

Identity building through perpetual choice: lyrical self in Vasyl Stus's poetry

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Abstract:

Based on the oeuvre of Vasyl Stus, the article investigates the origin of personal identity in Ukrainian poetry of the 20th century. The lyrical self in Stus's poetry is supposed to be represented by identity building provided through perpetual choice. The article indicates and explores the connection between the choice of lyrical self and the topical concepts of Stus's poetry, such as alive-death and death-life are. The article states that the lyrical self builds the identity perpetually by choosing beyond or within these concepts.

Keywords:

lyrical self, Vasyl Stus, identity, personal choice, authenticity.



Introduction

As a synthesis of phonic, visual, and semantic hypostasis poetry is based on the certain system of concepts. Probably due to this poetry-reader is constantly trying to catch the speaker's voice in order to indicate the point. Generally the message and the form of its delivery may be named as a *lyrical self*, or *subject/actor of lyrics*.

Lyrical self is the main source to represent the author's worldview. In poetry, lyrical self outlines the specific problems and offers the ways to solve them. Generally it is the union of *key-ideas (concepts)*, integrated into the text by the means of symbols, and *a set of tools* (rhythm, verse, rhyme, and visual structure of lines). All together it makes *lyrical semantics*. Consequently, *lyrical self* is a voice speaking ideas of exact lyrical semantics.

This article is a part of the research on the broader topic entitled *Lyrical self in the poetry of V. Stus, O. Zuyevskiy, and M. Atwood*. The author assumes that totalitarian conditions in some degree influenced the lyrical self in Ukrainian poetry of 20th century. It is well-represented by Vasyl Stus's poetry as its lyrical self is strongly connected with the problem of personal and national identity. Probably, identity is a cultural pattern in Ukrainian mythopoeics, it's a measure of creative work and human honesty with other people and own self. In the poetry of Stus the problem of identity is one of the most spoken by lyrical self. Identity belongs there to sacred sphere and is built by perpetual private choice of the lyrical self. The article is an effort to explore in-depth the unique key-concepts shaping the lyrical self in Stus's poetry.

The Origin of Personal Identity

Personal identity is a complex structure of the self-building which is determined by both external and interior factors. Roman Ingarden

remarks that strict identity of human is an ontological principle of personal responsibility (Ингарден, 2010, p. 107). Identity comprises at least three basic patterns which are individual's self-cognition, person's acknowledgment by society, and human's admission to the group (Матузкова, 2014, p. 17–18). Personal identity building frequently requires outlining of the links between the human and special communities which may be national, local, professional, or other groups. According to Anthony Smith, national identity as a multidimensional construction requires at least areal, mythological, historical, cultural, economic, and law unity of the community. In stateless countries identity supports the forces tending to become political equivalents of state power. The sense of national identity determines and orientates the *self* in the context of original culture. Opening the culture persons newly open themselves, they find out their *authentic Self*. In most cases the substantial tool to build national identity is ethnical basis of nation building (Сміт, 1994, p. 23–30).

Identity means the links between the world-view and different concepts of self. It is created through expression and representation of human choice. Through special values and national culture societies do represent different ways of being human (Тейлор, 2005, p. 636, 141, 91). Charles Taylor indicates acknowledgment, lack of it, or wrong acknowledgment as basic factors to shape identity. Correspondingly, person is existentially imprisoned and oppressed by the non-recognition and wrong acknowledgment. Identity strongly depends on the person's relations with others. Impossible isolated identity as a construction originates only through inner and external dialogue with others (Тейлор, 2004, p. 29–37; Гнатюк, 2005, p. 84).

