

## Vasyl' Stus and Russian Culture: A Complex Issue

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### **Abstract**

*This article is part of a larger project, aimed at studying the many influences and intertextual connections of Vasyl' Stus, a key figure for contemporary Ukrainian cultural identity, with writers of both Western, Ukrainian and Russian literature. Scholarship on Stus is growing rapidly, yet on the whole it fails to grasp the breadth of his knowledge of foreign literatures. More specifically, studies on the difficult last twenty years of his life often tend to obviate a truly scientific approach to his literary heritage. For fairly obvious reasons, one of the most neglected aspects of his biography as a poet is the role of Russian language, culture and literature in his artistic development. This article argues that a detailed study of the writer's Russian readings and of the possible influence they might have had on his work would help better understand his literary genealogy, his way of thinking and his poetic work. Discussions of works and authors of Russian literature constitute a significant part of Stus's letters. Russian (Soviet) reviews and translations were often for him the key to various foreign literatures and cultures. Russian writers and thinkers aroused his interest in a particular, "privileged" way. Special attention is also paid to the role of Donbas culture in shaping the identity of the young Stus.*

**Key Words:** Stus; Russian literature; Ukrainian literature; poetry; comparative literature.

Contemporary Ukrainian culture is unthinkable without the presence of Vasyl' Stus (1938-1985) in its literary canon, its historical background and more generally in its collective thought. The history of his reception as a poet and an almost mythologically depicted public figure has often been the subject of metacritical works,<sup>1</sup> which have underlined a deep rift between Stus's image as a writer and a poet, on the one hand, and as a fighter for human rights and the freedom and democracy of Ukraine, on the other with the second viewpoint often "invading" the literary field. It has been suggested that one of the weakest points in the existing studies on Stus's artistic heritage is a serious discussion of his literary sources, of the various components of the palimpsest of his poetry.<sup>2</sup> As Stus was not only a poet, but also a scholar of humanities who had to give up his scientific activity because of the impossibility of coming to terms with the Soviet establishment of the mid-Sixties, he was very well acquainted with classical and modern Ukrainian and world literature, as well as with philosophy, art history and Eastern thought. He managed to cultivate an interest in literature up to the last months of his life, asking relatives and friends to send books and journals to his detention camp or to copy poems in their letters to him.

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<sup>1</sup> B. Huk, 'Uwagi o stanie badań krytyczno-literackich nad twórczością Wasyla Stusa,' *Slavia Orientalis*, Vol. 41, No. 1, 1992, pp. 67-77. Iu. Bedryk, *Vasyl Stus: problema spryimannia*, Kyiv, Fotovideoservis, 1993. V. Prosalova, 'Retseptsiiia V. Stusa: Postradians'ka i diasporna interpretatsiia,' *Aktual'ni problemy ukrains'koï literatury i fol'kloru*, No. 12, 2008, pp. 255-267. M. Pavlyshyn, 'Martyrology and Literary Scholarship: the Case of Vasyl Stus,' *Slavic and East European Journal*, Vol. 54, No. 4, 2010, pp. 585-606.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 602.

Among his most beloved authors Russian writers played a significant and particular role, but very little attention has been paid so far to their presence in Stus's literary growth. This negative bias can easily be explained with the persistence of anti-colonial trends in Ukrainian literary criticism and culture in general,<sup>3</sup> as well as with the objective necessity to liberate Ukrainian writers and scholars from the constraints of a Little Russian literature entirely dependent on her Great Russian sister. However, this problem actually deserves much more work than has been done up to now. The question of Stus's relation to Russian literature and of the possible influences of Russian writers on his own work can be considered in a wider cultural perspective, as part of a more general topic which could be referred to as "Vasyl' Stus and Russian culture." This includes manifold problems such as his stance on the Russian language and its role in Ukrainian culture and history, Russian themes in his writings and the reception of issues linked with Russia and Russian in scholarly literature on Vasyl' Stus.

