

Zygmunt Bychynsky. *Kliuch zhuravliv*. Biographical introduction by Jars Balan. Afterword by Myroslav Shkandrij. Glossary. Lviv, Edmonton, and Toronto: Literaturna agentsiia "Piramida" in cooperation with the Canadian Institute of Ukrainian Studies, 2006. 804 pp. \$49.95. Distributed by Canadian Institute of Ukrainian Studies Press.

After Illia Kyriiak finished publishing his three-volume *Syny zemli* (1939–45), an observer writing under the pen name Aramis felt, not without a certain amount of relief, that, with the publication of this weighty epic, the "pioneer" era in Ukrainian-Canadian literature had surely come to an end and that authors

of Ukrainian belles lettres in Canada were now free to embark upon a more “normal” course of development. (See Aramis, “Kanadiiski pioniry,” *Zhyttia i slovo* (Waterford, Ont.), no. 1 (1948): 96–100, esp. 99.) However, with the present posthumous publication of Zygmunt Bychynsky’s substantial novel titled *Kliuch zhuravliv*, which may be translated as “A Flight of Cranes,” we have a kind of throwback that necessitates re-examination of this assumption. Written over a period of fifteen years, *Kliuch zhuravliv* lay dormant in manuscript form long after its completion in 1945 and was not published until six decades after the author’s death in 1947.

Bychynsky’s effort to fictionalize the early history of Ukrainian settlement in Western Canada feeds on his considerable experience with the written word (as a journalist, playwright, short-story writer, biographer, translator, and editor) and on his rich career as an active participant in the affairs of his community. From a general perspective, *Kliuch zhuravliv* offers a fairly predictable version of the rags-to-riches saga that dominates a certain genre of writing. (The formulaic structure of such story-telling was suggested long ago by Ivan Ohienko in his review of Onufrii Ivakh’s novel *Holos zemli* [Winnipeg, 1937] in *Nasha kultura* [Warsaw], no. 10 [1937]: 413–14.)

With his bride in tow, the book’s protagonist, Oleksander “Sandyk” Fedak, leaves his native village in the Old Country and moves to Canada to begin a new life as a homesteader. As expected, the usual struggles and hardships ensue. With much perseverance these are overcome, things get better, and, thanks to Sandyk’s superior qualities as a civic-minded, respected, and natural-born leader, his home in the so-called Ukraina colony thrives. Along the way, a large cast of assorted characters enlivens the narrative while Sandyk learns English, gets a nickname (“Sandy”), enters politics, raises a family, and encourages his children (all born on the farm) to go to school and enter the professions. Thankfully, to escape his burden of perfection, Sandyk gets to visit the Rockies and recharge his batteries, so to speak.

In the idyllic world of Bychynsky’s Ukraina colony, man and nature are inseparable, but then this primal bond starts to crumble in the face of change and “progress.” Slowly but surely the age-old reverence for mother earth fades away, and the land becomes just another commodity. In a prophetic mood Sandyk muses about a future when Canada, like his homeland, will also face the pressures of over-population. But without any fuss or resistance, the situation entraps the hero, and benign resignation brings closure when, in the final chapter, an aged but contented Sandyk makes a sentimental trip back to his native village in the Old Country. As the autumn wind “sings” its gentle requiem and migrating cranes cry out above, Sandyk dies peacefully under the barren boughs of an old pear tree that he and his father had planted long ago.

To be sure, there are many lessons to be learned from reading this book, and these, apparently, are largely a reflection of Bychynsky’s personal views on religion, assimilation, and many other issues that confronted the early Ukrainian Canadians. (Jar’s Balan’s meaty introductory essay offers plenty of clues in this

