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New York and Homesickness in Ryhor Krušyna's Poetry



The image of New York in poetry, as well as the city itself as a fertile breeding ground for cultural, social and literary movements, can hardly be considered a novel idea. Having been the capital of the United States of America from 1785 to 1790 and perhaps the most prominent port of entry for overseas immigrants to the country, New York has been home to elites and workers, hipsters and street gangs, poets and bankers alike, welcoming and intimidating foreign creators equally.

In regards to the development of modern poetry, first of all, we can link the New York literary scene to the relationship between the European and the American avant-garde, as, “within French Symbolism, ostensibly the origin of European avant-garde, we have a number of key concepts which feed into [...] the avant-garde tendencies in the New York School”¹. This, of course, means that European avant-garde is not, at large, a direct predecessor variant of the avant-garde that appeared within the context of the New York School in the 1950s; on the

¹ W. WATKIN, *In the Process of Poetry. The New York School and the Avant-Garde*, Lewisburg 2001, p. 23.

contrary, both of these literary currents, though mutually influencing each other, instead share a common predecessor: French Symbolist poetry. One could argue that French Symbolist poetry directly enables New York's literary autonomy and significance without detriment to its cultural ties to certain European sources.

That is not to say that New York as a creative context is devoid of purely American phenomena (read, literary movements and personalities that uniquely reflect the mixed, far from European colonial principles, and relatively newly formed culture of the United States). A very eloquent example of this can be found in the Nuyorican Poets Café, which began operating in the 1970s as a hub for New York-based (or born) poets of Puerto Rican origin. According to its own webpage:

A multicultural and multi-arts institution, the Café gives voice to a diverse group of rising poets, actors, filmmakers and musicians. The Café champions the use of poetry, jazz, theater, hip-hop and spoken word as means of social empowerment for minority and underprivileged artists. Our community of spectators, artists and students is a reflection of New York City's diverse population².

Thus, since its founding in 1973, the organization has fostered and developed a completely mestizo – and quintessentially New Yorker – approach to the arts, especially of poetry in its most varied, multimedia form.

Of course, New York's literary *métissage* has always included older and newer diasporas that gradually settled in the city, as well a number of illustrious visiting artists who have arguably left as much of an imprint in the city's cultural landscape as it, itself, has left on them. The most prominent example of this phenomenon is, most likely, Federico García Lorca's poetry collection *A Poet in New York*, which reflects the peak of the Spanish poet's surrealist period together with a chaotic, yet inspiring image of the Big Apple, affected by both the Great Crash of 1929 and the loneliness-inducing landscapes of the city, as we can see in this fragment, belonging to the *Poems about solitude at Columbia University* series: "Asesinado por el cielo,/ entre las formas que van hacia la sierpe/ y las formas que buscan el cristal/ dejaré caer mis cabellos" ("Slain by the sky,/ amongst the forms that go towards the snake/ and the forms that look for the crystal/ I shall let my hair down")³.

Like Lorca, Ryhor Krušyna's New York poetry echoes the thematic problems of solitude and alienation, though greatly contrasts with Lorca's; Krušyna's more conservative approach is deeply rooted in Belarusian popular poetry. However, New York remains a conceptual frame, both in terms of the city attracting and im-

² *Nuyorican Poets Cafe. History and Awards*, nuyorican.org/history-awards [23.05.2022].

³ F. GARCÍA LORCA, *Poeta en Nueva York*, cervantesvirtual.com/obra-visor/poeta-en-nueva-york-785140/html/a17d2a80-fa3c-40bd-b333-4d82ae223500_2.html#I_2_ [25.05.2022].

pulsing the development of new literary currents, and its landscape becoming the backdrop of the poetic apparatus of Ryhor Krušyna, amongst others. Moreover, we should note that the poet's own biographic background is no less important in the context of his literary creation.

Ryhor Krušyna⁴ (legal name: Ryhor Kazak) was born on 20 November 1907 (3 December, according to the Gregorian calendar) in the village of Biaźvierchavičy, in the Śluck poviat of the Minsk gubernia, in the territory of present-day Belarus, then controlled by the Russian Empire. He spent his early childhood years between the Śluck area and Vilna, but his family moved to Ryazan (Russia) in 1914, coming back to the Śluck poviat once the First World War was over. Young Krušyna's higher education and activism both began in 1924, when he took up general education courses in Śluck and started his work in the area of Belarusian studies. He began his studies at the Belarusian Pedagogical Technical School in Minsk in 1925, suffering his first arrest, together with his younger brother Mikoła, the very same year. He was released, and entered the Maxim Tank Belarusian State Pedagogical University in 1927. He became a member of the *Maladniak* Literary Union the same year.

