



“Reports from an Absurdist” —An Analysis of Artistic Features of Ukraine Diaries

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Doi: 10.7575/aiac.all.v.6n.6p.46

Received: 09/06/2015

URL: <http://dx.doi.org/10.7575/aiac.all.v.6n.6p.46>

Accepted: 25/08/2015

Abstract

With 13 published novels and 5 children’s literature books, which have been translated into 25 languages, Andrey Kurkov has been recognized as one of the most renowned Ukrainian writers in the world of literature, and *Ukraine Diaries* is his first non-fiction literary work. This paper attempts to focus on Kurkov’s unique literary characteristics in the unusual combination of deceptive simplicity of style and the profound insights, coupled with acrid ridicule and subtle narration, which can all be attributed to the characteristics of “the Absurdist School”. The writer regards his living condition, as the report from Kiev shows, as kind of dilemma, or paradox: on the one hand, he feels frustrated with Russia intellectually despite the affinity to traditional culture in emotion; on the other hand, he feels more indignant about the European Union who brought painful experiences to his country and his people, in spite of his closeness to western culture and political system.

Keywords: *Ukraine Diaries*, Andrey Kurkov, Absurdist

1. Introduction

If any country becomes the headline news of global media all of a sudden, it is hard to imagine that its people could still live the same life as before. However, in his writings, the Ukrainian famous novelist Andrey Kurkov (1961-) firmly believes that, at least in the very beginning, the Maidan Revolution broken out in November 2013 would finish before long like the former ones and people could come back to their normal life. But this time, the novelist, who has built his reputation by previous accurate political predictions, has to admit that he “does not know his country and the people well”. In his novel, *The President’s Last Love* published in 2004, Kurkov fabricates a plot that the President was poisoned by political opponents, and only six months later in the presidential election Viktor Yushchenko, the candidate, was really empoisoned. Besides, he predicts the disputes caused by natural gas price negotiations between Ukraine and Russia, and Russian government closed the oil and gas pipelines to Ukraine within two years. Similarly, in his newly published *Ukraine Diaries* (2014), Kurkov made an optimistic conclusion about the “seasonal revolution” in the country: the Ukrainian revolutions always begin after the autumn harvest and end in the next spring when people would go home and plant potatoes. Yet, the situation had not got any better until April 2014 when the book was finished.

2. An Overview of the Diaries

Kurkov has been keeping diaries for thirty-five years, but he has never before thought about publishing his diaries extracts. However, “his thought changed this time”, as he “lived in an apartment with his wife and three children, only 500 yards away from Kiev’s Independence Square”, and “From the balcony, we could see smoke rising from the burning barricades and hear the loud explosions of hand grenades as well as gunshots.” As a journalist since his youth, he felt the responsibility to stand out for “showing the truth”. He intentionally supplements a subtitle “Reports from Kiev” to his dairies, whose tone at the beginning indeed appears rather relaxed and humorous, for example, “I drive the kids to school at first and then watch the revolution”—it is totally out of expectation that an ordinary demonstration would spark the historically unprecedented political crisis in this country. Thus you can see, as Kurkov said himself, he “has no intention to record the history”. Instead, his diaries are kept to “record the life of an ordinary person (and his families) during the unordinary periods, revolution”—maybe in which the significance of this diaries lie.

Making peaceful petition is a normal political movement in democratic countries. It is especially common in Ukraine: revolutionaries busy with marching; ordinary people working; and children studying. Each goes his own way. The beginning of the revolution on the Independence Square (Maidan) was more of the same. The slogan was nothing but pro-Europe, anti-Russia and anti-corruption. Revolutionaries marched on the street. Patrols patrolled around to keep order and peace. Everything was as usual. Since the novelist himself was not a revolutionary, nor was he an official, he still went out every day, accompanying his parent to hospital to have an electrocardiogram, taking his family to the villa in the suburb which is eighty kilometers away from Kiev to grow vegetables, while conceiving a full-length novel which satirized Russian oligarchs in Lithuania. Like most people, he was expecting President Viktor Yanukovich and the government to make concessions to achieve political compromise and restore normal order, just as their predecessors did.

