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The European idea and national identity in Ukrainian literature at the turn of the 19th and 20th centuries

Abstract

The article presents the process of modernization of Ukrainian literature at the turn of the 19th and 20th centuries. On the one hand, the author analyzes the adaptation of the European idea and culture to Ukrainian realities, on the other hand, the evolution of nationalism reaching its maturity phase is observed in the text. This is evidenced by the declarations and programs published in such magazines as *Ukrain'ska Khata* [Ukrainian Hut] during the years 1909–1914, especially by the articles of Mykola Yevshan and Andriy Tovkachevsky. The discussions that took place during that period were particularly significant in establishing the direction for the development of national culture. Ukrainian literature acquires the features of cultural openness and dialogue, which are clearly illustrated by the works of its prominent authors such as Ivan Franko, Lesia Ukrainka, Mykhailo Kotsiubynsky, Olha Kobylianska, Ahatanhel Krymsky.

Keywords: modernism, nationalism, culture, literature, national tradition

Idea europejska a tożsamość narodowa w literaturze ukraińskiej przełomu XIX i XX wieku

Streszczenie

W artykule został ukazany proces modernizacji literatury ukraińskiej w końcu XIX i na początku XX wieku. Autor z jednej strony obserwuje adaptację idei Europy oraz przyswojenie europejskiego modelu kulturowego na gruncie, z drugiej zaś ewolucję nacjonalizmu wchodzącego w fazę dojrzałości. Świadczą o tym deklaracje i programy ogłoszone na łamach czasopisma *Ukraińska Chata* (*Українська хата*, 1909–1914), zwłaszcza artykuły autorstwa Mykoły Jewszana oraz Andrija Towkaczewskiego. Na szczególną uwagę zasługują prowadzone wówczas dys-

kusje, w wyniku których wytyczane są drogi rozwoju narodowej kultury. Literatura ukraińska przyswaja cechy otwartości kulturowej oraz dialogiczności, co dobitnie udowadnia twórczość jej wybitnych autorów, takich jak Iwan Franko, Łesia Ukrainka, Mychajło Kociubynski, Olga Kobyłańska czy Agatanheł Krymski.

Słowa kluczowe: modernizm, nacjonalizm, kultura, literatura, narodowa tradycja

The theoretical understanding of the European idea shows certain dynamics (Weller, 2021). Previously, this idea was applied mainly to Western European cultures, whose national identification in the 19th century occurred due to comparison with common European heritage (Fendler, Wittlinger, 1999). However, recently more and more research interest has been focused on Eastern Europe: one reason for a new discussion about Europeaness was discussed at length by Larry Wolff in his famous book *Inventing Eastern Europe* (Wolff, 1994), another and more significant one is the civilizational and cultural emancipation of Eastern Europe, which is actively taking place after the fall of communism in this part of the continent. This tendency is also present in Ukrainian humanities: the problem of European identity is raised in several important works devoted to Ukrainian modernism (Pavlychko, 1999; Shumylo, 2003; Hundorova, 2009; Tkachenko, 2010). As modern Ukraine continues to integrate into the European cultural space, the need for such studies is increasing, and they must be developed in every possible way.

The purpose of the article is to clarify the dialectical unity of the two concepts denoting European and national ideas. We aim to show how the Europeanization of Ukrainian literature at the turn of the 19th and 20th centuries prompts a radical rethinking of national identity. This process continues throughout the period; it is characterized both by the publication of innovative literary texts and by sharp discussions among Ukrainian intellectuals.

