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TOMASZ KAMUSELLA

AL'HERD BACHARÈVIČ'S *SABAKI ĘŦROPY*:
A BELARUSIAN *IQ84*?

Al'herd Bacharèvič is considered to be an enfant terrible, or even a “bad boy” of present-day Belarusian literature. The country's movers and shakers in the world of belles lettres grudgingly take notice of the sheer beauty and innovativeness of his prose and plotlines. But they choose to slight the author, for instance, through denying him the first place in the annual Jerzy Giedroyc Literary Award (*Litarnaja premija imia Jeży Hedrojca*) for Belarusian-language writers. Recently, Bacharèvič finally took offence – rightly so – and publicly requested that the autobiography on his youth as a punk rock star and poet, *Mae dzevjanostyja* (My 1990s, Bacharèvič 2018) be excluded from the 2019 competition. For Bacharèvič Belarusian-language literature is neither about securing a job provided by the state-approved Union of Belarusian Writer (*Sajuz belaruskich pis'mennikaŭ*), nor about contributing to the ethnolinguistic Belarusian national movement; currently quite suppressed in Aljaksandr Lukašenka's authoritarian and overwhelmingly Russophone Belarus, which is increasingly immersed in the unequal Union State with Russia (see *Aljaksandr* 2005).

From Belarusianization to Russification

Bacharèvič believes that writers are to write as best as they can in a language of their choice. This principle dictated his conscious decision in secondary school at the turn of the 1990s to start speaking and writing exclusively in Belarusian. At that time this language was considered an unbecoming “peasant patois”. It was believed that in Belarus one could be “modern and progressive” only in Russian. The author's parents and friends accepted his “peculiarity” as fascinating,

because he married it with avant-garde poetry (as a member of the irreverent Бум-Бам-Лит *Bum-Bam-Lit* literary movement) and unwavering loyalty to the freedom of thought (see Bacharëvič 2018: 59-87). On top of that all of the mentioned persons had a degree of passive command of Belarusian, while the generation of grandparents who had moved to Minsk after World War II still spoke it actively. From the perspective of the Central Europe of ethnolinguistic nation-states, it is normal that citizens should be fluent in the national (official) language of their country. Not so much in Soviet Belarus, where for the sake of making it into an integral part of the classless Soviet people (народ, *narod*), the Belarusians were *untaught* to use their language. Belarus is the sole post-Soviet state, where a minority – barely a tenth to a fifth of the population – speak the national language in everyday life (34% *minčukoŭ* 2020). Kazakhstan was on the same path to homogenous Russophone-ness, with a third of the inhabitants fluent in Kazakh, but this trend was reversed, so that now about 70 percent of the inhabitants speak this language. Unlike in Belarus in the case of Belarusian, in today's Kazakhstan a good working command of Kazakh is a must when one applies for a job in civil service or in the management of a private company (Aksholakova - Ismailova 2013).

A similar reversal of Russification of public life was attempted in freshly independent Belarus between 1991 and 1995 (Marková 2018: 33-35). A teacher who did not appreciate young Bacharëvič's choice of Belarusian as his sole language of communication and coursework might have him punished or even excluded from school. But the winds of history temporarily turned the table in favor of Belarusian and the national white-red-white flag, which the future author proudly brandished on his leather jacket (Bacharëvič 2018: 28-29, 41). After the 1995 proclamation of Russian as an equal co-official language in Belarus, his educational choices were limited to the Department of Belarusian Language and Literature at Maxim Tank Belarusian State Pedagogical University (Bacharëvič 2018: 115). Elsewhere, Russian remained or was re-introduced as the sole or dominant language of instruction. (To this day there is no Belarusian-language university in Belarus.) Subsequently, after graduation, Bacharëvič intellectually and socially suffocated working as a school teach-

