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Nechui's Aesthetic Code: Repetition, Pacing, and Non-Purposeful Narration

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Abstract
Traditional and modernist comments on the mechanics of Nechui's prose style are largely critical, focusing on what are assumed to be errors or infelicities in writing. This article examines these presumed errors and proceed to focus on three central qualities of Nechui's writing: repetition, pacing, and the absence of purposeful construction. The intention here is not to make judgments about the strengths and weaknesses of his writing but rather to point out its essential features. Two central features of Nechui's writing that are explored are deliberate repetition and non-purposeful plot structure.

Key Words:
Realism, narrative, storytelling, repetition, plot structure.

The figure of Ivan Nechui-Levytsky is, for most students of Ukrainian literature, an exemplary image of everything that is firmly rooted in the old realist aesthetic, essentially representative of what needed to be swept aside in order to move forward into the modernist era. He is the embodiment of "not modern." But the status he holds is not firmly rooted in the actual character of his writing. In this essay, I shall survey some of the critical examinations of Nechui's technique and then explore his actual technique with a particular view towards placing Nechui's writing in the development of Ukrainian prose technique through the realist and into the modernist era.

The most important and influential critic of Nechui is Serhy Iefremov, generally regarded as a preacher of populist realism. As many observers have noted, Nechui frequently uses simple epithets (usually just adjectives) or extended comparisons that derive, "primarily from the sphere

of village customs, agricultural life, and nature."[1] Furthermore, these descriptive passages often rely on the familiar qualities of beauty as they are understood in folk poetry. Vasyl Vlasenko explains: "Expressions from [folk] songs, sayings, and aphorisms are not just quoted in the text, they penetrate deeply into the foundations of the author's language."[2] The girls are all black browed and red-lipped. The men have moustaches the colour of tar. Serhy Iefremov puts it more callously: "Like folk poetry, Levytskyi does not know any artistic device other than comparison." After quoting the description of Vasyl Khomenko from *Dvi moskovky* (*Two Muscovite Women*), which ends with "Khomenko was handsome, fresh, and young," Iefremov adds with irritation: "Of course he was handsome, so handsome you want to disarrange him a little, ruffle his clothes, dishevel his hair, reduce his beauty. […] Mannerism, manipulation, artificiality, monotony, and wordiness are in evidence here."[3]

Iefremov sees Nechui as a disloyal realist who allows too much romantic idealism, too much deliberate beauty to enter into what is supposed to be a depiction of bleak social conditions. He also sees Nechui as a poor stylist. Because Nechui adhered to his own aesthetic and stylistic ideas so thoroughly and so consistently, Iefremov sees in him an immovable, unchanging, repetitive, and therefore boring writer.

Iefremov's criticism has had a very large influence in shaping the scholarly appreciation of Nechui's writing. His observations have been explicitly or silently repeated by almost every author who writes on the topic. Even critics on the other side of the modernist divide read Nechui from a similar point of view. Among the most interesting of these is Valerian

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1 Halyna Izhakevych, "Mova tvoriv I. Nechuia-Levytskoho," ["The Language of I. Nechui-Levytsky's Works,"] in vol. 1 of *Kurs istorii ukrainskoi literaturnoi movy* [*Course in the History of the Ukrainian Literary Language*] (Kyiv: Akademia nauk, 1958), 437.

2 Vasyl Vlasenko, *Khudozhnia maisternist I.S. Nechuia-Levytskoho* [*I.S. Nechui-Levytsky's Literary Mastery*] (Kyiv: Radianska shkola, 1969), 27.

3 Serhy Iefremov, *Ivan Levytskyi Nechui* (Leipzig: Ukrainska nakladnia, 1924). This monograph is reprinted in Serhy Iefremov, *Vybrane: Statti, naukovi rozvidky, monohrafii* [*Selected Articles, Scholarly Research, and Monographs*] (Kyiv: Naukova dumka, 2002), 396–494. The text quoted here: *Vybrane*, 444.

Pidmohylny, who wrote an introduction to the 1927 edition of Nechui's *Selected Works*. In this little-known essay Pidmohylny first discusses Nechui's "feeble dramaticality." He then goes on to his most damning remarks: "The first true sin of our author is the uncultivated shape of his expression. His works give the impression, as if once having written them, he never read them over. The rough and untidy character of his sentences hurts the eye."[4] As an example, Pidmohylny then goes on to quote a passage from *Kaidasheva simia* (*Kaidash's Family*) emphasizing particular words that get repeated in it.

> "All the people who sat by the church got up and *began to cross themselves*. Kaidash could see the entire hill on which the *church* stood, all the people who stood beside the *church*. He took off his hat and *began to cross himself*." Even an illiterate would figure out to say it this way: "All the people who sat by the church got up and began to cross themselves. Kaidash could see the entire hill on which the church stood and all the people beside *it*. He took off his hat and *also* began to cross himself." The use of pronouns and adverbs is an elementary, a childish step in the organization of an expression, not just a literary one, but any decent expression.[5]

This is a very serious indictment. There can be no such thing as a decent writer who fails an elementary test of clear writing. So, is Nechui a bad writer unworthy of our attention or is Pidmohylny wrong in his assessment?

