



Ukrainian Fantastic: it was yesterday

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При використанні матеріалів статті обов'язковим є посилання на її автора з повним бібліографічним описом видання, у якому опубліковано статтю. Дана електронна копія статті може бути скопійована, роздрукована і передана будь-якій особі без обмежень права користування за обов'язкової наявності першої (даної) сторінки з повним бібліографічним описом статті. При повторному розміщенні статті у мережі Інтернет обов'язковим є посилання на сайт Східного інституту українознавства імені Ковальських.

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UKRAINIAN FANTASTIC: IT WAS YESTERDAY

In the year 2000 the publishing of fantastic stopped in Ukraine¹. This sad event went unnoticed at the background of general economical difficulties and social conflicts, nobody was upset by the fact except the most sincere fans. Only the most sincere could be upset because all other kinds of fiction including those published in Russia are still abundant in the market. Then is there anything to regret for? Now more than 30 writers working in this genre live in Ukraine; in the same year 2000 they published about 50 books². But they were published in other countries and in other languages and could not be considered a contribution to the national culture the colours of which are nowadays not too rich. The situation is still more regrettable if we remember that fantastic is not a casual branch at the tree of Ukrainian literature.

I

The history of Ukrainian fantastic (including both science fiction and fantasy) as a separate genre may seem to be very short. First books that can be attributed as "strictly" fantastical were published in Ukraine only in the 1920ies. During the seven decades since then about twenty names, more or less famous, appeared at the scene. All of them remained almost unknown (it's another question whether it was justified or not) outside of the Ukrainian environment. But this impression becomes deceptive if we consider some special features of the genre itself and of Ukrainian literature in general. The historical circumstances went in such a way that Ukrainian authors wrote almost always not only in their native language. The reasons were numerous but the tendency had been distinctive in Middle Ages and has survived till present days. That is why it is reasonable to consider the works of Ukrainian authors written in all languages as a complex unity. It wouldn't be either a paradox or a strained interpretation. We can recall the Russian literature where a number of authors (from Pushkin to Alexey Tolstoy) wrote freely in French. Another example can be found in Finland where the schoolchildren read the national epic poem by L. Ruteberg in Swedish. The examples can be added more and more differing only in scale. As to Ukraine, it should be noted that the greatest of Ukrainian poets T.G. Shevchenko wrote a big

part of his works in Russian. The practice commonly adopted throughout the world is to consider all authors living and working in a country as native ones. But, *helas*, the provincialism inherent to some part (not the better one) of Ukrainian intellectuals makes them to exclude from Ukrainian culture some of its most significant layers only because they're not written in Ukrainian.

We must also specify more closely the definition of the fantastic genre itself. If we consider it in its present "wide" sense, including within its frames fantasy, mystical writings, alternative history and many other aspects, then from such point of view Ukrainian fantastic becomes rather of great interest.

Science fiction has appeared in Ukrainian literature comparatively not long ago, but the other popular genre, "fantasy", is deeply rooted and can be traced as far as the Middle Ages³. Here Ukrainian scholars were supported by the strong foundation of folklore and popular literature. The professional writers had to do only one step in order to create works of true fiction, i.e. to fix the popular stories on paper. As an example we can remember the famous paragon of mediaeval literature, Kiev-Pechersky Paterick⁴. If we cast a glance at the Paterick not as a religious but a literary work, we'll see a novel containing a number of stories consecrated to the struggle that the famous monks-hermits of the Kiev-Pechersky Lavra were leading against the legions of the Hell. The reader will find not without astonishment that the conditions, methods and techniques of this struggle correspond completely with those accepted nowadays thanks to Stocker and his followers. Ghosts of all kinds, werewolves, resurrected dead men, incantations, wonder-working talismans are plentifully represented in the book.

