

Lesia Ukrainka and the Aestheticist Perspective

Danylo Husar Struk

Although chronologically Lesia Ukrainka belongs to the period of Ukrainian Modernism, few critics have placed her into this tradition. Mostly she is seen as a poet “sui generis”, a grand proponent of the personal and national struggle, and one who has greatly expanded the thematic confines of Ukrainian literature while giving rise to and developing the genre of poetic drama. The reason for Lesia Ukrainka's exclusion from the ranks of Ukrainian modernists lies primarily with the limiting definition usually proposed for Ukrainian modernism. If Ukrainian modernism is seen as the turn-of-the-century movement of formalist experimentation and “decadent” pose (as in the case of the poets of the *Moloda Muza*), Lesia Ukrainka does not fit for she is too traditional as a lyrical poet: quite versatile in form, but very wholesome in content and with little of the typical imagery and vocabulary of the “weary” modernists. The exhortative and upraising leitmotiv of most of her lyrical poetry, so concerned with overcoming the personal sickness eating at her limbs, sets her lyrical poetry almost in opposition to that of the so-called modernists. If, on the other hand, Ukrainian modernism is seen in its broader context, a movement embracing everything “modern” including the so-called renaissance of the 20's with symbolism, futurism and other modern modes of expression, Lesia Ukrainka again does not quite fit, or, more precisely, fits only in so far as her work reflects elements of neo-romanticism. And yet, though some of her lyrics could have been written by a poet like Hrinchenko, the whole of her work, and especially her poetic drama, is markedly different from the writings of the populists and realists who preceded her.

As our discussions at the three previous sessions devoted to Ukrainian modernism have shown, the problem, first and foremost, lies with the definition of modernism. Chris Baldick reviewing a series of recent books on modernism in the *Times Literary Supplement* made an interesting observation about this very problem:

The modern writer who sets out to explore the cultural contradictions of the *fin de siècle* movement has a choice of two possible strategies by which to resolve the uncertainties into some kind of narrative order: the first is to emphasize the recurring pattern of anxiety or dread in the cultural products of the period, yoking them under the dominant myth of degeneration; the second

is to repudiate all the talk of decline and to reconstruct the grave Victorian confidence as the cradle of modernist innovation.¹

Although Baldick is writing within the context of English literature, his observation is nevertheless applicable to Ukrainian modernism as well. Whereas in our previous deliberations we concentrated on primarily the “temporal” murkiness of definition, a narrow time frame vs a wide one, Baldick sees the problem of definition not so much in the “time frame” but in the emphasis. In doing so he suggests another viable approach. Thus his “reconstruct the grave Victorian confidence” in the Ukrainian context can be replaced by “establish aestheticist principles.” With such an alteration of words Baldick's statement becomes useful in broadening the definition of the turn-of-the-century Ukrainian modernism to include not only the *molodomuztsi* but also such proponents of aestheticism as Lesia Ukrainka.

The *molodomuztsi*, however, would certainly resent the exclusion implied in the “not only them but also ... proponents of aestheticism.” They would argue that actually they, more than anyone else, were the proponents of aestheticism. They would be partially correct. They did espouse “art for art's sake.” They not only espoused it, but their adherence to what they thought were its principal demands brought them into conflict with the literary establishment, notably with Franko and with Iefremov who saw the aestheticism of the modernists as only “skin deep.” Actually they did not fare too well either at the hands of such non-establishment proponents of “modernism” as Ievshan. Although more tolerant than Franko and certainly less caustic than Iefremov, Ievshan too saw the works of the modernist *molodomuztsi* as rather weak and superficial. Similarly Lesia Ukrainka's attitude toward the writings of many of her contemporaries was rather critical. Writing to Olha Kobylianska in 1900 she remarks: Дивно, як тепер дехто думає, що тільки треба написати “по-декадентському”, то вже се дає право які хочеш дурниці писати.²

1. Chris Baldick, “Secular variations,” *Times Literary Supplement*, September 3, 1993, p.20.

2. Letter to O. Kobylianska 14-21 December 1900 (Henceforth referred to as *Khronolohiia* p. 519) Strange, how nowadays some think that all one has to do is write *à la decadent* and that gives one the right to write any kind of nonsense. (Here and in all other quotations the translation is my own—DHS).

The reason for such criticism from Lesia Ukrainka, Ievshan, as well as Franko and Iefremov lies in emphasis. The utilitarian approach to art had gone too far. All agreed that more attention had to be given to the artistic, the aesthetic element of art. The contention centered on the degree to which art was to be only self-serving. In their desire to break away from the proceeding tendentiousness of the populist-realists and under the influence of Stanisław Przybyszewski, the *molodomuztsi* stressed the meaninglessness of art beyond its very self.³ Franko attacked this notion as lack of idealism and ideology and presented his *Ziv'iale lystia* as a sample of what a literary work should be when written with artistry but without the burden of social consciousness.

