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A SHORT HISTORY OF TRACTORS IN UKRAINIAN BY MARINA LEWYCKA: DISCOVERY OF UKRAINE FROM THE WESTERN PERSPECTIVE

Kateryna Chernyavska

Анотація: У статті розглядається дебютний роман англійської письменниці українського походження Марини Левицької A Short History of Tractors in Ukrainian (2005 р.) з його баченням української історії двадцятого століття і проблеми еміграції із перспективи європейського Заходу. У статті аналізується роль гумору і використання стереотипів у романі, а також роль художньої літератури як засобу зближення і взаємопізнання Заходу і Сходу Європи.

Ключові слова: Марина Левицька, історія, гумор, стереотипи.

The revolutionary events in Europe which marked the end of the twentieth century (the collapse of the former Soviet Union, the fall of the Berlin Wall, the end of the Cold War, the creation of the EU etc) removed borders between West and East and created a new political landscape in need of integration and cultural rediscovery.

Eastern Europe, having been separated from the West with the Iron Curtain for decades, appeared almost as a blank space, an imaginative construct of Westerner's "other", a kind of cultural unconscious. As Larry Wolff points out, the invention of the East as an opposition and contrast to the West began centuries ago in the Age of Enlightenment, – an age which defined its own progressive "civilization" against other cultures' alleged barbarism and backwardness (Woolf, 1994: p.4).

In the Western fiction the imagery of Eastern Europe was initially shaped by the poetry of George Gordon Byron, who transformed his traveler's and warrior's authentic experiences into verses. At the end of the nineteenth century the unfamiliar region acquired negative connotations in Bram Stoker's *Dracula*. The novel gave voice to the hidden phobia of reverse colonisation: something horrible and dangerous could come from the East, a palpable threat from an invisible enemy.

Undoubtedly, this fictional "othering" of the European East as a mysterious place marked by predominantly negative connotations was a direct result of the lack of mutual understanding

and effective political, social and cultural communication on the continent. The changes in the dialogue between West and East may be introduced by new narratives with double perspective and questioning of stereotypes. Literature still remains a powerful instrument in the construction of identity, developing of new perspectives and changing of the landscapes in the process of their description.

One of the voices who contributed to this East-West transcultural dialogue belongs to an English author of Ukrainian origin, Marina Lewycka. Her debut novel *A Short History of Tractors in Ukrainian* was published by Penguin Books in 2005 and immediately captured the international book market. A dark family comedy centred around the conflict of different generations of Ukrainian immigrants in England, it was translated into more than 30 languages (including Japanese, German, Spanish, Dutch, Russian, Norwegian etc) and made it into John Sutherland's *Bestsellers* selling more than 1.000.000 only in UK (Sutherland, 2007: p.108). Also, in the year of its publication, the novel won the Bollinger Everyman Wodehouse Prize for comic fiction, the Saga Award for Wit, Waverton Good Read Award, and it was short-listed for the Orange Prize for Fiction, losing to Lionel Shriver's *We Need to Talk about Kevin*, and long-listed for Man Booker Prize.

Consequently, *Tractors* has received a lot of positive response from the critics, especially for its humour, described as "sharply comic", "hilarious", "extremely funny", "uproarious comedy" and "most entertaining". The *Economist* review stated that the book was "thought-provoking, uproariously funny, a comic feast" and the *Daily Telegraph* praised the writer's ability of reconciliation with the past: "Hugely enjoyable… yields a golden harvest of family truth" (Lewycka, 2005, cover of the 1st edition).

Paradoxically, the only negative review was published by the Ukrainian author Andrey Kurkov in the *Guardian* (Kurkov, 2005). In his opinion, *Tractors* is a badly constructed artifact of extracts from a school textbook on Ukrainian history which shows caricatures instead of characters. The Ukrainian literary critic Dmytro Drozdovskyj defined the novel an "anti-Ukrainian provocation" financed by unknown enemies, probably Russians (Drozdovskyj, 2006). Thus, the Ukrainian establishment erroneously interpreted the book as a hype of Ukraine's negative reputation in Europe and *Tractors* was not translated immediately into the language mentioned in its title.

