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WHAT IS A UKRAINIAN MODERNIST POEM?

The methodological premise for this study is founded on the belief that periodization of literature into movements such as romanticism, realism, modernism and the like is based on observable and identifiable features common to most of the works produced within that period. They are, in fact, what makes the given period distinct and unique. That is not to say that there are no singular traits for individual authors. There definitely are, and the better the author the more pronounced the individual signature. In the extreme, an author is so unique and individual that he/she falls out of a given period and either creates within the very period his/her own variant or starts a new one. In the period of 'canonical' modernism there were authors with pronounced "signatures" (Franko, Lesia Ukrainka, Oles) but none so individual as to be separate from the movement.

The object of this study is, therefore, to identify some of the specific features which make a "modernist" poem in Ukrainian literature different from the poems which were written in the preceding and following periods. Every poem, of course, has two major components: form and content, and it is in these realms that the specific features of a modernist poem must be found. There are many general observations about modernist poetry. In order to set the proper frame for this inquiry it would be advantageous to recall some of these. Halyna Sydorenko discusses the formal differences between previous and modernist versification:

"In comparison with the previous state of affairs, in the 2nd half of the 19th and the beginning of the 20th centuries all five basic meters of syl- labo-tonic metrics become commonplace in Ukrainian literature. The most frequently used, as previously, remain the iamb and the trochee, of the three syllable ones - the amphibrach and the anapest, the dactyl is less frequent although it too has fundamental usage. In the sphere of the basic five meters there occurs such a magnitude of rhythmic combinations that it becomes impossible to cover them in a general survey... [but]... Alongside the syllabo-tonic meters the vers libre appears in Ukrainian literature..."

Sydorenko does not mention it, but alongside the vers libre poetic prose also made its appearance at this time. Following Sydorenko's
observations one can proceed to separate modernist poetry from what went before (syllabic, early syllabo-tonic, the famous „kolomyika“ structure used by Shevchenko). Outside the scope of this paper, but a finer formal analysis of vocabulary and specific imagery is necessary to separate modernist poetry from what follows, since all of the major meters as well as vers libre and poetic prose continue to the present day. It is, however, in the realm of content, in the themes, chosen by the modernist poets, that the major group of features can be found. Many more generalizations have been made about the content of modernist poetry than about its form. The modernists themselves saw their poetry providing „new melodies“ and „new descriptions“:

„The new literary and philosophical currents do not by-pass also our literature; here and there we come across something new in the realm of conception and form, new melodies, new descriptions. In the [realm of] content the old dry descriptions and solutions of various 'questions' are replaced here-and-there by psychological understanding and feeling, again the mood of the [present] current; and in place of the old topographic or ethnographic notations we find a new combination of lines, spots, and sunny reflections“.

Franko, sensitive to the changes of the day, but unable to condone what he saw as a „frivolous“ approach to the duty of the poet-enlightener, paraphrased the above into rhymed lines:

Пісень давайте нам, поети,
Без тенденційної прижити,
Без сварів мудреців і дурнів,
Без городянських тих котурнів!
Пісень свободних і безпечних,
Добутих із глибин сердецьних,
Де о сучасних грязню битий
Душою вихлю міг спочати!

Serhii Iefrernov, however, saw nothing new or positive in these attempts. His condemnation is quite categorical:

"The creations of Ukrainian modernism consist in the most part of a desire, calculated for [the sole purpose of] being original, to say a new word where long ago it ceased being new; of discovering Americas in an empty space; of a struggle with so called literary cliches, but actually employing cliches to do so; of grinding out endlessly the same phrases about beauty, ... phrases lacking not only creativity but often devoid of literary decency".

There are other such summations of modernist poetry. The most recent history of Ukrainian literature, although not as critical as Iefrernov, is also not too positive or specific:

"A given segment of Ukrainian poetry was overcome with a decadent
worldview - moods of doom, decline, [and] death, [the latter] moreover consists not only of an objective description of dying, but of an emphasis on death's aesthetic value, uniquely reveling in it... A given segment of the creative legacy of such poets as P. Karmansky, S. Tverdokhlib, M. Filiansky, K. Hrynevycheva, F. Kokovsky, S. Charnetsky, M. Kichura are characterized by moods of disillusion and loneliness, by mystical longing for a 'higher truth' and an unearthly beauty, the cult of individualism. The lyrical heroes of such poets, as a rule, exist as captives of fluid moods, murky memories, exalted cosmic associations?".

