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Between Poetics and Reality: Anatol Sys' Early Period*

Między poetyką a rzeczywistością: wczesny okres twórczości Anatola Sysa

SIERGIEJ KOWALOW

Maria Curie-Skłodowska University, Poland

ORCID ID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-1717-9070>

e-mail: siergiej.kowalow@poczta.umcs.lublin.pl

Abstract. The article is dedicated to the early works of Anatol Sys (1959–2005) – one of the founders of the literary community “Тутэйшыя” [“Natives”], a great Belarusian poet with a tragic fate. Even during his lifetime, and especially after the death of Anatol Sys, many myths and legends about his extraordinary personality and work began to appear. One of these such myths is the idea that there are no early, student poems in his works, which would testify to the poet’s later work on mastering literary skills and artistic comprehension of reality. The author of the article analyses poems from the poet’s manuscript archive found in 2011 by Ales Bialiatski and Eduard Akulin and comes to the conclusion that most of Anatol Sys’ student poems written from 1978 to 1982 are artistically imperfect student texts with clear signs of imitation of Maksim Bagdanovich. Only a few poems, such as *Я ўваходжу ў каляю...* [*I’m Getting in the Rut...*], *Застолле* [*Feast*], *У сасновым лесе* [*In the Pine Forest*], and *Усявышняму* [*To the Almighty*] can be considered as indications of future wonderful works from the collections of poems *Агмень* [*Hearth*] (1987), *Пан Лес* [*Mr. Forest*] (1988) and the unpublished collection *Ягамосць* [*Gentleman*] (early 1990s). The paper demonstrates the evolution of Sys’ work from keeping in line with

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Contact details of the author: Department of Slavic Literature, Institute of Modern Languages, Faculty of Humanities, Maria Curie-Skłodowska University in Lublin, 4A Marii Curie-Skłodowskiej Sq., 20-031 Lublin, Poland, phone: +48 81 537 53 78.

the principles of poetics and traditional versification, to the presence of the tragedy of Belarusian history and modernity – from copying poetic samples and templates to existential experience of reality and its reflection through original artistic images.

Keywords: Anatol Sys, Maksim Bagdanovich, early poems, versification, imitation, artistic reflection of reality, the tragedy of the Belarusian world

Abstrakt. Artykuł poświęcony jest wczesnej twórczości Anatola Sysa (1959–2005) – jednego z założycieli grupy literackiej „Tutejsi”, wybitnego poety o tragicznym losie. Niezwykła osobowość i twórczość Anatola Sysa już za życia poety zaczęły obrastać licznymi mitami i legendami, które przybrały na sile po jego śmierci. Jednym z mitów jest przekonanie o braku w twórczości Sysa wczesnych, uczniowskich wierszy, które świadczyłyby o pracy poety nad opanowaniem warsztatu literackiego i artystycznym odzwierciedlaniem rzeczywistości. Autor artykułu analizuje wiersze z rękopiśmiennego archiwum poety, odnalezione w 2011 roku przez Alesia Bialackiego i Eduarda Akulina, i dochodzi do wniosku, że większość studenckich wierszy Anatola Sysa napisanych w latach 1978–1982 to teksty artystycznie niedoskonałe, z wyraźnym naśladownictwem twórczości Maksima Bahdanowicza. Jedyne w nielicznych wierszach, takich jak: *Я ўваходжу ў каляю...* [*Wchodzę w koleinę...*], *Застолле* [*Uczta*], *У сасновым лесе* [*W sosnowym lesie*], *Усявышняму* [*Wszeczmogącemu*], można dostrzec zapowiedź znakomitych utworów ze zbiorów *Агмень* [*Ognisko*] (1987), *Пан Лес* [*Pan Las*] (1988) i nieopublikowanego tomu *Ягамосць* [*Jegomość*] (początek lat 90. XX wieku). Artykuł pokazuje ewolucję twórczości Anatola Sysa od uczniowskiego podporządkowania się zasadom poetyki i tradycyjnej wersyfikacji, do uobecnienia tragizmu białoruskiej historii i współczesności, od kopiowania poetyckich wzorców i szablonów, do egzystencjalnego doświadczenia rzeczywistości i ukazania jej przy pomocy charakterystycznych obrazów artystycznych i asocjacji poetyckich.

Słowa kluczowe: Anatol Sys, Maksim Bahdanowicz, studenckie wiersze, wersyfikacja, naśladownictwo, artystyczne odzwierciedlenie rzeczywistości, tragizm białoruskiej historii

The most popular Belarusian poet of the late 1980s – first half of the 1990s was Anatol Sys (1959–2005) – one of the founders of the literary community “Тутэйшыя” [“Natives”], a creative leader of his generation, and a writer with a tragic fate. To those who knew the poet during the peak of his creativity, he seemed to be a prophet of a new national revival in Belarus, a genius; and to those who found him in a period of creative and moral decline – a “cursed poet,” a clown, a marginal degenerate.¹

Even during his lifetime, and especially after the death of Sys, his extraordinary personality and creativity began to grow with numerous myths and legends. One of these myths is the idea of the absence of early, student poems in his work, which would indicate persistent work in mastering literary skills, philosophical knowledge, and artistic reflection of reality.

