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ARNOLD McMILLIN

VOL'HA HAPEEVA'S PROSE AND VERSE
IN THREE RICHLY CREATIVE YEARS

Introduction

Attempts have been made to assess Hapeeva's early work from 2003 to 2018 (see McMillin 2019a and 2019b), and in the interim she has earned an international reputation for her translations, including some from Oriental languages, and for winning several prizes for her children's books, also coming very close to first prizes for both verse and prose, as well as receiving an Austrian award for her writing as a whole. She has also received the honour of holding the position of writer in residence in many European cities, most recently Graz and Munich.

Born in Minsk in 1982, she is an active linguist as well as one of the leading Belarusian poets of today, writing very personally about her feminist beliefs. From the beginning of her career she also attracted attention by her prose, two recent examples of which are discussed below.

The present article considers her writing in the years 2019-2021, which comprises two very different books of highly original prose, both described as novels, *Kémél-trévél* (Camel Travel, 2019) and *Sa-mota, što žyla ŭ pakoi nasuprac'* (Loneliness that Lived in the Room Opposite, 2021), and several books of verse, the two main ones being *Čornyja maki* (Black Poppies, 2019) and *Slovy, jakija sa mnoj adbylisja* (Words that Came to Me, 2020). Additionally there has been a short anthology with parallel English translations, *In My Garden of Mutants* (Hapeeva 2021a), a chapbook with translations into Flemish and English (Hapeeva 2021b) and, finally, a short anthology, *Serca na trapezii* (The Trapeze Heart), with translations from German and Belarusian into English (Hapeeva 2021c). This article will begin with

the two novels, before turning to her poetry. The novel in Hapeeva's first book *Rėkanstrukcyja neba* (Reconstruction of the Sky, 2003) had the subtitle: *Raman u detaljach – Detal' u ramane* (A Novel in Details – Detail in a Novel), and both her recent prose and verse also show the writer's love of details and digressions, but it is important to note that, far from being undisciplined or superfluous, they form an intrinsic part of her creative purpose and, indeed, help to build a picture of her individual worldview.

Prose

Autobiographical prose is not particularly common in modern Belarusian literature, and that overwhelmingly about WWII, although *Mae dzevjanostyja* (2018) by Al'herd Bacharėvič (b. 1975) is a notable exception, but Vol'ha Hapeeva's very personal quasi-documentary novel, *Kėmėl-trėvėl*, stands out in this context. It presents in twenty short episodes an unsentimental, often bleak but also humorous account of the female narrator's early childhood in the period before the Soviet Union finally collapsed, at the same time giving a vivid picture of the life and *mores* of Soviet people at that time. As a childhood view of a particular decade in the life of her country, behind its whimsical, even bizarre, title, Hapeeva offers a broad vista that is rich in detail. In the following review of this work,¹ five passages have been selected to describe or quote, which have a particular significance for the writer's life and work as a whole. Hereafter she will be referred to as the girl or occasionally as the narrator. In the first and longest section, 'Issyk-Kul' (Hot Lake), her family go to stay with relatives in Frunze (now Biškek). Her account begins with a long digression about communism with its many promises and reverence for Lenin (K-T: 6) In the flat where she and her parents stayed, there was a gramophone, on which was often played a song with rude words, which the girl did not understand, and she would bawl these words around the flat. When she discovers that *putana* means a woman only for men's pleasure, she sees this as the first "silvery dust" of feminism in distant Kirghizija (K-T: 9). The book, incidentally, takes its title from the only picture surviving from this early period of her life,

(¹) References in the text will be as K-T (see Hapeeva 2019b) with page numbers.

where she is seen perched on the back of a camel – the beginning of a life of adventures.

'Futbol i ŭkoly' (Football and Injections) brings other gender issues to the fore when the mother of one of the players shouts that healthy girls should not be playing sports, but preparing for marriage, which the narrator takes as an insult to her sex. Later her mother tells her that that same thing had happened to her and that nothing had changed for a quarter of a century (K-T: 40). The mixture of adult and childish attitudes is very characteristic of this book, as will be seen in an important passage later (K-T: 45).

Language is central in 'Hrafika i fanetyka' (Graphics and Phonetics), which describes two of her friends: one was a hooligan, and the other, Al'bert, was always well-dressed and clearly from the intelligentsia. One day she did something kind for him and he seemed to reply with black ingratitude, but her mother explained to her that 'Dziakuj' is Belarusian for 'thank you'. She had grown up in a russo-phone environment, and later realized that Al'bert came from a truly Belarusian family; she too, however, had owned the native language, but inside her, "like a partisan waiting for a suitable moment to come out" (K-T: 54).

The girl dreads going to stay with her grandparents who are former teachers, bickering about their poor life, and subjecting her to constant criticism. Escape (to things like fishing and cycling) needed a man to accompany a girl, in order to satisfy the wishes of society. Her conclusions end as follows:

But while you live, counting only on yourself, you acquire a not very useful trait of character – you can never believe anyone, gradually your sense of trust as such disappears: [...] it is best to do everything yourself in order not to be disappointed in people, and so on forever. (K-T: 70-71)

The last section of this book is 'Pra smerc' (On Death), in which she describes her early thoughts about death, beginning with her great-grandmother, and going on to pets, who, she discovers, die earlier than humans and that hamsters are better on their own than in groups where they can become worried and aggressive. The girl feels that this pure individualism corresponds to her own character and

way of life. When the pet finally dies she remembers that she did not want to grow up, but was prepared to become an adult in order to give homes to stray dogs and cats. The ending, however, shows a characteristic mixture of dry humour and realism: “So far I have not collected a single one” (K-T: 102).

