

BOOK REVIEW:

Marco Puleri. (2020). *Ukrainian, Russophone, (Other) Russian: Hybrid Identities and Narratives in Post-Soviet Culture and Politics*. Berlin: Peter Lang

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As far back as 2010, the now-deceased Kyiv literary scholar Nataliya Mazepa started her paper on the bilingualism in Ukrainian Russophone poetry by stating that her piece of writing should be understood as a part of the yet unwritten “history of Ukrainian Russian-language literature” (Mazepa 2010: 60). Pointing out that the incipient stages of such a project can be traced back to the Brezhnev era, Mazepa claimed that by “now” — that is, by 2010 — “the theoretical basis, basic strategies and methodological guidelines [for a project of this scope] have already been developed” (Ibid.). However, even now, in the year 2020, this history remains unwritten, and, in the view of the events after 2014, it might even seem to be unwritable.¹

The war in Donbass has triggered the “striving of a modern Ukrainian for an emphatic identity” of nationalist stripe (Polishchuk 2016: 106), turning ‘Russianness’ into a distinctly negative parameter. Same way, in Russia, one of the consequences of war has been the intensification of mass-media and cultural appropriation of ‘Russian’ (ruskiy, i.e., Russian-language, Russophone) as ‘pertaining to Russia’ (rossiyskiy). These processes have led to the politicization of Russian as a language of expression and of the identification with ‘Russian’ and ‘Russianness’, which, in turn, added complexity to the perception of Russophone literature. Since 2014, the latter existed in the field of conflicting identities and thus had to tackle the respective polarizations by transforming the ways of artistic expression and the language of expression (e.g., by tending from ‘pure’ Russophony to bilingualism), as well as some extra-textual practices (especially the modes of the author’s self-construction and self-presentation). Simultaneously, the scientific explanations of this literary phenomenon have become more complex. The current academic discourse can neither be limited to the descriptions of ‘links’ between neighboring cultures, nor can it lend implicit or explicit support to one-sided incorporation of Russophone authors into Ukrainian or Russian literature, which Mazepa actually meant by pointing to the “theoretical basis” that “ha[s] already been developed” (Ibid.).

A new book by the Italian Slavist Marco Puleri “Ukrainian, Russophone, (Other) Russian. Hybrid Identities and Narratives in Post-Soviet Culture and Politics” is arguably the first monographic attempt to find a new, more adequate and inevitably more nuanced theoretical approach to the study of Russophone literature from Ukraine. The study is a

¹ It is symptomatic that, in 2010, Mazepa’s article cited above was published in the section “Pohliad” (“Opinion”), which seemingly stressed the marginality and the controversial nature of the premise of the ‘Ukrainianness’ of Russophone poetry from Ukraine maintained by the literary scholar.

revised version of the author's monograph on the same topic written in Italian (Puleri 2016) and expanded with three chapters dealing with more recent material.

In terms of general context, the book relates to the corpus of Russophone literature studies that have been published outside of the Russian-speaking post-Soviet countries. To same corpus belong — to mention just few — the papers by Kevin M. F. Platt on Russian-speaking poets from the Latvian group “Orbit”, Vitaly Chernetsky on Russophone authors from Ukraine before and after Euromaidan, Dirk Uffelmann on the poetry by a Ukrainian poet Boris Khersonsky, Nina Frieß on the Russophone poetry of Kazakhstan and Maria Rubins on the “exterritoria” of Russian culture in the 20th and early 21st centuries (Platt 2013; Chernetsky 2019; Uffelmann 2019; Friess 2019; Rubins 2019).¹ Methodologically, Puleri's study explicitly adheres to the postcolonial line developed by Uffelmann and Chernetsky, among others, also with the use of the same contemporary literary material. It is telling in this sense that Puleri's monograph appeared as the 8th volume in the series “Postcolonial Perspectives on Eastern Europe” co-edited by Dirk Uffelmann.

