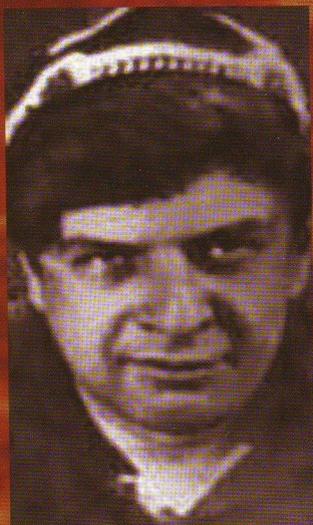


Petr Barenboim  
Boris Meshereyakov

# Flanders in Moscow and Odessa:

poet Eduard Bagritskii  
as Till Ulenspiegel  
of Russian literature



Petr Barenboim  
Boris Meshereyakov

---

---

# **Flanders in Moscow and Odessa:** poet Eduard Bagritskii as Till Ulenshpiegel of Russian literature



Летний сад  
Москва  
2010

**Peter Barenboim and Boris Meshcheryakov**

Flanders in Moscow and Odessa: poet Eduard Bagritskii as the Till Ulenspiegel of Russian literature. — M.: Letny Sad, 2010. — 64 p.

The book focuses on the Flemish theme in the legacy of the famous Russian poet Eduard Bagritskii (1895—1934) who cunningly managed to voice his opposition to Stalin's regime in the poems, allowed for publication by the Communist censors and overlooked by Soviet secret police.

ISBN 978-5-98856-115-6

*The authors feel especially obliged  
to Professor James Hickey of Hofstra University Law School, NY,  
who read the manuscript and suggested numerous changes  
to improve its clarity and style.*

*We would also like to thank our good friends:  
Aida Tulsakaya, Steven Halliwell, Samuel Hart, Sveta  
and Richard Bernard (all from New York);  
Jan Hutsebaut from the Uilenspiegel Museum in Damme,  
Naeem and Galina Sidiqi from the Friends of Bruges Society,  
and Olga Fadina from Moscow for their most valuable  
suggestions and comments.*

*And last but not least, we extend our deepest respect  
and gratitude to Maxim Shroyer, Professor of Russian  
and English Department of Slavic and Eastern Languages  
and Literatures at Boston College, MA, who, as the author of  
the only English language monograph on Bagritskii  
and a skillful translator of his verse, kindly encouraged us  
in writing a book on the yet unstudied aspect  
of Bagritskii's work.*

*All the mistakes found in the text belong entirely  
to the authors.*

## Preface by Peter Barenboim President of the Moscow Florentine Society, Co-Chair of the Friends of Bruges Society

Be you a scholar from Sorbonne or trickster small,  
Lo! how in victuals my tote bag does abound.  
Take shabby cloak along and we will make a round  
Of the enchanted land that people Flanders call.

*(Eduard Bagritskii)*

I discovered for myself “the wonderful land of Flanders” (in the words of Bagritskii) with the help of my Pakistani friend Gias Sidiqi, whose Russian wife Galina had convinced him to move to Bruges in western Belgium, buy a house there and settle down for good. I believe Bruges (or *Brugge*, as the Flemish call it) is the most beautiful city in Europe. During my quite frequent business visits to Bruges, I tried to spend all the time I had by walking along its streets and channels, every time being completely captivated by their unusually serene and quiet harmony. Several years had passed before I, on my friends’ advice, finally undertook a walking tour to Damme, a small town just five kilometers away from Bruges, with which it is connected by a foot path running along the channel. This path is probably one of the most picturesque pedestrian routes in the world.

It was then and there—walking past the Flemish fields, with a fresh breeze ruffling my hair—that I instantly felt the presence of Till Ulenspiegel. The Ulenspiegel flashbacks from my adolescent reading and from the Soviet feature movie made in 1976 were now coming back to me. The images—rather obscure, but still surprisingly strong—were surfacing from my deep unconscious. They were based not on the text of Charles De Coster’s book, but rather on the

spirit of freedom and mischief pervading it, the spirit which had long been imprinted on my memory in connection with none other but the Flemish rebel Till Ulenspiegel.

Many years later, when I started writing a book about Flanders and Bruges, in an attempt to find as many as possible of the destiny threads connecting them with Russia, I suddenly remembered my adolescent infatuation with the poet Eduard Bagritskii and his lines dedicated to Till Ulenspiegel, which now started vaguely forming in my memory. After several decades of forgetfulness, I had finally opened a volume of Bagritskii's poetry and was instantly overwhelmed: firstly, by the vigor and freshness of his verse, by its vehement and freedom-loving spirit, especially reflected in the so-called "Flemish" cycle, to which neither literary researchers nor translators seemed to have paid any attention at all. Secondly, I was amazed by the power of Bagritskii's "anti-Soviet" poems, which he had miraculously managed to have published; and which not only the Soviet censorship, but also the majority of contemporary literary critics had failed to see through.

The latter, in my opinion, happened because nobody has yet seemed to have fully understood the daring spirit of Flemish Ulenspiegel, this spirit of freedom and honor, which Bagritskii had borrowed from the pages of Till Ulenspiegel novel by Charles De Coster, the spirit the poet had adopted and made his own. Bagritskii had never been to Flanders, but the power of his artistic imagination could easily transcend national and political borders, making the theme of Flanders and Ulenspiegel run like a scarlet thread through his entire creative life, however short it was (the poet died at the age of 38). My longstanding association with Boris Meshcheryakov, the translator of this book, has allowed us to finally introduce the Western reader to the "Flemish



Ulenspiegel” cycle, the true pinnacle of Bagritskii’s poetry. Eventually, the author’s original concept has gradually outgrown the boundaries of a chapter in the book on Flanders and Bruges, evolving into a small book.

My friend Gias, who died prematurely in 2003 at the age of 50, had been telling me more than once that in my unending travels Bruges needed to become a place of rest and comfort. Sometimes, this indeed happens, and then, whatever the weather may be, I set out for Damme along the “Ulenspiegel path”. According to the novel, this small town is the birthplace of Flemish Ulenspiegel, in whose honor they opened a museum at the main town square and named a tap of local beer served in a multitude of Damme’s cafes and restaurants. During such walks, I have quite enough time to contemplate on the phenomenon of Bagritskii, who regarded Ulenspiegel as his alter ego and sang him praises in a delectably poetic Russian. I believe this close affinity can be explained by the fact that Bagritskii was born in Odes-



sa, a busy port town on the Black Sea, where the spirit of freedom, so valued by the Flemish, was bubbling then like a new wine. Coincidence or not, but it was none other but my dear friend Gias who had first brought me to Odessa. Taxi drivers from the Moldavanka streets knew Gias by sight, and he at that time was discussing with the municipal administration the project of granting Odessa the status of a free trade zone — a remake of its once lost *porto franco* status. All is intertwined in our globalized world, where a poet from Odessa was day-dreaming of Flanders; and my friend, a Pakistani businessman, was teaching me to love Odessa and Bruges. The world, where his son, quite inevitably, married a girl from Odessa and was baptized into Russian Orthodoxy, and then, together with his mother and with my participation, organized *The Bruges Friends Society*, under the auspices of which this small book is now published.

