Hryhorii Chubai: Beyond All Expectations

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Scholars of Ukrainian literature who followed the grim graphomania of the Stalinist period were greatly and pleasantly surprised by the appearance of young poets in the early sixties, the so-called shestydesiatnyky, who once again reaffirmed that Ukrainian literature has not been sapped of its vitality and that its strength still lies in the genre of poetry. Such poets as Lina Kostenko, Ivan Drach, Mykola Vinhranovskyi, Vasyl’ Symonenko and others, revealed in their poetry the essential mainstays of lyrical expression — an awareness of the individual and his relations with self, nature, and even society. The philosophy underlining their poetry was humanistic; the weapon of the sensitive individual facing a society warped by the days of Stalin was sarcasm. This led to sometimes subtle (Kostenko) and sometimes not so subtle (Symonenko) didacticism which, however, rarely marred their poetry, for they managed to couch their expressions, even didactic ones, in new poetic images, in a language once again honest and free from the clichés of the last thirty years. They were, in short, the Ukrainian counterparts to the “angry young men” of the fifties who, disapproving of the generation of their fathers, struck out against hypocrisy by re-interpreting the world around them in terms of honesty with self, real humanism, and delicately sensitive individual perception. As George S. N. Luckyj aptly remarked, “The greatest achievement of the young poets is the rediscovery of the function of poetry.”

Yet although the shestydesiatnyky were fresh and vibrant mainly in comparison with the outworn cliché-ridden poetry of their immediate predecessors, their own poetry, seen in the context of all Ukrainian poetry, did not progress much past the level that Ukrainian poetry attained during the revival of the twenties. To quote Luckyj once again, “Their poetic means are new, though not unrelated to earlier styles. The intellectualism of Drach is reminiscent of the best poems of Mykola Bazhan, and Kostenko’s lyricism resembles that of the early Tychyna.” In short, their poetry though new was still in the era of the early part of

this century; it was not new in terms of modern poetry as seen in the rest of the Western world. The sad fact remained that the most modern poetry in Ukrainian was not written in Ukraine but outside of its borders, mainly by such émigré poets as The New York Group. One could only hope that this poetry of the sixties would develop into a modern poetry, would proceed into more asymmetric forms and polysemous expressions.

With the new repressions toward the end of the sixties, all hope of any modernization of poetry vanished. Nevertheless, something quite unexpected happened. Toward the middle sixties there began to appear poems by a younger group of poets: Vasyl’ Holoborod’ko, Ihor Kalynets’, and Hryhorii Chubai. Their poetry was beyond all expectations and with its appearance Ukrainian verse managed to catch up with the most modern poetry of the world.

Their contribution to the development of Ukrainian poetry becomes even more remarkable when one considers that in the present Soviet reality they are proscribed poets and their poetry is completely outlawed. It is true that both Kalynets’ (born 1939) and Holoborod’ko (born 1946) managed to have some poems published in periodical publications in the years 1964-65, and that Kalynets’ even managed to have his first collection, Vohon’ Kupala (The Fire of Kupala), published in 1966. But with the great critical acclaim that these first poems brought came immediate repression; for example, Holoborod’ko’s first collection of verse, ready for print in 1966, was never published. Chubai, on the other hand, has, to my knowledge, been allowed to publish only three small poems in 1966-67 in the journal Zhovten’.

They are, in short, authors whose works reach readers through the facilities of samvydad (the Ukrainian counterpart of samizdat). They are known to us mainly because some of their works have been smuggled out of the Soviet Union and published in the West. Such is the case with two collections of poems by Ihor Kalynets’: Poezii z Ukrayiny (Poetry from Ukraine) published by “Lettres et Art” in Belgium in 1970, and Pidsumovuiuchy movchannia (Summing up of Silence) published by Suchasnist’ in Munich in 1971. Four’ manuscript collections by Holoborod’ko managed to reach the West and all four of them were published in one volume, Letiuchye vikontse (The Flying Window), by Smoloskyp in

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2 Ibid.
1970. The bio-bibliographical and critical material on these young poets is almost nonexistent.4

The worst in this respect concerns Chubai, about whom almost nothing is known.5 One does not even know the year of his birth, not to mention any data on his creative life. One only assumes that he is of the generation of Kalynets' and Holoborod’ko and supports this assumption on the few available examples of his work which have reached the West. This is most unfortunate for even though there is a great deal of similarity in the three authors, Chubai, even on the basis of the few examples, seems to be the most modern and interesting of the three. It is therefore the intention of this article to introduce to the scholar of Ukrainian literature Hryhorii Chubai on the basis of his one long poem “Vidshukuvannia prychetnoho” (“The Search for the Accomplice”), and in this way to indicate at least partially the heights which Ukrainian poetry has reached in the last few years.

