



The President and Fellows of Harvard College

The Modernist Ideology and Mykola Khvyl'ovyi

Author(s): OLEH S. ILNYTZKYJ

Source: *Harvard Ukrainian Studies*, Vol. 15, No. 3/4 (December 1991), pp. 257-262

Published by: [Harvard Ukrainian Research Institute](#)

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/41036430>

Accessed: 19/10/2014 06:15

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of the Terms & Conditions of Use, available at <http://www.jstor.org/page/info/about/policies/terms.jsp>

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.



Harvard Ukrainian Research Institute and The President and Fellows of Harvard College are collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to Harvard Ukrainian Studies.

<http://www.jstor.org>

The Modernist Ideology and Mykola Khvyl'ovyi

OLEH S. ILNYTZKYJ

The traditional division of Ukrainian literature into pre- and postrevolutionary periods, although valid and necessary, does tend to obscure the fact that literary borders between these two periods were more porous than most histories care to admit. Prerevolutionary trends persevered well into the new political era, giving the literary front a semblance of ideological and stylistic continuity for several years. The periodicals of 1917–1920 are a good testament of this. Journals like *Shliakh*, *Knyhar*, *Literaturno-krytychnyi al' manakh*, and *Muzahet* were in effect literary bridges that ferried modernist and quasi-symbolist writings (along with their representatives) into the 1920s. Even the first Soviet publications—*Mystetstvo* and *Shliakhy mystetstva*—did not escape this influence. Just how tenacious the modernist ideology was can be gauged from the article “Shukannia” (Searching), which appeared in December 1918 in *Literaturno-krytychnyi al' manakh*. The author, I. Maidan (D. Zahul) offers a rather hackneyed recitation of modernist verities, beginning, typically, by citing Edgar Allen Poe’s definition of poetry as “the rhythmical creation of beauty.” He insists that “every poet must be the creator of beauty,” that “Beauty is an absolute, an ideal,” and that the slogan “L’art pour l’art” “even now has not lost its relevance.” “An artist dare not pander to the tastes of the general public,” continues Zahul, railing simultaneously against “publicist-patriots” who demand patriotic works from novelists and force poets to write “dithyrambs in honor and glory of the nation, its past and its future.” “Many of our coryphaei,” he points out, “have gone into the service of this renaissance and thereby have abandoned pure, self-orienting art; they have become greater patriots than poets.” “No other literature has as much publicistic writing and, most of all, [so many] ethnographic elements as the Ukrainian.”¹ Variations on these themes were to appear again in *Muzahet* (May 1919) and elsewhere.

While such avowals of aestheticism and disparagement of the masses as appeared in Zahul’s article quickly become perilous in the new political climate, other elements of modernist ideology survived well intact among large groups of intellectuals. These people were invariably “elitists,”

¹ *Literaturno-krytychnyi al' manakh* (Kiev), bk. 1 (1918):22–25.

believed in a European orientation for Ukrainian culture, had visions of creating a sophisticated national art, and were determined to fend off all manifestations of provincialism and crudely utilitarian literature. They, it could be said, faced their own version of the old modernist bane—populism (*narodnytstvo*), except that it now went under the name of proletarian (Marxist) art. The great Literary Debate of 1925–1928 offers any number of tantalizing analogies to the modernist polemics that occurred before the First World War, recapitulating in one form or another the friction of Voronyi's generation with Franko, Iefremov, and Nechui-Levyts'kyi; Moloda Muza's estrangement from the conservative literary circles of Galicia; *Ukrains'ka khata's* struggle with the newspaper *Rada* and with *Literaturno-naukovyi visnyk*; and, finally, even Semenko's futurist rebellion of 1914. The typological and ideological similarities in all these cases should allow us to consider the Literary Debate of the 1920s not as an isolated event triggered by immanent Soviet circumstances but as the culmination of literary and cultural processes begun at the turn of the century.