¹ For more information about the life and creative trajectory of Anatol Sys, see Kowalow (2018, pp. 107–126).

Sys has never been a novice. Having published several epigrams in the student wall newspaper about the “men of the seventies,” his literary predecessors, in which he wittily ridiculed their biographical itch, he determined his path surprisingly early and, apparently, did not deviate from it.

Literary critics simply did not have time to confuse – not the right word here – him, because he had just begun his poetic work, and almost immediately finished it. After the publication of two books *Агмень* (1987), *Пан Лес* one immediately after the other he stopped. For a long time. Forever. Like Arthur Rambo in his time. (Тычына, 2001, p. 54)²

– Mikhas Tychyna, one of the most authoritative Belarusian literary critics, claimed.

Volga Shynkarenka, a well-known researcher of Belarusian historical prose, also expressed the opinion that Anatol Sys did not care about developing his poetic talent and expanding his cultural horizons:

It is necessary to say that the rurality of A. Sys had a very peculiar influence on his worldview. A fan of everything natural, he also perceived talent as a natural phenomenon, given once and for all, which does not require any growth and improvement from its recipient in the future. Therefore, apparently, the poet never really cared about its preservation and development, was not seriously interested in education or any specific sciences. (Šynkarenka, 2001, p. 26)³

For a long time, it was believed that the *early* poems of Sys, written between 1982 and 1984, were included in the collection *Агмень* [*Hearth*] (1988), and the *mature* ones, created from 1985 to 1988 – in the collection *Пан Лес* [*Mr. Forest*] (1989). As the poet himself noted in an interview with Ales Lipaj:

Almost the entire *Hearth* was written between 1982–1984 in the army. Ironically, it was in 1983 when the first page of the book was marked, but then a mistake was found, and manually corrected from three to eight. This is clearly seen. Anyway, the collection was published. So far, I have met only one person who said that I had printed the early poems in vain, saying that there was a posthumous “collection of works.” I don’t think so. (Sys, 2007, p. 267)⁴

² “Літаратурная крытыка проста не паспела збіць яго з панталыку, бо ён толькі пачаў сваю паэтычную творчасць, як амаль адразу і закончыў. Выдаўшы адну за адной дзве кнігі *Агмень* і *Пан Лес*, змоўк. Надоўга. Назаўсёды. Як Арцюр Рэмбо ў свой час.”

³ “Трэба сказаць, што вясковасць А. Сыса надзвычай своеасабліва адбілася на яго светабачанні. Прыхільнік усяго натуральнага, ён і талент успрымае як з’яву прыродную, аднойчы і назаўсёды дадзеную, што не патрабуе ў далейшым ад яго носьбіта ніякага росту і ўдасканалення. Таму, мабыць, паэт ніколі дужа не клапаціўся пра яго захаванне і развіццё, усур’ёз глыбока не захапляўся адукацыйй ці нейкімі пэўнымі навукамі.”

⁴ “Амаль увесь *Агмень* напісаны ў 1982–1984 гадах у войску. Па іроніі лёсу, менавіта 1983 годам і пазначылі першую старонку кнігі, але потым знайшлі памылку, выправілі ўжо

As for poems written before 1982, Sys confessed to his friends that he burned student poems because he “[...] wanted to come to literature as already formed and perfect author” “[...] хацеў прыйсці ў літаратуру ўжо сфармаваным і завершаным творцам”] (Bialiacki, 2012, p. 115). But wasn’t this recognition just another myth created by the poet himself?

Between 2006 and 2010, the magazine *Дзеяслоў* [*Verb*] published a small selection of early poems by Sys prepared by Ales Bialiatski, Viktor Shnip, and Serzhuk Sys. These poems had already been published between 1981 and 1984 in the newspapers *Гомельскі універсітэт* [*Gomel University*] and *Гомельская праўда* [*Gomelskaya Pravda*] or were preserved in letters to friends and albums of classmates (Sys, 2006a, pp. 184–187; 2009, pp. 285–289; 2010, pp. 299–306). These modest publications (about twenty poems) did not significantly affect the image of the poet, who died a few years earlier. About a dozen other poems by Sys from the period 1981–1984 entered the collection of selected works of the poet *Лён* [*Flax*] (Sys, 2006b), prepared for publication by Mikhas Skobla.

A real sensation was the discovery in 2011 of the archive of the manuscript by Sys, which contains more than a hundred (!) early poems, including the manuscript of the unpublished poetry collection *Берагі майго юнацтва* [*The Shores of My Youth*] (1981) with a negative publishing review by Fyodar Yafimav. The archive, which was found in Sys’ parents’ house in Garoshkava, was handed over to Ales Bialiatski and Eduard Akulin by the poet’s sister, Tamara (Bialiacki, 2012, p. 115). Shortly after finding Sys’ early poems, Bialiatski prepared several magazine publications with forewords, and in 2016, he published the book *Берагі майго юнацтва*, which included the poems by Sys from his student years and several unknown works of later times.

The beginning of Anatol Sys’ creative path differed little from the traditional biography of Belarusian poets of his generation: studying at the university at the philological (historical-philological) faculty, visiting the university literary association, trying to publish his works at the university, regional and later republican newspapers. During his studies at Gomel University, Sys already had the “fame” of a poet and wrote in the student wall newspaper not only satirical epigram, but also fully fledged poems of various genres with the hope of getting published. The large number of early poems by Sys is impressive: more than 120 texts. It turns out that during his student years he wrote about 30 poems a year.

