

Punishment Without Crime: Belarusian Prison Poetry

BY

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*'I never saw a man who looked
With such a wistful eye
Upon that little tent of blue
Which prisoners call the sky.'*
Oscar Wilde, The Ballad of Reading Gaol (1898)

*'Stone walls do not a prison make,
Nor iron bars a cage...'*
Richard Lovelace, 'To Althea, from Prison: Song' (1649)

In Belarus during the twentieth and twenty-first centuries many people were punished with imprisonment for the 'crime' of resisting hostile political systems or defending minority national and religious allegiances: under the Tsars, when Belarus was referred to as The North West Region of the Russian Empire; between 1921 and 1939 when Western Belarus was under Polish rule; before and after the Second World War in Soviet Belarus; and, of course, during the authoritarian reign of Aliaksandr Lukašenka.

It is worth recalling that Stalin's purges of the Belarusian elite were more thorough in Belarus than anywhere else in the Soviet Union, with 90% of the leading Belarusian literary group 'Maladniak' subjected to show trials as early as 1930. As Andrew Wilson notes, during the great purges of 1937-41, 100,000-250,000 Belarusians were murdered and buried in the notorious Kurapaty site near Minsk (Wilson 2011, 205). For more detail of Stalin's victims see the comprehensive work of Lieanid Marakoŭ: Marakoŭ 2002-05, Marakoŭ 2007a, and Marakoŭ 2007b. This paper considers the poetry of those who suffered prison rather

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than sudden extinction, written (or in some cases memorized for later writing) in jail (here taken to include the GULag). The attitudes of these prisoners vary from defiance to despair, there are many comparisons with the outside world and justified anxiety for what is going on there, and, above all, a will to survive, not least by recording their experiences in literary form. They range from Jakub Kolas (1882-1956), one of Belarus's national poets, to some whose literary fame rests mainly on the verse they wrote about prison. An idea of the nature of some of the literature to be discussed may be gained from the following book titles: *Pieśni z-za kratai* (Songs from Behind Bars), *Turemny dzióńnik* (Prison Diary) and *Piluju vieršam kraty* (I File at the Bars with my Verse). Amongst the most common themes are, unsurprisingly, laments at the harshness of fate and physical brutality, indignant protest, defiance, and a renewed sense of patriotism. The main division here is between Belarusian literature written in the jails of the present regime, and that written in Polish, Lithuanian and Belarusian prisons, as well as the Soviet GULag.

Two very different prisoners have written eloquently about their experiences in the earlier period: Jakub Kolas resisted the Tsarist authorities and was promptly imprisoned in Minsk's main jail; his younger contemporary Aleś Harun (1887-1920) made the political 'mistake' of following General Piłsudski, and was for many decades completely unmentionable in the Soviet Union on account of his opposition to the Bolsheviks. He was exiled to Siberia after imprisonment in Minsk and Vilnius. In Kolas's poem of 1908 'Noč u astrozie' (Night in Jail) he is clearly bored and angry, comparing prison to the claustrophobia of a coffin or grave, although he strikes a more original literary note in comparing the prison corridor to the gaping jaws of a serpent; he also describes some grim physical details like the clinking *paraša* (slop pail). Here are the first two stanzas of this poem describing night in prison:

Ноч глухая. Ціха.
 Густа легла цьма.
 Дрэмле чутка варта,
 Цяжка спіць турма.
 Страшнай зяўрай змея
 Калідор глядзіць,
 І тужыць лямпа
 Свеціца, дрыжыць.¹ (Kolas 1961-64, 1, 70)

¹ 'The night is deep. Quiet. / A thick mist has descended. / The guard dreams, but alertly. / The prison sleeps heavily. // The corridor looks / Like the terrible jaws of a serpent, / And the lamp grieves / It shines and trembles.' With one exception, the literal translations are by the author. Jakub Kolas (1882-1956) was, with Janka Kupala (1882-1947), one of Belarus's first national poets and also a talented prose writer. In both poetry and prose he established several new genres in the nascent literature.