It is worth mentioning that *Maladniak* gathered:

the best literary forces, talented Belarusian writers and poets [who] took part in [its] creation [...] and later formed its leadership. The names of U. Dubouka, M. Zarecki, K. Krapiva [...] and many others are now at the top of the list of the best representatives of the national literature and its classics, whose talent would only become stronger over the following century⁵.

From an ideological point of view, which is no less important in the context of the Belarus of the era, *Maladniak* had the objective "to give life to the ideas of materialism, marxism and leninism within Belarusian artistic creation"⁶. This sincere dedication to the new ideals of communism was not, nevertheless, enough to ensure Ryhor Krušyna and many other members the favor of the Party in the long

⁴ Ryhor Krušyna's short biography is written on the basis of: Л. МАКАРОЎ, *Рэпрэсаваныя літаратары, навукоўцы, работнікі асветы, грамадскія і культурныя дзеячы Беларусі. 1794–1991*, vol. I, marakou.by/by/davedniki/represavanyya-litaratary/tom-i/index_19569.html [26.05.2022].

⁵ Н. Зубчонак, *Дзейнасць часопіса „Маладняк” у кантэксце сучаснай трансфармацыі СМІ*, [in:] *Международная журналистика 2017. Идея интеграции интеграций и медиа. Материалы VI Международной научно-практической конференции*, Минск, 16 II 2017 г., eds. Б.Л. ЗАЛЕССКИЙ, Т.Н. ДАСАЕВА, Минск 2017, p. 120–123.

⁶ Т. ЛАЎРЫК, «Знаем – намі пройдзеных пучін не забыць, ня знішчыць, не закрэсьліць...», *zviazda.by/be/news/20190304/1551703724-znaem-nami-proydzennyh-pucin-ne-zabyt-nya-znishchyt-ne-zakreslic* [26.05.2022].

term. Krušyna published a series of poetry collections during the 1930s, including some serialized works in periodical publications that were released illegally under occupation, but he lived in Germany from 1944, working for the Munich editorial team of Radio Liberty in the 1950s and 1960s, and later emigrated to the United States. He went on to edit several literary periodicals and publish seven more lyrical anthologies in Munich and New York. Ryhor Krušyna worked in several other literary and journalistic genres, also releasing narrative poems, short stories and literary criticism articles. Concerning the formal and content aspects of his poetry, Krušyna was quick to leave Soviet literary standards behind, embracing the principles of freedom of speech, literature's independence from politics, as well as the image of the "poet in exile": a free artist with a broken heart. The author later took a liking to experimenting with classical and international poetry forms (sonnets, tercets, but also Turkic tuyugs and Sino-Japanese haikus, among others). The poems in the cycle *Lyric from the Big City* which we are about to analyze, nevertheless, are still very much based upon the formal principles of Belarusian oral literature and popular poetry, although their imagery already shows Ryhor Krušyna's growth into a more refined, conceptual kind of literary art.

The poetry cycle *Lyric from the Big City* (*Лірыка зь вялікага места* – in the original Belarusian) is composed of a total of nine poems written between 1953 and 1955 in its first version, published in the literary almanac *Next to foreign shores* (1955); its second version, published within the 1957 tome *Best works*, gathers a total of 15 lyrical works, including some later poems (written up to 1957, the anthology's year of publication), and excluding the long, three-part narrative poem that closed the first version of the cycle, *Cantata of the lonely*. We have taken into account both versions of the cycle in order to categorize and analyze the main elements of Krušyna's symbolic apparatus, using examples from the texts to illustrate our observations.

After a thorough reading of *Lyric from the Big City*, we have chosen to differentiate six main categories that make up the author's poetic view of New York within the cycle: two of them – the concept of distance and the landscape contrasts between the city and Krušyna's native land – are geographically based; another three – the mother, the lover, and the poet's lyrical persona as an artist in exile – are, on the other hand, character-based; lastly, special attention has been paid to a mixed element, the correlation between the moods of the poetic voice – most of all melancholy and homesickness – and the elements of nature and urbanization that surround them.