* * *

Vol’ha Hapeeva’s next novel, *Samota, što žyla ŭ pakoi nasuprac’* (2021), is quite different.² Described in its blurb as a metaphysical thriller, a new departure for this talented writer, although the first word of the title reflects not only one of the central themes of this work, but also one that is ubiquitous in her verse and prose as a whole. As a novel it is no less original than *Këmèl-trévèl* in its wide variety of fascinating characters and its curious, but successfully managed genre. It may be strange to discuss a blurb that could have been written by an editor rather than the author, but the two words of it (metaphysical novel) will be touched on later in the discussion of this unusual work. The book is something of a salmagundi of different themes, events and styles; the latter is mainly due to the narrator’s analytical and highly subjective descriptions of her surroundings, her elaborate dreams and the delirium of illness, as well as extensive quotations from lectures and letters, in addition to a wide variety of characters.

Hapeeva’s narrator is often very close to the heroine herself and the two sometimes merge, a fact that was observed by the outstanding critic Hanna Kislicyna, writing about her earlier work (see Kislicyna 2006: 135). For convenience and to avoid unnecessary clumsiness, here the narrator will often be referred to simply as Vol’ja. In this novel she has a strong interest in volcanoes and the setting is in and around a hotel in an unknown country or countries (probably including Japan) that specializes in volcanologists, to which she has come for the purpose of scholarly research. There she meets and is immediately drawn towards a mysterious, wise, and practical woman, Helga-Maryja (S: 7-9); the latter is an animal psychiatrist and campaigner against cruelty of humans to beasts, including clinical testing; she is also interested in other oppressed minorities, such as gays, al-

(²) References in the text will be as S (see Hapeeva 2021d) with page numbers.

binos, red-heads and intelligent women, to name but a few. At several points in the novel she saves Vol'ja from herself (a distant comparison might be with the figure of Evgraf in Pasternak's *Doktor Živago*) and Helga's almost visionary strength is perceived and appreciated by the narrator, although later in the novel Vol'ja feels the danger of relying on it too completely (S: 48). As the book continues, the closeness of Vol'ja and Helga seems at times as if they are different aspects of one person, although the author keeps their stories apart, so that this suspicion must remain no more than that. During the book Vol'ja has many serious conversations with her, believing that she has answers to all her problems. Helga's opposite is a Bulgarian (or, perhaps, Hungarian) woman with a Japanese name, Yamamota, who is convinced of the supremacy of humans over the rest of the natural world, and whose acolytes meet in a forest hut to celebrate their privileged position. Vol'ja who, by chance, finds them there faints with shock, and is only saved from discovery and punishment by Helga and her dog (S: 163-168). Another cruel character is a wolf hunter with the speaking-name of Meseraš (German *Messer*), although he actually prefers using his hands, to avoid damaging the valuable pelts with a knife. In addition to these two ruthless but all too believable characters, are a sensitive young man, Sebast'jan, who is in love with Helga but eventually killed by the ruthless hunter for rescuing one of his victims. Another man also with an evocative name is Cykada (*cicada*), who in his youth had been an apprentice executioner, a relic of which is that his notebook has a cover made from human skin (S: 115-118), although he has long since turned away from this gruesome profession. At the time of the novel he provides the connection between the characters encountered by Vol'ja in this unusual hotel.

The frequent change of scene and extensive description of such prosaic things as meals, rooms and other passengers in public transport, as well as the lectures (both Vol'ja and Helga are professional teachers), speeches and sometimes prosaic conversations may, perhaps, be compared to the technique used by Conan Doyle, later imitated by Agatha Christie, of placing extraordinary and frightening events in the context of stable, 'normal' life, although in this novel the normality of the latter is often coloured by Vol'ja's delirious nightmares and fantasies. One example is the opening of the second chap-

ter, where the potentially banal picture of a hotel breakfast is described as a mini-society, with its various fears and complexes, described with the author's characteristic eye for detail and in her subjectively analytical manner.

The loose comparison with earlier detective writers may be felt to fall down since the whole novel was written in a foreign country, Germany, where the author currently lives. In fact, the only really domestic parts of the novel are reminiscences of her childhood, when, we are told, her brother was killed in a volcanic eruption, and her time with her parents, who criticise her for being hypersensitive; also perhaps domestic are her reminiscences of various lovers, all of whom seem to be have been inadequate in some way or other, leaving her, as so often, lonely (S: 14). As has been mentioned above, the reality of the narration is elusive, often tinged with nightmares, fantasies and the delirium of illness with, most commonly, dreams related to death, a link that is famous in Hamlet's "To be or not to be" speech (*Hamlet*, III, 1, 56-62), or more than once in Shelley, in *Queen Mab*, for instance (see Shelley 2009: 11, 1-2).

Returning to the blurb, whether such phenomena as angels that speak (in numbers rather than words), human characters that appear only once, and the frequent references to Buddhism, not to mention several strange and ambiguous happenings, amount to metaphysics is, to say the least, debatable, and the book is not a page-turner in the way that a thriller might be expected to be. Hapeeva is far too intellectual and her material too complex for that, but it is certainly absorbing and, at times, mysterious with several deliberate loose ends, as well as unpredictable events.

Dogs and cats play an important part in the novel, and both Vol'ja and Helga have a strong interest in the former: Helga's dog is called Isamu (meaning 'brave') and Vol'ja's childhood pet was Kasavur (Kasia), but it had been poisoned, although it is not clear whether by accident or not. There are a number of anecdotes about various forms of canine behaviour. Here it is appropriate to mention a new character, who appears only in Chapter 7 and is not even given a name: this short-haired mysterious young woman speaks English (all translated, phrase by phrase into Belarusian – S: 102-103). After her arrival, all the dogs of every breed in the town start to disappear.

