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THE FLICKERING PHILOSOPHY OF IMPRESSIONISM: A LITERARY-CRITICAL PERSPECTIVE

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Abstract. The article discusses the attitudinal and philosophical premises of impressionism as a literary movement. The author explores the causes of difficulties associated with identifying literary works as impressionistic. The paper then explores the reasons for the shift in the attitudinal and philosophical conceptualization of impressionism from rationalist positivism to irrationalist trends in the “philosophy of life”. The conclusion discusses the impact of the philosophical basis of impressionism on the character of its poetics.

Keywords: impressionism, literary criticism, literary movement, philosophy, “philosophy of life”, poetics, positivism.

1. INTRODUCTION

It is possible to determine whether a work of literature is associated with impressionism only by applying clear identification criteria which correlate the distinctive features of the writer’s craft with the invariant of the movement’s aesthetic. This can be complicated primarily because in literary criticism there is no generally accepted definition of such an invariant, i.e., the attitudinal and philosophical premises and the doctrinal foundations of impressionism as a phenomenon. There are several reasons why the literary system of impressionist art has received little theoretical elaboration. First and foremost, this stems from the typological relation of literary impressionism to painting (which actually gave rise to its aesthetic) and to music. The syncretic nature of impressionism can be revealed only by projecting its poetics onto a binary coordinate system: literary criticism per se and a broader, cross-field framework of concepts and categories. In other words, a comprehensive understanding of the theoretical framework of impressionism is impossible without considering its genetic relation to painting and music; therefore, any attempts at an analysis from the perspective of literary criticism alone are doomed to failure.

Further complications are associated with the shift of impressionist art from realism to modernism. Some researchers (D. Nalivaiko, O. Chernenko, V. Aheieva) tend to interpret the poetics of impressionism from the perspective of realism; others (Yu. Kuznetsov) regard impressionism rather as a product of modernism. Paradoxical though it is, both approaches make sense. In fact, impressionism, like any other dialectic (capable of developing) phenomenon, evolved in accord with certain immanent laws and principles of cultural art. Whereas the classical version of impressionism bears an obvious genetic and typological relation to realism or naturalism, it is none the less evident that post-impressionism is connected with modernism. It is no accident that some impressionist painters

absolutized certain principles of their own aesthetic system thus gradually shifting to expressionism, whose aesthetic postulates are dialectically opposite. Among Ukrainian writers, there are those whose works represent a harmonious combination of impressionist and expressionist features (I. Franko, V. Stefanyk, B. Lepkyi). There is a symbolic boundary between naturalism (or realism) and impressionism on the one hand, as well as between impressionism and expressionism (or symbolism) on the other hand; consequently, it is not surprising that identifying impressionist elements in this poetical mixture is associated with difficulties. Yu. Kuznetsov was among those who focused on the nature of such difficulties: "Many researchers suggest interpreting impressionism as a transitional phenomenon. However, even the latest research papers (D. Nalivaiko, O. Chernenko, L. Usenko and others) regard impressionism as part of realist thinking. Hence, another question arises: what does impressionism shift from and to, considering it remains within the boundaries of realism? The opinions of the above-mentioned researchers can be summarized as follows: impressionism is a type of realism. However, in painting and literature impressionism emerges primarily as a shift from the realist tradition. How can it possibly remain part of realism? Such an approach is obviously contradictory" [6, p. 10].

This contradiction is further complicated by a number of sensitive issues in the literary process of the time. According to M. Naienko, "the transition from realism to modernism was no different from any other difficulties: the old refuses to make room for the new, whereas the new takes some time to beat the old. A movement like that may well last for decades" [9, p. 5]. V. Aheieva writes the following about the the Ukrainian literary process at the turn of the 20th century: "The Ukrainian literature of the first few decades of the 20th century is marked by an exceptional variety of stylistic trends and movements, by their simultaneous, at times 'unnatural', co-existence. The adherents of old realism still continue working, though this style is already perceived as anachronism by the younger generation of artists. At the same time, there emerges another inherently mimetic stylistic trend – impressionism – which becomes firmly established (realism, naturalism and impressionism were the three stylistic trends within a single type of artistic activity). It is also a flourishing time for subjective styles such as neo-romanticism and expressionism. Subsequently, there emerges avant-garde, 'left-wing', prose, though this movement has no significant achievements". The researcher is convinced that "neo-romantic, symbolist, impressionist trends are hardly identifiable in the works of Ukrainian writers. This is understandable since 'pure' styles can be found only in theoretical monographs" [1, p. 11–12].

