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Current Geopolitical Processes as a Methodological Opportunity for (Literary) Imagology

Abstract

The article proposes a hypothesis that traditional imagological concepts are no longer sufficient for interpreting the current and recent "imagological situation." The authors argue that given the significant changes in the geopolitical ordering of the world in the post-imperial period, it is necessary to expand and internally categorize the terms to capture a more nuanced way of looking at the "other." The article provides a summary of existing approaches and suggests innovations, particularly in making a careful distinction between the self-image of the internal and external, and the disaggregation of the "meta-image" into several layers. The authors point out that imagological research needs to consider that the ethnic identity of the recipient is not unambiguous, which problematizes the interrelation of "us" and "them." Additionally, in post-imperialism, there is an unravelling of the former bipolar perception. The authors trace the image in the context of concepts such as image, stereotype, and brand. The essay aims to analyse the manifestations of the emerging neo-imperialism, which returns to the traditional contrasting delineation of "our" and "the foreign." It also examines the factor of evaluation and the question of fictionality. The effectiveness of the new approaches is demonstrated in a Russian-Czech comparative analysis of selected novels by Vladimir Sorokin and Jáchym Topol. The authors perceive the current geopolitical processes as an opportunity for improving the imagological methodology and imagology as an effective tool for interpreting the contemporary world.

imagology; Russian literature; Czech literature; imperialism; post-imperialism; neo-imperialism; stereotype; brand

Imagology is currently a modern and, one could say, fashionable scientific discipline. This is undoubtedly due to the fact that its subject matter and methods have a high interpretive potential in the face of the contemporary turbulent and changing world, which is becoming more complicated. This is true even though the question of "what" and "how" to research has not yet been resolved. Or rather, the contribution of imagology may lie precisely in the fact that it dynamically adapts its subject matter and methods as needed. In particular, it addresses the extent to which literary versus non-literary texts are to be examined, literary versus non-literary methods are to be used, the extent to which the focus should be on the poetics of the literary work, and the extent to which non-literary factors are to be considered.

Imagology is now understood as a separate discipline rather than as a part of literary comparative studies, from which it emerged. Its history can be divided into three stages:

> The first period starts from the first ideas from the Middle Ages and ends with the Modern Era. The second one begins in the nineteenth century, with the advent of the "study of the image," a privileged field of comparative literature and lasts until 2007, until the appearance of the first Imagological Book. And the third stage starts in 2007, when the imagology regains its status as an independent discipline, continuing today. (Iovu 2020)

The monograph *The Cultural Construction and Literary Representation of National Characters: a Critical Survey* (Beller, Leerssen 2007) defined several methodological axioms. One of them is the artistic literature as the exclusive object of imagology:

> Literary — and, more particularly, comparatist — imagology studies the origin and function of characteristics of other countries and peoples, are expressed textually, particularly in the way in which they are presented in works of literature, plays, poems, travel books and essays. (Beller, Leerssen 2007: 7)

In contrast, in the monothematic issue of the Polish journal "Przegląd Wschodnioeuropejski" (11, 2020, No. 2) for example, literary studies are, de facto, a marginal part, giving way to research in the fields of cultural studies, linguistics, media discourse, economics, and

politics. Beller points out that imagology is not to be confused with sociology or anthropology: "While it is obvious that current attributes concerning a given nation are textual tropes rather than sociological and anthropological data…" (Beller, Leerssen 2007: 27). In the definition of image, however, he also invokes diverse disciplines: "The mental or discursive representation or reputation of a person, group, ethnicity or 'nation.' Images specifically concern attributes of moral or characterological nature; often they take a form of linking social fact and imputed collective psychologism" (Beller, Leerssen 2007: 27). Researchers note that imagology can afford a "bricolage" of approaches and practices (Zelenka 2018: 8). Even Beller admits that "although textual and literary sources are of primary importance, literary historians owe many of the most important concepts used to pioneering studies of sociologist, ethnologist, social psychologist, political scientist, and historians. This is the reason for the widely diverging terminology and for many methodological uncertainties…" (Beller, Leerssen 2007: 27).

The aim of literary imagology is defined by the above-mentioned ground-breaking publication as follows: "It is the aim of imagology to describe origin, process and function of national prejudices and stereotypes, to bring them to surface, analyse them and make people rationally aware of them" (Beller, Leerssen 2007: 11–12). The core of the research is the study of "a nations on contrasts," the study of the image of "others" and "foreigners." Beller considers the study of national identity as a secondary topic:

> The ultimate perspective of image studies is a theory of cultural or national stereotypes, not a theory of cultural or national identity. Imagology is concerned with the representamen, representations as textual strategies and discourses. That discourse implicitly raises a claim of referentiality *vis-à-vis* empirical reality, telling us that nation X has a set of characteristic Y, yet the actual validity of that referentiality claim is not the imagologist's to verify or falsify. (Beller, Leerssen 2007: 27)

In this book, Beller summarizes the terminological apparatus of the discipline: "A wide-ranging terminological cluster including topos, commonplace, prejudice, stereotypes, imago-type, cliché, etc." (Beller, Leerssen 2007: 8).

