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Art of Intrusion: Macaronicism in Ukrainian-Canadian Literature

The primary and most crucial aspect of any literary tradition is its use of language as a form of artistic expression. The encounter of two literatures sometimes marks the triumph of one literary language but never without some degree of impact, penetration or influence on the part of the losing party. In practice, languages and literatures in contact situations always set the scene for mutual exchange, divergence and innovation.¹ This process is clearly characteristic of Ukrainian-Canadian literature in English² where macaronic features serve to bridge the old and the new in ways that are fresh and extraordinary.

Due to a host of acculturative factors³, most writers of Ukrainian descent who are born in Canada tend to write in English. Like George Ryga, they prefer to use their Ukrainian entity as "merely the mood or coloration through which I will view things. It is certainly not linguistic."⁴ Vera Lysenko, Canada's first major writer of Ukrainian descent to work in English, betrayed strong ties to her mother tongue in both her novels. In *Yellow Boots* (1954) Lysenko digresses into an etymological excursus on the

1 In this regard, see, for example, George G. Grabowicz, *Toward a History of Ukrainian Literature* (Cambridge: Harvard Ukrainian Research Institute 1981) 98-100.

Macaronicism, as one of the literary dynamics of contact situations, was also noted by Roman Jakobson in his study of a "Medieval Mock Mystery (The Old Czech Unguentarius)" published in *Studia Philologica et Literaria in Honorem L. Spitzer*, ed. A.G. Hatcher and K.L. Selig (Bern: Francke Verlag 1958) 255.

2 The major branches of Ukrainian-Canadian literature are noted in Danylo Struk, "Ukrainian Emigré Literature in Canada," *Identifications: Ethnicity and the Writer in Canada*, ed. Jars Balan (Edmonton: Canadian Institute of Ukrainian Studies, University of Alberta 1982) 88-103.

3 For a recent survey, see W. Roman Petryshyn, ed. *Changing Realities: Social Trends among Ukrainian Canadians* (Edmonton: Canadian Institute of Ukrainian Studies, University of Alberta 1980).

4 George Ryga, as quoted in Jars Balan, 153.

names of the months in Ukrainian and concludes: "What lovely names! Each a picture! The poetic peasant fancy which has bestowed on each month isspecial quality pleased Lilli."⁵ In her second novel, *Westerly Wild* (1956), Vera Lysenko fixates on the surname of one of her characters, Jenny Kapusta (*kapusta* = cabbage), and, with tongue in cheek, composes a "Song of the Cabbage" for Jenny to recite as a poem in thirteen lines.⁶ The concealed but obvious link between surname and poem constitutes a kind of veiled, private joke that, in the absence of any comment or clarification from the author, goes unnoticed by the monolingual reader.⁷ Another novelist, C.H. Andrusyshen, writing under a nom de plume — C.H. Andrus, makes similar use of Ukrainian for covert purposes; unlike Lysenko, however, Andrusyshen openly declares his use of Ukrainian for cryptic purposes but without identifying the mysterious language by name.⁸

On the whole, Canadian writers of Ukrainian descent emulate their colleagues of non-Ukrainian background and use Ukrainian only sporadically for local colour or when absolutely necessary.⁹ Personal names, everyday expressions, and words relating to various facets of Ukrainian folk culture are the main categories in this regard.¹⁰ Occasionally, the issue of language itself appears as a narrative motif in the form of a language barrier situation.¹¹ In rare instances, a single, isolated Ukrainian word intruding into an otherwise English-language prose narrative, can have an arresting impact on the reader who, for example, in Janice Kulyk Keefer's short story, "Red River Cruise," is startled by the sudden interpolation of the Ukrainian pejorative, *'bunyak,'* (which in the vernacular can mean anything from rascal

to bastard) in a manner that differs quite significantly from Andrew Suknaski's controlled use of the same Ukrainian word in his poem, "Centennial Barber Shop."¹² Similar macaronic phenomena obtain in works created for the non-immigrant, mainstream stage in Canada such as *Cruel Tears* (1977), *Paper Wheat* (1982), and Ted Galay's dramas — all reflecting aspects of the Ukrainian experience on the prairies. Interestingly, in Galay's *After Baba's Funeral* (1983) only the deceased ancestors speak exclusively in Ukrainian, underlining thereby the dead-language status of spoken Ukrainian, at least insofar as the playwright is concerned. In *Paper Wheat*, Ukrainian dialogue spoken by the play's Ukrainian immigrant, Vasil Havryshyn, descends into futile babble that in itself, however, provides a spring for fun and hilarity.¹³

