Deconstructing the Empire, Remapping the Post-Soviet Identity: Contemporary Russian and Ukrainian Literary Travelogue (on the material of Victor Erofeev’s and Yurii Andrukhovych’s texts)

Юля Ильчук

Деконструкція імперії, картографія пострадянської ідентичності: сучасний російський та український літературний Travellog (за матеріалами прози Віктора Єрофеєва та Юрія Андрюховича)

У статті аналізується проблема пострадянської ідентичності у текстах сучасних російського й українського авторів. Обидва письменника мають спільний погляд на кризу пострадянської ідентичності та креативно деконструюють панівні національні мафі — радянські, імперські та націоналістичні. Подорожі, зображенні в прозі Єрофеєва та Андрюховича, розвідують невпинне поняття «дому» у екзистенційному значенні слова та орієнтується топологію національної ідентичності у нових пострадянських реаліях, позбавлених всіляких ориентирів.

Deconstruction of the empire and redefinition of post-Soviet identity have become the most popular topics in contemporary Russian and Ukrainian literature. With the collapse of the communist ideology and the national revival on the early 1990s post-Soviet space, the issue of national identity received a revision and redefinition1, bringing new life to the forgotten genre of literary travelogue. From the eighteenth century onward, Russian culture treated travel writing as a nation-building enterprise. In particular, Russian romantic writers produced a number of fascinating travel accounts and literary travelogues that established a geographically based notion of Russian national identity.2 Travel accounts of journeys to Europe and the imperial borderlands helped to negotiate Russianness through travelers’ encounters with the foreign as well as with domestic “Others.” Unlike the classical examples of the Russian literary journey (Fonvizin, Karamzin, Turgenev, Dostoevsky, etc.), the contemporary post-Soviet travelogue is less involved in the construction of foreign and domestic “Others,” but is more subject-oriented, i.e. reveals an urgent desire of the post-Soviet subject to solve the inner conflict of his/her lost identity. This study explores the issue of post-Soviet identity as it emerges in the literary travel writings of the two prominent contemporary Russian and Ukrainian authors — Victor Erofeev and Yurii Andrukhovych. The two writers not only share a common view on the post-Soviet identity crisis but are also creatively engaged in irreverent and playful deconstruction of the all-pervasive Soviet and Russian national mythologies, depriving the audience of any firm ground for the stable construction of Russian and Ukrainian post-Soviet identities. The venture depicted in Erofeev’s and Andrukhovych’s literary texts presents an exploration of the elusive notions of home and the topology of national
identity in the new historical circumstances. Striving to find the place for the post-Soviet Russian in the global world, Erofeev formulates the problem in terms of spatial disorientation: “From Moscow I can go either to Asia, or to Europe, i.e. it is clear to where I am going. It is unclear from where” (Piat’ rek zhizni (Five rivers of life) (1998)). In his attempt to map the post-Soviet Ukrainian identity, Andrukhovych also feels confused: “Where am I?” (Dezorientatsiia na mistsevosti (Disorientation as to Place), 1999).

Victor Erofeev: In Quest of the Fifth River

Victor Erofeev’s innovative but disturbing prose fiction draws inspiration from both the Russian paradoxical (Fyodor Dostoevsky, Nikolai Berdiaev, and Vasili Rozanov) and French existentialist traditions (Albert Camus and Jean-Paul Sartre). His literary style, based on an eclectic mixture of slang, obscenities, and poetic formulations and his thematic focus on acts of grotesque sexuality and violence expand postmodernist poetics and provoke the conventional sensibilities of his Russian audience. His novel Piat’rek zhizni offers a disquieting glimpse into the phantasmagoric imagination of a post-Soviet intellectual. It combines the elements of several genres: a picaresque novel, a travelogue, and a journey of discovery of the eternal formula of being. The protagonist — an unnamed Russian superman — travels along the five world rivers (Volga, Rhine, Ganges, Mississippi, and Niger), debunking Western and Russian cultural stereotypes about each other and plunging into the post-national archetypes of human existence.

Despite the seeming innovativeness of the genre (a “novel-river”), Erofeev’s travel novel closely correlates to the conventions of a classical Russian travelogue. The writer-travelers in the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries wanted not so much to share their travel experiences in their travel accounts as to establish themselves as sophisticated and cosmopolitan gentlemen. The subversion of the Grand Tour enabled the Russian writer-travelers to make chauvinistic statements about Russian national identity and to become critical observers of Europe. Imitating the conversational manner of the traditional travelogue, Erofeev’s narrator-traveler also engages with his fellow travelers — the German mistress Gabi, a nameless captain (an organizer of the bloody mass carnage), the captain’s assistant (“a dark-haired devil”), and a Russian woman, Lora Pavlova — in long conversations about cultural landscapes they observe and about Russian stereotypes about Others, which are often expressed with Erofeev’s distinctive humor and irony. With his two female companions, the protagonist shares not only conversations about the mysterious Russian soul but also in uncontrollable sexual orgies, which make the novel a variation of the genre “romance on the road.” In this context, Erofeev’s travelogue can be treated as a refutation of the father and as abandonment and disavowal of certain bonds which appear all-constraining. This produces a hedonist ethos, making the travel a highly licentious wandering.

