

“URBAN LANDSCAPE” OF MODERN UKRAINIAN PROSE

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Abstract

The article provides analysis of three prose texts: “Voroshilovgrad” by Sergiy Zhadan, “Port Frankivs’k” by Taras Prohas’ko, “Rivne/Rovno (The Wall)” by Olexander Irvanetz to research the background of “urban autobiography” term. The authors in the mentioned texts do not describe really existing cities (Voroshilovgrad, Port Frankivs’k) or actual events (separation of Rivno city into two parts), thus incarnating memories or dreams, showing their world view. The texts have features of novel, novelet, quasi-autobiography, alternate history, essay, which allows identifying its metagenre nature.

Key words: *autobiography, landscape, author, metagenre*

The autobiography as literature genre backdates to III-IV centuries AD., however, the term itself was introduced into scientific usage at the beginning of XIX century. Having complicated evolutionary background, having experienced both ups and downs, at the beginning of XXI century autobiographical genre is at the peak of readers’, writers’ and scientific interest, which demonstrates its integration and transformation capacity.

At the beginning of XXI century the genre borders turned out to be too narrow for the autobiography, which tends to become metagenre, which is obvious from the texts’ scopes, absence of their assignment, number of literary phenomena, adoption of genres from different art types, synthetical character. In this connection we believe that we shall introduce term “landscape autobiography” for identifying one of the autobiography types, which we understand as writing by the author about himself against certain natural and geographic background. Amongst the numerous texts of modern Ukrainian literature, which we attribute to this genre (prose by Mariya Matios, Yuriy Andruhovych, Sergiy Zhadan, Yevgeniyi Kononenko, Olexander Irvanetz, Oksana Zabuzhko, Taras Prohas’ko), we can separately identify those, which have clear features of “urban landscape”, which serves also to show new sides of the author’s personality, gives idea of his self-identification, national and generic assignment. These functions, in our opinion, are implemented by landscapes in autobiographical texts.

The target of the present article is to analyze prose texts by Sergiy Zhadan, Taras Prohas’ko, Olexander Irvanetz against background of term “landscape autobiography”.

Novel “Rivne/Rovno (The Wall)” (2000) by Olexander Irvanetz is difficult to classify according to genre. The author himself identifies it as “similar to novel”, thus underlying its ironic character and non-compliance with canons.

The text contains elements of alternate history genre, namely: story about appearance of Wall, fight of Polish, Belgian, and Ukrainian warriors. Metaphoric image of the Wall, German director and actress are allusions of Berlin Wall at first superficial view, however, at the deeper level it shows contraposition of western and eastern parts of Ukraine, or if viewed from existential viewpoint – shows opposition of communist past and capitalistic present. The stylistics of the text is similar to “Moskoviada” by Andrukhovich: wandering in the underground of theatre, alcoholic parties of writers etc., however, the mood is not so gloomy as in Andrukhovich texts, on the contrary, it is light, a bit ironic, which depicts character of the author.

Olexander Irvanetz in the foreword of second edition of his novel “Rivne/Rovno (The Wall)” speaks about autobiographic circumstances which gave rise to the idea to write the novel, about task of any writer, which is the ability “to put questions in correct manner” [Irvanetz, p. 4]. We shall mention that the novel is not a novel in traditional meaning, however, the text contains autobiographic elements: main hero is writer – Shloyma Etzirvan (Jewish variant of name Olexander and palindrome of

author's surname - Irvanetz); main female character is Oksana which is the author's wife's name, place of events is Rivne, i.e. town, where the author lived his childhood and youth. Besides, main hero works at staging a play (it is known that author has created several plays, he was member of the jury panel at Theater festival "Bonner Biennale" in 2000 and 2002 years, his plays were staged in Germany, Ukraine and Poland).

Certain autobiographic features of the main hero can be identified by comparing text of the novel and, for example, interview of the author or his close people. For example the novel says: "Superstitious man you are, Shloyma. And all your life, from childhood, you are same" [Irvanetz, p. 9]. His wife speaks about mysticism and superstitions in art: "He is viewed as Sashko Irvanetz – author of smart verses. Sorry, but "Rivne/Rovno" against the background of today's events in the country... In 2004-2005 people told him: well, Irvanetz, you invented all these, however, everything went different way. At that time I said: God grant that everything goes differently. I noticed it about him: he likes to write fiction..., but it somehow fits well into our reality, it is even scary sometimes. From time to time I say to him: if I were in the shoes of these people and this state I would have paid you big money just to make you stop writing" [Klymenko]. His wife identifies irony and vulnerability in his character saying: "He cannot but write his ironic verses – they just shape in his head. It is interesting to watch the creative process, he is just walking around and then he feels an impulse, piece of information, some phrase from news, he goes out to smoke and here the verse comes", "... and very vulnerable, and childish too much" [Klymenko].

