

A RESPONSE TO THE REVIEW BY ALEXANDER CHERTENKO: REFLECTIONS ON TODAY'S RUSSOPHONE STUDIES

Marco Puleri

Alma Mater Studiorum University of Bologna
ORCID: 0000-0002-9360-0296

<https://doi.org/10.36169/2227-6068.2020.01.00027>

I am very pleased that my monograph has been chosen for review in *Ideology and Politics Journal*, and I am very grateful to the editors for inviting me to debate further the topics and questions I raised in my book. I believe that the critical comments put forward by Alexander Chertenko are truly useful for discussing the broader need to develop a new theoretical basis and critical vocabulary for discussing the role and position of “Russophonia” in Ukraine (and even worldwide).

First, I eagerly take up Alexander Chertenko’s call for discussing the room (and the real need) for writing the “unwritten history” of Ukrainian Russian-language literature today. In the opening lines of his review, Chertenko refers to the Kyiv literary scholar Nataliya Mazepa and her paper on bilingualism in Ukrainian Russophone poetry: this is a study on the role of bilingual authors in the history of Ukrainian literature, mainly addressing the nuances behind literary and poetic bilingualism. In her writing, Mazepa clearly states that the article is part of the general project *History of Ukrainian Russian-language literature*, an unfinished project launched by researchers at the Shevchenko Institute of Literature of the National Academy of Sciences of Ukraine in Kyiv. According to Mazepa, who published the article in 2010, time has come for “the creation of a proper scientific history of Ukrainian Russian-language literature from the very beginning to modern times” (Mazepa 2010: 60). Mazepa describes this new time — i.e. the time of independent Ukraine (after 1991) — as completely changing “the whole humanitarian situation in the country”, whereas before — i.e. in Imperial and Soviet times — “ideological dogmas” prevented extensive research in this direction, and “it was impossible to find out the real nature of the Russian-Ukrainian dialogue” (Mazepa 2010: 60).

As Chertenko rightly notes, today “this history [of Ukrainian Russian-language literature] remains unwritten, and, in the view of the events after 2014, it might even seem unwritable”. However, I believe that looking at my book as one of “the first steps towards” such a history (of Ukrainian Russian-language literature), as observed by Chertenko, may be misleading. My book does not aim to address the long-awaited search for a history of Ukrainian Russian-language literature, since I also believe that such a history cannot be written yet. It is still impossible to research “the real nature of the Russian-Ukrainian dialogue” in historical perspective, exactly because it is impossible to write a history of a cultural and literary phenomenon that has been (and still is) neglected in its present form, where “ideological dogmas” are still affecting not only the public debate around Ukrainian-Russian relations, but even academic research. Accordingly, I

believe most of inconsistencies and gaps — which I am fully aware of — mentioned in Chertenko's review may be more surprising if looking at my book through the lenses of literary history.

While thinking about the structure and scope of my book, I tried to take into account these “methodological constraints”. I meant my book as a practice of deconstruction of the above-mentioned ideological dogmas, following the assumption of *discontinuity*, rather than continuity, of Ukrainian cultural developments in post-Soviet times. On the one hand, looking at the rather narrow “corpus of Russophone literary studies”, which are authored not only by scholars based in the West but significantly also by Russophone authors themselves, we clearly witness the slow and fragmentary, but still steady, formation of a true criticism built around the novelty of these cultural phenomena. On the other, the assumed marginality of Russophonia in the post-Soviet national contexts, as well as the absence of platforms for discussing such potential methodological approaches to the study of Russophone cultural products — not only in the “East” but also in the “West”, poses a fundamental challenge to scholars and researchers from different academic fields: the need for start a proper debate on the role and nature of Russophonia and the potential existence of Russophone studies today.

