

Literature, Exile, Alterity

The New York Group of Ukrainian Poets

STUDIES IN RUSSIAN AND SLAVIC LITERATURES, CULTURES AND HISTORY
SERIES EDITOR: LAZAR FLEISHMAN (STANFORD UNIVERSITY)





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The New York Group of
Ukrainian Poets

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I dedicate this book to the memory of Danylo Husar Struk, whose untimely passing left a void in the Ukrainian scholarly community and whose encouragement and mentorship I cherish to this day.

Contents

<i>Acknowledgments</i>	v
<i>Note on Transliteration and Translation</i>	ix
<i>Preface</i>	xi
Chapter 1. Introduction: New Land, New Poetry.....	1
Chapter 2. Discursive Practices: Poetry as Power	18
Chapter 3. Periphery vs. Center: The Poetics of Exile	42
Chapter 4. From Surrealism to Postmodernism: The Poetics of Liminality	62
Chapter 5. (Post)Modernist Masks: The Aesthetics of the Play-Element.....	98
Chapter 6. From Spain with Love, or, Is There a “Spanish School” in Ukrainian Literature?.....	114

Chapter 7. Transforming Desire: The Many Faces of Eroticism	136
Chapter 8. Eros and Exile	171
Chapter 9. Patricia Nell (Kylyna) Warren's Constructed Alterities: Language, Self-Exile, Homosexuality	188
Chapter 10. Literary New York: The New York Group and Beyond.....	209
<i>Conclusion</i>	228
<i>Selected Bibliography</i>	232
<i>Index</i>	243

Note on Transliteration and Translation

For the most part I use the Library of Congress system of transliteration in the body of this book, but with a few exceptions. The proper names of the poets of the New York Group are given in the form they themselves adopted in their respective countries of residence—thus Boychuk instead of Boichuk, Andijewska instead of Andiiivs'ka. Moreover, the soft sign (ь) is omitted in proper names and the adjectival ending –s'kyi in Ukrainian surnames is rendered by –sky; therefore Kostetsky instead of Kostets'kyi. However, I preserve the Library of Congress system of transliteration without any modification in the footnotes and Selected Bibliography. Unless otherwise indicated, all translations are my own, as are any errors or misinterpretations.

Preface

The phenomenon of the New York Group comprises two generations of Ukrainian émigré poets residing, despite the group's name, on three continents (North America, South America, and Europe). New York City, however, has always constituted a seminal point of reference and its name signified an innovative approach to Ukrainian poetry. The significance of the city of New York is not just symbolic; this is indeed the place where in the mid-1950s the group originated, imbuing the postwar Ukrainian literary émigré milieu with avant-garde spirit and fresh designs. The poets eagerly experimented with poetic forms, privileging *vers libre* and metaphor, and embraced artistic and philosophical trends that were fashionable at the time, such as surrealism and existentialism. By the early 1960s, all seven founding members of the New York Group (Bohdan Boychuk, Yuriy Tarnawsky, Zhenia Vasylykivska, Bohdan Rubchak, Patricia Kylyna, Emma Andijewska, and Vira Vovk) had published at least one poetry collection; in fact, a majority had by then two or even three books to their credit. At that early stage, the poetic output of the group's members formed a genuine aesthetic alternative to socialist realism, which was still prevalent in Ukraine of the 1950s under the communist regime.

While the label “New York Group” commonly refers to the seven poets named above, the group’s membership also includes five poets who joined the original contingent a decade or more later. These “fellow travelers” (Yuri Kolomyiets, Oleh Kowerko, Marco Carynnyk, Roman Babowal, and Maria Rewakowicz) betray the same inclination toward formal experimentation and display continuity in the realm of thematic preferences. Added to the universally poetic themes of love and death are the motifs of the erotic, the city, alienation, and malaise. The preferable modes of expression are highly subjective, intellectual, and often playful and ironic. But what really unites the founding members with their younger counterparts is a common desire to express themselves freely in their native tongue. Despite a few cases of bilingualism (Tarnawsky, Babowal, Kylyna, Carynnyk), Ukrainian by and large remains the main and preferable medium for poetic expression among the group’s members. As much as the overall conceptualization of the New York Group warrants the analysis of all twelve poets, this book of essays will focus on the founding members only.¹ There are two main reasons for my choice; first, the latecomers did not discursively participate in the formation of the group, and second, the poetry analyzed here is primarily from the group’s most active period—that is, the second half of the 1950s and throughout the 1960s—in which Kolomyiets, Kowerko, Carynnyk and Babowal were only marginally involved. With that in mind, my goal is to underscore those traits in poetic idiom and aesthetic outlook that justify the existence of the New York Group as a definable and coherent entity in the history of Ukrainian literature.

