

Introduction

Valerian Pidmohylnyi's *The City*

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In 1920, in the central Ukrainian city of Katerynoslav (now Dnipro), nineteen-year-old Valerian Pidmohylnyi published his first book. It was a small volume of nine stories with a very big title: *Works: Volume 1*. A year later, he was in Kyiv, the capital of the Ukrainian People's Republic, taking the first steps toward a career as a professional writer. These were heady times, not only for the aspiring young writer but for the Ukrainian nation and its culture as a whole.

In the nineteenth century, Ukraine may not have existed as a state, but the roughly 25 million Ukrainians certainly did. They were split unevenly between two imperial powers, Austria-Hungary and Russia. As with other stateless Slavic nations, much of Ukrainian history in the nineteenth century consisted of cultural activity designed to promote and assert national identity. In the Russian Empire, where the majority of Ukrainians

lived, this national awakening was met with repressions: there, the very existence of a Ukrainian nation and culture was perceived as a threat to the empire. But the political turmoil of the early twentieth century and the double calamities of WWI and the October Revolution brought the empire to its demise and opened the floodgates for a flowering of Ukrainian identity in both politics and culture. Between 1917 and 1919, a succession of Ukrainian governments claimed authority in Kyiv, before being overrun by Bolshevik military forces. Yet, unlike Ukrainian armies and politicians, Ukrainian culture and identity had substantial power and broad support. In the chaotic aftermath of wars and revolutions, in the absence of imperial restrictions on Ukrainian identity and the use of the Ukrainian language, Ukrainian culture — its literature in particular — flourished.

The 1920s were a period of growth and adjustment in Soviet Ukraine. In politics and the economy, it was two steps forward, one step back. But in literature, it was full speed ahead. A massive cohort of new writers, too young to have been active before the war, was suddenly writing and clamoring to get published. Literary journals were being established, publishing houses were growing, and literary groupings and organizations were forming and re-forming, battling each other for public attention. Most surprising of all, there was now a public whose attention was worth seeking. Four vital changes had occurred since the early years of the century. The upheaval

of war and revolution and massive human displacement, particularly of young men who had served in the military, meant that the uneducated, provincial Ukrainian peasants of nineteenth-century folkloric illusions had become worldly, inquisitive, and experienced individuals. Specifically, they had been transformed socially in three different ways, becoming literate, urban, and nationally conscious. A fourth dimension of societal development was the emergence of women on the cultural landscape as creators and consumers, which brought about significant changes, not least in their treatment as subjects.

The results of these changes can be seen in the outpouring of new literature in the 1920s. As the various wars finally came to an end and other problems like famine and cholera subsided, Ukrainian culture poured out into a receptive society as if from a dam breach, at first slowly and then in a massive torrent. Of course, not all of this flood was great literature. There were plenty of authors whose literary ambitions lacked substantial foundation. But there was also genuine talent in abundance. And, most importantly, there was diversity. Where Ukrainian literature of the late nineteenth century had mostly kept to a familiar pattern of heartfelt, realistic depictions of a variety of social ills, in the 1920s it spread into a very wide range of topics, genres, styles, and forms. The novel, a genre that usually prospers where there is a good market for literature, was flourishing. Novels were appearing with subjects as diverse

as prostitution in Kyiv and chemical plants in New York. There were novels about future world revolution and novels about the seventeenth century. There were novels about factories, farms, children, women, airplanes, motion pictures, exotic places and strange people, science, politics, sex, philosophy, and literature — or all possible combinations of the above in one work. There were detective stories and thrillers, family dramas, social dramas, and closet dramas. There was even pulp fiction.

This remarkable explosion of creativity lasted for about a decade. By the early 1930s, Stalin was conducting show trials of Ukrainian intellectuals and censorship was tightened. Soon, writers were being arrested and sent to the Gulag, or worse. The period when culture had been able to flourish later became known as the Executed Renaissance (*Rozstriliane vidrodzhennia*, after the title of an anthology published in Paris in 1959). The attack on Ukrainian culture was part of a Soviet attack on all things Ukrainian, including the nation itself, deliberately starved in a man-made famine in 1932–33. Such was the world of Ukrainian culture in which the ambitious young author of *Works: Volume 1* set out to make himself a place in the literary pantheon.

