

The reception of Joseph Heller in domestic literary theory (Ukraine, Russia)

У статті узагальнюється рецепція творчості Джозефа Хеллера в українському та російському літературознавстві на матеріалі дисертацій останніх десяти років. Загальна тенденція українських і російських науковців у вивченні Хеллера – увага до жанрового аналізу, вивчення типології романів, еволюції художнього методу митця, майже не звертаючись до конкретики художнього тексту. Ключові слова: постмодернізм, Хеллер, рецепція, література США, інтертекстуальність, чорний гумор, сатира, автобіографізм, філософічність.

В статье обобщается рецепция творчества Джозефа Хеллера в украинском и русском литературоведении на материале диссертаций последних десяти лет. Общая тенденция украинских и российских ученых при изучении Хеллера – внимание к жанровому анализу, изучение типологии романов, эволюции художественного метода художника, почти не обращаясь к конкретике художественного текста.

Ключевые слова: постмодернизм, Хеллер, рецепция, литература США, интертекстуальность, черный юмор, сатира, автобиографизм, философичность.

This article summarizes reception of Joseph Heller in Ukrainian and Russian literary theory in the last ten years. The overall trend of Ukrainian and Russian scientists while studying Heller is attention to genre analysis, typology of the novels, evolution of the artist's method, almost without addressing specific of literary text.

Key words: postmodernism, Heller, reception, American literature, intertextuality, black humor, satire, autobiografism, philosophism.

Lately the interest towards American literature of the end of the 20th century has risen dramatically. American studies in Ukraine and Post-Soviet countries are in their bloom, with popular theoretical works of American scholars like "The Encyclopaedia of Postmodernism" being translated, new theories implemented and American authors being reread and revisited as a result. Writers like J. Barth, K. Vonnegut, T. Morrison, I. Hassan, T. Pynchon, D. Dixon, and others become more in focus of our scholars, namely N. Vysotska, T. Denysova, Y. Goncharova, V. Lipina, Zh. Nadirova, A. Salimov, A. Lavrentyev etc. Joseph Heller and his literary

heritage are of substantial interest to Ukrainian and Russian literary scholars as well.

Joseph Heller became to America and the world more than a writer and an author of outstanding novels. His life and bright unusual personality and moreover, a term 'catch-22' he coined with his first novel are now deeply rooted in modern culture wherever English is spoken. Due to the nature of the term, and its unfortunate closeness to our reality, it is used by politicians, economists, historians and critics of all kinds. Thus, 'catch-22' is a form of reality and Heller himself is becoming a concept, a topos, a hero ('if not a thousand, than at least a dozen faces').

The attention of our literary scholars to Heller was blooming during the last decade. As we will see, though, the focus of our scholars has never seemed to move quite far from his first novel, 'Catch-22'.

For instance, A. Lavrentyev, the author of the 2004 thesis called 'The Black Humor in the American novel of 1950–1970', analyses the concept of the black humor in the novels of the abovementioned period. His work gives us the understanding of Heller's place in the domain of the black humor authors and whether the writer himself can be included there. Lavrentyev points out that the term 'black humor' gains its popularity due to the appearance of the Bruce Friedman's 'Black Humor' anthology (1965), that comprised the works by T. Pynchon, J. Heller, J. Donleavy, V. Nabokov, Ch. Simmons, J. Rechy, E. Albee, J. Barth, T. Southern, J. Purdy, C. Knickerbocker and L.-F. Celine. We can see here that Heller is thus stated as a 'black humor' writer along with others, who altogether make up a rather heterogeneous and somewhat surprising company. The main criticism of the anthology is in the fact that there is no fixed criteria or reason for the given authors to be included in it. And no author actually ever claimed himself to be a 'black humorist', with the exception of the editor, who included his own work in the anthology. These writers worked in different genres and aimed for different things in their literary work [3, c. 6].

In a later anthology 'The World of Black Humour', that came out in 1967, edited by Douglas Davis, Heller is included among John Hawkes, Donleavy, Terry Southern, Peter de Vries, Bruce Friedman. Elliot Baker, Warren Miller, Thomas Pynchon, Walker Percy, Charles Wright, James Pardy, William Barrows and John Barth. Douglas sees 'black humor' as an Americanized variant of absurdist fiction. He thinks that 'black humor' as an outlook was spread in post-war America due to its concordance with cultural and historical state of the time [3, p. 7].

