
In Search of Territories of Freedom: Ivan Kozlenko's Novel *Tanzher* and the Queer Challenge to the Ukrainian Canon

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Abstract: Ivan Kozlenko's novel *Tanzher* (Tangier) became one of Ukraine's biggest cultural events of 2017, vigorously debated in the country's media and shortlisted for multiple prizes. This was unprecedented for Ukrainian literature: a queer-themed novel whose plot centers on two pansexual love triangles, one taking place in the 1920s, the other in the early 2000s, did not provoke a torrent of homophobic abuse. Its presentations were not picketed by right-wing extremists, the way this happened on multiple occasions to other recent gay-themed publications, most notably the 2009 anthology *120 storinok Sodomu* (120 Pages of Sodom). Set in the city of Odessa, the novel constructs an alternative affirming myth, reinterpreting the episode in the city's history when it served as Ukraine's capital of filmmaking in the 1920s and seeking to reinsert this queer-positive narrative into the national literary canon. This article analyzes the project of utopian transgression the novel seeks to enact and situates it both in the domestic sociocultural field and in the broader contexts of global LGBTQ writing, countercultural practices, and the challenges faced by postcommunist societies struggling with the new conservative turn in national cultural politics.

Keywords: Ukrainian literature; Odessa; queering the canon; postmodernist intertextuality; pansexuality

In recent years, discussions of Ukrainian culture often sought to combine two seemingly opposite trends: an emphasis on unity, in the face of attempts at fracturing the nation along political, regional, generational, linguistic, and other lines, and the thesis that its diversity can be seen as a source of its strength. This can definitely be observed in the discussion of its cultural, and especially literary, canon: spurred by George Grabowicz's challenge to rethink the history of Ukrainian literature (1981) and Marko Pavlyshyn's

influential essay on the politics of Ukrainian literary canon (1991), a number of scholars and practitioners of Ukrainian culture sought to revise and reconceptualize the canon and the criteria on which it is based. Among the most notable examples of this kind have been efforts of Solomiia Pavlychko and Tamara Hundorova. Thanks to the work of these and other scholars, we have begun to think of the Ukrainian cultural canon not as a static “iconostasis” but as a dynamic system.

In exploring this dynamic system, both the spatial and the temporal axis have been investigated. Thus, Yaryna Tsymbal’s series of anthologies *Nashi dvadtsiati* (Our Twenties) brought a rethinking of Ukrainian 1920s writing to a broader audience, as did the campaigns to mark the anniversaries of the Futurist poets Mykhail’ Semenko and Geo Shkurupii, both of them victims of Stalinist terror. At the same time, regional dimensions of the canon have been explored as well, such as in Irena Makaryk and Virlana Tkacz’s *Modernism in Kyiv* (2010), John Czaplicka’s volume on Lviv (2005), or the 2015 conference *Kharkiv: City of Ukrainian Culture* at Columbia University. In the context of literary activity of recent decades, it has become commonplace to speak of distinct literary schools associated with specific Ukrainian cities, such as Ivano-Frankivsk or Zhytomyr. There has also been a distinct fascination with geography in post-Soviet Ukrainian writing, as discussed, for example, by Pavlyshyn and, elsewhere, by this author.

Within this overall trend, the city of Odessa has been curiously marginalized, even though it played a notable role in Ukrainian culture of the past two centuries, especially in the late nineteenth and the early decades of the twentieth century, when it was the largest city on Ukraine’s territory. The city’s ambiguous position as a seaport, literally located on the country’s edge; its heterogeneous population; and later, as it went into cultural decline, the obsessive clinging by many members of the local intelligentsia to a reductive and aggressively Russophone version of its cultural myth have tended to obscure and downplay its role as a Ukrainian cultural hub. The most remarkable manifestation of this role came in the mid- to late 1920s, when Odessa served as the capital of the booming Ukrainian film industry, and many notable Ukrainian writers, artists, theatre actors and directors got engaged in this ambitious project. 2017, a year rich with cultural events in Ukraine, also brought the long-awaited book publication of arguably the most ambitious intervention seeking to rethink the city’s place in Ukraine’s cultural history and create an alternative cultural myth affirming its contribution to the Ukrainian narrative, Ivan Kozlenko’s novel *Tanzher* (Tangier).

The book generated lots of public discussion and was among the titles shortlisted for the BBC Ukrainian book of the year prize.¹ The launch of a film adaptation of the novel was announced in October 2017; it is currently in development, with plans for

1 See <https://www.bbc.com/ukrainian/features-42234612>, accessed 1 May 2019.

filming in 2019 and release in 2020.² *Tanzher's* road to recognition, however, was by no means smooth.

