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Translator's Acknowledgements

A Note on Transliteration

In the body of the text, we use the conventional transliteration for East Slavic names and locations. However, for the notes and citations we use a simplified version of the Library of Congress system of transliteration, omitting ligatures for those Cyrillic characters that are rendered by more than a single Latin character. Indication of the Ukrainian soft sign "ь" is omitted in the body of the text but is retained in the notes, where it is rendered with a prime. For example, Ольга Кобилянська is transliterated as "Olha Kobylianska" in the body of the text and as "Ol'ha Kobylians'ka" in citations.

Preface

There are many theories of postmodernism. From my perspective, it begins in 1946, when in the first issue of the almanac *Mystets′kyi Literaturnyi Rukh* (MUR, or Artistic Literary Movement), Jacques Hnizdovsky (Iakiv Hnizdovs′kyi) set in to talk about "Ukrainian grotesque." He maintained that postwar Europe was returning to the world of naive emotions, and that the new era was breaking out with an appreciation for Sancho Panza and a mistrust of the intellectual Don Quixote. The era of Don Quixotes is over, and under way is the epoch of the naive, practical, and emotional Sancho Panza, claimed Hnizdovsky—a graphic artist who in his art discovered an atomic plurality of worldview and in his paradoxical thinking echoed the artistic postmodern of the Dutchman Morris Cornelis Escher.

In that same issue of MUR, Viktor Petrov (Ber) discussed the new era of the split atom and envisioned that art would lose its modernist negative-experimental color and would become "positive, real, and natural, although its naturalness and reality will be the nature and reality of the technical world."[1]

The actual aesthetic thinking that I associate with the postmodernism of the end of the twentieth century is tied to the oeuvre of the American writer John Barth, who in 1996 labeled postmodernism as "endism": "endings, endings everywhere: apocalypses large and small,"[2] he wrote ironically and suggested putting "[a]n end to endings." One form of such an "end to endings" for Barth is a narrative, a story, which from the perspective of ending defers the end itself. Thus he talks about a woman who comes out of the house, approaches a man working in the garden in order to break to him some horrible news she has just heard over the phone. She knows the news, but he does not yet. This is

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1   Viktor Ber, "Zasady poetyky (Vid 'Ars poetica' I. Malaniuka do 'Ars poetica' doby rozkladenoho atoma)," *MUR* 1 (1946): 21.

2   John Barth, "THE END: An Introduction," in *On with the Story: Stories* (New York: Little, Brown, and Company, 1996), 15.

where Barth finds the gist of the narrative—in the postponement of the trauma, in tricking both the addressee and the message, in suspending the communication by putting it sideways, behind, for a moment, not to freeze the emotions but to protect existence itself: "In narrated life," he says, "we could suspend and protract the remaining action indefinitely, without 'freeze-framing' … we need only slow it, delay it, atomize it, flash back in time as the woman strolls forward in space with her terrible news."[3]

To me, this kind of story is *postapocalyptic postmodern narrative.*

This suspension-in-play is, for me, embodied in the carnivalesque Ukrainian postmodernity, which begins simultaneously with the Chornobyl explosion in April 1986. Another version of postmodernism forms later, in the 1990s. It is characterized by a recombination of fragments and modes of writing, which shows similarities with the process of postapocalyptic existence. Overall, it is exactly the Chornobyl discourse that provokes the deployment of Ukrainian postmodernism because Chornobyl is not only associated with a socio-techno-ecological catastrophe that occurred in a certain time and place but also signifies a symbolic event that projects the postapocalyptic text about the postponement of the end of civilization, culture, and human into the post-atomic era.

