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LANGUAGE, PLACE AND HISTORY IN BELARUSIAN LITERATURE¹

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ABSTRACT: Belarusian literature is currently written under difficult circumstances, which, however, neither stimulates nor restricts its development. In fact it flourishes both in metropolitan and provincial Belarus as well as abroad. The much repressed language, after a chequered history, survives mainly in literature and in the use by mainly young nationally conscious Belarusians for whom it may act as a socio-political statement. The history of Belarus as the main successor state of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania is inalienable, though disputed and minimized by some of the country's leaders whose historical consciousness begins with World War II or even later. Most writers who left the country in voluntary or involuntary exile have gained new created energy, though the Belarusian Free Theatre would gladly return, were circumstances different. Whatever its difficulties, Belarusian culture remains strong.

It is a great honour to address such a distinguished gathering of Slavists today. As we are in the capital of Belarus, I am speaking today in Belarusian, the language of nationally conscious citizens of this country, although the Belarusian language is ostensibly in some decline, and not frequently heard on the streets of Miensk² or, indeed, amongst the country's officials. On the other hand, intelligent young people use it increasingly as a socio-political statement, so that, although the Belarusian language is repressed, discouraged and despised by ignorant people, it is certainly not dead. I could also say that some liberal commentators speak of a war conducted by the regime against culture, language, history and literature. I do not, however, intend to present a long list of laments, in the manner of Russian bard Vladimir Vysotskii's famous catalogue song, 'Ia

¹ This text was given as plenary paper at the International Congress of Slavists in Miensk 20–26 August 2013, The annotation was added subsequently.

² Miensk is the old, traditional name for Miensk, and is now favoured by many nationally conscious Belarusians (though not officialdom, or, indeed, international airports).

ne liubliu...’, although there is no denying that the Belarusian cultural climate, as I observed in the title of my last book, is indeed decidedly chilly (McMillin 2010).

On the other hand the often heard idea that suffering aids creativity is to my mind dangerously wrong. This notion was colourfully expressed by the great actor and film director Orson Welles when he said: ‘In Italy for thirty years under the Borgias they had warfare, terror, murder and bloodshed but they produced Michelangelo, Leonardo da Vinci and the Renaissance. In Switzerland they had brotherly love; they had five hundred years of democracy and peace and what did they produce? The cuckoo clock’. Today I do not intend to discuss giants of the Renaissance, let alone the Borgias, though some might think the last theme not relevant to my topic.

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In what follows I shall touch on aspects of the language and history of this country, as well as Belarusian literature, provincial and metropolitan, and within and beyond the borders of Belarus.

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Although the Belarusian language is by no means a lingua franca in either world or purely Slavonic terms, for nationally conscious Belarusians it holds an importance unimaginable in countries like Britain, for example, where people take their language and history for granted. So I shall begin with a few words about the history of the Belarusian language. It lost its official status as long ago as the end of the 17th century, and a hundred years later had so far declined as to be used in plays only for the speech of the devil or other buffoons, whilst the noble characters spoke Polish.³ The language began to be revived in the 19th century, although writing in it was forbidden by the Tsarist authorities until 1905. It briefly regained status for several months in 1918 during the short-lived Belarusian National Republic,⁴ then, to some degree, in early Soviet times, between 1920 and 1927 and, finally, between independence in 1991 and 1994 when the present regime began. Such a disrupted, broken history partly explains the language’s weakness, so that it is sad, but not surprising, that this situation has arisen.

³ For more information see Lewina 1967 and Barysau and Saŭnikau 1962.

⁴ For a bibliography of works on this short but historically important period see Nadson 2013.

