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LYUDMILA ULITSKAYA'S "READING" OF THE WORLD AND HERSELF

Abstract. This article examines Lyudmila Ulitskaya's *Discarded Relics* (*Svyashchennyy musor*, 2012), a hybrid work combining essayistic and autobiographical elements with postmodern assemblage. The analysis focuses on how Ulitskaya constructs her world perception, engages in self-analysis, and builds her identity within this unique literary form. Utilizing textual analysis informed by postmodernist, new realist, and modernist literary discourse, the study highlights Ulitskaya's pantextual worldview, where "everything is text," and "reading" becomes a comprehensive intellectual and emotional mode of conscious existence. Key findings include the multifaceted significance of the "sacred garbage" motif as a metaphor for human experience and the world-text, and Ulitskaya's distinctive multi-perspectival narration, which integrates a "writer's gaze" (metaphorical, subjective) with a "geneticist-scholar's gaze" (scientific, analytical). The article argues that *Discarded Relics* presents a holistic yet complex vision of existence, transcending binary oppositions through its collage-like structure and essayistic digressiveness. Ultimately, the work functions as a wisdom narrative, reflecting Ulitskaya's honest, self-critical, and dialogue-oriented spiritual journey from personal experience towards a universal affirmation of life and a vertical quest for higher meaning.

Keywords: Ludmila Ulitskaya, postmodern autobiography, pantextualism, identity construction, genre hybridity.

I am a storyteller of my time.
Subjective, of course.

Lyudmila Ulitskaya, *Discarded Relics*

Lyudmila Ulitskaya is recognized as "one of Russia's most famous writers" (Gessen, 2014, para. 1). In 2001, she was awarded – as the first female writer – the Russian Booker Prize for her novel *The Kukotsky Enigma* (*Kazus Kukotskogo*, 2000). She has been honored with many international awards, including: Prix Médicis étranger (France, 1996), Park Kyung-ni International Literary Award (North Korea, 2012), Austrian State Prize

for European Literature (2014), The Günter Grass-Preis (Germany, 2023). As Muireann Maguire (2024) observed, “[a]lthough internationally honoured (...), she has spent most of her life resisting prejudice and repression” (para. 1). Nobel Prize laureate Svetlana Alexievich calls the writer a person who worthily carries her understanding of life and her convictions, without trying to please anyone (Ulitskaya, 2017). Since March 2022, Lyudmila Ulitskaya has been residing with her husband, sculptor Andrei Krasulin, outside Russia, in Berlin. For her stance regarding Russia’s aggression against Ukraine, she was designated as a foreign agent (*inoagent*) in her homeland. On March 1, 2024, her name was entered into “the registry”, which also includes such writers as: Dmitri Glukhovsky, Ivan Vyrpaeve, Dmitri Bykov, Boris Akunin, Mikhail Shishkin. As the reason for such a decision, alongside opposition to the war, the promotion of LGBT ideas was cited (“Lyudmila Ulitskaya priznana inoagentom,” 2024, para. 2). With the appearance of the story cycle *Shest’yu sem’* in 2023, Ulitskaya achieved the status of an émigré writer, which has already found expression in the most recent scholarly works (Sidor, 2024, p. 2). The writer’s latest publication to date is – being a testament to the creative relationship with her husband – a “book about love and co-creation” *Fragmenty tselogo* (Svetova, 2025, para. 2), which was published in Germany in 2024 by ciconia ciconia publishing house in two languages (in Russian and German). It is simultaneously “a collection of documentary essays and poems by Lyudmila Ulitskaya dedicated to her husband as well as an artistic album of Krasulin’s works, inspired by his wife” (Konstantinova, 2024, para. 2).

