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‘CONTINUOUS WAR’ MOTIF IN BELARUSIAN PROSE
ABOUT WORLD WAR I: SOME TRENDS OF DEVELOPMENT

МАТЫЎ «ВАЙНА-КАНТЫНУМ» У БЕЛАРУСКАЙ ПРОЗЕ
ПРА ПЕРШУЮ СУСВЕТНУЮ ВАЙНУ:
НЕКАТОРЫЯ ТЭНДЭНЦЫІ РАЗВІЦЦЯ

The article is devoted to the multifaceted study of the ‘continuous war’ motif dominant in the Belarusian literature of the twentieth century. Two stages of its development are highlighted. The first one is associated with the works by Z. Biadulia, С. Hartny, М. Harecki, М. Zarecki, Я. Kolas, К. Šorny; the second one is connected with L. Dajnieka, Н. Dalidovič, V. Karamazaў, М. Loban, I. Šamiakin, А. Jakimovič and their historical novels. Both stages are characterized by a thorough analysis of the continuous stream of catastrophic events which tested common Belarusians.

Key words: World War I; Belarusian literature; ‘continuous war’ motif; literary inclusiveness.

Артыкул прысвечаны шматграннаму вывучэнню матыву «вайна-кантынуум», які дамінуе ў беларускай літаратуры XX стагоддзя. Вылучаны два этапы яго развіцця. Першы звязаны з творамі З. Бядулі, Ц. Гартнага, М. Гарэцкага, М. Зарэцкага, Я. Коласа, К. Чор-

нага, другі – з гістарычнымі раманамі Л. Дайнекі, Г. Далідовіча, В. Карамазова, М. Лобана, І. Шамякіна, А. Якімовіча. Абодва этапы характарызуюцца глыбокім аналізам бесперапыннай плыні катастрофічных падзей, якія выпрабоўвалі простых беларусаў.

К л ю ч а в ы я с л о в ы : *Першая сусветная вайна; беларуская літаратура; матыў «вайна-кантынум»; літаратурная інклюзіўнасць.*

Up to now, Belarusian literature about World War I remains to be a relatively new field of research for foreign scholars. As a testimony to this, the editor of The Cambridge Companion to the Literature of the First World War V. Sherry stated that ‘there are topic areas for which I wish there were room to provide coverage: the writing of the war ... from the Russian experience, which is ... relatively undeveloped in the awareness of Continental and Anglo-American readers’ [1, p. 10]. It is appropriate to clarify, that the adjective ‘Russian’ here, in this context, refers to all the nations that were once united under the name of the Russian Empire. Another problem connected with Russian, or Soviet, literature about World War I was clearly stated by B. Hellman: ‘It is common knowledge that the First World War did not give birth to any great literature in Russia. ‘War literature’ was treated harshly by contemporary critics and later observers have not felt compelled to dispute their judgments’ [2, p. 3]. Thus, the scholar describes one of the trends typical of the Soviet literary studies of the 1920–30s, where the prose, poetry and drama about World War I, were treated as alien to the society. Nurtured on communist ideas, it blamed the war itself as imperialist, tsarist, unnecessary and unjust. These stereotypes managed to survive up to the end of the twentieth century and outlived the Soviet Union itself. Belarusian expert in literary studies A. Adamovič explained the reasons presented above practically in the same way [3]. Nowadays Belarusian scholars treat works about 1914–1918 as an integral part of the national literary process allowing to broaden literary horizons and pay special attention to some ‘forgotten’ works (Z. Biadula’s novel *Drawing Near* («Набліжэнне») [4], A. Harodnya’s short-story ‘In the Water-Meadows’ («У поплавах») [5], the novel ‘Die Wacht am Rhein’ («Варта на Рэйне») [6; 7]), to reread Belarusian classics (C. Hartny, Ja. Kupala, Ja. Kolas, M. Zarecki). Some topical issues were already covered in A. McMillin’s article ‘World War I in the Belarusian and English Poetry: Comparison’ (2014) [8] assisting in popularising Z. Biadula’s, A. Harun’s, Ja. Kupala’s works abroad.

It can be stated, that the Belarusian war prose of the twentieth century is marked by inclusiveness. It presupposes a systematic appeal to the theme of wars and similar socio-political cataclysms allowing the protagonists almost all the manifestations of personal, national, common Soviet and universal existence. The hypertrophy of the military component in the Belarusian fiction of the last century results from the specifics of the perception of the historical process. One generation passed through several global disasters in a row, and this harsh but unique human experience could not but become the subject of numerous works.

