

Bartosz Osiewicz

Bykau, Wasil. 2023. *Długa droga do domu* (Wrocław – Wojnowice: KEW).

The 2020–2021 Belarusian protests have led to increased interest in Belarusian culture in Poland. The Polish publishing market has seen the publication of many relevant tomes, among them *Wschód wolności. Antologia współczesnej literatury białoruskiej* [*East of Freedom. An Anthology of Contemporary Belarusian Literature*] (Walczak 2020) and a volume of poetry by the Belarusian Russian-language poet Dmitry Strotsev, *Reportaż poetycki* [*Poetic reportage*] (Strocew 2024), as well as works by recent and contemporary Belarusian authors, and the final work by Vasil' Bykaŭ (1924–2003), one of the great masters of Belarusian literature, namely his autobiography, *Długa droga do domu* (2023) [*Доўгая дарога дадому*, 2002; *The Long Road Home*] (Bykau 2023). This Polish-language version of Bykaŭ's autobiography has been produced by an experienced translator of Belarusian literature, Joanna Bernatowicz. Bernatowicz based her work on the Belarusian original text, but also took into account the corrections made by Bykaŭ, which were introduced into the Russian translation by Valiantsin Taras (Bernatowicz 2023: 406). After reading her brilliant translation, I decided to write a review for this journal.

The Long Road Home was written when the author was on his deathbed, far from his beloved homeland. Bykaŭ clearly did not like the prospect of removing the death mask from his own agony-distorted face, that of a dying man. He therefore painted a more artistic self-portrait, returning a last time through memory, to the people and events that had conditioned his fate. In the last years of his life, Bykaŭ was the object of persecution in his homeland and forced to abandon Belarus, experiences that influenced the final form of his autobiography. As Bernatowicz notes, the dates of these events are missing and their chronology is sometimes distorted, due to the fact that at the time of writing Bykaŭ did not have access to his archive, which he had left in Minsk. Many key pieces of information could thus not be verified (Bernatowicz 2023: 406).

From a methodological perspective, Bykaŭ's *The Long Road Home* meets the criteria adopted by Philippe Lejeune in *Le Pacte autobiographique* [*The Autobiographical Pact*, 1975]. According to Lejeune, au-

tobiography is “a retrospective prose story in which a real person presents his or her life, emphasizing his or her individual fate, especially the history of his or her personality” (Lejeune 2001: 22). The author of an autobiographical text is both narrator and protagonist, and this identity is essential to the genre (Lejeune 2001: 24). It should be emphasized that Bykaŭ scrupulously follows the rules of the genre: the identity of the narrator and main character is, as is characteristic of autobiography, manifested – above all – in the use of the first-person singular (Lejeune 2001: 24), making it what Lejeune calls “classical first-person autobiography” (Lejeune 2001: 26). Moreover, Bykaŭ also signals the unity of the narrator and protagonist more directly as “when the narrator-protagonist appears in the text under the same name as the author’s name on the cover” (Lejeune 2001: 36). In other words, “the author’s name [within the text is] a fragment of the text endowed with [...] a real [external] reference” (Lejeune 2001: 45–46).

According to the findings of Janusz Sławiński, one can distinguish “[t]wo basic types of [...] autobiographies”: the first are “accounts corresponding to an extroverted attitude, in which the external world in its richness and complexity – other people, historical events, realities – is viewed through the prism of the ‘I’”; the second are “accounts in which an introverted attitude dominates”, where “the world is treated in them mainly as a setting for the internal experiences of the ‘I’” (Sławiński 2000: 50). In *The Long Road Home*, Bykaŭ makes use of an extroverted attitude, focusing on events that he has participated in and people he has met (Sławiński 2000: 50). His narrative is a story for his contemporaries and for their descendants, readers who, in accordance with Lejeune’s autobiographical pact, must trust the narrator-hero. In *The Long Road Home* Bykaŭ reconstructs his life. He recalls his childhood and youth. A special place is occupied here by the story of his participation in the war against Germany in the ranks of the Red Army. He focuses primarily on his own creative path, however, and on the fate of his literary heritage. His literary works were written in Belarusian and translated into Russian, often the condition for their publication in Soviet Russia; the writer openly admits that “the translation did not bring me pleasure” and “[i]t took much more paper and time than the original Belarusian version” (Bykau 2023: 219). Western literary criticism tends to perceive Bykaŭ as an outstanding representative of Belarusian culture, which, as Geoffrey Hosking notes, “is peculiarly threatened by its very closeness to the dominant Russian [culture]”, the reason that Bykaŭ “has sometimes spoken out bitterly against the swamping of his

native language and literature by [this] powerful neighbour” (Hosking 1989: 569). Hosking’s words recall a comment in Bykaŭ’s own autobiographical narrative: “The national language of Belarusians [...] was contemptuously abused in all fields, replaced by Russian, although this was not officially remarked upon. [...] Ignorance of the Belarusian language among the younger generation led to Belarusian culture being lost [dissipated, squandered, depleted] in its entirety” (Bykau 2023: 266–67).

