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History's Receding Potentiality: From Vasil Bykaŭ to Eva Viežnaviec

Cofający się potencjał historii: od Vasyla Bykaua do Ewy Viežnaviec

Artykuł dotyczy ponownego pojawienia się II wojny światowej w literaturze białoruskiej na przykładzie twórczości zmarłego sowieckiego pisarza Vasyla Bykaua i poradzieckiej powieściopisarki Ewy Viežnaviec. Czyta się je jako teksty o historii, podejmujące problem potencjalności historii, co nasuwa następujące pytania: Co ich literackie podejście do historii mówi o ich konkretnych pomysłach na rozwój podmiotowości? Jakie możliwości uzyskania podmiotowości one stwarzają dla ludności białoruskiej? Do kwestii tych autor artykułu podchodzi za pomocą kategorii opracowanych przez teoretyka antykolonialnego Frantza Fanona.

Słowa kluczowe: Literatura białoruska, II wojna światowa, historia, potencjalność, postkolonializm

How do we conceive of history and its potentiality as we learn about it in and through literature? Which framings of such a question does literature – especially literature *about* historical topics – bring to the table? And how are those conceptualizations of history's potentiality themselves subjected to historical change? These questions concern Belarusian literature past and present – especially when it is returning to the historical topics that have haunted it for decades: For example, the

Second World War. The war has been one of the major topics of Belarusian Soviet literature of the post-1945 period¹, and it still plays a major role in the *imaginarium* of Belarusian culture – looking, for example, at the ongoing productivity of the figure of the partisan.² The 2020 protests have brought this tendency out even more firmly, when the posing of the conflict as an ‘anti-fascist’ struggle has been used on both sides of the barricades, actualizing what novelist Alhierd Bacharevič has dubbed the „vaccination wound”³ every Belarusian carries with them from Soviet times – the ongoing presence of war discourse on everyone’s mental map. This ever-lasting return of the war in cultural discourse makes the questions posed in the beginning even more pressing: If history returns again and again, but under changed circumstances, then how does it do so – in what form? What is *meant* by it? Where does it point? To try to begin to answer such questions, this article will turn to the works of two Belarusian authors of different historical periods who wrote about the wartime, the late Soviet writer Vasil Bykaŭ and the post-Soviet novelist Eva Viežnavieč – and it will do so with the help of thoughts from the post-war decolonial theorist Frantz Fanon’s work.

Why this framing? I believe there is a gap in the application of so-called postcolonial theory to Belarus, which is becoming increasingly important – for good reasons.⁴ Often such an application is rather unhistorical, and cannot really explain why theories developed in the Western

¹ For a broader meaning of the war in Belarusian literature see S. Lewis, *The „Partisan Republic”: Colonial Myths and Memory Wars in Belarus*, in: *War and Memory in Russia, Ukraine and Belarus*, ed.: J. Fedor, M. Kangaspuro, J. Lassila, T. Zhurzhenko, Cham 2017, pp. 371–396.

² One should think here of the several actualizations that, for example, the figure of the Partisan has gotten in Belarusian underground and pop culture – the journal *Partysan* or a phenomenon like the „Kiberpartysan”. See A. Klinaŭ, *Partisanen. Kultur_Macht_Belarus*, Berlin 2014.

³ А. Бахаревич, *Последнее слово детства*, <https://www.sn-plus.com/2020/11/05/algerd-baharevich-poslednee-slovo-detstva/> [доступ: 12.05.2024].

⁴ See for example the recent monography by Simon Lewis: S. Lewis, *Belarus – Alternative Visions: Nation, Memory and Cosmopolitanism*, New York/London 2019.

academy concerning very different geographical spaces are applied to Belarus. I think it makes sense to go back to the roots, to the moment of actual decolonization that Fanon is writing about, i.e. the period after the Second World War. This is based on genuine parallels between the critiques developed by Frantz Fanon about post-war France and Vasil Bykaŭ about the post-war Soviet Union and Belarus. As we shall see, the scope of historical imagination brought out in Fanon's anti-colonial writing echoes the scope we find in his contemporary Bykaŭ's literary works. These parallels in biography and historical imagination are then used to elaborate a broader perspective on Belarusian literature on the Second World War and its view of history – cursorily read through the Bykaŭ-Viežnaviec continuum.

