



**passa porta seminar 2016**

**NEED & NECESSITY**

## **Which Weapon Should The Writer Choose?**

### **The Writer's Freedom of Choice**

Andrey Kurkov

A feast in time of plague. This expression, fitting but inappropriate, has been used frequently by Ukrainian journalists and bloggers when writing about the fact that during Euromaidan and the war in the Donbass region, despite the numbers of Ukrainian soldiers, civilians and volunteers being killed, many Ukrainians preferred not to acknowledge what was going on. The restaurants and cafés of Kiev and Dnipropetrovsk remained full of customers; politicians and businessmen continued living the high life. Strangely, over the past two years, when the whole world has been turned upside down, when faith in the post-war inviolability of our national and European borders has finally deserted us, people – in this case Ukrainians – have been faced with a choice: to acknowledge and react to the changes or to ignore them and carry on as before. People react in different ways. A friend of mine, an ethnic Hungarian from Transcarpathia, reacted immediately by moving his entire family to Germany. He didn't sell his house in Transcarpathia or the apartment he owned in Kiev, but took the decision in order to protect his wife and four young children from potentially calamitous events and anxiety about the future. Someone else I know, a civil servant from the Khmelnytskyi Oblast, enlisted as a volunteer and went to Donbass to fight for the territorial integrity of Ukraine, leaving his wife and daughter at home. Tens of thousands of Ukrainians have started working in a voluntary or charitable capacity, helping soldiers, refugees and those injured in the war. If reacting to the changes gives people freedom of action, not reacting leaves them in an illusory, nonexistent past, which they try to preserve by following the same way of life that they enjoyed before the changes.

Ukrainian writers have been faced with the same choice – to react or not to react. They fell

immediately into two categories: 'visible' and 'invisible' writers. The 'visible' writers instantly felt a new level of responsibility for their words and opinions. They stopped writing fiction and started engaging with current affairs, reacting in newspaper articles, blogs and even Facebook posts to any event that they felt was significant, to every dubious or asinine phrase uttered by a politician, to the unwarranted attacks on Ukraine by foreign governments, to the lies both inside and outside the country. The 'invisible' writers went into hiding. They carried on writing their novels and short stories, they carried on giving interviews to glossy magazines. They didn't see the point in changing their way of thinking, their way of life. In some cases this was due to their apoliticism – conscious apoliticism was a popular trend amongst the majority of Ukrainian writers until fairly recently, although the dramatic events of the past two years have seen it wane. In other cases it was due simply to a conservative fear of ending up on the wrong side of the barricades, in a political or purely literal sense. Of course, they could have opted to 'sit on' the barricades, thereby demonstrating their objectivity and emphasising the integrity of an independent point of view, but this would require a fine political sense and at least some political views and sympathies in the first place. By and large, the 'invisible' writers retreated from public life, sometimes even refusing interviews, particularly if they suspected that they might be asked for their views on the country's political situation.

I'm not going to say anything else about the 'invisible' writers. For now, they don't exist. They are bound to reappear when everything has quietened down and the situation is more stable – but this won't happen for some time yet, despite my most ardent wishes. Instead, I'm going to talk about the 'visible' writers.

Ever since the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, literature from each of the various post-Soviet states has followed its own path. Russian literature has retained close ties to the state administration. When Boris Yeltsin was attempting to build democracy, Russian literature championed democratic values. When the idea of a European-style democracy was abandoned and Russia's leaders began talking about a specifically Russian democracy, the new ideology was reflected in the country's literary output. And when the very notion of 'democracy' fell out of favour with Russia's political leaders, the Russian book market was inundated with a wave of state-centric 'imperial' literature, which served to justify the change in the political climate and uphold the new/old values, in some cases even reintroducing them. Thus began another period of historical revisionism, in which the best and most effective agents were Russia's writers. Laudatory new biographies of

Joseph Stalin and the head of the NKVD (KGB) Lavrenty Beria were published alongside new novels glorifying the 'good' old Soviet times. Moreover, these novels sought to reawaken in readers and society as a whole feelings of affection and respect not only for the Stalinist era, but also for the Russian monarchy and the Orthodox church. Writers – not all of them, of course, but the majority – rushed to assist the Kremlin in reshaping the collective consciousness of Russia's citizens, in uniting society around a common 'great Russian' ideology. Some writers set about purposely creating the image of a new enemy – Ukraine, whilst at the same time rehabilitating the Soviet Union's traditional enemies – the USA and Europe.

