

Valeriy Shevchuk. *Lunar Pain*. Translated from Ukrainian by Yuri Tkach, with a Foreword by Marko Pavlyshyn. Melbourne: Bayda Books, 2010. 121 pp. Paper.

Among Yuri Tkach's numerous translation projects that resulted in English editions of notable works of Ukrainian literature, his recent publication of Valeriy Shevchuk's *Misiachnyi bil'* [Lunar Pain] holds, in my opinion, a special significance. In this case, he made available to English-speaking readers a text of an author who not only occupies a prominent place in the Ukrainian literary canon and is important specifically for Ukrainian literary history (as was the case with Tkach's translations of Oles' Honchar's *Sobor* [Cathedral] or Borys Antonenko-Davydovych's *Za shyrmouiu* [Behind the Curtain]), but who is actually a writer of international stature and importance. Among literary scholars Shevchuk has been identified as one of the very few Ukrainian writers who could realistically contend for the Nobel Prize in Literature. (The poet Vasyli' Holoborod'ko was recently named as another serious candidate for this prestigious award.) And since the dearth of translations of Shevchuk's major literary texts into English, Swedish, and other languages has been one of the main deterrents to a possible nomination for the Nobel Prize, Tkach's rendition of *Lunar Pain* is a welcome addition to a small library of Shevchuk's works in English.

Lunar Pain is a novella (*povist'* in Ukrainian) originally published in 1984 in Shevchuk's prose collection *Malen'ke vechirnie intermetstvo* [A Small Evening Intermezzo]—one of several of his books that appeared in the early 1980s following a long period of enforced silence. During this silent decade of the 1970s, when the Soviet government suppressed the publication of his works, Shevchuk nevertheless continued to write and, unwilling to conform to the officially sanctioned socialist realism, developed his individual style, somewhat related to the magic realism of South American writers. Many of his works belong to the category of a fictionalized historical prose with philosophical overtones, set in Ukraine of the Middle Ages or the Cossack era of the sixteenth to eighteenth centuries. As Marko Pavlyshyn aptly states in his short, but informative introduction, *Lunar Pain* “presents Valeriy Shevchuk at his most characteristic: as a writer attuned to, and in awe of, the imperfect rationality of the world; as an observer of the riddles and anguishes of the human condition...” (7).

Lunar Pain features a characteristic type of Shevchuk's fictional hero: an exceptional individual blessed and cursed with unusual knowledge and talents (the protagonist of this novella possesses a terrifying ability to kill people with his stare) that isolate him from his social environment, but also give him an opportunity to attain a profound understanding of the laws and

mechanism that govern human behaviour. Such an understanding is intertwined with a deep sense of vanity of all pursuits and aspirations of the mainstream society, and especially those in position of power and authority. Clearly, the marginalized position of Shevchuk's protagonists echoes the plight of an artist and intellectual in the totalitarian Soviet state, but his texts always deal with more universal philosophical issues and can never be reduced to simple socio-political allegories.

Lunar Pain is set in the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries (the first events described in the novella take place in 1592), first in Italy, and then in Ukraine. The text is structured with a considerable degree of complexity. It is composed of short chapters narrated by various protagonists and not at all adhering to the chronological order of the plot. Occasionally, various narrators describe the same events from different points of view; the text combines realistic descriptions with dreams, phantasmagoric visions, myth, and legend in a way that may confuse an inattentive reader. The novella deals with esoteric symbolism and complex philosophical issues and, overall, requires a careful reading and deep reflection.

The discussion of the text's intricate structure and philosophical ideas (such as, for example, the concept of the "lunar pain" itself—a force that shapes actions of the protagonists, but is difficult to define and comprehend) is far beyond the scope of this short review, but it certainly deserves a thoughtful analysis by literary scholars. In general, Shevchuk's *Lunar Pain* is a brilliant prose text well worth being read, savoured, and seriously reflected upon.

Tkach's translation generally does justice to Shevchuk's original. In fact, his translation of *Lunar Pain* may well be one of his best English renditions of Ukrainian literary works published so far. There are, however, a few translation errors and some passages that, in my personal view, would benefit from a different approach. One of the errors is Tkach's incorrect translation of the word "Vloky." This Polish word for Italy (Włochy) was predominantly used in the Ukrainian language of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Regrettably, Tkach confuses this word with the Ukrainian "Voloxy" or "Voloshchyna," used to designate Moldavia and Wallachia, and renders this word inconsistently either as "Wallachia" (26), or as "Vloky" (42) in spite of the fact that these references clearly point the reader to the initial scenes of the novella that take place in Italy. This error may actually confuse a careful reader because it seems to suggest that there had been some other events in the protagonist's past that had taken place in Wallachia, but are not described in the book. In a similar way, Tkach confuses the Italian language with the "Wallachian" (79). Other mistranslations include the incorrect rendition of "nesusvitnie svitlo"

(otherworldly light) as “ridiculous light” (28), while different solutions should probably have been sought for some rather awkward phrases (for example, “I offer your excellency magnanimous friendship” on page 29 is not the best equivalent for “*ia proponuiu vashii mylosti bezkoryslyvu druzhbu*”).

However, these few isolated errors and awkward passages notwithstanding, Tkach’s publication of Shevchuk’s masterful novella *Lunar Pain* is a major achievement and a very welcome addition to the slowly growing, but still woefully insufficient library of Ukrainian literature in English translation.

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