

A close-up photograph of a woman's face, with her eyes and eyebrows visible through a frame of autumn leaves. The leaves are in various shades of brown, orange, and red, with some showing signs of decay and spotting. The woman has dark, well-defined eyebrows and bright blue eyes. The lighting is soft, highlighting her features against the dark background of the leaves.

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CONVERSATIONS BEFORE SILENCE

THE SELECTED POETRY
OF OLES ILCHENKO

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CONVERSATIONS BEFORE SILENCE:
THE SELECTED POETRY OF OLES ILCHENKO

by Oles Ilchenko

Translated by Michael M. Naydan

Guest introduction by Kostyantyn Moskalets

Translations edited by Alla Perminova

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A BIOGRAPHICAL NOTE

ON OLES ILCHENKO

Ukrainian poet, prose writer, children's author, culturologist, and filmscript writer Oles Ilchenko was born in Kyiv on October 4, 1957. He has lived in Kyiv for most of his life and traveled extensively to numerous other countries. He has spent the last several years living in Switzerland with his wife. He received degrees from the Drahomaniv Kyiv Pedagogical University and the Maxim Gorky Literary Institute in Moscow. He is the author of twenty-two children's books, the novels *City with Chimeras* (2009) and *My Beloved Kyara* (2011) and a book of memoirs of the 1970s-1990s, *Collectors of the Mists: Subjective Notes from a Life in Kyiv* (2017). His seven books of poetry include: *A Wintry Garden* (1991), *Constellation AS* (1993), *A Different Landscape* (1997), *Pages* (2004), *Cities and Islands* (2004), *Conversation before Silence* (2005), and *Certain Dreams, or A Kyiv which is Not* (2007). He also writes film scripts and is the author of numerous articles on cultural issues. His favorite pastimes include traveling to different countries, swimming, and experimenting with the creation of various culinary dishes.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

My translations of “When the nurse pulls the needle from your vein” and “a. my grandfather died in 1969” appeared first in Zoland Poetry Annual. My translations of the poems “hauling bodies through landscapes,” “I took down my portrait,” and “to find” appeared first in the journal of translation *Metamorphoses*, and my translations of the poems “slowly...,” “it’s worth it...,” CAIRO, “but then to separate...,” and “in making love with you...” were first published in *International Poetry Review*. Many thanks to Kost Moskalets for allowing me to translate and publish his fine piece on Ilchenko’s poetry. Much gratitude to Svitlana Budzhak-Jones and Alla Perminova for their extremely helpful comments on the translation of the introduction. Extra special thanks to Alla Perminova for her perspicacious suggestions for emendations to my translations of the poetry, which serve to make them much better. I, of course, am responsible for any errors that may have slipped through the cracks.

CONTENTS

A BIOGRAPHICAL NOTE ON OLES ILCHENKO	5
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS.	6
THE POETRY OF OLES ILCHENKO: SOME OBSERVATIONS ON A POET-TRAVELER	10
EXPERIENCING THE RAPTUROUS NOW	13
 FROM THE COLLECTION <i>PAGES</i> (2004)	 21
"YOU ASK WHY"	22
"IN MY FAVORITE CAFÉ"	23
"TO THE BARKING DOGS AT NIGHT"	24
"WHEN I LOOK AT A MOTH AT NIGHT"	25
"AT NIGHT YOU SHOULD WANDER"	26
"A SHADOW"	27
"THERE WAS A PRE-HISTORIC TIME WHEN"	28
"THE MOUTH OF A DROWNED PERSON"	29
 FROM THE COLLECTION <i>CITIES AND ISLANDS</i> (2004)	 31
NIGHT STATION.	32
"WHEN THE NURSE PULLS THE NEEDLE FROM YOUR VEIN"	32
"ONE FEBRUARY MORNING I DIED AND"	33
"THREE DRUNKARDS BAREFOOT"	34
"THEY LAID YOU TO REST. IT RAINED THAT DAY"	35
"WHEN YOU DIED, I STARTED TO WRITE"	36
PASSAGE.	37
"SLOWLY"	37
"THE LAST CROSSING"	38

