

A Democratic Art: Poetry In The Ukraine

OKSANA ZABUZHKO INTERVIEWED BY RUTH O'CALLAGHAN

Oksana Zabuzhko, awarded a PhD in Philosophy of Arts (1987), has held many fellowships and is Vice-President of Ukrainian PEN. Her publications include: five collections of poetry (one in English translation), literary studies and essays, translations, and the national bestseller *Field Work in Ukrainian Sex* (1996), which made her a major figure in contemporary Ukrainian literature, and has been translated into more than ten languages. She has received the Global Commitment Foundation Prize for Poetry, 1997, and several national awards.

ROC: In your letter of acceptance to the Global Commitment Foundation you mention that Ukrainian poetry is poorly known in the West. Could you outline some of the history?

OZ: Ukrainian literature has boasted a particularly strong tradition of poetry since the Baroque era (which, in the Ukraine, lasted from the sixteenth to the eighteenth centuries); and until the 1930s this tradition had never been interrupted, whatever turns the country's historical destiny took. Poetry, on the whole, is the most democratic of all arts: the least demanding in terms of the author's working conditions. Poems can be written on a walk, in a war trench, in a prison cell, and spread among readers hand-copied or by word of mouth. Poems by 'the Spinoza of the East', the great Ukrainian philosopher of the eighteenth century Hryhory Skovoroda, became part of our urban folklore long ago, and nowadays songs are still sung to his original tunes. Generally speaking, of all arts poetry is the least dependent on the social climate. This might explain the special place it occupies in endangered literatures, to which ours belonged for most of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. In Tsarist Russia the Ukrainian language was officially banned, and it was due to the Western part of Ukraine, then incorporated into Austro-Hungary (where minority languages were allowed public usage), that Ukrainian literature was able to survive.

The 1920s are known in our history as the years of the 'Short Renaissance': it was then that modern Ukrainian literature reached its prime. It was also then that the first translations of Ukrainian poetry started to appear in the West: for example, works by Pavlo Tychyna, whose masterpiece *Instead of*

Sonnets and Octaves foretold the horrors of the twentieth century. Stalin's cultural purge in early-1930s Ukraine put an end to any cultural development for decades to come. In 1930-34, during the man-made famine (the notorious "collectivization" now recognized as a genocide), the cultural elite of the country was exterminated. Some fifty thousand Ukrainian writers, artists and intellectuals fell victim to the purges; their works, along with most of the literary heritage of the past, were banned, and it wasn't until Khrushchev's brief 'thaw' that our literary fathers got a chance to start another Ukrainian Renaissance from scratch: trying to put right time which had gone out of joint, to restore the broken continuity of the literary tradition.

The liberation didn't last long. Brezhnev's 1970s brought another wave of purges upon the Ukrainian intelligentsia, even though these were minor in scale compared to the dark hole of Stalin's time. But I have vivid memories of the intoxicating atmosphere of the 1960s in which I grew up. I have the privilege of coming from a literary family - both my parents were professors of literature (later expelled from their jobs, among thousands of other Ukrainian intellectuals) - and our tiny apartment was always crowded with their enthusiastic students and colleagues, passionately discussing the country's past and present, rediscovering long-forgotten literary names, reading *samizdat*, and - most memorable for a child's ear - reciting poetry. Poets were then the cult figures of the generation. One of them, Vasyl Stus, who was later arrested - and died in a labour camp in 1985, when Gorbachev started to get rid of the political prisoners - has become a cultural icon. I think this was my emotional charge for a lifetime. Small wonder I started composing 'poems' before knowing how to put them down - since my sixth year - and have never stopped since.

Your generation of poets, the New Wave generation of the 1980s, wrote under entirely different circumstances to those of your parents. How did this come about, and how did you and your contemporaries keep Ukrainian poetic tradition alive?

