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Myroslav Shkandrij

Avant-gardist versus Neoclassicist: Viktor Domontovych's Early Novels

Viktor Petrov graduated from the University of Kyiv in 1918 and became a prominent scholar in the Ukrainian Academy of Arts created by the Ukrainian National Republic and subsequently taken over by the Soviet régime. For the next twenty years he filled many important positions in the Academy, among them secretary of the Historical Dictionary Commission and director of the Ethnographic Commission. Until he stopped publishing in the thirties, he was known in literary circles as Viktor Domontovych, a prose writer and a member of the neo-classicist circle around Mykola Zerov. During the Second World War, after the Academy had been moved to the Urals, he suddenly reappeared in occupied Kharkiv, where he worked for the German Propagandastaffel editing the journal *Ukrains'kyi zasiv* (Ukrainian Seeding). Following the evacuation of Kharkiv he retreated with the German front. The post-war years saw a great burst of literary activity in the camps that housed displaced persons. Here Petrov-Domontovych, by virtue of his intellectual stature and organizational abilities, played a leading role in the formation of the émigré Ukrainian literary organization MUR and once again became a productive writer. Iurii Sherekh called him "one of the greatest, if not the greatest intellectual figure in the emigration."¹ On 18 April, 1949, he suddenly and inexplicably disappeared. It was not until 1956 that he mysteriously resurfaced in Kyiv as the senior staff member at the Academy of Sciences Institute of Archaeology and as director of its scientific archives. In the years that followed, he stopped work as the creative writer Domontovych, although as Petrov he continued to produce scores of articles on ethnography, excavated Trypillian and Proto-Slavic settlements, and investigated the ancient burial mounds and Scythian artifacts.² 1965 produced another surprise: he was honoured with a medal for his achievements as a Soviet spy. He died in 1969. The involvement with the Soviet secret police remains a

¹ Iu. Sherekh, "Viktor Petrov iak ia ioho bachyv," *Ukraina* (Paris) 6.1951; quoted in V.H. Donchyk, ed., *Istoriia ukrains'koi literatury XX stolittia* vol. 1 (Kyiv: Lybid, 1993) 643.

² He also published an excavation diary of Khvoika in Zarubyntsiia. His most important works are *Skify. Mova i etnos* (*Scythians. Language and Ethnos*, Kiev, 1968) and *Etnohenez slovian. Dzherela, etapy rozvytku i problematyka* (*Ethnogenesis of the Slavs. Sources, Stages of Development and Issues*, Kyiv, 1972).

controversial and unexplained issue. Iurii Shevel'ov has denied the possibility, maintaining that Petrov was probably kidnapped, imprisoned and only allowed to return to active scholarly life during the post-Stalin thaw.³

The writer Domontovych was known for a deep scepticism, a hostility to the Soviet state, the new technological society and the avant-garde—hostilities which had to be concealed and therefore appeared in veiled form in his ironic and mystificatory fiction of the twenties. The erudite and sophisticated author, it has widely been held, stood outside the fanaticisms of his day, indeed sought to quietly puncture and deflate them.⁴

However, in the immediate post-war years in Germany Petrov was known as a literary historian (he signed these articles “V. Petrov”) and a philosopher (for these articles he used the pseudonym “V. Ber”). There appears to be nothing tentative about this Petrov-Ber’s commitments. Ber argues:

there is only one history, not many: it is impossible for literature to have its separate history, painting its own, philosophy, the natural sciences etc. each their own. Just as there cannot be many histories, there are not and cannot be many historical periodizations in each sphere. It is therefore impossible for literature to have one periodization and for politics or art to have another. There is only one history and therefore only one historical periodization. Literature does not exist alone. It exists in its dependance on a given historical epoch, carries all the signs of the given historical age and changes with the age.⁵

In vigorous polemics with other academics, Petrov-Ber put forward the new teaching on the unified mentality of an age. A corollary to this thesis was the belief in periodic spiritual-artistic revolutions or paradigm shifts—radical breaks which fundamentally redefine all aspects of a culture. The writer, who saw the contemporary period as undergoing such a break, politicized this theoretical principle, strongly denouncing the previous generation’s unreconstructed populism:

³ Iurii Shevel'ov, “Shostyi u groni. V. Domontovych v istorii ukraїns'koi prozy,” in V. Domontovych, *Proza. Try tomy* vol. 3 (*Suchasnist* 1988) 549–50. Sherekh’s assessment is disputed by Vasyl Chaplenko whose novel *Ioho taiemytsia: povist' i spohady* (New York, 1976) portrays Petrov as a Soviet spy being blackmailed by the secret police.

