

**Alexander Kratochvil. *Aufbruch und Rückkehr: Ukrainische und tschechische Prosa im Zeichen der Postmoderne.*** [Venturing Forth and Coming Back: Ukrainian and Czech Prose in the Context of Postmodernity.] Berlin: Kulturverlag Kadmos, 2013. 311 pp. Bibliography. Index. Paper.

**A**lexander Kratochvil's book, whose title might be translated into English as *Venturing Forth and Coming Back: Ukrainian and Czech Prose in the Context of Postmodernity*, is a valuable and original contribution to literary scholarship. At the same time, without adopting the genre features of the historical survey, it provides a useful overview, rich in detail, of the debates and literary works that captured public attention in two European cultures emerging from Soviet domination from the mid-1980s to the early twenty-first century.

Broadly speaking, the book is an attempt to describe and make sense of the phenomena that could be termed "postmodern" (or be usefully examined from a standpoint informed by global postmodernity) in societies marked, indeed traumatized, by the Soviet experience. The ambition of the study is to contribute to our understanding of the cultural predicament of a large part of Europe—using as examples ("am Beispiel" [287], as the handy and not easily translatable German expression has it) the literary cultures of Ukraine and the Czech lands.

No less convenient for describing the type of journey on which this book takes the reader is the phrase "im Zeichen"—literally, "in the sign of," but indicating an association of the most general kind. This is to the benefit of the inquiry because it makes possible, without agonizing over what can legitimately be labelled as "postmodern prose," the discussion of a great many interesting, but different, things. Thematic and structural variety is one of the book's salient features: interpretations of individual works based on detailed textual analysis alternate with theoretical reflections, rehearsals of debates, and accounts of social and cultural contexts. Given this multifarious structure, it is almost surprising to find the last of the sections of the book—one concerned with the hybridized Ukrainian-Russian language practice known as *surzhyk*—labelled as an excursus. The book is a succession of such "excursuses"—to its credit.

The virtues of the book, indeed, are many. Its introductory section gives a lucid account of the evolution of the concept of postmodernity in the international discussion. It contains insightful reflections, in conversation with Tamara Hundorova, on Chernobyl as a symbolic moment in the destabilization of faith in Soviet modernity. It offers a nicely pitched account of intergenerational tensions within literary cultures (in the Ukrainian case of the condescension toward the "sixtiers" by the "eightiers," and of the dismissal of the latter as irrelevant, in turn, by their successors).

It detects analogies between the Ukrainian and the Czech invocation of carnival, the grotesque, and of alternative histories.

In a book such as this, particular authors cannot help but emerge as especially representative. On the Ukrainian side they include Oksana Zabuzhko, Oleksandr Irvanets', Serhii Zhadan, Vasyl' Kozheliianko, Irena Karpa, and Liubko Deresh. Unsurprisingly, Iurii Andrukhovych is the most present of the Ukrainians. Kratochvil's engagement with Andrukhovych's *Rekreatsii* [Recreations] ingeniously reads the contraposition of Khoms'kyi with Martofliak as an allegory of two modes of being a poet—colonial and anti-colonial, respectively, and both bereft of promise for a future. Of the Czechs, Jiří Kratochvil, Jáchym Topol, and Miloš Urban receive individual attention.

The overarching preoccupation of the book is with the ethical dimension of the literary endeavour in societies like those of Ukraine and the Czech Republic. The intellectual motif that runs through the text, gaining in intensity toward its end, is the tension between the withdrawal from confidently asserted values that is generally regarded as a hallmark of the postmodern worldview, on the one hand, and challenges to moral judgment presented by collective memories of oppression and injustice in the period of Soviet domination, on the other. The author detects in some of the writing that he analyzes a reconciliation of the two apparent opposites in what he calls a postmodern aesthetics of responsibility (“postmoderne Verantwortungsästhetik” [237]). As he puts it in one of the illuminating formulations that are characteristic of his style,

the postmodern aesthetics of responsibility in postcolonial texts is not limited to responsibility for the aesthetics [of a particular text] ...; through individual histories it contributes to collective remembrance and opens new insights into one's past and into collective memory. Thus themes that in the collective consciousness have been overlaid by taboo and myth are opened up anew; thus processes of decolonization are set in train, as are transformations tending toward the emergence of a postcolonial attitude.... (265; reviewer's translation).

The “venturing forth” of the title is the abandonment of the monological conviction that literature is justified by its ideological content; what one “comes back” to is the stance that, in the end, indifference is not morally justifiable.

As the passage quoted shows, the author shares the view, familiar to Ukrainian literary scholarship, that the Soviet past imposes on the postmodern literary text a need to negotiate for itself a place in a terrain rendered complex by the residues and recidivisms of colonial force and by opposing anti-colonial power-claims; at times such texts aspire to the ideal

of an ethical conjuncture of knowledge and judgment deserving to be labelled as “postcolonial.” Kratochvil develops this dimension of his argument in dialogue with other participants in the discussion—George Grabowicz, Vitaly Chernetsky, and the author of this review, among others—allowing his interlocutors to speak through generous quotations from their texts.

Likewise, extensive quotations in the original language from works of literary prose, with the author’s fluent but accurate translations into German in the footnotes, are a hallmark of Kratochvil’s expository style. *À propos* of this it is necessary to sound a sole note of objection: the proofreading of the English-language quotations is not good, and that of the Ukrainian ones positively scandalous. A single twelve-line quotation from Zabuzhko contains no fewer than seven misprints, for example (257). These blemishes, one hopes, will disappear in a second edition and will not arise in the translation into Ukrainian that the book distinctly merits.

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