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# POPULIZMAS LESIOS UKRAINKOS LITERATŪRINIAME-KRITINIAME PAVELDE

## Populism in Lesya Ukrainka's Literary-Critical Heritage

### SUMMARY

The article raises the issue of populism in Lesya Ukrainka's literary-critical heritage and the formation of neo-romanticism as a new ideological and aesthetic phenomenon. The specific focus is on Lesya Ukrainka's articles, in which the modernist populist opposition is vividly presented. The basic principles of populism, which are examined by the writer on the basis of Ukrainian, Polish and German literatures, are analyzed. The term "populism" is understood as a set of ideological, aesthetic and stylistic features of the XIX century literature which to a great extent influenced realism and positivism. According to Lesya Ukrainka, both realism and positivism felt a considerable impact of populist school. Lesya Ukrainka used the term "populism" quite actively, implying a whole set of ideological, aesthetic and stylistic flaws in the XIX century literature alongside its thematic limitations. She was also interested in Herder's idea of the Slavs' honorable mission of implementing humanity in history, which had not been realized by the Romans and Germans.

### SANTRAUKA

Straipsnyje keliamas klausimas dėl populizmo Lesios Ukrainkos kūryboje, nagrinėjamas neoromantizmo kaip naujo ideologinio ir estetinio reiškimo atsiradimas. Daugiausia dėmesio skiriama Lesios Ukrainkos parašytiems straipsniams, kuriuose kalbama apie modernistinę populistinę opoziciją. Straipsnyje nagrinėjami esminiai populizmo principai, kuriuos rašytoja aprašė remdamasi ukrainiečių, lenkų ir vokiečių literatūros kūriniais. Šiame straipsnyje terminas „populizmas“ suprantamas kaip ideologinių, estetinių ir stilistinių XIX a. literatūros bruožų, stipriai paveikusių realizmą ir pozityvizmą, rinkinys. Anot Lesios Ukrainkos, realizmas ir pozityvizmas patyrė itin didelį populistinės mokyklos poveikį. Lesia Ukrainka gana dažnai vartojo sąvoką „populizmas“, kurią tapatino su ideologiniais, estetiniais, stilistiniais ir tematiniais trūkumais XIX a. literatūroje. Ji taip pat domėjosi Herderio idėja apie garbingą slavų misiją istorijoje įgyvendinant humaniškumą, kurio nerealizavo romėnai ir vokiečiai.

RAKTAŽODŽIAI: Lesia Ukrainka, populizmas, neoromantizmas, literatūrinis-kritis paveldas.

KEY WORDS: Lesya Ukrainka, populism, neo-romanticism, literary-critical heritage.

## INTRODUCTION

Lesya Ukrainka's literary-critical, epistolary and artistic heritage is a vivid evidence of the formation of neo-romanticism as a conceptual integrity, a new ideological and aesthetic phenomenon that has been rapidly developing in Europe since the 2<sup>nd</sup> half of the XIX century. The very term "neo-romanticism" indicated both the genetic affinity of the culture at the turn of the centuries with Romanticism and the original and distinctive worldview that could lay the basis for reproducing the ideas of the new era.

Considering stylistically varied works in the Ukrainian, Polish and German literatures (written by O. Kobylyanska, V. Stefanyk, V. Vynnychenko, G. Hauptmann, S. Przybyszewsky), Lesya Ukrainka pointed out in her articles that they have a common basis, neo-romanticism, thus emphasizing the neo-romantic nature of all the latest literary and aesthetic trends. In this regard, she turned out to be one of the first in the Ukrainian literature to begin the revision of populism as a broad spiritual movement at the turn of the century, the ideological limitations of which became an impediment to the entire national life of Ukrainians at the beginning of the new era.

In her article "Some Notes on the Contemporary Polish Literature", Lesya Ukrainka criticized the decadent trend in art and assessed populism, considering this trend typical for the 2<sup>nd</sup> half of the XIX century, but she marked its importance for the Polish literature.