Valerian Pidmohylnyi was born on February 2, 1901, in a village called Chapli, then part of the Russian Empire and now absorbed into the city of Dnipro in southern Ukraine. His father worked for a landowner as a manager of his estate. Valerian attended a village school

and, in addition, learned French from a tutor the estate owner had hired for his own children. Little is known about his life just after WWI. His KGB file said he was a supporter of Symon Petliura, a leader of the Ukrainian liberation movement. Some of his early stories focus on military events, but that was true of most writing at this time. What is clear is that he started writing when he was young and his early stories focused on young men finding their place in a hostile and confusing world. He also translated the French poet, journalist, and novelist Anatole France. But writing and publishing in the south of Soviet Ukraine was not sufficient to satisfy this ambitious writer — he was headed for the big city, Kyiv.

The welcome he received there was mixed. The Kyiv he arrived in faced outbreaks of disease and hunger; many intellectuals were leaving the city to settle in surrounding villages, where they could become schoolteachers and get paid with food. In Pidmohylnyi's case, that village was Vorzel, where he met and married the priest's daughter, Katria Chervinska. Kyiv also did not welcome his authorial ambitions. The arbiters of ideological purity wouldn't publish his work, as publishing was entirely state-controlled, so he sent it abroad, where it appeared in the publications of the anti-Soviet Ukrainian diaspora, a step that raised further ideological suspicions against him. But with the about-face in policy that came with the implementation of the New Economic Policy and then Ukrainization, his fortunes improved

dramatically. Within a few years, a number of his stories were published in Kyiv journals, and three small collections of stories appeared as separate books. Together with new-found friends in Kyiv — Ievhen Pluzhnyk, Hryhorii Kosynka, Borys Antonenko-Davydovych, and others — he formed a literary grouping that adhered to a fellow-traveler — that is, apolitical — position. Before long, they were in charge of an important Kyiv journal, *Zhyttia i revoliutsiia* (Life and revolution), with Pidmohylnyi as editor. Ukrainian literary life in Kyiv was now vibrant and contentious (as well as politically charged), and Pidmohylnyi was part of the action. But during the early 1920s, something was missing — the novel. Breathlessly emotional short stories, particularly about the recent years of wars and revolutions, were easy to create and thus abundant. A longer and more sober view took time to develop. And then, by the late 1920s, suddenly, everyone was writing novels. Pidmohylnyi's contribution to this stream was the work you are about to read: *Misto* (The city; 1928).

The novel was popular and cemented the author's reputation as a leading intellectual author. Pidmohylnyi rode a crest of popularity, and even traveled to Paris, Prague, Berlin, and Hamburg on a trip organized by the Commissariat of Education. He was also translating a great deal, mostly Guy de Maupassant and Anatole France. But the times were, once again, changing. His second novel, *Nevelychka drama* (A little drama; published in English translation by

George S. N. and Moira Luckyj as *A Little Touch of Drama* in 1972), was serialized in the journal he edited, but it did not appear in book form. Stalinism was taking hold. Pidmohylnyi was dismissed from his position as editor of the journal. He moved from Kyiv to the eastern city of Kharkiv, then the capital of Soviet Ukraine. No longer being published as an author, he worked tirelessly on translations to support his wife and son. From Kharkiv, he witnessed the progress of Stalin's dramatic attack against Ukraine: show trials, Holodomor (the Great Famine), the suicides of Mykola Khvyliovyi and Mykola Skrypnyk, among other leading figures. Like most intellectuals, he was, no doubt, waiting for the midnight knock on his own door. It came on December 8, 1934. He was charged with membership in a fabricated terrorist organization. He was interrogated and tortured for a month, sentenced to ten years' imprisonment, and transported to the prison camp on the Solovetsky Islands in the White Sea, in Russia's north. On November 3, 1937, following a re-examination of his case, he was secretly executed. In this, he shared the fate of hundreds of other Ukrainian writers at that time.



