

UKRAINIAN LITERATURE

A Journal of Translations

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Ukrainian Literature
A Journal of Translations

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Introduction

It seems somehow inappropriate and inopportune to discuss the problems of a literary journal in the midst of a war. As I write this introduction in Lviv, on the western end of Ukraine, on the other side of the country Russian troops have invaded and are conducting a war. As death and destruction ravage eastern Ukraine, destroying the lives of many innocent victims who want no part in this conflict, the fate of a small, irregular periodical seems hardly to matter.

And yet, this journal does matter, even—or perhaps particularly—in the current political and military situation in Ukraine. Whatever the Russian president's goals in Ukraine are, it is clear that he does not see Ukrainians as a distinct national group. In Russian propaganda, Ukrainian identity is seen as an artificial, false construct without historical, social, or cultural support and significance. The information war that accompanies Russia's invasion of eastern Ukraine is built on falsehoods, disinformation, and ignorance. In this context, every assertion of Ukrainian identity and every expression of its culture are important efforts to counteract and delegitimize the negation of Ukrainian identity. These steps are significant both in Ukraine, where Ukrainians need the emotional support that expressions of cultural identity bring, and also outside Ukraine, where there is very little knowledge of Ukraine and the rich variety of its culture. This journal plays a very small role in projecting and protecting Ukrainian cultural identity, but a nation and culture are not built by single efforts, whether large or small. Indeed, it is precisely the inexhaustible flow of small efforts that demonstrates the resilience and authenticity of cultural identities.

Smaller endeavors, however, face enormous challenges, and even the slightest disruptions pose serious difficulties for a modest project. So it has been with this journal. *Ukrainian Literature* was founded in May 2001 through the efforts of Larysa M. L. Z. Onyshkevych, then president of the US branch of the Shevchenko Scientific Society (NTSh), and the head of its publications committee, Marta Tarnawsky. They concluded an agreement with me that called on NTSh to provide financing of roughly \$10,000 per year to cover the cost of honoraria to authors and translators plus small office expenses. It was hoped the journal would appear every year in an online version as well as in a print edition, which NTSh would publish at its own, additional expense. In practice, that proved to be too ambitious a project. The journal has appeared only triennially and largely kept to the

anticipated budget. Even with the cost of printing, the expenses for each volume were under \$15,000 or roughly \$5,000 per year—a substantial but still modest commitment from an organization such as NTSh. Three volumes of the journal appeared under the agreement; however NTSh did not produce a print version of the third volume, despite requests from me and the translators to live up to its contractual agreements.

In the summer of 2013 I learned that the organization's support for the journal was being terminated. George Grabowicz, the new president of NTSh, explained that the journal's print edition was not successful and that the overall impact of the journal did not justify its considerable expense. My pleas to reconsider were not effective. The only English language journal in the world devoted to Ukrainian literature had lost its financial underpinnings and would likely have to cease publication. I wrote to the authors and translators who had already submitted materials for the fourth volume and they graciously agreed to allow their work to be published without any honoraria. Furthermore, my own translation of a classic Ukrainian author from the past (that is, an author requiring no honorarium) would occupy a substantial portion of this issue. The manuscript editor agreed to work without remuneration and my own work on the journal has always been gratis. Thus, the fourth volume of the journal could appear without any funding at all.

But this is not a model for the future. To survive, the journal must have a sponsor. One of the goals of this introduction is to make an appeal for secure, long-term funding for the journal. As the amounts described above indicate, the commitment is not particularly large. I will be knocking on doors soon, perhaps even yours. I will come with two arguments.

