

The Repressed Body in the Existential Experiences of Vasyl' Stus

The article explores the discourse of corporeality in the poetic works of Vasyl' Stus. In situations of constant external control (prison, exile, special regime camp), the existential conflict characteristic of Stus's artistic worldview intensifies. The themes of internal rupture between body and spirit become more pronounced. The poet conceptualizes the soul and body not as identical to the subject; they are separated from 'themselves' and transcend the boundaries of the integrated, transcendent 'I'. As a result, the physical world in which the artist exists becomes a space of non-presence. Instead, the motif of sleep as a memory-dream is activated, returning to the dreamer sensations stored in the emotional memory of the body. This conscious 'inward journey' becomes a form of 'internal emigration', allowing the poet to exist in conditions intolerable for such existence: outside his physical body, yet within the mental body's force field.

The issue of the artist's existence under a repressive political system has been explored in a wide range of studies. Scholars have examined various aspects of this problem, from the direct experience of imprisonment (in concentration camps, prisons, reservations, etc.), as addressed in the works of K. Caruth (Caruth 1996), O. Solzhenitsyn, P. Potter (Potter 2016), D. Gailienė, and many others (Gailienė 2005), to the broader understanding of any political system as a practice of coercion (e.g., M. Foucault's *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, H. Arendt's *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, *People in Dark Times*, and K. Jaspers' *Philosophical Autobiog-*

raphy). Despite a significant body of work, however, the topic of individual resistance and subordination under the Soviet totalitarian regime remains relevant and requires further exploration. This article focuses on the specific experience of conscious, consistent opposition to Soviet totalitarian practices during the period of the 'sixties' (1960s – 1970s), particularly as reflected in the poetic work of one of Ukraine's most prominent dissidents, Vasyl' Stus.

Ukrainian culture developed in conditions of total repression for most of the 20th century (from the 1930s to the 1980s). However, while the Stalinist purges primarily focused on the physi-

cal elimination of potential dissidents ('enemies of the people'), Brezhnev's rule was marked by greater psychological pressure and specific disciplinary practices aimed at breaking the will and dignity of individuals. As Mykhailo Osadchy put it: 'The cruelty we experienced was not like under Stalin, when it was physical, such as being forced to pull wheelbarrows day and night. The repressions of the Brezhnev era were characterized by psychological abuse. Everything was aimed at destroying the human psyche in a more sophisticated way' (Pidgirnyi 2002: 44).¹

Such observations are found not only in the memoirs of Mykhailo Osadchy, a prominent Ukrainian dissident writer who served two sentences in Soviet labour camps, but also in the testimonies of many other Soviet political prisoners of that time. According to O. Gomilko, 'the destruction of the human "I" self, of the personality as a form of human existence, that is one of the main tasks of a totalitarian regime and a prerequisite for its development' (Gomilko 2001: 208). Furthermore, a comparatively 'softer' form of repression, which was introduced and in-

tensified gradually (in Ukrainian literary discourse, a process referred to as the 'tightening the screws'), gave individuals time to decide on their civic stance and behavioural strategy. Many artists, for example, chose to accept censorship restrictions and work within the ideological framework set by the regime.

This had its advantages in material terms – the opportunity to receive housing, state awards, to publish work in state publishing houses, etc. At the same time, there were a few nonconformists who did not want to put up with the violation of human rights or restrictions on freedom of speech and conscience and who expressed their views openly, and their fate was often tragic. Unable to leave the country, these artists tried to resist the totalitarian system from within: 'we reacted to this totalitarian evil ... we resisted ... it was the only opportunity to preserve our moral and psychological bearings (*struktura*). Because you have to react to evil' (Semen Gluzman, Pidgirnyi 2002: 209). In response, the system alienated dissenters, deprived them of social guarantees and professional prospects, arrested and punished them, thus turning the most active 'dissidents' into outsiders, 'prisoners of conscience' and, in fact, 'internal emigrants'.

¹ Unless otherwise indicated, all translations in this article are my own – N. L.

The very concept of 'internal emigration' in modern humanities is primarily related to the experience of intellectuals living under authoritarian or, more often, totalitarian systems (Pylypushko 2018b). According to most scholars, the phenomenon of 'internal emigration' occurs when neither emigration outside the country nor full-scale integration into society (or a specific community) is possible due to socio-cultural conditions created and strictly regulated by a political authority. In such a situation, persons are forced to psychologically distance themselves from the dominant ideology and official social structures, avoiding open confrontation and adopting a position of 'non-involvement' in state politics. In doing so, they adapt to the circumstances of reality while simultaneously distancing themselves from them (Tsymbal 2012: 200–10). According to B. Pylypushko, such a 'special form of escapism [...] provokes reflection through art, strengthens the creative aspect of individuation, and can serve as a means of post-traumatic therapy' (Pylypushko 2018a: 11).