All of us who have studied modernism have read such statements and some of us have also made similar ones. Yet there is a certain vagueness in all of the above descriptions. It seems that in the mind of every scholar of Ukrainian literature there is a firm image of the type of poetry which existed in the baroque, of the type which existed in early romanticism before Shevchenko, of the type which existed during the positivist period, and of modern poetry after Tychyna. The image is not as firm or clear in relation to canon of modernist poetry. This will be an attempt to pin down some definite unifying and identifying features in order to have also a more specific image of Ukrainian modernist poetry.

To make this a more 'scientific' and manageable task, as in the case of any study based on deductions from sampling, one had to limit the possible sample. It would not do to examine the poetry of a single author, for it would be impossible to separate his own peculiar features from those pertaining to all. An anthology of poetry is a better sample. An anthology provides a limited and random selection, albeit skewed by the organizer's own preferences. In an anthology the poets are usually arranged chronologically and one should be able to discern if there were indeed features which appeared in the works of the known modernist poets and also in the works of poets from a previous or a later period who write during the time of canonical modernism. Such poems would "prove" that a literary period existed, that there was a specific perception prevalent at the given time. There might be, however, differences between poems which are motivated not by a different perception but by the very choice of subject. Orest Zilinsky's anthology of Ukrainian lyric poetry provides the necessary correction. Zilinsky organized his anthology by grouping the poems not only chronologically but also by the themes of love, fate, people, land, the past, the horizons, city, moments, creativity, and struggle. Chronologically his selections range from the earliest known literary works up to the 1920s. The theme of love was chosen as the most appropriate. It was felt that by examining the treatment of love by the poets in Zilinsky's anthology one should
be able to identify certain features which would be specifically modernist. In turn, at least theoretically, one could "measure" if a poem is modernist by gauging the presence or absence of these features.

Zilinsky's anthology was further narrowed for this analysis. It begins with the 9th selection, from Kotliarevsky, and ends with poem 63, from Oles. The sample chosen for this study thus contains 54 poems and 26 authors, spanning one hundred years and several literary periods. Although the sample reflects Zilinsky's personal taste and bias, it is, as shall be seen, nonetheless useful and revealing in establishing some definite points about Ukrainian modernist poetry.

Discernible immediately is the fact that the approach to the theme of love undergoes a definite development, a development which coincides with the progression of literary periods. Up to and including Shevchenko, love lyrics emphasized primarily the temporary absence of and the longing for the beloved. The heritage of the Cossack days, the frequent departure of the men to fight wars or, later, to earn some money, make a fortune in a distant land, is reflected in these poems as it is also in many Ukrainian folk songs. In the samples from Kotliarevsky, Pysarevsky, Zabila, Shashkevych, and Ustianovych the similarities to Ukrainian folk songs are very evident and the theme very similar from one poem to another:

Де ти, милій, чорнобривий? Де ти? — оозовися!
Як я, бідна, тут горюю, прийди поспіши.

Полетіла б я до тебе, та крилля не маю,
Щоб побачив, як без тебе з горя висихаю³.

Ось, за Немань ідееш, мене покидати:
Чого ж ти, мій милій, собі там бажаєш?
Хіба ж тобі краща чужа сторона,
Свої миліше родини вона⁹.

Сонце зійде — я нуджуся,
І заходять — плічуй:
Котру люблю дівчинюкую,
Тієї не бачу.
Довго й чутки вже не маю
Про милу дівчину;
Цілий вік свій усе плачуся
На лику родину¹⁰.

Коби мені крильця мати,
Соколом злетіту,
Тяжку тугу із серденька
При милій розбити!

... ... ... ... ... ... ... ...
Ах, я бігний, нещасливий,
Да її крилець не має,
Сохну, чайну в галечні,
Всяк день умираю!\textsuperscript{11}

Йно ми тужно за весною,
Що так борзо перетвіла:
Куда гляну мисленькою —
Нема того, що-м любила\textsuperscript{12}.

