

Hellenization and Hubris in Early Jewish Christianity: an Exploration via ‘Faux Reviews’ of Two Fictitious, Modern Novels

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Abstract

The following experiment in genre-bending intends to achieve the integration of multiple and diverse goals. The typical review provides a vehicle for summarizing a work (in this case, a “Biblical Thriller”), evaluating it, and simultaneously (if inadvertently) providing an insight into the reviewer himself/herself. The two, atypical reviews that follow do the same. However, this time, each element is fictional—a work of imagination. The protagonist of the first “novel” under “review” proposes a radical (some would say ‘demented’) understanding of Mark’s Gospel to the faculty at a Christian university in Seattle, Washington. The protagonist of the second, a specialist in the Book of Revelation, experiences her own individual apocalypse in modern Ukraine. Although highly compressed, such multilayered storytelling enables readers to glimpse the work and world of biblical scholarship as adventure, both personal and professional—the stakes in each being very high.

A Guide for the (Potentially-) Perplexed

It was not exactly “a dark and stormy night” of an occasion, but the mystery was almost as palpable. Soon after Diane had gone to choir rehearsal, from out of the blue, several aspects of my personal experience, professional service, and Ukrainian heritage (three generations, removed) converged in a sharply focused moment—as did the genre-adoption-adaptation by which to integrate and express them. While not quite the equivalent of Athena’s emerging from Zeus’s head, fully grown and armed, it was close enough (by the time my wife had returned) to lay the foundation for many subsequent drafts.

The Literary Mode

The Faux Review

So far as I am aware, the name originates with me. The two examples included below are written by the fictive biblical scholar, Pantelejmon Ohienko; in journals that do not exist; of novels that have not been published—nor have they actually been written by an author named “Ruryk Rusyn.”

Dominant Themes

Hellenization

During thirty-six years of teaching and researching the New Testament at Seattle Pacific University (concentrating on the Gospels and the Book of Revelation), I came to realize that I had not—nor had many of my colleagues in the field—sufficiently taken into account the impacts of hellenization upon both Judaism and Christianity.¹

The first to be reviewed by Ohienko is *Mark My Words*. Rusyn tells the story of a Gospels specialist at a progressive Christian university who threatens his tenured position and economic livelihood by proposing that Mark was written last (rather than first) to restrain (if not eliminate) certain paganizing trends which the Evangelist saw manifested in the additions and expansions so characteristic of Matthew and Luke: Jesus’s genealogy, dual fatherhood, supernatural conception, mighty deeds and profound teaching, opposition leading to violent death, and resurrection appearances.

Hubris

I had come to realize over the years how profoundly the theme of hubris had concerned ancient sages, be they Hebrew-Jewish or Greco-Roman. Self-exaltation seemed to be the great offense—both against the divine world and also among individuals living in community: city, state, and empire. The drive for status, wealth, and power was the root of all the evils. On this matter, at least, Jerusalem and Athens belonged in the same neighborhood.

Rusyn also addresses this theme in his second novel, *The Apocalypse of Katya Kanyuka*. This time, it’s set in modern Ukraine—heir (with the entire Eastern Slavic world) to the profound impact of hellenistic civilization upon its religion, language, and culture. Each chapter begins with a passage from the Book of Revelation mirroring the experiences of the protagonist who must navigate struggles for power among vying politicians, oligarchs, and clergy—starting in Lviv: City “of Lions.” It’s here that she must also wrestle with emerging ethno-nationalism in the context of the country’s war with Russia.

1 My Profile, CV, and a select list of publications can be accessed on [Academia.edu](https://www.academia.edu).

The Task

In composing these “reviews” (operating within their built-in constraints), I had to generate an embryonic plot for each “novel”; at least sketch the outlines of compelling, three-dimensional characters; create an aura of mystery; up the dramatic ante; and critique that which “I” had written.

Antecedents

In the interests of full disclosure, I must add that, after reading my faux reviews, a colleague at the University of Washington² told me that they reminded her of similar works by the Polish writer Stanislaw Lem, about which I had been unaware. He acknowledged his contemporary, Jorge Luis Borges, and (before him) Rabelais as experimenters with versions of the genre.³

Finally, how much should be made of the fact that Stanislaw LEM had studied in LEMberg (the name of Lviv under the Austrians), where a certain Eugene LEMcio had lectured at his university in the mid-90s?

