

Simone Guidetti¹
Otto Friedrich University of Bamberg

ARKADII DRAGOMOSHCHENKO'S POETIC LANDSCAPES AS AN INSTRUMENT OF SELF- QUESTIONING AND CROSS-CULTURAL DISPLACEMENT IN THE LATE SOVIET UNDERGROUND

Abstract: The poetry of Arkadii Dragomoshchenko (1946–2012), who spent his formative years in Ukraine and was active in the Leningrad underground of the 1970s and 1980s, represents a unique reflection of multiple cultural practices and media perspectives. Delving deeper into common assumptions of language, thought and representation, his texts encourage the reader to take a detached and reflective approach on literary texts, overcoming the strict cultural boundaries that usually confine the text and his author in space and time. This paper draws parallels between Dragomoshchenko's pseudo-descriptive landscape poetry, Buddhist thought, classical Chinese landscape aesthetics, and Hryhorii Skovoroda's nomadic philosophy of paradoxes. It thus illustrates how Dragomoshchenko consciously distanced himself from the predominant understanding of culture and memory within Russian so-called vtoraiia kul' tura, developing his own peculiar strategy of resistance to Soviet restrictions while also managing to avoid strict dichotomies such as pervaiia and vtoraiia kul' tura, official and unofficial, foreign and national culture.

Key words: Leningrad Underground literature, self-reflection, landscape poetry, Buddhism, Chinese art, Skovoroda.

¹ simone.guidetti@uni-bamberg.de

1. Introduction

The poet Arkadii Dragomoshchenko (1946–2012) has been considered a rather unusual protagonist of the Leningrad underground of the 1980s. The relativism of language and the degree of self-reflection and abstraction of his texts made his work obscure even to his fellow underground poets, most prominently by underground poet Viktor Krivulin, who once defined him as an “amorphous” poet (Volchek, 1985)². While playing an active role in the development of the Leningrad underground of the 1970s and 1980s, Dragomoshchenko never consciously inscribed himself into the established cultural pretext of the so-called *second culture* (*vtoraia kul'tura*) with its rehabilitation of Russian Modernism and its distinctive emphasis on cultural memory and collective responsibility (Pavlov & Ioffe, 2024:p.962f; Zhitenev, 2012:pp.5–29)³. Raised far from Moscow and Leningrad in the bilingual Ukrainian city of Vinnitsa, he would later describe his move to Leningrad at the age of twenty three as “emigration” from the multi-cultural background of his hometown, which he perceived as a “completely different planet” (Dragomoshchenko, 2009; Pavlov & Ioffe, 2024:p.963). In a letter to Konstantin Kuz'minskii from 1975, published subsequently as a presentation text to his poetry section in volume 3b of Kuz'minskii's *Blue Lagoon Anthology of Modern Russian Poetry* (1986), Dragomoshchenko proudly described himself as a “southerner” and distanced himself from the poetic “Petersburg tradition”, adding laconically to be an “orthodox Christian”:

‘Я живу в Ленинграде с 1969 года. Если будет кому-то нужно отнести меня к так называемой “Петербургской традиции” - прошу этого не делать, потому как это будет неверным. Я жил на Юге. Личный мой опыт формировался там / Вероятней всего, что я “южанин”. / Я православный.’ (Kuz'minskii & Kovalev, 1986:p.319)⁴

² “Драгомошенко же, к примеру, аморфен и существует в пределах необязательного, релятивного языка, не способного к тоталитарному давлению” (Volchek, 1985) [Dragomoshchenko, for example, is amorphous and exists within an unessential, relativistic language that is incapable of totalitarian pressure]. All the translations in English are by the author of this paper, unless otherwise stated.

³ On the impactful role of Russian Modernist culture (specifically the so-called Silver Age) in determining the character of Soviet *vtoraia kul'tura* see Zhitenev, 2012, Valieva, 2022, Maurizio, 2024. On the importance of collective memory as cultural value for the Soviet literary underground see Smola et al., 2024. In this context, Dragomoshchenko's implicit critique of Silver Age poetry in Leningrad unofficial culture as expressed in a passage from the first version of his poem *Uzbin's privetlivymi bogami* (1985) published in *Mitin Zhurnal*, 1, must also be cited (Edmond 2012:p.52).

⁴ ‘I have been living in Leningrad since 1969. If anyone needs to refer me to the so-called “St. Petersburg tradition”, please do not, since it would be wrong. I lived in the South. My personal experience was formed there / I am most likely a “Southerner”. / I am Orthodox.’

Dragomoshchenko also insisted on the impossibility of pinpointing anything specific in the intricate web of memories and past experiences that are inevitably linked to any intellectual knowledge. Instead of valuing individual works or authors (i.e. the “mélange of names” that took shape during his summer readings in Vinnitsa of Western and Russian literature such as “Blok, Kant, Remarque, Hermes Trismegistus, Solov'yov, Hemingway” [Dragomoshchenko, 2011b:p.618]) he would value the whole sensual experience associated with them: “В детстве нет классиков, в детстве существуют запахи, цвет, движение воздуха, вкус, оптические смещения” (Dragomoshchenko, 2011a:p.196)⁵.

