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## Representations of the Urban Environment in Contemporary Ukrainian Literature

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In his story ‘The Aleph’, Borges describes a place where everything happens simultaneously (1998, p.282). In the light of such an idea, the question of what comes first – the city, the text of the city, the text about the city, or the multitude of texts contained under the surface of that text – becomes irrelevant. In the Aleph such a question is senseless, as all is simultaneous. The idea of the space of simultaneity, of multiplicity resonates deeply with much contemporary Ukrainian writing on space, particularly the space of the city. Not only is this reflected in the representations of Lviv in the work of contemporary Ukrainian writers, but also in the very genre they choose to frame their representations. Ukrainian writers who deal with the urban landscape in their work have, over the last decade or so, turned increasingly to the essay form. This article will refer to various literary genres – from the prose fiction of Taras Prokhasko and Iurii Vynnychuk to the poetry of Iurii Andrukhovych, Oleksandr Irvanets and Viktor Neborak – but will concentrate on the essay, in particular those of Andrukhovych, Iurii Izdryk, and Iurko Prokhasko. A textual space which allows the free combination and juxtaposition of different elements, and by its very name implying experiment, the essay is perfectly suited to the

multiple, hybrid, simultaneous imaginings of the city which can be found in contemporary Ukrainian writing.

Borges states that language is not simultaneous, but successive, making the Aleph indescribable (1998, p.282). Thus, in exploring the various incarnations, physical and textual, of the urban space of Lviv, it is necessary to choose a starting point. Let us begin with the palpable city as it is most directly represented in text: the city that can be seen, touched, smelt, even tasted. Historian John Paul Himka reminds us that Lviv tastes simultaneously of beer and vodka: it has a centuries-old brewing tradition due to its Central European history, as is testified by beers such as *L'vivs'ke 1715* or *Stare misto* (Old Town – both beers are far more recent than their names and old fashioned labels suggest) but is also no stranger to horilka (Ukrainian vodka), a nod towards its contacts with the East (2003, pp.12-13). Lviv author Iurii Vynnychuk reminds us that it tastes and smells of coffee, in his nostalgic encyclopaedia of the city's (mostly lost) Habsburg or inter-war coffee houses *Taemnytsi l'vivs'koi kavy* (The Secrets of Lviv Coffee 2001). What does Lviv feel like? Lviv feels rough at the edges, broken and fragmented, it crumbles under your fingers, disappearing even as you touch it; it has many degraded surfaces, upon which the inscribed traces of various scripts can be felt. As Iurii Andrukhovych says in one of his early essays:

I love those inscriptions that come to the surface from out of every possible hole, every crack in the foundations, from under thresholds, from the subconscious of the city. (2002, p.14. All translations are the author's own)

These observations – the coffee house tradition inherited from the Habsburg era, the palimpsest created by the city’s visual culture – are common tropes both among contemporary Ukrainian writers, such as Andrukhovych and Vynnychuk, and in popular narratives about the city, as discussed by the historian Khimka, or cultural historian Ihor Junyk, who examines the phenomenon of nostalgic café culture in Lviv (2008). Junyk discusses the well known Lviv café *Pid sineiu pliashkoiu* (Under the Blue Bottle), which is a haven of Habsburg nostalgia, featuring portraits of Emperor Franz Josef I and old maps of Galicia, as well as coffee à la Bruno Schulz. While on the one hand, as Junyk admits, the establishment is aimed at tourists, on the other it is part of a general attitude of playful nostalgia in Lviv, which Junyk rightly identifies with Svetlana Boym’s concept of reflexive, as opposed to restorative, nostalgia – that is, a self-conscious, ironic appropriation of the signs of the past, rather than a reifying, monumentalizing approach to history and memory aimed at rediscovering roots and establishing origins (Junyk 2008, p.23; Boym 2001, p.49). The same could be said of such similar locations in the city as *Pid klepsydroiu*, which takes its name from Galician writer Bruno Schulz’s *Sanatorium pod klepsydrą* (The sanatorium under the sign of the hourglass), and also conveys the atmosphere of a pre-war coffee house. A more recent addition to the cityscape is *Masoch*, which presents a somewhat bowdlerized image of another of Galicia’s famous literary sons, Leopold von Sacher-Masoch. A bronze Sacher-Masoch stands on the pavement outside, while the theme of the interior is retro sado-masochism. As regards Andrukhovych’s inscriptions, while many untouched original examples can be found

around the city, many of them are especially conserved and cleaned up on the facades of shops and restaurants, while other businesses attempt to capture some of the nostalgic appeal by adding their own 'faded' inscriptions.

