

The 2006 J.B. Rudnyckyj Distinguished Lecture

University of Manitoba, February 23, 2006

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Independent Ukraine as a function of Soviet Inertia

In 1991 Ukraine broke away from the USSR, like a huge piece of ice breaking off an ice-berg. In the suddenly “freed” (and I use this word in inverted commas) Ukraine the Soviet state apparatus still functioned, the country was still led by Soviet “statesmen” (more inverted commas I’m afraid!) Essentially the economy remained Soviet too, although the co-operative businesses, which had been allowed by the Communist Party since the economic crises began in the mid eighties, became more active.

The Communist Party lost its monopoly on power and the most active former communists and Komsomol members formed their own parties on the “which party doesn’t exist yet? We’ll start that one” principle! These new party leaders had no personal political

persuasions. Only RUKh and the ecology movement party "Zeleni Svit" ("Green World") had their own ideology. The other 100 or so parties were created by their leaders specifically as instruments in the fight for power.

The Communist Party, that was later banned for some time, and the Komsomol movement turned out to have been the only "schools" for top- and middle- managers. This already formally independent country had no choice but to follow these leaders from the communist "school of management". Even today, in the new century, people brought up in the Soviet system hold top-positions. I don't think there was any other historic alternative to this development, but this is the main reason for the slow evolution of our society and for the rapid formation of a class of very rich people.

This situation is also partially responsible for all cultural atavisms that the society drags behind itself from 1980s. Soviet pop-culture is still in demand and is considered by its older "consumers" as something more real and human than contemporary pop-culture. The Soviet system of giving titles such as Honorary or People's artist remains in use in Ukraine and Russia. Only in literary life of Ukraine, not all Soviet literature is viewed with nostalgia.

At the end of 1980s over 1500 of the members of Writers' Union of Ukraine were Communist Party members. From its formation, the Union had served communist ideology through literature. Thousands of novels about factories, collective farms, good communists and the

heroic deeds of non-party factory workers were produced by its members. This parallel reality created by Soviet writers was taught in school and universities. Those who studied these works well, as well as those who had a sincere belief in the message they gave, were more likely to make a good career for themselves, since any career, even one in the arts, was dependent on the degree to which a person accepted this parallel reality as the basis for reality itself.

The majority of writers served the system loyally. They knew what awaited them if they did not, and they had no desire to lose their privileged status because of a soar conscience. Only the most cunning and talented writers, like Pavlo Zahrebelny and Valerii Shevchuk succeeded in avoiding subservience to communist ideology.

There were a few niches where those reluctant to serve the party could go: historical and ethnic mythology, children's literature or lyrical poetry. But there was little room in any of these niches.

Zahrebelny, even as a member of the Politburo of the Communist Party of Ukraine, wrote historical novels about the history of Ukraine and in some of them an attentive reader could find that his attitude to Ukrainian historical personalities was much more positive than to those from Russia. The Soviet censors simply were not interested in getting him to improve the image of Peter the Great or of Count Potemkin.

In 1991, along with the USSR, Ukrainian Soviet literature sank without trace. State publishers ceased to work and the publishing houses that sprung up began producing literature that was really in demand. And it was not literature about good communists anymore. In that year Ukrainian books accounted for 60-70 percent of all book sales in towns and cities and 90 percent in the villages. The rest of the books were published in Russia and were always in short supply. After 1991, when state Ukrainian publishing collapsed, the vacuum was filled by books produced by Russian publishers and Ukrainian publishers in the Russian language. After decades of the “politically correct” novel, the pendulum swung violently in the other direction. Initially the demand was for foreign science fiction, foreign detectives, books on alternative medicine, and love stories. Later the foreign science fiction was replaced by similar fare produced by Russian and Ukrainian authors.

In the mid nineties the Russian government lifted all taxes on publishers, and book production became a very lucrative business. However, the Ukrainian book industry had to wait until the mid nineties only to receive a small reduction in VAT. Prior to that books were subject to the same VAT as alcohol. As a result, from 1990 the Ukrainian book market was gradually taken over by Russian publishers who are now investing money in book trading in Ukraine,

80 percent of all books produced in Soviet Ukraine had to be in the Ukrainian language. Practically all of them had more to do with

ideological propaganda than with literature, and by the end of the eighties only a handful of Ukrainian writers had a real readership. Quite large print-runs of books that no one wanted were bought, compulsorily, by libraries and universities. From 1991 no new publishers wanted to print the work of the old, Ukrainian writers, even when they wrote on more contemporary themes without the old ideology. Many writers simply could not grasp the idea of freedom in creativity. They genuinely believed that writers should serve the party and so, when the first wave of nationalist ideology hit the country some writers turned their typewriters to serve the cause of the Ukrainian national idea. However, state orders for such books with large print-runs and a guaranteed income were not forthcoming.

