Literature and National Cultures

edited by Brian Edwards

Typereader Publications no.3
Centre for Studies in Literary Education
Deakin University

Notes

1. Brian Elliott and Adrian Mitchell (eds.), *Bards in the Wilderness* (Melbourne: Thomas Nelson, 1970).

2. Patrick White, *Voss* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1960).

3. Henry Lawson, *The Bush Undertaker and Other Stories* (London: Angus and Robertson, 1974), p.20.

4. Vance Palmer, *The Legend of the Nineties* (Melbourne: Melbourne Uni. Press, 1954), p. 22.

5. Ibid, p. 128.

6. In Clement Semmler (ed.), *Twentieth Century Australian Literary Criticism* (Melbourne: Oxford, 1967), p.41.

7. Rex Ingamells (ed.), *New Song in an Old Land* (London :Longmans, 1944), p.viii.

8. Rex Ingamells, *Handbook of Australian Literature*. (Melbourne: Jindyworabak, 1949), p.4.

9. In Semmler op.cit. p. 101.

10. Russell Ward, *The Australian Legend*. (Melbourne: Oxford,1965), p.1.

11. Ibid, p. 240.

12. Fredric Jameson,'Postmodernism and Consumer Society', in Hal Foster (ed.) *The Anti-Aesthetic*. (Port Townsend: Bay Press), p. 124.

13. Malcolm Cowley (ed.) *The Portable Hawthorne*. (New York: The Viking Press, 1969).

National Idioms in Soviet Literature? The Case of the Ukrainian Whimsical Novel

Marko Pavlyshyn

THE DISCUSSION OF national cultures in the USSR is commonly held to reflect developments in a debate within the power structure about the future course of Soviet nationalities policy. Traditionally, emphasis in public discourse on the present and future "flourishing" and "drawing together" of the nationalities of the USSR has been a sign that the national cultures lobby has gained ground; stress on the impending "fusion" of nationalities has meant the ascendancy of those who advocate the accelerated generalization of Russian culture as the culture of the USSR.[1] The tension between the two positions was especially evident at the June 1986 Congress of the USSR Union of Writers, as well as at the republican writers' congresses held in Ukraine, Estonia, Georgia and Kirghizia in that year. Perhaps in the spirit of the new Gorbachevian demand for openness and criticism, authoritative non-Russian writers called for measures to arrest the decline in the public, educational and scholarly use of the national languages - the central symbols of the Soviet national cultures.[2]

In the literary field there is an analogous tug-of-war between advocates of the relative autonomy of the various national literatures of the USSR and the advocates of "Soviet multinational literature" : a single literary process differentiated by language, but not by ethos.[3] There is little doubt that the latter tendency is dominant; nevertheless, there has been a degree of national differentiation between literatures since the end of the Stalin era in 1953. During the thaw, the uniformity of genre, tone and ideological content that characterized the literature of high Stalinism became a little less pervasive, and certain national idiosyncrasies were permitted to emerge in the non-Russian literatures. One such phenomenon is a relatively new sub-genre called the "whimsical novel" by Soviet critics, some of whom have observed that it is specific to Ukrainian Soviet literature.[4]

The term "whimsical novel" comes from the subtitle of the first work of this kind, Oleksandr Il'chenko's *There's No End to the Cossack Clan*, or *Mamai and the Female Stranger: A Whimsical Novel from the Folk Tradition* (1958). The novel is clearly part of the aftermath of the celebration, in 1954, of the 300th anniversary of the Pereiaslav Treaty - the agreement by which Ukrainian Cossacks accepted the sovereignty of the Russian tsar, and the fountainhead of what Lowell Tillett has called the myth of the Great Friendship between Russia and Ukraine.[5] Il'chenko's rather tedious and, fortunately, incomplete novel, set in the 17th century after Pereiaslav, has two major plot lines that illustrate the friendship myth. The first has as its central figure the Cossack Mamai, the subject of the most popular Ukrainian folk painting, who is endowed in this novel with supernatural powers. Mamai appears mysteriously in the town of Myroslav to help its citizens resist the insurgency of a villainous Ukrainian hetman against the tsar. The second narrative line concerns the journey of a young messenger to Moscow with a plea for the Tsar's assistance; the novel breaks off amidst euphoric renderings of the mission's success. While endeavouring to elicit the pathos of East Slav brotherhood, anti-Western xenophobia, and class resentment, the novel offers its reader entertainment through the amplification of ethnographic material (description of folk custom, lore, material culture, superstitions and modes of community life), through humour (comic names, slapstick action, indecent allusion, grotesque characterization, jovially mannered style) and through the coincidences and convolutions of a plot that is equally indebted to the Gothic novel, the "Schelmenroman" and the historical romance.

