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Literary perspectives: Ukraine

Longing for the novel

In Ukraine, the demand for engagement with the immediate past has produced a series of novels that are better described as autobiographies. One such is Yuri Andrukhovych's *The Secret*, which, in going to places out of bounds to the conventional autobiography, avoids the kitsch typical of the form. Another example is Irena Karpa's *Freud Would Weep*, part travelogue, part novel. The rising star of Ukrainian literature reinvigorates the Ukrainian language, impoverished during the Soviet period, in brilliant ways. But, asks Tymofiy Havryliv, is the autobiography equal to the task of representing recent historical experience?

In Ukraine, authors can write about everything. Twenty years ago, such a claim would have been seen as an unrealistic hope, despite *perestroika*. Not all that many years have gone by since then. If one was to take artistic freedom as a measure of democracy, one could say without qualification that democracy has successfully established itself in Ukraine, and what's more, as a *normal* democracy, and not as a *controlled* one.

In reality, the freedom of art is the result of its social marginalization. Art has a jester's license. In the 1990s, it increasingly became something of interest to a small circle of initiates. Its carnivalesque entry onto the scene immediately after the collapse of the Soviet Union was short lived, and it found itself once again part of the underground. It returned there for a reason far more banal than persecution or dictatorship: there was no more money for art. The huge publishing houses of the Soviet era, which in Kiev and other Ukrainian cities had published in over 140 different languages, had become leviathans out of water, stranded and unwieldy. Like the concert halls and opera houses, they led a woeful existence, renting out their famous, often wonderful, but also notorious rooms, until losing them one by one in hopeless and unfair court cases. Not all, but many. Bookshops, that once represented an exemplary Soviet marketing network that included every large village, lost their profile in order to catch up with contemporary demand: cosmetics shops, hairdressers, film-developing studios, department stores, electronics retailers, toilet roll and newspaper kiosks, bureaux de changes, chemists, boutiques.

The times when a poetry reading could attract an audience of hundreds were consigned to the history books as a long gone phenomenon of politicized society. During the Orange Revolution, society once again became politicized; but even then, authors played a far more modest role than they liked to admit. A good thing too, some said, glad that literature had been able to shed its political engagement, which in past epochs had starved it both formally and thematically. A little sad, said others, who, trapped in their dilapidated ivory towers, missed contact with the public and had all too quickly forgotten the

brutality with which literature was made the mouthpiece of ideology in the totalitarian system.

Literature quite literally plummeted into freedom, which it is enjoying to the full to this day. Literature's freedom to do as it pleases, and above all its retreat from political engagement, is one explanation for why in the last decade and a half authors have not been persecuted, in contrast to their colleagues from the mass media. The list of murdered journalists is too lengthy to speak of a real victory for democracy. Author's texts, despite being just as critical of the regime, went unnoticed outside a small group of insiders. Moreover, they were too abstract to endanger the concrete business interests of the nomenklatura. For economic reasons they were published only rarely, and when they were, only in small circulation, without hope for wider marketing. The average circulation for a work of prose decreased approximately fifty times (from about 50 000 copies to 1000) and for poetry about twenty times (from about 10 000 copies to 500). If at all, authors of the middle generation flirted only briefly with politics. That does not mean that they were not critical. On the contrary. Only that they distanced themselves from day-to-day politics, reflecting upon it in the role of the critical, sometimes despairing, sometimes blackly humorous *observer*. Only a group of authors from the older generation got involved in politics. They created what is called the political poetry of the 1990s. *Freud Would Weep* — to quote a title I shall return to. So would literary critics. Not to mention the merciful reader.

The media and the lower literary forms

Since the end of the 1990s, a special form of collaboration between authors and the media had developed. A number of newspapers and magazines invited authors to write regular columns: Oksana Zabuzko, Yuri Andrukhovych, Volodymyr Jeskilev, Taras Prokhasko, Ljubko Deres, Stepan Prociuk, to name a few. One occasionally discovers among their pieces wonderful examples of this lower literary form. The cultural pages of newspapers, which during the Soviet period had been heavily monopolized ideologically, developed particularly well thanks to this collaboration. Oksana Zabuzko, for example, went on to publish a collection of her columns under the title *Reportage from the Year 2000* — a noteworthy book, both intellectually and in terms of publishing — in which the author approached political events and everyday social life from a cultural perspective. It was the (political) cultural articles of the Ukrainian authors and intellectuals that provided the medial reflection of the Orange Revolution.

