Modernism in Ukrainian Prose

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Modernism in Ukrainian literature is poorly defined and inaccurately conceived. This is true of all labels in cultural history, and literary periodization, always a difficult and somewhat arbitrary exercise, is no exception. The conceptualization of Ukrainian Modernism is problematic not only in this formal manner but also in its useful practical application.

Regardless of our theoretical view of the nature, function, and value of stylistic literary periodization, the practical utility and colloquial currency of this tool is beyond doubt. We use it in the classroom, we use it in professional conversation, and we use it in our attempts to bridge the gap between literary studies and the other humanities. In this overall sense, Ukrainian Modernism is an established fact. In a narrower sense it is a label we use to characterize collectively the features of two literary groupings: Moloda Muza and *Ukrajins'ka xata*. In a wider sense we use it to describe the general change in Ukrainian literature that occurred at the beginning of the twentieth century. This change involved several factors, among them: 1) an emphasis on the aesthetic rather than the social function of literature; 2) a focus on urban rather than village readers and, therefore, subjects; 3) a focus on the individual as a unique being rather than a member of a community; and 4) a sense of crisis in human existence, a break with the past.

While there is general agreement among students of Ukrainian literature that such a change occurred at the beginning of this century, there is no working consensus on the dimensions of this change. This is particularly true in prose. With the notable exception of realism, the periodization of Ukrainian literature is generally measured according to its poetry. Modernism is usually conceived as a movement that encompasses such writers as Voronyj, Luckyj, Karmans'kyj, Pačovs'kyj, and Oles'. In my own lectures I generally follow this approach. It is a fair, workable solution to the problems inherent in the question. Modernism is Moloda Muza and *Ukrajins'ka xata*. Everything else is something different. But, then, Modernism is not a period designator. It identifies only a group. Of course, what makes these writers a single group is a common idea of the nature and function of literature, a shared ideology. The moment we try to identify the components of this ideology, however, we find ourselves opening the group to writers other than those who were members of Moloda Muza or who cooperated with

Ukrajins'ka xata. Or we don't find significant or sufficient links between the members of the group.

This same dilemma occurs with terminology. Among various authors who write about turn-of-the-century Ukrainian literature, the term "modernism," for political or other reasons, appears to be inappropriate. Other terms are found to take its place. Even among authors who do not themselves discard the term, modernism is often seen to be synonymous with decadence, symbolism, neoromanticism, or even those semimeaningless terms, impressionism and expressionism. Still others produce learned studies to establish that Ukrainian Modernism is, in fact, something other than itself.[1] All of these intellectual cartwheels are, of course, the result of a general lack of consensus on the definition of the term.

Ukrainian literature is not alone in this dilemma. In the English-speaking world definitions of modernism range from a group of particular authors (most notably, Yeats, Joyce, Eliot, Pound) to a general inclination toward Promethean rebelliousness that includes writers and thinkers from all times and all cultures. But even among critics who attack the idea or try to appropriate it for particular goals, there is a general notion that certain writers at the beginning of the twentieth century share a number of stylistic and ideological characteristics that allow them to be grouped under the heading of modernists. A similar consensus can be fostered in Ukrainian literature, provided the terms of reference are clearly identified. Although such a task is clearly beyond the limits of a single paper, we can, even in a limited forum, examine some of the chief characteristics of this proposed definition. I limit my remarks here to the problems that arise in Ukrainian prose, but these are not substantially different from those in other genres.

The first issue that arises in dealing with modernist prose in Ukrainian is chronology. If we limit Modernism to the narrow confines of Moloda Muza and *Ukrajins'ka xata*, then we have Myxajlo Jackiv and, maybe, Hnat Xotkevyč and almost no one else. While somewhat embarrassing, this absence of modernist prose in Ukrainian literature does not pose a theoretical problem, except that it is difficult to establish any intellectual and literary criteria that distinguish these two writers from many of their contemporaries. In particular, it is generally assumed that one of the key features of modernist prose is antitraditional technical experimentation. That is precisely what Georg Lukacs is speaking of when he argues that "modernism leads not only to the destruction of traditional literary forms; it leads to the destruction of literature as such. . . . Modernism means not the

[1] Tamara Hundorova, "Rannij ukrajins'kyj modernizm: Do problemy estetyčnoji svidomosti," *Radjans'ke literaturoznavstvo*, 1989, no. 12, pp. 3–7.

enrichment, but the negation of art."[2] Whether or not we agree with Lukacs's judgment, the features he describes in Joyce, Proust, and Kafka are not central in Jackiv and Xotkevyč. Other Ukrainian prose writers, however, consistently introduce technical innovations. Among these are Myxajlo Kocjubyns'kyj, Jurij Janovs'kyj, and Majk Johansen. The latter two, significantly, bring us into the 1920s, a period into which Modernism must extend.

