

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.32839/2304-5809/2020-79.2-21>

UDC 821.161.2.09(092)"19"

Syrko Iryna

Drohobych Ivan Franko State Pedagogical University

## THE DOMINANT MOTIFS AND IMAGES IN VASYL STUS' PRISON POETRY

**Summary.** The article explores the poetry of Vasyl' Stus, a major Ukrainian writer and intellectual of the second half of the 20th century. It deals with Stus' poetry, composed after his arrest in 1972. The study of poet's heritage provides a key to understanding the complexity of his mature art. The article presents Stus as a poet whose interest in universal issues places him high in the context of world literature. It examines the dominant intellectual sources of the works composed under conditions of incarceration and censorship. It has been suggested that the weak point in the existing studies on Stus' artistic heritage is a serious discussion of the motifs and images in his prison poetry. The research of such kind has never been undertaken before in a systematic manner.

**Keywords:** Vasyl' Stus, poetic heritage, prison poetry, incarceration, confinement, censorship, main themes, dominant motifs and images.

Сирко І.М.

Дрогобицький державний педагогічний університет імені Івана Франка

## ДОМІНАНТНІ МОТИВИ ТА ОБРАЗИ В ТЮРЕМНІЙ ПОЕЗІЇ ВАСИЛЯ СТУСА

**Анотація.** У статті розглянуто творчість видатного українського поета другої половини ХХ століття Василя Стуса. Акцентовано на тюремних творах поета. Проаналізовано філософські глибини та художні особливості тюремної лірики. Досліджено основні теми та домінантні мотиви віршів, створених в жорстких умовах цензури; простежено вплив ув'язнення на їх формування. Досліджено художню семантику традиційних для лірики поета образів, розглянуто новаторство і неповторність набору їх конотацій, вивчено основні шляхи їх «оновлення». Доведено, що дослідження художньої семантики образів тюремної поезії ускладнено її потужною філософською складовою. Зроблено висновок про модерні риси поезії Василя Стуса періоду ув'язнення й заслання, а саме – напашарування видінь. Доведено, що найважливіші візії (рідня, воля, Україна, Батьківщина) розглядаються як енергетичні, сугестивні. В окреслених образах детально простежено тайнопис внутрішнього, інтенсивного життя автора. Проаналізовано колористику тюремних віршів. З'ясовано, що автор рідко змінює колір на догоду рими чи ритму. Специфічною ознакою світобачення Василя Стуса визначено те, що колір у його поезії виконує не декоративну, а декларативну функцію. Доведено, що найчастотніше у тюремній поезії зустрічаються похмурі кольори, а саме – чорний, сірий, коричневий. Значно рідше простежуємо кольори «веселої» палітри. Використання чистих барв, а не відтінків свідчить про яскраво виражений максималізм поета. Предметний світ Василя Стуса умовно розділено на реальний та уявний, зроблено висновок про переважання останнього. До реального світу зараховано топас камери (нари, кам'яна долівка, ґрати), топас зони (колючий дріт), топас природи (місце заслання). Уявний світ розширює геометрію цих топасів до безкінечності. Простежено, що кожний елемент реального світу має свій дублікат у сфері уявного. Окреслено реалії зовнішнього і внутрішнього, сакрального світів, вказано на те, що межа між ними не завжди є чіткою. Для поета значно вагомішим є внутрішній світ – переживання Божественного у різних його формах, іпостасях та іменах. Найчастотнішою формою вияву Божественного у тюремній ліриці Василя Стуса є образи природи.

**Ключові слова:** Василь Стус, поетична спадщина, тюремна поезія, лірика, ув'язнення, цензура, основні теми, домінантні мотиви та образи.

