

Rethinking Tradition, Rejecting the Past: Ukrainian Poetry of the 1910s and 1920s in the Search for Europe¹

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1. Ukrainian Culture, modernization, and Europe

In the early twentieth century, Ukrainian culture was dominated by an intense debate regarding the direction that Ukrainian literature should follow in order to best tackle the challenges that the to-be-reconstructed Ukrainian nation, torn between two empires, was facing in its difficult path towards a national modernity. It is a well-known fact of Ukrainian cultural history that two main groups of writers and literary historians were fighting for the right to dictate the agenda of contemporary literature circa forty years after the death of the national poet Taras Ševčenko in 1861 (see Pavlychko 1996, 83), looking for a much-needed breakthrough after decades marked by the repression of Ukrainian language and culture in the Russian empire (Remy 2017, 44-5) and the consequent lack of those cultural infrastructures that can make literature sought-after and truly influential². The so-called populist faction of the Ukrainian intelligentsia supported an idea of literature as an accessible means of

¹ I have had the chance to access several crucial bibliographical items thanks to my status as an Adjunct Research Fellow at Monash University, Melbourne, Australia.

² As Bourdieu put it, “the work of art is an object which exists as such only by virtue of the (collective) belief which knows and acknowledges it as a work of art” (1983, 317). To be sure, Ukrainian literature of the nineteenth century did enjoy recognition among its scarce readers and did contribute to the nation-building process, but it clearly still lacked the collective dimension that it needed to become an element of political change.

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communication with the largest possible audience, using understandable language and focusing on everyday themes and situations that would reflect the lived experience of the to-be-educated targeted readers. Expanding on both Ševčenko's heritage – through a simplified, somewhat stereotypical reading of Ševčenko's complexity and thirst for experimentation – and the recent, but rich tradition of Ukrainian realistic prose of the 1870s-1890s by such authors as Ivan Nečuj-Levyc'kyj (1838-1918) and Panas Myrnyj (1849-1920) (see Tarnawsky 2015, 3-4), the populists were eager to make their (prospective) readers more conscious of their Ukrainianness. Conversely, the modernists strove for a refined literary culture that would see Ukrainian literature quickly reach the same level of complexity and diversity of their Central and West European counterparts, putting aesthetic values and experimentation over accessibility and what could be referred to as national character³. As Tamara Hundorova aptly observes, both groups pursued the modernization of Ukraine and its culture, albeit each in its own way (Гундорова 2009, 83).

The modernists saw in Europe and its culture the main goal of their endeavours in the literary arena, while the populists tended to see Europe as a potential danger for an idealized Ukrainian identity, as shown by Serhij Jefremov's (1876-1939) much-quoted negative review of the modernist writer Ol'ha Kobyljans'ka's (1863-1942) prose in light of the alleged excessively German character of her writings (Ефремов 1902), which were deeply influenced by Kobyljans'ka's multicultural background⁴. For the modernists, making up for lost time and opportunities to bring Ukrainian literature out from the provincialism to which history had condemned it was an operation that required radical choices, including breaking not only with the nineteenth century, but also with the recent past and even, or rather especially, with some of those early awkward attempts at modern writing that various groups and writers had made in the very first years of the century.

In this article, I will analyse instances of an explicit tension with recent Ukrainian literature in the works of three leading Ukrainian writers of the first half of the twentieth century who were all born in the early 1890s, Mychajl' Semenko (1892-1937), Mykola Zerov (1890-1937), and Mykola Chvył'ovyj (1893-1933). Their cultural orientation and the poetics were radically different, ranging from avant-garde to neoclassicism and what we might call proletarian expressionism, but the three shared a strong commitment to a radical aesthetic renewal that transcended literary divergences and put them in opposition to the recent past, with a view to making Ukrainian literature more European, *hence* more modern. I will focus on poems by Zerov and Semenko, and excerpts from critical prose in the case of Chvył'ovyj. By analyzing their negative reception of contemporary Ukrainian literature, often symbolized by the recurrence of a few names, such as that of Mykola Voronyj

³ From this point of view, the modernists' priorities at least partially diverged from that "cultural nationalism" that Anthony Smith, explicitly drawing on John Hutchinson, sees as typical for most East European states in the late nineteenth century, including among Ukrainians (Smith 1998, 178).

