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THE PROSE AND DRAMA OF AN OUTSTANDING POET, VOŁHA HAPIJEVA

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ABSTRACT: This article reviews the prose and drama of Vołha Hapiejeva up to 2018. The main themes of her work are: feminism, gender and sexual relations in a patriarchal society, and also various aspects of contemporary life. A Candidate of Science, she brings into her works, humorously, a variety of linguistic and grammatical forms. Her work is notable for its strong use of imagery, lively dialogues and many, especially in the plays, much absurdity. Without doubt Hapiejeva is not only one of boldest and most original of the promising Belarusian poets of our day, but also a very talented prose writer and dramatist.

Vołha Hapiejeva (b. 1982) is an active scholar, as well as one of the leading Belarusian poets of today, with strong principles and beliefs as well as enjoyment of fantasy. She has, however, also made original and highly imaginative contributions to prose and drama, where her notable individuality of style, thematic variety and stylistic mastery combines bizarre and biting wit with at times almost casual pathos. It is with these two genres that this review of her work up to 2018 is concerned. A prominent critic (Kiślicyna 2006, 135) has suggested that this writer is very close to her heroines; in writing about the novel and plays, however, I have consistently used the word ‘narrator’, albeit assuming that the narrator is female.

1. Prose

It has been suggested that Hapiejeva’s work in prose, particularly, her novel, stand out favourably from her early poetry (Šaŭliakova 2005, 113ff.). Whilst greatly admiring this writer’s work as a whole, the present author does not necessarily agree with this opinion, although he shares the critic’s great admiration for her prose.

Our review of Hapiejeva’s prose begins with a rather typical reference to language and grammar, it is somewhat unexpected to find apples associated with modern linguistics in a brief piece, ‘Jablyki, albo Hienieratyŭnaja hramatyka’ (Apples, or Generative grammar), which ends with two humorous rhetorical questions:

Ці сапраўды ўсё можна звесці да пэўнага мінімальнага набору аперацый?
 Ці сапраўды ўсё можна звесці да яблыка? (Hapiejeva 2017, 44)
 (Can everything really be reduced to a certain minimal selection of operations? Can
 everything really be reduced to an apple?)

The novel in modern and post-modern literature is one of the most fluid of all literary genres, and it is hardly surprising that a poet who early in her creative career took part in the Bum-Bam-Lit movement, should make a most unusual and original contribution to this genre. Her prose work to date comprises the novel, 'Rekanstrukcyja nieba (Raman u detaliach – Detał u ramane)' (Reconstruction of the sky (A novel in details – Detail in a novel)) (Hapiejeva 2003, 91-139) and the already mentioned collection of essays, (V)iadomyja historyji,¹ as well a charming children's book in prose, which will be mentioned later; a brief further prosaic element is 'MANIFEST vieršaŭ' (A MANIFESTO of poems) in her second book of poetry, Niaholieny ranak (An unshaven morning) (Hapiejeva 2008, 53).

The novel begins with a Warning (*Papiaredžańnie*) telling readers of either sex in a humorous way what they may or may not do. Amongst the former are writing while reading, and imagining themselves in the shoes of the main characters, taking part in the (in)equality of society by fierce criticism or by lofty odes or use certain phrases as incantations against toothache, unhappy love or the evil eye. On the other hand not recommended are learning phrases by heart or reading them at large public gatherings. The novel itself consists of twenty-five more or less discrete parts (referred to as Details) randomly numbered from 0 to 83. Some critics feel that this loose, fragmentary, collage-like form gives the possibility of extending the novel in future (Šaŭliakova 2005, 113), and it certainly seems that the order could be changed, although each Detail seems to be very carefully constructed, despite variegated content, and some relate to each other, be it by ideas, themes, narratorial voice or other elements.

The first of them (Detail 21), like several of the subsequent ones, contains a number of features familiar from Hapiejeva's verse: synecdoche, personification and a strong feminist sensibility, in this case awareness of the 'male gaze'. The sun descends somewhere near her breast, and another, presumably male, figure wants to draw a line straight from her nipple to the pupil of his eye. Towards the end of the piece the personified nipple feels itself important, self-confident and proud. It or she knew that somebody would certainly kiss, lick, fondle, and perhaps even bite it. The final line, however changes the tone: 'Такой самаўпэўненасці заўсёды бракавала мне' (I always lacked such self-confidence, Hapiejeva 2003, 93). The next Detail (4), like several others, is to do with dreams and memory, the narration moving unobtrusively between two people, with references to such cultural

¹ The pun in this title between known and edible cannot be translated closely, although a loose approximation might be (Cr)edible stories.

figures as Borges, Sartre and Henry Moore. The narrator who elsewhere sometimes seems attracted to women as well as men here shows tenderness towards a male figure, Eugene, who is so soft that eggs would not break under his feet (Hapiejewa 2003, 95). In Detail 15 there is a choice between going to bed and getting up. In her flat there is a man, injured by hooligans, who likes listening to Chopin, but the narrator's arms get tired by playing for him. He insensitively asks why she does not take in a young man, in the tone of why not take in an animal; she thinks that all animals should live in freedom and, in any case, as she notes dismissively, her flat is on the sixth floor (Hapiejewa 2003, 116).