**The problem setting.** Much of the influential literature of the world was composed under conditions of incarceration and exile. In N. Buriayk's opinion, "among the factors that have a most profound impact on the human psyche, incarceration occupies a place next only to love and death" [1, p. 1]. It explains why the experience of imprisonment has evoked similar intellectual and poetic responses among numerous writers. The list of incarcerated writers is long and impressive. Even though their "crimes" were different – from what was considered to be political treason to dissident activities – their works firmly established their names in literature and brought fame to their authors. Among the latter are Taras Shevchenko, Wilfrid Blunt, Oscar Wilde, Paul Verlaine, Jean Genet, Ezra Pound, to name but a few. The list also includes Vasyl' Stus, a Ukrainian poet whose works "...elevate him to the ranks of the most talented writers, not merely in Ukrainian literature, but in world literature" [6].

**The aim of the article** is to identify the main features of Stus' poetic personality; to examine the intellectual sources of his poetry; to investigate into his prison writings; to explore the effect of confinement on the images and motifs of his poetry.

**The novelty of the research.** The prison poetry of Vasyl' Stus has not yet been subjected to systematic and comprehensive analysis. So the novelty of our research is in the fact that examining Stus' works in the context of prison poetry and of identifying the influence of confinement on his treatment of different themes and the formation of images has been undertaken for the first time.

**The presentation of the main material.** Vasyl' Stus' poems reveal only small part of their author's internal world. For Stus could not entrust everything to the scraps of paper on which he wrote his poems: he could not know who would be the first to read them and did not wish to endanger his fellow companions in captivity. Thus even those texts

which managed to escape official censorship have undergone the author's own self-censorship. This is one of the most frightening phenomena of life in a country where disingenuousness and forced entry into soul of another are ubiquitous.

According to Yuri Shevelyov [4, p. 370], there are two kinds of poetry: programmatic and unprogrammed. Programmatic poetry (Sviatoslav Karavans'kyi, Mykola Rudenko) typically embodies a certain ideology, a "program", which the versifier lays out in his work more or less capably, depending on his talent. Unprogrammatic poetry (Vasyl Stus) may also have a well shaped ideology, but reflects it only indirectly, in the changes of moods and experiences. Programmatic poetry usually reflects formed views, unprogrammed one – thoughts and feelings in the process of formation. Being pre-shaped, programmatic poetry requires a constant change of themes and subjects in order to avoid becoming monotonous. Unprogrammed poetry can play endless variations on one theme and usually remains lyric. Its richness comes from a diversity of emotional experiences.

It is not difficult to describe the circle of recurring themes, motifs and images in Stus' unprogrammatic poetry, which form a common thread between himself and the outside world. Imprisonment is rendered in a few of its details: *the barbed wire, the barred windows, the puddle, the lantern, pine trees, the crow, the changing seasons of the year, a world devoid of light, human shadows, the howling of a bitch, very seldom – prison guards, and almost never – comrades in misfortune: "a handful of us ... for prayers and expectations only" (horstka nas ... lyshe dlia molytov i spodivannia)*. The monotonous life in prison have proffered many more motifs: *the brevity of meeting with his wife, the seeming infinity of separation, vague hints at the erotic, etc.*

But Stus' poetry, unprogrammatic and intensive as it is, does not go out in quest of themes and motifs. The bare minimum is more than sufficient for the real object of Stus' poetry. For him, images and motifs are merely points of entry into his inner world, the diary of the soul. They take the place of unsent letters in which he could have shared his inner self with others. The more impoverished the external world, the more prominent the essential, the spiritual, the emotional, the more distinct will be the dynamics by which the life of the mind and psychic reflexes come into being, the greater will be the wealth of thoughts, moods and feelings in transformation. In speaking of his sorrow, Stus says that it *"thunders in its muteness" (v nimoti hrymyt)*. This is true of his poetry as well. Reduced thematically to a minimum, it is pointed inward, and thunders all the more forcefully in its muteness.

There are a small number of laconic self-characterizations in Stus' poetry. These should be borne in mind as we illustrate his work. *"Misfortune writes with me" (Bida pyshe mnoiu)* is one such expression. On the one hand, it guides the reader to the biographical sources of his poetry; on the other – "it points to the poet's dependence on his compulsion to write poems within which he discovers self and world" [5, p. 331]. He also expressed this idea another way: *"Poetry, my beauty, my adornment, Did I live before you or to you?" (Poeziie, kraso moia, okraso, Ya pered tebe, chy do tebe zhyv?)*.

