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## Quest for Selfhood and Dystopia in Valerii Shevchuk's *Eye of the Abyss*

ABSTRACT: This paper argues that Valerii Shevchuk's recent work, *Eye of the Abyss* (1996), is a dystopian novel that ponders post-Soviet dilemmas through the lens of mythological events that take place in Ukraine's pseudo-historical past. The novel's themes include a utopian quest for happiness and totalitarianism; the value of true knowledge and the consequences of unawareness; a search for self-awareness and conformism. The quest of four main characters, who set out on a pilgrimage to a famous saint, Mykyta of Pereiaslav', in pursuit of faith and cultivation of high selfhood, provides the framework for the novel's major philosophical discussions. Although the novel's ostensible thematic concerns are presented in terms of ecclesiastical and theological issues, they point to urgent problems in post-Soviet Ukraine. While a fictional religious utopia is at the center of the plot, the very real Soviet utipode is implied in the subtext. The narrator, a self-appointed hagiographer of Mykyta, the pillar saint (i.e., Stylite) of Pereiaslav', seeks the truth about this acclaimed miracle-worker as well as a cure for his own spiritual despondency and creative void. Eventually, the hagiographer's task supersedes itself and turns into its opposite. He ends up writing an anti-hagiography of the fraudulent saint, which acquires the significance of a dystopia. Indeed, the narrator's account of the false saint's criminal deceit translates into an allegorical criticism of the mythology, transgressions and eventual collapse of the Soviet utopia. Thus, the narrative's exposure of the fraudulent saint also provides a venue for contemplating Ukraine's dystopian Soviet past.

One of Ukraine's most important prose-writers, Valerii Shevchuk (b. 1939), occupies a special place in Ukrainian literature because of his continuous engagement with the theme of selfhood.<sup>1</sup> In a variety of allegorical settings, he

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<sup>1</sup> This thematic direction in Shevchuk's work has been identified by a number of critics and was aptly termed by Marko Pavlyshyn as his creative urge for restitution of the sacred. See Marko Pavlyshyn, "Mythological, Religious, and Philosophical Topoi in the Prose of Valerii Shevchuk," *Slavic Review* 50.4 (1991). Also see: Marko Pavlyshyn, "Thaws, Literature and the Nationalities Discussion in Ukraine: The Prose of Valerii Shevchuk," in *Glasnost' in Context: On the Recurrence of Liberalizations in Central and East European Literatures and Cultures*, edited by Marko Pavlyshyn (New York: Berg, 1990); Anna Berehulak, "The Critical Aesthetic: Reappraisal of Ukrainian Literary History in the Works of Valerii Shevchuk," *Journal of the South Pacific Association for Commonwealth Literature and Language Studies* 33 (May 1992); Svitlana Kobets, "Discovering the Universe between the Feminine and Masculine: Valerii Shevchuk's Hunchback Zoia," *Canadian Slavonic Papers* 44.1 (March 2002). In Ukrainian see: Marko Pavlyshyn, *Kanon ta ikonostas: Ukrains'ka moderna literatura* (Kyiv: Chas,

deals with the Soviet legacy and traces paths for overcoming it. In his recent work, *Eye of the Abyss* (1996),<sup>2</sup> Shevchuk again places the quest for selfhood at the centre, making it the focal subject and a fulcrum for uncovering the narrative's other thematic layers. Furthermore, he establishes an inherent interconnection between the archetypal human quests for selfhood and utopia, endorsing them as a dystopian pursuit that allegorically reflects on the Soviet past. This pursuit is presented in the text as the main characters' search for selfhood in the setting of a medieval Christian utopia.

This utopia is portrayed as a segregated colony of Christian sectarians and bears uncanny similarity to Thomas More's classical prototype, inasmuch as it is also located on an island, has lofty foundational ideals, features a strict hierarchy, is characterized by a complete lack of freedom of its inhabitants and severely punishes those who attempt to escape.<sup>3</sup> Shevchuk's well-known penchant for contemplating post-Soviet reality in allegorical settings enables us to see this utopia as an allusion to its Soviet counterpart. Indeed, in the colony established by the acclaimed saint Mykyta of Pereiaslavl' (later exposed as a fraud), we discern a number of attributes of the Soviet model. These include a totalitarian ideology and dogmatism; crafty indoctrination strategies devised by the ruling elite; slavery of the duped subjects, and, finally, the rulers' penchant to assert their own righteousness and sainthood. These intimated pointers invite an interpretation of the text as a dystopia that bridges the realms of medieval Christian and Soviet utopianism. This article offers such an interpretation. It will

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1997); Anna Iosypivna Horniatko-Shumylovych, *Intelektualizm prozy Valeriia Shevchuka* (L'viv: L'vivs'kyi derzhavnyi universytet imeni Ivana Franka, 1999); Anna Iosypivna Horniatko-Shumylovych, *Borot'ba za "avtentychnu liudynu": Proza Valeriia Shevchuka* (L'viv: Kameniar, 1999); Tetiana Borysivna Zhovnovs'ka, *Onirychno-mifolohichniy dyskurs prozy Valeriia Shevchuka* (Odesa: Odes'kyi derzhavnyi universytet, 2000).

<sup>2</sup> Valerii Shevchuk, *Oko Prirvy* (Kyiv: Ukrains'kyi pys'mennyk, 1996). My translations of citations from this work are marked by "U" followed by the page number. Citations marked by "E" (followed by the page number) are from Valerii Shevchuk, "Eye of the Abyss," translated by Olha Rudakevych, *Ukrainian Literature: a Journal of Translations* 1 (2004).

<sup>3</sup> Utopia—including the religious, fictional and political/scholarly varieties—has always been conceptualized as a perfect society, a society of happiness and goodness. Paradise, the Promised Land, Champs-Élysées and Eldorado are among the religious and mythological utopian models, whereas Plato's *Republic* and More's *Utopia* belong to the first fictional pursuits of the extremely prolific idea of social utopia. For discussions of literary utopia refer to the following: Bronislaw Baczko, *Utopian Lights: The Evolution of the Idea of Social Progress*, tr. Judith L. Greenberg (New York: Paragon House, 1989); Paul G. Hashak, *Utopian/Dystopian Literature: A Bibliography of Literary Criticism* (Metuchen, N.J.: Scarecrow Press, 1994); Robert C. Elliott, *The Shape of Utopia: Studies in Literary Genre* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1970); Gary Saul Morson, *The Boundaries of Genre: Dostoevskii's Diary of a Writer and the Traditions of Literary Utopia* (Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 1981).

uncover in Shevchuk's work an intimated code for contemplating—through a medieval prism—issues urgent for contemporary Ukraine. The novel's implied subtext suggests a model in which the sect created by Simeon stands for the Soviet ruling elite, the exemplary saint Mykyta stands for a counterfeit ruler and the island's crippled population represents the Soviet people, while the defiant and inquisitive pilgrims stand for Soviet dissidents. Mykyta's island in its entirety therefore epitomizes the Soviet utopia and parodies it. Finally, the four pilgrims' quest for truth about St. Mykyta of Pereiaslav' adumbrates the dystopian quest of the post-Soviet individual for recovery of selfhood. In the novel this quest comprises several important dimensions—including the pursuit of spiritual wholeness, the cultivation of self-awareness, resistance to brainwashing and indoctrinated truths—all of which are crucial for its success. Furthermore, the pursuit of truth will be seen not only as a universal and atemporal quest but also as an integral part of the post-Soviet individual's quest for selfhood.