Ryhor Krušyna's poetry cycle is structured around the poet's feelings of displacement that stem from his absence and homesickness towards his motherland and the unfamiliarity and remoteness of New York, the city that inspired the poems in the first place. Thus, it is not surprising to see that the sheer geographical

distance between the two places, as well as the stark contrasts between their landscapes, are pivotal elements of these literary texts.

The feeling of unsurmountable distance from home permeates Ryhor Krušyna's verse throughout *Lyric from the Big City*, and is reflected in an especially eloquent manner by the word *далеч*, which, etymologically speaking, originates from the adjective *далёкі* ('faraway'), and should be translated as [a great] 'distance, remoteness', or, literally, 'farness'. Thus, for example, in his poem *Да цябе, дарагая* (*For you, my dear*, composed in 1953), Krušyna writes: "За паўс'ветам, за далеччу воднаю" ("Half a world away, across the watery distance")⁷. This image appears again in Krušyna's 1954 poem *Ці пачуе...* (*Will she hear...*): "Ці пачуе плач выгнаньніка/ Там у далечы яна?" ("Will she hear the exilee's cries/ There, in the distance?")⁸.

Even in these two short examples, we can recognize that the idea of this tragic *distance* is extremely intertwined with other poetic elements briefly mentioned above, namely, the womanly presences of the lyrical voice's mother and lover, respectively (*my dear, she*), and his self-perception as an *exilée*, or *выгнаньнік* in the original. In addition, it should be noted that the Belarusian term *далеч* appears also in the plural form, with little difference in both its meaning and its implications and nuances influencing the mood and lyricism of the poems: "люблю я сонца, шыры, і далечы" ("I love the sun, the width and the 'distances'")⁹.

The concept of distance is also expressed through other imagery. Going back to the first poem in the cycle, *For you, my dear*, we can find the following, deeply symbolic description of the wind: "Акiянскія горка-салёныя,/ Перамерыўшы мілі, вятры" ("The sour-salty ocean winds,/ which measured out the miles"). Of course, the winds are a symbol of freedom, most of all, freedom of movement, not finding themselves constricted by any geographical or administrative obstacles like the ocean or political borders between countries; on the other hand, we also see here a reference to *miles*, the customarily American unit of measure used for distances of the magnitude Ryhor Krušyna refers to in these poems, which accentuate the unfamiliarity and remoteness of the poetic voice's new environment, in a constant contrast with his faraway homeland.

The stark differences between the two points separated by this distance, both physical and metaphorical, logically follow the previously discussed concept, providing the poems with an additional layer of depth and a more developed

⁷ Р. Крушына, *Лірыка зь вялікага места*, „Ля чужых берагоў”, kamunikat.org/download.php?item=4002-7.html&pubref=4002 [29.05.2022].

⁸ *Loc. cit.*

⁹ Р. Крушына, *Белая нявіннасць* (*White innocence*, 1955), [in:] ІДЕМ, *Лірыка зь вялікага места...*

represented world. The 1953 poem *Пасьля працы* (*After work*) constitutes an especially good example that illustrates Krušyna's cultural shock, as it conveys the speaker's search for a piece of nature amongst New York's urban chaos:

Пясок і цэгла.	Sand and brick.
Шум і мітусьня.	Noise and bustle.
Жыццё камечыцца	Life crumples
Паміж таго каменя,	Between the stones
Хвабрычным дымам	As fiery smoke
Копціцца штодня.	Rising day by day.
На голым урбанізьме	Poetry cannot bloom
Лірыка ня можа	In full color
Прыгожа,	Beautiful,
Пышна	Magnificent
Краскаю цьвісьці.	On bare urbanism.
Дзе сінь, зяленіва —	Where there is blue and green,
Маё там падарожжа.	There I must travel.
Я пасьля працы	So after work
Ў парк люблю зайсьці.	I like to go to the park.
[...]	[...]
Паўстануць дні маленства	My days of childhood will come,
З гоманам Палесься,	With the noise of Polesie,
Да песьняў абуджаючы мяне.	To inspire me to write my songs ¹⁰ .

Not only does this poem eloquently enunciate the differences between the Polesie province of Belarus and the cold urban landscapes of New York, identifying the park as a regression into the speaker's childhood, but it also establishes a direct link between the bard's ability to compose his songs and the presence of a natural space that will allow him to access his creativity after a long day of (presumably, non-creative) work.

