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DONBAS: CRISIS OF IDENTITY

Three metaphors

Eastern territories of contemporary Ukraine present some of the greatest challenges. This is largely the consequence of their complicated history. For some time, these lands were parts of different states. They were colonized relatively late; moreover, economic development seemed quite unbalanced and uneven. Consequently, rich mineral resources of the region – the treasures of bituminous coal, which triggered rapid development during industrial capitalism of the late 19th and early 20th century and followed by Soviet industrialization of the 1920s–1950s, created their specific status among other territories. Though economic renaissance of Donbas was haphazard and one-dimensional,¹ it did not bring the cultural and civilization bloom, as would be expected.

The specifics of Donbas as a region manifested themselves differently in different times. Its stereotypical image is most connected with the deep-rooted type of Soviet civilization,² which lived in the system of self-made myths (the myth about heroic work of coal miners, crucial in this case)³. However, after the dissolution of the Soviet Union, this civilization, which experienced total defeat, preserved its sphere of influence in several specific enclaves – Donbas being one

¹ See: Куромія, Г. Х., *Свобода і терор в Донбасі. Українсько-російське прикордоння. 1870–1990-і роки*, Київ 2002; Studenna-Strukwa, M., *Ukraiński Donbas. Oblicza tożsamości regionalnej*, Poznań 2014.

² This term, coming from the well-known work by S. G. Kara-Murza, is widely used nowadays. We do not give it an impassioned meaning, as the above-mentioned scientist: Кара-Мурза, С. Г., *Советская цивилизация*, т. 1, 2. Москва 2001.

³ About basic myths representing the Soviet reality, see: Gill, G., *Symbols and Legitimacy in the Soviet Politics*, Cambridge 2011, 4–5. The Australian scientist writes first of all about the cults of so called “udarniks” (shock workers) and building of socialism, which is tightly connected with the formation of Donetsk identity.

of the most symptomatic ones. The characteristic tendency of those times lay in the fact that certain territories proved to be white spots in the background of social and political transformation of the early 1990s, to some extent becoming isolated from general processes. Soviet identity is preserved mostly among the population of “red pale” of the former Soviet Union, as American political scientist Roman Shporlyuk suggests: “...devotion of those people to Soviet values tempts to call them Luddites of the post-Communist era.”⁴ Donbas, indeed, was exactly such base. Therefore (with the legacy of the Soviet model), it turned out to be resistant to the changes of new times, being anachronistic in its fundamental orientations.

In the current conditions, the conflict of different identities within one state – Ukraine in this case – acquired an explosive character.⁵ However, in a historical sense the stereotype of the Soviet Donbas is only one of the metaphors which characterizes the past of the region. And this metaphor is fixed in public awareness because it was brought to life for a certain time through texts. The collective identity in such a case, obviously, is created not only on the basis of socio-economic or political conditions (as it might seem), but also on the basis of literary and cultural textualization:

*The evolution of the metaphors of Donbas is connected with the fact that the territory had a symbolic name, anchored with the help of literature, history and politics. In time, symbolic metaphors acquire certain existential meanings. They are so strongly rooted in consciousness that we no longer understand when and how these ideas appeared and how they influence us today. Over time metaphors transform into steady texts. As soon as we say “Donbas”, the associations of “coal country” and “the land of labour” come to mind. All of this comes from literature and is fixed in the texts connected with literature.*⁶

The metaphors of Donbas became indeed the product of mass culture. In particular, the Soviet image of the region is strongly connected with the literature of Socialist Realism (Russia and Russian language texts have significantly influenced the phenomenon), film, theatre, and mass propaganda. It was particularly during the 1930s–1950s that Soviet propaganda systematically strengthened the cult of blue-collar worker (miners and metallurgists), along with the related image

⁴ Шпорлюк, Р., *Формування модерних націй. Україна – Росія – Польща*, Київ 2016, 90.