Introduction by Jan Hutsebaut,  
Director of Uilenspiegelmuseum in Damme

## ULENSPIEGEL, THE FLEMISH SOUL, AND CHARLES DE COSTER

**U**lenspiegel first entered European literature in the early sixteenth century. The German author Hermann Bote wrote his Ulenspiegel stories, partly based on the German folklore version of Ulenspiegel. This German Ulenspiegel is a devilish villain, who turns the world upside down. Only a few years later, Bote's work was translated in Antwerp to mark the beginning of a very successful Ulenspiegel-tradition. Since then the Ulenspiegel tales were continuously re-edited, illustrated, set to music, and even adapted for children's reading. Gradually, the knavish tricks of a scoundrel have become the roguish pranks of a joker.

Perhaps the most important—and indisputably the most famous—modification of Ulenspiegel character was the one made by the Belgian-Flemish author Charles De Coster. Born in Flanders, this Ulenspiegel becomes both a jester and a freedom fighter, symbolizing the spirit of Flanders. As De Coster himself puts it: “noble people of Flanders, Ulenspiegel is your soul”. In the “Legend of Ulenspiegel” (1867), Till Ulenspiegel becomes the adversary of King Philip II of Spain and is committed to the freedom struggle of the Low Countries, during the sixteenth century. It is in this capacity that he roams the land together with his lady friend Nele and inseparable companion Lamme Goedzak.

This book of De Coster is often called the epic of the soul of Flanders. Its protagonists symbolize the Flemish na-





tional character at its finest. Katheline, half witch, half martyr, thus defines it, while foretelling the future of Flanders:

*“Ulenspiegel will be a master of merry words and frolics of youth, yet good of heart withal, having for his father Claes, the brave working man that knows how to earn his own living with courage, honesty, and gentleness. (...) Claes, working hard all the week, living according to right and according to law, and laughing at his laborious lot instead of being cast down thereby, will be the model of all the good workpeople of Flanders. Ulenspiegel, young and immortal, will ramble over the World and never settle in one place. And he will be peasant, nobleman, painter, and sculptor, all in one. And he will continue his wanderings hither and thither, lauding things beautiful and good, and laughing stupidity to scorn. Claes, then, O noble people of Flanders, is your courage; Soetkin your valiant motherhood; Ulenspiegel your soul. A sweet and gentle maiden,*

*lover of Ulenspiegel and immortal like him, shall be your heart; and Lamme Goedzak, with his pot-belly, shall be your stomach.” (Translated by Geoffrey Whitworth)*

For Charles De Coster, the Flemish soul stands for courage, justice, vitality, simplicity, joy... and, for all, freedom. This image of Flanders is now known all over the world thanks to Charles De Coster and his Ulenspiegel.

**T**he Flemish writer Charles De Coster, who died in 1879 in Brussels, Belgium, is now remembered mainly as the author of the novel, entitled *Legend of Ulenspiegel and Lamme Goedzak and Their Adventures Heroical, Joyous and Glorious in the Land of Flanders and Elsewhere*. Our hero, the Russian poet Eduard Bagritskii, was born in 1895: just two years after the re-publication of this novel in modern French, which had almost immediately become known in France and Belgium. The influence this famous novel had on the Russian poet not only helped him create half a dozen extraordinary poems on Flemish themes, but also led him to become one of the most vivid examples of literary resistance to Stalin's political regime — resistance, the roots of which may not be fully understood without first carrying out a deep analysis of this Flemish influence.

Charles-Theodore-Henri De Coster (20 August 1827 — 7 May 1879) was a Belgian novelist whose efforts laid the foundation for Belgian national literature. He was born at Munich. His father, Augustin De Coster, a native of Ieper (Flanders), was attached to the household of the papal nuncio at Munich, but soon returned to Belgium. Charles' mother came from Huy in Wallonia. Upon reaching lawful age, the youth was placed in a Brussels bank, but in 1850 he entered the Université Libre de Bruxelles, though he failed to complete his studies there and get a degree. De Coster became one of the founders of the *Société des Joyeux*, a

small literary club, more than one member of which was to achieve literary prominence. He was also a member of the freemason's lodge called *Les Vrais Amis de l'Union et du Progrès Réunis* of the Grand Orient of Belgium, where he was initiated on January 7, 1858.

De Coster made his debut as a poet in the *Revue trimestrielle*, founded in 1854, and his first efforts in prose were contributed to a periodical entitled *Ulenspiegel* (founded 1856). De Coster was a keen student of Rabelais and Montaigne, and familiarized himself with sixteenth-century French. He said that Flemish manners and speech could not be rendered faithfully in modern French; and, accordingly, wrote most of his best works imitating the old tongue. His chief masterpiece *La Légende d'Ulenspiegel* (The Legend of Ulenspiegel) was first published in Brussels (1867) and then in Paris (1868). The narrative was styled after a sixteenth-century romance, in which Flemish patriotism had found its fullest expression. De Coster spent as long as ten years in the preparation for this prose epic. *Ulenspiegel*, its protagonist, has been compared to Don Quixote and is the type of a sixteenth-century Fleming. The tale of Ulenspiegel's renowned resurrection from the grave was accepted as an allegory of the destiny of the Flemish people. The feats and pranks of Till and his companion Lamme are the thread of a semi-historical narrative, full of saucy and, sometimes, even slapstick humor. The second edition of the book appeared in 1869 under a much longer title: *La Légende et les Aventures héroïques, joyeuses et glorieuses d'Ulenspiegel et de Lamme Goedzak au pays de Flandres et ailleurs* (The Legend of Ulenspiegel and Lamme Goedzak and Their Adventures Heroical, Joyous and Glorious in the Land of Flanders and Elsewhere). This time, the book had numerous illustrations and contained an intro-

duction called *Préface du Hibou* (Preface of the Owl). It is the text of this edition that was used for verification of future publications and translations into foreign languages ever since.

The expensive book format, in which *Ulenspiegel* had originally appeared, and its language, which De Coster had intentionally styled after the sixteenth-century French by using a lot of obsolete words —primarily, names of many weapons, professions, and foods; as well as archaic past tenses for some verbs—made it known only to a limited circle of wealthy and highly educated readers. So when a much cheaper edition, rendered entirely in modern French, appeared in 1893, most readers in France and Belgium regarded it as an entirely new book. Still, even this marketing trick failed to bring it desired commercial success.

In 1870, De Coster became professor of universal history and French literature at the military school. None of his works, however, proved to be financially profitable; despite his government employment, De Coster was always in difficulties. In May of 1879, the writer died at Ixelles, Brussels and was interred there at the Ixelles Cemetery.

*The Legend of Till Ulenspiegel and Lamme Goedzak* (French: *La Légende et les Aventures héroïques, joyeuses et glorieuses d’Ulenspiegel et de Lamme Goedzak au pays de Flandres et ailleurs*) is an 1867 novel by Charles De Coster. Based on the fourteenth-century Low German figure of Eulenspiegel, Coster’s novel recounts the allegorical adventures as those of a Flemish prankster Till Ulenspiegel during the Reformation wars in the Netherlands.

De Coster was one of many nineteenth-century nationalist writers who used, adapted, and changed existing folk tales. De Coster made Till Ulenspiegel into a Geus, a Protestant hero of the Dutch War for Independence (or rather,





of the major part played in that war by the Flemish, even though Flanders itself was doomed to remain under the rule of Catholic Spain).

In his book, De Coster incorporates many of the original, quite amusing *Ulenspiegel* tales, alongside grimly graphic depictions of cruel tortures and *auto-de-fe* ubiquitously practiced by the Spanish Inquisition. According to De Coster, *Ulenspiegel* carries the ashes of his father in a locket around his neck. His father, Claes, was burned at the stake on charges of heresy — a detail not even hinted at in any of the original folk legends.