As time passed by, the political situation got more turbulent. Rumors flew around the capital: Ukraine's anti-EU elites in its western region claimed that one requirement for Ukraine's admission to EU was to legitimize homosexuality; while government representatives asserted that American paratroops had landed in western Ukraine, and asked Russia to dispatch tank troops responsively. "I see them proceed westward to search through the country for those American soldiers and apologize to the public for disturbing them after coming back," Kurkov recorded ironically. Then the authorities' attitudes got tougher. Motorways were closed in the name of anti-terrorism. As a matter of fact, they were worried about more people flocking to the square. Onlookers were suspected of opposing the government if they stayed over half an hour. Besides, the number of secret police was sharply increased. Private gatherings in a couple of journalists' houses were monitored, and some writers were interrogated for their improper political remarks. On the country, the strengthening of police forces failed to keep the society in order. Malicious incidents like theft and robbery frequently occurred, so did smashing windows and burning cars. Ukraine became the arena for domestic and international political forces overnight. Its president who ordered a crackdown on the masses ended up stepping down, but the political situation was hard to restore its stability due to underlying competitions between various forces. In this sense, the whole book can be regarded as a political allegory.

3. An Analysis of the Artistic Features

Readers who expect to dig out startling inside stories would have unavoidable sense of loss: certainly the novelist recorded the origin of "Maidan Revolution", the political games behind the parliament and the general election as well as historical events like the merger of Crimea, but all these seem to be solely backgrounds of the diaries and glowed dimly. The author's focus, indeed, fell on the people and the families drawn into the flood of the revolution. He had to socialize with police officers for organizing his son's 11 year's old paintball birthday party; his daughter asked for more pocket money because of soaring prices; his wife felt alarmed and thus wished the whole family to migrate to England. At times, of course, he would have coffee or cognac with friends, once he even received a vacuum cleaner from them. But life was very different from that before the revolution. The current situation confused him a lot. He considered all things happening currently were "beyond his understanding": why a peaceful petition would turn out to be a bloody violent clash? He even couldn't find the right word to express himself. In confusion and puzzle, the novelist felt he "almost aged 5 years in 3 months."

The last part of the diary tells that Kurkov with his family went on their last holiday in Crimea, just in order to take a glimpse of this resort before Russian annexation. The author himself does not sleep well and suffers from sharp eyesight decrease. What's worse, there was no progress in his full-length fiction. Therefore, he planned to go back to his dacha to grow vegetables—it was indeed not a relaxation but rather an option of bread earning.

Well-known as the "post-Soviet Kafka", or "Bulgakov the absurdist" in western literary circles, Kurkov's unique literary achievement is the unusual combination of deceptive simplicity of style and the profound insights, coupled with acrid ridicule and subtle narration. One of the specialties of *Ukraine Diaries* lies in the dramatic irony that the author pretends to be ignorant of everything happening around him. Undoubtedly, the readers are aware of what happens in Ukraine—government corruption and political instability, the infamous president is going to be deposed and Crimea to be annexed. While in comparison, the author seems to be an outsider, knowing nothing about both the background and the current situation, and all significant historical events are scarcely mentioned. Even if their life is filled with gunfire, he would also just take down "routines in his everyday life". That is because the most important thing for him in life, the novelist believes, is to "move on".

