

Alessandro Achilli

Beauty, Truth, and Sincerity. Lesja Ukrajinka and the Responsibility of Art Between Aestheticism and the Pursuit of Authenticity*

Lesja Ukrajinka's reputation as "the only man" in Ukrainian literature of the early twentieth century (Franko 1981: 271) has generated and continues generating a specific reception of her contribution to Ukrainian literary culture. In spite of – or maybe thanks to – the abundant and diverse feminist scholarship on Lesja Ukrajinka available, her figure is associated with the image of a defiant and resilient Ukrainianness, in which her 'masculine' agency is combined with the traditional image of *berehynja* as a female protector of a mythicized Ukrainian nation¹. Her prominent role in the traditional canon of Ukrainian literature, in which she shares the podium with the national writer par excellence Taras Ševčenko and the extremely prolific Galician intellectual Ivan Franko, has been consolidated in many ways, including through school programs, the affection for her symbolic persona nurtured by the Ukrainian diaspora, and her visual presence during the Euromaidan revolution, again alongside Ševčenko and Franko. In a national culture that has traditionally relied on literature as an ersatz for a missing statehood or a yet-to-be-created national identity, Lesja Ukrajinka's works – as with those of several other 'national writers' – have run the risk of being paradoxically 'dismissed' as just one more manifestation of the Ukrainian spirit. I here suggest that they be viewed as fully-fledged protagonists of the European early-twentieth-century canon.

The question that I will attempt to briefly answer in this article touches upon the issue of art's responsibility towards such human constructions as the individual, society and the nation as contrasted with the pursuit of beauty as a value in itself in some of Lesja Ukrajinka's writings. From the point of view of literary history, this contribution can be read as one more attempt to investigate the nature of early Ukrainian modernism in its confrontation with the so-called populist stream, the latter of which understood literature as a mere, although crucial, instrument of national consolidation.

* Research for this article was made possible by grants from the Ukrainian Studies Support Fund of the Association of Ukrainians in Victoria, Australia, the Ukrainian Studies Foundation in Australia and Monash University.

¹ For an interpretation of Lesja Ukrajinka's androgyny between reception stereotypes and self-characterization see Zborovs'ka 2002: 83-95.

As a writer and a reader endowed with a striking curiosity for several languages and literatures and an insightful commentator of the cultural developments of her time, Lesja Ukrajinka was caught between an understanding of literature as a key factor in nation-building and a feeling of sympathy and support for the free, not necessarily and not primarily political evolution of the arts that she observed and enjoyed in the national traditions that she read, translated and commented upon. In her 1999 book, Vira Ahejeva situates Lesja Ukrajinka in the history of Ukrainian and European modernism, paying special attention to the figure of the artist as it is represented in Lesja Ukrajinka's poems and plays. Focusing mostly on the long dramatic poem *U pušči* ('*In the Wilderness*'), Ahejeva sees the conflict between the artist's commitment to serve the people and his or her allegiance to his or her authentic inspiration as the cornerstone of Lesja Ukrajinka's complex allegiance to modernist art (Ahejeva 1999: 49-75). Reflections on art, its ethical boundaries and the artist's morality can be found to different extents in most of her pieces, including, but not limited to, *U pušči*, *Rufin i Priscilla* and *Lisova pisnja*.

Because of space constraints, I will mostly focus on the play *Blakytyna trojanda* and the dramatic poems *Advokat Martijan* and *Orhija*, which have been generally discussed from other points of view. These three pieces encompass some of the most beloved settings of her dramatic production: the early Christian, the classic and the Ukrainian. In these plays, although the problem of art's nature and duties is far from being exhausted by them, Lesja Ukrajinka develops a reflection on art's possibilities and its place in history, in a context marked by the question of the ethical responsibility of the individual towards themselves and their community. More specifically, these plays significantly contribute to the conversation on beauty, truth, responsibility and sincerity in art – and beyond art – that constitutes the most notable part of Lesja Ukrajinka's long, and at times contradictory, reckoning with contemporary aesthetics. I also argue that for Lesja Ukrajinka the question of art and its place in the world is far from concerning artists alone. As a key element of human existence, art is everywhere and its potential and limits are a matter for everyone.

Before focusing on drama, I will also discuss other texts by Lesja Ukrajinka, including critical essays, poems and letters, in which her own views on art, its contemporary developments and the condition of Ukrainian literature come to the fore with particular evidence. By doing so, I aim to show how Lesja Ukrajinka's musings on art in both her creative pieces and her critical writings form a complex body of reflections that cannot be reduced to a univocal approach or point of view, be it national or purely aesthetic. The multilayered nature of the freedom that Bohdan Pastuch sees as the main pivot of Lesja Ukrajinka's works (Pastuch 2012: 16-17) means it is impossible to oversimplify her complex art philosophy. However, in partial contrast to Pastuch, I here argue that freedom may not be the most fitting term to define Lesja Ukrajinka's art philosophy. In her view, the artist's freedom is limited by the need to respect art's communicative function, something that she sees as jeopardised in contemporary culture. As we shall see, it is the pursuit of art's 'authenticity' that guides Lesja Ukrajinka's reflections and her writing.

