



## Canadian Slavonic Papers

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Source: *Canadian Slavonic Papers / Revue Canadienne des Slavistes*, Vol. 34, No. 1/2 (March-June 1992), pp. 113-130

Published by: [Canadian Association of Slavists](#)

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/40869355>

Accessed: 15/06/2014 08:08

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*Oleh S. Ilnytskyj*

## Ukrainian Symbolism and the Problem of Modernism

Орест. ...Я не належу до школи рарнассиєн.  
Любов (озивається різко). Але я не думала досі, що ви до символістів належите!

Орест. Я? До символістів?  
Lesia Ukrainka, *Blakytna troianda* (1896)

„Я думав, що Ви таки зразу побачите різницю між творами символістичними, а творами напів-символістичними... В них є справжній символізм і щось... посереднє, власне модерністське, новітнє.....”

V. Voronyi in a letter to S. Iefremov (1901)

„Общепризнанной главой символизма в украинской литературе считается г-жа Ольга Кобылянская.”

S. Iefremov, *V poiskakh novoi krasoty* (1902)

„...У найновішу українську літературу... почав промикуватися з інших літератур модний модернізм, декаденство в усяких його складових частках: еротизмом, символізмом... і сливе порнографією.”

I. S. Nechui-Levyts'kyi, “*Ukrains'ka dekadentshchyna*” (1911)

During the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, the word “symbolism” appeared in the Ukrainian literary process with regularity. Allusions to European symbolists, especially the French (i.e., Baudelaire, Mallarmé, Verlaine) were quite prevalent. Not infrequently, the term “decadence” also came into play. Curiously, neither expression entered the lexicon of criticism as a period designator, and today the era from approximately 1900 to 1914 is commonly known as “Modernism.” The “symbolist” nature of Ukrainian “Modernism” survives in our literary consciousness, but more as intuition than as demonstrated fact.

One reason “modernism” may have eclipsed the term “symbolism” is that the latter was affixed subsequently to a phenomenon in vogue between 1917 and 1919, i.e., during the years of the Central Rada and the Het'manate. Contemporaries and later historians invariably used “symbolism” to designate the “organized” coterie around *Literaturno-krytychnyi al'manakh* (The Literary Critical Almanac, 1918) and *Muzahet* (Musagetes, 1919), and to this day these two journals are sanctioned as such.<sup>1</sup> Even as late as 1921, the “struggle between

<sup>1</sup> Cf. “Muzahet” and “Symbolizm” in *Entsyklopediia ukrainoznavstva*. Slovnykova chastyna. Vols. 5 and 8 (Paris-New York, 1966–1976) 1658 and 2808, respectively. The following writers appeared in the two journals: Pavlo Savchenko,

symbolists and futurists” was a truism of literary life, ending only when the former capitulated to the latter.<sup>2</sup> Thus both terminology and chronology have made symbolism and modernism discrete and distinct episodes in Ukrainian literary history. Symbolism is now usually understood to be a movement of the revolutionary period, having more in common with the processes that followed than to those that preceded.<sup>3</sup> Occasionally, halfhearted connections are made between symbolism and modernism, but for the most part they are treated in isolation.<sup>4</sup> As one critic noted: “The influence of the pre-symbolists [i.e., modernists] on the newer period has not been studied at all. Besides a few sporadic comments (Tychyna and Chuprynka, Tychyna and Voronyi, Oles' and Ryl's'kyi) nothing has been done in this field . . .”<sup>5</sup> This paper, among other things, is a small attempt to redress this problem.

I have argued elsewhere that “the traditional division of Ukrainian literature into a pre- and postrevolutionary period . . . [has] tended to obscure the fact that literary borders between these two periods were porous . . . [and] that prerevolutionary trends persevered well into the new political era, giving the literary front a semblance of ideological and stylistic continuity for several years.” In particular, I drew attention to the convergence between the ideology of the modernists and M. Khvylyovyi, suggesting that his ideas, in some important

Pavlo Tychyna, Iakiv Savchenko, Oleksa Slisarenko, Dmytro Zahul, Volodymyr Iaroshenko, Mykhailo Zhuk, Klym Polishchuk, Mykola Tereshchenko, Pavlo Fylypovych, Volodymyr Kobylans'kyi, and Mykhail' Semenko.

<sup>2</sup> Cf. V. Koriak, *Ukrains'ka literatura*. Konspekt. 2nd edition (Kharkiv: DVU, 1929) 229, 240.

<sup>3</sup> For a different understanding of the chronology, see Oleksander Doroshkevych, “Do istorii modernizmu na Ukraini,” *Zhyttia i revoliutsiia* 10 (1925): 71.

<sup>4</sup> Iaroslav Hordyns'kyi hinted at a link or even an identity between symbolism and modernism when he wrote: “The . . . symbolists . . . , which date back still to the end of the XIX century, attain their full bloom during Ukraine’s statehood [i.e., 1917–1920].” Cf. “Symvolisty,” *Literaturna krytyka pidsoviets'koi Ukrainy* (L'viv-Kiev: Ukrains'ka mohylians'ko-mazepyns'ka akademia nauk, 1939): 12. M.D. Rod'ko says that “Symbolism appeared in Ukrainian literature during the revolutionary period” (p. 78) but quotes comparisons, made by V. Koriak in the twenties, between the symbolists and the Modernist journal *Ukrains'ka khata* (the so-called “khatiany”). He himself draws analogies between the symbolists and poets like O. Oles'. Cf. M.D. Rod'ko, “Smertne spivannia (Poeziia symvolistiv),” *Ukrains'ka poeziia pershykh pozhovtnevykh rokiv* (Kiev: Naukova Dumka, 1971): 89, 90, passim. Bohdan Rubchak speaks of the early Modernists (Voronyj, Kobylans'ka, Kryms'kyi, Iatskiv) consistently as pre-symbolists, relegating symbolism to a later period. Cf. “Probnyi let” in Iurii Luts'kyi, ed., *Ostap Luts'kyi—molodomuzets'* (New York: Slovo, 1968).