In no way do we wish to argue with the premises presented. However, we believe that the traditional concepts and matrix of relations are no longer sufficient to describe the "imagological present" and the "recent imagological past." The aim of our paper is to propose an extension of approaches for imagological research and to define more detailed categories of certain concepts in order to capture the ambiguity and complexity of the present situation more accurately. It seems to be a process of mutual flux: today's complicated reality can shift and refine the methodology of imagology.

In our study, we will stay in the field of literary science. We will start from the analysis of specific literary works that are symptomatic both imagologically and in terms of reflecting the state of the contemporary world. We selected prose works by the Russian author Vladimir Sorokin and the Czech author Jáchym Topol from recent years (see below). Their novels have been described by interpreters and the writers themselves as social, political, and "key." They are also a combination of utopia, anti-utopia, dystopia, and alternative history. On the one hand, these have been the impetus for us to create some new imagological categories; on the other hand, we will use them as evidence to demonstrate the applicability of innovative approaches.

For our research, we start from the premise of the three successive historical cycles: imperialism (and its associated colonialism and nationalism), postimperialism (postcolonialism and postnationalism) (Bhabha 1994), and the subsequent neo-imperialism (neo-colonialism, neo-nationalism). The most significant transformation of the "imagological situation" occurred with the transition from imperialism to post-imperialism.

Until the early 1990s, there were clearly defined and separate bipolar geopolitical, ideological, and cultural blocs. It was not difficult to identify the boundaries, the centre and the periphery. Societies were built on a hierarchical structure and were largely homogeneous, languages did not mix, and ethnic identity was unambiguous. It was very easy to define "us" versus "them." Patriotism was largely based on fostering hatred of the enemy, on demonizing or dehumanizing the "other." The imagological situation was transparent and the evaluative relationship to the "other" was clear (mania, philia, phobia).

Since the 1990s, after the collapse of large systems and global imperial entities, openness and pluralism have come. Space first fragmented and then merged into one global whole. First, in the framework of real geography, then gradually in the sense of a single virtual online space. In artistic terms, this post-imperial period correlates with postmodernism, in economic terms with the fourth wave of globalisation. Cultures are intermingling, languages are mixing, the distinction between "own" and "foreign," centre and periphery is becoming problematic, borders are breaking down. In contrast to dichotomous models of space and the movement of people within it, the model of the rhizome, a decentralised network, is being applied (Hausbacher 2000). A singular identity has been replaced by alterity; ethnic identity has been made uncertain. Instead of a dialectical logic of identity, came a deconstructive or poststructuralist logic of hybridity (Bhabha 1994). The multiculturalism of social life increased. Even in the domestic environment, one finds oneself in a continuous succession of intercultural situations. Goods from all over the world are available to people. The imagological situation has become completely blurred.

However, given the evolution of the international situation, especially in connection with Russia's behaviour, it is probably necessary to consider the emergence of a new paradigm from 2014 onwards. The former totalitarian regimes are beginning to build new neo-nationalist utopias of empire reconstruction. After an era of liberation and freedom — but also uncertainty — such societies are returning to older states of political establishment and archaic structures of thought. With the end of imperialism, there has been talk of the end of history (Fukuyama 2002), when "posthistorical man must adapt to life in a post-national society" (Ulbrechtová 2015: 273). This is no longer the case for the present: the realignment of (geo)political forces in the world and the sharpened relations of the powers lead to a new polarization. The situation is fundamentally influenced by technology and new media, especially information and communication, where — referring to the post-truth era — information is manipulated and alternative realities are produced.

This is where imagology can be very useful, because one of its central questions remains the question of truthfulness. Imagology always considers the intentionality in the creation of the text and the factor of deception. "The truthfulness of such images should be questioned: Are we sure that we see what we think we see? Are our opinions about other persons or peoples true? And what do we know about the way we see ourselves?" (Beller, Leerssen 2007: 4). The underlying imagological axiom is that human

behaviour and action are determined not by reality itself, but by our ideas about reality (Konstantinović 1988).

How, then, do shifts in the "imagological situation" manifest themselves in artistic literature and how might one respond to them by refining the conceptual apparatus of the discipline? We suggest the following additions:

Relativization of ethnicity. We believe that in postimperialism or postnationalism, ethnicity cannot always be defined unambiguously. The current imagological research is concentrated on the portal imagologica.eu. Here, expert articles are still bipolarly classified according to the ethnicity of the observer and the observed. Articles from 2021, 2020 and 2019, e.g., Spanish — Spanish; French — French; Italian — German; Dutch, English; Flemish — Spanish; Scandinavia — English. Attention is paid to the exploration of both hetero-image, i.e. the presented idea of the other, i.e. how I want the "other" to appear to my audience, and self-image, i.e. the presented idea of myself, i.e. how I want to appear. This distinction is fundamental to imagology. However, delineating the ethnic perspective within them is more complex. Our selected writers, Sorokin and Topol, reflect changes in the plan of the narrator or the main characters. We present the attributes for each text in the table 1 (p. 110–111).

