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Piety and passion: the lyrics of Valiancina Aksak'

Pobożność i pasja: poezja Walancyny Aksak

Набожнасць і захапленне: лірыка Валянціны Аксак

Abstract

Valiancina Aksak's gentle yet mysteriously strong lyrics cover a wide range of topics including the Church and Christian belief, Belarusian identity, and indignation at the betrayal of national values, wine, music, flowers and the language itself, which she handles with a very individual mastery. Much of her verse is subtle and understated, although she is also capable of very clear descriptions of people and places and the various qualities and effects of wine. A highly musical poet, she also makes several references to classical music, and her verses about family, both children and parents are very touching indeed. She is a poet whose work deserves to be better known.

Keywords: Belarusian poetry, the Church, sensuality, national identity and language, flowers, wine, music

Abstrakt

Subtelne, ale jednocześnie tajemnicze i ekspresywne teksty Valancyny Aksak obejmują szeroki zakres tematów, w tym aspekty chrześcijańskie (Kościół i wiara), kwestie związane z tożsamością białoruską, gorzkie refleksje dotyczące zdrady wartości narodowych, wino, muzyka, kwiaty, a także sam język, którym poetka operuje z właściwym sobie mistrzostwem. Wiersze Aksak są finezyjne i refleksyjne, jak również realistyczne: poetka opisuje w nich ludzi i miejsca, a także ulubiony trunek: wino. Poezja Aksak często opiera się na efektach muzycznych, odwołuje się do muzyki klasycznej. Jej twórczość, zwłaszcza poświęcona rodzinie (zarówno dzieciom, jak i rodzicom) jest bardzo wzruszająca. Jest poetką, której twórczość zasługuje na lepsze poznanie.

Słowa kluczowe: poezja białoruska, Kościół, zmysłowość, tożsamość narodowa i język, kwiaty, wino, muzyka

Анатацыя

Далікатныя, але адначасова таямнічыя і экспрэсіўныя тэксты Валянціны Аксак ахопліваюць шырокі тэматычны спектр: Царква і хрысціянская вера, беларуская ідэнтычнасць і абурэнне здрадай нацыянальным каштоўнасцям, віно, музыка, кветкі, і нарэшце сама мова, якой паэтка валодае па-майстэрску. Вершы Аксак пэўныя рэфлексіі і вытанчаныя, хаця ў той жа час рэалістычныя: яна здольная вельмі дакладна апісваць людзей і месцы, а таксама розныя якасці і гатункі віна. Паэзія Аксак часта насычана музычнымі эфектамі, сустрэкаюцца і непасрэдныя алюзіі да класічнай музыкі. Вельмі кранальныя яе вершы пра сям'ю, пра ўзаемаадносіны дзяцей і бацькоў. Творчасць гэтай паэтки бяспрэчна вартая дакладнага вывучэння.

Ключавыя словы: беларуская паэзія, Царква, пачуццёвасць, нацыянальная ідэнтычнасць і мова, кветкі, віно, музыка

Aksak's romantic, sometimes mysterious, sometimes very physical lyric poetry is always musical, and notable for its fine sensitivity. It is for the most part gentle and whimsical, with vividly original imagery as well as much unobtrusive assonance. Her first book was in essentially rhymed verse, but already in her second and subsequent collections the poems are unrhymed and often with lines of uneven length. Freightened with meaning, despite its apparent simplicity, Aksak's verse is also thematically rich. Amongst the topics which run throughout the seven books under review are the Church, belief and unbelief, religion, the Bible, Belarusian identity and culture, a strong sense of place, notably Polacak, the river Dźvina, Vılńia and Smo-ličy, wine, music, flowers, sex, the ineluctable passing of time, night, sleep and dreams, ageing and death, loneliness, travel and, far from least, the Belarusian language.

Language is, of course, vital for any writer, and Valiancina Aksak has been praised by the leading poet of her age, Ryhor Baradulin (1935–2014), as the fearless tamer of her native language, as well as describing her as a sorceress from Niašviž.¹ Perhaps he had in mind the repetitions of words and lines in some of her poems that occasionally give the impression of an incantation. Moreover, the description seems to be endorsed by the poet herself in several poems where she appears to call herself a witch, such as *Vidma* (*Witch*, Aksak, 1992, p. 24), *Užo siabrouka...* (*Already my friend...*, Aksak, 2003, p. 54), *Sprečka* (*Quarrel*, Aksak, 2008, p. 19), 96–97, *albo Dva navahodnija*

¹ On the back cover of her fourth collection, *Vino z Kalifornii* (2003). The word sorceress (*valch-vica*) used by Baradulin is the title of the first poem in her third book, *Antyčny doždž* (1999), and refers to a mythical Belarusian figure connected with fire.

*vieršy daŭniejšamu siabru (96–97, or Two new-year poems for a longstanding friend, Aksak, 1999, pp. 93–94), and Zavinieny raj (A heaven of wine and guilt, Aksak, 2017, pp. 18–19), for example. More central to the poet's work, however, is indeed language, which she uses with great freedom, bringing into her poems dialectal and historical (sometimes obsolete) words as well as neologisms, many of which are not to be found in modern Belarusian dictionaries.² Baradulin himself, of course, provided a glossary of words from his native dialect (Baradulin, 2002, pp. 373–498), but it would not be fair to expect the same from less prolific poets. In one poem, *Inšamoŭny (The speaker of another language)* she refers to her verses as written for someone (her husband?) alone, but despite her efforts he cannot understand it, studying patiently the language in grammar books that she does not possess (Aksak, 2003, p. 46). In another poem *Znaki pryrynku (Punctuation marks)* the poet is caught in a snow storm and, on arriving home, discovers that the snow has entered her language, and that all the eponymous marks have been thrown into chaos (Aksak, 2017, pp. 88–89). Language is also related to questions of belief and, particularly, identity. In two related verses, *Niaviera (Unbelief)* and *Viera (Belief)* from her first collection it seems to play a central role. Here is the second of the pair:*

Вера

І ты, які не ўмее гаварыць,
І я, якая прамаўляць баюся,
Дух нашых словаў прымушаем жыць
У нашым неахрышчаным хаўрусе (Aksak, 1992, p. 84)³.

