

Translating Culture: Some Observations on the Temptations and Pitfalls of Postcolonial Visibility¹

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Our title may seem to suggest that the main thing to be observed in the phenomenon of the end of empire is the opportunity it brings for metaphorical temptation and, by implication, its consequences: falling from grace, sin, and damnation. In fact, the overarching aim of this discussion is to consider ways of conferring upon Ukraine and Ukraine's culture the benefit of visibility to the world outside Ukraine, and to the rest of Europe above all. We would like to note some steps that have been successful in bringing closer this laudable goal, but also to remark on others that, perhaps, have been counterproductive. Given these objectives, what follows will be mixed both generically (conflating the expository with the exhortative) and thematically (shifting focus between culture in general, literary culture and academic culture).

A number of preliminary clarifications are in order. First: our underlying assumption, shaped by participation in Western academe and reinforced by our location in an Australian university beholden for its values, traditions and objectives to Europe and the West, is that, for Ukraine, visibility to Europe and the global community is a good thing. This viewpoint, though it might seem a truism for some, is not universally held by participants in Ukrainian culture, and it needs to be defended. An important domain in which it is not held to be self-evident is contemporary Ukrainian literature. It is the consensus of literary criticism, articulated most pointedly, perhaps, by Ola Hnatiuk in her book *Farewell to Empire*,² that Ukrainian literature has been divided since the late 1980s into two camps, both embracing writers of considerable force and talent. One is oriented toward Europe or, more precisely, a somewhat mythologised Central Europe. The other is culturally introspective and autarkic,

¹ Paper presented at "Is There a Third Way for Ukraine? Future Cultural and Socio-Political Relations Between the EU and Ukraine" (Greifswald, Germany, 14-16 September 2007), an international conference organised by Giovanna Brogi and Alexander Kratochvil at Alfried Krupp Wissenschaftskolleg, Greifswald. The author gratefully acknowledges the assistance of two Australian foundations: the Ukrainian Studies Support Fund of the Association of Ukrainians in Victoria (Melbourne) and the Ukrainian Studies Foundation in Australia Inc.

² Ola Hnatiuk, *Pożegnanie z imperium: Ukraińskie dyskusje o tożsamości*, Lublin, Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Marii Curie-Skłodowskiej, 2003, esp. pp. 173-220.

even isolationist. Iurii Andrukhovych, Izdryk and most others associated with what has come to be called the "Ivano-Frankivs'k Phenomenon" instantiate the former category, Ievhen Pashkovs'kyi, Viacheslav Medvid', Oles' Ulianenko and Serhii Zhadan (his repeated references to West European and, more generally, Western popular culture notwithstanding) the latter. The symbolic head of these adepts of autochthonous introspection is the senior figure of Ukrainian literary prose, Valerii Shevchuk.³

Such a bifurcation, innocent enough in literature, where it contributes variety and animation, and occasionally polemical gusto, to cultural life, is of some concern when replicated in the institutions and practices of humanities scholarship: when those who believe that academic norms and rules, as well as criteria for establishing truth and plausibility, are by their nature universal, are confronted by others who tolerate and even encourage "knowledges" that do not sustain probing with the tools of critical inquiry that are in general use by the international scholarly community. There is no need to detail the latter phenomenon here. One of its familiar manifestations is the acceptance in certain parts of scholarly discourse (and, by osmosis, in pedagogical texts) of the authenticity of writings that are claimed to be medieval, but that are almost certainly forgeries or mystifications. George Grabowicz has crusaded vigorously against such less than critical attempts to co-opt the dignity of antiquity for the Ukrainian cultural tradition,⁴ though his campaign may well have served even further to entrench the positions it attacked. It appears that a not insignificant part of Ukrainian humanities scholarship would not be troubled if Ukrainian Studies should become a hermetic system in which scant attention is paid to external benchmarks. If, in the long run, such autarkism prevails over world-openness, the consequences cannot fail to be considerable. Anti-colonial endeavours – endeavours, that is, to establish autonomy from traditional and oppressive structures of domination – are, to a significant extent, struggles for presence. Within a rhetorical model of the world-system they are struggles for the right to speak and be heard, equally with others. It is not dignity alone that is at stake; orators speak in defence of the interests they represent. Even from positions of weakness, they make appeals to those who hold power in the rhetorical system and, given talent and persistence, may modify the dispositions of the powerholders in their favour. Much, therefore, is to be gained by asserting presence – speaking up – in the available contexts. And much is to be lost by

³ For a detailed discussion, see my chapter *The Rhetoric of Geography in Ukrainian Literature 1991-2005*, in: *Ukraine, The EU and Russia: History, Culture and International Relations*, ed. Stephen Velychenko, Houndmills, Palgrave 2007, pp. 89-107.

