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“PERVERZION” BY YURI ANDRUKHOVYCH: CULTURAL PERSPECTIVE

Роман Юрія Андруховича “Перверзія” є, певною мірою, відображенням неоднозначності міжкультурних відносин у сучасному глобалізованому світі. Автор імплікує ідею нетотожності понять “національність” і “культура”; останнє, за Андруховичем, визначається спільністю базових цінностей, а не походженням, місцем проживання чи соціальним статусом людини.

Ключові слова: культура, національність, культурне середовище, міжкультурні відносини, глобалізація, стандартизація.

Роман Юрія Андруховича “Перверзія” в определенной степени является отражением неоднозначности межкультурных отношений в современном глобализованном мире. Автор имплицитно использует идею нетождественности понятий “национальность” и “культура”; последнее, по Андруховичу, определяется общностью базовых ценностей, а не происхождением, местом проживания или социальным статусом человека.

Ключевые слова: культура, национальность, культурная среда, межкультурные отношения, глобализация, стандартизация.

“Perverzion” by Yuri Andrukhovych is, to an extent, a reflection of ambiguous processes of intercultural communication in today’s globalized world. The author implicates the distinction between the concepts of “nationality” and “culture”; according to Andrukhovych, the latter is predetermined by shared basic values rather than by a person’s descent, citizenship, or social status.

Key words: culture, nationality, cultural environment, intercultural relations, globalization, standardization.

The *object* of this research is “Perverzion” by a contemporary Ukrainian author Yuri Andrukhovych, a novel which “The Complete Review” calls “a demanding cross-cultural text” [8]; the *subject* of the paper is the cultural aspect of Andrukhovych’s book. For the purpose of this chapter I will use the original Ukrainian version of “Perverzion” [1], the quotations are translated by an American Fulbrighter Martha Kuchar, to which the author’s assent has been received. The *topicality* of the research arises from two current tendencies: readers’ interest in postmodern literature and interdisciplinary nature of many present-day works which focus on literary criticism, philosophy, cognitive psychology, intercultural communication. The latter statement may be supported by the idea of Robert Wuthnow and Anna Wierzbicka who consider literary criticism and cultural history “rich fields from which new insights can be derived” [10, p.1].

The *goal* of this chapter is to highlight the role of Andrukhovych’s book as a “rich field” of intercultural research, which suggests issues for further social and psychological investigations; its *tasks* are (1) to analyze the cultural content and message of “Perverzion”, (2) to explore the theme of intercultural relations in the book, and (3) to discuss the elements of cultural dichotomy such as nationality – culture, cosmopolitanism – patriotism, selling one’s culture – learning other cultures, unique cultural environment – standardization.

According to “Welcome to Ukraine” (2005), Andrukhovych is “one of the brightest stars” among Ukrainian luminaries. He writes prose, poetry, plays, and essays, does literary translations from Polish, German, and Russian. He has been translated and published in Poland, Germany, Canada, Hungary, Finland, Russia, Serbia, and the USA; some of his works appeared in the collections published in Sweden, Austria, Bulgaria, Croatia, Belarus, Lithuania, and Slovakia [7].

“Cultural content,” says Ben Goldstein, “[...] is often presented through informational texts which do not encourage reflection [...] or allow for personalization” [5, p. 16]. Andrukhovych’s texts are exactly the opposite; it is personalization that makes them so attractive (see, for example, his latest publication “Lexicon of Intimate Cities” [2]).

“Perverzion” (1996) is an amalgamation of carnival glamour and post-carnival absurdity, satire and true admiration, mysticism and real life, Orpheus-like romantic love and erotica, mischief and deep faith, a spy story and fantasy, and all these things are presented through “outrageous play on words” [9].

The protagonist of Andrukhovych’s story is Stanislav Perfetsky, a poet and an outstanding figure of the Ukrainian literary underground, and the plot is built around his travel west. In his review of “Perverzion” published in “World Literature Today” (2006), Vitaly Chernetsky says, “[...] the novel offers a poignant exploration of the place of the contemporary Ukrainian intellectual in the global cultural order through an encounter with the Western Other” [4, p. 61].

“Perverzion” offers quite a variety of themes. The surface ones, most commonly discussed by readers and critics, are Perfetsky’s journey across Western Europe, the devilish absurdity of the mystic seminar in Venice (which proves to be devilish but not so absurd after all), Perfetsky’s secret mission to murder someone of consequence in Venice, his strange relations with Ada Zitrona, and Perfetsky’s mysterious disappearance – an escape staged as suicide or vice versa.