The volcano of Akita-Komagatake is described in some statistical detail, but more interesting for the general reader is a book that Vol'ja seeks out in the local library, which turns out to have had two pages removed; when it is eventually replaced by a complete copy, Vol'ja discovers that on the missing pages was a picture of Helga and her dog with a strange man, although the mystery of the man, and why the pages were removed remain obscure. The book does, however, contain much about Japan in general and its people and customs, from which she discovers *inter alia* that this country is at least as patriarchal as her native Belarus (S: 45-47).

Another striking feature of the novel is the fluidity of time, in a way comparable to that with which T.S. Eliot and, amongst Belarusians, the late Ales' Razanaŭ (1948-2021) were often associated. A curious example is the description of a trolley-bus driver who arrives late at a stop, and opens the doors as slowly as she has driven; the narrator describes this as being because she has been on the same route for fifteen years, gradually traversing her past, and the effect of transfer of time is strengthened by the sounds of a fifteen-year-old song coming from her cab (S: 59). Another example is of Cykada telling Sebast'jan that all his own letters have already been written (S: 67-68); more rational is the narrator's observation that you need distance to take in the features of time (S: 63-65). Elusive time may be thought to be another aspect of metaphysics.

The ending is characteristically down-beat:

The waitress came up, and I paid for our coffee. Returning to the table, I saw that Helga-Maryja was no longer there.

There were twenty minutes before my train (S: 205)

As a whole this book, regardless of its genre, is undoubtedly an intriguing and very readable contribution to contemporary European prose writing.

Poetry

Čornyja maki (the first book of verse to be considered here) is divided into two parts, 'Zacmenne' (Dusk) and 'Morak' (Darkness). In the opening poem of the first, *Kancone pra troch il'voŭ* (Canzona about Three Lions), writing about one of the animals she says: "za-

пэўнівае мяне што асалода ў пакутах” (‘it convinces me that there is pleasure in torments’, Hapeeva 2019a: 8).³ A less exotic animal features in *naš ūjaŭny sabaka* (Our Imaginary Dog), although there is little straightforward in Hapeeva’s work, compared with, for instance, the humorous poem by her talented coeval Usevalad Sceburaka (b. 1981), *Moj sabaka razumee belaruskiju...* (My dog understands Belarusian...) (Sceburaka 2013: 17); here are the last three lines of her poem:

... з уяўным сабакам
мы ўяўна нармальная пара
сярод рэальных вар’ятаў (Ўм: 11)

(with an imaginary dog / we imagine ourselves to be a normal couple / amidst real lunatics)

Her skill as a linguist is displayed in a poem in English that appears to be an extension to *naš ūjaŭny sabaka*, which also illustrates the poet’s occasional taste for repetition:

A song

our imaginary dog
our imaginary happiness
our imaginary life
is just a dream
and I don’t want
and I don’t want
to wake up when you have already gone
but I don’t know
but I don’t know
who will take care of our dog
because you have already one
and many cats and her someone
so my imaginary dog
will be
homeless
like our happiness and dreams

(³) References in the text will be as Ўм (see Hapeeva 2019a) with page numbers.

like our life like our dreams
our imaginary dog... (Čm: 12)⁴

In another poem, *ja byccam slova što žyve ŭ dadanym umovy...* (I am like a word that lives in a conditional clause...) she again writes about a dog, this time drawing from the friendship between them new thoughts about creativity. Beginning with philosophical reflections on their unequal relationship, she notes that the animal loves her unconditionally despite being kept on a lead. Opposites attract, she suggests, and words come together to make texts, without struggle and destruction, but with rules and exceptions, although without a lead (Čm: 18).

The poppies of the title occur in *pramova pra vjartanne* (a speech about returning...), a grim description of a city of snakes, including a tramp who has been set on fire by some youths and shows passers-by his scorched penis, and a refined ballerina who feels she cannot go into a field of black poppies. In the fourth stanza the enigmatic symbolism of these flowers is 'explained':

... поле што злева засею чорнымі макамі
кожная хто прыйдзе сюды схіліць сваю галаву
будзе кахаць мяне і па чорных маках чытаць імя той што са
мною
быць не можа, але якая са мною назаўсёды... (Čm: 16)

(... I shall sow the field on the left with black poppies / everyone that comes here will bow their head / will love me and in the black poppies read the name of the woman / who cannot be with me, but who will always be with me...)

A long multi-faceted poem *Znaki* (Signs) is rich in ideas, superstitions and comments on the country in which Soviet stereotypes seem to be still alive, but where (women) poets are more necessary than ever:

... неяк сяброўка сказала што гэта краіна бы тая путана
можа прапанаваць адно – віно і каханне
а што яшчэ трэба паэткам
хіба каліва сну і добрыя вершы

(⁴) Several of Hapeeva's poems have English titles or sub-titles, and a few are written in English, of which this is just one instance.

раз-пораз і кепскія
жарты грошы і новыя мовы... (Їм: 25)

(... once a friend said that this country was like the proverbial whore / who can offer only alcohol and sex / and that women poets need / only a spot of sleep and good poems / and now and then bad ones / jokes, money and new languages...)

In a later verse collection (see Hapeeva 2020: 62), she herself writes bitterly of the country's capital as "moj zmročny zmročny zmročny horad..." ('my dismal dismal dismal city...'), ending the poem with the same grim words (*Slovy, jakija sa mnoj adbylisja*, Hapeeva 2020: 62).⁵

The penultimate section of *Znaki* contains, *it's so easy to love you*, which consists of a series of complex contradictions:

'it's so easy to love you'

І таму што? нецікава? вусцішна? нязвыкла? немагчыма? банальна? сорамна? сумна? балюча? не балюча? а хочацца, каб балела? каб крывяніла і не загойвалася? каб свідравала і пазбаўляла сну? бо барацьба, бо сэнс нейкі, бо так зразумела і звыкла? Бо так вучылі? бо іншага і не ведаў?

