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## Intermedial Aspects of *Non-finito*. Lesja Ukrajinka and Michelangelo

The twentieth century experienced, among others, a revision of aesthetic criteria, involving a reassessment of how wholeness in art is understood. A work of art that appears finished to the smallest detail may not be the completion of a certain artistic idea. Likewise, works of art which, at first glance, may seem unfinished actually represent meaningful and vivid artistic ideas, showing an inexhaustible aesthetic charge. A host of artworks that were not completed for a variety of reasons began to be perceived as an artistic regularity. This tendency became relevant in grasping the idiosyncrasies of the creative process and the phenomenon of co-creative reception. The latter essentially means that uncompleted works, given a certain degree of 'unspokeness', actualize the psyche of the recipient, and thus the work of art is finally completed only through its perception (Byčkov 2003: 389). The fact that many uncompleted works or fragments make a strong artistic impression has become crucial in the formation of the theory of non-finito. The term 'non-finito' has become key to interpreting the wholeness of a work of art in modern humanities, primarily in art criticism, and is used to designate a range of aesthetic phenomena, from unfinished works to a pervasive artistic concept characteristic of a particular author or epoch. This term applies to individual techniques, and to the description of the special features of the composition and structure of a whole work of art that is fragmented, uncompleted, or open-ended. These qualities expose the creative process, artistic material, the course of thinking, and doubts of the author. Intentional or accidental unfinishedness as a compositional feature of a text can be typical of both completed and uncompleted works. For example, external unfinishedness and internal wholeness (completeness) are characteristic of genre modifications, such as fragments, passages, essays, and works with an open structure.

Instead of focusing on the end, the non-finito form takes a cross-cutting trajectory that becomes apparent on all levels of the text. This includes emphasis on internal conflict, phantom characters, the technique of silence, truncation of the end, and so on. Intertextual connections, which rule out a close-ended form and provoke alternative reading, play an important role in revealing the receptive potential of a non-finito work. This includes switching to the vocabulary of other media and art codes abundant in modernist literary texts, among others. Ol'ha Turhan rightly points out that "the work of each artist acquires additional cultural and aesthetic coding and a chance to discover brand new planes

of metaphorical imagery. It contributes to the dialogic nature of different epochs and the development of a figurative and conceptual wholeness of the world” (Turhan 2007: 194)<sup>1</sup>.

This article sets out to identify special features of non-finito in the writings of the modernist writer Lesja Ukrajinka and to describe how Michelangelo Buonarroti’s intermedial code functions in the dramatic poem *In the Wilderness* (1909).

Originally, the study of the phenomenon of non-finito focused on the analysis of the plastic arts, and this term is often used today to describe the technique in sculpture that involves creating an unfinished piece, when “the sculptor only works part of the stone, leaving the image as if stuck in stone” (Pirališvily 1982: 78). The Italian sculptor Donatello was one of the first to use this technique, for example, in his bronze sculptures of the Padua period.

Michelangelo is a recognized master of non-finito. There are many hypotheses explaining why the artist’s sculptures are uncompleted, from financial to political. In reference to one of the most exemplary instances of Michelangelo’s non-finito, *Slaves*, Tamara Smithers argues that they “exist not in spite of being unfinished but *because* of their *non-finito*” (Smithers 2016: 37). Long before, Giorgio Vasari wrote about Michelangelo: “[...] the works he envisioned were of such a nature that he found it impossible to express such grandiose and awesome conceptions with his hands, and he often abandoned his works, or rather ruined many of them [...] for fear that he might seem less than perfect” (Vasari 1992: 472). The pressure of the conception on the ultimate result is a natural component of the creative process familiar to many artists. According to Jeremy Angier, “Never before had works of art so clearly revealed the process that made them, or provided such incontrovertible evidence that the piece was made by the hand of mortal man under the duress of the creative state” (Angier 2001). Recognition of a non-finito sculpture as brilliant, unfinished, unexecuted, or a sadly compromised masterpiece makes one think about the mechanisms that operate in the context of a given work of art and give an exclusive status to that art product. After all, just giving up on work is not an artistic method. Crucially, the uncompleted form captures the intention, the power of creation engendered by the resistance of material or the denial of ideological or aesthetic clichés, and probably the awareness of some other completeness, of an end that evades realization at a certain stage.

