

VAGARIES OF (ACADEMIC) IDENTITY IN CONTEMPORARY FICTION

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ABSTRACT:

Aim. The article attempts to look at the question of academic identities through the prism of the academic novel. This literary genre emerged in English and American literature in the early 1950s and focuses on the image of professor. In Slavic literatures the genre of the academic novel appears roughly in the early 1990s, which is directly connected with the change of the political order following the fall of the Berlin Wall and the disbanding of the Soviet Union. Contemporary Ukrainian literature with its post-Soviet heritage presents a unique source for the study of academic discourse.

Methods. An interdisciplinary approach which combines sociological investigation of academic identity (Henkel 2005) and hermeneutic literary analysis is used for this study. In this respect three novels from the contemporary Ukrainian literature – “University” (2007) and “Kaleidoscope” (2009) by Igor Yosypiv, and “Drosophila over a Volume of Kant” (2010) by Anatoliy Dnistrovj – are chosen for the analysis.

Results. The analysis of the novels shows that the literary representation of academics’ lives goes in line with the sociological findings, which, in defining a successful academic, put a strong accent on a given discipline and academic institution. The interpretation of Yosypiv’s novels about a Ukrainian nephrologist at the American Medical School suggests that protagonist’s academic success is rooted in the field of applied science as well as an American institution of higher education, while Dnistrovj’s novel sees a failure of a philosophy professor in the crisis of the Humanities as a survivor in post-Soviet Ukraine.

Conclusion. The given novels of Igor Yosypiv and Anatoliy Dnistrovj show that in the case of academic identity theme, the academic novels support sociological studies, i.e. the disciplines (Applied Sciences and Humanities) as well as the university rank (American vs. post-Soviet) play a decisive role in scholars’ academic lives. This in turn proves that the academic novel, like in the time of its emergence in the 1950s, continues to be a literary chronicler of higher education.

Key words: academic identity, academic novel, Ukrainian literature, Igor Yosypiv, Anatoliy Dnistrovj

In *The English University Novel*, Mortimer R. Proctor maintained that “the literary background of the university novel is (...) quite as important as the historical, and indeed the two are quite inseparable” (Proctor, 1957, p. 13). Charles Percy Snow’s *The Masters* (1951) may be considered a literary record of the university’s golden age prior to the 1940s. Albeit reserved for a select few, the academic life was taken for granted by scholars and society to be “a valuable one to live” and “the college was the place where men lived the least anxious, the most comforting and freest lives” (Snow, 1956, p. 312). Then came a most rapid and profound change and the college doors opened to millions of people around the world. This change received attention in both social and literary history, including the academic novel. The end of the twentieth century produced images of academics who were anxiously unable to adapt to the new requirements the welfare university imposed on their lives and identities. Talking about the “university man” today presupposes awareness of not only the historical and literary background, but also social and cultural diversity of the globalized world, which has a direct bearing on his/her academic identity.

Being a subgenre of the “profession novel”, the academic novel was concerned with the professional identity of its characters from the start, however predominantly in a satirical context (Womack, 2005; Showalter, 2005). Since Kingsley Amis’s *Lucky Jim* (1954), satire has remained an essential vehicle driving the novel (Moseley, 2007, p. 7), hence attention has focused on institutions and characters chosen for ridicule and on the manner in which it is done (Robbins, 2006, p. 249). In her article “Is there Life Outside of the Genre of the Campus Novel?”, Sally Dalton-Brown holds that in the academic novel the academic protagonist (usually male) is satirised in order to indicate his naiveté, while secondary academic figures are caricatured. She stresses that the story hinges on the academic’s decision concerning whether to opt for the life of the mind or the life of desires, be they sexual, status-oriented, or commercial. This dilemma is resolved by the end of the novel: the academic either wins the battle to stay in the academe or escapes. The protagonist’s department/university is shown to be a place of politicking that requires considerable cunning to survive. This is indeed the Ivory Tower, “a closed world, with its own norms and values, which is thick with the possibilities of intrigue” (Showalter, 2005, p. 3).

