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## "Foreign Woman, Do Not Look!" *Spring in Egypt* and Lesja Ukrajinka's Confrontation with Orientalism

Larysa Petrivna Kosač – Lesja Ukrajinka – spent much of her life travelling. From ten years of age a sufferer from tuberculosis, she sought treatment in Warsaw, Vienna, Berlin and Zürich. She journeyed to the peripheries of the Russian Empire – to Odesa and Crimea for her health, and to Georgia to be with her husband. Between 1909 and 1913 she spent three extended periods in Egypt, encountering a land which bore visible monuments of the greatness of its ancient civilization, but which had not been governed by native rulers since the fourth century B.C. After centuries of Greek, Roman and Byzantine, Arab and Ottoman overlordship, from 1882 onward Egypt had been under de facto British occupation. Among the vehicles of cultural influence that accompanied the European military and economic presence in Egypt was tourism, including the health tourism in which Lesja Ukrajinka participated. Lesja Ukrajinka was attentive to the depredations of colonialism in general and to the colonial marginality imposed upon her own and other cultures within the Russian Empire in particular. In the dramatic poems *Orbija* (*The Orgy*, written in 1912-1913) and *Bojarynja* (*The Boyar's Wife*, written in Egypt in 1910), for example, she offered astute representations of the discursive strategies by which imperial metropolises exploit and appropriate the human and cultural capital of their provinces or colonies, while simultaneously subjecting them to disparagement and mockery<sup>1</sup>. It is scarcely surprising, then, that her sojourns in colonial Egypt gave rise to literary reflections on the mechanisms by which colonial power is exerted.

Stimulated by Edward Said's book *Orientalism*, literary and other humanities scholarship has become increasingly sensitive to manifestations in cultural texts of the power disequilibrium between Western (and other metropolitan) cultures and those not Western and not metropolitan. Orientalism, defined by Said as "a Western style for dominating, restructuring, and having authority over the Orient" (Said 1978: 3), has become a shorthand term for the many ways in which Western discourses and practices reflect and extend Western domination over the East. These include Western description and study of the Orient that figure the observer as superior and the object of inquiry as inferior, and various rhetorical templates for representing and interpreting the Oriental Other – as, for example, feminized, eroticized or infantilized.

<sup>1</sup> See, e.g., Matusiak 2009, Jurčuk 2011, and Andrianova 2015.

As has long been recognized, Orientalism is not solely the province of consciously supremacist ideology. In many instances it functions as an “unconscious and sometimes benevolently intended set of attitudes and preconceptions arising out of relations of power” (Marcuse 2004: 809-810), and the boundary in such cases between the virtuous intentions of the actor and the underlying structure of domination in which the actor is complicit may be subtle. Given her many travels, her erudite Europe-influenced world-view, her choice of the ancient and modern Orient as thematic background for many of her works, and her personal experience as an intellectual in a subaltern culture within an imperial context, Lesja Ukrajinka presents a complex and fascinating case of the tension between, on the one hand, anti-colonial solidarity with oppressed peoples and classes and, on the other, the inextricable enmeshment of Orientalist postulates and attitudes with the European Enlightenment tradition. My objective in the present inquiry is to illustrate this tension through examination of a single poem (*Khamsin*)<sup>2</sup>, within the context both of the poem cycle which it initiates, *Vesna v Jehypti* (*Spring in Egypt*, 1910), and of Lesja Ukrajinka’s Egyptian experiences. The following analysis will show that Lesja Ukrajinka was informed about and respectful of Egypt and its people, empathetic toward the oppressed indigenous population, and confident in her ability to observe, understand and generalize – perhaps too boldly – about Egyptians and their plight. It will focus on *Khamsin* as a poem which clamors to be interpreted as a flash of insight into the frailty of Orientalist claims to knowledge, as an expression of the inflection such claims receive when articulated by a woman, and as a diagnosis of the fin-de-siècle crisis of the Occidental knowledge system.

Lesja Ukrajinka’s engagement with Egypt long predated her visits to that country. At the age of nineteen or twenty she undertook the major task of paraphrasing in Ukrainian Louis Ménéard’s *Histoire des anciens peuples de l’Orient* (1882). Twenty years later, in Egypt, she updated the manuscript and sought, unsuccessfully at the time, to have it published (see Ohnjeva 2005). It appeared in print in 1918, five years after her death, as *Starodavnja istorija schidnych narodiv* (*Ancient History of the Eastern Peoples*). The section on Egypt is a 60,000-word text on the geography, ancient history, mythology, lifestyle and culture of the land. The text radiates respect, indeed admiration, for the civilization of Ancient Egypt and does not hesitate to label instances of European interference with Egypt’s ancient monuments as acts of “vandalism” on the part of “European ignoramuses” (“jevropejs’k[ych] nevihlas[iv]”, Ukrajinka 2021, x: 158)<sup>3</sup>. Lesja Ukrajinka utilized the knowledge she had accumulated in writing the *Ancient History* in works set in Ancient Egypt, including a number of poems written in 1903-1904: *Ra-Meneji*, *Sfinks* (*The Sphinx*), *Napys na rujini* (*Inscription on a Ruin*), and *Izrajil’ v Jehypti* (*Israel in Egypt*) (Rudnyc’kyj 1971, Ostanina 2013).