er of Belarusian language and literature (see Bacharëvič 2018: 197, 245). Intermittent stints as a journalist for a factory newspaper's Belarusian-language page gave him more freedom, but the freedom of speech was soon over in Belarus (Bacharëvič 2018: 269-274). At that time he decided to devote himself fully to literature and earn a living solely by writing. When the repressiveness of the Lukašenka regime reached its new heights at the beginning of the 21st century, the writer was compelled to seek asylum in Germany in 2007 (Bacharëvič 2018: 263). But the West's fickle sympathy and support for refugees from the "last dictatorship of Europe" soon waned. Again, in 2013, Bacharëvič had no choice but to return to Miensk, if he was to remain loyal to literature as his sole profession. Luckily, after "winning" his fourth term in office as president in 2010, Lukašenka loosened – for a time – the screw of control over culture and the Belarusian-language intelligentsia (Al'herd 2013).

Against all Odds: Choosing Belarusian Literature

Bacharëvič's return to Belarus, swiftly followed by his second marriage to the Belarusian-language poet Julja Cimafeeva, reinvigorated his writing. In 2014, two volumes of his essays were published, alongside the bravura novel *Dzeci Alindarki* (Alindarka's Children, 2014). It is a veritable road and GULAG story of unrequited love to women and language, exquisitely mixed with the modernized fairy tale "Hansel and Gretel." This effort resulted in a scathing satire on state-approved Belarusian-language literature and on the state authorities' implicit decision to fully replace Belarusian with Russian in all aspects of public life. A command of Belarusian became a "medical condition" that had to be cured with Russian. On the other hand, the book is a highly readable page-turner, equally enjoyable when one has no background knowledge of Belarus for teasing out all the aforementioned nuances. Fittingly, in 2020 an English translation of this innovative novel was published in Scotland, but with all the dialogs rendered in Scots (Bacharëvič 2020).

In 2015, Bacharëvič upped the ante with the feminist not-so-fairy tale *Belaja mucha, zabojsca mužčyn* (White Fly, Men Killer). It is an unprecedented roller-coaster of a novel. The author pokes fun at the proudly continuing post-Soviet-style patriarchalism, which magnani-

mously designates 8 March as the International Women's Day, but keeps all the year's remaining 364 days as the almost never-ending holiday of machismo: women live only to serve their benevolent paterfamilias. In the book the current reinvention of this patriarchy in the anachronistic guise of "traditional Belarusian nobility" (*šljachta*) becomes the butt of ridicule. An underground group of feminist paramilitaries seize the just renovated castle-cum-museum (ostensibly, the Belarusian UNESCO World Heritage site of the Radziwiłł castle complex in Mir) and take all the male tourists and staff as captives, alongside the women who refuse any liberation from the shackles of patriarchy. Drunk Russian male tourists rioting inside and valiant Belarusian KGB officers (all males, as well) "liberate" the male visitors and their pro-patriarchy spouses from this almost biblical "female captivity", which for a brief moment afforded some hope for more equitable and inclusive Belarusian culture and society. The story is told by the male narrator through the lens of Gulliver's voyage to Brobdingnag. He found himself safe and fulfilled in this world briefly run by women larger than patriarchal life.

The topics of illiberalism as symbolized by the concentration camp and of relentless and unthinking patriarchy, as illustrated by the subservient roles of women, are at the heart of Bacharëvič's initial two novels, namely, *Saroka na šybenicy* (*Magpie on the Gallows*, 2009) and *Historyja adnaho z'niknen'nja* (*Šabany: The Story of a Disappearance*, 2012). These two books are longer (classified as *ramany* "novels" in Belarusian), much darker, and more avant-garde in the manner of story-telling than the aforementioned later novels (seen rather as *apovies'ci*, "tales" in Belarus). But both sparkle with wry wit and are a pleasure to read. However, in Belarusian and arguably in all post-Soviet fiction, *Saroka na šybenicy* offers the most incisive treatment of the shock of societal, economic political, cultural and technological change, as observed and experienced, from the early 1990s to the turn of the 21st century, by the inhabitants of anonymous "socialist quarters" of depressingly identical concrete blocks of apartments, nowadays plagued with anomy, inequality, crime and despair. *Šabany*, among others, probes into such an eponymous city quarter, the largest in today's Miensk. However, in this book, the author's attention is devoted to the dark and still unac-

knowledge recent history of this place, which used to be the location of the easternmost and third largest nazi death camp of Maly Trostinez (Maly Tras'ćjanec). Unfortunately, to this day, Belarusian literature remains silent on the wartime Holocaust of Jews and Roma. Belarus's official policy of commemorations is squarely focused on the Soviet-style militaristic celebrations of the mythologized "Great Patriotic War".

