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Uładimir Niaklajeu at the centre of Europe

Przegląd Wschodnioeuropejski 4, 331-349

2013

Artykuł został opracowany do udostępnienia w internecie przez Muzeum Historii Polski w ramach prac podejmowanych na rzecz zapewnienia otwartego, powszechnego i trwałego dostępu do polskiego dorobku naukowego i kulturalnego. Artykuł jest umieszczony w kolekcji cyfrowej bazhum.muzhp.pl, gromadzącej zawartość polskich czasopism humanistycznych i społecznych.

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UŁADIMIR NIAKLAJEU AT THE CENTRE OF EUROPE

Як добра, усё,
што мы памрэм
прад тым, як жыць далей
Uładzimir Niaklajeu, ‘Emihranty’¹

One of the most protean of contemporary Belarusian authors, Uładzimir Niaklajeu has gained fame or notoriety as poet, politician and prose writer.² The centre of Europe of the title is that of a book of stories and novellas dating from 1980 to 2009 (*Centr Jeuropy*, 2009). With little of the heady mix of philosophy, pornography and politics in his anonymously published *ramančyk Labuch* (Jobbing Musician, 2002–03), the collection is nevertheless recognizably from the same creative imagination, and represents the achievement of a highly talented and inventive prose writer from the period during part of which he was in exile.

Several writers have turned from poetry to prose, most notably Aleksandr Pushkin,³ and in Belarus the change in the other direction is also to be seen in, for example, the writing of Uładzimir Arłou. Some manage to write in both verse and prose throughout their careers. It was, however, with a heavy heart that the author of these lines received Niaklajeu’s 2004 poetic collection with an inscription offering ‘мога быць апошнюю кнігу паэзіі, бо падпірае ўзрост прозы’.⁴ This collection and its predecessor, *Proščca*, had shown the poet at the height of his powers, and prose, though not completely unknown to him,⁵ seemed an uncertain future. His sensational anonymous ‘little novel’, however,

¹ Uładzimir Niaklajeu, *Tak*, Minsk, 2004 (hereafter *Tak*), p. 13. These sentiments seem curiously ironic in view of the poet’s own life choice or fate: the latter distinction is discussed in one of Niaklajeu’s best stories, ‘Viartaŋnie Viery’ (see below).

² Shortly before going to press, it was learned that Niaklajeu was being proposed for the Nobel prize for literature.

³ Amongst young Belarusian writers may be mentioned Alhierd Bacharevič.

⁴ Communication dated 12 October 2004.

⁵ ‘Vieža’ (1986–88), a witty satire that features in *Centr Jeuropy*, for instance.

showed a vivid imagination and fluent style and it will be briefly considered in due course, whilst *Centr Jeuropy* (2009) reveals great versatility in style, lexicon and subject matter, and it is to this collection that most of what follows is devoted. Amongst recurrent themes are cruelty and violence, mockery, humiliation and embarrassment, politics, religion and belief, death, corruption, heavy drinking, and national identities, the latter often deliberately presented as crude stereotypes. The manner of treating these themes include: masterful dialogue, internal monologue, and skaz, mordant humour, parody, ubiquitous irony, numerous digressions in some stories as well as great concision in others, the combination of reality with fantasy and magic realism, and egregious repetition of phrases and descriptions. His narrator's attitude to and treatment of women seems at times both casual and harsh. Indeed, Niaklajeu's stories are notably free from any moralising or preaching, and even in the most serious of them, he leaves his readers to draw their own conclusions. His linguistic invention is prodigious and, last, but far from least, is the almost Dickensian profusion of characters, many of whom possess humorously absurd names. Absurdity is, indeed, one of the main elements in a number of the stories collected here.

The first story in *Centr Jeuropy* is 'Bomba' (1999). Niaklajeu clearly feels a strong association with the War and has written several poems, not least 'Daroha daroh' (1978), on that theme. Indeed, in another verse, 'Ja naradziusia u sorak šostym' (1973), he declared that the events just before his birth defined his life. There is an extensive post-war tradition in Belarusian poetry and prose of writing about the war and the post-war period, but 'Bomba' diverges notably from most other stories and poems on the subject of the tragic inheritance of war: at one, more characteristic, end, the tragedy of unexploded bombs as a threat to children and young people, as, for instance, in Halina Bahdanava's early story 'Pinča' and, at the other end of the spectrum, the semi-humorous treatment of the theme in Usievaład Haračka's celebrated 'proletarian song' 'Dziedava naha'. In contrast, Niaklajeu's 'Bomba', written in Warsaw, contains a bomb that does not explode but is the cause for recalling a grimly miserable life. Several generations are mentioned in as many pages, a concision that is found in some but far from all of the stories, beginning with humiliation (a frequent theme in Niaklajeu's prose) of a child Maryk, and the later repetition of similar cruelty by his daughter on her child. Maryk's wife is filled with sweetness, if not joy, when her husband is taken to a drying-out station: 'і ў яе цяпер такое ж гора, як і ва ўсіх астатніх баб' (*Centr Jeuropy*, 19).⁶ The narrator's dispassionateness is epitomized by his description in a single sentence of Maryk's son-in-law's death in Afghanistan: 'Калі зяця забілі, дачка

⁶ All future references will be by page to this collection, unless indicated otherwise.

павесілася' (19). At the end of this bleak story the eponymous bomb is rolled under a corner cupboard that is too heavy to move (20).

The next story, 'Teraryst' (2006), written several years later, likewise contains many layers of irony. It also features a bomb, albeit an imitation one, and some very real humiliation, notably by the tyrannical director of a technical college who addresses her colleague with the words 'Вы, Сырко, па-мойму, дурань', a phrase that is repeated aloud and silently throughout. Syrko's revenge is to leave a fake bomb in her office, thus gaining power, as she fears losing the good name of her organization rather than being blown up. He is finally persuaded to take the device to a distant park where, three months later, a student from the college is raped by security forces and then, so it was rumoured, blown up by a bomb to hide their traces. Taken to court as a terrorist, Syrko takes sweet revenge by re-using a version of the original phrase on the director herself, and escapes the false charges.

