

## INTRODUCTION

### *Antonych Grows. The Grass Grows.*

When Orpheus played his lyre, the earth heard him and knew itself. The chords of his music, those absolute and universal metaphors, taught trees to walk and stones to speak. The floor of the sea and the roof of the sky arranged themselves anew according to his harmonies. Finally, love led Orpheus on a journey to survey the very center of the earth, the very center of life, which is death.

There is a strain of poets, persisting through the ages, who are attuned to the song of Orpheus. No matter how different they may be from each other, they seem to hear it and reverberate it in their poems. Novalis, Nerval, Hölderlin, Slowacki, Yeats, Rilke, Khlebnikov, Guillen, Stevens are only a few of the many names that come to mind. In Ukrainian poetry this Orphic strain is represented by Taras Shevchenko, Pavlo Tychyna, Volodymyr Svidzinsky and Bohdan Ihor Antonych.

No matter where a son of Orpheus is born, his true birthplace is a budding copse or a green hill. The actual birthplace of Bohdan Ihor Antonych was a small village surrounded by hills, groves and ancient echoes of forgotten forest gods. He was born on the fifth of October, 1909, in Novycja, a village in the beautiful Lemko region at the extreme western border of Ukraine. It is one of those villages, Antonych says in a poem, where "flower-formed suns sleep on the mossy bottoms of wells" and where at night "the village tavern burns with its candles like a bush giving birth to stars." The son of a Ukrainian Catholic priest (Ukrainian priests are allowed to marry), the boy spent his childhood in a peaceful,

comfortable home.

A quiet, withdrawn, and sickly boy, Antonych received his early education at home; his father hired a sensitive young woman to tutor him, and throughout his life the poet remembered her with great fondness. Later his father sent him to the provincial city of Sanok for his high school education. The Polish environment of the school influenced the boy for a time: his first poetic exercises were written in the Polish language. But in high school his interest in poetry was sporadic, far outweighed by his other loves—music and painting. Young Antonych was a passable violinist and something of a composer. His life's ambition, however, was to be a painter. Although later he became discouraged with his own painting and gave it up, his theoretical interests in the art continued until his death.

At the age of nineteen Antonych matriculated at the University of Lviv, in the faculty of Slavic Studies. In the late twenties and early thirties Lviv was humming with cultural activity. The Ukrainian writers of the city avidly absorbed all the excitement of experimentation and the new national spirit that blew in from Kharkiv and Kyiv. When Stalinism put an end to the growth of modern culture in the Soviet Ukraine, Lviv was ready to take over the leadership of Ukrainian intellectual life. Lviv intellectuals had the advantage of free access to West European and West Slavic culture, made frequent journeys to Western capitals and studied in Western universities. In the ten years before the outbreak of the Second World War, West Ukrainian literature and art began fruitful experiments in the cross-cutting of purely Ukrainian cultural strains with such Western ventures as expressionism and surrealism.

Once in Lviv, Antonych gravitated toward Ukrainian student organizations which were powerhouses of the Ukrainian national spirit in the city. As a result of these contacts, he abandoned his flirtations with Polish poetry and devoted himself wholly to Ukrainian culture. The main disadvantage he had was his lack of knowledge of literary Ukrainian. The Lemko dialect in which Antonych had been brought up is

quite different from the normative Ukrainian language. Together with ancient Ukrainian words and flexions, preserved from erosion in that mountainous region, it contains massive Slovak, Polish and even some German lexical influences. But the main difference is that of stress, so important in prosody. The Lemko dialect is the only Ukrainian dialect in which words are stressed penultimately, as opposed to normal Ukrainian where stress-incidence is irregular. Although friends remember that Antonych often mis-stressed words in conversation, no such errors occur in his mature poetry. Antonych's second task was to learn as much about Ukrainian literature as possible, since until then his knowledge of his own culture had been sketchy. What he did know thoroughly, however, was the mythology, demonology and folklore of his own region, preserved through the centuries by the relative isolation of the Lemko people. And this knowledge became the cornerstone of his poetry.

