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ANATOMY OF A LITERARY SCANDAL: MYXAJL' SEMENKO AND THE ORIGINS OF UKRAINIAN FUTURISM

OLEH S. ILNYTZKYJ

I

Мене не знає історія.

М. Семенко

In 1930, sixteen years after Futurism first appeared in Ukrainian literature and only months before it was compelled to disband, an observer said the following about the movement:

Today we still lack a single study, nay, a single serious article which would objectively describe the role of Futurism in the literary process of the Soviet Ukraine. In addition there are certain literary facts that remain unexplained, and many materials are inaccessible. Of these some are, even today, bibliographical rarities (e.g., *Katafalk mystectva*) and others are in manuscript form and remain in the hands of those comrades who in one way or another were connected to the Futurist movement. Naturally, much of this material has already been lost. . . .¹

Almost fifty years later, this statement remains valid. Of the scattered studies published after 1930 which mentioned Ukrainian Futurism, few can be regarded as “serious” and fewer still as “objective.” Not only do “certain literary facts” about Ukrainian Futurism “remain unexplained,” but many require reassessment. Moreover, access to materials is immeasurably more limited now than in 1930. Today Futurist journals and publications are easily among the rarest materials in Ukrainian literature. Their very titles are considered exotic.² So neglected is the movement that

¹ M. Kačanjuk, “Materijaly do istoriji futuryzmu na radjans’kij Ukrajinі,” *Literaturnyj arxiv* (Xarkiv), bks. 1–2, 1930, p. 186.

² O. Slisarenko, M. Ljubčenko, and M. Semenko, *Al’manax tr’ox* (Kiev, 1920); *Semafor u majbutnje: Aparat panfuturystiv* (Kiev), 1922, no. 1 (May); *Katafalk iskusstva: Ežednevnyj žurnal pan-futuristov-destruktorov* (Kiev), no. 1, 13 December 1922. The latter journal was published in both Ukrainian and Russian; future issues were to appear in Yiddish, but the publication ceased with the first issue. *Žovtnevij zbirnyk panfuturystiv* (Kiev), 1923; *Gong kommunkul’ta: Orhan asociaciji Komunul’tovciv* (Kiev and Xarkiv), May 1924; *Neolif: Literaturno-vyrobnyčyj žurnal livoho*

identification of many of its adherents is virtually impossible. Even a famous — or, as some would have it, infamous — name in Ukrainian Futurism evokes virtually no literary associations.

There are several explanations for this state of affairs. Even during its heyday, in the 1920s, Ukrainian Futurism was eyed with suspicion in both political and literary circles. Unlike Russian Futurism, which rose on a wave of Formalist interests, the Ukrainian movement's growth coincided with the receding of the wave, which in the Ukraine was feeble even at its peak. The Marxist and sociological methods that dominated the Ukrainian literary scene had little sympathy for Futurism, and they ensured that right up to the end of the decade Futurism would not receive serious attention. What critical opinion did exist about Ukrainian Futurism sprang mainly from literary interorganizational conflicts. In these, Futurism had virtually no allies or supporters; it was attacked by groups that resisted the Party line in literature (such as VAPLITE) as well as by those that toed it (such as VUSPP). Consequently, the body of critical thought that developed in the 1920s was negative and partisan.

If objective analysis of Futurism was difficult in the 1920s, it became impossible in the 1930s. After the dissolution of literary organizations and the centralization of Soviet letters, Futurism continued to be one of the primary targets of the Party's apparatus. Under Stalin, Futurists came to share the familiar and tragic fate of all the "unorthodox." Those who survived Stalin's purges were, understandably, loath to recall — much less write about — their earlier "follies." Under such circumstances the study of Ukrainian Futurism came to a halt. Were it not for the occasional invective in a literary history, memory of the phenomenon might have faded completely.³

fronta (Moscow), 1925, no. 1; *Hol'štrom: Zbirnyk I, litsektora ASKK* (Xarkiv, 1925); M. Bažan, M. Semenko, and G. Škurupij, *Zustrič na perexresnij stanciji: Rozmova tr'ox* (Kiev, 1927); *Bumerang* (Xarkiv), 1927, no. 1; *Nova generacija: Bahato iljustrovanyj ščomisjačnyj žurnal novoho mystectva* (Xarkiv), 1927–1930. *Avangard-al'manax: Kyjiv's'koji hrupy proletars'kyx mystciv "Novoji generaciji"* (Xarkiv), 1929–1930. Futurists were also widely published in such "establishment" journals as *Červonyj šljax* and *Žyttja j revoljucija*, and they exerted considerable influence on others, such as *Universal'nyj žurnal*, *Mystectvo*, *Šljaxy mystectva*, *Barykady teatru*, *Globus*, *Vsesvit*, and *Žurnal dlja vsix*.

³ The following is indicative of the way Futurism was treated between the 1930s and early 1950s. At the First All-Ukrainian Congress of Soviet Writers, I. Kulyk stated: "The reconstruction of former Futurists, the so-called New Generationists, is transpiring very feebly. [Take] for example, M. Semenko. We have heard presentations in which he cultivated vulgarity, calculated awkwardness [and] defended the publicistic form and language of his own works and those of others." Cf. "Dopovid' na peršomu

After Stalin's death, when the liquidated and the silenced were gradually reinstated in the public eye, Ukrainian Futurists were kept in the background. As a group, they benefited far less from the "Thaw" than did adherents of other literary movements and schools.⁴ However, by degree, through the fifties, sixties, and early seventies, Futurism became a mentionable topic. The literary histories of these decades referred to it often and some contained useful information.⁵ Concurrently, a few noteworthy articles appeared which gingerly defended the movement and deplored its long consignment to oblivion.⁶ Unfortunately, these articles usually treated Futurism schematically and haphazardly, proving that the deeply ingrained Soviet biases against it could not be overcome easily. The major defect of this attenuated "rehabilitation," however, was that with some minor exceptions, it did not lead to the republication of Futurist works.⁷

vseukrajins'komu z"jizdi radjans'kyx pys'mennykiv," *Radjans'ka literatura* (Xarkiv), 1934, no. 7-8, p. 226. Three years after the statement was made Semenko was arrested and shot. A history of Ukrainian literature published in 1945 by the Ukrainian Academy of Sciences had only nine lines about Futurism and mentioned Semenko alone by name. Futurism was characterized as "a serious threat to Soviet culture": see S. I. Maslov and Je. P. Kyryljuk, eds., *Narys istoriji ukrajins'koji literatury* (n.p., 1945), p. 239. In 1954 a publication of the Academy of Sciences of the USSR called Ukrainian Futurism (together with VAPLITE and the "Neoclassicists") a leading anti-Soviet literary group. It was attacked for nihilism, nationalism, and cosmopolitanism. See *Očerky ukrajinskoj sovetskoj literatury* (Moscow, 1954), pp. 69-70.

⁴ In 1957, when the rehabilitation process in the Ukraine began with the publication of *Antolohija ukrajins'koji poeziji* (Kiev), Myxajl' Semenko was not represented by any works. The anthology included three poems by Geo Škurupij, but did not mention his being a Futurist.

⁵ *Istorija ukrajins'koji literatury*, vol. 2 (Kiev, 1957); *Istorija ukrajins'koji radjans'koji literatury* (Kiev, 1964); *Istorija ukrajins'koji literatury u vos'my tomax*, vols. 5 and 6 (Kiev, 1968, 1970).

⁶ B. L. Korsuns'ka, "Myxajl' Semenko," *Radjans'ke literaturoznavstvo*, 1968, no. 6, pp. 19-33. Oleksij Poltorac'kyj, "Myxajl' Semenko ta 'Nova heneracija,'" *Vitčyzna*, 1968, no. 11, pp. 193-200. M. D. Rod'ko, "Vid futuryz pro tr'ox P"jero do temy revoluciji," *Ukrajins'ke literaturoznavstvo*, 1970, no. 8, pp. 111-18. M. D. Rod'ko, "Vid futuryz pro tr'ox P"jero do temy revoluciji," *Ukrajins'ka poezija peršyx požovtnevyx rokov* (Kiev, 1971), pp. 135-80 (this is basically an expanded version of the article in *Ukrajins'ke literaturoznavstvo*, but there are a few interesting differences between the two redactions). N. V. Kostenko, *Poetyka Mykoly Bažana (1923-1940)* (Kiev, 1971) contains interesting information on Futurism and Bažan's relationship to it. Important information on Ukrainian Futurism can also be found in A. A. Trostjanec'kyj, *Šljaxom borot'by ta šukan'* (Kiev, 1968); V. I. Pivtoradni, *Ukrajins'ka literatura peršyx rokov revoluciji (1917-1923)* (Kiev, 1968). See also the entries "Futuryzm" and "Panfuturyzm" in V. M. Lesyn and O. S. Pulync', *Slovník literaturoznavečnyx terminiv* (Kiev, 1971). One valuable article was published in Czechoslovakia: M. Nevrlí, "Myxajl' Semenko, ukrajins'kyj futuryzm i slovacki davisty," *Duklja*, 1966, no. 3, pp. 23-28.

⁷ For example, works by Myxajl' Semenko have not been republished in the Ukraine or in the West since 1936 (except for a few poems that appeared in journals and anthologies), although it is known that the German publisher Jal-Verlag, Jal-Reprint

Now the timid interest of the past fifteen years has begun to wane, and Futurism is again under a dark cloud in the Soviet Ukraine. Recent developments suggest that the movement is once more being quietly but effectively buried as a legitimate field of inquiry.⁸

Ukrainian Futurism has not received much consideration in the West, either. Although Western and, in particular, émigré scholars have filled many gaps in Soviet Ukrainian scholarship, they have not shown any specific interest in the documentation and study of Ukrainian Futurism. Western literature about the movement is sparse indeed and much of it, like that produced in the Soviet Union, barely begins to tell the story.⁹ Curiously, although almost no reliable studies of Futurism exist, there is a wealth of highly opinionated material about the movement. This material owes its popularity not only to the absence of scholarship, but also to overt political sanctions in the Soviet Ukraine and not-so-overt political partisanship in the West. In the eyes of Western (émigré) critics, for example, Ukrainian Futurism is stigmatized because it is considered to have been politically more conformist and acquiescent to the Soviet regime than other literary movements.¹⁰ Even when it is acknowledged to have “resisted” the regime, Futurism receives little favorable recognition. Most Western critics assess Semenko as a poet with “little” or “no” talent,¹¹ and many agree that it is “hopeless to search [in Futurist] journals and works for some sort of special depth, poetic flight, or politi-

(Würzburg) is preparing an edition of Semenko’s works. Geo Škurupij, the second most active figure in Ukrainian Futurism, has fared only slightly better. A recent publication (*Dveri v den’: Vybrane* [Kiev, 1968]) contains a selection of his prose and poetry. Although an interesting volume, it contains only a fraction of Škurupij’s total corpus.