Journal for the Study of Gospel Relationships (JSGR): Book Reviews

Mark My Words. Ruryk Rusyn. Magnolia, WA: Deep & Wide Press, 2024. ISBN: 37223098199. Pp. 216. \$35.00.

With the appearance of this volume, the Publishers have launched a series of titles under the general rubric, “The Romance of Biblical Scholarship.” However, the Editors might just as well have named this one “Biblical Thrillers” or “Biblical Mysteries.”

Rusyn is himself a New Testament scholar who earned an Oxford DPhil at Christ Church. After tutoring undergraduates, both at the College and from across the University, he became a journalist, covering the Russo-Ukrainian war for several British news outlets from fetid, vermin-infested trenches in places like Adiyivka and Soledar. This breakout novel may well determine how many more will appear in the series.

His protagonist, Constantine Petrovych Lemko (“Kostya” to family, colleagues, and friends), is a mid-career professor of New Testament and Hellenistic Greek at Queen Anne University (QAU): a progressive Evangelical institution in Seattle that would rather be identified as Orthodox, Wesleyan, and Ecumenical.

As an undergraduate, Lemko double-majored in English Literature and Zoology. Not left-brained enough to specialize in the latter (preferring his lab

² Gordana Crnković, Professor and Chair, the Department of Slavic Languages and Literatures.

³ Particularly Lem’s *A Perfect Vacuum* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1971). The author does not provide bibliographic information for Borges or Rabelais.

drawings to be more aesthetically pleasing than accurate), he fulfilled his love of science by publishing poetry integrating it with religion. With a PhD in New Testament from Trinity College, Cambridge, he nevertheless found it difficult to find a teaching post in the mid-70s. A position at QAU was the only option open to him and his family of four. But it was a good fit.

With a monograph from Cambridge University Press, a coauthored volume with a Queen Anne colleague, three dozen publications, and an above-average reputation as a classroom teacher, Kostya was professionally set until retirement. On a few occasions, his published work (mainly on the Gospels and the Apocalypse) caused scholars to sit up and take notice. His forte was detecting issues that had fallen through the cracks or ones that had been insufficiently argued. Along the way, he blazed a couple of new trails and tried engaging scholars from Central and Eastern Europe, the regions from which his grandparents had immigrated before WWI.

However, one day—completely unsummoned—a line from his Sophomore Literature class by Algernon Charles Swinburne percolated up from his subconscious: “Thou hast conquered, O Pale Galilean; the world hath grown grey from thy breath.” Thus began an obsession with Emperor Flavius Claudius Julianus—a.k.a. “Julian the Apostate.” How could this nephew of Constantine the Great, raised a Christian in the palace at the imperial capital of Constantinople itself, later become a devotee of Neoplatonic philosophy and try returning the realm to worshipping the pagan gods just 40 years after the Council of Nicaea!? “Νενίκηκας Γαλιλαῖε” [“Vicisti, Galilaeae”] haunted Kostya ever since.

Refreshing himself in late, literary Koine and early-Byzantine Greek, Kostya began exploring the Emperor’s primary writings. Eventually, he stunned his colleagues with the completely new (and, to their minds, absurd) hypothesis about relationships among the Gospels. Mark’s was written last, not first. His aim, though a Greek-speaking Jewish Christian, was to prevent the fuller accounts of Jesus’s life from further severing their Jewish roots in becoming more hellenized. By supplying supernatural birth stories and resurrection appearances, Matthew and Luke were tending to imitate the 12-point pattern of pagan, Greco-Roman myths and heroic biographies.

In protest, Mark (who alone of the four uses the Greek term for “Gospel” at the opening of his narrative) insisted that the *euangelion* about (or proclaimed by) Jesus Christ did not begin before the world’s creation (so the Fourth Gospel); nor did it start with his conception by the Holy Spirit (so Matthew and Luke). Rather, it began with the Spirit-endowed adult, exclusively-human Jesus of Nazareth, whom God adopted as his Son—with all of the rights and privileges thereto—at the moment of his water baptism at the hands of John.

At first, Kostya’s colleagues were faintly amused. As they talked during lunch

or even in more formal settings (seminars and the like), there'd be plenty of opportunity to debunk his views, lest he embarrass himself and them by going public (either to the media or to other specialists). Was he just trying to introduce some "buzz" within the School of Theology or across campus, whose intellectual discourse had become rather sterile and stale? But nothing they said would make him budge. Then they began asking, "What if he were serious and—worse—correct? The development of early Christian thinking about Jesus would have to be revised radically. What would that do to their reputations and careers—not to mention their livelihoods?" And suddenly Kostya went from someone to be patronized to one who should be feared.