Individual traits (mainly dialectal) aside, all of the quoted poems treat the absence (the departure) of the loved one be it the male, as in the first two, or female, as in the rest. In days of arranged marriages, love and marriage did not necessarily go together. This gave rise to the theme of unhappy love which appears in the following sample:

Ні, мамо, не можна нелюба любити!
Нещасна доля із нелюбом жит.
Ох, також, ох, важко з ним річ розмовляти!
Хай лучше я буду ввести вік годовати!\textsuperscript{13}

Shevchenko caps this early period and presents not only the theme of absence:

Вітер буйний, вітер буйний!
Ти з морем говориш.
Збури його, заграй ти з ним,
Спітай синє море.
Вона знає, де мій милій,
Бо його носило,
Вона сказе, синє море,
Де його погіло!\textsuperscript{14}

The unmistakable 8+6 syllable kolomyika rhythm, the elemental force of nature (here the sea) and, as typical for Shevchenko, the lyrical voice here is a female. Shevchenko is the first, however, to bring in the aspect of missed chances, of opportunities wasted:

Та що з того? Не побавись.
Розійшлися, мов не зналися.
А тим часом дорогій
Літа твої молодії.
Марше прокинись!\textsuperscript{15}

Another poet picks up the theme of missed opportunity but the emphasis is on the ill-fated:

Ти не моя, голубко сива!
Щаслива голенька твоя.
Моя же доля нещаслива,
Бо ти, гівчина, не моя!\textsuperscript{16}

The same motif of lost love continues with the late romantics, Fedkovych and Hlibov, although in Fedkovych's case the loss is definitely due to death while for Hlibov the lover dies 'symbolically' in the arms
of another:

"Сестро ж моя, лелієнко біла,
Уповій я, де ти ся погіля?"
В гаю, брате, в гаю, в гаю,
P і д могилов пробуваю,
Все о тобі розмововеньку маю"17.
Iшов козаць корогою
Не в Крим, не по сіль,
Зустрілася приспівка —
Вдовина постіль18.

Mykhailo Starytsky the next author in the sample has two poems in the anthology. This turns out to be a very important happenstance of the Zilynsky selection. One poem is from 1870 and another from 1900. Although both are by the same author the treatment of love is different in both and as such the two poems seem to show two different literary periods: populist-realist and modernist. Although the realist-populist poets had little use for love poetry, Starytsky's 1870 poem does bring in a new element to the love theme: love is, after all, the only thing left for the poor and downtrodden:

Сплять вороги твої, знужені працею,
Нас не сполоха їх сміх...
Чи ж нам, охваченим долею клятою,
Й хвиля кохання — за гріх19.

The next poem by Starytsky in the anthology, however, deserves special attention for it is the first poem in this sampling that falls within the modernist time period. It is even more noteworthy since Starytsky is not known as a modernist poet. Yet this poem is quite different from poems Starytsky wrote earlier. An examination of the differences points to features which can be explained primarily by the changes in the author's perception. Changes, one can argue, which are born from the aesthetic perceptions of the day, that is, from modernism.

The poem is titled Monolohy pro kokhannia (Monologues on Love) and the title in itself is revealing. Up to this time, as seen from the sample, there were no poems about love (kokhannia) as such, rather about a lover (myliyi/myla) absent for one reason or another. Furthermore, Starytsky's poem is full of vocabulary not encountered before. There is a definite attempt to create an exotic atmosphere with such words as: pyshnnotu dolyn; sadiv-vertohradiv; pakhuche dykhannia; zbeshchenyi Nil; rozpalenykh skel', sribloshatyi Livan; zharkyi kolir; vust tvoikh pal zapashnishyi troiand Dagastanu; persa tvoi solodoshchiv i vtikhy povnishi; mliie pal'ma; lotos poven taiin; Edem; bud' moieu „khanyam”... and such lines as:

 Чи ти знаєш той край, де голубиться збещенй Ніл
go розпалених скель і шепоче про любощі п'яне? [кохання]20
And what is even more interesting is the appearance of a completely new treatment of the theme of love. For the first time in the sample, there is an attempt to portray the object of the love, the beloved, to describe in the most flattering terms:

Ой там зорі ясні і пись між яскравих блисій,
Але очі твої за ті зорі яскраві ясніші;
У пустелі палкій тішать душу джерела води,
Але перса твої солодощів і втіхи повніші.

Similarly in the following sample:

Висока їй рожа, мов тополя;
Гнучка, як восени пала,
Ти серед пшеничного роздоля
До мене руки простягла.