Europe up close

The gap between the European idea and national ideology, between modernity and tradition, and the tension between the desire for renewal and loyalty to the traditional image of Ukrainianness became the cornerstone problem that was most actively discussed in the context mentioned above. At the beginning of the 20th century, a new understanding of the national issue emerged in Ukraine. If we refer to the well-known theory of nations by Anthony D. Smith, it should be noted that this new understanding had an unstable and critical nature. In general, the formation of the Ukrainian nation can hardly be attributed to the typical models described by Smith: while the Western model of the nation is based on the law, which plays a central role and integrates society, in Ukraine a symbolic community was formed, which was united by customs, traditions, cultural and historical memory

(Smith, 1994, pp. 20–21; Ryabchuk, 2019, pp. 47–48). This explains why a special weight in affirming the national interest was given to fiction, emphasizing its civic and patriotic mission in every possible way (Matviyishyn, 2009; Zabuzhko, 1993).

The principle of artistic freedom, which has already borne brilliant fruit in the cultures of neighbouring nations, was located on the opposite side of the national-patriotic duty. However, due to its focus on the individual choice of the artist, this freedom separated the artist from the national roots and stimulated creative searches in the wider field of universal culture. Thus, the collision of national ground and groundlessness — which is synonymous with European openness and cosmopolitanism — was born. Heated arguments between writer-intellectuals took place in the context of such a collision. Significantly, the disputes remained relevant in the 1920s with Mykola Khvylovy's slogan of "Europe or Enlightenment," in the 1960s with program article *The Sixtiers and the West* by Yevhen Sverstiuk, and even after Ukraine regained independence (Hnatiuk, 2003). The strategic importance of the interplay between national and European factors was vividly and convincingly written about by Yurii Sherekh (Shevelov):

At the beginning of our century, when everything was still peacefully dozing on the surface of human life, when the fires of burning cities had not yet flared up, and the tornadoes that carried people away in the gusts of hot sand had not yet raged — even then Ukrainian literature raised the problem of groundlessness, and for this, we are grateful to it and respect it. In essence, the entire transition from what is called the "Narodnik" (populists) or "ethnographic" period of our literature to a new stage of its development. It was a transition from literature attached to its soil, like a white hut to rich black soil, to literature detached from its soil and eager to find it. This was manifested in turning to worldly themes, in immersion in the inner depths of characters, and in the moods of thirst and despair that were still unclear and vague, but already not "public," completely different, incomprehensible, and unfamiliar. From the idyll of the white hut, from the simple poor Cossack chivalry, literature set off into the sea of darkness, where some undefined sadness swayed, where, indeed, there was no storm yet, but the premonition of it vibrated in some incomprehensible *valse mélancolique*, where a peasant said goodbye to his village before a stone cross, where some *fatae morganae* mirages were carried away. Then a new feeling emerged: a longing for groundlessness.¹ (Shevelov, 1998, p. 392)

Supporters of the traditional view on the national question often did not understand the importance of openness to other cultures, a key characteristic of Europeanism. Their vulnerable experience of colonial struggle led them to internalize the tactics of action in conditions of imperial pressure and total assimilation [which ultimately resulted in denationalization — V.V.]. The only way to resist these destructive processes was to distance oneself from the imperial center and its supposed civilizational benefits that came through the mediation of that center. Another tactic was to focus on openness and breaking away from artificial isolation which has become a hallmark of the cultural and political emancipation of

¹ All quotations in the article have been translated into English by Vira Voievodina, unless stated otherwise.

the Ukrainian movement. “If Ukrainian identity among populists often equates to cultural isolation, then ‘Europe’ is a symbol of freer and more diverse cultural development” (Pavlychko, 1999, p. 41). The idea of modernization, penetrating the depths of the national movement, simultaneously destroyed old barriers that seemed insurmountable. The early modernist movement’s merit lies primarily in initiating a cultural dialogue, which began an irreversible process of integration into modern European culture (Korniejenko, 1998, p. 71). However, the division into supporters and opponents of modernization, as well as fierce debates among representatives of these camps, became a nerve-racking issue during the pre-revolutionary period. Devotion to Ukrainian literature (in conditions where it was impossible to freely publish one’s works in their homeland), as well as a demanding attitude towards aesthetic principles of creativity, orientation towards modern European culture, and a desire for self-improvement — all this testifies to the gradual formation of the consciousness of the national elite of its time. Marko Pavlyshyn claims:

Cultural parallels and interconnections of the late 19th and early 20th centuries demonstrate that, at least in the case of Ukraine, the development of national literature was also an engagement with Europe. Representatives of the Ukrainian literary process oriented themselves towards the norms of “real” Europe, whether through a conscious choice or an unconscious adaptation to the European cultural environment. This suggests that the creation of Ukrainian modern literature as *European* was part of the same process as the formation of modern Ukrainian national identity as European. (Pavlyshyn, 2013, p. 57)

In the consciousness of the new generation of Ukrainian intellectuals, the ideas of national and European identity are equally important. They create a characteristic dichotomy of self-identification, which is actually freed from the influence of the imposed model of colonial inferiority (Zabuzhko, 1993; Shumylo, 2003; Możejko, 1999). One of the leaders of the young generation, the critic and essayist Mykola Yevshan, writing about his native literature in comparison with other literature, advocates for the development of a new identity, one that would acknowledge the growing intercultural influences of the modern world, while also would ensure a balance between the foreign and the domestic:

The mutual influences between cultures have become so powerful in recent times that we must seriously consider them when balancing our national literature. As Ukrainians, it is even more important that we do not continue to protest in life and literature, limiting ourselves in advance from any foreign influences... We should not measure cultural phenomena solely by our own domestic standards or the conventions of national life but apply to them a more stringent European evaluation. On the other hand, it must be emphasized that all our excursions to “Europe” were disastrous and misguided. We either got lost there completely or when we returned, we didn’t bring anything really valuable back with us, just leftovers from a rich table. We tried to convince ourselves that this was the real “Europe,” real culture that was much richer than our “own” one! In both cases, we obviously ended up in a worse state than before we came. (Yevshan, 1998, p. 311)

Discussion tension

The sign of a pivotal time was the intense and diverse discussions about the ways of development of national culture, which were led among the creative intellectuals in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. The foundations of the discussion tension were already visible in the significant polemics between Mykhailo Drahomanov (under the pseudonym *Ukrayinets*) and Borys Hrinchenko (under the pseudonym *P. Vartovy*) on the pages of the *Bukovyna* newspaper in 1892–1893. The speeches of the leading representatives of contemporary thought provided the specific definitions of different identity formulas, which were developed using comparisons and identification with other cultures as a basis. This included Russian culture, which became a kind of mirror through which the Ukrainian national idea was viewed — in conditions of colonial enslavement (Hrinchenko, Drahomanov, 1994). Further debates concerned the ideological principles of creativity, although they originated from the understanding of a traditional or modernized model of national culture. Similar problems were discussed with varying degrees of acuteness in the polemics between Mykola Voronyi and Ivan Franko (1900–1901), Serhiy Yefremov and young poets (1902), Ivan Franko and the poets of *Young Muse* (1906), and so on. In these public dialogues, the question of a provincial (by the inertia of the oppressed state in the Russian Empire) or European path of development is consistently reconsidered.

The polemical tension mainly concerns two markers: the tasks and status of Ukrainian identity today, as well as its prospects and paths for development in the future. This provokes disagreements between supporters of traditional populist (“*Narodniks*”) and Enlightenment ideas, as well as revolutionary ideologies, between supporters of M. Drahomanov and Hrinchenko (so-called *polityky* [politicians] and *kul'turnyky* [cultural figures]), and between Galicians and Dnieper Ukrainians, who had different visions of the [political and social — V.V.] model of Ukraine based on their experiences with either Austria-Hungary or the Russian Empire.

