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Choosing a Europe: Andrukhovych, Izdryk and the New Ukrainian Literature

In Ukraine as elsewhere, the passing of the Soviet era caused many writers to lose their cultural bearings. As the writing community realised that the production of apologias for the politico-social status quo was not required in a new situation where high culture was not monopolised by the state, nor funded by it, many of its members fell silent. The most powerful poet, Vasyl' Stus, had died in the Gulag, and no poetic voice of equal strength was in evidence. The most accomplished and independent novelist, Valerii Shevchuk, had reached the apogee of his aesthetic power in the final moments when Aesopian language had still had a social function. The passing of political unfreedom deprived him of the context in which, through allegory and understatement, he had achieved masterpieces of subversive expression. Several writers signalled their break with Soviet tradition by exploring new themes and testing untried formal and stylistic techniques, but also by proclaiming their affinity with non-traditional cultural paradigms and contexts. One such context was 'Europe'—more precisely, the complex of contemporary thought and high culture that originated in Western Europe and was perceived to hold sway in the non-Soviet parts of the world.

Controversial, convention-challenging discoveries or appropriations of a cultural or intellectual 'Europe', coupled with a polemical attitude to more traditional cultural patterns, had accompanied previous periods of modernisation in Ukrainian culture. At the turn of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries poets of the 'Young Muse' circle had deliberately signalled their sense of common purpose and method with other European fin-de-siècle movements, provoking tumultuous protests from the realist and populist literary mainstream. In the Literary Discussion, the great debate of the 1920s concerning the future of Soviet Ukrainian culture, the pre-eminent advocate of revolutionary Ukrainisation Mykola Khvylovyi identified Europe with the ideal of progress itself, deriding as provincial, backward and undereducated those who defended a more home-grown model of socialist cultural development.

The construction of a similar opposition between a cultural system perceived as outdated, unproductive and otherwise defective, and a 'Europe' representing culture in an advanced and admirable form, proved useful to many young writers who, in the late 1980s, set about finding alternatives to Soviet cultural models. I suggest in the following that some of those who thus appropriated 'Europe' did little more than claim authority at the expense of a former cultural elite; others sought to incorporate into the post-Soviet identity which they proposed for themselves and their society values that they apprehended as European; and others still took their participation in a cultural Europe as a given and set about deliberating on the knottiest of Europe's unanswered questions without further ado.

The most visible of these seekers of alternatives in the late 1980s were a triad of young poets and happening artists who adopted the group name 'Bu-Ba-Bu' (for the first syllables of the words 'burlesque', *balagan* (a term designating both a booth for a theatre show, and a state of disorder) and 'buffoonery').¹ Their chief spokesman, the self-styled 'patriarch' of Bu-

Ba-Bu Iurii Andrukhovych (b 1960), framed their provocations theoretically as carnival in the Bakhtinian sense, designed to revitalise a flagging culture by subjecting its tired gods to laughter: “Carnival ... juggles hierarchical values, it turns the world upon its head, it provokes the most sacred ideas in order to rescue them from ossification and death”.² Bu-Ba-Bu overlapped, in part, with what came to be called the ‘Ivano-Frankivs’k phenomenon’: the concentration in the regional city of Ivano-Frankivs’k in Western Ukraine of several creative young people determined to produce cultural artefacts that differed radically, both from the norms of official Soviet writing, and from the traditions and values of the Ukrainian literary canon. This canon, in the view of the most erudite of the Ivano-Frankivs’k writer-critics Volodymyr Ieshkiliev, was entrapped in a “TR [testamentary and rustic] discourse”, while the Ivano-Frankivs’k circle and others like them represented “NM [neomodern]” and “PM [postmodern]” discourses.³ To emphasise the distance between themselves and the cultural context of TR discourse, the adepts of NM and PM discourses enacted provocations whose purported aim was to shock and disturb their audiences. Such was the case with the staging in the L’viv opera house in 1992 of the so-called ‘poeso-opera’ *Chrysler Imperial*, where the breaking of cultural taboos was interspersed with an explicitness concerning sexual matters that at the time was novel.