Travel writing, a lower form of literature related to the cultural pages, has enjoyed special popularity in recent years. Correspondents are sent on journeys, authors report on their sojourns abroad, interviews are conducted en route. Destinations are confined to Europe. "Today, if one travels *to Europe*, he no longer travels 'abroad'. A concept from the days of the stagecoach! At most, I travel into 'the unknown'". Thus another traveller, my fellow countryman Joseph Roth, writing 80 years ago in the introduction to his book, *The White Cities*.

The lower forms of literature have recovered better than the higher forms. That goes to the same extent for art. Monumental art forms have still not recuperated. This also goes for film, which has collapsed into a state of financial emergency. This in a country in which there used to be the expressionist film of an Oleksandr Dovzenko or the political cinema of a Serhij Paradzanov, and in which politicians regularly engaged in one-upmanship

over the "great culture and rich traditions". But even with the lower forms of literature, all is not as one might wish: the novella seems to have died out as something old-fashioned. And what about the short story: "Brevity is the sister of talent", if one is to believe Anton Chekhov?

Unlike poetry, the short story has been unable to create a name for itself. Ukraine is the land of the poem, a poetic country, in which everything is poeticized, the past, the future, criminal acts, and heroic deeds — though one does not always know whether something is still a heroic deed or if it has become a criminal act. Whether it was a heroic deed in the first place, or a criminal act after all. Most often, probably both, heroic deed and criminal act. Hans-Georg Gadamer's claim that the Germans had not brought forth a great storyteller, but superb poets (which I doubt very much — not the quality of German poets, but the uselessness of German prose), also applies to the Ukrainians. The admirable attempt made by the Ukrainian modern of the 1920s to create the Ukrainian novel, as the political and cultural (sic!) jargon of the time triumphantly declared, was *nipped in the bud*.

In the last two decades, poetry has sounded out all formal and thematic possibilities imaginable. Much turned out to be the repetition or rediscovery of what had been submerged. Much was seductive in its virtuosity. For example, experimental poetry, the acoustic and visual poem. But even in the year 2007, when prose is taken on by publishers more or less unproblematically, publishers refuse to include poems by well-known, even popular authors on their lists.

The novel as challenge: *The Secret*

The greatest challenge remains the novel. The number of novels increases from year to year, but what themes do they treat, and how? In what follows, five new novels will be introduced. In my mind, they are exemplary, as I will try to show.

Probably the best-known author in the West is Yuri Andrukhovych. His book *The Secret* (Kharkiv: Folio 2007), which I will talk about here, is the most recent. In the West, at least in the German- and Polish-speaking West, still known as central Europe, Yuri Andrukhovych stands for Ukrainian literature. In Ukraine, too, he is among the best-known novelists. He first gained a name as a poet, then as a novelist. His *Army Stories*¹ are less known than his five novels. Although the fifth, *The Secret*, bears the subtitle *Instead of a Novel*. "Instead" — but "of a novel" nonetheless. In interviews and in the first Ukrainian reviews (as the newspapers call the short and general information they provide on the occasion of the publication of a new book and book readings; there is no literary criticism in Ukraine — literature exists, but there is practically no discourse about literature) it was referred to as a novel.

I read *The Secret* with care and attention, even though I am not Sherlock Holmes and am aware of that fact. The reason I read *The Secret* with great care and attention is because it speaks to me in a particular way, in the way memories can. Because *The Secret* is memoirs, autobiography, and recollections of a life simultaneously. Autobiography, because in the novel childhood and youth are remembered. Memoirs, because adulthood is also recalled, because the book contains conversations with famous personalities, takes a stance on political tendencies and on dull, everyday life. The most famous personality the author speaks to is Yuri Andrukhovych. He interviews himself. His own alter ego asks him questions. The Berlin journalist Egon Alt.