Another reason lies in the conceptual opposition of the impressionists themselves to any schemes, rules, and doctrines in art. As noted in one of my previous papers, "the impressionists even denied the existence of their own school because they believed that the embodied perception of reality ended where and when there emerged an academic system of rules. The theory was received with skepticism, which accounts for the absence of a clear terminological definition of impressionism" [3, p. 219]. In fact, some literary critics do not even regard impressionism as an independent literary movement. Some of them consider it to be an attitudinal and aesthetic foundation of decadence, its substrate [2]; others, "a trend in modernism marked by a refined, sophisticated portrayal of personal impressions and observations about momentary, fleeting sensations and emotions" [4, p. 20].

Despite this, most researchers rightfully regard impressionism as an autonomous member of the literary process – "a stylistic trend" (Yu. Kuznetsov [6]), "a style" (O. Chernenko [12]), "a stylistic movement" (V. Aheieva [1]), "a literary movement" (D. Nalivaiko [10], R. Golod [3]). In this regard, it should be noted that the definition of impressionism as "a literary movement", in other words, "a creative unity of a significant number of writers from a certain historical period who have similar worldviews, ideologies, life experience and literary manner" [7], seems the most acceptable since this term reflects the holistic character of impressionist art as a unity of subjective (individual, original), objective (culturally and historically determined), formal (referring to genre composition, poetics) and content-related (referring to attitude and philosophy, theme and message) constituents.

In the history of Ukrainian literary criticism, the above-mentioned complications are coupled with ideological factors. During the heyday of both global and Ukrainian impressionism (the late 19th – early 20th centuries), leading literary critics, historians and literary theorists (I. Franko, B. Lepkyi,

M. Zerov, M. Yevshan, M. Sriblianskyi, S. Yefremov, P. Fylypovych, O. Biletskyi, N. Berkovskiy, S. Kozub, A. Muzychka, Yu. Savchenko, F. Yakubovskiy) felt compelled to focus on this phenomenon. By contrast, during the dominance of hyperrealism between the 40s and 60s, impressionism was not obstructed as much as the typologically similar movements of naturalism or expressionism; and yet discussions tended to focus not on impressionism as an independent and self-sufficient part of the Ukrainian literary process but rather on its elements such as impressionistic manner or impression which were regarded as parts of the poetics of a literary work or an author's original style absorbed by realism. However, the 70s and 80s saw revived interest in impressionism, as exemplified in the works of N. Kalenychenko, M. Kostenko, D. Nalivaiko. As regards international specialists in Ukrainian studies, O. Chernenko and E. Kriuba provide interesting insights on the genetic and typological characteristics of impressionism. An entire constellation of literary critics has recently explored the genre, style and literary achievements of impressionist art, as exemplified in the papers of Yu. Kuznetsov, V. Aheieva, I. Ivanio, H. Sipaka, S. Pryhodii, P. Yamchuk. A detailed outline of the literature on impressionism is given in the monographs of Yu. Kuznetsov *Impresionizm v ukrainskii prozi kintsia XIX – pochatku XX st.: Problemy estetyky i poetyky (Impressionism in the Ukrainian Prose of the Late 19th – Early 20th Centuries: Issues in Aesthetics and Poetics)* [6, p.9] and V. Aheieva *Ukrainska impresionistychna proza (Ukrainian Impressionistic Prose)* [1, p. 22–24].

However, in the light of the above-mentioned factors, Ukrainian literary criticism is still lacking both in comprehensive historical and theoretical studies of impressionism as a phenomenon and in a commonly accepted interpretation of the immanent characteristics of the movement. Thus in the absence of a clear theoretical framework of impressionism, let us generalize the numerous interpretations of this movement into a single picture by moving “towards the *objective* via the *intersubjective*” and unravel the ideational and aesthetic nature of impressionism by comparing its postulates with those of the other movements.

2. ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

Let us begin by analyzing the spiritual environment which contributed to the emergence of the ideational and aesthetic system of impressionism and by exploring the attitudinal and philosophical foundation of the movement.

Therefore, the turn of the centuries saw a serious breakdown of collective consciousness. Today it is unclear whether the early 20th century, marked by numerous humanitarian catastrophes such as wars and revolutions, caused the loss of faith in the rationalist principles of positivism, or, on the contrary, the irrationalist “revolt against intellect” led to these catastrophes, destroyed harmony and order, projected chaos and absurdity from mind to reality. It is probably one of those philosophical questions which will never be answered by philosophers themselves, nor will they resolve the debate about the distinction between primary and secondary qualities (matter vs. mind, existence vs. consciousness). However, the fact remains that, counterintuitively, the development of “*the philosophy of life*” in the spiritual sphere was marked not only by the *death* of mythical gods, but also by millions of deaths of flesh-and-blood human beings.

