

Maksim Bahdanovic in Byelorussian Literature

BY

VERA RICH

In considering a "new" literature, a literature, that is to say, which has recently been born or reborn from folklore and popular tradition, there is always a tendency to emphasize heredity and to ignore environment — to stress the origins and to ignore the effect of the literary milieu into which the new literature has been born. Thus, in the field of Ukrainian literature, there are numberless articles, books, pamphlets and treatises dealing with the folk and popular elements in the works of Taras Shevchenko — that figure who bestrides 19th Century Ukrainian literature like a colossus — yet, although it was he who first raised Ukrainian literature to the European, indeed to the world level, the critical works dealing with his place in world literature amount to little more than a preliminary survey by Juriij Bojko "Taras Shevchenko and West European Literature."¹

One would expect, therefore, the same picture to prevail for Byelorussian literature. All the more, since, when the *ukaze* forbidding the printing of works in the Byelorussian language was revoked in 1905², the work of such 19th-century pioneers of Byelorussian literature as Čačot, Dunin-Marcinkievič and Bahuševič was crowned and consolidated by a movement which aimed at a greater emphasis of the national roots of Byelorussian life — and in such a context "national" must primarily mean "folk." The organ of this movement was called *Naša Niva* (Our Cornfield) and from it the movement took its name. There is no space here to discuss in full the aims and ideals of the *Naša Niva* movement³, but a few stanzas a poem published in

¹) *The Slavonic and East European Review*, 34, (82) 77-98, London 1955.

²) Publication in the Byelorussian language had been forbidden in 1867, largely as a result of the unsuccessful rising in 1863 of Byelorussian and Polish insurgents, under the leadership of the Byelorussian Kastuś Kalinoŭski. The ban was revoked after the 1905 Revolution. The first Byelorussian newspaper to appear after this ban was *Naša Dola* (Our Fate). This was suppressed by the authorities in 1906 and was succeeded by the more moderate *Naša Niva*.

³) For a fuller discussion see the section on *Naša Niva* in *Byelorussia — the making of a nation*, Nicholas P. Vakar, Cambridge (Massachusetts), 1956, pp. 87-91.

the first number may serve to show how close in form and spirit to folksongs was the poetry it fostered:

Nioman flows between the mountains
 Filled with power and loveliness,
 Waters into distance boundless
 Through the woodlands it doth press.

Ah thou Nioman, river dearest!
 Thou dost give us food and drink,
 Oft a man's poor boat thou bearest,
 Bearest it upon thy brink.⁴

However, this picture of Byelorussian literature, strongly rooted in folk tradition and seeking to do no more than reflect folk-song themes and traditions, did not prevail. Partly because the very founder of the *Naša Niva* movement, as they became more familiar with the literary media in which they worked, began to develop and expand their range of themes, but also because there was shortly to appear on the literary scene a young poet who was to give a new and "European" impetus to Byelorussian literature — Maksim Bahdanovič.

Bahdanovič was the son of school-teacher parents, and was born in Minsk in 1891. His parents had left Byelorussia when he was a small child, and he was brought up and educated in Russia. He contracted tuberculosis early in life, and like many poets similarly afflicted⁵, this manifested itself in a precocious development of his talent. By the age of 16, he was already contributing to *Naša Niva*. And not, one may observe, as a humble beginner! It was a rule, indeed a hitherto unbroken rule, that all contributions to *Naša Niva* should be signed with a pseudonym, partly as a security measure in case of trouble with the Censor, and partly to create the impression that there were more writers than there actually were (each author using more than one pseudonym).⁶ Bahdanovič however, insisted that his work was signed with his own name — and won his way. His articles and poems were signed, as he wished, Maksim Bahdanovič.

His career, as one would expect, was short — less than ten years from the appearance of his first contribution — a short prose piece entitled *The Musician*⁷ — in *Naša Niva* on July 6, 1907, to his death on May 12, 1917.⁸ During most of his creative life he lived outside

⁴) Jakub Kolas, *Nioman* lines 1-8. *Naša Niva*, (1), Vilna 1906.

⁵) In addition to Keats, one should perhaps mention here Jiří Wolker and Lesya Ukrayinka. In the latter case there are many points of similarity with Bahdanovič — see the present author's article: "Lesya Ukrayinka in the world forum of poets" *Ukrainška Dumka*, (34), London 1963.

⁶) See Anthony Adamovich, *Opposition to Sovietization in Byelorussian literature*. Munich, 1958, p. 22.

⁷) *Muzyka*, reprinted in *Maksim Bahdanovič, Tvory*, Minsk, 1957, pp. 427-428.

⁸) All dates are given on the Old Style calendar.