The niche for national-ideological literature was filled spontaneously, rather than in any organized way and this occurred largely thanks to financial support from the Ukrainian diaspora and charitable foundations. Previously banned works by such writers as Vasyl Stus and Lina Kostenko, as well as by the Ukrainian "bourgeois" philosophers and historians, were published. Despite the small print runs of the first wave of these works, they were met with tremendous enthusiasm. The Ukrainian intelligentsia, however, demanded more and other books. All this was happening against a background of the mass publication of once banned Soviet dissident and émigré literature. Many Russian authors started to publish their novels and short stories which had failed to pass the Soviet censors.

Samizdat (samvydav in Ukrainian) had existed in Ukraine since the time of Taras Shevchenko and in the 1960s and 1970s it nourished a relatively small group of Ukrainian dissidents (around 1500 people). Most unfortunately, for various reasons, very little of their previously banned work inspired interest among publishers and those books which were published did not reach a wider audience. Nor did any form of a social literature take shape. Not a single, memorable work was published which touched upon the theme of Ukraine's newly independent status.

In the mid 1990s Ukraine saw the first of the new generation of young writers. There was a gaping hole in the literary market for Ukrainian literature, but the book market was and probably still is 90 percent taken over by Russian publishers. Although some Russian publishers have already tried to publish books in Ukrainian for the Ukrainian market, the imbalance between the two languages in the bookshops is still far from being redressed. In the Western Ukraine the majority of active readers refused to read Russian language books. Thus, in the mid nineties, if the situation for the Ukrainian publishers (officially numbering about 600, of which only about a few dozen were actually producing literature) was difficult, it was very promising for the young Ukrainian language writers.

It is against this background that we see the appearance of first Ukrainian cult novels: Oksana Zabuzhko's *Field Research in Ukrainian Sex* and Yurii Andrukhovych's *Moskoviada*. The success of these two

leading post-Soviet Ukrainian authors gave an example and hope to the younger generation of writers. I will talk more about these pioneering works later. Suffice it to say now that the place of the Soviet Ukrainian writers – the hundreds who were already lost in history – was being taken by perhaps a dozen Ukrainian postmodernists.

At the same time, teachers of Ukrainian literature in schools, universities and colleges decided to focus on pre-Soviet Ukrainian classics, while “rehabilitating” the Ukrainian poets of the 1920s and 1930s, like Pavlo Tychyna and Volodymyr Sosiura. For the majority of these teachers, new Ukrainian literature was more a source of annoyance than material for a lecture. They chose not to support the new generation of writers by bringing them to the attention of their students. In many higher educational establishments this tendency still remains strong. A year ago, I went with Andrii Kokotukha to give a talk to students at the Nizhen Institute of Culture, in Chernihiv oblast. We were guests of the faculty of librarianship. I asked students to raise their hands whenever I mentioned a writer whom they had heard of. I started with some outsiders, that I did not expect many people to know about, but even when I mentioned Zabuzhko and Andrukhovych, only the lecturers’ hands went up, and when I asked the students which writers they did know about, they replied: “Shevchenko, Lesia Ukrainka and Ivan Franko”.

It has to be said that the key representatives of new Ukrainian literature are themselves against the idea of becoming “official” Ukrainian literature. When the compilers of the school textbook *Ukrainian Literature for Tenth Graders* included some information about Andukhovych, the author protested, threatening to sue the textbook writers for mentioning him without his permission. Andrukhovych has always been anti-establishment – he demanded that his name be removed from the list of nominations for the Taras Shevchenko literary awards. And his position seems to have been shared by the majority of young writers. Agreeing to “work with” the establishment was, until very recently, the quickest way to lose the trust of your readers.