The author also speaks about predictions in his texts: "Today I witness how simultaneously get their embodiment three of my biggest prose works – "Rivne/Rovno", "Ochamymrya", and "Libencraft's disease". Now people with red spots gathered at Maydan and fight off the rest of people, who believe that they are normal. The wall, the one from novel "Rivne/Rovno", moves further to the west, however, it still exists and separates Ukraine into West Ukrainian Republic (WUR) and Social Republic of Ukraine (make the abbreviation yourself)¹" [Irvanetz].

The author describes invented story in the novel, however, the toponymy are realistic. For example the end leaf of the 1st edition contains map of divided city, which is in general map of real Rivno town, Soborna and Stepana Bandery Streets, Myr Avenue, park, only the Wall and Clevan corridor, existing in the artistic imagination of the author and his novel are added on the map.

In fact the novel starts with geographical reference, based on antithesis, and describes two parts of the city, dating back to year 2002: "ROVNO – oblast center of Social Republic of Ukraine. Number of population is 120 thousand people according to census of year 2000. Agricultural machinery building industry, flax processing industry is well developed. ... part of the city is divided from SRU by force and functions as a separate political entity under jurisdiction of U.N.O. Population of western sector of Rovno town is 150 thousand people as of September of year 2001. The economy of the western sector of Rovno town is characterized by all the faults and defects of capitalistic economy systems: high level of unemployment, inflation, corruption ...[Irvanetz, p.7]. Information is given from unknown reference book. Fiction nature of the text is proved at least by the fact that according to 2001 year census data the population of Rivno town comprised 248 thousand. This information along with other data is given in Wikipedia: "Rivne (1939–1991 – Rovno) – oblast center town in Ukraine, provincial center Population: 250 010 inhabitants (01.02.2014 year). The town dwells on banks of the river Ustya. Several highways cross the town Machine building, chemical (PJSC "Rivne-Azot»), light, food industries, turf processing plant (LLC «RECORD»). 3 high education institutions, 2 theaters. Historical museum. Uspenska wooden church (XVIII century). ..." [Wikipedia].

The author devotes most of the text to description of the Wall. The memories of the hero give historical reference about separation of the city: "...that fatal summer night just by chance I stayed as guest for the night at Yuvileyny. In the morning the town was divided and trolleybuses did not circulate any more. All transport, not only trolleybuses stopped. Blockade lasted for more than two years, and then later, they started to let you, "western people", to enter the eastern part ..." [Irvanetz,

¹ In Ukrainian abbreviation has slightly rude and ironic meaning (footnote added during translation)

p.19]. Author also describes the process of the main landscape object construction: “The Wall... It was erected at night in the light of searchlights by SRU military construction department, installing and adjusting closely concrete plates right along the curb of footway of 17th September Street, still Topoleva Street at the time. These grey concrete panels produced by local construction industrial complex cut off the inhabitants of the Western sector from central department store, Museum of nature, Shevchenko park..., campus of Water industry Academy, old building of Main Post Office, iron-shaped building, 1st maternity hospital, hotel “Myr” [Irvanetz, p.26]. This quote mentions other landscape objects – names of streets, districts, buildings, historical objects – which are real toponyms, and only imagination of the author divides them into two parts – eastern and western.

Description of the town parts correlates with events from the main hero's life: past goes in eastern part, today continues in the western part. The descriptions of the events and feelings, against background of the native town show autobiographic elements the best. Description of the park is clearly marked as autobiographic: “...up there behind the “Suputnyk” there is a park, a novel never written, three-quarters, no, nine tenths of your youth behind granite one meter high fence” [Irvanetz, p.31]. Autobiographic features come out in author's disapproval of the soviet past: “...looong, nine entrances long, grey panel monster-building, which at the end of 70th for certain time kept the place of longest building in the town ...” [Irvanetz, p.33]. Separation not only of the city but also of the life, which is not divided to past and present only, is represented in the following quote: “...presented himself as “Petro Tymchuk”, who in that previous life was if not close friend but at least good acquaintance. Around ten years ago Tymchuk was in charge of culture department in local youth edition, he wrote sufficiently smart satirical articles ...” [Irvanetz, p.44]. Besides, the author refers to abstract landscape objects, which are supposed to underline romantic and nostalgic mood of the hero: “These chestnut trees, these poplar, willow and lime trees remember you for around thirty five years...” [Irvanetz, p. 57]; “...and the park is still the same – big, enigmatic, silent” [Irvanetz, p.58].