There is also a broader understanding of 'internal emigration' (Litinskaia 2012) as a conscious physical or psychological departure from society that does not

necessarily result from authoritarian or repressive pressure, but can stem from a voluntary distancing from any social identity due to its rejection. Thus, the term 'internal emigrant' can be applied to those who 'are concerned with preserving their own freedom, immersed in introspection, declare abstract humanism, and generally cease communication with the outside world', and whose position is defined by 'political confrontation with any state system' (Kaufman 1983) and by psychological dissociation ('mental dissociation') from their country or environment (Gildea *et al.* 2013: 198).

From this perspective, interpreting 'internal emigration' as one's conscious separation within a specific political system or community allows it to be seen as a form of individual resistance to external pressure – a more or less active protest against the unacceptable realities of life. Such an interpretation aligns the phenomenon of 'internal emigration' with dissidence, while also highlighting its fundamentally different trajectory: if the goal of the dissident movement is the open demonstration of disagreement with the authorities and with official ideology, a direct protest aimed at changing the situation (*status quo*), the 'internal emigrant' moves in the

opposite direction – whether from outside or from within the situation – seeking to create his or her own autonomous space of relative psychological (and, if possible, physical) security. At the same time, ‘internal emigrant’ can adopt various forms of rejection, ranging from ignoring reality to completely neutralizing it, which sometimes leads to self-destruction (for example, through deviant or provocative behaviour). As with ordinary emigration, however, the nostalgic motif of the lost homeland plays an important role in the worldview of these persons – all of them effectively ‘outsiders’ – and is transformed in their imaginations into a symbolic ‘espace sans lieu’ or ‘space without a place’ (Althusser 1974: 87). Not only those who seek to isolate themselves from the influence of state institutions, but also the most active dissidents, whom the state itself begins to isolate within its own territory, may find themselves in a situation of alienation. Under conditions of ostracism, imprisonment, solitary confinement, psychiatric detention, exile, or other forms of being subject to total control, one is forced to ‘emigrate’ within the self, creating a separate, alternative dimension to preserve one’s identity and, as much as possible, neutralize ex-

ternal pressure. The bodily mode plays a significant role in this process. After all, even if the ‘punitive systems’ of modern society, according to M. Foucault, ‘do not make use of violent or bloody punishments, even when they use “lenient” methods involving confinement or correction, it is always the body which is at issue – the body and its forces, their utility and their docility, their distribution and their submission’ (Foucault 1995: 25).

Obviously, any form of emigration shapes a specific worldview, through which exiles position themselves in an alien or hostile physical space, significantly affecting their bodily experience of worldly existence. In a situation of ‘internal emigration’, however, which does not necessarily involve territorial movement, bodily sensations and somatic reactions can take on a distinctive symptomatic character, reflecting the individual’s psychological state of alienation and separation from an undesirable reality.

In poetic discourse, the problem of emigration as a forced and therefore traumatic form of alienation is represented through direct emotional experiences that are primarily connected with motifs of memory/forgetting, loneli-

ness/seclusion, existence/non-existence, one's/another's (hostile) world, and one's/collective identity. These motifs are clearly marked through bodily correlates, creating particular metaphors for the artist's creative world. The experience of 'internal emigration' interpreted through bodily symbolism is particularly compelling in the poetic work of Vasyl' Stus, one of the most renowned Ukrainian dissident writers of the second half of the 20th century.

The story of Vasyl' Stus's wanderings and his steadfast, conscious opposition to the repressive Soviet system begins on September 4, 1965. On that day, during the premiere of Sergei Parajanov's film *Shadows of Forgotten Ancestors*, Stus supported Ivan Dzyuba's protest against the first wave of political arrests targeting members of the young Ukrainian intelligentsia.² A few days later, he was expelled from the graduate school of the Taras Shevchenko Institute of Literature of the Academy of Sciences of the Ukrainian SSR (now the National Academy of Sciences of Ukraine) for 'systematic viola-

tions of the norms of behaviour for graduate students and employees of scientific institutions'. For several years, Stus was denied the opportunity to work as a writer and had to take on various odd jobs: at a historical archive, stoking a furnace, in a mine, on the railway, etc. In January 1972, like many other Ukrainian artists, Stus was arrested on charges of 'anti-Soviet agitation and propaganda'; he was sentenced to five years in a concentration camp in Mordovia and three years of exile in Kolyma.

This sentence only strengthened the artist's conviction of the need to resist the totalitarian system: 'The more torture and abuse I endure, the greater my resistance against the system of the abuse of man and his elementary rights, and against my own slavery' (Stus 2008: 381). While in prison, he initiated the formation of the 'Society for the Perpetuation of the Ukrainian Language', about which, according to Mykhaylo Osadchy, he wrote a statement in 1977 that was secretly distributed among prisoners and passed on to Andrei Sakharov (Pidgirnyi 2002: 43). In 1978, Vasyl' Stus officially renounced Soviet citizenship. Despite the risk of further punishment, he decided to join the Ukrainian Helsinki Group, es-

² For more information about this event see: <https://uinp.gov.ua/istorychnyy-kalendar/veresen/4/1965-premyera-filmu-tini-zabutyh-predkiv>, <https://portalhistoryua.com/event/prot-est-na-premyeri-tinej-zabutyh-predkiv/>

established in 1976, and did so immediately after returning from exile at the end of 1979.