то што лёгка прыняць складана

не змог (Їм: 28)

(it's so easy to love you // and because? it's uninteresting? Alarming? unfamiliar? impossible? banal? shameful? sad? painful? not painful? and you want it to be painful? that it should bleed and not heal? that drilling should also deprive you of sleep? because of struggle, because of a certain meaning, because of what is understood and familiar? because that is what they taught you? because you knew nothing else? // that which is easy to accept is complex // he could not)

The first item in the second part of *Čornyja maki* consists of a series of lines, each introduced by the word *maučannie* ('silence'). Here are the last two:

м а ў ч а н н е

(⁵) Hereafter references to *Slovy jakija sa mnoj adbylisia* will be as S1 (see Hapeeva 2020), followed by page numbers.

для паэткі
што для верніка адлучэнне

маўчанне
я абіраю мову (См: 30)

(Silence // for a poet is the same as excommunication for a believer
// Silence // I choose language)

As a poet her choice is hardly surprising, but in *I snila jana slova...* (and she dreamt about the word...), this essential part of a writer's craft seems curiously elusive:

і сніла яна слова
і прачыналася
і не памятала яго
і было тое слова простым і цэльным
такім што рабілася ціха і лёгка
быццам цяпер вядома ўсё
і рабілася ўсё зразумелым
патлумачаным і відавочным
і хацела прыгадаць тое слова

[...]

і сярод натоўпу бачыла яна розных
і гукала іх: слова ці ты гэта?
і многія ёй адказвалі
і многім яна верыла бо верыць хацела бо стамілася бо доўга
ўжо не спала
і пачала сумнявацца можа і няма таго слова
каго ні пытала ніхто пра яго не ведаў
сказалі толькі аднойчы
слова тое будзе апошнім
і як прыгадае яго забудзецца на астатніх
і сама станецца словам (Sl: 78-79)

(and she dreamt about the word // and she awoke / and she could not remember it // and the word was simple and whole / making the world quiet and light / as if everything in it were now known // and everything became clear / explained and evident // and she wanted to remember the word // [...] and among the crowd she saw others / and

called to them – word, is that you? / and many of them answered her / and many of them she believed / because she wanted to believe / because she was tired because she hadn't slept in so long / and she began to doubt whether her word even existed / no matter whom she asked, no one had heard of it / only one time somebody said / this word will be the last word / and when you remember it you will forget all others / and will become a word yourself (Hapeeva 2021a: 45)⁶

Hapeeva is not alone among Belarusian poets to engage in word creation; Valjancina Aksak (b. 1953), for instance, uses an invented word *Zavineny* (a combination of 'guilt' and 'wine') in the title of one of her books (see Aksak 2017). In Hapeeva's explanation of a word that might be thought to exemplify the title of the book in which it appears, *Slovy jakija sa mnoj adbylisja*, the poet is pithily honest:

сурадасць

слова такога няма

а вось цяпер няхай будзе (Sl: 54)

(shared joy // there is no such word // but lo and behold – let there be one)

Returning to the question of love, in the poem *you sometimes go crazy like a woman*, she tells her lover that she cannot be a man or woman, but soars above such roles, uncertain of her identity. Accordingly, she makes several offers: to be a guitar, but he cannot play; to be a frying pan, but he is a mediocre cook and so on (Čm: 34). Lest this be too dire or confusing, the next poem, *adnojčy ja sustrëla mužčynu...* (one day I met a man...), is plainer but more fantastical-ly humorous:

аднойчы я сустрëла мужчыну

які думаў што ён торт

не ўдакладняла які – вясельны ці на паўналецце

(⁶) Hereafter references in the text to *In My Garden of Mutants*, in particular the translations by Annie Rutherford, who has given kind permission to use them, will be by IMG (see Hapeeva 2021a), followed by page numbers. Other books with her translations will be referred to by their abbreviations, also followed by page numbers. Everywhere else where there is no reference after the translations, the latter are my own.

але вера яго была такой моцнай
што я паддалася
і стала хацець яго
мець на сваёй талерцы жыцця
і ўсё да таго і ішло
адстаяла чаргу ў месяц
прапускаючы наперад дзяцей і інвалідаў не вядомых
мне войнаў
і калі час дайшоў да мяне
аказалася застаўся апошні кавалак
і мужчына-торт аб'явіў
я адзін а вас шмат
не дамся нікому
захапляйцеся маёй прыгажосцю
на адлегласці недасяжнай
я апомніўся
і угадала што не аматарка тортаў (Ўм: 35)

(once I met a man / who thought he was a cake / I could not make out what kind – for a wedding or coming-of-age / but his belief was so strong / that I gave in / and began to want to have him / on the plate of my life / and, as it went on, I took my place in the queue / letting go in front of me children and veterans of wars / I did not know about / and when my turn came, it turned out that only one last piece was left / and the cake-man announced / “I am one and you are many / I shall not give myself to anyone / rejoice in my beauty / at an inaccessible distance” / I came to my senses / and remembered that I am not fond of cakes)

In a slightly later poem, *čorny sabaka pačynaje sa śmierci ŭlasnaj...* (the black dog begins with its own death...), talking about the borders between herself and her lover, she even refers to them as jelly, going on, after some play with the phonetic characteristics of the word, to say:

дзяўчына-жэле
дзяўчына-вяроўка
дзяўчына-цень (Ўм: 27)

(jelly-girl / string-girl / shadow-girl)

Comic relationships, however, are not always described in terms of food:⁷ in *pamiž nami kilametry paézii...* (between us there are kilometres of poetry...), writing about the life between her and a beloved poet in terms of distance, she refers to *vypadkovyja ljudi* ('chance people') and mentions:

і адзін выпадковы паэт
што не мог вызначыцца пінгвін ён ці хто
і хадзіў у заапарк
у надзеі сябе знайсці
і паглядзець на сваё затачэнне звонку (Їм: 39)

(and one chance poet / who could not determine whether he was a penguin or what / went to the zoo / hoping to find himself / and to look at his captivity from the outside)

After this episode, Hapeeva returns to her partner but the ending is uncertain and less than ideal:

але паміж намі ўсё тая ж паэзія
таму ніякае каханне
не страшнае нам як і растанне
усё ж цікава што б ты абраў баронячы нашыя міліметры
маўчанне
кулак
або? (Їм: 39)

(but between us is that same poetry / because no love / is as terrible to us as parting / all the same it is interesting what you would choose to defend our millimetres / silence / a fist / or?)

