Between Kafka and Gogol'. 'De-territorialising' National Narrative(s) in Post-Soviet Ukrainian Literature in Russian

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> In Kafka (as much as in Gogol) the boundary of the awakening assumes an even more important role: there it is not only a new chronological piece of time that is about to begin, but also a new framework of interrelations and connections, which comes out to be completely different from anything that was 'yesterday.' A new reality begins: an 'unreal reality.'
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> (Mann 1999: web)[1]

In his essay entitled *A Meeting in The Labyrinth. Franz Kafka and Nikolaj Gogol'* (*Vstreča v labirinte. Franz Kafka i Nikolaj Gogol'*, 1999), Jurij Vladimirovič Mann reflects upon the opportunity of finding symbolic points of intersection between the artistic experiences of the authors of such works as, respectively, *The Trial* (*Der Process*, 1925) and *Dead Souls* (*Mertvye Duši*, 1842). Reading the Russian literary critic's insights, their evocative 'meeting' lies mainly in the creation of a literary world split into two intersecting faces: both authors aimed to rewrite the romantic duality (*dvoemirie*) in a reduced form, crossing the line between the 'real world' and the 'world of the imagination" (Mann 1999: web)[2]. In both authors' works, the 'eternal discord between dream and reality,' as cried out by Piskarev in Gogol's *Nevskij Prospekt* (1835), can only be overcome in a purely literary dimension.

Following these lines, it is the existential fracture experienced by both Kafka and Gogol' in their respective historical and cultural environments that underlies their programmatic will to trespass the limits of the 'awakening:' the first author, a German-speaking Jewish writer, experienced Prague at the fall of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, while the second one, writing in Russian from the core of the Empire, embodied the duality of the Ukrainian cultural experience. For this reason, their peculiar representation of the complex – and conflicting – relations between the figure of the artist with the changing surroundings goes beyond the stylistic, geographical, and temporal distance between their artistic worlds (*Ibid.*)[3]. Accordingly, Mann has wondered whether the strict ideological

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[1]   Unless otherwise indicated, translations from Russian are mine.

[2]   "And here we come to the most important trend leading from Gogol to Kafka; I would define it as the reduction of *dvoemirie*. The Romantic writer, as stated by Liliana Furst, always maintained a specific understanding of the parallelism between two worlds: 'the world of reality […] was always close to the world of imagination'".

[3]   "And here we need to mention another motive bringing together both the authors […] This is the motif of space, or – rather – the relationship of man to space, or – to

interpretation of their literary roles, especially concerning the authors' identity dimension at the crossroads between different national cultural canons, could perhaps be an obstacle to a new understanding of their artistic relations, affecting their cultural legacy even at the eve of the New Millennium (*Ibid*.): "What can they have in common? On the one side there is an unconventional decadent, detached from the national soil, who does not believe in progress and in the creative forces of the people; on the other, there is literature full of mental health and 'looking to the future'".

Between Kafka and Gogol'. This suggestive title reflects the path that will be undertaken in this paper, approaching the two authors as privileged interlocutors in order to analyze the specific artistic dimension of the newest category of writers that has emerged in Ukraine following the post-Soviet historical fracture. Through the lenses of the peculiar features characterizing Franz Kafka's and Nikolaj Gogol's literary experiences, we will be able to highlight the nuances characterizing the specific cultural positioning of contemporary Ukrainian literary production in Russian. Following Mann, we will also deal with a 'labyrinthine' spatiotemporal dimension, as stressed by the literary critic in his study, which gives birth not only to "a new chronological piece of time," but also to "a new framework of interrelations and connections, which comes out to be completely different from anything that was 'yesterday'" (*Ibid*.). A 'new reality' thus comes out of this process as well: precisely as the Russian scholar stressed, an 'unreal reality' emerges.

Meeting with Gogol' and Kafka in the 'post-Soviet labyrinth,' we will be able to arrive at a new understanding of the cultural condition experienced by contemporary Ukrainian Russian-language writers. Moreover, by reading and interpreting Aleksej Nikitin's works, we will offer a new artistic attempt to recompose the fragments of the existential mosaics left unbound in the aftermath of the Soviet collapse.

Two Worlds, Two Souls: Gogol' and The Ukrainian Dvoedušie[4]

Ukraine represents an interesting case study in highlighting the 'hybrid' condition experienced by the Russophone literary communities in the post-Soviet space (see Puleri 2015, 2016). Our analysis is concerned with the recent developments within the cultural identity process, showing the main dynamics that characterized the area before the so-called 'Ukrainian Crisis' (2014-15). Nowadays, Ukraine has the largest ethnic Russian minority in the post-Soviet area, but what is worth stressing is that a large part of the Ukrainian population is actually Russophone (Masenko 2008: 101-102):

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be even more precise – *the relationship of space to man* […]".
    4   An earlier version of the following sections was included in Puleri 2016.

> [...] Ukraine came to its independence with a considerably distorted language situation. Russian as the language spread throughout the former empire ousted the national language on the vast territory of Ukraine, primarily in large industrial centers. Ukrainian-speaking communities in the Eastern and Southern regions of the country and to a lesser extent in the Central regions are limited to rural localities. Thus, nowadays Ukrainian is not the language of the country's absolute territorial or ethnic circulation, yet Russian has not completely superseded the Ukrainian language even in the most assimilated regions of the country either.

The ideologization of the language plays an important role in Post-soviet Ukraine, where the historical transition experienced in the early Nineties produced a complete overthrow of the benchmark values related to the language categories that had existed before national independence (see Bilaniuk 2009). In the national context, this has been played out in the contrast between exclusive language ideologies and inclusive cultural practices, giving rise to a complex model of self-positioning, particularly in the case of the Ukrainian Russophone community. The alternative outlooks on the configuration of the 'Ukrainian nation' lay on the different historical narratives of the area, leading to the institutionalization of cultural standards (*ivi*: 337):

> The case of Ukraine after the fall of Soviet power [...] presents a vivid example of a system in which both linguistic and social values have been shifting. The Ukrainian language, which had been marginalized and denigrated relative to Russian, has become increasingly used in public urban contexts and by political and cultural leaders, some of whom had themselves been marginalized in the Soviet system [...] In choices of language use and in debates about language, the previously dominant discourses clash with new discourses and practices elevating Ukrainian.