I intend to examine the group’s activity and output from a theoretical standpoint that is cognizant of power and transgression, exile and liminality, and, finally, alterity or “otherness.” The group’s understanding of and relation to modernism and postmodernism will also be discussed, as will be its preference for such philosophical and aesthetic trends as existentialism and surrealism. While this scheme necessarily points to a methodological

1 In fact, all major anthologies of the group’s poetic output published thus far include selections from all twelve members. Cf. O. H. Astaf’iev and A. O. Dnistrovyi, eds., *Poety N’iu-Iorks’koi hrupy: Antolohiia* (Kharkiv: Ranok, 2003); Mariia Revakovich, ed., *Pivstolittia napivtyshy: Antolohiia poezii N’iu-Iorks’koi hrupy* (Kyiv: Fakt, 2005); Mariia Revakovich and Vasyl’ Gabor, eds., *N’iu-Iorks’ka hrupa: Antolohiia poezii, prozy ta eseistyky* (Lviv: Piramida, 2012).

pluralism, it sets the stage for my own synthesis of literary politics, social history, and close textual analysis.

In Chapter 1, I situate the poets against the background of Ukrainian and Western modernisms and elucidate the New York Group's general aesthetic orientations. The group's version of modernism betrays hybrid qualities, mainly because it subsumes elements of both the historical avant-garde and high modernism. Moreover, the New York poets are typical late modernists in the sense that their proclaimed affinity with modernist aesthetics is self-consciously fashioned and underscored. They aspire to be part of an international community of writers and artists who place high value on formal experimentation and the individual search for personal values.² However, even though their claim to formal newness holds in the context of Ukrainian literature, the poets of the New York Group have not managed to secure for themselves wide recognition in their adopted countries, despite appearing in translation in numerous literary magazines.

Chapter 2 places the group's emergence and activity within a clearly defined social and political context. This contextualization is presented as a series of distinct discourses which foreground the poets' interactions not only with their predecessors and contemporaries, but also among themselves. I make use of archival material and refer to a number of letters the individual members sent to each other and to their literary mentors in order to show how much energy and thought the group devoted to gaining recognition and power. Asserting their distinct voice and presence was of utmost importance to them. Their beginnings were not chaotic but strategically designed to win over both the émigré reading public and the émigré critics of the older generation.

In Chapter 3, I introduce the concept of exile as one possible way to interpret the New York Group's poetic output. I argue that even though these poets do not fit the typical paradigm of exile writers, they nonetheless display exilic sensibility in their work. This sensibility manifests itself not only in feelings of alienation and "otherness" but also in the desire to make the experience of exile as universal as possible. The motifs of homelessness, uprootedness, and love for the native land, if occasionally present, are immediately cleansed of any local

2 As I will indicate below, their involvement in many translation projects underscores this desire to be part of the modernist community of poets.

reference. In this chapter I also discuss the group's situatedness vis-à-vis Ukraine, on the one hand, and vis-à-vis its periphery, the émigré milieu, on the other. The poets' creative position was literally betwixt and between two powerful structures: the communist regime of Ukraine and the politicized émigré majority, which had a hard time accepting such atypical exile postures as pure aestheticizing and formal playfulness.

Chapters 4 and 5 assess the group's poetic output from the perspective of two dominant trends in twentieth-century arts and literature, namely modernism and postmodernism. Chapter 4 analyzes the poets' surrealist turn and traces modernist and postmodernist characteristics in their writings, arguing in the process that in the "vocal"³ period, modernism prevailed. The poets' insistence on the autonomy of art, their hostility to mass culture, and their fetishization of newness and individualism indeed place them directly in the middle of the modernist camp. Chapter 5 focuses specifically on the aesthetics of play in the poetry of Emma Andijewska and Bohdan Rubchak. Despite the fact that both these poets toy with the ludic and employ some typically postmodern techniques such as intertextuality, irony, and fragmentation, they remain modernists at heart. This is also the case as far as Yuriy Tarnawsky is concerned, even though in his late poetry he assumes a somewhat postmodernist posture.