Il'chenko's successors, on the whole, have created whimsical novels of greater sophistication, but according to the same recipe: the components are a rural setting facilitating the presentation of Ukrainian ethnographic detail; historical reference, especially to the Cossack period; the use of the fantastic and supernatural, most often from the repertoire of Ukrainian folklore; the admission of non-realistic notions of causality; eccentricity of style, sometimes accompanied by waywardness and whimsy in narrative technique; erotic allusion; and humour.[6] These elements are present in some combination in the novels on which the following observations are chiefly based: Vasyl' Zemliak's *Flight of Swans* (1971), Ievhen Hutsalo's trilogy *The Borrowed Husband*, *The Private Life of a Phenomenon* and *Parade of Planets* (1980-84), and Valerii Shevchuk's rather more interesting *House on the Hill* (1982).[7] *Flight of Swans* traces individual fates in a fictional village during the 1920s and 30s, offering a whimsical and humorous refraction of the (historically rather unhumorous) processes of collectivization and dekulakization in Ukraine. *The Borrowed Husband* derives its effects by exploring the comic possibilities of a situation in which one woman has lent her husband to another against the security of a

pedigree calf. The novel is also notable for overwhelming the reader with a torrent of Ukrainian proverbs and other standard folk locutions. Of *The House on the Hill* I shall say a few words later.

The existence of such works of obvious national specificity raises a question : what meaning does the sub-genre of the whimsical novel have within the context of recent Soviet nationalities policy? (A fairly direct connection between policy and cultural phenomenon can, of course, be assumed in the USSR: a manifestation of Soviet culture is likely to be promoted or tolerated by the system's control mechanisms; otherwise it belongs to the realm of dissident activity.) In answer, the following observations suggest that it would be premature to regard the whimsical novel's construction of national difference as the signal of a more favourable attitude in the Soviet Union to the national cultures. It is an elementary notion of rhetoric that the persuasiveness of an argument depends in part on the prestige for a given audience of the medium in which the argument is formulated. The potential prestige of the whimsical sub-genre, it seems to me, is low, and the net argumentative force of the sub-genre operates against the interests of national culture, rather than for it.

Let us consider the probable meaning and value of some of the whimsical novel's determining features for the contemporary Soviet Ukrainian audience.

Take, first, the use of history and the ethnographic. Il'chenko's novel and half of Shevchuk's are set amidst the 17th century's Cossacks, who also make an incursion, through the technique of the explained supernatural, into Hutsalo's ultra-modern rural landscape. The ethnographic character of the novels is evident both at the stylistic and the thematic levels. The proliferation of the proverb in Hutsalo is only the most extreme form of the folksy raciness and informality which are characteristic of the sub-genre. At the same time, all the named novels are in love with the material things of rural life, and delight in enumerating them. The market-place is, not unexpectedly, an object of enthusiastic description by Il'chenko, Hutsalo and Zemliak.