⁵ Дорош, С., «Донбаський вузол»: ціна повернення Донбасу, *ВВС Україна*, 7. 7. 2016. [online: <http://www.bbc.com/ukrainian/politics/2016/07/160606_donbass_mentality_identity_sd>, cit. 2018-09-12].

⁶ Левченко, І., *Метафори Донбасу: як писалася історія регіону в літературі*, *Читомо*, 14. 3. 2016. [online: <<http://www.chytomo.com/news/metafori-donbasu-yak-pisalasya-istoriya-regionu-v-literaturi>>, cit. 2018-09-12].

of new socialist everyday life that was to accompany the rise of new cities and agglomerations. It doesn't matter that such image differed markedly from the actual living conditions in Donbas. It is easy to demonstrate this on an illustrative example of architecture of that time. Planning new cities, where hundreds of thousands of workers and their families were supposed to live, was guided by double standards – the connection of “official” and “unofficial” construction. Such double standards accurately represented the peculiarities of Soviet politics, which, paradoxically, connected pomp with poverty. The official centre of a typical socialist city made a monumental impression; it was where the Communist party élites resided. From all sides, such centre was “surrounded by vast housing estates which lacked elementary facilities and whatever possibilities for recreation and independent public activities”.⁷ It was to induce the faith in Communist ideals as well as a belief that everyday inconveniences are merely temporary. Yet “temporary” issues had not been solved and were inherited by the new state of Ukraine that emerged after the breakup of the USSR. The situation was also highly complicated given the decline of industry at the end of the 20th century. It caused deep crisis and numerous social, everyday life and demographic difficulties for the functioning of the Eastern territory.

The 20th century gave rise to at least three metaphors of Donbas, each of them reflecting the state of the region and its meaning within the country.⁸ The first image was formed at the turn of the 19th and 20th century. Its basic attributes were the steppe and hard physical labour. The second metaphor linked Donbas to Soviet industrialization and heroic labour. It became an axial for the consciousness of the population of the region and remained for a long time fixed in the Soviet society. The last, third metaphor, which becomes effective these days, substitutes and overrides the second one: it interprets Donbas as the zone of the entire crisis, dehumanization and existential void. The three metaphors that point, in different ways, to the mythologization of the landscape reflect the characteristic features of the region:

1. the beginnings of industrial colonization of the region;
2. its transformation into a leading zone of Soviet industry and exemplary agglomeration;
3. the crisis in the region which exhausted its economic potential; it also demonstrates the shortcomings of the system that was previously concealed.

⁷ Хмельницький, Д., *Сталінізація советського градостроїтельства в началі 30-х років*, in: *Miasta nowych ludzi*. t. 1 (OBÓZ nr 48). Red. Z. Grębecka – J. Sadowski, Warszawa 2007, 124.

⁸ Левченко, І., *Метафори Донбасу: як писалася історія регіону в літературі*, *Читомо*, 14. 3. 2016. [online: <<http://www.chytomo.com/news/metafori-donbasu-yak-pisalasya-istoriya-regionu-v-literaturi>>, cit. 2018-09-12].

It was in the 1930s when the Soviet cult of the region was launched with the dominant feature of the self-sacrificing and virtuous labour of miners. The cult gave rise to the so-called Stakhanovite Movement, i.e. the movement of *udarniks* (shock workers), which in those times seized the entire country. Nonetheless, this eventually turned out to be mere propaganda myth. Characteristically, its leading beneficiaries at the time were not represented by local intellectuals from Eastern Ukraine, but by those from the capital who were put in charge by the Communist government of the USSR. Those were mainly Moscovite writers and journalists, especially sent out to Donbas.

