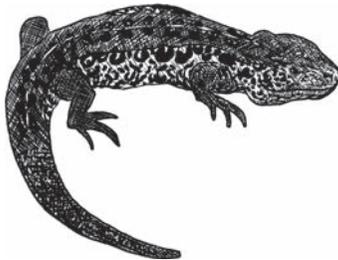


**THE WITCHES OF KYIV  
AND OTHER GOTHIC TALES**

SELECTED WORKS OF OREST SOMOV



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# FOREWORD

## THE UNKNOWN UKRAINIAN: OREST SOMOV'S PROSE AS A WINDOW TO EARLY NINETEENTH-CENTURY UKRAINE

Orest Somov (1793–1833), a Ukrainian Romantic author, literary critic, translator and essayist of the pre-Shevchenko period, has been unduly forgotten by the reading public in Ukraine and might not be well known to the English reader. Reasons for his obscurity vary, but the two most obvious ones are his contested position between the Ukrainian and Russian national canons and his short-lived literary fame, quickly overshadowed by his younger contemporary, Nikolai Gogol / Mykola Hohol (1809–1852). Even when rescued from oblivion by post-Soviet literary critics, Somov is still called a Russian author and delegated to the realm of the Russian canon, despite his Ukrainian origins and the prominence of Ukrainian themes in his tales – a tradition, reflective of Ukraine's presumed cultural subservience to Russia, cultivated by the Imperial and, later, Soviet regimes.<sup>i</sup>

Recently, Iurii Vynnychuk put Somov back on the Ukrainian literary radar by including his works in popular editions of the Ukrainian Gothic.<sup>ii</sup> With its collection of Somov's folktales, Sova

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<sup>i</sup> See Marina Zhurina's recent dissertation *Tvorcheskaia evoliutsiia O. M. Somova i problemy folklorizma* [O. M. Somov's Creative Evolution and the Issue of Folklorism] (Cheboksary: Iakovlev Chuvash State Pedagogical University, 2007) that presents Somov as 'deiatel russkoi kultury i literatury XIX veka' [nineteenth-century Russian writer and cultural activist]: <http://www.disserscat.com/content/tvorcheskaya-evolyutsiya-om-somova-i-problemy-folklorizma> 4 June 2016.

<sup>ii</sup> Iurii Vynnychuk, compl. *Ohnianyi Zmii: Ukrainska hotychna proza XIX st.* [The Fire-Breathing Dragon: Ukrainian Gothic Prose of the 19th Century]

The first group makes references to the Cossacks' glory (for example, Taras Triasylo, Cossack Hetman, and his successful campaigns of 1630 are mentioned in 'The Witches of Kyiv'), demonises the Poles, and, in the case of 'The Evil Eye', features a very poetic language, reminiscent of a Cossack *duma*. 'The Witches of Kyiv' tells a story of a dashing young Cossack Fedir Blyskavka, who comes home to settle down after his military service at the Sich, but the woman he chooses to marry, Katrusia, turns out to be an unwilling witch, made so by her mother. The story features a very gloomy ending with Katrusia killing Fedir and later suffering a violent death herself, being burned at the stake by other witches for betraying their 'guild'. While some scholars see in Fedir's death a latent punishment for involving himself in pagan rituals and forgetting about his Orthodox faith,<sup>xviii</sup> another interpretation of the tragic ending may be linked to the Cossack ethos that saw a move from the military to a settled or farm life as a form of metaphorical death. 'Rusalka' continues the theme of death and betrayal, but here we see both a religious and a national betrayal where a young Ukrainian girl falls in love with the enemy of the Ukrainian nation, a Pole. Such action leads her, and later her mother, to magic, forcing both to forsake their Orthodox faith. The third tale in the Cossack cluster, 'The Evil Eye', resembles a *duma* song by its language as well as its structure, appearing in the form of fourteen stanzas. Its sombre plot, featuring the untimely death of three beautiful daughters of the Cossack Mykyta, may be metaphorically interpreted as a waning time of Cossackdom, with Cossacks becoming settled and losing their military vigour, which, in turn, makes them vulnerable to hostile invasions.