So as not to obscure his radical views with thickets of footnotes, Kostya confined his citations to that small cadre of reputable scholars who opposed the reigning view—or at least who urged openness to alternatives: the priority of Matthew (William Farmer) and even of the Fourth Gospel (John A. T. Robinson). And had not E. P. Sanders shown that the gospel tradition got both longer and shorter, both more and less specific, and more and less Semitic during oral transmission? The famous and erudite George Salmon, writing in the late 1890s, anticipated Kostya somewhat: suggesting that Mark had made available Peter's reminiscences for the other Evangelists to use; but he'd composed his own version later: after theirs. However, Kostya's proposed reason for his doing so would have scandalized Salmon.

Why would Mark have been preserved at all, then? Well, there was that traditional connection with Peter. His was the only one actually to contain the word "Gospel" in the body of the text (which the others did not use at all in similar fashion). So, church tradition tucked him in at second place—where he could do less damage and where the other Gospels might exercise a positive influence on him. Readers could freely harmonize the four accounts into one uncomplicated narrative (as happens especially at Christmas, when the two very different birth stories of Matthew and Luke are blended during holiday pageants and in popular imagination).

Of course, taking such a stance publicly would put the University in an awkward position. Though in no way fundamentalist, it had tried maintaining historic doctrinal commitments. But to have one of its own alleging that the Markan Jesus had not been supernaturally conceived nor been raised from the dead would be a bridge too far. The economic implications for the Lemko family were he to be fired were considerable. Professionally, he would be done for—unless the publicity would make him a darling among Liberal Christians, not to say agnostics and atheists. Family relations might strain to the breaking point. Some worried about Kostya's state of mind—and soul.

Rather than issue a spoiler alert and give the ending away, I would rather

conclude this review with some critical observations about the literary quality of this first-in-a-series novel.

It would not be easy to move from writing fictive poetry to fictive narrative. The challenges facing a new author would be considerable and not always forgivable.

Commendations

It's a clever move to make "Constantine" the namesake for our protagonist. And the title does double duty. It's refreshing to come upon a solid husband-wife relationship: open, frank, transparent communication lying at the heart of it. Thankfully, there is no graphic detailing of their romantic life. The tensions that do arise are to be expected in a situation where the prospects of losing a single family income (with all that it entails) and academic reputation loom large.

Ophelia is lovingly portrayed as "The Comptroller": the finances being under her watchful eye, each expenditure evaluated for necessity as well as delight. At tax time, her specialty, she dons a familiar uniform: long sleeves held up by rubber bands at the elbow, ponytail in a clip under headband fronted with an emerald visor.

Furthermore, Rusyn has avoided the cliché of describing Kostya's teenage children (Maksym and Yulia) as cell phone-addicted to the Internet, who roll their eyes at anything sensible or uncool that their parents utter or do. A solid bond of mutual love and respect helps the family navigate developmental changes—in both adults and children.

One is also treated to an inside look at academic life, both on and off campus. We get a view of the boredom, jealousies, frustrations, and sexual tension at academic / scholarly conferences. If anyone wonders what goes on at the meetings of the Society of Biblical Literature and American Academy of Religion, Rusyn gives us a glimpse at events that outsiders might regard as just another junket—this time for eggheads rather than politicians.

At a time when a resurgent fundamentalism intrudes itself into faith-based schools of higher learning, readers are introduced to a progressive, evangelical institution founded during an era of 19th century radical reform: championing the cause of women, the enslaved, exploited workers, and reviled immigrants. However, the ability of that legacy to cope with the sexual revolutions of the 20th and 21st centuries is sorely tested.

Progressive as QAU may be in some areas, the top-down administrative style—which sometimes exploits the appeal to service, self-sacrifice, modesty, and quietism—can be oppressive. Consequently, the activism that the faculty in general and theological faculty in particular are able to display while demonstrating loyalty can serve as a paradigm for other, like institutions.

Concerns

And yet, there are some drawbacks to Rusyn's otherwise inventive (if not ingenious) story. The pacing can get ponderous, especially when his academic characters (not always fully rounded) discuss the fine points of biblical criticism. Sometimes a didacticism takes over: more telling than showing. This threatens the promise of the work's being a "thriller." Then there's the related matter of proportion and sequencing: how much to say and where to say it. We are a long way from Dan Brown.

