



## The Shifting Object of Desire: The Poetry of Oleksandr Irvanets

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### Abstract

Oleksandr Irvanets produced some of his best known works shortly after Ukraine's declaration of independence in 1991. The writer's irreverent, ironic, and humorous reworking of the Ukrainian self-image is analyzed. Using the writings of Slavoj Žižek and Jacques Lacan, the author argues that the poems surprise the reader by dislocating the object of desire from its expected, "traditional," place, and relocating it in another, wholly unexpected, one. In this way Irvanets reveals existing fantasy structures both in the patriotic poem and in the Soviet cliché. He questions their validity and suggests the need for a new sense of identity.

### Keywords

Ukrainian literature, post-independence, new identity, Oleksandr Irvanets

Oleksandr Irvanets (along with Yuriy Andrukhovych and Viktor Neborak) is a member of the Bu-Ba-Bu trio that achieved fame in the late eighties and especially around the time of Ukraine's declaration of independence in 1991. The group is best known for its irreverent, ironic, and often humorous reworking of the Ukrainian self-image. As Andrukhovych has admitted, the outdated attitudes and pieties on display in the nation's cultural life were too attractive a target to ignore: "literature directed and tempted us with undomesticated nooks, unpopulated spaces, and outdated taboos that we wanted so much to break."<sup>1</sup> Bu-Ba-Bu, whose name is formed from the Ukrainian words for buffoonery (*bufonada*), farce (*balahan*), and burlesque (*burlesk*), aimed at shattering, among other things, populist culture's naïve self-image: a picture of innocence, purity, and modesty "so becoming in every young miss" but less appropriate in an older woman when she is beginning to "age and dry

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<sup>1</sup> Iurii Andrukhovych, "Ave, 'Kraisler'! Poiasnennia ochevydnoho," *Suchasnist'* 5 (1994): 7-8.

out.”<sup>2</sup> This attitude drew the trio into a playful, deflationary and “deconstructivist” literary game in which they turned accepted and sometimes revered images inside out. Around the year 1992 Irvanets produced some of his most amusing and best known “deconstructivist” lyrics, bringing great delight to many readers and outraging others. How these poems achieve their effect has rarely been given consideration. Beyond some critical examination of their erotic imagery and their impact as political satire, they have not attracted close analysis. It is suggested here that many of the poems derive their strength by dislocating the object of desire from its expected, “traditional” place, and relocating it in another wholly unexpected one, with results that can be both hilarious and disturbing, depending on how wedded the reader is to a “traditional” form of expression.

Take, for example, the author’s most often anthologized poem, the now famous parody of Volodymyr Sosiura’s “Liubit Ukrainu” (Love Ukraine, 1944). Sosiura’s poem became a cause célèbre, when in 1951, during a clamp-down on expressions of Ukrainian patriotism in the post-war period, it was denounced for expressing love for “some primordial Ukraine, Ukraine in general” rather than the actual Soviet one. The decision to parody this classic expression on love for one’s homeland was already a provocative act. Irvanets models his own “Liubit!” (Love, 1992) on Sosiura’s earlier lyric, employing the same distinctive phrasing and meter. However, he enjoins readers to love not Ukraine, but Oklahoma, Indiana, Northern and Southern Dakota, Alabama, Iowa, California, Florida, Nevada, the District of Columbia, Georgia, Montana, Louisiana, Arizona, Alaska, Nebraska, and Virginia. The list of states, all of which have feminine endings in Ukrainian, suggest a list of female lovers. The poem hints at the need to share one’s affection generously, even to the point of promiscuity. In this way it achieves precisely the opposite effect to the one intended by Sosiura’s work, which exhorted readers to love Ukraine particularly, if not exclusively, not to be ashamed of this love, nor to dissolve it in a wider entity, such as the USSR, communism, the Soviet way of life, or Russia. When it appeared in 1944, Sosiura’s message was a bold departure from what had previously been allowed writers as a statement on wartime suffering. It was only allowed publication because during the war the regime briefly supported the expression of both a Russian and a Ukrainian patriotism as part of a drive to mobilize the population. Irvanets, however, calls upon

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<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 8.