A literary representation of that kind of inclusiveness is connected with the ‘continuous war’ motif. It emerged in the works of Z. Biadula, C. Hartny, M. Harecki, M. Zarecki, Ja. Kolas, K. Čorny. These authors were the first to

observe and point out that a number of historical events merged into one indivisible current (World War I, the revolutionary year 1917, the Civil War, foreign intervention, the formation of the Soviet statehood). Thus, the theme of ‘man at war’ / ‘person in the course of history’ crystallised. It required the use of various literary techniques: from the developments of classical and socialist realism to modernist innovations. However, the authors’ views sometimes did not coincide with the ones officially accepted in the USSR, but the systematic use of symbols, allusions or thorough documentation of events without personal comments allowed circumventing that censorship.

Since the 1960s, the ‘continuous war’ motif has become the prerogative of Belarusian historical prose. L. Dajnieka, H. Dalidovič, V. Karamazaŭ, M. Loban, I. Šamiakin, A. Jakimovič depicted continuity and interdependence of different trials in an average person’s experience, paid attention to the formation of a new awareness of the national evolution. For example, one of B. Sačanka’s characters described it in the following way: ‘you have no time to make sense of it, to realize it properly, but something different, even more incomprehensible, horrible, is already piling up, overwhelming you. And you... do not think about anything else, there is no time for you to think – except how to be saved, to survive, to hit the shore, to feel the ground under your feet again’ (‘асэнсаваць, усвядоміць як след не паспяваеш адно, а ўжо навальваецца, захліствае ўсяго цябе другое, яшчэ больш незразумелае, жахлівае. І ты ... Ні пра што іншае не думаеш, няма калі табе думаць – выратавацца б, ацалець, да берагу б якога цвёрдага прыбіцца, зноў грунт пад нагамі адчуць’ [9, с. 367]).

Novels and short stories depicting World War I, Kaiser’s occupation, refugees’ or prisoners of war’s life, and the formation of Belarusian Soviet statehood were conceptually significant for strengthening Belarusian national consciousness. However, describing the formation of Belarus as a new state, the abovementioned prose writers gradually moved away from socialist realist clichés that rigidly regulated the depiction of socio-political phenomena. Instead, with special attention to the vicissitudes of national history, they focused on a combination of different perspectives in their characters’ worldviews, such as the Soviet type of mentality with some Russian imperial components, common Belarusian and personal values.

The development of the ‘continuous war’ motif has not been the exclusive prerogative of Belarusian prose only. National playwrights and poets also tried to interpret it artistically (Ja. Kupala’s drama and poetry, M. Harecki’s dramatic works).

For several generations of Belarusian authors, the very fact of working with the ‘continuous war’ motif meant a special reaction to the discreteness of the previous native literary tradition, which had been repeatedly hampered in its natural development. Thus, poets, prose writers and playwrights faced the difficult task of restoring, reinterpreting and renovating some literary trends in the context of new points of view.

Themes of moral quest and axiological crisis played a special role in the prose discussed (e.g. ‘At the Imperialistic War’ («На імперыялістычнай вайне») by M. Harecki, ‘Balachoviec’ («Балаховец») by Ja. Kolas, ‘Fatherland’ («Бацькаўшчына») by K. Čorny). The authors pointed out the urgent necessity to revise traditional values in connection with the events of 1914–1918, and underlined some ongoing transformations in such philosophical categories as the sense of life, good and evil, justice and injustice.

It should be noted that the ‘continuous war’ motif is closely related to the epic way of thinking as was typical of some authors. M. Harecki (‘Kamaroŭskaja Chronicle’, «Камароўская хроніка») or M. Loban (the trilogy about the Šemiets) could offer a logical resolution to their stories, because life constantly offered new trials. Z. Biadula, M. Harecki, Ja. Kolas, K. Čorny tried to realise the ‘continuous war’ motif in their short stories. The dynamics and diversity of the historical process forced them to be careful in selecting episodes that illustrated the most striking manifestations of that ‘continuous war’. The authors attempted to combine in right proportions its ‘internal’ (the whole range of emotions and thoughts caused by extreme situations, constant psychological tension, awareness of the inevitability and ruthlessness of the trial) and ‘external’ (historical) components. In Belarusian literature, the ‘continuous war’ was reflected in the broad context of cornerstone images and themes: exile, return to the origins, quest for personal and national identity, loss and childhood.

