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BOARDING SCHOOL AS A TALE OF WANDERING
– A MAN AND A BOY

The Revolution of Dignity and then the war have greatly influenced the processes of shaping contemporary Ukrainian literature. The traumas experienced by Ukrainian society called for identification of new forms of expression. The quest was uneasy and entailed a plenty of risk. Initially, documentary literature dominated literary discourse. Authors wished to convey their dramatic experiences to posterity. The same applied to poetry: not only established poets but also amateurs, indeed much more willingly, felt the urge to verbalise their emotions and experiences. Publishing on this subject has become fashionable and widely read, following the publish-or-perish dictum: “If you don’t publish anything on the war in Donbas, you’ve lost,” writes Andriy Kokotyukha in his article *Війна в лідерах продажу*.¹ Among the hundreds of titles only some stand out in literary terms and merit attention among readers and scholars. These include, by all means, the novel *Boarding School*² by Serhiy Zhadan. From the critics’ perspective: “...this is a novel about the mysterious East of Ukraine, the mentality of its population, the dramatic fragmentation of the last years in the Donbas region”,³ and the war prose which, however, is not quite orthodox as the term prose about the war has been hitherto unknown.⁴

Boarding School by Serhiy Zhadan is an exceptionally well-written novel about Donbas and its residents. Zhadan placed it in the positional war phase, showing the vast destruction it sows in the lives of ordinary people of the occupied territories. The military events become a mere backdrop in the portrait of the

¹ Кокотюха, А., Війна в лідерах продажу, *Espresso.tv*, 15. 9. 2015. [online: <http://espresso.tv/article/2015/09/15/viyna_v_liderakh_prodazhu>, cit. 2018-09-30].

² Жадан, С., *Інтернат*, Чернівці 2017.

³ Поліщук, Я., Дух «мокрої псини», *Річ: часопис текстів і візій*. [online: <http://chasopys-rich.com.ua/2018/01/06/dukh_mokroyi_psyny/>, cit. 2018-08-22].

⁴ Василенко, Г. – Булкіна, І., Сергій Жадан. *Інтернат*, *Критика*, 2018, № 1–2, 243–244. [online: <http://krytyka.com/ua/reviews/internat>, cit. 2018-09-30].

fate of certain people, of the surrounding world, the issues that determine their identity, unimaginable fear and exhaustion that embodies the question: When will this finally end?

“It was important for me to try to show [...] these events in the eyes of civilian population. In any war, local people are deprived of their voice. The war itself silences the voice of peace. It seems that it is the civilian population who should make certain conclusions and understand that bringing a war to one’s home automatically entails to deprive oneself of one’s voice. By bringing war to your home you risk losing plenty. It is hard to imagine a war where civilians dictate the rules of the game, set the tone. Instead, they are the background in which dramatic, bloody events unfold,” said Zhadan.⁵

Boarding School could be understood in terms of the theory of cultural geography, pioneered by Denis Cosgrove and Peter Jackson. It focuses on the link between the space and the issues of power and ideology. It applies to both theory and cultural practice, as following the Raymond Williams. These scholars extended the definition of culture to include daily routines.⁶ It is the latter that the Ukrainian writer uses to present the problems faced in Donbas in the most graphic way. Using the theory of Elżbieta Rybicka, we can identify a few methods by which Zhadan represents power as landscapes. Principally, one should consider the way of cultural production of the landscape, which in the case of *Boarding School* essentially entails destruction, a conversion into chaos. It is directly related to the possibility of exploring the novel in terms of “landscape as an ideological concept, which emerged under the influence of specific national concepts and historical memory”.⁷ The notion of space as portrayed by Zhadan is subjected to constant change because of the conflicting national and historical ideas. These transmutations have their deepest impact on the characters, breaking into their lives, dominating their choices and thoughts and even their senses.

In order to explain the complexity of the situation portrayed, Zhadan uses the road as the leitmotif in the novel. Here, the meaning of the road is not “a separate strip of land connecting particular towns or points of the area adapted to communication” as described by Stanislaw Dubisz.⁸ The protagonist has to step off of the ready-made trails in literal as well as figurative sense. It is instead “the space that separates specific destination”, not only physical migration, but even more so internal migration. It is a journey on roads as well as “off-roads, routes,

⁵ Куришко, Д., Жадан про «Інтернат»: приводячи війну у дім, ти ризикуєш втратити багато, *ВВС Україна*, 6. 12. 2017. [online: <<http://www.bbc.com/ukrainian/features-42185504>>, cit. 2018-08-10].