In Chapter 4, I also introduce the concept of liminality, which entails transitional or ambiguous states.⁴ Liminality seems to be equally applicable to the questions of poetic shifts within the modernism–postmodernism paradigm and to the exilic condition into which the poets of the New York Group were thrown by the necessity of historical circumstances. Giuseppe Mazzotta in *Dante, Poet of the Desert*, for example, views both exile and poetry as naturally liminal states.⁵ In the case of the New York Group of poets, I contend that in spite of their émigré status (which necessarily entails a considerable degree of marginalization), they were able to transcend their periphery by pushing the aesthetic boundaries of Ukrainian literature.

3 This is my own designation for the period stretching roughly from 1956 to 1971.

4 I am using the concept of liminality in the sense given to it by Victor Turner. See his *The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-Structure* (Chicago: Aldine, 1969), 94–96.

5 Giuseppe Mazzotta, *Dante, Poet of the Desert: History and Allegory in the Divine Comedy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1979), 107–46.

The following two chapters, 6 and 7, approach the group's oeuvre from thematic perspectives. Without doubt, eroticism, with its existential subtext, and "Spanishness" are two themes that have proven seminal and pervasive for the New York Group. What I also view as important to point out is that inherent in each of these themes is the multiplicity of signification. Erotica, for example, was not only used to stir controversy by debunking sexual taboos and promoting transgressions or alterity, but also to convey an existentialist credo, including the need for freedom and responsibility for each individual choice. The emergence of the "Spanish School" phenomenon, on the other hand, happens to be the poets' guise for deeply felt and espoused internationalism.

While the "Spanish bug" affected only a handful of the group's members,⁶ Eros has proven to be universally inspiring, although it manifested itself differently in each poet. In fact, Chapter 8 discusses various representations of the erotic, at the same time tying them to the condition of exile. In many ways, this chapter returns to some of the concerns introduced in Chapter 3, expanding them by comparing the exilic condition to the state of being in love. Both constitute liminal states, and both imply lack and desire to possess something that is valuable, yet absent. I am also trying to convey in this chapter the idea that the dynamic between Eros and exile is capable of exposing all the inconsistencies in the process of reconfiguring the topoi of identification. Self-proclaimed cosmopolitanism, for example, can be the mask of an exile in distress. Or, escape into the poetic craft (the veneration of *ars poetica*) can help to alleviate the sense of not belonging. Thematising difference (linguistic and territorial), as well as estrangement and separation through the passage of time, lie at the heart of the group's poetic output and clearly elucidate its exilic sensibility.

Chapter 9 is devoted exclusively to the oeuvre of Patricia Nell Warren (Kylyna).⁷ Her rendezvous with Ukrainian literature is truly remarkable considering that she, unlike the other members in the group, volunteered to be exiled. She did not need to accept such a condition, and yet she did, learning

6 I am referring here mainly to the poetry of Tarnawsky, Kylyna, and Boychuk. These poets as well as Vovk and Vasylykivska learned the language and spent considerable time and energy translating the works of modernist and contemporary Spanish authors.

7 Kylyna is a pseudonym of Patricia Nell Warren, an American born in the state of Montana, who married Yuriy Tarnawsky in 1957.

Ukrainian well enough to express herself in that language poetically. I argue that all her transformations, those of a Ukrainian poet and of an American gay writer and activist, can best be explained by the concept of alterity, especially as conceived and proposed by the French philosopher Emmanuel Levinas. To him, alterity is the most radical gesture of ethical responsibility in the face of the Other. In Warren's case, I make an exception and discuss not only her poetry but also some of her English-language fiction. This decision stems from the necessity to underscore the simple fact that her Ukrainian poetry on the one hand, and her fiction in native English on the other, display a remarkable continuity and inextricably complement each other.

In the concluding Chapter 10, I ponder why the city of New York, so emblematic and essential to the group's image, has been so scarcely thematized in the poets' oeuvre. I contrast the approach to the New York themes found in the poetry of Tarnawsky and Boychuk with that of their predecessors (Vadym Lesych, Iurii Kosach) and, most importantly, with that of their much younger colleague, Vasyl Makhno, a Ukrainian poet who settled in New York in 2000. While the group's reluctance to explicitly refer to New York can be partially explained by the fact that their attention was turned mostly to their own subjectivity (quite in line with a modernist premise), the absence of poems with urban motifs, referring specifically to the metropolis in which they lived and worked, is rather glaring. In this respect, Makhno's emphasis on the concrete and the local comes as a stark contrast to the group's practice, underscores his postmodern inclinations for the particular rather than the universal, and, finally, outlines a new path forward for Ukrainian poetry outside Ukraine's borders.

