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### **A Radical Change in the Belavieža Cultural Tradition: The Inventive and Provocative Verse of Viktor Siamasška**

*Przewrót w tradycji kulturowej Białoruskiego Stowarzyszenia Literackiego „Białowieża”:  
innowacyjna i prowokacyjna poezja Wiktara Siamasški*

*Радыкальныя змены ў культурнай традыцыі Беларускага літаратурнага аб'яднання  
„Белавежа”: наватарская і правакацыйная паэзія Віктара Сямашкі*

#### **Abstract**

The poetry of Viktor Siamasška brings a strong and radically new contribution to the literary heritage of the Bielavieža group of Belarusian writers in eastern Poland. His mainly short, even minimalist, verses strike fresh and unconventional notes, rich in wordplay, euphony, anaphora and palindromes in all the themes he tackles, such as family, ageing and death, religion (particularly his Catholic faith), urban and rural life, the latter including many fantastic, personified images; his view of the city is dyspeptic from Moscow to Paris with Miensk in the centre. Musician and journalist as well as avant-garde poet, his five books to date (2010–2023) are both challenging and stimulating. Adventurous in form on the page, their lexical range is broad, not least in the use of non-standard, previously taboo words. A whole study could be made of Siamasška's fantastic imagery and metaphoric structures, but the present study is devoted only to an overall picture of his poetic achievement to date.

**Keywords:** Bielavieža, avantgarde, poetic imagination, transsense poetry, language taboos

#### **Abstrakt**

Poezja Wiktara Siamasški stanowi znaczący i radykalnie nowy wkład w dziedzictwo literackie Białoruskiego Stowarzyszenia Literackiego „Białowieża”. Krótkie, wręcz minimalistyczne wiersze poety uderzają niebanalnymi i niekonwencjonalnymi środkami językowymi,

takimi jak gra słów, eufonia, anafora czy palindrom. Równie imponująco prezentuje się tematyka poezji Siamaszki: od problematyki rodzinnej, poprzez starzenie się i śmierć, religię (szczególnie wiarę katolicką), aż po życie w mieście i na wsi, od Moskwy po Paryż, z Mińskiem jako centrum wszechświata. Pięć wydanych dotąd (w latach 2010–2023) książek tego muzyka i dziennikarza, a także poety awangardowego dla odbiorcy stanowi zarówno wyzwanie, jak i inspirację głównie ze względu na szatę językową: odważnym operowaniem nowatorskim słownictwem oraz przełamywaniem językowego tabu. Wyobraźnia poetycka oraz metaforyka Siamaszki wymagają szerszego opracowania, niniejszy artykuł został poświęcony jedynie ogólnej prezentacji twórczości poetyckiej tego zasługującego na uwagę poety.

**Słowa kluczowe:** „Białowieża”, język Awangardy, wyobraźnia poetycka, poezja transcendentna, tabu językowe

### Анатацыя

Паэзія Віктара Сямашкі ўносіць прыкметны і радыкальна новы ўклад у літаратурную спадчыну Беларускага літаратурнага аб'яднання „Белавежа” ва ўсходняй Польшчы. Кароткія, нават мінімалістычныя вершы паэта ўражваюць арыгінальнымі і нетрадыцыйнымі моўнымі сродкамі, такімі як гульня слоў, эўфанія, анафара і паліндром. Не менш уражае і тэматычны дыяпазон паэзіі Сямашкі: ад сямейных праблем праз старэнне і смерць, рэлігію (асабліва каталіцкую) да жыцця ў горадзе і ў вёсцы, ад Масквы да Парыжа, з Мінскам як цэнтрам сусвету. Пяць кніг паэта-авангардыста, музыканта і журналіста, апублікаваныя дагэтуль (у 2010–2023 гг.), уяўляюць сабой выклік, але таксама натхненне для чытача, дзякуючы іх непаўторнай мове і аўтарскаму стылю: смеламу выкарыстанню наватарскай лексікі і парушэнню моўных табу. Фантастычная вобразнасць і метафарычныя канструкцыі Сямашкі заслугоўваюць асобнага глыбокага даследавання; даны артыкул дае толькі агульнае ўяўленне пра творчасць гэтага знакамітага паэта, пра яго важнейшыя дасягненні на сённяшні дзень.

**Ключавыя словы:** „Белавежа”, авангард, паэтычнае ўяўленне, трансцэндэнтальная паэзія, моўныя табу

### *In memory of Jan Čykvín (1940–2022)*

At a time when both leaders of literary Bielavieža, Sakrat Janovič (1936-2013) and Jan Čykvín, are with us only in spirit, it is a great pleasure to find a Belarusian poet, albeit born in Miensk, of real quality to follow their sterling work with original poetry that is completely different from theirs and who is one of the most avant-garde poets in Belarus or, indeed, Eastern Europe as a whole. Whether, however, this term is still appropriate so long after the group at the Viciebsk Art School (1919–22) founded by Kazimir Malievič (1878–1935) or, indeed, James Joyce's *Finnegan's Wake* (1939), may be questioned by some; the question of appellations will be considered in due course. The variety and quality of Viktor Siamasška's distinctly original poetry is beyond question.

Born in 1980, he is certainly a complex poet as well as a talented musician<sup>1</sup> and journalist<sup>2</sup>. What follows is an attempt to assess his first five books of verse, all of them at times challenging as well as rewarding: *Maryja S.* (2010), *Re–Ra* (2011), *Habitacyja* (the name of a village near Budslaŭ, 2013), *Romb* (Rhombus, 2018) and *Aŭtar maje racyju zaŭždy* (The author is always reasonable, 2023)<sup>3</sup>. Mostly brief and with only occasional rhymes, his poems are consistently remarkable for a plethora of imagery and wordplay, euphony, anaphora and palindromes, and in content often prone to trans-sense or even nonsense. In an interview about his 2023 book the author suggests that such poems should, rather than conveying ‘normal’ meaning, recall free jazz (Anon, 2023, 1ff) Thematically these books cover a range of subjects, including his family, ageing and death, his Catholic faith, urban and rural life, including many nature lyrics, criticism of the deplorable state of official Belarus, and a keen erotic sense occasionally linked to the above-mentioned themes; the themes of ageing and death, despite Siamaška’s manifest energy, occur not infrequently throughout his work. Most religions lay stress on the afterlife, and the present writer chose the poet’s strong religious faith as the focus for his first tentative approach to his work (McMillin, 2015b, pp. 23–29).

The poet does not care for the appellation or, less politely, label of avant-garde as such (and considers that it has become a tradition itself), and feels little sympathy for postmodernism, preferring to be simply known for individual, original innovation. He is, however, undoubtedly a modernist with a strong individual voice, albeit looking back centuries to the history of palindromes, in which Simiaon Polacki (1629–1680) had been a Belarusian pioneer, calling them ‘Cancer’. Siamaška sees himself a follower of this national tradition (Anon, 2023, pp. 2–5).