For the purposes of this paper, I will limit myself to Mykola Khvyl'ovyi, the central figure of the Literary Debate, leader of VAPLITE (a “free academy of proletarian art”) whose pithy slogans—*Evropa*, *Prosvita*, *Masovizm*, *Olimpiitsi*—echo arguments of a bygone era. His recently published letters to Mykola Zerov, as well as the pamphlet *Ukraina chy Malorosia* (until now assumed to have been irrevocably lost), show that he had a close affinity for certain aspects of the modernist ideology. His writings place him in the line of preceding Young Turks bent on redefining Ukrainian culture along European lines.

It is worth recalling that Khvyl'ovyi's rivals were first to link his pamphlets to the prerevolutionary literary processes. In 1925 Oleksander Doroshkevych had accused Khvyl'ovyi of being an “epigone of [a] modernistic-aesthetic Europe.”² Curiously, at a time when others were debunking Modernism from the point of view of the new Marxist ideology, Khvyl'ovyi saw fit to defend the movement in his *Dumky proty techii* (cf. the chapter “Kul'turynyi epihonizm”).³ As we now know, the ideas he expressed in these essays were first aired in letters to the neoclassicist Mykola Zerov, an interesting fact in itself.⁴ Khvyl'ovyi offers an even stronger apologia for Modernism in the highly controversial *Ukraina chy*

² “Shche slovo pro Evropu,” *Zhyttia i revoliutsiia*, 1925, no. 6-7, p. 66.

³ *Dumky proty techii*. Pamflety (Kharkiv, 1926).

⁴ Cf. *Radians'ke literaturoznavstvo*, 1990, nos. 7 and 8, pp. 3–15 and pp. 11–25, respectively.

Malorosiia.⁵ Here Khvyl'ovyi virtually embraced comparisons being made by his opponents between VAPLITE and Modernism. True, he did not think the analogies were entirely apt, regarding them as attempts by his adversaries to “compromise our movement in the eyes of the Party,”⁶ but he nonetheless asserted that Modernism had been a “healthy, logical and an inevitable stage in the process of social differentiation [and] the awakening of new social forces.”⁷ He praised “the greatest of the Moloda Muza writers,” Mykhailo Iatskiv, for playing a prominent role “in the struggle against philistinism.”⁸ “The fundamental tendency of our Modernism was. . . entirely correct. The orientation was on the ‘real Europe.’”⁹ Modernism, he said, brought Ukraine closer to Europe.¹⁰ Comparisons drawn between VAPLITE and *Ukrains'ka khata*—critics had spoken of “хатянський європеїзм ВАПЛІТЕ”¹¹ (“a *khata*-like Europeanism of VAPLITE”)—were met with the following rejoinder:

. . . If we are “khatiany,” then those who are not with us are necessarily in the grips of provincialism. . . . For what is “khatianstvo”? Was it not a potentially westernizing orientation? Hence, *in this sense we really do see it as our precursor*. . . .¹²

As we see, Khvyl'ovyi acknowledged a certain consonance between his position and those of the Modernists. The most telling similarities concerned two of his key ideas: the need for a European orientation and its corollary—the obligation to struggle with provincialism.

In his letters to Zerov, Khvyl'ovyi reveals that he put great stock in the Modernists' concept of art. What is particularly interesting, and at first glance rather paradoxical, is that he attributes extraordinary *civic* meaning to the modernist position, seeing it as a contribution to nationbuilding. The Modernists, he argues, played a more important role in this respect than even Franko. So illuminating are his thoughts in these letters that I will venture to quote from them at some length:

. . . When I think of specific individuals in our literature who were enthralled by aestheticism, I come to the conclusion that Ievshan, Semenko and Voronyi represent tragic moments in our nation's history. If we consider the conditions under which

⁵ Cf. *Slovo i Chas*, 1990, no. 1, pp. 7–31, and *Vitchyzna*, 1990, nos. 1 and 2, pp. 179–188 and 168–178, respectively.

