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by Vitaly Chernetsky

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# From Anarchy to Connectivity to Cognitive Mapping: Contemporary Ukrainian Writers of the Younger Generation Engage with Globalization\*

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## Abstract

This article discusses several Ukrainian writers who gained prominence during the post-Soviet period, in particular Vasyl Makhno, Serhii Zhadan, Andrii Bondar, Nataalka Sniadanko, Oksana Lutsyshyna, and Dmytro Lazutkin. Grounded in theoretical models of cultural globalization, the analysis focuses on these authors' strategies of engagement with the rapidly changing global contexts in texts ranging from philosophical poetry to counterfactual fiction and appropriations of mass-culture forms.

## Keywords

Ukrainian literature, contemporary writing, globalization, cultural diversity

For nearly two decades now, since the beginning of the 1990s, a prolific debate has been raging concerning globalization as a socio-cultural phenomenon. Many of the participants in this debate have focused on the ways globalization as a political and economic tendency has been impacting the cultural sphere and, conversely, on the effect of “becoming cultural” on many aspects of global social reality. As Imre Szeman has noted in a recent essay, while the concept of globalization “offers us a way to comprehend a set of massive changes . . . that have radically redefined contemporary experience,” at the same time it continues to generate confusion: while “globalization is at one level ‘real’ and has ‘real’ effects, it is also decisively and importantly rhetorical, metaphoric

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and even fictional – reality given a narrative shape and logic, and in a number of different and irreconcilable ways.”<sup>1</sup> From the outset, however, a division emerged between the views on globalization grounded in politics and economy versus those drawing primarily on cultural anthropology. The former, frequently with a (post-) Marxist inflection, lead to a model which emphasizes identity rather than difference. As usefully summarized by Fredric Jameson in his influential essay “Notes on Globalization as a Philosophical Issue”:

... this model stresses the rapid assimilation of hitherto autonomous national markets and productive zones into a single sphere, the disappearance of national subsistence . . . the forced integration of countries all over the globe into [a] new global division of labor . . . a picture of standardization on an unparalleled new scale; of forced integration as well, into a world-system from which “delinking” . . . is henceforth impossible and even unthinkable and inconceivable.<sup>2</sup>

Conversely, the “culturalist” model offers an overwhelmingly positive view of postmodern “celebration of difference and differentiation.” Viewed through the prism of this model, all the cultures around the world find themselves “placed in tolerant contact with each other in a kind of immense cultural pluralism” which, Jameson notes:

... would be very difficult not to welcome. The logic of this model links the celebration of cultural difference with a celebration of emergence of a whole immense range of groups, races, genders, ethnicities, into the speech of the public sphere; a falling away of those structures that condemned whole segments of the population to silence and subalternity; a worldwide growth of popular democratization . . . which seems to have some relationship with the evolution of the media, but which is immediately expressed by a new richness and variety of cultures in the new world space.<sup>3</sup>

However, problems arise when the two visions, as it were, “invade” each other’s territory. An “economist” interpretation of cultural globalization, as one may expect, posits the contemporary cultural condition as “the worldwide

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<sup>1</sup> Imre Szeman, “Globalization, Post-Modernism and Criticism,” in *Metaphors of Globalization: Mirrors, Magicians and Mutinies*, ed. Markus Kornprobst, Vincent Pouliot, Nisha Shah, and Ruben Zaiotti (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008), pp. 167-83, here 168-69.

<sup>2</sup> Fredric Jameson, “Notes on Globalization as a Philosophical Issue,” in *The Cultures of Globalization*, ed. Fredric Jameson and Masao Miyoshi (Durham, NC: Duke Univ. Press, 1998), p. 57.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 56-57.

Americanization or standardization of culture, the destruction of local differences, the massification of all the peoples on the planet.” By contrast, the “culturalist” vision of the global economy stresses “the richness and excitement of the new free market all over the world.”<sup>4</sup>

The problem – or perhaps the richness – of the contemporary situation is that each of these models has a degree of validity, and a productive approach would be in an attempt to see the vying and tension between these opposite forces, as it has been argued that one of the key characteristics of the contemporary social condition is the “becoming cultural” of the economic and the “becoming economic” of the cultural. Jameson hopes that the clash of these visions generates a productive “flying of sparks.” Could this standoff be resolvable after all?

While it is beyond my scope here to offer an interpretative model for economic aspects of globalization, I believe that many of the analytical insights of the discourse on globalization grounded in cultural anthropology could provide a productive set of tools for analyzing some of the processes at stake in the work of many Ukrainian authors of the younger generation, authors who rose to prominence in the post-1991 era, the so-called *deviatdesiatnyky* (generation of the 1990s) and *dvokhtysiachnyky* (generation of the 2000s). In his pioneering study *Hybrid Cultures*, Néstor García Canclini advanced a vision of contemporary global culture as constituted by eclectic multidirectional contacts and borrowings that encourage the proliferation of new cultural forms.<sup>5</sup> Arjun Appadurai, another prominent anthropologist who has focused on the complex socio-economic developments associated with globalization, has stressed that in the face of the West’s, and the United States’ in particular, “endless preoccupation” with itself (with either positive or negative value judgments attached), we need to maintain continuous awareness that “globalization is itself a deeply historical, uneven, and even *localizing* process. Globalization does not necessarily or even frequently imply homogenization or Americanization,” as “different societies appropriate the materials of modernity differently.”<sup>6</sup> To be able to appreciate that one needs to be aware that “the United States is no longer the puppeteer of a world system of images but is

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 57–58.