It is worth mentioning that De Coster's novel enjoyed immense popularity in the USSR. As a result of this popularity, the book spawned several related artistic efforts. In 1976, the directors Alexander Alov and Vladimir Naumov released a four-part feature movie entitled *Legenda o Tile*, which had been filmed entirely on historical scenic locations in the then Soviet Estonia. The movie received a wide

international distribution. In Belgium, for instance, it was promoted as “Thyl Ulenspiegel”.

Some researchers claim that the literary image of Ulenspiegel was indirectly used by Mikhail Bulgakov in his bestselling novel *The Master and Margarita* (completed in 1940, first published in 1966) as a prototype for the black cat character *Behemoth*.

In 1983, the Soviet composer Nikolai Karetnikov and his librettist (later turned film director) Pavel Lounguine adapted De Coster’s novel as the *samizdat* opera “Till Ulenspiegel”, which had to be rehearsed and recorded in secrecy, having received its premiere only in 1993, almost two years after the collapse of the Soviet Union.

**E**duard Bagritskii, whose real name was Eduard Dzubin, was born on November 3, 1895, into a religious Jewish family, living in Odessa. His merchant father tried hard to provide his son, a severe asthmatic from early childhood, with the best education available under the circumstances. After graduation from secondary school for commoners, Eduard completed land-surveyor qualification courses, but never worked as such.

His first publication under the pen name *Bagritskii* appeared in 1915 in one of the Odessa decadent literary almanacs. The young poet was able, with equal aptitude, to versify in several Neo-Romantic styles most popular at that time, such as acmeism, futurism, and symbolism. Soon he became a prominent figure among the writers of the so-called *Southwestern* (or *Ukrainian*) *School*, to which, among many other highly talented authors, belonged such later renowned names as Isaac Babel, Yuri Olesha, Valentin Katayev, Ilya Ilf and Yevgeni Petrov. A large number of this

school's writers were Odessa natives who often incorporated Ukrainian inflections and mixed Russian-Ukrainian vocabulary into their writing.

When the Bolshevik revolution of 1917 was followed by the Civil War in 1918, Bagritskii, who joined the Red Army as a volunteer, started working for the political department of the Communist partisan detachment named after *VTsIK* (All-Russian Central Executive Committee), where he was in charge of composing 'topic-of-the-day' propaganda couplets for the soldiers, almost all of them barely literate former workers and peasants. Needless to say, Bagritsky became heavily influenced by the tumultuous events he was witnessing.

After the war, Bagritskii returned to his native Odessa, freelancing as an author and graphic artist for the Southern Bureau of the Russian Telegraph Agency in the Ukraine. He also contributed for some Odessa daily newspapers and magazines. In 1925, Bagritskii decided to move to Moscow, which provided much better opportunities to earn for living by his pen. Having settled down in Moscow, Bagritsky in 1926 joined the so-called 'Literary Constructivist Center'. Its members, who called themselves 'Marxists in literature', were endeavoring to apply the principles of technical design to literary work. In 1930, the Center was self-disbanded, and Bagritskii, whose asthma condition had in the meanwhile grown much worse, joined the loyalist RAPP (*Russian Association of Proletarian Writers*). In 1932, he published his second collection of verse, entitled "Pobediteli" (*The Winners*). The first one, called "Yugozapad" (*Southwest*), had appeared in 1928.

February 16 of 1934, Bagritskii, aged 38, died of galloping pneumonia, severely exacerbated by his asthma. His widow, Lydia Suok, was arrested three years later (in 1937)

and sent to the Gulag (the codename for labor camps in the Stalinist USSR). She was released only in 1956, having spent 19 years behind the barbed wire. Her and Bagritskii's only son, Vsevolod, a notable Russian poet, was killed in action in 1942 during the War of 1941-1945. Lydia Gustavovna Suok (a Russian of Swedish descent) had two sisters, also married to well-known writers, both of whom originally worked in Odessa: Olga's husband was Yuri Olesha,



and Serafima's — Vladimir Narbut. Vsevolod Bagritskii's widow, Elena Bonner, eventually married Andrei Sakharov and later became a prominent Soviet dissident.

Returning to Eduard Bagritskii, we indeed believe that he belongs to the last generation of the Silver Age of Russian poetry, which was cut short by the Bolshevik revolution of 1917, but managed to survive in the works of some writers and poets (Bagritskii was one of them) as long as the late 1920s. The Silver Age of Russian poetry encompasses the first two decades of the twentieth century. Its best-known representatives include such brilliant poets as Alexander Blok, Sergei Esenin, Valery Bryusov, Konstantin Balmont, Mikhail Kuzmin, Igor Severyanin, Sasha Chorny, Nikolay Gumilyov, Maximilian Voloshin, Innokenty Annensky, and Zinaida Gippius. The poets most often associated with the "Silver Age" are Anna Akhmatova, Marina Tsvetaeva, Osip Mandelstam, and Boris Pasternak. While the Silver Age is

believed to continue the development of the nineteenth-century Russian literature tradition, some *avant-garde* poets tried to overturn it: Velimir Khlebnikov, David Burlyuk, Aleksei Kruchenykh and Vladimir Mayakovsky.

Speaking about Bagritskii's native city — Odessa, we cannot help mentioning that it was probably the most Flemish city of the early-twentieth-century Russia. This busy seaport, seething with enthusiasm and fertilized by a mixture of different cultures, was founded in 1794 by the decree of Empress Catherine the Great. Odessa, which in 1819—1858 enjoyed the status of *porto franco*, became in the nineteenth century the fourth largest city of the Russian Empire (preceded only by Moscow, St. Petersburg, and Warsaw). No wonder it later gave birth to the already mentioned very influential *Southwestern School* of Russian literature.

Even today, Till Ulenspiegel still remains a well-known literary character in Russia. He epitomizes the Flemish enduring sense of liberty, which Bagritskii affectionately referred to as the Flemish “sweet love for freedom”. He is a boisterous vagrant who earns his living by playing the buffoon and performing at market squares. Ulenspiegel is a partisan of Flemish independence and protector of the poor. He is also the avenger for the death of his father, Claes, who was burnt at the stake by the Inquisition.

Till combines elements of Robin Hood, Don Quixote and François Villon. Besides, he is a bit of a Casanova, despite his true and eternal love for the beautiful Nele from his native Damme. Strung on his neck, right against his heart, he wears a little amulet bag filled with the ashes of his father. This bag taps at Till's heart when he becomes even momentarily tired of or disappointed in the Flanders' fight against the Spanish oppressors. The literary Till describes himself broadly in the following refrain:

*“I come from beautiful Flanders, I am both a painter and a peasant, both a nobleman and a sculptor. I travel this world, praising everything good and beautiful in it; but, as for the world’s folly, I hold my sides with laughter mocking at it”.*

Richard Strauss, one of the world’s most mystical composers, dedicated to Till one of his *tone poems* called “*Till Eulenspiegels lustige Streiche*” (Till Eulenspiegel’s Merry Pranks), Op. 28 (1895) and subtitled “*Nach alter Schelmenweise — In Rondeauform*” (A Rondo after Old Picaresque Stories). Till Ulenspiegel in Strauss’ music both wreaks havoc in shopping arcades and fools local damsels with amorous affectations. This prankster tears the cassock off a Catholic priest during the church service and mimics a university professor. Richard Strauss completes the chain of merry episodes with a mock execution of Till Ulenspiegel, who predictably eludes death.