The language must, of course, be Belarusian, and a sad little poem, *Rospač (Despair)* describes the poet's sorrow that at her father's funeral the priest delivered his sermon in a language that the deceased did not use (Aksak, 2015, p. 27). In another poem, *Varšaŭski akcent (The Warsaw accent)* her dreams are stirred by the local rhythm of speech, but when she casually enters a hall in the Writers' Building where Polish poet Tadeusz Rózewicz was due to recite his verse but refused, she wonders if she might have been the cause on account of the language of her thoughts:

...Няўжо адчувае,
пра што ў гэтай залі,
выпадковая,
думаю я

² Two examples of Aksak's word creations are the one in the title of her latest book, *Zavinieny raj*, which incorporates both the sense of *vino* (wine) and *vina* (guilt). From the same book, *varholy* is a humorous combination of *var* (boiling water) and *holy* (empty), implying worthless food.

³ „Belief // And you, who do not know how to speak, / And I who am afraid to utter, / We make the spirit of our words live / In our pagan society”.

ім забытаю
мовай Статуты! (Aksak, 2003, p. 11)⁴.

A sense of place is ubiquitous in Aksak's verse, and two striking poems describe the sense of loss of a city dear to all Belarusians, and of a town she hates but must visit: In *Sustreča (Meeting)* the poet describes being in Viłnia at a time of celebrating that city and Navahrudak (now in Belarus), leading her to beg for strength to bear the loss of Viłnia to the Lithuanian state (Aksak, 1992, p. 85). Grimmer is *Kudy? (Whither?)* in which she describes her husband's departure for a place that he enjoys but she loathes, and which she forces herself to like, although the consequences are dire:

..Сёння –
атрымалася.
Але куды ад сэрца
адлучылася душа? (Aksak, 2015, p. 41)⁵.

Religion and the Church are central themes in Aksak's first two books of poetry, as their titles imply: *Cvintar (Country church yard)* and *Kaplica (Chapel)*. In later books her attitude seems less strictly pious and her references to the scriptures more often apocryphal, although faith remains an important part of her life. God for her is a very personal one, and He is portrayed, sometimes with humour, as a friend or as the recipient of the poet's penitence – she is, after all, by her own reckoning, something of a witch. Her fate of being sent to heaven or hell is depicted in one early untitled poem as being in the hands of God as a divine customs officer:

На мытні Госпад ціха запытае: з якога скарбу твай пасар?
І выправіць –
туды, дзе д'яблаў зграя,
ці возьме ўверх –
пад собскі дах (Aksak, 1994, p. 81)⁶.

A similar question is found in a later verse, *Kali ja pryjdu da Ciabie... (When I come to Thee...)*, but this time the poet's sins (a not infrequent theme) are very much to the fore, and she can only see a witch:

...У грэх зноў цяжкі

⁴ „Does he feel, / what in this hall, / I, a casual visitor, / am thinking about / in the language / forgotten by him / of the Statute [of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania – A.M.]?”

⁵ „Today / I succeeded. / But whither from my heart / has my soul broken off?”

⁶ „At the customs the Lord quietly asks: / of what treasure is your dowry? / And he will send you – / to where there is a gang of devils, / or he will take you upwards – / to under his own roof”. In a short untitled poem, *Vino... (Wine...)* the image of a customs officer recurs but here as wine that demands dues, with payment only the next day.

ўпадаю:
з-пад промняў славы яго
свае аглядваю далі –
там відму адно відно (Aksak, 1999, p. 50)⁷.

It is worth mentioning that Belarusian and other pagan gods also have a part to play in the poet's spiritual, emotional and also, at times, physical (sexual) life. The name of the sun god Jaryla is sometimes used to stand for the sun itself, and his 'copper image' appears around a mountain in an early poem, *Kaliadnaja ranica* (*Christmas morning*, Aksak 1992, p. 89), whilst in *Jaryla*, for instance, the eponymous god meets her as she is going to an ancient church, and asks why she is bringing resentment (*kryūda*) there, suggesting a number of more positive thoughts, taken by other Belarusians, such as joy, the desire to have children and to be active (Aksak, 2003, p. 55). Another poem, in seven short parts, is *Chvalašpievy Žyžaliu* (*Songs of praise to Žyžal'*), devoted to the Slav god of fire, who also plays a considerable role in Belarusian folklore. The poet hopes that his light will dispel the darkness of loneliness (*morak samoty*). In the last part she reflects humorously on the purpose of the huge stoves and tiled chimneys in rural houses, concluding as follows:

...думаю,
рабілі гэтак
дзеля раўнавагі
паміж гарызантальным цэлам
ды вэртыкальнай душой (Aksak, 1999, pp. 127–129)⁸.

Thoughts of death appear frequently in Aksak's verse, and in *Troški niejkaje cišy...* (*A little of a certain quiet...*), seeing a slightly withered rose on a gravestone, she wonders who lies under it. Could it be she? (Aksak, 1999, pp. 57–58). In *Nie maju prava pamierci...* (*I do not have the right to die...*, Aksak, 1999, p. 126) she says that she has no right to die since she has not built a church for her death. There are several strong poems about the deaths of her father and mother, both on 22 February (the mother precisely nine years before her father who died in 2016). Rather than citing some of her more anguished poems, including *Pieršaja* (*The first one*, Aksak, 2015, p. 26) in which she feels herself the next to go after her father's death, I should like to adduce another short verse, *Zmiena žanru* (*A change of genre*), which describes the phenomenon of death with the poet's characteristic conciseness of expression:

⁷ „Again I fall into a heavy / sin / beyond the rays of his glory / I look over my prospects – / and there I only see a witch”.

⁸ „I think, they did it in that way / for equilibrium / between the horizontal body / and the vertical soul”.

Змена жанру

Смерць

гэта калі кіно

ператвараецца

ў фатаграфію (Aksak, 2015, p. 78)⁹.