It took some time to distinguish between the surface-level influences of European fashion and those that were essential and productive. In the last decade of the 19th century, there was the first approximation to European modernism through the adaptation of decadent ideas, motifs, and related images on a Ukrainian foundation. At the beginning of the new century, the secession style became popular, which balanced emotional extremes or avoided them through decoration and aestheticization (Matusiak, 2006). The innovative work of leading Ukrainian writers was eventually properly evaluated by Ukrainian critics, although often only after these talents were recognized by non-Ukrainian authorities, as was the case with Vasyl Stefanyk and Olha Kobylianska. The conservative principles of Ukrainian nationalism, which are focused on isolation and protection from external influences continue to have a significant impact. This tendency was sharply criticized by

Mykola Yevshan. According to him, the superficial adoption of European influences manifested through two stereotypes, representatives of which the critic calls “Janissaries” and “Enlighteners.” Some individuals easily adopt foreign things without their suitability for their own needs, while others are driven by a general aspiration for Enlightenment:

On one hand, our “Janissaries” have completely lost their understanding of the national spirit and literature; they have learned to criticize Kotsiubynskys, Stefanyks, Ukrainkas, or Kobylianskas, as provincial authors contrasting them with the elegance of some artificial literary figure from “Europe.” On the other hand, our “Enlighteners” forcibly began importing foreign fluff, unable to navigate among the truly valuable achievements of Western culture, and convinced the public that it was ‘top quality.’ In general, for both groups, Ukrainian literature was a mistress in a “short dress.” Despite attempts to make it mature and dress it in a “long gown,” they only made it superficially refined, teaching it various tricks from the literary “half-world” of Europe (Yevshan, 1998, p. 311).

The traditional view of Ukrainian culture as a culture of the past, represented by folk songs and historical legends and tales of the Cossacks, could not withstand criticism at the beginning of the new century and needed to be reconsidered thoroughly for the successful development of the national idea. Undoubtedly, the role of literary art in this process cannot be underestimated, especially since literature was the most important factor in national consolidation in 19th-century Ukraine. The process of opening up to various European contexts becomes of fundamental importance. The European theme gradually becomes dominant in Ukrainian discussions of the nature of Ukraine’s difference from Russia, as highlighted by Roman Shporliuk (Shporliuk, 2016, p. 358).

Therefore, European influence should not be associated with the dilution of national tradition, but rather with the effort to successfully rebuild it. Certain conditions emerged at the turn of the century that led to a shift in perceptions of the national community. This shift became particularly evident after 1905 when the pressure of Tsarist censorship in social life was somewhat loosened and new cultural institutions emerged to represent the national cause (Mikhutina, 2003, pp. 95–96). This process of modernization was an internal necessity for Ukrainians, which, unfortunately, was underestimated by the contemporary elite, who held on to traditional views of the sacred unity of the people (Mikhutina, 2003, p. 252). Additionally, external pressure played a significant role, as Russia’s imperial policy actively sought to assimilate Ukrainians. Consequently, the concept of the “modern nation” (Smith, 2010, p. 236) takes center stage, becoming the task for the young generation of Ukrainian intellectuals during this period.

In the face of new challenges, the doctrine of civic “service” of literature is increasingly being criticized, particularly by young advocates of national art. Andriy Tovkachevsky, a popular cultural publicist of the new generation, openly criticizes the populist concept of literature in the pages of the journal *Ukrain'ska Khata* [Ukrainian Hut] (1911), presenting numerous arguments highlighting its in-

adequacy. He clearly distinguishes between the essence of the term “civic responsibility of art” and the practice of literary creativity as a craft, which his contemporaries perceived as an important factor in promoting the national cause, regardless of the artistic value of the creative work itself. Tovkachevsky thus defines his position in the relevant debate of his time regarding the goals of literature:

The civic “service” of literature is understood not as the dominant idea of literature during a specific period, but rather as a *categorical imperative* imposed by society upon the writer and literature itself. It serves as a *criterion* for assessing the ethical value of the writer as an individual and the literary work as a piece of art. According to this principle, artists *have to serve* the people, and literature has to meet the *real needs* of the nation. Consequently, the artistic value of a writer is measured by an *ethical* standard, while the artistic value of a literary work is evaluated by its *utility*. Given that our society’s ethics are also measured by utility, it can be said that our attitude towards literature is based on a crudely utilitarian principle. The concept of utility is not interpreted in a broader context, but rather in its ordinary, everyday meaning. This is our society’s literary ethics and aesthetics as a whole. (Tovkachevskyi, 1912, pp. 418–419)