My book about postmodernism focuses on the post-Chornobyl library. In my view, the post-Chornobyl library is a metaphorical image of culture that is threatened and salvaged at the same time, of culture that—like the ark, museum, temple, and list—is a bridge between real life and fiction, the past and the present, self and other, play and apocalypse, high and mass culture. I see Chornobyl as an event that legitimized the beginning of Ukrainian postmodernity, and the post-Chornobyl library as a number of texts, topoi, topograms, quotes, discourses, and canons that atomize Ukrainian culture and turn it into a process unfolding not only from the beginning to the end but also backwards, from the end to the beginning: a postapocalyptic narrative. The postmodern library is an archive that preserves culture and renders it relevant; it is also a field of the resurfacing of past complexes and old taboos. Polyphonic and polysemantic, the post-Chornobyl library is not reducible to a single overarching narrative: it is written on the margins of other texts and at the ends of others' stories, thereby filling in the gaps of the national culture.

This book results from observations that for the most part are detached from literary milieus and literary practices. I wanted to look at contemporary Ukrain-

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3   Ibid., 28–29.

ian literature from a certain distance and to interpret what seems significant from the perspective of a witness without laying claims to fullness or definitiveness of my conclusions. I do not touch on the usual definitions of postmodernism, as I aim to build a specifically Ukrainian version of literary postmodernity.

There is no doubt that the Ukrainian literature that emerges in the 1990s is radically different from what preceded it. A separation from socialist realist thinking, along with an actualization of the aborted experience of the avant-garde and modernism of the 1920s, becomes the most important impulse for artistic experiment in the late Soviet era. At the same time, writers, first and foremost of the Eastern and Central European region, are introduced to the achievements and tendencies of Western literature and develop an interest in Western philosophy and cultural studies, previously unknown in the Soviet Union. The birth of Ukrainian postmodernity is also brought about by generational change. It depends on a new openness to the West; the informational-technological explosion which occurred due to the arrival of personal computers, video, and forms of mass communication; and the arrival of the "society of the spectacle" with its advertising industry, commodity, and the market of mass performances.

In this book, I want to sketch the main tendencies and directions taken by the postmodernist thinking in Ukrainian literature at the end of the twentieth century. I am also convinced that postmodernism does not appear in Ukraine suddenly, as an imported exotic fruit. Among the factors that contributed to its arrival are the experimental works of the Ukrainian avant-garde of the 1920s; MUR's intellectual prose fiction of the 1940s, which was saturated with Western existentialism; the Pop Art-inflected New York School poetry; Ukrainian whimsical prose—an offshoot of Latin American magic realism; and the adventurous, grotesque, and apocalyptic culture of the underground, which was incubated in the womb of socialist realism.

Finally, I took care to sidestep the traditional *victimizational* perception of Chornobyl. A third of a century after the event, it has acquired a new meaning, not only real-tragic but also symbolic and global. We live in a post-Chornobyl situation, in a postapocalyptic time, and this has turned out to be in Ukraine the gestation period of not only a new state but also of a new postmodern outlook and a new Ukrainian literature. This literature, polyphonic and polylingual, reformulates the whole history of the national cultural development; it teaches us to see otherness alongside identity; and it both offers itself to and receives from the vast intertext that is world culture. Thus, both life and literature exist in the nuclear age.

In some higher ironic sense, Chornobyl also bears witness to the fact that local tragedies and terrorist attacks are more frightening than a global catastrophe, and that, rejuvenated on the outskirts of civilization, the Chornobyl zone sometimes resembles the primeval Eden. It is postmodernity that has taught us to see such inversions.

Part One

CHORNOBYL AND POSTMODERNISM

Nuclear Discourse, or Literature after Chornobyl

Look under your feet—you won't be able
to see the earth covered with our footprints
take a careful look at the world
don't tell me you didn't want it like that
—Skriabin, "Chornobyl forevah"

In the second half of the twentieth century, the French philosopher Emmanuel Levinas proposed to look at the reflections on such apocalyptic situations as the Holocaust as a "representation in parentheses." This notion brought to mind the paucity of the modes of the description of reality, which slips out of control and does not yield to any definitive comprehension. Along with this, a point was made about the crisis of *literariness*, which was one of the main concepts of the modernist thinking associated with aesthetic progress in the twentieth century—more precisely, about the crisis of aesthetic auto-reflectivity and closedness of language on itself. Doubt arises that there is a unique—aesthetic—language, self-sufficient and different from the everyday, the one which allows for grasping and translating the content of fickle modern reality. The belief that artistic representation has a meaning tinged with an author's ethics also disappeared. Conjecture about an aesthetic experiment's ability—which the modernist work pretended to possess—to adequately represent reality was likewise devalued.