1. The Problem

Пасля вайны палічылі, колькі ў нас народу ўхайдачылі. Ну і вышла, што кожнага трэцяга. Каго немцы, а каго і не немцы, хто тут разбярэ.⁵

[After the war they counted how many people had been murdered here. And well, it turned out to be one out of three. Who by the Germans and who not by the Germans – who could tell?]⁶

Thus concludes one of the chapters of Eva Viežnaviec's novel *Pa što idzieš, voŭča?*, published in 2020, one of the most important texts in Belarusian literature of recent years. The position marked by these sentences is a specific one: it places the victims of the Second World War and their suffering centrally. At the same time, it makes it clear that against the backdrop of all those victims, the question of who was to blame for anything in the war must become blurred. So many suffered, so many were killed, that the „small history” of those who suffered

⁵ Е. Вежнавец, *Па што ідзеш, воўча?*, Мінск 2020, с. 97.

⁶ All translations from the Belarusian in this article are mine.

makes the „great history” of war parties, ideologies, etc. almost automatically impossible – „who could tell?”.

Viežnaviec writes her version of that small history through the prism of a small village in the swamps of Palesie in southern Belarus. This is where her protagonist Ryna hails from; it’s where she returns to after spending years as a labor migrant in Germany (working for elderly people – this employment position already points to the position she inhabits as a Belarusian in the world, but more on that later) for the funeral of her grandmother. The following chapters recount the history of the village and the people in it as told to Ryna by her grandmother. The grandmother herself was somewhat of an outsider: As a healer and supposed witch, she is as feared by the locals while her services are looked for in times of need. Thereby, her view is a specific one: She is not just excluded from „big” history by virtue of being born on the outskirts of empires between swamps and forests; she is also excluded from the dominant „small” histories those outskirts try to tell themselves to make sense of the ever-changing conditions brought to them by big history with its wars, empires, and political systems. To her, nothing really changes over the course of the 20th century. As she states laconically: „Вялікія балаты ў нас, непраходныя, а чалавеку ні схову, ані спасу няма. Як захочуць, то дастануць цябе і выкалацяць усю душу – ці ваўкі, ці ўласці.”⁷ [We have huge swamps with no way through, with no place to hide, and no salvation for man. If they want to, they’ll get to you and crush your soul – be it the wolves, be it those in power.] In the swamps, you’ll always get eaten.

Ryna, as the voice of her grandmother’s memory and returnee from Germany, takes over this double-outsider’s position: She might be the only historian her village has ever produced, but she also was never really part of the village (as her grandmother’s grandchild) and has left the village to work abroad. She is an alcoholic with no family and no money: Her travels out of the village did not bring her success. By

⁷ Е. Вежнавец. *Па што ідзе...*, с. 63.

changing her geographic position, she could not change her positionality in society; the swamp follows her. This then is what connects her to her home: it has put her and everyone else who lives in it into a situation of being excluded they can never transcend. *This* condition she shares with the others. As an outsider inside the village, she can speak about its condition: Outside of the world, bereft of power, never a subject. In this, Ryna mirrors all of her ancestors and their neighbors: None of them ever really became a subject in their own life. They might have tried, by becoming communists, Nazi collaborators, antisemitic murderers, or White Army warriors, but none of that could ever work out; none of these positionalities can get them out of small history. Subjectivity is reserved for other people, the ones with history on their side – maybe the ones Ryna is now caring for in Germany. What matters then, though, is the following: In Ryna's retelling of history, the actual decisions of the Palessie people don't matter. Which side of history they pick, which doomed attempt of subjectivizing themselves they might undertake – they pick from a palette of positions they didn't create, but they still *have to pick*, because big history demands that. Who is to judge such people?

One can read in this position a variation on the thesis developed by Valiancin Akudovič in his essay *Kod adsutnasci*, that in war there are neither heroes nor antiheroes – only martyrs and victims:

Там, дзе вайна, там няма высакародства (па-за прыватна-канкрэтнай сітуацыяй). У бруд і кроў упэцкваюцца ўсе. Там, дзе вайна, там няма герояў і антыгерояў, ёсць толькі пакутнікі і ахвяры. І калі наша свядомасць яшчэ не можа абысціся без ідэі гераічнага на вайне, дык няхай паспрабуе перанесці сваё ўяўленне аб гераічным на годнае пакутніцтва ці самаахвярнасць (як гэта зрабіла хрысціянства)⁸.

