



Mythological, Religious, and Philosophical Topoi in the Prose of Valerii Shevchuk

Author(s): Marko Pavlyshyn

Source: *Slavic Review*, Vol. 50, No. 4 (Winter, 1991), pp. 905-913

Published by:

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/2500471>

Accessed: 17/06/2014 00:26

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of the Terms & Conditions of Use, available at <http://www.jstor.org/page/info/about/policies/terms.jsp>

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.



Association for Slavic, East European, and Eurasian Studies is collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to *Slavic Review*.

<http://www.jstor.org>

Mythological, Religious, and Philosophical Topoi in the Prose of Valerii Shevchuk

Liberalized cultural discussion in the Soviet Union after the Twenty-seventh Party Congress in 1985 was concerned in part with the nature of a literature that would be appropriate to the new ideals of openness and restructuring. In Ukraine, as elsewhere, the debate brought forth a list of imperatives that, without challenging the socialist realist principle that literature must serve overarching social and political goals, amounted to a formula for a new kind of literary engagement. Literature must “boldly intrude into contemporary reality,”¹ it must defend the historical, cultural, linguistic, and ecological heritage and must unmask the crimes and abuses of the past and present.² It must no longer be bland and inoffensive and must not avoid controversial issues or praise the status quo as a matter of course.³

Valerii Oleksandrovysh Shevchuk, an author discouraged and obstructed in the 1970s, has received official recognition as this new critical frame has appeared. In March 1988 Shevchuk was awarded the Shevchenko State Prize of the Ukrainian S.S.R., the republic’s highest cultural accolade, for his novel *Try lystky za viknom* (Three leaves outside the window, 1986). The book, though set in the past, was lauded for its contemporary relevance and especially for its timely satire on bureaucratism.⁴

Praise for Shevchuk reverses the previous critical consensus. Shevchuk’s prose more often than not avoids direct reference to an immediately recognizable world—a characteristic that, until recently, had attracted critical censure. The award of the Shevchenko Prize amounts to tacit toleration of Shevchuk’s work as a whole, including its previously unacceptable dimensions, and allows us to analyze Shevchuk’s prose as an indicator of the extended limits of legitimate literary statement during the Gorbachevian thaw.

The following discussion, accordingly, considers some of Shevchuk’s deviations from the prevailing literary orthodoxy and includes such distinctive and innovative features of his prose (innovative in a Soviet context, of course) as use of myth, religious allusiveness, and emphatic reference to philosophical traditions remote from Marxism-Leninism.

As Lev Loseff has shown, the literary text in a situation of cultural control has a political subtext that exists not merely as the optional product of individual critical interpretations but is also a necessary part of the reception experience of each reader.⁵ A rhetorical framework may,

1. “Enerhiia slova,” *Literaturna Ukraina*, 24 July 1986, no. 30 (4179), 1.

2. See, for example, Volodymyr Puhach, “Na pidstupakh do istyny. Iaka vona, suchasna ‘sil’s’ka’ proza?” *Literaturna Ukraina*, 31 July 1986, no. 31 (4180), 3.

3. See Ihor Dzeverin’s contribution to the first in the series of discussions entitled “Krytyka v chas perebudovy: bol’ovi tochky i zavdannia,” *Literaturna Ukraina*, 18 September 1986, no. 38 (4187), 3.

4. Equivocal approval was, until 1987, the standard critical attitude toward Shevchuk. In 1980, Hryhorii Shton’ saw Shevchuk as standing “at a distance from the main lines of development of Ukrainian prose” (“Maister psykholohichnoi svitlotini,” *Zhovten’*, 1980, no. 10, 126–130, 126). Mykhailo Naienko, reviewing Shevchuk’s *Na poli smyrennomu*, drew attention to “individual mistakes in the artistic realization of the principle of historicism” (“Na bystryni chasu,” *Radians’ke literaturoznavstvo*, 1983, no. 8, 31). Mykola Riabchuk wrote of the “obvious marginality” of Shevchuk, while conceding that his works are highly original (“Te, shcho vyvysshchuie liudynu,” *Ukraina*, no. 45, November 1984, 11). By 1988, however, Riabchuk was nominating Shevchuk for the Shevchenko Prize. Approval for contemporary relevance was first sounded by Hryhorii Klochek in “Hospodar u ‘lisi liudei,’” *Literaturna Ukraina*, 19 February 1987, no. 8 (4209), 3.