<sup>5</sup> Rubchak, “Probnyi let” 28, 42.

respects, were an “extension of the modernist position.”<sup>6</sup> Moving backward in time, I would like to propose here that an even more solid tie exists between modernism and symbolism. Although symbolism has carved out an autonomous niche for itself in Ukrainian literary historiography, no one has seriously inquired whether this purportedly *new* movement of a *new* generation really exemplified an original stage in the Ukrainian literary process. Did symbolism rebel against modernism as futurism had done in 1914? Did symbolism have its own aesthetic and ideology? Did the movement transform Ukrainian poetry in some novel fashion? My inclination is to answer in the negative to each of these questions. A closer examination of the problem will reveal that modernism and symbolism are linked by strong and unbroken bonds, both ideological and stylistic.

## I

Ukrainian modernism has been accused, with some justification, of producing more than its share of poor poetry. While its weaknesses are undeniable, we should not overlook that the modernist ideology and aesthetic played a key role in the transformation of the nineteenth-century literary process and effectively set the tone for the first two decades of this century, even extending its influence into the twenties. Such sweeping claims for the movement are not necessarily convincing, if we insist on a traditional, narrow, and, ultimately, a priori definition of Ukrainian modernism—to wit that its essence lies in a defense of the autonomy of art; “pure art,” “l’art pour l’art”—these are the stock expressions associated with the movement. While the latter is an incontestable aspect of modernism, it has been accentuated—rather artificially—at the expense of other, no less prominent traits. Moreover, the broader context in which modernism’s apotheosis of art took place is generally ignored. For this reason I would like to draw attention in this essay to the movement’s socioliterary and sociocultural attributes, which too often are glossed over as something incidental, as just one of those “existential” burdens the modernists were “forced” to carry in their quest for “pure art.”<sup>7</sup> I will argue that, on the contrary, these must be seen as inherent and defining qualities of the Ukrainian movement.

Let us begin by reiterating the obvious: Ukrainian modernists were neither as extreme in their artistic practice, nor as one-sided in their ideology and program as alarmed contemporaneous critics imagined and some recent scholars (especially Soviet) have maintained. The writings of the modernist prove that

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6 “The Modernist Ideology and Mykola Khvylovyyi,” *Harvard Ukrainian Studies* 15 (3/4 [December] 1991): 257–262.

7 Rubchak, “Probnyyi let” 39.

they did not renounce the social contract (so cherished by their predecessors), and that their devotion to Art did not preclude concern for broader social questions. As we know, some modernists ultimately abandoned literature for politics; others introduced these quotidian concerns into poetry. In short, Ukrainian modernism's espousal of Beauty, its disdain for "social and patriotic tirades" (Ostap Luckyj), and—simultaneously—its strong national pathos (as exemplified by the patriotic lyric) were not so much failings or remnants of the previous era as the sum of its unique characteristics. To understand why these seemingly contradictory impulses coexisted so naturally in the movement, we must move beyond the popular view that modernism wanted to escape from civic life. Its true essence inheres not in the denial of social imperatives, but in raising them from class concerns to national ones.

The central achievement of Ukrainian modernism—and, hence, its historical significance—lies in its abandonment of the populist and realist premise that art serves the *narod*, and its attendant recognition of art as an *institution of national culture* that has civic value, independent of the proverbial "people." It was only during the modernist period that Ukrainian art began acquiring the stature of a separate institution in society and started aspiring—on that new level of conceptualization—toward equivalency with its western European counterparts. In this sense, Ukrainian modernists were less the advocates of "art for art's sake," than the exponents of a "high" European art (i.e., for and by the intelligentsia), which they came to regard as one of the indispensable attributes of Ukrainian nationhood. Modernism, after all, developed in tandem with the rise of modern Ukrainian nationalism, and for this reason *artistic* problems and issues of *nationality* became intimately interlocked in the movement from the start.

With this prologue in mind, we can now turn to the essays and poetry published in the aforementioned "symbolist" journals of 1918–1919. We will find that the movement they purportedly represented—considered the ultimate expression of "pure art"—was very much informed by concepts that came into being earlier in the century.<sup>8</sup>

## II

At first glance, the symbolists—much like the modernists—give the impression of being radical aesthetes. Dmytro Zahul, writing under the pen name I. Maidan, provided in *Literaturno-krytychnyi al'manakh* a recitation of the artistic verities

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<sup>8</sup> I would like to emphasize that this paper approaches *Muzahet* and *Literaturno-krytychnyi al'manakh* from a narrow perspective and with a specific purpose in mind. It is not to be construed as a full-fledged study of these heterogeneous and complex publications.

which he held to be true. Citing Edgar Allen Poe's definition of poetry as "the rhythmical creation of beauty," Zahul insisted 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," said Zahul, as he railed against "publicist-patriots" who demanded partisan works from novelists and forced poets into writing "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 much] ethnographic elements as the Ukrainian."<sup>9</sup>

It is rather obvious that Zahul's catchwords conform closely to the modernist *Zeitgeist* as previously expressed by M. Voronyi and Ostap Luts'kyi.<sup>10</sup> However, it is important to bear in mind that these attitudes represented only a part of the total argument. Zahul proves as much when a year later he elaborated on his postulates in the journal *Muzahet*.<sup>11</sup> Among the issues he raised there was the problem of "tendentiousness" in literature, the perennial anathema of modernism. While generally ill-disposed to the practice, he nevertheless writes: "Tendentiousness cannot in itself be harmful to a poetic work, as long as it is great and elevated [*velychna i vysoka*] . . . and does not destroy the purely aesthetic value of a poetic work . . ."<sup>12</sup> At one point he even cautions against extreme aestheticism. In the course of his long defense of poetry-as-art, he revives many arguments made sixteen years earlier by Mykola Voronyi, when he was compelled to defend modernist poetry from Franko's sharp mockery.<sup>13</sup> Although Voronyi defends the new sensibility vigorously, he does concede to his realist colleague that the poet has a duty to struggle against social evil.<sup>14</sup> Voronyi championed the contemplative poetic attitude and the

<sup>9</sup> "Shukannia," *Literaturno-krytychnyi al'manakh* bk. 1 (Kiev: Hrunt, 1918): 22–25.

