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UDC 821.161.1.09:398

**FOLK-POETIC ROOTS IN THE PROSE OF NIKOLAI GOGOL
IN THE FIRST HALF OF THE 1830S:
FROM "THE EVENINGS..." TO "MIRGOROD"**

SUMMARY. In this paper the phenomenon of folk poetry is considered as the element of Logos congruity strategy in Russian literature of the 19th century, early prose by N. Gogol. The author differentiates between the concepts "folklorism", "conception of folklore", "folk poetry in literature". The dynamics of folk poetry from a cycle to a cycle are tracked through a correlation of certain elements. A substratum of three sources (musical, plastic, picturesque) is outlined as a text-generating intention. Grounds for the writer's ideas about the spirit of the nation are observed. The elements of substantivity of spontaneous life are determined: vocabulary connected with thunder, claps of thunder; the topic of mountains. Integrity of the mythopoetics encompasses the figure of a little devil, who often bears a structurally necessary element of the myth about spring fertility acquired by the God Gromovick. The song is seen as a source of cyclical links in which the existence of a character is complicated (he crosses the border from "own" to "alien" space). The folk-poetics in the comprehension of the words "peace" and "border" are revealed in the category: light/heat/fire/water; walls/circle; rain/cloudburst; thunder/storm/lightning /mountain/rock. The religious conception of folklore initially motivates Gogol's artistic thinking, balance and connection between ethics and aesthetics, limits and freedom of self-expression, his sense of "spiritual repose".

KEY WORDS. Folk poetic instance, conception of folklore, Nikolai Gogol, cycle, ecography.

The nature of words in Russian literature of the 19th century has always been considered as something phenomenal, and experts have looked for ways to educe and describe this phenomenality [1-3]. The feeling of the logos-based approach's failure in art [4] resulted in the necessity of open public reflection over the Christian roots in works, ways of connecting words with folk consciousness and crystallization of the notion "folk-poetic" as a tool of the word, alive and uplifting.

"The Evenings..." and "Mirgorod" were created long before the first Russian attempts to theoretically conceptualize the poetic medium of folk. The author had only some printed editions of well-known collections like "Selected Russian Proverbs Chosen by Catherine II", "Pismovnik" by N. Kurganov, some materials by I. Bogdanovich, a book by D. Knyazhev (1822), two collections of Russian fairy-tales (I. Snegiryova, I. Sakharova), a collection by Kirsha Danilov and Russian folk songs

written down by M. Maksimovich at his disposal. What N. Gogol does is to collect, or, so to say, accumulate poetic images for his future novels. In his letters, dated 30 April, 1829, and 2 February, 1830, he inquires into the customs and traditions of "Our Little Russians": "The ways that the most ancient, most deep-rooted ones called them" [5; 25]. N. Gogol was interested in "the smallest details": "detailed wedding description", "all kinds of legends and customs", information about Christmas Carols, Ivan Kupala, mermaids, spirits, scary tales, fables, all kinds of anecdotes ("Funny, entertaining, sad, scary ones... all of them are valuable for me") [5; 25-27].

In the process of the formation and expansion of Russian research areas aimed at the description of fictional texts with the help of folklore [6-11], the notion of "folklorism" was created (the feature of writing, creation with systematic and conscious citations from a number of folklore works). From V.A. Mikhnyukevich's point of view, "a folklore citation in literature is oriented not to the folklore itself, but to the conception of folklore" [9; 52]. It seems necessary to differentiate between the notions of "folklorism", "conception of folklore" and "folk-poetic roots". The latter definitely includes occurrence folklorism (folk-poetic basis) as well as folklore conception, and it appears to be a philosophical and ethical component of a work/creation which is based on an author's urge to self-identify as a subject of a nation with the help of artistic reframing of authentic poetic experience of the country he/she studies.