The combination of history and ethnographism had once exercised sway over the Ukrainian reading audience. Ivan Kotliarevsky, writing the first work in vernacular Ukrainian, his travesty of Virgil's *Aeneid* (1798), fused the anarcho-autonomist image of the Cossacks with images of the prosperity and vitality of peasant life to create a rallying-myth for the deculturated Ukrainian intelligentsia, thus initiating its transformation into a literary audience ripe for romantic nationalism.[8] But Kotliarevsky's formula was valid only at the initial stages of cultural self-definition. Once a modern national identity had been established, the self-same combination of the historical with the ethnographic, especially in the stylistic proximity of humour, came to be perceived as anti-modern and even offensive. Cossack history as a symbol of national cohesion located the source of identity in the past and with a defunct social order. Worse still, the symbolism

of local colour is a symbolism of marginality: the ethnographic in its realization as the local is quaint and laughable, and the "national character" is an eccentric - a maladjusted personality outside mainstream social reality. Already in the nineteenth century, this had been perceived by such Ukrainian critics as Panteleimon Kulish, who had railed against Kotliarevsky's numerous imitators, claiming that they limit and debase the potential of Ukrainian literature. The whimsical novel, however, is precisely an anachronistic reactivation of the old Kotliarevsky mania.

Similar observations could be made concerning the use of the country as setting. Recent Soviet literature, and especially Russian Soviet literature, has know a movement usually called "village prose," which has the underlying structure of the idyll: the moral values and life virtues of the country are rediscovered in opposition to the city experience. But the city-country opposition presupposes as its point of departure, even implicitly, the recognition (and criticism) of the city, modernity and civilization. Not so the whimsical novel. Here the humorous depiction of the country has as its substructure not the opposition of city and country, but of metropolis and province. It is the country which is negatively evaluated - as backward, barbarian and, by civilized standards, hilarious. This manner of construing the national difference has as its first major statement the Russian-language stories of Nikolai Gogol about his native Ukraine: *Evenings on a Farm near Dikanka* (1831-32) and *Mirgorod* (1835). It comes as no surprise, then, that the whimsical novels are awash with references to Gogol. Il'chenko's town is called Myroslav in deference to Gogol's Mirgorod; Zemliak's regional capital expresses its provinciality by having, like Mirgorod, a vast puddle in the main square.

In the context of such signals indicating the provincialism of the country setting, the assertion that its localism may be transcended in the interests of a more general meaningfulness can be made only humorously or ironically. Hutsalo's comparison of the mores of New York with those prevailing in the village of Iablunivka is (intentionally) funny because of the shrieking differences in scale between the terms of the comparison. Zemliak gives his fictional village the name of Babylon, both to underscore the comic self-importance of the residents, and as an ironic concession to his readers that the village, as a seat of wealthy peasants, is a microcosm of the universal in one respect alone: it harbours the class enemy and is, in that sense, like the Babylon of the Book of Revelation, "the Mother of Harlots and Abominations of the Earth."

The whimsical novel, then, defines national difference in terms of quaintness, outdatedness, and rustic provinciality: qualities which perhaps have a certain old-world attractiveness, but which are even as notions the opposite of modernity and relevance - for the contemporary Soviet Ukrainian readership as for any other. Even Soviet Ukrainian critics, as well as writers themselves, have

protested against aspects of this state of affairs, often in the context of discussions of other matters than the whimsical novel. Iurii Shcherbak complained in 1986 that three-quarters of Ukrainian short stories are set in the village,[9] and Iurii Mushketyk at the 8th Congress of the Soviet Writers' Union (June, 1986) accused Soviet criticism of perceiving in Ukrainian contemporary literature only its "romantic dimension."[10] All of this unease could be summarized as an expression of discontent with the profoundly marginalized and underprivileged status of Ukrainian literature in the Soviet Union.

For the Ukrainian literary text, defined as different from mainstream Russian Soviet literature by its language and by the institutional symbols of a separate literature (republican publishing houses, a separate writers' union and a specialized fraternity of literary critics), appears in the normal course of events to have three possibilities: first, to pretend that the difference is not significant, and therefore not to reflect it structurally or thematically. This is tantamount to embodying the argument that national culture is, in fact, part of that unproblematical dialectic between national and international through which the USSR publicly claims, under "socialism," to have solved the nationalities problem. The second possibility is to reflect the national difference within legitimate bounds - that is to say, to define it, as the whimsical novel does, as marginality and provincialism. The third possibility is to reflect the national difference as a significant fact of life and therefore as a political problem - which is to write oneself into dissidence and out of the literary process.

