

# The Rape of Civilization: Recurrent Structure in Myroslav Irchan's Prose

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There is a recurrent pattern in Myroslav Irchan's storytelling: a relatively peaceful, if not entirely idyllic, existence is disrupted by a powerful and evil intruder. The latter is in most cases a war or a brutal colonization and conquest. In both scenarios the intervention is the product of hatred and greed, and the conflict rapidly dehumanizes the combatants.

The stories are framed within a larger question: whether contemporary civilization is fatally flawed. Irchan's most disturbing and brutal scenes deal with national, ethnic, and political violence, in which one side justifies the imposition of its will on the grounds of cultural superiority and the march of progress. The writer suggests that contemporary socio-political forces are indeed driving the world to destruction. Irchan's plot structures and endings incorporate his ultimate message of socialism, which he saw as the only idea capable of rising above national hatreds and ending class competition. His heroic characters typically look forward to a reconstructed, "new" world from which the horrors of armed conflict have been eliminated. There is no doubt that Irchan himself expected and encouraged such a Marxist interpretation of his work: he himself spoke of the "decoding" that his style required, suggesting in this way that it should be viewed as symbolic act and ideology.<sup>1</sup> However, whereas on the surface his

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1. In his "Avtobiohrafiiia" (Autobiography, 1927) the author explains that as a "proletarian writer" he "consciously sacrifices himself for his reader" because he tries "to write in a manner that corresponds to his [reader's] intellectual level. Therefore, in many cases I have not kept up with the modern way of writing" (Myroslav Irchan, *Proty smerty: Opovidannia* [Montreal: Ivan Hnyda, 1927], 157). In a second autobiographical sketch, "Pro sebe" (About Myself, 1932), he complains that almost no critic has "decoded [rozshyfruvav] from a reading of my works those ideas that gave birth to them" (Myroslav Irchan, *Vybrani tvory*, vol. 2 [Kyiv: Derzhavne vydavnytstvo khudozhnoi literatury, 1956], 459).

message appears clear, a careful analysis of his form uncovers complicating messages that to a large degree subvert the stated intention.

The recurrent pattern can be detected in all of Irchan's major prose works.<sup>2</sup> The collection of reminiscences *V burianakh* (In the Weeds, 1925) is concerned with the war of 1919–20 between the Army of the Ukrainian National Republic and the Poles on one side and the Red Army on the other. Another such collection, *Tragediia pershoho travnia* (The Tragedy of May First, 1923), recounts the experiences of a regiment of Sich Riflemen in the same period; it charts and attempts to justify the evolution of a section of the army to Bolshevik positions. The story collection *Karpatska nich* (Carpathian Night, 1924) describes the destruction of a simple man's life during the First World War and his ensuing sufferings as an immigrant labourer in Canada. The story "Batko" (The Father, 1921) describes a poor Jewish trader whose happy family life and sanity are destroyed when a group of anti-Semitic soldiers rape and kill his two daughters. In "Moloda maty" (A Young Mother, 1923) it is a young woman who is robbed of her dream of family life when her husband is killed in a mining accident in Canada. "Smert Asuara" (The Death of Asuar, 1927) concerns the fate of an Inuit boy who, along with 248 other children, is forcibly deported from Alaska to the United States, placed in a non-native family, and robbed of his culture. The Inuit community is depicted as the victim of industrial development and cultural genocide.

In all of his works Irchan is mindful of the larger political message. For example, in *Kanadska Ukraina* (Canadian Ukraine, 1930), an essay on Canadian history and the role of the Ukrainian emigration, the connection between four hundred years of colonialism and the treatment of Ukrainian immigrant labour is made explicit. The Anglo-Saxon establishment is bent on exploiting and assimilating the new immigrant in the same manner as they earlier treated the native. As the author claims, this fact is frequently denied or ignored by Ukrainian writers familiar with Canada: "The Ukrainian intelligentsia, which went on tours to its 'brothers overseas' or settled in Canada, wrote only