⁶ See: Rybicka, E., *Literatura, geografia: wspólna terytoria*, in: *Od poetyki przestrzeni do geopoezyki*, E. Konończuk – E. Sidoruk, Białystok 2012.

⁷ *Ibidem*, 16.

⁸ Dubisz, S., *Uniwersalny słownik języka polskiego*, t. 1, Warszawa 2003, 700–702.

highways, roads, access roads, bypasses, paths, streets, exits, stations, cellars, staircases, and all other places that may help to avoid an encounter with the military”⁹

In addition, Zhadan used the meaning of the road anthropologically as something that connects two points in space, a road that mediates centre with periphery. Physical and literal road described in the *Boarding School* connects two points: dormitory and home. The home, although lacking a lot, constitutes the centre for the protagonist – Pasha, a teacher of the Ukrainian language – and for his nephew Sasha, who lost his home because of his illness. *Boarding School* – dormitory, however is the periphery, a place where the boy was sent to, where he felt forced into exile.¹⁰

The novel opens with scenes inside the home. The opening dialogue starts with the father asking Pasha to bring the boy back from the dormitory. We observe the strained relationship in the family and their distinctively functioning home in the opening lines. A home, which is often portrayed in literature as apology of childhood, utopia etc. In the novel it is a home with no room, in literal sense, for the boy suffering from epilepsy.

This informs us about the inner state of the characters, their choices, values and understanding of humanity, to whom the home is a shelter and the best representation of themselves. We are therefore faced with a specific space, at first glance a certain “anti-home”, home infested with the legacy of the Soviet Union. In the centre of this space stands a continuously running television, which plays the part of an evening fireplace; it is the hearth and home. Still, Pasha has a bond with the building: “Pasha loved this house, he has lived here his entire life, and was going to continue living there. It was built by German prisoners, immediately after the war. It was a fairly spacious building for two families. The second row from the railway station, a densely populated private sector, largely inhabited by stationed workers.”¹¹

Despite all the shortcomings and flaws of Pasha’s family home, it was his sustenance and his shelter. It was far from perfect and filled with plenty of difficult and painful memories. History and socio-political changes never spared it. Yet, during his journey Pasha will understand that there was also love amidst the distance and coldness among the family members. The space of the home formed an unbreakable bond and love they shared. At the last stage of his journey, the protagonist will learn that, though this home is no paradise, to him it possesses the qualities of the Promised Land.

⁹ Ibidem.

¹⁰ About “internat” as a metaphore wrote Y. Polishchuk see: Поліщук, Я., *Гібридна топографія. Місяця й не-місяця в сучасній українській літературі*, Чернівці 2018, 181–186.

¹¹ Жадан, С., *Інтернат*, Чернівці 2017, 7–8.

In spite of appearances, the home in the novel acquires broader meaning. It is closely integrated in the space surrounding him and in an unbreakable way it is connected to the history, immensely complex and difficult, yet closely related to Donbas. This also brings in the issues of national identity. The protagonist has more questions than answers about his sense of belonging to a culture and nation. Therefore, contrary to other portrayals of home in Ukrainian literature, Pasha's home cannot be portrayed as a symbol of deep-rooted sense of Ukrainian nationality: to him the culture is not an easy inheritance. During his journey, when stopped by soldiers and asked who he was, he never answered in the categories of nationality, but by profession – a teacher.

Despite it all, the home becomes a shelter from all the pandemonium of the world. The characters feel as if it is their place on Earth where they feel quite safe, even though they don't know how long such state is to last and whether the rocky past would not take over the last piece of their space that is most precious to them. The functionality of the home is subordinate to a specific time in Ukrainian history – the war of 2015. It is the mayhem of military operations that forces the characters into a journey. Scholars in cultural studies point out that the road is perceived as dangerous experience, because of the unknown, the unpredictability, the undefined and the uncleanliness. All these elements become an experience for Pasha and later for his nephew, Sasha.

The main character begins his journey during Christmas, traditionally a season of hope, family reunions and happiness. Yet, his experiences are quite different. With great reluctance he begins his lonely journey to collect his abandoned nephew from the dormitory. The Christmas spirit is not only missing from his inner core, but also from the surrounding world. People seem to have forgotten about the holidays, and the silence around, associated with the momentary lack of explosions, in no way resembles blissful peace. It suggests a threat instead. It gives rise to suspicion and fear in the protagonist. Further experiences are even worse: images of destruction, decay and chaos appear before Pasha. Zhadan is quite adroit in the depiction of the contrast: "Two-storey building, above the main entrance sign Paradise. In the right wing of the café, in the left – a car wash, in the centre – an entrance to the reception. [...] Parking is filled with machinery and cars – heavy "crafts", undisturbed cars with Polish licence plates, a cluster of beaten and discarded cars – without windshield, with broken doors, with torn hoods. [...] – Paradise, – he says, smiling. – Instead the first ring of hell. Are you going – he throws him in the direction of Pasha and goes to the band."¹²