Here it is not the work which emerges as an act of the poet, but the poet who creates himself, as poet and human being, through his own poetry. To the familiar, *"in the beginning was the word"*, Stus adds an erratum: *the poetic word*. But at the same time he wants his poetry to be more than a confession, more than a reflection of *"all that has been dreamed" (vse, shcho namriialos)* or of all that has taken place. The *"hundredfoldtroubled soul" (stotryvozhna dusha)* must not only be expressed and revealed, but *"protected / hidden, swaddled" (zakhovaty, spelenaty)*. The ideal is the creative credo that has been attributed to Beethoven: *"suffering rendered harmonious" (harmoniiiovane strazhdannia)*, not mere suffering. The monstrous circumstances of Stus' life prevented him from always standing at the height of his ideal. However, what's important is his awareness of it and, in his better poems, he did attain it. Poetry is by no means merely the scream of his soul. It is a responsibility, and a catharsis – both for the poet and for the reader. It is an impiety, *"blasphemy" (sviatotatstvo)* to take life lightly, to focus on the private, to submit to one's suffering. One must be *"sick with good-heartedness" (dobrotoiu khoryi)*, master the art of *"melting as smoky dew in the grass" (roztavannia rosoiu dymnoiu mizh trav)*.

There is no evading the awareness that to perish is inevitable: *"The road has been cut off" (Obtialto dorohu)*, *"The Calvary imposed by God" (Bohom posiana Holhota)*, *"before you – your country, your crash, your ash" (poperedu – tvii kraii, tvii krakh, tvii prakh)*, *"the world has overcome you" (svit tebe peremih)*, *"The Lord has placed on your forehead His radiant and destructive finger" (vam na lob poklav Hospod' svii svitlyi perst nyshchivnyi)*, *"you fall yourself and your friends fall as well" (sam padesh i druzi – tezh padut)*, *"our ranks are broken" (riad utracheno)*. Countless such quotes could be cited. In this world, there is no tomorrow: *"Say another prayer to yesterday when there is no tomorrow" (Pomolysia shche – vchorashn'omu, koly nema zavtra)* and time has apocalyptically imploded into nothingness, so there is no future, but also no present. There is only the *"past and gone" (promynule)* and the memory, – but is it real?

In his poetry, the poet stands alone and his solitude is terrifying. I say "in his poetry", for in life this was not quite so. There were people who respected and supported him, he had soul-mates both inside and outside the Mordovian concentration camps [3, p. 208]. But in the poetry Stus is almost completely alone. References to friends are rare and very brief. Apart from them, the poet's sole companion is solitude: *"Stillness as a scourge, has surrounded space" (Bezhominnia mov bych, obkialo prostir)*, *"We are like inverted mirrors; they reflect nothing but our own souls" (My nibyto oberneni svichaddia – iedynovlasnu dushu svitlymo)*. Solitude is not only a fact of poetic life, but a regimen it consciously exacts: *"Grief trusts only solitude" (Hore viryt' til'ky samoti)*, as well as a pragmatic rule for the conduct of life: *"Stop at a distance. Do not come another step. For distance is the test of the heart and the phantasmagoric delirium of the soul" (Na vidstani spynys'. Ni na krok ne zblyzhuisia. Bo vidstan' – ispyt sertsia i feierychne maryvo dushi)*.

One might imagine that solitude, actual and invoked, could have resulted from a reluctance to men-

