NEOMODERNIST TRENDS IN UKRAINIAN POETRY OF THE LATE SOVIET PERIOD

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This article reflects upon the different stylistic and thematic embodiments of the neomodernist paradigm in Ukrainian poetry of the late Soviet period, with peculiar attention to Vasyl Stus, Ihor Kalynets, Mykola Vorobiov and Mykhailo Hryhoriv. The author stresses the necessity of a re-evaluation of the history of Modernism in 20th-century Ukrainian literature, showing the survival of a modernist poetic mind in underground Ukrainian Soviet poetry and the complexity of the adaptation of Modernism during the Stagnation.

Keywords: Ukrainian poetry, Neomodernism, Vasyl Stus, Ihor Kalynets, Kyiv School.

The revolutionary contribution of the generation born between the 1930s and the 1940s towards a global renewal of both society and the arts in Ukraine would be incomplete without taking into account its revival of the modernist paradigm in continental Ukrainian poetry. According to Solomia Pavlychko, after the deaths of Bohdan-Ihor Antonych in 1937 and Volodymyr Svidzinskyi in 1941 respectively and the cultural epoché of the mature Stalinist period, modernist poetry in Ukrainian language allegedly had the chance to thrive only outside of Soviet Ukraine, in the poetic production of the New York Group, and especially in its first phase [6].

The adaptation of the modernist artistic mind to the cultural conditions of the late Thaw and the Stagnation, a phenomenon that not all scholars of Ukrainian modernism have observed and aptly described, brought to different aesthetic results, which may nonetheless be subsumed under the common aesthetic denominator of Neomodernism. In the context of Eastern Europe, an adaptation of the tenets of the modernist idea of literature during the first decades of the century in the social and cultural environment of the post-World War II era resulted in a peculiar literary culture, a one which is to be partially distinguished from its equivalent in the West. While in most of the literary histories of Western Europe and the anglophone world in the second half of the century modernist writers and poets were generally free to draw from the legacy of the first part of the century and to develop it in a political and social context that had either seen no fundamental changes or even enjoyed an experience of liberalization and democratization, the situation in Eastern Europe was much more complex or possibly reversed. In the Soviet area, the inebriating artistic of the years 1900–1930 approximately had been merciless brought to an end by the introduction of Socialist Realism as the only official artistic doctrine, as well as by the brutal physical elimination of an entire cultural...
elite. While some scholars of Western literatures have written about “late modernist” trends in the artistic culture of the decades following the half of the century (see Anthony Mellors’s monograph) [10], the term Nemodernism, which implies a more drastic break with the tradition that preceded it, seems to be much more correct in the context of Eastern European literary history (see Aleksandr Zhitenev’s book) [4]. Neomodernist features are to be encountered in the production of several of those poets who would be later considered as among the most significant literary voices of the period, such as Vasyl Stus, Ihor Kalynets and the major representatives of the Kyiv School of poetry, including at least Mykola Vorobiov and Mykhailo Hryhoriv (see Taras Pastukh’s monograph) [7].

In the artistic path of Ihor Kalynets one encounters several examples of a raw and (apparently) chaotic poetic language of postmodern intonation and construction. An example of this tendency in Kalynets’ poetry can be found the «Intermediia: Kalynovyi herb», part of his 1967 cycle «Vidchynennia vertepu»:

Зяччий
Кирило Методій
по снігу
юси повиводив

лементують
кучі на вічі
ої навіще ж
то нам
навіщо

напевне
по наші душі
інквізіція
з рушницями
рушить

на снігу
прочитає псалми
чобітьми
і псами

нам би
та вовчі зуби
ми б
Кирила Методія
самі збули

а тепер
братове
The playful attitude with historic figures and sacred things (see the consonance psalmy-psamy), which can be interpreted as a refined mocking of the contempt for sacredness in the Soviet narrative, the strong focus on the significant itself and the formal aspect of the poem are among the elements that allow to put the stylistic nature of this text in the context of early Postmodernism.