Further development of the „love theme” in the sample is very rapid. In the very ie poem something new appears toward the end — a certain abrupt disillusionment, all is not as beautiful as it seemed:

А плівці, що повній був квітками,
Тепер плодив кубла гадюк,
І наг помрілими лугами
З сосни дралежний каркав крюк.

Coupled with this disillusionment is the feeling of being somehow out of kilter in life, of being lost, not only in love relations (since most often love is the cause of this orientation) but in general:

Я впомнився, охлая, серед шляху пристав
І тривожно шукаю дорогу.

Love becomes a prime cause of suffering. Love for the one who loves causes pain in the soul, in the heart. Such statements as Franko’s vid liutoho bolin, shcho sertse moie rozryvaie or se rozpuka moia, nev-tushyma toska, are expanded in the following metaphor of pain:

Глибокий плуг проїшов полями
Моеї тихої гуши,
...
...
Скажи ж мені... Але не треба:
Сама ти плуг той навела...

or similarly:

Ти могла мене зняти понад земні світи
І вчини самим ікаром-богом,
А тепер я сліпцем волочусь без мети,
А мій лан спочиває облогом.

It was not long before the blame on the beloved who causes pain is pushed one step farther and the beloved woman (usually it is the man who is suffering) is seen as inconstant, a deceiver, and finally an object to be 'purchased':

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Поклін вам, о гори, блакитні вершини.
Де мислями світить безсмртна тиша,
Куди не досягне душа павутини,
Нечиста, тілесна, жіноча душа!  

У кутках усі твоїх вишневих
Тайтися скрізь відтінь злоби,
І є в тобі щось із Магонни
Й з опереткової Ніоби...  

О пані! Тут тебе у рамі
Можна так дешево купити,
А я не знати ціни й готов був
Життям за тебе заплатити...  

and finally in derision:
У мене є багатий скарб —
Дорожчий від твоєго раю, —
Я замість усі гарячих маю
Багато переливних фарб.
Я ними так тебе змалюю,
Що не впізнаєш і сама —
Такого демона змайструю,
Якого в світі яже й нема.
А потім стану та й погляну
На переливи темних фарб
І сам я дивуватись стану,
Як роздивлюся на кожний карб,
Як міг кохати таку погану? —
Я не жебрак ще! В мене скарби!  

With love causing pain, with the love object not really as beautiful as first envisaged there was only one solution - escape, find refuge in dreams:

А як коли у сні тебе побачу,
То, бачиться, всю злість і гіркість трачу
І викудаю, мов гадюк тих звій;
Весь день мов щось святе в душі лелю,
Хоч не любов, не віру, не надію,
А чистий, ясний образ твій.  

Різьблю свій сон... Ох ніби вчора ми
Зійшлися, — і стріча та жива.
На землю тканками прозорими
Лягли осінні деревя  

Вдень ходив я по землі,
А ходжу по дну морському...
Що це? сон? по дну морському!
Вдень ходив я по землі!  

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The last quoted is unmistakably a Franko poem in its imagery (nenache perla u boloti) and sound. The excerpt nonetheless still reveals this modernist outlook on life as being an intolerable and painful experience (here due to love) and that it is preferable to escape into dreams where life and love is as one would wish. Lesia Ukrainka, the poet of forced vitality, proves the rule by being an exception. Lesia Ukrainka could not, of course, espouse the notion that any type of an escape could be preferable to the struggle of reality:

Ох, як часто мене опановують сні зловорожі,  
Сниться все, що я голову радо на штату несу,  
Але то тільки сні, — я повинна стояти на стороні,  
Бо мені заповідано в спадок жалобу й красу,  
Білий мармур, і плющ, і криваві осінні рози...  

The above excerpt shows well Lesia Ukrainka’s position in the Ukrainian modernist movement. Intellectually she was not a part of it. The poem is much too much positive in conviction. It lacks the idea of an escape from suffering into dreams, it lacks the fascination with one’s suffering, the dwelling on the pain in the heart. Nonetheless, even Lesia Ukrainka could not avoid the aesthetic sensibilities of the time and images such as bilyi marmur, ipliushch, i kryvavi osinnii rozhi... certainly could not have appeared in any poems written before the time of modernism. The contrast of color (marble white and blood red), the idea of the creepy ivy on a tomb suggesting the slow decay of everything, even marble, but at the same time evoking a strange beauty - that is all a legacy of modernism.

