

Oksana WERETIUK

University of Rzeszow
oksanaw@ur.edu.pl

IDENTIFYING THE UKRAINIAN: MARINA LEWYCKA'S *A SHORT HISTORY OF TRACTORS IN UKRAINIAN*

Abstract: This essay deals with the problem of Ukrainian identity in Marina Lewycka's novel: *A Short History of Tractors in Ukrainian* (2005). The paper suggests a twofold imagological¹ analysis in order to answer how the second generation of Ukrainian immigrants in Great Britain (children of the post-WWII political migration) perceives, the Ukrainian newcomer, the economic immigrant from a post-communist state, who looks strange and other for them and how the reader, in his turn, perceives the Ukrainianness of the first and the second. It also underlines that Marina Lewycka infuses the Ukrainian history (past and modern) with a unique sense of humour based on cultural varieties. Her English-Ukrainian and Ukrainian-English characters are observed from different perspectives.

Key words: imagological analysis, Ukrainian migration in Great Britain, Ukrainian history, post-communism, assimilation

In her first published book, with an ironically attractive title, *A Short History of Tractors in Ukrainian* (2005)² Marina Lewycka (1946 -) created a female type of *Lucky Jim* in the new European realities: a dexterous, blazingly beautiful, smart, impudent and vulgar divorcee from a poor country who makes plans for

¹ On imagology, auto-images and hetero-images see: *Imagology: The Cultural Construction and Literary Representation of National Characters: a Critical Survey*, ed. by Manfred Beller, Joseph Theodoor Leerssen, Amsterdam, New York: Rodopi 2007, pp. XIV, 18-30; Leerssen 1991, 129; Leerssen 2007, 343-344; Menno Spiering, *Englishness: Foreigners and Images of National Identity in Postwar Literature*, Amsterdam: Rodopi 1992, pp. 12, 18-19.

² Lewycka's debut novel – *A Short History of Tractors in Ukrainian* – won the 2005 Bollinger Everyman Wodehouse Prize for comic writing at the Hay literary festival, the 2005/6 Waverton Good Read Award, and the 2005 Saga Award for Wit; it was also long-listed for the 2005 Man Booker Prize and short-listed for the 2005 Orange Prize for Fiction.

a comfortable life in a much richer country and employs any means to achieve them. In the state of things as they actually exist in Europe, she had to be someone from Eastern Europe whose desire is to become a British immigrant. The author's competence in Ukrainian history – which follows from her biography³ – makes her heroine a woman from Ukraine. Therefore, *a hilarious tale of a gold-digging Ukrainian, Valentina, a fluffy pink grenade* (Lewycka 2006:1) who snares an elderly widower appears. But it is also a story about Valentina's 'victim': an eighty-four-year-old, eccentric post-war immigrant from Ukraine, a widower and the narrator's father, whose past makes this tale a *heart-rending account of the bloodstained history of Ukraine*.⁴ *How is the Ukrainian newcomer perceived by the narrator and the narrator's family? Do their opinions differ and why?* To answer these questions it is necessary first of all to make clear who the perceiving characters are.

The narrator's father, Nikolai Mayevskyj, an English draftsman and engineer, having been assimilated into the official language and manners of his new country, is still Ukrainian deep in his heart of hearts, is still 'working' with his mind for the good of his first country, the ancestral motherland he left, with a desire to return to his sweetheart Ukraine. In spite of the fact that he is more concentrated on his tractors and poems than on his contacts with the diaspora, his emotional well-being in many respects is diasporic. Mayevskyj retains *a strong ethnic group consciousness; a sense of empathy with co-ethnic members* [in his case – with Ukrainians from an established homeland, Ukrainian Ukrainians]; *an idealization of the ancestral home [...]; a strong tie to the past and a block to assimilation in present*. His individualistic nature, probably, hinders his *collective commitment to its [Ukraine's] safety and prosperity*⁵ and *directs him to his private responsibility*.