While creating "The Evenings..." N.V. Gogol was attracted to the idea of "a man of high purpose" [5; 15]. The thought of serene triumph of a man created after the image and likeness of God pervades this book. It is not a mere chance that in the beginning of the book the storyteller mocks the conceit of so-called "higher society" and "noble footmanship" while mentioning that in an ordinary person there can be "some kind of significance... and you feel involuntary homage" [12; 121]. The background of folklore conception of the first cycle is partially noted in the author's letters dated 1827-1830: "In the hours of reverie I have been trying to unthread the mysteries of the universe, of happy living"; "how I wish [...] to get away from the stuffy walls of the capital city and breathe country air if only for a moment"; "At this time I always strived for fresh air" [5; 9, 28]. Unlike "Mirgorod", where there is no "higher society", of course, but at least a town away from which you can stay for even five years, "The Evenings..." is a set of "evenings" with wondrous tales about the past, simple and naive. It is obvious that the author is concerned with "absolutely" Russian, really national art. In 1831 he writes: "I suppose that now a large building of purely Russian poetry is being built"; he names poets "the great architects" that create a town for "real Christians" [5; 33]. The article "Sculpture. Painting. Music" (1831) is essential for understanding Gogol's religious conception of folklore. In this work Gogol divides pagan and Christian ways of artistic impact. According to the author's idea of "three sisters", the plastic world, no matter how attractive it is in novels of the cycle, does not implement all the opportunities of the figurative and musical levels of artistic world of "The Evenings...". The author actually uses the capacity of pictorial art in the sphere of folklore citations, he manages to deepen and enhance the moment to the point of "heavenly revelations" [13; 10]. "It is more likely

that sand will grow on stone and oak will bend to water like willow than I will bend before you” [12; 57] — that is one of many examples where hyperbolized details undoubtedly have a folk-poetic character and play with elements. This kind of imagery is common for poetic works with their mainly metaphorical character. While describing nature, the subject of speech systematically uses the device of personification that is close to folk poetry: “midday shines in silence and sultriness, and the blue fathomless ocean like a voluptuous dome is bending over the earth and seems to be sleeping in delight, embracing and locking the beauty in his arms of air!” [12; 32].

N. Gogol draws the reader’s attention to the ability of music to affect those who have a peculiar perception: “She suddenly takes the man off the ground, stuns him with the thunder of powerful sounds and in a single stroke puts him into her world” [13; 11]. He means a sudden transition from contemplation to direct participation, in other words — the word’s syncretism. This substantivity of the folklore element of life takes place in “The Evenings...” short story cycle to the full extent, its frequency signs are rendered with the vocabulary associated with thunder strikes, and mountain topography that in its meaning genetically ascends to thunderous clouds [14; 350-351]. N. Gogol’s idea of music to a large extent is oriented around Christian, missionary discourse: “In our young and decrepit age, He (the world’s great Creator) sent down the mighty music that is to turn us to him” [13; 13]. In the scene where Andriy stands in the Catholic church, the folk-poetic origin functions not through folklore citations, but through the wholeness of the text’s mythopoetics. The “atmospheric” landscape (sky, rolls of thunder) and “imaginative” landscape (majestic, celestial music) match there, and the myth realizes itself literally (the character’s thoughts change after a “powerful strike”), and also in the context of other short stories of the cycle/s. On the other hand, the element of carnival manifests itself naturally in an unconscious “impulse of Bacchic movements” and graceful dancing. In the text the music serves as a catalyst of elements, it unites people into a universal and subordinate whole where every part of the structure inevitably finds unity and consent: “Everything turned, voluntarily or involuntarily, into a union and reached consent [...] Everything rushed. Everything danced” [12; 59]. Carefreeness, in the logic of myth, is almost brought to an automatism; it can be observed, for example, in the image of the old age: “they were silently shaking their tipsy heads, dancing with merry people” [12; 59].

The key character of the mythological space of “The Evenings...” is the evil spirit in a concrete hypostasis of the devil. It seems to be a deliberate text sign. The image of the devil is different from other mythical characters (like mermaids, satyrs, nixies, etc.) by the peculiarities of its genesis and existence: the devil did not exist in pre-Christian forms of folklore. The rise of beliefs in the evil spirit happened in late mediaeval times: “The stable and traditional image of the devil in German folklore appears not earlier than in the 12th century” [15; 123]. In “The Evenings...” there is a “common devil”, far from the image of the fallen angel from dualistic legends of the devil’s genesis. These fables are collected in cycles. From this point of view it is interesting to view the novel of opposition of God and the Devil, because it can, as we think, help understand many ambiguous fragments of the two cycles examined.