⁴ See, e.g., Hryhorii Hrabovych (George Grabowicz), *Slidamy natsional'nykh mistyfikatsii*, in: *Krytyka*, 2001, No. 6, <<http://krytyka.kiev.ua/articles/s6-6-2001.html>>, as well as his *Literaturne istoriopyssannia ta ioho konteksty*, in: *Krytyka* 2001, No. 12, <<http://krytyka.kiev.ua/articles/s4-12-2001.html>>, accessed 10 August 2007.

failing to speak: those who do not speak for themselves become objects of others' myths, interpretations and emphases. Their options are narrowed to reaction and complaint, and their capacity for agency is restricted.

So much by way of apologia for visibility. My second clarifying remark concerns the phrase "translating culture." Translation in the narrow sense "moves" a message from one language into another. "Translating culture" is shorthand for the broad range of strategies and actions that aim to make the way of being proper to one identity group intelligible to another. Translating culture, it is necessary immediately to say, is no innocent process. "Recoding" messages so that they become intelligible within another culture involves compromise and submission, in part, to the hierarchies and values of the target culture. Acts of translation (translation proper or, more broadly, writing or behaving in the original code to facilitate its reception in another) with a European or global audience in mind contain an element of submission to European values and hierarchies – in short, to European power. In Ukraine, as in other countries that are part of the geographical East of Europe, "Europe" as a seat of civilisational values and norms is imagined as commencing to the west of one's own borders (and, accordingly, as being an Other vis-à-vis oneself). To choose one's pre-eminent axis of translation is to make a weighty civilisational choice. Past choices of political and cultural orientation that have been made on Ukrainian lands may be viewed as choices of axes of translatability. In 988, as the *Chronicle* informs us, Volodimer chose the Christian faith in its Byzantine variant over the alternatives: the Judaism of the Khazars, the Islam of the Bulgars, and Latin Christianity. Of course, the choice involved a choice of interlocutors whom one would grow to understand and to whom one would become intelligible; it was a choice that predisposed the inheritors of the Kyiv patrimony toward Orthodoxy, and that rendered more distant the other, Latin, European alternative. A second choice, symbolised by the 1596 Union of Brest, can be read as intending a corrective and addendum to the first: it aimed to formalise, by acknowledging the hierarchical authority of the Church of Rome, the *de facto* re-orientation of the Rus' of the Commonwealth to the West while preventing the further erosion of the established vector of understanding toward Byzantium and the East. In fact, the failure of the Union to secure the acquiescence of all of the Rus' of the Commonwealth, and the subsequent religious divisions of the Rus' into Orthodox and Greek Catholic, may be seen as an expression of the enduring civilisational borderland quality of Ukraine. Rather than intelligibility in two different worlds, the result has been an endemic crisis of self-understanding reflected in political vacillation between westward and eastward orientations on the part of political elites, on the one hand, and repeated attempts by diagnosticians of the Ukrainian predicament from Lypyns'kyi to Riabchuk to locate the essence of the

Ukrainian experience "between East and West."⁵ A third choice, symbolised by Bohdan Khmel'nyts'kyi's decision of 1654 to prefer the suzerainty of Muscovy over the alternatives – suzerainty of the Ottoman Porte, and remaining within the Commonwealth – however it may have been apprehended at the time, became transparent subsequently as the choice of a colonial master. It was a choice that configured the relationship of Russian and Ukraine as a relationship between dominator and dominated, between metropolis and periphery; it rendered Ukraine invisible and inaudible to observers (including the descendants of its own elites) *except* as translated into the code of colonial dependence.