Concerning the last point, as already mentioned, a glimpse at the *status quaestionis* shows a rather disappointing situation. Some basic research on Stus's relation to Boris Pasternak and Marina Tsvetaeva has been conducted by the young Kyiv-based scholar Marharyta Iehorchenko,<sup>4</sup> while his interest in the life and work of Aleksandr Pushkin has been studied by Valentyna Narivs'ka,<sup>5</sup> now Professor at Dnipropetrovs'k State University. Moreover, the poet's son Dmytro Stus has published in two important Ukrainian journals previously unknown writings of his father on Lev Tolstoi.<sup>6</sup> Apart from these high-level, though few contributions, and some observations in Myroslav Shkandrij's monograph on Ukrainian-Russian cultural interactions,<sup>7</sup> not much has been written on this very important subject.<sup>8</sup>

The first, obvious element to be considered is Stus's own biography. Born in Vinnytsia *oblast'*, he moved as a child to Donetsk, thus being forced to acclimatise to the linguistic prevalence of Russian, the thorough Ukrainianness of his household notwithstanding. As did many other Ukrainian intellectuals of the central and Eastern regions of the country, he worked throughout his life to rescue the Ukrainian language from its cultural subjugation, while at the same time developing a fully-fledged knowledge of Russian literature. So, Russian culture in the broadest sense of the term, i.e. including language, literature and history, paradoxically occupied (and still occupies) for Stus and for several other Ukrainians a liminal, even schizophrenic space between rejection and attraction, foreignness and normality, openness to world culture and provincialism. Russian was one of the main and strongest tools of repression, but also the key to fundamental texts which were not available in Ukrainian translation. Unlike important instruments for achieving more or less independent knowledge, such as German, Polish and English, Russian was for Stus neither the result of a personal choice, nor obviously his mother tongue, but something which nevertheless was a constituent part of his life. Stus refused to see his wife and son during their attempt to visit him in the prison camp, because the guards required them to speak Russian- the language, paradoxically, of many of his most beloved literary works. In his letters from Mordovia, Magadan *oblast'* and the Urals Stus often complained about the lower quality of contemporary Ukrainian literature and literary journals in comparison to Russian ones. This was of course the inevitable result of several decades of Soviet Russification and centuries of imperial

<sup>3</sup> See M. Pavlyshyn, 'Post-Colonial Features in Contemporary Ukrainian Culture,' *Australian Slavonic and East European Studies*, Vol. 6, No. 2, pp. 41-55.

M. Iehorchenko, 'Funktsiia 'pasternakivs'koho tekstu' u tvorchosti Vasyliia Stusa,' *Aktual'ni problemy ukrains'koi literatury i fol'kloru*, No. 12, 2008, pp. 83-87. M. Iehorchenko, 'Problema tvorchosti Vasyliia Stusa ta Maryny Tsvietaievoi,' *Mandrivets'*, No. 2, 2008, pp. 63-66.

<sup>5</sup> W. Nariwskaja, 'Kul'turnaia samoidentichnost' kak neobkhodimost' zhiznedeiatel'nosti: fenomen Vasiliia Stusa,' *Polilog. Studia Neofilologiczne*, No. 1, 2011, pp. 97-109.

<sup>6</sup> D. Stus, 'Berehamy konspektiv V. Stusa: Do literaturnoi biohrafii poeta,' *Slovo i chas*, No. 9, 2000, pp. 42-51; V. Stus, 'Lev Tolstoi iak iavlyshche,' *Kyivs'ka Rus'*, Vol. 5, No. 25, 2008, pp. 7-34.

<sup>7</sup> M. Shkandrij, *Russia and Ukraine: Literature and the Discourse of Empire from Napoleonic to Postcolonial Times*, Montreal, McGill-Queen's University Press, 2001, pp. 249-258.

<sup>8</sup> Interesting observations on Stus's Russian readings are also to be found in M. Kotsiubyns'ka postface to Stus's letters in the first (and at present only) complete edition of his work. See V. Stus, *Tvory: u chotyrokh tomakh: shesty knyhakh*, L'viv, Prosvita, 1994-1998, Vol. 6, Book 2, pp. 218-240.

de-Ukrainization, and of the even stronger ideological pressure to which writers and critics in Kyiv and Lviv were subjected. Thus, the extremely politically conditioned Russian Soviet scholarship became nonetheless a not unavoidable, but fruitful source of cultural enrichment.