Lesja Ukrajinka’s letters, especially to her mother, the writer Olena Pchilka, and Borys Hrinčenko are rich in details about her first sojourn in Helwan on the Nile. Another source

<sup>2</sup> The title refers to the khamsin or simoom, the forceful, hot sand-bearing southerly wind from the Sahara.

<sup>3</sup> All subsequent references to this source give volume and page number only.

concerning that visit is a memoir by Mykola Ochrimenko, a teenager at the time, who kept a diary which enabled him in the 1950s to reconstruct with some precision the life of the guests of the Villa Continental where Lesja Ukrajinka resided. The main literary projects of her six months in Egypt – completion of the verse drama *Rufin i Priscilla* (*Rufinus and Priscilla*) and the writing of *The Boyar's Wife* – were not concerned with Egyptian themes. However, over five days in March 1910 Lesja Ukrajinka composed the seven poems of the *Spring in Egypt* cycle (Moroz 1992: 456-457). Six were published that year in the journal "Ridnyj kraj"<sup>4</sup>. They were inspired by the experience, vividly described in a letter to her mother, of a khamsin and the weather conditions following it: a calm hot spell and a north wind bringing showers. "Oh, if only you could see that red-haired demon of a khamsin – how it transforms the world into a yellow nightmare! Truly, an evil spirit – a Typhon!", she wrote, comparing the wind to the hundred-headed dragon resident in the underworld of Greek mythology (xiv: 197).

*Khamsin* was the first poem of the *Spring in Egypt* cycle to be written, and the furthest from the intellectual ground in which Lesja Ukrajinka generally anchored her lyrical subject. In general, and especially in the subsequent poems of the *Spring in Egypt* cycle, this ground is the heritage of the Western Enlightenment, from which many of her works derive their pathos of liberty, equality and solidarity. Her feminism, too, generally expresses itself as a demand for the recognition of women's full humanity on the basis of an Enlightenment-derived universalism. The genealogy of the Enlightenment is no less evident in the determined individualism, secularism and devotion to objective knowledge that find expression in much of her oeuvre.

The last of these is the intellectual value that, initially, the poem *Khamsin* appears to invoke. The lyrical subject is introduced in the act of precise, objective observation. The poem's audience is invited to visualize and co-experience, in sequence, a hot and fast wind that stings the skin with its heat and airborne sand; the wind's flute-like sound; its force as it lifts pebbles from the ground and carries them short distances before they fall and are picked up again; whirlwinds that briefly take shape in the sand-filled air, only to disappear into a yellow sandy haze; people who, caught in the open, lie flat on the ground to avoid the worst of the sand and wind; and, at the climax of the windstorm, airborne sand so dense that it dims the daylight and turns the sky yellow.

Evocation of these visual, aural and tactile sensations is accompanied by personifications and mythological allusions that intensify the poem's emotional charge. The desert wind is compared, initially, to a dancing figure, its wings and its flaming breath connoting dragon-like menace and aggression toward the lyrical subject. Unrhymed iambic pentameter with an unstressed extrametrical syllable at the end of most, but not all lines creates a diction that is close to descriptive prose while remaining within the orbit of metrical verse. This formal and stylistic neutrality of *Khamsin* harmonizes well with what initially appears to be the poem's mimetic intent:

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<sup>4</sup> One of the poems, *Son* (*Teplo ta jasno*) (*A Dream [It Is Warm and Sunny]*) was not published until 1947.

Рудий Хамсін в пустині розгулявся,  
 Жагою палений, мчить у повітрі,  
 Черкаючи пісок сухими крильми,  
 І дише густим полум'ям пекучим (v: 406)<sup>5</sup>.

Soon enough, though, the lyrical subject's vision of the natural spectacle is augmented by association with a wedding – a “wild” one at that. Erotic overtones are amplified as sandy whirlwinds anthropomorphize into female dancers, “mysterious wind-maidens” in diaphanous costume, who dance in Khamsin's honor:

Якесь весілля дике! Мов сопілка –  
 Співа пісок, зірвавшись зненацька  
 З важкої нерухомості своєї,  
 А камінці на бубнах приграють.  
 Хто ж там у жовтій та сліпучій млі  
 На честь Хамсінові таночки водить?  
 Щось віє покривалами тонкими,  
 Так прудко-прудко крутячись у танці...  
 Якісь таємні вітряні дівчата,  
 Веселі діти смутної пустині? (v: 406)<sup>6</sup>

These lines continue to testify to the lyrical subject's self-identification with the Westerner desirous of knowledge of the Orient. Question marks connote an attitude of curious inquiry and a researcher's willingness to propose hypotheses. The “reading” of the dancing-girl-like whirlwinds which the lyrical subject proposes – that they be imagined as “cheerful children of the melancholy desert” – correlates with Lesja Ukrajinka's observations concerning Egyptians in her letters. Egyptians, she found, were characterized by a happy group disposition despite the oppressive colonial and social circumstances under which most of them lived – an observation that offended her sense of social logic and demanded a causal explanation (of which more below). What is more, given the stereotype of the harem dancer that is invoked here, the lyrical subject appears to indulge in a manner of seeing akin to the eroticized and exoticizing gaze of such late nineteenth-century European artists as José Gallegos, Ferenc Eisenhut or Alphonse Pellet, painters of imaginary harem scenes. True to what Said described as the “citationary” nature of Orientalism (Said 1978:

<sup>5</sup> Red-haired Khamsin dances wildly in the desert; / Burned by thirst he races through the air, / His dry wings scuffing the sand; / He breathes thick, stinging flame (here and afterwards translations are mine, MP).