However, perhaps more serious is that an adult voice is lacking. For example, it seems that the Author has not had much intimate, male-female experience. The dialog between Kostya and a loyal, brilliant graduate student bent on seducing him is embarrassingly adolescent. Furthermore, he could have avoided this well-worn trope altogether by having her accuse him of plagiarizing one of her ideas and using that as leverage for advancement.

Finally, why would one want to write such a book? How much of this is autobiographical? Is it too cynical to suggest that it's Rusyn's method of proposing his own theory about Gospel relationships—that it's a less-risky way of putting it out there for consideration than doing the harder work of arguing a case in the usual, rigorous, scholarly manner?

Pantelejmon Ohienko, Seattle, WA

Journal for the Study of Early Christian Eschatology (JSECE): Book Reviews

The Apocalypse of Katya Kanyuka. Ruryk Rusyn. Magnolia, WA: Deep & Wide Press, 2025. Pp. 221. \$30.00.

This is the second installment in a series billed as "Spiritual" or "Biblical Thrillers"—the first of which (*Mark My Words*) I reviewed in the *Journal of Synoptic Gospel Relations*. According to the Publisher's marketing manager, "Sales were not too shabby. We were at least able to break even."

Rusyn again draws from the well of his Ukrainian heritage and experience, this time appropriating the name of his maternal grandmother, "Kateryna Kanyuka" for the heroine. The choice turns out to his advantage stylistically because he is able to avoid the annoying, frequent repetition of her given name and the corresponding feminine pronouns since she can also be "Kate," "Katey," "Kathy," as well as the more formal "Catherine."

The author also does readers the service of defining two terms, largely either misunderstood or unappreciated. In modern parlance, "Apocalypse" is almost always associated with a disaster of some sort (either human or natural). However, the Greek behind the English is the normal word for "unveiling" or "uncovering"

or “revelation.” So, while it’s common to speak of the Chornobyl (Ukrainian spelling) nuclear explosion in apocalyptic terms, it is less likely to hear someone asking, “What did that catastrophe reveal to us about Soviet (and human) disregard for the environment in their (our) attempts to get the most (and quick) commercial benefit at the lowest costs?”

The second word is “of.” The English (like the Greek) is supremely flexible and subtle. For example, it can function subjectively (= “by”) or objectively (= “about”). So, is the story revealing something about Katya; or is she herself the agent of revelation? Or both?

Before critically evaluating this second effort, an overview of plot and characters is in order. Each chapter begins with a quotation from the biblical Book of Revelation, whose ancient themes and images Rusyn sets in a contemporary context—that of modern Ukraine and (to a lesser extent), America and Britain.

Chapter one is titled “The Lion-Lamb of Lviv.” Founded in the 13th century by King Danylo Halytsky and named for his son (Lev) the city “of Lions” in western Ukraine (“Halychyna” in Ukrainian) has seen Empires come and go during the seven centuries since: Polish-Lithuanian, as “Lwow”; Austro-Hungarian, as “Lemberg”; and Russo-Soviet, as “Lvov.” Old Town is a veritable museum of architectural styles from the 1200s to the present day (Austrian and Polish predominating). The same Habsburgian architect had designed the opera houses in Vienna, Zagreb, Lviv, and Odesa (Ukrainian spelling). The City takes great pride in visualizing its namesake: lions in every pose and style are set in public squares, side streets, and boulevards. Organizations from athletic clubs to academic societies display them. Tourist shops abound with variations of that noble face and form on mugs, towels, hats, and all manner of bric-a-brac.

During renovation of the historic Leontopolis Hotel by a Canadian businesswoman of Ukrainian descent, trenchers expose a marble sculpture causing work to stop until archeologists can assess its significance, as required by law. It turns out that a single pedestal supports the image of a conjoined lion and lamb: his royal diadem and “her” crown of thorns (and certain other body parts) intertwining. Was the calloused paw meant to caress, or had its claws produced that ugly gash across the lamb’s throat? Did the lion’s stare and furrowed brow mean to intimidate or show concern for what was done? Regardless, the victim’s eyes returned the gaze with neither terror nor reproach.

Art critics assess the provenance *in situ*: no later than the end of the 16th century. In their judgment, this is the first instance in which the two figures—though appearing together in tapestries, illuminated manuscripts, and paintings—had actually ever touched (and certainly not in this intimate, ironic, paradoxical manner). Historians set about wanting to know more about its meaning and significance.

