

Course: Transreading Ukrainian poetry: a crimson bush amidst silence
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Assignment Three: The Executed Renaissance..

Лебеді

Михайло Драй-Хмара (1889-1939)

На тихім озері, де мріють верболози,
давно приборкані, і влітку й восени
то плюскоталися, то плавали вони,
і шиї гнулися у них, як буйні лози.

Коли ж дзвінкі, як скло, находили морози
і плесо шерхнуло, пірнувши в білі сни, —
плавці ламали враз ті крижані лани,
і не страшні були для них зими погрози.

О, гроно п'ятірне нездоланих співців!
Крізь бурю й сніг гримить твій переможний спів,
що розбиває лід одчаю і зневіри.

Держайте, лебеді: з неволі, з небуття
веде вас у світи ясне сузір'я Ліри,
де пинить океан кипучого життя.

Swans

On the tranquil lake where willows dream
Long tamed by both summer and Autumn
They splashdown, flutter and swim
Their necks bend like heavily laden vines.
When frosts come resonant as glass
And waves whisper immersed in a white trance
These swimmers shatter the frozen space
Fearless, although winter threatens.
Oh cluster of five unconquered singers
Through snow and storm your song victorious
Breaks the apathetic faithless ice.
Be strong; from slavery and nothingness
Be guided by the constellated Lyre
To worlds of light, oceans of foaming life

Mykhailo Drai-Khmara (1889-1939)

Павло Тичина

Вітер з України

Нікого так я не люблю,
як вітра вітровіння.

Чортів вітер! Проклятий вітер!

Він замахнеться раз –
рев! свист! кружіння!
і вже в гаю торішній лист –
як чортове насіння...

Або упнеться в грузлу рілью,
піддасть вагонам волі –
ух, як стремлять вони по рельсах,
аж нагинаються тополі!..

Чортів вітер! Проклятий вітер!

Сидить в Бенгалії Рабіндранат:
“Нема бунтарства в нас: людина з глини”.
Регоче вітер з України,
вітер з України!

Крізь скельця Захід мов з-за ґрат:
то похід звіра, звіра чи людини? –
Регоче вітер з України,
вітер з України!

Чортів вітер! Проклятий вітер!

Він корчувату голову з Дніпра:
“Не ждіть, пани, добра:
даремна гра!”

Ах,
нікого так я не люблю,
як вітра вітровіння,
його шляхи, його боління
і землю,
землю свою.

Pavlo Tychyna

The Wind from Ukraine

I do not love anything
As much as the demonic gale
That swings, past
Roars, whistles and twists
Last year's leaves in the wood,
Satan's harvest,
Or drowns the ploughed field in mud
And tries to wrest the cattle wagons free...
How they strain on the rails
How the Poplar bends...
Demonic gales...
Rabindrath sits in distant Bengal
"There is no insurrection here, the people are clay,"
Around him the wind from Ukraine
Laughs ironically
Through the rocks of the West, the bars of a prison:
"Is this the advent of an animal, an animal or a human"...
The wind from Ukraine
Guffaws,
With his bushy head from the banks of the Dnipro...
"Don't expect anything good from me, my lords...
Playing your vain and empty game..."

I do not love anything
As much as the gale
His pain and his path
And the earth
My earth.

Pavlo Tychyna

Володимир Свідзінський

Volodymyr Svidzinskyi

Я іду здовж ручаю.
Вечірня пташка мигтить крильми.
На вільхи, на скелі спадає
Покошлана мерва тьми.
Іду я самотно, леле!
Забуті руки ломлю.
Чи зрине казковий шелест,
Світющий шелест "люблю".
Та все навколо знайоме,
І глузливо шепоче тьма:
"Ти йдеш не в казку – додому,
А казки... казки нема"

I walk alongside the stream
A bird's wings flash in the dusk
Darkness thatches its shadow
On crag and alder.
I walk alone...
Tense my forgotten hands
Will I hear the fairy-tale whisper
Of someone's love.
But all around are familiar shapes,
Darkness lisps mockingly
That I walk home
Through no fabled landscapes
No stories come.

