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## UNDER WESTERN EYES: IMAGES OF UKRAINE IN CONTEMPORARY AMERICAN FICTION

To the memory of Solomea Pavlychko

*In the article author first of all defines the stereotype of Ukraine in consciousness of contemporary Western, exactly American, culture representatives and concentrates on the way it is illustrated in some works of American literature. From this point of view he examines Alexander Rodin's story «My Dead Brother Comes to America» (1934) and Benjamin Rosenblatt's «Zelig» (1915). Besides, the author analyzes three of the most contemporary novels «The Corrections» by Jonathan Franzen, «The Hunters» by Claire Messud and «Everything is Illuminated» by Jonathan Safran Foer, that appeared the last two years. Though, the ignorance of contemporary Ukrainian literature makes it impossible for him to compare Ukraine's self-image with the image that is generated by creative works published abroad.*

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Friends, honored hosts, it is a privilege to be speaking to you here tonight, in the great ancient

city of Kyiv, about whose legendary past I learned from my grandfather, Professor Bohdan Zahajkewycz, who every afternoon, when I came back

from American school, would give us a diktat about some aspect of his homeland. And so before I knew much of anything about Christopher Columbus, or George Washington, or Abraham Lincoln, I knew stories about Kyj, Schek and Choryv, and their sister Lybid; I learned of course about Askold and Dir, and later about the first kings Igor, Oleh, and then Olga and her glorious son, Volodymyr Velykyj. When I visited Hagia Sophia in Istanbul I imagined the posly from Volodymyr seeing that grand cathedral for the first time, the awe they carried back with them to Kyiv.

Their awe could not have been much greater than what I feel speaking at a University named for Taras Shevchenko. Under my parents' tutelage I memorized many of his fierce lyrical poems, including the powerful *Poslanyje*, which I recited {on the stage of the Ukrainian National Home, above a bar, in the poor section of Elizabeth, New Jersey,} one hundred years after Shevchenko's death. What could a six year old understand of the words he uttered that day: *I mertvym, I zhyvym, I nenarodzhenym...* Yet more than forty years later I still recall what must seem like clichés to you, but which live in my heart with the force of wisdom:

*Vchitsia, braty moyi, dumayte, chytayte,  
I chuzhoho nauchaiytes, svoho ne tsuraytes,  
Bo khto matir zabuvaye, toho boh karaey  
Chuzhi liudy tsurayutsia, v khatu ne puskayut'  
I nemaye zlomu na vsiy zemli bezkonechniy  
veseloho domu...*

To sophisticated literary scholars, these words may sound naïve or even silly - but I've lived long enough to recognize the deeper truths they contain. And so my thanks go out to Professor Denisova, Professor Zhulynsky and to other organizers and sponsors of this conference, as well as to my own University of Massachusetts for allowing to leave in the middle of a semester during a teaching week so that I can be here with you tonight.

I won't pretend that I always appreciated the parental insistence that I memorize pages of poetry in a language spoken by no one else at my school, about experiences of which I had no understanding - yet they did leave me with a profound sense of the importance of literature {in articulating the soul of a culture and a people}. By giving voice to elusive feelings and thoughts {which might easily pass through unremarked, felt barely registered} language both recognizes and creates us. Oral traditions are no match for cultures with skillful means of transcribing and communicating the vast range

of human experiences, from the most mundane - taking a shower, getting on a bus, checking e-mail - to the subtlest, as when Rilke writes «Beauty is the beginning of terror we are just able to bear...»

So I'm grateful for this chance to acknowledge my abiding debt to Taras Shevchenko, who was my gateway into world literature. There is, however, another point I'd like to make before moving into my subject, and that is that we must never take literature, the existence of literature, for granted. Like any other product of culture, it is historically bound, and it is bound to change as cultures develop. It, to borrow a term which may or may not be familiar to you from computer terminology, morphs-transforms, metamorphoses - with the times, and the times have introduced an array of competing media - I mean of course movies, television, the internet - which either aspire to or already appear to have usurped literature's role as tribal story-teller, or creator of mysterious images through which our daily experience is itself altered, elevated, or denigrated. My friend, the American literary critic Sven Birkerts, took a gloomy view of the consequences of our ongoing technological revolution (temporarily eclipsed by current economic and political crises currently roiling the globe, but which are certain to reemerge once this period of turbulence has passed and we once more get on with the business of living) in a book titled *The Gutenberg Elegies*. The title tells the story, and I won't bother to rehearse the book's arguments: I'd only note that we can't take the continuation of cultural modes for granted - it is up to us to keep proving their relevance and importance to every new generation, which will itself then decide whether to maintain those traditions or lose them in favor of what I fear are more trivial and less effective means of communication.

I realize again that this is a large subject, deserving of its own conference; I wish only to underscore, because I know that many of you here are teachers, the importance of the work you are doing. For years I've told my students at Boston University, and Harvard, and the University of Massachusetts that if they want to learn about the soul of a people and a culture, they should study its poetry and its fiction. The pictures I saw of Kyiv as a boy intrigued me; but the spell cast by Shevchenko's words was indelible.