⁴ On the ambiguous discourse of Europeanization in early-twentieth-century Ukrainian culture see Simonek 2005.

(1871-1938) – a writer who was actually committed to aesthetic innovation –, I will focus on the diverging strategies that Semenکو, Zerov, and Chvył'ovyj put forward while pursuing the same goal. I will also reflect on the extent to which discussions of art's autonomy were part of a broader and nuanced conversation on the national project and its implementation, shedding light on the complex, at times contradictory, relationship between the sphere of culture and that of political battle for the sake of Ukraine and its place in Europe. In the Ukrainian context, any defence of art for art's sake, that is of art's right to be viewed as a value per se, had – and still may have today – an (indirect) national significance: making a new art meant, or means, strengthening and consolidating the national space⁵. At the end of my contribution, I will offer a glimpse into the evolution of the European discourse in Ukrainian culture in the second half of the century.

2. Mykola Zerov: bringing the classics to Ukraine

Among the most cultivated and refined promoters of a radical renewal in Ukrainian poetry was Mykola Zerov, the main voice of a neoclassical sensibility in Ukrainian literary culture of the late 1910s and 1920s⁶. Born in the Poltava region in 1890, Zerov was one of the many Ukrainian intellectuals shot in Sandarmoch, Karelia, in 1937. In his biography of Zerov, Volodymyr Pančenko stressed Zerov's ability to combine academic rigour with an impressive public engagement, brilliantly supported by his enviable rhetorical skills (Панченко 2018, 6). Zerov is mostly known as the author of a significant number of translations from Greek, Latin, and modern European languages, but his original poetry is no less significant. Zerov's activity as a translator from Greek and Latin is to be read in light of his strong belief in the importance of the classics for the qualitative improvement of Ukrainian poetry, with the aim of saving it from what in his view had been an unsatisfying aesthetic performance.

In its capacity as a workshop for a kind of poetry that had virtually no precedents in the Ukrainian literary tradition, Zerov's metapoetry embodies his belief in the need to hark back to the roots of European culture – both classical and modern – to enhance the quality, and hence the impact potential of Ukrainian literature. In an original poem from 1921 available in slightly different versions, titled “Nova ukrajins'ka poezija,” “Moloda Ukrajina,” or “Pro domo”⁷, the lyrical

⁵ On the overwhelming role of “national allegories” in Ukrainian culture, that is of individual narratives and artistic gestures that cannot but have a national meaning, see Chernetsky (2003, 44), who has applied Frederic Jameson's theory to the Ukrainian context.

⁶ As to the *vexata quaestio* of the existence of an actual Neoclassical School in Ukrainian poetry of the 1920s, see Jurij Ševel'ov's 1944 essay “Legenda pro ukrajins'kyj neokljasycyzm” (Шевельов 2009, I: 394), which denies the existence of such a school.

⁷ In Zerov's 1922 manuscript *Sonety i elehiji*, printed in 1990, this poem is titled “Nova ukrajins'ka poezija.” In the 1990 collection of his poetry and prose edited by Dmytro Pavlyčko and Hryhorij Kočur, it is titled “Pro domo.” In the latter version, the first stanza is different (Зеров 1990, 66).

subject draws a sharp line between contemporary Ukrainian literature and European culture, not only classical but also relatively contemporary:

Коли ж то, Господи, мине нас ця чаша?
 Ця старосвітчина, цей повітовий смак,
 Ці мрійники без крил, якими так
 Поезія прославилася наша?
 От Петька Стах, містечковий сіряк,
 От Вороний, сентиментальна кваша...
 О ні, Пегасові потрібна інша паша,
 А то не витягне, загрузне неборак.
 Прекрасна пластика і контур строгий,
 Добірний стиль, залізна колія –
 Оце твоя, поезіє, дорога.
 Леконт де Ліль, Хозе Ередія –
 Парнаських зір незахідне сузір'я
 Зведе тебе на справжнє верхогір'я (Зеров 1990b: 12).