The Uniate faith, particularly widespread in Belarus and Ukraine, is featured in *Uspamin pra Uniju (Memory of the Union)*, in which she lists the many members of her extended family, and today prays for them and all her Orthodox predecessors, that God will give them peace in remembering their eternal Uniate souls (Aksak, 2017, p. 41). The second to last poem in the same book is *Apošniaja spoviedź ajcu Aliksandru Nadsanu (A last confession to Fr Alexander Nadson [dated 15 April 2015])*, saying that her first word of repentance was to him, and that during her confession she mentioned that she wrote poetry, thinking this might also be something to confess, when he suddenly exclaimed, „O, kali b ja ūmieŭ skladać vieršy!..” (Oh, if only I could compose poetry!..). This was a great relief to her, but when a quarter of a century later she had not been able to come to London again to confess, she could only pray silently for the Father, Son and Holy Ghost. And for His Spirit (Aksak, 2017, p. 110). Confession, of course, requires sin, and Aksak writes implicitly and explicitly about her real or imaginary guilt, both in the early poems and also in some later ones. In *Zvanki tvaje kryčali: budź bahiniaj... (Your bells cried, ‘be a goddess...’)* the poet experiences temptation which soon goes to the other extreme:

Званкі твае крычалі: будзь багінняй,
Царыцай будзь паміж усіх жанчын!
А рукі выштукоўвалі рабыню
На ўзор антычнай бессаромнасці карцін.

У рабстве тым тваім я думала: загіну
Ды раптам на шляху стаў іншы валадар.
З мяне ён вылепіў сапраўдную багіню,
Пры гэтым не забыў, што сам – і бог, і цар (Aksak, 1992, p. 50)¹⁰.

Two poems bear the title *Hrech (Sin)*: in the earliest of them she uses colours to depict her moral state (Aksak, 1992, p. 50), whilst in the later one, she describes herself vividly as a penitent:

⁹ „A change of genre // Death / is when cinema / turns into / a photograph”.

¹⁰ „Your bells cried, ‘Be a goddess. / Be a tsarina amongst all women!’ / But hands made a slave girl / on the pattern of pictures of ancient shamelessness. // I thought I would perish in that slavery of yours, / But suddenly on my path there stood another ruler. / From me he fashioned a real goddess, / At the same time not forgetting that he was himself both a god and tsar”.

Грэх

Пабітым сабачкам

стаю

ля Твайго

парога.

Літасць

Твая

Бязмежная.

Неабсяжны

мой грэх (Aksak, 2015, 84)¹¹.

In *Biassońnica (Insomnia)* the poet feels awkward when listening to the swallows in intimate conversations under the roof, and wonders whether they listen to the exclamations of her emotionally exhausted close guest. Her consolation is that the new moon, a silent witness to her sins, voluntary and involuntary, will not spread word of her nocturnal secrets in the morning (Aksak, 2008, p. 9).

Valiancina Aksak's works do not necessarily change radically from book to book in a thematic or technical sense, but the title of the poet's third collection, *Antyčny doždž (Ancient Rain, 1999)* does imply that pagan gods and other figures of antiquity will be featured, even when, for example, in *Reŭnaść (Jealousy)*, the poet finds herself in a bed made by rivals, biblical Oz and pagan Veles, between a rose and a knife, leading her to appeal to her own God to give her strength (Aksak, 1999, p. 37). Among themes prominent in this third book are mythical figures and contexts into which the poet has no difficulty in introducing herself naturally. Three such poems are *Syrynha (Syrinx)*, *Sapfo (Sapfo)* and *Danaja (Danaë, Aksak, 1999, pp. 10–16)*. Wine appears in various contexts, one of the most interesting being its association with inspiration; see, for instance, *Niespatolia (Long and strong thirst)* and *Sumoŭje (Shared expression)*: in the first poem, as a means of averting dreaded autumn, and in the second drinking is shown as a means of avoiding the falseness of words in favour of silent companionship (Aksak, 1999, pp. 34–35). There are several more references to wine in *Antyčny doždž*, amongst the most striking being *Mielanchaličny vaĺs (A melancholy waltz, Aksak, 1999, pp. 31–32)*. In this poem, after drops of cabernet have fallen into her glass matched by crimson leaves from a maple tree, the poet is led to the Shakespearian combination of lust and long-awaited madness, as the following lines from the middle of the poem show:

...і нават

прыкмеціць у поглядзе

ўвесь час пагардлівым

¹¹ „Sin // Like a beaten dog / I stand / near Your / threshold. /Your / Mercy/ is unlimited. / My sin / is unbounded”.

разгарваньне

юру

і доўгачаканага шалу... (Aksak, 1999, p. 31)¹².

Wine is also an element in the poet's later work, not only as part of the basis of the neologism in the title of Aksak's most recent book (see n. 2) but also directly in the title of her fourth collection, *Vino z Kalifornii* (*Wine from California*, 2003); the eponymous poem of which is set in the rather unromantic setting of a train from Prague to Miensk during which she enjoys some fine wine, whilst fellow-passengers quarrel about potatoes. Thinking of young maples in her beloved Smoličy, she feels, as the journey continues towards Miensk, that she is coming from nowhere (Aksak, 2003, p. 27). Wine seems to be closely related to her personal feelings in *Vysach vinahrad* (*The vine has withered*), where she says that her husband has drunk the ancient drink from her soul and that now she has no more little barrels with bunches of grapes to fill it up with (Aksak, 2003, p. 29). The following related poem *Vino, vino...* (*Wine, wine...*) expresses concisely a comparable problem:

Віно, віно,

тваё віно

ў мяне ня ўлецца больш

выратавальным успамінам (Aksak, 2003, 30)¹³.

More physical aspects of relationships are described in *Adslaniusia...* (*I lean aside...*) and particularly *Paścieł...* (*The bed...*):

Пасьцель

залігая віном,

у ёй так звабны

водар твайго цела –

найлепшы ланч,

любімы трунак днём,

апоўначы жаданая вячэра (Aksak, 2003, 9)¹⁴.

Another verse, *Čyrwonaja subota* (*Easter Saturday*) begins with her colouring eggs, but soon turns to red wine, although it is during a fast, summing up the significance of wine thus:

¹² „...and even / to notice in his constantly / arrogant look / the flaring up / of lust / and long-expected madness...”.

¹³ „Wine, wine, / your wine, / no longer pours into me / as a saving memory”.