In an unpublished conference paper, Danylo Struk discussed the positioning of Lesja Ukrajinka and her works in the history of Ukrainian modernism focusing on the problem of her relationship with the aestheticist movement. While the study of the aesthetic boundaries of modernism in Ukraine is in itself a still unresolved problem, the issue of Lesja Ukrajinka's participation in Ukrainian modernism is no less challenging. While it would be hard to confute Ahejeva's general view that "Lesja Ukrajinka formed a modernist conception of art by overcoming populist mottos and stereotypes, as well as by interiorising and transforming traditional romantic concepts", both the breadth of modernist aesthetics and the complexity of Lesja Ukrajinka's relation with early modernism call for a more articulated approach to this question². Quite clearly, and tellingly, separating her lyrical poetry from the rest of her oeuvre, Struk ventured to conclude his contribution stating that "through her poetic dramas and her criticism Lesia Ukrainka is not only a part of Ukrainian Modernism chronologically, but together with Ievshan, is a true proponent of aestheticism in Ukrainian literature"³. Struk sees "artistic plausibility" and "authorial sincerity" as the main features of Lesja Ukrajinka's embrace of aestheticism⁴, an aestheticism that he, following Lesja Ukrajinka herself, contrasts with the frivolousness and moral emptiness of the most extreme manifestations of decadent aestheticism. While Struk's statement can appear to be quite problematic, it is the very definition of aestheticism that is determining here. A complex term that the *Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics* defines as a "term for a literary, philosophical, and cultural movement of the late nineteenth century that came to be identified with the phrase 'art for art's sake'" (Greene 2012: 10), aestheticism has been often scrutinized in light of its stance towards values and commonly accepted morality⁵.

Of particular interest in this context is Lesja Ukrajinka's essay on Gabriele D'Annunzio and Ada Negri, written in 1899 and published in 1900. In *Dva napravlenija v novejšej italjanskoj literature (Ada Negri i d'Annunzio)*, Lesja Ukrajinka focuses on contemporary literature, but her essay also includes a short historical overview of certain trends in the history of Italian literature that she sees reflected in more recent developments. Lesja Ukrajinka

² "Модерністська концепція мистецтва формувалася у Лесі Українки через подолання народницьких лозунгів і стереотипів, засвоєння й трансформацію традиційних романтичних уявлень" (Ahejeva 1999: 50).

³ D.H. Struk, *Lesia Ukrainka and the Aestheticist Perspective*, unpublished conference paper, p. 13, cfr. <<http://sites.utoronto.ca/elul/Struk-mem/Works/Ukrainka-Aestheticist.pdf>> (latest access: 07.05.21).

⁴ *Ibidem*.

⁵ The issue regarding aestheticism's moral or its lack thereof is of central importance in debates around fin-de-siècle art. For example, this controversy is excellently captured in discussions around Oscar Wilde. See Quintus 1980: 561: "When Jackson discussed Wilde in *The Eighteen-Nineties*, he said that Wilde could not abandon himself to an unprincipled French aestheticism because of the 'still small voice' which continued to check Wilde's enthusiasm and to prevent him from being as immoral and amoral as the French upon whom he drew so heavily for his ideas. Something held Wilde back, Jackson notes, and kept him from being a Gautier or a Huysmans".

does not shy away from defining ‘tendentiousness’ (*tendencioznośt’*) as the most typical trait of both Gabriele D’Annunzio’s and Ada Negri’s works, and the one that makes a comparison between them meaningful and tenable in spite of the clear differences between the two authors in terms of style and cultural orientation. However, in Lesja Ukrajinka’s view, their alleged tendentiousness is nothing new from the point of view of Italian literary history:

В качестве тенденциозных поэтов Ада Негри и д’Аннунцио являются продолжателями вековой традиции итальянской поэзии. Начало этой традиции положил основатель итальянской литературы Данте, который в своей “Божественной комедии”, проникнутой мистической мечтательностью, не забывает среди ужасов ада политической борьбы ... Эта идея возрождения Италии была долгое время главным жизненным нервом итальянской поэзии, и упадок патриотизма всегда шел рука об руку с упадком поэтического творчества (Ukrajinka 1975-1979, VIII: 29).

