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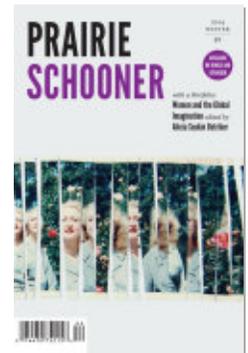
From "Letters to Ukraine"

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Prairie Schooner, Volume 82, Number 3, Fall 2008, pp. 161-172 (Article)

Published by University of Nebraska Press

DOI: [10.1353/psg.0.0122](https://doi.org/10.1353/psg.0.0122)



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I see now, as you pile every blanket in the house
 at the foot of the stairs and ready yourselves to jump,
 that his laws cannot apply here, his equations
 did not factor you in as variables, nor this part of you
 that will never be sure you can't fly, making every leap
 the leap during which you might.

Yuri Andrukhovych

Translated by Nina Shevchuk-Murray

From "Letters to Ukraine"

II

This is the capital. It is way too crowded
 and not green enough for plants or botanists.
 This city is so like a ship (or a shipwreck?)
 and not much of an arc, more like the Titanic.

There isn't air enough for these crowds.
 As everywhere most are fools or losers.
 Everyone turned away from the gates of heaven
 has the right to ashes and a place in an urn.

I must have written that I wear overalls.
 I have also learned the word "bespeaking,"
 learned to drink *kvas*, gauge the *alma populi*,
 and grow purplish blue from constant drinking.

I've learned to play cards, drink *chyfeer*
 (tea essence) and play rock until morning,

sip rubbing alcohol, judge hangovers, brush
the tops of my shoes on the bottoms of curtains,

and keep my soul in an ill-treated body,
distinguish by taste local cigarette factories,¹
learned to swear by god, and reach for nothing,
spit at the ceiling like decadent royalty.

I've learned to view trees as occasions for lynching,
a convenience embodied in every seed.
I am closer than ever to knowing the people.
Please. Show this letter to all in Ukraine.

III

About the girls. They are not so much youthful
as shrewd—they could outscrew Casanova.²
Junio is when they come into bloom—
or June, I'm sorry, I'm forgetting Ukrainian.
Their public behavior is often vulgar,
they cling to guys like boulevard-walkers.
True, they dress nicely, with a certain élan—
those clothes were chic in Europe last autumn.
About their beauty. The sensibilities
of temptation. On average they are familiar
with a dozen tricks, all of which, I must say,

1. Moscow cigarettes are labeled with the factory where they were manufactured: Dukat or Yava. To distinguish between these factories' production by taste, as the author claims, is an impossible feat; nonetheless, among smoking Muscovites, a myth circulates that the Yava "Yava" are better than the Dukat "Yava."

2. Giovanni Giacomo Casanova, chevalier de Sengal (1725–98), a legendary adventure-seeker, womanizer, and sex-giant, became the most powerful erectional symbol of wilting baroque Europe. Tireless and inventive in love, Casanova also achieved great heights in science and literature and revealed himself to be the Creator's special revenge for humiliated mankind. Casanova's *History of My Life* is one of the great literary works of the eighteenth century, and it inspired many modern masterpieces (Marina Tsvetaeva's plays *Adventure* and *Phoenix*, Federico Fellini's movie *Casanova*, and Y. Tarnavs'kyj's "Casanova's Old Age" [see the Ukrainian literary magazine *Chetver*, no. 3]).

we regard at home as quite inadequate.
 You will see for yourself—we'll go when you visit
 on a tour of brothels and similar places.
 Only you must first master English or Yiddish—
 locals aren't worth to them more than a penny.

Ukrainian girls are more southern, picturesque.
 Their nails and eyelashes are equally fiery.
 They are all cherry-eyed,³ all pure and virtuous—
 even whores are honest at selling and buying.
 I can't say I had wilted completely without them,
 I drive them through my dreams like a shepherd . . .
 Their wrists are bruised with the marks of *yasyr*,⁴
 only soldiers and Tatars want them in marriage.⁵

VII

There's another way out—to go into science
 like a prophet to the masses. Go shuffle books
 and if you don't have a bitch at hand,
 that is, a girl that has got you hooked,

and if your spiritual axis is hardened,
 and your magic root is full of ability,
 there is a chance for a flow of discovery,
 observations, impressions, and a mutability

3. Some Russian critics see in this passage an open demonstration of Ukrainian bourgeois racism. "Written themselves clear!" is the title of the "Letters to Ukraine" review by the philologist Hv. Smerdyakov, published in the newspaper *Day* and completely reprinted by *The Moscow Komsomol Man*.