Encouraged by the enormous success of her debut novel, Marina Lewycka considered the idea of writing a sequel for *Tractors*, but finally changed her mind and published her second novel *Two Caravans* in 2007, which was absolutely autonomous from its predecessor. The novel was equally successful and similarly to *Tractors* featured Ukrainians as main characters, but *Two Caravans* achieved a global dimension describing the life of migrant workers of other nationalities

(Eastern Europe, China, Malaysia and Africa), and was shortlisted for the Orwell Prize for political writing. The author confessed that she was trying to imagine what life she might have led as a Ukrainian in Britain, if she hadn't been the second generation immigrant (Lewycka, 2010).

Before publishing her third novel, Marina Lewycka promised that the book would be with "no Ukrainians and no vehicles" in it (Lewycka, 2008). As she explained in her interview to Doris Lechner, she was seriously concerned about being "pigeon-holed" for East-European topics and consequently she diverted from this subject (Lechner, 2010: p.454). *We are All Made of Glue* was released in 2009 and, as the title suggests, it is a multi-faceted research of human bonding, a metaphorical glue for mending international conflicts, like the Israeli-Palestinian one, and family disasters.

The British-Ukrainian author started her career unusually late: she was almost 60 when *A Short History of Tractors in Ukrainian* was published. But in spite of that, in the year of her debut book's publication, the UK book industry included Lewycka in the number of 25 authors chosen for "the future of British writing" (BBC News, 2007).

Marina Lewycka was born in a British-run refugee camp in Kiel in 1946, to Ukrainian parents who were taken to Germany as forced laborers by the Nazis. Her family was reunited by the Red Cross and subsequently moved to England when she was only 1 year old. From the refugee reception centre the family moved to Sussex, where Lewycka's mother found job as a housekeeper, while her husband, Marina's father, worked for the International Harvester Tractors in Doncaster.

From the early childhood Lewycka considered herself essentially English and the total integration was encouraged even by her family. In one of her interviews she confesses:

Most of my childhood I spent trying to be as unukrainian as possible and to become thoroughly thoroughly English. Really, until when I was in my mid-forties, I didn't want to have anything to do with Ukraine and Ukrainians. I thought it was far too embarrassing and I just wanted to be an English middle-class lady (Lewycka, 2010).

The need for integration in the UK was obvious: going to a primary school in Doncaster, Lewycka was bullied by English children who called her a Gerry, because she was born in Germany, and Rusky (Russian), because her parents came from the Soviet Union. She attended high school in Lincolnshire and Oxfordshire, continued her education at Keele University in Staffordshire

where she studied English Literature and Philosophy. Later she took the Bachelor of Philosophy at the University of York and then enrolled for a Doctorate of Philosophy at King's College in London, which she never completed.

During her school and university studies, Lewycka had the active social life of a British youth: she joined the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament, participated in the British National Socialist Movement in 1968 and even went off to live in a squat for a short period of time. Approximately at the same time she started her long carrier of unpublished fiction writer, as she mentions with typical self-deprecating humour in her website autobiography, and begins her work as a lecturer in media studies (journalism) at Sheffield Hallam University.

Actually, it was Lewycka's preoccupation about her aging parents that motivated her to explore East-European background of her family. Suddenly, she realized that they wouldn't be around forever and all their tales about the mysterious and unknown country Ukraine would irreversibly disappear. It was indispensable to treasure all their reminiscences about youth in gloomy Soviet era, experiences of war and exile, famine in Ukraine and austerity of immigrant's life in Britain.

Virginia Woolf affirms in *A Room of One's Own* that "we think back through our mothers if we are women" (Woolf, 1989, p.74) and Marina Lewycka asked exactly her mother to convey the history she wanted to know in the smallest details. This request meant to start a voyage of discovery which had led to great changes in the life of many people.

The interview about the past was recorded on tape and Marina Lewycka prepared to write her mother's fictional biography. Describing historic events she tried to be as realistic as possible, but very soon she sensed that the narrative was getting more and more sad and somber. Just then she introduced in the plot the real-life story of marriage of her recently widowed father with a migrant from post-communist Ukraine, depicted in a comic way. Unexpectedly, this secondary plot line turned to be more important and lately became essential. In order to make this modification, Lewycka found the liberating device of "making things up" (Lewycka, 2009). Although *Tractors* appears to be autobiographical, the author stresses the fact that "the characters took on a life of their own, and became distinct from the characters in my life, so they created their own stories" (Lewycka, 2009).