“A. MY GRANDFATHER DIED IN 1969”	39
“AFTER ALL WE ARE BORN IN THE CITY”	40
“IT’S WORTH IT”	40

CITIES AND ISLANDS 43

SEVEN CAPITALS 44

AMSTERDAM 44

BERLIN 45

BRUSSELS 47

CAIRO 48

LUXEMBOURG 49

MADRID 50

PARIS 52

SEVEN ISLANDS 53

GRAN CANARIA 53

TENERIFE 54

LANZAROTE 55

LA GOMERA 56

LA PALMA 57

EL HIERO 59

FUERTEVENTURA 61

FROM THE COLLECTION *CONVERSATION*

BEFORE SILENCE (2005) 63

I. A GREEN BOAT 64

“HAULING BODIES THROUGH LANDSCAPES” 64

“I TOOK DOWN MY PORTRAIT” 65

“TO FIND” 66

“BUT THEN TO SEPARATE” 67

“BENEATH SOFT VELVET WINGS” 68

“AT FIRST FOXTAIL AND BLUEGRASS” 69

“WITH THE KEY OF MEMORY OPENING”	70
“IN THE OLIVE-COLORED WATER”	71
II. TIME IN RIME.	72
“SHE’S SLEEPING CLOSE BY”	72
“TO ENTER INTO THE WARM ALLURING SEA”	73
“WHEN I MAKE LOVE WITH YOU”	74
“IT’S REALLY SWEET”	75
“WE TURN OUT THE LIGHT”	76
“WE’RE DRINKING ZAKARPATSKY COGNAC”	77

FROM THE COLLECTION *CERTAIN DREAMS,*

<i>OR A KYIV WHICH IS NOT (2007)</i>	79
“THEY’RE BURNING FALLEN LEAVES IN THE GARDEN”	80
“TO POUR OUT SOME BLOOD—TO DRINK WINE.”	81
“THOSE CROWS THAT LIVE ON REITARSKA STREET”	82
“IN THE DEAD CAFÉ”	83
“POURED TEA, COLD COFFEE”	84
“GULP, DRINK UP. DON’T MENTION ANYONE”	85

FROM POEMS NOT PUBLISHED IN COLLECTIONS.

“YOU SLEEP CAPRICIOUSLY”	88
“SEDGE”	89
“AN OVERLY SHARP SENSE OF LIFE”	90
“THOSE COLORS ARE GRAY”	91
“THE TASTE OF ACHING IN THE MIDDLE OF”	93

THE POETRY OF OLES ILCHENKO: SOME OBSERVATIONS ON A POET-TRAVELER

I once asked my good friend the poet Viktor Neborak to suggest some interesting newer poets emerging on the literary scene in Ukraine. Viktor, without even taking time to think about it, uttered the name of just one poet to me—Oles Ilchenko from Kyiv. Trusting Viktor's judgment and his refined literary taste, I jotted down the name in a notepad and went to a bookstore the next day where I found copies of the poet's books. After perusing and buying them, I dove into them and immediately was impressed by Ilchenko's poetry, which was profoundly philosophical and personal, as well as spare and direct in terms of its imagery and metaphors. The poet's voice was assured and steady, and it spoke directly to the reader much in the way that Lina Kostenko's and Anna Akhmatova's poetry did. The biggest surprise to me was a Ukrainian poet writing in the natural rhythms of the language without traditional rhyme and meter, the latter of which dominated Ukrainian poetry until the most recent transitional and current younger generation of poets. Ilchenko himself notes some of the possible influences on him in his shift to free verse through his own allusions to William Carlos Williams and Stanley Kunitz in his poems. One would be hard pressed to imagine two better poet "mentors" from the American tradition to aid in the poet's transition to new poetic forms.