The Orange Revolution of 2004 drew out onto the streets both readers and writers. For the first time young writers, who had been ignored by the country as a social or political phenomenon, took part in political events. For the first time, many of them were called upon by the media, in an old style gesture reminiscent of the Soviet Union, to act as society’s “moral judges.” I remember how I was invited to speak on live breakfast TV and asked, by the program organizers, to include in my address some words about the need to avoid violence. This was a little before the Maidan (Independence Square) got going. During the events, almost every day the Kapranovy brothers – publishers and writers – appeared on live TV and radio. In the evenings they guarded the tent village on the Khreshchatyk. Oksana

Zabuzhko and Yurii Andrukhovych were actively commenting on Ukrainian events in the Western mass-media. At that moment it became all too obvious just how few contemporary Ukrainian writers there were.

Since those events, a little over a year has past. In that time, only two books have appeared on the subject of the Orange Revolution: the collection of essays by Oksana Zabuzhko *Let my People Go* and a collection of plays by Olexandr Irvanets *Nut-cracker-2004*, the title piece of which is about an "orange" love affair between a girl from Lutsk and a special forces soldier from Simferopol (Crimea) who is sent to "quell the Maidan." Their ideological, geographical and linguistic incompatibility stand in the way of their love, but the author promises a happy end, demonstrating that, thanks to the victory of the Maidan, love between Western and the Eastern Ukraine is possible. Such optimism was a new phenomenon in post-Soviet Ukrainian literature, which reflected society's mood, sometimes in spite of conscious efforts by writers. Approximately five years ago the same Oleksandr Irvanets published a novel called *Rivne/Rovno* in which he describes his home-town divided by some sort of Berlin Wall, only the division is based on the language and the political sympathies attributed to these languages. There is a Russian-speaking pro-Eastern part of the town and a Ukrainian pro-Western part. This was an obvious premonition of future problems, which existed earlier too, but

which were either ignored or purposely aggravated by political forces as benefiting those forces.

Some reflection of the real state of society could always be found in Ukrainian prose, but it was usually the reflection of an atmosphere, not a focus on the specifics of the society. The “black” and depressive novels of Oles Ulyanenko appeared in the mid nineties, when the economic crisis finally transformed into a moral crisis for the entire society. Morality is a political and social phenomenon and, in Ukraine at least, it is an abstract one, since it was amoral politicians who were defending social morality. Therefore, the young authors who came after Oles Ulyanenko chose to write more about their own generation than about society as a whole.

The youngest, cult writer is the twenty-four-year-old Lubko Deresh. He has already published his third novel about a youth subculture revolving around drugs and mysticism. His recent novel *Arkhe* is about how a new drug produced on the basis of eye drops appears in Lviv and forges a distribution network covering the entire territory of the former Soviet Union. The effect of the drug is to make the user experience life as a stream of constantly changing text, in which the drug user becomes lost. This novel-text-game would be another example of postmodernism if it were not for the inclusion in the game of real, tragic events: the death of eighty spectators at a military air show in Sknyliv, near Lviv, when a stunt failed and a fighter plane crash landed, and the murder of the journalist Georgii

Gongadze. Both moments of Ukrainian history are not only at odds with the context of the novel, but show that the author himself is unable to see reality for what it is. Here the author uses reality as a source of secondary details for the text.

Today when the “powers that be” are more political than economic and when they espouse pro-Western ideals, the conflict between the establishment and the representatives of new Ukrainian literature is, in part, forgotten. Oksana Zabuzhko has agreed to serve on the advisory committee for culture under President Yushchenko, together with Ivan Malkovych, the poet turned publisher who is standing for parliament in the elections this March.

New Ukrainian postmodernist literature is up against mass literature, but the new writers are winning young readers, mostly in the urban areas of Western Ukraine and Kyiv. However, they completely ignore their country's social and political situation in their novels. The majority of them, like Lubko Deresh, Irena Karpa, Irena Starostina, fill a niche left completely empty during the Soviet period, that of “sex, drugs and rock and roll”! Older writers like Izdrik, Taras Prokhasko, Andrukhovych write ethnophilosophical, plot novels following the European rather than the Ukrainian tradition, while a few others like Evheniia Kononenko, Maria Matios, Yurko Pokalchuk and Vasyl Shklar, each in his or her individual way, are seeking a path to a broader spectrum of readers.

