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The Search for Identity:

Understanding Post-Soviet Ukraine through the Writing of Yuri Andrukhovych

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Since independence in 1991, Ukraine has struggled with great uncertainty as it attempts to solidify a national identity and forge a path for its future. One of its greatest challenges has been defining how it relates to Russia and the European Union. The current political environment has added additional pressure to Ukraine. The Eurasian Customs Union (ECU), Russian President Vladimir Putin's foreign-policy project, seeks to create a rival to the European Union made up of former soviet states and is now pressuring Ukraine to join. Brussels and the European Union are applying the same pressure for Ukraine to look west, creating an either/or option that Ukraine must address in the very near future.

Which identity will Ukraine choose? Although the future path for Ukrainian identity remains unclear, the debate is lively and heated. When societies go through transitions, the work of artists, writers, and philosophers reflects the reassessment process of national, cultural, and sociopolitical identity. In that way, “at times of transition and at turning points in the history and cultural evolution of a nation, the works of its artists, writers, philosophers, and social and political thinkers, as a rule, reflect the processes of reassessment and reinterpretation of the national cultural and sociopolitical identity” (Stech 233). Since the fall of the Soviet Union, Ukrainian intellectuals have embraced the idea that Ukraine is post-colonial. Marko Pavlyshyn, who said that Ukraine is at a post-modern and post-colonial crossroads, first introduced this idea to Ukraine. According to Helen Tiffins, in *The Empire Writes Back*, post-colonial literature is preoccupied with place and displacement. In transitional cultures there is always a crisis of identity where society strives to develop an identity or recover an identity from the past with regard to place and self. Ukrainian writers are currently striving to establish themselves in a European context while at the same recovering from their soviet past in which their language and

culture was stigmatized as uncultured and provincial (Chernetsky, “Displacement and Identity” 216).

Among those leading the movement are prominent Ukrainian writers who grew up under Soviet rule and matured as Ukraine transitioned to an independent state. They energetically apply their talents to revitalize the newly independent Ukraine. The idea of displacement is an organizing theme for writers of this era, and at the forefront is Yuri Andrukhovych, one of Ukraine’s most widely read contemporary authors. Credited with having radically renewed Ukrainian poetry in the mid 1980's, Yuri Andrukhovych writes in the Ukrainian language and is known for his pro-Ukrainian and pro-European views. Andrukhovych was born in 1960 in Ivano-Frankivsk in Western Ukraine. In 1985 he co-founded the famous Bu-Ba-Bu (which stands for *бурлеск, балаган, буфонада*--'burlesque, side-show, buffoonery') poetic group. Although he began as a poet, Andrukhovych has published five novels, four poetry collections, several short stories, and two volumes of essays. The work that made him most popular, albeit most controversial, is his quasi-trilogy of novels, *Recreations* (Рекреації, 1992), *The Moscoviad* (Московіада, 1993), and *Perverzion* (Перверзія, 1996) in which he explores the issue of Ukraine’s post-soviet national identity.

*Recreations* examines Ukraine’s internal transition to an independent state, its attempt to do away with political repression and to move past provincialism (Stech 233). It is also a critique of Ukrainian intellectuals and society on the verge of independence (Chernetsky, “Mapping” 217). It takes place at a festival called "The Holiday of the Resurrecting Spirit" in Chortopil ("Devilville"), a town in Western Ukraine. It follows the experiences at this festival of four poets who are present at the festival, the wife of one of the poets, and a local prostitute. Many strange events happen throughout the story, such as one poet’s encounter with an

underworld feast and another poet's search for the village he was born in that was destroyed in the war. Probably the most surprising scene is the ending of the story, in which all festival participants are rounded up in the streets for a mass arrest that turns out to be a joke and is also the final performance of the carnival. This scene draws the reader to more serious concerns, putting the story in the context of very real concerns of the time, only to poke fun of it in the end.

Traditionally, Ukrainian intellectuals have been elevated to some god-like standard, but here the main characters, Ukrainian writers, are crude, drunk, and obsessed with sex. Themes of confusion, irony, and dichotomy are prevalent throughout. For example, the story narration constantly switches between first person, second person, and third person in order to create a sense of confusion. More incongruities are evident when the book describes settings for events, such the "Russia" movie theatre and the auditorium of the city Communist Party committee as places where patriotic events are held. One critic said that all characters in the book "talk at each other with very little communication, and most often through a drunken haze in bars" (Chernetsky, "Rev. of Recreations" 543). This illustrates an alienated and isolated society.