The novel found its publisher with a help of a literary agent Lewycka got to know attending a course of creative writing. The provisional title *A Short History of Tractors in Ukrainian* wasn't changed and immediately after its publication, the oddly titled-book was erroneously classified by Amazon.com (a US-based multinational electronic commerce company) under Agricultural History. One of the first readers who reviewed the novel wrote on Amazon's website: "Be warned. This book

has nothing to do with tractors. The author should be ashamed of herself!" (Lewycka, 2009) Nevertheless, the book contains the sections on history of tractors scattered along the main plot. These sections are interconnected and form a story-within-a-story which conveys to the reader the role of technology in the former Soviet Union and its tight connection with the history of humankind.

The title itself was inspired by a real work *A History of Engineering (Technology)* written in Ukrainian language by Marina's father, the retired engineer Peter Lewycky. The forty or so pages of the manuscript which survived were mostly about tractors. After the worldwide success of his daughter's novel, his work was translated in English and some of its extracts were published in the "E&T" ("Engineer and Technology") magazine along with his drawings and poetry under the title *Exclusive: The Real History of Tractors in Ukrainian* (Vitaliev, 2010).

One of the by-products of writing of *Tractors* is that Lewycka rediscovered her family in Ukraine. Carrying out the background research for the book on the internet, she came across a Russian family-search website and occasionally made a request for the surname of her mother. One year later she received an email from the relatives she never met and had not even known about their existence. Marina Lewycka's parents used to tell her that they were the only survivors, the others must have died in the Second World War. Very soon new-found relatives sent her a family tree and the pictures of her aunts, cousins, grandparents, nephews and of her parents as children and later as young adults.

The emotional reunion of the family happened during the travel in Ukraine which Lewycka made with her daughter a bit afterwards the Internet discovery. For the first time in her life she visited the motherland of her parents. "It was wonderful but heartbreaking," – as she describes her impressions in the article "*A Short History of Tracking down my Family in Ukraine,"* – "Actually, what surprised me was that, in spite of the war and upheavals that split Europe and our family in two, we are all so alike" (Lewycka, 2005).

According to the English academic and author John Sutherland, bestselling novels are "the snapshots of the age" and they fit hand-in-glove with their period (Sutherland, 2007, p.2). *Tractors* therefore incorporates current anxieties of British society about immigration, inter-generational clashes and concern about aging people.

Doris Lechner, a researcher of the University of Freiburg who did a thorough analysis of Marina Lewycka's novels, inferred that *A Short History of Tractors in Ukrainian* is based on already well established on the British book market genres of family history, immigrant and chick-lit novel, but what seems to be crucial for the book's success, is its particular regard to the author's

Ukrainian-British identity (Lechner, 2010, p.437).

Last but not least, or maybe even the most important ingredient of success is the sparkling humour, which is paradoxically suitable even in the gloomiest parts of the book. The jokes at the expense of certain characters' less than acceptable behaviour function extremely well to mediate conflicts and to mitigate the sombre tone of the pages centred on the history of Nadia's family and the Soviet Ukraine. As Marina Lewycka points out in an interview: "There is no clear border between tragic and comic" (Lewycka, 2010) indeed even the questioning of stereotypes is not so painful if done with a smile.

Marina Lewycka was only one year old when her Ukrainian parents moved from the German labour camp to England and, referring to the terminology proposed by Graeme Dunphy (Dunphy, Rainer, 2001), she may be defined as an immigrant of the second generation. According to the German scholar, the second generation immigrants are the children of immigrants, who were either very young at the time of migration or were born in the country of arrival and find it easier to be assimilated into the local culture and society than people who immigrated as adults (Dunphy, Rainer, 2010: p.1). Personally Lewycka regards herself as a thoroughly English writer and a cosmopolitan woman with an identity capable of stretching and extending: "I think I'm very lucky to have a family which has migrated, because I have much more sense of the whole world as a place I can inhabit" (Lechner, 2010: p.454).

Such multifaceted identities are not exceptional in the contemporary literature of the British Isles; on the contrary, they become more and more common, being constantly produced by "the internationalization of English literature" (King, 2005). The territories of internationalisation tend to expand beyond the borders of the former Empire, but the European East remains an ambivalent cultural space for the Westerners. In the preface of the most recently published volume *Facing the East in the West: Images of Eastern Europe in British Literature, Film and Culture*, which is focused on the exploring of "new" European identities, the editor Barbara Korte writes:

The readings about East assembled in the present volume suggest that the East, for many writers in Britain today, is a space not only to be rediscovered, but also a mirror-space that helps the West to complement and destabilise its conceptions about itself, its stereotypes about the East, and its ideas about Europe and European cultural heritage (Korte, 2010: p.12).

