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CONTEMPORARY BELARUSIAN PROSE:
THROUGH THE PERSPECTIVE
OF A LITERARY AWARD

Belarusian literary landscape enjoyed major transformation in 2012. Polish Embassy, Polish Institute in Minsk, Belarusian PEN-Centre and the Union of Belarusian Writers launched a new prestigious Award for books of prose written in Belarusian, which eventually attracted quite a lot of public attention to the books as well as to the literary process in Belarus.

The Award was named after Jerzy Giedroyc – editor, publicist and politician. Born in Minsk in 1906, Giedroyc was fervent supporter of good relations between the neighbouring countries in the region – Poland, Belarus, Ukraine and Lithuania. The mission of the Award was to honor his memory, to promote Belarusian literature in Belarus and Poland and to encourage Belarusian writers to step into the international arena.

Prior to 2012, Belarusian literature had been struggling through a “marginal” period: there was little common platform for readers and critics to discuss the literary process and for writers to make themselves heard (read) nation-wide. Labyrinths of a postcolonial society (two Unions of writers, two languages, at least two literary canons) were exacerbated by the government decision to create literary holding that excluded the writers of the Union which didn’t enjoy the favour of the official establishment (up to the point of re-writing school curriculum in Belarusian literature). The new and old, the national and imperialistic, the local and global in Belarusian literature sometimes ignored each other, sometimes co-existed not only in opposition: they overlapped and swapped places giving rise to literary “betrayers” and “fugitives”.

The new Award brought a breath of fresh air. Though it didn’t create nation-wide platform for literary process, it facilitated wider discussion, reshuffled both canons and brought readers from different camps to become acquainted with new authors.

To present the current Belarusian literature, the following paper portrays chronologically the so far six laureates of the Giedroyc Award (from 2012 to 2017) and points out some highlights of the Award.

Year One (2012)

In 2012 bookmakers predicted victory either to a novel about the contemporary artist and his adventures in Europe (*Shalom* by Artur Klinau) or to a documentary research of a Minsk period of Kennedy's assassin (*Oswald in Minsk* by Aliaksandar Lukashuk). Both are solid conceptual novels, offering highly impressive depictions of Minsk.

Surprisingly, neither of the books won. The Award went to a thin book of fourteen short stories that was to become the first laureate. *National Team of the Republic of Belarus in Secondary Sports* by Pavel Kastsiukevich is a collection of stories, made of what the dreams are made of, where characters do not even pretend to be real and the main character is the delicate Jewish-Belarusian intonation.

The author explains that the book is about fear, disappointment and frustration. Yet, it is one of the funniest Belarusian books I've read, with housewives-visionaries, desperate athletes and – my favorite – female smugglers outsmarting not only the customs at the Belarusian border, but life itself.

Pavel Kastsiukevich is an acclaimed translator from Hebrew and English. His translations of Israeli writer Etgar Keret proved to be major success. I cannot help the subtle feeling that Pavel and Etgar have a lot in common, particularly in how they grasp reality and where they make reader burst in laughter.

His most recent book, the novel *Barbarosa Plan* (2016) ensured him even a better reputation. It is a story of a therapist torn between his great-grandmother (and, perhaps, a hook from the past that still keeps hold of him) and a lover (an immigrant with no sentiment for her past hooks but with a new story of success achieved without remorse in the West). Some complained the novel was worthier of the Award, but it came too late: the rules of the Giedroyc Award prevent former laureates to bid for the Award more than once.

Year Two (2013)

The lauded poet and former candidate for presidency in 2010 (the candidacy was to eventually cost him prison sentence) Uladzimir Niakliaiev wrote his *Soda Fountains With and Without Syrup* in 2012. The novel portrays the reality of dictatorial society in the 1960s and in 2010. Yet, along with the real figures and relations, some events in the book seem almost fantastic.

In the story, young poet (the author's prototype) comes to Minsk to pursue his studies to find himself in dissident circles. They hang out together, play with the radio, challenge the society with bold fashion style, bump into Nikita Khrushchev

to end up detained by KGB and charged with an attempt to assassinate the supreme leader of the country. This plot caused a wave of criticism from Minsk readers. People blamed Niakliaiev for embellishing his biography: in reality, Niakliaiev's youth was far from dissident: he was a laureate of the greatest Soviet young Communist award.

Critics split into two opposing camps – some vehemently defended the author, claiming the novel is plain art and doesn't have to address real stories; others were sceptical about and dissatisfied with the degree of politics the novel contains. Yet, even in such heated post-award discussions, everyone admitted that Uladzimir Niakliaiev is a great poet and remains a poet even in his prose.

The atmosphere of Minsk is portrayed through a string of neat and precise images: a date with an ex-girlfriend thirty years after the separation, interrogation by KGB officers with a threatening syringe, chic youngsters laying their hands on smuggled bits of American newspapers. Considering the topic, one might expect this to lend some heavy reading. Yet the novel is quite light and dynamic. Rather than politics, it focuses more on love and betrayal.

The novel consists of three intertwined parts: the story itself, a chapter of documents and afterword by one of the book characters. Interestingly, the notorious Lee Harvey Oswald, Kennedy's assassin, appears as well, thus making it seem very realistic and almost a documentary.

Year Three (2014)

The third Giedroyc Award went to Ihar Babkov for his novel *A Minute* (2013). The book was subsequently awarded the Visegrad Eastern Partnership Literary Award and was published in the Slovak language in 2014.

