“Primary and Secondary Nationality”: Nikolai Polevoy’s Review of Kyrylo Topolya’s Play Chary

Polevoy’s Framework

Kyrylo Topolya’s play *Chary, ili Neskol’ko stsen iz narodnykh byley i rasskazov ukrainskikh* (*Chary, or Several Scenes from Ukrainian Folk Tales and Stories*), published in Moscow in 1837, quickly attracted attention in metropolitan literary circles and was anonymously reviewed in *Biblioteka dlya chteniya* (*Library for Reading*). Two years later, in 1839, Nikolai Polevoy issued a two-volume collection of his critical writings, *Literaturnye ocherki* (*Literary Essays*)—one of the most important compilations of his criticism—in which he reprinted this very review in the second volume.

At the center of Polevoy’s analysis lies a two-stage model of nationality that traces the evolution of a people from primordial oral creativity to a politically consolidated literary culture.

Topolya and the Concept of Nationality

The first nationality denotes a primordial, communal phase characterized by oral, spontaneous, and emotionally immediate forms such as folk songs, tales, and legends. For Polevoy, these forms possess authenticity and lyrical vitality yet remain incomplete because they lack political cohesion and a developed literary language.

The second nationality, by contrast, represents a historically consolidated culture grounded in political unity and linguistic refinement. At this stage, poetic energy becomes individualized and is organized into genres such as drama, epic, and reflective lyric. Literature “in the strict sense,” Polevoy argues, emerges only here, within the institutional framework of the state (Biblioteka dlya chteniya, 51–53).

Polevoy reads Kyrylo Topolya through this theoretical lens, presenting him as a remnant of the first nationality—a “natural” poet without formal education, whose alternation between Russian and the “Little Russian dialect” signifies both authenticity and cultural incompleteness (Biblioteka dlya chteniya, 60–67).

Conclusion

Polevoy’s concept rests on the premise that cultural evolution is irreversible: once a people attains political and literary consolidation, it cannot return to the communal spontaneity characteristic of its primordial stage. This assumption informs his dismissal of Romantic attempts to artificially revive archaic folk forms (Biblioteka dlya chteniya, 52–70).

Within this framework, Ukraine—having failed to complete the transition to the “second nationality” before its incorporation into the Russian state—is effectively denied the possibility of an independent cultural trajectory. Its literary resources are thus construed not as the foundation of a separate national tradition but as material destined to be incorporated into, and perfected within, the larger Russian national organism.