Before turning to a review of some of the poet’s main themes, namely family, followed by death, faith and other topics, it is worth considering palindromes that are not always as immediately evident as, for example, euphony and anaphora. At the present time this device is particularly associated with the name of another poet, Viktor Źybuŭ (b. 1978), of whom Michaś Skobla in his anthology suggests that many suspected he had found a particular computer application facilitating this form of versification (Skobla, 2003, p. 853). Also relevant to the question of applying labels to writers, may be mentioned the term used in a book about Źybuŭ: *postavanhardyzm* (post-avant-gardism) (Skarapanava, 2018). Some of Siamaška’s palindromes are plain to see, like the titles ‘Jon-Noj’ (Sâmaška, 2018, p. 6), ‘SUM MUS’ (Sâmaška, 2018, p. 40), and ‘Son u nos’ (A dream into my nose) (Sâmaška, 2011, p. 46), although ‘rak ikar’ from ‘Račynyja śpievy’ (Crayfish ditties) (Sâmaška, 2023, p. 70) means ‘crayfish Icarus’ and not, as the present writer had at first supposed, ‘skin

<sup>1</sup> He is, amongst other things, the leader of a modern jazz group, ‘Fantastic Swimmers’.

<sup>2</sup> Head presenter for the Białystok station, ‘Radio Racyja’.

<sup>3</sup> There is an interesting anonymous interview with the author about this book, its ironical title and, not least, its musical and artistic genre: Anon, 2023.

cancer'<sup>4</sup>. The initially enigmatic cycle title 'Malapananapalam' (Sâmaška, 2023, p. 69) is spelled out in the same verse, 'Račnyja śpievy', under the heading BRAK (MARRIAGE), 'mala pana napalam' (with the possible meaning of: too little for a man to share) (Sâmaška, 2023, p. 70). Before leaving the question of specific forms, it may be worth mentioning the haiku, although this poet only seems to have produced one; since this Japanese form (in Belarusian *hoku*) attracted many Belarusian poets in the late 20<sup>th</sup> century, perhaps on account of its deceptively simple nature, although few troubled with the 5-7-5 syllable rule, just concentrating on conveying a particular mood<sup>5</sup>. Sîamaška also does not adhere to the rules of the genre, but, as always, shows an original approach:

жабка скок  
з каменя ў ставок  
віра майна (Sâmaška, 2023, p. 25)<sup>6</sup>.

The verses about the poet's family are varied in form, as may be seen from three examples that follow, *Radavod* (The history of my family), *Eju – aje*, and a poem in memory of his grandmother, *Ўы цяпер – паўза ў размові, babulia Janina...* (Now you are a pause in the conversation, Granny Janina..., 10.08.05):

*Радавод*

дачку назвалі ў гонар бабулі  
бабулю цяпер клічуць па бацьку  
ва ўнуку праявіўся дзед

маці з тагам  
зматаліся ў вяровіцу  
у дуба камель (Sâmaška, 2018, p. 13)<sup>7</sup>.

*Эю – ае*

на каленях па сыне  
жонка абдымае за плечы

<sup>4</sup> I am grateful for the communication of 4 January 2023 from the author on this subject.

<sup>5</sup> Valerija Kustava (b. 1984) comes closer to the genre than many (Kustava, 2004, pp. 82-84).

<sup>6</sup> 'the toad leaped / from a stone into a little pond / up and down'.

Incidentally in *Na прыпынку* (At the stop) he contemplates entering Heaven as a toad (Sâmaška, 2011, p. 70).

<sup>7</sup> 'The history of my family // our daughter was named after granny / granny is now addressed formally / a granddad has appeared for our grandson / mother and father rushed off for a rope / to attach to the butt of an oak'.

я – гара  
гару й грэю-  
эю-эю...

і сыны ў адказ  
і жонка, як ЦЭЦ і ГЭС

суцяшае й церпіць,  
гладзіць і ўзвышае-  
ае-ае... (Sâmaška, 2018, p. 115)<sup>8</sup>.

The third of these poems on his family is the simplest and most touching:

Вы цяпер – паўза ў размове,  
бабуля Яніна  
цяжкія ўздыхі  
ветру  
й кроплі  
з ацекшага неба

ад Вас лячу  
празь Дзвіну,  
праз дарогі  
між палеглых бярэзін  
з затоеным у сэрцы  
непаўторным мінулым (10.08.05) (Sâmaška, 2010, p. 3)<sup>9</sup>.

Turning to the subject of death, the poet's description of celebrating wakes after a funeral takes contrasting forms: for example, 'pa-za niabožčyкам zastajecca...' (after the deceased there remains...) predicts nothing but pain and calls for the survivors to look after each other (Sâmaška, 2010, p. 8). In *Son* (A dream), however, he sees people laughing and joking at wakes (Sâmaška, 2010, p. 59). For this poet dreams, incidentally, are no joking matter, more often they are sinister, with potentially dangerous consequences, as we read in 'son – heta ryzyka...' (dreaming is a risk...):

<sup>8</sup> 'on her knees before each son / my wife embraces them round the shoulders // I am a mountain and I warm, rm-rm // and the sons in reply / and my wife like a TsETs (an enterprise that produces electrical and thermal energy) and a GES (a hydro-electric station) // consoles and patiently, / strokes them and raising her voice says, ...ing-ing...'

<sup>9</sup> 'You are now a pause in conversation / granny Janina / the heavy sighs of the wind / and drops / from the guttering sky // I fly from you / over the Dvina / across roads / between fallen birch trees / with hidden in my heart the unrepeatable past'.

сон – гэта рызыка не прачнуцца  
 фізіка пачуцьцяў  
 .....  
 сплю,  
 трымаючы сябе за бараду  
 мой цень на тым беразе  
 пасьвіцца (Sâmaška, 2013, p. 75)<sup>10</sup>.

The titles of several other verses give a clear indication of the poet's awareness of the shortness of life<sup>11</sup>, and his interest in life after death, of which an early one, *Pamior* (I died), is unusual in that it begins at night, but when morning comes everything is so bright that it seems that he has passed away (Sâmaška, 2010, p. 54). The opening line of *Pieradapošni* (The last but one) 'памерлі ўсе хто мог...' (everyone that could had died...) seems apocalyptic, although it continues with the modest expectation that he will live for at least another two decades; it may recall the poem by Dmitry Prigov (1940–2007), *Tritsatsat'sed'maia azbuka (Pokhoronnaia)* (The thirty-seventh alphabet [Funereal]) of which most lines begin 'все вымерли' (all have died out) (Prigov, 1995, pp. 68–73). Three more examples of Sâmaška's poems about mortality deserve mention: *Dziady* (Grandparents) is the most fanciful but the other two show a more personal attitude towards death:

#### Дзяды

...а што, калі нашыя бацькі не памерлі,  
 насамерэч схаваліся ад нас  
 і жывуць сваім жыцьцём?

не пазнаюць нас на вуліцы,  
 але мы пазнаем

забыліся на нас,  
 а мы не... (Sâmaška, 2023, p. 43)<sup>12</sup>.