It was in the context of his diverse personal experiences that Dragomoshchenko initially encountered Eastern religious traditions such as Hinduism, Buddhism and Taoism, which would subsequently influence his understanding of language even prior to his engagement with Western continental philosophy in the mid-1980s. Just like with Western literary sources, his encounter with Eastern literature was not a deliberate or analytical process; rather, it was an indirect one, shaped by a series of “misunderstandings, minor coincidences, and random events” (Dragomoshchenko, 2011b:p.617f) that occurred during and after his formative years in Ukraine⁶. Although Dragomoshchenko had been familiar with Eastern philosophical texts since the 1960s, it was only in the 1980s that references to them began to appear with greater frequency in his work. This coincides with the “mature” period of Dragomoshchenko’s poetic work (Skidan, 2015:p.8f), which is characterized by a conflation of his past knowledge with the new urban experience acquired as a member of the Leningrad underground, especially after the birth of Klub-81 and his acquaintance with American poet Lyn Hejinian (1941–2024). By the time he started to assimilate the philosophy of French modernists and poststructuralists (whose works he would begin to receive from Hejinian in English translation [Skidan, 2015:p.7]⁷), Dragomoshchenko had already begun to shape his own

⁵ ‘In childhood there are no classics, in childhood there are smells, colour, air movement, taste, optical shifts.’

⁶ The history of these “random events” has been largely documented during a round-table interview at an AAASS conference in Boston called *From Underground Magazines to Cross-Cultural Poetics and Media Art: Arkadii Dragomoshchenko and Alternate Routes in Contemporary Russian Literature* in November 2009 (later published as *Responses*) and has been recently commented upon by Dennis Ioffe (2017).

⁷ Dragomoshchenko would also play a key role in establishing and editing the first samizdat-journal for literary and philosophical translations *Predlog* (1984–1989) by Klub-81 in Leningrad. The journal contributed significantly to the post-Soviet canonization of several Western literary and philosophical sources, as well as to a certain extent of decentralization of the otherwise Russo-centered underground canon (e.g. the anthological section on Ukrainian poetry in a 1986 volume).

perspective on language, subjectivity and thought under the influence of Buddhism and Taoism. This Buddhist-Taoist *filter* on Western continental philosophy can be observed as early as 1985 in his first poetic essay *Konspekt-Kontekst* [*Synopsis-Context*]⁸, where, for example, speculations about the relativistic, and intrinsically “incomplete” character of language are accompanied by quotations from the Taoist texts *Liezi* and *Zhuangzi*, as well as a reference to George Bataille’s notion of “sacrifice” (Dragomoshchenko, 2007:p.50; Skidan, 2015:p.8). Subsequently, this ongoing interweaving of Eastern and Western concepts will become a defining feature of his essayistic and novelistic prose from the 1990s onwards, including *Fosfor* (1994) and *Kitaiskoe Solnce* (1997).

Dragomoshchenko’s eclectic background knowledge between East and West created the conditions for an unusually rich while at the same time undifferentiated approach to multiple literary, artistic and philosophical traditions. As I will argue in this paper, this undifferentiated (while in no way disinterested) approach to multiple cultural practices significantly contributed to shift the boundaries of cultural dichotomies such as *pervaia* and *vtoraia kul’tura*, center and periphery, national and foreign culture, without necessarily aiming at transcending any of these categories. While Dragomoshchenko was undoubtedly an heir to Modernist poetics and Neomodernist poetic tendencies in the late Soviet underground (Zhitenev, 2012:p.321ff), his insistent reflections on multiple aesthetic practices and media can be considered as a critical revision of the Russian canon of *vtoraia kul’tura* and the implicit valorization of *culture* within it.

2. Valuing self-reflective *practice* over philosophical content

Western literature has actively engaged with Eastern arts and philosophies since at least the 19th century. Modernist and avant-gardist poets consistently imported motifs, images and concepts from Eastern arts and literatures, as well as from Taoist, Buddhist and Hinduist religion⁹. During the second half of the 20th century, Zen-

⁸The essay has been translated by Hejinian as “Synopsis-Syntax”, maintaining the graphic form of the original which showed the two words as graphically and phonetically diverging from the first common syllable.

⁹Two prominent examples can be briefly mentioned here that were considerably influential to Dragomoshchenko and his generation: the American poet Ezra Pound (1885–1972) with his *ideogrammatic method*, which was supposed to emulate the visual *immediacy* of Chinese writing system (Pound ideogrammatic manifesto in *ABC of Reading* [1939]), and the Russian modernist *Chinary* circle, which manifested its interest for Eastern philosophical traditions multiple times (see Kharms diaries with his manifested interest for the *Tao Te Ching* or the remarks on Buddhist logics in the *Chinary*’s recorded conversations *Razgovory* [1933–34]).

Buddhism and Taoism became increasingly influential within Western popular culture, eventually affecting the Soviet unofficial culture as well¹⁰.

The case of Dragomoshchenko is of particular interest because of his intermedial and reflective approach to these traditions. Buddhism, Taoism or even Chinese art were not regarded by Dragomoshchenko as intrinsically valuable from a philosophical or aesthetical point of view, nor did they directly offer a specific poetic model for active pursuit. Dragomoshchenko's primary goal lay, instead, in reflecting on the different perspectives and discourses on the medium of language within these traditions, reenacting them to address contemporary questions around the medium of poetry and its cultural value.

A large collection of texts like the Buddhist literary corpus, for instance, represented for Dragomoshchenko an example of what he called “ergodic writing”¹¹, continually “produc[ing] opinions of itself, ‘conversations’ about itself” (Dragomoshchenko, 2011b:p.620). In Dragomoshchenko's view, Buddhism represents an ongoing, evolving system of thought, whose intrinsic incompleteness serves as a driving force, prompting continual reflection and reasoning (something which will also become the distinctive feature of Dragomoshchenko's own poetic texts). Dragomoshchenko perceives in Buddhism and other Eastern philosophical schools a quality that he believes is absent in Western poststructuralism and deconstruction: the capacity of transcending questions of “presence” and “absence”, and embracing a multiplicity of perspectives beyond the confines of one's own *Self*:

‘It is not so much the reasoning of Buddhism (which in itself is a *contradictio in adjecto*) as it is the practice of “representing” reality and the self through *not-self*