<sup>10</sup> Cf. Doroshkevych, "Do istorii modernizmu na Ukraini;" Rubchak, "Probyni let."

<sup>11</sup> "Poeziia iak mystetstvo" [Poetry as Art], *Muzahet*. Misiashnyk (sic) literatury i mystetstva 1-3 (Jan., Feb., March, 1919): 79–98.

<sup>12</sup> "Poeziia iak mystetstvo" 97.

<sup>13</sup> „Сучасна пісня - не перина, Не гошпiтальнеє лежання." Cf. Ivan Franko, "Lisova idyliia. Poema. Posviata Mykoli Voronomu," *Tvory v dvadtsiaty tomakh*, vol. 11 (Kiev, 1955) 239.

<sup>14</sup> „Я, взявши в руки зброю, ...Рубаюсь з ворогом, співаю, В піснях до бою закликаю." Cf. "Ivanovi Frankovi. Vidpovid' na ioho Poslaniie," Mykola Voronyi, *Poezii* (Kharkiv: Rukh, 1929) 325. In a letter to Iefremov, Voronyi said this: "Civic motifs, feelings of duty, calls urging a struggle against 'dark forces'—this is the

search for an ideal by saying that the human soul longed for a respite. “We wish to rise briefly from the earth into the heavens. The suffering, disillusioned soul of the contemporary intellectual needs peace, rest. Perhaps then it will be easier for him *to live and work on earth*. . . .”<sup>15</sup> In his view, the new poetry was unique for it recognized the *whole* individual, i.e., his social as well as spiritual dimension.<sup>16</sup>

Zahul rationalized art in much the same way. He called it a complement to the practical life, a necessity for the soul, and the precondition for man’s wholeness: “The practical life is, in and of itself, uninteresting, pointless, and at the same time without value because it does not provide us with complete satisfaction, exacting for itself a certain aesthetic supplement.”<sup>17</sup> No matter how much Zahul espoused the “aesthetic life” as a “value in and of itself” (82), he never completely separated it from the social dimension. For him, poetry is the ideal that makes practical life possible. For example, he says: “The poetry of national liberation foreshadowed by eons the actual fact of [political] liberation” (82). He sees confirmation of this in the fact that “Ukrainian writers are at the head of the Ukrainian national liberation movement . . .” (82). Although this is not a prominent aspect of his essay, Zahul obviously comprehends art and culture only in a national context. He frequently resorts to such phrases as *natsional'ne mystetstvo* and *natsional'na kul'tura* (82). These, he implies, are the *sine qua non* for national identity and survival.<sup>18</sup>

The notion of a *national* art is radicalized markedly when another of *Muzahet*’s authors, Mykola Burachek, advances the idea of an art with *national traits*. He speaks of an “original art, typically Ukrainian” (*mystetstvo svoieridn[e], typovo ukrains'k[e]*) and lashes out against “aping foreign inspirations” (*malpuvannia chuzhoho natkhnennia*)<sup>19</sup>:

[Our] frantic susceptibility to everything that someone over there in Europe has done in art, [our] pursuit of the fashionable movements in art elicits [in me] great surprise: How easily and lightly a person adopts to one’s own individuality this or that [artistic] tendency . . . ! . . . Do we really need such borrowed art?<sup>20</sup>

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sphere of realist poetry. *It too is no less important . . .*” Cf., Oleksander Doroshkevych, “Do istorii modernizmu na Ukraini” 75. Emphases added.

15 Doroshkevych, “Do istorii modernizmu na Ukraini” 73.

16 „Моя девіза: йти за віком, і бути цілим чоловіком.” Cf. “Ivanovi Frankovi. Vidpovid' na ioho Poslaniie” 327.

17 “Poeziia iak mystetstvo” 82. Cf. also 81–83, 86, *passim*.

18 “Poeziia iak mystetstvo” 81.

19 “Mystetstvo u Kyivi. Dumky i fakty” 100.

20 “Mystetstvo u Kyivi. Dumky i fakty” 103–104.

While such sentiments were not uncommon for Iefremov or Nechui-Levyts'kyi, they certainly clash with the traditional interpretation of *Muzahet* as the agent of “symbolism” and “Europeanization.” The facts, however, prove that such attitudes were quite normal not only in *Muzahet* but in the modernist ethic generally. They reflect quite accurately the twin processes of “Europeanization” and “nationalization” (i.e., the institutionalization of art as a “national” system) that took place during this period. These two tendencies developed side-by-side and were, in fact, logical complements: to see oneself as a nation in Europe, it was necessary to underscore the national identity.<sup>21</sup> However, due to Ukraine’s political and cultural insecurity during this entire period, it was not uncommon, as Burachek’s words attest, to see flare ups of xenophobia. Such sentiments were evident in *Ukrains'ka khata* (The Ukrainian House, 1909–1914) a few years earlier, when M. Sriblians'kyi and M. Ievshan came face to face with futurism. Futurism caused anxiety for these critics not only on account of its aesthetic, but because it explicitly rejected the modernist devotion to “national” art (by then an idea that was being taken for granted). As early as 1901 Voronyi was writing that “we want to limit ourselves exclusively to aesthetics in a *national* form and refuse to shoulder *other civic* [i.e., populist] burdens . . .”<sup>22</sup> Semenko in contrast declared the “national period” in Ukrainian art at an end; he maintained that art “can neither be Ukrainian nor anything else. . . . National traits in art are a sign of its backwardness.”<sup>23</sup> Sriblians'kyi, on the other hand, vociferated: “My dear people, leave the latest words of Europe and speak Ukrainian freely and loudly in your own home.”<sup>24</sup> As an antidote to such foreign influences as futurism, Sriblians'kyi and Ievshan staunchly advocated a literature based on so-called Ukrainian foundations.<sup>25</sup> Significantly, futurism’s crusade against “national” art was the only instance during this entire prerevolutionary period