4. "Yasyr" is a term for the servitude forced on Ukrainian youth by the Turks between the fourteenth and seventeenth centuries. The Ukrainian word is spelled ЯСИР.—*Trans.*

5. Ukrainian women's proclivity for international marriage allows two equally convincing claims: (1) that Ukrainian women are too frigid for Ukrainian men and (2) that Ukrainian men lack potency for Ukrainian women. In reality, both reasons must be working at the same time.

of your thoughts from stupid to wise.
 Everything depends on your concentration.
 This enslavement to knowledge, like manna from the skies,
 must be taken without the least reservation.

For example, I learned what poems are.
 They are not wounds of words with humid aromas,
 not the rhythms of dreams, as some would have it,
 nor the field of battle with the Unicorn,⁶

but the prayers to Someone, Whom you do not trust
 and that's why the words must be honest, but boring.
 Poems are gifts you bring to the gods
 who have long ago despised such offerings.

I have also learned that one must in time
 recognize the devil, his crooked grimace.
 For contacts with him they'll break your ribs
 but you cannot hide from him anywhere here.

VIII

I am revelling here like a constant hard-on,
 in the culture of womanly sighs and sobs.
 It's like being without a tux in a room
 occupied by a throng of luxurious snobs,

6. See the author's poem "Unicorn":

*He's a gentle beast, and his coat is thin—
 the lance will break for all time, like a twig.
 I will slumber, prostrate against the slain beast,
 pierced with his horn.
 My dear.*

emigrés from down there, from Little Russia,⁷
 a place remembered here mostly from jokes.
 They're treated commonly like aborigines
 of the Barents Land, that is—like idiots.⁸

But even among them there are weighty personas
 who advance with wit and proper manners:
*Feofan Prokopovich—they say, a fag,*⁹
*Rozumovskiy senior—wasn't he a tenor?*¹⁰

7. "Little Russia" appears to be a different nation, parallel to Ukraine. In one of his letters, Shevchenko wrote, with his characteristic parabolic reasoning, "And I won't go to Ukraine . . . it's full of Little Russia (Malorossia)." On the other hand, according to the same Y. Malaniuk who provides the abovementioned fact, "Little Russianism" in art is a worldwide phenomenon. According to his concept, Joyce, Picasso, and Ionesco are all "little russians."

8. Idiocy—the lowest, plantlike level of mental retardation; the level from which everything else starts. Idiots are characterized by the rare skill of drooling effortlessly. They come to this world to remind humankind of its disgusting nature, in which, it turns out, everything depends on a combination of chromosomes. The appearance of "Barents Land aborigines" (*eskimosy*) in the same line proves only their phonetically morphologic kinship to "little russians" (*malorosy*). In our view, the author wasn't trying to offend any Native peoples.

9. According to eyewitness accounts and court chroniclers, even emperor Peter the Great enjoyed satisfying himself "in the unnatural manner" with the brilliantly educated and perfume-oiled Feofan Prokopovich. All together, the great church leader counted among his lovers close to two hundred people, including Prince Oleksandr Menshikov, field marshals Sheremet'ev and Brius, marshal Shaposhnikov, internal affairs minister Count Tolstoy, king of Rzech Pospolita Stanislav Leshchyns'kyj, architects Rossi and Rastrelli, writers Trediakovs'kuj and Kantemyr, Hetman Skoropads'kyj, and other officials.

10. Good tenors are much rarer than good basses, and the owners of such voices are phenomenally self-centered and scandalous creatures. However, Oleksa Rozumovs'kyj, first the lover and then legal husband of Empress Elizabeth, did more for Ukraine than any other tenor. Thanks to his unparalleled vocal and sexual abilities, Ukraine received back, by "the highest order," hetman-led independent government and older kozac privileges. Rozymovskij deserves to be included in the pantheon of Ukrainian freedom fighters. "If not with the sword, then with the dick!" was his knightly motto.

*Or for instance, Hogol' or Hrebinka,¹¹
and if you thrust deep into coronations,
Catherine the Second, a lady of distinction,
that is, a whore,¹² cross-bred the nations.*

I have here discovered hidden and obvious
machinations of spirit. They look like blemishes.
And the faith of the place is getting so Orthodox
that I lean more to Islam by the day.

They have fooled a thousand generations
—not a great sin, for them it's quite natural.
I've been told many times that we are related,
meaning, Kyiv was also once theirs.

IX

To travel here to the Middle Ages
is to crawl behind royal supply trains.
All you have to look at are strangers' faces
and these folks were found in tracts on eugenics¹³—

11. It was the *maloros* Yevhen Hrebinka who created the greatness and world glory of the Russian culture. This ascendancy happened thanks to his romantic tune "Black Eyes" ("Ochi Chyornye")—that inextinguishable *evergreen* of eating establishments in Europe, America, and both Indies. Along with the anonymous "Kalinka Malinka" and novels by Fyodor Dostoevsky, "Black Eyes" is Russia's most significant contribution to the world culture.