The poem “The Search for the Accomplice” appeared without any notation as to who the author was or where the poem came from in the eleventh number of the journal Suchasnist' for 1970. It was only later that one found out (mainly through the issues of the Ukraiinskyi visnyk) that Chubai was a poet in Ukraine and that he was actively involved in the dissident movement, mainly as a defender of Moroz to whom he even dedicated a cycle of poems.6 It is extremely difficult, therefore, to write anything about Hryhorii Chubai which cannot be

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5 There is virtually no bio-bibliographical material available on Chubai. The only concrete proof of his existence is the appearance of the three poems in Zhovten’, of one long poem in Suchasnist’, No. 7 (1970), and several poems in the same journal No. 2 (1971), as well as one poem in Ukraïns'kyi visnyk (Paris-Baltimore, 1971), IV, 70. From the publications in Zhovten’ we know that he is from the village of Berezyna of the Dubno region. His presence is also constantly noted in the available issues of the Ukraïns’kyi visnyk where his name appears in connection with various protests and petitions and also as one of the names constantly used by the KGB in their interrogations; e.g., “Do you know the poet Chubai?” “Did you read any of his poems?” etc. From the Visnyk we also learn that Chubai has at least one collection of verse, entitled Svitlo is spovid’ (1970), and another long poem, Vertep, neither of which seems to have been published in Ukraine except in samvydyav editions. Vertep has been published in the West by Ukraïns’kyi visnyk, No. 5 and also reprinted in Vyzvol’nyi shliakh, January 1972. For references to Chubai in Ukraïns’kyi visnyk see I-II, 219; III, 15, 71; IV, 32, 43, 70, 163-5.

6 See Ukraïns’kyi visnyk, IV, 70.
derived from reading the few examples of his poetry. Even though this is a rather uncomfortable situation for a scholar used to the idea of supporting his assertions by various citations from preceding critical materials, it is perhaps much more interesting and fruitful in the sense that one does not prejudge the work on the authority of the former criticism. It is in fact very similar to the formalistically oriented courses where a student is provided with examples of poetry without being given the names of the authors and is forced to discuss the given work on its own merits — not on the merits of an author's fame or the critical opinion of him.

It seems most appropriate, therefore, before proceeding to the discussion of the poem itself to quote it in its entirety here.

_The Search for the Accomplice_

H. Chubai (trans. D. Struk)

He saw today
in his own eye
yesterday's tear

the day after tomorrow in his own eye
he saw again
yesterday's tear
and he understood that he will never
be able to weep it out
and he understood
that this is already
the end.

THEN
he kissed the face of the evening road
with his soles up to
the precipice of silence a long time
and with difficulty he undressed the last phrase
nervously unbuttoning the buttons of words
a long time he was afraid to gaze
at his reflection in the note
re
and when he looked, he saw
no one there
then
a tree grew in the bell of fright
then
a giant tree grew
and split the bell
and split the bellfry the tree
of fright
and placed on its shoulders
a whole flock of rooks.
that tree passed very slowly
and when it finally passed
all suddenly saw
how a black apple rolled down a spasmodically frozen line

a black apple is rolling
stopping midst a field
and a soul of a suicide rides up
on a grey horse of smoke
in order to find the accomplice
to that suicide.
and its double stops on the other side of the apple
on a horse of green clay.
and the soul turns to him
with its accusations
and the double, on the other side of the black apple,
presents his excuses
and then the double tells the soul
its very own accusations
and word by word the soul repeats
the double's very own excuses
and when the double, angered,
begins to repeat himself
the soul will hide behind a knife
and when the double quadruples himself
the soul will hide behind a candle
and the soul will hide behind a poppy seed
when the double tens himself
and fright exhorts all to wander aimlessly
among the signposts
enthusiastically it calls to wander
for already
on that side of the apple
a thousand doubles are grazing
their green horses