Local authors didn't join in until after the war. Consequently, the 1940s saw the emergence in Donetsk of the almanac *Literary Donbas* (in Ukrainian: *Літературний Донбас*) later followed by the magazine *Donbas* (in Ukrainian: *Донбас*) that reflected literary life in the region and published general government culture politics of the time. Symptomatically, it intentionally side-tracked Ukrainian language. The leading editorial posts were occupied by the writers P. Besposczadnyi, P. Syevyerov and P. Czebalin. They were pro-government writers who represented the Donbas version of Socialist Realism, focusing on industrial themes and miners' heroism. Many local talented authors could not even dream of publishing in *Donbas*. Creative self-realization in the conditions of the region seemed quite impossible unless an author became the bard of the Communist regime. On the whole, the literature of Socialist Realism did not aim to reflect actual situation. Moreover, it only superficially fit in the categories of truth and false: as contemporary researchers argue, Socialist Realism created a specific parallel reality and programmed life according to the laws which it developed for itself.⁹

Today, the region witnesses total crisis of humanism, a crisis that is the result of the neglect of humans and obliviousness to the social factors of social development. The epic scale of heavy industry, production plans and the pathos of self-sacrificing labour blocked another, shadow side of the life in Donbas that addressed self-awareness of an average person and moral values. This adversely affected the current situation where one finds himself in the role of *izgoi* who atones the sins of politicians, oligarchs and power élites, while those affected by the region's humanitarian catastrophe avoid accusation and attach the responsibility for their activities to others.

⁹ See: Добренко, Е., Соцреализм и реальный социализм (Советская эстетика и критика и производство реальности), *Colloquia*, 2007, vol. 18, 58–91. [online: <http://www.llti.lt/failai/Nr18_04_Dobrenko.pdf>, cit. 2018-09-13]. The basis for such a view on socialist realism was initiated by an American researcher K. Clark, see: Clark, K., *Soviet Novel: History as Ritual*, Chicago 1981.

The image of the wearing and dangerous work was replaced in public mind in Donetsk by other life phenomena, especially new capitalist principles of the day. In the representation of the regional identity, this image frequently becomes crucial, as can be shown by the popular poem by Lyubov Yakymchuk, *Apricots of Donbas* (*Абрикоси Донбасу*, 2015). Yakymchuk, however, refers not only to the Soviet memory, but also to the prehistoric memory of the East (Scythian, steppe), relating it to the present state of crisis and destruction. She is alarmed by the general defeat of the humanist project in the region, as the laws of physical survival and brutal rivalry have lost none of their currency from the era of the industrial height. In the collection of her poems, Yakymchuk paints the image of decay, lasting crisis, a frontier that reflects the current state of the region, as the disqualified myths of the past. Vis-à-vis these phenomena, she points out to the apparent need for new identity, which has not yet been created. To Yakymchuk, Donbas nowadays resembles a decaying human body:

Wait!
 The mine will swallow you
 The dark-skinned beauty
 Stony
 Maybe the Scythians built monuments to her
 In the middle of the steppes unshaven as the miners
 Wait!
 She will give birth to a dead sea
 Her waist is not 60
 And breasts are hanging down to the hips
 Do not go into it
 You may not return
 As a child in mother
 Who does not want to give birth.¹⁰

Yakymchuk's poem *Apricots of Donbas*¹¹ combines the above-mentioned metaphors of the region – industrial, Soviet and post-industrial. At the same time, Yakymchuk attempts to construct some other identity that absorbs the experience of the past, but also indicates the perspective of its development. Alas, current

¹⁰ Зачекай! / Ця шахта ковтне тебе / Ця красуня з темною шкірою / Кам'яна / Може, це їй скіфи поставили / пам'ятники / Серед неголених як шахтарі степів / Зачекай! / Вона народить тобі мертво море / Її талія не 60 / А груди обвисли до пояса / Не заходь у неї / Можеш не повернутися / Мов дитина в матері / Яка не хоче народжувати.

¹¹ Якимчук, Л., *Абрикоси Донбасу* (поема), *Шо*. [online: <<http://sho.kiev.ua/article-sho/5361>>, cit. 2018-09-12].

circumstances in the region (though they can be somewhat extended to the entire territory of Ukraine with its uncertain and transitional quality), prevent even a sketch of such perspective. The total crisis buries Donbas into chaos and uncertainty; permanent existence in the dead point of the civilization can hardly be accurately defined. The only fact that analysts and writers point at is that the current processes are of irreversible nature and the return to status quo that had existed several years ago is utterly inconceivable. Tectonic landslides that caused the war and the alienation of inhabitants of the region have not been thoroughly identified. In this context, literature plays the role of a specific treatise which is able to identify the landscape and the state of affairs, though it is unable to ensure fast and proper changes that would rectify the current situation.