We entered the literary scene as 'the children of liberty', driven, among other things, by a strong post-colonial impetus. Permeated, on the one hand, with sarcastic disgust for everything 'Soviet' - including a morally corrupt Soviet literary establishment which included neither gatekeepers nor role models for us - we were, at the same time, full of idealism, typical of cultural activists in all newly-liberating nations. We were eager to explore the spate of suddenly opened artistic possibilities, and determined to create a 'free literature for a free nation' We started to read our poetry in public places, gathering hundreds of

listeners. I remember reading at one of the political manifestations with which the Kiev of the late 1980s was swarming; and when, this summer [2008], I was invited to read at our most popular international ethno-rock festival *Kraina Mrij* - in the square, under an open sky, to a crowd of thousands - *deja vu* evoked in me the revolutionary spirit of 20 years ago!

Did things change for poets with the fall of the Soviet Union and the Declaration of Ukrainian Independence in 1991? Did censorship paralyse or fuel poetry?

The German poet Hans Magnus Enzensberger once remarked (quite wittily, I daresay) that in any country, big or small, the number of true poetry lovers remains the same: about three thousand people. (Considering that my *Collected Poems* have sold six thousand copies in two years, I take his figure as accurate.) When I compare those crowds listening to poetry back in the late 1980s to nowadays, I see the difference in the quality of each audience. Those from pre-independence times were hungry for a 'free word', or simply a word in Ukrainian (which had been by then, even though not officially banned, marginalized, and pushed out of public usage), and were thus far more receptive to the political implication of a poem than its artistic power. On the other hand, you can be sure that present-day audiences are true poetry lovers. And this is the major shift which I find most rewarding. I don't believe censorship does any good to poetry. What it can do, though, is to instil in poets a false sense of self-importance ("If they threaten me for my writing, then I must be important"), which, like any delusion, can be dangerous and, if it lasts long enough, may completely distort the poet's relationship with his or her talent, as well as that between poet and reader.

You refused to accept a nomination to Parliament, declaring it was "a writer's shortest route to degradation". Wouldn't this have been an opportunity to influence matters from within?

No, I don't think so. I believe writing and politics constitute two parallel circuits of power, which by definition should stay apart. To begin with, we use language differently. The writer's job is, to a large extent, similar to that of Biblical Adam - to name, for the first time, what's been previously unnamed - but no reasonable politician should ever say to the public what the public wouldn't already know. Another substantial difference lies in the fact that politicians are always interested in masses' feeling - and voting - alike, while authors are interested in individuals. Whenever authors switch to thinking in terms of mass feelings, they end up losing their original power to

see people, and speak for them on the most personal level. It's like selling your birthright for nothing, for a mess of pottage.

How has Ukrainian poetry changed since the Orange Revolution?

Needless to say, political events of such a scale don't affect literature in an immediate way (unless it's bad literature!); but the whole of Ukrainian cultural life has become incomparably more vivid and animated since 2004. Within a year of the Orange Revolution, book sales all over the country had increased six-fold, and they continue to grow. Poetry has become marketable. People simply took a new interest in culture, and first and foremost this refers to the younger generation, to the so-called 'Children of Maidan' ('Maidan' is short for the Independence Square in Kiev where the 2004 uprising was centred). It's the Orange Revolution generation who call the tune. They wear T-shirts reading, "Time to read!", fight to protect historical sites and city parks from the unbridled lust of construction companies, hand-cuff themselves to entrance doors of bookstores under the threat of closure, and attend *en masse* the multiplying arts and literary festivals, poetry readings, literary cafes etc., to the great surprise of our Western colleagues, who are unaccustomed to see so many young people in the audience. In poetry, the past four years have brought an avalanche of new names. Ukrainian literature these days boasts probably one of the highest percentages of all European debuts.

Recently I took part in a round-table on Ukrainian-Russian literary connections, held by one of Russia's major literary magazines, and I was truly pleased to learn from my Russian colleagues that Ukrainian literature, and poetry in particular, is now winning popularity among Russian intellectuals as being "more interesting and dynamic" than their own. On Russian-language websites more and more poems of political resistance are appearing, most of them caustically satirical - an undeniable sign of life under a dictatorship.

To Western readers your website statement, "The writer's First Commandment should be Thou shalt not lie" which you say makes the writer's job "a risky and dangerous one, similar to that of a diver or mountain climber" might appear exaggerated.