[Where there is war, nothing noble can exist (outside of concrete and private situations). Everybody has dirt and blood on them. Where there is war, no heroes and antiheroes can exist, just martyrs and victims. And if we need the idea of the heroic in wartimes for our conscience, then we

⁸ В. Акудовіч, *Код адсутнасці. Асновы беларускай ментальнасці*, Мінск 2007, с. 59.

should try to transfer our perception of the heroic to graceful martyrdom or self-sacrifice (as Christianity has done).]

From such a point of view, war escapes any ideological evaluation – it is suffering, it is death. If anything, it brings to light only the lowest human impulses. Akudovič focuses on this thesis because he has an opponent – the Soviet myth of the heroic Belarusian partisan, which he wants to deconstruct. For Akudovič, the partisan is a stranger, a pure ideological construction of the Soviet rulers, which does not refer to anything real in the Belarusian war experience. All have killed, all have suffered – „who could tell?”. And those who claim to know are lying.

2. Frantz Fanon

A movement like this, which finds its literary completion in Viežnavieč's novel, the de-ideologization of history from the perspective of those who are small in it, can be placed in a tradition with the post- and anti-colonial thinking of the 20th century. One of the founding fathers of this thinking, Frantz Fanon, in his great work *The Wretched of the Earth* (1961), describes, how, from the position of the colonially oppressed, the world shows itself to be devoid of any ideological exaggerations:

The town belonging to the colonized people [...] is a place of ill fame, peopled by men of evil repute. They are born there, it matters little where or how; they die there, it matters not where, nor how. It is a world without spaciousness; men live there on top of each other, and their huts are built one on top of the other. The native town is a hungry town, starved of bread, of meat, of shoes, of coal, of light. The native town is a crouching village, a town on its knees, a town wallowing in the mire.⁹

With Fanon, one can understand the war of the colonized in Viežnavieč's novel as just such a war: they are hungry, crouched down, on their knees.

⁹ F. Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*, London 1971, p. 30.

Fanon develops his description of the colonial world based on the situation after the Second World War. He, who had at great risk traveled to Europe from his homeland, the French colony and Caribbean island of Martinique, to fight in the Free French Army, had believed in the idea of a free France until the outbreak of war. His biographer David Macey describes the young Fanon as an enthusiastic supporter of the ideas of the French Revolution, of freedom, equality, and justice, and it was his belief in these values that led him to go to war in Europe. His thoughts on colonialism developed from this; he did not see the promise of the great anti-fascist struggle fulfilled in the world after the war. Even during the war, he writes to his family, „I've been deceived.”¹⁰ And in 1945, Fanon writes to his brother: „Listen to me, I've grown a lot older than you. [...] I've been deceived, and I am paying for my mistakes [...]. I'm sick of it all.”¹¹ In a letter to his parents, he qualifies the deception even further:

[I]f one day you should learn that I died facing the enemy, console each other, but never say: he died for a good cause. Say: God called him back to him. This false ideology that shields the secularists and the idiot politicians must not delude us any longer. I was wrong!¹²

Fanon writes of a problem: an ideology that shields itself from reality and reality from itself. France did not correspond to its own values – the Second World War no longer presented itself as a war of liberation, but was rather turned into its opposite: fascism may have been defeated, but freedom had not been achieved; the world remained one of authoritarian states in which lack of freedom might be modified, but not abolished. It was precisely this realization that made Fanon an anti-colonial fighter in the post-war period. In 1960, after one and a half decades of thinking through the problem, Fanon summarizes the contradictory situation in which he finds himself as a colonially oppressed who fought on the side of France against fascism:

¹⁰ Cited by: D. Macey, *Frantz Fanon. A Biography*, London/New York 2012, p. 101.

¹¹ Cited by: *ibidem*, p. 101.

¹² Cited by: *ibidem*, p. 102.