⁸ I have indicated elsewhere that recent Soviet publications are again censoring references to Futurism and Semenko. See my review of Mykola Bažan, *Tvory v čotyri’ox tomax: Tom IV*, in *Recenzija* 6, no. 2 (Spring–Summer 1976): 11, especially fn. 12.

⁹ Brief but useful references to Futurism can be found in the following publications: Jurij Lavrynenko, *Rozstriljane vidrodžennja* (Munich, 1959); Bohdan Kravciw (Krawciw), *Obirvani struny* (New York, 1955); idem, s.v. “Semenko, Myxajlo,” *Encyklopedija literaturoznawstwa: Slovnykova častyna* (Paris and New York, 1973), vol. 7 (PR-SY). See also a much earlier work by Jaroslav Hordyns’kyj, *Literaturna krytyka pidsovjeć’koi Ukrajinny* (Lviv and Kiev, 1939), pp. 10–12.

¹⁰ “For years Soviet Ukrainian Futurism exposed VAPLITE’s and Neoclassicism’s nationalism”: Lavrynenko, *Rozstriljane vidrodžennja*, p. 111. See also Jurij Lavrynenko, “Kost’ Stepan Burevij,” *Ukrajins’ka literaturna hazeta* (Munich), no. 3, March 1955, p. 1.

¹¹ Ivan Košelivec, *Sučasna literatura v URSR* (New York, 1964), p. 181.

cal thought.”¹² And although not all critics condemn Futurism for “disturbing the socially (ethically) conditioned system of language,” many agree it was a “negative” instance of literary creativity.¹³

Soviet scholarship entertains virtually identical views. Even during its tentative rehabilitation Futurism inspired doubt and reservations. The notion that “Futurism had a generally negative influence on Ukrainian poetry” and “slowed down” its development was not uncommon.¹⁴ For instance, A. Trostjanec’kyj found Geo Škurupij’s Futurist work to be a “far cry from real creativity.”¹⁵ Arsen Iščuk, writing about the poet Mykola Tereščenko, stated: “The poet lived through his enthusiasm for Panfuturism, with its tendency towards destroying the poem’s form. However, this sad episode did not become fatal for his further fate as a Soviet poet.”¹⁶

Such statements give the distinct impression that Ukrainian Futurism continues to be a threatening presence which calls for condemnation, not elucidation. In contrast to Russian Futurism, which has a firm place in Russian literary history, founded on a respectable body of scholarship, Ukrainian Futurism remains unexamined from the historical, theoretical, or literary viewpoint, and, as we shall see, serious questions were and are raised about its place in the Ukrainian literary process.

Unsympathetic attitudes towards the Ukrainian movement existed even before the prejudices spawned by the 1920s and 1930s took root. They developed out of the intense scandal in the literary community that accompanied Ukrainian Futurism’s debut in 1914. The scandal provided the basic arguments for dismissing Ukrainian Futurism as an unworthy literary phenomenon and lent legitimacy to later negative appraisals. It seems appropriate, therefore, to begin a reexamination of Ukrainian Futurism precisely from that event. This study analyzes the scandal’s history and, especially, the literary and cultural context in which it took place. Analysis of Ukrainian Futurism’s formal aspects remain outside its scope.

¹² Hr. Ševčuk [“Jurij Šerex,” George Y. Shevelov], “Istorija Edvarda Strixy,” *Arka* (Munich), 1947, no. 6, p. 14; Jurij Šerex, “Istorija odnijeji literaturnoji mistyfikaciji,” in Edvard Strixa, *Parodezy. Zozendropija. Avtoekzekucija* (New York, 1955), pp. 264–65. In the latter, Šerex was slightly more generous to Futurism than he had been in 1947.

¹³ Vasyl’ Čaplenko, “Meži j možlyvosti movostylju,” *MUR* (Regensburg), 1947, no. 3, p. 28.

¹⁴ Cf. A. I. Kostenko’s introduction in *Iz poeziji 20-x rokiv* (Kiev, 1959).

¹⁵ See his introduction in *Dveri v den’*, p. 8.

¹⁶ See the introduction to Mykola Tereščenko’s *Krylate vidlunnja: Vybranne* (Kiev, 1966), p. 5.

II

В українській поезії щинився тара-
рам. І вчинив його — Михайль Се-
менко.

В. Коряк

Ukrainian Futurism is virtually synonymous with one writer, Мухайл' Semenکو. Distorting as this may be of the movement as a whole, the association is not without basis. Semenکو was the founder of Ukrainian Futurism and long its only major representative.¹⁷ Without him the movement may not have existed at all or, at least, not have appeared in 1914; most certainly it would not have survived as long as it did. Semenکو stubbornly nursed Futurism from its very inception and persistently revived its appeal among writers and readers. Until the late 1920s (when O. Poltorac'kyj relieved him of the role), Semenکو was also the movement's chief theoretician. As such, Semenکو cleverly modified his theories to keep Futurism afloat amidst antagonistic and quickly changing political circumstances. Hopeless as they must have seemed at times, his efforts did bear fruit, as Futurism gradually attracted more and more writers and artists. Not all remained loyal to the movement. Yet, despite fluctuations in membership and a breakdown in organization, Futurism persevered to produce one of the most interesting journals of the 1920s, *Nova generacija*. Against all odds, this periodical, edited by Semenکو, survived from 1927 to the end of 1930, when Futurism as a whole was suppressed by the authorities. Thus, although he was not the "king of the Futurist prairies" (a title assumed by Semenکو's second-in-charge, Geo Škurupij) Semenکو was always the unquestioned leader of Ukrainian Futurism. Consequently, he became the universally acknowledged *enfant terrible* of Ukrainian literature.

Nothing in Semenکو's early career indicated that he would become the "bad boy" of Ukrainian letters.¹⁸ On the contrary, his literary beginnings were thoroughly traditional, modest, and circumspect. The young poet emerged within the ranks of the then dominant Modernists and was first published in the journal *Ukrajins'ka xata*. His first collection of poems,

¹⁷ Semenکو's brother, Vasył', and Pavlo Kovžun, both painters, were among the early Futurists (cf. Pavlo Bohac'kyj, *S'ohočasni literaturni prjamuvannja* (Prague and Berlin, 1923), p. 35. In 1914 M. Sribljans'kyj (Šapoval) described Pavlo Savčenko as a Futurist (which is doubtful), but little is known about him. See M. Sribljans'kyj, "Etjud pro futuryzm," *Ukrajins'ka xata* (Kiev), 1914, no. 6, p. 460.

¹⁸ Poltorac'kyj, "Myxajl' Semenکو ta 'Nova heneracija,'" p. 194.

which appeared in Kiev under the title *Prélude* (1913), was an undistinguished debut. Written between 1910 and 1912, the poems were mostly melancholy meditations on love, loneliness, and the poet's dreams and aspirations. Dissatisfaction with earthly life and a yearning for inner peace were the dominant emotions. The poet sought solace in nature and music, and he perceived the city as a threatening place ("misto ce, velyke i strašne").¹⁹ Thematically and formally the poems were faithful echoes of Ukrainian Modernism, reflecting intimate knowledge of O. Oles', H. Čuprynka, and M. Voronyj. The influence of Ševčenko and folk poetry was also plainly visible ("I lynut' dni, i lynut' roky," or "ljutuje burja, serce stohne"). The poems reflected the characteristic ambivalence of Ukrainian Modernism: should the poet serve Beauty or Country? Thus in one poem Semenko declares, "Ja xoču žyt', žyttju j krasi vsmixatys' [I want to live and smile at life and beauty]." But in another he confesses, "Xočet'sja plakat' za volju zakutuju [I want to weep for our enchained freedom]"; and in yet another, "Tjažko v nevoli spivaty [It is hard to sing in captivity]."

Despite its weaknesses, *Prélude* was reviewed by the leading Modernists of the time: M. Voronyj, H. Čuprynka, and M. Sribljans'kyj (Šapoval).²⁰ Voronyj was the most critical of the three. Questioning whether the collection was the work of a real poet or a "scribbler" (*viršomaz*), Voronyj made several harsh, but accurate, remarks about the caliber of Semenko's verse; he tempered his criticism, however, by referring to the inevitable naiveté of an overeager beginner. Sribljans'kyj and Čuprynka were more favorably disposed: like Voronyj, they pointed out Semenko's failures, but they praised and encouraged him, as well. Čuprynka wrote, "*Prélude* is weak, but it testifies to an undeniable literary talent, although one which is uncultivated and rough" (p. 381). Sribljans'kyj added that certain poems in the collection could, with a little work, become true jewels ("blysnuty bryljantamy"). In short, while Semenko's appearance as a Modernist poet was not greeted with hosannas, he was recognized as a writer with some potential.

This judicious and essentially kind welcome was the only calm reception that Semenko's poetry received for years to come. In 1914 Semenko published two new collections which not only officially inaugurated

¹⁹ These and the following quotations are taken from M. Semenko, *Kobzar* (Xarkiv, 1925).

²⁰ M. Voronyj's review (signed "M. Y—ko") appeared in *Literaturno-naukovyj visnyk*, 1913, no. 6, pp. 571–74. Čuprynka's was published in *Ukrajins'ka xata*, 1913, no. 7–8, p. 506.

Ukrainian Futurism, but set the stage for a scandal without parallel in Ukrainian literary history.