The underlying cause of modernist innovation and technical experimentation in Western European literature is a general attempt to break away from the real or apparent constraints of the past. For Joyce or Proust, the social agenda of late nineteenth-century realism is not an acceptable aesthetic system. But in Ukrainian literature, the revolt against realism is not merely an aesthetic position but also, fundamentally, a political one. Neither Joyce nor Proust need to defend the legitimacy of the creative intelligentsia or its role in determining the cultural agenda. In Ukraine the situation is different. The aesthetics of realism are tied to the politics of populism. The poetic debate between Voronyj and Franko and the essays of Jefremov clearly show the political nature of the prevailing cultural criteria that the Modernists attack. Thus, the modernist writer in Ukraine rebels not only against literary realism but against political populism as well. This rebellion still occurs within the context of a Ukrainian national awakening. The mere choice of Ukrainian as a language of literature and intelligent discourse is still, well into the 1920s, a deliberate act of national allegiance. This is bountifully reflected in the many works from the 1910s and 1920s, where nationality and language appear within otherwise unrelated thematic clusters. Prostitution, mechanization, international espionage, and a flood of similar issues appear with a specifically Ukrainian dimension. Ukrainian Modernism is, therefore, limited in the degree of its rebelliousness. Like the runaway child who can't cross the street, Ukrainian Modernists are hemmed in by their loyalty. They reject realism and they reject populism, but they endorse the national awakening. That combination necessarily limits the degree of innovation a writer can introduce into his or her work.

This is evident in the chronology of technical experiments in prose. The most dramatic innovations are introduced in the late 1920s in works such as Johansen's *Podorož učenoho doktora Leonardo...* and Jurij Janovs'kyj's

[2] Georg Lukacs, "The Ideology of Modernism," in *Backgrounds to Modern Literature*, ed. John Oliver Perry (San Francisco, 1968), p. 271. Lionel Trilling shares some of the same sentiments but without the same ideological prejudices: "On the Modern Element in Modern Literature," in *The Idea of the Modern in Literature and the Arts*, ed. Irving Howe (New York, 1967), pp. 59–82.

Majster Korablja, both published in 1930, as well as in some of the works of Geo Škurupij, also from this period. All of these authors are still rebelling against realism as an aesthetic doctrine, but they are no longer confronting political populism. The national awakening is either an accomplished fact or a dead issue, but certainly not a cause that requires public declarations of loyalty. Twenty and even fifteen years earlier, this was not the case. Even as innovative a writer as Myxajlo Kocjubyns'kyj, whose works are a clear departure from the traditions of Ukrainian and Western European realism, cannot make a radical break with the past. Except for the short poem in prose, his works are entirely traditional in their genre. Indeed, in his longer works, such as *Fata morgana* or *Tini zabutyx predkiv*, he is not far removed from Ivan Franko and Nečuj-Levyc'kyj. Unlike them, Kocjubyns'kyj does not focus paramount attention on the national awakening, but his consistent attention to social issues, particularly the interaction between the community and the individual, is a direct response to populist ideology. There is even less distance between the technique of the old realists and that of Xotkevyč, Jackiv, or even Stefanyk. Although they deliberately attack the credulous piety of populist realists, the tools they employ, except for the very short genre, are hardly different from those in the hands of their opponents.

Despite this limitation on the technical level, rebellion against the past is still the major force defining Ukrainian Modernism. But it is in ideas rather than techniques that this rebellion manifests itself. One of the clearest symptoms of this rebellion is the hostility with which it is greeted by the self-appointed guardians of the old traditions. Indeed, this hostility is a reliable touchstone in determining the modernist lineup. One of the immediate consequences of this maneuver is the inclusion of Ol'ha Kobyljans'ka. For Jefremov, in particular, she was one of the chief culprits in the abandonment of the traditional good causes that were so dear to his heart.

Kobyljans'ka's significance to Ukrainian Modernism is larger than just the addition of her name to a list of writers. Her stature is such that she immediately gives new life to the idea of modernist prose in the prerevolutionary period. More significant than the quality of her work is the link she provides with what is surely one of the principal wellsprings of modernism throughout all of Europe, namely, the works of Friedrich Nietzsche. The obvious influence of his ideas, even if in a somewhat misunderstood form, in her works provides the ideological foundation for much of the rebellion that characterizes early Ukrainian Modernism.

