UKRAINIAN STUDIES IN EUROPE: NEW POSSIBILITIES

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The field of Ukrainian Studies is dogged by an epistemological problem. Like nature, knowledge should abhor a vacuum. Academic research should gravitate toward big, unknown, complex things. But if the recent crisis has made anything clear, it is that Ukraine remains Europe's *terra malecognita*: large, diverse, understudied, badly understood. At times I illustrate the problem to my students by way of an interdisciplinary analogy: imagine a physicist in 1991 who discovers in her laboratory a new particle, the largest of its kind in a particular system. This particle affects the movement and trajectory of its neighbors and sits at the system's nexus. Then the physicist notes something even more astounding: the particle is held together in a peculiar way. Most other particles have at least one particular feature that causes them to cohere; this particle does not. Now imagine leagues of other physicists who shrug their shoulders and return to business as usual.

This has been the story of Ukrainian Studies in European higher education outside of the Slavic-speaking world since the dissolution of the Soviet Union. Ukraine is the largest country within the continent, situated at a geopolitical crossroads and bound together not by one language, or one church, or one ethnicity, or even one historical inheritance. Yet at an institutional level, the academy has largely shrugged its shoulders in response to Ukraine's emergence as an independent state in 1991. It tends not to recognize the country and its people as an official object of knowledge, perpetuating instead a public outbreak across the continent of 'reverse hallucination', a condition of not seeing what is there with respect to Ukraine. As I write this essay, Russian forces are amassing along Ukraine's eastern border. To the casual European observer, they might as well be poised to invade a black hole. This problem exists despite the dedication of accomplished European scholars like Giovanna Brogi Bercoff, Alexander Kratochvil, Michael Moser and others too numerous to mention here. It also exists despite the activity of the Ukrainian Free University in Munich and of such curricular initiatives as the Ukrainicum summer school at Greifswald and the Ukrainian course at the *Institut national des langues et civilisations orientales* in Paris. Above all, the problem exists because of a persistent failure in the academy to interrogate the value-bound choices of research in 'area studies' and to disentangle intellectual merit from often ossified perceptions of politico-cultural power. In other words, the problem is a prevailing logic by which might is not only right, but read.

This much has been abundantly clear to all of us in Ukrainian Studies, Baltic Studies, African Studies, and so on for some time. Less clear has been our collective response, which has at times bordered on defensive, for understandable reasons. Rather than chronicling this history or detailing the state of Ukrainian Studies in Europe – which could amount to an exercise in shaking a fist at the sky – I would

like to make one or two brief and modest suggestions for the future. In general, I am convinced that the international study of Ukraine has tremendous upside, provided we take more academic risks, engender more creativity and connection, and above all market for the public a multiethnic, multicultural Ukraine ripe for innovative interdisciplinary and comparative study.

1.

Engaging the public and letting the intellectual case lead the way: this is all very well and good. But even a cursory glance at dissertations and theses on Ukrainian topics recently produced in Great Britain, for instance, reveals the challenge of our practical follow-through. The very disciplines that can overcome the limitations of language and of geographical and historical distance to reach the public efficiently and effectively – the disciplines of the humanities – are woefully underrepresented. Beyond a few recent notable exceptions, doctoral theses on Ukrainian literature, film, music and visual art have been rare over the past two decades. In British scholarship, Ukraine largely appears as a creature of politics and economics – but not culture.

In one sense, the study of Ukrainian culture stands at the intersection of general crises in the humanities and in Slavic Studies. Its relative neglect should not come as a great surprise, but it is quizzical all the same. Political Ukraine owes its very existence to culture – to Cossack *dumy*, to folk music, to popular ethnography, to Romantic poetry in the Ukrainian vernacular that invited, seduced, and cajoled readers into the national project. This fact is precisely what makes the study of the Ukrainian language a *sine qua non* for any student and scholar of the country. It is a matter of simple professional competence. Without a knowledge of Ukrainian, one cannot speak or understand the language of the modern Ukrainian national idea. Similarly, without a knowledge of Russian, one cannot speak or understand the language of a significant part of living, breathing Ukrainian society. We have to promote the former, embrace the latter, and provide both at the curricular level, with short-course pathways for Yiddish, Crimean Tatar and Polish wherever possible.

In another sense, the study of Ukrainian culture stands directly in the wake of over two hundred years of colonial exploitation. We can debate the historical position of Ukraine as a political and economic colony, but its existence as a cultural colony of its neighbors is not in doubt. Today distant echoes of the imperial practices of provincializing Ukrainian culture and of the anticolonial practices of politicizing Ukrainian culture continue to resound in Slavic Studies. These are practices that reductively cast artists as either zeroes or heroes, as unworthy of scholarly attention or unassailable beyond certain norms. They can stifle conceptual innovation and lead to intellectual inertia. Beyond the work of scholars in the Ukrainian diaspora, for instance, it is very difficult to find published English-language scholarship on nineteenth- and twentieth-century Ukrainian literature. The work of Taras Shevchenko, one of the most extraordinary and extraordinarily influential artists in modern European history, is rarely broached. This neglect – as outrageous as it is – presents us today with a remarkable opening and an

opportunity for reinvention and scholarly entrepreneurism. I am very intrigued by, for example, the application of the digital humanities and 'computational criticism' to colonial Ukrainian literature, which could jettison it out of the provincial-political realm and into a new constellation of ideas about transnational exchange and global culture. In general, whatever our methodology, we need to revisit Ukraine's colonial-era culture with the same sense of excitement and open-ended potential as we do its postcolonial-era culture – to read, say, Mykhail' Semenko or Valer'ian Pidmohyl'nyi as we do the ever-popular Serhii Zhadan.