One of Niaklajeu's most concise stories, 'Chajbach' (1998–2001) takes its name from the Chechen equivalent of Chatyń, that is, the burning of women and children, and rewarding those who did it. It begins with what seems like an absurdist, almost post-modern fantasy: 'Сёння дзень серада. Заўтра, ці ўчора быў чацвер – і ў чацвер мяне забілі' (101), but quickly turns into a tale of war: one in Afghanistan and three in Chechnia, with a great deal of cruelty, mutilation and violence on both sides. One small example will suffice: 'Капітана ўскінулі на стол, адрэзалі вушы, нос, губы, выразалі язык, выкалалі вочы, адсеклі ў кісях рукі і ў шчыкалатках ногі, рэзанулі ўрэшце паміж ног і адкацілі, як абрубак, да сцяны' (111). After many such atrocities, the end is almost throwaway, with an argument about whether the river is too poisoned for fishing, ending thus: 'Яны заспрачаліся, але я ўжо не слухаў. Калі ты нарэшце мёртвы, табе ўсё адно, ці ёсць рыба ў рэках' (112).

A novella from roughly the same time, 'Miron dy Miron' (1993–2001), is Niaklajeu's other book about, amongst other things, wartime, but very far from 'Chajbach' in most respects. Andrej Fiedarenka, who wrote an introduction to this collection, describes the work as 'відавочна аўтабіяграфічная і жорсткая ў сваёй праўдзе' (10) and it is one of Niaklajeu's comparatively few works with a rural rather than urban setting. The epigraph is taken from Kant's observations about children being able to teach themselves to write, and begins with a description of the early wartime life of young Miron (the other Miron is his father)⁷ up to the death of Stalin. Mostly written in the author's words, it makes increasing use of thought reporting (see, for instance, 326), and extremely

⁷ This simple example of play with names and identity is matched by Albin and Albina, on which the author specifically comments early in the same novella (312–13), although far more outrageous names in some other works appear to be purely for the reader's entertainment, as well as serious examinations of identity.

convincing attempts to understand childhood feelings. After the death of his parents, Miron is left on his own, a receptacle of memories, some from observation and others of events told him by people who thought he would never recall them. There is, indeed, much to remember in the plot of this expansive story, including wartime and hardly less appalling post-war events, including parental abnegation of the boy's half-sister, Jefrasin'nia (known as Chruška), cruel repression by the security forces, and suspected and real murder. Also prominent is a seemingly casual attitude towards women: from their role as trophies of war to rape, bigamy, deception, corruption and fierce jealousy. No less central are questions of religion and paganism.⁸ Dreams in this novella include one of the boy's father obtaining a Christmas tree from under the Kremlin walls, and of Stalin decorating it with lots of toys (all the people who had been mentioned in the story) that drop off on the way home, so that his father arrives home with a bare tree (344–45). Such fantastic dreams and thought reporting reflect the events of the narrative and the political background at one remove, and present varied and all too convincing pictures of life at the time, both at close hand and with a broader historical sweep, making this story remarkably memorable.

Deliberate play with names and identity figures largely in 'Muziej Brouki, albo Za ščaste vypič z Šulmanam!' (2008), a playfully humorous tale with several episodes of *skaz* writing; it also features heavy drinking, like several other of Niaklajeu's stories. Siarhiey Ryhoravič Zasievič has been given some good Armenian cognac by his colleague Brouka (not the poet Piatruš Brouka whose museum is nearby). He invites his neighbour Askar Barysavič Šulman to share the bottle, hoping he may be an Armenian. As they drink, they become increasingly agitated about each other's nationality and background. After discussing in details various other names, Askar, who works at the Philharmonia, is struck that his host has the same name (though not, of course, patronymic) as Prokof'ev, and this leads to a (factually accurate) speech on the composer's life. After he has gone, Zasievič become obsessed with whether Piatruš Brouka ever shared a bottle with his contemporary Erenburg, and rings up the museum of the title, receiving another little lecture.

Written in the same year, 'Zaľataja arda' also treats national (in this case Tatar) features, but its most striking element is the use of magic, if not exactly magic realism. It is essentially a fantasy about death (often treated humorously by Niaklajeu), self-identification and the friendship of the narrator Mar'jan with Mahamed, who seems to want to visit Batyj and the Golden Horde. Mar'jan sees a parachutist at his window who appears to pass a letter through the glass;

⁸ Sent by the authorities to fight against religion, Miron's father finds himself accused of 'an anarchistic struggle with God' (330), amongst other charges.

its red letters apparently ask him to follow what he wants: ‘ІДЗІ ЗА ІМ І ПРЫЙДЗЕШ ДА ТАГО І ТУДЫ, ДЗЕ І З КІМ ЗАЎСЁДЫ ХАЦЕЎ БЫЦЬ’ (56). He is, however, nervous when invited to step out of the window, as he recalls, in a digression, how he was hung high over the Nioman by gangsters whom he had crossed in their shady dealings. As always, Niaklajeu shows great regard for detail as well as humour in describing Mahamied’s aspirations to join the Golden Horde. The narrator has met Tatars in the army and is quickly exasperated: ‘Вось і зразумей татарскую натуру... У Залатую Арду ён хоча...’ (67), ending the story with pithy scorn: ‘от, морда татарская’ (68).

Mystification also figures in ‘Fancik’ (2004), this time in a tale of gangsters and violence. The eponymous forfeit refers to a drunken game where Kim the gangster husband of a simple woman, Tamara, is killed in a form of Russian roulette. In this story the gangsters’ molls are even more corrupt and worldly than their husbands. When Tamara tries to escape, she is dragged back and the Georgian who owns the building has his testicles cut off for letting her get away. She is visited by a mysterious old woman in a white cape who had apparently lived in the apartment previously, and who claims to be able to visit the cosmos. Amongst the many mystifications is how Tamara’s older sister bullied her way into obtaining the old woman’s telephone number. At the end of the story Tamara waves her cape at the sky and imagines she sees the old woman waving back, which leads her to conclude in a typically downbeat comment: ‘Яна, мусіць, пакуль у космас не паляцела, мела два капялюшкі’ (83).

Farcical rather than mysterious is ‘Juzyk’, a humorous story with much repetition that involves, among other things, what seems to the other characters a comic name, contrast between Polish ambition and Belarusian lack of it, and some comic and grotesquely macabre events at a wake. This story is more zany than most, and derives its humour most obviously from repetition.