Identity issues have been one of the mainstream research topics for several decades now. However, in the current research literature there is no universally accepted definition of ‘identity’. Scholars from different fields of social sciences tend to focus on singular identity categories, like national, personal, social, gendered, etc. ‘Identity’ in its singular form is more often substituted with the plural form for “it captures the idea of people identifying simultaneously with a variety of social groups” (Gonçalves, 2013, p. 80). Social constructivists agree that there is no ‘absolute self’ and see identities as “constructed, co-constructed, confirmed and negotiated by individuals in and through discourse at a particular point in time and place” (Gonçalves, 2013, p. 81). Thus, identity is not only a social construct itself, but “it is what people

agree it to be in any given historical and cultural context" (Gonçalves, 2013, p. 81). In this context, professional academic identity raises particular interest, being the subject of many studies (e.g. Crownie, 2004; Henkel, 2005; Archer, 2008). Mary Henkel (2005, p. 158-159) chooses the discipline and the institution of higher education to be two "key communities in which individual academics built their academic identity" together with the status of academics in the nation state and the power of the academic elites to secure widespread acceptance.

Taking into account the empirical research and discussions led by cultural theorists and educators, this article attempts to look at academic identities through the prism of contemporary fiction, coming in particular from post-Soviet Ukraine. Usually, the academic novel is perceived as a phenomenon of English and American literary traditions. However, this perception starts to change: academic novels constitute a small but recurrent presence in Slovak ("Temporálne poznámky" and "Excentrica univerzita" by Stanislav Rakús, "Univerzita" by Eman Erdelyi and Marek Vadas, "Katedra paupológie" by Oliver Bakoš), Czech ("Univerzita" and "Čtyři" by Jiří Fanta), Polish ("Barocco", "Kurlandzki trop" and "Brukselska misja" by Tobiasz W. Lipny, "Na krótko" by Inga Iwasiów, „Sto dni bez słońca" by Wit Stoszak) and other literature. In Slavic literature, the academic novel appears in around the early 1990s, which is directly connected with the change of the political order following the fall of the Berlin Wall and disbanding of the Soviet Union. Ukrainian literature with its post- and anti-Soviet heritage, however, presents a unique example for researchers interested in the academic discourse of contemporary fiction. Although the academic novel written in Ukrainian would deserve a separate article, for the present study three novels by two writers are analysed: "University" (2007) and "Kaleidoscope" (2009) by Igor Yosypiv, and "Drosophila over a Volume of Kant" (2010) by Anatolij Dnistrovij. Despite their seemingly peculiar national characteristics, the novels present two cases of academic careers and academic identities in which many academics may recognise themselves.

UKRAINIAN AMERICAN DREAM

Taken together, the novels "University" and "Kaleidoscope" by Igor Yosypiv can be treated as two parts of the academic *Bildungsroman*, telling the story of a Ukrainian doctor-researcher-professor in the United States. "University" may also be interpreted as the novel of success, while "Kaleidoscope" provides glimpses into the life 'after success'. Together, they propose a popular demythologisation of a stereotype about 'happy life in immigration' in relation to people of the medical profession. The protagonist Andriy Korzun is a successful researcher-nephrologist, a doctor-practitioner who specialises in pediatrics, a professor of the doctor-training university in New Orleans, LA. However, his academic and medical career started in Lviv, Ukraine in the early 1990s and brought him to the US.

Although the novel begins *in medias res* at the international symposium on nephrology in Adelaide, Australia, the next chapters present Andriy Korzun's story in the chronological order, starting with the first meaningful events in his life – first love, first sexual experience, graduation from high school, freshman year at Lviv Medical School, dancing and driving lessons, summer vacations at a students' health resort, graduation with honours, internship in one of the provincial towns in the Trans-Carpathians, voluntary dancing lessons for the town's school-kids and a decision to return to Lviv to take up post-graduate studies. All these events covered in one chapter leave the reader with one distinct impression that the Medical School was no big deal and that university life was more about dancing, than cramming. Everything changed when Andriy became a post-graduate student at the Research Institute in the Department of Pediatrics of Lviv Medical School. A year of experimental work published in one article, a decision to continue research, readiness to invest time and energy into research due to the discovered results seemed to be Andriy's personal resolutions and achievements in this institution. He still had the time to attend dancing lessons, to play jokes on other members of the Institute, to participate in tea-drinking rituals. To Andriy the Department of Pediatrics appeared to be a group of colleagues who were

well-organized and not really well-organized, interested in research and not really interested, responsible and indifferent, hard-working and lazy, well-bred and ill-bred, problem oriented or self-centered. However, all together they make a functional department of pediatrics inside the Institute. Generally friendly and helpful, they read medical and research literature, teach students of the Medical School, plan and conduct research, give lectures at different institutions, consult and treat patients-children, take night shifts at hospitals, write and defend their PhD theses, travel to other cities on business, write final reports. They don't neglect entertainment either... (Yosypiv, 2007, p. 51)

However, some people there impressed him with their professionalism, despite the outdated equipment and all odds, with their dedication to fundamental research. His daily routine also suggests a direct connection between his research and medical practice: he divides his day between the hospital and the Institute. With time, Andriy has less and less time for dancing, but he still keeps reading fiction before going to sleep and occasionally buys paintings.