In the example quoted above and in a few of the other examples he gives, the basic issue is repetition. In another set of examples, Pidmohylny demonstrates that sometimes Nechui makes no particular effort to smooth out the narrative flow from one sentence to another. One short sentence follows another without the familiar conjunctions, adverbs, or other connecting devices that facilitate the reader's comprehension. In a third and final set of examples, Pidmohylny complains that Nechui relies too heavily on comparisons that lose their vitality because they

4 Valerian Pidmohylny, Introduction to vol. 1 of *Vybrani tvory* [*Selected Works*] by Ivan Nechui-Levytsky (Kyiv: Chas, 1927), x.

5 Ivan Nechui-Levytsky, vol. 3 of *Zibrannia tvoriv u desiaty tomakh* [*Collected Works in Ten Volumes*] (Kyiv: Naukova dumka, 1965), 314–15.

are repetitious and annoyingly familiar. What's clear in all of this is that Pidmohylny is responding to a particular style that is evident in Nechui's writing. The key ingredients of this style, in the context of Pidmohylny's criticism, are a very deliberate, slow pacing and repetition. Pidmohylny assumes that these are symptoms of poor writing. Perhaps they are merely elements of a style that Pidmohylny (and many a like-minded reader) doesn't like. Whatever the verdict, they are not accidents from the pen of a careless and inattentive writer. They are very deliberate and conscious choices that Nechui makes.

One of the most revealing examples of rhetorical repetition in Nechui's works occurs on the opening page of his novel *Mykola Dzheria*:

> Near the town of Vasylkiv, the small Rastavytsia River quietly flowed across a wide valley between two rows of gently sloping hills. Clumps of lush, tall willows dotted the valley where the village of Verbivka lay engulfed in their greenery. A high, white-walled, three-domed church was clearly visible in the sun, and beside it a small bell tower seemed entangled in the green branches of old pear trees. Here and there, whitewashed cottages and black roofs of big barns peeped out from among the willows and orchards.
>
> Communal vegetable fields and meadows stretched across the village on either side of the river. There were no fences; plots were separated only by boundaries or rows of willows. A footpath wound its way through Verbivka along the grassy riverbank. Looking around from that path, one could only see a green, green sea of willows, orchards, hemp, sunflowers, corn and thick-growing sedge.[6]

In this opening landscape of the novel, within the eight sentences that constitute the first two paragraphs, the words *verba* and *Verbivka* (Willow-ville) occur a total of eight times.[7] Perhaps Pidmohylny would find this excessive and objectionable, but the passage is aesthetically effective and the repetition of a key word helps create a particular effect

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6 Ivan Nechuy-Levitsky, *Mikola Dzherya: A Long Story*, trans. Oles Kovalenko (Kyiv: Dnipro, 1985), 3.

7 The translator, Oles Kovalenko, has smoothed out the text and undone some of this repetition, particularly in the second and third sentence. A more literal translation might read: "In the valley stood green, luxurious, rich, and tall willows, where the village of Willow-ville seemed to drown in the willows. Among the willows there shone very clearly in the sun a tall white church with three domes…"

on the reader. Nechui is attempting something similar to the famous repetition of the word "fog" in the second paragraph of the first chapter of Charles Dickens' *Bleak House*. Just as Dickens' fog describes both the actual weather in London and the metaphorical lack of clarity in the High Courts of Chancery, so, too, Nechui's willows are more than just the predominant tree in this central Ukrainian village. They are a symbol of the qualities of this place – verdant, luxurious, and healthy. They are also, as the village name indicates, a symbolic component of its human dimensions. They stand as metaphorical surrogates of the inhabitants to whom the natural qualities are thus ascribed. This becomes particularly evident in the second paragraph, where the gardens and meadows are described as being without fences, divided only by the willows themselves. Of course, Nechui wants to emphasize the harmony that characterizes village residents in their relations. Unlike Robert Frost's twentieth-century unfriendly New Englander, they don't need fences. But the willows that do separate these garden plots are not there accidently. As Nechui explains on the next page: "Usi vulytsi v Verbivtsi niby zumysne obsadzheni vysokymy verbamy: to porosly verbovi kilky tyniv."[8] ("All the streets in Verbivka were lined with tall willows that seemed to have been planted there on purpose. Actually, they were willow fence posts which had taken root.") As Nechui and most village boys know very well, a willow stick pushed into the ground might easily take root and grow into a tree. It turns out that the willows in Verbivka are not only the natural ornament of this valley; they are also a living monument to human activity, an enduring sign of human civilization. They offer testimony of the naturalness and appropriateness of the human presence in this valley. Like the willows that surround them, the residents of Verbivka have taken root in this place, they belong to it, although it certainly does not belong to them, since they are serfs. Verbivka's willows, its inhabitants, its buildings, and its stream and mill pond are all part of a simple natural order.