¹⁰ Zen-Buddhism became particularly popular in the West (especially the USA) after Daisetsu Teitaro Suzuki's influential *Essays in Zen Buddhism* (1927–1934), which eventually circulated also in the Soviet Union after the Thaw. Taoism became widely known in the Soviet Union as well due to the impactful anthology on classical Chinese philosophy *Drevnekitaiskaia filosofia. Sobranie tekстов v dvukh tomakh* (Mysl', 1972). Besides Dragomoshchenko, other authors and artists in the Leningrad underground of the 1970s and 1980s were influenced by Buddhism and Taoism (e.g. the poet Leon Bogdanov [1942–1987], who published his works in the samizdat journals *Chasy* and *Mitin Zhurnal* [both of which co-edited by Dragomoshchenko], and musicians such as Sergei Kurekhin [1954–1996] and Boris Grebenshchikov [1953–] who both exhibited at organizations such as Klub-81, co-founded by Dragomoshchenko). It might be promising for future research to compare Dragomoshchenko's highly reflective, intermedial approach to Buddhist and Taoist sources with that of other Leningrad underground members at the time.

¹¹ The term was borrowed from Espen Aarseth's “cybertext” theory (1998). Derived from the Greek *ergon*, meaning ‘work’, and *hodos*, meaning ‘path’, the term stands here actually for any non-linear literature that requires an active, nontrivial effort from the reader to follow or even “recreate” its narrative (Aarseth, 1998:p.1f). Dragomoshchenko's misquote is an example of his syncretic transference of meaning from one concept to another, disregarding the actual use of a specific term.

[...] not because emptiness is *shunyata*, “absence” [...] which as of late commonly occurs in the works of European revisionists of “post-structuralism,” problems of the “present” and so on; I am talking about a very different “emptiness,” a kind of lens with a floating focal point in which “planes of being” appear most convex in their transposition or conflation. It is, in other words, a sort of ontological optics of changing change.’ (Dragomoshchenko, 2011b:p.620)

Given the emphasis on *practice* in Eastern literary and philosophical traditions, Dragomoshchenko explored Eastern literature not only in terms of philosophy and religion. Some poetic texts from the early 1980s, for instance, evince a distinctive fascination with Chinese classical art and poetry¹², which he only partially contextualizes in his essays. Dragomoshchenko had been familiar with sources about Chinese art and literature by Soviet sinologists since his first years in Leningrad. These included the essays and translations from Chinese classical literature by Nikolai Konrad (1891–1970) and Julian Shchutsky (1897–1938), as well as the works on Chinese classical art, poetry and aesthetics by Evgeniia Zavadskaia (1930-2002), with whom Dragomoshchenko would personally get acquainted (Dragomoshchenko, 2011b:p.619). Later in the 1980s he would eventually get acquainted also with Soviet sinologist Vladimir Maliavin (1950–) and his works on Taoism and Chuang-Tzu (Dragomoshchenko, 2011b:p.619).

During the early period, Dragomoshchenko's attention was particularly drawn to Chinese landscape painting, possibly stimulated by Zavadskaia's translation of the classical Chinese painting manual, *Slovo o zhivopisi iz sada s gorchichnoe zerno* [*Mustard Seed Garden Manual of Painting*] (1969), which Dragomoshchenko acquired by chance for a few *kopeiki* in Smolensk (Dragomoshchenko, 2011b:p.619). References to Chinese painting and poetry are dispersed throughout the poems of the collections *V Predelakh Peska* [*Within sand borders*] (1983) and *Nebo Sootvetsvii* [*Corresponding sky*] (1985) (both originally published in *Chasy*, no. 46 and no. 58 respectively), ultimately reappearing in a few poems from the 1994 collection *Pod Podozreniem* [*Under Suspicion*], which demonstrates Dragomoshchenko's sustained interest in this subject matter over the course of several decades. Here too, it was not a specific artist, content, or image from Chinese art to initially strike Dragomoshchenko's interest. Instead, it was the broader practice of Chinese landscape painting, viewed within the context of its aesthetic and philosophical

¹² Motifs and symbols from classical Chinese art and poetry are present already in Russian Modernist poetry: see most prominently the poems cycle *Farforovy pavilon* (1917) by Acmeist poet Nikolai Gumilev (1886–1921), which was actively inspired by classical Chinese aesthetics (particularly by its naturalistic clarity of expression and less by its medial implications [Solntseva, 2013]).

significance, that captured his attention. Chinese painting is traditionally linked to the other two Chinese classical art forms or *perfections* (*san-chüeh*): Calligraphy and Poetry (Murck & Fong 1991:p.XV)¹³. This is particularly true in the case of Chinese *literati painters* (*wen-jen hua*) from the late Tang and Sung periods, i.e. several intellectual scholars and officials who generally eschewed the conventions of academic art (in some cases even conflicting with the emperor court), adopting instead a more personal and spontaneous mode of expression. This promoted an engagement with questions of form and representation, practicing different artistic disciplines altogether, including poetry, calligraphy, and landscape painting (Bush, 2012:p.1ff; Zavadskaia, 1975:p.114ff). Many of these artists were influenced by Chan Buddhism and Taoism, and they intended their aesthetic work as an exercise to reestablish a lost connection with the common ground of nature and the *Self*, either through peaceful contemplation of the *Tao* in their work practice or via fulfilling “illumination,” as through Zen Buddhist *Satori* (Zavadskaia, 1975:p.203ff). In alignment with Buddhist and Taoist tenets concerning the intrinsic “emptiness” of phenomena and forms like words and images, these artists regarded linguistic and visual representations as inherently “insufficient” for comprehensively apprehending the true essence of things, reflecting this, for example, through intricate roots, branches and rock formations in landscape painting or lighthearted, spontaneous brushstrokes in calligraphy (Zavadskaia, 1975:p.371f).