As a first attempt to systematically map “contemporary Ukrainian cultural developments through the lens of Russian-language literary production and the Russian-language intellectual community's position” (p. 36), Puleri's study has all the advantages and disadvantages of pioneering texts. While adding new thematic areas and outlining potentially productive methods of their research, it remains largely fragmentary, at times inconsistent and inexact. This also pertains to the overall research perspective discussed at length in the introduction. The key question which Puleri tries to theorize concerns the relationship between postcommunism (postsocialism) and postcolonialism which seems to be the mother of all questions in postcolonial studies of Eastern Europe. Speaking of Svetlana Alexievich, he states the “presence of multiple points of intersection between the two ‘post-’: postcolonial linguistic and cultural hybrids, textual and identity deterritorialization, conflictual binary discourses [that] re-emerge in a different form — but, at the same time, akin to classical colonialism — in the cultural contexts of the new countries that have arisen from the ashes of Communism” (p. 23).

For Puleri, the most interesting and most productive field of such “intersection,” which also is at the core of the Ukrainian Russophony, is “the revision of the so-called ‘East–West’ divide in the heart of Europe,” offering scope for the “global contacts and interdisciplinary research perspectives” (p. 23). Reading further, one will find out, which interdisciplinary perspective the author actually means and what kind of contacts are at stake: the name of the game is the “global tendency towards the transnationalization of cultural practices” (p. 37). Running ahead of the story, it should, however, be said that this utterly productive ‘global’ perspective largely remains an unfulfilled promise. The author of the book doesn't really compare the Russophone texts from Ukraine to the texts from some other Russophone cultures (in particular, Kazakh) to which he refers by citing other scholars (in particular, Dmitriy Mel'nikov), although it is only through this comparison that those Ukrainian texts could have been contextualized ‘globally’. That is why in this book

¹ It is also worth noting that the respective works of literary scholars based in Russia and Ukraine are scarcely mentioned in Puleri's book.

Russophone texts from Ukraine are only seen through the prism of the traditional post-Soviet Russian-Ukrainian field of reference, in particular of contested memories and conflicts in national identities which, as a number of inaccuracies attest to, do not belong to Puleri's expertise — and not through the lens of “global Russian cultures” (Kevin Platt), as enthusiastically stated in the introduction (p. 14ff).

With this in mind, it also remains unclear why the Russophone literature from Ukraine should actually serve as a model for those “global cultures.” In the introduction and at the beginning of the first chapter, referring to scholars as different as Maria Rewakowicz and Georgiy Kas'yanov — one could also cite Karl Schlögel's notion of Ukraine as “a laboratory of borders” (Schlögel 2015: 62) — Puleri insists that “it is the space of Ukrainian literature that in the long term better reflects the room for hybrid forms — and their contestation — in the post-Soviet space” (p. 34), thus calling Ukraine “A Laboratory of Political and Cultural Identity/ies” (p. 48). However, neither the introduction nor the subsequent chapters are indicative of what exactly makes Ukraine a “laboratory” and why Ukraine — and not, say, Belarus, whose representative Alexievich was named as an example of the polycultural and deterritorialized post-Soviet condition — is regarded as more suitable for the role of a ‘model’. One rather tends to assume that both authors ascribe the role of the “laboratory” basing not so much on the intracultural as on extracultural factors, mostly on the ‘catastrophic’ visibility of the country produced by the series of revolutions — Schlögel mentions the latter as a motive to re-think the Russia-dominated mental maps of Eastern Europe, Puleri as an impetus to “readapt the postcolonial categories to Ukraine as a post-Soviet (and post-Maidan) society” (p. 34).

The postcolonial quality of the “transnationalization of cultural practices,” which is central to Puleri's study, also lacks a clear profile. It is precisely because of vagueness in a postcolonial framework of the monograph that a quite reasonable and potentially productive question — “on what levels are the literatures of postcommunist countries postcolonial?” (p. 24) — does not receive a full answer. The only dimension of the post-communism's postcoloniality thoroughly discussed in the monograph is the hybridity, the notion that Puleri mentions in the title of his work. It is the hybridity, the researcher argues, that serves as the pivotal characteristic of Ukrainian Russophone literature with its major indebtedness to the Soviet heritage and its post-Soviet nationalization, its multi-level socio-cultural dynamics, its extraterritoriality and a complex equilibrium of cultural and political identifications. On a conceptual level, Puleri relies not so much on the classical hybridity theory by Homi K. Bhabha but on Anjali Prabhu's program for developing a historically specific and dynamic toolkit for valorization “of an historical moment, action or geographical space *as* hybrid” (p. 35) (Prabhu 2007: 14). This approach fully corresponds to the literary material under study. Understanding cultural hybridity not as an “utopian” or “absolute” response to the colonization, but as a changeable set of practices, which possibly even does not refer to any colonization of “traditional” type, Puleri facilitates a much more adequate research into multiple “‘Russian’ subjectivities” (p. 14) in Ukraine, their formation through “cultural debate that emerged in imperial and Soviet times,” the “political clash of national paradigms in post-Soviet times” (p. 36) and, in the last analysis, into the historically and culturally concrete changes in the functioning of those “subjectivities” before and after Euromaidan. At the same time, when using the