The other two verses are equally touching: *kali skanaju...* (when I expire...) and *kali pamru – nie treba ślioz...* (when I die – there is no need for tears):

<sup>10</sup> 'dreaming is a risk / of not awakening / the physics of feelings // I sleep / holding onto my beard / my shade on the other bank is grazing'.

<sup>11</sup> Two poems from *Romb* illustrate his feelings on this subject: *Cudy pryrody* (The wonders of nature) and *d/b* (Sâmaška, 2018, pp. 21 and 29).

<sup>12</sup> 'Grandparents // ... and what if your parents had not died / but in reality had hidden themselves from us / and are living their own lives? // they do not recognize us in the street, / but we recognize them // they have forgotten about us / but we have not forgotten them...'

калі сканаю,  
адразу й не зразумею  
можа  
ўжо? (Sâmaška, 2013, p. 73)<sup>13</sup>.

калі памру – не трэба сьлѣз,  
бо сьмерць – жыцьця апатэоз (Sâmaška, 2011, p. 30)<sup>14</sup>.

Equally pithy is the following exchange:

– ці буду я пасья сьмерці?  
– будзеш, але не ты (Sâmaška, 2023, p. 32)<sup>15</sup>.

The opening lines of *Muta* (Turbulence) are intensely depressing:

сорамна паказвацца  
перад людзьмі  
за некалькі дзён да скону (Sâmaška, 2018, p. 56)<sup>16</sup>.

Finally, here is *Zachlyn* (Emptiness), a quatrain of grim domesticity:

Імбрык паставіў –  
І скончыўся  
  
той сьвішча ў захлын,  
а зьняць няма каму (Sâmaška, 2013, p. 29)<sup>17</sup>.

Before leaving death itself, it is worth noting some of this poet's responses to the equally universal phenomenon of decline and ageing, as well as the gap between different generations. The process of degeneration and lack of time is well described in an early verse, *Chada* (Movement), of which this is the first half:

Толькі па дрэвах  
Па тварах чужых  
Адчуваю хаду  
Мінулае падаецца бліжэй, чым раней

<sup>13</sup> 'If I perish, / I shall not immediately understand / whether it can be so /already'.

<sup>14</sup> 'when I die, there is no need for tears / for death is the apotheosis of life'.

<sup>15</sup> 'will I exist after death? / you will exist, but it won't be you'.

<sup>16</sup> 'it is shameful to show oneself / before people / a few days before dying'.

<sup>17</sup> 'I put on the kettle – / and died // it whistled into the emptiness / but there was nobody to take it off'.

такім жа сучасным

выключаецца паціху  
апарат за апаратам  
толькі таймэры  
сьлепяць вочы  
быццам засталася няшмат часу

будыніны-снобы  
ў плямінах вечаровых  
з кірпатымі насамі  
з вузлом рук на грудзёх  
у плямінах  
няшмат часу

Паступова ахоплены вакуўмам (Sâmaška, 2010, pp. 12–13)<sup>18</sup>.

In *Nekroz* (Necrosis) there are many comparisons between the life of young and older people, some of the life roles interchanging between the two age groups. In the longest stanza, towards the end of the poem, the first two lines appear to apply to the elderly and the remaining to the upcoming generation (described with disgust), while the poem fades away as the poet seems to decide that such comparisons are worthless:

...цела з гадамі моршчыцца  
ад навакольнага хараства  
рот закнуты бургерам,  
вушы плэерам,  
вочы маніторам  
і годнасьць у надзейным кулаку

аднак  
назіраньне зьмяняе  
аб'ект і суб'ект

пачынаю думаць

<sup>18</sup> 'Only on trees / on the faces of others / Do I feel movement / The past seems nearer than previously / equally contemporary // quietly devices / switch themselves off / only the timers / blind the eyes // as if there was not much time left // arrogant buildings / in evening patches / with snub noses / with a bundle of hands on their breast / in patches // there is not much time // Gradually enveloped in a vacuum'.

што й ня варта  
пачынаць ду... (Sâmaška, 2012, p. 119)<sup>19</sup>.

Another poem about mental decline, *Ž dźvie tysiačy šostym!* (From the year 2006!), begins with quasi-palindromic bilingual wordplay, but ends with a cheerful stoicism and no regrets. Here are the beginning and the end of it:

Год – hot-dog

Рыба – чэлес

Празрыстыя пальцы ног

Промні з твару –

гэта штодзённа й

зразумела

натуральна – не заўсёды правільна  
бывае на карысць, калі рацыянальна

мазгоў клямбачка ў кветках

ля ганку

[...]

а сам памру ўвесь сівы  
без успамінаў і спадзяванняў  
памру проста ў дадзены на тое дзень

які ёсьць

ні пра што не шкадуючы (Sâmaška, 2010, p. 25)<sup>20</sup>.

In *S/T* (Gardening club) he writes ironically of elderly people gaining a feeling of immortality and building themselves dachas, led into this sin by various tempters, for

<sup>19</sup> ‘... with the years the body wrinkles / from the beauty all around / the mouth is stuffed with a burger, ears with a player, eyes with a monitor, and honour lies in a trusty fist // observation, however, changes / the object and the subject // I begin to think / that it is really not worthwhile / I begin to thi...’.

<sup>20</sup> ‘The year is a hot-dog // A fish is a penis // My transparent toes // Lines on my face - / this is daily and understood // naturally it is not always truly beneficial, when rationally // there is a little flowerbed with my brains near the porch [...] I myself will die quite grey / without memories and hopes / I shall die simply on the appointed day // as it is // not regretting anything’.

questions of life and death are for God alone. Here are the first five and the last two lines:

з узростам прыходзіць адчуванне  
ўласнае неўміручасці:  
дзядзькі, якім пад 70,  
будуюць сабе новыя лецішчы

*толькі Бог мае рацыю*

[...]

Звыкліся са страхам сьмерці  
будуюць сабе новыя лецішчы (Sâmaška, 2018, p. 73)<sup>21</sup>.

It would probably be too remote to go from death to what the French call *la petite mort* but, be that as it may, the next of Siamaška's subjects to be considered here is that of love, beginning with its unhappiest form – unrequited passion, which occurs in this poet's work as a literary theme not infrequently. There follow four examples: *Miriam, in memoriam, stoma I slota...* (weariness and sleet...), *ad toje da hetaje Paschi...* (From the last to this Easter...) and *Anakreontyka* (Anacreontic). The first of these is a particularly desperate poem, and the other laments, though no less heartfelt, are varied in form and emphasis. First, the bitter memorial:

*Miriam in memoriam*

ня чуў твайго голасу гады паўтары  
на сьвята званіў у Дзень Панны –

адказала нейкая дзеўчынка:  
цябе няма, ня будзе й заўтра  
мо' праз паўгода ці год

хацеў засьведчыць пачуцьці  
марныя (Sâmaška, 2023, p. 27)<sup>22</sup>.

<sup>21</sup> 'with age comes the feeling / of personal immortality / old boys who are already nearly 70, / are building themselves new dachas // *only God has the right* [...] they have got used to fear of death, / and build themselves new dachas'.