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<sup>21</sup> It is worth emphasizing that this was a subtle but very radical reorientation of Ukrainian thought. It amounted to a total rejection of nineteenth-century conceptualizations of Ukrainian culture, which was always placed within a Russian Imperial context. Whereas men like P. Kulish, M. Kostomarov, and M. Drahomanov viewed Ukrainian culture in a complementary (indeed, a supplementary) relationship to the Russian, the modernists saw it as an independent and self-sufficient entity in a European context. They either consciously ignored Russia or treated it as just “another” foreign model.

<sup>22</sup> Oleksander Doroshkevych, “Do istorii modernizmu na Ukraini,” 73. Emphases mine.

<sup>23</sup> Mykhail' Semenko, *Kvero-futuryzm* (Kiev: Kvero, 1914) 2–3.

<sup>24</sup> M. Sriblians'kyi, “Etiud pro futuryzm,” *Ukrains'ka khata* 6 (1914): 463.

<sup>25</sup> For details, see Oleh S. Ilytzkyj, “Anatomy of a Literary Scandal: Mykhail' Semenko and the Origins of Ukrainian Futurism,” *Harvard Ukrainian Studies* II.4 (December, 1978): 493–97.

when art and nationality were programmatically divorced from each other.<sup>26</sup> For violating this established decorum of Ukrainian letters, Semenko was, for all practical purposes, drummed out of its ranks.<sup>27</sup>

*Muzahet* offers another variation on these themes in Iurii Ivaniv-Mezhenko's article "Individual and Collective Creativity."<sup>28</sup> It begins as a ringing endorsement of the artist's independence, in this case, from the rising Proletkul'ts. "The creative act is a boundary that separates the individual from the collective and elevates him high above it . . ." says Mezhenko. "I resolutely defend the individual and justify him completely. . . ." (7). These words reverberate with the familiar ring of the modernist's disdain for "the people" (Mezhenko uses "mob"—*natovp*), before whom the achievements of culture must be defended. Mezhenko writes: "The tragedy of today's poet, the tragedy of an artist is the tragedy of a culture that valued itself too much but which was valued too little by its own people" (3). But as in Burachek's case, this radical aestheticism and elitism is mediated, even cardinally transformed, by concepts of nationality. Mezhenko's artist, it turns out, is free but only within the confines of a national culture. In what could be a reference to Semenko, Mezhenko states: "A nation rejects the son who, attracted by a foreign culture, abandons his own [culture] and rejects the psychology of his people" (5). "It is important that the creative act be built on a foundation of the popular national spirit" (12). Mezhenko renounces "Byronic isolationism"(4), maintaining that the artist must communicate with his nation. "To designate art and the products of artistic creation as worthy of, and necessary only to, the author would be a monstrous limitation . . ." (5).

Given such a stance, it is not surprising that, like his modernist forebears, Mezhenko shows neither sympathy nor understanding for the avant-garde. He speaks scornfully of futurism and the music of [Richard] Strauss—all because they are "alien" to the psychology of the Ukrainian nation and its people (cf. 13, 14). He summarizes his position in a typically modernist fashion, fusing principles of individualism and nationality into one:

<sup>26</sup> It would be interesting to compare the debate of this period with one that took place between Ivan Franko and Ivan Nechui-Levyts'kyi on the pages of *Pravda* (L'viv) and *Molot* in 1878.

<sup>27</sup> "Anatomy of a Literary Scandal: Mykhail' Semenko and the Origins of Ukrainian Futurism" 467–499.

<sup>28</sup> "Tvorchist' indyviduuma i kolektyv," *Muzahet*. Misiashnyk literatury i mystetstva 1–3 (Jan., Feb., March, 1919): 65–78. Reprinted in A. Leites and M. Iashek, *Desiat' rokiv ukrains'koi literatury (1917–1927)*. 2nd ed., vol. II. (Kharkiv: DVU, 1930) 3–15. My references are to the latter source.

The creative individual can only create when he recognizes himself to be a higher being than the collective and, while refusing to submit to the collective, he nevertheless senses his national bond with it. (15)

