

## The Ukrainian “Friday” and the Russian “Robinson”: The Uneasy Advent of Postcoloniality\*

**Mykola Ryabchuk**

*Ukrainian Center for Cultural Studies, Kyiv, Ukraine*

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### Abstract

The paper addresses the problem of Russian-Ukrainian asymmetric relations as revealed in the struggle of two discourses—the discourse of imperial dominance and the discourse of national/nationalistic resistance and liberation. Critical discourse analysis is applied to deconstruct the imperial discourse as a major obstacle for the normalization of Russian-Ukrainian relations. Postcoloniality is suggested as a desirable condition for both Russian and Ukrainian cultures to achieve internal freedom and eliminate colonial stereotypes and anti-colonial mobilization, respectively.

### Keywords

Ukraine, Russia, postcolonialism, imperial discourse, identity

Forty years ago, Pierre Elliott Trudeau, the prime minister of Canada, famously declared that living next to the US “... is in some ways like sleeping with an elephant. No matter how friendly or temperate the beast, one is affected by every twitch and grunt.”<sup>1</sup> Ukrainians probably have even more reason to complain in this regard because the “elephant” next to which they live has never been temperate or friendly to them as a separate nation. This may sound paradoxical since most Russians enthusiastically proclaim their love for Ukraine and Ukrainians, refer often to their own Ukrainian roots and connections, and sometimes even perform a Ukrainian folk song to prove their sympathy

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<sup>1</sup>) Ludovic Kennedy, *In Bed with an Elephant* (London: Corgi Books, 1996), p. viii.

and know-how. In this regard, they seem to differ radically from Ukraine's other neighbors and former masters, the Poles, who are typically very cautious about Ukrainians, often file historical grievances against them and, in various opinion surveys, place them at the very bottom of the list of the most/the least sympathetic nationalities.<sup>2</sup>

Another paradox, however, is that for many Ukrainians Polish unfriendliness is more bearable and acceptable than Russian "love." The Poles, even if they dislike Ukrainians, usually recognize them as a separate nation – however rough and unsympathetic. Russians typically treat Ukrainians as a subgroup of their nation; they "love" Ukrainians as themselves, as an imperial myth, which is hardly acceptable for Ukrainians since it leaves no room for the latter's separate national identity (not just a regional one, within the Greater Russian identity). In other words, the Polish view of Ukrainians, however biased and distorted, usually does not question the essence: the existence of a separate Ukrainian identity and nationality. The Russian view of Ukrainians, however friendly and seemingly sympathetic, typically denies this very essence, thereby making any dialogue between the two nations as equal sovereigns virtually impossible.

From a postcolonial point of view, Russian-Ukrainian relations may be compared to the relationship between Robinson Crusoe and Friday: every

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<sup>2</sup> When placed on the scale between –3 (antipathy) and +3 (sympathy), Ukrainians were rated by Poles at –0.54, i.e., below the great majority of nations, including Serbs, Russians, and Belarusians, above only Jews, Arabs, Romanians, and Roma (Gypsies). It should be recalled, however, that ten years earlier Ukrainians were rated at –1.28. See *Czy Polacy lubią inne narody? Komunikat z badań*, no. 2846 (Warszawa: Centrum badania opinii społecznej, January 2003), <http://www.cbos.pl/PL/Raporty/2003r.php>, accessed March 15, 2009.

After the Orange Revolution, Ukrainians substantially improved their image in Polish eyes and moved from the bottom to the middle of the list of the most/least sympathetic nationalities, but still the rating is rather negative: –0.30. See *Sympatia i niechęć do innych narodów. Komunikat z badań*, no. 144 (Sept. 2007): 3–5; <http://www.cbos.pl/PL/Raporty/2007r.php> (accessed March 15, 2009). See also *Ukraine-Analysen*, no. 25 (June 2007): 12–13; [www.ukraine-analysen.de](http://www.ukraine-analysen.de) (accessed March 15, 2009); and *Polen-Analysen*, no. 14 (June 2007): 11; [www.polen-analysen.de](http://www.polen-analysen.de) (accessed March 15, 2009).

By contrast, their image in Russian eyes has badly deteriorated. In January 2009, according to a nation-wide survey carried out by the reputable Levada Center, only 29 percent of Russians had a "very positive" or "rather positive" attitude to Ukraine, while 62 percent declared their "very negative" or "rather negative" feelings. See <http://www.levada.ru/press/2009022501.html> (accessed March 15, 2009). For the dynamics of Russian attitudes towards Ukraine, see the Levada Center Yearbook, *Obshchestvennoe mnenie – 2008* (Moscow: Levada Center, 2008), p. 127, <http://webfile.ru/2612342#> (accessed March 15, 2009).

Robinson “loves” his Friday – but only as long as Friday follows the rules of the game established by Robinson, accepts colonial subordination, and does not question the superiority of Robinson and his culture. But as soon as Friday dares to rebel – to declare himself sovereign and equal to Robinson and to demand equal respect for his language and culture – he becomes Robinson’s most hated foe. Such a Friday is deemed a priori abnormal – either a bourgeois-nationalistic traitor, in the phraseology of communist propaganda and KGB prosecutors, or a “nationally obsessed” pervert, in the terms of popular chauvinistic discourse that alludes scornfully to the quasi-medical formula “sexually obsessed” (*seksualno ozabochnyyi*). In the first case, such a deviant should be imprisoned as a dangerous criminal, and in the other, he should be placed in a mental hospital or at least ostracized and marginalized, and certainly not treated seriously no matter what he says.