<sup>6</sup> It's some kind of wild wedding-feast! The sand, suddenly uprisen / From its heavy immobility, sings like a reed pipe, / While pebbles drum accompaniment. / Who is it that in yellow, blinding mist / Performs dances in Khamsin's honour? / There is a flutter of diaphanous veils / As something dances, swiftly whirling... / Are these some mysterious wind-maidens, / Cheerful children of the melancholy desert?

176), the image of veiled danseuses evokes an entire tradition of Orientalist representations of women, their status as objects of male desire enhanced by the idea that in lands of the Orient religious convention removes women from the public (and, ipso facto, the inquiring and desiring Western male) gaze. Such a voyeuristic masculine perspective, the poem at this juncture appears to imply, is shared by the lyrical subject.

Here, however, the poem takes some unexpected turns. Khamsin, the personified wind, uses the feminine noun "*čuzynka*" ('female foreigner') to address the lyrical subject:

“Чужинко, не дивись! Засиплю очі!”  
І заздро загорнув Хамсін полою  
Киреї жовтої своїх танечниць.  
Ніхто не сміє бачить їх. Араб  
Серед пустині падає додолу,  
Як на молитві (v: 406)<sup>7</sup>.

The lyrical subject, then, is a woman. But she has articulated a Western *man's* interest in Khamsin's danseuses. His outrage and his threat to blind her bring to the fore the two kinds of transgression which have overlapped here, one against an established gender role, the other against a cultural (more specifically, religious) tradition.

First, a woman has acted in a man's role. Khamsin is represented as jealously believing not only that "his" women have been coveted, but that they have been coveted by a woman, who has thereby usurped a form of culpable desire thought of as the province of men. Contemporary readers interpreting this role inversion as an allegory of a socio-political argument within the framework of their European value-system might well have detected here a liberal, even feminist complaint against the fact that desires which society disapprovingly tolerates in men are found outrageous if manifested by women.

Second, an Islamic prohibition has been breached. The rules of modesty governing which parts of women's and men's bodies may be seen, and by whom, have differed according to time and place (Boulanouar 2006: 138). However, from Lesja Ukrajinka's correspondence and Ochrimenko's memoirs it is evident that she, like other Europeans in Egypt, observed many women in public with their face and body covered and believed that Islam allowed them to be uncovered only in front of the woman's husband and a small number of other categories of person. The lyrical subject, a foreign woman behaving as if she were a man, has broken this rule. In doing so, she has not only challenged Khamsin's demand to be the sole spectator of "his" women. She has also behaved impiously in relation to the dominant religion of Egypt.

Up to this point, it is possible to read Khamsin's anger as his reaction to the transgressive behavior of the female lyrical subject, whose looking upon the veiled dancers

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<sup>7</sup> "Foreign woman, do not look! / I shall fill your eyes [with sand]!" / And jealously Khamsin enfolded in his yellow robe / All of his dancers. / None dare look at them. The Arab / In the desert drops to the ground, / As though in prayer.

may appear to be a libertarian act symbolizing rejection of Islamic custom, akin to the declaration in *The Secret Gift*, the sixth poem of the *Spring in Egypt* cycle, that “Woman has been oppressed by Islam”, v: 410). Such an emphatic critique of Islamic gender norms implies corresponding confidence in the universality of the Western values of liberty and agency – a universality later disputed, as will become apparent, in the poem *Khamsin* itself, though not in the cycle as a whole. The conjecture that, in *Khamsin*, Islam and its value system might be at stake is supported by the poem’s momentary focus on “the Arab”, who, imagined as confronting the spectacle of whirling dancers, falls to the ground “as though” (“*jak*”) in prayer. The phrase “as though”, by qualifying what follows as a simile, enables the evocation of Islamic piety even as it announces that Islam is not the main concern at hand. In the observed “real world” of the khamsin-struck desert people lie down to protect themselves from the wind and the wind-borne sand; the “as though”, signifying similarity, but not identity, draws attention to the fact that the analogy between their prostration and the posture that Muslim faithful adopt in prayer is just that – an analogy. At the level of myth, where Khamsin is emerging as a powerful, indeed supernatural, presence, the Arab’s prostration is clearly *not* an act of Islamic prayer. It reveals itself as a reflex of fear and self-abasement before an ancient deity that is not merely pre-colonial, but also pre-Islamic<sup>8</sup>.

