

Course: Transreading Ukrainian poetry: a crimson bush amidst silence  
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## **Crimea River: Heaney, Huk, Tychyna and who are they walking through my fields?**

**В'ячеслав Гук**  
**Vyacheslav Huk**

### **THE ANNEXATION OF CRIMEA**

Пливе хвилями сіра чайка, як самотній човен на фіорді,  
стрілка уриває свій рух – і в душі стає занадто тривожно,  
час порушує правила синтаксису, уже підкорившись моді,  
та все-таки в цьому житті дуже важлива дрібничка кожна;

він схиляє голову в глибокій задумі – сіріє ранкова гавань;  
неначе поранене часом єство чинить смерті шалений опір  
наприкінці зими, де лежать занедбані землі й тепла замало,  
а сорочка вільна від запаху тютюну й од фарби, якої колір

уже назавше втрачено, – так рветься вітрила цупка тканина, –  
зателефонуй туди, де серце від страху рятує журба і втеча,  
ложку грубого цукру кладе до чайної чашки сумна людина,  
тому що там, на кримському півдні, панує лише холоднеча

і горло втрачає голос – так судина з часом стає безкровна,  
так гіркий запах горілої деревини раптом вчувають ніздрі,  
іржава кров знаходить свій шлях, утілившись в виногрона;  
й обрив слова, як життя, має кінець і початок, ніби залізні

бур'яни росли вздовж берега, де чайки сірокрили мовчали,  
бо вода зберігає спокій – і скоріше мертвіє слово, ніж тіло;  
чи ти пам'ятаєш, як рушали повозки з фруктами й овочами  
десь високо-високо в горах, де мідь сонця навідліг горіла? –

це визначала пам'ять, наче він залишався в рідному місті,  
окупованому російськими солдатами, ще протягом року  
і думав, що дуже схожий на Leo Gursky\*, що мився в мисці  
перед самою смертю – цілковито самотній, в Нью-Йорку.

## THE ANNEXATION OF CRIMEA

"I feel alien, solitary, an orphan amidst the people with whom I now live... in exile..."

Osyp Turiansky

"Beyond the boundaries of pain"

A solitary seagull breasts the waves, a boat undulating on a fjord,  
The arrow halts its flight... and the heart becomes too anguished  
The rules of syntax are violated, and now unfashionable  
But every trivial thing in this life is significant.

His head bowed in deep contemplation. The harbour grey in the morning,  
Nevertheless the living entity is powerful enough  
To resist death at winter's end, where the neglected soil lays,  
And there is scant warmth and the shirt free of the aroma

Of tobacco and paint, whose colour is already lost forever,  
The thick cloth of an old sail. Phone that place  
Where the heart was salvaged from terror by flight and fear,  
A morose man adding a spoon of coarse sugar to his tea

Because only the cold rules in the Crimean south and the throat  
Loses voice, as the veins lose their blood in time,  
The acrid fragrance of burnt timber suddenly reaches you,  
The rusted blood finds its own path, is a vine

And the ruptured word has its beginning and end, like iron  
Weeds embroidering the roadsides,  
The water retains its calm and the word  
Will die sooner than the body.

Do you remember how the wagons  
With fruit and vegetables trundled in the mountains  
While the copper sun blazed and this  
Defined by memory, as if he remained in his hometown

Now occupied by Russian soldiers albeit for only a year  
And thinking he resembles Leo Gursky\*  
Washing in a bowl before his death  
And utterly alone in New York.

\*Leo Gursky is the protagonist of Nicole Krauss's novel "The History of Love".

## І ПТАХИ

Те ж запізнене літо – і мелодія пісні довга,  
як слова заспокоєння, як здобута в борні перемога,  
як запланований напад, як марення Пенелопи,  
в котрих віддалі й відстані наповнюються птахами  
і зникає у небі, вицвілім до нестями, –  
військовий Grasshopper.

На одному зі столиків – парує гаряча кава,  
пахне біла троянда – і на все це ти маєш право:  
на мелодію вітру, підкорену темним кронам,  
на пожовклі листи, витягнуті з коробки,  
чи на термін невизначений, короткий  
серпневих канікул, проведених за кордоном.

