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Campus Life in Contemporary Polish, Slovak, and Ukrainian Fiction

Oksana Blashkiv

Institute of Linguistics and Literary Studies
Faculty of Arts, University of Siedlce
Ul. St. Konarskiego 2, Siedlce 08-110, Poland
Email: oksana.blashkiv@uws.edu.pl
ORCID iD: https://orcid.org/0000-0002-3607-9895
https://ror.org/01wkb9987
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Abstract. The article focuses on the image of campus life as presented in a selection of novels written in Polish, Slovak, and Ukrainian after 1989. The author presents generic peculiarities of Slavic campus fiction and analyses the theme of (academic) coming-of-age in Slavic campus fiction. The maturation of student characters in Maryna Hrymych's *Yura* and Pavol Parkov's *The Legend About the Language* occurred in Soviet Ukraine and Czechoslovakia, respectively, around 1968. In contrast, the protagonists of Jagoda Grudzień's *Erasmopeja* and Tania Kalytenko's *Antero* undergo academic identity formation in contemporary Scandinavian countries as participants in academic exchange programs. While Hrymych and Rankov portray characters navigating totalitarian societies of the past, Grudzień and Kalytenko situate their students within the anxieties of the globalised world, where remembering the past remains crucial. The author concludes that contemporary campus fiction written in Slavic languages addresses the issues significant for the cultural memory of the particular nation. Collectively, these novels contribute to a sense of continuity in academic culture within East-Central Europe.

Keywords: campus novel; image of campus life; university; student; history.

Introduction

Recently, the study of campus fiction has intensified in a global context, suggesting both a deepening crisis in the university and a natural increase in the genre's popularity, fuelled by other media such as graphic novels, amination, video games, TV series and films about college life. For decades, scholars of campus fiction have attempted to explore the representation of university life and to combat the assumption that fictional history fully reflects reality (Reynolds, 2014; Gruszewska-Blaim, Moseley, 2016; Tobolowsky, Reynolds, 2017), seemingly in vain. The scope of traditionally Anglo-American campus

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literature has broadened to include campus novels written in other languages and referencing other cultural contexts (Fuchs, Klepuszweski, 2019; Selejan, Moseley, 2022). However, no similar studies have examined representations of higher education across media and time based on Slavic-language cultural texts. Meanwhile, a closer look at campus fiction in East Central European countries such as Poland, Ukraine and Slovakia, provides valuable insights into these countries' student – and broader academic – culture. The aim of this article is to present the image of campus life in post-1989 novels from Poland, Ukraine and Slovakia and to define the main trends in the contemporary representation of academia in this socio-cultural area. Therefore, the poetic analysis will be contextualised within a broad socio-cultural and historical background.

Campus fiction: generic and cultural background

In sociology, "student culture" is understood as "a wide range of formal and informal practices, values and characters typical for university life" (Rauser, Rogowski, 2018, p. 7). The literary representation is embodied by the genre of the campus novel or, before that, the *Bildungsroman*. Lodge (2006) defined campus fiction in the English literary context as one in which "action takes place mainly in a college or university, and which is mainly concerned with the lives of university professors and junior teachers … and to a lesser extent with their students, both undergraduate and postgraduate." Williams (2012, p. 561) argues that American literature distinguishes between the campus novel (centred on students) and the academic novel (centred on professors). Both scholars agree that the early fictions of university life were student-centred. Often an obligatory element of the nineteenth-century Bildungsroman as an episode in a long series of events leading to the formation and maturation of the young man's character (SRGL, 2006, pp. 87–90), the depiction of the university experience is present in contemporary coming-of-age fiction and at the same time forms the basis for the genre of the campus novel.

The application of the word "campus" to literature written in Slavic languages poses some difficulties. In English, the Latin word "campus" (field), which refers to the university campus (bearing in mind its peculiarly closed structure), began to be used in the 1950s because of its frequent use in America. In the Slavic languages, there is no equivalent word other than "university". Moreover, only a few Slavic countries can boast a medieval university and its campus (Jagiellonian University in Crakow and Charles University in Prague). Other universities appeared much later in East-Central Europe, and their architectural structure did not (could not) follow that of their medieval predecessors, and their campuses were not surrounded by university walls. Thus, in the Slavic languages, the word "university" functions as the one that encompasses the notion of the institution of higher education, the building(s) in which it is located, and the life of the people associated with it. Therefore, it is reflected in the literary terminology: powieść uniwersytecka, univerzitný román, університецький роман. In this article, the terms "campus novel", "university novel", or "campus fiction" are used interchangeably to emphasise the students' lives in the texts discussed.