The colonialist countries, when they were in danger, and fascism, Nazism were submerging them, hence when their freedom and their independence were threatened, did not hesitate to tap the African masses and to hurl a majority of the „colonials” against the Nazi positions. Today it is the freedom and the independence of the Africans that are at issue.¹³

The post-war world does not fulfill the promise of the anti-fascist war: instead, Free France continues to keep its colonies under massive oppression, committing massacres against the civilian population in Algeria, where Fanon moves in the 1950s, and where it does not kill them, it keeps them in the very abject conditions expressed in Fanon’s quote. The world did not become free in the violence of war, rather, in retrospect, it is only a transformational form of a violent process from which there seems to be no outside – at least not within the framework of societies that claim the very tradition of freedom for themselves and thereby pervert it, as Fanon would say for post-war France. His doubt is not about France’s anti-fascist struggle per se, but about a France that does not live up to its values. Fanon’s critique, which is formed from this moment on, is an immanent one: he criticizes a France, a Europe, a Western society that does not live up to its own claims. The war was worth nothing because it was not waged for freedom.

3. Vasil Bykaŭ

Why this digression to a thinker objectively not very close to the Belarusian situation? If you read the works of Fanon’s contemporary Vasil Bykaŭ – and they really are contemporaries, Bykaŭ was born in 1924, Fanon in 1925 – then you can see that their critiques of their respective worlds mirror each other to a certain extent. Both are, to just give a starting point, influenced by existentialism. Both meet Jean-Paul Sartre, one of the most important thinkers of that school, exactly once in

¹³ F. Fanon, *Toward the African Revolution. Political Essays*, New York 1967, pp. 172–173.

their lives and in the same city, in Rome: Fanon in 1961, Bykaŭ in 1965. And for both of them, the decisive factor in these meetings was Sartre's position on the question of imperial oppression: Fanon motivated Sartre in Rome to write the preface to his main anti-colonial work *Wretched of the Earth*, and Bykaŭ recalled Sartre's position on the Gulag in his autobiography *Doŭhaja daroha dadomu*:

Мы ўважліва і зь некаторым здзіўленьнем слухалі глыбакадумныя выступы Сартра, рэжысэра Антаніёні, Джона Карла Вігарэлі, якія гаварылі зусім ня так і не пра тое, што мы прывыклі чуць на радзіме. Асабліва ўразіў Сартр сваімі філязофскімі экспромтамі пра экзістэнцыялізм. Разумна ён гаварыў, Сартр, а я думаў, што ўсё ж праўда, мабыць, на баку ягонага земляка Камю, які зганіў СССР за канцлягеры, а Сартр за тое парваў зь ім адносіны¹⁴.

[Carefully and somewhat surprised we listened to the profound speeches by Sartre, the director Antonioni, and Giancarlo Vigorelli, who all did not talk in the same way and not about the same topics we were used to from at home. Sartre especially impressed us with his philosophical improvisations on existentialism. What he, Sartre, said – it made sense, but still, I thought that the truth may be on the side of his compatriot Camus, who had damned the Soviet Union for its concentration camps, for what Sartre had ended all relationships with him.]

In writing, Bykaŭ, like Fanon a front-line soldier in the Second World War, like Fanon a participant in a „liberation”, the worth of the war also is increasingly thrown into question. Bykaŭ often reads like a predecessor of Akudovič's theses cited at the beginning of this article. His texts are in this way always historical texts – texts about history.

This becomes clear when looking at Bykaŭ's novella *Sotnikaŭ* from 1970, in which the very value of war is called into question; the question of who of the protagonists in the story acts „correctly” is not definitively answered in the text: Sotnikaŭ, who does not break his oath after being arrested by the Germans and goes to his death for it, or other characters who cooperate with the Germans. Soviet post-war literature hardly

¹⁴ В. Быкаў, *Доўгая дарога dadomu*, Мінск 2002, с. 242.

knows a clearer moral juxtaposition than that of loyal partisan and traitorous defector¹⁵ – but Bykaŭ introduces various levels of complication into the equation that destroy this clarity. In these ambiguities, a critique of official war narratives is developed – a critique that, in its specificity, goes back above all to the non-fulfillment of the story that Soviet liberation tells of itself.