The perspective of critics and scholars on the work of the author of the novella *Sonechka* (1992), called a master of “prose of nuances” (Alekseyeva, 2014), has changed over time. Initially, she was most often classified as a representative of “women’s prose” (Kolyadich, 2005, p. 370, Chumachenko, 2011) or “women’s writing” (Sałajczykowa, 1999, Supa, 2009). Such a scholarly approach is still vital and continues to deepen (Kowalska, 2020, Novikova, 2021, p. 191). Such reception of the prose writer of the turn of the 20th and 21st centuries was probably determined by the dominance of the image of the world seen through the eyes of a “speaking woman,” who becomes not only the subject of representation but also the narrator of her own fate (Pushkar’, 2007, p. 243). Furthermore, as Monika Knurowska emphasizes, Ulitskaya’s works address various aspects of “bodily life” (openness without unnecessary sensationalism or vulgarity), including sexuality, physicality, childbirth, menstruation, initiation, and illness (Knurowska 2010, p. 68). With the appearance of subsequent bestselling novels in which the writer deepened philosophical, religious, and existen-

tial (universal human) themes, and also made men the main protagonists (Pavel Kukotskiy, Daniel' Shtayn), such frameworks proved "too narrow." Although the "feminine component," the "gender aspect" constitute an essential element of the poetics (and themes) of Lyudmila Ulitskaya's work, they by no means exhaust its richness and specificity. Some scholars even believe that what is "gendered" in her novels becomes a kind of defense against "supersystems" that want to seize human consciousness and freedom (Bezrukavaya, Baskova, 2016, p. 36).

The subject of analysis in this article will be the specificity of world perception in connection with processes of self-analysis and self-presentation, as well as the question of identity construction in the hybrid work *Discarded Relics* (*Svyashchennyy musor*, 2012), combining essayistic elements with autobiographism. In research reflection, this text is classified in various ways. Joanna Tarkowska calls it an "autobiographical novel" (Tarkowska 2019, p. 253), which is difficult to agree with due to the absence of literary fiction. More accurate is the designation "autobiographical prose," although due to its generality, it is in turn insufficient (Bondareva 2013, p. 132). Kira Gordowicz notes that although *Discarded Relics* is built on autobiographical material, it transcends the framework of typical memoirs (Gordowicz, 2016, p. 191). The designation "book of stories and essays" also appears (Sizykh, 2015, p. 42). Meanwhile, Helena Goscilo emphasizes that the writer in her earlier works, such as *Daniel Stein, Interpreter* (*Daniel' Shtayn, perevodchik*, 2006) and *The Kukotskii Case*, already combined fiction with non-fiction elements, for example, making actually existing persons the heroes of her novels ("both works treat in semi-fictional fashion individuals who actually exist(ed)," Goscilo, 2015), and "*Discarded Relics* belongs less to literature than to a *sui generis* miscellany or grab bag, united solely by the author's persona (...)" (Goscilo, 2015, p. XXII). Indeed, individual parts of the work are characterized by significant autonomy and could exist independently (or do exist, as for example interviews, letters, or the writer's speeches that co-create the text). However, Goscilo's judgment that only authorship connects them is too radical, because the work is characterized by a coherent, well-thought-out composition and a consistently developed worldview.

The author herself, in an interview given to Dmitri Bykov in 2021 on his channel *Zhalkaya Zamena Literatury s Dmitriyem Bykovym*, directly stated that when writing she never succumbs to the dictates of a specific genre form: "(...) I don't work in a specific genre, I work as it comes out. I don't set myself the task of fitting into a genre. My task is to write what I want, because actually I write for myself" (Ulitskaya, 2021)¹. On the other hand, one

must remember the genesis and circumstances related to the text's creation. In a conversation with Grzegorz Przebinda (Ulitskaya, 2022), the writer admitted that she has been keeping diaries since 1971. One can assume that their content largely influenced the "matter" of the work. The catalyst for writing such an autobiographical book was probably cancer. Ulitskaya's story of fighting cancer in 2010–2012 also found its place in the work. Not insignificant remains the fact that during the promotion of *Discarded Relics* at the Non/fiction book fair in 2012, the writer called her work "the last conversation." In a later interview, asked about the meaning of such text qualification, she explained:

(...) the book in its concept should be the last. (...) Because in a sense it is a summary of life, because in every person's life comes a moment when one wants to free oneself from various types of ballast (...). (Ulitskaya, 2012, para. 3)

