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Contemporary Belarusian Literature through the eyes of a foreigner

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CONTEMPORARY BELARUSIAN LITERATURE THROUGH THE EYES OF A FOREIGNER*

In my presentation I address some aspects of contemporary Belarusian literature, use the folk image of the three whales upon which it, like other worlds, may be thought to stand. I hope to touch rather than dwell on the restrictions imposed on literature by the regime, and to talk about the main groups of writers during this period. I shall also say something about gender and genre. The role of women is an increasing one, at all levels, creative and critical. As for genres, some (such as war literature) have all but disappeared, whilst others have found new life, like historical and erotic writing, to name but two.

I wrote my first survey of Belarusian literature in the late 1960s. The last chapter was called ‘Post-war developments’, and in it I mentioned – very sketchily – many of the writers who became the literary pillars of the second half of the 20th century: Ivan Mielež, Uładzimir Karatkievič, Michaś Stralcoŭ, Pimien Pančanka, Vasil Bykaŭ and Janka Bryl. Not one of them is still alive, although two others I picked out at that time, Nił Hilevič and Ryhor Baradulin are, thankfully, still with us and have the status of major national figures – by ‘national’, of course, I mean the real Belarus of tradition and culture. In the other, official, Belarus, things are very different: for example, national poet Baradulin’s seventieth birthday in 2005 passed completely unmarked by officialdom.

I do not, however, intend to spend my time on personal reminiscences, but hope to assess some of the important events and people who have influenced Belarusian literature over the last forty or so years, for better or for worse.

Before turning to the two main literary groupings of this period, I shall say a few words about the question of literary influence, imitation and heritage. As is well known, it is not necessarily the greatest artists, musicians and writers who are the most influential. Mozart, for instance, had far less influence on his

* This paper was given at the Plenary session of the International Congress of Belarusianists in Miensk on 20 May 2010. In the event it was dedicated to Uładzimir Niaklajeŭ who had been arrested on the previous day.

successors than did Haydn, whose heritage may be heard in the works of Beethoven. Turning back to literature, the malign influence of socialist realism has lasted into the work of many writers, whether or not they are aware of it. In Russia, for example, the novels of Solzhenitsyn were almost pure socialist realism with reversed signs. One antidote to this unwelcome tradition is postmodernism, and without stepping into the quagmire of trying to define it, I should like to mention the novels of Ihar Babkoŭ and Siarhiej Bałachonaŭ as particularly interesting examples of this phenomenon. On the question of influence, the imaginative historical works of Uładzimir Karatkievič undoubtedly inspired some of Belarus's later novelists to write creatively about the past. Vasil Bykaŭ, on the other hand, the greatest Belarusian prose writer of the 20th century, made his reputation through his individual and unmistakable brand of war literature, but writing about the Second World War has not been very conspicuous in recent decades. Bykaŭ arguably exerted more of an influence with the genre of parables to which he turned in his last years. He is also the first of several writers to leave the country towards the end of the last century. Bykaŭ is the only modern Belarusian writer to gain a worldwide reputation, and that through translations of Russian versions of his works. And yet, as Belarusian literature grows in stature it deserves to attract more interest abroad. The obvious path to this goal is for far more translations to be made into, particularly, English (as you might expect me to say). Otherwise we shall be like the importunate Arab carpet seller with pearly teeth depicted by Uładzimir Arłoŭ in one of his stories who having no doubt what Belarus is, repeats joyfully: 'Minsk, Chernobyl. Lukash'enka.'

I shall say a few words now about the main literary groupings over the last forty or so years. In the 1920s, at a time of relative liberalism before Stalin's purges, the movements 'Maładniak' and 'Uzvyšša' flourished. It was well over half a century later in 1987, at a time when cracks were already appearing in the Soviet Union, that a new grouping appeared as an offshoot of the official Writers' Union, 'Tutejšyja', named after Kupała's play, and later known as Tavarystva maładych litaratarai. Rejecting much of what had gone before, they, in return, were fiercely attacked by some of the old guard as (I quote) 'фронта, нацогі, банда, сіяністы і антысеміты, хамы, блязны, варвары, вар'яты' who were, moreover, 'невыхаваныя, бяздарныя, закамлексаваныя, нахабныя'.

The people who dished out these insults were, for the most part, representatives of the first of my 'whales', i.e. Stalinist socialist realism and its subsequent manifestations. The recipients of the abuse were mainly young Turks, led by Adam Hłobus and Anatol Sys who felt that Belarusian literature had entered something of a dead-end, and so followed their predecessors in 'Maładniak' or

the Futurists of many countries, in rejecting all that had gone before. Outside this unseemly row with its intemperate language stood such outstanding writers as Vasil Bykaŭ, Uładzimir Karatkievič, Uładzimir Niaklajeŭ and the already mentioned leading historical novelist Uładzimir Arłou. By the time of the next major literary movement, 'Bum-Bam-Lit', more than a decade later, many of the Tutejšyja had become middle-aged or even died, as in the tragic case of the immensely gifted poet, Anatol Sys. The 'Tutejšyja' movement has, incidentally, been well described in a book by the young novelist Aksana Biazlepkina.

