

**ANNUS  
ALBARUTHENICUS  
2005**

**ГОД БЕЛАРУСКИ  
2005**

**VILLA SOKRATES**

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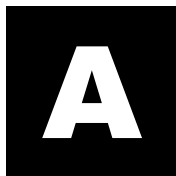
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**Arnold McMillin**

## **Anatol Sys – a soul in torment**



leś Harun famously underlined the poetic nature of Belarus in a memorable line, ‘sam narod – piaśniar’ (the people themselves are a bard), but himself also exemplified a melancholy feature of the history of Belarusian poetry – the unnaturally short lives of some of its best practitioners. Amongst other prime examples may be mentioned Harun’s contemporaries Maksim Bahdanovič and Siarhieĭ Paľujan, as well as, in more recent years, Symon Błatun, Leanid Jakubovič and Anatol Sierbantovič; most recently was the tragic case of Dzianis Khvastovskii.<sup>1</sup> But there is a distinction between death from disease, accident or war, and the loss of a poet through self-destruction, as seems to have been the case with Anatol Sys, a victim of alcohol addiction. It is greatly to be hoped that, by some miracle, this outstandingly gifted poet, still in the prime of life, has not burned himself out by a ruinous lifestyle. For Sys is a captivating poet of varying moods, forms and themes, a fine craftsman with a rare gift for expressing deep thoughts and emotions in an unpretentious, sometimes deliberately repetitive way. A truly patriotic poet, whose poems are deeply embedded in the cultural and spiritual past of his coun-

try, he expresses most vividly his hopes and, particularly, despair in view of what seems to him a catastrophic decline in his beloved native culture. He is one of the strongest voices in contemporary Belarusian poetry.

Anatol Sys was born on 26 October 1959 in the village of Haroškaŭ in the Rečyca district of Homiel region. In 1977 he entered the Historical – Philosophical Faculty of Homiel State University, graduating in 1982. After military service in the Red Army, he worked for the Vietka local newspaper and later as senior technician in Belarusian Television. His poetic début came with some verses for the youth magazine *Maładość* in 1986 and since then he has published three slim but very impressive volumes of poetry: *Ahmień* (The hearth, 1988), *Pan Les* (Lord Forest, 1989), and, most recently, *Vieršy* (Verses, 2002).<sup>2</sup> After *Pan Les*, however, Sys abandoned paid work and many fear that now he appears to have ceased writing. A founder member, with Adam Hłobus (b. 1958), of the *Tutejšyja* (Locals) group of young writers in 1987, Sys led a boisterous life filled with scandals which at first were mostly forgiven, thanks to his charismatic character and immense poetic gifts, but which later became routine and unacceptable. It is his poetry, rather than the aberrations of his life, which form the principal subject of what follows.

\*\*\*

Anatol Sys's poetry is derived from and connected with his native culture in many different ways: through Belarusian mythology; through links with writers of the past and present, including many echoes and transformations of well-known earlier poems; through concern for the language, expressed more indirectly than in some 20<sup>th</sup>-century poetry; and, not least, in his despair at the destruction of national identity and consciousness by the 'vandals' who can only be resisted by the sacred flame of poetry.

The flame is, of course, mythological in itself, and in the untitled poem, 'My – čarada samotnych ptachaŭ...' (We are a flight of lonely birds), Sys uses characteristic bird imagery in a poem of great oratorical power, not least in the line which divides the poem's two parts, highlighting Belarus's national colours:

---

<sup>1</sup> On Khvostovskii see Žybul 2003.

The equivalent to these short-lived talents for English readers is Thomas Chatterton (1752-1770) who took his own life at the age of seventeen.

<sup>2</sup> The latter book, incorporating many poems from the earlier two, was, in fact, published with the help of one of his many admirers, Valancina Jakimovič.

Мы – чарада самотных птахаў,  
над намі зорныя крыжы,  
за намі вісельні ды плахі  
ды ўслед шурпатыя глыжы,  
за намі веды валунамі  
грымяць этапамі бацькоў,  
няма жывой душы за намі,  
нат з плах залевы змылі кроў.

Чырвоны Зніч над Белай Вежай.

Гудзе ў здагадках стольны Менск,  
а мы ў нябёсах крэслім межы –  
вяргаем Вільню, Пскоў, Смаленск...  
Мы – чарада самотных птахаў  
у атачэнні груганоў,  
Дняпро нясе ад Маці-Плахі  
ў чужое мора нашу кроў.<sup>3</sup>

This poem contains not only a central mythological or folkloric element, but is, in fact, emblematic of much of Sys's poems on national themes, from the dream of returning the ancient boundaries of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania to the association of present-day Belarus with an execution block surrounded by rapacious ravens where knowledge and, by extension, culture lies in the past, and where the lonely birds, frequently associated by Sys with poetry, are fleeing from clods of frozen earth being thrown at them. Blood, incidentally, figures alarmingly frequently in Sys's verse, highlighted ironically in 'Kryžavali krumkača' (They were crucifying a raven) where ravens and swans are crucified by a 'learned executioner' because both have black blood and so it would be 'a sin not to crucify them' (Sys 2002, 49).

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<sup>3</sup> 'We are flights of lonely birds, / above us the starry crosses, / behind us are scaffolds and execution blocks / and at us are cast clods of frozen earth, / behind us knowledge like boulders / thunders with the ages of our ancestors, / there is no living ground beneath us, / the downpours have washed the blood even from the execution blocks. // A Red Sacred Flame above the White Tower. // The capital Miensk hums with speculation / but we in the heavens mark the boundaries / – we take back Vilna, Pskov, Smolensk... / We are a flight of lonely birds / surrounded by ravens, / the river Dnieper bears from Mother-Execution Block / our blood to an alien sea': Anatol Sys, *Vieršy*, Miensk, Mastackaja Litaratura, 2002 (hereafter Sys 2002), 129.

Returning to folkloric elements, they are widespread: implied in the poems which gave their names to Sys's first books, 'Ahmień' and 'Panski Les', they are prominent in poems like 'Božavoŭk' (The wolf god), 'Čornaja hadziuka, biełaja zmiaja' (Black grass-snake, white serpent), 'Pastuchi' (Shepherds), and 'U čarocie ptuška načawała' (The bird spent a night in the reeds), the latter ending with the all-too-plausible statement that his mother would not let him into the house for the night. Finally, 'Nieapalenaja kupina' (The fire-resistant icon) also brings folk belief right into the practicalities of life, as does, on the same theme, 'Zamova ad pažaru' (A spell against fire) from the 'Alaiza' narrative poem (cycle of poems might be a more accurate description). Folkloric verses like 'Žmiainy car' (The Serpent-King, 1910) and 'Stracim-lebiedź' (The doomed swan, 1916) echo the titles of well-known poems by Bahdanovič,<sup>4</sup> and 'Biełaruś maja, maja maŭila...' is resonant with one of the best-loved poems in Belarusian literature, 'O Biełaruś, maja šypšyna...' (O Belarus, my briar-rose..., 1925) by Uładzimir Duboŭka. These three poems are, however, very different from their referents. 'Žmiainy car' was one of the verses based on Belarusian mythology in Bahdanovič's early cycle, 'U začarovany m carstvie' (In an enchanted kingdom, 1910); Sys's poem has four quatrains each hailing the authority of the Serpent-King, who will show the way across a mossy marsh, protecting his marvellous author (Bahdanovič) from rapacious foreigners; the poem is a present to the earlier poet. Bahdanovič's 'Stracim-lebiedź' is a tragic bird that flies independently from Noah's ark, but is finally weighed down by smaller birds which sit on him, and dies leaving no descendants. Just how Sys's poem relates to Niaklajeŭ is not entirely clear: the latter once foolishly declared himself 'the best poet' but 'fashions naive verses' which are for Sys inspirational, like the first cranes of spring. He must fly without looking back (presumably from his expatriate life in Finland) (Skobła 2003, 747).