The same ambiguity seems to characterise Stus's feelings towards Donbas and its hybrid culture. On the one hand, it appeared to be a thoroughly Russianised region, which he opposed to the real Ukraine around Kirovohrad,<sup>9</sup> for instance. On the other hand, he couldn't help recognizing it as his own native land, where the Ukrainian language still managed to survive outside of Donetsk. This is quite evident in his prose, which still constitutes one of the most neglected parts of his artistic production. In the context of its manifold possible meanings, Stus's short novel *Podorozh do Shchastivs'ka* (*A Journey to Shchastivs'ka*, a place name that could be perhaps translated as "Happiland"), which has been dated back to the end of the Sixties and the beginning of the Seventies,<sup>10</sup> could be read as the story of a symbolic journey through Ukraine and its uncertain, ungraspable identity. The hero's first trip from Kyiv to his native Donbas reveals to him that the only element which can provide him with a feeling of belonging is his family, while society appears to be deprived of national roots enabling the possibility of sharing common values and perceiving oneself as part of a united, coherent social body. This existential indefiniteness permeates not only the collective sphere, but the self as well as a consequence of the broader alienation it is plunged into. As an intellectual,<sup>11</sup> and a nationally conscious one, Petro is utterly useless in Soviet Ukraine, he cannot find a common ground with the people around him. Thus, he cannot understand himself, either. The language question seems to play an important role in the disaggregation of society, with characters not being able to speak proper Ukrainian (or proper Russian) and mainly expressing themselves in the alienating medium of *surzhyk*.

Stus's letters and autobiographical texts abound with references to Russian literature. His interest in it never abandoned him up to his last months, as shown in his last letters to his wife and his son. In 1979 he wrote to his German friend Ch. Bremer that his favourite Russian writers were Aleksandr Pushkin, Ivan Bunin, Boris Pasternak, Lev Tolstoi, Fedor Dostoevskii and Andrei Platonov.<sup>12</sup> Elsewhere he also praised Nikolai Zabolotskii<sup>13</sup> and Valentin Rasputin.<sup>14</sup> His judgments tend to reflect his personal taste more than traditional critical views: for example, he expressed a preference for Bunin's poetry rather than his prose,<sup>15</sup> which is generally considered his greater and more original achievement. He also wrote about his love for Aleksandr Blok's work and the unexpected, barely perceptible presence of the Russian poet's "spiritual search" in his own experience.<sup>16</sup>

In one of his later messages to his family he referred to Goethe, Rilke and Pasternak as his three (favourite) poets,<sup>17</sup> while at the same time stressing the unattainable greatness of the first. Pasternak is often mentioned in his writings. However, Stus seems to be engaged in a sort of fight to overcome the anxiety of Pasternak's influence. In his preface to his collection of poems "Winter Trees" from 1969 Stus declared that he had liberated himself just three or four years earlier from an excessive love for the Russian poet, which had lasted since the end of his military service.<sup>18</sup> In various letters he shows mixed feelings on Pasternak, alternating praise<sup>19</sup> and misgivings.<sup>20</sup> Stus's dialogue with the Russian writer occurs on a poetic, as well as on a human and political level. Generally speaking, Pasternak's model of a moderate, private opposition, which at some points in his life even had to take the form of a

<sup>9</sup> V. Stus, 'Dvoje sliv chytachevi,' in V. Stus, *Tvory*, op. cit., Vol. 1, Book 1, p. 42.

<sup>10</sup> See *Ibid.*, Vol. 4, p. 511.

<sup>11</sup> The same problem is at the core of Stus's prose known with the title of *Tak buvalo uzhe ne raz* (*It wasn't the first time*).

<sup>12</sup> V. Stus, *Tvory*, op. cit., Vol. 6, Book 2, p. 161.

<sup>13</sup> See D. Stus, *Vasyl 'Stus: Zhyttia iak tvorchist'*, Kyiv, Fakt, 2004, p. 304.

<sup>14</sup> V. Stus, *Tvory*, op. cit., Vol. 6, Book 2, p. 163.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, Vol. 6, Book 1, p. 78.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 208.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 455.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, Vol. 1, Book 1, p. 42.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, Vol. 6, Book 1, pp. 459-460.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 465-466.

real, painful adaptation to Soviet power,<sup>21</sup> might have been for Stus a reason for disappointment. He claimed to have stopped loving Pasternak in the mid-Sixties,<sup>22</sup> when his clash with the post-Thaw Ukrainian establishment had already taken the form of open and harsh opposition. However, these external, purely biographical observations should not divert attention from a truly literary approach to the complex issue of Pasternak's place in Stus's poetic path. A detailed, micro-textual comparative study of the poetry of both writers is yet to come.