In countries of East-Central Europe, in particular Poland, Ukraine, and Slovakia, the novels that may be attributed to campus fiction began to appear with greater frequency after 1989/1993. This reflects their strong connection to the political situation of the time. It is beyond doubt that the emergence of campus fiction was also caused by the changed status of the university as a representative and interpolator of state power, which it had been for decades, into an institution of higher education following the fall of the Communist regime (Gwóźdź-Szewczenko, 2019). Indeed, it could even be argued that it represents a residual institution. In consequence of this historical context, the dominant themes of these campus novels relate to their country's history, both in terms of living through the traumatic past and reconstructing it from the perspective of the present day. Furthermore, they refer to different episodes in the history of their countries. In view of the absence of a campus novel tradition in Slavic literature, it is unsurprising that such works are often classified as historical novels or mysteries, particularly when they incorporate a detective plotline.

Another noteworthy aspect of these texts is their portrayal of university life and the "university men" (students and professors collectively) within the context of a vast historical backdrop. Student culture, which originated concurrently with the establishment of universities, flourished as the scale of university education expanded and became more widely accessible. As the number of students increased, a shared experience led to the formation of a particular culture or subculture. A comprehensive historical analysis of student culture in the Warsaw Pact countries reveals a significant degree of shared characteristics, including the existence of various student organisations and clubs dedicated to academic, scientific, sporting, or political activities. Nevertheless, each country exhibited distinctive characteristics contingent upon the prevailing social and political circumstances of the era (Kola, 2009; Volko, 2018). The contemporary university fiction emphasises these nuances in plot structure, characters and settings, creating models of the past or fictional reconstructions that also reveal the university's current condition, characterised by a sense of loss and dislocation of the university community, on the one hand, and a possibility of regaining it in foreign lands, on the other. It is, therefore, essential to consider the reconstruction of the university's past in the countries of East-Central Europe, as well as its depiction in campus fiction.

In this regard, the texts discussed below present two dominant themes in Polish, Slovak, and Ukrainian fiction focused on campus life. The first of these is the coming-of-age in a society under Communist rule, set in the recent past. The second is the contemporary challenges of student or young scholar academic exchange. Pavol Rankov's *Legenda o jazyku* (2018) and Maryna Hrymych's *Yura* (2020) concentrate on university life during the Communist era in Czechoslovakia and Ukraine. As representatives of the 1960s generation, both international award-winning authors are known in Slovakia and Ukraine as distinguished academics and novelists who have made significant contributions to the study of their countries' past. Meanwhile, the younger generation of authors Jagoda Grudzień from Poland and Tania Kalytenko from Ukraine depict contemporary campus life from the female perspective based on their personal academic exchange experience

in their novels *Erasmopeja* (2014) and *Antero* (2020), respectively. Collectively, these novels provide insight into the socio-cultural landscape of these countries as a whole, as reflected in the campus life captured in certain historical moments.

1968: trauma, revision, reconstruction

Until recently, the topic of the Soviet invasion of Czechoslovakia was virtually absent from contemporary Ukrainian fiction. In her novel *Yura*, Maryna Hrymych addresses this episode of Soviet Ukrainian history from a student's perspective, thereby infusing the coming-of-age theme with a historical dimension. The Slovak writer Pavol Rankov addresses the social consequences of the Soviet invasion for the Prague university community in his novel *Legenda o jazyku*, set several years later. Both novels challenge the long-held assumption that the invaders and victims were distinct entities, demonstrating that the event had a profound impact on both parties. They also encourage a re-evaluation of history from a post-colonial/post-Communist perspective, highlighting the similarities in the cultural memory of the recent past on both sides of the former Soviet border.