Sadly enough, the majority of Russians do not like the real Ukraine and try, by all means, to undermine and marginalize it in their consciousness, since it challenges and denies the virtual Ukraine that exists in their historic imagination – as an exotic “singing and dancing Little Russia” with no intellectual strength and political ambitions.

Some time ago I witnessed a funny and, in a way, revealing episode at the international meeting of editors of East European cultural journals. All the participants had the opportunity to exhibit their periodicals, so I brought a copy of the Ukrainian monthly *Krytyka* that I was co-editing at the time. Predictably, it attracted keen attention from my Russian colleagues, who leafed through it with mixed feelings. On the one hand, as professionals, they clearly liked it. On the other, as Russians, they apparently had a psychological problem with recognizing that Ukrainians, their stereotypical “village cousins,” could produce something trendy, artistically attractive, and intellectually viable. Ultimately, they found a satisfactory explanation for this abnormal phenomenon. On the final page of the journal, among various technicalities printed in small font, they discovered a note that *Krytyka* collaborates with the Harvard Ukrainian Research Institute (HURI).

“Ia tak i znal, chto eto amerikanskoe!” (“I knew it was American!”), happily exclaimed one of my Russian colleagues. His mythical world, which had been shaken for a moment by the appearance of *Krytyka*, returned unshattered to its firm foundations. In this world, no Friday can ever match a Robinson, until and unless he happens to be assisted by some other Robinson – an American one in this case. I did not know at the time that the same logic would eventually be applied to virtually all Russian interpretations of Ukraine’s Orange Revolution. The Ukrainian Friday, most Russians believe, did this not for the

sake of his freedom and dignity, but merely as a result of manipulation by sinister Western Robinsons – primarily the Americans – to do harm to his legitimate Russian master.

The mythical character of Russian images of Ukraine and Ukrainians is not the sole consequence of the protracted colonial relations between the two nations and of intensive imperial myth-making in academia, the educational system, the media, literature, and other spheres where the dominant discourse is produced and enforced. Students of postcolonialism note that the colonized group gradually accepts and internalizes the negative self-image imposed upon it by the colonizers. The subjugated group adopts the whole system of alien, degrading, and essentially humiliating images of themselves as barbarians, primitives, sub-humans, and bearers of chaos.<sup>3</sup> Their own cosmos collapses, demolished under the pressure of negative stereotypes-cum-self-images, and the colonized group plunges into a chaos from which it can exit only through assimilation into the cosmos of colonizers, into an alien and basically hostile civilization – or, alternatively, keep on performing the chthonic, destructive, subhuman role assigned to them by the colonizers.<sup>4</sup>

Ukraine, however, differed profoundly from the “traditional” colonies in Asia, Africa, and the Americas: here, the main difference between the dominant and subaltern group was cultural and linguistic (and, of course, social), but not racial. Ukrainians were alleged to speak a “wrong,” “uncultured” language of kolkhoz slaves. The Ukrainian language was their “black” skin that could be relatively easily changed for “white” skin, i.e., respectable Russian. It was also a sign of loyalty and normality. Nobody cared much if kolkhoz slaves spoke Ukrainian. But commitment to a “black” language was deemed incompatible with education and social progress. In this case, public use of Ukrainian was a clear proof of deviation, disloyalty, and bourgeois nationalistic defiance.

<sup>3</sup> The leading Russian nineteenth-century literary critic Vissarion Belinsky described Ukrainians as “iron-headed” savages. In Ukraine today, it is mostly urban Russians who belittle mostly rural Ukrainians by animalistic nicknames like “*byki*” (bulls), “*kuguty*” (cocks), “*raguli*” (horned), or by nicknames that refer to some human shortcoming, like “*zbloby*” (greedy-guts), “*selo*” (village bumpkins), “*kolkhoz*” (uncouth kolkhoz slaves).

<sup>4</sup> See Oxana Grabowicz, “The Legacy of Colonialism and Communism in Ukraine: Some Key Issues,” *Perspectives on Contemporary Ukraine* 2, no. 2 (March–April 1995). Remarkably, this purely academic presentation elicited enormous reaction and was published in the Lviv daily newspaper *Ratusha*, and later reprinted by the Warsaw Ukrainian weekly *Nashe slovo*, the Kharkiv monthly *Berezil*!, and the Kyiv quarterly *Arka*.