Another, more intellectual and more explicitly ‘European’, challenge to TR discourse was the invocation of a grid of cultural references that was at the time unfamiliar to society at large, and the representatives of TR discourse in particular. The cultural grid that the Ivano-Frankivs’k community presented as its own was that of West European intellectual high culture, including its poststructuralist representatives. These figured in glossaries and compendia after the postmodern fashion of the time, at least two of which were produced in Ivano-Frankivs’k. One, edited by Iurii Izdryk, appeared in 1992 as issue No 3 of the journal *Chetver* (Thursday). In it, alongside much arcane and whimsical material on cabballistic and demonological, as well as theological and philosophical topics, were references to Herodotus, Hegel, Hölderlin and Heidegger, Lucian and Leibnitz, Casanova and Camus, Rabelais, Rilke and Remarque, Shelley and Keats, Thales, Plato, Nietzsche, Georg Trakl and Freud. The other Ivano-Frankivs’k compendium, called *Mala Ukrain’s’ka Entsyklopediia Aktual’noi Literatury* (Small Ukrainian Encyclopaedia of Contemporary Literature, 1998) or *MUEAL*, was a joint project of Ieshkiliev and Andrukhovych. In addition to biographical and critical entries on the members of the Ivano-Frankivs’k circle and their friends, as well as entries on theoretical concepts and cultural phenomena, *MUEAL* contained articles on Barthes, Bakhtin, Borges, Warhol, Heidegger, Derrida, Eco, Nietzsche and Foucault. The display of these potent European names was not without ostentation. It signified the freedom of those who invoked them to move in an elite intellectual space. In this respect the naming of notable figures of the European intellectual canon resembled a widespread post-Soviet phenomenon of everyday life: the display of European-made consumer items (or items made elsewhere, but satisfying imagined criteria of ‘European’ quality). Such European or quasi-European products and procedures have been organised in popular parlance, through the addition of the prefix *ievro-* (Euro-) to the names of familiar things, into a distinct category. Thus, *ievrokukhnia* and *ievrovanna* are, respectively, a well-renovated kitchen and bathroom, and *ievroremont* is the process of renovating an interior to a high standard. As a leading representative of Ukraine’s small but expanding cultural studies community has remarked, drawing upon Baudrillard’s remarks on the signification coded into consumer practices, what is at play here is a process of allusion to a life-style ideal imagined as the opposite of the Soviet realities of queues, shortages and shoddy goods: the ‘Euro-quality’ of a thing arises when it is “inserted into another, non-European (or, more precisely, not-quite-European) context, where it arouses associations of high social status and of Europe as utopia”.⁴

Such claims to Europeanness are not without their contradictions. Appropriation of European attributes and diligent demonstration of the extent to which European values and attitudes have been incorporated into everyday life or into high culture imply rejection of a value that is central to the European tradition, especially in its modern phase from the Enlightenment onward: authenticity, and with it individualism. Authenticity finds expression in the correspondence of inner and outer, of essence and accident, of belief and behaviour, all of which are abandoned or overlooked when value is seen to reside above all in approximation to an external norm.

In his well-known book *The Anxiety of Influence* Harold Bloom sees in the accomplishment of authenticity the reward of enduring or 'strong' poets; the danger which they struggle to overcome, often in vain, is that of influence—of being deprived of complete selfhood by the power of predecessors. To assert their authentic voice and their "priority in divination",⁵ Bloom observes, strong poets duel constantly with those who shaped the poetic landscape before them. Strong poets negotiate their anxiety about succeeding in their struggle for self-authentication against the resistance of the pre-existent voices of canonical poets by means of strategies not unlike those envisaged in Freud's thoughts on repression: strong poets forget their predecessors, or misconstrue them. This creative misreading, Bloom believes, is a symptom of the anxiety of influence.

In the Ivano-Frankiv's'k phenomenon it is possible to discern an anxiety analogous to the one described by Bloom. Representatives of the Ivano-Frankiv's'k phenomenon are anxious lest they be influenced by TR discourse. They fear that the romantic and realistic traditions of Ukrainian letters, shored up by the idiom of Socialist Realism, may render originality, indeed creativity itself, impossible. As Ieshkiliev puts it:

... a feature of TR discourse in Ukrainian literature is the 'anthology principle' under which a corpus of operative texts has emerged that is sanctified by the tradition of popular education and toward which the expression of any critical attitude is prohibited: Taras Shevchenko, Ivan Franko and, in Soviet and post-Soviet times, Andrii Malushko, Oles' Honchar, Ievhen Hutsalo and others. The 'anthology principle' significantly narrows the field for creative experimentation by TR writers and renders practically impossible the existence within TR discourse of serious literary criticism ... TR discourse favours a didactic, schoolbook pragmatism and integrates into itself practically nothing of the semiotic, conceptual or formal advances of twentieth-century literary practice. A reason for this is the specifically rustic mind-set of TR literati, whose world-view is circumscribed by the horizon of the 'terrain of village cares' (Heidegger) ... [T]he cyclic rustic world view characteristic of TR discourse, bound by the symbols and rituals of the annual agricultural cycle, rejects qualitatively new or different forms of thought (where difference is conceived of as a philosophical category). A consequence of such cyclicity of sign and image is the autarchic quality of the textual practices of TR discourse that leads to their progressive degeneration.⁶

There are numerous rhetorical and stylistic symptoms of anxiety in this text: its hyperbole, mockery, unsubstantiated accusations and general tone of aggression. And yet, this very passage which so vigorously opposes the influence of a canon viewed as domestic and retrograde expresses approval for a different kind of influence: that which, presumably, is evident in discourse that has assimilated "the semiotic, conceptual or formal advances of twentieth-century literary practice".