In the novel, the quest for selfhood is dramatized as a journey of four Christian pilgrims seeking assistance from an acclaimed pillar saint, Mykyta of Pereiaslav'. The narrator, the calligrapher and illuminator of the legendary *Gospel of Peresopnytsia*,<sup>4</sup> Mykhailo Vasyliovych,<sup>5</sup> sets out to seek a remedy for his apathy and loss of artistic inspiration, opting to overcome his spiritual and creative crisis by gaining self-knowledge. "Each of us has his own dark cloud ... And each of us must know and contend with his own dark cloud" (E 28), he says to his traveling companions, deacon Sozont and friar Pavlo, who also seek remedies for their deficiencies. The learned monk Sozont aspires to observe and document the life and miracles of Mykyta. This project comprises part of his penance, namely, compiling a new Menology by witnessing and documenting miracles of contemporary saints. Yet he also seeks a cure for his "intellectual arrogance," which is revealed through his constant speculations and doubts, which boil down to his lack of faith. "My sin lies in my attempts to verify verity, rather than trusting in faith" (E 25), he admits to his friends. The third companion, the epileptic monk Pavlo, seeks exorcism, remarking that a miraculous cure of his condition by saint Mykyta is his last hope (U 33). Like Mykhailo and Sozont, Pavlo also has an important intellectual reason for his pilgrimage. The narrator describes his ailment as an obsession with questions to which he cannot find answers (E 25). The fourth pilgrim, Monk Kuz'ma, sets out to find out the truth about St. Mykyta.

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<sup>4</sup> For a discussion of the historical and literary importance of this medieval Ukrainian manuscript (1556-61) see Ivan Vlasovs'kyi, *Narys istorii Ukrain's'koi Pravoslavnoi Tserkvy*, vol. 1 (Kyiv, 1998) 239-43.

<sup>5</sup> A monk of Peresopnytsia monastery, Mykhailo Vasyliovych, the son of Archpriest Sanots'kyi, was the author of the artwork that decorates *The Gospel of Peresopnytsia*.

At the onset of the pilgrimage the four companions are inspired by their hopes. But when they reach their destination, they find themselves in the hostile environment of Mykyta's camp, where they are confronted by the saint's grim teachings and an imminent threat to their lives. Their arrival marks the beginning of the dystopian denouement since their pilgrimage results not in the anticipated cures, but in brutal deaths at the hands of the alleged saint and his disciples. The only survivor of the ordeal, the narrator Mykhailo, conveys for posterity a philosophical tale of their pilgrimage, endowing Mykyta's anti-hagiography with a dystopian meaning: he closely scrutinizes Mykyta's personality and teachings and ultimately debunks his sanctity.

The four main characters' quest for selfhood is an ascetic<sup>6</sup> endeavour that brings to the fore the important ascetic dimension of the novel.<sup>7</sup> Indeed, all the central characters in the novel—including the four pilgrims-petitioners, their "saintly" host, and his disciples—are ascetics, the most ardent Christian seekers of selfhood.

With ascetics central to the narrative, asceticism becomes one of its foremost themes. The concept of asceticism has a broad range of forms and doctrines,<sup>8</sup> yet most commonly it is identified as a religious practice.<sup>9</sup> In this sense, its ideology can be roughly summarized as the personal quest of a devout

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<sup>6</sup> Ascetic practices and doctrines have been long recognized as a powerful means of pursuing selfhood. Michael Foucault recognizes this role of asceticism in his article, "Technologies of the Self," where he explores the phenomenology and practices of cultivation of selfhood by Christian ascetics. See Luther H. Martin, Nuck Gutman, Patrick H. Hutton, eds., *Technologies of the Self: a Seminar with Michael Foucault* (Amherst: The University of Massachusetts Press, 1988).

<sup>7</sup> Shevchuk reveals a clear predilection for ascetic types, which densely populate his works. Such characters as the monk Athanasii Pylypovych, the protagonist of the novella *To the Maw of the Dragon* [V pashchu drakona, 1993], the monk Khoma Usufiv, the main character of the short story *The Tree of Memory* [Derevo Pam'iati, 1995], Patriarch Heremia, from the short story *The Mission* [Misiia, 1995], and the protagonist of the short story *The Beginning of Terror* [Pochatok Zhakhy, 1995], the monk Mykhailo Vovchans'kyi, are just a few of them.

<sup>8</sup> These include, for example, Stoic and Cynic as well as Hindu and Christian doctrines and practices. For a discussion of different ascetic models, doctrines and texts see: Wincent L. Wimbush and Richard Valantasis, eds., *Asceticism* (New York-Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995). For the discussion of Christian asceticism see Elizabeth A. Clark, *Reading Renunciation: Asceticism and Scripture in Early Christianity* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999); Leif E. Vaage & Vincent L. Wimbush, eds., *Asceticism and the New Testament* (New York and London: Routledge, 1999).

<sup>9</sup> A number of scholars have commented on the universal importance of asceticism. Thus Geoffrey Galt Harpham posits that "In the tight sense, asceticism is a product of early Christian ethics and spirituality; in the loose sense it refers to any act of self-denial undertaken as a strategy of empowerment or gratification." See Geoffrey Galt Harpham, *The Ascetic Imperative in Culture and Criticism* (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1987) xiii.

individual, who, by rigorous self-discipline and continuous prayer uncovers and cultivates his/her higher self, opting to attain unity with the divine—i.e., enlightenment, nirvana, satori, logos, grace—in a word, the ultimate goal of spiritual self-fulfillment.<sup>10</sup> The vast majority of ascetics withdraw from society,<sup>11</sup> yet according to a prominent scholar, Kallistos Ware, the ascetic quest can hardly be viewed as an anti-social venture. Ware posits that the ascetic “... serves society by transforming himself through prayer and by virtue of his own transfiguration he also transfigures the world around him.”<sup>12</sup> This statement highlights that the ascetic quest for self-perfection has an underlying utopian idea, the idea of human perfectibility.