In this Italian sonnet, Zerov posits craftsmanship as the precondition of any artistic endeavour. As per the first stanza, dreams are impossible without a solid pair of wings capable of supporting the many Icaris of contemporary Ukrainian poetry in their idle aesthetic ambitions. Mastery of poetic form, which implies a solid knowledge of tradition and the willingness to adapt it to one's own cultural context, is the basis for any further attempt at using words to create what we could call "a thing of beauty," as Keats put it in his poem "Endymion" (Keats 1978, 65). While the first stanza brings up the issue of the low level of Ukrainian literary culture without going into details, the second does not refrain from naming some of the authors that in the lyrical subject's view have not been able to provide aesthetic products of a satisfying level. The writers mentioned in the second stanza include one name that has entered the Ukrainian literary canon, that of Mykola Voronyj, and one that has not left significant traces in the history of Ukrainian literature, that of Petro Stach, pseudonym of Spirydon Čerkasenko (1876-1940). After directly naming some examples of literati whose approach to literature Zerov's lyrical subject views as inadequate, the third stanza presents a compact sample of normative poetics, insisting on precision, regularity, and possibly elitism as markers of high-quality writing. Poetry is, or must be, like a railway: iron hard, straight, and solid. The fourth and last stanza of the sonnet turns again towards literary history, now naming some exempla, providing the Ukrainian audience with instances that should be followed to improve the status of Ukrainian poetry. Consistently with his apotheosis of poetic form, Zerov's subject mentions two names that were indeed central to the discourse around the poetic of form in nineteenth-century French poetry, those of Charles Marie René Leconte de Lisle (1818-1894) and José Hérédia (1842-1905), whom we however would not rate among the most highly regarded and influential voices of post-romantic French poetry. To be sure, both Leconte de Lisle and Hérédia are part of the canon, but it is not them who have come to symbolize the strength

and the innovative character of French poetry of the second half of the nineteenth century⁸. Zerov, who translated into Ukrainian poems from both Leconte de Lisle and Hérédia, insisted nonetheless on formal perfection and the independence of art from explicit political content as the most important criteria for literary production, and in this regard the Parnassians were indeed an excellent model for his highly demanding project.

Interestingly, in 1920 Zerov had published an anthology of contemporary Ukrainian poetry also titled *Nova ukrajins'ka poezija*. Zerov begins his introduction by mentioning Voronyj and his efforts for the modernization of Ukrainian poetry⁹. Voronyj is also the opening name of the anthology with two poems, “Ad astra” and “Lileji” (Зеров 1920, 1-2). The fact that the first text of the collection had a Latin title cannot be a matter of chance and might be seen as a sign of Zerov’s actual, although clearly not unambiguous and consciously felt, admiration for Voronyj, or at least his awareness of his role in the history of Ukrainian poetry.

In another sonnet from the same collection, titled “Dante” or “V carstvi proobraziv,” also available in different versions, it is Dante himself and Petrarch who are indirectly posited as models to follow for Ukrainian poets aspiring to aesthetic renewal and excellence:

Сагою дивною, без демена й весла,
Ми пропливали вдвох, – я й чарівник Вергілій.
Як бронза він різьбивсь – і до далеких лілій
Ріка незнана нас, гойдаючи, несла.

Латаття там плелось без ліку і числа,
На світ займалося в пустелі злotoхвилій;
Я поглядом тону в тій наплаві білій,
А слухом – у речах небесного посла.

Я чув: “Ці лілії, що уповають чаром,
Далеко від землі, від valle lacrimarum
Зросли тут засівом потужної руки;

Далекі від тривоги і від земної сварки,
Колишуться і снять, одвічні двійники
Сонетів і канцон майбутнього Петрарки (Зеров 1991а, 66).

⁸ In his study of neoclassicism (which he explicitly writes with a small n, cf. Fitzgerald 2022, 174), William Fitzgerald focuses on cliché as “a central characteristic of neoclassicism in its negative sense” (175): “Both of the collections I will examine in this chapter, the anonymous *Anacreontea* (first century BCE to sixth century CE?) and *Études latines* of Charles Marie René Leconte de Lisle (1818–94), invite the characteristic complaint that neoclassicism is a mechanical, regressive, and lifeless attempt to repeat a venerated antiquity: both collections ‘voice’ a long-dead, classical poet” (175).