The scandal broke out with the publication of the first collection, *Derzannja*, and was fueled by the appearance, shortly afterwards, of the second, *Kvero-futuryzm*. Their strong impact was fully warranted: in almost every respect, the collections defied Modernist sensibilities. Instead of being quietly introspective, they were gleefully extroverted; instead of assuming a “poetic” stance, they were often blatantly prosaic and coarse; instead of dealing with eternal questions, they focused on banalities. In the two new collections Semenko evinced a healthy irony and self-mockery. His disarming sincerity (“V mojim žytti nemaje zmistu”) humanized his rhetorical egotism, as in the following instance, when he publicly acknowledged men who had inspired him:

Ще нижче поклонись! Ще кланяйся, кланяйся
Вони здобутки всі зараз тобі дали —
І Ігорь, і Бальмонт, і Білий, і Чурлянціс —
Всі хором, і ретельно так, гули:
Семенко — кланяйся, кланяйся!
— Ні, не схильюсь. . . .²¹

The poetic paraphernalia of Futurism was present, but it was devoid of the deadly earnestness that had marred Semenko’s Modernist poems. The collections’ “trans-sense” verse appeared to be almost a humorous game, written to satisfy some unspoken rule of Futurism, rather than a true experimentation with sounds in the spirit of Kručenyx or Xlebnikov.²²

The collections had forewords which were, in effect, manifestos of Semenko’s new literary stance. More than the poetry itself, they caused the great furor. Because the forewords are extremely important, largely unavailable, and frequently misquoted, excerpts from the original are provided below. The first, from the collection *Derzannja*, bore the title “Sam” [Alone]:

Ей ти, чоловіче, слухай сюди! Та слухай же — ти, чудовий цілком! Я хочу сказати тобі декілька слів про мистецтво й про те, що до нього стосується — тільки декілька слів. Не має нічого ліпшого, як розмовляти з тобою про мистецтво, чоловіче. Я беруся руками за боки й регочуся. Я весь тремчу від сміху — вигляд твій чудовий, чоловіче! Ой, та з тобою ж пекельно весело! . . . Ах, з тобою страшенно тоскно. . . . Я не хочу з тобою говорити. Ти підносиш мені засмальцованого “Кобзаря” й кажеш: ось моє мистецтво.

²¹ Semenko’s “Prytysnutyj,” *Kobzar*, p. 76.

²² See Semenko’s poem “V stepu,” *Kobzar*, p. 79.

Чоловіче, мені за тебе соромно . . . Ти підносиш мені заязовані мистецькі "ідеї" й мене канудить. Чоловіче. Мистецтво є щось таке, що тобі й не снилось. Я хочу тобі сказати, що де є культ, там немає мистецтва. А передовсім воно не боїться нападів. Навпаки. В нападах воно гартуєся. А ти вхопивсь за свого "Кобзаря," від якого тхне дьогтем і салом, і думаєш, що його захистить твоя пошана. Пошана твоя його вбила. Й нема йому воскресення. Хто ним захоплюєся тепер? Чоловік примітивний. Як раз вроді тебе, показником якого є "Рада." Чоловіче. Час титана перевертає в нікчемного ліліпута і місце Шевченкові в записках наукових товариств. Поживши з вами відстаєш на десятиріччя. Я не приймаю такого мистецтва. Як я можу шанувати тепер Шевченка, коли я бачу, що він є під моїми ногами? Я не можу, як ти, на протязі місяців витягувати з себе жили пошани до того, хто, будучи сучасним чинником, є зъявищем глибоко відразливим. Чоловіче. Я хочу тобі сказати, що в сі дні, коли я отсе пишу, гидко взяти в руки нашу часопись. Як би я отсе тобі не сказав, що думаю, то я б задушився в атмосфері вашого "широго" українського мистецтва. Я бажаю йому смерти. Такі твої ювілейні свята. Отсе все, що лишилось від Шевченка. Але не можу й я уникнути сього святкування.

Я палю свій "Кобзарь."²³

²³ This quotation (orthographically unchanged) is from M. Jevšan's article "Suprema Lex": Slovo pro kul'turu ukrajins'koho slova," *Ukrajins'ka xata*, 1914, no. 3-4, pp. 272-73. *Derzannja* was not accessible. In translation the manifesto reads approximately as follows:

Hey, man, listen here! Listen here, I say. You're really strange, man. I'd like to tell you a few words about art and about those things that pertain to it, just a few words. There can't be anything better than talking with you about art, man. I grab hold of my sides and laugh. I shake with laughter. Your appearance is strange, man! Oh, you're funny as hell.

Ah, it's terribly boring to be with you. . . . I don't want to talk to you. You raise your greasy *Kobzar* and say: here is my art. Man, I'm embarrassed for you. . . . You bring me debased "ideas" of art and it makes me sick. Man, art is something you haven't even dreamt of. I want to tell you, that where there is a cult, there is no art. And most importantly, it [art] doesn't fear attack. Quite the contrary. It is strengthened when attacked. But you've grabbed your *Kobzar*, which smells of wagon grease and lard, and you think that your reverence will protect it. Your reverence has killed it and there is no way to resurrect it. Who is enthusiastic about it [the *Kobzar*] now? Primitive men, precisely of your type, who read [the newspaper] *Rada*. Man, time turns Titans into worthless Lilliputians, and their place now is in the annals of scholarly institutions. Living among you, one falls decades behind the times. I don't accept that type of art. How can I revere Ševčenko, when I see that he is under my feet? I can't be pulling veins of reverence from my body for months at a time the way you do for a man who, because he is a contemporary factor, is [therefore] a deeply repulsive phenomenon. Man, I want to tell you that right now, as I write this, I find it loathsome to pick up our papers. If I didn't tell you what's on my mind, then I'd choke in the atmosphere of your "sincere" Ukrainian art. I wish it would die. Such is your jubilee celebration. That's all there is left of Ševčenko. But, neither can I avoid my own celebration.

I burn my *Kobzar*.

The second is from *Kvero-futuryzm*:

Національну добу в мистецтві . . . ми вже перебули. . . Нам треба догнати сьогоднішній день. Тому плижжуємо. . . Хай наші батьки (що не дали нам нічого в спадщину), втішаються «рідним» мистецтвом, доживаючи з ним вкупі, ми, молодь, не подамо їм руки. Доганяймо сьогоднішній день!²⁴

The reaction to Semenکو's blatantly provocative attitude was extreme. At first, the poet's debut as a Futurist was officially ignored: newspapers refused to accept reviews of the collections and bookstores refused to stock them. One critic wrote that Semenکو had become a leper ("stav prokažennym"),²⁵ and another reported that "some sincere Ukrainian even boasted that he would 'punch Semenکو in the snout.'"²⁶ At last, however, *Ukrajins'ka xata* broke the conspiratorial silence. The initial attack was the article "'Suprema Lex'" by M. Jevšan (Fedjuška).²⁷ Shortly afterwards, M. Sribljans'kyj joined in the fray with a blistering attack on Semenکو in "Etjud pro futuryzm."²⁸ Referring to it years later, Jakiv Savčenko said that "even from the point of view of the most elementary ethics one cannot imagine a more shameful and unacceptable criticism than Sribljans'kyj's."²⁹ Sribljans'kyj reiterated some elements of the attack in a one-page review of *Kvero-futuryzm* which appeared in the same issue of *Ukrajins'ka xata* as his article.

Jevšan and Sribljans'kyj had utter contempt for Semenکو's new literary style. Both critics called him an "idiot" and his verse "idiotic stuttering." Jevšan compared Semenکو's poetry and theories to spitting in a reader's face (p. 272), and scorned him as an *intelligent* who "having produced nothing himself, mocks his native language, national music, poetry, literature" (p. 274). Sribljans'kyj declared Semenکو's poetry "brigandage — not literature" and characterized his language as the ravings of a "degenerate" (p. 464). "Impudence, not boldness" is how Sribljans'kyj defined the title of the collection *Derzannja*.

²⁴ Quoted from O. Doroškevyč, *Pidručnyk istoriji ukrajins'koji literatury*, 2nd ed. (Kiev, 1926), p. 290 (*Kvero-futuryzm* was not accessible to me). The passage translates as follows:

We have already covered the national (*nacional'nyj*) period in art. . . . We must overtake the present. Therefore let us leap forward. . . . Let our fathers (who have left us nothing to inherit) make merry with their own native art and end their last days with it; we, the young, will not stretch out our hands to them. Let us overtake the present!

²⁵ Jakiv Savčenko, "Myxajl' Semenکو: 'P'jero zadajet'sja,'" *Literaturno-krytyčnyj al'manax*, bk. 1 (Kiev, 1918), p. 28.

²⁶ Bohac'kyj, *S'ohočasni literaturni prjamuvannja*, p. 35.

²⁷ See fn. 23. Subsequent references are indicated by page numbers in the text.

²⁸ See fn. 17. Subsequent references are indicated by page numbers in the text.

²⁹ Savčenko, "Myxajl' Semenکو," p. 28.

Especially reprehensible to the attackers was Semenکو's insolent attitude towards Ševčenko. The phrases "Ševčenko is under my feet" and "I burn my *Kobzar*" were angrily condemned. "The greatest hypocrisy . . . a lie," cried Sribljans'kyj: "The burning of the *Kobzar* is not the boldness of a hero, but the villainy of a brigand" (p. 464). Sribljans'kyj's wrath culminated with this hysterical onslaught:

One could probably remain calm [in the face of this futuristic poetry] but the point is that this Semenکو is a symbol of Ukrainian reality. He protests against that which will not land him in prison. He is a typical Ukrainian: he does not know Ukrainian, he stutters *vn tk*,* presenting this as the future language. He is a symbol of Ukrainian disintegration and cynicism. He is a product of that patriotic villainy (*xamstvo*) which latches on to the newest slogans, not knowing their content; he fingers and smears them. . . . He does not understand that this poem "V stepu" is his soul. He is just like the famous painter-artist who boasted about the strength of his imagination by saying that he paints dung not from nature, but from memory. (p. 464)

Semenکو emerged from under Sribljans'kyj's pen as the archetype of chaos and the antagonist of all that is natural, freedom-loving, and beautiful. The tirade concluded with the hope that this evil would perish and that good would triumph again. In terms obviously borrowed from the Modernist repertoire of images, Sribljans'kyj portrayed his own ideals thus:

The future language will be the language of free people, not the limited scale of sounds [produced] by a degenerate. Let us become free people — then we will have a free, musical and flexible language which will sound forth in a symphony of magical sounds. This language will shine and burn in the eyes, will astound by the beauty of its gestures, will enthrall your body in bliss. The future language is Beauty. The future life is Beauty. This will be a language which will echo from the mouths of free people and not from contemporary impertinent scatterbrains, ignoramuses, savages with yellow shoes and protruding collars. . . .