ад рукі тройку на васьмёрку. Гэта відаць няўзброеным вокам. Як бы там ні было, зборнік выйшаў. Пакуль мне сустрэўся толькі адзін чалавек, які сказаў, што дарэмна я надрукаваў раньнія вершы, маўляў, на гэта ёсць пасмяротны »збор твораў«. Я так ня думаю.”

In Andrey Melnikov's biographical essay about Anatol Sys published in 2017, we read: "In 1981, Sys sent to the Union of Belarusian Writers, for review, his typewritten poetry collection *Берагі майго юнацтва*. The review by Fyodar Yafimav turned out to be negative" ["У 1981–м Сус даслаў у беларускі Саюз пісьменнікаў на рэцэнзію свой машынапісны паэтычны зборнік *Берагі майго юнацтва*. Рэцэнзія ад Фёдара Яфімава аказалася адмоўнаю"] (Mielnikau, 2017, p. 15). According to Melnikov, it was difficult for the Russian-speaking poet Yafimav, a native of the Voronezh region, to understand Sys' Belarusian poetry⁵ (Mielnikau, 2017, p. 16). The biographer formulates his own attitude to Sys' early poems laconically and convincingly: "It is worth reading. That a field says a lot about its sower" ["Чытаць варта. Тая рунь шмат чаго кажа пра яе сейбіта"] (Mielnikau, 2017, p. 16).

Ales Bialiatski also highly appreciates the artistic level of his friend's early poems: "After reading the found poems from the heights of today, and thirty of them have passed, I've made sure that most of them are self-sufficient, high-quality works" ["Чытаючы знойдзеныя вершы з вышыні сённяшніх гадоў, а іх мінула ўжо трыццаць, я пераканаўся, што большасць зь іх зьяўляюцца самадастатковымі, высокавартаснымі творами"] (Bialiacki, 2012, p. 119).

With all due respect to both the author of the poems and the author of the book *Берагі майго юнацтва* [*The Shores of My Youth*], it is difficult to agree with this conclusion: in fact, out of 120 early poems by Sys, a maximum of 20 texts are *self-sufficient* and *high-quality* works that can be included in later reprints. Sys' early poems are written on several levels lower than *Агмень* [*Hearth*] and *Пан Лес* [*Mr. Forest*]; they do not stand out for their originality and artistic perfection against the background of the works of other Belarusian novice poets of the 1980s and they do not reflect the tendencies, schemes, and stamps characteristic of the contemporary Belarusian Soviet poetry.

In support of my opinion, I will give some vivid examples of banal versification performed by the student of Philology, Anatol Sys.

From the poems on a historical theme:

The battlefield,

Kulikovo.

The people begged God day and night,

Guys from Bryansk, guys from Pskov, not sure that 'guys' is the right word here.

Like the sheaves in the harvest fell.

⁵ In fact, although Fyodar Yafimav wrote poems in Russian, he knew the Belarusian language well, was an experienced editor at the publishing house "Mastatskaya Litaratura" and a talented poet.

Rus celebrated,
 Rus wept
 For the sons, for the daughters.
 Now their eyes are blooming with poppies,
 The echo on a resounding day is their step. (Sys, 2016, p. 26)⁶

From the poems about the Great Patriotic War:

I dream about soldiers of the Patriotic war at night,
 The Motherland goes on the attack in the greatcoat.
 And those who died will not rise,
 They will not return home from the war.

The last screams of the splinters ruthlessly
 Cut through,
 And on the fly.
 And the bullet bit into the body like a betrayal,
 The blood left an autograph on the bandage. (Sys, 2016, p. 102)⁷

From the poems about the Motherland:

I am the sprout of any land,
 Connected with it by dreams, heart, blood,
 And all that is good in my life
 I give to my Motherland with gratitude.

And to unite even better with the Motherland,
 I will grow a deep root in it,
 Oh, how proud I am to be called a native,
 That I call Belarus my mother. (Sys, 2016, p. 43)⁸

Ales Bialiatski rightly notes the absence of Soviet ideology and propaganda poster verses in Sys' early poems:

⁶ “Поле ратнае, / Кулікоўскае. / Бога ўдзень і ўноч люд маліў, / Хлопцы бранскія, хлопцы пскоўскія, / Як снапы ў жніво паляглі. / Адгуляла Русь, / Русь адплакала / За сыноў сваіх, за дачок. / Цяпер вочы іх цвітуць макамі, / Рэха ў звучны дзень – іхні крок.”

⁷ “Салдаты Айчынай начамі мне сняцца / Радзіма ў атаку ідзе ў шынялі. / І тым, хто загінуў, ужо не падняцца, / Ужо не вярнуцца да хаты з вайны. / Апошнія крыкі асколкі няшчадна / Рубілі навывлет / І наляту. / І куля ўпівалася ў цела як здрада, / Аўтограф аставіла кроў на бінту.”