The title of my talk, *Under Western Eyes*, as I'm sure most of you recognize, is taken from Joseph

Conrad's novel about Russian revolutionaries. As Shakespeare suggested, one of literature's traditional roles is to hold a mirror up to nature {- by which he didn't mean that pastorals and landscapes were its obligatory subjects, of course. He meant human nature; and human nature grows in all sorts of landscapes - primarily, these days, we seem partly by choice partly by necessity to live in those peculiar landscapes of our own devising, cities - if man is, as the poet Robinson Jeffers observed, nature dreaming, then surely cities are man hallucinating, reflecting simultaneously our dreams and nightmares captured in stone and steel and optic fiber. And as these cities change, so do we}. Fiction from the start has been primarily (though certainly not exclusively) an urban phenomenon, whose mission it's been to reflect the evolution of the individual within society. In his second volume of meditations on the art of fiction, *Testaments Betrayed*, Milan Kundera offers a wonderful characterization of the importance of fiction to the West. He describes it as an invitation of the Enlightenment which has been central in developing our Western notion of the individual.

It's important to note that he offers his analysis in the context of discussing what he sees as the West's failure in the Salman Rushdie case. Some of you will remember that the late Ayatollah Khomeini of Iran issued a fatwa - a death sentence - against the Anglo-Indian Salman Rushdie after the publication of *Satanic Verses*, in which Muhammed is negatively presented (there is no evidence that the Ayatollah or any other of the novel's clerical critics had actually read the book), and Western intellectuals, while consistently defending Rushdie, issued their defenses with an accompanying apology for any offense the book might give to Islam. Kundera scorns what he sees as a fundamental misreading of the mode and function of fiction which he believes must be free to imagine anything whatsoever, that in this absolute freedom lies its essential nature, as well as its fundamental virtue. It contributes most to society and the world when it is utterly free to imagine whatsoever it will: in doing so, it holds an empty mirror before the contents of our consciousness, which themselves put into words how we are feeling and faring inside the strange world we are creating. That's why fiction remains so vital: it is probably more important than ever that we hear how our fellow citizens respond to the bewildering changes we are all undergoing. The changes may appear small when taken individually: a cell phone, a computer, the internet, nanotechnology.

Taken together, however, they appear to support Czesław Miłosz's observation from half a century ago that humankind is in the process of becoming the fifth element, competing now with nature itself as a primal force, suffering weather and the elements of water, air, earth and fire, yes, but also capable of affecting the earth's environment as powerfully as they. Surely such radical changes as we have lived through need to be written down so that we can observe and reflect on how they might be affecting the individual not only in the public realm but also in his innermost thoughts and most secret self. Therefore, Kundera argues, fiction often serves us best when it appears to criticize us most harshly. Surely when we consider such landmarks of world literature as *Madame Bovary*, *Ulysses*, and *One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich*, (and perhaps I should also add *The Kobzar* to this list) we recognize that what these very different works have in common is the courtroom. Each triggered the forces of repression which were - note this, every last one - eventually defeated. {I'd like to stress the important part a mirror plays in aiding our efforts to at least appear civilized. Without mirrors, it would be hard to shave, to prune, to shape - to exert in short those efforts at self-creation which are central to our understanding of ourselves. And here let me turn to my subject, which gives the title to this talk, Ukraine under western eyes}.

For my generation, growing up Ukrainian was something that seemed to happen almost in secret. During the height of the cold war, Ukraine appeared to have slid off most maps and out of most history books where it was, as you well know, mentioned, if at all, as a part of the Soviet Union and generally regarded by most Westerners as a Russian province. Those of us experiencing American schools for the first time were shocked to find that far from being the center of the Universe, Ukraine had no place at all in the awareness of most of our peers, or for that matter, our teachers. If anything, we were likely to discover hostility to our claims for its existence as an entity independent of Russia. I had many troubling and even angry encounters throughout my school years and up through my graduate experiences at the University. Only in retrospect did I recognize how complex were the causes for the general and nearly universal misunderstanding about Ukraine and its history. And I should honor the truth of the past by noting that my speaking to you here appears (to those traces of my former self whose memory I insist on preserving) as nothing short of miraculous.

For a long time many members of my generation of Ukrainian-Americans {personally I'm not fond of the way hyphens clutter a page and so prefer to think of myself, to the degree that I am moved to categorize myself at all, as simply an American - but I'll say more about this later} could not find themselves reflected anywhere in American literature. Whenever I did find any reference at all to Ukraine, I felt both excitement and gratitude at the validation, even though the validation was almost unanimously negative. For instance I remember feeling both thrilled and ashamed as I read this opening sentence in Isaac Bashevis Singer's *Satan In Goray*: «In the year 1648, the wicked Ukrainian hetman, Bogdan Chmelnicki and his followers beseiged the city of Zamość but could not take it, because it was strongly fortified: the rebelling haidamak peasants moved on to spread havoc in Tomaszów, Biłgoraj, Kraśnik, Turbin, Frampol-and in Goray, too, the town that lay in the midst of the hills at the end of the world. They slaughtered on every hand, flayed men alive, murdered small children, violated women and afterward ripped open their bellies and sewed cats inside...» How many Ukrainian-Americans of my generation felt like Martians who had been raised by our own kind in the security of our homes by parents who forgot to tell us before we went out into the world that we should not remove our hats lest we reveal our pointed ears, and that we should wear scarves to cover the bolts on our necks. In my second novel my character Alex Kruk is born with something called the disagrjearing sickness, which was meant to serve as a metaphor suggesting the way in which the self one imagined oneself to be disappeared under the gaze of eyes that did not believe such a self could exist.