The admiration that the contemporary audience felt for this music of Richard Strauss was clearly expressed by his French colleague Claude Debussy: “*The confidence of orchestration is amazing, especially striking is the vehement energy of forward motion which literally drags the listener throughout the protagonist’s adventures*”. Richard Strauss’ music reflects the primary feature of Ulenspiegel’s personality — his amazing ability to disappear, vanish, fade away from anywhere, — only to appear elsewhere in the same out-of-the-blue fashion.

The famous French writer Romain Rolland (1866-1944) wrote in his article about Ulenspiegel:

*“Ulenspiegel is a Flemish Geus (a rebel against Spain), son of Claes, a skilled artisan, a freedom fighter and protector of his people. He avenges his people by using laughter, and he avenges his people by using a battle-axe. Here he is: one*



*sees “his quick eye, his brown eye, his mouth and nose, as if made by two foxes, schooled in the art of cunning”, his leanness, his unquenchable thirst, his wolfish teeth, created for biting and devouring, his always cheerful mood, his cruel pleasures, his light mind, headstrong skull, implacable forehead, on which, as a list of debtors, each and every wrong is recorded to the day of its retribution, his incorruptibility, his cruelty. His birthplace is Damme, a town in Flanders. His epoch is the age of Philip II the Butcher and William I the Silent. But with all that he is Flanders of all times.*

*He is the banner of his people. He is the banner and coat of arms of his nation. Scarlet maw — scarlet awe. Sharp fangs and merry laughter — a sin before and the blood after.*

*[...]*

*The laughter of Flemish Ulenspiegel is the mask of a laughing silenus, hiding his wrathful implacable face, his bitter gall, his fiery passions. Tear the mask off! He is terrible, this Ulenspiegel! His fate is tragic...*



*And how well Charles De Coster himself knew it! Much better than all his commentators, he defined his own self, he was the first in setting the tone by his macabre “Owl’s Foreword”: “Ulenspiegel — Uylen Spiegel. A mirror for you, the rulers and the ruled, — the mirror of follies, nonsense, and crimes of the entire epoch...”*

*“Seemingly-guileless, you are laughing at me, but what your politics has been living by since you started your reign over the world? By carnage and bloodshed alone... Are you sure there are no more Charles Vs or Philips IIs?” Owl (Uyl) is a politician who puts on the mask of free-thinking, incorruptibility, and love for the entire human race, and then, without a word of warning, he takes and chokes the life out of an entire nation... My fellow poet, go and count, if you can, all the owls of this world and contemplate if it was reasonable to attack, like you do it, the Might and Cunning, these two royal owls...” This means he was attacking them. Here it is, — the concealed plot!”*

Bagritskii emphasizes that he has neither the vigor nor the armor similar to those used in battle by Ulenspiegel, who sings in the novel by De Coster:

*With a double coat I am protected:  
The one is my own skin, the other's made of steel.*

But Bagritskii writes on behalf of his Ulenspiegel:

*I'm not that strong to don a suit of armor  
Or wear a battle-helm! But I will cross  
Thentire land as a free-roaming minstrel.*

It is this image of a free-roaming minstrel that had become the focus of Bagritskii's inner life. De Coster's novel was very popular among French and Belgian symbolists, whose poetry Eduard Bagritskii avidly read in his adolescence (Georges Rodenbach was one of them). Rodenbach said the belfry of Brugge's Belfort Tower was the Heart of Flanders, while De Coster called Nele, the Ulenspiegel's bride, the Eternal Love of Flanders. Another native of Damme and a permanent travel companion (a sort of a "Sancho Panza") of Till's, the renowned gormandizer and skillful cook Lamme Goedzak, can be called the Stomach of Flanders. The good reason to visit Damme by the channel boat called "Lamme Goedzak" is to enjoy the famous cuisine offered by the numerous restaurants of this small Flemish town.

The Ulenspiegel novel by Charles De Coster has been repeatedly translated into Russian and largely reprinted. It is for this reason alone that Russian tourists should especially enjoy a visit to Damme, the birthplace of Ulenspiegel, located only five kilometers away from Bruges. To make such a visit, however, took us, Russians, almost a century.

The already mentioned Soviet four-part movie about Ulenspiegel had to be filmed not in Belgium, but in Estonia. Eduard Bagritskii, who made Ulenspiegel his *alter ego* and carried Till's image throughout his whole life, had never been to Belgium either. The genuinely Flemish mood of Bagritskii's Ulenspiegel poems was entirely the product of his deepest spiritual affinity and self-identification with Till, additionally fueled by the poet's powerful imagination.

For young Bagritskii, who, like Till, often experienced the pangs of hunger, the idea of food became almost a cult. A rebel, like Till, Bagritskii fought in Persia and in the Ukraine, carried away by the revolutionary idea of universal freedom. Earlier, in the days of the 1917 February revolution, Bagritskii commanded a detachment of sailors sent to maintain public order. He, aged 22, was arresting ferocious Odessa bandits and marauders, as the Tsarist policemen were disarmed and ousted from their offices by the people's militia. During the day, Bagritskii defended the revolution and composed *agitprop* couplets. In the late evening, he wrote poems about Flanders — the land he had never been to. Afterwards, the poet recalled that with the help of Ulenspiegel image he had been searching for “*complex historical analogies*”:

*If not a bard, then who on earth has to  
Tell people of the joy already bygone  
And call them to the joy, which is to come?  
As long as stately floats above the road  
The huge and heavy orb of briny sun,  
As long as cool is water in the morning,  
As long as blood is fresh and birds are singing, —  
Till Ulenspiegel roams across the land.*

Till Ulenspiegel, Bagritskii's alter ego, felt free to take property (especially food and gold) from the Spanish occupiers and their local henchmen. At the same time, he was a strict legalist among his fellows, the Flemish insurgents. This helps to explain the duality of Bagritskii's Muse, when the poet impersonates both a smuggler who wants "*to twirl his moustache, lying down at the poop; and to look at the star, shining over the bowsprit, and to rasp his gruff voice with the cant of Black Sea,*" while listening to "*the tongue twisters of the picket boats*" searching after him; and a law enforcer who wants "*with a revolver in hand, to track down the thief barely seen in the fog.*"

The tumultuous feelings of Ulenspiegel's libertine spirit are well reflected in the following Bagritskii's lines:

*Go throb in my blood veins,  
Go to the extremes,  
My outcast youth,  
Burning rage of my dreams!*

February 16, 2009 marked the 75<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the untimely death of Eduard Bagritskii. Had he not died in 1934 and lived just a few years longer, he might well have perished in the torture chambers of Stalin's secret police or in the GULAG labor camps. Then, perhaps, his so-called "rehabilitation" could have legally happened in the 1950s or later, thus securing him a place of honor among the men-of-letters who had "officially" suffered from Stalinist repressions.

But History is devoid of subjunctive mood and has no what-ifs. True, Bagritskii, by dying young, avoided Stalinist reprisals. Unfortunately, some "super-democratic" critics now use this fact as an argument, groundlessly accusing

Bagritskii of “poeticizing violence”. Such false accusations indeed deserve a proper response.

The writer Isaac Babel—a close friend of the “Russian Ulenspiegel” —referred to Bagritskii as “*the most carnal of ‘em Flemish.*” He also said that in the “radiant future” everybody would be just like “*Odessites — witty, infallible and merry, — in other words, the true Bagritskii type.*”

The initial violent brew of Bagritskii’s desperate fight for freedom during his youth did not turn into the stale swill of apathy at his older age. This was the “sweet love for freedom”, which Bagritskii had received from his idol—Flemish Ulenspiegel—that was preserving the poet’s young soul till the end. That is why he refused to clam up and continued writing with an amazing sincerity about his generation of the young revolutionaries — the generation already nearly choked to death by the ever-tightening grip of the Stalin’s oppressive regime.