It seems appropriate to accept as justifiable the observations of present-day Ukrainian literary scholars who argue that "the typical for the European culture contrast between Modernism and Positivism has been transformed in Ukraine's history into the modernist-populism opposition" (Hundorova 1997: 39). However, in their discussions of the literary process at the turn of the XIX century, a number of scholars protest against the ungrounded 'labelling' of the national literature as 'populist', or 'folk', or 'incomplete', which devaluates it, either totally, or partially, at particular stages of its development (with the terms 'ethnographic', 'domestic' and the hackneyed 'enlightenment' abounding) (Shumylo 2003: 186–187; (Denysiuk 1999: 35).

At the beginning of the XX century. I. Franko was the first to oppose the use of the term "populism" for the "old" Ukrainian literature. In his polemics with S. Rusova, who referred populism to a limited thematic scope of literature in her article "The Old and the New in Modern Ukrainian Literature", I. Franko argues: "I think it is time to leave off these definitions, incorrect in their rigidity. The Ukrainian literature has never been entirely populist. Already in his "Aeneid", Kotlyarevsky wrote about the Ukrainian gentry, i.e. middle-range and rich Cossacks of the late XVIII century, rather than peasantry" (Franko 1982: 91–92).

POPULISM IN LESYA UKRAINKA'S LITERARY-CRITICAL HERITAGE:  
CONCEPTION, WORLDVIEW AND AESTHETIC APPROACHES

Lesya Ukrainka used the term "populism" quite extensively and implied, alongside thematic limitations, a set of ideological, aesthetic and stylistic shortcomings of the XIX century literature. She studied thoroughly the issues of populism in world literature. Her conceptual articles are "Little Russian Writers in Bukovina", published in Russian in the magazine *Life* (1900, № 9), and "Some Notes on the Contemporary Polish Literature" in the first issue of St. Petersburg's magazine *Life* (Lesya Ukrainka 1975–1979; Vol. 8: 100–127). Another article, on M. Konopnitskaya's poetry, written for the Russian magazine *God's Peace* in 1902, for the 60th anniversary of that Polish writer, was turned down by the editors and has not survived, but its contents are known from Lesya Ukrainka's letters. Her article "Populism in Germany", which was not published either, is outlined in the letter to her parents as of January 28, 1901 (Lesya Ukrainka 1975–1979; Vol. 11: 204).

Lesya Ukrainka's article "Some Notes on the Contemporary Polish Literature" deals with the first manifestations of the populist trend in Polish literature, which she could discern in the poetry of Romanticism, in the development of Polish folk themes, and in the "passion for ethnography" (Lesya Ukrainka 1975–1979; Vol. 8: 103). This trend in the Polish literature gave "certain contours to the idea of organic labor", which is based on "the principle of the service for the nation, paying off age-old debts to all forgotten Polish peasants", to the content of "realists" and "idealists" alike (Lesya

Ukrainka 1975–1979; V. 8: 105). Lesya Ukrainka believed that old, as well as modern populist Polish prose, was greatly influenced by the "Ukrainian School" in Polish Romanticism:

"[...] the beginning of Polish populism was closely connected to the Ukrainian School of novelists and playwrights [...], as if Polish writers had noticed the existence of Ukrainian "serf" earlier than they did their own, the Polish one [...] because the Ukrainian "serf" used to remind of his existence for many centuries, with the Ukrainian problem looming like a ghost over Polish figures of all tendencies [...]" (Lesya Ukrainka 1975–1979; Vol. 8: 104).