Following these lines, the language issue still represents a contested benchmark even in defining what belongs – and what does not – to the national literary canon. Contextualising the Ukrainian cultural legacy, it is worth wondering about the specific cultural positioning of authors such as Nikolaj Gogol', Taras Ševčenko, Hryhorij Skovoroda and others who worked 'between' languages, traditions, and cultures. As Oleh Ilnitskyj (2003: 322) has stressed, "these individuals were products of a cross-cultural experience generally unfamiliar to ethnic Russians, but typical for members of Ukrainian society." This experience was "essentially liminal" and "dualistic in terms of language and institutions" (*Ibid.*). Especially throughout the nineteenth century, the reconceptualization of the Imperial cultural system into distinct national models was an ongoing and ever-changing process, establishing new ideological frontiers between the emerging literary phenomena. The rise of the Ukrainian literary system within the 'All-Russian' cultural context was thus 'filtered' by the use of the Imperial *lingua franca*. This phenomenon gave birth to a large body of literature in Russian written by Ukrainian authors, which emerged in a composite self-positioning pattern (Ilchuk 2009: 21):

> Some writers, like Vasilii Kapnist, Somov, Narezhnyi and Gogol, maintained their regional Ukrainian identities while embracing Russian national identities; some, like Hryhorii Kvitka-Osnovianenko, Mykola Markevych, and Mykhail Drahomanov, existed as 'all-Russian'; and others, like Taras Shevchenko, Panteleimon Kulish, Marko Vovchok and Mykola Kostomarov, enjoyed a more or less separate Ukrainian identity.

This artistic phenomenon arose from the contact between the different cultural and identity affiliations held by Ukrainian *in-between* literary actors. As observed by G. Grabowicz (1992: 232), this literary production "should indeed be considered part of Ukrainian literature," even if "there was an inescapable sense for virtually all these writers that Ukrainian literature was a subset of Imperial, All Russian literature." Nonetheless, the Ukrainian writers who gained success in the 'center' of the Empire played the important role of cultural mediators between the Russian and Ukrainian societies. In their literary depictions, the Ukrainian 'periphery' was transformed and adapted to make it accessible to Russian readership: "Implicitly if not explicitly, their work tended to minimize or aestheticize the differences between Russia and Ukraine, thus discounting the inherent autonomy or 'otherness' of the Ukrainian historical and cultural experience" (Andriewsky 2003: 184).

The case of Nikolaj Gogol'/Mykola Hohol' (1809-1852) definitely embodies the fluid cultural dynamics of his epoch. The definition of his national identity has been at the core of intellectual and political debates in Russia and Ukraine, where his literary experience has been included in both the Russian canon (as Nikolaj Gogol') and in the Ukrainian one (as Mykola Hohol'). Reading his works, critics have mainly categorised it according to two different periods: the Ukrainian one (1829-1836), including the works devoted to 'national' themes, and the Imperial one (1836-1852). Nevertheless, throughout the last decades a huge body of literature on Gogol' has been issued, focusing especially on the hybrid aspects of the literary figure (see Grabowicz 1994; Luckyj 1998; Ilnytzkyj 2002; Bojanowska 2007). E. M. Bojanowska (2007: 6), in her study entitled *Nikolaj Gogol. Between Ukrainian and Russian Nationalism*, stresses how the author's national identity "cannot be framed as an either/or question [...] *Whether* Gogol was a Russian or a Ukrainian is thus the wrong question to ask." The periodization of Gogol's literary production into two distinct 'artistic phases' seems to address the complex duality of the author's experience by means of abstract ideological terms, ignoring the extraordinary patchwork of language, cultural and political elements involved in his identity formation. Gogol's 'inbetween' positioning underlies the ambivalence of the 'literary space' imagined by the author. As stressed by Myroslav Shkandrij (2001: 115), "Gogol brought a Ukrainian consciousness to St. Petersburg, that is, structures of thought and feeling that were deeply critical of Russian society, which he drew upon throughout his creative life". O. S. Ilnytzkyj (2002), moreover, has tried to define the artistic experience undertaken by Gogol'/Hohol' as the outcome of the inter-

section between three cultural paradigms: the Ukrainian tradition, the Russian model, and the Imperial paradigm. This entails a positioning 'between cultures' that, as observed by Yulia Ilchuk (2009), implies an artistic experience moving in an intermediate space 'between languages'. It is the presence of Ukrainian and hybrid Russo-Ukrainian forms that confer a 'defamiliarizing effect' onto Gogol's literary language: "Positioned on the 'interstices' of two cultures, Gogol existed in the in-between space of cultural ambivalence that diluted the imaginary essence of the Russian nation through a '"distorted' Russian language" (Ilchuk 2009: 19). Thus, Gogol' gives birth to a 'transcultural' identity model, which lies outside the rigid parameters of 'national canonization' (Gogol' 1952: 418):

> […] I only know that I would grant primacy neither to a Little Russian over a Russian nor to a Russian over a Little Russian. Both natures are generously endowed by god, and as if on purpose, each of them in its own way includes in itself that which the other lacks – a clear sign that they are meant to complement each other[5].