One of the fundamental narrative strands in *Sotnikaŭ* are the fates of various figures from the civilian population who become the collateral damage of the arrest of the two partisan protagonists. The most interesting of these is the figure of the elder, the *starast* of a village, a „collaborator”. He is initially mistaken by Sotnikaŭ, the loyal partisan, for a simple criminal:

Ён не мог спачуваць чалавеку, які пайшоў на службу да немцаў і так ці інакш выконваў гэтую службу. Тое, што ў таго знаходзіліся нейкія там апраўданні, не кранала Сотнікава, які ўжо ведаў цану такога роду апраўданням. У той барацьбе, якая пачалася з фашызмам, нельга было зважаць ні на якія, самыя важкія прычыны – перамагчы можна было толькі насуперак усім прычынам. Ён засвойў гэта з самага першага свайго бою і ўсюды трымаўся менавіта таго пераканання, што толькі і давала яму захоўваць цвёрдасць сваіх пазіцый ва ўсіх складанасцях гэтай вайны.¹⁶

[He could not feel for a man who had worked for the Germans and did what he had to do in this position, for better or worse. His justifications didn't touch Sotnikaŭ, who already knew these sorts of justifications. In the fight against Fascism, one couldn't consider any, not even the most serious explanations – one could only win despite all explanations. He had made that lesson his own from his first battle and had been true to this conviction, and only that made it possible for him to be true to his positions despite all hardships of the war.]

Later, when they are both imprisoned, Sotnikaŭ learns the whole

¹⁵ See Lewis, *The Partisan Republic...*, p. 381.

¹⁶ В. Быкаў, *Сотнікаў*, в: В. Быкаў, *Альпійская балада. Дажыць да світаньня. Сотнікаў*, Мінск 2021, с. 353.

story of the *starast* and how he belongs to a category of people who do not fit his moral ideas and his friend-enemy scheme:

– Ясна? Як жа вы тады ў старасты пайшлі? [...]

– Я пайшоў! Калі б ведалі... Нягожа гаварыць тут. Хаця што ўжо цяпер таіцца. Адбрыкваўся, як мог. У раён не ехаў. Хіба я дурны, не разумею, ці што. Ды во гэтак уночы раз – тут-тук у акно. Адчыніў, гляджу – наш былы сакратар з раёна, начальнік міліцыі і яшчэ двое, пры зброі. А сакратар мяне ведаў калісь, яшчэ ў калектывізацыю адвозіў яго пасля сходу. Ну, слова за слова, кажа: „Чулі, цябе ў старасты мецяць. Дык пагаджайся. А то Будзілу паставяць – усім горай будзе“. Во і пагадзіўся на сваю галаву.¹⁷

[–Clear? How did you become a starast then?

–Yes, I became one! If you only knew... One shouldn't talk about these things. But who cares now? I tried my best. Didn't go to town. I'm not an idiot, I understand everything. But then one night – knock-knock at my window. I open it, and there is our former secretary from the town, the chief of the militia, and two more, with weapons. And the secretary knows me from way back, I took him home once after a meeting during collectivization. Well, one word gives the other, and he says: „We hear people want you as starast. Please, agree to do it. Otherwise, they'll give Budzila the position – and it will be worse for everyone.” So I agreed and put this weight on me.]

For the *starast* there is no liberation, there can be no liberation in war: As a member of the „small” people, he is only pushed back and forth by people with real power – be it partisans, Germans, or the militia. He is one of the hungry, crouched down, on his knees, to say it with Fanon. He has no subjectivity, and he will die meaninglessly; for someone like him, there is no liberation: „Паўгода выкручваўся. А цяпер што рабіць? Давядзецца пагінуць.”¹⁸ [For half a year it worked out for me. And now what? I'll have to die.]

When Bykaŭ writes about the war in this way, he reads the story of

¹⁷ Ibidem, c. 454.

¹⁸ Ibidem.

the war against the grain, to paraphrase Walter Benjamin¹⁹: he introduces people into history who otherwise do not exist in it; a population that lives outside of the great liberation narrative of the Great Patriotic War. Any liberation would actually have to prove itself to this population. If this population does not become free, the war is nothing but slaughter – and the mere admission of such a thought in the 1970s indicates that there is something unfulfilled about the Soviet promise of liberation, that there is something wrong with Bykaŭ’s present, that the war was not worth the sacrifices in their totality. In this, the criticisms of their present formulated by Bykaŭ and Fanon mirror each other: an element emerges behind the great history that can never become a subject in it – and thus the potentiality of history is thrown into crisis.