Harun's poetry is far more emotional, as he remembers everything he has lost, and laments not only his own fate but also what he sees as the punishment of all Belarus; he even asks his loved one not to write, because her letters remind him of a happier past, as we read in 'Jej' (To her):

Хачу прасіць... Найлюбшая, святая!
 Пакінь пісаць ты мне... Забудзься... Не пішы!..
 Каб знала ты, як мыслі аб няволі
 Пасля тваіх лістоў яшчэ цяжэй гнятуць...² (Harun 1991, 136)

In a poem called 'Pieśni niavoli' (Songs of Captivity) he mentions seeing fighting amongst the prisoners, a very rare or at least unmentionable feature in literary depictions of Belarusian prison life (Harun 1991, 50), although it is quite common in the stories of Russian writer Varlam Shalamov (1907-1982), for instance. Aleś Harun, a great poet, long unpublished by the Soviets, writes with a combination of vivid detail and eloquent lyricism about his life in Russian prisons.

Jazep Hiermanovič (1890-1978), who wrote under the appropriate pen-name of Vincuk Advažny (Vincuk the Brave) in 1962 produced an account of his travels, *Kitaj, Sibir, Maskva* (China, Siberia, Moscow) (Advažny 1962), followed two years later by what he called a contemporary fairy story in verse, *Kniaz i lapać* (The Prince and the Bast Shoe). At the start of a section of the latter called 'Sibir' (Siberia), he emphasizes the huge variety of nations in exile. Solzhenitsyn later did the same thing by introducing emblematic characters into his account of Ivan Denisovich's day (Solzhenitsyn 1991, *passim*):

Едуць, едуць не адны
 Беларусы-ліцьвіны:
 Там расейцы, там чужынцы –
 Чэхі, немцы, украінцы,
 І кубанцы, і армянцы,
 І эстонцы, туркестанцы,

 Грэкі, туркі... шмат народу:
 Хто каму тут робіць шкоду?
 Там пайшлі цяжкія весці:

² 'I want to ask you... My beloved, dearest! / Stop writing to me... Forget me... Do not write!.. / If only you knew how thoughts about captivity, / After your letters, oppress me even more harshly...' Aleś Harun (pen name of Aliaksandr Prušynski, 1887-1920) was one of Belarus's most lyrical poets, known only for one book, *Matčyn dar* (A Mother's Gift), which comprises poems written between 1907 and 1914. He sent it to Vilnius in 1914, but it was only published in 1918 during the period of the Belarusian National Republic.

Шмат работы, мала есці.
 Хто працуе з цэлай сілы,
 Веку хопіць да магілы.³ (Advažny 1964, 220)

Advažny was not only a brave but also a highly spiritual man whose later years were spent as a priest in the Greek Catholic community in Finchley, London. His verse is simple, written in rhyming couplets, very descriptive but entertaining albeit monotonous in terms of prosody.

Siarhiej Novik-Piajun (1906-1994) was first imprisoned by the Poles, then by the German invaders, and finally sent to the Soviet camps by Stalin. Indeed, he spent about half of his life in captivity. He was one of those who for most of the time had no writing materials and was obliged to commit his poems to memory, reconstructing them later in the already mentioned collection, *Pieśni z-za kratai* (Songs from Behind Bars), first published in the year of his death. His happy recollections of Belarus and memories of his lover shot by the Germans are combined with melancholy and a feeling of weakness and physical decline. In a poem of 1945 written in Yakutia, 'Z kryvi bielaruskaj' (From Belarusian Blood) he asserts that Belarus had won freedom and would be free for ever, but such wild optimism can only be explained by his long absence in various remote forms of imprisonment. Here are the last two stanzas:

Няволя моц духу нічуць не зламiла,
 Надзеi i веры агонь не пагас.
 Пазнае йшчэ вораг крывiцкую сiлу,
 Як прыйдзе расплаты апошняе час.
 Наперад iсцi незалежнiцкiм шляхам
 Наказваем дзецям i ўнукам сваiм
 Пад бел-чырвон-белым крывiцкiм мы сцягам,
 Пад знакам крывiцкай Пагонi святым.⁴ (Novik-Piajun 1993, 122)

Some of Novik-Piajun's passionately patriotic poems, including this one, with many references to Belarusian flags and other symbols, later became very popular

³ 'They go, they go not alone / The Belarusians and Litvins: / There go Russians, there foreigners – / Czechs, Germans, Ukrainians, / And Kuban' Cossacks, and Armenians, / And Estonians, and Turkmens, // Greeks, Turks... many people: / Which of them is doing anyone harm? / Bad news has come: / There is much work, little to eat. / He who works with all his strength, / Will live until his grave.'

⁴ 'Captivity has not in the least broken my strength of will, / The flame of hope and belief has not died. / The enemy will come to know the strength of the Kryvians, / When the final hour of reckoning comes. // To go forward on the path of independence / We shall show our children and grandchildren / Beneath the white-red-white Kryvian standard, / Beneath the sacred Kryvian Pahonia.'

songs – albeit not popular with the Soviet or, indeed, post-Soviet authorities.

Larysa Hienijuš (1910-1983), the only Belarusian woman poet to write verse in Siberia, was by any standards a major literary figure. Her life and fate, as is well known, were exceptionally hard. Escaping the First World War in Russia, and having returned home in 1919, she followed her husband to Prague in 1937, whence she was kidnapped by the NKVD in 1948 and exiled to Siberia in the following year. A poem written in the early 1950s ‘Kryvioj napoŭnilisia pojmy rek...’ (The River Flood-Lands are Filled with Blood...) gives a vivid picture of the convoy of women prisoners, where the poet feels like a defiant wolf, full of feelings for Belarus, emphasized by exclamation marks, although ‘they have thrown a chain on the nightingale’s neck’ (Ланцуг накінулі на шыю салаўю). Here are the first two stanzas:

Крывёй напоўніліся поймы рэк,
Бурліць адчаем слёз людскіх разводдзе.
Гляджу на свет. Я – лагернік, я – зэк,

Мяне драты, сабакі сцерагуць,
Дзікіх надзораў зграя нада мною,
І лоб штодня мой на прыцэл бяруць
Навучанья забіваць канвоі.⁵ (Hienijuš 1990, 288)

Another fine poem is ‘Ŭstavala sonca, jak chvost paŭliŭni...’ (The Sun Rose like a Peacock’s Tail...):

Ŭставала сонца, як хвост паўліŭні,
над мёртвым снегам тундры бясконцай,
дзікім пажарам на небе сінім
гарэла сонца.
Гарэла сэрца, як Зьніч адвечны,
ў дакор пагрозам белае смерці,
сілай і вераю нечалавечай
гарэла сэрца!⁶ (Skobla 2003, 247)

⁵ ‘The river flood-lands are filled with blood, / The patch of ice-free water bubbles with the despair of human tears. / I look at the world. I am a camp prisoner, I am a ‘con’, / Sentenced to a quarter century of torments. // I am guarded by barbed wire and dogs, / There is a pack of savages surveying me from above, / And every day convoy guards, trained to kill, / Take aim at my forehead.’

Larysa Hienijuš by the end of the twentieth century had become almost a cult figure. While still alive, she was visited by many of the bolder young Belarusian writers, and since her death several young poets have dedicated their work to her memory.

⁶ ‘The sun rose like a peacock’s tail, / above the dead snow of the endless tundra, / the sun burned / like a wild fire in the blue sky. // The sun burned, like the eternal Sacred Flame, / As a reproach to the threats of white death, / My heart burned / With superhuman strength and belief!’