Indeed, texts associated with the Ivano-Frankiv's'k phenomenon sometimes display a craving to be influenced by non-indigenous traditions and, indeed, a markedly non-Bloomian anxiety lest the extent of this influence prove insufficient. *MUEAL* pays homage to the classics of European modern and postmodern cultural production and post-structuralist thought by granting them space on its pages. *MUEAL* affects an easy familiarity toward them, as though the neighbourhood of Barthes with Bondar-Tereshchenko, Sartre with Sapeliak and Foucault with Fufal'ko were the most natural thing in the world. Yet the texts which purport to inform the interested reader about the heroes of the new canon are couched in the exclusive code of unelucidated jargon. Ieshkiliev's article on Foucault may serve as an example:

Characteristic of the episteme of the Renaissance is the condition of language as a 'thing among things', while in the episteme of the present language becomes a thing-in-itself, imposing its will upon the world of things and constructing in it new hierarchies of meaning (discourses). This last situation, Foucault believes, destroys the capacity of the human being to protect his or her essential world, his or her *personal discourse* ("people die, structures remain"). Thus Foucault effectively denies the possibility of protecting a personal encyclopaedia and a personal register of values under conditions of a linguistic *metagestalt* ("dictatorship of language").⁷

If there is an intended audience for this text that stands outside the circle of the initiated, then the rhetorical design of the text upon this audience is not benign. The audience is to be startled, puzzled, and made to feel frustrated and inadequate in the face of the imaginary speaker, who demonstrates superiority over it through command over an arcane and demanding discourse to which the audience has no access. The implicit non-elite audience, indeed, is relegated to the same low level as the explicitly denigrated mouthpieces of TR discourse.

Were we to follow Bloom in comparing textual strategies to operations of the human psyche as observed by Freud, we should be hard pressed to overlook the analogy between the behaviour of the speaker implied in Ieshkiliev's text, and exhibitionism. Exhibitionism involves the derivation of excitement and sexual pleasure, not so much from the actual display of the virile member, as from the contemplation of the discomfiture of the unsuspecting victim. What is more, according to Freud, "the compulsion to exhibit ... is also closely dependent on the castration complex: it is a means of constantly insisting upon the integrity of the subject's own (male) genitals and it reiterates his infantile satisfaction at the absence of a penis in those of women".⁸ The behaviour results from an aberrant prolongation of immaturity. Similarly, we might well see in the emphatic display of European post-structuralist erudition the reflex of a furtive anxiety about the efficacy of this provocatively displayed possession. Ieshkiliev can name and in this sense 'possess' Foucault and Derrida. His text suggests open satisfaction at the thought that the majority of the potential audience does not so 'possess' them. Yet it remains an open question whether such possession imparts the equivalent of potency—the acknowledged capacity to generate works that have a life within Ukrainian high culture. Preferring the influence of modern and post-modern Europe over that of nativist tradition is no antidote to cultural anxiety.

For a phenomenon that depended so heavily on provocation, Bu-Ba-Bu had a surprisingly long life-span. This longevity could be attributed partly to the talent of its members, partly to the need in the culture for a counterweight to tradition, and partly to the skill of the trio at self-promotion and self-recycling. But by the mid-1990s the members of Bu-Ba-Bu had ceased to generate new work in their original avant-gardist style, reflecting

instead, often no less nostalgically than ironically, upon their movement's past glories. In 1995 Andrukhovych and the other two Bu-Ba-Bu writers, Oleksandr Irvanets' and Viktor Neborak, published an anthology dedicated to their collective centenary. (The arithmetical justification for this unexpected anniversary lay in the fact that, in 1994, Andrukhovych had turned 34, while Irvanets' and Neborak had both reached the age of 33.) The sixth issue of *Chetver*, dated 1995 and published in 1996, was titled *Chrysler Imperial* in nostalgic homage to the scandalous opera that had been staged a scant three years earlier. Among the materials collected in *Chetver*, No 6, was Andrukhovych's essay 'Ave, Chrysler', written as early as 1993, which reflected upon Bu-Ba-Bu as a phase in the lives of its creators and acknowledged the need to move on:

And yet, something changed. The river began to change its course ...

It seems that youth has passed. We followed its passage very slowly, drinking it to the last drop as if it were the costliest potion in the world ...

In its place arises that typically European question: What next? What is it that lies beyond the Chrysler's last stop and denies entry to the limousines of youth? And what will remain of Bu-Ba-Bu if its limousine is taken away?