⁴ Iu. Sherekh, “Ne dlia ditei,” in his *Ne dlia ditei. Literaturno-krytychchni stati i eseji* (Prolog 1964) 358–75; Iu. Lavrinenko, “Pro grunt odnoho bezgruntia,” in his *Zrub i parosty. Literaturo-krytychchni stati, eseji, refleksii* (*Suchasnist* 1971): 135–41.

⁵ Viktor Petrov, “Vstup,” in Viktor Petrov and Dmytro Chyzhev's'ky, *Istoriia ukraїns'koi literatury* (Munich: Instytut zaochnoho navchannia pry ukraїns'komu vil'nomu universyteti, 1949) 3.

Historically, the twenties and thirties had to complete the move from ethnographic-populist positions to national ones... The people consolidated themselves into a nation. Ethnographic provincialism was transformed into an organic whole of national action.⁶

His “revolutionary” generation had no time for conciliation with the generation of their parents:

Our predecessors spoke of development and progress. For us the word evolution has already lost its taste. We speak not of progress, but of catastrophe and crisis, of negation and not of agreement... In the early twenties, the most pressing problem was drawing a distinction between two currents: the populist and the anti-populist. The idea of the epoch served as the basic general theoretical principle...⁷

Here Petrov-Ber appears as a determined, impatient modernizer and nationalist. His ideas owe much to the debates of the revolutionary and pre-revolutionary modernists, who had called for a radical reshaping of culture in line with national political requirements, especially in the pre-war journal *Ukrains'ka khata* (*Ukrainian Home*).⁸ The militant, uncompromising tone of these quotations and their conflation of art and politics into the idea of an epoch also recall the formalists view of revolutionary change in the artistic sphere and the avant-garde's idea of a total aesthetico-political project.⁹ There is a clue here to the decoding of Domontovych's fiction, in which the radically new clashes with the old, and in which characters are compelled to reshape themselves according to the imperatives of a new art-politics that called for mastering nature and radically reshaping all aspects of social and cultural life.¹⁰ The conflicts between the

⁶ Viktor Petrov, “Problemy literaturoznavstva za ostannie 25-littia (1920–1945),” *Naukovo-literaturoznavchyi zbirnyk* (Svitannia: 1946): 44.

⁷ Petrov, “Problemy,” 46.

⁸ On the connection between *Ukrains'ka khata*'s modernism and nationalism see Oleh Ilnytzkyj, “*Ukrains'ka khata* and the Paradoxes of Ukrainian Modernism,” *Journal of Ukrainian Studies* 19.2 (1994): 5–30; and Solomiia Pavlychko, *Dyskurs modernizmu v ukrains'kii literaturi* (Kyiv: Lybid, 1997) 127–62.

⁹ For an analysis of Petrov's writings on culture in this period see Solomiia Pavlychko, “Na zvorotnomu botsi avtentychnosty: Kulturfilosofia Petrova-Domontovycha-Bera (1946–1948),” *Suchasnist* 5 (1993): 111–125; and her *Dyskurs*, 279–301. Her insightful account draws on Domontovych's writings of the forties, in particular his novel *Bez gruntu: Povist'* (Regensburg: Vydannia Mykhaila Borets'koho, 1948), which she feels was written as well as published in German occupied Kharkiv from 1941–1942. Pavlychko emphasizes Petrov's polemic with earlier, pre-revolutionary Ukrainian modernism, which he saw as superficially influenced by Western Europe and incapable of breaking decisively with populism.

¹⁰ The collaboration of the avant-garde with bolshevik power has been described as following “from the very essence of the avant-gardist artistic project,” which is the

characters of Domontovych's fiction reflect this discourse of the twenties concerning modernization and modernism. A particular interest in the novels is the clash between avant-gardists and neoclassicists.¹¹ Both parties reject the legacy of populism and of pre-1914 Ukrainian modernism. The former is despised for its didacticism and apotheosis of the *narod*, the latter for its subjectivism, cult of feeling and lack of intellectual rigour. By contrast with the preceding generations, the avant-gardists and neoclassicists project a new type of literature. The avant-garde, represented by the futurists and constructivists, develop iconoclastic forms that aim to capture their vision of a dynamic, urban, technocratic modernity.¹² Neoclassicists, on the other hand, counterpose rationalism and scepticism to the revolutionary fervour of the futurists and constructivists.

