Ksenia at the Rose Garden Café or the Loneliness of the Long-Distance Ukrainian

1. Ksenia

In summer 2006 I spent three months at the University of Greifswald, on the Baltic coast of the former East Germany, teaching in the department of Fremdsprachige Philologien. One of my courses was called “Aspects of Ukrainian-Canadian culture” and dealt with representative figures from the Ukrainian diaspora in Canada, and the ways in which they have negotiated complex questions of identity and belonging. The course included works by visual artists William Kurelek and Natalka Husar, literary texts including several short stories and my own Honey and Ashes, a family memoir, non-fiction in the form of Myrna Kostash’s All of Baba’s Children, music by Alexis Kochan as well as films by Halia Kuchmij and John Paskevich. To give my students some background to the issues and topics they were to encounter, I assigned Anna Reid’s engaging, though often problematic Borderland: A Journey through the History of Ukraine.

Several of my students were from cities like Swinoujscie and Szczecin: the Polish border is only a few hours’ drive from Greifswald. The majority of my students, however, were German, and one—the one whose name features in the title of this talk, was as hyphenated as any Canadian, a young woman I shall call Ksenia Lutz. Among my twenty-odd highly intelligent students, she stood out for me because of the intensity and urgency of her interest in all things Ukrainian. Slender, fair-haired, pale, she gave the impression of physical fragility and an immense strength of concentration. When she argued a point or presented an alternative interpretation of a text, her face would take on the flushed, new-skinned quality of a scar.

At the end of the course, Ksenia asked me out for tea at a café squeezed into a narrow courtyard behind a bakery not far from the faculty—nothing was very far from the faculty; Greifswald is a former Hanseatic League town with an ancient market square, and at the time of my visit it had not caught up with pre-Great-Recession Galloping Consumerism: on any given day there were far more people on bicycles than cellphones. True to its name, the Rosengarten café where we sat down to talk together was studded with pink and red and crimson-yellow roses, and we had the small, quiet, scented place all to our selves.

Ksenia began by telling me of her family, and particularly, her mother, who was born in Germany, the child of Displaced Persons from Kolomeya who escaped the fate of repatriation to Soviet Ukraine at the end of World War II. I’ve forgotten, now, how Ksenia’s parents met, but she was brought up in Munich, christened in the Greek Catholic church, and sent to ridna shkola under its auspices. Her teacher, she confessed, was a severe woman who showed her displeasure at Ksenia’s learning the Cyrillic alphabet far more quickly than the teacher’s own children. For Ksenia, this was the beginning of an awareness that her Ukrainianness, and her assertion of belonging to her mother’s rather than her father’s people, brought with it certain punitive consequences. Isolated by her precocity in leaning the Cyrillic alphabet, Ksenia later felt, or was made to feel, inadequate or insufficient in her Ukrainianness during her adolescence, when she was a member of various Ukrainian youth organizations; when she entered university, she was
accused of being willfully perverse in her commitment to the Ukrainian language. Having made the decision to major in Slavic languages with Ukrainian rather than Russian as her major, she was treated with skepticism by certain faculty members, including a professor with a considerable degree of seniority, who, observing that Ukrainian was nothing more than a dialect of Russian, expressed incredulity that Ms Lutz would dedicate herself to something so unworthy. “Is your family Ukrainian?” the professor asked, suddenly recalling this student’s non-Germanic Christian name. “My mother is,” Ksenia replied. “Then that explains it,” the professor observed, the assumption being that the Ukrainian language is of so little intrinsic interest and importance that only those with some burden of blood, would choose to master it. The probability that anyone with a doctorate in Ukrainian language and linguistic studies would find it difficult to find a university appointment wasn’t mentioned: perhaps it didn’t have to be.

When she went to Ukraine to spend the obligatory year abroad essential to students of foreign languages, Ksenia was met by a parallel skepticism on the part of Ukrainians themselves. In L’viv, she was constantly upbraided for assuming she could consider herself to be Ukrainian, and for making grammatical errors in a language which most non-native-Slavic speakers find ferociously complicated. When she went on to Kyiv she frequently found herself at the mercy of people who would address her in a torrent of Russian; only when she protested that she didn’t understand their language would they grudgingly switch to fluent Ukrainian.

“I never felt more German than when I was in Ukraine,” Ksenia confessed, as we drank our tea and nibbled at pig’s ears—the German word for a pastry known in French by the more delicate term papillon. “People knew I wasn’t Ukrainian just by looking at me—at my glasses, for example”. They were small, rimless disks—she explained that she grew up wearing glasses with clumsy, heavy frames and that she couldn’t bear to deck herself out in them any longer. Rimless glasses were a rarity in Ukraine when she lived there, hence her sense that people spotted her “Made in Germany” label from a kilometer away. Ksenia returned to her studies in Germany with a sizable collection of Ukrainian folk and rock music, and with her emotions—her ‘heart and soul,’ as she put it—rooted deeply in Ukraine; continuing her demanding labours in Slavic Studies (courses in Czech and Russian, as well as Ukrainian) she made time to audit my seminar, latching on to the texts I taught, the images I showed, as if they were lifebuoys thrown to an exhausted swimmer.