Comparable in disappointment is an interesting longer poem, *Piac' dzën* (Five Days): during this period she and her man are described as Eurydice and Cerberus, as a female sorceress (*šamanka*) and devil, and, more basically, a poet-philosopher and linguistic poet. Visiting a zoo she empathizes with a bear that is losing its wits in a small cage, feeling that she too may be heading in the same direction. The difference in taste between her and her partner reflects how far apart they are. For example, he says he has read and enjoyed the Swiss

(⁷) This writer's interest in food is expressed in an excellent *jeu d'esprit*, with a punning title that defies translation: (*Viadomyja historyi*) (see Hapeeva 2017).

writer Robert Walser, but she remains silent; then he says he has started reading the social psychologist Erich Fromm and asks whether that makes her think he is an egoist, and again she is silent, noting only that, of the books he has given her, she had only managed one page and instead found an empty corner in which to write her own poems (Sl: 51-53).

One extremely gloomy poem is *zleplenaja' sa slovaŭ taho što ciabe nenavidzic' ale i kachaje...* (fashioned from the words of him who hates you but also loves you...), which is seemingly addressed to a 'rival' for the attention of an egoist and alcoholic who has gone off with her, blaming the poet for everything, while he seems to take a sadistic pleasure in pitting the two women against each other. The poet would like to hear the other woman's story, and describes in a passionate monologue her changing attitude towards her and her own ambiguous sentiments towards the man, but ends on a philosophical, perhaps more sisterly note:

і можа народзіцца ўва мне нянавіць стома ці злосць
або спачуванне
але кожнае з тых пачуццяў будзе нарэшце маім
а значыцца слушным (Ўт: 21)

(and perhaps there will be born in me hatred, exhaustion or anger / or even sympathy / but each of these feelings will be, after all, mine / and therefore reasonable)

In another poem on personal relations, *chaču čalaveka pobač...* (I want somebody alongside me...), it turns out that this wish is extremely theoretical, as the following lines from the middle of the poem make clear:

... у мяне ж ніякага плану
быць цялеснай не модна
сэкс – пачвара для мяшчанаў
не займаешся каханнем – кепска
займаешся – таксама кепска
[...]
таму пошукі мае бессэнсоўныя
таму пошукі мае бясконцыя (Ўт: 32)

(... I have no plan at all / to be physical is not fashionable / sex is a

/ exchanging plans for the evening / and perhaps for life itself // according to one linguistic study / happy people pay less attention to judgments / they may not recognize shades of intonation or meaning // they may not recognize anything / they do not care / they have their happiness // it is easy to begin to hate other people / when you hate just one of them // perhaps I should apologize for this // but my thought is already far away / where there is neither hate nor apology / but only the forest)

A colourful, example of discursiveness, which also illustrates Hapeeva's talent for comic writing is *13 kастрычніка* (13 October), although some of the extensive excursion into the lives of two young women and questions of anatomy has had to be cut out here for reasons of space:

... і такое блакітнае неба
сонечны дзень
13 кастрычніка

Агрыпіна прыносіць талерку грыбоў
свайму мужу той памірае
саступіўшы трон ейнаму сыну Нерону

Малер дае свой першы канцэрт
святкуе народзіны Маргарэт Тэтчэр

Грынвіч робіцца нулявым мерыдыянам
[...]
мамо вось я і патрапіла ў навіны
аказалася самае вялікае маё дасягненне – загінуць ад

абстрэлу гарматы
горка так усміхнуцца
і дадаць
у міжнародны дзень па зніжэнні рызыкі бедстваў
нязначны дзень у гісторыі
нязначных людзей (Sl: 65-66)

(... and such a blue sky / a sunny day / 13 October // Agrippina gives a plate of mushrooms / to her husband, he dies / leaving the throne to her son, Nero // Mahler gives his first concert // Margaret Thatcher celebrates her birthday // Greenwich is made Prime Meridian // [...] // Mum, look, I'm on the news / turns out that my greatest accom-

plishment was to die from shelling / on the international day of disaster reduction // an unimportant day in history for unimportant people (IMG: 31-33)

The reference to war is not unexpected in Hapeeva's writing, usually without any lightness of tone. An important, thoughtful and original poem devoted to this subject is *čornaja jablynja* (the black apple tree), which touches on various years of conflict given here in the order in which they appear in the verse: 2017, 1942, 1945, 1941, 1914, 1945 (again). Her particular concern is the fate of women in wartime, as the end of the poem makes abundantly clear:

... і тое што адрэзалі ногі
і тое што боль трывала нясцерпны
і што не баялася адмаўляць камандзіру
не лічыцца
і я думаю – а што лічыцца
спаць з маладымі медсёстрамі?
абрухаціць баявога таварыша?
або гвалціць дачку ворага?
ордэн табе не дадуць
калі сумняешся ці варта страляць
калі спачуваеш і сваім і чужым
калі топіш сваё дзіця каб выратаваць астатніх
калі клапацішся пра чужога мужа
калі вешаешся на яблыні чорнай
у імя маці, дачкі і святой душы (Sl: 76)