All that changed when you reclaimed your self-possession in 1991- and I felt then, and continue to feel today, such relief that it leaves me with great sympathy for people anywhere in the world facing similar forms of subtle erasure or even complete cultural and spiritual annihilation.

The consequences of your declaration of independence have been profound and continue to echo in every aspect of our political and cultural lives- because the future, which we create through our actions in the present, always changes the past. Serious readers in the United States today will find Ukraine uniquely present in American literature. In 1999 John Updike edited a centennial edition of an annual anthology called "Best American Short Stories" in which he chose one story from every

year in which the anthology appeared. The year 1934 is represented by a story titled «My Dead Brother Comes to America» by a writer I'd never heard of named Alexander Rodin whose brief biography in the back of the book tells us that he was born in 1909 in «the Ukraine» and came to New York in 1922. He worked as a bottler in a chemical plant while writing the novel *On the Threshold*. «Nothing more is known about him». His story is a brief but poignant summary of a classic crossing by boat of a mother and her three sons finally going to see their father again a decade after he went to America, during which period one of his son's died. They discover in the end that the dead boy's ghost accompanied them. That ghost-filled world of the Ukrainian imagination, which recalls the painful world of the American deep south, with its legacy of violence, brutality, and nobility, is surely still recognizable to you.

But Grodin's story is not the only sign of Ukrainian life in Updike's seminal selection. In fact, the very first tale in the anthology, published in 1915, the first year the collection was issued, titled «Zelig», by Benjamin Rosenblatt, who is described as having immigrated to New York from Russia in 1890, takes place partly in New York and partly in «Little Russia». It too tells a tale of émigré suffering and privation. In fact, I would say that Updike's anthology should be mandatory reading for anyone thinking about emigrating whether to the United States or anywhere else: here fiction reveals one of its singular strengths, the ability to convey the Juman drama at the proper emotional pitch. The information it offers about what life really feels like is far more useful and essential than mere facts about exchange rates and the histories of buildings.

Finally I'd like to look briefly at three novels, all of which appeared the last two years. *The Corrections* by Jonathon Franzen and *The Hunters* by Claire Messud were published in 2001; *Everything is Illuminated*, by Jonathan Safran Foer, appeared earlier this year. Each writer claims his own decade: Franzen was born in the fifties, Messud in the mid-sixties, and Foer in the late seventies. All three novels were widely praised by both critics and readers, and while they may not wind up on that very small shelf that holds the handful of books we select to endure, to represent our time to a future age (though at least one of them stands a chance of doing just that), each illustrates several significant facets of American life, and the state of

contemporary American fiction - which, by the way, based on the evidence, I would call reasonably robust if not exactly healthy. Like most American industries (but perhaps this is true in most overdeveloped countries), our literature suffers from a happy superabundance. Bookstores in America are now almost grotesquely swollen bazaars brimming with cultural product. Because every year thousands of new fiction titles are published I'll avoid generalizing too glibly: the field is so rich that just about any observation you make is bound to be equally true and equally false, depending on the evidence one examined.

To begin with Jonathon Franzen. *The Corrections* was by both critical and popular consensus one of the most important novels of the last decade. {It's author, Jonathon Franzen, has publicly chronicled his struggles with his novel, the false starts, the hundreds of pages thrown out, the minor characters who became major characters. Franzen is one of several contemporary American novelists of my generation who have a particular niche in the literature (others include Franzen's friend, David Foster Wallace, Richard Powers, and William Vollman) all of whom are characterized by words like «hip» and «cool» and «edgy». Certainly they share a literary ancestry-all tumble out of the overcoats of Thomas Pynchon and Don DeLillo, both of whom have very self-consciously embarked on big projects trying to reflect our multifaceted age back to itself even as the age is still forming around us. Both place special emphasis on the intrusive presence of technology in our lives. All, fathers and sons, are highly critical of many elements of contemporary American society}. In fact, I'd say Franzen's novel is the one book I'd hand a stranger who wanted to know what life was like for upper-middle class white America during the roller-coaster of the 90s.

The frame for Franzen's story is as simple as that of a television situation comedy: Now in her seventies, Enid Lambert, who lives with her husband in the mythical middle-western town of St. Jude, wants all her children to return home for one last Christmas holiday together. She is especially insistent this year because her husband Alfred is increasingly under the spell of a debilitating Parkinson's compounded by the drugs that are used to treat it.

Enid and Alfred Lambert are presented as classic middle-Americans. Alfred, who worked as an executive for a railroad company, and a part-time inventor is a familiar figure: he is conservative, asexual, stingy, possessed of (or by) a Protestant work ethic, and ethical to a degree that infuriates

his wife and children who wish he would be more selfish and bring more of the American pie to their dinner table. {Like most characters in this brilliant satire, Alfred is a largely pathetic figure: we see him as a packrat, hoarding, collecting, secretive, close-hearted and tight-lipped: a man who turns away from his wife's invitations in their marriage bed, and an old-fashioned and sometimes abusive father who was not above using his belt as a strap when necessary - something for which his sons have not quite forgiven him. Like all the major characters here, however, Alfred is also complex: we admire his sturdy principles, his refusal to milk a company for money for a patent on which he has a fair claim: his values are contrasted with those of his eldest son Gary, who is closest to him in temperament}.

