



THE
SELECTED
LYRIC
POETRY

— of —

MAKSYM
RYLSKY

GLAGOSLAV PUBLICATIONS

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*Translated from Ukrainian
by Michael M. Naydan*

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by Maksym Rylsky

Translated by **Michael M. Naydan**

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Translated by Michael M. Naydan

With a guest introduction by Maria Zubrytska





Maksym Rylsky

(1895–1964)

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*This edition is dedicated to
Alex and Helen Woskob*

BETWEEN
THE LYRIC AND IDEOLOGY:
THE DUALITY OF MAKSYM
RYLSKY'S POETIC WORLD

*There is a poem by Verlaine
in which the poet asks himself
in bitter remorse: "What have you,
a reckless man, done with your life?"*

Maksym Rylsky

In the history of Ukrainian literature Maksym Rylsky's creative oeuvre comprises an illustrative example of political violence versus poetic talent, when under coercive circumstances the poet's vision of the world breaks up in two: into a lyrical perception of the world on one hand and into an ideological one on the other. The best proof of this dichotomy or split of the dimension of Maksym Rylsky's creative imagination may be the structural and semiotic cartography not solely of all his works, but of the titles of all his thirty-five collections of poetry published during his lifetime as well. The very number of his collections of poetry alone indicates a certain obsession with the ardent zeal of the poet to adhere to his principle of compensation

or a symmetric balancing of coerced ideological involvement with the unconstrained vital force of the lyrical word no matter what. In this respect Maksym Rylsky is indeed the most paradoxical Ukrainian poet, whose answer to political violence was a lyric explosion, whose mission apparently was escape from his ultimate failure both as a Person and as a Poet.

The early poetry collections of Maksym Rylsky are characterized by a neo-romanticism that flows into Symbolist poetics, which captivated the poet under the influence of the French Symbolists Baudelaire, Rimbaud, Mallarme, and Verlaine as well as the Russian Symbolists Blok and Annensky. The poet supplemented his neo-romantic and Symbolist predilections with his fascination with folk songs as well as with his interest in the principles of musical organization of poetic texts. For this reason, his sonnets and octaves have the feel of songs. In his subsequent collections Maksym Rylsky prefers classical poetic forms: the tercet (*terza rima*), the octave and sonnet, and different metric feet from the hexameter and iamb to *vers libre* appear in his poetry. Owing to such a wide range of different styles and poetics in the texts of Maksym Rylsky, the Ukrainian word acquired a new resonance. Already in 1925 Mykola Zerov, one of the most interesting Ukrainian theoreticians of literature and Neoclassicist poets, underscored the dominance of the features of the Neoclassicist style in the poet's oeuvre of that time. In particular, Mykola Zerov emphasized the equilibrium and clarity of form, exceptional melodiousness, the combination of ingenuousness with elegance along with an aphoristic nature. This prominent literary theoretician underscores the refinement and at the same

time sophistication of the architectonics of the poet's lyric texts, his natural simplicity in the creation of poetic images-reincarnations, including self-metamorphosis and self-transformation.¹ This observation is particularly important for the understanding of the radical self-metamorphoses in Maksym Rylsky's oeuvre under the ideological tension of the repressive Stalinist regime.

Maksym Rylsky as a lover of life, who observed the beauty of nature with enchanted eyes and who, with a pure and almost childlike rapture celebrated it in his poetic images, rich in associations and personifications, managed in his early poetic oeuvre to grant the status of event to the most prosaic of things, and to transform the most ordinary scene into an artistic poetic canvas that fascinates the eye and ear. The synthesis of his color palette, the phonetic melodiousness of polyphonic sound, and the ability to evoke tactile sensation in the reader comprise the most characteristic features of Maksym Rylsky's poetic masterpieces. His creative work is abundant with examples of this artistic synthesis; the motifs of the autumnal garden with ripe apples ("These apples ripened so prematurely," "The apples ripened, the apples are red") and the subtle poetization of the image of grapes and roses deserve particular attention. In Maksym Rylsky's poetic garden "real" becomes "abstract" and becomes elevated to the highest form of aesthetization and vice versa. The notion of beauty is always deeply rooted in the the hard work ethic involved in tending a garden well:

1 Zerov, Mykola. *Literaturnyi shliakh Maksyma Ryl's'koho: Tvory v 2-kh tomakh*, II (Kyiv: Dnipro Publishers, 1990).

He cherishes his little garden as he would cherish a child
He talks to it with tenderness every day;
He digs around and ties up raspberry branches,
He cuts dead branches off cherry trees.

or the extended metaphorization of the image of
language as a grapevine:

Cherish your language,
As you would cherish a sprout of the vine;
Weed your garden
Carefully and diligently.
Let language be
Purer than a tear...