⁸ “Я ж – парастак люблага краю, / З’яднаны з ім марамі, сэрцам, крывёй, / І ўсё, што ў жыцці сваім добрага маю / З падзякай дарую Айчыне сваёй. / А каб яшчэ лепей з’яднацца з радзімай, / Карэннем глыбокім у ёй прарасту, / О як ганаруся, што клічуць радзіміч, / Што маці сваёю заву Беларусь.”

Anatol did not perceive “ideologically correct” poetry. He ignored and mocked rhyming crackling lines in honour of Lenin, the party, the revolution, and various other communist holidays and events. Even when writing on “passable” topics at the time, for example, about the Great Patriotic War, he understood it through the specific difficult fate of his father, who came from that war. (Bialiacki, 2012, p. 121)⁹

But the number of poems considered “passable” for contemporary Belarusian poetry themes in the early works by Sys is very significant, and these poems are not always individually conceived, thought out and felt.

A characteristic feature of Sys' constant poetry is the almost complete absence of love lyrics, which has been pointed out by many researchers of his works (Štejnier, 2006, pp. 213–214; Halubovič, 2010, p. 17). In Sys' early works, every third verse is dedicated to love, but with the exception of a few four-line poems, all these verses are very banal, close to the style of “cruel romances.”

Here is a typical sample of love lyrics performed by Sys:

The bridges that lie between us are burning.
I do not regret, you do not regret.
And so recently with our own hands
We built these bridges.

Bridges are burning,
And it's too late to put them out.
They burn like candles from the past.
No, wailing and crying won't help
And there's nothing to look for. (Sys, 2016, p. 36)¹⁰

Attempts at landscape poetry look a little better in the collection *Берагі майго юнацтва* [*The Shores of My Youth*], but they also do not stand out against the background of the then mass works of novice poets about autumn, fogs over the river, snow-covered trees, and it becomes clear why there is almost no landscape poetry in Sys' later collections.

⁹ “Анатоль ніяк не ўспрымаў »ідэалагічна правільную« паэзію. Ён грэбаваў і здзекваўся з рыфмаваных траскучых радкоў у гонар Леніна, партыі, рэвалюцыі ды розных іншых камуністычных сьвятаў і падзеяў. Нават пішучы на »прахадных« на той час тэмы, да прыкладу, пра Вялікую Айчынную вайну, ён асэнсоўваў яе праз канкрэтны цяжкі лёс свайго прыйшоўшага з той вайны бацькі.”

¹⁰ “Гараць масты, ляглі што паміж намі. / Я не шкадую, не шкадуеш ты. / А так нядаўна ўласнымі рукамі / Наводзілі мы гэтыя масты. / Гараць масты, / І ўжо тушыць іх позна. / Як свечкі па мінуламу гараць. / Не, не памогучь прычытанні, слёзы / І вінаватых нечага шукаць.”

Siarhei Dubavets in the article *Схема* [*Scheme*] published in 1987 analyzed in detail the then scheme of versification, emphasizing such elements as creative desire to write, although there is nothing to say; lack of spiritual experience and erudition; through themes and forms; rhyme and rhythm as an end in itself; poetic stamps; the pursuit of imaginary beauty; the illusion of ambiguity; speculation on sacred words and realities; manifestations of aesthetic and moral deafness; the inaccuracy of words; Russisms, etc. (Dubavets, 1992, pp. 172–181). As examples, Dubavets quoted lines from the poems by Aleh Loika, Siarhei Paniznik, Yurka Holub, Marian Duksa, Uladzimir Shakhavets, Mikhas Gubernatarau, Viktar Hardei, Mikola Myatlitski, Yauhen Khvalei, Uladzimir Mazho, and Viktar Shnip. Many vivid examples of the poetic “scheme” would have been found by the critic in the first book of Sys *Берагі майго юнацтва*, if it had seen the light of day in the early 1980s, as the author dreamed, sending a manuscript of the book to the Union of Belarusian Writers.

At the end of the article, Siarhei Dubavets summed up: “The task is to ensure that weak versification (and it always has been and will always be) does not change its place in the family album and wall newspaper to a place in the mass press and publishing plans. This is the task of editing” [“Задача ў тым, каб слабое версіфікатарства (а яно заўсёды было і будзе) не змяняла свайго месца ў сямейным альбоме і насценгазеце на месца ў масавым друку і выдавецкіх планах. Гэта задача рэдактуры”] (Dubavets, 1992, pp. 172–181). It seems that Fyodar Yafimav honestly coped with his task, negatively evaluating the manuscript of the young poet from Gomel, and in the future, further creative biography of Sys served him well. However, the task of an experienced reviewer and publishing editor was not difficult, since the submitted manuscript contained not only many stencilled, faceless poems, but also illustrative examples of a poetic defect, authorial deafness, and aesthetic shortcomings. There are a lot of Russisms in the collection, which a professional reviewer could not help but pay attention to: “stupid towers” [тупыя башні], “moon” [луна], “drops” [каплі], “seal” [пячаць], “bedsheet” [прастыня], “habit” [прывычка], “in the sixth platoon” [ў шастым узводзе], “second language” [другая мова], “hard” [крэпка], “killed” [убіў], “wounded” [ўраніла], “raging” [бяснуюцца], and others.¹¹