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2. His most important prose publications were: *Smikh Nirvany: Narysy i noveli* (Lviv: Komisarariat Ukrainskykh sichovykh striltsiv v Volodymyri Volynskim, 1918); *Filmy revoliutsii: Narysy i noveli* (Berlin and New York: Kultura, 1923); *Tragediia pershoho travnia: Spomyny z horozhanskoï viiny na Ukraini*, vol. 1 (New York: Molot, 1923); *Karpatska nich: Opovidannia* (Winnipeg: Robitnycho-farmerske vydavnyche tovarystvo, 1924); *V burianakh: Spohady z hromadianskoï viiny na Ukraini*, vol. 2 (Toronto: Komitet budovy Ukrainskoho robitnychoho domu v Toronto, 1925); *Proty smerty: Opovidannia* (Montreal: Ivan Hnyda, 1927); *Na pivdorozi: Narysy i opovidannia* (Kharkiv: Derzhavne vydavnytstvo Ukrainy, 1930); and *Vybrani tvory*, 2 vols. (Kyiv: Derzhavne vydavnytstvo khudozhnoi literatury, 1956).

encomiums prepared in an English sauce and painted Canada as a real heaven on Earth."<sup>3</sup>

In all of these cases, the cruelty, violence, and ideological blindness of the disruptive force is stressed. Rapes, pogroms, and profiteering in wartime have their analogies in judicial murder, genocide, and the swindling of the labour force in peacetime. The deeper plot in these works is the discourse on civilization and savagery. The narrator intervenes at various points to express ironic commentary on the claims of the powerful to cultural sophistication; he exposes their faith in a "civilizing mission" as merely a pretext for conquest. Military intervention and assimilationist ideas provide the drive to dominate politically and profit economically. The veneer of gentility and respectability that covers representatives of the exploiting classes is a sham; beneath it lies a naked desire for personal enrichment. In *V burianakh* the narrator openly condemns the "pillars of Western European culture, the super-civilized bankers, factory owners, property owners, and 'holy' fathers, who ... howl about the wild East."<sup>4</sup> Later in the same work he expresses outrage at the behaviour of "cultured" Polish gentlemen. His Belarusian friend comments: "Those people are still living the 'holy' inquisition and consider themselves messiahs, the sole defenders of civilization against the Eastern Vandals. The present war against us is in their eyes a crusade."<sup>5</sup> In a similar vein, "Bila malpa" (The White Monkey, 1926) aims to show that the Anglo-Saxon middle class is shamelessly concerned with financial gain. Both men and women exploit immigrants to obtain the material possessions that they covet. In the story a beautiful and respectable woman living in an elegant home on Machray Avenue (at the time a middle class Anglo-Saxon enclave in Winnipeg's immigrant-dominated North End) accepts the sexual advances of the immigrant narrator, along with the expensive presents he gives her. She feels no pangs of remorse when her husband, George Murphy, returns. The Murphys are polite, understated and, above all, controlled in their behaviour. Both husband and wife accept the overriding importance of two precepts: the need to maintain respectable appearances and the desirability of acquiring possessions. The key to their characters, however, is the immigrant narrator's observation that nothing would ever penetrate George Murphy's sang-froid: he is incapable of compassion and self-sacrifice. Like the judge and the policeman in "Smert Asuara" who sent the hapless Inuit boy to the electric chair, he represents a complacency that depends on limited vision and an edited social conscience. It is these characters' atrophied moral sensibility that makes them defective and rather pathetic human beings.

3. Irchan, "Kanadska Ukraina," repr. in his *Vybrani tvory*, 2: 340–1.

4. Irchan, *V burianakh*, 26.

5. *Ibid.*, 44.

The hopes of humanity rest not with the exploitative and individualistic bourgeoisie or their servants, but with simple people who reject the gospel of acquisitiveness. They are the farmers, labourers, and traders who are linked to the land, their extended families, and their communities. In many cases the uprooting of their lives through war or emigration has caused a loss of bearings. Their integration into the world of foreign military adventures and industrial expansion, where they are to be mere cannon fodder or raw material for industrial production, has been a traumatic dehumanizing experience. Several stories describe the acculturation to the new reality as the indirect cause of personal tragedy. "Nadii" (Hopes, 1926), for example, is written with the purpose of demonstrating that two children of immigrants in Winnipeg's North End have been raised on false dreams of escaping from a life of labour. Their aspirations for professional careers as a musician and actress, respectively, are thwarted by poverty and lack of opportunity. At the same time, however, the children have turned their backs on their parents and their land of origin. They have assimilated the nativist contempt for immigrants. Cut off from the higher civilizing influences of both the old and the new culture, they are destined to lead spiritually impoverished, disappointed lives.

