

# APOSTLE OF IMMORTALITY

Школьнику  
проф. Лыткаму,  
в память и благодарность  
перекладу з  
3 томів "Смислів".

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# Oles Berdnyk

## APOSTLE OF IMMORTALITY

Ukrainian Science Fiction

Translated from the Ukrainian  
by  
Yuri Tkach



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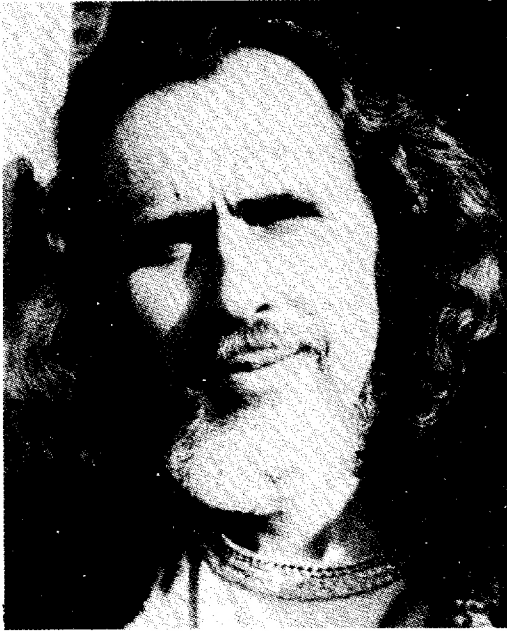
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## CONTENTS

Oles Berdnyk's Science Fiction <i>by Walter Smyrniw</i> .....	7
A Journey to the Antiworld .....	13
The Alien Secret .....	51
Two Abysses .....	73
The Constellation of Green Fish .....	85
A Chorus of Elements .....	99
The Apostle of Immortality .....	111

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## OLES BERDNYK'S SCIENCE FICTION



Oles Berdnyk

“Is there such a thing as Ukrainian science fiction?” This question has been put to me frequently during the past few years.

“Of course,” I would reply and then amaze the listeners further by telling them that at present science fiction is by far the most widely read literature in Ukraine.

This comes as a complete surprise to both Western readers of science fiction and literary scholars, because no major Ukrainian science fiction work has been translated into English and the history of Ukrainian science fiction is virtually unknown in the West.

Since its emergence in the 1920s, Ukrainian science fiction continually grew in popularity until it became the most popular literary genre during the 1960s and 1970s. To some extent this vogue emanated from new developments in space technology and the launching of the first earth satellite in the previous decade. But, no less significant a factor was the expansion of the thematic range of Ukrainian science fiction, which began in the late 1950s. At this time many authors made their debut in Ukrainian science fiction and among them Oles Berdnyk soon became the leading figure. He had proven himself not only as a prolific author, a writer endowed with an unusual imagination, but also a bold thinker who was not afraid to dwell on new concepts and introduce them into his fiction.

Unorthodox and provocative, Berdnyk's science fiction was highly acclaimed by readers, but it aroused the ire of political authorities. As a result, Berdnyk was harassed and persecuted by KGB agents who often detained him, seizing and even destroying his manuscripts. Thereafter the Soviet regime resorted to harsher punishment and, consequently, in May 1973 Oles Berdnyk was expelled from the Ukrainian Writers Union “for his antisocial acts and deviations from the principles and tasks” prescribed for Soviet writers.



After the expulsion Berdnyk no longer devoted himself solely to science fiction, but became active in the Ukrainian dissident movement, eventually becoming a leading figure in the Helsinki Group which monitored and protested against violations of human rights in Soviet Ukraine. At present much more information is available about Berdnyk's persecution and punishment by the Soviet government than about the evolution of his literary career. Indeed, only a few details of his biography are known at this time.

Oles Berdnyk was born in 1927. From 1943 to 1945 he served in the Soviet army and fought on the German front. After the war Berdnyk studied at the Ivan Franko Drama Theatre in Kiev and was then employed as an actor, later working in the offices of several newspapers. His first works appeared in the periodical press in 1947. For unexplained reasons, Berdnyk was arrested in 1949 and sentenced to seven years in various concentration camps; in all, Berdnyk spent from 1949 to 1955 in exile in the Far North and Kazakhstan. Only in 1956 was he allowed to return to Ukraine and able to devote himself to literature. The following year Berdnyk published his first collection of science fiction stories, entitled *Poza chasom i prostorom* (Beyond Space and Time). Thereafter he managed to publish a total of 17 volumes containing science fiction works, as well as a large number of short stories. After his expulsion from the Writers Union Berdnyk was systematically discredited and destroyed as a writer. Not only was he forced to make a living by manual labor, but his books were banned and removed from all libraries and bookstores. From 1976 Berdnyk was under continual police surveillance, experienced frequent searches and confiscation of his books and papers. In March 1979 he was arrested for his involvement with the Helsinki Group, and in December of that year Berdnyk was sentenced to six years exile in concentration camps. Nothing at all is known at present about Berdnyk's life or his place of exile.\*