Gogol's/Hohol's *dvoedušie* reflects the duality of the Ukrainian cultural experience. The impracticable way to 'univocal canonization' lay in the fact that in the author's epoch, as stated by Grabowicz (1992: 224), "the very idea of what is to be a Ukrainian writer (and indeed a 'Ukrainian') was in a state of becoming". Actually, even in post-Soviet times, the ideological legacy of the Imperial and Soviet experience has refrained from an assimilation of the featuring duality of the national culture (see Shkandrij 2009: web)[6]. Nonetheless, nowadays it is just this kind of duality that could open the way to a new epistemological and cultural understanding of the post-Soviet area (Blacker 2014: web):

> Russian-language culture [...] has its representative throughout Ukraine, including in the West [...] They can no doubt identify with strange, in-between linguistic and cultural space [...] The vantage point of this space affords a perspective on culture and literature as phenomena that are never easy to define, since they are the product of complex histories, linguistic hybrids and entangled identities. These are things that are not always embraced in Ukraine or in Russia; they are rarely perceived by casual observers of Ukraine. Yet they are there, and they are part of the everyday lives of millions in the country.

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[5]   "[...] никак бы не дал преимущества ни малороссиянину перед русским, ни русскому пред малороссиянином. Обе природы слишком щедро одарены Богом, и как нарочно каждая из них порознь заключает в себе то, чего нет в другой, – явный знак, что они должны пополнить одна другую".

[6]   "Even though it is clear to all that there is a vast difference between a forced or imposed hybridity and a freely-assumed one, the imperial-Soviet experience has made this issue a painful one for Ukrainian intellectuals [...] To the 'anti-colonialists' hybridity damages the idea of a core tradition [...]".

We are dealing here with those authors who belong to "the millions of peo-ple" who live outside of the political borders of the Russian Federation and "who consider Russian to be their mother tongue," as stressed by Čuprinin (2008: 6) in his study *Russian Literature Today: Abroad* (*Russkaja literatura segodnja: zarubež'e*). In this case, the use of strict geographical or language criteria would clearly be inadequate. Such an approach would dismiss the composite nature of these literary practices: language rewords the peculiar patchwork made of hete-rogeneous cultural strata, undertaking artistic routes that can diverge from lite-rary references pertaining to a single national model. Nowadays, as stressed by Michail Nazarenko (2005: 117-118), professor at the Taras Ševčenko National University of Kiev, it is the 'marginality' of the Ukrainian literature in Russian, as compared with both the Ukrainian and Russian cultural systems, that gives birth to an 'experiential-expressive' model that privileges narratives focusing on 'the man at the crossroads between languages, cultures and epochs':

> The Russian Literature of Ukraine reveals marginal features when compared to both its 'sisters' […] Its most interesting and valuable trait consists in its point of view on both cultures from the inside and the outside – simultaneously […] Rus-sian literature in Ukraine is in need of finding its own characterising attributes […] in order to understand its unique, distinct and original nature […] and it is in need of understanding the tasks to be faced. This is needed in order to realize that its main object is the man at the crossroads between languages, cultures and epochs.

Furthermore, the peculiar positioning of this literary phenomenon on the 'interstices' has allowed the cultural actors to follow different kinds of interac-tions with Ukrainophone and with Russian literatures. As the Russian critic Il'ja Kukulin stated in the introduction to his edited issue on Ukraino-Russian rela-tions in *Novoe Literaturnoe Obozrenie*, "actually, the measure of the Ukraino-Russian relations is, first of all, the individual writer, and only then the literary groups, the periodicals, and so on" (Kukulin 2007: web)[7]. Thus, the unsystema-tic character of the Ukrainian literature in Russian does not let us define either its autonomy from or dependence on one of the respective cultural systems. Following these lines, an analytical description of these 'marginal' literary prac-tices can only be undertaken by the recognition of their 'minor' nature.

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[7]   "[...] Russian literature in Ukraine consists of several so-called 'sub-litera-tures,' which establish different kinds of interrelations with the literature in both Rus-sian and Ukrainian: some authors are oriented towards the European postmodern style, others towards the uncensored traditionalist poetry of the 1970's, and others still to-wards the '*derevenskaja*' prose […] Each author comes to be included immediately in several contexts, both literary and extraliterary: those who write in Russian in their everyday life face documents in Ukrainian, join everyday conversations in Ukrainian or 'surzhyk,' and so on. Actually, the measure of the Ukraino-Russian relations is, first of all, the individual writer, and only then the literary groups, the periodicals, and so on".

Through the lenses of Kafka: A Minor Perspective on Ukrainian Literature in Russian

There has been much discussion of the questions "What is a marginal literature?" and "What is a popular literature, a proletarian literature?" The criteria are obviously difficult to establish if one doesn't start with a more objective concept – that of minor literature. Only the possibility of setting up a minor practice of major language from within allows one to define popular literature, marginal literature, and so on. Only in this way can literature really become a collective machine of expression and really be able to treat and develop its contents. Kafka emphatically declares that a minor literature is much more able to work over its material (Deleuze, Guattari 1986: 18-19).

As observed by Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, throughout his literary experience Franz Kafka (1883-1924) reflected upon "the problem of expression" in art, especially "in relation to those literatures that are considered minor, for example, the Jewish literature of Warsaw and Prague" (Deleuze, Guattari 1986: 16). In their work devoted to the analysis of Kafka's literary production, entitled *Kafka: Toward a Minor Literature* (*Kafka. Pour une littérature mineure*, 1975), the French philosophers strove to theorize the characterizing features of the 'minor' artistic paradigm. In their view, a minor literature comes to be defined as the one "that a minority constructs within a major language" (*Ibid*.). This is the condition experienced by Kafka, a Czech Jew writing in German: it is exactly "the situation of the German language in Czechoslovakia, as a fluid language intermixed with Czech and Yiddish" that "will allow Kafka the possibility of invention" (Deleuze, Guattari 1986: 20)[8]. His literature turns out to be "something impossible" due to "the impossibility of not writing, the impossibility of writing in German, [and] the impossibility of writing otherwise" (*ivi*: 16). In these conditions, art becomes the main 'line of escape,' "because national consciousness, uncertain or oppressed, necessarily exists by means of literature" (*Ibid*.). Thus, in search for a new self-positioning, a minor writer's main instrument is his own language (*ivi*: 26):