Quite another point of view underlies a Latin poem "Roxolania" written by Sebastian Klenovich and little known by modern readers. The author who was a well-educated humanist scholar described cases of witchcraft, sorcery, necromancy and other household mystical practices of the XVIth century Ukrainians with many interesting details. Moreover, he included into his book several episodes which can be righteously considered as inserted fiction (fantastic) stories. Klenovich had shown a number of persons who did not struggle against the devils, on the contrary, the unholy ones were ready to bring help to them - of course, in exchange for some gratitude⁵.

A new step was made in the XVIIth century, when the barocco literature was predominant with its disposition for fantastical subjects. A bright example of this period can be given by the works of the Metropolitan Piotr Mogila, who wrote a whole cycle of short stories on fantastical and mystical subjects. There in accordance with the genre laws the author forewarned the reader that he himself

had witnessed the events described and tried to make his stories "documentary" by mentioning "true" names and dates. Sometimes the author is shown as one of the participants of the events⁶. Here we must note that while the Paterick was still created as a collection of agiographic texts, Piotr Mogila wrote his stories with a purely literary goal: to amuse and to scare his readers and at the same time to teach them to be wise.

In the so called "kossack chronicles" (by Samovidets, Velichko, Grabianka), which were created in the second half of the XVIIth century or at the beginning of the XVIIIth we can find numerous inserted stories concerning the above-mentioned subjects. But there the colouring becomes more gloomy: as a rule the stories dealt with various "ominous dead" who used to set a church in fire here or to come out of a well there⁷. Usually these stories have no "happy end"; thus we shouldn't be mistaken if we call them an early variant of the "horror" style.

Another significant work containing some features of fantastic was written at the beginning of the XVIIIth century. This work, a tragical comedy "Vladimir" by Pheophan Prokopovich, belongs to the ranks of "high" literature⁸ but from the point of view of fantastic it is written at the merge of two genres - those of fantasy and alternative history. There we can find the insidious visitors from Hell (both ghosts and alive) and brave representatives of "the forces of Light" opposing them. It's worth noting that a part of those "bad guys" is represented by pagan deities or daemons, and so we can consider not without reasons Pheophan Prokopovich one of the founders of "Slavish fantasy". Besides, real personages are acting in "Vladimir" too (Vladimir himself, his brother Yaropolk), but their "historical" doings have nothing in common with those described in the Nestor's chronicles. Naturally, the piece is supplied with a spectacular culmination showing how the good heroes inevitably vanquish the bad ones.

The traditions mentioned above were present in the literature in various forms throughout the whole XVIIIth century. So it is not surprising that the modern Ukrainian literature began just with the fantastic genre. It happened in 1798 when the first cantoes of "Eneid" written by Ivan Kotliarevsky were published in St. Petersburg.

II

The "Eneid" was the first book written in modern Ukrainian language. It has been traditionally defined as a "burlesque", "travesty" or "heroic-comic poem". All these definitions are justified, however we can add to them another one. We surely can call the "Eneid" a piece of heroical fantasy having rather a complicated

plot and made with exquisite mastery.

First of all the author created a Universe of his own by mixing in a fanciful way the features of Homeric antiquity and the world quite contemporary for him. As the result the legendary Trojans and Latins feel themselves at home along with the late XVIIIth Europeans. The features of different civilizations are mixed in the same way: swords and spears co-exist with fire arms, modern clothes, dishes and, of course, alcohol drinks. The acting persons, both Eneus with his companions and their adversaries, speak Ukrainian and Latin. Moreover, Kotliarevsky used in his poem two artificially created languages, although, unlike Tolkien, he didn't invent them but used the student slang of his time.

The plot of the "Eneid" includes all components inevitably present in all books of fantasy: the interference of transcendental forces, witchcraft and magic (the sorcerers speaking in the student's slang), expedition to the Hell and, naturally, numerous battles where the brave heroes wield their swords of all their might while the others are busy with cannon shooting. It's interesting that Kotliarevsky has shown true artistic flair refusing to give a "happy end" to his story. The final part of the "Eneid" where "the very good kossack" Eneus avenges the death of his friend should be made a paragon for many modern authors who do their best to marry the main hero or to provide him with a pretty crown.