. . . Free people will not bustle about, provoking, burning books, will not stand like simpletons on spread-eagled legs lolling out their tongues. . . . There will only be silence, filled with the sun's luster, the breathing of flowers, the sounds of unspoken poems, the beauty of rays crossing the air. . . . (pp. 464–65)

Compelled to mount his own defense, Semenکو reacted in terms that were sometimes equally harsh and offensive. His side of the battle, however, was waged primarily in verse. The most interesting counterattack, entitled "Prykryj stan" [A sad state of affairs], was written only a month after Sribljans'kyj's essay appeared:

* Refers to Semenکو's trans-sense poem "V stepu."

essay in 1924, when already an émigré, apparently without any qualms about its anachronism.³² (O. Slisarenko, then a Futurist, responded that just as an old maid who “loses hope of ever getting married rereads old love letters, so Sribljans’kyj delights in articles whose ‘earthly time has passed.’”)³³ Serhij Jefremov reiterated the negative opinions with particular success: the scathing assessment of Futurism in his popular history was almost certainly based on Sribljans’kyj’s essay.³⁴ Through Jefremov, Sribljans’kyj’s opinions spread in the emigration and resurfaced in derivative Western histories of Ukrainian literature.³⁵ Essentially, then, the standard view on Ukrainian Futurism in the West and in the Soviet Union came to share Sribljans’kyj’s three objections: namely, that Ukrainian Futurism is not literature (or, in a milder version, “bad” literature),³⁶ that it dishonored Ševčenko’s name,³⁷ and that it is not a “natural” phenomenon in Ukrainian culture but an artificial and alien transplant from Russian soil. The last argument became especially common and so deserves close examination.

In 1918, Oleksander Hruševs’kyj suggested that Futurism was antipathetic to Ukrainian traditions: “Futurism somehow has not been able to sink its roots deeply into the Ukrainian literary soil: the stable and durable traditions of Ukrainian literature have not given this literary ‘movement’ [the chance] to develop fully.”³⁸ Jurij Meženko argued along similar lines and concluded that Futurism was not suited to the Ukrainian temperament. Contrasting Futurism to Symbolism, Meženko noted that the latter had “somewhat of a tradition” and a “natural foundation” in the Ukraine, whereas the former did not. Futurism, he reasoned, “cannot naturally assume a place in Ukrainian poetry, which is tied to a nation whose psychology is constructive, not destructive, since, after all, there

³² M. Sribljans’kyj, *Etjud pro futuryzm* (Kam’janec’ na Podillju-Odesa: Drukarnja v-va “Čornomor” [Kališ tabor internovanyx], 1924).

³³ *Červonyj šljax* (Xarkiv), 1924, no. 11–12, pp. 306–307.

³⁴ Serhij Jefremov, *Istorija ukrajinskoho pys’menstva*, vol. 2 (Kiev and Leipzig, 1919 [1924]), pp. 386–89.

³⁵ E.g., Volodymyr Radzykevych, *Istorija ukrajins’koho literatury*, vol. 3 (Detroit, 1956), p. 88.

³⁶ Jefremov says that Semenکو “is not a writer . . . and his writings are not poetry, but simple and quite ordinary trickery,” p. 388. Later critics have called Semenکو’s work “vybryk” or “dyvadctvo.”

³⁷ This is a point almost no article or history fails to mention. It is one of the few universally known facts about Semenکو. L. Novyčenko’s statement can serve as an example: “M. Semenکو . . . in one of his poems (*sic*) blasphemously called for the . . . burning of the *Kobzar* of T. H. Ševčenko.” *Antolohija ukrajins’koho poeziji*, 3: 8.

³⁸ Quoted from his review of Semenکو’s “P”jero zadajet’sja. Fragmenty. Intymni poeziji. Knyha perša,” in *Literaturno-naukovyj visnyk*, bk. 2, 1918, p. 136.

really isn't anything to destroy."³⁹ This idea also made its way into later literature: for instance, the émigré scholar Volodymyr Radzykevych maintained that "Škurupij's poetry is proof of the unnaturalness and irrelevancy (*nedoladnosty*) of Ukrainian Futurism,"⁴⁰ and the Soviet scholar Aron Trostjanec'kyj insisted that "in general, for Ukrainian literature Futurism was an inorganic phenomenon and enthusiasm for it was short-lived."⁴¹ The noted Western critic Jurij Šerex wrote: "This [literary] current [i.e., Futurism] was not organic to Ukrainian literature."⁴²

The argument about the so-called inorganic nature of Semenko's work has become a convenient means of dismissing him and Futurism from the Ukrainian literary process. It is, in effect, a sleight-of-hand which obscures complex historical and literary issues while camouflaging prejudice. When the "organicity" argument is even slightly altered, as by the Soviet critic M. Rod'ko ("Besides, all these Kvero-futuristic innovations were nothing but the most common modifications of Russian Futurism"),⁴³ it becomes obvious that the real issue continues to be Russian influence or borrowing, just as it was with Sribljans'kyj. The presence of that element becomes reason enough to condemn or ignore Semenko as a poet.

Of course, Russian "influence" alone (as real as it was) cannot be grounds for discrediting Semenko's role in the Ukrainian literary process.⁴⁴ This argument is not only untenable, but falsely implies that Semenko can be reduced wholly to these "influences." In the 1920s, B. Jakubs'kyj dealt with this argument: "Russian influences . . . do not exhaust the content of Semenko's poetry: he is much more interesting, rich, and sincere [than that]."⁴⁵ Moreover, even if the "organicity" argument were to be taken at face value, it can still be proved, as we shall see, that Semenko's Futurism was not divorced from the Ukrainian milieu at all; that, in fact, it was nurtured by the Ukrainian intellectual atmosphere

³⁹ Quoted from Rod'ko, *Ukrajins'ka poezija peršyx požovtnevyx rokiv*, p. 177.

⁴⁰ V. Radzykevych, *Ukrajins'ka literatura XX stolittja* (Philadelphia, 1952), p. 91.

⁴¹ Škurupij, *Dveri v den'*, p. 5.

⁴² Strixa, *Parodezy. Zozendropija. Avtoekzekucija*, p. 262. Ivan Košelivec' objects to the "organicity" argument in his *Sučasna literatura v URSR*, p. 181.

⁴³ Rod'ko, *Ukrajins'ka poezija peršyx požovtnevyx rokiv*, p. 143.

⁴⁴ Claudio Guillén put the problem succinctly: "Obviously the discovery of an influence does not modify our appreciation or evaluation of a poem (although conventions may) and the analysis of these phenomena has precious little to do with any absolute scale of aesthetic values or broad survey of literary achievements." *Literature as System* (Princeton, N.J., 1971), p. 39.

⁴⁵ B. Jakubs'kyj, "Myxajl' Semenko," *Červonyj šljax*, 1925, no. 1–2, p. 247.

and appeared in response to specific Ukrainian literary and cultural problems.

III

Литературные скандалы закономерно сопровождают литературные революции.

Юрий Тынянов

Since Semenکو was originally a Modernist, it should not be surprising that Ukrainian Modernism laid the groundwork for his Futurism. Already long before Semenکو, Ukrainian literature had taken a sharp innovative turn as, in the late nineteenth century, it began to throw off the mantle of national introspection. West European literature steadily became the model by which new Ukrainian literary works were judged. Although the populist and “national” orientations refused to die, Ukrainian literature now unquestionably sought “universal” horizons. With the appearance of the Modernists (Mykola Voronyj and the “*Moloda muza*” group), pursuit of this goal accelerated, and attacks on tradition — particularly on socially and nationally “utilitarian” literature — increased. This led to the first scandal in Ukrainian literature, pitting the Modernists against the older, traditional writers and critics (i.e., Franko, Jefremov). Ukrainian Modernism did not attain European or Russian levels of “decadence” at the time, but the new writers did loosen the fabric of tradition and, to an extent, did legitimize “non-conformity.” Certainly, *Ukrajins’ka xata* could not have appeared without this prior transformation in Ukrainian culture.

By the 1900s, then, inherent radicalizing forces were at work in the Ukrainian literary process, and they became the soil on which Ukrainian Futurism took root. Šerex may be correct in saying that the non-urbanized Ukraine was not an ideal place for the flowering of Futurism (a movement “as a rule connected with urbanism”), but he, like others, is incorrect in concluding that Futurism was therefore “inorganic” in Ukrainian literature. Such a conclusion gives too much weight to economic factors and undervalues the intellectual and literary milieu that, after all, plays a more important role in such matters. Despite the low level of urbanization, the intellectual and literary preconditions for Futurism’s rise did exist in the Ukraine. The journal *Ukrajins’ka xata*, together with its two major critics, was highly instrumental in creating these conditions.

In her reminiscences about *Ukrajins'ka xata*, Halyna Žurba mentions that “Marinetti and his Futurism” was one of the “burning issues”⁴⁶ which concerned her and Sribljans'kyj. This is an indication that Futurism was not entirely alien to Ukrainian writers. More generally, Žurba shows that some literary figures — for instance, Hnat Xotkevych and Hryhorij Čuprynka — lived in the kind of “bohemian” and “decadent” atmosphere associated with Futurism. Her portrait of Hryhorij Čuprynka — which has a curious resemblance to descriptions of Semenko in his later Futurist period⁴⁷ — is of particular interest:

In the corner, stiff and silent, sat Hryc'ko Čuprynka. He was tall, lean, and bald, with two tufts of hair on his temples. The face was gray, mute, without any moustache; the lips were narrow, compressed, the eyes, gray and cold. Probably, he felt ill-at-ease in this company without drinking, without scandalous activity. Nevertheless, he survived till the very end, without engaging in any extravagance. He was an anarchic type, who had grown up on wild, steppe-like, and poorly cultivated soil. He walked about in a long black cape, a black, brimmed hat from beneath which he stared like Rinaldo Rinaldini. He liked to give himself airs. Nevertheless, later, during the liberation struggle, he showed character and patriotism and knew how to die for the Ukraine with rifle in hand.⁴⁸

This individual idiosyncrasy was matched by ideological originality. *Ukrajins'ka xata* was deeply imbued with the spirit of avant-gardism and revolt, as Žurba correctly points out:

Ukrajins'ka xata was at that time the most progressive revolutionary platform for the young, a platform for their protest, revolt against all types of stagnation (*zaskoruzlist'*), lack of principle, political opportunism. It consisted of an uncompromising political-literary group. . . . Its belligerent style occasionally took on a very sharp tone in the war with the conservative camp of Čykalenko-Jefremov.⁴⁹

No one was more belligerent than Sribljans'kyj and Jevšan. These critics were strongly influenced by the works of O. Kobyljans'ka and, especially, by her Nietzschean attitudes. Their fondness for a “higher order of men” made them quick to devalue earlier Ukrainian cultural achievements, which they viewed as the weak products of an uncrystallized Ukrainian national spirit. Their antagonism to the past was expressed in ways that rivaled some of Futurism's most extreme statements.