I do not know. We are so protean that it is impossible to predict all of our future mutations.⁹

Andrukhovych gave no reason for considering 'What next?' to be a typically European question. Given his view, to which we shall return presently, that form and order are a particularly European preoccupation, it is plausible that he should have regarded the linear narrative with its progression from event to event as a genre expressive of something essential to European culture. However that might be, Andrukhovych's answer to his 'European' question—the answer articulated in his works of the second half of the 1990s—was, simply, 'Europe'. Beyond Bu-Ba-Bu and its rejection of the traditional local cultural values articulated in TR discourse there would be explicit affirmation of a particular set of values linked to a particular kind of Europe. In his works Andrukhovych began to foreground the theme of constructing a self through identification with a cherished cultural community. This community, in some cases best called the Austro-Hungarian Empire and in others Central Europe, was only partly attested by Andrukhovych's experiences as a traveller and a turn-of-the-millennium intellectual. To a greater degree it was the product of historical imagination, myth and nostalgic yearning. With Central Europe's best-known émigré Milan Kundera, whom he succeeded in 2001 as a recipient of the University of Vienna's Herder Prize, Andrukhovych might have proclaimed, "Central Europe is not a state: it is a culture or a fate. Its borders are imaginary and must be redrawn with each new historical situation."¹⁰

Andrukhovych's choice of this Europe was very different from Ieshkiliev's manifesto-like and anxious proclamation of fealty to the Europe of Foucault and Derrida. It was characterised by a calm, respectful, almost reverent attitude grounded in details of personal experience, in family memory and in reading. It gave rise to some of Andrukhovych's most distinguished writing. After the novel *Perverziia* (Perversion, 1996) Andrukhovych wrote very little fiction, concentrating instead on essays and travelogues, many of which were subsequently gathered in collections titled *Dezorientatsiia na mistsevoisti* (Disorientation as to Place, 1999) and *Moia levropa* (My Europe, 2001), the latter also containing texts by the Polish writer Andrzej Stasiuk.

Andrukhovych's chosen Europe is defined as much by difference from what he regards as non-Europe as it is through its intrinsic qualities. As one critic observed, the title word 'disorientation' can productively be read as 'dis-Orientation'.¹¹ The point is not so much that Andrukhovych does not know where he is, but rather that he knows he does not wish to be in the Orient. Andrukhovych emphatically turns away from the East, which for him is, first and foremost, almost the whole of the former Soviet Union. The Soviet and post-Soviet East appears in Andrukhovych's opus as a hostile continent which includes not only Moscow, rendered as grotesque and demonic in the novel *Moskoviiada* (The Moscoviad, 1993), but also Kyiv, which Andrukhovych described—libelled, as some claimed—as lifeless for all its metropolitan business, inhuman for all its scurrying masses, and redeemed only by pockets of intellectual and cultural soul-mates who would be isolated even from each other were it not for the metro lines.¹² Oksana Zabuzhko, a poet, philosopher, prose writer and Andrukhovych's almost exact contemporary, leapt to Kyiv's defence, lauding the city as Julio Cortázar had lauded Paris ("To be nothing in this city, which is everything, is a thousand times better than the opposite") and celebrating its multifariousness ("not a planet, but a galaxy comprising innumerable separate Kyivs").¹³ But in this latter feature, a virtue in Zabuzhko's judgment, Andrukhovych would discern the cardinal vice of formlessness which, in turn, stands in the way of human individuation:

Form, or rather the lack of it—that is the name of all our misfortunes ... The absence of form is a return to the condition of the brute. It is the eternal greyness of being that one escapes through the suicide's rope ... Our total destruction of nature betrays our incapacity to cope with the landscape and results in our destroying ourselves.

How and why did this happen? Against a background of strident formlessness we labour at a new myth, shouting about our Europeaness, marshalling strange racial, anthropological and geographical arguments, reaching back to the Trypillians, the agricultural Scythians, to pagan times or, alternatively, to Christianity. We point to the Easter egg and the dough horse. Yes, we used to have it, that sense of form. Long ago.

Perhaps the reason lies in our vulnerability to the East?¹⁴

The geographical equivalent of such formlessness is the steppe, endless, throwing up no limits or obstacles, and therefore open to boundless despotism. For Andrukhovych it is akin to the Asia that Count Metternich claimed to spy through the eastern windows of his Vienna palace.

The antithesis of this Orient is Europe. A particular kind of landscape, but also the way in which people have been formed by this landscape and then have shaped it in its turn are notable features of the Europe that Andrukhovych chooses. For him, space determines being. Like the German theorist of cultural pluralism Johann Gottfried Herder (1744–1803) with whom his name is now so felicitously linked, Andrukhovych connects landscape and climate to cultural type. "The European person", Andrukhovych reflects,

was created by mountains and forests. Here nature prompted being to strive for discreteness, variety and completeness of form ... The European person was created by inheritance. You enter the world among towers and gardens that are countless centuries old. You are powerless to spoil anything here, even if you wanted to do so very much. All this architecture has been copied from the landscape, all of its makers are known to you by name. This is a victory over the vanity of vanities, these co-ordinates of duration

and gradualism signify certain absolute values, among which is the human personality, distinct, sole and unrepeatable.

