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All translations are by the author unless otherwise specified.

I

Oles Barlih: Queering Myths for Legitimation

Abstract

In the 1990s, prominent literary critics Solomiia Pavlychko and Tamara Hundorova, revised the relationship between the totalitarian society and literary development in Ukraine. Pavlychko argued that in the formerly colonial and totalitarian Ukrainian society, the search for a modern ideal involves revisiting the once-forbidden historical past and looking toward the West (2002) and what Hundorova (2013) described as the desacralization of literature initiated by post-modernism. In other words, departing from traditional literary norms and themes is a part of that search for an ideal. This raises the crucial question of whether that departure from tradition encompasses queer narratives recently created in contemporary Ukrainian literature. Such narratives can be studied as constructs, not as inherently natural or “original,” as Judith Butler (1990) put it, to help us better understand how the traditional gender categories are challenged in literature. The emergence of gender-nonconforming and queer narratives contributes to the broader legitimation of queerness in literature. In this paper, the plays of Oles Barlih from the collection *Zviri podivlâtsâ zamîst tebe / Beasts Will Gaze Instead of You*, are analyzed as both performative acts of queerness and cultural activism. The analysis will focus on the origin of homoerotic narratives and character networks to understand forms of intertextual playfulness, such as pastiche, parody, and burlesque as modes of subverting traditional gender politics in Ukraine. Contrary to views that position representations of queerness as paradoxical or infantilized, this article examines Barlih’s manifestations of queerness, phantasmagorical characters, and his undermining of normative gender discourse and politics, highlighting his role in fostering the legitimation of queerness in literature in post-Euromaidan Ukraine.

Keywords: Oles Barlih, queer, contemporary literature, identity, legitimation.

Introduction

Homoeroticism has been a part of Ukrainian literature since the late 19th century, with the literary works of Olha Kobylanska (*Valse Mélancolique* (1898)) and Ahatanhel Krymsky (*Palmove Hillâ* (1901), *Andrij Lahovskij* (1905)). This phenomenon has become more prevalent in post-1991 literature influenced by Western Postmodernism. This trend was manifested in popular culture. As the Soviet Period, with its overarching ideas on the binary gender perception and asserting the lack of an alternative to heterosexuality, exerted a strong influence, the formation of a Soviet Ukrainian queer culture was impeded.¹

Subtle manifestations of homosexuality took a different level after the Revolution of Dignity, which stimulated a radically different understanding of gender and sexual identities. Being the first post-Soviet country to do so, Ukraine repealed all sodomy laws. With its proximity to Europe and European values throughout its history, Ukraine had a good initial position after the dissolution of the Soviet Union to start developing a national queer culture. However, homophobia, as Martsenyuk argues, has remained a core challenge for Ukrainian society in the 2000s.² Despite the slow progress in changing social attitudes toward queer people, queer literary culture has been on the rise in Ukraine, particularly following the revolutionary events of 2013-2014.

To describe the influence of those events, after 2013, Ukrainian politics shifted into a binary position regarding the LGBTQ+ community and culture. On one side, there are individuals recognizing the European Union's progress in gender equality and the equal treatment of LGBTQ+ individuals under the law, while on the other, the Right Sector continues to use derogatory terms like *Homodyktatura* (Homo-dictatorship), and *Heiropa* (Gay Europe)³ to denounce 'non-traditional' values that are widely accepted in the Western World, like marriage equality, and gender-affirming care for individuals, which they claim undermine the institution of the family, threaten cultural heritage, and endanger the nation itself. This positioning in Ukrainian politics leads to polarization, with one group moving towards European ideals and the other being stuck in the patriarchal past. Before Russia's full-scale invasion of

¹ Maryna Romanets argues that Ukraine under the totalitarian rule of the USSR did not experience the revolutionary sexual liberation movements that happened in the 1960s-1980s. As an alternative to that, it "made up for the lost time" after the dissolution of the Soviet Union. Starting in 1991, both hetero and homo sexuality became a much more common sight in Ukrainian literature. (Romanets, Maryna. "Orients of the Mind: Deviance, Sexual Enlightenment, and True Love in Fredericks's Degenerate Empress, Vynnychuk's Zhytiie haremnoie (Life in the Harem), and Parker's Roxelana & Suleyman." *Canadian Review of Comparative Literature*, Vol. 44, 2017, pp. 95-110, doi:10.1353/crc.2017.0006.)

² Tamara Martsenyuk, *The State of the LGBT Community and Homophobia in Ukraine*, [in:] *Problems of Post-Communism*, Vol. 59, No. 2, 2012, pp. 51-62.

³ Both *Homodyktatura*, and *Heiropa* are a reaction to what Pavlychko describes as looking for an ideal in the West. Aware of this, right-wing supporters use derogatory terms for the West to portray it negatively knowing that Ukrainians take the West as an example of advancement.

Ukraine in 2022, the action of refraining from European developments in the questions of gender and sexuality led the Ukrainian right-wing groups to be associated with Russia as the defender of heterosexuality and traditional values. This association is no longer relevant after 2022, as Ukrainian nationalism has gained a new understanding. This new understanding fostered a more inclusive approach toward groups historically marginalized within the framework of Ukrainian identity. But even in the newly developing all-inclusive Ukrainian nationalism, the space for a queer culture is disputed. Just like Russia,⁴ Ukraine also tackled the question of identity in binary terms (i.e., East/West), but unlike Russia, which chooses a mixed interpretation of East and West as a colonial powerhouse,⁵ Ukraine has always been a step closer to the West.⁶

With the government of Ukraine changing and making meaningful steps towards European integration, the queer literary culture gained momentum. More literary works either fully or partially dedicated to queer narratives were published by writers like Oksana Zabuzhko, Kateryna Babkina, Nataliia Sniadanko, and Anna Magilon.⁷ Thus, the literary repertoire of Ukrainian literature began to include more narratives of open queerness.

However, first, the beginning of Russia's hybrid war in Eastern Ukraine, then the full-scale invasion of Ukraine starting in 2022, thwarted the exciting developments in social and political spheres and, consequently, contributed to the demonization of queerness.⁸ Even though since the Revolution of Dignity and, especially, after the full-scale invasion, LGBTQ+ groups and people have been very active in every front possible, they have been accused of "seeding the society with perversion"⁹ once they ended the "strategy of invisibility" and, brought up their identities into

⁴ Nárcisz Fejes and Andrea P. Balogh, editors. *Queer Visibility in Post-socialist Cultures*. Intellect Ltd, 2013, p. 24.

⁵ Ibidem, p. 25.

⁶ For further reading on this topic, see Paweł Leszkowicz, *Queer Ukraine. Images, Ideas, Struggles*, [in:] *Als der Krieg kam ... Neue Beiträge zur Kunst in der Ukraine*, ed. Kilian Heck and Aleksandra Lipińska (Heidelberg: arthistoricum, 2023), pp. 140-141.

⁷ M. Răbčenko, *Kvir-İdentičnist u Sučasnij Ukraïnskij Prozi*. [in:] *Visnik Kiïvskogo Nacionálního Universitetu imeni Tarasa Ševčenko*, Vol. 39, 2021, pp. 1-20. doi:10.35619/ucpmk.v39i.507.

⁸ P. Leszkowicz, *Queer Ukraine: Images, Ideas, Struggles*, *Als der Krieg kam ... Neue Beiträge zur Kunst in der Ukraine*, edited by Kilian Heck and Aleksandra Lipińska, arthistoricum, 2023, pp. 134-160. <https://doi.org/10.11588/arthistoricum.1227.c17107>, Y. Soroka, et al. *Perverts or Heroes in the Post-Socialist 'Cold War': Formula Stories of Lesbian/Bisexual/Queer Women and Transgender People in Ukrainian Media*, [in:] *International Journal of Symbolic Logic*, Vol. 47, No. 2, 2022, <https://doi.org/10.1002/symb.627>, and O. Plahotnik, *Imaginaries of Sexual Citizenship in Post-Maidan Ukraine: A Queer Feminist Discursive Investigation*. PhD thesis, The Open University, 2019. <https://doi.org/10.21954/ou.ro.0000f515>, and O. Plahotnik, *Imaginaries of Sexual Citizenship in Post-Maidan Ukraine: A Queer Feminist Discursive Investigation*. PhD thesis, The Open University, 2019. <https://doi.org/10.21954/ou.ro.0000f515>.