⁴⁶ Halyna Žurba, “Vid ‘Ukrajins'koji xaty’ do ‘Muzahetu,’” *Slovo: Zbirnyk 1* (New York, 1962), p. 440.

⁴⁷ Jurij Smolyč gives us glimpses of Semenko's character in *Rospovid' pro nespokij* (Kiev, 1968), and *Rozpovid' pro nespokij tryvaje* (Kiev, 1969). See also Klym Poliščuk, *Z vyru revoljuciji* (Lviv and Kiev, 1923), pp. 12, 14.

⁴⁸ Žurba, “Vid ‘Ukrajins'koji xaty’ do ‘Muzahetu,’” p. 445.

⁴⁹ Žurba, “Vid ‘Ukrajins'koji xaty’ do ‘Muzahetu,’” pp. 437–38.

For example, in 1913, reacting to M. Hruševs'kyj's *Kul'turno-nacional'nyj rux v XVII st. na Ukrajinі*, Sribljans'kyj declared:

There is no culture in our past. . . . We shall not bow, the way the patriots demand, to our forefathers, who have left us only one inheritance — their stupidity, lack of principle, barbarism, and darkness. We shall not honor their “uncultured culture,” we shall not bow in front of their art. This is something we do not need, while that which we do need our forefathers have not created and have not given to us. . . . We have no forefathers worthy of honor and the unworthy of honor are useless to us.⁵⁰

Jevšan, too, was capable of similar outcries. In a comment on the contemporary literary scene, Jevšan ridiculed “Ukrainian” art in terms not unlike Semenko’s:

And so the drunken mob of buffoons rushes forward somewhere and bursts into insane laughter, [all] under the banner of “Ukrainian” art. . . . And one is convinced for the *n*th time, that in all these works there is often no sign of creative thought, [nor] even of the intensity that would indicate some sort of broader interest; there is absolutely no desire to venture out from one’s own warm corner where everything happens easily, of its own accord.⁵¹

Both Jevšan and Sribljans'kyj despaired over what they perceived as the narrowness, provincialism, and superficiality of Ukrainian literature. They were offended by the literature’s effeteness as art and, especially, as ideology. They resented its portrayal of suffering, meekness, and helplessness without posing a solution. They emphasized that literature must be liberating and stimulate change, that it must heal the “maimed” human soul and, rather than avoid life, “enter it boldly.”⁵² Characteristically, Jevšan deplored the fact that there was “no protest, no struggle”⁵³ in contemporary literature. He was pleased to discover Čuprynka’s poem “Do svojix,” just because it contained the line “bunt dlja buntu [revolt for the sake of revolt].”⁵⁴

⁵⁰ Quoted from P. Bohac'kyj, M. Šapol, A. Žyvtok, *Ukrajins'ka xata (1909–1914)* (New York, 1955), p. 14.

⁵¹ M. Jevšan, *Kudy my pryjšly* (Lviv, 1912), pp. 10, 12.

⁵² This is a leitmotif which recurs constantly in *Ukrajins'ka xata*. It is especially evident in the following articles: M. Sribljans'kyj, “Pro Domo Sua,” *Ukrajins'ka xata*, 1909, no. 7–8, pp. 413–31, and M. Jevšan, “Problemy tvorčosty,” *Ukrajins'ka xata*, 1910, no. 1, pp. 24–31.

⁵³ Jevšan, *Kudy my pryjšly*, p. 31.

⁵⁴

ДО СВОЇХ . . .

З громадського багна, багно літературне
зробили ви . . .

П. Куліш.

Я не співець свого народу, —
Він сам поет своїх страждань, —

Undoubtedly, this vigor of spirit had a significant effect on Semenko's own development as a poet. In many respects the poetry he wrote after *Prélude* fulfilled Sribljans'kyj's and Jevšan's critical desiderata admirably. The poems of 1913 (which were grouped in Semenko's *Kobzar* under the title "Najivni poezijky") attest that Semenko had begun moving away from the melancholy and retiring tones of his *Prélude* to more assertive and even rebellious positions. The interesting fact here is that as Semenko's rebelliousness grew, so did the Futurist elements in his poems. This strongly suggests that Semenko evolved towards Futurism largely on the basis of attitudes prevalent in *Ukrajins'ka xata* and that Futurism acted as their natural complement and logical conclusion. Even in his Futurist manifestos, Semenko referred to basic concerns first voiced by *Ukrajins'ka xata* (consider his attack on the newspaper *Rada*, the leading opponent of *Ukrajins'ka xata*, and his rejection of the "fathers" and their art).

Semenko's evolution from Modernist melancholy through *Ukrajins'ka xata*'s rebelliousness to Futurism is traceable in the poems he wrote during the last months of 1913. The poem below, written on October 9, is still pervaded by characteristically Modernist dejection and sadness. Only the title, "Najivni poezijky," suggests that Semenko may possess a new-found irony:

Ой люлі люлі любий світ
 прийми сутінний мій привіт
 І ледве чую запитання:
 Скажи, що краще літа є?
 Що краще є лісів зелених,
 Степів шовкових, запашних,
 Буяння пахощів південних,
 Пташок веселих, голосних?

Я славлю небо, славлю вроду
 І пал душевних поривань.

Краса зостанеться красою,
 Хоч і в занепаді вона,
 Я окроплю її сльозою,
 Я вирву цвіт її з багна.

Коли ж нема нового ґрунту
 І животворної роси,
 Я кину лозунг — бунт для бунту
 Своім гнобителям краси.

Hryhorij Čuprynka, *Tvory* (Prague, 1926), p. 71. Jevšan quotes this poem in *Kudy my pryjšly*, pp. 50–51.

Лечу від вас, але плекаю
 У серці думку — чи сказати?
 В похмурі дні будете, знаю,
 Ви літа теплого чекать.
 Я ледве чую запитання,
 Все тихше промінь в очі б'є.
 Сонце всміхається востаннє —
 Скажи, що краще літа є!⁵⁵

The poem “Ja jdu,” written on November 24, heralds a definite change in Semenکو’s attitudes:

Я йду від вас — ланцюг скидаю,
 Що ваше — вам віддаю.
 Беріте попіл — все, що маю,
 Душу лише мені мою.
 В майбутнє я пішов — стежками,
 Якими звірі у свій час йшли.
 Ми вже одкреслені смужками —
 Ми ріжні, ми розійшлись.
 Дякую за історію і за хліб.
 Також за кохання й млу ночей.
 Від світла нового я осліп —
 Я не бачу своїх очей.
 Я кидаю вас — ланцюг скидаю,
 До своїх залізних спішу.
 Беріте попіл — все, що маю.
 Я світ новий оголошу.⁵⁶

Although vague in the Modernist fashion, “Zaklyk,” written on November 25, echoes Sribljans’kyj’s irreverent cry against all “ancestors.” A number of its elements suggest Semenکو’s imminent transformation:

Гартуйте дух. Пора на волю.
 Тікають степом вороги.
 Не нарікати нам на долю.
 Огляньмось сміло навкруги.
 Нас тіни *предків* не злякають
 Забуті генії хай сплять.
 Хай в тузі нас вони втішають,
 Як б'ється серце гріх мовчать.

⁵⁵ *Kobzar*, p. 53.

⁵⁶ *Kobzar*, p. 55.

Гартуйте дух. Пора на волю
 Лунає полем передзвін
 Ми завоюєм свою долю
 Огнем червоним творчих змін.
 Нема нам вартостей взамін
 І пал живий нас в пущі водить
 А на руїнах сірих стін
 Уже трава зелена сходить.
 Гартуйте дух. Пора на волю.
 Тікають степом вороги.
 Не нарікати нам на долю
 Огляньмось сміло навкруги!⁵⁷

Two days after “Zaklyk,” Semenکو composed “Poezopisnja,”⁵⁸ a poem hailing the “kingdom of eternal change (*carstvo vičnyx zmin*).” Its very title points toward Futurism (and, more precisely, Severjanin). By December 8, Futurist elements became more pronounced: completed on that day was “Počatok,” a poem with an awkward but significant mixture of Modernist images, Futurist neologisms, and ideological attitudes reminiscent of Jevšan and Sribljans’kuj:

Живущосмілими екстазами
 Ми ваші душі враз напоємо,
 Безмежнодивними фантазами
 Всі виразки на вас загосємо.
 Ми не прийшли з мозками хорими —
 Наші чуття життям наповнені,
 А наші думи світозорими
 Новими темами оздоблені.
 Співожиття прожить дуетами —
 Це наші маріння загадані,
 І сміло, сміло йдем з поезаами,
 Як ваші сни ясні, негадані.
 І не страшні нам ваші накрики
 І осуд рабського обурення, —
 З вами не вмруть бо наші заклики,
 Нудних шаблєонів смілі буріння.
 І прийде час — свої фантази ми
 У храм прекрасний перетворимо,

⁵⁷ *Kobzar*, p. 57.

⁵⁸ *Kobzar*, p. 59.

А ПОТІМ СОНЯШНОЕКСТАЗАМИ
ЩОСЬ НА РУІНАХ ЗНОВ УТВОРИМО.⁵⁹

These four pre-Futurist poems, while hardly masterful, are valuable historically because they mirror Semenko's efforts to break new literary terrain. The poems also show how the call for change and renewal by the critics of *Ukrajins'ka xata* was eventually translated into and identified with Futurism. If nothing else, these poems show that Semenko's Futurism was an extension (an "organic" extension, if you will) of the journal's Modernism, not an alien or sudden violation of Ukrainian tradition.

