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## The beginning: The poetry of Lina Kostenko during the Thaw

A short period of time after Khrushchev's Secret Speech in 1956 was characterized by relative freedom of speech, plurality of cultural approaches and the easing of censorship in Soviet Ukraine. Under these favorable conditions, a new generation of young writers, artists and intellectuals emerged in Ukraine, known as the Generation of the Sixties, or "the Sixtiers." Despite the fact that they were part of Soviet culture, they gradually formed a kind of cultural opposition to the official culture. Lina Kostenko played a significant role in this process, and some opposition motifs in her works appeared from the very beginning of her career. This study traces the emergence of some of these motifs, which later became the basis of Kostenko's literary career: anthropocentrism, solidarity among the oppressed and national issues.

**Keywords:** Kostenko, cultural opposition, colonialism, Thaw, national movement

The so-called Secret Speech by Nikita Khrushchev in February 1956 during the 20th CPSU Congress, in which the first secretary denounced Stalin's cult of personality and expressed the idea of "returning to Leninism," has become a milestone in the modern history of the USSR and Soviet Ukraine. Some economic reforms and their social direction, the easing of censorship, a relative openness towards western cultural influences; all of these changes evoked positive impulses for Soviet society and optimistic expectations among the Soviet people.<sup>1</sup> Despite the fact that, in Khrushchev's mind, culture and literature remained only the instruments of ideological work and the correct education of society, the vague assertion of "returning to Leninism" remained for a couple of years the only direction in which Soviet

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<sup>1</sup> D. Filtzer, *The Khrushchev Era: De-Stalinization and the Limits of Reform in the USSR 1953–1964*, London 1993.

culture should develop. Such generality opened up space for different interpretations in works of literature and the arts.<sup>2</sup> Under these relatively favorable conditions, a new generation of young writers, poets, artist and literary critics emerged in Soviet Ukraine, known as the Generation of the Sixties, or “the Sixtiers.” Among these young people, Khrushchev’s speech was perceived ambiguously. For some, it was a kind of “insight”<sup>3</sup>; for others, it was a cause for optimism or just the confirmation of already-existing doubts.<sup>4</sup> In any case, a space for cultural discussion and individual approaches to literature was opened.

The Sixtiers are often perceived as the beginning of political dissent, but during the first years of the Thaw, it would be more correct to speak about cultural, even aesthetical, opposition to the dominant culture. The early poems of Lina Kostenko played a significant role in these opposition-minded cultural developments. In this study, I will show that, despite the fact that Kostenko, just like the other Sixtiers, was in some sense a part of Soviet culture, some oppositional motifs that later became the basis of her literary work appeared from the very beginning of her career at the end of the fifties. The literary work of Lina Kostenko has been the subject of many academic and popular studies that appeared after Ukraine gained its independence in 1991. It is most relevant to mention those that have appeared more recently. Besides the detailed study by Ivan Dziuba, *Гармонія кризь тугу дисонансів* (2016), in which Dziuba briefly analyzes Lina Kostenko’s early texts, and which is accompanied by a lengthy biographical interview of Kostenko provided by Oksana Pachlovska, there are a couple of studies that are relevant to my own. The newest book by Valentyna Saienko, *Поетія Ліни Костенко: традиція, контекст, художня своєрідність* (2020), in which the author concentrates on some specific features of Kostenko’s literary text in a culturological context, often with the help of comparative analysis; the monograph prepared by Hryhorij Klochek, *Ліна Костенко: Тексти та їх інтерпретації* (2019), in which the researcher interprets the main motifs of Kostenko’s work throughout her career; and finally, a study by Oleksii Kovalevsky, *Бунтівне бо чисте: філософія бунту і філософія серця у творчості Ліни Костенко* (2020), in which the author in some sense develops a philosophical approach to Kostenko’s poems based on existential philosophy and the philosophy of the revolt, which were earlier written by Oksana Pachlovska.<sup>5</sup> In some aspects, all of these studies correlate with mine, which is framed by the short chronological period of the Thaw (1956–1964). In this article, I will argue that the main motifs in Kostenko’s work which could be considered to be oppositional and even anti-imperial appeared in her texts almost from the very beginning of her literary career. In this sense, this article could

<sup>2</sup> P. Jones, *Myth, Memory, Trauma: Rethinking the Stalinist Past in the Soviet Union, 1953–1970*, Yale 2016, pp. 57–77.