His son Gary, a banker, is perhaps the least likeable of the Lamberts. He is aggressive, successful, and though he tries to deny it, depressed. He appears to have everything: a beautiful wife, two healthy children, abundant financial resources, a beautiful house and so on. „Yet these classic ingredients of the American dream prove a recipe for frustration. Unable to understand why the appearance of success provides him with no spiritual nourishment, Gary takes pleasure in abusing his parents, treating them coldly, as though paying them back a debt long overdue. He is an extreme portrait of the American individualist, for whom the accumulation of money and material goods has become an end in itself. And he is miserable.

His younger brother Chip is a failed academic who has stumbled into a crazy money-making scheme trying to help his ex-girlfriend's husband, a Lithuanian political figure, sell off parts of his country to foreign investors. This savage parody of Eastern Europe's extreme swing from public ownership to privatization should evoke some uncomfortable laughter in readers from this part of the world. Certainly Franzen's Lithuania is a cartoon (even more so than his America); his portrait of his own culture is far more complex and nuanced. Because Franzen does not ridicule his characters gratuitously. He is too good a writer for that. Though, every figure in the novel is satirized, each is also given the chance to show genuine warmth and affection, preventing us from dismissing any of them as mere caricatures and instead recognizing something of ourselves in their confusions.

Perhaps the most appealing figure here is the Lambert's daughter, Denise, who is presented as an attractive and dynamic woman, very much of

her time, pursuing the American dream as avidly as any of the male characters. For her it takes the form of success as a restaurateur. Certainly few professions are as emblematic of the U.S. in the nineties. The obsession with food in America over the last decade reached tragicomic proportions: whole sections of newspapers are devoted to it, as are countless magazines and television shows. Dinners have become opera for the middle-class, who flaunt (or did, before the new economy began taking hold) their new affluence in public while appearing to participate in a significant cultural experience. The effect of so many years of philosophizing about food have given it a cache comparable to that once claimed only by the fine arts. As you probably know, more than 50 % of the population of United States is overweight (in that way too I see myself as a typical American). In fact celebrity chefs were the supermodels of the 90s. Denise's other appetite is for married man, whom she enjoys vigorously, and serially - until one unhappy affair leads her to the arms of the husband's wife. Yet, the bisexual Denise finds sexual thrills but little lasting nourishment in her philandering.

Enid Lambert, mother of these prodigies of materialism, has not lost her instinct for family: she insists that personal sacrifices be made so that the family can come together for a last look at each other. While she does not quite get her way, she's successful enough to suggest that we have not yet entirely lost this essential social need. But while her maternal identity exerts a certain civilizing-though oppressive-force, she is far from being an admirable figure. Enid is full of envy for her wealthy neighbors, and brimming with criticisms of her children and husband. She too had an American dream which reality could not satisfy. Her marriage with Alfred has largely been a series of frustrations and compromises, and while her capacity for affection and her sense of duty are strong enough to ensure she play her part and act humanely, when her husband finally dies by book's end, Enid suffers little, and feels instead liberated and freed to go on with what is left of her life. So nobody emerges as even close to heroic, never mind exemplary. Franzen largely offers a *via negativa*: showing the paths we should avoid.

Now I've included *The Corrections* here for one very brief passage. During a culinary adventure to Europe, the hypercritical Denise, who has nothing but contempt for much of what she finds, both in terms of the food and the people, escapes from overbearing friends in Vienna and slowly makes her

way «as far east as Ruthenia,» where her mother's father was born, and which is now a part of «the Ukraine. In the landscapes she traversed there was no trace of shtetl. No Jews to speak of in any but the largest cities. Everything as durably, drably Gentile as she'd reconciled herself to being. The food, by and large, was coarse. The Carpathian highlands, everywhere scarred with the stab wounds of coal and pitchblende mining, looked suitable for burying lime-sprinkled bodies in mass graves. Denise saw faces that resembled her own, but they were closed and prematurely weathered, not a word of English in their eyes. She had no roots. This was not her country».

Franzen's larger aim is to skewer American consumerism and individualism run amok. We develop ourselves, we pamper and care for ourselves, past all reason, he suggests. We distract ourselves with toys and hobbies and private pursuits at the expense of the common good. In trying so hard to find ourselves, we lose much more than just ourselves: we destroy, or threaten to destroy, those very structures that gave rise to us in the first place. In Franzen's mirror we are indeed monstrous. And yet we have not completely lost our humanity. And his novel's implications are surprisingly conservative: ultimately our lives are redeemed only by a genuinely selfless concern for others, something that should, but often does not, begin with one's own family.

Franzen's Ruthenia-Ukraine is no more than an emblem of the past, of a European history America has rejected. Looking at its people, Denise recognizes her self and instinctively flinches, before fleeing. She finds neither comfort nor deep identity there; she feels neither guilt nor sympathy for the little she knows of what has happened in her grandfather's native land. One might say that she is too shallow for one, and too unstable and personally weak for the other. It's possible to argue that her failure to see beyond clichés is simultaneously the author's (all too American) inability to connect with any history beyond that of an individual's immediate senses.

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Claire Messud's «A Simple Tale», one of two novellas in her book *The Hunter*, published in the summer of 2001, tells the story of a Ukrainian cleaning woman in Canada. Messud's title alludes to Flaubert's subtle lovely novella, *A Simple Heart* about the last days of an old servant woman whose most prized possession is a stuffed parrot.

