

## OKSANA JACKIM

Maxim Rylsky. *Autumn Stars*. Translated from the Ukrainian into English by Michael Naydan. (Bilingual edition: Litopys Publishing House, 2008). ISBN 978-966-7007-63-8.

It is believed that the Ukrainian poet Maksym Rylsky (1895-1964) was arrested for the sentiments expressed in this poem:

When everything in life's haze  
 Is lost and leaves no traces,  
 You don't feel like going from home or home,  
 Because even there the fire has long ago burned out—  
 In you, art, in you alone there is  
 Shelter: in the beauty of unknown words.  
 In music that embodies beauty known to all  
 Into a heavenly play of colors.  
 In you, art, in a small painting  
 That is greater than the entire boundless world!  
 To you, art, and in your realm  
 I send you a bow and my warm greeting.  
 Your deeds—alone are everlasting,  
 And among the flowers you are the brightest one.

(From Rylsky's collection *Beneath the Autumn Stars, II* (pub. 1926)

Rylsky had a complex and convoluted literary life. It might be easy to discard Maksym Rylsky as a poet because during the Soviet regime he adopted the doctrine of social realism and produced poetry aligned with the demands of Soviet Party ideology. His poems glorified the Communist Party and workers' and peasants' achievements in their attempt to build socialism. It is easy to say that as a poet,

Rylsky assassinated his Muse; that, as a human being, he remained blind to the atrocities caused by the Stalin's dictatorship, while many of his fellow writers were repressed and died in the labor camps.

But there is another Rylsky—Rylsky before his arrest in 1931 and his elegant and melodious yet simple poetry full of vivid imagery. There is also Rylsky in the early 1940s: in times of war when the censorship was lax he mourned the desolation of Ukraine, walking a fine line between ideological doctrine and pure poetic form. And there is Rylsky at the end of his life, still meditating on the questions of life and poetry. All those features of Rylsky's extraordinary poetic talent are compiled in the bilingual edition under review.

Maksym Rylsky began writing poetry early: his first published poem appeared when he was thirteen. When he was just about fifteen, his first collection *On White Islands* was published in 1910. Several others followed: *Under Autumn Stars* (1918), *The Blue Distance* (1922), *Poems* (1925), *Through a Storm and Snow* (1925), *The Thirteenth Spring* (1926), *The Sound and Echo* (1929), and *Where Roads Meet* (1929). During those years, Rylsky evolved from a neo-romantic to a neo-classical poet. In the 1920s he belonged to the so-called group of neo-classicists—poets, writers, and critics—among whom were prominent Ukrainian literary figures such as Mykola Zerov, Mykhailo Drai-Khmara, Pavlo Fylypovich, and Osvald Burghardt (pen name Yuri Klen). They were aesthetes, who, preoccupied with the essence of human existence, strove for classical simplicity and refined poetic language.

In 1931 came Rylsky's arrest on charges of conspiracy and counter-revolutionary activities. His public humiliation was intended not only to silence him but to teach a lesson to anyone who might criticize the government. Rylsky was released—there wasn't enough evidence of his presumed

terrorist activity—but the price he paid, the bail he posted, as it were, in order to keep the status of Soviet writer, was his agreement to write party hymns

Rylsky returned to poetry but in a new role, as a zealous mouth-piece of the party line. The collections *The Sign of Libra* (1932), *Kyiv* (1935), *Summer* (1936), *Ukraine* (1938), *Grape Harvest* (1940), with their forced rhyme intertwined with political ideology, show that Rylsky has not realized his true poetic genius, he has not become the poet he was destined to be. In other later collections, such as *For the Homeland* (1941), *Weapon of Light* (1943), *Thirst* (1943), *Fidelity* (1947), *Under the Stars of the Kremlin* (1953), *Autumn in Holosiiv* (1959), the ambivalence of ideological poetry and the true nature of Rylsky lyricism can be noticed. Other achievements include a multitude of critical pieces and translations.

The present collection, *Autumn Stars*, is comprised mostly of selected poems from Rylsky's earlier collections (1910-1931). It also includes several pieces published outside of his collections (1907-1964). It ends with an epic poem-vision, *Thirst*, which after its publication came under criticism for its failure to praise the Party; it was edited, with short inserts that put communist achievement back on the pedestal. But the picture remained bleak, one of woe and hope: barren land, suffering people, and a spark of hope to a thirsty soul—that is Rylsky's portrayal of Ukraine.

A true artist, Rylsky uses all colors and shades of the palette. Life brims in “azure dreams”(p. 35), “on silken wings, a bright sky-blue” (37), “floating white islands as though made of snow” (39), “it still weaves a bright golden head scarf”(41), “in uncertain violet darkness”(105), “a black whirlwind, terror of the unknown” (107), “like roses in a pale-blue grass” (217), “that golden strings quietly quiver in my heart,” (223) “the scarlet evening burns low” (245), and

“from the rainbow spring” (283). This lyrical depiction of life’s vibrancy is Rylsky’s true vision of art, “In you, art, in a small painting/ That is greater than the entire boundless world!”