Early in the twentieth century Friedrich Nietzsche was a popular figure, particularly in Western Ukraine. But his ideas were generally misunderstood or acquired in a diluted form. Even in this limited understanding,

Nietzsche was further pigeonholed according to local conditions. Generally, the popular view of Nietzsche in Ukraine was as the creator of the superman, rather than as the defender of base human instincts. This was, to a degree, a result of the cultural politics of the time. For young modernist writers, Nietzsche was a weapon against the populist agenda. He was their shield against cultural decay, ethnographic primitivism, and social relevance in art. This is evident in their programmatic statements on the function of art and the primacy of aesthetic values. The Moloda Muza, with their strong links to Polish Modernists and through them to Nietzsche, offers a good example. In their manifesto, Ostap Luc'kyj declares:

> It is characteristic of the last decades that in all fields of human thought old truths and concepts are breaking down. The unusually (for a philosopher) popularized Nietzsche has sent his Zarathustra out into the wide circle of contemporary world society, and he, perhaps even more than all previous oracles, has made everyone who has met him notice that we are approaching the time of analytical inspection of many of our concepts about matters of the utmost interest to us in our lives. . . . The new feverish inspection has begun; dogma after dogma has fallen into the abyss of forgetfulness, or into the corner of more or less living memories; and beneath this pulsed the main source of the current crisis and misery—the tumor of the entire contemporary social order.[3]

The old truths and concepts here are those of populism. Ivan Franko, the champion of art for social improvement, understood this when he derided Luc'kyj and his current crisis: "Nietzsche did indeed experience such a crisis—and it drove him into an asylum."[4] The conflict between populist and Nietzschean values was evident to the populists also. Serhij Jefremov, the champion of populism in literature, uses Nietzsche to diminish the reputation of the writer Ol'ha Kobyljans'ka.

> In her youth she experienced a large influence from Nietzsche, with his ultra-individualistic philosophy, and Kobyljans'ka in her works became his faithful disciple. . . . She depicts characters, mostly women, with a "longing for beauty" and an impulse to attain heights, traits which are understood as a specific "aristocratism of the spirit" that attempts to rise from the level of the mundane, of "stupid vile souls," of "the mob" and to "soar far, far away," somewhere, to the level of above-earthly feelings and above-human experiences. Kobyljans'ka's heroes are all this kind of "aristocrats of the spirit." They want to embody the ideal of the above-human [superman, MT]: "to be, above all, a goal unto oneself" and "not to care for the masses."[5]

[3] Ostap Luc'kyj, "Moloda muza," Dilo, 18 November 1907, reprinted in *Ostap Luc'kyj—Molodomuzets'*, ed. Jurij Luc'kyj (New York, 1968), p. 55.

[4] Ivan Franko, "Manifest 'Molodo muzy'," in *Zibrannja tvoriv u p''jatdesjaty tomax* (Kiev, 1976–86), 37:412.

[5] Serhij Jefremov, *Istorija ukrajins'koho pys'menstva* (Leipzig, 1919), 2:263–64.

Reflections of the polarity between populist social and aesthetic values and diluted Nietzschean ideas can be found scattered throughout Ukrainian literature of the first two decades of the twentieth century. In many works, this polarity is depicted in the conflict between the individual, especially the artistic, creative individual, and the community in which he lives. Kocjubyns'kyj's *Tini zabutyx predkiv* and Vynnyčenko's *Česnist' z soboju* are examples of such works. Occasionally antipopulist rebellion is reduced to its simplest form: depictions of the brutality and lack of dignity of the common man. Kocjubyns'kyj does this in a number of his works, including "Smix," "Posol vid čornoho carja," and *Fata morgana*. Even Vynnyčenko, for all his socialist inclinations, occasionally depicts the lower classes as wild animals, particularly in such early stories as "Holod." All of this is in marked and deliberate contrast to the image that we find in Nečuj-Levyc'kyj, Myrnyj, Franko, and others of the dignified suffering of the downtrodden peasants or workers and the unwavering dedication of the intellectual who struggles for the liberation and protection of his oppressed brethren. But the fact remains that the issues are still those of the populists. Only the values have changed. For example, the relationship of the intellectual to the community is depicted in many modernist works. The leadership theme, if we may call it that, occurs in Kobyljans'ka, Kocjubyns'kyj, Vynnyčenko, Lesja Ukrajinka, and many others. But Franko and Nečuj-Levyc'kyj also addressed this question in such works as *Mojsej* and *Xmary*. Ukrainian Modernists, pursuing a course that Stephen Spender calls "the revolutionary concept of tradition,"[6] fall back on a selected tradition and infuse it with new values.