Although theorizing such as this may, and probably should, raise doubts about the “symbolist” nature of these publications, there can be little hesitation in recognizing the obvious persistence of a few key ideas—from early modernism (Voronyi, Moloda Muza) through *Ukrains'ka khata* to *Muzahet* and *Literaturno-krytychnyi al'manakh*. It is also rather telling that nowhere in the latter two journals does this group of writers and critics identify itself explicitly as “symbolist.” Zahul refers to symbolism briefly in the course of a broader discussion but betrays neither particular partisanship nor much understanding for the movement. He claims symbolism “differs from classical [*antychne*] art only by its accumulation of symbols [*nakopychennia symvoliv*] and points to its mysticism and enchantment [*mistyka, kazkovist'*].”<sup>29</sup> *Muzahet*'s reviewers show no special preference for the symbolist collections they review. Mezhenko, for example, argues that “the concept of sound in Tychyna's [*Soniashni kliarnety, The Sunny Clarinets*] is completely different from that of the symbolists.”<sup>30</sup> P. Fylypovych, reflecting on O. Slisarenko's collection *Na berezi Kastal's'komu* (On the Castalian Shore), notes that although symbolists were innovators, they were also guilty of “many mistakes, artificial ‘decadent’ contrivances.” “And generally, such symbolists as Bal'mont (in the majority of his works) led poetry away from real life, deprived it of earthly colors and characteristics, without which it cannot live. Because for poetry, abstraction is death.”<sup>31</sup> Curiously, he declares the “formal influences” of such “contemporary poets” as the “ego-futurists” “more beneficial than imitations of Bal'mont.”<sup>32</sup> In an editorial statement, the journal itself proclaimed: “*Muzahet* does not adhere to any one particular movement [*napriamok*], but promotes *everything* that has *artistic value*. At the same time, *Muzahet* resolutely severs all ties with the *old, exhausted traditions*, which stood as impediments on the road to developing a *Ukrainian culture* in the generally *European* sense of the word.”<sup>33</sup>

The reticence of these writers to define themselves in terms of a specific style or movement is worth stressing, for it reveals much about the nature and strength of their artistic identity. It hardly speaks of a conscious or programmatic symbolism. (In contrast, again, one can note that the futurists betrayed no such

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29 *Muzahet* 87–88.

30 *Muzahet* 27.

31 *Muzahet* 149, 151.

32 *Muzahet* 149, 151.

33 See the programmatic statement at the end of *Muzahet* 1–3 (1919). Emphases added.

ambivalence when they declared themselves in 1914.) This “symbolist” intelligentsia, in short, approached literature in a manner reminiscent of Voronyi’s generation which, too, was reluctant to declare explicit allegiance to an “-ism,” preferring instead to advocate a new direction for literature in broadly defined terms. Nearly all of them reacted defensively, sometimes indignantly, when identified with a specific movement, as if belonging to one detracted from their patriotism. Typically, their rebuttals involved affirmation of social or national principles. Hnat Khotkevych, for example, was very offended when Iefremov called him a “symbolist and decadent” in 1902. He resolutely denied this characterization, maintaining that there was no “struggle of movements” [*borot'ba napriamiv*] in Ukrainian literature, and said that young writers were only taking “very small steps not to write like Mordovets' . . . .” He then pointedly adds: “We were the generation that was escaping the limits of ethnography [and] an unspecified, subconscious patriotism. . . . I and my friends were stirred by the ideas of a broad national efflorescence and that, necessarily, led to political tasks.”<sup>34</sup> *Muzahet*’s foreword, characteristically, sketches an image of the writer not as an ivory-tower aesthete but as one who is in close communion with his social environment: “We, the young writers, turn toward Ukrainian society... with the deep conviction that in it, and only in it, will we be able to find the moral support for our spiritual existence. . . . We . . . firmly believe that our creative strength will enrich the treasury of our *national culture* with *new values*. . . .”<sup>35</sup>

### III

We have seen thus far that, symbolist claims to new values notwithstanding, their artistic ideology did not go much beyond what had previously been enunciated by the modernists. As we shall now see, this is also true of their poetry. In *Literaturno-krytychnyi al'manakh*, we find that, in general, poems oscillate between two poles: a subjective, mostly pessimistic lyricism and an exalted patriotism. Significantly, it is on the latter note that the journal opens. Pavlo Savchenko’s “Dzvony” [Bells], a paean to the Ukraine national revival, strike an affirmative, uplifting chord:

Дзвони. Дзвоники. Дзвонята.  
Гомін-гімни. Гомін-гам.  
Щезла наворож проклята,  
Усміхнулась доля нам.  
.....

<sup>34</sup> Hnat Khotkevych, “Peredmovna avtora,” *Tvory. Opovidannia. Tom 4* ([Kharkiv]: Rukh, 1929) 5–7.

<sup>35</sup> “Vid redaktsii,” *Muzahet* 1–3 (1919) 3, 4.

Се-сі Гімни в місті Кия—  
 Се наш сповнений наказ.  
 Не пропала кров нічия,  
 Що точилась в чорний час.

Знов забили наші жили  
 Жвавим живчиком життя.

.....  
 ..геть з дороги  
 Все що дивиться в труну.

Compared to this declarative verse with its overt content, Iakiv Savchenko's poetry in the same journal appears downright elusive and darkly evocative. His verse has genuinely "symbolist" traits, although, in its own camouflaged way, it too is imbued with political overtones. Savchenko's cryptic vision is violent and bloody, teeming with death and sadness; only rarely does it provide a flicker of hope:

Мое-  
 Мечами срібними кує  
 В далекім крузі золотім.<sup>36</sup>

The presence of Tychyna's now famous and well-known "Enharmoniine" [Enharmonic] in *Literaturno-krytychnyi al'manakh* has a certain logic. No doubt, these puzzling miniatures can be classified as symbolist, although in tone they are brighter than other works in the journal, and their poetics seems to have as much in common with folk riddles as with mystical musings.

Slisarenko, like Iakiv Savchenko, utilizes capital letters in his poems to underscore the mysterious and profound. Although permeated with the imagery of death, decay, and suicide (e.g., the poem "Kvitka syn'ohub"), his verse fails to attain any real transcendent effect. It is a gloomy poetry without deeper connotations:

В душі, як на дворі млисто,  
 В душі—в'язниці чуття скуті...  
 Я не одержав сьогодні листа,  
 Мене забули напів забуті.

In two other poems, Slisarenko conjures up—rather directly and rhetorically—an ideal world to which the poet is tragically denied access. Much the same is done by D. Zahul, except that his approach is more lyrical and song-like.