A Short History of Tractors in Ukrainian by Marina Lewycka is set in England, but its main characters are immigrants of different generations from Ukraine. For European audience the reading of this novel must be certainly a brand new acquaintance with one of the former USSR republic, which they can vaguely know from the TV news about Orange Revolution and problems with the gas supply from Russia. Speaking about this country with Marina Lewycka the interviewer starts with the question which shows how unfamiliar and obscure Ukraine for Western European readers:

Well, Ukraine is very little known, isn't it? Many people of our country have difficulties with placing it on the map. And the sense where it is and what it is, and it's history, and the famine, and the things which are sort of shaped it in the twentieth century are probably not very well understood (Lewycka, 2010).

The long process of acquaintance is still to be done and the blank spaces are still to be filled with the salvaged memories of older generations, which help us inscribe the dry and impersonal history accounts into life experiences, connected to human beings, although imaginary ones. Therefore, in the contemporary post-Wall period the European East is being explored as a site of memories and histories which the West has yet to recuperate and reassess, not least in relation to Europe's cultural heritage and European history.

A Short History of Tractors in Ukrainian is the fiction of memory and from the very beginning we are also warned that the reconciliation with the past will not be so painless as the humorous tone of the opening lines and of the novel suggests. The narrator Nadezhda is compelled to reconstruct the history of her family after the death of her mother followed almost immediately by her father's marriage with an economic immigrant and potential gold-digger Valentina. The arrival of the young glamorous divorcée from Ukraine, the country which the parents of Nadezhda left after the Second World War in the pursuit of survival, has a disruptive effect on the life of all the characters, but especially on the narrator's relation with the past: the explosion of a bombshell from the Old Country "brings to the surface a sludge of sloughed-off memories" (Lewycka, 2005: p.1).

Nadezhda is a sociology professor in her mid-forties, the family's "precious peacetime baby" who was born in 1945 in a German labour camp and grew up in England after her parents' fortunate migration to the UK. Her mother and older sister Vera decide to shelter Nadia from the heavy knowledge of the past, taking a lot of care to keep the memories locked away under the cover of silence. The narrator clearly has autobiographical features and Marina Lewycka remembers that in

her childhood her mother used to tell her only happy ending stories: "I think all parents want to shield their children from the true nature of adult world, especially when they have experienced the barbarities of the century like the last." (Lewycka, 2009).

The horrible memories are inaccessible to Nadia, but it seems that hidden truth is drenched in her blood and she's constantly anxious about "something terrible that has happened in the past" (Lewycka, 2005: p.45). The natural curiosity mixes up with the jealousy for the knowledge that Vera possesses, being a privileged guard of the family secrets and, as a result, Nadezhda starts to feel a painful urge to reconstruct the past, to discover what happened before her birth and to gain the full understanding of who she is:

My sister is ten years older than me, and had one foot in the adult world. She knew things I didn't know, things that were whispered but never spoken about. She knew grown-up secrets so terrible that just the knowledge of them had scarred her heart. Now that mother has died, Big Sis has become the guardian of the family archive, the spinner of stories, the custodian of the narrative that defines who we are. This role, above all others, is the one I envy and resent. It is time, I think, to find out the whole story, and to tell it in my own way. (Lewycka, 2005: p.49)

For the achievement of her aim Nadezhda has to rely only on her relatives, especially on Vera, who is particularly reluctant to open the door of the past. The narrator starts from scratch remembering mother's stories and gathering snippets of information from sporadic conversations with the older sister. Her process of reconstruction is shaped by what Marianne Hirsch has termed 'post memory' (Hirsch, 2001), explaining it with the reference to the children of Holocaust survivors. The principle of postmemory, though, is applicable to other second-generation traumatic contexts of genocides and collective catastrophes like those of American slavery, the Vietnam War, the Dirty War in Argentina, South Africa apartheid, Armenian and Cambodian genocides and so forth.