After obtaining his Master's degree in 1933, Antonych launched into feverish creative activity, almost as if he knew that he was running out of time. Unmarried, sharing a flat with an old aunt who doted on him, Antonych became even more of a recluse than he had been before. Shy and humble, he was inwardly both sure of his ability and firm in his convictions. The more naively romantic readers of his poetry were often disappointed upon meeting him: was this undistinguished person, of soft and hesitant body and of soft and hesitant speech, the same as the elemental, all-encompassing *persona* they got used to meeting in his stanzas?

Antonych's systematic working habits drove his bohemian friends to distraction. He wrote poetry every other day, devoting the rest of his time to critical prose, scholarship and reading. He rose early in the morning and hurriedly outlined a new poem in order to catch and fix the subtle intimations of his night dreams. In the afternoon he usually walked or read, trying not to think about the poem on his table. In the early evening he returned to it, rewriting and polishing it late into the night. But in spite of this methodical approach to writing, he firmly believed in inspiration. When his friends worried that he was overworking himself, he told them that he must

keep up with the dictation. He once told Olha Olijnyk, the woman he hoped to marry: "You know, sometimes it seems that someone whispers the lines into my ear. *Literally* whispers them."

In 1937 Antonych was hospitalized for routine appendectomy. In the hospital he caught severe pneumonia which was all but cured when his heart, damaged by prolonged high fever, stopped beating. He died on the sixth of July, in his twenty-eighth year. Antonych left behind approximately four hundred poems, a number of essays and reviews, an opera libretto and two singularly unexciting attempts at imaginative prose. At his death more than half of his works remained unpublished.

The early writings of Bohdan Ihor Antonych are a negative indication of his astonishingly rapid growth. Most of his mature work was done in the last four or five years of his life. His numerous early poems, on the other hand, reveal a modestly gifted young beginner. They are marred by his struggle with literary Ukrainian and with the syllabotonic metrical system. Antonych published some of these early efforts in various youth and religious journals but the bulk of them remained in manuscript at his death.

The poems that Antonych included in his first collection, published in 1931 and entitled *Pryvitannja zhyttja* (*Life's Greeting*), are of a much higher caliber. Nevertheless, they are still a far cry from his later mature work. Their main flaw is their literariness, their faithful devotion both to traditional and modern poetic models. Antonych, like Rilke, Stevens, Yeats and many others of such stature, proves the claim of contemporary theoreticians that most good poets begin in "literature" and not in "life." They find their own voice not by listening to the song of nightingales or the speech of the local grocer but by immersing themselves in poetry and then laboriously weaning themselves from it. What astonishes in Antonych's early work is the extraordinarily wide spectrum of his influences: from free verse to mannered games with the sonnet form, from startlingly direct visual imagery to involved verbal metaphors, bordering on conceits. In his youthful enthusiasm Antonych often abandons discrimination, so that

very good poems are followed by near failures. And yet this youthful enthusiasm is evident everywhere, and in the end it saves the book. The reader is carried away by the poet's tremendous energy and love of life. This energy and love of life will never abandon Antonych.

In this first collection the voice of the "true Antonych" resounds when the poet turns to memories of his native village to the sad beauty of the Lemko countryside, to the mysterious lore of that land. His style becomes direct, his prosody uncomplicated and his imagery immediately arresting. This is especially evident in the longer poem "Zelena elehija" ("A Green Elegy"): "I know now," the poem ends, "that each of us knows only a single truth, the truth of his green moments."

The truth of one's green moments is the motif underlying Antonych's next collection which was published in 1934. Its title, *Try persteni (Three Rings)*, recalls to a Ukrainian not so much S. George's mystical *Der Siebente Ring* as magical ring images in the folk poetry of Ukraine. The book is composed of longer poems, which Antonych calls "elegies" and of short two-three-stanza miniatures. In his two subsequent collections, Antonych will formalize this division, grouping the longer poems into "Chapters" and the shorter works into "Intermezzos" and then alternating these groups. Although in *The Three Rings* the groupings are still more or less intuitive, the thematic nature of each of the two groups is already sharply defined. The "elegies" develop the motif of childhood memories. In the especially beautiful "Elehija pro spivuchi dveri" ("The Elegy of a Singing Door") there is no telling where the memory of childhood ends and pure imagination begins:

I still remember: on the water  
The morning scatters trembling sparks.  
I still remember a white building  
whose walls are made of wood and dream.  
.....  
A singing hallway, a white maple,

A threshold ringing underfoot:  
Thus my imagination figures  
The scenes of boyish joys and dreams.