The tradition that had been developed and supported by the "Eneid" continued its existence in the XIXth century. In particular, Kotliarevsky himself wrote an amusing piece "The Moscal Sorcerer" ("Moscal" being a popular name of that time for soldiers), which is a witty parody for various kinds of "mystics". The author mocked at the excessive passion of his countrymen for all possible "horrors", but, of course, he couldn't have put an end to it.

Fantasy and mystics were constantly present in this or that form in the works of the first modern Ukrainian prose-writer Grigory Kvitka-Osnovianenko, who can be righteously considered the first fantasy writer in Kharkov. The most significant of his works in this field is the famous long story "The Konotop witch".

Here we have not the pure fantasy but a specific horror novel which is half-parody at the beginning but becomes more and more serious and even frightful. The author used real features of the XVIIIth century Ukraine and added many political and erotic details to the subject. The duel between a witch, the most real witch that time, and the inhabitants of the town of Konotop was going on with alternating success. The finale of the story is ambivalent too: the witch has won but she had little time to enjoy her victory. The hour has come, and the villain died in awful suffrage. This scene is a masterpiece equal to McCammon's or even Steven Kings' ones.

Even among the works of the most politically engaged Ukrainian author Taras Shevchenko we can find a number of specimens of this kind. Suffice it to remember his first published piece of poetry - a ballad (or rather a short poem) "Prichinna" ("The bewitched"), where we find ghosts and a drowned girl and everything that can be expected besides them. Shevchenko wrote a variant of his own at the "Witch" subject, which appeared more romantic than that of Kvitka's.

Taking into account this background we can better understand the great phenomenon of Nikolay Gogol, who belonged without doubt to the Russian literature but all his roots lie in the Ukrainian one. It was Gogol with his "Evenings near Dikanka", "Viy" and "Portrait" who developed maximally the traditions of Ukrainian fantasy of the XIXth century. The "Malorossian" ("Ukrainian") cycle of the stories by Gogol was in fact the summit of both Russian and Ukrainian fantastic of the romantic period and at the same time its final achievement.

III

By the mid-XIXth the new Ukrainian literature has grown up and acquired enough vigour. The apprenticeship had come to the end, the new generation, that of Kulish and Panas Mirny began to investigate with all responsibility the most serious and vital subjects of their time. But... the fantastic stream was extinguished. This pause lasted for more than a half of century. Among the vast variety of genres and subjects one can find no works that could be attributed to this genre even approximately in Ukrainian literature of the second half of the XIXth - early XXth centuries. The only although very bright exclusion was provided by Lesya Ukrainka who used widely the folklore themes. Her "Forest song" can be appreciated as a quite typical fantasy work having all characteristic features of the genre. However this brilliant example only underlines the general rule: we can find no traces of fantastic in Ukrainian literature of that time.

The causes of this phenomenon were various. Ukrainian readers hadn't lost the interest for fantastic. Quite on the contrary, this interest had even grown up; it is just enough to mention that the first translations of the fantastic novels by Jules Verne were undertaken by the Ukrainian woman-writer Marko Vovchok. Fantastic literature used to be translated and read - but not written by native authors. Of course, this can be explained by the changes in social circumstances and the expiration of the romantic period. The enlightened readers became indifferent for the patriarchal witches and mermaids. From the other side, the era of "technological" or "scientific" fantastic (whose bright representative was,

first of all, Jules Verne) still didn't begin in the agricultural Ukraine of that time. It is interesting that a similar situation was then observed in Russia. But Russian authors of that period made their contribution to such a genre as social fantastic (suffice it to mention Grigorovich and Bulgarin) while the Ukrainians preferred to solve social problems using the material taken from life within the frames of realism that predominated in the contemporary literature. This tendency had been ruling over almost seven decades. Only after all components of social life (social establishment, life conditions, mentality) underwent dramatic changes the conditions were created for the Ukrainian writers to return to fantastic; but it was a quite different fantastic. As a matter of fact the genre has been born anew.