8 Nechui-Levytsky, vol. 3 of *Zibrannia tvoriv*, 35.

The rootedness of the willows and the peasants is, of course, an important theme in the novel. The story line of the novel depicts Mykola's uprooting, his enforced alienation from his family and the place where he belongs. The repetition of the word willow on these opening pages serves to call attention to this natural rootedness. Repetition thus functions as a form of emphasis, which further combines with a metaphorical interpretation of the significance of the repeated image to highlight an important thematic motif in the novel. This emphatic function is, essentially, a product of the reader's awareness of the fact of repetition.[9] This awareness is a form of disturbance in the otherwise smooth flow of a reader's appreciation of the text. Because this disturbance takes place in a temporal dimension, repetition also has a rhythmic function. The reader perceives it as a temporal pattern of events. Nechui makes very specific use of this rhythmic function of repetition. He uses it to alter the tempo of his narration and to reinforce the reader's sense of familiarity with the characters and setting of the story.

Unlike a musical rhythm, which sets a basic, underlying pattern, the rhythmic function of rhetorical repetition is a singular phenomenon that the reader perceives against a backdrop of underlying patterns established by other features of the text or the story. However, the first

9 J. Hillis Miller asserts that "The reader's identification of recurrences may be deliberate or spontaneous, self-conscious or unreflective," in his *Fiction and Repetition: Seven English Novels* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1982), 2. This may be true, but nevertheless there must be an identification of the recurrence. The unreflective identification of repetition cannot be understood as a total unawareness of the recurrence. There can be no emphatic function without this recognition. The subjective nature of this recognition also helps to explain the variability of the effect of repetition on readers and of their judgment of its rhetorical efficacy. A very attentive reader may find an instance of repetition annoying because the emphasis it provides was already evident. A very inattentive reader may not notice the repetition at all, or may fail to appreciate the relevance of the emphasis in a particular text. For a wide discussion of repetition as a linguistic and rhetorical device, see the essays collected in *Repetition*, ed. Andreas Fischer, *Swiss Papers in English Language and Literature* 7 (Tübingen: Gunter Narr Verlag, 1994), particularly Jean Aitchison "'Say, Say it Again Sam': The Treatment of Repetition in Linguistics," 15–34, and Brian Vickers, "Repetition and Emphasis in Rhetoric: Theory and Practice," 85–114.

repetition of the word "verba" in *Mykola Dzheria* occurs in the first two paragraphs of the text, before there is much of an opportunity to establish any other rhythm. In what is, by its genre, an introductory, scene-setting landscape description the reader is bombarded with a long sequence of recurrences that highlight and dramatize the passage. The rhetorical rhythm is somewhat at odds with the bucolic languor of the serene river valley. This perception is reinforced by other rhetorical devices, such as the alliteration of the "r" sound in the first sentence. Verbivka and the Ros River valley get a somewhat surprisingly staccato introduction. In subsequent paragraphs there are fewer recurrences. The reader feels the tempo subside, the tension of the narrative diminishes. The willows still appear in the text, recalling the earlier paragraphs, but their frequency is reduced and they are explicitly referenced as repetitious elements: "Na hrebli znov u dva riadky vydyvliaiutsia v vodi duzhe stari, tovsti, duplynasti verby."[10] ("On the dam once again two rows of old, thick, hollow-ridden willows were reflected in the water.") The technique has a curious effect on the reader. The sequence of recurrences is apparently not finished, but its character has changed. The repetition itself now seems familiar, the emphatic effect is therefore reduced. The tempo is diminished. The passage suggests an incompleteness. Something is missing. The reader expects either an abandonment of the repetition – its function is already established – or an elaboration that leads to closure. But in the third and fourth paragraph, Nechui deliberately holds back, teasing the reader, as it were, with a very unhurried narrative style that draws the reader even further into what will eventually turn out to be a very simple and familiar image of a Ukrainian village. The lethargy and familiarity are, of course, qualities of the village that Nechui thus passes to the reader as a sensation embodied in the text.

Eventually, the author takes pity on the reader and at the beginning of paragraph five, explains the fence-post origins of the willows lining

10 Nechui-Levytsky, vol. 3 of *Zibrannia tvoriv*, 35.

the streets of the village.[11] This recurrence of willows has a different character than the previous ones – it offers a rational explanation of the significance of the image that has been elaborated. Because it explains, this recurrence gives the reader a sense of finality, of closure. After the deliberate delay of the preceding two paragraphs, the rhetorical device and the importance of the image are now complete. But the closure is potentially disappointing. The explanation is so simple. The reader had fully accepted such a reading even before being offered this additional guidance. Nechui's use of repetition is sometimes elaborate, but it is not complicated. The apparent purpose of the device is to give emphasis, but that emphasis is neither surprising nor profound. A more significant function of the device is to control the rhythm of the narration and to enhance the aesthetic qualities of the text. It is a verbal, narrative device used as much for its rhetorical, artistic function in the shaping of the narrative as for its potential to enhance the articulation of thematic material. For the most part, repetition is decoration, it adds aesthetic qualities to the text. Nechui uses the device constantly. Even as he brings the recurrences of willows to a close, he ends the fifth paragraph with a doubled epanalepsis: "Dyvyshsia i ne nadyvyshsia, dyshesh i ne nadysheshsia."[12] Nechui repeats, and he cannot repeat enough. It's a central feature of the rhythm and folksy flavor of his prose. It is an instrument of his technique that controls the tone and tempo of the writing.