Olexander Irvanetz is actively participating in modern literature process and became one of the founders of literature group **BU-BA-BU** (Burlesque-booth show-buffoonery). Exactly style of Bu-Ba-Bu is used to describe gathering, which the hero attends in the eastern part of the town. Meeting, where the author of the novel “The Wall” was judged (autobiographic element – Irvanetz introduces himself into the text canvas as the author) is proceeding in the best socialist traditions. Appropriate, easy to recognize, ironic, and sometimes even sarcastic, the author depicts condition of modern Ukrainian literature, names and gives assessment to both leading authors (“...they criticize you severely in the Ukrainian literature manual for 10th grade, at the very end of it there is a short section devoted to modern literature ...they mention you and Andruhovych there, and also that one, poor man...” [Irvanetz, p.53] and scientists (“... guest from the capital, so educated and famous, namely, professor, chairman of literature sub-department in Kyiv State University, Yuriy Pavlovych Chmonya” [Irvanetz, p.49]) as well as literary critics (“...the Grabovyches and also their homebred yes-men, someone like Oksana Zabuzhko...” [Irvanetz, p.50] along with professional periodic publications (“...he came across those in not often read Kyiv chronicles – “Kyiv”, “Motherland” and recently re-edited “Soviet literary study”...[Irvanetz, p.50], and even well-known literature contest – the one sponsored by chocolate plant.

The analyzed text of Olexander Irvanetz has features of different genres – novel, novelet, autobiography, alternate history, which allows us to make conclusion about its metagenre nature. Clear autobiographic elements in the text are closely connected to the landscape so dear to the author, and which is used as background for the events, gives impulse revoking memories, plays role of philosophic metaphor, which gives us grounds to classify the text as urban autobiography.

Novel “Voroshilovgrad” (2010) by Sergiy Zhadan in our opinion is a transformation of one of traditional storylines – returning of a hero. Main hero of the novel is Herman who returns to the city of his childhood and youth, back to his roots in order to stop for a while and think over his life. This return is without any message or positive framing, it is of real post-modernism character and plunges the hero into a range of everyday, at times primitive daily problems of provincial town. Peculiarity of the novel lies in the fact that the town which name is given to the novel is in fact not a real one and it is not described in the text, however, we cannot deny historical fact that contemporary Lugansk city

used to have name Voroshilovgrad at soviet times. This city is a fantom, ghost, image of the past, memory image. In fact the town is mentioned in the text only once: "Let's say, post cards with views of Voroshilovgrad. Now the town does not exist even, but for several years I used to tell about it in German... In the pictures, as a rule, there were some administrative buildings or monuments of some kind ... maybe to Voroshilov. To be frank, I do not remember now. So, the task was to tell what you see..." [Zhadan, p.183]. Moreover, both researchers and the author himself insist that the novel depicts native town of the author, Starobil'sk town, located in Lugansk oblast: "The reader witnesses 80th - 2000-th of Starobil'sk town through memories and monologues of the hero"; "Modern realia, vividly shown in the novel "Voroshilovgrad", demonstrate sharp contrast of lifestyle, communication, priorities in the capital and province..." [Fomenko, p.99] However, the author does not give names, he only describes certain objects, which allow to establish the place of events. Urban landscape, depicted by the author, is clearly negative and shows the situation in which different parts of ex-totalitarian state dwell. Sometimes it is petrol station or non-operated airport, "...former pioneer camp, ...with peeling off pioneer monument"[Zhadan, p.179], "depths of depot, full of darkness, as if filled up with oil", "... private houses districts, gangster districts, alcohol dependence territory" [Zhadan, p.283-284], "silent yards, overgrown with grass and stuck up with spider web", "glass, iron and burnt grass on the roadside" [Zhadan, p.436], "Disturbing and abandoned area, ...black dry earth, low skies..., paralyzed harvester combines..." [Zhadan, p.267]. All these objects give depressing feeling of helplessness, neglected and useless existence.