In "Apostoly" (Apostles, 1927), another story set in immigrant Winnipeg, it is a group of whisky-distilling Christians who represent the degeneration of the community: their faith is a parody of Christianity, a mind-befuddling opium. The equation of alcoholism and religion is a clear Marxist dismissal of false consciousness. The dying socialist at the story's conclusion juxtaposes the claims of this degenerate cult with the teachings of the great enlightener and social activist Ivan Franko, making it clear where true virtue and salvation lie.

In this way Irchan's stories set up an opposition between civilization and barbarism that reverses the habitual metropolitan representation of peripheral and defenseless "native" people as backward and the raw material for assimilation into a higher civilization. "Proty smerty" (Against Death), the opening story of the collection with the same name, distills Irchan's thoroughly orthodox Marxist philosophy into a parable.<sup>6</sup> It paints the development of humanity as a remarkable and wondrous phenomenon that has been poisoned by the desire of one class or nation to rule another. When this disfiguring and corrupting characteristic is eliminated, presumably after the construction of a socialist society, full human potential can be realized. Imperialist, metropolitan views might paint the resistance of colonized cultures as blind, anarchic, and chaotic forces whose passionate opposition to assimilation threatens to unleash destruction, but in Irchan this equation is reversed to portray the dominant power as the force of dissolution and anarchy, and the traditional cultures as forces for constructive

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6. Irchan, *Proty smerty*, 5-12.

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cultural life. This underlying structure enables him to link exploited nations and peoples in a perspective of global resistance.

The author does not accept a Schopenhauerian view that the blind Will that drives human conduct is a terrible and absurd force from which one must escape. His message is to urge the victims of war and class exploitation to resistance. The longer prose works reveal a kind of *Bildungsroman* structure in which the leading character reaches a higher sense of personal and political understanding at the end and begins waging a conscious struggle with political evil. Rather than negating the Will, the author's position drifts toward the Nietzschean embrace of the Will's power to effect change. The dull, inarticulate individuals who have lost all sense of history or have degenerated into alcoholism or violence can, in some cases at least, be rescued and made into a force for good. The thin, alcohol-distilling Indian whom the narrator finds fishing on the banks of the Red River in "Vudzhenia ryba" (Smoked Fish, 1925) is described as an example of the degenerate condition to which the native population has been reduced. His counterparts can be found in the Inuit Asuar of "Smert Asuara," in the brutal Lithuanian of *Karpatska nich*, and in the psychotic Ostafii of "Za krov" (For Blood, 1923). However, although the native fisherman and the perverse Ostafii appear irredeemable, the Lithuanian undergoes a transformation that leads to a rejection of senseless and cruel violence. Asuar's act of murder is described as a conscious act of political revenge, with which the reader is led to sympathize. The law court and the judge, with their pedantic formalities and circumscribed field of vision, cannot understand the overriding issue of genocide or the reasons for Asuar's conduct: the facts of colonial expansion are not admissible as legal evidence, nor can their discomfoting reality be allowed to impinge on the awareness of Western Canada's establishment.

The same closing of the mind that allows the objectifying of people is described in the pogroms of Jews and the Communist victimization of local Ukrainian villages in Western Ukraine in 1919 and 1920. These scenes are depicted with shocking candour in *Tragediia pershoho travnia*. The revolting attitudes and unspeakable acts of cruelty are, in fact, an important element in justifying the narrator's turn to communism. He makes it clear that he believes in the new Communist regime's will to restore "civilized" behaviour and end the violence. But the message is a wider one. Savagery, it is clear, can stem not only from upper-class prejudice and military aggression; it can rise from the unenlightened and oppressed village of one's compatriots. As he witnesses scenes of destruction, he remembers the description of the *haidamaka* uprisings in Polish literature and of lawlessness in Panteleimon Kulish's historical fiction. A fear of the blind violence that in the past accompanied the striving of Ukrainian peasants to overthrow their oppressors, which is inevitably released in times of war with ensuing decivilizing tendencies, haunt the writer.

The author's attempts at introducing this orthodox Marxist political message in his prose were not without complications. Firstly, he fails to achieve a tidy narrative closure. In however muted a form, he criticizes the violence and cruelty of the Communist side. It is the Bolsheviks of Jewish origin who poke out the eyes of the icons and forcibly requisition and sell peasant property for personal profit.<sup>7</sup> Behind the Bolshevik front lines there are hordes of useless "panic commissars" ready to line their pockets and then run at the first sign of danger. The lines between ethical and unethical conduct, between civilized and uncivilized behaviour, are not as clear as a rigidly partisan approach might require. It is, indeed, the confusion of these zones that makes Irchan's work particularly interesting and, of course, made him a suspect figure to the Soviet authorities.