For Andriy the situation changed when the information about internship on pediatric nephrology abroad came through: out of one hundred applicants Andriy and three other students received a chance to prove themselves outside of Ukraine. Andriy's proficiency in English and previously acquired skills to write a research proposal played their role and the whole new world of opportunities opened to a young Ukrainian physician "with a call to adventure". For his fellowship, Andriy is based in one of the Medical Schools in New Orleans, LA, USA, which also has a child hospital as a part of its training program. Andriy goes through the internship, which means he learns to work as a pediatrician-nephrologist under the supervision of Dr. Robbins, a university professor and doctor. However, his partner, Dr. Morgan, who is primarily a

researcher, offers Andriy to try himself at writing a grant proposal. That opens a new door for Andriy: he is now transferred from the hospital to Dr. Morgan's laboratory. From this perspective, Andriy sees the university as a "theatre-aquarium" where "no one talks but everyone knows everything":

No personal questions or comments, no comments outside of work at all, no extra talk or remarks. Silent steps, subdued voices, reserved mimes and gestures, emotions under control always, ceremonial greetings, eyes turned away or downward, alert glances from aside, evasive answers to questions. (Yosypiv, 2007, p. 79).

Andriy compares it to a "planet in miniature," when his visa status is about to expire:

The majority of the laboratory staff, technicians, and post-graduate students are foreigners. How many of them, the slaves for a new empire, are here? Having arrived from all the parts of the world and having yielded to temptations of this country, they - Chinese, Indian, African, Latin American, and Mexican - long to stay here forever. The Damocles sword of the visa status hangs over each and everyone of them. I am not an exception. My visa expires in two months. There are no reasons for its postponing so far. If I get the grant, I get an appropriate document for the financial department and the reason will appear. If I don't get the grant, I'll have to leave this university and this country. ... Uncertainty of the situation and of the future annoys, distracts him from work, and doesn't allow him to focus. One needs to think in different directions and come up with backup plans. There's no one to ask for advice. Behind the broad smiles and polite greetings you hit the wall. There's no time to talk anyway. (Yosypiv, 2007, p. 112)

Once the grant is received, Andriy gains the support of the university, which subsequently gives him a chance to stay in the country and continue his academic and medical career. Andriy's way from a foreign fellow on a scholarship to the Head of Department is richly filled with exams to confirm his ability to practice pediatrics, night shifts, consulting, writing and reviewing articles and grant proposals, conference papers of different kinds and occasional colourful patches of foreign urban landscapes which from time to time diversify his university routine. The academic careers of Dr. Robbins and Dr. Morgan, with whom Andriy started as a fellow, unfolded differently: Dr. Morgan continued to receive grants and ascend on the career path, while Dr. Robbins had to accept a teaching position in a university across the country. This showed the young Ukrainian all the roughness of the research university life in the US, where there is no end to expectations and all yesterday's big achievements come today's small steps for tomorrow's advancement. Increasing the tempo of work and adaptation to new expectations, Andriy reaches the summit - he receives a type of grant that allows him to occupy the position of the head of department, entering the community of scholars, who would define the direction of research until the next grant proposal round. In several years he holds two such grants, teaches at the university, performs functions of the deputy director of the research centre, and treats patients. A new position he is offered in Miami requires a person to be "active in clinic, research, teaching, and administrative work, able to be a leader and facilitate the relations between colle-

agues, generate new ideas and implement them, work equally well with all the disciplines outside his field, be capable of meeting patients' expectations, be assertive, communicative, permanently accessible and available, flexible, collegiate and ready to participate in the department's charity events" (Yosypiv, 2009, p. 134).

I. Yosyiv's first novel "University" leaves the reader with a realization that no matter how much effort and time it took, Andriy realized his Ukrainian American Dream. Yosyiv's second novel "Kaleidoscope", on the other hand, shows that 'success' does not presuppose the change in routine but the increase of mobility, grey hair and solitude. Although Andriy admits to his colleagues that success for him was most important, but he was able to reach it because of "the colleagues he was lucky to meet on his way". Both novels form one entity, which is a kind of a 21st century scientist's diary. The narration, which seems to be a verbalized calendar filled with work tasks and appointments, and only occasional glimpses of conference sightseeing, emphasizes the image of a marathon the scholar is doomed to run in liquid times.