Having stopped writing fiction, the 'visible' Ukrainian writers became observers of events, acting as both witnesses and commentators. Current affairs journalism flourished. Writers with no affiliation to the Ukrainian government, which has never been interested in the opinions or potential of its writers, began travelling to the zone of military conflict, the Donbass region, in order to hold public meetings and debates with the aim of rousing the local people, who had never expressed their opinion and didn't think it would count for anything anyway. These visits are still taking place today. The majority of those who stopped writing fiction have not yet returned to it. But time goes on, and at the end of the day the course of events in Ukraine is determined by politicians, both Ukrainian and foreign, not by writers.

### **Zone of Silence**

In the autumn of 2013 I was writing a novel about Lithuania and Europe, about the problem of young people migrating from this Baltic state to Western Europe. I was also working on a collection of essays about Ukraine, in which I was attempting to explain the difference between the Russian and Ukrainian mentalities, history and culture. I have always felt that 'explaining' things is one of the most important aspects of a writer's role. It is possible to explain things in novels or in person during public appearances, but the best way to explain is through the medium of social and political journalism, in essays. Euromaidan, which began at the end of November 2013, put a stop to my attempt to explain the Ukraine of today. It also brought my novel to a standstill, for almost two years.

I remember feeling 'paralysed'. I understood what was happening, but I had no idea how the situation would develop.

I know that many other Ukrainian writers found themselves in a similar psychological predicament. It was as though someone had suddenly raised a red flag above us, suspending all activity and imposing a regime of waiting and analysis.

I was lucky. Since the age of fifteen I have always kept a diary, where I record my reaction to anything and everything that interests me. And my diary, in which I immediately began to note down my thoughts and feelings about Euromaidan, didn't allow me to remain 'frozen' for long. When you think in terms of the written word, it is easier to form a clearer picture of what is going on and to make sense of your own relationship to it. My problem, as it turned out, was the scale of the 'picture'. But gradually I found myself able to occupy two roles at once: both analytical observer and commentator, trying to evaluate events and at the same time to explain how they had come about and their possible consequences.

In some sense I stopped being a writer and became a 'responsible citizen' for whom the values of the state had taken precedence over the values of literature, which in turn were relegated to the periphery.

Over the past two years I have come to realise the importance of the spoken word over and above the written word. Literature doesn't teach people to speak, nor does it encourage many readers to think. Readers find it easier to sympathise with literary characters than to think for them, to analyse their behaviour or to speculate as to where they will end up as a result of their behaviour and their outlook on life.

In February 2015 I spent some time travelling around the area bordering the war zone in the Donbass region. Just 12km from the frontline and not far from the Russian border, I visited the desolate town of Sievierodonetsk. To the sound of missiles exploding in the distance I walked up and down the main street, Gvardeyskiy Prospekt, trying to strike up conversations with passersby, who were few and far between. People shied away from me as though I were a leper. Nobody wanted to talk to a stranger, but it was more than that – I had the impression that nobody wanted to talk at all. The people of this region were not accustomed to talking. They knew how to listen, but those who were doing the talking – local politicians, representatives of the local political elite – were not interested in listening to them in turn. Nobody cared what the people of this region had to say, and the people had grown accustomed to this and dutifully occupied their silent and passive role. They

were used to following orders, but no one had ordered them to speak.

I often think back to this trip. The only person willing to talk to me on the street was a 10-year-old schoolboy, who was walking along Gvardeyskiy Prospekt with a small Ukrainian flag fastened to a button on his jacket. 'Aren't you frightened?' I asked him. It's probably still not completely safe to walk around Sievierodonetsk with a Ukrainian flag, even now the city is under the control of the Ukrainian authorities. 'No, I'm not!' he told me bravely. 'All the children in my class are patriots, but our teachers are separatists. We argue with them about it all the time!'