In the context of Ukrainian political reality it was very difficult to accept that art should care about nothing but itself. Thus it is of little surprise that the works of the French aestheticist, Marie Jean Guyau (1854-1888), had such an immediate and profound influence on those of the Ukrainian modernists who were revolted by the utilitarian attitude toward literature of the populist-realists but could not fully accept a literature free from all and any “higher” purpose. Guyau's *L'Art au point de vue sociologique* provided an answer. As early as 1889 (one year after Guyau's death) Lesia Ukrainka was directed to Guyau's work by her brother Mykhailo who in a letter to her on the 5th of November 1889 wrote: В X книжці “Русской Мысли” дуже хвалять книжку Guyau “L'art au point de vue sociologique.” Якби її перекласти, або хоч зміст подати до “Зорі.” Книга ця хорошого напрямку і не зашкодило б нашим письменцям познайомитися хоч з її змістом.”⁴ Although I did not find definite confirmation that Lesia Ukrainka did in fact read Guyau, her statements about literature indicate that she not only read him but agreed with the gist of his ideas.

3. As an illustration of the extreme position one should recall Vasyl Pachovsky's “Це є Штука — я не пхаю тут ідей [this is art—I don't push ideas into it].”

4. Letter of brother Mykhailo to Lesia and mother on 5 November 1889, *Khronolohiia*, p. 91). In the X book of “Russkaia mysl” they praise highly the book Guyau “L'art au point de vue sociologique.” If one could but translate it or at least give its contents in “Zoria.” This book has a fine direction and it would not hurt for our writers to get acquainted at least with its content.

It is interesting to note that Guyau's second work *Les problèmes de l'esthétique contemporaine* was translated into Ukrainian in 1913 and reviewed by Ievshan in “Ukrains'ka khata” of that year. Ievshan, of course, draws very heavily on Guyau's aestheticism.

Guyau was unequivocal as to the aim of art: “*Le but le plus haut de l'art est de produire une émotion esthétique d'un caractère social.*”⁵ In fuller terms he argued:

*L'art véritable est, selon nous, celui qui nous donne le sentiment immédiat de la vie la plus intense et la plus expansive tout ensemble, la plus individuelle et la plus sociale. Et de là dérive sa moralité vraie, profonde, définitive, qui n'est d'ailleurs pas la même que celle d'un traité de morale ou d'un catéchisme.*⁶

or

Un des traits caractéristiques de la pensée et de la littérature à notre époque, c'est d'être peu à peu envahies par les idées philosophiques. La théorie de l'art pour l'art, bien interprétée, et la théorie qui assigne à l'art une fonction morale et sociale sont également vraies et ne s'excluent point. Il est donc bon et même nécessaire que le poète croie à sa *mission* et ait une conviction.⁷

Those who lack this belief and conviction (most of the *molodomuztsi*- herein lies the reason for the conflict between them and people like Franko) tend toward a disequilibrium which, Guyau notes, can lead to pessimism:

Une tendance très caractéristique des déséquilibrés, c'est un sentiment de malaise, de souffrance vague avec des élancements douloureux, qui, chez les esprits propres à la généralisation, peut aller jusqu'au pessimisme.⁸

The above ideas of Guyau found fertile soil. The neo-platonic notions of a higher good which art must serve coincided well with the neo-romantic tendencies of Lesia Ukrainka and provided a frame for her aestheticism. Most important was Guyau's insistence that there was no contradiction between art for art, *properly understood* (his words) and art with a purpose. The matter lay, of course, in the quality of the art. In any case the art itself had to strive toward perfection, the artist had to believe in his mission as one called by a higher force. There were certainly to be ideas in literature, but they had to be an intrinsic part the work of art. Thus Lesia Ukrainka could easily dismiss the “tendentious” literature of her less gifted contemporaries and

5. M. Guyau, *L'Art au point de vue sociologique*, Paris, 1897, p. 21. [The highest aim of art is to produce an aesthetic emotion which has a social character (purpose).]

6. *Ibid.*, p. 75 (emphasis in the original). [True art, according to us, is that which gives us a sense of the immediacy of most intense life, all together most expansive, most individual and most social. From this is derived the its true morality, profound, definite, and which is not, moreover, the same as a treatise on morals or a catechism.]

7. *Ibid.*, p. 161 (emphasis in the original). [One of the characteristic traits of thought and of literature in our epoch is to be a bit overcome by philosophic ideas. The theory of art for art, well interpreted, and the theory which assigns to art a moral and social function are equally true and not exclusive. It is nonetheless good and even necessary for the poet to believe in his mission and have a conviction.]

