

The Aesthetic and Ideological Strategies of "New" Ukrainian Literature¹

У статті осмислені основні віхи історії української літератури: зародження нової української літератури й творчість Івана Котляревського, специфіка українського романтизму й спадщина Тараса Шевченка, особливості українського народництва й творчості Нечуя-Левицького, унікальність українського модернізму й дилеми радянської літератури, сучасний стан українського культурного простору. Автор доводить, що, зважаючи на довготривалу бездержавність української нації, логіку розвитку літератури зумовлювали не тільки естетичні, а й ідеологічні стратегії.

Ключові слова: нова українська література, ідеологічні та естетичні стратегії, український романтизм, народництво, модернізм, радянська література, український культурний простір.

В статье осмыслены основные вехи истории украинской литературы: зарождение новой украинской литературы и творчество Ивана Котляревского, специфика украинского романтизма и наследие Тараса Шевченко, особенности украинского народничества и творчества Нечуя-Левицкого, уникальность украинского модернизма и дилеммы советской литературы, современное состояние украинского культурного пространства. Автор доказывает, что, исходя из длительной безгосударственности украинской нации, логику развития литературы обусловили не только эстетические, но и идеологические стратегии.

Ключевые слова: новая украинская литература, идеологические и эстетические стратегии, украинский романтизм, народничество, модернизм, советская литература, украинское культурное пространство.

The article deals with milestones of Ukrainian literature history: the emergence of "new" Ukrainian literature and Ivan Kotlyarevsky's works; specificity of Ukrainian romanticism and Taras Shevchenko's heritage; peculiarity of Ukrainian populism and Ivan Nechuy-Levytsky's works; the uniqueness of Ukrainian modernism and dilemmas of Soviet literature; the current state of Ukrainian cultural space. The author argues that as a result of the long statelessness of Ukrainian nation the logic of literary

¹ This article is based on the guest lecture which was delivered in Pennsylvania State University in November, 2005 as part of a course about Ukrainian culture for students of non-Slavic specializations.

development has been influenced not only by aesthetic but also by ideological strategies.

Key words: *new Ukrainian literature, ideological and aesthetic strategies, Ukrainian romanticism, populism, modernism, Soviet literature, Ukrainian cultural space.*

Every discussion of Ukrainian literature is always complicated by the connection between literature and Ukrainian statehood or the Ukrainian national idea in general. Throughout its history Ukraine has often been subjugated by other countries. Therefore, Ukrainian literature has traditionally reflected the historic past and Ukrainian politics, serving as an embodiment of Ukraine's lengthy desire for independence. By doing so, Ukrainian literature has tried to fill in the political and spiritual vacuum in Ukraine.

This ideological engagement elucidates the general method through which Ukrainian literature can be perceived. It must be viewed not only through aesthetic prism, but first and foremost ideologically, which leads as to the main topic of this article: "The Aesthetic and Ideological Strategies of "New" Ukrainian Literature".

One of the most famous Ukrainian literary critics, Serhiy Yefremov, offered the following classification of Ukrainian literature:

1. Ukrainian literature of the late 14th century – the period of national independence, the beginning of Ukrainian literature.

2. Ukrainian literature of the 15th–18th centuries – the period of foreign rule, during which Ukrainian literature was influenced by other literatures, especially by Russian and Polish.

3. Ukrainian literature of the late 18th century – the early 20th century, which was the period of national Renaissance and rapid development [1, p. 31–33].

Today, it is possible to assert that the third period has been continuing as Ukraine, its culture, and its literature are just beginning to attain a truly separate identity.

I plan to focus primarily on the third period of Ukrainian literature characterized by the process of National Renaissance. One of the main ideological strategies of Ukrainian literature of this period is to describe, regenerate, and glorify the heroic past of Ukraine, especially the Cossack epoch because it was a symbol of the Ukrainian state. To write about the past and Ukrainian history means to create the future of Ukraine.

