

AMERICAN LITERARY STUDIES IN UKRAINE: ACADEMIC DISCIPLINE OR A MOVER TOWARDS SOCIAL CHANGES?

NATALIA VYSOTSKA¹

ABSTRACT. *American Literary Studies in Ukraine: Academic Discipline or a Mover towards Social Changes?* The paper presents an overview of the past and the present of American literary studies in Ukraine since the nation's independence in 1990. We argue that American diverse experiences in finding the workable balance between an individual and the state as recorded in literature and shaped by it have been of special significance for Ukraine as potential models in its quest for new national identity. The paper discusses institutional forms of teaching and studying American Literature, recent publications in the field, as well as current theoretical trends in Ukrainian scholars' approaches to the works authored by US writers.

Keywords: *American literary studies, Ukraine, national identity, social changes, postmodernism, multiculturalism.*

REZUMAT. *Studii literare americane în Ucraina: disciplină academică sau îndemn spre schimbări sociale?* Lucrarea de față trece în revistă evoluția istorică a studiilor literare americane în Ucraina, de la câștigarea independenței naționale în 1990 și până în prezent. Susținem că varietatea de experiențe americane în ce privește atingerea unui echilibru funcțional între individ și stat, așa cum se regăsesc în literatură, au o semnificație deosebită pentru Ucraina, în sensul că oferă modele ce pot ghida în demersul formării unei noi identități naționale. Lucrarea discută forme instituționalizate de predare și studiere a literaturii americane, publicații recente în domeniu, precum și tendințele teoretice actuale, așa cum se reflectă ele în modul de abordare a operei scriitorilor americani de către specialiști ucrainieni.

Cuvinte cheie: *studii literare americane, Ucraina, identitate națională, schimbări sociale, postmodernism, multiculturalism.*

Dana Heller remarked in her introduction to a special edition of *American Studies International* featuring papers on post-Soviet American Studies, "as post-Soviet scholars, teachers, and intellectuals engage day-to-day with changing forms of local and

¹ Natalia Vysotska is Full Professor of European and American literature, Head of "Theory and History of World Literature" Department at the Kiev National Linguistics University in Ukraine. Her research interests encompass African American literature with special focus on drama; multi/transculturalism and ethnic literatures in the United State. Her major publications include the books: *The Concept of Multiculturalism as a Factor in American Literary History. Late Twentieth – Early Twenty-First Centuries* (Kiev, 2012); *The Unity of the Plural. American Literature of Late Twentieth – Early Twenty-First Centuries in the Context of Cultural Pluralism* (Kiev, 2010) as well as numerous essays. Contact address: <literatavysotska@gmail.com>.

regional life, American Studies may provide a border space for the representation of a people to itself by way of a detour through the ‘other’” (2003, p. 7). Indeed, the culture of the Other inevitably turns out to be a mirror giving back, in the course of its perception, features, contours, and shadows of both the sender and the recipient of the message. Therefore, the ultimate image staying with us contains not one, but two overlaying silhouettes – the Other’s and one’s own. Speaking of literature, this dual reflection is further multiplied by difference in language always implying, in addition to linguistic translation, the need to translate cultural matrices and national mental settings.

The Ukrainians were first exposed to American literature in the second half of the nineteenth century. Since then they have expanded and refined their knowledge in this realm, often against heavy odds caused by Ukraine’s dependent status. In the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries the narratives telling this story differed for Western and Central Ukraine due to their being parts of different empires; suffice it to mention that for Central and Eastern regions ruled by Russia the ban on book publishing in the Ukrainian language was not lifted until 1907. The Soviet period saw a boost in translations of American authors and in related scholarship, but the selection of writers and texts was very much guided by political and ideological considerations. The fateful socio-political shifts that took place in early 1990s radically changed both the mode and the nature of American literary studies in Ukraine. The declaration of independence urged each and every citizen to revise his or her position vis-à-vis the *socium* and the *universum*, and here diverse American experiences recorded in fiction could be of special value since Americans were confronted with the problem of self-identification right at the dawn of their existence as a nation.

Studies in American literature across the post-Soviet space have all evolved from common roots in the Soviet ground. In the past teachers and scholars from these countries were all subject to nearly identical ideological and censorship pressures, while presently they are all suffering from similar economic and institutional constraints. Nevertheless, after the collapse of the Soviet Union the once monolithic “tree trunk” was split and since then its “branches” have been growing in a variety of directions indicated by national traditions and general intellectual climate in their respective societies. The quest for harmonious relationships between an individual human being and the state power has always been among the crucial concerns of literature. Historically, the emphasis on individual merit, achievement, and opportunity constituted one of the cornerstones of the American national ethos while, ideally, liberal democracy is about guaranteeing the protection of the basic rights for all individuals. Therefore, much of American literature explores the problem from the perspective of an individual.