Individuals do not count in "large politics", but for Bacharëvič literature must be about real-life persons, not any "historical processes", "masses" or "great historical heroes", with whom Soviet literature and school textbooks of history are littered. Otherwise, it is no longer literature, but propaganda, not writing but "producing" novels in accordance with the official plan that requires five pages of a "literary work" per a working day. Bacharëvič is against this Soviet-style "productive character" of literature or its subservient role to the building of a Belarusian nation. Literature is about the discovery and creation of beauty, freedom, the unexpected and love. Nothing would do short of this principled benchmark. While in German exile, Bacharëvič re-read the canon of Belarusian literature, and sorted nationalist and socialist realist chaff from Literature with the capital L. In his *Hamburski rachunak Bacharëviča* (Bacharëvič's Hamburg Account, 2012), Bacharëvič gives engaging portraits of 50 Belarusian authors from the last two centuries, and is appalled to find out that only four women made it to this relentlessly patriarchal pantheon, namely, the first Belarusian feminist *Cětka* (that is, Alaiza Paškevič), poet Natallja Arsen'neva, the sole female member of the Belarusian government in exile Larysa Henijuš, and lyricist Jaűhenija Janišćyc. Subsequently, Bacharëvič wrote the unduly Sovietized and Russified Belarusian literature back into its historical and cultural context of Central and Western Europe, by closely observing it through the prism of Belarus's numerous links with Paris in his bravura essays gathered in the volume *Bezavy i ćorny. Paryű praz akuljary belaruskaj litaratury* (Lilac and Black: Paris Through the Prism of Belarusian Literature, 2016). Finally, in *Nijakaj litas'ci Al'herdu B.* (No Mercy for Al'herd B., 2014), the author spelled out his uncompromising understanding of literature, the role of the writer, Belarusian history and liberty.

The Question of Values

Yet, hardly has Bacharëvič's ambitious oeuvre been noticed outside his native Belarus, and even in this country only Belarusian-language readers appreciate his stunning achievements. On the other hand, many fellow writers keep denying this success and even denigrate the author for the fact that he singlehandedly reevaluated the Belarusian canon in line with his principles, and reinvented Belarusian literature in his own books, safely beyond the state's control and without bowing to Soviet and national sanctities. For Bacharëvič literature is a goal in itself, its value and importance to be decided by readers alone (Bacharëvič 2018: 153-201). Obviously, his famous two parallel essays on the bright and dark sides of the classic (pre-Soviet) and then Soviet poet Janka Kupala generated much criticism (Bacharëvič 2011a and 2011b). All public attention zoomed on Bacharëvič's analysis of how this poet allowed himself to be made into a soulless Soviet "engineer of souls". State-approved officials of Belarusian literature and culture could not forgive Bacharëvič this slight. They were unable to understand that each successive generation of poets and novelists must commit symbolic patricide (and matricide) in order to find their own way for the sake of reinventing and rejuvenating literature, rather than to keep plodding on in the well-trodden rut as boring epigones of a previous epoch.