Despite his constant preoccupation with teaching, research and treating patients, Andriy Korzun produces a picture of a wholesome personality. He appreciates arts, classical music, he goes to the opera and symphony concerts, collects paintings and has a piano at home. His research field (child nephrology) is a blessing for his academic career in the US: had he stayed in Ukraine, his research would never have gone that far due to the historical moment and the downfall it entailed. Most likely, however, Andriy's success wouldn't be possible in any American academic institution – his luck was to be based at a university focused on both teaching future doctors and conducting research. The status of this institution in and outside the country together with colleagues like Dr. Morgan has its share in Andriy's success. His case also shows that fundamental science is universal, transcending national borders and political regimes.

THE UKRAINIAN DIMENSION OF A GERMAN UNIVERSITY

The protagonist of the novel "Drosophila over a Volume of Kant" by Anatoliy Dnistroyj is Pavlo, a professor of philosophy at a Kyiv university. He is reaching the age of Christ, which fills his inner monologues with a fair number of questions regarding the meaning of his existence. Pavlo mourns the loss of his beloved who died in an accident. She was a young poetess, married with a child, from the western region of Ukraine. They met when she went to Kyiv to receive an award for her volume of poems. The affair was short, since Pavlo saw himself mainly as a scholar who required solitude for his studies. Her death, of which Pavlo learns six months later, prompted him to re-evaluate his life.

Trauma initiates an identity crisis on many levels but it is his professional identity that undergoes most severe scrutiny. A seemingly successful university professor with a good prospect to write a habilitation thesis becomes a full

professor and head of department. With a good publishing record and conference presentations, Palvo starts to understand his misery only working on a “scholarless book for teenagers” on Kant. The metaphor he finds for himself is that of “drosophila flying over a volume of Kant.” The name of Kant, random though it may seem, is not accidental at all: together with his writings fundamental to philosophy as a discipline, Kant was one of those German philosophers who contributed to what is known today as the German model of the university. Its purpose was the formation of “the whole man” through instruction and research; in terms of the nation, the institution provided the nation state with useful knowledge for the preservation and reproduction of national cultural traditions (Kwiek, 2009, pp. 86-87). The Soviet university which was built on the German model, though modified for the needs of its ideology, also shaped Pavlo, who took “a leave from everything for the sake of ideas” as his academic motto. However, the time and its philosophy changed, leaving Pavlo behind. Due to his identity crisis, which he defines as “inner calmness”, he comes to realize that he is “a scholar of dwarf value” (Dnistroyj, 2010, p. 56), who will never ever write anything half-worthy, his name will not remain in history, the sacrifice he made for the academic ambition was wasted.

The image of drosophila, an insect which “lives off the remains of the plant rot”, “highly resistant to different mutations,” “used in genetics to model negative effects of medicine and pollutants,” also known to have “200 000 neurons, while the human brain has milliards” (Dnistroyj, 2010, p.20), eventually becomes a symbol of (Ukrainian) scholars in general. Palvo is not an exceptional loser in the league of his own (compare Hundorova, 2016); rather, he is one of the many drosophilae produced by the Soviet system:

During the Soviet times each drosophila, who wanted to defend a PhD in philosophy, needed to write on the philosophical problems of natural sciences, as the result of which this field turned into the realm of legalized cretins, marasmics, visionaries, dreamers or simply those obsessed with the belief in their own academic mission ... Sometimes I think that all the postcolonial intelligentsia and intellectuals, if there are any in our country, are doomed to be torn between worldviews, methodologies, manners, and styles, forms and ways of writing and thinking. These awkward horrifying eclectics, which their papers, lectures, discussions, books are full of, is not only their karma, but is what our culture is about. (Dnistroyj, 2010, p. 29)

Nonetheless, Pavlo recalls an example of real professors, professors worthy of highest acclaim: those were professors who had the guts to oppose the system in their times. The new liquid times rejected these dying species as well, and with their gradual extinction, the country turns to a wasteland. This intellectual apocalypse breaks Pavlo’s heart and he consciously chooses to be one of them, the “last of the Mohicans with the well-read and unchangeable views, full of deep knowledge, which is of no use to anyone” (Dnistroyj, 2010, p. 84).