And the device is not limited to any particular narrative mode or style. It occurs in the language of the characters. It occurs in the narrator's focalized and unfocalized voice. It occurs between the language of the characters and the language of the narrator. It occurs as a major element in extended passages, and it occurs as a simple oddity in single sentences.

11 It must not go unnoticed that in this fifth paragraph, Nechui introduces a new and different image of the valley as a space flooded with sea water that has suddenly crystalized in tall waves of green. This image belongs to a different kind of non-rhetorical repetitive sequence that points forward to Mykola's sojourn on the shores of the Black Sea as a fisherman.

12 Kovalenko's translation fails to capture the tone: "One never tired of that view and could never breathe one's fill of that hot, fragrant air." Kovalenko, trans., *Mikola Dzherya*, 5.

The reader is frequently faced with verbal constructions that highlight the recurrence of a word without the elaborate choreography that was shown in the passage analysed above. For example, in the novel *Neodnakovymy stezhkamy* (*Not the Same Paths*) from 1902, Taisa Andriivna, in a moment of self-contentment, consumes "dorohyi zapashnyi chai z varenniam ta krykhkymy krendeliamy, do choho tsia vypeshchena lasiika bula duzhe lasa."[13] ("Expensive aromatic tea with jam and crisp pastry, for which this spoiled, craving woman had a strong craving.") A reader with a taste for only the most elegant, lean, and simple linguistic pastry may well find this craving for repetition repetitious, as Pidmohylny does. But the device occurs with such frequency, regularity, and, occasionally, with such clear purpose, that it is simply impossible to dismiss it as the unconscious product of a careless writer. For better or worse, Nechui employs this device very deliberately throughout his works. Also, its use is tied to a number of other features of his writing, particularly plot development and character delineation.

Another example Pidmohylny gives speaks directly to the role of repetition in the development and tempo of the story line. He mentions two episodes in *Kaidasheva simia* in which an anticipated repetition is delayed. In the first example between the narrator's announcement that Marusia Kaidash has stepped out of her door to call her family to lunch, using the much favored *vechirnii pruh* (evening arc) expression, to when she actually calls them in to eat, an entire paragraph intervenes with a lengthy characterization of this pompous woman who served in the master's kitchen when she was young and now behaves as if she were better than the other villagers.[14] When only Lavrin comes to eat, Marusia repeats the invitation and Nechui mentions the arc of the sun again. Late in the afternoon, as Kaidash sets off for church, the sun's position is mentioned once more. Pidmohylny is apparently annoyed that the narrator does not move directly from Marusia at the door to her calling

13 Nechui-Levytsky, vol. 8 of *Zibrannia tvoriv*, 433.

14 Nechui-Levytsky, vol. 3 of *Zibrannia tvoriv*, 304–05.

the men for lunch. The effect here is similar to a cinema flashback: we learn Marusia's biography as she stands in the sunlight, framed by the door of her house. The tableau is not unlike the one that framed Kaidash just inside his barn door on the second page of the novel. Nechui likes to bring his characters on stage and then – slowly, deliberately, expansively, exploringly, exhaustively, annoyingly – to stop the action for a moment while he gives them a character profile. Pidmohylny, a psychological realist who portrays characters through their actions and words, does not favor this kind of old-fashioned description while the action of the story is arrested. What Pidmohylny does not note, but might have, is that this scene is not only slowed down by the descriptive digression that delays the act of inviting the men to lunch, its dramatic impact is enhanced by this digression. Through the delay, lunch seems to acquire a greater importance. Actually, of course, Kaidash, who fasts on Fridays, doesn't come home for lunch, only his sons do. Marusia's unusually drawn-out invitation builds a contrast between her pretentious, formal expectations and Kaidash's foolish religious fervour. The day ends with the hungry old zealot wasting his money and his evening at the village tavern, where his day-long fast has finally landed him for some decidedly unhallowed relief. Repetition thus frames a pattern of digression and return that is an important component of Nechui's storytelling.