The relationship of Duboŭka's inspirational poem to Sys's cry of despair is clearer: Duboŭka calls on the symbolic briar-rose to overcome the weeds which seek to choke it, to resist boldly the hardships brought by (Belarus's) enemies. In Sys's poem the patriotism is no less, but for him Belarus is already a grave:

Беларусь мая, мая магіла...

І калі вясёлкай над труной  
вып'е кроў да кроплі з маіх жылаў,  
Беларусь, накрый мяне зямлёй.  
Не, счакай, яшчэ аддам я вочы  
сваёй здані,  
каб мая душа  
не зблудзіла на чужыну ўночы,  
каб між намі не лягла мяжа.

Беларусь мая, мая магіла,  
з бел-чырвона-белага радна  
ці кашулю мне на смерць пашыла?  
Беларусь мая, мая магіла,  
ты ж адна ў мяне, як ёсць адна.<sup>5</sup>

Sys's vision is indeed a bleak one. In 'Łastaўka' (The swallow) he laments that the bird has for a long time not visited his native parts (the villages Niehlubka and Motal are mentioned), that it has not witnessed death, but that this will soon change, as we read in the eloquent final lines:

дык пабачыш, якая смерць...  
Снег з Расейшчыны, дождж з Паляччыны –  
будзе целу й душы балець,  
  
ластаўка.<sup>6</sup>

The image of hell recurs in a variety of poems from 'Cnatlivi kniaź' (Chaste prince), where Bahdanovič seems to be the eponymous hero, to 'Raj' (Heaven) in

---

<sup>5</sup> 'My Belarus, my grave... // And when like a rainbow over the coffin / my blood will be drunk up to the last drop in my veins, / Belarus, cover me with earth. / No, wait, I shall give my eyes / to my ghost, / so that my soul / may not wander into foreign parts at night, / that there should not be a boundary between us. // My Belarus, my grave, / from the white-red-white sackcloth / have you sewn me a shirt for my death? / My Belarus, my grave, / you are all I have, absolutely all': Sys 2002, 127.

<sup>6</sup> 'and you will see what death is like... / Snow from the Russian lands, rains from the Polish – / it will be painful for your body and soul, // swallow: Sys 2002, 124.

which an old woman dreams of joining her dead husband, having ‘lived in hell long enough’. The poet finds life in spiritually impoverished Belarus a cause for despair, as is reflected in one of his most powerful verses:

**Беларусі**

Хто з пяром, хто з паходняй, хто з посахам  
свет знайшоў,  
а я – з гострым нажом,  
о сівая мая, о боская,  
звалтаваная, мая босая,  
мая голая пад дажджом.

А ты думала, а ты й думай так,  
што твой родны сын не зладзей,  
таму й носіць нож, бо робіць мастак  
скрыпкі знатныя для людзей.

О сівая мая, о боская,  
хаця сэрца сніць гостры нож,  
ад цябе адной не адрокся я –  
у нагах тваіх – медны грош,

але прыйдзе ноч дужа зорная,  
тваёй спраўджанай слязой,  
а мая душа будзе чорная,  
небяспечная, як лязо.

Яе ўгледзіш ты,  
я цябе прашу,  
я па-воўчаму буду выць:

---

<sup>7</sup> ‘To Belarus // Some with a pen, some with a torch, some with a staff / found the world, / and I found it with a sharp knife, / O my grey one, O divine one, / my barefoot raped one, / bare beneath the rain. // And you thought, and go on thinking so, / that your own son was not a villain, / that he carried a knife, for an artist makes / wonderful violins for people. // O my grey one, O divine one, / although my heart dreams of a sharp knife, / you alone have I not abandoned – / at your feet I am a copper coin, // but there will come a thickly starry night, / with your righteous tear, / and my soul will be black, / dangerous as a blade. // You will notice it, / I shall beg you, / and I shall howl like a wolf: / do not approach my soul at night, / for then I shall no longer live’: Sys 2002, 130-31.

не ідзі ўначы па маю душу,  
бо тагды і мне больш не жыць.<sup>7</sup>

Death never seems far away in Sys's verse, whether he is going to die dramatically, pathetically, or like a dog, as in 'Jak toj sabaka' (Like that dog) which ends with the words, 'Ja pahibiel čuju'.<sup>8</sup> The image of the full moon as a skull is found in many poems including 'Moj Dniapro try tysiačy hadoŭ...' (My Dnieper for three thousand years...) and 'Biełaruskija Ikary' (Belarusian Icaruses). Excessive drinking and its consequences are mentioned, often obliquely, in various contexts, not least that of the poet's family of which he writes with apparently more sincerity than actual regret. One graphic verse is very open about the problem:

На твары шчацінне, як пожня жытнёвая,  
вочы – праталіны мутнай вады...  
– Мілы сыноч мой, пачні жыццё новае,  
грэх блазнаваць у Хрыстовы гады.

– Мама, я рады б –  
як пчолы на ліпень,  
музы лятуць на хмяльнага мяне.  
Жыць без паэзіі? Гэта ж пагібель!  
Жыць без віна? Гэта ж смерць удвайне.

Хто ж вінаваты, што аж з нараджэння  
з мёдам смакчу я з цябе малако?  
Ведаю, сохне паціху карэнне,  
хоць і жывеш над Вялікай Ракой.

Ну і няхай музам колкая пожня,  
горкія вусны мне, дык няхай.  
Мама, такога народзіць не кожная,  
мама,  
не перажывай!<sup>9</sup>

---

<sup>8</sup> 'I feel my end coming': Sys 2002, 130.

<sup>9</sup> 'Stubble on my face like a reaped field of corn, / my eyes like pools of thawed murky water... / – My dear little son, begin a new life, / it is a sin to play the fool with the years Christ has given. // – Mother, I would be glad

Drinking brings Sys loneliness and loss of his friends; his Fatherland, so vital in his sober consciousness, becomes a fatherland of alcohol<sup>10</sup> where day and night are interchangeable. A somewhat rambling, yet powerful poem, ‘Samotny’ (Lonely), ends when the poet stifles his loneliness with his own blood, thus escaping night and witnessing the return of (illusory?) day. The following lines from the middle of this poem reflect the dire consequences of his addiction:

Я хаваў ад іх сляпыя вочы,  
налівалі, і я піў віно,  
сам жа, як злачынца,  
ўсё адно  
я чакаў сваёй самотнай ночы.  
Я змярцвеў,  
хоць чуў вакол прадмовы  
пра каханне, адраджэнне, мову,  
тосты за Радзіму...  
Ўсё адно  
за самоту піў сваё віно.

Так спазнаў яшчэ адну Радзіму.

Цяжка ўспомніць – ноч была ці дзень, --  
бо здушыла горла, як камень,  
мне віно,  
і верш мой занямеў.<sup>11</sup>

---

– like bees in July, / so the muses come to me when I am drunk. / To live without poetry? That is certain ruin! / To live without drink? That is doubly death. // Who then is to blame that, from my very birth, / I suck milk from you together with mead? / I know that my roots will quietly die, / even though you live near the Great River. // Well then let my muses be in a prickly stubble field, / let also my lips be bitter. // Mother, not every woman can give birth to such a one, / mother, do not fret!': Sys 2002, 141-42.