Before I embark on the story of the New York Group, however, it is fitting to begin by telling the life stories of its members, all the more so because their biographies have considerably impacted their poetry. Furthermore, they all represent a generation that not only experienced the horrors of war but also lived through an enormously dynamic and even transformative period of history. The postwar decades in America witnessed the proliferation of artistic styles and movements that necessarily found their expression and cultivation in the creative endeavors of young émigré poets.

Bohdan Boychuk's organizational skills contributed to the impression (sometimes upheld even by his colleagues) of his being the unnamed leader

of the group, a label he has neither disputed nor defended. Born in 1927 in the village of Bertnyky in Western Ukraine, he was old enough to be directly affected by the dread of World War II, and suffered forceful deportation to Germany for hard labor by the Nazis at the age of sixteen. He completed his high school education in a Displaced Persons' Camp in Aschaffenburg, Germany, and immigrated to the United States in 1949.

Eager to establish himself in his adopted homeland and taste its everyday comforts, he enrolled in City College of New York, and in the mid-1950s graduated with a Bachelor's degree in electronic engineering. By a twist of fate, his college education was interrupted by a military draft and the subsequent discovery of a serious illness, which prevented him from serving in the Korean War. Diagnosed with tuberculosis, he spent three years recovering at Stony Wold Sanatorium in upstate New York. Upon his return to the city in 1953, he resumed his studies at CUNY and three years later finished his college education. In 1957, Boychuk's first poetry collection, *Chas boliiu* ('The Time of Pain'), came out, marking the beginning of an émigré literary career. The two professional roles he assumed ran perfectly parallel lives and seemingly never interfered with each other. He retired from his engineering job in 1992 and since then has devoted himself to literature full-time. In 2000 he moved to Kyiv, Ukraine, and in the past decade he has divided his residence between Kyiv and Glen Spey in the Catskills in upstate New York.

Boychuk's poetic oeuvre, viewed from the angle of its philosophical underpinnings, exhibits a remarkable degree of unity and continuity, despite the fact that his eleven collections to date span half a century. He is an existential poet with a strong metaphysical bent, placing supreme emphasis on the individual—his thoughts, fears and desires—as well as on the individual's relationship to society, the universe, and God. The anguish caused by human mortality and his frustrated attempts to rise above the historicity imposed by time is counterbalanced in Boychuk's poetry by the energy drawn from creativity and physical love. The poet embraces and identifies with the pain that life brings as it unfolds, because it alone allows the fullness of experience and construes the identity of each individual.

Bohdan Boychuk and Yuriy Tarnawsky met in 1953, and from the very start engaged in organizing a variety of forums for their literary production: ad hoc café gatherings, literary evenings, and the bulletin "Students'ke slovo"

(The Student Word), an addendum to the daily newspaper *Svoboda*. Born in 1934 in Turka, a small town in Western Ukraine, Tarnawsky was luckier in some ways than his older colleague. Like Boychuk, he finished his high school education in Germany, but unlike him, arrived in the United States in 1952 not alone, but with his father and siblings, an older sister and a younger brother. Tarnawsky's family settled in Newark, and he graduated from Newark College of Engineering with a degree in electronic engineering. He subsequently worked for IBM until his retirement in 1992, settling permanently in White Plains, New York. Perhaps it was the computers' communicative potential that prompted him to expand his education. In the mid-seventies he returned to school to study semantics, and in 1982 earned a PhD in linguistics from New York University. In the mid-nineties, he taught Ukrainian literature for three years as an adjunct professor at Columbia University in the department of Slavic languages and literatures. In the past decade he has shifted his focus from writing poetry in Ukrainian to writing experimental prose in English. His most recent publication is a collection of mininovels titled *The Placebo Effect Trilogy* (2013), consisting of *Like Blood in Water*, *The Future of Giraffes*, and *View of Delft*.

By general consensus, Tarnawsky is considered the most radical and experimentally daring poet among the members of the New York Group. A fervent proponent of vers libre in poetry, he practices what he preaches. The author of ten books of poetry in Ukrainian, the last of which, *Ikh nemaie* (They Do Not Exist, 1999), was published in Kyiv, Tarnawsky delights in formal and genre diversity: lyrical miniatures, stanzaic poems, prose poems, and even poems constructed as questionnaires. His poetic oeuvre displays an incessant search for novel formal solutions in order to channel his vision as accurately as possible. Tarnawsky's poems evince a certain sense of mathematical precision, especially in the realm of poetic language. His images tend to be word efficient, concrete, and calculated, yet spontaneous at the same time. The poet exhibits a real talent for mixing the ordinary with the unusual, for perceiving the similarity in the dissimilar.