The native tradition was interrupted but by this time the world fantastic already knew the names of Herbert Wells, Arthur Conan Doyle and Bram Stoker. The generation of Ukrainian writers of the 1920ies that aspired to join the "literary Europe" used the existing experience in full extent. The pioneer of the new tendency became the most famous of Ukrainian writers of the time Vladimir Vinnichenko.

In 1924 a big novel by Vinnichenko was published: "The Solar Mashine", created at the merge of different genres. There one could find the elements of both science fiction and social fantastic showing the supposed future of the totalitarian Europe at the end of the XXth century. This novel describes a society where the oligarchy of bankers and aristocrats is opposed by the bloody communist underground. Social conditions become more and more tense but all of a sudden an eccentric inventor appears and suggests a mashine to be used by everybody; this mashine allows every man to earn his living by his own work. The economic system comes to ruin, complete chaos spreads all over the world...

The impact of "The Solar Mashine" was enormous. Fantastic became the favourite genre for many writers, beginners first of all. Many authors who later on concentrated their efforts on the subjects of socialist production and socialist competition had began their literary career just in the field of fantastic. These efforts had not left any significant traces although among those authors there was a number of such who acquired popularity after some time, for example Ivan Le who wrote a story about "solar people" or Yury Smolich with his "Beautiful Catastrophe". We can mention only one writer of the time who was specializing exclusively in fantastic. It was Geo Shkurupiy who wrote a short novel "The Door to the Day". The novel enjoyed some popularity and we can consider its author as the first true Ukrainian fantasy-writer of the XXth century.

During the 1930ies the young beginners came to their senses and turned to quite another themes. But Ukrainian fantastic continued its existence. Vladimir

Vladko becomes the most famous author (his inclination towards fantastic lasted for all his long life). Among his works of that period ("The workers coming", "Miracle generator", "Twelve stories") the most interesting are "Universe Argonauts" (1935) — the first Ukrainian novel about spaceflights. Vladko made his contribution for the "historical" fantastic too. In his novel "The Descendants of Scythians" (1939) a modern expedition happens to enter the world where the Greek slaves carry on the fierce class struggle with the Scythian slave owners...

At the same period we can mention an interesting fact, namely the close cooperation between the Ukrainian authors and the renowned fantastic writer Alexander Beliyev. Kiev cinema studio (later on called by the name of Dovzhenko) worked at the screen versions of his books. Moreover, the text of the novel "Miraculous Eye" by Beliyev has been preserved till our time only in Ukrainian version. The specialists suggest that it is a translation, but we cannot exclude the possibility that the novel had been originally written just in Ukrainian language according the order of an Ukrainian publishing house.

The 1940ies were in general unfavourable for the fantastic. Besides, beginning from 1946 the campaign of struggle against "Ukrainian nationalism" was carried on and it became for some time almost impossible to publish new books in Ukraine. During this period Vinnichenko who had emigrated to France wrote a novel perfectly corresponding to the time: "You are to say your word, Stalin". It was the first effort ever made in Ukrainian fantastic to create a piece of "alternative history". There Stalin who "came to his wits" trying in vain to conquer an all-mighty underground organization "Termites" understands that it is necessary to refute the totalitarian socialism and establish "collectocracy", that is to give power into the hands of collective labour teams (such was the favourite theory of the author).

IV

Helas, in real history things went on in such a way that it was but in the second half of the 1950ies that Ukrainian writers were able to taste "a bit of freedom". The fantastic came to bloom once more. Vladko renewed his activities and published a number of new novels and stories ("Violet death" "The gray-haired captain", "Time borrowed"). Once more, as it had been in the 1920ies, many young authors aspired for the glory following both the old names (Wells) and the recent ones (I. Yefremov). But among these diligent young people no outstanding talents were recognized. The subjects used by them were far from outstanding too. The principal theme repeated here and there was the competition

of our courageous cosmonauts who make fools of their colleagues overseas and, of course, the achievements of the highly talented Soviet scientists making overwhelming discoveries and suffering the underhand plottings of the "damned American spies". The only really Ukrainian feature of these writings were the surnames of the personages.