The journey in Erofeev’s novel is structured around a deliberate derision of the popular nationalist myth about Russians’ spiritual superiority. The protagonist envisions himself as a new Messiah and his voyage as an Advent, which is travestied later in the novel. Positioning himself as the antichrist, the protagonist rapes and murders innocent Europeans, and then “baptizes” the survivors in the blood of the dead. This violence, to use Michel Foucault’s
definition, refers to a cultural ideology that disregards the body and suppresses its desires and needs in the sublimation of the body’s energy to the sovereignty of the Law, the political power, the dominant ideology and the utopian horizon of the promised paradise. In the protagonist’s acts of uncontrolled violence, Erofeev discloses the Soviet totalitarian regime with its political oppression, racist and nationalistic ideology, imperialist politics and chauvinism. The loss of a sense of existential boundaries as a norm of historical being, the identification of death with a performance, and finally the transformation of death into a game — all of these describe the state in which the subject finds coalescence with a totalitarian society.

In Piat’ rek zhizni, rivers epitomize people’s historical destiny and national character. Thus, the Volga is “the concrete of the Russian myth of Russia’s century-long suffering: not a river, but a motorway of tears.” In tune with the romantic idea of correlation between national mentality and geography, Erofeev accounts for Russia’s ambivalent positioning between Europe and Asia with the geographical fact that the Volga, unlike all other rivers in the world, does not flow to the ocean but is stuck in the Caspian Sea (which is classed as the world’s largest lake). That the main Russian river “pours all Orthodox energy in the Islamic settling tank [the Caspian Sea — Yu.I.]” is the cause of Russia’s cursed destiny. In the cruise on the Volga, the protagonist bloodily murders his German mistress, avenging his own grandparents’ death in World War II. The journey on the second river, the Rhine, highlights Europe’s obsession with bourgeois comfort and the appearance of morality. Beneath the surface, however, Europe does not adhere to the same ethical standards it seeks to impose on Russia. Like Dostoevsky, who, as a staunch Slavophile, stamped the consumerism of Western Europeans in his Zimnie zametki, Erofeev also debunks the obsession of the Europeans with private property, which he plays out in the grammatical conundrum:

Europe consists of the verb to have, of its conjugation and aspeotual forms... Switzerland is the verb to have in its natural form... It crushed to be under the pressure of to have... Germany is I need to have. Historically-hysterically but with an excusatory undertone, damn it, this is how it’s happened, it is my fate: I am forced to but I have to have... France is do I have if I have?... Holland: have conscience to have... The Russian never has it..., even brother Slavs, Ukrainians and Belarusians, have it (maiut). The Russian is always to be (est’) (pp. 385–387).

The farther from home, the more Erofeev’s novel obtains the structure of a colonial myth in which the traveler emerges as a usurper, conquer, and enslaver of the aboriginal people as in the best traditions of colonial travel writing. On the Rhine, the protagonist under the mask of the Nazi slaughters old ladies and in their blood performs a ritual “christening of Europe.” Then, he prosecutes a lawyer and his wife from Cologne. The trial gradually grows into the usurpation of Berlin and Paris. The narrative impulse of identification in this chapter is one of empowerment and domination. In such a way, the protagonist mocks the secret intention of Russia in relation to the West, formulated in a popular nationalist sentiment: Europe unconsciously fears Russia because it is stronger and one day Russia will devour Europe. If Russia is the subconscious of Europe, according to Erofeev, India serves as the subconscious of Russia: even the geographic shape of India looks like the udder of Russia to which its subconscious trickles down. The third river, the Ganges, offers a route
to a spiritual and creative revival for Russia: “Russia conceives of itself as an unknowable entity — India realizes itself as an enigma.” Traveling on the fourth river, the Mississippi, is a senseless undertaking from the protagonist’s point of view because of the essential sameness of American cities. Americans live in a state of existential torpor, devoid of irony, expressiveness, or generosity of spirit. The final river, the Niger, is a true gateway into the land of the Other. Erofeev’s traveler indulges in a stereotypical discourse about African backwardness, thereby exposing the racism of Russians.

The “third world” (India and Africa) emerges as the center of the Universe in the novel. The tone of the narration changes in the journey on the Ganges and Niger. The protagonist’s travel notes become more profound and detailed and less ironic towards the people. On the fifth river, the Niger, the protagonist arrives at his final destination — his ontological home. The Niger serves as a metaphor for spiritual insight: “Everyone has their own fifth river ... If you find it, you won’t be sorry.” Passing through a series of initiations in Africa, which signifies the symbolic crossing between the cultures, the protagonist is released from his former prejudices of the Russian nationalist ideology. The journey in the “third world” has a healing effect on his soul, and the protagonist comes to understand that Western civilization desperately wallows in conventionalities, its people having become too dependent on those social roles they ascribe to themselves. Thus, moving away from the center of the Russian and Western myths towards the world’s periphery (India and Africa), Erofeev subverts the West/East dichotomy. By the end of his journey, the protagonist, according to the laws of the genre, is enlightened and completes his journey with a sense of an appreciation of his own culture and people (“After all these rivers, I came to treat Russians more leniently. They also have something alive in their souls.”)

Yurii Andrukhovych’s Exercises in “Geopoetics” and “Cosmopolitics”