Nikolai Mayevskyj, the narrator's Pappa (very likely, a contamination of the Russian word *nana* [papa] and the English *papa, daddy*⁶), with his permanent Ukrainian-English 'Aha. Yes. No', 'vat' [instead *what*], is the most Ukrainian person on Coronation Street, where the Mayevskyjs lived together. An immigrant of the first generation, he is always thinking of his motherland, with its *[b]lue-painted wooden houses, golden wheat fields, forests of silver birch, slow wide sliding rivers* (26). Physically living and working in one space, Mayevskyj emotionally lives across geographical and political boundaries. Being in deep pain in his loneliness for Ukraine, after his Ukrainian wife's death, he decided to marry Valentina: she and her son would become his substitute family. From his idealistic point of view

³ Lewycka was born to Ukrainian parents in a refugee camp in Kiel, her family subsequently moved to England.

⁴ Marina Lewycka interview for *We Are All Made of Glue*.

⁵ I refer to the features of the traditional diaspora defined by William Safran and Robin Cohen [Cohen 2008: 6-7; 17].

⁶ Unfortunately in the Polish and the Ukrainian editions the translators did not save this Russian element, a special feature of the original. See: Marina Lewycka. *Zarys dziejów traktora po ukraińsku*. Translated by Anna Jęczyżyk. Warszawa: Albatros 2006; Марина Левицька. *Коротка історія тракторів по-українськи*. Переклав Олекса Нагребський. Київ: Темпора 2013.

it is doubly useful for both of them – his pretty young wife (with her *hair like the golden wheat fields* (134), with her *handsome Slavic profile* (115) and her son will escape from the very poor and unstable Ukrainian post-communist reality and he – as he thinks –

can speak with them in his own language. Such a beautiful language that anyone can be a poet. Such a landscape – it would make anyone an artist. [...] Instead of going home to Ukraine, Ukraine will come home to him (26).

Moreover, the narrator remarks that such patriotism in him is stable, durable and consistent and at all times there were his countrymen who – with truth or with untruth – were ready to immigrate to the rich West with the help of his altruistic and idealistic invitation.

This isn't the first time he has harboured fantasies of rescuing destitute Ukrainians. There was once a plan to track down members of the family whom he had not seen for half a century, and bring them all over to Peterborough. [...] Dozens of replies came pouring in from dodgy-sounding 'relatives' [...] (26).

Presenting – from time to time – the fragments of his book on the Ukrainian tractor industry to his family (mainly to his English son-in-law) he also introduces a detailed history of Ukraine describing as *a terrible tragedy what has happened in this beautiful country*. His exact and at the same time poetic mind names the cause of its tragedy very shortly and metaphorically: *'The twin evils of fascism and communism have eaten her heart'* (32).

Nikolai Mayevskyj comes from an educated family (the place of its residence is not known). As the narrator informs us, *The Mayevskyjs were part of the small Ukrainian intelligentsia* (68). The use of the attribute *small* has a very important historical sense: after the long period of assimilation of the Ukrainian gentry and intelligentsia with Russians (in the East) and Poles (in the West) under colonial or half-colonial conditions, the very small group remaining saved its Ukrainian identity – apart from the clergy, nearly all the intelligentsia, and especially the nobility, were in the service of foreign overlords. But those who preserved their identity preserved their native language and culture. Mayevskyj-senior, like real historical figures – Mykhaylo Hrushevs'kyj, Dmytro Doroshenko, Serhiy Yefremov, Volodymyr Vynnychenko – tried to create and defend Ukrainian independence directing the Ukrainian national movement in The Central Council of Ukraine of the Ukrainian People's Republic (UPR). *In the brief flowering of Ukrainian independence in 1918 he [Nikolai's father] was even Minister for Education for six months* (68). After the UPR was overthrown and Civil war passed, he managed to survive in soviet Ukraine, adapting himself and his Ukrainian identity to the new conditions. His granddaughter notes:

After Stalin came to power and all ideas of Ukrainian autonomy were stamped out, he became the head teacher of a Ukrainian language school in Kiev, operating on voluntary subscription and under constant pressure from the authorities (68).

Mayevskyj-junior keeps alive the independent spirit of his father and his pro-Ukrainian orientation. In his student years in Kiev he *belonged to a secret circle of Ukrainian poets, which had been outlawed as part of the drive to impose Russian as the lingua franca of the Soviet Union (31)* (probably in the stream of the Ukrainization process of the 1920s⁷). Then, Nikolai Mayevskyj could speak standard Ukrainian but in England he preserves his native tongue for himself only. He does not speak Ukrainian with his daughters and, probably, he has lost his 'standards' in spoken Ukrainian, but he composes poems, he writes prose in good Ukrainian. His younger daughter/narrator – who mainly presents his image – observes again: *He writes [the history of Ukrainian tractors] in Ukrainian then translates it painstakingly into English (he studied English and German at high school) (59)*. His written English is good, but he prefers creative writing in his native language.