Indeed, the core of asceticism, the concept of human perfectibility is essential both for religious and political utopias and was ideologically endorsed as the Christian vision of the Kingdom of God and as the communist ideal of a man-made Paradise. Communist and Christian ideals significantly coincide in their goals of universal happiness as well as in their totalitarian means, since neither allows alternative positions. Christian and communist paradise is attainable for humans only in their amended—perfected—version, not in their natural state. These utopian visions showcase the Christian and communist understanding of reality as transient, providing a basis for their futuristic aspirations.

Despite the fact that the Soviet state regularly transgressed against the principles of Christian ethics, its structural elements reveal contiguity with the ascetic Christian ideal. Just like the early monastic communities, Soviet society was founded—at least in theory—on the idealistic principles of goodness, freedom, and equality, which were incessantly reiterated by the media,

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<sup>10</sup> In both these senses, asceticism and the ascetic imperative are among Shevchuk’s most prominent topics as his oeuvre engages both explicitly and implicitly religious, cultural and ethical dimensions of asceticism. See, for example, short stories and novellas in Shevchuk’s selections: *U cherevi apokaliptychnoho zviria* [In the Stomach of the Apocalyptic Beast, 1995], and *Bis ploti* [The Demon of Flesh, 1999]. Besides the works which contemplate asceticism as a religious development, Shevchuk’s narratives employ its universal (i.e., lay) dimension of self-discipline and resistance to temptation and evil in a stoic sense. Thus, the narrator in the short story *Snake-Woman* [Zhinka-zmiia]—albeit a lay person—champions abstinence, celibacy, and seclusion. Another example of secular asceticism can be found in the novella *Hunchback Zoia* [Horbunka Zoia], whose protagonist both attempts to withstand the pressures of society and to resist his attraction to the beautiful hunchback.

<sup>11</sup> This withdrawal can be collective (practiced by monks) or individual (practiced by the anchorites).

<sup>12</sup> Kallistos Ware, “The Way of Ascetics: Negative or Affirmative?” in *Asceticism*, edited by Vincent L. Wimbush and Richard Valantasis (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995) 8.

propagated by educational and other institutions, and documented in the state constitution. Ascetic principles of self-denial, refutation of family ties,<sup>13</sup> and a life of sacrifice for the sake of the communist future were invested with the highest ethical value and proclaimed the ideological pillars of Soviet society. However, the Soviet state inevitably distorted the initial utopian claim for equality by its claim to power, creating an oppressive totalitarian regime and proving yet again the incompatibility of utopia with the reality of life.<sup>14</sup> On the other hand, monastic communities also frequently failed to live up to their saintly ideal.<sup>15</sup> Shevchuk's novel illustrates one such case.

Shevchuk's markedly negative portrayal of a famous ascetic, Nikita the Stylite of Pereiaslav' (d. 1186), by no means amounts to a criticism or denunciation of the validity of the ascetic worldview. After all, in the novel he offers both positive and negative portrayals of asceticism. It should also be noted that controversial saints have always been an integral part of the Orthodox Christian tradition, where we find transvestites, holy fools, tax collectors, prostitutes, and saints who visited brothels.<sup>16</sup> At the same time, the genre of sacred parody, which thrived in the Middle Ages—and was tolerated by the

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<sup>13</sup> A commonplace ascetic refutation of family ties, including the famous examples of Alexis the Man of God and St. Simeon the Stylite, can be compared to the betrayal of parents by the Soviet cult figure Pavlik Morozov and to the purging of his own family by Joseph Stalin. For a discussion of ascetic topoi in Soviet literature see Marcia A. Morris, *Saints and Revolutionaries: The Ascetic Hero in Russian Literature* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1993).

<sup>14</sup> See the argument offered by Walter Benjamin: "...nothing historical can relate itself on its own account to anything Messianic. Therefore the Kingdom of God is not the *telos* of the historical dynamic; it cannot be set as a goal. From the standpoint of history it is not the goal, but the end. Therefore the order of the profane cannot be built up on the idea of the Divine Kingdom, and therefore theocracy has no political, but only a religious meaning." Walter Benjamin, "Theologico-Political Fragment," in *One-Way Street, and Other Writings*, translated by Edmund Jephcott and Kingsley Shorter (London and New York: Verso, 1979) 155-6.

<sup>15</sup> Examples of failed ascetics have been documented in a number of hagiographies, including those of Isidora the Fool of Egypt (d. 369) and Isaak of the Kyiv Cave Monastery (d. 1090). At times, vitae criticize individual ascetics; at other times they criticize the hostile environment and the profane mentality of monasteries and convents. Yet the majority of vitae give examples of perfect (or textually perfected) lives of canonized saints. See Kliuchevskii's argument that the objective of a hagiography is the creation of a Christian ideal, rather than a true reflection of history, in V. O. Kliuchevskii, *Drevnerusskie Zhytiia Sviatykh kak istoricheskii istochnik* (Moskva: "Nauka," 1988) 363.

<sup>16</sup> These saints belong to the category of secret sanctity, a specifically Orthodox Christian variety of saintliness. For a discussion see Sergei Ivanov, *Blazhennye pokhaby: Kul'turnaia istoriia iurodstva* (Moskva: Iazyki slavianskikh kul'tur, 2005).

Church—yields a wide variety of subgenres ranging from mock prayers, psalms, testaments and church services to jocular gospels and Lives of saints.<sup>17</sup>

Shevchuk's novel, however, is not an ironic stylization in the vein of *parodia sacra*, but rather a postmodern deconstruction. As such, it should be seen in line with post-Soviet campaigns of questioning and dismantling the sacred idols of the Soviet past. In post-Soviet Ukrainian literature this campaign unfolded within an ongoing discussion of Ukrainian identity and its post-Soviet redefinition. This preoccupation often manifested itself as derision of Ukrainian sacred icons (e.g., Bu-Ba-Bu's mocking of Cossacks) and as attempts to transcend the taboos set by classical Ukrainian and later Soviet literature (as in the works of Oksana Zabuzhko, Iurii Andrukhovych, Valerii Shevchuk).<sup>18</sup> Shevchuk's debunking of a canonized Orthodox Christian saint is also geared toward regaining a post-Soviet Ukrainian selfhood and therefore should be viewed within this postmodern literary context.