As a result, in October 1980, Vasyl' Stus was arrested again as a 'recidivist'. He perceived the second sentence – 10 years of imprisonment in special regime camps and 5 years of exile – as an inevitable consequence of maintaining a conscious civic stance under Soviet totalitarianism, and continued to protest. He declared a hunger strike, demanded proper working and living conditions for prisoners, and more. This stricter regime of imprisonment, the lack of opportunity to correspond with his family, a de facto ban on his wife's visits, the absence of communication altogether (for a year, Vasyl' Stus was kept in solitary confinement, not allowed to speak during walks, and had books and personal notes taken away), poor nutrition, and systematic punishment through isolation in a cold cell without warm clothing made the writer more hot-tempered, anxious, and irritable. These hardships did not break his will, however. Even when anticipating the end – once again punished with solitary confinement for reading a book in his cell while leaning on the upper bunk – Stus declared a dry hunger strike in protest.

According to his friends, throughout this time, the poet continued to write poems, compiled a collection of free verse entitled *Bird of the Soul* (which was unfortunately confiscated by the guards and is now considered lost), and in his final years, worked on translations of Rilke's elegies from German. To a large extent, such work served as a form of escapism for the Stus, a means of spiritual self-preservation in the absurd reality of captivity. As Yevhen Sverstyuk notes, 'The extent of his renunciation in the camp in recent years was simply terrible... It reminds me of Rilke's Orpheus and Eurydice, when Eurydice walked away, all filled with death' (Pidgirnyi 2002: 298). A certain symbolism can also be found in the date of Stus's death on September 4, 1985 – exactly 20 years after his protest speech at the premiere of Parajanov's film at the 'Ukraine' cinema.

Unfortunately, Stus's status as one of the most famous Ukrainian dissidents, who consistently opposed the repressive Soviet system, somewhat overshadows his own poetic creativity. This issue of his literary reception has been repeatedly addressed, particularly by Dmytro Stus (Stus 2008: 3–4), Yurii Sherekh (Sherekh 1986: 57), Marko

Pavlyshyn (Pavlyshyn 1997: 159–60, 172), and others, all of whom emphasize the need to ‘overcome stereotypes in the perception of Vasyl’ Stus’ (Polishchuk 2011: 48) and to uncover the universal cultural meanings of his work. This article proposes a discursive analysis of the bodily dimension of Stus’s worldview, as reflected in his poems, allowing for a departure from established approaches to his work and revealing the deeper personal foundations of his experience of complex existential situations. These foundations shape the poet’s unique style and, to some extent, express his philosophy of being.

The human body retains a lasting memory of all its experiences – physical, emotional, mental, existential, and so on. In verbal expression, these memories are often invoked through association with physical sensations and states (such as smells, sounds, tastes, sensations of touch, pain, nausea, pleasure, or numbness), as well as through bodily symbolism itself. Moreover, as numerous studies have shown, ‘the body’s memory stores much more information than consciousness’ (Fuks 2007). Most often, recurring images related to the body are interpreted as ‘somatic markers’ through

which consciousness shapes its being in the world.

In Vasyl’ Stus’s poetry, several bodily correlates can be distinguished: screams, pain, blood, throats, hands (palms), veins, hearts, eyes, and faces. Among these, the image of the throat holds the most complex symbolism, being associated with breathing, the voice, blood (haemorrhage), the pulse, and even the beginning of existence (‘And I float not with the current, / but against it – as if into the throat / of spilled screams. As if returning / to an ancient birth’³). The throat symbolizes both relentless, real life (‘and the son runs, / as blood runs from the throat!’⁴), and a way of speaking, of expressing oneself creatively (‘And the poems go, and go, and go, / like blood from the throat’⁵).

The central existential theme (and leitmotif) of the artist’s entire creative output is pain, which can take on both negative connotations (black, hellish, suffering) and positive ones (young,

³ ‘Дорога самовтечі, невідвладна...’ (‘The path of self-escape, uncontrollable...’, Stus 2003: 167).

⁴ ‘Наснилося, з розлуки наверхлося...’ (‘I dreamed, a bizarre dream of separation...’, Stus 2003: 254).

⁵ ‘Вік би не бачити й не чути...’ (‘I would not see for ages, nor would I even hear...’, Stus 2003: 139).

ardent, wilful), as it emerges as the core principle of human existence:

ти в цьому світі – лиш
кавалок муки,
отерплий і розріджений,
мов ртуть.⁶ (Stus 2003: 57)

For Stus, pain seems to be a desired sensation and a signifier of conscious life. It serves as both a necessary prerequisite for and a dominant element in the concept of 'deathexistence' / 'lifedeath' ('It Was Not Destined to Hide from Fate') found in his worldview. A living soul, even if lost in the 'between-the-worlds', in the space of 'alien existence', reveals itself – and thus, must endure pain:

розпечена, аж біла з
самобою,
як цятка пекла,
лаконічний крик
усесвіту, маленький
шротик сонця,
зчужілий і заблуканий у
тілі.⁷ (Stus 2003: 97)

⁶ You are but a figment of suffering in this world, / lukewarm and liquefied like mercury.