The Kyivan Rus sequence consists of two tales, based on ancient Slavic beliefs and customs, that Somov wanted to preserve for posterity. The tales feature pre-Christian names of their characters (Velesyl, Mylava, Konchyslav and Nasoloda) and mention pagan Slavic Gods (Perun, Kupalo and Veles). In comparison to the previous tales, where the focus was more on women as victims of cruel fate or demonic forces (with the exception of 'The Witches

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<sup>xviii</sup>M. P. Grebneva, 'O roli iazycheskikh i khristianskikh predstavlenii v povesti O. M. Somova 'Kievskie vedmy'' [On the Role of Pagan and Christian Beliefs in O. M. Somov's Long Tale 'The Witches of Kyiv']: <http://cyberleninka.ru/article/n/o-rol-i-azycheskih-i-hristianskih-predstavleniy-v-povesti-o-m-somova-kievskie-vedmy.pdf> 5 June 2016.

of Kyiv', where Fedir occupies the reversed position of a damsel in distress), here the victims are mainly men. They are punished for their pride and anti-Christian sentiments (as in the case of Konchyslav, whose very name suggests the end of the ancient Pagan glory<sup>xix</sup>) or for straying off a Christian path. These tales can be linked to the preceding cycle through the image of a water-sprite (*rusalka*). However, here *rusalka* is an evil spirit that leads a Kyivan knight astray, as opposed to an innocent victim, as she is portrayed in the eponymous tale of the previous cycle, which was written later and featured a more psychologised narrative.

Finally, the last tale, 'God's Fool', introduces the supernatural to the everyday life of Somov's contemporary society. Mersereau spoke on the importance of this story in Somov's growth as an author, since it pays close attention to the psychological maturation of the main character, young officer Melskyi. This is spurred by his acquaintance with the holy fool, Vasyl, who sacrifices his life to save Melskyi.<sup>xx</sup> The tale draws very close to Tzvetan Todorov's concept of the fantastic, as it never offers any explanation for Vasyl's ability to see into the future and predict fate. In Mersereau's words, "The reader never knows whether [Melskyi] is facing coincidence or occult powers, and the story gains interest from this cleverly exploited tension between belief and disbelief."<sup>xxi</sup> Despite being placed last, this tale is the earliest among the six works selected for this edition. Its importance also lies in the fact that it shows Somov's interest not only in Ukraine's past, but also in its present.

In conclusion, the collected tales expose Somov from three angles: Somov as a Ukrainian author of the early nineteenth century, who worked in the capital of the Russian Empire but, nonetheless, thematically (as well as publicly, in his letters) showed his national allegiance to his homeland; Somov as an ethnographer, who was rushing to collect as much Ukrainian folk material as possible to preserve it for posterity;<sup>xxii</sup> and Somov as an initiator of an

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<sup>xix</sup> Mersereau, *Orest Somov* p. 80.

<sup>xx</sup> Mersereau, *Orest Somov* pp. 126-131.

<sup>xxi</sup> Mersereau, *Orest Somov* pp. 130.

<sup>xxii</sup> See Somov's own footnote to that regard in his novella *Tales of Buried Treasures*. 'Читатели, конечно, поняли цель сей повести собрать сколько можно более народных преданий и поверий, распространенных в Малороссии и Украине между простым народом, дабы оные не вовсе были потеряны для будущих археологов и поэтов.' [Readers must have

indigenous literary tradition of the Gothic in the Ukrainian literary canon. When we look at the critical works on Somov that have appeared thus far, they are full of reference to Ukraine (for example, Zinaida Kyryliuk's 1965 monograph features a section dedicated to the Ukrainian themes in Somov's works, which is four times as long as the section on the Russian folklore/theme). However, their authors keep recycling old imperial and Soviet slogans, presenting Somov as a Russian author. I hope that the current English edition of Somov's tales, which presents him as a Ukrainian author to the world audience, will serve as the first in a series of works aimed to decolonise and reclaim this early Romantic for the Ukrainian literary canon, putting an end to the tradition of including Ukrainian authors under the collective editions of Russian prose.

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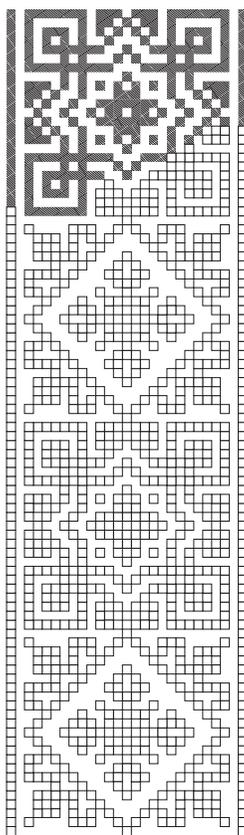
guessed that the goal of this novella is to collect as many of the folktales and beliefs that are popular among the simple folk in Little Russia and Ukraine as possible, so that they will not be lost to future archeologists and poets.'] Somov, 'Skazki o kladakh' [Tales of Buried Treasure], in *Byli i nebylitsy* p. 217, fn. vii.