There is nothing that is major or revolutionary except the minor. To hate all languages of masters. Kafka's fascination for servants and employees (the same thing in Proust in relation to servants, to their language). What interests him even more is the possibility of making of his own language – assuming that it is unique,

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[8]   In this light it is worth mentioning, in particular, how complex was Kafka's relation to Yiddish, as stressed by Deleuze and Guattari (*ivi*: 25): "What fascinates him in Yiddish is less a language of a religious community than that of a popular theatre […] Yiddish is a language that frightens more than it invites disdain […] it is a language that is lacking a grammar and that is filled with vocables that are fleeting, mobilized, emigrating, and turned into nomads that interiorize 'relations of force.' It is a language that is grafted onto Middle High German and that so reworked the German language from within that one cannot translate it into German without destroying it".

that it is a major language or has been – a minor utilization. To be a sort of stranger *within* his own language.

Affected with a "high coefficient of deterritorialization" (*ivi*: 16), in minor literatures language comes to be the most effective 'political' vehicle in order "to express another possible community and to forge the means for another consciousness and another sensibility" (*ivi*: 17). This has also been the case of the Irish writers James Joyce (1882-1941) and Samuel Beckett (1906-1989), particularly "the use of English and of every language" by the novelist, and "the use of English and French" by the playwright (*ivi*: 19). According to the French philosophers, "we might as well say that the term minor no longer designates specific literatures but the revolutionary conditions for every literature within the heart of what is called great (or established) literature" (*ivi*: 18). Thus, on one hand, the 'major' writer is honoured with the role of 'canonical mirror' of the human passions; on the other hand, "the primary feature of any literature that is defined as minor is its exclusion from the canon, an exclusion that may on the face of it be as much on the grounds of purely aesthetic judgments as on those of racial or sexual discrimination" (Lloyd 1987: 20). In his works, the minor writer does not long for the recognition of the grades of 'representative authority' of the "human experience" (*ivi*: 20)[9], precisely because of his 'marginal' perspective. This 'lack of representativeness' lies in "the oppositional relationship of the canon and the state" (*ivi*: 21) and is "the product of the biographical alienation of a German-speaking Czech Jew or of a Creole woman in the post-colonial Caribbean" (*ivi*: 22). It is the symbolic representation of 'non-identity' that becomes the key feature of this literary paradigm. Minor literatures focus on the crisis of the 'hegemonic' narratives on identity, rewriting the expressive forms of tradition by means of parody and frequent intertextual references. Thus, the authorial voice interacts with the dynamics of major literature and, at the same time, seeks to subvert them.

Following this frame of reference, post-Soviet Ukrainian literature in Russian could be read as a minor perspective on the identity and artistic categories pertaining to both the Russian and the Ukrainian traditions. In a recent article published in the *Novyj Mir*'s September 2015 issue, the Ukrainian writer Andrej Krasnjaščich (b. 1970) endeavours to address exactly the question concerning the 'canonization' of the Russophone literary phenomena emerging in post-Soviet Ukraine. By using the acronym *Rusukrlit* – Russian Ukrainian Literature – the author wants to stress its tight connections with both of the national cultural contexts. According to Krasnjaščich (2015: 174), language is not the only factor to be considered in such an analysis, which can also be noticed in the case of other 'minor' literary traditions:

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[9]   "For it is exactly insofar as the writer represents not only his own private experience but 'elementary passions' that he becomes both representative and canonical".

> There we have the most important question to face: why is it all the same Ukrainian, and not a Russian enclave in Ukraine? The issue is not simple at all. But to answer this question as simply as possible [...] then, this is because the German-language literature of Prague is also not German, and neither is Austrian literature, while at the same time the Irish English-language literature is not English [...] And what can be said about the American, the Canadian and the Australian literatures? The Belgian literature is not French. The Latin-American literature is neither Spanish nor Portuguese. But what, then, is the determinant? It is the theme, the mentality, the traditions or the local color: it is this we need to understand and contest.

These marginal voices have a collective value in terms of textualising (and recomposing) the post-Soviet historical fracture. Thus, Russian-language literature seeks mainly to re-discuss and to reword a 'history with holes:' narrative strategies built on the privileged representation of metamorphosis, identity transformation, and symbolic 'interstitiality' emerge within the frame of the Russophone perspective. Moreover, a peculiar kind of duality emerges in the literary production created by those authors who position themselves 'outside of' the contemporary national canons. This happens to be exactly because, borrowing Deleuze's and Guattari's words, "talent isn't abundant in a minor literature, that is, there are no possibilities for an individuated enunciation that would belong to this or that 'master' and that could be separated from a collective enunciation" (Deleuze, Guattari 1986: 17). Accordingly, meeting in the post-Soviet labyrinth with the Ukrainian Russian-language author Aleksej Nikitin (b. 1967, Kiev), we will be able to approach his literary mosaics by analysing his minor perspective on the 'new framework of interrelations and connections' that arose in the 'unreal reality' of the post-Soviet epoch.

