



The Children's Book in Modern Ukraine: between two Languages and Cultures

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Abstract: Children's book as a social phenomenon is getting formed under the influence of numerous metaliterature factors. This paper aims primarily at demonstrating the peculiarities of the present shaping of the Ukrainian children's literature which are determined by the corresponding present social and political, cultural and educational processes in the country.

Key words: national children's book, social and political background, educational aspect, Ukraine.

Taking into consideration the fact that Ukrainian experience is hardly known around the world, we decided to give a general outline of the situation, to introduce readers to the problem rather than provide a detailed analysis of it.

Social and political background

Ukraine belongs to such young democracy countries that have just entered the path of independent existence – independence was proclaimed in 1991. That is why Ukraine still retains the bitter “flavour” of imperial dependence and totalitarianism. In order to find their niche in the present day world Ukrainian people need to understand: “who we are today”. It is noteworthy that looking for national identity is the most burning issue in post-colonial countries, regardless of how long ago they became independent (see Diakiw, 1997). Ukraine's experience can be interesting in that it represents patterns that are common for a number of post-soviet countries and at the same time it demonstrates unique Ukrainian scenario of constructing so called ‘ambiguous national identity’.

“On obtaining its independence, Ukraine – the biggest in Europe objective (...) suddenly wanted to become itself” (Andrukhovych, 2007: 335). However, to ‘become oneself’ turned out to be not so easy: in various layers of Ukrainian society there exist various, sometimes even opposite conceptions and convictions as to what this means – so heavy appears to be the ‘heritage’ of lingering existence without state. The main reason for hampering and complicating the process of self-determination among all the possible reasons is a lack of clear, and, most important, commonly shared understanding of such crucial for this process notions as ‘Ukrainian state’ and ‘Ukrainian nation’, derivative notions ‘Ukrainian culture’, ‘Ukrainian education’, ‘Ukrainian literature’ among different layers of Ukrainian society including the ruling elites.

The lack of consensus in the present Ukrainian society has been determined historically. By the beginning of the twentieth century, the Ukrainian territory had been divided between two empires that differed in their mentality and in all the elements of social and spiritual development. This is reflected in the modern differences between Ukrainian regions. Even the fact that these regions were united into one republic in another empire, that is the USSR, did not resolve these differences and contradictions. Contemporary Ukraine as ‘a cultural chip of empire’

consists of regions which so far on the cultural level have little in common apart from the colonial ‘little-Russionism’: they speak different languages, and not only in the direct meaning, but, which is even worse, in the indirect sense: they use different semiotic codes, different historical and cultural myths; they are reading different books, listening to different music, watching different TV programmes, subscribing to different news-papers – and the bad thing is not that they are ‘different’ but that they have nothing ‘the same’, nothing in common, nothing that would be uniting and creating a commonly shared discourse, a shared cultural code without which, as a matter of fact, there can be no fully fledged nation. For the time being, there are different regions, different cities and villages that at different times found themselves in the Ukrainian Soviet Socialist Republic, united more by soviet rather than Ukrainian identity. In fact, they are still incapable of creating a shared cultural, moreover informational space, continuing to live in their ‘local’ worlds and speaking if not different languages, then for sure in different sonic frequencies (Ryabchuk, 1998: 7).

Sociological surveys conducted during and after the last presidential elections, especially after ‘Maidan-2004’, have shown evidence of progress in the political awareness of Ukrainian population who start to identify themselves more and more with Ukraine and less and less with Russia or USSR. But whether this political ‘Ukraineness’ will ever get transformed into a cultural one is difficult to say. Political events of recent years have once more demonstrated polarization of Ukrainian society precisely in spiritual sense, they have also shown that

neither obtained in 1991 formal attributes of independence..., nor implemented much later, already as the result of the Orange Revolution, now change of political elite (from ‘post-Soviet’ to ‘national, that is to such for which the fact that ‘Ukraine is not Russia’ would not require anymore a special argumentation), nor any other steps on the way of our ‘decolonization’ can manage to annul in one moment two hundred years of Ukrainian colonial decay (Zabuzhko, 2007: 36).

Educational aspect

It is quite clear, under such circumstances, that the attempts of educational institutions to implement the concept of national education for new generations of Ukrainians designed on the romantic wave of the first years of independence, so far appear to be of little effect. In early 1990s a group of scholars and practicing educators worked out a programme “Education. Ukraine of the 21st century”. It was adopted by the First congress of educators of Ukraine (1992), ratified by the Cabinet of Ministers of Ukraine, signed by the then President of Ukraine.

