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PROVINCIJOS TOPAI UKRAINIEČIŲ LITERATŪROJE: POSOVIETINIS DISKURSAS

Topos of the Province in Ukrainian Literature:
Post-Soviet Discourse

SUMMARY

The article looks into Soviet and post-Soviet identity episodes in contemporary Ukrainian prose and offers models to interpret this phenomenon. In Ukrainian literature, this phenomenon is described in stories of characters returning to the places of their childhood and youth, that is, to the province. The province shows up as an important specific model with “Soviet leftover” vestiges that has proved to be extraordinarily stable and that Soviet everyday life has hardly changed. The authors of Ukrainian prose Serhiy Zhadan (novel “Voroshilovgrad”) and Artem Chech (novel “District D”) embody two models of analysis of the Soviet past. The first model suggests the regeneration of a simulacrum identity that does not maintain any links or connections with the family history. The second model mirrors the acceptance of the Soviet reality as the Other / Alien and the awareness of oneself as the Other. In both cases, the Soviet past is desacralized.

SANTRAUKA

Straipsnyje nagrinėjami sovietinio ir posovietinio identiteto epizodai šiuolaikinėje ukrainiečių literatūroje, pateikiami šio reiškinių interpretavimo modeliai. Sovietinį ir posovietinį identitetą atskleidžia nagrinėjamų kūrinių personažų pasakojimai jiems grįžtant į vaikystės ir jaunystės vietas, į provinciją. Provincija apibūdinama kaip konkretus modelis, turintis „sovietinio gyvenimo“ ženklų, kurie pasirodė besą labai tvarūs, nes gyvenimas provincijoje beveik nepasikeitė. Ukrainiečiai prozininkai Sergejus Žadanas (romanas *Vorošilovgradas*) ir Artemas Čekas (romanas *D rajonas*) savo kūriniais įkūnija du sovietinės praeities identiteto modelius. Pirmasis identiteto modelis siejamas su simuliakrine tapatybe, kuri nepalaiko jokių sąsajų ar ryšių su savo šeimos istorija. Antrasis identiteto modelis sovietinę tikrovę suvokia kaip „Kitą“, „Svetimą“ ir save laiko „Kitu“. Abiem atvejais sovietinė praeitis yra desakralizuojama.

RAKTAŽODŽIAI: sovietinis, posovietinis diskursas, tapatybė, provincija, ukrainiečių literatūra.

KEY WORDS: Soviet, post-Soviet discourse, identity, province, Ukrainian literature.

INTRODUCTION

Describing the late Soviet and post-Soviet Ukrainian identity is an urgent intellectual challenge for the Ukrainian humanities. Understanding the features of post-Soviet identity has gained a wide cultural resonance after the events of 2014 – the Revolution of Dignity, the war in eastern Ukraine. The crisis of values in Ukrainian society has shown that nostalgia for the Soviet past has not yet been

completely destroyed. Ukrainian literature now describes how the Soviet semiosphere is disintegrating, how a character from the border worlds – Soviet and post-Soviet – exists in the rifts of time and space. The study of this phenomenon is an integral part of a broad intellectual discussion of post-Soviet and Soviet identity in the Eastern European humanities.

POST-SOVIET IDENTITY IN MODERN UKRAINIAN LITERATURE

The Soviet semiosphere is still left in architectural images, types of interpersonal relations, intellectual ideas, and everyday histories, which were formed not so much in the center of the empire as in the provinces. According to Olena Styazhkina, “a wide frontier zone was formed there, in which not only peasant and urban traditions has “fused”, but ethnic groups, cultures, and very often languages “ (Styazhkina 2013).

The space of Soviet everyday life, recorded in artworks, is depicted mainly as a space of trivial everyday life. The festive discourse of the Soviet semiotic system is more pronounced in journalism, mass media, and official discourse. Instead, in the space of everyday life (according to the concept of Yuri Lotman (Lotman 1992: 9)) the real features of the Soviet / post-Soviet space and ways of its decoding, interpretation at the present stage are revealed.

Ways of reading everyday Soviet or post-Soviet experience in literature reflect attention to the conceptual components of Soviet culture (time and space, center and periphery, man and life, mem-

ory of the past as nostalgia or romanticization, and more broadly – reflection). It is hardly possible to cover all these features within the article, it can become a separate research project. However, these characteristics are important for our study, because they set the vectors of the study of Soviet / post-Soviet topics. The object of research will be the prose of Ukrainian writers Serhiy Zhadan and Artem Chekh. This research emphasis is justified by the fact that both works are a metaphorical and symbolic understanding of human existence in the 1980s–2000s years in Ukrainian literature. And what is important – They are not typical. Yaroslav Polishchuk, for example, connects the disintegration of Soviet identity in his works of art with “internal and external expansion” (Polishchuk 2018), and emphasizes that internal expansion was ensured by works that established the cult of the province as an island of national identity and tradition in the past, and also depicted the destructive influences experienced by the province during the Soviet era, when it was deprived of its inherent charisma, impersonated, as-