“I don’t know who I am,” she lamented. “I don’t know where I belong.” The Ukrainian community in Munich, she volunteered, was extremely standoffish—she made a gesture with a finger flicked up from the tip of the nose: universal sign language indicating the exclusionary snobbery of self-proclaimed elites. She was hoping, she told me, that she might fare better in Canada; that the diaspora there would be more welcoming or less forbidding; that she might, in a city like Winnipeg or Edmonton, discover a sense of belonging. I replied that it could indeed be so, but warned her that Ukrainian ethno-linguistic snobbery seemed to know no borders, mentioning the case of a Ukrainian-language primary school in Toronto attended by many recent immigrants from Ukraine. The novi prybuli, it seems, had the habit of mocking the accents and vocabulary of their Canadian-born classmates, so cruelly, in fact, that many of the latter had pleaded to be transferred to another school. In fairness, I should add that the children doing the
teasing were no doubt suffering traumas of dislocation and dispossession: the one complete possession they would have been able to bring with them from old country to new would be their native tongue, and it would be natural for them to hold fast to any advantage or status it could give them.

When I asked Ksenia about her immediate plans for study, she told me that she was working to raise the funds she needed to purchase both a visa for and a letter of invitation to Russia, so that she could spend two months in St Petersburg studying Ukrainian. The National Library of Russia has one of the best collections of Ukrainica anywhere, as well as all the best Ukrainian dictionaries, scholarly texts and journals for her branch of linguistics. She was unhappy about the need to go to Russia—she would so much rather go back to Ukraine, she said. Attacks on foreign students in St Petersburg made her especially reluctant to go, though she knew that the racist basis of these attacks meant that she herself would not be targeted. We spoke for a while about the alarming rise of xenophobia in Russia, and ended by discussing the possibilities for Ukraine’s transformation into a European state where civil society and democratic values could flourish. And while we agreed that the cards, especially the political ones, seemed stacked against Ukraine, and that the global context in which the Ukrainian nation is attempting to create itself is anything but auspicious, whether in terms of catastrophic climate change, economic collapse, or latent pandemics—we ended on a note of hope.

2. Community and Loneliness

Is Ksenia an anomaly, or are many Ukrainian diasporans as isolated or conflicted as she, and do they labour under a similar burden of disapproval by svoi or blithe ignorance discharged by the world at large? Let’s put aside for the moment the hypothesis that, had she grown up with the same parentage in, say, Winnipeg Ksenia would have been welcomed into a branch of the Ukrainian-Canadian community, encouraged, even rewarded for her ambitions to become a professor of Ukrainian language and literature. And let us eliminate from our consideration of diasporans those Ukrainian emigrants to Canada who were born and educated in Ukraine, and who thus have the language as a birthright: the kind of diasporan whom, for example, I encounter on a day to day basis in Toronto—our pharmacist, from L’viv, for example, or a teller at our bank, who hails from Kyiv. Or the crowds of émigrés who turned out to hold vigils at Toronto’s Ukrainian consulate in those charged late November days of 2004, when the fate of the Orange Revolution hung in the balance. Let’s restrict our consideration of diasporans to what I refer to in my title as “long-distance Ukrainians:” those Ukrainian-Canadians who were born in this country, for whom English not Ukrainian is their mother tongue, and whose primary cultural identification—the books they read, the radio and music they listen to, the films and television they watch, the politics they follow and participate in—is Canadian.

Before Ukraine’s independence, the loneliness of this kind of diasporan would have been largely a factor of knowing oneself to lack the freedom to travel in Ukraine wherever and whenever one wanted, without the need for Intourist guides or any other agents of surveillance, and of being forbidden to speak without constraint to anyone, saying exactly what one thought and asking whatever questions, probing or tactful, one desired. It was due to the abysmal lack of such freedom that certain communities formed in the Ukrainian diaspora in order to create and sustain the kind of discursive freedom
any national culture needs in order to survive, rather than fossilize, and to maintain a living presence on the world historical stage. The role of the diaspora in keeping alive the memory of the Holodomor when, in Soviet Ukraine it was “banalised or marginalized” as scholar Olha Zazulya has expressed it, is a case in point (Zz).

