

The Role of Michaś Skobla in the Belarusian Literary Process

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Abstract

The many-sided work of Michaś Skobla (b. 1966) takes a variety of forms, including that of prose writer, critic, editor, anthologist, parodist, translator, radio correspondent and lyric poet. The article aims to outline the main features of his writing, with particular emphasis on his parodies and lyric poetry, in this way showing his central role in the Belarusian literary process of today.

Keywords

Michaś Skobla – Belarusian literature – criticism – anthologies – parodies – lyric verse

1 Anthologies

Writers of anthologies may expect to be criticized for errors of fact or omission, but it was precisely Michaś Skobla's excellent anthology of Belarusian poetry in the 20th century, *Krasa i sila* (Beauty and strength) (Skobla 2003), that drew the present writer's attention to his creative work, although familiar with him as a regular correspondent for Radio Liberty. Leaving aside the choice of examples (for living authors may have their own favourite children) the commentaries are remarkable for their richness of information, wise judgment and, where appropriate, sense of humour; writers of histories of literature have much to learn from Skobla's thoroughness and sensible assessments.

The anthology comprises 358 poets, although he admits that a further seventy-two failed to find a place in it (Skobla 2003, 31). The earliest entries, Stry Ulas (1865–1939), Al'biert Paŭlovič (1875–1951), Ciotka (1876–1916), Andrej Ziaziulia (1878–1921), Hal'jaš Lieučyk (1880–1944), and Janka Žurba (1881–1964), are all full of valuable information that may have been new to many Belarusians. In treating national figures, he writes with realism and, of course, respect; one example is Janka Kupala (1882–1942), whose poem about Stalin is authenticated,¹ and whose mysterious death is suggested, on the latest evidence, as most likely being murder by the Soviet security forces.

On the other hand, his account of the, in the opinion of many, unworthy national poet Piatruś Broŭka (1905–1980) who enjoyed the highest positions and received a nine-volume edition of his works as well as being twice awarded the Stalin-prize is written ironically and peppered with eloquent exclamation marks. Of a less egregious figure, Mikola Miatlicki (b. 1954), Skobla notes that, after a promising start as a poet, he worked in a state publishing house from 1983 to 2002, where he oversaw the publication of more than ten of his own books, magnificent in appearance but weak in content, bizarrely receiving a state prize in 1998 at the same time as Uladzimir Niakliajeŭ was awarded the same accolade for his truly outstanding verse collection, *Prošča* (Lake Prošča).

Skobla's second major anthology was of translations into Belarusian from world poetry, *Halasy z-za niebakraju* (Voices from beyond the horizon, Skobla 2008a), and in this case the commentaries are, naturally, on the translators rather than the translated. His introduction, entitled 'Kosmas paezii' (The cosmos of poetry), outlines some of the high points from the biblical translations of Frańciška Skaryna, and Mikola Husoŭski's Latin *Carmen bisonti* (Song of a bison), through the Polish-language philomaths and philarets and, a century later, the enforced encomiums to Stalin, right up to the present day.

Naturally some translations are freer and less accurate than others, or, indeed, otherwise unsuccessful, but Skobla does not apply his satirical skills to the 198 translators in his anthology. Of the fifty-seven languages from which the Belarusian versions are made, many must have come second-hand from word-for-word versions, but this is not to diminish the compiler's achievement in amassing such riches.

1 In his poem, 'Kupalaŭski muzej' (The Kupala museum), however, he expresses disapproval of the quotation from this poem and the references to his death among the exhibits there (Skobla 2001, 59–60).

2 Parodies

Turning to *Rozhi ŭ roznicu* itself, a small selection of the five dozen or so parodies may illustrate his methods: each item is given an epigraph from the victim's work, often, however, changing the order of lines and, in one of my examples, altering the actual words. The first, Ryhor Baradulin (1935–2014), was far from a defenceless object of mockery, producing his own humorous book, *Dulina ad Baradulina* (A rude gesture from Baradulin, Baradulin 2004, 30) in which a friendly jest is made about Skobla. In the latter's book, 'Ja nie paeta' (No poet I)² takes as its object the humorous verse 'Razmova ŭ pustynie' (A conversation in the desert, Baradulin 1988, 179–80) in which the poet engages in a light-hearted chat with a camel.³

Perhaps the best objects for parody, however, are poems that are serious or even pompous. The second example is a faintly absurd poem 'U kaviarni pachnie kavaj ...' (In the coffee bar it smells of coffee ...) by Viktor Šnip (Šnip 1990, 59) that Skobla transforms into 'Pryšviačėnnie Dniu niezaliežnaści' (A dedication to Independence Day) in which the coffee bars in which Šnip felt out of place and uncomfortable are replaced by Skobla with bars where uninhibited Belarusian men celebrate the eponymous holiday by vigorously guzzling and, of course, swigging alcohol (Skobla 1993, 61).

Less well known than the previous two poets, Uladzimir Mazho (b. 1959) receives what might be called rougher treatment from the parodist. In his verse 'Maŭčańnie zor' (The silence of the stars, Mazho 1992, 78–80), which incidentally has its own slightly absurd epigraph, Mazho writes about a time in the future when his successors may experience messages from other planets. Skobla's parody, 'Antyvajennaja daktryna Uladzimira Mazho' (The anti-war doctrine of Uladzimir Mazho) is a good deal shorter than the object of its mirth, but the excerpt with which he begins it transforms Mazho's meaning by replacing 'Šapču' (I whisper) by 'Kryču' (I shout). Perhaps this is just a mistake.

In sum, Skobla has made a considerable contribution to the genre of literary parody, which is popular in Belarus (see Kudasievič 2001), but the promised sequel to *Rozhi ŭ roznicu* has not appeared in the nearly forty years since it was mentioned on the latter book's back cover. He did, however, receive his own epigram from Uladzimir Arloŭ delivered at the launch of his own book and quoted in his first anthology:

2 Almost certainly a reference to a line from Janka Kupala.

3 Camels are also mentioned in one of Skobla's own poems, 'Vierš pašlia Elijata' (A poem after Eliot, Skobla 2001, 40), although it may be noted that T.S. Eliot, like Pushkin, is a poet not easily followed or imitated.

Паэтаў беларускіх шобла
Са страхам думае пра Скоблу!

SKOBLA 2003, 658

(The gang of Belarusian poets
Thinks with fear about Skobla!)