As we can see, the ethnic background of both the observer and the observed is not unambiguous. Their ethnicity tends to be vague, multiple, or fluid. Ethnicity is most relativized in Sorokin's *Manaraga*. The protagonist is unable to determine his ethnic identity: his father was from a backwater Jewish Lithuanian-Belarusian nest, his mother was a Muslim from a family of Crimean Tatars, Geza was born in Budapest and grew up in Bavaria. The hero owns ten (fake) passports, which he rotates as needed. It is therefore possible to say that the Russian author describes Russia in a stylized way through the eyes of a foreigner. However, this is not simply because there are no categories of Russia or foreigner. The most complex imagological starting point is Topol's novel *Cloctate Tar*. The narrator and main character is a boy from a children's home for ethnic minorities and children of foreigners. He does not know his origins and defines himself as "Ayvar." He is "other" and grows up among "others." This ambiguity leads to his ability to switch between cultural codes. He acts as a *de facto* double agent. Thus, he sees the Czechs once as his own, and once as foreign (from the perspective of the occupying Soviet troops, whom he joins for a time). In *The Sensitive Man*, the imagological prism is sharpened by the fact that the image of the Czech Republic is filtered through the characters who are Czech, but who are returning to their homeland after a long time (family) or an even longer time (the uncle who emigrated to the USSR in 1968). The image thus stands on the borderline between self-image and hetero-image; however, the main characters are to some extent separated from Czechness.

The blurring of the situation implies the difficulty of delimiting the basic imaginative categories: "us" — "them," "our" — "foreign." In *Manaraga*, "we" is defined broadly as "we, the new Europeans." In *Telluria*, the "we" changes with each chapter and with the varying scope of the ending identity of the heroes (we small, we big, we limbs, we inhabitants of "Kolmoskovia," we Tellurians, we Bavarians, we Berliners, we anti-Russian Serbian cell, we Russian family…). If the "we" proliferates, the "they" proliferates. The "others," the "foreigners" are basically everyone, except one's own, often unnumbered group.

Table 1.

	The Day of the Oprichnik (2007)	Telluria (2013)	Managara (2017)	The Sister (Sestra, 1994)	Cloctate Tar (Kloktat dehet, 2005)	The Sensitive Man (Citlivý člověk, 2017)
time of action	2027	probably the 40s, the 21st century	probably the 1950s, the 21st century	the early 1990s	1968	2014–2015
narrator	the main character, ich-form	50 different narrators	the main character, ich-form	the main character, ich-form	the main character, ich-form	omniscient
main character	the oprichnik Komiaga	different main characters in each chapter	the "cook" Geza	the young man Potok, the author's alter-ego	the orphan, boy Ilya	family (dad, mom, two boys)
ethnic identity of the main character	Russian	from the distinct to the vague, beyond human and non-human ("small," "big" peoples, "centaurs"…)	mixed	Czech with roots in the "East"	obscure (from the "Land of Shadows"), hidden from the main character	Czechs living abroad
spectant	Russian	50 different spectants	multiethnic character	Czech	foreigner of Eastern European origin	Czech — emigrant

	The Day of the Oprichnik (2007)	Telluria (2013)	Managara (2017)	The Sister (Sestra, 1994)	Cloctate Tar (Kloktat deget, 2005)	The Sensitive Man (Citlivý člověk, 2017)
spected	Russians, foreigners	Europeans	all	Czech, Asians	Czechs, Russians, Germans, Chinese, Roma...	Czechs, Ukrainians, Russians, Chinese, Muslims, "Ayvars"
language of characters	Russian, linguistic purism	Russian, French, Chinese, English, territorial and personal multilingualism	"common language," other languages through translators, French, English, Chinese, territorial and personal multilingualism	Czech, mixed "pre-Babylonian language"	Czech, Czech as a foreign language, Russian, multilingualism ("gibberish")	Czech with Anglicisms and Russianisms
"blending"	monoculture Russian style	heterogeneity	acculturation	heterogeneity	official monoculture, heterogeneity in the micro-space of the orphanage	heterogeneity
the prevailing historical situation	imperialism, neoimperialism	postimperialism	postimperialism, globalization	postimperialism	imperialism	postimperialism, globalization, the germs of neoimperialism

Table — compiled by the authors.