<sup>10</sup> Sys usually refers to alcohol as *vin*o (literally, wine). Here and elsewhere *vin*o is translated as alcohol, drink, or, where appropriate, omitted. The only exceptions are where the poet specifically refers to wine, for instance, red wine.

<sup>11</sup> 'I hid my blind eyes from them, / they poured and I drank. / I myself though, like a criminal, / all the same / waited for my lonely night. / I became dead to the world, / although all around I could hear speeches / about love, rebirth, the language, / toasts to the Fatherland... / all the same / I drank to loneliness. // Thus I found another Fatherland. // It is hard to recall whether it was night or day, / for drink / crushed my throat like a stone, / and my poetry became dumb': Sys 2002, 120.

The rhyme of ‘ўsio adno’ (it is all the same) and ‘vino’ (drink) is a particularly chilling one. In ‘Maja chata biez siabroў – nie chata’ (My home without friends is not a home), he writes of being abandoned by his friends, although he believes it is not drink but his poetry that is to blame:

бо паэзія у гэтым вінавата,  
так што ні пры чым зялёны змій.<sup>12</sup>

In another simple but effective poem, however, he asks to be kept away from a poet who has been invited to his house where happiness has turned into sadness:

Пад вакном журба збірае мяту,  
а расціла  
радасць  
яе тут.

Калі Бог пашле паэта ў хату –  
пасадзіце на чырвоны кут.

З абраза святою павуцінай  
павучок, як Дух, чало кране...  
За паэтам я зайду ў хаціну –  
не пускайце да яго мяне.<sup>13</sup>

In one particularly searing verse, ‘Pierad boham’ (Before God), the only solution to the poet’s appalling situation of ‘devilish circles’, attempted self-mutilation and suicide, and the ‘stinking chapel’ of his home, appears to be Woman, ‘the mother of all sinners’. This powerful poem will end this brief review of his alcoholic despair, before turning to more cheerful or, at least, stable aspects of Sys’s life and poetry:

---

<sup>12</sup> ‘for poetry is to blame for this / since the green bottle [lit. serpent] has nothing to do with it’: Sys 2002, 138.

<sup>13</sup> ‘Under the window grief picks mint, / but joy grew it here. // When God sends a poet into a house, / place him in the icon corner. // From the icon in a holy spider’s web / a little spider, like the Spirit, touches his brow... / After the poet, I go into the house – do not let me approach him’: Sys 2002, 84. In the poem ‘Pad biarozaju kości, a ū kronie hniazdo ptuška mościć...’ (Beneath a birch tree are bones, and in the crown a bird is making a nest...) there is peace, apart from the mockery of people, as the poet lies resting in a graveyard: Sys 2002, 10.

### **Перад Богам**

Я думаў,  
вершы мае відушчыя,  
аж пакуль не аслепнуў сам  
ад маланкі, самім жа пушчанай,  
я гарэў, як бязбожны храм,  
сам сабе я ў ім здаўся богам,  
адпускаў сам сабе грахі –  
грызла ганак, вяла дарога  
зноў на д'яблавы кругі,  
ад яго я вяртаўся ў поўсці  
і калі цалаваў свой крыж,  
ён адбіткам жажлівым помсціў,  
бы люстэрка ці д'яблаў віж,  
і тагды я складаў малітву,  
можа, ў соты свой самасуд,  
той малітвай, нібыта брытвай,  
сашкрабаў у адчаі бруд,  
і ў адчаі я рэзаў вочы,  
і жахаўся крыві сваёй,  
і жагнаўся – набожна, тройчы, –  
і агідны жывёльны лой  
з гострай брытвы маёй малітвы,  
быццам гной, патыхаў маной.

Я пакінуў свой храм смярдзючы,  
азірнуўся на купалы,  
а святыя ў маіх анучах  
неслі кроў маю на сталы,  
а я, голы, як здань, бяскроўны,  
у чыесьці ступаў сляды,  
перад Богам жывёле роўны,  
нёс грахі свае на клады,  
і глыбела за мной сцяжына,  
і ступала ў мае сляды

маці грэшных усіх – Жанчына –  
з поўнай чарай жывой вады.<sup>14</sup>

Not all Sys's family relations are depicted in his verse as chaos or crisis. 'Dzied pierad śmierciu' (Grandpa near death), for instance, is a touching depiction of the old man and his heritage, with the words of his son, Sys's father, as a simple epigraph and first line: 'Jon svaje nohi dažyŭ...' (He wore his legs out...). On his own father the poet writes with feeling and admiration in 'Bačka tak i nie śsvieŭ...' (Father simply did not grow grey...), and, looking back to hard times, in a powerful poem, 'Hałodny hod' (A hungry year). In the same vein is the prose poem 'Brukavanka' (The paved road), in which Sys sets out without purpose but finds himself in his native parts and by the paved road sees graves, amongst which, 'like a candle, like a silver birch tree', stood his father's grave. In another far from self-pitying poem, 'Heta pamiataje tolki maci...' (Only mother remembers this...), it is his mother who recalls his childhood enthusiasms, and shares the memory of his particular humiliation when being mocked by the village people. In fact, many poems reflect Sys's love towards his father and mother, another good example being 'A ja pomniu, jak mianie chryścili...' (But I remember how they christened me...). Several charming poems recall his childhood, of which perhaps the most interesting is the prose poem 'Nizka abarankaŭ' (A string of biscuits), subtitled 'a true story that happened to me', which describes how the boy takes literally the instruction not to ignore the unfortunate, and arrives home without the things he had planned to bring. Also may be mentioned an early string of poems entitled 'Vočy malenstva' (The eyes of youth), as well as 'Pieśnia pra syna' and 'Pieśni pra syna'.

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Anatol Sys has a vivid imagination and a rich command of register and voice that finds notable expression in a series of monologues (*manalohi*). This genre was

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<sup>14</sup> 'Before God // I thought, / my verses can see / until I myself am blinded / by lightning which I myself have unleashed, / I burnt, like a godless temple, / I seemed to myself like a god in it, / I absolved my own sins – / I was drawn across the porch, the road led / again into devilish circles, / from it I returned in a fleece / and when I kissed my cross, / it revenged itself with a fearful fragment, / like a mirror or a devils' gaze, / and then I composed a prayer, / perhaps my hundredth act of self-condemnation, / with that prayer, like a razor, / I despairingly scratched off the filth, / and in despair I cut my eyes, / and was fearful of my own blood, / and crossed myself – piously, three times, – / and the disgusting animal fat / from the sharp razor of my prayer, / like rotten matter, smelled foully of lies. // I left my stinking chapel, / looked around at the cupolas, / but the saints in my toot cloths, / bore my blood to tables, / and I, naked, bloodless as a ghost, / trod in someone's steps, / the equal of an animal before God, / bore my sins to the cemetery, / and behind me the path grew deeper, / and there trod in my steps / the mother of all sinners – Woman – / with a full cup of living water': Sys 2002, 118-19.