Another extraordinary example is the proliferation of Ukrainian-based scholarly communities, Canada being blessed with, among others, the Ukrainian Academy of Arts and Sciences in Canada, the Shevchenko Scientific Society, the Petro Jaeyk Educational Foundation, the Canadian Institute of Ukrainian Studies, and The Prairie Centre for Ukrainian Heritage. Initiatives such as the Tarnawecky lectures themselves, as well as the Kobzar literary prize, sponsored by the Ukrainian-Canadian Foundation of Taras Shevchenko, are crucial components of a cultural and academic infrastructure that in many cases is remarkably inclusionary: the mission statement of The Centre for Ukrainian-Canadians Studies at the University of Manitoba is exemplary in this regard:

Specifically, the mission of the Centre is to create, preserve and communicate knowledge relating to Ukrainian-Canadian culture and scholarship. While our focus must by definition maintain a Ukrainian flavour, nevertheless, the Canadian dimension must be paramount in our thinking. Likewise our audience begins with those of Ukrainian-Canadian heritage, but then extends to those who are interested in things Ukrainian-Canadian, and ultimately extends to all the people of Manitoba, Canada and the world. (M)

In this culturo-academic realm, individuals like Ksenia would be welcomed, one imagines, with open arms. In my experience of attending seminars and presentations sponsored by the Petro Jaeyk foundation at the Munk Centre of the University of Toronto, I have found an ethos of inclusion and a welcoming of diversity: the audiences for discussions on Ukrainian topics are by no means limited to “the usual suspects”—those diehards within the Ukrainian community of Toronto who show up for any and every event tinged with synazhovta—but often include students and faculty and visiting scholars whose ethnic and national origins range from Belarus and Poland to Kashmir and Beijing. This community of scholars and interested auditors is the Ukrainian community in Toronto to which I feel myself most happily to belong; it has been especially important to me while I have been pursuing research for various literary projects bearing on Ukraine and Canada and the synergy between them. But the sense of connection to one’s community, I would argue, is not necessarily a cure for cultural loneliness.

3. Cultural Loneliness

What exactly do we mean by loneliness? First, let’s distinguish it from the aloneness of solitude, the latter being a voluntary, potentially desirable state, as in Marvell’s “The Garden”: “Two paradises t’were in one/to live in paradise, alone.” Loneliness, however, has an inescapably plangent, plaintive sound—it suggests a sense of being rejected, friendless, excluded from the happy many—damnably one. Second, what is cultural loneliness, as I’m deploying the term--loneliness as a factor of cultural consensus?

Ukrainian-Canadians can be said to possess an “exiguous” culture, in the terms established by Francois Paré’s study of “the Margins of Literature,” entitled Exiguity. Paré distinguishes between minority cultures and micro-cultures, arguing that in the latter, as
evidenced by Iceland and Quebec, literature and literary institutions are thriving and that a genuine reading public has evolved. But minority cultures—for example, the Franco-Ontarian to which Paré belongs—are a different case, he argues. For they are small cultures forever trying to ‘measure up’ to the large cultures that harbour them, and they have often “exhausted themselves in segmentation and diversity” (P 8). Minority literatures, defined by Paré as “works of literature produced by ethnic minorities within Unitarian states. . . . [within a dynamic of] unequal power relationships . . . .” (P,9) can be vital, he argues, “in spite of the relentless submergence of the ethnic and cultural communities from which they spring” (P,2). He cautions us, however, that “it is not easy writing and living in the insularity and ambiguity of a minority culture which has been made to feel largely inferior. Such cultures make themselves feel inferior to the very core. Minoritization can only be experienced in the living flesh.” (P,2)

In the case of Ukrainian-Canadians, this is multiply true: artists—or if you prefer, cultural producers—are not only in a minority position in regards to the dominant settler culture in Canada, but also vis a vis a stronger or more creative minority cultures, as can easily be seen by comparing the number of literary works written by Ukrainian-diasporans with those produced by, for example, their East-Asian or West-Indian counterparts in Canada. As importantly, Ukrainian-Canadian writers have few easily available literary ancestors to think back through, apart from the premier Romantic poet and national icon Taras Shevchenko, and to a much lesser extent, the nineteenth century poet and dramatist Lesia Ukrainka. Those unable to read these writers in the original face a huge stumbling block: most widely-available translations of Shevchenko, at least, leave much to be desired, and give no idea to anyone outside the culture of the poet’s achievement. In the era of pre-independent Ukraine, the only authors and translations most diasporans had access to were those approved by the Soviets; after independence, Ukraine’s publishing industry was often blocked by such phenomena as acute paper shortages, and still suffers from grave underfunding of the arts. A case might even be made that Ukraine itself has been a minority culture, forever overlooked or despised and feared by Russia, whose leaders, at various time, have banned publication in Ukraine in Ukrainian, imposing Russian, the language of Empire instead. How many non-Ukrainians know the Russian writer Nikolai Gogol as Mykola Hohol? Unlike his friend and contemporary, the ex-serf Taras Shevchenko, Hohol remained in St Petersburg and wrote in Russian for a Russian audience. Writer Oksana Zabuzhko—often described as Ukraine’s Margaret Atwood—has decried the failure of Ukraine’s government to educate the outside world on the richness and variety of Ukrainian art and culture. Describing how the Polish airline LOT has featured, on its European flights, short films showcasing Polish artists and thinkers, she bewails Aerosvit’s failure to do likewise (Z). Behind her words we can hear the extra-Ukrainian chorus of “Why is there, pace Archipenko, no Ukrainian of the stature and achievement of an Ionescu or Kundera, a Chopin or Stravinsky, a Chagall or Bakst?—artists, we may observe, who were not only championed in the west, but who also lived there, in various forms of exile.