8. *Ibid.*, p. 342. [A very characteristic tendency among the unbalanced is a feeling of malaise, of vague suffering with painful throbbings, which can in minds prone to generalizations go as far as pessimism.]

accept her own art which often carried a very specific “tendency.”

As early as 1890 in a letter to her uncle-mentor, Mykhailo Drahomaniv, she notes that her friends accuse her of “lacking” a purpose and a social message:

Та от мене дехто з товаришів корить, що нема в моїх віршах міцної тенденції, що бракує громадських тем, що в мене тільки образи і форма.... Ба що ж робить, хоч і так! десь моя муза вдалася така нетенденційна та вбога, Дехто теж вирікав, що я ховаєсь від “народніх” тем і складу мови народньої, лізу в літературшину та “інтелігенцтвую”, але тут, певне, вся біда в тому, що я інакше розумію слова: народність, літературність та інтелігенція, ніж їх розуміють мої критики....⁹

Not only did Lesia Ukrainka understand the concepts differently, she believed that only those “tendencies”, those “messages” which aesthetically fit and intrinsically flow from a work of art, only those have a place in proper art. Again, in a letter to Drahomaniv, she returns to these accusations of her critics but now clearly states that there must be a proper artistic union between form and content:

Впрочім, мене люди зовсім не за самий вірш лають, а за те, що я мало ідейна, чи то пак мало тенденційна, але мені здається, що коли я буду тенденцію за волосся притягати, то всім буде чути, як її волос тріщатиме нещасний. А вона, як схоче то сама до мене прийде, тоді я вже її не прожену.¹⁰

To paraphrase Guyau when a poet senses his mission and has the conviction then the form and the content will meld to create a truly aesthetic work. Lesia Ukrainka echoes this belief in 1905 in a letter to Ahatanhel Krymsky:

Тимчасом, в поезії я тепер обдарована несподіваною гармонією настрою моєї музи з громадським настроєм (се далеко не завжди бувало!). Мені якось не приходить навіть нагадувати сій свавільній богині про її “громадські обов’язки”, так обмарив її суворий багрянець червоних коругів і гомін бурливої юрби. Я навіть не розумію, яка приємність сій *citoyenne-Muse* воловодиться тепер з таким недолугим сотворінням, як я. На її місці я вибрала б собі поета з такою героїчною поставою, як V. Hugo, з голосом, як у Стентора, приставила б йому рупор до уст і гукала б через так вдосконалене знаряддя моєї волі на весь

9. *Khronolohiia*, p. 123. [Some of my friends reproach me that my poems lack a strong tendency, that they lack social themes, that all my poems have is imagery and form... But what am I to do, even if it is so! somehow my muse turned out to be without tendencies and poor.... Some have also complained that I hide from “populist” themes and that I avoid the pattern of the peoples’ speech, that I climb into literariness and “snoby intellectualism”, but I’m sure the whole problem lies in the fact that I understand differently the words: populism, literariness and intellectualism than my critics do...]

10. *Khronolohiia*, p. 176. [By the way, people scold me not only for my poems, but because I am not ideological enough, or rather tendentious enough, but it seems to me, that if I insist on pulling tendency by the hair, then all will hear how her unfortunate hair is cracking. But it (tendentiousness), if it wills, will by itself come to me and then I will not chase it away.]

світ.¹¹

This seamless union of art and ideology is the cornerstone of the aestheticist principles which motivated Lesia Ukrainka as an artist and as a literary critic. Although she wrote some literary articles (mainly in Russian for Russian magazines—they paid better), the more interesting and spontaneous literary criticism is found in her voluminous correspondence, where Lesia Ukrainka revealed an unwavering consistency and astute insights. The object of such critical musings was not only her own work but that of her writer friends as well as of other literary figures. An examination of some of these observations reveals a consistent conviction as to what forms true art: it has to be formally developed, true to life, that is, honest, and when it is so, it invariably has the necessary purpose and the right amount of “tendency.”

Although Lesia Ukrainka does not admit it outright, she seems to have found it extremely hard, however, to live up to the Guyau-an notions of aestheticism in her lyrical poetry. She views her poems very much in a romantic manner as creations of a “possessed” soul, something which cannot be directed, forced, or manipulated. Hence, they are either good, both artistic and meaningful, or not. She states this very clearly in a letter to Pavlyk in 1902:

Власне, найтрудніше “зважити” не писати віршів, бо то не робота, а так собі хвилеві імпровізації, певна форма нападів божевілля, за які людина здебільшого ручити не може; взагалі ж я вмисне, з виразним заміром, ніколи не віршую, — як не йдуть вірші самі на думку, то я їх ніколи не кличу, хоч би й рік цілий — обійдеться.¹²

When she does manage to write a poem which is purely an exercise in formal virtuosity, like her excellent pre-Chuprynkian “sound” poem “Khvyliia” (written in 1908 but published in 1911)

