

Writing from Ukraine: Fiction, Poetry and Essays since 1965, ed. Mark Andryczyk (Penguin)

Two immediate surprises from this volume: firstly, how much poetry is included within its 343 pages; secondly, that Penguin have chosen to repackage, reprint and retitle a 2017 anthology. Surely they could have put together a new book? We all know how quickly work can be requested, submitted, edited, typeset and printed these days!

Never mind. If I wasn't someone who reads the small print, I'd probably never know, although the Introduction and section of review quotes still refer to the book by its previous title, *The White Chalk of Days*. What is missing is, of course, any mention of the recent Russian invasion and war, which as I write has been happening for 160 days. Perhaps that is a different book, one I'd like to see, but I suspect I am not alone in wanting to find out more about Ukraine because of the current conflict.

The prose, some of which is excerpts from longer works, is perhaps more obviously Ukrainian. The fiction is often set within the country, and characters dress, speak and act in specific ways, in settings that seem to be actual places. The essays grapple with issues such as history, culture, poverty, oppression, often from surprising angles: Taras Prokhasko's '*Selections from FM Galicia*', a series of ruminations on the nature of cities, the seasons, language, and much more, could be non-fiction or fiction, but is perceptive, insightful and engaging. Yuri Andrukhovych offers up a brief history of Prypiat, a city which only existed from 1970-1986, when it died from 'Acute Radiation Syndrome', but the piece is also a travelogue and philosophical discourse. Who can be held accountable? What can be done? Nothing it seems...

Elsewhere things get more fantastical and perhaps more 'Westernized'. Andrey Kurkov's prose excerpt is about a KGB captain who arranges for the hand of Jimi Hendrix to be brought to L'viv so it can be buried in the Lychakiv Cemetery, whilst Yuri Vynnychuk's excerpts '*From Spring Games In Summer Gardens*' swim 'along the waves of daydreams', sometimes reminiscent of Virginia Woolf in their lucid brevity. Viktor Neborak was part of Bu-Ba-Bu performance group, and some of his poems seem rooted in that world:

It rises up like a head,
the lopped-off head of a vagrant.
It utters words from the beyond
once, twice, and for the third time:
I AM THE FLYING HEAD!
[...]
Are you devouring TV soaps?
You gaze at dragons behind the glass!
[...]
I AM THE FLYING HEAD!
Remember you can't hide anywhere!

[...]
I AM THE FLYING HEAD!
I AM THE HE AD FLY
ING HE AD I
INGHEA I AM
AYO AY O
(*From Genesis of the Flying Head*)

—Paint a BABE naked BLUE
with lips the day looks BA
BU in dithyramBs BU taBOO
put your teeth in BUBABU
(from 'A Drum-Tympanum')

Elsewhere, Marjana Savka writes about how 'books we've never read are opening for us' and listens to Sonny Rollins, the 'Lord of Jazz'; Andriy Bondar ponders how Ukrainian he looks and takes advice from Robbie Williams; Sylvia Plath turns up in Marjana Savka's 'Who, Marlene, Who?'; and Serhiy Zhadan serenades 'Alcohol' in the guise of a lover, or vice versa.

Other poems seem more mainstream, taking love, loss, separation and distance, family and relationships as their subject. Ivan Malkovych spends 'An Evening with Great-Grandma', whilst Bondar ponders the fact he has 'very good genes' and that his 'great-great-grandfather lived to be 119 and died with dignity / simply walked into the house and died'. Lyuba Yakimchuk considers her 'Grandmother's Fairy Tale' and 'The Book of Angels', but also takes her clothes off ready to make love before learning to also shed her family's expectations and judgement:

and now we wear nothing at all
such people are called naked
(from 'such people are called naked')

The (original) Introduction offers context for the anthology, which arose out of the Contemporary Ukrainian Literature Series of events, and came to a close in 2014 due to a war with Russia. It also introduces the 15 writers selected, whilst the new Preface re-contextualises the book in the light of more recent events. Throughout the book there are helpful footnotes, and each author gets an introductory page before their work.

If there is little here to suggest that Postmodernist writing has taken root in Ukraine, and little evidence of textual and linguistic experiment, it is nevertheless an intriguing and informative anthology with plenty of different styles of work on offer. Whilst I feel Lloyd's Schwartz's claim on the back cover that this is an 'act of moral generosity' is somewhat hyperbolic, it is nevertheless deserving of your attention and time.

Rupert Loydell