

Imagining Scandinavia in Ukraine

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Ukraine has been an independent country for 26 years now, and thence developed quite solid expertise in various fields of academic research. Be fair to say, that the substantial basis for humanitarian knowledge is partly the legacy of Soviet era scientists. Nonetheless, Scandinavian studies flourishing in the Soviet Russia with two centers – St. Petersburg and Moscow – comprise a lacuna in Ukrainian academia and research institutions. In my presentation, I intend to discuss several ways in which Scandinavia is made familiar to Ukrainian “consumer”, and different, yet scattered initiatives that help shaping the way Northern countries emerge in the minds of my fellow-citizens. There are four main channels that facilitate the formation of region’s image: translations, education, grassroots initiatives, and marketing.

Translations (fiction and non-fiction) that circulate in Ukraine nowadays can be further divided into two categories depending on the time they were made and published: 1) in the Soviet Union after the Khrushchev Thaw and in the course of Brezhnev Era; 2) after Ukraine proclaimed its independence. The first category is largely defined by censorship; the material for translation is mainly chosen based on the criteria of compliance to dominant, and the only, ideology. This may be inferred from the introductory notes from translators or literary scholars that precede or conclude the actual work of fiction/ non-fiction. Rather common was the practice of including some line of reasoning to make the text acceptable either for the censorship board, or even omnipresent party representatives, or regular concerned informants, and in such manner smuggle the masterpieces of world literature into the Soviet context unless there was something impossible to twist and expedite.

The latter was the case with the authorship of Søren Kierkegaard. Russian was among the first foreign languages the works of the Danish philosopher were translated into back in 1894. The work was conducted by Peter Hansen, a Dane living in the Russian Empire at that time, who was one of the first

promoters of Scandinavian culture there. The book he chose to render into Russian is still known by the name *Pleasure and Duty*¹ and is available for free download from the Internet. In case you are wondering what that mysteriously obscured book of the genius is and why you never heard of it before, think no more: *Pleasure and Duty* is the Russian title of Kierkegaard's proper *Either/Or*. The change of the title is not the most curious thing about the translation. Peter Hansen, whose actual field of expertise was statistics and sociology, possessed rather vague knowledge of philosophy or any humanitarian discourse whatsoever. *Pleasure and Duty* was Hansen's interpretation of *Either/Or*, the complicated structure of which he narrowed down to a simple binary of aesthetic::ethical; one of the epigraphs serving as a crucial paratextual device was omitted; some parts were either abridged or excluded. The members of the editorial board that chose to publish again Hansen's text in 1994 (in Kyiv) summed up the gist of translator's venture in the following words: "The reader gets not so much the actual Kierkegaard but rather Russian Kierkegaard notably marked by distinctive features of the dawn of domestic decadence"². Russian philosophers, Lev Shestov being the most prominent one, read Kierkegaard through the works of German phenomenologists – Edmund Husserl and Martin Heidegger in the 1920s. The next translation of the Danish original text was conducted and published in 1993 by Sergei Isaev; the work was a bundle of *Fear and Trembling*, *The Concept of Anxiety*, and *Sickness unto Death*³. The Soviet era circumvented Kierkegaard completely, for his philosophy was perceived and even branded as religious, and there was no place for any religion in the USSR.

Different was the case for another titan of the Danish Golden Age – Hans Christian Andersen, whose brilliant fairy tales were widely read back in the day. In the introductory note to the 1973 edition⁴, Andersen is depicted as "the singer of a common, hard-working, and poor man"⁵, the one who supported class struggle, highlighted social injustice, and condemned "oppressors, advocates of serfdom, kulaks-bloodsuckers"⁶, and this last sequence of attributes sounds extremely sanitized in English, in Russian these are the code words of passionate propaganda. This is the line of reasoning meant to be found in Andersen's texts as the dominant one; however, by no means does that degrade the mastery of the works or narrows the range of themes, ideas manifested through them, which is evident to any reflective reader.

