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If art is a lie that brings us closer to the truth, can Russian literature be read after the Bucha massacre?

Если искусство представляет собой ложь, способствующую приближению к истине, то возможно ли изучение русской литературы на фоне событий, произошедших в Буче?

Abstract. The purpose of this article is to propose a reflection based on the question: "Is it possible to read Russian literature after the Bucha massacre?" This question gives rise to a number of reflections, firstly, on the relationship between war and literature, with reference to Theodor Adorno's famous aphorism; secondly, on the immediate, not infrequent reaction of rejection of any cultural and artistic expression of a Russian nature, with the consequent links to the paradigms of "cancel culture". On the basis of statements on the subject by Russian and Ukrainian writers, poets and scholars, as well as other interlocutors from Western cultures, an attempt will be made to propose an answer to the first question that is not only dictated by an instinctive impulse, but also by an articulated and, above all, motivated reasoning.

Keywords: Russian literature, cancel culture, censorship, Russo-Ukrainian war, literature defense

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On an unspecified day in March 2022, and within weeks of the invasion of Ukrainian territory, more than five hundred people were massacred in Bucha. Their bodies lay abandoned in the streets or half-buried in mass graves until the town was liberated by Ukrainian forces. The massacre of Bucha is a symbol of Ukrainian resistance and a watershed separating two spatial (Russia and Ukraine) and chronological (before and after the extermination) dimensions, two cultural fronts, each in fact osmotically linked to the other (Russia and Ukraine; Russia and the Western world) and, above all, two perceptions – separated by a deep rupture – of the literary word. We can imagine this painful rupture for Taras Shevchenko[1], the

[1] It may be argued that the reference to the renowned Ukrainian writer appears somewhat incongruous and misplaced in this context. It should be noted that the contemporary circumstances

great Ukrainian poet and writer – "in many ways it can be said that Shevchenko is the personification of Ukraine and identifies with his country like no other Ukrainian writer" (Siedina 334) – who wrote in his diary on 24 March 1858:

> 24 [марта]
> Еще раз виделся с Сергеем Тимофеевичем Аксаковым и с его симпатическим семейством и еще раз счастлив. Очаровательный старец! […].
> От Аксаковых заехали к В.Н. Репниной, а от нее к актеру Шумскому. Вкусили священной пасхи с вестфальской колбасой и поехали к Станкевичам. Не застали дома. Отправились в книжный магазин Н.М. Щепкина и комп., где и остались обедать. Обед был званый: Николай Михайлович праздновал новоселье своего магазина и по этому случаю задал пир московской учено-литературной знаменитости. И что это за очаровательная знаменитость! Молодая, живая, увлекающаяся, свободная! Здесь я встретил Бабста, Чичерина, Кетчера, Мина, Кронеберга-сына, Афанасьева, Станкевича, Корша, Крузе и многих других; я встретился и познакомился с ними как с давно знакомыми, родными людьми. И за всю эту полную радость обязан я моему знаменитому другу М.С. Щепкину (Ševčenko 215)[2].

It is precisely this rupture that, because of its dual ethical-moral and cultural implications, raises an inescapable question in our contemporary witnesses: "Can Russian literature be read after Bucha?"[3]. This dramatic question recalls the compelling but not definitive statement formulated by Theodor Adorno in 1949 and published in 1951 in the essay *Kulturkritik und Gesellschaft*: "Nach Auschwitz

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and facts are, in actuality, distant and wholly foreign to the historical and cultural milieu in which Shevchenko is situated. However, it must be recognised that the profound respect demonstrated by a Ukrainian literary scholar, who is not fully acquainted with the Russian language, towards the Russian *intelligencija*, fosters the establishment of an ideal and accomplished intellectual unity. This unity is consolidated through the peaceful and fruitful discourse between the Ukrainian and Russian cultures.