¹⁴ „The bed, / flooded with wine / in it is so attractive / the smell of your body – / the best lunch of all, / my favourite drink in the afternoon, / at midnight my longed-for supper”.

...што у паэтаў натхненнем,
а ў шараговых,
як я,
назваецца Эрасам,
стану (Aksak, 2003, 35)¹⁵.

A variety of poems in Aksak's next book, *Ružoŭnica* (*Rosary*, 2008), also refer to wine. In *Vybar* (*Choice*) she turns with relief from Montaigne and Razanaŭ to Californian wine; in *Abiareh* (*Amulet*) wine and a candle serve to keep her strong, here and now; in *Antycud* (*A non-miracle*) her attempts to make her own wine result only in vinegar. Two verses from *Dzikaja sliva* (2015), *Zapoznienaja* (*The late one*) and *Novy hod* (*New year*) continue this theme, but the first of them puts wine into a far wider context than most of these poems:

Запозненая
Заўчасна
нараджаецца ўнучка.
заўчасна
памірае бацька,
заўчасна старэе муж.
Толькі я
запозненая
тут,
у незнаёмым скверы
з мроямі маладымі
і пляшкай старога віна (Aksak, 2015, p. 31)¹⁶.

Even a brief acquaintance with the poetry of Aksak will reveal the great musicality of her word choice, with or without any perceptible assonance. In her work there are a number of references to classical music, which is clearly dear and familiar to her. Early in her first book a poem, *Arhanistka* (*The Organist*), describes a slender young girl producing from her instrument huge sounds that ring around the church and linger in the roof; there is a very physical description of awakening and subsiding. Less elaborate are two early poems that also describe music making: *Minor* (*Minor key*) in which the sounds produced by a young violinist makes the poet think of autumn, and in *Na kancercie* (*At a concert*), she describes a vocal concert in a church where all are in despair and hoping for a resurrection when a voice emerges from the arched roof

¹⁵ „... what is for poets inspiration / but for the class of rough people / like me / is called Eros”.

¹⁶ „The late one // Prematurely / my granddaughter is born, / prematurely / my father dies, / prematurely / my husband grows old. / Only I am / the late one / here / in an unfamiliar square / with my young dreams / and a bottle of old wine”.

with enlightenment, while an old woman gives a wild cry... with a child sleeping on her lap (Aksak, 1992, pp. 6–7). Ringo Starr features in *Sustreča adnakursnikaŭ* (*A meeting with classmates*) which ends with her dancing the quick-step despite it being already quite out of fashion (Aksak, 1994, p. 40). In one of Aksak's many poems about her family, *Viečar z Ramanam* (*An evening with Raman*) she describes her feelings, after a day of hard, unrewarding work, on hearing, despite her friend's bronchial coughing, Bach played by her eldest son on the guitar, and then suddenly imagining a limpid Italian stream and the music of Giuliani and Perugino (Aksak, 1999, p. 22). In the following poem, *Mielodyja dlia liutni* (*Melody for lute*) the poet, listening to her son, thinks of the classical figures of Ariadne and the Minotaur, Phoebe and Niobe, ending with her own, real, God. Eighteenth-century music is also featured in *Listapadnyi eciud* (*Autumn study*) which features Vivaldi's *Autumn* from his ever-popular *The Seasons*, which she finds inspiring despite being in F minor. In *Chaj Motsart...* (*Let Mozart...*) the great composer dispels gloom and brings merriment into the poet's room. Beethoven is clearly for her the composer of autumn, as we read in the opening lines of the first of the *Vosieŭskija eciudy* (*Autumn studies*):

Калі ўжо нахлынуць,
як смутак раптоўны,
дажджы
ды прыйдзе пара
Бэтховэна слухаць... (Aksak, 1999, p. 38)¹⁷.

In *Impravizacyja* (*Improvisation*) Beethoven's lively soul (as it emerges in his 7th Symphony) floods the little room with splashes of sound (Aksak, 1999, pp. 28–29). In a later poem, *Minorny ŭtok* (*A minor weft*) the same symphony appears in a quite different light; presumably the poet is thinking of the slow movement that contrasts with the lively mood of the others:

...Бэтховэна
Сымфоніяю сёмай
Каміннае цяпло
Сплывае
Ў халодны далягляд... (Aksak, 2017, 6)¹⁸.

Finally, the last movement of Beethoven's 9th symphony provides a great inspiration for a student reunion in *U 20-ja ŭhodki studenctva* (*On the 20th anniversary of our*

¹⁷ „When there rush down, / like sudden sadness, / rains / and the time comes / to listen to Beethoven...”.

¹⁸ „Like Beethoven's / 7th Symphony / the warmth of the fireplace / floats away / into a cold horizon...”.

student years) where the triumphant music pours all over their still young souls, and the invincible idol who expressed himself so well, has now, she supposes, been for a long time drinking beer with Abraham (Aksak, 1999, pp. 91–92). Also may be mentioned *Zimovy eciud* (*A winter study*) in which the approach of the first ray of Eros's rainbow makes her think that somebody's music is coming (Aksak, 1999, p. 103). Naturally, not all poets respond to music, especially classical music, but it seems entirely normal in a poet like Aksak who is so very alive to the beauty of her surroundings.

A different kind of harmony is found in the natural world where she brings a consistently sensitive approach to scent, touch and sounds, and it is another prominent theme throughout Aksak's poetry, namely the joy of gardening and of flowers. The latter are often unobtrusively personified, as, indeed, are animals, birds and stars (a good example of the latter is *Svavoľnaja zorka* (*A wilful star*, Aksak, 2017, pp. 14–15). Roses are a special love of the poet, and in *Reľnaŝć ruľaľ* (*The jealousy of the roses*) she writes of her greatest trust being not in her family but, druid-like, in plants that await patiently her return from travelling, when she will embrace them, although the roses expect special treatment and use their thorns to express their jealousy (Aksak, 2015, p. 10). In another poem, *Siabroľki* (*Girl friends*), the flowers, like the birds, pay more attention to her than the eponymous friends (Aksak, 2015, p. 16). Gardening and caring appear to be a full time job, judging by *Cejtnot* (*Time-trouble*) in which the poet uses a term from chess in a simple little verse that describes the fullness of her commitment:

Цэйтнот

Ад красавіка да кастрычніка
корпаюся ў кветніках
у спадчынным садзе,
а затым усю зіму
гадую флянсы ў вазонах,
і няма ў мяне часу
засушыць гербарый (Aksak, 2015, p. 14)¹⁹.

