

# Arnold McMillin

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## Politics and Criticism in the Work of Young Belarusian Poets

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ARNOLD McMILLIN  
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## POLITICS AND CRITICISM IN THE WORK OF YOUNG BELARUSIAN POETS

KEYWORDS: politics, criticism, Belarusian poetry, humour, laments, lies, national consciousness

ABSTRACT: Young poets at the beginning of the 21st century are often critical of their Leader and the physical and spiritual state of the country. The state of the language, a central part of the national heritage, features widely, sometimes with pathos at others with mordant humour, in this respect similarly to references to the leadership. Also important are official distortions of history, false media reporting and regrets at the present state of both the city and the country as a whole. As most of their books come out in small editions, they are probably considered harmless by the authorities, unlike the regular street demonstrations. Moreover, they provide something of a safety valve to release the widespread dismay felt by many of the nationally conscious intelligentsia.

Belarusian poets born in or after 1980 all began writing when the present regime had already established itself. Although they would not thank anyone for calling them ‘Lukashenka’s Children’, the two score poets from which those on which this article is based, represent some of the most inventive as well as angry writers in Belarus of the twenty-first century. Although it seems a quiet, relatively stable country, it is also widely known as the last dictatorship in Europe, and there is much to protest about: from the repression and neglect of the language to mendacious propaganda, restrictions on freedom of speech and, at one extreme, political demonstrations and prisoners, with many other topics in between. This aspect of young Belarusian poetry may be regarded as a safety valve in the absence of other means of debate and dissent.

After brief discussion of such topics as language and attitudes to the leadership, this review will turn to the falsity of the media, the struggle for democracy, official distortion of history, embarrassing relics of Soviet mentality and behaviour, and, finally, to laments on the state of the city (usually Miensk) and, indeed, the country as a whole.

Anguished comments on the state of the language date from the middle of the last century and earlier, but in a separate category is an enterprising poet, Ihar Kulikoŭ (b. 1988), whose linguistic interests extend to attempts to create his own language, especially in his second book, *Svamova*, where, for example, he

writes in the title poem: ‘зноём сваёмным таёмнай Свамовы’ (with its own sultriness of mystery) (Kulikoŭ 2013, 27). His debut book, *Pavarot na mora* (A turn to the sea, 2011), contains another bizarre, apparently anarchic piece, ‘Halosnych dni padličany. Ich šviet čakaja zhniba...’ (The days of vowels are numbered. Decay awaits their world) (Kulikoŭ 2011, 44). Many syntactical and orthographic errors are committed (at times deliberately) by several young writers, not to mention the work of an older poet and bard, Jaryla Pšaničny (b. 1973), who consciously uses *trasianka* (a mixture of Belarusian and Russian) in his verse (Pšaničny 2011). For more detail on various aspects of the Belarusian language see McMillin 2015.

Many mordantly humorous lines have been written about the Belarusian Leader, and particularly scornful lines on his inadequacy to lead a proud people belong to an interesting and bold poet, Siarhiej Koŭhan (b. 1984), who begins with passion and wit a poem of national assertion and lament, ‘Nie lajdak ty i nie trus. Ty svabodny Belarus...’ (You are not a lazybones and not a liar. You are a free Belarusian...):

Не лайдак ты і не хлус. Ты свабодны беларус.  
Каб далей жылося нам лепей, намай сябе на вус:  
Не растуць грыбы на плоце, хлеб не сеяць на балоце  
А дзяржавай кіраваць, не даярак прыціскаць.

(You are not a lazybones and not a liar. You are a free Belarusian. / For us to have a better life in future, bear this in mind: / Mushrooms do not grow on a fence, you do not sow corn on a marsh / And ruling a state is not the same as giving milkmaids a squeeze.) (Koŭhan 2002, 16)

Vitaŭ Ryžkoŭ (b. 1986) in ‘Rospač na prodadž’ (Despair for sale) writes:

Выспела роспач.  
У краіне адчаю,  
пераважна населенай беларусамі,  
Чалавек з вусамі шлёпае вуснамі,  
і слова яго –  
не дапамагае...