Ukrainians to love all American states. As the poem develops, readers realize that they are being instructed in a rather didactic, earnest style to repeatedly shift the object of their love from state to state, and – incongruously and inanely – to concentrate their love exclusively on the USA (perhaps also its women). The parody is shocking because Sosiura’s “Liubit Ukrainu,” after being introduced into school curriculums in late Soviet times, now enjoys canonical status in the pantheon of patriotic statements. Its treatment by the regime in 1951 attached to it a further subtext: national persecution in Stalin’s time. Ukrainian readers would not be unaware of this subtext. And yet, patriotism and victimhood are precisely the parody’s target. Moreover, the poem appeared immediately after the declaration of independence, a time when there was an outpouring of national pride, and many readers would have expected sentiments and a form of expression appropriate to a celebratory, solemn moment.

The poem achieves its effect by taking Sosiura’s message quite literally and making explicit some underlying but unspoken assumptions. Sosiura urges young women and men to consider the fact that their prospective partners in life might not love them if they do not love their homeland. This warning is repeated by Irvanets who makes the message even more direct by reducing it to an injunction: suppress sexual instincts in favour of love of patria. As he puts it in his most unsubtle manner, young men should cultivate a love that is “stronger than the lure for the vulva” (*sylnishu, nizh potiah do vulv*). The object of desire has here shifted disconcertingly not only from territory to territory, and perhaps person to person, but also from love to sexual desire. Moreover, by moving to a lower register – the language not of love, but of sex – Sosiura’s strategy of blackmailing lovers is made to look ridiculous. Irvanets is in fact laying bare the working of an ideological ritual: the declaration of love for the homeland, the eroticization of this patriotism, and the threat of being denied a sex life if the ritualistic sentiment is not accepted. This structure of thought and feeling is sustained by a hidden fantasy: the link between patriotism, love, marital bliss, and sexual satisfaction. However, it is only a veiled formulation in Sosiura, an ideological message that cannot entirely be acknowledged openly. Irvanets challenges not so much patriotic convictions and desires, but the external ideological ritual of declaring one’s love of nation, and the formulaic and insipid sentiments that inevitably results from any institutionalized and repeated recitation. When patriotism demands such ritualistic recitations, it is ineffective; the partially suppressed fantasy that nourished the original poetic expression begins to appear feeble and ridiculous. The poems of both

Sosiura and Irvanets can be found alongside their English translations in the recent anthology of Ukrainian poetry compiled and edited by Olha Luchuk and Michael M. Naydan:

Любіть!

*Присвячую В. М. Сосюрі*

Любіть Оклахому! Вночі і в обід,  
 Як нььку і дедді достоту.  
 Любіть Індіану. Й так само любіть  
 Північну й Південну Дакоту.  
 Любіть Алабаму в загравах пожеж,  
 Любіть її в радощі й біди.  
 Айову любіть. Каліфорнію теж.  
 І пальми крислаті Флориди.  
 Дівчино! Хай око твоє голубе, –  
 Та не за фізичнії вади –  
 Коханий любити не встане тебе,  
 Коли ти не любиш Невади.  
 Юначе! Ти мусиш любити стократ  
 Сильніше, ніж любиш кохану,  
 Колумбію-округ і Джорджію-штат,  
 Монтану і Луїзіану.  
 Любити не зможеш ти штатів других,  
 Коли ти не любиш по-братськи  
 Полів Арізони й таких дорогих  
 Просторів Аляски й Небраски.  
 Любов цю, сильнішу, ніж потяг до вульв,  
 Плекай у душі незникому.  
 Вірджінію-штат, як Вірджінію Вульф,  
 Люби.

І люби – Оклахому!

Love!