ON THAT SIDE OF THE APPLE
A THOUSAND DOUBLES

and nowhere to hide
no, it's not I, not I
perhaps a flower
no, it's not I, not I
a green horse
no, it's not I, not I
a thousand doubles

and what if it's really a flower, a distant flower
that for three hundred years, frightened by rumours of
the Inquisition, blooms on the wall
of the house

perhaps it's the flower that saw in him
the inquisitor and brought him to suicide

it's the flower's eight petals
like eight faces
that appeared to him

it's the fragrance of the flower which flew over
the tingling watery surface of
the window it's time which has stopped on the blue path
and he saw in the aquarium of his
yesterday's tear
a goldfish gasping for air
and around there was no river
no sea, lake
nor stream was around
only helpless imagination
surrounded itself with uncountable suggestions
For every one of the flower's eight faces
the imagination surrounded itself and staggered
staggered and fell
and never got up and did not come
did not ask — what time
did not ask — why the door opened
did not ask — where they buried the goldfish
on the sun or on the moon
and is it very frightening when there's inquisition
when one cannot
remember the voice and cannot forget
the face
when for a very long time no one comes.

and later, still, she comes
and with a very accomplice body
and with very accomplice lips
and as if calling the far wind she calls herself

and the echo answers
and calls her lonely

as if a lonesome woman
she calls herself
and then he comes
and commits suicide

there

where West is a side of the world
there

where grass is dream-grass
there

where today is all the special and the ordinary
days in the world
where the shore of loneliness is too white
and the night too passing
and the road flows without the slightest splash.
and no matter where one goes
it means to by-pass
to by-pass
one’s own body
to by-pass
one’s own children
and then to by-pass all the nights in the world
and then the cross on one’s own grave
and all this so simply
as strangers by-pass one another
on the street, as the hand by-passes
the uncountable number of raindrops

and to remain here
means to become an accomplice
indeed, even to give birth to a joking gesture

there’s no illusion here but plain belonging
even if one were only to listen to how the sand
whispers in the palms
even if one were only to look into the green eyes
of chlorophyll

even

the white butterfly of lilies
on the water

even the rings on blue water
the disappearing green rings

even then
when
no one
nowhere
never
and what if really suddenly nowhere
and what if really suddenly no one
and what if really suddenly never

and only we
intentionally seen
and only we
emphatically existing
are frightened above all else in the world
of our own inexistence
we believe
that everything some day
we believe
that everything some where
and our body
and our souls
and give us this day
you see

it's a door opening, a door which really is
it's one of us coming and saying that
he saw today things beyond the visibility of things
and that
he sees a body beyond the visibility
of our body
and that very Wittily
we play at being alive
(but a wall knows a wall even more Wittily than we)
and a thousand visible tigers
frighten us less than one
invisible star, even though it is
the star that we lack
far in front in order to go to it
even though it is the star we
lack far behind
in order to return
to it.

after a while one of us runs
to ascertain if
there still is a wall
and then all of us together run
each to his wall
and zealously we draw
any one of the visible stars
and we also draw a road to it
past a huge white ant hill
through ten violins to the horizon
and then further up the path
of lightning.
and having finished
we hurry
to fill up the space between our walls
completely with
buildings, grass, ourselves
stones, water, chickens
so that no one settle there
invisible
no one different from
us.

and already the curse
has been forced outside the area of the mouth
and the teeth have been firmly shut
so that it cannot return and the string
has been closed into a black case
so that the string will not call the
curse back home.

