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More Than a Peasant Language: How Western Ideas and Literature Influenced Maksim Bahdanovich and Lesya Ukrainka's Works

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Abstract

Throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, the Russian Empire subjected the Belarusian and Ukrainian languages to discriminatory policies and social prejudice. One such policy was the Valuev Circular, implemented in 1863, which heavily censored Ukrainian- and Belarusian-languaged publishing, thereby preventing a variety of literary voices and ideas from being spread amongst the Belarusian and Ukrainian-speaking populations within the Russian Empire. As a consequence of centuries-long Russification, the process of forcibly or voluntarily assimilating Russian culture and language, the Ukrainian and Belarusian languages came to be regarded as 'peasant languages.' The Valuev Circular was revoked in 1905, opening the door for up-and-coming poets such as the Belarusian Maksim Bahdanovich (1891-1917) and Ukrainian Lesya Ukrainka (1871-1913) to use their diverse and educated backgrounds to introduce Western ideas into the Belarusian and Ukrainian languages. Western ideas are most seen implemented in their works through allegorical references to Ancient Greek and Roman culture, the poets' masterful translations of Western literature into their native languages, as well as in their usage of Western literary styles. This project sheds light on the literary works and translations of Lesya Ukrainka and Maksim Bahdanovich and argues that their use of Western ideas and literary traditions modernized Belarusian and Ukrainian literature.

Keywords: Belarusian literature, identity, nationalism, poetry, Ukrainian literature

In Maxim Bahdanovich and Lesya Ukrainka's works, the West is used as a literary and ideological tool of transformation and rebellion. Through this tool, the poets, both born during the turn of the 20th century, from different walks of life and different nations, protested language and social hierarchy in the Russian Empire through writing.

The banning of native-language publishing of Ukrainian and Belarusian in the Russian Empire and several social, political, and economical circumstances set back Ukrainian and Belarusian publishing by decades. Meanwhile, European literature evolved during all cultural epochs. The Valuev Circular, also known as the Ems Ukaz, was the ban authored by Interior Minister Count Pyotr Valuev and decreed by Tsar Alexander the II. It wasn't until 1905, upon the first mass Russian revolution in response to public pressure on tsarist rule, that the Valuev Circular was revoked, allowing some freedom for native-language publication.

The revoking of the Valuev Circular in 1905 started the rise of many Belarusian and Ukrainian writers who would go on to play a role in the future consciousness of their nation and the exploration of literary genres and incorporation of Western writing styles. Since the rise of one of the first pioneers of modern Ukrainian literature, Ivan Kotliarevsky, the rise of new writers, Ivan Franko, Marko Vovchok, Olha Kobylianska, and Lesya Ukrainka, would go on to evolve Ukrainian modern thought. For Belarusians, the rise of new writers meant one of the first moments of national consciousness with the works of Janka Kupala, Jakub Kolas, Michas Čarot, and Maksim Bahdanovich.

What makes Belarusian literature an interesting case of study is its lack of any development in style and genre before the early 20th century; that is, until the revoking of the Valuev Circular, when a rising young voice would come along and pioneer Belarusian modernism. His name was Maksim Bahdanovich.

Bahdanovich was born in 1891 in Minsk, in the Russian Empire, contemporary Belarus. Through his writing, he would go on to pioneer new genres, styles, and ideas in Belarusian-language poetry through his use of Western styles and techniques as well as expressing ideas through translation of Western literature into Belarusian. Belarusian literature was decades behind Ukraine's literary presence. However, the delay in Belarusian literary evolution is credited to a lack of national awareness, identity, and socioeconomic status of Belarusian speakers in the Russian Empire. In the 19th century, a Belarusian would not have a nationalist answer to the question 'who are you?'. A Belarusian was better known as a *tuteishy* or local, or by a religious identity, that of Orthodoxy or Catholicism. "Referring to himself as *muzhyk*, or peasant, he knew what he was not, and that was a *pan* (or lord), or a Jew. But [the Belarusian] would be hard pressed to find a category defined as "people""(Rudling 43). Ukrainian people were regarded the same – as *muzhyky* (peasants) (Soroka 325).