<sup>22</sup> 'I have not heard your voice for a year and a half / and rang you on the Day of the Virgin Mary // some young girl answered: you do not exist, she will not be here tomorrow either / perhaps in six months or a year // I want to bear witness to my feelings, which are desperately miserable'.

The poet's feelings that he has missed his chances may, for English readers at least, recall the celebrated advice to young girls in 1648 from Robert Herrick (1591–1674) (*mutatis mutandis*), 'Gather ye rosebuds while ye may [...] tomorrow will be dying' (Herrick, 2013, I, p. 80).

For all the anguish in Siamaška's poems quoted above, there are also descriptions of straightforward affection in his work. After all, his first book has *Maryja S.* as its title, and it contains many verses directly or indirectly devoted to her. For example, *Da Maryja (To Maryja)* expresses longing for his beloved, characteristically ending the verse with lines close to some that had come earlier in it (Sâmaška, 2010, p. 75). Four examples of his distinctive love lyrics follow, beginning with a blissfully happy romantic poem, *tvoj vobraz...* (your image...):

твой вобраз  
пачынаець чытацца –

рухі, абрысы  
разам зь імгненнем фарбамі  
й няўлоўнымі пахамі ў такт

ты йдзеш са мной поруч  
мы прачынаемся  
ў нашым ложку

твая пяшчота перапапаўняе сусьвет,  
тваё чыстае цёплае зьяньне (Sâmaška, 2013, p. 44)<sup>23</sup>.

The next two examples of this poet's amorous verses seem more unusual. *Nia Jezus* (Not Jesus) is both passionate and humorous:

праз манаства ты не станеш сьвятой, Марыя  
і сьвятасьць ня можа быць мэтаю

мы павінны быць разам  
у нашым выпадку

толькі каханьне між намі  
наблізіць нас яшчэ бліжэй

да Пана Бога

<sup>23</sup> 'your image / is beginning to be read // movements, contours / together with momentary colours / and elusive rhythmical smells // you go hand in hand with me / we awaken / in our bed // your caresses fill the whole universe, / your pure warm glow'.

мы ўжо адно, Марыя  
ты ня хочаш сабе ў тым прызнацца,  
але гэта так

Я КАХАЮ ЦЯБЕ –

вось мой доказ  
усе мае тлумачэньні

ня можа быць інакш, Марыя  
у цябе няма плянаў і намераў

ТЫ КАХАЕШ МЯНЕ,

Марыя

Хоць я далёка ня Езус (Sâmaška, 2010, p. 79)<sup>24</sup>.

The very title of *Klopät* (Concern) might be surprising, although the tone of this short verse is truly affectionate:

кроплі зары ў лесе  
на напарацах  
пад вываратнем

адчуваю твой пах і клопат,  
родная  
нават тут (Sâmaška, 2013, p. 54)<sup>25</sup>.

Finally on the topic of love may be mentioned a poem in eighteen parts written in *Lacinka* (Roman script), *ad mora da* (From the sea to), which concludes Siamiaška's most recent book. From the middle of no. 9 is the following rather erotic picture of love on a beach:

...ty lažyš bielaja I doŭhaja  
ŭ piasku, pieramiešanym z šyškami  
čuju mora ŭ tvaim žyvacie

<sup>24</sup> 'you will not become a saint through a convent, Maryja / and saintliness cannot be an aim // we should be together / in our case // only the love between us / brings us even closer // to the Lord God / we are already as one, Maryja / you do not want to admit this to yourself, / but it is so // I LOVE YOU // that is my proof / all of my explanations // it cannot be otherwise, Maryja / you have no plans and intentions // YOU LOVE ME, Maryja / although I am far from being Jesus'.

<sup>25</sup> 'there are drops of dawn in the forest / on the ferns / under the evergreen tree / I feel your scent and concern, / my dearest / even here'.

nosam ryju tvaje dziuny  
jahady ssu na kupinach  
šukaju vadu pa pachu  
pa radzimekach... (Sâmaška, 2023, p. 95)<sup>26</sup>.

Readers startled by the comparison of a penis to a fish earlier, or, indeed, to the smell of vaginas in the description of two women in an all-night café (Non-stop),<sup>27</sup> should not be surprised to find a bird compared to a young girl's breast in *Sitaŭka* (The wagtail)<sup>28</sup> or to read of his lover's breasts described as dunes. Here is the valedictory final part of this strange work:

...horła poŭnaje moram  
mora jdzie nosam  
pruhki vietraž  
skoŭvaje namaraž  
što bylo j što budzie jość zaraz  
toje, što tam, toje ž i tut –

mała miejsca dla słowa (Sâmaška, 2023, p. 97)<sup>29</sup>.

Whatever the anguish of unrequited love or the occasionally erotic nature of his descriptions of happier relationships, absolutely nothing is as strong as the poet's love of God, which is evidenced in many of his works. Four lines from an early poem *Akrylieny* (Winged) offer a clear statement of his beliefs, the last word presumably referring to dissatisfaction with worldly ideas:

...касьцёл узмацняе віну й пазбаўляе страху  
дае супакой і моц  
цярпеньне й рашучасьць  
любоў і нязгodu... (Sâmaška, 2010, p. 6)<sup>30</sup>.

The second stanza of *Razumieju*... (I understand...) could hardly be more explicit:

<sup>26</sup> '...you lie white and long / in sand mixed with fir cones / I hear the sea in your stomach / I bury my nose in your dunes / I suck the berries on the bushes / I seek water by scent / amongst your birthmarks...'.  
<sup>27</sup> Sâmaška, 2013, p. 49.

<sup>28</sup> Sâmaška, 2013, p. 58.

<sup>29</sup> '...my throat is full of the sea / the sea goes up my nose / a springy sail / a hoar-frost binds / what was and what will be now / the same there as here // there is no more space for words'.

<sup>30</sup> '...the church strengthens duty and frees from fear / gives peace and strength / patience and decisiveness / love and disagreement...'.  

---

...разумею цяпер,  
чаго мне баяцца?  
Я ж каталік... (Sâmaška, 2010, p. 78)<sup>31</sup>.

*Hluzdy* (Brains) draws a clear distinction between intellect and faith (Sâmaška, 2011, pp. 59–60), and the following poem, *NIE!* (NO!), states emphatically what prayer should and should not be:

*HE!*  
лепей займацца верай,  
маліцца моўчкі  
й бязглузда  
малітва – ня значыць „кажы”  
малітва – гэта, каб слухаць (Sâmaška, 2011, p. 61)<sup>32</sup>

In *Praca-Vita* pious humility concludes with something not unakin to ‘muscular Christianity’:

за добрае дзякуй Богу  
у благім вінаваць сябе  
  
нашыя імёны  
ня маюць ніякага  
дачыненьня да сутнасці  
  
лянота стамляе  
праца бадзёрыць  
  
мала часу ў гульця  
перад працавітым – вечнасьць (Sâmaška, 2018, p. 5)<sup>33</sup>.