The first argument concerns success as a measure of what is useful and viable in the world. From the perspective of pessimists and cynics (let alone enemies) the entire enterprise of Ukrainian national identity and culture could be assessed as unsuccessful, beaten back by its opponents for over two centuries. Today, this argument is all but the official policy of Russia: Ukraine should not exist because it is unsuccessful (and Russia spares no effort, including military invasion, to insure Ukraine is unsuccessful). Nevertheless, if you are reading these words you likely share my judgment that Ukrainian culture and identity (they are inseparable) are not failures—although, heaven knows, it would be nice to see greater success. Ukrainian culture has outlived the cultural genocide of the Tsarist government, including its attempts to stifle the Ukrainian language. Ukrainian identity has outlived Communist totalitarianism, including the physical destruction of millions of Ukrainians in targeted campaigns against the peasants and against the cultural intelligentsia. Ukrainian culture has survived the ravages of post-Soviet corrupt governments in Ukraine. It will survive the current challenges as well, in part because the enemies who wish to destroy it don't have the power or support they think they command. The fate of this journal

is not commensurate with the fate of Ukrainian culture, of course. But *Ukrainian Literature* is performing a unique service in that sphere. It allows a broad and worldly audience access to the variety, the richness, the exuberance, the insights, and the achievements of Ukrainian writing in the past and in our own time. At this time in particular, when Ukraine has become a focus of world attention and concern and yet is little known or understood, that role should be fostered and ensured, not cut short because the enterprise seems to be unsuccessful. Success is a relative measure, and what looks embarrassingly unsophisticated or hopelessly discouraging today may be the height of fashion tomorrow. And financial measures of success are always mis-applied to cultural products. Taras Shevchenko never made a living from his poetry. That doesn't diminish his stature today. This journal doesn't aim to turn a profit. That's why we need support. But that's not because we waste money on futile efforts. If our product were popular, we wouldn't need support. But if it were popular, we wouldn't be the only ones doing this.

It is fair, of course, to channel funds to those projects that are more successful and away from those that are less efficient or less effective. But comparisons must be fair and objective. How can this journal be compared in its effectiveness to other projects funded by charitable or scholarly foundations? What are the criteria? Personally, I feel that, measured in purely financial terms, this journal achieves a great deal at very little cost. I would happily compare it to other projects, including those still funded by the NTS.

The second argument in support of funding for this journal has to do with how the funds are used. The overwhelming bulk of our funding went to pay honoraria to authors and translators. Most of the translators were not well-paid academics, but rather students, retirees, or other individuals without the benefit of comfortable and steady income. The small honoraria help motivate them to continue translating. So too does the mere fact of publication—there are very few other venues to publish translations of Ukrainian literature. Proponents of the success argument frequently tell me I am doing the wrong thing by publishing a non-commercial journal and that Ukrainian literature in translation should be published by commercial publishers who command a wider market and far more resources. Indeed, that is my goal as well, but such publishers (outside of Germany) have not yet shown a strong inclination to do so, leaving this journal far from irrelevant or redundant. Our volume three published the first half of Myroslav Shkandrij's translation of Serhii Zhadan's *Depeche Mode*. The entire novel is now available from Glagoslav in a print edition. The same publisher has also published other material from our journal in anthologies of short stories. This journal is a conduit toward commercial publication, not an obstacle or a hindrance. Ukrainian literature remains woefully unknown outside Ukraine, particularly in the English-speaking world.

Ukrainian writers need more exposure, encouragement, and feedback from the west as well as financial support. The modest payments we made to living authors in Ukraine or to their publishers not only assisted them financially but also helped confirm the notion that a Ukrainian writer can realistically hope for a wider audience. What's more, these payments allowed us to be more selective in choosing material for the journal. The very best writers know their own worth and rightly expect an honorarium, even if a modest one, for publication of their works.

Ukrainian literature is struggling to find its place in the world. I am happy to devote time and energy to promote it. Ukraine's history and politics are also important topics, but I choose to support culture in general and literature in particular. Translations of Ukrainian literature into English project an unabashedly positive image of Ukraine (no matter what the works are about) and don't require tearful explanations of the circumstances and challenges facing the country. Literature is the very best ambassador for Ukraine and Ukrainians. I hope you agree and will help me find a new source of funding for this journal.