Angels appear in several of Hapiejewa's poems and not always in romantic let alone religious form as, for example, in 'špinami ũ šnieh padajem...' (we fall on our backs into the snow) where they have changed into mufti at the end of a war (Hapiejewa 2003, 63). In Detail 16 the angels are wingless, and, in a somewhat whimsical scene of youthful imagination, a child collects hens' feathers (thirty-seven of them, to be precise), fluffy ones like little rabbits and sharp black ones like soldiers (another of this writer's recurrent images). They are placed in a tea jar, and she goes for a bike ride, but it is a curiously expressionless day, and she does not know whether she is riding or being drawn along. In Detail 31 the atmosphere is quite different. Late for an appointment with a worldly angel (who smokes, for instance), she is embarrassed by the angel's demonstratively loud voice, and escapes by thinking of Mary Queen of Scots. This turns into a short essay on the Queen, complete with a portrait and footnotes, which ends with the narrator's opinion that the image of her presented by Schiller and Zweig was idealized (Hapiejewa 2003, 118-20).

Love, loneliness and (un)faithfulness are recurrent elements in Hapiejewa's novel, just as they are in her verse. Detail 2 discusses time zones and their relevance to faithfulness, concluding that any betrayal is only to time itself:

Мы живем у розных краінах і ў розных часавых паясах. Калі тут 10, там яшчэ 9. Так што ў мяне ў запасе гадзіна. Я вучуся не хлусіць. Хоць, калі ня хлушчу я, абавзкова знойдзецца нехто, хто будзе хлусіць мне. Я старанна праектую свае сказы, нібыта архітэктар, асабліва, калі кажу, што ты чалавек, якога кахаю, пазьбягаючы пры гэтым слова «адзіны», якое пазбавіць мяне магчымасьці будаваць іншыя палацы ў гонар іншых чалавекаў, якіх я кахаю. Да таго ж, калі я цалуюся зь не-табой, гэта адбываецца на гадзіну раней. У тваім часе я заўсёды шчырая й заўсёды з табой. Так што, калі ты вырашыш зьехаць у Аўстралію, 6 месяцаў вольнага жыцця мне гарантаваныя. Як гарантаванае табе маё вечнае чаканьне, бо адзіны, каму я здраджваю – гэта час. (Hapiejewa 2003, 98)

(We live in different countries and in different time zones. When it is 10 here, there it is still 9. So I have an hour to spare. // I am learning not to lie. Although, when I do not lie myself, there will always be someone else who lies to me. I plan my sentences carefully, like an architect, especially when I say that you are the person I love, avoiding the word 'alone', which would deprive me of the possibility of building other palaces

in honour of other people I love. Moreover, when I kiss someone who is not you, it happens an hour earlier. At that time I am always sincere and always with you. So that if you decide to go to Australia, I am guaranteed six months of free life, just as you are guaranteed my eternal waiting, because the only thing I betray is time)

A quite different view of time, geography and love is found in Detail 83, where the narrator appears to regard her lovers as patients, comparing the geography of the city to her own body. At first the patients can find her intimate parts without maps, but later, touched by the attentions of veterans of love, she goes out and finds that the names of the streets are wound around the names of her patients, noting in her diary that they particularly like the word 'tomorrow', although there can only be today (Hapiejeva 2003, 135). In Detail 8 she apparently makes a reference to the poem that brought her fame and notoriety, 'na padlozie vandrujuć papiery' (on the floor papers are wandering about, Hapiejeva 2003, 18), when she is in the company of a rather domineering male acquaintance who both disgusts and attracts her: she thinks that he suspects that his coffee has sperm in it, something she denies vehemently (Hapiejeva 2003, 101-02). In Detail 13 the narrator disturbs the regular life and peace of another man by her violence to him and his beloved pet animals, leading him, after a long silence during which she feels herself a little slut, to make a humble but devastating declaration: 'мене так сорамна, але я не кахаю цябе' (I am so sorry, but I do not love you, Hapiejeva 2003, 104). The result is a string of disparate numbers and letters on the page (can this be related to the numeration of the Details?), followed by the narrator's collapse in pieces on the carpet.