Messud's Maria Poniatowsky was «born outside Gulyaypole, in the Ukraine» (it seems Ukrainian-American academics have given up trying to persuade Anglophones from prefacing Ukraine with «the»). Here's how Messud describes her origins: «The Soviet Union was young, then, although the village was old; and although restructured as a collective farm, an administrative alteration of which Maria's parents and uncles and cousins complained, it was, to all intents and purposes, the village they had always known...» (p. 10).

{She suggests the complex atmosphere of Maria's childhood by saying she was educated in a Soviet school for several years «until the young schoolmaster vanished in the night and was neither located nor replaced». Messud meticulously evokes village life in a three room cottage housing seven souls who sleep «beneath rugs in a straw bed» listening to each other's breathing and «the scrambling of rats that nestled in the foundation». The atmosphere is portrayed as claustrophobic, emphasizing the daily sensory assault of mundane poverty yet without neglecting human affections: «...Maria could see precisely, in fragments, the beloved elements of her mother's face: the etched lines across her narrow forehead, beneath the patterned headscarf; the thick black bun at her mother's nape, filigreed with the silver strands that had so impressed her; the rippling creases in her mother's ruddy cheeks when, rarely, she laughed...» Both in her descriptions of her parents and in her subsequent evocation of the landscape, one feels the presence of hardship, the faces of the people etched by a difficult climate which Maria remembers as generally wintery}.

This impressionistic natural and familial world is then layered over with a history even more challenging than the land and the weather: «War had been visited upon them first as famine, a war merely to survive the bitter winter months. Crops had failed: the barns that should have been heaped with grain were home only to gaunt rats and the wind whispering amid the chaff along the floor... The kolkhoz which had been a village was a community linked, then, above all in suffering: everybody came to look related... They ate grass soup. With slingshots, Maria and her siblings tried to kill the rare crows... They ate even the cat... the war came in person, and was almost a relief».

Messud's portrait is sympathetic yet detached. Her narrative is a chronicle of privations while her subject is not a character with a particularly rich inner life. Indeed, she is by her own admission,

somewhat frivolous (that is, superficial) and a sensualist conscious of her own prettiness. She appears to have no political or cultural awareness—indeed, she is not too far from the cows in the field. She is fifteen when the Germans arrive to gather up young workers: «They had not been brutal—there were enough, in the region, who could trace German ancestry, fair Ukrainian peasants named Otto and Fritz...» Maria even imagines flirting with one of them.

The Germans' treatment of Ukrainian peasants is presented as non-coercive: «Let it be said that the soldiers were civil; they presented departure as a choice... they left all the old people...» The young people are taken to a work camp where brothers and sisters are separated. Here Messud presents a darkening of the Ostarbeiters circumstances: «They were not well treated; the inefficient and the sickly among them were beaten, or left for dead, or sent elsewhere for efficient extermination. But they were not Jews, nor were they political insurgents, nor Gypsies nor homosexuals. They were peasants, labeled with the word 'OST' stitched in blue to their breasts, signifying their provenance, hoarded in barracks with others like themselves, strong-backed and sturdy-limbed, culled from villages and farms across the conquered territories, not quite starved, and yoked, like oxen, for the glory of the Reich» (p. 16).

After the first camp Maria is sent to Essen where alongside other Slavs, under a sign reading «Slawen Sind Sklawen» (Slavs are Slaves), Maria works for the weapon-making clan of Krupps. Here the living and working conditions are merciless, brutal, though not murderous. Then, it is 1943 and the bombing begins. {The workers are not encouraged to seek protection. During one air raid (the terror of which Messud describes vividly, writing that this was the «endless suspended moment that she lived in death») a bomb tears a hole in the electric fence and Maria, together with a Romanian woman named Dardia, escape. Their journey is quickly and suggestively rendered as they move through the German landscape of nightmare. They are eventually taken in by German farmers who, having assured themselves the girls are neither Jews nor Gypsies, hide them in return for their help with farm work. Gradually the girls are restored to health.} And just then the allies sweep through the fallen Reich and the girls are again shipped off to a different kind of camp, this time for «Displaced Persons». There Maria meets her husband-to-be, a Pole named Lev, with whom she

speaks Russian «the language of Stalin», while together they prepare for the future by learning English and, fed the familiar litany of incentives by various camp administrators, prepare to go off together to Canada, turning their backs on their homes, with «lives as wrecked and forlorn as the skeleton dome of the church in Gulyaypole...» (The power of the future's lure is evident in the apparent ease with which Maria turns her back on the past-yet the pain of the procedure is subtly underscored as Messud compares her to Lot's wife, and describes her writing a letter to her parents without knowing whether her parents were still alive...)

The North American reality is for most immigrants black and white, and not the Technicolor of the movies and fantasies hatched on foreign shores, and Lev and Maria are quickly disenchanted. Moreover by now they have a child, a boy named Radek. But they adjust, they adapt to the rituals of immigration which primarily involve a willingness to work long hours at jobs previous generations of immigrants no longer wish to perform. (In that way you might say that North America has developed a unique kind of caste system, which follows a traditional hierarchy, from untouchables to Brahmins, except that there's mobility from one generation to the next and even, depending on luck and/or education, within the same generation. You might say work can serve as a kind of purification ritual (by the sweat of your brow, God says to Adam in Genesis) - though in the present economy it is growing increasingly hard to maintain that possibility so that I would argue in the West one of the deeper struggles in which we are currently engaged is between the ideal of democracy and the corrupting temptations of feudalism, where already wealthy consumers depend on the labor of others in the so-called third world to feed their appetites for material things and sensations}.