3 Critical and Publicist Writing

In 2016 a collection of publicist and other essays about Belarusian and neighbouring cultures, *Sarkafahi strachu* (Sarcophaguses of fear, Skobla 2016) once again demonstrated its author's immense, almost encyclopaedic, knowledge of Belarusian culture in context. Mention of a few of the themes will have to suffice to give an impression of this cornucopia. The book begins with 'Baranić svaje vuľli' (Defend your hives)⁴ which is almost entirely about literature, particularly Larysa Hienijuš, a poet in whom he has taken a particular interest. The overall theme of this section is the need to cherish and preserve writers who, amongst the vicissitudes of Belarusian history, have not, at least until recently, received the credit they deserved.

The second section, 'Most u krainu Niemaninu' (The bridge to Niemaninu),⁵ beginning in Warsaw, traces many different people returned to their place of origin (Belarus); it also describes the flourishing group of Belarusians in Eastern Poland (Bielastoččyna), going on to reflect on three men with the name Tvardouški: Aleksandr Tvardovskii (a Russian of Belarusian origin), poet and editor of the leading literary journal, *Novyi mir*, who published a translation of one of Vasil' Bykaŭ's works on its pages, despite this outstanding writer's being in 'disgrace'. The second with this name is the legendary hero Jan Twardowski, who features in Mickiewicz's comic ballad, *Pani Twardowska* (1822), and the third a humorous priest, Jan Tvardouški.

The third section, 'Raspłiatannie tkaniny' (The untwining of fabric) contains essays on the Grand Duchy of Lithuania, *Trasiianka*, various episodes from Belarusian and Ukrainian literature, and much more. The penultimate section, 'Kainava braterstva' (The brotherhood of Cain), like the name of the opening section, has a link with some of Skobla's lyric poetry. Here, as might

4 Bees and their hives as an image are found earlier in the poem 'Bortniki' (Beekeepers), see *infra*.

5 This word appears to be a neologism of Danuta Bičel'-Zahnetava meaning the Harodnia region, seeming also to refer to the river Nioman. Private correspondence with the author, 5 February 2020.

be expected, the content is mainly negative: from Roy Medvedev's views on Belarus to the activities of General Čarhiniec, leader of the officially sponsored breakaway writers' union, via a tribute to the scholar Hienadz Kisialioŭ, who fought to establish the truth of the rebellion led by Kastuś Kalinoŭski in 1863, to events in Ukraine and from there to the suggestion that the true triangle of nations should be Poland, Ukraine and Belarus.

The final section of this variegated collection of essays 'Zbudavać svoj kaŭčeh' (To build one's ark) contains reminiscences and critical assessments of many, mostly Belarusian, writers including Ryhor Baradulin, Lieanid Halubovič, Alieś Salaviej and especially Larysa Hiejjuš. There can be no doubt that Skobla's very readable prose has played a notable part in destroying his country's sarcophaguses of fear that began in or, at least, were epitomized by Stalin's massacre of writers in the 1930s.

4 Translations

Skobla has made a number of very competent translations from Polish (Konstanty Gałczyński, Wiktor Woroszyński, Tadeusz Karabowicz and Janusz Wójcik), Ukrainian (Vasyl Stus, Ivan Andrusiak, Olesia Mamchych, Lina Kostenko, Serhii Pantiuk and Ivan Malkovych), Russian (Sergei Averintsev), Lithuanian (Jonas Liniauskas) and Georgian (Rusudan Kaishauri). In only two cases are these translations repeated in his second anthology, namely versions from the Ukrainian of Kostenko and Malkovych.

Since the above translations are only part of Skobla's work in this field, it is, perhaps invidious to comment on the selection of poems in these two sources (Skobla 2008a and Skobla 2016b), but there is certainly a contrast between the rather weak originals of Georgian Kaishauri and the brilliant Pole Janusz Wójcik and Russian Averintsev. This does not, however, reflect on the professionalism and skill that the translator brings to a wide range of texts.

5 Original Lyric Poetry

Interesting and important as Skobla's anthological, translating, editorial, critical and publicist writing undoubtedly is, his original verse is equally significant and worth at least as much attention. Uladzimir Niakliajeŭ, introducing a selection of the younger poet's work, *Kamizelka dla miesiaca* (A waistcoat for the moon, Skobla 2016b), apart from blaming western influence for everything he does not like in young Belarusian poetry, expatiates on the nature

of Skobla's poetic world, comparing it to a well-ordered Belarusian home in which everything you need (*usio, što treba ...*) is there in place, just like his place in contemporary Belarusian literature.

This review of Skobla's early poetry written just over a decade and a half up to 2016 will begin with some of the themes and techniques in his first two verse collections, going on to their appearance in works written later. Themes and techniques that appear only later will be considered afterwards. His debut volume, *Viečny Žnič* (The Sacred Flame), came out in 1990, when he was already thirty-four years old. Its themes and techniques foreshadow much of what was to follow, including the enterprising, sometimes wild, use of rhyme, sensitive imagery and a thematic range that reflects his broad interests and, indeed, knowledge, especially of nature, which in his verse is often linked with religion and patriotic feeling.

The opening poem, 'Zornych šaliaŭ, vichor, nie vahaj ...' (Whirlwind, do not shake the scales of the stars ...), depicts various aspects of nature in autumn or early winter, ending interestingly with the fallen leaves burning under his feet, preserving the breast of the native land. In other early poems, however, his country is depicted as in a sense inadequate: in 'Za imhnieńnie da viartańnia ŭ hety śviet' (A moment before returning to this world) he decides not to return (after abandoning everything to sail amongst the winds), because that can only be to his native land, realizing with horror that even such an outcome is insufficient for him (Skobla 2016b, 11).

In another equally gloomy poem 'Ja chacieŭ by pamierci ŭ śnie ...' (I should like to die in my sleep ...) the poet prefers the idea of soaring like a bird beyond the sight of everyone, where he will find it easier to breath than in a grave in his native land (Skobla 2016b, 12). It should be said, of course, that from his other works we know that Skobla is second to none in his concern for and love of his country. Two other characteristic poems from *Viečny Žnič* are worth mentioning: 'Ja pramaŭliaju slova BOH ...' (I utter the word GOD ...) recalls childhood enthusiasm for the church and all its features including spiritual comfort, after which he may feel afraid to go home (Skobla 2016b, 9).

