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Roman Koropeckyj

Desire and Procreation in the Ukrainian Tales of Hryhorii Kvitka-Osnov'ianenko

ABSTRACT: Recently, Hryhorii Kvitka-Osnov'ianenko has come under criticism from feminists for originating female characters whose repression of sexuality contributed to the perpetuation of a "patriarchal discourse" constitutive of Ukrainian populism. The problem with this take is that it ignores the fact that it is anxiety about sexuality as such, including its essential "patriarchal" correlate procreation, that informs Kvitka's Ukrainian stories. The consequences of this anxiety—namely, an entire series of childless heroes and heroines, whose erotic desires are effectively foreclosed—is to undermine the conservative patriarchal order that is at the heart of Kvitka's overt ideology. As in Gogol, what remains is a vision of an occluded, doomed society.

Its shortcomings notwithstanding, Simon Karlinsky's ground-breaking 1976 study of Nikolai Gogol argues forcefully, and in my view convincingly, that an understanding of the writer's work is at the very least incomplete without a consideration of the complex, and complexed, nature of the sexuality it projects.¹ I would contend that the same is true of Hryhorii Kvitka-Osnov'ianenko, whose work in this respect is no less complex, and thus potentially no less exegetically productive, than that of his Little Russian contemporary.

There are, in fact, some rather salient analogies between, on the one hand, Kvitka, whose attempt to exploit Ukrainian themes as an entrée into imperial Russian literary culture was only moderately successful, but whose Ukrainian tales gave birth to modern Ukrainian prose; and, on the other, Gogol, a writer who managed to parlay his Ukrainian origins into a literary career that ultimately elevated him to the status of, arguably, the father of modern Russian prose. Both Kvitka and Gogol came from the provincial Ukrainian gentry, a fact that conditioned, *mutatis mutandis*, their perceptions of and attitudes as much to the Ukrainian common folk as to imperial Russia and Russians; both shared a fascination with theater that was critical to their literary no less than personal development, and which at times functions as something of a metaphor for the latter; both were involved in one way or another with institutions concerned with the education of young ladies; both felt driven to publicly lecture their countrymen—in the case of Gogol, the imperial gentry, in the case of Kvitka, the Ukrainian peasantry—from positions that were similarly informed by

¹ Simon Karlinsky, *The Sexual Labyrinth of Nikolai Gogol* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992).

nineteenth-century Orthodox fundamentalism, with all of its reactionary implications; finally, their respective *œuvres* are marked by a sexual anxiety that in the case of both Gogol and Kvitka may be linked, ostensibly, to intimations of sexual alterity.

In this respect, the objections of, first, Tamara Hundorova and, then, Solomiia Pavlychko to what they perceive as the unrelentingly anti-feminist patriarchalism of the author of “Marusia,” the originary work of modern Ukrainian prose, miss the point. To be sure, there are some striking passages in Kvitka’s correspondence that would seem to underscore this view. In a 7 December 1803 letter to his close friend Andrii Vladimirov, for example, he declares his “like for women as people, but not as women.”² Several years later, after an unsuccessful attempt at a monastic life, he writes to this same Vladimirov (14 November 1808), “Life has become tedious, and I find satisfaction nowhere, [not] even with women—even with women? Precisely, I have bidden adieu even to them” (*ZT* 7:168). But it is remarks such as these that suggest something other than patriarchal anti-feminism may be at work in Kvitka’s depiction of women. To argue that his heroines—“represented” as “idealized” embodiments of “Little Russian” “affect and morality”—in effect “secured the affirmation of a patriarchal system” at the expense of their sexuality³ is, to my mind, to ignore the underlying web of displacements and sublimations that figure them as such. What is at stake here, rather—is a view toward Kvitka’s works that would take into account a deeper—necessarily repressed—dynamic that inscribes his projection not only of feminine sexuality, but of sexuality and sexual relationships *tout court*.