*Dedicated to V. M. Sosiura*

Love Oklahoma! At night and at supper.  
 Love your mom and your dad quite equal.  
 Love Indiana. And the very same way  
 Love Northern and Southern Dakota!  
 Love Alabama in the red glow of fires,  
 Love her in joy in misfortune,  
 Be sure to love Iowa. And California, too.  
 And the branchy palms of Florida.  
 Teenybopper! It's not for your eye so blue,

And not for your physical defects,  
If you stop loving Nevada  
Your love will stop loving you too.  
Hey guy! You have to love a hundred times  
Stronger than you love your Love,  
The District of Columbia and Georgia the state,  
Montana along with Louisiana.  
You can't love any other states  
If you don't brotherly love  
The Arizona fields and the charming  
Alaskan Nebraskan wide open space.  
This love is stronger than the lure for the vulva,  
Cultivate the eternal in your soul.  
Love Virginian the state like you do Virginia the Woolf,  
And be sure to love – Oklahoma!<sup>3</sup>

A similar need to break with outworn sentiments and empty forms is the motivating force in other works. In one short story entitled “Lvivska brama” (Lviv Gate, 2002) a character finds himself in the house of a man who has a strange personal museum. The collection of historical objects includes the beard of Mykhailo Hrushevsky, the Chairman of the Central Rada in 1917 and Ukraine’s most distinguished historian, whose works laid the foundation for later scholarship in a number of fields. The collection also includes hair from Avhustyn Voloshyn (the President of the Carpathian-Ukrainian state in 1939), from Yaroslav Stetsko (a leader of the Organization of Ukrainian Nationalists at the time of the Second World War and in emigration), and from other leaders of the government in exile of the Ukrainian People’s Republic (1917-1920). There is no demand for this esoteric collection of artifacts, but the owner keeps a few hairs from each figure “just in case.” Readers might see in this a humorous comment on the importance of Hrushevsky, whose entire beard has been preserved, and the lesser significance of other figures, from whom only a few hairs have been kept. There is also a large package of old papers called the Ukrainian Idea, which the collector asks his unexpected guest to transport to Kyiv. The latter does so, but accidentally drops the enormous bundle into the Dnipro, where it sinks. The collection of artifacts could be interpreted as a comment on the fossilization of Ukrainian history, which, because it only survives in museums, has a limited impact on

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<sup>3</sup> Oleksandr Irvanets’, “Liubit’!,” in *A Hundred Years of Youth: A Bilingual Anthology of 20th Century Ukrainian Poetry*, ed. Olha Luchuk and Michael M. Naydan (Lviv: Litopys, 2000), pp. 640-41.

contemporary life. The fact that his guest loses the bundle of papers underscores this point: the collector clings to preserving only the hollow forms of the past, slowly fading expressions of past idealism. Contemporaries are saddled with these forms and must pass them on to others, until the time comes when they can finally be jettisoned. The contrast between two ideologies – one contemporary and one frozen in the past – and the attachment to the formal structures each generates, is also the basic organizing principle of his novel *Rivne-Rovno* (2002). This work describes the writer's hometown as separated by a kind of Berlin wall: one half belongs to the West and lives a modern existence, while the other remains stuck in the Soviet zone and maintains all the characteristic features of the communist era.