The Ukrainian language was not forbidden in the Soviet Union, unlike in the Russian Empire, but its public usage was effectively undermined and restricted by mostly informal rules and practices. This peculiarity of the Soviet system was aptly noted in 1987 by the American political scientist Alexander J. Motyl:

Language use has a potent symbolic quality in a politicized linguistic environment: it immediately assigns the user to one of two sides of the ideological barricade. ... The use of Ukrainian, they realized, is tantamount to opposition to the Soviet state ... Although no laws forbid deviations from this behavioral norm (as one Soviet Ukrainian representative once told me, no one “is holding a gun to their heads”), non-Russians in general and Ukrainians in particular appear to understand that insistence on speaking one’s native language – especially among Russians – will be perceived as rejection of the “friendship of peoples” and as hostility to the “Soviet people.” Few Ukrainians are audacious enough to risk such unpleasantness as public censure, loss of employment, or even jail for the sake of linguistic purity. As a result, they signal their loyalty to the state and sidestep chauvinist reactions by speaking Russian.<sup>5</sup>

Ukrainians as individuals were not discriminated against either in the Soviet Union or the Russian Empire. Many of them made brilliant careers in Moscow or St. Petersburg. Empires usually care much more about loyalty than nationality. Ukrainians, Georgians, Muslims, or Jews could advance everywhere as long as they managed to prove their loyalty to the Russian communist (or Russian Orthodox) empire. They merely had to be more Russian than the Russians. They had to adopt a “white skin” and abandon their black one; accept the superiority of the imperial language, culture, and ideology and, implicitly or explicitly, the inferiority of their native cultures and languages. None of them could claim equal cultural and linguistic rights with the dominant Russians; none of them as a group could ever question their non-sovereign, subordinate, and culturally inferior position within the empire. Their group rights – as Ukrainians, Muslims, or Jews – were highly restricted in both the Russian and Soviet empires, formally and informally. As a group, as members of a separate nation (or nationality) they were strongly discriminated against, but this ambiguity remains largely ignored by scholars who emphasize the lack of racial difference between Ukrainians and Russians and the virtual absence of ethnically-based discrimination at the individual level.

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<sup>5</sup> Alexander J. Motyl, *Will the Non-Russians Rebel?: State, Ethnicity and Stability in the USSR* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell Univ. Press, 1987), pp. 100-01.

The simple truth is that Ukrainians were not discriminated against as *Little Russians*, i.e., as loyal members of a Russian regional subgroup, who recognize their subordinate position and do not claim any specific/equal cultural rights. But as *Ukrainians*, i.e., as members of a nationally self-aware and culturally self-confident group, they were not merely discriminated against, but also politically persecuted as dangerous “nationalists.”

*Perestroika* loosened propagandistic pressure and secret police coercion against the “nationally obsessed” but did not eliminate the bureaucratic, socio-economic, cultural, educational, and – last but not least – psychological mechanisms of Russification. Nor have they disappeared after Ukraine gained its independence. One of these mechanisms, an extremely significant if not absolutely determining factor in Russian-Ukrainian cultural relations, requires more detailed scrutiny.

### **Discourse of dominance**

The last decade brought to the Ukrainian book market (and the intellectual milieu) a number of important translations that have facilitated the development of postcolonial studies and encouraged Ukrainian scholars to apply Western poststructuralist methodology to the analysis of Russian colonial and Ukrainian anti-colonial discourses. This includes the classic works of Edward Said (*Orientalism*, originally published in 1984; Ukrainian translation: 2001, and *Culture and Imperialism*, 1993 and 2007), Michel Foucault (*L'archéologie du savoir*, 1969 and 2003, and *Surveiller et punir*, 1975 and 1998), Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (*In Other Worlds: Essays in Cultural Politics*, 1987 and 2007), and a few books where this methodology is applied to a specific analysis of the Russian Empire – first of all, Ewa Thompson's *Imperial Knowledge: Russian Literature and Colonialism* (2000 and 2006) and Myroslav Shkandrij's *Russia and Ukraine: Literature and the Discourse of Empire from Napoleonic to Postcolonial Times* (2001 and 2004).

Within this theoretical framework, Russian-Ukrainian relations are deconstructed as relations of cultural subjugation/emancipation, relations that are supported, on the one hand, by the dominant imperial discourse, and challenged, on the other, by a “nationalistic” counter-discourse of native counter-elites. The imperial discourse about Ukraine consists of a number of myths that are broadly accepted as “scientific truth” and/or common knowledge. All of them aim at the cultural undermining and political subordination of Ukraine, legitimization of imperial dominance, and an eventual mystification

of the true nature of these relations. The constituent elements of those myths are ideas of the “triune” Russian nation as purportedly consisting of Russians, Ukrainians, and Belarusians; the close proximity, near-sameness, of today’s Russians and Ukrainians; some unique and essentialized Russian spirituality as opposed to alleged Western soullessness and mercantilism; and the mesmeric greatness of the Russian Empire, supposedly so attractive for all the nations around it that they cannot but join it eagerly and voluntarily.<sup>6</sup> Hence the special mission of the Russians, authorized either by God or History, to unite all the Slavs and, at times, non-Slavs; to promote true Christianity, to rescue the world and, of course, to establish due order in its near and not-so-near abroad, completing a classical imperialist *mission civilisatrice*.

This imperial discourse was born with the empire, in the symbolic deeds of Peter I and the quasi-historical writings of his Ukrainian apologist Teofan Prokopovych. But it achieves true brilliance only in the nineteenth century, in the age of Romanticism, which coincided with the age of the Napoleonic Wars and the spread of modern nationalism throughout Europe.