In the early Renaissance period writing about Ukrainian history was extremely dangerous because Ukraine was part of the Russian Empire and the Russian tsars attempted to suppress any Ukrainian desire for independence. That is why any mention of Ukraine's independence was

strongly frowned upon. Ukrainian writers had to seek different aesthetic methods which could play the function of allegorical Aesopian language and to disguise their real intention of describing Ukrainian history. In this context, the poem *Aeneid* by Ivan Kotliarevsky, a famous Ukrainian writer and the founder of the new Ukrainian literature, is extremely significant [3]. Kotliarevsky used Virgil's plot about Aeneas's journey and adventures. In fact, he was writing about a Cossack leader and his friends. In addition, he offered an elaborate description of Ukrainian life and traditions. The poem was written after a complete liquidation of the Cossack state by Catherine the Great. In other words, Kotliarevsky uses burlesque and travesty as an evident mode of description, i.e., Aeneas's journey. But the reader also sees a latent mode, i.e., the Ukrainian heroes, specifically in this case, the Cossacks.

The topic of Ukrainian history became one of the main themes in Ukrainian romanticism. Historicity was its unique characteristic and made it different from romanticism in its other European nations. Unlike other literary trends, romanticism enjoyed its greatest development in Ukraine. Many scholars explain the prevalence of romanticism by the crucial image of the heart which was so pertinent to both Ukrainian lifestyle and Romantic Movement. The Romantics describe Cossacks as strong, powerful soldiers who were always ready to defend their Motherland. They paid special attention to the Cossack hetmans (leaders) such as Bohdan Khmelnytsky, Dmytro Doroshenko, and Petro Sahaidachny, and described the battles against the Turks and the Poles. The motif of love was also very important for the Romantics. A typical protagonist in romantic poems is a girl who awaits her beloved from battle, or a girl who suffers in Turkish captivity, longs for Ukraine and her Cossack love, or a Cossack returning from battle eager to see his beloved. Sometimes, such plots turned mystical. One example is Shevchenko's *The Bewitched Woman*. With nature in the background (the Dnipro River roaring, the wind blowing) a love drama unfolds. A girl is waiting for her Cossack to return from battle and dies from suffering. The Cossack comes back home and sees her dead. In despair, he takes his life as well [5].

The Cossack theme is very important for Shevchenko. Since he spent most of his time outside Ukraine, the history of the country was his major tool for learning and writing about Ukraine. This "view from the outside" helped him to identify Ukraine as a coherent entity, as a nation. Shevchenko was the first to create the myth of Ukraine, its image as a country, and because of this he is considered to be the greatest Ukrainian poet of all times. Thanks to Shevchenko, Ukraine has acquired an image of a united sovereign nation with its ethnic identity, its language and traditions. Thus, it is safe to say metaphorically that Shevchenko presented Ukraine to his own people, the Ukrainians. Interestingly, Shevchenko's fate

is similar to the fate of Ukraine. He was bought out of serfdom to become a great artist and an independent writer who had faith in Ukraine. As he himself symbolically stated, "The history of my life is part of the history of my Motherland".

The slogan "writing about the people and for the people", which was also supported by Shevchenko, developed as the mainstream ideological and aesthetic principle of 19th century Ukrainian writers, who were figuratively called populists or "the writers of the people". The notion of "populism," which in Ukrainian is "narodnitstvo", was attributed to the intelligentsia who directed all their efforts to consolidating the nation. These intellectuals believed that the nation was primarily composed of farmers and peasants. They envisioned their role as that in serving the common people. This intellectual trend of populism was unique because it appeared in literature well before it developed ideologically. First and foremost, it supported the idea of literature as a voice of Ukrainian statehood.

The influence of this kind of Ukrainian literature, oriented towards the common people, was two-fold. On the one hand, the epoch called on literature to serve the people, which was very important for Ukraine, because it promoted unity during the very difficult times of repressions under the Russian tsars. The tsarist policy was predicated on the conviction that the Ukrainian language and culture had never existed in the past and would never exist in the future. As Serhiy Yefremov aptly described it, it was metaphorically "an intermission" in the history of Ukraine. Literature then was a voice of the nation, since it reiterated its existence.

On the other hand, while serving political and ideological purposes, literature gradually began to lose its aesthetic qualities, turning into "a tool" for political proclamations. Most Ukrainian works of art of that period hardly present any aesthetic values. Unfortunately, it is not an exaggeration. It becomes quite obvious if one compares Ukrainian literature of that epoch with Russian or other European literatures.