Through the strange events of the story—one character finding a warm corpse, other characters hiding their host in the trunk of a car, and a ghostlike figure following a couple home at night—Andrukhovych portrays a situation in Ukraine that has gone wrong and a country that is in crisis. Despite a seemingly gloomy outlook on Ukraine, the book also manages to characterize Ukraine as having a passion for change while trying to deal with what remains from its old corrupt society. As a result, the book has become a defining piece of literature that has been used to characterize the role of new literature for Western Ukraine. (Chernetsky, "Rev. of Recreations" 543).

Through *Recreations*, Andrukhovych transitioned Ukrainian literature into a post-colonial context by shocking complacent readers with previously taboo topics and mocking what had previously been held sacred in Ukrainian culture. By the time Andrukhovych wrote *The Moscoviad*, readers had already gotten used to his writing, making his second book not nearly so controversial and proving that he had caused a paradigm shift in Ukrainian writing (Chernetsky, “Mapping” 217). While *Recreations* considered the situation in Ukraine, *The Moscoviad* examines Ukraine’s relationship with its empirical neighbor, Russia. The story takes place during the collapse of the Soviet Union and follows one day in the life of Otto Von F., a literary student at the famous Moscow Gorki Institute. It is interesting to note that Andrukhovych seems to be writing his personal story to some extent, because he was also a literary student in Moscow.

The story starts with a description of the dormitory where Otto Von F. lives and an introduction to the many caricature-type characters who live there and who have come from all corners of the Soviet Union. For example, the reader meets Yezhevikin and Nicolai Palkin who are so obsessed with imperialism that Yzhevikin says just hearing the word “imperiiia” brings him to orgasm. Otto Von F. finds himself out of place in a hostile impersonal Moscow and unable to write anything creative. He feels lonely even though there are many other Ukrainians in Moscow. The character “Sashko,” whose name is always in quotations because we are never sure if he is really Ukrainian or simply an imposter, epitomizes these Ukrainians. Furthermore, Otto Von F. is mugged by a fellow Ukrainian. Both characters show how Ukrainians have degenerated under the empire’s rule, lowering their moral standards or serving as accomplices to the empire’s goals. They have lost their own identity and blended into the rest of soviet greyness (Chernetsky, “Mapping” 223).

His encounters with his love, Galia, also go poorly, which illustrates the degeneration of communication in the empire (Chernetsky, “Mapping” 223). Furthermore, seems to Otto von F. that no one else is very interested in literary work—even his classmates in the literary institute seem to have arrived in Moscow to do everything but develop their creative writing skills. He is so depressed by lack of creative inspiration that he is driven to drink and spends most of the book in a drunken stupor. He goes off on a whirlwind of adventure, encountering vagabonds, underground KGB empires, and as in Andrukhovych’s other works, a masquerade ball attended by dead people. Through his adventures, Otto Von F. realizes how pervasive the surveillance of the empire is. Throughout the book, the empire is also depicted as ironic and grotesque. For example, the masquerade attended by dead people is supposed to be a gathering to discuss the critical situation of the empire. At the end of the story, Otto Von F. barely manages to escape death himself. Ironically, to his relief, his escape forces him back to his motherland—Ukraine. Andrukhovych uses the story’s conclusion to illustrate his view of what the Soviet Union ultimately did to its citizens—it forced them to retreat to their homelands (“The Complete Review”). Throughout the story, Otto Von F. sees himself as an outsider and even though he manages to escape in the end, no one is ever sure if the escape was complete or successful. Andrukhovych sees Ukraine’s independence from Russia in the same way (Chernetsky, “Mapping” 224).

Andrukhovych’s third novel, *Pervezion*, explores Ukraine’s position in the global context, and more specifically, the place of the Ukrainian post-soviet intellectual in the West. The book tells the story of Stanislav Perfetsky, a Ukrainian poet who is invited to Venice for a conference entitled "The Post-Carnival Absurdity of the World: What is on the Horizon?" The story follows the events of the festival and conference in Venice and ends with the mysterious

disappearance of Perfetsky at the end of the story in which he supposedly jumps out of the window of his hotel and into the canal where he meets his end. The reader is never certain, though, whether Perfetsky died or just escaped and disappeared into Europe with a new identity.