Like Victor Erofeev in the late 1990s, Yurii Andrukhovych also engages in an artistic deconstruction of the Soviet empire in his early novels, Moskoviada (The Moskoviada) (1993)⁹ and Pervexzia (Perversion) (1996)¹⁰. In these texts, the empire emerges in its splendor and misery through the defamiliarizing gaze of a Ukrainian outsider. Moskoviada presents the post-colonial adventure of the protagonist, a Ukrainian poet named Otto von F., in the capital of the agonizing Soviet Empire right before the putsch of 1991. Organized as the protagonist’s inner monologue, the narrative follows his day-long odyssey through the circles and undergounds of Moscow, an illusory ghost city. Bearing a striking similarity to Andrukhovych’s own biography¹¹, the novel opens with a satirical description of the dormitory where he temporarily resides. In a miserable coexistence of the various national minorities (natsmenschyny) gathered from all over the empire in the dorm, the writers mocks a popular Soviet myth of “great friendship between the people.” The protagonist’s Ukrainian identity is revealed not only in his direct anti-imperialist statements¹², but also in his literary tastes (taken primarily from the examples of European literature) and his own literary enterprise — the Ukrainian translation project of Rilke’s Sonnets to Orpheus — emphasizing the compatibility of Ukrainian literature with Western European. The two other inhabitants, Russian poets Ye泽hevkin and Palkin, associated with the chauvinist journals Nash sovremennik and Molodaia gvardiia, become
a mouthpiece of the Russian imperialist ideology: “Why is it, tell me, oh the Baltic,/That you hate Holy Rus’ so much?/Freeze, Estonian Tremble, Lithuania!/You are about to see the Russian prick!” “But for some reason,” the narrator says, “the word prick is crossed out, replaced with sword, which is crossed out as well, substituted by tank” (pp. 122–123). The culmination of the late Soviet imperialist apotheosis is expressed in the scene at the conference hall, where the Russian nationalists (which include black-shirted fascists, monarchists, and Stalinists) are gathered wearing masks and imitating the voices of the epochal historical personas: Ivan the Terrible, Catherine II, Lenin, Dzerzhinskii. They drink to a “united and indivisible Russia”, trying to reinforce the imperial ideology. Otto is invited to the event by accident; the organizers took him for a loyal Ukrainian representative. One of his fellow Russian poets explains Otto the reason for the chaos in Russia — a loss of “Slavic brotherhood.” Being rather grotesque caricatures, these characters, however, coalesce with a much more ominous power, the Soviet KGB, represented by Sashko, a KGB officer, who torments the protagonist throughout the novel. Like the adventure in Erofeev’s novel, the adventure in Moskoviada draws close to the allegorical surreal space. The places Otto passes through, like the circles of Dante’s hell, grow more and more dark and ominous. First, the protagonist appears in the filthy dorm; then he proceeds to the beer hall where he follows several of his acquaintances, then makes a frustrated visit to his beloved Galia. Chasing after the mugger, Otto finds himself in the realm of Moscow’s secret underground, populated by KGB agents and mutant rats. Finally, Otto is arrested and locked in a cage. In this secret underworld, the protagonist learns how deeply the threads of surveillance pervaded the empire, when even his beloved Galia appears there with orders to kill him. In the end, Otto receives a bullet in the head from Sashko, but survives and manages to escape in the last train to Kyiv. Moskoviada, therefore, depicts an archetypal “journey home:”

...I am not running off, but returning [home — Yu. I.]. Angry, devastated, and, over and above, with a bullet in my temple. Whom am I, damn it, needed? I do not know. I only know that now almost all of us are like this. We are only left with the most persuasive hope, bequeathed to us by the glorious ancestors — things will be somehow (“iakos’ to vono bude”). The main thing is to survive till tomorrow. To last out till the station Kyiv... (p. 246).

In the final scene, Andrukhovych does not simply bear witness to the decline and fall of the empire, but explores the contradictory nature of the Ukrainian post-colonial subject who acquires its own power under the destroyed imperial body.

Andrukhovych’s next novel, Pervhazi, further explores the quest of the Ukrainian intellectual for his place in a larger cultural order through the encounter with the European “Other.” Like Moskoviada, Pervhazi follows its protagonist, Stakh Perfets’kyi, also a Ukrainian writer, through a journey — this time to Venice, where he is invited to participate in an international conference entitled “The Post-Carnival Absurdity of the World: What is On the Horizon?” His travels take him through the Eastern Europe and Germany in search of adventure, which turns out to be a quest for his own identity. The author’s sarcasm now is reserved for the West, which persists in its ignorance of and disinterest in Ukraine and its culture (the invitation letter and the program of the conference misspell Ukraine as
“Ukraina,” and “Ukraiia;” the list of suggested topics includes Ukrainian nuclear arms, a cholera epidemic, or “your writers,” such as “Dostoevsky, Gorky, Bulgakov, Sakharov and others”). In order to familiarize the European scholars with the Ukrainian culture, Perfets’kyi dupes them by patching together mythical and real characters and facts of Ukraine’s history in a sort of forgery: thus, the quasi-mythical figure of Cossack Mamai becomes Cossack Jamaica; the historical Yaroslav Os’mynysl, whose name renders in Ukrainian as “of eight senses,” turns into Yaroslav Os’mynih (“of eight legs,” also the Ukrainian word for “octopus”) (pp. 112–113). While mocking Europeans’ stereotypical perception of Ukraine as exotic, he accomplishes his mission of post-colonial “cultural invasion”, which intends to renovate the fragmented post-modernist Europe with the vital Ukrainian spirit. As Tamara Hundorova observes, in Perverziia, Andrukhovych has created a “polymorphous” hero, whose elusive essence marks the “absence of any definite identity” (p. 111). The masquerade of the roles and identities that the protagonist performs in the novel is due to the absence of a strong and powerful center as well as a definite idea of home. Therefore, Perfets’kyi’s mysterious disappearance at the end of the novel is interpreted within the novel as an escape, or a symbolic suicide — in other words, as a non-arrival at home.

