The Images Swarm Free. A Bi-lingual Selection of Poetry by Maksim Bahdanovič, Aleś Harun and Žmitrok Biadula. Translated by Vera Rich. Edited with an Introduction by Arnold McMillin. The Anglo-Byelorussian Society, London, 1982. 135 pp.

For these poets their mother tongue, *rod-naja mova*, was an inspiration. Using it they became truly themselves, at home in a living community, sure of their utterance. When Bahdanovič, Harun and Biadula were writing the poems in this book, all of which date from the first quarter of the 20th century, the Byelorussian village still retained most of its immemorial features. Their poetry could draw upon the energies of an oral tradition. The writer in no way condescended to the language and beliefs of the common people: these were the means to his own enlargement. Bahdanovič possessed a wide European culture. He translated poems by Verlaine and Heine; he took his epigraphs from Boileau, St-Beuve, Rimbaud; he even experimented with Japanese and Persian forms. By the age of five, as Arnold McMillin relates in an excellent introduction, Harun could read Polish and Russian. Biadula began with Hebrew verse prayers on models some two or three hundred years earlier; for writing poetry he was expelled from his Talmudic school. All three found in Byelorussian the necessary idiom for an art that should be fully alive and their own.

Biadula in his fine poem *Prysiaha* (Oath of Allegiance), which fittingly closes the collection, pledged his countrymen to honour their mother tongue, the treasure they had: 'Skarb bahaty, što my majem'. Harun in the equally fine *Pieśnia-zvon* (Song-Bell) figures it as a great bell of gold and silver thundering on. Each dedicated poetry to the defence of the Byelorussian people in their want and misery. For Bahdanovič too, as *Letapisiec* (The Chronicler), *Pahonia* (The Pahonia) and *Emihrackaja pieśnia* (Emigrants' Song) variously attest, the situation of Byelorussia demanded a similar national and civic note. In the 1890s Yeats complained of the movement

Young Ireland that it wanted 'a nation unified by political doctrine alone, a subservient art and letters aiding and abetting'. The poetry approved by Young Ireland was trite, alien to the national genius and without character. In Byelorussia during the period of *Naša niva* the poets knew where their priorities should be. Bahdanovič died shortly after the February Revolution of 1917, Harun — by then a supporter of Pilsudski against Soviet Russia — in 1920. Only Biadula, living another two decades, allowed his poetry and prose fiction at times to 'aid and abet' a political doctrine.

Readers who like myself have to work at these poets with frequent recourse to the translations, and with Dal' at their elbow for interest, will soon appreciate the flexibility of Byelorussian verse, as revealed in its distinctive accents. When one discerns in Bahdanovič's *U wioscy* (In the Village) the structural patterning of Russian classical verse, or in his lyric *Pa-nad biełym pucham višniaŭ* . . . (Above the white down of the cherries . . .) the presence of Fet, there may come to mind the old tag describing Crabbe as 'Pope in worsted stockings'. This would appear to range Crabbe beside country craftsmen who imitated Chippendale. The analogy does not hold for these poets. Bahdanovič was set on enriching Byelorussian verse with the movement and sensibility of Russian romantic or symbolist poets, and with the verse forms of French tradition (triolet, rondeaux). But his importations cease to be foreign. The triolet for example in late 19th-century English verse is most often an archly affected form, drifting inexorably to light verse and the pages of *Punch*. When Bahdanovič employs it for his elegy on the poet Paťujan, the result is not in the least artificial. The little poem reads like a

genuine accession to Byelorussian song. So too with Harun and Biadula: their technical skill is rooted in a tradition where the people itself, as Harun claims in *Ludziam* (To People), is naturally poetic: 'Dzie sam narod — piaśniar'.

Poetry addressed to an audience with its own rural culture does not go easily into English today. Since Hardy such forms as the ballad (still sung in his youth) no longer seem natural. A poet at ease in Lowland Scots would probably have less trouble in catching the tone of Byelorussian, though his vocabulary might need more explication than Byelorussian does. Vera Rich is highly regarded for her service to Byelorussian poetry. Without her anthology *Like Water, Like Fire* ignorance of its wealth would be almost insuperable in this country. She breaks new ground with the present volume. Harun had not been represented at all in the former collection; only five of the poems here by Bahdanovič and two of those by Biadula were included. Her method is to preserve as closely as possible metrical form and rhyme-scheme. This procedure has some familiar drawbacks, but a good case can be made for adopting it in a selection where the element of song so much prevails. Only a poet with Pound's infallible ear could find an equivalent for these poems in his style of translation, which works out from the dynamic tension and the weight of each individual phrase.

Vera Rich's conspicuous merit is fidelity to the sense, even though considerations of form have to be overriding. She is uncon-

monly dependable. Sometimes, however, it becomes difficult to avoid wordiness — the metre must be filled out. We have to accept for 'jak laty' the cumbrous 'like old rags, dull and frowsty'; 'šaptańnie/I zvon ručaja' spreads out into 'the soft murmured calling/Of the stream running clear'; 'Ty pieśnia, nie maŭčy' becomes 'O you song, sink not to voiceless quiet', the last word in uneasy assonance with 'night'. Verisimilitude can be damaged by the exactions of rhyme. 'Bo moj pryhon hityaje čas' rings oddly as 'time eats my impetus', and what peasant girl would speak of 'a heifer as my dot'? Now and again uncertainty of tone seems to result from the difficulty of imitating form. Bahdanovič's *Hutarka z panienkami* is a slight piece, but it combines grace with colloquial vigour; 'Conversation with Young Ladies' relegates it to a Victorian keepsake. And finally there are lines in *Letapisiec* which have a straggling movement such as 'Copying the whole from an ancient parchment, from first word to the last, of Mahiloŭ and what passed there'. Bahdanovič uses Alexandrines for this poem.

I should not wish to end in a carping tone. *The Images Swarm Free* is a well-constructed anthology presenting three poets of high and varied accomplishment. Their translator has not failed them: much of the force and colour of the original comes through. The versions lead to a surer recognition of what their language could give these poets, and what they gave in return.

Henry Gifford

Jankova, T.S., comp. *Dyialektny sloŭnik Łojeŭščyny*. 'Navuka i technika', Minsk, 1982. 432 pp.

Further evidence of the revival in the fortunes of Byelorussian lexicography over the last two decades is provided by the

publication (in an edition of 1200) of this dictionary of the dialect spoken by the rural population living on both sides of the