Politicians balk at this challenge to conventional notions of power, especially as the country is finally in a position to emerge from under the centuries-old dominance of Catholic Poland or Russia (whether under orthodox czars or atheist commissars). The manly roar of the king of beasts and jungle's lord was being muted, actually transmuted, by a bleating, bleeding sacrificial animal. While this might serve religion, it gives mixed signals to the populace about the nature and exercise of authority. But clergy have their misgivings as well, since their own status and role are largely dependent on secular power brokers (both political and commercial). And that image does not serve the ideal of a muscular Christianity being cultivated by the emerging class of political elites and industrial oligarchs. And what mindset and sect of the Church had commissioned this monstrosity in the first place?

More ominously, veterans of the SS Galicia Division—unashamed of their collaboration with Nazis—are not at all pleased to see the City's prominent symbol defanged and de-maned. They had served only in the interest of a distinct Ukrainian identity and freedom. Hitler had promised them a certain amount of autonomy within the Third Reich in exchange for their jointly opposing the USSR. However, these Ukrainian patriots continue insisting that they had been prepared to use their training, arms, and experience eventually to fight against both demonic powers. What was unforgivable to certain European and American minds was that, in so doing, they had delayed eventual victory. In fighting the Soviets (mainly drafted, fellow *Ukrainians*), they had fought the West's ally on the eastern front.

Consequently, all of the above have their own interest in eliminating or subduing the attention that will likely be given to this new discovery. And each would have to decide which measures should be taken to achieve his aims. Disruption, harassment, threats, and pursuit are not beneath them.

Chapter two is set across the Atlantic and across the American Continent. Catherine Kanyuka serves on the faculty of Queen Anne University (QAU) in Seattle, a member of the same department as Kostya Lemko (the protagonist in *Mark My Words*). Like him, she has caused a stir. However, this time, it comes from an uprising by fundamentalist female students belonging to a society called "The Guardians." Their various attempts to muzzle Katya (or at least get her to modify her "unorthodox" interpretation of the Apocalypse) culminate in setting fire to her office. Her sins: reading the Book of Revelation in the context of Greco-Roman culture in the Eastern Mediterranean—including their myths and symbols. It is not enough for them that her teacher credits St. John the Theologian (under divine inspiration, of course) with adapting and arranging differently what he had adopted according to his convictions about and experience of Jesus.

So as to quell the conservative parents of these students (who sometimes came from wealthy households), the Provost of QAU arranges for his troublesome

colleague to take an unscheduled sabbatical as far from the University as possible until the crisis can be quelled. Seizing the opportunity to visit the homeland of her grandparents for the first time, Kate briefly balks at being “handled” thus by a superior unabashedly making academic decisions based on political and financial considerations. Colleagues and distant family members in the land of her grandparents prepare to welcome her “home.”

In the chapters that follow, she encounters the stir caused in Lviv, her “port” of entry by train from Warsaw (reached from Seattle by the Polish Airline, LOT). Because the excavated sculpture “fleshes out” the double-image of Lion and Lamb in the Book of Revelation—among the subjects of her research and teaching—Katya becomes the target of various antagonists bent on blunting her effectiveness as a visiting expert, regardless of method or cost.

Commendations

Creating a Mood

1. Rusyn succeeds in recreating the atmosphere of mid-90s Ukraine. Political figures, once leaders of the Communist Party at various levels, have simply changed hats. The then-President Leonid Kuchma had just a few years before headed the country’s largest producer of ballistic missiles (aimed primarily at the US, Seattle one of its main targets). Unlike the government of post-War Germany, the nation hasn’t [yet?] put its Communist leaders on trial. In fact, there is resistance even for putting the Party on trial. The embossed Hammer and Sickle above Parliament’s entrance have yet to be replaced by the Trident.
2. Katya reminds Ukrainians, expressing gratitude to the new regime for granting their newly found freedoms, that it is the governed who grant governments the right to exercise certain powers on behalf of their citizens.
3. Russian still dominates conversations on Khreshchatyk, Kyiv’s main thoroughfare—gradually to be replaced by the state language to be used in all spheres. The Polish legacy in Lviv remains for a while, as evidenced by signage in both languages (Latin and Cyrillic alphabets). Both cities are well on their way to becoming major international capitals. Although western (and especially central European) leaders regard Ukraine primarily as a geo-political buffer zone between them and Russia, some Ukrainians take upon themselves the more challenging task (still unrealized) of demonstrating to the world how their language, history, and culture differ from that of their eastern nemesis.
4. Economic shock therapy (converting a controlled economy into some version of a capitalist one) produces a dramatic rise in crime—as witnessed by Kate when thieves rob passengers of a tram downtown in midday. Despite instances of daylight criminality, families can be seen walking securely late at night in

what Americans might regard as “spotty” neighborhoods.