This understanding of what the role of literature is Bacharëvič first put to test in his early avant-garde novels. On this foundation, he began writing eminently readable fiction, also thanks to innovative ways of story-telling developed in his later novels. In 2017, with these achievements under his belt, Bacharëvič came back to the literary scene with an unprecedented literary big bang on a European scale. My first reaction after the breathless read through the thick tome (which took almost three weeks, due to my initial lack of facility in reading the Belarusian Cyrillic), was: that is a European reply to Haruki Murakami's *1Q84* (2011). In spite of the Russophone everyday reality of his childhood in Soviet Belarus, and the post-1995 Russifying pressure, he remains loyal to Belarusian as the medium of his fiction, and actively reinvents this language by uncovering its Europe-wide historical and cultural connections. This choice he communicates with his spelling of *Ėuropa* in contrast to the Russifying version

Eŭropa in the now official standard of Belarusian. With liberty high up as the lodestar of the writer's values, Bacharëvič engages with the latest discourses of European and global culture and politics, thanks to his fluency in German, French, Polish and Russian. Some propose that these "dogs" in the title of *Sabaki Ęŭropy* refer to the "small states" of Central and Eastern Europe. I beg to disagree. Bacharëvič wrote this novel during and in the wake of the so-called 2015 "migrant crisis", when almost 2 million refugees arrived in the European Union, and half of them headed to Germany. But this number is less than a half of a percentage point of the Union's population of half a billion. In 2015 Europe was at its most prosperous and secure ever in history. Many more millions did much smaller and heavily devastated Western Europe accept and integrate in the wake of World War II during the latter half of the 1940s. That is why the more shocking must have been to Bacharëvič and like-minded intellectuals and thinkers the populist, racist and xenophobic reaction to the inflow of these refugees, otherwise so much needed by Europe's aging societies.

Literature is not politics, but behind the plot lines of his latest novel, readers can sense Bacharëvič's despair that the brunt of upholding these European and Western values, which he holds dear, seem to be resting now on his fiction. The bulky "shoulders" of the beautifully published volume *Sabaki Ęŭropy* become the infectious readability of this novel's stories. They are sure to uphold the endangered values without losing the reader to the boredom of didacticism. The leading immersive principle of belles lettres is *never* to afford the reader a space for thinking about something else than the novel's world divined into being by the writer's magic wand. Bacharëvič excels at this command.

The Novel

From the structural point of view, one is tempted to say that *Sabaki Ęŭropy* is a collection of six loosely connected stories. But this is a simplistic interpretation. From the temporal perspective, these stories are a history of the future foretold of Belarus and Europe (or Russia's antithesis). Hence, the novel is de facto composed from stories within stories, like Polish-Lithuanian aristocrat Jan Potocki's French-

language pan-European novel, titled *The Manuscript Found in Saragossa*. During the Enlightenment, philosophers and writers, like Potocki, offered a modicum of freedom for imagination, between the covers of their often banned, burned, and yet ceaselessly smuggled books in the Europe of absolutist monarchies. In *Sabaki Ęuroopy*, Bacharėvič smuggles back the very freedoms and ideas that make present-day Central Europe's paternalistic, nationalist and homophobic authoritarian leaders shudder. He smuggles them across the militarized frontier Wall of the Russian Reich of the mid-21st century, which had conquered half of China, India and Pakistan. In Story 6 "S'led" (The Trace, pp. 665-867), as once in the Third Reich, stereotypical guarding German shepherd dogs make sure that an unwanted traveler would not cross the border. This future totalitarian unfreedom is opposed to the individual freedom of a beautiful French woman-savant who makes love to her sprightly sighthound, if she chooses so. The woman-libertine published an illustrated diary of her amorous adventures with the canine lover, written in her own constructed language, which no one has been able to crack.

This last story of the book constitutes a counterpoint of the detective-like Story 1 "My lėhkija, jak papera" (We are as Light as Paper, pp. 7-169), which takes place in today's Miensk. A middle-aged schoolteacher, who thinks he is still young, befriends a student of his, who astounds the teacher with his facility at developing a constructed language, or *kanlanh*. This jargon word sounds almost like slangy *kanclah* ("concentration camp"). In the end, the supposedly opposed poles of freedom and unfreedom may be the same. Especially, if the worship of a language (for instance, Belarusian) or ideology (for example, the Belarusian nation) replaces real-life relations with other people. The story's team of two protagonists develop a language named Balbut ("Blah-blah"), but soon the student becomes the master of this game. The inevitable conflict comes to the fore, when an accidentally encountered girl joins them. Behind his teacher's back, the student comes up with a new constructed language to woo her. The teacher is unable to forgive this betrayal, as he wrongly thought the girl had fallen for him. In a police station, where the investigators detained this teacher, he is convinced that it was him who had killed the student. But there is no proof of his crime. At