The story of Cain, which features in *Sarkafahi strachu* and elsewhere⁶ is the subject of 'Na plasio žniamielaj rabinu ...' (On the execution block of a dumbstruck redcurrant bush ...); in this grim early poem many words link nature to pain and torture, whilst Cain boasts that he is a brother of the Sun (Skobla 2016b, 10).

6 For example, the theme receives extensive treatment in a later poem, 'Brat' (Brother, Skobla 2016b, 127–28).

Other notable verses in Skobla's first collection include 'Kamiani' (Boulders) in which the eponymous rocks, victors in the War, return home angry because they do not know the language of the local people, reflecting that the dwellers in their land are imprisoned and will never come to freedom (Skobla 2016b 13); it may be noted that prisons are very much in the poet's consciousness, for instance when in 'Most' (The bridge) balustrades are compared to prison bars (Skobla 2016b, 18); and in 'U voblaku, by ŭ bielaj ssypcy ...' (In a cloud, like a scattering of white ...) a violinist plays in a prison cell as if it were a small concert hall, and the poet, as well as recognizing the healing power of music, wonders whether the bow could cut through the prison bars (Skobla 2001, 82–83). In 'Vočy savy' (The eyes of the owl), which was to become the title of the next collection, the poet's preference for night over day is clear, and between his eyes and the full moon must always flutter the butterfly of his hope (Skobla 2016b, 16). This insect, of course, also forms part of the title of another collection, as well as being featured elsewhere in Skobla's verse, for example in 'Matyliok' (Butterfly, Skobla 1994, 34–35).

Four years after *Viečny Žnič*, came *Vočy savy* (The eyes of the owl, 1994), in which are also reprinted a few of the most striking poems from the earlier collection; it provides a similarly rich thematic range. 'Pasluchajcie, čalavieki ...' (Listen, people ...) stresses the impermanence of the world we live in, including fire that returns to the sun and cemeteries that are turned into parks named after some ridiculous person; it begins with a few auditory images of lingering phenomena:

як доўга не памірае мора ў ракавіне
малітва ў разбуранай царкве
рэха на стадыёне

SKOBLA 1994, 13

(How long the sea takes to die in a sink
a prayer in a ruined church
an echo in a stadium)

In 'Valoški Valošynu' (The hair of Voloshin) the poet, always alert to verbal concurrence, imagines divine intervention connecting the Russian poet Maksimilian Voloshin with Maksim Bahdanovič on account of formal links between their given names (Skobla 1994, 70), and the Belarusian poet also features in the next verse, 'Pantijski idal' (The Pontic idol), where, amidst a rich tapestry of sound, his premature death by the sea and with it the termination of his great talent is bitterly lamented in, for instance, the last stanza:

...Мора кленчыцьме тысячы год,
 прыпаўзаючы зноў да падножжа,
 ды зашыты маланкаю рот
 даравання
 прамовіць
 не зможа.

SKOBLA 1994, 72

(...The sea will kneel for thousands of years,
 crawling again to the foot of the cliff.
 and its mouth sewn shut by lightning
 cannot
 give
 word
 to his gift.)

Comparable play with names is found in 'Piaty' (Heels) where the name of the dedicatee (Alieś Bialiacki) and that of Achilles are linked. Here are the last two lines of the penultimate stanza: 'Ах, Алесь і Ахілес/ Беражыце пяты' (Oh, Alieś and Achilles, / take care of your heels, Skobla 2016b, 153).

Several verses are set in 'гордая, гаротная Гародня' (proud, impoverished Harodnia), including 'Pi kroŭ – nad Ajćynaju mieč ...' (Drink blood – over the Fatherland hangs a sword ...), which ends with two striking images:

...Масцілі, застаўшыся ўдвох,
 на беразе мяккае ложа.
 Са свечкай жалбы ў галавах,
 як плачка, стаяла Каложа.

Туман давідна дабрыдзе,
 як стомлены конь, да пагоста.
 Рассыплецца поўня ў вадзе
 кальчугай,
 што скінуў староста ...

SKOBLA 1994, 56–57

(...Remaining alone, they made a soft bed
 for two on the shore.
 With a candle of lament by their heads,
 stood, like a ghostly weeping woman, the Kaloža church.

Mist will roll up before dawn,
 like a weary steed to a country churchyard.
 A full moon scatters in the water
 like a shirt of mail
 that a leader has cast off ...)

Humour is a recurrent element in Skobla's work, and an early example is found in 'Kruhlaja plošč'a' (The circular square), a lightly comic poem with the unlikely theme of victory over the enemy in WWII, in which the Almighty refuses to accept a medal from the people. The square dies, and is at first guarded, then allowed to dream like a grave, before being walled up forever (Skobla 1994, 22).

There is, however, nothing light or frivolous about 'Vajna' (War) in which the poet describes the violence and absurdity of the beginning of the war for the USSR and particularly Belarus, from the trenches to the statues (Skobla 1994, 44–45). A strong verse from the poet's 2009 collection, *Akno dlia matyŭlkoŭ* (A window for butterflies), 'Oda baraźnie' (Ode to a furrow), in which the furrow plays the role of a trench in war. At the end it is described as a place from which an attack may someday be launched, but the opening stanza expresses its defensive possibilities vividly:

О баразна – беларускі аноп!
 Хай дыктатура ці мор у краіне
 Хай землятрус ці сусветны патап –
 А беларус баразны не пакіне.

SKOBLA 2016b, 118–19

(Oh furrow – Belarusian trench!
 Let there be a dictatorship or plague in the land
 Let there be an earthquake or world flood –
 But the Belarusian will not abandon his furrow.)

Several strong poems describe the destruction of churches without the contribution of war. Two examples may be found in Skobla's second book: 'Lia Doma kino 1990' (Near the House of cinema 1990) and 'Balada pra stajniu' (Ballad about a stable). In the first of them there is a sad scene at the Miensk Red Church with an actress, like a lonely bird, dreaming of being a film star, and a priest who is without dignity, when suddenly an atheist starts giving a report on all the things needed to destroy and deconsecrate the church; three old women come to this place without God and live, as they cry, silently (Skobla 1994, 39).