⁹ I. Graborivska, *Sučasna ukraïnska genderna politika u svitli ěvrocivilizatsijnikh prahnen' Ukraïni*. [in:] *Ukrainoznavčij almanah*, vol. 18, 2013, pp. 73-75.

the public sphere. The LGBTQ+ issue in Ukraine was regarded to be untimely and inappropriate.¹⁰ According to an online article, aggressive tendencies and tolerance towards them also increased in the revolutionary and war-torn atmosphere.¹¹ Despite pervasive hostility and institutional barriers faced by LGBTQ+ individuals in Ukraine, the literary landscape has emerged as a site of resilience and expression, offering a counterbalance to societal rejection and invisibility.

The Literary Landscape

Amidst the radicalization of attitudes towards queerness, overpowering hate speech, and a non-supportive legislative atmosphere, one might expect queer artistic productions to be rare. On the contrary, in Ukraine, both translation of queer world literature and writing of queer Ukrainian literature took an upturn despite the challenging climate. Western translations – both to Russian and Ukrainian – were published and were highly appreciated by the Ukrainian reader. In 2009, however, the publication of *120 Storinok Sodomu / 120 Pages of Sodom*, an anthology of queer literature translated from various authors and languages into Ukrainian (which was also the first queer anthology published in the post-Soviet space), marked a significant change in the literary landscape. The editors¹² faced significant backlash, leading to a presentation of the book vandalized by homophobes. Vitaly Chernetsky outlines the significance of these events, stating,

“The milestone of Ukrainian queer culture-building that has received the greatest renown so far came in 2009. In September of that year, something unprecedented in the history of publishing in independent Ukraine took place. Four events held to commemorate the publication of a literary anthology resulted in violent protests, physical attacks, and vandalism”.¹³

Between the developments of 2009 and the publication of Oles Barlih’s second book-long collection¹⁴ *Zviri podivlâtsâ zamîst* from Ternopil-based publishing house ‘Krok’, queerness never ceased existing in contemporary Ukrainian literature.

¹⁰ T. Martsenyuk, *Sexuality and Revolution in Post-Soviet Ukraine: LGBT Rights and the Euro-maidan Protests of 2013-2014*, [in:] *Journal of Soviet and Post-Soviet Politics and Society*, Vol. 2, No. 1, 2016.

¹¹ D. Lavrik, *Gomofobiâ v Ukraîni: Tendencii postmajdanogo periodu*, [in:] *Commons*, 18 May 2015, <https://commons.com.ua/uk/gomofobiya-v-ukrayini/>, accessed 27 October 2024.

¹² Īrina Šuvalova, Albina Pozdnâkova, and Oles Barlig.

¹³ V. Chernetsky, *Ukrainian Queer Culture: The Difficult Birth. Queer Stories of Europe*, Cambridge Scholars Press, 2016, pp. 216.

¹⁴ Oles Barlig’s first book-length publication was his poetry collection *Nasoloda uâvnoi smerti* (2012).

In 2013, Katerina Babkina's debut novel *Sonya* was published by Folio, a publishing house based in Kharkiv. The novel's description on the publisher's website reads:

«Соня» — дебютний роман найяскравішої української молодої поетки — це історія про любов, молодість, кордони, гомосексуалістів, євреїв, Німеччину, Польщу, Албанію, Чорногорію, Салоніки, контрабанду, молитву, інцест, вічне життя, заробітчання, вагітність, пошук, Аллаха, чудеса та чотириста тисяч євро.¹⁵

The book has side characters that are gay, which is not the first¹⁶ (and the last¹⁷) time Babkina uses homosexual characters in her narratives. The book description, however, is concerning because the presence of homosexual characters is presented as an ill-conceived and haphazard marketing strategy that involves, to some extent, tokenism of “the extremes of society.” The issue does not lie in the inclusion of homosexual characters within the work, but rather in the term *homoseksualysti*, which lacks a direct English translation. This term implies that homosexuality is a condition or illness and is often used derogatorily, particularly in reference to homosexual men, serving as a formal alternative to the derogatory term *pydor/pydoras*.

Nevertheless, Babkina claims and highlights the didactic role of the author in social activism. In Chytomo's¹⁸ article from 2023,¹⁹ she explains her decision to ‘feature’ LGBTQ+ characters in her works: “Тому що вони є, а література має симулювати взаємодію з реальним світом, а не з вибраними його частинами”.²⁰

In 2015 “the first Ukrainian gay novel” *Teplo yoho dolon' / The Warmth of His Palms*, as described by its author, Yurii Yarema, shows how love takes different forms and does this in the second favorite genre²¹ of the Ukrainian reader,

¹⁵ *Sonya* – the debut novel by the brightest young Ukrainian poet – is a story about love, youth, borders, homosexuals, Jews, Germany, Poland, Albania, Montenegro, Thessaloniki, smuggling, prayer, incest, eternal life, labor migration, pregnancy, seaching, Allah, miracles, and four hundred thousand euros (Babkina, Folio 2013).

¹⁶ Lili pislia tebe, 2009.

¹⁷ Myi did tanstiuavav krashe za vsikh, 2019.

¹⁸ Largest independent media covering publishing and contemporary literary and cultural processes in Ukraine <https://chytomo.com/en/about-us/>.

¹⁹ Gorčinska, Oleksandra. “Na pitannâ pro te, čomu Babkina virišila ‘oseliti’ u svoïh knigah LGBTI-heroïv.” Čytomo, 2 November 2023, <https://chytomo.com/u-nas-pro-take-ne-hovoriat-istoriia-rozvytku-lhbt-literatury-v-ukraini/>.

²⁰ Because they exist, and literature should simulate interaction with the real world, not just with selected parts of it.

²¹ According to the results of a 2020 nationwide survey on reading habits within the broader context of media consumption and personal development, conducted by Info Sapiens LLC for the Ukrainian Institute of Books (I. Volosevič, and A. Šurenkova, *Zvit za Rezultatami Vseukraïnskogo Sociologičnogo Doslidžennâ «Čitannâ v Konteksti Mediaspoživannâ ta Žyttekonstruïvannâ*, [in:] Contract No. 81, 10 July 2020, Ukrainian Institute of Books, executed by Info Sapiens LLC, Kyiv, 2020.),

which is a love novel. *Teplo yoho dolon'* tells the story of two men's love and was presented at GOGOLFEST on 26 September 2015. In an interview with the Gay Alliance Ukraine²² that is later published on the website of the book's publisher, Yarema elaborates on his main message – that is to show the reader that homosexuals are no different from heterosexuals and also claims the book's place as first in Ukrainian queer literature.²³

The most scandalous of them all, however, was *Mayia ta yiyi mamy / Maya and Her Moms*, a children's book about a lesbian family, by Larysa Denysenko, and illustrated by Masha Foya, which created a sensation as it 'attacked' the institution of the family with its one paragraph describing Mayia as having two mothers, and the father being only a donor.

Taking into account the above, we can summarize that the growth of queer literary expression in Ukraine reflects a significant cultural and artistic engagement, paving the way for further – and more experimental – exploration of the marginalized identities in contemporary Ukrainian literature.

Oles Barlih

In recent years, Ukrainian literature has emerged as a vibrant and dynamic space for the exploration of marginalized identities and unconventional narratives, which gave relatively new authors, like Barlih, a much-needed platform to voice their queer ideas. Starting with the Revolution of Dignity in 2013-2014, writers increasingly use nonheteronormative narratives as a sign of acceptance of European values. The processes that influence sexuality might not always be apparent or may occur without conscious intent,²⁴ nevertheless, globally, those processes tend to reinforce default notions of sexuality, which are primarily defined as occurring between a man and a woman. Humanity went through a demystification of non-heteronormative sexual identities after the first half of the 20th century.²⁵ Queer cultures and subcultures often emerge through confrontation, and even rebellion, challenging mainstream ideas about sexuality. In this context, queering literature with conscious intent should be seen as an act of defiance against societal norms – particularly those that uphold the heterosexual family unit.

love novels are Ukrainian adults' second favorite genre to read after crime novels. For more information please visit <https://ubi.org.ua/uk/activity/doslidzhennya/doslidzhennya-2020>.

²² <https://upogau.org/eng/about>.

²³ K. Kamufłaž, «*Hoču zabiti vse, jak strašnij son*»." Gej-Alāns UKRAĬNA, 14 August 2015, www.anetta-publishers.com/presses/190, accessed 16 October 2024.

²⁴ M. Foucault, *The History of Sexuality*, Volume I: An Introduction. Translated by Robert Hurley, Vintage Books, 1978.

²⁵ W. Hilton-Morrow, and K. Battles, *Sexual Identities and the Media: An Introduction*. 1st ed., Routledge, 2015.