simulated" (Polishchuk 2018: 25). However, Zhadan in the novel "Voroshyllovgrad" and Chech in the book "District D" present a dramatic image of the provincial post-Soviet everyday life. These works represent two models of encounter with the Soviet identity, two models of understanding the post-Soviet identity. Both models are based on the following principles: personal history with autobiographical accents; the province as a metaphor of Soviet everyday life and the space of formation and destruction of the Soviet semiosphere; nostalgia as a call to

return to the province; motive of return / escape as the basis of the plot.

These models are based on different types of perceptions of post-Soviet identity and the destruction of the Soviet semiosphere. In essence, these two works outline ways to understand the phenomenon of the post-Soviet, the way out of the worldview crisis for the characters whose childhood and adolescence passed in the late Soviet era. This will show how the post-Soviet identity is disintegrating and what consequences it has for literature and culture.

SERHIY ZHADAN "VOROSHYLOVGRAD": I-PHANTOM

In 2010, Serhiy Zhadan received the BBC Book of the Year award for his novel *Voroshyllovgrad*. And this was only the beginning of the novel's triumph. The work has been translated into 13 languages. It entered the curricula of Ukrainian universities. In 2018, the premiere of the film "Wild Field" based on the novel took place. The plot of the work is Herman's return to the city of his childhood in order to save his brother's business.

Returning to the province makes Herman remember his past and appreciate the present. For the main character, this is not a joyful meeting, but rather a dramatic plot, since he has no one to come to. His brother fled to Europe. His parents are dead. Instead, there is a community that replaces family ties – friends. This is a community of their own kind, but they are not relatives. Herman does not find a foothold for his memories, just as no place for himself.

The return to oneself, as well as the return to the provincial town¹, actualizes the semantics of the province. In the So-

viet semiotic space, provinciality, provincialism, and provincial were the embodiment of stativity (as opposed to a dynamic town center), nostalgia, primitiveness, and at the same time authenticity. Thus, Lyudmila Park singles out of the Russian province myth an authenticity component; the province, in her opinion, in literature, cinema, press captures the image of "truly Russian, real" (Park 2018). The province as a space for preserving the true meanings of life and culture – this topos had such symbolic knowledge in the second half of the twentieth century and Soviet culture. Instead, in Serhiy Zhadan's prose, the province as a space has other semantic features.

First of all, it is the transformation of the name of a provincial city, its loss or replacement by simulacra. This concept is embodied in the novel "Voroshyllovgrad". Voroshyllovgrad was the name of the Luhansk city in 1935–1958 and 1970–1990. And this is a simulacrum for the characters of the work. This is the only common memory of Herman and

Olga, the only material embodiment of their generally identical Soviet past. The civilizational rift in the late twentieth century, associated with the collapse of the Soviet empire, affected the existential perception of a generation whose youth and maturity date back to 1980-2000. Undeveloped values are the leading problem of such generations. Such a generation is depicted in S. Zhadan's novel "Voroshylovgrad". Outlining this problem, Hannah Arendt writes: "Every new generation, literally every living person, when it finds itself in the rift between the infinite past and the infinite future, must rediscover and relentlessly pave the way" (Arendt 2002: 18). The protagonists of Zhadan's novel live as if in a space-time interval, which "is determined by duty, by things that no longer exist, and by things that do not yet exist in history. It has happened more than once that such time segments contained the moment of truth" (Arendt 2002: 13). The truth, which is revealed to almost all the characters in the novel, is expressed by a minor character – Ernst: "And what happened to our dreams? Who took our tickets to heaven? Why did they drive us to these backyards, I ask you?" (Zhadan 2010: 142).

Everyone to whom Herman returns as a family is united by a common feeling: this time and this space do not belong to them. There are no photos of parents, grandparents, or stories from episodes of family stories. This semantic emptiness in the personal biographies of the characters of the late Soviet era is emphasized by the title of the novel – Voroshylovgrad. This name is used in the work three times. The first is the title of the novel. And twice – in the memo-

ries of Herman and Olga. People of one generation, they can't remember just one case that unites them. These are postcards with the image of Voroshylovgrad, which they described in German language lessons.

"And it was all as if it wasn't with me" says Olga. – "Like in another life, with other people. Apparently, these pictures are my past. Something that was taken away from me and made to forget about it. And I do not forget, because it is, in fact, a part of me" (Zhadan 2010: 433).