A later, even more iconoclastic, group of young writers, Bum-Bam-Lit appeared towards the end of the 1990s and produced an anthology, *Tazik bielaruski*, in 1998. In this connection I should like to say that it is not particularly significant that they followed the comparable Ukrainian Bu-Ba-Bu group by more than a decade. Switzerland, for example, is regularly behind the European Union in social and other changes, although many of the Union's citizens would gladly live in Switzerland – if it were not so expensive... As with the Tutejšyja, so Bum-Bam-Lit attracted a number of very talented young poets and writers, although they had even more contemporaries who did not join the organization. After all, not everyone wishes to belong to a collective, particularly after the Soviet experience. Bum-Bam-Lit, incidentally, has been extensively described by, amongst others, Jury Barysievič. On the subject of those who belong to the same generation but did not join, some are no less experimental, whilst others continue to pursue a well-trodden path

One final organization that deserves mention is the Writers' Union. The Tutejšyja may have perceived it as conservative, but by the present century, under the dynamic leadership of the young poet and historical novelist Aleś Paškievič, it is seen by the country's powers-that-be as a real threat. This new-style Writers' Union was first betrayed by a group of mostly untalented so-called 'patriotic' writers led by Taisa Bondar, and it was subsequently emasculated by the seizure of its premises. When I say emasculated, I mean deprived of not only the Union's traditional building but also of funds, the latter being channelled to the 'loyal' breakaway group. In spirit, on the other hand, the original Writers' Union remains strong, enjoying the loyalty of nearly all Belarusian writers and poets of consequence.

These unsavoury events were anticipated by the drawing together of all the official journals and publishing houses in a process known by the English word 'Holding'. This entailed the replacement (perhaps the word 'purging' would be more appropriate) of the previous, relatively liberal, editors by people known to be loyal to the regime. Disastrous as this process was, it was countered, in a sense, by the creation of new journals like *Arche* and *Dziejasłoŭ*, new publishing houses, especially the very enterprising Łohvinaŭ, and, to a lesser extent, newspapers. The late Janka Bryl once memorably wrote about Belarusian literature of

the past that it (I quote): пралезла <як парастак паміж плітамі тратуара>. He could not have anticipated present events at that time, but it is certainly as true now as it was over a century ago that Belarusian literature has shown great resilience and determination in the face of official indifference and – to put it mildly – discouragement. This courage, determination and resourcefulness is my second ‘whale’.

Many Slavic societies hold deeply patriarchal attitudes, and Belarus is no exception. The distinguished poet and historical novelist Volha Ipatava described the position vividly (I quote):

У краіну паэзію ўваходзіць жанчына
Ідзе па пякучых снягах басанож...

Post-Soviet literary criticism is generally far more sophisticated and better informed than in earlier decades, and it worth noting that two of the leading critics of today, Hanna Kiślicyna and Iryna Šaŭlakova, are women, although it must also be said that one of them was recently exposed to a disgracefully intemperate chauvinist attack on the pages of *Arche* (over – of all things – the meaning of postmodernism) by a talented (male) provincial poet who should have known better. It makes depressing reading. My new book (if I may use this lecture to advertise it) ends with a review of four outstanding young women poets, some of whose work is exceptionally outspoken and, at times, nihilistic. In other words, the position of women, in literature at least, appears to have changed radically since Ipatava wrote her memorable words over forty years ago.

Mentioning the recent verbal abuse from a wounded male ego reminds me that another sea change of recent decades has been the growth of a genuinely provincial, or at least non-metropolitan literature. No longer do all talented provincial writers migrate to the capital. To give a few examples, one of the most interesting novels of recent years came from the already mentioned Homiel writer, Siarhiej Bałachonaŭ, namely his *Imia hrušy* of 2005. In Połacak Aleś Arkuš and Vincent Mudroŭ continue to make a very distinctive contribution to Belarusian literature some distance from Miensk. From Horadnia comes the very talented poet Juraś Paciupa, to whom I have already indirectly referred. Also from Horadnia, Jury Humianiuk has made some claim to fame for his sexually and violently outrageous writings.