The scents of decay, decomposition and damp rise above these and similar views. The surrounding world is degrading, and all this takes place in a way that evokes the feeling of the greatest abomination. What is worse, during his journey,

¹² *Ibidem*, 30.

he becomes a part of this world: “In the corner the TV shows the news, and Pasha has a feeling that he has seen the news in real life today in the fresh air, a few kilometres from here.”¹³

External degradation is accompanied by the disappearance of human reflexes, by dehumanization. The protagonist confronts the destructive system and politics through subsequent detentions, checking documents and demanding explanations about who he is, where he is going to and why. There is no good answer for the latter. Any explanation may arouse suspicion and lead to accusation. So it is like playing roulette.

Using the topos so popular in literature, the wandering Zhadan exposes the conflict of generations, which has been growing between the uncle and nephew over the past several months. For Pasha, the experience of the collapse of the Communist system and subsequent transformation has affected his entire later life. Without it, he was deprived of a sense of security and childlike faith in the good of the world. After the rebellion, there was disappointment and a need to reconcile with the gloom of everyday life. When in other regions of Ukraine people enjoyed the regained independence and freedom, in Donbas, for the family of Pasha and their neighbours it meant poverty and a lack of future. Independence deprived them of the world that guaranteed them stability and prosperity. Narration from the inside, from the perspective of Donbas, it yields credibility to the text by Zhadan.

Further in the novel the uncle's attitude to the outside world is seeped in helplessness; the unwillingness to fight for change irritates the nephew. Based on their relationship, Zhadan reveals the cultural specificity of the region, its problems, seen from the perspective of its residents. As Agnieszka Matusiak and Mateusz Świetlicki suggest: “If we take into account the traumatic nature of the memory transfer of the past (especially the closest, the times of real socialism) and the systemic breakthrough in post-totalitarian societies, their culture-related consciousness and generational dispersion turn out to be the most appropriate research instrument to trace, understand and describe the nature and mechanisms of change in socio-cultural paradigms in order to reassess the totalitarian past of post-Communist countries. [...] This perspective seems to be the most effective strategy to describe the reality of the Eastern Bloc, because the satellite states were not only charged with trauma of totalitarian Communist legacy, but also of the stigmatizing colonial heritage of the Soviet / Russian Empire...”¹⁴

¹³ Ibidem, 33.

¹⁴ Matusiak, A. – Świetlicki, M., *Kategoria pokolenia we współczesnych badaniach, Posttotalitarny syndrom pokoleniowy w literaturach słowiańskich Europy Środkowej, Wschodniej i Południowo-Wschodniej końca XX – początku XXI wieku w świetle studiów postkolonialnych*, Poznań – Wrocław 2016, 17–18.

Zhadan flawlessly constructed the figure of an adolescent who cannot accept the constant withdrawal of his uncle, especially being at the stage when he needs authorities. There is no father and the mother, who works as a conductor, is seldom at home. The boy tries to look for support in the outside world, only to find it full of temptations and challenges. Giving in, he probably wants to attract the attention of the family. Raised without enough parental attention, he wants to see strong man in Pasha, a warrior for his family and ideals. The uncle's constant helplessness, even when the mother sends the boy back to the dormitory, evokes in his nephew rebellion and a sense of betrayal. No wonder that, when the war breaks out, he declares that he "does not want to know him and is ashamed of him". He expects him to take sides, but the uncle evades such choice. Zhadan uses the character of tutor at boarding school to diagnose the problems of the Donbas residents. In a stormy conversation with Pasha and a local PE teacher, she says: "You've been hiding your whole life. You have been used to someone deciding for you, someone solving everything for you,"¹⁵ "you are afraid to call things by their proper name, you are afraid to tell the truth,"¹⁶ says Nina to the PE teacher. When Sasha and his uncle start their journey through the war-torn territories from the dormitory back home, the boy is often the one to give explanations and display better judgment. In the face of the growing threat, these proportions, however, change.