The choice is not a happy one: two variants of apologia for current cultural power relations, or a critical rhetoric whose exercise results in more or less severe sanctions against the person of the writer.

Is it possible, under these circumstances, to write in a way that actually furthers the cause (i.e., increases the prestige) of any national culture other than Russian within the Soviet Union? The answer, I think, is that it is possible, but difficult, and I cite Shevchuk's *House on the Hill* as substantiating evidence.

The novel, which in its subtitle calls itself a "novel ballad," is in two parts, the first half providing the frame narrative for the collection of twelve short stories that form the second half. Within the frame narrative there is a deliberately obfuscating movement backwards and forwards in time, from which there gradually emerges a simple, indeed schematic, sequence of events. The narrative covers the years 1911-1963. During that period the house on the hill - located in the country near an unnamed town - is inhabited by a single family line of mothers and daughters, one woman in each of four generations. Two kinds of male seek out the house on the hill. One kind ascends the hill, accepts an offered cup of water and remains in the house as husband of the woman then of marriageable age. Of such unions are born daughters who inherit the house. But prior to this, as each woman reaches sexual maturity, she is visited by a grey-

suited dandy with impeccable manners and lacquered shoes which are always preternaturally free of dust, for these dandies descend from aloft in the form of eagles. The transformation from eagle to dandy is at first only hinted at, then referred to, and finally becomes the object of an elaborate and surreal description. In each case the avian incubus strives to seduce the woman; sometimes he succeeds, and the progeny in such cases is always male. These men leave the house early and eschew social normality: they are seers, endowed with privileged insights into the nature of things. The stories of the second half have been written by one such man, Ivan the goatherd (he used to be a government clerk until the Vision possessed him); they have been edited by his grandnephew, also an offspring of the demonic conception.

These stories are each as fantastic as the frame narrative, but they are set in the seventeenth century in Cossack milieux, and the fantastic in them is constructed from motifs that are directly borrowed from the canon of Ukrainian folklore.

An interpretation of the novel is more than the spatial limits of this paper allow; even this sketch, however, must suggest that *The House on the Hill* would prove fruitful ground for several critical methodologies. What is immediately evident, however, is that the text contains many of the national topoi that the whimsical novel has utilized: history, folklore, country - but has alienated them from the argumentative function which they perform there. The country is not the province, but a (value-free) landscape in which symbolic places and things (hill, roads river, mist, sunset) can be located. History is not the past as a predecessor of the present, but a fictional construct facilitating the exploration of non-modern epistemological possibilities; ethnographic objects (superstitions and stories) are not local colour, but the medium which relieves the plot of realistic reference and opens it up, like the Kunstmarchen, for a multitude of readings. Humour - which is the element that in the whimsical novel confirms that dismissal of the history-folklore-country complex as a negative value - is absent altogether.

The aesthetic strategy embodied in *The House on the Hill* allows an escape from what might be called a Soviet national literature's tragic choice between apologetic and dissident writing. Shevchuk's novel marks its own participation in a national cultural tradition unambiguously, avoids evaluating that tradition directly, thus proposing it to be a viable and natural medium for literature, and proceeds to other, self-defined, literary tasks. Of course, this seeming "naturalness" of national literature is a product of great artifice; it is evidence of a successful resistance to the dominant imperial discourse such as only a few texts within a Soviet non-Russian literature seem able to accomplish.

Notes

1. See Lowell Tillett, *The Great Friendship. Soviet Historians on the Non-Russian Nationalities* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1969) for a discussion of the symbolism which expresses relationships between the non-Russian nationalities and the centre. On the fluctuation between "drawing together" and "fusion" in the Ukrainian context, see Roman Solchanyk, "Politics and the National Question in the Post-Shelest Period," in *Ukraine after Shelest*, ed. by Bohdan Krawchenko (Edmonton: Canadian Institute of Ukrainian Studies, 1983).