11. Babyshkin, O. K. (ed). *Lesia Ukrainka pro literaturu: Poezii, statii, krytychni ohliady, lysty*, K. 1955, p. 252. [Meanwhile, I am now blessed by an unexpected harmony between my muse and social issues (this was not always the case!). It seems that I need not even remind this carefree goddess about her “social duties”, to such an extent she has been stupefied by the flame of the red flags and the shouts of the unruly mob. I don't even understand what pleasure this “citoyenne-Muse” gets in bothering with such a pathetic creature as I am. In her place I would choose a poet with an heroic stance, like V. Hugo, with a stentorian voice, I'd place a speaking trumpet to his mouth and through such a superb instrument of my will I'd address the whole world.]

12. Babyshkin, Oleh: *Lesia Ukrainka pro mystetstvo*, Kyiv, 1966, st. 151. [Actually, it is most difficult “to decide” not to write poems, for that is not work, but rather momentary improvisations, a certain form of attacks of insanity, for which a person generally cannot be held responsible; in general I never write poems “purposefully”, with a general intent to write — if poems do not flow of “themselves”, then I never call them out, even if a whole year went by, one can do without them.] (emphasis by LU).

she is quite critical of it since the poem seems to be too frivolous. But she does note that it is a sample of what the new poets consider, wrongly in her mind, as “art for art” pure poetry:

... теж саме відноситься і до “Хвилі” — я зовсім згоджуюсь з твоїм присудом про неї, доказ тому, що вона три роки ждала посилку до друку (писана ще в Євпаторії). Тепер послала більше на доказ того, що й “старі” поети можуть, коли хочуть, “дзеньки-бреньки” писати, і писали їх раніше, ніж той великий приклад подали “молоді”, та тільки не спішайся з тим межи люди, бо вважають це марницею, для того і точна дата стоїть під віршиком.¹³

As any artist who is also a critic, Lesia Ukrainka was never quite certain if what she had written merited publication¹⁴ and relied heavily on the opinions of people she trusted, especially her mother, Olena Pchilka, and her uncle Drahomaniv. She was, nevertheless, very definite about aesthetic and structural aspects of her works. Ever conscious of both form and content, she found it difficult to write good lyrical poetry maintaining the necessary poetic high mission and conviction. The few poems where she did manage to merge the lyrical I with the social one (such as “Contra Spem Spero”, “Slovo chomu ty ne tverdaia krytsia”) were a great success and brought her, especially after Franko's pronouncement wherein he named her as the “only man in Ukrainian literature”, much recognition and a place in the “pantheon” of Ukrainian writers who advanced the cause of nationhood. It was in the realm of poetic drama, however, where Lesia Ukrainka found for herself the more applicable medium for creating true literature within the dictates of the aestheticist theory as propagated by Guyau.

That she was both conscious of her aesthetic “mission” and convinced in the correctness of her approach can be glimpsed even from the few remarks she wrote to her mother about

13. *Ibid.*, pp 159-160.[...the same can be said about “Khvyliia”—I am in total agreement with your judgment of this poem, the fact that the poem waited three years before it was sent for publication serves as proof of my agreement (it was written still in Yevpatoriia). I sent it now only to show that even the “old” writers can, if they so choose, write these “jingle-jangles” and that they wrote them much sooner, even before the great example of this kind of poetry was given by the “young”, but that they did not hurry into print with such works because they consider them trifles; thus the exact date is given for the poem.] (The poem is given on p. 145-6, vol 2 of the Tyshchenko-Bilous collected works of LU in 12 vols.)

14. She writes to her sister Olha in 1912: ¹сама ніколи не маю певної думки про своє писання: поки пишу, то мені здається, що варто писати (інакше кидаю), а як скінчу, то ніколи не знаю, чи варто його друкувати. [I myself am never sure about my writing: as long as I am writing, it seems to me that it is worth writing (otherwise I stop), but when I finish I never know if what I have written is worth printing.], Babyshkin, *Lesia Ukrainka pro literaturu*, p. 289.