[2] As we know, he left the Orsk garrison thanks to the persistent requests of Fëodor Tolstoi, vice-president of the Academy of Arts, and his wife, Countess Anna, for his final discharge from the Imperial Army, in which he had served as a corporal after serving a prison sentence for criticism of tsarist politics. After receiving an imperial pardon, he had to settle first in Astrakhan and then in Nizhnij Novgorod between June 1857 and July 1858. During these years, Shevchenko met and visited some important members of the Russian *intelligencija*, with whom he established deep friendships and fruitful collaborations. For example, the theatre actor Michail Shchepkin and his son Nikolaj, the publisher and educator, the writer and literary and theatre critic Sergej Aksakov, the writer and publicist Nikolaj Stankevich, the philosopher and jurist Boris Chicherin, the writer and translator Nikolaj Ketcher, the translator and critic Andrei Kroneberg, the folklorist and scholar Aleksandr Afanas'ev, the progressive journalist and translator Evgenij Korsh, the doctor, translator and poet Dmitrij Min.

[3] This question can be introduced by Pablo Picasso's famous and categorical statement: "El arte no es la verdad" (Picasso). It's easy to see how Picasso's statement might make the supporters of the erasure of Russian literature feel more confident about their beliefs. They see a strong link between a nation and its culture, and they might think that the ethical and moral ideas in Russian novels are false, and that the idea that literature has a teaching role is a lie.

ein Gedicht zu schreiben, ist barbarisch". The question "Can Russian literature be read after Bucha?" is a chronological and ontological consequence of Adorno's aphorism, and the concept of 'barbarism' unites the recipients of the philosopher's implicit warning and the question that has animated a lively and unresolved debate since 24 February 2022: writers, poets and men of letters, on the one hand, and readers, on the other, who are in turn reciprocal interlocutors in the dialogue that is supposed to contribute to the development of a civilization. If writing poetry after Auschwitz is a barbaric act, then reading poetry, or literature in general, produced by the civilization to which those who massacred Bucha's inhabitants humanity belong, seems an equally nefarious act. What ideally unites the Adornian statement and the collective question is probably the feeling of horror that deprives man of speech and creates a stony silence, that annihilates all thought and indefinitely suspends all intention: the horror inherent in the metonymic valence of the two place names, Auschwitz and Bucha. The well-known statement by Theodor Adorno seems to translate the feeling of pain, mixed with bewilderment and disbelief, that invades the mind and spirit of Ukrainian poets and writers: "после Бучи, Марюполя, Изюма невозможно писать стихи. […] Теодор Адорно, будь он нашим современником, снова назвал бы стихописание варварством и снова оказался бы прав" (Garber, electronic source).

The destiny of the poet has not changed in the course of time: to overcome the impossible and to say the unsayable, a mission with a double and distressing result, which is expressed either in a deafening silence[4] in response, or in the accusation of having committed a barbaric act (Garber, electronic source). Even in the fatal moments of history, poetry continues to speak to man about himself. It is always addressed to each and every human being: to those oppressed by pain or crushed by despair, to those paralyzed by fear or spiritually impenetrable. Impervious to any emotional appeal, Adorno continues his reflections and arrives at a lapidary and, at least in appearance, irrevocable conclusion: whoever becomes part of the culture of the aggressor becomes an accomplice to the crime against

[4] The silence of poetry as the only possible response to the barbarity of war is not unusual in human history. One example is the famous poem *Alle fronde dei salici* (*On the Willow Boughs*, 1944) by Salvatore Quasimodo, in which the author recalls the sacrifice of silence made by poets during the Nazi occupation: "And we, how could we sing/with a foreign foot on our heart/among dead abandoned in the squares,/on the grass hard with ice/to the lamb bleat of children,/the black howl of the mother/going toward her son/crucified on a pole?", evoking the impossibility of writing poetry: "On the willow boughs, as an offering,/even our lyres were hung,/and lightly swayed in the sad wind" (Quasimodo 127). The image of the lyres hanging from the branches of the willows refers to the silence of the Jewish people deported to Babylon, celebrated in the Psalm: "How can we sing the songs of the Lord / while in a foreign land?/[…] There on the poplars we hung our harps" (Psalm 37 *By the Rivers of Babylon*).

life. He therefore declares the need for a new categorical imperative, stating that it is not the repression of spiritual ignorance, but rather the arrogant contempt displayed by that same spiritual ignorance, that leads to the failure of culture and civilization, and ultimately to the failure of life itself, since it is above all the failure of morality.