Standing quite apart from the preceding is the work of one other contributor: M. Semenko. Why this futurist appeared in *Literaturno-krytychnyi al'manakh* is a complex question which cannot be discussed here, although it should be noted

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<sup>36</sup> "I pered ostannim vstanu," *Literaturno-krytychnyi al'manakh* 9.

that the journal contained additionally a long article about him by Iakiv Savchenko. Semenko's poem "Vinok tremtiachyi" [Trembling Crown], is one of his many transitional works, demonstrating a gradual but unfailingly conscious effort to purge himself of the modernist idiom and sensibility. It is written as a crown of sonnets. In an impersonal, almost epic tone, he invokes images of a metropolis at night. While some of Semenko's vocabulary (e.g., *hirliandy* [garlands], *smert'* [death], *son* [dream], *chornyi zhakh* [black fear]) is still reminiscent of modernism/symbolism, the poem itself represents a radical departure from this poetics. The lyrical voice here is vigorous. The verse has neither symbols in capital letters, nor the typically pessimistic tone and yearning for the beyond. It is full of concrete urban images suggesting motion, sound, and light.

We turn now to *Muzahet*. It opened with three superbly crafted poems by Tychyna ("Mizhplanetni intervaly," [Interplanetary Intervals] "Pluh" [The Plough], and "I Bielyi i Blok i Iesenin i Kliuiev" [And Bely and Blok and Esenin and Klyuev]), which surpassed everything else the journal offered. For all its originality, Tychyna's work here, from the perspective of the literary process, was clearly evolutionary rather than revolutionary. It was typical especially in the way the poems fused the national/patriotic leitmotifs with symbolist/modernist conventions (e.g., music, the sense of the universe). This is especially obvious in lines like these:

Поете, любити свій край не є злочин,  
коли це для всіх!

[Poet! To love one's land is not a crime,  
as long as one loves in the name of all]

In fact, social and national motifs are quite palpable in *Muzahet*. They are perhaps most surprising when coming from the pen of Dmytro Zahul who, for all his protestations against "publicist-patriots," has the following line in one poem: "Hodi nam buty vichno rabamy!" [Enough! Let's not be eternal slaves!] (10). Also unexpected from a purportedly symbolist publication that self-consciously pursued "new values," is the poem by Mykhailo Zhuk ("Nich osinnia" [A Fall Evening]) which depicts—not very successfully—tragic scenes of poverty, complete with orphans and peasant overcoats [*syrota, svyta*]:

Загнали півня до курника...  
Нехай ранком не співає,  
Спить або нехай куняє,  
Хай не буде селянина.  
Щоб не бачив, бо дитина  
Темна, гола... Ха-ха-ха! (20)

Much more typical for the journal was the melancholy lyric, with its attendant modernist motifs: weariness (*Pid znakom stumy i vtomy*, writes Volodymyr Iaroshenko); sadness (Klym Polishchuk invokes *skorbotni dumy* (22), adding *Spaliat' v sertsyakh minorni zhali!* . . . , 23); boredom (*Od khmar nud'hu pryima / Zemlia nima*, P. Fylypovych, 27); hopelessness (*I movchat' lisy i liude, / I nikhto ne rozumiie, / Dlia choho zhyttia vmyra*, P. Fylypovych, 28); apprehension of the ideal (. . . *Holos dalekoho raiu*, M. Zhuk, 16; . . . *Ia vidshukaiu rai*, M. Tereshchenko, 26); Beauty (*Spyt' krasa v kryvavim kraiu* . . . , K. Polishchuk, 22); flirtation with the unknowable or forbidden (Volodymyr Kobylans'kyi, "Taiemnytsia" [The Secret], 35). Surprisingly, except for a two-line poem by V. Kobylans'kyi, there is not a single love lyric in *Muzahet*.

If we exclude Tychyna and, to some degree, Iakiv Savchenko, there is little reason to see much difference—either thematic or formal—between the early “modernists” and these ostensible “symbolists.”<sup>37</sup> One could cite numerous poems and passages to prove this point, but the following from *Muzahet*, written by Mykola Tereshchenko, speaks volumes on this subject:

Печаль і ніжність – о як розняти  
В душі поета печаль і ніжність;  
Коли землею вечірні шати,  
В моєму серці печаль і ніжність...

Журба безкрая – о не забути,  
Не втамувати печаль поета;  
Коли у трансі вечірнім люди,  
Чом я голублю печаль і ніжність...

О ніжність пани – яка подібність:  
Моя задума й журлива діва;  
В душі поета яка подібність –  
Печаль і ніжність, печаль і ніжність...

As any schoolchild will recognize, the above is nothing more than a poor calque of O. Oles's 1906 poem "Z zhurboiu radist' obnialas' . . ." [Joy Embraced Sadness . . .] which opens with these lines:

<sup>37</sup> Many of the themes in *Literaturno-krytychnyi al'manakh* and *Muzahet* are already prefigured in Voronyj's poetry. He summarized his poetic credo this way: ". . . Avoiding works that are grossly naturalistic, brutal, we desire works that would at least exhibit a touch of originality, contain a little bit of philosophy which would flicker with the distant azure of the sky that attracts us with its ungraspable beauty, its unfathomable mystery . . ." Cf. Doroshkevych, "Do istorii modernizmu na Ukraini" 72.

З журбою радись обнялась...  
 В сльозах, як в жемчугах, міх сміх,  
 І з дивним ранком ніч злилась  
 І як мені розняти їх?  
 .....

Tereshchenko's poem is the most egregious example of how closely bound the "modernist" and "symbolist" were. But even if we allow for exceptions and admit that the "symbolists" cannot be judged solely on the poems in these two journals, it still remains impossible to argue that the poetry in *Muzahet* and *Literaturno-krytychnyi al'manakh* somehow stands out against the background of the previous decades. On the contrary, the publications demonstrate a clear continuity (if not outright stagnation) in the poetic practice, right down to lexical resources and devices.