5. Lev Loseff, *On the Beneficence of Censorship: Aesopian Language in Modern Russian Literature* (Munich: Sagner, 1984).

therefore, be used for an analysis of Shevchuk's work and to enquire how this work functions as argument: How does it try to effect change, whether of conviction or mode of feeling, in its readers. To use the term *argument* in this way is not to creep into the intentional fallacy. The text is not a set of deliberate propositions clothed in the trappings of aesthetic form. The argument is the result of persuasive forces that accompany the aesthetic working of the text and receives its definition only through interaction with the reader, whose literary expectations, in turn, are influenced by specific social, political, and cultural formation. Writers often write with programmatic intent, of course, especially in societies where literature is recognized as an important sphere of public discussion. This does not, however, limit the principle that the argument comes into being, by a process analogous to Georg Lukács's triumph of realism,⁶ independently of the author's intentions and, conceivably, even in contradiction of them. In this essay I will present Shevchuk as arguing—in the sense just defined—for a cultural restoration with three major elements: the relegitimation of the medieval and baroque as components of Ukrainian literary tradition, the reconquest of the zone of aesthetic experience associated with the sacred, and the establishment of a new literary discourse that is neither determined by a monopolist ideology nor oriented toward a single all-union cultural center.

Our rhetorical model makes it convenient to work with the term *topos*, applied here in its Aristotelian sense as developed by such modern topos theorists as Walter Veit and Lothar Bornscheuer⁷: It is not, as vulgar critical parlance sometimes has it, merely a recurrent verbal formula, but an aesthetic structure of any scale (from the individual image and motif to the narratological unit) that is recurrent and can be seen as the medium of diverse arguments. Examples of such topoi in Shevchuk include the symbol of the sphere, the motif of transformation from human to animal, the allusion to biblical or other familiar narrative, the genre of the parable, and the notion of cyclical time.

Valerii Okelsandrovych Shevchuk was born in Zhytomyr in 1939 and educated in philology at Kiev University. At the time of his literary debut in the 1960s, Shevchuk, like his near-contemporaries Ievhen Hutsalo, Hryhir Tiutiunnyk, and Iurii Shcherbak, was writing in a predominantly realistic mode leavened by the psychological impressionism that links the entire group to the tradition of Mykhailo Kotsiubyns'kyi. In 1967–1969 his first three books were published: *Sered tyzhnia* [In mid-week], *Naberezhna, 12* [12, the esplanade], and *Vechir sviatoi oseni* [Evening of blessed autumn]. They each display in some measure an optimism that is the residue of the Khrushchevian thaw. A ten-year gap in literary publication followed, as a consequence, Mykola Riabchuk hints,⁸ of official disfavor during the repressive 1970s. During this time Shevchuk researched, edited, and translated Ukrainian medieval, renaissance, and baroque texts and acquired substantial knowledge of the period's religious culture and its leading ecclesiastical spokesmen.

The consequences of this encounter with history became evident once Shevchuk began publishing imaginative literature again. The collection of short stories, *Kryk pivnia na svitanku* [Cock crow at dawn, 1979] and the *povisti* (short novels) included in *Dolyna dzherel* [Valley of springs, 1981] still cautiously recall his early realistic mode, but *Na poli smyrennomu* [On a submissive field, 1982] is the first in a series of books that present the supernatural in a mysterious and esoteric world. *Dim na hori* [The house on the hill, 1983], probably the high point of Shevchuk's "mythological" prose, was followed by a somewhat lightweight collection of *povisi* entitled *Malen'ke vechirnie intermetstvo* [A little evening intermezzo, 1984] and the prize-

6. The well-known thesis that Honoré de Balzac, his social and political conservatism notwithstanding, created novels in which the Marxist critic may identify an objectively "correct" and progressive reflection of the process of history, is most comprehensively developed in Lukács's *Balzac und der französische Realismus* (Berlin: Aufbau, 1952), 25–45.

7. Walter Veit, "Toposforschung. Ein Forschungsbericht" [1963], rep. in *Toposforschung*, ed. Max L. Baeumer (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1973), 136–209, and Lothar Bornscheuer, *Topik. Zur Struktur der gesellschaftlichen Einbildungskraft* (Frankfurt a.M.: Shurkamp, 1976).