And there are encouraging moments of enterprise at the most basic levels: city-dwellers selling products from their urban gardens; other urbanites selling fruits and vegetables (ugly but delicious) from their rural dachas; and tinkers lining thoroughfares with their home-made products. At the south end of Khreshchatyk Street, the famed Bessarabskij Rynok (covered market) teems with shoppers astounded at the quantity and variety of produce. To get there, they pass luxury automobiles parked outside of “Mafia”-controlled strip clubs, music assaulting the ear with its throbbing eroticism.

5. Leaving Lviv on a local train (*elektrychka*) to the Carpathian foothills for a visit with another branch of her family, Katya hears the most bloodcurdling squeals emanate from a burlap sack full of piglets loaded onto the mail coach. During the journey, a peddler paces her aisle with wares hanging from both linings of a floor-length overcoat: pins, needles, thimbles, buttons, multi-colored threads, combs, scissors, pens (both fountain and ballpoint), pencils, crayons, trinkets, etc. Following this entrepreneur, an earnest Jehovah’s Witness tries distributing copies of *The Watchtower*, its cover story leading with a dramatic prediction about the Last Days from the Dead Sea Scrolls—which particularly catches her attention.
6. Westerners, with their raised heads and open faces, can be spotted a mile away. Yet, even well-meaning North American members of the Diaspora are reminded that, though always welcome, they will forever be tourists in the Ukraine of their ancestors. Kate feels this reality keenly.
7. The impact of Greek language and culture (via Byzantium / Constantinople) is both deep and wide, especially evident in place names and personal names—suffixes in -pol or pil (from the Greek *polis* = “city”): Sebastopol, Simferopol, Mariupol, Ternopil, etc.: Kiril, Orest, Dmytro, Andrij, Alexander, Pantelejmon, Konstantin, Yevhen, Fedir (Fyodr in Russian), Anatoly, Mykola (Nikolai in Russian), Hryhorij, Varvara, Evdokia, Khrystyna, Yevhenia, Kateryna, Iryna, Sophia, etc.
8. Wherever one goes, well before Steve Jobs & Co. flooded the world with a tsunami of “Smart” phones, Ukrainians of every age are seen reading books and newspapers: on buses, trams, and the underground Metro; in parks, the edges of fountains, walking. The most obvious piece of furniture in Stalinist-era apartments (interiors somehow insulated against the odor of cat urine permanently suspended in the stairwells) are shelves lined with books (often with Soviet-era, censored western classics). Educated people are not ashamed of being regarded as “intellectuals” or as members of the “intelligentsia.” Poets are national heroes. Parents expect a new kind of learning to usher in the New

Ukraine. Throughout the week, people of all ages in street clothes flood theaters and opera houses, the government still subsidizing the arts. Universities and polytechnics are becoming centers of uncensored research and teaching. Professional journals, no longer beholden to Marxist-Leninist propaganda, are launched with great fanfare—as much social events as scholarly ones.

9. Places of worship teem with parishioners and visitors. Jews, who had suffered so much in this part of the Pale of Settlement, begin to thrive in numbers, culture, and commerce. Uman becomes the destination of worldwide pilgrimage, especially for Israelis. It's a stunning situation, given earlier pogroms and the intensity of the Holocaust in this region. At this point, Rusyn notes that the Greek *δολοκαύτωμα* means “whole burnt offering.” Muslim Tatars dominate the population of the Crimean peninsula. But simmering tensions between Orthodox and Greek Catholics (“Uniates”) sometimes break out into ugly, violent scenes. The latter accuse the former of control by the Russian Church. Ukrainian Orthodox charge the Uniates with political and religious treason: in 1596 accepting political allegiance to Poland-Lithuania and pledging loyalty to the Roman Pope. Protestants (largely Pentecostals and Baptists), though a tiny minority, begin their expansion into the largest Evangelical denomination in Europe—even though many congregations lose half of their numbers (plus pastoral and lay leaders) during the end of the Gorbachev-era. Mass emigrations to North America and elsewhere are said to be divinely inspired.
10. In private, with distant family, colleagues, and new acquaintances, Katya experiences the warmth and generosity of people who have little but somehow manage to bend tables with hospitality: ethnic cuisine appearing in several courses.