One of the most prominent postmodern features of Shevchuk's dystopian endeavour is his revisiting of the Middle Ages whose colourful scene serves as an atemporal setting for discussing questions of eternal and contemporary importance.<sup>19</sup> After all, the role of the Middle Ages as the arena for staging contemporary battles has long been established.<sup>20</sup> The major contributor to this discussion, the Italian writer and literary scholar Umberto Eco, posits that the Middle Ages continuously appeal to our imagination because they are the real cradle of our (i.e., European) civilization. He goes on to say that the origins of all present problems of the Western world can be traced to the Middle Ages (64). "Thus," he concludes, "looking at the Middle Ages means looking at our infancy, in the same way that a doctor, to understand our present state of health, asks us about our childhood, or in the same way that the psychoanalyst, to understand our present neuroses, makes a careful investigation of the primal scene" (65). The scholar outlines ten different approaches to, and uses of, the Middle Ages in contemporary literature (68-72), the first of which, "The Middle Ages as a pretext," describes in a nutshell the authorial intent in the pseudo-historical

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<sup>17</sup> See D. S. Likhachev, A. M. Panchenko, and N. V. Ponyrko, *Smekh v Drevnei Rusi* (Leningrad: Nauka, 1984) 8.

<sup>18</sup> See Michael Naydan, "Ukrainian Literary Identity Today: The Legacy of the Bu-Ba-Bu Generation after the Orange Revolution," *World Literature Today* (Sept.-Dec. 2005): 24-7.

<sup>19</sup> See Shevchuk's discussion of the poetics of his historical works in "Buty Myttsem, a ne ioho tinniu," *Vsesvit* 7 (1995): 174-7.

<sup>20</sup> See Umberto Eco's essay, "The Return of the Middle Ages," in *Travels in Hyper Reality, Essays*, by Umberto Eco, translated by William Weaver (San Diego, New York, London: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, Publishers, 1986).

novel *Eye of the Abyss*. Indeed, Shevchuk evokes the Ukrainian Middle Ages, staging in that period his urgent contemporary spiritual and moral battles.

The issues—Christian faith, the value of knowledge, power, ethics, selfhood and truth—have striking relevance for a post-totalitarian and post-colonial Ukraine. Rigid medieval truths, fanaticism, and an inhumane attitude towards the individual inevitably bring to mind recent Soviet totalitarian rule. After all, unrelieved censorship and propaganda, spiritual slavery and brainwashing, as well as oppression and terror, typify not only the Middle Ages but all tyrannical regimes. At the same time, the medieval setting is a perfect habitat for the spiritual and ideological battles of Christian ascetics.

Although the novel's main characters are ascetics, their understanding of the ascetic imperative differs dramatically. The four pilgrims belong to the Ukrainian Orthodox Church, adhering to the Christian tenets of humility, chastity and prayer, and none of them have any claims to extraordinary asceticism or sanctity. In contrast, Mykyta's asceticism is shown to be a cruel, arrogant and dubious endeavour. Emulating the ascetic exploit of Simeon the Stylite of Syria (d. 459),<sup>21</sup> Mykyta practices pillar standing, which later in history gained a rather negative reputation and was not a recommended practice within Christian asceticism.<sup>22</sup> Shevchuk aptly chooses this practice to emphasize the transgressive nature of its practitioner's asceticism. In the disconsolate glory of his rotting body, his self-inflicted wounds, pretentious self-discipline, and showy austerity, the voluntary martyr St. Mykyta is portrayed as an abomination, while his exploit is presented as a senseless, masochistic undertaking, a parody, rather than a spiritual feat.<sup>23</sup> Mykyta's is an unnatural asceticism, defined by Ware as an attempt to seek out "special forms of mortification that torment the body and gratuitously inflict pain upon it."<sup>24</sup> The scholar underscores the importance of differentiating between natural and unnatural asceticism,

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<sup>21</sup> For hagiographic texts of Simeon's life and exploits and for their scholarly discussion, see Robert Doran, trans., intro, *The Lives of Simeon Stylites* (Susan Ashbrook Harvey, forward) (Kalamazoo, Michigan: Cistercian Publications, 1992).

<sup>22</sup> For a discussion of the extreme nature of stylitism see Ieromonakh Aleksii (Kuznetsov), *Iurodstvo i stolpnichestvo: religiozno-psikhologicheskoe izsledovanie* (S-Peterburg: tipografiia V. D. Smirnova, 1913). Also see Ware, who cites pillar standing in the same line as self-castration and other macabre practices of self-inflicted torture, positing that "such actions surely display a curious disrespect to God as creator; for we are not to disfigure the gifts that God confers on us" (10). Ware emphasizes that the goal of the ascetic is not killing the body, but rather conquering its addictions and wrong predispositions and concludes that the "the aim of the ascetic... is not to suppress... passions but to reorient them" (12).

<sup>23</sup> For a discussion of elements of parody in the ascetic imitation of saints see the chapter "Ascetic Linguistics," in Geoffrey Galt Harpham, *The Ascetic Imperative in Culture and Criticism* (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1987) 13.

<sup>24</sup> Ware 9.



juxtaposing them as “divine and royal asceticism” and the “tyrannical and demonic.” Contrary to the unnatural, the natural asceticism “reduces material life to the utmost simplicity, restricting our physical needs to a minimum, but not maiming the body or otherwise deliberately causing it to suffer.”<sup>25</sup> Only this latter kind facilitates one’s quest for selfhood. It is by means of these two varieties of asceticism that Shevchuk defines his characters and juxtaposes their goals and pursuits. Furthermore, as the pilgrims make progress in their spiritual quest in the course of the narrative, they come to a realization that Mykyta’s asceticism is, to put it colloquially, a power trip.

Indeed, relying on the early Christian paradigm of a saint’s power, Mykyta derives authority from his extraordinary asceticism and from its customary interpretation as a sign of sanctity.<sup>26</sup> This paradigm of authority is mirrored in the Soviet model, especially in the tendency to sanctify and venerate communist leaders. Indeed, the alleged saintliness of the latter stemmed from their ascetic self-abnegation and unconditional devotion to the cause. We can recall here myths of Lenin and Stalin working around the clock and their renunciation of family ties. Furthermore, parallels between Christian and Soviet paradigms of sanctity embrace various spheres of human activity ranging from the realm of ethics (self-sacrifice) to claims of ultimate knowledge; from the veneration of relics (cf. Lenin’s Mausoleum) to an emphasis on ritual (cf. incessant Soviet celebrations and parades); from strict censorship and insistence on orthodoxy to the enforcement of canonical artistic and literary principles (for example, Socialist Realism and Christian hagiography).

At the same time Mykyta’s asceticism has discernible national markers that point to a Russian, rather than a Ukrainian provenance of Soviet utopianism. Shevchuk chooses St. Nikita of Pereiaslav' (d. 1186) as the questionable saint for emphasizing the imported (i.e., Russian) character of the Soviet utopia, perfectly adopting this saint to the Ukrainian setting: he has a Ukrainian name, Mykyta, and a Ukrainian biography. The city of his ascetic feat is readily

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<sup>25</sup> Ware 9.