The ballad describes the atrocities of turning a church into stables; the stable boy is drunk, and the horses want to kneel with fire in their eyes, but the boy is frozen with fear, despite his vodka (Skobla 1994, 40–41). A different aspect of this question is reflected in the picture of unexpected repentance in ‘A ũačy biasstrašnja žaŭniery ...’ (And in the night fearless soldiers ...) in which a general is sent to destroy a church but instead lights a candle to cries of ‘Hurrah!’ During the last battle, when his soul was thinking of heaven, he heard not shots but prayers (Skobla 1994, 53). Finally, in ‘Načnyja Stročycy’ (Stročycy at night), a church moved to a museum loses not only its congregation and sanctity, but can also become prey to evil forces (Skobla 2001, 69).

A major theme in Skobla’s poetry is the role of trees. In ‘Drevy’ (Trees), for instance, they – unlike everything else – hold the world together. More elaborate is ‘Dušy drevaŭ hlyboka ũ ziamli ...’ (The souls of trees lie deep in the earth), in which he reflects on what wood, when cut, is used for, from violins to shepherds’ crooks, or Charon’s oar, or Noah’s wheel. The rotten stumps stir, and the souls of the trees cannot find a way out, at night snuggling up to others’ leaves (Skobla 1994, 7).

This brief mention of Noah is expanded in two other poems in this collection, ‘Burštyn’ (Amber) and ‘Hieradotava mora’ (Paema svavolia) (The sea of Herodotus aka the Sarmatian sea [A mischievous poem]). In the first of them, the poet pictures Noah’s flood and its effect on people, homes and, especially, trees, imagining amber as being the tears of forests, the frozen rays of the pre-Chernobyl sun, and as a rosary so that people should not forget to which faith they belong (Skobla 1994, 10–11).

The longer, ‘mischievous’ poem, with a historical epigraph from ‘competent’ sources, is a retelling of the tale of Noah, but set in a Belarusian inn, with a wide range of characters, including Uncle God (*dziadźka Boh*) who is angry that Belarusians complain at being land-locked. Other characters include a veteran who wants more respect for Lenin, shepherds, workers, a vet, an unemployed man and many others, whose conversations are characteristically lively with some inventive rhymes like the proletarian who, we are told, ‘(Перш хмяліўся, / пасля маліўся)’ (First he got drunk, / then prayed’, Skobla 1994, 85).

A few stanzas later Arthur Rimbaud appears, alongside Homer, providing a rhyme with *rabro* (rib). Skobla’s poem, clearly, is set many centuries after the Flood, and all that the Belarusians seem to want is ham and a drink. Incidentally, the familiar reference to God will not surprise readers of even genuinely spiritual Belarusian poetry since Karatkievič’s famous declaration, ‘На Беларусі Бог жыве’ (God lives in Belarus, Karatkievič 1987–91); Skobla in “Паеты” Todara Kopšy’ (The ‘Poets’ of Todar Kopša) refers to the coming of a specifically Belarusian God (Skobla 1994, 67).

Other recurrent themes first introduced in *Vočy savy*, include snakes (real and symbolic), poetry and its opaqueness for many, pagan beliefs and folklore, the violence and absurdity of war, the destruction of churches, and the history of Belarus and its writers. In ‘Śvislač’ (The river Śvislač) a snake wishes to come into Miensk and is not rejected, before the wind blows like a fakir and the snake rears over the city (Skobla 1994, 16–17). If this is fantasy, then the image of the river Prypiač crawling like a snake in the marshes in an extravagant poem about rivers, ‘Nioman niabiesny’ (The heavenly Nioman), is hardly extreme, whilst ‘Zalatyja Piaski’ (Golden Sands), Skobla’s poem about how the Bulgarians used hedgehogs to rid their famous beaches of snakes, ends with these reptiles in unmistakable human form, as he ponders on the possibility of luring the prickly little animals to Belarus:

...Вожькі міля,
 Хочаце – я дам вам бусі
 І куплю вам купэ ў цягніку
 Да самой Беларусі?
 Бо не магу ужо я
 Трываць там гадаўя ...

SKOBLA 2016b, 139

(...Dear hedgehogs,
 Would you like me to give you beads
 And buy you a compartment
 in a train to Belarus itself?
 For I can no longer stand
 the serpents there ...)

Poetry itself is by no means an uncommon theme in the work of Belarusian poets, but Skobla manages to produce an original angle: in ‘Zvyjčajna’ (Usually) he writes about most people’s dislike of or resistance to poetry, suggesting some works that may turn readers away (the *kvantemy* (quantemes) of Alieś Razanaŭ and, more bizarrely, *The Satanic Verses* by Salman Rushdie) as well as some that should convert the doubters (the Song of Songs, Maksim Bahdanovič and García Lorca), noting that from time to time people respect poets in order that the human race should not die out (Skobla 1994, 24).

In ‘Stadyjon’ (The stadium) he describes how birds get lost there, repeating that he is sorry for a lost bird, somehow melding it with an Uzbek, who respects but does not understand poets (Skobla 1994, 21). Finally may be

mentioned a humorous poem, 'Jak trapić u raj' (How to get to heaven) about a wastrel and drinker who has squandered his chances in life, but on approaching heaven reads some of the verses he had written 'for his soul' and discovers that the Almighty likes poetry and for that reason ignores his sins and lets him in (Skobla 2016b, 160–61).⁷

The poet's religious faith is matched by his interest in the pagan folklore of Belarus, on which he has written several verses, notably 'Kupalinka' (Kupallie song), 'Jak patuchnie vahoń kupalski ...' (As the Kupallie flame dies down), 'Vajdelotka' (Pagan goddess preserving the eternal flame) and 'Vaŭkalak' (Werewolf), all of these in Skobla 1994. The theme is continued in the next collection, *Našeście poŭni* (The sudden coming of a full moon), with 'Ni śliazój, ni abrydlaj źviahoj ...' (Not with a tear, nor with hateful barking ...), which describes contests between pagan gods, Viales and Vulcan (here Svaroh), with priests, after which the holy light (źnič) will prevail and return to the poet the light in his soul (Skobla 2001, 7–8).

In 'Doždž' (Rain), a variety of images depict rain trying to get into church, but only making it lean like the Tower of Pisa. It wishes to confess its sins like a poor relative or a lost believer, but receives no kindness from people, and goes to pagan groves where it turns itself into the god of flowers and trees (Skobla 2001, 9).