If in his early novels Andrukhovych deals with the journey on the thematic level, in his essays written in the 2000s and the recent novel Leksykon intymnykh mist: Dovil’nyi posibnyk z geopoetyky ta kosmopolityky (A Lexicon of Intimate Cities: an Arbitrary Manual in Geopoetics and Cosmopolitics) (2011) he exploits the genre of travel writing in corpore and provide a tentative solution to the problem raised earlier in Moscoviada and Perverziia — “East” (represented by Russian and Soviet empires) or “West”? This determinative for Ukraine opposition prompts the writer to develop the concept of (East)-Central European identity. First, his collection of the essays, titled Dezorientatsiia na mistsevosti, depicts a nostalgic journey in the past of Andrukhovych’s home region of Halychyna and creates a topography of the Ukrainian identity, inscribing it in the space of the imaginative community called Central Europe. The location of Halychyna, geographically in the center of Europe but culturally at its periphery, has determined the self-identification of its people, Western Ukrainians. A former part of the Austro-Hungarian province of Galicia, Halychyna has been always a contact zone for intercultural dialogue. The Habsburg period of its history created a productive superimposition of various historical, cultural and multiethnic spaces. Without acknowledging the inequalities and hierarchies of Habsburg Galicia’s social structure, the writer favorably compares the increase in civic rights during the ruling Austrian dynasty with the far more oppressive and rigid social order of the neighboring Russian Empire. In reality, there was nothing resembling a “harmonic coexistence” of many nations in Halychyna. The demise of the Austro-Hungarian Empire immediately exposed the tensions between its former subjects and gave birth to the wave of Ukrainian nationalism that has lasted to this day. As the result, the Ukrainians of Halychyna swiftly realized their political and cultural separateness from the other nations and developed an awareness of being different, i.e. Europeans, in the newly formed Soviet Ukraine. Andrukhovych articulates the ambivalent position of Halychyna within Ukraine as viewed from the perspective of other Ukrainian regions: “From the perspective of Polissia, for example, Galicia does
not exist. Or, to be exact, it does, but this fact is meaningless. Galicia is non-Ukraine; it is some kind of geographic add-on, a Polish hallucination” (p. 118). However, only mountainous Halychyna managed to preserve some relics of identity; whereas the steppe zones of Ukraine have always been open to Asian despotism and have lacked any formative principles for identity formation:

Form, or rather the lack of it — that is the name of all our misfortunes... Our total destruction of nature betrays our incapacity to cope with the landscape and results in our destroying ourselves. How and why did this happen? Against a background of strident formlessness we labor at a new myth, shouting about our Europeanness, marshaling strange racial, anthropological and geographical arguments, reaching back to the Trypillians, the agricultural Scythians, to pagan times or ... to Christianity. We point to the Easter egg and the dough horse. Yes, we used to have it, that sense of form. Long ago. Perhaps the reason lies in our vulnerability to the East? (pp. 39–40).

Fully realizing that his Galician project is nothing but nostalgic mythmaking, Andrukhovych nevertheless attempts to restore a nonexistent social and political order that granted the Galician ethnic community its collective “Central European” identity. This identity opposes associating it with the “East European” one, being synonymous for many Western Ukrainians with the Russian/Soviet mentality. Because the nostalgic yearns for continuity in a fragmented world, he attempts to obliterate conventional interpretations of history and turn it into a private mythology. As Svetlana Boym has noted in her monograph *Future of Nostalgia*, nostalgia can have some dangerous effects; it may confuse the actual home with an imaginary one.

Writing from the position of a Western Ukrainian writer, Andrukhovych articulates the historical, geographical, and cultural relations which are now lost but can be restored in the form of “small narratives” (memory of his grandparents, old maps and relics of classical architecture). The writer must become a restorer of the “fragments of lost languages, writing systems, dialects, burnt manuscripts” that left their traces in Galician towns (p. 122). One has no choice but to put together the fragments that constitute this place as a cultural whole. Andrukhovych’s own cultural identity, like that of Central Europe, emerges in fragments of its various pasts — Habsburg, Soviet, and post-Cold War — in which the Soviet part overbalances the other two:

my identity may be torn into pieces and cut off from itself. You see, a large part of me was left there, on the other side of this newly painted curtain; now I can only fiercely scratch against it with my nails... I am cut off from Prague, Budapest, Krakow, soon I will be cut off from the Danube, the Balkans and Transylvania... I consider myself a resident of East Central Europe, that is a European, but a different one, with the experience quite distinct from what is usually regarded as European experience. Mine is that of an ‘occupied European’; I mean here not only the tanks in Prague in 1968, although them too... [East Central Europe] is a pole on the outskirts of the town of Rakhiv in the Carpathians, a geographical fiction discovered back in the days of the Austro-Hungarian geometricians... It is a territory with many ruins... It is moveable territory that drifts eastward. It is my last territory... It is the historically much closer arena of totalitarian communist
rule. That is, fragments indeed, and indeed of an empire, but different - the western ones of the Russian/Soviet empire... here Austria is basically absent..., but the former GDR is present, and not only in connection with the 1953 workers’ uprising ("Me, the Mirror, and I").