This year independent Ukraine will celebrate its fifteenth anniversary. It's a good reason to look back and to see what was achieved during this long period. One could talk separately about Ukraine's recent economic or political history, but it takes a much longer period to be able to analyze either. And, taking into consideration that I'm not an economist, my analyses would not be deep enough to create an objective picture of the trends. I find the sociological developments which we are witnessing in our society much more interesting, and even captivating. Of course, I appreciate that you cannot divorce these developments from the economic and political situation (much as I would like too), but, to some extent at least, cultural developments seem to have a life of their own, dependent on something other than who is in government or the average monthly income.

In some sense Ukrainian society is a mirror of all these developments and whatever the society does is a reaction to the state of that country/society. Life is organized in such a way that all the bits and pieces of day-to-day life are accurately written down and reported back to us by an army of journalists. They are supposed to look for facts and tendencies. I would be happy to talk here about the benefits of a completely free press and objectivity, but in the case of Ukraine it will be some time before such a talk can be given. Somehow even in President Kuchma's time Ukrainian writers enjoyed much more freedom to write as they thought than journalists did.

I believe it is true to say that over the last fifteen years there has been no censorship of literature, while at the same time, censorship in journalism has been a constant feature of our society. Of course, if one writes a political

book which poses a threat to the government there could well be trouble. When Dmytro Chobit wrote a biography of Viktor Medvedchuk, who was the head of presidential administration, police went to the author's garage where the print run was being stored and set fire to it. But *Narcisse* (the title of the unfortunate biography) was more of a journalistic investigation than a piece of fiction. Fiction, however critical, was not seen as a threat to the politicians in power. Sometimes I have been criticized for creating a negative image of Ukraine in my novels, but this criticism has been rather soft. The general attitude has been "let sleeping dogs lie" because that, like it or not, is what Ukrainian literature – in its homeland – has become, a sleeping dog.

What is the reason for this strange situation? Why have writers been free to write whatever they want, while journalists have been anything but free? The answer could be rather upsetting for Ukrainian writers but unfortunately it is true: journalists through their newspapers have tremendous influence on their readers, writers have none or almost none. And this despite the fact that, typically, the high-speed journalistic reactions to events in the country are often superficial in comparison with the "slow," ponderous reaction of writers. Surely the reading public, people who grew up in the USSR valuing literature as a guide through the political darkness, surely these people would not forsake literature as a key to understanding what was going on now that freedom is theirs, and while the political situation is even less transparent than it was in Soviet times.

Well, perhaps reading Ukrainian is exhausted: the speed with which the Ukrainian state has been developing in recent years may have made

people too tired to read anything except newspaper headlines! So people stopped reading literature. But, you would think, writers and film makers could only be further inspired by the current situation, by the changes and by the speed at which they have occurred and the result which was the approached real democracy. So, I thought, to write this lecture all I had to do was to find several writers who were writing about today's Ukraine from different view points. The task seemed easy. Life in Ukraine since 1991 has been so politicized that I was confident that I would find plenty of literary material to analyze. I do read a lot of contemporary Ukrainian prose, but preparing this lecture I was hoping to discover a lot of new names and new books. However, I was too optimist. I should have known better, because I know, better than anyone else, that the main problem of the Ukrainian publishing world is the almost total absence of any book-distribution system.

Publishing in Ukraine is a very local affair. Books published in one town very often cannot be found in a bookshop in a neighbouring town. I am sure there are hundreds, if not thousands, of books that are published every year in the Crimea or Donetsk which never reach Kyiv or Lviv. These books are sold in the places where they are published, so one might think that local writers are writing about local problems or reflect local attitude towards global topics and problems. I am only really familiar with the prose written in the Ukrainian language by writers living in Central and Western Ukraine. What I was looking for was new Russian-language literature created in the south and east of the country, where people mostly speak Russian. There are other literary phenomena in Ukraine but unfortunately, again, they are

inaccessible. I'm talking now about works of prose and poetry written in the Tatar language in the Crimea. There are over eighty writers who write and publish their books in Tatar, but strangely enough the books are not translated into Ukrainian (or Russian), as if these writers have nothing to do with Ukraine at all. So the "sleeping dogs" are sleeping in distant isolation from each other.