After Auschwitz, "there is no more innocence of becoming" (Bellan, Cicatello, Cortella 115). The moral disapproval of any creative act related to art touches on a further and broader question: is it still possible to "live and think after Auschwitz?" (Bellan, Cicatello, Cortella 117). It is a German-speaking Romanian poet, Paul Celan, in his famous lyric poem *Todesfuge*, composed around 1945 and published in Romanian in 1947 and in German in 1949, who breaks the moral constraint expressed in Adorno's aphorism by explicitly addressing issues such as anti-Semitic hatred and the extermination of the Jews[5]. Against the background of the long, albeit intermittent, epistolary dialogue between the philosopher and the poet from 1960 to 1968, Theodor Adorno contrasts his own original, dogmatic aphorism with a completely different one. Adorno uses the adjectives 'questionable' and 'paradoxical' to define the concept of 'culture resurrected after Auschwitz', arguing that any work yet to be born will pay a bitter price. However, since the world has survived its demise, art must in any case be understood as a stunned historiography of the world itself (Gnani). Faced with such a reformulation, observes Paola Gnani, "our thoughts cannot but run to the figure of Paul Celan" (Gnani 106). In *Negative Dialectics*, Adorno returns to his statement about the impossibility and inappropriateness of writing poetry after Auschwitz, calling it a mistake: "Eternal suffering has as much right to expression as a tortured man has to scream; therefore, it may have been wrong to say that after Auschwitz one could no longer write poetry" (Adorno 2004: 362). In August 1969 Theodor Adorno died, and in the spring of the following year Paul Celan took his own life. Among the German philosopher's papers were some reflections on Paul Celan: "they probably constitute the fundamental core of the often announced and never published essay on the poet's work" (Gnani 178). Adorno wrote of Celan's poetry as follows: "His poetry is permeated by the shame of art in the face of suffering that escapes both experience and sublimation. Celan's poems want to speak of the most extreme horror through silence" (Adorno 2002: 322). The German

[5] It is worth recalling the fundamental encounter with the work of Osip Mandel'shtam – Paul Celan translated some of Mandel'shtam's poems into German and published them in the *Neue Rundschau* in 1958 – and the profound identification with the fate of the Russian poet, with whom he had a lot in common: the Jewish roots; the passion for translation and the mission of poetry; the dramatic experience of persecution and imprisonment in a camp; and finally the tragic death instinct, albeit with different results (Gnani).

philosopher thus recognizes the value of Celan's voice, "radically persistent in affirming poetry's right to exist even after Auschwitz and genocide" (Gnani 178).

So even after Bucha, the poetic word must live on. The Ukrainian poet Aleksandr Kabanov takes up this exhortation and publishes the collection *Iskhodnik* [The Fugitive] in Russian, in the language of the enemy, and in 2022, but with the Jewish-American publishing house Sefer Izrael. Although everyday life can never be the same and every poem is only an attempt to overcome the impossible (Garber, electronic source), the poet writes "чтобы люди помнили/ это мы лежим во рвах" (Kabanov 31).

One can, one must, try to answer the question "Can Russian literature be read after Bucha?" without seeking a definitive and, above all, irrefutable answer, perhaps by exploring two different and, at first sight, antithetical perspectives, expressed both in the immediate or not entirely mediated reflections published on blogs and in the reflections articulated in academic or scientific contributions. If the former often offer a clear or even dogmatic and unyielding vision derived from the urgency of history in the making, as a dimension of the *hic et nunc*, and introjected by those who feel called to play the role of active witness to the present, the latter invite the sharing of a broad perspective, freed from the contingency of the moment and oriented towards questions of an achronic and universalistic nature.

It is well known that the blog is a new genre of journalism, characterized by a narrative style and the personalization of news, and thus differs significantly from traditional journalism (Wall). Much of the information crosses the borders of cities, nations and continents and is immediately shared with readers who, if authorized by the blogger, interact with the published narrative, becoming interlocutors rather than passive recipients of the written word (Wall).