*From the black [rye] bread and the honest wife  
We have contracted anemic abulia...  
Our grip is too weak for a knife,  
A [writer’s] pen is not to our liking,  
A pickaxe mortifies our [noble] pride  
And glory is of no use to us:  
We are rusty [red] leaves  
On the rusty oaks...  
In the wind  
From the North  
We start falling down.  
Whose path are we now carpeting?  
Whose feet will be walking across our rust?  
Will some young buglers trample us down?  
[Or] will foreign constellations rise above us?*

**W**e should especially note the last lines of this “lost generation” poem. The “foreign constellations”, mentioned there, hint at the still available alternative to being jailed and, eventually, killed by Stalin. The poem was written in 1926 — four years after the “two shiploads of Russian philosophers” were banished from their Motherland, and three years before Leon Trotsky was driven into a lifelong exile. After that, perishing in prison would be the only option left to Stalin’s opponents.

There exists a striking similarity between the fates of Eduard Bagritskii and Osip Mandelstam. On May 13, 1929, Bagritskii, together with Pasternak and another thirteen distinguished writers and poets, signed a collective letter in defense of Mandelstam. The false accusations against Mandelstam partly concerned the latter’s participation in the editing of the Russian translation of “Till Ulenspiegel” by Charles De Coster. In February of 1934 (the month and the year Bagritskii died of an asthma attack) Mandelstam told Anna Akhmatova that he had prepared himself for future arrest and death, by concealing a razor blade in the heel of his shoe. Three months later, when Mandelstam was arrested and thrown into a prison cell, he slashed his wrists with this concealed razor blade, but failed to kill himself.

We must note yet another striking similarity — the one between the beginning of the above poem and the early poem of Osip Mandelstam “Our bread is poisoned”.., which also contains the reference to the stars of foreign lands.

*Our bread is poisoned, and there’s no air left to drink:  
How difficult it is to heal the wounds!  
Joseph, sold to Egypt,  
Could not have suffered more.*

*Bedouins under the starry sky  
Are riding on horseback with their eyes closed...  
So, if the song is sung verily  
And if the lungs are full of air, then at last,  
Everything vanishes, — and what remains  
Is the space, the stars and the bard!*

Russian modern poet Falikov correctly links the poem by Bagritskii to the poem “Leaves” (1830) by the famous Russian poet Fyodor Ivanovich Tyutchev (1803-1873). Tyutchev likens his contemporaries to the leaves which, unwilling to turn yellow and die in autumn, beg the cold wind to blow them away, while they are still green, and to help them follow the birds of passage heading south.

This is the tale not only of Bagritskii’s own generation but that of subsequent generations of Soviet people. The final version of this poem omits these outspoken lines: “*The four winds have erased all [our] traces, the inspiration is still with us, but the voice is already gone...*”

And suddenly Bagritskii, the “Russian Ulenspiegel”, with a cold-blooded sincerity writes in another poem:

*We have acquired the martial skill  
Of patience, the marksman’s eye,  
The knowledge of ruse, of holding our tongue,  
Of looking straight in the eye.*

Bagritskii’s real attitude often remains a mystery to modern researchers of literature. This can be explained by the depth of Bagritskii’s self-identification with the image of sly prankster and freedom fighter Till Ulenspiegel, the depth which remained unnoticed by many Russian and foreign literary critics. This is where Flanders, Bruges,



Eduard Bagritskii,  
still free...



Osip Mandelstam,  
already in prison...

Damme, and Ulenspiegel should come on stage! It is only with their help that we can correctly interpret the works of one of the most brilliant Russian poets and realize his unbelievable audacity and ingenuity, which allowed him to give the macabre and prophetic diagnosis in the face of the inhuman political regime.

Eduard Bagritskii is probably the most European among the poets of Russian Silver Age. His very close intrinsic affinity with the literary character of the daring Flemish hero—Till Ulenspiegel—is essential for correct interpretation of one of the most outspoken anti-Stalinist poems of that time, which its author, Bagritskii, even managed to publish under the Stalinist regime.

Most educated Russians know the opening lines from the poem about Stalin written by another famous poet of the Silver Age — Osip Mandelstam (1891—1938): “*Feel-*

*ing not the land under, we dwell day by day. No one can at ten paces make out what we say...*” For decades these lines had been hand-copied and disseminated by people risking their freedom. This poem first appeared in official print only during *perestroika*. Writing these lines was an act of civic courage for Mandelstam, who eventually paid for it with his life. At the same time, very few seemed to have noticed the heroic deed of Eduard Bagritskii, who in 1929 had managed to publish (!) a poem condemning the already emerging Stalinist oppressive regime. Luckily for the poet, Soviet censorship failed to uncover the true message of this poem, having mistakenly labeled it as a mere piece of “revolutionary romanticism”, which allowed the poem to be largely republished and reprinted ever since. Maybe this is why modern researchers of literature still misinterpret what Bagritskii had written about his imaginary encounter with the ghost of Felix Dzerzhinsky. Sad but true, they indeed persist in their misunderstanding of these courageously sardonic, verily “Dantesque” rhymes, thrown by the poet in the ugly face of Stalinism.

The foreword to a new collection of Bagritskii’s poetry published in 2008 claims that “*Bagritskii sang odes to violence*”. Its author quotes from the Bagritskii’s poem of 1929, entitled “TBC”<sup>1</sup>. However, this quotation consists, in fact, of the words uttered by Felix Dzerzhinsky, with whom the hero of Bagritskii talks in his imagination. Felix Dzerzhinsky, the notorious founder of *Cheka*—the Bolshevik secret police, organized for sowing Red Terror—had been the most feared man in the Soviet Union before Stalin took this garland from him. Some historians even argue that Stalin and Dzerzhinsky were in conflict before the latter died in 1926.

---

<sup>1</sup> The poem’s Russian original uses for its title the Latin abbreviation ‘TBC’, i.e. ‘tuberculosis’. (B.M.)



Disagreeing with the foreword author's opinion, we must say that such Bagritskii's works of the later period, as "TBC", constitute, in fact, an outright denouncement of Stalinism.

The Bagritskii's "Flemish" spirit and his love of freedom may become clearer to us, if we recall Till Ulenspiegel, his favorite literary character and the role model for the poet in his youth. As if imitating Ulenspiegel,

who was covertly, but at the same time publicly offending King Philip II of Spain, our poet spits out in the regime's face the words nobody has ever dared to utter. Bagritskii writes that he saw an apparition, a ghost of the late Felix Dzerzhinsky, in whose mouth the poet places the dire truth about the completely degenerated Bolshevism:

*Look back to see there are only foes,  
Spread hands to see comrades flinch away.  
But if the Time orders, "Lie!" — do so.  
But if He orders you, "Kill!" — obey.  
This Time keeps watching both friends and foes.  
Mass graves are closing their mouths shut,  
The trickle of ink on death sentence flows  
Just like from a shot head — the trickle of blood.*

To kill for the ideal Bolshevik truth was only natural at that brutal time. But to lie?! In the same year (1929)

Bagritskii had this poem published, Mandelstam wrote: “*This animal fear is pounding the keys of typewriters: snitching in writing on those still around, kicking those already down, and demanding the death penalty for those imprisoned*”. These lines, which came to light only during *perestroika*, long after Mandelstam’s death in the *Gulag*, well prove the cold-blooded bravery of Bagritskii who condemned (in print!) not only the regime’s inclination to manslaughter, but also its propensity for falsehood.