A certain traditionalism is evident in Semenko's outburst against Ševčenko, too. If examined closely, the attack appears far less scandalous than it was first taken to be. Here, too, Semenko seems to have amplified an idea which was not new. P. Kuliš, M. Drahomanov, and I. Franko had already attempted, in one way or another, to strip Ševčenko of some of his sanctity and absolute poetic authority. Semenko's iconoclastic statements take on an altogether different and gentler light in this context, particularly if they are compared to Drahomanov's statements in his *Ševčenko, ukrajinfily j socijalizm* (1879): "The *Kobzar* has already outlived its time — 'ein überwundener Standpunkt,' as the Germans say. And moreover: the *Kobzar* is, in many respects, a seed which has been left lying in the storehouse and did not perform the service it ought to have while it was yet fresh, and today it is of little service."⁶⁰ And, at another point:

Litanies, particularly litanies said after the death of a saint, bring little benefit and a lot of harm to people. And perhaps no one is harmed more by litanies than we, the semibarbarians of Eastern Europe. Let us remember that Russian literature began to grow in earnest only after Belinskij pointed out that Russia has no real literature, that Puškin by himself does not constitute a literature and that there is no real need as yet to pray to him. It is time that someone or other would perform a similar service for Ukrainian literature in respect to Ševčenko, particularly because the Ukrainophiles for a long time now have exalted him as a writer and as a leader in social endeavors. But from all this exaltation the Ukrainian cause, whether literary or social, has not progressed very far.⁶¹

In 1901 Franko derided those who continued to identify Ukrainian literature exclusively with Ševčenko, as if no real literature were written after

⁵⁹ *Kobzar*, p. 64.

⁶⁰ Myxajlo Drahomanov, *Literaturno-publicystyčni praci u dvox tomax* (Kiev, 1970), vol. 2, p. 100.

⁶¹ Drahomanov, *Literaturno-publicystyčni praci*, 2: 97. For the scandalous effect these words had, see I. Franko's introduction to M. Drahomanov, *Ševčenko, ukrajinfily j socijalizm*, 2nd ed. (Lviv, 1906), pp. iii–iv.

him.⁶² In 1911 Jevšan addressed the problem, warning that the uncritical adoration of Ševčenko was dangerous both for the great poet and for Ukrainian society (note the similarity to Semenko's manifesto):

Every year we organize all kinds of concerts and evening meetings; we pronounce that "the Ukraine lives on" and say that in doing so we honor the memory of Ševčenko.

Such official celebration of Ševčenko has not advanced us one step forward, has not brought us closer to the poet and his ideas; it has only taught us lies!!

. . . We have not yet learned anything from Ševčenko, we only deceive ourselves. We systematically insult not only his memory, but everything that is beautiful, good, and holy, everything that governs the life of nobler souls.⁶³

Sribljans'kyj himself wrote a scathing attack against cult-mongers of this type, charging that "Nowhere does the mob show its hypocrisy and villainy better than in a cult [devoted to] its 'prophet' and 'martyr.'"⁶⁴

It is in this reformist spirit that Semenko's own manifesto must be understood. Like Jevšan, Semenko was reacting against those whose ignorance had made Ševčenko repulsive to "nobler souls" (it should be remembered that the manifesto pictured Ševčenko's apologist as a conservative and "primitive man"). Contrary to what critics have maintained for over half a century, Semenko's manifesto is not an attack on Ševčenko, but, as Semenko clearly says, primarily a statement "about art and about those things that pertain to it."⁶⁵ Semenko's assault on the Ševčenko cult (" . . . your jubilee celebrations. That's all that is left of Ševčenko") is only an elaboration of his main point.

In *Derzannja* Semenko called for the revitalization of literature and the abandonment of exhausted literary forms. His attitude towards Ševčenko's work per se was basically positive: for instance, Semenko counted Ševčenko among the "Titans" of art. By saying that great art had nothing to fear, he implied that Ševčenko, as a great poet, had nothing to fear from being "burned." Clearly, Semenko did not regard the *Kobzar* as bad art, only as anachronistic. In his view, the constant idealization of the

⁶² Cf. I. Franko, "Naša poezija v 1901 roci," *Tvory v dvadcaty tomach*, vol. 16 (Kiev, 1955), pp. 333–34.

⁶³ M. Jevšan, *Taras Ševčenko* (Kiev, 1911), pp. 6–7.

⁶⁴ M. Sribljans'kyj, "Poet i jurba: Do xarakterystyky 'kul'tu Ševčenka,'" *Ukrajins'ka xata*, 1910, no. 3, p. 28.

⁶⁵ Consider with what consistency Semenko emphasizes that art is his main concern: "There is nothing better than talking with you about art. . . . You raise your greasy *Kobzar* and say: here is my art. . . . You bring me debased 'ideas' of art. . . . Art is something you haven't even dreamt of. . . . Where there is a cult, there is no art. . . . [Art] doesn't fear attack. . . . I don't accept that type of art. . . . I'd choke in the atmosphere of your 'sincere' Ukrainian art."

Kobzar testified more to petrified literary forms and tastes than to patriotism. Ševčenko was understood to be a “repulsive phenomenon” when the philistine, ignoring the need for literary evolution, proffered his *Kobzar* as a model for contemporary artists and consequently made Ukrainian art fall “decades behind the times.” In short, Semenko was rejecting not Ševčenko, but the backwardness and philistinism that Ševčenko’s cult and the newspaper *Rada* symbolized. The work Semenko burned was not the *Kobzar* of the Titan Ševčenko, but the “greasy” *Kobzar* of the cult formed in his name. His gesture aimed to purify, not to destroy.⁶⁶

* * *

If the foregoing resolves one issue — Futurism’s “organicity” in Ukrainian literature — it also raises important other issues. If Semenko had fairly deep roots in both the immediate and less immediate Ukrainian tradition, why did Sribljans’kyj and Jevšan consider him alien to that tradition? If Semenko had so much in common with the two critics, why did they reject him so violently? The answers lie in the divergence of views about the purpose and function of literature.

Semenko’s Futurist manifesto showed an intrinsic interest in literature as art. For Semenko, the question of art’s modernity or quality loomed larger than the question of its social, national, or political function. In this respect, he remained true to early Ukrainian Modernism, which emphasized the formal aspect of art and had an antipathy for “socially committed” works. The critics who published in *Ukrajins’ka xata* held virtually antithetical ideals and were thus obliged to find Semenko’s literary orientation unacceptable. Contrary to widespread opinion, the views maintained in *Ukrajins’ka xata* were not a more radical extension of the earliest Modernist trends (i.e., of the positions of Voronyj and the “Moloda muza”). If anything, the journal backed away from the radical literary principles of early Modernism. Opinions that the *Ukrajins’ka*

⁶⁶ Ševčenko remained an important topic in later Futurist writings, as well. Especially in the late 1920s, during the period of *Nova generacija*, the Futurists engaged in a concerted effort to “rehabilitate” Ševčenko, i.e., to liberate him from the cult. *Nova generacija* published a series of poems under the heading “Rehabilitacija Ševčenska,” including one by O. Korž which strongly suggested that contemporaries viewed Semenko’s “attack” on Ševčenko primarily as a blow against the cult rather than against the poet himself. Korž wrote: “I ja, / i ja tak samo, / odverto / skažu za M. Semenom, / ščo nyny / je / pid mojimy nohamy / Taras Hyrhorovyč Ševčenko. / Ne poet i revoljucioner, a — / mityčnyj / bat’ko-božok / tyx dlja koho / i šče ne vmerla / krajina / syvyx šapok. . .” (“Xorobryj tovaryš,” *Nova generacija*, 1929, no. 10, p. 17).

xata group “parted ways much more radically” with the ideas of Franko and Jefremov “than [did] the ‘*Moloda muza*’ poets,”⁶⁷ or proclamations that “the Kievan *Ukrajins’ka xata* group carried forward the work of the ‘*Moloda muza*’ group, developing their ideological-aesthetic program to the extreme”⁶⁸ are wholly overstated.

If there is truth in the above statements, it lies only in the use of the words “extreme” and “radical.” These terms are not applicable to *Ukrajins’ka xata*’s literary program, however, but only to its political and national ideology. Much more nationalistically inclined than its predecessors, the *Ukrajins’ka xata* group resented the older generation’s tepid “Ukrainophilism,”⁶⁹ which, the group believed, could never create a true nation or culture. Its aesthetic program was largely contingent on this view and therefore, at heart, rather conservative. In many respects the group’s literary attitudes, while peculiarly their own, also coincided with those of the older generation, and were thus poles apart from the positions held by the early Modernists.

Like pre-Modernist writers, *Ukrajins’ka xata* adhered to the notion of a utilitarian literature. However, as Sribljans’kyj put it, theirs was to be a “higher utilitarianism,”⁷⁰ stronger, bolder, and more reformist than the impotent whining and do-goodism of the nineteenth century. The journal’s first issue stated the philosophy quite plainly:

This land cannot throw off its moral and material poverty. . . . This is understandable because the Ukraine is enmeshed in darkness, deprived of education and the light of reason. . . . *Literature and science — these are the mighty and far-sighted leaders which point at the horizon of a better future and show the path to it. . . . We believe that systematic, unwavering, and well-intentioned work will bring help and light into the dark Ukrainian home.*⁷¹ (emphasis mine)

Sribljans’kyj’s own article in the same issue made this position even more clear: “The decline of the Ukrainian nation necessarily forces Ukrainians to turn to the national literature (*nacional’ne pys’menstvo*) that alone can stir the people, [that can] lead them out of darkness and

⁶⁷ Bohdan Rubčak, “Probnij let: Tlo dlja knyhy,” in Jurij Luc’kyj, ed., *Ostap Luc’kyj — molodomuzec’* (New York, 1968), p. 40.

⁶⁸ *Istorija ukrajins’koji literatury u vos’mj tomax*, 5: 343.

⁶⁹ “*Ukrajins’ka xata* came out with a sharp critique of traditional petty actions and of the psychological remnants of so-called Ukrainophilism with its moderate liberalism, superficial democracy, loyalty, compromises, and orientation on alien social forces in the national liberation struggle.” Bohac’kyj et al., *Ukrajins’ka xata (1900–1914)*, p. 52.

⁷⁰ Sribljans’kyj, “Pro Domo Sua,” p. 418.

⁷¹ *Ukrajins’ka xata*, 1909, no. 1, pp. 2–5.

poverty onto the way of progress.”⁷² This was a far cry from early Modernists like Ostap Luc’kyj who pointedly objected to “social and patriotic tirades”⁷³ in literature, and others like Voronyj who paid “the greatest attention. . . to the aesthetic side of the work”⁷⁴ while agreeing with Baudelaire that “La poesie n’a pas la verité pour objet, elle n’a qu’elle-même.”⁷⁵ The early Modernists may not have always lived up to their manifestos, but that does not alter the fact that a great programmatic difference lay between them and the *Ukrajins’ka xata* group.