Elsewhere, Herman shares his memories of the same experience and compares it to his present existence:

"It turns out that you can do without all these rules. And in general, none of what you are shown, no. So, there is nothing to talk about. And all these are just ways to use you. On perfectly legal grounds. ...I am. And Voroshylovgrad is not present. And this must be taken into account" (Zhadan 2010: 184).

Meetings with his past is a dramatic existential test for Herman, in which it turns out that the (Soviet) past still follows you, on the margins of the biography fixes Voroshylovgrad as a name, and does not allow to create any new meanings. The Late Soviet province is a special kind of "place of memory" (Pierre Nora), in which identity is blurred and distorted. And such important components of identity as family, social, regional, ethnic components are leveled. Topographical marking of "his" space for the character of Serhiy Zhadan's novel "Voroshylovgrad" is no longer possible, because its provincial space appears not as a whole territory, with specific contours or markings, but as a

simulacrum. In this space, there is no House as the center of family life, the family album as a way of visualizing family stories, the family itself as the personification of Herman's personal history. Instead, there is a gas station where he spends all his time (a kind of Anti-house, according to the concept of Lotman), postcards depicting the city, which is no longer on the maps (Voroshylivgrad renamed Lugansk), and family is replaced by ghost friends whose stories balance between reality and fiction.

Rhythmic natural or urban landscapes are a contrast to Herman's adventures in Zhadan's prose, they are so realistic that on their background Herman and his friends, their personal stories look phantom, untrue. Thus, the novel models the post-Soviet identity as a simulacrum identity. Its components are a sense of belonging to a commu-

nity of "imaginary people" (usually not family, but friends, acquaintances), to the values formed in this circle, and not related to the real family. Serhii Plokhly calls such components "fictional memory" (Plokhly 2020). It is easy to fill with stories of other people's lives, other people's memories, dreams, etc. Perhaps this is the role played by the pastor's stories in the novel or the story of the birth of jazz in Donbass.

The key idea of Zhadan's novel: is it possible to forget the Soviet and become someone else? This makes the reader think about the model of identity, in which the hierarchy of components is based on the combination and transformation of memory, the processes of forgetting to understand the answer to the question "Who am I?" Returning to the province is only the first stage of such reflection.

ARTEM CHECH "DISTRICT D": "MY BITTER REALITY"

Artem Chech's book "District D" is based on the plot of his return to the province. The author notes that "District D" is "my own way out of the ingrained Soviet mentality". We need to go through these injuries, we need to talk about them, see them through and exfoliate them like old skin" (Chech 2019). Each personal story² in the work is a micro-plot of the characters' existence, which has passed through the life of the narrator. Local stories are strung together and create a holistic picture of the past – the late 1980s–1990s.

The key biography (R. Bart) of this book is the motive for escaping / returning to the area where the narrator grew

up. He will try to leave it when he grows up. Memories bring him back here. "District D" is a mosaic of stories of people who lived in the same yard since the 1960s, when two typical five-story buildings were built on the outskirts of the provincial Cherkasy. The former space – estates with gardens and orchards (the so-called private sector) was replaced by a new space – for migrants from surrounding villages and towns.

In addition, the space described by Artem Chech has two dimensions. The first is

"the land of Bohdan and Taras"³, he priceless heritage of fertile fields and dense groves, the cradle of the Cossacks, the

great and small homeland of prominent people and defining historical events, the perfect work of nature, the unconditional degenerate of industrialization (Chech 2019: 5).

The second space is the legacy of Soviet industrialization, which changed both the iconic images of the city and the socio-cultural way of life, transformed colorful areas into a unified space in which

the social masses mixed in factory blenders, and by the mid-1980s the average Cherkasy resident was created. He was far from Bohdan, much less Taras, but the Soviet social and educational system prevented his complete lumpenization, while blocking oxygen to those who tried to fly higher and dive deeper (Chech 2019: 6).

Such a double coding of identity – through officially canonized images and through the normalization of existence – is a typical example of the formation of the so-called Soviet man. It still resonates in the worldview of ordinary Ukrainians, for whom the issue of ethnic identity and the formation of ideas about their own home is still marked by Soviet components. Thus, in a survey conducted in 2016, 45% of respondents in 2016 said that to be a citizen of Ukraine for them – “to live in their homeland, where home, nature, native land is left” (NA 2016). The feeling of belonging to a certain house is obviously a basic component in the hierarchy of identity. Thus, in particular, Natalia Yakovenko insists that the very idea of her home motivated the idea of identity of Volyn nobles against the background of conceptual and cultural-geographical coordinates of the 17th century (Yakovenko 2012). However, in the 20th

century, the hierarchy of identities of the population of Ukraine is changing – primarily due to migration (moving from village to city, moving to other cities – within Ukraine or the Soviet Union). O. Malynovska points out that Ukraine was most actively involved in migration processes: “... in 1959–1970 the population of Ukraine grew by 50,000 people annually due to inter-republican migrations, and in 1970–1979 by 30,000” (Malynovska 2009: 697). Therefore, the identity of Ukrainians was largely formed not so much as rooting in their own living space, but as an experience of living not in their home, not in their space.