The next important hypostasis of personal identity is authenticity. Authenticity includes the creation, the development, and the

disclosure to be related with the opposition to society's rules and to be shaped through the dialogue between the human and the community. Containing the disclosure of the life itself authenticity is an idea of freedom (Тейлор, 2013, p. 56–57). On the personal level it is chiefly represented by honesty. Being honest with yourself means keeping honesty to your originality. The articulation and representation of originality determine the self of particular person. Honesty to the person's nature is unique element to be actualized by human being. The main principle of authenticity concept is the honesty enforcing moral dimension of the culture. Authenticity makes important the image of person's self-becoming. Moreover, it should be mentioned that people are able to understand themselves and to determine their identity only after having mastered various languages of human communication. Self-understanding is probably reached through personal choice to be provided in different spheres of human life. This choice is mostly represented by pivotal problems, which are existential for concrete person, and by variety of ways to solve them according to unique moral imperative of human (Тейлор, 2013, p. 28, 36).

To conclude, personal identity is built through the dialogue between the person and the communities. This perpetual conversation is generally supported by searching for authenticity and reaching self-understanding. Having personal moral rules and keeping them strictly in all spheres of existence lead to identity shaping and development of the unique way to be a human.

Personal Choice as Identity-Builder

As a cogitative and a social creature human being seeks for self-understanding through being understood by community. Although this aspiration might be provided various ways, the tendency is that the person tries to achieve the self-understanding despite the hostility of

the life conditions. Limited in social activities or imprisoned the human repeatedly immerses in the freedom of thought. This inner space allows person to confirm own unicity, to delineate the borders of personal self, and to build the personal identity. Moreover, identity building is often accomplished through creative work by retransmission of the person's inner existence. The handholding of unsteady emotional states and desperate ideas, the perpetual self-filling, and the constant self-search altogether help the poet to build the personal identity and demonstrate it somehow by the form of the lyrical self. Totalitarian regimes of the 20th century showed that the human tends to seek for self-understanding *against* and *despite*: against complicated historical conditions and despite the lack of political freedom. Vasyl Stus is an outstanding example of such personality in Ukrainian poetry of the 20th century.

The self-assertion as universal and atemporal practice is related to human desire of self-cognition and personal identity building. It is strongly connected with the personal choice of the way to be a human. The self-assertion as the main principle of Stus's life and creative work shapes the lyrical self of his poetry. The lyrical self of Stus's poetry seeks for the answer of how to stay human in totalitarian conditions of personality eradication. According to Hannah Arendt (1996), prisoners of the totalitarian camp were the object of experiment provided by totalitarian power as there person's individuality was exposed to be totally destroyed (Арендт, 1996, p. 590). In conditions of public activities expropriation human being is led to submerge into the space of the freedom of thought. Correspondingly, the humaneness declines as much as the person refuses the freedom of thinking. Being simultaneously alienated from the hostile reality and taking this reality into account allow to open the sphere of freedom and to transmit this inner space of

thought through creative work (Арендт, 2008, p. 32–46). This probably explains why imprisoned Vasyl Stus tried to send his poetry abroad so that to publish the created texts and share them with the human community.

Art itself is the dimension of artist's freedom. Philippe Sers determines the art as a mechanism of the reasoning, the moral and the philosophical choice. The inner experience of the human living in totalitarian conditions is the kind of the evidence exposure (Сепс, 2004, p. 14, 118). In case of Stus the experience of surviving in totalitarian conditions is probably transformed by the poet through the way that allows demonstrating of the reality by the means of the poetry. As Ingarden (1996) states, the literature text is intensional, intersubjective, and transcendental in reference to the feelings of both author and reader. The text itself in contradistinction from its concretely perceived version contains the gaps to be filled in by reader and includes the plan of images which possibly might be completed by interpreter (Ингарден, 1996, p. 136–163). For this reason, the poetry of Stus is the colossal source of searching for authenticity which needs being explicated and reviewed through the prism of the lyrical self-development.