¹¹ It is quite natural that the collection *Берагі майго юнацтва* [*The Shores of My Youth*] was not published in the early 1980s, but the question arises: was it necessary to publish clearly student poems of the great poet in 2016? The compiler of the collection Ales Bialiatski explains his decision to publish Sys’ early poems as follows: “They fill the »white spot« at the early stage of Anatol Sys’ creative path” (Bialiacki, 2012, p. 119); “[...] without them, it is impossible to understand the ways of developing the talent of the great poet. They add a lot to the understanding of the creative evolution of Anatol Sys, the formation of his poetic style” (2012, p. 116). A similar position was expressed by Siarhei Dubavets, who published in 2018 a facsimile edition of a student notebook with early (school and student) poems by Tatiana Sapach (1962–2010) (Sapač, 2018). Of course, such poems will seem naive and imperfect to the modern reader, but for researchers of Sys and

Ivan Shteiner, a Belarusian literary critic and professor at the Gomel State University, mentions in an article about Sys that “one time Anatol Tsikhanovich reproached me with regret for not being able to appreciate the power of his gift as a student. And he turned out to be right, although I regretted it several times” [“у свой час Анатоль Ціханавіч папракаў са шкадаваньнем, што я ня змог разгледзець сілу ягонага дару ў студэнцкія часы. І ён, як аказваецца меў рацыю, хаця я некалькі разоў каяўся ў гэтым”] (Štejnier, 2006, p. 201). I think Shteiner repented in vain: it is very difficult, in fact impossible, to consider Sys' student poems as a harbinger of future brilliant poems of the period of *Пан Лес* [*Mr. Forest*]. In general, how to notice a few gold grains in tons of empty ore. If someone is able to do it today – only because he has samples of poetic “gold” from the later works of the poet and can purposefully search for grains of the appropriate sample.

The student poems by Sys are impressive not only for their figurative patterns and stylistic flaws but also for the vague, faded image of reality reflected in these poems. It seems that the young poet focused more on the general laws of poetics than on his life experience and his own vision of the world.

In Sys' early work, as well as in his later one, there are many poems about Belarus (but who of the novice poets did not have such poems?), about nature, animals and birds, which the poet calls *родзічамі* [“relatives”], many dedications to other poets (Maksim Bagdanovich, Uladzimir Karatkevich, Ryhor Baradulin, Ales Razanau, Viktor Yarats, Sviatlana Karobkina), there are examples of hidden quotations – the use of other poet's lines in his own work (Bagdanovich, Karatkevich, Razanau), many poems are characterized by plot and drama and dramatism (the influence of the poetics of ballads, especially the ballads of Karatkevich), one of the main themes is poetry and the fate of the poet (autothematism). But there are many more differences, starting with ideological beliefs and worldviews. Convinced Belarusian patriot, the author of the famous lines “Russians have slanting swords, / Russians have Batu's eyes” [“У расейцаў шаблі касыя, / у расейцаў вочы Батыя”] (Sys, 2006b, p. 216), Sys in his early poems admires Russia's victory at Kulikovo field and the character of Russian Tsar Peter I, who sings the great river Volga and calls the city on the Neva his favourite city (the influence of the times and the result of an international school education). One of our most religious poets, in whose later verses Christian motifs and the image of God – the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit – are invariably present, declares in his early verses that he does not believe in God and resents his ancestors: “Rebuke boils from my chest / For my great-grandfather and his grandfather / For making God out of their weakness” [“Дакоп кіпіць з маіх грудзей / На прадзеда

Sapach, for historians of literature, they are valuable material for reproducing the creative evolution of poets, for understanding their intellectual and spiritual pursuits.

і яго дзеда / За то, што з немачы сваёй / Зрабілі бога”] (Sys, 2016, p. 159) (again such influence of the times, atheistic upbringing, and also the poetics of Romanticism with its God-fighting and demonism).

If we talk about creative landmarks and influences, then in the early poems of Sys there is a general influence of Belarusian Soviet poetry of the 1960–1970s (Pimen Panchanka, Maksim Tank, Uladzimir Karatkevich, Ryhor Baradulin, etc.), while still declarative – at the level of admiration, quotes, and dedications – the influence of Ales Razanau’s poetry (a worthy choice for a novice provincial poet) and almost epigonal imitation of Maksim Bagdanovich, which manifested itself not only as a spiritual fascination with the figure of the poet and his works but also at the level of figurative and visual topiary (images of cornflowers, weavers, Madonnas, single poet, etc.) and at the level of composing verse (appeal to “solid” forms of poetry, such as sonnets, triplets; creating a wreath of sonnets *Лірычны маналог душы* [*Lyrical Monologue of the Soul*]).

It should be noted that Maksim Bagdanovich was and remains a favourite poet of the Belarusian youth and orientation to the Bagdanovich tradition is noticeable in the works of many young poets, especially those with a philological education. In student publications, collective collections, debut books of young poets of the 1970s–1980s there are poems about the tragic fate of Bagdanovich, dedications to Bagdanovich, epigraphs from Bagdanovich, images borrowed from *Вянка* [*Wreath of Sonnets*], and Bagdanovich’s favourite forms of poems: sonnet, triplet, octave. Very few of the poets of that time benefited from such a legacy (it seems that only Aleg Minkin was able to organically perceive and even develop Bagdanovich’s tradition of poetry of “pure beauty”), and did special harm to the early Sys. Reading the collection *Берагі майго юнацтва* [*The Shores of My Youth*], it is easy to see that sonnets, triplets, poems with cornflowers and Madonnas are the most banal and faceless in Sys’ early work. Of all the Belarusian classics, Sys respected and loved Bagdanovich as a student, he even wrote a term paper on Bagdanovich’s sonnets (Bialiacki, 2012, p. 119), but the refined poetic manner of Maksim-the Scribe did not correspond to Sys’ spontaneous nature, his bold, daring character and ironic, slightly cynical attitude to reality.