The writers showed how an ordinary Belarusian did not see the end of the bloodshed, how major historical events of the period prolonged the moment of ‘exit’ / escape from the war [10, с. 292]. M. Paśladovič points out some features that confirm how deeply the concept of ‘continuous war’ affected human life. He proves his hypothesis by some scenes of everyday life: ‘the war, which had been raging over the land for five years, left its mark on people’s clothes. Its marks were now visible everywhere. Whether in soldiers’ belts or in long, down to the ankles, overcoats. The usual, everyday clothes of the war became a festive outfit for the poor village’ (‘вайна, якая на працягу пяці год грымела над краем, палажыла сваю пячаць на адзенне людзей. Усюды былі цяпер відаць яе адзнакі. Ці то ў салдацкіх паясах, у доўгіх да пят шынялях ... Звычайнае, будзённае адзенне вайны зрабілася для беднай вёскі святочным убраннем’) [11, с. 60–61]. The author highlighted the ‘militarisation’ of consciousness as that generation of Belarusians had become accustomed to the ‘continuous war’ to such an extent that they perceived it as something, if not entirely natural, then inseparably connected with their lifestyle. ‘Militarisation’ of life affected human attitude to nature as well. After World War I, the flora and fauna were desecrated. An ex-combatant accustomed to manslaughter tried to adapt his experience to the areas which were not to be subjected to destructiveness. The same problems were discussed in ‘Drawing Near’ by Z. Biadula and ‘At the Imperialistic War’ by M. Harecki.

The desire for a life without wars and revolutions inextricably followed S. Baranavych’s characters, yet they foresaw that the new peaceful order would not be established so soon. They had to listen to literally every word to predict the

further course of events. Even an incredible rumour was perceived as an indisputable fact, every ill-considered statement caused panic. In such circumstances, the illiterate heroines of the story 'Borders' («Межы») took a piece of paper with a list of the future collective farmers for the announcement about the next mobilization. Soon 'war rumours spread throughout Brody. And no one knew where they had come from' («па ўсім Бродзе насіліся чуткі пра вайну. І ніхто не ведаў, адкуль што ўзялося») [12, с. 172]. Males, who had taken part in the 1914–1918 massacre, considered ideas about the future acts of armed aggression a regular topic for discussion. Each of them tried to emerge as an outstanding futurist or strategist.

K. Čorny short story 'Seventeen Years' («Семнаццаць год») is distinguished by synergizing both approaches to the concept of 'continuous war'. Integrating exceedingly focused childhood memories with a more detailed story about the vicissitudes of adult life allowed the author to create a multifaceted analysis of the existence of Belarusians through socio-political cataclysms as well as to highlight certain universal problems exacerbated by World War I.

The very title of K. Čorny's story 'Seventeen Years' reflects his attempt to find at least some boundaries of his characters' existence in the course of severe events. Highlighting this relatively short period of time the writer maximally 'enriches' Piotr Tadarovič's life with all sorts of hardships. Existential problems caused a real axiological crisis, when the main character 'wasn't able to find either the beginnings, or endings, or reasons for anything: war, death, famine' («ён не мог знайсці ні пачатку, ні канцоў, ні прычын – нічому: ні вайне, ні смерці, ні голаду») [13, с. 261].

Speaking about the essence of war in the twentieth century, K. Čorny made another synergy: he united private and universal aspects of human existence. Altogether, his ideas can be treated as a specific definition of the 'continuous war' motif: 'War is also part of the iron series of misfortunes that have settled in from the time immemorial, and every now and then, they descend upon humanity – like famine, diseases and deaths, and everyone tries to find salvation ... as well as they can' («вайна таксама ўваходзіць у той жалезны шэраг няшчасцяў, што адвеку ўсталяваны і час ад часу сыходзяць на чалавецтва, як сыходзяць голад, хвароба, смерць, і кожны чалавек ратуецца ... як можа») [Там жа, с. 250].

Belarusian 'war' literature underwent a qualitatively new stage of development in the 1920–30s. It was associated with an objective historical need to represent World War I in fiction, the birth of the USSR, some attempts to solve several urgent national and international problems. Belarusian writers noticed that those catastrophic events intermingled in peoples' consciousness to the extent that they were treated as something eternal and fatal. That observation was so topical that the authors started to seek for adequate literary means to depict that peculiar way of life perception. Broadly, they were united by the 'continuous war' motif.

We have discussed the 'continuous war' motif based on several groups of prose works. They are the books exclusively devoted to the events of 1914–1918 (e.g. 'At the Imperialistic War', 'The Russian', 'The General' by M. Harecki, 'In the Water-Meadows' by A. Harodnia) and the ones where World War I was introduced into a broader historical context (e.g. 'Kamaroŭskaja Chronicle' by

M. Harecki, 'Fatherland', 'Seventeen Years' by K. Čorny). These works raised a whole complex of socio-political and moral issues, they depicted the process of transformation of individual consciousness ('militarisation') under the long-term influence of emergency factors. The 'continuous war' motif presupposed the use of some literary techniques: one of the most relevant for that purpose was the 'stream of consciousness' which highlighted two aspects: endlessness of social trials and eternal attempts to analyse the course of history. The historical background of the 'continuous war' motif was enriched in the second half of the twentieth century (especially by the events of World War II).

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