8. Riabchuk, *Ukraina*, no. 45, November 1984, 11.

winning *Try lystky za viknom* (1986), a three-part novel that traces the secularization of Ukraine through the seventeenth, eighteenth, and nineteenth centuries. *Kaminna luna* [Stone echo], a collection of *povisti* published in 1987, represents one of Shevchuk's periodic returns to realism. Although Shevchuk's prose has oscillated between the poles of mimetic verisimilitude and the fantastic, critics have recognized that in both cases it generates a unique tone and delineates a world that is unmistakably Shevchuk's own, characterized, as one critic has aptly observed, by an "imperceptible transition from the concrete realities of life to mystery."⁹

The impression of mystery and sacredness is produced by mythological topoi, some traditional (the narrative of Oedipus or the symbol of the winged horse), others acquiring their mythological function in Shevchuk's works. Phenomena of everyday life are endowed with a sacred aura and become symbols that seem to point to some profound meaning, without, however, yielding easily to exegesis.¹⁰ Topoi involving nature are especially important for this strategy. The topos of articulate, sentient nature is realized in a variety of ways: Nature is perceived as communicating with humans, accompanying their actions, reflecting their thoughts, and pointing mysteriously toward transcendental worlds. Thus, for example, grass is given meaning in numerous and by no means consistent ways. In *Try lystky za viknom* it is both friendly and hostile to the hero; it can express the violence of fate by ruthlessly stopping up the mouth of an injured man who has been thrown to the ground; it may allegorize loneliness ("Can people be so lonely as to be like grass? . . . Is it enough to crush them or tear them out for there to remain no trace, no echo of them?"), or human adaptability ("the wind blows, and it bends; darkness falls, and it sleeps"), or mystical knowledge (the supreme, and last-learned, skill of the witch is to hear grass growing).¹¹ Natural phenomena such as the sun, the moon, shadows, mist, and dust; artificial things, such as roads, houses, villages, or castles; and even abstractions, such as geometrical shapes, are used as though they were the component symbols of a mythology: The frequency and stylistic solemnity with which they are invoked suggests ritual incantation, while their multivalence resists rational allegorization and locates meaning in the telling itself rather than in any encoded "truth" behind the telling. The argument may be described as a rediscovery of sacredness in the world—a rewriting of its profane text as myth, and a negation of the authority of philosophical materialism. Such a reading is corroborated by the syntax in which these topoi are suspended. Shevchuk's language is rich in long but uncomplicated compound sentences that emit an air of liturgical solemnity and primeval simplicity:

Slowly he retreated into the depths of the green twilight, the rain pattered and splashed, and he gazed with sadness, and the green twilight suddenly blossomed with unexpected light: in front of him lay a translucent sphere, and he was to enter it. Thither led the blue, shimmering road, along which he walked; behind was his house with his sad wife and his happy children.¹²

This passage contains one of the most pervasive of Shevchuk's mythological images, and one that is emblematic of his mythogenic enterprise: the circle or sphere. It appears memorably in one of his earliest stories, where it helps illustrate the impressionist thesis that the world is what we (physiologically) see it to be: "Outside the window the mist was beginning to thin and the outlines of two decorative maple trees, like balls, became more clearly visible. I used to love lying in my room, pressing my fingers to my eyelids and watching the two green balls leap and divide."¹³ The image appears in a bewildering variety of forms: as a clock-face or the planet

9. Oleksandr Onyshko, "Real'nist' khymernoho," *Vitchyzna*, 1982, no. 11, 198. See also Mykola Riabchuk, "Knyha dobra i zla za Valeriiem Shevchukom," *Vitchyzna*, 1988, no. 2, 176–179.

10. For a description of this strategy of mystification see my article, "'Dim na hori' Valeriia Shevchuka," *Suchasnist'*, 27 (1987), no. 11 (319), 32–33.

11. *Try lystky za viknom* (Kiev: Radians'kyi pys'mennyk, 1986), 27, 29 and 278 (benign); 24 and 269 (malign); 24; 269; 278. *Dim na hori* (Kiev: Radians'kyi pys'mennyk, 1986), 461.

12. *Dim Na hori*, 44.

13. "Barvy osinn'oho sadu," dated 1964, in *Sered tyzhnia* (Kiev: Radians'kyi pys'mennyk, 1967), 12.

earth in deliberations on time; in apocalyptic landscapes as a terrifying tumbleweed or as a grotesque rolling pumpkin; as the sun, both benign and threatening; as a menacing spherical cloud of red dust; as balls of light, not akin to any natural phenomena; as a snake biting its own tail; as the circular path described by the disoriented traveler attempting to move in a straight line; as “large spherical bodies” floating in the sky, in which “human likenesses were discernible, elongated and altered, as in a curved mirror,” and in many other embodiments.¹⁴

Shevchuk’s circle or sphere might be regarded as his answer to the halo of a Christian saint (which also, under one symbol, unites virtues and biographies of the most diverse kind) or to the Hindu or Buddhist mandala, the circle drawn to create a holy precinct. If, as Mircea Eliade assures us, the mandala is a representation of the cosmos and the pantheon and the making of a mandala accordingly a reenactment of world creation and a therapeutic return to the origin of time,¹⁵ then we are entitled to see Shevchuk’s repeated acts of mandala drawing as a ritual of healing the world and restoring its sacral dimension.