His late wife, Ludmilla, Milla, Millochka Mayevskyj – unlike him – never assimilated with the British. She spoke to her daughters in her native tongue, *with its infinite gradations of tender diminutives. Mother tongue (15)*. Ludmilla kept her house and cooked in the traditional Ukrainian way, she regularly kept in touch with the Ukrainian diaspora in Britain, and she presented the most characteristic ethnic features.⁸ For a long time the Ukrainian people have been famous for their exceptional hospitality, industry and good order in domestic life. The Ukrainian woman had to be a good mother, wife and a very good housekeeper. Her great heart warmed each member of their family. Her pantry and table were never empty. Such a woman was Ludmilla Mayevskyj. The narrator recalls a fantastic *fabulous soup* with *halushki* cooked by her mother and in detail describes her mother's purveying talent (18-19) and garden with flowers, fruit trees and greens (12-13); she also recalls her mother's thoughtfulness and sensitivity toward others, her desire for cleanliness and beauty: *When my mother was here there were always fresh flowers, a clean tablecloth, the smell of good cooking (2006:30)*. Ludmilla was held in high respect at home and in the local diaspora.

⁷ See for details: Орест Субтельний. *Історія України*. Київ: Либідь 1993, сс. 476-79; Мирослав Семчишин. *Тисяча років української культури*. Київ: АТ «Друга рука» м.г. «Фенікс» 1985, сс. 425-434.

⁸ The Ukrainian ethnic character was studied by Mykola Kostomarov, Hryhorij Vashchenko, Volodymyr Lypyn'skyj, Volodymyr Antonovych, Yuriy Lypa, Dmytro Chyzhevskyj, Ivan Ohiyenko, Oleksandr Potebnia, Oleksandr Kulchytskyj, Petro Hnatenko etc. For example, Antonovych noticed that ethnic characteristics were formed, based on those inherited, in that nation's history, and in its cultural and historical upbringing. See: Володимир Антонович. „Три національні типи народні.” [in:] Володимир Антонович, *Твори*, Т. 1. Київ 1932, с. 196-210.

In spite of her close contact with the Ukrainian and her ethnic style of domestic life she did not speak standard Ukrainian. Her family history was more tragic and the conditions in which she lived were not conducive for her learning Ukrainian. She came from Ocheretkos, wealthy farmers, former Cossacks. Vera, the elder sister of the narrator, recalls the very traditional ethnic appearance of her grandmother's relatives on her wedding:

The Ocheretko men strode into the church in their riding-boots, embroidered shirts and outlandish baggy trousers. The women wore wide swinging skirts and boots with little heels and coloured ribbons in their hair. They stood together in a fierce bunch at the back of the church and left abruptly at the end [...] (63).

They were Ukrainian not only in their appearance – they had the Ukrainian essence and condemned those who were traitors to the land. The narrator's mother lost her father in 1930, when she was eighteen. He was arrested in the middle of the night, *charged with secretly training Ukrainian Nationalist combatants. Was it true?* (65). After a short time he was executed, and his family was lucky to survive. Ludmilla Ocheretko living in Poltava in 1932-1933 faced collectivization and starvation. The eldest daughter recalls her horrible stories about Holodomor, the younger sister may understand well her mother's food ideology: she knew what famine was

and this knowledge never left her throughout her fifty years of life in England [...] she knew for certain that behind the piled-high shelves and abundantly stocked counters of Tesco and the Co-op, hunger still prowls with his skeletal frame and gaping eyes, waiting to grab you the moment you are off your guard (19).