I argue that telling the truth - bringing to the spotlight of people's consciousness what's been previously in shadow, whatever it may be - has been, and will always be, a risky job, for as long as human society exists: if only because, in pronouncing certain truths for the first time, you inevitably

attack the whole set of psychological, mental, and verbal stereotypes which were disguising it. Virginia Woolf made a similar observation, in *Professions for Women*, when explaining her need to kill 'The Angel in the House'. Like any explorer, a writer sets out to undermine with their words the established order of things: and thus makes an easy target of himself, for people seldom like to be disturbed in their mental households.

To what extent does language define a sense of national identity?

In Soviet times, especially since the catastrophe of the 1930s, the struggle for the rights of the Ukrainian language had been close to the struggle for a national identity. Back in the 1970s and 1980s, people who dared to protest against imposed Russification were still sentenced in Ukraine to seven years of prison as Bourgeois Nationalists. Interestingly, nowadays, when Ukrainian is at last the official language of an independent state, many of those Ukrainians who grew up speaking Russian and with no access to Ukrainian schools recognize Ukrainian, according to the polls, as their "native language". Apparently, language still plays the role of an identity marker, of a symbolic citizenship to which they claim loyalty, even if they don't master it well.

However, dialogue conducted between writers of different nations, via international forums etc., does affect our "national cells" more than we imagine. I even believe that contemporary writers make up a kind of nation of their own. We all oppose the same adversary: the visual totalitarianism of mass culture, which stifles and mutes people's sensitivity.

Have Ukrainian women experienced any kind of a feminist movement, or did the struggle against political oppression obviate gender differences?

In Ukraine women's poetry has traditionally been strong, probably the strongest among the Slavs. We have classical cult figures, like Lesia Ukrainka (1871-1913) and Olena Teliha (1907-1942, shot by the Nazis in Babi Yar), who were glorified in the national pantheon as "more manly than men". It's due to the protective presence of these literary mothers that Ukrainian women's voices have never been easy to silence. Yet, as we all know, patriarchy can be quite inventive in its tricks, and knows how to impose its norms, even if in disguise. Soviet culture, with all its hypocritical discourse about 'women's liberation', managed to corral gender-articulate women's voices into a special women's ghetto, which I used to call 'The 8th of March **Drawer***, since it was on official Women's Day that love poetry by women filled the pages of the press, embellished by pictures of the authors *in their prime*. To

make it in the mainstream, you were supposed to castrate yourself, to gender-neutralise your choice of subject as well as your language.

It wasn't until the 1990s that we could have a feminist revolution similar to the one you had in the 1970s. And I'm happy that I've made a contribution, as it was the scandal provoked in 1996 by the publication of my novel *Field Work in Ukrainian Sex* (which has a woman poet as its narrator) that finally opened the door from ghetto to mainstream for women writers. Similarly, my book *Notre Dame d'Ukraine* (2007) is the story of the silent war conducted for decades by patriarchal culture against one of the most interesting women literary heretics of the past century, our female classic, *Lesia Ukrainka* (1871-1913). The West is yet to discover her dramas: which, I'm sure will take their place among the highlights of European women's writing.

How has a Ph.D. in aesthetics influenced you as a writer?

I believe poetry and philosophy are quite compatible. Boris Pasternak graduated from a philosophy department, Ingeborg Bachman defended a thesis on Wittgenstein. And Nietzsche was a poet, wasn't he? *Human, All Too Human* makes for wonderfully poetic reading! In Ukraine we have Hryhori Skovoroda, as I already mentioned. For me, poetry and philosophy are just two parallel ways to approach the mystery of being: in both, you address the world through moments when the dense fabric of everyday life tears, and speaking in Biblical terms, lets out "the hidden flame of being".

In 1994 you were a Fulbright Scholar, teaching Ukrainian literature at Harvard and the University of Pittsburgh. Did the 'Western dream' fulfil your expectations? Did you experience a culture shock?