Given how little most non-diasporans know of Ukraine’s history and culture, it is easy to see why the Orange Revolution, and the global attention it generated, was such an epochal event for the diaspora. Yet the world has long since tuned into other channels. On the first and even second anniversaries of the Orange victory, various newspapers ran columns assessing the achievements of Yushchenko, Tymoshenko et al., and by most
accounts, the revolution was deemed a failure in terms of real change in Ukrainian politics and the eradication of corruption in public life. The current stasis in Ukraine occasioned by the rivalry between Yushchenko and Tymoshenko, coupled with the paralysis of the country’s economy due to the worldwide “Great Recession” might even be taken, by pessimists, as evidence that Ukraine may become a ‘failed state’. And while Ukrainians both at home and in the non-Russian diaspora have made mighty efforts to draw the world’s attention to such key events in Ukrainian history as the Holodomor, seeking to have it classed as an act of genocide as worthy of remembrance as the Shoah or the massacre of the Armenians, it seems to me that the battle is still decidedly uphill. Ignorance, stereotypes and prejudice vis a vis Ukraine and its people are, in my experience, a grim given:

One recent example of this phenomenon can be seen in a comment by one of this year’s jury members for the prestigious Giller prize for Canadian fiction. In a column written for the Financial Times, English writer Victoria Glendinning lamented the fact that so much mediocre fiction is published in Canada—that while we’re capable of outstanding literary achievements, they tend to be overwhelmed by what she calls “the muddy middle range of novels, often about families down the generations with multiple points of view and flashbacks to Granny’s youth in the Ukraine or wherever” (G). Yet when the shortlist for the Giller was announced, Glendinning was quoted as saying that all these deserving contestants were “open to the world, open to ideas and beautifully written.” One has to assume that for her, Ukraine lies somewhere outside of the world, and possibly of the realm of ideas. Several reviewers have speculated that Glendinning’s comments on “Granny in ‘the’ Ukraine” was a reference to Shandi Mitchell's Under This Unbroken Sky, a novel dealing with the tragic fate of Ukrainian homesteaders in the Canadian prairies; Glendinning was (hypothetically) reproved by novelist Aritha van Herk for her unfair dismissal of this novel about Ukrainian immigrants: “the knowledgeable reader, one who understands Canadian context, will regard this book differently and read it with rapt attention,” she concludes, pointing out that, in spite of its flaws, this powerful and beautifully written first novel forms “an important stone in the mosaic of our shared Canadian conundrum. This nation, so richly complex, so lucky in its diversity, has been built on the blood of people who did indeed suffer and sacrifice. We owe that story our best attention” (V). In this context, it is unfortunate that Unbroken Sky did not appear on any of the prestigious literary prize shortlists this year—neither the Governor General’s nor the Rogers Writers’ Trust awards.

4. Language and Loneliness

Possessed of an exiguous culture, to what extent is the disaporan as I’ve defined her or him, lonely vis a vis the Ukrainian language? How common is Ksenia’s experience of meeting hurdles instead of help vis a vis her ambition to speak Ukrainian as fluently as possible? Who are the guardians of the language, and what effects do they have on the would-be Ukrainophone with their quest for purism, rooted as it has been in the urgent need for preservation of a language so often forced into silence or eclipse? Permit me a personal digression. My parents were Ukrainian immigrants, that is, their place of origin though it may have been named Poland in their passports is now located in Ukraine. My mother came to Toronto at the age of 14, my father having been born there shortly after his parents ‘got off the boat’ from Halychyna. Their first language—and the
language in which they were most themselves—was Ukrainian, though they became fluent English speakers. They stopped speaking Ukrainian in our home during the McCarthy era, with the result that for my sister and brother and me, English was our first language, though we spoke baby talk and ‘kitchen-table’ Ukrainian with our grandparents. Later, when it was politically safe to do so, we were sent to Ukrainian schools for Saturday classes, then to a Ukrainian summer camp, and I had the luck to attended St Andrew’s College here at the University of Manitoba for two consecutive summers, when I was a teenager. Only then did I learn that Ukrainian, like the Latin I was learning at high school, was an inflected language; only then, in other words, after all the meaningless rote learning at Saturday school, did I study Ukrainian as a foreign language, making my first stab at memorizing declensions and conjugations.