For cultures that start off with less sonority or presence in the world, the choice of an axis of translation is therefore, inevitably, in part a choice of the context in which they are to be dominated – a choice of coloniser. Such choices, however, are not all of one kind. They can be more disastrous and less so, more conducive to retaining a significant element of the identity of the translated culture, and less so. A significant proportion of the cultural elites of Ukraine is united in the belief that a European or Western vector of translation is more in the interests of Ukraine and Ukrainians than the inertial persistence of its presence in the Soviet or post-Soviet cultural space. But it would be naïve to imagine the translational refocussing toward Europe, were it to occur, as a liberation from a heritage of Oriental despotism into a power-free or power-neutral utopia, in which an authentic Ukrainian identity would become transparent to the world. Such a refocussing would, brusquely put, involve the choice of a different colonialism, if probably one less debilitating than its predecessor. It is clear, for example, that there is a social and economic price of proximity and openness to the European Union.⁶ The expectation is, of course, that this price will be outweighed by the advantages to individuals, and to society at large, of the generalisation in Ukraine of the political and economic culture (rule of law, respect for human rights, transparent political processes subject to democratic control) that Europe represents. But let us not imagine that one can have one's Europe and entirely escape being eaten by it.

⁵ For an account of the history of the "Ukraine between East and West" topos, see Nataliia Iakovenko, *Ukraina mizh skhodom i zakhodom: proektsiia odnoi idei*, in: Paralel'nyi svit: doslidzhennia z istorii uiaavlenn' ta idei v Ukraïni XVI-XVII stolit', Kyiv, Krytyka, 2002, pp. 333-365.

⁶ See, e.g., Victor Cebotari, *New Social Changes: Conflict and Poverty in the New Neighbourhood Area of the European Union*, in: EU Integration Process from East to East: Civil Society and Ethnic Minorities in a Changing World, round table, Liepaja, Latvia, 9-12 June 2005, <<http://www.iccv.ro/romana/conf/conf.liepaja.2005/papers/victor.pdf>>, Mihaly Simai, *Poverty and Inequality in Eastern Europe and the CIS Transition Economies*, United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs, Working Paper No. 17, February 2006, <http://www.un.org/esa/desa/papers/2006/wp17_2006.pdf> and Kerstin Zimmer, *Ukraine: Time of the Migrants*, Transitions Online, No. 1(23), 2007, <<http://www.tol.cz/look/TOL/section.tpl?IdLanguage=1&IdPublication=4&tpid=26&ALStart=8>>, accessed 10 August 2007.

Let us, then, take stock of who or what in Ukraine has achieved global, or Western, or European visibility. There have been some remarkable successes, most of them in the realm of non-elite activity: popular culture, which directly influences the perceptions of large numbers of people and influences the rhetorical climate within which other claims and statements are received. Without doubt, the most forceful, instructive and image-altering manifestation of Ukrainianness to the world in recent years was the Orange Revolution, which for weeks projected onto the television screens of the world the image of a vast assembly of individuals, photogenic, emphatically peaceful, yet determined to achieve political goals.⁷ The image, present to the world in the immediacy of the visual, needed no further mediation. Nothing could serve more eloquently, not only to assert the presence of Ukrainians, but to represent them as a civic nation – remarkably personable, but also politically mature. One has to add immediately that this representation did not represent a previously existing, but concealed, “essence”: it is more plausible to suggest that the nation of the Orange Revolution came into being in the process of its representation. The technology that showed the myriad individualised faces of the Maidan to a global audience also made possible for many Ukrainians a new political self-image as a socially and culturally, even ethnically, variegated nation united by its democratic commitment.