Valerian Pidmohylnyi's *The City* is a landmark event in the history of Ukrainian literature. First and foremost, it is an exceptionally good novel, well written by a master craftsman in full control of the texture, rhythm, and tone of the text. The quality of the writing is, of course, tied to

the author's talent. But writing is also an acquired skill, and this novel displays better writing than Pidmohylnyi's earlier works. Much of the difference derives from the authors he was reading and translating — the nineteenth-century classics of French prose and some contemporary authors. The lessons learned can be summarized in three categories: construction, style, and themes. The basic plot of *The City* is clearly lifted from Guy de Maupassant's *Bel Ami*, which Pidmohylnyi had translated into Ukrainian. Maupassant's novel is about a young man from the provinces who rises to worldly success as a journalist in Paris by manipulating a series of powerful and influential women. Pidmohylnyi's hero, Stepan Radchenko, is not quite as corrupt or manipulative as his French counterpart, but he, too, achieves success as a writer through a succession of romantic encounters with women. It's not just the overall plot that is borrowed — many scenes, tropes, and devices are, as well. One example is names. Maupassant's Duroi renames himself Du Roi, to sound more aristocratic; Pidmohylnyi's Stepan becomes Stéfan — with stress moved to the first syllable — because, he wonders, "Wasn't he a king or something?" a reference to the sixteenth-century Polish king Stefan Batory (150). Both men are given pet names by their lovers — Bel-Ami for Georges and *bozhestvennyi* ("the divine one") for Stepan. Devices such as these and discipline in chapter construction give the novel a shape familiar to readers of Western European literature.

Style is also a lesson that Pidmohylnyi learned from his French models. Although Pidmohylnyi is writing in an age of modernist literature, his prose lacks some of the features that characterize modernism. If modernist prose is embodied by the writings of James Joyce, Marcel Proust, Virginia Woolf, and Mykola Khvyliovyi, and if modernist prose is experimental, ornate, subjective, densely allusive, and inscrutably complex, then Pidmohylnyi's novel belongs somewhere else. That somewhere else is, in fact, realism. Of course, Pidmohylnyi does share some features characteristic of modernism: irony, skepticism, and a retreat from blind faith in the rational powers of man. His writing is certainly not a throwback to the ethnographic realism that characterized Ukrainian prose in the nineteenth century. But in its clarity, precision, simplicity, and materiality, the style of *The City* is far closer to Honoré de Balzac, Guy de Maupassant, Gustave Flaubert, and Anatole France than to André Gide, Franz Kafka, Samuel Beckett, or William Faulkner. What distinguishes Pidmohylnyi is the fact that he writes about things, not emotions. For instance, we observe the number of pockets in a pair of trousers but not the experience of pain or joy. We walk the streets of a real city which we can trace on a map, and we flounder in the alphabet soup of various newly-formed Soviet institutions. The author exposes human psyches through actions rather than a stream of consciousness. His sentences have a logical structure, and his narrative is held together by

development rather than association: X causes Y and leads to Z. Language is used as an instrument of sense, not ornamentation. Words appear in their basic meanings, not through prisms of symbols, sounds, or allusions. Even where the author allows himself an allusive and symbolic image, he hides it beneath a veil of visual reality. For example, in approaching Kyiv on a steamship at the beginning of the novel, Nadiika notices a sailboat with three boys and, with them, a girl in a veil who seems like someone from old fables. Old fables, indeed: her name is Lybid, the boys are her brothers, Kyi, Shchek, and Khoryv, and we are witnessing the legendary story of the founding of ancient Kyiv that is told in the Rus' Primary Chronicle. Yet it is not necessary to make this connection in order to enjoy the text: It could just be some folks enjoying a sunny day on the river.