The era of Positivism which followed Romanticism kept taking interest in Polish people, peasantry, in particular, as the time was regarded as unpoetic; however, Lesya Ukrainka marked out Maria Konopnitska, the poet-populist:

"The populist approach was of great importance for the Polish literature, as it immediately opened the new vistas, modernized both the form and contents of the Polish novel and short story and generated the *novella*" (Lesya Ukrainka 1975–1979; V. 8: 105)... Populist poets, with Maria Konopnitska being among the most outstanding among them, tend to shirk more or less successful attempts of poetization of everyday work and everyday human suffering, and plunge into the dream of nirvana, burst into curses of earth or reproaches to heaven, or seek solace in philosophical indifference to everything" (Lesya Ukrainka, Vol. 8: 113).

According to Lesya Ukrainka, realism and positivism were also under the

strong tutelage of populist school. As the main cause of Polish populists' degradation, she regarded their confusion on such concepts as "people", "nationality", "nation", "nationalism" and "patriotism", which would tempt them away from a clear-cut, direct path in theory and practice," (Lesya Ukrainka 1975–1979; Vol. 8: 107–108).

Lesya Ukrainka, as V. Petrov pointed out later, (Petrov 1994: 184–187), singled out the two leading trends in both the Ukrainian and the Polish literatures of the XIX century: the romantic and ethnographic populism as the prevailing methodological and ideological trend in the 1<sup>st</sup> half of the XIX century, and the positivist, or realistic populism in its 2<sup>nd</sup> half, which was based on positivism, realism, and evolutionism. The people, i.e. the peasantry, are in the center of the populist doctrine of both trends. In fact, "the peasant conception of the people, on the one hand, and the linguistic-literary, philological conception of the people, on the other hand, are consistently intertwined. The statement "people is the language" becomes an unbreakable dogma throughout the XIX century" (Petrov 1994: 185).

Lesya Ukrainka's article "Little Russian Writers in Bukovina" characterizes the populist trend in the Ukrainian literature. She opposes it to new views and artistic achievements of O. Kobylanska and V. Stefanyk, who marked the transition to the period of modernity by their literary works. Lesya Ukrainka presents Y. Fedkovych's writings as romantic populism, seeing his excessive ethnographic passion as a weakness in his artistic system:

"Fedkovich is no stranger to the shortcomings inherent in the populist literature of the time: he often falls into senti-

mentality and ethnography; in addition, he is influenced by European, mainly German, Romanticism" (Lesya Ukrainka 1975–1979; Vols. 8: 66–67).

However, she did not intend to consider the popular themes and images of rural life within the category of "populist literature". This becomes quite evident in the way she characterizes V. Stefanyk's works; he should not be classified as "a populist", even if his short stories, in fact, did not go beyond the themes of peasantry. Lesya Ukrainka writes in her article "Little Russian Writers in Bukovina":

"Stefanyk is not a populist; his "people" are not the bearers of any "foundations" and virtues unknown to the "rotten intellectuals", but it is the absence of these foundations and virtues, revealed with a skilful and loving hand, and it produces on thinking and feeling readers a stronger, deeper and more fruitful impression than all the panegyrics of the idealized people in populist literature, imbued, of course, with the best intentions" (Lesya Ukrainka 1975–1979; Vol. 8:74).

Lesya Ukrainka also criticizes the superficial, purely decorative layer of people's life, without any "honorable idea" or subtly outlined "silhouettes of folk types" of European social drama (the article "European Social Drama in the late XIX Century" (Critical Review):

"[...] As long as it (drama – R.P.) focused on forms rather than contents of social life... it was finally reduced to the so-called "folk play", which "is thriving on all third-rate stages of Western Europe. It is a mixture of ethnography and masquerade, melodrama and farce, almost completely devoid of artistry, and only measured by a cheap effect" (Lesya Ukrainka 1975–1979; Vol. 8: 285).