Nonetheless, even a quick overview of the most relevant features of their poetic worlds can provide some interesting preliminary observations. According to Aleksandr Zholkovsky,<sup>23</sup> the central theme of Pasternak's poetry can be summarised in the idea of the “magnificent unity” of the world, or, to use the words of the poet himself, it can be defined as the “interaction of enthusiasm and everyday life.. Pasternak's lyrical subject is engaged in the poetical depiction of the harmony of the universe and of his own place in the inexorable movement of a multifaceted, but homogeneous reality. His early poetry is a joyful explosion of sensuality, while his later texts tend to reflect the cumbersome atmosphere of the Stalinist era. However, the orgiastic communion of the lyrical subject with nature of *My Sister – Life* is not replaced by despair and disenchantment, but rather by a sober declaration of faith in the ability of poetry to restore the fruitful correspondence of inner self and external reality, which has only apparently been obscured. That is the meaning of Pasternak's *Second Birth* and of the life path of his alter ego Iurii Zhivago. If we were to set forth a short but comprehensive description of Stus's poetic world we would be confronted with a quite different picture: there is no basic harmony between the subject and the universe he is plunged into. Stus's poetic path is an exercise in sublimation, i.e. an *askesis*. For his lyrical subject, reality is not to be understood, no communion with it can ever be reached.<sup>24</sup> On the contrary, the only goal that can be pursued is liberation from the fetters of this world. In this respect Stus's poetic world might be compared with Marina Tsvetaeva's. Being tightly linked with both Pasternak and Rilke and one of the most influential authors for young Soviet poets, Tsvetaeva has been a steady presence in Stus's literary interests. His epistolary comments on her work and personality show the same alternation of passion and detachment as in his relation to Pasternak. In a long letter to his son Dmytro, Stus rejoices at the former's interest in Tsvetaeva's *Poem of the End*,<sup>25</sup> but he can hardly accept her loud tones and her overwhelming ego. Elsewhere he strongly criticises the style of the correspondence she exchanged with both Rilke and Pasternak, blaming the three poets for their lack of human sincerity. However, Tsvetaeva's mature poetry seems to have much in common with his own. In the lyrics and poems she wrote in the second half of the Twenties, in the first years of her *émigré* life in Paris, her lyrical subject strives towards freedom from everything earthbound,<sup>26</sup> relying only on the cathartic power of poetry. Corporeality, feelings and human ties are accused of entrapping the free development of the poetic mind, which seeks total identification with the poetic Word. This invariant of Tsvetaeva's mature poetry should be discussed along with similar themes in Stus's work, but it is too early to predict the possible results of such a comparative study. It should also be noted that he gave an enthusiastic response to the reading of Tsvetaeva's 1927 essay *Art in the Light of Conscience*.<sup>27</sup> In it the Russian poet Tsvetaeva states the identity of art and nature, in which she sees the premise for the immortality of the poet. Moreover, Tsvetaeva compares the poet to a child on the basis of their mutual irresponsibility towards everything but play, i.e. creativity, art itself.

<sup>21</sup>That is one of the main tenets of one of the latest and most successful biographies of the Russian poets. See D. Bykov, *Boris Pasternak*, Moskva, Molodaia gvardiia, 2007. See also A. Zholkovsky, “The Dynamics of Adaptation: Pasternak's Second Birth”, in A. Zholkovsky, *Text counter Text: Rereadings in Russian Literary History*, Stanford, Stanford University Press, 1994, pp. 213-238 .

<sup>22</sup>V. Stus, “Dvoie sliv chytachevi”, op. cit., p. 42.

<sup>23</sup>A. Zholkovsky, *Poetika Pasternaka: invarianty, struktury, interteksty*, Moskva, NLO, 2011, p. 11.