A new and more interesting phenomenon began to show through this dull background from the late 1950ies on. The generation of Ukrainian writers that had to enter the social life in the bright sixties got seriously interested in the old romantic literature trying to revive the traditions of Kvitka and Gogol. This tendency has manifested itself most distinctly in cinematography (we'd remember the cycle of fantasy films created at the Dovzhenko film studio including "On the eve of Ivan Kupala" and "The lost manuscript". The neoromanticism was reflected in the literature too giving a series of works worth noticing, among which the most outstanding are the writings of a very interesting writer of that time, Alexandre Ilchenko, born in Kharkov. He wrote a novel that can be considered the best Ukrainian fantasy novel "Kossack kin ever grows green, or Kossack Mamay and the Fiery-beauty" (1958).

The novel was written at the merge of classical fantasy and alternative history. The adventures of the favourite hero of Ukrainian folklore, the immortal kossack Mamay, unfold at the background of incredible events the participants of which are apostle Peter, tsar Alexey Mikhaylovich, jesuites, Ukrainian hetman having one arm replaced by a wing and even the personified Death who tries in vain to catch Mamay. The author allowed his imagination to flourish in such an abundance that he couldn't manage to bring the novel to the finish; meanwhile the favourable period had passed and the fantastic writers had to wait for better times once more.

The controversial character of the epoch was best manifested in the works of the author who was well known both in Ukraine and abroad, a talented writer of the 1960s Oles Berdnik. He was one of those who exploited the futuristic innovations implemented by Ivan Yefremov and created a variant of future communist society of their own. But the Universe of Berdnik was not like either the Yefremov's Great Ring or the world created by brothers Strugatsky. Berdnik was a philosopher first of all and the Future interested him not as such but in close connection with the Past. In his books ("The Heart of the Universe", "Arrow of Time", "The Ways of Titans", "The Veil of Isida") two traditions were combined: modern science fiction and old Ukrainian fantasy. As a matter of fact Berdnik followed the way successfully opened by Ilchenko but he expanded the Universe both in time and space. Unlike the cosmopolitan Universes of Yefremov and the

Strugatskys his world had distinct national colouring. At that time this was a heresy not only for the ortodox marxists but also for the bigger part of the writers who preferred to foresee the future as a kind of enormous New-York. Moreover, in the best books by Berdnik, first of all "Cup of Amrita" (1968), the most important problems involved are neither technical nor social but moral ones. In the context of the time such audacity could not lead but to a sad end. The ideas of the author were subjected to severe criticism and the author himself was arrested and exiled.

During the seventies and early eighties the Ukrainian (better to say Ukrainian-language) fantastic writers kept almost absolute silence. It was very significant that not only interesting and original authors didn't appear but the translators didn't publish anything too, although formerly fantastic books from Russia and other countries had been translated in Ukraine regularly and in great number. Now as much as two decades had to pass before the books by the Strugatskys were translated into Ukrainian. But this happened in the late eighties when a new period began. Of course, even at those unfavourable 70ies and 80ies Ukrainian fantastic writers and translators have been alive and went on writing, translating and even sometimes publishing; but the publications were for the most part in Russian. Only a few quite decent translations were published in Ukrainian (in particular the "Slaughter-house number five" by Kurt Vonnegut and "The main midday" by Alexandre Mirer; all other (not very numerous) publications were "ideologically perfect" but dull and tasteless "fantastic" articles as if stamped with one and the same cliché. They are not worth mentioning at all. Nevertheless at the same time many outstanding authors were published in Russian: first works by Boris Shtern, two original books by Vladimir Zayats, new books by Vladimir Savchenko who had already begun writing in the 1960 ies (all three authors from Kiev, the capital of Ukraine); first books of Vassiliy Golovachov (who lived at that time in Dnepropetrovsk) came out of print; stories written by the Kharkov authors (Evgeny Philimonov, Ernest Marinin, Andrey Pechenezhsky) were published in various magazines and collections of fantastic.