Larysa Hienijuš, a major female writer, shows at least as much fortitude as the male prisoners in the face of appalling conditions with frozen fingers and ubiquitous ‘white death’ (Hienijuš 1990, 255-57). She also draws attention to a probably universal aspect of the life of political prisoners, namely the role of informers (Hienijuš 1990, 254-55). Her many poems about the harshness of existence in Siberia show both humanity towards others and indomitable personal courage, qualities that remained with her when in 1956 she was allowed to return to Belarus, although not pardoned. In connection with Hienijuš it is worth mentioning briefly a prisoner of Lukašenka, his former helper and later candid biographer, Aliaksandr Fiaduta (b. 1964): in prison he wrote a little book called *Amerikanske stikhi* (Poems from the Punishment Block, 2012) that contains both narrative prose and some verse. Since it is all in Russian and therefore beyond the bounds of the present paper, here are just the last three lines of a poem he wrote about an envelope embellished with a picture of Hienijuš that illustrate the very high regard in which the poet was held by later generations:

Гениюш...
 ‘Всё – не спеть...
 Строчкам – верьте’⁷ (Feduta 2012, 68)

Also beyond the boundaries of this article, but interesting in their own right, are the prose prison letters of the human rights activist and literary scholar, Aleś Bialiacki (b. 1962).

Many nationally conscious Belarusians in Western Belarus were imprisoned by the Poles, and four in particular described their experiences in literary form. The most considerable poet was Maksim Tank (1912-1995) who appealed for resistance in a rather muscular verse of 1934 ‘Nie zabyvaj’ (Don’t Forget), calling for (literally) filing and tearing apart the steel chains and the walls of barbed wire (Tank 2006, 35-36). The poem confidently anticipates future victory.

Valiancin Taŭlaj (1914-1947) was the poet who planned to file his prison bars with poetry, and was imprisoned for his writing, which, he tells us in his verse, ‘Ab maich vieršach’ (About my Poems, 1941), spies had compared to dynamite (Taŭlaj 1984, 7). He describes the act of composing verse as being in prison, polishing, for instance, poems like his chains (Taŭlaj 1984, 8). In the last stanza of his ‘Lukiškija vieršy’ (Lukiški Poems), written in 1935, he combines a realistic description of his prison spy-hole with the image of seeking freedom through his verse:

⁷ Hienijuš... Not everything can be sung... / Believe in the lines’

Глядзі ў ваўчок як дзень, так ноч, –
не ўбачыш, чорт зіркаты,
што я заўзята і даўно
пілюю вершам краты.⁸ (Skobla 2003, 312)

Earlier, in 1928, in ‘*Žadańnie*’ (A Wish), Taŭlaj had expressed (like Tank, with many exclamation marks) the hope that nature would smash Earth’s rusty chains and liberate it, as we hear in the poem’s last stanza:

Апошні волатаўскі ўзмах
па тых іржавых ланцугах, –
і Сонца здзіўлена асвеціць
Зямлю, раскутую ў сусвецце!⁹ (Таўлај 1984, 8)

In ‘*Apošniaje slova*’ (A Last Word, 1929), Taŭlaj also hopes his verses will be read on the barricades of resistance. Finally, in a sad poem written in Vilnius’s notorious Lukiški jail, also in 1929, ‘*Minuŭ astrožny dzień*’ (The Prison Day is over) he says that his plight throws a shadow on the gentle form of his poem, as yet another day of life in prison comes to an end:

Жалоба цень кладзе
на верша тонкі стан:
яшчэ адзін мой дзень
сканаў, як арыштант.¹⁰ (Таўлај 1984, 16)

Michaś Mašara (1902-1976), another political prisoner in Lukiški, in a simple poem of 1927 ‘*Hej, bratočki, z mur-zvanicy...*’ (Hey, Brothers, from the Prison Walls...), also calls for a storm to destroy his captivity, aided by prisoners banging resoundingly on the walls, like clanging bells, and pouring out songs of freedom

⁸ ‘Look through the judas night and day, / You fiend, sharp-eyed, accursed, / You’ll not see how I file away / The bars with my verses’. This translation is by Vera Rich (Rich 1971, 134)

Valiancin Taŭlaj was a communist from his teenage years who conducted underground work in Polish-ruled Western Belarus on behalf of the Soviet government, and for a time headed the secret opposition there before being arrested and imprisoned in Maladziečna, Lukiški and Hrodna. Later, his rather uneven revolutionary verse was found inspiring and widely translated.