This statement by the author allows us to look at the text as a kind of realization of confessional-reckoning prose. In this article, I position it as an essayistic autobiography with elements of postmodern assemblage. I have in mind here the understanding of art as a kind of collecting, building a work from ready elements, "garbage." It should be noted that Lyudmila Ulitskaya's prose emerges from the tradition of classical Russian realism and is shaped at the intersection of realism and postmodernism (Egorova, 2007, p. 5), because the author enriches the poetics of her texts with such elements as: intertextuality, grotesque, irony². Katarzyna Duda classifies Ulitskaya as a representative of new realism, emphasizing the individual, particular perspective of presenting historical reality and its political aspects (Duda, 2008, p. 48). Meanwhile, Mark Lipovetskiy states that in her works "postmodern poetics intersects with intellectual-modernist literary discourse" (Lipovetskiy, 2008, p. 464). In turn, Elizabeth Skomp and Benjamin Sutcliffe note that the writer, like Nabokov, manifests "modernist respect for the word as art" (Skomp, Sutcliffe, 2015, p. 17). This is well illustrated by *Discarded Relics*, in which modernist absolutization of literary life-writing (*zhiznetvorchestvo*) meets with pantextualism, about which more in the further part of the article.

Lyudmila Ulitskaya's *Discarded Relics*, a work from the borderlands of essay and autobiography, combining into a heterogeneous whole erudite intellectualism, subjective point of view and formal "openness" (hybridity of the essay) with the gesture of sincerity and emotional exhibitionism inscribed in autobiography, takes the reader on a fascinating journey through the meanders of memory, cultural texts, real places, events, life stories of real

people... The general map of this journey is determined by a tripartite structure reflecting the gradual and consistent expansion of areas of intellectual-artistic exploration and reflection: personal world / external world / spiritual world. It finds expression in the titles of individual parts: *Lichnyy mir* ('personal world'), *Mir vokrug* ('world around'), *Mir vverkhu* ('world above'). In the first part, themes related to family, reading, and friends dominate; in the second – history and politics; in the last – questions of faith and liminal experiences such as: cancer, death, existential solitude. Alena Bondareva, in a review of the book, calls Lyudmila Ulitskaya's reflections on life, politics, and reading "PR for intelligentsia values" (Bondareva, 2013).

Within each part of the triptych, there is also a division into smaller, more detailed thematic groups. Thus, for example, in the last, third part of the work, a separate group consists of essays devoted to the fight against breast cancer³ and fragments of three interviews from 2010–2011 concerning the problems of the novel *Zelenyy shater* (*Green Tent*), on which Ulitskaya worked during her illness.

The triptych is preceded by a kind of introduction, consisting of two short essays and an interview fragment. The initial essay, titled like the entire work, *Discarded Relics*, introduces the reader to Lyudmila Ulitskaya's world, determining the dominants of its description and reception. The titular "sacred garbage," as Kira Gordowicz emphasizes, becomes the central motif of the work – multifaceted and multidimensional, far exceeding its literal meaning (Gordowicz, 2016, p. 191). The oxymoronic character of the phrase not only reveals the creator's original perspective but projects a penetrating and bold perception of the world, capable of breaking stereotypes, and expresses readiness for active, subjective revaluation of existing, "ready-made" knowledge. One can also see in this – implicitly inscribed – the understanding of conscious existence as an "intellectual and emotional process."

It should be emphasized that things – material "shells of the past" in Ulitskaya's textual universe – have their own "biography" and "geography," "birth" and "death." They are identified by belonging and bear traces of wear: grandmother's torn ball gloves, great-grandfather's cracked porcelain bowl, a Chinese tea set broken by the first husband, great-great-grandmother's basket half-unbraided... The ambivalent nature of these "vile treasures" reveals itself to the heroine when she decides to throw them away. This gesture seems to be generated by the writer's ambiguous attitude toward the question of the significance of the past in building her own worldview and her own self. One can perceive in the work Ulitskaya's torn feeling between attachment to these material signs of the past and the desire to free