The author opposes urban post-industrial landscape with description of eastern Ukraine landscapes: peculiarities of nature, climate, change of seasons and day parts. Totally different moods and intonations come out: "Green slopes stretched on both sides of the road, May was warm and windy; birds travelled from one field to another, their noisy flocks were plunging cheerfully into wind streams. Ahead, at the horizon line, white blocks of flats were blazing in the red flames of sun, looking like a hot basketball ball" [Zhadan, p.17]; "may greenery, sticky and bright, was striking eye, biting the eye retina ..." [Zhadan, p.18]; "Then standing long time under the warm skies, near empty highway; so similar to night metro station: same feeling of hopelessness, same impression of forever lasting minutes of expectation" [Zhadan, p.21]. However, as we see from the quoted abstracts, the author is the child of city life: along with nature sketches we always see urban elements, which mostly are opposed to each other: silence/noise, hope/hopelessness, compactness/emptiness.

East Ukrainian landscape performs function of the background for depicted events and feelings of the main hero. These descriptions give the biggest and brightest part of the author's entity and autobiography. However, some researchers are of different opinion. Thus, I. Bondar-Tereschenko notes: "Sometimes one can have an impression, that time and space are the main heroes of this story, and the rest of "live" material, like brothers Lyonya and Borya, or car mechanics Crippled Shura and Kocha, or the rest of marginal heroes of the novel, are just moving décor to a story about place and time circumstances" [Bondar-Tereschenko].

Zhadan never comes out as moralist or patriot, his texts have no traces of pathos or hortative, important things read almost in between the lines, intertwined into routine and joylessness of existence, however, exactly these parts are key parts of the novel and the ones that give hope. To that category we can attribute the thoughts about genetic memory, friendship, mutual help, belief, solidarity. The author put the dominating idea of the novel into the speech of the pastor: "It happened so that you live here all together: Christians, unbaptized, stundists, and some punks, who even do not know how to read properly... You were born and grew up here; your families and your business are here. All is correct and all is fair. But you continue fighting each other, ignoring the most important part – there are no enemies amongst you in fact. They play you off against each other; provoke fighting each other, making you weak and defenseless. So as long as you are together there is nothing to be afraid of. In principle, no need to be afraid at all... You just have to trust yourself and rely on your steadfastness" [Zhadan, p.441]. One more note is worth to be made: despite traditional expectation to hear the ideas of the author from the main hero, the "Voroshilovgrad" grants the role to the pastor, in particular when the point comes to important life-view things. Exactly he makes statements like this: "...there are things, which are more important than belief. Those are gratitude and responsibility" [Zhadan, p.418], "We have joint responsibility. And joint gratitude" [Zhadan, p.421],

“...Defenseless is the real reason of aggressiveness. As well as weakness”, “Make what you did before. Do not ignore those who are alive. But also do not forget those who died” [Zhadan, p.431].

Novel “Voroshilovgrad” by Sergiy Zhadan is not an autobiographic work in traditional understanding of this genre; it is rather quasi-autobiography, stylization and imitation thereof. Text analysis allowed identifying features of metagenre: mix of novel, reportage, memories and autobiography elements. The image of the author comes out the brightest way in descriptions of eastern Ukrainian landscape, familiar to the author from his childhood, which allows us to classify the text as metagenre formation, namely, urban landscape autobiography.

Taras Prohas’ko in his book “Port Frankivs’k” (2006) used Galicia nature as main landscape; even description of the city is given with accent done on the nature, which is the peculiarity of the author’s style. The leading place amongst toponyms is taken by the Carpathians. The text is nationally oriented. Image of the author shows in the attitude to depicted landscapes, love for it to such extent that it embodies dream about own sea: in soviet times (1979) a project to create the Carpathian sea in the valley of the river Striy was developed.

Out of the 3 analyzed texts the novel by Prohas’ko is an autobiography: the book contains texts, which were written as author’s column for weekly publication “Galicia correspondent» in 2005 year.

The foreword describes the genre as the “letters written to himself”, to imaginary, half mythic city-port Frankivs’k, dream-city. The dominating mood of the foreword is anguish for the times, when people had time, wish, possibility and need to write letters. Genre reflections: «Letters are like novels. Novels are similar to letters. Letters, written on carbon paper for some collected works book. Letters-reports and last will letters. Last will letters like confession letters... Annual letters-appeals to convert into some faith. Encoded references and standard letter text with blank space for new name each time...Also military memories“ [Prohas’ko, p.3-4].