While in the "elegies" nature is mediated by memories of childhood, in the miniatures the voice of the earth speaks directly. Constructed on a powerful single image or a cluster of images fused by a single phenomenal field, these poems demonstrate a deliberate simplicity of prosody and diction, an uncomplicated alternate rhyme scheme and subdued alliteration, as if the poet were deliberately struggling to push back the tempting autonomy of language in order to let the physical presence of the world speak for itself.

Historical time does not exist in this realm. Neither does death. Time here is the cyclical, regenerative time of nature and myth, where past and future are contained in the eternal present. Antonych proposes to "praise the beauty of our temporality," on which the poet must always be drunk. In order to feel this truly human time with every cell of his body, the poet must enter into a state of Dionysian ecstasy:

Having sold my days to the sun  
For a hundred ducats of madness,  
I shall stay an enchanted pagan,  
A singer of heady Mays.

One has to become a pagan in order to receive the word from a deity which has nothing in common with the Judaeo-Christian God. This deity bestows language upon the poet like a part of his body:

He who gave lightness to a doe,  
Who gave the bees their golden flowers,  
Who gave the pard his steely claw—  
Gave me my words, my singing powers.

The words of poetry are *in* the poet because they are in na-

ture. Antonych urges: "Learn the forest language / From the Bible of foxes and deer."

The motif of the earth language is intensified in Antonych's subsequent collections. Occasionally referring to himself in his poetry by his last name, Antonych thus advances the depersonalization of his lyrical self in order to liberate the prepersonal energies of his being which come out of nature and therefore unite him with all living things: "I hear the noise of comets and the growth of grass. / Antonych is a curly and sad animal too." It is indeed only thus, without the interference of personality, that the poet will open himself sufficiently to listen to the magical speech of the earth. The lyrical "I" of consciousness must stand aside and observe "Antonych" who is a part of nature. For Antonych, as for Heidegger, the poet is not he who speaks but he who listens:

Antonych grows. The grass grows.

The curly poplars are greening.

O bend, bend a little:

Magical words have a meaning.

A different semantics is obviously involved here, a semantics of participation rather than of difference. And to hear these Orphic meanings, both the poet and the reader must lean toward the earth, putting their heads close to the ground, since the human posture seems too haughty for such listening. Antonych grows. But this growth is not upward, not directed toward the blank blue of the sky where there is nothing to grow *into*: "And above is the desert of the sky, human fear, a dead light." The sun Antonych worships is the sun that tills the earth, that makes things grow.

In a complete reversal of the literariness of the first collection, literature and its history must now go through the prepersonal existence of the self. The poet writes: "Antonych was a may bug and lived on cherry trees, / The very trees of which Shevchenko sang." Here Antonych establishes a continuity between the great Ukrainian Romantic and his own poetry. But how? In a literary-natural reincarnation Antonych becomes an insect, living on an object of poetry-na-

ture which was created by another poet of nature almost a century before.

The basic impulse underlying his next two collections, *The Book of the Lion* and *The Green Evangelium*, is the search for total Orphic unification. We see this in the short poem "Podvijnyj koncert" ("A Double Concert") where sound and color fulfill each other to the point of creating a new intangible phenomenon. Characteristically for Antonych, this high blending begins at the level of the mundane—a prosaic still life—effected by the counterpositioning of a drab black radio set and multi-colored bouquet of flowers in the unpredicated first line:

A radio set and a posy of flowers.  
From the black cabinet music flows.  
And the souls of the blooms are aglow with a light  
That, because of the sounds, is blindingly bright.

In the longer poems of the two books such fusion is brought about on much deeper levels. Under shells of asphalt and brick, blind, viscous forces of nature move slowly but relentlessly against the paltry structures that man has built. These silent stresses destroy the marble horses of monuments, erode civilizations, confound historical time. But they do not harm those impulses in man which ultimately derive from them. The simple people of the city, the girls who work the oil presses and the young men at the brick kilns, the tired seamstresses and the apprentices of locksmiths—those who know nature because they live below history—join in the slow gyrations of her own time. The poem "Epichnyj ve-chir" ("The Epic Evening"), is an excellent illustration of a fairly large group of poems in this thematic vein.