⁶ *Vitchyzna*, 1990, no. 1, p. 182.

⁷ *Vitchyzna*, 1990, no. 1, p. 182.

⁸ *Vitchyzna*, 1990, no. 1, p. 183.

⁹ *Vitchyzna*, 1990, no. 1, p. 183.

¹⁰ “«модерністська» гігантомахія. . . наблизила до нас європейські далі. . . , *Vitchyzna*, 1990, no. 1, p. 183.

¹¹ *Vitchyzna*, 1990, no. 2, p. 169.

¹² *Vitchyzna*, 1990, no. 2, p. 177. (Here and elsewhere the emphases are mine—OSI).

our nation grew and developed, if we consider the horrible reactionary atmosphere in which, say, Voronyi lived, then there can be nothing strange about the fact that our aesthetes were inclined to take extreme positions. . . . [Oleksander] Doroshkevych says Ukrainian aestheticism was not influential. But does that mean that it was “asocial” (*ahromads’kym*)? . . . I attribute to the representatives of our modernistic Europe an enormous *civic meaning* because I look at things not from the point of view of those syrupy-sweet principles of *populism which retard national development* but from a deep understanding of the *national question*. I dare say that this “cursed question” will cease to stand in the way of progress only when the nation can fully express itself, when, to be more specific, its art attains the highest aesthetic values. In this respect, the Voronyis and Ievshans were a genuine civic phenomenon, one could say, a red [i.e., communist—OSI] one. For me, the celebrated “peasant” Franko, as an artist, is less dear, than, let us say. . . the aesthete Semenko, this tragic figure. . . of our regressive reality. Both Kobylians’ka and members of Moloda Muza are stages [in the history] of our *art*, while Dr. Franko is an episode, perhaps, even a bright one, [in the history] of [our] *civic life*.¹³

At this point in his letter, Khvyl’ovyi goes on to praise Panteleimon Kulish, a figure beloved by the Modernists, especially by the critics of *Ukrains’ka khata*. His criticism of Franko, however, must have elicited a shocked response from Zerov, for in the next letter Khvyl’ovyi is compelled to elaborate:

One would have to be a big ignoramus not to appreciate the work of this giant of our culture. . . . At the same time, even though Franko was a brilliant milestone in our civic life and no mean artist himself, he remained far behind those ideas that were contained in the barbershop masterpieces of the “Voronyis” (парикмахерські шедеври “вороних”). . . .¹⁴ In Franko’s work. . . the emphasis is placed on the culture of ideas (*kul’ turu dumky*). Franko never took on himself that role which, say, Semenko—the aesthete bravely assumed. . . . Franko never imagined that *in the name of solving the national problem*, Ukrainian *art* must, in the near future. . . pioneer a new artistic cycle. . . . In this sense Voronism, objectively, was not only a healthy civic reaction but was ahead of Franko.¹⁵

In another letter, Khvyl’ovyi adds: “. . . the appearance of Modernism was. . . a revolutionary event in the history of *literature*, and hence also in the history of the *nation*.”¹⁶

Khvyl’ovyi obviously defends the Modernists’ concern with *art in and of itself* as a socially constructive activity and argues that there is a relationship between the attainment of the highest aesthetic values and complete

¹³ *Radians’ke literaturoznavstvo*, 1989, no. 7, p. 13.

¹⁴ The reference here is to Semenko’s “Parykmakher” (1916), a poem in which O. Oles’, M. Voronyi, and H. Chuprynka are satirized.

¹⁵ *Radians’ke literaturoznavstvo*, 1989, no. 8, p. 15.

¹⁶ *Radians’ke literaturoznavstvo*, 1989, no. 8, p. 19.

national self-expression. As we know, this linkage between art and the national question was Khvyl'ovyi's preeminent issue, one which was also the most politically controversial. That he viewed Modernism in the same way can hardly be surprising. But was this an imposition of his views on an earlier period, or, as I have been suggesting, was it really an extension of the modernist position?