At the same time, however, these experiments with the style of the postmodernist zeitgeist in Kalynets’s work are carried out alongside other, utterly and strikingly different stylistic choices. Looking for an answer to Kalynets’s astounding multifacetedness, scholars such as Marko Pavlyshyn and Danylo Struk came to define his poetics as intrinsically (neo)baroque. According to the playful yearning for experimentation of both Baroque and Postmodernism, Kalynets’ has also been the author of pure neomodernist texts. His neomodernist inspiration can be for example fully appreciated in Lito, a poem which is part of the same complex textual structure of baroque and postmodernist inspiration that is «Vidchynennia vertepu», with plentiful neomodernist notes:

Вухами лопухів слухаю мушлю тиші,
причаєний під білими кронами кульбаб.
За розлуки ще один довгий тиждень,
що на циферблаті соняха добігає, пробач.

Я тепер у джмелине tremolo
заслуханий більше, ніж у власне єство.
Та інколи, від спогадів дощу обмоклій,
гріюся під животворним омофором строф.
І тоді ти мене то підносиш, то нищиш,
спалюєш на зеленолезих ватрицах трав.
І дуже шкода мені доброї мушлі тиші,
найбільшої втрати серед тисяч втрат [5, p. 72].

This poem represents an excellent manifestation of the neomodernist spirit: it features the idea of the poetic text as a refined and sacred construction, hermeticism as an elitist strategy of signification, and a strong focus on subjectivity as a unifying, stabilizing principle defined by clear poetological traits. The energy of the subject – which in this poem appears to be stronger and more self-confident than in most neomodernist texts, although being subjected to the ambiguous inebriating force of music – is once again guaranteed by his allegiance to the poetic word and its magic power. The symbiotic relationship between the subject and the artistic force that enables it to accomplish itself is a clear marker of the neomodernist weltanschauung that informs the text.

Kalynets’s kaleidoscopic poetics, in which neomodernist texts such as «Lito» can coexist
with poetic prose and monoverses in the context of a complex poetic world tending to both Neobaroque and Postmodernism, is often compared to the art of some other representatives of the underground literature during the Stagnation period, including representatives of the Kyiv school. Similarly to Kalynets’s poetics, the poetry of some representatives of the Kyiv School such as Mykola Vorobiov and Mykhailo Hryhoriv shows neomodernist elements as a part of a many-sided poetic world.

The most complete realization of the neomodernist paradigm in Ukrainian poetry is probably to be found in the later phase of Vasyl Stus’s poetry. Although Stus’s poetry shows a remarkable variety of thematic and stylistic trends, both in its initial phase and in its more mature realizations, the general evolution of his writing from his beginnings in the late 1950s to the late 1970s is to be ascribable to the neomodernist paradigm. Stus’s mature lyric experience is centred around the exceptional strength of its subject, who, in spite of the devastating effect of history on himself, fights to maintain his identity and his uniqueness both as a human being and as a poet, and eventually succeeds in this task. Several examples of neomodernist are can be encountered in «Chas tvorchosti / Dichtenszeit», Stus’s most coherent neomodernist poetry collection from 1972, and «Palimpsesty», the impressive summa of his poetic legacy. In Stus’s production, the neomodernist conception of poetry can translate itself into different stylistic and thematic choices, as shown by the two following poems from «Chas tvorchosti / Dichtenszeit»:

Усе – в народженні, усе – у плоті і крові.
Долає смерть одне живе життя.
Те, що колись, поставши із любові,
ані про спин, ані про вороття
не відає. Оновлення планети –
у смерті смерті, в радості чинінь.
Отак і ти постанеш знов, поете,
з майбутнього високих благостинь,
коли навчишься бачити й любити,
радіти веснам, першому зелу.
Лише збагни: людина – небожитель,
не відданий ані добрі, ані злу,
лише живому – тому, що у русі
шукає, прагне, твориться, кишить.
Квітуй же сподіванням, бо в окрузі
усе запрагло тлін свій пережить,
аби себе подовжити у леті
godin, zірок, galaktik i sistem.
Bлагословенна ж будь, моя плането,
благословений серця вічний щем,
благословення зорі над водою,
и райдужне сувіття по дощі,
i кроплене живлющою росою
These two poems, both taken from Stus’s most purely neomodernist collection, confront the reader with two different realisations of the subject’s quest for itself in his poetry. In «Use – u narodzhenni, use – u ploti i krovi» the subject openly celebrates, in Goethean terms in accordance with the extraordinary presence of Goethe in the collection, the greatness of both himself and mankind, whose primary task and predestination is continuous and unstoppable progress. Moreover, the reference to mankind’s ascent to heaven in the last line of the poem seems in this case not to be an instance of the modernist and neomodernist topos of escape from earth in the reassuring but thanatological realm of the sky, as in several other poems by Stus, but an image of humanistic growth. In the second text quoted, which is the final part of a longer poem which begins by the line «Kudy tobi prybytysia, liudyno», the subject is seemingly condemned to madness, decay and death. The subject’s alleged dismemberment in the great Nothing clashes with his invincibility as a poetic voice, in the context of a profound metaphoricity in which triumphant poetology appears to be the main – albeit concealed – thematic axe of the poem. The muteness, the obscurity and the void which mark the end of the poem and also, on a superficial level, the seeming dissolution of the subject as a human being are rather to be read as metaphoric manifestations of the subject’s poetic apotheosis, in the context of the romantic, symbolist and modernist tradition of an ideal identity of poetry, music and silence.

In other cases, especially in the more complex stylistic and thematic landscape of Palimpsesty, it’s Stus’s experimentation with hermeticism, frequently elaborated in an expressionistic fashion, that defines his embrace of neomodernist poetics:
In the context of hermetic poetics, the neomodernist idea lies in the opportunity of constructing meaning out of both apparent semantic short-circuit or semantic overload, that is difficulty, thus reaffirming the supremacy of logos and interpretation over chaos and confusion. A poem such as this one also once again shows the subject’s ability to maintain his individuality in spite of the threats deriving from both the outer world and his own poetic gift, which at the same time defines him as a poet and gives him eternity, on the one hand, and jeopardizes his survival as a human being, on the other hand. Stus’s complex, contradictory poetology, torn between triumphalism and melancholy, is one more fundamental feature of his neomodernist poetic worldview.

In the early poetry of Mykola Vorobiov, whose literary legacy spans several decades, collections and artistic choices, the subject’s obsession with his own eye sight and his apprehension of the world is to be seen in the context of the modernist and neomodernist subject’s struggle for the preservation of its own identity and personality. This is evident, for example, in a poem from Vorobiov’s third printed collection «Ozhyna obriiu» from 1988:

The subject of «Shybka bolyt’ ineiem» repeatedly stresses his own impellent need of understanding both himself and the outer reality, grasping their hidden meaning and reaffirming his nature as a living being capable of understanding and creating significance. Meaning is difficult to reach, retain and express, but its ultimate existence is not denied and
exactly in this regard Neomodernism distinguishes itself from the disintegrating, dislocating and centrifuge, although possibly cheerful and seducing, power of Postmodernism.

A slightly different manifestation of Neomodernism in Vorobiov’s poetry can be appreciated in «Trykutnyk zhyttia», a poem taken from his fourth collection «Prohulianka odyntsem» from 1990:

Така безмовність цього трикутника,  
що зараз я запишу скаргу про біль і жаль,  
i так само поспішно відступлю до життя,  
доганяти його, бо пам’ятаю, що був я  
весь час під колесом, окрім цієї миті,  
i не знаю, звідки ця мить, ця звістка  
про мене в світі, щоб міг я нарешті  
записати скаргу про біль і жаль...