The complications of the ideological plot are intensified by the author's choice of literary forms. Irchan's reliance on impressionistic devices frequently works against the projection of a simple, unambiguous message. In fact, it often produces inconsistencies. He himself noted in his "Avtoportret" (Self-Portrait, 1927) that there was an opposition in his work between class obligations and personal feelings. The typical modernist stress on the introverted, the psychological life of individuals, the narrow but intensely lived time frame, the flow of impressions, and the divided and conflicted consciousness were all part of his technique. Irchan articulates this interest in self-consciousness by deploying devices such as stream of consciousness, interior monologue, *style indirecte libre*, portrayal of the divided self, and fragmentary composition.

When he chooses common people for his heroes and heroines or depicts a group experience, he is describing one collective individual—the development of a social psychology. Sometimes, as in his descriptions of soldiers in combat, this technique of characterization is analogous to the portrayal of the collective hero in Eisenstein's *Battleship Potemkin* or constructivist dramas of the 1920s. But impressionistic techniques are rather poor tools for didactic writing, which prefers the abstract and typical, eschewing the concrete and individual. Almost by definition, an impressionistic portrayal is limited and subjective, does not grasp the entire picture, and cannot, therefore, move towards easy and complete closure. Its organizing principle is, more often than not, the focus on the fluctuations in mood, often in a character who is not central to the political or historical events described. As he delves into individual psychology, the author's orthodox politics disintegrate.

"Avtoportret" captures the writer's own conflict between a sense of social responsibility and a self-exploratory urge. He admits that his consciousness has split. One persona requires him to write something that his public will recognize

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7. *Tragediia pershoho travnia*, 78.

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as socially significant in order to meet an editor's deadline. The other persona advises him to write about himself, to compose an individual portrait. "But then I shall be a futurist!" he declares. The role of futurism is identified here with self-promotion, self-indulgence, and egotism. His "futurist" alter ego, however, accuses him of cowardice and insists that only such self-examination will produce originality. The two egos co-exist. Together they succeed in composing a personal interview in which the individualist-subjectivist poses questions and the collectivist-rationalist responds. "Avtoportret" is an exploration of Irchan's personal dilemma. His prose does in fact demonstrate the presence of both personalities. This story is one of his most successful.<sup>8</sup>

The problem for Irchan lies not so much in the fact that this attention to psychology paralyzes the political energy of the individual as in the recognition that it becomes self-absorbing to the point of rendering the historical moment irrelevant. A typical setting for the impressionist exploration of the mind is to be found in the use of the *entr'acte*. This is usually a scene in which the hero has been cut off from normal existence because he is in hiding or because he has been forced into a period of detached reflection.<sup>9</sup> During these periods the hero's thoughts (Irchan invariably chooses a male protagonist) are often presented as a stream of consciousness or through *style indirecte libre*. His free-flowing, meditative, and detached observations drift into unexpected and seemingly irrelevant details and manifest a variegated consciousness that has to be brought back to "reality." The narrator reveals himself as primarily interested in the mingling of sense data as an end in itself. Most commonly these moments allow him to exploit two favourite devices of impressionism: the dream sequence and the hallucination.

A memorable moment of the *entr'acte* occurs in *V burianakh*. The hero is caught behind enemy lines and crawls into a thick hedge, where he hides for four days. The reader, like the hero, observes the war and the working of the character's own mind from this molelike perspective, in which the arrival of chickens seeking shade and the hoeing of a couple in a neighbouring field are

8. In "Pro sebe" (p. 442) the author notes that the piece was "honest" and that he received admiring letters from readers.

