

## **Abstract**

### **Magdalena Lubas: *The steppe topos in Polish literature***

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The subject of current dissertation is “*The steppe topos in Polish literature*”. The main goal of the work is to present the role of steppe in our literature and analyse the significance of its iconospheres. The Author points out the interest in the subject of steppes, Eastern borderlands and Ukraine, since in many cases those terms have been equated. Steppe is not only a space, but also a culture category and a state of consciousness. It was a place where many ethnical, religious and cultural groups were brought together. Through the centuries authors were fascinated and inspired by this topic.

The Author analyses the presentation of steppe on the pages of works originating from different literary periods, starting from old-polish period till the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Through the centuries, the perception of steppes and tumuli changed. The researchers, authors and readers go back to the steppes of Ukraine. Those lands certainly nourish their imagination, tempt with its wilderness and open space. Besides being a land of tumuli and steppes, the Ukraine is also a myth.

The first chapter „*Stanitsas, fortifications and steppe oases*” presents a vision of steppe in old-polish- and Enlightenment period. At this time, steppes were mainly a place of numerous wars, engagements, Tatar-Cossack invasions. The works originating from this literary period – diaries and journals – were preserved to our times mainly without the names of their authors. Diaries enrapture the reader with the dynamics of images. In the old-polish and Enlightenment periods, the steppes were elements of war stories and “*Eastern borderlands heroicum*”. In old-polish diaries and journals, also in Trembecki’s ‘*Sofijówka*’ the histories taking place in steppes interlaces with a mysterious reflection on the words essence. ‘*In the wide steppe*’, where a wilderness outbalanced the humanity, numerous fortifications and stanitsas were built. Their task was to ensure safety of plains and borders.

In the second chapter „*The canon of steppe iconosphere*” the Author describes the vision of steppe, which was created by authors of Romanticism. The representatives of

Ukrainian school started valorisation of steppe topic. This perception of steppe is present in output of Zaleski and Goszczyński. Their works present a land with lush greenery of bulrush and bents. The rural images are disturbed by steppe wind which brings a feeling of emptiness and death. Malczewski's *'Maria'*, Słowacki's *'Żmija'* also Goszczyński's *'Zamek kaniowski'* reveal the dark side of steppe. It becomes a place which is hostile to humans and turns into the devil's own land.

The authors of Romanticism began to describe an extraordinary richness of fauna and flora, also histories enchanted in graves, crosses and tumuli. The size of steppe plains was emphasized by an image of galloping Cossack against a loudly blowing wind. The literature of Romanticism started to describe the duality of steppe nature: on one hand it was perceived as Arcadia, on the other it revealed its deadly character. Open space, which symbolizes vastness and infinity was a favourite place for Romanticism authors, therefore steppe is one of the most important types of space described in Slavic literature. This is also due to the contribution of Adam Mickiewicz's works. In Polish literature, besides few exceptions, it was Ukrainian steppe, mainly due to the fascination with flora of Eastern borderlands and Cossack tradition. The Romanticism authors were drawn to Cossack life, primal, untouched by civilisation. A legend of Cossack was created – full of primal beauty, hot-tempered, impudent, brave, vengeful. The variety of romantic concepts of Ukraine results in different images of Cossack – son of steppe, nimble, brisk, free Byronic avenger who is wily, cheeky, full of fantasy and brave. The canon of steppe iconosphere was contributed by Wincenty Pol, who set Mohort, a stout-hearted defender of Eastern borderlands, in beautiful landscape of steppes. The steppe became in his concept a heroic and chivalrous land.

Steppe was a synthesis of romantic vision of Ukraine. Large areas enlivened by wild wind, covered with cotton thistles and bents, lonely man on a galloping horse lost in mad rush and melancholic melody of dumka – this is a typical Slavic, mainly Ukrainian, image which is absent in western literature.

In the third chapter *'Under the star sign of Sienkiewicz'* the Author presents a large realisation of steppe subject in the literature of 20<sup>th</sup> century. For this purpose the output of Henryk Sienkiewicz and Franciszek Rawita-Gawroński is analysed. Sienkiewicz places the setting of his book *'With Fire and Sword'* on the steppes and moves the imagination of reader to the bosom of nature. He locates there the dynamical historical events and underlines in his

novel a historical role of steppes as former Eastern borderlands of Rzeczpospolita. The steppes in *'With Fire and Sword'* are described as constant battlefield. In the novel there are numerous descriptions of steppes, which are presented as a war zone and endless land, deaf and fecund. Affluent nature, numberless birds harmonize with many knight graves which cover the whole area. The citizens of those lands are arrogant. Snooping Tatars and rascals can be met here. The steppe theme is also present in *'Fire in the Steppe'*, which is the third volume of "The Trilogy".

The steppe is also present in historical novels of Franciszek Rawita-Gawroński, for whom it was an element of Eastern borderlands and romanticism. The Author personifies the steppe by addressing the Mother Earth topos. In his novels, the steppe is not stripped of the activeness, its 'live' is inscribed into changing seasons. It is inspirited by blowing wind, which becomes a fatal force occasionally portending a misfortune.

The fourth chapter *„About the context of twentieth-century valorisation of steppe subject”* describes the role of steppe in 20<sup>th</sup> century. Polish literature of this period, in its whole diversity of topics, genres and levels of artistry, brought new realisation of “steppe language”, however relation to literature tradition is still present. In 20<sup>th</sup> century there were not many moments to admire the beauty of steppes. The output of poets and prose writers presented in this chapter show that Mother Earth can put its citizens through real hell. Earth can take life but also can take it away. In some cases, based on literary output of Romanticism, the twentieth-century authors celebrated the beauty of steppe and expressed longing for “fecund Ukraine”. This is the case of Bolesław Leśmian and Jarosław Iwaszkiewicz output. The main trend among twentieth-century writers was to present a vision of steppe as hostile place for humans.

The events occurring there are similar to 'hajdamaczyzna'. Steppes are describes as a place of doom and obliteration. The steep topos is present in literature of this period in both, prose and poetry and can be found in works which are significantly artistically different. Its popularity was influenced by both, tradition and experience of authors. Being sometimes very personal, it relates to the essence of polish fate and complex relations between human and history. Based on pieces of Włodzimierz Odojewski and Zofia Kossak-Szczucka the Author of current dissertation show that steppes are a place of torment and enormous suffering. The authors experience were eternalized on pages of theirs works.

As it turns out, the popular literature and masterpiece of kitsch in 20<sup>th</sup> century cannot do without the subject of steppe. The novels of Helena Mniszkówna are an example of that. The characters of her stories live in harmony with nature. They meet in steppes, take a stroll there and confess love to each other. The elements of steppes turn into characteristics of main characters.

It should also be pointed out that the topos of steppe can be perceived as *loci communes* of Polish and Ukrainian cultures. The number of papers which refer to this subject is constantly increasing (i.a. dissertations of Dymitr Doncow, Aleksander Astafiew and Jadwiga Sawicka). The dissertations raise an issue of similar valorisation of steppe in both, Polish and Ukrainian literature (Taras Szewczenko, Jewhen Małaniuk, Jurij Andruchowycz).