(... and that they amputated her legs / and that she suffered unbearable pain / and that she was afraid to reject the commander // does not count // but I think well what does count? // to sleep with the nurses? / to take down a comrade in arms? / or rape the daughter of your enemy? // they won't give you a medal / if you doubt whether you should fire / if you sympathize with your opponents as well as your own / if you drown your child in order to save others / if you make efforts for another woman's husband / if you hang yourself on a black apple tree // in the name of the mother, daughter and holy spirit (IMG: 31-33)

Also on the topic of weapons and war is a poem, about flowers, *flëks* (phlox), which begins harmlessly but in the second part turns into a catalogue of destruction:

... на мове кветак флëксы – адзінства сэрцаў
на мове вайскоўцаў – артылерыйская ўстанова
адметнасць якой звышшчыльнасць абстрэлу
журналіст піша:
*на заводзе разлічваюць, новы баявы сродак
знойдзе свайго спажыўца*

цікава як называюцца тыя
што пацерпяць ад тых спажыўцоў?

у царстве вайны
ёсць і іншыя кветкі

гіцыят – гармата, калібру 152 міліметры
(як адтуліна вадасцёкавых труб)
гваздзік – гаўбіца калібру 122 міліметры
(як грэйпфрут)
васілёк – мінамёт, радыус паражэння 18 метраў
(як грэнландскі кіт)

можа гэта і ёсць кветкі зла
на якія злятаюцца адпаведныя матылькі
а дакладней
матыльковыя міны
яны змяшчаюцца на далоні
і важаць усяго 90 грамаў (Sl: 69-70)

(... in the language of flowers phloxes are united hearts // in the language of war it's an artillery unit / remarkable for its accuracy of fire / a journalist writes: *the factory is confident this new weapon / will find its consumer* // interesting who are those / who suffer from these consumers // in the kingdom of war / there are other flowers too // hyacinth: a gun with 152mm calibre / (like a drainpipe) carnation: a 122mm howitzer / (like a grapefruit) / cornflower: a mortar with a range of 18 metres / (like a bowhead whale) // maybe these are the *flowers of evil* / to which certain butterflies flock / or rather butterfly mines / these fit in your palm / and weigh only 90 grams (IMG: 35)⁸

(⁸) Two lines seem to be missing from both the Belarusian and the English ver-

Male cunning in love appears to be the theme of *piac' kvetak...* (five flowers...):

пяць кветак
сказаў прадавачы
дзве раскрытыя
адну напай-
і дзве закрытыя
узнятае брыво
ніколі не мела такога ўніклівага пакупніка

[...]

дзіўная звычка дарыць
цотную колькасць памерлым

быццам недастаткова розніцы паміж намі
памерлымі і жывымі

быццам была надзея
што і я разгарнуся бы тыя бутоны

якія
не разгарнуліся (Sl: 27)

(five flowers / he told the florist / two open wide / one just a bit / two more still buds / a raised eyebrow / never had she had such an exacting customer [...] that weird custom of giving an even number of flowers / to the dead // as if there weren't enough differences between us / being dead and alive // as if there was hope / that I too might unfurl like those buds // which / never did (IMG: 43)

To end the topic of difficult relationships and the poet's menagerie of inadequate men, it may be worth quoting part of a poem that begins with taking clothes off, *raspranajusja raspranajusja raspranajusja...* (I undress undress undress...), in which she regrets that in their world there are no more people, only angels, devils and (male) poets, and nobody wants to be her muse. The man thinks naively that in order to be an angel one should not engage in love-making, and, near the end of the poem, Hapeeva describes her unenviable fate:

sions in IMG after line 11, and I have taken the liberty of adding these lines to both the Belarusian, from its original source, and the translation.

... СЛОВА ВЫВАЛЬВАЮЦА З МЯНЕ
 як бясконцая плынь
 пад ёй і пахаваю сябе
 дарэчы хто гэта homo normales
 вы такіх сустракалі?
 для мяне – яны сапраўдныя богі жыхары неба
 вось каго трэба кахаць і любіць і каму пісаць вершы
 (Ўм: 31)

(... words pour out of me / like an endless stream / I hide myself
 under it, / by the way, who is this homo normales / have you met
 such people? / for me they are real gods, inhabitants of heaven / it is
 they whom one should love and cherish and write poems to)

This theme of loneliness, as has been seen, is a *topos* in both the
 prose and the verse of this writer, and a minimal verse at the end of
The Trapeze Heart could hardly be clearer on this topic:

самотны тюльпан
 самотная птушка
 самотная я
 ў траве
 на дрэве
 сярод людзей (Hapeeva 2021c: 26)

(a lonely tulip / a lonely bird / lonely me // in the grass / on the tree
 /amongst the crowd)

A major collection of the period under review is the already mentioned *Slovy jakija sa mnoj adbylisja*, almost twice as long as *Čornuja maki* and published a year after it. It is from this book that come the majority of poems chosen by her translator Annie Rutherford. Unsurprisingly, some of the themes in the verse collections overlap thematically, as, indeed, they do with passages in her prose, but the treatment in every poem is individual and distinct from Hapeeva's other verse and prose.

Comparisons between animal and human behaviour and fates, as has been seen, played a large part in Hapeeva's most recent novel, and there are many examples in her newest poems. For instance, in the verse, "паміац' цела прымушае шукач' пакуты..." ('the memory of my body forces me to seek torments...'), she seems to compare herself with animals, trained and untrained, noting that seals appear to be

happy, although for her own body it is a question of whips and sticks, and the memory of her body is of constant dressage (see Sl: 37).