⁷ [R]ed-hot, white with self-pain, / like a speck of hell, a laconic cry / of the universe, a small speck of sun, / alienated and lost in the body.

What is unexpected in this context is the way the lyrical subject's conscious self relates to his physical body, which rises above the 'I' in its essential existence and into which the subject still needs to mature. Pain, it turns out, is not so much a physical experience as a metaphysical one – it signifies life, but is separate from the body, which symbolizes ontological integrity and full inclusion in the organic flow of being:

Ти, народившись,
виголів лишень,
а не приріс до тіла. Не
дійшов
своєї плоті.⁸ (Stus 2003: 97)

For Vasyl' Stus, 'growing into' one's own flesh is a painful process of self-improvement, the ability to renounce the self, to let go of one's ego, in order to achieve the true fulfilment of being – an absolute, sensual fusion with the world in all its fullness. After all, only the ultimate existential experience, the moment of being in union with the world through pain, offers the opportunity to accept one's existence and imbue it with meaning:

⁸ You, having been born, only became naked, / and did not grow into the body. You did not reach / your flesh.

Ти тут. Ти тільки тут. Ти
тут. Ти тут –
на цілий світ! І
поєдинчим боєм
обперся об натужні
крони сосон.
А стогін їхній, вічністю
пропахлий,
вивищує покари до
покор.⁹ (Stus 2003: 49)

Here, humility is understood as the awareness and acceptance of one's own fate, one's existential choice, in which pain is not suffering (*punishment*), but the manifestation of a living force, the deep ontological meaning of the world's existence.

Another important aspect of Stus's concept of being is 'ardour' – a passion that should fill every moment of a person's life and, in fact, makes one truly alive. This passion manifests itself either as a love frenzy, in which one can 'lose one's limit to oneself', or as a frenzy of life itself – a struggle, competition, or arbitrary act through which one can mature into and fulfil oneself. In any context or situa-

⁹ You are here. You are only here. You are here. You are here – / for the whole world! And with a single pain, / lean against the mighty crowns of the pine trees. / Their groans, fragrant with eternity, / raise punishments to humiliations.

tion, for the poet, this frenzy is always a moment of maximum emotional 'burning' – from the well-known 'be livid, soul, be livid, and do not weep' (ярій, душе, ярій, а не ридай) to the later 'the soul flees your body, / making a hole in the body while rushing out' (Stus 2003: 284). Frenzy, rampage, pure anger, ardent pain – are states of the highest 'test', of accomplished self-conscious being in its fullest existential sense.

At the same time, the poet envisions the conscious course of life as a return to the beginnings of the world, a remembrance of what has already occurred and must find its completion – or realization – through death. Thus, Stus actualizes the concept of memory as the recognition, remembrance, and consciousness of a person's existence in the world:

Давно забуто, що є жити
і що є світ і що є ти.
У власне тіло увійти
дано лише
несамовитим.¹⁰ (Stus
2003: 119)

¹⁰ 'To live' has lost the meaning it once had:
the notions of 'the world' and 'you'
have perished.
The right to enter one's own flesh, so
cherished,
is granted only to the restless mad

In other words, the maximal manifestation of a living (*frenzied*) life is not just memory, but the memory of the body – as the most enduring and true essence of existence, its quintessence. At the same time, this full, passionate bodily existence is a sign of its passing, because ‘manifestations are self-destructions’, and only a petrified, solid form ‘knows self-preservation’ (Stus 2003: 47).

All memories that appear in the poetic world of Vasyl’ Stus are linked to bodily sensations. At the same time, when the body is remembered as an object (for example, the body of a beloved), visual images prevail:

І разом з тобою ми
заходимося визбирувати
роздратовані уста, очі,
пам’яті,
погляди, губи, плечі,
розшукаємо все – до
найменшого панігтя,
щоб, затиснена в себе, як
в кулачок,
ти ставала цільною й
неушкодженою,
реставрована для мого
охриплого

(‘This Pain Is Like the Wine of Dying Throes’, trans. by Alan Zhukovski).

горлового шепоту
щастя.¹¹ (Stus 2003: 51)

In the above quote, the list of body parts that are significant for the restoration of identity include a category of ‘memories’ that are shared by both the subject and the object of these memories. Remembering oneself and one’s own feelings serves as a kind of ‘assembly point’, a territory of contact that connects a person to the present moment, transforming ‘eyes’ into ‘gaze’ and ‘irritated lips’ into ‘lips’. Nonetheless, this transformation occurs not only through the subject, with his active, visually fixed action (*restoration*), but also for his sake, for his ‘whisper of happiness’.