home he unravels confronted by the constant dread of his ever-present but never appearing wife. Now she turns out to be a forgotten yellowed paper cut-out figure from the teacher's childhood. The expectations of machismo were too steep for him to scale successfully, the teacher never progressed beyond an imaginary paper love. Is the fact of not having been imprisoned and having your own language a real freedom?

The grammar and dictionary of Balbut is appended to the volume (pp. 869-894). Documents and sentences in this constructed language appear in the novel's various corners, including the poem that intervenes between the two initial stories, and across most of the text of Story 5 "Kapsula času" (The Time Capsule). English and German sentences pop up at times, also phonetically noted in Cyrillic, alongside Belarusian and Russian counterparts jotted down in the Belarusian Latin alphabet. Unlike continental Europe's academies of languages and literatures, Bacharëvič disagrees that languages' orthographies must be "periodically reformed" (updated). When he quotes a Russian text from before 1917, Bacharëvič uses all the letters and spelling conventions, which subsequently the Bolsheviks banned. The author believes that any "orthographic rewriting" of Russian classics, be it novels by Tolstoy or Dostoevsky, falsifies them. These two pre-revolutionary writers' works were republished in the Soviet Union in "modernized and revolutionary" Russian.

Story 2 "Husi, ljudzi, lebedzi" (Geese, People, Swans, pp. 173-295) is a fairy tale of the future, taking place in 2049, when Belarus had already disappeared in the loving embrace the Russian Reich. The country was annexed out of existence in the wake of the 2030s war against Europe, resoundingly won by octogenarian Putin's Russia. When Bacharëvič wrote his novel, it was just another flight of his unquiet imagination, though the fear of such a development became palpable after the Kremlin's 2014 annexation of Crimea. In 2019 the Russian mass media began openly discussing the "2024 problem". According to the Russian Constitution, following the second consecutive term in office, President Putin would need to step down, which is not an option. For a time there was no taste for changing the Russian Constitution, either. Hence, the innuendo contributed to many Belarusians' existential fear that the "obvious solution" to the dilem-

ma, according to Russian pundits, would be completing the “unification” of Belarus with the Russian Federation. This would allow for counting Putin’s terms yet again from scratch, because he would become President of the brand-new polity, namely, the Union State of Russia-Belarus, or this novel’s Russian Reich.

Story 2’s plot-line is loosely based on Swedish writer Selma Lagerlöf’s children novel *The Wonderful Adventures of Nils*. The story takes place in the border zone village of Belyja Rosy 13. The name refers to the Soviet Belarusian feature film *Belyja Rosy* (“White Dew”), which Bacharëvič interprets as the Soviet propaganda’s attempt for the underhand falsification of his state’s history and for facilitating the Russification of Belarus. In this movie an old shock worker tells his grandchildren the spurious story that the shared name of their village and Belarus comes from their country’s name “White Ros”, or *Ros* for *Rossija* (“Russia”). In reality this *Ros* was none other than the medieval polity of Rus’, whose lands mostly overlap with today’s Belarus and Ukraine. In Story 2, the village’s inhabitants speak “funnily” (that is, in Belarusian). Civil servants and officers are sent from Moscow to draft young males to the imperial army for the never-ending wars, which the Reich constantly wages across eastern and southern Asia. The imperial army teaches recruits proper Russian, and most never return home, either dead or enjoying a career in the empire’s far-away cities. Maŭčun (“Silent Boy”) wants to know what is there in this sternly forbidden West, beyond the scary frontier forest where people disappear without a trace when picking berries or mushrooms too close to the secret security installations. In the forest, Maŭčun chances upon a beautiful lady, Stefka, who is a Western agent, an unexpected herald of all the Western freedoms, now forbidden in the Reich. She befriends the boy, but eventually it turns out that Stefka does not really care about Maŭčun. He is a mere pawn in another game of intelligence agencies. The insomniac, always – day or night – clean-shaven Muscovian officer, who then lodges in the boy’s family hut, observes and follows Maŭčun. When he discovers Stefka, in the ensuing murderous confrontation, both turn out to be military robots. Frightened Maŭčun, embraces his beloved goose, and they fly away from this horror. They head to the liberation afforded by the blue sky. But a border guard spots them. The