Such acts of defiance take different forms, shaped by the dominant culture and constitute its historical development. In Ukraine, the situation is particularly nuanced and multilayered, as the country's colonial, patriarchal, and religious legacy impedes queer activism, as discussed in the research of Vitaly Chernetsky.²⁶

The case of Oles Barlih's oeuvre (real name Vitaliy Stanislavovych Babenko) can demonstrate the complex multilayering of queer identity with global and national traditions. Oles Barlih was born on 2 July 1985 into a Russian-speaking family in Zaporizhzhia, Ukraine. He is a poet, prose writer, playwright, and translator, and a long-standing LGBTQ+ activist. His course of activism began as early as the publication of his texts in *Odyn z nas / One of Us* in 1994, the first Ukrainian gay periodical. Even though the publishers of this journal changed a couple of times, they protected the designated type of this journal as a journal of "masculine aesthetics." Some of the earliest critical studies of the periodicals identified their erotic, even pornographic nature,²⁷ although the journal's eroticism did not go beyond topless pictures of men. The journal's title page was in Ukrainian; however, the readers would be expected to read the content of the articles in Russian. Barlih published both his creative works²⁸ as well as his critical works²⁹ in Ukrainian in the journal multiple times.

The Collection

Zvirì podivlâtsâ zamîst tebe (2017) is a collection of queer plays, or "queer dramas" as defined by the author. Featuring a shaved male naked torso on the front cover and the author's picture, holding a teddy bear, and wearing leopard-print clothes on the back cover, the book challenges conventional norms even before one proceeds to read it. The author does not use the words "lesbi[an]/gay/bi" he used for the queer anthology *120 Storinok Sodomu*; instead, he refers to the umbrella term "queer" in his collection. The collection can be interpreted as an attempt at filling the gap in queer Ukrainian literature.

The plays in his collection can be categorized as fairy dramas because of the abundance of mythological, phantasmagorical, and demonological elements. Furthermore, Barlih brings into play two of the most well-rooted traditions in Ukrainian literature: folklore and burlesque. In Ukrainian studies, the influence of burlesque tradition was studied by Myroslav Popovych, Serhii Ushkalov, and more recently by George

²⁶ V. Chernetsky, "Ukrainian Queer Culture: The Difficult Birth." *Queer Stories of Europe*, Cambridge Scholars Press, 2016, pp. 206-225.

²⁷ O. Ū. Poda, *Odin ì bez nas, abo problemi gej-presi*, [in:] *Učënye zapisky Tavričeskogo natsionalnogo universiteta im. V. I. Vernadskogo, Seriâ Filologiâ*, Vol. 20, No. 4, 2007, pp. 141-145. UDK 070.489-055.1.

²⁸ O. Barlig, *Virši. Odin z nas* 79 (2014): 20-23.

²⁹ O. Barlig, "Gej-literatura: Ukraïns'kij šlâh do legitimizatsii." *Odin z nas* 65 (2010): 37-39.

Grabowicz and Tamara Hundorova, who emphasized the *kotliarevshchyna* and kitsch as the resistance strategy of popular culture created by colonial Ukrainian writers for the metropolitan audience.³⁰ Barlih also uses burlesque and kitsch,³¹ not as a tool to undermine the seriousness of the imperial culture or to parody the idea of the socialist utopia in the post-socialist period,³² but as a means of queer self-expression. The appreciation of *kotliarevshchyna* and other canonical Ukrainian works undergo a paradigm shift in Barlih's writing, transforming into a performance of queerness. What Barlih's plays in the collection *Zviri podivlâtsâ zamist tebe* share with the tradition established by Kotliarevsky is the same code of self-articulation, i.e. the same style that is travesty, the act of creating humorous or exaggerated imitation, but additionally, he endows burlesque with an activist purpose. In postmodernist literary discourse, this is often achieved by reinterpreting a serious work in a comical or burlesque manner.³³ In other words, what Kotliarevsky (satire, pastiche), Gogol (irony, phantasmagoria, absurdity), and other writers originally from the periphery of the empire did to achieve humor in texts is utilized by Barlih as a strategy of revisiting the past tradition to create his own queer humor.

The collection consists of ten plays of different lengths and topics that address various psychological, political, and ethical issues that concern or are directly related to queer subjects. Barlih's choice of dramaturgy as a genre to communicate his ideas about queerness from the beginning hints that this work is not intended for popular reading; prose fiction would be a much more preferred format. The idea that the dramas were written for a special readership solidifies once the characters of the plays are introduced. Among the ten plays, most are one-act plays. The author claims this is rooted in his tradition of writing short stories, and he believes that he conveys messages well in shorter text corpora.³⁴

The Analysis

The plays in the collection *Zviri podivlâtsâ zamist tebe* abound in Greek and Eastern Slavic mythology, medieval grimoires, as well as animal and demonic compendia. The demonic, dark theme is tangible throughout the work, in fact, there is only one play that does not have a singular instance of a phantasmagorical mani-

³⁰ See also Grigorij Grabovič (George Grabowicz). *Do istoriï ukraïnskoï literaturi: Doslidžennâ, ese, polemika. Semantika kotlârevšini*, 1997. pp. 316-332.

³¹ According to Tamara Hundorova, in postmodern societies kitsch plays the role of a communicative channel, or metalanguage that objectifies desires. It partakes in the creation of political and cultural myths which shape the perception and representation of the other. (*Kitč i literatura*, 2008, pp. 476-477).

³² See also Tamara Hundorova, *Kitč i literatura*, pp. 235-247.

³³ T. Gundorova, *Kitč i literatura. Travestii*. Kyïv: Fakt, 2008.

³⁴ O. Barlig, *Interview*. Conducted by Ali Karakaya, 20 October 2024.

festation. With that in mind, it would not be erroneous to classify the majority of these plays as *féeries* – a theatre genre where the action includes magical, fantastical, and supernatural elements.

One of Barlih's signature strategies is the subversion of many Eastern Slavic elements. His playful parody of *The Forest Song* by Lesia Ukrainka provides one such example. In his play *I tvoiu frazu takozh / And your phrase too!*, Barlih names two of his supernatural characters based on two characters from *The Forest Song*:

<i>The Forest Song</i> – Lesia Ukrainka (1912)	<i>I tvoiu frazu takozh</i> – Oles Barlih (2017)
Toi, shcho hrebli rve	Toi, shcho nad kashtanamy hude
Toi, shcho na skeli sydyt'	Toi shcho na pechi sydyt'

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Toi, shcho hrebli rve,³⁵ who symbolizes the spring runoff, and Toi, shcho na skeli sydyt',³⁶ an evil spirit who symbolizes death and oblivion, appear in Lesia Ukrainka and Toi, shcho nad kashtanamy hude,³⁷ and Toi shcho na pechi sydyt'³⁸ – in Oles Barlih. In *The Forest Song*, the prologue opens with Toi, shcho hrebli rve, as winter comes to an end and spring takes its place. The prologue has no humans in it, yet the mythical creatures are aware of their existence. Similarly, the one-act play *I tvoiu frazu takozh*, opens with the scene when the two spirits talk about the coming of spring, the cyclical nature of life, and a possible wedding. The reference to a highly revered and canonical Ukrainian literary source is an example of how pastiche is used by the postmodernist writer to create a connection with and celebrate the original text. This also brings the idea of seeking validation through tradition into the discussion. The depiction of Barlih's characters is not devoid of comical elements. They have human-like desires and wishes and do not speak in verse but rather in simpler sentences, unlike Lesia Ukrainka's voluble characters. This 'comedic reimaging' serves to satirize the gravity and fear that pervade Ukrainka's original characters, marking a clear difference between modernist and postmodernist approaches to character development. Barlih's engagement with Lesia Ukrainka's tradition exemplifies the interplay of pastiche and parody, which overall serves the purposes of validation through the canon and its mockery.

The play is presented to be written for the birthday of Leonid Yukhvid, a Ukrainian writer and playwright from Zaporizhzhia oblast, and the author of the play *Vesillia v Malynivtsi*.³⁹ Barley's play is close to a post-apocalyptic and queer rewriting of the

³⁵ He Who Rends the Dikes in Percival Cundy's translation of the *Forest Song* published in 1950.

³⁶ He Who Dwells in Rock, in the same translation.

³⁷ He Who Hums over Chestnut Trees.

³⁸ He Who Sits on the Furnace.