Dragomoshchenko's reception of Chinese landscape painting was shaped not only by this rich complementarity of media, but also by the constant overlapping of reflective thinking and contemplative perception, subjective and objective thought. These visual and linguistic crossovers are exemplified by Dragomoshchenko's poetic descriptions, in which the description of a natural landscape grows parallel to the meta-poetic observation of the descriptive act itself. This pursuit occurs in an almost tautological circularity, making the describing agent an integral part of his own *objective* description. The most representative example in this sense is the poem *Nabliudenie padaiushchego lista, vsiatoe v kachestve poslednego obosnovaniia peizazha* [*Observation of a falling leaf, taken as the ultimate basis of landscape*] (1985), initially created for the collaborative project with Lyn Hejinian *Nebo Sootvetstvii* [*Corresponding Sky*]. Here the image of an asymmetrical leaf falling down from a tree triggers what Dragomoshchenko calls “landscape speech” (“peizazhnaia rech”), letting a fragmentary landscape of visual perceptions, memories, imaginations, anticipations and apprehensions of thoughts “settle down”

¹³ On the aesthetical-mythological origin of painting and calligraphy in Chinese literature see Zavadskaia 1975:p.209ff and 2001 [1969]:p.289f.

on paper (Dragomoshchenko, 1985:p.130f). The poem opens with an epigraph from chapter II of the Chinese Taoist text *Chuang Tzu* (quoted from Pozdneeva's Russian translation [1967]), entitled *[Discussion] on [making] all things equal* (in Pozdneeva's translation: *O ravenstve veshchei* [Pozdneeva, 1967:p.139]), a passage which sees the Taoist philosopher acknowledging the impossibility of identifying the precise origin or cause for subjectivity, feelings and emotions, suggesting that there would be no subject at all if there were no thoughts and feelings as perceivable objects (Pozdneeva, 1967:p.140). Dragomoshchenko's poem is then followed by the brief remark "чтение" [a reading], which emphasizes both the verbal nature of this observation and the passive stance of the author, as if "reading" or observing his own description (Dragomoshchenko, 1985:p.130f). The text makes then several direct references to the ancient *I Ching* (or *Book of Changes*), a traditional source for classical Chinese aesthetic theories and thinking overall, as well as many indirect references to Chinese landscape painting and the techniques employed therein: a rectangular form, "прямоугольно", is followed by the line "Синева в прорехах сепии" [Blue in the sepia gaps], which evokes the typical sepia color of Chinese handscrolls (Dragomoshchenko, 1985:p.130f). A "mulberry tree" ("Шелковица," typical for silk production, i.e. the most common handscroll material) is also referenced (Dragomoshchenko, 1985:p.130f). Additionally, the poem makes several references to "weaving" and "fabrics" ("Ткани совмещения" [Matching fabrics], "наблюдение листа, / соткавшее основу для пейзажа" [the observation of a leaf, / weaving the basis for a landscape]) and alludes to the act of applying "seals", i.e. the official ownership markings on Chinese handscrolls ("клеят прозрачность вещество" [sealing the substance transparency]) (Dragomoshchenko, 1985:p.130f). Finally, the poem displays the most basic elements of Chinese landscape painting, such as mountains, hills and rock formations, featured thereby as *described* elements rather than existing objects ("Гора" [Mountain], "описания камня" [descriptions of a stone], "Буквально дерево на пригорке" [Literally a tree on a hill]) (Dragomoshchenko, 1985:p.130f). The leaf form itself offers on the one hand a metaphor for the reciprocal, tautological relationship between the Self and the World, turning around each other like the edges of a falling leaf ("ось[ю], концы чьи связаны, / как рукава тавтологии, [...] Зерна схема распрямлена [я учу я] в листе, / вращающем местность" [Dragomoshchenko, 1985:p.130f]¹⁴); on the other, it offers another link to Chinese calligraphic art, the leaves of orchids and other plants being particularly reminiscent of calligraphic marks in Chinese

¹⁴ 'Becoming its axis, whose ends are joined, / like sleeves of a tautology [...] The seed's schema is pulled straight [I teach I] in a leaf / swirled into the surroundings.' (transl. by Lyn Hejinian).

aesthetic theory (Zavadskaia, 2001:p.403). Eventually, the leaf image could have been possibly stimulated by the series of illustrations showing different leaf, branch and tree types Dragomoshchenko could have *observed* in the *Manual of the Mustard Seed Garden* (a work which is by itself yet another linguistic *description* of visual art) (Zavadskaia, 2001:pp.214–239)¹⁵.

Rather than simply imitating Chinese landscape art and poetry, Dragomoshchenko's *descriptions* address the whole aesthetic practice of Chinese handscroll painting, employing a reflective approach analogous to his engagement with the previously mentioned ergodic texts of Buddhism. In several poems from his early collection *O predelakh peska* (1983) and others from the later book *Pod Podozreniem* (1994), Dragomoshchenko even situates himself within the narrative of Chinese art history, offering fictionalized accounts of presumably lost handscrolls and inventing biographies of unknown Chinese handscroll masters. In the poem *Vesennee polnolunie... [The full moon in spring...]* (1994), for example, Dragomoshchenko reiterates a passage from an eleventh-century Chinese painting history book by Kuo Jo-Hsü about a lesser-known painter named Fang Ts'ung Chien (whose works are now lost), active during the Five Dynasties. He builds upon this account by reimagining Fang Ts'ung Chien's lost work about a warrior named Ch'en Teng and creating a fictional, semi-mythological biography of the painter in a footnote to the poem (Dragomoshchenko, 2000:p.67)¹⁶. Similarly, in a section called *Translations from Chinese [Perevody s kitajskogo]* from his collection *O predelakh peska* (1983), the reader is confronted with a free interpretation of Chinese aesthetics and cultural history featuring, once again, a fictional Chinese landscape painting of an utterly invented painter *Pa Un Dzi*¹⁷ described almost mythologically as “послед[ий] цензор[] нефритофой антологии” [the last censor of the jade anthology] and “главн[ый] чиновник церемонии извлечения Пятого Звука” [chief official for the ceremony of Fifth Sound extraction] (Dragomoshchenko, 1983:p.131). Similar inventions are present in yet another poem, possibly written for the same collection but published only later in the collected works *Opisaniie [Description]* (2000) among the 1960s and 1970s poems of the section *Miscellanea*, where a Chinese landscape handscroll is described as featuring French symbolist