practiced by, amongst others, the dazzling Russian poet Andrei Voznesenskii, to whom several Belarusian poets responded enthusiastically, most remarkably Ryhor Baradulin in his own glittering poem of the mid-1970s, ‘Andreju Vaznasienskamu’ (To Andrei Voznesenskii). But whilst the Russian’s half dozen or so monologues tend to be very generic (a beatnik, a biologist, an actor, a future reader of poetry, for example) and rarely devoted to individuals (exceptions being the eighteenth-century explorer Nikolai Rezanov and, most famously, Marilyn Monroe), Sys’s monologues are mainly delivered by celebrated figures from Belarus’s past and, to a lesser degree, present. They are people whose aspirations and interests the poet clearly shares. There are about a dozen, of which the first is ‘Manaŭoh Źmiciera Źyŭnoviča’, a simple poem of four quatrains, reflecting the disappointment of this writer and communist activist, better known by his pen name of Ciška Hartny. The Belarusian people are like dunes in a storm, with winds blowing constantly, from West and East, black and red, hiding the sun and the icon, but teaching people to seek money and (spurious) honours. The poem begins with a vivid image for the idealistic Źyŭnovič and the same image introduces the last stanza:

Як пазашлюбны плод,  
свае хаваю думы:  
чаму ж ты, мой народ,  
падатлівы, як гума?<sup>15</sup>

Two suicides – the already mentioned Siarhiej Paŭjan and an actor, Ramuald Źakoŭski – attract Sys’s sympathy and attention, as does the short lived West Belarusian poet, Uładzimir Źyŭka. Most inspirational of all these early flowers of Belarusian culture is Aleś Harun. The first and last stanzas of his monologue express vividly the aspirations of a poet with whom Sys clearly empathizes, using the image of heated stones (perhaps at some level reminiscent of Pushkin’s celebrated ‘Prorok’ [The Prophet, 1826]) to express the poet’s desire to arouse and inspire his fellow-countrymen:

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<sup>15</sup> ‘Like the fruit of an extra-marital relationship, / I preserve my thoughts: / but why are you, my people, / as pliant as gum?’: Sys 2002, 102. This image is picked out by Hanna Kišlicyna, one of the few scholars to attempt an analysis of Sys’s achievement, as ‘aesthetically ugly’: Kišlicyna 2003, 58. Reaction to poetic diction is, of course, particularly subjective, as the unending disagreements about the last line of Boris Pasternak’s poem ‘Gamlet’ (Hamlet, 1946) show.

Маналог Алеся Гаруна

Гараць камяні ў маім вогнішчы,  
расцвеленыя агнём,  
нібы ваўчаняты ў логвішчы  
сонечным прамянём.

(.....)

Дай Бог, каб маё каменне  
Жар-птахам дайсці змагло  
да тысячных пакаленняў  
і сэрцы іх апякло.<sup>16</sup>

It may be noted at this point that Harun also appears unexpectedly in the last two lines of Sys's poem 'Sabaka' (Dog), with the kind of quasi-banal final rhyme to which the poet is clearly attracted:

І ўночы жудасна хтось выў –  
Алеся Гарун сабакам быў.<sup>17</sup>

Another passionate monologue is that of Karuś Kahaniec ( Sys incorrectly gives the pen-name of this writer and artist, Kazimir Kastravicki, as Karuś Kahaniec, a curious slip). In this poem Kahaniec is made to link the Belarusian language, which is preserved as a weapon and carried on the people's back, to the Belarusian God. The latter is not an alien and cruel God, a waxen idol, but, like the language, part of the people's body:

ЁН  
БОГ НАШ  
І БОГ АДЗІН.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> 'Monologue of Aleś Harun // Stones burn in my bonfire, / stimulated by the flames. / like wolf cubs in their lair / warmed by the sun's rays. [...] // Pray God that my stones / may reach like a firebird / to thousands of future generations / and set their hearts on fire': Sys 2002, 64-65.

<sup>17</sup> 'And in the night someone wailed fearfully -- / Aleś Harun was a dog': Sys 2002, 69.

<sup>18</sup> 'HE / IS OUR GOD / AND OUR ONLY GOD': Sys 2002, 125.

Perhaps less interesting are the monologues of an unfrocked priest and of an apostate. ‘Manałoh Jazepa Drazdoviča’, however, enables Sys to introduce through this artist, best known for his paintings on mythological subjects, some of the true symbols of an independent Belarus, such as the Pahonia<sup>19</sup> and the bison. The latter’s threatened extinction deeply disquiets true Belarusians, as may be seen from the following lines from the middle and end of this poem:

Жалобны рэквіем зубрыны  
на мой  
народ  
наводзіць шлях.  
(.....)

там крыўская Пагоня скача,  
і німб над ёй, як зорны шлях.<sup>20</sup>

An aspect of Belarus’s medieval history is brought out in ‘Manałoh Aranasa Filipoviča’ (Monologue of Afanasii Filipovich) in which the troubled and turbulent seventeenth-century priest recalls his lack of good fortune (*dola*) in Belarus. As may be apparent from the poems mentioned so far, Sys is deeply aware of the Belarusian historical heritage, feeling keenly its periods of hope and despair, through his chosen spokespersons. Another example is a poem that refers to the greatest literary historian of all, ‘Nastupniku Uładzimira Karatkieviča’ (To the descendent of Uładzimir Karatkievič), ending with the following appropriately Romantic stanza:

І свіцяцца скрозь цемру руны,  
Ён ідзе,  
пакуль вы спіце,  
і на спадчынных гусях струны  
Чуюць сэрца Яго біццё.<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> On the Pahonia, see, for instance, Sys’s vivid poem ‘Pieśnia pra ūvaskrašeńnie vieršnika’ (Song of the resurrection of the rider).

<sup>20</sup> ‘The mournful requiem of the bison / brings sadness to my people... [...] / there the Kryvian Pahonia gallops, / and a cloud above it is like the Milky Way’: Sys 2002, 51.

<sup>21</sup> ‘And the runes shine through the darkness, / He goes along, / while you sleep, / and on the hereditary gusli the strings / hear the beating of His heart’: Sys 2002, 131.

Somewhat different is ‘Manafoh “Tutejšaha” (Monologue of ‘a local person’) in which the speaker implores ‘Lucyjan’, the last hope, to maintain the traditions embodied for Sys by Janka Kupała.<sup>22</sup> There is a memorable rhyme in the middle of the poem, where the stanza also shows Sys’s fondness for repetition:

Ты адзін, ты адзін, ты адзін,  
ты застаўся адзін на славяншчыне,  
і Радзіма твая, паглядзі,—  
русакосая янычаршчына,<sup>23</sup>

The poem’s last six lines become quite frenziedly assertive:

бо цяпер ты адзін народ,  
быццам храм на шляху вандалаў.

ДЫ ПАКУЛЬ ТЫ ЯШЧЭ ЖЫВЕШ,  
ЗАПАЛІ ПРАД КУПАЛАМ СВЕЧКУ,  
ПРАЧЫТАЙ І СПАЛІ МОЙ ВЕРШ,  
А ВАНДАЛАМ СКАЖЫ,  
Я ВЕЧНЫ!<sup>24</sup>

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The poetry of Anatol Sys as a whole is redolent of Belarusian literature and culture. Whilst it would be an absurd exaggeration to say that his *oeuvre* could serve as a guide to the national heritage, nonetheless knowledge of the latter is essential to understand much of his verse. In that sense Sys is a deeply national and (if the word has any meaning) nationalistic poet. His anti-Russian feelings are no secret and have already been seen, for example in ‘Łastaŭka’ where the Russian snow has

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<sup>22</sup> The poem is dedicated to Maksim Tank, and ‘Lucyjan’ refers to the freethinking medieval artist who is the eponymous hero of Tank’s well-known poem ‘Lucyjan Tapola’ (1946).

<sup>23</sup> ‘You are alone, you are alone, you are alone, / you have remained alone in the Slav lands / and your Fatherland, look, -- / is a territory ruled over by janissaries with light brown plaits’: Sys 2002, 71.