Cast of Characters

1. Many of these are finely “drawn” and contribute some comic relief. In “The Unbearable Lightness of Being—Myron,” the gifted son of Yaroslava and Andriy Yarosh, frustrates his primary school teachers with tales about playmates of colorful angels. He organizes mini-dramas about them with schoolmates. The parents, Greek Catholic Christians, have only recently been encouraged by their priest to study the Bible for themselves. So, when reading together the Woman-Dragon-Child myth in Revelation 12, Myron wants to stage a play based on the dynamics of the passage. In it, a magnificent, celestial woman is about to give birth to a son, whom a fearsome lizard wants to devour because he knows that the infant will grow to rule all nations—a role that the enemy wants for himself. So, Yaroslava agrees to perch herself on a balcony. Above

her, Andriy arranges a tackle and pulley so that the boy, sitting hidden between her feet, can then be hoisted to a landing above. His mother, a former actress at the nearby Zankovetsky Theater, secures a Japanese dragon costume that Uncle Maksym, a nearby neighbor, agrees to don as the primeval antagonist.

2. Yet, a more sinister version of this innocent play emerges in Kyiv. During an atmosphere of unbridled religious freedom, several sects are spawned. Among the most popular is the Black Brotherhood (“Chorne Bratstvo”). Leading the movement is Maryna Khrystova. Impregnated by her unemployed lover (a construction worker), she claims to be that glorious figure envisioned by St. John. Her unborn child, she asserts, is none other than God Incarnate—although, on other occasions, Maryna proclaims herself to be that divine embodiment. Kate’s encounter with this historical enrobing of a foundational myth is nothing less than a clash between two titanic, spiritual forces.
3. Katya’s adopting Mila, a disabled, middle-school girl from an orphanage (after some questionable bending of residual, bureaucratic communist regulation) provides an added emotional dimension to the childless heroine’s overly intellectualized self-understanding.

Maintaining a Pace

On the whole, the pace of this thriller is sustained throughout, unlike that of *Mark My Words*. (Rusyn would no doubt admit that he’s no Dan Brown.)

1. In the regional capital of Chernivtsij, Kate learns from her students at the National University about a mural painted in the onetime home of a Jewish artist who perished in the Holocaust. Shlomo Weitzman had rendered the eventually exalted figure of Daniel 7 in an unprecedented manner. He labeled the portrait, “Child of Dust”—the same expression that she had used to interpret the more common English expression, “son of man.” Her study of the Old Testament and Dead Sea Scrolls had convinced her that the Aramaic original depicts the personage in terms of frail, vulnerable humanity. It is to one in this condition that the Ancient of Days grants kingdom, glory, universal authority, and homage. In the New Testament, Jesus alone uses the designation exclusively of himself; and the author of Revelation envisions him as a magnificent (but grotesque) entity, a double-edged sword emerging from his mouth.

The genius of Weitzman’s work is that the figure’s face seems to suffer slow decrepitation with each horror experienced by humanity at the hands of fellow humans. No wonder that subsequent anti-Semitic owners had painted over and boarded up the offending image. Since the house was larger than average size, it originally served as an SS officer’s HQ towards the end of the War. A

victorious Soviet general made the place his base of operations.

With the premises abandoned, Katya's attempts at a late-night break-in to expose and recover the hidden panel are interrupted by a group of Mossad agents in balaklavas and armed with heavy weapons. The Yad Vashem Museum in Jerusalem had assigned them to recover this example of mid-twentieth-century Jewish heritage. Ignoring her protests against this looting of UKRAINIAN cultural legacy, they speed to the Romanian border in a darkened van, intent on escaping by a submarine lurking offshore in the Black Sea.

She joins the chase by commandeering a nearby tram whose operator evacuates the passengers under protest, grudgingly setting the rheostat to full throttle. For miles, highway and railway run parallel, sometimes crossing at points that result in near-disaster. The author enables us to smell acrid ozone generated by sparks escaping the friction between metal pantograph and overhead wire. Laws of physics and mechanics bend to near breaking point as the heavily steel-plated carriage lurches from side to side. When a Mossad sniper eliminates the motorman, Kate herself takes over. As the tram hurtles towards the defended and blockaded border control checkpoint, Rusyn treats us to one of the most graphic accounts of collision in slow motion ever narrated (at least in this reviewer's reading). One can only imagine what a movie director could do with this scene.