¹⁵ Many indications from the *Manual* on how to draw leaf types (such as orchid leaves, bamboo leaves or whole foliage) are clarified by comparing the strokes to the calligraphy of similar Chinese characters (Mai-Mai Sze, 1956:p.65f; 368f; 372f; 384f).

¹⁶ For a comparison with the original source see Kuo Jo-Hsü (1951), p. 33 and 146 (in Russian translation Go Zho-Siui, 1978).

¹⁷ In a later version from *Opisaniie* (2000) this fictional name was changed to Iun Li (Dragomoshchenko, 2000:p.325).

poet Charles Baudelaire together with a fictional Japanese-sounding poet Manefuza Edziamono¹⁸ walking on a mountain path in a classical Chinese landscape setting (Dragomoshchenko, 2000:p.324).

In playing with such imitations and fictional descriptions, Dragomoshchenko implicitly employs discursive practices such as those of the Chinese Literati painters, whose works are in fact partly lost and their descriptions surviving (alongside art history books) only in poetic texts or epigrams by subsequent poets. Literati painters would have not only provided detailed descriptions of paintings but would have also engaged in a reciprocal exchange of ideas through their responses to one another's ekphrastic *descriptions*, demonstrating a dynamic interplay between visual, calligraphic, and poetic forms. Prominent examples in this sense are Su Shi's poem by the title *Guo Xi's Painting Autumn Mountains, Level Distance*, dedicated to a now lost Guo Xi's handscroll painting, and Huang Tingjian's *Matching the Rhyme of Su Shi Inscribing Guo Xi's Painting, Autumn Mountains*, dedicated to Su Shi's description of Guo Xi's painting (Foong, 2000:p.102f). Both poetic texts simulate thereby the same "floating perspective" of Guo Xi's visual landscapes, developing the poetic description upon different points of view (Zavadskaia, 1975:p.233).

Dragomoshchenko's descriptions do not seek to demonstrate any harmonious convergence of media forms, nor (least of all) to express a natural harmony between the Self and an underlying "emptiness" of reality, like many Chinese literati painters (Zavadskaia, 1975:p.206f). Rather his poetic descriptions question first and foremost the boundary between preconceived categories such as subjectivity and objectivity, thought and perception, linguistic and visual depiction, embracing a decentered model of epistemic and aesthetic experience which is constantly stimulated by the shifting boundaries between these categories.

3. Fictional landscapes from China to Ukraine

Dragomoshchenko's reflections on both Buddhist thought and Chinese aesthetics can be considered to partake in a general poetics of *landscape* he has consistently engaged with since the 1970s, displacing a fragmentary scenery of thoughts, memory and imagination onto an exterior surface of description¹⁹. While

¹⁸ Possibly a derivation from the name of popular Japanese poet and master of haiku Matsuo Bashō (1644–1694), also known by the name of Matsuo Chūemon Munefusa (Bashō, 2008).

¹⁹ *Landscape* as self-reflective projection of language onto a surface of *description* was a common *topos* among the American so-called "Language Poets" (Edmond, 2004). The poem *Nabliudenie padaishchego lista* as all other poems from the collection *Nebo Sootvetstviu* were conceived initially as a common project together with American poetess Lyn Hejinian since their acquaintance in 1983

Dragomoshchenko partly recognized himself in Buddhist thought and Chinese aesthetic practices, his landscape poetics have consistently been informed just as well by other philosophical traditions which he reflected upon from a meta-poetic perspective. Another one worth mentioning is closer to him geographically while arguably just as exotic as Chinese literature to most of his Soviet fellow poets at the time. It is the case of Ukrainian philosopher Hryhorii Skovoroda (1722–1794), whose writings Dragomoshchenko was likely to have encountered since the early 1970s²⁰. The eclectic philosophy of paradoxes, *coincidentia oppositorum* and self-inquiry espoused by Skovoroda's writings have exerted a similar fascination on Dragomoshchenko as the Buddhist and Taoist views on consciousness and perception that he would have encountered later in his life.

As with Buddhism, Taoism and Chinese aesthetics, Skovoroda's philosophy is reflected by Dragomoshchenko from a syncretic, intermedial perspective on representation, language and thought. The poem *Hryhoriia Skovorody Vozvrashchenie* [Hryhorii Skovoroda's Return], dated 1973 (Dragomoshchenko, 2020:p.42), is an example of how Dragomoshchenko's early landscape poems approach similar issues of subjectivity, objectivity and representation as those inspired by Chinese aesthetics, while reflecting on them from yet another cultural standpoint.