The mythologized Khamsin’s reaction to the Arab’s prostration is one of irony: he pretends to understand it as an act of prayer, but demands that the Arab’s piety be directed to him, Khamsin – for, as he now proclaims, he is a deity, “that mighty Seth”:

“Вже ж! Молись! Молись!  
Я давній бог, я той могутній Сет,  
Що тіло Озірісове нетлінне  
Розшматував і кинув у пустиню.  
Ох, як тоді Ізіда заридала”.  
І звеселився спогадом Хамсін,  
І вся пустиня мов знялася вгору  
І в небо ринула. На жовтім небі  
Померкло сонце – око Озіріса –  
І стало так, мов цілий світ осліп... (v: 406)<sup>9</sup>

<sup>8</sup> In the manuscript draft of *Khamsin* the term initially used for the prostrated figure was “*fellach*” (fellah), a member of the autochthonous peasantry (v: 799). The word was crossed out and change to “*arab*” (“the Arab”). Lesja Ukrajinca may have assumed that her readers would more readily associate Islam and Muslim prayer with Arabs than with indigenous Egyptians.

<sup>9</sup> “Just so! Pray, pray! / I am an ancient god, I am that mighty Seth / Who ripped to pieces Osiris’s incorruptible body / And threw it into the desert. / Oh, how Isis wept then!” / The recollection amused Khamsin, / And all the desert seemed to rise aloft / And surge into the heavens. In the yellow sky / The sun, Osiris’s eye, went dim; / And it was as though the whole world had gone blind...

The cultural point of reference of the poem has shifted once more. The poem's audience no longer accompanies a Western lyrical subject on a quest for knowledge of the natural phenomena of the Orient; nor are readers enjoined to criticize, from a Western viewpoint, the cultural prohibitions enshrined in Islam. Instead, the audience is now invited to understand nature – in this case the millennial duel between the desert and the Nile-fed arable land – through autochthonous myth. As in Egyptian myth, Seth in Lesja Ukrajinka's poem is the divinity of chaos and destruction, the antagonist of the orderly cycle of regeneration and death represented by Osiris and Isis.

The words that the poem attributes to Khamsin/Seth reveal him as a malevolent force, his ferocious violence reflected in the verb *rozšmatuvav* ('ripped to pieces')<sup>10</sup>, his merciless contempt for the defeated adversary evident in his "throwing" the dismembered body of Osiris, which he mocks as "incorruptible", into the desert. Khamsin/Seth's pleasure at the recollection of his slaughter of his opponent has its objective correlative in the natural event, observed by the lyrical subject, which closes the poem: as the windstorm reaches its climax, the sand in the air obscures the light of the sun and makes it impossible to distinguish desert from sky. The topos of *ordo inversus* – the world turned upside down – is invoked in the image of the desert rising up and surging into the heavens, while the murk that has descended is brought into association with the (mythological) dimming of the eye of the dying Osiris and a blindness that is inflicted upon the world.

From a standpoint that acknowledges mimesis as a function of art, the poem offers a vivid and convincing poetic picture, precise in its visual and even tactile representation of an experience of the khamsin. In such a reading the allusions to contemporary cultural realities and to ancient myth serve to intensify the sensual and emotional effect of what is, in essence, the representation of a sandstorm, for an audience whose European horizon of expectations anticipates a vision of the Orient as exotic, rich in mysterious mythologies, and fundamentally Other.

If, on the other hand, Lesja Ukrajinka's *Khamsin* is approached as an exercise in *Gedankenlyrik* – as a poetic thought experiment – it can be read as formulating a moment of epistemological insight. Lesja Ukrajinka, an adherent to the Enlightenment project and the quest for knowledge that is fundamental to it, recognizes a key limitation of that project: that the Other, and especially the cultural Other, is only partially knowable. The poem begins as a Western effort to describe a natural phenomenon in a foreign land; it soon becomes entangled in Orientalizing tropes as it endeavors to communicate its observations in ways that address its audience's Western expectations; it is then rocked by the resistance of the subject-matter to this colonizing form of interpretation; finally, it becomes aware of itself as committing a succession of acts of transgression against the cultures that surround the natural object under observation. This realization, and the poem itself, end with the

<sup>10</sup> In Lesja Ukrajinka's manuscript of the poem the force of the verb *rozšmatuvav* is magnified by the dash which precedes it, signifying a pause that adds emphasis to what follows. The punctuation mark is not reproduced in standard editions (Avrachov 2007: 104).

image of a world gone blind – an image that readers may choose to read as a symbol of despair of the possibility of intercultural knowledge or, even more broadly, of the crisis of a central part of the heritage of the European Enlightenment: the universalist view of humanity on which belief in the possibility of understanding across cultures is based<sup>11</sup>.

The poem *Khamsin* thus sustains interpretation as challenging the justification of Western efforts to know the East – or, to state the same in another idiom, as deconstructing Orientalist claims to knowledge. Does such skepticism correspond to Lesja Ukrajinka's intellectual stance as articulated in other works?