4. Eva Viežnaviec

Eva Viežnaviec takes up this very problem again in *Pa što idzieš, voŭča?* in 2020. The novel is in itself a novel about history, as it tells the story of how the great history of the 20th century meets a village in Palesie, but from a different perspective: Viežnaviec narrates the wars, the Holocaust, the entire 20th century in Belarus as a pure succession of moments of violence, as a trauma passed down through generations, a series of deaths. Her writing about the war often mirrors that of Bykaŭ; we again encounter the *starast*, who falls powerlessly into this role:

Так і жылі. Удзень прыязджаюць немцы, ставяць старастам якога мужыка. Той просіцца, моліцца: не магу я старастам, заб’юць мяне парцізаны. Але з немцамі размова кароткая: або застрэлім, або збірай харчы для гарнізона і вазі. І нідзе не дзенешся, прынясеш як міленькі.²⁰

[So that’s how we lived. During the daytime, the Germans came and made

¹⁹ W. Benjamin, *On the Concept of History*, https://www.sfu.ca/~andrewf/books/Concept_History_Benjamin.pdf [accessed: 12.05.2024].

²⁰ E. Вежнавец, *Па што ідзеі...*, с. 90.

some guy the starast. That guy pleads and prays: I can't be starast, the partisans will kill me. But with the Germans there is no time for talk: Either we'll shoot you, or you'll collect food for our soldiers and bring it to us. No way out for you, you'll bring it to them either way.]

The war in Viežnaviec's prose means the absence and impossibility of subjectivity. Ideological categories, the different warring parties, all that merely represents an untruthful shell for what is actually going on: a continuation of the ever-same. The reader hears this in a description of the partisans' ways of treating the population:

Ну, хлопцы нашы і змікіцілі, што як не пойдзеш у парцізаны, то ці заб'юць, ці апухнеш з голаду і работы. Валоў, кароў і коней забралі ўсіх – як не немцы, дык парцізаны. Аралі, скародзілі і сеялі хто на чым прымелі, на нейкіх калеках, якіх ніхто нікуды адагнаць не мог, або і на сабе.²¹

[Our boys understood well, that if you wouldn't go to the partisans, they would kill you, or you'd die of starvation and work. The cattle, the cows, and the horses had all been brought away – if not by the Germans, then by the partisans. They plowed and sowed with whatever was left, with cripples that no one could steal, or just by themselves.]

Later, after Stalin gives out an order to mobilize all of the village men to the partisans, and to shoot all supporters of the Germans in the same vein, these ideological categories, again, for the people on the ground realize in a way that just continues their deathly domination:

Ну, ён тут і назнаходзіў столькі ворагаў і пасобнікаў, што зямля загарэлася ў нас пад нагамі. Прыйдуць у вёску, набяруць „пасобнікаў”, згоняць усіх, прачытаюць загад іменем Сталіна і трудавога нарожу і пастраляюць. А трудавы народ стаіць і трасецца, языкі ў сраку запхнуўшы, бо як заступішся, то і сам пасобнік. Застрэляць цябе, палічаць, і ў Маскву напішуць.²²

[Well, he found as many enemies and helpers here that the earth started to

²¹ Ibidem, c. 87.

²² Ibidem, c. 88.

burn under our feet. They would come to the village, would collect some of those „helpers”, would round them up, read them orders in the name of Stalin and the working people, and shoot them all. And the working people would stand in fear and shiver, not saying a word, because if you’d speak up, then you’d also be a helper. They would shoot you, count you, and send a note to Moscow.]

There are no heroes in war, categories like „enemy”, „helper” or „working people” just guise a way for the deeper circle of violence to repeat itself. The subject claimed by the Soviet system as its basis – the „working people” – are the ones shivering in fear of being shot in the name of the „working people”. Categories of subjectivization in their reality turn into categories of domination. There is no outside to this – there never was.

The narrator’s grandmother symbolizes that in a way: She, the healer, the one in cahoots with the occult, always persists. Her services are needed by everybody, all the different sides fighting for differing versions of „progress” actually rely on her: „Палюбоўніцы парцізанскія ні бабу, ні мяне не далі б забіць. Хто б ім зелле на аборт рабіў? Не кожную вазілі ў Маскву, а толькі заслужаных. Зноў жа, па сёлах то тыф, то дрыстун крываваы.”²³ [The partisans’ lovers would not allow to kill grandmother or even me. Who would have made them potions for their abortions? Not all of them would have been brought to Moscow, just the most deserving. Again, there was typhus in the villages and bloody diarrhea.]