Personality building is supposed to be the key-tool to resist totalitarian regime. In totalitarian conditions creative work helps human to control the sense and to save personal freedom. The distinctive feature of personality is denial of the common consensus in favor of the subjective attitude to the absolute and inviolable things. That's why personality building is the choice of the way to achieve this absolute. It requires specific tools to determine the sense and values. In such conditions the sense is originated as a result of the connection between the inspiration and the possibility. The creative work becomes an indicator of artist's personality to be built (Сепс, 2004, p. 187–210).

In USSR the building of personality started since the shaping of nationalistic sense which creation was strictly suppressed by the totalitarian system. Ernest Gellner (1991) claims the importance of nationalistic sense as a substantial element of personal identity in the post-industrial world. Nationalism is a principle in concordance with which political and ethnical units must coincide. In this paradigm nationalistic sense means both indignation caused by nationalism infringed and contentment resulted by nationalism embodied (Геллнер, 1991, p. 5–23). It should be noticed that strengthening of the person's nationalistic sense occurs simultaneously with self-understanding and accepting the reality as it is, through searching the answer for eternal question "Who am I in this world?". Taking into account the life and the oeuvre of Stus might be concluded that to be human in totalitarian condition means for person to choose whether cooperate with the system or resist it. Resistance foresees *keeping ethical principles* and *nationalistic sense*, *living in the freedom of thought* and creating art *against* and *despite*.

Totalitarian regimes demonstrated that *staying human* means *behaving* the way to correspond *the keeping of personal ethical principles* which contradict the ideology. The texts of Stus broadcast his inner life to the outside world by *balancing on the edge of existence* through the *search of the self* provided as an *everlasting renewal* and *personality building*. Therefore identity building means a perpetual self-development which in totalitarian conditions helps person to resist the system and to save the authenticity. Stus's personal choice of the way to be human was developed at least in four aspects which might be determined as *the direct resistance* (writing of the letters-appeals, letters-accusations, letters to close people, and poetry creating), *the outstanding behavior* (indignation concerning the arrests of Ukrainian intellectuals, keeping the personal

ethical rules, hunger-strikes, angriness caused by prison-workers' behavior, and claim for justice), *the freethinking* provided in creative work (poetry, diary, and correspondence), and *the connection with the free world* (delivery of the texts abroad in order to have them published there).

In order to outline the personal choice of lyrical self in Stus's poetry it should be noticed that his texts have specific character. For instance, Yuriy Shevelov (1987) defines Stus's texts as the non-program poetry reflecting the thoughts and feelings in the process of their *shaping*. The treasure of such poetry is in the inconstancy of the feelings of lyrical self. The lyrics of Stus are produced by the shifting *from the observed world to the poet's inner feeling*. The topics and motives are only the exits to the inner world, to the diary of the soul, to the unsent letters about interior world of Stus's personality. The poorer external world is, the more separated and distinguished become the substantial, spiritual and mental aspects of lyrical self, the more noticeable appear the dynamics of psychical motions and the richness of transformed thoughts and moods (Шевельов, 1987, p. 371–372).

Having a closer look at Stus's poetry reader might find out that it contains several typical motives to be varied from text to text accordingly to the emotional state of the lyrical self. All of these motives are connected to identity shaping. In this part of the article the attention should be paid to the motives which are related to the personal choice provided by lyrical self. The first and the strongest motif of Stus's poetry is **the free will of doom acceptance**. For example, in the poetry (1) ("The broken branch of the evening is trembling...") the lyrical self provides the supraliminal choice of the doom, the trials, and the precious death: "I bless your autarchy, / the road of doom, the road of pain!... Let me, God, be highly destroyed! / Freely is trembling the broken

branch" (Срыс, 2010, p. 10, 12). The motif of the free choice is repeated in the short poetry (52): "Haven't live till the harvest, haven't get the crop, / neither have loved. And nor lived. No regret" (Срыс, 2010, p. 84). This motif is modified in the (14) poetry ("The church of St. Iryna..."): "The darkness wraps the throat / you can't breathe. / Hello, my black misfortune, / hello, my holy way" (Срыс, 2010, p. 28).