Lesya Ukrainka does not accept the idea of “service” in Franko’s work either. She cannot agree with the view of literature as the extended enlightenment or the public duty of the writer who “takes care of health and soul of the people”, thus letting authors disregard the artistic side of their work. Lesya rejects the idea of moralizing at the expense of the artistic dimension, any disguise of the artistic frailty by a patriotic phrase; she also opposes the industrial-patriotic understanding of literature and its deliberate “simplification” (Doroshko 2015: 54–56). In her letter to M. Drahomanov as of March 15, 1892, she writes that it is only to a genius that she could forgive

“a poorly constructed poem, but not always, for that matter. Ukrainian poets... should be forbidden to write national-patriotic poems for a while and learn versification through lyrics and translations instead; while now they rely, by and large, on their readers’ patriotism rather than on their own rhyme and meter” (Lesya Ukrainka 1975–1979; Vol. 8: 130).

Lesya Ukrainka added the depth meaning to the notions of “people”, “nationality”, and “folk language”, bearing in mind an old tradition:

“Some people complained that I was evading “folk” themes and the vernacular composition, elbowing into literary sophistications and “intellectualizing”, but the trouble, probably, is that I understand the words “people”, “literature” and “intelligentsia” differently from my critics’ way” (Lesya Ukrainka 1975–1979; vol. 10: 65).

In populist literature, Lesya does not only question the shallow image of people’s lives, ethnography and decorativeness, but also disputes the very basis of

this trend – the “peasant” concept of the people. In her article “It’s Not So Much the Enemies as Good Friends”, she opposes Ivan Franko in viewing the term *populist*:

“I. Franko’s main commandment is the direct propaganda among the people (he uses the word “people” not in the European, but in the populist sense “peasants”) [...]; however here, in Ukraine, it is necessary to gain the intelligentsia, first and foremost, and return its “brain” to the nation” (Lesya Ukrainka 1975–1979; vol. 8: 22).

The term “populism” involves, for Lesya Ukrainka, any kind of bias that is turned into an established norm or cliché, thus constraining the poet’s creative imagination, and she rejects it as such. She, as L. Doroshko rightly emphasizes, rejects flatly what is superficial, declarative, or stylized. Hence her negative attitude towards Sadovsky’s imitation populist theater and Nechuy’s clumsy folk types (“For God’s sake, don’t judge us by Nechuy’s novels, or we will have to be condemned forever, not guilty as we are. Actually, I don’t know a single intelligent person in Nechuy’s novels. If you believed him, all Ukraine would seem stupid” (Lesya Ukrainka 1975–1979; Vol. 10: 113)). She cannot reconcile with the ethnography, decorativeness and superficial perception of people in Y. Fedkovych’s poetic work (“Fedkovych’s poetic talent was only sufficient to reproduce immediate impressions of life in an artless form” (Lesya Ukrainka 1975–1979; Vol. 8:64)). Hence her critique of European social drama without an “honorable idea”. Speaking of domestic drama and comedy, Lesya Ukrainka sees the cause of the writer’s ideological and

artistic imperfection, his social commitment, with the aesthetic aspect being ignored.

In comparing the development of Polish and Ukrainian literatures at the turn of the XIX century, V. Morenets argues that Polish thinkers did not link the “modernist break” with the renunciation of national issues, and that the Ukrainian populism could not be fully identified with positivism, thus insisting that only one of the aspects (primarily, educational) of the Ukrainian “populism”

turned out to be a specific case of positivism” (Morenets 2002: 51). V. Morenets believes that “populism as a complex set of characteristic ethno-cultural features deserves further consideration rather than rejection”, because folklore and mythological folk song traditions have always been definitive in the Ukrainian literature, and this distinguishes it from other Slavic literatures, which managed to renounce the barren postulates of a positive worldview [...] without renouncing themselves” (Morenets, 2002: 51–52).