(Despair has matured. / In a land without hope, / mostly inhabited by Belarusians, / The moustached man talks and talks, / and what he says – does not help...) (Ryžkoŭ 2010, 45)

It may be noted that in Belarusian poetry moustaches can be associated with Stalin and Hitler, but it is clear here who the poet has in mind. Viktar Siamaška also implies a different kind of impotence in his heavily assonantal ludic poem with an untranslatable title, ‘Dyk’, of which this is the beginning:

дыктатар –  
 хакею аматар,  
 азадкаў лапар  
 дыктатар-кастрат –  
 дыктуе трактат  
 пра трактар

(dictator – / lover of ice hockey, / fondler of bums / the eunuch dictator / dictates a tract / about a tractor) (Siamaška 2013, 14).

Anatol Ivaščanka in ‘Kim być’ (Who to be) offers one of his alternatives in the second of three stanzas:

Хто скажа, што лепей цяперашным часам,  
 Дыктатарам быць або мёртвым паэтам.  
 Кім быць – дыктатарам ці падарасам.  
 Лепей, вядома ж, ня тым і ня гэтым.

(Who can say what is better at the present time, / To be a dictator or a dead poet / Who to be – dictator or pederast. / Of course it is better not to be either of them.) (Ivaščanka 2013, 80)

His strong and imaginative poem of alienation ‘Jany’ (They) has extensive epigraphs from two bold and important prose works of 2011, Natalka Babina’s *Rybin horad* (Down among the Fishes) and Viktor Marcinovič’s *Ściudziony vyraj*. (Freezing emigration). Ivaščyna’s poem, which will be mentioned again, begins with bitter humour:

Пакуль мы пісалі дапаможнікі  
 Па выжываньні ва ўмовах дыктатуры  
 І абаранялі дысертацыі  
 Па барацьбе з крывавым рэжымам,  
 Марылі нарадзіць прэзідэнта  
 (альбо — наадварот),  
 яны  
 проста  
 жылі.

(While we were writing guides / on surviving under the conditions of a dictatorship / And were defending dissertations / On the struggle with a blood-stained regime, / We dreamed of giving birth to a president (or vice versa), / they / simply / lived on.) (Ivaščanka 2013, 20)

Two years earlier Maryja Martysievič had expressed comparable ideas in a more whimsical poem, ‘Naradzi prezidenta’ (Give birth to a president), where she

advises Belarusian women to free themselves by giving birth to a new president who would change everything. The opening seems to be a clear reference to the boldly dramatic protest by poet Slavamir Adamovič (b. 1962) when he sewed up his own lips at a public meeting in 1997. Here is the first stanza:

Ты кажаш, голкай цэнзуры зашыты твой рот  
і ванітоўней, чым сёння, ужо не будзе.  
А па мне, усё ў тваіх руках, пакладзеных на жывот:  
Нарадзі прэзідэнта, якога хочаш, сабе і людзям.

(You say your mouth has been sewn up by the needle of censorship / and that it cannot be more sickening than it is today. / But in my opinion, everything is in your hands, placed on your stomach. / Give birth to a president, whatever kind you like, for yourself and the people.) (Martysievič 2011, 55)

Political repression, including the description of Belarus as a prison state, is the topic of several poems, and, perhaps, implied in many more. It may seem surprising to start with Та́ццяна Сівіец, who is mainly a romantic poet fond of classical forms: although she did appeal for a national saviour in ‘Dzie ty, Kastuś Kalinoŭski?’ (Where are you, Kastuś Kalinoŭski). Her poem ‘U palonie’ (In captivity), of which this is the first stanza, is very outspoken:

Мы жывём, бы схаваныя ценьямі кратаў,  
Вечна ў цемрадзі згубаў і лютасці катаў.  
Да бясконцай хлусні і пакутаў  
Мы здаўна кайданамі прыкуты.

(We live, as if hidden in the shadows of prison bars, / Always in the darkness of deaths and the wild cruelty of executioners. / To the endless lies and torments / We have long since being fastened with chains.) (Siviec 2003, 52)

Hanna Novik in ‘Atlantida’ (Atlantis) writes:

Тут кожны жыве апрыёры  
І ў сеціве тоне павольна  
Тут трызняць спакоем балотным,  
Тут кожны – і кат і ахвяра.