From Dante and Petrarch through Tasso to Carducci and other nineteenth-century Italian writers, Lesja Ukrajinka reads the bulk of Italian literature through the prism of its struggle for the nation and its (re)birth. Significantly, she links the decay (*upadok*) of patriotism that has occasionally happened in Italian cultural history to the decay of poetry itself, using a term that has been used as a synonym for decadence (*decadentism* in the Italian context) as a cultural movement, possibly echoing Dmitrij Merežkovskij’s influential essay from 1893 *O priččinach upadka i o novych tečenijach sovremennoj ruskoj literatury*. Later in her article, Lesja Ukrajinka explicitly defines D’Annunzio as a decadent, but her musings over D’Annunzio’s poetry and prose leave the impression that she is actually trying to compromise with herself, balancing between a more or less open condemnation of his decadence and admiration for his poetic talent, which is also a reflection of D’Annunzio’s complex literary self-positioning. “Новое слово д’Аннунцио не в этом стремлении обновить обветшавшее: несмотря на призывы к возрождению, он певец вырождения” (Ukrajinka 1975-1979, VIII: 50).

A similar approach can be found in *Zametki o novejšej pol’skoj literature*, her 1900-1901 article on contemporary Polish literature. Writing on Stanisław Przybyszewski, one of the most successful writers of her generation, Lesja Ukrajinka is again at odds with decadent art. It is the issue of the artist’s “absolute” freedom that she contests:

Итак, искусство и артист свободны абсолютно. Можно бы, пожалуй, заключить из этого, что новая теория признает, кроме принципа силы, еще и принцип свободы, но увы! мы видим нечто прямо противоположное (Ukrajinka 1975-1979, VIII: 119).

After listing all the things that the modern artists cannot allegedly do, such as speaking to the masses and talking politics and representing things, Lesja Ukrajinka comes to the conclusion that the so-called free artists of her and Przybyszewski’s time are actually deprived of many of the freedoms that those artists believe to enjoy:

Таким образом “абсолютно свободный артист” является чем-то вроде лишеного всех прав состояния. Судя по тем положительным примерам, на которые указывает Пшибишевский в своих критических очерках, бедному свободному артисту даже выбор тем предоставляется очень небольшой: любовь, смерть... и, кажется, все (Ukrajinka 1975-1979, VIII: 119-120).

Lesja Ukrajinka sees no freedom in the contemporary infatuation with extreme states of mind and the obsessive search for a new type of beauty. In her view, without pursuing a connection with people and their nation, modernist artists, like prisoners of their own souls, are condemned to solipsism and monotony.

Lesja Ukrajinka's ambiguous attitude towards international early modernist literature, and especially its decadent and symbolist trends, is the object of some of the most interesting literary comments in her epistolary exchanges. Writing from Berlin to her mother in 1899, she expresses her absolute contempt for *Jugendstil*⁶. In a letter to Volodymyr Hnatjuk from 1900, she speaks of her “antipathy towards modernists” (“Нехай Ваша хв[алена] Редакція поборе відому мені свою нехить до ‘модерністів’” [Ukrajinka 2017b: 202]), possibly also hinting at her awareness that modernist literature was actually much more complex and meaningful than she, also a translator of Maeterlinck, might instinctively perceive it to be. However, in her later remarks about Serhij Jefremov after the publication of his much-discussed essay *V poiskach novoj krasoty*, she shows a much more sophisticated approach to contemporary literature. Angry with Jefremov for his condemnation of Ol'ha Kobyljans'ka and other writers from Bukovyna, and especially irritated by his failure to understand that the influence of German literature on their own writings was actually positive and enriching, Lesja Ukrajinka accuses Jefremov of not understanding the complex character of contemporary literary trends. While the loss of the text of her open letter to Jefremov, which she unsuccessfully submitted to “Kievskaja Starina” for publication, prevents us from having access to an articulated response, some of the letters that she wrote from San Remo in early 1903 offer an interesting insight into her view of decadence and symbolism at the dawn of the new century. In a letter to Olena Pčilka, Lesja Ukrajinka accuses Jefremov of not differentiating between symbolism and decadence. Talking about the latter, to which she assigns major poets such as Verlaine and Rimbaud, she indirectly states her belief that true poetry cannot be separated from moral and social commitment:

Верлен був дуже щирий поет і таки справжній поет, хоча вдача його, а через те й поезія була протейська по змінливості і значно психопатична, – але що може зробити поет, окрім того, щоб бути щирим? Верлен не був квієтистом, його, як і Бодлера,

⁶ “Буля Ліля і на виставі ‘Secession’ (‘Modernisten’, отих, що Jugend видають), вона їй страшно не сподобалась. Купила мені на показ ілюстрований каталог, то справді якесь страхіття. Емма і Марі, роздивляючись той каталог, раз-у-раз скрикували: Hässlich, grässlich, sche[у]sslich, gre[u]elhaft! Na, ist es möglich? Ich bin sprachlos! Я на сюю Secession не хочу дивитися, хоч би й могла!” (Ukrajinka 2017b: 130).