Ultimately, Levinas's phrase could be interpreted as an invitation to fictionality, intertextuality, and virtuality—discourse outside any representation of reality; and the philosopher perceived as an adept of postmodernist thinking, as his idea about "representation in parentheses" effectively undermines

the aesthetic categories ascribed to literature in modernity. Levinas was seen as opposed to the idea that narrative was about a determinate event or situation—that it had a stable meaning; that it narrated a "truth" about an event or situation, and, further, had a broader ontological meaning that affirmed the human content of time-space, identified as *pleroma*[1] by Frank Kermode.

Nevertheless, a disciple of Edmund Husserl and Martin Heidegger, and the creator of an original existential philosophy that has at its heart an *ethics of responsibility*, Levinas can hardly be called an adept of postmodernism. On the contrary, he is an opponent of postmodernist deconstruction and postmodernist polysemy. His philosophy, based on an ethics of responsibility, revolves around the notion of "the other" and of the encounter face-to-face with this other—the encounter that is the foundation of humaneness. Such an encounter endows the self with a "bad conscience"—that is, a conscience "which comes to me from the face of the other" and "uproots me from the solid ground."[2] This consciousness positions humans before death and makes them ponder on the most important questions of being.

Levinas perceives the Holocaust as one of the greatest of humankind's tragedies, whose meaning defies comprehension. On the one hand, instead of creating definitive images, that is, "complete" history and "truthful" representation of the tragic event, what he calls for is to reveal this event as "an uncrossable gap," a "hole in history" which cannot be filled with any objective narratives.[3] Levinas shows a complete distrust of representation because it appeals to certain objectivity. On the other hand, a subjective, unconscious participation of I (or self) in history is combined with a responsibility for the other, thereby creating "the dia-chrony of a past that cannot be gathered into re-presentation."[4]

Nevertheless, however paradoxically, Levinas's ideas about the "hole in history" which cannot be filled with any narratives, and about "the dia-chrony of a past" that resists any representation, are echoed in postmodern theories about traumatic experience and its (un)representation in postmodern literature. Ultimately, one version of the origin of postmodernism is based on a supposition that the appropriation of traumatic events like the Holocaust or the

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1   Frank Kermode, *The Sense of an Ending* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 193.
2   Emmanuel Levinas, *Entre Nous: Thinking-of-the Other*, trans. Michael Smith and Barbara Harshav (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998), 148.
3   Robert Eaglestone, "From Behind the Bars of Quotation Marks: Emmanuel Levinas's (Non) Representation of the Holocaust," in *The Holocaust and the Text: Speaking the Unspeakable*, ed. A. Leak and G. Paizis (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2000), 104.
4   Emmanuel Levinas, *Entre Nous*, 171.

atomic apocalypses of Hiroshima and Nagasaki produces aesthetics and poetics that are radically different from those that hitherto existed.

Indeed, traumatic events such as the Holocaust, the Great Purge, and the Holodomor acquire in the twentieth century a global symbolic meaning. Auschwitz, in particular, becomes a point of reference for Theodor Adorno, who sees in it a crisis of the "positivity of the apparent being" and the failure of the Enlightenment humanism. After all, he says, suffering "in the camps, without any consolation, burned every soothing feature out of the mind, and out of culture."[5] Later, Auschwitz will serve as a point of departure also for Jean Francois Lyotard: the distrust of knowledge and progress will prompt him to formulate the new postmodern situation. "Following Theodor Adorno, I have used the name 'Auschwitz' to signify just how impoverished recent Western history seems from the point of view of the 'modern' project of the emancipation of humanity," notes Lyotard and asks a rhetorical question: "What kind of thought is capable of 'relieving' Auschwitz—relieving [*relever*] in the sense of *aufheben*—capable of situating it in a general, empirical, or even speculative process directed toward universal emancipation?"[6]