The initial core of the group, consisting of Boychuk and Tarnawsky, soon expanded to include Zhenia Vasylykivska and Bohdan Rubchak, the latter residing in Chicago at the time. Vasylykivska, born in 1929 in Kovel in the Volhynia region of Western Ukraine, emigrated with her family first to Austria

in 1944, and then in 1951 to the United States, settling in New York City. She delayed her poetic debut until 1959, but by the mid-1950s had become active in editing and translating, especially from French, Spanish, and English into Ukrainian, and occasionally also from Ukrainian into English. A PhD candidate in French literature at Columbia University at the time of the group's inception, she was highly respected by her male counterparts and encouraged to share her considerable literary and language expertise. After receiving her degree, she moved south and settled in Washington, DC, got married, and by the mid-1960s disengaged completely from things literary, abandoning active participation in Ukrainian émigré culture. She worked at the Library of Congress for a few years, but after she earned a Master's degree in political science she was hired by the U.S. government as a political consultant, specializing in the issues of nuclear arms.

Korotki viddali (Short Distances, 1959), Vasylykivska's only book of poetry, foregrounds the elusive, the veiled, the oneiric. Avoiding confessional directness, she filters her poetic vision through dense, opaque metaphors that are nonetheless fresh and not without a dose of surprise. The emotions of the lyrical heroine—never overexposed but always intensely felt—are imperceptibly interwoven into the voluble world of nature, a world in which poetry and nature seamlessly conflate. Slight as her poetic output is, it manages to unveil an idiolect that is both mature and youthfully promising, with a deeply felt responsibility for the written word and an almost childlike delight in the freedom of expressive possibilities.

Bohdan Rubchak's connection with the New York Group turned out to be more steady and significant, even though, unlike Vasylykivska, he did not reside in New York at the time the group was consolidating, but rather visited New York on a regular basis. Discursively and creatively, through correspondence and publications, he was very much in the center of all the major efforts undertaken by the group. Born in 1935 in Kalush, Western Ukraine, he was barely a teenager when he arrived in America in 1948, together with his mother. His early proclivity for things philological eventually resulted in a full-fledged literary and scholarly career. He graduated with a PhD in comparative literature from Rutgers University in 1977. After almost a decade of living on the East Coast, he returned to Chicago in 1973 and took a teaching position at the University of Illinois. He worked as a professor in the department of

Slavic languages and literatures until his retirement in 2005. Currently, he resides in Boonton, New Jersey.

The author of six books of poetry, Rubchak defies hasty compartmentalization. On the surface, he easily strikes us as a traditionalist, the least experimental member of the group, especially in the way he approaches poetic language and forms, but what is often missed is that behind his refined intellectualism and poetic craftsmanship lies a strikingly innovative incorporation of the implied reader into the structure of his texts. Rubchak appears to be the only poet of the New York Group who displays a penchant for a playful dialogue with the reader. His early poems clearly betray an existentialist bias and foreground the motif of dichotomy between nature and the city, but his more mature oeuvre favors intellectual, referential, and distanced or rational treatment of the subject matter over the guarded spontaneity and lyrical directness of his early poems. Interestingly, Rubchak's poetry bears no reference to American reality; by and large it basks in the universal rather than in the particular and the local.

When Patricia Kylyna published her debut collection *Trahediiia dzhmeliv* (A Tragedy of Bees, 1960), it was greeted by her colleagues as well as by the critics with much awe and enthusiasm. Born Patricia Nell Warren in 1936 in the state of Montana, she embraced alterity as a guiding force in her creative endeavors quite early on. Her Ukrainian turn came as a result of events of a personal nature. While still a student of medieval studies at the Manhattanville College in Purchase, New York, she met the young Ukrainian poet Yuriy Tarnawsky in 1956, and a year later they were married. Kylyna mastered the Ukrainian language within a remarkably short period of time and published three books of poetry, using Ukrainian as her only medium of poetic expression. Her rendezvous with Ukrainian literature spanned approximately sixteen years, from 1957 to 1973, during which time she also worked professionally as an editor for *Reader's Digest*. By the late 1960s, Kylyna's interest was increasingly shifting from writing poetry in Ukrainian to writing fiction in her native English. In 1973, she divorced Tarnawsky and declared herself a lesbian. Since then she has devoted herself exclusively to prose in her native English. The author of eight novels, the best known of which is *The Front Runner* (1974), a gay love story, she currently resides in Glendale, California, and co-owns a media company, Wildcat International.