THE CURSE

taught to simulate
  a ship
  water
  clay
  the apple of Paradise
  and the titmouse

THE CURSE

taught to simulate
everything simultaneously
and each separately
and equipped to search
for the accomplice to the suicide
which is under some tree
which is by some door
which is over some eye
but wherever the curse will come

only very long parallel smiles
only a small toy rifle
only a large paper flower

THERE

the shores do not run to overtake the escaping water
and eyebrows do not run to overtake the escaping eyes
and the road flows through the window
up to an icon
and the smoke over the burned out ruins
stands on its knees there

THERE

HAVING COME
THE CURSE
WILL HEAR

you curse are a curse
but we are not ears
you curse are a tree
but we are not leaves
you curse are a ship
but we are no harbour

and our parallel smiles
will never twist into an angry grimace
we are much too good
and all that’s left for you
is to fall dead
across our endless
parallel smiles

even if you’re a ship
even if you’re a fish
even if you’re leaves

Even
if
he himself
comes there 
he will not find himself there 
and he will be surprised and he will call forth 
why am I not here 
I remember very well 
that I am to be here precisely here. 
why is there some tree growing here 
why is there some bird flying here 
why is there some house standing here 
I remember very well 
that I am to be here precisely here. 
and then from that house 
someone will come 
who is very good 
and another 
who is even better 
and another 
who is really very good 

and thrice they will carry around the 
one who came 

his very own 
dead curse so that he 
believe that he himself 
is not there 
but he will not believe 

then they will lead around him 
nine times 
the gray horse of smoke 
on which for quite a long time 
the rider of his soul has not ridden 

but he will not believe 
and his body will come and 
it will search 
its own traces and it will run 
perplexed around the house and it will want 
to raze it not having found any trace of 
itself it will want to catch the bird
and pluck its feathers.
but the body will by-pass the house
but the body will by-pass the bird
and it will cry helplessly in the shade of a tree

and a flaming cloud will pass by it
and a hand that gives a penny will pass by it
and a hand that takes a penny will pass by it
and the city soviet of workers' deputies will pass by it
and will chase there a whole
swarm of suicides
suspected of something alive
they will sit on the grass around his body
around the body
around the tree
around the bird
and for a long time they will talk
about how only the suspicion of living
does not allow them to leave this earth
but also does not allow them to resurrect themselves
and forces them to be intentionally
living right here
around the body, around the house
around the tree, around the bird
around us

They will sit on the grass
and behind each one
will sit ashes
they will listen
how the water learns to cry
not yet having learned to be salty
someone will speak consoling words
someone will rock a poppy seed and will send it rolling
over the floor
all will be afraid of its frightening rumbling
all will say
it's a thousand stars coming
all will say
it's a thousand women coming
all will say
it's a thousand flowers coming
and behind each one
will sit ashes

but someone invisible will suddenly say
Christ Has Risen
and all will turn their heads back

everyone will want to see behind him a fire
everyone will see behind him
ashes

someone will suggest
to halt the debates
but the invisible one will again say
Christ Has Risen

All will slowly turn
their heads back
not to frighten the one who's behind
all will suddenly hear how on the sea of black pepper
the green waves turn yellow all will suddenly
see

on the far shore a star which they never saw before
all will start waiting for the tiny
boat of the nightingale
that is to take them to that shore.

the waves on the sea of black pepper
turn yellow and calm
the knotty bottom will regain sight
and someone invisible will again say
Christ Has Risen
all will slowly turn their heads back
Any minute now they are to see
behind themselves
a fire.

The first thing that strikes one after reading the poem (albeit in translation) is the specific rhythm peculiar to modern poetry since the
days of T. S. Eliot. This rhythm is based on the recitative prayer-like effect produced by the repetition of whole lines, often with very small variations. Compare, for example, Chubai’s

and what if really suddenly nowhere
and what if really suddenly no one
and what if really suddenly never
and only we
intentionally seen
and only we
emphatically existing

and our body
and our soul
and give us this day

with the beginning of Eliot’s *Ash-Wednesday*:

Because I do not hope to turn
Because I do not hope
Because I do not hope to turn

Because I do not hope to know again

Because I do not think
Because I know I shall not know
The one veritable transitory power
Because I cannot drink

The element of prayer is very important in both examples. Eliot ends the first part of his poem with “Pray for us now and at the hour of our death,” which is taken right out of a prayer, and Chubai ends the strophe above with a line directly out of *The Lord’s Prayer*. Besides specific examples both poems depend heavily on the recitative effect of prayer not only for rhythm but also to bring across the underlying religious motif. This is not, however, a paper on the influences of Eliot on

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*Even in the first published poem by Chubai in *Zhovten*, No. 8 (1966), p. 41, the poem “Holubin” (“The Blueness”) already contains elements of this particular rhythmic structure:

I have not yet looked
at the stars from close up
I have not yet walked
over the moon’s craters*
Chubai nor on the similarities between the two (although a paper of this nature would be most illuminating). Suffice it so say that Chubai greatly draws on the rhythmical patterns used and developed by Eliot.