Ilchenko is one of the best Ukrainian poets writing in free verse today. His poetry is associative, flitting, and fragmentary. At times he does not form complete sentences in his poems and links words together into phrases before shifting into another thought or idea. The language of his poetry has a tendency to collapse into itself, often forcing the reader to reevaluate a word or line, to reread a previous word or phrase to focus on the poet's inner logic. This fragmentary incompleteness and permeability mimics much the way human consciousness works without the filter of the written communicative convention of sentences and grammatical structure. This "slipperiness" and rapid shifting of voice comprises one of the essential invariants in Ilchenko's poetics. The poet also flaunts many

traditional poetic Ukrainian conventions. Like ee cummings he tends to avoid capital letters or punctuation such as exclamation points. One will find only commas and dashes for pauses, and an occasional period in his poems, which do not always end with the finality of that punctuation mark. In doing this, the poet often suggests a fragment or slice of his life broken off on the page and to be continued at some point in time.

The imagery of Ilchenko's poetry, too, is devoid of excessive embellishments and rhetorical flourishes. He presents to his reader precisely what he is feeling or perceiving at a given moment, whether that be his own unfiltered pain and psychological state in a hospital emergency room or his elation at discovering the essence of places he visits in his native Kyiv, the capitals of Europe, or the Canary Islands. He fuses the visual with the aural in his poetry and conveys scenes with a roving consciousness that describes and subtly interprets. One always senses the poet's physical presence, his eyes, in the vivid scene he describes, as if he were a camera filming it. Perhaps his background in writing film scripts and the film industry gives him that pictorial focus on the slices of the interpreted world that he presents in his poetry. While certain of his poems are elegiac or confessional, they do not lead him to the depths of darker mental states, but rather serve as points of departure for a continuation of his life's journey and an expiation of that deeply felt emotion left behind on paper or in the computer and later on the printed page. The experience of the death of loved ones and one's own infirmity clearly spurs the poet's writing process, particularly in the first part of the collection *Cities and Islands* (2004). Consciousness of his own mortality leads him to understand that the meaning of life can only be found in living one's own life. He discovers that human beings must continue on with their lives after emotional pauses as well as profound losses. The only answer to death can only be life and in living the latter with passion and love. To that end the reader, particularly in the poet's later poems, finds the omnipresence of a beloved other, whom he is found observing. Readers will find sexuality and eroticism in Ilchenko's works, but a much more restrained male eroticism than other postmodern Ukrainian writers who focus on the pure physicality of sex and not the emotionality. That attraction, that psychological bond with his love, marks the fulfillment of being that is a powerful means of overcoming loneliness in the vast cosmos, one's own personal method of not raging, but coping with the dying of the light of those close to him. There is decanting in several of Ilchenko's poems—the pouring and drinking of vodka, wine, cognac, and coffee in cafes along

with degustation—these all comprise a part of both necessary nourishment as well as the celebration of life. The poet, too, often is a traveler, whose peregrinations give him new life experience and physically take him away from the locus of his former emotional losses and pain. Those travels also serve to spark the creative imagination, the results of which comprise a significant part of this collection of selected poetry. Ilchenko is a fascinating poet whose idiom and unique manner of expression in Ukrainian translates seamlessly into the poetics of contemporary English.

– Michael M. Naydan
Woskob Family Professor of Ukrainian Studies
The Pennsylvania State University

EXPERIENCING THE RAPTUROUS NOW

The new collection of poems by Kyivan poet Oles Ilchenko *Cities and Islands* comprises his fifth book of poetry. Before that he published *Winter Garden* (1991), *Constellation AS*¹ (1993), *A Different Landscape* (1997) and, after seven years of silence, a book of photographs and poems *Pages* (2004). *Pages* appeared shortly before *Cities and Islands* and immediately attracted the attention of poetry aficionados as a result of the author's quite original design, lyric poems interspersed with rare photographs of Kyivan architectural monuments that disappeared from the urban landscape in recent decades and that were unable to withstand the savage attack of our rabidly capitalistic civilization. The dominant nostalgic aching inherent in *Pages* was caused by the irreversible nature of the disappearance of landscapes of childhood and youth; we recognize it on the first pages of *Cities and Islands*. But this time, the nostalgic aching engendered much more dramatic cataclysms, those generated from places of the heart, not just from buildings that no longer exist. This first part of the book is about the death of people closest to us, about this unbearable but unavoidable primer of human existence that each of us must learn over the course of our lives, knowing in advance that the last letter will be "я" (I; the last letter of the Ukrainian alphabet) even when you apply the magic of the mirror of grammatology or when you try symbolically to replace the letters of the Cyrillic with those of the Latin alphabet as in the following poem:

- a. my grandfather died in 1969
- b. my mother's father lived 84 years
- c. one grandmother suffered away
- d. the other was terribly ill before that
- e. my mother's gone after she took ill
- f. and my father would be alive if
- g. it's clear whose turn it is now

1 The constellation "AS" is mentioned in Job 9:9 in Slavic bibles and rendered in most English bibles as the Bear or Great Bear.

- h. all the same it's strange to step to the front of the line
- i. when someone asks me who's last
- j. I answer in a whisper
- k. it's insulting not to die but to forget everything
- l. maybe memory anyway is kept there
- m. what feeling do I take with me
- n. to the heavenly city
- o. to the islands of hell

Memory does not just gather the dead at the table (“I sit in a circle of the dead...”); it brings together the living world of man, a mysterious one not subject to analysis, in this way creating entire hearts from disparate (according to point of view) feelings, thoughts and events. Memory consists of the Word uttered in a single breath, and therefore, it is a blissful amnesia, the keenly needed oblivion of the laws of death’s morphology. Therefore, for the poet the question of preserving the gift of personal, unblemished memory *there*—“beyond the heavens, beyond the stars” is vitally urgent. However, to preserve memory means to be made whole yourself and simultaneously to save your beloved dead. Therefore it is a bit awkward to interpret Ilchenko’s book, in particular the first part subtitled “Night Station,” as a collection of essentially artistic works. That section is a miniature book within a book, reminding us of a prayer book of a contemporary secular man; a prayer, according to the accurate observation of Bakhtin refers to actions rather than artistic works. In “Night Station” the phenomenology of that, which dies is alienated; sometimes even the ironic description of an unengaged observer is replaced by the involvement of a person who utters prayers for the dead. Those prayers as a real application of memory and word emerge beyond the latent state of alienation, exploding in a burst of ecstasy for him who no longer is (“How oddly he’s mentioned there...”). Noting the presence of the infrastructure of death that wraps around the living world and occasionally becomes visible, Ilchenko consciously highlights the most unessential of its signs (“After standing in the cemetery everyone greedily gulped down hot cabbage soup”) so as to suddenly find what is left in the shade as impossibly unreal—identification with the dead person:

One February morning I died and
stared at myself for a long time, at

the sharpened features of an indifferent face.
I didn't shudder in fright when I touched myself, though
I tried hard to remember something, but
couldn't; I wanted to say something, but
felt it to be inappropriate.
Inaccessible for those in my past expired here
irony fills the hereafter.
Really enjoyable was the absolute
light, much higher than rays in
the windows of intensive care on the top floor...

Oles Ilchenko belongs to a series of poets whose talent continues to mature from collection to collection, passing stages of growth unhurriedly and least of all not focusing on whimsical poses and the demands of quickly changing literary fashions. These poets never appear instantaneously ready, fully equipped for versification. Cherishing their constant unpreparedness of being, they therefore remain receptive longer to changes and renewal; they gradually acquire new techniques, systems of rhyme, and metrical forms so that, having mastered them totally and having provided the most perfected example of a given form, immediately and for a long time ignore their laboriously obtained know-how to return to different themes, to a fundamentally different instrumentation. *Cities and Islands* is a book entirely written in free verse, while Ilchenko's previous collections were written in more traditional forms. His poetry of the 1990s is reminiscent of the fresh, vigorous sprout of the neoclassical tree. It patterned itself on the loftiest achievements of the Silver Age of Russian literature (particularly on the masterpieces of Anna Akhmatova) and the Golden Age of Ukrainian literature (here we should first mention the undeniable influence of Maxym Rylsky and Lina Kostenko). However, the transition to free verse is not the only innovation that catches your eye. In *Cities and Islands* the poet repeatedly returns to his earlier works, rewriting them in a new key, "translating," adorning them in richer semitones and penumbra, occasionally radically changing the original version. For example, you can compare these two poems, the first of which was published in the collection *Constellation AS*:

there's snow in the yard
and three kings with gifts

walk along the empty street
passing the only house with lights
in the city
it's cold now
as if summer had never been
we are left only to follow the kings
with our eyes
the last night will judge everyone
and for the wormwood of the looking glass
will give everyone
Ukraine
for the infant in her arms already is evil