Recalling the first poetic steps of Sys during his studies at the Gomel University, Bialiatski confidently states: “Even then, the youth poems of Anatol Sys fascinated us with their inner energy and identity. It was obvious to us that a great talent was being shaped and honed right next to us” [“Ужо тады юнацкія вершы Анатоля Сыса захаплялі нас сваёй унутранай энергіяй і самабытнасцю. Для нас відавочна было, што побач з намі, на нашых вачах кшталтуецца і шліфуецца вялікі талент”] (Bialiacki, 2012, p. 115). It seems that such confidence has emerged *post factum*, from the height of today.

During his student days, the future author of *Пан Лес* [*Mr. Forest*], in the words of the same Bialiacki, was “purposefully and obsessively engaged in poetry” (Bialiacki, 2012, p. 113), publishing 30–40 poems a year. Yesterday’s villager was determined to become a poet and was inspired to compose verses even when there was nothing to say. In one of the poems of that time, young Sys self-critically confessed:

I’m getting in the rut,
If in the smithy poems
My routine soul forges –
An innocent sinner

I’m getting in the rut
If not the heart –
Rhymes
Sing about loyalty to all native
Aloof and ordinary. (Sys, 2016, p. 156)¹²

Among the students, Sys had the image of a poet, but an eccentric poet, an impostor poet, and his poetic experiences were laughed at by senior students and some teachers, as he “writes anyhow, just to be” [“піша абы як”] (Bialiacki, 2012, p. 137). In Bialiacki’s diary entries from 1984–1985, which are more authentic than later memoirs about Sys, we read:

They usually met at “Крынічцы” (“Spring”).¹³ I remember whether his poems were discussed at the first meeting, and then, to my unfettered taste, the poems seemed to me strange, painful, or something like that... Now I understand: there was a search at the level of his development, ugly and uneven, where some aesthetic criteria have been shifted, but this is a separate speech. I remember a poem about a dolphin killed by a man, whose brains floated on the waves. (Bialiacki, 2012, p. 135)¹⁴

Among Sys’ student poems it is possible to find other examples of works with “shifted aesthetic criteria,” with “dislocated,” “schizoid” lines that could impress the listeners, and be remembered for a long time. Paradoxically, it is these “schizoid”

¹² “Я уваходжу ў каляю, / Калі бы ў кузні вершы / Душой будзённаю кую – / Невінаваты грэшнік / Я уваходжу ў каляю / Калі не сэрца – / Рыфмы / Пра вернасьць роднаму пяюць / Адчужана і звыкла.”

¹³ The name of the university literary association headed by the poet and teacher Viktor Yarats.

¹⁴ “Сустрэкаліся звычайна на »Крынічцы«. Памятаю, ці не на першым паседжэньні абмяркоўвалі яго вершы, і тады, на мой неўмацаваны густ, вершы падаліся мне нейкімі дзіўнымі, хваравітымі, ці што... Зараз я разумею: ішоў пошук на ўзроўні свайго разьвіцця, пачварна няроўнага, дзе некаторыя эстэтычныя крытэрыі былі ссунутыя, але гэта асобная гаворка. Запомніўся верш пра забітага чалавекам дэльфіна, мазгі якога плылі па хвалях.”

texts, rather than the standard poems about war, homeland, nature, village that are the most interesting in the early works of the poet, it is in them you can see the golden grains of poetry, which would later be cast into Sys' poetic beads and crosses.

It is in these “atypical,” “paradoxical” poems that the poet’s peculiar worldview is most clearly manifested and a strange, paradoxical artistic world appears (at least its first manifestations). Allegedly realizing that such poems have no chance of publication, the author forgets about poetic schemes and stereotypes and focuses on expressing his own thoughts and feelings, trying to reflect on paper his intellectual and emotional state.

In 1979, he wrote the poem *Застолле* [*Feast*] (possibly influenced by lectures on ancient literature and the reading of ancient Greek poetry and drama):

A fireball of the blazing sun
 Fell into the thicket of ship pines,
 And I run into the hot sky
 A particle of a great fire.
 In the twentieth century, I dream of unity with the sun.
 Apparently, Aeschylus also dreamed of this
 In the days of the earth and Olympic gods,
 In the years of exile from the Athenian colonnades.
 And I am an exile in an empty field.
 You're dead
 I'm still alive
 Yes, it doesn't matter.
 Let's sit at the feast –
 I'm drinking wine from my blood today,
 For the divine dust and spirit of thy tomb,
 For a useless union forever,
 I know we are destined to be related,
 To become brothers,
 Greek and Belarus. (Sys, 2016, p. 32)¹⁵