захоплювали і моральні і соціальні питання, тільки він довго ні на чому спинитись не міг. Так само і Rimbaud (Ukrajinka 2018: 21).

Almost as if feeling the need to defend Verlaine and Rimbaud from both public accusations and her own instinct, Lesja Ukrajinka sees the poet's main duty in his or her commitment to sincerity, while also stressing the absolute importance of their duty towards society, not necessarily considered from a national point of view. If Verlaine and Rimbaud failed, while Baudelaire's status is unclear, it was because of their mental illness. In her study of the obsession with the rhetorics of sincerity in Russian cultural history, Ellen Rutten has defined it as a combination of "genuineness, truthfulness, and the quality of not pretending", while also pointing out that it "is something that an addresser 'demonstrates' or 'shows' and that the addressee 'doubts'" (Rutten 2017: 37). Sincerity has been deemed a significant innovation in the artistic culture of the early twentieth century, as a reaction to both the search for objectivity of realism and the moral detachment of fin-de-siècle aestheticism (Peyre 1963: 237). Although sincerity could then be unexpectedly taken to its extreme through some of the most daring manifestations of the early avant-garde such as the emotional outbursts of expressionism or the penchant for *épatage* of futurism, Lesja Ukrajinka's insistence on sincerity can be viewed as in line with the reaction to the alleged aloofness of much of late nineteenth-century art that was part of the complex cultural landscape of the first years of the new century. Implicitly, Lesja Ukrajinka's call for innovation, which paradoxically also involved her re-adaptation of neoromanticism, was also a reaction against the powerful populist vein that she observed in her own literary tradition.

In one of her very first letters, Lesja Ukrajinka reveals how her antipathy for the provocative character of modern literature was not limited to decadent writers, but also included realism and its most extreme manifestations like naturalism:

З французьких книжок, окрім Жорж Санда, я мало читала в першотворі, більш у перекладах і то з новітніх натуралістів школи Золя, котрі мені зовсім не подобаються, бо мені здається, що в їх більше страхів різних та ефектів ніж тої правди, або сама безпросвітня бридота. За це ж я не люблю й Толстого, та ще й за його містицизм я ж, як нарощне, читала більш усього його останні твори, в котрих окрім чортів та ангелів нічого не видно, або само тільки страхиття як напр. "Смерть Івана Ільича" (Ukrajinka 2017a: 56).

Quite unexpectedly, it is in a lack of truth, or artistic truth, that Lesja Ukrajinka sees the most disappointing side of naturalism, a broadly understood category in which she also seems to include Lev Tolstoj's late works and their 'mysticism'. Interestingly, she uses the same term (*strachyttja*, here *strachyttja*) to refer to the excesses of both naturalism and *Jugendstil*. In Lesja Ukrajinka's view, art that lacks sincerity and truth has no choice but to recur to a bombastic style with the aim of shocking its readers.

According to her, this is modern(ist) art's unsuccessful attempt to make up for the missing value of something that, aware of the long and diverse tradition of this term in the

history of philosophy, we could call ‘authenticity’. Alessandro Ferrara has defined authenticity as “what is uniquely indispensable for an individual to be himself or herself” (Ferrara 1998: ix). In Lesja Ukrajinka’s view, art must be truthful, beautiful and sincere. If it fails to live up to this standard, it betrays its own nature and vocation, thus losing its authenticity. Her low opinion of realistic prose by such Ukrainian authors as Ivan Nečuj-Levyč’kyj and Oleksandr Konys’kyj, whom she repeatedly and with a certain degree of maximalism accuses of a lack of artistic taste⁷, can be explained by the same obsession with the ideal of an art that needs to be true to itself in order to be able to impact the world. Writers and intellectuals are free, but their freedom is somewhat limited by the necessity to comply with the rules of art and its communicative mission.

Lesja Ukrajinka’s cool reception of some of the most successful trends in contemporary literature, both Ukrainian and international, can be seen as related to her views on her own duties as a (Ukrainian) writer and public intellectual, in a period during which Ukrainian literature was set to enter a phase of rapid and irreversible secularisation. In a poem she wrote in 1898 to celebrate the first centennial anniversary of Ivan Kotljarevč’kyj’s *Enejida* and hence of modern Ukrainian literary culture as such, explicitly titled *Na stolitnij juvilej ukrajins’koji literatury* (Ukrajinka 1975-1979, I: 174-175), Lesja Ukrajinka’s lyrical subject laments the exceptional condition of Ukrainian literature if compared with the experience of (most) other national traditions:

У кожного люду, у кожній країні
Живий такий спогад, що в його в давнині
Були золотії віки,
Як пісня й слово були у шанобі
В міцних сього світу; не тільки на гробі
Складались поетам вінки.