⁹ In his introduction, Zerov abstains from actually praising Voronyj, but stresses Voronyj’s work on the formal side of his poetry (Зеров 1920, vii).

True art is the opposite of the petty matters of mundane life. As an act of magic, poetry has the power to engender a new reality, to make the invisible visible and the inaudible audible. Through a language that imitates, or re-enacts, classical poetry by using typical devices of ancient epics such as epithet (e.g. “zlotochvylij”), Zerov offers his readers a poetic staging of the situation of Ukrainian literature at the crossroads of stasis and renewal. To provide the to-be-invented Italian poetry with solid poetic instruments and to create his own tradition, Dante had to follow classical models. With the aim of forging a new Ukrainian poetry, Zerov’s subject-as-poet has the advantage of having more than one cultural tradition at his disposal: not just the ancient, as in the case of Dante, but the entirety of the Western literary heritage from Homer to the present. The closure of the poem, with the ambiguous mention of the future Petrarch referring to both post-Dante Italian literature and the long-expected renewal of Ukrainian poetry¹⁰, leaves no doubt as to the radical character of the changes that Zerov’s lyrical subject sees as necessary for Ukrainian poetry to attain a truly European quality. Zerov’s subject’s insistence on poetry’s distance from earthly matters in both tercets – with the repetition of “distance from” that might strike some readers as an artistic flaw – stresses the need for poets to view both their inspiration and their craftsmanship as sacred. By positing both the French parnassians and early Italian poetry as models for Ukrainian poets, Zerov aims to widen the spectrum of eligible inspiration sources for Ukrainian literature, thus not limiting the coveted Europeanness to a single stylistic feature or thematic area. What matters is quality, broadly definable as adherence to, and knowledge of, tradition and the pursuit of formal flawlessness, as well as the willingness to see poetry as an autonomous sphere of endeavour, one not directly subject to extra-artistic goals¹¹. Making literature more solid, that is more aware of its links with European sources, and defending its autonomy does not mean confining it to a sterile obsession with formal pursuit. In Zerov’s view, modernism-as-Europeanism coincides with the rediscovery of one’s own belonging to Europe, which cannot but imply a political dimension: by modernizing art through the rediscovery of its deep European roots, Ukraine has the chance to reconnect with its own profoundly European nature. While repeatedly reminding his fellow literati of the need of a solid knowledge of both classical and modern literature throughout his critical essays, Zerov also foregrounded Ukraine’s innate belonging to Europe “through every single pore of its social organism” – a significant marker of its distinctiveness and its difference from Russia:

¹⁰ Interestingly, in the earlier version available in the 1991 reprint of Zerov’s *Sonety i elehij*, Petrarch is not “future,” or “to-come” (majbutnij), but simply “grand” (“velykyj,” Зеров 1990b, 14). We might conclude that in the version presented as more mature in Zerov’s collected works Zerov decided to stress the link between the original Petrarch and the future (Ukrainian) one, thus strengthening the manifesto character of the text.

¹¹ On the problem of art’s autonomy see Sven Lütticken’s definition of the aesthetic as “the constant questioning of art and more precisely of claims for art’s autonomy, counteracting its reduction from persistent problem to ideological given” (2014, 83).

Вікно в Європу було прорубано раз, «в Питербурхе-городке» на початку XVIII століття, коли на російські центри упало снопом європейське світло і так яскраво підкреслило околишню тьму; на Україні ж у нас вікон не прорубали, у нас паруски європейської культури промикалися всюди тисячею непомітних шпар та щілин, сприймаючися помалу, непомітно, але всіма порами соціального організму (Зеров 1943, 269).

In Zerov's view, Ukraine's profound, diffused but seemingly forgotten Europeanness meant both the unforgivable character of its alleged provincialism and, on a positive note, its supposed receptiveness to cultural change. In comparison to Russia, with its superficial, fake European veneer, Ukraine has the potential to become a truly European country, or actually rediscover and reactivate its hidden European soul. To be able to do so, it needs to fight its cultural backwardness and go back to the sources of European culture: in other words, it must forego Russian mediation and read the classics, including contemporary and recent ones, in the original.