The *Masoch* bar is a perfect example of what Junyk describes as a carnivalesque, irreverent popular approach to local history (2008, p.23). This is not only characteristic of Lviv society, but also one of the distinguishing features of its writers, as shall be discussed later in this article. It would be saying too much to suggest that the playful nostalgia discussed by Junyk is purely the service of the writers discussed in this article, but it is reasonable to assert that they contribute significantly to the creation of this imagination. The cafés *Pid sinieiu pliashkoiu*, *Masoch* and *Pid klepsydroiu* (Under the Hourglass) all reflect the popular imagination of the city, in that they cater for the nostalgia present in that imagination. However, the images of these cafes are created by the city's artistic community, including the writers discussed in this article. The décor in *Pid sinieiu pliashkoiu* is partly the project of Lviv artist Vlodko Kaufman, who regularly works together with writers like Andrukhovych and Izdryk. *Pid klepsydroiu* is located within the arts complex *Dzyga*, which, as well as organizing regular literary events, is partly run by Kaufman and employs Izdryk.

Popular representations of the city in consumer and café culture, in popular literature, and in the works of the city's more serious writers, feed off one another and off the physicality of the city itself in a complex interplay of narratives, myths and symbols. While language may well be successive, the sensual, physical city and its

representations, both in the imaginations of its writers and the popular imagination of its inhabitants, exist in a complex interdependency that does not lend itself to simple, linear temporal explication.

Of course, the original coffee houses and breweries no longer exist. The beer *Stare Misto*, with its sepia cityscape on its label, or the tourist-trap *Wiener Kaffeehaus* on Prospekt Svobody, or the more playful, self-consciously nostalgic *Pid sinieiu pliashkoiu* do not signify a continuum of tradition. Their signifieds do not lie in the city's past, but with them in its present – the happy conjunction between nostalgia and consumerism. Similarly, the quaint anecdotes and sepia photos of Iurii Vynnychuk's nostalgic publications signify not a historical reality, but a myth which answers present needs, what Svetlana Boym called 'the pervasive longing for the visible and invisible cities of the past, cities of dreams and memories', and 'the recovery of other temporalities and reinvention of tradition' (2001, p.75).

It is hardly surprising that such things as coffee and beer play an important role here: it does not take Proust and his madeleine to remind us that tastes and smells transport us into the past. Proust attributes the particular power of such sensations to the place they have in our involuntary memory, which is beyond the reach of our intellect. Similarly, in Freud's terms, true memory traces are left only in the unconscious (see Benjamin 1973, p.154). None of those few Lvivians left who remember the interwar period, or the Habsburg era, will be transported back there by *L'vivs'ke 1715* beer. What the

makers of this beer or the proprietors of Weiner Kaffeehaus can offer is a collective, consumerist simulacrum for the memory trace.

The connection above between Proust and Freud is made by Walter Benjamin in his essay on Baudelaire, the great poet of urban experience. Benjamin describes Baudelaire as a traumatophile, opening himself to the barrage of experience the city provides, gathering what 'fragments' of this experience he can (1973, pp.154-157). What Baudelaire was faced with was the chaotic birth of the modern city, and the shock to the human psyche of this new, fast-moving, impression-saturated urban environment. The contemporary Lviv poet is less concerned with grasping fragments of a vast, overwhelming experience – the shocks with which the churning mass of urban life pierces the consciousness – than with the experience of fragments. The contemporary Lviv poet is faced with the degraded remains of the modern city, the absence of that overwhelming presence that Baudelaire experienced. Instead of being barraged with urban impressions, the contemporary Lviv writer feels the need to seek them out, to dig around for them in the city's ruins. The approach recalls Benjamin's essay 'A Berlin Chronicle', in which he uses the analogy of archaeology to describe memory, also in connection with the urban environment. He describes it as 'the most meticulous examination' of the strata of memory, the search for

the real treasure hidden within the earth: the images, severed from all earlier associations, that stand – like precious fragments or torsos in a collector's gallery – in the prosaic rooms of our later understanding. (1978, p.26)

In his essay 'L'vivs'ki epifanii' (Lviv Epiphanies 2006), essayist and literary critic Iurko Prokhasko declares his faith in these 'prosaic rooms of our later understanding'. He believes that the city yields its secrets if one only knows how to read the signs of its past. His essay talks of the sense of dislocation between the city's contemporary inhabitants and the historical physicality of the city, which belongs largely to the past of other nations: to the Poles, Austrians, Jews and Armenians who left their distinctive mark on the city's landscape (2006, p.35). To avoid feeling alienated from one's surroundings, Prokhasko suggests, one must come to know them, to experience the joy of their interpretation, to read them like a text. 'In cities like Lviv,' Prokhasko states, 'knowledge gives considerable pleasure [...] the pleasure of interpretation' (2006, p.36).