<sup>5</sup> See Néstor García Canclini, *Hybrid Cultures: Strategies for Entering and Leaving Modernity* (Minneapolis: Univ. of Minnesota Press, 1995), originally published in Spanish in 1990.

<sup>6</sup> Arjun Appadurai, *Modernity at Large: Cultural Dimensions of Globalization* (Minneapolis: Univ. of Minnesota Press, 1996), p. 17 (Appadurai’s emphasis).

only one node of a complex transnational construction of imaginary landscapes,” rather than get entrapped in “a confusion between some ineffable McDonaldization of the world and the much subtler play of indigenous trajectories of desire and fear with global flows of people and things.”<sup>7</sup> Thus, while many cultural critics rightly lament that within the global economy of the cultural industry we may speak of the triumph of “market realism” that ought to be resisted as much as socialist realism was resisted back in its heyday,<sup>8</sup> others seek out hopeful signs in emergent trends of “grassroots globalization” or “globalization from below.”<sup>9</sup> A productive path for such a project is suggested by John Tomlinson, who in his study *Globalization and Culture* stresses that the singular defining aspect of cultural globalization is what he terms “complex connectivity,” namely “the rapidly developing and ever-densening network of interconnections and interdependencies that characterize modern social life.” To grasp the direction and scope of contemporary cultural transformations, he argues, it would be productive to inquire “how globalization alters the context of meaning construction: how it affects people’s sense of identity, the experience of place and of the self in relation to place, how it impacts on the shared understandings, values, desires, myths, hopes and fears that have developed around locally situated life.”<sup>10</sup> This approach does not necessitate a conflation between culture and its technologies that is observable in the work of some scholars: literature is as much of a valid focus for such concern as the mass media or the Internet.

A hypothesis advanced by Tomlinson is that in contemporary context, displacement – long an important focus of studies on literary discourse – now generates experiences not so much of alienation, but of ambivalence: “people ‘own’ local places phenomenologically in a sort of *provisional* sense.” While we are all, as human beings, embodied and physically located, contemporary transformations, in his opinion, suggest that locality has now become a more complex cultural space. Within this context, what practitioners of culture may aspire to, given “the uncertainties of global modernity,” is not so much “a heroic ideal of global citizenship” but a “low-key, modest cosmopolitanism”

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 29–30.

<sup>8</sup> For more on this, see Tariq Ali, “Literature and Market Realism,” *New Left Review* 199 (May–June 1993); 140–45.

<sup>9</sup> See Arjun Appadurai, “Grassroots Globalization and the Research Imagination,” in *Globalization*, ed. Appadurai (Durham, NC: Duke Univ. Press, 2001), pp. 1–21.

<sup>10</sup> John Tomlinson, *Globalization and Culture* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1999), pp. 2 and 20.

resulting from “the deterritorialization of mundane experience that increasingly opens the world to us, along with the drive to self-realization in lifestyles which are themselves ‘open’ to an expanded mutuality.”<sup>11</sup> The first Ukrainian writer whom I would like to consider in the light of this hypothesis is Vasyl Makhno (b. 1964).

Within contemporary Ukrainian literature, Makhno stands out in several respects. The beginnings of his literary career in the early 1990s can be seen as somewhat typical for poets of his generation, with an emphasis on the search for buried and suppressed traditions of Modernist innovation and a “yearning for world culture” of many Ukrainian authors active between the two world wars; however, already his earlier efforts testify to a powerful impulse of “complex connectivity” in his literary endeavors. In fact, it could be argued that the high point of Makhno’s activities in the 1990s came with the publication of the anthology he compiled, *Deviatdesiatnyky* (Poets of the Nineties), and a scholarly study of Bohdan-Ihor Antonych, the iconic figure of the great promise of Ukrainian Modernism cut short for many Ukrainian intellectuals who came of age in the final years of the Soviet Union’s existence.<sup>12</sup> Both these books signal the importance for Makhno of a project of cognitive mapping – in Jameson’s well-known definition, a “culture which seeks to endow the individual subject with some new heightened sense of its place in the global system.”<sup>13</sup> In the case of his study of Antonych, Makhno’s major focus was on the poet’s artistic model of the world (*svitobudova*), while in the anthology he sought to map out the principal features and trends of his generation of Ukrainian poets. Many similar concerns can be observed in Makhno’s third poetry collection, *Liutnevi elehii ta inshi virshi* (February Elegies and Other Poems, 1998), which includes selections from his earlier volumes and serves as a summing up of his first period of literary activity. The connectivity impulse is at the core of the book, as most poems in it are addressed to specific individuals, while several also address other national cultures – Polish, Jewish (both diasporic and Israeli), and French. The choice of authors with whom Makhno proclaims an especial affinity is highly significant. On the one hand, Makhno frequently invokes Zbigniew Herbert, whose poetry he also translated extensively into Ukrainian; on the other, he enters a dialogue with

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 207 (Tomlinson’s emphasis).