My older sister never managed to learn Ukrainian in any useful fashion: our younger brother, however, applied himself far more diligently to language learning, and can speak Ukrainian with ease with other members of the Diaspora, though conversations with native speakers from Ukraine show the gaps in his command of contemporary vocabulary and idiom. For him, speaking Ukrainian is a pleasure and an enrichment of his life: he doesn’t use the language at all in his profession, and has no children to whom to “pass it down.” I, on the other hand, abandoned all contact with the language when I went off to graduate school in England. Some thirty years after ‘leaving the language’ that my ridna shkola teachers had impressed on me was my mother tongue, I set myself to try to learn it well enough to be able to speak with my peers in Ukraine and to read contemporary and traditional Ukrainian literature—a project with which I am still struggling.

The reasons for this return were many, chief among them the impact of the Orange Revolution and the luck of having won a grant enabling me to devote time to the study of things Ukrainian. From January to April of 2006, I was enrolled in a course in intermediate Ukrainian at the University of Toronto—a refreshing as well as challenging change of perspective and status for any university professor to be one among a group of students—and to be the worst student of the bunch, too. My classmates were in their early twenties, all of them having grown up at least partly in Ukrainian, having attended bilingual English-Ukrainian schools; they were comfortable conversing in Ukrainian at a low-level, everyday, conversational way with accents that varied from perfect to competent—whereas I was paralyzed by the fear of making a mistake as soon as I opened my mouth.

The ‘star’ of the class was a recent immigrant from Poland who spoke Ukrainian with a ravishing accent—she was born into the language, even though she complained that growing up Ukrainian in Poland she had to hide her use of her mother tongue, and that she’d learned a dialect, not ‘proper Ukrainian.’ Our professor, an émigré, had a ready sense of humour and enormous patience. He ‘d taken pains to find excerpts from twentieth-century or contemporary Ukrainian literature that would be both interesting to us and rich in vocabulary more suited to the internet café than the kitchen table. From Xeroxes of want ads and other advertising, of magazine articles and contemporary short fiction, we were given access to Ukrainian slang and idioms, some of which those ‘guardians’ invested in a fossilized, romanticised culture would no doubt frown upon.

Many diasporas in Canada wrestle with the “language” question vis a vis identity. One exploration of the subject is Clive Doucet’s Notes From Exile: On Being an Acadian, which makes the case for extra-linguistic “belonging.” Of Acadian background, he is an
Anglophone author whose work has been rejected by the Acadian elite and ‘cultural infrastructure’—so that his books are not stocked in the bookstores of Acadie, where he is considered an English-Canadian writer. Doucet makes a convincing case for other, equally important ways of belonging to an ethnic group—for example, through knowledge of history and cultural forms other than those transmitted through language (D). And yet, the ability to speak one’s ancestral language remains a key factor in the recognition and conferring of belonging. The situation within the Ukrainian diaspora is no different, though the stakes, I would argue, are far higher than is the case with ancestral languages that have not been threatened with extinction, a fact that is often of huge concern to the diasporan ‘revenant’, who has been taught that it is in the struggle to keep the language alive that the soul of Ukrainianness lies.

Despite the fact Ukrainian is being taught, for the first time, in primary and secondary schools, as well as at university, as a first language, Russian (or surzhyk, that unlovable fusion of Ukrainian and Russian) is still used overwhelmingly in shops and on the streets, not just in Dnipropetrovsk or Kharkiv, but in Kyiv, L’viv and even Poltava, in which, it is said, the purest Ukrainian is spoken. As importantly, the giant’s share of popular culture--almost all films, television shows and western pop songs--are dubbed into or produced in Russian. The big bookstores in Kyiv have remarkably few books written in Ukrainian: the translations of Stephen King and Danielle Steele sold on rickety tables in underpasses are all done into Russian, though superhuman efforts were made to get the Ukrainian version of *Harry Potter* published before the Russian. The English-language guidebook to Kyiv that I purchased in that city spells the capital’s name in the Ukrainian way, but refers to all sites, streets and personal names by the Russian: Piotr Mogila instead of Petro Mohyla, Grushevsky instead of Hrushevsky. But perhaps this linguistic mishmash is a tradition: among the information the guidebook provides concerns a notorious misprint in the *Kyiv Telegraph*, the city’s first private liberal newspaper: instead of “All Kyivans are optimists” it printed “All Kyivans are onanists” (TK,14)

One of my happier encounters, on the other hand, in seeking directions on a Ukrainian street occurred when I was walking past the Mohyla Academy, on my way to the Chornobyl Museum. When I asked a student for directions in my best Ukrainian, she replied in that language, and then seeing uneasiness in my face—the directions were fairly complicated—she asked me what language I usually spoke, and then switched into fluent English. She was courteous and friendliness itself--exactly the sort of person whom my student Ksenia should have met up with in Ukraine. Certainly I experienced with her none of the shame I usually feel when using my flawed or feeble Ukrainian with my contemporaries and especially with the elders who reproach me for not knowing better Ukrainian. Shame, and sometimes, exasperation: if my parents had emigrated from, say, the Dordogne rather than Halychyna, I would have no difficulty in speaking their mother tongue.