Of Other Spaces (and Of Other Times): Aleksej Nikitin's Literary Heterotopias[10]

In his essay entitled *Of Other Spaces* (*Des Espaces Autres*, 1984), published just after his death, Michel Foucault studied the interactions between the human being and her/his space perception. According to the French philosopher, "we live inside a set of relations that delineates sites that are irreducible to one another and absolutely not superimposable on one another" (Foucault 1984: 3). This coordinate system defines our consciousness of the space in which we live. However, quoting Foucault, "there are also in every culture, in every civilization, real places [...] that are something like counter-sites, a kind of effectively enacted utopia in which the real sites that can be found within the culture are simultaneously represented, contested, and inverted" (*Ibid*). Thus, Foucault discerns the dimension of the *utopia*, a site devoid of any spatial references, from

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10   For further information on Aleksej Nikitin and other contemporary Ukrainian Russian-language authors, see also Puleri 2014, 2016.

the *heterotopia*, which describes those spaces "that are absolutely different from all the sites that they reflect or speak about" (*ivi*: 4). In order to understand their peculiar functioning, the French philosopher metaphorically describes *heterotopias* as mirrors, which are able to re-signify reality in *other*, 'unreal' spatial dimensions (Foucault 1984: 4):

> The mirror is, after all, a utopia, since it is a placeless place [...] But it is also a heterotopia in so far as the mirror does exist in reality, where it exerts a sort of counteraction on the position that I occupy. From the standpoint of the mirror I discover my absence from the place where I am since I see myself over there. Starting from this gaze that is, as it were, directed toward me, from the ground of this virtual space that is on the other side of the glass, I come back toward myself; I begin again to direct my eyes toward myself and to reconstitute myself there where I am. The mirror functions as a heterotopia in this respect: it makes this place that I occupy at the moment when I look at myself in the glass at once absolutely real, connected with all the space that surrounds it, and absolutely unreal, since in order to be perceived it has to pass through this virtual point which is over there.

Heterotopic mirroring enacts a process of metamorphosis: an identity transformation that involves both the man and the space. Thus, borrowing Foucault's words, it is possible to envision this spatial trope also as a different kind of textualisation in order to reword the 'major' cultural narratives: "*Heterotopias* are disturbing, probably because they secretly undermine language [...] as they destroy 'syntax' in advance, and not only the syntax with which we construct sentences, but also that less apparent syntax that causes words and things [...] to 'hold together'" (Foucault 1970: xxviii). By calling a text *heterotopic*, we mean that "it is preoccupied with an exploration of those topoi – cultural, social, linguistic – that lie on the margins of the traditionally privileged literary discourses" (Chernetsky 2007: 91).

It is exactly by means of his depiction of 'other spaces' and 'other times' that Aleksej Nikitin endeavours to recompose the compensatory illusion of his epoch. In an attempt to de-territorialize the post-Soviet experience, the Ukrainian Russian-language writer constructs his texts as 'literary heterotopias.' The duality of the spatial dimension portrayed by the Russophone author 'mirrors' the ongoing metamorphosis of the people who experience this space, a recurring theme in Nikitin's works that is emblematically described by Krasnjaščich (2015: 177) as the 'mystery of binary human nature:'

> The question that lies at the core of Nikitin's entire literary production concerns the mystery of binary human nature. This is a mystery that cannot be solved, but that we nevertheless need to try to answer, because our attempts at least reconcile with the fact that anyone who today is a friend-comrade-brother or beloved will imperceptibly turn into something foreign and hostile tomorrow.

In his novels, the author focuses on the late Soviet years, retracing the period of transition that preceded the 'historical catastrophe.' At the core of his

literary production lies his hometown, Kiev (see Krasnjaščič 2015: 177)[11]. According to Nikitin, this focus is rooted in the need for "a proper narrative of the capital in the late Eighties and in the Nineties" (Puleri 2016: 192). The marginal position of such an historical period in the 'major' narratives devoted to Kiev makes the author's textualisation an important practice of resignification. In order to fill this blank space in the collective memory of his community, Nikitin symbolically chooses to follow the game dynamics. Thus, in *Istemi* (2011), the 'invention' of history lies in the creation of a world made of new imaginary states: in 1984, five students of Kiev University invent a fictional role-playing game based on historical events and set in the territories of the former Soviet Union. Within the time frame, which goes until 2004, the borders between past and present come to be blurred in the Kiev heterotopic space.

In the novel, the synthesis of real and fictional elements works on different narrative levels. Furthermore, *Istemi* is also the outcome of a 'rewriting' process: "Do you remember The Black Book and Shwambraniya? That's where we got the idea. Lev Kassil…[12]" admits the protagonist Davydov during an interrogation in the KGB's offices. This passage refers to the Soviet novel written in 1928-1931 by Lev Kassil' (1905-1970) and based on an autobiographical subject. In *The Black Book and Shwambraniya* (*Konduit i Švambranija*)*,* likewise, two boys 'invent' their history, setting it in an imaginary country: Švambranija. Also in this case, the developments occurring in the game reflect the advent of the Revolution in real life, mixing historical characters and settings with fantasy. By intersecting different temporal strata and constructing 'other' spaces, Nikitin has the textual instruments apt to recompose the fragmented identity of his characters. In *Istemi*, the Russian-language author aims to represent "history as a black hole […] rather than a utopian repository of Truth" (Chernetsky 2007: 93-94). Nikitin's characters gain awareness of their precarity by means of a constant dialogue with the Ukrainian capital space, which embodies the true etherotopic mirror of their existential condition (Nikitin 2011: 122-123):

> In the intervening years nothing had changed here. Everything was the same, the street, Castle Hill, the heaviness of the raw evening sky […] Here Was Borichev, the Church of the Mother of God that they'd finished rebuilding ten years earlier. It was a dead place. Here it seemed that everything was the same as it had ever been: the howling dogs, the old snow at the beginning of spring, the incredible colours of the evening sky. Even the smells were the same. Even Castle Hill. But the bridge to the cosmos had been destroyed. It was gone. There was no cosmos. No metaphysics[13].

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[11]   "Everything is about Kiev. Kiev is everywhere [...] No doubt, Nikitin is 'the most Kievan' contemporary writer".

[12]   "Кондуит и Швамбрания. Помните? Идея – оттуда. Лев Кассиль…" (Nikitin 2011: 53). Translated by Anne Marie Jackson (2013).