In the narration recorded in the Vladimir Province it is told that “God created the Earth plain, and the devil spat on it. Where the devil spat, a mountain grew” [15; 20]. In the Kaluga Province there is a similar story: the devil burrowed all the earth and created many large mountains. When God asked “Why did you do it?” he answered “For you, God, and for myself”. When a man would go to the mountains on a tired horse, he would beat it and swear and call the devil, and when he reached the top, he would say “Thank God, at last I’ve reached the top” [15; 147]. Perhaps God and the Devil cannot exist without one another, but in “The Evenings...” and “Mirgorod” the Devil, among other things, is very often complemented by the structurally essential element of the myth about the procurance of fruitfulness by the god of thunder. Thunder and bangs follow the character all through his fairy-tale journey to Saint-Petersburg on the devil’s back (“The Night Before Christmas”); when playing the card game “Durak” (“Fool”) with the devil (“The Lost Letter”); the smug laughter of the mayor favored by the commissar (“May Night, or the Drowned Maiden”); the cursed kiss of Peter, Basavryuk’s appearance and his laughter (“Ivan Kupala’s Eve”); the proposal of marriage to Fedor Ivanovich. The greatest number of sound insertions is noted in the story “A Terrible Vengeance”: in this story thunder, storm and strikes are mentioned 15 times, and mountains are mentioned 21 times; one statement in this story often combines thunderstrikes, pictures of mountains and denotation of the evil spirit: “the musket struck, and the magician disappeared behind the hill” [12; 196]. In this “legend”, among other tales of the two cycles, the author expresses a strong shock fixed in the plane of space and sound: proportionally to the pictured occurrence the highest peak in space is noted — the Carpathians, and the deepest dip: “How long is the distance from the earth to heaven, the same distance was from there to the bottom of the abyss” [12; 221].

In the closing story of the first cycle “A Bewitched Place”, the reader can see the acme of an impetuous dance: “He was dancing in such a way, even with a hetman’s wife”; “his legs were not immovable: they were as if at every moment someone was twitching them” [12; 243, 242]. The plot of the tale is based on the conflict between a strong wish “to do his best and do some whirl and twist with his legs” and the ill-fated curse of the place (“His legs were stiff as though made of wood! [...] they just would not dance to their full, and that is all!”) [12; 243]. The fairytale motif of “fooling” in folklore usually presupposes mockery of the devil, but in this case, on the contrary, “the devil wants to hoodwink you” [12; 240]. In the folk-fantastic halo of the story there is a myth — a trial for a character, that is why in the text there is an angry strike with a spade and the sight of a cliff hanging over: “A cliff hanging over his head and looking every minute as though it would break off and come down on him” [12; 247]. A special kind of magic space is noted in the story, it differs from the drawn space of protection — the chalk circle from “Viy” which is equal to the sun in the logic of the myth. In “Bewitched Place” the space turns out to be a shapeshift: “In a flash, the same field was all around him again” [12; 245]. Through the turnskin space the character “shapeshifts” himself and sees a “different” self. According to the Slavic heroic epos, shapeshifts were a domain of the supreme forces, ancestors, relatives

and patrons. It is not a coincidence that the wife did not recognize her husband: “By heaven I say, I thought it was a barrel climbing” [12; 247]. With irony the author turns the heroic plot inside out and takes off the pathos of strangeness, and then shows a fooled Grandfather from an even funnier side against his unnamed twin “the wolf character”.

N. Gogol considers the ability to describe an absolutely strange world through the eyes of “his national element, of his people, to feel and speak in such a manner that his countrymen think that it is actually they who feel and speak” [13; 51], which is a very important feature of a national artist. According to the writer, “[in folklore] there is no eloquence, just poetry” [13; 55]. Gogol as a portrayer of ordinary life speaks true of the folklorized image of the world in both cycles of stories. In “Mirgorod” the fairy-tale mode of stories of “The Evenings...” changes for the life-like, epic, fabulous.