The extroverted model of autobiography also influences the writer’s ability to capture a holistic concept of his or her own life. In Bykaŭ’s case, the most important thing (among others) is his awareness of his own individuality and his understanding of his own national identity, as well as his connected concern for his native Belarusian language and culture in difficult historical conditions. This was apparent equally during his career as a writer and during his professional travels abroad. Bykaŭ spent time on both sides of the Iron Curtain and mentions in his autobiography, among other trips, a visit to an institute in Paris “where all the languages of the Soviet Union were taught except Belarusian” [Bykau 2023: 346]. Informed that this curricular absence was due to “lack of interest”, the writer states: “Why should they know it in Paris, if they do not want to know it in Minsk?” [Bykau 2023: 346]. He also recalls meeting with students of the Free University in West Berlin, where he answered questions such as “What is Belarus? Where is it? In Siberia or closer?” [Bykau 2023: 333]. Thanks to his trip to Finland, the Finns “learned about a country unknown to them at that time – Belarus” [Bykau 2023: 288]). Bykaŭ was never “ashamed of his Belarusianness” (Bykau 2023: 261), he opposed the “destruction of the Belarusian language” (Bykau 2023: 338) and in Soviet Belarus, “a completely Russified, communist country [...], he retained the courage to stick to his language and to the remnants of the culture that came before” (2023: 284). Bykaŭ experienced being forced to “create in a linguistic vacuum, when not a single word of [one’s] native language can be heard nearby”, and where the Belarusian language “has been preserved as a relic and there is a risk that it will soon join Sanskrit or Latin” (Bykau 2023: 328).

The dominant elements in Bykaŭ’s autobiographical narrative are the motifs of travel and home. His home town was Grodno, located on the border of cultures and civilizations, characteristics shared by his autobiographical writing. Here the writer contributed to the emerging genre of “lieutenant’s prose” (stories of the war time experience of junior officers), an artistic emanation of his life on campaign during the war. Bykaŭ’s image of war differed from the stereotypical ideas of the con-

flict that were sanctified by official literature, however. It is therefore “not difficult”, as Grigorii Svirskii notes, “to understand why bureaucrats of all ranks conceived such a hatred for him and why the Grodno KGB, with the tacit approval of the Union of Writers under the control of Fedin and his ilk, proceeded to hound him the way it did” (Svirskii 1981: 376). Autobiography aims at consolidating the image of an author through a textual narrator-hero. Through this genre, Bykaŭ introduces facts from his own life into the public sphere, emphasizing the importance of his own national identity and patriotic attitude towards Belarusian culture. He uses the “extroverted” model of autobiography model and as a result, manages to paint a self-portrait against the background of the era, the portrait of “a simple Belarusian, wearied of life”, who had only “one goal – to remain an honest person” – and a “dream” that “apparently will not come true”: “to live to see freedom” (Bykau 2023: 394).

Bibliography

Bernatowicz 2023: Bernatowicz, Joanna. 2023. 'Od tłumaczki' in Bykau, Wasil. *Długa droga do domu* (Wrocław – Wojnowice: KEW), 405–407.

Bykau 2023: Bykau, Wasil. 2023. *Długa droga do domu* (Wrocław – Wojnowice: KEW).

Hosking 1989: Hosking, Geoffrey. 1989. 'The twentieth century: in search of new ways, 1953–80' in *The Cambridge History of Russian Literature*, ed. by Charles A. Moser (New York: Cambridge University Press), 520–94.

Lejeune 2001: Lejeune, Philippe. 2001. *Wariacje na temat pewnego paktu. O autobiografii*. (Kraków: UNIVERSITAS).

Sławiński 2000: Sławiński, Janusz (ed.). 2000. *Autobiografia: Słownik terminów literackich*. (Wrocław – Warsaw – Kraków: Ossolineum), 50–51.

Strocew 2024: Strocew, Dmitrij. 2024. *Reportaż poetycki* (Wrocław – Wojnowice: KEW).

Svirskii 1981: Svirskii, Grigorii. 1981. *A History of Post-War Soviet Writing. The Literature of Moral Opposition* (Ann Arbor: Ardis).

Walczak 2020: Walczak, Emilia (ed.). 2020. *Wschód wolności. Antologia współczesnej literatury białoruskiej* (Bydgoszcz: Miejskie Centrum Kultury w Bydgoszczy).