What I am interested in is not the representation of facts, the perception of others through the remembering self, but that these recollections largely relate to *my* era and to *my* topography. The same city, the same people, the same streets, now renamed, the same trains and train stations, the same school, though it is hardly mentioned, the same other city. Many cities and journeys. The reader gets something of the atmosphere of the last four decades and more, but more still of the atmosphere of the values and judgements of the narrator, the interviewed self, how it suits itself to autobiographical writing, to the writing of memoirs.

Generalizations and profiles of strangers, or rather estranged others, descriptions of life, at least life *in those days* — above all the 1970s to the 1990s — are not this book's strength. One should not expect that from an autobiography. But certainly from memoirs. While reading, I could not shake off the feeling that here someone was looking down at others — a perspective that I cannot warm to: the self above, the others below. Unlike Andrukhovych's early novels, the distinction between above and below is not dissolved through the act of carnival. The book is serious about this. Perhaps I'm mistaken. Perhaps the fact that the other is perceived as such can be traced back to the inhumanity of the totalitarian regime. Perhaps remembering is formed in such a way that the present, from where the narration takes place, is above and the remembered below; consequently, all others are far below, with the exception of the remembered self, even if the memoirs extend up to Berlin in 2005.

The most human, the best, and the most successful sections in the book are those where the interviewed self talks about his relationship to his father. As is the portrait of the father, made up of mosaics scattered throughout the book, from which one can infer a deep affection. In these sections, *The Secret* has a poetic feel. *The Secret* is probably one possible metaphor for "My Life", the baring of the private, the intimate, all the way into fantasies, in which *femina* and *phallus* celebrate a kind of mystic union — or at least would like to celebrate one. Honesty is to be respected. Through its honesty, Andrukhovych's autobiography distinguishes itself from those of his colleagues from the preceding generation, in which they stylized themselves as martyrs and heroes. As such, *The Secret* steers well clear of such heroic kitsch. If the interviewed self does refer to a hero, then it is rare and always affectionately ironic. Unlike heroic kitsch, Yuri Andrukhovych does not bracket out what might be called the "sexual sphere". On the contrary, it is accentuated, from the discovery of the penis as a schoolboy up to the sexual fantasies of the 45-year-old somewhere between the Berlin train stations of Schöneberg and Bundesplatz; a live experience, so to speak, in the middle of an interview, when the two selves, the interviewer and the interviewee, talk at length about a dark-skinned woman — "or more precisely, her bottom". To a certain extent, the book reads as a kind of alternative biography of the self, as opposed to most autobiographies, in which chastity — not to say hypocrisy — is written across the author's face. It is perhaps to go to the other extreme to react against the kitsch of self-imposed continence, in which the human being is composed entirely from the spiritual firmament, by occasionally reducing character portraits to a description of that person's genitals, the penis or the vagina or — as in the episode just mentioned — the bottom (female, naturally). This episode refers to a similar scene in Andrukhovych's early novel *Moskoviada*. The circle (or *The Twelfth Ring*, to cite the title of another of his novels) is closed.

The Secret can be read as an introduction to the "Bu-Ba-Bu" circle (here, I refer to Viktor Neborak, whose book *Bazilews* I will discuss next). *The Secret*

captures parts of recent literary history. The protagonists are well-known authors, artists, and intellectuals, many of whom still live, work, and create. [Mykola Riabchuk](#), for example, is just as important for the younger generation as he was when Yuri Andrukhovych was young — an intellectual that does not let himself be corrupted either by time or by circumstances. *The Secret* as literary history, which, as is common in the history of literature, makes use of quotations. From texts by Yuri Andrukhovych. Every autobiography of an author is simultaneously a literary history, since, alongside the books responsible for the development of the author's self, it refers in one way or other to the author's own work, takes these works as read, or awakens the reader's interest in them. Some autobiographies are even histories of a work or interpretations of it. This one is not. Not only. However, like all the others, it is an observation of the self.