Pasha and other people on the journey are filled by incessant fear: "Fear is invisible, but it's all-encompassing: as if you cannot see any fire, around quietly, even the sky above the glittering metal plates, but [...] the realization that you are in sight [...], makes this whole situation uncomfortable, and I want to continue to sit with my eyes closed and count, say, up to one hundred, until the next local monsters will go away..."¹⁷ The shadow of death, often meaningless, floating over them only intensifies the fear. At the same time, he mobilizes to fight for survival after all: "Pasha again conceals the unspeakable fear, he again wants to close his eyes and hide under the blanket, but the iguana does not spend time in vain, presses on gas and turns aside, just to the ravine, where the river should flow."¹⁸

His journey to a precise destination, despite earlier expectations, takes on instead the character of continuous escape, sometimes reminiscent of wandering. This incessant struggle with borderline situations, however, brings an unexpected approach to Pasha and his nephew. Overwhelmed by the growing fear, Sasha dumps the mask of an adult, and Pasha learns to control his own fear and be a support not only for his nephew, but also to the others they meet along the way. The joint journey home and numerous border experiences cast aside past

¹⁵ Жадан, С., *Интернат*, Чернівці 2017, 160.

¹⁶ *Ibidem*, 159.

¹⁸ *Ibidem*, 55.

resentments and disappointments. Zhadan shows how both his heroes begin to build their relationships from scratch and grow closer to each other. Sasha often regrets his overly long passivity, his waiting and looking at the threats to which the boy is exposed. Taking action to save the boy from the war, he tries to redeem his faults, at least in part. Sasha often notices his uncle's horror, his fatigue, but he appreciates that he can control them. He also tries to overcome his temporary weaknesses without revealing them to his uncle. He tries to behave like an adult, only occasionally showing that he is still a child.

Wandering through the apocalyptic world is a test of courage, strength and endurance. The landscape is an indispensable element of their search for the way home. Rybicka, in her studies of cultural geography, distinguishes different orientations. In Zhadan's novel, two of them are the strongest. The first "is to study the landscape as an ideological product that was created under the influence of specific national concepts and historical memory. [...] The landscape here becomes more of a field of struggle for the meaning and its use by specific national, ethnic and social groups rather than a neutral, geographic area."¹⁹ Zhadan portrays the complexity and ambiguity of these issues on the territory of Donbas. The meaning, which is the object of the fight, is not well-defined, ordinary citizen is lost in reading them. Yet, he experiences the effects of the fight painfully. Pasha and Sasha have to repeatedly wade through the tank tracks, pass by destroyed buildings and farmsteads with no doors or windows, covered with bloodstain. The entire landscape is shrouded in mist and smoke: "They have been floating since yesterday, as if the ground broke somewhere and something worst came out of the earth, and no one knows how it could be stopped, because no one knows how it happened, that the ground parted, releasing this darkness, which now spreads over the January sky, clogging all openings and crevices."²⁰ Rybicka points out another phenomenon: "...the research on the sensory perception of the landscape. The sense of sight plays the predominant role. [...] Nonetheless, its position is being contested by such categories as smellscape or soundscape."²¹ *Boarding School* abounds in descriptions that strongly affect the readers senses. Along with the wandering heroes, they almost feel the overwhelming smell of smoke, decay and rotting meat. They experience cold and damp, and his eyes are filled with the sights of destruction. The description of the field of undeveloped sunflowers exerts powerful influence on the imagination. At a point, yellow field with blue sky hovering over might evoke associations of Ukrainian national symbols.

¹⁹ Rybicka, E., *Literatura, geografia: wspólne terytoria*, in: *Od poetyki przestrzeni do geo-poetyki*, E. Konończuk – E. Sidoruk, Białystok 2012, 15.

²⁰ Жадан, С., *Интернат*, Чернівці 2017, 167.

²¹ Rybicka, E., *Literatura, geografia: wspólne terytoria*, in: *Od poetyki przestrzeni do geo-poetyki*, E. Konończuk – E. Sidoruk, Białystok 2012, 16.

Yet no sooner had the boy and his uncle seen the sunflowers than they turn black. “And so, they will stand,” thinks Pasha of the sunflowers, “like a zombie. Forgotten and cursed. Until someone ploughs through it all.”²²

Experiencing the hardships of wandering through the apocalyptic world, slipping through snow and wilderness, fighting with fatigue and their fears and hiding from the military together leads to a breakthrough in their relations. The resentments and disappointments from the past are set aside and the most important thing is to achieve common goal or safe return home. To achieve it, they must care for each other, keep spirits high. The events bring them so close that, at the end of the journey, the uncle and his nephew become friends who return to their safe haven.