regard.) In spite of its heavy overlay of social history, the book's primary intention is literary in nature. Unfortunately, the writing lacks the kind of subtlety, style, and sophistication that seasoned literati such as Ivan Ohiienko once expected and appreciated (see, for example, his "Movne probudzhennia ukrainskoi Kanady," *Ridna mova* [Zhovkva] 5, no. 12 [1937], cols. 465–68). Its structure is too episodic and bears a choppy narrative composed of sudden disruptions, a characteristic that Paul Robert Magocsi once observed in Carpatho-Rusyn literature, which perhaps reflects the author's unsuccessful attempts to have his work serialized in the form of installments in the Ukrainian press of his day. Moreover, the pervasive use of cutesy dialogues and theatrical monologues suggests that this novel's thirty-three chapters (each with its own title) actually constitute a long performance piece composed of a cycle of interconnected playlets, a protracted melodrama scripted to suit the rather commonplace tastes that dominated Canada's early Ukrainian immigrant stage and its audience. And finally, although Bychynsky wrote in Ukrainian, at times he thought in English—a confrontation that mars the quality of his prose. As I have noted elsewhere (see my "The Art of Intrusion: Macaronicism in Ukrainian Canadian Literature," *Canadian Review of Comparative Literature* 16, nos. 3/4 [1989]: 763–69), bilingualism is seldom used to advantage in modern literature.

From beginning to end, in this particular piece, the oral nature of Ukrainian folklore shapes the language, while agrarian folkways drive the action; in fact, no single page is bereft of proverb, saying, mannerism, custom, belief or ritual. See, for example, Bychynsky's extended lament in prose (pp. 116–120), which is meant to express the agony of leaving his Old Country roots and features a forlorn Sandyk in conversation with the hallowed land of his birth. There are, of course, several taboos (or are they literary conventions?) that sanitize this ideal configuration: in Bychynsky's borderline utopia no one makes homebrew (although alcoholic drinks abound), robotic housewives slave to please their families, privies do not exist, and incest is unimaginable. (As far as "oral" literature is concerned, the subject of incest was never absent from the narrative repertoire of Ukrainians on the Prairies. As late as the 1960s, I was able to record several ballads on this topic.) On occasion, however, the squeaky-clean members of the Ukraina colony do succumb to the realities of such things as old-fashioned anti-Semitism (p. 648), spousal abuse (p. 331), mental illness (pp. 188–92, 343–47), greed (p. 474), deception (p. 749), mixed marriages (pp. 579–80), overheated sex drives (pp. 267, 306, 415), rape (p. 267), murder (p. 493), and suicide (p. 506).

Distinguishing departures from the literary norms of Bychynsky's era emerge when he dips into the popular culture of his times to craft his narrative in ways that are reminiscent of Hollywood scenarios. Indeed, the reader does get to witness fights and a drunken brawl, seemingly inspired by the cowboy westerns that once titillated moviegoers everywhere. Other moments mimic the techniques of classic cinematography: the writer's pen becomes a camera lens that zooms in and out or highlights the silence when lovers' "eyes meet." And could

it be that the film *Earth* by Ukraine's legendary filmmaker Oleksander Dovzhenko, with its glorification of mechanized collective agriculture under the Soviets, inspired Bychynsky to have his novel feature happy communal harvest operations and anthropomorphic threshing machines?

Although the storyline often seems trite and overly heroic, such drawbacks are more than compensated by Bychynsky's obvious love for the Canadian steppe. The prairie backdrop, "with all its wonders" (p. 520), provides a landscape where headlights turn falling snowflakes into "fluttering butterflies" and golden eagles circling high above become "tsars of the steppe swimming through the air over an endless sea of green" (pp. 148; 167). His fondness for prairie flora and fauna covers everything from wild grasses to playful gophers; his countryside is stunning at all times of the year; and his sun, moon and stars are more than touch-ups on a pretty canvas. All this pastoral sentiment undoubtedly draws much of its potency from the Ukrainian language itself, a gender-sensitive medium with built-in poetics that readily lends itself to the imaginative expression of life in all its manifestations.

There are, then, four overlapping dimensions to this work: historical, literary, ethnographic, and didactic. The final result is an uneven, antiquated period piece dependent on a provincial aesthetic and grounded in a story that's become too familiar. Paradoxically, however, these limitations also underline the book's undeniable value as a resource for scholars, a handbook to be consulted on a myriad of topics. (In this regard, a detailed subject index could have served to capture a host of nuances that are rarely found elsewhere.) After all, given Bychynsky's credentials, this work of interpretive fiction does stand as a form of credible documentation, and its insights are ready to advance scholarly interest in things Ukrainian-Canadian. Consequently those who labored to salvage and publish *Kliuch zhuravliv* deserve many words of thanks and appreciation.

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