The subject’s body primarily records touch, sound (such as, for example, a ‘hoarse throaty whisper’, which combines these two sensations), and smell, especially smell, because it is through scent (in scent) that the most lasting emotional memory is preserved. In Stus’s poetry, everything connected with im-

¹¹ And together with you we start collecting / irritated lips, eyes, memories, / looks, lips, shoulders, / we will find everything – down to the smallest detail, / so that, squeezed into yourself, as in a fist, / you become whole and unharmed, / restored for my hoarse / throaty whisper of happiness.

portant, significant experiences has a smell: red apples, earth, human blood, sunflowers, bees, and tears all share the same scent of childhood (in the poem 'Streams'); the 'sad palms' and 'bitter lips' of his wife have their own scent; and even the poems themselves 'smell of rue, which / is already half-forgotten, / and they smell of mint' (Stus 2003: 139).

The poet's memory (if not of childhood or erotic lyrics) is primarily painful: memories are like knives, the feeling of the earth 'like a painful dream', the image of the beloved like 'a speck of my pain'. It is precisely this pain that sustains / manifests a person in the world, making him or her conscious. To feel pain, to be aware of it, and to accept it is to live one's own life as a true, tangible physical existence. Only a living (and conscious, self-aware) body is capable of feeling pain. Similarly, memory must hurt in order to remain live matter, to remain the 'mental body' of the personality.

The opposite state, the state of non-memory or oblivion, means the loss of identity and inhabiting a space of non-existence, a detachment from the general flow of being:

Ріка життя уже тече повз мене.

І жди-не-жди, і скільки не чекай –

та оббігає течія шалена
забуту гору і забутий
гай.¹² (Stus 2003: 341)

In Vasyl' Stus's life, such a space of non-existence becomes real starting from January 12, 1972, the moment of his imprisonment. In the poem 'Already then, when diving into the forest', the poet interprets memories of the final days before his arrest as disturbing signs of an approaching disaster, manifested through physical sensations of a freezing body (*the cold hands, a numb heart, stiff arteries*) and perceptions of surrounding space (*gloomy drawn-out lanterns, unsettling stillness*). All moments of living contact with the world are perceived as threatened:

яким війнуло холодом на мене
в цій вичужлій вітчині,
отут,
де край мені здався
серцем серця,

¹² The river of life is already flowing past me. / And wait-don't wait, and no matter how long you wait – / And the wild current runs around / the forgotten mountain and the forgotten grove.

а стогін крови – обрій
знакував!¹³ (Stus
1986: 292)

It is as if the process of psychological alienation from the world to which the subject can no longer belong begins even before the actual isolation. As the author later realizes, this painful feeling of alienation from everything that constituted the essence of his existence (*the heart of the heart*) turned out to be a final farewell – not only to the most significant landmarks of Vasyl' Stus's life but, in fact, also to himself:

Я непомітно перейшов
межу
самого себе. І лежу на
споді
вітчизни, пам'яті, жаги,
свободи,
не знаючи, що Богові
скажу
за цю міграцію душі та
тіла.¹⁴ (Stus 2008: 194)

¹³ How cold it blew upon me / in this alienated homeland, here, / where the land seemed to me the heart of the heart, / and a wail of blood marked the horizon!

¹⁴ I have imperceptibly crossed the border / of myself. And I lie at the bottom / of homeland, memory, longing, freedom, / not knowing what to say to God / or this migration of soul and body.

In this text, dated March 1972 (almost two months after the arrest), the soul and body are perceived by the poet as distinct from the subject; they are separated from 'themselves' and lose their meaning: they move (migrate) beyond the boundaries of the transcendent, integral 'I' and find themselves 'at the bottom', in the space of non-presence.

As psychological research proves, such experiences lead to 'a splitting of "being within oneself" [in which a] person perceives his [or her] own body as something foreign, alien' (Yazvinska 2013: 10–11). This specific detachment from one's own bodily sensations and emotions, provoked by an unacceptable situation of external coercion and violence, can be interpreted through the lens of 'internal emigration', and in its extreme forms, borders on escapism. Moreover, the entirety of Stus's behaviour in prison and exile demonstrates his conscious and consistent rejection of the Soviet political system as 'a system of the abuse of man and his elementary rights' (Stus 2008: 381). The most eloquent gestures of this rejection are his actual renunciation of Soviet citizenship and, in a certain sense, his symbolic renunciation of real life. Stus wrote a statement about renouncing citizenship twice,

and in the second, dated October 18, 1978, emphasized: 'Having Soviet citizenship is an impossible thing for me. Being a Soviet citizen means being a slave. I do not accept such a role' (Stus 2008: 381). His symbolic renunciation of life can be seen, in particular, in his hunger strikes (including the final one, declared by the poet to be 'to the end'), acts of protest with which Stus reacted to manifestations of injustice, both in relation to himself and to other political prisoners. For him, this was almost the only way to preserve himself, his own consciousness and his personal human dignity. Sherekh defined such an uncompromising position as Stus's creation of the 'psychological complex of a kamikaze with a high and final life mission' (Sherekh 1986: 28).