Something similar occurs in the second example of delay that Pidmohylny offers. At the beginning of chapter two of *Kaidasheva simia* Karpo goes to visit his sweetheart Melashka, who is engaged in the quintessentially ethnographic activity of whitewashing and decorating her house. Her materials are two jugs of clay, one red and the other white. The girl has the red jug in her hands, and the second jug is on the ground by the doorsill.[15] Pidmohylny elaborates: "We read on for a page – there's nothing about this second jug. In the middle of the second page, angry at the author for introducing irrelevant details, we finally forget about the second jug with the white clay, until suddenly, on the third page we

15 Nechui-Levytsky, vol. 3 of *Zibrannia tvoriv*, 309.

see 'Karpo turned around to avoid soiling his boot and struck the second jug with white clay with the heel of his foot.'"[16] What Pidmohylny doesn't mention is that the jug with the red clay has already spilled. Karpo and Melashka have been engaged in a very familiar scene of slapstick romantic courtship that would not be out of place in a Chaplin film comedy. The fact that the white jug goes unmentioned for three pages while the red jug is at the centre of the comic action is, once again, very basic comic technique. As Pidmohylny admits, the reader is waiting for the white clay to spill as well as the red clay. Since the joke will end there, the white jug is delayed until the events have played out to their maximum duration. The real issue here is that Nechui's estimate of the maximum length of a comic scene – that is, of the best rhythm for comic material – is different from Pidmohylny's.

Nechui's use of repetition for narrative rhythm and the framing of narrative digressions is a component of a larger issue concerning the shaping of narrative and the structure of plot in his works. This is a difficult subject in literary studies. The nature of what constitutes an effective plot and, as a corollary, what constitutes an ineffective plot, is a highly contentious issue.

The most damning formulation of this concern for plot structure occurs in an introduction by Andry Nikovsky to a popular edition of Nechui's *Mykola Dzheria* published in 1926. In this lengthy essay Nikovsky discusses the difference between works of literature that are based on plot and works that are based on character. Nikovsky, although not a conservative Marxist ideologue, adopts in this introduction a Marxist position on the value of literary works. He insists that the value of literature is tied to reality, to the depiction of actual issues that affect living people (or those who lived at other times). He distinguishes between two modes of storytelling:

16 Pidmohylny, *Ivan Nechui-Levytsky*, xii. "Chytaiemo dali storinku – nemaie nichoho pro toi druhyi hlynianyk; na polovyni druhoi storinky, poserdyvshys na avtora za nedotsilni detali, pro hlynianyka z biloiu hlynoiu, zreshtoiu, zabuvaiemo, i raptom, zvernuvshy na tretiu storinku, bachymo: "Karpo obernuvsia, shchob ne zamazat chobit, i zachepyv piatoiu druhoho hlynianyka z biloiu hlynoiu!" Nechui-Levytsky, vol. 3 of *Zibrannia tvoriv*, 311.

one focused on characters, which he terms a portrait approach, and the other focused on events, which he calls a plotted (*siuzhetnyi*) approach. In his view, the portrait or psychological approach is distinctly inferior. He argues that "only a high level of artistry in developing the fundamental universal plots (and only partially one's own national and local plots) will lead this or that literature out of the limits of domestic usage onto the free expanse of world literature."[17] Nikovsky sees *Mykola Dzheria* as an example of a psychological type of writing and he wonders how a European reader, accustomed to the masterpieces of world literature, would respond to this novel. After asserting that such a reader would see the work as a weak variant on the plot of Tristan and Isolde in Uncle Tom's Cabin, Nikovsky asserts:

> There is no point in continuing a literary debate with our European listener, because, aside from misunderstanding, nothing good will come of it: he will start to complain about the deficient and lame dramatic tension in the scenes or he will admonish Levytsky for the gray and forlorn destiny of his heroes. And he will be right, because in life and in literature, only what ends clearly (whether for better or worse) is good. But here it turns out that plenty of things in the novel (the romance with Nymydora, with Mokryna, relations with the master, etc.) do not end in any way at all. So let's leave our foreigner with the suggestion that he read the entire novel and gain a wider familiarity with Ukrainian literature. Let's agree that there is some kind of plot in Nechui-Levytsky's novel, that it's poorly developed but nevertheless interesting; that the internal dialectic of the novel is very weak because all the logical possibilities that arise from the given combination of relations are not developed, and because the psychology of the characters who are drawn into the plot is treated rather monotonously; but a number of the structural defects, faults (but not mistakes!) can be explained by the theme of the novel and by the conscious political tendencies of this author.[18]

Despite the confusing and backhanded manner of his presentation, Nikovsky is making a familiar and comprehensible point. Nechui's fictional works generally share two qualities of construction: they are built

17 Andry Nikovsky, "*Mykola Dzheria* (Literaturnyi Analiz)," ["*Mykola Dzherya*: A Literary Analysis,"] introduction to *Mykola Dzherya* by I. Nechui-Levytsky (Kyiv: Knyhospilka, 1926), xii.

18 Nikovsky, inrtoduction, xviii–xix.

around a very simple plot that lacks dramatic tension, and they are not built around logical or emotional arguments for a particular thematic idea or position. These qualities of construction are evident on various levels of Nechui's works, from the overall structure of the works to the structure of individual scenes and chapters.