When I was plunged into Ukrainian classes at the University of Toronto, spending hour upon hour puzzling through weighty homework and reading assignments, I came across a book called *French Lessons: A Memoir*, by Alice Kaplan, now Professor Emeritus of Romance Studies, Literature, and History at Duke University. In *French Lessons* Kaplan describes how, after a year in Switzerland at a French-language boarding school, French became both an immense consolation and a powerful “counter language”
for her. Kaplan’s family is Jewish, her ‘other language’ should, by rights have been Yiddish, but it was French that she reached out for to redefine herself and to shape her future once she returned to the United States. There seems to have been no disapproval on the part of her family for this: her mother both impelled and facilitated the year abroad to help her young daughter get over her beloved father’s sudden death. Neither was there any reproach, it seems, for the fact that Alice never learned or even wanted to know that endangered tongue, Yiddish: “My family,” she writes, “had made the transition from diaspora Yiddish to American English in a quick generation. You couldn’t hear the shadow of an accent unless my grandmother was around” (K, 9).

I couldn’t help contrasting all this with my own experience—and Ksenia’s as well. For us, the learning of a language that was supposed to be a mother tongue was fraught with anxiety, humiliation, frustration and despair. Two passages in Kaplan’s text resonate strongly for me in this context: one was her mention of how ’the polyglot writer Elias Canetti describes his mother teaching him German by holding the book away from him, throwing her hands over her head when he got it wrong and shouting ‘My son’s an idiot! I didn’t realize that my son’s an idiot!’” (K,129-30). The other is Kaplan’s devastating analysis of the teacher’s power to confer approval or communicate contempt “I became a teacher,” she writes, “because I wanted the chance to give the smile, or withhold it. There is nothing cruder, nothing simpler, in terms of pedagogic power than what goes on in a language classroom: listening, repeating, listening, spurred on by the sound and rhythm of someone else’s voice, by mockery and desire for revenge’(K,128). Kaplan excelled at French, “absorbing a new reality, repeating it, describing it, appreciating it. I felt a pull toward learning I hadn’t felt since fifth grade: quiet mastery of a subject. Knowing I knew the material, that I had it down. Knowing how to find out more, inventing methods for listening and making them habits. Feeling a kind of tickle in my ear at the pleasure of understanding”(K,56-7). Her acquisition of French became enmeshed with her romance with France itself—her desire, when she left home for university, to go off to live in France—to be seen not as an American tourist, but as someone who, falling in love with a Frenchman, attempted to absorb the language through his skin, “the rhythm and pulse of his French, the body of it”(K,86). And though her lover may have failed her, language never would: through all the traumatic events of her young life, she concludes “French had saved me” (K, 57)

In my case, it was English that saved me—the English that was my true mother tongue: if I remained hopelessly incompetent in Ukrainian, then I would become all the more mistress of English. I did so, as far as I was able, getting my highest grades in that subject, and even transferring in my second year of university, from a specialization in French and German, to the pursuit of an honours English degree. Needless to say, when the time came to publish my first considered attempts at creative writing, English was my language of choice.

”Whatever the method, only desire can make a student learn a language, desire and necessity,” Kaplan concludes (K,131). By contrast, what prevents a student with an aptitude for languages, from learning a particular foreign language with any fluency? Psychological obstacles, in the case of, for example, Sylvia Plath, for whom, in her attempts to learn her father’s first language, “The tongue stuck in my jaw./ It stuck in a barb wire snare./ Ich, ich, ich, ich,/ I could hardly speak./ I thought every German was you./ And the language obscene” (P). As far as I was concerned, Ukrainian was not, by
any stretch, obscene, but it was a stepmother rather than a mother tongue: looking back I see the irony, the comedy even, of my DP instructors assuming that I didn’t need to learn Ukrainian grammar: that I was being stubborn as well as stupid in my inability to understand why nouns—solid and stable in English, morphed uncontrollably po-ukrainskomu: stil’ into stola, mama into mamoyu—and why verbs, especially verbs of motion—so trouble free in English or French—refused my attempts to make them do my bidding: the fact that there aren’t two verbs in Ukrainian that mean, simply, to come and to go—as in venir and aller—still daunts me.