In Domontovych's fiction this conflict serves as the underlying principle that structures characterization. In this regard, his two early, acclaimed novels *Divchynka z vedmedykom* (Girl with a Teddy Bear, 1928) and *Doktor Serafikus* (Doctor Seraphicus, 1947), along with the programmatic story "Ekhardt and Gozzi," written in 1925 for a planned but never-published anthology of neoclassicist writings, present a consistent poetics. These works date from the twenties, although *Doctor Seraphicus* was only published in Munich in 1947 and bears the marks of later revisions. Their particular focus is the avant-garde and the inevitably tragic fate of characters who adopt its response to modernity. Their strivings toward the new are frustrated by biology (innate and hereditary

total mastery of nature: "Since the world itself is regarded as material, the demand underlying the modern conception of art for power over the materials implicitly contains the demand for power over the world. This power does not recognize any limitations and cannot be challenged by any other, nonartistic authority, since humanity and all human thought, science, traditions, institutions, and so on are declared to be subconsciously (or, to put it differently, materially) determined and therefore subject to restructuring according to a unitary artistic plan." Boris Groys, *The Total Art of Stalinism: Avant-Garde, Aesthetic Dictatorship, and Beyond* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992) 20–21. He also makes the point that "Although the design of the avant-garde artistic project was rationalistic, utilitarian, constructive, and in that sense "enlightenist," the source of both the project and the will to destroy the world as we know it to pave the way for the new was in the mystical, transcendental, "sacred" sphere, and in that sense completely "irrational" (p. 64).

¹¹ See Solomiia Pavlychko, *Dyskurs modernizmu v ukrains'kii literaturi* (Kyiv: Lybid, 1997) 168–230, especially 192–93.

¹² On Ukrainian futurism see Oleh S. Ilnytzkyj, *Ukrainian Futurism, 1914–1930: A Historical and Critical Study* (Cambridge: Ukrainian Research Institute, Harvard University, 1997).

factors) and tradition (historically-sanctioned attitudes and behaviour). The avant-gardist rejects the authority of European classics, is passionately committed to social and spiritual transformation, and experiments in sexual relations. The counter-position is presented by the neoclassicist "character," whose behaviour is informed by an awareness of the European literary tradition, scepticism toward the possibility of revolutionary change, demureness and self-control in matters of the heart.

In *Girl with a Teddy Bear* a bookish young scientist is appointed tutor to two young daughters of a new and successful Soviet industrial planner. The teacher, Ipolit Mykhailovych Varetsky, becomes infatuated with the younger girl, Zyna and their worlds collide. He is blinkered and emotionally naive. She, at the age of sixteen, has already assimilated the ideas of the futurists on the need to destroy the old art and morality, and proceeds to put into practice her ideas concerning sexual liberation and personal freedom, with devastating results.

Zyna represents an attitude to life and a manner of conduct that is widely shared. Stefan Khominsky, a parody of the futurist poet and a guiding light of his time, is her acquaintance. But the radical morality of these young people is part of the whole social atmosphere. The older men are also deeply involved in developing the technological society. Ipolit Mykhailovych, Panas Hryhorovych and Semen Kuzmenko are all parodic portraits of the optimistic captains of industry and heroes of the construction novels of their day. They are learning the new and throwing out the old. The Achilles' heel of all these "new" people is a lack of cultural breadth and a limited understanding of human nature—especially of their own emotional lives. Zyna, the youngest representative of this brave new world, is mimicking an accepted, indeed mandatory, style, and practicing it in her personal life.

The *reductio ad absurdum* of the new religion of reason and its unsentimental, utilitarian morality is represented by the figure of Mykola Butsky. Having fallen on hard times, he has been reduced to selling match-boxes on the street. Eventually he murders his wife. Before carrying out the killing, he discusses it for several weeks with passers-by. It is clear that he considers the act a "logical" solution to his predicament; his motivation is a "rational" desire to relieve suffering. This episode is closely related to Ipolit Mykhailovych's thoughts concerning Machiavelli and the need to plan social behaviour. Discussing terror in Machiavelli, the hero muses: "Love is not always soft and gentle; sometimes it is cruel and severe. And often in an act that at first sight appears brutal and monstrous one can observe the lofty impulse of a spirit devoted to love."¹³ Shevelov has written of the importance of this episode for an

13 Domontovych, I: 169.

understanding of the text and Domontovych's views. According to him it is a study of "uncontrolled human behaviour and the contradiction between intention and action."¹⁴ He also suggests that Domontovych here predicted the terror of the 1930s, which was also carried out in the name of humanity's future happiness:

Domontovych not only affirmed the irrational nature of man and the impossibility of establishing the kingdom of reason. He went further. He stated, that those propagating the idea of reason's domination were themselves irrational.¹⁵

Domontovych attempts to link the moral experiments of Zyna and Mykola Buts'ky to the dominant art-politics of the twenties. *Girl with Teddy Bear* is a critique of a generation who appeared in the grip of a myopic, heedlessly aggressive determination to reshape society and human nature in the name of a new, supposedly rational order. The writer's concerns, however, reach beyond the immediate post-revolutionary situation. His books also raise wider issues that stem from the encounter with modernity: the consequences for society of a loss of faith in reason and progress, the fear that at the root of all human conduct there might lie a fundamental irrationality.¹⁶