In fact, *Field Work in Ukrainian Sex* was written during my stay in the US, and one of the key subjects of the book is precisely what critics in Eastern Europe have described as "the clash of an Eastern European intellectual with American culture". It's quite depressing to see how my premonitions concerning American civilization, as expressed in this novel, are coming true. When I first came to the US in 1992, as Writer in Residence at Penn State University, I was struck by innumerable similarities between two superpowers: the US, and the late USSR. On the other hand, I fell in love with red-neck America, with NYC and New England, with the profound democratic spirit, and unshakeable meritocratic instincts of the American people.

Do you find that literary criticism, the backbone of many university courses,

frequently appears to have a set language in which to assess widely differing texts?

You've described very well what I call ' professorial blindness'. Of course, as an author, I might be biased; but my general feeling is that contemporary schooling is designed rather to kill a reader's empathy in prospective critics than to cultivate it. In my archive I keep a special file for 'irrelevant' reviews - those which, even when complimentary, left me open-mouthed - all of them written by university professors! It looks as if they were trained to pigeonhole a book in advance. Of course, there are exceptions, but usually I don't expect much of an understanding from this category of criticism. In a way, Octavio Paz was right when claiming that, to understand a poet, one has to be a poet oneself.

Are critics a necessary evil?

Critics are different. Sometimes they can be truly helpful, even inspiring -when they reveal to you something about your work that you didn't know yourself. And, yes, they are necessary: it's they who translate our writings into current public discourse, a mediation without which literature would have been sentenced to a hermetic existence in a cell of its own.

You have said that "translating the poets you admire opens you to new ways of feeling". Could you like to expand on this?

I believe that, for a poet, translating is as necessary as practising their instrument is for a musician. After all, language is our instrument, and it's hard to think of a more efficient way to keep it tuned than in translating those of your kin, who have played their tunes in other languages. It's like getting a blood transfusion: the original poem, which has struck you as somehow congenial to your own feelings, serves as an energy donor for a new poem which you re-create in your native tongue, thus overcoming its initial strangeness, having adjusted to your own breath and pulse. Admiration in this case stands for a form of kinship across linguistic barriers: poets, according to my experience, are usually able to recognize their brethren of the same 'blood group' in whatever linguistic disguise. Though I myself never dared to translate from languages that I don't know well enough, I admire Ingeborg Bachmann with her dense, convoluted, and, to my ear, incomprehensible German, no less than I do Sylvia Plath, or Marina Tsvetaeva, or Wislawa Szymborska, many of whose poems I know by heart in the original.

I definitely prefer translations made by poets to those made by

academics. Even in cases when the former don't fully master the language of the original, and indulges in poetic licence, there's always some chemistry between two poets which preserves at least some of the power of the original.

You have been called the Ukrainian Sylvia Plath. Was Plath an influence on you? Does your work also draw on familial relationships?

In my late 20s and early 30s I was very much under her spell. I was translating Plath's poetry like a madwoman, sucking from her a vitamin that I had been missing for my own work: the self-assuredness of a distinctly female voice. For, as our great playwright Lesia Ukrainka observed a century ago, women seldom have the confidence to say "it is". Rather, they choose to say "it seems to me": an observation not to be underestimated. I'm afraid that until now the "it-seems-to-me" way of thinking has preserved its power over many women writers, inhibiting their inner freedom. It was from Plath that I first learnt how literature can transmute female experience into a universal one -an invaluable lesson which helped me immensely in finding my own voice, both in poetry and in prose.

Familial relationships shape our personalities for life, and writing is, among other things, driven by authors' inexhaustible need to articulate conflicts conceived back in their childhood years. In a way, all writers are grown-up children: children who have learnt to speak for themselves. And I'm no exception in this regard. As a fiction writer, I'm quite obsessed with family stories, not in the least because it's from them that the real texture of every national history is woven, which doesn't necessarily coincide with the official national narrative.

What is the poet's place in society? Does it differ from the novelist's?

It certainly does. Poets are and will always remain the guardians of a language, which every society tries to contaminate with lies of its own. Unlike novelists, who may be pigeonholed as opinion-makers, poets are seldom interviewed by media on political and moral issues, yet in the end it's they who remain responsible for the very human capacity to opine. They keep our language alive.

Ruth O'Callaghan's latest collection *A Lope OfTime* (Shoestring) was published in 2009.