The common Belarusian speaker of the 19th century would not see themselves as being a part of a greater "nation" or having much of a "national" belonging. However, the start of free publishing gave Belarusian-speakers, especially the Belarusian intelligentsia who moved from the rural countryside to the bigger cities such as Minsk, the opportunity to actualize the need for national belonging and identity for Belarusians. During this time, writers such as Janka Kupala took a leadership role in national intelligentsia to ignite national awareness through traditional and social protest writing. The literary form of social protesting took center stage in

Belarusian-language newspaper publishing. One of the first of such newspapers was *Nasha Dolia* (Our Fate). However, after being deemed extremist and described as an "attempt to destroy the entire current political system" (Rudling 54), *Nasha Dolia* was ultimately replaced in 1906 by the longer-lived *Nasha Niva* (Our Field). This was the newspaper that paved the road for the Belarusian intelligentsia and literary pioneers of the 20th century. For the founders of *Nasha Niva*, "literature meant social protest rather than an artistic expression, and their poems were rhymed comments on contemporary conditions of life" (Vakar 90). For this very reason, Belarusian publishing was unconcerned about evolving and exploring literary genres, but rather with the traditional genres to connect with rural Belarusians. For the founders, the goal to establish an awareness of the 'nation' must synonymously mean the awareness of the 'folk.' The overarching goal of the newspaper was to emphasize the class issue between the Belarusian-speaking *muzhyk* (peasant) in relation to the pan (lord) in the Russian Empire.

Similarly, the Ukrainian intelligentsia had several organizations which prompted the publishing of works that heightened the national awareness of Ukrainians. One (among many) prominent publishing organizations was the Ukrainian journal *Hromoda* (Community), whose first publication came out in Geneva in 1878 and was edited by Mykhaylo Drahomaniv, whose journal marked the beginning of modern Ukrainian political thought (Rudnytsky 255-281). A decade before the first edition of *Hromoda*, in 1864, Drahomaniv joined the staff at the St. Vladimir University in Kyiv where he taught ancient history and, in his free time, led an underground organization called *Stara Hromoda* (Old Community). In her book entitled the Life and Work of Lesya Ukrainka, Constantine Bida describes *Stara Hromada* as "a secret Ukrainian society which carried on social and cultural work in the difficult political circumstances existing under the Russian tsarist regime in the second half of the nineteenth century" (Bida 4). The organization was later banned from publishing in the Russian Empire due to the Valuev Circular. A member of *Stara Hromoda* was Drahomaniv's friend and lawyer, Petro Kosach. In 1864, Kosach married Drahomaniv's sister, Olha Drahomaniv, who is better known for her poet pseudonym, Olena Pchilka. The two had six children, one of which was Laryssa Kosach, the second daughter, who would later become well known by her pseudonym Lesya Ukrainka (or Lesya of Ukraine). Ukrainka was born in 1871 in the small village of Zviahel, which at the time was in the Russian Empire, today contemporary Ukraine. Ukrainka, who was a poet, playwrite, and feminist, would become one of the most important contributors to modernizing Ukrainian literature. This paper emphasizes the works of Maksim Bahdanovich (1891-1917) and Lesya Ukrainka (1871-1913), who, influenced by Western ideas and literature, evolved Belarusian and Ukrainian literature beyond traditional genres and in doing so, introduced new genres, styles, and thought into their native-language literature.

National Awareness and Western Ideas

'Western ideas' are defined herein as Western philosophical thought, evolved literary genres and styles, and shared new experiences between the Western world and Maksim Bahdanovich and Lesya Ukrainka. The political environment and national goals of Ukrainian- and Belarusian-language publishing created difficult circumstances for the spread of these ideas. The precedence of Russification and a Belarusian and Ukrainian literary focus on the 'folk' genre as a pathway towards national awareness set Western ideas on the sidelines. Bahdanovich and Ukrainka grew up in Russified environments, Bahdanovich more so than Ukrainka.

Though he was born in Minsk, Maksim Bahdanovioch grew up in Yaroslavyl and Nizhny Novgorod, in present-day Russia. His father, Adam Bahdanovich, came from a small peasant family. He worked as a teacher in a parish school and later for a peasant bank. Although Bahdanovich grew up steeped in Russian culture and language, he learned Belarusian with the help of his father, who was deeply interested in the ethnography, folklore, and history of the Slavic people (Tvory 6). By the time of his graduation from Yaroslavyl University in 1916, Bahdanovich had already published several of his poems in *Nasha Niva,* including his only published anthology *Vianok* (Wreath). Bahdanovich began publishing in *Nasha Niva* starting at 16 years of age with his debut short story *Muzyka* (The Music) which was about the yearning and longing for the Belarusian language, personified as The Music or a Musician, to spread across the world. Upon his graduation, Bahdanovich moved to Minsk, however soon after he was diagnosed with tuberculosis and moved to Yalta, Crimea in search of treatment. Sadly, he died there at the young age of 25 years old in 1917. During his lifetime, Maxim Bahdanovich learned several languages. In addition to Belarusian, the poet learned other Slavic languages as well as Latin, German, and French. He also translated the works of Janka Kupala, Taras Shevchenko, and Ivan Franko into Russian (Kazyra 2011). Throughout his deep engagement with Western literature, Bahdanovich became one of the first Belarusian writers to emphasize the need to spread Belarusian literature throughout the world, especially into Western Europe.