Interestingly, it was only the first part of a large saga intended by the author. When in 2017 the second part appeared (*A Minute. Second Book*), it caught many readers' attention – now they had to reread the thing as a whole.

The first book begins with a real Minsk-based café Minute of the 1980s where three main characters – Eva-Dominika, Bohdan and Frantisek – are setting out on an adventurous and exciting journey to fight the regime. The book leaves us with their lifelines puzzled as their journey becomes unclear. The second book deals mostly with their despair and how they learn to come to terms with the new times, when they are a lot older, betrayed and separated.

According to his self-definition Ihar Babkov is a poet, philosopher and wanderer. Hence, his prose is a bit magic, shamanic and poetic. The rescue he envisages for his characters rests in metaphysics – somewhere on the crossroads of our lives and dreams.

Year Four (2015)

Viktar Kazko, a representative of the traditional Belarusian prose, received the Giedroyc Award for his book of three tales *Time to Collect the Bones* (2014). The narrator is a man on the verge of dying who is looking back at his life and trying to metaphorically collect the stones from his path. Curiously, the stones turn out to be bones.

Viktar Kazko received the Award while being already an established author in Belarus. He was one of the few writers of the Soviet era who continued writing after Belarus gained her independence. His prose has since reached deeper, acquiring a tint of tragedy and dissonance with the times. Some critics accused him of abusing hate-speech. In fact, the narration is on the verge of moralizing; the spirit of all three tales is apocalyptic, even revengeful.

Yet, the style is spotless, as is the language. Though it does not resonate with me and I cannot relate to it entirely, I find it to be an important and curious reading, an unexpectedly sad take on the 1990s.

Year Five (2016)

Max Shchur is a poet and an anarchist, forced to emigrate from Belarus twenty years ago after writing and staging a play about the death of a dictator. He found political asylum in Prague, where his real literary life only began. His novel *To Complete Gestalt* (2015), which received the fifth Giedroyc Award, was written in Prague, in Belarusian and was published in Ukraine. It is a seemingly simple story about a long trip to Amsterdam.

The main character goes on a trip during a hard spell of his life: he gets fired at the beginning of the book, he is an émigré, lonely, unable to remember even the illusion of happiness he used to enjoy many years ago when visiting Amsterdam. Hence, he wants to revisit the city to try to understand what is going on in his life and in Europe; and to track the trajectory of anarchist/hippy/beat generation ideas in Europe over the last fifty years.

Max Shchur's prose offers anything but smooth and convenient narrative. He doesn't use conventional structures for his stories. Instead, he sends the narrative into long and winding labyrinths, with particularly enjoyable dialogues and quite witty (let them be self-derogative) monologues. Again, I subconsciously put it down to the influence of Latin American literature which he works most with, being a translator, working with several languages, though primarily with Spanish.

Year Six (2017)

The most dramatic influence on the contemporary literary developments in Belarus, though, came from Svetlana Alexievich, the 2015 Nobel Prize laureate. The Prize made non-fiction popular almost overnight. That might also have been why the 2017 Giedroyc Award went, for the first time, to a non-fiction book, *There Lived a Speaking Sparrow with its Lord* (2016) by Zmitser Bartosik.

Bartosik is an actor, journalist, popular bard, and author of a collection of stories *My Black Pistol*. During his journalistic expeditions he spoke to plenty ordinary people from remote places in Belarus. Their stories about Belarusian history made this award-winning book. They are unique because they are confessions of people who have reached the very end of their lives. The book, although it is about Belarusian history, deals more with the soul and heart of human being than with an established line of history events.

The editor of the book, Siarhey Dubavets noticed that Bartosik walks in the footsteps of Alexievich and Dylan at the same time. He doesn't explore the "Red Man", as Alexievich did, but ordinary Belarusian people falling out of the Soviet system, whose life stories would challenge the accepted vision of the 20th century events.

Alherd Bakharevich, a category of his own

When the long-list for the Giedroyc Award 2018 was announced in June 2018, Alherd Bakharevich was declared the most frequently nominated Giedroyc author – the last seven years saw seven of his books in the run up for the Award. Three times his books received the second prize, and once the third. His 2018 book, *Dogs of Europe* is believed to be his opus magnum. A number of critics predict he will finally break the vicious circle of second prizes and become the laureate.

His latest book is an anti-utopia about Belarus and Europe fifty years from now. It has already made its reputation of being the most attractive anti-bestseller. One of the slogans of the book intriguingly claims: "You will never read this book". The volume of the book – it is more than 900 pages long – and frequent passages in the constructed language Balbuta would intimidate a hesitating reader. Yet, people increasingly see it as an intellectual challenge and reach for the book.

The dark metaphor, taken into the title of the book, stands for people of culture on the verge of disappearance. In as much as barking presents the last chance for a chased dog to feel alive, writing is the same for authors right before the end of their era, at the dawn of the one of hate and destruction.

Summing up this short overview of contemporary Belarusian prose, I can't help noticing that Belarusian literature of the last decade stands in between two extremes. On the one hand, there is the desperate and tragic barking of the "dogs of Europe" in Belarusian prose, with the bark growing louder because of the continuing authoritarian regime in Belarus, the Russian war in Ukraine, the end of hopes for the rescue to come from the West, and the rise of non-democratic tendencies in the West. On the other hand, Belarusian literature focuses on the traditional Belarusian longing for "home, sweet home". It features the traditional Belarusian ability to make home against the odds. Perhaps, the wavering between the noble despair and the archaic healing hope is inherent in Belarusian mentality. And it is this wavering, this fleeing form that makes Belarusian literature so beautiful.