The Maidan, visual far more than textual, was its own translation. The same is true of Ukrainian successes in another significant venue of mass visibility, sport. Taras Shevchenko is untranslatable; Andriy Shevchenko needs no translation. Taras Shevchenko’s poetry practically created modern Ukraine in its own image, but is of little help to outsiders trying to make sense of Ukraine. The footballer Andriy Shevchenko does not help make sense of Ukraine, either, but he convinces millions that it exists. A further success story of the translation of Ukrainian culture for the non-Ukrainian world involved the clever use of the platform of the Eurovision Song Contest by the popular singer and performer Ruslana. Elsewhere I have analysed the rhetorical efficacy of Ruslana for two audiences at once, one international, the other domestic.⁸ The singer contrived, not merely to assert a presence for Ukraine, but also to refashion its image as a vibrant source of life energy, capable of infusing an Old Europe – this Rumsfeldian term was invoked in some of the interpretive responses to Ruslana – with new vitality and eros.⁹ It is, of course, likely that Ruslana was not entirely

⁷ For an account of the role of the mass media in the Orange Revolution, see Andrew Wilson, *Ukraine’s Orange Revolution*, New Haven, Yale University Press 2005, pp. 130-133

⁸ See my article *Envisioning Europe: Ruslana’s Rhetoric of Identity*, in: *Slavic and East European Journal*, vol. 50, No. 3, 2006, pp. 469-485.

⁹ Kateryna Shchotkina, *Dyki tantsii: Nova syla dlia staroi Ievropy*, *Dzerkalo tyzhnia*, No. 20 (495), 22-28 May 2004, <<http://www.zn.kiev.ua/nn/show/495/46507>>, 4 October 2004, accessed 1 November 2006.

ingenuous when claiming to conserve in her performance the authenticity of Carpathian folklore. The whips, leathers and metal studs that were so prominent in her performance had far more to do with the sexualized image of the “tough girl” of contemporary youth and musical culture¹⁰ than with any Hutsul arts and crafts. But in all translation, authenticity is compromised up to a point. In some cases, the loss of authenticity is a small price to pay if what is to be had instead is visibility where little or none was before.

How does Ukrainian high culture score in the visibility stakes? Not very well. There are no Ukrainian Nobel laureates for literature, no Ukrainian equivalents of Umberto Eco, Milorad Pavić or Milan Kundera, no culture of Ukrainian art film enjoying a visibility equal to that of the Polish output of the 1980s, no Ukrainian philosophers or theoreticians whom in certain circles one needs to quote as one needs to quote Julia Kristeva or Slavoj Žižek. Perhaps under slightly different circumstances Valerii Shevchuk might today be enjoying the kind of translated visibility that is the lot of the Latin American magical realists with whom he is sometimes compared¹¹ - but the fact is that he is not.

The scarcity of successful examples of the translation of Ukrainian culture in a high-cultural context is such that the few success stories deserve special attention. Iuriï Andrukhovych, though translated on a number of occasions into English without substantial resonance, has achieved not inconsiderable visibility in the German-speaking countries through Sabine Stöhr's 2005 translation of his *Dvanadtsiat' obruchiv* (*Twelve Rings*, 2003)¹² and, perhaps even more importantly, through the publicity campaign conducted on his behalf by the publisher, Suhrkamp Verlag – a campaign so exacting that it left even the publicity-friendly Andrukhovych claiming to be exhausted.

The contrast between the fate of *Twelve Rings* and most other translations of Ukrainian literature points to a particular temptation to which translators often succumb: motivated by their love of the source text or their enjoyment of the translation process itself, they persist in this activity even if there is little hope of its product achieving the visibility that would enable it to serve the purpose of cultural translation. A great deal of translation of Ukrainian literary texts has possessed the quality of *samvydav* – self-publishing, an activity that, for all its courage and dignity, commands small readerships and brings little increment by way of

¹⁰ Sherrie A. Innes, *Tough Girls: Women Warriors and Wonder Women in Popular Culture*, Philadelphia: University of Philadelphia Press 1999.

¹¹ See, e.g., Anna Berehuliak, *Mahichnyi realism ta literaturnyi mif – zsilennia chy panatseia u postkoloniial'nomu suspil'stvi?* Suchasnist', 1993, No. 3, pp. 67-75.