<sup>12</sup> See Vasyl’ Makhno, ed., *Deviatdesiatnyky* (Ternopil’: Lileia, 1998); Makhno, *Khudozhnii svit Bohdana-Ihoria Antonycha* (Ternopil’: Lileia, 1999).

<sup>13</sup> Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (Durham, NC: Duke Univ. Press, 1991), p. 54.

Saint-John Perse, the French-Caribbean poet whose work epitomized both the vicissitudes of exile and their obverse, the openness to world's cultures in all their diversity. A great paradigm shift, however, occurred in Makhno's life and creative work when he left Ukraine for the United States in 2000, settling in New York City. While New York was a major center of Ukrainian diasporic writing during the preceding generations, at present Ukrainian-language literary voices are few in number in this hyper-heterogeneous city. While Makhno's initial experience of America and New York, especially given his limited command of English at the time, was that of alienation and not fitting in, in the years since then he has been experiencing a major burst of literary creativity. His poetry has transformed, shedding many of the late-Modernist formal strictures and embracing the heterogeneity of contemporary urban experience. In many respects, it now builds upon the aesthetics of American poets of the New York School, such as Frank O'Hara and John Ashbery, whose work had earlier reached Ukrainian poets via the Polish "O'Haraist" poets of the late 1980s-1990s generation. These texts explore locales that are both fragmentary and interconnected, some anonymous, others firmly "embedded." One of the best-known poems from his New York years, "Na kavi u 'Starbucks'" ("Having Coffee at a *Starbucks*"), while reflecting on the march of economic globalization across our planet (chain stores, the commercial Christmas music they play in December), also offers a melancholy exploration of a self in a Brownian movement mixed with an observation of a street scene in downtown New York, powerfully captured in a few precise strokes.<sup>14</sup> Another key image of Makhno's recent writing, appearing both in his poetry and in his essays – indeed, providing the title of his recent book of essays, is the statue of Gertrude Stein in New York's Bryant Park, next to the New York Public Library. The ironic title of the essay collection, *Park kultury ta vidpochynku imeni Gertrudy Stein* (The Gertrude Stein Memorial Culture and Recreation Park), blends an iconic New York locale with vocabulary and imagery from the author's Soviet-era childhood and youth. The book's essays explore Makhno's heterogeneous affinities and interests within the web of "complex connectivity" of global culture: poetry in New York (with the emphasis on the New York School and on Garcia Lorca's New York sojourn); the author's travels and literary friendships in Serbia and Romania; the figures of Witold Gombrowicz and Nichita Stănescu, epitomizing writers as cosmopolitan outcasts and gadflies of their national cultures; and the Lemko region in what is now southeastern Poland,

<sup>14</sup> "Na kavi u 'Starbucks,'" in Vasyl' Makhno, *Cornelia Street Caf : Novi ta vybrani virshi 1991-2006* (Kyiv: Fakt, 2007), pp. 132-33.

with its legacies of Antonych and the philosophical poetry of Janusz Szuber, another author whose work Makhno has translated into Ukrainian.<sup>15</sup> Many of these themes also reverberate in Makhno's poetry of the New York period, both saturated with global heterogeneity and bursting with photographically precise yet surreal descriptions of, for instance, Astor Place, Tompkins Square Park, McSorley's Old Ale House, and the La MaMa Theater – all of them iconic locales in the East Village – as well as the nearby Cornelia Street Café, a well-known poetry reading space whose name provides the title of the comprehensive collection of Makhno's poetry that came out in 2007. This emphatic emplacement meshes in his texts with an active and restless ongoing search for affinities with authors past and present from contexts whose range and diversity is truly breathtaking in the context of Ukrainian letters. Makhno's recent writing thus can be seen as an example of cultural globalization as Americanization in the best and noblest sense – namely, an embrace of global heterogeneity of contacts and flows and a celebration of New York's additively vibrant cultural energy that is nevertheless tinged with bittersweet irony, a palpable melancholy, and an acute awareness of the fleeting and fragmentary nature of interaction in this vortex-like megalopolis. This expansive, observant, melancholy yet hopeful against all odds cultural project makes Vasyl Makhno's writings, especially of his New York period, a veritable breakthrough in the practice of Ukrainian letters.

Makhno's introspective, contemplative approach of globalization that retains so much of the "yearning for world culture" of the high Modernist era emphatically contrasts with the defiantly countercultural and aggressive literary and public self constructed by Serhii Zhadan (b. 1974), who swiftly rose to high acclaim as a poet in the 1990s and has since been propelled to international renown also as an innovative prose writer, becoming arguably the best-known Ukrainian author of his generation.