Irrespective of the existential problem, the attitudinal and philosophical principles of humanity change at the turn of centuries. There is further transition from the rationalist principles underlying the philosophy of positivism (A. Comte, H. Spencer, H. Taine, Ch. Darwin) to a whole set of inherently irrationalist philosophical trends such as “*the philosophy of life*” (F. Nietzsche, W. Dilthey), “*the philosophy of suffering*” (A. Schopenhauer), “*the philosophy of intuitionism*” (H. Bergson). However, the above-mentioned changes did not occur momentarily, nor did they unfold according to the law of the negation of the negation, when the spiritual achievements of the past are abandoned; they were marked by evolutionary transformation of quantity into quality, when a novel *main stream* in philosophy emerges gradually on the basis of new intellectual achievements and discoveries. Hence, it is no surprise that in the early 20th century the philosophy of positivism still influenced spiritual life, and some of the postulates of its doctrine even adapted and developed in new philosophical systems.

In defining the attitudinal and philosophical foundations of impressionist art, these complicated and ambiguous circumstances of spiritual development at the turn of centuries must not be disregarded because, in our opinion, poetical transitivity, which is arguably a determining category for understanding the phenomenon of impressionism, is based on attitudinal and philosophic transitivity. According to V. Aheieva, "this borderline character of impressionism is connected with a philosophical turning point, a shift from the dominance of positivism to subjective idealism and intuitionism at the turn of a new century" [1, p. 7–8].

Decisive though this turning point might have been, V. Aheieva herself, as well as most other researchers of impressionist art, recognize the impact of positivism on the formation of the attitudinal and philosophical system of impressionism. Thus L. Hurova writes, "Impressionism is a baby of the materialist worldview. Its world is undoubtedly positive. However, this world did not resemble the one seen by A. Comte: it was not a closed existence, but development, motion" [5, p. 67]. O. Chernenko claims that "positivist empiricism was the foundation of the impressionist worldview" and that "the psychologism of impressionist literature is a direct consequence of this typically empirical postulate" [12, p. 24]. In fact, the impressionists are concerned with the binary opposition of the material and the ideal. Swinging to and fro between these two categories is directly related to choosing between the philosophies of positivism and intuitionism. Unlike classical positivism, impressionism no longer adheres to the cult of science, unconditional faith in progress, universal determinism, etc. However, the term "positive" was adopted by the impressionists from the philosophy of positivism (founded by A. Comte, among others) and defined as "relative" as opposed to "absolute" [3, p. 222].

It is undeniable that the psychoanalytic theories of Z. Freud and C. Jung had a significant impact on the ideational and aesthetic system of impressionism. It refers largely to the focus of psychological impressionism on the personal unconscious and the collective unconscious. To illustrate, impressionism advocates the "stream-of-consciousness" technique, which is in fact intended to capture the unconscious sphere of human activity. According to O. Chernenko, some literary critics "are inclined to believe that the philosophy of Henri Bergson, which posits that reality is characterized by continual changeability, also contributed to shaping the impressionist worldview". O. Chernenko is convinced that A. Hauser, among others, is an impressionist, who stresses that "impressionist mindset manifests itself primarily in the Bergsonian conception of time" [12, p. 26]. One of the leading theorists of impressionist art, Herman Bahr, referred to Ernst Mach's theory as "the philosophy of impressionism" (machism). His view is also advocated by O. Chernenko and V. Aheieva, among others. The researchers account for the link between machism and impressionism by the common tendency of the two systems towards "gnoseological relativism" [12, p. 24], according to which "we acquire knowledge about the surrounding world through sensory experience" [1, p. 25]. Yu. Kuznetsov stresses that the desire to access the unconscious mind (Freud) or soul (Nietzsche), which emerges as a reaction to the rationalism of the 19th century, "pervades not only philosophy but also the spiritual culture of the 20th century in general", and "this desire is perhaps the most conspicuous in Einstein's relativism" [6, p. 5].