The zone of decay

Young author Oleksandra Ivanyuk in her novel *Amor[t]e* (*Амор[т]е*, 2017) paints vivid image of the Donetsk conflict through the sensitive emotional lens of the protagonist. The war appears as a background, but gradually evolves into one of the leading motives, thus breaking the continuity of the storyline. It abruptly storms in the private lives of the characters, not only violating harmony of their relationships, but also causing long crisis and turning into tragic experience. Human fate becomes hostage of evil genius who suddenly breaks into the ordinary life and infects everything around by the spirit of aggression and hatred. No less significantly, Ivanyuk proposes smooth introduction into the theme. She portrays Donbas on the eve of the events of 2014. She gradually follows the trends that evolved into the conflict in the region, depicting, as it were, the history of the disease that brought the tragedy of the war. It shows how the spirit of evil and intolerance, which eventually exploded in the bloodshed of confrontation, gradually acquired strength. The portrayal of the cause-and-effect chain seems to be convincing, at least in a way it is able to clarify the restless behaviour and unpredictable choices of the protagonists.

The core of the novel is created by a rather atypical, original plan. Ivanyuk tries to illuminate the theme from reverse perspective, i.e. she doesn't portray Donbas directly, but through special glasses, thus vicariously observing the development of social conflict. The unorthodox angle proves effective in achieving this intention. The story is told by a foreigner who finds herself in Donetsk and spends some time there, unexpectedly getting into the whirlwind of events. Hence the mapping is not routine, but through permanent comparisons drawn by the protagonist in her imagination. The perception of a young Italian woman who is not acquainted with Ukrainian context – and the more regional Donetsk – is

specific enough. It includes numerous details that represent mental differences, contradictions and related confusions.

Although the novel is meant to be a fiction, the author offers proof of the actual love history.¹² She includes a photograph of the lovers and biographical note of Yuriy Matushak who became the prototype of the protagonist: young patriot, historian who went as a volunteer to the frontline and died near Ilovaysk on the 29 August 2014. The character of Francesca, as the author admits, is not entirely fictional either: her prototype was a real person who the writer had met in Warsaw and who had wanted to share her moving love story¹³. Moreover, the impression of the documentary character of *Amor[t]e* is often evoked by descriptions and scenes. They generally correspond with the chronology of the events, and demonstrate the intensification of the tension and later even the open conflict in Eastern Ukraine in 2013–2014. The material also contains descriptions of the main manifestations of the tension (public meetings, other civil activities).

Finally, the actual history is evidenced in the final chapter which is put together from Francesca's letters to Yuriy. These are letters to nowhere: they are not to be delivered to and read by the addressee. They are written in the state of frustration as an attempt of autotherapy and also as a desperate gesture – to save the beloved. Moving history of human love intrigues the reader and carries the novel far above the framework of social and political background (Donbas – Ukraine – war). Ivanyuk appeals to universal emotions and feelings outside the division into different languages, nations, political views, and social statuses.

Ivanyuk's Donbas is an infected, deformed, empty space. It is deprived of essential features, without which there are no chances for future. It is the region in the state of decay. In the beginning this state is fixed in the heads of the inhabitants. Later, it manifests itself in the reality and sets in motion a chain of corresponding events. Appealing to the theory by Marc Augé, Donbas in the novel *Amor[t]e* can be defined as a typical no-place, i.e. the transitive point where human life does not find comfort, but only sees a temporary port, poorly arranged, trivial transition. There is no will to live in such places because they represent space which cannot be defined either in terms of identity, relations or history.¹⁴ The people of Donetsk portrayed in *Amor[t]e* are well aware of this. Hence, they strive to leave the city at all cost. Among them we find Francesca's students who study Italian in order to emigrate. On the contrary, Francesca – led by the example of her lover Yuriy – is ready to accept Donbas seriously, not just as a transition zone. This, after all, determined her choice because she came there and stayed

¹² Іванюк, О., Я гуляла Донецьком по Google Maps, *ВВС Україна*, 23. 11. 2017. [online: <<http://www.bbc.com/ukrainian/in-depth-42080988>>, cit. 2018-09-14].