I don’t wish to give the impression that my experience with university-level Ukrainian language learning was all slog and sighs. I couldn’t have found a better-designed course, or a better teacher, the polar opposite of the dragon-women who had so humiliated me in my childhood for my inability to speak Ukrainian. And for all the frustrations furnished by erratic verbs, it was bliss when a clue came my way to unlock a word whose sound I’d known since childhood, but of whose meaning I was ignorant: form example, ‘chudo’ which I knew from the chorus of a Christmas carol and whose literal meaning, ‘wonder’, tardily unlocked, gave me a sense of enormous satisfaction and rightness. There was also the charm of hybridity: so many Ukrainian words derive from other languages: from French: trahtuar, reklam, natyurmort, peyizahzh, hastronome, trykotazh, sheduvara, shosay. Or German: dakh, kartoplya.

5. Loneliness as gift

_Buv sobi dyeed i baba_—so many Ukrainian folk tales begin with this version of the once-upon-a-time-formula an old couple living all alone in the forest, childless, and dreading not so much their impending deaths, as the possibility that there will be no one to attend to and bury them decently, when the time comes. Alone together on a patch of land at the edge of a forest or river, their only sense of community furnished by their livestock the heros of these tales are often a prize calf, or a goat or sheep who, though they are the old couple’s devoted friends, run off to seek their fortune, leaving them with no larger community than themselves.

But is there a sense in which aloneness can be advantageous, even necessary to the diasporan? I would argue that this is so in the case of the artist, who is not “damnably” but strategically, savingly one; not isolated but happily peripheral, with one foot inside, and the other outside the circle of community. For without the practice of detachment and disinterestedness—qualities that allow the diasporan artist to adopt a critical or interrogative perspective on her or his heritage and community, strong, powerful and necessary art cannot come into being.

What degree of aloneness or distance from “nashi” is necessary for the Canadian artist to create the best work of which she or he is capable? Internationally-famed photographer Edward Burtynsky was born in 1955 to Ukrainian immigrants and grew up in a working-class neighbourhood in St Catherine’s, Ontario. As journalist Gerald Hannon attests, Burtynsky’s parents “demanded the children speak Ukrainian in the home, that they attend Ukie school (as they call it) two evenings a week. Then there was the Ukrainian mandolin band... Ukie camp in the summer. There were cultural events and parties at the Black Sea hall, the Ukrainian community centre” (H, 83-4). Burtynsky’s focus on the beautiful and the poisonous in his subject matter of industrialized landscapes shows, to quote Gerald Hannon once more, “a man who is at
argue within himself, savouring the wonders and comforts we mine from our wounded planet, apprehending the woe we are bound to inherit” (H, 84).

Arguably, that argument can be traced back to his Ukrainian heritage: what is certain, however, is that Burtynsky has distanced himself deliberately and dramatically from the ‘hromada,’ or Ukrainian community, however mythical such a homogenous entity may be—there are, of course, many different kinds of Ukrainian communities in Canada. “He understands the importance of and richness of his Ukrainian heritage,” Hannon observes, “but found it too claustrophobic, too closed in its acceptance of ideas and its lack of interest in exploring a complicated world. He resisted the pressure to marry. . .a Ukrainian girl and have children. . . who would learn the language” (H,88).

Like the painter William Kurelek, Burtynsky had a strict, harsh immigrant father who was anything but supportive of his son’s passion for art. Hannon argues that Burtynsky, whose father died aged 45 of cancer most likely related to his work with PCB-impregnated oil at an auto parts plant, is ‘driven’ as an artist by his unfinished quarrel with the father who both gave him his first camera, and refused to pay for film that the 11 year-old could practice with, thus forcing his son into entrepreneurial habits that have led to his current economic independence. It is fascinating to contemplate what the results would be if Burtynsky, like Kurelek before him, were to travel to his father’s birthplace, and photograph the industrial wastescapes of contemporary Ukraine. But he is just as likely, and has every right, to practice his art in Italy or China or Bangladesh.

Consider, in contrast, the case of painter Natalka Husar, whose work—figurative, nightmare-surreal and yet falling within the continuum of traditional history painting—hangs in Canada’s National Gallery as well as in museums and galleries across the country. Like Burtynsky, she is the child of Ukrainian DP parents, though hers settled in New Jersey rather than Ontario. Like Burtynsky, she grew up speaking Ukrainian in the home, and belonged to a multitude of Ukrainian organizations. But her parents, unlike his, staunchly supported her ‘habit’—her father, who had practiced dentistry in Ukraine, found employment at a Chanel perfume factory in New Jersey and would bring home sheets of packaging paper that Husar would pin to her bedroom walls and cover with images. Moreover, Husar has felt compelled to confront the subject of contemporary Ukraine and her own problematic experience of diasporan life.