A search for new information on the internet failed to unearth much. In the bookshops of Kyiv I found only one book *Ukrainian literary postmodern* by the well known philologist, Tamara Hundarova, which gives some information about the main contemporary Ukrainian writers writing in Ukrainian. The work is essentially dedicated to the history of several "cult" groups of writers and poets, and deals more with stylistic differences between the authors than with "young literature as a mirror of a young country's life." Having checked most of the available sources of literary information I came to the conclusion that there is no or almost no new literature written in the south and east of the country. Do the most populated areas of Ukraine have no well-known young writers and virtually no new books? Can this really be possible? Well, it is either completely true or the literature of these region is completely ignored because it is written in Russian or because it has no literary quality. However, the one or two books that I was able to unearth did not lack literary credentials.

So, while trying to create for myself and for you a literary map of today's Ukraine I made the amazing discovery that half the country appears to be a literary desert or rather terra incognita of Ukrainian literature. I

would like to remind you about the results of Ukrainian presidential elections of 2004 and how they influenced the literary map of Ukraine. The literary centre and west of Ukraine voted for the pro-European candidate Viktor Yushchenko, and the non-literary regions supported the pro-Russian candidate Viktor Yanukovich. From these differences in the voting results it is possible to come to the conclusion that people reading new Ukrainian literature are pro-Western and those who don't read (and don't write) are pro-Eastern (or pro-Russian). There is some truth in this, but only some. And new Ukrainian literature plays a positive role in Central and Western regions not thanks to its content but just thanks to its existence. Because the new Ukrainian literature today is 95 percent politics-free.

This was not always the case. As I have said, after obtaining its independence in 1991 Ukraine was awash with cultural activities. Ex-underground literature and culture were becoming "legal" cultural products. This ex- and semi-underground literature was in Soviet times an intellectual protest reaction against the method of socialist realism. Once legalized it started contributing towards the break from Soviet literary tradition. Metaphorically speaking, these writers were trying to speed up the process of departing from the Soviet past.

The best examples of new Ukrainian literature which could be called a "literature of spiritual departing" were Yurii Andrukhovych's novel *Moscoviada* and several short novels by Vasyl Kozheliianko.

Moscoviada is still the very best example of such a literature. The main character of the novel is a poet from Galicia, Otto von F, who is a student of

the Moscow Institute of Literature. The story takes place in Moscow at the very end of the 1980s, when the Soviet Union is crumbling. The author himself was at that time a student in the same institute. The novel describes one day in the life of the Galician hero. The events described are phantasmagorical and sometimes surreal, but apparently incidental comments about the background social and political make this work much more meaningful. For example, there is the opening of a Ukrainian bookshop in Moscow's Arbat Street, or the first Russian issue of a Ukrainian newspaper, published by RUKh. And of course there is the city of Moscow itself, the basis of all things and thoughts Soviet. The main hero, whose perception of the city largely coincides with Andrukhovych's own, hates Moscow, but is at once transfixed by it. He gets lost in the metro or in huge department stores, he gets drunk and as a result happy. He watches Moscow and sees its spiritual disintegration. In the end, the attitude of Otto von F is one of a stranger who must escape from this imperial monster of a city in order to survive and find balance in his life.

During the first years of Ukrainian independence there was too much talk of the historical ties between Russian and Ukrainian people. And more often subconsciously than otherwise some writers were working hard to break these ties in the minds of Ukrainian people. Departing from the USSR meant for those writers not only departing from a geographical neighbour and from a mutual political past, but also from the neighbouring people themselves. In the beginning of the 1990s in the newspaper *Literary Ukraine* and in some

other publications, articles and essays appeared underlining the differences in tradition between Russians and Ukrainians.

I remember one such article very well: it was dedicated to a comparative analysis of the folk-tales of the two nations. The author's main idea was to show and prove that the main characters in Russian folk-tales are lazy, stupid and not really positive, whereas in Ukrainian folk-tales the main heroes are always good and hard-working guys. Those articles were written by representatives of the older generation. But at the same time younger writers achieved greater results with their provocative fiction without thinking about it.