The change of thoughts that happened in N. Gogol at the beginning of 1833 shows the dynamics of creative methods: “You ask about the “Evenings of Dikanka”. Damn them! [...] I cannot add any fairy tale. I have no talent to speculate. I even forgot that I have written these “Evenings...” [...] Let them be condemned to obscurity! Until something voluminous, great, ingenious will be created by me” [5; 40]. The crisis the author faces before creating “Mirgorod” probably affected the new artistic quality of the second cycle. He calls doubts that torment him “hellish feelings”, when the man just turns angry and ridicules his own helplessness [5; 46].

The interest in history transforms ethnographical attempts by the author into a passionate affection for folklore songs that replaced “inflexible chronicles”: “These songs, not even historical, even lewd; they all give some new features to my stories, more and more they all unmask people that are, alas, already gone...” [5; 48]. The author collects songs with greed: “Last year I gave about 150 songs to Maksimovich and he did not know them. After that I got about 150 new ones. Maksimovich now has 1200 of them” [5; 55]. The folklore genre that expresses a generally ideological and emotional attitude to events helps the author to establish a new type of dialogue between stories, to create new intercylic links. Plots of singing art constructed according to a fixed structure serve as sources of these links. Research into folklore as a special kind of communication (Y.M. Lotman, V.Y. Propp, D. Ben-Amos) help Y.A. Emer to “refer to the song genre as to a micromodelling system” and find out that the character of a lyrical song is in constant motion; his movements from “his” space into a “foreign” space and back again serve as a plot-formative factor, a means of compositional organization of the genre [16; 113, 114, 146]. The motif of trespassing the border and the poetry of border is included in the folklore plane of “Mirgorod”. A special kind of typology of characters is formed from the point of view of border poetry. Sainly men in the cycle are represented as a category of people’s ethical evaluation of the actions and thoughts of all other characters of the stories. The non-fairy-tale superstitious world of the second cycle stories is demonic and pious. The apparent difference of this cycle from “The Evenings...” is excluding the devil from the list of characters and banning naming him in the majority of

stories. In four stories this alignment of forces is balanced by real disasters caused by nature and social elements, connected with loss and enmity: anility, betrayal, a murdered son, a victim of witchcraft, litigation. The folklore poetic plane of “Mirgorod” is present in the comprehension of the word forms “world” (=a border of protection) and “border” (=town). The illusion of the myth about town in the last story is exposed by false links and an obvious deception by the storyteller. In the other three stories, on the contrary, there is an ethnographically clear vision of the world’s poetic being. Allusion to elements partially uncovers the deep folklore implication of righteous living, the monumental image of the hero-bogatyr, a grotesque over an elementally deterministic victim. The categories like light/warmth/fire/water; protective borders of a house/circle; rain/downpour/hail; thunder/storm/lightning/mountain/ cliff are parts of a consistent world image. In the stories of the cycle, like in calendar myths, the happiness of fruitfulness is exposed; it can be stopped (or broken) only seasonally in the name of further establishment of harmony. So, the cycle stands for the natural normalization of life regardless of man’s will. Folklore conception of the second cycle is much more oriented towards historical authority, complicated intertextual inclusions, typisation of Russian Man and innovatory stylistic devices.

“The legends say that during a thunder storm God shoots arrows at devils” — this explains a popular belief that a cloud of dust that wind lifts during storm is actually a devil; there are various humorous stories based on the idea that “devils are afraid of storms”, in one of them the devil begs to be in God’s bosom [15; 137]. These and many other folklore elements compose the imaginative background of N.V. Gogol’s works of the first half of 1830s, and with this background there are complicated inclusions of absurd, anticomic, anti-order elements of artistic wholeness like “Ivan Fyodorovich Shponka” or “The Tale of How Ivan Ivanovich Quarreled with Ivan Nikiforovich”. According to the author’s idea, “Mirgorod” should have dissipated the “melancholy mood” and shown “how terribly far we are from our basic elements”, although “one should consider life as a trifle, as a cossack does” [5; 68]. Anyway, the idea of “self-exclusion” from life was not able to satisfy the search of a religious preacher. The author will constantly go back to the past, “where the blameless beginning of life was happening; where everything bore the inexpressible, ineradicable trace of innocent childhood, where all the motherland was”. And from this point of view Gogol is, undoubtedly, an artist of the ecographic type [17].

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