Looking after flowers in a domestic setting seems to arouse different views and demand flexibility, as in *Kvietkavy kampramis* (*A compromise of flowers*, Aksak, 2008, p. 65) where she and her husband seem to prefer different vessels for them, but in any case she appears to compare cutting them to using a guillotine. Flowers, in this case camomile, daisies and roses in a bed, suddenly remind her of her granny, as we see in the last five lines of *Kvietnik* (*The flowerbed*):

¹⁹ „Time-trouble // From April to October / I potter about in the flowerbeds / of the garden I have inherited, / and then the whole winter / I look after flowers in pots, / and I have no time / to dry out my herbarium”.

...узгадаўшы раптоўна,
як кужаль,
што бабуля бяліла да шлюбу,
дачасна зацьвіў
на маёй інтэрнацкай пасьцелі (Aksak, 2003, p. 31)²⁰.

As has been mentioned, roses occupy a special place in the poet's world. In *Niadzielia (Sunday)* she describes church in the morning, dancing in the evening and between them scratching around (*kalupańnie*) in flowerbeds. All this is sacred and most pleasant, but people are not close, and with nobody to look after them, the roses have to look after themselves (Aksak, 2015, p. 96). In *Rachunak ružam (Calculation for the roses)* she writes of the constant criticism she receives because of the time she 'squanders' on looking after flowers, proposing the eponymous calculation, which the poet sums up with characteristic humour:

...Хронас
зьбіўся
з панталыку (Aksak, 2017, p. 36)²¹.

In *Pieršaja ruža na Kaliady (The first rose at Christmas)*, Aksak, 2008, p. 69) the poet describes how at Christmas there are no living flowers. Even the fir trees are killed to help people dream of a new life. But she has revived a tradition taken from her distant relatives in Götaland of placing among the little firs a vase with the last rose that flowered in her native garden before the growth of the Sun, or the first that was visited by the Sun in the garden of her successors.

In two poems, *Studzień zabludziŭsia (January has gone astray)* and *Chto vinavaty (Who is to blame?)* she worries about the buds of winter roses, endangered by the vagaries of weather and in the second poem asks why it is that spring simply does not come (Aksak, 2017, pp. 50–51). In *Raźvitańnie s sadam (Farewell to the garden)* she pictures the fate and ultimate loss of a rose that comes out too late before the frost:

Развітанне з садом

Недацвілюю ружу
прыхопяць марозы
і пойдзе пад снег
скамянелая кроў,
красавіцкім дасвеццем
адцінак змарнелы

²⁰ „... suddenly remembering, / how the linen / that my granny had bleached before the marriage, / shone before time / on the bed in my boarding school”.

²¹ „Chronos / was at his /wit's end”.

хтось зрэжа –
не ўбачу таго (Aksak, 2015, p. 97)²².

The thorns characteristic of roses remind the poet of Christ's crown of thorns, and in the title poem of her sixth collection, *Dzikaja sliva*, she muses on the blackthorn of that crown, which formed a later historical tradition, wondering whether this is the reason she is pricked so painfully when attempting to extract plums from amongst the roses. Here is the second half of the poem:

... Пэўна, таму
так балюча джаляць мяне
смалицкія спадкаемцы
палестынскае дзікае слівы,
якіх спамяж ружаў
выдзіраю няшчадна,
не прызнаючы
іхняе святасці (Aksak, 2015, p. 9)²³.

In *Niezvyčajovaja (An unfamiliar one)* she writes of the rarity of dog-roses let alone real roses in her village, as the farmers see no attraction in flowers that can prick their fingers (Aksak, 2003, p. 32). Wild flowers, which she is careful not to tread on, give her a boost, removing a weight from her shoulders and restoring her creative strength in *Bukiet (A Bouquet)*, Aksak, 1994, p. 99–100).

Many different flowers appear in Aksak's verse, some of them linked to other people. *Valoška Bykava (Bykau's cornflower)* describes how the great writer was sad not to find any of his favourite flowers when visiting, but how the cornflower is celebrated by those who remember him. Here are the closing lines of this touching verse:

... І цяпер яго любая
васількова цвіце
ў Baltic Centre
на дзевяностаў старонцы
зацёрханага да дзірак
гасьцявога журналу (Aksak, 2008, p. 66)²⁴.

²² „Farewell to the garden // A rose that has not yet come out / will be seized by the frosts / and its stony blood / will go beneath the snow, / and one April dawn / someone will cut / the feeble little thing – / and I shall not see it happen”.

²³ „It is probably for that reason that / I am pricked so painfully by / the successors in Smoličy / of the Palestinian wild plums / that from amongst the roses / I pull up mercilessly, / not acknowledging their sanctity”.

²⁴ „And now his beloved / cornflower flourishes / in the Baltic Centre / on the ninetieth page / rubbed into holes / of the visitors' book”.

Nearer to home, *Uspieńnie (Assumption)*²⁵ describes the different flowers who disturb the dominance and generally attempt to take over from the poet's roses. The one flower that seems indomitable, however, is the chrysanthemum which proudly pushes itself out like a colourful blot on former beauty (Aksak, 2015, p. 5). The poem gains particular edge from an earlier untitled verse in which it emerges that chrysanthemums are the favourite flowers of Aksak's redoubtable husband:

Мой дзень народзінаў
прыпаў на час
разводу ружаў –
то веснавыя зоркі,
бачыш.
Зьвінаваціліся ў тым,
што калючая я і ўвосень,
хрызантэмаўлюбёны
мой муж (Aksak, 2003, p. 32)²⁶.

One particularly touching poem is *Kvietki fermera Matusieviča (The flowers of farmer Matusieviča)*, which after a long enumeration of different types of bloom, ends thus:

...Тры гэктары красы.
Чыстай. Бескарысьлівай. Не загароджанай.
Для сябе і для сьвету (Aksak, 2017, p. 86)²⁷.