Prokhasko closes his essay with two textual metaphors for Lviv. First, he describes its dominant colour as that of yellowed paper, whether of old, faded paper, the genuine traces of the past, or artificially faded paper that has been dipped in tea: the simulacrum of the past. He goes on to compare the city to a library:

You can imagine Lviv's streets as bookshelves, in which the books are the buildings. As with books, sometimes their appearance is more attractive than their contents, or vice versa. In any case it is always tempting to look inside [...] and the library itself passes from hand to hand, from generation to generation [...] and suddenly you realise: today you are the librarian. (2006, p.36)

Prokhasko is unique, however, in this unequivocal belief in the adequacy of linguistic structures to capture the essence of the city. The general trend in Ukrainian literature is to take Prokhasko's city-



text and, rather than decipher it, to mystify, mythologize and subvert it to such an extent that the process of creating narrative from the disparate fragments of the urban text is exposed as arbitrary and often absurd. Taras Prokhasko, brother of Iurko, examines the possibility of recreating or recapturing the past through a careful reading of the urban landscape in his story 'Uvibraty misto' ('To Choose a City', 2004). The story's protagonists try to recreate the street battles between Poles and Ukrainians in 1919 using historical accounts, and by photographing the very same walls and courtyards, at the same times of year and day, and where possible in the same weather/lighting conditions. The task, however, proves impossible, and the project, instead of recapturing the events and spaces of the past, results in a complex interplay of experiences of past, present and place as chaotically and inextricably bound up in one another. For Prokhasko's protagonists, the exploration of the city becomes a joyous, playful celebration of the urban imagination, fuelled by poetry, wine and laughter, rather than a serious attempt to recapture history.

This playful, joyous and irreverent approach to the urban environment, and the traces of the past contained in it, is typical of Ukrainian literature of the early 1990s, and is part of a tendency in this literature that has been identified as 'carnival postmodernism' (Hundorova 2005, p.77). The use of parody, mockery, polyphony, masks, sex, violence and revelry, an emphasis on the bodily, and the inversion of the sacred and profane are all common tropes in Ukrainian literature of the early 1990s, and are all key elements of carnival as formulated by Mikhail Bakhtin (1984). In addition to the

use of these tropes, the attitude of Ukrainian writers to the signs of the past that are engraved in the urban landscape also concurs with Bakhtin's theory: in opposition to official celebration, which 'uses the past to consecrate the present', to assert hierarchy and 'eternal and undisputable truth', carnival revels in its own temporariness, celebrates 'becoming, change and renewal', and is 'hostile to the immortalised and completed' (Bakhtin 1984, p.10). Here we see an extra dimension to the connection between Bakhtin and Svetlana Boym's theories of restorative and reflective nostalgia, as mentioned above in connection with Lviv's café culture.

The best known purveyor of carnival aesthetics in contemporary Ukrainian literature is Iurii Andrukhovych. Together with the poets Viktor Neborak and Oleksandr Irvanets, Andrukhovych formed the poetic group Bu-Ba-Bu in the late 1980s. The group's name derives from the words *burlesk*, *balahan* and *bufonada* (burlesque, chaos/mess, buffoonery), and accurately reflects their creative ethos. Their poetry is irreverent, iconoclastic, ironic and bawdy, and was written specifically with performance in mind. The performance aspect of the group's work fulfils two of the main criteria of carnival communication – that of mass participation and of 'free, familiar contact' between people (Bakhtin 1984, pp.10-11). In fulfilling these criteria the group's work engages intensely with the city space, which is both described by the three poets in their texts, and inhabited by them in the performance of these texts. The height of the group's popularity came during the *Vyvykh* festivals of the early 1990s, during which the three poets were instrumental in

organizing carnivalesque stunts and performances throughout Lviv.<sup>1</sup> The second festival culminated in a 'poeso-opera' based on their poetry, 'Chrysler Imperial', which appropriated the city's famous opera house, a space more accustomed to stage ballet and opera productions, for a riotous and satiric 'rock-opera'. Not only did the opera perform a carnival inversion of the city's emblematic space of high culture, but it appropriated and mocked the signs of the past visible in and around that space, decorating, for example, the statue of Lenin in front of the theatre with large, phallic balloons (see Andrukhovych 1999a; Hrycak 1997).