Returning briefly to the poet's first two collections, the history of Belarus and its writers also form the theme of several verses. 'Viartańnie vietru' (Return of the wind) paints a picture of destruction and decay by the wind, but after the poet's grandfather's poplar tree resists being blown over, the wind abates, later strengthening again and leading throughout Belarus to groaning glass skyscrapers (like sunny pikes), boiling furnaces in factories and so on, until finally a wounded wind comes to the poet's window each night, but he does not know how to soothe its torments, and heal its burns (Skobla 2016b, 19–20). An interesting poem from the second collection, dedicated to Slavimir Adamovič (b. 1962), 'I vynajšaŭ Boh čalaviaka ...' (And God invented man ...) depicts God's creation and how all the different religions pester him in different ways, but

...і толькі адныя беларусы (такі ўжо рахманы народ)
тыя патрабуюць дакладна:

7 A very loosely comparable experience occurred with the poet Valiancina Aksak who, confessing to Fr Alexander Nadson in London, admitted writing poetry, only to be told that he wished that he had the talent to do the same: see Aksak 2017, 110.

– Вярні нам Бацькаўшчыну, Божа!
сядзіць сядзіты Бог на воблаку
і разгублена камечыць кавалак свежае гліны

а раптам не атрымаецца
гэты самы Беларус?

SKOBLA 1994, 43

(...and only the Belarusians (such a modest people)
they demand clearly:
'Return our Fatherland to us, God!
God sits angrily on a cloud
absent-mindedly moulding a piece of fresh clay

and suddenly it does not work out
is that a Belarusian himself?)

The history and present condition of the poet's country is featured in several later poems. For example, 'Kupaly carkvy, jak pavietrany šary ...' (The cupolas of the church, like balloons ...) describes the cupolas rising into the sky full of the dry smell of incense, but at first held down to the earth. Suddenly the Catholic and Orthodox churches and pagodas in Western Belarus seem to ascend and, as everybody looks up, the poet imagines historians again in Harodnia digging up ancient foundations where once the light of Vitaŭt might have shone (Skobla 2001, 75–76).⁸

From the same collection, 'Raká Bielarús ...' (The river Belarus ...) this imaginary stream constantly flows both westwards and eastwards (where goods are stolen and taken east). The second part of the poem begins 'Ráka Bielarús' (Belarus of cancer), noting that all that comes from the west is silence after the Chernobyl disaster, but he mentions some of his favourite Belarusian saints and heroes, including Kastuś Kalinoŭski, Saint Eŭfrasińnia of Polacak (1105–1173) and Larysa Hienijuš. At the end of the poem, the eponymous river bounces indifferently on the waves of cancer, as if it were the last boat (Skobla 2001, 88–89).

A quite different metaphorical river is featured in a poem about Belarusians' particular form of heroism: 'Zastaŭsia ũ sahach, chto masty paliŭ ...' (He who burnt bridges remained in sagas ...) tells the story of a Georgian who swam the Dardanelles to show that Georgians were invincible. A Belarusian, however,

8 This poem is reprinted in the anthology *Kamizelka dlja mieciaca* with the title 'Paliot' (Flight).

is skilful in coping with the river of history, although his hands and feet are tightly bound, and he will eventually swim to the promised land (Skobla 2016b, 143). The tied limbs are partially due to the activities of the eponymous figure in another verse, 'Škodnik' (The malefactor), which gives a list of all the bad things that have been done under the present regime, including selling gas and changing the national flag, as well as the actions of the КДВ (which turns Europe against Belarus). The poem ends by suggesting with heavy irony that all the problems are due to the (liberal) Belarusian National Front, adding that, without them, things would be very bad (presumably for the authoritarian government) (Skobla 2001, 105).

Before leaving the КДВ, may be mentioned a humorous indirect reference to this malign organization: in 'KaDaŭBieški' (Hollowed-out dishes) the poet recalls how his ancestors scooped out dishes from lime wood, although the КДВ now come silently at night looking for oaks with split trunks (Skobla 2001, 106).

'Bortniki' (Beekeepers) characteristically links past and present, passing from the Grand Duchy to a present-day poet. Here are the first and last stanzas:

Суцішыцца чорнае птаства.
 На могілках вецер прысьне.
 дзе – госьцем зь Вялікага Княства –
 пчаліны дамок на сасьне.

[...]

Як збрыдне і духу, і вуху
 зьнікчменелы, пошасны сьвет –
 пад соснамі на медвуху,
 у борнікі пойдзе паэт ...

SKOBLA 2001, 87

(The black birds fall silent.
 The wind dreams in the churchyard
 where – as a guest from the Grand Duchy –
 a little house of bees is on a pine tree.
 As will bore both spirit and ear
 the world, now insignificant and plagued –
 under the pines for the honey
 the poet will join the bee keepers ...)

In 'Asudžanyja' (The condemned) Skobla also links the past and present, beginning with people who in the past were hung for various crimes by the Grand Prince, but noting that, although they now live in a more humane age, Belarusians are fated to reach the same end, as we read in the poem's last stanza:

...Не зменіш ні артыкул, ні статут.
 Пара прыходзіць сцішыць парыванні.
 Мы ўсе, мы ўсе асуджаныя тут
 Да найвышэйшай меры пакарання.

SKOBLA 2016b, 156

(...You will not change either the article or the statute.
 The time is coming to reduce your striving.
 All of us, we are all condemned here
 To the highest degree of punishment.)

Another poem of almost despair is 'Kraj staicca ŭ piatli naściarožanych miežaj ...' (The land hides in a noose of suspicious frontiers), where the last two stanzas reveal the great contrast between ideals and squalid reality:

... Край, дзе люд паспаліты хаўтуры, як свята,
 Адзначае, дарма, што ў душы – тарарам.
 Дзе не можа ніяк – увесьчасна занята –
 Дазваніцца да Бога адноўлены храм ...

Не зялёны валун, што бакі падлежаў,
 І не бусел, што ў Афрыцы вынайшаў рай,
 Серабрыстыя фаласы сіласных вежаў –
 Вось твой сімвал, заціснуты зашмаргай межаў,
 Закаханы у неба свабоднае Край!

SKOBLA 16b, 114

(...A country where the general people regard bad work
 as a cause for celebration,
 despite the complete chaos in their souls.
 And where the renovated church can get through ...
 to God – the line is always busy.