Peter Preuss once wrote about modernity as the age of the discovery of history, which was „not simply the discovery of a set of facts about the past but the discovery of the historicity of man: man, unlike animal, is a historical being. Man is not wholly the product of an alien act, either natural or divine, but in part produces his own being.”²⁴ The Palessie of Viežnaviec’s prose is a place where this has never happened – man

²³ Ibidem, c. 94.

²⁴ P. Preuss, „Introduction”, in F. Nietzsche: *On the Advantage and Disadvantage of History for Life*, Indianapolis/Cambridge 1980, p. 1–3, here S. 1–2.

never became historical, he has always been the product of an alien act. He is trapped in a pre-historical position, for him, nothing ever changes – in the continued need for a pre-modern form of medicine the absence of progress, of any meaningful subjectification comes to the forefront. Ryna and her grandmother are what is real about the swamp: They are *its* people. Their reality is grim, and it only becomes more so in the war. What is posed as liberation is not that; just continued subjugation.

However, *Viežnaviec*'s novel continues its narrative at a place that Bykaŭ rarely gets to: she tells of how the traumas produced during the war also determine the post-war and post-Soviet period.²⁵ What is only hinted at in Bykaŭ is fully brought out here: The war was worth nothing in the lives of the crouched down and the hungry, to return to Fanon's phrasing; those who were down never found liberation. One can find a nearly word-to-word echo of Fanon's description of the colonially crouched-down in *Viežnaviec*'s description of life in the direct after-war period: „Народ тады нарадзіўся маленькі, нізенькі, слабарукі і крываногі, але было яго многа. У кожнай хаце па трое – па сямёра дзяцей. Неяк выкачаліся, вывучыліся.”²⁶ [A small people was born, tiny, with weak arms and crooked legs, but high in numbers. In every hut, there were three to seven children. Somehow, we managed – we learned how to.]

The novel concludes with a chapter that simply lists the deaths of various villagers, one more senseless than the next, all of them falling under the paradigm that has become established in English-language literature as „deaths of despair”. In the last sentence of the novel, this comes to the fore once again: „А сабака, павешаны ў аleshніку, быў

²⁵ Of course, Bykaŭ has several texts that are set at least partially in the post-war period, for example, the novella *Abelisk*. But even there, the relationship between the war and the post-war period is still in question in a way that it isn't anymore in *Viežnaviec*. In *Abelisk*, the possibility of a new view on the past, of actual progress, is very much still intact – it's the whole point of the novella. This has broken down in *Viežnaviec*. See: В. Быкаў, *Абеліск*, в: В. Быкаў, *Дажыць да світаньня. Аповесці*, Мінск 1990, с. 262-322.

²⁶ Е. Вежнавец, *Па што ідзе...*, с. 99.

ні пры чым. Сабачая смерць тут не лічыцца.” [And the dog that hung in the alder tree didn’t matter. A dog’s death doesn’t count here.] Viežnavieć describes a lost, dark world in which the subtext of Bykaŭ’s stories has become the text. In this respect, it is literature about people as Fanon already located them in the post-war world: People for whom there is no place in history. On the one hand, these people are actually given the center stage in Viežnavieć’s texts – but on the other hand, they are also trapped in this role; there seems to be no beyond.

In *The Wretched of the Earth*, Frantz Fanon still has the hope that behind a successful political revolution, a transformation, a completely different world would still be possible – that there would be a life behind the violence, that the subjugated need not remain prisoners of their traumas: „After the conflict there is not only the disappearance of colonialism but also the disappearance of the colonized man.”²⁷ The questions raised by the Bykaŭ-Viežnavieć continuum could then perhaps be posed as follows: Is this line to be understood purely as a coming-together in the sense that Belarusian literature can finally tell of people and their traumas that never had a place in great history? Can literature finally address what has long been taboo? At the same time though: What potential does literature like this still see in people and history? Does the history described mean anything? Can it yet mean something?

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²⁷ F. Fanon, *The Wretched...*, p. 198.

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