The poem, *Zloje* (Bad deeds), doubtless consciously, echoes in demotic language part of the Lord’s Prayer:

памятаю злое,  
што рабілі мне

<sup>31</sup> ‘...I now understand / what do I have to fear? / I am after all a Catholic...’.

<sup>32</sup> ‘NO! / it is better to concern yourself with belief, / pray silently / and not intellectually / a prayer does not mean ‘tell’ / a prayer is for listening’.

<sup>33</sup> ‘for what is good thank God / blame yourself for the bad // our names / have not the least / relationship to reality // laziness wearies / work enlivens / the idler has little time / before the hard worker there stretches eternity’.

і злое,  
што рабіў я

іншых прабачаю інгненна  
сябе не прабачу ніколі (Sâmaška, 2010, p. 57)<sup>34</sup>.

Far less didactic, though equally passionate, is *Adzinaje* (The One), a prayer that is a major statement of faith, in which the poet abases himself as a blind criminal and backward lunatic, with God his only belief and love (Sâmaška, 2013, pp. 11–13). It may be mentioned in passing that the poet's attitude to religion can be not only devout, but also humorous as in *Jak stać miestačkojcam?* (How should one live in a small town?), in which he suggests visiting different churches on different days of the week, but, in addition to attending in turn the Catholic, Orthodox, Uniate, Old Believer, and Lutheran churches, the mosque and a pagan temple, one should visit the synagogue every day (Sâmaška, 2023, p. 40). Another humorous poem with a religious background is *Dyjaryuš Franciŝkanca* (Diary of a Franciscan monk), which is divided into five short sections: the day before yesterday, yesterday, today, tomorrow and the day after tomorrow. Two excerpts from the first section and three from the last will give a flavour of these rather worldly reflections:

зла няма,  
ёсьць нецярплівасьць<sup>35</sup>

за такіх людзей трэба маліцца  
прытым блізка не падпускаць<sup>36</sup> (Sâmaška, 2023, p. 44).

[...]  
грахі паступова праходзяць,  
нібыта хвароба<sup>37</sup>

набліжаемся да чагосьці велічнага  
хутка лопне шкарлупка вечнасьці<sup>38</sup> (Sâmaška, 2023, p. 48).

A rather surrealistic week is described in *Tydzień* (The week), although Sunday is reassuringly familiar:

<sup>34</sup> 'I remember the bad deeds / that have been done to me / and the bad deeds that I have committed // other people I forgive instantly / myself I never forgive'.

<sup>35</sup> 'there is no evil / there is impatience'.

<sup>36</sup> 'you must pray for such people, // at the same time do not let them come too close'.

<sup>37</sup> 'sins gradually pass, / like an illness'.

<sup>38</sup> 'we are approaching an immense event / soon the shell of eternity will burst open'.

штодзень як тыдзень  
аўторкам серады ёсьць панядзелак /  
субоце пятніцу чацьвер /  
нядзеля – Бога дзеля (Sâmaška, 2023, p. 77)<sup>39</sup>.

The self-criticism, already seen in *Adzinaje*, is far from rare in the work of this talented writer. A mild example is *Niepatrebnaść* (Uselessness) in which he describes a pleasant dream of his worthlessness, as is evident in the first half of the poem:

засынаю з прыемнай думкай  
пра ўласную непатрэбнасць –

чужы для тых,  
што мне падабаецца  
чужы для блізкіх і родных  
чужы для сваёй рэлігіі

дурны  
самому сябе незразумелы  
кахаю прыдуманья вобразы

гаварыць няма аб чым  
невядома, як бавіць час... (Sâmaška, 2010, p. 49)<sup>40</sup>.

In *Ziamlia* (The earth) the poet seems to take his imagined inadequacies for granted and certainly not as a reason for dismay, as his spirit is nonetheless capable of great deeds and moral strength without distractions like intellectual thoughts and doubts (as in *Hluzdy* mentioned above). The first part of the poem states his position, after a rather startling opening line:

павер, ты нікому непатрэбны  
ні сябрам, ні родным  
чужым тым больш  
гэта так

<sup>39</sup> ‘every day is like a week / to Tuesdays Wednesdays are Monday / to Saturday Friday is Thursday / Sunday is for the sake of God’.

The (apparently otiose) forward slashes at the ends of lines (usually only used for indication of line breaks in translations) also occur in a few other of Sîamaška’s poems.

<sup>40</sup> ‘I fall asleep with a pleasant thought / about my own uselessness - // useless for those / whom I like / alien to my nearest and dearest / alien to my religion // stupid / incomprehensible to myself / I love imaginary images // there is nothing to say / I don’t know how to pass the time...’.

прымі гэта, як дадзенае,  
не як прычыну для журбы й смутку

твая непатрэбнасць –  
твой супакой  
і твая воля  
нагода для вялікіх здзяйсненняў... (Sâmaška, 2010, p. 74)<sup>41</sup>.

In *Aйтаспын* (Hitchhiking), however, he feels that the more he tries to approach the Lord the weaker he becomes. He has not the strength to serve Him, and he decides that it is time to stop. He leaves the church feeling himself the worst scumbag (*hnida*) in order to go on his way (Sâmaška, 2013, p. 22). Even less temperate language is found in *Dulia* (A rude gesture):

няма росту  
няма прагрэсу

маем віраваньне  
па арбіце праўды

ёсьць неабходныя хібы  
ёсьць сонечны зайчык  
ёсьць зьяньне

няма геамэтрыі  
ёсьць серада  
ёсьць акіян і пена

сьвет – пена  
я – хвігня (Sâmaška, 2023, p. 23)<sup>42</sup>.

The relationship between madness and saintliness (at least in the popular mind) is the subject of a simple verse *Sacyjamanija* (Social mania):

вар'ят ня лічыць сябе вар'ятам  
сьвяты ня лічыць сябе сьвятым

<sup>41</sup> 'believe that you are no use to anybody / not your friends, nor your family // even more you are useless to strangers / that is how it is / take it as a given, not as a reason for sadness or embarrassment // your uselessness – is your peace, your will / a cause for great actions...).

<sup>42</sup> 'there is no growth / there is no progress // we have turbulence / on the orbit of truth // there are inevitable errors / there is a sunny bunny / there is a shining // there is no geometry / there is Wednesday / there is the ocean and foam // the world is foam / I am just a shit (*chvihnia*)?.

проста людзі лічаць сьвятых вар'тамі,  
а вар'ятаў уводзяць у ранг сьвятых (Sîmaška, 2023, p. 73)<sup>43</sup>.

More surprisingly, while enjoying the natural world in *Padanki* (Fallen fruit), where after chewing the fruit like a machine, in the last stanza he hears sounds that deeply disturb him:

чую  
паданьні птушак  
казаньні травы  
і не трымаю розум (Sîmaška, 2023, p. 70)<sup>44</sup>.