<sup>3</sup> Interview with Bohdan Horyň, Kyiv, 13.10.2018.

<sup>4</sup> Interview with Ivan Dziuba, Kyiv, 28.12. 2018.

<sup>5</sup> О. Пахльовська, *Українські шістдесятники: філософія бунту*, „Сучасність” 2000, no. 4, pp. 65–84.

be perceived as a contribution to the research of the oppositional movement and the colonial discourse of modern Ukrainian literature.

## Aesthetic: The decanonization of the canon

The Thaw became a period of the “decanonization” of the socialist realism canon.<sup>6</sup> The voices which called for the widening of the borders of the official canon sounded even before the Secret Speech, especially those of Oleksandr Dovzhenko<sup>7</sup> or Vladimir Pomerantsev.<sup>8</sup> Finally, the discussion over the further development of Soviet culture which followed after the Secret Speech formed a modified concept of Soviet culture. Some “widening” were allowed with the silent consent of the party leadership. Writers could focus much more on human beings and were not obliged to focus solely on the working man. This tendency to a type of hybrid “socialistic anthropocentrism” was allowed during the first years of the Thaw. The idea of the uniqueness of each human being resonated in the texts of writers throughout the USSR: in Yevgeny Yevtushenko’s *Людей неинтересных в мире нет* (1962), in the book by Lithuanian writer Eduardas Medzhelaitis, *Человек* (1961), or in Vasyl Symonenko’s well-known poem *Ти знаєш, що ти людина?* (1963). This did not mean that the traditional canon was destroyed: Khrushchev still called for the writing of literary works glorifying the working men and women in factories; the ideological party discourse remained crucial for any kind of literary text; confrontational rhetoric over hostile ideologies was still supported; and positive pathos remained the key element of official culture.

Describing the early texts of Lina Kostenko, Ivan Dziuba has stated that they were marked by the inevitable “social topics” of the era.<sup>9</sup> Indeed, as with all other Sixtiers, Kostenko’s first steps in literature were influenced by the dominant culture, which is quite logical and natural. Some elements that could be perceived as a link to the mainstream official culture appeared in the first collection of poems *Проміння землі* (1957), but the general pathos, optimism or party rhetoric was strange for the young poetess. The first three collections of Kostenko’s poems published during the Thaw — *Проміння землі* (1957), *Вітрила* (1958) and *Мандрівки серця* (1961) — were marked by intellectualism, opposing the official concept of “simplicity of literature.” Kostenko’s intellectualism was not only evident in that reading her poems required a solid educational background to understand her references to many his-

<sup>6</sup> Х. Гюнтер, *Жизненные фазы соцреалистического канона*, [in:] *Соцреалистический канон*, ред. Х. Гюнтер, И. Добренко, Санкт-Петербург 2000, p. 286.

<sup>7</sup> О. Кошелівець, *Панорама найновішої літератури в УРСР. Поезія, проза, критика*, Пролог 1963, p. 5.

<sup>8</sup> P. Jones, *Myth, Memory, Trauma: Rethinking the Stalinist Past in the Soviet Union, 1953–1970*, p. 62.

<sup>9</sup> І. Дзюба, *Є поети для епох*, Київ 2019, p. 12.

torical personages (from the artist Horace Vernet to the world chess champion Wilhelm Steinitz), or to comprehend her use of complex metaphorical characters such as the “granite fishes”;<sup>10</sup> Kostenko’s intellectualism, above all, consisted of the articulation of the internal dimension, concentration on the internal feelings of the human being, its personal emotions and traumas. In this sense, Kostenko’s anthropocentrism is very often expressed with the help of existential motifs, as the opposite of the outer mainstream pathos and positive joy of the collective building of the bright future.<sup>11</sup>

The main topics which Lina Kostenko used to define herself apart from the official mainstream were the motifs of childhood and nature. Childhood, as Kostenko wrote in one of her early poems, was “the best that you have inside of you.”<sup>12</sup> For the poetess, childhood was a source of sincerity and natural behavior, without all the affected elements that grown-up life and the hypocrisy of Soviet reality brought. That is why childhood was one of the key motifs and instruments of self-immersion in the existential world of self, and this is how childhood was articulated in Kostenko’s first collections of poems, where she combined these two topics (*Я виросла в садах* [1957], *Поля мого дитинства* [1961]).