Any credible evaluation or critique of this Bagritskii’s poem should accept and take into account his bitter sarcasm in condemning the violence and untruth around him. It would be a grave mistake to judge such alleged “odes to violence” only by their apparently superficial shell. We know that it was already impossible to denounce the Stalinist regime openly at that time. Mikhail Kuzmin, another famous poet of the almost extinct Silver Age, indeed demonstrated a crystal clear understanding of the Bagritskii poem’s undertones and its real anti-violence meaning, when in 1933, living in Stalinist Russia himself, he paradoxically referred to “TBC” as a poem “*very obscure and running deep in meaning*.” Later, Kuzmin shrewdly added that Bagritskii might have to defend his poetry not with literary polemic but with his own life.

Ilia Falikov, a well-known Russian poet and literary critic, remarks that Bagritskii used to begin each newly published collection of his verse with poems from the “*Ulenspiegel*” cycle — the poems ostensibly carrying no political message and standing apart from the then ubiquitous eulogies to the Socialist industrialization. Falikov quite accurately characterizes the implied sense and true meaning of Bagritskii’s allegedly bloodthirsty verses, when he writes that the poet uses “*the literary device consisting*



*in a statement that implies quite the opposite meaning*". Such a device is obviously intended for a friendly reader already aware that the poet's real inspiration consists in "*nature, winds, songs, and liberty*" as proclaimed by the latter's "program manifesto" — the "Ulenspiegel" poems. But we need to make yet another step to realize that Bagritskii identified himself with Ulenspiegel di-

rectly. In other words, he valued personal freedom above all, thus denouncing the fundamental Bolshevik idea of priority of the collective over the individual. Yet unable to make this final step, Falikov chooses to apologize for the "TBC" poem on Bagritskii's behalf by saying that there was "*no need for advocating*". He correctly explains that everybody somehow failed to notice that Dzerzhinsky of the poem is the sign of the disease itself: its phantom pain, its paroxysm, its delirious raving. Falikov continues, "*His [Dzerzhinsky] monologue is a verbalization of tuberculosis: the out-of-limit, emaciated, and ecstatic word of the already defunct revolutionary romanticism. Dzerzhinsky says, 'Die while still winning, die like I did'*". Our analysis leads us to the self-evident conclusion that Bagritskii, in fact, distances himself from Dzerzhinsky and effectively denounces the Stalinist Bolshevism of his time. Dzerzhinsky died of consumption in 1926, three years before the poem was written. Bagritskii, on the opposite, had never suffered

from tuberculosis. Shortly before his death, Dzerzhinsky in a narrow circle expressed his disagreement with the political methods of Stalin. Bagritskii, who had some highly placed connections, could have been aware of this. So Dzerzhinsky of the poem soliloquizes:

*I was feeling too the heavy load  
Of his hand and arm on my shoulder placed.  
And my cheek was too in a similar mode  
By his trimmed moustache of a soldier grazed.*

A year later, Mandelstam in his satirical poem about Stalin, the opening couplet from which we have quoted above, among other characteristic features of Stalin, did not fail to mention the Great Leader's moustache: "*His moustache of a cockroach is grinning, and his well-polished bootlegs are beaming.*" But let us now return to Bagritskii's poem.

The "TBC" continues:

*...Splitting their sides in a crazy hurry,  
The shoots and mercury climb up sunwards.  
(This means: laryngeal phlegm is dry,  
The air, high-fired, is flowing down,  
But up from the bottom, clutching the vines,  
Like mildew, tuberculosis climbs.)*

*The soil is cracking and popping from heat.  
The thermometer bursts. And now I see  
The worlds with a rumble to crumble on me  
With drops of the liquid mercury fire,  
They scorch my head. They flow to my mouth.  
And the road, like mercury, flows down south...*

*...The street has the same dull and gelded look,  
'Tis the same world belonging to kids and cats,  
'Tis the world which gasps and crawls in blood,  
The world, which is detestably nice,  
Its smoke is filling my nostrils, mouth,  
My bronchi, my lungs — it fills them all...*

*...My hand is growing painfully numb,  
A vein on my temple is throbbing fast.  
(This means: the bronchi are sucking in  
The air drop by drop to each vessel mine;  
This means: body tissues are gnawed by rust;  
This means: there's fever, swelter, and shiver.)  
A vein on my temple is throbbing fast,  
Fitfully trembling are eyelids twain.  
As if there's someone who softly knocks  
With a tapered finger at my door pane.  
Well, it's time to let him in, after all!*

*I say, "Come in," and there he comes:  
The oblique triangle of a face,  
The oblique triangle of a goatee.  
(Right down from the wall, and who else but him  
That slid off the inflamed banners in?)*

The parallel with Vladimir Mayakovsky—his already famous poem in which he was conversing with a Lenin photo on the wall of his room—is anything but unintended by Bagritskii. Equally apparent is the difference in each poet's approach: Mayakovsky, in his poem, happily reports to comrade Lenin the great achievements in the construction of socialism (making a side remark that it was 'a hell of a job, indeed'), while Bagritskii mentions only "inflamed [i.e. red] banners".

The author of “TBC” then tries to stop his intrusive guest:

*I tell him, “You came to see me,  
Felix Edmundovich? But I am unwell”...*

Again, unlike Mayakovsky who is thoroughly enjoying the conversation with Lenin he himself has started, Bagritskii constantly emphasizes his unwillingness to continue this compulsory verbal exchange. He digresses to make a description of the yard whence the uninvited specter of Dzerzhinsky has appeared. Now, what a verily “picturesque” landscape, where “*the sun is setting into the cesspool*” and “*the untidy moon is rising from behind the clapboard outhouse (toilet)*,” unfolds there before the reader! Clear irony: to big to be visible.

Nonetheless, Dzerzhinsky of the poem pays little attention to the poet’s protests and enters his room, saying, “*Well, let us just talk of this and that*”, and then “*he sits down on the [author’s] bed*”. Then follows the most important detail: Dzerzhinsky starts talking by “*resuming the old dispute*”, which bears evidence of Bagritskii’s disagreement with his (Dzerzhinsky) thoughts and ideas.

Then, the founder of Cheka endeavors to relieve Bagritskii of any doubts with the following argumentation:

*... Your loneliness nicely befits our Time.  
Look back to see that only foes are around.  
Reach out for friends, but they are no more.  
But if He orders you, “Lie!” — do so.  
But if He orders you, “Kill!” — obey.*

*All here was watching both friends and foes.  
The foes came to sit on this very chair*

*They sat down and tumbled into the void.  
The morass of dirt sucked their tender bones.  
The mass graves above them were closed shut.  
And the signature on a death sentence crept  
Like the trickle of blood from a hole in the head.  
O Mother Revolution! It's not easy to spread  
The trihedral truth of your bayonet.*

It is Dzerzhinsky who says all of the above. He offers this as a sort of excuse. As already mentioned, the order to “tell lies” conflicts with the alleged core principle of Communist propaganda — the Bolshevik *Pravda* (i.e. Truth).

Even the leading newspaper of the Soviet Union was called *Pravda*.

Between the two passages quoted above, there are several lines we intentionally left out, as they deserve special analysis:

*And my desk became as wide as the land,  
Its [green] square of cloth stained with blood and ink,  
There are scraps of paper and rusty pens...*

Here we can see the poet's return to the image of the unnamed leader (who else but Stalin?) from the poem *Night* written in 1926 — the year Dzerzhinsky died:

*Above the leader's desk — the phone is exhausted,  
And the green cloth,  
Like a swamp, sucks in  
Paperweight and pencils... (Elision marks belong to the  
author — P.B.)*

The leader's desk is analogized to a swamp, a morass, swallowing up the entire country! Did Bagritskii need to

make it clearer in a text intended for a narrow circle of his fellow intellectuals and their successors, capable of reading between the lines? — Probably, not!