The protagonist of Hrymych's eponymous novel is Yura Baklanov, a second-year undergraduate student at the Department of Physics in one of the universities in Kyiv. He is the son of Oleksandr Baklanov, a high-ranking KGB officer, and Klavdia Baklanova, the current editor-in-chief of a prominent literary journal. Yura's social circle comprises the offspring of his parents' professional colleagues, who reside in the exclusive building reserved for high-ranking party officials. These young people are referred to as the "golden youth" due to the advantageous position of their parents, which affords them a distinct set of opportunities in life. However, they are expected to make assertive, predetermined decisions to demonstrate their allegiance. In the context of a gradually restrictive political climate, Yura is confronted with a decision regarding his friends and university colleagues that will significantly impact his future in the Soviet Union.

In the novel *Yura*, the university environment is portrayed primarily from the perspective of extracurricular activities, i.e. meetings or other events of the Komsomol youth under the close supervision of Communist Party members. Classes and exams are only mentioned in passing. For the protagonist, Yura, the defence of his term paper becomes a moment of truth, a choice and a coming of age (a final stage of maturation). As a student of physics, Yura appreciated working with the only nuclear physicist at the university, Dr Majstrenko, and his talented fellow student from a peasant background, Mykhailo Nejizhak. Under the conditions of the Khrushchev Thaw, the two became involved in a political matter: in April 1968, they both signed the petition expressing their protest against the political persecution in Ukraine initiated by the mathematicians and physicists, known as the "Letter of 137" (Hrymych, 2020, p. 159). The response of the authorities after the letter was delivered to senior officials in Moscow directly affected the professor and his student: Dr Majstrenko is dismissed and awaits arrest, and his student Mykhajlo awaits expulsion from the university. Yura, a secretary of the Komsomol organisation, was faced with the choice of siding with them or disowning them both. Disowning meant "staying

on the bright side of the street" (Hrymych, 2020, p. 265)[1] and securing his further career as a politically correct scientist. It also meant organising a public accusation of his fellow student and friend in anti-Soviet activities to expel him from the Komsomol organisation, as his ideological superior Ivan Rafailovich Druzhkov expected him to do. Despite the disadvantages of his career, Yura chooses to prevent his friend's public disgrace and to publicly acknowledge his friend and teacher's involvement in his research, thus siding with the political outcasts. With this act of honesty and courage, Yura wins the respect of the members of the Academic Council, who, under the circumstances, silently express it in public with a firm handshake, which also makes Yura aware of the fact that not all professors (even if the majority of them were members of the Communist Party) are like Druzhkov: "There are also faculty members. The academic (professional) community. And they are much bigger power than him [Druzhkov – O. B.]" (Hrymych, 2020, p. 252).

Another traditional aspect of student life is friendship, sometimes even more formative and meaningful than social awareness or academic achievement. In Hrymych's novel, the protagonist is shown to have a close relationship with a group of peers who live in the same building. First called "the hearts of four" or "the four musketeers" (three boys, Yura, Andriy, Garik, and a girl, Zoya), then "the hearts of six" (Rita, first Yura's girlfriend, later Andriy and Zoya's boyfriend Roman), these young people are portrayed at the moment of their transition to adulthood, which for each of them is conditioned by different triggers. One of these triggers is the events of 1968 in Czechoslovakia. The novel presents the parents of the "golden youth" as the direct organisers and participants in the invasion of Czechoslovakia, albeit "to prevent a greater evil". The invasion coincides with Rita's stay in Prague for the Czech Summer School. There, she learns about student movements in France and Poland, which she had never heard of in Soviet Ukraine. Circumstantially involved in the protest against Soviet tanks in the streets of Prague, she shares this experience with friends upon arrival in Kyiv, admiring the Czechs' peaceful attempt to stop the tanks and noting the different reactions of foreign students to this protest. While the French encouraged her to participate in the protest, the Pole refused, having survived the March Uprising in Poland and fully aware of the consequences. A few days after Rita secretly shared her feelings and observations with her friends, she was arrested and interrogated by the KGB. Rita's boyfriend, Andriy, interprets her arrest as the result of Yura's (her former boyfriend's) betrayal, motivated by jealousy and wounded pride. Soon after, in the aftermath of the end of the thaw in Ukraine, Zoya's boyfriend, Roman, is arrested for his involvement in the underground activities of the Greek Catholic Church. In protest at the actions of her father's department against Roman, Zoya desperately leaves home to find a safe haven with the Baklanovs. In both cases, Yura proves to be a loyal friend, but these events cause him to reassess his values and what he has always described as "simply his father's job". In the light of the "Czechoslovak events", the latter turns out to be more difficult than the young people thought, conflicted and ambiguous rather than blunt and straightforward. On New Year's Eve, when all the problems have been resolved,

[1] All the translations from Polish and Ukrainian into English are mine – O. B.

and Zoya is trying to sum up the experience of 1968, she says to her friends and their parents gathered around the dinner table: “We are different. We are a different generation” (Hrymych, 2020, p. 326). This statement leaves the reader with an ambivalent feeling when, shortly afterwards, at the end of the evening, her father, the KGB general, gets up to deal with the newly arrested students.