Free choice motif is connected with the second one which may be entitled as **being happy by the choice's results**. It is well represented in (53) ("God, angriness pure..."): "I disperse the yearning by thought / to be always the same / as my mom did bear me / and did bless me go in. / And *for good* that she couldn't / save me from the misfortune" (Срыс, 2010, p. 84). The happiness by results of the choice are shown in the (33) ("Workdays there are like holiday..."): "**Although** the creative house / is too drilled by gazes, / **although** your bare heart / is there touched by hands, / **never mind**, don't be angry: / this eternal above us / will take out shafts from wound / and will kiss it; / **wave desired** / saves by killing" (Срыс, 2010, p. 54). In this poetry the redemption of lyrical self is supposed to happen through eradication. In (60) ("Through hundreds doubts I go to you") the choice is identified as the only right way to get: "Through hundreds doubts I go to you, / the good and truth of epoch. Through hundreds / disillusion... / And the ardour predicts me: never stop, go on. / This way is faithful. You are its precursor" (Срыс, 2010, p. 98). Being sure that the way is right gives lyrical self the strength to keep on the self building. This motif is demonstrated, for instance, in (37) ("Only you consecrate the world..."): "Only you make my heart shout. / Only you give me force go / ahead the world storm, / Only You, only You" (Срыс, 2010, p. 60).

In the context of identity building the third motif of the Stus's poetry is probably the **independence of lyrical self**. It allows lyrical

self to observe the world as if the self is out of the world: (34) ("On the equal quadrates...") "Equal right for all to suffer / and to endure the same pressure. / Victim and the executioner both feel bad / but none happy. / All are doomed to die / behind the seven locks. / That is you, the human sorrow, / that is you, the black chaos, / the democracy of humility / and the freedom of the dumbness/... Violated souls in vain / with no reason, no goal / honeycomb of passionate distress / with wild honey of solitude. / With wild honey of solitude" (Стус, 2010, p. 56). There the lyrical self is beyond the world, it observes everything from outside. Through the independent view and evaluation the lyrical self chooses to leave the antithetical world, to rid of odd and usual things, to get an opportunity of being free in the space of thought. Lyrical self saves the ataraxy facing with the hard obstacles, stays estimable tending to have the revenge for personal origin and the death (9) ("Away the memoir – away from eyes..."): "If the lake we swim, / if the ford we go, / if the wall we creep / through the labyrinth of disasters / up to the personal time border / where the highest reward / and the most honest is revenge / for our arrival and our goal / being burden by the cross" (Стус, 2010, p. 20). Finally, the self is built through *reaching the identity*. It is clearly shown in the (35) ("Is it possible you are born, man..."): "Is it possible that your life doesn't call you? / Or you cognized your life way / on this sad joyless job / where everything is covered by the human torment. / You are still standing in my deep grief / my weak heart / sympathizes your misfortune. You are twice more unhappy / than me. **I am the self. You are just shadow.** / I am the good. But you are rot and temporality. / The common is that we are both imprisoned, / for both sides of the door. You there and me here. / The wall us separated like the statute" (Стус, 2010, p. 58). The motif of self-creating is crystallized when the self

is rid of the troubles and fears, when the self accepts the doom and the world as they are (150) ("A bit more better near God's gates..."): "A bit more better near God's gates / human soul can feel itself. / I rid of you, my alert. / There is no world. I exist myself. / Around me is only cold earth thick. / I am magma of magma, am voice of pain's pain. / What did you get betraying own fortune, / you fiber of eternal shrub? / What did you find? You did fall deep in earth / from seven skies you fell with your head down" (Стус, 2010, p. 254).

To summarize, *the perpetual choice* of the lyrical self in Stus's poetry is connected with at least four motives to be shifted from text to text. These motives are *the free will of doom acceptance, being happy by the choice's results, the independence* of the lyrical self, and *reaching the identity* through the self creating. The emotional state of the lyrical self fluctuates and changes but the motives are constant.