The need for “a new critical vocabulary and research methodologies in response to the transnational turn that has swept the humanities since the beginning of the twenty-first century” (Doak, Platt & Strukov 2020: 2) has been claimed by both scholars in Russian studies (i.e. Gerasimov 2014; Byford, Doak & Hutchings 2020) and Ukrainian studies (i.e. Portnov 2015; Pavlyshyn 2016). The main aim of this new epistemological approach should be “to historicize and deconstruct notions such as Russia, Russianness and Russian language, looking critically at the boundary-work that has sustained these categories” (Doak, Platt & Strukov 2020: 3). This is why in my book I decided to devote my attention not only to textual analysis (which, as Chertenko rightly observes, has been assigned a marginal role, boasting a narrow scope as for literary national, regional and group specifics), but also to the study of those fields where “methodological nationalism” has prevailed throughout post-Soviet times (i.e. intellectual and political debates). In order to “look critically” and deconstruct “the boundary work” that has sustained categories such as Ukrainian, Russophone and Russian, I thus decided “to historicize” my research, contextualizing Ukrainian hybridity as an informal and fluid stage of development in post-Soviet social and cultural realities, rather than a static and essentialized category in historical perspective (as clearly stated in the introduction (Puleri 2020: 37), the prehistory of the phenomenon — which was analysed in my previous study (Puleri 2016) — has been deliberately assigned a marginal role for the above-mentioned reasons). This hybridity, in order to be an effective analytical tool for studying political and cultural phenomena, should be defined differently according to the different historical periods and conditions: that is why, in my view, adopting a long-term historical perspective on Ukrainian hybridity would have not prevented “attempts at formulating historical and ideological projections” (Puleri 2020: 37). This hybridity is inherent first in contemporary social dynamics, and only then takes shape through narratives or “literary speech acts”: that is why in my book I tried to study first and foremost the dialogical relation between cultural production and political forces, without

assuming any “optimistic diagnosis” about the future developments of Ukrainian culture in light of its hybrid nature.

I believe this approach can be quite productive in answering the need for a new “global” epistemological approach in response to the transnational turn in humanities, more than building a “global” study in terms of comparison with other post-Soviet and world realities (that was out of the scope of my book). While writing this book, I mainly aimed to join the debate around a new idea of Russophonia as a research field with a clear impact on and connection with contemporary political dynamics. Here the constant dialogue with Ukrainian and Russian Studies was always meant as a possibility to enrich their respective research fields, revealing common research questions and constraints. Again, it is worth mentioning that Russophonia as an autonomous field is not recognised (or even institutionalised) yet, not only in the political sphere, but also in the academic one. For this reason, I believe the first important step, even before focusing on the study of this phenomenon in its entirety, is to build a full-fledged methodological framework with a clear interdisciplinary outlook, embracing tools from cultural, political and sociological studies. This could help us go beyond today’s analytical impasse. We could thus look at Russophonia as an intermediate stage towards the recognition of Russian as a world language (and Russian studies as a transnational discipline). We could then envision Russianness as a category open to “other” ways to be Russian than the ones proposed by the current Russian Federation’s government, thus identifying the complex history and diversity of the Russian people, their migration and diasporic existence worldwide; and, alike, we could imagine the Ukrainian cultural space as including a universe of different perspectives on the way one can feel Ukrainian and at the same time can enrich Ukrainianness with social and life experiences coming from the diverse cultural background of Ukrainians.

To conclude, I am fully aware of the flaws and constraints in starting such a research, and I really welcome the reviewer’s comments and criticisms. I believe that the research lines suggested by Chertenko would surely help enrich the study of Russophone literature in future academic ventures. In any case, this is a truly fascinating research area to follow up on, and I really look forward to seeing other scholars embark in similar research directions.

Bibliography:

- Byford, Andy; Doak, Connor; Hutchings, Stephen (eds.). (2020). *Transnational Russian Studies*, Liverpool: Liverpool University Press.
- Doak, Connor; Platt, Kevin M. F.; Strukov, Vlad. (2020). The Transnational Turn in Russian Studies. *NewsNet: News of the Association for Slavic, East European and Eurasian Studies*, 60 (2):. 2-6.
- Gerasimov, Ilya. (2014). Ukraine 2014: The First Postcolonial Revolution. Introduction to the Forum. *Ab Imperio* 3: 22-44.
- Mazepa, Nataliya. (2010). Bilinhvizm. Epizod chy tendentsiya? (Suchasna ukrayins’ka rosiys’komovna poeziya) [From Ukr.: Bilingualism. An Episode or a Tendency? (Contemporary Ukrainian Russian-Language poetry)]. *Slovo i Chas* (2): 60–77.

- Pavlyshyn, Marko. (2016). Literary History as Provocation of National Identity, National Identity as Provocation of Literary History: the Case of Ukraine. *Thesis Eleven* 135 (1): 74-89.
- Portnov, Andrii. (2015). Post-Maidan Europe and the New Ukrainian Studies. *Slavic Review* 74 (4): 723-731.
- Puleri, Marco. (2016). *Narrazioni ibride post-sovietiche. Per una letteratura ucraina di lingua russa*. Firenze: Firenze University Press.
- Puleri, Marco. (2020). *Ukrainian, Russophone, (Other) Russian: Hybrid Identities and Narratives in Post-Soviet Culture and Politics*, Berlin: Peter Lang.