The pre-war generation of Ukrainian modernism is presented as offering an inadequate alternative to the new reality of the twentieth-century, especially to the "irrational" faith in reason. It can suggest only an escape into a symbolist dream-world, represented by Maria Ivanivna, or into the philologist's paradoxes, represented by Vasyl' Hryb, who produces a cynical, oxymoronic wisdom. The only real opposition to the new politics and aesthetic of rupture comes from Zyna's sister, Lesia, who represents the neoclassicist's model of restraint, "all within the canonical exactness of the four-footed iamb and classical versification."¹⁷ She behaves with a dignity and stoical resignation, and accepts the time-honoured role of wife and mother. In one exchange with her sister, Lesia expresses admiration for Goethe's Iphigenia. Characteristically, her younger sister Zyna passionately disavows the morality and aesthetic that produced tragic Goethean victim-heroines like Iphigenia and Margarita.¹⁸ She expresses a determination to shape life to her will.

¹⁴ Shevel'ov, "Shostyi u hroni," 518.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Pavlychko, *Dyskurs*, 219.

¹⁷ Domontovych, I: 88.

¹⁸ Iphigenia languishes in the Crimea (Tauris), an alien land where her "spirit can not feel at home," bound by "solemn, sacred bonds of slavery." Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, *Iphigenia in Tauris*, trans. Charles E. Passage (New York: Frederick Ungar, 1963) 21–22.

Zyna and Ipolit end in tragedy because of a fatal blindness. Ipolit Mykhailovych, by trusting to reason alone, fails to grasp his own feelings or his circumstances. He cannot understand his love for Zyna or her motivation, and ends by driving her to more willful and, finally, catastrophic acts. She escapes to Berlin, where he is unable to find her. In the end not his powers of observation or deduction but his subconscious mind reveals to him in a dream that the woman he witnessed shooting her companion in a Berlin night club was, in fact, Zyna. The hero observed, but was unable to see, until it was too late. Both Ipolit Mykhailovych and Zyna are victims of the destruction of the old society and its psychology, and the attempt to replace it with a functional, "rational" alternative. On the other hand, Lesia represents the neoclassical ideal, the timeless lessons of moderation and harmony. She does not "belong to today," but is "beyond time and place." Her today is a "repeated yesterday."¹⁹

There is a constant tension between Ipolit Mykhailovych Varets'ky's attraction to the new and the pull upon him of the old, symbolist aesthetic of the pre-1914 modernism. His trip to the beach with Maria Ivanivna contains an epiphany, a mystical moment in which the unity of all things is sensed:

Solitude, silence, sun, sand, willow bushes. You can lie on the beach for hours motionlessly looking at the sky's azure. Your sight disappears in infinity. In the endless azure time loses itself, consciousness, "the ego," everything that was and will be.²⁰

In these moments of reflection Varets'ky recalls and recaptures the attitudes and sentiments of his youth, formed by the transcendental yearnings of the symbolists and other authors of the pre-Soviet modernist period. This makes him partly a transitional figure, a man still under the spell of the subjective dream-spinning of this ineffectual generation. To this old aesthetic, the new futurist-constructivist generation has counterposed the destruction of all art, illusion and mysticism in the name of lucidity. Zyna, according to Varets'ky, was

too intelligent to attach importance and significance to values that the previous generation had considered rules, principles, norms and morals. For Zyna there was nothing forbidden... With lucid consciousness she observed herself, Lesia, myself, her feelings, the environment, people, objects, events, ideas and facts. She liked to proclaim thoughts that loudly and incongruously contradicted the quiet atmosphere of the Tykhmenev household... She spoke as though she wanted to destroy everything others considered untouchable and sacred.²¹

19 Domontovych, I: 132.

20 Domontovych, I: 70.

21 Domontovych, I: 76.

Zyna also expects an epiphany from her negation of conventional morality, but anticipates a passionate conflagration that will usher in a new consciousness and a spiritual emancipation:

She thought that *love* would be something bigger than *loving*, that *love* would turn to ashes, the ashes of days and weeks of routine, that in love the azure dream of an unknown future would blossom.²²

This, however, does not occur. Instead she destroys herself. In words that prefigure Maiakovskii's suicide note by seven years, Zyna composes her final communication: "We sought improbable truths. We did not find them. Life broke us..."²³

The plot of *Doctor Seraphicus* follows a similar pattern. The dry pedantic hero, Vasyl' Khrysanfovych Komakha—known to his friends as Seraphicus—teaches reflexology (a form of behaviourism) and the scientific organization of labour (Taylorism and assembly-line management techniques). His study of abstractions and the general principles of group behaviour has done nothing to prepare him for contact with psychological complexities. Naive concerning his own emotions, incapable of fathoming those of others, he is the victim of an experiment in free love by the beautiful Ver Elsner. She, like Zyna in the previous novel, is part of the futurist-constructivist milieu, which also includes her friend Korvyn, the constructivist painter, whose abstract forms represent plastic analogies to Seraphicus' abstract principles of behavioural and organizational science.