It is a poet, publicist and art critic, Russian and pro-Putin, a supporter of the so-called "special military operation", as well as a volunteer fighter, who ideally starts the debate. More than a year after the invasion of Ukraine, Aleksej Shorohov published a short intervention on his blog. The title, *Смысл литературы сегодня*, expresses with millimetric precision the premise of the collective debate, not without dissonances, authentic stumbling blocks, which is necessary for the widest and deepest possible reflection, as well as surprising and painful. The subtitle "Мысли с фронта" immediately throws us into the place and time of barbarism, where Aleksej Shorohov becomes an active subject, enlisting in the Russian army in December 2023, taking part in military operations and receiving military rewards. His speech begins with a solemn declaration: "Литература, подлинное, это то, что выхват человека из потока жизни и ставит перед самим собой" (Šorohov, electronic source). He then explains that literature – and poetry in particular – is placed in a prophetic dimension. Above all, however, he addresses

a question that inescapably constitutes an essential theme in the consideration of the question: "Can Russian literature be read after Bucha?"

> Есть такое распространённое заблуждение, что литература может кого-то изменить. Сделать лучше. Добрее.
> Мы тащим с собой это убеждение из Русского XIX века.
> Но есть факты. Ленин читал Толстого. И Тургенева. Лейба Троцкий читал (и даже лично знал) Есенина.
> Гитлер читал Гёте. И Шиллера.
> Основатель ГУЛАГа Нафталий Френкель читал Достоевского.
> Эсесовский палач доктор Менгеле проходил в школе Гофмана.
> Стали ли они лучше?
> Ответ очевиден.
> Но. Совершенно не исключено, что маленький Ульянов мог рыдать над судьбой Муму. А юный Шикльгрубер над страданиями бедного Вертера (Šorohov, electronic source).

Shorohov's thoughts, which are perfectly understandable, are reminiscent of similar considerations made by the Ukrainian artist and philosopher Andrii Dostliev, a representative of the culture that suffered from Russian aggression. This is how Dostliev addresses his readers:

> Just think of it – at some point in their lives, every Russian politician planning the occupation of Ukraine, every Russian military commander giving orders and every Russian soldier obeying those orders, every Russian state propagandist calling for the genocide, and every Russian citizen happily swallowing those propaganda pieces, every fucking one of them had to read Tolstoy (Dostliev, electronic source).

Narrowing his field of observation to a snapshot of the protagonists at the front, the bearers of death, he sarcastically insists on the tragic failure of the civilising mission of Russian literature and, in particular, of Tolstoi's pacifist doctrine: "Every murderer in Bucha, every plunderer in Irpin, every torturer in Olenivka and every executioner in Popasna had received an obligatory infusion of Tolstoy's supposedly irreplaceable writings" (Dostliev, electronic source).

He vehemently calls for the erasure of Russian culture and the initiation of a process of de-imperialization of Russia's classical and contemporary cultural heritage. He argues that the narratives imposed by this civilization dehumanize the cultures subjugated by imperial conquest. The symbolic image of this literary oppression and colonization is Dostliev's mother's library: "rows and rows of volumes in monochrome cloth covers" (Dostliev, electronic source), ignating the imagination: "I am trying to imagine the color of the Karelian swamps near Sandarmokh; could it be similar? The very same swamps where in the late 1930s, the Soviets executed the Ukrainian cultural elite, among others. The people whose books should have been on those shelves and in my education from the start but

whose place was taken by a swampy swarm of the Tolstoys" (Dostliev, electronic source). Instead of Tolstoi's books, says Dostliev, there should have been the works of the great Ukrainian writers – Pidmohylny, Khvylovy, Zerov, Domontovych – who, even in the post-Soviet era, were excluded from the curriculum of Ukrainian schools: "During my school literature classes, no one would mention these names along with many others, not to mention those we might still not even know about. It was in the late 1990s, several years after the USSR fell apart" (Dostliev, electronic source).