Apparently celebrating the privileged status of literati in medieval Europe, synecdochically referred to as the whole world, Lesja Ukrajinka’s lyrical subject makes use of the golden-age topos to describe the poor condition of Ukrainian literature, which not only suffers in the present, but cannot even boast or dream of returning to a glorious past. However, the second stanza complicates the seemingly stark contrast between Ukraine and the West indirectly, but unmistakably hinted at in the first:

За пишнії хрїї, величнії оди,
Король слав поетам-співцям нагороди,
Він славу їх мав у руці;
За ввічливі станції, гучні мадригали

⁷ “Мені тільки жаль, що наша бідна українська література отак поневіряється через різних Нечуїв, Кониських, Чайченків і т.п. ‘корифеїв’, а то, про мене, хоч би їхніми творами греблі гачено” (Ukrajinka 2017a: 157).

Вродливиці теж нагороду давали
Не знали погорди співці.

The harmony between writers and rulers described in the opening lines is here questioned by explicit references to issues of power and subordination. It is now evident that writers had to pay an enormous price to enjoy their privileged status and their reputation, namely the total dependence of their inspiration on the self-aggrandising mania of their rulers. The following stanza makes this even more explicit by using imagery linked to incarceration such as shackles (*kajdany*). The second half of the poem, graphically separated from the first, is dedicated to Ukrainian literature. Readers might expect the decay of late nineteenth-century Ukraine to be contrasted with Ukraine's own golden age, that of the glory of Cossackdom, but this seems not to be the case. The hetmanate is directly mentioned, but the contribution to its splendour by writers recognised as individuals endowed with personality and inspiration is long forgotten:

Так... в кожній країні є спогади раю!
Нема тільки в тебе їх, рідний мій краю!
Були й за гетьманів співці;
З них деякі вічні співи зложили,
А як їх наймення? і де їх могили,
Щоб скласти хоч пізні вінці!

According to the lyrical subject, not even in times of national success were Ukrainian writers able to enjoy the privileges to which their Western colleagues were entitled. Moreover, this stanza appears to condemn the idea of art as a mere instrument of national struggle if the unique contribution of each artist as having individual worth per se is not granted the recognition that it deserves.

The second half of the poem ends with the same reference to shackles that concludes the first. Ukrainian literature and Western literature may seem to be very different, but they actually turn out to be more similar than expected, sharing the same subordination to rulers and the same indifference towards writers as human beings, merely reduced to producers of encomiastic poetry. Ivan Kotljarevs'kyj, the father of modern Ukrainian literature and the ideal protagonist of the poem, is not thematized or hinted at in the poem. The first author in modern Ukrainian literature recognized as such, he remains a blank space, as absent and mute as the writers from Cossack times that preceded him both in the poem and in the history of Ukrainian culture. The poem seems to enact the same silence that the lyrical subject laments as a central feature of Ukrainian culture. The issue of writers' anonymity, of their failed public acknowledgement, is crucial here. It is as if Lesja Ukrajinka were anticipating one of the central tenets of postcolonial criticism, namely the invisibility, or inaudibility of the subaltern. However, eventually laying an ideal, long-awaited wreath at the grave of old Ukrainian literature in the final line, Lesja Ukrajinka's lyrical subject is able to make up for centuries of forced silence through the performative act of the poem

itself. Moreover, the poem is authored by a female writer, although this is not evident from the text of the poem itself, with the lyrical subject concealing itself behind its lamentation and the act of its final celebration of its predecessors. In the context of the implied author's work, however, the text is likely to be perceived as part of the literary legacy of a powerful female writer, thus representing a reckoning with both the plight of the writer under oppression, although the status of artists broadly speaking in the West is also subjected to criticism, and the eternal and much deeper female condition of subalternity.

The issue of Lesja Ukrajinka's complex concept of art's place in the world, the role of beauty and the relationship of creativity and responsibility plays an important part in most of her theatre plays. In *Blakytyna trojanda*, a play from 1896 that has received critical attention especially with regard to its depiction of what used to go by the name of hysteria (most recently Boruszkowska 2020) and Lesja Ukrajinka's debut as a playwright, modernity and modern(ist) art are the subject of conversations between Ljubov Hoščyns'ka, the tragic protagonist, and her interlocutors. Throughout the play a number of subtle references are made that seem to hint at an idea of modern art as fallacious. In the first act, Ostrożyn, a writer and journalist who significantly looks older for his age, keeps asking Ljubov whether her taste in art and music, and her conversation style are 'modern', or 'new'. Ljubov's elusive, sarcastic answers demonstrate her lack of sympathy for fashionable trends, which one would link to decadence. In one of her most articulated replies to Ostrożyn on the subject, Ljubov accuses her generation of moral weakness:

М-г Острожин, се розмова серйозна, хоча теж moderne, коли хочете. [...] Справді, панове, розмова наша виходить à la Ibsen. Що ж робити? Наше бідне покоління стільки вже ганьби прийняло за необачність, егоїзм, що нарешті задумало поправити свою репутацію і поставило ребром питання про спадковість. Се, панове, варто давньої християнської філософської моралі. Закон причинності, спадковість, ви-
 родження – от наші нові боги (Ukrajinka 1975-1979, III: 17).