The next real hero of new Ukrainian literature who joined Yurii Andrukhovych in pushing Ukraine away from Moscow was Vasyl Kozheliianko, author of *Parade in Moscow (Defiliada v Moskvi)*. It is in fact rather far away from Andrukhovych's prose and methods. For his series of short novels he chose the genre of "alternative history" and *Defiliada* is the first and, probably, the most provocative of his novels. The main event in the book is a military victory parade on Moscow Red Square on the November 7, 1941. Well, November 7 was the October Revolution day – a national holiday still celebrated by hard-core communists. But the parade described has nothing to do with the victory of the Soviet Army over Nazi Germany. Just the opposite – it is a victory parade of the German army which has successfully defeated the Soviet Union in less than a year. But Germany of course has not been able to achieve such military success alone. In fact the Ukrainian military units had first stormed and then occupied Moscow. And even Joseph

Stalin was captured in his bunker in the Ural Mountains not by Germans, but by Ukrainian special forces. This is why immediately behind Adolf Hitler who is driven in a golden cart on Red Square walks the Ukrainian president Stepan Bandera.

The so called "anti-Moscow novels," humorous, satirical, surreal, had their moment of glory, but, like a dying star, this literary phenomenon had no logical continuation and was not followed up by any kind of even slightly ideologically active prose. And then out of the blue the governor of Luhansk, which is a big industrial city in the east of the country, in a very Soviet way, ordered the publication of a new edition of the Soviet heroic novel *The Young Guard* by Fadeev – a novel about young members of Komsomol who fought against Nazi occupation in the Donbas Region and who were caught by the Gestapo, tortured and executed – thrown alive into the mine of Krasnodon. The fact that a new edition of this book was ordered can be seen as the result of a deficit of heroic literature, but also it could have been a reaction against attacks on the Soviet past. And the latter is more probable, since Luhansk is situated in the "pro-Russian" and "pro-Soviet" part of Ukraine.

The field of literary activities in the Central and Western Ukraine was divided between "not-so-serious" young postmodernist writers and very serious academicians and writers of the older generation. The young postmodernists were making fun of, or turning into a joke, elements of the Soviet past, old-style values, indeed everything from the past which remained in the mentality and the memory of Ukrainians. Both academics and writers of the older generation carried on the work started a century and

a half earlier by Ukrainian populists (narodnyky) – furthering the education of people and attempting to form a Ukrainian national idea.

Although the younger and older generations were working independently of one another, the fact that both were participating in this process guaranteed that all types of active readers were satisfied. By the end of 1990s postmodern literature had fulfilled its duty of clearing all elements of the Soviet past from the heads of its readers. Some authors started writing much more serious literature which could be called ethnocentric, since it dealt mostly with the spiritual, actual and even metaphorical history of the Western regions, especially the Carpathians. The high profile of this new fiction and of more academic pro-Ukrainian essays in central and western areas also indicated that in these parts of Ukraine Soviet literature had been fully replaced by the new one. The republication of a Soviet classic, as happened in Luhansk, could not possibly have occurred in Kyiv or Ternopil. What seemed to be alive and kicking in Central and Western Ukraine, did not exist at all in the east and south of the country. There were no young postmodernists, or active academicians writing for the older generation. Maybe this was a reaction to the animosity towards Russian-speaking Ukrainians which could be felt in the press. It has to be said that there was animosity. For example, in 1997, in the first issue of the leading intellectual fortnightly *Krytyka* (Criticism), the poet and critic Natalka Bilotserkivets published an article "Literature at the Cross-roads." The main question in this article asked was : Why is a Ukrainian bestseller impossible? In the article, she asked why Yurii Vynnychuk's books, with their brilliant

erotic scenes and excellent stylization, don't sell? Why the refined style of Yurii Andrukhovych does not make his novels bestsellers? Why Andrii Kokotiukha's explosive plots don't appeal to Ukrainian mass readers? And she suggests the answer is that contemporary Ukrainian literature is too good for the uneducated average Ukrainian from the most densely populated east of the country.

It is quite possible that I am exaggerating the role played by the animosity shown to Russian speakers by Ukrainian speakers in the literary developments in the east and south of Ukraine. But the fact is that the writers from these regions started looking towards Moscow and generally Russia. This practically made the writers non-Ukrainian in the sense that they did not write about their country and did not write from the point of view of a Ukrainian writer. At the same time postmodernism as a way of destroying the status quo in the value system of Russian literature was not much appreciated. Conservative critics considered it a menace to the Russian mainstream and ideologically sound literature. Thus, in Russia, even now, postmodernism is still discussed only on the periphery of literature. The absence of postmodernism in Russian literature has played its part in allowing old Soviet and post-Soviet values to survive in Russia and in Eastern/Southern Ukraine.