If this encounter hadn't happened I would have forgotten all about Sievierodonetsk and its inhabitants. But it did happen, and I still maintain that we must teach people to speak up, to articulate their thoughts and opinions, even if they are diametrically opposed to the thoughts and opinions of their potential audience. Young people are our future, of course, and the fact that they are still prepared to talk is a hopeful sign. Nevertheless, we must try to ensure that everyone gets a chance to have their say.

In a completely different part of Ukraine – Bessarabia, on the Romanian border, near the Danube – I chaired a public meeting that was attended by a number of older people, including some who were clearly pensioners. When I began trying to solicit their opinions, one elderly gentleman became agitated and called out, 'Who sent you here?' He assumed that I was there under orders, as they were. Moreover that I had been tasked with doing whatever I could to find out what they, as representatives of the older generation, thought about the political situation in Ukraine. They didn't want to discuss politics. Who knew what might happen? Perhaps the meeting was being recorded and they would be punished? On the other hand they did complain about the fact that statues of Lenin were being dismantled and streets were being changed back to their prerevolutionary names. As far as they were concerned, stability had always been represented by the inviolability of statues of Lenin and the existence of streets named after the 26<sup>th</sup> Congress of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union. As far as I am concerned, stability is represented by the inviolability of Ukraine's international state borders. Some conversation did take place, in the end, although it was more like an exchange of barely related monologues.

Writers can hide away in their studies, writing novels or essays. Publication of these novels and essays might stir up a storm, inspiring heated public debate and even physical

fights, all of which serves to make the writers themselves 'visible'. However in times such as we are currently experiencing in Ukraine, writers need to make themselves visible in a more literal sense, by appearing in public more often. They need to be aware that while the new reality can cause a great deal of psychological and even physical harm, it can also make life richer, it can galvanise people and it can give the writer a new awareness of his or her role in society, even as the ground beneath this society appears to be giving way.

### **A Step to the Left**

Every crisis in Ukraine ends with snap parliamentary elections. Sometimes these are followed by presidential elections; sometimes it's the other way round. But writers and poets are the ones who step forward every time to save the country from crisis. For many, this has led to a role in parliament or even the diplomatic service. It goes without saying that they are not elected for the quality of their writing or the brilliance of their ideas, but for their tireless ability to deliver eloquent speeches on patriotic issues. I mustn't generalise: there are exceptions, of course, rare occasions when a good writer becomes a good politician. One such example in Ukraine is Maria Matios, a wonderful writer from Bukovina. However in their sincere desire to rush to their country's aid there is always the risk that a writer will go too far, to the extent of actually causing problems and even, in some cases, contributing to the next crisis. Some expect writers to impart wisdom, others expect tolerance or political slogans and rallying cries. It is easy to see how someone accustomed to an enraptured audience might be tempted by the prospect of political leadership. An enraptured audience swallows every word and makes no attempt to challenge what is being said, because they don't feel the need to. So the expert orator, master of the monologue, forgets the importance of listening to others and changes career. Some take a step to the left, towards socialist populism, others take a step to the right, but all of them forget that before politics they were, or at least they wanted to be, writers. They dreamed of a readership for their books, but instead they got a temporary platform for their opinions – some better formulated than others – and their rallying cries. The best audience for a writer is just one person, who will look you in the eye and wait for you to finish talking in order to ask questions – and this brings me back to the notion of dialogue. Without dialogue there is no writer; without dialogue there can be no peace, no love. Without dialogue war will continue to rage, both on the frontline and in people's hearts and minds.

I am asked almost every other day when I'm going to write a novel about the war. About

the war that is happening in Donbass? My response is never. At least, not any time soon. About the First World War? Maybe one day. I have already written a novel partially set during the war in Chechnya. The writer always has a choice – to portray the situation in a novel or to try and influence it. I choose the latter, in full awareness that my influence is of no great significance. This does nothing to dampen my enthusiasm – instead, it teaches me to remain patient and calm.

*English translation by Amanda Love Daragh*