As we have seen in some of the examples of repetition above, Nechui often relies on a circular narrative direction that brings the exposition back to the point from which it started. This circularity is most evident in the large canvas of some of his plots. At the beginning of the novel, Mykola Dzheria gets married and leaves his village. At the end, he returns to his village, but his wife is no longer alive and he is as solitary in his old age as he was during the bulk of his life, which he lived away from his village. The plot has the protagonist actually return to his village and his family, but the chief quality of this plot line, and most of Nechui's plots, is not so much in the actual return to a condition defined at the beginning of the work, but in the absence of any linear progress, the failure (in the development of the plot) to resolve the major issues that were presented at the beginning of the story. This is Nikovsky's major complaint about *Mykola Dzheria*.

There is no thematic advancement. Whether the action is judged to be circular, repetitive, or simply static, Nechui's plots and thematic constructions generally end up in the same place where they began or, more precisely, they do not reach any particular dramatic or thematic goal. They are non-purposeful.

In *Mykola Dzheria*, for instance, Nechui does not actually focus on the social problems that critics, particularly Soviet critics, invariably mention as the thematic center of the novel. As Nikovsky points out,[19] the novel was written a decade and a half after the abolition of serfdom. In 1878, Nechui could no longer adopt the abolitionist tone that characterizes the work of writers such as Marko Vovchok. The novel does indeed depict the inhumanity of serfdom, but these scenes are limited to the first two

19 Nikovsky, inrtoduction, xix–xxi.

chapters, a mere quarter of the book as a whole. After that, Mykola and the runaways experience another form of exploitation, industrial labor, but this, too, lasts for only two chapters. The third section of the novel, again two chapters, depicts a life of relative peace and tranquillity, although far from home. Chapter seven is a digression about the life of Nymydora and those left behind in the village. The suffering here is largely a result of the absence of Mykola, rather than the underlying social conditions. Finally, the last chapter accelerates the action of the plot, events reach a climax but, in an act of apparently divine intervention, serfdom is abolished and Mykola returns home, only to find new loneliness and a new regimen of social inequality. The text ends with the image of an elderly Mykola telling youngsters stories about the adventures he experienced. Beyond any doubt, the work is held together by its titular protagonist rather than an interest in depicting social conditions. Nechui's novel is often juxtaposed with Panas Myrny's *Khiba revut voly iak iasla povni?* (*Do the Oxen Bellow, when Their Mangers are Full?*), a novel that takes a very broad historical survey of both social and family history. But Myrny's novel is focused at every turn on the influence of social injustice – historically and in the present – on the behaviour of its protagonist. Nechui's novel is very different. Here, there is hardly any sense of causal relationships. Serfdom is a despicable institution that ruins people's lives, but in the chapters set in Bessarabia, Mykola has in fact escaped its reach, though not very happily. It is the personality of Mykola that is central to the story. He is a rebel, a hothead who responds angrily and violently against injustices of all kinds. But he is not a hero. His rebellions appear sooner as instinct than as purposeful activity. They accomplish very little of value. On the contrary, when he returns his family and his village are suspicious of him and only grudgingly accept him back. Nechui's novel thus never reaches a meaningful thematic statement. Nechui has not produced an expose of social injustice, he has not produced a portrait of noble suffering, and he has not created a model of heroic struggle. Like Faulkner's Yoknapatawpha County, Nechui's Verbivka and its inhabitants merely endure, but unlike Faulkner's characters, Nechui's do not acquire the stature of exemplary

human beings, symbols of the moral and philosophical importance of the human condition. Nechui avoids the elements of plot and structure that would ennoble his characters or provide the reader with abstract ideas that give meaning or explanation to the dilemmas he portrays.

In *Mykola Dzheria*, this avoidance is most apparent in the deliberate unwillingness to explain a key event. In chapter two, as Mykola and the other serfs are leaving the village, the night sky is illuminated. The master's stackyard and barns have been set ablaze. Nechui depicts the scene in a beautiful, extended passage full of colour and extraordinary detail. But he never explains who was responsible. The men watching on the hillside raise this question and one of them, Kavun, says that the arsonist will be revealed by the image of his soul flying in the sparks of the fire. Mykola rebuffs the superstitious idea, but in the next scene, as noted earlier, Nymydora, losing her rational faculties, sees Mykola in the flames. The matter ends there. As Nikovsky suggests,[20] perhaps Nechui is using this image to reveal who the arsonist is. But there is no certainty here. Nechui clearly does not want to reveal who set the fire. Even without Nymydora's hallucination, readers would consider Mykola a primary suspect. The connection between Kavun's remark and Nymydora's vision is not emphasized, and it is not self-evidently plain. Responsibility for the crime remains uncertain. Analytical readers might suggest various reasons for Nechui's reticence. Perhaps he felt an attribution for the crime would be seen as an endorsement of violent revolt against social order – something censors in both Russia and Austria would view unfavourably. Perhaps he felt an attribution to Mykola would lead readers to turn away from his protagonist and judge him too harshly. But these potential arguments are very weak. Far more likely is the simple fact that such an attribution would clarify what Nechui means to keep vague; it would add rational purpose to what is meant to remain indeterminate, it would alter the character of the fiction he is producing, pointing it toward drama, social significance, and explanation (as in Myrny's novel), rather than perception, sensibility,

20 Nikovskyi, inrtoduction, xli.

portrait, and landscape – the core elements of Nechui's non-purposeful writing style.