Most discussions about Ukrainian Modernism note the apparent incongruity between the movement's espousal of Beauty, its disdain for "patriotic tirades," utilitarian art, and the equally strong patriotic strain. One is easily convinced of this by reading the Modernists of Western Ukraine, the poetry O. Oles', by recalling lines from Voronyi's verse ("Мій друже, я Красу люблю, як рідну Україну"), or by reading M. Sriblians'kyi, the unabashedly nationalistic critic from *Ukrains'ka khata*. These manifestations have normally been interpreted as a failing of Ukrainian Modernism, an inability of Ukrainian literature to shed completely its populist heritage, or as the inevitable response of poets to the unenviable political position of Ukraine. I would argue that these are not necessarily inadvertent or unprincipled deviations from the modernist ideology but a sign that the movement never intended to divest literature of its social or national obligations. These populist concepts were never really rejected by the Modernists; rather, a new interpretation was placed on them.

The truly innovative aspect of modernist ideology for Ukrainian literature rests on the fact that it severed art from its edifying and enlightening function (what Khvyl'ovyi would later call contemptuously "Prosvita"). It also liberated literature in a programmatic sort of way from its fixation on the visibly salient attributes of the Ukrainian identity (i.e., peasant and ethnographic themes). Modernism legitimized art as an autonomous pursuit that had nothing in common with the "masses" and which was to be measured by European (not simply nativistic) standards. This conceptual revolt was engineered by the young intelligentsia which now claimed art as its own independent domain that it singled out for active cultivation. However, in doing so, the modernist writer, as Khvyl'ovyi noted, did not become "asocial." The fact is he simply redefined his social responsibilities. Instead of serving the *narod* (the common man), he now saw himself as the servant of a *national culture*, a concept which only during the modernist period emerged as something distinct from the proverbial "people." It was this move away from the "people" to the "culture" that was at the root of all quarrels between Modernists and Populists who often construed this as tantamount to treason. The modernist writer, however, saw no inherent contradiction between the life of art and civic duty because he/she was now working on the assumption that *art itself was in the national interest*. This

view was succinctly put somewhat later by Bohdan Ihor Antonych when he said "Art—in and of itself—is a social value; a nation is obviously a society, therefore art by definition is also a national value."¹⁷

The newfound modernist concern with the national culture gave rise to a new phenomenon: disgruntlement with the native environment. It is worth emphasizing that only during the modernist period do we witness a systematic expression of dissatisfaction with things specifically Ukrainian. Only now is the harshest criticism reserved for one's own national obtuseness. The populist image of a noble "people" now metamorphoses into the ignoble "mob," from whom the intelligentsia must defend the achievements of culture. M. Sriblians'kyi, for example, railed in *Ukrains'ka khata* that "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."¹⁸ Sriblians'kyi dubbed this "darkness" "Ukrainophilism" (*ukrainofil'stvo*). Khvyl'ovyi called it "Little-Russianism" (*malorosiianstvo*) and a host of other derogatory names.¹⁹ Whatever the term, the battle cry was directed against an ersatz culture incapable of meeting European criteria. This "culture" was deemed an impediment to genuine nationhood.

Ukrainian Modernism clearly has other important features, but this idea was probably its most powerful. It influenced cultural developments for more than two and a half decades and, in many respects, remains to this very day a popular model of what Ukrainian literature should be.

University of Alberta

¹⁷ "Natsional'ne mystetstvo," *Karby*, 1933, p. 5.

¹⁸ Quoted from P. Bohats'kyi, M. Shapoval, and A. Zhyvotko, *Ukrains'ka khata (1909–1914)* (New York, 1955), p. 14.

¹⁹ E.g., *masovizm, pluzhans'kyi analfebetyzm, narodnytstvo, bezvykhidne boloto narodnytstva, psevdointernatsionalizm, khokhlandiia, Prosvita, hrinchenkivshchyna, pylypenkivshchyna, vulharnyi marksyzm.*