The desired objects in Irvanets's poetry might be seen as elements in the mediating screen of fantasy that is thrown up between the desiring subject and the inaccessible Other. According to Slavoj Žižek's reading of Jacques Lacan, a fantasy teaches us how to desire. It provides a "schema" according to which certain objects in reality allow us to project desires upon them.<sup>4</sup> The structuring of fantasy is of primary importance. In "Liubit!" Irvanets takes the formal symbolic structure of the patriotic poem, as provided by Sosiura, and then shifts between various objects of desire. Readers are allowed to fill in the blanks with their own eroticized desire, perhaps as they imagine how and why they should love Oklahoma, Indiana, Northern and Southern Dakota, and so on. The author's strategy is to fragment and deterritorialize the object of desire, in this way questioning its validity. In the same way readers of the short story and novel are confronted with and made to ponder the fantasy life that has produced such strange phenomena as the collection of artifacts or the museum-town of Rovno. If a literary work is to be effective, Žižek has argued, the desire that animates it has to be partially suppressed, to remain "implicit" and to maintain a distance from the explicit symbolic texture it sustains. Too close and obvious an identification destroys the literary work's power.<sup>5</sup> For this reason even the most harmonious art is a priori fragmentary and allusive; it always relies on the distance from fantasy. According to such a reading, by bringing the erotic fantasy into the open, often in the most direct manner, Irvanets breaks the artistic spell and produces a humorous reaction. He undermines the ideological edifice by making an identification that is too literal, and thus deliberately erodes the required minimal distance from explicit statement. By fragmenting the object of desire, by displacing it in time and place, and – in

<sup>4</sup> Slavoj Žižek, *The Plague of Fantasies* (London: Verso, 1997), p. 7.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 19.

the case of his “Liubit!” – by making the sexual content too explicit, Irvanets throws into question the homogeneity and solidity of some historical and cultural constructs.

There is of course a deeply subversive element to this kind of parodic literature, as the strong reactions among some readers to Irvanets in particular and to the Bu-Ba-Bu group as a whole testify. At issue here is not so much the literal content of a given poem or a particular interpretation, but the fact that the work makes available the underlying fantasy sustaining a whole structure of thinking and feeling, and exposes how this fantasy is constructed. Discovering this procedure can be disconcerting, because, for one thing, it suggests that the desire and fascination are not absolutes, but can easily attach to something entirely different: “desire is, of course, metonymical; it shifts from one object to another; through all these displacements, however, desire none the less retains a minimum of formal consistence, a set of phantasmic features which, when they are encountered in a positive object, make us desire this object. . . . In a slightly different way, the same mechanism regulates the subject’s falling in love: the automatism of love is set in motion when some contingent, ultimately indifferent, (libidinal) object finds itself occupying a pre-given fantasy-place.”<sup>6</sup>

There have been many debunkers and “anti-patriots” in Ukrainian literature. Ivan Franko, Petro Karmansky, and Yevhen Malaniuk are among those who have in different ways denounced compatriots for speculating on national sentiments, or for clinging to outmoded, insincere, and unconvincing narrative patterns and imagery in an attempt to describe why they “love” their country or people. Edvard Strikha did a similar parodying of bombastic revolutionary and futurist poetry. The imagery of patriotic love has at different times focused on a glorious, heroic past; a village idyll replete with cherry orchards and beautiful maidens; a people who have suffered greatly and who have been denied their identity; and so on. But the parodic works of Irvanets and the Bu-Ba-Bu are perhaps subversive in a deeper way, since they draw attention to changing schemas and suggest the fundamental instability of any libidinal fantasy. By doing so, these works hint that those who accept the schemas are making themselves into willing instruments of the fantasy’s realization, committed believers who turn themselves into tools of a “big Other” that is hiding in the background. This “big Other” can be seen as a hidden mechanism that generates and directs fantasies; it has been

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<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 39.

compared to an invisible agency pulling the strings and running the show behind the stage curtains. It can be “divine Providence in Christian ideology, the Hegelian ‘cunning of Reason’ (or, rather, the popular version of it), the ‘invisible hand of the market’ in the commodity economy, the ‘objective logic of History’ in Marxism-Leninism, the ‘Jewish conspiracy’ in Nazism, etc.”<sup>7</sup> The role of such a hidden mechanism can vary: “It can function as a quieting and strengthening reassurance (religious confidence in God’s will; the Stalinist’s conviction that he is an instrument of historical necessity) or as a terrifying paranoid agency (as in the case of the Nazi ideology recognizing behind economic crisis, national humiliation, moral degeneration, etc., the same hidden hand of the Jew).”<sup>8</sup> From this perspective, the “big Other” that hides in the background and constructs the fantasy-life of nationalists can be identified as the dream of community solidarity, the interests of the homeland, or the organicist metaphor of a single people who live and breathe as one body. By bringing to light this powerful fantasy and by showing how it sustains an entire literary structure, Irvanets demystifies it and – for patriots at least – demonstrates the need for new literary structures capable of replacing it.