The most striking examples of this "ambivalence" were in the Ukrainian theater and the drama. The first professional artistic group appeared in 1882, during a period of strong oppression. Surprisingly, it was not in the capital of Ukraine or any major city, but in a small provincial town of Kirovohrad. Then the first Ukrainian theater – later called "the theater of leading figures" – moved to Kyiv where it was a great success. Since no Ukrainian books or newspapers could be published in Eastern Ukraine Ukrainian culture was sentenced to decay, the Ukrainian theater could stage performances about the Ukrainian people, their everyday life and Ukrainian traditions. Paradoxically, the Ukrainian theater was a striking success among the Russians and its actors quickly gained popularity. For

example, Maria Zankovetska, the first national actress, was invited to the Emperor's Theater in St. Petersburg but she rejected the proposal and stayed in Ukraine.

To sustain this success, new theatrical works were needed, which often compelled the actors and producers to author these plays themselves but their own. Often, they were written hastily, which explains their poor aesthetic quality. Besides, they were often written to appeal to the mediocre tastes of undemanding audiences, which restricted and undermined the development of Ukrainian literature. The Ukrainian intelligentsia was gradually losing its national roots, since it turned to more advanced Russian and Polish literatures. The readers of Ukrainian literature were common rural people.

The protagonist of Ukrainian literature in the mid-19th century was a serf who fought for his freedom. The classic example is the novel "Mykola Dzheria" by Ivan Nechuy-Levytsky [4]. He narrated a story about an intelligent peasant who wanted to become free and fought against a stubborn landowner. Mykola had to escape and leave his young wife with a baby because the landowner wanted to imprison him. Mykola lost everything: his village life, his family, but, most importantly, his belief in the future. He became a freelance laborer in search of a job. Even after serfdom was abolished twenty years later, Mykola failed to feel free, spending most of his life outside his native village.

In the end of the 19th century, Ukrainian literature called for new ways of development. There were two major trends: one was based only on the Ukrainian national literary tradition, while the other one looked toward European literatures.

The latter signified the specificity of Ukrainian modernism. It was a very important change, because the development of Ukrainian literature was no longer seen as an ideology, but rather as an aesthetic phenomenon. The main characteristics of Ukrainian modernism were the borrowing of the best of European qualities along with high esthetics, intellectualism, and special attention to language. Chronologically, Ukrainian modernism was marked by the appearance of two major collections of poetry: *Withered Leaves* by Ivan Franko, and *Clarinets of the Sun* by Pavlo Tychyna.

Ivan Franko, the well-known Ukrainian writer and thinker, incorporates the two trends discussed above, representing both populist literature and modernist literatures. First of all, he thought that the writer must serve the people and sacrifice his own life and his interests for the nation. Early in his literary career Franko wrote poems with revolutionary slogans totally void of any intimacy. The publication of his collection of poetry *Withered Leaves* [6] as unexpected not only for Franko's readers, but for Franko himself too.

One of my students, describing his impressions of the collection, said that he had never come across a male who so openly shares his emotions as Franko does. This collection is generally believed to be about unhappy, unrequited love, which is both correct and false at the same time. The collection also has a deeper symbolism. It is about a person who seeks the meaning of life. Through suffering as well as Christian and Buddhist spirituality, the hero escapes his suffering and achieves nirvana.

As Franko's collection appeared, the sharing one's emotions became not only fashionable but also indispensable. It was a symbol of a new modern esthetic thinking. For the first time in Ukrainian literature, the modernist writer touches on the topic of sexuality, describing not only the human soul but also the human body. It was one of the greatest achievements of Modernism since it offered a new understanding of the human being's essence as a complex combination of the intellect and instinct. The main conflict of human life therefore was transferred by Ukrainian modernists from public life to personal and spiritual life.

New possibilities for Ukrainian literature opened up after the 1917 October Revolution in Russia. First of all, literature was accessed by many new talented writers who came from the countryside and did not always have an opportunity for education. Secondly, many new literary groups appeared, contributing to the revitalization of literature. This revitalization was characterized by formalistic literary experiments. It was a period when many literary directions developed: Symbolism, Futurism, Constructivism, and others. The 1920s was the most dynamic creative period in Ukrainian literature. It was extremely promising and gave hope of revitalization of Ukrainian literature.

The totalitarian epoch under Stalin's rule was the most tragic in the fate of the Ukrainian people and Ukrainian literature in particular: 90 percent of Ukrainian writers were executed and a few also committed suicide.