9. Vira Aheieva has written: "Time in the impressionist novella is often an episode of escape from society, from the habitual round of social and daily duties, tiresome traditions—a situation of temporary separation from almost all external relations. (A similar removal, dissociation from the social maelstrom, can be found in the novels of impressionists, even in one as voluminous as M. Proust's *A la recherche du temps perdu*.) The impressionists were interested not in the continuity of history, but the individual moment specially isolated from it" (Vira P. Aheieva, *Ukrainska impresionistychna proza* [Kyiv: Instytut literatury im. T. H. Shevchenka Natsionalnoi akademii nauk Ukrainy, 1994], 157).

the day's highlights. Hunger and delirium deform the hero's thoughts. A similar pattern occurs throughout Irchan's stories. The distorted perspective is often that of a character with limited understanding (as in *Karpatska nich* and "Asuar") or one who is at a distance and lacks familiarity with the details of the life being observed. The narrator in "Vudzhena ryba" views the old fort across the Red River, contemplating the fact that it is now a restaurant and place of upper-class amusement. In "Bila malpa" the disoriented narrator stands outside the house on Machray Avenue, from where he expresses his contempt for middle-class hypocrisy. These moments of reflection provide an opportunity for commentary on the history of native conquest in the first case, and on the false respectability of the Anglo-Saxon petit bourgeois in the second. However, typically, they also admit other "extraneous" material and are filtered through the confused haze of an unreliable consciousness, which is itself driven by jealousy, misunderstanding, or spleen.

The choice of simple, unsophisticated protagonists is limiting artistically. Firstly, Irchan restricts himself to portraying the milieu of the down-and-out labourer. The brief meeting with George Murphy and his wife in "Bila malpa" is an exception, but it fails to give a convincing portrayal of the two middle-class protagonists. We know nothing of the interior of the house on Machray or of the Murphys' milieu. The point of the story is the immigrant's disillusionment. Secondly, the limited consciousness of Irchan's protagonists and the unrelenting grimness of their fate leads to monotony. Unlike, for example, Upton Sinclair, with whom he was acquainted and corresponded and who influenced his portrayal of grim labour conditions,<sup>10</sup> Irchan does not describe immigrant leisure activities or the wider social life of the community. In each prose work we are given only the individual consciousness of a loner.

This becomes a greater flaw in a longer work, something the author senses when in *Karpatska nich* he appears to apologize for the limitations of his hero Matvii Shavala: "Matvii continued to live in far-off America, not knowing about anything. In truth he did not know America, even after living there for eight years. His world was small: the factory and the room. He was only interested in his work, in getting his pay, and chewed on his own pain without sharing it with anyone. He had not been to the city once because he had no reason to go."<sup>11</sup> This is a particularly narrow lens through which to view social life, and it is coupled with other drawbacks. There is little in the way of romantic interest: Matvii has no domestic obligations and almost no friends. He is as lost and emotionally isolated in Winnipeg as he was in the trenches during the First

10. See Mykhailo I. Kachaniuk, foreword to Irchan, *Na pividorozi*, 13.

11. Irchan, *Karpatska nich*, 107.



World War. The same can be said of the autobiographical narrator of *V burianakh*.

The tension between the political imperative and the writer's desire to portray the conflicted individual consciousness surfaces powerfully when a character feels sympathy for the enemy. The hero of "Kniazhna" (The Princess, 1921), for example, admits his weakness—attraction to the opposite sex. We learn that beautiful aristocrats have always played a part in his fantasies; ever since he was a child he had listened to stories about princesses. In the incident described he resists the charms of a beautiful counter-revolutionary aristocrat who comes to him in the form of an apparition. In the end he shoots her. The hero, it is suggested, is trying to exorcise his attraction to the books and culture of the past. Upon seeing the art and lavish library in the palace where the revolutionary soldiers are billeted, he experiences a destructive urge: "We should dynamite all of it! Blow up the whole refined, sumptuous gentry culture! Tear down the expensive frescoes with our fingernails! They are not made with paint, but blood, the blood of millions. The wonderful carvings should be effaced with blood! The glistening floor washed in blood!"<sup>12</sup>

This passage has often been quoted. It has generally not been pointed out that Irchan's intention is ironic. It is a remarkably unconvincing manner of building "civilization" and one in which the narrator himself does not believe. Although he claims to understand the vandalizing "psychology of the masses," he clearly disagrees with it and feels a much more powerful attraction to literature and the "wonderful" art he sees in the palace. In this case the politically correct equation is again overturned: it is the masses who are destroying civilization, and even though it is the civilization of the rich, the narrator-hero, in spite of his bravado, is clearly disturbed. In later stories the author stressed the corrupt and unappealing nature of "bourgeois" culture, but in this early futurist piece the refined culture exercises a powerful attraction that the narrator struggles to overcome.