Perhaps the poet consciously chooses this very poetization of the natural connection between the meaning of the Latin word "cultura" (to cultivate) and its modern meaning as a stage of human civilization established by the algorithms of human behavior and by the symbolic structures that make this behavior meaningful and significant. In the poet's artistic presentation this formula of transformation of the "culture" concept has a masterfully unsophisticated metaphorical articulation:

Human happiness has two wings:
Roses and grapes – both beautiful and useful

In this context we should underscore the polysemantic symbol of grapes with their rich variational component, which, in Maksym Rylsky's creative imagination, has the very significant connotation of "usefulness – sacrifice,"

which, at the same time, is characteristic of the poet's oeuvre. The frequent characterization of the symbolic image of grapes in the poet's creative oeuvre, the dynamics of its modification from one collection of poetry to another, gives us grounds to assume that this image occupies a very privileged place in the axes of Maksym Rylsky's poetic thinking. Beginning with his early collections of poetry, grape symbolism as well as the symbol of the rose or blooming garden is predominant in world baroque poetry in general and in Ukrainian poetry in particular; suffice to mention *The Garden of Divine Songs* by Skovoroda. Mykola Zerov was the first to comment on Rylsky's predilection for neobaroque forms, for its syntax and symbolism, along with the distinctive neoromantic and Symbolist aspirations of the poet: "first he will flow in the poetic lines with a capricious stream of the nearly colloquial syntax of Mickiewicz ('The Boat,') then he will take a motif of Franko and decore and debaroque the strict architectonics of its monumental masses beyond recognition") ("Wanderers").²

The cartography of Maksym Rylsky's poetry collections clearly demarcates the lines between exclusively lyric titles and ideologically engaged or conditionally neutral titles. Let us take for example the poet's early collections of poetry such as *On White Islands* (1910), *Under Autumn Stars* (1918), *The Blue Distance* (1922), *Poems* (1925), *Through a Storm and Snow* (1925), *The Thirteenth Spring* (1926), the titles of which reflect the neoromantic and Symbolist disposition and aspirations of the poet. Such poetry collections as

2 *Ibid.*, 561.

The Sound and Echo (1929) and *Where Roads Meet* (1929), which were called Maksym Rylsky's "poetic death" by Jurij Lavrinenko), can be considered the beginning of the transformation of the poet's conception of the world.³

By the way, the titles of these collections of poetry alone comprise a distinct marker of the motif of the harmony and possible union of two parallel worlds: the world of the creative imagination and the other not very appealing world of reality. This statement requires a brief contextual explanation. In the 1920s of the past century Rylsky was a member of the group of talented poets and literary critics that is known in the history of Ukrainian literature as the school of Ukrainian Neoclassicist writers. Besides Rylsky, the school is represented by Mykola Zerov, Mykhailo Drai-Khmara, Pavlo Fylypovych, and Osvald Burghardt (whose pen name was Yuri Klen). Neoclassicist writers considered themselves aesthetes with a distinctive predisposition for classical simplicity, exalted feelings, a deep insight into the philosophical essence of existence, and the refinement of poetic language and advanced excellence in poetic versification. Numerous ideological adversaries of Neoclassicist aesthetics accused its proponents of deliberate escape from reality, of a reluctance to celebrate the achievements of the Bolshevik Revolution and to reflect on the burning issues of post-revolutionary reality. Perhaps this is the reason why Maksym Rylsky responded to these straightforward and tactless accusations in his own way in "a chapter from the poem 'Sashko'" that contains evident ironic digressions

3 Lavrinenko, Jurij. *Liryka i lirychnyi epos Maksyma Ryl's'koho*, Vol. 2 (Kyiv: Ukrains'ke slovo, 1994): 94.

with a distinct critique of the political, socio-cultural and literary atmosphere in Ukraine at that time:

I know every single world,
And these worlds are sacred,
But time after time we make them
A sacrifice to our secret goal.