Other stories that treat death humorously include ‘Adludak’ (2007), ‘Смок’ (2009) and ‘Za ścianoj’ (1980), the latter one of the few tales with a rural setting. ‘Adludak’ is a completely unromantic story about a dying man, Ničypar, and his visitors, but although it contains elements of rivalry in love, sexual jealousy, philosophy, cruelty and, particularly, loneliness, it is also somewhat comic in its picture of village characters and their primitive greed, beliefs and memories. The old man’s weekly visitor Antanina has little patience with his weakness, but chooses to entertain him with various mottos and maxims, such as, at the beginning of the story: ‘Людзі любяць тых, хто любіць іх’ (124), to which he attempts to reply before she is gone again. Here the humour arises from simple characters in a sad situation.

Death is treated humorously in ‘Смок’, a fantastic story also characterized by repetition. It begins with the burial of Cimoch Niłavič Maciej (since

childhood given the inappropriate nickname of *Смок*),⁹ whose body farcically slips out of the coffin as it is being lowered into the ground. Under a hedge in rain and snow the ‘corpse’ (who is thought to have lived for fifty years), awakes and startles a neighbour’s daughter who, having seen many films, takes him for a ghost. He invites her to a café where, as it happens, the wake is being held. There he meets and chats with various women, one of whom, recently widowed, rejects his approaches: ‘але тая ўперлася ў бок ягоны локцем: маўляў, памёр, дык не лезь’ (29). Having rested and realized that he had another ten years until his pension, *Смок* goes back to work.

The third story treating death with humour is ‘*Za ścianoj*’, which begins with a quarrel about a crying baby through the wall before the narrator receives an anonymous call that his granny has died. He goes to her village, *Karuny*, where, not only do at least half the inhabitants have the same name, *Karunski/skaja*, but the old woman, as his granddad tells him with many complaints, is still very much alive. She has a characteristic phrase, which has been taken up in gentle mockery by all the villagers: ‘А што ж я цяпер рабіць буду?’ (37ff). *Niaklajeu* is never loath to pause in a narrative for a diversion or, at least a description of extra characters, and this story is enlivened by a young woman who attaches herself to him and by the foul-mouthed harridan in the shop where she works. The dominating tradition of Belarusian village prose, of which this writer is not usually considered a part, is enriched by this comic and vulgar story, which, for all its characteristic features (repetition, for instance), also shows, like ‘*Miron dy Miron*’ a keen understanding of rural life.

In general the novellas contain more political satire than the stories in *Centr Jeuropy*, but one particular story, written in Finland, is extremely provocative in many of its openly critical comments on the situation in Belarus and the behaviour of its authoritarian leadership. The title is improbable for such a work, ‘*Kot Kłaudzii Lvouny (Myšynaja historyja, 2000)*, although *Uładzimir Arłou* was also to use a mouse in his satire, *Orden Bielaj Myšy (2001)*. *Kłaudzija*, a former dancer of great beauty is going to marry *Staś*, a disloyal acolyte of the Leader, but a friend asks her to look after her cat and suggests, absurdly, that she marry the cat instead. With *Staś*, she and the cat go to a party at the Leader’s residence in honour of the Holiday on the Routine Change of the Constitution. The President, incidentally, is known as *KDB* (the Belarusian equivalent of the *KGB*) standing for *Kiraunik Džiaržavy Bielaruś* (Leader of the State of Belarus), and *Kłaudzija*’s father *Leu Mironavič* leads a band of so-called ‘partisans’ who frequently attempt to assassinate the Leader, who for his part uses doubles to escape such attacks. When *Kłaudzija* is asked why she has a cat for a husband,

⁹ *Смок* (literally a folk monster, but also an onomatopoeic smacking of lips) is a recurrent word in *Niaklajeu*’s writing.

her father is quick to say that the members of the President's parliament themselves are jackals, swine and rats with their mice (86). Moreover, when the Leader makes a pronouncement, he means the opposite of what he says: 'калі ён кажа пра дабрабыт, дык чакай галечы. А наколькі пра галечу ён не кажа, дык дабрабыту не чакай' (88). Deciding to make a present of her cat, Kłaudzija finds the guards doubtful about letting it in; as one of them says: 'Не наш нейкі, хоць і надта на некага з нашых падобны...' (91). Leu Mironavič is dismayed that all his achievements in ruining the country will be rewarded: 'А што рабіць застаецца? ... Я і рэкі з азёрамі асушыў, і старыя вуліцы з храмамі рушыў, і мову родную карчаваў, а пра мяне ў школах расказваюць, які я легендарны герой і сын свайго народа. Ды яшчэ помнік мне ставіць збіраюцца!.. Колькі ж такое трываць можна?' (92). Next Kłaudzija wins the Leader as a prize, but he disappears in a puff of smoke, leading one of his generals to wonder: 'Ці кінем гэтую цыганіну з двайнікамі і сапраўдныя выбары прызначым?' (96). The cat becomes the new leader, but his tail is something of an obstacle, although it becomes the new national emblem. The constitution is rewritten (yet again), and the story ends bathetically with a suggestion that a hole can be cut in the back of the cat's trousers: 'А дух выпускаць дык нават лацвей будзе...' (100).

* * *

Quite different from the other stories and novellas in this book is a parable written forty days after the death in 2003 of Vasil Bykau, Belarus's greatest writer of the second half of the twentieth century: 'Їміелі і вандрунік: Прыпавіеў на саракавіны Васіла Быкава'. Niaklajeu's parable raises questions of belief and unbelief, death and immortality, but in some respects is more obscure than the parables of Bykau himself. Clearly, both he and the dedicatee of this work are, in a sense, wanderers, and the bee is very much a symbol for Belarusians, appearing as it does in the engravings of Francisk Skaryna. The overall idea, however, is clear enough: the handing over of the cultural baton from a dying writer to a younger generation who must rise to the challenge.