herself from the burden of the “throat-squeezing” past, to get rid of everything that seems unnecessary (up to the maximalist and utopian longing for the state of *tabula rasa*): “Here I will lose my hands, legs, head and age, birth date and death date, nationality and education, here I will lose my name and surname, and it will be good” (Ulitskaya, 2018, p. 7). The above fragment is an “auto-quote”, an intertext taken from her own work (*Lyudi nashego tsarya*, 2005), which Ulitskaya does not hide. The author reinterprets the question of “loss,” inscribing the intertext in the context of human existence determined by the process of accumulating and getting rid of “things.” Unfortunately, it turns out that “these shells and remnants of the past are somehow connected with immaterial things” (p. 6) and actually nothing can be thrown away. The ontological heterogeneity of things (materiality and spirituality) is conditioned by their symbolic meaning. They become for the heroine a sign of: “beautiful principles and positive approach to life, borrowed ideas and brilliant concepts” (p. 6), components from which she tries to build a holistic worldview. This is a paradoxical platform of transgression from the material toward spirituality. The “shoebox”, into which the heroine placed things she found difficult to part with, grows into an image of human existence: “(...) the shoe box is rather a model, and perhaps a metaphor, describing the universal way of accumulating wealth and then freeing oneself from it” (p. 6). This is, in my opinion, an illustration of the conflict in the heroine’s understanding (at the starting point of her journey) of the relationship between material and spiritual, past and present: daily bustle greatly interferes with “persistent searches for higher meanings” (p. 6), trinkets kept for years become emotional and physical ballast. When the attempt to free herself “from all junk” ends in failure, memory provides the author an associative hint – a memory of the great-grandfather and his boxes.

It is significant that initially the heroine/Ulitskaya “does not understand” the ancestor’s strategy, who not only never threw anything away, carefully describing accumulated objects, but also kept something he identified as completely useless – “a string that is no longer good for anything” (Ulitskaya, 2018, p. 7). The initial essay leaves the reader with the question of the meaning of such action and with the articulation of the desire to free oneself from the ballast of “things.” I perceive such a finale as an authorial action aimed at eliminating the didactic aspect from the image of the heroine-narrator by emphasizing cognitive uncertainty, an open, searching attitude. It is also a form of reader activation that assumes a specific pattern of reading the work, engaged and dialogical. The seemingly absurd action of the great-grandfather, a clockmaker, can be read as an exemplification

of acceptance of the diversity of being and understanding of the value of all its elements. Respect toward matter does not exclude deep spirituality, and existence is shown as constant labor in which cognition combines with evaluation.

At first glance, the writer repeats her great-grandfather's gesture – according to his model of accumulating and organizing “matter,” she creates the structure of the discussed work, in which she not only “collects” but classifies and characterizes events, experiences, readings, various types of texts, people, places... For example, a group of essays-portraits of people important to the author, friends and acquaintances, is entitled *Zolotaya kollektsiya* (*Golden Collection*). In the context of the entire work, however, the image of “a shoebox full of sacred garbage” evolves, becoming simultaneously: a model of the world-text (heterogeneity), a metaphor of individual life (accumulation), an aspect of conscious existence (analysis, reflection), an element of identity building (active relationship with the past). Taking into account the twofold articulation in the initial essay of the strong need to get rid of the ballast of the past and the reckoning character of the work, the strategy of the heroine-author appears as a modification of the great-grandfather's method, freeing oneself from what is unnecessary through an evaluative-organizing view of oneself and the world.

In the second essay of the introductory part, entitled *Razgovory pod diktofon* (*Conversations at the Dictaphone*), Ulitskaya reveals further components determining the character of her perception of reality and self-identification. The heroine begins her reflection with considerations on the specificity of the “interview” form and the level of native journalism, which leads to the articulation of an attitude of irony, self-irony, and distance toward her image as a public person created in the media. The writer perceives the interview as a highly manipulative form, because the final “image of the respondent” is largely determined by the interviewer's intent. As an example, she includes in the work her flattering portrait created as a result of compilation of fragments from many interviews she had previously given, created by one of the journalists and published in “Esquire” in 2011, *Pravila zhizni Lyudmily Ulitskoy* (*Lyudmila Ulitskaya's Rules of Life*). Ironic distance is also conditioned by experience, awareness that using “the same device one can also make something completely opposite – show the author as a complete idiot. This has also happened” (Ulitskaya, 2018, p. 10).

In *Razgovory pod diktofon* appears the image of “fish in water”, important for understanding the relationship between human and culture:

The great law of growth from simple to complex, whether called Creation or Evolution, created culture as the highest fruit of human consciousness. We are all immersed in it, like fish in water... Without this, there is nothing to talk about. (Ulitskaya, 2018, p. 9)

In the writer's optics, humans shaped by culture and immersed in culture cannot function as full-fledged persons without it, because culture is our natural environment of life. In an interview given to Kseniya Larina in 2023, Lyudmila Ulitskaya stated with conviction: "culture is indestructible, (...) it is the only thing that remains" (Ulitskaya, 2023).