<sup>26</sup> The ascetic’s astounding self-afflicted tortures have been traditionally seen as manifestations of Christian self-denial and were intended to inspire awe. These practices comprised an important part of the theatrical appeal of the early Christian ascetics, who gained for themselves the fame of holy men capable of overcoming matter and channelling divine grace on behalf of the eagerly waiting needy congregation. The ascetic’s horrific show manifested his power over himself and the material dimension, raising him above the profane world and legitimizing his sacred authority. In line with this model, Mykyta derives his power from his extraordinary asceticism which is perceived by his petitioners as saintly. For a discussion of this phenomenon see Peter Brown, *The Cult of the Saints: Its Rise and Function in Latin Christianity* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1984).

identifiable as the Ukrainian city of Pereiaslav(I').<sup>27</sup> Yet the canonized saint, Nikita of Pereiaslav', belongs historically to quite a different cultural tradition.<sup>28</sup> He comes from Muscovite lands and the city of his ascetic life and fame is the ancient Russian city Pereiaslav'-Zalesskii which, like Moscow, was founded by Prince Iurii Dolgorukii. The importance of Nikita's cult in Russian history and culture as well as his veneration by a number of Russian state figures, most notably Ivan the Terrible, makes this unusual saint quintessentially Russian.<sup>29</sup> Within the allegorical reading of the novel's utopian subtext, St. Nikita's Russian origin is symbolic of the alien provenance of the Soviet utopia. Yet Shevchuk's subversion of Mykyta's authenticity—and therefore sanctity—is not made obvious in the narrative itself: Mykyta's identity as a saint is challenged only when the pilgrims arrive on the island in pursuit of miracles.

Hagiographic stories about miraculous healings occupy an important place in the Lives of Christian saints, demonstrating their divine grace and serving as the foundation for their post-mortem canonization by the Church. These stories are usually placed at the end of the hagiographic narrative. Yet in Shevchuk's *Eye of the Abyss* stories about miracles are tightly intertwined with other events. Significantly, all the accounts about Mykyta's remarkable deeds and miracles are taken from the Life of Simeon the Stylite, bringing to the fore the pressing question about Mykyta's legitimacy as a saint. Quite in line with the Christian

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<sup>27</sup> The city is spelled Pereiaslav in Ukrainian and Pereiaslav' in Russian. It is now known as Pereiaslav-Khmel'nyts'kyi, located in Kyiv region on the river Trubezh. It was first mentioned in the treaty with Byzantium of 907. In the second half of the sixteenth century it was an important centre of the Ukrainian Cossack movement. In the seventeenth century it became the centre of Ukraine's struggle for independence from Poland. There in 1654 Bohdan Khmel'nyts'kyi signed his famous treaty with Russia.

<sup>28</sup> A contemporary of Iurii Dolgorukii, St. Nikita of Pereiaslav' died an unusual violent death in 1186. According to a local legend, which was later expanded into Nikita's official hagiography, he was robbed and killed by two brigands who thought that his chains were made of gold. Only later, when the thieves reached the banks of the Volga, did they see that the heavy chains were made of iron and not gold. The wretched robbers threw their loot into the river, yet the chains did not sink, but miraculously floated on the surface. This fantastic episode is among the very few original miracles found in Nikita's life. Basically, all miracles and a number of events from his life can be traced to the lives of his hagiographic model, the Syrian pillar saint Simeon and, to a lesser extent, to the life of his namesake, a fourth century Slavic martyr St. Nicetas (d. 372), after whom the monastery of St. Nikita's ascetic exploit was named.

<sup>29</sup> For a discussion of different versions and copies of St. Nikita's life, its place within hagiographical literature of the sixteenth century and about the saint's canonization see V. O. Kliuchevskii, *Drevnerusskie Zhytiia Sviatykh kak istoricheskii istochnik* 43-50. The discussion of the emergence of St. Nikita's cult and its place in Russian history can be found in Gail Lenhoff, "The Cult of Saint Nikita the Stylite in Pereiaslav' among the Muscovite Elite," in *Fonctions sociales et politiques du culte des saints dans les societies de rite grec et latin au Moyen Age et a l'epoque moderne. Approche comparative* (Warsaw: LARHCOR, 1999) 331-46.

tradition, Mykyta's miracle-working ability becomes an infallible benchmark for the authentication of his sanctity, or, more precisely, for exposing his sham.

The very first "miracles" that pilgrims witness on the island are murders. The treacherous murder of Kuz'ma (a punishment for his presumable lack of faith in Mykyta's sanctity) and the ruthless slaying of a penitent bandit (who ostensibly asked for such "help") shock the pilgrims. Soon they realize that the purported miracles are nothing but hoaxes and that they are caught in the "saint's" skillfully arranged trap. Their suspicion is corroborated by the dwarf Musii, who mockingly comments on Mykyta's miracle-working ability:

[Sozont] "Have you been here for a long time?"

"Yes, for lo-o-ong! I like it here. I don't have to beg. They feed me just like that! A good life! You guys don't want to beg either, do you?"

"No, we came here to heal ourselves," said Pavlo.

"Then you wasted your trip. Look how many of us are here, but saint Mykyta hasn't cured a single one! He says that he will cure us when we die, ha-ha!"

"Did he say it himself?" Sozont asked.

"No, Mykyta sits in his hut. The ones who are with him did."

"How often do people come here?"

"Not that often. It's hard to get here! Yet the ones who come here don't always go back. That's it!"

"What happens to them?" Sozont asked.

"O-o, saint Mykyta helps them!"

"How?" Pavlo asked.

"Grabs them by the tail and in the bag they go!" The dwarf grabbed himself by the neck—Rat-a-tat—and one's gone, ha-ha! And then to the Eye—plonk and plop!" and he started gurgling as if he was rinsing his throat.

"You mean he drowns and kills them?" The surprised Pavlo asked.

"No, he does not kill them... He helps them... That's it! (U 99)

The pilgrims see on the island crowds of crippled individuals whose pleas for miraculous healing were denied. The alleged saint cured not a single one! Nonetheless these hapless petitioners remain on the island, creating its gullible, inert and oppressed community. The destitute condition of this community strongly recalls that of the Soviet population. Furthermore, both communities eagerly participate in, and whole-heartedly support, their leaders' mythmaking. Just like the impoverished Soviet people eagerly promoted the myth of the

prosperity of their state, Mykyta's crippled congregation supports the myth of his miracle working.