The majority of contemporary Ukrainian writers avoid writing about the events of recent Ukrainian history. Even the tragic events of the 20th century are left untouched. The idea itself – to write something about recent tragic events, like the holodomor (the enforced famine of 1933), or tragic-

heroic ones, like the battle of Kruty, smacks too much of state literary orders (the state telling the writer what they should write about). Some time ago, President Yushchenko addressed the arts constituency asking them to make a film or create a piece of literature about the battle of Kruty. There is a strong ideological message in this piece of real history, in which about 200 young Ukrainian students died in 1918 in a battle with the Red Army defending independent Ukraine.

So far, there has been no public reply to the president's words, but I imagine this "state order" will be taken up by a writer from the older generation. For the older generation it is not only acceptable, but desirable to write books to order. The other tragic theme – the Holodomor (the state-caused famine of 1932-33) – has been written about several times. Around ten years of work was dedicated to researching these events by the Ukrainian writer Oles Volia. Mostly, he gathered witnesses' memoirs and editing them. The print-runs of this book were huge, but society did not react to this collection of quite horrific and tragic memoirs. In spite of its literary quality, the most recent book about the Holodomor (the artificial famine), a novel by Leonid Kononovych, better known for his thrillers and crime-novels, has also failed to provoke any reaction.

The reason for this may be found in specific features of the national mentality: even the Ukrainian elite does not like to focus on the tragic moments of Ukrainian history but prefer positive, heroic moments. To open public discussion on the Holodomor is to accept that the Ukrainian nation was a nation-victim. In reality, the Ukrainian nation was a victim more than once,

but that is not something one would want to focus on while trying to form and consolidate a new Ukrainian nation. However, it has to be said that the essays and literature of today's Ukraine do often feature hero victims or indeed nation-victims and in this way do indeed reflect the nature of our society.

Ideologically or socially motivated literature can cover many important themes in Ukraine – from the Chernobyl disaster and its consequences to the removal of hundreds of thousands of farmers from Ukraine to Siberia, the extermination of most of the Ukraine's artistic and academic elite, the Holodomor and the fighting of OUN-UPA soldiers against the Soviet army. All these topics are still important for society, but it is the society itself that does not respond to publications dedicated to these topics.

There is one notable exception: Chernobyl. But even here the initially powerful literary response proved short lived. The Chernobyl disaster of 1986 belonged to Soviet times. This nuclear explosion may have had repercussions in scientific circles, but its real significance was socio-political. The sudden change that occurred in the heads of ordinary people as well as in the heads of Ukrainian writers meant that the life received a whole new set of coordinates – BEFORE the explosion and AFTER. Nothing could ever be the same again. Ukrainian Soviet literature could no longer be super-loyal to the Communist Party and Soviet ideology. There had been an underground culture and nationalistic movement which gave impetus to the process of the USSR's disintegration and the disintegration of its ideology. And now for the

first time, still under Soviet rule, many writers who previously focused on heroism, took up a “pessimistic theme” and wrote about Chernobyl. Clearly this was not a positive advertisement for the Soviet regime. The literary scene of that period looked like a “socialist competition” to see who could write most movingly, most passionately, or just “most” about it? Whose book would prompt the greatest number of tears? “Chernobyl” poems were everywhere.

The most tragic moments of history often have silver linings. As soon as there is a difference of opinion, the battle for truth begins. In Russia a difference of opinion arose over the war in Chechnia between the state and the lone female journalist Anna Politkovskova, who spent two years in Chechnia among the local people, and of course among the local soldiers. Her books brought down the fury of a powerful state upon her. She was forced to hide in Austria, Norway and England, where she published the books that could not be produced in Russia. Just at that moment, as if by a wave of some magic wand, a book and TV series appeared describing the heroic deeds of the Russian soldiers in the war.

In Ukraine the state has still not learned to protect itself in this way, and perhaps we should be grateful. Made-to-order books rarely inspire trust. The book about Russian hero soldiers in Chechnia was not commissioned by the Russian government, but of course it was hailed and supported by it. It is interesting, however, that the Chechen war, in which quite a number of Ukrainians fought alongside

the Chechens against the Russian forces, has inspired two quite high-profile books in Ukraine: the action novel *Elemental* by Vasyl Shklar and Andrii Myroniuk's novel *Kavkaz.ua.*, based on his experiences while fighting with a Ukrainian volunteer detachment in Chechnia.