Byelorussia, returning to Minsk only in 1916, and remaining there only a short while before proceeding to Yalta in a vain search for health. Yet these ten years were to set the feet of the young Byelorussian literature firmly on a new and outward-looking path.

For Bahdanovič, even at his most simple, is no singer of folk-songs. Even in a piece such as *In Winter*⁹, a descriptive lyrical piece, there is a richness of language and sensitivity to words that contrasts deeply with "The well-loved words of simple speech"¹⁰ of the early days of *Naša Niva*. Even in a light, occasional piece of this kind there is a new note and a new approach:

Hail, frosty evening, ringing, calling,
Hail, crunching crisp, soft spread of snow,
No snowstorm blows, the wind has fallen,
And freely the light sledges go.

Like phantoms, birches whitely hover,
Under night-time's azure quilt,
In the heavens, the stars shiver,
Frozen utterly, frost-chilled.

The moist moon from on high is shedding
A shaft, transparent and aglow,
And with silver cloaks is spreading
The blueing acres of the snow.

With sledges cleave the snow, good horses!
Gay copper bells, ring out with zest!
Forests and fields fly in swift courses, —
Till blood is boiling in the breast!

Until this time, Byelorussian poetry had served rather a utilitarian purpose; to the founders of *Naša Niva* "literature meant social protest rather than artistic expression, and their poems were rhymed comments on contemporary conditions of life. Their lyrics were simple, unsophisticated, and told of the elemental love of the peasant for his land."¹¹ But Bahdanovič's poems tell of a love no less elemental; the love of a poet for his art. He was familiar with the great French writers on style, and their works are reflected in his epigraphs: his song "Above the white down of the cherries"¹² carries an epigraphs from Verlaine's *L'Art Poétique*,¹³ while two sonnets

⁹) *Zimoi, Naša Niva*, (1), 1911. Reprinted in *Tvory* (1957), p. 47. This translation was previously published in *The Muse* 8, (2), Cathlamet (Wa.), 1964.

¹⁰) Janka Kupała: *Bratu u čužynie (To a brother in exile)*, *Naša Niva*, (32), 1910. An English translation appeared in *Backauščyna* (41-42), Munich 1958.

¹¹) Nicholas P. Vakar, *op. cit.*, p. 90.

¹²) *Panad bielym pucham višnaŭ*, *Naša Niva*, (21), 1910, *Tvory* (1957), p. 50.

¹³) "De la musique avant toute chose", Paul Verlaine, *L'Art Poétique*, line 1.

have epigraphs from Boileau's *L'Art Poétique*¹⁴ and from one of the sonnets of St. Beuve,¹⁵ respectively. It would be dangerous, of course, to assume that Bahdanovič had read and perused these works in detail. The quotations are of the kind cited in anthologies of famous sayings. It is significant, in this regard, that Bahdanovič attributes the sentiment "Scorn not the sonnet..." purely to Ste. Beuve, although the later himself states that this particular poem is "imité de Wordsworth." Similarly, in *Remembering*,¹⁶ Bahdanovič says:

"This day" — so once Catullus wrote —
"With a white stone I shall mark boldly",

recalling the lines:

"Quare illud satis est, si nobis datur unis,
Quern lapide ilia diem candidiore notat",¹⁷

the conclusion of, shall we say, one of the more outspoken of Catullus' *Carmina*,¹⁸ which he may not have known in the original.

Whatever the source of the epigraphs, however, they reveal the poet's interest and love for the technicalities of the creative art. Of the poet's task he writes *To a singer*:

Know then, young brother, that hearts in men's breasts,
As if stone-made, are hard, unresponsive,
Always upon them weak verse will be smashed,
Without rousing in them holy conscience.

From steel one must forge, temper flexible verse,
With patience rework it and ply it,
Then when you strike, it will sound like a bell,
From the cold stones the sparks will go flying.¹⁹

¹⁴) "Un sonnet sans défaut vaut seul un long poème." N. Boileau, *L'Art poétique*, *Chant II*, line 94. Quoted as epigraph's to Bahdanovič's Sonnet *Pamiž piaskoū Ehipekaj ziamli* ("Among the sands of Kgypt spread around"), *Naša Niva*, (25-26), 1911, *Tvory* (1957), p. 114.

¹⁵) "Ne ris point du sonnet o critique moqueur." (This quotation differs slightly from the form given in *Oeuvres de Sainte-Beuve, Poesies Completes*, tome I. Paris, 1879, p. 171, line 1, which reads: "Ne ris point des sonnets, o Critique moqueur!"). It is cited as epigraph to Bahdanovič's sonnet *Na ciomnaj hladzi sonnych luž balota* (On the dark smoothness of marsh puddles' dreaming), *Vianok*, p. 95, *Tvory* (1957), p. 115.