3. Mychajl' Semenko: (a moderate) avant-garde instead of boredom

As one would expect, the idea of a radical break with the recent past is also part of the culture of the Ukrainian avant-garde. I will focus on Mychajl' Semenko, the leading voice of Ukrainian Futurism. Born in the Myrhorod district in 1892, Semenko was one more victim of the repressions of the late 1930s. With his thirst for experimentation and his ability to produce a kind of poetry that was at the same time bold and enjoyable, Semenko managed to radically alter the expectations of the Ukrainian reading public. In a poem from 1916 titled "Parykmacher," Semenko's lyrical subject compares his state of boredom with the effect produced on an audience by a meeting with three leading names of contemporary Ukrainian literature:

Сьогодні вдень мені так нудно,
ніби докупи зійшлися Олесь, Вороний і Чупринка.
Почувалося дощово й по осінньому облудно,
в душі цілий день парикмахер на гітарі бринькав.

Іноді думав про неї й робив ескізи листа –
Що не гадався їй надісланим бути.
Згадав кілька французьких фраз забутих,
разів зо два поглянув на образ Христа.

Наспівував банальні вальси безголосно,
дивлячись на стелю в брудне павутиння.
Ні, мені було тільки тоскно – тільки тоскно...
В серці моєму розкладалась диня (Семенко 1929: 113).

The group of three allegedly boring Ukrainians mentioned by Semenko's lyrical subject authors features the same Mykola Voronyj that Mykola Zerov would accuse of aesthetic inadequacy only five years later. From the vantage point of lit-

erary history, Semenko's and Zerov's shared contempt for Voronyj and his work is likely to appear unjustified. One of the most prominent advocates of a thorough renewal in the early years of the century, Voronyj delivered a significant contribution to the modernization of Ukrainian literary culture after decades dominated by the cult of Taras Ševčenko and the frequent, epigonic repetition of his patterns. In 1913, soon after the publication of Semenko's first collection, *Prélude*, Voronyj had published a rather negative review of the young writer's debut, which he accused of a lack of a clear literary orientation (Ilnytkyj 1997: 4). *Prélude* was indeed far away from providing a significant breakthrough. This would happen only a few months later, with the publication of *Derzannja* in early 1914.

The two other names mentioned by Semenko's lyrical subject are those of Oleksandr Oles' (1878-1944) and Hryc'ko Čuprynka (1879-1921), two very well-known poets united by a tendency to focus on patriotic themes and to include elements of Ukrainian folklore in their poetry¹². The melancholic atmosphere of Semenko's poem reflects the mood of much of neo-romantic early-twentieth-century Ukrainian poetry, within which Semenko himself had taken his first steps as a debuting writer (Ilnytkyj 1997, 3), so as to deconstruct it from within the field of (cautious) avant-garde aesthetic. "Parykmacher" shows an interesting combination of that to-be-overcome traditional poetry with moderate avant-garde gestures, creating a poetic language that instead of bluntly *épater le bourgeois* quietly mixes elements of the new art with the gloomy notes of that "banal waltz," to quote the poem, that could be said to constitute the default option for Ukrainian poets, at least in the preceding years, and that the subject was used to singing in the past. In the second stanza, such a traditional theme of early-twentieth-century Ukrainian poetry as the subject's longing for the beloved woman and his struggling because of her absence or distance is matched with a reference to "some forgotten French sentences," a possible hint at international pre-avant-garde poetry, thus revealing a different view of recent French achievements in literature if compared with Zerov's praise of the Parnassians. The concluding lines of the poem combine the usual melancholy ("meni bulo til'ky toskno – til'ky toskno") with a repetition that seems to stress the empty, mechanical character of these poetic formulae. Moreover, the image of the melon decomposing in the subject's heart might remind readers of the aesthetic of such prominent examples of avant-garde paintings as cubist still lifes. Instead of contributing a piece of normative poetics through the performative gesture of a poem that would embody that poetics in the spirit of classics – what Zerov would do with his 1921 poem –, Semenko mocks the tradition he is rebelling against by laying it bare and corrupting it, so to speak, or rather, from his point of view, elevating it, with elements of avant-garde aesthetic.