2. See the September, 1986 issue of *Soviet Nationality Survey*. A summary of recent Ukrainian cultural demands is presented in Marko Pavlyshyn, "'Openness' and the Contemporary Literary Discussion in Ukraine," *Soviet Ukrainian Affairs* (Northolt, U.K.),1,(1987), No. 2, 7-10.

3. A development toward national variation within "multinational Soviet literature" and away from literary uniformity is viewed with favour, for example, by V.A. Shoshin in "Vzaemodeistvie natsional'nykh literatur i sovremennoe sovets'koe literaturovedenie,' *Russkaia literatura*, 25 (1982), No. 4, 7-17.

4. See, e.g., Anatolii Pohribnyi, "Moda? Novatsiia? Zakonomernost'? O 'khimernom' zhanre v ukrainskoi proze,"*Literaturnoe obozrenie* (1980), No. 2, 24-28.

5. Tillett, pp. 299 ff.

6. For discussions of the whimsical novel, see Pohribnyi, "Moda? Novatsiia? Zakonomernost'?" and the relevant sections of Pohribnyii, "Suchasnyi styl' " vdumlyvist' poshuku i pidstupnist' mody," *Vitchyzna* (1984), No. 12, 145-52, Mykola Zhulyns'kyi, "Masshtaby suchasnosti, hlybyny istorii," *Kyiv* (1986), No. 1, 125-33 and No. 2, 131-45, and MykhailoStrel'byts'kyi, "Vysokosnyi rik romanu," Zhovten' (1982), No. 1, 105-123.

7. None of the novels has been translated into English. Most appeared for the first time in literary journals. The titles of their most accessible editions in book form are, respectively, *Lebedyna zhraiia*, in Vasyl' Zemliak, *Tvory* in 4 vols., Vol. III (Kiev: Radians'kyi pys'mennyk, 1984), 5-279; Ievhen Hutsalo, *Pozychenyi cholovik. Pryvatne zhyttia fenomena* (Kiev: Radians'kyi pys'mennyk, 1982) and *Parad planet* (Kiev: Radians'kyi pys'mennyk, 1984); and Valerii Shevchuk, *Dim na hori* (Kiev: Radians'kyi pys'mennyk, 1983).

8. See my article, "The Rhetoric and Politics of Kotliarevsky's *Eneida*," *Journal of Ukrainian Studies*, 10 (1985), No. 1, 9-24.

9. "Obrii khudozhn'oi prozy," *Literaturna Ukraina*, 21.8.1986, No. 34 (4183), 1.

10. "VIII z"izd pys'mennykiv SRSR. Vystup Iu. Mushketyka," *Literaturna Ukraina*, 3.7.1986, No. 27 (4176), 3.

Scandinavianism: A Supra-Nationalism Born of the Literary Imagination

Hans Kuhn

IN THE SEVENTEENTH century the two Scandinavian realms, Denmark and Sweden, were European powers of some note, both economically, as trading nations in a crucial position between the North Sea and the Baltic, and by virtue of their military strength. Denmark at that time included Slesvig-Holstein, Norway and Iceland and was establishing colonies in Africa and in the East and West Indies. Sweden comprised Finland and the neighbouring parts of Russia, including Estonia and Latvia, and was constantly involved in Polish affairs. While Christian IV of Denmark was unsuccessful in his campaign on the Protestant side in the Thirty Years' War, Sweden gained a substantial foothold in North Germany as a result of its intervention under Gustavus Adolphus, the 'Lion from the North'. When the two rival powers were not engaged elsewhere they were mostly at each other's throats; the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries saw few periods of peace between the two countries, and what is now the southernmost and westernmost part of Sweden passed then from the Danish to the Swedish crown.

This period of big-power games also saw the first attempts to create something of a national tradition and a national identity with the help of history, literature and archaeology. Humanists all over Europe had been busy extolling the virtues and the noble history of their respective nations, and the Scandinavians were not slow to follow suit. The kings were eager in this way to acquire historical nobility and to foster a spirit of heroism and national pride, and this led not only to the appointment of royal historiographers but to the first printed editions of Old Norse prose literature, believed to be historical records, of the Eddic poems and of collections of popular ballads.