Here we have to refer to the work by Morris Dickstein 'Gates of Eden: American Culture in the Sixties', which Lavrentyev notes in his thesis, calling it 'the most profound analysis of the 'black humor' as a cultural and

historical phenomenon. Dickstein draws a line between 'black humor' as a speech practice within the scope of traditional forms of literature and 'structured black humor', which expresses a special kind of outlook, the one that moves preset limits and forms a new sense of a new reality. Dickstein puts Joseph Heller in the latter category along with Kurt Vonnegut, John Barth and Thomas Pynchon. Lavrentyev sees such distinction as perfectly fair, as, like he points out, "the artistic beauty of a literary work cannot be reduced to and isn't an automatic consequence of using... the set of means of expression without appropriate outlook content" [3, p. 9].

Another point of view to which Heller's novels were ascribed to is 'literature of absurdity'. Thus, Harris named his book about Heller, Vonnegut, Pynchon and Barth 'Contemporary American Novelists of the Absurd' (1971). We have to note here that the book came out before Heller's 'Something Happened' (1974), and all of his other novels – basically, Harris could relate Heller to 'absurd' writers only on the basis of his first works – 'Catch-22' (1961) and the play 'We Bombed in New Haven' (1969) (we won't be taking his early short stories, first of which was published in 1948, much into account). This is not surprising and may be quite legitimate, since the sense of absurdity of life is overwhelming in these, especially, of course, in 'Catch-22'.

R. Hauck in his book entitled 'A Cheerful Nihilism: Confidence and "the Absurd" in American Humorous Fiction' (1971) considers 'black humor' a quality, that was a feature of American culture since the time it was formed and remained one through all periods of its historical development. According to Hauck, the 'black humor' of the 1960s is a special American reaction to the overwhelming crisis of the whole Western culture and is a manifestation of the peculiarities of a national character [3, p. 10].

Lavrentyev explains that all three critics seem to agree upon the fact that a peculiar feature of all American writers is, despite the influence of European literature, an adherence to traditional American individualism, and a creative attitude towards absurd world becomes a consequence of that [3, p. 1].

The Ukrainian literary scholar Y. Goncharova analyses Heller's 'The Portrait of an Artist as an Old Man' for her dissertation on the phenomenon of autobiographism in American literature of the late XX – the beg. of XXI century. Studying the works of Barth, Heller and Hassan, Goncharova draws attention to the importance of this phenomenon for the American postmodern literature, claiming that it helps detect new tendencies in it, as well as analyze the ideological and esthetical contribution of these writers to American literature [1, p. 3].

Goncharova studies transformation of an autobiographical narrative in Heller's novel. The diffusion of the author's ego in character Eugene Pota, who is the 'author' of the novel, is a distinctive feature of the postmodern autobiographical narration. The emerging image of the author thus cannot be definitely associated neither with literary, nor with real world [1, p. 10].

The scholar distinguishes the main idea of the author – to take away any kind of 'biographical / autobiographical truth', as "the main thing here is the recreation of the process of creative life of an artist through its various stages" – from the emergence of the idea of the work to its realization [1, p. 11]. Comparing Heller's autobiographism to Dixon's, Goncharova defines Heller's as 'intentionally literary' one, by which he "puts his "portrait" into the intertext of American literature, contemplating on the creative life, the role of a writer, the problem of immortality in life-creativity in connection with his own self" [1, p. 11]. His intention, therefore, is "to wash out the face and to create a portrait" [1, p.17].

Another vast research on Heller is provided by A. Nalimov in his 2010 thesis "The evolution of Joseph Heller's novelistic creative work". Nalimov's aim is to study the artistic method and its evolution through his work, which leads to somewhat shallowness of his research, which is explained by the broad object of it. The outlines the scholar provides sometimes makes the reader wish the analysis was more insightful, although it certainly leaves space for the further deeper research.

For instance, the novel 'The Portrait of an Artist, as an Old Man' Nalimov studies in the scope of his overview of Heller's novels. Although the chapter devoted to it is called 'Intertextuality of Joseph Heller', it is rather a general review of the novel, which doesn't cover all distinctive intertextual relations present in it. The researcher points out connections with other Heller's novels ('Closing Time') and mostly concentrates on Tom Sawyer and an episode with a lecture on literature of despair, that Pota delivers by invitation of one of the universities of South Carolina. Nalimov connects the title of the lecture with Yossarian from "Closing Time", who meets all these great American writers, (whose biographies Pota read and got his inspiration from), and talks to them at the Alley of Despair [5, p. 129]. A funny thing is that to meet all them he has to find himself in an underground kingdom, a kind of hell.