Despite spending a lifetime away from his native land, Bahdanovich's awareness of Belarusian history and culture is very prevalent in his work. His poems on the topic of national awareness and Belarusian identity spoke just as loudly as those that evolved Belarusian-language poetry through the use of Western Romanticism, Parnassianism, and Triolets (Nabytovych 16). In his poem, *Ya hatseu by spatkattsa z vami* (I would like to meet you) Bahdanovich envisions his nation in unity, heading towards a destination.

I would like to meet you,
On a quiet, blue night
And say:
"Do you see these big stars,
The bright stars of Hercules?
Our sun is headed toward them,
And the earth moves behind the sun.
Who are we?
Only travelers, travelers among the heavens.
Why on earth are there
Quarrels and fights, pain and sorrow,
When we are all flying together,
Towards the stars?"

("Untitled", from Tvory 1957, translated by Olga Yatsenka)

The poet uses the Ancient Greek Hercules to depict struggle and strength, despite quarrels and fights, pain and sorrow, and to show there is yet hope for the nation to realize its goal – heading towards the *bright stars of Hercules*. In a similar-in-topic poem, *Kali zvaliu duzhy Herkal u pyl Anteia* (When the great Hercules threw Antaeus into the dust), the poet uses the analogy

of the connection between Anteus and Mother Gaia, or the mother of earth and of all that is living, to describe the life force behind Bahdanovich himself. He writes:

Broken by life, awaiting death,
My native land, I placed myself against you,
And life poured into my weakening veins, and
Stirred my soul's slumbering strength,
Where in its place, from then on, there is no more pity.

("Untitled", pg 95, *Tvory* 1957
Translated by Olga Yatsenka)

Bahdanovich's use of Ancient Greek mythology to draw connections to Belarusian strength, resiliency, and yearning, depicts the poet's position as an evolving revolutionary in Belarusian nationalist movements. His connection between Belarus and worldwide myths and legends, especially those that have been explored in the West, presented an opportunity for the poet to explore hope through a globalized and evolved literary perspective. As Vera Rich states, "For Bahdanovich, even at his most simple, is no singer of folk-songs" (Rich 38). His works carry a deep sensitivity for the romantic, stylistic, and hopeful. Even his protest poetry is romantic in nature.

Another example of Maksim Bahdanovich's contribution to the Belarusian movement's national awakening is his poem "*Sonnet*." At the beginning, he quotes the French poet Nicolas Boileau-Despréaux, "a flawless sonnet alone is worth a long poem." The poem is a two-stanza allegorical sonnet, in which Bahdanovich uses the image of Egyptian seeds, hidden in a jar near the Nile, to describe the rebirth of ancient seeds into the present time:

Where the Egyptian sands spread far around,
Close where the waves of azure Nile are flowing,
A tomb stood many thousand years: men going
Within, some seeds hid in a jar were found.
Although the grains were parched and dried, still sound
Their vital force awoke, and, new life knowing,
Flourished abundantly, young ears were growing,
In spring the crop stood high above the ground.

In the second stanza, he creates a connection between the reader and his homeland:

Forgotten land of mine, this is your symbol;
At last thy people's spirit is atremble,
I believe it lies not in sterile sleep,
But that it will surge upward like a fountain,
Which, rushing in a mighty, sounding leap,
Pierces the soil, into free spaces mounting.

("*Sonnet*," translated by Vera Rich)

For Bahdanovich, the idea of ancient seeds having the possibility to flourish again is a "symbol" of an accessible and possible rebirth. The poem carries the hope that Belarusian culture and language may, too, one day "surge upward like a fountain."