⁹ ‘The last titanic blow / on those rusty chains, – / and the Sun will light up in amazement / The Earth, unshackled in the universe!’

¹⁰ ‘Sadness places a shadow / on the delicate form of my verse: / yet another of my days / as a prisoner is coming to an end’.

like a bursting thunderstorm. The mood, as in Tank's poem, is bold and optimistic:

Гэй, браточкі, з мур-вязніцы
 Мы дазвонім, як з званіцы,
 Чыстым гукам, новым звонам,
 Перамогаю – не стогнам.
 З вольнай песні, як з крыніцы,
 Льюцца сілы навальніцай.¹¹ (Mašara 1971, 6)

The fourth of the poets imprisoned by the Poles was Chviedar Iljaševič (1910-1948), who was nearly as short-lived as Taŭlaj; his verse was collected posthumously. Although he spent much time in Lukiški, he left relatively few poems about prison as such. In the verses he did write, however, like many other prisoners, he found night a particularly difficult time, dreaming of his native village and meadows in a poem written in jail in 1928, 'Daŭhaja, vastožnaja noč...' (The Long Night in Prison...) (Žyvica 1982, 68). In another poem, also of 1928, 'Na turemnaj hliebie śmiahnuć...' (In the prison earth will dry up...), the poet describes young flowers withering in the prison grounds for lack of sun, light and dew, going on to compare them to himself, also drying up and wishing blood would run more freely through his veins, as he longs for affection and life:

На турэмнай глебе сьмягнуць
 Краскі-кветкі маладыя...
 Яны сонца, сьвету прагнуць,
 Просяць росы веснавія...
 Сьмягну й я ў турме, як краскі,
 Жду, калі ўжо пабяжыць
 Кроў з грудзей, што просяць ласкі,
 Што жадаюць, прагнуць жыць.¹² (Žyvica 1982, 52)

¹¹ 'Hey, brothers, from the prison walls / We shall ring, as if from a bell-tower, // With a pure sound, a new tone, / As victory – not as a groan. / From a free song, as from a spring, / Our forces pour forth like a thunder storm'. Mašara described himself as a 'son of poverty and darkness', but after imprisonment in 1928-32, he took an almost apolitical stance. One of his best works is the narrative poem, 'Śmierć Kastusia Kalinoŭskaha' (The Death of Kastyś Kalinoŭski, 1934). Later he showed himself adaptable in his loyalties, including poems lavishly praising Stalin. His book of memoirs about life in Western Belarus is called *Lukiški* (1970).

¹² 'In the prison earth will dry up / The flowers and plants... / They long for the sun, for light, / They beg for spring dew... // I too shall dry up in prison, like the flowers, / I wait until there runs / Blood from my breast that asks for kindness, / That desires, longs for life'. Iljaševič was a talented poet whose life was cut short in a motoring accident in Germany where he had moved at the end of World War II. In addition to three volumes of verse, he wrote academic books on the Mamonič brothers, the early (1572-1622) Belarusian printers, and on the satirical and humorous writer of prose fables, Jadvihin Š (1869-1922).