The communist regime by the will of history (or was it history?) could conquer the Poles, the Czechs, the Hungarians. But it was always regarded in these countries as a temporary and absurd misunderstanding, so much at odds was it with these squares, arches, cathedrals, belfries, parks and gardens.¹⁵

The Europe that Andrukhovych chooses is, patently, not the Europe of Brussels and Strasbourg, of commerce and trade, of the bureaucracies of the European Union; not the Europe which real post-Soviet Central and East European states strain to join. Andrukhovych chooses not to recognise this Europe, let alone acknowledge that its reality is remote from the high cultural dream, presided over, perhaps, by Rilke, that is the Europe of his mind's eye. Andrukhovych chooses a Europe which allows him to view his native landscape—the foothills of the Carpathians—and his favourite city, L'viv with its Habsburg history, as part of a continuum that stretches to Venice and Munich, encompassing much that is picturesque and visually comfortable. The physical existence of the landscape appears to render this Europe tangible, but as a cultural object it is the fruit of selective vision, nostalgic introspection and imagination. It is Andrukhovych who creates his own Europe, not the composite reality of contemporary Europe that impinges upon—influences—him. His choice of a Europe implies withdrawal into an aesthetic, artificial realm that offers the reader no socio-political challenges or exhortations.

Andrukhovych is quite aware of the limitations that his choice implies. Sometimes he defends them, adopting an aestheticist position that values the artist's loyalty to objects of observation and articulating a fear of the danger that ideology presents to his art:

At the mention of language and words I seem already to cross the boundary of what is permitted and fall into the world of unstable abstractions, and this seems highly undesirable, for then I might begin to speak also of the ruins of souls and of virtue, of the ruins of love and the ruins of hatred, of the ruins of faith and the ruins of expectations.

Then I would be forced to moralise (in fact, I have begun to do so already), to break into open windows and doors, to create nervous drafts in these corridors between the past and the future.

Instead of this I would prefer to look a little more closely at objects and things, at what is tactile, I am sometimes reminded of my childhood idea of becoming an archaeologist, I write lists in verse about refuse tips and ruined habitations, about basements and attics crammed with the bric-a-brac of the Middle Ages—excuse me, of Central Europe.¹⁶

Yet Andrukhovych signals in this very passage his recognition of the fact that renunciation of the political is an ephemeral ideal. Among the objects that attract him as an artist are habitations that he describes as 'ruined', conceding thereby that they are no mere objects of disinterested contemplation, but products of a history from whose narration human suffering and loss cannot be excluded. It comes as no surprise, then, that Andrukhovych's part of *My Europe* ends with stories of the narrator's own family, all of them entwined with the wars, persecutions, migrations and violent deaths that characterised Central Europe in the twentieth

century. The celebration of an ideal Europe of Andrukhovych's own subjective making has been augmented here by a more nuanced response to Europe as a location of history and therefore of pain.

Different in trajectory, but not dissimilar in outcome is the choice of Europe by another member of the Ivano-Frankivsk circle, Andrukhovych's friend Iurii Izdryk (b 1962), editor of the aforementioned journal *Chetver* and author, among other works, of a complex and linguistically eclectic short-novel-length prose text titled *Votstsek* (1996).

The title alludes to a series of European predecessors: Johann Christian Woyzeck, a soldier who in 1821 murdered his common-law wife out of jealousy; the dramatic fragment *Woyzeck*, written by the German playwright and radical journalist Georg Büchner (1813–1836) on the basis of Woyzeck's medical file (the fragment was not published until 1879, and was first staged in 1913); and the twelve-tone opera *Wozzeck* (1925) that Alban Berg based on Büchner's drama. Izdryk retains the name of the central character, making him an emotionally troubled resident of some post-Soviet West Ukrainian city. He also retains elements of the plot (a love that comes to an end; a senseless crime) and the overall atmosphere. In Izdryk's *Votstsek*, as in the earlier works that invoke the Woyzeck plot, anguish mixes with black humour as the central character progressively loses his grip upon a disordered and unintelligible world. *Votstsek*, who as narrator also figures under the appellations 'he', 'I', 'you' and 'That One', is represented as suffering. He suffers because he can come to terms neither with the disturbed nature of his consciousness, nor with his conscience. To represent this double failure Izdryk makes connections to two traditions of European thought: that of Cartesian and Kantian epistemological rationalism, and of existentialism. With some virtuosity, the text acknowledges the scepticism that poststructuralism imposes upon the insights that once might have seemed to flow from the exploration of such avenues of thought. Yet—and here Bloom would recognise the 'strength' of Izdryk as an 'author'—the text, by a remarkable feat of control over the general architecture of the work and its logic, contrives not to become yet another demonstration of the relativity and indeterminacy of all possible statements. Instead, it establishes an authorial position (for all its confessed scepticism regarding authorship) that is finely balanced between relativity and indeterminacy on the one hand, and Christian theism on the other. Each side of this binary opposition negates the other, yet each emerges with equal validity from the world-view system of the text. It is a tribute to Izdryk's skill as a writer that this exercise in intellectual acrobatics is accomplished in a text that remains engaging and readable.