Ukraine’s initial representation in the imperial culture largely resembled the representation of the exotic southern and eastern imperial borderlands and, more generally, the representation of all “oriental” lands in classic Western texts. Like any colonized land, it was portrayed as wild, or semi-wild, amorphous, archaic, anarchic, populated by highly primitive communities, beyond real time and real history, i.e., imperial. This view of Ukraine had been thoroughly elaborated by the leading Russian literary critic Vissarion Belinsky, who based his interpretations partly on the works of Gogol, Pushkin, Kvitka-Osnovianenko, and other writers of the time, but much more on his own, Hegel-inspired, ideas about the Spirit of History and historical/non-historical nations.

The “orientalist” representation of Ukraine, however, encountered strong resistance from the very reality it tried to represent, and required a substantial correction within the framework of imperial discourse. First, Ukraine was no “East” *vis-à-vis* Russia. Rather, for more than a century, it had been a major source of Western influences and an important agent of Europeanization of the Muscovite tsardom and its transformation into the Russian Empire.

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<sup>6</sup> Consider the following statement by the contemporary Russian nationalist writer Stanislav Kuniaev: “Nationalism is for small peoples who fear extinction. Russians are a great people . . . Russia speaks like Christ used to speak: Come to me and share my spirit” (*La Repubblica*, Jan. 27, 1990). Quoted in Iver Neumann, *Russia and the Idea of Europe: A Study in Identity and International Relations* (London: Routledge, 1996), p. 197.

Secondly, the empire itself was not certain about its own identity and European credentials. It was still heavily orientalized in West European discourse, for instance in the famous travelogue by the Marquis de Custine. Finally, and most importantly, Ukraine could not have been something completely alien to the empire – not only because of its Orthodox Christian and East Slavic consanguinity, but also because of its Kyivan Rus legacy that was to be seamlessly incorporated into the imperial history as presumably “our own,” natural and organic.

Therefore, Ukraine was represented in Russian discourse rather ambivalently. It was a country both kindred and alien, friendly and hostile, mild and wild, idyllic and dangerous.<sup>7</sup> To avoid logical contradictions between these representations, Russian historiography elaborated a sophisticated model of the “triune” Russian nation. Ukrainians were assigned the role of a regional branch in this model, which had been broken away from the “Russian” tree by some evil historical forces, but now regrafted, to thrive once again with the whole tree. Ukrainian ambivalence acquired a rationale: everything that is good in Ukraine and Ukrainians comes from the common Rus/Russian legacy. Everything that is bad comes from evil, alien influences: Polish, Catholic, Jesuit, Uniate, or Tatar, Jewish, German, and so on. Interestingly, Polish influences in this model have never been cultural or civilizing in nature. Instead, they have brought about destruction, social and religious oppression, spiritual decline and moral degeneration. Even though Ukrainians had borrowed some elements of European civilization from Poles, their impact was deemed rather negative. The Western system of education and Polish republican institutions proved arguably their inefficiency, leading Poland into complete chaos and forcing its neighbors to partition it and establish parental guardianship. In most cases, however, the imperial discourse tried to exclude Polish influences. All its political and military ambitions notwithstanding, the Russian Empire felt rather uncomfortable *vis-à-vis* Poland in cultural and civilizational terms. So, in order to culturally undermine the Ukrainians, it hinted primarily at “Tatar” and, generally, “Asiatic” influences on them, rather than Polish ones.

One may refer, for instance, to Pushkin’s long poem *Poltava*, in which the Ukrainian hetman Ivan Mazepa (who switched sides during the Russo-Swedish war) is portrayed as a semi-oriental operetta-style stock character, a clear

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<sup>7</sup> Maria Todorova notes a similar ambivalence in Western attempts at “orientalizing” the Balkans. See her *Imagining the Balkans* (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1997), pp. 3-37.



opposite of the “true European” Peter the Great. One may refer also to Belinsky’s notorious description of Ukrainian Cossacks as some sort of “Tatars” or to Pavel Svinin’s lesser known but no less curious ruminations about Ukrainians in his 1830 foreword to a Gogol short story:

Little Russians are closer in appearance [than Great Russians] to the splendid inhabitants of Asia [resembling Asians in their] facial appearance, frame, shapeliness of figure, laziness and carefree nature, [but] Little Russians...do not have those stormy, untamable passions characteristic of believers in Islam: a phlegmatic unconcern appears to serve them as a defense and barrier from uneasy disturbances; and often from under their thick eyebrows a fire flashes; a bold European intelligence penetrates; a passionate love of the motherland and ardent feelings, clothed in pristine simplicity, fill their breasts.<sup>8</sup>

The discourse is rather ambivalent: on the one hand, it is driven by a genuinely artistic need to represent Ukraine and Ukrainians as something curious, exotic, different, peculiar; on the other, it follows the political imperative of imperial homogenization and assimilation of the colonized land. The differences between the Ukrainians and the Russians might be interesting from an artistic point of view, at the level of folklore, habits, and appearance, but from the political point of view they should not be too excessive, too substantial; they should not hinder the domestication and subjugation of the country, its integration into a grand imperial project. All their peculiarities notwithstanding, Ukrainians should remain, in the imperial discourse, a regional subgroup of the Russians, material for empire building rather than for artistic exercises.