A clear example of this observation, along with an autobiographical account, can be found in the group of essays and interviews titled *Chteniye* (*Reading*). In these, Ulitskaya describes how the books she read during childhood and her student years influenced her. In the essay *Konets mladenchestva* (*The End of Infancy*), the writer equates reading with an explosion, expanding the world, filling it with new knowledge. The first generator of the protagonist's world "expansion," her "educator," becomes the bookshelf in the corridor of her maternal ancestors' apartment; later, other home libraries joined it: those of her parents, friends, acquaintances. Reading in childhood – accidental, uncontrolled, full of personal/individual discoveries and joys – seemed to fill the protagonist's entire world: "The 'I' is partly composed of the sum of books read" (Ulitskaya, 2018, p. 29). Later, it is perceived as a partnership between author and reader and compared to sex. Her relationship with books, as the author admits in an interview included in the work, developed like a love affair. With maturity also came the understanding that for many, reading was a way to hide from Soviet reality, and great Russian literature was able to "replace a life filled with falsehood, cruelty, and impoverished ideology" (Ulitskaya, 2018, p. 32). Among many writers whose acquaintance proved particularly important to her, Lyudmila Ulitskaya mentions Boris Pasternak and Vladimir Nabokov. The first showed that the world is full of plots: "like the apostle Peter, he opened with his key the door behind which is kept the best that man has created by guiding his pen across paper" (Ulitskaya, 2018, p. 64). The second helped understand the difference between a talented writer and a genius: "Something that is inexpressible in language, genius moves into the realm of the expressible – and human consciousness expands" (Ulitskaya, 2018, p. 35).

The writer presents the process of "reading" as an immanent element of human existence and universalizes it. This is a consequence of Ulitskaya's pantextualism. For the author of *The Kukotskii Case*, everything is

text, an element of the great book of life: things ("holy trash"), old family photographs, remembered past, interviews, grandfather's letters to grandmother when he was in exile, read books and their creators, life stories of friends, man and his genes, dreams, cities visited, every living being... Thus understood, "reading" becomes a synonym for conscious, intellectual existence – an epistemological and axiological gesture/process. In her statements, Ulitskaya often emphasizes another property of "human-as-text" that is significant for her – an ontological one – namely, that man is the only being who can create text: "We are texts producing text" (Ulitskaya, 2021, para. 23). This means, *de facto*, that man is simultaneously the object of analysis (text), the analyzing subject (reader), and the creator of text, which well illustrates the status of the protagonist/narrator/author in the discussed work.

The writer also does not omit the issue of the relationship between culture and politics, stating: "Culture in Russia has suffered a cruel defeat, and we, people of culture, cannot change the suicidal policy of our state" (Ulitskaya, 2018, p. 364). She also expresses disappointment at the "unread" status of *The Gulag Archipelago* – Solzhenitsyn's reckoning with the Stalinist regime – by a society that has lost its moral compass. Ulitskaya is not afraid to address painful, controversial issues, including political ones, although she does not claim to be a bearer of "ready-made truths" (Bondareva, 2013). On the contrary, she states with bitterness: "My country suffers from aggressive ignorance, nationalism and imperial mania" (Ulitskaya 2018, p. 364). Thanks to the wide spectrum of intellectual reflection in *Discarded Relics*, a portrait of Soviet and post-Soviet times also emerges, bearing witness to the functioning of the individual in totalitarian space and during the time of rapid political-economic transformation. With particular sentiment and care, the writer also tries to save from oblivion people who are close and important to her. In this perspective, Joanna Tarkowska's considerations on the specificity of the authorial concept of memory in Ulitskaya's work are significant. According to the researcher, who analyzes the group of "essay-portraits" *Zolotaya kolleksiya (1993–2012)*, Ludmila Ulitskaya's understanding of memory as "resurrection" was influenced by representatives of Russian cosmism, particularly Nikolai Fedorov, and the Leibnizian monad (Tarkowska 2019, p. 254–256).

