

From the history of Baroque-style suicides

Yuri Andrukhovych

Yuri Andrukhovych – poet, novelist, essayist and translator. He was one of the founders of the “Stanislav Phenomenon” and co-founder of the Bu-Ba-Bu (Burlesque-Blaster-Bufferoonery) literary group. He made his debut in 1985 with a volume of poetry called *The Sky and Squares*. Two subsequently published volumes, *Downtown*, and *Exotic Birds and Plants*, consolidated his position as the precursor of a new trend in Ukrainian poetry. In 1992, he published his first novel, *Recreations*, in the Kyiv monthly, *Suchasnist*. He received the Leipziger Buchpreis (awarded to authors whose work contributes to the European agreement) for the novel, *Twelve Rings*, released in 2003, and the Angelus Central European Literature Award, founded and organised by the City of Wrocław, as well as the Herder Prize in 2001.

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When towards the end of 1990 in one of my versified letters to an imaginary friend I wrote, "Ukraine is a country of the baroque," this line contained not only irony. And when in 1998, following in Danilo Kiš's footsteps, I said that "since the days of my childhood I've been attracted to ruins," I too, first and foremost, had them in mind – castles. I don't know how this could be explained, most likely it cannot be given any explanation at all, but among all the objects of our world – those fully or only half alive – my amazement to this day belongs to them. Meanwhile the country which I have so irresponsibly designated "baroque" in no way emphasises its own love for them; it is rather the other way round. Truth be told, this is why our castles almost always equal ruins. And besides, these are the ruins which are disappearing.

Those that have survived, at least in part, were frequently adapted to serve as prisons, reform schools for juvenile delinquents, boarding schools, or as various completely hopeless hospitals – psychiatric, venerological, and tubercular. Soviet power treated castles like lost warriors of a destroyed alien army. In its eyes they had no relation to any of the officially imposed values, and thus they came across as a kind of historical mistake. Soviet power, therefore, humiliated them in any way it could. It granted them further survival at the price of deliberate symbolic mockery.

However, the castles that were not even given this opportunity were much greater in number.

Remnants of walls, cavities of moats overgrown with wild grasses, burdock, and lilies, deformed silhouettes of towers, galleries and gateways covered in piles of trash – all this was and remains for me a highly important, even necessary, irritant. It wouldn't be easy to answer the question of how many of them have been there in my life, although they probably

number in the dozens. If I were more pedantic (and more attentive) I would probably put together a whole collection of them, classify them in time, space, and in my own biography scattered through space and time: family nests of aristocrats and bandits; residencies of magnates; ghosts of fortifications on hilltops and on the horizon. Castles – and in this I claim no special discovery – to this day remain a sign of permanence and tenacity inalienable from the European landscape. It seems that the further west within Europe we find ourselves, the more numerous they are around us. Bearing this in mind, a reverse perspective is also possible: Ukraine as the land of their easternmost penetration. And an answer to the question posed to me on numerous occasions in recent years and then left to its own devices – “Where lie the eastern limits of Europe?” – could be formulated as follows: they extend as far as the last buttress of the eastern wall of the last of the easternmost castles.

Our castles (or, more often, what remains of them) are most numerous in Transcarpathia, in Galicia, Volhynia, and Podolia, then – moving further and further east – not even their ruins remain, only random references in hard-to-access chronicles or legends complete with ghosts and curse-bearing dungeons. As the landscape becomes flatter, the smaller are their chances of survival. East of the Dnieper there aren’t even legends.

In my memory, I go through the castles of that now distant past when travelling through various Germanys or Italys which was definitely not on the cards before the collapse of the Soviet Union. Or rather, one thought of these countries the way one thinks of the planet Mercury today. Indeed, such a planet does exist – and so what? Well, at that very time the castles of Ukraine came to the rescue of my need for ruins and rhymes, demonstrating a possibility, even if very distant and vague, of some other kind of being. But which kind?

I remember a school trip to Halych and how we hid from the teachers in order to bum a quick smoke behind the hole-ridden wall. I remember annual visits to L’viv to Oles’ko – the company was always different, but the poems and wine the same. I remember an unbearably rainy summer during which we traveled through all of Transcarpathia, and the intended destination was always yet another castle. In Uzhhorod, Nevyts’ke, Vynohradiv, Mukachevo, Korolevo, and Khust – the castles were quite different from each other, in some they had opened museums, in others greasy spoon cafes, and in yet others they had opened nothing – only the wind wandered across the walls and grass grew underneath. The rain was also different in each of these places. For instance, in Serednie, where

the Knights Templar had built a castle back in the day, it poured through the sunshine into the castle. And we had with us plenty of homemade wine, both white and red, bought also here, in Serednie, and we drank it without measure, for how could we know that in this world there existed much finer and more expensive wines?