Not as a rule. What is generally true of Lesja Ukrajinka, as Ivan Dzjuba (2006: 7) pointed out, is that in her life as in her works she seldom failed to underscore her universalist dedication to human freedom, equality, and social justice, or to condemn colonialism in its political and cultural forms. Her Egyptian writings, no less than her actions while in Egypt, were no exception. Indeed, Lesja Ukrajinka's social conscience is the leading theme of Ochrimenko's memoir of her first Egyptian sojourn. The memoirist records her outrage at the efforts of a few of her countrymen to get some Egyptian boys drunk, thus tempting them to break an important religious obligation; she loudly condemned their "dirty behavior" as that of "cultural savages" (Ochrimenko 1971: 354). The memoir also tells of a friendship between Sajid Abramovyč, an Egyptian postal official, and the denizens of the Villa Continental. After Sajid entertained the tourists by singing in various European languages and dancing the *rususkaja* and the *hopak*, Lesja Ukrajinka urged him in private not to "lose his national dignity by making himself a clown for the Europeans" (Ochrimenko 1971: 348). She did her best to ameliorate a situation where thoughtless European arrogance was welcomed and encouraged by its victim. Proud of having adopted Western customs, Sajid invited his European friends to his home in order to see, uncovered, the "beautiful face" of his wife. En route to Sajid's domicile Lesja Ukrajinka urged her fellow visitors to observe the customs of removing footwear on entering the home, speaking softly and not looking directly at Sajid's wife – who, while quite unembarrassed by the visit, took no part in the conversation, since she spoke no European language. Yet even Lesja Ukrajinka was not entirely free of the Orientalizing and infantilizing condescension that characterized this grotesque episode: "Larysa Petrivna came up to Sajid's wife to say farewell, gently stroked her head and said, 'My poor little dove'" (Ochrimenko 1971: 349).

The poems of the *Spring in Egypt* cycle that follow *Khamsin* leave no doubt as to Lesja Ukrajinka's solidarity with the indigenous rural population, the fellaheen, whose labor profits others than themselves (especially in *Dychannja pustyni* 'The Breathing of the Desert'), or her disapproval of the British colonial presence in Egypt (in *Afra*). And yet,

<sup>11</sup> Vira Ahejeva sees such a "broad world-view and philosophical crisis [...] from which European modernism arises" (Ahejeva 1999: 31) as characteristic of Lesja Ukrajinka's later, post-1900, work in general. As the present inquiry demonstrates, in the *Spring in Egypt* cycle, at least, such consciousness of cultural crisis is a revelatory exception, not the rule.

several of her utterances express a degree of confidence in her ability to comprehend Egypt that, at least with the advantage of postcolonial hindsight, may sound culturally presumptuous. Writing to her mother after visiting the pyramids, the Great Sphinx and the Cairo museum, Lesja Ukrajinka described the experience, somewhat egocentrically, in terms of Egypt fulfilling or failing to fulfill her expectations; furthermore, she saw herself as having achieved a fullness of understanding of ancient Egyptian art: "Egypt has not disappointed me; it has enchanted me even more, and only now I have understood its art, in every way [an expression of] genius" (XIV: 180). She translated some ancient Egyptian texts into Ukrainian verse from a prose translation into German (Wiedemann 1903), claiming to detect in them similarities to Ukrainian folksongs (XIV: 190). In the introduction to the publication of these texts as *Liryčni pisni dawn'oho Jehyptu* (*Lyrical Songs of Ancient Egypt*) she calls her rhythmical texts the fruit of her intention to "translate not the letter, but the spirit of the original" (VIII: 59) – a bold claim to knowledge of that "spirit", given that she could not read Egyptian hieroglyphs and relied on a prose paraphrase of the originals in one of the metropolitan languages of Europe. After the sandstorm that was the stimulus for the composition of *Khamsin* Lesja Ukrajinka wrote to her mother, ironically but with no diminution of her confidence in her ability to comprehend the Other, "I'm glad, because I did want to know what Africa really is. Now I do know" (XIV: 197).

The conviction that she possessed a plenitude of knowledge about Egypt emboldened Lesja Ukrajinka to generalize about Egyptians and what she took to be their prevailing collective mood. She found especially striking and yet difficult to explain the seeming happiness of the fellaheen, notwithstanding their historical and contemporary oppression. The personification of whirlwinds in *Khamsin* as "cheerful children of the melancholy desert" is but one manifestation of the motif of the happy denizens of Egypt, and especially of its happy women. In her introduction to *Lyrical Songs of Ancient Egypt* Lesja Ukrajinka extolled these "songs" as "examples of the radiant, joyous poetry of a great and mysterious people" prior to drawing attention to the contrast she observed between indigenous Egyptians' objective misery and their subjective good cheer:

This people ("*narod*") has not enjoyed a happy fate – its entire history is one of oppression either by its own despots or by foreign invaders. And yet, it drew from somewhere the strength not to close its eyes to the joys of the world or of life. Perhaps that is why this people has survived for such a long time. The sphinxes smile with luminous joy, the very walls of the mausoleums shimmer with cheerful colors, and seldom does one encounter a sad expression on the sculpted or painted covers of the papyrus biers in which the black mummies are enclosed. A similar brightness and joy of the spirit is manifest in the songs that are here translated (VIII: 60).