It is significant how the writer, succinctly, in one sentence, can signal the multi-perspectival nature of her view of reality, combining, for example, the perception of the world characteristic of an artist with the analytical gaze of a scientist⁴. Let us recall that when describing the "shoe box," the protagonist could not determine whether it was a "model" or a "metaphor."

In the last element of the introductory part of the work, the aforementioned fragment of the interview-compilation, we observe the protagonist's self-identification as a writer and a biologist ("Yes, a writer," "I am a biologist," Ulitskaya, 2018, pp. 10–11). Issues dedicated to the protagonist's life path from scholar to writer, the relationship between science and literature, and her understanding of writing are addressed in a separate memoir-reflective group of essays and interviews *Bez diploma* (*Without a Diploma*), which forms part of the first section of the triptych. Declarative statements appearing in this section emphasize the complex perception of the world that is crucial for the protagonist: "as a former scholar, (...) I cannot renounce such a worldview in my writing practice" (Ulitskaya, 2018, p. 221). However, Ulitskaya leaves the answer to the question of whether she is more a writer-scholar or a scholar-writer to the reader (p. 222). She also does not forget another important component influencing the specificity of her work:

I write as a woman can write – from a female point of view, with issues comprehensible to a woman, and I do not try to make my books more 'masculine.' There are enough men among my readers. (pp. 242–243)

The writer firmly challenges the validity of the stereotypical and, in her view, discriminatory division of literature into male and female categories. At the same time, she accepts and understands, "as a former geneticist," the biologically determined differences between sexes.

Characterizing her writing "roots" (the writer's identity), Ulitskaya admits that her literary work is born, on the one hand, "in an empty space" (lack of philological education, late debut at 50 years of age), and on the other – has solid genetic foundations in the history of her ancestors: in her great-grandmother's poems, her grandmother's sketches, her grandfather, a Gulag inmate's, books on demography or music, a practical guide written by her father for car owners... In Ulitskaya's self-positioning as a writer, one can see an evolution from the uncertainty and fear of an "impostor" (Ulitskaya, 2018, p. 10) to the feeling of freedom of a "volunteer": "where to rush, everyone has long since overtaken me. (...) Others are professionals, I am a volunteer" (Ulitskaya, 2018, p. 227).

"The writer's gaze" – metaphorical-symbolic imagery, emotionality, and subjectivism, which we tend to attribute to the sphere of art – is realized in the work, for example, through the oscillation of semantic dimensions of key images-metaphors in Ulitskaya's text ("holy trash," "shoe box," "threads," "fish in water," "bookshelf"), which define her worldview and are linked to

processes of self-identification. It is noteworthy that, for example, in the essay *Chelovek so svyazyami* (*A Man with Connections*), Ulitskaya, continuing her reflections on the nature of man and the world, sets out like a hunter "to hunt for a spectacular metaphor." Great literature once again becomes the inspiration, Jonathan Swift's *Gulliver's Travels*, and more precisely, the image of the sleeping giant bound by thousands of threads by the Lilliputians. Starting from this image-metaphor, the writer creates a vision of the world as a complex, intricate network of interconnections and relationships. This holistic perception of the world as an organic whole, where every element has its place and meaning, and everything is connected to everything else by "thousands of threads": the material with the spiritual, the physical with the metaphysical, the human with the animal, the past with the present. It turns out that the literary/cultural source of such a perspective was Boris Pasternak's work: "In my youth, Pasternak convinced me that the world is woven from the finest threads, and every living being possesses thousands of valences with the surrounding world and with each other" (Ulitskaya, 2018, p. 62). This determined her perception of literature, which for Ulitskaya became a way of artistically understanding, accumulating, articulating, and ordering these "threads" of connection between man and the world. Accordingly, all human culture appears to the writer as a gigantic fabric of myriads of threads, in which remains as much "as each of us is able to retain" (Ulitskaya, 2018, p. 65).