(Here everyone live a priori / And slowly drowns in the internet // Here they rave about the peace of bogs, / Here everyone is both executioner and victim.) (Novik 2010, 29)

Ўмітрок Ку́зьменка, in his poem ‘Skroź i zauždy belarus vinavaty...’ (The Belarusian is always thoroughly to blame...), writes of all the places where Belarusians have been imprisoned: in Poland, by the Russian NKVD, and under

Stalin, concluding simply yet memorably by wondering how one can be sent to a Belarusian prison for the sake of Belarus:

Толькі хто мог бы такое прадбачыць,  
Што давядзецца сядзець яму хутка  
За Беларусь у турме беларускай.

(But who could possibly foresee such a thing, / That he would himself soon end up / in a Belarusian prison for the sake of Belarus.) (Kuźmienka 2012, 91)

In another poem, ‘Nas dzialili zdaŭna...’ (We have long been divided...) this poet takes up the theme of nationally conscious Belarusians being regarded as *adščapiency* (renegades):

Адшчапенцы... Ну, так.  
Бо змаглі “адшчапіцца” адкрыта  
Ад дрымучага здзеку,  
Нахабнай казённай хлусні.  
Лепей быць адшчапенцам,  
Чым спаць халуём пры карыце  
І ніколі ў жыцці  
Нават сноў аб свабодзе не сніць.

(Renegades... Well, so be it. / For people could break off openly / From the ancient mockery, / Of brazen official lies. / It is better to be a renegade / Than to sleep like a lackey by the trough / And never in your life / Even dream of freedom.) (Kuźmienka 2012, 42)

Alienation and rejection is also the theme of Ivaščanka’s poem ‘Adrynuty(-ja)’ (The rejected) where he says that you, I and we are all rejected, observing that, ‘Цэлы народ замкнёны’ (The whole people is locked up) (Ivaščanka, 2013, 37).

The reference to lies by Siviec and Kuźmienka is clearly linked to the question of state propaganda. Ivaščanka in ‘Žančyna z škljanymi vačyma’ (The woman with glass eyes) personifies in such presenters the flow of misinformation from state television, as the following four lines show clearly:

Жанчынаў з шклянными вачыма  
становіцца болей штодня.  
Іх памнажае з айчынных  
тэлэканалаў хлусыня.

(Every day there are more and more / women with glass eyes. / They are increased by the lies / of the state TV channels.) (Ivaščanka 2013, 86–87)

Ryžkoŭ in his ‘čorna-biely vierš’ (a black and white poem) of 2009 emphasizes the power of propaganda, comparing it to any other weapon; the image of protest as war will be mentioned later. Here are the first four lines of Ryžkoŭ’s poem:

...тых, хто замахваўся на тыранаў ці аўтарытарных лідараў,  
далёка не ўсе – і справядліва – лічылі героямі,  
бо прапаганда зла не пакідае выбару,  
як і любая зброя.

(...those who struck out against tyrants or authoritarian leaders, / were not considered heroes by everyone – and quite right – / for the propaganda of evil leaves no choice, / like any other weapon.) (Ryžkoŭ 2010, 6)

The open struggle, to which Ryžkoŭ refers, may have had nothing to do with heroics as such, but it did produce a powerful little anthology of verse and prose reactions to a particularly crucial time in the ongoing political revolt, late April 2006, ‘Reportaž ž miesta padziejau: Vieršy j pieśni’ (Report from the place of action: Poems and songs, 2006); young contributors to this work included Siarhiej Prylucki, Ciemryk Vieliet and Dar’ja Lis (b. 1981). Before considering their poems, however, it is worth mentioning one or two verses outside the anthology, beginning with one by Ivaščanka with the title ‘Plošča’ (The square), in which he recalls peasant uprisings by suggesting taking pitchforks to the regime:

<Хлопцы, сьвяткуйма,  
Хутка рэжыму вілы!>

(‘Boys, let us celebrate, / Quickly take pitchforks to the regime!’) (Ivaščanka 2013, 34)

In Hanna Aučyńnikava’s poem ‘Aby nie bylo vajny’ (Only let there be no war), using as her title very familiar words in Belarus, so often fought over in the twentieth century, she suggests struggling slowly, despite the ‘crazy leaders on the throne’, inheritors of a trampled language. She ends her poem thus:

А будзь тыран, не будзе –  
Абы не было вайны...