¹² In the introduction to his anthology *Nova ukrajins'ka poezija*, Zerov defined Oles' as "the Coryphaeus of our poetry" (Зеров 1920, xi), stressing the innovative character of his poetry. For Čuprynka, although not failing to mention the originality of his rhythm and his themes, Zerov (*ibid.*, xii) had a lesser degree of admiration.

“Parykmacher” is not the first poem to openly attack Voronyj. In “K drugu-stichotvorcu,” a 1914 poem whose Russian-language title openly alludes to Puškin’s tradition, Voronyj is posited as the symbol of everything old and boring:

Пане Вороний! Коли Ви перестанете
вже ходити у вибиваних штанях?
Це дивно, але невже Ви не почуваете,
що літом просвіщаєтесь на саях?
І нам (як Вам) осточортіли зорі-очі,
й очі вже давно пора кинути озорювать,
та й панночки до зор вже не такі охочі –
невже Ви відмовляєтесь палкі серця покорювать?
Пане Вороний! Пора вже скинути онучі,
бо вже по містах – хоч яких – все ажур,
і так нудні Ваші гаї та дніпрокручі,
як почуття щирих українських шкур.
Пане Вороний! Я бачу – Ви цього й не почуваете,
хрещатикуючи серед літа – ха, ха! – в саях,
але все ж... Невже таки не перестанете
у вибиваних ходити штанях?

1.IV.1914. Київ
(Семенко 1985, 58)

Thoroughly opposing himself to “Mr Voronyj,” Semenکو’s lyrical subject posits his own poetic gaze as able to understand reality, while his rival is condemned to keep making a fool of himself. Semenکو’s subject claims that Voronyj’s (alleged) obsession with the beauty of Ukrainian nature and with the stereotypes of the Ukrainian literary language prevents him from seeing the world around him. Semenکو’s skilful use of paronomasias and folklore-based etymological figures¹³, combined with hapaxes such as “chreščatykuvaty” (to stroll through the Chreščatyk, central Kyiv’s main street), is meant to embody the overcoming of those poetic clichés that in his view constituted the bread and butter of Voronyj’s old-fashioned idea of poetry. By questioning Voronyj’s manliness – he is allegedly incapable of, or uninterested in, attracting female eyes and hearts –, Semenکو’s lyrical subject points to the sterility of Voronyj’s poetics. Unable to recognize that literary tastes have changed and that the audience is deaf to his boring lines, Voronyj is doomed to humiliate himself and lose his own prestige. In line with the avant-garde’s push to claim its own territory by proclaiming its alleged break with the past, Semenکو’s lyrical subject cannot but express the utter novelty of his own approach to poetry. Interestingly, and in syntony with “Parykmacher,” “K drugu-stichotvorcu” proclaims its subject’s awareness of Voronyj’s alleged backwardness by copying, or mocking, traditional poetry, with

¹³ The “zori-oči” mocked by Semenکو’s subject are a reference to a 1912 poem by Voronyj with the same title, which reads like an exercise in symbolist writing with a folkloric touch, a staple of early-twentieth-century poetry (Вороний 1996, 65).

its repetitions and its musicality. The recent past may very well sound boring and stereotypical, but its open, carnivalesque deconstruction occupies a central place in the new generation's public performance. The explicit character of the avant-garde's reckoning with poetic tradition is underlined by the title of the poem, with its explicit reference to Puškin's 1814 poem. With his homage to young Puškin exactly one hundred years after the latter's original "K drugu stichotvorcu," Semenکو seems keen to foreground the eternal play of topoi, stereotypes, failed renewal, and actual renewal that is at the core of any literary process, to some extent anticipating the formalist reflection that would flourish in the next decade.

Interestingly, a few years later, in 1920, Zerov would deliver a similar poetic portrait of Voronyj:

Руді штанці, зневажливе пенсне
 І хриплий голос – все дари Моргани.
 Чи стане він, чи глянє, чи моргне,
 Він лавреат, він лицар без догани.
 І що йому критичний наш терор?
 Таж він гудець, він сьогочасний Ор,
 Великий у своїй співецькій долі,
 Цар і в поезії, і в алкоголі.
 Петлюра славив лірний його дар,
 І Ковалевський укладав хвалітни,
 І тоне в морі сміливий Ікар.
 Так по щó ж він спирається на Стаха
 По щó гудцеві переїзжа сваха?
 (Зеров 1990b, 60)