Meanwhile, Pavol Rankov’s novel *The Legend of the Tongue (Legenda o jazyku)* focuses on student life in Czechoslovakia in 1972, three years into the period of normalisation, which was a return to Stalinism or a “soft totalitarian regime” (Žilka, 2009, p. 123) supervised and controlled by the Soviet Union. The main characters in Rankov’s novels are “the problematic four” – Tomaš, Martin, Taňa and Klara – as the professor of “Czechoslovak History I”, Dr. Šindelář defined the four freshmen at the History Department of Charles University in Prague almost from the beginning. In contrast to the rest of the students, who are obedient and willing to be led by the Czech Communist Party and its youth organisation, the four students stand out as questioning and resisting, if not rebelling against, the generally accepted approach to history. Meanwhile, Tomaš describes the professor as “a sneaky agent provocateur, applying elaborate techniques to establish which students are religious to mention them in his next report for his department authorities, the Party committee, or even the Department of State Security” (Rankov, 2020, p. 31) and a “one hundred per cent comrade who in 1968 successfully resisted temptations of democracy” (Rankov, 2020, p. 52). Dr. Šindelář, like Druzhkov, helps students organise the Union of Socialist Youth and elect its representatives at the end of his class. After the first day of classes, Tomaš ironically described his newfound friends as “class enemies of the state” (Rankov, 2020, p. 53). The events that followed show the extent to which the internal security services were prepared to overstep their authority in monitoring potential student rebels.

Unlike the “golden youth” (children of KGB officials) from Kyiv, Czechoslovak students are not protected by their parents’ background; on the contrary, as intelligentsia, they are considered unreliable, requiring special attention on the part of the proper organs. In the face of the political cleansing that followed the invasion of 1968, Tomaš’s parents (a religious teacher and an engineer) moved to Prague to disappear from the local radar. Taňa is the only one who, like the Kyiv youth, comes from a family of state officials; they moved to Prague because of her father’s promotion at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, but she is reluctant to inform the others about it. Ultimately, just as Zoya’s father is unable to prevent the KGB investigation of her friends Rita and Roman in the novel *Yura*, Taňa’s father is unable to protect her and Tomaš from the Department of Internal Security and their strong desire to find and fight “class enemies” among the students: instead obediently agrees to it.

In Rankov’s novel *The Legend of the Tongue*, the plot, which revolves around student life in the 1970s, is developed with the legend of St Nepomucen as a subplot. The legend presents Jan Nepomucen as a Catholic priest and Queen Sophia’s confessor, who was tortured and killed by King Václav IV, his body dismembered and thrown into the Vltava River from Charles Bridge in Prague. Since the 15th century, the legend has accompanied

the various stages of development of the cult of Nepomuk, which has become one of the strongest and most deeply rooted elements of Czech culture. With the Soviet occupation of Czechoslovakia in 1968, the subversion and destruction of people's religious beliefs was one of the main objectives of the communist ideology, which was introduced and promoted at the university level. In the course "Czechoslovak History I", first-year students are expected to reconstruct the history of the legend's reception through the centuries to disprove its veracity. At the same time, at the National Museum in Prague, an "international scientific team" is studying the relic of the saint – the tongue of St Nepomucenus – driven by a purely scientific interest in the relic. "The problematic four" are convinced that whatever the results, "the Party and the government" will never reveal the truth. While Yura's mother, the editor of a literary magazine, instructs her son, who wants to make a career in the Komsomol, to "learn their language (which makes no sense but still), ritual and find his place in the hierarchy" (Hrymych, 2020, pp. 122–115), Tomaš and his friends can hardly tolerate this language of lies. Their desire to find and publish factual data about the relic drives them in their research and after-school activities.