It is not only calm and orderliness that disturbs the narrator, but more generally the standardization of life that she sees around her. In Detail 12, set in the metro (public transport is a frequent setting for her thoughts), she finds herself sitting opposite a statistically typical family: father, mother and daughter. She begins to observe the man closely, thinking about how the child was physically conceived, and how empty their faces are. Nevertheless, she imagines snatching the man away, concluding 'Дасканалнасьць не для мяне' (Perfection is not for me, Hapiejeva 2003, 127). Standardization is also to the fore in Detail 72 in which the narrator sees a notice put up by a woman with countless children, seeking a quiet corner for them all. This makes her feel that she too would like a corner for herself and starts to think of how large her own family is growing, with all her lovers who address her by a huge number of names related to Volha (Volia, Olia and so on). She hopes to find a flat and puts up her own public notice, but soon runs into the desire of society to standardize everything:

Толькі перакроч ганак – ты адразу адчуеш як усе й усё прапахла адзіным жаданьнем – уціснуць усіх у нейкія памеры, нумары, знакі, лічбы, адрасы, гендэры, статусы, іміджы, не ведаю я, які ў мяне памер. (Hapiejeva 2003, 112)

(As soon as you cross the threshold you immediately feel that everyone and everything smells of a single wish: to squeeze everybody into certain sizes, numbers, signs, figures, addresses, genders, statuses, images. I do not know what my size is.)

The narrator continues by reflecting on the life of a pretty saleswoman outside her shop, but the main theme is the standardization of everyone in life, epitomized by the measuring and fitting in a clothes shop: ‘Тут галоўнае працэс, а ня вынік’ (Here the main thing is the process, not the result, Hapiejeva 2003, 113). Her conclusion is indeed depressing:

Але выкруціцца немагчыма. Цябе ўсё адно заклісфікуюць, дадуць асабісты нумар, падбяруць адпаведнае азначэнне, падпішуць цану, знайдуць пакупніка, па-святочнаму запакуюць і адправяць. Куды? Куды-небудзь, лёс – ён як і нумар – ва ўсіх свой асабісты. (Hapiejeva 2003, 113)

(But there is no way to get out of it, They will classify you anyhow, they will give you a personal number, will choose a suitable significance, will find a customer, pack you up in festive style and send you off. Where to? Anywhere, fate is like a number – everyone has their personal one.)

The pretty saleswoman is not the only female to draw the narrator’s attention in this novel. Detail 28 describes a kindergarten attraction towards a child of a Russian mother and Jewish father who has an exotic name. She fantasizes about marrying her and living together when they grow up. The details are already being planned: ‘Я прыляплю сабе вусы падчас рэгістрацыі, і ніхто не адгадаецца, што я – гэта я’ (I shall stick a moustache onto myself during the registration, and nobody will guess that I am who I am, Hapiejeva 2003, 129). Another example of gender-bending is found in Detail 34 where the narrator entertainingly describes being willing to imagine a partner (who has recommended far too many books to her) in the lotus position. Here are the opening lines:

Я згодная ўявіць цябе ў позе лётаса пры адной умове: ты маеш быць асобай мужчынскага полу, бо цябе-жанчыну я ўяўляла бы ў іншай прасторава-часавай камбінацыі. Да таго ж зь цябе астрымалася б ня самая лепшая паненка. Не хавайся, вопратка табе не спатрэбіцца... (Hapiejeva 2003, 103)

(I am willing to imagine you in the lotus position on one condition: you must be a person of the male sex, for I should imagine you as a woman in a different combination of space and time. Moreover, you would not make the best little lady. Don’t hide yourself, you won’t need your clothes...)

Before continuing this theme, it is worth reiterating that in the work of Volha Hapiejeva, despite her sometimes graphic description of physical relationships

and the female body,² for her narrator here, as for the heroine of her poetry, sex, whatever its orientation, is far less important than questions of gender. Through the narrator of the novel, she shows a strong feeling for physical sensations, from language to touch, sights and sounds, as well as to smells. Before turning to two Details that seem less fantastical than others, reminding one critic of a Bildungsroman (Šaūliakova 114) (Details 0, 28, 83 and 9), Detail 45 should be mentioned, describing as it does a meeting with a mysteriously attractive woman on a trolleybus who is compared to a smelly rather than fragrant white flower (Hapiejeva 2003, 110). There is, however, nothing remotely pleasant about the smells in Detail 0, which describes the fourteen-year-old narrator voluntarily visiting an old woman, although she is not her granny, and it is difficult for the teenager not to wonder why her husband does not look after her. The fantastic description of the smells and the medicines lead her to ask herself whether she has acquired her own smell yet. The story moves on to her at the age of nineteen, when she rejects forthrightly boys who talk about her in the abstract; when one of them says she smells of milk because she is so young, she declares that she does not like milk and drinks coffee. She lies on the floor with her drink and reads a book called *Perversions* until she is interrupted by a potted plant falling to the floor. Such random sequences of events are far from rare in the novel and, indeed, the plays.