Zerov's lyrical subject not only laments Voronyj's alleged lack of courage in breaking with traditional writing, but also the contrast between his alleged shabbiness and his success among the general public, including politicians, that contrasts Voronyj's prosaic figure with his own ideal of *kalokagathia*. By mentioning Petro Stach, as he would do a few months later in his poem "Nova ukrajins'ka poezija," Zerov's lyrical subject is keen to draw a sharp contrast between his own idea of poetry and his rivals, stuck in the tethers of a tradition that they are too weak to abandon. The reference to Icarus was sure to remind Zerov's readers of a 1902 poem by Voronyj in which the lyrical subject identifies with Icarus and proudly foresees his fusion with the sunbeams and his consequent fall to the Earth (Voronyj 1996, 69-70). Zerov, who would share with Mykola Voronyj's son Marko (1904-1937, also a poet) the plight of Stalin's repressions in the 1930s, was not afraid of invectives to express his dissatisfaction with the recent past of Ukrainian poetry.

4. Mykola Chvylovyy: a revolutionary able to recognize merit

Semenko and Zerov are not the only writers of the 1910s and 1920s reckoning with those recent trends in their own literary tradition that they found unsatisfying and worth fighting against. The most iconic name in this regard is that of

Mykola Chvylovyj (1893-1933), one of the most influential names of Ukrainian culture of the 1920s and a refined prose writer, who committed suicide in 1933 after experiencing strong disappointment with the direction Soviet Ukraine and its culture had taken under Stalin. A communist and a nationalist, Chvylovyj believed in the necessity of promoting a kind of literature that would significantly improve the aesthetic level of Ukrainian culture, bringing it into line with European standards, while also being accessible and attractive to a larger audience. In his pamphlets from the mid-1920s, Chvylovyj openly shares his views about the path that Ukrainian literature should take to free itself of the alleged provinciality to which history had condemned it over the last two centuries:

Both the priest Luther and the workers' leader Bebel belong to one and the same type of European civic person. [...] This is the person whose biological nature is always troubled, always fully engaged. This is the European intellectual in the best sense of the word. [...] We are faced with this fundamental and unexplained dilemma: Are we going to approach our national art as fulfilling a service (in the given instance, serving the proletariat) and as forever subordinate, forever a reserve for those of the world's arts that have attained a high level of development? [...] Or, on the contrary, while retaining the service role shall we find it necessary to raise its artistic level to that of the world's masterpieces? [...] Ukrainian art must find the highest aesthetic values. And on this path the Voronyys and levshans were a phenomenon of social importance. For us the eminent "muzhik" Franko, who considers Flaubert to have been a fool, is less dear than (let this not be personalia) the aesthetic Semenko, this tragic figure against the backdrop of our backward reality [...]¹⁴.

Chvylovyj mentions again the same Mykola Voronyj who tendentiously functioned as the quintessence of the old, to-be-overcome provincial literature in Semenko's and Zerov's poetry, but Chvylovyj rightly sees him and his approach to literature as a stage in the path that Ukrainian culture had been undertaking in its development and modernization¹⁵. While giving a rather belittling judgment of Ivan Franko (1856-1916), the number two writer in the Ukrainian literary canon after Ševčenko and an intellectual of impressive culture and complexity, Chvylovyj praises Mychajl' Semenko, foregrounding his aesthetic rebellion against the literary mainstream. One could claim that by favoring Voronyj over Franko, Chvylovyj seems eager to intervene in the literary dispute that had unfolded twenty years earlier in the opening pages of *Z-nad chmar i z dolyn*, an almanac edited by Voronyj himself, published in Odesa in 1903.

The first text of *Z-nad chmar i z dolyn* is a poem by Franko titled "Mykoli Voronomu: Poslanije." In his three-page satire, Franko's lyrical subject accuses Voronyj

¹⁴ I am quoting Chvylovyj's essays from Myroslav Shkandrij's English translation in Lindheim and Luckyj 1996, 270-73.