tion friends and like-minded people, just in case the poems were seized by the secret police. But this is surely not the complete explanation. What is much more convincing is that Stus' solitude includes a small cluster of friends and like thinkers: that his solitude is collective. For even as a group they remain alone in this world, on this "road of fate, this road of pain" (*doroha doli, doroha bolii*). This is not by any means to deny that in some poems, especially those dating from the Kolyma exile, loneliness is completely private. But in all those poems which are more than pages from a prison diary – solitude is not only a personal, but also a shared experience. At the same time, this solitude is part of the universal human condition, even a philosophical category. This becomes quite clear in such contexts: "Both doubled stars and a doubled moon wander through the heavens, in doubled motion we are centers of tensions of the heart. In sleepy flight a small assemblage ascends in the air, And fixedly stares at the death that is flying in wait" (*I zori podviini, i misiats podviinyi blukaie, podviino-ho rukhu my tsenry sertsevykh natuh, u sonnomu leti male tovarystvo shyriai, i pylno vdyvliaietsia v smert, shcho chyhaie dovkruih*). "We" instead of "I" can be interpreted here as a group of the like-minded, or as mankind. Pay attention to another example: "Divine yourself within the fumes of wills in conflict, and choose, while we still have fate, the true vale of tongueless tears" (*Zbahny sebe u chadi riznovollia i obery, dopoky nasha dolia, pravdyvyi padil beziazykykh sliz*). The imperative mood here, again, may be addressed to the poet himself, or to mankind in general.

Solitude in Stus' poems is not the record of one specific individual prisoner. It is both the existentialist motif of the human being, as cast into the world independent of choice or desire, and an expression of almost childlike helplessness in the face of this wide and incomprehensible world: "The world emerges from an egg. A furry chick, yellow as sorrow, rushes to search for its sisters, its mother, the millet, the grief" (*Z yaiechka vyide svit. Kurchatko volokhate, zhovtave, nache zhal, yak kynetsia shukaty, a sestry de, a maty, a proso, a pechal*).

In his memoirs on Stus, M. Kheifetz speaks of the poet's profound interest in existentialist philosophy: the notion of man as banished into the world does not exclude but, on the contrary, demands human action. This is true of Stus, whose awareness of his mission sets him above the circumstances and conditions of his life and the limitations of place: "My spirit lifts me above this prison wall, above this sorrow, above the bell tower of St. Sophia" (*Nad tsei tiuremnyi mur, nad tsiu zhuru i nad Sofivsku dzvynysiu znosyt mene mii dukh*). In this context it is appropriate to mention the words of W. Zyla concerning V. Stus: "Despite the horrendous obstacles placed in the poet's way ... his spirit can rise above physical and political enslavement. It expresses an unquenchable sense of individual honor and glory" [6].

In some poems, the poet is as if possessed by the awareness of his mission so much, that he forgets the poeticity of his world view, does not clothe his expression in images, and even becomes declaratively prophetic: "Through a hundred doubts I go to you, the goodness and truth of the age. Through a hundred disappointments. Astonishment casts a spell: do not stop, go on. The path is right. You are its precursor" (*Kriz sotni sumniviv ya ydu do tebe, dobro i*

*pravdo viku. Cherez sto znevir. I vrochyt podyv: ne spyniaisia, ydy. To – shliakh pravdyvyi. Ty – yoho predtecha*). But much more frequently this awareness finds its own, essentially Stusian, expression, and at such times it does not resound with prophetic ecstasy but attires itself in original and restrained images. On his "frenzied paths" (*doroha nesamovytykh*) the poet finds God, and in God – the realization of his mission: "The road that steals beyond the mountain pass is wrapped in the dimness of memory. But You, You abide like the Bridal-Spirit, trembling like a Flame-Tear and growing rosy like a petal on shackles. This is, this is, what you lived for, what you came into this world for, rising to your feet, falling head over heels to refresh yourself" (*Doroha ta okradna shcho za pereval, uhornulas morokom pamiaty. Ale Ty, Ty – probuvaiesh, yak Divykh-Dukh, i tremtysh, nache Spalakh-Sloza, yak peliustka na kaidanakh – rozheviiesh. Tse i ye, tse i ye, zadlia choho zhyv, zadlia choho pobachyv svit, dovho zvodyvsia, shkerebert padav, shchob osvizhytys*). The newly-hatched chicken, cast into the world and doomed to "death-existence and life-death" (*smerteisnuvania, zhyttiesmert*), finds its vocation in being the pink petal on the chains that bind humanity. This petal neutralizes the chains, exposes their powerlessness, opens the "age of new sight" (*doba prozrin*), creates poetry and poeticizes the world.

