

Maxim Tarnawsky. *The All-Encompassing Eye of Ukraine: Ivan Nechui-Levyts'kyi's Realist Prose.* U of Toronto P, 2015. 376 pp. Notes. Bibliography. Index. \$66.00, cloth.

This monograph challenges received opinion about Ivan Nechui-Levyts'kyi, the major nineteenth-century Ukrainian realist-prose writer, and offers a fresh, more judicious assessment of his work. Nechui-Levyts'kyi has not fared well at the hands of past, and even recent, literary critics. Ukrainian modernists, with their rejection of realism, and Serhii Iefremov, in his biography of the writer, have treated him as a mediocre talent—as merely a populist, ethnographic writer of the Ukrainian village. Soviet scholarship, constrained by ideological tenets, treated Nechui-Levyts'kyi as a voice of the people. These interpretations of Nechui-Levyts'kyi have established him as a largely uninteresting figure for present-day readers. Maxim Tarnawsky's study convincingly shows that prior interpretations of Nechui-Levyts'kyi are seriously flawed and need to be reconsidered.

Tarnawsky examines Nechui-Levyts'kyi's biography and covers virtually all of his writings—his prose fiction (novels and stories), major essays, and historical writings—as he grounds his claims with careful readings of, and with numerous and extensive examples (given in Ukrainian and English) from, Nechui-Levyts'kyi's texts. He situates Nechui-Levyts'kyi's work within the Ukrainian literary tradition and within the broader context of the movements of realism and modernism. The results reveal new, largely unforeseen aspects of Nechui-Levyts'kyi's work.

Nechui-Levyts'kyi, as Tarnawsky makes clear, was an unabashedly Ukrainian writer, but not in a parochial sense. His sense of Ukraine encompassed all peoples (Ukrainians, Jews, Poles, and Russians), places, and events within the country, but he was particularly focused on the fate of the Ukrainian ethnos. Although the vast population consisted of peasants (93% in Dnipro Ukraine, even in 1897) and they do figure in Nechui-Levyts'kyi's fiction, they do not, as Tarnawsky emphasizes, actually dominate Nechui-Levyts'kyi's works (109). Nor does Nechui-Levyts'kyi present the populist concepts of the noble peasant and idyllic village; he consciously shows a dark side of village life. And he does not dwell on peasant customs, as did earlier Ukrainian writers (such as Hryhorii Kvitka-Osnov"ianenko). Furthermore, he presents urban settings, such as Kyiv (which he knew in detail from his student days), Chişinău, and Odesa; and the major characters in a number of his novels include an urban intelligentsia or women in search of their place in a new social order (for example, in *Ne toi stav* [*He Is Not the Same*], 1896).

Tarnawsky rejects the notion of Nechui-Levyts'kyi as a mediocre talent, arguing for the positive virtues of a style that other critics have found wanting. He defends Nechui-Levyts'kyi's repetition of phrases, use of

established types, and simple plots as deliberate features of what he terms a “non-purposeful writing style” (250). Nechui-Levyts'kyi does not seek to deliver a political message, advance an ideology, or offer moral lessons, even though he depicts social reform efforts in his fiction. His characters are not ideologues, nor is there a focus on their psychological inner workings. Nechui-Levyts'kyi presents the flow of life, often driven by human foibles, with humour and satire rather than with analysis or conclusive lessons. Tarnawsky also points to Nechui-Levyts'kyi's aesthetic descriptions of nature (a well-established tradition in literature) and urban settings as signs of the writer's deliberate concern with his craft. The country landscapes that figure in Nechui-Levyts'kyi reveal an interest in history and the beauty of vistas rather than a preoccupation with the details of farms, fields, and grain. And, as Tarnawsky claims, this aesthetic wonder in Nechui-Levyts'kyi makes for a peculiar kind of realism.

Nechui-Levyts'kyi is often portrayed as a cranky realist writer of the older generation—cranky, in particular, about new modernist trends, which he sharply criticized as inappropriate for a developing Ukrainian culture. But Tarnawsky points out that here, too, a more nuanced approach is needed. Nechui-Levyts'kyi understood the need for progress and the necessity of the peasantry rising above its dire straits through enterprise and education. However, he also saw social mobility as a force leading to denationalization through assimilation and urbanity (196). For Nechui-Levyts'kyi, cosmopolitanism and the attraction of the city were potential threats, which could easily draw upwardly mobile Ukrainians to abandon their own culture and ethnos and, thus, could impede the development of a Ukrainian culture. For this, he was often criticized as being conservative and even reactionary. However, while he was critical of cosmopolitanism, which he linked to Russian nationalism, he was not opposed to European high culture, which, for him, could contribute to Ukrainian national ideals (210).

For Nechui-Levyts'kyi, the Polish influence was a threat and the Russian influence even more so. Nechui-Levyts'kyi addresses the latter in his essays “Nepotribnist' velykorus'koi literatury dlia Ukrainy i dlia slov'ianshchyny” (“The Undesirability of Great Russian Literature for Ukraine and for All Slavic Lands,” 1877) and “Ukrainstvo na literaturnykh pozvakh z Moskovshchynoiu” (“Ukrainianness in a Literary Duel with Muscovy,” 1891); and Tarnawsky discusses these essays in detail. Nechui-Levyts'kyi raises the crucial points that Ukrainian literature and language are distinct from Russian literature and language and are not provincial; and that Ukrainians in both the Russian and Austro-Hungarian empires are a single people with a single history who are distinct from Russians. As Tarnawsky writes, “His energies are focused on establishing the dignity and reputation of a distinct Ukrainian literature, culture, and nation” (190). All of this informs and

haunts Nechui-Levyts'kyi's work. For Nechui-Levyts'kyi, the Ukrainian ethnos needed to develop its own cultural path in the face of imperial pressure—the Valuev Directive (1863) and the Ems Ukaz (1876)—and the allure of a high society alien to its peasant roots.

The monograph under review is a most welcome addition to Ukrainian studies. Tarnawsky's critical reading unquestionably succeeds in redefining Nechui-Levyts'kyi as a writer and establishing his importance for Ukrainian literature and the nineteenth-century literary process in Ukraine. The volume is well argued and balanced; it convincingly demonstrates Nechui-Levyts'kyi's achievements while still noting his blind spots. There is more work to be done on Nechui-Levyts'kyi, as Tarnawsky himself admits, but this scholarly volume goes far to define the questions that need to be addressed. It is a must-read for anyone working in the field of nineteenth-century Ukrainian literature and culture.

George Mihaychuk
Georgetown University