Postmemory is not identical to memory: it brings the temporal delay of the "past" with all its implications, but at the same time it approximates the memory in the force of its emotions. Marianne Hirsch defines postmemory as "describ[ing] the relationship of the second generation to powerful, often traumatic, experiences that precede their births but that were nevertheless transmitted to them so deeply as to seem to constitute memories in their own right." (Hirsch, 2011: p.104). She also suggests that the growth of memory culture is caused by a need for inclusion in a collective awareness the inherited traumatic experiences. In the case of *A Short History of Tractors in Ukrainian*, the

narrative of Nadezhda has a function of explaining and transmitting the memories of the Soviet and East European communist terror to the present readers of the book and to the next generations:

Postmemorial work strives to reactivate and to re-embody more distant social/national and archival/cultural memorial structures by reinvesting them with resonant individual and familial forms of mediation and aesthetic expression. Thus less-directly affected participants [members of the second generation like Lewycka] can become engaged in the generation of postmemory, which can thus persist even after all participants and even their familial descendants are gone (Hirsch, 2001: p.111).

The privileged site of memorial transmission is the family and Nadezhda acquires her knowledge about the Ukrainian past from the conversations with Vera and from the history of tractors written by her father Nikolai. She finds out about the horrors of the Soviet terror to which her family was subjected in Ukraine, about the arrest and execution of her grandfather in 1930, her mother's consequent expulsion from university, the famine induced in Ukraine by Stalin during which millions of Ukrainians died in 1932-1933, the brutal arrest and lucky release of her maternal grandmother in 1936, and the deportation of Nikolai's colleagues in Siberia in the same year. She finally learns about her parent's and Vera's deportation to the German forced labour camp Dranchensee, where they were confined to a correction block, which they only survived due to being rescued in time by the British.

According to the Russian translator and literary editor Maksim Nemtsov, "it would have been completely impossible to write such a book even ten years ago and even less impossible to expect that it will receive positive reviews and gain popularity among the readers." (Nemtsov, 2010). Sure enough the novel could not be published before the dissolution of the former Soviet Union with its rigid system of censorship and control of information.

For Marina Lewycka herself it was not an easy task to do a research on the history of Ukraine in the 20th century, precisely because there are still too many diverse historical sources and it is not clear which of them are truthful and which are not. The different versions of the same event are frequent and very embarrassing, like, for instance, the contradictory descriptions of Babi Yar, the site of a series of massacres carried out by the Nazis during their campaign against the Soviet Union, that Lewycka mentions in one of her articles: "It's the slippery nature of this country's history that's bothering me: you can't pin it down. Each player tells the story in his or her own way, but the bones

still keep coming up." (Lewycka, 2005).

However, even in spite of these difficulties, the writer still feels responsibility and a kind of addiction for telling the past and the present experiences of Ukrainians in her books. After coming across the Stephan Shakhno's work *Gone West: Ukrainians at Work in the UK* (Shakhno, 2004), she immediately decided to write about immigrant's life in her second novel *Two Caravans*: "I looked at the study, which was done by the Union Congress in Britain, and thought: This is a very interesting story. And it is a story I will have to tell, because nobody else will be able to tell it." (Lechner, 2010: p.456).

In her first novel Lewycka prefers to rely on her mother's account, on the stories of direct witness of historical events, though even this option is not absolutely reliable because of the particular nature of postmemory. In the reconstruction of the family history from postmemory perspective, Nadezhda creates intense images of her mother, her house, her lost motherland which reinforce the living connection between past and present, between the generation of witnesses and the generation of survivors. She also increases awareness for Ukrainians, who in the post-war period formed one of the largest ethnic groups of Displaced Persons in Germany and Austria, and awareness of Ukrainians in Great Britain in general, as she acknowledges in her interview to Doris Lechner: "I felt that other immigrant communities were much more visible and the Ukrainians had really almost disappeared. They sort of blended in and nobody knew about us." (Kulyk, 2003).

As I have previously stated, humour and comedy are of the great importance for this novel: the representation of serious topics like family conflicts, age issue, memories of war, loss and separation through comic writing, unexpectedly soothing and reconciling in this context, won the critics' attention and reader's sympathy in large part of the world.

The review snippets on the book's paperback edition like "Extremely funny," "Outstanding", "Mad and hilarious" signal the key features of the novel and explicitly promise entertainment. "They love comedy, it's true", says Marina Lewycka about the English readers, "They have the sense that the world is very gloomy and they like things that are little more entertaining." (Lechner, 2010: p.458). Traditionally the postcolonial literature deals with suffering, since considering the past is never painless, but Lewycka chooses a different tone: even if our life is a nightmare, it is a hellishly funny one.