boy is shot down, and falls down to earth, holding for his dear life to a goose feather. The goose is allowed to continue in her flight, guards are interested only in humans.

This goose feather of lost Belarusianness links this story to the final Story 6. But let us first turn to Story 3 “Neanderthal’ski les” (The Neanderthal Forest, pp. 301-514). Old Bjanihna (perhaps an anagram of *bahinja* “goddess”) is a *babka*, or a female witch-healer, another strong woman of Bacharëvič’s fiction. Her hut is located on the border between the two forests, the Anderthal one, where we all live, and the Neanderthal Forest of hereafter. She heals by taking evil, which she finds in sick people, from “our forest to the other”. Ailing women, men and children from all around Belarus flock to her for help. Bjanihna married three times and lost her successive husbands to accidents and alcoholism. It is a usual post-Soviet tale of everyday grief. One day emissaries of the secretive leader of new Kryvjja (an early 20th-century appellation for Belarus – derived from the name of a medieval ethnic group – that never gained much currency) arrive at her hut and propose a marriage on his behalf. Bjanihna, who could be Maksim’s granny, wavers. The emissaries kidnap her and transport in a car first to Miensk, and then to Lithuania. From the latter country a private jet takes Bjanihna and the kidnappers to the island of Kryvjja, or a Mediterranean toxic waste dump, located between Italy and Greece, which Maksim bought at a bargain price. The independent and exclusively Belarussian-speaking Belarus of Belarussian nationalists’ dreams is an authoritarian pseudo-monarchy. The few inhabitants lured to this political project suffer a serious carcinogenic skin disease. Bjanihna, as a symbol and latter-day practitioner of Belarus’s indigenous pre-Christian healing powers, was kidnapped to cure them of this unseemly malady. And she does, only to be turned into the pillar of Kryvjja’s economy. She slaves as a healer for rich patients from all over the world, until Kryvjja is taken over by Mediterranean refugees arriving in boats. Subsequently, Bjanihna is relocated to Germany, where she continues to be abused in the same role in the scenic valley of the Neander River, or in the Neanderthal in German, until she dies and moves to the *non*-national Neanderthal Forest. The story delivers a poignant #MeToo parable on trafficking vulnerable women in today’s Europe of human rights.

Story 4 “Tryccac’ hradusaŭ u ceni” (Thirty Degrees in Shadow, pp. 521-614) is simultaneously a burlesque and an ode to the ubiquitous *paket*, or “plastic bag”. Once, in the freshly post-Soviet countries, such a bag used to be a sign of the higher status of a buyer with an envied access to Western consumer goods. The narrator’s mum, who left by plane for Berlin, on saying a good-bye in the Miensk Airport, left her son with another unenviable task: to deliver a plastic bag with its mysterious content to a person in a peripheral district of Miensk. This phantasmagoric and repeatedly frustrated voyage through the closely observed sun-scorched cityscape and the metro underground of the present-day Belarusian capital brings to the narrator’s mind musings about a Nils who was shot down from the sky and about an oppositionist who bought himself a sea island in the Mediterranean. Story 5 “Kapsula času” (The Time Capsule) is also placed in the present but brandishes a temporal twist. A frustrated teacher, striving to get their students interested in something, develops the idea of a time capsule, to which all his class are expected to contribute. Among these contributions is a letter in Balbut, cited verbatim. This *deus ex machina* device links the novel’s present with the future.