* * *

Most of Niaklajeu's novellas, including 'Miron dy Miron' which has already been discussed, were written while he was in Finland. The only exception is the first one. 'Vieža' (1986-88), a bold satire for its time, is set in the same village as 'Смок', famed for remarkable events such as a well in the 19th century driven right through to the Pacific Ocean, causing a flood that could only be escaped in a three-tier boat. In this novella one of the villagers, Jutka Kazubouski, builds a tower high into the sky in order to lie on top and

enjoy the fresh air. His fantastic project attracts worldwide attention, including that of a billionaire American Frank Morgan whose rich clan had been founded by Kiryła Morhauka from the neighbouring village of Stryptuny, a place famous for the number of fools (*johupy*) it produces (156). ‘Vieža’ presents a highly comic socio-linguistic clash of cultures, centring on the return of the American who rouses all the prejudices and ignorance that were so fostered in the Soviet Union, and which are embodied in Andron, the collective farm chairman, whose wife not only failed to give him child but has run off with a Saudi prince. Andron’s unimpeachably loyal life is made even worse by the fact that the tower earns many times more than his farm. Accustomed to summon all his underlings for reports at midday, he is not impressed when one of them, Romka, announces that his visitor needs to speak to the American President at this time on a direct line:

– Прэзідэнт пачакае, – цвёрда заявіў Андрон. – У крайнім выпадку, калі размова важная, містэр Морган можа перагаварыць з прэзідэнтам з майго кабінэта.

Ромка зірнуў, скасіўшы вочы, на дапатопны Андронаў тэлефон з рычажком-відэльцам і разрагатаўся. (167)

The novella ends on a characteristically banal note, with the tower’s creator sleeping on top of it, and being kept warm by the new moon: ‘Нават прыпякала са спіны’ (189).

* * *

The three remaining novellas, ‘Niachaj žyvie 1 Maja!’ (2001), ‘Praha’ (2000-01) and ‘Viatańnie Viery’ (2004-08) were all written during Niaklajeu’s years in Scandinavia, like, indeed, *Łabuch*. Throughout his career he reflected numerous foreign sojourns in verse and prose, creating impressionistic pictures of the places he had stayed in. Particularly striking are the immensely imaginative, even fantastic, descriptions of India, Poland and Finland in three outstanding narrative poems: ‘Indyja’ from *Prošča* (1994), and ‘Pałanez’ and ‘Łożak dla pčaly’ from *Tak* (2004).¹⁰ All of the novellas include assessments of the way of life and the people of Finland, Europe and, particularly, Belarus itself, and contain some spirited assessments of the reality of the Belarusian language, history and tradition, usually in connection with the highly sceptical remarks of the narrator’s interlocutors, especially in ‘Łożak dla pčaly’.¹¹ They

¹⁰ For more information on Niaklajeu’s late poetry see Arnold McMillin, ‘Poetry, Prose, Pornography and Politics: The Eventful Life and Recent Verse of Uładzimir Niaklajeu’, *Przegľad Wschodnioeuropejski*, 3, 2012, 327–45.

¹¹ Uładzimir Niaklajeu, *Tak*, Minsk, 1994, pp. 220–21.

all contain lively, sometimes discursive plots, elements of fantasy or magic, a variety of narrative devices, and a multitude of credible, yet often comically parodic, conversations, as did 'Vieža' before them, with the addition of much additional emphasis on corruption and criminality, heavy drinking, and political stupidity and venality.

* * *

'Niachaj žyvie 1 Maja!' centres on two middle-aged Belarusian engineers from the concrete industry desolately wandering the streets of Helsinki. The plump Vadim Albiertavič and the taller Aleh Michajlavič (hereafter VA and AM, respectively), discuss various existential questions including the nature of Jewishness (191–92), before they suddenly come across what seems to be a rather feeble parade by Finnish anarchists, which turns their thoughts to Soviet parades and how to drink during them undetected. They also reflect on the different fates of Finland and Belarus at the hands of Russian imperialism (198); during satirical thoughts about presidents they meet the remarkably unassuming (female) Finnish holder of this office, who reminds VA of his actress wife. Next they meet the only person they know in Finland, 'crazy Pekka' who once saved VA from being crushed in a crowd of students. They regard themselves as simple folk and Pekka as 'a simple antysavietčyk' (having spent six years in Moscow) (214). The three retire to a sauna to drink and discuss Marxism, but AM contrives to put spirits on the embers and burns the place down.

Attempting to find a bus home, they arrive at a restaurant where a drunk, having been expelled, lowers his trousers, causing the friends to compare political speeches to acts of excretion (220–221), not one of the more extreme comparisons in Niaklajeu's prose. Pekka's friends include an Uzbek, Timur, who, addressing VA and AM as 'сокалы Лукашэнка', is looking for someone to kill; the Belarusians make a predictable suggestion (224). They next run into an ice-hockey-playing acquaintance of AV, Hleb (nicknamed Klej),¹² whose views are even more primitive than those of his countrymen, lamenting that Stalin did not finish off Finland during the war (231–32); VA, for his part, finds Finland just like Belarus, only a hundred times better (233). Hleb is rich and has a skinhead assistant who, like him, feels himself a Soviet; he associates himself with Robert Rozhdestvenskii's line: 'По национальности я советский' (235), and VA and AM concur. Being Belarusian seems unimportant to them as they drunkenly sing Soviet songs, As they are about to leave for home with Hleb, he suddenly decides he wants to see the 1st of May demonstration 'на часова захопленай ворагамі тэрыторыі' (239). They improvise banners from

¹² Ice-hockey is particularly associated with the Belarusian president, and he is, indeed, praised by Hleb (234).

commandeered bras and knickers and join in again, but their families in Belarus seeing them on TV take fright, thinking they are waving the forbidden red-white-red flag (245–46).