Ivan Kozlenko has achieved acclaim as an enthusiastic reformer and transformational leader of the Alexander Dovzhenko Center in Kyiv, where he served for three years as deputy director, and since 2014, as director. In leading this institution, Ukraine's premier film archive, he has demonstrated that ossified state cultural institutions in Ukraine can in fact be rethought, reinvigorated, and made socially and creatively relevant. He is also at the moment Ukraine's most prominent cultural figure who is comfortably out as gay. The novel was written in 2006, when he made a decision to leave Odessa for Kyiv. Prior to that, Kozlenko was an active participant in the city's artistic circles as a young writer and cultural activist. A version of the novel was published in the journal *Kyivs'ka Rus* in 2007, in a special issue focused on Odessa, but generated relatively little response at the time.³ The author later indicated he was unhappy with the editorial "cleaning up" of the text that sapped it of local color, and revised the manuscript several times before the 2017 book publication. The latter is also accompanied with explanatory footnotes, an author's afterword, and several primary and secondary texts dealing with Ukrainian Odessa in the 1920s.

The novel, of course, is not just about Odessa. It is also a book about coming of age and the shedding of illusions—a paradigmatic narrative through much of Western literature. It is named after Tangier, a city that from 1923 to 1956 was a so-called international zone, under joint administration of multiple European powers, before being reincorporated into Morocco. During this period and subsequent years, Tangier had a reputation for diversity and tolerance, both religious and sexual. It was famous as a home for expatriate writers and artists, most notably Paul Bowles and William Burroughs, who wrote his *Naked Lunch* there. The novel opens with an epigraph from Burroughs. While critical of Odessa's present, it reaches into the past for a reimagining of the city as a "territory of freedom."

The book's structure is complex. It is organized around two triangular relationships, one set in the mid-1920s, the other at the beginning of the 2000s. There are distinct and conscious parallels between them. Structurally, the novel borrows this device from Michael Cunningham's award-winning novel *The Hours* (1998), which is organized as a complex intertextual dialogue with Virginia Woolf's *Mrs. Dalloway*. In the case of Kozlenko's novel, the dialogue is with Yuri Ianov'skyi's *Maister korablia* (*The Shipmaster*, 1928), a novel iconic in the context of modern Ukrainian literature, with addition of other intertexts (fiction, memoirs, historical documents) that describe Odessa during

2 See http://dergkino.gov.ua/ua/news/show/1241/roman_yvana_kozlenka_tanzher_bude_ekranizovano.html, accessed 1 May 2019.

3 See http://shron2.chtyvo.org.ua/Kyivska_Rus/2007_N02_XI_Khvyli.pdf, accessed 1 May 2019.

the years 1917–1927 (including both Ukrainian-language authors, like Volodymyr Sosiura, and Russian-language ones, like Teffi, Ivan Bunin, and Aleksei N. Tolstoi). There is an important precedent of the use of this device in innovative Ukrainian literature, when Valerian Pidmohyl'nyi borrowed the basic plot structure of Maupassant's *Bel Ami* and transferred it to the 1920s Kyiv in his *Misto* (1928). Crucially for Kozlenko, *Maister korablia* is a book by a young author: Ianovs'kyi was only twenty-five when he wrote it, and this youthfulness is what for him unites the two plot lines