In a statement full of ambiguities and that has significant repercussions on the discourse on psychic disease central to the play, Ljubov sees the contemporary embrace of hereditary theories as a way of eschewing personal commitment to morality. In her next reply to one of the guests at her house, Ljubov raises the issue of responsibility (*vidpovidal'nist'*). By doing so, she flips the current argument that people are doomed to dealing with the fatal consequences of their background by stating that hereditariness forces, or should force individuals to act because of the results that their actions and choices will have on future generations. Ostrożyn, obsessed with the modern taste, claims that "Ми мусимо дбати тільки про своє власне 'я' і прислухатись до його емоцій" (Ukrajinka 1975-1979, III: 18). It should nevertheless be noted, as Irena Makaryk does in her article on Strindberg's influence on Lesja Ukrajinka, that Ljubov herself falls prey to hereditary theories, thus contradicting her own stance: "Liubov's certainty that she will become mad in fact brings about her madness" (Makaryk 1984: 28). Later in the play, after being accused by one of the male characters of having 'ascetic' tastes because of her interest in science, Ljubov expresses

her actual contempt for ascetism: “У мене аскетичний погляд? Ну, не знаєте ви мене! (Палко.) Адже мені усякий аскетизм, усяке фацірство глибоко противне” (Ukrajinka 1975-1979, III: 29). Ljubov’s declared refusal of ascetism, although in contrast with some of her actual life choices and eventually not enacted⁸, can be read as at least a statement of faith in life, which implies her embracing of authenticity and sincerity as integral parts of the human experience. Her being “enamoured of risk”, as Svitlana Krys correctly put it (Krys 2007: 396), is linked to her frustrated artistic ambitions, which Roman Weretelnyk sees at the roots of her mental illness (Weretelnyk 1989: 36). In Ljubov’s view, art, science, values and responsibility form a continuum outside of which any of these components loses its validity and its power. While art is not absolutized, as it is in the contemporary fashion for which Ljubov does not have much sympathy, albeit not denying it altogether, art is a fundamental part of human life, and its connection with ethics is crucial. In conclusion, one can say that although in *Blakytna Troianda* the main character’s Weltanschauung is not matched by her deeds, her passionate plea for an art that does not refuse the living world and envisages engaging with it embodies some crucial aspects of Lesja Ukrajinka’s art philosophy in the early stages of her literary career.

One of the most compelling instances of Lesja Ukrajinka’s complex exploration of beauty in art, a question she approached in several of her writings, can be found in *Advokat Martijan*, a piece of drama that she worked on between 1911 and 1913. Not among her most discussed works, *Advokat Martijan* originated in the context of Lesja Ukrajinka’s productive fascination for early Christian times. The play has been mostly read as a typical tale of intergenerational conflict in the spirit of Ivan Turgenev’s *Fathers and Sons* (Witochynska 1983: 161-162). *Advokat Martijan* retains the focus on hereditary central to *Blakytna trojanda*, although abandoning the central role such theories play in Ljubov Hoščyns’ka’s story. The plot of the play centres around Martijan and his family, including his two children, Avrelija and Valent. Describing her fascination for the Christian faith, which her father has to hide so as not to jeopardize his career as a lawyer, Avrelija defines her faith as ‘dead’. Not being able to live her life and her religiousness in full means for Avrelija being deprived of the regenerating power of the faith that she has decided to embrace. The outer, aesthetic side of a given religion plays a crucial role in her relationship with faith:

А все-таки я чула, що в церквах
є малювання і величні співи,
але мені заказано на те.
Я тільки безборонно бачу в вікна
на вулицях весь ідолянський культ:
веселі сатурналії, поважні
теорії жерців, похід весталок,

⁸ I am thankful to one of the anonymous reviewers for prompting me to better assess Ljubov’s contradictory rejection of ascetism, which she actually refuses to follow, resulting in the failure of her relationship with Orest, her suicide and his death.

і думаю: “Ся віра неправдива,
але чому в ній стільки є краси,
а наша правда так убого вбрана?”
Від сих думок любов моя вмирає...