This question lays a foundation for meditations about a "postmodernity" that no longer trusts thinking based on the idea that reality is "purposeful" and "complete." At the end of the twentieth century, Lyotard stated the general epistemological uncertainty of the time: "There is a sort of grief in the *Zeitgeist*. It can find expression in reactive, even reactionary, attitudes or in utopias—but not in a positive orientation that would open up a new perspective."[7] Therefore, proceeding from the word-symbol "Auschwitz," Lyotard theorizes a peculiar negative teleology of the postmodern. He perceives the postmodern world as founded on distrust of the progressive deployment of knowledge that works towards social and individual emancipation.

The treatment of "Holocaust" or "Auschwitz" as word-symbols does not mean an unethical reading of those traumatic events but, to the contrary, serves as a basis for discussion about the fate of morality and humanity in the modern world. I argue that the Chornobyl disaster is also an event of a traumatic significance—that "Chornobyl" becomes a word-symbol of the after-modern modernity which comes *after the catastrophe*.

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5   Theodor Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, trans. E. B. Ashton (London: Routledge, 1973), 365.
6   Jean-Francois Lyotard, "Note on the Meaning of 'Post,'" in *Postmodernism: A Reader*, ed. Thomas Docherty (London: Routledge, 1993), 49.
7   Ibid., 49–50.

It is no accident that a special issue of *Anthropology of East Europe Review* in spring 2012 dedicated to the commemoration and cultural representation of Chornobyl (and published after the accident at the Japanese nuclear power station Fukushima) is not so much preoccupied with the search for "scientific 'objectivity'," as with exploring the "symbolic fallout" of Chornobyl—its place in collective memory and cultural artifacts, its integration into the everyday life and individual fates.[8] Such symbolic meanings of the Chornobyl catastrophe are exactly the subject of my analysis in this book.

On the map of the modern life, "Chornobyl" is a symbolic event that undermines the modernity that formed in the late Soviet era. It is characterized by disappointment in modernization under "socialism," which more than half a century ago was implemented by way of violence towards individual freedom and the exploitation of the intellectual and physical potential of humans. Chornobyl turned out to be a critical moment which precipitated perestroika and disenchanted the whole Soviet system. Mikhail Gorbachev, in an interview given twenty years after the Chornobyl tragedy, acknowledged that the catastrophe had turned from a technological into a social one because, in his words, "more than anything else, it made possible freedom of expression, since the system as we knew it could not exist like that any longer."[9]

It was exactly the Chornobyl factor that triggered the reevaluation of the totally rotten socialist system. Gorbachev, asserting post factum a connection between the Chornobyl accident and perestroika, and thus building a Chornobyl mythology, admitted that the breakdown "made absolutely clear how important it was to go on with the politics of glasnost, and I have to say that I started to think about time in before-Chornobyl and post-Chornobyl categories."[10]

During perestroika, various modernizing projects in the Soviet mode—social, national, technological, informational—were delegitimized. The accident focalized in itself all the disappointment with the Soviet system, the best testimony of which is *Chornobyl discourse*—the numerous official and unofficial proclamations, rumors, witness testimonies, and documental and fictional works about Chornobyl. Behind these narratives stand their immediate contexts: the lack of information; the death of firefighters; the mobilization of the military; the labor of miners, scholars, and nuclear scientists; the evacuation of people from the zone; and the fate of refugees.

8   Melanie Arndt, "Memories, Commemorations, and Representations of Chernobyl: Introduction," *Anthropology of East Europe Review* 30, no. 1 (2012): 2.

9   Mykhailo Horbachov, "Chornobyl´s´kyi perelom," *Den'* 65 (2287), April 18, 2006, 1.

10 Ibid.

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