When an underlying fantasy structure is exposed, according to Žižek, the effect is similar to what viewers experience at the ending of Chaplin’s *City Lights*. The young woman has regained her sight. She has long fantasized about the man who provided her with money for the operation that allowed her to do so. All along she has expected him to be rich and the owner of a car. In the final scene, when she is able to touch and hear the voice of the tramp, she finally understands that her Prince Charming is in reality a wretched vagrant. When the young woman’s identification can no longer coincide with the object, the symbolic order (her world of linguistic communication, social relations and conventions) is destroyed. Throughout the film her gaze (the way she sees and understands being seen) has been aimed not at the tramp, but at someone else, a figure created by her own fantasy. As soon as she becomes aware of her mistake, she must deal with a disturbing and confusing reality, the “stain” presented by the tramp.<sup>9</sup>

Something similar occurs in several poems by Irvanets. “Aine klaine nachtmusik” (*Eine kleine Nachtmusik*, 1992) exemplifies this disillusioning

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<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>9</sup> Slavoj Žižek, *Enjoy Your Symptom! Jacques Lacan in Hollywood and Out* (New York: Routledge, 2001), p. 4.



procedure. The poem begins with some typical patriotic sentiments: Ukraine is described as a vast country and a nourishing mother (*nenka*). The exalted phrases recall songs that are sung as an affirmation of national solidarity or identity. References to well-known quotations set the tone and mood: “From the Don to the Sian” (*Vid Donu do Sianu*) expresses national political aspirations for a united Ukraine. Irvanets reverses the words in the line, which are “Vid Sianu do Donu.” “The Sun is low in the sky, the evening is near” (*Vzhe sontse nyzenko, Vzhe vechir blyzenko*) is a love song and aria from Mykola Lysenko’s operetta *Natalka-Poltavka* (1889). There follows another often expressed sentiment, the encouragement to include every member of the nation in the great family: “let us recall everyone” (*Davai spomianemo vsikh*). After such an opening, the reader expects a continuation of lofty civic feelings. However, this call to include every member of the nation is taken quite literally. The speaker begins enumerating the citizenry: astronauts circling the earth, amateur doctors (*kostopravy* also suggests thugs: people who “reset” bones), pederasts, millionaires, officers in the army, prostitutes – all of whom go about their daily lives without devoting much thought to being part of the “family.” This imagery of the motherland and its citizens cannot be idealized in any uncomplicated manner, since it is both “bitter and immaculate, sacred and hated” (*hirka i prechysta, sviata i nenavysna*). By interpreting the idea of community as quite literally all-inclusive, the poem exposes and punctures the unexpressed fantasy that underpins the solemn and ritualistic phrase “let us recall everyone.” The eclectic mixture of lines from different works and figures from different walks of life produces a pastiche whose intent is parodic.

The poem “Uroky klasyky: Tsykl” (*Lessons in the Classics: A Cycle*, 1992) achieves its effect in a similar way. Each of the poem’s three sections is a revelation of what is suppressed when a common phrase or cliché is spoken. The first such cliché is the instruction to “Squeeze the slave out of oneself, drop by drop” (*Po krapli vydavliuvaty z sebe raba*). The phrase was first used by Anton Chekhov in a letter to the publisher and journalist A. F. Suvorin on January 7, 1889. It is frequently used in order to express the need to “walk tall” or “straighten one’s spine,” and suggests that the servile behavior instilled in people by a long legacy of serfdom and imperial rule must be overcome.