* * *

‘Paha’, which in places reads like a film script, was originally published in *Poľymia*. Unlike the novellas that precede and follow, it is mainly set in Belarus, although the title denotes not only the Belarusian word for thirst but also the capital of the Czech Republic. It begins with the main (anti-) hero Andrej Bryzin waking after a prolonged drinking bout during which he has lost both his money and passport, preventing a planned visit to Prague, and giving him a fierce thirst. In the opening pages we meet several of the main characters, beginning with his beloved daughter Maša (who later turns out to be not his, but that of his former friend Artur Sinicyn – a characteristic example of confused identity in Niaklajeu’s prose). She is, incidentally, the only character with a normal name, for Bryzin’s wife (who has left him) was called Taisija Arčybaldaua, daughter of Arčybald Inakienčevič, and the barmaid’s name is Kapitalina, though she is usually known as Lizavieta, whilst a doctor (who is a remote relative of Kapitalina) is called Samson Samsonavič. Sinicyn himself dwells on this topic, feeling that his own given name and surname do not go at all well together (252). Like ‘Niachaj žyvie 1 Maja!’, ‘Paha’ is a roller coaster of a romp in terms of subject matter but here Niaklajeu also gives full rein to his fascination with unusual names, and is freer with thinly disguised swear words. Bryzin seeks to clear his befuddled head by sex with a loose woman, Nina Cimiškina who prefers to be known by the quintessentially Soviet name of Ninel. He then spies Maša who, instead of attending college, is talking to a *muryn* (young Negro or Arab). An argument ensues and the question of lying, not infrequent in Niaklajeu’s work, is hotly debated.¹³ She blames Bryzin for the duplicity of his generation in the Soviet period, which, as it seems to her, could not have been worse than the present (261–62). A detailed description of a drinking session at Kapitalina’s beer hall ensues, with exchanges of various sexual rumours and intrigues, and a series of toasts, including, interestingly, one linking poets and whores through their deep, rasping voices (271). Other conversational topics include poor eyesight, and the power of a mother’s curse, as well as, again, truth and lies. One apparently discrete episode is a trip to Sochi where Bryzin’s unexpected heroism in a struggle with masked criminals cements his relationship with the seventeen-year-old Maša (276–78). Such sections emphasize the similarity to a film script.

¹³ The political party that Niaklajeu led, with disastrous results, in the 2010 elections was called ‘Skaży praudu’ (Tell the Truth).

Back in Miensk, Sinicyn crashes his car into Bryzin's garage, revealing a stash of stolen cognac, which leads to a highly entertaining picture of police corruption, personified by Major Jarochin: '...і брат мой мент, і бацька, і ўсе мы менты' (279-81). Soon Bryzin rushes to hospital where Masa has been taken after somehow being injured by Sinicyn. There follows another digressions on Samson Samsonavič's magnificent flat, with a reminiscence of medical work during the conflict in Angola. Drinking resumes. In a bedroom Bryzin discovers several life-size rubber dolls as well as condoms and a syringe (289-90), such objects remind him of visiting a general and his daughter, and of an unwanted baby being put down a rubbish chute. A further digression is of a peasant who decides against killing himself. All this violent quasi-phantasmagoria is increased by a drugged cigarette, which leads Bryzin to imagine his daughter undressing him and kissing him 'дзе нельга' (294), making him think of the Oedipus story.

In reality, Maša has died and Bryzin, ever insecure, attempts to make sense of the messages on her phone. In the final episode the former friends, Bryzin and Sinicyn, play dangerous games driving over a railway crossing. Amongst the abuse and threats, Sinicyn claims to be the father of Maša and produces a letter to prove it (as they are racing downhill towards the crossing), Bryzin jumps out with the letter (which is from Maša to Sinicyn saying she has chosen a different and better father than him). The car with its driver goes into a shallow lake, and Bryzin, in a bathetic ending, sits under a tree and weeps unheard, whilst any witness might think he was resting from pruning the apple tree, only surprised that he had chosen summer to do it (310).

* * *

Andrej Fiedarenka links the last part of the novella 'Viartaŭnie Viery' to *Labuch*, also suggesting that as a complex, philosophical work it is not accessible to 'mediocre intellects' (10).¹⁴ Certainly, the structure is more ambitious than the usual linear narration of Niaklajeu's prose works, for all their interspersions with digressions. Also, the verbatim repetition in passages that was so characteristic of some of the stories, has here a more rational explanation, for the novella has multiple narrators of the same events, although each narrator also tells the reader about their backgrounds: first Pavał, then Nataša, Ražon and Šviatasłau, ending with a section 'Dźvie Viery', which is narrated mainly by the first, Belarusian, Viera rather than her Swedish persona. The first two sections of the work, however, are on the wedding of Crown Prince Frederik of Denmark

¹⁴ Such a categorical assertion recalls for the present writer an article by Aleh Łojka in which he suggested that only Belarusians can fully understand and appreciate the poetry of Baradulin: 'Pra Baradulina – biez cytatau...', *Rodnaje slova*, 2000, 2, pp. 14-19.

and Mary, and on the wedding of Spanish Prince Felipe to Donna Leticia, with much emphasis on the costs of these events, and a note that Leticia's 31-year-old sister was found dead in Madrid, having apparently taken strong medicines. These two events also figure later in the novella. The work as a whole is particularly rich in humorous observations on foreign countries and manners and on Belarus and its national identity.

The first narrator, Pavał, walking down a street in Malmö meets a stranger who seems to shoot him in the forehead. Provoked to wonder who he and the people around him are, he cannot believe that such things happen in peaceful Sweden. On the ferry to this city he had visited the casino, attempting by bluff to place a huge stake and confusing the croupier, who is trained to a different logic, by asking if there is a limit on losing as well as winning (351). His dominant feeling is one of alienation, particularly when he finds two identical casinos and bars, but with different names and on different decks, and he enjoys reflecting on the difference between the various Scandinavian countries, although to him they are miniscule. He gets on well, however, with the director of the casinos, Arvid, who introduces him to Nataša, a prostitute, before he meets the man who had earlier seemed to want to shoot him. He also meets a Chechen who needs an extra \$100,000 for the liberation struggle, and is disappointed at Pavał's lack of money. Talking to Nataša about his background, Pavał discovers that she does not distinguish between Belarusians and Czechs. There is a digression on his own father and non-nationalist origins, before an evening of drunken singing and a night with Nataša. Settling in the Hilton and waiting for his new girlfriend, he is approached by the stranger who first met him and, not merely the situation is reprised, but also whole phrases are repeated verbatim.

The novella's next section is narrated by Nataša, with much deliberate repetition. Europe, like Hamlet, seems to be gradually growing crazy (361). Her background is described including the caste system of prostitutes and how she emigrated when Putin took over from El'tsin. Having tried to seduce a youth who then committed suicide, she had travelled to Finland as a 'lady' with a Russian entrepreneur who was attempting to sell wood to the Finns. Not quite so absurdly, however, the hollowed-out trunks are full of narcotics and other goods, leading to jail for Nataša as a 'manager'. She eventually gets out, thanks to an equally unpleasant Finnish businessman, but then meets a mafioso Ražon, who bullies her into more smuggling. We learn many sordid details of criminal life, but Nataša finds Belarusians to be like Swedes (in their easy morality). Such generalizations about nationalities are ubiquitous in this work. She naively tries to escape Ražon by alerting him to Pavał, and they try to kill each other, while the population at large is watching a magnificent royal wedding on the television. Hoping that she might live with Pavał, she is too late because Ražon shoots him first. There is much repetition of phrases and descriptions here,

including specifics of place (such as the ultra-modern hotel lift), guns, national characteristics and a great deal else.