But the similarity of Chubai to Eliot or for that matter to any other Western poet ends when one approaches the subject of imagery. In fact, the imagery is the unifying link between the three poets mentioned: Kalynets’, Chubai, and Holoborod’ko. Moreover, it is an imagery which is somehow rooted in the ancient pre-Christian Ukrainian folk beliefs. (It is interesting to note that the publishers of Kalynets’ *Poetry from Ukraine* have illustrated the collection with drawings by the young artist Soroka which are full of allusions to various pagan and pagan-Christian folk beliefs. The same illustrations and one in particular — “The Saint” — could stand as an illustration to the given poem by Chubai.)

Furthermore, Dziuba’s statement about Holoborod’ko that in his (Holoborod’ko’s) poetry “comes to life the world of the ancient animistic beliefs about nature; the world of our distant ‘naïve’ forefather or a credulous child, a world filled with strange beings, full of magic sounds and colours . . . the world of the Ukrainian folk, still pagan demonology . . .” — this statement can equally be applied to the poetry of Kalynets’ and to the poem of Chubai.

In this respect one must view the whole ritual of the soul hiding behind the knife, candle, and the poppy seed — reminiscent of some ancient warding-off ceremony. In this respect also must be seen the whole incantative dialogue of the “we” with the “curse”: “You curse are a curse/ but we are not ears” etc. — so reminiscent of the verbal formulas in the pagan incantations. It is the ability to merge the ancient, the primordial verbal formulations, with the modern and to couch them in modern poetic forms that makes Chubai’s poem so great and which in fact places him above the modern poets among the émigrés. The latter managed to adopt modern poetic forms but could never fill the forms with native Ukrainian content and searched for their inspiration in foreign (e.g., Spanish) cultures. Chubai’s poem is modern yet it is still grounded within the Ukrainian folk tradition, generating its images and moods from the most ancient beliefs, ceremonies, and the most ancient literary expression — the oral tradition of incantation.

There is further similarity, however, between Chubai and Eliot and

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* See the enclosed reproduction from I. Kalynets’, *Poezii z Ukrainy*, p. 20.
for that matter with other modern poets. It is based on the fact that modern poetry, on the whole, is concerned with and directed toward social issues. In this respect Chubai differs from his immediate predecessors, the *shestydesiatnyky*, who, as lyricists, were primarily concerned with the sensitive individual and his personal reflections. When society threatened this individual the poets resorted to sarcasm (Symonenko) or even satire (Drach’s ballads) as a means of defense. Chubai resorts to neither. He faces the problem of the individual in society on a more cerebral level and through poetic expression transforms these problems into multi-tiered refractions. Thus, as in most modern poetry, Chubai’s “The Search for the Accomplice” is extremely polysemous.
Even the title itself allows for various levels of meaning. The keys to
the understanding of this poem lie hidden in the various folk beliefs on
which the poet draws, and a more exhaustive study of these beliefs
would be a prerequisite to a detailed analysis of this poem.

It is interesting to note, however, that the aforementioned illustration
by Soroka contains many of the images found in Chubai's poem: there
is the bellfry with a frightened face behind it; there is the eight petal
flower on the side of a house and two frightened men in the house,
frightened of the "Inquisition"; there is the bird; there is also something
which looks like the devil but can be interpreted as the "curse" capable
of simulating everything. All these elements appear in the drawing as
if they were visual representations of that which Chubai is portraying
verbally in his poem. Moreover, it is also interesting to note that Ukrain-
ian Easter eggs which merge pagan and Christian symbols also contain
some of the same images that are used by Chubai: for example, the
already mentioned "eight petaled flower" — the symbol of the sun god
and later associated with Christ — is almost a constant feature on each
Easter egg; the "gold fish" — the early Christian symbol of Christ —
also appears frequently. This only proves that some of the symbols
used by Chubai are archetypal for the Ukrainian pagan and Christian
folk tradition.