On the other hand, the lack of an end, of a finished form, is also a debatable issue. What is the final criterion of completion? Who determines the ultimate result of the artistic process and the extent to which the finished work conforms to this convention? There is certainly a conventionality that can sometimes be articulated by the authors themselves, who might describe the conception of their artwork and the process of creating it, offering their own assessment of the piece’s relative state of completion. Michelangelo’s poetry is an illustrative example in that it expresses his reflections on his own sculptures and the idiosyncrasies of the author’s creative process.

<sup>1</sup> Unless otherwise noted, all translations are mine (o.v.).

Thus, the work of Michelangelo dominated by the non-finito technique, which acquired meaning in his own poetry, became an intermedial code that enables artists of subsequent epochs to address the problem of incompleteness symbolically or directly.

Lesja Ukrajinka's writings are a striking example of non-finito artistic thinking. Out of her works, 14 prose and 7 dramatic texts have the status of uncompleted. As she stated in one of her letters, Lesja Ukrajinka happened to set aside a started or nearly finished work for a period of time and not return to it: "I postpone this work ad infinitum" (Ukrajinka 2017: 393). Probable reasons for incompleteness include the author's desire to block excessive lyricism, especially in prose; more active work on dramatic genres, driving her to abandon prose projects; and a departure from stereotyped aesthetics. The writer also takes special pains to reject any traces of biography in both prose and drama, which may lead to unfinished works. Very often, the works that live to date in the form of plans and essays can help trace how the ideas that emerged in them were realized in other conventionally completed texts. Lesja Ukrajinka's creative process is characterized by a long multi-phase formation of her texts. This impacts the writer's personal style overall, and her finished works are largely marked by an open and flexible structure. The author's aesthetics of non-finito is concerned with the psychological features of the creative process of the writer, which has a dual rational and intuitive nature. Textological materials (manuscripts, letters, and memoirs) reveal the hidden mechanisms of the author's creative work. Manuscripts of Lesja Ukrajinka's dramas show the writer's tendency to examine several similar but non-identical draft scripts.

By genre, most uncompleted works are prose texts. Chronologically, they grow in quantity in the 1900s, when the writer actively masters dramatic genres, and they are most concentrated in 1906, when the disappointment following the revolutionary events of 1905 causes the writer to develop an interest in utopian ideas. This interest led to three utopian fragments dated that year (1906). There are several tendencies blocking the work of Lesja Ukrajinka, including excessive lyricism and the consolidation of several themes and styles in one fragment (*Utopia, And Yet You Come...*, etc.). Another category of uncompleted prose texts includes the works of an obviously populist style (*Here It Is, That Coveted Equality, People's Slander, They Take Jevcja to the Farmhouse*). Numerous uncompleted plans of prose works suggest that the epic genre could not fully encompass the literary talent of the writer.

Lesja Ukrajinka's approach to non-finito responds to more complex questions and challenges in her dramaturgy. The 'path' to some of her plays can take several years or even decades. There are seven unfinished dramatic works in Lesja Ukrajinka's collection. One of them, *Dimna Hračyča*, dates back to 1900. The list of characters reveals the writer's intention to write a drama about family life. One of the reasons for the incompleteness of the work may be, again, the realistic populist tendency, generally uncharacteristic of the author's texts. In the drama *The Bažaji Family* (probably started in 1907) biographical allusions can be found, which may have stopped the work of the writer, who generally avoids biography in her work. Ill health was a likely reason for the significant amount of unfinished work from the last years of Lesja Ukrajinka's life (1912-1913). However, it is also

important that some motifs that remain inchoate in these works are partially realised in Lesja Ukrajinka's other dramas.