Detail 6, which appears to end in the world of recognizable reality, opens boldly with the repeated words: 'Кожны дзень я кагосьці зьядаю' (Every day I shall eat somebody, Hapiejeva 2003, 106). Although she does not care a jot that nobody reproaches her for this crime, she nonetheless becomes a nervous wreck, unable to hold her cutlery and so on. She wishes a certain Heinrich could help, but he himself is quite hopeless, unable to open a jar of jam without falling into depression. Despite all this, the narrator allows herself a few musical jokes, beginning with *lia-nota* (laziness, which can also be read as the sixth note of the solfeggio, 'la'). She appears to fall asleep after turning on a tap in the bathroom, imagining an ocean from which she saves a foreign beauty, whose grateful father arranges a marriage between them (Hapiejeva 2003, 107). As she wakes from this exciting dream, she is back to a banal conversation and children's songs. Next the narrator seems to be a teacher who sometimes goes to the cinema with her postgraduates; she thinks that one of them may be in love with her, but her conviction that children can be very cruel usually makes these young men go away (Hapiejeva 2003, 108).

Detail 54 describes the death of a tree to which she had always spoken and which in turn spoke and listened to her. The narrator imagines the trees as lovers, or at least gossips, deciding that men are more inclined to spread stories than

² In her openness about her body she resembles another, very different, young poet Valžyna Mort (b. 1981).

women and, in any case, people are crazy. There seems to be an echo here of one of her poems, 'Zryvajusia...' (I fall off..., Hapiejeva 2003, 53).

The excerpts from the novel given so far have shown tremendous thematic variety, both between the Details and also within many of them. *Rekanstrukcyja nieba* is a very literary work, as we are reminded by the opening of Detail 3a: 'Новы дзень (пераклад з ангельск.)' (A new day [translation from Eng.], Hapiejeva 2003, 114). Each of this piece's six paragraphs begins with 'Ад каго' (From whom), comprising excerpts from a correspondence. In the first of them she knows the announcement has come from a woman, and hopes to find out more about her, asking her to write again, mindful nonetheless of all the viruses coming from nearby Russia. The third letter, addressed to Volia concerns her depression and advises her not to pay so much attention to other people – some flowers are destined to bloom in isolation. The fourth begins breezily: '...хай, sweety, як там маешся?' (Hi, sweetie, how's things?), worrying about why the narrator is depressed – is she to blame? Life working in Macdonalds, she reminds her correspondent, is no joke. This is followed by another letter speaking of her illness and disquiet that 'our Vital' seems in no hurry to return from the United States, and hoping that he won't stay there with all those fat American girls (Hapiejeva 2003, 115). In the last letter she blames the narrator for sending her a Valentine card and then going off with someone else – she has not been able to get through by telephone and suspects deception, ending bitterly: 'У мяне новы тэлефон, і, вядома ж, табе пляваць, як мне на новым месцы. // Бывай.' (I have a new telephone and, of course, you could not care less how I am getting on in my new job. // Goodbye, Hapiejeva 2003, 115). Detail 3 contrasts a familiar opera by Verdi at La Scala, in which the heroine empathises with the heroine, with the more worldly concerns of her Italian friend who is so absorbed in parking her car cheaply that it becomes for her the principal event of the evening (Hapiejeva 2003, 3).

As a final example from this diverse and absorbing novel, Detail 9 (the last) returns to the ubiquitous theme of the narrator's loneliness. It begins by her listening to other people's conversations from adjoining cabins in the post office, excusing her behaviour as an escape from boredom. Loneliness is also a constant presence in the flat of a prostitute of her acquaintance, who, when she goes out, takes with her a warmly wrapped plastic doll; she is also cold at home, wearing a scarf (that may also be made of plastic). The narrator tries to phone her, but the prostitute has to phone one of her shy clients to tell him of her situation before dragging him in for painful sex. Later the narrator finds the phone is often busy, so decides to write a letter, avoiding all sentimentality, describing how she plans to go to a carnival. She plans also to write such a letter to an 'amber king', from which he will somehow or another learn that all my acquaintances – angels, postgraduates, killers, lovers, collectors, vegetarians, mountaineers – are currently undergoing a course of treatment, and will even be discharged soon. In the last paragraph

the narrator, watching the leaves falling joyfully from their branches, concludes that you can deceive not only other people but also yourself (Hapiejeva 2003, 138-39).

