

Rostyslav Mel'nykiv. *Literaturni 1920-ti: Postati (Narysy, obrazky, etiudy)* [The Literary 1920s: Figures (Sketches, Portraits, and Essays)]. Kharkiv: Maidan, 2013. 256 pp. 43 pp. of photographs. Index. Cloth.

The introduction to this book about ten Ukrainian writers of the 1920s offers a fair description of what the reader can expect. Here we have sketches that vary in degree of detail and in length (e.g., 5, 8, 21 pages, and so on), which weave together biographic facts with literary context and some analysis of literary works. The author includes a number of major and better-known writers (Iohansen, Pylypenko, Slisarenko, Svidzins'kyi, Khvyil'ovyi, Pidmohyl'nyi, and Polishchuk), as well as minor writers—at least in terms of reader familiarity—(Muzyk, Vukhnal', and Chernov), all of whom contributed to the vibrant renaissance of Ukrainian literature during the short-lived period of Ukrainization, before nearly all of their lives were cut short by the repressive Soviet politics of the 1930s. This period has a deservedly special place in Ukrainian scholarship because of its rich variety of talented writers and literary works and because of its tragic conclusion. Major scholarly works on the subject appeared in the West during the Soviet period (Lavrinenko, Luckyj, Shkandrij). Now, in the post-Soviet period, the field continues to attract the attention of Western and Ukrainian scholars. In his volume, Mel'nykiv, whose scholarly career has taken him abroad, uses Western and Ukrainian sources as part of an ongoing effort to reassess and fill in the blank spots in the history of Ukrainian literature.

Mel'nykiv urges a reassessment of popular misconceptions that have designated many of these writers as uninteresting owing to current unfamiliarity with much of their work or to their being disparagingly labeled as Soviet or Komsomol writers. In selecting these particular writers, Mel'nykiv also seeks to emphasize Kharkiv and the surrounding area (Slobozhanshchyna)—from where many of the writers hailed or where they worked during the 1920s and 1930s—in order to remind readers of the region's importance to Ukrainian literature and cultural life from the nineteenth century through the 1920s, when Kharkiv was, for a short time, the capital of Soviet Ukraine. The volume closes, in a slightly unusual fashion, with Mel'nykiv's book reviews of three more recently published/translated works—two dealing with writers that appear in the volume (Svidzins'kyi, Pidmohyl'nyi) and one with a writer that does not (Kostets'kyi).

The volume's discussion of writers provides the reader with a measured overview of the general issues that shaped Ukrainian literature during the vibrant 1920s. This period—that is, the early, heady days before Soviet Marxist aesthetics and politics began to assert themselves—allowed for a great deal of experimentation, which is evident in the wide variety of genres that surfaced, the number of literary journals that were published, the open

literary debates that took place (about quality, ideology, and orientation), and the backlash of political repression. Many of the facts regarding these topics are known, but Mel'nykiv fosters a new appreciation of some of the issues, while also offering new insights.

In nearly all of the essays, the author emphasizes the writers' concern with aesthetics and quality over ideology. In the case of established figures like Mykola Khvyly'ovyi and Volodymyr Svidzins'kyi, there is little need to defend their literary reputation, but for a number of others he pursues a reassessed perspective. For example, Serhii Pylypenko, often disparaged as a propagator of peasant literature (*massovizm*), is presented as being as deeply committed to Ukrainian culture as Khvyly'ovyi. In addition, his fables (*baiky*) are defended as a reimagining of the genre in a new, proletarian manner. In the case of Iurii Vukhnal', Mel'nykiv argues in favour of the artistic quality of Vukhnal''s science fiction and children's stories, which have nearly been forgotten. Similarly, Mel'nykiv points out that the works of Vasyl' Muzyk, now largely unknown, were well received by his contemporaries—the poets of Pluh and Vaplite. He also argues for the literary importance of Oleksa Slisarenko.

These essays also highlight the literary experimentation of the time and the wide variety of genres, a number of which would influence later Ukrainian literature. Poetry (lyrical, imagist, and futurist), dramas, screenplays, science fiction, travelogues, children's stories, adventure novels, reimagined fables, humoresques, literary translation, and literary critical essays can be counted among the achievements of this group of writers. Mel'nykiv shows that their participation in a variety of literary organizations and orientations led to lively literary discussions in journals and newspapers, where nearly all of the writers worked at one time or another.

The trajectory taken by these writers eventually placed them on a collision course with Communist Party dictates. A crucial moment, according to Mel'nykiv, was Joseph Stalin's conversation with Ukrainian writers in Moscow in February 1929. Alarmed at their commitment toward developing a vibrant Ukrainian literature, Stalin emphasized the necessity of a literature that would be "socialist in content and nationalist in form," and this led to the rehabilitation of several writers and then the end of Ukrainization. Maik Iohansen was essentially sent away to study the oil industry, as a form of re-education; Pylypenko and Khvyly'ovyi had to apologize for earlier errors; and some, such as Valerian Pidmohyl'nyi and Svidzins'kyi, took up safer literary activity, such as translation. What began as a "Red renaissance" (*chervonyi renesans*) in the 1920s ended in the 1930s as an "executed rebirth" (*rozstrilene vidrodzhennia*).

Mel'nykiv argues that many of these creative and interesting writers were thwarted in their development, and he weaves together positive and

critical reviews of the time to reveal the quality of their work and the mounting criticism. The volume is not intended to be a detailed literary history or to focus on a particular movement or issue; thus, numerous talented figures of the time are not included here, such as Semenko, Kulish, Bazhan, Ryl's'kyi, Tychyna, Panch, Zerov, and many others. Instead, *Mel'nykiv* reminds readers of the contributions made by the individual writers and seeks to spur further research into one of the most vital and vibrant periods in Ukrainian literature.

George Mihaychuk
Georgetown University