¹³ Ibidem.

¹⁴ Augé, M., *Nie-miejsca: wprowadzenie do antropologii hipernowoczesności*, Warszawa 2010, 53.

voluntarily in the uncertain times, in order to be with her boyfriend. Francesca becomes a good example of a civic responsibility for her surroundings not only in the apathetic Ukraine but also in self-sufficient Italy.

However, the novel shows the conditions of Donbas quite brutally, without glitz. In particular, Francesca is struck by the culture of the people who do not love each other, who are distrusting and evil, who consider their city to be merely a forced point from which they dream to escape as soon as possible. For Francesca, the shallow exotics of Donbas turns to be an emotional shock when she becomes more deeply acquainted with the mentality of the local people. She fails to find there any productive values that ordinarily form the foundations of civil society in Europe. The situation of being on the verge becomes true not only during the first days of the foreigner in an unknown city (which is quite understandable), but also every following day which can be full of unpleasant intrigues and events. This leads to the following considerations:

All the same, life in Donetsk – it's all hell where everyone you meet tries to con you. I have not met a single honest taxi driver or market seller. Once they discover I am a foreigner, which is not that difficult to tell in five seconds of conversation, they immediately try to deceive me, use me or rope me into something such as marriage business. My God, it seems everybody is obsessed with profit, fraud, escape abroad or whoever knows what else.¹⁵

To live in such no-place is not only uncomfortable and inconvenient, but also dangerous. The theory of no-place can be a successful explanation of the passivity of Donbas inhabitants unwilling to think on their own or falling into unfounded aggression when someone else is deciding their fate. In the novel, only the main characters (Yuriy, Francesca, and – to a point – their friends and relatives) try to resist the magical influence of no-place as a black hole; they fill the transit space with their own charisma, thus giving it certain attributes. However, they have to pay too high a price for this, because they are forced to sacrifice either their own life (Yuriy), or love and happiness (Francesca).

The collective portrait of the people of Donetsk is highly critical, though not unambiguous. It is a caricature – in the passages where Ivanyuk exposes ordinary inhabitants or accidental acquaintance. It is a compliment – in the situation when Francesca comments on Yuriy and his patriot friends who try to resist the enslaving

¹⁵ «Все ж таки життя в Донецьку – це суцільне пекло, в якому кожен зустрічний намагається пошити тебе в дурні. Я досі жодного разу не зустріла чесного таксиста або продавця на базарі. Коли дізнаються, що я – іноземка, – що не складно почути у перші п'ять секунд розмови, – мене одразу намагаються ошукати, використати або втягнути у щось таке, як торгівля шлюбами. Господи, тут наче всі зациклені на якомусь зиску, шахрайстві, втечі за кордон і бозна на чому ще.» (Іванюк, О., *Амор[т]е: роман*, Чернівці 2017, 99.)

power of the no-place. The collective image of Donbas which appears in the novel merits further and more detailed analysis. It contains certain elements of what should become (and undoubtedly will become) the subject of serious intellectual reflection. It touches upon local identity as represented by the characters in the novel: everyone in its own way, in its mosaic variety, but in a weak, most often non-discernible quality.