The poem reimagines the last moments of the Ukrainian philosopher Hryhorii Skovoroda after years of roaming and travelling. He conceives him in stark contrast to the image of disciplined spirituality and asceticism that biographers such as

and their regular letter correspondence (to which the name *Corresponding sky* in the original English project title also refers). The poems contain impressions from Hejinian's own letters and quotes from her poems, e.g. *The Guard* (1983), which shares a similar goal in investigating "the linguistic layering of the landscape" (Hejinian, 2000:p.173), making these texts interwoven reflections of each other. Hejinian and Dragomoshchenko embarked in a long-term translation project of the poems into the respective language: Dragomoshchenko's poems would get published under the name *Description* in 1990, and the text versions (both in the English translation and in the successive Russian re-editions of the poems) would sometimes change significantly (Edmond, 2012:p.53ff; 214). Besides Language Poets, the landscape *topos* had also been popular in experimental music, e.g. the series *Imaginary Landscapes* (1939-1952) by American composer John Cage, in whose compositions the already mentioned Leningrad underground musician Sergei Kurekhin (founder of Pop-Mekhanika and close friend to Dragomoshchenko) was interested in at the time. See also Cage's *I Ching* inspired *Music of Changes* (1951) and its influence on Kurekhin's compositional method (Kan, 2008:p.83; 104f).

²⁰ Skovoroda's philosophy had been initially rediscovered in Russia by religious philosophy at the beginning of the 20th century, particularly by Russian philosopher Vladimir Ėrn (1882–1917) with his monograph *Grigorii Savvich Skoroda. Zhizn' i uchenie* (1912), which also impacted Symbolist poet Andrei Bely (1880-1934) (Lavrov, 1975). Skovoroda's anti-rationalistic, mystical thought was reinterpreted by Ėrn as representative of a truly "Russian thought", an interpretation that echoed Bely's own ideas about Russia's "special path" ("особый путь") (Lavrov, 1975:p.396f).

Mykhailo Kovalinsky have portrayed (Skovoroda, 1973, vol. II:pp.439–476). Dragomoshchenko's portrayal of Skovoroda presents a rather elderly and fragile figure grounded in physical reality. The Ukrainian philosopher appears exhausted after years of endless wanderings, sitting at first peacefully, eating cherries and discarding the seeds at his feet. The landscape evokes images of Ukrainian summer plains, such as wheat fields and hills under a hot sun, a river flowing between them and steaming under the heat, cherry and apple trees in bloom, wild bushes, a muddy clay road and a wagon leaking flour on the ground. Soon enough, the landscape is revealed to be an almost organic extension of Skovoroda's own consciousness. His movements along a "road of astonishment" ("дорог[а] изумленья") are reflected and even directly stimulated by his thoughts ("«Да, это я иду, – промолвил, – это мне травую»" ['Yes, that is me walking,' he mumbled, 'that is grass to me'²¹]), while an hawk, traversing the clear sky like a dark dot, is initially depicted as a teardrop, then later as "suspended" ("висел") in the sun's embrace and reflected alongside with it by Skovoroda's eye pupils²² (Dragomoshchenko, 2000:p.337f). Ultimately,

²¹ The expression "это мне травую" declined by the instrumental case appears as the literal realization of the Russian idiomatic expression "это мне всё [трын]-траву", meaning "it's indifferent to me" (translator's note).

²² Skovoroda's glance at the hawk over the sun is perhaps reminiscent of Skovoroda's parable about the hermit "catching an elusive bird" as the eternal, never ending search for Truth (Skovoroda, 1973:p.11f; Ushkalov, 2017:p. 5f). The bird as folkloristic *topos* appears also frequently in Skovoroda's works, particularly in the *Garden of Divine Songs* [*Сад божественных пѣсней*] [*Sad bozhestvennykh pesnei*], here, however, bearing specific symbolic meanings borrowed from Ukrainian folklore: see e.g. the image of a nesting small bird in danger from a hawk (symbolizing humility versus pride) from the popular 18th song *Ой ты птичко жолтобоко* [*Oi ty ptichko zholtoboko*] (Skovoroda, 1973, vol. I:p.76; Potebnia, 1883:p.237f). Skovoroda's *Garden* can be considered in this context as just as well an extensive poetic landscape, in this case a landscape about the eternal harmony of creation and the transient nature of earthly things. Skovoroda's *Garden* was also partly inspired by Ukrainian landscapes (e.g. the 12th song *Не поїду в город богатий. Я буду на полях жити* and the 13th song *Ах поля, поля зелені, / Поля, цвіттами распеширенні* [*Akh polia, polia zeleny, / Polia, tsvetami raspeshchrennyi*] [Skovoroda, 1973, vol. I:p.69ff; Ushkalov, 2017:p.31f]). From the same work, see also Skovoroda's praise of the Divine Garden as an eternal place of the soul where "leaves never fall" in the 3rd song *Весна любя, ах, пришла!* [*Vesna liuba, akh, prishla!*] (Skovoroda, 1973, vol. I:p.62) (an image which was possibly retrieved and purposely altered by Dragomoshchenko in his previously mentioned *Наблюдение падающего листа* [*Nabliudenie padaiushchego lista*]: see the lines "Сорок лет, однако ж, – говорят – с этого дерева лист / слетает" [Dragomoshchenko, 1985:p.131]).

Birds in the sky appear in general multiple times in Dragomoshchenko's poetry, often as a symbol for the dynamic and interdependent duality of form and background (e.g. as a metaphor for letters on paper), through which an otherwise invisible background becomes visible (Jampol'skii, 2015:p.66ff). This corresponds to the principle of "concealment in disclosure" ["сокрытие в открытии"] and the Buddhist "radiance in eclips" ["сияние в затмении"] Dragomoshchenko talks about in his essays (2011a:p.215; 2011b:p.620).

upon death, Skovoroda's "spirit" ("дух") is depicted almost as reuniting with Nature, as if in a process of *returning* (as the poem's title suggests) to the maternal womb (Dragomoshchenko, 2000:p.338), extending its arms in a manner reminiscent of "children's tree branches" ("ветвями детскими") (Dragomoshchenko, 2000:p.338). The figure of Death is personified thereby as a reaper with his sickle, fitting into the wheat fields of the Ukrainian landscape and representing a principle of life and rebirth ("живительному жалю") (Dragomoshchenko, 2000:p.338).