<sup>24</sup> ‘for now you are alone, my people, / like a church in the path of vandals. // AND WHILST YOU ARE STILL ALIVE, / LIGHT A CANDLE BEFORE KUPAŁA, / READ AND BURN MY POEM, / AND SAY TO THE VANDALS, I AM ETERNAL!’: Sys 2002, 72.

helped to make his country a grave.<sup>25</sup> In ‘Budźma!’ (Let us!), a poem about sharing, Sys creates strong images in the last two stanzas to explain what he does not want (Belarus) to share:

Мы не будзем дзяліць палын,  
і за долю, як за дзяўчыну,  
нам не трэба чужы калым  
і жаніх з касымі вачыма.

Мы не будзем дзяліць любоў,  
калі ж будзем, дык толькі гора,  
яно здарыцца можа, бо  
вакол нас і садом, і гамора.<sup>26</sup>

Comparable ideas are reflected in, amongst other places, his poem ‘Dziki miód’ (Wild Honey) in which Sys recalls his father escaping from the Russian bear with a pot of honey, something that affects the poet himself every time he himself goes to the forest, deciding finally to dig up a machine gun ‘*kab chadzić śmieła ũ baćkavaj puščy*’ (in order to be able to walk boldly in the pushcha of my father – Sys 2002, 132). Not all Sys’s patriotism is so violent, but the relationship between Belarus and Russia is crystal clear to him. He is, moreover, convinced that it is even more important to be a Belarusian than a poet:

Паэтам можаш ты не быць,  
а беларусам абавязаны,  
расейцаў можаш не любіць,  
а можаш быць у іх блазанам.

Калі ж паэтам хочаш быць,  
у скронь пацалаваным духам,

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<sup>25</sup> More prosaically, a startling incident was when he accosted as a ‘Russian bear’ the relatively mild mannered Russian foreign minister, Andrei Kozyrev, during the latter’s visit to Miensk: See Skobla 2003, 741. Comparable drunken escapades by Sys have been described more than once.

<sup>26</sup> ‘We shall not share wormwood, / and for good fortune, as for a girl, / we do not need alien bride money / and a groom with slanting eyes. // We shall not share love, / but if we shall share, then only grief, / it may happen, for / around us is Sodom, and Gomorrah’: Sys 2002, 144.

дык, Божа дбаў цябе забыць,  
чыя ў вачах Купалы скруха.<sup>27</sup>

More interesting than Sys's anti-Russian outpourings, understandable though they may be for a poet of his disposition, are the many poems that promote in one way or another Belarusian literature past and present. One of the earliest figures to be celebrated is Paŭluk Bahrym, who is featured in the poem 'Kali lublu' (When I love) as an example of a completely self-made poet. Most works, however, display a strong attraction to contemporary poets and writers, such as Aleś Razanaŭ, expressed in, amongst other works, 'Hlina' (Clay) which begins with the touchingly simple line, 'Dziakuj, Aleś, što ty jość' (Thank you, Aleś, for being who you are – Sys 2002, 151), and in 'Adviečnym šlacham' (On an eternal path), a straightforward yet affecting reflection on the continuity of life. Uładzimir Niaklajeŭ has already been mentioned in connection with Sys's extravagant dedication to him, although specific intertextual references to his verse are not as evident as those to Razanaŭ. Danuta Bičel-Zahnetava, one of the most promising young poets of the 1960s, is acclaimed for her close links to the fatherland, although a Belarusian poet's fate is likely to end in a crown of thorns and crucifixion, as the first four and the last five lines of 'Danuta Bičel-Zahnetava' show vividly:

Бязродная песня паэтава,  
што птах са сляпымі вачыма.

Данута Бічель-Загнетава –  
якая паэтка айчынная!

(.....)

Вось коціцца кола з цярных лісцяў,  
каляных, суздром засохлых,  
ты ўстала, ты ведаеш:  
трэба выйсці  
насустрэч сваёй Галгофе.<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>27</sup> 'You may be not a poet, / but you are obliged to be a Belarusian, / you may not like Russians, / but you can be taken by them for a fool. // But if you want to be a poet, / kissed on the temples by the spirit, / God forbid that you forget / whose sadness is in Kupała's eyes': Sys 2002, 141.

<sup>28</sup> 'A stateless poet's song / is like a bird with blind eyes. // Danuta Bičel-Zahnetava – / what a true poet of the Fatherland! [...] // Look how a crown of thorn leaves is rolled together / hard, completely dried out, / you rise, you know that / you must go out / to meet your Golgotha': Sys 2002, 52.

In connection with the above, it may be noted that, not only bird imagery, but also the metaphorical use of a crown of thorns are *topoi* found throughout Sys's poetry.

A very particular poem is 'Прачытаўшы вярш Пиміена Панчанкі "Развітаніе"' (On reading Pimien Pančanka's poem 'Parting'), written after Sys and several other young writers had visited Pančanka in hospital in 1988, as a response to the older poet's farewell verse. Clearly Sys believes himself to be a natural successor of him, and yet the visit came soon before his own terrible decline.<sup>29</sup> His poem 'Hlina' to Razanaŭ shows a similar faith in his own great significance, as does a verse dedicated to Anatol Viarcinski, 'Try mazali ŭ mianie' (I have three calluses) which, turn out to be on his tongue, his heart and his hand, far the most dangerous being the first which expresses itself through his outbursts and through his poetry. It ends, somewhat strangely, as follows:

Што да бяды, жуды, нуды,  
дык – гэта ў вершах.  
Хаця... ў паэзіі у кожнага свой слуп.  
Я ўсім кажу, што я паэт найпершы,  
калі ж папраўдзе: першы жыццялюб!<sup>30</sup>

Another distinctive poem centred on the literary heritage is 'Cnatlivy kniaz' (Honourable prince): Maksim Bahdanovič is Sys's eponymous prince of things Belarusian who descends from heaven to hell, bringing a garland to the coffin of a suicide.<sup>31</sup> The poem ends with favourable winds helping geese to bring his radiant spirit on their wings from Ialta (where he had died of consumption). There seems to be a great gap between such touching poems and those in which Sys writes about his own talent, sufferings, or addiction.

Amongst other Belarusian writers to whom poems are dedicated may be mentioned, in alphabetical order, the scholar and poet turned monk, Aleh Biembiel (also known as Žnič), Halina Bułyka, the religiously inclined poet Hanna Kanapielka, Aleh Minkin, a poet and publisher who took Russian citizenship, the prose writer Jarasłaŭ Parchuta, and the writer and poet Aleś Naŭrocki.

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<sup>29</sup> For a description of the visit to Pančanka and Sys's attitude to him see Aleś Arkuš, 'Viartańnie ŭ "Tutejšyja"', *Kalošsie*, 9, 2001, 115-27 (hereafter Arkuš 2001), 126-27.

<sup>30</sup> 'What misfortune, horror, poverty, and it is in poems. / Although... in poetry everyone has their pillar of support. / I tell everyone I am the first poet, / when in reality I am the first lover of life!': Sys 2002, 136.