¹⁶) *Uspamin*, *Naša Niva*, (22), 1913, *Tvory* (1957), p. 205.

¹⁷) Catullus, *Carmen LXVIII B* lines 147-148 (107-108).

¹⁸) Some exact figures on Bahdanovič's epigraphs may be interesting: not counting epigraphs to his Russian works, Bahdanovič uses epigraphs from the following languages and authors: Italian (Dante, Giovanni), French (Verlaine, Sully-Prudhomme, Victor Hugo, Boileau, Sainte-Beuve), Polish (Żygliński), Russian (Fet, Bryusov (twice), Baratynskii, Fofanov, Pushkin). There is also one Latin quotation from Pushkin's: *Ssteny xz rytsarskikh vremen* (Scenes from the times of knighthood). See: *Polnoe sobranie sochinenii A. S. Pushkina*, Moscow-Leningrad 1949, vol. 5, p. 482. He has one Byelorussian epigraph — from Janka Kupała's *Z minuūšych dzioń* (From days gone by) J. Kupała: *Zbor tvoraū*, Vol. II, Miensk 1926, p. 225. This poem has been omitted from all later editions of Kupała's work.

¹⁹) *Piesniaru*, *Naša Niva*, (15), 1910. Reprinted in *Tvory* (1957), p. 102.

or in more cynical vein:

You tell me: the poet's soul, when it has given
 Birth and brought forth some wonderful verses,
 Is warmed by the fires of heaven,
 And then among men he the first is...
 Ah, thank you sirs, thank you for this kind oration;
 And joy to my soul would be certainly clinging,
 But sirs, I know this complication:
 Frogs also are skilful at singing.²⁰

Or on a particular theme:

No statues did Cellini hew
 But only statuettes.
 And yet he was an artist true —
 No statues did Cellini hew.
 In vain the triolet
 (D'you hear, sharp critic) you eschew;
 No statues did Cellini hew
 But only statuettes.²¹

For the triolet was a form dear to Bahdanovič's heart. In all he wrote eight poems in this form,²² varying the rhymescheme slightly — using the following patterns: abbaabab (once), ababbaab (once), abaaaabab (once), abaabaab (twice) and abbabaab (as below) three times:

Once I was gazing on the sun,
 And the sun blinded all my vision.
 What means the dark of night's abysm,
 Once I was gazing on the sun,
 Let all men mock me in derision.
 To them my answer thus shall run:
 Once I was gazing on the sun,
 And the sun blinded all my vision.²³

Bahdanovic seemed indeed drawn to the use of repetition; on one occasion he tried his hand at the rondeau²⁴, and he made various

²⁰) *Vy kažacie mnie...* Maksim Bahdanovič, *Vianok*, 1912, reprinted in *Tvory* (1957), p. 105.

²¹) *Krytyku* (To a critic). This poem was not published in Bahdanovič's lifetime and appeared first in *Hadavik Bielaruskaha navukovaha tavarystva*, 1, p. 169, Vilna 1933. Reprinted in *Tvory* (1957), p. 219.

²²) Excluding one triolet in Russian: *Nikolai Ivanovich!* which was first published in *Bielaruś*, (6), p. 21, 1953, and reprinted in *Tvory* (1957), p. 287.

²³) *Kaliś hliadzieŭ na sonca ja*, *Vianok*, p. 95, *Naša Niva*, (39), 1913, *Tvory* (1957), p. 117.

²⁴) *Uzor pryhaży peknych zor* (Patterns of stars, lovely and fair), *Vianok*, p. 96, *Tvory* (1957), p. 118.

experiments of his own in this field; both the simple, but how effective repetition of *Snowstorm*.²⁵

Wind beats on the rooftop drums,
Thunders on them, rings and hums,
Music ever louder poured
From the ball of the Storm-Lord,
Wind beats on the roof-top drums,
Thunders on them, rings and hums.
Now there seethes a wine of snow,
Gushing forth in foaming flow.
Wind beats on the rooftop drums,
Thunders on them, rings and hums.
In the street drunk wildness blows,
Booming, drunken snowstorm goes,
Wind beats on the rooftop drums,
Thunders on them, rings and hums.

and the subtler, lyrical approach of *Romance*.²⁶

...From that time forth, evermore I'd go gazing,
Upon the night sky, watching long for that star.
Within me a deep silent love for you blazing,
From that time forth, evermore.

But the time of our parting draws near, ever nearer;
Thus does our fate, does our fortune appear.
Deeply, profoundly, I loved you, my dear one,
But the time of our parting draws near.