The fantasy drama *The Autumn Tale* is most indicative of Lesja Ukrajinka's aesthetics and poetics of non-finito. The work is dedicated to the revolutionary events of 1905. The author embodies the social changes of the turn of the century in the form of a fairy-tale. Imaginary characters (Princess, Knight, Servant, Builder, the phantom image of the King, etc.) are all involved in complex ethical and ideological conflicts. The modern interpretation of the archetypal plot of the liberation of the princess illustrates the change of elites (including in terms of gender) and the destructive power of the social element.

The author worked extensively on the play's concept, starting in about 1901, when she was working simultaneously on the translation of Hauptmann's play *The Weavers* and the article *The Latest Social Drama*, both of which were influential in the creation of her own drama. The author's last impulse to work on the play occurs after witnessing the revolutionary events in Tbilisi. Thus, *The Autumn Tale* illustrates the trajectory of the psychological development of the material by Lesja Ukrajinka. The ironic final remark, "someday the end might come", is evidence of the author's intention not to complete the work.

In addition to the fairy tale drama of *The Autumn Tale*, Lesja Ukrajinka's aesthetics of non-finito also appears in dramas based on ancient mythology. For example, the unfinished piece *Iphigenia in Taurus* fails because Lesja Ukrajinka seeks to adhere to the classical canon. The work was conceived as a drama, but even at the manuscript stage, Lesja Ukrajinka changed the genre to a 'dramatic sketch.' The dramatic poem *Cassandra* organically combines the closed form of ancient drama and the openness of modern thinking and the style of non-finito. The work is characterized by mass scenes, individualisation of the conflict through the centralisation of the character, and the lack of a clearly marked beginning, culmination, and end. In addition, it relies on the technique of truncation of the finale. When submitting the text for publication, the author drops the final epilogue, making it impossible to unambiguously interpret both the ending and the general idea of the drama.

Like *Cassandra*, the dramatic poem *At the Blood Field* also uses truncation, which causes a drastic change in the overall conception of the work. The rejection of a major part of the text can be interpreted as a mechanism of transformation from 'closed' text into 'open' text, completed into uncompleted.

While employing the technique herself, Lesja Ukrajinka seems to examine the reasons for non-finito as well. This examination can be most clearly seen in the depiction of artists, especially sculptors, in the author's work. The gravitation towards the plastic arts is pervasive in Lesja Ukrajinka's texts. Sculptural monuments are interpreted quite uniquely. For example, her poem *Niobe* is a kind of monologue by the statue that the mythical heroine turned into after losing her children. In the poem *Slavus-Sclavus*, the phenomenon of Slavic mentality evokes associations with a mysterious statue whose codes cannot be deciphered. Sculptural images of ancient Greek gods perform important functions in dramatic works, such as *Iphigenia in Tauris* (Artemis), *Cassandra* (Paladion), *Orgy* (Terpsichore), and others. Lesja Ukrajinka was especially interested in the sculptor's creative process, the

emergence and realization of the conception, which involves a complex transformation of stone (marble), its resistance, alienation of the artist from the piece of art created by him or her, and the reception by contemporaries and posterity. In many ways, it seems the work of a sculptor is the focus and apogee of all creative intentions and efforts for Lesja Ukrajinka.

When starting to write, Lesja Ukrajinka sometimes imagines her creative product as a plastic composition. Her thoughts on her own artistic version of Don Juan's legend are well known, as she shares them in her letter to the writer Ol'ha Kobyljans'ka. When a drama seems finished, the author takes it up again to rework it in order to reduce or "concentrate its style like some strong essence", get rid of lethargy, add energy to the plot, as if the elaborated material were "stone". "I don't like", the author writes, "a lot of mesh decorations and patterns on statues, and this drama was supposed to look like a sculpture group – that was my design, but I can't judge the execution" (Ukrajinka 2018: 672). When analyzing the linguistic authenticity of the characters of *The Stone Master*, Tamara Hundorova concludes that they "project like bas-reliefs from their discourses, objectifying themselves on the surface, transforming into sculptural, symbolized figures" (Hundorova 1997: 246).