It is not a green boulder whose sides have gone to sleep
 and not a stork that has found heaven in Africa;

Уваскросьлі понтыі пілаты,
і Варава – за рулём таксі.

SKOBLA 2001, 86

(Biblical times. The stars, like stigmata,
despairingly
suffer in the heavens.

Pontius Pilates have risen from the dead,
and Barabbas is at the wheel of a taxi.)

More prosaic, though no less distressing, is the poet's disgust at a museum with a duff guide and many exhibits missing: 'U muziei' (In the museum, Skobla 2016b, 21–22). Related, though far more entertaining is 'Na ekskursii, albo Tapanimika z hrymasami' (On an excursion, or Toponymy with grimaces', a parody of a guide who gives a completely anachronistic and fantastic account of the sights shown, and is greeted by rude swearing and mimicry. The epigraph by Skobla himself may be worth quoting:

Аднойчы ў Полацку на вуліцы Леніна, непадалёк ад <вала Івана
Грознага>, мне паказалі <домік Петра Першага>, перад якім стаяў
помнік Льву Таслстому ...

SKOBLA 2016b, 162

(Once in Polacak on Lenin street, not far from 'the rampart of Ivan the
Terrible', they showed me the 'little house of Peter the Great', before
which stood a statute of Lev Tolstoi ...)

Water, rivers and the sea figure extensively in Skobla's poetry, much of the theme used metaphorically, but not always, as in 'Try imhnieńni Śviciazi' (Three moments of the Śviciaž). 'Na Vialloj' (On the Viallia) is a fine poem about a tributary of the Nioman, incorporating the sound of the bells of churches, as the river, like a tired pilgrim, ends up at the foot of the Mother of God (Skobla 2016b, 107). In another verse, 'Na ad'ezd ad Luninca' (On leaving Luniniec), the poet introduces humour, noting that in this place of departure residents are always ready for a farewell drink, as may be seen in this excerpt when a person claiming to be Aquavit seems destined for prison:

...Там і чарка-расхадуха
П'ецца без канца.

- Хто ты будзеш? – Акавіта.
 – А з чаго ты будзеш? – З жыта.
 – Пашпарт пакажы. – Няма.
 – Раз няма, табе турма!

SKOBŁA 2016b, 115

(There 'one for the road'
 is drunk endlessly.
 'Who might you be?' 'Aquavit'.
 'And what are you made from?' 'From corn.'
 'Show me your passport.' 'I don't have one.'
 'If you don't have one, then it's prison for you!')

'Tryptich mora' (Triptych of the sea) contains a series of very varied images (including dough and fish soup), the first being comparison of the sea to an infant who desperately tries to escape from its cradle but despite its effort cannot significantly move it, just as the sea is kept within bounds (Skobla 1994, 76). 'Mora vostravam ...' (The sea [dreams of] an island ...) depicts the sea dreaming in vain of a sunlit island. The incongruous middle stanza of this poem is somewhat bizarre, perhaps on account of the need for rhyme:

...І чаўны, бы рабы ў капальні
 Зрэдку бразгаюць ланцугамі.
 Мінаваўся сезон купальні
 Цар марскі адмяніў цунамі.

SKOBŁA 1994, 78

(... and vessels like slaves in mines, / from time to time clank their chains, /
 The season for bathing is over / The king of the sea has cancelled the
 tsunami.)

Trees featured early in Skobla's verse, and in his work as a whole there are many associations with creative artists and particularly the Deity. In 'Nad Krošynam iznoŭ pahrymvaje ...' (In Krošyn again thunders ...) it is suggested that a candle should stand in the church to mark its most famous son, the poet Paŭliuk Bahrym (1813–1891), but the illumination of the church appears to belong to animals and, particularly, birds, as is made clear in the closing lines: 'Свяціся ж боскаю лампадаю / У жаўруковых песнях, храм!' (Shine then as a divine lamp / church, in the songs of the cranes!, Skobla 2016b, 154). His faith could

not be clearer than in the closing lines of 'Pastukvaje žaŭna na nakavaŭni ...' (The black woodpecker knocks on the anvil ...): '... у гэтым дзіўным свеце – / I бор-сабор, і міласэрны Бор' (...in this wondrous world – / both the forest-cathedral and merciful God, Skobla 2016b, 126).

Nature and weather draw from this poet (like many others) lively images in several vivid poems, including 'Zima' (Winter) and 'Kastrыčnik. Daždžoŭ abloha ...' (October, A siege of rains ...). Two poems describe nature taking over from places deserted by humans: 'Na radzimie Straŭcova' (In the native region of Straŭcoŭ) depicts an apparently abandoned village where the houses are now living in the forest, or the forest has come to live in the houses (Skobla 2016b, 146); 'Bartalamieŭka', named after a village in the Homiel region, again paints a picture of neglect and decay with, once more, nature taking over the human habitation, reminding the poet of the last day of Pompeii (Skobla 2016b, 152).

Like nature, the ever-endangered language is a frequent theme in Belarusian literature. Before providing illustrations from Skobla's work, it may be worth mentioning that his poetry employs a very wide vocabulary, incorporating a rich variety of dialectal words (sometimes for the purpose of rhyme) and neologisms, including those of others, as well, of course, as an imaginative use of the literary language, which should be apparent from the examples given so far.

Concern for the possible loss of the Belarusian language is widespread: the title of 'Vulicy miesta maŭcać biez'jazyka ...' (The streets of the town are silent without a tongue ...) hints at the question, but far clearer is the exclamation in the middle of 'Noć u Kušlianach' (Night in Kušliany): '– не пакідайце мовы, каб ня ўмерлі! / Самазабойцаў не ўваскросіць Бор' (– do not abandon your language, so that you do not die! / God will not resurrect suicides, Skobla 2001, 65). Equally strong is 'Zvon' (Ringing), particularly in the last stanza:

...А места маўчыць,
Не стамляйся, званару!
Ды звон, разарваўшы жалезны замок,
бы ў проламку, кінуўся ў чорную хмару
і, стаўшы, як люд, безъязыкім, замоўк.

SKOBLA 2001, 52

(...And the town is mute,
Do not weary, bell ringer!
And the ringing having broken the iron lock,
as if into an ice hole, throwing itself into a black cloud
and becoming,
like the people, without a tongue, fell silent.)

