

Maryia Martysevich (Belarus)

Rodeo Clowns versus Belarusian Martyrology

“Belarus is a crazy country: everybody’s too serious here.”

-Siarhej Michalok, a popular Belarusian rocker

The film, *Brokeback Mountain*, by Ang Lee, gave me an experience its creators hardly expected anybody to have. While I could easily bring together homosexual and ranch aesthetics, one aspect was totally surprising to me. There’s a scene in which the protagonist takes part in a rodeo and suddenly falls off a bull. A rodeo commentator announces: “This guy seems to be in trouble. It’s high time for a cowboy clown!” And indeed, the audience watches a rodeo clown run around the ring in order to distract a furious animal’s attention from a fallen cowboy. As I have never been to a rodeo, I was completely unaware that there were any actors except for a cowboy, a bull and a popcorn seller. Thus, a gay cowboy as compared to a clown cowboy seemed to be less controversial. Later, thinking about this character, I made up my mind that a rodeo clown is a good metaphor for describing the functions of contemporary literature.

The tradition of European literature that I belong to has had two basic ways of dealing with laughter. The first way is total division of tragedy and comedy as a canon of ancient literature, as well as literature of classicism. The second one is a mixture of satire and irony with grief and melancholy, as is the case in baroque and romantic literature. The best example of such a mix, in my opinion, is *Simplicius Simplicissimus* written in 1668 by Hans Jakob Christoffel von Grimmelshausen and inspired by the events and horrors of the Thirty Years' War, which devastated Germany from 1618 to 1648.

As for Belarusian literature of the twentieth century, known mainly as “Belarusian Soviet” literature, and which still forms a basis for contemporary writers, it is strongly influenced by social realism, proclaimed in the 1930^s as the only literary method in the Soviet Union. As the dominant style of a communistic empire, social realism followed classicism and acted similarly. So there was an undercover description of what *could* be funny in Belarusian creative writing and what *could not*. One was obliged to be extremely serious when writing about The Nation, The Language, The Revolution, The Nature, The War, The Harvest and The Village. Women were sometimes allowed to write about The Love, but also with proper pathos. In the 1990^s, after the Soviet Union collapsed, topics of Chernobyl, Faith, God and National History were added to this unpublished list.

Satire and irony could be used only in definite genres marked as “comic:” comic poetry, comic song, a fable. They were treated as a low, trifling genre worth publishing only in the last pages of magazines. And only an external enemy or a dishonest worker could be ridiculed. It’s interesting that authors of all the most popular satirical poems describing Belarusian society in the 19th, 20th, and 21st centuries preferred to remain anonymous. The main point, I think, was not to have a “trifle genre” mentioned in biography. It looked like the only possibility of writing ironically about “serious“ topics in Belarusian Soviet literature was to write for children. This is probably the reason why a Belarusian philosopher Valiantsin Akudovich recently mentioned the book *Mikolka-Paravoz (Mike-Locomotive)* by Mikhas Lynkou among the modernistic Belarusian canon. This book, beloved by many generations of Belarusian children, describes adventures of a railwayman’s son during World War I and the Soviet Revolution.

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While in Russian society in the 1980s such a cultural situation made satire and humor a power of some postmodern dissidents, Belarusian dissident writers remained extremely serious, talking about absurdness of Soviet reality. Some psychologists attribute this to national mentality: in Belarusian dictionaries one can find about 20 synonyms for *grief* and just one or two for *happiness*.

In spite of the changes within the last 20 years, seriousness is a main feature of what I call “traditional Belarusian literature”. This seriousness is described by some critical intellectuals as a “Belarusian martyrology.” As a result, the only thing an average Belarusian knew about native literature is that it’s dull and not worth reading. That it’s something you are forced to study at school to forget forever soon after finals.

So, a reaction came: around the Millennium, satire, humor and irony became the most important means of post-modernistic authors in their attempts to stimulate readers’ interest. This is not surprising, as, in my opinion, irony is the first language of smart people, when they face a contemporary world, full of contradictions and absurdness.

One of the most ironic authors in contemporary Belarusian literature is the poet Andrei Khadanovich. His poetry is closely related to the European literary tradition. Three years ago it became the basis material for my postgraduate research of classical code in post-modernistic Belarusian poetry. Let me read the English translation from Khadanovich’s book, *Berlibres* to introduce you the style of his poetry (please see poem attached).

When making a report on this topic at the conference in my alma mater university, I faced the committee of literature studies professors, laughing at every quotation as if they were watching a sitcom. After I finished, one of them came up to me and kindly said: “Dear girl, take it easy! All your research is in vain, as I can’t see any “classical codes” in what Khadanovich does. The only function of his “comic writing” is to entertain such serious authors as me.”

The most terrible thing about this reaction was that I never laughed when reading or listening to those poems. Sometimes I may have smiled. But mostly I had tears in my eyes, as irony of modernistic or postmodernistic authors concerns very deep archetypes of Belarusian life.

In my own writing, I (sometimes unconsciously) match tragic and ironic pathos within one text. And almost all the time I feel dissonance between my writing and the average reader’s feedback. Very often I hear people say that I’m a “stand-up poet.” I think these readers can hardly imagine the sorrow that usually makes my writing. Is this sort of misunderstanding good or evil? I still don’t know. I just can note the ambivalence of contemporary Belarusian writing. Laughter is a primary and natural emotion; furthermore, it can lead you toward thinking. It’s up to you. I’m sure, that what they call “real literature” must act in two ways: to entertain people while working with rather tough topics, like facing a bull at a rodeo. To provide literature which I believe is now necessary for my Reader, is the job of a rodeo clown.

By Andrei Khadanovich

COMMEDIA

Which circle
of Dante’s Hell

is meant for the drunkards

who the day before were mixing
sweet wine with beer
and missed their chance to repent before death?

In this very circle
we woke up in the morning,
though formally speaking

we were in Poland
the city of Wroclaw
hotel Wodnik.

The spring sun soothed our pain a little
but didn't evoke any desire
to talk in tercets.

Morning coffee transferred us to Limbo –
as pagan bastards
(meaning virtuous pagans),

or maybe even unbaptized infants?
(you should have seen the infantile physiognomy
of a poet sitting in front of me!)

We kept ascending
Dante's ladder
and here we were in the hotel Purgatory:

Finnish sauna, swimming pool,
TV set, pool table
and everything is free of charge.

Who knows how far into Heaven
we would have gone
if not for the check out time?

The receptionist's name was Peter;
but we didn't pay attention to his badge
when giving him our keys
and getting into a taxi.

translated from Belarusian by Valzhyna Mort