Zhadan is a remarkable example of a writer-activist; he was, in fact, a prominent figure in the events of the Orange Revolution, serving as the head of the tent camp in the main square of his home city, Kharkiv, Ukraine's second largest. While Vasyl Makhno has sought affinities among poet-philosophers and urban flâneurs, reaching back to the venerable Modernist lineage begun by Baudelaire, Zhadan eagerly and doggedly embraces the image of writer-as-rebel. He therefore aligns himself with the spectrum ranging from Rimbaud and the Futurists to various Western countercultural youth

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<sup>15</sup> Vasyl' Makhno, *Park kul'tury ta vidpochynku imeni Gertrudy Stain* (Kyiv: Krytyka, 2006).



movements of the past several decades and, in Ukraine, to that other Makhno, Nestor, the famous anarchist leader. Zhadan's writing, consequently, brims with rebellious energy, and invests heavily into the (quasi-)autobiographical mode, be it in poetry, fiction, or nonfiction. In the course of his literary career, however, Zhadan underwent a rapid evolution, beginning with a style of poetry has been seen as a re-adaptation of Futurist poetics for a new era, then shifting to a meditative intellectual style that made critics draw comparisons with Joseph Brodsky; in his more recent poetry, Zhadan reinterprets the legacy of American Beat poets. His best work of fiction, the novel *Depeche Mode* (2004), is a stunning tour-de-force of stream-of-consciousness writing technique, set among a gang of working-class youths in the early 1990s – an explosive hybrid of *Ulysses*, *Trainspotting*, and modern Ukrainian realia.

The countercultural impulse, along with a nod to the legacies of leftist position in both art and politics, remains a central aspect of Zhadan's literary persona. The nearly 800-page thick tome of his collected writings published in 2007 bears the loaded title *Kapital*, thereby brilliantly updating for the present the daring gesture of Mykhail Semenko, the leader of the Ukrainian Futurists, who titled the 1924 volume of his collected writings *Kobzar*. Zhadan's gesture is thus akin to Semenko's provocative inscribing of himself into the center of Ukrainian culture of his time by reclaiming the classic title that had been previously exclusively, and deferentially, reserved for Shevchenko's oeuvre. Earlier, Zhadan's first poetry collection, published in 1995, and a 2005 volume of his collected poems bear the title *Tsyatnyk* (A Book of Quotations), alluding to Mao's "little red book," *Quotations from Chairman Mao Tse-tong*. Yet these and other titles of Zhadan's books also play with the vocabulary of global commodity culture: next to nods to Marx and Mao, as well as the earlier mentioned *Depeche Mode* and *Anarchy in the UKR* (2006, referencing "Anarchy in the UK," the first single released by the celebrated British punk rock band *Sex Pistols*), we find books titled *Pepsi* (1998), *Big Mak* (Big Mac, 2003), and *Maradona* (2007). Therefore, if one were to judge Zhadan by the titles of his books alone, one could well assume that he is quintessentially a canny exploiter of the signifiers of globalized mass media.

Yet such an assumption would sell this outstanding author short, as Zhadan is truly a restless and energetic figure. While some have criticized his work, especially his more recent prose, as perhaps too hastily and roughly written, here too the influence of the American counterculture is a key guiding principle. On the one hand, he seems to take to heart Allen Ginsberg's famous

dictum, “first thought, best thought”<sup>16</sup>; on the other, Zhadan’s writing, especially *Anarchy in the UKR*, owes a significant structural debt to Kerouac’s *On the Road*. The paradigm shift in Zhadan’s aesthetics is visible in the name of the authors whom he has been translating in recent years into Ukrainian – an explosive combination of Paul Celan, Charles Bukowski, Marcin Świetlicki, a leading contemporary Polish poet himself much influenced by postwar American poetry, and last but not least, Yaroslav Mogutin, a Russian émigré countercultural and openly queer poet and artist based in New York.

Zhadan’s texts from the 1990s are first and foremost outstanding examples of “the biographical turn” and “new sincerity”<sup>17</sup> heralded in many national literatures after the densely allusive, intertextually playful writing that characterized much of the postmodernist literature of the preceding period. In this respect, despite the provocative title of his first book, Zhadan’s early poetry is anything but citational. Gradually, however, the poet engages in an ever more active intertextual dialogue, at first mostly with well-known figures from earlier periods of Ukrainian literature (Shevchenko, Antonych, Volodymyr Sosiura). Then, the collection *Balady pro viinu ta vidbudovu* (Ballads about War and Reconstruction, 2001) shifts tone and comes to include a series of provocative texts that explore a project of cognitive mapping through mending and molding the space-time continuum, saturating it with Zhadan’s

<sup>16</sup> To be more specific, this phrase, popularized by Ginsberg, was a key principle preached by his Buddhist teacher, Chögyam Trungpa Rinpoche. See Chögyam Trungpa, *First Thought, Best Thought*, intro. by Allen Ginsberg (Boston: Shambhala Publications, 1983).