Continuing his exploration (or, rather, restoration) of a Central European identity, Andrukhovych narrows it down in his other essay “Tsentr’no-skhidna revizii” (The Central-Eastern revision) the second half of the book Moia Evropa (My Europe) (2001) written jointly with the Polish writer Andrzej Stasiuk. Andrukhovych locates his “Central Europe” in the liminal space between “Russians” and “Germans”: “a Central European anxiety balances between two disasters: Germans are coming and Russians are coming. A Central European death is the death either in prison, or in camp, but always en masse... A Central European journey is an escape. But from where to where? From Russians to Germans? Or from Germans to Russians? Thanks God, there also exists America for such cases” (p. 101). The Soviet regime had silenced all the tragic stories of displacement, murder, famine and the suffering of Central Europeans in general and Western Ukrainians in particular, and only through the narration of them can the poet reconnect with his dead ancestors and restore his lost sense of belonging and identity. Andrukhovych’s task here is to overcome an inherited apocalyptic understanding of time, which all “representatives of unhappy communities” share with each other, endowing them with the common Central European identity (p. 136). In the framework of such understanding of the category of time, the future looks like “the end of the world, the ultimate catastrophe, the final settling of the score, for example, with evil, before some other, already nonhuman, higher being” (p. 143). By depriving Halychyna of its unique historical experience, the narrator develops a sense of the collective identity shared with other Central European nations who suffered similar atrocities throughout the 20th century. The narrator connects the tragic fates of many Galician Ukrainians to the experience of the other Central Europeans by repeating his grandfather’s last words: “I like these last words of him the most. I repeat them every time I feel attacked. They bring me a relief, I feel Somebody Bigger backing me up... It is almost like wearing a silver ring — a protective ring that connects us, we’re not alone” (p. 152). This discursive ability to change the meaning of a tragic phrase can reshape the hopeless trajectory of the history of lost Central European communities.

The process of demarcating one’s own borders is as important for identity formation as crossing them. In Moia Evropa, crossing the Danube, the Western border of Central Europe, signifies the post-colonial subject’s entering the New World, i.e. America. The mystic image of the Danube as a river beyond which another, happy, world exists traces its origin back to Ukrainian folklore, in which it signified the desire of the archetypal hero to cognize himself by traveling to the other world. As Erofeev’s fifth river conceals an eternal sense of being, Andrukhovych’s Danube has the power to “attract” human souls, like the ocean does: “there is everything behind its close proximity: time, eternity, history, mythology, we are themselves.”

Interrogating the post-Soviet imperial past and remapping the symbolic space of Europe have constituted a crucial part of Andrukhovych’s literary works in the early 2000s.
If in the essays analyzed above, the narrator emerges more like an archaeologist and a restorer of a lost Ukrainian identity, in his recent novel-encyclopedia, *Leksykon intymnykh mist*: *Dovil’nyi posibnyk z geo poetyky ta kosmopolityky*, he attempts to be a cartographer and to find the place of post-Soviet Ukraine in Europe. Andrukhovych’s *Leksykon* fictionalizes his actual travel impressions from 1966 to the 2000s and presents them in an unusual-to-the-travelogue alphabetical order, destroying the linear chronological structure of the narrative. Only the stable nature of the alphabet, in the writer’s opinion, can “establish sequence and order, an internal (and external) order of the writing.” The author has already practiced his hand in designing the “reference” material — *A Glossary of Mythological Elements of Ukrainian Culture* (in the late 1980s during his participation in Bu-Ba-Bu) and an encyclopedia, *A Concise Ukrainian Encyclopedia of Contemporary Literature* (1998). This time, the form of *Leksykon* offers a new unique feature — to be a “dictionary in a broad sense,” “a manual in a specialized field of auto-geo-biography.” The combination of “geo” and “bio,” according to the author, is an “attempt to experience the geography and biography of human existence as a single and undivided experience,” thereby “mixing them in such a way so that it would be impossible to discern where one ends and the other begins.” While superimposing “autobiography” on “geography,” Andrukhovych creatively violates the fundamental principle of the genre: in a traditional travelogue, the narrative voice of the author-narrator places the events of his travel experience in the past while showing the potential for a future, which is revealed in the temporal progression of the journey and which can never be synonymous with the older self. The dividing line between fact and fiction is elusive in Andrukhovych’s *Leksykon*. The testimony of recognizable eyewitnesses is deconstructed into an illusion of a present embedded in a commentary that exceeds and transgresses the criteria of authenticity.

Still centered round the figure of the traveler (Andrukhovych puts “auto” in front of “geo” and “bio”), the “autogeobiography” shifts the emphasis to the inner development of the cities themselves. The cities function as intimate, “almost erogenous” zones, the points of the traveler’s destination as well as sources of his artistic inspiration. They acquire the “body” and all physiological problems related to it; for example, the history of Prypiat’ (the city X in *Leksykon*) is described in terms of the medical history of an adolescent (the city existed only for 16 years, from 1970 to 1986) who “instead of a passport received a death certificate. In the diagnosis they wrote ‘radiation sickness’” (p. 181).