¹² See the digest of the reviews in the German-language newspapers *Neue Zürcher Zeitung*, *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, *Die Zeit* and *Frankfurter Rundschau* on the site [perlentaucher.de](http://www.perlentaucher.de). Juri Andruchowytsh, *Zwölf Ringe*. Roman, Suhrkamp Verlag, Frankfurt am M. 2005, <<http://www.perlentaucher.de/buch/20460.html>>, accessed 10 August 2007.

increased knowledge of the target culture. It lacks the practicality that one Australian commentator, interested in the fostering of awareness of Australia and its culture abroad, sees as essential: one cannot do without “extratextual translation tools,” as she puts it, and these “include press releases, author visits and other educational projects about the source culture which provide points of reference around which a reader can situate himself or herself.”¹³

The success of *Twelve Rings* in getting translated can have been no accident. Lacking knowledge of the actual process that made Suhrkamp decide to adopt Andrukhovych as one of its authors, we can nevertheless observe many inner structures of the novel that facilitate its reception by a reader in the German-speaking countries. A Germanophone central character, Zumbrunnen, charmingly naïve about the extremities and grotesqueries of contemporary Ukrainian life; the concomitant construction of Ukraine as an exciting but comfortably remote “Wild East”; the motif of Zumbrunnen’s journeys along a West-East axis – all of these features inscribe the European outsider looking in as the ideal reader of the novel. Such strategies of familiarization are even more in evidence in Andrukhovych’s most recent and, at the time of this writing, still untranslated novel, *Taiemnytsia* (*Secret*, 2007), where the structural principle is that of an interview: a German interviewer in Berlin questions a character who is almost indistinguishable from the Iuriï Andrukhovych of flesh and blood whom we know and love. The journalist-like interlocutor extracts information from the Andrukhovych character (“I have to remind you of my question: do you remember moments when you felt good?”),¹⁴ insists on the closure of commenced narratives (“I don’t recollect the part about the smell of sulphur. But even so, how does that story end?”),¹⁵ and demands self-interpretations and rationalizations (“And yet. How could these things be reconciled: you were in the Russian capital, in the very centre of the empire, you were surrounded by Russians and their culture, every day you walked past all those monuments, walls and signs, past all that semiotics, you were located inside the metatext – and at the same time you wished upon all this the most rapid disintegration possible?”).¹⁶ It is he who requires that this Ukrainian Orient of Andrukhovych’s be neatly processed in accord with his, the interviewer’s, curiosity and desire for explanations, indeed, with his conceptions of (political, social, psychological) causality.

¹³ Lara Cain, *Translating Australian Culture: Literary Representations on the World Stage*, London: University of London, King’s College London, Menzies Centre for Australian Studies, 2001, pg. 2.

¹⁴ Iurii Andrukhovych, *Taiemnytsia: zamist’ romanu*, Kharkiv: Folio 2007, pg. 16.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 98.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 308.

Through such textual clues Andrukhovych's novels signal their awareness of having succumbed to temptation and having committed the sin without which translation is impossible: that of betrayal. "Traduttore, traditore!" the time-honoured tag warns us. What is the nature of this treason? That in the quest for common ground and intelligibility across a cultural boundary the essential, "real" self is relinquished. The Andrukhovych character in *Secret* tells his interlocutor a story that he would not otherwise tell. But the sin of translator's treason can scarcely be considered more than venial in an environment ineradicably marked by the heritage of deconstruction. Who could confidently insist today, after all, on a self that is essential and "real," rather than situational and contingent upon the dialogic situation in which it finds itself? Is not translation, indivisible as it is from communication itself, one of the best available metaphors for the contemporary human condition?

What Andrukhovych has done has been to lighten the translator's task in anticipation – to do some of the translation work himself, as it were, thereby facilitating the speedy appearance of his books in a language other than Ukrainian and, accordingly, the speedy attainment of visibility. This is an act for which postcolonially inclined representatives of the discipline of translation studies – such authors as Anuradha Dingwaney, John Kraniauskas and Sathya Rao¹⁷ – would castigate Andrukhovych. In their view, smooth translations that domesticate the text in the language into which it has been translated deprive it of its "'foreignness,' even, perhaps, of its radical inaccessibility"¹⁸ that alone is capable of expressing the resistance of a text from a subaltern culture to the power of the dominant one into which it has been translated. This might seem to some an exercise in excessive purism or in cutting off one's nose to spite one's face. Few forms of colonial coercion are more pernicious than rendering invisible and excluding from dialogue. If the creation of translations that appear natural is the cost of visibility and presence, so be it. Furthermore, one might venture to speculate that there are few publishers who would prefer a text bristling with "radical inaccessibility" to one that reads well and is likely to sell.