In most of Nechui's other novels, this non-purposeful approach is even more evident. *Starosvitski batiushky ta matushky* (*Old-World Priests and Their Wives*) is unabashedly structured as a chronicle of the way clergymen lived in the first half of the nineteenth century. As already noted, the plot follows the careers of two priests, Kharytin Mossakovsky and Marko Balabukha. The former is a local boy without much education who has been elected parish priest by his community. The latter is a seminary-educated careerist. Nechui switches focus, alternating the two men in their relations with women, their relations with parishioners, their relations with church and secular authorities. In some cases, entire chapters are juxtaposed, each presenting parallel events in the life of one of the priests. Nechui satirizes both men. Balabukha turns out to be more successful, but nevertheless unhappy. Kharytin is a hopeless bumpkin, but a far more personable and likable man. While Nechui makes no particular effort to suggest any conclusions on the basis of the juxtaposition of these two men, the events in the novel follow a simple logic of comparison. But at the beginning of chapter nine Kharytin dies and the focus switches to his widow, Onysia. The last two chapters then focus on domestic affairs in the Balabukha household, particularly the role of his wife, Orysia. The balanced comparison of the two priests is thus partially unbalanced in the final pages of the book. The novel concludes with the marriages of the children in both families, that is, it returns to the same issues with which it began, the disposition of parishes and the marriages of clergymen's daughters, which are often one and the same matter. Nechui brings the events full circle to the next generation of characters, with very little purpose other than depicting the life, the habits, the characters, and the setting. Nechui's readers would no doubt have recognized that church reforms in mid-century had introduced changes into the life of the rural clergy that brought to an end the manners and customs described here, but this fact is nowhere specifically addressed in the text. The juxtaposition (that is, repetition highlighting differences) of the two priests is

neither an anti-clerical satire nor a particular endorsement of the old ways. It is certainly not a justification of the impending institutional reforms intended to professionalize the clergy. Aside from a nostalgic gratification in witnessing the mundane events in the lives of these characters, Nechui does not convey any special sentiment or judgment regarding the social setting he depicts. The plot is built in a circular pattern with repetition used for contrast. The events with which Nechui builds his plot, both here and in most of his novels, consist of courtship, marriage, and domestic family relations as well as the daily rituals that distinguish people by their professions. Both in its overall structure and in the construction of individual scenes or chapters, the action and the narrative are not designed to convey a particular judgment. For example, Onysia browbeats the metropolitan in Kyiv to assign her late husband's parish to the orphaned children, and her daughters hastily marry young seminarians. But despite keeping the parish in her own hands, Onysia is not particularly fortunate, nor are her daughters. In contrast to this, Balabukha's wife, Orysia, aspires to a great social future for her daughter, Nastia, whom she is matchmaking with the son of the foreign director of the sugar refinery. But the director leaves town after an argument with the local landlord, and Nastia ends up marrying a colourless widower with children who is a local administrative official. Nechui infuses both ends of this comparison with rich satiric details and wonderful comic situations, but there is no larger lesson hiding in the juxtaposition. These are merely fascinating characters with delightful peculiarities in intriguing situations.

The quality of non-purposeful storytelling is evident in the general plot of all of Nechui's novels. *Kaidasheva simia*, like *Starosvitski batiushky ta matushky*, is a family chronicle except there is only one family involved (but contrast is developed through juxtaposing the love stories of the two sons). The story begins with discussions of the marriage prospects of the two sons. It ends with the two sons taking over their late father's property and continual quarrels between their two families. The only events along the way are the matrimonial enterprise and foolish domestic quarrels. Of course, this is satire, but the aim of this satire is too broad to have specific

targets. Readers generally see this novel as a glorious, rollicking monument to the idiosyncrasies of life in a Ukrainian village. *Kaidasheva simia* is satire without scorn, ridicule without contempt. It's comedy without instructive purpose.

The glue that binds this novel lies in the relations between the characters and in the accumulation (repetition?) of incidents that depict the personalities of the characters in the story. Kaidash is shown to be a weak-willed religious obscurantist. His wife, Marusia, is pretentious and proud. Time and again we see these traits without significant expansion or development. The qualities Marusia Kaidash displays on her visit to the Dovbyshes are no different from the qualities on view during the visit to the Balashes. The jokes may be different, but there is no advancement in the development of her character or in the reader's understanding of it. What there is, however, is a wonderfully colourful interplay of familiar personalities in a slow dance of anecdotal merriment. Works such as *Neodnakovymy stezhkamy*, *Afonskyi proidysvit* (*The Vagabond from Athos*), and *Kyivski prokhachi* (*The Kyivan Beggars*), have a somewhat sharper focus because they concentrate on a single idea (respectively, social changes resulting from the disappearance of an agricultural economy, the hypocrisy of Orthodox monks, and charity as a corrupt industry). But even here the organization of the episodes and the overall plot do not lead to specific conclusions or to a thematic closure. The ideas presented at the beginning of these works are not significantly elaborated or explored in the course of the presentation.