³⁹ *Wedding in Malynivtsi*. A famous Soviet movie script written by the same author was produced in 1967 under the same name (Rus. *Svadba v Malinovke / Wedding in Malinovka*).

play. The shared character in both works is Yaryna, who agrees to marry someone she does not want to marry. In Yukhvid's play, Yaryna's fiancé is Hrystko, a hetman,⁴⁰ a title for a Cossack leader, while in Barlih's play, he is Hiatsynt,⁴¹ a bandit. Yaryna, or Yara, is a young girl who the reader first gets to know when she is engaged in a dialogue with Dasha, her friend. There is a sexual tension between Yaryna and Dasha who consider running away from the wedding that is about to happen. The atmosphere abruptly changes when her mother enters the room and starts addressing her as her "dear son." Later, the reader finds out that Yara was actually Yaroslav (a common Slavic male given name) and she was posed as a girl by her mother to protect her from the dangers of the post-apocalyptic world they live in. This comes with a tragicomical twist as Hiatsynt falls in love with Yara, and he wants to marry him.

Яра: За що ти мене покохав?	Yara: What do you love me for?
Гіацинт: За очі. Я у дівчат таких очей ще ніколи не бачив.	Hiatsynt: For your eyes. I have never seen a girl with eyes like yours.
Яра: А груди?	Yara: What about my breasts?
Гіацинт: Все в тобі люблю.	Hiatsynt: I love everything about you.
Яра: Ну, груди ж дивись які — немає майже.	Yara: Well, just look at my breasts – there's almost nothing there.
Гіацинт: Буду їх сьогодні вночі цілувати. ⁴²	Hiatsynt: I will be kissing them tonight.

In the excerpt above, we see an absurdist and comical manifestation of Yara's transgender identity to Hiatsynt. Barlih bends the gender norms in various ways: even though there is no mention of a transition, only the fact that the mother hid her son's gender identity, Hiatsynt believes that Yara is a girl, and loves her for who she is, and even though Yara is disheartened about her womanly features, Hiatsynt does not make an issue of it. Nevertheless, Yara does not want to marry Hiatsynt, and in an abrupt change of setting, kills him on the day of the wedding.

The influence of various apocryphal works, such as *Ars Goetia* and *Pseudomonarchia Daemonum*, is reflected in demonic characters in various plays. The author presents this play to the reader as a "semi-documentary play" and has mentioned during the interview I conducted that most of the lines there are from real-life Facebook posts of people that he gathered and accumulated over the course of years.⁴³ The reader is shocked by the brief visit of Aamon, the Grand Marquis of Hell. In the play

⁴⁰ A title for Cossack leaders from Ukraine and Russia. Can also be spelled Otoman. It is disputed to come from the Turkic roots of Ata (father; ancestor) and man (men; I) as the title is directly tied to steppe cultures, nevertheless, it is argued to also come from words Hetman (*Hauptmann*; captain) or Ottoman.

⁴¹ It is later found out that it is not the real name of the character, even though when asked by Yara, Hiatsynt claims that it is his real name and is of Greek origin. This might suggest a connection with the myth of Hyacinthus.

⁴² O. Barlig, *Zvirî podivlâtsâ zamist tebe*, 2017, p. 154.

⁴³ O. Barlig, *Interview*. Conducted by Ali Karakaya, 20 October 2024.

Uroboros u Skhidnomu Ekspresi / Ouroboros in the Orient Express, whose main action is set in a TV studio where participants discuss gender and sexuality-related polemical issues, one of the participants, a member of the Right Sector of Ukraine and defender of traditional values, attempts to summon the Devil as a guest to the studio. As the devil is busy, Marquis Aamon comes in his place. The satirical moment denotes the connection of the Right Sector participant with evil, as he asks to summon the Devil. He then asks Aamon if the Devil sent the “sodomites” onto the planet to spread his shame and sin. When Aamon claims that this is not his domain, the right-sector participant loses his interest, and Aamon vanishes.

Сіромаха: Ти Князь Темряви?	Siromakha: Are you the Prince of Darkness?
Маркіз Аамон: Я Маркіз Аамон — володар сорока духів, здатний відкривати брами минулого і майбутнього.	Marquis Aamon: I am Marquis Aamon – the lord of fort spirits, capable of opening gates of the past and the future.
Вікторія Зінчук: Перепрошую, але ми викликали Диявола.	Viktoriia Zinchuk: I am sorry, but we’ve summoned the devil.
Маркіз Аамон: Він зайнятий. Відділ кадрів відправив мене.	Marquis Aamon: He is busy. Human resources sent me.
Сіромаха: Скажи нам, содоміти це слуги твого володаря? Чи велів він розносити їм свій срам і гріх по землі?	Siromakha: Tell us, are the sodomites servants of your master? Did he command them to spread his disgrace and sin across the earth?
Маркіз Аамон: Ви знаєте, я більше спеціалізуюся на військовій справі, а любовними втіхами у нас займається Король Велет. Це вам його треба покликати. (...) ⁴⁴	Marquis Aamon: You see, I specialize more in military affairs, while the King of Giants handles matters of love and pleasure. You need to summon him for that. (...) ⁴⁵

The use of gender- and sexuality-related slurs is a phenomenon that does not escape attention. As LGBTQ+ people from Ukraine have been excluded from society’s idea of national belonging, they had to come up with their own sense of individual belonging. Responding to this exclusion, unique cultural and linguistic practices – like slang or jargon – become forms of identity building, resistance, and even survival.⁴⁵ Barlih does not refrain from using words that can be deemed derogatory as a method of negotiating queerness. Judith Butler interprets such negotiations as identification with the “oppressor’s version of the identity of the oppressed.”⁴⁶ This is also observed in various gay and transgender communities, and it is used as an unconscious trauma coping mechanism and attempt at self-liberation. Barlih uses derogatory terms as an imitation of real-life hardships of queer people within the Ukrainian context.

⁴⁴ O. Barlih, op. cit., 2017, p. 121.

⁴⁵ Jasbir K. Puar “Introduction: *Homonationalism and Biopolitics*.” *Terrorist Assemblages: Homonationalism in Queer Times*, Duke University Press, 2007, pp. 1-36. JSTOR, <https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctv1131fg5.4>, accessed 16 December 2024.

⁴⁶ J. Butler, *Gender Trouble*, Routledge, 2006, p. 191.

Another example of a demon as a character can be observed in the play *Demona vyklykaiu, Tamaro / I summon the Demon, Tamara*. The play's title appears to establish an intertextual connection with Mikhail Lermontov's Romantic narrative poem 'Demon.' Both works feature a heroine named Tamara, a demonic figure, as well as thematic explorations of supernatural desire, transgression, and the transition between earthly existence and the afterlife.

The play opens with Tamara – a cook, Pavlo – a physics teacher, Elvira – an old singer, and Maksym – a teenager waking up in an unknown place after trying to commit suicide. In the following part, they are greeted by *Abstrakstno-umovna odyntsia / Abstract-conditional unit*, the supervisor of the group in the form of a sparkling ball. They are later joined by Rebibus, described as the most beautiful man on earth, as well as Lidiya, a Rusalka.⁴⁷ The description of Rebibus is striking; his name refers to St. Christopher, an Orthodox Christian saint,⁴⁸ with the head of a dog. This reference becomes more clear at the end of the play as the reader finds out the attempted suicide has, in fact, been 'successful,' and the characters are in some sort of an afterlife where they turn into mythical beasts or demons after having spent some time in their bodies and realizing their actions. Pavlo is the first one in the group who undergoes transformation; he turns into Naberius, another Marquis of Hell, and a variation of Cerberus from Greek mythology. Naberius, mentioned among the 69 demons of Johann Weir's *Pseudomonarchia Daemonum*,⁴⁹ is usually depicted as a demon with three dog heads and crow's feet. This cynocephalic connection between the two characters deepens the importance of metamorphosis in the play and mirrors the emotional changes the characters undergo, and represents the fusion of man and beast, highlighting the inner conflict between their former humanity and their newly acquired demonic selves. Rebibus' uncertainty regarding Pavlo's transformation can be observed below:

Лідія: Нічого не можу уявити із Максимом.	Lidia: I can't imagine anything with Maksym.
Ребребус: Це найпростіше. Якийсь дрібний троль, або сатир... Мене більше Павло хвилює.	Rebibus: That's the easiest. Some sort of a small troll or a satire... I am worrying more about Pavlo.
Лідія: А що із ним не так? Він мовчить здебільшого.	Lidia: What's wrong with him? He's mostly silent.
Ребребус: Усі вони як на долоні. Крім нього. Від таких завжди чекай вибрику. ⁵⁰	Rebibus: They are all as clear as day. Except for him. Always expect a tantrum from people like him.

⁴⁷ A common character in Slavic mythology, a water nymph.