Another poem, *На Брадвэй*, written the following year (*On Broadway*, with its earliest published version using the grammatical variant *На Бродвэю* in Belarusian), goes a step further, enabling the speaker to look for remnants of his homeland not in the city's green areas, but within its artificial attributes: "Маністамі Бродвэю на вятры/ Калышуцца, ня ўсыцішацца/ Зыркя вачорныя агні./ Цярушацца, мітусяцца/ Зоркамі у чорнай глыбіні"¹¹ ("Like Broadway beads

¹⁰ Р. Крушына, *Пасьля працы* (*After work*, 1953), [in:] ІДЕМ, *Лірыка зь вялікага места...*

¹¹ Р. Крушына, *Выбраныя творы*, kamunikat.org/download.php?item=3697-2.html&pubref=3697 [29.05.2022].

in the wind/ The bright evening lights./ Sway without stopping/ Tremble and fuss/
Like stars in the black depths”).

Ryhor Krušyna returns to the themes of *After work* in his 1957 poem *Апосталь каханьня* (*The apostle of love*), which also includes the problem of (the Belarusian) language and identity, a question that remains relevant in Belarusian literature and society to this day: “Прырода Палесься/ Яго напаіла/ Крынічную песьняй,/ Зарой небасхілу [...] / Палескіх гушчараў/ Ён мовы ня кінуў./ Ня страціў тых чараў/ На бруку Брукліну”¹² (“The nature of Polesie/ watered him/ With the song of a water spring,/ With the dawn of the skies [...] / He did not give up the language/ Of the Polesie thickets/ He didn’t lose those charms/ On Brooklyn’s cobblestone”). Once again, the evocative nature of the poet’s native land acts as a source of inspiration, and the context of the city appears as a contrasting force antagonistic to lyricism.

It is, thus, not surprising, that the city landscapes act as a reflection, a companion, or even an intensifier of the poetic voice’s moods and emotions within this poetry cycle. More specifically, we can observe this phenomenon occur in three different forms.

First of all, Krušyna uses the personification of landscape elements through the attribution of human gestures and feelings, thus identifying them, to an extent, with the poetic voice. For example, coming back to *For you, my dear*, we find these lines: “Дзень нахмурыўся, плача і жаліцца./ Родзіць смутак. Сьляза на вакне”¹³ (“The day frowns, cries and laments./ It gives birth to sadness. A tear on the window”). The day and, in a more ample sense, the elements, comes alive, and the rain turns into true human crying. The reference to childbirth is also worthy of our attention, as it grants not only human, but womanly attributes to the day, within a poem which is dedicated to the speaker’s mother, as we will see later.

Secondly, we find the poetic voice interacts with the elements on a primeval level, obtaining life and creative energy directly from them, like in the 1954 poem *Апошняя ростань* (*The last crossroads*): “Перадвесьняй дыхаю, п’ю імжу./ Урачыстасьць ціхая”¹⁴ (“I breathe the eve of spring, I drink the mist./ A quiet celebration”). Even in the context of gray city life, the speaker is able to solemnly consume what little is there of nature in order to renovate his creativity and lyricism.

Lastly, we find within the cycle examples like the 1955 poem *Адвечоркам* (*In the evening*), which present us with the polar opposite of the case we have just discussed; instead of the poetic voice interfering with the elements, we find

¹² *Loc. cit.*

¹³ *Loc. cit.*

¹⁴ *Loc. cit.*

the surrounding elements directly affect the poetic voice: “Горад смуткам цісьне мае плечы,/ Плача вечар. Горкі вецер сьвішча” (“The city presses my shoulders with its sadness,/ The evening cries. The bitter wind whistles”). Again, we see an example of personification in the second part, with a crying evening and, though a common turn of phrase, a whistling wind. Nevertheless, the city is not only personified, but also interacting with the speaker directly, touching his shoulders as a living, physical entity would.

To finish our analysis, we will move on to the last imagery category that we consider to be fundamental for *Lyric from the Big City*: specific human figures that serve as pivotal points for the poems thematically. On the one hand, we see two prominent feminine figures, both very close to the poetic voice, that accentuate his longing for his homeland: his mother and his (tragic, sometimes unrequited or unrealized) lover. On the other hand – and perhaps more importantly – the poetic voice depicts himself precisely in the role of an artist-*exilée*, a poet whose works are influenced, helped or impeded, by his condition as an emigrant in New York.