*Perverzion* illustrates Andrukhovych's opinion of Ukrainian national identity in relation to the West. On one side, he is sarcastic towards a West that he portrays as disinterested and ignorant of Ukraine. For example, in Perfetsky's letter of invitation and in the program for the symposium, Ukraine is misspelled in various ways. The invitation also offers Perfetsky suggestions of what a Ukrainian speaker could talk about, but each topic is actually a Russian topic, such as proposing that he discuss famous Russian writers including Dostoevsky, Gorky, and Bulgakov (Chernetsky, "Mapping" 225). Perfetsky is the only Ukrainian at the symposium, and he is constantly forced to explain Ukraine to other conference participants. He finds ways to reveal their complete ignorance in his explanations. When he gives his speech in the symposium, his introduction includes an explanation of Ukraine:

I've come here from a country about which you know either very little (calling it either Ukrainia, or Urania, or Ukrenia) or nothing. Those of you who know "nothing" truly know much more than those who know "very little," for the latter know just distortions and mutilations (Andrukhovych, "*Perverzions*" 220).

At another point in the story, Perfetsky has a conversation with an Italian priest in which the priest actually asks, "And what do the inhabitants of your homeland look like?" (Andrukhovych, "Perversions" 111). Later in the conversation, Perfetsky explains Ukrainian Christmas traditions to the priest. To emphasize the West's ignorance of Ukraine and its view of Ukraine as exotic and mysterious, he intertwines real traditions with made-up ones (Andryczyk 52).

It is worth noting that the name of *Perverzion's* protagonist, Perfetsky, means perfection. Perhaps this is meant to show that the story represents the journey of a saint in his search for perfection. In his search for perfection, he leaves Ukraine and goes to Europe where he

eventually disappears. Thus it appears that Europe is Andrukovych's ideal—as a saint aspires for perfection, Ukraine aspires to become part of Europe (Naydan 456). Furthermore, in the story, Perfetsky realizes that his current life must come to a complete end before his new life can begin. This is why he staged his suicide to escape. Perhaps this is Andrukhovych's recommendation for the manner in which Ukraine should transition to independence—the old ways of Ukraine should completely die before it can embrace a new identity (Stech 239).

Andrukhovych makes his ideas of Ukrainian national identity clear through his quasi-trilogy. When taken as a whole, Yuri Andrukovych exhibits a focus on geography and the relations to geopolitics, the persistence of colonial power structures, and the relationship between Ukraine and its “others.” The experiences of his characters are meant to represent the collective experiences of Ukraine (Stech 233). This intent of creating characters who are not merely individuals is revealed, for example, when in *Perverzions*, it is noted that Perfetsky had, “all together forty names, and not one of them was real, for no one knew his real name, not even he himself” (Andrukhovych, *Perverzions*, 154).

Even the order of his trilogy illustrates his process of post-colonial identity construction: first he looks at the internal situation, then at the imperial power, and finally at the future displacement and identity construction. Each book in the trilogy gets progressively longer; more complex by playing with narrative, plot and chronology; and arguably more absurd (Pavlyshyn 188). Andrukhovych utilizes a dynamic relationship between arts and every day life—all of his books are a mix of “actual” and “artistic” (Stech 234). With each novel, the scope of the characters' displacement increases, their disorientation increases, and the ambiguity of the endings increases. In his third book, *Perverzions*, the reader is even left wondering whether or not the protagonist, Perfetsky, died or escaped.

In his writing, Andrukovych denounces the imperialism of Russia, but at the same times does not consider the current post-colonial Ukraine as an ideal. He makes clear at the end of *Perverzion*, when Perfetsky disappears in Europe, that aligning with Europe is the ideal future for Ukraine. However, it is important to identify which Europe Andrukhovych idolizes: it is not the Europe of commerce and trade or of European Union bureaucracy. The Europe of his dreams is represented in landscapes: in the Carpathians and in his favorite city, Lviv. He sees these places as extensions of a continuum of landscapes that extend from Ukraine to Venice and Munich (Pavlyshyn 256). He also identifies Europe as the source of his creative inspirations. For example, his favorite authors are from the West, and his writing is heavily influenced by the West. For example, the writing of *Perverzion* is linked to a visit Andrukhovych made to Munich (Ivashkiv 42). In some ways, Europe represents everything that isn't Russia. It represents a free, democratic society with high standards of living and a wealth of ideas and cultural achievements that Ukraine didn't have access to under the Soviet Union.