The language and imagery of Shevchuk’s works, both those that use supernatural motifs and those that do not, are pervaded by mythological topoi that present the restitution of the sacred. The epiphany in which true reality reveals itself to a sensitive observer is just as much a part of the experience of the realistic hero of “Dolyna dzherel” as it is of Ivan the Goatherd, the seer in *Dim na hori*. The realistic hero can derive “the harmony necessary for the soul” from a vision of jackhammers chewing at the ground and construction cranes circling the sky—a sensation akin to the “strange, lucid tranquillity” and the “intentness and quiet joy” Ivan experiences as he comprehends “the union of everything animate.”¹⁶

The supernatural is, nonetheless, an important contributor to the mythological ambience. Shevchuk borrows motifs and personages from folklore and creates new ones in their image. He makes use of the Bluebeard plot and the motif of the righteous man who makes the devil do his bidding.¹⁷ We encounter the shaman in his Ukrainian incarnation as *znakhar* or *kharakternyk*.¹⁸ In Shevchuk’s demonology we recognize the night rider, the witch, the *perelesnyk* and the *domovyk* from European and Slavic myth, the tempter-devils from the *Pechers’kyi pateryk* [Patericon of the caves], and Pan Twardowski, the Polish Faust.¹⁹ Others—such as the bird-man succubus who flies to the house on the hill and is transformed into a dandy in dapper grey suit and impeccably lacquered shoes or Satanovs’ky in the novel *Try lystky za viknom*—appear to be original inventions.

From the rhetorical perspective, Shevchuk’s use of this folkloric and pseudofolkloric pan-demonium can be explained in two ways (in addition to the well-tried ability of the supernatural and the uncanny to seize and hold the reader’s attention). First is the project of recovering the sacred. If the universe is indwelt by something other than matter, then the traditional spirit world is a serviceable symbol for this indwelling, for it is more familiar, even to a secularized audience, than any new authorial creation might be. The second model is political. Since Nikolai Gogol’ at least the remnants of pagan myth have formed part of the definition of Ukraine as a provincial and comical place of primarily ethnographic interest; I have argued elsewhere that, by

14. *Naberezhna*, 12. *Seredokhrestia* (Kiev: Molod’, 1968), 90; *Try lystky za viknom*, 186; “Vohnyshche,” in *Dolyna dzherel* (Kiev: Radians’kyi pysmennyk, 1981), 172; *Try lystky za viknom*, 47, 265, 25, 29, 97, 281, 30, 33, and 158; *Dim na hori*, 188; *Try lystky za viknom*, 31; *Dim na hori*, 260 and 232; *Try lystky za viknom*, 54.

15. Mircea Eliade, *Patterns in Comparative Religion*, 4th impression (London: Sheed and Ward, 1979), 372–373.

16. *Dolyna dzherel*, 8; *Dim na hori*, 115. The moment of the cockcrow is, similarly, such an epiphany moment: *Kryk pivnia na svitanku* (Kiev: Molod’, 1979), 6.

17. *Try lystky za viknom*, 303, and the novella “Shvets’” in *Dim na hori*.

18. *Try lystky za viknom*, 303.

19. The novellas of the second half of *Dim na hori* contain night riders and witches and tempters appear throughout *Na poli smyrennomu*, *Dnipro*, 1982, no. 1, 70–112 and no. 2, 66–104. Pan Twardowski is in “Vid’ma” and “Syvi khmary,” *Dim na hori*, 279–291 and 292–308.

taking the old folkloric idiom and fashioning it into the sophisticated carrier of a high art, Shevchuk endeavors to free the Ukrainian ethnographic world of this literary image.²⁰

For all that we have said of mythologizing topoi, Valerii Shevchuk does not consciously advance a new mythology, not even as an unintended consequence of their aesthetic functioning. Shevchuk's opus, rather, expresses a yearning for a mythological age, and this yearning is the formulation of a discontent with the prevailing state of the world.

The same is true of Shevchuk's use of religious topoi, which do not promote a new religious feeling or the restoration of an old one. The presence of Christian images and notions, in particular, is not tantamount to a profession of faith by Shevchuk, who has more than once undertaken a rudimentary critique of Christianity.²¹ Religious topoi, however, contribute to Shevchuk's lament over the irreversible march of the secular.