Sîmaška has written many poems about nature and particularly trees, the full moon, wind and rain (all frequently personified). Before turning to the destruction of the countryside, here is a fine example of the poet's ability to appreciate his natural surroundings and his reactions to them, *Asińnik* (The aspen grove):

вёска схавалася разам з ракой  
у зморшчыне краявіду  
дым ці туман стужкай  
злучае поле й сад за дарогай  
  
...пацяклі вокны  
сьлізгоча трава  
асьцярожныя крокі  
хавае асіньнік  
Прайшло два тыдні.  
праз белую завесу  
жаўцее лес  
жалуды й каштаны  
адчуваюць падэшвы  
залева бясконца гамоніць  
поўнай шматлікасьцю галасоў  
ураджай кропляў на галінах  
з даху гірлянды слоў  
  
гліны глыбокія ўдыхі

<sup>43</sup> A madman does not consider himself a madman / a saint does not consider himself a saint // it is simply that people consider saints madmen, / and bring madmen into the rank of saints'.

<sup>44</sup> 'I hear / the falling of birds / the chattering of the grass / and I cannot keep my wits'.

пагынаюць твой тэкст (Sâmaška, 2011, pp. 40–41)<sup>45</sup>.

A more jokey verse is *Tuman i poŭnia* (Mist and the full moon), in which the personified Mr Mist and his female consort make love before taking the trolleybus home (Sâmaška, 2013, p. 23), but the poet's reverence for the natural world is well evidenced by the following four short poems. In the first, *Pavieŭstka* (Agenda), the description of nature and seasons is far from the mildly humorous formality of the title:

па-першае  
вечер уверсе, вецер у вещьці  
ўсьпеньвае дрэвы  
сьвышча ў печкі піпку

па-другое  
туман  
зь зямлі  
струменямі  
бруіцца

па-трэцяе:  
кастрычнік  
праступае скрозь верасень  
рабізнай (Sâmaška, 2023, p. 28)<sup>46</sup>.

Another poem with one of this poet's favourite themes from nature is *Dzie viecier* (Where the wind blows):

вечер  
недзе  
  
чуваць  
ледзьве

<sup>45</sup> 'the village hid together with the river / in a wrinkle of the landscape / smoke or mist in a ribbon / joins the field and garden across the road // ...the windows dripped / the grass became slippery / cautious steps / are hidden by the aspen grove // Two weeks passed. / through the white curtain / the forest shows yellow / acorns and chestnuts / feel our footsteps / to the left there is a constant conversation / with a full chorus of different voices / a harvest of drops is on the branches / there are garlands of words from the roof // the deep sighs of the clay / swallow your text'.

<sup>46</sup> 'first, / the wind up above, the wind the branches / makes the trees froth / whistles in the pipe of the little stove // secondly, / mist comes up in streams from the earth // thirdly, / October appears through September / in ripples'.

дзьме ў макаўку лесу  
моршчыць крыніцы роўнадзь...  
закальхаліся яліны побач  
у пакоры нахілілася трава

вечер ужо мые нам твар  
разьдзімае лёгкія

яго подых  
яго дотык

скрозь  
скроні

да

сьлэз (Sâmaška, 2011, pp. 51–53)<sup>47</sup>.

Another, quite different, but still very original example of his nature poetry is *ziamlia jašče pachnie čaboram...* (the earth still smells of thyme...):

зямля яшчэ пахне чаборам  
галіны здольныя зьняць пот  
а травы гладзяць пяты

прыціскаюся да цябе, зямля,  
не адпускай!

.....  
заходняе Сонца

рве на кавалкі аблокі

вугольлем гарыць скрозь гальлё

воскам шаруе яблыкі (Sâmaška, 2013, p. 69)<sup>48</sup>

Finally, the natural world is presented in a completely unexpected, indeed fantastic, way in *zachad zapaľvaje...* (the west lights up...):

<sup>47</sup> ‘the wind / somewhere / can be barely heard / it blows in the tops / of the forest / it wrinkles the smooth surface of the spring... // the fir trees nearby start to swing / the grass bends obediently // the wind is already washing our face / expanding our lungs // its breath / its touch // through / our foreheads // until / we cry’.

<sup>48</sup> ‘the earth still smells of thyme / the branches are able to remove sweat, / and heels smooth the grass. // I press myself on you, earth. / don’t let me go! // ..... // the Sun in the west / tears the clouds to pieces // it burns like coal through the branches / like wax, it cleans the apples’.

захад запальвае  
лямпачкі ў кватэрах

– дамы-актопусы на вочы багатых  
прыпынкі для гіпапатамусаў  
знакі для бронзавых насарогаў  
правады для камароў.  
што сьлізгаюць  
сьпінамі ўніз (Sâmaška, 2010, p. 30)<sup>49</sup>.

Unconventional as the above nature poems may be, Sîamaška's feeling for this world is unmistakable, not least when it is destroyed, as in *Praz traktarny* (Across tractor tracks) where the industrialized land, broken by railway lines like a slow chain, has become a refuge for alcoholics and the homeless. The end of the poem, which follows, is sadly valedictory:

... ліхтары на слупах  
нагадваюць пра дрэвы колішнія –  
усё для нічога,  
тут іншае неба  
дождж змывае іржу  
з вагонных шыбаў (Sâmaška, 2018, p. 11)<sup>50</sup>.

Later in the same book he writes gloomily about the inhabitants of the Belarusian capital in *Minaki* (Minskians) suggesting that not only is the city ugly, but its citizens are superstitious and with a criminal mentality (Sîamaška, 2018, pp. 89–90). In *Pružany* (a town in western Belarus) he uses a quasi-biblical phrase that may refer to an earlier comparison in *Vialikaja ryba* (The big fish)<sup>51</sup> of the city to a serpent: *Менск, дзе тваё джала?* (Miensk, where is thy sting?) (Sîamaška, 2018, p. 87).

There are very many highly critical literary works about Lukašenka (see McMillin, 2016) and Sîamaška's contribution to this rich harvest of well-deserved abuse, *Dyk* (After all) does not fall behind in content:

дыктатар –  
хакею амагар,  
азадкаў лапар

<sup>49</sup> 'the West lights up / the lamps in the flats // the octopus houses rich in eyes / are resting places for bronze rhinoceroses / the wires are for the mosquitoes / which slip off, / onto their backs'.

<sup>50</sup> 'lamps on their posts / recall the trees that once were – / all this for nothing / here there is a different sky / rain washes the rust off / the windows of the carriages'.

<sup>51</sup> See Sîamaška, 2010, p. 63.

дыктатар-кастрат  
дыктуе трактак  
пра трактар

ну, дык, што, дыктатар –  
народ, які ўчора быў за,  
сёння дае тату дыхту?

калі мы разам,  
адзін з нас – ты,  
дзірагент і правадзірак (Sâmaška, 2013, p. 14)<sup>52</sup>.