Similarly, in his *Songs*, a collection of imitations of the traditional poetry of numerous countries — Russia, Ukraine, Serbia, Scandinavia, Spain, Persia and Japan, — he is careful, in his "Scandinavian"²⁷ ballad to write out the full refrain in every stanza:

Ingeborg, slender as pine-tree was she,
— So ever sings the wild gale —
She met with a doom that struck harsh, bitterly.
— We pity, we pity her take —

She heeded not mother, nor words father told,
— So ever sings the wild gale—
Her love was Askar, the sea-warrior bold.
— We pity, we pity her tale. —

²⁵) *Zavirucha. Vianok*, p. 55. *Tvory* (1957), p. 76.

²⁶) *Ramans, Vianok*, p. 33, *Tvory*, p. 52. A complete English translation appeared in *Collected Poems*, 1961, p. 63 (Venture Press).

²⁷) *Skandinaŭskija Piešnia*, first published in the 1927 Miensk edition of Bahđanovič's works (*Tvory*, 1927). Reprinted in *Tvory*, 1957, p. 364. A complete English translation appeared in *Manifest*, (7), London 1963, pp. 16-17.

Askar to a far foreign country did roam,
 — So ever sings the wild gale —
 Long left he his sweetheart to pine there at home.
 — We pity, we pity her tale. —

and so on to the end, although the standard method of printing Scandinavian ballads of this form — used, e.g. by Grundtvig and Sigurdsson²⁸ — is to give the refrain in the first and last stanzas only, and to print only the "story-lines" of the intervening stanzas. Incidentally, this insistence on the refrain gives the ballad a far more genuine "Scandinavian" atmosphere, although there is no genuine ballad analogue of the plot, than can be found, for example in the Ukrainian translations of Icelandic ballads by Ivan Franko, for in the latter case, although the "story-lines" are rendered in a generally faithful manner,²⁹ the refrains (following von Willatzen³⁰ are omitted completely, so that the whole mood and atmosphere of the ballad is lost. Bahdanovič, however, was fully aware that the essence of "national" poetry lies not only in its content but also in its form, though it is worth mentioning, in view of the present-day cult of the tanka, that in attempting this tight syllabic pattern, he was not content merely to count the syllables in an arbitrary and mechanical manner — the themes too are Japanese in concept, and the sense-caesura at the end of the third line³¹ (so often ignored in Western attempts at this verse-form) is well preserved, as in:

Ah, how the blue-eyed
 Bird is singing so sweetly
 In love's harsh torments.
 Hush then, little bird, O hush
 Lest I too torment myself.³²

or in:

Fragile wondrously,
 Scintillating, yellow-hued,
 Tinged with azure,
 The lovely leaves of autumn
 Covered the pathways with silk.³³

²⁸) Svend Grundtvig and Jón Sigurdsson: *Islensk Fornkvaedi*, Copenhagen, 1854-1855, cf. also Edith C. Batho, *Icelandic Ballads*, in *Saga-book of the Viking Society for Northern Research*, 10, (2), London 1929, pp. 165-187.

²⁹) But see the present author's forthcoming article *The Icelandic Ballads of Ivan Franko* in *The Ukrainian Review* (1), London 1966.

³⁰) P. J. von Willatzen, *Alt-isländische Volksballaden und Heldenlieder der Färinger*, Bremen, 1865, is generally accepted to have been Franko's source. See Ivan Franko, *Tvory*, 15, p. 577, Kiev, 1955.

³¹) J. Ingram Byam: *The Literature of Japan*, London 1929, p. 33 ff.

³²) *Ach, jak spiavaje*. First published in *Tvory* (1927). Reprinted in *Tvory* (1957), p. 369. The English version was first published in *Manifold* (7), 1963, p. 19.

³³) *Dziuna kvolyja*. First published in *Tvory* (1927). Reprinted in *Tvory* (1957), p. 369. English version reprinted from *SCTH* (3), *El Rito* (1964), p. 9.