⁴⁸ J. Salmon, *St. Christopher in English Medieval Art and Life*, [in:] *Journal of the British Archaeological Association*, Vol. 41, No. 1, 1936, pp. 76-109. Taylor & Francis Online, <https://doi.org/10.1080/00681288.1936.11894007>. Published online 21 September 2017.

⁴⁹ T. Bane, *Encyclopedia of Demons in World Religions and Cultures*, McFarland, 2016.

⁵⁰ O. Barlig, op. cit., 2017, pp. 92-93

The transition from life to the afterlife in Barlih's work is mediated through a transformation of form. For the individuals of the group, the transformation manifests in the form of various mythological creatures, including demons.

Other notable mythological creatures in the play are centaurs, unicorns (named Mark and Andrew, serving as a metaphor for gay men), salamanders,⁵¹ and a basilisk from the Medieval European lore of lethal reptiles. In this play, Barlih uses mythological creatures to create a demonic atmosphere and to establish a connection with the consequences of suicide. There is homoerotic intimacy between human and monster/demon characters as well as exclusively between monster/demon characters, breaking normative boundaries. This play and the extensive use of mythological figures act as a metaphor for the exoticization of LGBTQ+ identities, highlighting the complexities of queerness in real life. In the interview, Barlih stated that throughout his childhood and teenage years, he always read fantasy literature and was influenced by various bestiaries and grimoires.⁵² This influence finds its manifestation in his writing, creating a new reviving a new understanding, as well as an expression of queerness of his own.

In the final and most extensive play of the collection, Barlih deliberately invokes an intertextual reference by titling the work after Ivan Bahrianyi's *Tyhirolovy / Tiger Trappers*, a significant Ukrainian novel, and the most popular work of the author.⁵³ The original name of the novel when it was first published in 1944 was *Zvirolovy / Beasthunters*, then it was published again in 1947 with its current title. While Bahrianyi used this to emphasize the importance of the tiger within his narrative as one of the strongest and most feared animals, Barlih uses this title to make a connection with the main character Hnat's lineage. He is depicted as a descendant of tigers. This strategic titling not only establishes a dialogue between the two texts but also invites a deeper exploration of the thematic resemblances. Hnat and other characters reference tigers multiple times using them as metaphors for various concepts, much like Bahrianyi does in his work including references to tiger hunting, which directly resonates with Bahrianyi's plot.

Another key theme of the play, othering and orientalizing of characters, can be observed in the quote below:⁵⁴

Гнат: Хто вони хоч?	Hnat: Where are they from anyway?
Віндред: Хамір і Заур? Узбеки.	Vindred: Khamir and Zaur? Uzbeks.
Гнат: А чому не гавайці?	Hnat: And why not Hawaiians?
Віндред: Візуально — це майже одне і те саме.	Vindred: Visually, it's almost the same.

⁵¹ Salamanders in Medieval European bestiaries were typically associated with fire (Byghan 2020).

⁵² O. Barlig, *Interview*. Conducted by Ali Karakaya, 20 October 2024.

⁵³ N. Blinova, Ĭ. Bahrânij, *Do 100-riččâ vid dnâ narodžennâ: Biobibliografičnij pokazhčik*. Oblasna universalna naukova biblioteka, 2005.

⁵⁴ O. Barlig, op. cit., 2017, p. 234.

The depiction of homoerotic tension is introduced⁵⁵:

Віндред: Ні, не хочу. Піду на кухню, подивлюся на останні приготування. Упевнений – Хамір і Заур знову дають один одному куштувати страви, які сьогодні приготували. Ти коли-небудь бачив як вони це роблять? Пальцями. Пропихуючи до рота шматочки їжі. А потім облизують цей жир і соус. Один у одного.	Vindred: No, I don't want to. I'll go to the kitchen, and check out on the final preparations. I am sure – Khamir and Zaur are feeding each other the dishes they've cooked today again. Have you ever seen how they do it? With their fingers. Pushing food into each other's mouths. Then they lick the grease and sauce. Off each other.
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As the text continues:⁵⁶

Відображення Володимира: Попросиш Хаміра і Зефіра?	Volodymyr's Image: Will you ask Khamir and Zefir ⁵⁷ ?
Володимир: Заура!	Volodymyr: Zaur!
Відображення Володимира: Ну так — на зефір він не дуже схожий. Хіба що на шоколадний. А буває шоколадний зефір?	Volodymyr's Image: Well yeah – he doesn't really look like a zefir. Unless it is a chocolate one. Does chocolate zefir even exist?

The orientalist approach of Barlih's characters can be traced back to his earlier, critical writing. In the 2010s, he believed that Ukraine was incomparable to some of the other countries from the post-soviet space in terms of gay culture development. Even though from the perspective of literary studies this observation is fairly accurate, it still stigmatizes the Central Asian countries that underline the stigmatization of Khamir and Zaur in the play. This inescapably problematic perspective complicates the association of 'Europe' with progress, as it reinforces a binary distinction between a 'progressive' Europe and the 'underdevelopment' of the 'East.'

Зрозуміло, що порівняти Україну з Киргизією, Таджикистаном чи Узбекистаном – смішно і недоречно.	It's clear that comparing Ukraine to Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, or Uzbekistan is both laughable and inappropriate.
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(⁵⁸)

By framing Ukraine as an exceptional case, Barlih inadvertently marginalizes Central Asian post-Soviet republics, whose own struggles with postcolonial legacies and LGBTQ+ rights are often overlooked in the discourse of European progressivism.

⁵⁵ Ibidem, 2017, p. 236.

⁵⁶ Ibidem, 2017, pp. 258-259.

⁵⁷ A type of soft confectionery that is frequently consumed in the countries of the former Soviet Union. Usually white or light pink in color.

⁵⁸ Idem, *Gej-literatura: Ukraïnskij šlâh do legitimizatsii*, 2010.

The action in the play continues to develop with Hnat confessing the reason behind his depression as a result of his intense liking of Nazar, which he realized in the course of his maturation. This phenomenon could suggest an intertextual relationship with *Lolita*, with Hubert Hubert's initial view of Lolita as sublime and the idealization, objectification, and aestheticization that changes over time as Lolita grows up. This change leads to disenchantment when Humbert Humbert realizes that he does not see the same qualities in Lolita. Hnat goes through the same process as Nazar grows up. In the following lines, Nazar is infantilized by Hnat's explanation of why he liked him, and then that infantile image is juxtaposed with Nazar's "hairy back" which symbolizes the "turning point" of Hnat's liking of Nazar because the "hairy back" is not an attribute associated with young men. This homoerotic take on *Humbertism*⁵⁹ also refers to the ancient tradition of pederasty, which is a fondness of old men towards younger men. Furthermore, the reader is presented with another case of homoerotic *Humbertism*, when Nazar's father, Volodymyr, confesses his feelings towards young Hnat in the same way Hnat feels towards Volodymyr's son. This crooked and homoerotic love triangle adds to the absurdity, nevertheless showing Barlih's acknowledgment of historical narratives around homosexuality. Using them in his plays bravely to connect with tradition even though the reception of these could be murky, as the main argument against homosexuality has for a long time been the fact that it intersects with pedophilia.

As a literary critic who worked on Barlih's earlier works, Olha Shaf, in her 2016 monograph *Henderno-psikholohichni aspekty ukrainskoi liriky 20 stolittia* elaborates on the theme of homosexual activity when she analyzes Barlih's 2012 poetry collection *Nasoloda uiavnoi smerti*. She claims that teenage same-sex activity between boys is presented as a 'playful' almost game-like act.⁶⁰ Shaf interprets this act as an expression of the protagonist's romantic infatuation. In the play *Tyhrolovy*, however, there is no depiction of sexual activity, there is only homosexual desire, hence proving that the author's take on manifestations of homosexuality has changed. Barlih demonstrates a new layer of homosexual desire as a negotiation of the protagonists' queer identities in the eeriness of a gothic setting.

The repeated gatherings of the play's characters to dine together also suggest a gothic ambiance. The ritualistic and psychological tensions arise when non-conventional food items like a scorpion dessert in tropical fruit sauce are served as a part of a dinner. This absurdist approach evokes the phenomenon of the genre, contributing to the hybrid and experimental nature of Barlih's plays. In one scene when the characters are gathered around the table for dinner, Hnat orders Khamir

⁵⁹ P. Clandfield, T. Conley. 'YOU TALK LIKE A BOOK, DAD': *Pedagogical Anxiety and 'Lolita, Soundings* [in:] *An Interdisciplinary Journal*, Vol. 88, No. 1/2, 2005, pp. 15-41. JSTOR, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/41179098>, accessed 5 November 2024.

