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A cult Ukrainian writer hints that far from being dead in Venice, his most famous character is needed at home.

LVIV, Ukraine | Stas Perfetsky has come a long way since he took off from Lviv back in the heady days of the early 1990s on a wild ride across Europe, only to end up in the cold depths of a canal. To his admirers Stas' adventures embodied the precarious condition of the Ukrainian artist in those years, and they never gave up hope for him even though he seemed to have vanished. Now it looks as though Stas may be coming home.

Theater audiences in three countries heard the news this spring and summer from Stas' creator, Yuri Andrukhovych, who took the stage after performances of his new play to recite some lines from his poem about the play's hero, titled "Stas Perfetsky Is Coming Back to Ukraine." Although the poem is quite new, written after the Orange Revolution, Andrukhovych is the last man in Ukraine who could be charged with political conformism. He simply had no choice: something very important had happened in Ukraine, and his hero, or alter ego, after a decade and more on the European road, simply had to react to the good news.

The author's unscheduled recitals took place at the conclusion of performances of his play *Orpheus, Illegal* in Dusseldorf, Palermo, and Kyiv. The play, which will also open the upcoming autumn season at the Schauspiel theater in Leipzig, is based on his 1996 novel about Stas Perfetsky's European odyssey, *Perverzion*. Perfetsky ventured into Western Europe as a cultural representative of newly independent Ukraine in the early '90s. But he disappeared during a trip to Venice in 1993. His vanishing, described at the end of *Perverzion*, might have been a suicidal canal leap from his hotel window or murder. In his afterward to the novel, Andrukhovych inclined toward a hypothesis of faked suicide. And, he wrote, "He is coming back."

THE MASKS OF STAS

Yuri Andrukhovych was born in 1960 in the western Ukrainian city of Ivano-Frankivsk. He began to make a name in the Soviet Union in the 1980s with his poetry and appearances with the BuBaBu ensemble of young Ukrainian writer-performers. Throughout the '90s he published several novels that were translated into a number of languages, and he appeared at universities and literary festivals across Europe, the United States, and Canada. An English translation of *Perverzion* was published in 2005 in the Northwestern University Press' "Writings from an Unbound Europe" series.

Like his creator, Perfetsky comes west as a rising young Ukrainian artist. He has been invited to a seminar in Venice on "The Post-Carnival Absurdity of the World: What is on the Horizon?" The novel describes his illegal trip from Lviv to Munich on the way to Venice, although in a manner that pays tribute to the adventure genre, rather than to social message-making. Is it necessary to remark that this postmodern novel is full of multilevel cultural traces? Strange things happen to him, in Munich, in Venice, as though he's fallen into a seamy, funny, and sinister cultural vortex. The sophisticated seminar turns into carnival (though the real Carnival in Venice has just ended and the action takes place at the beginning of Lent, the season of restraint), and culture turns back to magic.

Casting a blanket of plausibility over Perfetsky, Andrukhovych almost has the reader believing in him, this famous poet and hero of underground culture, superman, conqueror of musical instruments and women alike. The illusion of verisimilitude is heightened through the author's way of dropping identifiable figures from Ukrainian Bohemia into Perfetsky's story. In part, the story tells how, deep in debt, having lost the only woman he ever really loved, resentful at his compatriots for not honoring his artistic nature, he decides to leave his native country forever. Not, certainly, in search of excitement: the past couple of years overflowed with the euphoria, creativity, hope, and chaos of the early '90s – a condition well known to young post-Soviet artists of that epoch.

Perfetsky is not the only character with a Ukrainian shadow. His interpreter and new love, Ada Zitron, has Ukrainian origins, as does another seminar participant, the American radical feminist Liza Sheila Shalayzer, and the name John Paul Ostsyenko – it belongs to a Jamaican reggae singer – carries a clear Ukrainian ring. And although his fellow seminar guests can't remember Perfetsky's name and believe him to be Russian, he has the gift of captivating them with lyrical descriptions of his native country. Ukraine is the kind of place only poets can see in all its integrity and the kind of place others prefer to forget. For them Ukraine and its neighbors are the small towns they, or their parents, left full of hope for something better. Yet Perfetsky, too, has come to "old Europe" looking for hope – for hope to reconstruct the integrity, completeness of his world. Such paradoxes contribute to the tensions and the strength of *Perverzion*. The same is true with Europe, a paradoxical part of the world that no one can fully understand. Perhaps that is what holds Europe together.