Seraphicus feels a strong urge to have a child. He hears the call of biology, but cannot answer it. His desire for a child leads him to develop the idea of giving birth himself, "by the most rational method, namely by avoiding the participation in this matter of a woman."²⁴ This project is as doomed as the experiment in love "without strings" that Ver initiates with Seraphicus. Like all experiments in Domontovych's world, they receive rational elaboration: Komakha does not accept that reproduction without women should be impossible if he wills otherwise. Like Ver's experiment, his fails because some laws and constants in human nature have been overlooked. Seraphicus does not conceive; instead he falls in love with Ver. Nature takes her revenge on both characters.

The cubist portrait of Komakha-Seraphicus itself emphasises the abstract, the product of rational experimentation:

²² Domontovych, I: 131.

²³ Domontovych, I: 181.

²⁴ Domontovych, I: 379.

Komakha had a disproportionately large head with a protruding forehead, and on his broad muscular nose, instead of glasses, he had complex lenses which refracted the light into geometrical flashes—triangles, cubes, squares. The geometricised light seemed to transform itself into mathematical schemes. His heavy lenses appeared to serve not for seeing the world and people, but for experimenting with light.²⁵

In Domontovych's world, the rationalist aesthetic and morality comes up against resistance and failure in every relationship attempted. Tetiana Berens, like Maria Ivanivna in the first book, is also a member of the pre-revolutionary symbolist-modernist generation. She rejects Korvyn because she seeks marriage and a family. Komakha loses Taisa Pavlivna, who like Lesia in the first novel, represents the ideals of moderation and harmonious development. Komakha's attraction to the five-year-old Irtsia's charming spontaneity and honesty also serves to emphasize his alienation.

Finally, there is the sketch of an earlier, perhaps homosexual, relationship between Komakha and Korvyn.²⁶ The importance of this episode lies in its connection with an earlier period, a time when “infatuation, tenderness and devotion” were the fashion, when ineffable, “azure” dreams were dominant. “There are such absent, fantastic, ephemeral moods, which are never realized; which in reality do not exist. They are no more than expectations, bright sunny expectations that somewhere in the world there is another, different, better life.”²⁷ This could refer to the symbolist-modernist youth of both Komakha and Korvyn, but it strongly suggests the first year of the revolution. The enthusiasm of the revolution's first year when hopes for an independent Ukrainian state were at their height was best reflected in Pavlo Tychyna's brilliant collection of poems entitled *Soniashni kliarnety* (Sunny Clarinets, 1918). The relationship of Komakha and Korvyn appears to have coincided with this mood of social enthusiasm that was captured by Ukraine's greatest symbolist poet. In this atmosphere of social and political elation, the symbolists and the futurists collaborated, seemingly oblivious to the spiritual gulf between them, and which they would only recognize later.

As in the first novel, the denouement to the primary love intrigue, in this case Komakha's relationship with Ver, is preceded by a journey. This time it is to Mohyliv. It underscores the hero's complete estrangement from his surroundings. He has boarded the wrong train and thinks he is in Kamianets. A humorous discussion with a sullen cab-driver takes place. The latter is prepared to drive the customer anywhere and to go along with his whims. He offers to

25 Domontovych, I: 367.

26 Ibid, 425–27.

27 Ibid, 426.

travel “left, right or forward,” however he is instructed, but is adamant that there never was a street named “Petrohrads’ka,” nor has any street by that name anywhere in the city been recently renamed “Leninhrads’ka.” Political leaders, this appears to suggest, can change street names, construct and deconstruct history, but underneath the surface there remains a firmly unchanging reality. Like the politicians who are gripped by self-deluding ideologies, Komakha-Seraphicus has mistakenly superimposed a false geography and itinerary on a real city. He cannot bring himself to admit his mistake and fears losing face with the cab driver. When, finally, he returns to his room in Kyiv, it is with a sigh of relief, and he resolves not to venture out again. There is an obvious warning here against the machine age (the train carries him off to an unexpected place) and the danger of abstract constructs unnaturally grafted onto life. As though to emphasise these points, Ver’s disastrous experiment in free love immediately follows the episode.