[13]   "Здесь ничего не изменилось за прошедшие годы, все осталось таким же: улицы, Замковая, тяжесть сырого вечернего неба […] Вот Боричев, вот церковь Успенья Богородицы, заново отстроенная десять лет назад. Мертвое место. Здесь,

In this excerpt from the novel, Kiev is portrayed as the victim of its different historical narratives. Davydov's reflections recall the Soviet past and how it strove for the creation of a 'bridge to the cosmos,' that is, the artificial alternative to real life under the regime. On the other hand, Istemi, the last lord of the Zaporižian Khanate, is Davydov's alternative, the alter ego chosen by the protagonist in the historical game played with his friends (*ivi*: 67-68):

> Later, sitting up on Castle Hill and looking down at Kiev in May, I knew, with a distinct and vivid certainty, that our biggest problems were behind us and nothing worse would happen. Could there really be something worse than the prison inside the KGB building? […] I haven't been back up Castle Hill since then. Probably for no good reason. The view from there is marvellous. Marvellous and very precise – no aberrations, no distortions. Now, twenty years on, I can see that the hill was right and I was wrong. But what can you take from me now? […] I'm now a peddler of fizzy drinks, and my affairs no longer take me to Castle Hill. But back then…Then, Istemi was behind me, and we were equals. Not in everything, but in some ways we were. And Castle Hill knew it[14].

Throughout the novel, Kiev is represented as a universal place. The holy hills of the capital preserve Kiev's historical prominence, as conveyed by the traditional textualisation of the city's secular image (see Kochanovskaja, Nazarenko 2012: web)[15]. Nevertheless, Nikitin's narrative on Kiev recovers and integrates different traditions. On a first reading, it seems to recall the nostalgic

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вроде бы, все, как всегда: лай собак, старый снег в начале весны, невообразимые цвета вечернего неба. Даже запахи не изменились. Даже Замковая. Но мост в космос разрушен. Его нет. Никакого космоса. Никакой метафизики". Translated by Anne Marie Jackson (2013).

[14]   "Тогда, сидя на Замковой горе и глядя на майский Киев, я понимал отчетливо и ясно, что самые серьезные неприятности позади, и хуже чем было – не будет. Может ли быть что-то хуже внутренней тюрьмы КГБ? […] С тех пор я не поднимался на Замковую. Наверное, зря. С нее открывается удивительный вид. Удивительный и очень точный. Никаких аберраций, никаких искажений. Сейчас, двадцать лет спустя, я понимаю: права тогда была гора, а я ошибался. Но, что теперь с меня возьмешь? […] Теперь я торговец водой, и мне больше нечего делать на Замковой. А тогда... Тогда за мной был Истеми, и мы были равны. Пусть не во всем, но в чем-то были. И Замковая признавала это равенство". Translated by Anne Marie Jackson (2013).

[15]   "The brightest example is Gogol [...] and philologists have began to argue about the chthonic and magical nature of Gogol's Kiev. Meanwhile, it is enough to look without prejudice at Mirgorod and Dikanka in order to see that to Gogol Kiev, as Dikanka itself, is the heart of an ordered existence, a safely protected place [...] And this is not Gogol's individual perspective. Kiev was perceived in a similar way by Shevchenko, and not only in his poetry, but also in his prose [...] It is the Ukrainian variant of one of the main ideologemes related to Kiev. 'Kiev is the second Jerusalem:' it is a holy city that, by definition, stands on the hill in the center of the world. This image, which has been secularised for obvious reasons, survived the Soviet power and, becoming a cliché, has come into our days [...]".

and intimate gaze of its last great narrators in the twentieth century: Michail Bulgakov (1891-1940) and Viktor Nekrasov (1911-1987). Both Bulgakov in *The White Guard* (*Belaja Gvardija*, 1924) and Nekrasov in his *Notes of an Idler* (*Zapiski Zevaki*, 1976) recorded the familiar historical memory of a 'lost city.' It is however through a deeper glance at Nikitin's Kiev, where "life has never been snuffed out" (Nikitin 2011: 179)[16], that we can understand how the Russian narrative of the city, which describes Kiev as fallen in an 'eternal dream', and the Ukrainian one, which depicts it as a 'holy city', 'out of time', can intersect (Kochanovskaja, Nazarenko 2012: web):

> Somewhere in here we witness the main crossroads between the Russian and the Ukrainian images of Kiev (Gogol, as always, lies at the intersection). If in the Russian tradition Kiev is frozen in an absolute past, has fallen in an eternal sleep (golden or nightmarish), and has turned into a sacred graveyard, then in the Ukrainian tradition the sacred and ancient image of the city instead remains timeless: from this point of view, the modern Kiev, fussy and profane, is just another link in that unbroken chain that began, following Nestor the Chronicler, already in Apostle Andrew's times. This duality of Kiev's image is primarily due to the real history of the city, where periods of rapid rise were followed by decades of decline and immersion into an ahistorical stillness.

The duality embodied by Kiev reflects the *dvoedušie* experienced by Davydov-Istemi. The protagonist's 'duplicity' finds its 'heterotopic mirror' in the textual space created by Nikitin. If in the last pages of *Istemi* Davydov can still glimpse the Zamkova hill, which is "already disappearing into the night" (Nikitin 2011: 197)[17], it is in Nikitin's second novel that the Kiev hills are there to convey a warning to its inhabitants. In *Mahjong* (*Madžong*, 2012), in the urban space imagined by the Russophone author, the remaining bastions of the national culture are eroded by the new post-Soviet 'winds of change' (Nikitin 2012: 358):

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[16]   "It's not for no reason that human beings have lived for thousands of years on these high clay banks, not wishing to leave them. Whatever the circumstances – and at times the curcumstances were gut-wrenching and life grew utterly unbearable – life has never been snuffed out. Something keeps us here, replenishing us with the force of life. Come what may, the force of life has always been abundant in the Kiev hills [Все-таки не зря последнюю пару тысяч лет на этом крутом и глинистом берегу реки суетятся люди, не желая его оставлять. Как бы ни складывались обстоятельства, а временами они складывались очень кисло и жизнь здесь становилась невыносимой, полностью, все же, она не пресекалась никогда. Что-то держит нас на этом месте, наполняя жизненной силой. Чего-чего, а жизненной силы на киевских холмах всегда было в избытке]". Translated by Anne Marie Jackson (2013).