There is much silence also in ‘Маўча́нне-но́ч’ (Silence – night) in which all the earth is mute in various ways and people are enjoined not to do the same or, indeed, to use other people’s language, although the example given is not the regrettably ubiquitous Russian used by those who still seem to think it more cultured than Belarusian, but somewhat bizarrely he quotes Chekhov’s famous final words in German after he had spent most of his last months in Badenweiler; the last two stanzas show the poet’s deep concern:

...Ты, чалавек, ня шыйся ў чарнабожжа,
адпреч бяседу з духамі начы.
З таго маўчанья выбавіць ня зможа
цябе ніхто. Ты ноч перамаўчы.

Перачкай у сутаргах і сьвербе,
стрымайся ад апошняе мяжы.
Як Чэхаў перад сьмерцю: *ich sterbe*
на мове на чужацкай не кажы.

SKOBLA 2001, 23

(...You, man, do not crawl into pagan beliefs, / reject conversation with the spirits of the night. / Nobody can free you from that / silence. Remain silent all the night. // Wait through it in spasms and pain, / hold back from the final frontier. / As Chekhov said before his death: *Ich sterbe* / do not speak in an alien language.)

‘Mienskaje mietro’ (The Miensk metro) seems at first to be a reference to the well-known joke that the Belarusian language can only be heard underground (in the metro) or in the sky (in Belavia), and the poet contrasts his pleasure at hearing the sounds in the metro with the disgusting pillar and cells on the surface. He concludes, however, that it is no use setting traps to catch the language beneath the surface, or to put a tap on it or hunt it with lions. Language will burst out like a volcano, simply from the earth below (Skobla 2016b, 145).

In the opening poem of *Našesćie poŭni*, dedicated to the undisputed master of language, Ryhor Baradulin, ‘Mova ŭduchnataja ŭ nas, jak duša’ (Language is breathed into us like our soul) he presents a more spiritual view:

Мова ўдыхнутая ў нас, як душа,
і падгасподніцай жыць не павінна.
Душу дастане лязо палаша –
і застанецца аглухляя гліна.

І застанеца зьмярцьвеляя плоць
 Рыбінай, выкінутая на сушу,
 марна чакаць – а мо шчодры Гасподзь
 новую мову ўдыхне, нібы душу.

СКОВЛА 2001, 5

(Language is breathed into us like our soul
 and should not live as a serf.
 The soul will be caught by the sharp edge of a sleeping bench –
 and it will remain deaf clay.

And it will remain dead flesh
 a fish thrown onto dry land
 there is no use waiting – but perhaps the generous Lord
 will breath a new language into us, like a soul.)

Naturally, part of defence of the language is the constant official state of two languages, which is seen by some as thinly disguised Russification. In 'Paetu B.' (To the poet B.) he compares using two languages to riding two horses in a series of rhetorical question:

...Паэт дзэвюхмоўны – а адна душа?
 Паэт дзэвюхдушны – а адна Айчына?
 Ці – у душы ў паэта ні шыша,
 ці – і Айчына рвецца, як аўчына?

СКОВЛА 2001, 98

(...A bilingual poet, but with one soul?
 A bilingual poet, but with one Fatherland?
 Or is there nothing at all in the poet's soul,
 or will the Fatherland tear apart like a sheepskin?)

Another poem, 'Čaho ŭ nas tolki ni bylo ...' (What have we not had ...) is equally sardonic on this subject:

Чаго ў нас толькі ні было,
 Якія нас ні гнулі дэмань!
 Прыгон, калгаснае сіло,
 Вайна і барацьба з нацдэмамі.

Была турма, была карчма,
 Змагла ня страціць голаў нацыя.
 А сёньня хоць крычы крычма –
 Ідзе дзбіл-арусізацыя!

SKOBLA 2001, 101

(What have we not had, / What devils did not crush us! / Serfdom, the silos of kolkhozes, / War and the struggle with the National Democrats. // There was prison, there was the inn / the nation managed not to lose its head. / But nowadays you can shout as much as you want – there is taking place moronic Russification!)

Finally, 'Adkaz Kardynala' (The Cardinal's reply) describes the attempts of a congregation to have their services held in Belarusian, at which the cardinal, 'a lover of the Russian language' goes off somewhere in the direction of Tambov (Skobla 2016b, 166).

Naturally, Skobla in his poetry has great concern to preserve the heritage of those who use the language, i.e. his fellow countrymen, although the majority of his work in this area is in his first anthology and in his extensive compiling and editing of texts which for many decades were forgotten or suppressed in Belarus.

Marc Chagall, considered by Belarusians as one of their own, is the object of a poem, 'Uźniasinnie Šahala' (The ascension of Chagall) that depicts this renowned painter as nostalgic for his shtetl in the Viciebsk region, and imagines God as saying that on his (Viciebsk) easel he had painted His picture (Skobla 1994, 68). Guillaume Apollinaire (born Kastravicki) is another 'lost' Belarusian, and his portrait is presented in 'Kaska Apalinera' (The helmet of Apollinaire); his helmet here is a bandage round his head 'like a sheikh' (Skobla 2001, 57–58).

The subject of 'Alieś Salaviej' is a writer who emigrated to Australia, and whose works were subsequently prepared for publication by Skobla. Rarely satisfied with his own work, Salaviej (pen-name of Alfred Radziuk, a name he changed to Albert Kadniak in his new country), was a true disciple of another of Skobla's literary heroes, Maksim Bahdanovič. Finally, may be mentioned Adam Mickiewicz (born in the Navahrudak region), in whom Belarusians have always taken a strong interest. Two poems in *Našeście poŭni* take aspects of the Polish national poet's life: 'Pamiaci duba Adama Mitskieviča ũ Ščorsach' (In memory of Adam Mickiewicz's oak tree in Ščorsy) is an imaginative poem incorporating ghosts and evil spirits that Piarun is called to dispel.

In Belarus, as people light their stoves, the smoke makes an aerial bridge in order that Mickiewicz's memory should be eternal (Skobla 2001, 53–54); the other poem, 'Mitskievič u Krakavie' (Mickiewicz in Kraków) depicts this poet as a stranger in many places, including Kraków, with references to the famous opening of his *Pan Tadeusz* and also to General Kościuszko who was born in the Biaraście region of Belarus.