Closer to some of the earlier poems are several about contacts between birds and (spoilt) humans. In one of them, *tam dze rastuc' drevu...* (there where trees grow...), the birds are shown in their natural surroundings, and in the second part of the verse, the poet realizes that what humans hear as birdsong is really their conversation about daily affairs:

... вось тут разважаюць пра гнёзды
а тут пра культуру палётаў
якое ў модзе пер'е
і як здабыць чарвячка

і раптам я зразумею
тое што для мяне песні
для птушак будзённыя справы
размовы так ні пра што

і можа быць там дзе растуць дрэвы
усё ж неабходны аркэстры
каб мы слухалі птушак
а птушкі слухалі нас (Sl: 20)

(... they are conversing about nests / and hearing about the culture of flight / what feathers are in fashion / and how to catch a worm // and suddenly I realize / that what for me are songs / are daily matters for birds / conversations about nothing in particular // and perhaps there where trees grow / orchestras are after all necessary / so that we listen to the birds / and the birds listen to us)

Turning from birds to human language, a topic almost universal for nationally conscious Belarusians, Hapeeva, as always, has an original, sometimes surprising approach. In the verse “*kali prychozic' jana – prychozic' mova...*” (‘when she comes – the language comes...’) it turns out that the woman is usually silent, and after various details of life and beliefs, the poem turn to a carpet that is in constant conflict with the feet treading, somersaulting, jumping or just standing on it, turning the red colour to black. The development, however, contains both the carpet’s thoughts, and its owner’s whimsical, yet practical observations:

... і кілім думае
 вось яно шчасце
 сколькі кілімаў ведаюць што яны не кілімы
 а метафара ў маім вершы

сама забываюся часта
 казаць людзям здымаць абутак
 калі яны хочуць зайсці на кілім
 спадзяюся самі дадумаюцца
 але
 і сёння ніхто не чакаў снегу (Sl: 41-42)

(... and the carpet thinks / what real happiness / how many carpets know that they are not a carpet but a metaphor in my poem // I myself often forget / to tell people to take their shoes off / when they want to go on the carpet / I hope they will think of it for themselves / but / today nobody expected snow)

Another poem, *kali vyrastaeš...* (when you grow up...), muses on the differences between words for 'to love' in Belarusian (*kachac'* and *ljubic'*) whilst other languages have only one word, concluding that the language is both a prison and freedom, but her concern about the risk of offending foreigners is somewhat dampened by a slight misquotation of Hamlet, something that just might appeal to the poet's healthy sense of humour (see Sl: 22). In *mabye' dadatak pavedam-ljae...* (perhaps the app informs you...) the poet not only writes about learning words in a rare language but, typically, wonders whether one more would make any difference:

мабыць дадатак паведамляе
 што я вывучала 285 нарвежскіх словаў
 гэта мала ці шмат?
 цяпер я ведаю як сказаць:
 мядзведзі не чытаюць газетаў
 або
 на курцы восем гузікаў
 але не ведаю як называецца
 тое да чаго дакранаюся кожны раз як ты сур'ёзнееш
 або ўдаеш мультышнага персанажа
 можа
 286 будзе тым самым (Sl: 43)

(perhaps the app informs you / that you have learnt 285 Norwegian words / is it a little or a lot? / now I know how to say: / bears do not read newspapers / or / a jacket has eight buttons / but I do not know what to call / my experience every time you become serious / or play a cartoon character / perhaps / the 286th will do the job)

The same idea about potentially crucial numbers comes up at the end of a quite different poem, *nikalaszèè* (Nikolassee),

... дзве незнаёмыя жанчыны
адна выйдзе на ніколасэе
іншая паедзе далей
я магла б быць любой з іх
пражыць тысячы варыянтаў
і шкадаваць што не выбрала тысяча першы
так і не навучыўшыся радавацца
той кім ёсць (Ch: 12-13)

(... two unknown women / one will get out at Friedrichstrasse⁹ / the other will go further / I could be either of them / living out a thousand possibilities / and still feel sorry I didn't choose the one after that thousand / instead of learning to enjoy / the one that I have (Ch: 10-11)

Whimsy is not rare in Hapeeva's poetry. One example, *vyznačycja z pamieram...* (determining the size...), has the subject of a shiny new boat that she invites friends onto for a journey and although finding that it has a crack, wants to launch it anyhow, for reasons given at the end:

трэба спусціць яго на ваду
і сустрэцца з неідэальнасцю
чоўна
сабе
і іншых (Sl: 30-31)

(I have to launch it onto the water / and face the imperfections / of the boat / of myself / of the others (IMG: 41)

(⁹) The translator explains that she decided to change the name of the station so that the English reader might find it easier to recognize Berlin. In the original poem the poet writes about Nikolassee – the station before Wannsee – where the Literary Colloquium Berlin is located, where Hapeeva was a writer-in-residence several times.

An example of where whimsical reflections on age include a terrible episode from early childhood, and go on to thoughts about society in general, is *kali tabe 35 a ty ūsĕ jašĕe choĕaš navuĕyĕcĕja hrac' na skrypcy...* (when you are 35 and you still want to learn to play the violin...), including her recollection of being sexually attacked on a fishing trip, although the ending of the poem is at once depressing and whimsical. The spelling out in words of ellipsis is bizarre but perhaps stronger as a result:

... калі табе 35 а ты так і не ўрэзала
 вырадку што браў цябе на рыбалку
 каб
 тут шматкроп'е
 бо табе было чатыры і пастаяць за сябе
 ты не ведала як

 калі табе 35 і іншых вырадкаў
 грамадства спраўна падсоўвала ў падліве
гэта нармальна усе так жывуць
 хвалюешся што з табою нешта не так
 але табе 35 і ты
 за справядлівасць

 а значыцца варта зрабіць бачным свінства і не
хаваць
пачуцці
 яны абавязкова скажуць што ты помслівая сука і
гістэрычка

 або можна нічога не рабіць
 і заставацца ідэальнай маўчунняй
 тады вяртаемся да радка са шматкроп'ем