A relatively unknown work of Hnat Xotkevyč, recently published in Kiev, offers a good example of the dependence of Ukrainian Modernism on populist traditions. Xotkevyč's *Aviron*,[7] first published in 1917, is clearly a belletristic answer to Franko's *Mojsej*. It tells the story of the gradual disillusionment of this naïve young follower of Moses during the period of Moses' communion with Jehovah on Mount Sinai and immediately after. Thus, Xotkevyč retells the same biblical ten commandments story that Franko does, but from a different perspective. Where Franko focuses on the inner struggle of the leader who must overcome his own self-doubt and the doubts of his followers, Xotkevyč focuses on the disillusionment that comes from the realization that Moses is merely a man and the policies he

[6] "The Modern as Vision of a Whole Situation," in *Backgrounds to Modern Literature*, ed. John Oliver Perry (San Francisco, 1968), p. 234.

[7] *Kyjiv*, 1990, no. 7, pp. 63–93, and Hnat Xotkevyč, *Aviron. Dovbuš. Opovidannja* (Kiev, 1990), pp. 5–61.

implements are calculated political strategies designed to diffuse opposition and maintain authority. Characteristically, the story ends with an intoxicated Moses diplomatically leading the young Abiram, who has been accepted as an assistant in the construction of the tabernacle, out of the tent where Moses and the sculptor Beselius have been reveling and are about to receive maidens assembled for their pleasure. The debauchery of these men, whom Abiram had presumed to be saintly, precipitates a final disillusionment and leads the young man to question the goodness and existence of God.

A key moment in the story occurs when Abiram is apprenticed to Beselius. The sculptor, a callous but intelligent man, mutters about the cruelty of punishing so many Israelites while he and Aaron, the men most responsible for the creation of the golden calf, go unpunished. In anger, or perhaps only in jest, he deliberately shapes a grotesque figure of an angel and shows it to Abiram, who is horrified at the sacrilegious impudence of the master. Moses enters and sees the figure.

"А це що ти тут наробив?"—спитав Моїсей, зупинившися перед херувимом, притуленим до стіни.

І ждав Авірон, що нахмуряться брови великого пророка, що блискавиця вийде з очей і поразить святотатця, що покажеться ж правда господня.... Але нічого не сталося.... Замість гніву—вибух сміхом Моїсей і реготав, упершися в боки, аж хитався всім дебелим тілом своїм. А Веселіїл, зберігаючи серйозну міну, хоч очі в нього бризкали сміхом, говорив роблено суворим голосом:

"Це ж бог тобі. Я тобі добре зробив тельця, навіщо ти спалив його? А херувимів я робити не вмію."

І двоє старих стояли й реготали з святині Ізраїля, з уповань на нього....

"А цей дурник питає: чи це так воно й зостанеться? А що ж, кажу, йолопе, гадаєш, що буду переробляти? А не діждеш ні ти, ні твій Моїсей!"—і знов старі реготали, здоровим дужим сміхом міцної старості.

А потім узяв Моїсей янгола і, поплескуючи його по носі, від чого ніс зробився зовсім ні на що не похожим, сказав:

"Ану-ну, покажи цьому молодикові, що значить сила господня, котру дав тобі в руки господь!"—і знову вони реготали, аж сльози виступали у них на очах.

Зручним рухом підхопив Веселіїл янгола, поставив його перед собою й почав водити пальцями по лиці. І здавалося, що грався він, роблячи безліч непотрібних рухів: то вивертав кумедно палець, то врізувався в глину твердим, як залізо, нігтем, то швидко-швидко тер одне місце, і все не переставав приговорювати всякі дурниці. Відхиливши голову та прищуливши очі, приглядався до роботи, аж нарешті різким рухом відкинувши ввесь корпус, відійшов Веселіїл і крикнув:

"Ану, дивись тепер дурню!"

Авірон глянув—і не знав, що тут сталося справді: чи сила господня, чи чарування якесь?!

На нього скорботно дивилося божественне лице.[8]

"And what have you done here?" asked Moses, stopping before the cherub, which was leaning against the wall.

And Abiram waited for the great prophet's brows to darken, for lightning to flash from his eyes and strike the blasphemer, for the Lord's justice to show itself. . . . But instead of anger, Moses exploded and roared with laughter, holding his sides while his entire stout body shook. Beselius kept a serious face, although his eyes sparkled with glee, and spoke with affected sternness:

"This is god for you. I made you a good calf, what did you go and burn it for? Cherubs I don't know how to make."