This interest in verse-form led Bahdanovič, inevitably, to the sonnet. There is in existence a little-known article of his, in which he praises this verse-form, its power and poetic discipline.³⁴ With the odd exception of *In Vilna*,³⁵ Bahdanovič's sonnets are models of regularity; he uses the strict Petrarchan rhymescheme, and the pentameter line of Western European tradition, unlike Janka Kupała, who preferred the long hexameter line:

My orchard is set round with skeps of honey-bees
That sing like music-makers with unending humming...³⁶

favoured by the Polish poets, notably Mickiewicz.³⁷

But at this point, we must pause and consider if Bahdanovič was so devoted to Europeanizing and universalizing his poetry, can he truly be considered as a Byelorussian poet at all. Is he not rather a "world" poet, who by accident of language happened to write in Byelorussian? This could hardly be the case: had he wished, he could have written in Russian, and indeed on occasion he did so; there exist several reworkings of his Byelorussian poems into Russian, a few Russian poems to which no Byelorussian parallel exists, some critical and literary prose, and some translations into Russian from Byelorussian and Ukrainian poetry. But these Russian works form only an insignificant fraction of his total literary output: his language of composition and self-expression was Byelorussian, and his Russian works were little more than an occasional sideline. Moreover, the spirit of his work is Byelorussian. We need not go as far as the Soviet encyclopaedist³⁸ who denies that there is little more than

34) *Saniet* (The Sonnet). This article appears in Maksim Bahdanovič *Vybranija Tvory*, Minsk, 1946, pp. 204-205. It does not appear in *Ivory* (1957), nor is it mentioned in *Maksim Bahdanovič — Biblijahrafičny daviednik*, Minsk, 1961. I have been unable to ascertain the original place of publication.

35) This poem is subtitled "Saniet" (Sonnet) but it consists of thirteen lines only. As it stands, it is a Petrarchan sonnet that has lost its second (or third line). Thus it appears in *Vianok*, and all subsequent editions. The autograph version does contain a variant with the correct number of lines, but with a deficiency of half-a-foot in the second line. The thirteen-line version is reprinted in *Tvory* (1957), p. 510.

36) Janka Kupała, *Pčoly* (Bees), in *Zbor tvoraŭ*. Minsk, 1928, vol. 5, p. 103. This poem does not appear in the 1962 *Zbor Tvoraŭ*, and is most readily accessible in Janka Kupała, *Spadčyna*, Munich, 1955, p. 233. A complete English translation appears in *Sonnetarium — a chapbook of sonnets*. Ed. V. Rich and E. Harvey, London, 1962, p. 15.

37) Strictly speaking, since Polish poetry is syllabic, not accentual, one should speak of a thirteen-syllable line. But this corresponds to a hexameter-line with feminine rhymes in accentual metres. It is worth noting that almost all translators of Mickiewicz have replaced the "hexameter" lines of his sonnets by the more normal pentameters. Cf. Adam Mickiewicz, *Selected Poems*, New York, 1955, where all but three sonnets are rendered as pentameters and *The Slavonic and East European Review*, 16, (18), 1938, 497-507, and Adam Mickiewicz, *Selected Poetry and Prose*, Warsaw, 1955, where all sonnets are translated into pentameters.

38) *Bol'shaya Sovetskaya Entsiklopediya*, vol. 5, p. 348, 1951.

a superficial reflection of the "art for art's sake" movement in Bahdanovič's work, claiming that his fundamental inspiration is the "fate of the Byelorussian nation, the hard lot of the peasant", stressing "revolutionary" and "national-liberation" ideas, and citing as his "best" poems those which come closest to this somewhat artificial picture of his work.³⁹ Bahdanovič's approach to Byelorussia is far more subtle.

There are, of course, works of purely patriotic sentiment — the "home thoughts from abroad" of one who spent almost his entire life outside his native land. Thus, *In a foreign land*,⁴⁰ the cornflower, symbol of Byelorussia, bids the poet:

"Remember, friend, while in this rich land you dally,
Our own native country, so poor, far away."

Again, *Emigrants' song* puts into the mouths of exiles the poignant words...

"There are in this world such far-rovers,
Who believe not in God not in devil,
Who delight in bright banners high over
The ships that in ocean ports revel...

They have none to leave here whom they cherish,
For they have neither kin nor belongings,
They care not if they live or they perish,
On one sole aim are fixed all their longings:

To visit lands, so far unsought-for,
To taste there of fortune and grieving,
And to perish among the salt waters
Of blue seas where white foam is seething.

But we do not seek such a bounty,
It is not far lands we are needing,
We would not have left our dear country
If there had been bread for our feeding.

And in clatter and noise of streets roaming,
Where the crowd ever-restless whirls streaming,
We dream of the village, the Nioman,
And Libava with harbour lights gleaming.⁴¹

³⁹) Thus the poem *Pan i mużyk* (The Lord and the Peasant) is quoted among the best poems, although it is no more than an indifferent four-line epigram. See *Tvory* (1957), p. 199.

⁴⁰) *Na čužynie, Naša Niva*, (42), 1909, *Tvory* (1957), p. 152.

