Literature, Exile, Alterity: The New York Group of Ukrainian Poets

By Maria G. Rewakowicz

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Summary:

This pioneering book is the first to present the postwar phenomenon of the New York Group of Ukrainian émigré poets as a case study for exploring cultural and aesthetic ramifications of exile. It focuses on the poets’ diasporic and transnational connections both with their country of origin and their adopted homelands, underscoring the group’s role in the shaping of the cultural and literary image of Ukraine abroad. Displacements, forced or voluntary, engender states of alterity, states of living in-between, living in the interstices of different cultures and different linguistic realities. The poetry of the founding members of the New York Group reflects these states admirably. The poets accepted their exilic condition with no grudges and nurtured the link with their homeland via texts written in the mother tongue. This account of the group’s output and legacy will appeal to all those eager to explore the poetry of East European nations and to those interested in larger cultural contexts for the development of European modernisms.

“Critics often contend that literature is an open concept, an activity always in process, an entity that has no permanent essence or canon. While canons indeed often come and go, there are always certain junctures and events in the historical development of any literature which resist erasure no matter how open and unstable the concept of literature itself is. This book is an attempt to show that the phenomenon and poetry of the New York Group constitutes an example of one such juncture in the history of Ukrainian literature.”

—Maria G. Rewakowicz, from the Preface (xxiii)

About the Author:

Born in Poland, Maria G. Rewakowicz is affiliated with the Slavic Department at the University of Washington. She holds a Ph.D. in Slavic Languages and Literatures from the University of Toronto and has taught at Rutgers, Harvard, Columbia and the University of Washington. She is the author of four books of poetry in Ukrainian, two anthologies of the poetry of the New York Group and a book of essays Persona non grata (Kyiv, 2012). She also co-edited a collection Contemporary Ukraine on the Cultural Map of Europe (2009). She is currently working on a monograph on literature and identities in Ukraine since 1991.
Praise for Literature, Exile, Alterity:

“Long overdue, this book-length study of the New York Group, whose poetry appeared at an important juncture in Ukrainian diasporic literature, benefits from careful archival research as well as from the author’s personal knowledge of many of the poets. Encompassing aspects of literary politics, social history, and textual analysis, the book offers sensitive, sensible, and accessible readings of major themes and concerns in their oeuvre.”

— Irene R. Makaryk, Professor, Department of English, University of Ottawa

“Maria Rewakowicz’s collected essays—and de-facto a monograph—are a highly significant contribution to the contemporary understanding of this literary phenomenon and of the place of Ukrainian literary discourse within the world. This is the first monograph to thoroughly analyze the New York Group of writers from the perspective of such theoretical concepts such as the exile, alterity, and alienation at the interface of different aesthetic and cultural planes, be they geographical, generational, or otherwise. Given the very preliminary stage the English-speaking world’s familiarity with Ukrainian topics, this work is very timely.

“The conceptual framework, the selection of topics and materials, and especially the strength of research methodology places Rewakowicz’s book in dialogue with the most recent discussions in the field. In examining the works of the New York Group authors (Bohdan Boychuk, Bohdan Rubchak, Yuri Tarnawsky, Patricia Kylnya, Emma Andiievska, Zhenia Vasylkivska, Vira Vovk, and others), as well as the work of their predecessors (Vadym Lesych, Yuriy Kosach) and successors (Vasyl Makhno), Rewakowicz pays particular attention to stylistic and thematic aspects— their acceptance of the literary devices and philosophy of modernism and postmodernism, avant-garde, surrealism, and existentialism; motifs of eroticism and sexual orientation, gravitation to geographical nexuses as Spain, Latin America, and New York.

“The entire creative output of the group, from the time of its founding in 1958 to the present, has been engaged with the relationship of émigré literature to that of the homeland, since the language of the works was Ukrainian. The group members made a large contribution to the body of fundamental modernist text translated into Ukrainian. Through their literature they fundamentally modernized postwar Ukrainian literature and thus not only played an important role in its preservation, but also influenced its further development after Ukrainian state independence was achieved in 1991. Rewakowicz’s book provides us with the first exhaustive picture of this process. This study promises to become an important event in Ukrainian scholarly and intellectual life. It is augmented by detailed work with the New York Group’s archives, which in and of itself broadens the horizons of our literary scholarship. It deserves our attention.”

—Halyna Hryn, Editor, Harvard Ukrainian Studies
CONTENTS

Acknowledgments v

Note on Transliteration and Translation ix

Preface xi

Chapter 1 Introduction: New Land, New Poetry 1

Chapter 2 Discursive Practices: Poetry as Power 18

Chapter 3 Periphery vs Center: The Poetics of Exile 42

Chapter 4 From Surrealism to Postmodernism: The Poetics of Liminality 62

Chapter 5 (Post)Modernist Masks: The Aesthetics of the Play-Element 98

Chapter 6 From Spain with Love, or, Is There a “Spanish School” in Ukrainian Literature? 114

Chapter 7 Transforming Desire: The Many Faces of Eroticism 136

Chapter 8 Eros and Exile 171

Chapter 9 Patricia Nell (Kylyna) Warren’s Constructed Alterities: Language, Self-Exile, Homosexuality 188

Chapter 10 Literary New York: The New York Group and Beyond 209

Conclusion 228

Selected Bibliography 232

Index 243