Like his Ukrainian fiction itself, and, in fact, coextensive with it, Kvitka’s depictions of women as sexual beings are either comically burlesque or sentimentally melodramatic. The former is, of course, best exemplified by “Konotops’ka vid’ma” (The Witch of Konotop), where, with an unmistakable (and perhaps empathetic) nod to Gogol and, indeed, to the Ukrainian burlesque tradition, the female is presented as domineering, demanding, shrewishly aggressive, the eponymous witch that must be punished. There is no question here of productive union between man and woman. But then too, it is precisely productive union, that is, procreation, “breeding,” that is perhaps the most problematic aspect of Kvitka’s so-called sentimentalist works. Concerned as they are almost exclusively with the world of the Ukrainian peasant (which in a letter

² Hryhorii F. Kvitka-Osnov’ianenko, *Zibrannia tvoriv u semy tomakh*, vol. 7 (Kyiv: Naukova Dumka, 1981) 165. Henceforth cited in the text as *ZT*, followed by volume and page number.

³ Tamara Hundorova, “Pohliad na ‘Marusiu,’” *Slovo i chas* 1991, no. 6:16, 18; Solomiia Pavlychko, *Dyskurs modernizmu v ukraïns’kii literaturi* (Kyiv: Lybid’, 1997) 32, 79.

to Pletnev [8 February 1839] Kvitka claims to be “depicting from nature, without any adornment or colouring” [ZT 7:214]), his “Little Russian tales” represent a way of life that, on the surface, is conservative, pious, and uncompromisingly patriarchal, where young women are supposed to be modest and virtuous, treasuring their virginity for their future husbands. But this is rather the ideological quilt for Kvitka’s vision of Ukraine, a kind of ideal moral standard that frames a represented world which, as befits its creator’s cautionary intentions, more often than not fails to live up to it. What is surprising, then, is that upon closer inspection there is no place in this unabashedly traditionalist (patriarchal) program for something as fundamentally inherent to it as the natural production of children.⁴

Paradigmatic in this regard is the story “Bozhi dity” (God’s Children),⁵ which opens with a curiously ambiguous paean to children:

Як таки не любити діточок, сих янголиків божих! [...] Чи є ж такий чоловік на світі, щоб не любив діточок? Інший хоч і не любить з ними пестоватись, і не зуміє їх приголубити, та *усе-таки* любить їх від серця [...] (ZT 3:348; *my italics*)

How, after all, can one not like children, those little angels of god! [...] Is there such a man in this world who would not like children? Another, although he may not like to indulge them and does not know how to caress them, nevertheless likes them with all his heart [...].

In this almost textbook instance of the Lacanian *dit-que-non*⁶ evasive negations in effect articulate a conflict between a reluctant subject and the normative expectations of his collective, leaving little doubt as to the narrator’s identification with that “other man.” The protagonists of this story—but also those in Kvitka’s other Ukrainian stories, “Marusia” most prominently among them—play out this conflict in a number of ways.

⁴ From a biographical perspective, it is interesting to note that Kvitka married at the age of forty-two, which even for his times was late. As his correspondence with P. O. Pletnev makes abundantly clear, his wife, Anna Hryhorivna née Vul’f, who had been a matron at the Kharkiv Institute for Girls of the Nobility that Kvitka founded, was rather a helpmate, focused almost exclusively on her husband’s career. As far as I can determine, the Osnov’ianenkos did not have any children. Cf. O. I. Honchar, *Kvitka-Osnov’ianenko. Seminarii*, 2d ed. (Kyiv: “Vyshcha Shkola,” 1978) 113.

⁵ Or should it be “chillun”? One cannot help drawing an analogy here between Kvitka’s depictions of Ukrainian peasants and depictions of African Americans in nineteenth-century American fiction. On some parallels, see my and Robert Romanchuk’s “Ukraine in Blackface: Performance and Representation in Gogol’s *Dikan’ka*,” forthcoming in *Slavic Review*.

⁶ See Jacques Lacan, *Écrits: A Selection*, trans. Alan Sheridan (New York: Norton, 1977) 298–99. Cf. Bruce Fink, *The Lacanian Subject: Between Language and Jouissance* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997) 38–41.