Maria winds up working for Mrs. Inessa Makarevich, a Russian-Jewish woman whose parents had emigrated to the west before the Russian revolution and who took a special interest in the DPs from Eastern Europe. {Here Messud interestingly observes that Mrs. Makarevich mistakenly imagines she knows what they are going through-suggesting that the differences between forced and voluntary emigration are far greater than most people can conceive. And it is this sort of subtlety that marks Messud's performance throughout the book. Inessa Makarevich enjoys the privileged existence wealth affords, employing numerous servants, all from Eastern Europe, while Maria winds up in a

position that would not have been much different had she remained at home}.

Messud sympathetically chronicles Maria's lot as she moves from working for one upper-middle class home to another, going from Inessa Makarevich to Brice Ellington. Here society is decidedly mixed, and includes Wasps, Arabs, and Jews, whose common denominator is an established financial base. Maria winds up cleaning for all of them. No one wants to talk about the war anymore. The women feel they are performing a good deed by simply employing Maria, whose past is for her to deal with. This quietly brilliant observation underscores the psychological dilemma of the DPs who under the weight of daily labor for basic subsistence found no way to work through the traumas they had experienced. And in this unnatural silence they begin to forget-who they were, and what they went through (this is exactly the opposite of the course pursued by the families of those killed in the bombing of the Twin Towers on 9/11).

Yet, through their consistent hard work, the Poniatowskis do manage to buy their own home and move up in the world. Meanwhile, their son Radek {Rod to his peers} grows into a good Canadian boy, who plays hockey and attends the university and like many young people takes no interest in his parents' past and is embarrassed by his mother's being a cleaning woman, and so proceeds to grow estranged from them. The estrangement is mutual to a degree, as Maria disapproves of his marriage to his high school sweetheart Anita, herself a girl from a working class family who goes to beauty school instead of college. Cut off from her own past, Maria finds her son now frustrates her fantasies about her future, which she imagined leading her ultimately into the class for whom she had toiled her entire life. The situation is made worse by the fact that Anita, herself the child of German immigrants, looks down on her future-in-laws for not being able to read and write English and who continues to label them Displaced Persons. After they marry, Maria says to her husband: «Who wins in the end, Lev... She's a German, isn't she? We both know what that means». And so the ironies of life multiply. Soon after, Lev is diagnosed with cancer, which the doctors attribute to the asbestos at work but which Maria blames on his soul's breakdown, due in part to his son's marriage to a German woman.

In widowhood, after a period of bereavement, Maria allows herself to experience the innocent pleasures of dancing and vacations which life had

heretofore withheld from her. After her son's German mother-in-law dies, Maria is finally invited to visit her grandchildren in their lakeside summer home. The visit doesn't go well, as might be expected: the nuances of middle class anxiety are sharply conveyed here, with her son and his wife fearful of anything that reminds them of their working-class origins. It is here, in what should be an idyll, that Maria experiences her most painful moment. Observing her son, his wife, and their children absorbed in their leisure time activities, she comes to feel superfluous; having struggled her entire life, it is precisely her experience of peace that undoes her. In typical western fashion everyone has drifted into their own individual isolation. She imagines herself drowning and doubts anyone would notice. She thinks to herself that the only person who now remembers her as she was when she was young and vibrant is her employer, Mrs. Ellington.

Meanwhile, as Mrs. Ellington grows sicker, she begins treating Maria more and more abusively, as though pained by this living reminder of her own fading youth. In a scene full of comedy and pathos, her employer reviles her for being too demanding, complaining that it is her servant who makes her aware of all they lack, her servant whom she is herself forced to serve. And so she fires her. Alone, without her servant, unaccustomed to taking care of herself, Mrs. Ellington begins to fail. Finally her daughter arrives to put her in a nursing home, and Maria is called on to help with the transition.

And so we see the complexity of Maria's circumstances: the brutality of her early childhood strengthens her character. At the cost of her youth, her family ties, and much of her identity, she gains a durability, a strength that makes her a kind of force of nature. As the novella ends, her former employer drifts toward death, and her husband's family falls apart (his daughter runs off with an older man, he and his wife decide to divorce), while Maria endures. In the last scene, Maria, having forgone what had become an annual pilgrimage to the beaches of Cuba, buys a kitschy painting of a tropical sunset whose vivid colors she describes to the nearly blind Mrs. Ellington. As she describes the colors of light, Mrs. Ellington falls asleep.

Messud's portrait is a deeply sympathetic study of an individual of limited abilities forced to dance a violent jig by the cruel forces of twentieth century history. We never hear Maria reflecting on her plight, never see her struggling to identify or even to blame anyone for what she is forced to endure.

And yet while this severely limits her ability to develop her self, it may also be part of what allows her to endure. One might even say she is emblematic of life itself, gross, unrefined, but unkillable. One might even say that she is remarkable, even heroic, for coming through not merely with more than a little dignity, but even continuing to keep growing to the very end, after others who had led far more privileged lives have withered or dissolved. Moreover, Maria in buying a painting of a sunset suggests she remains capable of appreciating both the beauty of the world and others ability to recreate it, despite what she has seen of the monstrosity of mankind.