In the system of characters of Lesja Ukrajinka the playwright, one can single out a number of artists who are a projection of the writer's vision of her difficult position in the Ukrainian culture of that time. Sculptors take up an important place among the characters in her works. The Egyptian slave in *In the House of Work, in the Land of Captivity* can only fulfill his creative potential in dreams. Instead, Phaedo in *Orgy* can create real masterpieces by tapping into the potential of marble: "If it was once divine, then it will never / Turn back to simple stone..." (Ukrajinka 1968: 160). A "sculptor from the suburbs" stands out in the list of characters of the drama *Rufin and Priscilla*; he perceives his own work as the craft that was in demand in the wealthy Rome of the early Christian era. The phenomenon of the sculptor's work will be the subject of *In the Wilderness*, one of Lesja Ukrajinka's dramas that raises the issue of artistic non-finito clearly and in multiple aspects.

Notably, this is Lesja Ukrajinka's second dramatic text after her failed debut in the genre of psychological drama (*Blue Rose*). However, this is also the first text in the genre that will become determinant for her in the future: *In the Wilderness* is a dramatic poem in form and a drama of ideas in substance. It was started in 1897 by the young author, who had already clearly understood that poetry was not the only artistic medium for her. Almost halfway through the text, the author stops working, although she returns to it periodically and finally completes it 12 years later. The autograph refers to the original title of the work as *Sculptor*, and in her letters the writer describes this work as "a drama about a sculptor among the Puritans" (Ukrajinka 2018: 342). The margins of Lesja Ukrajinka's manuscripts contain some useful information. The inscription "*Finis*" made by the author in the draft autograph of the drama *In the Wilderness* after the second act is quite indicative. However, Lesja Ukrajinka's inexhaustible creative energy drives her to return to the text even after the declaration of the end.

The drama *In the Wilderness* centres around the mission of art. Sculptor Richard Iron is forced to emigrate from Italy to America among the English Puritans, fleeing the pres-

sure of Catholicism. However, in Massachusetts, he finds himself among fanatical believers, including the sculptor's mother. Despite his willingness to share the existential choice of the religious community, Richard Iron advocates the inherent value of art, the supremacy of beauty, and the right to creativity. Eventually, Richard must leave the community and move to Rhode Island, only to face a new obstacle. Now his artistic intentions are resisted not by religious fanatics, but by philistines, whose priorities are crafts and mass culture instead of the elite art of sculpture. The inner plot of the work can be seen as a kind of transformation of the artist, who is constantly divided between his moral and social duty and his own desire for artistic self-realisation.

The dramatic poem was probably conceived in 1894, and researchers associate this initial idea with Lesja Ukrajinka's exploration of the English poet, thinker, and public figure John Milton, which contributed to her knowledge of public opinion of the 16th and 17th centuries, including the establishment of aesthetics of the Early Modern period. To write a brochure for the general public, Lesja Ukrajinka carefully studied academic literature written in European languages, historical sources, and the writings of Milton himself. However, the author failed to fully realize her intention, put off any work on the brochure, and a fragment of it was only published as late as 1954 (Ukrajinka 1954). It should be emphasized that it refers to the role of Italy in the self-education of John Milton, and his familiarity with numerous masterpieces of painting and sculpture: "He saw beautiful paintings by the best Italian painters Raphael and Michelangelo, which depicted heaven, hell, the flood, the first people, and the holy family" (Ukrajinka 1977: 209). Echoes of Milton's artistic impressions find expression in his well-known epic poem *Paradise Lost*.

Like Milton, the protagonist of *In the Wilderness* was born in England, but Italy can be considered his other motherland. This is where he also discovered the work of great Renaissance artists and, even on leaving this land for the American prairies, Richard Iron can form the most detailed image of the architecture and sculpture of Italian cities, which drove him to catharsis even in his memories. He unfolds an entire scroll of images of Venice to his nephew Davy by excitedly describing the happy moments when he watched a kind of 'theater of statues' adorning majestic palaces:

At such an hour, the marble seems to come alive,  
the statues perform in some Mystery place,  
and under the sun's rays the marble faces  
become transformed... (Ukrajinka 1988: 25).