Like Naum and Nastia Drot in “Marusia,” Zakharii and Vas'ka Skyba are an old childless couple. But unlike the latter, they are not finally blessed with a little miracle,⁷ opting, rather, for adoption, in other words, for a rational, not biological form of procreation.⁸ The two orphans they take in, Kost' and Melasia, are in this sense the couple's complementary inverse and can thus be situated in a long line of Kvitka's young heroes and heroines who are either fatherless, motherless, or both: Vasyl' (“Marusia”), Levko (“Kozyr-divka” [The Intrepid Lass]), Oksana (“Serdeszna Oksana” [Poor Oksana]), Halochka (“Shchyna liubov” [True Love]), and all of the central characters in “Konotops'ka vid'ma.”

But what is no less striking in this regard is that most of these heroes, both male and female, do not so much repeat in their own lives this lack or partial lack of biological family, but rather themselves challenge, more or less overtly, and ultimately make impossible, the very conditions for creating such a family. In the case of “Bozhi dity,” Kost' openly declares to his stepfather his plans for the future, which exclude both women and marriage:

“Ну, пожалуй, я і оженюся, стану хазяїном, буду хліб робити [...]. От я житиму у всякому приволлі! Так як живе і усяк, хто тільки затим дума жити, щоб з голоду не вмерти. Не так воно є, таточку! Кому милосердний Бог відкрив світа через письмо та через розум, так треба жити на світі затим, щоб яке добро робити другим [...]. Ох, таточку! що то мені хочеться таке що-небудь зробити, щоб від того добро було або бідному, або хоч нашому селу, та готов би душу свою положити, аби зробити що добре. [...] [Т]а затим-то не хочу і одружитися [...]. А то, пожалуй, є дівчат [...]; пальцем кивну, так десяти побіжать за мною [...]. Цур ім! Нехай ськають свого, а я буду дожидати свого.” (ZT 3:360)

⁷ D. V. Chalyi, “Khudozhnia proza,” in *Istoriia ukrains'koï literatury*, vol. 2, *Stanovlennia novoi literatury (druha polovyna XVIII–trydtsati roky XIX st.)* (Kyiv: Naukova Dumka, 1967) 449, quite rightly notes the hagiographic models from which “Marusia” borrows its narrative structure.

⁸ Although this article focuses on Kvitka's Ukrainian stories, it is important to note that anxious ambivalence toward sex and procreation can be found in his Russian works as well. In *Pan Khaliavskii*, for example, although children do appear, they do so almost as an afterthought, their “birth,” moreover, verging on the “miraculous”—they simply appear out of nowhere, and in *absurdly* large number, to boot: “А тут, ни отсюда, ни оттуда, дети кругом осыпали. Сам не знаю, откуда они уже брались! На свободе как-то сосчитал наличных, так ужас! Миронушка, Егорушка, Фомушка, Трофимушка, Пазинька, Настенька, Марфушка и Фенюшка – ну, прошу покорно! Ведь поставила же на своем Анистья Ивановна намерение, положенное еще до замужества ее и я не переспорил ее” (ZT 4:193; *my italics*). (And here, out of nowhere, it began raining children. I myself don't know where they came from. When there was some free time, I somehow managed to count up all those present, frightful! Mironushka, Egorushka, Fomushka, Trofimushka, Pazin'ka, Nasten'ka, Marfushka, and Feniushka—now please! Anis'ia Ivanovna had already put her foot down before her wedding and I could not dissuade her).

“O.K., so I get married, become a farmer, make a living [...]. I'll live in clover! But that's the way everyone lives who only thinks to live in order not to die of hunger. That's not the way it is, papa! To him to whom merciful God opened up the world through letters and through a good mind, it behooves to live in this world in such a way that he do some good for others [...]. Oh, papa! How I want to do something that would benefit a poor person or even our village, and I'm ready to lay down my life in order to do something good. [...] It is for this reason that I don't want to get married [...]. Of course there are girls [...]; all I need to do is wag my finger and dozens will come running after me [...]. The heck with them! Let them look for what they want, and I'll wait for what I want.”