The other poets considered here both belong to the Lukašenka era. Slavimir Adamovič (b. 1962), bitterly opposed to the regime, seemed to be asking for imprisonment when he wrote a poem in Russian, ‘Ubei Prezidenta!’ (Kill the President!), first published in America in 1995, in which he suggested taking a machine gun or axe, and then throwing the President’s severed head down a lavatory (Adamovič 2001, 10). Before that, Adamovič had already shown considerable theatrical courage by publicly sewing up his lips as a protest against lack of free speech in Belarus. In prison he described a hunger strike during which he apparently hallucinated about Woland from *Master i Margarita*, the novel by Mikhail Bulgakov (1891-1940): ‘Vitaľnyja haliucyjnacyji na vychadzie z haladoŭki (Greeting hallucinations on quitting my hunger strike) (Adamovič 2001, 39). Adamovič’s prison diary like Niakliajeŭ’s book, *Listy da Voli* (Letters to Volia), also contains elements of humour, notably in a poem dated 6 July 1996, ‘Nie hani purhu, načalnik...’ (Don’t Tell Lies, Boss...). This little verse is rich in sometimes comic rhymes with a splendid ending in which he anticipates his release, rhyming the word for ‘lie’ with the acronym for the duty assistant head of the isolation cell (дзяржурны памочнік начальніка сьледчага ізалятара):

І таму як ні ўсьміхайся,
як мне ў вочы ні хлусі,
скажа некалі: ‘Зьбірайся!’
і табе ДЭПЭНСІ¹³ (Adamovič 2001, 44)

Adamovič has several poems about the dreadful conditions in prison, but less standard for the genre is his letter of 12 July 1996 to another prisoner: ‘Malodšamu Sjaržantu Vitaliju, siadzieĺcu čačviortaj kamiery “Amerykanki”’ (To Junior Sergeant Vitalii, occupant of the 4th punishment cell). It turns out that Vitalii’s main fault is not his taciturn surliness, but that he has been arrested for stealing caesium, when he could, more honourably, have been arrested ‘for Belarus’:

Сядзіш за скрадзены цэзіі
А мог бы – за Беларусь,
маўклівы і негарэзьлівы
барысаўскі беларус.¹⁴ (Adamovič 2001, 60)

¹³ ‘And, therefore, however much you smirk, / however much you lie to my face, / Some day the duty assistant head of the isolation cell / Will say ‘Clear off!’ to you as well’. Apart from his scandalous activities, Adamovič is undoubtedly a very talented poet, author of several verse collections.

¹⁴ ‘You are in prison for stealing caesium / Though you could be there for Belarus, / Taciturn and surly / Belarusian from Barysaj’.

In prison Adamovič compares his life with that outside. The first stanza of the poem beginning ‘Kančajecca leta. Jablyčny spas...’ (The summer is ending. The apple festival...) ¹⁵ is a fairly ordinary comparison, but, as the poem proceeds, prison is seen to serve only to foster opposition to the regime. The second stanza shows clearly that the poet knows what is going on in the world outside, as well as reminding us that he is an imaginative poet as well as extrovert protester:

У вас там кажуць пра новы стыль
(‘Прадай Радзіму’ назвалі).
А мы тут гніём, як падвальная цвіль,
як брудная пена хвалі. ¹⁶ (Adamovič 2001, 79)

Around the turn of the millennium it was reported that Slavimir Adamovič, for several years in voluntary exile in Norway, was awaiting the chance to return to Belarus with great *éclat*, like the triumphal return to Russia in 1994 of Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn (1918-2008). What is known, however, is that Adamovič did come home for his 50th birthday, a serious age for a Young Turk. When all is said and done, he should be admired not for his extravagantly extrovert behaviour, but for his poetry and his great civic courage.

Uladzimir Niakliajeŭ (b. 1946) is a complex and ambitious poet celebrated for, amongst other things, his rich imagination and imagery. He is also well known as a candidate for the Belarusian presidency in December 2010, when he was severely beaten up, smuggled out of hospital in a blanket, and thrown into prison behind one of the KDB buildings on Praspiekt Niezaliežnaści. In late 2012 he was still under curfew and forbidden to leave Minsk, as well as suffering considerable pain in his back from the beating in 2010.