TRAVEL COMPANIONS

Andrukhovych has said that Perfetsky is the kind of man he himself would like to be, and he knows him well after living with him through many years, journeys, and books. Really, the author has been writing the same book all the time, only it is scattered in his poems, essays, newspaper articles, interviews. Author and character share tastes in books as well: Ukraine's Klasyka publishing house is issuing "The Perfetsky Collection," a series of translations of works by the character's favorite writers, chosen by Andrukhovych. Perfetsky's list of favorites leads off with the novel *Nine* by Andrzej Stasiuk, the Polish writer and Andrukhovych's good friend. Judging from Perfetsky's choice, it seems he likes these strangest parts of Europe – these Polands, Ukraines, Hungarys, Czechias – the kind of world sometimes called Central, but more often Eastern Europe. Stasiuk likes them, too. "He chooses strange countries to love," Andrukhovych once remarked of his Polish friend.

On 15 December 2004, Andrukhovych addressed the European Parliament in Strasbourg on the "universal historical drama" in Ukraine, where huge crowds were demonstrating and camping out in frigid Kyiv to call for free and fair elections. In the poem "Stas Perfetsky Is Coming Back to Ukraine," Andrukhovych would later declare that it was Perfetsky who that day spoke to the European community. In fact, the writer had begun his speech by quoting his character's words as he asked the parliamentarians to give their support to the Ukrainian people as the Orange Revolution unfolded, or, as he later put it, "to help a certain cursed country save itself."

No doubt, that moment and every word Andrukhovych spoke that day were political. Equally true, what was supposed to be a political message was in fact a search for hope. And what was supposed to be an election was in fact a miracle.

And what is called "European integration" in documents and reports in circumstances like these means the completeness of the world.

And still Andrukhovych seems hesitant to bring Perfetsky back to Ukraine. Not because Ukraine is not the right place for him, but because Europe still needs Stas Perfetsky. He feeds off the cultural humus of Europe, where he is still to be found. His travel and confusion keep him young and preserve his vitality and zest for life. No, Andrukhovych's skepticism concerns modern Europe rather than Ukraine. This position has nothing to do with traditional stances positing a gulf between the "European project" and the concerns of nations in the eastern part of the continent. Actually, it's not even skepticism, but rather a kind of nostalgia. Giving his acceptance speech last spring on being awarded the Leipzig Book Prize for European Understanding, Andrukhovych tried to explain it. His audience heard not only words of gratitude, but also keen criticism. The reason was an interview in the German newspaper *Die Welt* with one of the commissioners of the European Union. Guenter Verheugen, formerly the commissioner for enlargement, now in charge of industrial policy, remarked that in 20 years all European states will be members of the EU, with the exception of the successor states to the Soviet Union that are not part of the EU today. Andrukhovych addressed not only Verheugen, but also those European intellectuals who let his words go unchallenged.

"Perhaps Europe is simply scared?" Andrukhovych wondered. "Perhaps it is scared of Europe, of its very self? Perhaps it closes itself off from us for the very reason that we took its values too close to heart, that these values have become ours? For in reality, this Europe could not care less for these values these days. The main thing it wants is not to change. Is this incapacity to change that it secretly nurtures, its highest value?"

The speech was a triumph: the audience rose in applause, and several major European newspapers published it. Andrukhovych conquered that day because he came with his hands empty of post-Soviet resentments and pretensions. Ukrainians like him because he is driven to open up the big world and its possibilities; Europeans from elsewhere are attracted by his drive toward the anomalous.

Andrukhovych's work began attracting wider recognition nearly 15 years ago, after his first long trip to Western Europe, where he spent time in Munich on a scholarship and made his first visit to Venice. He, though, might stress his success in a different medium, pointing to his just-released compact disc with the Polish experimental jazz group Karbido. The album, his second, is called *Samogon* (it means *samohon* in

Ukrainian, "moonshine liquor" in English). Andrukhovych recites some of his poems in Polish and sings a little in Ukrainian. Stas Perfetsky would be proud of him.