In 1968 William Heinesen participated in an international symposium dedicated to the influence of Maksim Gorky on world literature. In 1973 the translations of his two novels were published in Moscow: *The Black Cauldron* and *The Lost Musicians*⁷. The author of the preface characterized Heinesen as "The great artist and true humanist, active public figure, fighter for peace and democracy, olden friend of the Soviet Union... [who] by right occupies the

visible spot among the first-string masters of modern progressive literature⁸". This simple sentence, along with Heinesen's visit to the USSR, legalized the circulation of his two novels that thematically went far beyond the plain "depiction of workpeople's life"⁹ leaning more towards ostracized in the Union modernism, than solidifying realism both in form and content. "At the time of one of the visits to the Soviet Union...¹⁰" is the shibboleth password line inletting *Independent People* and *Iceland's Bell* by Halldór Laxness into publication in Russian in 1977. Author's religious conversion was triumphantly deemed as "not the rupture but manifestation of despair, inability, and impossibility to grasp the sense of life"¹¹". The outweighing coverage was given to Laxness's attitude towards the Soviet Union: "He writes about the practice of Russian revolution as the example for all peoples, states the acknowledgement of socialist ideals¹²", and further it is added: "However, to speak of a true consistency of his socialist beliefs is hardly possible¹³". This twofold statement is quite remarkable regards to the intention of the preface's author: the first part of the quote places Laxness and his views in accordance with the expectations of the ideological machine, and the second one contains a slight deviation from them, so to say, reflecting his unique but appropriate views. We later read: "*The Book of the People* proves that the worldview of the writer was considerably eclectic, he operates in it with both Marxist ideas and trendy at that time bourgeois philosophers like Spengler¹⁴". Finally, the line is drawn, the frame is constructed because whatever the author might deviate at, most importantly "The entire modern capitalist world must be destroyed, and on the remaining debris of the past a completely new society shall be mounted – this idea transfuses the entire *Book of the People*¹⁵".

The twofold statements, framing structures, and selective representations of truth mentioned in previous examples are rather vivid in the introductory note to August Strindberg's *The Red Room*, *The Defense of a Fool*, and *Alone*¹⁶ (published in 1989) written by Vladimir Neustroev, a monopolist for Scandinavian literatures of a sort. The following points of multifaceted authorship were highlighted: "the ideas of social utopianism¹⁷", "all bourgeois politics compared to the labor movement is not worth a red cent¹⁸", "he contrasts essentially the ideology of bourgeois marriage with his ideal –"peasant family with its 'natural' division of duties between the sexes¹⁹", and just for the sake of it:"It is not a single person, according to Strindberg, that is responsible for disharmony in life – and therefore, the condemnation towards the woman is perceived as the death sentence to all bourgeois reality²⁰". Obviously, one can never overuse the word "bourgeois" with some negative connotations in order to justify the publication and misogyny, and even make it a core value of the fight against the morally corrupt capitalist and bourgeois West. Certainly, Selma Lageröf, Astrid Lindgren, Tove Jansson were not

omitted, in fact, their works were rather popular, translated into both Ukrainian and Russian. I refrain from discussing the way they were presented to the reader, for I have not managed to get the actual editions from the Soviet era.

At this juncture, we have discussed some patterns in translation choices largely defined by ideology. In today's Ukraine the choice of material for translation is mainly regulated by two factors, not different from the rest of the free world, the taste of a singular professional and the demand of the consumer market. One of the most recent examples pertaining to our discussion is fetched from the annual book fair *Book Arsenal* held in Kyiv (May 17-21, 2017). According to Ivan Lopatchenko, the PR-manager of *Family Leisure Club* publishing house, more than 90 novelties were introduced at the fair by their organization, and top sales were made by two non-fiction books – *Ukrainian Women in the Crucible of Modernization* and *The Little Book of Hygge: Danish Secrets to Happy Living*²¹. The case of *Hygge*²² as a best-seller does not seem surprising. First and foremost, the book is written in compliance with all good marketing moves as to sell the country via its lifestyle abroad. The design of the book is fabulously appealing: it is cozy and easy to read – little text generously interspersed with lucrative images of plainly marvelous life which can be achieved nearly anywhere, at any time. Except for the standard promotional description one can find on *Amazon*, *Penguin*, to name a few, the website of the publishing house lists three additional points targeted specifically at a Ukrainian reader:

- Atmospheric and attractive edition;
- Hygge is a phenomenon that gives happiness and tranquility. This practice is a worldwide trend;
- Well-structured information with examples, statistics, and numerous colorful illustrations²³.

To conclude the point, this edition is meant to appeal to sense perceptions such as vision and somatosensation before its content reaches one's intellect. With Ukraine usually lagging behind in reception and adoption of 'worldwide trends' (e.g. projects of modernism and postmodernism executed nearly simultaneously at the end of the 20th century in literature and fine arts), and people still quite often bound by inferiority complex (citizenship in the third world country), the statement that everyone else in the world already practices hygge should work as a magic trigger to purchase the book. Finally, the last argument can be taken rather ambiguously: as an easy to use manual which is good and helpful when you crave for a change now; or as an offence implied by the reader image imposed. This is the image of a person that barely needs to perform any intellectual activity to digest "numerous colorful images". The quintessence of Danish lifestyle is thus introduced into Ukrainian context, and the

message is the following: Scandinavian lifestyle is easy, just put on a sweater and light up a candle.