In order to refine imagological research, we propose to work with the concept of "terminal identity" in determining the identity of characters (Haller 2003). In the (neo-)imperial *The Day of the Oprichnik*, the hero is clearly confined to the borders of Russia. Already in *Telluria*, however, the finite identity of the individual has perhaps all variations. It is world — block — state — regional — urban — rural — community — family — completely individual (hermitic). The view of the "other" is then very much influenced by the terminal identity. It reflects the outlook or degree of cosmopolitanism of the characters, but also the type of regime they live under. The limited terminal identity in *The Day of the Oprichnik*, which depicts a totalitarian state, leads to xenophobia and neophobia. The all-planetary end identity of the hero of *Manaraga* leads to levelling.

In the post-imperial era, ethnorelativism was supposed to prevail. The ethnocentric starting point of the observer and the ethnicity of the observed became blurred, diluted, relativized, and mixed. But ethnicity did not disappear. This is illustrated by both authors. In addition to indications of age and occupation, a brief ethnic characterization ("thirty-year-old Englishwoman," "nineteen-year-old bio-rapper from Angola") usually accompanies many of the characters, often in the form of a label, an ethnic stereotype: a Serbian veteran, a Vietnamese prostitute. Especially if an individual has moved outside of his or her original ethnic area, being labelled by his or her ethnicity is a convenient distinctive label for the environment and those around him or her, but of course also a simplistic one.

Extension of the dyadic concept spectant — spected to triadic concept. In the field of literary science, the dyad spected and spectant is more or less sufficient. However, it would be appropriate to extend it to the triad spected, spectant, and recipient. The fact for whom the image is created and for what purpose is crucial for the form of the "image." In our opinion, the extension of the dyad of actors of imagological communication to a triad implies that self-image should be further classified into internal self-image, i.e., "self-image" directed to members of one's own group, and external self-image, i.e., the image of oneself presented to "others." This distinction is most clearly manifested in *The Day of the Oprichnik*. Russia's external self-image is based primarily on the demonstration of power and strength (the "roaring Russian bear"), the country's indispensability with regard to raw material resources, and the emphasis on Russia's moral purity. The inner self-image is based on a kind of softness, bucolics, evoking feelings of beauty, emotion, love, and compassion.

More attention to exploring meta-image. Meta-image (a "presumed image," Beller 2007: 344) involves the subject's ideas of how others imagine them. Meta-image reflects a hetero-image, it is a projection of it. We might also call it a "putative hetero-image." It is meta-image that is considered one of the most promising directions of imagological research (Beller 2007: 344). Sorokin, for example, speculates what an Islamist view of Europe looks like:
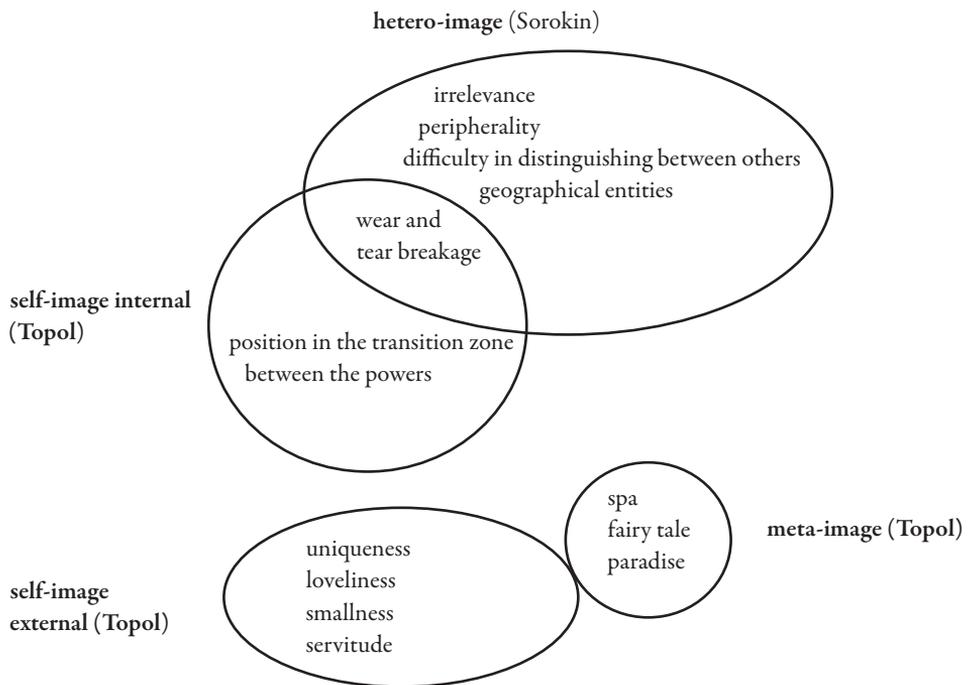
> Vítr svaté války vlaje nad Evropou. Ó prastaré kamenné kvádry Paříže, Kolína a Budapešti, Vídně a Dubrovníku. Strach a třas ten naplní vaše železná srdce! Ajjá! Ó dlažbo Lyonu, Prahy, Mnichova a Antverp, Ženevy a Říma. Ať se vás dotknou obnošené sandály hrdých Alláhových bojovníků! Ajjá! Ó stará Evropo, kolébko šibalského lidstva, bašto hříšníků a smliníků... útulku bezbožníků a sodomitů. Kéž už hřmot džihádu otřese tvými hradbami. Ajjá! Ó zbabělí a lstiví muži Evropy, co víru zaměnili za každodenní rutinu, pravdu za lež a hvězdičky nebeské za ubohé grošíky...