“Iphigenia”—her first attempt at poetic drama:

“Іфігенію”, бачиш, посилаю, вона вже днів три, як написана... Монолог, я сама бачу, страх довгий, колись потім, для сцени (!) можна буде скоротить, а для читання се, я думаю, нічого. Колиб се була побутова драма, то такий монолог був би злочинством, але для драматичної поеми *en style classique* я се допускаю. Се пишу для того, щоб ти і Мих[айло] Петр[ович] Старицький не думали, ніби я зрікаюсь свого принципу виключення монологів з новітньої драми. “Іфігенія” іменно не буде новітньою: в ній буде хор, репліка *a parte* і, може, навіть *deus ex machina*!¹⁵

Perhaps even more telling about Lesia Ukrainka's belief in her “mission” as an artist are her statements which accompany the writing of her “Kaminnyi hospodar.” In a letter to A. Krymsky, Lesia Ukrainka confides:

Оце позавчора скінчила почату вже по великодні нову річ, але яку!... Боже, прости мене і помилуй! — я написала “Дон-Жуана”! Отого-таки самого, “всесвітнього і світового”, не давши йому навіть ніякого псевдоніма. Правда, драма (знов-таки драма!) зветься “Камінний господар”, бо ідея її — перемога камінного, консервативного принципу, втіленого в Командорі, над роздвоєною душею гордої, егоїстичної жінки донни Анни, а через неї і над Дон-жуаном, “лицарем волі.”... Так чи інакше, але от уже і в нашії літературі є “Дон-Жуан” власний, не перекладений, оригінальний тим, що його написала жінка (се здається, вперше трапилось цій темі).¹⁶

Aware of her achievement as a woman she is even more conscious of her act as a Ukrainian writer. She writes to Liudmyla Starytska-Cherniakhivska:

...се ні більше, ні менше, як українська версія світової теми про Дон-Жуана. “До чого дерзость хохлацкая доходить”, скаже Струве і вся чесна компанія наших “старших братів.” Що се є справді дерзость з мого боку, се я й сама тямлю, але вже певне “то в вшшем суждено совете”, щоб я *mit Todesverachtung* кидалась в дебри всесвітніх тем (як, наприклад, з “Касандрою” своєю), куди земляки мої, за виїмком двох-трьох одважних, воліють не вступати.¹⁷

15. *Khronolohiia*, p. 427. [As you can see, I'm sending you “Iphigenia”, written some three days ago... The monologue, as I can see myself, is frightfully long, sometime later on one can shorten it for the stage!, but for reading I think this will do. If this were a play of manners, then such a monologue would be a crime, but for a dramatic poem “en style classique” it is permissible. I am writing this so that you and Mykhailo Petrovych Starytsky do not think that I am abandoning my principle of excluding monologues from contemporary drama. “Iphigenia”, precisely, will not be a contemporary drama: it will have a chorus, dialogue “a parte”, and perhaps even a “deus ex machina.”]

16. Babushkin, *Lesia Ukrainka pro mystetstvo*, pp. 161-2. [It was the day before yesterday that I finished a new item begun after Easter, but what an item!... God forgive and pardon me!—I wrote “Don Juan”! The very one, the “universal and worldly one” and I did it without even giving him a pseudonym. True, the drama (again it's a drama) is named “The Stone Host”, because the idea in the work is the victory of the stony, conservative principle, embodied in the Commodore, over the split soul of the proud, egotistic woman Donna Anna, and through her over Don Juan, the “knight of freedom.”... In one way or another, but here **we have in our literature our own “Don Juan”, which is not a translation, but an original and to top it all the author is a woman (this, it seems is a first for this universal theme)**. (Emphasis is mine—DHS.)

17. *Ibid.*, p. 162. [... this is no more nor less than a Ukrainian version of the universal theme of Don-Juan. “the khokhol impudence has no bounds” Struve and the whole honorable company of “elder brothers” will say. That this is indeed impudence on my part, I know very well myself, but it must have been written “in a higher council” that I

Certainly Lesia Ukrainka's views are an excellent illustration of Guyau's *Il est donc bon et même nécessaire que le poète croie à sa mission et ait une conviction*.

The rather negative, if not scornful, note in the above quotation regarding her contemporary Ukrainian writers stems from the fact that Lesia Ukrainka found most of them wanting in both form and content. As early as 1892 she writes to her uncle:

Українським же поетам слід би на який час заборонити писати національно патріотичні вірші, то, може б, вони скоріше версифікації вивчилися примушені до того лірикою та перекладами, а то тепер вони найбільше надіються на патріотизм своїх четців, а не на власну риму та розмір.¹⁸

and continues, but with more conviction, in a letter to Osyp Makovey:

І Ви, і д. Верхатський признаєте у мене порядну форму віршів, — я сього не ставлю собі в велику заслугу, **бо се повинність кожного, хто пише вірші не для забавочки тільки, добирати кращої форми**. Правда, що у нас ще не всі пишучі зрозуміли сю повинність і думають, що для такої убогої літератури, як наша, “всякое даяние благо” і через се друкують речі, яких запевне не одважились би показати жадній редакції якої чужої часописі. Але ж я думаю, що такі письменці не поважають або себе, або української літератури. А я все таки не вважаю нашу літературу за жебрачку і коли у мене виходить що негаразд, то вже хіба через те, що не вмію краще зробити.¹⁹

Not only the writers but also the critics are not quite aware of the proper aesthetic requirements:

Боюся я, що наші критики дивляться на ту нашу літературу теж з виключного погляду, що вона, мовляв, молода, то не слід їй так суворо судити, а навпаки — треба хвалити й заохочувати хоч до якоїнебудь праці. Коли діло стоїть справді так, то се велика шкода. Не знаю, як хто, а я б хотіла, щоб мене судили по ширості, не вважаючи ні на мою молодість, ні на молодість нашої літератури, а я б тоді відала, як мені з тим судом обійтися... Не люблю тільки критики *ad hominem*, бо й справді не в тім сила, чи поет молодий, чи старий, хворий

throw myself with “contempt for death” into the thickets of universal themes (as, for example, with my “Cassandra”) where my fellow countrymen prefer not to tread, with the exception of the two-three courageous ones.]

18. *Khronolohiia*, p. 175. [For a while the Ukrainian poets should be forbidden to write national patriotic poems. Then, perhaps, they would learn more quickly the art of versification, forced into it by (reading) lyrical poems and by (doing) translations. As it is they count more on the patriotism of their readers than on their own rhyme and meter.]

19. *Khronolohiia*, p. 200. [Both you and Mr. Verkhatsky note the proper form of my poems. I do not consider this a great achievement because it is the **duty of everyone who writes poems, and not only for a lark, to find the appropriate form**. It is true, that not all of those who write among us, have understood this duty and think that for such a poor literature as ours “anything will do” and for this reason print things which, for sure, they would never dare show any editorial office of a foreign publication. But I think that such writers either do not respect themselves or do not respect Ukrainian literature. I, nevertheless, do not consider our literature a beggar and, therefore, if my work is not up to standard, then it is because I cannot do it any better.] (emphasis is mine—DHS)

чи здоровий, оптиміст чи песиміст у своєму житті, від того вірші його ні кращі, ні гірші.²⁰

But the primary cause for poor literary criticism is the lack of proper knowledge, the lack of any consistent aesthetical theory. Much later in 1909, Lesia Ukrainka voiced these concerns in a letter to Nadia Kybalchych:

Критика наша, правда, дуже відстала, та се тому, що взагалі в межах “російської культури” людей літературно освічених дуже мало, а для критика не досить талану і громадських цнот, тільки треба конечне **спеціальної** освіти, інакше вийде — єфремовщина, або хоткевичівщина. Не подумайте, що я вже так холодно-розважно ставлюся до того, що в нас “закони пишуть” такі критики, як ... *passons les noms!* Що в нас автори діляться на “старших і молодших”, неначе в школі, що в нас часто переймають “останній крик моди”, не знаючи не раз ще й abc — все це мене дуже болить,...²¹ (emphasis by LU)

Seeing the failures of Ukrainian criticism Lesia Ukrainka tries to compensate by her own critical evaluations. Thus she dismisses Maupassant for his “corruption” of naturalism²², sneers at Ibsen for “forcing” his ideas onto his characters,²³ and praises Maeterlinck, albeit cautiously for his achievements in modern drama.²⁴ As a critic of her contemporaries, even of her friends,

20. *Idem*. [I'm afraid that our critics look at our literature also from an exclusive point of view, that it is, they say, still young, that one should not judge it too severely, on the contrary, that it should be praised and encouraged to produce, no matter what. If such is indeed the case, then it's a great loss. I don't know about the others, but I want to be judged sincerely, disregarding both my youth and the youthfulness of our literature. Then I would know how to deal with such criticism... I do not like, however, criticism “ad hominem” because the point is not whether the poet is young, or old, sick or healthy, optimist or pessimist in his own life, and his poems, because of these conditions, are neither better or worse.]

21. Babyshkin, *Lesia Ukrainka pro literaturu...*, p. 274. [It is true, our criticism is very much behind the times, but that is so because in the confines of “Russian culture” there are very few people with a literary education, and to be a critic one needs more than talent and social graces, one definitely needs a very specialized education, otherwise all one will get is Iefremovism or Khotkevychism. Don't think that I am blasé about the fact that for us “laws are set” by such critics as... “passons les noms!” or that our authors are classified as “older and younger”, as if in some elementary school, that our authors often follow the latest “literary fashion” without knowing even “abc”—all of this pains me greatly.]

22. Щодо Мопассана, то над ним, я думаю, не варт собі голови сушити, бо в його творах чиста ідея натуралізму зовсім зопсувалась і вийшло щось таке, про що не варт і говорити. [As to Maupassant, there's no cause to bother one's head with him, for in his works the pure idea of naturalism has been corrupted completely and what has appeared does not merit discussion.] Letter to her brother from November 26-8, 1889. *Khronolohiia*, p. 93.