Shevchuk's writing abounds in quotations and borrowings from religious texts. The epigraphs of chapters in *Dim na hori*, for example, include excerpts from a Babylonian prayer; the story "Dyiavol, iakoho nema" (The devil who does not exist) contains a discussion between the hero and the religious polemicist Ivan Vyshens'kyi (c. 1545–c. 1620), in which Vyshens'kyi's words are direct quotations, in modern Ukrainian translation, of his *Oblichenie diavola miroderzhitsa* (Unmasking of the devil, ruler of this world).²² Biblical motifs, such as those of the prodigal son or of Samson emasculated by the loss of his hair, are widely used; the Egyptian plagues are echoed in Shevchuk's hail of stones and rain that brings death.²³ (The last also alludes to a contemporary ecological scourge, acid rain.) The narrative of Petro Turchynov's'kyi in *Try lystky*, in which the symbol of the net plays an important role and in which the narrator and the central figures of his four stories are called "Petro," contains allusions to the apostolic Fisher of Men, except that the metaphor is inverted: The World is the fisher, the Peters are its prey, and the purpose of the fishing is not Christian salvation but secular damnation. Shevchuk finds use even for two discernibly religious genres: the parable and the patericon. The first narrator of *Try lystky* writes a series of parables in order to give form to his insights into the "mudrist' peredvichna" and a patericon—that of the Monastery of the Caves—is the basis for *Na poli smyrennomu*. Not only is the form parodied, but the very plots serve in some fashion as well.

Shevchuk formulates some religious notions, such as the ideals of nirvana or of asceticism, as part of arguments which do not, in the end, guide the reader to share these notions. A range of Christian moral precepts (recognized by Soviet critics as humanist principles, which, naturally, they are as well) are embodied as high norms in Shevchuk's satirical works and are proposed to the reader as unqualified absolutes, not as topoi carrying some other argumentative baggage. The vices of greed, egotism, anger, gluttony, and hypocrisy, for example, are denounced, while the virtues of generosity, honesty, moderation, and responsibility are upheld in an unmediated and straightforward manner.

An early work, *Naberezna, 12*, is built on a foundation of such Christian moral notions. Set in 1956 and written in the 1960s, it can usefully be interpreted as a celebration of the healing potential of the post-Stalin thaw. *Naberezna, 12* follows the lives of several groups of characters living in one house. Initially they are at odds with each other, unhappy and beset by social problems: Pavlo the cobbler is an alcoholic, Sashko is a latchkey child, Lusia has become preg-

20. See my article, "National Idioms in Soviet Literature? The Case of the Ukrainian Whimsical Novel," in *Literature and National Cultures*, ed. Brian Edwards (Geelong: Deakin University Centre for Studies in Literary Education, 1988), 109–116.

21. See "I metafory real'noho zhyttia," the record of an interview conducted by Mykola Zhulyns'kyi, in Zhulyns'kyi, *Nablyzhennia* (Kiev: Dnipro, 1986), 233, and Valerii Shevchuk, "Myslenne derevo," *Zhovten'*, 1986, no. 10: 17–18.

22. Vyshens'kyi's works were published in modern Ukrainian in 1986 in a translation by Shevchuk: Ivan Vyshens'kyi, *Tvory* (Kiev: Dnipro, 1986).

23. *Dim na hori*, 191, 354–378; *Try lystky za viknom*, 291; *Na poli smyrennomu*, *Dnipro*, 1982, no. 2: 88.

nant out of marriage, and the accountant, who once informed on a neighbor who was then sent to Siberia, is guilt-ridden. The situation may be intentionally conceived in religious terms. The cobbler, seeking relief from his spiritual and social anxiety, reenacts the narrative of the “testing of the faiths” from the Primary Chronicle: He examines the relative virtues of three religious groups—the Baptists, the Jews, and the Catholics—before deciding unlike the chronicler’s Volodimer, that he will find no solace in formal religious practice. Problems resolve themselves without supernatural assistance, as the novel works toward a reconciliation, achieved at Liusia’s wedding, of all the characters with each other. The ceremony and the wedding meal are the secularized remnants of the sacraments of matrimony and the eucharist. Yet the harmony that descends upon the assembly, in the manner of divine grace, suggests that the profane has been resacralized.

As for the informer, he too resolves his guilt in a way that we can only term Christian, so strongly reminiscent is it of the sacrament of confession. The sinner experiences contrition, performs the act of confession (in this case to his victim), and does penance by quitting his home town.