⁶⁰ O. Šaf, *Genderno-psihologični aspekty ukrainskoj liriky 20 stolittâ*, Kyïv. Prosvita. 2019, pp. 201-203.

and Zaur to bring the desert – fresh scorpions served in an exotic fruit sauce, which undeniably contributes to the uneasy and absurd atmosphere of the play.

Towards the end of the play, Oksana, Nazar's fiancée, is introduced, and the tension between her and Hnat arises as the latter sees her as a rival. Hnat takes Oksana on a fishing trip and kills her there. After her death, Oksana finds herself on the bottom of the river, talking to anthropomorphic animals – a crab, and a "Korolivskyi Korop."⁶¹ They help Oksana deal with her death. In explanation, the crab references Nikolai Gogol's "May Night, or the Drowned Maiden," claiming something similar had happened in that story as well.

Рак: Ти ж тепер жива мертвечина...	Crab: You are a living corpse now...
Оксана: Можна мені нарешті усе нормально пояснити!	Oksana: Can someone finally explain everything to me properly!
Рак: А ти «Травневу ніч, або Утоплену» ⁶² Го-голя — читала?	Crab: Have you read Gogol's "May Night, or the Drowned Maiden"?

(⁶³)

Barlih's recurrent reference to canonical literature functions as a strategy to engage with the established and widely known texts, bringing forth context and depth to his writing.

Recurrence in the collection *Zviri podivlâtsâ zamîst tebe* happens not only in the form of intertextual references but also through recurring characters across various plays. Vitaliy Yukhimenko,⁶⁴ a Ukrainian poet and the author of influential queer works, most notably *Ya uznał chto ya pidor / I found out that I am a faggot*. Yuhimenko is present in three of the plays as himself. In *Nostradamus i vsi skorboty / Nostradamus and All the Sorrows*, a play about the homosexual (and almost incestuous) relationship between a human and an angel, where many mythological images from both Greek (Liriya-Sirba a manticore that speaks in verse⁶⁵) and

⁶¹ C. Royal, *The folk name for mirror carp (a variety of the common carp, Cyprinus carpio)* according to this article in Ukrainian <https://rivnefish.com/fish/27/carp-dzerkalnyi>.

⁶² *Майская ночь, или Утопленница* (original, Rus.). The most widely accepted translation of this story into Ukrainian is *Майська ніч, або Потопельниця*. Nevertheless, Barlih modifies that meaning into *Травневу ніч, або Утоплену* which is an acceptable translation, yet is inverted for the sake of comedy, as the crab did not read the story.

⁶³ O. Barlig, op. cit., 2017, p. 290.

⁶⁴ Vitaliy Yukhimenko was born in 1981 in Kiev. He graduated from the philological faculty of the Taras Shevchenko National University of Kyiv, and has worked in print and electronic media with a focus on Ukrainian LGBTQ issues. His poetry was published in Ukrainian and Russian journals – in Russian ones before the start of Russia's aggression against Ukraine. He currently lives in Kiev and is engaged in the cultivation of indoor plants (Yukhimenko, Vitaliy. Biographical details. Pocket Samovar, edited by Kate Shylo, <https://www.pocketsamovar.com/new-page-12>).

⁶⁵ In *the Forest Song*, most mythological creatures speak in verse as opposed to people. This differentiates one from the other, as well as aligning the creatures with different aesthetics than human aesthetics.

Slavic (a *potercha*⁶⁶ named Bohdan⁶⁷), Vitalyi Yukhimenko plays the protagonist's ex-boyfriend.

The second appearance of Yukhimenko is in the play *Uroboros u skhidnomu ekspresi*. He comes to action towards the end of the play and reads his poem 'Oni povsiudi' in its Ukrainian translation by Barlih, almost as an intermediary, as other characters continue to have a philosophical discussion as he reads his poem in the background. Through this Barlih spotlights a Ukrainian queer poet to his readers through an intertextual method, and Ukrainianizes his work by translating it from Russian. This not only presents the poem to Barlih's readers but also legitimizes Yukhimenko's work as a part of the queer Ukrainian literary culture.

The next and last appearance of Yukhimenko in the play *Ishche ne dohorila temnota / The Darkness Has Not Yet Burned Out*, completes the cycle of recurrence in a katabatic plot – a narrative structure in which the hero descends to the underworld. From Gilgamesh to Odysseus, from Aeneid to Dante, many canonical works in Western literature describe a journey to the underworld. These journeys are attributed to virtuous heroes who embody the values of the respective society.⁶⁸ Even though this plot was dominant in the myths of the Ancients, just like any other trend, it is cyclical, and returns during the Renaissance, and later during Modernism. It can be observed in postmodernist literature as per our example. In Barlih's version of a katabatic plot in a one-act play, Yukhimenko finds himself barefoot and sitting next to Kennedy Carter, a British porn actor, already in the underworld. Shortly after the reader finds out that the plot is set in a dream of Yukhimenko, where it resembles a Bosch's painting. Yukhimenko sees Charon, the ferryman of the underworld, swim by across the river Styx, and Carter makes an interesting comment:

Віталій Юхименко: Вочевидь Харон.	Vitalyi Yukhimenko: That is clearly Charon.
Кеннеді Картер: А чого у нього голова песяча? Не що компроміс між Герасимом і Му-Му?	Kennedy Carter: Why does he have a dog's head? Isn't that some kind of a compromise between Gerasim and Mumu?
Віталій Юхименко: У моєму сні ти не повинен знати, хто така Му-Му.	Vitalyi Yukhimenko: In my dream, you shouldn't know who Mumu is.

(69)

⁶⁶ Wandering souls of children that died a gruesome death before baptism in Ukrainian folklore (Tihovska, Oksana Mihajlivna. "Etnopsihologichnij aspekt mifologičnih uāvlen pro zagrobne žittā duši u folklori Ukraīnciv Zakarpattā." Naukovij visnik Užgorodskogo universitetu: Seriā: Filolohiā, Vol. 1, No. 45, 2021, pp. 564-570, <https://dspace.uzhnu.edu.ua/jspui/handle/lib/48999>), also present as evil spirits in *The Forest Song*, previously mentioned work by Lesya Ukrainka.

⁶⁷ The name Bohdan (verbatim translation from Ukrainian 'given by God') is paradoxical when applied to an evil spirit, thereby adding yet another layer of irony and humor.

⁶⁸ J. Fletcher, "Introduction." *Myths of the Underworld in Contemporary Culture: The Backward Gaze. Classical Presences*, Oxford Academic, 2019, <https://doi.org/10.1093/oso/9780198767091.003.0006> and J. Campbell, *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*, 3rd ed., Princeton UP, 2004.

⁶⁹ O. Barlih, op. cit., 2017, p. 213.

Carter, after seeing Charon the Ferryman, likens him to a blend of Gerasim and Mumu from Ivan Turgenev's short story *Mumu*. This connects the play with yet another canonical text through the use of intertextuality and, on top of that, the theme of cynocephaly is brought back with Carter's simile and continues with the following:

Кеннеді Картер: А ось така гидота має бути у тебе уві сні?	Kennedy Carter: Is this kind of abomination supposed to be in your dream?
Віталій Юхименко: Я вчора книгу читав про Святого Христофора. Він був песиголовим і переносив на спині людей через річку. Мабуть воно якось наклалося в свідомості, от і вийшов такий Харон.	Vitaly Yukhimenko: I was reading a book about Saint Christopher yesterday. He had a dog's head and carried people across the river on his back. Maybe it somehow got mixed up in my mind, and that's how this Charon turned out.

(70)

With this, the play *Ishche ne dohorila temnota*, and *Demoni vyklykaiu, Tamaro* connect through the image of Saint Christopher/Rebrebus.

The protagonists hope to get aboard the Stygian ferry, however, as they do not possess a 'branch from the garden of Persephone' Yukhimenko claims that Charon will refuse to take them.

Віталій Юхименко: (з інсайтом) У нас немає гілки з саду Персефони!	Vitaly Yukhimenko: (with an insight) We don't have a branch from Persephone's garden!
Кеннеді Картер: І що тепер?	Kennedy Carter: And what now?
Віталій Юхименко: Все. Він нас із собою не візьме.	Vitaly Yukhimenko: That's it. He won't take us.
Кеннеді Картер: Чого це?	Kennedy Carter: Why's that?
Віталій Юхименко: Без гілки — не має права.	Vitaly Yukhimenko: Without the branch, he doesn't have the right.
Кеннеді Картер: А якщо я йому відсмокчу?	Kennedy Carter: What if I sucked him off?