Having learned about Mykyta's inability to perform miracles, the pilgrims come to recognize the grotesque and preposterous nature of his ascetic pursuit and see him as a brazen murderer, a pretender, and a pride-stricken heretic. Ultimately, Mykyta turns out to be a horrendous creation and a puppet of the sect's *de facto* ruler, Simeon, who masterminds the "saint's" Life and orchestrates its documentation in the form of a strictly censored *vita* based on the hagiography of the famous Syrian stylite, whose name, Simeon, the sect's leader assumes. The new Simeon (formerly Stepan) satisfies his thirst for power by establishing a new utopia and subjugating to his authority a miracle-seeking community of cripples.

As the pilgrims are confronted with the pressing need of discovering the truth about Mykyta, their search for selfhood becomes inseparable from the search for truth. To be sure, the possibility of their cure depends on the authenticity of Mykyta as a miracle-worker, hence the importance of truth about his personality, teachings and deeds. The mortal danger accompanying this quest underscores its vital importance.

The theme of truth develops in the narrative principally as the pilgrims' pursuit of textual truth, which is juxtaposed to fabrication or "parable-telling" (*baikotvorennia*). The main concern is the question of authenticity and the epistemological value of hagiographic texts—first and foremost, of Mykyta's life. But the latter is not the exclusive subject of discussion because the narrative abounds in numerous imbedded hagiographical stories. Indeed, each of the four pilgrims creates for himself a story based on the *vita* of his chosen hagiographical character and attempts to convince his audience of the tale's authenticity. The narrator is the only exception, as his character is based on a historical figure. Shevchuk debunks these hagiographic claims to truth, allowing the learned monks to unmistakably identify the literary sources of each other's tales and to expose each other's myth-making strategies. Yet the characters' hagiographic pursuits are not condemned. They are identified as creative ventures (parable-telling)—and legitimized as such. The narrator, who espouses an aesthetic vantage point, takes this argument even further, placing creativity at the core of humanness:

What would become of man if he would say "no" to parables? Would he be able to elevate himself above the animal? Would he [be able to] know God, when even his God is very often just one of his parables? Making parables is nothing short of creativity. And everything that comes into existence has [the right] to live and to sustain its life... (U 119)

The question of parable telling becomes one of the major themes of the novel; it is connected to the question of creativity and art, and is further elaborated into motifs about freedom of expression and censorship. Within this discussion the strictly censored and basically fraudulent *vita* of Mykyta can be

seen as a work of Socialist Realism, which is exposed on account of its falsehood, its role as propaganda and as a major agent in the implementation of the sect's utopian program. Furthermore, the diverse interpretations of Mykyta's teachings and asceticism amount to several contrasting claims to truth, selfhood and views of humanity.

The first claim comes from the sect's secret leader, Simeon/Stepan, who masterminds Mykyta's scam and advances an ideology reminiscent of the Soviet one. Simeon creates a self-contained totalitarian society, compelling the crippled congregation to accept unconditionally the sect's leadership and to worship unquestionably their custom-made idol, Mykyta the Stylite. Simeon claims to uphold high Christian ideals, yet in order to assure his sect's power, he skilfully manipulates the Holy Writ, justifying transgressions against essential Christian commandments. In order to attain his goals, he—not unlike Soviet rulers—resorts to unscrupulous means, enforcing terror and repeatedly resorting to murder. Through his mouthpiece Mykyta, Simeon proclaims death to be the most important principle of the Christian worldview. Given that illness puts the afflicted individual in close proximity to death, Simeon posits that it draws him closer to God. This eschatological argument is the core of Mykyta's (or rather Simeon's) teaching; it proclaims *ars moriendi* (the art of dying well) the primary Christian objective and experience.

On the one hand, this claim does not contradict the Christian worldview, which sees death as the doorway to eternal life. On the other hand, it is essential for discerning the heretical nature of the sect. For like other heretical apocalyptic sects—Gnostics, Syrian Monophysites, Bogomils and flagellants (*khlysts*)—Simeon's sect categorically denies the validity of personal love, family, creativity, joy, and beauty (U 108). His group convinces the congregation to live in unrelieved gloom and slavery, under its misanthropic religious regime.<sup>30</sup> Mykyta's chilling exhortation to love death (U 125) is both a parody of Christian *memento mori* and a call for the submission and spiritual slavery of the congregation. As such it goes against the fundamental Christian aspiration to seek freedom through truth (cf. "You will know the truth, and the truth will make you free," John 8:32).<sup>31</sup> At the same time it parodies the very

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<sup>30</sup> For a discussion of apocalyptic sects and their ideological premises see the chapter "Apocalyptic," in *Khlyst: sekty, literatura i revoliutsiia*, by Alexandr Etkind (Moskva: Kafedra slavistiki Universiteta Khel'sinki: Novoe literaturnoe obozrenie, 1998). For a discussion of Gnosticism see Bentley Layton, trans., introd., *The Gnostic Scriptures* (New York: Doubleday, 1995).

<sup>31</sup> Notwithstanding the continuous theological efforts of Christian authorities, who throughout history strove to canonize particular approaches to Christian scriptures and teachings, these texts show a remarkable openness to interpretation. Numerous denominations of Christianity, including heretical movements and sects (note that the Greek meaning of the word "heresy" is choice), produced an extraordinary number of

nature of utopia, which by definition stands for an ideal, happy life and therefore should proceed from *ars vivendi*—not *ars moriendi*.

The sect's emphasis on death brings to mind the disrespect for human life in the Soviet Union, which not only eradicated millions of its own citizens, but also ignored the actual pathetic lives of Soviet people in favour of utopian dreams about a distant communist Paradise. On the one hand, this led to constant shortages, poverty and lack of freedom; on the other hand, it resulted in apathy, lack of motivation and bad work habits. The Soviet reality is mirrored in the miserable existence of Mykyta's crippled congregation, whose inability to discern the truth about their situation figures as their most fundamental failing, providing a stark contrast to the truth-seeking pilgrims. It is Simeon's apocalyptic denial of the validity of life, creativity, and humaneness that is methodically questioned throughout the novel, building momentum for the narrator's epiphany.

The viewpoint of the pilgrim Sozont at first seems to be in juxtaposition to that of Simeon. However, the narrator discerns striking similarities in their positions. Both Sozont and Simeon are intellectuals and theoreticians—and both venture to hold their own opinions about the Christian creed. But most importantly, both are intolerant. Simeon's intolerance translates into tyrannical censorship, ruthless suppression and murders of his adversaries; Sozont's intolerance is revealed in his un-Christian judgmental attitude and eagerness to punish culprits.