An unusual way in which Sys pays tribute to other writers is by using individual lines from their works, with footnoted acknowledgment. Amongst examples of this there is the line from Lorca in 'Błudny syn', 'vyšyj mianie na padušcy svajoj...' (sew me on your pillow...), and there is more sewing (a *topos* in Sys's own poetry) in a line from Afanasii Filipovič at the beginning of 'Serca' (Heart), 'Mnie na sercy zołatam vyšyvali kraty...' (They sewed in gold prison bars on my heart...); in the second part of 'Serca' Sys quotes from the poet Mikoła Kuprejeŭ, 'O kab serca žuraŭlinaje...' (O, that the heart of a crane...); and, finally, the Belarusian title of J.D. Salinger's *The Catcher in the Rye* (1951), appears twice in a context that may exist in the Belarusian translation (*Nad prorvaj ŭ žycie*), but which does not conform to the original text, in 'Nie chadzicie za mnoj...' (Do not follow me...) and 'Zabojstva ŭ N'ju-Jorku' (Murder in New York).

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Apart from some startling uses of capital letters, so far in this article little has been seen of anything unusual in the formal aspects of Sys's verses, although they in fact possess several strongly distinctive features. The poems have been described as fuelled by alcohol, and several people recall Sys's mastery of incantatory, hyper-rhetorical reading, somewhat like a shaman.<sup>32</sup> Although apparently not conceived specifically as performance poetry, the rhetorical nature of some of his work may be indicated by the abundance of exclamation marks, capitals and, especially, the ubiquitous repetition, not quite to the frenetic extent found in some recent films by Kira Muratova,<sup>33</sup> but nonetheless in sufficient quantity as to be a distinctive feature of Sys's work.<sup>34</sup> An extreme example is the following poem from *Pan Les*, 'Pole pole ŭ nimbach ślaniečnikaŭ ślaniečnikaŭ...' (Field field in clouds of sunflowers sunflowers...):

Поле поле ў німбах сланечнікаў сланечнікаў  
жоўты жоўты вецер пчолаў лашчыць лашчыць

---

<sup>31</sup> *Vianok* (A garland, 1913) was the title of Bahdanovič's only lifetime collection of verse. It is not clear whether Sys's poem envisages his predecessor bringing a garland of cornflowers (Belarus's national flower) to the grave of the suicide Siarhiej Pałtaran or to the grave of Belarus itself.

<sup>32</sup> On the effect of alcohol on Sys's readings see Adam Hlobus, 'Nataki pra tutejšaha paeta', *Holas Radzimy*, 25 April 2001 p. 7.

<sup>33</sup> Such films, for example, include *Asteničeskii sindrom* (1989), *Chuvstvitel'nyi militsioner* (1992) and *Chek-hovskie motivy* (2002).

<sup>34</sup> In addition to poems already mentioned in this connection, see, for example, 'Nadta chočacca ŭ vyraj...' (Too anxious to migrate...), a work rather in folk style, typically for Sys, addressed to a bird.

страшна страшна страшна вее вее вее  
жоўтым жоўтым жоўтым ветрам ветрам ветрам  
ходзіць ходзіць ходзіць полем вечнасць  
вечнасць пчолы пчолы пчолы джаляць маці маці  
ў вочы вочы вочы  
па шчоках сцякаюць слёзы слёзы слёзы слёзы  
слёзы слёзы слёзы слёзы слёзы слёзы  
слёзы слёзы<sup>35</sup>

There are many and varied examples of anaphora, be it of letters, words, or opening (or closing) lines of successive stanzas. In an untitled poem, ‘Sivyja pčoły...’ (Grey bees...), for instance, the first three lines are alternated at the beginning of the three stanzas:

СІВЫЯ ПЧОЛЫ,  
СІВЫЯ ПТУШКІ,  
СІВЫЯ ЛЮДЗІ<sup>36</sup>

In the third stanza people come first, and the poem ends with a characteristic line, ‘vinom i ślazoju prośłaść pamianuŭšy’ (recalling the past with a drink and a tear). A curious example of repetition is that two discrete poems – one about death, the other about birth (namely, the pregnancy of the poet Raisa Baravikova) – begin with the same line: ‘Kali kraty raspiŭavać...’ (When the prison bars are filed open...).<sup>37</sup>

‘Radzima’ (Fatherland). is an interesting and almost emblematic poem, full of Sys’s favourite themes, where the anaphoric word is ‘Ja’ (I) and the last word of each line becomes the main word in the next. Here Sys’s patriotism and abiding concern with himself come together fully in a way that is a little reminiscent of

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<sup>35</sup> ‘field field in clouds of sunflowers sunflowers / a yellow yellow wind caresses caresses the bees / there blows blows blows terribly terribly terribly / a yellow yellow yellow wind wind wind / eternity eternity walks walks walks over the field / the bees bees bees sting my mother mother / in her eyes eyes eyes / down her cheeks run tears tears tears tears / tears tears tears tears tears tears / tears tears’: Sys 2002, 6. Also on the subject of his mother’s death, but in more straightforward form is ‘Radzima pačynajecca z žančyny...’ (The Fatherland begins with a woman...).

<sup>36</sup> ‘grey bees / grey birds / grey people’: Sys 2002, 33.

<sup>37</sup> It may be hoped that Baravikova’s pregnancy is quite unlike the allegorical one imagined by Sys in ‘Los ślachi vybiraje...’ (Fate chooses its paths...) where the result is that the spirit becomes an outcast: Sys 2002, 132.

Voznesenskii's effulgent showpiece, 'Goiia' (Goya, 1959), although in the latter poem the narrative voice is, of course, Goya, so that the sense of the poet's self-absorption is at one remove:

### Радзіма

Я – зямля, на якой растуць дрэвы.  
Я – дрэва, на якое не садзяцца птахі.  
Я – птах, якога не сочаць нават паляўнічыя.  
Я – паляўнічы, у якога вечна галодныя сабакі.  
Я – сабака, якога не баяцца зладзеі.  
Я – зладзей, якога не гоняць з вогнішча.  
Я – вогнішча, якое не сцеражэцца леяў.  
Я – лея, якой не шкада вандроўнікаў.  
Я – вандроўнік, якому ўсё адно, куды вядзе дарога.  
Я – дарога, якая не сніць ройсты.  
Я – ройста, на якой валацуга бязмысны.  
Я – валацуга, які страціў радзіму.  
Я – радзіма...

Я – радзіма?

Паляўнічы, сабака, бадзяга, зладзей...<sup>38</sup>

Another poem exemplifying a different aspect of Sys's endemic repetition, this time of the first half of the verse in the second half, is 'Paet' (The poet), which, having begun with the unexceptionable line 'Paet – boskaja ptuška' (The poet is a divine bird), ends (in the middle and at the actual end) with:

як свечка, як з воску я.

Я? я, я, я!<sup>39</sup>

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<sup>38</sup> 'Fatherland // I am the earth, on which trees do not grow. / I am a tree on which birds do not perch. / I am a bird that even hunters do not stalk. / I am a hunter whose dogs are always hungry. / I am a dog that is not feared by robbers. / I am a robber who is not chased away from the bonfire. / I am a bonfire that is not careful with riding breeches' leather pads. / I am a leather pad that has no pity on travellers. / I am a traveller who does not care where the road goes. / I am a road that is not dreamt of by signposts. / I am a signpost at which a tramp has no direction. / I am a tramp that has lost his fatherland. / I am the fatherland... / I – the fatherland? / A hunter, dog, wanderer, robber...': Sys 2002, 15-16.

<sup>39</sup> 'I am like a candle, as if from wax. / I? I, I, I!': Sys 2002, 137.

Sys also enjoys unusual placing of the words on the page, as, for instance, in the first four lines of ‘I vysiekli vinahradniki’ (And they cut down the vineyards):

І вы	клалі	душы
секлі	вогнішчы	грэлі
вінаграднікі,	сярод поля,	безаглядныя.