Yet, among all philosophies, positivism is regarded by most researchers as an inseparable element of the attitudinal and philosophical foundation of impressionism. In this regard, paradoxical as it is, the relativist bias of positivism became one of the most productive constants in building the ideational and aesthetic system of impressionism. The paradox is that not all researchers take into account this characteristic of the positivist philosophy. In fact, it is perceived as contradictory and gets ousted to the doctrinal margin by some other constants of the philosophical system of positivism, for instance by the postulates of attitudinal monism and universal determinism, or by the thesis that human behavior is determined by "race", "environment" and "moment", etc. However, meticulous researchers, such as Barbara Skarga from Poland, claim quite fairly that one of the six meanings of the term "positive", which, in fact, gave rise to the philosophical movement per se, is "relative in contrast to absolute" [13, p. 12]. In the same way, O. Chernenko writes the following about positivist relativism: "In terms of practical purpose, positivism is more inclined towards materialism because it emphasizes the material world in all its forms and trends (including psychological and social manifestations) studied by the so-

called positive sciences. However, in terms of cognition, positivism must be regarded as a variety of idealism since it relativizes and subjectivizes this cognition disregarding its objective, or at the very least absolute, character" [12, p. 23–24].

How significant is such positivist, or machist, or Eisteinian relativism for superimposing an impressionistic aesthetic system?..

It seems that the understanding that human knowledge and the world are relative urged the impressionists to tend towards solipsism and to reject any metaphysics, excessive theorizing, or "closed existence" within the framework of a certain doctrine. For realists and naturalists, the principle of relativity was not particularly significant; and this very factor prevented their attitudinal monism and universal determinism from splitting, in contrast to the ideational and aesthetic system of impressionism [3, p. 222]. V. Aheieva is convinced that "a shift from determinism and the intuitivist philosophy of the early century resulted in focusing on the subconscious, the depths of the human psyche, which had hitherto been disregarded in art" [1, p. 30]. In other words, the finding about the relativity of human knowledge about reality generated the desire to study a human being and the world, essence and existence in depth, "here and now", instead of stringing the scattered fragments of time and space onto a linear thread of rational laws and regularities.

Another feature of the poetics of impressionism, adopted directly from positivist empiricism, was the manner of recording the character's thinking, their worries and conflicts, mood and emotions with the help of "the stream-of-consciousness" technique. "M. Kotsiubynsky's psychologism is best instantiated by sketches such as *Tsvit yabluni* (*The apple blossom*), *V dorozhi* (*On the Way*), *Persona grata*, *Son* (*The Dream*) and others, where anxiety is depicted as 'a stream of consciousness'," remarks O. Chernenko. The researcher thinks that the popularity of this technique in M. Kotsiubynsky's works, as well as in those by impressionists in general, can be accounted for by the fact that "while studying reality, we know neither the material nor the transcendental world; only when we face them, do we gain experience. Thus for a typical empiricist, the soul can only be conceived of as an experience of a stream of consciousness" [12, p. 24].

Impressionism has also retained the inertia of the positivist reasoning methodology with its reliance on fact. However, in the early 20th century, fact itself loses its typically materialistic, objectivist interpretation and comes to be perceived rather as an ideal phenomenon, whose existence is confirmed only due to its capability to have a certain psycho-emotional impact on the cognizer.

As regards the other major assumptions of the positivist doctrine, they fail to preserve their significance and influence on the attitudinal and philosophical foundations of impressionism. Positivist attitudinal monism, scientism, and determinism gradually fade into oblivion. Alongside the destructive tendencies in impressionist movement, researchers also observe a "positive" attitudinal program: "Impressionism is perhaps the last nostalgic flicker of hope for harmony – a hope which was born during the Renaissance and is fading at present. It is not impossible that the destruction of harmony will be the only thing which will cause the 20th century to go down in history," contemplates Yu. Kuznetsov. "The art of the late 19th-early 20th centuries was fueled by the anticipation of epochal changes – either as decadence, getting disappointed at the fruit of civilization, or as impressionism in a new urban world, hoping to preserve dreams of harmony. It is no accident that the optimism inspired by the impressionist worldview permeates all spheres of culture across various countries. For this reason, it becomes the last universal style to overwhelm many kinds of art. Filled with a feeling of beauty and inclined to poetize nature and the urban world, impressionists sought to transfer their hopes for harmony into the future from the gorgeous Renaissance era, which sank into oblivion. Yet, impressionism did not totally belong to the past. It sought a totally different harmony – not a harmony in the natural world, but in the human soul. Plein air painting, poetization of nature is nothing but an expression of the living soul. It is the soul that becomes a benchmark for all new beginnings in the cultural life of the early 20th century, namely in impressionist art" [6, p. 5]. Although a person and the world where they belong are still regarded by the adherents of the movement as "a single whole since they are created from the same matter and comply with simple universal eternal laws of existence" [8, p. 41], this feeling of unity is still fragile and uncertain. It results from the invisible presence of one

and the same firstborn – the author’s individual perception – in every single episode of an impressionist artwork. The illusion of unity disappears as soon as we try to trace cause-and-result relations among distinct details in an impressionist artwork; in the same way, in fine art the holism of an impressionist painting, when viewed closely, turns into a chaotic accumulation of small brushstrokes. For impressionists, as well as for the naturalists, reality is composed of separate atomic facts (monads). However, while naturalists acknowledge the existence of objective rational laws of the world, for the impressionists a split of reality into monads increases the possibility of accidental links among them, so this perspective becomes one of the first steps towards shaping the modernist vision of the world as absurd and chaotic [3, p. 222–223].