12. A clarification: "that is, a whore" is meant to be applied not to the concept of "woman" in general but to Catherine II specifically.

13. The original line reads, "these guys had been described by Lombroso." Cesare Lombroso (1836–1909) was the Italian criminologist who advanced the theory that crime is the result of a hereditary predisposition in certain individuals.—*Trans.* An alternative line is "these guys come to kill you as a whole *kolhoz*." Although the following stanza doesn't agree well with this choice, sometimes, when the audience is unfamiliar with Lombroso, this variant seems more acceptable.—*Trans.*

there's something criminal in their appearance,
 something convicted, a kind of causality,
 and the past peeking through their humble obedience,
 in a word, has features of bestiality.

Autumn is a road somewhere northward:
 in the trees the flame grows dull and dims.
 Greenwich doesn't apply to this different timeflow,
 but one travels still. And life's wonder-filled,

notwithstanding the fact that it's dark much earlier
 than in other lands, and the blacker the yonder
 the closer you get to the Khan.¹⁴ Local murderers
 do their job for the principle, aren't total scoundrels,

and don't crave the blood of the sentenced princes.
 One might kill a prince, say, in a bathing house
 or during a hunt¹⁵—the woods are thick here.
 You must count the dead by counting widows,

and the ever more dried out trees
 whose branches have such disabling abilities
 that a body plummeting through them falls freely.
 You can smell the Dark Ages everywhere you go.

x

Ukraine's a baroque domain.
 Travel here is solace, a feast for one's eyes,

14. The Volodymyr track, leading northeast from Moscow, was originally the path the Moscow princes and czars traveled to evince their loyalty to the Great Khan of the Golden Horde (blow jobs?). Later they sent convicts down the same road to Siberia.

15. Various ways of killing a prince surfaced in the author's imagination when he visited the town of Bogoliubovo near Vladimir, where Prince Andriy Bogoliub-skyj, on the steps of his own fort, was knifed to death like a boar one night.

an abundance that feeds its own temptation
 to lay waste, destroy. Wherever one rides
 there are things left behind: towers, moats,
 walls still ailing with the plague of the Turks,
 gates pentagrammed in tar and chalk.
 The stars have abandoned our wells,
 and gone is the water, though traces remain
 and allow us to foretell the future,
 mostly in the shape of our faith in the unavoidable.
 Our land is more than a salve for the skin.

The land's florid soul keeps blooming,
 madly, even in ruins,
 even when we are banished
 and silenced in Europe. The jailers

turned into dungeons our castles and forts,
 but never the chapels, we kept those filled.
 This is why a short step under a chapel dome
 is the first plunge deep into all things Ukrainian.

I can see it all from this foreign capital.
 Everything yet can be raised from the ruins,
 except the blood that's alive and calling
 from under the ground, but we already knew it.

Write to me if everyone's well and healthy.
 If above the Danube¹⁶ the angels soar.
 If it's raining in Lviv, and also write me
 if there is enough blood, if the blood keeps calling.

16. One can speak endlessly about the Danube in Ukrainian folk poetry. M. Grushevs'kuj insisted on the Black-Sea-Danube epoch in our prehistory. Apparently, only in connection with this Danubian factor can we now claim our half-forgotten, ragtag Europeanness. At the same time, the Dnieper River is never once mentioned in Ukrainian folklore. It's as if it didn't exist until Shevchenko observed the mighty river "roaring and moaning."

xvi

In Ukraine at Christmas things occur
of an eternal and mysterious nature.
Say, the moon becomes irrelevant,¹⁷ and the Holy Eve does not
grow into a night full of sleepy cherubs,
but a night like an ocean,
where the three wise men, baffled and hurried, travel
with gifts from the mountains for the Virgin.

But an ocean needn't make the journey interminable,
neither that it is in vain nor that we should doubt
all the lame foretellings, signs, and auguries.
Though the winter be cold, though it grow darker
it is quite unavoidable that there must be a marvel
in the village of Duklia,¹⁸ somewhere small.

This faith is like a comet, like the very star
that pointed the way, shepherded the shepherds,
their lambs, and all things that tonight will come true:
Joseph, hay, manger, *koliada*, and the candle.

And still—everything exists only in the box of nativity,
where you can peer through the smallest of keyholes,
for the truth is, there is no barn for the cradle.

Still, I must be ready to bear my gifts
though my pockets are empty, and gray are the heavens.

17. The moon becomes superfluous on the Holy Eve for Hogol' and his pocket devil in his novella *Night before Christmas*.