Ražon, the next narrator, was brought up near a city in an agricultural settlement, where the main entertainment was fighting with the urban dwellers. His memories of childhood include seeing an army returnee cutting off a cock's head in one blow with the side of his hand, a spectacularly cruel deed that he hopes to emulate (370). Working for the *spetsnaz*,¹⁵ he likes the violence but not the pay, so hires himself to a 'New Russian' (in fact, an old communist party functionary), one of those who set about cynically dividing up the country's wealth, allowing Niaklajeu to present a humorous view of recent history. Ražon is asked to form a fighting 'liquidation' group to defend his master's interests, apparently successfully, since there are queues for graves. The functionary's wife runs a brothel, and when there is an attack on her husband, Ražon assembles all the prostitutes and cuts off the head of one of them, describing the incident in the same terms as for the earlier incident of the cock. Such physical and mental cruelty is not rare in Niaklajeu's prose, but here it is validated by the nature of the narrator. The enemy turn out to be led by a powerful KDB man, and, the functionary's son, having asked for a pistol to kill off his father does away with himself instead: 'А хлапчук вярoўкай абышоўся...' (373), as Ražon notes dispassionately. The functionary goes to Moscow looking for revenge, and Ražon flees to Stockholm where he cynically tries to set up a business. The authorities order him to get rid of the Swede at the centre of the wood import scam, whereupon he reflects upon the dangers of the (inconvenient for Slavs) law-abiding nature of the Scandinavians and Germans. There follows an ironic description of a Swedish court that is much exercised over the case of a poisoned cat. The view from the top of the Hilton is described again:

Адкуль, як парц'е сказаў, ці не ўся Еўропа відаць. Ці ўся
Данія. Альбо, ва ўсялікім разе, Капенгаген. З якога швед наркату вазіў... (375)

In the restaurant a small man crouching like an animal appears at the next table and, when challenged by a waiter, gives the number of his room as Ražon's. A Belarusian from Vaukavysk, he is fighting to prevent Russia from occupying Belarus, saying that if only Belarus had had Shakespeare, they would have had their history (377). Called *Sviatasłau*, he stammers, so Ražon calls him *Babyb*. Having picketed against naming a street after Suvorov and consequently arrested, he tries to gain political asylum in Sweden, but is threatened with deportation. Here follow some repeated reflections on the excellence of Swedish prisons. There is much more repetition, as Ražon tries to decide whether *Babyb* could be useful to him.

¹⁵ The Soviet and post-Soviet equivalent of the SAS.

The narration of Śviatasłau begins with his version of meeting Pavał and his attempts to avoid arrest, using many of the phrases familiar from the preceding section. He has lost Viera, the woman he loved, after two decades of demonstrations and pickets and a series of children of uncertain parentage. He also loves Nasta who, he thinks, does not know Viera. They share an amoral student past, but Nasta's upward career is remarkable: when she first appears on television, after the militia and KDB attacked the crowd at the Dziady cemetery, she says that nobody was beaten or gassed, although three years later she appears again to confess to lying, alongside a man who claims that the militia and KDB had recruited him as a secret agent. Viera guesses at Nasta's motives (which the latter calls life choices), particularly when Nasta says that Viera and her fellow-demonstrators should have been killed at Kurapaty, thereby creating a useful legend. The narrator adds: 'Вера, мусібыць, таксама многіх бы забіла, калі б магла' (385). Viera, on the other hand loves reading poetry, the first example in the text being from one of Niaklajeu's most striking poems, 'Mauklivy mitinh'.¹⁶ There are various anecdotes about Vaukavysk, not least about a wolf-dog on a local mountain whence the locals had fought their enemies, and how at school the teacher told the children that they must love their native land, a meaningless expression that does not worry anyone. In Śviatasłau's view: 'Беларусаў мала бянтэжыць адсутнасць сэнсу ў чым бы там ні было' (387), something the Swedish prosecutor believes when he is told of the Belarusian's desire to kill another Belarusian, whatever his colours (388–89).

After a digression about meeting Pavał, there are numerous reflections on Belarusian national characteristics. Viera has become a major source of sceptical opinion of this topic (her father was Russian and mother Belarusian).¹⁷ If Belarus is the centre of Europe, its essence is nonetheless an elusive one. An amusing passage describes the comparison of Śviatasłau's two women by a schoolteacher named Fedor Mikhailovich Dostoevskii (spelt in Belarusian orthography). Why, he asks, having driven off their enemies, did the Belarusians then settle on a marsh that became Bangalore Square? at which Viera cries out, 'За вызваленне Індыі ад Брытанскай імперыі!' (392) The interrogation of Śviatasłau by the Swedes continues with some digressions on sex in the two countries (Swedish sex is compared to a Swedish buffet), and another digression on the notorious 1995 referendum on the constitution. Śviatasłau's interrogator has been hired by Ražon, and his application for asylum rejected because of an anonymous accusation that he had killed a cat, thus offending the feminists in the Swedish immigration service. The lawyer's analysis is very similar to Viera's

¹⁶ Uładzimir Niaklajeu, *Prošča*, Minsk, 1994 (hereafter *Prošča*), pp. 117–18.

¹⁷ In 'Palanez' the narrator's ethereal muse or lover Jabłońska doubts even more strongly the existence of Belarus: *Tak*, p. 84.

of the young man's envy and impotence, with particular reference to his role in demonstrations. The Swede, however, continues to show a literal mind, and Šviataslau continues to dream. As the latter was leaving Moscow on his way to Stockholm, there had appeared on the Internet: 'Дыктатура не расправіцца з нашай ВЕРАЙ' (403). There are repeated comparisons of Swedish and Belarusian prisons, while Viera believes of Belarusians: 'Ген свабоды нам не прывіць, у рабоў ён не прыжываецца. Таму мы і шчаслівыя ў рабстве' (405). The investigator's wife, also called Viera, is a journalist who has written flatteringly about Belarus, considering Western consumerism to be the biggest threat to society. Šviataslau thinks she deserves a prize, observing ironically: 'Жылі і не ведалі пра сваё шчасце' (407). She would like to write about her Belarusian acquaintance, but is busy as a correspondent for the Spanish royal wedding, which is being shown on television. Šviataslau, however, seems to hear the familiar voice of his Viera commentating and making a mockery of the grand occasion (408).