#### “NATIONAL SELF-CONSCIOUSNESS” AND “ARTIST AND SOCIETY” AS CONTEMPORARY PROBLEMS OF POPULISM

Lesya Ukrainka also managed to renounce the “barren postulates of a positive worldview”, without any self-denial. As indicated by O. Zabuzhko, a deeper, more ancient tradition, and the preservation of cultural memory meant much more for her, (Zabuzhko 2018). In view of this, Lesya Ukrainka’s interest in German populism deserves special attention. In her letter as of January 28, 1901 (Lesya Ukrainka 1975–1979; Vols. 11: 20), she requests her sister Lily to find materials on the subject of “Populism in Germany”. The article was never published and obviously lost. She took an undoubted interest in Herder’s idea of the Slavs’ mission presented in his work “Philosophic Reflections on the History of Mankind”. Herder is known to regard the Slavs as an ideal, for they were to have fulfilled their mission in history, unfulfilled by the Romans and Germans. However, according to Herder, the Slavs had, primarily, to discover themselves, their national history and culture, that

is, in other words, to complete their national “self-determination”. An important factor to cement the national unity and self-consciousness was the constantly impending danger of foreign religious and secular aggression and, consequently, struggle for freedom, which lasted for centuries and found its vivid expression in the Slavs’ heroic folklore, including the Ukrainian. Ukrainians are distinguished by their folk tradition, specific character traits and folk culture; they are ready to fulfill the honorable mission of implementing the principles of the noble idea of humanity (Kozak 2011: 87). Lesya Ukrainka must have been interested in Herder’s Slavophile conceptions, therefore the issue of external and internal slavery prevails in her dramas.

The poet and his poetry became an important factor for Lesya Ukrainka in the new era, although she added a modern meaning to the concepts of “education” and “service for the people” which was associated neither with moralism,

nor with ardent appeals of public speeches, nor with thematic limitations, nor with stylistic imitations of folklore. Thus, the classical problem of the relationship between the artist and society under Romanticism developed into the problem of populism.

Lesya Ukrainka was aware of the flaws in Ukrainian literature that prevented it from taking the road of the new European development. She denounced, criticized and analyzed them – and she called them “populism”. M. Zerov defined Lesya Ukrainka’s role in the “new reality” and the “new style” very precisely, summarizing the main features of populism which she consistently criticized. The new Ukrainian poetry, in his

opinion, begins in the late 1890s and early 1900s, “when Ukrainian poets (not all of them, only the most radical) felt the dreadfulness of the old Ukrainian sentimentalism in the lyrics, with its artificial and sugary style perceived as obligatory, [...] and discerned the obsolete character of naive lamentations over peasant misery [...] They wanted new ways, they wanted to “get a little closer to the trends and tendencies in the European literature”, they wanted to walk along new paths” (Zerov 2002: 324). The critic emphasizes that Lesya Ukrainka did not only seek something new and spoke about new vistas, like many others did, but she created a new aesthetic reality in her poetry.

## CONCLUSIONS

Lesya Ukrainka was one of the first in Ukrainian literature to start the formation of neo-romanticism as a system and a new ideological and aesthetic phenomenon by the “reassessment of values” and the discussion of literary populism. Her literary-critical articles, focused, in particular, on populism in the Ukrainian and Polish literatures. Her letters to relatives and friends, contained an open revision of populist approach towards the individual, the life and the art, and it centered on the principles of moralism and utilitarianism. Lesya Ukrainka’s term “populism” covers a number of features: the superficial description of folk life, the focus on its decorative side, the fascination with folklore stylization, the conception of the people as peas-

antry, the biased social commitment of the writer, with all of them accountable for the artistic frailty of literary works. Lesya Ukrainka contributed a lot to the transition of the Ukrainian literature from a narrow ethnographic framework to the wider European space, by opposing populist culture studies in every possible way. The revision of populist traditions in the Ukrainian literature and the priority to the aesthetic values initiated by Lesya Ukrainka was later developed by Ukrainian critics M. Sriblyansky, A. Tovkachevsky, and M. Yevshan on the pages of the modernist magazine “Ukrainska Khata” (1909–1914). They actually declared a war on the old populism by professing the European modernity of the Ukrainian literature.

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