In the late 1920s clouds gathered over all those who had a clear-cut artistic, public and socio-political position, and who were not afraid to defend it openly. The ten-year period of rapid development of Ukrainian culture, literature and art that is known as the "Ukrainian Renaissance" became the subject of severe criticism by Stalin and his menials. Shortly thereafter staged trials took place, the scenario of which was accurately described by Franz Kafka in his novel *The Trial*. They were directed exclusively at the most prominent and talented representatives of the Ukrainian intellectual elite. Maksym Rylsky was the first of the Neoclassicist writers who became a victim of Stalinist repressions. On his birthday on March 19, 1931 he was arrested on the preposterous charge of "membership in a counter-revolutionary organization." The poet was behind bars until August 1931. He was forced to give testimony against himself every day or sometimes even twice a day. These kinds of "testimony" and "self-denunciations" under intense psychological and often physical pressure comprise a characteristic phenomenon of the Stalinist period and unequivocally would require separate interdisciplinary research. The records of the investigation of his case (case #272 from the KGB archives) were first published in the journal *Kyiv* (#2, 1996) sixty years after

the fact. In August 1931 Maksym Rylsky was released from prison due to a lack of evidence on his purported “terrorist” activity. The “coercively-voluntary” poetic celebration of Party ideology and of the workers’ achievements of the Soviet people along with the status of an official Soviet writer comprised the price Rylsky paid for this freedom. This price would not have been so dramatic if not for the fact that Maksym Rylsky was the only Neoclassicist writer who remained alive and who subordinated his muse to the dictatorship of the Party. The majority of his friends, particularly Rylsky’s sworn spiritual brother Mykola Zerov from the Ukrainian school of Neoclassicist writers were repressed and died in Stalinist labor camps. The collection of poetry *The Sign of Libra* (1932), in which the poet definitively switches from the poetics of his prior texts to the emphatic glorification of the achievements of the Party, became the ultimate turning point and the final break from his prior texts. Such poetry collections as *Kyiv* (1935), *Summer* (1936), *Ukraine* (1938), and *Grape Harvest* (1940) illustrate the dramatic plummeting of the poet’s lyric talent in the context of the most tragic events in the history of Ukraine: the inhuman manmade famine of 1933 and the Stalinist repressions that were aimed at the extirpation of the Ukrainian intellectual elite. During the most sorrowful days when an ideological plague was being spread all over Ukrainian towns and villages, inundating them with unbearable suffering and deadly terror, Maksym Rylsky wrote and published one collection of poetry after another as if in the frenzied rhythm of a “dance macabre.” When the muse of the aristocrats of the Ukrainian spirit grew silent, the official Communist Party mouthpieces would “force rhyme.” However disappointing that may have been,

Maksym Rylsky, one of the most talented Ukrainian poets of the twentieth century who, as a result of political circumstances, failed to realize his full potential as a Poet.

Despite his falling into the abysses of ideological traps, Rylsky continually strove to sublimate the deep lyricism of his view and perception of the world into lines of poetry. The poem-vision “Thirst” comprises a characteristic example of such resistance to circumstances. Although it is disreputably dedicated to the “25th anniversary of Soviet rule in our glorious Ukraine,” it is, in fact, modern in its form, and it encloses the text with a manifold system of explicit and implicit meaning. Of course, the surface of the text contains an ideological outline that is thin as a veil along with a curt glorification of the Party and its leaders, but in its depth the text comprises an artistic audiovisual composition of three voices and three silhouettes amplified with the themes of a fairytale and a “dream – beyond the dream.” Interestingly, ideological motifs alternate with lyric ones in these themes, and the latter often resonate with the bitter acknowledgement of a devastated garden and a desolate home.

Oh, geese, young geese!
Descend today to take them on your wings!
The earthly children! But no! In vain! In vain!
My garden is a wasteland, my home a prison!