23. Ся Нора [Ibsen's heroine from *The Doll's House*] таке наївне звірятко, що я надивуватись не можу, як вона могла вкінці обернутись у *Frau Ibsen*. Але ж таки обернулась, при Божій та авторовій допомі, бо остатню сцену була такою проповідницею, що аж злість на неї брала — *es klag gar zu erbaulich und es roch nach Oel*. [This Nora is such a naive little creature, that one cannot cease to marvel how in the end she turned into Frau Ibsen. But turn she did, through the will of God and the help of the author, because in the final scene she was such a preacher that one got annoyed—this sounded a bit too didactic and smelled of oil.] From a letter to O. Kobylanska, 18 January 1900, *Khronolohiia*, p. 510.

24. Я не абсолютна (далеко ні!) поклонниця Метерлінка і взагалі “модерни”, але в трьох драмах сього автора я справді бачу нові елементи штуки, скомбіновані з великим таланом. [I am not an absolute (far from it) fan of Maeterlinck and the “modernists” in general, but in the three dramas of this author, I truly see new elements of art, combined with great talent.] From a letter to Hnatiuk, 18 May 1900, *Khronolohiia*, p. 514.

Lesia Ukrainka was brutally honest. She notes, for example, Kobylanska's inability to make her characters quite believable:

Кобилянська письменка нової школи, неоромантичної, але її неоромантичний стиль не дійшов ще до такої гармонії ідеалу з життєвою правдою, як то єсть у деяких французьких письменців. Часом у неї тенденція надто виступає червоною ниткою і разить очі мов дишармонія барви.²⁵

but she is also aware of Kobylanska's strengths:

Щодо німеччини, то я іншої гадки про се, ніж Ви і всі галичани. Не згубила, а врятувала К[обилянську] німеччина, показала їй широкий європейський світ, навчила ідей, навчила стилю (не в значенні слів, лексики, але в значенні фрази, багатства форми), а розвивши її розум **тим самим виховала для свідомої і розумної служби рідному краю.**²⁶

What is of special interest is the last sentence where Lesia Ukrainka clearly reaffirms Guyau's aestheticist belief that good art must be well done and have a higher purpose, in this case the “service of one's native land.” If the works are not good artistically, Lesia Ukrainka dismisses them as she does Nechuy Levytsky's work in a letter to Drahomaniv:

Принаймні не знаю ні одної розумної людини в Нечуєвих романах. Якби вірити йому, то вся Україна здалась би дурною. У нас тільки сміються з того “Чорного моря”, а прочитавши його, можна тільки подумати, чи не час би вже Нечуєві залишити писати романи, бо вже як такі романи писати, то краще пір'я дерти. А, пожалься Боже того пера і чорнила! Мені тільки жаль, що наша бідна українська література отак поневіряється через різних Нечуїв, Кониських, Чайченків і т. п. “корифеїв”....²⁷

Nechuy's work is criticized for failing in the two tenets of Lesia Ukrainka's aestheticist outlook: it was neither well written nor properly motivated. Furthermore, it was dishonest because it was not true to life. A work is true to life, not because it reflect reality but because it is

25. *Khronolohiia*, p. 134. Letter to Pavlyk from 6 March 1891. [*Kobylanska is a writer of the new school, the neo-romantic, but her neo-romantic style did not reach such harmony of the ideal with life's reality, as it did in the French writers. Sometimes tenebrousness in her works appears as a red thread and hurts the eye with its disharmony of color.*]

26. *Khronolohiia*, p. 490. From a letter to Pavlyk on 26 May 1899. [*As to Germany, I am of a different opinion about this than you are and all other Galicians. German did not destroy but saved Kobylanska, for it introduced her to the wide European world, taught her ideas, taught her style (not in terms of words, lexical borrowings, but in the meaning of the phrase and in the richness of form), and having developed her mind prepared her for the conscious and intellectual service of her native land*]. (Emphasis is mine—DHS)

27. *Khronolohiia*, p. 156. [*At least I do not know of one intelligent human being in the novels of Nechuy; if one were to believe him, then all in Ukraine would seem idiots. Here they only laugh at his “Chorne more” {ref to Nad Chornym Morem}, and having read it, one can only reflect whether it is not time for Nechuy to stop writing novels, for if one is to write such novels, one would be better off to [be engaged in] feather plucking. And, God have mercy, how much pen and ink he used up! I am only sorry that our poor literature is in such dire straights because of the various Nechuys, Konyskys, Chaychenkos and such similar “coryphées”....*]

so well constructed that the reader can accept the author's creation as plausible and probable. In discussing her own works with her mother, Drahomaniv, Pavlyk, Krymskyy, Kobylainska and even Franko, Lesia Ukrainka demanded of her works precisely that they be well constructed and aesthetically well motivated so that they present a plausible and probable vision of the author. She expected the same from other authors. The fact that she was a woman, 15 years junior, and addressing an “icon” of contemporary literature, did not stop her from telling Franko how he erred in respect to the above dictums of a good literary work.