During most of the Soviet period and especially during the 1960s the plight of the Belarusian language produced a torrent of impassioned poetry and, occasionally, prose. For instance, one young poet, Jauhienija Janiščyc (1948–1988), declared that she would die without a groan for her native tongue, whilst twenty-eight of the leading Belarusian writers in 1986 even wrote to Mikhail Gorbachev for help, slightly reminiscent of 19th century Russian peasants appealing to the Tsar'-batiushka (Listy 1987). A further disastrous blow to the Belarusian language was the referendum introduced by the new President of Belarus in 1995 that officially gave Russian equal status with Belarusian, which, as could have easily been foreseen, was greatly to the detriment of the smaller, weaker, Belarusian language. This process was further accelerated by the closure of many Belarusian schools and other nationally oriented educational institutions. The degrading of the language was accompanied by the changing of all the traditional national symbols, such as the white-red-white flag and the figure of a horseman known as the Pahonia. Nowadays, Russian or a mixture of Belarusian and Russian, known by the word for cattle feed, *trasianka*, is heard on the streets of the capital, as well as in many productions of the Belarus film industry. It is, indeed, sad, but also far from surprising, that the Belarusian language is so neglected by many citizens of the country. The question of language is further complicated by questions of orthography and transliteration, which I do not need to go into deeply here, but which are hotly debated issues amongst some Belarusians. One of the two orthographies can only be used in books produced by non-state publishers, but even there not all writers automatically make what is, in a sense, a non-conformist statement by using it.⁵

* * *

Henry Ford is, perhaps apocryphally, reported to have declared, 'History is bunk', and the English novelist George Eliot certainly said, 'the happiest women, like the happiest nations, have no history' (Eliot 1980, 338), but such remarks are totally inappropriate for a country like Belarus where the past has to be constantly restored and revealed to avoid the terminal erosion of national consciousness and pride. Since the collapse of the Soviet Union, professional historians have been able to write more freely about Belarus's paths of development,⁶ and historical themes are found in the work of many of the best novelists

⁵ The official orthography, *narkomauka*, replaced *taraškevica* in 1933, but the latter continued to be used by émigré writers and others outside Belarus, and has gained popularity again amongst nationally conscious writers

⁶ Among the best Belarusian historians are Hienadź Sahanovič and Zachar Šybička. An important documentary source in English is Kipel 1988.

as well as poets and playwrights.⁷ Clearly Belarus is one of the main successor states to the Grand Duchy of Lithuania, but such a powerful and successful predecessor is not easily shared, and present-day Lithuania also lays claim to be *the* rather than *a* successor state of the Grand Duchy, ignoring the lack of contemporary Lithuanian documents, and the fact that the mid-17th century Statutes of this country or empire were written in the Middle Belarusian language.⁸ Moreover, the language at the time was considered different enough from Russian for the authorities in Moscow to demand interpreters for peace and other negotiations. Incidentally, the idea of the Grand Duchy's name indicating present-day Lithuania is as absurd as suggesting that the Polish national poet Adam Mickiewicz was a Lithuanian or, for that matter, Belarusian, just because the first line of his *Pan Tadeusz* is: 'Litwo! Ojczyzno moja! ty jesteś jak zdrowie...'. Continuing the theme of health, Belarusian historical writing, academic and literary alike, is in good shape, preventing some (whom I shall not mention by name) from completely destroying the country's heritage.

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The third and largest element of my presentation is the question of place. I shall begin with a few words about metropolitan and provincial writing, before turning to questions of emigration and exile. As in many, probably most, countries, cultural and, in this case, literary life tends to be centred on the capital. Nonetheless there are active groups of writers and, indeed, individuals in many different regions of Belarus, the main ones being Bieraście, Horadnia, Polacak and Homieĺ.⁹ On the whole, relations between the literary metropolis and the provinces are good, although occasional perceived slurs and hurts can cause flare-ups even about subjects as ephemeral as the nature of postmodernism.¹⁰ Moreover, the element of metropolitan snobbery is as alive as it is in London or Paris.

Turning to those who now live outside Belarus, it may be remembered that many countries have writers beyond their borders, sometimes indeed their greatest literary figures. In the twentieth century, one only has to think of Thomas Mann and Bertolt Brecht from Germany or, nearer to Belarus, Vladimir Nabokov

⁷ The leading Belarusian historical novelists are Uladzimir Karatkievič (1930–1984), Uladzimir Arlou (b. 1953) and Andrej Fiedarenka (b. 1964). Details of their work can be found on the internet. In English may be mentioned Zaprudnik 1993 and Arlou 2013, *Belarus: At a Crossroads in History*, Boulder, San Francisco, Oxford, Westview Press, 1993 and Arlou 2013. Amongst other history books in English are Wilson 2011, Bennett 2011 and Marples 1996 and 1999.

⁸ The first and still classic Western study of the language at this period is Stang 1935.

⁹ These are the traditional Belarusian spellings of cities more widely known in the West in their russified forms Brest, Grodno, Polatsk, Gomel'.