Despite the confessional tone of the novel, the university life and all its inhabitants appear in a series of caricatures, as is typical of the academic novel. As in classical shots of college-life films, we see Pavlo standing in front of the lecture room full of female students, trying to make up their minds about him: some

of them are suspicious, some intrigued, some are ready to flirt, some are already flirting, some are writing and passing personal notes to him. In the next episode, we see Pavlo going out of town to the provincial branch of the university to teach philosophy to part-time students, then to conduct an exam. As a single young professor from the capital city he is seen as a good catch by the young single faculty members, their attention makes him feel hunted and he does his best to avoid the female colleagues. His next visit to this town is connected with the exam period: at his hotel Pavlo accepts an invitation to a party, gets drunk, has sex with one of the ladies and the next morning learns that those were his students, since extramural students coming to town to pass the exams and visiting faculty share the same hotel and in fact do not know each other's faces. At this stage of his life, Pavlo does not particularly pay attention to his role as a teacher, but when asked by the students whether he is a living philosopher, he admits to be a teacher of philosophy without his own philosophy.

Pictures of his colleagues are also blurred and fragmentary. There, he sees Professor Hnatovych, who likes to talk about books, forgetting about his interlocutor; there, he buys alcohol for his other colleague Professor Pampushka and sends it up the building on a cord attached to the balcony (Professor Pampushka is a heavy drinker and his wife locks him up in the flat to sober up). In the next fragment, we see Pavlo entering the flat of his colleague professor whose place is filled with loads of books and dust: during the Soviet times, Professor Golovan made promising attempts to be a theologian but crushed by the system he became a philosophy professor. Still another fragment tells a story of a joke played by Professor Sergiy Kryms'kyj and his colleague Professor Ihor Bychko (in fact, real people) on the Soviet system, making it accuse Kryms'kyj (a Jew) of "Ukrainian bourgeois nationalism" and Bychko (a Ukrainian) of Zionism. All these glimpses show distorted images of academic reality as if through fractured mirror pieces, producing a rather tragic picture of the post-Soviet (academic) society, lost and disoriented.

Marginalised, alienated, disoriented and lonely – these would be the adjectives defining professor images in Ukrainian contemporary fiction. Rooted in their contemporary moments, the novel offers a look at post-Soviet Ukraine. Its image, despite carrying its Soviet past and postcolonial present on its shoulders, appears to be pretty much in tune with the rest of the world, where globalisation and the long-lasting and still deepening crisis of the Humanities caught the scholars in the seemingly open but strangely claustrophobic state of entropy. The only remedy the characters independently choose is to accept their fate and keep true to the path they once chose.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

In his monograph *Intellectual as a Hero in Ukrainian Fiction of the 1990s*, Mark Andryczyk defines the character prototype which he calls "the Ambassador to the West" as one of the three leading prototypes of intellectuals represented in

Ukrainian literature of the period – the Swashbuckling Performer, the Ambassador to the West, the Soul Sick. According to this definition, the Ambassador to the West is a character through which the Western world learns about Ukraine just after the dissolution of the USSR: he travels to the US, speaks some English, gives lectures and talks, helps to translate books on Ukraine and explains Ukraine to both Americans and Ukrainians in the US. Dr. Andriy Korzun appears to be a reversed version of this prototype – “the Ambassador to Ukraine”: he informs the Ukrainian audience about the “real” life in America with no stereotypical glee and great expectations. In this relation, the Yosypiv novels can be interpreted as a manual for the ambitious Ukrainian medical student on how to make a career in the US. In this case Dr. Andriy Korzun appears to be a literary career advisor who, with his own example, illustrates the Ukrainian American Dream, though without euphoria. The dream appears to be a successful solitude rooted in endless research. On the other hand, Andryczyk defines the Soul Sick as “a disillusioned hero who is formed by the chaos engulfing Ukrainian cultural life in the 1990s” (Andryczyk, 2012, p. 13), and the Dnistrovjy’s novels follow this tendency quite well. His protagonist Palvo is deeply rooted in the reality of post-Soviet Ukraine with its general state of disorientation and chaos together with euphoria coming from political independence, which “had prolonged the ideas of instability and flux as part of a general attack on the indentures, structures and frameworks that existed for decades” (Andryczyk, 2012, p. 81), one such structure being the system of higher education.

On a broader scale, the novels initiate a discussion of contemporary problems within the academe, be it the isolation of the disciplines raised by C. P. Snow’s *Two Cultures* or academic institutions as “legislators” of scholars’ “professional life and whole existence” (Donskis, 2009, p. 185) or change of educational paradigm in an age of “network society” (Bauman, 2011). In liquid times, when the university cannot perform its basic function, i.e. “to prepare for life” (Bauman, 2011), it appears to be the task of scholars themselves and their institutions to define their path and role in society. The novels vividly illustrate the decisive role the disciplines and academic institutions play nowadays in scholars’ academic life, which only proves that the academic novel continues to be a literary chronicler of higher education.

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The results of the research carried out under the research theme No. 484/17/S were financed from the science grant granted by the Ministry of Science and Higher Education.