In earlier years Niakliajeŭ had used imprisonment in his imagery, for example, warning against slowing down as a form of unfreedom:

Бойся руху свайго запавалення
Запаваленне – зняволенне. ¹⁷ (Niakliajeŭ 1979, 93)

In one of his most striking love poems, ‘Tvaje vočy, jak vokny bańnicy...’ (Your Eyes Are like Hospital Windows...) he writes of love as a prison from which he

¹⁵ Jablyčny spas is a popular rather than clerical name for the blessing of fruit held annually on 6 August.

¹⁶ ‘Out there where you are they talk about a new style / (‘Sell your Homeland’ they called it). / And we rot here, like mould in a cellar, / like the filthy foam of a wave’.

¹⁷ ‘Fear the slowing down of your movement / Slowing down is imprisonment’.

must escape:

О кахання астрог!..
Кожны дзень я
Вырываўся з цябе, як з турмы.¹⁸ (Skobla 2003, 580)

A third example is a fine narrative poem, ‘Sarakaviny’ (Fortieth Day Memorial, 1986), in which he compares guilt and responsibility to prison walls:

Як цёмна скрозь! За мной, перада мною
Сцяна віны. Астрожная сцяна.¹⁹ (Niakliajeŭ 2010, 135)

But Niakliajeŭ’s greatest contribution to the theme of prison is the book of poems he wrote to his wife during his recent period of imprisonment, *Listy da Voli* (Letters to Volia, 2011), a masterpiece that on occasion bears some resemblance to his highly imaginative narrative poems, namely in the use of voice and dialogue (particularly with God), and the strange depictions of love in two of those poems: for example, with a Finnish bee in ‘Ložak dlia pčaly’ (A Bed for a Bee, 2003) and with a glamorous Polish ghost in ‘Palanez’ (Polonaise, 1999-2000) (Niakliajeŭ 2010, 201-324 and 167-200). Adamovič in prison reflected on sex and love rather prosaically, but Niakliajeŭ’s imagery in *Listy da Voli* is prodigiously complex. Early on, he suggests that the prison has become his wife (Niakliajeŭ 2011, 48), usurping his real spouse, like a serpent, and provoking strong rivalry between Volia and the prison:

Каханая! Цябе адну
Кахаю... А турма змяёю
Шыпіць, вяртаючы са сну,
Дзе зноў табе я здрадзіў з ёю.²⁰ (Niakliajeŭ 2011, 49)

He even begins to forget what freedom (*volia*) is for.

There are many instances of play with his wife’s name and the word for freedom, *volia*. Indeed, the main theme in this book, reprised in many variations, is freedom and its association with his wife. Before saying more about the bizarre love triangle of prison, prisoner and wife, it may be mentioned that when the poet is introduced to the other inmates he finds that most of them are ghosts of people who have been shot. Later he again encounters a cast of ghosts – secret agents,

¹⁸ ‘O prison of love!.. // Every day I / Try to break loose from you, as from a prison’.

¹⁹ ‘How dark it is everywhere! Behind me, before me / Is a wall of guilt. A prison wall’.

²⁰ ‘Beloved! You alone / I love... And the prison like a snake / Hisses, awaking from sleep, / Where again I have betrayed you with it’.

traitors and heroes, and, interestingly, the prison is so much a part of his being that it replies to the inmates' questions:

У сутарэннях – цэлы свет:
 Героі... здраднікі... сексоты...
 Яны мяне пыталі: 'Хто ты?'
 Турма адказвала: 'Паэт'.²¹ (Niakliajeŭ 2011, 51-52)