[17]   "Я стоял напротив Замковой, но гора уже ушла в ночь. Я различал только ее силуэт [...]". Translated by Anne Marie Jackson (2013).

A gust of wind coming from Dnipro can rip the hat off the careless passer-by in Marinsky Park. It can tear away the child's balloon, taking it over the crystalline skies of Kiev. Don't cry, baby. Don't cry. Get used to it. Not far from here, there are other winds, other hurricanes, which echo. And don't compare the winds coming from Dnipro with the dry and dusty ones that are eroding the country, which are rising from the bustle coming from Hrushevsky and Bankova Streets […] in Kiev, as some are wearing away and building up the soil of the historical hill of Shchekavytsa, while Sofia and Lavra are trying to hold on with all their remaining energies. How long is it going to last? […] and what can be said of us, disunited and weak, who vivaciously argue over trivial matters, invented out of a whole cloth?[18].

In *Madžong*, Kiev is crowded with failed writers, ambitious *bukinisty,* and unscrupulous billionaires, all striving to seize a 'priceless manuscript.' In this novel as well, the game dynamics underlie Nikitin's literary world, employed in order to re-write tradition and to re-appropriate History. It is the trilogy of *Mertvye duši* as planned by Nikolaj Gogol', the contested father of Ukrainian literature in Russian, that is to be the target of a complex rewriting. Gogol's project was to write a great 'epic poem in prose' on the Russian Empire, which was to be structured in three parts. It would narrate the journey of the protagonist, Pavel Ivanovič Čičikov, following lines of development close to Dante's Comedy. Legend has it that the second part of the trilogy was destroyed by Gogol' shortly before his death, while the drafting of the third part never even started. In *Madžong*, the main plot concerns the fortuitous finding of the fragments of a supposed *Dead Souls* third volume[19]. On the one hand, the protagonist is a failed philologist, Ženja L'vov, whose 'unfinished' doctoral dissertation was devoted to studying the 'evolution of Čičikov's developments' in Gogol's 'missing' trilogy. On the other, the demiurges of the story come to be the four players of Mahjong: throughout the novel, their matches open the chapters and their moves upset the balance of the exhausting search for Gogol's volume. As stressed by the literary critic V. Toporov (2012), we witness a "Russian prose – built on a Ukrainian subject – and clearly oriented towards Western models (Borges, Cortázar, Umberto Eco, Pérez-Reverte – here on this line)." Literature,

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[18]   "Порыв свежего ветра с Днепра может сорвать шляпу с неосторожного прохожего в Мариинском парке, может выхватить шарик у ребенка и унести его в ясно-голубое киевское небо. Не плачь, детка. Не плачь. Привыкай. Совсем рядом ревут другие ветры, другие ураганы. И не сравниться ветру с Днепра с иссушающими страну самумами, поднятыми шелестом на улицах Грушевского и Банковой ...срезают и застраивают в Киеве историческую Щекавицу, из последних сил держатся София и Лавра. Долго ли продержатся? […] то что же говорить о нас, разъединенных и слабых, радостно грызущихся из-за выдуманных, из пальца высосанных пустяков?".

[19]   In this light it is worth mentioning that also in *The Good Angel of Death* (*Dobryj Angel Smerti*, 1998) by Andrej Kurkov (b. 1961), a Ukrainian Russian-language writer based in Kiev, the plot concerns the search of a mysterious 'treasure' belonging to one of the fathers of modern Ukrainian literature: Taras Ševčenko. For further information, see Puleri 2015a.

as well as History, is subject to fate. Man is bound to go through in his desperate search for an absolute and an unambiguous narrative: a search that can never be satisfied. At the end of the 'game,' the different narrative levels symbolically intertwine in the "last unnumbered chapter," a spatial dimension where Ženja becomes the shaman Kara Gerzen. Under these guises, the protagonist finally has the power to change the course of 'History' (Nikitin 2012: 381):

> What's the manuscript? – "Dead Souls." Nikolaj Vasil'evič Gogol'. Part Three. – Great. I sincerely congratulate you. – Why? – Because you are in good company now. – With Gogol'? Thanks. – If it was just with him…well, what's wrong with your manuscript? – It does not exist. Ok, it existed before. I read some pages. – But then, when it came the time to place Hen Tamgan, it turned out that there was no manuscript, didn't it? – Yes. That's how it turned out [...] – That's all right. Actually, the manuscript does not exist. It does not and never did exist. You have not written it yet. – Me? That's me who did not write it? [...] – No one wrote it. Neither you nor Gogol. Nor anybody else[20].

"More than everything else, that story looked like a game" (*ivi*: 370), comments the narrator in the last pages of *Madžong*. In addition to the well-structured stylisation of Gogol's prose in the imaginary passages from the third volume of *Dead Souls*, Nikitin injects his authorial intrusions and historical digressions to consolidate his rewriting of tradition. Thus, the writer can disguise himself as Old Kačalov, one of the Mahjong players, and re-appropriate his voice to formulate his 'historical truth' (*ivi*: 72-73):

> [...] The Russian language was created by Ukrainians and it should be recognised abroad as Ukrainian property. Kačalov began with the Primary Chronicle, which was written only three hundred meters from his office, and did not forget anyone. In his list it was not only the theologians from Mohyla Academy, who were invited by Patriarch Nikon to Moscow to put in order the church books, that needed to be included, but also all the renown Ukrainian nobles and raznochincy who wrote in Russian[21].