The young poet's national awareness began long before his first poetry publication in *Nasha Niva* in 1907 when Bahdanovich was only 16 years old. The poet's father, Adam Bahdanovich, whose knowledge and interest in Slavic ethnography and his Belarusian library, encouraged the poet to learn and interact with his native language. In his earlier poems, Bahdanovich already begins to describe a yearning for his homeland. In *Na Chuzhinye* (On Foreign Land*)*, the poet writes about a field of flowers amidst which there was the "native and forgotten in the shadows cornflower" who reminds the poet to "Remember, my friend, in your rich foreign land, about your poor and distant country" (Tvory 152, translated by Olga Yatsenka). Furthermore, the revolution of 1905 not only created a strong impression on the young poet, but he considered the year to be "the starting point of a new period in Belarusian literature and emphasized the extraordinary influence of the revolution on the spiritual life of the [Belarusian] society" (Tvory 18).

The Russian language, to use Joshua Fishman's terminology (Fishman 1972), is considered an H-language or dominant language and, in the Russian Empire, this meant social prestige and social ascent. For Maksim Bahdanovich and Lesya Ukrainka to write in their native languages was not only considered revolutionary, but it also meant that their work, like their languages, would be viewed as second-class in the Russian Empire. However, the two writers were not discouraged by this. Lesya Ukrainka, in particular, took boldly and passionately to modernizing the Ukrainian literary scene. And although she was not the first to arrive on the scene of modernizing and evolving Ukrainian literature, she is, to this day, considered one of the most valued and beloved Ukrainian writers. Her book, *Lysova Pisnia* (Forest Song*)*, went on to create space for the fantasy genre in Ukrainian literature (Zarevych 2022) and she masterfully evolved Ukrainian playwriting and poetry throughout her lifelong travels, relationships, and education.

Lesya Ukrainka grew up in a Ukrainian intelligentsia family. Her parents exposed her and her five siblings to Ukrainian culture from a young age. Ukrainka's mother, Olha Drahomaniv, was an active leader in Ukrainian literature and in cultural life. Constantin Bida describes Ukrainka's mother's interest in her children's lives:

> She was assiduously engaged in the matter of printing up her children. Concerned about their education, she tried to obtain the best textbooks and reading materials for them. For this purpose, she began translating foreign authors into Ukrainian. (Bida 5)

Before Lesya Ukrainka could be registered for secondary school, she became ill with tuberculosis of the bones and there began her lifelong battle with the disease. Ukrainka ultimately spent the rest of her life largely confined to her bed and traveling to warmer climates in search of treatments and surgeries. Despite her bed confinement and the condition of her health, Ukrainka was a vessel of information, imagination, and creativity. She continued to read and engage with books, especially those of Ukrainian writers such as Taras Shevchenko, who inspired many of Ukrainka's earlier poems. Some of her earliest poems were published at the young age of 13 in the magazine *Zorya* (Star) in Lviv. These earlier works were published in

Western Ukraine where Ukrainian publishing was not forbidden under the *Valuev* Circular and were then smuggled into the Russian Empire.

Beyond Ukrainian, Ukrainka went on to learn Latin, English, German, French, and Italian. Her mentor and uncle Mykhaylo Drahomaniv, known for being a well-traveled social figure, encouraged and supported Ukrainka to use themes from world literature in her own works. She had many literary friendships such as with Olha Kobylianska, who was inspired by German literary tradition and was the "first Ukrainian writer to introduce Nietzschean ideas into Ukrainian literature" (Soroka 326). Because of her exposure to Western literature, Lesya Ukrainka understood the importance of evolving Ukrainian literature so as to not only keep up with Western philosophical thought but to 'nourish' Ukrainian intellectual thought. Mykola Voroniy, who published the first Ukrainian modernist manifesto called *Znad Khmar I Dolyn* (From Above the Clouds and the Valleys) in 1903, stated "Our intellectual no longer wants to read our literature and our poets. His aesthetic taste, nourished by the best European literary works (even if they are in Russian translations) and by Russian literature, feels only aversion to Ukrainian ones" (Pavlychko 99). It could be this statement, her mentorship under her uncle, her friendships with well-read writers such as Kobylianska, or her well-rounded education, or all of the above that ultimately motivated Ukrainka's works.