category of hybridity in relation to the Russophone literature from Ukraine, one should obviously consider the fundamental difference between, roughly speaking, the hybridity imposed by the cultural policy of the (imperial) center ((anti-)colonial hybridity) and the subversive hybridity, as conceived of by Bhabha (postcolonial hybridity). Although Puleri mentions this difference in the first chapter with reference to Myroslav Shkandrij, he further makes use of a much more vague and essentialist concept of “inherent hybridity of post-Soviet realities” (p. 54). This ignores the fact that both types of hybridity imply significantly different forms of cultural self-identification, also in postcolonial coordinates, and that fluid borders between them, whose shifting can often be found in literary works and/or in the self-placement performances of the same writer, unequivocally characterizes the changes in the post-communist/postcolonial status of a specific area of Russophone literature in general. Besides, it is not entirely clear why the author of the book restricts Russophone hybridity in Ukraine to only two cultures, excluding, for example, an important Jewish component (alongside with some other ones). Being typical of some of the Russophone authors of Ukraine (e.g., for Boris Khersonskiy, who is repeatedly mentioned in the monograph), this component enriches the Russian-Ukrainian equation with further historical and cultural contexts (see: Burago 2020), which are extremely important for grasping the “transnationalization of cultural practices” in Ukraine as a *multilayered* — and not as a purely Russian-Ukrainian *dual* — phenomenon.

The structure of the main body of the book, composed of two parts — “From Culture to Politics — Displaced Hybridity/ies (1991–2013)” and “From Politics to Culture — After Revolution of Hybridity (2014–2018)” — follows the dual logic of before Euromaidan / after Euromaidan. In terms of this logic, 2014 acts as a turning point which radically changed the status and modes of (re-)presentation of Russophone hybridity. In the first part, the emphasis on literary studies dominates. In the second part, which is composed of previously published articles that not necessarily fit together seamlessly, the unfinished body of actual material requires the analysis of discursive framework, in which literary and cultural phenomena are embedded.

In the Chapter 1 (“The Missing Hybridity: Framing the Ukrainian Cultural Space”), Puleri makes a retrospective glimpse in the history of “notable duality of the national culture” (p. 53) in Ukraine (again, without involving any other cultural contexts). The retrospective begins with brief portraits of the two archetypal figures, the Russophone Ukrainian Gogol’ and the Ukrainophone Ukrainian Taras Shevchenko. This, in turn, leads to an extremely interesting analysis of the discussion on the LitAccent website (pp. 74–80), which demonstrates a variety of opinions on the Russophony (in particular, on Russophone literature) in pre-Maidan Ukraine. In so doing, however, the author of the book disregards the entire Ukrainian nation building of the 19th–first half of the 20th century, which activated a wide repertoire of linguistic, cultural and political hybridity reaching far beyond Gogol’s model. On top of that, Puleri omits the entire post-war discourse of Ukrainian literature with its tradition of self-translation into Russian and émigré self-reflection. There is no escaping the impression that the post-Soviet linguistic and cultural contestations, which come up right after speaking about Shevchenko and Gogol’, as well as the phenomena of “individual bi-ethnicity” (Valeriy Khmel’ko) or

“language ideologies” (Volodymyr Kulik), pullulate on their own accord or as a reaction on the broadly understood Soviet heritage. The truth is, however, that they originate, at least in literature and culture, from the intensive and extensive work with the texts and language practices of authors from the ‘omitted’ periods. This fact should have been taken into account, especially in the course of textual analysis. A certain simplification of the overall picture also stems from the elimination of some important imperial (or quasi-imperial) contexts, most notably the Polish (with explicit explanation, p. 50) and the Austrian-Hungarian ones (the latter without explanation), as well as from the reduction of regional diversity of the “Twenty-Two Ukraines” (Yaroslav Hrytsak, cited on p. 61) to the “usual suspects”, such as the Donbass, Galicia, Kyiv and Charkiv, and the consistent avoidance of references to the political positioning of the disputants (be it right, left or centrist). As a result, the reader is confronted with a kind of self-referential counterpoint of the overall picture, which gives a certain idea of the diversity of standpoints and opinions, but doesn’t offer any insight as to whether those vantage points are representative for certain historical, cultural, regional or ideological groups (and, if yes, for which of them).