After the respiratory paroxysm is gone (asthmatic himself, Bagritskii knew only too well what he was describing), the ghostly visitor simply vanishes into thin air.

Even a lay reader without any knowledge of the theory and history of literature can easily verify the analysis and argumentation we have just made. Still, having such a knowledge, we will see that Bagritskii did not at all favor the themes of political morals, being much more proud of his fowler's profession and his likeness to Ulenspiegel. Falikov explains the presence of Ulenspiegel in Bagritskii's poems by the latter's links to Dostoevsky and Raskolnikov. Much closer to the gist of Bagritskii's Odessite personality was his "hometown buddy" and a close friend, Lev Slavin. Slavin recalls in his memoirs that self-consciousness and soul-searching have never been the traits common in the people of Odessa. Odessites preferred to eschew the abstract. Odessa had never been the home for God-seekers, visionaries, and religious philosophers. Under Odessa's "*firm, eternally blue skies there lived extremely earthy people*", in whom the traveling mystics from Northern *guberniyas* evoked nothing but laughter. "*Dostoevsky never enjoyed much popularity in Odessa.*"



Falikov mentions “*the Odessa adventurism, poetical seafaring liberty and filibusterism of Bagritskii, whose Westernism is again much Odessa-tinted*” and calls Bagritskii’s native city “*a porto franco of verse, an open city, a melting pot of nations*”. Falikov also notices the influence that the Ulenspiegel image had on Boris Pasternak who borrowed almost unchanged this line from Bagritskii’s “Till Ulenspiegel”: “[And] *leaning at the wooden doorcase*”, — for his poem “Hamlet”: “*The din has faded. I came out on stage. Stood there leaning at the wooden doorcase...*”

The Russian literature historian, Mikhail Latyshev, remarks that the unique and inimitable coloring of Bagritskii’s poetry, with its “sounds and aromas”, has been almost completely unknown by Russian poetry before Bagritskii, and that his “Ulenspiegel” cycle undoubtedly belongs to its highest pinnacles.

Bagritskii, a bird-catcher in his youth (following the example of his favorite Till Ulenspiegel), was fully aware of how fast freedom can be transformed into bondage, and how easily captivity can enslave liberty. In one of his poems, Bagritskii addresses the caged nightingale, which he has just bought at a pet market, with these words:

*Where are we to go?  
Our plight tastes so bitter!  
Where shall you now sing?  
Where shall I chant my rhyme?  
They peddled away our warble, our twitter...  
To strangers they sold them all,  
One at a time...  
We both are ensnared,  
Entangled in nets!*

Bagritskii behaved much like Ulenspiegel: he eschewed extreme seriousness and always had time to laugh at himself. Isaac Babel wrote in his essay dedicated to Bagritskii:

*“The effort directed at creation of things beautiful, the effort continuous, passionate and ever increasing, — that is what Bagritskii’s life was all about. It consisted of one unstopping ascent. Among his early poems, some weren’t too good; but, as the years went by, his style was becoming more and more chaste. The inspiration of his poetry continuously increased. The passion contained therein became stronger because Bagritskii’s work on the meaning and spirit of his poetry kept intensifying. He did this work honestly, with perseverance and exhilaration.*

*Bagritskii’s writing was due not to his physiological ability, but owed to his enormously enlarged [poetic] heart and brain, both enlarged as compared to what we consider the norm now, but what would become only a subsistence minimum in the future.*

*I remember him as a young man in Odessa.*

*He showered his companion with sheer waterfalls of verse — both of his own and of other poets. He ate differently, his everyday clothes consisted of tracksuit trousers and a knitted jacket; his behavior was rambunctious, but at times he became very quiet.*

*In the years when the standard [modus vivendi] was dictated entirely by the circumstances, Bagritskii was always himself and nobody else.*

*The fame of this “François Villon of Odessa” had made him endearing, but not trustworthy. And then his yarns and tall tales suddenly started to ring truly prophetic, and his boyishness turned into wisdom, because he was a wise*

*man combining the sprit of a Young Communist League member with that of Rabbi Akiba ben Yossef.*

*[...] By his life he was telling us that poetry was an urgent, essential and everyday business.*

*[...] Bagritskii died at 38, without accomplishing even a smaller part of what he could have done.*

*[...] His poems are becoming more and more alive year after year, because he said nothing but the truth.”*

But, in fact, there were no real chances for Bagritskii to accomplish more than he did. “They won’t let me finish these,” — said Babel to his wife, when Stalin’s secret police came to arrest the writer in 1939, and, after searching his room, the agents had filled five boxes with yet unpublished manuscripts. Babel whom world now know as ““Russian Maupassant”, was thrown into prison, brutally tortured and, finally, executed on 27<sup>th</sup> January 1940. All confiscated manuscripts were eventually burnt down. Bagritskii’s destiny, had he lived a little longer, could hardly have been different.

Babel also referred to Bagritskii as “*the most carnal of ‘em Flemish,*” saying also that in the “radiant future” everybody will be just like “*Odessites — witty, infallible and merry, — in other words, the true Bagritskii type.*” In his early twenties, Bagritskii was often plagued by malnutrition, which put him close to Ulenspiegel (who, as we know, never missed an opportunity to enjoy food and drinks, and loved to chat about food when none was available). What Ulenspiegel usually prescribed to his friend Lamme Goedzak as a remedy against melancholy was two helpings of roasted lamb, ten mugs of beer and a good afternoon nap. Ulenspiegel depicts a typical Flemish hotplate as follows: “*...excellent stewed beef served with acrid con-*

*diments, — the beef which is lean, succulent, and tender as rose petals, and which floats like a Shrovetide fish among clove, nutmeg, coxcombs, calf glands, and other delightful viands”.*

The Soviet historian of literature, Andrei Sinyavsky, wrote in 1936 about yet another aspect of Flemish influence on Bagritskii: “*Very indicative of this [influence] are Bagritskii’s poetic “still lives”, largely inspired by Flemish paintings, which—with all their graphic imagery and genre proximity to the forms of the visual art—defy adequate translation into this “foreign language”, being “undepictable”:*

*There rises a giant chunk of ham,  
Like crimson sunset in hue,  
Like a cirrus cloud, the weeping lard  
Envelops it all around.  
The rubicund fists of apples get  
From wicker baskets out;  
The cannon-ball oranges hide inside  
The acid explosive juice...*

*If we try to visualize the image of the poem, as if transferred to a canvas, we will see that “ham, like crimson sunset in hue” simply cannot be reproduced as an oil (or any other) painting. Its “sunset” quality will be inevitably lost; therefore, as a result of such reductions, losses, and shifts, the painted “analogue” will appear very distant from the poetic original.”*

Bagritskii writes appropriately:

*I was lassoed by food — her noose is tight.  
She rises as a giant, epic threat,  
Her clasp is indestructible and dire,*



The monument to Bagritskii at a residential district in the west of Moscow, next to the street bearing the poet's name.