Irvanets takes the well-known phrase and develops it, once more quite literally, elaborating it, in a way that resembles one of Maiakovsky’s long, “realized” metaphors. (Maiakovsky would take a metaphor such as “being on fire with love” and then describe in some detail the arrival of fire engines to put

out the towering human inferno.) The effect of such literalism is comic and bathetic:

Повільно з себе видушувати,  
Та все на папір,  
На папір ...  
Вичавлювати, витискувати,  
Як пасту з тюрбика ...<sup>10</sup>

Slowly squeeze it out of yourself,  
Right onto the paper,  
Onto the paper ...  
Force it out, squeeze it out,  
Like toothpaste from a tube ...

Far from developing an elevated sentiment and tone, the “realization” of the metaphor associates it with the physical and personal, suggesting in fact some sort of unpleasant medical operation.

The second cliché is “A human being is born for happiness, like a bird for flight” (*Liudyna rodytsia dlia shchastia, iak ptakh dlia polotu*). By describing specific birds, the author elaborates and concretizes this aphorism, which occurred in Vladimir Korolenko’s essay “Paradoks” (Paradox, 1894) and then in Maksim Gorky’s story “Starukha Izergil” (Old Izergil, 1895). However, the birds Irvanets mentions mostly do not fly at all or are not associated with gracefulness – either in flight or on the ground – and the resulting effect is once more comic bathos:

Як птах ...  
Як індик,  
Як півень,  
Як деркач на болоті?  
Як страус,  
Як ківі,  
Як ему,  
Чи як марабу?<sup>11</sup>

Like a bird ...  
Like a turkey,

<sup>10</sup> Oleksandr Irvanets’, “Uroky klasyky,” in *Bu-Ba-Bu* (Lviv: Kameniar, 1995), p. 91.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*

Like a cockerel,  
 Like a bittern in the mud?  
 Like an ostrich,  
 Like a kiwi,  
 Like an emu,  
 Or like a marabou?

And, finally, the third cliché, “Everything in a human being has to be beautiful” (*V liudyni vse musyt buty prekrasnym*), is taken from Chekhov’s *Diadia Vania* (Uncle Vania, 1899), in which Doctor Astrov says: “Everything in a human being ought to be beautiful: the face, and clothing, and spirit, and thoughts” (*V cheloveke vse dolzhno byt prekrasno: i litso, i odezhdha, i dusha, i mysl*). This overworked phrase is made to look ridiculous when taken quite literally:

В людині все мусить бути прекрасним:  
 Думки й почуття,  
 Пальто і сорочка,  
 Шкарпетки й підтяжки,  
 Зачіска, брови, вії,  
 Губи і зуби,  
 Ротова порожнина, слизова оболонка,  
 Волосся на голові,  
 В паху і під пахвами,  
 Нігті, шкіра, мозолі на п’ятах,  
 Кров, лімфа,  
 Шлунковий сік,  
 Геніталії і фекалії.  
 Усмішка її єдина,  
 Очі її одні.<sup>12</sup>

Everything in a human being has to be beautiful:  
 Thoughts and feelings,  
 Coat and shirt,  
 Socks and garters,  
 Hairstyle, brows, eyelashes,  
 Lips and teeth,  
 Oral cavity, saliva coating,  
 Hair on the head,  
 On the bosom and under the armpits,  
 Nails, skin, calluses on the heel,

<sup>12)</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 92.

Blood, lymph,  
 Stomach juices,  
 Genitalia and fecalia.  
 Every person's smile is singular  
 Their eyes unique.

All the phrases in the above poems were used in the Soviet school system with a frequency that emptied them of any richer meaning. The mind-numbing repetition of these celebrated phrases was often meant to “explain” literary classics by condensing them into a single phrase, and by squeezing them into the only acceptable paradigm of class struggle in which all characters were assigned positive and negative characters. The effect was often to turn pupils away from the classics. This perhaps is the message conveyed in the ironic title to the three poems of the cycle.