The discussion of judgment and retribution—a significant issue in the post-Soviet debate—is presented in the novel within the framework of Christian ethics, becoming a benchmark of humaneness, i.e., of high selfhood.<sup>32</sup> By granting Simeon's sect his understanding and sympathy, the narrator honourably passes the test of Christian compassion, suggesting by his position a new way of seeking selfhood in the post-totalitarian era. His companion Sozont, on the other hand, fails this test as a Christian, exhibiting intolerance and a lack of empathy. Mykhailo understands that Sozont's position would not offer a remedy for the actions of Simeon's sect: it would result in more blood—and ultimately in another totalitarian solution:

Deacon Sozont ... did not want to sympathize with these people and wasn't concerned with their salvation. He was carried away by the hunt, pursuing them with puffed up nostrils. He was happy that he figured out and exposed their hoax, and

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idiosyncratic readings of canonical and non-canonical texts, providing a notable diversity and pointing to the lack of consensus within this creed. This aspect of Christian faith is discussed by the novel's character Sozont when Pavlo asks him whether Mykyta's teachings lie within Christian dogma (U 136).

<sup>32</sup> See, for example, the discussions of repentance and retribution offered in Tengiz Abuladze's film *Repentance* (1987) (note the Medieval imagery especially!) and in Oksana Zabuzhko's novel, *Field Research in Ukrainian Sex* (1996).

was ready to stab his victim with an imaginary knife or spear. Yet while uncovering their evil-doings, he himself adhered to evil—the Eye of the Abyss<sup>33</sup>—thereby dooming himself [to perdition]. He was convinced that his own understanding of truth was the ultimate one, thus transgressing against the limits set up for humans. And this [arrogance of his] frightened and alarmed me. (U 118)

Even though both Simeon and Sozont are representatives of Orthodox Christianity, their views exhibit striking differences, which function to illustrate the cultural divergence between Christian East and West. The latter also translates into a differentiation between Russia and Ukraine. Indeed, Sozont's spirituality, which is representative of Ukraine, reveals a strong admixture of Western values. Educated in the West, he is a proponent of Western views, adhering to humanism, intellectual pursuit, and a moderate asceticism. On the other hand, the sombre teachings of Simeon (presented as Mykyta's) represent Russian Orthodoxy and betray misanthropy, tyranny, self-denigration, and extreme asceticism.<sup>34</sup> In light of this juxtaposition, the novel views the divergence between the folly of ignorance and the wisdom of self-awareness as a fundamental disparity between the Western adherence to intellect and Russian predilection for simplemindedness, which is epitomized by Russia's unique bias for holy fools.<sup>35</sup>

In the novel, meekness and simplemindedness are presented as dubious virtues. Shevchuk's revealing portrayal of the thoughtless, inert and apathetic cripples sharply poses the question of their own responsibility for the unrelieved gloom of their existence. Their ignorance and lack of self-awareness are presented to a large degree as a consequence of their spiritual laziness, a reluctance to think or act on their own. Their debilitating condition reflects the spiritual bankruptcy of the Soviet people, testifying to the fact that just like the novel's thoughtless cripples, they too provided a perfect foundation for their

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<sup>33</sup> I discuss the significance of the Eye of the Abyss below.

<sup>34</sup> The interpretation of Russian Orthodox spirituality and culture as misanthropic and masochistic was proposed in Daniel Rancour-Laferrriere, *The Slave Soul of Russia: Moral Masochism and the Cult of Suffering* (New York: New York University Press, 1995).

<sup>35</sup> For a discussions of this issue see, for example, George Fedotov, *Sviatye Drevnei Rusi, 10-17 st.* (New York: Izdanie russkogo pravoslavnogo Bogoslovskogo Fonda, 1959) 191; Ieromanakh Ioann (Kologrivoff), *Ocherki po Istorii Russkoi Sviatosii* [Essays on the History of Russian Sanctity] (Brussels: "Zhizn' s Bogom," 1961) 243; Ewa M. Thompson, *Understanding Russia: The Holy Fool in Russian Culture* (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1987); Jostein Børtnes, *Visions of Glory: Studies in Early Russian Hagiography* (Oslo: Solum Forlag A/S & New Jersey: Humanities Press International, 1988); Ju. M. Lotman and B. A. Uspenskii, "New Aspects in the Study of Early Russian Culture," translated by N. F. C. Owen, in *The Semiotics of Russian Culture*, by Ju. M. Lotman, B. A. Uspenskii (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan, 1984).

self-serving, ruthless rulers. After all, in both cases, the enslaved masses were not just an easy prey but eager supporters of their oppressors.

The third claim to truth is offered by the dwarf Musii, who, far from being an extraordinary personality, nevertheless stands out among the submissive cripples as the only one who dares to go against the sect's "ascetic" rules. His life-affirming and markedly anti-ascetic argument in favour of following rather than suppressing one's nature is presented as a trivial, albeit deadly, "love affair." Unable to produce proof that his mate is his lawful wife, the hapless dwarf is charged with fornication and sent to his death at the sect's own Eye of the Abyss—an area in the surrounding island swamp, which presumably differentiates between sinners and righteous individuals, mercilessly swallowing the former.

Introduced in the novel's title, the enigmatic Eye of the Abyss is the immediate incentive for the narrator's pilgrimage, figuring prominently throughout the narrative and challenging the reader to decipher its multiple meanings. The narrator describes it as an ineffable entity, saying that man cannot perceive its real meaning (U 101), yet his own attempts at grasping the Eye of the Abyss continue throughout the novel. As he contemplates its different aspects (for example, as the ultimate measure and meaning of human life), it appears that the Eye of the Abyss represents facets of the protagonists' spiritual quest. Foremost, it is the *memento mori* of religious contemplation, an omniscient Eye overseeing the hero's quest for selfhood and truth. It is representative of one's spiritual imbalance and of one's yearning for spiritual wholeness, of God, and of one's quest for God, of ascetic endeavours, truth, and death, to mention just the most important of its meanings. The many connotations of this multidimensional image reveal themselves gradually, yet its primary meaning as death is paramount: "...it is, finally, like Death—that link between life and eternity..." (E 2), concludes the narrator. If in the beginning of the novel the Eye of the Abyss sends the narrator on his quest of self-fulfillment, later it functions as a vehicle of murder by the sectarians. The sectarians' Eye of the Abyss swallows Kuz'ma, Musii and Sozont, leaving the survivors horrified and prompting an allegorical reading of their deaths.

Whereas the deaths of monk Kuz'ma, the pilgrim Pavlo and the penitent brigand allegorically refer to Stalin's purges and the oppression of truth-seeking Soviet dissidents, the savage punishment of the ill-fated Musii brings to mind the show trials of the Great Terror. Musii indeed is charged on false pretences; his execution is orchestrated as a spectacle designed to prove the rightfulness of the rulers, strengthen their position, while also intimidating the congregation and coercing their obedience.