Such a work by a novice author had no chance of being published in the Belarusian press at that time, and you can imagine how the students of Philology giggled while listening at the meeting of the literary association “Крынічка” [“Spring”] to the proposal of the eccentric poet to the ancient classic to sit at the

¹⁵ “Агністы шар палаючага сонца / Упаў у гушчу карабельных соснаў, / І я бягу ў гарачы небасхіл / Часцінкаю вялікага пажару. / У дваццаты век пра еднасць з сонцам мару. / Відаць пра гэта марыў і Эсхіл / У часы багоў зямных і алімпійскіх, / У гады выгнання з каланад афінскіх. / І я – выгнаннік у пустое поле. / Ты мёртвы, / Я пакуль жывы, / Ды ўсё роўна. / Сядзем за застолле – / Сягоння п’ём віно з маёй крыві, / За боскі прах і дух тваёй грабніцы, / За бескарысны назаўжды саюз, / Я ведаю, нам суджана зрадніцца, / Каб стаць братамі, / Грэк і Беларус.”

table and drink blood. But for the experts of Sys' later works, *Застолле* [*Feast*] will not cause aesthetic dissonance, the images “an exile in an empty field” and “today we drink wine from my blood” will seem familiar, traditional for Sys' poetics.¹⁶

Among Sys' early poems there are imperfect texts written “anyhow”, with banal images and silly lines, which contain the same (or very close) thoughts, the same feelings as in the poet's later works, which became programmatic and textbook. In the poem ...*Птушкам не дадзена клясцця ў вернасці дому* [...*Birds Are Not Allowed to Swear Fidelity to Home*], we find the following four-line:

People sometimes swear to their Motherland every day,
 People sometimes swear to their Motherland desperately.
 Only Motherland is not some virgin-madonna,
 She is tired of our empty confessions. (Sys, 2016, p. 129)¹⁷

Clumsy rhymes, a dubious antithesis “Motherland – virgin-madonna,” but you can immediately guess the poem *З чаго пачаць?... Пачну з Радзімы* [*Where to Start?... I Will Start with the Motherland*], which opens with the collection *Агмень* [*Hearth*], and which is quoted by almost all researchers of the work of Sys:

Where to start?... I'll start with my Motherland.
 This is how we should start.
 – But you're not the only one,
 Why cry out for love? (Sys, 2006, p. 13)¹⁸

In the early works of the poet, you can find a thematic analogue of the program poem *Пан Лес* [*Mr. Forest*] from the collection under the same title, but what a huge distance – intellectually, spiritually, and artistically – between the educational work of Belarusian literature and the poem *У сасновым лесе* [*In the Pine Forest*], written in 1980! I quote the beginning:

How suddenly the city passes
 In the pine forest
 And the resin smell!
 How unexpected ... – Oh, the fear of discovery! –

¹⁶ One of Sys' later poems is immediately remembered: “I know. / I was lost at cards / by envious poets. / Please, / when you kill, don't suck it out of the wound / my purple poetry” [“Я ведаю. / Я ў карты прагуляны / зайздроснымі паэтамі. / Малю, / калі заб'еце – не смакчыце з раны / барвовую паэзію маю”] (Sys, 2006, p. 324).

¹⁷ “Людзі, бывае, радзіме клянуща штгодзённа, / Людзі, бывае, радзіме клянуща адчайна. / Толькі радзіма не нейкая дзева-мадонна, / Ёй надакучылі нашы пустыя прызнанні.”

¹⁸ “З чаго пачаць?... Пачну з Радзімы. / Так абавязаны пачаць. /– Але ў яе ты не адзіны, / Навошта пра любоў крычаць?”

I enter the mansions of nature,
 Hurriedly tearing the hat from my head.
 And the forest is mute,
 And I become silent,
 I do not understand: who is one of us, who is a tree,
 And like a fish caught in a net –
 My brains. (Sys, 2016, p. 80)¹⁹

Clumsy expressions (“fear of discovery,” “mansions of nature”) and anti-aesthetic images (“brains in the net;” this time, not a dolphin, but a lyrical hero), but a sincere sense of admiration for the forest, sacralization of forest depths, the pantheism of nature hides behind the unfortunate lines. The problem was only to express your thoughts and feelings in an appropriate way, on a decent artistic level, so that your poems were not laughed at, but read, understood, and empathized with. For example, the way he would do it ten years later:

The forest is a temple.
 The Boor will recover in it.
 The forest is a Holy place,
 Mass for lost souls. [...]

Mr Forest won't let you have
 Feelings that harm the Forest.

for you cannot defile the temple,
 for it is impossible to destroy the Holy,
 where then will the Boor come,
 to clear his soul of rudeness? (Sys, 2006, pp. 138–139)²⁰

Probably in 1981, 22-year-old Sys was very upset when he received by mail the manuscript of his collection of poems with a negative review from the Union of Belarusian Writers. Another blow to the ego of the ambitious artist was the participation in the Republican seminar of young Belarusian writers in Karalishchavichy in the autumn of the same year. In Karalishchavichy, the unknown provincial Anatol Sys with his rather banal and sometimes simple poems went

¹⁹ “Як нечакана горад пераходзіць / У лес сасновы / І смаловы пах! / Як нечакана... –
 О адкрыцця страх! – / Я ўваходжу ў хорамы прыроды, / Сарваўшы шапку спешна з галавы. /
 І лес нямы, / І я стаю нямы, / Не разбіру: хто існы з нас, хто дрэва, / І нібы рыба, што папала
 ў невад – / Мае мазгі.”