<sup>17</sup> “The biographical turn” as a concept originated in the discourse of social sciences but has since been increasingly used in the humanities as well; it is described as an effort to unite theoretical inquiry or creative endeavors with biographical experience (see e.g., “Biographical Turn,” in Thomas A. Schwandt, *The SAGE Dictionary of Qualitative Inquiry*, 3rd ed. [Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, 2007], p. 22). The term “new sincerity” originated in cultural criticism to describe a response to the heavy favoring of an ironic mode by the dominant streams of postmodernist culture. See Jim Collins, “Genericity in the Nineties: Eclectic Irony and New Sincerity,” in *Film Theory Goes to the Movies*, ed. Ava Collins, Jim Collins, and Hilary Radner (New York: Routledge, 1993), pp. 242–64. Wikipedia contains a surprisingly detailed entry on “new sincerity” in Anglo-American music, film, philosophy, and poetry at [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/New\\_Sincerity](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/New_Sincerity) (accessed December 15, 2008). In post-Soviet countries, especially Russia, the term is used fairly frequently in discussions of contemporary literature and art. See e.g., Mikhail Epshtein [Epstein], “Katalog novykh poezii,” in *Moderne russische Poesie seit 1966: Eine Anthologie*, ed. Walter Thümler (Berlin: Oberbaum, 1990), pp. 359–67 (available online at [http://www.emory.edu/INTELNET/pm\\_katalog\\_poezii.html](http://www.emory.edu/INTELNET/pm_katalog_poezii.html) [accessed December 15, 2008]), Valerii Savchuk, “Ideologiia postinformatsionnoi iskrennosti,” *Khudozhestvennyi zhurnal* 30/31 (1999) (available online at <http://www.guelman.ru/xz/362/xx30/xx3005.htm> [accessed December 15, 2008]).

trademark raw emotionality. Thus, “muzyka dlia tovstykh” (“music for fat people”) imagines Yuri Andrukhovych (b. 1960), a prominent Ukrainian writer of the generation immediately preceding Zhadan’s and the leader of carnivalesque rebellion associated with the Bu-Ba-Bu group and the wider literary phenomenon, as a seventy-year-old resident of a nursing home, “niu-iork fakin siti” (“new york fuckin’ city”) gives us a melancholically observed late-fall urban landscape, and the remarkable longer poem “islam” mounts a powerful protest against war and violence.<sup>18</sup> A lyrical rebel is gradually morphing into a mordantly witty and melancholy poet-philosopher.

An even greater shift, however, takes place after Zhadan’s year-long sojourn in Western Europe (primarily in Vienna) in 2001–2002. His poetry moves ever more radically toward free verse; it is increasingly dominated by impulses of narrativity and, as Andrii Bondar has noted, of cinematic structure.<sup>19</sup> Even more radically, though, Zhadan shifts to prose that joins his trademark emotional intensity with an exploration of a transnational “lost generation” of urban youth that has been feeding the countercultural movements since the punk era in 1970s Britain. The texts comprising his first book of prose, *Big Mak*, are quasi-diaristic, fragmentary, frenetic products of a stream-of-consciousness account of the author’s peripatetic wanderings across the European continent that prompt a rethinking of his identity in the here-and-now of the swiftly changing contemporary world. The novel *Depeche Mode* that followed this first prose effort continued explorations of the stream-of-consciousness technique, but this time filtered through the workings of memory (writing from the vantage point of 2003 about 1993) and the concomitant evolution of the authorial self. Despite the book’s emphasis on the locally grounded setting (Kharkiv and its surroundings), *Depeche Mode* succeeds as a participant in the global cultural dialogue by endowing with a voice a previously unrepresented identity: eastern Ukrainian urban déclassé youth in the early post-Soviet years. The hypnotic flow of its prose contains a ringing testimony of the rise of a critically thinking self in this radically inhospitable environment, evoking a comparison with such classics of fictionalized odysseys through urban underworlds as John Rechy’s debut novel, *City of Night* (1963).

Zhadan’s third and fourth books of prose, both published in 2006, are radically different in structure and style. *Anarchy in the UKR* is comprised of

<sup>18</sup> See Serhii Zhadan, *Kapital* (Kharkiv: Folio, 2006), pp. 613–14, 616, 636–44.