Prince Dolgoruky’s sketches from his 1810 trip to “Little Russia” exemplify major features of this discourse:

*Khokhol* appears to be created by nature to till the land, sweat, burn in the sun and spend his whole life with a bronzed face. ... He does not grieve over such an enslaved condition: he knows nothing better. ... He knows his plough, ox, stack, whisky, and that constitutes his entire lexicon. ... He willingly bears any fate and any labor. However, he needs constant prodding, because he is very lazy: he and his ox will fall asleep and wake up five times in one minute. ... I dare think, if this entire people did not owe a debt to well-mannered landowners for their benevolence and respect for their humanity, the *khokhol* would be

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<sup>8</sup> Quoted in Vladimir Zviniatskovskii, *Tainy natsional’noi dushi* (Kyiv: Likei, 1992), p. 172; translated into English by Myroslav Shkandrij in his *Russia and Ukraine: Literature and the Discourse of Empire from Napoleonic to Postcolonial Times* (Montreal: McGill-Queen’s Univ. Press, 2001), p. 79.

difficult to separate from the Negro in any way: one sweats over sugar, the other over grain. May the Lord give them both good health!<sup>9</sup>

Dolgoruky's arrogant condescension *vis-à-vis* the "khokhol" is of a social rather than ethnic nature. In the early nineteenth century neither Russian nor Little Russian (Ukrainian) noblemen reckoned themselves and their serfs to be members of the same nation. Prince Dolgoruky could have certainly written in the same scornful way about a Russian or any other peasant. But discursive forms have adhesiveness and continuity. They not only reflect and explain reality, but also create and distort it. Perhaps unwittingly Dolgoruky envisaged the classical model of Russian-Ukrainian relations for years to come. Whatever his intention, the next generation of either Russian or Ukrainian intellectuals could not but discern a clear imperialistic message in those kinds of statements.

Very likely, Dolgoruky's imperative was first and foremost aesthetic: to give his readers something exotic, amusing, and entertaining. The "wild" Caucasus and the "singing and dancing" Little Russia provided the Romantics with much more attractive material than Russia proper. But there was also an important political imperative, at least implicitly: to ensure political and economic dominance of the empire in the newly acquired territories, to make the "khokhols," first in symbolic representations and then in actuality, harmless, domesticated, adapted, and adjusted to the needs of the empire (the needs of "khokhols" themselves were obviously of little if any concern).

Dolgoruky's text graphically exemplifies the nearly complete merger of political and aesthetic imperatives. All the peculiarities of "Little Russians" are presented in a manner and to a degree that is needed to legitimize their imperial enslavement and exploitation. Khokhols are said to be peasants like any other but a bit lazier, so they require a bit more supervision and compulsion. To the credit of more talented authors, however, we must recognize that the conflation of political and aesthetic imperatives remained noticeable in their works and, at times, explosive. An early example comes from Kondratii Ryleev's Romantic poem *Voynarovsky*, where the Ukrainian hetman Ivan Mazepa is depicted not as a traitor (according to the dominant imperial discourse) but rather as a rebellious freedom fighter, according to the poet's own artistic intuition.

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<sup>9</sup> Quoted in Shkandrij, *Russia and Ukraine*, pp. 79-80. *Khokhol* is a slightly derogatory Russian term for an ethnic Ukrainian.

Another, even more important, example comes from the “Ukrainian” tales of Mykola Hohol (Nikolai Gogol). Aesthetically, these short stories, despite the author’s unquestionable loyalty to the empire, played a rather ambiguous, if not quite subversive, role *vis-à-vis* the empire. By the very force of his talent, Hohol brought the contradiction between the imperial need for Ukraine’s political subjugation (through its imperial homogenization) and its aesthetic liberation (through the exposure of its cultural uniqueness and richness) to a dangerous point, after which this country with its glorious past and rich heritage could evolve separately, by its own trajectory, in spite of the homogenizing and unifying efforts of the empire. As a loyal imperial subject, Hohol denied this possibility, stressing the view that his Little Russia was just a museum, a glorious past that was no more, a project that could be accomplished now only within the common empire of which both the Ukrainians and the Russians were co-owners. As a Ukrainian patriot and a great writer, however, he created a myth that acquired a separate life in the imagination of his successors. Little effort was needed to revitalize and reinterpret the myth of a beautiful and glorious but defunct Ukraine.

### **The emergence of counter-discourse**

It was Taras Shevchenko who created a new myth that was polemical but also successive *vis-à-vis* that of Hohol.<sup>10</sup> His Ukraine was not dead but just asleep, buried alive, yet ready to be awoken and resurrected. Shevchenko merely re-created the Ukraine that had been created but prematurely announced deceased by Hohol and other imperial loyalists of his time. However duly Shevchenko is praised as the spiritual father of modern Ukrainian nationalism, he would have had hardly anything to build upon if his “Little Russian” predecessors had not completed the groundwork and provided him unwittingly with all the major elements for the eventual development of a powerful nationalist discourse.<sup>11</sup>

<sup>10</sup> Hryhorii Hrabovych [George Grabowicz], “Hohol’ i mif Ukrainy,” *Suchasnist’*, no. 9 (1994): 77–95; no. 10 (1994): 137–49.

<sup>11</sup> An apt analysis of the implicit contradiction between things politically “imperial” and aesthetically “national” in early modern Ukrainian literature can be found in Marko Pavlyshyn, “The Rhetoric and Politics of Kotliarevsky’s *Eneida*,” *Journal of Ukrainian Studies* 10, no. 1 (1985): 9–24.