It is not the purpose of this paper to repeat the detailed analysis in which the foregoing observations are grounded,¹⁷ but to draw attention to the role that the European intellectual tradition is made to play in Izdryk's construction. No less than Andrukhovych, who derives the principle and value of individuation from the European landscape, which, being parcelled, is easily compassed by the mind, Izdryk is impressed by the notion of the autonomous subject. But he finds its philosophical champions unconvincing. Very early in *Votstsek*, Izdryk mocks Descartes' "I think, therefore I am" and Kant's radically isolated subject of cognition by taking the reader on a vain quest for the elusive seat of subjective consciousness, visualised as a journey into the brain and into the ever smaller particles of the matter that comprise it:

In the quest for your own 'I', in your attempts to crystallise out this elusive substance (a prerequisite for any encounter between the first and second persons) you

always come up against the purely technical limitations of internal optical magnification, of good old neurophysiological blow-up.

It was, after all, quite predictable and logical that, as you looked for the 'I' in the depths of your skull cavity, your gaze should first have surveyed the whole of the brain, that unfamiliar and untouched planet, uninhabited and comfortless, whose immobile, even imperturbable surface gave no hint of turbulent processes inside ... After roaming about its desert surface for a while and inspecting without much enthusiasm all these convolutions and hemispheres, these thalamuses and hypothalamuses, these hypophyses etc, you began your descent into the dura mater and the arachnoid, ever deeper and downward. You sampled this tender soil at the most disparate points and your analyses became increasingly painstaking, detailed and complete. At the stage where you could no longer do without lenses or microscopes, neurones, synapses, axons and dendrites hove into view, and later still—nucleuses, cell membranes and mitochondriae. Here life was in full swing, but the cursed 'I' was nowhere to be seen. Stubbornly you advanced into the depths of matter, and soon you had before you strange molecules which you smashed to pieces with the determination of an infant getting to the guts of a new toy. Later still, armed no longer with optical instruments but with various bizarre contraptions—Wilson chambers, electron guns, Doppler accelerators and Foucault's pendulums—you examined atoms and, once again, nucleuses, then protons, electrons and neutrinos, you performed impossible three-particle operations (two nucleuses and a muon) using Coulomb's law, also two-particle and one-particle operations, but of course all this was wasted effort and vain hope, for somewhere past the last threshold you came up against the one great indivisible and non-existent Nothing—the glittering likeness of pure energy that stood at the foundation of all things and all worlds and finally the whole Universe.

It was time to look around and ask, 'But isn't this a mirage?'

The quest for the 'I' retreated into the background. It became tiresome and uninteresting.¹⁸

The other European intellectual tradition that Izdryk makes his own in *Votstsek* is that of existentialism. Heidegger, in particular, looms large here and elsewhere in his work. In Izdryk's *Chetver* encyclopaedia, in contrast to the bouquet of the expected heroes of poststructuralism in Ieshkiliev's *MUEAL*, only one European thinker is represented—Heidegger. The entry itself, instead of being an expository text about the philosopher, consists of the translation of a sizeable excerpt from Heidegger's lecture of 1946, 'Wozu Dichter?' (What Are Poets For?).¹⁹ The text of *Votstsek* contains parodic gestures toward Heidegger and toward 'What Are Poets For' in particular. In his lecture Heidegger analysed minutely one of the late poems of Rilke, especially those of its lines which refer to the ways in which human beings, on the one hand, and plants and animals, on the other, are 'wagered' by Nature and for their part acquiesce in this wager ('Wagnis') through an act of their will.²⁰ Heidegger's discussion is long, subtle and painstaking. Izdryk's irreverent quip in response is brief and brutal: "People are OK, God bless them. As for things—you can put up with them, too. But plants and animals are sometimes intolerable" (13). Another parody is at the level of style. Heidegger is famously etymological in his writing, seeking to connect concepts to words in what he takes to be their primordial meanings. Izdryk is also constantly on the lookout for effects that the Ukrainian language produces—as a phonetic system. What he discovers and rejoices in, however, are not additional, enriching, intensifying meanings,

but word-plays, structural ambiguities in Ukrainian syntax, accidental and meaningless repetitions of sounds or syllables. Language for Izdryk is not, as it is for Heidegger, an archive containing evidence of the primordial human grasp of Being, but rather the opposite: a system whose internal order is imperfectly rational and threatens to break down, destroying the illusion of connection between words, meaning and the world.