The clash between neoclassicists and avant-gardists over the issue of modernity was, however, not without its complexities. The scholar-philosopher Petrov-Ber, like the futurists and constructivists depicted in Domontovych’s fiction, was himself attracted to abstract forms. As we have seen, during the polemics of the forties in Germany he became an intransigent structuralist who observed the importance of radical cultural-political paradigm shifts. He also wrote:

we establish the laws of poetics not by researching the material, natural or external environment from which a work arises, not the country’s climate, the society and biography of a writer, but only the given work, its internal structure. Its internal structure, which grows out of itself, defines the work’s essence, its characteristic features. Form has an independent existence. Matter, as such, does not exist; there are only forms of matter.²⁸

Structure revealed the meaning of an individual work, just as it revealed the character of a period or an epoch. This idea of a complex pattern linking form, style and epoch had been assimilated from Heinrich Wölfflin’s *Renaissance und Barock* (1888) and *Die Klassische Kunst* (1899), and from the teachings of Russian formalists. An elegant historiographic scheme was used by him to “emplot history,” frame events and explain individual behaviour. It dominates his writings on literary and intellectual history.²⁹

²⁸ V. Ber [Viktor Petrov], “Zasady poetyky,” *MUR. Zbirnyk 1* (1946): 18.

²⁹ He wrote a long introduction to the mimeographed edition of Chyzhevsky’s history in which he attempted a periodization of literary-cultural history. See: D. Chyzhev’sky and V. Petrov, *Istoriia ukrains’koi literatury* (Munich: Instytut zaochnoho navchannia pry Ukrains’komu vil’nomu universyteti, 1949).

Why, however, would the scholar Petrov-Ber, who adamantly defended the necessity of philosophical abstractions and revolutionary, modernizing change, allow his alter ego, the writer Domontovych, to produce fiction which apparently undermined these convictions? There appear to be two answers. Firstly, Domontovych's argument is ultimately not with reason as such but with its excesses, its reduction to mathematical concepts, its exclusion of whatever in material reality could not be translated into a language of formulas. It was this kind of consciousness, he felt, that ran the risk of simply detecting everywhere one and the same pattern. This was a problem the writer would have known from reading Kant's discussion of the relationship between the noumenal and the phenomenal. The schemes and experiments of Domontovych's characters spring from minds that are disconnected from, or can draw only on a narrow emotional and lived experience.

Secondly, Domontovych was concerned about the implications for human freedom of any radical social engineering. He could see how intimately the demystificatory and emancipatory projects were embroiled with other issues: the crisis of legitimacy posed by the loss of faith in progress and rationality in the post-Enlightenment era, and the moral dilemmas posed by the exercise of power.³⁰

If progress, humanism and rationality were, indeed, illusory, what, then, would become of the totalizing view of style proposed by Petrov-Ber? Was this not also the dogmatic imposition of an abstract scheme on life's multiplicity? Would it not necessarily require a standardization in order that the criteria of typification be met? Domontovych's own novels push the historiographic argument with pedantic insistence, a fact noticed by critics, who have spoken of sections that sound like essays inserted into the text³¹ and have described the

30 He may have become familiar in the forties with *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, published by Adorno and Horkheimer in 1944, which saw an urge to control and manipulate in knowledge that was abstract, utilitarian and focused on the need to master nature: "Enlightenment behaves toward things as a dictator toward man. He knows them in so far as he can make them." See Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer, *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (1944), trans. J. Cumming (London: Verso, 1986) 6. Some of these ideas may have found their way into his *Doctor Seraphicus* during its rewriting in Germany. In any case, the writer was already concerned with this issue in the twenties. In the forties, as Viktor Ber, the author put forward a critique of modernity that was phrased as a contrast between the Middle Ages and post-Renaissance, post-Enlightenment Europe. This last question is discussed in Pavlychko, *Dyskurs*, 280–83.

31 Sherekh, "Ne dlia ditei," 367. One such section is chapter 6, which was perhaps revised for publication in 1947. In it the author seems to be retrospectively strengthening his theoretical argument concerning the necessity of period

“collision around feelings” as reminiscent of “an algebraic problem.”³² For all the potential dangers of schematism, however, the analysis of character through conflicting period styles is successful precisely because the author allows for a subtle layering of traits. For example, Ver Elsner’s intellectual evolution is shown as moving from populism, through symbolism-modernism and futurism-constructivism to a final denial of art’s value and significance. The chapter describing this could stand on its own as an essay on the evolution of literary tastes from 1910–1930. It also represents the author’s view of character as a construct of many historical periods. A similar analysis based on period styles serves as the methodology for an “in depth” characterization of Seraphicus, Korvyn and Tetiana Berens in *Doctor Seraphicus* and for Zyna, Stefan Khomynsky, Maria Ivanivna in *Girl with a Teddy Bear*.