(Whether there is a tyrant or not / Only let there be no war...) (Aučyńnikava 2011, 28).

The chorus of Siarhiej Kouhan’s ‘Himn paustancau’ (Hymn of the insurgents) is completely unambiguous:

Белая Русь, чырвоная кроў.  
 Мы ўздзімем над галовамі палотнішчы сцягоў.  
 Стары і малы ў адзінай чарадзе.  
 Старажытная пагоня наперад вядзе.

(White Ruś, red blood. / We shall raise above our heads the canvases of banners. /  
 Old and young in one procession. / The ancient Pahonia leads us from the front.)  
 (Koŭhan 2002, 20)

Returning to the 2006 anthology, Prylucki's passionate and vividly credible poem, 'Repartaż ź miesca padziejau' (Report from the place of action), consistently refers to the protests as a war, whose reporting by *them* is as distorted as the other media reports already mentioned (Prylucki 2006, 8–10). It seems to be one of the most impressive accounts of a recurrent national tragedy. Far more whimsically, Ciemryk Vieliet, a poet whose work often seems to reflect world-weariness and low self-esteem, in 'A praz turmy zimy prarastaje viasna...' (And spring will grow through the prisons of winter...) writes of a white flag bursting out with blood; he seems also to hope for a re-writing of the Belarusian borders to allow a return to the Lithuania of old (2006, 15). Dar'ja Lis, in her verse in the anthology, 'Kraina mankurtau' (Land of the mankurts), raises the familiar topic of the intelligentsia, surrounded by people who have lost their memory and historical awareness:

Мы быццам чужынцы  
 У краіне сваёй.

(We are like aliens / In our own country.) (Lis 2006, 33–34)

She also refers to her country's Leader as a curse that they have suffered for twelve years. Her title resonates with Kuźmienka in his 'Evaluicyja mankurctva, abo Čatyry razmovy z pramiežkami u hady' (The evolution of mankurtism, or Four conversations with gaps in the years), a bitter commentary on how Belarusians when told by their 'benefactor' to abandon their heritage – their land, fellow countrymen and forefathers – submissively agree to do so without question. At the end of the first three stanzas the 'chorus' is '– Добра, мой дабрадзею, я згодны' (Vey well, my benefactor, I agree), and the poem ends with a final command and utter submission:

Стань бяздумным рабом, бездакорным!  
 А ў адказ – безуважнае <Так>  
 І ківок галавою пакорны...

(Become an unthinking, irreproachable slave! // And in reply comes a silent "Yes" /  
 and a submissive nod of the head...) (Kuźmienka 2012, 76–77)



The image of *mankurty* also features in a short poem by Ivašćanka, of which the ending is only slightly ambiguous:

паўсюдна манкурты  
 твой розум прыкуты  
 трохкутнік пакуты  
 ў радок увапхнуты  
 ды келіх з атрутай  
 дасюль не крануты  
 вуснамі Юды.

(mankurts are everywhere / your mind has been chained / a triangle of suffering squeezed into a line // and the poisoned chalice has not yet been touched by Judas's lips.) (Ivašćanka 2006, 80)

Far from unrelated to the above poems is Aleś Baranoŭski's verse, 'Rodnaja mova', that begins with a weary comment on the re-writing of history, surely a part of the general oppression of 'nationalism' and those who try to retain their heritage. Here are the first two lines:

Пустазеллем парасла зямля.  
 Пішуць зноў гісторыю нанова...

(The ground is overgrown with weeds. / They are writing history over again...)  
 (Baranoŭski 2012, 34)

Distaste at the shaming and annoying still Sovietized behaviour of fellow-countrymen, brilliantly described in a story by Uladzimir Niaklajetu (Niaklajetu 2009, 190–246), as well as being found in the work of several young poets, is at one level obviously less crucial than the objects of protest mentioned above. It is also highlighted in the already mentioned poem by Ivašćanka 'Jany'. The opening lines of this poem were quoted earlier, as was the image of a war, though this time there is no winner, as the enemy does not know that there is a war on:

Не, яны не перамаглі,  
 і мы не прайгралі.  
 Нельга перамагчы,  
 ня ведаючы пра тое, што ідзе вайна.