Keats, like many other Romantics, was shocked by the prodigal extravagance of nature, by its careless cruelty and wanton violence. Such excesses do not shock Antonych. Quite the contrary, it is here that he sees yet another synthesis: the brief progress of man from birth to death is linked with the eternal presence of nature's time. "Again you find





earth, / Weave themselves into a melody that sounds through stumps of trees." This music expresses itself in human love and love, in turn, changes blood "into green music." Addressing his beloved, the poet says: "Green and thirsty like the earth you burn. You are music." Antonych wants to reach "to the bottom, to the essence, to the root of things, to the womb, / To the center of the word and to the center of the sun!" We grow by leaning. By leaning toward the earth and by going backward in time to the origin of all memory, we learn the true nature of poetic language: "The earth in its orbit turns backward / Into its own youth, into the dream of arch-language." It is this arch-language, which is earth music, that *forces* the poet to reach upward. In a passage reminiscent of Rilke's *Duineser Elegien* Antonych writes:

This low earth music takes into itself each movement  
Of ether, grows and slims itself, and rings with light,  
And rings the shrouded bell of night until it reaches  
The meeting point of the Eternal and of Nothing

It is thus that Antonych becomes an Orphic poet. The magnificent poem "Dim za zoreju" ("The Home Beyond a Star") ends with the poet's lyre—the heritage of Orpheus—proclaiming the unity of transcendence and descent.

As opposed to *The Green Evangelium* the slim volume *Rotaciji* (*Rotations*) was far from complete when Antonych's friends brought it out in 1938. It is a random collection of poems on which Antonych was working at the time of his death. This book shows that Antonych was attempting to break away from most of his established patterns and find new fields.

The poems continue the motif of the city-nature relationship. This time, however, the poet refuses to unify these opposites. Notes of bitter irony and even sarcasm, previously absent from Antonych's world view, prevail here. Such poems as "Balada blakytynoji smerty" ("The Ballad of the Blue Death") where the orgasms and the death cramps of two suicidal lovers parody the Orphic unity of love and death would be unheard of in the earlier Antonych. In such eerily

beautiful works as "Nazavzhdy" ("Forever") or "Koncert z Merkurija" ("A Concert from Mercury") the lyrical element has now become an item in a drab catalogue: "A star in the wallet, a redhead in bed, wet roses" or in the following image: "The grey overcoats dig into their pockets for stars / To pay the girls for five minutes of love." Such seemingly slight shifts in image construction imply nothing short of a radical change in Antonych's whole philosophy.

A new Antonych? An examination of Antonych's earliest manuscripts quickly shows that there is no real break between the earliest and the latest point in this line of his development. Depressing stanzas on the boredom of city workers, desperate stanzas dealing with the metaphysical dread of Nothingness, grotesque stanzas of nightmarish imagery abound in the manuscripts and grow from year to year. Here is an example from a poem entitled "Kaminni strofy" ("Stony stanzas"):

And my lips will be silent when blue dusk falls,  
lifeless and cold, like the stone of statues,  
for the void is all there is, death is all there is,  
and nothing else is worth giving voice to.

And here is an example of the poet's impatience with the helplessness of poetry in the face of evil:

Never will he grasp the essence of things,  
nor uproot evil with his words.

Although some of these poems are technically perfect, only a few found their way into literary journals. None is included in the collections over which Antonych had control. Whether Antonych was saving them for a future volume, where he intended to perform a dramatic *volte face* for his readers, or whether he was writing them only because they demanded to be written will remain a mystery.

We are certain of one thing. From his second book onward, Antonych was carefully orchestrating every collection by excluding much more material than he included. His selec-

tions were not motivated by quality alone, since some of the poems that were left out are obviously better than many of those which made it into the books. They were motivated by the *persona* that Antonych was carefully constructing—the *persona* of the poet as Orpheus. The haunting poem “The Home Beyond a Star” is its crowning chord. This poem proclaims the unity of earth and horizon, of immediacy and distance, of transcendence and immanence. But above all it proclaims the unity of poetry and the world. While the poet lived on this earth, he lived in his poetry. It is in his poetry that he continues living, far beyond the charming streets of provincial Lviv. “Dichterisch wohnet der Mensch,” Hölderlin said. Poetically man dwells.

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