Carefully and imperceptibly Andrukhovych introduces one more theme, not so obvious as those mentioned above, – the theme of intercultural relations.

The author sends his character first to Germany and then to Italy. It is an open secret that in Western societies they know more about Russian and Eastern cultures than about Ukraine. But Andrukhovych does not try to advertize either his country, or culture. On the contrary, at first glance Stanislav Perfetsky, an underground artist, is hardly the one who could promote a positive image of his country. The author does not parade his love for his land. It is only twice that he mentions the subject – in Stanislav’s talk with an old Italian priest and when describing how Perfetsky and

his young wife try to get settled in his hometown, Chortopil, in the Carpathian mountains. Important as they are, both passages are painted with such a delicate brush that they can pass completely unnoticed on the background of much more adventurous stuff.

Andrukhovych writes about the beauty of the places lost somewhere in the Ukrainian Carpathians. In his descriptions of amazing national traditions, he rises to the high poetic standards set in the 1960s by an international celebrity Sergei Parajanov, an Armenian film director who worked in Ukraine. However, as it has already been said, such explicit expression of a deep connection with his land and culture is not a distinctive feature of "Perverzion". Andrukhovych does not attempt to get the West interested in a hitherto disregarded part of Eastern Europe; rather, he shows the West through the eyes of a Ukrainian intellectual. It is this approach to intercultural relations that gives him firm ground under his feet: he does not sell his culture, he forms an opinion of other cultures.

Andrukhovych uses his favourite devices – fragmented narration and detail – to describe the complexity of his character and Perfetsky's relations with the world around him. This is, for example, Perfetsky's impression of Venice, a new cultural environment: "There is the lapping of water, the scent of perfumes, almond pastries, chapels on piles, a poem of Rilke's dedicated to Richard Beer-Hofmann, sharp-quilled grasses in inner courtyards, a thimbleful of sludgy hellish coffee, learned erudites and bookworms, brazen old women who look you in the eye, ten thousand churches, palaces, wine cellars, museums, bordellos, four hundred bridges from each of which you are invited to spit, schools of mysterious trades, street tenors singing romances, and of course, the most triumphal of all Venetian phenomena: the ubiquitous flapping of laundry that never dries" [1, p. 56].

In today's world, "Quarrels over the pros and cons of 'identity politics' were largely replaced by more far-reaching discussions of cosmopolitanism, nationalism, globalization, diasporas, the concept of race, and the legal rights of the cultural minorities" [6, p. 173]. At least five of these issues – cosmopolitanism, globalization, intercultural communication, race, and cultural minorities – are touched upon, though very subtly, by Andrukhovych in "Perverzion".

In Venice, Stanislav Perfetsky is invited to the premiere of "Orpheus in Venice", an "opera buffa" created by "Director Mathew Kulikoff (Los Angeles – Paris – Melbourne), a reformer of the world today". His credo is "to shatter his viewer to bits". "Only then, from these broken bits, can he be built anew and even better," says Kulikoff [1, p. 167]. To me, it sounds pretty much like a good old melting-pot principle with its idea of people blending in a culturally homogeneous society. Only this time, the merging is of global and more profound nature, devised to standardize mentality, thinking, and tastes. This new dumbed-down consumer of Kulikoff's production is supposed to buy, among other "findings", innovations such as replacing the conductor, the scent of whose eau-de-cologne upset Kulikoff's lady-friend, with a robot; replacing the robot, that shorted out right before the start of the performance, with an extra juggler on the dais facing the orchestra who was asked to wave his arms as energetically as possible; the orchestra quickly lying flat on the ground when they ended the overture because one after another three blasts in multiple color enveloped the stage, fortunately no one was killed or even injured; the glass cylinders suspended over the stage by chains from above; inside the cylinders was every kind of reptiles – crocodiles, toads, snakes, salamanders, iguanas, and so on; these huge glass cylinders swayed threateningly over the heads of the singers, no doubt a symbol of the dangers in store for them as the opera continued.

The opera itself, though claimed to be based on a classical story, is described as "chunks of various operas stitched together quite well and seamlessly, but even ears not armed with prior knowledge of the operatic art, noticed quite easily with what thick threads the whole fabric was sewn together" [1, p. 172].