Гудіння мотора у проміжках часу літа,  
гнізда птахів, заколисані в кронах вітром,  
надають можливості прошепотіти уголос: це вість  
або ж розуміння образи й кінцевої точки зору,  
залишається чорним, незмінним у будь-яку пору  
негатив літака, що бомбує чужу місцевість.

На всім горизонті, без винятку, на всім виднокраї –  
низьке небо у погляді, що літак у височінь проводить,  
і немає можливості аналізувати у снах – безмежжя  
життя, тому що в біноклі, вириваючи крила з сині,  
передчуваючи холоди осінні,  
летять птахи у напрямку південного узбережжя.

## BIRDS

This late summer, and the melody of song protracted,  
Like soothing words or victory after struggle,  
A planned assault or the delusions of Penelope,  
Wherein distant perspectives are awash with birds,  
And a military Grasshopper  
Disappears into the sky and fades to unconsciousness,  
A coffee's warm vapour drifts from one of the tables,  
And a white rose exhales its fragrance.  
You are entitled to all of this,  
The wind subdued by the tree's dark tree crown  
Forms melodies of yellow leaves,  
Extracted from a box, whether for an undefined period,  
A short August vacation abroad.  
The engine hums through broken passages of summer,  
Where the wind cradles birds' nests in tree crowns,  
Giving you the possibility to whisper: this is an augury  
Or the comprehension of an image and the end point of flight  
Which remains dark and immutable in any season.  
The negative of a plane bombing a foreign location.  
Through all horizons, without exception, and in all perspectives,  
The low sky you encompass in a glance continues  
With a plane at a high altitude, and there is no possibility  
Of analysing life's boundlessness in dreams.  
So you watch birds through binoculars,  
Their wings sculling though blue sky,  
Anticipating autumn's coldness  
As they fly towards the southern coast.

**Pavlo Tychyna**  
**Павло Тичина**

### **Прорив**

Дельфін не гравсь у морі,  
Не був і сонцехмар —  
На давню синю тему  
Задумалась гора.

Я йшов і оглянувся —  
Чи хтось мене позвав!  
Креснуло-полоснуло  
І блиснуло в слова.

І дощ заколихався,  
Перемісило муть.  
Грімкі, палкі промови  
Над морем як у тьму.

І я побіг. Над муттю —  
То був такий прорив!  
На дві октави нижче  
Шуміло із гори...

## Rupture

There was no dolphin frolicking in the ocean,  
And no cloud backlit by the sun  
Although the mountain  
Meditated on its ancient blue theme.

I walked and looked around  
As someone called my name,  
Lightning happened,  
Words burst into flame.

The rain trembled over the ground,  
The mud was churned,  
In the darkness over the sea  
I heard the storm's oratory

And ran through the mulch - It was like  
A break in music,  
When, two octaves lower,  
The mountains murmured.

## АЙ-ПЕТРІ

Давно вже вечір. Риси —  
Мов вирізьблена рить.  
Вгорі огонь горить,  
І мовчки гробнуть кипариси.

Цвірчіння стопрозоре,  
А вітру аніяк.  
І тільки море, море,  
Безтрепетний маяк.

І тільки повно слуху.  
І ряснозорна бризь  
Одглибивилась скрізь  
Без руху...

Яке бажання стріч!  
Мов Дафніс той і Хлоя,  
При місяці там стоя,  
Шепчуться всю ніч.

А ген аж в сині нетрі  
В зазубреннях колон  
Піднісся як закон  
Некоронований Ай-Петрі.

## **Ai-Petri<sup>1</sup>**

It has been evening for a while,  
Outlines engraved in metal.  
Overhead the clouds are on fire,  
The cypresses entombed in silence.

The limpid chirruping of birds,  
The windless stillness  
The sea motionless  
The lighthouse.

Everything listens...  
The dusk deepens all around  
Through stars and planets  
Without

Movement or sound.  
This is a meeting I have yearned for,  
Like Daphne and Chloe,  
To stand

Before the moon  
While all the night murmurs,  
And in the distant  
Blue depth of forest,

Among jagged columns  
The pedestal and the law  
Will be  
Uncrowned, Ai-Petri.