Stus' life and works are closely interconnected; they harmonize with one another in a unique way. Both are honest, and this, to use Mykola Zerov's words, in our "ignoble and avaricious times" (*pidli i skupi chasy*), is a great deal. But there is a significant difference between them. In life, Stus never yielded to the enemy and never expressed doubts. Such rectitude exacted a high physical and psychological toll for it was fraught with spiritual conflicts. Much of Stus' poetry reflects not so much decisions as the inner dialogues with the angels who gave him the insight to stay his course and with the devils of temptation, with "those inner voices which constitute the inner essence of the spiritual life of every human being" [5, p. 332] and is not particular to the life of a prisoner of an inhuman political system.

Stus' prison poetry is human and humane throughout: it is full of exaltations and depressions, despair and bursts of joy, maledictions and absolutions, cries of pain and the grinding of gritted teeth, coverings within the self and revelations of the world's infinitude. We face a human being, not a "living torch". Loyalty to the inner truth and openness in the declaration of one's flaws and triumphs do not, in themselves, make poetry. However, they are a prerequisite of poetic creativity. Without them one can make rhetoric, or a rhymed pamphlet, but not true poetry. Naturally, in his progress towards death on Golgotha, a progress propelled by development towards a kamikaze complex and inspired by the realization of his noble and definitive mission in life, Stus could not have many companions or even people who understood him. Like many poets before him, Stus had to discover what everyone discovers for himself: the paltriness that exists alongside mankind's nobility. He found that people, as a rule, "are not noble enough for their own crucifixion" (*mali dlia vlasnoho rozpiattia*). Stus knows this, but discovers it afresh. Here, doubtless, is one of the keys to his loneliness.

There is bitter irony in the fact that prison poetry has undergone a scarcely credible refinement. In place of stereotyped allegorical images of Hrabovs'kyi, in Stus' works we move among images of great emotional tension and unsurpassed originality. Even more importantly, from the groans of a tortured body and spirit, we have moved on to a philosophy, which far transcends the boundaries of the biographical and the political. Such of Stus' poems as "*Reading Iasunari Kavabata (Za chytanniam Iasunari Kavabati)*" or "*She Lies like Crumpled Water*" (*Vona lezhyt', iak zibhana voda*), may occupy an honorable place alongside the best of the world's lyrics of our day. They burst through the boundaries of the history of prison literature and

Ukrainian literature; they belong to the literature of the world.

**Conclusions.** Contemporary Ukrainian culture is unthinkable without the presence of Vasyl' Stus in its literary canon, its historical background and more generally in its collective thought. In our article we haven't fully succeeded in grasping the inner world of a poet in its totality. Our analysis of Stus' poetry is not exhaustive and complete. But we hope that it contributes to understanding of some aspects of his poetic creativity. Investigating into Stus' prison writings, we have paid close attention to the intellectual sources of poet's works and have explored the profound impact that confinement had on his images, themes, motifs and philosophical implications.

## References:

1. Burianyk, N. (1997). *Incarceration and Death: The Poetry of Vasyl' Stus*. Doctor's thesis. Edmonton, Alberta, 273 p.
2. Carynyk, M. (1985). Translated Excerpts from Vasyl Stus' "Notebook". *The Ukrainian Weekly*. Sept. 15 (pp. 7–12); Sept. 22 (pp. 7–10).
3. Kheifetz, M. (1981). Ukrainian Silhouettes. *Suchasnist'*, 288 p.
4. Shevelyov, Yu. (1987). "Trunok i trutyzna". *Vasyl Stus. Selected Poems*. Munich: The Ukrainian Free University.
5. Syrko, I.M. (2007). Two Stylistic Voices in Stus' Poetry. *Svit doslidnytskych studij: Naukovyi zbirnyk na poshanu profesora Mykoly Zymomri* (pp. 330–334). Drohobych: Kolo.
6. Zyla, W.T. (1986). "I have no fear of dying": the late Vasyl Stus. *Proceedings of the 10th Anniversary of the Ukrainian Helsinki Group*. Retrieved from: <http://www.ukrweekly.com/old/archive/1986/458610>