It is also clear from Irchan's portrayal of other acts against the landowners (*pany*) that his sympathies for the oppressed do not extend to condoning all acts of violence. The act of arson committed against the landowner's estate in "Zmovnyky" (Conspirators, 1923) is not a conscious political act and is opposed by the hardworking old peasant, Prokipchuk, who comments: "Even though it's the *pan*'s, it's still a sin. It's someone's labour."<sup>13</sup> Prokipchuk, who opens and closes the story, presents a counter-position to that of the arsonists. The critique of blind violence is, perhaps, most clearly made in "Za krov," a story omitted

12. Irchan, *Na pivdorozi*, 91.

13. Irchan, *Proty smerty*, 38.

from later Soviet editions.<sup>14</sup> Here the “protest” against Polish landowners is organized by a boy who pathologically detests girls. The attempt to abduct the landowner’s little girl ends in a double drowning—hers and that of another boy-abductor who tries to save her at the last moment. The violence here is senseless, the product of an unreflecting hatred internalized by small children. The author’s sympathies lie with the gentry family, whose civilized existence has been tragically and pointlessly destroyed.

The pressure of Irchan’s political commitment weighed heavily on his later works, which, it is patently evident, were adapted to the Soviet line. His best passages remain the “impressionistic” renderings of individual consciousness. For this reason his early works, particularly the prose collection *Filmy revoliutsii* (Films of the Revolution, 1923) and *V burianakh*, are generally considered his most impressive achievement. They are full of the spontaneous flow of thought, feeling, and irreverent, sometimes frivolous and unexpected, ideas. In them the writer experiments with hallucinatory dream sequences, flashbacks, and sudden juxtapositions in a flow of creativity that was never again as untrammelled.<sup>15</sup> These early works still bear strong traces of the influence of Mykhailo Iatskiv, with whom Irchan was personally acquainted in the prerevolutionary years and whose symbolist prose he imitated,<sup>16</sup> and of the telegraphic style of the Ukrainian futurists, with whom he associated in 1921 and 1922.<sup>17</sup> These traces are evident in the impressionistic combat scenes in *Filmy revoliutsii* and *V burianakh* for which Irchan became famous.

The devices of flashback and hallucination also work to undermine any simple political message. Flashback allows Irchan to condense a decade or more into a narrow time frame in *Karpatska nich* and to capture a moment from the past in the stories “Prysmeryk mynuloho” (Twilights of the Past, 1921) and “Tse bulo tak davno” (It Was So Long Ago, 1922). Hallucination is used to describe an apparition in “Kniazhna.” The narrator’s interpretation of these events,

14. Originally published in Irchan, *Proty smerty*, 39–50, it was dropped from *Napivdorozh* and *Vybrani tvory*.

15. In his “Avtoportret” the author comments: “Many have said that my sketches and tales from the revolutionary period in Ukraine are the best things I wrote. I really wrote them in the maelstrom of the revolution. I wrote them because I was afraid that no one else would write about those small events, which took place before my eyes. Out of them was born a new life and a new word. We were all poets then, but our poetry was so powerful at that time that no one could ever convey its power and beauty” (Irchan, *Proty smerty*, 155).

16. See Vladen Vlasenko and Petro Kravchuk, *Myroslav Irchan: Zhyttia i tvorchist* (Kyiv: Radianskyi pysmennyk, 1960), 19; and Kachaniuk, 9. Irchan’s first collection, *Smikh Nirvany* (The Laughter of Nirvana, 1918), was influenced by Iatskiv’s symbolist.

17. See Kachaniuk, 10–11.

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however, is questionable. The flashback might be a personal interpretation and editing of the past. In the last story he is not able to establish whether the apparition was "real" or a product of his imagination. In all cases where the drama of the doubting and confused mind is Irchan's interest, his prose takes on a richer texture and offers more possible readings and more complex interpretations.