Again, although Lesia Ukrainka intellectually fought against the modernist mood, she provides in Zilinsky’s sample the only poetic prose - something which, again, did not occur before modernism. In trying to capture the ephemeral moods of the soul, those „fluid moods, murky memories, exalted cosmic associations” poets pushed the confines of meter and rhyme, the use of which seemed much too strict and unwieldy to render the undefinable feelings. The predilection for free verse or for fragmented meters becomes the rule. The farthest outreach of this formal expansion occurred with poetic prose. A lovely example is present within the anthology sample:
... Тільки з тобою я не сама, тільки з тобою я не на чужині. Тільки ти змієш ратувати мене від самої себе. Все, що мене томить, все що, мене мучати, я знаю, ти здіймаєш своєю тонкою тримчаною рукою, — вона тримтиться, як струна, — все, що пильарить мені душу, ти пронесеш променем твоїх блискучих очей, — ох, у твірків до життя людей таких очей не буває! Се очі з іншої країни...
Крізь темряву у простір я простягаю руки до тебе: візьми, візьми мене з собою, се буде мій рятунок. О, рятуй мене, любий!

І нехай в’януть білі й рожеві, червоні й блакитні троянди³⁶.

This poem offers not only a sample of the formal diversity of modernist poetry but also suggests an escape by the ultimate dream, by death.

To summarize then, the study of the set sample from Zilynsky has shown that, as has been noted above, all metric forms in myriad variations appear at this time. The formal diversity is, to a large extent, the result of the poet’s attempts to capture the mood of a spiritual malaise. In vocabulary, there is a preference for the exotic, for images that provide a striking, somewhat strange aesthetic effect. There is a concretization of the description of the beloved, words are found to describe very graphically the beauty of the beloved. The poems reflect the poet’s dwelling on the longing caused by love and on the pain of the soul, on the strange disequilibrium. The poet does not focus on the positive aspect of being in love but dwells on the painful aspects and blames the beloved for this pain. Escape is found in dreams of what was or could be, or even in the final dream of death. Another escape is into a self-protecting stance: the beloved (invariably a woman) is not really what she seems, not only that, she is the cause of the pain, and a deceiver, and, finally, something cheap and readily buyable, therefore an object of mockery and scorn.

In more concrete terms the discernable features consist of 1) a loosening of strict metric form, the appearance of vers libre and poetic prose; 2) the use of language from registers considered exotic; 3) the dwelling on the inner sufferings of the lyrical hero who finds himself in pain, lost, disoriented, and sad; and 4) a preference for dream over reality.

A Ukrainian modernist poem, therefore, is one which exhibits some of the above features. To verify the validity of these features and to counter the argument that the above features apply only to poems dealing with love, one can examine other poems in Zilynsky’s anthology written during the period of ‘canonical’ modernism but on a different
theme. In the brief confines of this paper let it suffice to quote just a few poems to show that indeed the features deduced from the above sampling can be used to define a canonical Ukrainian modernist poem. Samples have been chosen from the theme of "fate":

В осінній, сірий день нас сумерк породив,
Беззвісних ночей сум в колисці нас лестив,
В тісний обручи судьби скрізь втомлену клацем —
Сумні ігем... 37

Ні, то не спів, то ніби щось квильить
І скшлить, як нібито пташина.
Щось хлапає і стогне і кричить —
Голосить, мов охаяла гостина...

Та що вона? Стриюй... Цитьє, серце, цить!
Це ж у тобі озвається самотина.
Озавалася нудьга твоя і жаль
І давня, нерозважена печаль 38.

Під сонцем радісним життя:
Ввесь жар його у себе впніт
І з першим вітром олетіті
В крайню темну небуття 39.

Зміливі людські думи йдуть,
Душа гумками грає —
І мруть і йдуть, і йдуть і мруть,
І цілі в них немає!.. 40

One can go on, but it is quite clear that even though the theme (is no longer) love, metric diversity, the mood of pessimism, the dislocation of the lyrical hero, and the desire to escape into the ultimate dream - are all there. In other words, poetry written during 'canonical' modernism shows a loosening of form and often comes couched in a specific vocabulary revealing a certain self-indulgent perspective (often called "pessimistic") on the suffering of the lyrical hero, a perspective absent during the previous periods of positivist-realism, romanticism, or ethnographic classicism.