Shklar's *Elemental*, which presents the first ever Ukrainian literary super-hero of the "Hollywood" genre, makes interesting reading. On the one hand this Ukrainian super-hero is a product of the French Foreign Legion. In the process of accomplishing his mission (assigned him by the Ukrainian Secret Service), he kills dozens of *moskali* (a derisive term for Russians). On the other hand this hero is so physiological and anti-intellectual that he is very unlikely to inspire sympathy among readers. The second attempt to use the theme of Chechen war promised to be more interesting, since the book was presented as a semi-autobiographical novel. But unfortunately Andrii Myroniuk in *Kavkaz.ua* turned his own war experience into material for a trivial thriller without even trying to bear witness to the events he must have seen.

I think that the democratization of society frees the authors from fulfilling any "compulsory social duty," at least in terms of what he actually writes. A number of writers are more involved in public life as commentators, but keep their literary work separate from this. Yurii Andrukhovych, who calls himself "a totally apolitical writer," was involved, together with other writers, including myself, in the events of the Orange Revolution. But once it was over, he stopped all purely political activities,

such as signing public petitions. Nonetheless, he regularly writes columns for Ukrainian and Polish newspapers, even if only to describe life in Berlin where he is living at the moment. Writing columns and so on does allow a writer to “fulfill a social duty.” It is also a way for the author to “socialize” with his society and creates a link between author and society. The same can be said about Oksana Zabuzhko, who entered the Ukrainian literary scene with a very brave feminist novel *Field Research in Ukrainian Sex*, an unusual thing for Ukraine, but quickly became very active in the country’s public life, commenting on state cultural policy or rather the lack of it, and generally on all things Ukrainian.

But the main literary/public authority for Ukraine is a person who is seldom seen on TV or read in the press. I am speaking of Lina Kostenko, who publicly ignored invitations by ex-presidents Kravchuk and Kuchma, and refused all kinds of decorations they wanted to bestow on her. Instead she has been spending time with ordinary people living in the closed Chernobyl zone. Lina Kostenko has become an icon, a symbol of honesty and dignity in Ukraine. She departed from literature long ago and this was seen by many of her readers as a protest against the corruption and criminality in Ukraine. She has devoted herself to public life and has quickly acquired the image of moral judge. This is why both ex-presidents so badly wanted her to be in their entourage. Before the 2004 presidential elections she became a personal representative of Viktor Yushchenko, and in this way she passed a message to her audience about this individual’s morality. We should understand that her audience is limited to the Ukrainian-speaking

intelligentsia working in education or involved in voluntary education projects.

I have mentioned by no means all representatives of contemporary Ukrainian literature. The literature of our young state is developing very actively. In a few years time we will be talking about the books of writers as yet unknown. However, I am concerned that the younger generation of writers may continue to distance itself from the political and social reality of Ukraine, considering current affairs only suitable material for journalists. In the fifteen years of the country's independence, Ukraine has experienced dozens of dramatic events, from the establishment of small businesses amid mafia-type wars in the early 1990s to the coal miners' protests and marches on Kyiv. The political history of a country is not only good material for historians. It is also excellent material for the authors of political novels. Books based on investigative journalism are still practically unheard of in Ukraine. There is not a single novel about, or even around, the events of 1991 which led to Ukraine's independence. Kuchma's appearance on the Ukraine's political stage and especially his disappearance from it simply beg to be captured in the form of a novel. But no such novel has appeared. We should say a separate thank you to Kuchma for the book he put his name to, but which was, in fact, written by four Ukrainian academics. As a piece of research *Ukraine is not Russia* deserves serious attention. It is a pity, therefore, that Leonid Kuchma had it published in Moscow.

From February 7 to 10 of this year the Ukrainian parliament hosted the first "parliamentary book fair." It was organized by the president of the Lviv

Book Forum, Lesia Koval and the Kapranovy brothers. The book fair was a success and not only because it was opened by the parliamentary speaker, Volodymyr Lytvyn, and was attended by a hundred members of parliament and by President Yushchenko. This fair gave reason to hope that the mutual lack of interest which has dominated the relationship between the state and the writer is finally about to be replaced by a mutual interest and the hope that, with this development, the young writers of our country will wish to feel the pulse of their society more often and occasionally pose society questions through their novels.