Some examples of how the city has been turned into a battleground following falsified elections and other abuses will follow shortly, after a few images reflecting the poet's view of Moscow, which he compares to a kind of Las Vegas with cars crawling like snails through filth; nonetheless he prefers this Babylon to the Palmyra of the North, finding more friendliness, although at the end he checks his passport, money and ticket home (Sâmaška, 2011, pp. 22–23). Far more negative is the picture of the Russian capital in *Azijackaja brama* (A gate to Asia). Here is the beginning of the poem before he goes on to a picture of anger as an illusion of survival, longing for theft, and savagery and chaos:

...А шмат хто яшчэ  
працягвае жыць у Савецкім Саюзе:

лічаць Маскву <столицей нашэй родины>  
расейцы называюць <нашим>,  
Беларусь <Белоруссией> –

цётка таўчэ ботамі ваніты  
скрываўлены чалавек прыціснуўся  
да вентыляцыі  
бамжы з сабакамі –  
вось ваша Масква... (Sâmaška, 2010, p. 41)<sup>53</sup>.

<sup>52</sup> 'dictator - / fan of ice hockey / fondler of bums // the castrate-dictator / dictates a treatise on a tractor // well , dictator / how is it that the people who yesterday were for you / now curse daddy? // if we are together, / one of us – you, / are the conductor and little leader'.

<sup>53</sup> '...And many people still / continue to live in the Soviet Union: // they consider Moscow „the capital of our native land”, / they call it „ours” / Belarus as Belorussia – // an old woman pushes vomit aside with her boot / a bleeding man squeezes up to a ventilator // homeless people with dogs – that is your Moscow...’.

His view of Paris by contrast, although not flattering, is at least more human: in *Varšaŭska – Parižskija natatki* (Warsaw – Paris notes) he compares the French capital to the underwear of a drunk but very lively middle-aged woman (Sâmaška, 2010, p. 34).

Before illustrating attitudes to Lukašenka and his actions, a brief digression on use of language provides a brief introduction to the subject. In *Biely šum* (White noise) (Sâmaška, 2018, p. 7) the poet refers to his ‘phallogocentric brain’ and references to or comparisons with phalluses and other sexual parts, as has been mentioned, appear here and there in his work, most strikingly in the heading of a section of his most recent book, *Čerap i čelies* (Skull and penis) (Sâmaška, 2023, p. 52). In another poem, however, he says ‘u halavie – tabu’ (in my head there is a taboo) (Sâmaška, 2013, p. 58). Even in the present age of political correctness, readers are rarely shocked, but a few decades ago many Belarusian poets used ellipses rather than rude words (notable exceptions being Maryja Martysievič (b. 1982) and Anatoł Ivaščanka (b. 1981)), although not a few poets thought nothing of using English words instead (see McMillin 2015a), despite being warned of the inherent dangers of such a practice by the short-lived Dzianis Chvastoŭski (1976–2001) in *U soliezdabytnuju šachtu...* (Into a salt mine...) (Chvastoŭski, 2006, p. 96).

Naturally, several Belarusian poets regard the present Belarusian leader and the state to which he has reduced his country as a provocation to all sorts of abusive vocabulary. Siamaška is as disgusted as many of his fellow countrymen, wherever they live, and his poems on this subject are quite as original as those he has written on many other themes. First, a brief sardonic verse reflecting the Soviet mentality that Lukašenka (not to mention Putin) seems to live in:

я – апарат савецкае вытворчасці  
без кулака па кумпале  
не запрацую ды ня ўцямялю (Sâmaška, 2018, p. 84)<sup>54</sup>.

On a similar theme is a longer poem, *Bliaknot rabkora* (The notebook of a working correspondent), which due to the semi-literate nature of the writing is regrettably untranslatable. Amongst the many dreams in this poet’s works (ranging from images of death to love making), one of the most memorable of all is the highly political *Son* (The dream), which is unusual in being given a specific date (9–10 April 2011):

Увесь горад нібы на ваенным становішчы,  
але мінакі кажуць, што гэта ня так: аб’явілі  
выходныя папярэдне на тыдзень. У цэнтры  
няма аўтамабіляў, шмат людзей, мала хто хоча  
сядзець дома, шмат міліцыянтаў у цывільным

<sup>54</sup> ‘I am a result of Soviet production / without a fist on my skull / I shall neither earn nor understand’.

– прызнаюцца, што <не жадаюць разам з  
маскалямі ваяваць>...

Я вярнуўся сюды ў аўторак. І ня ведаю, што  
здарылася ў панядзелак.

Тым болей, што будзе ў сераду (Sâmaška, 2023, p. 90)<sup>55</sup>.

An inside view of the situation is given in *Indyvid* (An individual), which describes the different generations in the security forces:

людзі ў форме прадалі свой зьмест  
і гвалтам змушаюць штацкіх

шэрагі строяў  
шоргат новых  
шкарпэтак і гальштукаў...

<старлею> лягчэй падмануць, бо ён <дзед>  
<дух>, скажы мане <не> (Sâmaška, 2023, p. 89)<sup>56</sup>.

Just before ending this review of the poet's views and experiences of his native country, it may be worth mentioning a mostly trans-sense poem *Nihm* (A star) in which he seems to speak of his country in an extremely disrespectful way as 'Jeblarus', and its inhabitants as 'My, jeblarusy' (Sîamaška, 2013, p. 33).

A final and particularly strong example of his commentaries on the repression of civil protests is *Na marmury* (On marble) in which the simple anaphora emphasizes the feeling of dread:

ці то лужына вады  
ці то лужына крыві  
ці то цень  
ці то цень чалавека  
ці то...

пляцы блішчаць патыліцамі

<sup>55</sup> 'The whole city is as if in under martial law, / but the population of Miensk say that that is not the case: they had announced / a week's holiday in advance. In the centre / there are no cars, there are many people, as few want / to stay at home, there are many militia men in mufti – / they admit that <they do not want / to fight with the Russkies>... // I returned here on Tuesday, and I do not know what / happened on Monday. / Moreover, I shall return on Wednesday'.

<sup>56</sup> 'people in uniform have sold their purpose / and suppress civilians with violence // rows of orderly lines / the rustling of new / socks and ties... // it is easier to deceive a <senior lieutenant>, for he is a <lifer> / <the spirit>, say 'No' to lies'.

завадатар выступае абвінаваўцам

хто ляжа спаць – наўрад ці ўстане (Sâmaška, 2023, p. 90)<sup>57</sup>.

In contrast to the grim mood of these examples, the poet's sense of humour, already evinced in some of the poems cited earlier, deserves further illustration. The verse *Faršasklad* (A store of stuffing) makes use of repetition, anaphora and euphony:

гукі ў нотах  
гукі ў літарах  
гукі ў ліках  
гукі ў лічбах

ноты ў літрах  
ноты ў тонах  
нотаў пюпітры  
ў мэраў і мэтраў

лікі палічым  
пралікі й страты  
клікі мышыныя  
поклічы кількі

лічбы – лыч бы  
лічбы – ды вам бы  
лічбы бы німбы  
лічбы ў палічцы

літары – лідэры  
лідэры – підары  
клітары аўтараў  
літарасратары

лірыкі-клеркі  
крытыкі фаршу  
клірыкі фальшу  
ваш фарс-фініш! (Sâmaška, 2011, pp. 72–74)<sup>58</sup>.