In addition to prose and dramatic dialogue, poetry provides a third and the most productive vehicle for macaronic verbal behaviour.¹⁴ Its special focus on formal aspects of literary composition make poetry an ideal forum for linguistic experimentation. In this connection, it is interesting to note the dominance of poetry in the birth and subsequent development of modern Ukrainian literature and the seminal role of humour in this process.¹⁵ A parallel phenomenon is characteristic of Ukrainian-Canadian literature in English as reflected in the works of two poets, Maara Haas of Winnipeg, and Andrew Suknaski of Regina. For the former writer, macaronicism constitutes a major comic device as shown in her groundbreaking work, *The Street Where I Live* (1976). Haas, for example, delights in manipulating personal names. Some names (such as *Xenia*) escape macaronic play; others, like *Veedma*, represent onomastic neologisms whose meanings in the original language are revealed contiguously in English. The resultant tautology with its threat of tedium is hidden from the monolingual reader¹⁶ while other moments or onomastic macaronicism are readily

5 Vera Lysenko, *Yellow Boots* (Toronto: Ryerson Press 1954) 79.

6 Vera Lysenko, *Westerly Wild* (Toronto: Ryerson Press 1956) 213.

7 While she avoids interpolating Ukrainian textual matter, Lysenko is more generous in regard to other languages: in *Yellow Boots* she reproduces a six-line lullaby from the Japanese original (260), and in *Westerly Wild* (215), the author quotes a couplet in German.

8 C.H. Andrus, *An Olympian Adventure: A Serio-comic Adventure* (Saskatoon: Modern Press 1981) 54-55.

9 Canadian writers of non-Ukrainian descent who have 'Ukrainianized' their works with such incidentals include Margaret Atwood, Pierre Berton, Margaret Laurence, Gabrielle Roy, William D. Valgardson, and others.

10 Typical, in this regard, is Ray Serwylo's short work, *Accordion Lessons* (Vancouver: Pulp Press 1982), the winning entry in "the fourth international three-day novel-writing contest," 14-15, 23, 30 and 42.

11 See, for example, Ralph Connor, *The Foreigner: A Tale of Saskatchewan* (Toronto: Westminster Co. 1909) 83, 111, 213-215, 265; and Frank Mohr's "The Broken Globe" in *Prairie Performance: A Collection of Short Plays*, ed. Diane Bessai (Edmonton: NeWest Press 1980) 44-45.

12 Janice Kulyk Keefer, *The Paris-Napoli Express* (Ottawa: Oberon Press 1986) 78; and Andrew Suknaski, in *The Name of Naid* (Erin: Porcupine's Quill 1981) 114.

13 Twenty-fifth Street House Theatre, *Paper Wheat: The Book* (Saskatoon: Western Producer Prairie Books 1982) 39-40, 44, 47, 49. Bibliographical data for plays cited in the preceding sentence are as follows: Ken Mitchell and Humphrey and the Dumptrucks, *Cruel Tears* (Vancouver: Talonbooks 1977); and Ted Galay, *After Baba's Funeral* (Toronto: Playwrights Press 1983).

14 See also R. Klymasz and B. Medwidsky, "Macaronic Poetics in Canadian Ukrainian Folklore," *Canadian Slavonic Papers* 25.1 (March 1983): 206-215.

15 Note, in this connection, Ivan Kotliarevsky (1769-1838) and his poetic travesty of Virgil's *Aeneid*, as well as Taras Shevchenko (1814-1861) and his collection of serious poetry, *Kobzar*.

16 For her use of *Veedma*, see Maara Haas, *The Street Where I Live* (Toronto: McGraw-Hill 1976) 73; see also page 32 for similar use of *chort/devil* and page 40, *perena/quilt*.

revealed with the help of epithets as in "Mrs. Onion, the Widow Siboolka," "Horbaty the Hunchback," "Yolop dummy," and "mamoochka, little mother" (29, 40, 45, 111). Tautological extensions also obtain, as in the case of Mrs. Holub who "is like a mourning dove with a bent wing [...] peck, peck, peck peck," and Percival Pshawkraw whose surname surfaces unobtrusively eight lines later in English translation as "dog's blood" in the form of a curse voiced by one of the book's many characters (77-78). Shmarkaty Kapusta, another onomastic neologism, provides a special opportunity for extended macaronic word play, which in contrast to Vera Lysenko's focus on the surname, Kapusta, noted earlier, concentrates instead on the first name, Shmarkaty (= 'runny nose'), and the alliterative suggestiveness of its initial cluster, *shmark*. First, Haas clarifies the meaning of *shmarkaty* by means of a macaronic tautology: "Kapusta who is always/ Shmarkaty with a leaky nose"; then she uses *shmarkaty* again twice in one line but in two different ways: "Shmarkaty is eating shmarkaty doughnuts from/ a greasy bag" (35, 37). The initial use of *shmarkaty* preserves its onomastic function while the second instance of the same word shows its transformation into a neologistic epithet in English. Other examples of this writer's intimate knowledge of vernacular Ukrainian include her epithetical expression, 'monkeyfaces,' which Haas borrows from Ukrainian (*bila mavpa*) and uses metaphorically in reference to "painted women" (87).¹⁷

Other macaronic moments in Haas' novel include her efforts to mimic the phonological and syntactic aberrations of immigrant speech (17, 48), including commonplace phrases like "bad weather" which in Haas is transformed into "bed wedder" with the help of the paranomastic metathesis of vowels sounds (bad/bed) and consonants (weather/wedder) (68).