A modified version of the same text in *Cities and Islands* sounds fundamentally different:

Three barefoot drunkards...
Where are they going and why?
They're teased and called "kings." They
avoid all the buildings with lights,
skulk next to certain gray walls
of the city at night.
They place a candle at every ruin.
They try to plead their case—for an evil infant.
Maybe they're right.
Who is able to understand them?

As you can see, the initially elevated image, made in the spirit of a modernized Christmas crèche scene is markedly "brought down" in the second version. The Kings from the East appear as grotesquely ordinary drunkards who comprised "three" and are only nicknamed "kings." However, the surreal development of the scene (barefoot bums place candles at every ruin for the "evil infant"—the Antichrist given birth by Ukraine in the previous version of the poem) informs the grotesque with a tragic and menacing sound, no less expressive than the original elegiac version. In subsequent editions such "paired" verses should be printed next to each other in order to maintain the obvious nature of the dialectic and synthesis of productive, creative efforts and to emphasize

the continuity of their own tradition, read now only by isolated experts of Ilchenko's works.

Despite the rather gloomy thanatology of the first part of *Cities and Islands*, it especially makes the strongest impression, not in the least due to the particular density and laconic nature of poetic expression. An almost complete lack of metaphors, sparse and precise comparisons, a weary aphoristic nature, and a uniquely "novelistic" quality—all these and many other features of Ilchenko's new writing create a surprisingly capacious image of a structured work, which, according to Les Herasymchuk, "grows from late conceptualism and is close to virtual poetry that is slowly replacing postmodernism." However, in the new collection there is no shortage of specific signs of postmodernism, which are profusely scattered in the two following sections "Passage" and "Cities and Islands." This can be the bewitching sound patterning that resembles the magical effect of serial music as well as many eloquent allusions and hidden quotations—as in Kyivan urban folklore, or with sculptural groupings in Madrid—or an intertextual game with poems by William Carlos Williams or Wallace Stevens (most visibly manifested in the poem "How strangely he is mentioned there..."), semi-hints, semi-allusions to Nabokov, Domontovych, Gogol, flashes of youth slang or provocative puns and oxymorons ("Subsequently I began to feel something...", "glamour rustling rapidity...", "why don't you try to paint that way..."). I must admit, after the icy elevated nature of "Night Stations," the transition to colorful descriptions of exotic cities and islands (the cycle "Seven Capitals" and "Seven Islands"), to a nomadic carefree tourist, a gourmet, a lover of life, to the candidness of an expert on countless species of plants, animals and wine is perceived first as unintentional blasphemy or the inadequately planned structure of the book. It was only later, after prolonged thinking and rereading, despite the fact that directly in the text you begin to be inclined toward agreeing with the author's intention: it simply could not have been structured differently. After all, for our secular contemporary belief in the Islands of the Blessed, to where after death a righteous soul departs, is just a beautiful myth, one of many tokens of the ancient past. This belief can call on—like the Egyptian pyramids, "*gray triangles on a colorless sky*." That is why one should seek and find those islands in life, here and now, so that on some La Palma, surrounded by the ocean, one can remember or surmise, confirm and verify with one's own personal experience something that the ancient Orphics, the Indian Brahmins and Egyptian high priests called:

looking at the perfection
of the waves and the sky
of the round island amid the ocean
the local climate
and strong drinks
you begin to guess
in what the perfection
of a person should lie
here and
somewhere (“La Palma”)