In the Chapter 2, “Post-Soviet (Russophone) Ukraine Speaks Back,” Puleri, on the basis of Ukrainian literary market’s analysis, demonstrates the paradoxical nature and the “hybridity” of relations between the center and the periphery in the cultural (self-) identifications of post-Soviet Ukraine. Even though the Russophone culture was positioned as peripheral within the Ukrainian national culture, it was dominant in terms of sales and re-importation from Russia. As noted by Puleri, this tendency was accompanied by the process of “‘assimilation’ of Ukrainian [Russophone] writers into the Russian market” (p. 93) during the pre-Maidan period. This, by the same token, highlights the problem of distinguishing “between the Russophone literature,” often identified with Ukraine, and “the literature of the Russian diaspora” (p. 97). The wide variety of identification strategies that distinguish the former from the latter, according to the researcher, constitute the true hybridity of Russophone literature. This implies Russophone literature’s programmatic departure from the duality of Ukrainian national self-identifications and the multiplicity of “‘minor’ narratives” that arise “in the marginal space where Russophone subjectivities write from” (pp. 113–114). Although very much productive in itself, this deduction requires specification from at least three points of view. First, identifying the affiliation of a respective writer either to Russophone or to “diaspora” literature mostly by means of the same author’s self-attributions, Puleri actually privileges extra-textual factors (in particular, ideologically determined preferences and the constructs of the author’s self-fashioning within the literary field) over the “minor narratives” themselves, which are not necessarily written along the lines of such self-definitions. Secondly, such an ‘a priori hybridity’ of the Russophone stays in apparent contradiction to the departure from the “utopian” vision in favor of a concrete analysis of historical configurations declared in the introduction. Thirdly, here again we see a certain lack of sensibility towards regional and group specifics, which could serve as a bridge between the individual author’s position and the contexts that have shaped it.

In the third Chapter, “A Minor Perspective on National Narrative(s): Deterritorializing Post-Imperial Epistemology,” which is of the utmost interest in the first part of the book, Puleri tries to contour a sort of basic Russophone narrative typical of post-Soviet Ukraine before 2013. For this purpose, he adapts the well-known concept of “minor literature” developed by Deleuze and Guattari. For him, it is the Russophone literature from Ukraine that can be defined as “minor” against the backdrop of the two “major”, established ones, i.e. Ukrainian and Russian. In Russian-Ukrainian historical context, the undermining of “major” cultures and discourses brought about by “minor” literatures inevitably gains a postcolonial dimension, which transforms this subversion “from below” into a “negotiation between the fragments of imperial and colonial discourses” (p. 120). It is this minor status, as Puleri rightly points out, that determines the literary specifics of Russophone texts from Ukraine, most notably their “chronotope of betweenness” (*khronotop promezhutochnosti*, Madina Tlostanova), the poetics of liminality and performative political impact as “collective utterances” (p. 121). These parameters are demonstrated in case studies of works by Andrei Kurkov, Alexei Nikitin and Vladimir Rafeenko, which still quite rarely become objects of literary analysis.

