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Between poetology and nation building: complex identities in Ukrainian underground poetry of the 1960s–1980s*

In this essay, I analyse how identities are constructed in Ukrainian underground poetry of the late Soviet period. On the basis of selected poems by Mykhailo Hryhoriv and Vasył Stus, I explore the complex dynamics between the explicit commitment to fostering national identity that is often regarded as a standard duty of Ukrainian writers and the pursuit of a transnational, purely literary identity as part of a wider embrace of the modernist imagination.

Keywords: Vasył Stus, Mykhailo Hryhoriv, Kyiv School, Ukrainian poetry, literature and identity

It is a well-known and easily detectable fact that modern Ukrainian literature has been intensively preoccupied with the issue of creating, steering, and supporting Ukrainian national identity. In this context, the prominence and the highly-regarded status of poetry in the Ukrainian literary canon¹ have meant that the lyrical subjects of modern and contemporary Ukrainian literature have frequently dealt with the problem of more or less directly delimiting and defining their identity for

* Research for this essay was made possible by grants from the Ukrainian Studies Support Fund of the Association of Ukrainians in Victoria, Australia, the Ukrainian Studies Foundation in Australia, and Monash University.

¹ On the crucial role of poetry as an instrument of nation building in Ukraine see R. Finnin, “Nationalism and the lyric, or how Taras Shevchenko speaks to compatriots dead, living, and unborn,” *The Slavonic and East European Review* 89, 2011, no. 1, pp. 29–55 (in particular pp. 30–36).

themselves and for their implied readers. If, on the one hand, personal identity is, per se, a fundamental theme of modern poetry, which makes its importance for the lyrical reflections of Ukrainian poets neither unnatural nor unexpected, the complex role of collective identity or identities in Ukrainian poetry is an element that should be studied with more attention than it has been so far. The quest for a deeper and broader layer of self-identification and for identity paradigms able to merge the private and the collective experience, which should not actually come as a surprise in the context of Ukraine's prolonged periods of statelessness and negation of its national distinctiveness, is a component of Ukrainian poetry that will impact any discussion on its nature and its significance in the overall structure of modern and contemporary Ukraine culture.

Ukrainian underground poetry of the late Soviet period, which includes the Kyiv School and its surroundings² and some so-called "post-Sixtiers," such as Vasyl' Stus and Ihor Kalynets', is a privileged area of research in this regard. Those Ukrainian poets who refused to comply with the aesthetic — and political — requirements of the official Soviet literary production, while at the same time more or less explicitly expressing dissatisfaction with certain stylistic and thematic choices prevailing among some of the leading Sixtiers, developed in their poetry a refined and complex, although at times concealed, reflection on collective identity. The question which needs to be addressed here is that concerning the nature of the communities evoked and created, or imagined,³ by poets in their poetic worlds, which from the point of view of language is often embodied in the use of the first person, with special attention to the complex dynamics between national identification and metaliterary reflections and identities.

The opening poem of Mykhailo Hryhoriv's first published collection, *Спорудження храму* (1992), which came out after almost three decades of forced poetic silence, is a perfect case in point:

ми довго ткали
з оцих
кроків
розлогу сіль

завзято
доточували
нарвані краї
і краї
самої середини
яка вислизала
з пальців

² See T. Pastukh, *Kyivs'ka shkola ta її otocennia: moderni styl'ovi techii ukrains'koï poezii 1960–90-kh rokiv*, Lviv 2010.

³ See B. Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, London 1991.

розвіяна
морем
та іншою плоттю
кривавих змов;

в оточенні
перших паростків
моху
повнили
безголосу порожнечу
переконуючи
себе
кожного разу
спочатку
ніби ми справді реальні
на вістрі свічкового пломеня
де завжди
постійна лише свічка
однак
ми ще раз вернули
чиїсь хрести
дерева
пообіч каналу
яким виводили
воду⁴