Parody upon Heidegger notwithstanding, Izdryk's *Votstsek* acknowledges the irreducible seriousness of the problems raised by the fact of the human being's location in a world. The world as a venue for physical and mental agony and a place where the human being (whether 'I', 'he', 'That One', or 'you') cannot be comfortable; and the self, however tortured and fragmented, as responsible for action and as questing, tragically, for an authentic Being-with-another—these are the main motifs and issues in *Votstsek* that are inherited from the existentialist tradition. Izdryk's novel takes them both seriously and not seriously. Responsibility for action is a case in point. The central character, Votstsek, performs actions that cause pain to others. Yet the novel does not help its reader to pass judgment upon him. Votstsek locks his wife and child away in a basement and keeps them there for months until they are released by the police. These actions of Izdryk's constitute, "in the opinion of the authorities, an illegal imprisonment of his family".²¹ But to Votstsek's mind they represent the sole chance of protecting his wife and son "from the menace of a decadent, evil, lascivious world".²² What is more, from the perspective constructed by the novel it is not even clear whether these actions correspond to events that in the novel's fictional world are to be taken as 'real', or to events that take place in Votstsek's dreams. The novel's structure is at pains to point out that its readers cannot know which of its passages belong to Votstsek's dream world, and which to his 'really' lived life. A full chapter is dedicated to the narration of a morning during which Votstsek makes several attempts to come out of sleep into full waking consciousness. The attempts are serially thwarted as Votstsek realises that he has dreamt each successive awakening. The chapter ends with a 'real' awakening whose status, however, remains dubious: "perhaps that treacherous dream has lasted to this day".²³ If Votstsek's legally reprehensible action took place in a dream, any common-sense notion of responsibility becomes absurd—but what can, with confidence, be proclaimed to be not a dream?

Izdryk's *Votstsek*, then, both draws upon and mocks the European intellectual tradition in a manner worthy of what Andrukhovych on the back cover of his friend's book calls "all this (pardon the expression) 'postmodernism'". Put in another way, *Votstsek* engages with some of the big questions of European secular philosophy since the seventeenth century but, far from being able to answer them, cannot get beyond questioning the terms in which they are phrased. This predicament vis-à-vis the European canon is eloquently articulated in the chapter 'Genealogy (Here They Come Again)'. Elsewhere a genealogy might be an opportunity for homage to precursors and influencers, but not in *Votstsek*. Here genealogy proves to be devoid of meaning, and the very names that have a place in it lose their recognisable form and disintegrate into random words:

As for the genealogy, we shall begin with Adenauer, the only luminary who remained after Heidegger's ignominious flight. Adenauer, our infinite father, universal and multilingual, emerged from the dark unknown and disappeared into the darkness, leaving us his descendants and the melody of his name: 'Add ... 'er ... now ...'²⁴

Heidegger's flight here is probably best read, not as an allusion to his possible coquetry with National Socialism, but as an allegory of the defeat of a philosophical Europe, and the coming in glory of Adenauer is an acknowledgment of the reality of the contemporary Europe that

Andrukhovych so steadfastly overlooks. Adenauer, the ‘father’ of the German post-war economic miracle, the partner of de Gaulle in the invention of the economic Europe that has gradually displaced all other possible Europes, is also the ‘father’ of the ‘tribe’ among whose members the text enumerates the younger generation of Ukrainian writers, lightly and wittily disguising their names. Neither Andrukhovych nor Izdryk are excluded from this list. Part of this Adenauerian heritage is the postmodern loss of faith in meaning and in humanist values. *Votstsek* deplores this heritage, yet acknowledges that it is doomed to share it. Towards the end of the novel the voice of the fractured central figure finds a formula for converting this experience into literary form:

That One found ways of annihilating literally all aspects of the text, of forcing the beautiful up against the ugly, of transforming the sublime into the ridiculous, of disguising tragedy as farce ... Nothing would be known with certainty ... Even the protagonist would disappear in the end into the jungle of his own self-indulgent gibberish.²⁵

And yet, if doubt is universal, then doubt itself is doubtful, and through this double negation the possibility of faith is restored. A leap of faith into God—yet another manoeuvre for which there are impeccable European precedents—becomes entirely possible, and each of the two chapters of *Votstsek* ends with the central character reciting the Lord’s Prayer. Lest this statement appear too affirmative, however, the text of the prayer is represented graphically as breaking up towards the end into disconnected syllables and, finally, letters. There remain in *Votstsek* two European alternatives, each as plausible and as implausible as the other: theist faith, and nihilism as the ultimate consequence of reason’s radical critique of its own foundations.

Both Andrukhovych and Izdryk choose a Europe, and the choice for each of them is no easy matter. Both engage with Europe, each in his own way savouring its blandishments and suffering its impositions. Both move far beyond the petty mimicry of a few European gestures that so easily gratifies some of their contemporaries. Both recognise that they are not of the East, Andrukhovych through explicit declaration, Izdryk through silence concerning it. Andrukhovych struggles to preserve the joy of seduction by Europe, to retain it as a familiar and beloved Other. In his efforts to remain detached—a tourist, a Europhile—he admires, enthuses, describes, classifies and interprets. Yet, in the end, he acknowledges that he cannot but be involved. Europe is his, warts and all—not only its rococo palaces, but also its genocides. Izdryk, less ambivalent, has no comparable detachment. Europe’s great problems are his problems. He is not a Europhile, but a European.