Unsurprisingly, given the strength of her conviction that joy was a central feature of the cultural and psychological disposition of Egyptians from ancient times to the present, Lesja Ukrajinka looked for a theory to explain this phenomenon. She found it in the notion, well established in European thought since at least Montesquieu and Herder, that

climate powerfully influences culture and society (see, e.g., Grundmann, Stehr 1997). In a letter to Hrinčenko she observed, more in relation to her fellow health tourists than to Egypt's indigenous population, that

[h]ere even the climate, and especially the colors, incline people to cheerfulness: the sky, always bright, the absolute certainty that it will not rain (in the 2.5 months that I have been here rain has fallen on perhaps five occasions), a certain special gentleness of the color scheme, a certain lightness of the air that I have not witnessed anywhere in Europe – all of this somehow raises one's spirits (XIV: 189).

It is not implausible to suggest that Lesja Ukrajinka, who came to Egypt so that the climate might alleviate the symptoms of her tuberculosis, was open to the idea that this same climate exercised a benign influence on the physical, and therefore also psychological, constitution of people who had experienced it over millennia.

Quite in keeping with this climatic explanation of the purported happiness of Egyptians is the argument of the poem *Tajemnyj dar* (*The Secret Gift*) that closes the published version of the *Spring in Egypt* cycle. The first half of the poem comprises a series of illustrations of its opening statement, "Egypt does not know how to weep for long" ("Plakaty dovho Jehypet ne vmije")<sup>12</sup>. The rain merely rinses the palm trees, sprinkles the greenery of the crops along the Nile, refreshes the "shimmering gilt" ("blyskuču pozlotu") of the desert and causes Egypt to "smile once more – secret are the joys of the Sphinx" ("Usmichajet'sja znovu, – tajemni radošči Sfinksa!").

As nature rejoices, so do people. The lyrical subject prefaces the series of images that follows with a single word that identifies him or her (on this occasion readers receive no grammatical clues as to the speaker's gender) as an observer, an eyewitness: "I see:" ("Baču."). What the lyrical subject sees includes women with laughing eyes, men and women who sing as they tout their wares, a water-bearer who jokes as he carries his heavy burden and smiles as he takes payment, and carefree children of the fellaheen at play, unperturbed by their poverty.

"Whence this joy?" ("Zvidky sja radist'?), wonders the lyrical subject. The answer, which constitutes the second half of the poem, takes the form of an invented creation myth of the Nile. Only the figure of Nil (*Neilos* in Greek, *Nilus* in Latin) and the notion that he had many children are prefigured in ancient sources; the rest of the narrative is new<sup>13</sup>. Ancient Egyptian mythology knew Hathor as a goddess of the sky, of women and fertility. In Lesja Ukrajinka's poem there are seven wise Hathors, each of whom makes the newborn Nil a gift. The first six gifts are aspects of the fertility of the Nile valley and the promise of Egyptian civilization, while the seventh concerns Nil's children:

<sup>12</sup> All quotations from *The Secret Gift* are from v: 410-411.

<sup>13</sup> For a discussion of the interplay of received and invented myth in *The Secret Gift*, see Kozlitina 2011.

Сьома всміхнулась крізь сльози і мовила щиро:  
 "З задрощів, вічну неволю судили боги твоїм дітям,  
 Я ж у незламную радість озброю народную душу, –  
 Гніт фараонів, кормига чужинців її не здолає!"<sup>14</sup>

Thus, the answer to the question concerning the origins of the indefatigable good humor that the lyrical subject of the poem, like Lesja Ukrajinka, sees as characteristic of Egyptians, despotisms notwithstanding, is mythological, at least at first appearance: it is a gift of the gods, a given, like the regenerative annual flooding of the river. And yet, while the structure of the poem does not compel the reader to proceed to an allegorical decoding of the sequence of gifts, the narrative does imply a theory of economic cause and psychological effect: the exceptional fertility of the Nile valley has made life easier for Egyptians than other agricultural peoples, and this in turn is the source of their carefree and cheerful disposition. Lesja Ukrajinka foreshadowed such a theory in her *Ancient History of the Eastern Peoples*, quoting Herodotus's remarks about the easily tillable soil of the Nile valley and the civilizational consequences of this fortunate circumstance (X: 147-148). An invented "Egyptian" legend, despite its outward mythological attributes, becomes the vehicle for a geographically and economically determinist explanation of what is presented as a general feature of an Egyptian collective psyche. An "Oriental mystery", the inexplicable happiness of the Egyptian people, is dispelled by the force of Western reason.