Before leaving the natural world, it may be worth mentioning a few discreet mentions of sex²⁸. In a touching poem that looks back at her predecessors, with almost a chorus of „Vosień stary / radzinny sad / bačka ŭ kurčach boliu” (the old man in autumn / the native garden / my father in spasms of pain), in *Adviedziny (Visit)*, referring to the last days of her father, she chooses the reproductive organs of flowers (stamens and pistils) when speculating about how her other ancestors went forth and multiplied (Aksak, 2008, pp. 11–12). In the second of three *Vosieńskija eciudy (Autumn studies)* she refers to the spring attraction of *Jaryla's penises*, but more enigmatic is *Adhadka (Solution to a riddle)*, where she makes one of many references in her poems to women's clothes:

²⁵ The title of this poem serves as an addition to the remarks already made about this poet's unusual use of language, namely the employment of words from the world of religion (here in the title) outside a religious context.

²⁶ „... my birthday / fell at a time / for the planting of roses – / that is to say that spring stars, / you see. / They apologized for / my being prickly even in autumn, / chrysanthemum-loving / husband”.

²⁷ „Three hectares of beauty. / Pure. Unselfish. Not fenced off. / For himself and for the world”.

²⁸ Although it is not the purpose of this article to compare Aksak's poetry with that of her husband, he is far more outspoken in a way that some call vulgar, but many others, including the present writer, prefer to call robust.

Адогадка

Кветкі й матылі
афарбованыя
ў зыркiя колеры
дзеля адной мэты –
сэксу.
Дык вось чаму я
не апранаюся
ў чырвонае (Aksak, 2015, p. 36)²⁹.

Finally, an untitled poem, *Rastrubam krony...* (*The ball-shaped crowns of the trees...*) compares the dissatisfaction of the lime tree with the clouds, and her own escape behind the stockade of Lust (Aksak, 1999, p. 59).

Sex, love and other related phenomenon including jealousy, dissatisfaction, inequality and, more extremely, madness all play a role in Aksak's poetic world, not least in the form of erotic fantasies, frequently with reference to the classical world, as, for instance, Satyros and Eros in *Erato* (*Eros*, Aksak, 1999, pp. 112–13). To begin with, an early untitled verse, *A my nie zlučonyja Boham...* (*But we are not united by God...*), seemingly about the conflict with the poet's deep-felt religion; here is the beginning and end:

А мы – не злучоныя Богам.
А мы – толькі страсці саюз.
Знясільнага полымя многа,
Ды цісне ўсё болей той груз,
Які быў так лёгкі спачатку,
Бо ноч пераходзіла ў ноч.
Не мела абрысаў пячатка
Пацвердзіць нам шчасце...
[...]
Развейвае вецер імжу,
Што нашага полымя попел
Схавала ў рамонках густых.
Збяру я іх потым, а покуль
Чытаю Пісанне святых (Aksak, 1992, p. 28)³⁰.

²⁹ „Solution // Flowers and butterflies / are dressed / in bright colours / for one purpose only – / sex. / And so that is why I / do not wear / red”.

³⁰ „But we are not joined by God. / And we are only a union of passion. / There is much of a weakened flame, / And that burden ever more squeezes..., / For night passed into night. / The stamp had no outline / To confirm our happiness [...] The wind blows away the frost, / That was hiding the ashes of our flame / in thick camomile plants. / I shall gather them up later, but for the time being / I am reading the Writings of the saints”.

In other poems from the same book, sin is explicit in *Hrech* (*Sin*, Aksak, 1992, p. 51), and a form of enslavement in the dramatic *Ty – drapiežnaja ptuška, ja znala...* (*You are a bird of prey, I knew...*, Aksak, 1992, p. 42) as well as the already cited, *Zvanki tvaje kryčali: budź bahiniaj...*, whilst jealousy, caused by real or imagined unfaithfulness, is the theme of *Nie každy mnie pra chvoraje serca...* (*Don't talk to me about a sick heart...*, Aksak, 1992, p. 34), as, indeed, seems to be the case in a strong poem from *Kaplica* (*Apoŭnačy* [*At Midnight*], Aksak, 1994, p. 35). Sexual inequality is the subject of *Nu, viadoma...* (*Well, as we all know...*) which ends with the word for a male prostitute (*prastytut*) (Aksak, 1999, p. 83). In *Takoje razvažnaje...* (*So rational...*) her husband alights on Marques's suggestion, translated by Carlos Sherman, that all men should have two wives: the first for love, and the second for sewing on buttons. It takes a glass of good Californian wine to help her recover from this extreme male chauvinism, observing that this is what is important in the time of the plague for both Marques and Arloŭ (Aksak, 2008, p. 14). Less directly, in *Viasiolka* (*Rainbow*) the poet compares being caught in the open under a downpour like being in bed with a chance fantasist (*donkichot*) (Aksak, 2003, p. 67). When the poet considers more directly other literary works in *Nia jnačycca* (*It does not change*) she finds that John Fowles has gone to sleep and Michel Houellewecq is slumping in a friend's armchair, whilst Adam Hlobus also does not charm her onto someone else's little couch with his *Damavikameron*. On her own bed, given as a dowry, night comes with her earliest and old, ancient feelings, whilst on the shelves the books rot like an irrepressible lover (Aksak, 2008, p. 28). Many of Aksak's poems even on serious themes have elements of humour, and her comment on faithfulness, *Try sposaby* (*Three means*), is a good example of the poet's light wit:

Тры спосабы

Тры спосабы вернасці –
самота,
вар'яцтва,
смерць.
Толькі ў трэцім не пэўная.
Пакуль што (Aksak, 2015, p. 33)³¹.

Loneliness is a frequent theme in Belarusian lyric poetry (see, for examples, Dubanieckaja et al. (eds), 2009, pp. 163–67), but, as in so much else, Aksak brings a distinctive individual note to this topic. An unexpected connection is in *Unjackaja kaplica* (*A Uniate chapel*) where poets, she suggests, are expected to be lonely:

³¹ „Three means // There are three means of being faithful – / loneliness, / madness, / death. / Only about the third one I am not certain. / For the time being”.