The essays and letters by Berdnyk that were published in the West during the past decade suggest that he wrote in a solemn and didactic manner. However, not all of Berdnyk's writings are serious and profound. He composed many lighthearted stories

\* In May 1984 Oles Berdnyk was pardoned by the Presidium of the Supreme Council of the Ukr.SS.R. A declaration was published on 17 May 1984 in *Literaturna Ukrayina* in which he repented his involvement in the Helsinki Group (Transl.).

and adventure tales which contain enough references to science and technology to be regarded as science fiction. But as Berdnyk developed and matured as a writer, he began to dwell on serious notions, particularly on the problems pertaining to the evolution of scientific knowledge and the extent to which man's own nature would change due to advancements in science and the introduction of engineering techniques in biology and psychology.

Berdnyk's first major novel, *Shliakhy tytaniv* (Paths of the Titans), 1959, contains an extensive and laudatory depiction of scientific and technological progress. Such notions as matter-antimatter propulsion systems for starships, various antivirality devices, mass production of indestructible war machines able to annihilate entire galaxies and be controlled by one scientist – these and other notions would certainly please the science fiction buffs fond of complex technology. From the developments in the novel it is evident that overall Berdnyk endorses the notion of scientific and technical progress, with some reservations, for he asserts that advancements in computer technology must not evolve to the point that all thinking is carried out by machines, inasmuch as this would ultimately make them electronic dictators over all living beings. Berdnyk also doubts that science would enable mankind to overcome such biological limitations of living creatures as their continual dependence on food sources, eventual aging and death.

In his next novel, *Strila chasu*, (Arrow of Time) 1960, Berdnyk explores further man's biological limitations in the context of societies with highly-advanced science. He tries to show that in spite of many technological and scientific advancements which will make it possible to travel through both space and time, man will not be able to control many phenomena in space and, therefore, will not become an omnipotent and omniscient being.

In his subsequent major work, *Dity bezmezhhzia*, (Children of Infinity) 1964, Berdnyk subordinates further the notion of scientific and technological progress and places all emphasis on the development of man's psychological potentials. He endeavours to outline the "enormous" strength of man's "psychic energy" and declares that as soon as "mankind is able to gain complete control of this flow of energy, it will become almighty."

Berdnyk's last novel *Zorianyi korsar*, (Star Pirate) 1971, is certainly his most accomplished and cumulative work. Here Berdnyk expresses his utter scepticism about the contribution of

the natural sciences to man's evolutionary developments. While he de-emphasizes the significance of conventional science, Berdnyk acclaims the manifestation of "psychic energy" which enables humanoids to direct and control their own evolutionary processes to such an extent that their will-power alone enables them to alter their own nature to the point that they are able to travel through space and time by their own volition, to acquire unlimited knowledge and to become immortal. In short, by utilizing their "psychic energy" these creatures can transform themselves into god-like beings. At this point both the author and the narrator of the novel seem to proclaim the imminence of immortality and godhood as the ultimate stage in the evolution of living beings.

In the realm of science fiction the theme of man's evolution leading to immortality and godhood is by no means unique. In fact Western science-fiction writers have resorted to it frequently, and it recurs in the works of both minor writers and such eminent science fiction authors as Arthur C. Clarke, Isaac Asimov and Frank Herbert, to mention but a few. During the past few decades the very appearance of such works was received as a godsend both by publishers and assiduous readers of science fiction in the West.

But quite the contrary state of affairs prevails in Soviet science fiction. Apart from Oles Berdnyk, no other science fiction author has dared to portray man's evolution into an immortal and god-like being. This notion is indeed incompatible with the official Soviet ideology based on dialectical materialism. Consequently, the Soviet political authorities do not tolerate any deviations from it, not even in the realm of fantasy. And obviously this was the main reason for the persecution of Berdnyk, which began after the publication of *Star Pirate* in 1971.

The main themes of Berdnyk's science fiction are developed fully in his major novels. But many of them reverberate also in his short stories. Among them are such themes as man's quest for immortality, contacts with alien life forms from distant regions of space, man's extraordinary journeys through inner and outer space, dreams and accomplishments of bold individuals who dare to deviate from the prevailing patterns in life and perception of reality, and accounts of dissident scientists who challenge or reject the established scientific precepts and through their radical approaches achieve quite extraordinary results.

It is gratifying that the present volume of Berdnyk's writings – the first English translation of his works – contains a selection of

stories which illustrate many of the above-mentioned notions, and as such these stories are a representative sample of the entertaining and thought-provoking traits of Oles Berdnyk's science fiction.

Walter Smyrniw  
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1983