What Hanna Kiślicyna called the дэфларацыя of Belarusian literature did not, in fact, belong to Humianiuk, but to Adam Hlobus with his many, often jokey, pastiches of Boccaccio. Indeed, it was not about Humianiuk, but about another lover of epatage, Słavamir Adamovič, that Hlobus wrote: <калі такія людзі захопляць лідэрства ў нашай эратычнай літаратуры, нас чакае мрочная готыка>. I do not consider eroticism to be one of the whales on which Belarusian literature stands, but it is a new phenomenon of recent decades, practised mainly in the books of, in addition to Humianiuk and his ilk, middle-aged men, like Hlobus and Niaklajeŭ, and young women poets like Volha Hapiejeva and Valžyna Mort, to name but two.

Although some people would like Belarusian history to have begun in 1994, the real history of a country is a vital element in its national pride and self-awareness. The days of professional falsifiers of history like Łaŭrenci Abecedar-ski are long gone, and now has been a welcome collaboration between historians such as Hienadź Sahanovič and historical novelists led by Arłou; there is also a very interesting growth in historical writing by writers of all generations, from Volha Ipatava to Ludmiła Rubleŭskaja and Andrej Fiedarenka. The prose and verse of such talented writers not only popularizes Belarusian history and spreads information about the past, but also helps to put the country into a wider context of Europe and beyond. Another way of filling in the numerous gaps in the country's past is the resurrection of works that had been lost in the past through political repression. A small but good example is Todar Lebiada's poems, *Vyhnan'nia*, or the considerable quantity of Jewish writing, which forms the topic of one of the panels at our Congress. Major émigré writers like Natalla Arsieŭnieva and Majsiej Siadnioŭ entered for a brief but stimulating period into school programmes in Belarus, but before long – at around the time of the notorious Holding – they were withdrawn and resumed their status as traitors. The present-day teaching of literature in schools is lamentably limited, with many major writers, as well as the émigrés, deemed non-kosher and excluded from school and university syllabuses.

Poetry remains, as it always has been, the principal genre of Belarusian literature, and, if I were to continue with the idea of 'whales', I could mention Kupała, Kołas and Bahdanovič, the classical writers of nearly a century ago.

There is tremendous respect for them, reflected in new encyclopaedic and other complete editions of their work. It must be said, however that some have been better treated by the modern generation than others. The youngest generation of Belarusian writers seem to enjoy playing with the name of Kupała, a gentle example being Michaś Skobła's witty poem 'Janka Kupała ũ N'ju Jorku' in which the great poet encounters a Red Indian demonstration (I quote):

Даводзіцца чуж і паэту:
<Прэч з нашае дзедзіны, янкi>

Far cruder, though also inventive, is 'Saha pra Klimienkaŭ' by the already mentioned Jury Humianiuk, who calls Kupała 'kakupała', and refers to him and Kołas as 'JaK-1' and 'JaK-2'. Kupała's best-known poem, 'A chto tam idzie?', was not universally popular when it was written, and it has attracted disrespectful attention from some contemporary writers: Siarhiej Dubaviec in his bitter essay of 1993, 'Smerć kultury', finds that the poem's response 'ludźmi zvacca' diminishes Belarusian self-esteem, and that Kupała's influence has become negative rather than positive a century later. Ihar Łosik responds to the same iconic poem with the words, 'Lepš nie każy, chto my' and another young poet, Ihar Sidaruk, is cruelly direct in 'A chto tam nie jdzie (Nie Kupała)', listing many different nationalities, such as (I quote two lines):

<Курды, кітайцы, малайцы,
вузбекі, таджыкі, нанайцы>

ending with:

<нашы ўсе аднасельцы!>

Although Kupała might be turning in his grave, it is certainly the sign of a mature literature that the classics may be treated playfully as well as with love and respect.

Quantity is, of course, less important than quality, but I venture to mention that there are some 175 writers in my book (another advertisement). Of these, nearly all are still alive, and only a few of them lack real talent: I do not propose to name the latter now, and you may wonder why I included them. Nor shall I mention the writers who were omitted due to my ignorance. My point is that there are very many worthwhile poets, writers and dramatists active in Belarus

today. If in my enthusiasm I have given the impression that being a writer or poet in Belarus today is an easy or joyful occupation, then it is a false impression. One of the congress panels to which I have the honour of being attached is entitled 'Čaławiek u lusterku dehumanizavanaj litaratury', and, on a more elementary level, it is very striking how many writers and poets of all generations write about loneliness in their work. Indeed, there are well over a dozen works with the two main words for loneliness in their titles: adzinota and samota. In an article in Fr Nadson's Festschrift, I described loneliness as an ubiquitous topos in contemporary Belarusian literature.

To end on a brighter note, Belarusian literature has always been an interesting subject, but nowadays it is fascinating for its variety of genres, styles, themes and language. It is also highly encouraging on account of the large number of very promising young writers and poets – women and men alike – who overcome myriad difficulties to give creative expression to their thoughts and ideas. They are my third 'whale' and give great hope for the future of this unjustly neglected but very worthwhile literature.