<sup>57</sup> 'is it pool of water / is it a pool of blood / is it a shadow / is it the shadow of a person / is it... // the squares shine with the back of people's skulls / the instigator steps up as the prosecutor / whoever lies down to sleep – is not likely to get up'.

<sup>58</sup> 'sounds in musical scores / sounds in letters / sounds in faces / sounds in numbers // scores in litres / scores in tons / desks of scores / of measures and metres // let us count the numbers / the miscalculations and losses / the squeaking of mice / sprat calls // numbers should go into an ugly

A witty rhyming couplet returns to the question of sleep:

сум не сасьспеў,  
бо сон прысьпеў (Sâmaška, 2018, p. 74)<sup>59</sup>.

*Maršoiŭka* (A crazy party) has, as well as much assonantal word play, a delightful macaronic and anachronistic epigraph from one of the most famous lines in Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar* 'Et tu, Brute', which in the Belarusian's version is *Netto Brutto* (Net Gross) (Sâmaška, 2023, p. 34).

Finally, a curious semi-nonsense poem, *0<*, about time, ends without finishing the last word, a phenomenon already noted in some of the poems cited:

едзем дзе?  
будзем дзе?  
выпадзем?  
зойдзем за?  
  
які дзень будзе?  
хто пабудзіць  
якая дата?  
хто вінаваты?  
  
ці ёсьць нейкая розьніца? –  
XXI-ае хутка скончыцца,  
так і не па... (Sâmaška, 2023, p. 9)<sup>60</sup>.

Sâmaška's verse consists mainly of short poems, but one of his most recent and, in his own view, most important works is a kind of narrative, *Paema M* (Poem M), with (to the present writer) many incomprehensible subtitles. The M refers to the (Miensk) metro and the *paema* is an impressionistic and imaginative picture of all aspects (especially sounds) of the system, combining realistic and fantastic features in what he has called 'a hyperbolic metaphor'; some of the photographs that illustrate his latest book were taken in one of the stations in the metro. It begins with teenagers fooling about on the trains and ends with an announcement that the train will go no further and a request for passengers to leave their carriage. For the poet an important event behind

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mug / you should have them / numbers are like nimbus clouds / numbers on the shelf // letters are leaders / leaders are pederasts / the clitorises of authors / shitters of letters // lyric poets are clerks / critics of stuffing / clerics of falsehood / this is the end of your farce!'

<sup>59</sup> 'sadness was too late, / because sleep came on time'.

<sup>60</sup> 'where are we travelling? / where will we be? / shall we fall out? / shall we call for something? // what day will it be? Who will wake us up? / what is the date? / who is to blame? // is there any difference? // the 21st century will soon come to an end, / and it just won't begi...'

this work was the explosion at Kastryčnickaja station in April 2011 even though (at the time of writing in 2009–10) it was still in the future, like the repressions of 2009–10, although by the time the book came out there had been a considerable number of extremely cruel happenings on the streets of Miensk and other Belarusian cities. The book's publication was delayed because of its apparent relevance to current events.

Unsurprisingly for this poet, there are occasional references to spirituality and the Church (Sâmaška, 2023, pp. 49–55). Underground systems have quite a rich cultural heritage in European film and literature, albeit without so-called terrorist attacks, one classic movie being *Zazie dans le metro* (1960)<sup>61</sup>, and particularly relevant to what Siamaška calls the mantras is the title of Moscow-born writer Zinovy Zinik (b. 1945)'s collection of long short stories, *Mind the Doors* (Zinik, 2001) where the experiences of London are epitomised by this announcement. Also notable is the humorously referential title of Kiryla Anochin's book, *Aščiarožna drevy začyniajucca* (Take care, the trees are closing up) (Anochin, 2013).

Viktar Siamaška, who uses the traditional (Taraškievica) orthography in all his books, even when his poems are semantically far from conventional, no doubt is as dismayed as most intelligent Belarusians are by the widespread use of *trasianka* (a mixture of Belarusian and Russian) in everyday life. Thus, when he gives Polish and Belarusian titles to the various sections in VARŠ/TATY (FATHER'S STUDIO)<sup>62</sup> in what seem to be prose poems in a mixture of Belarusian and Russian, divided up (not for the first time) by forward slashes (Sâmaška, 2023, pp. 78–81), his mixing of languages is done by conscious decision, just it was in the deliberate *trasianka* of the groundbreaking book by Jaryla Pšaničny (1973–2015) (Pšaničny, 2011)<sup>63</sup>.

It may seem illogical to end a survey of Viktar Siamaška's five books with a verse from the first of them, even if one recalls that barely a dozen years separate the first and last of the poems in them. *Praktykavaŭni* (Practicing) shows much of, by no means unfamiliar, trans-sense, but ends with four lines that seem not only relevant to the poet but also to the present writer, as well as doubtless some other readers:

смакі й пахі  
смыкі й птахі  
цмокі й чмокі  
стрэхі й страхі  
рэха гарэха  
хвасолі соль

ціш ды сmentarz

<sup>61</sup> The film, directed by Louis Malle was based on a story of the same name by Raymond Queneau.

<sup>62</sup> I am grateful to the poet for the confirmation that the poem's title refers to his own father's studio.

<sup>63</sup> In the poem to be discussed next it will be noticed that there is (quite exceptionally) a Polish word in the 7<sup>th</sup> line.

кволая воля  
валоў валіць валам  
шчырае цела  
цяляці  
    меці маці  
    й не меці маці

чапляе – не чапляе  
галоўны крытэр  
гвалтоўны памер  
манэўры жаўнера  
супрэматызм

не чапляе

ад Сонца вочы растаюць  
набываюць пэўную манатоннасць

пішу, бо не хачу  
губляць сувязь

ня ведаю,  
што адчуваю

больш адчуваю,  
чым ведаю (Sîmaška, 2010, p. 48)<sup>64</sup>.

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As the above examples of Viktor Sîmaška's poetry should have shown, he is a truly new voice not only in eastern Poland's Bielavieža but also in metropolitan Belarus and, indeed, in all Slavic literature. Offering a mixture of touching pathos and usually euphonic trans-sense, extreme experiments and a keen awareness of his surroundings, he combines a strong religious sense with a robust sense of humour and a disregard for linguistical taboos and lexical norms. Such an original and strong talent deserves a wide audience.

<sup>64</sup> 'tastes and smells / string bows and birds / serpents and kisses / roofs and fears / the echo of a nut / boasting and salt // quietness and a cemetery / weak will / the billows pour down in a rush / the sincere body / the calf / to have a mother / and not to have a mother / it clings on – does not cling on / the main criterion / violent development / a soldier's manoeuvres / suprematism // my eyes melt from the Sun / they get a certain monotony / wateriness... - // I write for I do not want / to lose the connexion // I do not know what I feel / I feel more than I know'.

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<sup>65</sup> This book was published at a time of fierce protests about the Belarusian dictatorial regime, so that the publishers did not give their names for fear of reprisals: message from the author on 13.12.2022.

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