Kurkov claimed during an interview that absurdity was nothing unusual in Ukraine. His "discovery" of such absurdity was first enlightened by his brother's arrest for being a dissident. The boy was officially convicted of "stealing ice cream" (so long as "anti-government" as a charge has not been invented then). Informed of the Judge's particular interest in collecting badges (after endless inquiries through connections), their mother sacrificed all the grandfather's badges of Tsarist Russia and brought them to the Judge as a bribe. Thankfully, his brother was sentenced to two year's probation as a consequence. Two months later those badges were auctioned publicly in an antique store. Embezzlement and corruption elude no one in Ukraine, the author concluded, not even the President, the Prime Minister, or all the parliament members. A total of 185 political parties are registered in such a small country. The author observed that you can, if you wish, actually "buy" a little one to take part in local elections and retrieve your investment by renting the party after elected. For example, Tymoshenko, the former Prime Minister, was once sent to court for embezzlement and corruption, and the Judge in charge of the case, was also demoted for the same conviction several months later. Officials come and go, leaving the public amazed at the absurd farces on end. Corruption tends to plague every corner of the country, save not even the most prestigious literature prize, which has been on sale in public. Another 100 winners were selected out of the President's whimsical command just in order to help him gain more support.

More ridiculous, once invited to have a talk with the Prime Minister, who asked him about his opinion on the current political situation, the novelist spent more than 50 minutes talking to himself continuously within this one-hour conversation; however, when the program was broadcast finally, it was the Prime Minister that turned to be the eloquent man, while the novelist was just standing there, listening attentively and nodding from time to time to express agreement. What a funny scene! Besides, according to the observation by Kurkov, during the revolution, flowers and candles were the only two businesses in flourish around the city. After the massacre of hundreds of demonstrators in February, 2014 in particular, the squares and streets were piled with bunches of flowers presented respectfully for those martyrs, and the churches had lighted much more candles than usual. "It seemed that only by doing so could the God see clearly what had happened in Ukraine", teased by the writer. Except for the corrupted and incapable

government...no one was willing to live under the control of such an absolutely corrupted and illiterate government who left nothing to his people but exploited the whole nation...sometimes, the write made a mock of part of the people. On his part, a large number of the so-called revolutionaries participated in the Maidan Revolution merely because they had nothing else to do. "Every morning, they came to the square, sang the national anthem, and then cleaned up the site before back home." The next day, another group came and duplicated, just like the shift of workshops. They were supposed to form a duty team for order maintenance, but finally the team members changed to be Mafia at night.

4. Conclusion

Andrey Kurkov has been living in Kiev since his childhood. His grandfather died in the Anti-Fascist War, however, now the writer himself was condemned as a fascist and his son was isolated at school, which puzzles him a lot. The country is becoming stranger and stranger to him for the time being. His attitude toward Russia, a powerful neighbor of Ukraine, is quite contradictory. On the one hand, as a writer who was born in Leningrad and received soviet education, he was unwilling to witness the relationship between the two countries to get worse, especially not willing to see Russia lose his reason day by day and go crazy as a result of flaunting his superiority. On the other hand, he protests against President Putin's backstage manipulation which has intensified the situation in Ukraine. He believes that President Putin is planning to regain the glory of Soviet Union or even that of Tsar's. However, Crimea is to Putin is what a stolen diamond to a thief. He can only appreciate the diamond privately instead of showing it off publicly.

As a matter of fact, he was more indignant with the tricky and inconstant political tricks of EU than with Russia. The EU, so vociferous in its support for Ukrainian democratic course, suddenly fell silent and walked away from Ukraine, preferring to profit more from trade with its larger and powerful neighbor. The EU reacted much slowly to the subsequent action of Russia's annexation of Crimea. "Though in the information age," the writer satirized, "their access to information seems to rely on horseback." All in all, "It's bare money and interest." What the EU did and said could sufficiently prove that "money is more important than democracy". Finally he added some words in his postscript: "The spicy lesson that the EU taught Ukraine will inevitably impact on the future of our state." Thus the writer ended his diaries with his parting admonition.

With 13 published novels and 5 children's literature books, which have been translated into 25 languages, Andre Kurkov has been recognized as one of the most renowned Ukrainian writers in the world of literature. *Ukraine Diaries: Dispatches from Kiev* is his first non-fiction literary work, which won him enormous acclaims from the international literati.

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