The novel is signed off in a most personal manner: ‘цалую абдымаю, вашая воляга’ (I kiss and embrace you, your Volha)

* * *

To write entertainingly about food and eating is by no means easy, although in the Renaissance François Rabelais made a magnificent job of describing some of its grosser forms. Volha Hapiejeva’s collection of miniature articles on this subject, (V)iadomyja historyi, is in some respects a philosophical *jeu d’esprit*, which displays the writer’s fecund imagination, and reveals some of her most personal concerns, not least in the first section, ‘Hrečka, albo Prajavy šavinizmu’ (Buckwheat, or Phenomena of chauvinism), which is a humorous essay on this plant and what can and cannot be done with it. The narrator calls herself a complete chauvinist who cannot be anything else, while buckwheat is compared to a refined young lady, whose voice she does not accept, as it can do nothing except be buckwheat; in its place she would certainly become a feminist (Hapiejeva 2017, 7-8). The next piece is ‘Pamidor, albo pra ab’jektyŭnaju reaľnaść’ (The tomato or about objective reality), which describes how the narrator abuses a neglected tomato. A humorous footnote discusses various forms of reality that logically equate her to a tomato (Hapiejeva 2017, 9-10). Despite that, the tomato is subject to her powerful character, and dies. The next section is less philosophical: ‘Cybulia, albo etika nieliubovi’ (The onion, or the ethics of dislike) describes the narrator’s antipathy to onions, causing her to learn the word for this vegetable in fifteen foreign languages in order to avoid ordering it. She considers that the effect it has on salads is like a whole class in school being blamed for the ‘sin’ of one of them. She also says that a whole country can be blamed for an individual, which would not happen with a cucumber or radish on their own (Hapiejeva 2017, 11-12). The themes of some other sections relate to stereotypical thinking: lovers (sweet cakes), loneliness (canapés), the problem of choice (tea), the question of trust (macaroni), social categories (sweets), cultural relativism (caterpillars),³ the power of thought (ragout), universal relativity (icing sugar), the metaphysics of tiredness (conserves), incompatible exclusivity (ratatouille), symbolic practices (mushrooms) and the miracle of empathy (chestnuts). The section entitled ‘Pialmieni, albo pra stalaść formy i zmiestu’ (Pelmeni, or about the mature link between form and content) describes the narrator’s parting with a boyfriend of four years’ standing, all because of pelmeni.⁴ Not having enjoyed this food

³ The English are traditionally aghast at the French fondness for eating frogs’ legs, but if caterpillars are considered edible in Belarus, or anywhere else, the present writer confesses to complete ignorance of the matter.

⁴ The nearest Western food to pelmeni is ravioli.

as a child, she tries to make her friend eat it as a test. She then calls him a pelmeni man and, as she says, goes into internal emigration. Later the ex-boyfriend gets married, and goes to restaurants boasting of his enjoyment of carpaccio of beef, but nothing can change reality. The pelmeni man remains pelmeni (Hapiejeva 2017, 30-31). A quite different story about pelmeni is Aliaksiej Palačanski's 'Pielmieni. Sudzilišča jedakoŭ' (Pelmeni. The judgment of the eaters, Palačanski 2014, 54-64).⁵

After the food, the second part of the book is about the implements and places for eating it. In the first section, 'Nož i vidieliec' (Knife and fork, Hapiejeva 2003, 57-58), the narrator describes how she always remembers one of her men when she places her cutlery 'correctly' after a meal. In the next, 'Posud i defiekty' (Crockery and defects, Hapiejeva 2017, 59-61), she relates the story of various breakages, comparing damaged items to people with flaws that can make them either very individual or outcasts. Maybe crockery takes on our faults and breaks under the strain, or maybe the damaged mug is a Buddhist, teaching her not to become attached to things, and making it easier to part with those that have gone. A characteristic section is 'Sieliadziečnica' (The sardine dish) that begins with a description of this piece of crockery and the specifics of its use (with a note on the changing status and use of sardines). The last sentence is typical of the narrator and her philosophical approach: 'Такое сабе самаспазнанне ісціны быцця праз рэч (*чытай, талерку*)' (Such is the truth of existence through a thing [*read plate*], Hapiejeva 2017, 65). Also philosophical is 'Kitajskija palački' (Chinese chopsticks). The narrator describes how she learned how to use these instruments from Chinese friends. One (Belarusian) lover gave her a pair, but his successor (not wanting to be reminded of his predecessor) snapped them in half and threw them out of the window, whilst a third lover got another pair and enjoyed using them too. The narrator supposes this may be seen as an illustration of Hegelian thesis, antithesis and synthesis (Hapiejeva 2017, 66-67). Finally may be mentioned 'Jajkarezka' (The egg cutter), which, when a child, the narrator seized upon, being deprived of her piano while staying with her granny, and enjoyed playing on this 'harp-like' device before it was confiscated by adults and put back in the cupboard with other rarely used items. Now, when the world is full of advanced gadgets, the egg cutter is dear to her because it contains music. The writer's musical interests have, of course, also been manifested in the novel, and music plays a significant role in her play, *Tam* too.

Finally should be mentioned here, and not only because it follows a description of her book about food, Hapiejeva's first delightful children's book, *Sumny sup* (Sad soup, Hapiejeva 2014) which was awarded the Ex libris prize in 2013.

⁵ Belarus's big brother Russia treats many subjects, including food, very seriously. For an entertaining review of this subject see Wylie 2018.