<sup>19</sup> See Andrii Bondar, “Nebesnyi kinematohraf Serhiiia Zhadana,” in Zhadan, *Istoriia kul'tury pochatku stolittia* (Kyiv: Krytyka, 2003), pp. 77–87.

several “riffs” on a group of related topics: part one is a Keorucian narrative relating the author’s trip from Kharkiv to Nestor Makhno’s hometown, Huliaipole, with a stopover in Zhadan’s own place of birth, Starobilsk, a small town in the Luhansk region in the east of Ukraine; part two is a collection of the author’s reminiscences of his childhood and teenage years; part three is an exploration of Kharkiv’s main square, where Zhadan headed the tent city of protesters during the Orange Revolution of 2004; and the fourth, final part, consists of ten sketches bearing the titles of the songs (all of them classics of rock music) the author claims he would like to hear at his own wake – a heterogeneous “mix playlist” of mini-stories set in New York, essayistic reflections, and (quasi-)autobiographic accounts. By contrast, *Himn demokratychnoi molodi* (The Democratic Youth Anthem, 2006) is a tightly organized collection of stories where a new incarnation of skaz-like narrative sometimes drips with sarcasm, sometimes approaches prose poems, and at other instances resembles paranoid drug-induced ramblings. The combination of these textual modes serves to describe the roller-coaster world of post-Soviet Ukraine, the striking survival skills of its population, and the impossible criminal schemes and mind-boggling adventures they sometimes generate, as evidenced by colorful, intentionally shocking titles of individual stories, e.g., “Sorok vahoniv uzbetskykh narkotyktiv” (“Forty Train Cars of Uzbek Drugs”) and “Osoblyvosti kontra-bandy vnutrishnikh orhaniv” (“Peculiarities of Smuggling Internal Organs”). Tireless rebel, radical drifter, prolific lyrical chronicler of the violent contradictions of the rapid changes experienced by contemporary Ukrainian society, Zhadan has found a voice and place of global anti-establishment solidarity that informs his writing to a degree unprecedented in the history of Ukrainian letters.

It might not be immediately obvious to a non-Ukrainian reader what a remarkable breath of fresh air it is to read the poems of Andrii Bondar, especially from the 2004 collection *Prymityvni formy vlasnosti* (Primitive Forms of Ownership), his third. Bondar is of the same age as his friend and colleague Serhii Zhadan, yet the two of them exemplify quite different paths of poetic development. While Zhadan’s roots are in the often brutal countercultural rebellion of the Rimbaud – Futurists – Beat poets tradition, Bondar began as a reviver/reinventor of high Modernism cut short by Stalinization of Ukrainian cultural life in the 1930s. In the afterword to his 2001 volume *Istyna i med* (Truth and Honey), Yuri Andrukhovych rightly invokes the names of Lorca, e.e. cummings, and crucially, the early Mykola Bazhan, the author of intense, challenging expressionist poetry (and later, Rilke’s Ukrainian translator).

Bazhan did capitulate to the Soviet regime, but Bondar, Andrukhovych asserts, picked up the lineage of this difficult, “other, desirable Bazhan.”<sup>20</sup>

*Prymityvni formy vlasnosti*, Bondar’s latest book of poems to date, is much closer in its tone to the American poets of the New York School (notably John Ashbery), and also to their followers, the group of post-communist era Polish poets known as “the O’Haraists.”<sup>21</sup> Their “creative misreading” of O’Hara, Ashbery, Schuyler and others is, in turn, “creatively misread” by Bondar. His poems are rooted in the autobiographical here and now, their voice is bold and fresh, refreshingly open, fragile, and unaffected. Perhaps most importantly, Bondar’s new poetry manages to combine, in a truly impressive fashion, the rootedness in all the problems, complexes and neuroses of the post-Soviet/postcolonial double bind, in which Ukrainian culture finds itself, on the one hand, and the emphatic engagement with the processes of cultural globalization, on the other.

Bondar’s poems are uniquely his, and his only, yet they also provide an excellent insight into the hopes and anxieties of the Ukrainian intellectuals of his generation. They are characterized by intimate energy and vigor, and a feature I would describe, borrowing a phrase of Perry Anderson’s, as “a sense of lucid enchantment with the world.”<sup>22</sup> Such texts as “Choloviky moiei krainy” (“The Men of My Country”), “Jogging,” and “Tilky ne vidshtovkhui mene” (“Just Don’t Push Me Away”)<sup>23</sup> display a refined, melancholy sensitivity and a remarkable openness to “complex connectivity,” profound emotional kinship with a wide range of others. A similar sensitivity and introspection can also be found in Bondar’s acclaimed short essays that have been appearing as a column in *Hazeta po-ukrainsky*,<sup>24</sup> as well as in his diverse translation projects.

<sup>20</sup> Yuri Andrukhovych, “Sim istyn stosovno Andriia Bondaria,” in Andrii Bondar, *Istyna i med* (Odesa: Astroprynt, 2001), pp. 57-59.

<sup>21</sup> For more on these poets, see Joanna Nizyńska, “The Impossibility of Shrugging One’s Shoulders: O’Haraists, O’Hara and Post-1989 Polish Poetry,” *Slavic Review*, 66, no. 3 (Fall 2007): 463-84, the bilingual anthology edited by Anna Skucińska and Elżbieta Wójcik-Leese, *Carnivorous Boy, Carnivorous Bird: Poetry from Poland* (Brookline, MA: Zephyr Press, 2004), and *New Polish Writing*, a special issue of *Chicago Review* 46, nos. 3-4 (2000).