At the same time, Andrukovych uses his literature to alter the position of power and responsibility that are traditionally invested in a Ukrainian writer. In all three of Andrukhovych's novels, the writers are not placed on a pedestal in the traditional Ukrainian role of writer as "voice of the nation." Instead the characters of writers are portrayed more like rock stars with big egos, easily distracted by sex and drinking. It is not that they are not patriotic or passionate, but Andrukhovych wants to make it clear that they are human and fallible. (Andryszk 46). Furthermore, in *Perverzion*, the story is told from so many points of view—from the points of view of the author, the protagonist Perfetsky, from letters written to various people, and from interviews—that the reader doesn't really know who the author of the novel is. In this way, Andrukhovych undermines the heightened valued of a writer.

Andrukhovych further shows that in literature, reality is at the will of the author—if a writer wants something to be true, he makes it so in his writing. For example, in the *Moskoviad*, Otto Von F. meets a stranger and starts referring to him as the “gypsy baron.” Later we are told that this is in fact the stranger’s real name. At another point in the story, Otto Von F. is shot and killed, but he decides he doesn’t want his story to end that way, so he rewinds the scene and does it over again in a different way so that he doesn’t die. The reader is even left wondering if it was the character Otto Von F. or the book’s author, Andrukhovych, who had the authority to re-do the scene (Andryczyk 44). In *Perverzion*, Andrukhovych’s demonstrates another instance of a writers’ lack of authority. Perfetsky gives a speech at the symposium in Venice in which he tells the history of Ukraine, but then he ends his story by saying that he made it all up. This is Andrukhovych’s way showing the subjectivity of a writer’s work and removing the responsibility and authority that is traditionally given to Ukrainian writers.

Even though Andrukhovych makes a point of showing the fallibility of writer, he nevertheless takes his role as a writer very seriously. According to Boris Dubin, “it is the intellectuals who create symbols of individual and collective identity, and who are also responsible for arranging, realigning, transmitting, and recreating them” (Andryczyk 143). Andrukhovych demonstrates his desire to fulfill this description of an intellectual. His work strives to make up for the loss of artistic expression Ukraine experienced under the oppressive soviet rule (Ivashkiv 38). He also sees it as his responsibility to inform Ukraine about the West. He does this by referencing western ideas and personalities in his writing, sending intellectual characters to the West, and sharing observations of the once-forbidden-under-soviet-times but now-suddenly-accessible western world (Andryczyk 25). He considers himself the guardian of

the true Ukrainian language and fights against attempts by the Ukrainian government to marginalize Ukrainian (Andryczyk 120).

Finally, he strives to inform the world about his desires for Ukraine. For example, on March 15, 2006, in his acceptance speech of the “Leipzig book prize for European Understanding,” Andrukhovych expresses his devastation upon hearing a comment made by Gunter Verheugen saying “in 20 years, all European states will be members of the European Union with the exception of the successor states to the Soviet Union that are not yet part of the European Union today.” He is devastated because he was hoping that Europe would say it needed Ukraine and was waiting for Ukraine. Instead, the comment made by Verheugen extinguished Andrukhovych’s hope for Ukraine. He takes this personally, considering his writing to blame for Ukraine’s failure to be considered in the European Union. He responds to this comment by saying,

“For, as always, I am left with having to start, once again, from scratch. I am left with having to recognize that all my previous novels were simply horrible, and I should start working on a new one. I am left believing that—despite the above-mentioned 99 percent—writing books can indeed change this world; it can even change Europe” (Andrukhovych, “Europe—My Neurosis”).

The debate about identity and nationalism is centuries old for Ukraine. In fact it appears that the current debate of nationalism is just a continuation of the same topics debated in Ukraine over a century ago. The debate was only temporarily put on hold during the rule of the Soviet Union (Hnatiuk 205). Andrukhovych, for example, has given many interviews in which he quotes what Ivan Franko famously said over a hundred years ago, “We, too, are in Europe” (Andrukhovych, “Europe—My Neurosis”). Regardless of what happens politically in Ukraine in the next year, the long-lasting weight of the question of national identity will continue. The issues of national identity have a destiny of their own made up of complex constructions of an

interrelation of ethnic, cultural, territorial, and economic and political components. These constructs are so deeply rooted in a nation that sudden radical political changes will not reverse them (Smith 15).

Although Andrukhovych wrote his famous trilogy before and shortly after Ukrainian independence, and nearly two decades ago, the points he raises through in his literary works remain important today. The discussion is especially timely due to recent pressure from both Russia and the European Union for Ukraine to take a stand on its identity. Therefore, Andrukhovych's trilogy serves as both a reflection of and a contribution to the Ukrainian discourse surrounding notions of self-identity and otherness.

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