She also knew that the only way to outwit hunger is to save and accumulate, and she did so. She was an excellent housekeeper, a gardener and a truck farmer in England. In her young years their mother wanted to study to become a veterinary surgeon, but her position in the class structure, her biography closed the door to soviet education. She left khutor for Luhansk, where she met her first husband. In Russified Poltava and Luhansk she, supposedly, partly lost her beautiful and clear, local Poltava dialect of Ukrainian. They married in 1936. Nikolai, an engineer, worked on tractor production before and during WWII. After the war they headed towards the West. Their younger daughter, Vera, similar to Marina Lewycka, the author, was born in a refugee camp in Germany in 1946 and moved to England with her father, mother and older sister. The Mayevskyjs' history is a dramatic history of their land.

Their daughters are English. They have very poor contact with the diaspora (they know local Ukrainians thanks to their mother). Both of them have married Englishmen, follow English traditions (five o'clock tea, lunch, a chat about the

weather, a neutral tone with distance, etc.), but they remember well the poor, fearful and sad beginning of their immigrant life and their parents' motherland (historical/collective and subjective memories taken together). That is why the younger one, the above-mentioned narrator, has her own vision of Ukraine and presents it in her English-and-hybrid way, full of *narrative struggle* (Bhabha 1990:295) and repressing her cultural unconscious narration (in-between the English and Ukrainian perspectives, the result of the influence of Daddy's romantic spirit, sentimental reminiscences and real and half-real media-information).

The narrator, Nadezhda, a middle-aged woman, an English academic teacher and writer, looking very much like Marina Lewycka herself, has fairly strong Ukrainian roots. Perhaps the narrator felt the nature of Ukraine mostly by intuition (the *archaic emerges* from her deeper consciousness). Her knowledge and her conscious reasoning complement her instinctive feeling. She is aware of the fact that Ukraine is still divided into two countries, each of it with its own religion, language, history, culture, mode of thinking and behaviour – Eastern Ukraine and Western Ukraine. Her parents were from the east, where the Russian influence was very powerful (a result of enduring Russian oppression⁹ and close borders). That is why their everyday vocabulary has absolutely essential Russian elements (the odd and funny English-Russian *Pappa*, for example, instead of the Ukrainian *Tato*, Daddy); their family proper names evidently manifest the Russification of the Ukrainian language (Nadezhda instead of Nadiya, Vera instead of Vira, Kolya, Nikolai instead of Mykolka, Mykola etc.). Even Nikolai Mayevskyj continues this using of proper names. In spite of the fact that in his student years in Kiev he *belonged to a secret circle of Ukrainian poets*, fighting for the Ukrainian language in Ukraine, he retains the impact of the previous historical context, which leads to the hybrid of Ukrainian and Russian narration (so-called *Surzhyk*) in his family language. At her English home Ludmilla Mayevskyj's Ukrainian is very mixed. The narrator notices: *She talked in her own DIY language – Ukrainian sprinkled with words like handheldblendera, suspenderbeltu, greenfingerdski* (Lewycka 2006:7-8) But it was still Ukrainian, which always helped to retain her and her husband's national distinction. *A language does not make a nation*, neither is it the *main distinctive determinant of the nation* (Antonovych 1932: 196), but on the other hand, nothing but language unites one with a spirit of one's nation. What is interesting is that Mayevskyj, this English engineer with a Ukrainian heart and a poetic soul, with real Ukrainian emotionalism¹⁰, realizes the great power of the native language – entirely in harmony with Humboldt's and Sapir-Whorf's

⁹ Russian colonialism of Ukraine is believed to have started in 1477 and its end was believed to be 1991, with the political independence of Ukraine, but in practice Russian influence still dominates this territory. See for details: Vitaly Chernetsky, "Postcolonialism, Russia and Ukraine".

¹⁰ For Dmytro Chyzhevskyj *emotionalism* and *sentimentalism*, *sensitiveness* and *lyricism* were the absolute, unconditional features of the mental construction of the Ukrainian. See in: Дмитро Чижевський, *Філософські твори у чотирьох томах* – Том 1, Київ: Смолоскип 2005, с. 15.

((neo-)Humboldtian linguistics) concepts of the relation *language-thought-reality*, according to which a human being is always captured within the boundaries of his own language and has his linguistic national *worldview* (German philosophical term *Weltanschauung* and Humboldt's key concept *Weltansicht*).¹¹ This can be traced in the following dialogue with his younger daughter/narrator, when he grumbles to his daughter about the aggressiveness, barbarity and foul language of his new wife:

[...] 'In Russian. [Valentina] Said all in Russian.'