Despite the popularity of the book, it is by far, and luckily, not the only attempt to introduce more of Scandinavia into Ukrainian reality. Currently, there are two centers – Kyiv, the capital of Ukraine, and Lviv, the informal cultural capital – leading in translation of fiction/ non-fiction from Scandinavian languages. While the translators in Lviv can be fairly called a school, Kyiv is just a political center with big potential and more possibilities than elsewhere in Ukraine, and that is the purpose any capital is to fulfill. Worth mentioning is that Swedish and Norwegian literatures representation significantly outnumbers the works written in Danish, Icelandic, and Finnish. Most recent are, for example, translations of Peter Høeg's novels *Miss Smilla's Feeling for Snow* (publ. 2013) and *The Quiet Girl* (publ. 2012) from Danish; Sofi Oksanen's *Stalin's Cows* (publ. 2011), *Purge* (publ. 2013), *When the Doves Disappeared* (publ. 2014), and *Norma* (publ. 2016), and Jyrki Vainonen's *13 Novellas* (publ. 2016); Emil Hjörvar Petersen's book of poetry *The Fox* (publ. 2014). This all seems rather exotic on the Ukrainian market.

Very different is the situation with Norwegian and Swedish languages. Ukrainian reader can enjoy the works of nearly all Nobel Prize winners (Knut Hamsun, Bjørnstjerne Bjørnson; Selma Lagerlöf, Carl Gustaf Verner von Heidenstam, Pär Lagerkvist, Eyvind Johnson, Tomas Tranströmer (selected poems in online blogs)). Contemporary literary process in these two countries is also rather tangible. My aim is not to present a full list of books here, I want to name a few that shoot in the eye, in my opinion. The first one is the *Anthology of Contemporary Norwegian Novella* (publ. 2003) that features, among others, Tarjei Vesaas, Johan Borgen, Nils Johan Rud, Dag Solstad, Ingvar Ambjørnsen, and Jon Fosse; the second one – *18 Poets from Gothenburg* is a poetry anthology that introduces David Vikgren, Lina Ekdahl, Elise Ingvarsson, Kennet Klemets, Jörgen Lind, Ragnar Strömberg, and Christine Falkenland, to name a few. Although postmodernist literature is confidently appearing in Ukrainian reality (however, I doubt that any of the present-day translators will engage in the world of Majgull Axelsson), modernism, realism, romanticism, not to go even more backwards in time, are hardly known to the Ukrainian reader.

Hopefully, the situation will be subject to change in the future, because the generation of students finely schooled in Swedish Philology is growing bigger with every year. In Ukraine, there are three universities that offer Swedish language instruction: Taras Shevchenko Kyiv National University (KNU), Ivan Franko Lviv National University, and Lesya Ukrainka Eastern European University, all supported and recognized by the Swedish Institute. Only one of them – KNU – takes the educational process beyond simple language learning, and offers the history of language, lexicology and stylistics, some cultural

commentary squeezed in the mentioned classes, and literature is taught by instructors with degrees in World Literature. Ukrainian degrees in World Literature do not presuppose any knowledge of Scandinavian literary contexts at all, nor does the instructor know the actual language, which is fine as long as the analysis of the text does not appear, and it does – in term papers, master's theses, and this is a big problem because the issue of verification, precision, and accuracy arises.

The third way of 'exporting' Northern countries into Ukraine is by means of NGOs and grassroots initiatives appearing within the last five years. In 2013, Språkcafé was founded as a society for learning Swedish language and cultural exchange. Not tied to a particular place, people interested were gathering in pubs, cafés, and open spaces to communicate and bring Sweden closer, which was quite achievable given that with time more and more native speakers would join the venture. Språkcafé was started by three young ladies, who either studied or worked in Sweden before, and grew into a large community of nearly 300 registered members on *Facebook*. In 2015, Swedish-owned outsourcing IT-company in Ukraine *Beetroot* got involved in the activities of the community helping with hosting place and resources. Usually the meetings occur every fortnight and are thematically arranged; we either celebrate some holidays the Swedish way or learn about the traditions and exchange experiences.