Like the crestfallen Vasyl' in “Marusia,” who voluntarily kills any procreative urges he still may have after the heroine's death by sublimating his desires—and ultimately ending his own physical existence—in a monastic habit, Kost' sublimates (biological) love of woman through love for fellow human. In turn, the dynamic of the story's plot dictates that his, the hero's, “selfless” decision to take the place of a poor draftee with wife and children is to be understood as itself an act of sublimation that effectively detudes the institution of marriage. To be sure, Kost' does in the end get married, but, I would argue, only as a conventional afterthought for the sake of a happy ending. After all, he refused to bid adieu to the woman who loves him when he was about to set off for the service, “grimacing,” in fact, at the very thought (*ibid.*, 370); and when he does get married, it is as a veteran of the Napoleonic wars whose left arm, for good measure, has been amputated. And while there is a lengthy, folkloric description of his wedding, in the little paradise that emerges at the end of the story, with its land and workers and old Zakharii, now registered as a merchant, living together with Kost' “in joy and in happiness” (*ibid.*, 375), there is no mention of that ostensibly greatest of all joys, grandchildren. In Kvitka's Ukrainian Eden there is simply no place for them.

Kost''s abnegation of his sexual self at least finds him among the living at the end of his story. Halochka (“Shchyra liubov”) becomes, like both Vasyl' and Marusia, a victim of Kvitka's relentless suppression of erotic desire. Indeed, “True Love” reads as something of a manifesto *and* an involuntary but transparent confession. It begins, of course, with its programmatic reconfiguration—or rather, as we have already seen in such circumstances—negation of the cliché that gives the story its title:

Що то є любов? Багато про неї пишуть у книжках, і розказують, та бачиться мені, що усе щось *не так*. (ZT 3:302; *my italics*)

What is this thing called love? Much is written about it in books, and it's talked about a lot, but it seems to me that it's all somehow wrong.

Kvitka goes on, then, to propose his own definition of the word, which, not surprisingly, not only erases the physical, i.e., the erotic, but by the very same token effectively de-genders it by multiplying the combinatory as well as semantic possibilities of love:

Щира любов не приглядається, чи карі, чи чорні очі, чи з горбиком ніс, чи біла шия, чи довга коса: їй до сього овсі нужди мало. Часто бува, що один одного не дуже і розгляділи, не мовили промеж собою ні словечка, не знають, хто є і відкіля; а вже один одного зна, [...] один на одного дивиться, один без одного скуча, і якби могли обоє, кинулися б один до одного [...].

От як так одна душа другу знайшла, що як сестри собі рідненькі [...].

От сама щира любов, хоч меж нами, чоловіками, хоч меж жіночим родом. [...]

А як така любов та народиться меж парубком і дівкою і возьмуться вони меж собою, так от благодать господня! [...]

Коли ж, полюбившись меж собою, парень з дівкою та бачать, що їм зовсім не можна побратись, а хоч поберуться, так друге через нього буде страждати [...] так він лучче [...] зайде далеко від другого, щоб про нього й не чути, аби б його другові не було лиха, аби б від нього відвернути біду...

Ви вже, знаю, скажете: “Так, Грицьку, се меж чоловіками так так, а меж парнем і дівкою зовсім не так. Їм аби б тільки укупі жити [...]” (Ibid., 303–4)

True love does not look too closely whether eyes are hazel or black, whether the nose is aquiline, whether the neck is white, whether the braid is long: those things are of no concern to it. It often happens that two people, not having looked one another over very much, not having uttered a word between themselves, unaware of who they are or whence, that they already know each other [...], they look at each other, they pine for each other, and if they both could, they would throw themselves into each other's arms [...]. This then is true love, be it among us men, be it among womankind. [...] And when such a love is born between a young man and a young woman, and they take to each other, this is a blessing from the Lord! [...] When, having fallen in love, the young man and young woman see that it's impossible for them to marry, or even if they do get married, one will suffer on account of the other [...], the former will rather [...] go far away from the other so as not to hear about him, so that no harm would come to his friend, so as to turn misfortune away from him.... I know you'll say: “True, Hryts', that's the way it is between men, but between a young man and young woman it's not at all like this. All they want is to live together [...].”