Вы не прыйдзеце сюды болей.<sup>40</sup>

Another example of Sys in playful rather than rhetorical mode is the following reflection on prosody from the third part of his longer poem, ‘Ałaiza’:

Неба? –  
блакіт вачэй.  
Першы харэй мой: ма-ма!  
я  
м  
б  
па шчацэ цячэ: сля-за  
каляная.<sup>41</sup>

Finally, it may be mentioned that a right-angled triangle is the form of a poem that begins with ‘Ja’ (I) and ends with ‘Jahamość’ (Your worship), in which the poet asks to be taken as he is, linking the divine spark with champagne bubbles (Sys 2002, 128). These examples of the ludic aspects of Sys’s work are adduced here to counter the general view from the days of the ‘Tutejšyja’ group that Sys represented instinctive rhetoric and patriotism whilst his co-leader Adam Hłobus stood for (post-)modernism and internationalism.<sup>42</sup>

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Anatol Sys, as a highly gifted but troubled poet, is at times painfully aware of his country’s past and present. In the former it tends to be the bleaker periods of

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<sup>40</sup> ‘And you put your hearts into / cutting bonfires were heated / by vineyards, in the middle of fields, regardless. // You will not come here any more’: Sys 2002, 101.

<sup>41</sup> ‘The sky? – / the blue of eyes. / My first trochee: ma-ma! / i / a / m / b / down my cheek rolls a / hardened tear’: Sys 2002, 106-07.

<sup>42</sup> See, for instance: Adam Hłobus, ‘Hutarka pra spadčynaść, prozu, “tutejšych” i erotyku’, *Holas Radzimy*,

history that attract him, with no sign of the looking back to the ‘golden age’ of Skaryna, found in so much metropolitan and expatriate poetry. ‘Vilnia, 1864 hod’ (Vilna 1864), for instance, brings birds to the scaffold after the repression of the anti-Russian uprising. Nearer to the present, there is no issue that agitates nationally aware Belarusians more than the graves at Kurapaty. ‘Zamova ad Kurapat’ (A spell against Kurapaty) is full of resonance and sound play, but a more important poem in this connection is undoubtedly the already mentioned ‘Biełaruskija Ikary’, a poem which vividly illustrates Sys’s love of repetition as well as his indignation at a national scandal and his gratitude to the man who first revealed it, Zianon Paźniak:

### Беларускія Ікары

Срэбны прах, балючы прах на скрылцах,  
з ранай у патыліцы зямля,  
да людзей баіцца адпусціцца,  
да людзей баіцца адпусціцца,  
да людзей баіцца адпусціцца  
курапацкіх ластавак сям’я.

Прывіды пакут зямных – Ікары,  
прытуліўшы да грудзей начніц,  
зазіраюць ластаўкам у твары,  
зазіраюць ластаўкам у твары,  
зазіраюць ластаўкам у твары  
цёмраю прастрэленых вачніц.

Быццам дзве жабрачныя далоні –  
неба і зямля, жыццё і скон,  
а над Светам белы чэрап поўні,  
а над Светам белы чэрап поўні,

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25 April 2001, p. 7. Here Hlobus describes himself and his group in the organization as ‘more intelligent and urban’ whilst Sys’s followers were more *narodny* (nationally-minded, popular); another obvious distinction was Sys’s provincial background against that of the more ‘sophisticated’ metropolitan writers. For a more objective view of this division see Arkuš 2001. In fact the less contentious and more important distinction was that Sys was in charge of poetry, and Hlobus prose.

а над Светам белы чэрап поўні  
куляй звоніць – ноч гучыць, як звон:

“Ёсць Ікары, ёсць і ў вас сталіца,  
там Тыран накрыў для вас сталы!..”  
А з нябёсаў голас: “Лепш разбіцца...”  
А з нябёсаў голас: “Лепш разбіцца...”  
А з нябёсаў голас: “Лепш разбіцца  
аб бетон Урадавай скалы!”

Срэбны прах, Купалаў прах на скронях,  
б’юць падковы ў чэрап, як у звон,  
топчуць цела чалавека-коні,  
топчуць цела чалавека-коні,  
топчуць цела чалавека-коні,  
з куляй у патыліцы – Зянон...<sup>43</sup>

The most significant event of recent Belarusian history, the Chernobyl disaster, inspires Sys to a powerfully imaginative and bitter poem, ‘Čornaja byl’ (A black event), to add to the host of anguished poetic and prose reactions to this tragedy, which will be considered elsewhere.

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What of the present as reflected in Sys’s poetry? As we have seen, he considers being a true Belarusian more important than being a poet, but in fact the themes of

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<sup>43</sup> ‘Belarusian Icaruses // Silver dust, painful dust on their wings, / the earth with a wound in the back of the neck, / fearing to descend to people, / fearing to descend to people, / fearing to descend to people / are a family of Kurapaty swallows. // Ghosts of earthly torments, the Icaruses, / huddling against the breasts of nightjars, / they gaze into the faces of the swallows, / gaze into the faces of the swallows, / gaze into the faces of the swallows / their eye sockets shot through by the darkness. // Like two begging palms – / heaven and earth, life and death, / and above the Earth the white skull of the full moon, / and above the Earth the white skull of the full moon, / And above the Earth the white skull of the full moon / rings with a bullet – the night sounds like the ringing of a bell: // “There are Icaruses, you too have a capital city, / a Tyrant there has laid tables for you!..” / And from the heavens a voice: “It is better to smash yourselves...” / And from the heavens a voice: “It is better to smash yourselves...” / And from the heavens a voice: “It is better to smash yourselves / against the concrete of the Government cliff!” // Silver dust, Kupala’s dust on their temples, / horseshoes beat against a skull as if it were a bell, / they trample the body of the man-steed, / they trample the body of the man-steed, / they trample the body of the man-steed, / with a bullet in the back of the neck – Zianon...’: Sys 2002, 121-22.

Belarus, of poetry, and of Sys as creative artist are closely intertwined in his work. It is clear that, despite his manifest enthusiasm for certain contemporary poets and writers, he holds most Belarusian literature and, indeed, many aspects of Belarusian life in very low esteem indeed. Self-interest is ubiquitous, as we see in 'Pacir' (The false bottom) which ends with the following memorable quatrain:

і сталі дружна, шчыра, шчыльна,  
як на касьбе ці на сяўбе,  
паэт сказаў: п'ем за Айчыну!  
І кожны выпіў – за сябе...<sup>44</sup>

For all writers the basic problem is lack of freedom, whether they acknowledge it or not. Sys takes a new approach to the old theme of birds as symbols of freedom, when he describes cranes, which figure so prominently in his poetry, as without pity for Belarus, singing a polonaise, symbol of a freer country. The characteristically inventive final rhyme is particularly damning:

Журавы спяваюць паланез і іх  
не шкада над беднай Беларуссю

я паэт прыгоннай паэзіі  
і такім да смерці застануся

журавам не трэба ў зорнае жніво  
з поўняй на гарбу ляцець на паншчыну  
колькі б нас пасля Купалы ні жыло –  
плюнеш – не паэты – самазваншчына.<sup>45</sup>

References to God and religion are quite extensive in Sys's poetry, although he believes that he lives in a 'crazy age' and 'geese fly from godless lands to land on a cross's sharp point' ('U Safi kryž čyrvony – In the cathedral of Sofia there is

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<sup>44</sup> 'and they set about it amicably, sincerely, intimately, / as at scything or sowing, / the poet said: 'let us drink to the Fatherland! / And everyone drank – to themselves...': Sys 2002, 59.