The final section of this ambitious novella is entitled 'Dzvie Viery', and it begins with a statement by Viera that throws considerable light on some of the earlier thematic lines in what is potentially a mystifying work:

Не ведаю, як яно так атрымлівалася, ніхто мяне гэтаму не вучыў і сама не вучылася, але з дзяцінства я ўмела жыць і ў сабе, і ў іншых, пасяляцца ў некім, пачуваючыся і сабой, і тым, у кім пасялілася. (409)

When six years old, she saved a pony from a fire, seemingly having abilities beyond herself. She feels able to enter other worlds, and when she is attacked and raped by a forester with the already familiar name of Cmok, she dies for the first time (411). Later, however, she burns the forester's barn and with it the pony she had saved, highlighting the irony and contradiction of salvation and destruction. Meanwhile Cmok seems to have lost his wits. Reflecting on her parents, Viera says of her father: 'як амаль кожны рускі, не любіў сябе, а праз тое не любіў нікога' (413). Following a description of the effects of the 1995 referendum, Viera becomes a banner, and this is her second death, her resurrection being prefaced by four lines from Niakalajeu's song 'Šciah' describing the Belarusian flag, temporarily (?) banned.¹⁸ Šviataslau was not, of course, resurrected but there is a long reflection on his weakness, which, Viera believes, leads to harsh and cruel behaviour (for instance, his mindless killing of a cat). She recalls all his past offences but regrets not saving him in his hour of need, when he was arrested at a demonstration: 'Наш лёс залежыць ад тачо, хто нас пакліча' (414). Nobody follows his appeal that the fatherland is

¹⁸ 'Šciah' is a song with words by Niakalajeu and music by Žmicier Vajciuskievič.

calling, and she feels that he will poison her, anticipating this by trying to cut her veins in a bath. At which point the other Viera, the Swedish journalist,¹⁹ comes to the door, and there follows an unflattering description of her profession. They had first met at a fountain in Kupała square, and a digression introduces part of one of Niaklajeu’s poems about identity.²⁰ When VieraS also undresses, the two are seen to be distinguished only by one having an extra mole. As VieraB reflects on this, the opening of the poem ‘Suzor’je Ryb’ is quoted.²¹ VieraB had introduced Nasta to VieraS who wanted to interview someone from the government: ‘Людзей цікавяць не людзі, а нелюдзі’ (419). There ensues much repetition of VieraS’s views on consumerism, and the theme of postponed death recurs. She appears to have a lesbian relationship with Nasta (422–23), and says that she did not just appear, but was called (apparently to invite VieraB to one or other of the royal weddings). Another verse extract is inserted,²² and the two Vieras exchange memories, notably about the dreadful Cmok who is said now to have relations with a handicapped woman, Aśfior (a name reminiscent of Ahasver, the Wandering Jew). Many events are repeated in recollection, including the burning of the horse, and the wolf-dog that is maintained by Śviatasłau in Vaukavysk. Amongst all this repetition comes the remark: ‘Паўсюль і скрозь адно і тое’ (427). When one of the Vieras disappears, the other ‘realizes’ it was a dream. Her father had asked her about the end of the world (431), and another poem, this time one written in Prague in 2007, is inserted as commentary, ‘Usio adno śmiarotny ty...’²³ Some strong Russian drugs are found with the name ‘Kreml’ (a joke of the KGB?), leading to various images of the Soviet Union. VieraS leads VieraB into taking this drug with wine and she has a narcotic fantasy of Belarus and God where her appeals for Belarus are met only with advice to continue seeking (434–35). She slashes the wrists of VieraS, dresses in her clothes and sets off for Malmö via Moscow and Stockholm, taking VieraS’s place. She helps Śviatasłau to evade extradition, and a grateful Russian builds him a mansion comparable to the hill in Vaukavysk from which he and his wolf-dog can howl over all Europe.

* * *

Labuch, Niaklajeu’s *rromančyk*,²⁴ differs from the shorter prose discussed above in several ways, apart from its length and anonymous publication. A mixture of philosophy, political satire and sexual explicitness, it differs in

¹⁹ Henceforth the Belarusian Viera will be called VieraB and her Swedish alter ego VieraS.

²⁰ ‘Sarakaviny’, *Proščča*, p. 172.

²¹ *Proščča*, p. 55.

²² Uładzimir Niaklajeu, ‘Kosmas’ from ‘Linija losu’ in *Naskrož*, Minsk 1985, p. 7.

²³ Uładzimir Niaklajeu, ‘Usio adno śmiarotny ty...’, *Kon*, Minsk, 2010, p. 255.

²⁴ The word means not only little novel, but also small penis.

terms of satire only by its outspokenness. There is no shortage of sex in the stories and novellas, although its quantity and variety in the little novel is prodigious. Apart from that, the main difference from his earlier prose is the role that philosophy (of the Tao variety) plays in the novel, albeit not nearly as overtly as sex and politics.²⁵ It is true that in some poems there had been cultural, almost ethnographical themes, for instance, in ‘Indyja’ and ‘Łożak pčaly’ where they presented fantastically, almost surreally, but in the shorter prose the references to high culture are generally superficial and ridiculous: for instance, the already mentioned comparison of Hamlet with Europe in ‘Viartańnie Viery’, or, in ‘Niachaj 1 Maja’, the absurd statement by Aleh that he led Vadim into the journey to Finland ‘like Mephistopheles with Faust’ (212). Whatever else it is, *Łabuch* is rich in cultural, political and other references, all bound into a lively plot, notable for its lack of restraint. It is certainly not a book for politically sensitive or prudish readers.