⁴¹) *Emhrackaja piešnia, Naša Niva*, (17), 1914, *Tvory* (1957), p. 228. The Nioman is the principal river of Byelorussia. Libava or Lepaya is a Latvian seaport, formerly within the Grand Duchy of Lithuania.

At times his poetry takes on the patriotism of national resurgence:

My dear mother, my own mother-country...
 ...Forgive, take back thy son in thy bounty,
 O permit him to die for thy sake.⁴²

But this mood is somewhat rare. The excesses of *Naša Niva*-ism are not for him. Let us consider one of the principal aspects of the movement — its attitude to Byelorussian history.

It had been one of the avowed aims of *Naša Niva*: "to revivify the entire country, bring back its former glory, revive that language which was once noble and respected, but is now used only among the common folk."⁴³ Which evokes the question: "what glory?" To the *Naša Niva* group this meant, primarily, the days of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania, in which the Byelorussians appeared, in the words of an eminent scholar⁴⁴ "as partners" and "whose princes then styled themselves 'Dux magnus Lithuaniae et Russiae.'⁴⁵ The Lithuanians were both less numerous and less civilized than their Slav subjects and hence it was that they took over a form of Byelorussian mixed with Ukrainian as their own official language of administration and also of literature." So the sober facts of history. Unfortunately, a vast complexus of legend has been woven upon this basis, not the simple heroic legend of the wars and battles of chieftains of *The Beheaded Stone*,¹⁶ but a whole academic legend that comes close to being accepted as genuine history and can lead a literary critic to such eulogies as: "Byelorussian literature of the *Naša Niva* period attempted to renew the historical past as a glorious epoch of its state and cultural life. Of all the *Naša Niva* poetry, the writings of Kupala contain the clearest and most comprehensive pictures of the past, both of the legendary and historical period of the independent sovereign principalities with their democratic order up to the XIII century, and later the period of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania during which the united Byelorussian nation dominated the other peoples included in the Duchy... By reviving past centuries of glory in the national consciousness and comparing and contrasting them with the wretched present conditions, the poet wished to awaken the national conscience of the nation, to compel it while drawing strength from past centuries to shake off serfdom."⁴⁷ Since there are, alas, no surviving contemporary Byelorussian records of

⁴²) *Pahonia* (The Pahonia), *Vol'naja Bielarus* (32), 1917; *Tvory* (1957), p. 263, lines 21, 23-24.

⁴³) See N. P. Vakar, *op. cit.*, p. 88.

⁴⁴) R. G. A. de Bray, *Guide to the Slavonic Languages*, London, 1951, p. 129.

⁴⁵) Hence Chaucer's "In Lettow... and in Ruce", *Canterbury Tales*, Prologue, line 54.

⁴⁶) Karuś Kahaniec, *Ściaty kamień* in I. Dvarčanin (Ed.). *Chrestamatyja Novaj Bielaruskaj Literatury*, Vilna, 1927, pp. 39-40.

⁴⁷) S. Stankievič, "Kupala in Fact and Fiction", *Byelorussian Review*, (3), Munich 1956, p. 43.

these centuries,⁴⁸ it is difficult to estimate the exact greatness or otherwise of the Byelorussian tribes or nation during these centuries, though it may be remarked here that a contemporary Icelandic source names Polack and Smalensk in a list of the principal cities of the world.⁴⁹ But indeed, no detailed historical knowledge is needed to expose this fallacy — only common sense and a little historical intuition. For the eulogy just quoted goes on to name Kupała's poem "On the Nioman" as particularly important in this regard — yet when we examine this poem we find a quite impossible picture for the thirteenth century — the prince is shown as a constitutional monarch, obeyed by his retainers, but himself bound to obey his moot (*vieča*).⁵⁰ In fairness to Kupała and to the *Naša Niva* movement, it should be observed that this is not a failing of Byelorussian writers only; even so eminent an historian as Freeman occasionally construed the eleventh century in terms of the nineteenth — consider such passages as "his (Godwine's) eloquent tongue could not always command a majority in the Witan"⁵¹ and "the fluctuations of success and defeat which he underwent in the great deliberative assembly."⁵² But Freeman wrote against a considerable background of English historiography, in which the enthusiasms of one historian were quickly curbed by the criticisms of his fellow scholars and critics. But the enthusiasm evoked among certain literateurs for the idealized history depicted by certain of the *Naša Niva* writers has, alas, grown beyond the level of rational evaluation — criticism of Kupała's picture of the past is no longer a matter of history but of politics, and to the enthusiasts this picture, however wishful, will remain as a foundation on which to build their image of Byelorussian statehood.