Shevchenko did not invent Ukrainophilism: there was already a long tradition, exemplified most vividly by Hohol. But Shevchenko made the new Ukrainophilism incompatible with imperial loyalty: Ukraine has not died yet, but she will certainly die, he implied, if she does not get rid of the imperial yoke. A utopian confederation of free and sovereign Slavic nations was suggested as an alternative. This admittedly naïve idea of pan-Slavic unity might have evoked benevolence in the imperial establishment if it did not entail the subversive ideas of republicanism and Ukrainian sovereignty. The Ukrainian movement was crushed, Shevchenko exiled for twenty-five years to the Urals and Central Asia, his friends imprisoned, but this was just the end of a battle, not the war. Nation building, however delayed, was not aborted, and the cultural emancipation of Ukrainian intellectuals from the imperial framework was basically completed by the end of the nineteenth century. As Oleh S. Ilnytzkij writes:

Th[e] gradual and initially almost imperceptible intrusion of the West as a model into Ukrainian cultural consciousness displaced the ubiquitous, defining presence of the empire. The imagining of Ukraine in a European framework – and the corresponding rejection of the all-Russian/imperial context – was a profound paradigm shift that allowed Ukrainian culture to view itself not as a subsystem or a complement, but as a complete world in its own right, equivalent (if not in fact, at least potentially) to all other self-contained European national cultural systems. By embracing Europe as a point of reference, Ukraine symbolically transformed itself from a dependent provincial culture in an empire to an independent national culture within a European framework. Ukrainian culture could now be imagined as accommodating both the “high” and the “low” within itself.<sup>12</sup>

Surprisingly, this transformation remained largely unnoticed by the great majority of Russian intellectuals. As late as the Revolution, the attitude of enlightened Russians towards Ukrainian culture and the Ukrainian issue in general remained virtually the same as in the 1830s and 1840s, in the age of Belinsky and Khomiakov. Neither competence in the subject nor the level of argumentation changed substantially. The popular attitude either followed the conservative paradigm, which denied Ukrainian high culture and literature as a dangerous deviation, or mimicked the liberal paradigm, which allegedly

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<sup>12</sup> Oleh S. Ilnytzkij, “Modeling Culture in the Empire: Ukrainian Modernism and the Death of the All-Russian Idea,” in *Culture, Nation, and Identity. The Ukrainian-Russian Encounter, 1600-1945*, ed. Andreas Kappeler *et al.* (Edmonton: Canadian Institute of Ukrainian Studies, 2003), pp. 314-15.

tolerated that local extravagance, but only as a regional/dialect kind of Russian culture and literature. According to Myroslav Shkandrij:

Ukrainian literature was still considered an aesthetically degraded medium and Ukrainian consciousness a manifestation of provincialism. The scholarly discourse concerning Ukraine had penetrated Russian literature only feebly, and the most forceful articulation of the counter-discourse remained largely unavailable. As a consequence, Russian intellectuals marginalized Ukrainian issues. In literary portrayals Ukrainian characters were almost never allowed any depth, nor were their cultural concerns treated seriously. Ukrainians did appear in Russian realist fiction in the second half of the century (embodied, for example, in the various horse-grooms, gardeners, and rank-and-file soldiers identified as Ukrainians in Tolstoi's works), but they were distinguished from Russians only by their "dialect." Although Anton Chekhov and Ivan Bunin jokingly identified themselves as *khokhly*, they assigned no political importance to this characterization.<sup>13</sup>

This astonishing blindness and deafness of the imperial culture *vis-à-vis* its closest and largest neighbor exemplifies the self-sufficiency and dramatic inertia of the imperial discourse, which affected even such great writers as Mikhail Bulgakov, Vladimir Nabokov, or Joseph Brodsky with petty chauvinism. The discourse of dominance that throughout the whole nineteenth century domesticated, emasculated, and marginalized Ukraine has basically not changed even today. It carefully selects voices, facts, and events and represents only those that reinforce it. It silences and marginalizes everything that contradicts the colonial image of "provincial" Ukraine and subverts the idyllic patron/client model of Russian-Ukrainian relations. Empire authorizes itself to speak on behalf of its subjects because it believes it knows their thoughts and feelings much better than they themselves do. A great many Russians who have never read a single Ukrainian book have no doubt that there is nothing worth reading – just because, as Prince Dolgoruky put it long ago, "the khokhol appears to be created by nature to till the land, sweat, burn in the sun," and certainly not to produce any books, films, or operas.

Remarkably, though, all the immense power of the imperial discourse proved to be insufficient to neutralize the anti-imperial counter-discourses that emerged during the nineteenth century. Despite total government control over publishing, education, public activity, and academic exchange, the empire failed to curb its nationalist rivals by merely discursive means. It had to embark, predictably, on censorship and coercion. The competition between

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<sup>13</sup>) Shkandrij, *Russia and Ukraine*, p. 166.

the two cultures once again proved to be a struggle between the culture that had an army and a secret police and the culture that had absolutely nothing, not even an officially recognized language and the possibility to use it in print. The view of Ukraine did not differ much among the Russian elite, be it left-wing or right-wing, liberal or conservative, monarchist or republican, repressive or intellectual.