This is exactly the experience of life described by Artem Chech in the book “District D”. The 16 short stories of the residents of the house, not connected by blood ties, they create a space of social solidarity, because they are united by social circumstances, not family ties. The semantic center of their stories is broken destinies, broken family relationships. It is a situational social community and a vivid example of situational identity. Social also strengthens the sense of local identity – belonging not to Cherkasy, not to Ukraine, not even to the Soviet Union, but rather – to the district D. Modeling ideas about themselves and their community is based on social ideas, rather than ethnic.

Artem Chech seems to reverse the perception of the identity of the Soviet man and puts in the first place not the supranational component (Soviet), but local (personal history of each individual character). A real matrix of one big story (history) is superimposed on real characters and fragments of their biogra-

phies (story). The story of the inhabitants of a typical five-stories building consists of one great story of the existence of a small man in the province at the turn of the great historical time of the twentieth century, when the USSR collapsed.

Are the inhabitants of "District D" Soviet people? Yes, no doubt, because their fates are the result of those migration processes that "accompanied the processes of formation of Soviet civilization" (O. Styazhkina)⁴. Can they get rid of the Soviet past? The author's answer is no. For them, to go beyond the provincial space is to actually break with the Soviet past, and no one but the narrator can do that. Moreover, even the narrator has nostalgic feelings for this fragment of the provincial space. He is overwhelmed by the strange feeling that the Soviet has never disappeared, it still continues, he can be taken to Poland or Germany by the characters of the work, but the line between Soviet and non-Soviet is still blurred.

Artem Chech proposes a model of meeting with the Soviet past, which is not about losing memories (as in Zhadan), but about remembering the Soviet as a distancing from him. The narrator contrasts and compares himself with

each character of 16 short stories, compares his existential experience and theirs. And suddenly he discovers that he is the other one, and this native space is foreign. It is commensurate with "dull sadness, such purely teenage longing, unbroken cry ..." (Chech 2019: 318). This is "a bitter reality that belonged to me and only to me, confused and wild, as if brought to a big city by Papuans" (Chech 2019: 318). Nostalgia for the province prompts the narrator to treat the Soviet as the Other / Foreign, to form from this and other components of a new self. Such an experience can be described as the experience of accepting the Soviet identity as a component of one's living space, within at the same time a strong desire to destroy the Soviet in oneself and outside oneself. Forget this province, so as not to return there. Always remember it so you don't end up there again. This is a model of borderline identity being an identity of values, consistent with the ideas of T. Judt (Judt 2010). Its center is the acceptance of the Soviet as a foreign, the thing that must be forgotten forever, and the simultaneous rejection of him as a stranger. And this is an important stage in the formation of post-Soviet identity.

CONCLUSIONS

Artistic models of understanding the phenomenon of Soviet identity in Ukrainian literature are based on the plot of returning to the province, reflections on the fate of the little Soviet man. The province is a symbolic space in which Soviet everyday life is still recorded and the stories of the fate of the Soviet people

are echoed. In this plot, the writers unfold two models of understanding the experience of Soviet life.

The first model is based on the reproduction of the simulacrum identity of a person born in the late Soviet era. The family history of such a person is someone else's stories. The second model is based

on a person's desire to record / memorize the stories of those whose personal stories are dramatic evidence of a loss of identity. In both cases, it is said that the Soviet identity is particularly firmly fixed in the provincial space, visualized and personalized in the stories of the existence of little people from the province. The mechanisms of destruction of the semiotic model of the Soviet man in both cases include the experience of reflection on one's own

past and understanding it as Other / Foreign. Soviet as Other / Foreign thing is an important stage in the formation of a new understanding of self. The prose of Zhadan and Chech tells about the crisis of values of the generation that grew up on the verge of epochs, about a new artistic vision of reality, in which a community of those who will not associate themselves with the post-Soviet province and Soviet identity is born.

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Endnotes

- Obviously, Serhiy Zhadan describes the city in which he was born – Starobilsk, the district center of Luhansk region.
- "District D" consists of 16 short stories – memoirs of the narrator.
- There is a well-established language formula that determines that Taras Shevchenko, a Ukrainian poet, and Bohdan Khmelnytsky, a Ukrainian hetman, were born here. This language formula is standardized, including by Soviet propaganda.
- It is noteworthy that Chech's work destroys the myth that migration affected only Donbass, and joins the conversation that migration as a way of forming a Soviet man was a typical social phenomenon for the Soviet reality and directly influenced the formation of post-Soviet identity in Ukrainian society. Victoria Amelina writes about this in the novel "House for Home".