One can observe the poet’s ambivalence between ideological poetry reflecting on topical issues of the day and his lyric sketches and confessions in the

collections of poetry published in the 1940s and 1950s, such as *For the Homeland* (1941), *A Word about My Mother* (1942), *Weapon of Light* (1942), *Thirst* (1943), *The Burning Bush* (1944), *The Journey Back to Youth* (1944), *The Chalice of Friendship* (1946), *Fidelity* (1947), *Under the Stars of the Kremlin* (1953), *On the Resurrected Land* (1956), and *Autumn in Holosiyiv* (1959). In addition to these collections of poetry, Maksym Rylsky published four books of lyro-epic long poems, a series of translations from Slavic and West European literatures and scholarly works on linguistics and literary criticism. Among the most famous of Rylsky's translations are *Pan Tadeusz* by Adam Mickiewicz, *Hernani* by Victor Hugo, *Cyrano De Bergerac* by Edmond Rostand, *The Maid of Orleans* by Voltaire, *King Lear* and *The Twelfth Night* by William Shakespeare, and *Eugene Onegin* by Aleksandr Pushkin. The Communist Party generously rewarded its official poet with lofty titles and state prizes. In 1943 he was elected an academician; in 1943 and 1950 he received the State Prize of the USSR; in 1944-1964 Rylsky served as the director of the Institute of Art, Folklore Studies and Ethnology of the National Academy of Sciences of Ukraine; and in 1960 he was awarded the Lenin Prize.

In contemporary Ukrainian literary criticism scholars do not show particular interest in the figure and creative oeuvre of Maksym Rylsky. There are several reasons for this. In the first place, it has been a matter of priority to fill in gaps in Ukrainian literary history with the rehabilitation of those poets who were annihilated by the brutal Stalinist ideology machine and whose works were obliterated completely from the consciousness of the reader in view of various taboos and prohibitions. The vivid memory of those thousands and thousands

of Ukrainian intellectuals who died a martyr's death in Stalinist concentration camps may comprise another factor. With this in view, the ideological conformism of those who managed to survive cannot be forgotten; because of that they are considered antagonists of the victims of Stalinist repression. The poet, whom Ukrainian literature of the twentieth century had been anticipating, became the victim of self-transformation and self-metamorphosis. As the voice of damnation of his poem-vision "Thirst," Rylsky doomed himself to eternal duality. At least, in that split of his poetic soul, one of the voices not only did not sing out of tune, but it reached the heights of poetic brilliance. Let us listen closely to that voice and open the lyric texts of the poet despite prevailing literary fashion. The poetry of Maksym Rylsky is still awaiting its attentive reader whom the poet had been anticipating for a long time and whom he addressed ardently and desperately, almost on the verge of his soul's scream:

Reader! Look more closely with what
I comforted my song,
And perhaps then you will hear something
That is more than just sounds and words.

You will hear in my song
The echo of your own hopes...
Reader! Take a look, give a smile:
I am yours, I am not dead, I am alive!

—Maria Zubrytska, Ivan Franko Lviv National University
—Translated by Olha Tytarenko, University of Nebraska

TRANSLATOR'S INTRODUCTION

Two things struck me on my first visit to the Rylsky Museum at the edge of the luxuriant oak trees of the Holosiiv Forest in the southwestern part of the city of Kyiv — one obvious, the other a bit subtler. As I passed by a small lake with paddleboats to my right, I came up to a seemingly endless number of long platform-like, concrete steps, each about a meter long. This was the only encumbrance to reach his house-museum at the top of the hill. Even if you're in good physical condition, it's still quite a few huffs and puffs to reach that road at the top. Perhaps that is one reason why Rylsky chose to live there after his arrest in 1931 — the secret police may have felt that the near vertical walk was not worth the trouble. I have been told that during his arrest Rylsky was paraded for four hours along the city streets with his arms forcibly raised above his head, so that everyone could glimpse the famous poet—and thus be warned by his fate. After the public humiliation, Rylsky was, fortunately, released, only to live in fear for most of the rest of his days. Despite the constant psychological terror of impending arrest, while living in Holosiiv, he could enjoy the beautiful oak forest as well as a modicum of peace and security provided by the seemingly endless steps. What was his crime? He was a lyric poet who never wrote any political verse. That was

more than enough to be an enemy of the state in Stalin's time, particularly given the fact that Rylsky was a great poet who happened to write in Ukrainian.

It has been revealed in now open NKVD-KGB archives that over half of the 1500 or so writers purged by Stalin in the 1920s and 1930s were Ukrainian. Rylsky somehow managed to survive while many others did not. Perhaps it was partly his fame, the exalted role that poets play in Ukrainian culture; perhaps it was his acquiescence to the state imposed literary doctrine of socialist realism in the 1930s. The second, and a quite telling feature for me in the Rylsky Museum is a small figurine on Rylsky's writing desk — three monkeys hearing, speaking and seeing no evil. This was Rylsky's obvious path to salvation in impossible times. But in following the advice of the figurines, one also pays a certain price: Rylsky's output of significant lyric verse plummeted except for a few long poems penned during the wartime period of relaxed censorship, and a handful of inspired lyrics toward the end of his life in the late 1950s and early 1960s.