According to Graeme Dunphy and Rainer Emig, this way of mixing tragic and comic in memory fiction is becoming more and more common among cultural immigrants, migrants, and subsequent generations of ethnic minorities (second and third-generation migrants):

The experience of exile and migration in twentieth-century Europe has been marked by feelings of displacement and insecurity not unlike those caused by more traditional, internal forms of alienation, by conflicts of interests and identities, by the often difficult co-existence of communities and the struggle for equality and recognition, and later also by a generation gap exacerbated by divergent cultural expectations. Among the many forms of expression which speak to and out of this situation, humour has become increasingly significant (Dunphy, 2009: p.7).

One of the examples of the humorous depiction of traumatising events is a book, *Tractors* is often compared with, the debut novel of the American writer Jonathan Safran Foer, *Everything is Illuminated,* published in 2002 (Foer, 2002). Its main character, a young American Jew Jonathan, is similarly confronting the past and Holocaust postmemories in his journey to Ukraine, where he is trying to find the family that saved his grandfather from the Nazis during the Second World War.

According to Marina Lewycka, dark humour perfectly fits in the setting of a country like Ukraine, particularly because of its gloomy history: "Black comedy is very Eastern European. You celebrate whatever is to celebrate, because you never know whether there's going to be anything to celebrate tomorrow." (Llewellyn Smith, 2009).

The ethnic humour, which is usually related to a special racial, national or cultural minority group one, is also essential in *Tractors*. Konrad Lorenz, a Noble Prize winning zoologist whose interests in later life shifted to the study of humans in society, linked this kind of humour with social aggression and maintained that "laughter produces simultaneously a strong fellow-feeling among participants and joint aggressiveness against outsiders […] Laughter forms a bond and simultaneously draws a line" (Lorenz, 1963: p.253). Then, its aim is to delineate the boundaries of ethnic community and to spot out the intruders whose culture, or more precisely lack of it, makes them unacceptable.

The young Ukrainian woman Valentina is an explicit outsider to the British community, therefore her character is generously equipped with all the undesirable sociocultural traits which make her exotically fascinating and repulsive at the same time: excessive sexuality, uncleanliness and gluttony. When she appears on the pages of the novel for the first time, she wears denim mini-skirt, high-heeled peep-toe mules and Bardot-style blond pony-tail (Lewycka, 2005: p.2); the style of her clothes is not merely bad, it always borders on vulgarity and crudeness.

Like the most of economic immigrants from the so-called Third World, Valentina is

obsessed with the high standards of occidental life, which are often illusory and bear no relation to real life . "She cannot be blamed, she believes that in the West everybody's a millionaire"(Lewycka, 2005: 98), says Nikolai trying to give at least some explanations of his wife's senseless behavior, who makes him throw lots of money on useless domestic appliances and two cars she does not even know how to drive. Ukraine is characterized by backwardness and corruption and the driving license can be easily obtained even by people who have never been behind the wheel: "Valentina holds an international driving license issued in Ternopil, which is valid for a year. She has never taken a driven test, says my father, but she paid for the license in pork cutlets and sausages from her mother's smallholding." (Lewycka, 2005: p.85).

Finally, "Valentina has achieved the apogee of her dreams of life in the West – she is the owner of a Rolls-Royce" (Lewycka, 2005: p.117), but the car which came from the estate of Lady Glaswyne was used for many years "as farm vehicle transporting hay, sheep, fertilizer bags, anything you like"(Lewycka, 2005: p.118) and is good for nothing. The decrepit symbol of prestigious class is left to rot on the house drive alluding to the absurdity of following up the mirage-like Western lifestyle.

Perhaps Valentina is condemned to be excluded from the British society which is too good for her, even if occasionally she could have had a chance of being accepted. The American scholar Werner Sollors observes that in ethnic humour "comic boundaries can be rapidly created and moved, as communities of laughter arise at the expense of some outsiders, and then reshape, integrate those outsiders and pick other targets." (Sollors, 1986: p.136). But Valentina is destined to be expelled from England forever and a day.

Sure enough in *Tractors* there is a humorous disjunction between what the characters are searching for and what they actually find, starting from Nikolai who in the course of events discovers that his romantic love, Botticelli's Venus from Ukraine is his potential killer. Valentina, who expected her husband to be almost a millionaire, becomes furious when Nikolai's modest savings comes to the end and she starts abusing him verbally and physically. When the desperate aged Don Juan finds himself confined in his own house and beaten with a wet towel, he fearfully complains to his daughter: "I believe she wants to murder me!" (Lewycka, 2005: p.199).