'Pappa, the language doesn't matter...'

'No, on contrary, language is supremely important. In language are encapsulated not only thoughts but cultural values...' (139).

Although Valentina came to Peterborough from Ternopil, which is situated in Western Ukraine with its strong Ukrainian identity, in her language, mentality and manners she appears Russian. Mayevskyj's Ukrainianness makes the Russian strange and with a tincture of imperial plundering.¹² He compares Ukrainian and Russian types of woman: 'This Valentina, she is beautiful like Milla [his late wife], and like Milla she has strong spirit, but also with an element of cruelty in her nature unknown to Ludmilla, which by the way is characteristic of the Russian type' (170). Having measured the length of Valentina's foot he generalizes her features to the Russian type: 'True, this is the defect of character which is typical, by the way, of the Russian psyche, in which there is always the tendency to believe in violence as first rather than last resort' (204).

The narrator, being more English than her Pappa and much more distant from Ukraine spots these ethnic differences within the Ukrainian nation. She underlines several times, that Valentina who has come from the Ukrainian Ternopil is Russian (96, 139, 106) and Valentina's brother is Russian (95). What does this mean in the space of her hybrid, heterogeneous mind, which is full of *double consciousness* (Du Bois' term, see Gourdine 2002:2)? Characterizing Valentina as Russian, does she mean her Russian ethnicity in a literal sense, or Russian mentality as a result of prolonged imperial power, when the Ukrainians were the subordinate

¹¹ [...] language is connected with the shaping of the 'nation's mental power' (Humboldt 1999:21); Human beings do not live in the objective world alone, nor alone in the world of social activity as ordinarily understood, but are very much at the mercy of the particular language which has become the medium of expression for their society. No two languages are ever sufficiently similar to be considered as representing the same social reality. The worlds in which different societies live are distinct worlds, not merely the same world with different labels attached [...] We see and hear and otherwise experience very largely as we do because the language habits of our community predispose certain choices of interpretation (Sapir 1958:69); On Humboldt's *Weltansicht* see for details in: James Underhill. *Humboldt. Worldview and Language*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press 2009, pp. 16-18.

¹² Volodymyr Antonovych trying to characterize and compare three national types, noticed that Russians regarded that which was strong as ethical. (Антонович 1932: 209- 210).

group and the Russians the dominant group, and when it ran to *dissemiNATION* of Ukrainian identity? Or it is the generally accepted Western perception (in the traditional English narration of the narrator) of everybody from Eastern Europe (Russia, Ukraine, Poland, Slovakia etc.) as Russian?¹³ In spite of Marina Lewycka's reported comment in Ukraine, that she oriented her book to an English reader (Western perception),¹⁴ I am prone to think, that she tries to locate her mind under Western stereotypes and imagines present Ukraine as a non-holistic nation, where heterogeneous processes were and still are taking place¹⁵.

Valentina's family history (Ukrainian, of peasant origin (her 'peasant' mother), Catholic) has been assimilated with external Russian/soviet elements in such a manner, that the reader perceives the results of the post-war Russification of the Western Ukrainians, their powerful and dynamic assimilation (whether voluntarily or not) in favour of Russian language, behaviour and culture and the creation of hybrid national and cultural individuals. With intrinsic humour, the narrator opposes Daddy's sentimental and charming Ukraine in the past (the lost homeland) with the contemporary East European country on the initial stage of its independence. *Ukraina: he sighs, breathing in the remembered scent of mown hay and cherry blossom. But I catch the distinct synthetic whiff of New Russia* (1). The same is true with their perception of Valentina: whereas a sentimental Mayevskyj, familiar with dramatic Ukrainian history expresses his understanding of the new-comer from his poor and lovely motherland, his sympathy with her:

Clearly this Valentina, she is of quite different generation. She knows nothing of history, even less about recent past. She is a daughter of the Brezhnev era. In times of Brezhnev, everyone's idea was to bury all gone-by things and to become like in the West. To build this economy, people must be buying something new all the time. New desires must be implanted as fast as old ideas must be buried. That is why she is always wanting to buy something modern. It is not her fault; it is the post-war mentality (170).

His clever western daughters do not compromise and are sharp in their evaluation of the present facts.