Therefore, a certain consensus was reached in the debates concerning the purpose of art. On one hand, the principle of civic duty as the objective of creativity underwent critical reassessment, especially among young writers who were influenced by contemporary European literature. On the other hand, the radical practice of liberating the author from social involvement and exploring intricate psychological conflicts, particularly within the realm of affective experiences (as evidenced by the fascination with decadence), found only a limited circle of adherents.

Occident and Orient

When discussing European influence, the broad significance of this concept has to be considered. The idea of Europe serves as both an attraction and a challenge for young Ukrainian literature. It is enticing primarily because it offers the prospect of cultural openness. This openness encompasses a fascination with the West (Occident) and a growing interest in the East (Orient). Ahatanhel Krymsky, as a writer and cultural figure of the new generation, naturally incorporates both directions in his artistic output. His example demonstrates the choice of an optimal path for modernization, one that avoids radical breaks with tradition while exploring the realm of the exotic — that which was previously marginalized and overlooked, yet has the potential to become a significant element of national culture. The modernist character of Krymsky’s literary texts is clearly evident in his interest in the latest themes and trends of Western thought. Indeed, as Solomiia Pavlychko pointed out, Krymsky deeply felt, experienced, and embodied the trending European ideas of his time — “the disharmony of the human soul, its Dionysian nature, decadent hedonism, and exotic passions” (Pavlychko, 2001, p. 46).

Moreover, the immense scope of his creative personality, encyclopedic knowledge, and proficiency in numerous languages and cultures — all these elements shaped a distinctive framework for his creative imagination, where various influences were aligned and correlated with his own artistic intentions. Despite his active involvement in literary and public life, Krymsky did not consider himself a writer and harbored reservations regarding his own creativity, allowing him to maintain a distance from superficial trends and eschew overt imitation. Unlike the poets of the *Young Muse*, for instance, he refrained from emulating the decadent style and instead attempted to express the underlying psychological foundations of widespread sentiments of despair and apocalypse (Tkachenko, 2002, 2010; Pastukh, 2013).

The writer's position was quite peculiar, often surprising his contemporaries. He interpreted the notion of Europeanism broadly, encompassing not only Western influences but also Eastern ones. The numerous translations and adaptations from Eastern languages in his collection of poems *Pal'move hillia* [Palm Branches] (1901, 1908), notably enrich Ukrainian poetry with exotic motifs and nuances of the lyrical subject's experiences. In his adaptation of the popular decadent sentiments of that time, A. Krymskyi proved to be more original than many of his contemporaries. It was precisely this originality that was valued by Mykola Yevshan, who held his talent in high regard among the tectonic changes taking place with the emancipation of art:

Among all Ukrainian poets, A. Krymsky perhaps comes closest to the type of the so-called *modern poet*. By this, I do not mean a narrowing of the realm of creativity, which we observe in modern poets everywhere. Contemporary poetry is far removed from the poetry of old, which served as a potent weapon in the struggle for freedom, a language through which laws were written and proclaimed for the people. [...] Present-day creators have distanced themselves from life, and their poetry has become a reflection solely of their private sentiments. [...] Krymsky undoubtedly senses that as a Ukrainian poet, he must encompass a much broader sphere within his creative endeavours; he senses it, even attempting at times to strike a chord that resonates with all, but these are mere trials, and the poet cannot venture beyond them, lacking the strength. (Yevshan, 1998, pp. 194–195)