The search for new meanings

Circumstances, namely the war, prevent neutral discussion about the regional identity of Donbas. The hybrid war (information and media confrontation, and competition of the latest technologies of mass manipulation) makes the issue of identity particularly complicated and unpredictable for the analysis. The puzzle of mental, political and cultural differences of Donetsk existed throughout the short history of independent Ukraine: it was either in the centre of public attention or, on the contrary, was marginalised. It is possible to say without exaggeration that the mentality of Donetsk, whether we like it or not, is an integral part of the forming a young state. The success of the state as a whole depends on the extent the Donetsk mentality is distinct and how it combines with other regional identities of Ukraine. On the one hand, Donetsk region is one of the youngest in contemporary Ukraine, which explains the obscurity and indistinctiveness of its current metaphors. On the other hand, at the time of opposition to the war, it is Donbas that becomes the specific prism where various projects and models of new identity, which Ukraine of the 21st century should acquire, are being refined.

During the era of the independent Ukraine, sporadic attempts were made to reform cultural identity of the region. Nonetheless, they proved too weak and did not bring wider effect. First, it relates to general weakness and vague nature of regional politics in post-Soviet Ukraine. Second, Donetsk intellectual élites were too weak to offer a new model of the region. Moreover, great many of them left the region for Kiev or emigrated from Ukraine. The efforts by different enthusiasts, unfortunately, did not match the interest of the state. Only lately, against the background of the armed conflict in the East (and in direct or mediated relation to it) the attention paid to the cultural identity of Donbas has been rapidly growing. Hence, the recently published anthology *Breed* (*Плода*, 2017) introduces a number of noteworthy authors of Donbas whose works are not yet widely known. The authors featured in the almanac, including Vasyl Stus, Ivan Svitlychnyi, Ivan Savych, Leonid Talalay, Vasyl Starun, Vasyl Holoborodko, present a different image of the region from that which was painted during the Soviet and

Socialist Realist era.¹⁶ For the first time, collection presents such an amount of literary works not marked either by ideological or thematic engagement. They tend to appeal more to universal themes of culture, and also reflect humanistic and psychological aspects of life, representative of the underground of the late Soviet period. Hence, there are analogies to the Donetsk almanac in Kiev and Lviv underground of the 1970s–1980s. It is not only a matter of works being written in Ukrainian, but also of cultural positioning of the many authors who associate themselves with Ukrainian East. That, however, doesn't entail any association on their part with the proletarian Russian literature that appeared in the context of double marginalization: as the provincial version of Russian literature; and as the thematic and style impasse, because it limited itself to the imitation of Moscovite patterns of official culture. The authors featured in the almanac manifest individual rebellion against general depersonalization and cynicism.

Only a handful of authors are currently connected with Donbas by origin and, at the same time, consider the region the object of their artistic imagery. The few of the kind include such authors as Vladimir Rafeenko, Olena Styazhkina, Oleksiy Czupa, Lyubov Yakymchuk, Oleh Solovey, or Olena Stepova. Their works contain some contradiction which is a distinctive of the theme. Characters largely refrain from expressing their individuality either because of public mimicry, or for other reasons. Their consciousness depends more on general norms, customs and stereotypes; if they rebel against these norms, it makes their rebellion unpredictable and spontaneous, often subconscious, hence futile. That creates fusion of individual identity with the collective one. It makes the possibility of differentiation between the two phenomena extremely difficult. While portraying the people of Donetsk, the writers endeavour to expose particular mentality, and to answer the question of local identity, which remains the theme of passionate disputes.

The characters portrayed by the above mentioned authors embody self-awareness of the frontier. Though not clearly shown in usual circumstances, it can acquire categorical forms, and trigger violence and aggression in dramatic situations. In the works of the Donetsk writers Oleksiy Chupa – *The Tales of My Bomb Shelter* (*Казки мого бомбосховища*, 2015) and Vladimir Rafeenko – *The Length of Days* and *Little Book of Goodbyes* (*Довгі часи, Мала книжка прощань*) one notices a lack of individual features and, on the contrary, the dominance of certain social stereotypes of the behaviour which is meant to hide this absence. Apart from that we can talk about biological features of these types, the physical reactions (pain, fear, suffering), which have great impact. As the physical reactions are expressed quite clearly, in issue arises the acceptance of norms of social behaviour. Non-recognition or blind rebellion against social norms conceal the absence of

¹⁶ *Порода: Антологія українських письменників Донбасу*. Упор. В. Білявський – М. Григоров, Київ 2017.

certain moral and ethical tradition, and also the memory of the past. Thus, it is possible to perceive Donetsk identity as indirect consequence of the Soviet experiment, which reduced itself to the denial of tradition, maintenance of absolute power and the right of the stronger.