Still, with all that, these publications remained a droplet in the sea - interesting and talented manuscripts were for the most part awaiting their turn in the desk drawers of authors and editors, covered with dust. By the way, the Russian fantastic writers of the time experienced almost the same depression.

The period of the so called "Perestroyka" ("Reconstruction", late 1980ies - early 1990ies) was marked with the appearance of a number of new names at the horizon of Ukrainian fantastic. At that time the literary union VTO was organized for the young fantastic writers and soon became known all over the country. Of

course it existed but for a short time and became peacefully extinct by 1992 but many people remember till now the short interval when its activities had been various and energetic. The abbreviation VTO means in Russian: "All-Union creative organization", and its branches existed in all regions of the former USSR but it was most active just in Ukraine; here several collections of stories were published with the works of Ukrainian authors included. Those VTO collections contained for the most part inevitable graphomaniacal writings (graphomaniac is the species present in any country and usually extremely diligent). But among them, in the same collections named "Compass of fantastic" one could find short novels and stories by Lev Vershinin (Odessa), Natalya Gaydamaka, Ludmila Kozinets and Boris Shtern already recognized by the fans (all three from Kiev), Elisabeth Manova (Kharkov), Vitaly Zabirko (Donetsk) and other interesting authors. Vassiliy Golovachov (now living in Moscow) still lived then in Dnepropetrovsk but his books were actively published in the series "Golden Bookshelf of Fantastic" of the Flox publishing house (Nizhny Novgorod, Russia) and in some others; they appeared in Ukraine too. Just then Golovachov laid the foundations of his present popularity thanks to his own efforts. One can argue the degree of his talent, praise or criticize his works, but one thing remains without doubt: Golovachov was the man who did his best stubbornly and persistently to break the barriers built by the publishers (ideological at the beginning and commercial ones later on), and he succeeded in doing it. His books appeared one after another, and soon Golovachov acquired numerous readers and fans. It was one of the first cases that demonstrated to the publishers the possibility to earn money printing the native authors. However the market was then dominated by translated literature. Even the criminal stories of local origine were not published eagerly, not to say about the fantastic ones. There was almost nothing to read besides the VTO books and the Golovachov's "Golden bookshelf". Such was the end of the epoch. The situation was really dramatic but one still could believe that for the Ukrainian fantastic it was not the finale but only an interruption. The more so because things seemed to go already better in the neighbouring Russia. The Yesterday was declining, Today was at dawn...

FOOTNOTES:

1. In 2000 exactly seven books were published in Ukraine that could be thought of as fantastic ones (two of them were translations). All seven were issued in very moderate number of copies (in summary not more than 15 thousand), thanks to the money donations of the authors themselves or their

sponsors. Moreover, because the book-selling trade in Ukraine is now in ruin the readers had but a random access to all these books.

2. The number was determined according the book: "Фантасты современной Украины"/Под. Ред. И. В. Черного. — Харьков, 2000. In 2000 the books of Ukrainian authors were published (for the most part in Russia and in Russian) in about 700 000 copies.

3. A brilliant text collection of "ancient" and "new" Ukrainian fantastic first of all of folklore and apocryphal origin one can find in the publication: "Антологія українського жаху". — Київ — Черкаси, 2000.

4. Абрамович Д. Києво-Печерський Патерик — К., 1991.

5. The description of sorcery and spirit transactions see in: Кльонович С. Роксоланія// Українська поезія XVI ст.. — К., 1987. — С. 160-164.

6. Here's a typical example: "In the year of 1629, in the month of January the 14, when we had visited a village belonging to our monastery..." //Українська література XVII ст. — К., 1987. — С. 420).

7. For example the description of the "Konotop miracle", the main "participants" of which were the seven corpses of Sosnovsky family who managed to fill an empty well with water in a mysterious way in order to appear from it and to scare the people (Літопис Самовидця. — К., 1971. — С. 65.).

8. Прокопович Ф.Владимир //Українська література XVIII ст. — К., 1983. — С. 258-305.