Although they opposed Modernism’s early ideological stance, Sribljans’kyj and Jevšan readily accepted the movement’s reforms in language, style, vocabulary, and imagery. They took it upon themselves to give these elements a new ideological orientation, and in so doing probably influenced many Modernist writers (which may partly explain the increase in patriotic themes in late Ukrainian Modernist poetry). At any rate, the literary views of *Ukrajins’ka xata* stood somewhere between the poetics of the early Modernists and the patriotic desiderata of Sribljans’kyj and Jevšan. Beauty and “socially-patriotic tirades” were no longer incompatible, as these lines from Voronyj’s own poem “Krasa” illustrate:

Мій друже, я красу люблю
Як рідну Україну.⁷⁶
/ My friend, I love beauty
As I love my dear Ukraine./

As his “Etjud pro futuryzm” shows, the only formal demands Sribljans’kyj then placed on poetry was that it be mellow and musical (p. 451), decent and elegant (p. 455). Aside from these vague qualities, the critic judged poetry according to how it reflected social and national aspirations: his remark that “Lepkyj’s poetry is of great value because it is a portrayal of the present sorrow of the Ukraine”⁷⁷ is typical. In other respects, Sribljans’kyj was scornful of “aesthetes, admirers of beauty and pure art,” whose increasing number he called “a real epidemic.” To him, “Modernist” was not a positive designation. He observed that “In the press and in literature the noble populists and patriots dominate,” and then added, “but the Modernists are creating a significant ruckus, as well” (p. 449).

⁷² *Ukrajins’ka xata*, 1909, no. 1, p. 24.

⁷³ Luckyj, *Ostap Luc’kyj — molodomuzec’*, p. 56.

⁷⁴ Mykola Voronyj, *Poeziji* (Xarkiv, 1929), p. 25.

⁷⁵ Voronyj, *Poeziji*, p. 324.

⁷⁶ Voronyj, *Poeziji*, p. 139.

⁷⁷ *Ukrajins’ka xata*, 1909, no. 1, p. 46.

Clearly Sribljans'kyj thought of Modernism as something separate from the literary views that *Ukrajins'ka xata* stood for. He admitted as much in later years:

Modernism in Ukrainian criticism refers to that current of literary-social thought that appeared in *Ukrajins'ka xata*. To a certain degree this is true. [It was] Modernism, but only in the sense of "newness," because *Xatjanstvo* never had anything to do with decadence in literature, nor with modernism in religion. Our modernism was a reappraisal of the Ukrainian movement, and our relationship to Ukrainian history, a reappraisal of our relationship to our revolutionary contemporaries, who created the 'revolution' of 1905, a reappraisal of our liberation ideology and the search for a new ideology of liberation.⁷⁸

It becomes quite apparent, then, why Semenko was so violently rejected. He and *Ukrajins'ka xata* shared a commitment to radicalism, but the journal's commitment was basically political in nature, whereas Semenko's was literary. For the most part *Ukrajins'ka xata* was interested only in reforming the "spirit" (*dux*) of Ukrainian literature, and it was glad to harness Modernism's achievements to achieve that goal. Consequently, it doomed itself to literary inertia. Semenko, on the other hand, went beyond merely "spiritual" reform (which he accepted) to embrace literary reform, as well. He chose the approach that best reflected this bold new spirit, namely, Futurism.

Žurba's reminiscences as well as Sribljans'kyj's own reviews of Semenko's work show that the critic was, in theory, favorably disposed towards Futurism. Yet it is equally obvious that he appreciated only Futurism's "spirit," not its literary manifestation nor, certainly, its "trans-sense" experiments. Sribljans'kyj perceived literature primarily through the prism of ideology, and so was mortified by Semenko's rejection of Ševčenko. The renunciation of Ševčenko as a literary model so logical to the aesthete Semenko was inconceivable to the ideologue Sribljans'kyj, who saw Ševčenko's work as virtually the only literature which expressed the "rebellious" spirit. For Sribljans'kyj, Ševčenko was an eternal, irreplaceable model; for Semenko, he was an outdated one. Sribljans'kyj condemned the Ševčenko cult only when its impotent "Ukrainophile" nature was evident; in other cases, where he perceived the cult as beneficial to the national ideal, he was its firm defender.⁷⁹ Semenko, on the

⁷⁸ Quoted from Bohac'kyj et al., *Ukrajins'ka xata (1909–1914)*, p. 35.

⁷⁹ In "Etjud pro futuryzm" Sribljans'kyj described Ševčenko as "the creative stimulus for the rebirth of man in the Ukraine." A few years earlier he had rejoiced that "Ševčenko's name is everywhere surrounded by a joyous cult, wherever there are conscious Ukrainians . . . and no wonder! His name is the very content of the Ukrainian idea (*ukrajinstvo*). . . . The *Kobzar* has primarily an *organizing* . . . *educational* meaning"

other hand, was indifferent to Ševčenko's political significance. And inasmuch as he believed the "national" period in Ukrainian *art* to have ended (the *Kvero-futuryzm* manifesto), he rejected the cult on the universalist principle that it irrevocably led to bad literature. In Semenko's view, therefore, the cult had two drawbacks: it blinded the reader to the "real" Ševčenko — i.e., to the poet — and it sanctioned imitation of his style.

The question of a "national" vs. "universal" literature posited in *Kvero-futuryzm* became another issue which stirred controversy between *Ukrajins'ka xata*, on the one hand, and the early Modernists and Semenko, on the other. By the time the literary scandal occurred, the journal was retreating from one of the most characteristic literary features of Modernism, namely, the West European orientation. Previously, Voronyj had urged Ukrainian writers to produce literature which would "in content and in form at least approximate the new currents and directions in contemporary European culture."⁸⁰ O. Luc'kyj's manifesto referred to works by Nietzsche, Ibsen, Maeterlinck, and Baudelaire as examples of what literature should be. When Semenko proclaimed his "Kvero-futuryzm," he was acting on this same premise. But Sribljans'kyj and Jevšan reacted to his "Europeanism" by calling for a return to "national" roots.

The issue dividing Semenko from the two critics was stated succinctly by Jevšan: "A new creativity, well and good. But on what basis (*na jakomu hrunti*)?"⁸¹ The critics' unequivocal answer was a resounding affirmation of the "national" foundation of literature. Both maintained that more was lost than gained by following "European fashions." Sribljans'kyj lamented: "We had all the most fashionable products of Europe, we discussed [Europe's] wisest words, but our Ukrainian cause — 'weeps like an orphan on the Dnieper'" (p. 463). Jevšan glanced at the "fashionable" literature and sighed: "It is a pity that there is no one who might defend the Ukrainian creative idea" (p. 272).

Jevšan argued that the problem with Ukrainian literature was that its

(emphasis his; *Ukrajins'ka xata*, 1909, no. 1, p. 4). Sribljans'kyj's view of Ševčenko is surprisingly similar to Franko's. Compare the following statement by Franko in 1905, defending Ševčenko from the so-called Moscowphiles: "For a long time now our Moscowphiles have considered undermining Ševčenko's cult in our society. By doing so they hope to deprive this society of its major source of idealism, which gives it the zeal to work and raises its members from simple consumers of bread to the dignity of men" ("Mistyfikacija čy idiotyzm," *Tvory v dvadcaty tomax*, 16: 344).

⁸⁰ Voronyj, *Poeziji*, p. 25.

⁸¹ Jevšan, "'Suprema Lex,'" p. 271.

writers had never created a “real” national literature. He accused the writers of the nineteenth century, whom he called “eunuch-Ukrainophiles,” of having killed Ukrainian national literature at its very inception (p. 270). The present dilemma in Ukrainian literature, according to Jevšan, stemmed from the fact that Ukrainian writers failed to follow the example of Kocjubyns’kyj’s *Fata Morgana*, Kobyljans’ka’s *Zemlja*, and Lesja Ukrajinka’s *Lisova piscnja*, which, again according to Jevšan, had all been attempts at creating a national literature. Instead, says Jevšan, writers turned to Europe and began writing about “nerves, coffeehouses, night life, and trolley cars” (!), completely forgetting about Ukrainian issues. Jevšan used Semenko to exemplify this betrayal, but he implied that Semenko was part of a larger problem: “Tens of thousands from among the Ukrainian intelligentsia in Galicia and Bukovyna mock the Ukrainian element (*styxija*)” (p. 274). Jevšan ended his article with these words:

This then is precisely the problem: the Ukrainian creative idea has begun to chase electric lamps, not having learned to examine life well in the light of the gas lamp. The blinding light has had a bad effect on the eyes and they squint and cannot discern the “nearest of objects.” The “nearest of objects” in literature is the culture of the native word, that natural soil without which every creative work must emerge stunted and useless. . . . Let us reach for that beauty which contains the soul and thoughts of the Ukrainian people!! (p. 277)

Sribljans’kyj was so exasperated by Semenko’s Europeanism that he called out: “My dear people, leave the latest words of Europe, and speak Ukrainian freely and loudly in your own home” (p. 463).

The gulf between Semenko and the two critics was enormous. In *Prélude*, Semenko had shown himself to be a Modernist of European orientation by his allusions to Villon, Musset, and Baudelaire. This tendency was developed even further in *Derzannja* and *Kvero-futuryzm*. In *Derzannja* he attacked “sincere” Ukrainian art; in *Kvero-futuryzm* he explicitly stated, “We desire, by means of an artificial movement (*stučnym ruxom*) to bring our art closer to those boundaries where universal art begins a new era.”⁸² Semenko not only aspired toward a universal art, but, moreover, he purposely criticized the “national” element in literature: for instance, “National traits in art are signs of its primitiveness.”⁸³ In a poem written in 1914 he characteristically said:

⁸² Quoted from Rod’ko, *Ukrajins’ka poezija peršyx požovtnevyx rokov*, p. 144.

⁸³ Rod’ko, *Ukrajins’ka poezija peršyx požovtnevyx rokov*, p. 144.