Similarly to Yura, who found professional communication with Dr Majstrenko and his friend Mykhajlo particularly enjoyable, the friends' conversations are most stimulating for them as historians. Although Tomaš Dobrotka's parents ask him to be careful what he says and try to "hide" the fact getting a job in a museum, he and Taňa make contact with a foreign student in the international team to learn about the findings first hand. This act led to them being accused of conspiracy. Their arrest and eventual disappearance from the student community goes unnoticed by the rest of their peers, who, as in Soviet Ukraine, agree to play by the rules and not cause trouble. Although Ranko's novel deals with the issue of the collective memory of the recent past, the students' story suggests that the university as an institution (during the period of normalisation and later after 1989) is responsible for cultural amnesia in Slovakia.

Academic exchange as a quest for identity

In campus fiction, novels with doctoral students as protagonists can form a separate group. In the context of this article, an interesting example of the representation of student culture in novels that focus on the academic exchange experience of students is given. In the twenty-first century, academic exchange programmes can be seen as a contemporary variant of the traditional "Grand Tour", an educational journey for classically trained British aristocrats in the eighteenth century. The conventional destination at that time was Italy; the journey was supposed to be the final stage of higher education and a symbol of the gentleman's maturity. It is symptomatic that the protagonists of *Erasmopeja* (2014) Jagoda *Grudzień* and *Antero* (2020) by Tania Kalytenko are women, and that for them, the "Grand Tour" is not the final stage of their studies but a kind of temporary episode, which is nevertheless of paramount importance in terms of personality development.

In both novels, academic exchange brings the foreign experience of female academics to the fore. Grudzień's protagonist, Marcela, takes advantage of the one-year Erasmus

exchange programme in Norway, while Kalytenko's protagonist, Olena, comes to Finland on a four-months scholarship. Both are in a liminal state: for Marcela, the programme covers a year after her graduation and before she begins her doctoral studies in Polish literature; for Olena, the four months are intended to cover the time needed to complete a project, mainly based on library research and self-study under the formal supervision of a local tutor. As international students, they belong to a different category of strangers, neither tourists nor wanderers; their presence neither disturbs nor inspires the locals (Bauman, 1995); instead, they are temporary visitors to the university, looking for an adventure and at the same time becoming shining examples of the *homo café* generation (Mrozik, 2012, p. 78). The interplay between the two characters is slightly different due to their ages and national backgrounds; however, they both represent the humanities (theatre and cultural studies, respectively), which allows their search for identity to unfold against the socio-cultural backdrop of contemporary Western European society.

As the genre of the coming-of-age novel implies and as the title of the novel suggests, for Marcela (almost like for Ulysses), a year at the University of Bergen becomes an adventure of self-discovery and a glorious homecoming. Initially longing "to prolong her studies, the best thing ever that a person can encounter in his/her life, for as long as possible and to diversify it as much as one can" (Grudzień, 2014, p. 9), and not knowing what to choose, Marcela entrusts her decision to a Norwegian university and a Ph.D. recruitment commission in Warsaw. On the day of the Ph.D. entrance exam, it turns out that she is "throwing herself into the vortex of life and making her first life-changing decision" (Grudzień, 2014, p. 14), choosing Norway. The student hostel becomes her new home, where she meets many foreigners, enjoys parties and group hikes, develops new friendships and finds a job to keep her head above water. Here in Norway, Marcela transforms from a shy girl into a responsible adult, capable of earning 70 ECTS points in humanities and a diploma. *Erasmopeja* reads like a detailed guide to the Erasmus student experience, decorated with numerous funny episodes carefully arranged by a third-person narrator who could be Marcela herself, enriched by her Erasmus year with distance and irony. The narration is also characterised by literary digressions that comment on this prose as "a classical tragedy or at least a postmodern pastiche on the classical tragedy" (Grudzień, 2014, p. 29) and its construction.

