


[Donohoe on Hundorova, 'The Post-Chornobyl Library: Ukrainian Postmodernism of the 1990s'](#)

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Tamara Hundorova. *The Post-Chornobyl Library: Ukrainian Postmodernism of the 1990s.* Translated by Sergiy Yakovenko. Boston: Academic Studies Press, 2019. 320 pp. \$42.00 (paper),

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Reviewed by Brett Donohoe (Harvard) **Published on** H-Ukraine (May, 2020) **Commissioned by** Nataliya Shpylova-Saeed (Indiana University)

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Sergiy Yakovenko's new translation of Tamara Hundorova's *The Post-Chornobyl Library: Ukrainian Postmodernism of the 1990s* is an exciting addition to the growing field of anglophone studies of Ukrainian literature. Hundorova masterfully traces the etiologies and manifestations of postmodern literary and cultural structures in Ukraine, placing the explosion of the Chornobyl nuclear power plant as the genesis of the postmodern cultural and literary movement in Ukraine.

Hundorova's book is divided into five parts. In part 1, Hundorova analyzes the Chornobyl explosion as not merely a nuclear catastrophe but an apocalyptic crisis. After the explosion and the ensuing chaos, nuclear discourse began to permeate and irradiate all aspects of Ukrainian life in the late Soviet Union. Chornobyl exposed deep-seated flaws in Soviet ideology and invoked a radical rethinking and restructuring of previously secure cultural discourses, such as those concerning language, representation, and modernism. Hundorova conceptualizes the trauma of the Chornobyl incident and posits a uniquely Ukrainian genre: the Chornobyl text, which is characterized by "multilingualism, in spite of the lack of communication per se, and the emergence of topological and allotropic thinking" (p. 9). Chornobyl exposed Ukrainian literature to "the world of post-modern hyperreality" (p. 31), which destabilized systems of signification and relation in literary texts. Ultimately, for Hundorova, Chornobyl ceased to be a historical event and, instead, becomes a spectacle of collapse and dissolution.

In the following section of *The Post-Chornobyl Library*, Hundorova begins to introduce, situate, and elaborate the common stylistics and topoi of Ukrainian postmodernism. Here, Hundorova views postmodernism as a cultural critique of Soviet and post-Soviet Ukraine. Through literary tricks, irony, popular culture, "desacralization of the classic" (p. 66), intertextuality, and sundry other devices and techniques, the postmodern Ukrainian author seeks to put "on the mask of the superhero and [embody] the nonhierarchical and fragmented consciousness of the outsider character" (p. 90). For Hundorova, these moves are all a reaction to the trauma that Chornobyl initiated and the collapse of the Soviet state materialized.

The carnivalesque character of Ukrainian postmodernism is the focus of part 3, which provides an especially compelling overview of the Bu-Ba-Bu group. As Hundorova evaluates, the Bu-Ba-Bu authors

were among the first postmodernists in the Ukrainian literary scene. Their carnivalesque modality and behavior sought to expose and diagnose the problems of post-Chornobyl society, rather than to fix them. The bulk of the analyses in this section concern Yuri Andrukhovych's literary works, and Hundorova's insights and close readings into his texts are quite exemplary.

The most compelling part of Hundorova's book comes in part 4, which is an extended consideration of individual authors and their works. Here, Hundorova is able to provide a chronological and intellectual history of Ukrainian postmodernism from pre-Chornobyl forerunners to twenty-first-century manifestations. Hundorova expertly relates disparate manifestations of postmodern thinking and practice among such writers as Yurko Izdryk, Taras Prokhasko, Oksana Zabuzhko, Serhiy Zhadan, and many others.

One can perhaps quibble with some of Hundorova's specific interpretations. Reading Zabuzhko's novel *Fieldwork in Ukrainian Sex* (1996), for example, Hundorova employs feminist and gender-critical analytic frameworks, remarking on the "masculine and overman symbolism" (p. 186) of the Bu-Ba-Bu group and many other postmodern authors. Hundorova's feminist intervention into these discourses is compelling, but the book limits its feminist critique to the sole female author examined seriously in the book. Hundorova does not, for example, interrogate the possibly ironic misogyny present in Andrukhovych's *Recreations* (1992), despite pointing out the gendered nature of the negative discourses in the novel.

Ultimately, Hundorova's *The Post-Chornobyl Library* is an important contribution not only to the field of Ukrainian literary criticism but also to the expansive library of studies of postmodernism. This work will certainly prove useful to people in either field of study, and its new translation into English allows anglophone critics access to Hundorova's comprehensive, insightful, and theoretically sophisticated arguments on Ukrainian literature, postmodernism, and their interaction.

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