2. Drama

There are some snatches of dialogue in Volha Hapiejewa's verse and prose, but her drama for the purposes of this article comprise three plays, 'Kaliiekcyjanier' (The collector), which formed part of her debut book (Hapiejewa 2003), Kardyjahrama – historyja adnoj niazhody: Kazka-fars (Cardiogram – the story of one misfortune: A fairy tale–farce, Hapiejewa 2011), and 'Tam' (There, Hapiejewa 2016).

The first is an imaginative surrealist play, with an epigraph from Sartre: 'L'enfer c'est les autres' (Hell is other people). The introduction, 'Pradmova da p'jesy' (Preface to the play) is quite extraordinary and it is not clear how and by whom it would be read. Here are the last four lines:

І пайду сьвяткаваць вызваленне
сваёй рэспублікі
Я – нацыянальны герой
Люблю бублікі (Hapiejewa 2003, 77)
(And I shall go to celebrate the liberation of my republic / I am a national hero / I like
bagels)

It was first staged in 2003 in the Museum of the History of Belarusian Literature, with a cast drawn from some of the leading writers of today: Viktar Žybuľ and his wife Viera Burlak (aka Džeci), Valžyna Mort and Alhierd Bacharevič. The following year it was staged again in the Palace of Arts, and later (in Polish translation) in Lublin.

The dramatis personae are:
Dumka (Thought, female),
Jon (He, male),
Supračaz (Gasmask, sexless),
Man with a little cart,
Woman with a suitcase,
A female voice.

The setting is: a room with a bed in the middle, and a blindfolded girl tied upright against one wall. To one side stands Jon, dressed as a fireman, holding a gasmask and looking straight ahead. The text is supposed to be delivered without any emotion. The latter instruction must have been difficult with the lively cast of writers who played the parts at its first performance.

A brief account of what happens is the best way to describe this extraordinary work. In Act I Jon, who turns out to be a collector,⁶ describes his thoughts about Dumka who seems to obsess his mind, and whom he controls by keeping her captive. She has come into his life on Tuesday (all days turn out to be Tuesdays). Amongst the absurdity is a woman's voice off stage announcing a train that will depart from Platform 5 in six months and thirty-one days time. Enter the man with the little cart, paying no attention to the other two characters, but complaining about a crowded tram the day before, when he had smothered a howling baby to quieten it; after describing the other passengers on the tram, he removes his cart, making soothing sounds. In Act II Jon talks to the young woman, whom he describes as his wife. She wishes to discuss grammar, but he can only make incomprehensible sounds. Her attitude towards him is a mixture of sympathy and scorn, particularly for his imaginary heroism at work. Her attitude is feisty:

Я ж Думка. Я старанна выконваю сваю працу. Я ніколі не спазняюся паведамляць камусьці пра штосьці, бо хтосьці й дзесьці ўжо забыўся на кагосьці калісьці. (Hapiejewa 2003, 83)

(I am Dumka. I conscientiously carry out my work. I am never late to inform someone about something, because somebody somewhere has already forgotten about someone some time.)

After this declaration, Jon, not unreasonably, starts to bang his head against the wall, soon followed by Dumka herself. Their conversations are totally absurd, but when he reads a little poem from his grandma that, amongst other things, calls her his Thought, Dumka furiously declares that she is her own thought. An alarm sounds and the man with the cart and the woman with the case quarrel about the sex of the children they want to have. The alarm sounds again. In Act III Jon and Dumka have nonsensical but fierce discussions about the nature of thought and the rules of writing, provoked by the name Hramadzki Hramada Hramadavič, for example. The woman with the case re-enters and hangs a poster around the neck of the man with the cart, 'Ladies! Let us defend our younger brothers!' (Hapiejewa 2003, 87). The woman talks about her ideal wife (even if she cannot cook properly) but agrees that she should be talking about an ideal husband. They discuss what he should have – he does, it turns out, have a collection of sperm, for which the woman has no use. She fixes a string between the bed and the lamp, and the latter goes on and off as she pulls it. In the fourth and last act all are on stage. The alarm sounds again. An announcement is made of a new virus, by which everyone must tell lies. To preserve hygiene all must wash in cold water. As a prophylactic one should tell three or four fibs a day. The second point is that one must be especially

⁶ He is a collector in the sense of English novelist John Fowles's *The Collector* (Fowles 1963), which in 1965 became a successful and influential film.

careful about contact with the opposite sex. The fine for non-compliance is half the minimum wage. All remove their gasmasks. Darkness.

Over ten years later Hapiejewa wrote 'Kardjahrama', a comedy in six acts, all of which, except Act III, comprise only one scene. The epigraph is: '...doctor, people are dying there without love...'

The dramatis personae are:

Rozum (Reason, male),

Serca (Heart, male),

Postman (male),

Amur (Cupid, female),

Doctor (male),

A red dress (no sex).