(Ukrainka 1975-1979, VI: 21)

To Avrelija, there is no distinction between faith, life, beauty, love and truth. While her father advises her that she, as a Christian, should be able to grasp the ‘higher beauty’ of her faith, Avrelija replies that the only time she has experienced real, living beauty was when she saw a young girl in a circus standing up for her faith while being persecuted. For Avrelija, the only way in which faith, and hence life, can be meaningful is by providing believers with the very concrete experience of beauty. Beauty can also be said to prevail on truth in the hierarchy of Avrelija’s values. Although she has no doubt that paganism is untrue, while Christianity is simply ‘our truth’, she cannot but admire the pagans’ attention to the aesthetic side of religion. In her view, truth needs beauty to keep being perceived as such. Being equivalent to love, truth risks dying if it is not sustained by a powerful commitment to the emotionality provided by the aesthetic experience. Significantly, Avrelija also lists refined rhetoric as a source of aesthetic pleasure alongside visual performances. To her, the “serious theories” of pagan priests are as beautiful as the vestals’ processions and the cheerfulness of saturnalia.

Valent, Avrelija’s brother, is also in disagreement with their father regarding the way in which religion should be lived. Valent’s aestheticization of religion is no less intense than that of his sister, although his allegiance to Christianity appears more solid than hers. His view of Christianity as a fully rewarding experience combines the mysticism of spiritual ecstasy with the physical fervour of the worshippers’ collective body:

У мене дух займався, як я слухав
про вхід господній у Єрусалим,
коли юрба народу незчисленна
‘Осанна сину божому!’ кричала,
і віття ліс над нею колихався.
Се ж був триумф!

(Ukrainka 1975-1979, VI: 28)

While for Avrelija beauty is the embodiment of faith, Valent sees in glory the highest realisation of religion’s connubium with art. Without the fulfillment of a totalizing worship in which body and soul come together, religion loses its appeal, which explains why he disapproves of his father’s clear-headed, moderate faith. Valent expresses his fascination for Paul, whose deeds he would be ready to imitate and whose glory he envies. Similarly to his sister, for Valent religion is powerless without the support of rhetoric: “Чин живий / або живеє слово – се талан мій” (Ukrainka 1975-1979, VI: 31). Valent has attempted to achieve glory through literature, but in his view the written word does not guarantee the

degree of satisfaction that he sees as a requisite for achieving true glory. In his conversations with his father, Valent notes that Martijan's glory is not enough for him. Stating his willingness to be sincere, Valent maintains that in his work as an advocate, his father is not actually granted the opportunity to defend the truth. Moreover, Valent laments that Martijan's work does not bring him any glory. Only emotional rhetoric and heroic deeds can quench Valent's thirst for honour and fulfillment.

The younger generation cannot conceive of a careful approach to both faith and life, two notions that if lived to the fullest come to be identified as the same thing. Deprived of vital energy, religion makes no sense to Avrelija and Valent. The two siblings' idealistic view of religion-as-life is however unlikely to pass the test of the real world, as Martijan knows. One of the play's enigmas is its very title, which draws the reader's attention to Martijan and not to his children or the other characters that surround Martijan. At the centre of both parts of this 'dramatic poem', Martijan ambiguously stands for a careful, uninspiring approach to life and spirituality. Lacking sincerity and courage, Martijan cannot be a hero, although his refusal to live religion as an aesthetic experience may signal a deeper, pristine connection to faith, thus standing for a different, actually more profound level of authenticity. Moreover, his cautious choices have given him the chance to raise his children as Christians, thus enabling the true faith to thrive and be passed down to future generations.

Orhija is one of Lesja Ukrajinka's last works. Antej, its protagonist, is a Greek singer from Corinth who refuses to accept the unavoidable presence of the Roman power in his personal life as an artist and in the choices of those who surround him, including his wife Nerisa and his students and colleagues. The national question plays a not secondary role in the play, with issues of cultural colonialism and imperial oppression given a prominent position. Although the juxtaposition of the Greek and the Roman world is likely to be read as a metaphor for the Ukrainian-Russian context, the colonial question is far from exhausting *Orhija's* thematic repertoire. In her recent "postcolonial reading" of *Orhija*, Anastasiya Andrianova highlighted "the tension between the colonial artist's idealist aesthetics and her material realities" (Andrianova 2015: 26). Rightly pointing out the complex axiological configuration of the play, which she cannot find duly analysed in the rather straightforward readings of *Orhija* as an anticolonial piece proposed by most of the play's commentators, Andrianova defines *Orhija* as "a national drama that asks us to reconsider whether its hero's idealism may not disguise an inflexible and ultimately sterile parochialism" (Andrianova 2015: 27). The juxtaposition of authentic inspiration and the constraints of the real world, in which men and women of art are forced to adapt their inspiration and their skills to the political context of their time, is indeed a central theme of the piece. The protagonist Antej's resistance to compromise with the colonial power actually means the impossibility for him to have his art admired by a potentially large audience. Andrianova correctly sees in Antej's "archaic national aesthetic" (Andrianova 2015: 41) the cause of his failure.