Уже вечір, вечірній вітер.
За безлистим деревом саду,
Як дві нерідних сестри,
Вербова віта цвіте
І жовта свіча горить.
Вербова віта цвіте
На весну, на юний шум,
А навіщо ця жовта свіча?
Уже вечір, вечірній вітер.
Ти бачиш на сході вороних коней,
Повкриваних древніми паполумами,
Як виринають із сивого мороку?
Будуть тихо назад брести,
Будуть тебе везти,
А жовта свіча відокремиться
від вербової віти
І буде кульгати за ними на одній нозі,
Курячи сипким димом,
І прийде на замкнену влоговину,
І поклониться кам'яній півночі.
Уже вечір, вечірній вітер.
Небо, роздерете на світло і тьму!
Нехай жовта свіча скапає своє тіло
На мою паполому,
Але вербова віта нехай цвіте,
І коли зринеться зоря,
То нехай не падає на мою димку свічу,
Щоб її погасити,
А нехай розсиплеться по вербовій віті,
Щоб її осіяти.

It is already evening, a soft breeze
Behind the leafless tree in the orchard
(As if these two trees are not kindred)
The willow branches blossom
With a candle's yellow flame
Lit for spring, its juvenile roar.
Why does it burn?

It is evening with a soft breeze,
Do you see black horses to the east
Dressed as for some antique funeral
Emerging from the dusk?
They will bear you back quietly
As the yellow flame is severed
From the willow branch
To limp after them,
In dishevelled smoke will come
To the locked hollowness and bow
Where the north is blank as stone.

It is already evening with a soft breeze
Sky torn between light and dark.
Let the willow's yellow flame tremble
On the dark horses robed
For my funeral.

When the stars come
Let them not fall upon my candle
But break into flame
On the willow branch
So it may bloom.

Yevhen Pluzhnyk (1898-1936)
Євген Плужник (1898-1936)

Вона зійшла до моря. Хто вона,
Навіть самій їй байдуже віднині.
...Хіба ж не всі ми - єдності луна
В скороминущій і пустій відміні?

Лінивий рух - і ось під ноги ліг
Прозорий вінчик - кинута намітка,
І на стрункім стеблі високих ніг
Цвіте жарка, важка і повна квітка -
Спокійний торс, незаймано-нагий!

Спадає вал... Німують береги...
І знову плеск... І затихає знову...
То пальцями рожевої ноги
Вона вгамовує безодню бірюзову.

І відкрива обійми їй свої
Ця велич вод, усім вітрам відкрита,-
Здається, повертає Афродіта
У білий шум, що породив її.

She approaches the sea, now indifferent
Herself to who she is.
Is that not all of us, at the same pitch
In fleeting and vacuous changes?

She moves lazily. A transparent corolla
Lays at her feet, her headscarf cast aside
On the slender stalks of her long legs
Warm heavy full the bloom flowered
Her body , calm virginal...

A wave relapses... the shores are mute...
Again sea splash... then it subsides...
Her pink toes soothe
Unplumbed depths of turquoise

And she is embraced by the water
Its vastness surrendered to the wind
Until It seems Aphrodite has returned
In the white foam that bore her.

Writing Game 3: Rebels and Risk Takers

The priest descended the steps from the aircraft and collapsed to his knees to kiss the tarmac. It was 1992, and my father and I were on our way to see my aunt who had returned from the Komi Republic after four decades in camps and exile. This priest was my first glimpse of Ukraine, a country I had been told from childhood was my homeland. I was now twenty-nine years old, and its inhabitants seemed alien to me. I had flown at the front of the aircraft with the “Europeans”, while in the back the Ukrainians were obscured by tobacco smoke. We were estranged by a haze of nicotine and history.

Later, my father and I stood in line for hours waiting for a train ticket. A continuous argument raged by the ticket counter—my first encounter with Ukraine’s red tape. Losing patience, Dad headed for the car park and paid a shell-suited thug sixty dollars to queue-jump.