Even after Musii is ruthlessly silenced, the case in favour of natural human happiness continues to be made throughout the novel. It becomes a powerful counter-argument to the sect's misanthropy, negation of life and blindness to the world's beauty. It appears as a debate about original sin, challenging the



pilgrims with the dilemma of Adam and Eve's guilt and suggesting yet again human incompatibility with utopian bliss. This position is exemplified by the harmonious singing of the priest Ivan's happy family, and can also be seen in Martha's yearning for Simeon's love. The conclusion to this discussion comes at the end of the book when Mykyta's blind disciple, Theodorite, recognizes the equal validity of the ascetic utopian quest for self-perfection and the counter-ascetic quest for natural human happiness. This claim resounds in Mykhailo's vision-dream, in which he returns to the sect's island and finds out that Simeon fled fearing retribution, that Martha and the other disciples followed him, that Mykyta died shortly afterwards, and that, following these events, the crippled congregation abandoned the island. Only Theodorite stayed behind hoping that his beloved Martha would return to the island and that they would live happily ever after. In case she failed to return, Theodorite planned to resume Mykyta's exploit of mortifying his flesh on the pillar!

The fourth worldview manifests itself as the narrator's epiphany. Mykhailo, as he is called, is the only character that in the end recovers his creative drive, gains self-awareness and, most significantly, becomes the carrier of a powerful anti-utopian argument. His new dystopian worldview is expressed as several insights. First, Mykhailo offers a potent argument against absolutizing any claims to truth and consequently against intolerance, totalitarianism, slavery and idolatry. Secondly, he argues in favour of a free choice of creed, and, most importantly, underscores that one's selection of religion (i.e., worldview) is immaterial in attaining the high ideal of goodness (U 119). And thirdly, he introduces into the narrative a tone of tolerance and openness: instead of blaming the sectarians for their transgressions, he treats them with understanding and compassion, comprehending their offences and showing no inclination to punish them:

Yes, they are creating a parable of life, which, as any parable, is not entirely true. Yet, as they do so, the parable itself starts creating them. Thus, having created the parable of life, they started living in accordance to it; in other words, they lost control over their lives, whereas their parable gained it. They attempted to go beyond the limits of human nature. They aspired to elevate themselves to the unattainable, fantastic level, forgetting that man cannot jump over his own head. As a result, they fell into a trap, which they had set up themselves. They fell into the hole, which they had dug themselves. They turned into Pharisees, who say one thing and do another. And this became their curse because they know but too well that they oppose God's will and contradict human nature [which was designed by God]. This means that God, to whom they dedicated themselves, won't have mercy on them, but will throw them into the Eye of the Abyss. They became creators of their own hell. They tried to escape the Eye of the Abyss, which is this world, yet created another Eye of the Abyss and started worshiping it as a pagan idol, zealously protecting their idol like a pack of guard dogs (U 118).

Thus the narrator arrives at a postmodern realization that texts influence not only other texts, but also the reality of life, and this realization provides the key to his dystopian vision. This perspective not only explains the tragedy of Simeon's sect, but also provides commentary on the failure of Soviet utopianism. Mykhailo sees the sectarians' predicament in the discrepancy between their high goal and its abject realization, remarking that it is yet another failed attempt on the part of humanity to live up to its utopian dream. In the conclusion Mykhailo sees Simeon and his sect as confused fellow-human beings, who were trapped by their own utopian dreams and—unlike the retribution-seeking Sozont—posits that the sectarians deserve empathy and concern, rather than un-Christian judgment and punishment.

Countering the negative stance of Simeon's sect and the lifeless intellectualism of his companion Sozont, Shevchuk's narrator-protagonist carries out his ascetic quest for self-knowledge and self-fulfillment. His newly discovered truth takes him beyond the passive expectation of miracles, spiritual dependence on canonized truths, and allows him to comprehend—and therefore accept—God's world (U 118): this sets him free from the haunting doom of the Eye of the Abyss. As the latter loses its grip, God's world ceases being a baffling place, dominated by suffering and death. Mykhailo expresses his epiphany as an acceptance of God's will and His world and as readiness to respect its enigmas without fear:

We would not understand the day if it were not for the night and the other way around. Everything [in this world] is interconnected, creating an astonishing symbiotic union, where things and phenomena highlight and elucidate one another. This is the truth, not the abyss, yet the human mind is incapable of seeing its bottom. Its bottom is God's enigma and it is unknowable (U 192).

Mykhailo's embrace of God's world is interconnected with his realization that there is no need for a man-made utopia. He comprehends that a person needs to gain his own understanding of the enigma of God's creation rather than defy God's plan by utopian constructs. This realization facilitates his ability to counter any intolerance and, most importantly, to recognize the legitimacy of all religious creeds. Furthermore, he understands that openness and tolerance are instrumental in the individual's quest for self and God, which is not confined to Christian doctrine:

I thought that faiths are not divided into genuine and false ones, and that ritual—namely, the rules of adhering to any particular faith—by no means authenticate them. Eastern or Western, those found among sects—such as, for example, this sect of Semionides—or among Muslims, or any other creed—all faiths are true. It is faith that matters, because faith is true, while the lack of faith is false. The only thing that matters is the mystery that is or is not in one's soul. ... I knew that they [these thoughts] were not evil, because they were based on tolerance. Evil, on the other hand, begets intolerance (U 119).

Thus, the protagonist's quest for self-realization and truth is epitomized in his self-aware, renewed self and dystopian vision. Independent thinking, open-mindedness and tolerance are the key human values that make the narrator's quest for selfhood successful, rendering him immune to pride-stricken leaders, arrogant teachers and false saints. Resistance (a crucial ascetic faculty and virtue!) to imposing and enslaving conventions and dogmas is proposed as the vital agent for one's spiritual self-fulfillment. Initially, utopia did succeed in luring the narrator but in the end it was rendered powerless by his enlightened self and was unable either to dupe or seduce him. And it is the restored, invigorated self of Shevchuk's protagonist that enables him to pass through the impenetrable swamps surrounding Mykyta's island and to leave the utopia behind.

The happy ending of a regained and enlightened self, however, remains open. Will the protagonist continue moving forward on his path? Will he be able to achieve high selfhood? These are questions without answers. His lot is that of every seeker after the truth, whose quest is always in progress. Therefore the conclusion implies that only an unflagging self-awareness (the ultimate goal of the ascetic) can enable individuals to discern and successfully conquer illusion, which in turn will take them beyond enslaving utopian dreams—to the truth of self-fulfillment.