Skovoroda's apparent dissolution into the natural landscape of the poem reflects his own philosophy of fulfilment through self-examination and recognition of one's own invisible, eternal nature through the visible world of transient forms (Chyzhevsky, 1974; von Erdmann, 2005), resonating in the poem's epigraph from a letter to Kovalinsky, in which he contrasts his actual birth with the more fulfilling and illuminating birth of the Spirit of Christ in his heart ("Nam mea frusta genetrix enixa fuit, ni Tu genuisses me, o lux mea, vita mea"²³) (Skovoroda, 1973, vol. II:p.327). However, as with the poems inspired by Chinese painting aesthetics, Dragomoshchenko's poem goes beyond the representation of Skovoroda's mystical thought. As is the case with most of his subsequent poetic landscapes, the poem evokes memories from Dragomoshchenko's personal background, here specifically his youth in Ukraine. The image of Skovoroda's eating cherries, following the hawk with the gaze and falling in a mystical experience of rebirth is reminiscent of Dragomoshchenko's own semi-mystical experience in childhood as narrated in his later novel *Raspolozhenie v domakh i derev'iakh* [*An Arrangement in Homes and Trees*] (1978) which describes a scene from his youth on a rooftop during the summer months, contemplating sparrows eating cherries and experiencing a sense of rebirth (Dragomoshchenko, 2022:p.230). Dragomoshchenko himself is therefore implicitly present, once again, within the frame of his own descriptive account, figuring as both subject and object of Skovoroda's mystical experience.

Furthermore, the poem was republished many years later in his last poetry collection *Tavtologiia* [*Tautology*] (2011), this time bearing the subtitle *kleenka, akril, promyshlennyye krasiteli, pozolota* [*oilcloth, acrylic, industrial dyes, gilding*] (Dragomoshchenko, 2011a:p.174), which clearly situates it in the context of the poetics of ekphrastic description developed in the decades after the 1980s. The subtitle could be seen as a reference to either naïve painting ("oilcloth, acrylic") or orthodox icon painting and crafting (the "gilding" ["pozolota"] layer on it), which in light of the experience with Chinese handscroll aesthetics can be seen as just as much problematizing the ekphrastic *description* of a painted landscape as a non-

²³ 'For my mother would have given birth in vain, had you not given birth to me, My light, My life.'

objective, *inverted* reflection of it, like the inverted perspective of orthodox icons²⁴. The contextual similarity of these media reflections stimulates also philosophical analogies between the mystical philosophy of self-cognition and paradoxical *coincidentia oppositorum* of Skovoroda (as well as his carefree, joyful attitude towards earthly things [Ushkalov, 2017:p.31]) and the Taoist philosophy of paradoxes, spontaneity and “equality of things” as seen by Chuang-Tzu as of fundamental relevance for Chinese painting aesthetics. Skovoroda’s reflecting the hawk in his eye pupil and his dreams, described as nests “brooding bird chicks” (“Птенцов выводят”) (Dragomoshchenko, 2000:p.337), can be regarded in this sense as somewhat alike to Chuang-Tzu’s butterfly dream parable at the end of chapter II, in which dreamer and dreamed object (Chuang-Tzu and the butterfly) cast doubts on whose consciousness is actually “dreaming” of being the other, making both subjects a reflection of each other (Pozdneeva, 1967:p.146).

4. Conclusions: Dragomoshchenko’s landscape poetics as an instrument of self-questioning and cross-cultural displacement

Dragomoshchenko’s landscape poems and poetic descriptions are not conceivable as something like a philosophical dialogue between different cultures, even less a globalizing and universal experience (as the practice of Chinese literati painters and Skovoroda’s *philosophia perennis* would be). Instead, they are conceived first and foremost as an experience of self-reflection and self-questioning, shifting the boundaries between thought, expression and perception. The different cultural and philosophical views are reflected in the poetic descriptions almost as a mirror in which the describing agent would be able to get rid of his own national-cultural allegiance and subjective preconceptions.

Poetry is for Dragomoshchenko by no means a monolithic product of culture; rather, it is a process that is perpetually on the verge of becoming something other than itself, subject to constant reflection and questioning by both the author and the reader, stimulated even by the rejection of it: “Поэзия - есть достаточно простое отношение между чувством презрения к ней же, каковой бы она ни была (если она существует), и самим ее писанием” (Dragomoshchenko, 2013:p.310)²⁵. As Dragomoshchenko put it in his essay *Konspekt-Kontekst*, language in poetry

²⁴ See also the possible pun entailed in the word “промышленные” [industrial] with its etymological root *мысль* [thought] referring to a reflexive practice.

²⁵ ‘Poetry consists in a quite simple relationship between the contempt you feel for it, whatever poetry may be (if it actually exists), and the very same process of writing it.’