There comes Nalimov's conclusion worth paying particular attention to. Nalimov concludes that serious themes of the novel and their development, and also the mood of hopelessness indicate author's tragic attitude toward the world, which is more characteristic of modernism. Therefore, says Nalimov, it's impossible to classify this novel as purely postmodern work [5, p. 131].

While analyzing the evolution of Heller's artistic method, Nalimov finds it appropriate to review the place of comical and grotesque in his novels, and also such tendencies of modern American literature as multiculturalism and documentalism [5, p. 135].

Russian scholar Zh. Nadirova, in her 2011 thesis "The tradition of Menippea in literature and literary theory of the post-war USA" uses Heller's first novel for the research from the point of view of its connection with the archaic genre of Menippean satire [5, p. 8].

Nadirova analyses Heller's 'Catch-22' alongside Vonnegut's 'Slaughterhouse 5' using theoretical works of Bakhtin, with a purpose of showing how the genre of Menippean satire was developing in the USA in 1950 s. She aims to demonstrate how this genre transformed due to national peculiarities and postmodernist epoch by giving examples of carnivalization and Menippean satire features from the books [5, p. 182].

One of the examples is a structure of the novel, typical for Menippean satire (chaotic text of the first pages gains solid structure in the end); then the humorous element, Nadirova states, which is reduced to bitter sarcasm, being practically non-existent in the last chapters. Absurd, which is perceived as an artistic method at the beginning of the novel, uncovers itself gradually as an existentialist category [5, p. 63]. One and the same event is described from different points of view, adding up the facts and various reasons, which makes you change and alter your attitude towards the characters through this polyphony. Nadirova points out the fact that in this novel Heller often resorts to "the moral / psychological experimentation, depicting the unusual and abnormal states of the human, meaning madness of different kinds" [5, p. 75]. These states destroy the integrity of the human, though opening space for his / her hidden potential. Insisting upon humanistic values of the novel depicted in the main character Yossarian, Nadirova interprets even his decision to flee to Sweden not as a sign of despair, but as an affirmation of human life as a highest value, as there's nothing negative in saving your own life by fleeing.

Nadirova concludes that all these topics create the exact Bakhtinian monotony and lots of different styles of the narrative [5, p. 85], that are necessary for Heller to prove his idea of humanism and value of human life, that is in the core of 'Catch-22'.

L. Kazakova, whose dissertation on Heller is a general overview of his literary heritage, much like Nalimov's, took "Creative evolution of Joseph Heller the novelist" (2006) as a main focus of her research. The research itself is profound and can be characterized as a first attempt in Ukrainian literary theory to provide a full review of all Heller's novels. Kazakovamakes "aesthetic conception of the writer, stressing its general

stages and elements, researching their typological features" a point of her thesis [2, p. 22]. The conclusion she makes is somewhat general, stating that "the evolution of Joseph Heller the novelist" is interpreted as a "full disclosure of the writer's self, characteristic of the works of 80s, namely "God Knows" (1984), "Picture this" (1988) [2, p. 16]. The scholar divides Heller's novels into 4 periods, names them and defines main features of each. This helps her distinguish genres of Heller's novels, namely satirical ("Catch-22"; "Something Happened", "Good as Gold"), philosophical ("God Knows", "Picture This"); and intellectual ("Closing Time", "Portrait of an Artist as an Old Man"). The dominant themes of his works, according to Kazakova, are ethical problems between a person and society in different epochs, and their harmonious coexistence is a main goal of their development. Kazakova then states how Heller in his first novel proves the importance of a particular life of a person, in the 70s he "highlights that the power of spirit and the possibility of a personal development are grounded specifically in the family" [2, p. 17], in the 80s "love theme becomes the most important in his work along with a topic of historical value", and the 90s "added topics of value of life experience and reciprocity of the past, present and future" [2, p. 17]. The scientist claims to distinguish characteristic features of his narrative manner, which are philosophical insights and intellectualism. The basis for the artistic and philosophical conception of the writer is formed by humanistic values, which is realized through the conceptual consolidation of movements of modernism, postmodernism and the school of 'black humor'.

Thus we can see that in domestic literary theory Heller's legacy was analyzed through the lenses of black humor and absurd literature, autobiographism etc.; the overall tendency of Ukrainian and Russian scholars while studying Heller is the preference of genre analysis, defining typology of the novels, pointing out such broad categories as topicality and but almost never close reading through particular methodologies. Moreover, most researchers still focus on Heller's first and most famous novel, leaving out the literary theory potential of his other works.

This gives us space for further research using the tools of deconstruction and narratology, which prove to be effective in analysis of postmodern novels and will certainly show the uncovered layers of Heller's novels.

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