The key word in this verse “perfection” is linked to spatial relationships, but it also suggests time coordinates, just imprecisely as a certain final “somewhere.” “Somewhere” anticipates “everywhere and always.” The experience of a good decentered nature, balance, and presence in being is reproduced by “La Palma,” the experience of which is reminiscent of the lesson of mystics of all times, with one substantial caveat: the ecstatic unity with itself and the world is achieved today and is not postponed to the otherworld tomorrow. “He, who thirsts for ‘a bigger life,’ ‘a more intensive life,’ ‘a higher life,’ ‘or a real life,’ sees before himself... a number of non-religious forms of revitalization, which occupy a certain positive legacy of religion: this is art, science, the erotic, travels, corporeal culture, politics, psychotherapy, etc. They all can make their contribution to the reconstruction of that “fullness of life” that in religion was the focus of dreams and memory... A new study of life occurs through the great work of remembering, however, one that not only raises the sludge of the past. “The innermost recollection leads not to a story but to a force. To touch this force means to experience a flood of ecstasy. This experience ends up not in a past but in a rapturous now,”² Peter Sloterdijk has written in *Critique of Cynical Reason* by analyzing these phenomena over which readers of Ilchenko’s poems reflect today.

Is it precisely the “rapturous now” that becomes the main persona in the final chapter of *Cities and Islands* that is realized in the generous flood of the resurrected? the commemorated? feelings seized in

² I’ve opted to quote here from the English translation of Peter Sloterdijk’s *Critique of Cynical Reason*. Michael Eldred trans. Minneapolis-London: U of Minnesota P, 1987: 287.

contemplation-relishing of a kaleidoscopically variegated and in its own way harmonious world. These poems breathe the openness of ocean spaces and immense capitals without losing the characteristic home warmth of realized cherished dreams. The life that flickers in this poetry is unaware of its finite nature—nor does it give it particular significance: “You are left to ascend to death at the final night station.” (“It’s desirable to celebrate your day of death...”).

Life is not the antithesis of death; this line of thought would be too banal and is therefore false. Life comprises death in itself, it grows it like a tiny island amid the never before seen beauty of the ocean—and only thanks to this firmament underfoot does it make sense, in other words, have value. *Cities and Islands* by Oles Ilchenko without excess fuss professes belief in the value of every existence, every memory, every joy, and every death—everywhere and for always. Therefore, you should closely listen to this book—because such belief and similar experience are inherent among us all, and there are myriad opportunities for daily trials.

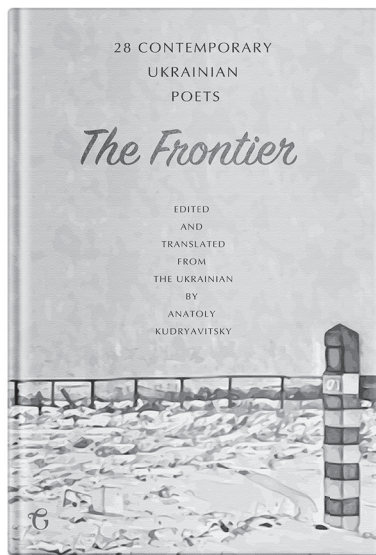
—Kostyantyn Moskalets,
from his book *The Game Continues:
Literary Criticism and Essays*. Kyiv: Fakt, 2006.

—Translated by Michael M. Naydan



The Frontier

28 Contemporary Ukrainian Poets - An Anthology



This anthology reflects a search of the Ukrainian nation for its identity, the roots of which lie deep inside Ukrainian-language poetry. Some of the included poets are well-known locally and internationally; among them are Serhiy Zhadan, Halyna Kruk, Ostap Slyvynsky, Marianna Kijanowska, Oleh Kotsarev, Anna Bagriana and, of course, the living legend of Ukrainian poetry, Vasyl Holoborodko. The next Ukrainian poetic generation also features prominently in the collection. Such poets as Les Beley, Olena Herasymyuk, Myroslav Laiuk, Hanna Malihon, Taras Malkovych, Julia Musakovska, Julia Stahivska and Lyuba Yakimchuk are the ones Ukrainians like to read today, and each of them already has an excellent reputation abroad due to festival appearances and translations to European languages. The work collected here documents poetry in Ukraine responding to challenges of the time by forging a radical new poetic, reconsidering writing techniques and language itself.