Beyond or within: the Lyrical Self and Alive-death/Dead-life Concepts

The image of palimpsest is symbolical for Stus's poetry. Palimpsest is a metaphor of Ukrainian 1960th generation who reviewed the former arts experience through having extracted the new senses from it and by having created the new word on the tradition. Taking this into account the main principle of Stus's poetry might be indicated as a conception of human self-actualization in the conditions of boundary existence (Тарнашинська, 2013, p. 55, 68). Thus, Stus's poetry expressively represents the unique phenomenon of the creation of artistic word provided on the intersection of experience and boundary existence. This boundary being is based on self-destruction and self-burning. Simultaneously it is accompanied by the belief in eternal return and the expectation of supreme truth.

The lyrical self in Stus poetry is supposed to be *beyond* or *within* the observed reality. This principle is realized by the concepts which might be entitled as *alive-death* and *dead-life*. As a result of perpetual choice, lyrical self fluctuates between *alive-death* and *dead-life*. These concepts are strongly related to the motif of being honest with own self. It is transformed into different symbols such as a mirror, a fluctuating branch, or eternal movement. For instance, in (3) ("Hundred of mirrors are directed to me") the mirror is a means to provide the self-reflection: "Hundred of mirrors are directed to me / exactly on my solitude and voicelessness. / Are you there? Are you really there? Maybe / not. Sure, you are not / ... Who are you? Alive or dead? Or maybe / both alive and dead and being yourself?" (Стус, 2010, p. 14). Moreover, the motif of fluctuation (not a branch but the pine-tree) is supposed to be a vision of Ukraine's future, the important goal to be achieved through the accepting of the person's doom: (12) ("The pine-tree emerged as a ship...") "But you are already on opposite side, beyond the edge / where the frail phantom is being trembled. / There is Ukraine. Beyond. / Left turn from heart. Cause of young grief / pine-tree emerges through the night like ship. / God whispers thirstily: I will pay you back!" (Стус, 2010, p. 24).

The ability to watch out the space from beyond the daily reality symbolizes some sort of alternative existence to be achieved through the *constant movement*. It might be presented by *the water flow* or *diving into space of thought*. In (28) ("The water whimpers...") the water appears as a metaphor of movement: "The water whimpers. The same way time is running / approximating me to the time term. / Away from memories – observed is only blackness of the holes. / The road's free of mines – please go! / The blessed are climbings and the abysses / and glorified the native land!" (Стус, 2010, p. 48). Time rids the person of the memories and allows reviewing of the

things: the observer is located *beyond* the reality, in the alternative space, *out of the edge*. Correspondingly existence is determined as a constant moving *beyond* or *within* the world.

Lyrical self is constantly exploring the inner space of personal thought. For instance, in (44) ("Meanwhile reading Yasunari Kawabata") the goal of this movement is ideal *middle* located in the space of thought and self-understanding: "Spread, my soul, / for four tatami. / And don't bend cause of strokes / and don't close yourself with the hands. / Although you have two borders / the middle is true. / The enemy fails guessing / whether young this truth is or mature. / In the middle the trunk of the years, / on the sides their top. / In the middle the eternal trace is / from the cradle to death" (Стус, 2010, p. 70). Reaching the *desired middle* is the destination of *identity building, the best expectation of self-becoming*.

The concepts of *alive-death* and *dead-life* probably allow finding the way of identity creation. Stus's lyrical self accepts the death as a logical way to exist. For example, in (42) ("It's great I don't afraid of death...") the concept of *alive-death* is supported by the motif of eternal return: "My nation, I'll come back to you / **in death I turn to life** / my face is not evil, it's just afflicted. / As a son I will bow down you / and honestly will stare into your eyes / and in the death I'll be connected with my native land" (Стус, 2010, p. 66). In (90) ("How strongly want die!") lyrical self wishes to die in order to reach the alternative reality: "How strongly want die! / For silence avoiding, / for shout escaping... Being unnoticed, to reach / **beyond** the expectation border, / beyond the horizon of impossibility, / beyond the wall of humility, / beyond the grating of madness, / beyond the fierceness, the borders, / beyond the vines of appeals" (Стус, 2010, p.154, 156).