Another writer who utilizes carnival aesthetics in relation to Lviv is the city's foremost postmodernist-mythmaker, Iurii Vynnychuk. In his novel *Divy Nochi* (Ladies of the Night, 2003a), the carnival ethos is built up through raucous and bawdy scenes of feasting in seedy underground bars or exclusive hotels, specifically located within the city. While the scenes of feasting and sex provide the physical, 'familiar contact' aspect of carnival communication, the use and misuse of multiple languages, dialects, obscenities and slang, which is a natural result of the city's location on the edge of the Soviet union where Russian and Ukrainian meet Polish and Georgian, fulfils the polyphonic criterion of Bakhtin's theory. *Mal'va Landa* (2003b), on the other hand, takes a far more radical approach to re-imagining the city, creating an entirely new, alternative Lviv in the city's rubbish dump. The novel juxtaposes sacred symbols of Ukrainian national culture, from its poets to its partisans, and even such fundamental concepts as borsch, with a degraded, disgusting

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<sup>1</sup> The name of the festival means literally 'dislocation', but has associations of 'breaking free'.

landscape made entirely from rubbish. Again, carnivalesque revelry is key to the novel's dynamic, and grotesque scenes of feasting and love-making abound. Bakhtin describes carnival as creating a 'second life', alternative to officially sanctioned, everyday life (1984, p.9): Vynnychuk's novel creates a second space in which the second, carnivalesque life of Lviv is allowed to take place.

For Iurii Andrukhovych, it is Lviv's architectural specific that provides its carnival atmosphere. The distinctive market squares provide the archetypal space for carnival communication, the baroque architecture links back to the most carnivalesque of historical periods, and the innumerable towers and cellars provide the important vertical axis upon which carnival relies for its dynamic of sacred-profane inversion. It is in one of the aforementioned attics that the hero of Andrukhovych's novel *Perverziia* (Perversion) finds a mysterious manuscript that tells the story of Lviv, representing the city's narrative as a polyphonic, carnivalesque palimpsest:

[...] among other things that I found in that secret haven was a thick, homemade book, copied by hand on over seven hundred sheets of various types of paper – from card to cigar and even toilet – sewn together, tied with string and numbered, and bound in the remains of the covers of other books, in particular, an apocryphal Gospel of Adam, a black magic Andalusian treatise “The Indestructible Loins of Fecundity”, and the memoirs of Austrian cavalryman, General von Böhm-Ermolli.

The manuscript had been written by one and the same hand, but in different languages: the most numerous were fragments in Ukrainian, but sometimes when the author lacked a particular term or, for example, certain idiomatic possibilities, then he shifted to Polish, German, Yiddish; several ample passages had been written in Armenian, there was also a fragment each in

gymnasium Greek, Gypsy, Turkish-Tatar, Old Church Slavonic, Karaite and Genovan. (2004, p.214-215)

The image of the palimpsest is a useful one for postmodernist writers, as it provides an escape from the cycle of rejecting one metanarrative for another, allowing different narratives to exist simultaneously in one textual space. In Lviv there are Ukrainian, Polish, Russian, Austrian, Jewish and Armenian narratives, narratives of Soviet occupation and Soviet liberation, the narrative of the communist period and the post-independence one, and many more. What makes the palimpsest particularly resonant to the city, however, is not only its figurative appropriateness to its multiple histories, but the fact that the city is itself an actual physical palimpsest, as Andrukhovych states in the passage quoted near the beginning of this article.

Andrukhovych's work precludes any singular, totalizing narrative, its carnival ethos always leaving room for ambiguity and multiplicity. However, ambivalent and provisional as they may be, Andrukhovych's representations do engage in interpretation. His essay 'Misto-korabel' (City-ship, 1999b) contains typical carnival mystifications, but also engages in serious reflection on Lviv's past and present. The author makes much of the myth of Lviv's lost river, for example, seeing it as a metaphor for Lviv's isolation from Europe. He tells us that ships once sailed from here to the Baltic Sea, linking Lviv to the rest of Europe and the world, but that now the river exists only in the sewers. Similarly, he links the city's hybrid of 'Romanesque and Byzantine accents' with the mentality of its people, the latter aspect preventing them from fully committing to Europe. Knowledge of the city's topography is seen by the author as

a key factor in the outcome of the Polish Ukrainian war of 1918, and the subsequent fate of the Ukrainian population, which is the cause of continued mistrust and resentment between the two peoples even today (1999b, p.25-31). While the city-text is fragmented beyond reconstruction, its fragments can still teach us about the 'invisible city', revealing its hidden, complex, contested narratives.