Pasha's journey is multidimensional, partly a lonely one and partly accompanied by his nephew. Circumstances forced the teacher, attached to the place where he lives, to undertake the journey. He does not set off voluntarily and does not expect the journey to affect him in any way. It turns out, however, that the decision to leave the house was the first step to maturing and responsibility. His sister placed the epileptic boy to the dormitory, no one wanted to take care of him and the issue was silenced and avoided by the family. Yet, when the boarding school was in the centre of the war, the feeling of guilt towards the boy and the responsibility for him could not be avoided. The sense of responsibility grows with the awareness of the horror of the situation and the conviction that it is the last moment to save his nephew because the new authorities will not care about the dorms. During the numerous difficulties encountered along the way, Pasha is not indifferent to human misfortune, on the contrary; he begins to feel more and more responsible for the people around him. He also experiences the strength that good deeds release in others. One of the turning points of his journey is a meeting in the boarding school with Sasha's teacher who, with her relentless attitude and accompanying children despite the numerous threats, forces him to confront himself. One of Nina's statements directed to Pasha is also extremely important. It concerns a much larger group of people, exposing the mechanisms of securing peaceful life by avoiding confrontation and not taking responsibility for anything. The teacher accuses the silent fleeing from speaking out about important matters and for participation in the moral and social discourse.

Thus, Sasha's journey to the boarding school becomes not only a journey in space, but also an inner wandering, which he did not want. Thanks to her, however, he returns to the long-forgotten values and demeanour. It is not always easy, for it forces him to evaluate his lifestyle and work. It is especially difficult for a teacher to meet a former student at one of the block posts: the student chose hostility towards Ukraine. How could I have not noticed that my students are fighting

²² Жадач, С., *Інтернат*, Чернівці 2017, 171.

against me, against what I have taught them? – contemplates the teacher. The journey is also a metaphor for the next stage of maturing of both the adult Pasha and his adolescent nephew. On a journey through the mayhem of war, one can also see the metaphor of the family life of the residents of the house by the station. Its subsequent stages are connected with various stages of family relationships. The journey home becomes a pilgrimage and purification. It helps them to understand the value of home, and to appreciate all the elements that are important there and the processes that it is subjected to: “A house filled with a thousand items, spacious and memorised, to the last button in the top drawer. The homeland to which you are accustomed, get used to your own body. Parents are still alive and healthy, from whom you grow increasingly distant, whom you understand less and less, although this does not in any way disturb you: it is enough for you if they just are somewhere, somewhere near,” the protagonist recalls the days of his youth.²³ Now only his father is alive, but his presence is still irreplaceable, it becomes the patron of a sense of inner security even if the world collapses. “Quiet evenings, dark nights. So much joy in everything, so much warmth.”²⁴ The travellers, experiencing the horrors of war, think more about the home as the Promised Land and paradise lost. “Let’s catch the horn. Our windows are lit by the television screen. Home smells of fresh livestock,”²⁵ reminisces Sasha. The paradise is to become an ordinary everyday life. The four walls closed to strangers are in fact an alternative world, which was created by its inhabitants against the war. Alas, it is only up to them how long it will last.

Along with Zygmunt Bauman, it might be suggested that this exceeding journey not only becomes his experience of diversity, but it also makes him cross his cultural boundaries and the restrictions implied by his social context.²⁶ It allows him to break out of the impasse of acting as *Homo post-Sovieticus* unconcerned about the surrounding world, to see a new perspective and start fighting for what he really cares about.

²³ Ibidem, 227.

²⁴ Ibidem, 308.

²⁵ Ibidem, 335.

²⁶ Bauman, Z., O turystach i włóczęgach, czyli o bohaterach i ofiarach nowoczesności, in: *Ponowoczesność jako źródło cierpień*, Warszawa 2000, 133–155.

ABSTRACT

***Boarding School* as a Tale of Wandering – a Man and a Boy**

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This article analyses Serhiy Zhadan's novel *Boarding School*, where, upon military conflict in Ukraine, are depicted different fates of individuals, their varying interpretation of the surrounding world, the difficulties they face when trying to determine their own identity, the constant fear and fatigue, as well as the inevitable question "At what time will it be over?" In order to interpret *Boarding School* author used the theory of cultural geography of Cosgrove and Jackson, which puts a special focus to the link between space and the issues of power and ideology. Author has supported this perspective with the theoretical basis developed by Rybicka, that allows disentangling different ways of imaging power with the landscape. Analysis of Zhadan's anthropological understanding of the road links two points in space, while mediating between the centre and the peripheries. Following Bauman, one could say that the extremely tedious journey of the main character not only becomes an experience of diversity, but it also forces him to cross cultural borders and the limitations existing in his social group. In some ways, this journey allows him to break the impasse of functioning as Homo post-Sovieticus, who is oblivious to the world around him as well as to look at the world from different perspectives and start fighting for what he truly cares about.

Key words: Ukrainian Literature, Serhiy Zhadan, *Boarding School*, Military Conflict in Eastern Ukraine

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