We had time to spare so I headed into the city and checked out a bookshop. I was particularly interested in Ukraine’s Executed Renaissance of the 1920s. I had first read about them in the diaspora journals my father would bring home. But all I saw on these shelves were Russian books.

“Where are the Ukrainian books?” I asked.

The guy behind the counter looked at me with disdain and gestured to his right. There was an empty bookcase labelled *Ukrainian Literature* and it was cordoned off with string. Some store browsers stared. Others avoided my gaze.

Ukraine had been submerged within the Russian empire since before 1917. As early as 1627, Tsar Mikhail had issued a decree to destroy all copies of Ukrainian religious texts. When, in 1654, Ukraine was incorporated within the Russian empire, the assault on Ukrainian intensified. In 1720, Peter the First forbid book printing in the language. In 1729, Peter the Second required all state decrees issued in Ukrainian be rewritten in Russian. Decree followed decree. In 1863, interior minister Pyotr Valuyev banned the publication of secular and religious books (apart from belles lettres) in Ukrainian, stating that, “the Ukrainian language never existed does not exist and shall never exist.” The 1876 Ems Ukaz banned publishing new books and performing plays in Ukrainian. Yet, in spite of legislative strangulation, the language remained like a sea held in check by a levee.

In 1920s Ukraine, the lifting of centuries of oppression of the language was the cultural equivalent of blowing a hole in a dam. Writers poured through the gap: Symbolists. Neo-classicists, Futurists. In the absence of a state, Ukrainians had acquired a ferocious capacity for self-organisation. Writing in Ukrainian challenged political and artistic orthodoxies. Olha Kobylanska (1863–1942) wrote her feminist novella *Valse mélancolique* (1898) even before Virginia Woolf’s *A Room of One’s Own* (1929). Vasyl Stefanyk (1871–1936) produced brilliantly wrought expressionist literary miniatures, bonsai novels. Rory Finnin of the Cambridge University Ukrainian Studies department observed that: “Ukrainian literature is replete with vigorous voices . . . It is a literature of rebels and risk-takers, writers whose works injected world culture with new euphonies and expanded the boundaries of human expression.”

But, in the nineteen thirties, Stalin launched a wave of repressions which resulted in the deaths of many of these authors, either in labour camps or by execution for spurious crimes. Their work remains almost unknown in the west...

Your Exercise

The poems in this selection, by contrast with Soviet aesthetic orthodoxy, placed the individual at the centre of nature, seemingly without any irritable searching after “fact or reason” or indeed any ideological statements. However, this is not the case. Drai-Khmara's sonnet *Swans* celebrated a quintet of neoclassical authors of whom he was one, flying beyond the bounds of Soviet orthodoxy. He paid for it with his life. Svidzinskyi's natural landscapes eschew any simplistic interpretation but the darkness in some of them is palpable. He survived the nineteen thirties by writing very little and publishing almost nothing. Tychyna's poem celebrates an ambiguous revolutionary energy which would result in him being tortured and purchasing his life by writing Stalinist doggerel while his peers were slaughtered. Pluzhnyk's poem, in what was, for him, an unusually classical style, observes without sloganising at a time when artists were increasingly required to march to the beat of the Stalinist drum. These translations hopefully capture the spirit of this poetry which has been able to pass through the bars of the prison where Stalin sought to destroy it.

Your exercise (should you choose to accept it) can be any one of these:

- to write a poem giving voice to a poet or author who was politically repressed or murdered by the state. What would they have to say to us now if they could speak?
- To write a poem which, like *Swans*, uses an analogy from nature for repression and its transcendence through poetry.
- To write a poem which using natural metaphors like Tychyna's evokes this moment in British history. His poem is not without analogues, including Shelley's *Ode to the West Wind*, in English. But poetry is not at present, as far as I can see, speaking to “the state of England/Britain”.
- To write a poem which simply observes a natural moment, a crane taking off from a field, wagtails twittering like the radio of memory whistling as if searching for a lost voice, and evoking this in beautifully wrought language while imbuing it with a significance arising from the act of writing.