In reply, what Kvitka proceeds to demonstrate in the “exemplum” of “Shchyra liubov” is nothing less than an implicit equation of a male-female relationship with a relationship between two males⁹ or, at best, between two neuters.

⁹ Noteworthy in this regard for its “slippage” is the description of the narrator-hero's courting mission in *Pan Khaliavskii*. In his ultimately unsuccessful ventures from one marriage candidate to the next, the narrator happens upon a landowner “у которого по спискам значилась едиnorodная дочь Евфимия” (who, according to the records, had an only daughter by the name of Evfimiia). This Evfimiia turns out to be his only son Efim (ZT 4:125).

Like Kost' in "Bozhi dity," Halochka sublimates her refusal of the erotic by an appeal to some "higher" virtue, in this case, an ostensibly sagacious grasp of the potential complications inherent in a *mésalliance* with Semen Ivanovych. She opts for displacement, marrying someone from her own caste, a good man (Mykola), but one whom she does not truly love. It goes without saying that this concatenation of sublimation and displacement precludes any possibility of procreation, even, or particularly with, Mykola, since it would necessarily reintroduce the erotic. And here Kvitka takes his exemplum to its logical conclusion: de-eroticized, de-gendered, and hence condemned by her creator to barrenness, Halochka's traditional role in the patriarchal society—which she, ironically enough, attempts to conserve—becomes in effect superfluous, her physical death being just a concretized metaphor for her condition as an unwoman.

It is, in fact, precisely this ironic, and ultimately self-annihilating, contradiction between conservation—or conservatism—on the one hand, and the elimination of the procreatively erotic on the other that informs "Marusia," the thickest of Kvitka's stories of Ukrainian life. Indeed, I would argue that it is not so much the tale's primacy in the evolution of Ukrainian literature nor even its programmatic¹⁰ artistry that has determined its resonance for generations of readers, but rather the complexity and symbolic (unconscious) depth of its sexual dynamic. And in this, the story not only fleshes out our understanding of Kvitka *qua* Kvitka, but on its own terms articulates no less saliently than the Gogol of, say, "Old-World Landowners" or "Taras Bul'ba," that peculiar early nineteenth-century articulation of Ukraine as a land marked by morbid infecundity.¹¹

In "Marusia" (dedicated, no less, to his wife) Kvitka enriches the psychosexual symbolism of his narrative about two lovers by introducing, in the figure of Naum Drot, an overt paternal superego that prevents any form of (erotic) consummation and, consequently, procreation. Like Tykhon Brus of "Dobre roby—dobre i bude" [Do Well and Everything'll Come Out Well], Drot is a self-righteous carrier of the most conservative aspects of his patriarchal society, for whom erotic cleanliness is next to ostentatious godliness. His injunctions, in turn, are internalized by his daughter, effectively binding her to her father in and through a quilt of moral and ethical values that work to suppress the erotic. However, the irruption of the erotic in the person of Vasy!

¹⁰ As Kvitka indicated to Pletnev in his oft-quoted letter of 15 March 1839, he wrote the story to demonstrate that one could indeed "write something serious [and] moving" in the "Little Russian dialect," that "one could be deeply touched by the Little Russian language" (ZT 7:215).

¹¹ Cf. George G. Grabowicz [Hryhorii Hrabovych], "Hohol' i mif Ukraïny," *Sučasnist* 10 (1994): 145.

begins tearing at this quilt (“Ох не цілуй,” Marusia says to Vasyl’, “Мені усе здається, що гріх нам за се... Боюсь прогнівити Бога!”) (ibid., 42, “Oh, don’t kiss me [...]. It constantly seems to me as if we were sinning... I’m afraid of angering God!”) and by the same token tearing Marusia away from her father, individuating her. And in this respect, it is not so much the lying on Marusia’s part, for that is just a symptom, but rather the emergence of her sexuality—her “self” as a woman—and her willingness to indulge in it that ultimately leads to tragedy.