And the two old men stood and laughed at Israel's sacred treasures, at the hope they elicited.

"And this blockhead asks: 'Is it going to stay like that?' And I tell him 'Do you think, you fool, that I'm going to do it over? You won't live to see the day. Not you nor your Moses either!'" and again the two roared with the loud strong laughter of healthy old age.

And then Moses took the angel and patting it on the nose with his finger, which completely disfigured the nose, said:

"Well, why don't you show this youngster what power the Lord has put into your hands," and again they roared until tears welled up in their eyes.

With a graceful motion Beselius snapped up the angel and put it in front of himself. He began to run his fingers over its face. He seemed to be playing, making countless pointless motions, turning his fingers in a comical gesture, cutting into the clay with his fingernails, hard as iron, or very quickly rubbing one spot, while continuing with his senseless muttering. Leaning back with his head and squinting his eyes he examined his work until, finally, throwing the whole piece down with a sudden gesture, he stepped back and said:

"Well, stupid, have a look!"

Abiram glanced and did not know what had happened. Was this God's power or some kind of magic? A sorrowful heavenly face was looking at him.

In this passage, Xotkevyč not only disparages the stature of community leaders (something he does throughout the story as part of the program of turning Franko's portrait on its head) but also examines the role of the artist in relation to the community and to the leaders of the community. In a characteristically modernist gesture, Beselius asserts the independence of art and the artist. He changes the standards of aesthetic appreciation. He deliberately creates a work of art that will be perceived as ugly. Even more significant than the deformity of the cherub, however, is Beselius's refusal to serve any master other than his own judgment. He tells Moses that the golden calf was a beautiful work of art, and Moses shouldn't have destroyed it. As a good modernist, Xotkevyč believes that art should be free of

[8] Xotkevyč, *Aviron. Dovbuš. Opovidannja*, pp. 58–59.

social obligations. But when Moses asks him to show the boy the power of God that is in the hands of the artist, Beselius complies and creates a beautiful and moving angel. The power of art to affect man and to change the world is a characteristically romantic notion to which Modernists subscribe without hesitation. But Beselius, and, with him, Xotkevyč, are now back in the service of the social cause. Xotkevyč allows the artist to assert his independence from the social cause, but he does not let him actually abandon it. The world is still being viewed from the perspective of a confirmed believer, even though at the end of the story Abiram has lost his faith.

Xotkevyč's story exemplifies the relationship of the Ukrainian modernist author to the past. Characteristically, the work is conceived as a rejection of the past, a rebellion against it. But the rebellion is almost wholly absorbed with its denial of the past. There is no room for an assertion of its own values. The agenda of Ukrainian Modernism, at least in its early period, is determined by the past it rejects. Xotkevyč opposes Franko by rewriting his *Mojsej*, which is itself a rewrite of the biblical story. At the end of the story, Abiram is on the verge of a final break with Moses and with God. But there is no assertion of new values. Like Xotkevyč himself, Abiram can reject his adversary only on Moses' terms. In its technical and intellectual foundations, the story does not break new ground. It is a traditional naturalist narrative without any discernible influence from Nietzsche, Freud, Marx, or any of the other legendary demons of modernism.

In summary then, Ukrainian modernist prose is characteristically a weak phenomenon in the last years of the nineteenth century and in the first three decades of the twentieth. Within this time span we can clearly speak of two periods, roughly prerevolutionary and postrevolutionary. The telling difference between these two periods is in the level of technical and intellectual experimentation, a feature which, ironically, seems to be dependent on the underlying commitment to the idea of a Ukrainian national awakening. The driving idea of Ukrainian Modernism is the rejection of populism and village realism. To a certain degree, Nietzschean ideas play a significant if indirect role in this rejection, but the channels of this influence are shallow, narrow, and very muddy. The influence of other seminal thinkers, often evidenced in modernist writers in Western Europe, is not apparent. Finally, Ukrainian Modernism is not an exclusive aesthetic and intellectual current at this time. On the one hand, longevity makes living anachronisms of Nečuj-Levyc'kyj and Myrnyj. On the other hand, an alternative tradition makes modernism share the literary stage with psychological realism and

revolutionary romanticism. This competition is part of what makes the later modernist period more vibrant. But in this period, as in the earlier one, Ukrainian Modernism is in a precarious alliance with political forces whose goals do not include ugly cherubs.

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HARVARD UKRAINIAN STUDIES

Volume XV, Number 3/4
December 1991