During Marcela's epic adventure in Norway, several events occur that suggest that they had a character-forming effect. The first is related to the administrative problems of Erasmus student life. Comparing her experience with that of a Mexican student to legalise her stay in Norway, she concludes that "all that matters in life is an ability to follow the crowd and the EU citizenship" (Grudzień, 2014, p. 31). Another event is her first night as a waitress, which turns out to be successful; however, during this night, she becomes acutely aware that she does not want to be associated with the Polish labour emigrants and that she "feels ashamed being here and being like them" (Grudzień, 2014, p. 75). The next success is academic: Marcela manages to pass three final exams in Norwegian and graduates. Although campus life (classes, lectures, tutorials) only appears in a few paragraphs in the novel, because during Erasmus, "even if one wanted to study, there

was no time to" (Grudzień, 2014, p. 101) due to Friday parties and other extracurricular activities, the attention Marcela pays to the feedback from the professors after the exams suggests that during her stay academic achievement was, after all, of primary importance to her. The diploma she receives at the end confirms her academic excellence and acceptance by the international scientific community. For her, it will also be the final proof of her ability and desire to continue her doctoral studies in Poland.

In *Erasmopeja*, the image of student life is presented as that of an international community, the future European elites who will decide the fate of a united Europe in a few decades, while the host university appears as a place of foreign socialisation and learning, offering both local and incoming students the opportunity to make friends and possibly establish long-term relationships across and beyond borders. As one of the German students says:

> ...we, students, are the future of the nations, we, students, especially those majoring in the Humanities, especially those connected to sociology, psychology, media, foreign languages, and other influential trends. We [Germans – O. B.] are sending abroad master students, who hold the future of Europe in their hands to meet several people from other countries and understand that all are nice, not dangerous, and in fact, the same as us. … it is difficult to spread hatred on a big scale, when you know someone in person, it is easy to throw big words without proof into a crowd. Meanwhile, we, students of the Humanities, get the most of it. (Grudzień, 2014, p. 137)

The Erasmus exchange programme is an excellent social, educational and forward-looking initiative. Still, both the narrator and the characters in the novels seem to recognise that the validation of this noble belief will only be evident decades later. In the meantime, *gaudeamus igitur, iuvenes dum sumus*. Given the narrator's attempt to portray Marcela's journey as a "postmodern pastiche of the classical tragedy", such an assessment of the Erasmus programme can also be read as a subtle criticism of EU cultural and educational policy in the age of globalisation.

In the novel *Antero* by Kalytenko, Olena (Leena) arrives in Helsinki from Kyiv to study the motif of remembering and forgetting in mass culture. This academic interest in cultural memory turns out to be deeply intertwined with her family history. Her great-grandfather, who returned to his village long after the end of the Second World War with only a spoon and tuberculosis as war trophies, had his participation in the Russo-Finnish War (1939–1940) shrouded in silence. Nevertheless, Olena feels his presence the moment she sets foot on Finnish soil.

According to the legend on the book's cover, "Antero Vipunen was a mythological giant, who after his death merged with the land, the trees started to grow through his body, and thus he became the land of mythological Kalevala" (Kalytenko, 2020). Other sources mention that Antero was a giant shaman with powerful spells dating back to creation. According to this variant of the legend, Olena's character could be interpreted as the mythical hero Väinämöinen, who came to Finland to awaken Antero to obtain his spells to write her family history. Groping her way through this mystical experience, Olena (who

from this point on introduces herself as Leena) tries on imaginary personae: a wild woman in a long leopard coat, an invader who might have been her great-grandfather, a volunteer helping a family of Syrian refugees whom she invites to share her small dormitory room, an academic doing research as part of an international team of scholars. In this fragmented but very sensual reality, she walks in her great-grandfather's footsteps during long night walks; while looking at museum pictures, she imagines scenes of violence against him by Finnish soldiers; while visiting the spacious university library, "sees" war hospital floors filled with the wounded and a faceless scholar, whom she knows to be herself, working at the desk; she lives her imaginary and extremely vicious violent attacks against random male Finns, all named Otto and looking alike. This mental inability to establish personal relationships with the locals is linked to her unarticulated appropriation of the role of the invader, the foreigner, the conqueror that her great-grandfather must have been. She thinks: "To be an invader means to be detached… You want to suck up from the land all the best there is, all the tastiest, all the fattest. …you need more and more proof that you took away all the best the locals had" (Kalytenko, 2020, p. 41). The convoluted nature of her "invader complex" is the greatest challenge in Olena's interaction with the Finns.