At the same time, the childhood of Lina Kostenko, just like that of the other Sixtiers, fell during the war years. This traumatic experience of a childhood broken by war appeared at the very beginning of Kostenko’s poetic career, even before the first collection of poems was published in 1957; for example, *Стою над згаріщем (Згадка про Труханів острів)* (1945).<sup>13</sup> This motif was developed in her first books, such as in *Вітрила* (1958), where Kostenko wrote:

Були у мене за дитячих літ / такі блакитні очі / як згадати/ що навіть білий світ / мені здавався голубуватим / І в тому світі не було / Ні тіні чорної / ні плями / Лише довір’я і тепло / І щедре сонце над полями... / але ввійшло в дитячі дні небачене / і неймовірне доти / червоний колір крові на війні / і чорний колір людської скорботи / ...<sup>14</sup>

Finally, Kostenko herself stated that “war and terror are something that marks people for their whole lives.”<sup>15</sup> That is why exploring childhood, on the one hand, as a source of sincerity, and on the other, as a traumatic war experience, was the way to avoid official, positive literature and to concentrate on herself.

Nature, as another general motif of Lina Kostenko’s texts throughout her career, appeared from the first known collections of her poems. The poetess perceives nature in different ways: Earth in general, as expressed in the title of the first book *The Rays of the Earth*; experiences the beginning of winter (“...i raptom — stohne, mete

<sup>10</sup> Л. Костенко, *Вітрила*, Київ 1958, р. 26.

<sup>11</sup> О. Пахльовська, *Українські шістдесятники: філософія бунту*, “Сучасність” 2000, no. 4, р. 65–84.

<sup>12</sup> Л. Костенко, *Вітрила*, Київ 1958, р. 9.

<sup>13</sup> Correspondence between Pavlo Tychyna and Lina Kostenko. Central State Museum — Archive of Literature and Arts of Ukraine, Kyiv, Ukraine. Fond 464, Box 8503.

<sup>14</sup> Л. Костенко, *Вітрила*, Київ 1958, р. 3.

<sup>15</sup> І. Дзюба, Л. Костенко, О. Пахльовська, *Гармонія крізь тугу дисонансів*, Київ 2016, р. 125.

churtovyna — ... to bila zyha na zelenim pomosti ...”<sup>16</sup>; observes sunrise (“sontse zijshlo, jak schodyt vikamy”)<sup>17</sup>; uses it as a vision of hidden, potential power (“Rika zachovalas pid kryhu, v snihach zahubyla slid...”).<sup>18</sup> In most cases, one should not look for some hidden meaning or complicated metaphors in these poems. Vasyl Stus named this kind of text a “fixation of the mood.”<sup>19</sup> These nature poems were, first of all, another way to express her own mood and her unique perception of the world.

## Solidarity Among the Oppressed

Another important motif that was characteristic for Lina Kostenko’s poetry in the early stages was similar to what Homi Bhabha later named “solidarity between ethnicities that meet in the tryst of colonial history,”<sup>20</sup> or solidarity among the oppressed. This approach was not new in Ukrainian cultural history; some of Taras Shevchenko’s poems could be interpreted this way.<sup>21</sup> Among the Sixtiers, probably the best-known text that could be perceived this way was *Курдському братові* (1962) by Vasyl Symonenko. The feeling of solidarity among the oppressed cultures or nations was a part of the general ethics of the Sixtiers; this belief of the young people resonated with the thesis, voiced by Adam Mickiewicz, that “my home is right there, where someone is suffering.”<sup>22</sup> This compassion and sympathy with cultures that had disappeared, were oppressed or were still struggling for their, even if only metaphysical, independence, emerged very soon in Kostenko’s poetry. For example, in her second collection *Вітрила* (1958), the poetess uses the character of the Estonian poetess of the 19th century, Lidia Kojdula, who found herself abroad and yearned for her homeland (*Лідія Койдула на чужині* [1958]).<sup>23</sup> More often, Kostenko uses the vision of some unidentified disappearing culture, for example, in her poem *Погасли кострища стоянок* (1958),<sup>24</sup> in which the poetess meditates on the fate of an ancient tribe. Kostenko wrote more concretely a few years later, when the poem *Іма Сумак* (1962) was published. In this, the poetess is frankly wistful about the decline of the culture of the Incas (“Bulo na sviti plemja inky — bulo na

<sup>16</sup> Л. Костенко, *Мандрівки серця*, Київ 1961, р. 21.