 калі табе 35 і здаецца быццам усё зрабіла
 засынаеш з палёгкай
 бо зранку
 можна пачаць новы верш
 <калі табе 36> (Sl: 63-64)

(... when you are 35 and you failed to hit / the monster who took you on a fishing trip / in order to / an ellipsis here / for you were four then and did not know / how to stand up for yourself // when you are 35 and other monsters / are generously slipped into the sauce / *it is nor-*

mal – everybody lives that way / you feel strongly that something is wrong / but you are 35 and / believe in justice // which means you should bring swinishness to light and not hide your feelings / they will certainly say that you are a vengeful and hysterical bitch / or one could do nothing / and remain an ideal silent woman / then we return to the line with an ellipsis // when you are 35 and seem to have done everything / you go to sleep with a feeling of relief / for in the morning / you can start a new poem / ‘when you are 36’

Whimsy often overlaps with fantasy and humour, and this certainly applies to Hapeeva’s approach to the legend of Adam and Eve. She is not, of course, the first to tackle this theme: Ryhor Baradulin (1935-2014) produced a whole book, albeit not one of his best, with their names as the title, *Adam i Eva* (1968), and two decades later a poet quite different from both of them, Sjarhej Prylucki (b. 1980), ended the second of two elegies with some characteristically strange words (he was apparently drugged and, in any case, only interested in Adam) in *Dzevjanostyja forever* (*The Nineties forever*, Prylucki 2008: 123).¹⁰ Hapeeva’s very imaginative poem, however, provides a fantastic and completely original view of this pair in *adno z peršych realici-šoŭ...* (one of the first reality shows...) presented in two variants: in the first they play hard ball with the apple but the police come to see who is vandalizing Adam’s property, before they can discover that it is edible. In court Eve says she was not herself and pretends to be crazy. In a different scenario, maybe Eve egged Adam on and had already long gazed at the tree but not dared to approach it. In any case perhaps Eve spoke Norwegian and Adam Swahili. The end of this very entertaining poem, about “the apple being the first international misunderstanding” (Sl: 59), describes some of the possible versions and witness statements in the court, before the bathetic ending:

... набіралася шмат версій і сведкаў
 смакоўніца даводзіла што ніякай яблоні там не
 было
 і папрасіла ўнесці ў пратакол скаргу за абдзіранне
 ейнага лісця

⁽¹⁰⁾ The resonance with the title of Bacharevič’s book of ten years later reflects the only link between two diametrically different writers.

friend...'), in which the poet traces aspects of their young lives, and ends by suggesting that women mainly survive by holding on to thin air. Here are the closing lines:

... затое стаўлю ў прыклад
 маю сяброўку і іншых жанчын
 што трымаючыся адно за паветра
 трымаюць усіх нас (Sl: 68)

(... while I point to / my friend and other women / who holding on
 only to the air / hold us all (IMG: 25)

Feminism may be an individual and, indeed, lonely path to follow in a patriarchal society, but Vol'ha Hapeeva also aspires to be part of a wider world, as we have seen, of flora and fauna, as well as passers-by or fellow passengers. Some of this wish is expressed in the final example of her verse, *kali ŭ ateli pachne jak u kascële...* (when in the hotel it smells like in a church...); as is often the poet's wont, she starts from afar, but the end is a continuation of her search for self identity and a place in the world. The epigraph, "before one becomes many", hints at what is to come:

... пражываючы дні
 спрабую зразумець
 вырасці
 перарасці
 стаць кімсьці перахварэць
 але замест гэтага слухаю
 як сумуе суседскі сабака
 як баіцца матылёк на асфальце
 як трывае перакулены на спіну хрушч

 і я прашу прабачэння
 як толькі магу
 што не з імі
 сумую баюся трываю
 што здраджваю ім з гарадамі
 цалую мужчын абдымаю жанчын
 думаю пра лес пустэльнію і неба
 дзе баяцца не трэба
 і быць кімсьці не трэба
 бо можна быць усім. (Sl: 33-34)

(... living through my days / I try to understand / to grow up / to grow through / to become a someone / to recover / but instead of that I listen to / how the dog next door laments / how afraid the butterfly is on the asphalt / how the beetle turned on its back survives // and I apologize / as best I can / that I am not with them / to lament, be afraid, survive / that I betray them with the cities / I kiss men I embrace women / I think about the forest, the desert and the sky / where one should not be afraid / and should not be a someone / for it is possible to be everyone.)

Conclusion

Vol'ha Hapeeva is a talented writer of both prose and verse who at the present time occupies a central position in the Belarusian literary scene, recognized by awards both at home and abroad. Her two prose works, very different from each other, both make real contributions to the genre, whilst her often humorous verse is inventive, thematically varied, technically skilful and always lexically rich. In both novels and poems the author enjoys diversions from the main line of plot or subject, entering into extensive detail that is far from being random, but often throws light on other parts of the work in question or her oeuvre as a whole. At a central point in her career, this writer is making a most valuable contribution to Belarusian and, indeed, European literature.

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La prosa e i versi di Vol'ha Hapeeva in tre anni altamente creativi

L'ultima fase della carriera di Vol'ha Hapeeva, la cui opera prosastica e poetica è stata insignita di numerosi premi, soprattutto nei paesi germanofoni, comprende scritti del triennio 2019-2021, in cui l'autrice, descrivendo in prosa la sua infanzia nella Bielorussia sovietica, dà vita ad un fantasioso giallo metafisico. Anche i suoi versi, inti-

mamente personali nel loro rispecchiare le radicate convinzioni femministe dell'autrice contro il carattere ostinatamente patriarcale della società in cui vive, sono maturati nel tempo, al punto da garantirle un posto d'onore tra i maggiori poeti bielorusi contemporanei.

Keywords: Maturity, autobiography, loneliness, metaphysical thriller, volcanoes, animal rights.

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