In the context of the 'big zone', as the Soviet Union was ironically called by its citizens, real imprisonment paradoxically gave a person greater freedom of thought and self-expression. Political prisoners of the Soviet system felt freer internally, because they no longer had to pretend and seek compromises with their own conscience: 'We came from this double-minded world. They have already removed this skin of falsehood that we all had' (Semen Gluzman, Pidgirnyi

2002: 208). Vasyl' Stus's son explained this phenomenon as well, reporting that his father 'wrote from the zone that he felt very good. He was good there because he felt free there. Ultimately, it seems to me that freedom was the main indicator of happiness for him, simply being free of barriers. We are under a cap here, you can't say anything [if you want to] get into an institute or university, you have to make some kind of compromise... And there he could afford to say what he thought. He is in prison for this' (Dmytro Stus, Pidgirnyi 2002: 135).

The idea of finding oneself through self-denial – whether voluntary or in the context of total control and coercion – the arbitrary rejection of real life for the sake of a true, authentic life ('sudden self-immolation and eternal / conversion to the body' (Stus 1986: 400), becomes the leading concept, the fundamental principle of self-conscious existence in the works of Stus during his period of exile. The poet constantly emphasizes the arbitrariness of his choice: *self-immolation*, *self-exile*, *self-destruction*, *self-torture* appeal simultaneously both to the loneliness and to the selfhood (і до самотності, і до самоці) of this deadly confrontation with the system:

... В космічній стужі
відігриває нас лише
вогонь
від самоспалення...¹⁵
(Stus 2003: 375)

The direct bodily sensations that define the artist's physical existence gradually shift into memories of the past or individual moments of 'relived' experience in the present (such as meetings with relatives, dreams, visions, or fragments of the landscape that evoke memories of home).

In Stus's work, the body is not merely a part of the living world: it is directly integrated into the organic natural space of being. The loss of this space leads to the loss of the ability to fully experience the world through the body, in fact, it marks a loss of life in its existential sense. The poet's bodily detachment from his physical location is marked by somatic signs of cold and blindness, as well as a dramatic shift in spatial coordinates. A prison cell or place of exile becomes an artificial space divided into squares (*a square heart in a square circle, a square sun, a square step*), or an anti-space perceived as an endless, colourless wasteland (*empty sand, a*

¹⁵ ... In the space frost, / only the fire of self-combustion warms us.

dead desert, barren and black all around). The soft, fluid lines of the natural world, rich with sounds and smells, are replaced by the harsh geometry of sharp angles:

... Квадратура
таємних бід і ромби
самоти,
і прямокутники старих
напастей,
і лінії спадні усевпокори,
і вертикальний
понадзірний щем.¹⁶ (Stus
1986: 200)

The poet's body reacts to the harsh new conditions of existence by blocking sensations of blindness (*blind fingers, blind soul, half-blind spirit*) and flashes of 'deaf-mute pain'. Not only the human body, but the entire world becomes cold, blind, and deaf ('the blind veil of the sky'; 'the mercury of the prison twilight, blind, like a scar'; 'deaf-mute water'; 'the blinding sky – blinds with deaths!'). This mutual alienation leads to the catastrophic destruction of the foundations of existence, which, in turn, causes the subject, who becomes aware of the inevitabil-

¹⁶ ... The squares / of secret troubles and the rhombuses of solitude, / the rectangles of old misfortunes, / and the lines descending of all humility, / and the vertical, unobservable ache.

ity of this catastrophe, an almost physical pain: 'A mirror/ of the broken heavens with shards of radiance / hurts a longing gaze' (Stus 1986: 200).

Thus, the body seems to 'switch off' from the real, present reality for the author, and to focus all sensations on memories of the past and projections of a possible, but lost, future. The space of the lyrical subject's physical presence is marked as 'groundless', 'boundless', and 'shoreless'. It becomes an empty territory of death, a cold wasteland, a non-existence, where the 'black-black raven', the harbinger of the apocalypse, outlines 'Mesolithic circles, like holes in the universe' (Stus 2008: 167–68).

A sky without earth, like a soul without a body, that is, without a boundary that gives form and meaning to the vital potential of the spirit, deprives existence of validity and support. This motif closely aligns with the problem of groundlessness, which Sherekh described as a state of internal emigration for 'fugitives within countries' (Sherekh 1998: 390). For Stus, as the previous analysis has shown, rootedness is a vitally necessary feeling of existential involvement in the world, of physical presence in it – not only an organic connection with the living matter of the world (natural environment, na-

tive land, etc.), but also a literal rootedness in one's own material essence, in the body. A soul that loses the ability to hear its 'roots', that is, its connection with the body, loses its landmarks for purposeful movement and, therefore, its development ('We gladly leave our own nests', Stus 2008: 185).

At the same time, the angelic spirit, 'pinned with sharp spears / to its own body – the likeness of the cross', loses 'the right of self-evasion, / of self-exceeding extreme limits' (Stus 2003: 146). In this poem, which begins with the line 'You, angel, are thrown into hell' and is dated January 31, 1972 (the third week after his arrest), the semantic field of the 'body', which encompasses its own physical needs and limitations, also includes 'beloved ones, friends, hopes', 'pitiful loneliness', and 'a night filled with alienation'. That is, an attachment to one's physical existence, a dependence on everything that emotionally connects a person to the world, becomes an additional punishment and a sacrificial trap for the rebellious spirit.