<sup>17</sup> Ibidem, р. 43.

<sup>18</sup> Л. Костенко, *Проміння землі*, Київ 1957, р. 21.

<sup>19</sup> А. Лазоренко, *Штрихи до портрету Василя Стуса*, [in:] *Василь Стус: поет і людина*, ред. О. Орач, Київ 1993, р. 19.

<sup>20</sup> H. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*, London-New York 1994, р. 331.

<sup>21</sup> R. Finnin, “Mountains, masks, metre, meaning: Taras Shevchenko’s *Kavkaz*”, *The Slavonic and East European Review* 83, 2005, no. 3, pp. 396–439.

<sup>22</sup> О. Пахльовська, *В Європі на генетичному рівні виникає спонтанна любов до народу, що постав на захист своєї свободи*, <https://m.day.kyiv.ua/uk/article/top-net/oksana-pahlovska-v-yevropi-na-genetychnomu-rivni-vynykae-spontanna-lyubov-do-narodu> [7.11.2020].

<sup>23</sup> Л. Костенко, *Вітрила*, Київ 1958, р. 14.

<sup>24</sup> Л. Костенко, *Мандрівки серця*, Київ 1961, р. 11.

sviti — i nema...”). On the other hand, this is not just a meditation about the decline and the rebirth of some ancient culture, but also the awareness of the role of the cultural figure as a bearer of cultural traditions and national values:

...Чи плем'я, знищене для битви, / помстилось голосом співця? ... Йому під силу велич опер / врочистий грім чужих молитв. / А він, могутній, чинить опір, / співає те, що кров велить. / Співає гімни смертна жінка. / А в ній — чи знає і сама? / безсмертно тужить плем'я — інки. / Те плем'я, котрого нема.<sup>25</sup>

It would probably be an exaggeration to argue that this kind of solidarity was just an instrument for the allusion to the contemporary situation in Soviet Ukraine. Above all, it was clearly a feeling of sympathy with the oppressed cultures. Still, the example of the Ima Sumak poem offers the assumption that at the beginning of the sixties, Kostenko was already considering her friends and herself in the roles of carriers and continuators of national Ukrainian traditions.

## National question

The self-awareness of the Sixtiers as the “new generation of Ukrainian national intelligentsia”<sup>26</sup> and the gradual understanding that they were the continuators of national cultural tradition were the key points that united this generation of writers. Under the conditions of the Soviet policy of “merging of nations” (or, in other words, the creation of the Soviet class identity which sought to marginalize the national originality) and the gradual russification of Ukraine,<sup>27</sup> the articulation of their own national distinctiveness became one of the crucial goals of the literary works of the Sixtiers. In an effort to emphasize Ukrainian uniqueness, young poets of the sixties addressed the topics of Ukrainian history: Cossack motifs or the classical figures of Ukrainian culture, primarily Taras Shevchenko.

If, in Lina Kostenko's first book, the national (or even ethnographical) motifs are practically limited to a couple of mentions of the Carpathian Mountains or the Hutsuls (*Добре живу* [1957], *Моя перша зустріч з гуцулами* [1957]), and her second book includes only one mention of a Cossack as a character in *Дума про три камені* (1958), then in the third book, *Мандрівки серця* (1961), the national motifs become clearly visible. The poetess frankly professes to her Cossack origin, which sounded similar to Vasyl Symonenko; Cossack culture, as a symbol of power, as something to be proud of: “Та sertse povik ne zdorozhytsia, I strachu ne znaje ne darom. Mij pradid був запорозhtsem, vodyv за porohy Bajdary.”<sup>28</sup> This Cossack motif will

<sup>25</sup> О. Кудрін, *Ліна Костенко*, Харків 2017, с. 70.