(71)

In addition to using the plot of Aeneid, Barlih takes a highly revered text yet again and makes it comically queer with Carter's proposal. Furthermore, the text is connected to the queer culture through the gay phenomenon of "diva worship."⁷² Daniel Harris argues that this occurs due to the othering of gay men and the camping – fandom through which they express a statement of solidarity within a particular group, just like the homosexual identity itself forming a shared, distinct

⁷⁰ idem, 2017, p. 213.

⁷¹ idem, 2017, p. 213.

⁷² See Daniel Harris's *The Death of Camp: Gay Men and Hollywood Diva Worship, from Reverence to Ridicule*, 1996.

cultural identity. Carter, while talking about his dreams, mentions being endorsed by Madonna, and spending time with her.

Кеннеді Картер: У моїх снах я часто їду до матері у Лондон і ніяк не можу доїхати. Всього час щось стається по дорозі. То раптом усім пасажиром треба виходити з електрички і йти збирати нектарини в саду. То по дорозі мене збирає Мадонна. Зупиняється біля мене і говорить: «Ти такий класний, поїхали з нами!». І я сідаю у цей кабриолет, мені наливають шампанське, ми усі співаємо пісні Едіт Піаф і їдемо кудись...

Kennedy Carter: In my dreams, I often travel to my mother in London, but I can never get there. Something always happens on the way. First, all the passengers have to get off the train and go pick nectarines in a garden. Then Madonna picks me up along the way. She stops next to me and says, "You're so cool, come with us!". And I get into the convertible, they pour me champagne, we all sing Edith Piaf songs, and drive somewhere...

(73)

The play abruptly ends with Carter pushing Yukhimenko into the river Styx to wake him up. This short play becomes a playground for Barlih's attempts at legitimization.

In the interview, Barlih explained frequent recurrences of Yuhymenko for purely literary and cultural activist reasons.

[Vitaliy Yuhymenko] Is the golden child of Ukrainian gay poetry. I wanted the youth to meet with him and his poems and that is why he is a recurrent character in my plays.⁷⁴

(Barlih, 2024⁷⁵)

Barlih recruits Yuhymenko into his plays to consciously contribute to the development of queer literary culture in Ukraine. By making him a part of his literary process and directly quoting his poetry (after translating it from Russian to Ukrainian), Barlih, on a broader level, makes Yuhymenko available to his already very niche readership and 'legitimizes' both him through this as well as himself through the already established readership of Yuhymenko. This intertextual and presumably non-reciprocal 'cooperation' to a large extent contributes to the broader cultural legitimacy of queerness in Ukrainian literature.

There is a parallel intertextuality of the one-act play *Bilshе nizh mozhna / More than Possible* to the one mentioned in the last paragraph. In the very diligently structured play, the reader encounters two separate rooms, each occupied with separate entities; in one, it is Cernunnos, a Celtic deity, and in the other, Kokhana,⁷⁶ a young woman. These spaces are linked to one another physically with a phone and emotionally by

⁷³ idem, 2017, p. 214.

⁷⁴ "Він золото української гей поезії, і для того, щоб молоде покоління познайомилася з ним та його віршами він є повторним персонажем в моїх п'єсах.

⁷⁵ O. Barlih, *Interview*. Conducted by Ali Karakaya, 20 October 2024.

⁷⁶ Ukrainian adjective meaning beloved, and is often used as a vocative adjective, not a proper name.

the bond of a friendship. Cernunnos' exact function as a divinity is rather unknown, as the knowledge we possess of him comes from visual imagery where the deity is described with antlers and ears of a deer.⁷⁷ Barlih employs this precise visual representation in his play and poses the antlers as something Cernunnos experiences considerable emotional and psychological conflict over. Barlih's Cernunnos is a queer one and is self-abased because of his antlers, and he worries that this puts him in a disadvantageous position while dating men⁷⁸ because a man he went on a date with did not text him back after their first date. His friend Kokhana consoles him and then the scene shifts to her side of the play. Kokhana's mother Hanna, who is a witch, comes over to visit her, and they talk about life and their relationships in general. Upon learning of her daughter's plans to marry, Hanna questions the identity of the intended spouse. Kokhana then introduces her partner, Mykola, as a person with shapeshifting abilities. One of them, if not the first ever written mention of a shapeshifter is in the epic of Gilgamesh, during the epic fight between Gilgamesh and Enkidu, where Gilgamesh and Enkidu make the journey to the cedar forests to fight Humbaba⁷⁹ and this has been a part of folk tales and mythology ever since antiquity (Kachuba, 2019). In the play, Mykola is a shapeshifter who does not have a stable form while shapeshifting, and as of the time of the events of the play is a tree. More importantly, in this example, we observe yet another intertextual connection with a Ukrainian poet. In 1965, Mykola Vinhranovskyi published his poem "Kokhana..." / "Beloved..." The first five lines of the poem that are directly related to the plot can be observed below:

Кохана ти не знаєш що коли я приходжу від тебе я засинаю людиною а просинаюся деревом	Beloved You do not know that when I come back from you I fall asleep a human but wake up a tree
--	--

(⁸⁰)

The plot of the poem and Barlih's play align impeccably, as do the names of the couple Kokhana and Mykola. Alas, the poet does not mention a specific name other than 'beloved,' Barlih uses a vocative adjective as the name of his character in the

⁷⁷ D. Fickett-Wilbar, *Cernunnos: Looking a Different Way*, *Proceedings of the Harvard Celtic Colloquium*, Vol. 23, 2003, pp. 80-111. JSTOR, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/25660728>, accessed 6 November 2024. And Bober, Phyllis Fray. "Cernunnos: Origin and Transformation of a Celtic Divinity." *American Journal of Archaeology*, Vol. 55, No. 1, January 1951, pp. 13-51. Archaeological Institute of America, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/501179>.

⁷⁸ This can be interpreted as a representation of body dysmorphia that is experienced by many individuals and is a big part of queer and gay experiences.

⁷⁹ See "Humbaba's Capture" (Kovacs 1989, p. 42).

⁸⁰ Vinhranovskij, "Kokhana...", 1965.

play. This draws another connection with a poem, which is essentially chosen and promoted by Barlih to his audience. Additionally, he uses the poem as an intertext within a queer framework, positioning queer literature not merely as a part of a sub-culture, but as a significant component of national literature. The play concludes with the mother and daughter bonding over their differences and similarities, as well as Cernunnos receiving a call from the man with whom he went on a date, calling him on a second date to watch the movie *Moonlight*,⁸¹ which is another reference to the global queer culture.

Barlih makes use of other literary devices to connect with different canonical artistic creations. An example of this can be seen in the play *Stribai, Lilia, Stribai*, where the main plot of the play has elements of a famous painting. The first monochromatic painting in the history of art, Kazimir Malevich's *Black Square*, is used as a visual reference in the play. The play develops in a room where a congressman, his wife, his boyfriend, and a girl named Lilia, with some other characters, find themselves irresistibly drawn to a 'black square.' One by one, the protagonists fall into the black square, representing the use of avant-garde painting as a device. The title page of the play reads, "Written for the 100th anniversary of Kazimir Malevich's painting *Black Square*." This adds another level of depth to the play and another canonical connection that is not in text form, that resonates with the reader and familiarizes the reader with the absurdity of the play.

The only play that does not contain any phantasmagorical elements or characters is ironically called *Monstry vykhodiat' iz khryzantem / Monsters Come out of Chrysanthemums*. Through this titling, Barlih sustains the phantasmagorical and dark atmosphere throughout the entirety of the collection, reinforcing these themes even in a play without such elements.