The wind of the holy war is blowing over Europe. Oh, ancient stone blocks of Paris, Cologne, Budapest, Vienna, and Dubrovnik. Fear and trembling will fill your iron hearts! Ajjá! Oh, paving stones of Lyon, Prague, Munich, and Antwerp, Geneva, and Rome. May the worn sandals of proud warriors of Allah touch you! Ajjá! Oh, old Europe, the cradle of wicked humanity, the fortress of sinners and flatterers... a refuge for godless and sodomites. Let the roar of jihad shake your walls. Ajjá! Oh, cowardly and deceitful men of Europe, who have traded faith for daily routine, truth for lies, and heavenly stars for meager pennies... (Sorokin 2013: 45–46)

Topol projects how the Russians probably see the West: "Sly Westerners, sly Westerners, they brought us to our knees because we weren't strong enough!" (Topol 2017: 50; "Úlisný Západ Úlisný Západ nás dostal na kólená, protože my nebyli pevni!").

Self-image, hetero-image and meta-image influence each other. Meta-image can very strongly shape a self-image. It adapts to the meta-image. (I present myself the way I think they want to see me), or it responds oppositely to them. Topol imagines that the world powers that be see the Czech Republic as a paradise, a garden, a spa. In the external self-image, he then goes against this idea and attributes to the Czechs the idea of building a great number of "grill bars, culture halls, gambling halls, casinos..." (Topol 2017: 273–274).

However, meta-image can be distorted compared to hetero-image, i.e. our idea of how others imagine us can be wrong. We can illustrate this by comparing the different images of the Czechs and the Czech Republic in the novels *Manaraga* and *The Sensitive Man*:

hetero-image (Sorokin)

irrelevance
peripherality
difficulty in distinguishing between others
geographical entities

wear and
tear breakage

**self-image internal
(Topol)**

position in the transition zone
between the powers

spa
fairy tale
paradise

meta-image (Topol)

uniqueness
loveliness
smallness
servitude

**self-image
external (Topol)**

Picture 1. The different images of the Czechs and the Czech Republic in the novels *Manaraga* and *The Sensitive Man*. Compiled by the authors

However, the situation is even more complex if we include other possible ways of perspective. "Our" idea of how the other sees himself or herself, i.e., the "putative self-image," can be called the "meta self-image." Topol, for instance, believes that the Russians see themselves as a traditional, masculine, tough culture: "The arena of death, a sport for real men. Only man and machine. This is not entertainment for homosexuals and pedophiles like in the West" (Topol 2017: 46; "Arena smrti, sport vopravdovych chlapu. Jen muž a stroj. To není pro homosexuálov a pedófilov zábava jako na Západě!"). Further, one can speculate about what the "other" thinks of the "other other," i.e., a "putative hetero-image," "meta-hetero-image." The Czech author presents the Ukrainians through the eyes of the Russians: "Ukrainian fascists are launching rockets Grad! They do not want Ajvaristan to Novorussia!" (Topol 2017: 51; "To ukrajinský fašísty pálí rakety Grád! Oni nechtějí Ajvaristan do Novorusíji! Ale tu to bude jako na Krymu, neboj, brát…"). The "meta-hetero-image" can have another level: our imagining of what "the other" imagines that "we" imagine about "the other other." One could also single out the category of "meta-heteroimage": what "we" think "they" think about what "we" think about "them."

The definition of the categories is not an end in itself, moreover, it is not a mental exercise. We believe that ideas do arise at this "reinforced" level and that they interfere with the real communication of representatives of different cultures. First of all, they define mutual expectations, which in turn influence the degree of (non-)acceptance of the "other." In this area, imagology should be interdisciplinarily linked with psychological research on perceptual stereotypes.

S c a l i n g   p o l a r   p e r c e p t i o n. Traditionally, the imagology describes "us" and "the foreigner" in a system of binary relations: ethnocentrism X colonialism, normalcy X exoticism, educated X barbarian, North X South, West X East, centre X periphery, orientalism X Occidentalism, etc. (Zelenka 2018: 13). In the post-imperial era, along with territorial and power fragmentation, heterogeneity and mixing, a distinct polarity distinction is apparently not possible. In neo-imperialism, on the other hand, it is recycled in full force.