The most striking example is the life and work of Mykola Khvylovy, an exceptionally talented prose writer. He was a devoted communist who strongly believed in the future of communism. The image of "an ideal commune" as a symbol of a happy future prevails in his prose. Philosophically, he considered communism as a path to the renewal of life. But then Khvylovy had to confront a dreadful reality: communism was incompatible with Ukrainian national identity and Ukrainian statehood. It was a shocking discovery for Khvylovy. He so strongly believed in the communist idea that he couldn't come to terms with the contradictions between Ukrainian nationalism and communist ideology.

Some writers had to reconcile themselves with the totalitarian regime and became so-called "singers of the Communist party". The most tragic

example is Pavlo Tychyna. His first poetry collection was exceptionally successful. First of all, Tychyna worked out his own style, which was called "clarinetism" (from the word "clarinet") which combines sound, color and words [2]. Tychyna's lyrical hero explores the world for himself both internally and externally. Critics believed this collection was the first in Ukrainian literature which targeted the present rather than the past. The most tragic feelings of contemporary life along with the most revolutionary changes, which killed the human within the human being, were the subject matter of Tychyna's poetry. He tried to survive under the totalitarian regime, which prevented him from being an independent writer. Tychyna had to sublimate his genius in order to survive by praising the party. His collections of poetry of the 1930s and the 1960s were hymns in honor of the party.

Many Ukrainian writers tried to escape the totalitarian regime and emigrated to other countries. They continued to write and generate new ideas in opposition to the Soviet system. Consequently, the development of Ukrainian literature split in two directions: the Soviet Ukrainian literature and the Ukrainian Diaspora literature. Their common ideological feature was the predominance of monologue as a specific communicative strategy. While Soviet Ukrainian literature was ideologically influenced by the Soviet regime, oppositional anti-totalitarian discourse was typical of emigrant literature.

The epoch of 1960s marked a new period in the Ukrainian literature. After Stalin's death, Khrushchev harshly criticized his policies, beginning the period of the so-called "thaw". Writers tried to focus again on the importance of human life, which was neglected by the totalitarian regime. They started paying closer attention to the importance of the national ideas for everyone.

In the late 1960s and early 1970s, the period of the so-called "thaw" ended, which caused a division in the camp of the writers of the sixties: some supported the ideology of the state, others preferred to withdraw from participation in political life and stopped publishing their work, still others became dissidents.

Ukrainian dissidents denounced the national policies of the Communist Party. Most of them were imprisoned as a result of such criticism. Vasyl Stus is the most famous of the dissident writers. During his life, he was little known in Ukraine, because for Soviet Ukraine Stus was a political threat. At the same time, some of Stus's collections were published outside Ukraine and were a resounding success. He was even nominated for the Nobel Prize. Ukraine stood a unique chance to have its first Nobel Prize winner, but, unfortunately, Stus died under unknown circumstances, by this I mean he was probably assassinated by the KGB, a month before the decision on the Nobel Prize was to be announced.

The period of perestroika and then the dissolution of the Soviet Union opened new promising prospects for Ukrainian literature. After a very long period as an "isolated" culture, Ukrainian literature began to explore and employ world's literary models. Again, Ukrainian literature had two paths of further development.

The first was the use of literature as a means of creating a new Ukrainian nation. It meant that Ukrainian literature was again restricted by its political role. The second was to use the aesthetic standards of postmodernism. It was the best way to create new aesthetic qualities for Ukrainian literature, which at the same time marked a rather dangerous direction of its development. Western postmodernism developed as a result of exhaustion from the traditions of structural thought. Ukrainian literature has a "disconnected" tradition, because during the Soviet times it was atypical of the traditions of Ukrainian literature at the beginning of the 20th century.

The second direction proved to be more important for Ukrainian literature. The group *Bu-Ba-Bu* (burlesque, bluster, buffoonery) was the most successful Ukrainian postmodernist project. The group satirized Ukrainian symbols and traditions, which had helped to create a new national literature free of the trite motifs of the Ukrainian tradition.

The postmodernist perspective continued in the very famous novels by Yuri Andrukhovych and Oksana Zabuzhko. For example, Zabuzhko attracted the attention of many Ukrainian readers by her scandal novel *Field Work in Ukrainian Sex*.

Today, Ukrainian literature has many new opportunities to develop but also faces many new challenges. Among them are the promotion of publishing business and book sales as well as supporting Ukrainian-speaking writers. We can assert that Ukrainian literature continues to develop and establish its own identity.

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