Castles are signs. Their hidden meaning is sometimes revealed but it doesn't stop being a mystery as a result of this revelation.

Here is another of them. On that September day we set out for a day trip along the left bank of the Dniester, through Buchach towards Yazlovets and from there on to Zoloty Potik. Each of these place names carries within it a whole bundle of mysterious signals that very few can sense. In the cultural dimension one can compare these lands, without exaggeration, to Atlantis. True, this particular Atlantis experienced not a single – once and forever – murderous catastrophe, but an entire chain of devastation – ethnic, religious, class- and race-based. The beginnings of these places reach back into the darkest sources of the Middle Ages, and their end didn't even come with the Second World War. As a consequence of a layering of anti-cultures, which I have discussed on another occasion, these areas are almost completely deprived of cultural continuity. There are only remains that lie underneath the strata of oblivion. I beg your pardon for lapsing into pretty verbiage; I should say, underneath piles of trash and faeces.

Historical sources assert that Zoloty Potik was a city and that it was granted Magdeburg Rights in 1570. Three decades later, Stefan Potocki, the Voivode of Bratslav, one of the most powerful aristocrats of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth, built a castle with a palace there. Later he decided that the capital of his state within a state and his main headquarters should be precisely here. And since Stefan Potocki at the time was the leader of the Podolian branch of the Potocki clan, within just a few years Zoloty Potik acquired tremendous importance. Try visualising all these fairs, religious processions, Sarmatian festivities complete with fencing and hunting, philosophical disputes in "Ruthenian Latin," the various wandering minstrels, lute players, court poets, falconers, and also the inexhaustible supplies of mead and Malmsey in the castle cellars.

Yes, it is worth visualising all this, but it is also very hard. Following the roads of the former city – on which we encountered only chickens and geese – we finally reached the place that once was the castle. It was first destroyed in 1676 by the Turks. During the centuries that followed,

the castle caught fire on multiple occasions and slipped into decline. It was rebuilt again and again, but from 1939 onwards, when Soviet power arrived in these lands, it appeared to suffer the final defeat in its confrontation with history.

We moved towards it, bypassing some peasants' backyards on the right. Still further to the right flowed a stream, although in reality it did not flow and it wasn't a stream – it was an almost stagnant ditch with remnants of black putrid water, a pitiful parody of the Styx. I found out later that this was precisely the Zoloty Potik – which means Golden (!) Stream (!) – a once affluent tributary of the Dniester. Further on we walked along some fairly well-preserved sandstone walls with some chaotic doghouse-esque wooden additions attached to them. A pained sensation appeared, but I did not know why.

We entered the castle courtyard through the gate, which was also fairly well preserved. I am not sure why I felt compelled to walk not to the ruins of the palace but rather to generally uninteresting structures which looked like some non-residential outbuildings. I climbed the half-rotten wooden steps to the porch. It looked as if in the collective farm days these buildings were used to press oil – for instance, from walnuts. A few broken and disassembled presses confirmed this. As did a small grove of walnut trees outside. Everything else inside was the same as always and everywhere in such spaces: dust, desolation, humidity, piled up timber, cardboard, rags; and silence.

That was it. One could now leave. The excursion into the land of the baroque exhausted itself. The pain did not abate.

Suddenly I saw an inscription (made with a chipped off piece of stone?) on one of the walls:

DEATH FOLLOWS MY FOOTSTEPS
AND I'M NOT ALONE

What sort of poetaster is this, I thought. My gaze followed an arrow scratched on the wall. Damn it, was it really there or was it not, that arrow? In any case, in one of the other rooms I read two more lines on the wall:

MAY HEARTBEAT SPILL OVER –
THERE'S TIME UNTIL TOMORROW

Then I realised that these were parts of one and the same message. The meter was the first proof of its tragic nature.

In the third room I saw the last (apparently concluding) part:

DON'T GRIEVE FOR ME, FRIEND,
WE'LL STILL MEET AGAIN

And from this third inscription an arrow, indeed, started. And it pointed to the last of the rooms – the furthest in, without windows, thus at that early evening hour darkness had already gathered there. And on its very bottom, on the rotten floor boards and old work coats, amongst shards of glass bottles and broken syringes, there could be anyone – for instance, a corpse.

Translated from the Ukrainian by Vitaly Chernetsky