However, in the context of Lesja Ukrajinka's complex approach to the many challenges of her times, including both the recent developments in the arts that she disliked and Ukraine's subjugation to Russian imperial power, Antej's stubbornness can be read in more

than one way. His unconditional cult of art as a pure, sacred entity actually resembles the decadent religion of art. Antej calls the sculptor Fedon's decision to sell a statue of Terpsichore to the Roman patron a sin, but Fedon's reply highlights the shortcomings in Antej's uncompromising stance, while also developing the reflection on glory central to *Advokat Martijan*: "Не розумію, що ти з мене хочеш! / Чи мав би й я весь вік, як ти, сидіти / без хліба і без слави?" (Ukrajinka 1975-1979, VI: 187). While Antej's following reply is centred around the national question ("Се повинен / терпіти еллін, коли хліб і славу / здобути може тільки з римських рук" [Ukrajinka 1975-1979, VI: 187]), Fedon objects to him that without his glory a Greek is not a Greek. Later in the play, using wording that could be read as an allusion to Ivan Franko, Antej's wife Nerisa similarly accuses him of neglecting true glory in favour of sterile idealism: "Такому ж от, як ти, хіба лишиться / зів'яле листя та вінці надгробні" (Ukrajinka 1975-1979, VI: 194). To be sure, Antej also happens to demonstrate a more refined political conscience than that of the people that surround him. Replying to his sister Evfrozina's claim that Hellas's future is in his hands, Antej objects that it is not wise to set all hopes on a single person. The final scene, with Antej killing his wife with his lyre and then committing suicide with one of the lyre's strings, epitomizes the catastrophic consequences of Antej's refusal to come to terms with the world in which he should be able to live and operate, or, to use a ševčenkian term that appears in the play, to accept and make the best of his fate (*dolja*). While Andrianova and other scholars have rightly stressed the weight of the feminist discourse of the play, with Nerisa being more rational than her husband, Antej's story can also be read as an allegory for the dangerous, or even fatal consequences of a dogmatic approach to art and the inability to understand and shape the social environment in which art has to be produced and disseminated. A refusal to mediate with society, even if this is regulated by a colonial power, means for artists a betrayal of their responsibility towards themselves and their talent.

In both her creative writings and her critical utterances, Lesja Ukrajinka shows a traditional, although non-dogmatic view of literature as a platform for authenticity, intuitively grasped as the truest expression of a human being's personality and of art's own communicative potential. As Peter Lamarque put it discussing the relationship between literature and truth since Plato and Aristoteles, "the proper focus for the truth debate must rest with the question of value rather than the question of fact and not so much with the value of truth, which is not controversial, but the value of literature, which is" (Lamarque 2009: 367). In Lesja Ukrajinka's thinking, life is worthless without true art and art is helpless and inauthentic when it is not powered by sincerity and unable to function in the world. Artists are responsible for both allegiance to their own inspiration and the integration of their talent in the life of society. The failures and contradictions of many of her characters, including *Blakytina Trojanda's* Ljubov and *Orhija's* Antej, may be read as a result of their inability to reconcile their idealized art concepts with real life, to have art functioning in the world. The dichotomy of art and life, be it that lived or proclaimed by her characters or the one she observed among her contemporaries, has no place in Lesja Ukrajinka's worldview. It is because of the transformative potential of art that it cannot be reduced to a

mere aesthetic pleasure, while the failure to embed art in life – both personal and societal, or even national – equates to its silence, with potentially fatal outcomes for its coryphaei. Although her refusal of some of the most successful names and works of fin-de-siècle literature and art is likely to appear naïve from the vantage point of today, one may conclude by saying that Lesja Ukrajinka's pragmatic approach, not least motivated by her willingness to support Ukrainian literature in its quick development, leaves little room for ideological extremism. The very contrast between the maximalist views of some of her characters and their life choices is fascinatingly contradictory, and their often tragic fates seem to cast a shadow of healthy relativism on the whole of her metaliterary work. We cannot but greet this as a sign of Lesja Ukrajinka's modernity.

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Abstract

Alessandro Achilli

Beauty, Truth, and Sincerity. Lesja Ukrajinka and the Responsibility of Art Between Aestheticism and the Pursuit of Authenticity

In both her creative writings and her criticism, Lesja Ukrajinka developed a complex reflection on the nature of art and the artist's place in society. Prompted by her ambiguous response to contemporary trends in the arts such as decadence, she saw true art as the product of an authentic inspiration able to function in its social context. In this article, I attempt to show the complexity of Lesja Ukrajinka's concept of art, neither instrumental nor ascetic, on the basis of a number of extracts from her critical writings, her letters, her poetry, and her works for theatre, with special attention to *Blakytyna trojanda*, *Advokat Martijan*, and *Orhija*.

Keywords

Lesja Ukrajinka; Ukrainian Literature; Ukrainian Modernism; Ukrainian Theater; Aestheticism.