### **Postcolonial liberation?**

Colonialism is harmful to both the colonized and the colonizers. It creates neurotic resentment on the one side and deeply entrenched prejudice on the other. Internet forums, where Ukrainians and Russians exchange their views on today's topical issues, are depressing sight. Nobody listens to the arguments of the other side; nobody even tries to articulate them in a comprehensive and non-insulting way. The state of intellectual discussions is not much better. In most cases, if they happen at all, conversations resemble monologues of deaf people.

It is a postcolonial approach, some scholars suggest, that may heal colonial wounds and dispel mutual grievances:

Postcoloniality recognizes the teleological quality of colonial and anticolonial positions, and therefore also their exclusivity and violence, whether historically demonstrated or merely potential. For that reason it maintains a highly skeptical attitude to all schemata and symbols of imperial, as well as anti-imperial, glory. At the same time, however, postcolonialism recognizes the realities of history: on the one hand, the reality and pain of injustices suffered, and on the other – the impossibility of thinking the present without also thinking all elements of its prehistory, both anti-colonial and colonial. Postcoloniality in culture is open and tolerant; it creates the new, utilizing as its source the full spectrum of culture past. It is cautious with regard to categorical slogans, simple categories, unambiguous historical narratives and myths that purport to explain all, preferring, rather, a world-view marked by irony. Notwithstanding what has just been said, it is not the destructive mockery of nihilism that is the philosophical background of postcolonialism, but a wish to avoid all forms of violence or domination. Postcolonialism does not seek to replace the domination of the colonizer with a new hierarchy of power, but with a condition of freedom and convenience shared equally by all.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> Marko Pavlyshyn, "Post-Colonial Features in Contemporary Ukrainian Culture," *Australian Slavonic and East European Studies* 6, no. 2 (1992): 42–46.

Ukrainian culture of the last two decades demonstrates postcolonial *Weltanschauung* and innovative cultural practices in a great variety of genres, from the non-verbal – music, painting, or performance – to the verbal and hybrid – literature, film, and theater. In the latter, however, the advance of postcolonial freedom, openness, and ideological disengagement remains much more problematic primarily because of the heavily politicized and still unresolved language issue. In many cases, language use still has a noticeable symbolic quality; it still tends, as Motyl wrote in 1987, to assign the user to one of two sides of the ideological barricade.

Ukraine is basically a bilingual country where virtually everybody understands both Ukrainian and Russian and where a great majority (about two-thirds of respondents, according to various opinion polls) claim to be nearly fluent in both languages. The problem stems from the fact that a significant and, importantly, influential minority retains a profound bias against the Ukrainian language, culture and, in some extreme cases, statehood. As the primary descendants of the Soviet elite (which was territorial rather than national), they inherited substantial administrative resources and accumulated enormous wealth. Not a single Ukrainian oligarch, remarkably, speaks Ukrainian in private. Russians and Russophones dominate most urban centers, the key branches of the economy, the major media and, to a great extent, the political arena. By and large, they promote an ambiguous ideology that combines old imperial anti-Ukrainian (“anti-nationalist”) stereotypes, still supported and disseminated across the border by Russian culture and media, and a kind of local, Creole-type, patriotism-cum-statism that employs some national (“native/aboriginal”) symbols and narratives to legitimize political independence of the “settlers’ state.”<sup>15</sup>

This combination is a difficult task because the constituting elements are largely incompatible. As a result, the dominant ideology as well as the symbolic representations and cultural policy of the post-Soviet Ukraine are highly

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<sup>15</sup> The term “Creole” is employed here in reference to cultural phenomena resulting from the mixture of colonizers and colonized in Ukraine and Belarus since their incorporation into the Russian Empire. It refers to a hybrid cultural, territorial, and national identity that has developed among the part of the Russophone population in Ukraine that identifies neither with Russia proper nor with the identity, cultural codes, and historical narratives of the non-assimilated autochthones. One should be aware, however, that the social and cultural distance between the Russian settler and the Ukrainian or Belarusian indigenous population was never as significant as it was in Latin America, where the term originated. See my *Vid Malorosii do Ukrainy: Paradoksy zapizniloho natsiietvorennia* (Kyiv: Krytyka, 2000).

ambiguous, vague, incoherent, eclectic, and contradictory. They are products of permanent bargaining, negotiations, concessions, and compromises between the dominant “Creole-type” minority and the socially/culturally marginalized “indigenous” majority. In political terms, it makes the state more or less viable and relatively pluralistic. In cultural terms, however, it produces deep dissatisfaction on both sides. The Russophile group feels that concessions to the Ukrainophiles (“nationalists,” in the standard imperial discourse) have gone too far and may eventually subvert their dominance. The “aboriginal” Ukrainian-speaking group, on the contrary, feels the concessions are mostly symbolic and insufficient since they do not change the essence of the colonial relations, nor do they challenge effectively the social and cultural/linguistic dominance of the “settler” (“Creole”) group. This provokes strong anti-colonial resentment that still is noticeable in today’s Ukrainian writing. It substantially complicates the professed advent of a bright postcolonial future since it chafes colonial wounds and instigates anti-imperial mobilization. Russia’s aggressive (“assertive,” in EU diplomats’ terms) policy in the “near abroad” further aggravates the problem.