Rylsky’s genuine fascination with and understanding of nature can be traced throughout the whole collection, whether he writes about the white clouds of dreams, ripened gardens, black roses, autumn stars, or thirsty land. He explains why nature is central to his poetry: “Love nature not like the symbol/ Of your soul,/ Love nature not for your own sake,/ Love her for her own./ ... She is a mother. Be then her son/ And not an aesthete,/ Then you’ll become a living poet / And not just a paper one!” (80) It should not be a surprise that Rylsky’s poem “The Apples ripened, the apples are red,” published in 1917, was set to music and performed by a Ukrainian singer Olexandr Bilash in the 1960s. The last two lines, “Kiss for the last time, embrace for the last time;/ Only someone who was able to love knows how to part” (98), entered everyday speech as they transcended the poem into the realm of people’s wisdom.

The translator of this collection, Michael Naydan, had to face several challenges: how to preserve the rhyme scheme, how to recreate the cadence and align it with what is natural to English, and how to deal with translating a synthetic language into an analytic one.

As the Italians would say, “traduttore, traditore,” translators are traitors. There are some sacrifices that have to be made in translation. Here, the sacrifice is the elimination of Rylsky’s rhyme scheme in English. However, the lack of rhyme does not detract from Rylsky’s poetry in translation. Naydan compensates for the lack of end-rhymes by occasional rhyming and alliteration within the lines. A stanza from “Blue Distance” provides a typical example:

METAMORPHOSES

Desdemona clothed in white  
Stands on the **steps** above—  
And above her **brow** is her **crown**  
Made of the roses of the evening star. (128)

In Ukrainian, the same stanza has the rhyme scheme *abab*. Naydan uses a compensatory strategy in his translation: alliteration in “Stands” and “steps” and, in the case of “brow” and “crown”, internal rhyme.

Rylsky’s poems are saturated with caesurae, pauses both visible with punctuation and audible when read out loud. This creates a melodious rhythm. While to preserve every caesura in translation is practically impossible, for the most part Naydan recreates the verse in the new cadence that is natural to English, yet preserves the rhythm of Rylsky’s poetry. Here are the final lines from the poem “Let the Cold, Web-footed Snow Fall,”

Let the cold, web-footed snow fall  
Blocking the path for your friends and foes.  
Let it cover the paths around the houses,  
Let it give me a chance to fall asleep. (123)

The benefits of this bilingual edition are manifold. Those who read Ukrainian can enjoy the original poetry. For native speakers of English, this edition can be a true gem of discovery—the beauty and melody of Ukrainian language captured and transported into English. Those who will try to compare poems side by side in both languages might occasionally stumble upon shifted lines. There is a simple explanation for this phenomenon: unlike English, an analytic language, where the word order is pretty much fixed, Ukrainian is a synthetic language that relies heavily on inflections. Rylsky creates vivid images by using the

verb-noun order in sentences for emphasis. Clearly, this complicates translation. Preservation of the same word order in English would sound obscure. Naydan occasionally inverts the position of the lines to untangle the synthetic nature of Ukrainian, and, by so doing, he preserves the clarity of Rylsky's poetry and its simplicity. Imagine if one had to read these two lines, "The distance of autumn evening/ Began to chime through thin ice" in reverse order, "Began to chime through thin ice/ The distance of autumn evening" as it is in the original ("The Windows Speak," 181). In another example, Naydan connects the verb "to pity" and "myself" in lines, "And not to pity myself, a crushed bug/ If only I could," whereas in Ukrainian these two words are deliberately split, and "to pity" starts the second line ("To Circle in the Golden Air," 175).

On a final note, let us return to Rylsky, the poet. How sad it is that the Soviet regime suppressed Rylsky's talent. Here is a glimpse of comparison between the lyrical Rylsky and the ideological poetry-making machine, so vividly captured in this collection. Here are the lines from the poem-*Thirst*:

I see the bloody, screaming mouths  
Of the tortured and the raped,  
The maimed and the crippled,  
My own blood relatives!  
Ukraine! (275)

In 1942 Rylsky captures the moment of despair lyrically. In 1956 Rylsky revised his poem by adding several lines, such as these, "You are alive, my Ukraine,/ You are alive in the great family,/ In the family of nations/ That the force of October unified forever..." (277). These are stark examples of different Rylsky's, separated by fourteen years.

## METAMORPHOSES

All in all, this collection of Rylsky's poetry shows that Rylsky still captivates the reader despite his unfulfilled genius. One of his more mature poems, written in December 1963-January 1964, shows the tormented soul of the poet in his disease-engulfed body (Rylsky died of cancer in July 1964):

Night, a lamp, reflection, solitude,  
The snows of still mute paper,  
The soundless anxiety of creation,  
Lips closed in silence,  
A barely outlined task  
Again lures the heart to the road.  
("The Scarlet Evening Burns Low...", 245)

It is now for the reader to open the book, become immersed in the images that Rylsky creates, and perhaps spot that brightest star of all, his art.