The draft autograph describes Florence as the city of Richard Iron's education; Venice was chosen later, after Lesja Ukrajinka's personal acquaintance with Italy, where she went twice between 1901 and 1903 for climatotherapy. In her letters to family members, she lists a number of European cities that made a great impression on her, but is most enthusiastic about Venice, describing it as "the best in the world, the queen of sea and beauty" (Ukrajinka 2017: 364). One reason the collective image of the Italian city is shrouded with a special anguish in the memories of Richard Iron is that he "learned the alphabet of art"

there, spent his youth in a circle of like-minded young men from the “sculptural group”, and gained his first recognition (Ukrajinka 1988: 41). However, early fame did not encourage the young man to rest on his laurels. Like Milton, he searched for his own style after adopting the best traditions of the Renaissance, sensitive to the later Renaissance tendency towards degeneration, imitation, and stagnation.

Richard Iron’s promising talent catches the eye of true admirers of the plastic arts whose expectations are revealed by what one of the sculptor’s former friends had said: “you will become another Michelangelo” (Ukrajinka 1988: 96). The invaluable contribution to the arts which made Michelangelo the symbol of unique talent, innovative ideas, universalism, and perfect technique in the West was recognized in Ukraine as well. In the nineteenth century, the magnetism of Michelangelo’s talent is mentioned by Ukrainian writers, such as Taras Ševčenko, whose artist in his novel *Painter*, says: “...I attended sculpture classes and dreamed of the land of wonders and of the world capital crowned by the Buonarroti dome” (Shevchenko 1988: 190). In 1904, Lesja Ukrajinka’s older friend and writer Ivan Franko had the opportunity to observe Michelangelo’s sculpture *Moses* in the Basilica di San Pietro in Vincoli, which became an important incentive for him to complete the poem *Moses*, one of the greatest works in his literary legacy. Interestingly, the translator of this work into Russian, Petro Djatliv, abandoned the idea of including a photograph of Michelangelo’s piece in the Viennese edition of the text, persuaded by the critic and writer Bohdan Lepkyj, who believed that Moses meant ‘power’ in the famous sculpture but was dominated by ‘doubt’ in Franko’s interpretation. The image would contradict the poem because, as Lepkyj wrote, “one can discover all that Moses is” in the marble statue (Nahlik 2013: 197).

In addition to the general presence of the Italian school and Michelangelo in *In the Wilderness*, Lesja Ukrajinka alludes specifically to Michelangelo’s works in the text. Sailing to an unknown America, Richard Iron is full of ambitious plans to “light the fire of eternal beauty” (Ukrajinka 1988: 41) that would be more democratic but as majestic as in noble Italy. Richard observes the muscular puritans with inspiration, relying on the Italian school of expression of corporality. Their figures are “severe, hard, full of strength and power” and “in the starlight, they seemed immense” and similar to bronze statues (*ibidem*). Despite the different material, they have much in common with some of the finest examples of Michelangelo’s non-finito practice: his marble *Slaves*, from the never-realized project of the mausoleum of Julius II. When the sculptor Richard Iron hastily depicts his mother’s face in which he captures the suffering characteristic of the classic images of the Mother of God, the reader cannot but imagine one of the most famous depictions found in young Michelangelo’s *Pietà*.

Michelangelo’s name is also invoked and clearly stands for the eternal nature of artistic genius. In an argument with the organist about the value of various arts, Richard Iron strengthens his position by referring to Michelangelo: “Do you think that the great Michelangelo // created only for entertainment?” (Ukrajinka 1988: 83). This argument does not move the organist, who frankly admits that he has not seen Michelangelo’s sculptures himself because they are not accessible to everyone. He points out, instead, parishioners regularly listen to liturgical music in many churches. The discussion is not so much about the rivalry

between visual and acoustic arts, as it is about their role in society, their adaptation by ideology (religion), and their purpose on the elite and masculine levels. The topic of the relationship between art and society, being crucial for Lesja Ukrajinka, is repeatedly foregrounded throughout her work. In *In the Wilderness*, it is clearly concentrated in the parable of Martha and Mary, essentially conveyed in Richard Iron's aphoristic phrase: "...Martha cared about the things // of the world, Mary craved for things eternal" (Ukrajinka 1988: 54).