2. In taking the overnight train in their flight from Kyiv to Lviv, Kate and Mila are forced to share a compartment with two strangers, both men. Upper and lower bunks face each other. How the four negotiate sleeping arrangements and privacy provides a note of comic relief until one realizes that one of the men has been hired to assassinate mother and daughter.
3. In a chapter entitled, "The Dragon Pursued the Woman and Her Children," the pace and place of the action continue in the UK, both in Cambridge and Oxford. Unlikely to outrun local thugs hired by enemies in Ukraine, Mother and daughter try to outwit them. Taking to the River, they hijack a punt hired by protesting tourists from Ohio. The "muscle" is not aware that the bottom of the Cam changes: from slippery flagstone, to shifting sand, to unforgiving muck congealing tangled reeds. Without Kate's knowledge, acquired during her student days, they are unable to avoid the latter. Their poles, ending in a metal eagle's claw, stick to unforgiving natural sludge—leave punters and passengers stranded. Members of the University, sometimes to their own chagrin, also learned not to raise the pole too soon after passing under one of several bridges. "Townies" ensure that mother and daughter escape by grabbing the villains' only means of propulsion and navigation, leaving vessels adrift. As

they continue their itinerary to Seattle, Katya and Mila are also pursued to Oxford, where they barely avoid a kidnapping and being hurled from Magdalen College Tower.

Concerns

Pace

Rusyn's laudable efforts to produce a page-turner are threatened by two temptations, to which he sometimes yields (both being understandable, if not quite forgivable in a "thriller"): to lapse into travelog mode and to provide social, political, and religious commentary. It's a monumental task for anyone: the attempt to acquaint Westerners with this largely unknown land and its people, who begin to experience the first years of democracy and who at last have the opportunity to showcase their distinct and distinctive thousand-year history. Furthermore, by the time that Katya and Mila reach the UK, the action seems to be running out of steam and the crisis situations appear contrived—although not quite at the level of Hollywood's requirement for car chases or cliff-hanging scenes from the tops of high rises.

Voice

A few male authors have been able to write with a female mind, voice, and sensibilities. But Rusyn does not quite bring it off. Only name and pronoun are different. The result amounts to an exercise in narrative crossdressing.

Art as Character

Rusyn obviously wants art to be a main character of the story—a trope that writers have occasionally employed: cities, cathedrals, houses, institutions, etc. Fair enough. But some questions and observations immediately come to mind. Is he qualified to do so? There is no evidence of specialization in art history. Has he actually canvassed all of Christian art to support the audacious claim that lion and lamb have never previously touched nor been conjoined? Has he ever even dabbled in art himself?

The author might claim that evidence of the latter is the sculpture, portraiture, drama, and music about which he writes—creations that otherwise have no independent, objective, material existence. Rather, we are meant to regard *them* as such works in and of themselves: the discovery of the 16th c. Lion-Lamb (Lviv), the stolen portrait "Child of Dust" (Chernivtsi), Myron Yarosh's mini-home dramatization of the Woman-Child-Dragon myth (again, Lviv), and the heavy metal performance in Kyiv of Ancient Near Eastern cosmogony (the victory of Marduk over the dragon Tiamat and her brood) by the rock group "Babs Babylon & Her Watery Review." So, it is not art in some abstract sense that's a prominent

member of the *dramatis personae*. Rather, it's *Rusyn's* art that upstages the other players.

Despite these misgivings, I concede that, by and large, the author succeeds in showing that this art is not merely *imitating* life (as if it were keeping up—just barely). In his second volume, he shows art actually *driving* life.

Furthermore, by introducing passages from the Apocalypse at the head of each chapter, *Rusyn* does double duty. At one level, he acquaints readers with texts that are largely unknown or unfamiliar or poorly interpreted; at another, he draws our attention to the original *artistry* of the Seer—the *See*-er. His narrative is imagistic, iconic. “Picture this,” he says. In so doing, the author also exhorts us to “Look around! Listen up!”

A Final Word

It remains to be seen how many more “thrillers” of this kind will flow from *Ruryk Rusyn's* fountain pen (his chosen instrument). As a biblical scholar, his publications have centered on the Gospels and Revelation, the environment of these novels. Does he have plans to integrate other Scripture texts or themes with aspects of his profession and ethnic heritage? Is there an entirely different protagonist around whom to spin another tale—an aged librarian or a child (perhaps even *Mila*)? Will he be able to show and tell in a compelling, informative way? Might *Katya Kanyuka* herself be the heroine of another novel, say: *Publish AND Perish*?

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