M. Naienko is convinced: “One of the characteristic features of the transition from realism to modernism was that, on the one hand, in its radical forms it tried to abandon both objective imagery (depicting an action “here and now”) and what literary works portray as “typical characters in typical circumstances”; on the other hand, it tried to notice destructive chaos, which was beyond rational interpretation, practiced irrational imagery, became overwhelmed with nihilism and so forth” [9, p. 5]. V. Aheieva emphasizes that “the impressionist worldview disintegrated, atomized reality, with the smallest atomic expression gaining self-sufficient significance. Impressionism applied the practice of accurate representation of external realities to exploring mental processes, thus enriching the techniques and means of psychological analysis. There is growing focus on capturing the nuances of the character’s mood and mental reactions” [1, p. 30]. O. Chernenko explains this attitudinal characteristic of the adherents of the movement as follows: “The impressionists believed that only through such momentary experience of atomized reality can they conceive of the sense and essence of holism” [11, p. 206].

D. Nalivaiko expresses the opinion that the transitional nature of impressionism, its “duality” lies in swinging between objective world and its subjective image, which can lead an artist to radical subjectivism and even to solipsism [10, p. 170]. Therefore, impressionism can rightly be referred to as both dualistic and pluralistic since monism is succeeded by pluralism, which entails tolerance of every autonomous monad due to its intrinsic value and self-sufficiency; and since external interaction among monads is not only regular but also accidental, we can safely assume that its existence is internally determined, that it is not an *object* but a *subject*, and that the world composed of a myriad of such monads is not *objective* but *intersubjective* [3, p. 223].

3. CONCLUSIONS

In fact, awareness of the uncertainty and fragility of this intersubjective harmony, its temporal and spatial insecurity and momentary life-affirming nature – this is probably the quintessence of impressionism. The soul in the context of an impressionistic artwork is a substance which is no longer materially based or fatally determined by “race”, “environment” or “moment”, unlike for the naturalists and realists; nor is it deformed by pain and suffering, unlike for the expressionists. The impressionistic soul is a quiet sorrow over the loss of harmony; it is a lyrical, even melancholic, mood; it is a meditative attempt to restore the balance between the external and the internal world.

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Статтю присвячено вивченню світоглядно-філософського базису імпресіонізму як літературного напрямку. З'ясовуються причини труднощів, які виникають у процесі ідентифікації літературних творів як імпресіоністичних. Їх декілька: типологічна спорідненість літературного імпресіонізму з малярським і музичним видами мистецтва; перехідний характер напрямку від реалістичного до модерністського типу творчості; концептуальна опозиційність імпресіоністів до будь-яких схем, правил і доктрин у мистецтві; чинники ідеологічного характеру тощо. З'ясовуються причини перехідності світоглядно-філософського базису імпресіонізму від раціоналістичного позитивізму до ірраціональних течій “філософії життя”. Історичні обставини, пов'язані з численними

гуманітарними катастрофами на зламі віку – війнами та революціями – спричинили зневіру людей у раціоналістичні принципи філософії позитивізму. Однак зазначені зміни відбувалися не одномоментно. Тому ще й на початку ХХ століття філософія позитивізму зберігала свій вплив на духовне життя людства, а окремі положення її доктрини навіть адаптувалися й розвинулися в нових філософських системах. Це й зумовило перехідний характер філософського базису імпресіонізму. Немає сумніву, що особливості світоглядно-філософської основи імпресіонізму мали безпосередній вплив на перехідний (від реалістичного до модерністського типу творчості) характер його поетикальної системи. Відтак імпресіонізм – це своєрідний міст, який розділяє і водночас об'єднує традиційні ідейно-естетичні системи й новаторські пошуки кінця ХІХ століття. І в генетичному, і в типологічному аспекті напрям знаходиться на перетині двох типів творчості: реалістичного та модерністського. Водночас саме ця обставина й забезпечує ідейно-естетичну значущість і поетикальну своєрідність імпресіонізму.

Ключові слова: імпресіонізм, літературний напрям, літературознавство, поетика, позитивізм, філософія, “філософія життя”.