In his poetry, A. Krymsky fundamentally (without affectation, with a conscious understanding of the weight of literary tradition in the broadest sense of the term) defends the autonomy of the creative individual and its right to express a wide range of human feelings and emotions. Despite the diminishing tone of self-commentaries, as seen in the preface to the collection *Pal'move hillia*, where he seemingly justifies the pessimistic and psychopathic moods of the book, he is aware of the originality and freshness of the images he introduces into Ukrainian literature. While others may assert themselves challengingly, this author formulates his ideas delicately yet with great clarity. His characteristic creed is expressed in the poem “Poeziie! Suputnytse moia...” [Poetry! My companion...], serves as a declaration of self-worth and the inner integrity of creativity (Yaremenko, 2001, p. 717).

The innovation of the novel *Andriy Lagovskiy* (1905) aligns well with the evolution of the intellectual novel in the 20th century, positioning Ahatanhel Krymsky as its true precursor. His characters stand in stark contrast to the protagonists of the positivist program of the 19th century, including the protagonist in *Perekhresni stezhky* [Crossroads] by Ivan Franko, as they focus on the impartial reflection of the world. The novel effectively embodies the decadent discourse, explaining the extensive discussion on its autobiographical nature (Pavlychko, 2001, pp. 148–149; Pastukh, 2013). Krymsky's characters are intellectuals who experience psychological disorders and deviations, emphasizing their own emotions. Despite the author's apparent lack of linguistic means in expressing psychological processes, their sincerity undeniably evokes empathy in the reader.

Conclusions

At the turn of the century, the question of European orientation in Ukrainian literature emerged with a sense of profound importance, signifying the consolidation of Ukrainian identity and a transition to a mature developmental phase. The populist–Enlightenment dichotomy is being replaced by a liberal doctrine of cultural openness, which urges young forces to seek support beyond the boundaries of the traditional Ukrainian world. They eagerly absorb the teachings of European intellectual creativity, being particularly drawn to modern philosophical ideas and their paradoxical and controversial nature. This marks a transition from the conservative model of the 19th-century nation, which deliberately seeks to preserve the cultural tradition of an oppressed and assimilated people, to a modern model that creates not only a cultural but also a political foundation for the nation, prioritizing the present and future development over the past (Ryabchuk, 2019, p. 48).

The affirmation of this new model takes place in an atmosphere of turbulent and intense discussions that characterize the public space and are evident in various publications, including periodicals and almanacs, as well as in private correspondence among numerous intellectuals. These discussions, initiated by Mykhailo Drahomanov and Borys Hrinchenko as early as 1881–1893, persisted into the turn of the century and in publications from 1909–1911. Through the speeches of prominent critics of the journal *Ukrain'ska Khata*, they evolve into a mature and balanced position. The articles authored by Mykola Yevshan and Andriy Tovkachevsky clearly emphasize the recognition of European orientation while concurrently preserving and nurturing national distinctiveness. It was not merely a superficial Europeanization as a seasonal trend — even though Ukrainian literature was abundant in its instances — but rather the organic assimilation of the achievements of European culture, including the modern era.

The cultural openness of Ukrainian literature manifested itself in the liberation from an exclusive focus on issues of ethnic and cultural order, in overcoming

the state of specific colonial isolation, as well as in the interest in a wide range of themes and images that expanded the cultural horizon of Ukrainian identity both in breadth (acquiring knowledge of neighboring and exotic cultures) and in-depth (exploring world history, mythologies, and assimilating global treasures). This path was successfully pursued by prominent writers such as Ivan Franko, Lesya Ukrainka, Mykhailo Kotsiubynsky, Olha Kobylianska, Ahatanhel Krymsky, and others. They paved the way for Ukrainian literature to emerge from its narrow limitations and gain authority even among non-Ukrainian readers. Ukrainian literature became the subject of a unique cultural transfer, which was fundamentally important for its time. Without the defined ideological and aesthetic breakthrough mentioned in the article, Ukrainian literature would not have achieved such success.

Translated by Vira Voievodina

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