In *The Hours*, we have three interconnected plots: one is about Virginia Woolf herself; the other about a person reading *Mrs. Dalloway* in the 1950s; the third about a 1990s person who seems to be reliving the plot of *Mrs. Dalloway*. Crucially, the present-day part is set among members of the LGBT community: Clarissa Vaughan is a lesbian in a long-term relationship; her best friend, Richard, is a gay poet dying of AIDS-related complications; however, in their young days they were part of a happy triangular relationship with another man. Cunningham's success in presenting their experiences as universal and relatable not only for queer readers but for a much broader general public is one of the reasons the book enjoyed such broad acclaim, winning its author the Pulitzer and the PEN/Faulkner award and leading to a star-studded film adaptation. In Kozlenko's novel, we have a retelling of the central plot premise of *Maister korablia* (the relationship between ToMaKi [based on Ianovs'kyi himself], Sev [based on the film director Oleksandr Dovzhenko], and Taiakh [based on the ballerina Ita Penzo]) with the names of the 1920s participants restored and some details reimagined; the contemporary triangle of Orest, a young writer (who shares some features both with Ianovs'kyi and with Kozlenko himself), Seva the experimental film director (whose name is a clear allusion to Ianovs'kyi's Sev), and Marta, Seva's companion; and the historical background of Odessa during the 1917–1920 revolutionary events (struggle between the Ukrainian People's Republic, the Bolsheviks, the Denikin army, the Austro-German troops in 1918, the Franco-Greek troops in the winter of 1918–1919, and the independent warlords like Nykyfor Hryhor'iev) and of the early years of Soviet rule, when it attracted many young ambitious writers, some locally born, others transplants (both Russophone, like Isaac Babel, Eduard Bagritsky, Il'ia Ilf and Evgeny Petrov, Valentin Kataev, Semen Kirsanov, Yuri Olesha, and Konstantin Paustovsky, and Ukrainophone, like Mykola Kulish, Mykhail' Semenko, and Ianovs'kyi), visual artists, like Anatol' Petryts'kyi and Vasyly Krychevs'kyi, and actors, like Amvrosii Buchma and Natalia Uzhvii, not to mention Ukraine's leading avant-garde theater director, Les' Kurbas, and Dovzhenko himself, who transformed in Odessa from an ambitious yet little-known painter into a major film director. Kozlenko relishes the ambiguity, ambivalence, and contradictory nature of that history in both the documented (to the extent we have documentary evidence) and the mythologized versions. The warlord Hryhor'iev emerges as a symbolic embodiment of this ambiguity: "What should one do with Hryhor'iev,

for example? Is he a hero or a scoundrel? A savior or a traitor? There are far too many questions" (29).

Odessa in the novel is a hybrid, transitional space both in the 1920s and the early 2000s, and its beauty can be found in unexpected places some would term ugly (like the notorious and sprawling "7th Kilometer" market, the site of a major plot development in the present-day section of the text). The narrative pointedly attacks the narcissistic belief of many Odessans in their city's superiority and their condescending attitude towards Ukrainian culture—a feeling shared by many in the local intellectual elite both during the 1920s and during the post-Soviet era. In both periods, the text seeks to uncover ephemeral spaces that served as points of attraction for bohemian artistic circles and their sexually liberated ways. The 1920s section seems to have a distinctly Weimar touch, as if portions of it stepped off the pages of Christopher Isherwood, although he is never directly acknowledged in the novel as an inspiration.

Rethinking and highlighting the role of gender and sexuality concerns in Ukrainian literature has been a prominent phenomenon during the post-Soviet era. However, in a number of instances, including Solomiia Pavlychko's writing on Lesia Ukraïnka and Ol'ha Kobylians'ka and Grabowicz's writing on Taras Shevchenko, it has often caused controversy among the more conservative members of Ukrainian cultural establishment, both in Ukraine itself and in the diaspora. Later, the 2009 publication by Krytyka of a scholarly anthology of queer writing that bore a title challenging old-fashioned norms, *120 storinok Sodomu*, resulted in violent attacks on the contributors and other panelists by right-wing extremists at several public events associated with the book's launch, and eventually the torching of Ya Gallery in Kyiv, the site of one of them, by arsonists (see Chernetsky, "Ukrainian Queer Culture," 216-17).

In retrospect, Kozlenko's novel shares more with Pavlychko's efforts in the 1990s than with the militant queer activist practices of the more recent years. Half a year before the dissolution of the Soviet Union, Pavlychko published her groundbreaking essay "Chy potribna ukrains'komu literaturoznavstvu feministychna shkola?" ("Does the Ukrainian Literary Scholarship Need a Feminist School?"), which launched a powerful school of feminist literary criticism in Ukraine (1991). Trained as a scholar of Anglo-American literature, Pavlychko builds, among others, on a classic essay by Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar, "Infection in the Sentence: The Woman Writer and the Anxiety of Authorship" (1979), outlines the dilemmas of authorship for writing women. Gilbert and Gubar emphasize the alterity of the writing woman within the literary tradition through challenging Harold Bloom's theory of literary history that postulates the artist's "anxiety of influence," the "warfare of fathers and sons," as the key to its dynamics (see Bloom). They argue that in reaction to the hegemonic masculine authority of the tradition, the female poet/artist experiences an "anxiety of authorship"—a radical fear that she cannot create, that because she can never become a 'precursor' the act of

writing will isolate and destroy her”; the female artist, they continue, “must first struggle against the effects of socialization which makes conflict with the will of her (male) precursors seem inexpressibly absurd, futile, or even . . . self-annihilating.” She has to react to the tradition with a revision that is far more radical than that performed by her male counterpart—frequently by actively searching for a female tradition which, “far from representing a threatening force to be denied or killed, proves by example that a revolt against patriarchal literary authority is possible” (49). Hence for women writers and artists, and—I would argue—for artists representing other non-hegemonic identities (in terms of race, ethnicity, sexual orientation, disability status, etc.), a crucial step is to seek out allies and precursors that can be seen as hallmarks of an alternative, resistant canon—which makes Kozlenko’s lengthy list of literary influences in the biographic note to the novel’s journal publication a perfect representation of this paradigm.