Last year (2016) I was invited to give several lectures on Swedish literature by Språkcafé. The first one I dedicated to postmodernism in Swedish literature because strategically through *The April Witch* by Majgull Axelsson I could reach out to St. Birgitta's image and writings and historically to medieval Sweden; Jonas Jonasson's *The Hundred Year Old Man* allowed me to draw Harry Martinson's *The Road to Klockrike* and the concept of nomadism in a large modernist context; Tomas Tranströmer was a key to discussing surrealist poetry. As for the next two lectures I was asked to talk about Scandinavian mythology and the sagas, and tried to incorporate the Romantic Movement of Gothicism, Olof Rudbeck's *The Atlantis* and, as a means of constructing the national identity, the short insight into the history of Folkhemmet. Finally, for the last lecture the public enquired about the Nordic Noire in literature and cinematography. Rather notable and, I would say, quite symptomatic is the popular demand for the shared Scandinavian yore reflected in *Eddas* and the contemporary ethno-detectives, and I would even go further to assume that these are the only literary dimensions most Ukrainian readers are willing to digest, but we will come back to this issue later in the article after the discussion of other two initiatives.

Ukrainian-Scandinavian Center is another initiative that became known at the beginning of 2016, as "non-governmental public organization

oriented on development of relations between Ukraine and Scandinavian countries in various spheres²⁴". The most notable of the USC activities is the annual Summer School (2016, 2017) for Ukrainians and Norwegians (and in 2017 – for Swedes as well) supported by the Royal Norwegian Embassy in Ukraine and held at one of the oldest and most beautiful educational facilities in Ukraine – Chernivtsi National University. The founders of the Center are young professionals who did their Master's degrees in Norway mainly in the spheres of International Relations and Human Rights, and that largely defines the scope of the activities in Ukraine.

Finally, the most recent initiative is the Swedish Language School – Kyiv of which I am a co-founder. The School was started with the idea of later developing it into a Swedish Cultural Center that could become a valuable asset to university students of humanitarian specializations and all people interested to go beyond mythology, krimis, and commercial brands in their knowledge about the country. With the purpose of popularizing the image of Sweden, the School developed the conception and the program of the first *Sweden Days in Ukraine*, submitted a proposal to the Institute of Philology of KNU and got authorization to conduct the 6-day long event with talks about literature, history (language and country), tourism, movie night, education and future employment possibilities based on real-life experiences. Certainly, the event was not perfect and I truly hope that in the future, for the second time of *Sweden Days*, we will see more interest from the Embassy of Sweden in Ukraine and the SI.

Recently a massive marketing campaign has been launched in Kyiv advertising a new residential complex with a highly attractive name *Scandia*. The masterminds behind the campaign describe their creation as "Scandinavian town of a family type suitable for everyone ranging from students and young families to married couples that have spent their entire lives together, who value European standards and strive to cardinaly change their life quality. Living in the Scandinavian town is very easy – only 20 minutes from the center of Kyiv along the Brovary highway and you are at home!²⁵" The appeal embedded in the conception is meant to match the expectations of wide public who wish to live in Europe now yet preserve their national values. One of the most debated issues in Ukraine in the context of European integration was the threat to traditional values (marriage and family) as if imposed from the West, and therefore, family is a core of this European-type town. Nevertheless, as we learn from the description on the website of the complex, European standards advertised here essentially refer to high-quality of utilities, such as clear water available 24/7, and also constantly fresh air, good apartment planning, safety, exclusiveness. Quite symptomatic here, to my mind, is the promise of a radical change (following our two revolutions within the last thirteen years), the

bright future guaranteed. The last sentence is the most intriguing regarding this discussion; its first part “living in the Scandinavian town is very easy” implies that the space, artificially constructed by architects, designers and marketers, already exists as positively charged with “core values of Scandinavian society”. In a superficial and rather homogenous form, by what makes up a façade of ‘Scandinavian society’, the future dweller is attracted to a northern utopia of a kind. Second part of the sentence is currently an object of study of cultural anthropologists. It deals with a wide-spread belief of a Paradise gained via an inter-country migration – people moving from big cities to the suburban areas, or small satellite villages with the hope to find virgin nature, clear water, and fresh air and still maintain strong ties to civilization. The image of Scandinavia emergent from this example is a specific homogenous space in which the three countries (and maybe more) merge into a unity; a hermetic utopia with a solid foundation conveyed through the Marxist formula: “it is not the consciousness of men that determines their existence but their social existence that determines their consciousness²⁶”, or as it is stated in the vulgar Soviet interpretation within Marxism-Leninism “environment defines your subjectivity”.