Уніяцкая капліца

Царква
паэтаў і самотнікаў,
што ў прынцыпе –
адно і тое.
З вакенца
позіркам адлётніка
глядзіць на свет
дзіця малое (Aksak 1994, p. 22)³².

Astatny ramans (The last romance) is a highly musical poem rich in imagery and assonance, in which the poet describes herself as unable to write or make love to Miss Loneliness. The poem's final stanza expresses her feeling of hopelessness:

... І стане ясна ўсё, як дзень, –
самота не мінецца.
Душу маю акрые цень
і пасткаю замкнецца (Aksak, 1994, p. 58)³³.

In *Jak kotka...* (*Like a little cat...*) she refers to herself as permanently lonely (*samotnik wiečny*, Aksak, 2003, p. 68), whilst the very title of *Kaliendahrafika samoty (Calendar of loneliness)* reveals its content, enumerating the months from December to November. Each is quite different, but each is pathetic in its own way. *Travień'* (*May*) will serve as an example:

Травень

на Траецкай гары
трапяткая лістота
і ў нагатніку аркуш
трапечацца так
што радок да радка
падбягае ахвотна
не трапляючы ў такт
слё-
за-
па-
ду! (Aksak, 1994, p. 71)³⁴.

³² „A Uniate chapel // The church of poets and lonely people / which is in principle / one and the same thing. / From the little window / a small child / with the gaze of a migrant / looks out onto the world”.

³³ „And everything will become clear as day, – / loneliness will not pass. / My soul will be covered by a shadow / and close like a trap”.

³⁴ „May // on Trinity hill / the foliage quivers / and in my notebook the sheet of paper / is trembling so much / that one line runs / willingly onto another / not keeping time with / the cas- / cade / of / tears!”

Unsurprisingly, Aksak is not only highly educated but also full of national consciousness, and the names of some of the great cultural figures of the past appear in her works, some of whom have already been mentioned. She responds particularly warmly to the verses of émigré poet Natallia Arsieńnieva, and regrets the denationalization of one of Belarus's most famous sons, Marc Chagall. Others mentioned include national poet Janka Kupala, the grammarian Jazep Liosik and a younger contemporary, Andrej Chadanovič, whose comments on writing poetry is evident from the title of one of her poems: *Andreju Chadanoviču, jaki niejak skazaŭ, što pisać pra niaščaście liohka, a voš pasprabujcie pra ščaście...* (*To Andrej Chadanovič who once said that writing about unhappiness was easy, but just try writing about happiness...*, Aksak, 2008, p. 36). This poem illustrates well Aksak's enjoyment of word play, notably of the words *viecier* (wind) and *viečar* (evening), a pairing of words also exploited in *Jość viecier...* (*There is a wind...*), and elsewhere.

The warmth of her national pride, which remains with her on her travels in many countries including Sweden, Catalonia, Czechoslovakia, Italy, France, England, Ukraine, Poland, Romania, Bulgaria, as she recalls such excellent native institutions as the Belarusian lyceum (now officially closed, but operating on an ad hoc basis). Terrorist acts in Paris and Barcelona naturally startle her, and produce vivid poetic reactions. In contrast to her serious poems, *I my tam byli* (*We were there too*) emphasises the importance of presents and souvenirs as proof of their visits:

Ну і што,
што казаў,
але хто ж
без дарункаў
паверыць,
што і мы
там былі (Aksak, 2017, 73)³⁵.

Aksak's affection for the best Belarusian people of her country is matched by a rare ferocity in her comments on what has been and is being done to it. In *A vieršy tut rastuć* (*But poems grow here*) she paints a very bleak picture of Belarus historically, ending with drug users and pederasts on the landings of buildings (Aksak, 2003, p. 50). In a poem about the relationship between good wine and good myths, *Čytajučy antyčnyja mity* (*Reading ancient myths*), she suggests that if they lived far away from the Aegean sea (sc. in Belarus) Dionysus would shoot himself with his own bow, Eurypides would not have made up fibs about the beautiful Helen, and Homer would not have praised that homeless man (*bomž*) Odysseus. The humour in another poem is more like her husband's comic descriptions of ignorance, *Čyja radzima?* (*Whose fatherland?*), in which the poet is amazed to find a country house

³⁵ „What does it matter / what he said, / but who / without presents / will believe / that we were / there too”.

(*dača*) in Viazanka described as being in the fatherland of Jakub Kolas. Finally, she decides that there is nothing to be amazed at, recalling the confident words of a taxi driver:

... Казаў жа з гонарам пару гадоў таму таксіст,
пачуўшы беларускую мову пасажыраў:
«Я, между прочім, тожа імею отнашэніе
к беларускаму языку, патаму што радзілся
в Нікалаевшчыне, на родзіне Янкі Купалы.
Слышалі такога беларускага пісацеля?» (Aksak, 2017, p. 97)³⁶.

At a literary festival in Lithuania she first hears of the award of the Nobel literary prize to Svetlana Aleksievich, when she received various half-hearted congratulations, since the laureate declares herself to be a Belarusian, despite writing in Russian (she was born in Ukraine, although her parents moved back to Miensk). More pernicious, in the present writer's opinion, was the question from a Japanese poet whether all the laureate's books were inspired by dictatorship (Aksak, 2017, p. 96).³⁷

Aksak's reactions to the negative aspects of Belarus, range from urbanization, which is a lament of many people and not only poets everywhere, via specific events, to bitter remarks about the wilful destruction of Belarusian history. *Vierbnica ў Vasilieŭcach* (*Palm Sunday in Vasilieŭcy*, Aksak, 1992, p. 17) regrets the destruction of a village where people made their lives now incorporated in and crushed by Novapolacak. Far worse is the wilful denationalization of Belarus by means of destroying historical memory. This is described with bitter clarity in two short poems: *Padmianili narodu hierojaŭ...* (*They have replaced the people's heroes...*) and *Čużyncy* (*Aliens*). Deceit lies at the basis of the first:

Падмянілі народу герояў
І нікому таго не казалі.
І чытаем чужыя імёны
На сваіх пракаветных скрыжалях (Aksak, 1992, 79)³⁸.