Four decades later, in the Berlin of 2050, a dead poet of an unknown language is discovered in a cheap hotel. The motive of language making connects these two plot lines. Was the poet’s language in which he wrote Bluerusian, Greenrusian, Yellowrusian, or Whiterusian? The dilemma underpins the tour de force of Story 6 “S’led” (The Trace). The only trace to be followed is the goose feather tightly clasped in the deceased poet’s hand. Was the poet this shot-down Maŭčun-Nils of Story 2? Did the boy manage to evade the Reich border guards and reach the West? Inspector Terezius Skima’s job is to establish document-less deceased persons’ names, their obscure native language is often an important lead. In Europe they still care about such details, individual freedom is protected, and democracy survived the 2030s war with the Russian Reich. The Czech Republic and Slovakia are still EU members, but presciently Bacharëvič is silent about the fate of Poland. The future’s unisex fashion is dresses and skirts, as opposed to today’s ubiquitous trousers. The inspector’s mythological name of gender-shifting Tiresias symbolizes

the freedom to love and having sex with whomever one wants, provided that the other person consents. Not all is so easy, because in Berlin's Turkish district male shopkeepers in respectfully long dresses disapprove of Skima's short skirt and plunging neckline that shows his chest hair. However, the inspector's sartorial taste is appreciated by his female acquaintances, who tend to borrow Skima's clothes.

It is a Europe of (a)social media and electronic communications, where the environment-unfriendly employment of paper for printing is a thing of the distant past. Only few weirdos trade in old dusty clumps of moldy paper, which are supposedly to be known by the antiquated name of "books". Some of these harmless eccentrics even produce brand-new books of poetry. The search for any clues about the dead poet leads Skima to the unhygienic and hard to fathom netherworld of few surviving bookshops. He travels hectically, taking Eurocity trains, to Hamburg, Paris, Prague and Bratislava, or in other words, to Bacharëvič's beloved Central European cities of culture and literature. The dead poet wrote in Belarusian, which was unlike the Reich's Russian, so the market was limited. A bookseller interested in publishing his poems encouraged the poet to translate his poetry into another language. The author followed this wise advice, and translated some poems into Balbut, which commercially speaking was not of much help, either. However, this clue allows Skima to direct his search to Minsk (now not Miensk any longer), or the Reich's western capital. The neoimperial Russia of one truth, one leader, one language and homophobia is not to the inspector's liking. His is the Europe of Gulliver and Nils, of works written by Dadaists, Nabokov, Stein, Joyce, Woolf, Kafka, (the imaginary) von Schtukar, Sylvia Beach, Chadasevič and Mandel'stam. Should such Europe be no more, it is necessary for Skima and Bacharëvič to (re)invent this continent of culture, liberty and solidarity, so as not to go mad and fall for the poisonous lure of the "hetero-orthodoxy" of the Russian Reich of the Third Rome, the racial purity of the Third Reich, or for the Middle Reich of China's wool-over-the-eyes made from colorful hi-tech nothings.

Non-reception in the West, Shunned in Authoritarian Belarus

Unfortunately, Western publishing houses and reviewers have not taken a proper note of this Belarusian-cum-European *IQ84*. However, the book found its way to the Russian audience. Whatever Bacharëvič may think of the Russian language, its close to 200 million speakers constitute an opportunity that should not be missed. The writer translated his opus magnum into Russian, and in 2019 *Sobaki Evropy* was released in Moscow (Bacharevič 2019). The Russian translation was included in the short list of Russia's prestigious Big Book (*Bol'shaja Kniga*) literary award, but did not win the author any accolade. It appears that Bacharëvič's big novel turned out to be "too Western" and "un-Russian" to Russian readers' and critics' tastes.