<sup>24</sup>Dialogue with the surrounding world is actively looked for in Stus's young poetry, but it definitely cannot be said that the lyrical subject of his *juvenilia* (the period of his maximum interest in Pasternak's *oeuvre*) manages to reach a state of joyful interaction with the external reality.

<sup>25</sup>V. Stus, *Tvory*, op. cit., volume 6., book 1, p. 380.

<sup>26</sup>I. Vitins, “Escape From Earth: A Study of Tsvetaeva's Elsewheres”, *Slavic Review*, Vol. 36, No. 4, December 1977, pp. 644-657.

<sup>27</sup>V. Stus, *Tvory*, op. cit., Vol. 6, book 1, p. 430.

Stus translated poetry of both Tsvetaeva and Pasternak, but his Ukrainian versions of the latter's poetry are lost. In general, translations from Russian do not play a significant role in Stus's *oeuvre*. The reader can acquaint him or herself with the Ukrainian version of Bunin, Briusov, Zabolotskii and Tsvetaeva, which have been found in Stus's archive and letters. Apart from Tsvetaeva's poem, whose original is to be found in a letter to D. Stus from 1983, all other texts date back to the early Sixties.<sup>28</sup> They thus constitute a part of his early poetic apprenticeship. Bunin's two texts are quite traditional examples of neo-romantic landscape poetry. Valerii Briusov's three poems, which Stus translated under the general title *Z kryms'kykh tsykliv*, are more differentiated one from another, even if they could be defined as neo-romantic, too. In the first, (*Mesiatsa svet elektricheskii - Elektrosiaievom misiatsia* in Stus's translation), the *Jakobsonian* dominant is clearly to be seen in the hypnotic musical element, as so often in Briusov's poetry, which Stus masterfully manages to render in Ukrainian. The two other poems reflect the romantic *cliché* of incommunicability between the lyrical subject and nature. Astonishingly different is the historical and literary context of Zabolotskii's poem *Vokrug sela brodili grozy* (*Navkruh sela blukaly hrozy* in Stus's translation), written in 1954. It was for Stus a text of contemporary literature, which took inspiration from typical Soviet themes such as work, physical strength and man's power over nature, with a good deal of aestheticizing transfiguration. The most significant text in Stus's small corpus of Russian translation is his 1983 version of Tsvetaeva's 1922 poem *Nepodrazhaemo lzhët zhizn'*,<sup>29</sup> which he directly comments on in the letter to his son mentioned above. As stated by the same author,<sup>30</sup> the dominant element of this text is its sound pattern, not its external, superficial meaning ("Ale u ts'omu virshi zmistu, skazaty b, nema"). The task Stus sets himself (and which he manages to accomplish) is the rendering of its sound and the preservation of its gracefulness.

One more aspect of Tsvetaeva's heritage which might prove fruitful if applied to *Stus studies* is the Symbolist idea of *zhiznetvorchestvo*,<sup>31</sup> which has been positively used to discuss some moments of strong overlap of biographical facts with their poetic rendering by critics of the Russian poet. The necessity of a truly literary approach to Stus as a writer has been one of the toughest problems since the Eighties, when Yuri Shevelov, who is highly unlikely to be accused of philological carelessness, openly expressed the objective difficulties linked with considering Stus's poetry as a sheer fact of literature.<sup>32</sup> Criticism on Stus has still not overcome its traditional division into two opposing parties, the literary and the biographical/martyrological. The priority of the literary study, which was proclaimed in Melbourne more than twenty years ago,<sup>33</sup> but which still needs to be implemented by scholars, does not exclude a cultural insight into Stus's biography and its links with possible literary sources and models. A re-evaluation of the idea of *zhiznetvorchestvo* (Ukr. *zhittietvorchist'*) and the application of this word in order to describe Vasyl' Stus's human and artistic path lies at the core of Dmytro Stus's biography of his father.<sup>34</sup> A productive reinterpretation of the many semantic possibilities which the same word offers could possibly consist in its referring to literature (*tvorchestvo*, *tvorchist'*) as a mirror of life (*zhizn'*, *zhyttia*), a fundamental source of artistic and moral enrichment for the artist and the man in the unity of his human experience.<sup>35</sup> So, for example, Stus's

<sup>28</sup> See *Ibid.*, Vol. 5, p. 380.