In contrast, communist ideology as practiced in the Soviet Union (and spread, among other channels, through literature) tended to prioritize “we” over “I”, the collective over the personal inculcating into the minds of its citizens the belief that the state was much more important than an individual. After the independence, Ukrainians faced the task of changing this pattern radically and exposure to American literature

could provide models for doing so. Therefore, books by American writers were regarded by many scholars, teachers, and readers in Ukraine as something more than “literature”, rather as a kind of “democracy”. Consequently, American studies were seen as a step towards social changes. This fact explains the interest in American literature both for research and teaching purposes, as well as the principal lines along which its study has proceeded. Even though one cannot be so naïve as to expect literary discourse to have immediate social impact, its long-term consequences must not be disregarded.

Another distinguishing feature of American literary studies in Ukraine is their openness to novel Western methodologies predetermined by the country’s geographical location, its geopolitical goals, and its European aspirations. In this respect, the best possible research practices would seem to combine the opportunities offered by new analytical instruments with rich national philological traditions. Also, mutual “pollination” between different national versions within the same disciplinary field is productive in terms of both generating new insights about their object of inquiry and forging the common language of cultural diplomacy so much in demand in today’s gruesome political situation. It can be argued that over the past decades Ukrainian, Russian, and Byelorussian scholars have formed a kind of “tripartite alliance” closely collaborating in their academic pursuits. Today our collaboration with Polish colleagues is rapidly expanding via publications, conference participation, and holding joint events, such as seminars and round tables.

The above-mentioned issue of *American Studies International* (2003) included a paper coauthored by Prof. Denisova and myself which analyzed the status of American Literary Studies in Ukraine as of that moment. This study has summed up some important developments in the field that have transpired since the years of independence. The authors mention, in particular, the lifting of external ideological (and to a certain extent internal-ized) censorship in selecting problems, texts, and individual writers for in-depth study; the institutionalization of teaching American literature in primary, secondary, and tertiary education; the expansion and modernization of the methodological approaches, etc.

It is also my duty and pleasure to mention the huge role played by the Public Affairs Section of the US Embassy in Ukraine, as well as the academic exchange programs active in Ukraine² in reshaping the discipline under discussion in independent Ukraine. These bodies provided comprehensive organizational, financial and personnel support in building up the capacities of American Literary Studies (providing books, giving a helping hand in organizing and funding conferences, facilitating the participation of American scholars in our events etc.). This support was especially intensive at the early stages; at that time this assistance was mostly provided through the English Language Resource Center and the American Library affiliated to the Kyiv–Mohyla Academy, one of the most progressive Ukrainian universities in the early years of independence. Due thanks should also be given to American officials and

² The Fulbright Program and the Kennan Institute at the Woodrow Wilson Center for International Scholars.

Fulbrighters, such as Jeannette Demiray, Ann Colley and Irving Massey, Hortense Simmons, and many others for their generous donations of books of fiction, as well as theory and literary history. The American Embassy in Kyiv supported three big international conferences followed by the publication of their materials (*20th Century American Literature after Mid-Century*, 2000; *American Literature at the Turn of the 20th -21st Centuries*, 2004; *Mainstream – Heterogeneity – Canon in Current American Literature*, 2006)). They also supported summer and winter schools of American Studies in Mykolaiv, as well as three issues of *Window into the World*, a journal that dealt exclusively with various aspects of studying and teaching American literature in Ukraine (1999). No less important is the fact that many Ukrainian Americanists of different generations participated in several academic exchange programs – the experience was instrumental in enhancing their professional competence and plunging them, even if for a short period, into the midst of academic life in the US. Some of these scholars are: Tamara Denysova, Tetiana Mykhed, Maria Shymchyshyn, Olexander Hon, Natalia Bidasiuk, Olesia Bondarenko, Oksana Starshova, Anna Haidash, and myself.

The rest of this paper briefly summarizes major developments and trends in American Literary Studies in Ukraine over the past decade and a half.

1) Institutionally speaking, the setting up of the Center of American Literary Studies in Ukraine affiliated to the “T.H.Shevchenko” Institute of Literature of the Academy of Sciences of Ukraine in 2005 became a landmark. Actually, the Center had operated long before its official opening. The inspiration behind the Center, its soul, and its unchallenged president until her much lamented demise in May last year, was Tamara Denysova, an illustrious scholar, the dean of American Literary Studies in Ukraine. According to its Bylaws, the Center aims at conducting sessions of the informal School of American Literature, organizing conferences, symposia, and round tables, publishing the yearbook *American Literary Studies in Ukraine* (nine issues have been published up to the present), designing courses in American literature, collaborating with publishers in translating, editing, commenting upon works by American authors published in Ukraine; delivering academic and popular lectures to various audiences etc.