The most telling examples of Nechui's non-purposeful construction are found in those works that depict the issues with which his writing is intimately concerned: the nationality question and marital relations. Marital relations are an abiding theme of Nechui's writing. The relations between husband and wife – or more generally, between men and women – are surely the most frequently encountered topic in his works. Occasionally, however, this topic assumes a greater significance in his works, as it does in *Ne toi stav* ([*He*] *Changed*), *Na hastroliakh v Mykytianakh* (*On a Tour in Mykytiany*), and *Hastroli* (*On a Tour*). These works are central

in any understanding of Nechui's depiction of women but in terms of their structure and plot, they avoid projecting a strong thematic idea. In the first of these, *Ne toi stav*, a woman struggles to find marital happiness with a husband who becomes a fanatically devoted religious scholar and abandons the normal joys and responsibilities of domestic life. Nechui makes clear the dimensions of the problem, but stops short of actually analysing it. His story includes a variety of instruments for comparison and analysis. Solomia is compared to Zinka, Roman is juxtaposed to his friend Denys and his father in law, Fylon, but in the last chapter Nechui has Roman abandon religion and turn to drink, and Solomia dies helping rescue neighbours from a house fire. The ending seems very contrived and discontinuous. The events and themes of the story lead nowhere, Solomia's death simply brings the story to an end, with no thematic closure, no catharsis, no insight. Solomia is neither heroine nor victim.

Nechui's two variants of the "hastroli" story have a similar structure. In both versions, Sofia takes a lover while her husband, an opera singer, is away from home. In both works (though more elaborately in the longer *Na hastroliakh v Mykytianakh*) Nechui reveals the incompatibility of the personalities of husband and wife and thus provides motivation for the wife's love affair. In both works, however, the love affair, after developing in a traditional manner that corresponds to the reader's expectations, ends without a morally or dramatically satisfying conclusion. In *Hastroli*, the station master, Nykolaidos, is suddenly forced to quit his job. He leaves the area and abandons Sofia, who moves to Kyiv and finds a new lover. In the other version, Flegont has an angry confrontation with his faithless wife. Her young lover leaves and she returns to her husband. But the story continues for another five paragraphs, detailing the fate of Flegont's cousin, Levko, who also pursues a career as a singer but ends up taking his own life when an unfortunate disease robs him of his voice and his income. The connection between this anti-climactic ending and the events of the story is accidental and thematically obscure. The presumed reconciliation of husband and wife is not elaborated or explored. The melodramatic suicide of a secondary character creates a dramatic coda,

but one whose tone seems peculiarly out of sync with the larger plot. Nechui's understanding of the basic form of his story seems disconnected from its plot. Levko's death at the end of the story is neither poetic justice nor tragic irony. Nechui seems explicitly to avoid the expected judgment and its appropriate dramatic exposition around which he has constructed his story.

This non-purposeful approach to storytelling lies at the heart of many readers' disaffection with Nechui's works. Among the earliest negative reactions to Nechui were those provoked by works that focused on what should be his signature theme: the development of Ukrainian national consciousness. Pavlo Radiuk, the presumed hero of the novel *Khmary* (*Clouds*), was criticized by Drahomanov, Konysky, and others for the weakness of his active commitment to the Ukrainian cause, for being merely a spokesperson rather than an activist. But all of these criticisms are built on the highly dubious assumption that Nechui set out to depict an activist hero. In fact, Radiuk – like all of Nechui's heroes from Mykola Dzheria to Andrian Hukovych (*Neodnakovymy stezhkamy*) and including Viktor Komashko, the schoolteacher in *Nad Chornym Morem* (*On the Black Sea Coast*) – is a product of a non-purposeful approach to story construction that does not presume to offer answers, display essential features, or provide analysis and judgment. Nechui builds his works on a measured, repetitive depiction of Ukrainians and Ukraine, of people and place, of characters and setting. He is not focused on ideas, on analysis, or goals. His characters are not heroes, his settings are not metaphors. His writing is meant to offer a reflection of the beauty and reality of Ukraine. It is not directed at a social, political, moral, or even national purpose. In the culinary metaphor that Nechui used to describe his writing, the meal he prepares has no motive beyond good taste.

Nechui's works no doubt embodied many sins. He was certainly not the European intellectual modernist that younger writers saw as the literary ideal. But he was also not quite the urban, industrial, and politically engaged realist that western European fiction had established as the previous ideal. His writing was simultaneously simple and unadorned yet

also artistic and consciously crafted. This made him a very peculiar realist. Most of all, his aesthetics were derived from traditional folk models of language use, and his realism was not grounded in a socially purposeful and intellectual approach to perceived reality. This made his fiction incompatible with the modernist principles that were gradually establishing a hold on Ukrainian culture even while Nechui was still writing.

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