Shevchuk has two kinds of philosophical topoi: those that contribute merely to a pervading air of profundity that augments the mythological tone and those that are more specifically directed parts of the argument. The former category includes allusions to heroes of philosophy (Hryhorii Skovoroda, Plato), commonplace motifs associated with the acquisition of wisdom (the youth who enquires of the sage how to live, the journey of education), and commonplace philosophical notions—epistemological, aesthetic, and ethical.²⁴ Epistemological topoi in Shevchuk’s works include the semimystical awareness of a higher truth that is inexpressible and the feebleness of theory and of book learning.²⁵ He employs the aesthetic topos, familiar from Friedrich Schiller, of the contrast between naive and sentimental creativity.²⁶ His philosophical topoi often stand in opposition to each other: Skovoroda’s imperative of escape from the world and passive nonresistance to evil contrasted with the stoic pursuit of virtuous action, the recognition of the vanity of the world and the affirmation of the value of existence; the Darwinian amorality of the life struggle and a morality based on revealed truth.²⁷

The topoi that bear on the philosophy of history, however, are at the center of what we may read as the boldest and most important political arguments implicit in Shevchuk’s prose. Three topoi of time, all of them familiar and well-used in literature, are encountered in Shevchuk’s works: cyclical time, with prototypes in the time experience of the archaic, rural, precivilized world; linear time, conceived as infinite chronological progression, the common-sense time experienced by modern secular humankind; and chiliastic time, which regards linear time as the prelude to a posthistory, an eschatological, utopian, or dystopian state in which there is no further change.

From these temporal topoi are constructed the arguments of the two great novels, *Dim na hori* and *Try lystky za viknom*. *Dim na hori* includes two contrasting kinds of narrative: The frame story is a mythical account of how things are and have been in the house since the beginning: One generation of women succeeds another and each is visited first by a succubus then by a human male. Ten novellas, about half of the novel, are narratives of a seer who is a character in the frame story. These novellas, for all their demonological and uncanny trappings, are governed

24. Ivan the Goatherd is a reader of Skovoroda (*Dim na hori*, 26), while the most virtuous figure in *Try lystky* is called Mykola Platonovych Biliashivs’kyi; *Try lystky za viknom*, 18; journeys of education include that of Illia Turchynovs’kyi in *Try lystky za viknom* and of the boy in *Dim na hori*.

25. *Try lystky za viknom*, 28; *Na poli smyrennomu, Dnipro*, 1982, no. 2, 100.

26. “Postril,” *Dolyna dzherel*, 215.

27. Escape from the world is thematized in the first two narratives of *Try lystky za viknom*; virtuous action can be found in *Na poli smyrennomu, Dnipro*, 1982, no. 1, 75; *Dim na hori*, 240. See, for example, the opposition between the world outlooks of Kyriak Satanovs’kyi (creator of the notion of the “human forest”) and Illia Turchynovs’kyi in *Try lystky za viknom*.

by linear time: They progress by an unfolding of information that generates tension and surprise, but in doing so they construct a world of fear, uncertainty, and tragedy.

By strategies too complex to describe here,²⁸ the reader understands that the novellas offer an authoritative, if gloomy, interpretation of the world, while the frame narrative creates a world of humanity and meaning that, from the authorial perspective, is preferred but is an unreal and archaic idyll. The temporal structure of the novel thus reduces to the topos of the golden age in which the present is tawdry, paltry, and diminished in contrast to some happy time which has been or ought to be.²⁹ As always, the topos of the golden age, consisting of melancholy concerning the present and a nostalgia for another time whether past or future, is open to a political reading.

Try lystky puts the somewhat abstract and unlocalized ennui of *Dim na hori* into historical and geographical perspective. It writes the history, not of culture in general, but of a particular culture, the Ukrainian, as the history of a Spenglerian decline. The book contains three stories told by first-person narrators, each the descendant of his narrator-predecessor, living in the seventeenth, eighteenth, and nineteenth centuries in Ukraine. The triptych chronicles a change in the manner and objective of human cognition and a decline in the dignity of human intellectual concerns. Illia Turchynovs'kyi, a representative of the Baroque worldview and, like Skovoroda, a wandering visionary, seeks to apprehend transcendental knowledge; he derives mystical insights—revealing ethical principles rather than divine personages—from vision and dream, and strives to reiterate them in aesthetic form as parable and drama, thus allowing others to share them. His grandson, Petro Turchynovs'kyi, is a man of the Enlightenment. A servant of the judiciary of the hetmanate, his quest for truth is justified by a pragmatic consideration: the forensic needs of the state, in this case the discovery of a murderer. He pursues his truth, conceived of in factual terms, through rational enquiry and skeptical criticism of evidence. The nineteenth century narrator, Satanovs'kyi, is obsessed with the trappings of rationalism—he is an addict to systematization and classification—but his activity bypasses the quest for truth and is determined by a utilitarian political goal: the maintenance of the Russian Empire.