2) Under the aegis of the Center systematic seminars of Ukrainian researchers of US literature were initiated and attended by participants from every region of Ukraine. While the first set of seminars focused on contemporary literature (first of all, in the context of postmodernism and multiculturalism), the next one was historically oriented, offering the revision of the main stages in the development of American literature from new theoretical angles (the colonial Puritan period, the Enlightenment, Romanticism, critical realism, modernism). It was followed by discussions about genre modifications in US literature (poetry, short story, drama), as well as seminars on various works by individual authors. Bimonthly discussions traditionally ended in a symposium resulting in a publication, that is, a collection of scholarly papers. As teachers, undergraduate, graduate, and doctoral students keep telling us, these volumes have become much-

treasured sources for those who are engaged in research or simply interested in American Literature. The most recent issue (2016) addresses various aspects of Henry James' legacy and it is the last collection edited by Professor Denysova.

Due to current financial constraints limiting the number of academic publications in Ukraine, every book-length study in American Literature becomes an event. A real milestone in the Ukrainian development of American Studies was the publication in 2002 of Professor Denysova's book *The History of the 20th c. American Literature* (re-edited in 2012) (Denysova 2012). This publication was supported by the Fulbright Program in Ukraine and it was the first book-length American literary history published in Ukraine. The long and complicated literary history of the previous century, with its array of trends, schools, titles and persons, is presented as a system, in accordance with the authorial vision guided by the difficult task of selecting from the multitude of literary facts the most relevant ones for the Ukraine of today. Denysova's last book – *On American Literature* – was published in 2014. Some other recent book-length publications include Mariya Shymchyshyn's study of African American identity as shaped in the Harlem Renaissance writings (2010); Tetyana Mykhed's examination of the Puritan roots of American renaissance (2006); a research into Frank Chin's transcultural aesthetics authored by Victoria Lipina and Volodymyr Seligey (2013); Olena Dubinina's book on Styron (2011), as well as my own discussion of various facets of cultural plurality in American letters (2010).

3) A significant part in promoting American literature in Ukraine has been and is still played by the *Vsesvit (The Universe)*, a magazine specialized in presenting world literature in Ukrainian translations to the nation-wide readership. Under the Soviet rule it used to act as a pioneer in making many resonant books by American writers available to Ukrainian-speaking audiences (Mario Puzo's *Godfather*, Eric Segal's *Love Story*, E. Doctorow's *Ragtime*). Curiously, they were sometimes translated by Ukrainian diplomats who at that time were among the happy few enjoying access to American culture. It was in the pages of *Vsesvit* that Faulkner and Hemingway first spoke Ukrainian, their collected works coming out later. A cohort of outstanding translators (such as Iryna Steshenko, Rostyslav Dotsenko, Volodymyr Mitrofanov, Mar Pinchevsky, and others) were instrumental in bringing these and other American authors within the orb of Ukrainian readers. At present, with Ukraine subscribing to copyright laws, the magazine faces grave financial problems, but its editor-in-chief, Dmytro Drozdovsky, still entertains the idea of putting together a special American issue of *Vsesvit*. In 2012, another Ukrainian magazine, the influential *Krivbass Courier*, implemented an ambitious project. It published fragments from American fiction in Ukrainian translations accompanied by essays about the translated writers authored by Ukrainian scholars.

4) For Ukrainian professionals in the field of American literature, the main directions of their scholarly quest over the past decades have included philosophical and aesthetic innovations caused first by postmodernism and later by its twilight. Main areas of research included the turn towards cultural pluralism, and the

development of ethnic literatures followed by the transcultural vision of American literature; the increasing porosity of boundaries between literary and cultural studies; imagological and intermedial studies; New Historicism; biographical and autofiction. The appropriation of current theoretical approaches and analytical tools formerly inaccessible to the Ukrainian literary scholars due to the Iron Curtain resulted in the diversification of research methodologies. The scholarly discourse, therefore, is freed from the necessity to conform to one “correct” interpretation of literary phenomena, which had been a trademark of the Soviet period. Earlier periods in American literary history, such as American Renaissance or modernism, are subject re-conceptualizations from new perspectives. Popular (genre) literature, as a socio-cultural phenomenon, also attracts a lot of attention, especially detective and fantasy fiction. The generic palette is expanded, too, with Ukrainian scholarship moving from a traditional novel-centered approach in the direction of other genres, such as poetry, drama, documentary writings, (auto)biography, short fiction, and technogenic literature (hyperfiction).

On the whole, it can be argued that the years of Ukraine’s independence have succeeded, to a considerable extent, in bringing the potential of national American literary studies to fruition in spite of economic and institutional obstacles that have, by no means, become a thing of the past. The fact that universities, as well as research centers, are permanently submitted to ill-considered reforms and downsizing damages continuity in the normal development of American literary studies. No less detrimental is the constant shortage of operational funding holding back the scholars’ academic mobility and their performance on the international arena.

Nevertheless, in spite of all adversity, our finest experts in American literature seem to meet the world competence standards in the field as testified by their successful participation in international conferences, exchange programs, and scholarly publications. For better or for worse, today, as always, *studia humanitatis*, including American Literary Studies, involve not only the intellect, but the heart as well; the engagement with American Literature is a destiny, rather than a career, being pre-ordained not so much by mercenary considerations, as by the urges of one’s soul.

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