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The translations included in this volume cover a very wide range of literature. Since 2014 marks the 200th anniversary of the birth of Ukraine's great poet, Taras Shevchenko, I am delighted that this volume includes several of his poems in fresh translations by different translators. Shevchenko is notoriously difficult, if not impossible, to translate into readable English that maintains both the flavor of poetry and the meaning of the text. The translations included here show two very different approaches to this enormously complex task. This issue also contains translations of another complex poet, Ihor Kalynets, by the late Volodymyr Hruszkewycz, as well as some poems by Vasyl Stus. All of these poems are offered here without detailed notes or further explanations, although no doubt the reader might yearn for some additional information. Such is the nature of poetry. Ukrainian readers also struggle to make full sense of Shevchenko, Kalynets, or Stus.

This volume also contains a number of works by living authors. Vasyl Makhno lives in New York and American readers may well recognize the geography, if not the cultural specificity, of his play, *Coney Island*. On the other side of the world, Kyiv and its academic settings look bizarre indeed in Kseniya Dmytrenko's "The Ping Pong Professor." An important quality of literature is its ability to challenge our notions of the familiar and the ordinary. Nowhere is this more evident than in the marvelous story "Dinosaur Eggs," by the late Oles Uliianenko, which gives us a whole new understanding of the heroism of mundane acts of imagination.

The bulk of the volume is devoted to classic authors from the history of Ukrainian literature: Vynnychenko, Kobylanska, and Pidmohylny. As always with complex works from a distant time, translators must navigate the narrow path between aesthetic considerations and explanations of factual details. In Vynnychenko's story, much depends on a sense of the historical period, when some Ukrainian activists had found new courage to pronounce their message openly, while many of their compatriots were still too timid to give voice to their feelings in a climate of repressive government measures. The untranslatable terms *khokhol* and *katsap*—pejorative labels for Ukrainians and Russians, respectively—delineate the translator's dilemma in capturing terms whose sense lies in their insulting character rather than in any specific translatable meaning. Kobylanska's story about the horrors of war holds its own difficulties for the translator, who must negotiate a highly symbolic descriptive vocabulary and a stylized, emotive narrative style.

In Pidmohylny's novel *The City*, the issues are different. This major work holds significance on many different levels. One of these is history. Pidmohylny reflects the reality of Kyiv in the early Soviet period in many aspects of his novel. In my translation I have deliberately chosen to maintain some of these peculiarities in their Ukrainian equivalents, to preserve the cultural flavor of the times. The various acronyms that sprang up—KUBUch (Комиссия по улучшению быта учащихся), the committee to improve the living circumstances of students; the SocZabez, (Соціальне забезпечення) Social support committee; VUTsVYK, (Всеукраїнський центральний виконавчий комітет) the All-Ukrainian central executive committee, the highest organ of state (not party) power—have been retained as they were known at the time. I have also preserved the designation of the University as the Institute of People's Education, a silly euphemism of early Soviet times. The Institute that Stepan attends is, of course, Kyiv University. The geography of Kyiv's streets and structures is also usually rendered with Ukrainian names. The Golden Gates are familiar to English readers but the names of the bazaars (Sinnyi, Zhytnyi Ievreiskyi, and Besarabka) and other places are rendered in transliterated Ukrainian.

Pidmohylny also relies on many allusions and witticisms that may be lost on the English (and occasionally on the Ukrainian) reader. The village Stepan comes from, Tereveni, might be translated as "Nonsensical jabber." The three boys and a girl in a veil that are seen on the Dnipro are allusions to the mythological founders of Kyiv: Kyi, Shchek, and Khoriv with their sister Lybid. Iskra and Kochubei, whose monuments Stepan finds along the river, are historical figures who opposed Hetman Mazepa and sided with Peter the Great. "I-kannie," like the more familiar "a-kannie" is a feature of Russian pronunciation. All in all, Pidmohylny's novel is full of very specific allusions that readers may or might not recognize. The same is true of any great work of literature. The translator's role is not to explain everything to

the reader—that's for university professors—but to allow the reader to enjoy the work in a form as close as possible to the original text. I hope the translations in this volume provide you with such an experience.

Maxim Tarnawsky
Lviv, September 2014