Although, as mentioned above, the poem can be interpreted on vari-
ous levels, it is basically concerned with guilt, be it the guilt of an indi-
vidual afraid of his own inexistence, or the guilt of a whole nation com-
posed of "thousands of doubles." The guilt arises from the inability
to believe, to have faith. Although the poem can be interpreted as a
description of an individual's anguish at the fact of having realized that
he lacks the necessary faith to live, knowing the situation in which
Chubai is writing one tends to give the poem larger dimensions and to
accept it as a statement of an individual facing the Soviet reality. Fright,
then, logically, is what prevents the soul from finding the accomplice
to its destruction. It is fright which breeds thousands of doubles and
it is fright which exhorts "all to wander aimlessly." It is fear which
forces each and every one to point to someone else as the guilty party —
even if the guilty party is nature itself, the nature of a people depraved
by "three hundred years" of subjugation (It is interesting to note here
that it is the eight point flower which is the symbol for Christ which is
linked with this subjugation. Is Chubai referring to the three hundred
years Ukrainians have spent under the Russian orthodoxy?), frightened
by rumours of the Inquisition. The fear is so great that no one asks really “is it very frightening when there’s inquisition”; the people have been driven to fear without questioning. Out of fear people give up hope and commit spiritual suicide. But the poet continues by showing that this, of course, is not the answer, this is just by-passing the real issues. But neither is the answer to be found in total acceptance of the system: “to remain here” means “to become an accomplice” and on top of that it is a futile gesture. The only solution to fear is the realization that one is afraid only of one’s own inexistence. This realization will “open the door” to a different perception of life, one full of belief in the invisible, in the spiritual. And even though people are more afraid of one invisible star than of real tigers it is this very faith in the invisible star which people must have to survive. Without this faith people are just playing at existence. Even in dreams people are just playing at existence. Even in dreams people are afraid to believe in the unseen, in the “different from us,” and quickly fill their life with material trivia which stifles their spirituality. The accomplice to one’s own spiritual suicide, then, is fear of having faith in the spiritual.

In exasperation at their spiritual suicide people will send forth a curse, powerful in all sorts of ways but ineffectual in the given society of hypocrites with pretended goodness, who will try to convince the few who are still spiritually alive that they are not alive at all, that they simply do not exist and never have existed (a fate understandable to those who have been “purged”). Yet these will refuse to believe that they have been non-existent and after a futile search for proof of their existence they will end up together with other near suicides who have been damned for no other reason than a suspicion of still being “alive,” of having faith. It is among these people that faith will finally triumph (“Believe and you shall be saved”), and after a long waiting and after several false hopes the true moment will come and their belief will produce fire — symbol for life — and not just ashes — death.

The above is but one possible interpretation of what Chubai is trying to say in his poem. It is perhaps too simplistic, as all interpretations of such polysemous poems tend to be. Yet this is not of prime importance. The validity of Chubai’s poem does not rest on a given interpretation but on the fact that each person cannot so much interpret as feel what the poet is trying to say. Chubai achieves this by the excellent combination of rhythm and imagery, of modern form and ancient symbols, and in doing this produces one of the finest examples of truly modern Ukrainian
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poetry written to date. In the given political situation this is truly beyond all expectations.

RÉSUMÉ/ABSTRACT

Hryhorii Chubai: Beyond All Expectations

L'article s’efforce de donner une image des résultats les plus récents de la poésie contemporaine ukrainienne par la présentation d’une analyse et d’une traduction de “Vidshukuvannia prychetnoho” (La recherche d’un complice) de Hryhorii Chubai.

Cette présentation prouve que Hryhorii Chubai et ses contemporains (Holoborod’ko et Kalynets’), — en ce qui concerne la modernité de leur poésie —, ont dépassé les poètes des années soixantes, les “shestydesiatnyky.”

Le langage figuré du poème est fondé sur un mélange très intéressant de symboles païens, chrétiens, et contemporains. Le rythme provient en grande partie des cadences récitatives que l’on trouve dans des prières.

L’expression est polysémantique, quoique le sujet soit plutôt social. Tous ces éléments font du poème “La recherche d’un complice” de Chubai un des meilleurs exemples de ce qu’il y a de mieux dans la poésie moderne ukrainienne.

D. S.