

Title: The Old Face of the New Ukrainian Literature: Lina Kostenko's *Zapysky ukrains'koho samašedšoho*

Author: Oleh Kotsyuba, Harvard University

In Lina Kostenko's first prose work (and her first new book in 20 years), *Zapysky ukrains'koho samašedšoho* [Notes of a Ukrainian Madman] (2010) emphasis is meaningfully shifted from aesthetic qualities of the text to its political and ethical meaning: for the narrator, as in the case of Nestor, the recording of events, not the artistic excellence of the text, is primary. Similarly, in an act of symbolic substitution, the narrator occupies a place as high as Nestor in historiography of the Slavs and the Slavonic written tradition – and Kostenko extends this line of association further, to Nostradamus and Cassandra, the prophets of catastrophe.

However, the “novel” (a rather questionable generic definition of this text) is in many respects problematic and at times indeed an “uncomfortable read.” It appears at this stage of research that the novel represents a new trend in contemporary Ukrainian literature towards neo-conservatism and neo-populism. While the moral impetus of the book is clear and there is little to say against its factual content, both the aesthetic value of the book and the validity of its conclusions about modern-day Ukraine are debatable.

Kostenko conceptualizes her book as “a diary of humanity” in order to “retain in memory what was happening on this planet” and as a warning before an impending catastrophe. Facing existential changes in the way of life and in the realm of interpersonal interactions, catastrophism has again become the all too known face of the “new” Ukrainian literature. Fear before the new and unknown, a number of unprocessed national tragedies and complexes result in yet another turn towards the past: xenophobia and homophobia, peasant superstitions, rigid religiosity, strict adherence to the patriarchal system of values and gender roles prescribed by it dominate the text. In criticism of the modern-day reality of an independent Ukraine, there is no room for playfulness and dynamism: this society seems to be doomed to failure, as it does not have any productive and vital forces within itself. From the narrator's perspective – which substantially conflates with that of the author – the future lies in the (idyllic) past, that is, in return to traditional, patriarchal mode of existence.

kotsyuba@fas.harvard.edu