Likewise, the incongruity is present in characters themselves, not only in their ludicrous interrelationship. Valentina, who is striving to appear as a successful Western European woman fails to understand what is acceptable and what is not, especially in clothes:

Just at that moment, Valentina emerges from the house. Although it is June, and the

weather is warm, she is wearing a huge pinch-wasted, wide-shouldered fur coat, which she wraps around herself with her hands in the pockets, movie-star style [...] Stanislav, in a short-sleeved shirt, walks behind her carrying her bag (Lewycka, 2005: p.178).

This kind of dressing style and behavior is manifestly stereotypical for Eastern Europeans and Valentina is a stereotypical character to a certain extent. As Marina Lewycka observes, "at the beginning, Valentina was more of a caricature, but as I fell in love with her, I tried to understand who she really was, and how she came to be as she was." (Lewycka, 2010). Nadezhda, the prototype of Lewycka in *Tractors* and the most human and sensitive character of all, argues with her sister Vera and defends Valentina after the expelling of the intruder out of their house and their country: "Yes, she is greedy, predatory, outrageous, but she is a victim too. A source of cheap labour" (Lewycka, 2005: p.280). Unarguably, at the beginning of the novel Valentina is introduced as a pure caricature, but afterwards Lewycka tries to ascribe dignity to her most undignified struggle and give the character a human shape.

In her interview to Jen Persson the author explains that she used stereotypes to render her characters immediately familiar and recognizable to the readers (Lewycka, 2009). In this case, the knowledge of a nations shared stereotypes can be interpreted as a kind of cultural knowledge which can be used in fiction for a more effective description of the characters. Talking about stereotypes in the context of humour, the American psychologist William Edgar Vinacke observes that they "should properly be regarded as concept-systems, with positive as well as negative functions, having the same general kinds of properties as other concepts, and serving to organize experience as the other concepts do." (Vinacke, 1957: p.233).

The character of Valentina to a certain extent embodies what the ordinary English person thinks about immigrants, so it is the culturally corrosive humour and it contributes to the process of "othering" of the Eastern Europe in the Western imagination. But on the other hand humour helps to dispel animosity by bringing cultures together and making us experience what the German philosopher Helmuth Plessner called "the humanity of the human" (Crichely, 2002: p.3) – the laughter. Everybody has a choice to decide whether Valentina is a politically incorrect representation of immigrants or a splendid comic creation. Perhaps she is a double-edged figure which can not be judged unilaterally. Anyway, the author is generous with her heroine, since at the end of the novel she donates Valentina the happiness of maternity and a beautiful baby-girl. As Vera points out, "Babies change everything" (Lewycka, 2005: p.313) and hopefully the united family of Ukrainians will have a different

future, a better one.

This hope is strengthened by the fact that Nikolai donates to Dubov, Valentina's Ukrainian ex-husband and at the same time her new partner for life, a patent for a tool bar for tractor. Dubov is an engineer, like Nikolai, and he understands how this new invention "with superior design" functions and can be used. The two men come to the optimistic conclusion that "Maybe this will be rebirth of Ukrainian tractor industry" (Lewycka, 2005: p.308).

Certainly, Nikolai's gift symbolizes a contribution to the wealth of his motherland which he had left half a century ago in the turbulent past-war years and the return of his engineer's talent back to Ukraine, where it always belonged. Accepting this donation, Dubov acts as a link between generations and countries and, as Nikolai suggests, probably he will be able to satisfy Valentina: "She is a beautiful woman, but maybe I did not make her happy. Maybe with Dubov she will be happier. Dubov is good type. In Ukraine maybe he will now become rich." (Lewycka, 2005: p.308). Lewycka ends the novel with a humorous scene of Nikolai practicing yoga in his private apartment in a shelter housing lodging, where he moves after selling his family house. Apparently Vera and Nadezhda manage to put everything in its place and help their father to start a new life. Similarly, Marina Lewycka integrates her Ukrainian identity in her British self and makes one of the first attempts to tell the Western world about Ukraine – the country of her parents which history and culture are still waiting to be rediscovered.

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Інформація про автора:

Чернявська Катерина Володимирівна, 1984 р.н., студентка 5 курсу факультету іноземних мов і літератур університету м. Салерно (UNISA), Італія; магістр слов'янської філології Львівського національного університету ім. І.Франка, випуск 2005 р.

E-mail: katia.chernyavska@gmail.com. Mobile phone: + (39)3276722499.