The semantic strength of the personal pronoun “ми” as the opening word, not only of this poem, but of Hryhoriv’s first published collection in its entirety, cannot but put strong emphasis on the role of collective identity, paradoxically even more so in the context of a highly individual and hermetic poetic world such as Hryhoriv’s. Readers of this poem will not fail to ask themselves who the lyrical subject is referring to in the description of the long, difficult, and eventually successful quest for meaning that constitutes the semantic core of the poem. In fulfilling the arduous task of trying to fill the void of silence with their voices, the lyrical subject and those in his proximity are constantly haunted by doubts about their own existence. While it is obviously impossible to give a unequivocal answer to the question about the identity of the I and the people whom he identifies as his companions, in a context in which the “I” is actually never separated from the “we,” it seems that at least three hypotheses are plausible: the lyrical subject and those who immediately surround him; the nation; and the lyrical subject’s peers, that is, the community of poets, both national and international, with which the lyrical subject identifies. The indirect but consistent insistence of the poem on the struggle of meaning creation, immediately introduced by the weaving metaphor in the first part of the text, might suggest that poets are its likeliest protagonists, which does not exclude the multi-layeredness of the complex identity that the poem itself creates and celebrates. The ambiguous ref-

⁴ M. Hryhoriv, *Sporudzhennia khramu*, Kyiv 1992, pp. 3–4.

erence to a voicelessness that needs to be filled in the third stanza might be read both in metaliterary terms, as the necessity to create or recreate poetry as a basic form of human expression, and from a national point of view, as the search for a specifically Ukrainian voice previously silenced. On closer inspection, the two interpretations are not mutually exclusive. Both an authentic poetic voice and the Ukrainian one have to be resurrected, with the two identity categories complementing each other.

In the second poem from *Sporudzhennia khramu*, the reader again encounters the plural subject identified in the opening text:

[...]
 стоїмо
 немов обійняті в рослинах
 немов скорочені дерева
 немов провалля квітки

аж тінь без овиду⁵

The voice, able to overcome the difference between singularity and plurality, links its, or their, own features to the natural world, elaborating on a type of imagery already encountered in the opening poem. The subject(s), its or their voice(s), and nature share the same precarious condition, but also, one would add, the same authenticity and primordial essence. Faced with an external threat, symbolized by the poor condition of the trees, their proximity is both physical and existential. The dynamics of sameness and alterity between the voice(s) of the subject(s) and nature is also to be found in the concluding lines of another poem from *Sporudzhennia khramu*:

[...]
 дерево
 виростаючи попри нас
 (кожен застав його та знітився)
 і риби
 (чимраз глибше)
 випливають з моря⁶

Human subjects seem to be separated from, or even alien to, nature, especially when humanity is seen as a collective body of individuals favouring community over their private relationship with the natural world. The connection between humans and nature is an ambivalent one, between proximity and alterity, as the ambiguous preposition *popry* (near, by, but also despite, against) might suggest. Similar or different, close or distant, humans and nature are in a tense relationship. It is the idea of collectivity itself that seems to be at odds with the primigenial link between humanity and nature, calling into question the validity and viability of human constructs such as society and, indirectly, the nation.

⁵ Ibidem, p. 5.

⁶ Ibidem, p. 12.

There is at least one poem in the collection in which an individual subject explicitly envisages its own fusion with nature outside of a broader identification with a collective identity:

покладіть
 покладіть мене
 на зелений листок
 капусти
 і
 попри оту гору
 що пахне рослинами
 й звірятком
 і
 попри віконце
 над птахом⁷

Here, a traditional individual voice reclaims its right to be reunited with nature to regain peace, ideally overcoming that feeling of separation and otherness that dominates the subject's relationship with nature as described in other poems from *Sporudzennia khramu*. However, in order to do so, the subject needs to be assisted by other fellow human beings, as the second person plural of the twice-repeated initial verb seems to suggest. Like in the other poems from *Sporudzennia khramu* discussed above, the identity of those others, between metaliterature and the nation, is open to various interpretations. Regardless of who the subject's companions may be, their role in enabling his reconnection with nature is crucial. Outside of interpersonal relationships, even in the atemporal poetic world of Hryhoriv's poetry, humans may no longer be able to regain their proximity to nature, which in its turn is a crucial element of their existence.