<sup>22</sup> In his book *The Origins of Postmodernity* (New York: Verso, 1998), p. 76, Anderson uses this phrase to describe Fredric Jameson’s writing.

<sup>23</sup> Andrii Bondar, *Prymityvni formy vlasnosti* (Lviv: LA “Piramida,” 2004), pp. 13-14, 69-71, 55-57. For these and other poems by Bondar in English translation, see <http://ukraine.poetryinternationalweb.org/> (accessed December 15, 2008).

<sup>24</sup> Available online at <http://www.gazeta.ua/index.php?rid=38> (accessed December 15, 2008). A selection of short essays by Bondar and three other regular columnists from *Hazeta*

It has not been uncommon for many prominent Ukrainian writers to dedicate significant amounts of energy to translation activities; both in their choice of texts and in their approach to translation they have continued the work of their predecessors who strove to expand the field of Ukrainian letters and effect a paradigm shift in the prevailing approaches and tastes. These efforts proceed sometimes by way of careful nudging, sometimes by open provocation. For Bondar, this has manifested in his work on translating some of the most difficult Polish-language prose, such as Witold Gombrowicz's Modernist masterpiece *Ferdydurke* and *Lubiewo* by Michal Witkowski, an innovative text by a radical homosexual author, for which Bondar had, in essence, to “design” Ukrainian-language homosexual slang. Given the near-absence of homosexual voices in contemporary Ukrainian letters, the turn of Bondar and Zhadan, two heterosexual but homosexual-friendly writers, to foreign queer texts in their translation efforts has thus given a voice to a virtually silent segment of contemporary Ukrainian society. By helping the Ukrainian culture speak in a multitude of diverse voices, they help take the Ukrainian nation-making project to a new level, making it an integral part of a non-hierarchical and open project of cultural globalization.

The lyrical intellectualism of Bondar contrasts sharply with the ironic prose of Natalka Sniadanko (b. 1973). Best known for her 2001 novel *Kolektsiia prystrastei* (A Collection of Passions), which has become a bestseller in several languages, Sniadanko offers a cheeky subversion of numerous stereotypes of choices and behavior, ranging from educational to sexual, expected from a young woman from a “good” western Ukrainian family, particularly in the clash of enduring patriarchal views and a somewhat disorienting encounter with cultural globalization. The success of Sniadanko's highly readable prose, which leads the readers to consider a wide range of social issues by first “hooking” them on with an outspoken discussion of sexuality, follows in the footsteps of Oksana Zabuzhko's famous novel *Polovi doslidzhennia z ukrainskoho seksu* (Field Work in Ukrainian Sex, 1996); however, the tone and style of these two authors' writing could not be more different. Sniadanko's prose pointedly rejects Zabuzhko's emotional charge; the narrator-protagonist's view of the world and of herself in it, while refreshingly skeptical and sarcastic, even a bit aggressive, eschews the utopian impulse at the core of Zabuzhko's novel and opts instead for a distanced, detached perspective. Rather than working through the traumatic experiences, the narrative deflates them

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*po-ukraïns'ky*, Svitlana Pyrkalo, Mykola Riabchuk, and Vitalii Zhezhera, was recently published in book form: *Avtors'ka kolonka: Zbirka eseïv* (Kyiv: Nora-Druk, 2007).

through laughter and a keen feeling for the absurdity that is present in our lives. Sniadanko's later writing has shared these concerns. Her 2005 short story collection, *Sezonnyi rozprodazh blondynok* (Seasonal Sale on Blondes), continues the diverse and observant irony of her debut novel, while her second novel, *Syndrom sterylnosti* (The Sterility Syndrome, 2006), is an absurdist satire savaging the close-minded provinciality of some Ukrainian intellectuals. Sniadanko's latest book, *Chebrets v molotsi* (Thyme Soaked in Milk, 2008) is a Proustian recollection of the sensory experiences of the author's childhood and youth years where she uncharacteristically forgoes her trademark irony. While Sniadanko's recent original writing has not so far enjoyed the critical success of her debut novel, like many of her colleagues, she has been lauded for actively helping Ukrainian letters through her translation projects. Sniadanko's primary focus as a translator has been on German-language authors, resulting in particular in her acclaimed rendition of Kafka's *The Castle* (2006).

A far more radical instance of gender-inflected engagement with cultural globalization has been provided in the work of another woman writer, Oksana Lutsyshyna (b. 1974). Similarly to Vasyl Makhno, she moved to the US (Florida in her case) in the early 2000s; however, Lutsyshyna has also combined her creative writing activities with academic work, focusing in particular on postcolonial women's writing and producing a comparative study of the work of Zabuzhko and the Algerian author Assia Djebar.<sup>25</sup> While she has two previous books to her name, critical recognition came to Lutsyshyna with the near-simultaneous publication in 2007 of two volumes of her writing: a collection of short stories, *Ne chervoniiuchy* (Without Blushing), and shortly thereafter, a novel, *Sontse tak ridko zakhodyt* (The Sun Sets So Rarely).<sup>26</sup> Lutsyshyna's stories in particular have sparked a lively controversy among Ukrainian critics, as her encounter with assertive feminist writing from around the world led to her own exploration of textuality emphatically grounded in a woman's corporeal experiences, from childhood and the relationship with parents to sexuality, childbirth, and interpersonal relations in all their diversity. The programmatic refusal of "blushing," in other words, of self-censorship guided by restrictive social mores, stems from Lutsyshyna's interest in psychoanalysis, as well as from her keenly felt "complex connectivity" with feminist writing worldwide. She also demonstrates a readiness to deconstruct the stereotypes of femininity and motherhood while confronting the traumatic