In fact the first text is devoted to the utopian idea of the Carpathian sea creation, which gave the name to book “Port Frankivs’k”. Making idyllic picture of impossible future, the author stays faithful to himself: he describes the locality, using not only well-known geographic names (the Carpathians, Galych, Opillya, Lviv cities, countries (Turkey) and continents (Africa)), but also names of plants dear to his soul and professional experience: “...mountains, covered with plants, which do not grow anywhere else in the surrounding latitudes; it is seacoast after all (something evergreen, juicy shall grow there, at least different kind of moss shall grow)” [Prohas’ko, p.5]. The author depicts his own world in the text, making it look like description of actually existing landscape: he gives coordinates’ system, describes neighboring countries, cities, mountains and valleys, rivers and minerals, even buildings and people, who live in imaginary city-port. The author insists on its medieval origins, saying “...it was intended to be a fortress and thus was created as fortress” [Prohas’ko, p.6]. Trying to recreate the history, Prohas’ko indicates that year 1812 was the year of turning point in the city history, after which the city changed once and forever, not similar to an ideal place, too much built-up and more simple; while the reason of it is not in external conquerors but in inner contradictions.

Text “Excursion to home”, which narrates about overcoming world-view crisis, is important for understanding the texts’ autobiographic landscape. In fact the crises started from the “feeling of native city”, to be exact – from the feeling that the city never changed. However, everything changes, when stable space starts to be dynamic: an acquaintance comes to see his city and has only one hour for this: “The most important was to be shown, because impossible to show everything” [Prohas’ko, p.22]. The author chooses river, rocky beach, square, kostel as most important landscape objects which follow each other as shots follow each other in a film. This dynamics and outside view at his own city changes feelings of the author and heals his depression. Author’s understanding of interior is also based on sensations, even rather on feelings: “...home comfort first of all requires mutual remembering that we are supposed to make life of each other more interesting” [Prohas’ko, p.25]. In the author’s opinion sensations change perception of the landscape: “Landscapes you run along or across you cannot see in such perspective if you just pass them by” [Prohas’ko, p.42].

Basic landscape of the text is mountains. They are present in the “Family authority”, “Thirty three points about jogging”, “Affair with gas”. The last work contains mountains only in dreams at first,

later they become real, as well as ideal city on the Marburg mountain. The author tries to investigate the landscape of this city and compare it to a Ukrainian city. The research comes up with two basic landscape features of the city: lichen and rocks: "In general the Marburg is similar to lichen. Only lichens know how to stay so green while growing on rocks" [Prohas'ko, p.26]. Staying faithful to his profession (Prohas'ko is a botanist), the author names great number of plants while describing rocks: "... several types of grapes, ivy, lots of moss, liana, laurel, boxwoods, lemon trees, oleanders, cypresses, cades and plane-trees are growing between the plates" [Prohas'ko, p.27].

His own life philosophy Prohas'ko sets off in text "Seasonal thinking". It lies in the necessity to synchronize life of a person with the change of seasons, which is synchronizing with nature, at least paying attention and observing the changes taking place in nature. Autobiographic element shows in professional knowledge of dozens of flowers, connecting some place with certain season: "Budapest is May. Berlin is June. Vilnius is July ... cooking crawfish at the Balkans in September..." [Prohas'ko, p.39].

While defining genre of the analyzed book by Prohas'ko it is worth mentioning the author's variant – feuilleton. Partially we agree with this definition, since some texts have ironic elements, however, we cannot identify them as satirical. Texts have philosophic conclusions, memories about events, description of feelings and thoughts of the author, botanic terms, urban landscapes' descriptions, both imaginary and abstract along with real ones and specific, which allows to classify the text as metagenre one in general. The text is autobiographic, since it is not only written on behalf of the author, but also it recreates his thoughts, feelings, world outlook, and attitude to surrounding reality.

The authors of the analyzed texts describe non-existing in real life cities (Voroshilovgrad, Port Frankivs'k) or imaginary events (division of Rivne city into two parts), thus embodying their memories or dreams and disclosing their world outlooks. Difficulty lies in genre classification of these texts since they have features of a novel, novelet, quasi- autobiography, alternate history, essay, which allows identifying their metagenre nature.

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