“cannot be appropriated” since it is “perpetually incomplete” (Dragomoshchenko, 1990:p.21). This means for him also that poetic language cannot even properly partake in any particular national culture: “Язык поэзии никогда не становится языком национального наследия, [...] он не является также мечтой о всеобщности, но разрывом слова со всем сказанным прежде” (Dragomoshchenko, 2011a:p.209)²⁶. The fact that Dragomoshchenko never studied any Eastern foreign language and relied on Soviet translations demonstrates this a-priori skepticism towards the possibility of attaining and appropriating knowledge in languages and cultures²⁷. Dragomoshchenko’s convergence of different cultural and philosophical traditions doesn’t intend to follow the model of a universal *philosophia perennis* as some mystical traditions he indeed showed much interest in (including Skovoroda’s philosophy); rather, it stands for something which could be redefined as *poesis perennis*, a transnational attitude towards language based on continuous “disruptions” [“разрывом”] (Dragomoshchenko, 2011a:p.209) in views and perspectives instead of joint commonalities. Confronted with the position of Leningrad underground poet Viktor Krivulin mentioned in the beginning, Dragomoshchenko’s indifference to national culture stands out as opposite to the Mandel’shtam-reminiscent burden of (literary) culture and memory in Krivulin’s poetic reflections. Krivulin’s ephemeral landscapes of Saint Petersburg from ekphrastic descriptions like “Gobeleny” (Sandler, 2007) are substituted in Dragomoshchenko’s poetry by a culturally and geographically dispersed (or *disrupted*) landscape of language.

Dragomoshchenko’s continuous reflections on the subtle boundary between subjectivity and objectivity, thought and perception, verbal and visual expression, as illustrated in this paper, do not seek to transcend, or utterly negate these dichotomies, but rather to functionalize their intrinsic difference and disruptions as an alternative perspective upon them. When asked about his personal strategy of

²⁶ “The language of poetry never becomes a language of national heritage, [...] neither is it a dream of universality, but a disruption between a single word and all that has been said before.”

²⁷ On the background of such a cultural *indifference* it may be questioned why Dragomoshchenko always opted for Russian instead of his second mother-tongue Ukrainian for all his poetic works. This choice remains a non-trivial issue that should be reconsidered from a larger historical postcolonial perspective that goes beyond the scope of this paper. As far as is known, Dragomoshchenko never consciously reflected on the matter, so that the degree of conscious choice in opting for a language instead of the other remains questionable, given also his skepticism towards language as such (let alone language as a means of national and cultural expression). As illustrated in this paper, the Ukrainian cultural landscape is still present on multiple levels in Dragomoshchenko’s work (including some passages in Ukrainian language) and plays a much greater role in his poetics than the Russian topographic literary discourse of Leningrad and Petersburg.

resistance against both the official rhetoric of the State and the vulgarity of popular medias in a Radio Liberty Interview in 2010, Dragomoshchenko replied at first by distancing himself from forms of direct opposition or *negation* (in line with many former members of the Leningrad underground): “сопротивление и ‘нет’ не имеют ничего общего между собой. ‘Нет’ всегда оборачивается ‘да’ и весьма часто неожиданно” (Fanailova et. al., 2010)²⁸. He instead promoted something he called “resisting the weather”, explaining this by referring, once again, to Taoist philosopher Chuang Tzu: “я сопротивляюсь погоде. [...] Он [Chuang Tzu] говорит: «[...] Я просто становлюсь водой». Я хочу сказать, что моя форма сопротивления – это форма небытия, я перестаю быть” (Fanailova et. al., 2010)²⁹. As noted by Evgenii Pavlov, this strategy of resistance is the opposite of political resistance and opposition, while still representing a peculiar form of dissidence and refusal, i.e. refusing to take any political stance and becoming “functional” to the political machine (Pavlov, 2017). It could be argued that not taking position is paradoxically speaking just as well an intentional act of taking position, either in a passive undifferentiated way or an active will (such as Dragomoshchenko’s will to “becoming water”). As mentioned before and as evident with his cross-over of multiple medias and cultural references, however, Dragomoshchenko’s strategy is eventually to escape both positive affirmation and negative opposition, turning the very same act of “differentiation” between categories (i.e. the disruption implicit in any intentional act of thought and expression) into a poetic paradigm of inquiry and reflection, driven by its own perennial incompleteness.

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²⁸ ‘Resistance and “no” have nothing to do with each other. “No” always turns into “yes” and quite often unexpectedly.’

²⁹ ‘I resist the weather. [...] He [Chuang-Tzu] says, “[...] I just become water. I want to say that my form of resistance is a form of non-being, I stop being”’

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Симоне Гвидети

Универзитет Ото Фридрих у Бамбергу

ПЈЕСНИЧКИ ПЕЈЗАЖИ АРКАДИЈА ДРАГОМОШЧЕНКА КАО ИНСТРУМЕНТ САМОИСПИТИВАЊА И МЕЃУКУЛТУРНОГ ПРЕМЈЕШТАЊА У ПОЗНОМ СОВЈЕТСКОМ АНДЕРГРАУНДУ

Резиме

Овај академски рад истражује поетске пејзаже Аркадија Драгомошченка, совјетског пјесника из Украјине, активног на лењинградској андерграунд књижевној сцени. Аутор анализира Драгомошченково дјело, откривајући утицаје будистичке мисли, класичне кинеске естетике и филозофије Григорија Сковороде. У раду се Драгомошченкова поезија испитује као јединствена пракса саморефлексије која се опире устаљеним културним класификацијама. Његови поетски пејзажи, инспирисани кинеским сликарством, Сковородином мистичном филозофијом и будистичком мисли, истражују границе између субјективности и објективности те представљају транснационални приступ језику и поетским медијима. У раду се на крају анализира Драгомошченков рефлексивни, недиференцирани приступ културним границама у контексту совјетске незваничне културе (такозвана „вторая культура“). Драгомошченков приступ се стога пореди са иначе пресудном улогом културног памћења у совјетској незваничној поезији (нпр. у дјелима лењинградског пјесника Виктора Кривулина). На тај начин анализира се како Драгомошченко у свом дјелу настоји да избјегне дихотомије као што су *прва* и *друга култура*, званична и незванична, страна и национална култура.

► **Кључне ријечи:** Лењинградска андерграунд књижевност, саморефлексија, пејзажна поезија, будизам, кинеска умјетност, Сковорода.