Precisely on this issue – the role of Russian culture and literature in the former Soviet republics – it is certainly worth considering another reflection, published three weeks after the invasion of the Russian army and coming from a different angle: that of the scholar Tamara Caraus, a specialist in Soviet and post-Soviet culture and a Soviet citizen until the dissolution of the USSR. She observes that the generally accepted assumption that the so-called "great Russian culture" is above all judgement and protected by the chrism of inviolability from any desecrating gesture by any possible critical theory associated with the academy is still the norm (Caraus, electronic source). She notes the non-existence of academic circles in which a postcolonial approach to the study of Russian culture is envisaged. At the same time, she emphasizes the vulnerability of Russian culture to aggression and the absorption of power: it is not immune to the risk of being exploited for ideological purposes. Tamara Caraus recalls President Vladimir Putin's speech at the Russian Literature Forum (Rossijskoe literaturnoe sobranie) on 21 November 2013:

> Это и наши соотечественники, и друзья из ближнего и так называемого дальнего зарубежья. Всех нас объединяет не только любовь к русскому литературному наследию, но и глубокое понимание его воспитательной, эстетической и нравственной ценности, его великое влияние на развитие мировой цивилизации и мировой культуры (Putin, electronic source)[6].

Perhaps, the scholar notes, the desirable postcolonial approach to the study of Russian culture and literature should have been adopted by scholars from the ex-

[6] The text is a stenographic transcription of the President's speech, the reactions of the audience (which consisted of more than five hundred representatives of various professions: writers, poets, publicists, publishers, literary critics and translators; teachers and lecturers of literature, museum workers and Russian librarians from abroad) and the speeches of some of the Russian intellectuals invited to discuss the fate of Russian literature. Their surnames – Tolstoi, Dostoevsky, Lermontov, Solzhenicyn, Sholokhov, Pasternak and the absent Pushkin – seem on the one hand to evoke the complex relations between literature and power suffered by their eponymous predecessors, on the other hand, in a context of grotesque theatrical connotations, each of their appearances is an explicit eulogy of power, an expression of that consensus which power – imperial, Soviet or post-Soviet – has always demanded from intellectuals and the masses.

Soviet space, however committed, as Tamara Caraus points out, to the colonization of the values of Western cultures. In the absence of a tradition of critical thinking about Russian culture, potential attempts to critically examine its founding values and expressions have always run the risk of being seen as Russophobic manifestations. The systematic cancellation of initiatives and activities related to Russian culture and literature that the researcher observed three weeks after the start of the "special military operation" is russophobic[7]. In social media, the condemnation of this witch-hunt was basically unanimous: it was repeatedly stated that denying the world access to Russian art and culture was excessive and that the inherent failure of the Putin regime to distinguish itself from the great Russian culture, the culture of the classics, which is an integral part of the cultural heritage of Europe and the world, was an ignominious act. Although such unacceptable measures do indeed appear to be a reckless action, a legitimate question arises: "Why did this culture not prevent war?" (Caraus, electronic source), a question that recalls a famous exchange of letters between Albert Einstein and Sigmund Freud. In 1932, the famous scientist asked the equally famous psychoanalyst the following question:

> Is there any way of delivering mankind from the menace of war? It is common knowledge that with the advance of the modern science, this issue has come to mean a matter of life and death for civilization as we know it; nevertheless, for all the zeal displayed, every attempt at its solution has ended in a lamentable breakdown (Einstein, Freud 11–12).

In Freud's wide-ranging response, which emphasizes the impossibility of completely suppressing human aggressive tendencies, an interesting observation is made about the psychological implications of cultural phenomena and their social consequences: "on the psychological side two of the most important phenomena of culture are, firstly, a strengthening of the intellect, which tends to master our instinctive life, and, secondly, an introversion of the aggressive impulse, with all its consequent benefits and perils" (Einstein, Freud 55). But the strengthening of the intellect and the introversion of the aggressive impulse do not negate the possible risk of war. For the pacifists, among whom Freud counts Einstein as well as himself, the aversion to war is not merely intellectual or sentimental, but organic: it is, in fact, a constitutional intolerance, a kind of idiosyncrasy in its most severe form. Hence the question: "How long have to wait before the rest of

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[7] In the weeks and months following 24 February, numerous acts of cultural erasure took place in different countries: Russian films were excluded from film festivals; Russian dance performances were suspended indefinitely; works by Russian composers were removed from concert programmes; Russian art works were rejected from biennial exhibitions. In most cases, it was an indiscriminate erasure of Russian culture as such.

men turn pacifist?" (Einstein, Freud 56). Although Freud concludes his argument and his letter to Einstein with a confident note, he does not, of course, take any answers for granted: "Meanwhile we may rest on the assurance that whatever makes for cultural development is working also against war" (Einstein, Freud 56–57). But the war was still a long way off, and when it came, seven years later, to devastate Europe, it revealed the illusory nature of Freud's certainties: Adorno's aphorism thus appears to us as a kind of counter-song to the words of the father of psychoanalysis.