A central tenet in the poetics of both modernists and symbolists was "mellifluousness" or "musicality." In the case of the modernists, this frequently turned into a cloying tendency to underscore and project the sound texture of the verse. Their favorite devices were alliteration, assonance, consonance, onomatopoeia, and rhymes—especially the grammatical and exact. We have already seen these traits above in Pavlo Savchenko's poem "Bells." It is very prominent in other works as well. Take this example from Zahul which appeared in *Muzahet*:

Там де втомно в темінь тоне  
 Кучерявий вечір,  
 Хтось невтомним дзвоном дзонить  
 Про чарівні речі.

Шелестять шовкові хмари  
 Безшелесним шовком,  
 Вечір хмарами гітарить -  
 Марить без умовку.

Or these lines by Fylypovych:

Не вони се сумно  
 Шепчуть у вісві?

By 1918–19 this was orthodoxy of the highest order. Even as early as 1909, Hryhorii Chuprynka sensed that this poetics was rife for parody. His poem "Dzen'ky-Bren'ky," [Sing-Songs] subtitled "poetychnyi zhart" [A Poetic Joke], suggests as much:

Викликає ясний дух  
 Вірш легесенький, як пух,  
 Вірш, як усміх ньеньки,  
 Вірш маленький, коротенький

Без задуми, без вагання,  
 Без кохання, без благання.  
 І серденьку легко-легко,  
 Бо прогнали сум далеко  
 Дзеньки-бреньки....<sup>38</sup>

Semenko parodied this mindless sound play in his 1913 poem “Zuby Hali” [Halia’s Teeth]:

Білі зуби як коралі  
 білі зуби зуби Галі  
 тіло біле все у неї  
 тіло білої лілеї....<sup>39</sup>

As Chuprynka states, this type of poem—*Вірш маленький, коротенький, / Без задуми, без вагання* [A poem, small and brief / Without thoughts or doubts]—had a distinct tendency to undermine the ideational side of verse. The intellectual poverty of this poetics (so characteristic of much of O. Oles’) stems not just from its sorry word play but its dependence on various forms of repetition: outright duplication of identical words or roots, refrains, anaphora, as well as the unrestrained concatenation of synonyms. Poetry in *Literaturno-krytychnyi al'manakh* and *Muzahet* suffers from these devices repeatedly. Tereshchenko’s “Pechal’ i nizhnist” (Sorrow and Tenderness, cited above) is a case in point. In the span of twelve lines he repeats the words of the title seven times and “poet”—three times. The use of synonyms and the repetition of words (both italicized in the examples below) is characteristic of many contributors. Pavlo Savchenko does this in *Literaturno-krytychnyi al'manakh*:

Не даремно *плакав-квилів*,  
 Стогін скарги в *охах* струн.  
*Охи* бурю породили  
 В *бурі* виплекавсь тайфун. („Дзвони”)

Or:

*Гаснуть, никнуть* ясні спиці  
 Золотої колісниці  
*Зачиняються* ворота  
*Замикаються* замки. („Вечір”)

O. Slisarenko is not immune to this device as well:

*Над могилами* самогубців  
 У ночі схилявся Білий Ріг.

<sup>38</sup> Hryts'ko Chuprynka, *Poezii* (Kiev: Radians'kyi pys'mennyk, 1991) 91.

<sup>39</sup> M. Semenko, *Kobzar* (Kharkiv: DVU, 1925) 72. Semenko’s poem is probably a takeoff on V. Pachovs'kyi’s “Oi vzhe Halia, moia Halia,” which appeared in *Rozsypani perly* [Scattered Pearls, 1901].

*Над могилами Синьогуб цвів  
І ніяк одцвісти не міг... („Квітка синьогуб”)*

And again by the same author:

*Як тоскно од електрики вечорами,  
Як тоскно од білих очей ліхтарів!..  
Хтось навіки замкув зачаровані брами  
Зачаровані брами Голубих Овтарів.*

Dmytro Zahul resorts to the same approach:

*Пливають, пливають похмурі хмари  
В далекий, довгий шлях,—  
Біжать, біжать, немов примари,  
Тремтячі тіні на полях. („Пливають, пливають”)*

*Гудуть, гудуть далекі дзвони  
Про вічний рай і біль...*

Or take this poem (from *Muzahet*) by Mykhailo Zhuk:

*Полізуть хмари брудними,  
Темними смугами горі,  
Іми закрийються зорі,  
Місяць закрийється ними,*

Another pattern involves the use of binary structures. At its simplest, evident in the foregoing examples, this led to pairing of synonyms or the doubling of words. On a philosophical level, it betrayed itself as a dualism, a predilection to see things as opposites or antipodes. In the following lines by Volodymyr Kobylans'kyi (from *Muzahet*), it amounts to a play with the antonyms “open/close” (note also the refrain, the parallelisms, and the repetition of words):

*Я одчинив камінні двері  
І опустився в таємницю,  
У льох глибокий, що від віку  
Зачинений був чоловіку...  
Я одчинив камінні двері  
І опустився в таємницю.*

Some of the more common binary combinations include: day and night (cf. “Nich” and “Den”—two poems by Volodymyr Iaroshenko); pain-joy; earth-sky; and spring-fall. Zahul uses the colors white and red as metaphors for weakness and passion; Zhuk plays with darkness and light (*Temnym na bilomu stanut'*, *Muzahet*, 17).