This is also true of Irchan's impressionistic descriptions of nature. The picture of the midnight storm at the beginning of "Smert Asuara" is one of his finest passages. It is a prose poem of vivid, evocative imagery and considerable lyrical beauty. The eerie imagery of the stormy night sets the atmosphere and casts its reflection over the entire story. The ending, which links the storm's lightning to the execution of Asuar in the electric chair, is a not entirely successful attempt by the author to integrate the earlier imagery. The vivid details of the storm in the city capture the reader's imagination in a way that cannot be fully reconciled with the Irchan's didactic intent. The symbolism of a menacing natural phenomenon, by threatening to blindly sweep everything before it, particularly within the nighttime setting that he favoured, has a more metaphysical than political significance. The description of the night in "Taina nochi" (The Secret of the Night, 1922) and the approaching hurricane in "V poloni morskoi ordy" (Captive of the Sea Horde, 1928) are two further examples. Their meaning is ambiguous, but, partly as a result of this, a stronger aesthetic effect is created here than in the more polished stories over which the author laboured.<sup>18</sup> Here the power of nature escapes compartmentalization in the civilization/savagery dichotomy that underpins Irchan's ideology. It carries a disturbing, deeper message about the recurrence and strength of natural and, by implication, social disturbances.

Ukrainian modernism began as a protest of the free imagination against the stereotypes of populism and its pious calls to social activism and patriotism. A revelation of the complexities and contradictions of the inner life was one of its major contributions to literature and, more broadly, intellectual life. The analytical scalpel was put to various purposes. In Petro Karmansky's work it brought to the surface individual disgust with the pseudo-patriotism and hypocrisy of national leaders; in the writings of Lesia Ukrainka and Olha Kobylianska it revealed the discontentment with women's consciousness having been excluded from literature and history; and in Volodymyr Vynnychenko's prose the focus became the workings of "pathological" psyches. Irchan began as

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18. In his second autobiography, "Pro sebe," Irchan explains that he studied the life of Alaskan natives and checked the details of his story assiduously. He reports that he even went to see a film four times because it had a short scene with an electric chair, an object he wished to describe in the story. See Irchan, *Vybrani tvory*, 2: 454.

an investigator of the inner voice of the oppressed individual from the masses. In the end, the ever more demanding strictures of the new social gospel to which he adhered hindered him from fully exploring the rich material he had unearthed.<sup>19</sup>

In the 1930s, after returning to the USSR, Irchan wrote reports of the successful collectivization of Soviet Ukraine and made favourable comparisons between Soviet and Canadian life.<sup>20</sup> He continued to hammer out the same message, but his prose was devoid both of the political honesty and the literary sophistication that had animated his earlier writings. Notably missing were precisely the devices of literary impressionism. Consequently, the later accounts fall remarkably flat. In the end Irchan's political orthodoxy did not prove enough to save him from arrest. In 1934 he was accused of terrorism and membership in a counter-revolutionary organization working on behalf of the Nazis. He was sentenced to ten years' imprisonment and sent to a concentration camp in the Solovets Islands. In 1937 he was tried a second time for "maintaining his counter-revolutionary activities" and executed.<sup>21</sup> These accusations were, of course, ridiculous. Irchan was a loyal Party man and an effective voice for the Communist cause. His "crimes" were an original manner of expression and a concern with the Ukrainian national identity.

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19. Irchan looked to Western literature for spiritual enrichment in the same way that the above-mentioned writers did, but he lamented the fact that his social and political obligations prevented him from following modern trends more closely, declaring that "in many cases I have fallen behind the modern manner of writing" ("Avtoportret," 157). Karmansky summarizes the early modernist position in his *Ukrainska bohema: Z nahody trydtsiatlittia Molodoi muzy* (Lviv: Roman Kulchytsky, 1936), 114. For a recent study of the modernism of Lesia Ukrainka and Kobylanska as an opposition to "the patriarchal model of culture," see Solomea Pavlychko, "Modernism vs. Populism in Fin de Siècle Ukrainian Literature: A Case of Gender Conflict," in *Engendering Slavic Literatures*, ed. Pamela Chester and Sibelan Forrester (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1996), 83-103.

20. See, for example, his "Kanadska Ukraina" and "Z prerii Kanady v stepy Ukrainy" (From the Prairies of Canada to the Steppes of Ukraine, 1930), repr. in his *Vybrani tvory*, 2: 335-62 and 363-430.

21. Irchan's arrest and sentencing was reported in a pro-Communist newspaper published in the United States by a Party member then visiting Ukraine. See Samitnyi [V. Rybak], "Kolektyvizatsiia i klasova borotba na seli," *Ukrainski shchodenni visty*, 16 October 1934; and Peter Krawchuk, *The Unforgettable Myroslav Irchan: Pages from a Valiant Life* (Edmonton: Kobzar, 1998), 65.