<sup>26</sup> Р. Корогодський, *Брама світла: Шістдесятники*, Львів 2009, с. 46.

<sup>27</sup> В. Krawchenko, *Social Change and National Consciousness in Twentieth-Century Ukraine*, Toronto 1985, pp. 186–202.

<sup>28</sup> Л. Костенко, *Мандрівки серця*, Київ 1961, р. 6.

be later developed in dozens of poems, primarily in Kostenko's monumental texts *Берестечко* (1999) and *Маруся Чурай* (1979), but the origins of these national topics already appeared at the very beginning of the sixties.

Another national topic is the character of Taras Shevchenko. Shevchenko first appears in Kostenko's poems in the already-mentioned collection *Мандрівки серця*. In the first poem Kobzar appears as a wise mentor, to whom the poetess directs her insecurity about the new era ("Kobzariu, znajesh, nelehka epocha, tsej dvadciatyj vik...") and Shevchenko is the one who supports the poetess with the famous words, "there was no era for poets, but there were poets for the era."<sup>29</sup> In the second case, Shevchenko appears in his traditional image, as the steadfast freedom fighter, regardless of his imprisonment and oppression: "A pisnia narostala u zaslanni, a pisnia hraty rozbyvala vschent."<sup>30</sup> A few years after this publication, Kostenko came back to the same topic, but in a different context. The fourth, and later banned, collection of poems *Зоряний інтеграл* (1963), included the following poem, which was distributed in samizdat at the end of the Thaw:

Що писав би Шевченко / у тридцять другому, в тридцять сьомому роках? / Певно, побувавши на Косаралі, / побував би ще й на Соловках. / Загартований, заграгований, / прикиданий землю, снігом, кременем, / досі був би реабілітований. / Хоч посмертно, зате — своєчасно.<sup>31</sup>

This poem is not just another articulation of the poetess' national identity with the help of Shevchenko, or a meditation about the role of the oppressed poet; it was primarily the reaction to the processes of the rehabilitation of Stalin's terror's victims that took place in the end of the fifties. Despite the fact that the massive rehabilitation was undoubtedly positive, it still opened deep wounds. The Sixtiers justly felt that irreparable damage had been caused by the Soviet regime; above all, the murder of dozens of the representatives of Ukrainian intelligentsia in the thirties, the so-called Executed Renaissance. The rehabilitations could hardly help to heal this wound. This is what is expressed in the last word of this poem, "in time," pronounced ironically and in the Russian language. This poem also marks a much more radical approach on the part of Lina Kostenko. It was not aesthetical opposition, cultural independence or an attempt to vindicate some sovereign view on historical issues. This was probably one of the first clear and uncovered challenges Lina Kostenko made to the Soviet regime.

When talking about the Sixtiers, one should keep in mind that during the so-called Thaw in the USSR, the Sixtiers were part of official culture. Despite the fact that by the end of 1962, Soviet censorship had intensified (Lina Kostenko felt it like no other, because her fourth book, *The Star Integral*, was completely banned in 1963), there was still relative freedom to write and to maneuver between the official socialist realism and different literary innovations. During the years of the Thaw, the Sixtiers rapidly developed and their texts became much more confrontational towards the of-

<sup>29</sup> Ibidem, p. 4.

<sup>30</sup> Ibidem, p. 16.

<sup>31</sup> Interview with Bohdan Horyń.

ficial culture. The poems of Lina Kostenko exceeded the official canon with the help of clearly humanistic and even existential motifs. The poetess tried to define herself in contrast to the official positive pathos by concentrating on the human being. The motif of solidarity among oppressed cultures appeared in Kostenko's text as a part of the ethical culture of the Sixtiers. One of the most important motifs of the early works of Lina Kostenko, just like for the other Sixtiers, was the issue of nationality. The attempt to separate Ukrainian history and to emphasize the sovereignty of Ukrainian culture despite the governmental policy of the merging of nations, could even be perceived as anti-imperial approaches.<sup>32</sup> All these motifs became crucial for Lina Kostenko in later years, but they emerged and were already developed in her first collections of poems, published during the years of the Thaw.

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<sup>32</sup> М. Шкандрій, *В обіймах імперії. Російська і українська літератури новітньої доби*, Київ 2004, р. 50.

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