Symbolism and modernism also have much in common lexically. Indeed, an analysis of both journals shows that the symbolist vocabulary correlates nicely

with what we know about modernist themes. In *Literaturno-krytychnyi al'manakh* we find such words as: *bil'*, *bolity*, *bilyi*, *chorny*, *dukh*, *dusha*, *fantaziia*, *ianhol* (*anhol*), *mohyla*, *mriia* and *omrianyi*, *nadiia*, *naviky*, *nazavshy*, *nebesnyi*, *nebozvod*, *odtsvilyi*, *odtsvitaty*, *ostannii*, *rai*, *rais'kyi*, *shchastia*, *smert'*, *smertel'no*, *smertno*, *son*, *tykho*, *tysha*, *vichne*, *vichnyi*, *zacharovnyi*, *zhakh*.

In *Muzahet*: *askety*, *asketyzm*; (word with the prefix *bez-*, suggesting absence or limitlessness): e.g., *bezkraia*, *bezmirno*, *beznadiino*, *bezshelesnyi*, *bezzhurno*; *bilyi*, *blakyt'*, *blakytyni*, *charivnyi*, *chary*, *hrikh*, *hrishni*, *hrishnytsia*, *ianhol*, *ianholiata*, *khmara*, *khmarytys'*, *nebesnyi*, *nebo*, *osin'*, *plach*, *rai*, *rydaty*, *sam*, *samotn'o*, *sl'ozy*, *smikh*, *samotnia*, *sum*, *sumno*, *sumnyi*, *synii*, *temin'*, *temno*, *temnyi*, *tin'*, *tsarstvo*, *vesna*, *vesniani*, *vichnist'*, *vichno*, *vichnyi*, *zhal'*, *zhurba*, *zhurlyvyi*.

Very rarely indeed do we find concrete and urban words like: *asfal't* (Slisarenko); *benzynno* (Semenko); *elektryka* or *eletrychno* (Slisarenko); *trotuary* (Semenko); *aerolit* (Vol. Iaroshenko); *ulytsi* (Vol. Iaroshenko). Remarkably, these words appear only in the works of the writers that eventually formed the nucleus of the futurist movement in the early twenties.

#### IV

The foregoing allows us to conclude that, in poetry especially, the period from 1900 to 1919 betrays a remarkable coherence in ideology, style, themes, and formal conventions. This was the age of Ukrainian Modernism. What now passes for the symbolist movement turns out to have been nothing less than a final burst of modernism. Put another way, it could be said that there is as much "symbolism" in early Modernism, as there is "modernism" in so-called Symbolism. Still, "modernism" is the preferred term for this entire period because of its less restrictive connotations. Unlike "symbolism," it better conveys the frequently timid and hesitant way poets embraced the new literature and how they balanced it with the creation of a separate and specifically "national" artistic institution. Any kind of obsessive hermeticism, formalism, aestheticism or decadence were alien to Ukrainian modernists. This was made plain from the start, when in 1901 Voronyi said: "We want to focus our attention exclusively on the aesthetic side of our publication, drawing it closer to the new currents and movements of European literature." (Compare this to the editorial statement in *Muzahet*, cited above.) He then added emphatically: "But not [closer] to the worthless [*skalichenykh*] forms of Russian decadence."<sup>40</sup> Elsewhere he says: "We must take from symbolism what is best," but

<sup>40</sup> Cf. Doroshkevych, "Do istorii modernizmu na Ukraini" 73.

underscores that he has no intention of introducing into Ukrainian literature “some sort of decadence (*dekadentshchynu*).”<sup>41</sup> Symbolism for Voronyi seems to have been virtually synonymous with what he called the broad “new currents and movements of European literature.” He ascribes its influence to a host of writers.<sup>42</sup> Thematically, “the sphere of symbolist poetry” he argues is “love (in the wide sense of the word), beauty and the search for truth (light, knowledge, the source or ‘God’).”<sup>43</sup> All this is pursued, to reiterate, in the name of the intelligentsia and “aesthetics in a *national* form.”

Influenced by the Ukrainian national revival, a new generation of writers at the turn of the century came to see itself as the guardian of cultural and artistic institutions, discovering a national purpose in what previously (for populists and realists) carried only class obligations. Whereas the populists promoted propaedeutic societies like “Prosvita,” the modernists set out to create elitist national institutions of culture. In trying to elevate these emerging institutions to European standards, they themselves were oriented mostly on recognized and mainstream authorities, not marginal (avant-garde) movements; they were not driven by sectarian, cliquish interests. Theirs was an inclusionary self-image; they did not want to be outsiders. Hence why the “older generation” and the modernists frequently appeared side-by-side in the same journals and almanacs. Typically, Voronyi addressed his appeal for a new literature to a broad spectrum of artists and invited participation in his almanac even from writers like Mordovtsev and Nechui-Levyts'kyi. Clearly, feelings of national solidarity and visions of “high” art eclipsed for the modernists any sense of allegiance to a narrow artistic movement. It is the absence of the latter which accounts for the fact that a phenomenon which started as a literary revolution quickly became an entrenched orthodoxy, gripping—and, to a large degree, stifling Ukrainian poetry until the twenties. The first conscious challenge to the dominance of the modernist aesthetic came only with the appearance of futurism in 1914. But it failed to undermine modernism immediately not only because the modernists launched a strong counterattack that nearly destroyed futurism, but also because Semenکو and his entourage continued to struggle in their own work with the demons of modernism. As the evolution of Semenکو’s, Shkurupii’s, and Slisarenko’s poetry shows, it took a lot of effort and time on the part of the futurists to liberate completely their psyche and verse from the pervasive presence of modernism.

41 Cf. Doroshkevych, “Do istorii modernizmu na Ukraini” 75.

42 Bal'mont (but not Briusov), Goethe, Heine, Tetmaier, Meterlink, Hauptmann, Ibsen, Baudelaire, Poe, Chekhov and Gor'ki. Cf. Doroshkevych, “Do istorii modernizmu na Ukraini” 75.

43 Doroshkevych, “Do istorii modernizmu na Ukraini” 75.