She is as critical, as searching, as divided in her treatment of her subject matter as Burtynsky, yet because she is looking up-front at a tangle of human values, attitudes and assumptions rather than taking a long view at manmade but largely unpeopled landscapes, she takes emotional risks in her work that are fully the equal of the physical risks Burtynsky courts to produce photographs of some of the most dangerous places on earth. And because she has turned her critical gaze on cherished icons of the diaspora, and because she is always searching out material that unsettles, frightens, even repels both herself and her viewers, she has incurred a marked degree of displeasure among many Ukrainian-Canadians. Her treatment of ethnic kitsch is illuminating, as can be seen from the following remarks she made in a 1985 interview with arts journalist Robert Enright, in which she lambasted the “fake” “xenophobic” Ukrainian public who have been offended by what she sees as the honesty of her vision. “Embroidery is beautiful, gorgeous, back-breaking work, and then you take it and put it on a ceramic ashtray and you bastardize it—it’s ridiculous and ugly and it becomes kitsch.” Guilt, nostalgia and a relentless awareness “that you really can’t just plunge into the mainstream and totally
forget your background” comprise her experience of ethnicity. “‘There’s so much pain there that nobody sees,’ Husar . . . say[s], describing the overall condition of people living within a displaced culture. ‘So if you can, just show it. The pain goes for any ethnic group.’” The result, Enright declared in 1986, “is evidence of the first serious questioning of accepted ethnic conventions yet posed by a Ukrainian-Canadian artist” (E).

Husar insists that it is her passionate love for and commitment to Ukraine that drives her to ‘probe the wound;’ of its past and present condition: the attention she paid to the diaspora in such wonderfully comic and bitingly ironic earlier works as “Our Lady of Mississauga” or “Mama’s Boy” has been displaced by later work which confronts, for example, the phenomenon of young women, Chornobyl-haunted and damaged by Ukraine’s slam-bam embrace of the worst excesses of western popular culture and consumerism, stranded in Canadian-suburban or Ukrainian-urban contexts. She is all too aware of the possible claustrophobia that can ensue from too tight an embrace of or by “the Ukrainian community” in Canada—by which I mean, of course, the many branches of Ukrainian diasporan life experienced here: there is, of course, no monolithic community, for Ukrainians in this country continue to be split on lines of politics, religion, and cultural loyalty—for instance, should the diasporan’s prime concern be with the homeland or rather, with the manifestations of Ukrainianness which immigrants have been able to create and develop in Canada, be they the giant Easter egg of Vegreville or the Shumka dancers.

As for me and my ‘loneliness,’ I situate myself somewhere between the complete disassociation of Byrtynsky from and the complete identification of Husar with, Ukraine. Because I’m a Canadian, and hence hyphenated, I can say that a version of Ukraine, a compound of my family’s history and stories, both in Halychyna and as immigrants in Toronto, is my ‘other’ country, an imaginative if not an actual homeland, and that it is constantly being modified or even transformed by my own experiences in Ukraine and my attempts, via the internet, lectures at the Munk Centre and conversations with other diasporans, to ‘keep up’ with what is happening there and now. As far as my own writing is concerned, I am planning to research, during an upcoming sabbatical, the lives of certain Ukrainian exiles in Paris between the world wars, and to produce a work of creative non-fiction on that subject. The richness and depth of Ukrainian history as experienced by those who remained within, and those who fled from, their native land is a true ‘gift’ for a writer, and I hope to do justice to my subject matter, partly by accepting the condition of voluntary loneliness—or aloneness—that is a condition for being an artist. Not just the aloneness needed in order to actually put words on paper, to immerse oneself in an imaginative world, but also the distance from certain pressures of community that might influence one to write, not the story that one needs to tell, but rather the story that will be most rewarding or consolatory for readers to hear.

I will close by returning one last time to Ksenia and our conversation in the Rose Garden café. Since our course had ended, and I would be leaving Greifswald soon, Ksenia handed me a gift to take back with me: a beautifully intricate pysanka decorated by her mother. I protested that it was too valuable and too fragile a gift for me to accept, but Ksenia insisted: the egg, she said, had been coated with shellac and would withstand the pressures of travel. When, on my return home, I opened my suitcase and unwrapped it from its swaddling, I was devastated to find that the egg had suffered on the train journey
and flight from Berlin: a small chip had occurred, and cracks had formed on the shell, although these were hardly noticeable at a distance. On reflection, I think the *pysanka* is all the more fitting and meaningful a gift for the fracture lines and imperfections it now bears: at any rate, I cannot look at it without thinking of Ksenia, hoping that she has found the community within which she will best be able to develop her Ukrainianness, and that she will be able to develop that fruitful aloneness in which the researcher, the critic, the scholar as well as the artist pursue their passions.

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The publication of this brochure was supported by a grant from the SUS Foundation of Canada