¹⁷ See, e.g., Anuradha Dingwaney, *Introduction: Translating 'Third World' Cultures*, in: *Between Languages and Cultures: Translation and Cross-Cultural Texts*, ed. Anuradha Dingwaney and Carol Maier, Pittsburgh: Pittsburgh University Press 1995, pp. 3-15; John Kraniauskas, *Translation and the Work of Transculturation*, in: *Specters of the West and the Politics of Translation*, ed. Naoki Sakai and Ukiko Hanawa, Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press 2001; *Traces: A Multilingual Series of Cultural Theory and Translation*, No. 1, 95-108; and Sathya Rao, *From a Postcolonial to a Non-Colonial Theory of Translation*, in: *Translation, Biopolitics, Colonial Difference*, ed. Naoki Sakai and Jon Solomon Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press 2006; *Traces: A Multilingual Series of Cultural Theory and Translation*, No. 4, 73-94.

¹⁸ *Introduction: Translating 'Third World' Cultures*, in: *Between Languages and Cultures: Translation and Cross-Cultural Texts*, in: Anuradha Dingwaney and Carol Maier, Pittsburgh: Pittsburgh University Press 1995, pg. 5.

So far the discussion has addressed the translation of culture as an act of making present a postcolonial Ukraine to a European or global world. But we need to consider, as well, the reverse process where the West is rendered comprehensible to Ukraine. Soon after the Ukrainian proclamation of independence George Grabowicz, reflecting on the consequences of Ukraine's colonial and provincial status within the USSR, identified as important among them the quality of *vtorynnist'* – derivativeness, supplementarity – that attached itself to the non-Russian cultures of the USSR by virtue of their not being part of that entity's metropolitan culture.¹⁹ There is a temptation that bears heavily upon those capable of mediating between the West and Ukraine to foist upon Ukraine a new kind of *vtorynnist'*, this time relative to the West. I am thinking, not of situations in economic life, nor of everyday lifestyle, nor of popular culture, where the West can be apprehended more or less directly through the media. Rather, I have in mind a sphere where mediation is necessary: that of humanities scholarship. In order to become functional in a Ukrainian environment, Western theories and methods need competent translation, competent teaching and, perhaps most importantly, competent exemplification. The ideal model of the use of Western instruments of scholarship would involve not their automatic "application" to Ukrainian realia, but their critical and dialogic redevelopment in the light of an unaccustomed institutional and cultural context.

In my own discipline, literary scholarship, I can point to instances where Western theory has been used in just this productive way. But I can also point to cases where, under the guise of "translating" Western models for a post-Soviet environment, authors have presented their readerships (often captive, because consisting in the first instance of students) with accounts that are distorted or misleading or, indeed, garbled and irrational – in imitation, it must be said, of the deliberately abstruse and hermetic style that is not infrequently adopted by Western colleagues. Thus, simulacra of scholarly discourse are introduced into the culture under the guise of being dense and demanding. In combination with the parallel tendency toward academic autarkism that I have referred to earlier, they risk poisoning the academic environment and producing a situation where scholarly dialogue with the West is not sought at all by one part of the institution, and cannot competently be conducted by another.

For the post-colonial subject, the translation of culture is an essential part of the strategy for achieving presence, dignity and equality of status among the participants in the discursive field that is the contemporary world. There are opportunities for visibility that have been

¹⁹ George Grabowicz, *The Wages of Colonialism and the Pitfalls of Post-Colonialism*, in: *Ukraine in the 1990s: Proceedings of the First Conference of the Ukrainian Studies Association of Australia*, Monash University, 24-26 January 1992, ed. Marko Pavlyshyn and J. E. M. Clarke, Melbourne: Monash University, Slavic Section, 1992, pg. 27-37, here pg. 31.

seized with talent and energy by cultural players across the full breadth of the spectrum of culture, from mass culture to high culture. There are risks and losses that have to be sustained – notably, the identity of the thing translated never survives unmodified the process of its translation. But, for a new actor emerging from the darkness of colonial invisibility, such erosions are a small price to pay if what they purchase is the right to be heard as well as seen: a right that belongs to the mature and responsible members of any free community.