<sup>45</sup> 'The cranes sing a polonaise and they / do not pity poor Belarus // I am a poet of serf poetry / and that how I shall be until my death // the cranes do not need to go to the starry harvest / and with the full moon on their backs fly to serfdom / however many of us there has been since Kupala / you can spit, they are not poets but a crowd of impostors': Sys 2002, 74.

a red cross: Sys 2002, 126). At other times, for example, in ‘Pieśnia pra kachańnie’ he describes his religious feelings in quasi-erotic terms, as in the following stanza from the middle of the poem:

Бачыш сам: пусты ложка.  
Надакучыла мне  
спаць з Табой, любы Божа.  
У мане, у віне.<sup>46</sup>

The last three stanzas, after Sys has begged for divine forgiveness and declared that he writes as he sins, end ecstatically:

Даруй , любы мой Божа,  
што вярэджу душу,  
што абраў бездарожжа,  
як грашу, так пішу.

А папраўдзе: як дзеці,  
мае вершы растуць,  
няма сілы памерці,  
бо яны не даюць,

таму нам не каляны  
ложак шлюбны – як пух!  
Мой Мужчына каханы,  
Айцец, Сын, Святы Дух!<sup>47</sup>

At the very least, Sys regards his death philosophically and his birth as having a strong religious dimension, although in one short untitled poem, ‘Pamreš syty ci

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<sup>46</sup> ‘You see for yourself: my bed is empty. / I got bored with / sleeping with you, dear God. / in deceit and drink’: Sys 2002, 139.

<sup>47</sup> ‘Forgive me, my dear God, / that I am damaging my soul, / that I have chosen to leave the path, / as I sin, so I write. // But in truth, like children, / my poems grow, / I have no strength to die, / for they will not let me, // therefore the marriage bed / is not hard but like down! / My beloved Man, / Father, Son and Holy Ghost!’: Sys 2002, 139-40. For an example of a poem where the Deity is referred to without the emphasis of exclamation marks or extra capital letters, see ‘Ruža’ (The rose) where God is invited to look into the poet’s eyes to see his ‘love and sadness’: Sys 2002, 73-74.

hałodny...' (Whether you die full or hungry...), the divine spark of inspiration is rendered concrete in the contrast between the cold dust of death and the hot ash of birth. After an utterly prosaic opening it ends with a paean of thanks:

Памрэш сыты ці галодны,  
а якая розніца.  
Попел цёплы. Прах халодны –  
што з яго народзіцца?

Але я вось нарадзіўся,  
маці кажа: З прысаку.  
Быццам Бог перахрысціўся  
за зямную іскарку.

Дзякуй маці!  
Дзякуй Богу!  
Дзякуй, свет дзівосны!  
Дзякуй, хросная – дарога!  
Дзякуй, посах – хросны!<sup>48</sup>

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Anatol Sys is an uncomfortable, depressing and extremely powerful poet. Whether he is writing about his childhood, his country's mythology and history, its present predicament under the rule of Pharisees with the concomitant threat of Russian domination; whether he writes about other poets or the state of Belarusian poetry as a whole, or, indeed, himself and his convictions, with the ever-present alcoholism as a leitmotiv – whatever he writes about, he conveys a sense of total conviction, simply, inventively and with passion. The meaning of his poetry is not hidden or mysterious as it sometimes may be in Razanaŭ, nor is its form as extravagantly virtuosic in imagery or sound and word play, as Baradulin's,<sup>49</sup> although his

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<sup>48</sup> 'Whether you die full or hungry, / what is the difference. / The ash is warm, the dust cold – / what can be born of it? // But this is the way I was born, / my mother says, from hot ash. / As if God had crossed himself / for a little earthly spark. // Thanks to my mother! / Thank God! / Thank you, wondrous world! / Thank you, way – of the cross! / Thank you, staff [of the cross]': Sys 2002, 143.

<sup>49</sup> Sys's alliteration, for instance, is usually unobtrusive, although he makes effective and simple use of sibilants in a short poem recommending his poems as cradle songs: 'Zakałyšy dzicia maimi vieršami...' (Rock the child to sleep with my verses...).

call for patriotic feeling and national memory is also very strong. Sys has a distinct and resonant voice, full of blood, tears, and a keen sense of guilt, defiance and mortality. The following untitled poem from *Pan Les* reflects in deceptively simple but passionate terms many of the poet's beliefs and fears:

– З чаго пачаць?  
Пачну з Радзімы.  
Так абавязаны пачаць.  
– Але ў яе ты не адзіны,  
навошта пра любоў крычаць?

– Няхай, няхай я паўтаруся  
ў любові тысячу разоў,  
затое шчыра ў ёй клянуся,  
без фальшу, без падробных слоў.

– Што ж, пачынай.  
Сам выбраў долю...  
й нядоля знойдзецца сама.  
Перад табою поле бою –  
тут не адзін паэт сканаў.<sup>50</sup>

Returning to where this article began, Belarus can ill afford to lose its leading poets and writers, and it must be hoped that Sys, an addictive as well as addicted poet, can miraculously recover. He himself holds out such a prospect in 'Reabilitacyja' (Rehabilitation):

### **Рэабілітацыя**

чорныя  
чорныя

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<sup>50</sup> '— Where shall I begin?.. / I shall begin with the Fatherland. / I am obliged to begin thus. / – But you are not alone, why should you shout about your love? // – Let me, let me repeat myself / a thousand times about my love, / but I swear it sincerely, / without falsity, without counterfeit words. // – Alright then, begin. You have chosen your fate, / and a bad fate will find itself. / Before you lies a field of battle – / here more than one poet has perished': Sys 2002, 84.

як з камяноў  
сумныя  
сумныя  
як з таго свету  
сорок гадоў – без’языкіх званоў –  
стогнам вярнулі натхненне паэту<sup>51</sup>

In a country which has suffered more than its share of tragedy and has had many valid reasons to groan, all who love Belarusian poetry must long to hear a different kind of groan, the groan of Sys’s returning inspiration.

#### РЭЗЮМЭ

У гэтым артыкуле разглядаецца трагічна кароткі паэтычны шлях Анатоля Сыса, некалі аднаго з вядучых маладых пісьменьнікаў групы „Тутэйшыя”. Сус жыве, але цяжкі алькагалізм не дае яму пісаць.

Сус – адзін з найбольш значных беларускіх паэтаў свайго пакалення, магічны паэт з амаль шаманскай інтанацыяй, часамі нагадваючай Андрэя Вазнясенскага. Сус – знакаміты рамеснік верша, і хоць ягоная тэхніка простая і непрэтэнцыёзная, яго вершы выдатна выразніваюцца мацатою разнастайных паўтораў. У творах Сыса аднаўляюцца шматлікія вобразы нацыянальных герояў, і ў яго ашаламляльных маналёгах здзіўляе незвычайная здольнасць аднаўляць чужыя галасы. Яго адчайнае мілаваньне Беларусі заўсёды прысутнае і ў іншых тэмах – рэлігійнай, алькагольнай; сьмерці і жыцця ў цяперашняй Беларусі, што – на думку Сыса – апусьцілася да самога маральнага дна.

Сус – трагічна цяжкі, але вельмі магутны паэт, творчасць якога заслугоўвае найвялікай увагі.

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<sup>51</sup> 'Rehabilitation // black / black / as a fireplace / sad / sad as from the other world / forty years – bells without their clappers – / groaning they have returned his inspiration to the poet': Sys 2002, 128.