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1

Ai-Petri is a mountain in Crimea

## НА СВІТАННЮ

Із води із океана  
там вона далеко вийшла.  
І такеє в неї видно -  
одірватися не можу.

Підняла вона коліно -  
щоб на камінь стати вище.  
І такеє в неї видно -  
одірватися не можу.

Мов у пісні, Калевалі,  
вітер в лоно їй повіяв,  
зарожевив знизу перса,  
почорнив оте, що видно.

І лягла вона розкрито,  
головою десь за море.  
В небо промені- коліна  
божевільно ще дівочі.

І настала ніби тиша,  
ніби злотне плюскотіння.  
Зараз, зараз я побачу,  
як рождатиметься сонце

## Dawn

She went so far  
On the astringent  
Waters of the sea,  
I could not look away,

As she lifted  
Her knees and hands clinging  
To the bare rock  
And stood naked

On the outcrop  
Above the waves like a woman  
In a song from the Kalevala<sup>2</sup>.  
The wind's

Caress,  
Her body turning rose coloured,  
Darkening with her own blood.  
Then

The wave's curled lip came  
And drank her in. She laid  
Her head bobbing on the sea,  
A sunray

Picked out  
Her still smooth knees,  
Just breaking the surface.  
This mad

Lost girl.  
As twilight fell, it grew quiet  
Except for the waves splashing gold light.  
I saw

How the sun waits.

Seamus Heaney

**The Toome Road**

One morning early I met armoured cars  
In convoy, warbling along on powerful tyres,  
All camouflaged with broken alder branches,  
And headphoned soldiers standing up in turrets.  
How long were they approaching down my roads  
As if they owned them? The whole country was sleeping.  
I had rights-of-way, fields, cattle in my keeping,  
Tractors hitched to buckrakes in open sheds,  
Silos, chill gates, wet slates, the greens and reds  
Of outhouse roofs. Whom should I run to tell  
Among all of those with their back doors on the latch  
For the bringer of bad news, that small-hours visitant  
Who, by being expected, might be kept distant?  
Sowers of seed, erectors of headstones...  
O charioteers, above your dormant guns,  
It stands here still, stands vibrant as you pass,  
The invisible, untoppled omphalos.

## Writing Game 4: Crimea River

Crimea, the rough diamond-shaped peninsula dangling from Ukraine's Black Sea coast, which is currently under Russian occupation, has a long, multi-ethnic history. Goth was spoken in some isolated areas there until a century ago and it has given a home to Greeks, Tatars and many other peoples over the centuries. The Ukrainian poet Vyacheslav Huk has this rich legacy embroidered in his DNA and is of mixed Jewish, Russian and Tatar descent but writes in Ukrainian. However, even when Crimea was actually part of Ukraine before being annexed by Russia in 2014 it was in the process of being Russianised. The Crimea which Ukrainian authors imagine is one that is not the Crimea of Russia's Tsarist empire. Lesia Ukrainka's story *Nad Morem (By the Sea)* reads like a feminist version of Chekhov's ----- (*The Lady with the Little Dog*). The concluding paragraphs are a paean to a landscape that transcends the tawdry holiday romances and colonial exploitation that the story describes:

“It will be a dark night. The sea will burn,” said the sailor. And indeed a delicately blue phosphorescent band trembled beyond the stern, and the oars seemingly paddled in fire. I scooped the water in my hand casting it aloft, and a fantastic fountain of cold flame glittered. Dolphins splashed, battering geysers of light from the black surface and stars fell into the sea. The shore was invisible in the dark — only far, far away the communal fires burned like the Pleiades. The boundless sky seemingly spoke to the sea in words of flame and the sea sang its powerful, majestic, and eternal poem to the solemn night.

Mykhailo Kotsiubynsky explored the lives of the Crimean Tatars in some of his work *On Stone (Na kameni, 1902)*, one of his wonderfully evocative Crimean tales, is a well-observed account of a patriarchal Tatar community, which is shaped by the arid landscape it occupies. Yet even this Crimea, to which Greeks and Turks sailed without visas, seems less isolated than today's militarised peninsula.