On the stage is a screen showing a building site and workers on it, in front of which sit Serca and Rozum drinking wine with their backs to the audience. The Postman brings Serca an arrow (which has to be signed for). The dialogue, as throughout this play, is mostly farcical. Rozum is very finicky, grabbing at Amur's words, as if at a lover. There is much discussion of love and its desirability or otherwise. Rozum suggests death as a way of escaping the traumas of love, and the relationship between these two extremes becomes a recurrent theme in this work. There is some play with orthographically close words, such as was seen in Hapiejewa's earlier writing, and then Rozum produces some suitably absurd statistics:

На дзесяць шлюбаў адзінаццаць развядуцца, са ста выпадкаў смерці прычынай дзевяноста дзевяці – каханне. (Hapiejewa 2011, 50)

(For ten marriages, eleven end in divorce, from a hundred case of death ninety-nine of them are caused by love)

Act II is more literary: the setting is Amur's room where the red dress (a desired but false aid to love in the play) is hanging, and she is lying down writing with enthusiasm, when the Postman enters and starts criticizing her for laziness. She reads him a love lyric, but he thinks she should find a poem on the internet and do something useful like archery. Amur faints on hearing Rozum suggested as a companion. A doctor is called who asks her a series of psychological questions, which only leads to suspicions that he is a spy (there are a lot of them about). It is agreed that love is a drug and Amur might be a dealer but not a user. In Act III Rozum is trying to advise Serca on how to win the favours of a pretty girl sitting on a bench; in a later scene Serca dresses as a woman, and he and the girl engage in a flirtatious conversation, Rozum tells Serca to write a poem, suggesting that without love the alternative is death (Hapiejewa 2011, 143). After its recitation,

Amur notes that, with emancipation, all sorts of things can happen (Hapiejewa 2011, 144). Serca starts shouting 'Down with men!', as if at a demonstration (Hapiejewa 2011, 144).

In Act III Amur and the Postman are sitting in her flat, where there is no sign of the red dress; on the walls of the room mysterious graffiti include the words 'fool, read books'. Suddenly the Postman notes an arrow sticking out of Amur's back. In Act IV Amur and the Postman are on the floor looking at slides of faces (also shown to the audience on a screen) of boys, men, girls, celebrities and so on, for Amur to choose from. She reads again a poem, some of which had been heard earlier, and the end of which suggests death. In Act V Serca asks Amur whether there is anything gay there? (Hapiejewa 2011, 145). He has by now bought the red dress, which they both regret stealing. Amur rejects Serca's advances, saying she brought all the troubles on herself by hoping for peace and harmony. The dress is no use for an empty heart. Act VI consists of a poem pointing up the moral of the farce, at least for those who do not reject love. Here are the last two lines:

Усё жыццё, ці хаця бы палову,
Галоўнае – кахай і кожны дзень нанова. (Hapiejewa 2011, 146)
(All your life, well, at least half of it,
The main thing is to make love and every day again)

As with all Hapiejewa's plays, the sharply witty dialogue demands to be performed or read in full and aloud, rather than short printed excerpts.

Volha Hapiejewa's last play to date is the four-act 'Tam' (Hapiejewa 2016), with the epigraph: 'what are you doing here – preparing a revolution or collecting money for something?..'. Also farcical, but more violent than its predecessors, it contains sadness and squalor as well as humour. Women's lot is much to the fore, as are concomitant male delusions. In 'Rekanstrukcja nieba' the instruction had been to read the text without any emotion, but here the situation is reversed, as this play is notable for heightened feelings, and far longer passionate, as well as absurd, speeches and declarations than in the earlier plays.

The dramatis personae are:

First woman (well coiffed and with lipstick), 75 years old,
Second woman, young in casual dress,
Dirty woman, middle-aged and in ordinary clothes,
Composer, a woman of about 40 in a tuxedo and bow tie,
Barmaid, aged 20–30, dressed in an apron and cap,
Track walker,
Conductor, a middle-aged woman,
Train manager, a man of 30–40, in uniform under a greatcoat.

The play, which is set on a train, opens with an absurd conversation between the first and the second woman about husbands during which the latter confuses the words *padvodnik* (submariner) with *palkoŭnik* (lieutenant). The first woman explains that submarines only sink through the weight of the books in them, and that her husband is an underwater librarian, although she cannot explain what happens to the books afterwards, supposing that they are given to the fish or burned. Before the next scene a fat man in braces crosses the stage silently in front of the women. In the second scene the two women talk about a variety of other topics, beginning with the hospitality of Moldova and the superiority of their boars as the source of sausages, then, in the third scene (after the fat man has crossed the stage again), different kinds of vets are discussed (to cure live animals and to certify dead ones); other topics include soldiers returning from Poland, including one attractive officer, whose invitation to go for a ride had been rejected by the older woman, and who died in a car crash the next day (Hapiejeva 2016, 216). She produces a bottle of 'holy water', which she proposes to give to one of her religious friends who had not been allowed to kiss the cross by her priest, who told her to come to church more often.