Bu–Ba–Bu and the Lviv text

Bazilews by Viktor Neborak (Lviv: Sribne slovo 2006) stands in close relation to *The Secret*. Like *The Secret*, *Bazilews* is more often referred to as a novel.

Viktor Neborak is the co-founder of the literary group Bu–Ba–Bu, a poet, and an essayist, "one of the most consistent creators of the Lviv text in modern Ukrainian literature", as the cover blurb promises. Neborak is also one of the figures referred to in *The Secret*, the recipient of those letters of the interviewed self that deal with the dual theme of literature and male youth. In his own book, Viktor Neborak continues the narrative of the Lemberg Myth, whose protagonist he is. *Brazilews* is also a memoir, kitted out in the form of a narrative rich in metamorphosis. It seems encoded and fictionalized, very neo–baroque. Ukrainian literature from the 1990s until today, both prose and poetry, is closely related to the Ukrainian baroque of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, known as the teachers', monks', or Cossack's baroque. The real *topos* of this book is Lviv, or Lemberg, to use its German name. The protagonist moves through the city, its alleys, its historical and cultural connotations. Insofar as he moves through the city and its history, he moves through his own history, through his youth, tries to find himself in the city and find the city for itself. Lviv and episodes of his youth run through the essayistic oeuvre of this author, and even more, the connections between these two themes, their liaison. In many poems, too, it is the dominant theme.

Neborak would not object if one were to call him a poet of Lviv urbanity. After all, it was the Bu–Ba–Bu group, it was Neborak and Andrukhovych, who wrote and continue to write about Lviv as myth. Both deal with the same period and with largely the same themes. It is all the more interesting to hear these articulated by two different voices. While Andrukhovych stands in the Western–Latin tradition, it is the Byzantine that emerges in Neborak's voice, seeking to find a point of connection with modern Europe.

Taras Prokhasko's *One Could Make a Few Stories out of That* (Ivano–Frankivsk: Lilea NV 2005) is also closely related to *The Secret*, and also has an intentionally fragmentary character. Perhaps this intention arose from the impossibility of the novel. While Neborak's novel is an homage to Lviv and the youth of the protagonists, the city at the centre of *One Could Make a Few Stories out of That* is Ivano–Frankivsk, formerly Stanislaviv. A city that also plays a fateful role in *The Secret*, where it is intimately and teasingly referred to as Franyk. Seen geographically, *The Secret*, *Brazilews*, and *One Could Make a Few Stories out of That* are Galician books. And perhaps not only geographically.

Instead of novels, we have recollections or memoirs. Fragments out of which novels could be made. But were not. Why?

Journey into the self

Finally, I want to introduce two more books, both written by women. The two authors have varying authorial experience and belong to different generations. Irena Karpa, with her book *Freud Would Weep* (Kharkiv: Folio 2006), represents what is unappetizingly known in the bodies responsible for such things as "up-and-coming literature". It is the generation of Ljubko Deres or the even younger Tanja Malarcuk. They and their texts attracted attention from very early on. Deres has recently achieved a breakthrough in Poland and has been published by Suhrkamp, the renowned Frankfurt publisher. While the three "Galician" texts named above are more or less poorly disguised autobiographies, albeit thoroughly interesting and informative, with *Freud Would Weep* by the Galician Karpa, we have a novel in the form of a journey, including — as one would expect — a journey to the self, played out in Indonesia and India, Moscow and Kyiv, Europe and of course Paris, with various hotel rooms, of which the self is one, and in which just as much exoticism is discovered. "While" does not mean a contrary position, a binary opposition between travel writing and autobiography, since both genres demonstrate a number of formal and thematic, but also metaphorical relationships. After all, is an autobiography not a journey into one's own past and travel writing a journey to the self? The author dares to enter the globalized world without his trusty crutches: Galicia, the Carpathian Mountains, central Europe, the Hapsburgs. In his introduction to the novel, the poet and essayist Andriy Bondar calls it "the first colonial novel in the history of Ukrainian literature". Ironically, of course — not as regards the book, but as regards the predicate "colonial".