*The Secret Gift* summarizes unambiguously the view of the collective personality of Egyptians that Lesja Ukrajinka had recorded in numerous other places. But in *Khamsin*, written a few days earlier, the legitimacy of the "seeing" that permits metaphorization of desert whirlwinds as either seductive female dancers or "happy children" is thrown into doubt. There is a chthonic force of chaos and unreason that resists the efforts of the impertinent "foreign woman" to "see" in this way. The punishment threatened by Khamsin/Seth for such sacrilegious seeing is blindness. The Western gaze with its implicit claims to know the Oriental Other, name it and explain it is exposed as inadequate to the task. The close of the poem, where the desert surges into the heavens and the world goes blind, extends the experience of the *čuzynka*, the foreign woman, to the generality of the Western paradigm of Oriental knowledge: both are presumptuous, and both deceive themselves when they develop models that 'explain' the Orient. Even more than that: in the tradition of epistemological skepticism, the poem points to the fragility of the contention that knowledge of anything external to the consciousness of the subject is possible. Symbolic of this precariousness is the vulnerability of the observer's eye, easily blinded by the sand of Khamsin/Seth and as easily made sightless when nature in a state of chaos renders all forms indiscernible.

<sup>14</sup> The seventh smiled through her tears and spoke with sincerity, / "Envious, the gods doomed your children to eternal slavery, / But I shall arm with unbreakable joy the soul of the people. / Neither the oppression of pharaohs, nor the yoke of foreigners shall vanquish it".

All of these iterations of doubt concerning the validity of knowledge reached through observation and theorization – the paradigm of the sciences from the Enlightenment onward – are summarized in the lines, “*Čužynko, ne dyvys! / Zasyplju oči!*” (“Foreign woman, do not look! / I shall fill your eyes [with sand]!”), which bring together ideas of blindness and foreignness – synecdoches, respectively, of the fraught nature of knowledge in general and cross-cultural knowledge in particular. In Lesja Ukrajinka’s Egyptian letters the act of seeing is shown to precede a leap in knowledge: the previously mentioned visit to the Cairo museum results in greater understanding of Egyptian art (XIV: 180); seeing the pyramids and the Great Sphinx gives “a real idea of the *soul* of these stone creations” as no paintings or photographs can (XIV: 180, emphasis in the original). To the Sphinx, a monument that impressed her deeply, Lesja Ukrajinka attributes a profound capacity to see objects both transcendental and real: “The Sphinx in particular – it has a great soul that is thousands of years old; it has living eyes; it is as though it sees eternity. And what a landscape the Sphinx has before its eyes!” (XIV: 180). The description of the Sphinx’s gaze, it is plausible to surmise, is an approximation of the ideal of vision to which Lesja Ukrajinka herself aspires. It is, however, precisely this kind of insightful looking that Khamsin/Seth forbids and threatens to punish. Behind this mythologizing narrativization of a natural phenomenon – in the sand-filled air forms lose shape and dissolve in a yellow mist – lies the idea that knowledge of the culture of the Other is inaccessible, because, from the perspective of the Khamsin/Seth as the embodiment of that Other, the lyrical subject is a foreigner, a stranger.

In the poem *Odno slovo* (*One Word*, 1903) Lesja Ukrajinka had already reflected upon the inaccessibility to the cultural Self of certain kinds of knowledge possessed by the cultural Other. The lyrical subject of the poem speaks on behalf of an unnamed people of the Arctic north. There appears among them a foreigner, “*čužyj*” (v: 515), whom readers of the poem are led to identify as a political exile. The foreigner strives, with only partial success, to learn the language and customs of the indigenous people. He, for his part, tries to explain to them what it is that he most painfully lacks (the poem’s audience is guided to guess that this is “freedom”), and hopes that his interlocutors will teach him their word for it. They, however, remain at a loss to grasp the concept, let alone name it in their language. The primary argument of the poem is that freedom cannot be explained to those who have never experienced the absence of it. More generally, the poem formulates the insight that, for there to be understanding across a cultural divide, there must first be some commonality of experience.

The demarcation between *Khamsin* and the remainder of the *Spring in Egypt* cycle highlights the audacity of Lesja Ukrajinka’s epistemological and ontological claims to Western subjecthood, while exposing the vulnerability of these very claims. In *Spring in Egypt*, including the beginning of *Khamsin*, Lesja Ukrajinka emphatically lays claim to the vantage point of the West, seeing, describing, and theorizing the Oriental Other with the optics of the Western subject and judging it against the norms regarded by the West as universal. The claim is audacious for two reasons: first, because it is made by a woman and thus asserts the overcoming of what feminist criticism has conceptualized as the implicit maleness of the Western subject and the attendant “liaison between universalism and mas-

culinism" (Yeğenoğlu 1988: 105); and second, because it is advanced by a representative of a subaltern culture. Lesja Ukrajinka's self-identification with the West is inseparable from the *reverse* Orientalism that is the rhetorical strategy most evident in the explicitly anticolonial dramatic poems referred to at the beginning of this discussion. In *The Orgy*, the most admirable Corinthians assert a scornful moral and cultural superiority over Rome, for they are guardians of the heritage of Greece, even though their land has been annexed to the Roman Empire. In *The Boyar's Wife* the heroine, whose transplantation to Moscow is one of the human consequences of the political subjugation of her Ukrainian homeland to Muscovy, is appalled by the oppression of women she encounters there, decrying it as akin to "Turkish" and "Tatar" backwardness. The subaltern asserts the right to hold the colonizer in contempt and uses an orientalizing slur to do so. In the same spirit, Lesja Ukrajinka's claim to Europeaness in *Spring in Egypt* is a claim to shared possession of the liberal values by whose measure she constructs as barbarian and inferior the imperial system of which, by contributing to a Ukrainian high culture, she is of necessity an adversary.