<sup>29</sup> The writing of this poem was inspired by the reading of Pasternak's *Sestra moia – zhizn'* (*My Sister Life*). See M. Tsvetaeva, *Knigi stikhov*, Moskva, Ellis Lak, 2004, p. 813.

<sup>30</sup> V. Stus, *Tvory*, op. cit., Vol. 6, Book 1, p. 441.

<sup>31</sup> On *zhiznetvorchestvo* see I. Paperno and J. Delaney Grossman (eds.), *Creating Life: The Aesthetic Utopia of Russian Modernism*, Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1994, especially the "Introduction" by I. Paperno (pp. 1-11): "In this sense, art turned into "real life" and "life" turned into art; they became one. For the artist no separation existed between the "man" and the "poet," between personal life (*zhizn'*) and artistic (creative) activity (*tvorchestvo*)" (p. 1).

<sup>32</sup> Iu. Shevelov, "Trunok i trutyzna," in O. Zinkevych and M. Fratsuzhenko (eds.), *Vasyl' Stus: v zhytti, tvorchosti, spohadakh ta otsinkakh suchasnykh*, Baltimore and Toronto, Ukrain's'ke Vydavnytstvo "Smoloskyp" in V. Symonenka, 1987, pp. 368-401. See p. 369.

<sup>33</sup> M. Pavlyshyn (ed.), *Stus iak tekst*, Melbourne, Universytet im. Monasha, Viddil Slavistyky, 1992.

<sup>34</sup> D. Stus, *Vasyl' Stus: Zhyttia iak tvorchist'*, op. cit. A highly informative, extremely interesting work, which nevertheless carries on the tradition of the heroic, martyrological interpretation of Stus's personal and literary experience.

<sup>35</sup> T. Hundorova's definition of Stus's poetry as a *zhertvoslovo* is of inestimable help in this regard. See T.

staunch moral rigour one of the most notable features of his personality, might have found confirmation in Lev Tolstói's penchant for constant self-observation and self-correction. The writer from Iasnaia Poliana was one of Stus's favourite authors, as he declared in the above mentioned preface to "Winter Trees."<sup>36</sup> Tolstói's diaries, for instance, are the record of a scrupulous inquiry into the writer's idea of a moral and enriching life path, which so often stumbles into failures, doubts and uncertainties.<sup>37</sup> Similar self-judgments and declarations of the necessity of constantly delving into one's own inner world, behaviour and habits are to be found in Stus's letters and diary entries.<sup>38</sup> The most immediate source of information about Stus's interest in Tolstói and his heroes is a series of observations and notes on *War and Peace* which are supposed to date back to the mid-Seventies.<sup>39</sup> In a subsequent letter to his wife and his son of 1981 Stus wrote that in his whole life he had never read anything better than Tolstói's major novel.<sup>40</sup> His reading notes, which are structured as commentaries to single portions of Tolstói's text, show a special interest in the key moments of the novel, when the heroes realise they have found the existential truth they had been seeking for so long. On the basis of lengthy quotes from the original text Stus meditates on issues such as the contrast between reason and conscience and will and resignation to destiny which reveal both his deep personal engagement in these themes and his close acquaintance with Existentialism. Tolstói's and Stus's words seem to merge into one singular voice and the only external sign of their alternation is the shift from Russian to Ukrainian and *vice versa*. Stus's reflection inquires into both Andrei Bolkonskii's and Pier Bezukhov's liminal experiences, such as battle and first of all imprisonment, when the two young men manage to get rid of the mundane obstacles that prevented them from understanding the actual meaning of words such as life, freedom, and love. One of the most profound problems for both Tolstói and Stus is doubtless the dilemma between reason and faith. Pier's revelation of Platon Karataev's authentic, immediate spirituality teaches him to see the "great, eternal and infinite" that is in everything, which sharply contrasts with the masonic teachings about the Great Architect of the Universe he has recently been introduced to. In one of the first paragraphs of the text Stus writes: "Almost every single image of the novel is a possibility of existence, incomprehensible for all of the heroes. Their sense is the accomplishment of their fate, which is revealed in the fortuitous, the logical, the existent."<sup>41</sup> Tolstói's masterpiece and its characters become for Stus a mirror of his own situation and of the inescapable necessity of making some sense out of its absurdity. Commenting on Pier's wonderings Stus states that "the only real mission of man is suffering. That's hard. For this reason the exhausted person remains in his existential parasitism. But that is a life without roots, nothing else but the cutting of one's own trunk."<sup>42</sup> Stus's pages on Tolstói are of inestimable value for the comprehension of the philosophical basis of both his poetic work and his *Weltanschauung*.