The shifts in defining oneself in relation to other geopolitical blocs are also recorded in artistic literature. We demonstrate them through a quantitative analysis of the significant lemma frequency:
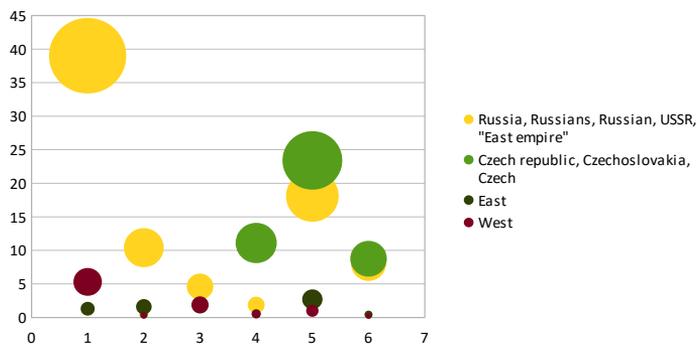
1. *The Day of Oprichnik*, 2. *Telluria*, 3. *Manaraga*, 4. *The Sister*, 5. *Cloctate Tar*, 6. *The Sensitive Man*

Chart 1. Analysis of the significant lemma frequency (10 000 words). Compiled by the authors

In the (neo)nationalist state of *The Day of Oprichnik*, the Russia-West opposition dominates with an emphasis on building Russia's self-image. The West is nevertheless a significant category here, since for the construction of self-image in a totalitarian system, a negative demarcation against the hostile "other" is the basis of identity. In *Telluria*, neither the West nor the East are ideological categories; they are only associated with the direction of movement. Russia is disintegrating. In a globalized *Manaraga*, the categories become meaningless. In the post-imperial *The Sister*, West and East are considered as commensurable geographical and mental constructs that mix in the border space of Czechoslovakia: Prague sells "shining Ukrainian-Vietnamese-Laotian-Czech samurai swords" (Topol 1994: 12). Russia is hardly reckoned on in the process of establishing a new Czech identity after 1989. The novel *Cloctate Tar* tells the story of Czechoslovakia as a battlefield between the "Eastern Empire" and Czechoslovakia, both subjects being significantly verbally represented and contrasted. In *The Sensitive Man*, in contrast to *The Sister*, Russia is again at play.

Let us mention an example of a different artistic representation of spatial coordinates. In *The Day of the Oprichnik*, the centre of everything is Gosudar's chamber in the Kremlin, and away from it — in gradually receding circles — space loses its significance. Most notably in *Telluria*, the traditional spatial relations of large — small, important — *unimportant*, central — circumjacent, Russia has disintegrated into half a dozen new states with local centres, with no-man's territories in between. There is a centrifugal movement. Sorokin inverts the traditional Russian stereotype where everyone wants to "go to Moscow." Here, in turn, the inhabitants are fleeing Moscow. In *Manaraga*, the notion of a centre is virtually non-existent, and it is not obvious from where the society is controlled. Moscow is not mentioned at all.

In Topol's novel *The Sensitive Man*, we observe another manifestation of incipient neo-imperialism, namely the renewal of zones of geopolitical influence. China and Russia and the Muslim world are becoming world powers: "President Zeman said that we don't have to be afraid of anything because he, along with the Chinese and Russian presidents, have decided that this beautiful Czech land, protected from foreigners, will be transformed into paradise. There will be no shooting range, tank training ground, concentration camp, or factory here. Instead, the smoggy Chinese and Russians will come here for holidays and vacations" (Topol 2017: 273–274; "Pan prezident Zeman pravil, že se nemusíme ničeho bát, že neboť s panem čínským prezidentem a panem ruským prezidentem rozhodli, že nádherná česká zem uchráněná cizáků bude proměněna v ráj... nebude tu střelnice, tankodrom, koncentrák, robotárna... ale prachatý číňani a rusáci sem budou jezdit na kanikuly a prazdniky...").

D i s t i n g u i s h i n g   t h e   c o n c e p t s   o f   i m a g e ,   p i c t u r e ,   s t e r e o t y p e ,   a n d   b r a n d. From the numerous definitions of image, we have selected a summary of meta-analysis proposed by Artur Chepkasov (Chepkasov 2017). An image is a structured unit, an image of an object formed in the psyche of people, to which a certain evaluation is attached. Image is a product deliberately created, artificial. It is the result of conscious activity delivered to an individual from the outside. The image is formed by a set of ideas circulating in the general consciousness, and these have a collective essence. Although the "image" is constructed rationally, it contains a considerable amount of affective, figurative, and associative elements. It is symbolic in nature and can be linked to reality in a completely loose way. Image is thus to be distinguished from the categories of "picture," stereotype, brand, or even reputation and prestige.