Later (1994) another significant document appeared “Concept of National Education” directed onto introduction of the Programme into all educational institutions in the country.

According to this documents the priority directions of reforming education were the following: formation of national awareness, love for the native land and one’s own people, desire to work for the welfare of one’s state, readiness to defend it, formation of a high language culture, mastery of the Ukrainian language, filling education with the cultural and historic acquirements of Ukrainian people, engrafting respectful attitude to the culture, customs, traditions of all peoples inhabiting Ukraine. However, from mid 1990s, open attempts commenced to revise both above-mentioned documents. The aim was to neutralize in it the national accent. There were some alternative programmes appearing in which ‘national education’ is transformed either into ‘education within the national system of education’, or into a ‘civil education in the circumstances of development of Ukrainian statehood’, or simply into a ‘civil education’ without determinant ‘national’. The problem is that:

in the tongue of those Ukrainian politicians who are actively promoting denial of the idea of national education in favour of civil education, the latter, that is civil education is in fact losing all significant senses, it just disguises a sheer cosmopolitanism, snobbism and disrespect in attitude to Ukrainian spiritual and cultural values, tendentious ‘ignoring’ of one’s own, national within the universal. Such education has once already resulted in an ill-famed type of human being – homosovieticus (Pohrybnyj, 2000: 7).

‘Face’ of modern Ukrainian children’s book

The circumstances above mentioned explain the fact that during twenty years of independence of Ukraine the key question of whether new Ukrainian children’s book has already developed and what kind of national identity it presents remains open. What does it mean modern ‘Ukrainian children’s book’ – is it book in national language, or book “about Ukraine” – both in Ukrainian and Russian languages, or book published in Ukraine?

If to take for a starting point territorial (rather formal) characteristic, then all the printed production addressed for children that is being published, distributed or accumulated in the libraries of Ukraine can be considered national. If to take for a starting point language – it also can be considered national: the great part of Ukrainian children’s book repertoire consists of Ukrainian language editions (for example in 2009 76%). But qualitative analysis shows, even if the language of a book is Ukrainian it doesn’t mean that it is Ukrainian in its nature. Unfortunately, among modern Ukrainian language books for children a lot of books are low-quality, especially in lingual aspect. Such kind of texts and books seriously spoil the fostering of children’s language and speech culture create for the Ukrainian language a reputation of a

language incapable of talking to a child softly and naturally. Faulty translations also hamper the rise of the prestige of the Ukrainian language which is anyway having difficulties in paving its way forward under the conditions of Russian-Ukrainian bilingualism and diglossia.

Moreover around 65% of Ukrainian-language books are numerous re-publications of Ukrainian folklore, Ukrainian and world classics written and translated long time ago. The doubtless value of classical works lies in the preservation and transmission of historic memory of a nation, in using it together with educational and didactic instructions for the studying of a national literature history. However, since the time when this text corpus was created the world of Ukrainians, including that of the young ones, has seriously changed at least twice – in the epoch of Soviet Union, in the new phase of independence. Even the archetype itself, according to scholars, has undergone certain changes. Almost none of Ukrainian classic authors whose works are studied at school ever wrote specifically for children. On the background of the missing developed Ukrainian children's literature, they were used for children's reading due to their high skills of story-telling or because of the topic of childhood present in their books. Yet, because of their palpable distance in time, because of the archaic plots, themes, images, language, and so on the classical works are becoming more and more difficult for perception of a contemporary child and, naturally, are not fit for everyday reading. A contemporary Ukrainian child needs a contemporary book with a new Ukrainian hero, contemporary realities, and modern Ukrainian language.

Thus, to recognize Ukrainian children's book of the transition period proper Ukrainian and at the same time contemporary – not only by its formal but also by its essential traits is, probably, still quite hard. It should be mentioned, though, that in the beginning of the new century the situation started changing for better. There appeared few new interesting Ukrainian authors, valuable and relevant literary texts, new highly professional Ukrainian translations (without Russian language as an intermediary language) of the best world children's literature, adapted to the needs of a young Ukrainian reader. The attempts to produce original children's book have been getting more and more frequent. But the process of looking for new Ukrainian children's book and literature still is rather intricate. The problem will be difficult to solve without a consensus in our society on the understanding of the concepts 'nation', 'national culture', 'national literature' and state protectionism which would consist in every possible support of Ukrainian-centered education, theory and practice of the development of a canon of a modern Ukrainian children's literature.

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