This decline in the spiritual scope of the successive narrators' epistemological ambitions parallels the growth of the state. In Illia Turchynovs'kyi's experience the state does not figure at all; in Petro's eighteenth century it enforces justice, and in Satanovs'kyi's nineteenth it is an omnipotent and malign leviathan, an empire with remnants of the original idea of enlightened centralism in perverted form. The consequences of this misfired "enlightenment" are bureaucratism, grotesque inefficiency, arbitrary use of power, alienation, and lack of freedom. Like E. T. A. Hoffmann and other romantic critics of the rising state in the early nineteenth century, Shevchuk selected the automaton as his symbol of the functionalized, spiritually disfranchised human being: "We prepare these children," reflects Satanovs'kyi, who is a teacher by profession, "to become cogs in the gigantic human machine that is our empire, but are we not cogs ourselves? Do I not myself become a mechanical doll as I sit on this dais?"³⁰ What Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno, in a later period, called the dialectic of Enlightenment, has run its course: The application of seemingly rational organizational principles has resulted in a cruel caricature of rationalism.³¹ The otherwise puzzling image of a boar rooting up a square-shaped plot of earth, a dream-vision of Illia Turchynovs'kyi, may well be emblematic of this dialectic.³² In several mythologies, as Eliade points out, the square inscribed in a circle is a symbol of sacred place. It often forms the initial plan of a settlement (as, for example, very probably

28. See, however, "'Dim na hori' Valeriia Shevchuka," *Suchasnist'*, 27, no. 11 (1987): 34–36.

29. See Walter Veit, "Studien zur Geschichte des Topos der goldenen Zeit von der Antike bis zum 18. Jahrhundert" (Diss., University of Cologne, 1961).

30. *Dim na hori*, 400.

31. Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno, *Dialektik der Aufklärung. Philosophische Fragmente* (Frankfurt a.M.: Fischer, 1969).

32. *Try lystky za viknom*, 104.

in the case of Rome) and represents the center of the cosmos.³³ In Illia's vision, however, the square is generated by a member of the pig family—an animal with few positive associations in literary tradition. An allegorical reading therefore suggests itself: The center that Turchynovs'kyi foresees is a false center, and those who, in creating it, violently impose the square (of rationalism?) on the round surface of the planet and thereby negate the sacred circularity of the mandala may be compared to swine in their insensitivity.

The plot as a chronicle of human regression intersects with the chiliastic time frame imposed by the demonic figure of the nineteenth century narrator, Satanovs'kyi. As a demon his place is in hell, but his sphere of activity is the Russian Empire. The reader is at liberty to construct a terrible syllogism: If the empire is hell, and hell is a place at the end of history, eternal, and knowing no further change, then the empire, too, is both hellish and everlasting. It remains for readers to decide whether this eternity encompasses their own present and the country in which they live.

Shevchuk's mythological, religious, and philosophical topoi, then, present to contemporary Ukrainian readers substantial arguments about the political and cultural dimensions of their lives. At different stages in Shevchuk's career these topoi have formulated a series of increasingly pessimistic political outlooks—from reformist optimism in *Naberezhna*, 12 through a generalized discontent with the present in *Dim na hori* to a bitter condemnation, in *Try lystky*, of the Russian Empire and, potentially, the successor state that it metonymically represents. Within cultural debate, mythological and religious topoi have affirmed the notion and the experience of the sacred without claiming authority for any particular mythology or religion. They have also defined a position in an implicit debate concerning the conservation of national cultural heritage.³⁴

Mythological, religious, and philosophical topoi are also part of Shevchuk's sustained argument for a cultural revitalization of the medieval and baroque past of Ukraine, not excluding its presecular, spiritual dimension. As an element of cultural tradition, the presecular past once again produces original aesthetic creativity. Thus Shevchuk's *Na poli smyrennomu* is an against-the-grain reading of the *Pateryk pechers'kyi*, an enduringly popular medieval collection of hagiographical lives of notable monks in the Kiev Monastery of the Caves. *Na poli smyrennomu* is composed as an ironic commentary on the *Pateryk* and unmasks the original work's monastic ideology.³⁵ This unmasking comes not from the standpoint of scientific atheism, but from a third position, that of the narrator who, although skeptical of dogma, is open to a pantheist awareness of transcendental sense-imposing principle. The position of the author "himself" among all of these distancing mechanisms is deliberately unclear, but he does not deliver an atheist credo.