In the fourth Chapter, which opens the second, “post-Maidan” part of the monograph (“Hybridity Reconsidered: Ukrainian Border Crossing after the ‘Crisis’”), Puleri captures the main challenges and chances for the Russophone hybridity related to the political and socio-cultural consequences of Euromaidan and the war in Donbass. Here, he puts forward an important point by suggesting that “the epistemological crisis preceded the political one and prompted its escalation, rather than the other way around” (p. 162). A similar point, which actually ascribes a certain prognostic meaning to the study of literary and journalistic texts, can also be found in the article by Andriy Portnov on the cultural representations of Donbass in Ukraine (see: Portnov 2016a; Portnov 2016b; Puleri cites Portnov 2017). Puleri’s argument is that the “revolution of hybridity” [sic!], i.e. Euromaidan, and the war in Donbass instigated “the long-awaited [by whom?] fulfilment of the painful self-determination process in Ukrainian Russophone literature” (p. 179). An optimistic diagnosis, according to which hybridity and, as a consequence, “openness to accommodating the Other” are spreading throughout Ukraine after 2013/14 in a “centripetal” way, that is, “from the contested Ukrainian borders towards the central territories, subsequently taking the form of a broad social process ‘from below’ that could be considered the direct result of the hybridizing impetus of the revolution” (p. 174), clearly contradicts the pressure of the nationalist “unifying representative model” (p. 169), the more so because, as the author himself states, this “model” is inseparable from military mobilization (p. 180).

An attempt at solving this contradiction can be found in Chapter 5 (“Values for the Sake of the (Post-Soviet) Nation”), which focuses on language policy, decommunization practices and the whole socio-political discussion after 2014. Here, the yearning for a “unifying representative model” of a nationalist brand is attributed to political actors, both in Russia and in Ukraine (p. 184), at best to close-minded literary nationalists from Russian “mainland” (pp. 202-205) or — with reference to Inna Bulkina — to Ukrainophones (p. 169). The Russophone literature from Ukraine, on the contrary, is shown to be a tool for producing “blurred cultural boundaries” (p. 184), which has an

irrefutable hybridizing effect and is thus subversive by virtue of its language and “minor” position alone. The optimistic view on the effects of the “revolution of hybridity” predominates here as well. In Russia, as Puleri repeatedly emphasizes, the unifying potential is presumably beamed down “from the top” (p. 198), “from politics to culture,” while in Ukraine the driving force comes “from below,” i.e., from the “people” or “culture” to “politics” (p. 182, 185, 193, 198, 205), even if, in broad terms, there is a “symmetric pattern in Ukrainian and Russian state–society relations” (p. 200). Unfortunately, the desire to extol revolution (and war) as an impulse promoting literary and cultural hybridity (rather than national monovalency) does not stand up to scrutiny. (It is revealing that, at the end of the fifth Chapter, Puleri himself admits that “today the interrelation between the field of culture and the field of politics has become narrow as a direct result of the clash of discourses enacted by the respective political elites”, p. 206.) To see why, one should sound out a vast body of literary and publicist texts on the war in Donbass written by Russophone or bilingual authors from Ukraine, from Olena Stepova to Yevhen (Yevgeniy) Polozhiy and from Aleksandr Mamaluy to Boris Khersonskiy. These texts exhibit a large repertoire of defamations against the “Donbass” (and South-Eastern Ukrainian) hybridity with its unclear boundaries and insufficiently ‘pro-Ukrainian’ stance (cf. Chertenko 2019; Uffelmann 2019) and actively draw their vocabulary from official and pro-government media outlets.

In Chapter 6 (“Towards a Postcolonial Ethics: Rewriting Ukraine in the ‘Enemy’s Language””), Puleri again uses detailed textual analysis of the works by three authors (the same Nikitin and Rafeenko plus Aleksandr Kabanov) in order to outline a kind of “postcolonial ethics” articulated by Russophone authors from within the Russian language, which is increasingly perceived as enemy’s language or the language of the colonizer. Arguing against Dmitriy Bykov’s point that the Russian-Ukrainian conflict coerced Ukrainian Russophones into switching to Ukrainian (p. 208–209), the researcher insists that for Russophony “there is still room for the rise of a ‘third position’ stemming from a ‘postcolonial orientation’” (p. 209). For Puleri, this “third position” implies “changing terms such as language and ethnicity into more fluid identity markers” (p. 209–210). The chapter identifies at least three modes of such change: firstly, the “deterritorialization of Russianness” (p. 210), i.a. as a standardization of the Ukrainian version of Russian language¹; secondly, the “demystification of both the Russian and the Ukrainian historical narratives” (e.g., in Kabanov’s poetry); thirdly, a somewhat fuzzy process of „dis-identifying from the historical narratives” (p. 228), which Puleri observes in Nikitin’s and Rafeenko’s texts. This inspiring interpretation, however, seems to be somewhat far-fetched. Comparing the third and the sixth chapters of the monograph, both dealing with Nikitin and Rafeenko, it is hard to tell which “more fluid identity markers” the later texts of the same authors possess in contrast to the “pre-Maidan” ones. Rather, one gets the impression that both sets of texts focus “on the crisis of the hegemonic narratives on identity, rewriting the expressive forms of tradition by means of parody and frequent intertextual references” (p. 119). Besides, one of the three writers scrutinized in the sixth chapter (Rafeenko), whose novel “The Length of Days” (Dolgota