ПРИМІТКИ

1 The method has been tested successfully in my course-survey of Ukrainian poetry. The poetry is taught completely without authors. Students are given at the weekly meeting up to ten poems to read, discuss and analyze. The poems are randomly selected and from various literary periods. Parallel to this I lecture on Ukrainian poetry, periods, characteristics of periods and of individual authors. By mid term students are able to identify features in given poems which place the poems into literary periods. By the end of the year poems by the more significant authors can also be identified through the author’s specific traits, i.e. his literary 'signature.'
In the first session on Modernism at AAASS in 1990 the question of dating was discussed. Not to repeat the discussion here, I shall assume modernism to start in the 1890s and to finish with the cataclysmic events which occurred in Ukraine after 1917. The term "canonical" is used to designate this period.

Halya Sydorenko, Virshuvannia v ukrains'kii literaturi (Kiev: Rad. Pys', 1962), pp., 81 and 90.


I. Franko, "Mykoli Voronou (poslanie)", Z nad khmar i z dolyn, p. 1 (Odessa, 1903).

S. Iefremov, Istoria ukrains'koho pys'menstva (Kiev-Laipzig: Ukrainska Nakladnia, 1919) vol 2, pp. 269-70.


Orest Zilynsky, Antoloohia ukrains'koi liryky (Toronto-Edmonton:CIUS, 1978), p. 50, Kotliarevsky (1819). Henceforth only the page and the author will be given.

p. 51, Pysarevsky (1820-30)

p. 52, Zabila. (1835-6)

pp. 53-4, Shashkevych. (1837)

p. 55, Ustiianovych. (1836)

p 55, Hrebinka (1840)

p. 56, Shevchenko (1838).

p. 58, Shevchenko (1848).

p. 60, Rudanskyy (1854).

p. 63, Fedkovych (1862).

p. 64, Hlibov (1867).

p. 65, Starytsky (1870).

p. 66, Starytsky (1900). A poem of 6 quatrains in a 5 foot anapest and cross rhymed AbAb

p. 67.

p. 67, Shchoholiv (1882). A poem of 4 foot iamb; 8 quatrains; cross rhymed aBaB

p. 68.

p. 83, Karmansky (1906). A poem of 4 foot anapest alternating with 3 ; 6 strophes; rhymed: AbAb

p. 75, Cherniaovsky (1888-1895). A poem of 4 foot iamb alternating with a hypercatalectic line; 3 quatrains; rhymed aBaB

p. 83, Karmansky.

p. 84, Shchurat (1907). A poem of 4 foot amphibrach; 3 quatrains; rhymed: aBaB

p. 86, Charnetsky (1908). A poem of 4 foot hypercatalectic iamb; 3 quatrains; rhymed: abcb

p. 92, Kobyliansky (1913-17). A poem of 4 foot iamb; two 14 line stazas; rhymed: AbbAcDcDeFeFeF

p. 73, Franko (1898). A poem of 5 foot hypercatalectic iamb; alternating with a 3 foot in every third line; 4 strophes of six lines each, rhymed: abCabC;
aaBccB

31 p. 80, Vorony (1907-22). A poem of 5 foot iamb with many pyrhic feet; 8 quatrails; rhymed aBaB (with many spondee rhymes)

32 p. 88, Oles (1906). A poem of 4 foot (alternating catalectic) trochee; 6 quatrains; rhymed: AbbA

33 p. 71, Franko (1895). A poem of a catalectic 4 foot iamb, with some lines having but one foot to produce emphasis; three uneven strophes (12, 17 and 15 lines) rhymed: AAbAAAbAccddA; AAbbAAAccdceeAA; AAAbbccDeeDffflD

34 p. 78, Lesia Ukrainka (1901). A poem of 5 foot anapest; three stanzas of five lines; rhymed aBaBa, 1901

35 see note 7.

36 p. 77, Lesia Ukraiinka (1900).

37 p. 144, Charnetsky (1904).

38 p. 145, Vorony (1902).

39 p. 147, Chorniavsky (1904).

40 p. 149, Tverdokhlib (1908).