Bahdanovič, however, avoids these excesses. Once again, his is the subtler approach. In his cycle *Old Bielarus* he stresses the imaginative, evocative aspects; the historical details remain deliberately vague. Thus in *The Chronicler* he speaks of the old monk:

"Writing at a chronicle industriously; four years
He has copied all from an ancient parchment,
From first to last word of Mahileu and what passed there.
...And then, of all he saw he bears true testimony.

⁴⁸) The Chronicles formerly kept in the Cathedral of St. Sophia at Polack have not survived; they were either destroyed in one of the several disastrous fires which swept the city during the middle ages (e.g. the great fire of 1440) or else lost when Polack was ravaged during the Russian-Polish wars of 1563 and 1579. See V. I. Ikonnikov, *Opyt russkoi istoriografii*, vol. II, part 1, p. 535, Kiev, 1908.

⁴⁹) In Hauksbók (circa 1370) AM. 544 4-to folio 3 verso. For the origin of this material see Jón Helgason's preface to the facsimile edition in *Manuscripta Islandica*, Copenhagen, 1960, p. 19.

⁵⁰) *Nad Niomanom*. Published in Janka Kupała *Šlacham Žyćcia* (1913). This poem does not appear in the 1962 *Zbor Tvorau*, and is most readily accessible in Janka Kupała, *Spadčyna*, Munich, 1955, pp. 72-74.

⁵¹) E. A. Freeman, *History of the Norman Conquest*, vol. ii, (1870), p. 35.

⁵²) *Ibid.*

All the things that came to pass in former ages,
 What they thought and about what disputed sagely,
 Why they fought and how the true faith they defended,
 Through the paper all made known to their descendants.⁵³

But these historical events, carried down through the ages, like a
 message in a bottle found by fishermen, which are to
 "awaken all, arousing."⁵⁴

so that

..."men about their forefathers will learn and heed,
 About their woes and joys, about their mighty deeds,"⁵⁵

are left deliberately vague. He is interested more in the survival of
 the past rather than in its conscious recreation, and it should be
 remembered, when considering the poem *The Weaver-Women of
 Shuck* in the same cycle that they too belong to the past, for the
 Radziwiłł factory at Słuck where the famous girdles were made was
 closed down in 1844. This poem, set to music by various composers,
 notably by M. Ščahloŭ-Kulikovič, is one of the most famous of
 Bahdanovič's works, and as such worth quoting in full. But it is
 more than a lyric, it is a tribute to the dogged persistence of Byelo-
 russian culture which can absorb, engulf and "Byelorussify" external
 influences. Let us consider the first redaction of this poem.⁵⁶

From native home, from native tillage,
 To the lord's court, for beauty's sake,
 Luckless girls taken from their village,
 Girdles of gold to weave and make.
 Long hours of toiling they endeavour,
 Forgetful of their girlish dreams,
 Labour at the broad weaving ever,
 Where the Persian pattern gleams.
 Outside the walls, the smiling tillage,
 The blue sky gleams beyond the pane,
 And thoughts go wandering, willy-nilly,
 There where the spring's in flower again.
 There by the rye in the bright distance,
 The cornflowers shine with azure still,
 And waves of chilly silver glisten
 Where rivers gush between the hills;
 Edge of an oak-wood, dark in verdure...
 And hands, forgetful at the loom,
 Neglecting the designs of Persia,
 Weave in the native cornflower bloom.

⁵³) *Letapisec, Naša Niva*, (26), 1912; *Tvory* (1957), pp. 60-61, lines 4-6, 10-15.

⁵⁴) *Ibid*, line 30.

⁵⁵) *Ibid*, lines 31-32.

⁵⁶) *Shuckija Tkacychi, Naša Niva* (26), 1912, *Tvory* (1957), p. 64.

Bahdanovič too was to write in the "designs of Persia",⁵⁷ yet for him, tomb which still remained fertile after several millenia had elapsed it is the "native cornflower bloom" to which he returns again and again. The story, now disproved,⁵⁸ of seeds discovered in an Egyptian evokes the reaction:

Forgotten land of mine, this is your symbol,
At last thy people's spirit is a-tremble,
I believe not it lies in sterile sleep,
But that it will surge upward like a fountain,
That, rushing in a mighty, sounding leap,
Piercing the soil into free spaces mounting.⁵⁹

A recurrent theme in his work is that of beauty arising from and yet uncorrupted by ugliness — the pearl in the oyster,⁶⁰ the "sweet nest" of the swallow, where

..."from mud she has made both
The walls and the floor that goes under."⁶¹

This too may be interpreted as symbolizing the Byelorussian nation and language, bemired and yet untouched by long centuries of foreign domination. Certainly, it is expressed on occasion by a purely Byelorussian picture, the white water-lilies growing in the foul water of a swamp,⁶² and, at a deeper level, by the *In the Village* sequence of *The Madonnas* a passage which, in spite of its length, merits quotation in full:

Once upon a working day in summer-time
I passed through a village. In a dreary line
On both sides the winding narrow lane, the houses
Stood there, grey, decayed, like old rags, dull and frowsy:
In the walls their windows staring blindly back,
The thatch too had even rotted and turned black.
All was ruins, growing old, death had come crawling.
Only here and there was something still adorning
The village dreariness. The poppy still unfurled

⁵⁷) In the cycle *Songs*, there are two "Persian" stanzas *Ja ūsio zabyū na šviece* (All things on earth forgotten) and *Prazrystym pakryvalam* (With a transparent veil). For English translation see *Manifold*, (7), 1963, p. 19.

⁵⁸) For a refutation of this "legend" see John Percival, *The Wheat Plant*, London 1921, pp. 32-34.

⁵⁹) *Saniet — Pamiž piaskoū* (Sonnet — Among the sands), *Naša Niva*, (25-26), 1911, *Tvory* (1957), p. 114, lines 9-14.

⁶⁰) *Kali ū rakovinu*, *Vianok*, p. 79, *Tvory* (1957), p. 100.

⁶¹) *Hutarka z panienkami* (A conversation with young ladies), *Naša Niva*, (23), 1911, *Tvory* (1957), p. 103, lines 7-8.

⁶²) *Na ciomnaj hladzi sonnych luž balota* (On the dark smoothness of marsh-puddles' dreaming), *Vianok*, p. 95, *Tvory* (1957), p. 115.

Bright flowers like butterflies, where many colours swirled
 Beside the path, and with them made the soul grow care-free.
 Then, too, one might notice here and there a pear-tree,
 Crooked, gnarled with age... and that indeed was all, —
 But no one to be seen, no people, none at all, —
 All in the fields. No trace of bright skirt for a moment,
 No new bride passed with pails to bear the water homeward,
 No white caps of peasants to be seen, nowhere,
 No sound of colts' neighing echoed in the air,
 No sad song was heard, floating, ringing, flying...
 Then, how strange! There came the sound of infant crying.
 Hearing this, I started and looked round, alas!
 I'd scared a little boy... He crawled upon the grass
 Beside the path, on hands and knees, poor little baby,
 Towards his nursemaid — she a girl of eight years maybe, —
 And now he'd reached her and into her lap straightway
 He hid his little head, voice fearful with dismay,
 And, as the tip of a small birch nods in the breezes,
 The girl bent to the little boy to calm and ease him,
 And wiped his tears, and started murmuring to him,
 Exactly as a mother would. And thus within
 One living form the two mingled and merged together,
 The stature of a girl, the manner of a mother.
 At that moment she, childlike in form, and thin,
 Seemed sudden to appear filled to the very brim
 With some far-spreading native loveliness within her,
 And, I recall, my soul grew finer for an instant.
 But maybe in the girl it was not loveliness —
 In that thin, grubby, puny little girl expressed —
 But something higher which great Rafael endeavoured
 To show through the features of our Lord's own mother.⁶³

This passage exemplifies the essence of Bahdanovič's work — the loving tender description of Byelorussian life, neither wallowing in the darker side, nor refusing to see anything other than beauty, sensitive description yet simple to the understanding, an everyday theme, yet deep in philosophical content, and his wide knowledge of world culture not displayed for its own sake, but subtly used to relate to the general European pattern something that is essentially Byelorussian.

Maksim Bahdanovič had, in all, some ten years of creative literary work. During his lifetime he published one book — *Vianok* (The garland) — and various individual poems and articles in literary journals, notably, as we have said, *Naša Niva*.⁶⁴ Yet in those ten

⁶³) *U wiosci* (In the village), *Vianok*, pp. 107-109, *Tvory* (1957), pp. 126-127.

⁶⁴) Bahdanovič also contributed to *Holas bielarusa* (Byelorussian Voice), to the anthology *Krasavik* (April), and to the *Naša Niva* annuals, as well as to several non-Byelorussian journals.

years he raised Byelorussian literature to the European, indeed to the world level. Whether his work is an isolated phenomenon, or whether it set a new trend followed by his successors among Byelorussian poets is beyond the scope of this article to discuss: indeed, such a discussion might well be deemed premature, since it is not yet sixty years since the revocation of the Valuyev ukaze and the consequent rebirth of Byelorussian literature. But whatever the final verdict of history, one fact is indisputable; the work of Maksim Bahdanovic has made it impossible for the poetry of Byelorussia ever to be dismissed as a purely traditional and "peasant" literature.