Some of Lesya Ukrainka's most notable works were her plays. She was well-read in Ancient Greek mythology, Ancient Rome, and the modern literature of her time. Ukrainka's work, which shows her accomplished understanding of world literature, also displayed an analogy for Ukraine within each of them. The play *Orhiia* (The Orgy*)*, set in Ancient Greece, is an anti-colonial allegory for Russia's colonialism over Ukraine. In the play, *Robert Bruce, King of Scotland*, which Ukrainka dedicated to her uncle Drahomaniv, she offers another allegorical story to describe the Ukrainian struggle for freedom. The same allegory is demonstrated in one of her shorter poems:

And thou, like Israel once fought great battles,
O my Ukraine. For God Himself had placed
A force of sightless destiny, unblessed,
Contending with thee. He encompassed thee
With nations that, like lions in the desert,
Roared in their raging, eager for thy blood.
He sent on thee such darkness that within it
A brother could not know his true-born brother
And in the dark appeared one, undefended,
Some spirit of the time, willing the doom
"Death to Ukraine!"

(Bida 257, Translated by Vera Rich)

Furthermore, Ukrainka experimented with European literary traditions such as in her drama *The Stone Host*. Set in medieval Spain, Ukrainka engages with the European literary tradition of using Don Juan to describe unscrupulous seduction, with the exception that in this play, roles are reversed, and Donna Anna takes on the unscrupulous role.

Ukrainka not only engaged with her work on a nationalist level, but also on a spiritual one. Because of her lifelong illness, Ukrainka lived a life of discomfort and pain. Though not many, some of her most touching poems are those that are most personal about her health. In her Latin-named poem, *Contra Spem Spero* (Against All Hope, I Hope), Ukrainka overcomes pain and sadness through a stubborn transcendence of grief and her acceptance of resiliency. Yet another display of how personally Ukrainka engaged with her work, her poem *Eppur Ti Tradiro* (I may betray you), describes her interaction with the Ancient Roman and popular literary tradition of the muses. She writes:

I may betray you. And at that hour,
The whole world will cover with a secret,
A genius with a fiery look will soon appear
And will kiss my forehead.
And then I will stand, pale and trembling,
I'll leave my bed and follow him.
I'll follow him through darkness, my proud
And majestic secret genius.
He will put his own words in my mouth,
And will reveal all the wonders he knows himself.
From the depths, the heart will pour out
To the wide, vast skies,
Unstrained, brave, free singing.

(Eppur ti tradiro, translated by Olga Yatsenka)

In this poem, Ukrainka reflects on her personal relationship with her genius or muse. Specifically, the important reflection here is seeing the creative genius as being the dictator behind her work as "he will put his own words in my mouth, and will reveal all the wonders he knows himself."

Lesya Ukrainka continued to write her poems and plays and even translated several Western literary works into Ukrainian such as *The Communist Manifesto* and authors including Shakespeare, Homer, Hugo, and Byron (Britannica). Despite her lifelong fight against tuberculosis, Ukrainka ultimately died in Georgia in 1913, at the age of 42, leaving behind hundreds of poems, plays, and an unforgettable mark on Ukrainian history.

Conclusion: What Do M. Bahdanovich and L. Ukrainka's Works Represent?

The significance of Maksim Bahdanovich and Lesya Ukrainka using Western ideas and literature to evolve their native-language publishing represented a protest against social and language hierarchy and a spiritual uplifting of their people. During their lifetimes, Belarusian and Ukrainian languages were relegated, by *Tsar Nicholas II*, to Little Russian, when he allegedly recalled that "There is no Ukrainian, just illiterate peasants speaking Little Russian" (McCann 32). Little Russian was an umbrella term used to describe Ukrainian and Belarusian as unevolved dialects of Russian, spoken only by the peasant population, thereby labeling Belarusian and Ukrainian as "peasant" languages. Through their work, Maksim Bahdanovich

and Lesya Ukrainka disprove the imperialist and prejudiced idea of a “peasant” language by evolving their native-language publishing.

From Bahdanovich’s controversial Romanticist style in *Nasha Niva*, his translations, and his introduction of Western Romanticism, Parnassianism, and triolets to the Belarusian literary scene, to Ukrainka’s experimentalism with Western literary traditions, her translations, and the introduction of the fantasy genre into Ukrainian literature, the two writers created masterful works that uplifted Belarusian and Ukrainian literature to European and even World level. Vera Rich writes about Bahdanovich’s impact on Belarusian literature saying “the work of Maksim Bahdanovich has made it impossible for the poetry of Byelorussia ever to be dismissed as a purely traditional and "peasant" literature” (Rich 50). Lesya Ukrainka’s work offered new perspectives to the Ukrainian intelligentsia, new visions for the nation, and in general, an original voice to the Ukrainian literary scene, which would go on to inspire the future generations of Ukrainian modernist and contemporary writers.

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