A more nuanced characterization is also achieved through the accumulation of nicknames and aliases. Ipolit Mykhailovych Komakha is also known as Seraphicus and referred to by the narrator several times as “mastodon” (*mastodont*), a reference to his size, but suggesting also a pun on the author’s own name Domontovych. The need to rename and redefine Komakha is felt by Irtsia, who describes him as a doll (*pups*). Korvyn, who denies the previous generations cult of feelings (“We disregard feelings,” he says of his contemporaries), as though rejecting his own past, calls Komakha “a gnome, a homuncule, a paper doll.”³³ This play with naming produces a shifting, multi-faceted impression, a counterpart to the earlier cubist physical description. Another layering of features is achieved through literary allusion. References to Goethe’s heroines and Machiavelli are important cases, but there are many more. Hans Christian Andersen’s “Nightingale and Rose,” Gogol’s *Marriage*, Cervantes’ *Don Quixote*, Savonarola, Thomas Campion, Seneca, Plato are among the literary works and historical figures that serve in *Girl with a Teddy Bear* as devices of allusive characterization and veiled plot commentary. Many references are to classical and Renaissance texts. The intertextual game can be read as a defence of the European humanist tradition then under attack from radicals: the neoclassicist sees permanence beneath the surface of change, the irony of repeated literary patterns and archetypes surfacing in the contemporary revolt against tradition. At the same time, it signals the author’s anxiety over the death of the subject in a modern world of broken images and self-reflections.

revolutions. This was also the year in which Petrov was composing his introduction for the *History of Ukrainian Literature*, which deals with style as the sole criterion for periodization.

³² Pavlychko, *Dyskurs*, 215.

³³ Domontovych, I: 437.

In the wake of the collapse of belief in progress and the values of humanism, the new subject can only be constructed from fragments.³⁴

Domontovych's characterization therefore, to a degree, complicates and subverts the schematism of Petrov-Ber. The novelist appears to be working out the implications for human character of theoretical premises advanced by the historian and philosopher, while at the same time suggesting that there are limitations to theory, especially in determining the deeper, frequently contradictory drives in human conduct.

The books raise the moral issue of the legitimate use of power. What right does the new have to destroy the aesthetic and the world view of the old? If a character's identity is bound up with a previous formation, then to destroy it is to do violence to the individual. Perhaps people are better off with their favourite illusions? Ipolit Mykhailovych at one point says:

But having destroyed this illusion, what did I achieve? Did I feel some relief? Did I recapture peace and my former spiritual balance? No! Well, then? Would it not have been better to continue living in anticipation of this impossible meeting, which until now had governed my actions?³⁵

The price of modernity for the main protagonists—Varets'ky, Zyna, Komakha, Elsner—is shown to be cultural dislocation and rootlessness. Cut adrift spiritually, denied access to tradition and the literary classics, they are incapable of understanding themselves, or of relating adequately to others. This makes these books subversive of the politics of human engineering self-confidently advocated by ultra-revolutionaries: the Ukrainian intelligentsia of the day, Domontovych appears to say, has been rendered impotent, isolated from social realities, in the same way as Komakha is from the cab driver in Mohyliv, and is unable to discover its own identity. Once more, there are wider associations here. Since the reign of Peter, imperial society had felt the impact of forced experiments in social planning. The eternal cab-driver represents sullen, uncomprehending, popular resistance. His aimless and unnecessary wandering might also be seen as a parody of Gogol's famous ending to *Dead Souls*, in which "Rus'" is portrayed as a *troika* careering into an unknown future.

The need to construct a totalizing view of the world is natural. It is the five-year-old Irtisia's instinctive desire. Her world-picture relies on an idiosyncratic logic that assimilates unexpected facts into a complete picture: "The truth of details ought to harmonize with the truth of the whole."³⁶ Her belief that Komakha is the father of insects (*komakha* means insect) leads her to construct a

³⁴ See Pavlychko, *Dyskurs*, 286–87.

³⁵ Domontovych, I: 56.

³⁶ Domontovych, I: 368.