# THE WITCHES OF KYIV

1833

A young kozak from a Kyivan regiment, Fedir Blyskavka, had returned to his homeland from a campaign to liberate Ukraine<sup>1</sup> from her oppressors, the Poles. Taras Triasylo, a brave Hetman of the Ukrainian army had driven the Poles from many Ukrainian towns since the famous Taras Night, when he defeated the arrogant Koniecpolski. [...] The kozaks had returned to their homes, burdened with rich spoils that they considered to be theirs by right. [...]

Those who knew Fedir Blyskavka as a dashing kozak surmised that he did not return home empty-handed. Indeed, every time he pulled a handful of ducats out of his pocket to pay a tavern-keeper or *bandura-player*<sup>2</sup>, the Polish zlotys very nearly cascaded into the streets. At the sight of his gold the eyes of tavern-keepers and shop-keepers sparkled, and at the sight of the kozak the cheeks of maidens and young wives blushed. And with a good reason – no wonder they all called Fedir Blyskavka a dashing kozak. His tall stature and courageous bearing, his handsome and



masculine physique, his black moustache, which he twirled proudly, his youth, good looks and courage could sweep any woman off her feet. Is it any wonder that young Kyivan women looked at him with playful and welcoming smiles, and that each of them was overjoyed when he spoke to them or allowed himself some harmless liberty in his conduct towards them?

The street hawkers of Pechersk and Podil<sup>3</sup>, all of them, from the first to the last, knew him. With contentment on their faces they winked to each other when he walked through the market. They waited for these visits like a raven waits for blood because Fedir Blyskavka, with his kozak swagger, would bump their trays laden with *knyschy*<sup>4</sup>, *slastiony*<sup>5</sup> or cherries and send large mounds of watermelons and rockmelons rolling in all directions, but would then compensate them for everything at three times the usual price.

“Why haven’t we seen our mischievous lad for so long?” remarked one of the Podil hawkers to her neighbour. “Without him, trade is so very different – you can sit all day without making a tenth of what you could make from him in one moment.”

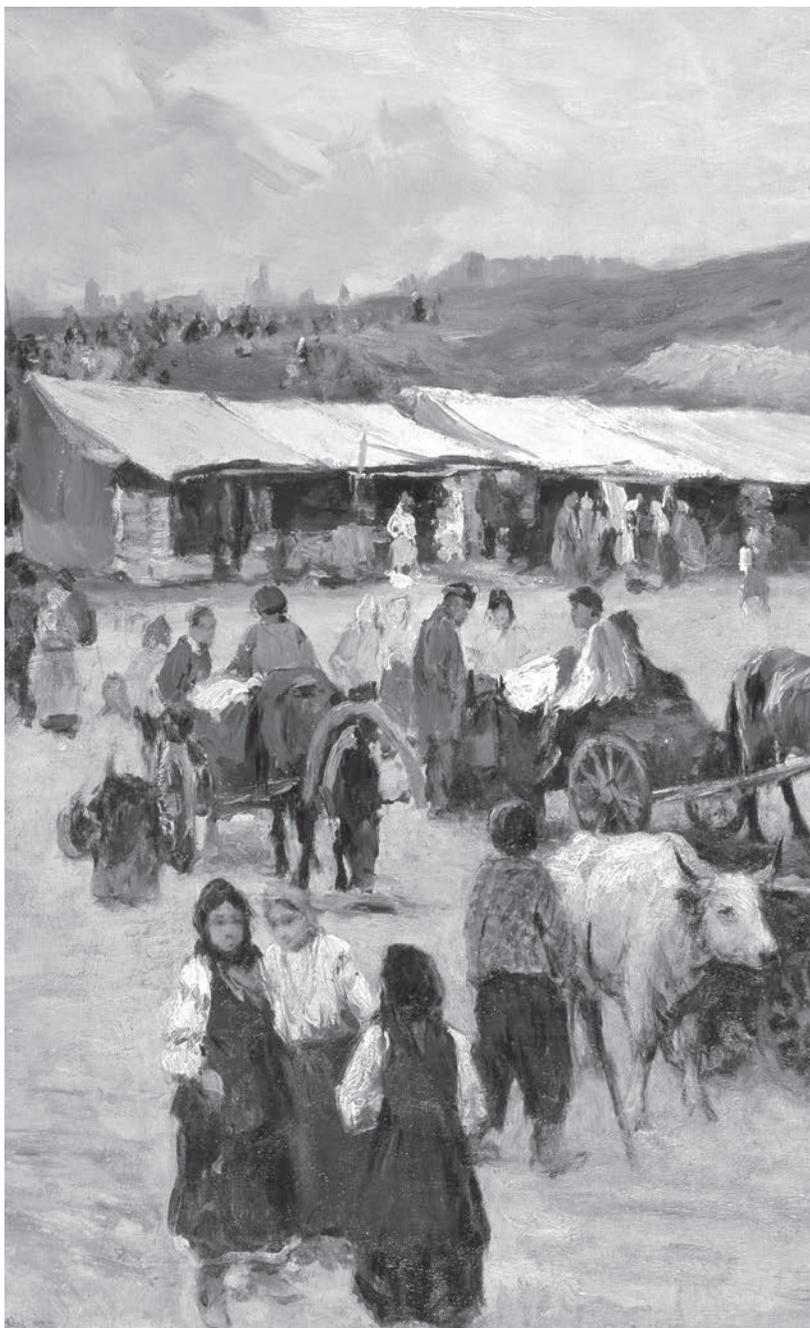
“He has no time for all that now!” her neighbour answered. “You see, he is fawning after Katrusia Lantsiuhivna. Since he met her, he stopped showing himself at the markets.”