The immediate reaction of the societies that witnessed the brutal Russian aggression led to a general rejection of all cultural and artistic expressions linked to the country that had invaded Ukraine, in a kind of collective ritual of erasure. In December 2022, the Ukrainian Minister of Culture, Oleksandr Tkachenko, called on the Western allies to impose a general boycott of Russian culture until the end of the conflict: "Boycotting Russian culture is an important step […]. Ukrainian culture has so much to offer. Our composers have produced masterpieces, and no writers should be no less esteemed than their Russian counterparts. Ukrainian literature has deep roots and is still actively developing" (Tkačenko, electronic source).

On 1 March, a number of Ukrainian cultural institutions – the Ukrainian Book Institute, the Lviv International Book Forum, PEN Ukraine, the Book Arsenal International Festival, the Bookspace platform – in an open letter published on the PEN Ukraine website, called for a total boycott of Russian books, though the first two articles of PEN Ukraine's statute state that literature knows no borders and that in all circumstances, especially in times of war, works of art, the heritage of humanity, must be protected from actions driven by nationalism or political passions. The text of the letter was signed by more than 1,700 people. A similar initiative was launched by the editorial staff of "Literaturnaia gazeta" on 28 February, a few days after the Russian invasion of Ukrainian territory. The letter, signed by 565 people (poets, writers, literary critics, journalists, members of the Writers' Union and other associations), had a programmatic title and subtitle: "Кто хочет жертв? Обращение писателей России по поводу специальной операции нашей армии в Донбассе и на территории Украины" (*Kto hočet žertv?*, electronic source). The final statement is interesting:

> А чего хотим мы? Мы хотим, чтобы Украина была суверенной и дружественной, процветающей и свободной. Но не хотим, чтобы ею правили нацисты.
> Вот поэтому с горечью, но и с надеждой смотрим мы, писатели, на вынужденные действия российской армии. С надеждой смотрим на Президента (*Kto hočet žertv?*, electronic source).

The signatories also state that Russian writers do not want war and do not intend to deal with political issues. They point out, however, that the voice of reason and inspiration, the voice of literature, will express itself later, when the time

comes to describe what has happened in this unrepeatable and painful moment. The last sentences praise the propagandist and nationalist narrative that, as we know, underlies the government's actions: "Мир тебе, Украина! Мир вам, Россия и Белоруссия! Из одного истока мы, и этот исток Руси изначальной будет питать и нас, и близкие нам по духу народы, всегда!" (*Kto hočet žertv?*, electronic source).

In this respect, the reflections of the Indian-born British scholar and philosopher Kenan Malik are certainly worthy of support: while it is possible to understand and accept the call for a boycott of Russian institutions and cultural exponents invested with official roles, the programmatic censorship of the *Nutcracker* ballet or the novel *War and peace* because of the Russian nationality of their respective authors is totally unacceptable. Indeed, such an initiative implies sharing the Putinist idea of the mutual identification of culture and nation, of Russian culture as the property of the Russian nation and the expression of the soul of the Russian people (Malik, electronic source). Yet, as Malik points out, every culture encompasses many others that are often in conflict with each other. Far from being confined within its vast national borders, Russian writers and artists are part of an ever-expanding cultural discourse. Tchajkovskij and Dostoevsky; Chekhov and Akhmatova; Tolstoi and Popova are understood by Ukrainians, British and Indians as much as by Russians themselves (Malik, electronic source). However, it is undeniable that the great classical Russian authors – such as Pushkin, Lermontov and Tolstoi – surrounded the depictions of the wars in the Caucasus with a romantic aura, a mere backdrop for sentimental narratives set in the sumptuous halls of aristocratic palaces and marked by balls and duels. Readers of all times and places must be aware that the exorbitant price of the supposed courage attributed to their heroes was paid by the victims of the Russian Empire's wars of colonial conquest. Ljubov' Terekhova, a philosopher, while acknowledging the great value of Russian literature and its essential role in world literary history, poses an interesting question to herself and her readers: should a well-written text really be regarded as the bearer of unquestionable truth forever? Or should it not instead be subjected to a new reading, to that decolonial vision that would lead Western intellectuals to get rid of the stereotypical image of Russian literature as the representation of a reality connoted by a tangible aesthetic character and an equally inviolable indulgence in moral purity (Terekhova, electronic source). A similar thought is expressed by Oksana Zabuzhko, poet and writer: "It is time for a re-reading of Russian literature and culture in order for us to understand how it continues to shape the mentality of a society that makes no distinction between victims and perpetrator" (Ingvarsson, electronic source). An interesting and constructive response to such unquestionable demands comes from the Turkish-born American writer