¹⁰ For an absurd and disgraceful example of this see Paciupa 2006.

kov and Joseph Brodsky as exiles from Russia. Many, however, will remember Anna Akhmatova's famous lines 'Не с теми я, кто бросил землю...', and her epigraph to *Реквием* that begins 'Нет, и не под чуждым небосводом'. People leave their countries for many different reasons, and, though I understand it, I do not share Akhmatova's implied criticism of exiles and émigrés.

Belarusians, in fact, have not shown the same impulse to leave their native country as, for instance, Russians and Poles during the last century. The greatest 20th-century Belarusian writer to emigrate was undoubtedly Vasil' Bykau (1924–2003) who left Belarus for Finland in 1998 fearing for his life,¹¹ somewhat like Natallia Arsieñnieva (1903–1997) and Masiej Siadniou (1913–2001) of an earlier generation, who found themselves under German occupation in World War II and had no choice but to move West at the end of it. I shall return to the theme of Germany later.

* * *

Vasil' Bykau was Belarus's greatest prose writer of the 20th century, and the best-known in both Russia and the West, largely due to the translations he made of his own works into Russian. In the five years between his emigration in 1998 and death in 2003 he produced some extremely memorable works, not least the deeply moving book of correspondence with his friend, national poet Ryhor Baradulin (b. 1935), comprising prose miniatures from Helsinki and poems of bereavement from Miensk, a true monument to the tragedy of exile for those left behind when their friends and colleagues leave the country (Bykau and Baradulin 1999).

Bykau later lived in Germany and the Czech republic, before returning to Belarus to die. In exile he turned to, and made his own, the genre of parables, the majority of which treat acute political and existential problems. Many lament what he saw as Belarusians' apparently willing surrender to subjugation. For example, one of them, 'Muzyka' (The Musician), concerns the senseless life of a musician who falls into a feverish dream about a cosmic ceremony that turns out to be a burial, the burial of a whole nation (Bykau 1999, 159-71). In case anybody wonders why Bykau only wrote parables in exile, I would remind you that dictators everywhere, Soviet or other, dislike mystery, symbols and hints more than direct challenges. Bykau's memoirs published a year before he died, *Doŭhaja daroha dadomu* (The Long Road Home) (Bykau 2002), are exceptionally interesting, as are some of the new works that have appeared posthumously. *En passant* I could mention that there is a biography of Bykau now transla-

¹¹ He told me that about two years before he actually left.

ted from English into Russian that contains an extensive and fascinating interview with him made in his last years (Gimpelevich 2011).

A major poet whose name reached the world's press for all the wrong reasons, after the presidential elections in 2010 is Uladzimir Niakliajeu (b. 1946). For several earlier years he was in voluntary exile in Poland and Finland, he produced a number of brilliant narrative and lyric poems as well as embarking on a career as a prose writer. Many of Niakliajeu's works written abroad offer not only immensely imaginative, sometimes phantasmagoric, pictures of foreign countries but also an often highly sceptical view of Belarus, its language and national identity, as seen through the eyes of foreigners. I may add that these foreigners may be Polish ghosts, Finnish bees and other fantastic figures. I shall just give one example of the dismissive comments of a bee by whom the narrator has been stung with whom he has therefore fallen in love. The poem is 'Łoža dla pčaly' (A Bed for a Bee, 2003):

Ах, што за мова! Колькі звону ў слоўе!
 А восы – супраць! Авадні ўсе ў змове:
 Таго няма! Сяго ёй не стае...
 А як пчала на беларускай мове
 Звініць-пяе!
 І не адно звініць... Збірае мёд.
 І не паздіць пра мову і народ.

(Niakliajeu 2004, 220–21)

In another poem 'Pałanez' (Polonaise, 1999–2001) the Polish ghost is equally unsympathetic to Belarusian ideals and aspirations. The Finnish perspective apart from a sceptical bee and a pastiche of the *Kalevala*, is also more prosaically examined in a novella 'Niachaj żyvie 1 Maja!' (Long Live the 1st of May!, 2000–2001) where indifference is, if anything worse than scorn. (Niakliajeu 2009, 190–246), I could also mention Niakliajeu's rather scandalous novel, *Łabuch* (The Jobbing Musician, 2003) (Niakliajeu 2003), which combines strong political satire with sex, and Taoist religion in that order of importance, as well as his very talented verse collection, *Tak* (So, 2004), which he told me at the time was probably his last poetic work. I was very pleased to discover later that this prognostication was false. Being abroad undoubtedly gave Niaklajeu the chance to express his feelings without restraint, although he was, of course, severely punished.