Memet looked out to sea. “There will be a storm,” he said, without turning round. “The wind's getting up. It's catching the sails on the boat.”

The Tatars turned their heads to the waves.

The wind really was swirling the sails on a large black boat, which appeared to be turning towards the shore, blowing them till they tore from human hands like vast white birds: the boat listed and lay with its side against the delicately blue waves.

“It's heading for us!” said Dzhepar. “I even recognise the boat, it's the Greeks bringing salt here.”

Both Ukrainka and Kotsiubynsky were writing in a period when the Tsarist regime was hostile to Ukrainian literature and had prohibited the language from many areas of public life. Tychyna's Crimean cycle was produced in the twenties when the Soviets were trying to secure the loyalty of Ukrainians by allowing the language to be used (albeit towards the end of the twenties) literature was increasingly policed to ensure it complied with Soviet orthodoxy. The poem places Crimea outside of imperialist narratives and alludes to the Peninsula's Greek past, alluding to Daphnis and Chloe, the lovers from Longus's second-century Greek tale. The lyric in which they appear is entitled “Ai Petri,” after the Crimean

mountain that bears the Greek name for St. Peter and thus neatly unites the pagan and Christian traditions of the peninsula:

It has been evening for a while  
Outlines engraved in metal  
Fires burning above  
And cypresses entombed in silence.

Tychyna's Crimea may have been part of Soviet Russia but it was not Russian - Huk's poetry uses the language of the country that had once been a colony of Russia, Ukraine, to reinvent the peninsula in his 2013 collection *Crimean Elegies* and locate it within a western European cultural framework. After WW2 Ukrainian literature began to flourish in Crimea and although Huk grew up in a Russophone environment he dreamed of being a Ukrainian language writer. The poem *Arnold Schönberg* transplants the Austrian-American composer to a Crimean seascape:

You believed in the fragility of the sea, and female hands,  
Your car ran smoothly along the shore, the sea's sound  
Muffling the clumsy noise of its motor.  
The sand was too white, reminiscent of the first snow.

The coast extended to where they built the lighthouse,  
And the cape looked into the sea, where a seagull flirted,  
And you, cigarette squeezed tightly in your fingers, smoked,  
Until only the filter remained between your lips.

*Birds*, from the same collection, reveals Huk's deep rooted love of the Crimean landscape expressed in beautifully modulated language. However, soon afterwards, he watched helplessly from his apartment in Kyiv as the Peninsula was annexed by Russia. The poem *The Annexation of Crimea* is, tellingly titled in English, locating what for him was a deeply personal traumatic experience in the impersonal language of international diplomacy. However, it is a poem written in exile from his colonised homeland in the language of a country that was once a Russian colony (and if Putin had his way would be so again). Heaney, by contrast, is writing from the vantage point of the colonised ethnicity but in the language of the coloniser which Ireland has claimed beautifully for itself - he said Lowell had "Englished Russian" but he and other Irish authors, and indeed the Irish people, have "Irished English." But he is also the successor of Caedmon who he celebrates in one piece, the author of the first "English" poem.

The works and the authors presented here show how poetry can respond to intra European colonisation with a subtlety that eludes politicians. They also allow us to explore the nuances of ethnic identity - Vyacheslav's genes may not be Ukrainian but he is a Ukrainian by choice.

### **Your Exercise**

Your exercise: write a poem which explores your own identity through the prism of imperialism or colonisation. Wherever you are you cannot, as R.S. Thomas said of Wales, "forget the past". You could write about the slave ships that once bore their cargo to England, or about the loss of the culture of the highlands or the Irish famine. You could look at the legacy of colonisation in the U.S and explore the 1862 Dakota War. Or you could

look at what is happening to you now and how it has been shaped by attitudes linked to empires and liberation struggles. Poetry should eschew political slogans and simplistic stances in search of the truth that you can only find by listening to what your own voice tells you. Or maybe not. . Explore the themes raised in this exercise in whatever poetic way works best for you.

And please deal with this subject sensitively... it is perhaps best to write about these topics using your voice to explore your own background or ensure that your work is informed by a sensitive reading of those you are giving a voice to and, ideally, their own words.