The eponymous jobbing musician’s name, Raman Kanstancinavič (hereafter referred to as Raman), is ambiguous: Ramančyk may mean either a little novel, the hero of this little novel or, as has already been mentioned, a penis. In the latter connection it may be noted that sex occupies nearly all the first half the work and later on sexual imagery is widely used, including the narrator’s description of the chain of power in the world and, in particular, the administration of the country, which, we are warned in an explanatory note, may not exist.²⁶ Sex in the novella takes a prodigious number of forms and with a remarkable number of participants, from under-age boys to old people, including a luxuriantly endowed woman (O, Рубец! – Ł25),²⁷ the wife of the book’s representative of Tao philosophy (she also has a taste for dogs as sexual objects).²⁸ Other examples of sex with animals, include the activities by a backward boy who lets Raman watch; homosexual acts are demonstrated by a loud-mouthed poet with a broomstick, elaborate sex takes place in aeroplanes and with a ghost in a graveyard, and so on and so on. This account of frequent and variegated sexual activity not only demonstrates how Raman’s macho qualities greatly exceed his musical ones, but can also be, like much of Niaklajeu’s prose, distinctly funny. One example from early in the novel when Raman is remembering childhood sexual interests and experiences is of how, at

²⁵ Interest in Oriental philosophy is not rare amongst contemporary East Slav writers, such as, for instance, Russians Vladimir Sorokin and Viktor Pelevin.

²⁶ Uładzimir Niaklajeu, *Łabuch*, Minsk, 2003, p. 2. All future references to this work will be by page number preceded by Ł.

²⁷ His enthusiasm, however, seems to fade quickly, as she soon becomes ‘Рубец – хрэнубец’ (Ł29).

²⁸ Apart from his relationship with Li-Li, sex with this enormous ‘filly’ (*kabyła*) attracts the most detailed attention in Raman’s recollections.

the age of thirteen and a half, he, having been sucked off by a nurse, found himself trapped inside her by his erect penis, and had to be taken off to the hospital in that condition (Ł15-18). There are many other fantasies in the novel, including the narrator describes wishing for sex with a picture.

The Tao philosophy in *Łabuch* is not nearly as prominent as the sex and, indeed, politics. It is represented by the father of Raman's first lover, Li-Li. As a timid professor of Sinology, he is both afraid of the life that is embodied in most Eastern philosophies, as well as of the world around him; he is, moreover, impotent, which makes him a poor example of the diffusion of the material into the immaterial, or, perhaps a humorous illustration of the belief in action without action, an immanent Tao that is at the same time forever absent. Although elements of this philosophy can be found at various times in the novel, it is the abundance of sex and the provocatively outspoken comments on national identity and political reality that remain longest in the memory.

The randy narrator is finally noticed by the powers-that-be, and they attempt to blackmail him into their service by accusing him of a murder he did not commit. His designated role is to act as a candidate for the opposition against the government's candidate, later leaving this side and appearing on television with accusations of the opposition's dirty deeds.²⁹ A period in which he later lands in prison and his dreams there are curiously prescient of the Niaklajeu's own situation in 2010. The upshot in Raman's story is that his girlfriend leaves him, but his 'career' changes for the better, as instead of being an indifferent musician he becomes a composer, playing at the funeral of a friend who had committed suicide, and making a career with film music in Moscow. Perhaps at the end he even acquires some kind of Taoist peace: as the image of Li-Li recedes further and further, the novella ends with sounds that could be of sex (there had been plenty of those earlier) or, more likely, of a note on his instrument: 'A-o-y-a-y...' (Ł325).

None of the above, however, is what caused a great flurry of agitation when the text of *Łabuch* first appeared, causing the authorities to strive frantically to discover who had written and published it. The very epigraph is itself immensely provocative, coming from a conversation of Socrates³⁰ with the author:

‘быць беларусам – бяда.
Ды што зробіш?
Гонар не дазваляе
кімсьці іншым стаць’ (L3)

²⁹ This element of the plot recalls the already mentioned episode in ‘Viartańnie Viery’.

³⁰ Rather than fantasy, this could be reference to Sakrat Janovič.

One notably offensive political passage, is the image of the country's chain of power consisting of one person screwing another whilst him/herself being screwed, doggy fashion (*ďřęřě*) and so on. Other of Raman's observations on the political process in his country, however, are sure to offend not only the authorities but also the oppositionists, to which Niaklajeu himself undoubtedly belongs:

На палітычныя страсці, якія віравалі ў краіне з канца васьмідзесятых, я глядзеў так, як глядзіш з берага на штармавое мора: страшнавата, але што яно мне, калі я на беразе? Адштарміць і суціхне... Я музыкант, на які чорт мне палітыка? Музыка пры любой уладзе – музыка...

Тыя, хто ўладарыў апошнімі гадамі – ні прэзідэнт, ні хеўра ягоная – нічым мне не заміналі. Яны не надта мне падабаліся, выпірала з іх нахабная пыха людзей, што з гразі выскачылі ў князі, але і тыя, хто тузаўся з імі, каб скінуць, не выглядалі вытанчанай шляхтай. Нацыяналісты, камуністы, патрыёты, незалежнікі – усе былі для мяне на адін капыл. Гвалт пра незалежнасць, дэмакратыю, нацыянальную ідэю, славянскае адзінства і народнае шчасце выклікаў слыхавую алергію – хацелася, каб усе знямелі. Мяне не здзіўляла, што яны змагаюцца – якое тут дзіва? Мяне здзіўляла, што яны не заўважаюць, зацяттыя ў барацьбе, як марна губляецца час і пуста мінае жыццё. Мне здавалася, што яны захварэлі, павар'яцелі... (J47)

* * *

Niaklajeu is far from being a mere lover of scandal and provocation, but it is certainly true that *Łabuch* takes Belarusian literature into previously uncharted waters. His prose as a whole, particularly in 'Praha', 'Viartańnie Viery' and this *romančyk*, show him to be a master story teller and this, in addition to his inalienable position as a major poet, makes him one of the most important figures in contemporary Belarusian literature as a whole. Indeed, at the centre of Europe.

Владимир Некляев в Центре Европы

Глубоко ироничные истории в сборнике «Центр Европы» Владимира Некляева исполнены живых диалогов, ярких монологов и сказа. Пародии и лирические отступления перемежаются с интенсивностью повествования, жесткий реализм с магией и фантазией. Наряду с многочисленными языковыми находками в историях действуют многие персонажи с абсурдно-комическими именами. Абсурд – одна из главных черт собрания рассказов. Повторяющиеся мотивы включают элементы жестокости, насилия, издевательства, унижения и растерянности. Главные темы: политика, вера, смерть, национальность, коррупция и пьянство. Роман «Лабух» содержит провокационную смесь философии, политической сатиры и порнографии.