Many Belarusians now have the chance to travel, and Skobla has written two imaginative poems about Riga: in 'Hotyka Ryhi' (Gothic Riga) he is struck by the cocks on church spires, and presents a general impression of a damp city with the sky carelessly thrown over it like a mantle at night-time (Skobla 1994, 23).

The second verse is 'Kachańnie praciahlaściu ũ cely doždž ...' (Love-making throughout the entire rain ...), in which he seems to claim for Riga Paris's reputation as the city of love. As always with Skobla there is a torrent of adjectives, here mostly attached to cats, and he enjoys a patriotic Latvian phrase, 'Laj dzivo!', detecting in it Kryvian notes (Skobla 2001, 39). He is not, however, ever tempted to emigrate to America, as we are told unequivocally in 'Niabiosaŭ vypierany šery tok ...' (The grey current of the sky has overtaken ..., Skobla, 2016b, 92).

Less exotic than his poems of real or imaginary travel, are the miserable circumstances of one of Belarus's linguistically closest neighbours, Ukraine and its tragic war, about which he has written two strong poems: 'Śnieh' gives a picture of the Maidan and of snipers blinding Ukrainians. Skobla is clearly more sympathetic to them than to their oppressors, and at the end he shows God giving sympathy to one of the victims:

...І дабраславіўшы Украіну,
 <Ён загінуў – так шапнуў ёй Бог, –
 Каб ты, нэнько, бачыла штоміг
 Сяброў, і ворагаў сваіх>.

SKOBLA 116b, 130

(...And having blessed Ukraine,
 <'He perished', whispered God to her,
 'So that you, young woman, should see every second
 who are your friends, and who your enemies>.)

The other poem, 'Danieččyna, lieta 2015' (The Donetsk region, summer 2015) is also about the Ukrainian war, ending on a tragic international note:

Праз стэп прамасучаны, як качагарка,
 Параненай яшчаркай скача прамень.
 У драме ўкраінскай курсівам рэмарка:
 На фонце ўсходнім без перамен.

SKOBLA 2016b, 131

(across the steppe, oily as a stoker,
 a ray of light gallops like an injured lizard.
 In the Ukrainian drama using the italics of *Re marque*:
All quiet on the Eastern front.)

Concerned as he is for his native land and its cultural and especially literary heritage, Michaś Skobla does write a little about his own creativity, although not nearly so much as many other lyric poets. In two early poems he seems to feel a degree of frustration: in 'Adnojčy' (One day) his desire to write about the Deity and heaven comes to nothing, particularly when a maple tree near Slucak swipes away what he has written, like a little girl, and the skies become empty and grey (Skobla 1994, 36); in 'Vyratuj mianie, vyratuj mianie ...' (Save me, save me ...) he feels the danger of being as blind and deaf as a drowned man, and he requests that language be returned to his mouth, and that night should leave him and, please, release his hands (Skobla 1994, 37).

In another verse, 'A mnie? A mnie, jak kažuć, Boh nie daŭ ...' (And to me, to me, as they say, God did not give ...), the poet wants to find his poetic voice, without his lively and inventive imagination being corrupted by Lucifer, and appeals to Hebe to help him, as since time immemorial poets have requested favours from on high (Skobla 2001, 36). His scorn, quite remote from the good-humoured early parodies, is kept for those who choose to write verses in Russian in 'Makaraničny vieršyk' (A little macaronic poem) or write memoirs to make themselves seem more important in 'Memuaryst' (The Memoirist) (Skobla 2001, 108–09).

Death is not a frequent topic in Skobla's poetry, but in 'Apuścili ŭ mahilu trunu ...' (They lowered the coffin into the grave ...) the deceased, who has been launched like a boat, might still wish to get some sight of the land he has left, and so the poet asks that no wall be built around the grave to block the view from the coffin (Skobla 2001, 70). A relatively recent poem, however, 'Prošba' (A request) is distinctly elegiac in mood, despite being written not later than 2016 when the poet was only fifty. He begins with the wish to live peacefully without lofty ambitions, though he is grateful for life, and now the time has come to sit quietly on the porch; in the last stanza he asks God for a

most insignificant end, using first a sporting image and concluding, more characteristically, with a rustic one:

Не пакінь другім ці першым
 На апошнім крузе,
 Ты мяне завершы вершам,
 Як стажок у лузе.

SKOBLA 2016b, 168

(Don't give me second or first place
 on the last lap,
 Finish me with a poem,
 Like a little rick in a meadow.)

Most of the prominent features of Skobla's poetry should have emerged from the examples of his verse given above, including humour, unusual rhymes, word associations and language play, occasional repetition and, above all imagery. Rather than ending with premature elegiac writing, however, three very different examples of this writer's fecund imagination may be offered: in 'Zima' (Winter), for example, he imagines the smoke from snow-bound houses as tow being woven (Skobla 2001, 15); the image of the sun as a billiard ball being shot into the hole of a volcano is untypically extreme in 'Bil'jard' (Billiards, Skobla 2016b 101), whilst 'Kryšku nie pa siabie' (Not quite myself) is far more philosophical and ends memorably:

...Учэпіста вісьне
 пад дахам душы
 кажан трывогі.
 І поўня нязрушна мігціцца,
 як пень
 сьпілаванага
 Дрэва Сусьвету.

SKOBLA 2001, 22

(...Hanging firmly
 under the roof of my soul
 is the bat of anxiety.
 And the full moon winks without movement,
 like the stump

of the Tree of the Universe
that has been sawn down.)

Finally, to end this review of his lyrics on a whimsical rather than alarming note, 'Vosień świetlaja' (Bright autumn) includes comparisons of clouds to sleepy dirigibles and, more extremely, pictures the forest washing its head in the lake of Davyd-Haradok.

6 Conclusion

The remarkable range of Michaś Skobla's knowledge and interests, reflected in his anthological, editorial and translating work, is matched by the thematic breadth and vivid imagination of his original lyric poetry, which presents many aspects of this writer's world view through some striking and often memorably vivid imagery.

His lively sense of humour, most evident in his parodies, is also to be seen in some of his other writing, without in any way diminishing the power and pathos of his serious concerns for the preservation of his country's cultural heritage as well as its present well-being and, indeed, future. He has shown himself through his work as a whole to be a universal figure whose great contribution to the Belarusian literary process is beyond question, and it may be hoped that this article will bring his work to the attention to those who wish to increase their knowledge of Belarusian writing and literary culture as a whole.

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