¹ At the same time, Puleri paradoxically calls this idea of Kurkov “quite exceptional in the national literary scene” (p. 212).

dney; Rafeenko 2017) is cited by Puleri as evidence of “recasting Russianness within the frame of Ukrainianness” (p. 210) after 2013, in his later novel “Mondegreen” (Mondegrin; Rafeenko 2019) also switches from Russian to Ukrainian. This fact could serve as a kind of performative argument against the assumption of “fluid hybridity” after 2014. The transition of two other significant Russophone writers, Boris Khersonskiy and Iya Kiva, to the bilingual camp mentioned in the conclusion (“The Future of ‘Russianness’ in Post-Maidan Ukraine”) (pp. 239–241), as well as “a gloomy perspective for the future of Russianness in post-Maidan Ukraine” (p. 240) observed by Kiva also do not seem to attest to the new, albeit problematic, prospects of Russophone hybridity in times of revolution and war. Instead, they corroborate the fact that, after 2014, we rather deal with the well-known nexus of “bellicosity and nation” (Leonhard 2008), which is fundamentally incompatible with “blurred cultural boundaries” and can hardly be described in postcolonial, but rather in colonial or, at best, anticolonial terms.

To conclude, it should be pointed out that, taken as a whole, Marco Puleri’s book is a thought-provoking study which for the first time consequently maps the Russophone literature from Ukraine as a hybrid discourse and a liminal cultural practice. Despite the fact that the monograph contains a number of controversial or insufficiently substantiated assumptions, the overall approach proposed in it opens up a highly productive perspective on the subversive potential of Russophone writing, which is especially important in the light of further advancing ‘official’ uniformity both in Ukraine and in Russia. This approach makes it possible to comprehend both “major” literatures and cultures, which interact with “minor” Russophone literary production in various ways, as multi-layered, dynamic compounds that combine elements of colonial, anticolonial and postcolonial in changing proportions. This, in turn, stresses the need for complex, multifaceted, non-descriptive tools for the analysis of Eastern European cultural artifacts from a postcolonial perspective. One can but regret that such an interesting impulse which underlies Puleri’s book remains largely middle-of-the-road. This is especially true of textual analysis, which takes up only two chapters out of six and involves works by only four authors, all the more because it is these chapters that represent the complexity and inner heterogeneity of Russophone literature’s cultural hybridity in a most impressive manner. The textual basis of the study is also somewhat watered down by the fact that all the texts analyzed in detail originate from only two Ukrainian regions — Kyiv and Donbass. As a result, many other interesting phenomena of Russophone literature connected with Ukraine, in one way or another, remain left aside. Here, one could mention texts by representatives of some other regional schools, i.a. from Zhytomyr, Dnipro (Dnipropetrovs’k), Kharkiv (Krasniashchikh 2015) or Transcarpathia (Bandy Sholtes), as well as by Russophones who, in contrast to, say, Rafeenko, did not leave the occupied territories of Donbass, or left Donbass or Crimea, but went to Russia and not to Ukraine. Other instructive phenomena include the works by bilingual authors, such as Yevhen (Yevgeniy) Polozhiy, and literary production by authors who emigrated from Russia to Ukraine after 2014 and tend to associate themselves with Ukraine to varying degrees (e.g., Arkadiy Babchenko or Galina Rymbu). Admittedly, as Puleri notes in the introduction, his book does not claim to be “a history of Ukrainian Russian-language literature” and thus doesn’t “include all its contemporary variants and actors” (p. 37). Still, by outlining a

possible methodology for dealing with Russophone literature from Ukraine, it constitutes one of the first, extremely difficult and for this very reason extremely important steps towards such a 'history', whose necessity was evident in 2010 and is even more obvious today.

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