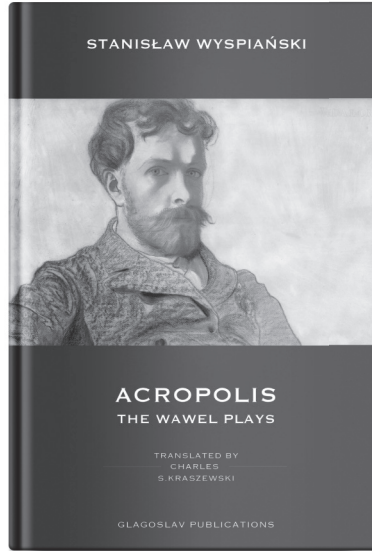
Edited and translated from the Ukrainian by Anatoly Kudryavitsky.

A Bilingual Edition.

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Acropolis – The Wawel Plays

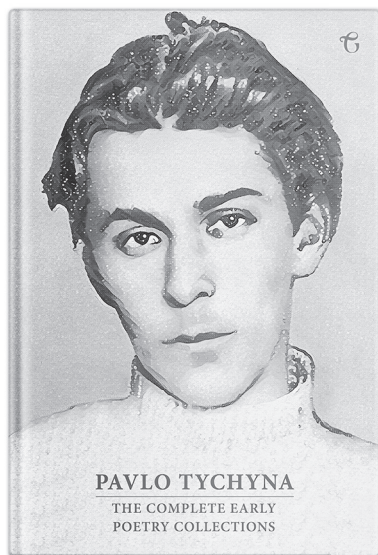
by Stanisław Wyspiański



Stanisław Wyspiański (1869-1907) achieved worldwide fame, both as a painter, and Poland's greatest dramatist of the first half of the twentieth century. *Acropolis: the Wawel Plays*, brings together four of Wyspiański's most important dramatic works in a new English translation by Charles S. Kraszewski. All of the plays centre on Wawel Hill: the legendary seat of royal and ecclesiastical power in the poet's native city, the ancient capital of Poland. In these plays, Wyspiański explores the foundational myths of his nation: that of the self-sacrificial Wanda, and the struggle between King Bolesław the Bold and Bishop Stanisław Szczepanowski. In the eponymous play which brings the cycle to an end, Wyspiański carefully considers the value of myth to a nation without political autonomy, soaring in thought into an apocalyptic vision of the future. Richly illustrated with the poet's artwork, *Acropolis: the Wawel Plays* also contains Wyspiański's architectural proposal for the renovation of Wawel Hill, and a detailed critical introduction by the translator. In its plaited presentation of *Bolesław the Bold* and *Skalka*, the translation offers, for the first time, the two plays in the unified, composite format that the poet intended, but was prevented from carrying out by his untimely death.

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Pavlo Tychyna: The Complete Early Poetry Collections

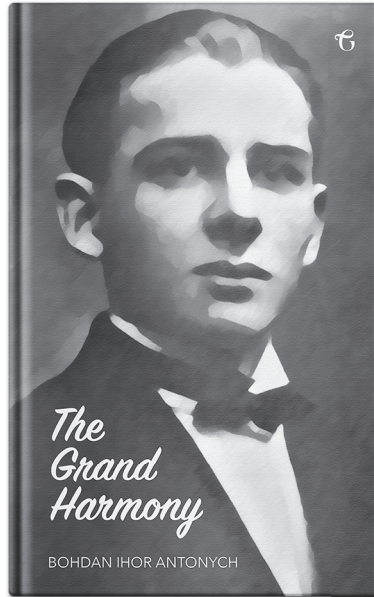


Pavlo Tychyna (1891-1967) is arguably the greatest Ukrainian poet of the twentieth century and has been described as a “tillerman’s Orpheus” by Ukrainian poet and literary critic Vasyl Barka. With his innovative poetics, deep spirituality and creative word play, Tychyna deserves a place among the pantheon of his European contemporaries such as T.S. Eliot, Ezra Pound, Rainer Maria Rilke, Federico Garcia Lorca, and Osip Mandelstam. His early collections *Clarinets of the Sun* (1918), *The Plow* (1920), *Instead of Sonnets and Octaves* (1920), *The Wind from Ukraine* (1924), and his poetic cycle *In the Orchestra of the Cosmos* (1921) mark the pinnacle of his creativity and poetically document the emotional and spiritual toll of the Revolution of 1917 as well as the Civil War and its aftermath in Ukraine.