Act II is set in the buffet car where the second woman, the conductor and the dirty woman sit at a table. The dirty woman complains about being called dirty, despite her constant washing, and prays for a miracle that would lead to her being called clean. She believes that dirt is indelible unless one believes (in the teaching of the Patriarch). When the barmaid comes to take their orders, the composer asks for her voice and a cabbage salad, leading to a ridiculous discussion about cabbages. The musician enumerates her compositions and laments that she is expected to have a husband and children; she also rejects the idea of composing for local celebrities. When the barmaid returns with the cabbage, singing 'la, la, la', the dirty woman tries to persuade her to join the composer's orchestra, even though the latter does not yet exist. She, however, is not interested in joining anything, including a meeting of anonymous women – if anything, she will join a meeting of anonymous barmaids. The second woman makes great play with linguistic paradoxes, such as joining something that does not exist, despite the fact that many say linguistics is a useless science. She envisages great publicity, with the headline, 'Жанчына перамагла мову' (A woman has overcome language, Hapiejeva 2016, 219). In her passion she grasps the barmaid by the shoulders, saying, 'Няўжо вы не хочаце змяніць жыццё мільёнаў прыгнечаных і абяздоленых?' (Do you really not want to change the lives of millions of the oppressed and unfortunate?, Hapiejeva 2016, 219). A siren sounds, followed by instructions on the service of customers. The train manager comes in to reprove the barmaid for constantly saying, 'I don't know', 'I don't understand'. He threatens to send her to a 'Ghetto of Silent Women' for those who have lost their voices. In her alarm at this dreadful prospect, she confuses all her words, for instance, *nor* (of burrows) for *norm* and *maniu* (I shall entice)

for *menu* (menu). The dirty woman and composer persuade her to come into the orchestra, whereupon the manager declares that he will be their conductor.

Act III is set in the original carriage, and is as diverse in content as the first two. The barmaid returns, having been dragged off to coach 8 to perform. She had left behind a huge bag, reminding the second woman of the Vietnamese who once were everywhere, despite not having ‘proper’ noses like the Belarusians. She hopes to sell things to the other women once they cross the frontier, but they have their own financial operations in mind. The manager announces that he has met a famous conductor and wants the barmaid to come with him, but only to work in the buffet. There ensues a terrifying meteor-like hail of stones that are being thrown at the train by local hooligans, and it seems that the dirty woman has been killed. Suddenly a voice from above begins reproaching the composer for denying that when she was four-years-old she was interfered with by one of her family members’ dirty hands, and saying that the only way of losing this memory is by recounting it now. She is devastated, but the voice continues, saying that at first she treated it as a joke but then began interfering with other women. She is told to forget it, but cannot. The noise of the train drowns her protestations, and in the darkness she seems to have committed suicide.

In Act IV, scene 1 the two original women are discussing the emptiness of the older woman’s life, and the train conductor joins them with her own tales of exhaustion. She tells them of the fate of the barmaid who did not fit into the orchestra and was sent to the feared ghetto, described as worse than a concentration camp, where she died (Hapiejewa 2016, 226). They reach a station and the two passengers leave the train. In the second scene the manager is seen preening himself in front of a mirror and thinking aloud. He muses on how it is right that women have the menial jobs. It is ordained ‘ПА ПРЫРОДЗЕ’ (BY NATURE, Hapiejewa 2016, 226). He goes on to discuss, as examples, the women on the train. Their highest ambition is to get his body and position. The women have left the train without him, but he interprets this as their wanting to give him a surprise. Or perhaps the conductor has murdered them in order to have him for herself. When this idea is rejected, he stabs her with a knife. To him belong the last words of the play: “‘Ну вось і ўсё. Цяпер галоўным буду я”’ (‘Well, that’s it. Now I shall be the main one’, Hapiejewa 2016, 227).

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Volha Hapiejewa’s first three plays show a great talent for lively dialogue, humorous situations, and the raising of a host of contemporary issues, ranging from women’s rights in a patriarchal society to the role of linguistics as a legitimate field for scholarly enquiry. Only in ‘Tam’, however, are these issues very clearly presented, without, it must be said, losing any of the comic exchanges between the characters

in whose depiction she excels. Although only one of these plays has been staged at the time of writing, they all work well as literary texts and can be enjoyed by readers as well as theatre audiences.

Naturally, describing the work of a young writer is unfinished business. It is expected that Voľha Hapiejeva's work as poet, prose writer and dramatist will fulfil its early promise, and continue to flourish in future. Her many enthusiastic readers, including the present author, will await with impatience many more years of creativity from this fecund, boldly inventive and immensely varied writer.

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