In general, Haas transforms the bilingual encounter into an extended comic device, as shown in the following excerpt:

The marble clock with gold cherubs laughing,
shows already half-past three, and still no one comes.

Is not fonny, says Father Mashik, shaking his
finger at the laughing cherubs.

Today is my feerst veddink in the big city choorch.

Solemnly, he smooths the black gown over his
stomach shaped round and firm like a heavy
potato dumpling.

17 Note, in this connection, the Canadian setting for a short story entitled "Bila Mavpa" by the early Soviet Ukrainian writer, Myroslav Irchan.

The marriage candles are ready for lighting.
The blue velvet cushions to kneel down, are waiting.

And the jewelled crowns to sit on the head of the
bride and groom, are like everything else, waiting
and watching.

God is vatchink, Bishop is vatchink, says Father
Mashik, mournfully.
Whole parish she is vatchink poor village priest
greenhorn in new country.

Father Mashik's twinkly blue eyes behind the
goldrim glasses are not so twinkly.

With sad eyebrows, he looks at the suffering
Christ above the altar.

I am eskink, only, you should keep your hend on
da jewells crown, Dear Jesus, so they are not
fallink off da heads, to make fool.
... The name of da Fahder, da Son and da Holy Ghost.
AMEEN

Mother to Jesus, vehr is heppy groom for
confession? (16-17)

In contrast to the above, Andrew Suknaski uncovers other, more serious dimensions of macaronicism. His balladic poem, "The First Syrota,"¹⁸ for example, is rendered totally in a kind of pidgin English that is completely bereft of the antics that characterize many of Maara Haas's writings. In the following excerpt, Suknaski disturbs the norms of literary English but maintains a tense and sombre tone throughout:

fahderr vent vay somvett vone
day vahzzeh varyy poorr
he vent vay vorrk forr vile
sommeh nunz dey commeh geev herr food
startink tell err bout chrrist
all deem story

fahderr commeh bek hom

18 Andrew Suknaski, *In The Name of Narid*, ed. Dennis Cooley (Erin: The Porcupine's Quill 1981).

ketch herr prayink
he start beatink herr
tole herr forget evrryink
nunz telleh herr
she say 'noh!'
she be likkeh dem beaueeful storry
soh he putteh lohgz een fireplec
ven good firre goink
he drehggeh herr crross florr
you noh stahpeh behleevink
i troh you een firre!'
she noh fraid noh say nhotink
he putteh herr clohc to flemz
she feeleh nohiink
he troh herr crross florr

nexteh he boilink beeg pot bearr fet

.....

.....

he putteh herr een...

she noh cryyeh

by ghalley he tekkeh heez etx (36-37)

In general, Suknaski is careful to translate, paraphrase, define or otherwise clarify all Ukrainian loanwords.¹⁹ On occasion, he uses a strong functional slot that succeeds in carrying this use of Ukrainian without any interpretive support: a poem, "A Letter to Mykola," closes with "*liubov*" (32), and in "Old Country Alcoholic Orphan" he makes repetitive use of a four-line refrain in Ukrainian with no explanatory comment (123-124). Elsewhere, Suknaski's macaronicism takes on pronounced, onomatopoetic features, as shown, for example, in his conversion of the suffix *-kan* (from Ukrainian *hurakan*) into *gone* and, similarly, of *-ala* (from *vidlitala*) into *allah* (120-122).

In conclusion, then, macaronicism in Ukrainian-Canadian literature can be characterized as a unique and highly distinctive literary feature that obtains exclusively as a product of the Ukrainian community's experience in Canada. As shown above, this phenomenon operates on various levels; and it can remain submerged and obscure — unless the reader is sufficiently bilingual to detect and appreciate the macaronic element when it appears.

Its full potential was defined by the master herself who was the first in Ukrainian-Canadian literature to recognize "the language barrier as a technical device to unearth the larger universal truth" (Haas, 135).

There can be no doubt that macaronicism constitutes a dominant component in the poetics of ethnicity in Canadian literature. Insofar as Ukrainian-Canadian literature is concerned, there remains the need to explore and distinguish the nature of macaronicism as found in related forms of literary expression (such as Ukrainian-Canadian literature in *Ukrainian* and Ukrainian-Canadian oral lore) *vis-à-vis* Ukrainian-Canadian literature in English, as discussed here. Other 'literatures of lesser diffusion' in Canada also require investigation in order to determine the manner in which macaronicism obtains as a creative, aesthetic literary act from a comparative point of view.

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19 See, for example, 15, 16, 19-21, 25, 29.