With the help of her characters, the author gives us some reasons why we should see the post-Soviet satellite states as suffering from the postcolonial syndrome, for

¹³ I asked Marina Lewycka about this, but she preferred not to answer this question, as is her right, of course. Maybe, both interpretations would make sense. We, critics, must read and make up our own mind. The author leaves her work open to interpretation.

¹⁴ Марина Левицька, «Коли Україна більше повірить у себе, вона не буде боятися сміятися з себе». Interviews Alla Lazareva, „Український тиждень”.

¹⁵ The present Ukraine is divided into three language communities: Ukrainian-speaking, Russian-speaking and Surzhyk-speaking. In such a way in Ukraine the feeling of language unity and solidarity does not embody not a bit.

example the compensatory behaviour in the form of fondness for the Western lifestyle. Undoubtedly, Nadezhda's narration is more objective than her father's one. Her needle-sharp eyesight notes a new type of people in Ukraine (irrespective of their ethnicity): those who live and act in accordance with the 'code' of the newly rich business class in post-Soviet Russia. Perceived as a stereotypical caricature, many New Russians achieved rapid wealth by using criminal methods during the transition of post-soviet Ukraine into a market economy. Valentina Dubova (a Russian last name: it looks like she has chosen a Russian husband) entirely reflects this.

Unfortunately, the Ukrainians in 2005 (when the book was published), being on the wave of the democratic Orange revolution, had forgotten those early years, full of economic struggle and social stratification and – what is even worse – did not understand her English humour, which was perceived as *caricature and sarcasm, black humour and satire*.¹⁶ *The fusion of Ukrainian newcomers with conventional English life on Coronation Street is sharply comic. Comic moments alternate with dramatic, perfect English – with colourful, juicy, untranslatable Ukrainian; Middle England past and present – with communist and post-communist regimes in Eastern Europe. I understand the great patriotism of 'the Orange' Ukrainians well: for the first time in the history of twentieth-century Ukraine the idea of revolutionary changes interested people of all ages and increased the overall unity of Ukrainians. The time/space needed heroes, not antiheroes or fillisters, such as Valentina. Regardless of this objective fact I am not prone to agree with Andrey Kurkov's (a'propos, Kurkov is a Russian language writer from Ukraine) negative opinion of Lewycka's image of a Ukraine full of caricatures and negative stereotypes (Just about everyone portrayed in it inspires the sympathy of the reader except the Ukrainians, legal and illegal. What we see is caricatures).*¹⁷ The crux of her comedy is the fact that the narrator's stepmother (younger than her stepdaughter) from *Ukraina* is not Ukrainian at all!

The novel pioneers the characteristic subject-matter of the post-communist European time: a young woman with a communist burden making her way into a capitalist world. While jokes and sketches, intended to make readers laugh, frequently rise to high English comedy, the novel is also an absorbing family story, and never loses its grip on the painful and complex realities of human relationships. It would be appropriate also to underline that Marina Lewycka knows these subjects and the realities of migration very well since she herself is a daughter of Ukrainian immigrants; it was her who – in the early years of her childhood (after having moved to Sussex,

¹⁶ Марина Левицька - Матеріал з Вікіпедії.

¹⁷ Andrey Kurkov, Review: *A Short History of Tractors in Ukrainian*.

Marina Lewycka mentioned this fact two years later: *Some Ukrainians were sniffy about the book, including the one who reviewed it in the Guardian back in March 2005 and found it a "banal tale" that crossed a "school textbook on Ukrainian history with [...] an episode of Coronation Street."* [in:] Stephen Moss, *Better Later than Never*.

England) – fed the ducks and started to acquire an interest in the welfare of poultry, and it was her parents who moved to the United Kingdom in search of work. Marina Lewycka impresses with a unique sense of humour based on cultural varieties.

To summarize: two waves of Ukrainian émigrés in England illustrate a complicated and dynamic process of transformation of identities when the assimilated English Ukrainian of the first wave emigration perceives as the Strange a representative of the next wave. The analysis of plot, narration and language has shown the unstable location in post-WWII Europe, which leads to vague identification. The interpretation of Lewycka's *Tractors* needs a very careful imagological reading, which would take into consideration different points of view and historical perspectives.

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