Notes

- 1 For discussions of Bu-Ba-Bu and related provocative literary movements, see Oleksandr Hrytsenko, ‘Avanhard iak tradytsiia’, *Prapor*, 1989, No 7, 156–66; Halyna Chernysh, ‘Semenko brate ia tezh kudlatyi narobym dyva u svita khati’, *Prapor*, 1990, No 7, 22–26; Natalka Bilotserkivets, ‘BU-BA-BU ta in. Ukrain’skyi literaturnyi neoavanhard: Portret odnogo roku’, *Slovo i chas*, 1991, No 1, 42–52; Liubomyr Strynhaliuk, ‘Apostoly antyestetyky’, *Slovo i chas*, 1993, No 8, 86–88; Tamara Hundorova, ‘“Bu-Ba-Bu”, karnaval i kich’, *Krytyka*, 2000, No 7–8, 13–18; Ihor Pizniuk, ‘“Bu-Ba-Bu”: In memoriam’, *Krytyka*, 2000, No 7–8, 18–19; and my chapter, ‘Demystifying High Culture? “Young” Ukrainian Poetry and Prose in the 1990s’, in

- Todd Patrick Armstrong, ed, *Perspectives on Modern Central and East European Literature: Quests for Identity*, Palgrave, Houndsmills, 2001, 11–24.
- 2 ““Bu-Ba-Bu” i vse inshe’, *Literaturna Ukraina*, 28 March 1991, 7.
 - 3 Volodymyr Ieshkiliev, ‘Dyskursy v suchasni ukrains’kii literaturi’, in *Pleroma 3* (1998), *Mala Ukrains’ka Entsyklopediia Aktual’noi Literatury: Proekt Povernennia Demiurhiv*, Lileia- NV, Ivano-Frankivs’k, 1998, 50.
 - 4 Oleksandr Hrytsenko, ‘Doba ievro-remontu’, *Krytyka*, 2001, No 1–2 (39–40), 15–17, here 17. This and all subsequent translations are mine.
 - 5 Harold Bloom, *The Anxiety of Influence: A Theory of Poetry* (1973), 2nd ed, 1997, Oxford U P, New York, 8.
 - 6 *MUEAL*, 108–9.
 - 7 *MUEAL*, 114. Italics in the original.
 - 8 Sigmund Freud, *Complete Psychological Works*, Vol 7, Hogarth, London, 1953, 157.
 - 9 Iurii Andrukhovych, ‘Ave, kraiser! poiasnennia ochevydnoho’, *Suchasnist’*, 1994, No 5, 5–15, reprinted in *Chetver*, No 6 (1995), 49–65, here 63.
 - 10 Milan Kundera, ‘The Tragedy of Central Europe’, *New York Review of Books*, 26 April 1984, 33–38, here 35.
 - 11 Serhii Hrabovs’kyi, ‘Ecce Andrukhovych’, *Krytyka*, 2000, No 7–8, 20–23, here 20.
 - 12 Iurii Andrukhovych, ‘Mala intymna urbanistyka’, *Krytyka*, 2000, No 1–2, 9–13.
 - 13 Oksana Zabuzhko, ‘Metropoliia i provintsiia’, an article published in Ukrainian in the Russian-language Kyiv newspaper *Stolichnye novosti*, 14–20 March 2000, 5 and 14.
 - 14 Iurii Andrukhovych, ‘Vstup do heohrafii’, in his *Dezorientatsiia na mistsevesti*, Lileia- NV, Ivano-Frankivs’k, 1999, 39–40.
 - 15 Andrukhovych, ‘Vstup do heohrafii’, 37.
 - 16 Iurii Andrukhovych, ‘Tsentral’no-skhidna reviziia’, in Andzhei [Andrzej] Stasiuk and Iurii Andrukhovych, *Moia Ievropa*, Klasyka, L’viv, 2001, 76–77.
 - 17 See my article, ““Votstsek” Izdryka’, *Suchasnist’*, 1998, No 9, 101–13. For other readings, see Lidiia Stefanivs’ka’s afterword to Izdryk, *Votstsek*, Lileia-NV, Ivano-Frankivs’k, 1997, 100–09 and Rostyslav Semkiv, ‘Ironiia nepokirmoi struktury’, *Krytyka*, 2001, No 5, 28–30. See also Volodymyr Ieshkiliev’s commentary, *Votstsekurhiia bet: Kommentari do ‘vnutrishn’oi entsyklopedii’ romanu Izdryka ‘Votstsek’*, Unikornus, Ivano-Frankivs’k, 1998.
 - 18 Izdryk, *Votstsek*, Lileia-NV, Ivano-Frankivs’k, 1997, 10–11.
 - 19 ‘Haidehher [Heidegger] Martin’, *Chetver*, 1993, No 1 (3), 41–45, including ‘Nashcho poet?’ (What Are Poets For?), translated by Iurii Prokhas’ko.
 - 20 Martin Heidegger, *Gesamtausgabe*, Vol 5, Vittorio Klostermann, Frankfurt am Main, 1977, 269–320.
 - 21 *Votstsek*, 67.
 - 22 Ibid, 67.
 - 23 Ibid, 61.
 - 24 Ibid, 28.
 - 25 Ibid, 94–95.