Немає нічого більш прекрасного
 Як сьогоднішній день.
 Я не дожену його тут
 Кожного дня застаюсь з-заду
 Тут між своїми
 Геть родичів — у серці моєму
 Місця немає рідному всьому —
 Рідним жити буду після 40 літ.
 Геть усе що спиняє мене
 Що шкодить моєму бігові
 Що душу мою елястичну старить!
 Лагідність тягне мене під рельси
 Благополучіє мене вбиває
 Не хочу слави тут
 Між своїми де за мішок
 Сміття та козацького вуса славу дадуть.
 Що мені за діло до Київа та родичів
 Коли про Семенка мусять марсіяне знать?⁸⁴

Semenko's identification of the "national" element with primitiveness was unexpectedly and inadvertently confirmed by Sribljans'kyj and Jevšan. Patriotism and nationalism led the two critics to consider Ukrainian elements the measure of a literary work's merit. Thus, the critics' legitimate desire for political and cultural independence became an illegitimate hunt for Ukrainianisms in literature. Because they had found nearly all the Ukrainian past lacking in the appropriate spirit, they could define "Ukrainianism" essentially only in terms of Ševčenko. Sribljans'kyj saw Ševčenko not only as an ideal from the past, but as the light of the future: "We have *only one* great, phenomenal, insanely brave, pathetic, tearful Ševčenko, who was buried with his fists clenched. We have *only one* futurist, *only one* promising, blameless Ukrainian," wrote Sribljans'kyj (emphasis mine, p. 463). In his view, even the peasants were preferable to certain literary innovators: "You understand that every one of our peasants is a thousand times more a Ukrainian than you [i.e., Semenko and Futurism], a Muscovite product" (p. 463). Years earlier a similar view had motivated Sribljans'kyj to declare that Ukrainian literature had no real national character. Ukrainian literature, he had written, "cannot be called 'Ukrainian' in the *national (narodn'omu)* sense" (emphasis in the original). He went on to say: "Sometimes this was even a good literature, but it was not national (*'ale ne narodnja (nacional'na)*')."

⁸⁴ Semenko, "Duže ščyra poezijka," *Kobzar*, pp. 101–102.

[There was no] 'Ukrainianism' in it, as this is understood in the popular (*norodn'omu*), peasant (*mužyc'komu*) world."⁸⁵

The *cul-de-sac* and faulty judgment this led to is graphically illustrated in Jevšan's article. Having rejected writers of Semenko's ilk, Jevšan turned to the ideas of Marija Proskurivna, a contemporary epigone of the dying ethnographic tradition (and, ironically, Semenko's mother!), and suddenly heralded this very minor and anachronistic writer as a literary reformer: "The soul rejoices, as if someone had brought into the stifling *city atmosphere* a bouquet of field flowers" (emphasis mine, pp. 274–75). The sensation was so pleasant, the Ukrainian elements in her works so attractive, that Jevšan was ready to suspend critical judgment: "The fresh, pleasant gust coming from this little book is so strong that one could even *overestimate* its literary qualities. Which wouldn't, after all, be a sin" (emphasis mine, p. 275). This reduction of Ukrainian culture to Ševčenko and the peasant milieu was, of course, hardly new. Ukrainian culture had always been conservative, for reasons which are not difficult to ascertain. As a culture under siege, its conservatism stressed those elements which most graphically and unambiguously defined Ukrainian life. Any breach of its eminently restricted but self-affirming boundaries was perceived as unpatriotic. Thus, when Franko looked towards Europe for literary models, or Kocjubyns'kyj wrote prose for the intelligentsia, or the Modernists devoted themselves to the principle of "beauty," they committed acts which were considered dangerous because they were not in some specific (usually thematic or ethnographic) way "Ukrainian."

The appearance of Semenko's Futurism and the reaction to it must be understood as part of this historical conservatism. It should be noted, too, that the inherent suspicion toward everything new (i.e., foreign) was especially aggravated in 1914 by the harsh repressions of the Russian government. Only months after the literary scandal broke, *Ukrajins'ka xata*, along with other Ukrainian journals, was banned, and one of its editors was exiled to Siberia.⁸⁶ Previously, the Russian government had forbidden the commemoration of the one-hundredth anniversary of Ševčenko's birth, which had triggered shockwaves of resentment in the Ukraine. Under such tense circumstances, Semenko's attack on the "national" principle in literature and his verbal burning of the *Kobzar* could readily have been misinterpreted as yet another instance of Rus-

⁸⁵ M. Sribljans'kyj, "Testimonium Paupertatis," *Ukrajins'ka xata*, September 1911, p. 407.

⁸⁶ See D. Dorošenko, *Moji spomyny pro nedavnye mynule, 1914–1920* (Munich, 1969), p. 21.

sian chauvinistic abuse. Sribljans'kyj came to precisely this conclusion: "The representatives of the two-headed eagle have burned the portrait of Ševčenko, and Semenko burned the *Kobzar*" (p. 457).

IV

Отже й Семенка в українській літературі не можна вважати за випадкове непорозуміння.

Ф. Якубський

Semenko was and continues to be the victim of a historical and literary misunderstanding. Far from being a "trickster," a "defamer" of Ševčenko, or a sower of "alien" literary fashions, Semenko was a literary reformer not unlike the earlier Voronyj and probably more important. He introduced Futurism into Ukrainian literature primarily as an attempt to remedy its rapidly deteriorating condition. Although critics such as Sribljans'kyj and Jevšan acknowledged Modernism's weakness (they often, indeed, referred to a crisis in Ukrainian literature), they viewed the problem as a deficiency in spirit and will, rather than in literary style and language. Modernism's failings as literature became fully apparent only after the Revolution, when such leading representatives as Čuprynka and even such outstanding ones as Oles' rapidly lost standing in the eyes of renowned critics.⁸⁷ Semenko must, therefore, be credited with giving both the earliest and the sharpest expression to the crisis, and with proposing a literary rather than an ideological solution.

Semenko's appearance in 1914 symbolized the end of one literary era as well as the beginning of another. His Futurism was the first of the many post-Modernist trends that were consciously committed to revitalizing Ukrainian literature and, in a broader sense, Ukrainian culture. This characteristic makes Futurism and Semenko the forerunners of the "renaissance" of the 1920s, particularly because the issues he raised in 1914 became staple fare in literary debates after the Revolution. The interest Semenko showed in modernizing Ukrainian art, the emphasis he placed on intrinsic literary problems, and the scorn he displayed toward provincial ("sincere") Ukrainian literature became of primary importance

⁸⁷ Cf. Fylypovyč's introduction to O. Oles', *Vybrani tvory*, 2nd ed. (n.p., 1929), reprinted in Pavlo Fylypovyč, *Literatura: Statti, rozvidky, ohljady* (New York, 1971). See also Mykola Zerov, "Poezija Olesja i sproba novoho jiji traktuvannja," in his *Do džerel* (State College, Pa., 1967), pp. 228–37.

in the next decade for such diverse literary groups as the Futurists and VAPLITE.

Doubtlessly Mykola Xvyl'ovyj recognized Semenko's role when he referred to him as a "tragic individual in the midst of our reactionary reality," and added, "for us the great 'peasant' Franko . . . is less important than the aesthete Semenko."⁸⁸ This statement, coming from one of Semenko's leading literary adversaries, can be considered a compliment as well as a strong indication that the so-called nationalist Xvyl'ovyj and the self-proclaimed internationalist Semenko had much more in common than normally meets the eye. It also helps to explain why, in the 1920s, writers such as M. Bažan, O. Slisarenko, and Ju. Špol could move from Futurism to VAPLITE without much self-contradiction. Some critics have interpreted their transition as yet another sign of Ukrainian Futurism's essential bankruptcy or inability to keep good writers. This is not so. It must be remembered that alongside the many similarities between Semenko and such groups as VAPLITE and the "Neoclassicists" stood one very important difference. Futurism was dedicated to an extreme avant-gardism, a relentless quest for the newest and most modern forms in art. The latter groups, on the other hand, were prone to fall back on more time-tested literary modes. Semenko was an avant-gardist, whereas his opponents were, so to speak, "Kulturträgers." Futurism's avant-gardist posture, "activism," and "antagonism"⁸⁹ necessarily kept the movement out of the literary mainstream, away from the majority of the reading public. To many writers this type of existence at the farthest outposts of literature — or, as the Futurists were fond of saying, "at the barricades" — became intolerable. Like Mykola Bažan, who began his literary career as a Futurist and then abandoned the movement, many writers "stopped dreaming about a new form of art, a thousand times more influential, stronger, and greater than the old."⁹⁰ They decided, instead, to give the sonnet and the ballad another try. VAPLITE suited such writers admirably: within the framework of this academy they could pursue many of Futurism's principles, without assuming its avant-gardist burdens.

In short, the great error of most critics has been to assume that Semenko and Ukrainian Futurism belonged to the same realm as VAPLITE, "Neoclassicism," "Lanka," or MARS.⁹¹ This assumption resulted in un-

⁸⁸ M. Xvyl'ovyj, *Dumky proty tečiji* (Xarkiv, 1926), p. 52.

⁸⁹ Renato Paggioli, *The Theory of the Avant-Garde* (Cambridge, Mass., 1969), pp. 27–40.

⁹⁰ "Zustrič na perexresnij stanciji: Rozмова tr'ox," in A. Lejtes and M. Jašek, *Desjat' rokov ukrajins'koji literatury, 1917–1927*, vol. 2 (Xarkiv, 1930), p. 368.

⁹¹ An exception was P. Bohac'kyj in his *S'ohočasni literaturni prjamuvannja* (1923).

favorable comparisons between those organizations and Futurism. But Semenko cannot be judged in this literary context. He is properly understood only within the avant-garde context of West European and Russian Futurism, Cubism, Constructivism, Dadaism, Expressionism, and even Surrealism. To judge him by other standards or theories is like judging abstract paintings by the standards of an earlier century.

Once this simple, yet important, fact is accepted, Semenko and Ukrainian Futurism take on a different aspect and their contribution to Ukrainian culture can begin to be correctly assessed. We may well have to reexamine the old, worn accusations that Semenko knew Europe and its trends less well than his "cultured" opponents: *Nova generacija* alone is enough to suggest that Semenko knew Europe (especially Germany) no less than did the "Kulturträgers." The main difference is that Semenko knew and advocated Europe in its most radical guises. In this respect he may well be considered the most European of his contemporaries and his movement one more important indicator of just how innovative Ukrainian literature became between 1914 and 1930. Ironically, Semenko and Futurism also prove how difficult it is for Ukrainian critical thought to keep abreast of developments in the arts, and how conservative and slow it has been in understanding its own literary process.

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