As in the case of the previous poem, it is the dynamics of negation and affirmation that forms the semantic pivot of the text, torn between silence («bezmovnist’») and the will to reconquer and reembrace the long awaited poetic word. A poem such as this one and several others in Vorobiov’s poetic legacy, torn between recognition and bewilderment, impulse and confusion, is actually to be situated at the crossroad of Neomodernism and Postmodernism. Nonetheless, the difficult persistence of the subjective principle as the centre of the poetic world, albeit uncertain of his own possibilities and even of its own existence, keeps the text within the boundaries of the neomodernist idea of art.

The poetry of Mykhailo Hryhoriv offers a different realization of neomodernist poetics. The extreme concentration of his poetic world, based on a reduced number of motifs and on the purification of poetical language from anything superfluous, draws on the idea of the sacredness of the word and of its cathartic, purifying power. What at a first glance might appear as an embodiment of early postmodernist devaluation of the word is actually its opposite, a genuine re-evaluation of the modernist and neomodernist cult for words and their combination.

This is evident in the first poem of Hryhoriv’s first collection «Sporudzhennia khramu», which came out as late as 1992, and which title is per se a tribute to neomodernist poetics:

Ми довго ткали  
з оціх  
кроків  
розлогу сіть  
завязто  
dоточували  
нарвані краї  
i краї  
самої середини  
яка вислизала
The extremely careful weighing of each word in Hryhoriv’s text, which clearly emerges from the alternation of one-word lines with more traditional ones, is a clear marker of neomodernist orientation, although at a first glance the very visual structure of the text might suggest exactly the opposite. Not less fundamental for the definition of Hryhoriv’s orientation in this poem and more in general in his art is the treatment of the subject. The most striking feature of the construction of subjectivity in this poem is the use of the first person plural. As frequently in subject-centered modernist and neomodernist poetry, it is not clear whether the first person singular or plural refers to man and mankind or to the poet(s). On a more general level, the dynamics of emptiness and fullness, danger and salvation, decay and fulfillment in the poem testifies to its belonging to a neomodernist literary worldview, a one based on the constant search for meaning, in spite of the consuming action of the outer world on the subject and of his own inner laceration.

The richness, variety and aesthetic value of the several concrete textual embodiments of a literary trend that is neither an unproblematic continuation of the modernist aesthetics of the first half of the 20th century nor a set of literary devices generally definable in postmodern terms still awaits a full appreciation of its relevance for the literary history of the 20th century, both in Ukraine and, at a more general level, in European culture.
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**НЕОМОДЕРНІСТСЬКІ ТЕНДЕНЦІЇ В УКРАЇНСЬКІЙ ПОЕЗІЇ ПІЗНЬОРАДЯНСЬКОГО ПЕРИОДУ**

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Зосереджено увагу на складності й оригінальністі неомодерної течії в українській поезії пізньорадянського періоду. Автор акцентував відмінність ситуацій у Західній та Східній Європі після Другої світової війни, наголосив на впливові політичних обставин (у періоди відділені і застою) та розірваності модерної традиції в українській літературі. Умови вийшли потребу досліджувати розвиток модерністської поезії в історії української літератури після сталинської доби, водночас зупинився на теоретичному обґрунтуванні неомодернізму як недооціненої складової літературного процесу ХХ століття. У літературах Східній Європи і колишнього Радянського Союзу зокрема, неомодернізм успадковував від попередньої модерністської традиції першої половини сторіччя й найголовніші естетичні риси, такі як визначальна суб’єктивна концепція, творчий досвід, епічний історичний контекст, які проявляється у вишуканості, сакралізації й гетерогенно-мовах, та складність його конструювання, однак мусив їх адаптувати в умовах тоталітарного тиску на мистецтво. В українській поезії потужні
елементи неомодерного художнього світобачення спостерігаються у творчості Василя Стуса й поетів Київської школи та її оточення. Проаналізовано твори Василя Стуса, Ігоря Калинця, Миколи Воробйова та Михайла Григоріва з метою виявлення в них різних маніфестацій неомодерної поетики.

Ключові слова: українська поезія, неомодернізм, Василь Стус, Ігор Калинець, Київська школа.