In the play *Monstry vykhodiat' iz khryzantem*, Barlih draws attention to the rich cultural tapestry of Ukraine. He brings together poets of different national origins, sexual orientations, and gender identities together in a very traditional setting for Ukrainian culture – a table-centered narrative. In Kotliarevsky's *Eneida*, Shevchenko's *Haidamaky*, and Gogol's *Taras Bulba*, which are quintessential representations of Ukrainian tradition, i.e., the Cossack culture, there are multiple scenes where the characters gather together around a table, eat and discuss. The play is set in Zaporizhzhia, Barlih's hometown, which is the historical center of the Cossack culture. Furthermore, Barlih uses a similar narrative structure in many of his plays; however, the plot of this play is set fully around a table at the feast, which makes it unique. The poets in this play have different attributes assigned to them, except for being poets. These attributes make them representatives of different groups that are part of Ukrainian culture. Vitya is an LGBTQ+ activist and a trans man, Dilyara is a Crimean Tatar woman, Zhenya is a Jewish man, Sasha is presumably a heterosexual man, and Mila is the mistress of the house where the play is set. Just like in the

⁸¹ A 2016 film that explores the difficulties of growing up gay.

play *I tvoiu frazu takozh* –Yara (Yaryna) x Yaroslav – Barlih, uses the former name of the transgender character (Vika) and juxtaposes it with the new name to create a certain understanding that the character is transgender. This is achieved through the inherently gendered structure of Slavic language practices, where unisex names practically do not exist. Barlih, in the interview, says that all of these people are the ones he knew in life.⁸² Even though the play's main issue is tolerance toward queer individuals, it offers an immense depth into the Ukrainian cultural codes, as well as the national identity. No matter their racial, ethnic, religious, sexual backgrounds and gender experiences, people of Zaporizhzhia, on a broader level symbolizing the Ukrainian nation, can eat at the same table and discuss issues. The discussion in the play, however, is not successful. The reader can observe a divergent tendency that simply does not align with the Ukrainian national idea: queerness, specifically transgender identity. This is juxtaposed with the image of the Cossack archetype – a man who fights for his freedom and honor – to create conflict. The tension created by that conflict makes the reader question the traditional nationalistic and gender norms, which further complicates the larger ideological, cultural, and nationalistic discourse. This abrasion is further defined by the broader conflict within the intersections of queer and nationalistic ideas.⁸³ This phenomenon occurs not for the first time across the collection, yet this is its most significant manifestation.

The title play of the collection, *Zvirì podivlâtsâ zamist tebe*, spotlights nonbinary identities, a less commonly addressed group within the LGBTQI+ spectrum. Barlih challenges binary gender norms by imagining a reality where gender does not exist and romance and sex unfold free from gendered constraints. The characters, called elementals, transcend traditional gender classifications and are portrayed as superior, sublime beings. This portrayal is pointed out through the sexual relations of the so-called First and Second Elemental in the play. In Barlih's works, gender is not defined by cultural constructs of male and female.⁸⁴ This vision aligns with queer studies' call for transcending binary gender and explores the potential of a genderless future. Through these fantastical figures, Barlih advances his activism and contributes to queer discourse, reimagining identity as fluid and inclusive beyond traditional boundaries.

⁸² O. Barlig, *Interview*. Conducted by Ali Karakaya, 20 October 2024.

⁸³ This scene depicted by Barlig enticingly matches with what "Interviewee 13" describes as in the article of Martsenjuk (2016): "In general, little has changed in the mood of society. I heard from my friends who used to be fairly moderate the following thesis many times: in this situation, we need a strong traditional family — we should give birth to Ukrainians who will defend Ukraine."

⁸⁴ Solomiâ Pavličko discusses gender as a social construct within the context of identity and interprets Western works on gender theory for the Ukrainian feminist context in her article "Gender ta identičnist" that was published in her 2002 collection of essays *Feminizm*.

Conclusion

Barlih grew up in Zaporizhzhia, the heart of the Cossackdom, a region characterized by ethnic and cultural hybridity. The influence of Cossack culture might have led him to appropriate the Ukrainian burlesque tradition. His use of burlesque, travesty, and parody as the structural device and themes of his collection shaped his views on masculinity, nationalism, and imperialism. This gives him a unique perspective in conveying queerness to his readers. He attempts to create a queer collection of works that serves an activist purpose for the legitimization of both queerness and queer literature in the Ukrainian cultural framework. He does this by making highbrow literary references in an attempt to mock the canon. This referencing is particularly interesting as it poses Barlih at the level of the highbrow writing tradition, even though he writes from the periphery of a peripheral culture.

In terms of the content, his fantastic and mythological images serve not only an artistic function but also embody the queer issues present in the works. This approach acts as a metaphor for the exoticization of LGBTQ+ identities, bringing forth the unexpected and the unseen, thereby highlighting the complexities of queerness in real life within his plays. In the Ukrainian context, these manifestations can be interpreted as a reimagining of the carnivalesque topos of Ukrainian literature, where inversion, humor, and the subversion of norms are achieved through queerness, temporarily suspending the harsh reality of homophobia in Ukraine, when even homophobia itself is discussed, and making more room for queerness, which is marginalized and even considered taboo.

His kitschy bricolaging of key elements of Ukrainian cultural identity⁸⁵ and Western literary phenomena creates a unique fusion that exemplifies the relationship between Ukrainian and Western literatures while simultaneously affirming that Ukraine possesses its own cultural dynamics through the performative interactions of cultural codes and queerness. This can be interpreted as a reimagining of the carnivalesque⁸⁶ topos of Ukrainian culture or a new form queer performativity for Ukrainian literature.

Regarding form, familiarization and defamiliarization go hand in hand in this queering of myth, tradition, and canon. This turns into a blend that pulls queerness out from the forgotten and never-revered basement of subculture by first familiarizing the reader with the classics, the canonical, and the binary. Then, defamiliarizing the reader through the subversion or queering of the canon and the intertexts – which is a prime example of desacralization. This intertextual strategy queers the literary landscape and creates a new understanding of queerness in Ukrainian literature that did not exist before.

⁸⁵ Tamara Gundorova in *Pisláčornobilska biblioteka* claims “playing with cultural codes,” turns literature into a public space, a form of self-representation (2013, pp. 130-132).

⁸⁶ Also in *Pisláčornobilska biblioteka* it is argued that carnivalization brings a certain degree of freedom from taboo that has always been rooted in Ukrainian literature (2013, pp. 132-133).

After Euromaidan, new approaches to understanding otherness emerged. For literature, this phenomenon materializes with the disabled, minorities (Jewish, Crimean Tatar, Roma) and LGBTQ people becoming subjects of literature. Although LGBTQ representation existed prior to Euromaidan, it entered a new phase where these identities are discussed and explored more openly. Groups that were previously non-existent or vaguely a part of the intellectual discourse have now become fully realized participants of the literary sphere. Barlih's dramas indicate this shift to marginalized people as a part of a project of creating a larger and more inclusive conception of Ukrainianness. The rigid indoctrination of the "ideal" Ukrainian identity began to erode after the events of 2013-2014, making the need to portray marginalized groups as people who 'fit in' or a little different but still one of us. These characters can now be observed as subjects of history in their own right, asserting their autonomy and a place within the national narrative. Even though the more inclusive notion of Ukrainianness remains contested by parts of Ukrainian society, works like Barlih's undeniably contribute to its normalization.

This shows that the notion of a nation as a big family that has to keep going is a thing of the past and defies the idea that nationalism is exclusively heterosexualist and that the queer discourse is inherently opposed to nationalism. This is especially vivid in the plays *Uroboros u skhidnomu ekspresi* and *Monstry vykhodiat iz khri-zantem*, where he deliberately juxtaposes mainstream nationalist narratives against queerness with what he deems to be queerness. With that, he reinterprets notions of nationalism, most notably defending one's homeland at a time of war. This work also places the queer problem in literature within the national dichotomy of Ukrainian identity – nationalism vs. imperialism. The collection *Zvirî podivlâtsâ zamist tebe* critiques how national belonging and citizenship are often framed within heteronormative ideas. Barlih's queer 'terrorist bodies'⁸⁷ throughout the collection disobey conventional expectations of correctness and acceptability. The defiant bodily acts (e.g. homosexual intercourse) and embodiments of identity (transgender identity) of Barlih's queer characters, as well as the non-hegemonic ideological language used by Barlih act as a tool of legitimation that pushes the boundaries of normativity.

The queer characters in Barlih's works, unlike other manifestations of such characters in Oksana Zabuzhko's, Kateryna Babkina's, Yuri Yarema's, Anna Maligon's works, where the queer character is often infantile and troubled by their own existence and sexuality, and is only manifested as confined to the setting of obligatory heterosexuality, are non-gender conforming, strong and self-acknowledging activists and laugh in the face of societal pressure and patriarchy. With this, he brings new

⁸⁷ See also Jasbir K. Puar, "Conclusion: Queer Times, Terrorist Assemblages," [in:] *Terrorist Assemblages: Homonationalism in Queer Times* pp. 203–22. Similar to Puar's concept of 'terrorist bodies' – those bodies that are constructed by the state, media, and society that as threatening, Barlih's 'terrorist bodies' are framed by right-wing supporters as foreign perversions from Europe, or *Heiropa* (Gay-Europe), seen as incompatible with Ukraine's 'organic' cultural heritage.

layers into the tradition that did not exist before: opening the road for the formation of a Ukrainian queer culture that is not a part of the subculture but a part of the grand Ukrainian culture.

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