Shevchuk's use of ecclesiastical themes and some of the religious and philosophical issues of past centuries in contemporary literature has not only expanded the potential aesthetic interpretations of the past, but also legitimated a more complex image of Ukrainian cultural history. His favorite period, the baroque of the seventeenth and the first half of the eighteenth centuries, was the last in which Ukraine had an autonomous, full-scale or, to use Dmytro Chyzhevskiy's term, "complete" culture of its own,³⁶ one that extended socially from the aristocratic to the

33. Eliade, *Patterns*, 373.

34. An open debate on this issue characterized the period following the Twenty-Seventh Party Congress, when calls for the study, translation, and publication of early Ukrainian texts; for the preservation of historical monuments; and for the intensification of research into Ukrainian history became commonplace. See, for example, the speeches at the June 1987 plenum of the Writers' Union of Ukraine as reported in *Literaturna Ukraina*, 9 July 1987.

35. Not unexpectedly, this feature of *Na poli smyrennomu* has attracted the attention of Soviet reviewers. See, for example, Leonid Novychenko, "Pro roman Val. Shevchuka 'Na poli smyrennomu.'" *Dnipro*, 1982, no. 2, 104, and Petro Maidanchenko, "U tii boliuchii dobroti," *Zhovten'*, 1983, no. 4, 127.

36. Dmytro Čyževs'kyj, *A History of Ukrainian Literature: From the 11th to the End of the 19th Century*, trans. Dolly Ferguson, Doreen Gorsline, and Ulana Petyk; ed. George S. N. Luckyj (Littleton, Colo.: Ukrainian Academic Press, 1975), 374.

popular and manifested itself in a wide range of the arts—music, literature, and architecture in particular—through characteristic local styles and possessed a native intellectual leadership in the Kiev Academy with its elite of ecclesiastical literati. It was also the last period of extended political autonomy enjoyed by Ukraine before its complete absorption into the empire in the fourth quarter of the eighteenth century. The baroque had been proscribed territory for Ukrainian literature between the 1930s and the 1970s, except insofar as it could be used by such writers as Petro Panch, Ivan Le, and Natan Rybak, and, in the early 1930s, Pavlo Zahrebel'nyi in reiterating the account, essential for the legitimist mythology of the Soviet Union, of the 1654 union between the Ukrainian Cossacks and Muscovy at Pereiaslav.

Shevchuk has, therefore, created readings of the past that are not guided by state ideology, that do not reiterate the thesis of the beneficent centrality of Moscow, and that allude to the former wealth, autonomy, and dignity of Ukrainian culture. We recall that Shevchuk's works also argue for an end to the long-standing link between the ethnographic and the provincial and, thereby, for new authority and prestige for an important element of Ukrainian culture.

Of course, such an argument takes shape circumspectly. The denial of the center's authority can contain no direct or superficially evident effect but must emerge as a possibility from the Aesopian substratum. The text allows for plausible critical readings that can conclude that the author is a champion of the prevailing orthodoxy. Mykola Zhulyns'kyi can assert that *Try lystky* is an anticlerical text that applauds secularization.³⁷ Shevchuk cannot afford simply to substitute one authority for another, as Mykola Rudenko did in *Orlova Balka* [Eagle's ravine, 1982], which urges its readers to adopt a physiocratic, instead of a Marxist, economic model and does not promote the intellectual and cultural openness fundamental to Shevchuk's project. On the other hand, Shevchuk does not favor, as Oles' Honchar did in *Sobor* [The cathedral, 1968], a mere modification of the manner in which the center exercises its authority. Shevchuk is far more radical. He seeks an alternative to authority itself: Escape from the world's structures, the baroque ideal most frequently invoked in the first two narratives of *Try lystky*, might well serve as an emblem for his work as a whole.

To transcend immutable and exclusive hierarchies of cultural values, Shevchuk's prose, therefore, delivers materials to the reader that might help shape a new Ukrainian cultural identity or identities. Previous attempts at such new beginnings had taken as their departure the rejection of traditions. Ivan Kotliarevs'kyi's *Eneida* [Aeneid, published between 1798 and 1842] pointed to the paradigm of romantic ethnographism and turned its back on ecclesiastical literary culture; Mykola Khvyl'ovyi called for a new literature suitable to the temper of the postrevolutionary 1920s and rejected ethnographism as provincialism.

Shevchuk proceeds differently. His innovation was not to reject but to absorb old idioms and to use them to invest his national literature with widened aesthetic and intellectual possibilities. In this respect he is more tolerant and economical, and less authoritarian, than his predecessors.

37. "U vichnomu zmahanni za istynu," introduction, *Try lystky za viknom*, 5.