Kylyna's poetic oeuvre conveys existentialist anguish, at the same time underscoring a surrealist sensibility. She is an intellectual poet and often incorporates Hellenic, Arabic, Spanish, and American native mythic sources, deliberately spicing up her lyricism with dramatic and narrative elements. In her mature poems, Kylyna experiments with poetic forms—lyrical miniatures, sonnets, long poems—and ventures into new themes, the most interesting of which are her poetic descriptions of Spanish cities.

The year in which Kylyna began to learn Ukrainian, 1957, also saw the arrival of Emma Andijewska from Munich, Germany, and the beginnings of her association with the group. By then she was a well-known young poet—her debut collection *Poezii* (Poems) came out in 1951—whose thirst for novelty and experiment earned wide critical acclaim. Born in 1931 in Donetsk, Andijewska is the only poet among the founding members of the group who comes from Eastern Ukraine. During the war her family managed to settle in Germany, and this is the country she has adopted as her second homeland, even though at various times she has taken temporary residence in New York City and Paris. She currently lives in Munich and, in addition to writing, devotes much of her time to painting, for which she has gained considerable international recognition.

Andijewska's almost three-year residence in New York coincided with the most dynamic period in the group's existence. It is arguable that her best poetic work comes from those years, and her knowledge of the riches and nuances of the Ukrainian language has been phenomenal and much admired by her colleagues, who many a time were criticized for insufficient mastery of the language. In 1959, Andijewska married Ivan Koshelivets, a Ukrainian émigré literary critic, and shortly after that they both returned to Munich.

An enormously prolific poet and writer, Andijewska has authored twenty-eight books of poetry, three novels, and numerous works of short fiction. The hermeticism of her poetry, at times intriguing and bewildering, invites many interpretations. This is most likely why her output has triggered a variety of responses, some positive and some negative. The poet herself never reacted in public to the criticism about her, never attempted to explicate her particular approach, and made no effort to dispel the charges of elitism. The perceived difficulty of Andijewska's poetry stems from the way she approaches poetic language. Language, to her, constitutes the material out of which a new reality

must be built; it is never simply a tool that enables her to inform or mirror something already in existence. The mystery of existence sparks the dance of words for Andijewska and simultaneously instigates the desire to go beyond them into the unknown and primordial.

Vira Vovk's affiliation with the New York Group came about comparatively late, at a point when she was already deeply involved in literary matters of the Ukrainian émigré community. By the time she became acquainted with most of the group's members in 1959, she had authored three collections of poetry and three books of short fiction. Perhaps that is why she has always guarded her independent stance and preferred to speak of her association with the group in terms of a friendly cooperation rather than in terms of outright membership. However, her creative peer exchanges with the poets of the group left a mark on the development of her poetic idiom.

Born in 1926 in Boryspil, Western Ukraine, Vira Vovk (a pen name of Vira Selianska) left her homeland while still in her teens, joining her parents as they fled the Soviet occupation of Lviv. The family settled in Dresden, Germany, where Vovk received her high school diploma and witnessed the death of her father during the relentless bombing by Allied troops in the final stages of the war with the Nazis. After the war, she completed her undergraduate education, attending universities in Tübingen and Munich, but did not stay in Germany. In 1949, she immigrated to Brazil, where she continued her studies, earning a doctorate in comparative literature at the Catholic University in Rio de Janeiro. For many years, until her retirement, she taught at the Federal University in Rio. In addition to seventeen collections of poetry, she has also published numerous books of prose, drama, and translations.

Vovk's poetry focuses on positive aspects of human reality such as friendship, charity, love, and ultimately faith in God. A religious undercurrent remains strong throughout her entire oeuvre and stands in sharp contrast to the skeptical (if not atheistic) existentialist posture of her colleagues. Thematically and formally, Vovk's poetry is dynamic, diversified, and constantly searching. Her poetic world is not insulated from surrounding reality; the mythic and the contemporary coexist and are of comparable importance. Feminine (and occasionally feminist) concerns also captivate her imagination: whether it is a woman-lover, a woman-poet, or a woman as mother, the poet identifies herself with every womanly hypostasis, at the same time ascribing to

her originary qualities, a dimension in which causality dissolves. Within the context of the New York Group's output, this particular imprint is Vovk's alone.

