

**GOETHE MEDAL 2016**  
**LAUDATORY SPEECH FOR**  
**YURII ANDRUKHOVYCH**  
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It is a great honour and special pleasure for me to be able to speak about Yurii Andrukhovych here today and have the opportunity to praise him in front of you on the occasion of the awarding of the Goethe Medal. Yurii Andrukhovych is an intellectual, a wanderer between worlds and, when the times demand it, a political activist. But, above all he is a poet, writer and translator.

He has very close ties to the German-speaking world. As we will hear, he learned German at a young age and thereby developed a very unique relationship with Goethe. His grandmother was born in Austria-Hungary and experienced the emperor's visit. That was in Stanyslaviv, the birthplace of Yurii Andrukhovych. The city is now called Ivano-Frankivsk, and when he is not traveling, Yurii Andrukhovych still lives there. It was not the grandparents and parents of Yurii Andrukhovych who migrated, but the territory in which they lived. In the 20th century, western Ukrainian Galicia, together with all of Ukraine, moved ever deeper into the east to become part of the "Soviet Union," hardly distinguishable to us from Moscow. Together with others such as Andrzej Stasiuk and Martin Pollack, it is due to Yurii Andrukhovych that Galicia opened itself to us again and sharpened our view of the many facets of its culture and history, including the crimes perpetrated by Germans and in the name of Germany.

Quite undoubtedly, Yurii Andrukhovych's pathway into the consciousness of the German cultural area led via the rediscovery of Galicia, via his essays on the history, culture and present-day of his western Ukrainian homeland. Just last year, in 2015, we were delighted – and laughed a little sagely – when we found a book of essays by Yurii Andrukhovych being exhibited as part of the "Myth of Galicia" exhibition at the Vienna City Museum. These essays were the ones that had aroused interest in Andrukhovych in Germany, Austria and Switzerland.

But, just as the strivings of Ukraine and Ukrainians to move away from Russia and towards Europe cannot be reduced to a few western Ukrainian dreamers or even nationalists, as Russian propaganda long wanted us to believe, Yurii Andrukhovych cannot be grasped as a Galician regional ethnographer or apologist in the tradition of the Austro-Hungarian empire. And of course he is anything but a museum piece!

What need not be stressed here, of course, is that cultural mediation is not a street on which things are exported in one direction while other goods are being delivered on the opposite carriageway. We read literature, including foreign literature in order to learn something about the world, but above all about ourselves. Cultural exchange is composed of an infinite number of elementary particles that flow in all possible directions, float about, meet and

detach yet again to then come together to form ever new constellations and enrich one another.

Precisely this is the essence of the literature of Yurii Andrukhovych. He draws from multiple sources and combines them into a distinctive tone. This is how he brought Ukrainian literature out of its classical ossification and Soviet-Ukrainian provincialism in the 1980s. He gave it back its mischievous grin and opened it to the diverse impressions and influences of Europe and the world. And he reclaimed Ukrainian literature's place in Europe. In this way – and not only in his political thinking – Yurii Andrukhovych was and is avant-garde.

Reading Yurii Andrukhovych promotes intercultural understanding, whether he tells stories of Ukrainians in Moscow or Venice or of Austrians in the Carpathians, whether he describes poetic wanderings through the castle and palace ruins of his homeland or experiences at literary festivals in Toronto or Mexico, or of the rootlessness of young Ukrainian students in the late 1970s in Leningrad.

That brings us to the leitmotif of this year's award conferment: to wandering, migration.

If proof were needed that Yurii Andrukhovych's literature is the literature of wanderers, the following scene would provide it. On a hot day in the summer of 2006, we are on the Crimean peninsula, the bay of Balaklava in Sevastopol. In the tunnels and shafts where Soviet nuclear submarines once lay (and perhaps soon the Russian?) an exhibition of contemporary installation art is taking place. In the queue at the entrance, we encounter a group of students with tents, backpacks and a well-thumbed copy of Yurii's *Perversion* that they have brought along this summer for their hike across Crimea.

You can imagine how very much the author and the readers were overjoyed at this unexpected meeting!

Yurii Andrukhovych wanders of his own free will to expand his horizons, while remaining firmly rooted in his Ukrainian homeland, which he loves and with and over which he suffers. His fictional characters are also all wanderers in foreign worlds: Otto von F. from *Moscoviada*, the Ukrainian writer with a scholarship at the Moscow Institute of Literature, who becomes entangled in the maze of the capital city and at the last moment, and after uncovering the truth behind Russian superpower aspirations, saves himself on the train to Kiev (Alive? Or dead already?). Stas Perfezki, the protagonist of *Perversion*, whose trials and tribulations begin in an old Swabian flat, and who tries to grasp Venice and ultimately can only free himself from the clutches of Satan by leaving his hotel room high above the Grand Canal through the window. And good-natured, naive Viennese Karl-Josef Zumbrunnen who is led by destiny and love to the Carpathians, where he succumbs to liquor and love in a 24-hour convenience shop, in the realization that despite all our efforts we are incapable of understanding the foreign, the other.

We cannot understand what is foreign to us. Linked to this is our inability to explain our own reality to others and to reach genuine understanding. The pianist from Yurii Andrukhovych's play of the same name, which premiered last year in Chur, suffered from just that: he is unable to give others – his friends – an understanding of the reality of Ukraine, the reality of the Maidan and its barricades. Everything he says is either ignored or at least confirms the stereotypes that already exist in the minds of his listeners, such as stereotypes of violent nationalists and neo-Nazis.

I believe that Yurii Andrukhovych sometimes feels very close to the character of the pianist in this play. That he sometimes falls into despair because it seems that in spite of his novels, plays, poems, essays and interviews he is not able to win out over the boundaries in the minds and against the sledgehammer of propaganda.

But that's not true. That would be like comparing gingko trees with wooden stakes! The work of Yurii Andrukhovych is distinguished precisely by the fact that it celebrates diversity and questions cherished beliefs, both his own and that of others. The fact, dear Yurii, that you are read, heard and questioned proves that you not only have something to say, but that we want to hear it. And ultimately, being awarded the Goethe Medal is further evidence that you can overcome barriers, can explain different perspectives and can mediate between people as a wanderer between worlds. I congratulate you most sincerely on this award!