18. The author makes an involuntary reference to B.-I. Antonych and his simple-hearted, ingenious poem "Christmas":

*God is born in a sleigh
in the Lemkio town of Duklia . . .*

Here, Duklia, buried somewhere in the Carpathian Mountains, becomes the Bethlehem of Ukrainian poetry.

I was preyed upon here by windows and doors.
I must leave. Perhaps I will outwait King Herod.¹⁹

XVII

*... in my soul all day
a lazy barber plucked
a guitar.
Myhail' Symenko*

From the latest news: I'm telling my fortune
by reading the I-Ching and the occult media.
I've gone to some brotherhood, I think, a lodge²⁰—
it looked bad, black mass was not very interesting.
However, they did summon ghosts.
One of the Germans, I think it was Schiller,
threw plates on the floor (but didn't touch bottles).
I left. At night I dreamed up a thriller,
although recently I have been only seeing
erotic dreams and dripping juices—
it's pleasant. The ladies in dreams are willing
to share pure and high aspirations.
After dinner, the devil brought round Seriozha—
he's the guy here who cleans water closets.
He had what goes with food and wanted
to know all about my fortunes.
We yapped forever like soldiers in foxholes,
until dark. The sweet camaraderie of talking!
In the presence of wine we all become brothers.²¹

19. "When Herod had died, behold, the angel of the Lord appeared in a dream to Joseph in Egypt and said, 'Rise, take the child and his mother and go to the land of Israel, for those who sought the child's life are dead.'" Matthew 2:20.

20. The author seems to imagine that his lyrical subject was allowed to enter one of the Masonic lodges now active in Moscow. It must be either "Immortality" or "Salamander."

21. About the unifying significance of wine, read also in Homer, Anacreont, Rable, Bocaccio, Neborak, Pushkin, Pushyk, Petronij, Petrovtsij, Petrarka, Haiam, Hafiz, Goethe, Bracciolini, Rustaveli (Tsynandali), Joyce, Kafka, Proust, Li Fu, Doo Bo, Vaj Ven', Van' Vej, Nguyen Hyj, Hemingway, Rushdie, John the Apostle, and others. Also read about it in the journal *Chetver*.

Then he left, collecting his weapons of mopping,
 buckets and brushes of hair and wire.
 He went into the night, and took with him also
 the empty bottles. To hell with the scoundrel!
 Inside me, someone tormented a guitar;
 as the old poet would say, it must be the barber.²²

xx

Having bought the ticket with my last change,
 I consume with my eyes, brain, and mouth
 the immediate, exulted lift to the sky—
 and below me, as they say in English, Moscow.

I ascended. I saw waving at me from below
 a hundred partings, a hundred wings
 beating in ecstasy, crazed—whores,
 rock stars, ambassadors, generals, czar Ivan
 and czar Pushkin. Immortal genius
 waved from his pedestal (farewell, buddy!

22. Here is the poem by the “old poet,” Myhail’ Semenko:

The Barber

Today I felt so bored
 as if Oles’, Voronyj
 and Chuprynka all came together.
 It felt rainy and also lusty—
 in my soul all day
 a lazy barber plucked
 a guitar.

Sometimes I thought about her and drafted a letter—
 the letter that wouldn’t expect to be sent.
 Remembered a few forgotten French phrases,
 Looked up twice at the image of Christ.

Voicelessly hummed some banal waltzes
 Staring at the ceiling and dirty cobwebs.
 No, I was just sad—only sad . . .
 In my heart a melon lay decomposing.

13.X.1916 Vladivostok; first appeared in the collection *Pierrot Loves*, 1918

I won't see you again. At home in L'viv
 they kicked you out of heaven like
 a charlatan, jester, imperial debris).

I took off. Will you, Moscow, survive without me?
 I can't change it—I must take myself farther south.
 I leave you my fiery word. All the same
 without me life will grow sourer
 in your bottomless pits, beloved Mecca,²³
 to which paupers crawl on their bellies.
 But now you are so far from Ukraine
 that it's silly to say "together forever"!

Good evening, skies and cotton wool clouds!
 Sleep tight the blood-colored city!
 I am flying home to sing my carols.
 To join Irvanéts, Neborák,²⁴ and the others.

23. The comparison of Moscow to Mecca is a result not so much of Andrukho-
 vych's love for orientalism (which does not merit discussion) but his need to
 demonstrate a loyalty to Islamic fundamentalism as the most promising of the
 world's ideologies.

24. Here must be a typesetter's mistake. "Neborák," is a synonym for "bum,"
 "harmless fool," "oaf," "poor stupid thing," or "dimwit." Why this word is spelled
 with a capital N is unknown. The last line of the "Letters to Ukraine" should likely
 read "To meet Irvanéts, poor dimwit, and others."