The poet's body itself is transformed into a 'vertical coffin', in which a 'disoriented, deaf soul' is imprisoned:

Затиснутій минулим і
майбутнім,
тобі ані знайтись, ні
загубитись –
ти мого тіла яро-чорна
тінь.¹⁷ (Stus 2008: 185)

Between the past and the future, instead of the present, the soul finds itself 'suspended'. Without a body (only a painful, fiery-black shadow), trapped between memories and vain hopes, in the alienated space of non-life, the soul is torn not only from its own living flesh, but also from the subject itself ('you fly at a distance from me, you beckon'). The splitting of the personality into a dead (mortified) body, a disoriented soul, and a reflective 'I' leads to the total collapse of the world, in which impossible combinations include not only 'soul with body, joy with sorrow', but also the ontological primaries of being: 'life with death' and 'heaven with earth'. In contrast to the notion of physical death as the freezing of space and disembodiment, the motif of sleep emerges as a memory-dream that returns to the dreamer lost bodily sensations and, therefore, returns himself. More precisely, it is the

¹⁷ Trapped between the past and the future, / you can neither be found nor lost – / you are the fiery black shadow of my body.

return of his own reflection in the water:

І ось воно: відбитком по
воді
Враз попливло сумне
твоє обличчя
[...]
Тепер себе – пізнаєш по
біді?
По сивій голові – тепер
пізнаєш?¹⁸ (Stus 2003: 153)

Recognizing himself in the flowing image on the water (which diverges into *red streaks*) evokes in the poet's memory a similar situation from the past, when 'desired fate was met – eye to eye' (жадана стрілась доля – вічі в вічі) sharpening the awareness of a lost, un-lived life and unfulfilled hopes: 'Not in yourself, you return from yourself'.

The boundary between what happened before and what can happen in the future appears in Stus's artistic world as a liminal space, where emotional memory, recorded in bodily sensations, intertwines with imaginary visions and dreams to creating another phantom (or symbolic) dimension of being:

¹⁸ And here it is: like a footprint on the water / Suddenly, your sad face floats... / Now you will recognize yourself by your misfortune? / By your gray head - now you will recognize yourself?

Тримайся бо потойбік.
 Ти – за гранню,
 де видиво гойдається
 святе.
 Там – Україна. За межею.
 Там,
 лівіше серця.¹⁹ (Stus 2008:
 251)

Through sheer willpower, the subject consciously transforms himself into an emigrant who carries his homeland close to his heart. It exists beyond the confines of present reality and is there, *beyond*, where the artist seeks to be. The image of his native land pains him, yet it is revived in that pain, becoming physically tangible and, therefore, embodied, real. As Sherekh noted of this peculiarity of Vasyl' Stus's writing, 'Dreams in the life of an exiled prisoner are part of his biography, and in his poetry, they serve as a gateway to another reality' (Sherekh 1986: 34).

Certain motifs characteristic of the state of 'internal emigration' appear in poems that Vasyl' Stus wrote long before his imprisonment, however, at the time when the pressure of the repressive system was just beginning

¹⁹ Stay on the other side. You are beyond, / where the holy vision sways. / There is Ukraine. Beyond the border. There, / to the left of the heart.

to intensify. According to the poet's recollections, this occurred sometime after 1962²⁰. In the poem 'On a Sleepless Night', dated 1964, the concept of emigration itself emerges as an anxious premonition of alienation, an identity crisis, a threat to existence:

Емігрантом. Їй-богу.
 Ліжко.
 І на ковдрі – од вікон –
 грати.
 І подушка моя
 скуйовджена,
 і скуйовджена голова.²¹
 (Stus 2003: 41)

Here, the image of the emigrant's bed becomes a metaphor for the broader issue of (not) finding one's place in the world (*my pillow is tousled*), which is directly tied to the search for one's identity (a *tousled head*). The state of restlessness and uncertainty, of being lost in the suddenly alienated space of a night room in the middle of 'fading Kyiv', leads, both in this work and more generally in the poetry of the 'Winter Trees' period (1970) to existential themes

²⁰ See the letter to his wife dated 16.05.1981 (Stus 2008: 405).

²¹ An emigrant. Oh my God. A bed. / And on the blanket - from the windows - bars. / My pillow is tousled, / and my head is tousled.

of loneliness, anxiety, the meaning of existence, and death.