In this regard, one more fundamental aspect of his heritage which still needs to be clarified is his stance on the philosophical tradition of Existentialism, which constitutes an important chapter of the general question "Stus as a reader." He often expressed his great love for Albert Camus's work and was well acquainted with Martin Heidegger's, Jean-Paul Sartre's and José Ortega y Gasset's writings. In a recently published dissertation on Stus, which is doubtless one of the best contributions to the study of his poetry, the young Donetsk-based scholar Olena Rosins'ka has carefully analysed the role of Karl Jaspers' thought in Stus's philosophical background.<sup>43</sup> Apart from that, a solid research on Stus's relation to both European and Russian Existentialism is still missing. In a letter to Vasyl' Holoborod'ko of 1969 or 1970<sup>44</sup> Stus wrote that he had just begun reading Nikolai Berdiaev's books. He named his *Spiritual Crisis of Intelligentsia* (1910) and *Philosophy of Freedom* (1911). The latter is his second

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Hundorova, "Fenomen Stusovoho «zhertvoslova»", in M. Pavlyshyn (ed.), *Stus iak tekst*, Melbourne, University of Toronto Press, 1992, pp. 1-29.

<sup>36</sup> See note 18.

<sup>37</sup> See B. Eikhenbaum, *Molodoi Tolstói*, München, Wilhelm Fink Verlag, 1968, pp. 11-57.

<sup>38</sup> D. Stus, *Zhittia iak tvorchist'*, op. cit., pp. 118-127.

<sup>39</sup> See note 6.

<sup>40</sup> V. Stus, *Tvory*, op. cit., Vol. 6, Book 1, p. 395.

<sup>41</sup> V. Stus, *Lev Tolstói iak iavyshe*, op. cit., p. 9.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 29.

<sup>43</sup> O. Rosins'ka, *Symvolika poezii Vasylia Stusa*, Donetsk, Noulidzh, 2010, pp. 36-42.

<sup>44</sup> V. Stus, *Tvory*, op. cit., Vol. 6, Book 2, p. 68.

book and contains *in nuce* the main aspects of his philosophical thought, which will be fully developed in his subsequent works. Stus's comments on the book are quite enthusiastic: he highlights the consonance of Berdiaev's themes with his personal reflections and claims that Berdiaev's argumentation confirms the validity of the moral path he has decided to follow. In his last sentence on the Russian philosopher Stus even concludes that "almost all his complex of thoughts could be reproduced by his own bosom."<sup>45</sup> The idea of spiritual freedom is at the core of Berdiaev's thought.<sup>46</sup> His highly contradictory, but essentially optimistic philosophy of irrational, creative liberation from the repressive power of earthly necessity must have been a message of hope and confirmation for Stus, who found himself in the middle of a war against the idea of the free moral and artistic development of the single human being. Moreover, Stus might have identified Berdiaev's re-use of the Slavophile idea of *sobornost'* with the battle for the national rebirth of Ukraine. In *Philosophy of Freedom* Berdjaev postulates Logos, or the "great reason" as spirit, the divine principle of the natural world and of man, and links it with Knowledge (*znanie*). Real Knowledge is indistinguishable from Truth (*istina*) and is in opposition to the rationalist, divided knowledge of Kantianism and Neo-Kantianism, which has separated subject and object, originally undivided in the divine *bytie*.<sup>47</sup> Berdiaev sees the absolute necessity of rescuing man's divine essence, which is revealed in his ability to create (*tvorchestvo*). He develops Vladimir Solov'ev's idea of "God-man" (*bogochelovek*), in which he identifies the ultimate goal of a mankind eventually free from the burden of original sin (*bogochelovechestvo*). To achieve liberation from sin man has to carry his cross, but Berdiaev insists that suffering must be active, creative, free, paradoxically joyful. The choice of positive, liberating suffering cannot be but the result of a conscious, willed act of freedom. In the Christian openness to the invisible, as opposed to the constraints and limitations of modern scientific thought the Russian philosopher sees the real freedom, which is possible only in the unifying spiritual body of the (Orthodox) Church. Mysticism, the real moment of communion with God, is a fundamental part of the creative process, that is the theurgical act of revelation of man's divinity. We do not know whether Stus was acquainted with Berdiaev's later and more mature works, such as *Philosophy of the Free Spirit* (1927) and *The Meaning of the Creative Act* (1916), in which he developed a deeper and more precise argumentation of his principles. Berdiaev's linking of creation to freedom and redemption seems to be the key of Stus's interest in his thought. In any case, a careful analysis of the differences and similarities in Stus's philosophical poetry and Berdiaev's unsystematic philosophy could prove very fruitful. A good study of the role of Berdiaev's work in Stus's heritage cannot overlook the latter's feelings towards Dostoevsky's novels and L. Shestov's thought. Stus's observations on the author of *The Brothers Karamazov* in his letters show a mix of irritation and admiration, rejection of his extreme, pathological characters and sensitivity to the depth of his psychological penetration. It should be borne in mind that Dostoevsky's role in shaping both Berdiaev's and Shestov's philosophy can hardly be overestimated. Stus wrote that the only book by Shestov he knew was "Dostoevsky and Nietzsche."<sup>48</sup> A comparative study of the idea of the Absurd and of the poetic mind's reaction to it in the philosopher's work and in Stus's poetry is one more urgent *desideratum* of *stusoznavstvo*. In this regard Shestov's and Dostoevskii's place in Camus's philosophical and artistic work cannot be overlooked, either.