As this example shows, Pidmohylnyi's realism does not come at the price of ignoring allusions, symbols, or emotions; they are built into the fabric of the text. Emotions in particular — the whole gamut of human relations — are a vital part of this novel. There is probably no other writer in Ukrainian literature whose characters are so completely informed by Freudian psychology, which Pidmohylnyi knew and wrote about. Repression and the subconscious are evident everywhere. But psyches are revealed through the actions of characters, not through self-analysis or the narrator's descriptions. Where modernists say things, realists show them.

The thematic palette of this novel is very wide, and only some of it comes from the French realists. Balzac and Maupassant did not invent the theme of rural conquest of urban space, but it is their example that has brought that theme into modern literature, and this novel in particular. Eugène de Rastignac and Stepan Radchenko are cut from the same cloth. But Stepan exists in a Soviet world, where rural-urban relations are not just a sociological curiosity but an ideological platform. The propaganda of the time called it “coupling,” and Pidmohylnyi turns it into a joke in the novel. Yet here the topic has various dimensions, including Ukrainization, the official policy of expanding the role of Ukrainian language and culture in an otherwise Russified urban setting. Radchenko is a perfect choice for this function, but his general behavior, like that of his French cousins, is far from ideal, although in his case the iniquity is largely limited to his relations with women. He date-rapes Nadiika, crushes Musinka, and humiliates Zoska. However, unlike Maupassant’s hero, he does not commit these offenses for the purpose of social advancement. His faults are emotional and instinctual, not purposeful or calculated. Indeed, his ascent in his career as a writer and in his material conditions are almost accidental: they are not the reward for his misdeeds.

Pidmohylnyi’s depiction of Ukrainian literary life in the 1920s is, of course, unrelated to his French realist models. Some of this description is just realistic satire,

with vaguely recognizable figures and a searing indictment of the personal rivalries, incompetence, unprofessionalism, and ridiculous bureaucracy that characterized organized Soviet Ukrainian literary life. But it's also an uplifting chronicle of the success of Ukrainian culture and literature in Kyiv and all of Soviet Ukraine in the 1920s. Ironically, the foolish hijinks of literary life and improbable trajectory of Radchenko's literary career are proof positive that Ukrainian literature had finally arrived and taken its rightful place in Ukraine. Unlike the martyrs and saints who struggled against repressions in the Russian Empire to keep the candle of Ukrainian writing flickering, Radchenko is part of a chaotic horde of wannabe big shots trying to express themselves in poetry and prose. Ukrainian literature, like every strong national literature, is a disorganized mess within which the unexpected gems of culture and talent can develop.

Perhaps the most important quality of this novel is its profoundly philosophical core. The chief idea is signaled in its two epigraphs. Man is both physical and spiritual, instinctual and intellectual. This disharmony characterizes our existence in the world, where our intellectual side expects rational order, whereas the instinctive natural world follows its own principles. The result is alienation and disorientation, the basic principles of existential philosophy. In this, Pidmohylnyi is much closer to his modern European counterparts than to their nineteenth-century realist forebears. Nothing

is certain anymore. The first sentence of the novel tells us so: “It seemed you couldn’t go any farther” (7). Of course, you can go farther, but it is not clear in advance where you are heading. This is a very complex problem involving reason and irrationality, and one that I have written about elsewhere. * Here I shall merely state that Pidmohylnyi sees unpredictability and uncertainty everywhere — that’s why so many games of chance appear in this novel.

Pidmohylnyi’s *The City* is many things, but, at its most basic, it is a novel about Kyiv, a great and ancient Ukrainian city that he lived in for barely a decade. It sits, as the novel makes clear, at the very heart of Ukrainian culture and identity. As I write these words, Russia is conducting a genocidal war against Ukraine. Kyiv is slowly being destroyed, because the Russian goal — a Ukraine that is not Ukrainian — cannot be achieved as long as Kyiv exists. We can only hope the Russians fail.

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* Maxim Tarnawsky, *Between Reason and Irrationality: The Prose of Valerijan Pidmohyl’nyi* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1994).