Within it, the appearance of V. Domontovych next to Ianovs’kyi, the main intertext of Kozlenko’s novel, is telling. In Pavlychko’s monograph on Ukrainian modernism, she highlights in particular the theme of sexuality in the work of several writers who sought to create new modern urbanist Ukrainian prose, Valerian Pidmohyl’nyi (1901–1937) and V. Domontovych (pen name of Viktor Petrov, 1894–1969). In the case of the former, it was an interest in nineteenth-century French literature (especially Balzac and Maupassant), as well as a fascination with Freudianism, that brought him to discuss homosexuality (interestingly, not so much in his own fiction writing, but in critical essays about other authors, especially the nineteenth-century classic realist author Ivan Nechui-Levyts’kyi). However, an even more radical and fascinating case is presented by V. Domontovych. As Pavlychko notes, in his novel *Doktor Serafikus* (written 1928–29, published in emigration in 1947) we see the first “posing of the question of love between two men in the Ukrainian context” in a work of literature (*Dyskurs modernizmu* 227). While this is but one of the many plot lines in the novel, its presence in a work that draws a memorable portrait of Kyiv intelligentsia in the 1910s–1920s is hugely consequential.

In this context, the brief but vividly portrayed scene of lovemaking between Ianovs’kyi and Dovzhenko was probably the most potentially controversial element of Kozlenko’s novel. Later, several scenes with the two of them and Ita Penzo continue indicating that this is a happy pansexual relationship of three equals united as one. In the present-day plot line, Marta, in one of her remarks, calls Orest to treat his body not as something that imprisons him, but as something that has its own language and freedom; this exploration likewise leads him to open to pansexuality. All the more remarkable, given the enduring presence of homophobic attitudes in contemporary Ukraine, that the publication of the novel did not provoke homophobic abuse or physical attacks at any of the multiple public events associated with its launch over the course of the spring and summer of 2017.

The question of sexuality and the radical reimagining of the role of Odessa in modern Ukrainian culture thus stand as the two equal pillars of Kozlenko's ambitious text. What is also notable is that the novel was written during the time when the author made a conscious decision to switch from the Russian he spoke in his childhood and youth (similarly to many fellow Odessans) to Ukrainian. The novel thus also served as a documentation of the author's refashioning of his own identity. Paradoxically (and he is very much aware of this paradox), given Kozlenko's fascination with the Beat generation writers and their theory of spontaneous writing, his own literary practice was far from spontaneous, and indeed the novel took many months to write and later underwent multiple revisions. I would argue that we have here a productive conflict between the aesthetics of spontaneity and a "difficult," intertextual form, documenting the desire to master a means of expression. Its yearning for utopian transgression, one could argue, resonates profoundly with the Ukrainian culture of public protest and the creation of short-lived utopian spaces at the Maidan square in Kyiv, both in 2004 and in 2013. Perhaps this is the answer to the question why the novel's reception has been overwhelmingly positive, the potentially controversial plot elements notwithstanding.

Sadly, Kozlenko's *Tanzher* for the moment remains a vision of an Odessa and of Ukrainian queer culture that could have been. But one is hopeful that the newfound recognition that the novel is experiencing may be able to trigger, at long last, a rethinking of the queer potential within Ukrainian culture that the author is calling for. Recent reconsideration of homosexuality as key to the identity and creative work of Ahatanhel Kryms'kyi, Ukraine's leading Orientalist scholar of the late nineteenth-early twentieth century and a pioneering poet of same-sex love, both in his original work and in his translations from Classical Arabic and Persian, are telling. Transformed cultural spaces are in fact appearing in the city where the novel is set; the return to Odesa of major figures of the older generation, like the artist Oleksandr Roitburd, who recently became the director of the Odessa Fine Art Museum with an ambitious plan for its transformation into a vibrant globally and locally relevant cultural hub, and the successful holding of Pride festivals in the city now for three years demonstrate that the impulse for experimentation and subversion portrayed by Kozlenko in his novel with a tinge of loving nostalgia for the economically poor but culturally fluid 1990s is far from extinguished. Zones of freedom can appear in the most unexpected circumstances—one just needs to be able to see them.

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