In her understanding, this trip to Finland was necessary to complete the cause started by her ancestors (Kalytenko, 2020, p. 196). However, her great-grandfather's silenced war experience does not allow her to associate him either with invaders (Ukrainians were Soviet soldiers due to Ukraine's colonial status within the Soviet Union) or with victims (for the Finns, he was a Russian soldier and invader). His untold story becomes the source of Olena's endless attempts to "get to the truth," which turn into speculation and further immersion in the memory she has constructed for herself and out of her helplessness. Torn between guilt towards the Finns and the need to create a "prosthetic" family memory, Olena makes several attempts to explain her story to different people but in vain. An old Finn, whom she meets in the library and tries to confess to, suggests that she leave the past behind and sort out her own life (Kalytenko, 2020, pp. 142–143). A stranger named Otto suggests that she stop looking for the "footprints of others" at the expense of her "own path" and "future" (Kalytenko, 2020, p. 173). The relief comes after she confesses her family history to a random stranger, Annikki. Instead of rejection and contempt, Olena receives gratitude for reviving the forgotten history of Annikki's family, who were twice deported from Karelia (Kalytenko, 2020, p. 226). Thus, the journey to foreign lands is, in fact, a search for forgiveness, acceptance and identity.

Meanwhile, the university is a domain of society that prefers to remain objective and detached – read "indifferent and impersonal" – working with historical facts rather than people and their "bags of memories". It is no paradox that Olena sides with Ali, a Syrian refugee, who sees Europe as the land of dying culture and Europeans as those who look at refugees, "nod, express condolences, say something like 'oh, poor kid, poor kids', sipping their words with coffee in snow-white tiny cups" (Kalytenko, 2020, p. 167). She also feels that Ukraine is an outcast from Europe, a non-white people "despite the colour of the skin, eyes, and hair", "a poor, ill relative, who is cared for but never approached in order not to catch the "black" taint" (Kalytenko, 2020, p. 168). The lunch with her supervisor and

fellow students only highlights the gap between Olena's world and the quiet, contented, and partially isolated by the comfort and security of the university community of the Western world, which is neither touched by war nor interested in the tragedies of "small nations".

Although it may seem that *Erasmopeja* and *Antero* present two educational journeys that could not be more different, they share a common ground: an academic exchange programme within which the characters' identity is (re)constructed, the foreign campus becomes for them the Foucauldian "other space", the site of self-exploration that provides both the freedom and the conditions necessary for this personal growth. Moreover, campus life abroad offers a different perspective on both the global and the local campus, this "microcosm" reflecting all the social, political and cultural particularities of contemporary Europe and the world at large.

Conclusion

In the Anglo-American literary tradition, campus fiction is associated with the depiction of university life, which, from the perspective of the professors, is "a valuable one to live", as C. P. Snow put it in *The Masters* (1951). Still, campus life is "a place where humanity plays out its obsessions and discovers what makes life bearable" (Jay Parini, quoted in Showalter, 2005, p. 3). When narrated from the student's perspective, the account of university life typically adopts a nostalgic tone "for the beauties and ineffable subtleties of undergraduate life, almost always at Oxford, Cambridge or, if American, an Ivy League university" (Moseley, 2007, p. 100). It is safe to say that while some novels adhere to this generic convention, Slavic campus fiction, currently being written in Polish, Slovak and Ukrainian, offers a different perspective on university life. The university life portrayed in the novels *Legenda o jazyku* by Pavol Rankov, *Yura* by Maryna *Hrymych*, *Erasmopeja* by Jagoda Grudzień and *Antero* by Tania Kalytenko suggests that university history is inextricably linked to the collective and cultural memory of these nations, which has been either silenced or lost due to difficult historical circumstances. The novels of Pavol Rankov and Maryna Hrymych argue that the cultural climate of the 1960s was particularly formative for university youth on both sides of the Soviet border. At the same time, Tania Kalytenko's protagonist, although situated in the context of contemporary Europe exposed to the waves of refugees, goes back in time to the Russo-Finnish war of 1939–1940 in her "remembering" of her family history. Jagoda Grudzień, on the other hand, presents a somewhat idealised vision of a united Europe whose future is entrusted to today's Erasmus scholars. The values espoused in these novels include national identity, historical and cultural awareness and collective memory. These are essential for promoting openness and tolerance in a globalised world. The analysis of the selected novels shows that campus fiction in Slovak, Polish and Ukrainian literature not only records the contemporary history of the institution but also (re)constructs its previous decades, which opens up new possibilities for further research.

Notes

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