We also need to facilitate and enable more readings of – to continue the analogy – Semenko or Pidmohyl'nyi *alongside* Zhadan. Today Ukrainian literary fiction is flourishing at a rate unseen since the 1920s, and a number of scholars have recently offered brilliant close readings of this more recent work, particularly in the context of Memory Studies. Going forward, we would do well to encourage our students to leverage this vibrant interest in the contemporary period in the service of more 'vertical' contextual analyses that can join postcolonial production with colonial pretexts – Oksana Zabuzhko and Lesia Ukrainka; Iurii Andrukhovych and Ivan Kotliarevs'kyi; etc. – in a variety of interpretative frames.

2.

Availing ourselves of the intergenerational, intertextual, interlinguistic vibrancy of Ukraine's culture is to use a master key. It opens all manner of doors, particularly with the public. Without question, a buzzword in our field should be public outreach, particularly in the age of Facebook, Twitter and iTunesU. As scholars we are understandably conditioned to view anything beyond our teaching and research as a career-killing waste of time. But the future of Ukrainian Studies depends on our ability to generate more career, publication and funding opportunities for our students and to grow a more diverse audience over the long term. Here in Great Britain, our colleagues in Polish Studies and Russian Studies can build critical mass by collaborating with such institutions as the Polish Cultural Institute and Pushkin House, which engender public interest in Poland and Russia with concerts, exhibitions, film festivals, translation initiatives and the like. These colleagues can also expect that a visitor to any High Street bookstore will discover, for example, literary Poland and literary Russia among the texts on its shelves.[1] We have no such luxury, nor can we afford to wait for one. *Koly – iak ne zaraz, i khto – iak ne my?(When if not now, who if not us?)*

All of us in Ukrainian Studies therefore have a stake in fostering the study of culture and showcasing cultural products for public consumption. Doing so pays intellectual and practical dividends. We unveil new research horizons, reach new audiences, and recruit new colleagues by developing the profession of Ukrainian-to-English literary translation and by regularly organizing film screenings, concerts, or art exhibitions in collaboration with Ukrainian partners. At Cambridge, for instance, one of our annual public offerings is an evening of musical performances and literary readings in tribute to and in support of *Vsesvit*, the oldest active literary journal in Ukraine. Founded in 1925 by Oleksandr Dovzhenko, Vasyl' Blakytnyi, and

Mykola Khvyl'ovyi, the journal has translated over 4,000 works from 98 literatures of the world into the Ukrainian language.

Over the course of the *Vsesvit* evening, we read selected texts in their original languages – Catalan, Yiddish, Hebrew, Armenian, Georgian, Russian, Polish, Italian – and then in English translation and in the Ukrainian translation published in *Vsesvit*. Our audiences bring to the event a variety of linguistic competencies and disciplinary backgrounds. Many are there to discover the Ukrainian language for the first time. Others are undergraduate and graduate students in our Ukrainian Studies programme who approach the selected texts as opportunities for further comparative study: Adam Zagajewski's reminiscences of L'viv/Lwów, Hayim Nahman Bialik's elegies for the Jewish community in Volyn, Aharon Appelfeld's representations of the Ukrainian peasantry in Czernowitz/Chernivtsi, Mykola Bazhan's interpretations of classical and Romantic Georgian literature. In other words, events like the *Vsesvit* evening present Ukraine both as a cultural centre and as a cultural interstice, a site of artistic creation and translation. They elicit attention from diverse publics and from a particular constituency whose significance, in my view, is often underestimated in Ukrainian Studies: the undergraduate community.

In nearly six years at Cambridge, we have had well over one hundred undergraduates enrolled in our various course offerings. Some come to us with no prior knowledge of a Slavic language, meaning that Ukraine is the first stop on their intellectual journey through Eastern Europe. A growing number of our undergraduates go on to pursue topics in Ukrainian Studies at the graduate level, by which time they have already critically assessed the conventional wisdom about *translatio imperii*, 'historical' vs. 'non-historical' nations, and the like. As it stands, Ukrainian Studies in Europe is predominantly a graduate teaching enterprise. The field would be well served by more directed appeals to undergraduates and even to students in advanced secondary schools. In fact, national affiliates of the International Association of Ukrainian Studies may wish to consider including the post of 'Schools Liaison Officer' among the leadership and to formalize this outreach to younger communities.

3.

To this point I have simply suggested that the field of Ukrainian Studies in Europe embrace the cultural and engage the public and the undergraduate community with more purpose, ambition and direction. I would like to conclude with a self-evident but nonetheless important observation. London, Berlin, Vienna are only a short flight away from Kyiv and Kharkiv. This relative geographical proximity underscores our collective responsibility to work in active partnership with students and colleagues in Ukraine, to the extent possible. Here we seek to follow in the footsteps of our colleagues in the United States and in Canada. Programs and initiatives in Ukrainian Studies can only succeed and flourish if they cultivate deeper bilateral relationships with Ukrainian cultural and educational institutions and with the people of Ukraine – especially now, as the country bravely embarks on a new chapter in its history.

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Notes

[1] A quick, simple visit to Blackwell's Online is instructive: a search for in-stock books under the heading 'Russian literature' yields 131 results and under 'Polish literature', 16 results. An identical search for books under the heading 'Ukrainian literature' yields no results at all.