The random selection of 111 cities in *Leksykon*, presented to the public on 11.11.2011 for the price of 111 UAH, demonstrates the playful postmodernist nature of the enterprise rather than the authorial intention of authenticity. Thus, the unremarkable Swiss town Aarau opens the novel not because of the narrator’s unforgettable memories about it, but because of its rare spelling (double A at the beginning of the word). For pragmatic reasons (to compensate for the lack of interest in Eastern Ukraine of which Andrukhovych has been frequently accused), the author included Enakievo, a hometown of the current president of Ukraine, Victor Yanukovych, a place which is insignificant to the author’s own life journey, although quite significant to modern Ukrainian history. *Leksykon* includes only 24 Ukrainian cities out of 111 in total, focusing mostly on the narrator’s journey in Europe.
Aarau (Switzerland) — Alupka (Ukraine) — Antwerpen (Belgium) — Augsburg (Germany) — Athens (Greece) — Basel (Switzerland) — Bayreuth (Germany) — Balaklava (Ukraine) — Barcelona (Spain) — Belgrade (Serbia) — Berlin (Germany) — Berne (Switzerland) — Brussels (Belgium) — Budapest (Hungary) — Bucharest (Romania) — Warsaw (Poland) — Venice (Italy) — Vienne (Austria) — Vilnius (Lithuania) — Vinnytsia (Ukraine) — Wroclaw (Poland) — Heidelberg (Germany) — Haisyn (Ukraine) — Hamburg (Germany) — Gdansk (Poland) — Gothenburg (Sweden) — Graz (Austria) — Guadalajara (Mexico) — Denver (USA) — Detroit (USA) — Dnipropetrov’sk (Ukraine) — Drohobych (Ukraine) — Dusseldorf (Germany) — Essen (Germany) — Yenakiieve (Ukraine) — Jerusalem (Israel) — Geneva (Switzerland) — Salzburg (Austria) — Zaporizhzhia (Ukraine) — Zolotyi Potik (Ukraine) — Istad (Norway) — Izmır (Turkey) — Izaclas (Ukraine) — Iks (Chornobyl, Ukraine) — Igla (Czech Republic) — New York (USA) — Kaliningrad (Russia) — Kędzierzyn-Koźle (Poland) — Cologne (Germany) — Kyiv (Ukraine) — Chisinau (Moldova) — Konstanz (Germany) — Krakow (Poland) — Leningrad (Russia) — Linz (Austria) — Lisbon (Portugal) — Lausanne (Switzerland) — London (UK) — Lviv (Ukraine) — Lublin (Poland) — Leipzig (Germany) — Mainz (Germany) — Malbork (Poland) — Marburg (Germany) — Minsk (Belarus) — Moscow (Russia) — Munich (Germany) — Utrecht (Netherlands) — Nowy Sacz (Poland) — Nürnberg (Germany) — Odesa (Ukraine) — Olomouc (Czech Republic) — Osnabrück (Germany) — Ostroh (Ukraine) — Palermo (Italy) — Paris (France) — Passau (Germany) — Pittsburgh (USA) — Poltava (Ukraine) — Prague (Czech Republic) — Ravenna (Italy) — Regensburg (Germany) — Riga (Latvia) — Rome (Italy) — Rodos (Greece) — San Giovanni Valdarno (Italy) — San Francisco (USA) — Sevastopol (Ukraine) — Istanbul (Turkey) — Stockholm (Sweden) — Strasbourg (France) — Tallinn (Estonia) — Temopil (Ukraine) — Toronto (Canada) — Uzhhorod (Ukraine) — Urbino (Italy) — Philadelphia (USA) — Florence (Italy) — Frankfurt am Mein (Germany) — Frankfurt (Oder) (Germany) — Kharkiv (Ukraine) — Khust (Ukraine) — Zug (Switzerland) — Tsurupins’k (Ukraine) — Zurich (Switzerland) — Chernivtsi (Ukraine) — Chicago (USA) — Stuttgart (Germany) — Szczecin (Poland) — Uteborg (Germany) — Yalta (Ukraine)

The alphabetical principle of the travel notes violates not only the spatial logic (thus, Ukrainian Alupka appears right after Swiss Aarau, American Detroit next to Ukrainian Dnipropetrov’sk, and American Chicago follows Ukrainian Chernivtsi) but also the temporal (the lexicon begins with the travel record of 2006 and ends in 1966). The linear structure of the travel writing is deconstructed, corresponding to the complex view of the decentered state of the post-imperial, post-national world. At the same time, the alphabetical order restores historical justice: the former European city Lwow (“Lviv” in Ukrainian transliteration) stands next to German “Leipzig;” post-Soviet Ukrainian “Kyiv” next to the post-Soviet Moldovan “Kysyhniv” (Chisinau), and still-Soviet “Minsk” next to the equally Soviet “Moscow.” As a true postmodernist writer, Andrukhovyč offers innumerable ways of reading his Leksykon: by an alphabetical survey of the cities or rivers, or in chronological order of his visits, or in geographical order of the cities moving westward (in which case San Francisco would end the book) or eastward (in which case Moscow would become his last destination point), or in alphabetical order according to the names of the countries in which the cities are located, or by earthquakes, or by seasons, or by landscapes, etc.
All these ways of reading, as the narrator believes, can only reinforce the hidden unity that any European, either Western or Eastern, should feel because of the “dunais’ko-chornomors’ka” (Danubian-Black-Sea) unity of Europe, each drop of whose rivers belong to this region (with Romania “having the most of these drops” p. 59). The same can be said about the Carpathian unity: 5 percent of the Czech Republic, 10 percent of Poland and Ukraine, 20 percent of Hungary, and 60 percent of Romania consists of the Carpathians: “it seems as if the mountains separate us. But for me they unite us... Everything that divides us can also unify. We just are not used to looking at things in this way” (p. 60). This is precisely the traveler’s task: to find, in a patchwork of discontinuous interests and multi-vector politics, points of arrival. Surprisingly, it is not manmade constructions, such as bridges, but natural “dividers,” such as mountains and rivers, that better establish connections among Europeans. Thus, the historically multilingual Swiss nation is unified by the fact that the “Rhine begins in the Swiss Alps where half of the population speaks Italian, the other half — Rhaeto–Romance. If some Swiss throws an empty bottle in the Switzerland water of Rhine, in eighty hours some other Dutch will catch it in his part of the river” (p. 26).