It is particularly impressive when you take note of the fact that Rylsky mastered the art of poetry at the precocious age of fifteen with a fully developed and mature poetic voice. Rylsky is a master particularly of two genres — the intimate love lyric and nature poetry. He would often combine both elements of his art in a single verse with the same kind of emotional reverence for his beloved that he had for nature. Both love and nature poetry for him comprise a vehicle to express a heightened sense of awareness of being, a hyperconsciousness of the joy of existence reflected in the surrounding world. Rylsky is one of those poets who comprehends that nature can profoundly transform our inner world, and that we

as human beings are codependent on it as a source of sustenance and inspiration. It is, simply, an integral part of our soul. Rylsky also has a third focus in his poetry that serves as a steady source of support for him — the literary tradition and its thoughtful contributions to the development of civilization. In his poetry in the Neoclassicist tradition you will find embedded as well as open references (epigraphs, dedications, and poems) to Homer, Sappho, Dante, Lamartine, Annensky, Nietzsche, Heine, Shakespeare, Baudelaire, and many others. For him the present can not be the present without the past. You will also observe a great reverence for contemporaries of Rylsky in his poetry, particularly for Mykola Zerov and Pavlo Tychna. Another of Rylsky's other long-abiding interests – native Ukrainian folklore and songs – can be found in the long poem “Thirst,” which combines elements of the lyric with the epic in the poet's entreaty to save his homeland from destruction during World War II.

Rylsky was truly a Parnassian poet of extraordinary talent who was born as a poet and not made. This collection hopefully provides a representative selection of the best that his poetry has to offer.

– Michael M. Naydan
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of Ukrainian Studies
The Pennsylvania State
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ON WHITE
ISLANDS
(1910)



A SLEEPLESS NIGHT

It's stifling, quiet and dark everywhere,
The darkness strangles me, an evil darkness,
The bright world is gone... Where are you, people,
Where have you disappeared? You're gone, all gone...

Threatening walls stand in silence,
Apparitions twist in a wild dance...
Where are you, beautiful one, where are you, happy one,
In the glow of beauty as if in an elegant wreath?

It's stifling... Open a window? No — quietly
Azure dreams fly into the window,
There's no place in the heart for them...
My heart broods and cries.

It's stifling and quiet... Where are you,
Enchanted dreams? Let one fly to me just for a moment!
Soulless walls, mute walls —
Move apart! And set me free!

As the pink evening descends onto the earth
I step out alone into a grove,
I'll look as the sun half asleep turns
The entire weary, worn-out land to gold.

Leaves will whisper a wondrous fairy tale,
One that is heard from the clouds,
And dreams will take wing over bright stars
To a far-off land of enchantments.

On silken wings, a bright sky-blue,
I'll rise up with them and fly off.
And once again in my thoughts there will be
No agony, no suffering, no weeping...

Maksym Rylsky (1895-1964) is one of the most outstanding Ukrainian poets of the the 20th century and master of the genres of the modern sonnet and the long narrative poem. He was closely associated with the Neoclassicist group of Ukrainian poets, who employed traditional poetic forms with rhyme and meter, wrote in a clear and accessible contemporary idiom, and often referenced Ancient Greek and Roman mythology as well as numerous other authors from world literature in their poetry. Rylsky was also a prolific translator from English, French, German, and Polish as well as a folklore and literary scholar, who worked most of the earlier part of his life as a teacher of philology. He published his first book of poetry at the precocious age of fifteen – *On White Islands* in 1910. His other early books of poetry include *The Edge of the Forest: Idylls* (1918), *Under Autumn Stars* (1918), *The Blue Distance* (1922), *Long Poems* (1924), *Through a Storm and Snow* (1925), *Beneath Autumn Stars* (1926), *Thirteenth Spring* (1926), *Where Roads Meet* (1929), and *Echo and Re-echo* (1929). Rylsky gained considerable popularity among the Ukrainian reading public for his neo-romantic contemplative musings and intimate lyrical poetry that focused on love, life and nature.