As a result, Ukrainian postcolonial culture, especially literature, encounters two problems that would barely hinder its impressive development, but may impose some serious limitations and distortions on its functioning within the society. The first is the problem of language, which does not mean a poor command of Ukrainian within the society at large but, rather, a protracted imperial bias that a priori disqualifies any “native” cultural product as inferior to the product imported from the imperial center. One may compare this to the situation in nineteenth-century America, where many white readers likely rejected any book by a black writer.

The second problem is one of political context. The unresolved issue of decolonization and minority/majority relations, as well as multiple conflicts with the former colonial master, perpetuate a sense of insecurity, the “siege mentality,” and national mobilization. This combination of an internal “Cold War” and an external siege promotes misreading and misinterpretation of any texts, especially those texts that are deliberately ambiguous, playful, ironic, and provocative.

A minor but graphic example of a double – both colonial and anti-colonial – misreading of an apparently postcolonial text comes from popular criticism evoked by two poems by Oleksandr Irvanets, styled purposefully as parodies of nationalist and Socialist Realist scribbling. One poem, “Love Oklahoma!” alludes to Volodymyr Sosiura’s classic “Love Ukraine!” Irvanets took all the naïve clichés of populist poetry from the conventional Ukrainophile text and



applied them to different American states and realities. Thereby, their complete inanity became simply too obvious and ridiculous.<sup>16</sup>

However, this rather innocent and funny joke was interpreted in a number of Ukrainophile periodicals as a blasphemous profanation of a sacred text and, more generally, as another attempt of sinister colonizers to ridicule and humiliate Ukrainians.

Another poem by Irvanets, “Ode to the Hryvnia,” provoked a similar misinterpretation, albeit from the opposite side. The hryvnia is the new Ukrainian currency that was introduced in 1996, after the years of hyperinflation, as a symbol of the independent state (the word “hryvnia” hearkens to the Kyivan Rus period, when this currency was used), but also as a hopeful sign of economic and financial stabilization. In his parody, Irvanets played with both nationalistic rhetoric and the Socialist Realist tradition of ode writing. In fact, he explored the compatibility, fusion, and propensity for mutation of both the old and new graphomanias.

Shortly afterward the eminent critic Lada Fedorovskaia published a long article in the respectable Moscow weekly *Literaturnaia gazeta* under the title “Bilingualism, Kiev Style,” to expose the excesses and stupidity of the forceful “Ukrainization” allegedly being carried out in Ukraine.<sup>17</sup> The poem was featured as a key example of the “officially approved vulgarization” of patriotic feelings. “A certain Mr. Irvanets,” she wrote about the noted Ukrainian writer whose works have been translated into many European languages, “flying high on patriotic passion, has produced an ‘Ode to the Hryvnia’.” Then she quoted a fragment and noted reasonably that it looks like a parody. “But it is not a parody!” she reported to readers, because it was published in a journal founded by the Ministry of Culture of Ukraine and, moreover, in a rubric entitled “Read This on Scene.” A post-imperial critic, thus, misread postcolonial irony in a poem offered for reading by stand-up comedians for a serious nationalistic statement to be read solemnly at official concerts!

These amusing and bizarre arguments hide an assumption that is more important and self-evident to both the author and her readers: Ukrainians cannot parody themselves simply because they are not a nation like any other, with their own sages and fools, heroes and villains, poets and scribblers. They are not a nation at all, just a band of “nationally obsessed” provincial intellectuals, a Friday that has suddenly gone crazy.

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<sup>16</sup> See also Myroslav Shkandrij’s article in this issue.

<sup>17</sup> *Literaturnaia gazeta*, March 27, 1997.

Without a doubt, this context influences Ukrainian writers, no matter how uninhibited, disengaged, and committed to the postcolonial way of writing they are. Even the most renowned and internationally established leader of this generation, Yuri Andrukhovych, cannot escape from the daunting context that is much more neo- than postcolonial. As a Swedish critic aptly notes:

The national theme is exploited to varying degrees in all the novels by Andrukhovych and with ever greater seriousness and stronger commitment to the independence of Ukraine and to defense of his country against Soviet and Russian hegemony and imperialism. At the same time all his novels, and not only *Moskoviada*, are dedicated to the deconstruction of the nationalistic rhetoric. This defense of Ukrainian independence and simultaneous criticism of nationalistic propaganda is a very important feature of the novels of Andrukhovych as well as of the works of other Ukrainian postmodernist writers.<sup>18</sup>

In sum, one may conclude that contemporary Ukrainian culture, however rich and versatile, and riding high on the postcolonial momentum, still encounters the serious problem of its colonial legacy and the even more serious challenge of neocolonial reality. Like any challenge, it may be daunting, and harmful – even fatal. But it can also be – and seems to be – thought-provoking, encouraging, and energizing.

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<sup>18</sup> Per-Arne Bodin, “The End of an Empire: On Iurii Andrukhovych’s Novel *Moskoviada*,” *From Sovietology to Postcoloniality: Poland and Ukraine from a Postcolonial Perspective*, ed. Janusz Korek (Huddinge: Södertörns högskola, 2007), p. 100.