Porosity, the diffusion of borders, is presented as having a positive effect on a formerly totalitarian Soviet Ukraine. The traveler has documented the process of opening the borders long before 1991 (for example, the smuggling of Western European music such as sympho-
rock, punk-rock, heavy metal, etc. to the Soviet Union significantly contributed to its breakdown). As the result of the inevitable interpenetration of spaces and diffusion of borders in the global world, too many cities positioned themselves as being located in-between “East” and “West.” Warsaw, Berlin, Vilnius, Lviv, Istanbul, Vienna, Prague, Frankfurt-am-Order, and even Kaliningrad (which the author sarcastically calls the “European gate of Russia”) — “it seems that being between East and West is much more attractive than Eastern or even Western location per se. Wait a while longer and you’ll see how Beijing and Tokyo will announce themselves cities located between East and West” (p. 65). The example of a true “in-between” city is Polish Wroclaw, in which “orientalization of the West and westernization of the East” occur (“‘Europe’ hates ‘Ukraine.’ ‘Ukraine’ hates ‘Europe.’ But when they meet somewhere, they meet in Wroclaw”). This hybridization of the world, according to Homi Bhabha, demonstrates that a contingent, borderline experience privileges the liminal and undermines pure, homogeneous cultures in favor of new cultural meaning. As a variation of “in-betweenness,” the cities in the “middle” (with Warsaw and Venice being located amid Europe (Western and Eastern) and the Old World, respectively) and “cities-crossroads” (with Lviv straddling between the Baltic and Black Seas and between various trade routes) populate Andrukhovych’s “mental” map of Europe. Nevertheless, being in-between acquires different connotations throughout Lexicon, depending on the part of the world: positive for the cities located in the middle of Central Europe and sarcastic for the cities located in the “middle of nowhere” in the U.S. For example, the middle location of Pittsburgh signifies “an intriguing nikudymenaledgezhist” (“non-belonging-to-anywhere”).

Not only spatial but also temporal “in-betweenness” is important for the post-Soviet traveler. The blending of different pasts has imprinted on the profile of many Ukrainian cities. In this context, Trans-Carpathian Drohobych presents an interesting site of the “ec-
umenism of memory:” recently the city officials mounted monuments to Yuriy Drohobych (a founder of the city), Stepan Bandera, Soviet soldier-internationalists, the 2000-year anniversary of Christianity, Markian Shashkevych, Vasyl Stephanyk, Ivan Franko, Taras Shevchenko, and the Catholic Pope John Paul II.

It is clear why Yuriy Drohobych. All four Ukrainian classics also look not bad together, but the four is, perhaps, too many for the city with a hundred thousand residents ... The monuments to the Pope and the anniversary of Christianity also do not contradict each other. But how can the Pope stand next to Stepan Bandera? How does Bandera feel standing next to the soldier-internationalists? And how do the soldier-internationalists feel around the Pope? ... God knows how. They already coexist in one space, this means reconciliation — maybe involuntarily, but it has already happened (p. 135).

Many Eastern Ukrainian cities are depicted as being lost in time; this is particularly the case with Kyiv, an exemplary post-Soviet city with its corrupted, mediocre president and government, Russian pop music, and prostitutes. It is defined as a “vichne tisto” (eternal dough) — an anti-rhyme to the “vichne misto” (eternal city) Rome. “Kyiv is like a failed student, who is expelled from the third millennium for not having learned the lesson ... Unlike the other world capitals, it is not an antipode of its own country, not its negation, but a confirmation and its essence ...” (p. 232). For a brief moment,31 Kyiv had served as the convergent point between the two halves of the Ukrainian identity (“Western” and “Eastern”, or “European” and “Soviet”), but this moment was lost, and one has to wait another thirteen years32 so that the narrator’s “ìlà” (I) can meet with his “Ìà” (self) and reunite the nation (p. 228–229).

Behind the fragmentary quality of Andrukhyvych’s Leksykôn lies an intricate layering of temporalities and geographies, in which moving from one destination to the other and ultimately arriving “home” (as in the classical examples of literary journey) is less important than inhabiting new spaces, making them one’s own home in the situation when the actual home is under “reconstruction.” However, the journey to European and American cities does not grant the narrator a sense of home; the narrator feels there as if in a “house where access to certain rooms is restricted.”33

In conclusion, the literary travelogue analyzed in Victor Erofeev’s and Yuriy Andrukho-
vych’s texts can not only provide a conceptual framework for the analysis of the issues of post-Soviet national identities, belonging, and “home,” but also demonstrate how the world in general, and Europe in particular, have been “mapped” by non-Western peoples. Both Erofeev and Andrukhyvych take up the potential of the genre for cultural critique as “counter-travellers” — those who resist the tendency to indulge in exoticism in presentation of their culture to the West or demarcate clear-cut cultural differences between Russia, Ukraine, and Europe. Unlike the majority of postcolonial writers who are engaged in “writing back” to the empire, Erofeev and Andrukhyvych rather expose the artificial construction of the borders and stability of national and cultural identities in the global world. Even if they have travelled with a sense of mission and entitlement, this mission has laid out expanding the mental borders of Europe further to the East.
The authors of the recent publication (Bassin M., Kelly C. Soviet and Post-Soviet Identities. Cambridge, 2012) have proved that the issue of post-Soviet identity is still urgent not only in Russia, but also in Slavic studies. In their introduction, Mark Bassin and Catriona Kelly observe important changes in the identity discourses in Russia after 1991: “If the early studies of post-Soviet culture generally emphasized rupture with the Soviet past, ... since 2000, ... it has become common to talk of ‘nostalgia’ – the longing for the return of the past” (Pp. 7–8).


4 Andrukhovych Y. Dezorientatsiia na mistsevosti: Sproby. Ivano-Frankivs’k, 1999. The connection between the two writers extends beyond their artistic similarities. They have organized and participated in “The Literary Express,” an “agit-tour” of various post-Soviet writers across Europe.

5 Erofeev borrows his ironic dialogism of the travel account from Dostoevsky’s “Zimnie zametki o letnikh vpechatleniakh” (“Winter notes on summer impressions”) that depicts the latter writer’s trip to Europe in 1862. In his travelogue, Dostoevsky’s narrator conducts dialogues with various imagined listeners and turns into an “underground man” obsessed by the Russian inferiority complex vis-à-vis the West.