"The geneticist-scholar's gaze," in turn, manifests through knowledge and elements of scientific discourse – precision, vocabulary, logical syntax – complementing and expanding the "reading" of the book of life, e.g.: "(...) social animals of the genus *Homo sapiens* are developing in the direction of sexual dimorphism" (Ulitskaya, 2018, p. 266). In the memoir essay *Staryye fotografii* (*Old Photographs*), Ulitskaya begins the story of her two ancestral lines, "by sword" (patrilineal) and "by distaff" (matrilineal), from a scientific perspective, indicating that, according to molecular genetics, it would be more precise to trace lineage through the female line. In this essay, the author characterizes an aspect of her identity conditioned by her origin. It turns out that as the last female representative of both lines, she managed to resolve two conflicts: ideological (intra-family) and national. As a "sensible bohemia," she reconciled two branches of the lineage: "bourgeois ants" (the branch focused on material matters) and "bohemian dragonflies" (the branch of the family with artistic interests). On the other hand, because all the men in the family married Russian women, the protagonist remained "the last Jewess in an assimilated family" (Ulitskaya, 2018, p. 28). Furthermore, in characterizing the phenomenon of love (a speech during the Lyon

literary festival in 2008 included in the work), the writer organizes part of her discourse as a consideration of two hypotheses on the genesis of love: divine and human (Ulitskaya, 2018, p. 286).

As a result, the coexistence of different perspectives on reality becomes a crucial component of the author's artistic style and the individual expression of the protagonist-narrator in *Discarded Relics*. For example, in the essay *Odyseusz (Odysseus)*, we observe a marriage of many "gazes": that of a biologist-geneticist (emphasizing the influence of the Homeric hero's lineage from both his father's and mother's sides on his character), a literary critic and literary scholar (reflections on the specificity of narration, versions of the finale, the archetypal dimension of the hero's story "life as a journey"), and a subjective reader (existential reflection, personal preferences, parascientific hypotheses): "Just a little while longer, ten or twenty years, and geneticists will unearth tiny bones, analyze the DNA, and confirm the fantastic hypothesis about the extraterrestrial origin of humanity" (Ulitskaya, 2018, p. 49). This method reveals the world as a space where science and art function complementarily, and a multifaceted perspective – analysis, description, evaluation, reflection, metaphor – builds its multi-dimensional image. The multi-perspectival nature of narration in *Discarded Relics* harmonizes with the collage form of the work and the heterogeneity of the protagonist-narrator-writer's image.

Significantly, the "collage" of memories (autobiographical past) in the discussed text is subjected not so much to biographical chronology as to an associative order of intellectual-emotional reflection. Particularly significant images, themes, events, and thoughts not only recur but can also return in a very similar linguistic realization; for example, when the protagonist recounts her first encounter with Boris Pasternak's poetry during her school years, thanks to a book found in her friend's home library: "From then on, I retained the feeling that Pasternak was a poet personally discovered by me" (Ulitskaya, 2018, p. 34); "And he became my own, personal discovery" (Ulitskaya, 2018, p. 63).

In turn, the digressiveness characteristic of the essay is most often realized in the form of a cultural exemplum, which becomes not only a complement to the "view" of personal experience – an intellectual and cultural point of reference – but also a part of it. An example is the reflection on Pasternak's novel *Detstvo Lyuvers* (*The Childhood of Luvers*, 1922) in the essay *Devochki i mal'chiki* (*Girls and Boys*), which opens the thematic group titled *Detstvo* (*Childhood*). Małgorzata Ułanek, viewing this Pasternak work as an initiatory novel, emphasizes that the author: "presents the stages of the titular heroine's formation not so much as a process of physical maturation

tion, but mainly as a complex emotional and spiritual phenomenon, in which acts of knowing and understanding oneself and the world play an important role" (Ułanek, 2014, pp. 221–222).

In Ulitskaya's work, the analysis of how the author of *Doctor Zhivago* depicts the maturation of the teenage protagonist becomes not only a demonstration of the strengths and weaknesses of the then twenty-seven-year-old novelist-poet, "who compensates for the lack of female experience with poetic revelation" (p. 18), but also a prelude to the presentation of memories concerning the shaping of her own Self, a private "cosmogony of personality." The writer recalls her earliest childhood experiences that shaped the fundamental differentiation for consciousness into self and non-self: cold-hot, near-far, own-other... The vector of reflection thus runs from the general – a discussion of the cultural, literary realization of a given issue – to personal experience. Reflection transforms into self-reflection. The dominance of the cultural-literary nature of digressiveness in *Discarded Relics* is largely connected with the already mentioned fundamental definition for the writer's self-identification processes of the relationship between man and culture (the image of "fish in water").