One might see Lesja Ukrajinka's artistic striving for eternity reflected in her character Richard Iron. His creation, however, suffers trials, tribulations, and creative failures in America, and his talent eventually fades. The stories of the artist's three statues, each representing one type of artistic non-finito, mark the stages of his path. One is a small figurine that Richard Iron brings to America as a memento from Venice. Even though the wax statuette was uncompleted, it caused a storm of emotions in those who viewed it: perturbation on the part of the puritan community and ecstatic admiration among the artist's friends that only a real masterpiece can engender. "It is a sin to hide something like this from the world!" Antonio says (Ukrajinka 1988: 98). The artist himself describes the mysterious nature of the work: "this is what enchants me. // (*Points to the figurine.*) // The dream! (Ukrajinka 1988: 99). In *In The Wilderness*, Lesja Ukrajinka's creative conception of non-finito can be defined as a dream, as the ideal perfection that cannot be brought to its final 'material' expression (the latter being a completed form), an intention that cannot be imprisoned by physical matter.

Another unfinished project of Richard Iron is a statue of a beautiful female aborigine. Led by Richard's antagonist Godwinson, the Christian community members see and condemn the sculpture during its creation. The puritans describe Richard Iron's piece as sinful – as art in general is – smash the sculpture, and destroy its sketches. The violent act forces the hero to finally sever his ties with the people around him and his creative crisis is exacerbated. In a futile attempt to complete his early design, Richard Iron creates another statue of a woman. However, the execution is unsuccessful. The artist himself finds it horrible. In the climactic monologue, Richard Iron calls his work a "stillborn creature", "ugly". But he cannot find the strength to destroy it. Like any work of art, an uncompleted piece also finds its place in the artist's legacy, at least as a "child of sorrow and grief" whom the artist addresses in his final monologue:

I feel the deepest sorrow, as that of a father  
for his unfortunate child who was born a cripple...  
This creation will never reach the stage of bronze  
and marble. Even before my own dead body  
turns to dust, this clay will dry out and fall apart.  
So let it stand awhile until then (Ukrajinka 1988:101).

His last work points to the artist's sophisticated inner effort, the resistance of material, painful philosophical reflections on the purpose of art, and the struggle of rational and irrational approaches to creation.



The dramatic poem *In the Wilderness* unveils an artistic understanding of the nature of the uncompleted, which engages with the work of Michelangelo. A mirror effect is observed: unlike the Italian sculptor who turned to poetry, among other things, in order to verbalize the secrets of creative process, the writer Lesja Ukrajinka adopted the motif of sculpture as a way of reflecting on the nature of art in general, and Michelangelo himself as the code of the phenomenon of the uncompleted. Non-finito in Lesja Ukrajinka's artistic interpretation becomes both a burden of creative defeat and a source of intellectual and artistic inspiration, which underlies many world masterpieces.

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*Abstract*

Oleksandra Visych

*Intermedial Aspects of Non-finito: Lesja Ukrajinka and Michelangelo*

The article deals with the phenomenon of non-finito represented by Michelangelo whose sculptures and poetry became the artistic code of unfinishedness that was widely represented in the art work of Lesja Ukrajinka (14 prose and 7 dramatic works were not completed). Also the author's finished works are marked by an open and flexible structure, primarily due to the author's type of artistic thinking, which is a sort of non-finito.

This term indicates individual techniques (omission, truncation of the finale, phantom images, etc), as well as the specifics of the composition and structure of a text which tend to convey the process of creativity, artistic material, the way of thinking and doubts of the author.

The article focuses on the drama *In the Wilderness* which reveals an artistic understanding of the nature of the uncompleted, enhanced by the author's engagement with Michelangelo. A mirror effect is observed: unlike Michelangelo who turned to poetry to verbalize the secrets of his creative process, the writer Lesja Ukrajinka adopted the motif of sculpture as a way of reflecting on the nature of art in general, and Michelangelo himself as the code of the phenomenon of the uncompleted.

*Keywords*

Lesja Ukrajinka; Michelangelo; Non-Finito; Intermediality; Sculptor.