In a fascinating letter to Franko from January 13-14 1903 she takes apart one of his works. She is tactful but honest and the validity of her criticism is confirmed by rereading the work, Franko's long poem “Lisova idyllia.”²⁸ She reminds him of his own dictum to authors that first and foremost they must be “*honest, honest, honest!*”²⁹ and then turns to his very tendentious and forced poem:

Що скажу Вам про Вашу поему? Вона ще не скінчена, і моя думка про неї не скінчена. В “Заспіві” (до Вороного) мені не скрізь подобається стиль, але, проте, якби Ви схотіли, ми поговорили б з книжкою та з олівцем в руках, а так в листі, прийшлося би розточитись в дрібницях, лист же мій і без того розточується *ad infinitum*. Пролог мені дуже сподобався в першій уступі (до початку діалогу), навіть нічого не можу сказати з погляду стилю. Щодо форми, то є одна строфа задовга... варто б її справити, щоб не порушувати суворих приписів октави (мені б було у них затісно!). В діалогу мені все приходилося **примувати** себе вірити, що ліс може так довго і складно розповісти цілий той випадок з князем, княгинєю, etc. Само по собі те оповідання не зле, але щоб його Вам ліс отак *knapp und gebunden* розповів, то не вкладається в мою фантазію. І лісовий ритм я собі не октавами представляю, — океан ще може мати октави, бо в хвилях його все ж є якийсь лад і закон, а ліс, мені здається, “верлібрист” і ніколи не скандує своїх віршів. Ще дві-три октави ліс, може б, і вдав при погожому вітрі, але 16? Натуральніше (я вживаю се слово в особливому значінні) здавалось мені там, де ліс про свою власну руїну розповідає, а коли розкаже про те, чого не міг бачити (про будуар княгині, про поділ спадків), то мені здавалось, що те не він говорить, а таки Ви самі. Чи не можна б так і поділити се оповідання, щоб кожний від себе говорив?³⁰

28. See Ivan Franko, *Zibrannia tvoriv u p'iatdesiaty tomakh*, vol 3. pp 107-135.

29. Babyshkin, *Lesia Ukrainka pro mystetstvo*, p. 154. Ви самі сказали про поетів: най будуть ширі, ширі, ширі!” — От тут весь закон і пророки! [You yourself said about poets that they must be honest, honest, honest!—Here's the whole law and prophets!]

30. Idem. pp. 155–6. [What can I tell you about your poem? It is not yet finished and my thoughts about it are also not finished. In the “Invocation” (to Vorony) I don't like the style in every instance, but we could talk about this, if you would wish, with book and pencil in hand, as it is in a letter, one would have to expand into details, and my letter, even without this is expanding *ad infinitum*. The Prologue I liked very much in the first part, (up to the dialogue), I can't even say anything regarding its style. As to the form, there is one line too long ... one should fix it in order to maintain the strict rules of the octave (I myself would find these too confining!). In the dialogue I had to constantly **force** myself to believe that the forest can narrate for such a long time and in such complicated detail the whole episode with the prince, princess, etc. All in all, its not a bad story, but to have the forest narrate it all like this “*knapp und gebunden*” {briefly and concisely}, this I find hard to believe. Also I do not imagine the forest rhythm in

Franko never did finish his poem and in the 50 vol. collected works there is no reply-letter. But Lesia Ukrainka's appraisal shows how she expected a work of art to comply with artistic plausibility and authorial sincerity. The whole conflict between the proponents of unbridled art-for-art and those who could not abide such frivolity comes down to authorial sincerity and artistic plausibility. The argument that a work was "frivolous and without tendency" really meant that it was unplausible and insincere. Conversely, the argument that a work was "too tendentious" meant that it lacked plausibility and replaced sincerity with preaching. Lesia Ukrainka understood this and in her poetic dramas she has both a "mission" and a "conviction" and manages to merge the structure with purpose in such a way that there is no tendentious preaching, only an exquisite artistic creation. Thus through her poetic dramas and her criticism Lesia Ukrainka is not only a part of Ukrainian Modernism chronologically, but together with Ievshan, is a true proponent of aestheticism in Ukrainian literature.

octaves, the ocean could have octaves because in its waves there is some order and rule, but the forest, it seems to me, would speak in vers libre and never scan its poems. Perhaps the forest could manage two-three octaves, with the help of the wind, but 16? More naturally (and I use this word in a special sense) it seemed to me that where the forest is narrating its own misfortune, but when its narrating that which it itself could not see (the princes' boudoir, about the division of the inheritance) then it seemed to me that it was not the forest speaking but you yourself. Could one not then divide the story in such a way that everyone speaks for himself?] (emphasis by LU).