The fantasy background that sustains the latter imagery in the poems is a humanist idealism (the conviction that each individual has a unique beauty), a boy-scoutish morality, and a call to individual self-improvement. There is also another literary structure that underpins the expression of this fantasy. It can be found in Vasyl Symonenko's poem “Ty znaiesh, shcho ty liudyna” (You know that you are a Person). Symonenko's poem is one of the classics of the 1960s and exemplifies the high-minded, rather didactic tone that inspired some of the best poetry from this period. In the post-independence, postmodern world of the nineties the outdatedness of this fantasy background is revealed. Real life details – the ugly, the banal, and the disgusting – intrude to show how much has been omitted from both the fantasy and the literary structure it parodies.

Irvanets delights in playing with various forms of “national” imagery, exploring both language and the way individuals imagine themselves by drawing on canonized authors like Sosiura and Symonenko, figures like Hrushevsky who championed Ukrainian independence, oral traditions, and earlier writers whose aphorisms are now used unconsciously as part of the language. He forces readers to review the unconscious feelings behind accepted imagery and the way clichés govern how we like to present ourselves to others. Since our understanding of ourselves and others is profoundly shaped by the use of language, the latter requires careful scrutiny. We identify with an image that represents what we would like to be. At the same time we are conscious of the place from where we are being observed, and from where we look at ourselves so as to appear likeable. We should therefore ask ourselves for whom we are playing a given role. There is a gap between the way we see ourselves and the point from which we are being observed in order to appear likeable. Irvanets

plays on this disjuncture when he takes a commonplace symbolic identification, which is initially presented in the form of what appears to be an acceptable, if somewhat hackneyed, phrase or thought pattern. Almost immediately, usually in the second or third line of a poem, the reader realizes that Irvanets has twisted the commonplace into something entirely different. The point of observation has shifted radically.

In allowing censored, silenced, and overlooked details to be seen, Irvanets undermines the entire symbolic structure of an “elevated” poem and the fantasy that breathes life into it. This kind of demystificatory operation is also directed against the clichés of Soviet life. In “Deputatska pisnia” (A Deputy’s Song) he mocks typical Soviet slogans: “Stay close to the laboring class” (*I blyzhchym bud do trudiashchyykh*) and “Give everything for the struggle” (*Vse viddai borotbi*). In “Pisni skhidnykh slovian” (Songs of the Eastern Slavs) he makes fun of the Russian self-image, which constructs itself as messianic and victimized. It is messianic in so far as it sees itself being continually called upon to rescue the world from tyranny, fascism, and foreign invasions; and it is victimized in to the extent that it sees itself as the persistent object of Western aggression, and of Ukrainian and Jewish treachery. According to this self-image, Russia must periodically step out of its apathy and put an end to the surrounding disorder, thus saving the world. The parodied text here is Aleksandr Pushkin’s *Pesni zapadnykh slavian* (Songs of the Western Slavs, 1834), a collection of poems with anti-Moslem and anti-Semitic overtones. Pushkin had translated Prosper Mérimée’s so-called “Illyrian” poems. These were fakes which purported to be folk poetry of the Balkans. The Russian writer initially believed them to be genuine folk ballads that express the popular view of a tragic and violent history. At the time Irvanets wrote his poem, Liudmila Petrushevskaia in her *Pesni vostochnykh slavian* (Songs of the Eastern Slavs, 1990) also produced an ironic version of this collection. Pushkin was targeted for parody not only because of his untouchable position as a national mythmaker, but also because the anniversary of his birth occurred at this time and was being celebrated with great pomp. It is ironic that his poems were translations of supposed translations of non-existent folk poetry. However, a fake reveals the desire that a certain work should exist; the fantasy life of educated Europeans in Pushkin’s time created the imagery of a wild Balkans and then attributed this imagery to the people of the region. Irvanets suggests that a different kind of wish-fulfillment, one of imperial violence justified by a sense of entitlement, has formed and continues to form a pattern in Russian fantasy-life.