One of the most fascinating instances of a refined poetic enquiry into the nature of individual identity and its multifarious stratifications as part of a collective body is to be found in Vasyl' Stus's collection *Час творчості / Dichtenszeit* (1972), arguably the most powerful demonstration of the deep modernist nature of Stus's mature poetry of the Seventies. While Stus's experimental and variegated early, pre-1972 poetry shows several instances of a more traditional national identification, arguably to be read through the prism of Shevchenko's influence on the young Stus and the Sixties' culture, the modernist poetic world of *Час творчості* tends to eschew rhetorically-fraught declarations of national belonging. The lyrical subject of *Час творчості* appears to be at least as interested in its literary identity as he is in his national one, all the more so as the transnational nature of the existential and metaliterary musings of the collection is made explicit by its bilingual title. The subject's Ukrainian-ness is generally expressed and elaborated through indirect references, with few exceptions, such as in the case of the poem *Tserkva sviatoi Īryny*, a text available in different ver-

⁷ Ibidem, p. 48.

sions, later inserted in *Palimpsesty*. Only in limited instances does the subject openly thematize his link to Ukraine and his being part of the Ukrainian community:

[...]
 І сіють зраду спогади марудні,
 що передовіряються перу
 і забивають дух тобі єдиний
 і тьмою тьмиться образ України,
 допіру він розтане — й я помру.
 І в помережаній увійду ночі,
 де ні жалю, ні радощів не ймуть,
 а так живуть — і смерть свою жують.
 О скільки слів, неначе поторочі.⁸

The subject's chances of survival seem to be univocally linked to the survival of Ukraine, without, or outside of which the subject cannot conceive his existence. This identification is intrinsically ambiguous. On the one hand, Ukraine as a national, or cultural, community provides the subject with a sense of belonging. On the other hand, it is exactly Ukraine's precarious condition, its being doomed to disappear, that condemns the subject to death. However, the reference to Ukraine, already put into question by concentrating on its image rather than on its essence, is actually moved to the background by the focus on words and their ambiguous power, which can be a conveyor of both salvation and ruination, a topos of Stus's poetry, and one which reveals his intense dialogue with Boris Pasternak's model.⁹

A purely literary, denationalized identity for the lyrical subject is explicitly and even proudly stressed in a number of poems, although the subject generally cautions himself against the risk of betraying his own talent and perverting the sacred nature of his mission:

Скажи ім'я своє, поете,
 і я вгадаю, ачи ти
 засяг у горнім перелеті
 своєї ярої мети,
 що раптом може спалахнути
 і без вогню, ти волі брат
 чи, свого духу супостат,
 загуби просиш, як покути
 для хисту нищого.¹⁰

⁸ V. Stus, *Zibrannia tvoriv u dvanadtsiaty tomakh*, vol. 3. *Chastvorchosti / Dichtenszeit*, Kyiv 2008, p. 27.

⁹ “О знал бы я, что так бывает, / Когда пускался на дебют, / Что строчки с кровью — убивают, / Нахлынут горлом и убьют!” [in:] V. Pasternak, *Polnoe sobranie sochinenii: v odinnadsati tomakh*, vol. 2, Moskva 2003–2005, p. 80.

¹⁰ V. Stus, op. cit., p. 25.

It is rather his own spirit to which the subject-as-poet must remain faithful, not a collective, overarching one. The poet's love for freedom is depicted as a moral imperative forcing him to obey his own vocation. National identity frameworks are not alluded to here, although they cannot be excluded from the subject's representation of his own nature and ethical duties.

The national and the literary identity in the self-characterization of the mature Stus's lyrical subject are not mutually exclusive:

Блажен, хто тратити уміє,
коли заходить час утрат,
аби лишалася надія
і виростала востократ,
що білий світ — він завжди білий
і завжди добрий — білий світ.
Хай ти у ньому — син несмілий,
кого пройняв циганський піт,
а все ж буття твоє — у леті,
і в ньому — порятунок твій.
Вся суть твоя — лише в поеті,
а решта — тільки перегній,
що живить корінь. Золотіє
над осінь яблуневий сад.
Блажен, хто тратити уміє,
коли заходить час утрат.¹¹