Grey Donbas

Oleksiy Chupa and Vladimir Rafeenko choose as their literary object an ordinary, “grey” inhabitant of Donbas in contrast to the business nouveau riches who are the actual wardens of the region. The authors attempt to listen to Donbas not in the hypothetical meaning as presented in political slogans. Instead, they deeply immerse themselves in the self-identity of their countrymen in order to comprehend their essence – either in the noble impulses or in low instincts or moral fall. They also create corresponding style. They argue that harsh conditions can be described by means of dry, laconic language, rough writing with elements of naturalism which enables to express the specificity of the characters. However, this is only applied at certain level, as both authors portray the different types of Donetsk inhabitants with vibrant local colour, though without flexible psychological motivation of their behaviour in general or in specific situations. Their characters are ordinary people with characteristic passions that often lead, through slippery roads, to suffering, aggression, violence and crime. Every history hides some fate, usually complicated, damaged, deformed. Although they don't quite emphasize this, it would be useful to look closely to the essence of those people in order to imagine, in their characters, their long-suppressed, withheld traumas. After all, every life was endowed with noble potential, yet the question is what came out of it in the gloomy surroundings of the demoralized Donetsk dump. The following excerpts from a short story by Vladimir Rafeenko illustrate the point:

Zabolot has just turned forty five. The age of men strong in spirit. The cottages immersed in November. There was no strength to look at such beauty. The cottages, half of them empty, everything, literally everything was buried under fallen leaves. [...] The cottagers who have not left for the city yet, were quickly leaving, abandoning everything here.

Zabolot, clad in a dirty, stinking overcoat, wandered from cottage to cottage and shot straight to the windows. He was not afraid of the coming autumn.

He was welcoming its terrible approach.¹⁷

¹⁷ «Заболоту стукнуло сорок п'ять. Вік сильних духом. А на дачах був листопад. Жодних сил не було дивитись на таку красу. На дачах, половина з яких були порожні,

Or another example of the incomprehensible, prima facie brutal behaviour:

Zabolot put on his overcoat. He brought Mary's things out of the cottage. He covered them by cellophane. He opened petrol canister and set the cottage and stable on fire. After rains it burnt badly and the petrol wasn't actually petrol.

He went quickly on the road, taking a close look at the architecture of the space lying under his feet.¹⁸

It is nor by chance that the two scenes are full of absurdity, revealing the futility of the situation or even of the surroundings, but of the conscience of the characters, their stereotypes, tendency to aggression.

Oleksiy Chupa wrote his novel *The Tales of My Bomb Shelter* straight after the beginning of the war in Donbas. He displays good knowledge of local conditions, along with solid understanding of specific schemes of the conduct of his characters. The chapters (the novel consists of separate stories) are histories of the lives of certain people. The book as a whole is perceived as an unorthodox collection illustrating the Donetsk mentality. The database of events is quite plain and schematic, not corresponding with the format of the novel. It is rather a series of stories connected by the unity of space and time, that becomes apparent only in some episodes: the armed conflict at the door of Vierka Labuha's flat (the chapter *Threesome / Секс утръох*) or in the attempt to destroy a monument (the chapter *Good Bye, Lenin!*). Chupa is not so concerned with the plot, as with the description of his characters. It is important for him to create a specific gallery where everyone can be recognizable without resembling anyone else. All in all, the characters represent an inherent community, city, region. Chupa strives to bring the collective image of his home out of the shadow of the traditional insignificance and greyness. He paints it with vivid, picturesque meaning. If he needs a plot, it is only to introduce more fully and with relief the features of the characters, their "cause and effect" condition. The portraits of the characters may appear prima facie static. Yet it is through their inner monologue that their thoughts and emotions are presented, and they acquire the fullness and complexity.