I might have felt amused by Andrukhovych's text, had it not reminded me of some things. Three years ago I saw "Oliver Twist" by Charles Dickens designed in the comic-book format about 100 pages long, published in the Czech Republic. Another example of internationally acclaimed primitivism is the books by Dan Brown. Their poor content is draped in the mantle of pseudo-historical and pseudo-cultural study spiced with the acrobatic turns of the plot. Andrukhovych's satire highlights the fact that all over the world, irrespective of their culture and nationality, people are being slowly but steadily dragged into the melting pot of standardization and primitive thinking, their senses numbed, their feelings roused only by over-the-top special effects.

Whith reference to financial and intellectual imperialism that conquers not lands but people's minds, way of life and thinking, Tamara Denysova, a Ukrainian linguist and art critic points out, "Today, culture is acquiring the status of a leading paradigm in preserving the unique environment and traditions, as it is, perhaps, the only means to achieve this aim. The globalization pattern causes strong, determined and well-organized resistance of a considerable part of the world's population" [3, p. 41]. In "Perverzion" Andrukhovych opposes the idea of universal core values to global dumbing-down. Perfetsky and the old vicar of a small church in Venice discuss the value of human life, the power of love, four virtues – wisdom, justice, courage, and moderation, – and celebrate the greatest Christian symbols. Another thing that unites them is their love of good music. They do not speak each other's language and have to use German as a lingua franca. But for all the differences between them – cultures, languages, age, styles of life, occupations, and social status (Perfetsky comes to church to make a confession of being forced to murder someone in Venice), – these two people understand and respect each other.

Interestingly enough, those characters who take the evil side and associate themselves with Lucifer come from different cultures too – Venetian, French, Swedish, Jamaican, American, Bessarabian and Transilvanian, German. Andrukhovych's point is clear: evil, as well as good are universal concepts; people are free to choose their priorities and the choice is not culture-specific.

Another interesting aspect of multicultural relations in "Perverzion" is the phenomenon of immigration. Before coming to Venice, Perfetsky visits Munich, Germany. On Ash Wednesday, the first day following the end of the carnival season, seeking entertainment, he finds himself in a strange apartment where an unusual musical interlude is unfolding:

“[...] the singing emanated from everywhere, from every room; all these people were still in carnival clothes, as if they rummaged through the trash for them; my bronze temptress dissolved into a crowd of women: mulattoes, Arabs, Turks, Chinese, Indians; everyone was decorating the apartment with live green springs, bits of fabric in hot colors, and countless little holy pictures, which I did not manage to have a good look at [...]. [...] all of them singing, singing nonstop, from the minute I walked into the place, singing without end, in broken German, something like psalms or hymns, their grammatical dissonance audible even to my ear, although the melody itself was rather lovely, a wildly lovely melody, inventive, a mixture of Celtic and Coptic with a little Brazilian, Armenian, Maghrebi, and Romanian mixed in. I felt unhinged by this music, I myself tried to chime in, but now and again one of the crooners shot me a nasty look, as if to say, don't butt in, this ain't for you, and I shut up [...]. Just the voices, of men and women, of kids and seniors, some sort of half-crazed prayer to some other god, something about forests, honey, woods, fields, orchards, mountains, meadows, grasses, gates [...]” [1, p. 25–26].

Andrukhovych provides no explanations and leaves it to a reader to infer what all these people from different cultural backgrounds have in common, why they pray to “some other god” in broken German, why they have their own small carnival, why they look “as if they rummaged through the trash” for their carnival clothes, and why Perfetsky is treated as an outsider by non-Europeans in a European city. The author calls these people the hurt and the disadvantaged from all over the world, tortured with hunger, bombs, AIDS, chemicals. They made it – legally and illegally, through hard work, humiliation, bribes, they've got this new land, this Germany, this prosperity, these sleeping bags in the subways. Kind and hardworking Germany gives them food and shelter. But they pray to their god for more. What do they want, asks Andrukhovych – forests, the meadows of the Alps, castles, museums, prolongation of their visas, warmth, empathy, cars? Or maybe they want citizenship?

The author describes the situation and asks questions rather than suggests solutions. What seems to be a solution to the problem may spark off fresh multicultural controversy. Andrukhovych shows that there is much more to life of modern society than the “melting pot – cultural diversity” theoretical dichotomy. He shows the complexity of the world that allows more than one interpretation.

As any good book, be it of antique, classical, or postmodern period, Andrukhovych's “Perverzion” addresses an array of philosophical, social, and personal issues, one of them being intercultural relations in the global cultural environment. An important inference an unbiased reader can make on finishing the book is that nationality is not a synonym to culture. The latter is broader in meaning in the sense that culture is a matter of shared values rather than citizenship or descent.

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