The motif of consciousness choice of death is connected with the concept of everlasting movement. For instance, in (140) ("Today is the

farewell time...") lyrical self appeals to fly ahead to the supreme aim despite the obstacles and against so called "half-reality": "To sky, to upper height, to black / to sun, fly, Icarus, ahead! / Equivalent to death we are. / Equivalent to death we reach the goals. / Oh kingdom of half-hearts, half-hopes, half-piers, / half-intentions, the kingdom of half-struggles and half-soules! / The last way of testing is gnashing in metal, / is roaring in metal. / The fragile and florid, the all-falling road. / The road to God is fragile and florid" (Стус, 2010, p. 242). There the half-life is being criticized as the betrayal the self's authenticity. The way of *half-life* might be generalized as *alive-death* concept. Conversely, to be a human means to move perpetually ahead and accept the doom as it is: (158) ("Let the night be lackluster than the dark...") "Let the night be paler than the dark is. / Let the day be the blacker than night is". / Let your secret be poured / in the tenderness's shine let the lightest of faces be. / ... Ought to die gloriously if this is doomed / for living your personal age, not the humility... / Let the fire be burnt / let the grey spirit up-move / to be recollected by both stupid enemy / and incomprehensible friend" (Стус, 2010, p. 268).

To conclude, the personal choice in Stus's poetry is the main tool to build identity of the lyrical self. Being beyond or within the reality, lyrical self surfs through *alive-death* and *dead-life* concepts. The eternal movement is supposed to be the only true means to find the identity. In this case the sphere of inner space is probably the main area to reach the personal authenticity. Thus, to be a human means to move perpetually ahead and accept the doom as it is.

Conclusions

Personal identity is built through the dialogue between the person and communities. This perpetual conversation is provided by searching for authenticity and reaching self-understanding. The texts of Stus broadcast his inner

life to the outside world by *balancing on the edge of existence* through the *search of the self* provided as an *everlasting renewal and personality building*.

The perpetual choice of the lyrical self in Stus's poetry is connected with at least four motives to be shifted from text to text. These motives are the doom acceptance, being happy by the choice's results, the independence of the lyrical self, and reaching the identity through the self creating. The lyrical self is *beyond* or *within* the observed reality. As a result of perpetual choice, lyrical self fluctuates between *alive-death* and *dead-life*. Alternative existence is supposed to be achieved only through the *constant movement beyond* or *within* the world, through the deep dive into inner space of personal thought. This movement builds *identity of lyrical self*. Stus's lyrical self accepts the doom moving perpetually ahead. ☺

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Budowanie tożsamości poprzez nieustanny wybór. „Ja” liryczne w poezji Wasyla Stusa.

Streszczenie:

Opierając się na przykładzie Wasyla Stusa, w artykule przedmiotem badania uczyniono genezę tożsamości jednostkowej w dwudziestowiecznej poezji ukraińskiej. „Ja” liryczne w poezji Stusa wydaje się być reprezentowane przez tożsamość kształtowaną w wyniku nieustannych wyborów. W artykule wskazuje się na związek między wyborem dokonywanym przez podmiot a głównymi pojęciami obecnymi w poezji Wasyla Stusa, takimi jak *żywy-martwy* czy *śmierć-życie*. Zakłada się przy tym, że podmiot nieustannie buduje swą tożsamość wybierając między tymi pojęciami.

Słowa kluczowe:

„Ja” liryczne, Wasyl Stus, tożsamość, wolny wybór, autentyczność.