(No, they did not win, / and we did not lose. / It is impossible to win, / not knowing that a war is in progress.) (Ivašćanka 2013, 21)

The excerpts quoted above from the work of the youngest generation of Belarusian poets evince a strong sense of despair, disillusion and, at the very least, dyspepsia. Laments at the state of the capital city should, however, be treated with caution, since poets around the world reject features of city life, and write primarily about the natural world. Ivaščanka calls Miensk a city of ‘cardboard cops’ (*kartonnnych mientau*) (Ivaščanka 2008, 44). In ‘Saniety da Frančeski’ (Sonnets to Francesca) Prylucki is, in this respect at least, typical, describing his capital as disgusting in comparison with bucolic heaven:

Глядзі, Франчэска, што за брыдкая сталіца:  
У параўнаньні араўнани з букалічным нашым раем,  
Дзе лес. Лілеі ў сажалках, прыгожы сад.

(Look, Francesca, what a revolting city it is: / Compared with our bucolic heaven, / Where there is a forest. Lilies in ponds, a beautiful garden.) (Prylucki 2008, 76)

Ryžkoŭ generally appears to be very critical of the West and its values, but he is equally bitter about the place where he lives, as we read, for instance, in ‘Bielaruś siamivokaja’ (Seven-eyed Belarus), the last stanza of which combines irony with a very striking image:

тут у горадзе *M* мне таксама радасна радасна  
але лёгка адчуць без любога сігналу трывогу  
у нас усё добра – мы ў атачэнні патрэбнага радыуса  
у самым смярдзючым цэнтры чагосьці жывога

(here in the city of *M* I am also so so joyful / but it is easy to hear alarm without any signal / here everything is fine – we are enclosed by a necessary radius / in the most stinking centre of something living) (Ryžkoŭ 2011, 54).

Laments about the state of the country are far more widespread, and a feeling of malaise and despair is found in the work of several poets, especially Ryžkoŭ, Vieliet, Ivaščanka, Kuźmienka and Prylucki. In one ludic poem ‘kraina sekand-chendu’ (a country of second hand) Ivaščanka describes Belarus as, amongst other things, a country of the security services (*зэбэшная краіна*) (Ivaščanka 2013, 28); the second-hand image was also used by russophone Svetlana Aleksievich in the same year (Aleksievich 2013), and her book was almost immediately translated into Belarusian (Alieksijevič, 2013). Vieliet declares that without the clever movement of his Bethlehem star he is like his accursed country, uninteresting and unable to see the path ahead (Vieliet 2007, 35), whilst Baranouski, asking where tears begin, suggests that his country is swaying in lament like a rowan tree (Baranoŭski 2012, 45). Finally, Prylucki, always forthright in his paeon to the 1990s, describes the place where he lives as

a borderland province of a country of the absurd (Prylucki 2008, 134), a land that evokes irony and fear (Prylucki 2008, 28), he considers the blind Belarusian Republic of the 1990s as suffering from an amnesia of nerves (Prylucki, 2008, 16), with, perhaps, the worst defect of all, loneliness:

Тут самота – паўсюдны галімы рэфрэн:  
ён гучыць у размовах, ліецца са сцен  
непаўторным айчынным дэфектам.

(Here loneliness is the ubiquitous miserable refrain: / it is heard in conversations and pours from the stage / as a unique defect of our native land.) (Prylucki 2008, 30)

Clearly in a country where free speech is discouraged and even dangerous, the work of young poets is important, and because their works are published in small print-runs (some as few as a hundred copies), they appear to be of little interest to the country's Leader, providing a channel for expressing criticism and political commentary unavailable elsewhere. In democratic countries, criticism of what goes on is expressed mainly through the theatre and cinema as well as the free press, although, of course, dismal pictures can also be presented in even the greatest poetry, such as T.S. Eliot's *The Wasteland* (1922), for instance.

Returning to Belarus, two books published in England in 2011 both end on notes of qualified optimism: Andrew Wilson suggests that 'the status quo is no longer an option' (Wilson 2011, 260), and Brian Bennett 'They [the Belarusians] deserve better' (Bennett 2011, ix). Whilst nobody could disagree with such sentiments, it must be hoped that the most talented young poets will continue to write and, apart from anything else, provide a safety valve for their long-suffering contemporaries.

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