Critics often contend that literature is an open concept, an activity always in process, an entity that has no permanent essence or canon. While canons indeed often come and go, there are always certain junctures and events in the historical development of any literature which resist erasure no matter how open and unstable the concept of literature itself is. This book is an attempt to show that the phenomenon and poetry of the New York Group constitutes an example of one such juncture in the history of Ukrainian literature.

CHAPTER 1

Introduction: New Land, New Poetry

One can only imagine what a teenager or young adult might have felt after two weeks of sailing through the Atlantic, seeing the approaching shores of a new continent and discerning on the horizon the contours of a new city. Was it excitement, confusion, fear, or perhaps a plain bewilderment at the enormous adjustments to be made in the host country? Displacement brings uncertainty but it also opens up many new opportunities. Émigrés often look nostalgically back to the past and the country of their origin, but they can also embrace their new home and immerse themselves in the culture of the new land. The Ukrainian poets of the New York Group clearly chose the latter, quite possibly because arriving in North America at a relatively early age made it easier for them to adjust.

The poetry produced by the members of the New York Group cannot be fully appreciated without examining the group's affinities with intellectual and cultural developments in the West, including its relation to the modernist and avant-garde movements, partly transplanted from Europe and flourishing in the United States shortly after the Second World War. In fact, the interplay between modernism's perpetual thirst for newness, on the one hand, and the

avant-garde's rebellious spirit, on the other, figures quite prominently in the poetic oeuvre of the group. In the context of Ukrainian literature, the poetry of the New York Group constitutes a synthesizing, and at the same time somewhat hybrid phase in the history of Ukrainian modernism. It is hybrid in the sense that it incorporates the elements of both international "high" modernism and the historical avant-garde, mainly surrealism. However, modernism has always been an important signpost for these poets, and it would be difficult to appreciate their output without understanding what it actually meant for them. One thing is certain—at the time that they entered literature, that is, the mid-1950s, modernism was no longer the vanguard but already considered a new establishment, and New York was its capital. In the context of international modernism, the New York Group was a latecomer, but within the confines of Ukrainian literature it definitely represented a new wave of modernist aesthetics and proposed novel poetic experiments.

Discussions of literary modernism have remained very much national or regional in character, often to the point that the same term may denote completely different concepts.¹ Yet there is a general agreement that the modernist movements and the debates they generated are the products of an era characterized by internationalism and ever-increasing artistic migrations. Malcolm Bradbury and James McFarlane put it succinctly: "No single nation ever owned Modernism, even though many of the multiform movements of which it was made did have national dimensions and origins in specific regions of European culture."²

In the Anglo-American tradition, the term "modernism" is predominantly associated with the writings of such authors as Ezra Pound, T.S. Eliot, James Joyce, Virginia Woolf, Wallace Stevens, and Gertrude Stein, most of whom had their literary debuts in the period following World War I. Their works display a high degree of technical innovation, which, in terms of form and language, stands in sharp contrast to the literary production of the preceding

1 Spanish literature is especially a case in point, where *modernismo* (roughly a Hispanic variant of French Symbolism) refers to literature written in the last decade of the nineteenth century, and *postmodernismo* refers to literature written before World War I, 1905-1914. See Matei Calinescu, *Five Faces of Modernity: Modernism, Avant-Garde, Decadence, Kitsch, Postmodernism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1987), 77.

2 Malcolm Bradbury and James McFarlane, eds., *Modernism, 1890-1930* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1991), 13.

era. The concept of “high modernism,” which is often applied to the writings of the aforementioned authors, is also extended to include literary figures whose medium of expression was not necessarily English. The modernist canon also embraces such writers and poets as, for example, Thomas Mann, Franz Kafka, R. M. Rilke, Marcel Proust, and André Gide. This kind of “high,” metaphysical modernism, as Tamara Hundorova puts it, is simply missing in Ukrainian literature.³

The period around the First World War in the Continental-European tradition is characterized by the presence of a wide range of avant-garde movements rather than by a canon of individual writers. Such movements as Expressionism in Germany, Futurism in Italy and Imperial Russia, and Dada and Surrealism in Switzerland and France bring about the question of the interrelationship between modernism and the avant-garde. While there are critics who see the avant-garde as a concept subordinate to modernism or as its prominent feature,⁴ there are also those who want to draw a firm line between these two artistic approaches, seeing the avant-garde as a more radical form of artistic negation, reflected especially in its daring experimentation and in opposition to art as an institution.⁵ Within the latter frame of reference, the term