The idea of city as text is central to Iurii Izdryk's essay 'L'viv: sekventsii psykhozu' (Lviv: Sequences of Psychosis, 2005). In the text's central part, which switches from the essay form to that of short story, the autobiographical narrator is given the task of taking an icon from a specific church in Lviv to an unnamed monastery elsewhere in the city, and told he will be guided by signs on his journey. Once again, we see the contemporary Lviv writer representing the city as a text to be deciphered. However, the text soon degenerates into chaotic metamorphoses, and the narrator loses track of the sequence of signs in the 'polyphonic chaos':

I have to say that the following sequence contained such metamorphoses that I could no longer comprehend... Everything became confused, mixed up, and the theme, if it was even there, was so deep in polyphonic chaos that even my attentive author's ear could not pick it out. (2005, p.35)

At this point the text switches to the more essayistic form with which it begins, and closes self-reflexively, attempting to pick out 'structures' in the chaos it has itself descended into, while questioning the possibility of this very process:

[...] is there such a thing as a motif? Or is it just that we, with our vulgar need to understand and objectivize, fish

out from the primal white noise the simplest structures our ear can access, and then by clumsy arithmetical operations give them some semblance of a comprehensible message. (2005, p.35)

Izdryk's depiction of Lviv undermines notions of ordered and comprehensible space, and epitomizes Michel Foucault's description of 'heterogeneous' space 'in which the erosion of our lives, our time and our history occurs' (1986, p.23). Space distorts itself as the narrator moves through it, dragging time with it as the narrative jumps backwards and forwards. Ultimately the narrator's subject-position itself begins to erode as his interpretative and descriptive faculties fail to keep up with the heterogeneity of the space he is attempting to negotiate. This challenging of the adequacy of linguistic structures conveys an important message about the complexity and perhaps impossibility of interpreting a city like Lviv, with its layers of inextricably interwoven sign systems.

If the memories of bygone Lviv are conjured up by the smell of coffee or the taste of beer, for Izdryk his journey through space and time starts off with the absence of such sensations. On his first visit to Lviv he comes to visit his wife in her attic room, furnished only by a bed, a cupboard and a piano stool. The narrator is promptly thrown out of this room and offered a place in an identical one next door, but instead of the piano stool – no doubt once belonging to a family of interwar Polish intelligentsia – he has an empty crate of 1715 beer – 'not the best Lviv beer', he informs us (Izdryk 2005, p.33).

While Proust travels down the vertical axis of time to hidden memories through his sensual experience, recapturing part of the lost

whole of the past, Izdryk is transported sideways, along the horizontal axis of space, with its fragmentation and heterogeneity. For Proust the signifier 'madeleine' allows access to the signified 'childhood' through a real semiotic relationship. For Izdryk, the empty signifier 'L'vivs'ke 1715', present only as an absence – an empty crate – is part of a simulacrum-like, broken signification in which the arbitrariness of the process is allowed to pour out and engulf the entire text, resulting in semiotic chaos and alienation from the object of the now shattered discourse.

Izdryk's approach is a typical, though extreme example of the way in which contemporary Ukrainian writers draw upon the topography, aesthetics and sensual experience of Lviv to re-present the city as a complex mesh of sign systems.

The approach of Ukrainian writers to the city of Lviv is a complex and varied one. The writers discussed are united, however, by several factors. The first is this approach to the city as text, as exemplified above by Izdryk. Sometimes this approach serves to interpret and understand the city space, sometimes it is used to undermine such ideas and convey the complexity and heterogeneity of the tangled city palimpsest. The second factor is an engagement with the physicality of the city in creating texts – with its physical nature, its tastes and smells. The third factor is the carnivalesque approach to the urban space, which the literary representations of Lviv share with the parodies of nostalgic popular-consumerist culture represented by the city's café culture, as discussed above. The resultant complex of sign systems – literary and non-literary, ironic-nostalgic and consumerist, genuine relics of the past and



contemporary re-makes – all contribute to the creation of heterogeneous, simultaneous textual-physical space, where the linearity of languages is overcome as multiple narratives exist in a single, chaotic, carnivalesque palimpsest.

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