Born in 1966 Claire Messud has by published three works of fiction, all of them very well received by the critics. A graduate of Yale and of Cambridge University in England, she has received numerous awards and grants. She is in fact married to one of the most important and original critics of her generation, the British writer James Wood (who himself received the Solomea Pavlychko Prize in Literary Criticism in 2002).

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Finally, the last book I wanted to mention is Jonathan Safran Foer's *Everything Is Illuminated*. {Though Safran Foer is very young (born in 1977), he is well-positioned, having studied at Princeton with the writer Joyce Carol Oates and} his book received a much critical attention when it appeared last year. A chapter was published in *The New Yorker*, reviews were generally (though not exclusively) ecstatic, and paperback rights were sold for nearly a million dollars.

The book is a braiding together of several different narrative strands. The principle story consists of a journey undertaken by a character named Jonathan Safran Foer to the village of Trachimbrod, also known as Sofiowka, to track down the woman who may or may not have saved his grandfather from the Nazis. He is accompanied on this journey by a Ukrainian translator named Alex, Alex's allegedly blind grandfather, and his «seeing-eye dog», Sammy Davis Junior, Junior.

The novel is presented in alternating chapters: one is narrated by the Russian-speaking Ukrainian Alex, and the other presents the history of the rise and decline of the imaginary shtetl Sofiowka-Trachimbrod. The village named for the wandering Jew Trachim whose wagon turns over in the river Brod in the year 1791. Among the contents of the wagon to float to the surface is a baby girl, a fe-

male Moses, who grows up to become «our hero» Jonathan Safran Foer's greatgreatgreat etc. grandmother. These chapters present a rich cast of characters that call to mind the villagers of Garcia Marquez's *Macondo* as reinvisioned by the kindred spirit of Chagall. Foer pokes fun at, and even parodies, various elements of his imaginary shtetl's life, and while the humor is often ribald, it is also affectionate, even loving.

Our narrator Alex is presented as a likeable buffoon, who butchers the English language in ways that are sometimes funny and other times just plain silly. The language Foer invents for Alex suggests the writer's verbal dexterity while turning the narrator into something of a caricature. At time I felt myself growing uncomfortable on behalf of the writer for choosing for a foil the frequently pathetic (but also sometimes entertaining and high-spirited) Odessan, Alex Perchov. {One might imagine how this might have been read had the character been an African-American speaking in a dialect}.

Foer suggests an insider's view of some of the linguistic politics of Ukraine, as is evident in the following passage about surzhik. When our travelers discover they are hopelessly lost, Alex decides to ask some men working in a field for directions. He is, however, nervous about approaching them: «...I was also afraid of the men in the field. I had never talked to people like that, poor farming people, and similar to most people from Odessa, I speak a fusion of Russian and Ukrainian, and they spoke only Ukrainian, and while Russian and Ukrainian sound so similar, people who speak only Ukrainian sometimes hate people who speak a fusion of Russian and Ukrainian, because very often people who speak a fusion of Russian and Ukrainian come from the cities and think they are superior to people who speak only Ukrainian, who often come from the fields. We think this because we are superior, but that is for another story...» He then goes on to add that «at times people who speak Ukrainian who hate people who speak a fusion of Russian and Ukrainian also hate people who speak English...» Eventually they discover the site where the village had been. However, instead of finding the woman who had helped the hero's grandfather escape the Holocaust, they find instead a lone Jewish woman, who indeed remembers Safran Foer's grandfather, «the first boy she ever kissed.» The rest of the village has been destroyed by the Germans.

But this is not the end of the story. The survivor presents the American Jonathan with a box which he opens in the company of Alex and his not

exactly blind grandfather. Inside the box are many artifacts, including a map from 1791 and a photograph which startles everyone at the table because one of the people in it resembles our narrator, Alex. And so begins the novel's final movement, with Alex's grandfather saying to Alex: «The woman in the photograph is your grandmother. She is holding your father. The man standing next to me was our best friend, Herschel... Herschel was a Jew... And he was my best friend... And I murdered him» (228). As the grandfather's confession unravels, in a rapid and chaotic monologue, we learn that the Nazis arrived in the village during the night and summoned all its citizens to the synagogue, where they demanded that the Jews be identified. «Who is a Jew?» the Nazi general thundered in Ukrainian. Eventually, to save his child, his wife, and himself, the grandfather turns in his best friend, Herschel. *Everything Is Illuminated* when the synagogue containing all of the Jews from the village is set on fire by the Nazis.

Early in the novel, as Jonathan explains his mission, he shows Alex the photograph, given him by his grandmother, of the woman said to have saved his grandfather from the Nazis. When Alex asks why his grandmother had shown him this photograph only fifty years after the war, Jonathan explains that she doesn't like to talk about the war and doesn't even know about his trip. Why not, Alex asks. So Jonathan explains that her memories of Ukraine aren't good, that all her family was murdered there. Inquiring how she survived, Alex asks if a Ukrainian saved her. Far from it, Jonathan explains, «The Ukrainians, back then, were terrible to the Jews. They were almost as bad as the Nazis. It was a different world. At the beginning of the war, a lot of Jews wanted to go to the Nazis to be protected from the Ukrainians.... Ukrainians were known for being terrible to the Jews. So were the Poles.» Then he adds: «Listen, I don't mean to offend you. It's got nothing to do with you. We're talking about fifty years ago...»