In the second poem she uses an extended image of wolves and wolf-cubs to portray the destruction of memory in her country:

³⁶ „A couple of years ago a taxi driver said with dignity, / hearing the Belarusian language of his passengers: / «Incidentally, I also have a relationship / with the Belarusian language, because I was in born / in the Nikalaev region, in the fatherland of Janka Kupala. / Have you heard of such a Belarusian writer?»”.

³⁷ In the days of the Soviet Union, a few Western scholars suggested that the great 20th-century Soviet writers were given additional inspiration by the restrictions and fear of the country they lived in, with no regard, of course, for those who committed suicide or were murdered by the state.

³⁸ „They have replaced the people's heroes / And not mentioned it to anyone. / And we read alien names / In our ancient annals”.

Чужыніцы

Застрэлілі памяць,
Як тую ваўчыцу на ўзлессі,
Пакінулі дзетак малых,
Ваўчанят,
Сірацін без пары.
І ніяк ім неўцяміць,
Чаму гэта выноць
Ваўкі не па-воўчы
Дагэтуль на нашым двары (Aksak, 1992, p. 80)³⁹.

A relatively recent episode in the destruction of Belarusian identity was the notorious referendum, which effectively devalued the native language. In a poem of 24 November 1996 she describes in characteristically dramatic form the effect of an event that was so destructive to nationally conscious Belarusians:

Рэфэрэндум

Слова згубіла водар,
думка згубіла згук,
на горлах ва ўсіх –
адэнома
на сэрцах –
інфарктны струп,
а душы,
яны ня ў вырай
памкнуліся назаўжды,
паклікаў іх нейчы вырак
ці выдых
туды,
дзе магчымы ўдых (Aksak, 1999, p. 85)⁴⁰.

Looking back to Soviet times in *Liemantar Jazepa Liosika* (*The primer of Jazep Liosik*) Aksak makes a pun between the first word of the title and that of the poem: *liemantar* (primer) and *liamantuje* (laments). The verse describes how a book of simple children's poems did not reach its young audience from the mouths of their mothers,

³⁹ „Aliens // They shot memory / Like a she-wolf at the edge of the forest. / They left the small children / Wolf cubs, / Early orphans.. / And they cannot understand / Why there howl / Wolves not like wolves / To this day in our yard”.

⁴⁰ „The word has lost its fragrance, / thought has lost its sound, / In everyone's throats / is a tumour, / in their hearts / the traces of a heart attack, / and their souls / have not flown / into warmer lands for ever, / they have been summoned by somebody's sentence / or exhalation / to a place / where a gasp is possible”.

but lay on a special shelf on account of its 'sedition' and 'air of national democracy', although it had a seemingly far more simple aim: „Бо хацела песняй ліцца, / Песняй вольнасці й братэрства” (For it wanted to pour out as a song, / A song of freedom and brotherhood, Aksak, 1992, p. 76).

In light of the above poems it is not surprising that she calls her country 'poor' (following many 19th-century poets) and also 'stupid' (*debiłny*) (Aksak, 2008, p. 39), or that in *Čytajučy Janku Kupalu* (*Reading Janka Kupala*) the poet expresses exasperation at what she sees as the lack of progress in the course of a century:

Чытаючы Янку Купалу

Божа мой, Божа, свет незварушны!

Сотню гадоў да сябе мы не рушым.

Сотню гадоў мы на самым пачатку.

Сотню гадоў не народ мы, а – статак (Aksak, 1992, p. 75)⁴¹.

Finally in this short catalogue of dissatisfaction may be mentioned a more recent poem that provides a good example of the poet's political irony:

Прадвесье

Прачнулася.

Сонца ў акно

ня сьвеціць.

Праз праспэкт ад мяне –

любiмы Цясляр

у вязьніцы.

Пазаўтра –

Дзень Волі (Aksak, 2017, p. 48)⁴².

But it would be inappropriate to leave this poet's multi-faceted work on a note of irony or despair. Amongst events not yet mentioned is her visit to a meeting of the BNF (Belarusian National Front) described in *Hościa* (*The guest*), of which this is the last stanza:

... Шчырыя, смелыя, дзёрзкія людзі.

З гэтага дня вы заўжды грамадой

⁴¹ „My God, God, the world is not moving! / For a hundred years we have not moved ourselves. / For a hundred years we are still at the very beginning. / For a hundred years we are not a people, but a herd”.

⁴² „Just before spring // I awoke. / The sun does not shine / into the window. / Across the avenue from me / our favourite Carpenter / is in prison. / The day after tomorrow is / Freedom Day.” The carpenter to whom the poet refers is the dissident Źmicier Daškievič.

У белых кашулях з чырвоным на грудзях...

Мне паміж вамі ў блакітным – адной (Aksak, 1992, p. 86)⁴³.

As should be already evident, Aksak's verse contains a strong element of romanticism, and a final example of it is a charming poem, *Pašlia koncerta Dančyka u Polacku* (*After Dančyk's concert in Polacak*) of which these are the last four lines:

...Хлопчык выбег да рэчкі русявы

Ладзіць новыя гульні-забавы,

Галасок свой ціхутка спрабуе

І ля хваляў Пагоню малюе. (Aksak, 1992, p. 91)⁴⁴

Valiancina Aksak is a poet of great and mysterious strength, most of whose verses are reflective, even introspective, and consistently strong when a message, personal, societal or political, is incorporated. Her rich vocabulary is drawn from popular culture, historical sources and, not least, a delight in creating her own words and forms. Consistently elegant and musical, her poems go from great simplicity to a complexity that may demand scrutiny and re-reading. The range of her themes is very broad, and she has a strong and memorable word on subjects ranging from language itself to her family, her love of nature, especially roses and other flowers. A true lyric poet, she reveals much of her unobtrusive self, sometimes with great pathos, often with gentle humour. Her quiet voice is well worth the attention of all lovers of Belarusian poetry.

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⁴³ „Sincere, brave, audacious people. / From that day you are for ever a community / In white shirts with red on your chests... / Amongst you I was the only one in blue”.

⁴⁴ „The light-brown haired boy ran to the little river / to fix up some now games and entertainments, // He tries out his little voice quietly / and near the waves draws the Pahonia”.

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