"I m a g e" v e r s u s "p i c t u r e." An "image" is a natural, spontaneous, elemental phenomenon, the result of an individual's inner emotional psychic activity, whereas a "picture" is a deliberately created product, the result of conscious activity. The main difference between "image" and "picture" is that, together with the object, it is also presented to the individual for interpretation. The creation of an image is reflected by writers as a patriotic effort to become. *The Day of Oprichnik* is essentially a showcase of Russian self-images and hetero-images of foreigners. At the same time, they create distinctive authorial hetero-, and particularly self-images. In Sorokin's work, for instance, it is a portrait of Russia as "a giantess with a diamond headdress and in a snow-white tsarist cloak." In Topol's work, it is an allegory of the lovable yet powerful doll Bohemia triumphing over "victorious devilish sorcerers with yellow wolf eyes."

"I m a g e" v e r s u s "s t e r e o t y p e." The stereotype is a schematic, standardized image characterized by extreme stability, while the "image" is to some extent dynamic. It is the study of stereotypes from which the distinction between self- and hetero- used in imagology originates. Autostereotypes (endostereotypes) form a self-image, an idea of one's own group. They have a positive charge, a positive identification of the individual and the group, and tend to be much more complex and richer than the typically homogeneous heterostereotype. Heterostereotypes (exostereotypes) are more of a "devalorizing character," where "the lack of information about the other leads to the automatic spread of negative stereotypes and the reinforcement of generalizing ideas about their otherness" (Košťálová 2012: 47). Although they arise from a) self-observation of alterity (individual stereotypes), they are far more often a matter of b) intergenerational transmission (collective stereotypes) and c) mediated experience gained in the process of socialization and through the media (Leyens 1994: 51). Stereotypes, prejudices, and clichés play a crucial role in the presentation of the self and the "other" because they are mentally convenient: "By applying a stereotype, reality becomes more transparent and predictable" (Košťálová 2012: 47). The stereotype poses a significant danger to the image. It constantly attacks it, trying to infiltrate its core. As a result, most images always end up narrowing down to simplistic, polar, and contrasting characteristics. Both writers "play" with this. They work with the assumption that in a general discourse there are fixed ideas associated with certain nations. These are so ingrained that they can be treated as prefabricated in a literary text: "Most importantly, don't drink their Norwegian aquavit, son, it causes depression!" (Sorokin 2013: 22; "Hlavně nepij ten jejich norský akvavit, synku, vyvolává to deprese!"); "As an ethnic German, I always thought too scientifically" (Sorokin 2013: 176; "Jako etnický Němec jsem vždy uvažoval až příliš vědátorsky"); "We knew that Slovaks are fast Moravians, Moravians have a kilometer-long fence, Czechs think ahead, and Praguers are arrogant pigs and that we are all on the same map as others" (Topol 1994: 35; "Věděli jsme, že Slováci sou rychlý Moráváci, Moráváci že mají kilometrovej drát, Češi že myslej za roh a Pražáci že sou nadutci a svině a že všichni jsme na jedný mapě s ostatními").

"I m a g e" v e r s u s "b r a n d." Brand is a phenomenon from the field of economics, and it is a priori positive. Image is rather a social phenomenon. With the progressive globalisation and the development of a consumer society, we can see the penetration of brand into image. Image is purposefully constructed in a similar way to branding. It borrows from branding the moment of "rebranding," i.e., the possibility of rebuilding the brand. In both Topol and Sorokin, we observe that the entire nations are "branded," i.e., reduced to a com-

mercial brand associated with goods or a service. Teluria is a country producing telluric spikes (the perfect drug), Sakhalin is part of the Republic of Holo, which produces holograms. In *Manaraga*, Thailand is only associated with massage, China with medicine, Japan with sushi, Transylvania with Dracula, etc. Topol goes even further and incorporates the Czech external self-image into the animated characters of Krteček (the little Mole) and Mikeš (the tomcat): "Did you know, folks, that everyone already loves our Little Mole? Now we'll also praise our Mikeš, the Czech cat with lining, and this beautiful Czech landscape. Hooray…" (Topol 2017: 273–274; "Víte, lidičky, že Krtečka našeho už všichni milujou, teď vyzdvihneme I našeho Mikeše, tu kočku českou podšitou, a tuto českou krásnou krajinu. Hurááá…"). Interestingly, both Sorokin and Topol see Russian literature as the brand of Russia (they agree on Dostoevsky). In their projections, this is all that will be left of Russia in the end.

A s s e s s m e n t   f a c t o r. There is always an emotional charge and an assessment component in the image. Imagology has a very elaborate scale of evaluation of the other: positive, negative, or distancing. Alternatively, the displacement of the other ethnicity from the author's field of vision takes place (Soukup 2006). Other terms also include attractiveness (mania), repulsion (phobia), equality (philia), and ignorance (distance). Given what has been said above, it is clear that even these categories will not be realised in a pure form in post-imperialism. The image will be formed as a mixture of strangeness and closeness, disgust, and admiration (Sanchez-Mazas, Licata 2005). Let us take an example of Topol's twofold assessment of the Czechs. The author depicts Czech national identity through a self-image both as a majestic "hard-working and industrious nation of the Czech basin" and as an underhanded one ("a nation of slaves"). The attractive "smallness" can turn into idiocy: Czech songs sung badly by foreigners, fake Czech glass, rubber dumplings…

It should also be remembered that an image consists of several thematic components, which the spector may consider separately and attribute to one another. The image cannot be perceived in a completely homogeneous way, but as a set with subsets: the image of the leader, the people, culture, nature… The image of the leader is usually worse than the image of the people (possibly a nation), the image of nature and culture can remain positive despite the demonization of the two previous ones (Čeněk 2008).