¹⁵ See also Oleksandr Bilec'kyj's 1929 article on Voronyj, whom Bilec'kyj defines as "the founder of Ukrainian modernism" (Білецький 1929, 158), tracing his influence on the whole of Ukrainian modernist poetry.

of being “an inveterate idealist,” who wrongly believes in the possibility of poetry as a sphere of endeavour detached from reality (Франко 1903, 1-3)¹⁶. In the second text of *Z-nad chmar i z dolyn*, Voronyj would respond to Franko with a poem of the same length titled “Ivanovi Frankovi,” in which Voronyj’s lyrical subject defends himself from Franko’s accusations, calling him a “teacher” and a “friend” (Вороний 1903, 4). Voronyj’s poem, which is opened by a slightly modified quote from Baudelaire (“La poésie n’a pas la vérité pour objet, elle n’a qu’elle-même?”), puts forward a kind of poetry that combines the defense of art’s freedom with its commitment to social engagement and justice: “Моя девіза: йти за віком / І бути цілим чоловіком!” (*ibid.*, 6). It should be noted that the publication of *Z-nad chmar i z dolyn* had been preceded by Voronyj’s call for contributions on the Lviv-based *Literaturno-naukovyj vistnyk*, one of the most important Ukrainian cultural journals of the early twentieth century. Inviting his colleagues to send him their submissions, Voronyj presented his project as a platform for reducing the distance between Ukrainian literature and current European trends: his ideal is an almanac

який би змістом і виглядом бодай почасті міг наблизитись до новітших течій та напрямків в сучасних літературах європейських і бажаючи стягнути як найширший круг співробітників” (Вороний 1901, 14)¹⁷.

As argued by Oleh Ilnytzkyj, Chvyľovyj was keen to defend early Ukrainian modernism against the widespread accusation of pursuing a low artistic level, defending their attempts at a renewal of Ukrainian literature (1991, 259). In spite of the significant differences in style and orientation between the Moloda muza group and Chvyľovyj, the latter was able to recognize their shared goal, that is Ukraine’s cultural rapprochement to Europe. In other pamphlets, Chvyľovyj stresses the need for Ukrainian culture to reduce its dependence on Russian models and to truly embrace itself and its European character in order to fulfil its true duty towards the Ukrainian nation: “The proletariat’s ideas did not reach us through Muscovite art; on the contrary, we, as representatives of a young nation, can better apprehend these ideas, better cast them in the appropriate images. Our orientation is to Western European art, its style, its techniques” (Lindheim and Luckyj 1996, 277). With his literary talent and his vision, Chvyľovyj was among the best of the cultural renewal of the early soviet years. His suicide in 1933 was among the first and most dramatic tokens of the end of the great hopes.

5. After the 1920s

After the heated debates and the productive competitions of the 1920s, discussions on the past, present and future of Ukrainian literature in connection with its Europeanness were abruptly silenced in the 1930s, when hundreds of

¹⁶ On Franko’s ambiguity with regards to the new trends in European and Ukrainian literature see, among others, Ahejeva (Ареева 2014, 21-4).

¹⁷ On Voronyj and Franko’s dispute see also Nowacki 2017, 487-90.

Ukrainian writers and men and women of culture were eliminated and others found themselves forced to make compromises with their own conscience and inspiration and embrace Socialist Realism, at least to a certain extent. The same pattern of rebuttal of one's own corrupted or powerless tradition in favour of a more decided turn towards Europe would then emerge again during and after the Thaw, with the Sixtiers' and post-Sixtiers' renewal of the Ukrainian poetic language (Pachlovska 2017), and in the 1990s, a decade of exciting cultural renewal, which was marked by the contrast between so-called nativists and westernizers, as Ola Hnatiuk put it (2006). In another contribution on the 1990s, Marko Pavlyshyn has managed to foreground how after the fall of the Soviet Union, Ukrainian writers were even able to offer multiple, rivaling images of, and discourses on, Europe (2001, 41).

In conclusion, we could venture to affirm that with 2014, Ukrainian culture has managed to attain a degree of rootedness in its nation and also, although slowly and especially after 2022, international recognition that has made the constant quest for a still missing, mythicized Europeaness less urgent than it had appeared to many Ukrainian writers of the past. More and more a part of European culture, as demonstrated by the constant participation of Ukrainian writers in literary festivals throughout Europe, Ukrainian literature is regaining the place that it had been questing after for more than a century.

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