In a way, Bacharëvič steps in the shoes of his famous compatriots. Early in his career, Vasil' Bykaŭ heard a low opinion about his novel translated into Russian. He read this translation and was appalled how cavalierly the translator had misinterpreted intended meanings and subtle turns of phrase. In the postwar Soviet Union, fiction and poetry composed in the union republics' national languages had to be first published in Russian translations, before the originals could even come off the press. Little attention was lavished on such translations beyond paying lip service to the interethnic friendship of the Soviet peoples. Socialist "literary" production mattered more than any literary considerations.

Bykaŭ would not have it. This giant of 20th-century Belarusian and Soviet literature harnessed himself to translating his own voluminous writings into Russian, so their beauty would not be lost in the run of the Soviet literary mill (Navicki 2011). Facing such odds, S'vjatlana Aleksievič chose to write exclusively in Russian. Her compassionate portrayals of the 20th-century personal tragedies of the Soviet people retold in their own words earned her a Nobel Prize in literature. That is why, across the world, she is better known under the Russian version of her name, as Svetlana Aleksievič. Young Lukašenka hounded old Bykaŭ out from Belarus into exile (Astapenia 2013). Now old Lukašenka makes his best not to notice Aleksievič and to marginalize her. She criticizes the strongman as Bykaŭ used

to, so the Nobel laureate also had to leave Belarus in the wake of the 2020 protests (*Svetlana* 2020).

Writers are free to write in today's Belarus only if they keep to writing, and – importantly – stay away from politics. After returning from German exile in Hamburg, Bacharëvič toed this tolerated middle route earmarked for independent Belarusian intellectuals who want no trouble with the authorities. But he was unable not to side with Belarus's White Revolution of Dignity in 2020. Bacharëvič issued statements in support of the pro-democracy protests and actively joined them (*Al'herd* 2020). In December 2020 the novelist left or had to leave for Innsbruck in Austria (*Autoren-Paar* 2020). He published an incisive essay on the rhetorical uses and realities of fascism nowadays, which was immediately translated into English, German and Swedish (Bacharëvič 2021a). Unless democracy returns to Belarus, this may be his another stint of exile abroad. Meanwhile, the Belarusian customs office “arrested” the entire run of the second edition of *Sabaki Eŭropy* and keep checking whether this novel might be “extremist” (Proverjat 2021). It appears that no new books by Bacharëvič will be allowed to be published in authoritarian Belarus. The writer does not despair, and has just released two new novels online (Bacharëvič 2021b and 2021c).

However, whatever the situation in Belarus may be, with time, translations into other languages will follow the Russian translations of Bacharëvič's brilliant novels, as earlier in the case of Bykaŭ. Keeping the nerve is a must until this moment, which seems to lie in not too distant a future, somewhen in the mid-2020s. Or a decade before the 2030s war between the Russian Reich and Europe (as prophesized in *Sabaki Eŭropy*). In 2030 the writer will turn only 55. So let him enjoy the hard-earned fame for longer. Bacharëvič well deserves it for all the literary and artistic pleasures that the writer magically conjures with each of his books.

October 2019, March 2021 and July 2021

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Cani d'Europa di Al'herd Bacharëvič: un 1Q84 bielorusso?

L'articolo presenta una riflessione su *Cani d'Europa* (2017), l'opera maggiore di Al'herd Bacharëvič, una riflessione che si apre con un'introduzione sulla biografia e sulla carriera letteraria dell'autore. Entrambe si sono sviluppate intrecciandosi con la storia della Bielorussia tardo-sovietica, democratica post-sovietica e autoritaria di oggi e con il destino della lingua bielorusca, soppressa nell'Unione Sovietica, rianimata nella prima metà degli anni '90 e ora nuovamente emarginata. Il romanzo in

questione riguarda tanto il momento presente e il futuro della Bielorussia e dei bielorussi, quanto l'Europa delle libertà individuali e la sua antitesi nella forma dell'autoritario *Reich* russo. La lingua bielorusa e la capacità di fare scelte individuali sono indicativi della democrazia e delle libertà civili, completamente soppresse nell'odierna Bielorussia e Russia.

Keywords: Belarusian literature, Belarusian novel, Belarusian language, European fiction, Al'herd Bacharèvič.

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