7 See the works of a German Romantic philosopher, Johann Gottfried Herder, on determination of national identities by the space in which they live.

8 Observing the crowd in London’s International Exposition, Dostoevsky’s narrator reproached the attendants’ interested fascination with visual and material consumption: “You feel that it would require a great deal of eternal spiritual resistance and denial not to succumb ... not to idealize Baal,” the god of the western bourgeoisie (Vol. 5. Pp. 69–70).


11 In the turbulent 1980s and early 1990s, Andrukhovych studied at the Gorky Literary Institute in Moscow.

12 For example, in a Moscow beer pub episode, Otto says that he does not hate Russia but is forced to protest when its imperial ambitions extend to the west, “swallowing up small nations, their languages, their customs, their beer, and swallowing up large nations, ruining their chapels and cafes, and most importantly — their quiet, dry bordellos and narrow cobblestone streets” (p. 147).


15 Andrukhovych, using Erofeev’s river metaphor, accounts the historical destiny of Halychyna for its location in the watershed of the Baltic and Mediterranean Seas. Moreover, the fact that all Ukrainian rivers and seas eventually flow to the Atlantic Ocean, like those of other European countries, inscribes Ukraine in a larger European whole.

16 In his early essay “Erts-Herts-Perts” (1994), Andrukhovych expresses his gratitude, not without irony, to the Austrian Emperor Franz-Josef I for having implemented a multicultural policy which allowed the Ukrainian language to be developed in the Austro-Hungarian empire (unlike the Russification policies implemented in the Russian Empire during the same historical period).

17 The “Galician project” was criticized by the authors of the “Austro-Hungarian” issue of the journal “Moloda Ukraina” (Andrii Kokotiukha, Mykhailo Brynykh, Oleh Kochevykh, Oleksandr Maslak and others) for implanting the feeling of Galicians’ superiority over other Ukrainians, which is not a productive solution to the search for a common Ukrainian identity.

18 Andrukhovych is nostalgic not for the multicultural Galicia but for the time when “my city created one state not with Tambov and Tashkent, but with Venice and Vienna!” (p. 8).

19 Andrukhovych himself acknowledges that his Central Europe is a product of his artistic imagination; it “almost doesn’t exist”, just as Halychyna “almost doesn’t exist” in Central Europe. It is like an amoeba that “fills with itself anyone in this space and all of this space in its entirety.”


22 A native of a Western Ukrainian city, Ivano-Frankiv’s’k (a.k.a. Stanislaw in Austro-Hungarian Empire), the writer frequently emphasizes the Europeanness of his cultural identity.


25 “...the world must somehow be divided — possibly for the very reason that we love it in its diversity. Perhaps this is what borders are for: they protect the differences and stave off the final leveling ... the complete disappearance of the borders ... would first and foremost mean the loss of identities” (“Me, the Mirror, and I”, p. 42).

26 “I return to the picture that still appears to me. A little boy is observing the river. There is a New World across the river. Across the Danube lies America, which means the future, across the Danube lies everything that will (and won’t) come true in the future” (p. 84).
27 In his interview during the presentation of the book, Andrukhovych disappointed the audience by saying that Leksykon is the least intimate of all his books (see http://cultural_unian.net/ukr/detail/192888).

28 This selective strategy discloses Andrukhovych’s resistance to the visa regulations for non-EU citizens which he, being a citizen of Ukraine, experiences in his real life but which he prefers to obliterate in the artistic process. In his interviews, he expressed his dissatisfaction with the visa restrictions that cut him off from participating in the space he feels is his “own.” Finding himself on the wrong side of Schengen, he not only resents the exclusionary force of the new geopolitical arrangement, but also strongly opposes equating “Europe” with the European Union.

29 In fact, most of the bridges are depicted as being completely destroyed, as in the chapter about the Serbian city Novy Sad.


31 Meaning the Ukrainian Orange Revolution in 2004.

32 This is, according to the narrator, the frequency with which the major transformation of the Ukrainian society happens.


YULIYA ILCHUK received her BA in Teaching Russian and English from National Pedagogical University (Kyiv, Ukraine), her MA in Culture from National University of Kyiv-Mohyla Academy, and her PhD in Slavic Languages and Literatures from the University of Southern California. Since 2010, she has been a Visiting Assistant Professor at Colgate University, where she teaches courses in Russian language, literature, and in two general-education programs—“Core: The Challenges of Modernity” and “Core Russia: Communities and Identities”. She has published articles in the self-fashioning of Gogol’s hybrid identity; institution of authorship, copyright, and the literary market; and in literary theory and criticism. She is currently working on a book project titled Nikolai Gogol: Rewriting the Hybrid Self.

E-mail: jilchuk@gmail.com

ЮЛІЯ ІЛЬЧУК отримала ступінь бакалавра у галузі викладання російської й англійської мов у Національному педагогічному університеті (Київ, Україна), ступінь магістра у галузі культурології у Національному університеті «Києво-Могилянська академія», і PhD зі слов’янських мов і літератур у Університеті Південної Каліфорнії. Від 2010 р. вона стала запрошенім доцентом Університету Колгейта і викладає курси з російської мови та літератури, а також в рамках двох загальноосвітніх програм (“Core: The Challenges of Modernity” та “Core Russia: Communities and Identities”). Має публікації з тематики самоформування гібридної ідентичності Гоголя; інституту авторства й авторського права, літературного ринку, літературної теорії та критицизму. Зараз працює над книжкою «Ніколай Гоголь: переписування гібридної особистості».

E-mail: jilchuk@gmail.com