There is nothing ghostly about Niakliajeŭ's love for Volia or, of course, freedom, but there is much inventive writing about their mutual relationship to the prison. He regrets not making more presents to Vol'ha of 'словы як перліны' (words like pearls – presumably poems) for they now come to him as nightmares (Niakliajeŭ 2011, 53). The well-known rhyme of *dolia* (fate or good luck) and *volia* (freedom) is introduced, but, more alarmingly, he appears to have been the lover of both the prison and Volia and, even worse, to love prison as much as he loves freedom: a sparrow behind the bars of his cell accuses him: 'Ты быў каханкам / Турмы і волі, – кажа зноў' (You were a lover of / Prison and freedom, it says again) (Niakliajeŭ 2011, 61). He dreams of sex and of Volia giving birth to her name meaning freedom, but awakens to find himself in the embrace of prison, which, bizarrely, asks him whether it should fertilize his wife in a cage (Niakliajeŭ 2011, 63-64).

Freedom and God dominate the remainder of this cycle of poems. Freedom is not something to be loved but is necessary, like water, because of thirst (Niakliajeŭ 2011, 64). Prison and freedom are nothing compared to God, says the poet (Niakliajeŭ 2011, 67), but blood spilt for freedom is more valuable than any other blood (Niakliajeŭ 2011, 67). The focus changes from the individual to the nation when he suggests why his countrymen have lost freedom: 'Не любілі, / Таму згубілі' (They did not love it / And therefore lost it) (Niakliajeŭ 2011, 69). Prison plays at freedom with its inmates and the latter all find something to be satisfied with in it, compared to life outside (Niakliajeŭ 2011, 69). When the narrator protests to God (and such protests are familiar from Niakliajeŭ's earlier work)² he uses the word *volia* in the sense of 'will'. His appeal produces a damning description of Belarus, as God tells him what to do about the child Volia:

З ёй весяліся, плач... Няхай
 Яна палюбіць гэты край,
 Ці ўзненавідзіць, як спазнае,
 Што тут салодкі вінаград,

²¹ 'In the cellars there is a whole world: / Heroes... traitors... secret agents... / They asked me: 'Who are you?' / The prison replied: "A poet".'

Дзе не садзі – не выпявае,
 Тут застаецца братам
 брат,
 Які ў патыліцу страляе!²² (Niakliajeŭ 2011, 71)

Begging God for forgiveness, the poet concludes, apparently optimistically, that freedom survives even in prison (Niakliajeŭ 2011, 72-73). After all the wild and fantastic imagery, word play and theories quoted above, it is worth mentioning that the poet also describes vividly the sounds of misery and torment from within the physical prison, ending with an ancient curse that besets Belarusians:

І з дальніх лёхаў даляцеў
 Задушны стогн, жалобны спеў
 Усіх
 загнаных у скляпенні,
 Тых,
 хто пракляты ў пакаленнях
 Праклёнам даўніны сівой:
 ‘Бадай бы вам цягаць каменні
 Да дом чужы, а не на свой!’²³ (Niakliajeŭ 2011, 69)

In this connection it might be mentioned that at the start of his career Niakliajeŭ received a very flattering offer to publish a book of Russian poems in Moscow, but rejected the idea of dragging stones into an alien home, and, most fortunately, decided to write only in Belarusian.

Belarus's unhappy fate has produced a considerable quantity of literature written in and about prison. In purely literary terms the fantastic imagination of Niakliajeŭ produces the highest results in literary terms, whilst Hienijuš confirms the courage and suffering of women in prison, and some of the other poets, despite, or perhaps because of, their unsophisticated verse, convey more of the reality of prisons of the past than is to be found in works written under the present regime. The punishment of all the poets mentioned here was undoubtedly a heinous crime, but the literary consequences are always interesting and, in some case, of true cultural worth.

²² A good example is ‘Zona’ (The Zone, 1986), a remarkable poem about the Chernobyl disaster: Niakliajeŭ 2010, 117-27.

²³ ‘Have fun with her, weep... Let / Her love this country, / Or hate it, when she realizes, / That here sweet grapes, / Wherever you plant them, will not flourish, / Here will remain as a brother / a brother / Who shoots you in the back of your head!’.

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