²⁰ “Лес – гэта храм. / У ім акрыяе Хам. / Лес – гэта святарнае месца, / Для душаў аблудных
 меса. [...] / Пан Лес не дазволіць мець / Пачуццяў, што шкодзяць Лесу. / бо нельга паганіць
 храм, / бо нельга святое нішчыць, / куды ж тады прыйдзе Хам / ад хамства душу ачысціць?”

unnoticed against the background of the other participants of the seminar, mostly older than him: Leanid Galubovich, Uladzimir Arlov, Uladzimir Yakhoudzik, Aleg Minkin, Viktar Shnip and others.

As Viktar Shnip later recalled:

At the seminar, Sys, in addition to poems, had a dozen parodies, which did not make a big impression on anyone. Then there was the time of Leanid Galubovich. And Anatol often sat in his room, which I once saw. Met. Sys read poems and all remembered how the Gomel guys fooled him that in order to be published, you need to write like Schnip. (Šnip, 2001, p. 35)²¹

However, returning from Karalishchavichy, Sys told his friends and acquaintances about his participation in the seminar in a different way: “I was told that I write very boldly. It will be difficult to print anything” [“Мне сказали, вельмі смела пішаш. Цяжка будзе што-небудзь надрукаваць”] (Bialiacki, 2012, p. 138).

The first attempt to “make his way in the world” and declare himself as a poet for the whole country was unsuccessful. Sys graduated from the University, served a year and a half in the Soviet Army in Poland, worked for a year in the Vetka district newspaper, and in 1985 came to Minsk to conquer the capital. With new works written at a higher level and in a different style. He did not show the poems from the collection *Берагі майго юнацтва* [*The Shores of My Youth*] to anyone, did not seek to publish them in the best or worst times for himself, and told his friends that he had burned his early works and advised them to do the same (Bialiacki, 2012, p. 129).

In the manuscript archive of Sys there was a poem *Усявышняяму* [*To the Almighty*], written at night from 9 to 10 January 1980, in which the young poet, a student-Komsomolets turns to God with the following plea:

Replace neon with the sky for me,
 Even if I go blind, I don't mind my eyes
 I'll get used to being blind to the ground
 And I will feel nature with my soul.
 Appoint a day for me
 To be ready
 Replace the old world with a new one.
 Appoint a day for me
 And don't forget
 To come yourself to be the first witness
 At my birth

²¹ “На семінары ў Сыса, акрамя вершаў, з сабой быў нейкі дзесятак пародый, якія вялікага ўражання ні на кога не зрабілі. Тады быў час Леаніда Галубовіча. І Анатоль часцей за ўсё сядзеў у сваім пакойчыку, у які нежак зазірнуў і я. Пазнаёмліся. Сыс чытаў вершы і ўсё ўспамінаў, як гомельскія хлопцы задурылі яму галаву, што, каб друкавацца, трэба пісаць як Шніп.”

And poems

without lies and deliberate falsehoods. (Sys, 2016, p. 119)²²

The motto “to write without lies and falsehoods” would become the most important moral imperative of Sys’ life and work, Christian images and symbols would take a firm place in his poetry, and Sys would tell to his friends that “God gave him the gift of a poet” (Bialiacki, 2012, p. 133). Leanid Galubovich also believed in the calling of Sys’ muse, not by God, but by society: “Anatol Sys is a poet who was thrown out of the bosom of his native nature by another wave of the Belarusian Renaissance in the late 80s. Except for his mother, he is a child of the national Belarusian idea” [“Анатоль Сус – паэт, выкінуты з лона айчынай Прыроды чарговай хваляй беларускага Адраджэння напрыканцы 80-х. Апроч сваёй маці, ён – дзіця нацыянальнай беларускай ідэі”] (Halubovič, 2001, p. 22).

An analysis of Sys’ early works refutes the myth of his genius from birth, of the inborn naturalness of his talent. There is an ideological and artistic abyss between the poet’s early and old poems, and great respect is aroused by the creator, who managed to overcome it in just a few years – with God’s help or through his own efforts and hard work. The creative phenomenon of Anatol Sys is not in his early genius and natural perfection of talent, but in the ability to develop his talent as effectively as possible in a short period of time, form an appropriate worldview and develop a poetic manner, optimal for a restless, arrogant character.

In his work, Sys has evolved from student obedient to the general law of poetics and traditional versification to understanding the tragedy of Belarusian history and modernity, from copying poetic patterns and templates to existential knowledge of reality and its reflection through distinctive artistic images.

Translated into English: Margarita Sviridova

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²² “Замяні мне неон на неба, / Хоць аслепну, ды воч не шкода / Я прывыкну сляпы да глебы / І адчую душой прыроду. / Дзень назнач мне, / Каб быць гатовым / Стары свет замяніць на новы. / Дзень назнач мне, / Ды не забудзься, / Сам прайсці, каб быць сведкам першым / Ў нараджэнні мяне / І вершаў / без ілжы і наўмыснай фальшы.”

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