все, достоту все, завалювало опалим листям. [...] Ті з дачників, хто досі не виїхав до міста, поспіхом виїжджали, кидаючи все. Заболот у брудній, смердючій шинельці блукав від дачки до дачки і стріляв їм просто у вікна. Його не лякало прибуття осені. Він вітав її страшний прихід.» (Рафеєнко, В., *Мала книжка прощань: роман*. Харків 2017, 11–12.)

¹⁸ «Заболот одягнув шинельку. Виніс з хати речі Марії. Накрив їх целофаном. Відкрив каністру бензину, та й підпалив хату і стайню. Після дощів горіло кепсько, та й бензин, мабуть, був не до кінця бензином. Шляхом крокував швидко, пильно вдивляючись в архітектуру простору, що лежав під ногами.» (Ibidem, 54.)

The identity crisis of Donetsk explored in this study reveals liminal condition, one between the past – as characterized by the Soviet myths of Donbas – and the present, which made it possible to discredit the former at last. Today, the dysfunctionality of the Soviet metaphor of Donbas is clearly manifested especially in the aforementioned literary works. At the same time there is a need for different cultural and civilizational identity of Donbas that is fundamentally different from the one used in the past. It is difficult to say what the identity will be like. The prerequisite for the creation of the new Donetsk project is in-depth and critical rethinking of cultural heritage of the region, something that has been, as yet, addressed only marginally in public discussions.

Principles of integration of Donbas into general Ukrainian space need to be created. One needs to look for those connecting points of regional and national identity in order to bring them in sync. Oleksandra Ivanyuk, Vladimir Rafeenko, Oleksiy Chupa and Lyubov Yakymchuk attempt, characteristically, to appeal to universal truths, to Christian moral principles, to shared national values. The Donetsk crisis, as reflected in the literary works of the past few years, attests the fermentation of a new quality that emerges from the destruction of the stereotypes – the legacy of the past. Alienation and self-isolation, cowardice and brutality, which are often disguised as strange and exotic, are the distinctive features of this context. On the outside, it aims to look strong and self-sufficient (from here comes the cult of strength and violence, which is discursively present in the characters of Donetsk inhabitants). Beneath this image usually lays fear, helplessness, inertia and an unwillingness to change life. Such gradation shows instability of self-awareness of the people of the region of Donetsk. It highlights the state of existential void that appeared in the place of the ruined Soviet myth, and the crisis of values and moral landmarks in contemporary conditions. How to fill this emptiness with a new meaning remains a topic for future discussion.

ABSTRACT

Donbas: Crisis of Identity

Yaroslav Polishchuk

The crisis of the regional identity, which is a fundamental problem of the post-industrial Donbas today, is one of the main themes of this study. The identity of the region has been expressed in a few of metaphors. They can be found in culture texts of the 20th and early 21st century. The image of Donbas is formed by three metaphors: industrial, Soviet and post-industrial. By today they had lost

their meaning. The process of creating new identity is very difficult as it entails negation of stereotypes of the past. Soviet history had the strongest influence on Eastern Ukraine. From the point of view of that history, the population of Donbas enjoyed elite status. The current crisis reveals the disqualification of the Soviet narrative. It manifests itself in the escalation of aggression and violence which conceals fear and existential confusion. Instead of the status quo, another metaphor ought to be made to reflect the present-day context. Contemporary literary texts of Ukrainian authors point to these problems to a large extent. Identity crisis is reflected in the novels by Oleksiy Chupa, Oleksandra Ivanyuk, Vladimir Rafeenko and Lyubov Yakymchuk. They diagnose a deep dehumanization of the region and highlight the need of a new cultural and civilization project of Donbas.

Key words: Donbas, Regional Identity, Crisis, Soviet Myth, Contemporary Literature, Region.

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