Lyudmila Ulitskaya's mental journey reveals existence as an intellectual-emotional process of "reading" the world and building one's own identity, combining many "reading" strategies (perspectives of description: writer, scholar, woman...), marked by self-irony. This process is feedback-based: we come to understand ourselves through the world and the world through us. The juxtaposition of the material and spiritual, internal and external, subjective and objective, concrete and metaphor does not expose binary oppositions, but simultaneously creates a heterogeneous texture of the text and a holistic vision of the world. It does not by any means signify axiological relativism, but rather reveals the complexity and processuality of human existence. The artistic expression of self and world is characterized by its collage-like nature, postmodern assemblage, autobiographical "facture," and essayistic digressiveness. This approach also shows respect for the word of the Other, rejecting the role of the omniscient teacher or "guru": "(...) Ulitskaya's *modus operandi* in public life and in her work is to give voice to all participants in the discussion, proving that the highest value of interpersonal contacts is dialogue" (Sidor, 2024, p. 3). Anna Skotnicka, in turn, analyzing the novel *Daniel Stein, Interpreter*, points out that dialogism becomes an essential component of the concept and portrait of contemporary human being (Skotnicka, 2020, p. 132). In the case of the writer, it is a dialogue with herself, realized also through the inclusion in the structure of the work of ready-made, earlier narratives, her own "voices," such as frag-

ments of interviews, speeches, and letters. It should be emphasized that all of Ulitskaya's "faces" revealed to us in the process of reading *Discarded Relics* are united by honesty towards herself and the world, self-criticism, independence, and the pursuit of inner freedom. The multilayered nature of the textual identity of the "heroine-narrator-writer" interferes with her no less complex auto-identification based on the categories of citizenship, nationality and religion ("I am a Russian writer of Jewish origin, raised in the Christian tradition", Ulitskaya 2018, p. 364) as well as multifaceted perception of the world. The central motif of "sacred garbage" evolves in the work from the literal "ballast" of the past to a complex metaphor of human existence, and the gesture of "reading" the great book of the world and life becomes a process of conscious existence.

The work, with its reckoning, ordering, confessional character, especially in the essays concluding the protagonist's fight against cancer, acquires features of a wisdom narrative. From the depth of her experience of an "extreme situation," Ulitskaya proclaims an Epicurean affirmation of life: "A few more years will pass, and I won't be here, and none of my current interlocutors (...). Therefore – rejoice! Rejoice today! Rejoice now! At this moment! As long as we say goodbye for a while (...)" (Ulitskaya 2018, p. 542). It is significant that in the final essay *Byt' nikem* (*To Be No One*), the protagonist's reflection returns to the question of perception of the world changing with maturation and the role of "things." It not only creates a semantic framework for her journey but also shows the significance of "things" from the perspective of human existential solitude and the transgressive power of love capable of blurring the boundaries between the material and the spiritual. *Discarded Relics* conclude with the reflections on the sphere of the sacred – the story of the spiritual quests of the heroine-author, reflecting the inalienability of the upward path and fulfilling the spatial "model" of the text-world established in the composition of the work, from horizontal movement (self / non-self, the Other) to vertical (the self – God). The integral components of Ludmila Ulitskaya's universe thus become: dialogism, pantextualism, heterogeneity, and transgression, which jointly define the nature of her intellectual and spiritual journey.

N O T E S

¹ Translation of all quotes from Russian is mine [W.B.-L.].

² On the function of irony in Lyudmila Ulitskaya's work see (Supa 2009, p. 222).

³ This fragment of the work was translated into English and appeared in "Granta" magazine (Ulitskaya, 2015).

⁴ The writer is a biologist by education. After graduating, she worked for two years (until 1970) at the Institute of Genetics of the USSR Academy of Sciences. In many interviews, she emphasized that although she changed her profession from geneticist-scholar to writer, the subject of her research remained the same – humans; only the methodology changed (Ulitskaya, 2017). A similar idea resonates in the discussed work (Ulitskaya, 2018, p. 227).

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