Drot, of course, does everything in his power to prevent the emergence of that separate, sexualized self, sublimating the potential loss of Marusia first as fear for her honour and then as fear for her potential straw widowhood (after all, he could easily give Vasyl’ money to hire a replacement for the draft but refuses). In any case, he reasserts his status as superego: “А знаєш ти,” the latter says to Marusia,

“що батько краще бачить твоє щастя, чим ти? [...] [З]автра будеш старіша, чим сьогодні, а від того і умніша.” (ibid., 54)

“Don’t you know [...] that your father understands your happiness better than you? [...] Tomorrow you’ll be older than today and, as a result, wiser.”

Marusia’s weakly developed ego is no match for him, her conscience: she gives Vasyl’ up. The second, this time successful, attempt at an engagement only underscores her decision as dictated by her superego: it is on the heels of this engagement that Marusia has her premonition of death. Having sinned once by indulging her sexuality, she, that is, her father/superego, cannot allow a renewed irruption of the erotic, even if legitimated, to come between herself and the father and thus simultaneously disrupt the moral and ethical universe that they now both embody. It is, then, but symbolic overdetermination on Kvitka’s part to have Marusia come down with her fatal cold while picking mushrooms, which in Slavic folklore are, of course, often associated with the phallus.¹²

The story could well have ended with Marusia’s death, who, like Halochka, becomes effectively superfluous as a human being once her sexuality is suppressed. But it does not. Indeed, in Kvitka’s sexual economy it cannot—for the tale must still deal with Vasyl’, the very node, as it were, of the disruptive erotic in the narrative. In a kind of coda that otherwise adds little to the story (in the formalist sense of the word), the reader learns that Vasyl’ has entered a monastery, that he too has succumbed to the paternal superego. Upon hearing the news that Vasyl’ still longs in the monastery to join Marusia in the next

¹² V. N. Toporov, “The Semiotics of Mythological Conceptions about Mushrooms,” trans. Stephen Rudy, *Semiotica* 53 (1985): 300–02.

world as quickly as possible, Drot cannot resist reinsinuating his authority—with a pointed reference, for good measure, to the “Our Father”: “Адже ти вже отець Венедихт,” he says as if Vasyl' were standing in front of him,

“ти служиш службу Божу... чого ти спотикаєшся? Ей, молись, широко молись! пам'ятай, що у “Отченаші” читаєш: да будет воля твоя, избави нас от лукавого!...” (ZT 3:86–87)

[“But you're Father Benedict now... You conduct the Divine Liturgy... why do you still stumble? Eh, pray, pray sincerely! Be mindful of what you read in the “Our Father”: “Thy will be done, deliver us from evil!...”]

That Drot commands this from afar, assuming, in fact, the identity of God the Father, only underscores his tyrannical ubiquity as Vasyl's implacable conscience.

But Vasyl's symbolic submission is in itself not sufficient for Kvitka's purposes, as the former's continual longing for Marusia demonstrates and which Drot understands only too well. For Drot, nothing short of biological extinction can kill desire and the drive to procreate. Hence he must go to the monastery in Kyiv in order to ascertain for himself, as it were, that Vasyl' has died; or, to put it another way, in order to drive a stake through the heart of the vampire of erotic desire. There is an unmistakable note of self-satisfied gloating and, indeed, of eerily unfeeling, almost obscene, detachment (Marusia was, after all, his daughter) in Drot's final admonition to the dead Vasyl': “Дай, господи милосердний, щоб ти там знайшов свою Марусю!...” (ibid., 87; second italics mine) [May the merciful Lord, allow you to find your Marusia *there!*].

With the death of Vasyl', and through the efforts of Drot, the patriarchal world, briefly disrupted by the erotic transgressions of Marusia and her lover, has been conserved—but at the same time preserved in a fatal stasis. The story comes around full circle. What remains to embody the Ukrainian collective is, like Gogol's Afanasii Ivanovich and Pul'kheriia Ivanovna, an aged, genderless couple, whose childlessness comes to serve as both a template and a symbol of that collective: Hryhorii Kvitka-OsnoV'ianenko's ideal, occluded Ukraine, condemned to extinction. The irony, that the symbolic insinuation of biological death is not necessarily commensurate with its consequences in and *as* literary history, is, of course, impossible to miss.