Yet these courageous assertions of the autonomy and agency of the female and the subaltern self in a world marked by imperialism are at the same time assertions of the right to be part of the great masculinist, Western enterprise of Orientalism. *Spring in Egypt*, except for *Khamsin*, endeavours to exercise this right. Egypt is observed, its people, especially women, are anthropologically analysed and speculated about, its culture weighed and found wanting on the scales of "universal" liberal values. But in *Khamsin* this Orientalist enterprise is seen to fail. The boldly claimed Western subject position adopted by the lyrical "I" is exposed in its weakness. The Western gaze which the lyrical subject of *Khamsin* purports to share comes up against the determined resistance of the Oriental object, which, instead of yielding to optical penetration, destroys the conditions for (Western) knowledge-as-sight. The tables are turned: in *Khamsin* it is no longer the Orient which is the Other, but the would-be observer who is unmasked as the "čužynka", the woman foreigner. The subject behind the lyrical voice of the poem is revealed for who she is: a woman representative of a subaltern culture, bravely, but not innocently, demanding to hunt with the Western hounds.

Lesja Ukrajinka concluded a letter to Hrinčenko with a remark about her impressions of Egypt: "It's a fine country, and I have already grown accustomed to loving it as one that is not foreign" – "ne jak čužu" (XIV: 190). But the lyrical subject of *Khamsin* realizes that in Egypt she is, irreducibly, a foreigner – a "čužynka". Her observations, however sharp, fail to comprehend the reality they confront, or they adjust it to pre-formed models of understanding. Some of these are Western and Orientalizing – the whirlwinds, when they are not the "happy children" of her social imagination, are the harem dancers of male Orientalist fantasy. But there is yet another filter through which the lyrical subject's sensory perceptions pass. The howling of the khamsin sounds like the melody of a "sopilka" – a reed pipe, the sounds of wind-carried pebbles skipping across the sand are reminiscent of the drumming of a "bubon", and the whole carnivalesque scene, before it disappears from sight, is like a "vesillja dyke" – a wild wedding. These sounds and sights have names which,

especially when taken together, allude to the folkloric realia of Ukraine – whether Volyn', where Lesja Ukrajinka spent much of her childhood and teen years, or the Carpathian Mountains, which she had visited with her friend and fellow author Ol'ha Kobyljans'ka. Later poems of the *Spring in Egypt* cycle, *Vitrijana nič* ('Windy Night') and *Viter z pivnoči* ('North Wind'), speak of a wind which the lyrical subject hopes will bring news from the homeland. Balancing the depredations of the khamsin, the north wind brings a shower of rain and some relief, even though its tidings are "plakuči" ("tearful"). Tyranny in that homeland, it appears, is a cause for tears, in contrast to Egypt, where oppression is ameliorated by the innate happiness of the oppressed. The lyrical subject's homeland is named in the seventh and final, long unpublished, poem of the cycle, *Son (Teplo ta jasno)* (*The Dream [It Is Warm and Sunny]*): "čy se Vkrājina? / Tak, se Vkrājina..." "Is this Ukraine? / Yes, this is Ukraine", v: 412).

From the poem cycle *Spring in Egypt* there emerges the character of a lyrical subject whom it is tempting to identify quite closely with the person of Larysa Petrivna Kosač. The lyrical subject is a woman; at a few points in the poems she refers to herself in the first person; and her thematic concerns and world-view positions, except for those formulated in the remarkable *Khamsin*, are coherent with many other utterances by Larysa Kosač, the private, letter-writing individual and Lesja Ukrajinka, the Ukrainian poet and dramatist. So it is, perhaps, not unreasonable to read *Khamsin* as the confessional record of an instant of insight when Lesja Ukrajinka recognizes the precariousness of her confident claim to knowledge and to cross-cultural understanding. It is an instant when Lesja, conceding that in a foreign land she is doomed to be Lesja Čužynka, also recognizes that she is, for better or for worse, Lesja Ukrajinka.

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### *Abstract*

Marko Pavlyshyn

*"Foreign Woman, Do Not Look!" Spring in Egypt and Lesja Ukrajinka's Confrontation with Orientalism*

Lesja Ukrajinka, profoundly aware of the subalternity of her position as a Ukrainian writer and intellectual in a Russian imperial context, was sensitive to analogous predicaments endured by others similarly marginalised. The cycle of lyrical poems *Spring in Egypt*, composed in 1910 during her first sojourn in Egypt, expresses solidarity with colonially oppressed Egyptians. Yet most of these poems also articulate an Orientalist confidence in the capacity of a foreign observer to comprehend Egypt and to make judgments about its people. The exception is the cycle's opening poem, *Khamsin*, which, as this article contends, formulates an insight into the contingent and fragile nature of European claims, in the spirit of the Enlightenment, to cross-cultural knowledge and, indeed, to objective knowledge itself.

### *Keywords*

Lesja Ukrajinka; Orientalism; Ukrainian Literature; Egyptian Themes.