The typical modernist attraction for the free space of heaven as opposed to the constrictions of earthly life, something that Stus would encounter from a poet he knew and admired, like Marina Tsvetaeva, is here paired with a metaliterary reflection on the very roots of the poet's ability to overcome the limitations of human existence. At the same time, the subject stresses the necessity of abandoning, losing the concrete material of his own roots, a Rilkean topos whose presence is not surprising in the context of Stus's enduring interest for Rainer Maria Rilke's poetry. The combination of Rilke's intrinsically cosmopolitan poetic world with the painful historical concreteness of Stus's Ukrainian-ness in the context of a collection of poems with a bilingual Ukrainian-German title, *Chas tvorchosti / Dichtenszeit*, is a powerful realization of the double nature of the identity of Stus's lyrical subject, torn between the free flight of the modernist poetic mind and the cumbersome reality of Stus's historical Ukrainian destiny. Stus himself in his letters stressed the difference between his own human path and Rilke's, which, however, did not prevent him from creating a poetic world in which poetic identity plays a fundamental role, although not an exclusive one, as in the case of Rilke's.

The most complete realization of the complex identity of Stus's lyrical subject is possibly to be found in *Iak dobre to, shcho smerti ne boius' ia*, one of his most famous

¹¹ Ibidem, p. 21.

quoted, and probably misquoted, poems, whose final lines provide the reader with an overview of the subject's literary and national roots:

[...]
 Хай прийдуть в гості Леся Українка,
 Франко, Шевченко і Скворода.
 Та вже! Мовчи! Залуканий у пущі,
 уже не ремствуй, прозирай у глиб,
 у суще, що розпукнеться в грядущє
 і ружею завітне коло шиб.¹²

The possibly unexpected irony of this poem, in which the national and the purely literary identities of Stus's lyrical subject merge in the evocation of an all-Ukrainian literary genealogy, lies in the actual contrast between the declared "standard genealogy" of Ukrainian literature and the rather international roots of Stus's mature modernism in *Chas tvorchosti*. This is a collection which actually reveals much more about Stus's entanglement with German and, secondarily, Russian, poetry than about his Ukrainian literary roots, with the sole notable exception of Volodymyr Svidzins'kyi. In spite of the fundamental role of both Shevchenko and Skovoroda for Stus's cultural horizon, and the undoubtable importance of Ivan Franko and Lesia Ukraïnka as key points of reference for him as a Ukrainian man of culture, it is not their legacy, with the exception of Shevchenko's, which deeply shaped Stus's literary identity. It is exactly thanks to his ability to overcome their cumbersome legacy through his modernist poetics that he will enter the Ukrainian literary pantheon. Moreover, it should be noted that the subject does not plan to ideally pay a visit to the four writers, something that one would expect given the weight of their authority in the national cultural history of Ukraine. Conversely, he invites them to visit him, indirectly stating his superiority over them as a proud member of the transnational community of modern(ist) poets.¹³

The dialectical dynamics between an ethnic and a literary identity in much of the underground poetry of the late Soviet times is coherent with trends that are typical of the whole of Ukrainian modernist literary culture, torn between the cosmopolitan tension that it shares with international modernism and the necessity of stressing and supporting national identity in the context of ever changing, yet continuous menaces from external forces. The struggle felt by both writers and readers about the very nature of Ukrainian literature and its duties towards the nation — something that, on the basis of Marko Pavlyshyn's work, one might define as a tension between text and iconostasis — runs as a constant throughout modern and

¹² Ibidem, p. 13.

¹³ In his letters, Stus frequently mentioned his dissatisfaction with several trends in both classical and contemporary Ukrainian literature. He was not impressed by Lesia Ukraïnka's works, although he acknowledged their importance for the evolution of Ukrainian culture, while he singled out Shevchenko's unique contribution to Ukrainian literature. See Stus's letter to his wife Valentyna Popeliukh from 8 March 1976.

contemporary Ukrainian literary culture. This ambiguity has strongly impacted the self-representation of the lyrical subjects of Ukrainian modernist poetry, contributing to the complexity and the hybrid character of this long and diverse chapter of the history of Ukrainian literature, whose significance today, in the midst of a new war with no simple resolution in sight, can hardly be overestimated.

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Przyjęto do druku/Accepted for publication: 17.07.2021