The ties between literary and cultural Scandinavia existing preferably in two dimensions – of the Viking Age and contemporary (dis)utopia – and popularity of the Scandinavian way of living are stronger than it may seem at first due to the international marketing of the image of Scandinavia as home (from the singular concept of the Danish proper *hygge* to Sweden listing its entire country on Airbnb rentals²⁷). Recollecting the pattern found in one of the most brilliant Freudian linguistic analyses we come across in *The Uncanny*²⁸, the line of marketing abroad is arranged along the axis of *ohemlig*. In Swedish, etymologically pertaining to home and the household, but meaning open and revealed, as opposed to secretive and concealed, this is the case if internationally achievable comfort and all of Sweden being accessible to anyone (the right which is, moreover, protected by law). However, maintaining the semantic connection to the common Germanic legacy, as is evident from Freud’s findings, *ohemlig* may also be *unheimlich*, or creepy, unfamiliar, insecure, and here it becomes easy to accommodate the longing for the Viking Age (putting forward the image of the almighty world-traveler and conqueror who can come and possess anyone’s home in all aspects of meaning) and keen interest for the ethno-detectives (playing off the scenarios of what could have gone wrong in the societies where there should be no need to kill for food or shelter fulfilling basic, almost instinctual, needs).

Obviously, the previous example, as well as the whole article, makes no claims as to fully grasp and explain some phenomenon or singular occurrence. I am more inclined to talk about the perceptions, expectations, and beliefs present in Ukraine today. I attempt to explain why they might occur. The process

of stereotypification by definition implies the distortion of reality, but it is necessary inasmuch as establishing a certain image which can further be either solidified or serve as a ground for academic work targeting at restoring the historical truth. The joke intended leads to the idea that one of the means of making stereotypes is travel writing, the genre built upon the impressions and reflections of the traveler of the places and people he or she has seen in the course of the not the least cognitive journey. I have found one solid example of such text written by the author of the *Executed Renaissance* – Valerian Polishchuk. At the beginning of the 1930s he managed to spend a month in Norway and less time in Sweden and Finland and put his observations to words in *The Raid into Scandinavia*²⁹. I will offer just several examples extracted from the text to give the general idea. The reader of the travel notes learns the following about the Norwegians: “... Northern giants, because it is known from all statistics, that this is the tallest race in the world. Men as well as women, I repeat, are tall, slim, and flexible. Especially this is felt when one is watching girls and young women. Blondes, golden faces somehow imperiously repose on the tall pillars of the torsos that especially highlight their flexible power when walking under the close observation. All of them are male and female skiers, ice-skaters, rowers. For the sports in Norway, as well as in Sweden, are the necessary addition to life and getting around³⁰”. After visiting the art gallery Polishchuk concluded, that in the room with contemporary paintings (the beginning of the 20th century): “New industrial and affluent Norway after the economic break burst out with rich and colorful painting. ... [which] has its own Scandinavian sporty vivacity, where the soul of those juicy petty bourgeoisie women and their tall partners, was steeped in sea winds and warmed by electrical stoves in their households. I intentionally call them “petty bourgeoisie women and their tall partners” because you will not see a worker story and the images of labor in these halls. You will instead see the newly represented Scandinavian nature and other European countries shown through the brushstrokes of these young painters because on its steamship Norway has dropped by everywhere³¹“. And the last of the examples is theater-inspired: “Theatrical culture, as to our Soviet mind, is rather late-blooming. The work of the actors – in realistic tones. At first they sit and talk, then, as the action develops, – walk and scream or walk and talk. But the public perceives it the best way possible; the cues are covered with laughter³²“. Here it should be mentioned, that the author did not know any Norwegian, so he could barely appreciate the action originating, developing, and concluding in the dialogue.

To sum up, more and more people every year demonstrate keen interest in the Northern countries. For now, it is mostly narrowed down to the immigration options, but the situation is likely to shift towards cognition and understanding of the way these countries function not only due to cutting-edge

designs but also several centuries long histories, cultures, and languages. Important in this aspect is the division of Scandinavian conglomerate region into separate unique countries with common heritage and close connections, and also the building of solid basis for humanitarian knowledge that always supplies the best access to all other spheres of social life and performance of the human spirit. In order to achieve this, cooperation between the cultural institutions and embassies of the respective countries is required, as well as furthering of the studies on the level of higher education viewed as the source for future translators, cultural ambassadors, and promoters of Scandinavian experiences based of factual knowledge.

Footnotes

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