Finally, a serious approach to Stus's cultural background must obviously peruse the interaction of his knowledge of West European and Russian literature and philosophy with the great tradition of his native Ukrainian culture. Skovoroda,<sup>49</sup> Shevchenko and Tychnyna, just to cite the most essential names,

<sup>45</sup> Ibid.

<sup>46</sup> See A. Ignatow and E. M. Swiderski, 'The Dialectic of Freedom in Nikolaj Berdjaev,' *Studies in Soviet Thought*, Vol. 38, No. 4, November 1999, pp. 273-289. See also J. McLachlan, 'Nicolas Berdyaev's Existential Personalism,' *The Personalist Forum*, Vol. 8, No. 1, 1992, pp. 57-65.

<sup>47</sup> N. Berdiaev, *Filosofia svobody*, Moskva, Izdatel'stvo Put', 1911, pp. 97-127.

<sup>48</sup> V. Stus, *Tvory*, op. cit., Vol. 6, book. 1, p. 207.

<sup>49</sup> A first, fundamental study on Stus's Skovoroda readings and their impact on his work has been published by N. Pylypiuk, but unfortunately its reception in Ukraine has hitherto been very limited. See N. Pylypiuk, "Vasyl' Stus, Mysticism and the Great Narcissus," in P. D. Morrison (ed.), *A World of Slavic Literatures: Essays in Comparative Slavic Studies in Honor of Edward Mozejko*, Bloomington, Slavica, 2002, pp. 173-210. See also A. Bila, "Skovorodyniv'skyi kod u dyskursi shistdesiatnystvstva (na materialy tvorchoosti Vasylia Stusa), in M.P. Korpaniuk (ed.), *Hryhorii Skovoroda – dukhovnyi oriientyr dlia suchasnosti (Naukovi materialy XIII Skovorodyniv's'kykh chytan'): u 2 knyhakh*, Kyiv, Milenium, 2007, 43

have been a constant presence in his artistic and human conscience. The Europeanness of Vasyl' Stus's Ukrainian culture<sup>50</sup> lies in this blend of traditions, whose richness deserves much closer attention than it has so far received, as well as a final liberation from any ideological obstacle.

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pp. 23-33.

<sup>50</sup>A feature he shares with the other representatives of that fundamental literary, historical and sociological phenomenon known as *Shistdesiatnytstvo*. Its main contribution to the spiritual renewal of Soviet Ukraine could be seen in the effort to restore the universal character of culture (in opposition to the stifling limitations of the official Soviet discourse) by means of a rehabilitation of its national belonging in the context of its interaction with the other national traditions.