Even though both the mother and the lover fulfill a similar function, accentuating the poetic voice's pain as he indulges in his nostalgia, the ways in which they are depicted are cardinally different. The mother, on the one hand, is represented in a tender, positive light: “Чую – маці пяшчотнымі пальцамі/ Ціха, прывідна лашчыць мяне”¹⁵ (“I feel how my mother, with her tender fingers/ Caresses me silently, like a ghost”). The lover, in turn, is more violently tragic, as we can see in the following lines of the 1955 text *Позным вечарам* (*In the late evening*): “Гэтак, любая, верад жыцця не лячы,/ Спапяліш не пачуцці свае, а паперу”¹⁶ (“Do not heal the ulcer of life so, my beloved,/ You will burn not your feelings, but the paper”). The poetic voice's love, as it appears, is unrealized, which adds feelings of regret for the things left unsaid and undone to the already painful homesickness that affects him, as proved by the poem *Згадка* (*Memory*), written in 1955: “І твая усьмешка, і твой сьпеў,/ Сьвята маладосьці і размовы./ Мне шкада, табе я не пасьпеў/ Выказаць затоеныя словы”¹⁷ (“Both your smile and your song/ Are a feast of youth and conversation./ I regret not having time to tell you/ The words that I had hidden”).

Last of all, the poetic voice's self-image as an *exilée* is quite literally expressed by the words *выгнаньне* ('exile') and *выгнаньнік/выгнанец* (two Belarusian-language variants of the word *exilée*). These words, unlike the internationalisms

¹⁵ Р. Крушына, *Да цябе, дарагая*, [in:] ІДЕМ, *Лірыка зь вялікага места...*

¹⁶ ІДЕМ, *Выбраныя творы...*

¹⁷ *Loc. cit.*

мігрант or *эмігрант* ('migrant' or 'emigrant', respectively), possess Slavic roots and are heavy and tragic-sounding, matching the mood of Krušyna's poetry cycle. To cite some instances in previous examples: "Ці пачуе плач выгнаньніка/ Там у далечы яна?"¹⁸ ("Will she hear the crying of an *exilée*/ There, in the distance?"); "На дзядзінцы – чортава ігрышча./ А з выгнанцам ходзіць цень галечы"¹⁹ ("There is a devil's gathering in the garden/ And the shadow of poetry walks with the *exilée*"); "Маю душу закаламуцілі,/ Зьвягае старасьць на выгнаньні"²⁰ ("My soul has been muddled,/ It reminds me of old age in exile").

As a conclusion, we can confidently state that Ryhor Krušyna is a truly unique, independent and fully realized poet in his own right, whose experience in exile contributed in enriching his symbolic system as well as his general poetic vision, inasmuch as he naturally (and, seemingly, effortlessly) managed to include classical, innovative and international poetry forms into his works, following the path marked by Maksim Bahdanovič while also drawing inspiration from Belarusian popular literature. From the point of view of the content, images and literary figures used in his poetry, Krušyna was able to gradually incorporate his new, often very unfamiliar, surroundings to his poems, giving them a completely new layer of depth and meaningfulness, as well as adding valuable elements to their symbolic repertoire.

We must also emphasize the fact that Belarusian emigration literature remains an underdeveloped research area for Slavic and Belarusian philology, especially concerning the imagery and technical aspects of Belarusian emigration poetry. Bearing this in mind, there are a number of rich veins for possible future research that we would encourage exploring, including: America as represented in Belarusian emigration literature (Masiej Siadnioŭ, Natalla Arseŭnieva and others); comparative studies of the literature created by different Slavic diasporas in the Americas; the development of Belarusian emigration literature from the first migrational waves to the present day (e.g. the *Belarus* almanac, published currently in the United States). Research can also be expanded to other directly and tangentially related areas, such as bilingual and multilingual Belarusian (or, in general, Slavic) authors in their homeland and abroad; the language of Slavic (and, in particular, Belarusian) emigration literature, or the mutual influence of home and emigration literatures in the Slavic languages, most especially in those languages that have suffered historical discrimination within their own native territory.

¹⁸ Р. Крушына, *Ці пачуе*, [in:] ІДЕМ, *Выбраныя творы...*

¹⁹ Р. Крушына, *Адвячоркам*, [in:] ІДЕМ, *Выбраныя творы...*

²⁰ Р. Крушына, *Белая нявіннасьць*, [in:] ІДЕМ, *Выбраныя творы...*

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