As seen through the lenses of neoimperialism, the evaluation is simplified to the extremes. Positive attributes ascribed to one's own group and negative attributes ascribed to an alien group chain and imply each other: good-bad, good-evil, holy-sinful, pure-impure, moral-corrupt, healthy-sick, trustworthy-treacherous, human-animal, etc. Let's mention the animal metaphors from *Oprichnik Day* as an example. For Russia, these are the images of a strong bear and "golden-glowing double-headed eagles," for its enemies such expressions as "scavenging worms," "slimy snakes," "treacherous rats," "jumping fleas," etc. The observer resorts again to pigeonholing, which is based on the psychological assumption that the human mind must help itself with categorization, and the categorical mind works with opposites (Allport 2004).

Despite the changes described above, it cannot be said that the basic imagological boundary of "us" versus "them" has even temporarily disappeared. In *Telluria*, for instance, the large stratas have broken up and small groupings, some in the form of city-states, have emerged. The new state formations immediately began to define themselves in relation to each other:

By you, for the youth, there is prohibition, right?
Yes. We cannot have even a drop of any alcohol until we are eighteen.
Here, we can have beer, natural wine, and champagne. You know — Moscovia!
It's a power in Moscow!
I would say that your Vladivostok is a much bigger power! You have casinos, knocking shops, and amusement arcades there. All of this has long been banned here. Right from the first Gosudar.

———————————

U vás pro mládež platí prohibice, že?
Ano. Do osmnácti let nesmíme ani kapku jakéhokoli alkoholu.
To u nás se může jak pivo, tak přírodní i šampaňské víno. To víš — Moskovie!
U vás v Moskovii je to síla!
Já bych řekl, že ten váš Vladivostok je daleko větší síla! Máte tam kasina, jeczunchuj i hrotéky. Tohle všechno u nás už dávno zakázali. Hned za prvního Gosudara.

(Sorokin 2013: 250)

For the self-determination of an ethnicity/nation, its separation from others remains obviously vital. Just as "foreignness" can be recognized on the basis of "own," "own" can be recognized, constituted, affirmed, and sustained on the basis of the "foreign," that is, by determining this "foreign" (Corbineau-Hoffmann 2008: 123).

Finally, we would like to state that the terms "they," "others," "foreign," and "foreigners" cannot be treated as synonyms. In imagology, "them" may mean other peoples, countries, and cultures, but in sociological, political, and sociological reality they can be representatives of any other groups (in-groups vs. out-groups, insiders vs. outsiders), (Košťálová 2012: 29), for instance, internal enemies or "former ours," etc. (Uriadova 2020: 169).

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The postimperial situation brought new impulses into the imagology. In our article, we have tried to show that it is useful to respond to the complexity of the world, the intertwining and multiplication of ideas and evaluations about the other and about oneself by expanding the imagological terms, and, in some cases, relativizing them. Imagological research must now consider the blurring of ethnic terms and categories (even us-them), with fragmentation (a kind of fragmentation of imagological elements), with networks instead of clear structures, and with the strengthening of fictionality.

In order to grasp the situation more clearly, we have proposed several approaches towards the interpretation of imagologically relevant artistic texts: to extend the spector and spectet dyad by adding a recipient to the triad, to carefully separate internal and external self-image, to create the categories "meta-selfimage," "meta-heteroimage," and "meta-meta-heteroimage." Our research showed that the system of polarity relations of binary oppositions is necessary to scale and structure the image internally thematically. Special attention should be paid to meta-image. Consideration of all the above-mentioned aspects of the variables increases the difficulty of literary interpretation.

But it seems that the more the actual "imagological situation" becomes intricate and unclear, and the more the structure of the "image" becomes complex, the more it leads in practice to a resignation to understanding them and to cognitive shortcuts. The image now dominates over the image, it becomes brandified, and its form is dictated by stereotypes.

In general, personal experience of the world is gradually disappearing and being replaced by mediated representation, primitivisation, and a lack of deep knowledge of other ethnicities and backgrounds.

As historians have argued, "[...] to describe the history of the stereotype with all its nuances and turns could contribute significantly to the resolution of war conflicts" (Košťálová 2012: 35). It is probably naive to assume that more precise imagological interpretations will serve to better understand each other's peoples. However, they can contribute to the interpretation and anticipation of the relations of various actors in today's world.

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