20　"Что за рукопись? – 'Мертвые души'. Николай Васильевич Гоголь. Том третий. – Прекрасно. От души тебя поздравляю. – С чем? – Ты попал в хорошую компанию. – К Гоголю? Спасибо. – Если бы только к нему... Ладно. Что же не так с твоей рукописью? – Ее нет. Прежде она была. Ее читали, держали в руках. Я сам видел несколько страниц. – А когда пришло время наложить хэн тамган, оказалось, что рукописи нет. Правильно? – Да. Именно так и оказалось [...] – Тогда все в порядке. Дело в том, что этой рукописи действительно нет. Нет и никогда не было. Ты ее еще не написал. – Я? Не написал? [...] – Никто не написал. Ни ты, ни Гоголь. Ни кто-то другой".

21　"[...] русский язык создан украинцами и его следует признать собственностью Украины за границей. Качалов начал с "Повести временных лет", написанной в трехстах метрах от его офиса, и не забыл никого. В записке были перечислены все богословы Могилянской Академии, которых Патриарх Никон

The sarcastic comment made by Kačalov reflects Nikitin's 'minor position' on the language and identity issues in Ukraine. According to the author, the Ukrainian contribution to Russian culture throughout the centuries is an "indisputable matter:" it is not to be envisioned as an Imperial "cultural expansion," but rather as an "exchange of authors" (Puleri 2016: 186). The Russophone writer considers those arguments recognising the presence of the Russian language in Ukraine as the outcome of a kind of 'colonial domination' to be inappropriate. Instead, Nikitin asserts that we witness a mutual influence between the Russian and Ukrainian systems, which later gave rise to the development of two different cultural models (see Serebrjakova 2011: web)[22]. Furthermore, framing the contemporary "Russian literature of Ukraine" as an active element of the Ukrainian artistic production would not limit it from being considered as a "constitutive category of Russian literature" (Meležik 2013: web). As stressed by Nikitin, to writers, self-identification is an "intimate question" and is affected by multiple factors that have nothing to do with the discourses of tradition (Besedin 2013: 65):

> Actually, self-identification is quite an intimate question. It touches pretty deep in one's heartstrings. Moreover, people change over time. They can switch from Russian to Ukrainian, and then again from Ukrainian to Russian, or vice versa. And, eventually, they can also write in both languages. They can change their country of residence, and they can do that more than once. An objective criterion does not exist […].

In constant search of a solution for the 'eternal discord' between ambiguous narratives of the past, as well as of the present, the writer can only unmask the precarity of all human attempts to find a proper answer to the game dynamics of History. Thus, in his last novel *Victory Park* (2014), Nikitin portrays the 'lyric dimension' of the fragmented lives experienced by veterans coming back from the Afghan war, by old revolutionists and inveterate smugglers. However, the world in miniature contained in Victory Park, set on the left bank of the Dnipro river at the edges of Kiev, also belongs to *other* spaces: it mirrors the search of an answer to the "ideological void" (Sochareva 2014) of the Ukrainian capital on the eve of the Soviet collapse. Eventually, in the post-Soviet labyrinth, it is exactly the epistemological crisis of tradition that reconciles both the simple man and the writer with that unreal image reflected on the mirror of an epoch (Nikitin 2014: 197):

пригласил в Москву приводить в порядок церковные книги, а также все известные украинские дворяне и разночинцы, писавшие по-русски" (Nikitin 2012: 72-73).

[22] "Literature is an open system: if something is missing, then this gap, as a rule, comes to be quickly filled. The exceptions come in those periods when someone – the church or the state – tries to regulate the literary processes from the outside, allowing some forms and banning others".

You are looking for a meaning, but you cannot find it in this. Once it was, but it has weathered a long time ago. Only tradition has remained. For example, in most countries they write from left to right. In others it is from right to left, while in others still they write from top to bottom, vertically. And when in a country where they write from left to right you start writing from right to left, they will not be able to understand you. And here they don't understand you. A tradition is often irrational: do not look for logic in it. Over time it loses all meaning, you need only to observe it. Because crossing the borders of the unintelligible, it is not only you who doesn't know whether the breach is great or not, but also those who follow the strict observance of the rules will not be able to make sense of it[23].

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[23] "Ты ищешь смысл, а смысла в этом нет – когда-то он был, но давно выветрился. Осталась традиция. Например, в большинстве стран пишут слева направо. Но в некоторых – справа налево, а в некоторых – сверху вниз. И если в стране, где пишут слева направо, ты начнешь писать справа налево, то тебя могут не понять. Вот и здесь тебя не понимают. А традиция часто иррациональна, не стоит искать в ней логику. Со временем она теряет всякий смысл, ее нужно просто соблюдать, потому что, пересекая границу непонятного, не только ты не знаешь, велико ли нарушение, но и те, кто следит за точным соблюдением правил, ничего в этом не смыслят" .

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Abstract

Marco Puleri
Tra Kafka e Gogol'. Modelli di 'deterritorializzazione' nella letteratura ucraina di lingua russa

Nell'Ucraina post-sovietica è emersa una nuova categoria di scrittori: il loro ricorso alla lingua russa si muove all'interno di una dimensione 'minore', tra la tradizione culturale sovietica e l'odierno radicamento nel contesto nazionale. Avremo modo di osservare le strategie narrative adottate da Aleksej Nikitin (1967, Kiev) attraverso la lente delle categorie d'analisi elaborate da G. Deleuze e F. Guattari per lo studio della produzione letteraria di F. Kafka (*Kafka. Pour une littérature mineure,* 1975). Nel tentativo di 'deterritorializzare' la 'frattura storica' sovietica, Nikitin costruisce 'specchi eterotopici', riuscendo a recuperare modelli narrativi occidentali all'interno della propria esperienza artistica 'minore'. L'analisi di alcuni brani tratti da *Istemi* (2011) e *Madžong* (2012) di Nikitin ci darà la possibilità di individuare la nascita di nuove testualizzazioni volte a ristabilire un continuum nell'esperienza storica ed artistica post-sovietica, i cui principali interlocutori sembrano essere proprio gli strumenti epistemologici e letterari occidentali.

Keywords: Ukrainian russophone literature, post-soviet Literature, A. Nikitin, deterritorialization.