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The Grand Harmony

by Bohdan Ihor Antonych



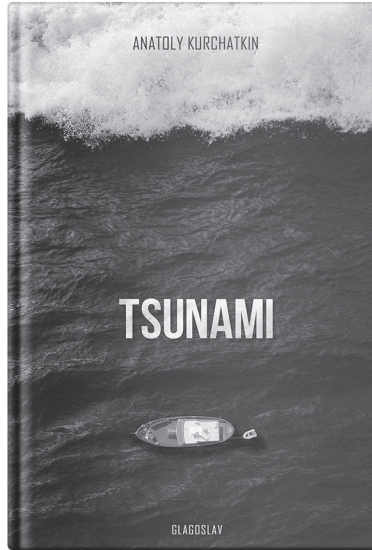
The extraordinarily inventive Ukrainian poet and literary critic Bohdan Ihor Antonych (1909-1937), the son of a Catholic priest, died prematurely at the early age of 28 of pneumonia. Originally from the mountainous Lemko region in Poland, where a variant of Ukrainian is spoken, he was home-schooled for the first eleven years of his life because of frequent illness. He began to write poetry in Ukrainian after he moved to the Western Ukrainian city of Lviv to continue his studies at the University of Lviv.

A collection of poems on religious themes written in 1932 and 1933, *The Grand Harmony* is a subtle and supple examination of Antonych's intimately personal journey to faith, with all its revelatory verities as well as self-questioning and doubt. The collection marks the beginning of Antonych's development into one of the greatest poets of his time.

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Tsunami

by Anatoly Kurchatkin



Anatoly Kurchatkin's novel, set in Russia and Thailand, ranges in time from the Brezhnev years of political stagnation, when Soviet values seemed set to endure for eternity, through Gorbachev's Perestroika and the following tumultuous and disorientating decades. Under the surface, ancient currents are influencing the destinies of mathematician Rad, art gallery owner Jenny, entrepreneur (and spy?) Dron, American investor Chris, redundant Soviet diplomat Yelena and Thai playboy Tony in a rapidly globalizing world of laptop computers, mobile phones, credit cards and international finance. The fourteenth-century battle in which the Prince of Muscovy, inspired by St Sergius of Radonezh, defeated the Golden Horde of the Mongol Empire foreshadows a modern struggle for the soul of Russia.

Tsunami was shortlisted for the Russian Booker Prize and the Russo-Italian Moscow-Penne Prize.

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An avid reader of English-language poets such as William Carlos Williams and Stanley Kunitz, Ilchenko is one of the best Ukrainian poets writing in free verse today. His poetry is associative, flitting, and fragmentary. At times he does not form complete sentences in his poems and links words together into phrases before shifting into another thought or idea. The language of his poetry has a tendency to collapse into itself, often forcing the reader to reevaluate a word or line, to reread a previous word to focus on the poet's inner logic. This fragmentary incompleteness and permeability mimics much the way human consciousness works without the filter of the written communicative convention of sentences and grammatical structure. This "slipperiness" and rapid shifting of voice comprises one of the essential invariants in Ilchenko's poetics. The poet also flaunts many traditional poetic Ukrainian conventions. Like ee cummings he tends to avoid capital letters or punctuation such as exclamation points. One will find only commas and dashes for pauses, and an occasional period in his poems, which do not always end with the finality of that punctuation mark. In doing this, the poet often suggests a fragment or slice of his life broken off on the page and to be continued at some point in time. He is a fascinating poet whose idiom and unique manner of expression translates seamlessly into the poetics of contemporary English.