<sup>25</sup> Available online at [http://kong.lib.usf.edu:8881///exlibris/dtl/d3\\_1/apache\\_media/72368.pdf](http://kong.lib.usf.edu:8881///exlibris/dtl/d3_1/apache_media/72368.pdf) (accessed December 15, 2008).

<sup>26</sup> Both released by Fakt publishing house.

experiences resulting from the crisis of contemporary masculinity (both Ukrainian and Western). In this respect, while Sniadanko's intellectual position and aesthetics are to some extent a direct opposite of the vision of women's writing that has been championed by Zabuzhko, Lutsyshyna displays a pronounced affinity with her older colleague's aesthetics and cultural politics, pursuing a radical feminist textuality that signals a strongly felt kinship with a vision of *écriture féminine* as articulated by Hélène Cixous and Luce Irigaray, answering Cixous's now-classic call, in her 1975 essay "The Laugh of the Medusa," that "woman must write her self" and "put herself into the text . . . so that other women . . . might exclaim: I, too, overflow; my desires have invented new desires, my body knows unheard-of songs." By "writing her self," Cixous argued, "woman will return to the body that was more than confiscated from her, which has been turned into an uncanny stranger on display," and this process "will tear her away from the superegoized structure in which she has always occupied the place reserved for the guilty."<sup>27</sup>

These interwoven concerns also continue in Lutsyshyna's novel which cuts between the stories of multiple characters, Ukrainian and Western, trying to make sense of their lives and find a meaningful realization of their dreams: one, a university graduate in foreign languages languishing in uninspiring office jobs in a provincial town, trying to escape through dreams of literary success, and finally leaving for graduate studies in the West; another, a small-town ingénue let down by urban experiences; and last but not least, a mafia don's lesbian daughter on the run from her father in the midst of the Everglades in Florida. In the end, the braid-like interweaving of the three narratives produces, like in Lutsyshyna's book of stories, a sober, intriguing, and open-minded vision of contemporary world grounded in women's corporeality.

The focus on the corporeal and the openness to heterogeneous global cultural influences has also been a dominant feature of the work of the youngest writers currently active on the Ukrainian literary scene, the twentysomething *dvokhtysiachnyky* (generation of the 2000s). Among them I would single out in particular Dmytro Lazutkin (b. 1978), who writes energetic elliptic poetry<sup>28</sup> while traveling the world as a sports commentator for Ukrainian television, the Kharkiv-based poet and novelist Sashko Ushkalov (b. 1983) whose

<sup>27</sup> Hélène Cixous, "The Laugh of the Medusa," trans. Keith Cohen and Paula Cohen, in *The Critical Tradition: Classic Texts and Contemporary Trends*, ed. David H. Richter (New York: St. Martin's, 1989), pp. 1090-1102, here 1090-91 and 1093.

<sup>28</sup> A representative example: "zabuv pin-kod / i vsi pomerly" ('forgot the pin code / and everyone died'), in Dmytro Lazutkin, *Benzyn* (Kyiv: Fakt, 2008), p. 30.



counterculturally inflected writing confidently follows in the footsteps of Zhadan, several promising young women writers, notably Sofia Andrukhovych (b. 1982), Tania Maliarchuk (b. 1983), and Irena Karpa (b. 1980), and the *enfant terrible* of current Ukrainian writing, Liubko Deresh (b. 1984). The latter two, Karpa and Deresh, have been particularly prolific. Deresh's entry into contemporary Ukrainian literature with the novel *Kult* (Cult, 2001) at the tender age of seventeen sent shockwaves around the country and proved that a major new talent has arrived; he has been publishing prolifically since then, and has been widely translated into other languages as well. Karpa, besides her quasi-autobiographical writing (five books out to date) is also an acclaimed rock singer. Deresh's and Karpa's prose offers a vibrant postmodernist pastiche of naïveté and graphic eroticism, countercultural rebellion and appropriation of mass culture imagery, intertextual play and a provocative simulacrum of confessional narrative. Most importantly, they, like their peers and older colleagues, provide eloquent testimony to the vibrancy, energy, intellectual excitement, and aesthetic pleasure that readers everywhere can derive from contemporary Ukrainian literature – a national literature which in the years since the collapse of the Soviet empire has been eagerly seeking out heterogeneous worldwide affinities to an unprecedented extent, and has endeavored to stake out an impressive presence on the cognitive map of global culture.