Demystificatory verse does not exhaust the Ukrainian poet's repertoire. However, the moment of Ukraine's political independence in 1991 appears to have given birth to a particularly strong mood of iconoclasm and a need to destroy illusions. In the year after independence, censorship disappeared, contacts with the rest of the world increased, and a flood of new images, texts, and cultural products appeared. Erotic imagery became widely available. A radicalized youth culture became acceptable in the public realm. Rock festivals took place at which young people delighted in expressing more liberal and open attitudes toward politics, sexuality, drugs, and cultural diversity. The Bu-Ba-Bu and other avant-garde groups were prominent participants in this process. Bu-Ba-Bu's high point came during the Chrysler Imperial performance at the Lviv Opera Theatre in 1992 which drew sold-out crowds for two days. The trio demonstrated a particular allergy to sentimentalism and to romanticized notions of women, youth, poets, love, and nation. Why did they feel obliged to publicize this allergic reaction precisely at the moment of the great national love-in that followed independence? In large part, the answer lies in a reaction to overworked imagery and stale forms. For a century and a half, Ukrainians had been fed a sentimental-romantic picture of a beautiful land, virtuous people, and mellifluous language, and had been enjoined to love their country in facile, didactic poetry. This "sweet Ukrainian style" and saccharine "poetic embodiment of the national project" irritated the younger generation because it suggested provincialism and moral hypocrisy.<sup>13</sup> At the same time, a marked shift occurred away from the populist notion that art's purpose was the expression of the national idea. Instead, young writers showed a strong interest in articulating individual identity. Moreover, "the national" had for too long been associated with the village and the peasant community, and the new generation was determined to break the connection with this spent paradigm. When it did speak of the collective, it linked Ukrainian culture with modernity, urban life, and Western models. The moment of independence therefore led to a wave of linguistic experimentation and stylistic play that aimed at creating a new identity.

The ironic tone evident in many works by the Bu-Ba-Bu and other avant-garde groups was experienced as a refreshing and bracing gust of fresh air. It has, perhaps, been insufficiently remarked that their manner of challenging received notions exploded the fantasies that nourished these notions. When

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<sup>13</sup> Solomea Pavlychko, "A Catfish for Your Thoughts: Ukrainian Literature at the Turning Point," *Agni* 39 (1994): 191-99, here 195.

investigated from this perspective, the work of Irvanets yields a deeper questioning of identity than is often supposed. His poetry is a biting critique of the national imaginary. It belongs to what has been described as the new “intentionality” of contemporary Ukrainian writing, one that has never before expressed itself in such a concentrated, panoramic, and demonstrative manner.<sup>14</sup> This literature declares its spiritual and intellectual independence from social habit and “constructs alternative concepts, models, and paradigms” in an effort to reform the language and aesthetic tastes.<sup>15</sup>

The poems from 1992 in particular provide not only great humor, but also stir some disconcerting and disquieting feelings. Some readers found unsettling the idea that the “target” of desire is an unstable, ever-moving and ever-evolving object. The suggestion that enjoyment or ecstatic delight, even if it can be caught in different ideological fields, still remains free-floating, poses a challenge to any iconic narrative. Žižek has put it this way: “The enthusiasm of fans for their favourite rock star and the religious trance of a devout Catholic in the presence of the Pope are libidinally *the same phenomenon*, they differ only in the different symbolic network which supports them.”<sup>16</sup> This is a more subversive message than the debunking of a particular icon, the rejection of kitsch, or the eruption of the carnivalesque. By revealing the link between the political and the erotic, and by exposing unconscious assumptions behind language, Irvanets, like others in the post-independence avant-garde, asks readers to question the way fundamental belief systems are constructed.

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<sup>14</sup> Iaroslav Holoborod'ko, *Artegraund: Ukrains'kyi literaturnyi isteblyshment* (Kyiv: Fakt, 2006), p. 3.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>16</sup> Žižek, *The Plague of Fantasies*, p. 50.