and journalist Elif Batuman: the impression a literary work makes depends on where one reads it (Batuman, electronic source). The writer evokes the character of Raskol'nikov, a vivid personification of the imperialist logic that legitimizes its criminal act, and points out that Fyodor Dostoevsky certainly did not share the protagonist's vision. The proof is in the title itself, *Crime and punishment*: the crime is punished with a sentence of hard labour in a Siberian prison. Hence a new question: "Can we read this book again?" (Batuman, electronic source). The answer lies in a series of considerations. The point, Elif Batuman insists, is not to condemn Dostoevsky, but to understand the concatenation of experiences of violence, trauma and repression at the heart of the novel. In the scene in which Raskol'nikov dreams of himself as a child witnessing the killing of a horse by a peasant, the writer introduces a tragic memory from his own childhood. And the reader acts as an intermediary between the author and the character, inserting himself into this long chain of violence. Perhaps, as astonished Elif Batuman points out, there is no other way to value the ability to feel and arouse compassion; to consider all aspects of a given personality simultaneously; to objectively assess a given situation; that ability which allows one to understand the dramatic or even tragic results of human actions as complex, interesting and unchangeable facts (Batuman, electronic source).

In the Russian cultural context, the idea that only novels of great stature can depict ambiguous and unsolvable human situations has become established over time, while narratives that focus on issues or circumstances that can be compared to simplified schemata are subject to unfavorable judgements (Batuman, electronic source).

Therefore, it seems inappropriate, deeply unfair and irrational to identify the theme, world view and actions of the characters in a novel with the ideological position, moral structure and ethical values of the author who created them. It is equally unreasonable to compare a literary work with the political physiognomy of the nation to which it culturally and linguistically belongs: there is no better way to stir up national hatred than to treat a culture and its history as an undifferentiated entity and to judge its quality as low (Morson, electronic source).

It is the contention of the present study that Russian culture and its literature are to be considered as an integral part of European culture and literature. The present study concurs with the opinion of Ivan Posokhin, namely that Russian culture and literature are an integral part of European culture and literature. The responsibility for the war lies with the government of that nation: certainly not with the Russian people or their culture (Posokhin). And it is interesting to note that the website of the press agency Pobeda contains the words of the President of the Italian Republic, Sergio Mattarella, in an interview published in the "Corriere della Sera" on 21 April 2023:

> The cancellation of culture with regard to Russian literature and art appears to be a false gesture that seeks to set back the products of centuries of European history, of which this culture is a full part. The most experienced intellectuals have not failed to stigmatize this view. Culture is such when it refuses to be categorized and strives to offer itself as a vision in confrontation with the world (Breda, electronic source).

Mattarella had already spoken on the subject a few months earlier, on 7th December 2022[8], on the occasion of the premiere of Musorgskij's opera Boris Godunov at La Scala: "Russian culture cannot be erased, it is European" (*La prima del Boris Godunov alla Scala*, electronic source). This idea is echoed by Jörg Sundermeier, founder of the German publisher Verbrecher Verlag: "Russian literature did not start the war; it was politics that unleashed the war. So, one is free to love Russian literature. Any literature apart from trash. Everybody is free to speak. Apart from Putin" (Sandalov, electronic source).