3 See her “Dekadans i postmodernism: pytannia movy,” *Svito-vyd* 1 (1995): 66.

4 Cf. Astradur Eysteinsson, *The Concept of Modernism* (Ithaca: Oxford University Press, 1990); Peter Nicholls, *Modernisms: A Literary Guide* (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1995); M. H. Abrams, *A Glossary of Literary Terms*, 4th ed. (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1981), 110.

5 The most notable proponent of such a divide is Peter Bürger. In his book *Theory of the Avant-garde*, he insists on separating the European avant-garde of the 1920s from aestheticism (and one can assume from “high” modernism as well) on the basis of the avant-garde’s goal to undermine, attack, and alter the bourgeois institution of art and its ideology of autonomy. In other words, changing artistic and literary modes of representation (something that experimentation is supposedly all about) was insufficient—one had to also attempt to reintegrate art and life to be considered truly “avant-garde.” However, as Bürger himself recognized, the avant-gardists failed to achieve their ultimate goal of dissolving the borders between life and art, and the question of aesthetic autonomy remained as much of an issue for them as for the modernists. (An excellent critique of Bürger’s work is included in Richard Murphy’s *Theorizing the Avant-Garde: Modernism, Expressionism, and the Problem of Postmodernity* [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998], 26-48.) The other critics who also advocate drawing a line between the avant-garde and modernism base their stand more on the grounds of the avant-garde’s artistic extremism and rebellious spirit rather than on issues related to the autonomy and institution of art. See, for example, Charles Russell, *Poets, Prophets, and Revolutionaries: The Literary Avant-garde from Rimbaud through Postmodernism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985); Matei Calinescu, *Five Faces of*

“modernism” is understood more along the lines of the Germanic literary tradition, in which modernism is a concept applied to the literary activities of the 1880s and 1890s, a period characterized by a proliferation of manifestoes and “modern” magazines all in the spirit of some kind of hybrid synthesis between romanticism and naturalism.⁶

The era of *fin de siècle* in the Anglo-American context corresponds to aestheticism and decadence (the writings of Oscar Wilde are the best representation of this movement in English literature) and to symbolism in France (with Charles Baudelaire as a point of origin and source of inspiration). The French symbolists (poets Mallarmé, Verlaine, Rimbaud, Laforgue) exerted an enormous influence upon the development of modernism in general, but there is no agreement on whether the movement itself is a constituent part of the modernist trends, or if it stands out as a completely separate phenomenon. René Wellek, for example, identifies symbolism with modernism and sets it off from the new avant-garde movements after 1914.⁷ The problem with this approach is that it sometimes creates paradoxical situations. In Ukrainian literature, symbolism is almost nonexistent or (at most) poorly represented prior to 1917. Hence, following Wellek’s interpretation, one could make a logical conclusion that it is impossible to speak of Ukrainian modernism before 1914. Bohdan Rubchak, for instance, consistently refers to the writers of “Moloda muza” (The Young Muse) and “Ukrains’ka khata” (The Ukrainian House) (the only two modernist groupings before World War I) as pre-symbolists. In those few instances when he does use the term “modernist” in reference to their writings, he puts it in quotation marks.⁸

Modernity; Richard Kostelanetz, ed., *The Avant-garde Tradition in Literature* (Buffalo, NY: Prometheus, 1982). Lastly, it is important to point out that there are also scholars who conflate the avant-garde and modernism, and make the latter subordinate to the former. Renato Poggioli’s concept of the avant-garde, for example, is so extensive that it really corresponds to what others designate as modernism. See his *The Theory of the Avant-garde* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1968). John Weightman’s *The Concept of the Avant-garde: Explorations in Modernism* (London: Alcove, 1973) clearly follows Poggioli’s line of conceptualization.

6 See Bradbury and McFarlane, *Modernism, 1890-1930*, 105-19.

7 See his “The Term and Concept of Symbolism in Literary History,” in *Discriminations: Further Concepts of Criticism* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1970), 119.

8 Taking into account that the members of the New York Group (and Rubchak, of course, is one of them) have always regarded themselves as the only genuine modernists in Ukrainian literature, this approach is quite symptomatic. One can certainly infer from this practice that