In an interview Safran Foer acknowledges that in fact he visited Ukraine on a mission to find the Ukrainian who had saved his grandfather. Instead he says that during the five days he spent in the country, he found in his own words «nothing but nothing...» And that nothing he says unleashed his imagination. «My mind wanted to wander, to invent, to use what I had seen as a canvas, rather than the paints».

I do not know to what degree Ukrainian literature has dealt with the many traumas the country

experienced in what one had thought had been the worst century on record, until the start of this one showed its teeth. Have your writers uncovered the wounds of the war, in order to begin to heal them? Has the history of anti-Semitism been aired publicly, and has the air been cleared? As an infrequent visitor I have no idea; these days I feel occupied enough by my own troubled American conscience. It is evident, however, from all three of the novels I've discussed that to most Western eyes, the issues remain alive. (Parenthetically, the question about anti-Semitism seems to me deliberately mis-cast: the proper forum for the subject would be found within a consideration of Christian-Jewish relations—the matter of *Ukrainianism* seems a mis-application of categories here).

Several passages in Foer, who was born 32 years after the war's end, communicated the horror his imagination projected onto a past of which he had not direct knowledge. That this was where his imagination led him (he could, after all, have had his character find the woman who had saved his grandfather: we would have had a very different story then) suggests that not much has happened to relieve the understandable griefs and resentments left by the Holocaust. Yet I'd also note the book should have been more disturbing than it was. The story Foer told has become *the* American cliché about Ukraine. As I noted several years ago in a review of Anne Reid's book about Ukraine, the image of Ukraine still held by most Americans is a surreal collage of «Easter Eggs and concentration camp guards». Your declaration of independence has gone a long way toward helping to fill out and complicate the picture. As you can see, there is more work to do.

Fifty years adds up to more than two generations, but literature is the child of memory and stories have enough in common with history to share a single word in French. The history of an individual always eventually entangles him in the tale of a family, a house, a town, a tribe, a nation, and a world. One reason I believe in the laws of karma is because I am a novelist, and a novelist's implicit subject are the laws of cause and effect. Not everyone will read history in the same way, needless to say, but those who dare to look at its darkest pages are the only ones likely to get past them to the chapters of light. Dante had to write the *Inferno* and the *Purgatorio* before moving on to narrate *Paradise*.

Listening to this talk you may get the impression that all American writers do is write about Ukraine. I assure you that is not the case. What is

remarkable about this last year is that out of the 3-4 thousand works of fiction published in the U. S. during this period, 3 or 4 recognized it. It shows what a huge difference independence can make: when you acknowledge your own existence, others begin to see you. And if what they see is not always what you wish was noticed, it may be helpful to remember Oscar Wilde's remark that the only thing worse than being talked about is not being talked about. Indifference to others' opinions may in some cases be a virtue; more often it is precisely the gross moral arrogance certain elements with my country, the United States, are so regularly guilty of—such self-absorption is always ultimately counter-productive and even self-destructive. My ignorance of contemporary Ukrainian literature makes it impossible for me to compare Ukraine's self-image with the image that is generated by creative works published abroad. Pasternak once remarked that a book is nothing but a burning smoking piece of conscience. Because we're ordinary human beings, our consciences are far from clear: it is precisely these troubled consciences, born of memory transformed by imagination, that inspire the creation of fictions that matter to the degree that they help us, as individuals and as a culture, to grow and to move on.

I am sure there is a Ukrainian version of this popular American joke: a famous writer speaking with a friend notices he has been talking about himself at length, so he stops abruptly and says: «But enough about me. Tell me: What do you think of me?» I would not want to suggest that literature ought to be self-regarding. And I don't mean to complain too much about not having seen my Ukrainian self reflected in American literature. In fact there are many ways in which not finding that reflection forced one to enlarge one's conception of self. There may have been nothing about a family of Ukrainian immigrants living in New Jersey for me to read, but there was *Madame Bovary* to flirt with, and there was Garcia Marquez's *Macondo* and Saul Bellow's *Chicago* for my imagination to prowl around in. At its best, after all, maybe literature is not so much a mirror as a window through which one sees not one's self, but the other, or better, others, the rest of the strange glorious world frolicking and fighting just outside—and perhaps one catches a reflection of one's self in that window, and recognizes what may be the truest vision of all: a transparent image on clear glass opening out onto a mysterious place that is far different from what it appears to be.

Мельничук А.

### ПОГЛЯД ІЗ ЗАХОДУ: ОБРАЗ УКРАЇНИ В СУЧАСНІЙ АМЕРИКАНСЬКІЙ ПРОЗІ

У статті автор спершу окреслює стереотип України у свідомості представників західної, зокрема американської, сучасної культури і зосереджується на тому, як її образ уособлюється у деяких творах американської літератури. У цьому ключі він розглядає оповідання О. Годіна «Мій мертвий брат приїздить до Америки» («My Dead Brother Comes to America»), 1934 р., та Б. Росенблатта «Зеліг» («Zelig»), 1915 р., а також аналізує три найсучасніші романи «Корекції» («The Corrections») Дж. Франзена, «Мисливці» («The Hunters») К. Мессюд та «Все висвітлено» («Everything is Illuminated») Дж. С. Фоеера, які було опубліковано протягом останніх двох років. Автор зазначає, що через недостатню ознайомленість із творами сучасної української літератури він не має можливості порівнювати втілення образу України в ній та у світовому письменстві.