Marriage is another reason for leaving a country and in the case of Valžyna Mort (b. 1981) Belarus's loss was America's gain, for she married an American and now lives there and, unfortunately, has started writing poems in English rather than in her native Belarusian. She will almost certainly be longest remem-

bered for the small quantity of high quality verse published before she left (see, for example, Mort 2005). At least her loss cannot be blamed on anyone else – marriage, like prison, is a universal aspect of life (although I personally would not dream of comparing them...).

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Two years ago in an impromptu interview for a Russian-language magazine (*Bol'shoi*), I made the mistake of casually recommending Germany as a place where Belarusian writers are more likely to find help and succour than, for instance, in Great Britain. As a result, my correspondence increased exponentially. I should like now to mention two very different writers who (certainly *not* because of my advice) have spent considerable time in Germany, and how they got on there. Aleś Razanau (b. 1947) is a prominent avant-garde philosophical poet who was invited by the hospitable German PEN-Club to come and work in Hannover. Always a challenging, experimental poet, he began to describe his new environment in charmingly simple verses, at the same time investigating new genres. Razanau also met his German translator, and tried his hand at writing poems in German, a natural but, in my opinion, unfruitful enterprise, as was that of Joseph Brodsky in America, trying to write verse in English. Razanau has now returned to Belarus.

The other, very different, writer, Alhierd Bacharevič (b. 1975), began as a punk rock singer, in which capacity he described Belarus as Bydliandyja (Cattlestan). (see Barysievič 1998, 28). After various scandals and a promising beginning as a prose writer, he emigrated to Hamburg where he made no secret of his admiration for Germany and dislike of Belarus, but, more importantly, produced several interesting and ambitious novels as well as various *jeux d'esprit*, like his so-called little medical encyclopaedia (Bacharevič 2011).

Even more of a hooligan who emigrated was the colourful, extrovert poet Slavamir Adamovič (b. 1962), author of an angry poem in Russian, 'Ubei Prezidenta!' (Kill the president!, 1995), as a result of which he was, not unexpectedly, imprisoned. He later fled to Norway, although now, so far as I know, lives between Belarus and Scandinavia.

Finally, in this brief survey of writers and others who have left Belarus to work in other places, I should mention the very talented Bielaruski Voľny Teatr (Belarusian Free Theatre) – that after numerous problems (to put it very mildly indeed) – could no longer even perform in clandestine places, but now have to put on their performances outside the country. Though travelling widely, they seem to have made their base in England, where they have had stalwart support from prominent playwrights and actors.

On the subject of place, which led me to describe some dramatic and less dramatic changes of location, it should be mentioned that not only those abroad, but also some young domestic poets, criticise relatively openly the regime, and write pastiches of their cultural tradition, mocking and parodying some of the classic writers, a phenomenon that I personally regard as indicating a mature rather than fragile literature.

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On another bright note, the Belarusian language does at last seem to be gaining a foothold amongst not only older members of the nationally conscious intelligentsia, but also amongst socially and politically active young people who represent the country's future. Amongst them are several very young poets who will form the subject of my next book.

* * *

The disputed history of what is now Belarus in the Grand Duchy of Lithuania as well as the Rzeczpospolita, not to mention the Russian Empire, is natural when several countries regard themselves as successor states: some would say the Zionists, Ukrainians, Lithuanians and, above all, Belarusians. All multi-national states that fall apart leave a confused legacy, and the Grand Duchy, having at its peak stretched from the Baltic to the Black Sea is no exception. As I have mentioned already, debates are frequent, particularly between Poles, Lithuanians and Belarusians, but the important thing is to remember that history did not begin in 1944 or even 1994, but belongs to the heritage of all Belarusians.

Finally, on the question of place, I have given examples of some writers who seem to have gained a new lease of life by changing the place where they live and work. The Free Theatre is, of course, different, as all actors and playwrights would prefer to address their domestic audience, were that possible.

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Despite some of the negative features of literary life mentioned at the beginning of this lecture, Belarusian literature somehow continues to flourish both at home and abroad, and I hope that some of those Slavists who do not know its richness will be inspired to enlarge their knowledge whilst staying in Miensk. Long live Belarus!

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