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John Manifold  
Makhno's philosophers  
1997

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## Makhno's philosophers

John Manifold

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Back in *tachanka* days, when Red and Green  
Pursued in turn each other and the White,  
Out on the steppe, I'm told, there could be seen  
A novel sight

Professors of philosophy, whom war  
From some provincial faculty dismissed  
To seek new pastures on the Black Sea shore,  
Fell in with Makhno - anarchist,

Terrorist, bandit, call him what you will -  
Who spared their lives and, either for a laugh  
Or from some vague respect for mental skill,  
Attached them to his staff.

Their duties were not hard. For months or years,  
Lacking a porch in which to hold debate,  
These peripatetics, ringed by Cossack spears,  
Had leisure to discuss The State.

With flashing pince-nez, while the sabres flashed,  
They sat berugged in carts in deep dispute,  
Or in some plundered village hashed and thrashed  
The nature of The Absolute

Bergsonians quite enjoyed it: from the first  
They'd known Duration to depend on Space.  
But Nietzscheans found their values arsey-versed  
By Supermen of unfamiliar race.

And, whereas Platonists got mulligrubs,  
Cynics were cheerful - though I'll not deny  
They grumbled when obliged to share their tubs  
With hogs from Epicurus' sty.

On quiet nights, bandits would form a ring  
And listen with amazed guffaws  
As syllogisms flew, and pillaging  
Was reconciled with Universal Laws.

Symposia were held, whereat the host  
(taught by the Hegelians of the Left)  
In stolen vodka would pronounce a toast  
To Proudhon's dictum: Property is Theft!

How did this idyll end? There's some confusion.  
Makhno, I fear was caught -  
Perhaps he let his native resolution  
Get sicklied o'er with other peoples thought.

But what of his philosophers? I feel  
Certain they reached an Academe at last  
Where each in his own manner might conceal  
His briefly bandit past.

To fool the OGPU or the CIA  
Would not be hard for any skilled expounder  
Of Substance and Illusion, growing grey  
But ever metaphysically sounder.

Yet each might feel at times old memories stir,  
And know himself, as ever, set apart:  
Once, among bandits a philosopher;  
Now, among academics, Green at heart.

In fact - I've wondered- take Professor X -  
Mightn't his arid manner be a blind?  
Are those lack-lustre eyes, behind those specs,  
Truly the mirror of his mind?

Or is the real man, far away  
From Kantian imperatives, once more  
Roaming the steppe, not as a waif and stray  
But waging revolutionary war?

Although his tongue belabours  
The stony boundaries of a bloodless creed,  
His soul is back again among the sabres  
Yelling, "The Deed! The Deed!"