In the artistic conception that Vasyl' Stus developed in his *The Vanishing Blossom* (1971), dedicated to the work of Volodymyr Svidzinsky, the problem of existence, of conscious being, is interpreted as a both universal and purely artistic spiritual collision: 'A person who has felt his own orphanhood and vulnerability in the world has become hardened under the hungry sky [...] And then he runs away – from the world and from himself' (Stus 2008: 362–363). For such a person, art becomes a form of 'surrender to the difficulties of existence', replacing real life with the cult of suffering: 'Making us unused to life, art teaches death' (Відучуючи нас жити, мистецтво навчає смерті). In this tragic perspective, the artist is likened to a spiritual kamikaze, as Sherekh wrote, he is doomed: 'A bee, releasing its sting, dies. So does the artist' (Stus 2008: 357). According to this concept, any poet is a priori an outsider-suicide who rejects 'normal existence' in favor of 'the lost and unattainable'. He 'searches for himself in that expanse through which he, always contrary to reality, defines the space of his individuality. But, searching for himself, he also

loses what he has' (Stus 2008: 356).

The problems of the fatal disconnection between the biological, sensual, and intellectual revolutionary principles, of creativity as inevitable alienation from the world, and of the general catastrophic nature of worldly existence, as outlined in *The Vanishing Blossom*, form most of the foundation upon which the 'internal emigrant' code is built. This code guided Stus throughout his life. External totalitarian pressure only strengthened and deepened this guiding principle. In fact, persons drive themselves into an existential trap: 'With horror, we realized that all the rivers of history flow backwards. [...] we become victims of our history, our actions, victims of ourselves' (Stus 2008: 364).

The same motif of reverse movement (against the flow of time, 'from the mouth to the sources') is pervasive in the poetic discourse of Vasyl' Stus. The future is opaque ('I peer into tomorrow – darkness and dark darkness'), and the present is entirely composed of fragments of the past ('All life is like a look / into the past age. Over the shoulder'). That is, the present is merely an imitation of real life in the here and now (Stus 2003: 124). Returning to the ori-

gins of existence, to the time 'even before birth', can 'reset' the situation, rendering past life inactive, because 'you are dead / in a dead world' (Stus 2008: 107). In conditions of imprisonment, these complex temporal layers acquire new meanings. According to Filip Zimbardo, it is crucial to maintain a temporal perspective in a situation of total control or severe social pressure, relying on one's own past (remember who you are), and considering the future consequences of one's actions in order not to lose oneself in the 'eternal present' and to reduce its influence. Zimbardo argues that 'when the past and the future unite to restrain the extremes of the present, that situation loses power' (Zimbardo 2014: 179). In Stus's poetic reception, the prospect of the future seems to be impossible in principle, and so it is shifted to the past, thereby making time into a circle ('the future is all in the past'), but leaving it outside the present. For the writer, this reflexive 'movement into oneself' (Sherekh 1986: 33) becomes a counterbalance and, perhaps, a form of salvation from destructive reality, a means of self-preservation:

Ми нібито обернені
свічаддя –

Єдиновласну душу
світливо.²² (Stus 1986:
140)

Indeed, for Vasyl' Stus, bodily involvement in life is a direct connection to the specific physical space of existence. Thus, the loss of this organic space leads to the loss of the very possibility of bodily experiencing life: 'Your soul has collapsed here, / your chest has become half empty' (Stus 2003: 189). As a result, the poet constructs a phantom existence, one that resides in memories and dreams:

Верни до мене, пам'яте
моя!
Нехай на серце ляже
ваготою
моя земля з рахманною
журбою
...
Нехай Дніпра уроча
течія
бодай у сні, у маячні
струмує.²³ (Stus 2003: 201)

His life is concentrated in the spaces of memory, as a recollection and reconstruction of the

²² We are like candles turned upside down – / we illuminate our own souls.

²³ Return to me, my memory! / Let my land lie heavy on my heart / with quiet sorrow / [...] / Let the charming current of the Dnieper / at least flow in a dream, in a delusion.

past, which is understood by him as a movement backward – not only to the times of youth and childhood but much further – to the dreams ‘with which you began / even before birth’ (Stus 2003: 162).

This is a conditional existence within the conditional space of ‘self-sleep’, where the poet dreams of himself, where ‘self-passing-by is your lot’ (самопроминання – твій приділ) (Stus 2003: 167). The discovery of one’s own integrity becomes a permanent immersion in memories, because all the future has already happened (or was about to happen) in the past (‘and I remember everything – as if I were alive’ (Stus 2003: 242). This new existence represents a form of ‘internal emigration’, allowing the poet to exist under conditions of imprisonment that are intolerable

for physical existence: outside the boundaries of one’s own body, yet within the force field of the mental body. Thus, through the memory of the body (and more profoundly, the memory of the lost world: ‘The forgotten sky / hurts like an amputated hand’, Stus 2003: 162), the phantom somatics of unrealized or repressed existence are brought to life in Vasyl’ Stus’s poems.

The research presented in this article was conducted within the framework of the PRIN 2022 PNRR project “Literature of Socialist Trauma: Mapping and Researching the Lost Page of European Literature (LOST)”, ID: P2022Z45X8, CUP: B53D23029360001, Principal Investigator: Andrea Gullotta (University of Palermo). The project was funded by the Italian Ministry of Education, Universities, and Research (MIUR) under the 2022 PRIN PNRR Call for Proposals, Directorial Decree No. 1409 of September 14, 2022.

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