The survey proposed here is not intended to claim completeness; rather, it is an indicative sample of Russian and American men of letters (poets and writers) and artists. The following individuals are in favour of spreading knowledge of Russian literature: Shorohov, Petrova and Batuman; and the Ukrainians: Dostliev and Zabuzhko, the former against, the latter in favour; scholars from various backgrounds, including the Romanian Caraus, the Americans Morson and Brintlinger, the naturalized British Indian Malik, the Belarusian Posokhin, and the German publisher Sundermeier – all defenders of the Russian literary world. It is noteworthy that only one contributor, an exponent of Ukrainian culture, advocates for the cancellation of Russian literature. This individual, understandably determined to combat the invader through the medium of the written word – the sole weapon at his disposal – is in opposition to the erasure of Russian literature. At this point, after having tried to initiate a reflection on the perception of the Russian literary heritage both by the actors of the conflict and by those who oppose the aggressive and expansionist policy of the Russian government (referring, in advance, to Theodor Adorno's long and tormented meditation and to the exchange with the poet Paul Celan); after having mentioned the international debate on the subject of the erasure of Russian culture and literature, we can express and argue a multiple answer to the question: "can Russian literature be read after the Bucha massacre?"[9].

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[8] In the period directly following the Russian invasion of Ukrainian territories, a series of cultural boycotts were initiated in Italy. These boycotts included the cancellation of university lectures dedicated to Russian literature, the exclusion of Russia as a guest country at the Festival of European Photography in Reggio Emilia, the cancellation of a retrospective on the Russian film director Karen Shakhnazarov, and the refusal of the Accademia Gallery in Florence to request the loan of works from the Pushkin Museum in Moscow.

[9] Let us begin our answer with a necessary clarification: Ukrainian literature, along with the literary heritage of the former Soviet republics, needs to be promoted. Already since 2024, and

Perhaps the first question to be asked is what is the function, or even the use, of literature, of all literature. Literature should be read and studied because it provides a means of preserving and transmitting the experiences of those who are far removed in time and space from our own contemporaneity, or who live in conditions different from our own. Literature helps us to understand that others are different from us and that their values are different from ours (Compagnon).

Literature unsettles, disturbs, disorients more than a philosophical, sociological, psychological discourse because it appeals to emotions and empathy: "It thus covers spheres of experience that other discourses neglect, but which fiction acknowledges in their detail" (Compagnon). Russian literature, at least, is all this, and we need it, as the scholar Angela Brintlinger notes: "Their writing speaks to us anyway […] or perhaps precisely because of these conflicts and complications" (Brintlinger 101).

Of course, not only can we, but we must continue to read Russian literature even after the massacre in Bucha. We must read it in order to preserve it and to protect it from the blatant instrumentalization of power[10]. We must read it not to search for the ineffable and indefinable 'Russian soul', but to find the individual genius: "look at the masterpiece – not at the frame – and not at the faces of other people looking at the frame" (Nabokov 17) – who was able to plumb "the darkest depths of the mind, not the Russian mind, but the human mind" (Petrova 72).

Not only can and should we continue to read Russian literature: we need to, even against the tragic backdrop of war: Angela Brintlinger observes that throughout Russian history there have been few governments that honest people would have supported, if they had had the opportunity to express their opinions (Brintlinger). The only wealth that Russia, as the poet and writer Alexandra Petrova points out, has been able to share with other cultures is precisely its literature: "Its citizens have always lived such a hard, suffocating, inhuman life that some have felt the need to create a parallel. And although this literature, like any other, bears the marks of a past historical period, it remains revolutionary, complex, never conformist" (Petrova 72).

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especially since February 2022, the interest of publishers in Ukrainian literature, especially contemporary literature, has increased significantly. The international publishing scene has been enriched by new names such as Aleksandr Kabanov, Vasyl' Stus and Andriy Lyubka, Oleksij Chupa, Oksana Zabuzhko, Serhij Zhadan, Yuri Andrukhovych, Andrei Kurkov, Kateryna Babkina.

[10] An example is the text published on the website of the Russkij mir Foundation on 12 July 2021. It summarizes an important statement made by President Putin: "The integration of the western regions of Russia into the national space took place on the basis of common religious beliefs and cultural traditions, as well as linguistic proximity. The works of Ivan Kotljarevskij, Grigory Skovoroda, Taras Ševchenko, Nikolai Gogol' constitute a common heritage that it is senseless to divide" (*"My odin narod"*, electronic source).

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