The openness and competence of Karpa's writing is contagious. The novel is a travel book, a novel within a novel: it contains fragments of a travelogue — notes that the protagonist Marla Friksen makes en route and that are cited sporadically. The unknown countries and islands, the distant continents, become backdrops that accompany the confrontation of the self with itself. New relationships are entered into and old ones thought about. A conversation is held with intellectual women from the past. Local colour is described. The sign of the times, to be seen everywhere, whether in Asia or in Europe, in Kyiv or in Paris, the metropolises of India or the villages of the Himalayas, sometimes in bright colours, sometimes in shabby lettering: *Enjoy coca-cola*. The documentary part of this travel book is captured in the accompanying photos. Some of them have been taken by the author, revealing that this novel is also an autobiography, encoded as travel writing, fictionalized through the figure of Marla Friksen and her adventures in love and travel, the striving for renewal and the failure to discover the self.

However, the novel is also interesting for other reasons. On the one hand, for its enrichment of the lexicon, on the other hand, because of its breaking of taboos, and thirdly, because of its reinvention of the language. The Ukrainian language, made artificial and barren during the Soviet epoch — like language in general — is widened through new terms for unknown circumstances, through neologisms and invented names for objects. The youthful idiom is brilliantly made fit for literature and the novel. Irena Karpa has managed to change the sub-language into a convincing narrative language in which the problems of an evolving self are dealt with in *its own* language. It's amazing how natural her tone is! Karpa subtly breaks taboos, both social and literary, in

that she lends the object of the taboo a natural voice. In comparison, Andrukhovych and Neborak are green youths who entered the fray all too long ago against the dishonesty of the older generation. Among other things, they formed the prerequisites for the breakthrough of Ukrainian as a living language. That does not mean that literature should from now on be written only in such and such a way. However, it means — above all lexically, but also thematically — an emancipation of the language, and that is no mean feat.

A special position is occupied by Iren Rozdobudko with her novel *The Button* (Kharkiv: Folio 2007), which bears the subtitle *A Psychogram*. It has two aspects in common with the other texts. Like Andrukhovych, Neborak, and Prokhasko, Rozdobudko tries to work over the past decade through literature. Like Karpa, she re-creates the language. There are, however, significant differences. Rozdobudko is the only one to have written an entirely fictional text. While she invents a language, it is one that most literary critics still dismiss as belletristic. Someone has to do it, however. The local academic sector recalls a kind of *French Academy* that keeps watch in archconservative fashion over the lexicon and subject matter. It is the contribution of Iren Rozdobudko that made Ukrainian capable of surviving; it is she who writes texts that regain readers lost at the beginning of the 1990s. We might call this mass-market or popular literature, nonetheless, literature it remains, as long as it is done well. Amazingly, it is precisely this belletristic novel that, in its composition, is the most demanding. In it, the first-person perspective alternates with the authorial narrative, the perspective of the man as first-person voice (in this genre, it has normally been men who have spoken with a female voice) and the woman hidden behind the authorial narrative.

Why these five books? What is exemplary about them? First, Ukrainian literature's great longing for the novel. Second, the immense demand for memoirs and autobiographies, which is met by writers as much as it is by many other people who are not writers, and whose recollections have been published in great numbers in recent years. The so-called national and collective memory pieces itself together through all these personal destinies, captured in written form. Third, the demand for literary engagement with the immediate past, with the twentieth century, neither "angrily nor nostalgically" (as Ljubomir Iliev, the translator of *Faust* into Bulgarian, has said). Autobiography is no longer up to the challenge. One can only hope that the attempts made so far, in autobiographical form, are an overture to the real novel of this epoch, an epoch that, when the novel does appear, is not so long ago that it no longer interests us. It is about the *translation of the world*. Of yesterday and today. Not an interlineal translation. Nor a literal one. That's what literature has always been about.

¹ Early prose texts by Yuri Andrukhovych that appeared in various magazines.