“theory” that he travels far into the distance to become tiny, then climbs into ant holes. The narrator comments:

The logical structure of the expressed thought was impeccable. Everything unnecessary had been eliminated, leaving a single mental construct that held nothing superfluous or extraneous.³⁷

This desire to produce a mental construct that would be fully explanatory, even at the expense of suppressing unwelcome facts, links Irtsia’s method of thinking to that of Komakha-Seraphicus, the futurists-constructivists, to imperial monologues and to all totalizing systems. Irtsia is a child who, one expects, will learn distinctions between fantasy and fact. Her conceptualizations, no matter how eccentric, are harmless because they remain in the realm of fantasy. In the adult world fantasies can become dangerous illusions, dogmas that direct personal behaviour and political practice. Domontovych sensed the frightening consequences that could result when immature minds move to implement theories, when the modelling of concepts becomes the “engineering” of people. The author’s novels pose the question of how to prevent disasters, to distinguish useful fantasy from harmful illusion? He implicitly suggests two solutions. One is the study of history: the imaginative identification with another time and mentality can reduce fanaticism. But the main recommendation appears to be a defence of art. For readers of the neoclassicist writer-critic Mykola Zerov the image of the source, the fount of knowledge, would have immediately conjured up his defence, in the book *Do dzherel* (To the Sources), of the European literary and philosophical heritage. He argued: “let us not avoid ancient or even feudal Europe. Let us not fear that it will contaminate us. (Who knows, perhaps it is better for a proletarian to be infected with the class determinants of the Western European bourgeois than with the pusillanimity of a Russian ‘repentant nobleman.’) We must get to know the sources of European culture and we must make them our own. We must know them, or else we shall always be provincials. To Khvyl’ovy’s ‘Quo vadis?’ let us answer: ad fontes, to the original sources, to the roots.”³⁸ In both the opening lines of *Doctor Seraphicus* and at the end of chapter 2 the image of a fountain occurs. The play of sunlight on its jets casts endlessly varied kaleidoscopic patterns on the surface of the water. Like all people, Komakha-Seraphicus and Irtsia delight in watching these, musing, searching in them for their own reflections. The fountain can be

³⁷ Domontovych, I: 370.

³⁸ *Do dzherel. Literaturno-krytychni stati* (Kyiv: Slovo, 1926) 118. Mykola Zerov’s exposition of the neo-classicists’ position began on May 24, 1925, at a public debate in Kyiv, whose record was published as *Shliakhy rozvytku suchasnoi literatury. Dysput 24 travnia 1925* (Kyiv, 1925).

taken as a metaphor for art: a pleasurable relaxation, a contemplation of changing patterns, a play of perceptions, a modeling of the world. By implication those who are incapable of enjoying the fountain are potentially condemned to a disastrous inflexibility. In rejecting the role art fulfills as purposeful play, in limiting themselves to one rationalist style of thought, while simultaneously effacing the boundary between art and life, the radical moderns have shifted the arena of experimentation from art onto life with catastrophic consequences.

Domontovych, an erudite man with catholic interests, felt hostile to the outmoded nineteenth-century populism, and was drawn to the analytical, demystificatory experiments of contemporary cubists, futurists and constructivists. At the same time, however, his Hobbesian fear of irrationality in human behaviour caused him to adopt a sceptical stance toward the results of violent and radical upheaval. His plots, therefore, reveals an understanding of the fascination exerted by the new, but serve as warnings against its siren-calls. One may discover in this dilemma a paradigm for Domontovych's implicit personal problem. Varets'ky and Komakha, the dry, bookish scholar-thinkers, represent Domontovych the intellectual. Zyna and Elsner represent the attractive radical aesthetic. The hero's love, seduction and then recoil may have represented Domontovych's own involuntary fascination and entanglement with their ideas. The neoclassicist writer Domontovych, "the most enigmatic Ukrainian classic of the twentieth century,"³⁹ was, perhaps, closer in temperament and taste to the aesthetic of rupture he mocks in his books than he was prepared to admit. Like the radicals, he was prepared to accept the role of history's midwife, to usher in the new. However, by accepting this role, he undermined the neoclassicist's attitude of scepticism and stoicism. Sensing such a dichotomy critics have in various ways suggested that the writer exhibits a blend of the incompatible: "neoclassicism" and "expressionism," in Sherekh's terms,⁴⁰ "abstraction" and "concretization" in Iurii Korbut's,⁴¹ a relativism or "intellectual vagabondage" in Pavlychko's.⁴² His fictions give evidence simultaneously of an attraction to the new and an apprehension of its dangers. The ultimate message appears to be that neither self-comforting dreams, nor voluntarism, nor the fantastic projects of scientific planners should be unthinkingly embraced. Domontovych's delicately balanced, evasive texts demonstrate the temptations of the great experiment, and gently subvert them.

39 Pavlychko, "Na zvorotnomu," 124.

40 Shevel'ov, "Shostyi," 529.

41 Iurii Korybut, "Doktor Serafikus. Bedeker do romanu," in V. Domontovych, *Doktor Serafikus* (Munich: Ukrains'ka trybuna, 1947) 162–64.

42 Pavlychko, "Na zvorotnomu," 123.