“And why wouldn’t Lantsiuhivna be a good match for him?” the third street hawker thrust herself into the conversation. “That young lady is as beautiful as a poppy flower; one look at her and you can’t help saying: ‘She is a beauty!’ Her hair is raven, her eyebrows and eyes are jet-black, her figure is flawless; a single smile from her drives all the lads insane. And her mother is not a poor woman either – although she is stingy, the old hag – in fact, she has money to burn.”

“All this is true,” the first street hawker butted in, “but only ill repute follows the old Lantsiuzhykha. Everyone says – Lord have mercy on us – that she is a witch.”

“I also heard those stories, dear,” the second hawker remarked. “Once my neighbour Panchokha saw with his own eyes how the old Lantsiuzhykha flew out of the chimney and travelled, apparently, to the Sabbath...”

“There are plenty of tales one can tell about her!” – the first hawker interrupted her. “She drove Petro Dziubenko’s cow to death and poisoned the Yurchevskys’ dogs, as one of them was a *yarchuk*<sup>6</sup> and could sniff out a witch. Because of the quarrel about



Detail of: *At the Fairground* by Serhiy Svitoslavskyi.

the vegetable garden with Nychypor Protaliy she did such things to him that I can hardly dare mention.”

“What? What was it?” the other two cried with curiosity.

“Well, whatever will be, will be, I have to tell you. The old Lantsiuzhykha turned Nychypor’s daughter into a good-for-nothing. Now, poor Dokyika meows and scratches the walls like a cat, or barks and bares her teeth like a dog, or squawks and hops on one leg like a magpie...”

“Enough of this idle talk, you chatterboxes!” their conversation was interrupted by an old street hawker with an evil appearance, who fixed them with the stare of a vicious dog when it growls at passers-by. “You would be better off talking about yourselves rather than others,” she snarled abruptly and angrily. “You believe all elderly women with money to be witches, but you do not look back to check your own tails.”

Involuntarily, all the street hawkers cried out at the old woman’s last words, but they calmed down instantly because they did not dare to quarrel with her. A quiet rumour about her had been circulating, a rumour that she also belonged to the coven of Kyivan witches.

Although there were good people who tried to warn Fedir Blyskavka against marrying Katrusia Lantsiuhivna, the young kozak laughed in their faces and had no intention of leaving Katrusia. How could he believe those rumours? The darling girl looked at him so innocently and so kind-heartedly, and she smiled at him so sweetly that, even if the whole of Kyiv had gathered in the town square and sworn that her mother was in fact a witch, even then, Fedir would not believe it.

He brought back his young wife to be the mistress of his home. The old Lantsiuzhykha remained in her house, and refused the invitation of her son-in-law to move in with them, explaining her decision that she, in her old habits, would not be able to get along with young people.

There was no limit to Fedir Blyskavka’s happiness and pride when he looked at his dear wife. Her passionate caresses and fervent kisses, her pandering to her husband’s needs and her mastery of household matters – everything pleased our kozak. The only strange thing he found with her was that sometimes, in the middle of the sweetest expressions of conjugal tenderness, she suddenly became sad, sighed heavily, and even tears appeared in her eyes; and sometimes he noticed such a gaze in her big black eyes