*She lies and waits, exuding perspiration...  
...On that day in Odessa at the market,  
I lost my way amidst tomato piles,  
I ran astray in watermelons maze,  
Sweet cherries led me to a cul-de-sac,  
I was immured within the walls of curd,  
Whose oozing whey had moistened cobblestones,  
And porous cliffs of yellow ripened cheese...*

**A**nd in conclusion we have to admit that both Charles De Coster and Eduard Bagritskii died without having been properly understood by most of their contemporaries. The Belgian poet and writer, George Rodenbach, wrote about Ulenspiegel's "literary father":



*How many scattered treasures, how many talents have been nipped in the bud! Only one or two, despite all difficulties, could completely fulfill their life task. Such was poor Charles De Coster, whose name, almost unknown now, still deserves as much as an apotheosis and a palm leaf garland for his poem in prose written in clear and picturesque style after the folk legend of Ulenspiegel. Oh, how unfortunate was this pure writer when they, due to some unconscious irony, decided to appoint him as French tutor at a government school. At first, he wanted to go abroad, disappear, banish himself to a self-exile; but then a yearning for the horizon of his childhood had seized him. One day, he quite accidentally happened to hear the sounds of a battered barrel organ, which in the yard of his Parisian abode seemed to sigh, while playing the old national tune of his native land. Oh, how bitterly did it weep, this woeful music! As if — one could think — it was completely worn-out by the long separation. It seemed to come out of the*

*unfathomable depths in order to ascend to the pale windows of his room. Memories of the past, the voice of his native land were put together from the voices of all who had loved and had died... It was a melancholic call, tearing his soul apart, entreating him to return... And this very evening De Coster had left, or rather fled from, Paris for good to go back to the insensitive atmosphere of his native land.*

*He died at the age of 40, killed by his sorrow and poverty; and now not a single stone on his humble grave can say anything about his forgotten name.*

During his funeral, when all the mourners bared their heads standing around a small monument, Monsieur Rembrandt, entrusted by the friends of the deceased, delivered a farewell speech with an unusually sincere and touching agitation. His voice was trembling; in his eyes there stood tears, which seemed to glisten like numerous little sparks. He saluted the unappreciated writer, whose fame had only started spreading around after his death, then the speaker, gradually growing more and more upset and aggrieved, brought the crime of indifference home to the entire nation, which had allowed such a great person to die without enjoying his well-deserved fame, the fame which poets seek as their daily bread... Then, all of a sudden, he halted and explained that he did not want to waste his words anymore, and switched to reciting, in memory of the deceased, the latter's own work — the entire conclusion of the apotheosis from the Legend of Ulenspiegel:

*“Is it possible to bury Ulenspiegel, the spirit of our mother, Flanders and Nele, the very heart of her? — No! Certainly, Flanders can fall asleep for a while, but she will never die!”*

In the early 1930s, Bagritskii already understood everything about the ugly Soviet regime and was opposing it in his



Bagritskii's grave at the prestigious Novodevichy Cemetery in Moscow.

own way. Although he earned due respect from many generations of readers, some literary critics stubbornly refuse to admit and appreciate Bagritskii's opposition to Stalinism. On the anniversary of his untimely death, let us recite—with deep respect and gratitude—the *hic jacet* he wrote for himself:

*And when the last fatigue will seize me, then  
I'll sleep that mortal sleep that has no waking.  
And let them on my tombstone neatly carve  
My coat of arms: a heavy aspen staff,  
Above an owl beside a wide-brimmed hat.  
And let them add these words: "Here rests in peace  
The jolly vagrant who has never cried."  
A passer-by! If you love, like he did,  
This wind, these songs, this nature and this freedom, —  
Do tell him: "Calmly sleep, my dear comrade,  
You've sung enough and now it's time to rest!"*

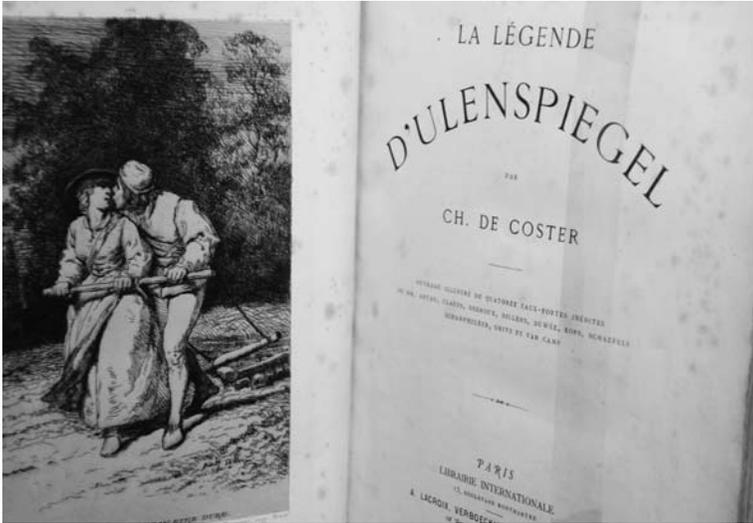
# SELECTED TRANSLATIONS

## TO THE VIATOR

Be you a scholar from Sorbonne or trickster small,  
Lo! how in victuals my tote bag does abound.  
Take shabby cloak along and we will make a round  
Of the enchanted land that people Flanders call.  
Each tavern will supply us shelter on our way.  
We will be drenched by rain and dried by summer's ardor.  
Until behind the hills our eyes will meet the gaze  
Of Flemish channels filled with slow and icy waters.  
Enough! Give up your bowing to the dusty book.  
Look at our path, which freely winds across the woods.  
Exchange your grammar textbook for a pilgrim's staff,  
Forget your studies, and be merry like a thrush.  
And earthly life will like a wisp of smoke dissolve  
Amidst the mooing herds and silent shine of stars.

## TILL ULENSPIEGEL

It's a spring morning and the kitchen doors  
Were opened wide. The reek of burning fat  
Is wafting out. The kitchen's full of bustle.  
The chef is wiping down his red-hot face  
With a worn-out apron, as he casts  
A hurried glance under the copper lids  
Of seething pots and pans. He yawns and goes  
To add up still more charcoal to the fire  
Which made the stove already piping hot.  
His young apprentice in a paper cap,  
Still clumsy and unskilled for this hard trade  
Climbs up the ladder to the condiment shelves,  
Then cinnamon and nutmeg does he grind,  
Misplaces spices in the labeled jars,  
Inhales the kitchen smoke and loudly coughs,  
His nostrils itching and his eyes awash  
With burning tears...  
This spring day is fair,  
The swallows' twitter merges with the gurgle  
Of saucepans on the stove; a house cat  
Shows pinkish tongue and, purring softly, sweetly,  
Half-hidden by the chairs, slowly crawls  
Towards the place where there lies unattended  
A generous slab of juicy, fatty beef.  
The realm of kitchen! Was there one who failed  
To praise the bluish smoke o'er roasting meat  
Or misty vapor over golden broth?  
A chanticleer, whose head may be chopped off  
Tomorrow by the chef, now hoarsely crows  
A joyous hymn to the majestic art,  
Which is at once most difficult and gracious...



On this day I am walking down the street,  
At rooftops gazing and reciting verse.  
Bedazzled by the sun, I'm feeling dizzy.  
My wayward, groggy head is going round.  
Inhaling kitchen smoke, I think of him,  
The vagabond, who maybe much like I,  
Was walking up and down the streets of Antwerp...  
Both ignorant and skilled in every trade,  
A swordless knight, a ploughless peasant, he,  
Maybe like I, was sniffing with delight  
The savory smells exuding from a tavern.  
Maybe his appetite, so much like mine,  
Was whetted by a gammon, and he gulped  
The thick saliva filling up his mouth.  
And that spring day was so much fair and mellow,  
His curls were ruffled by the hand of wind,  
Which felt just like his mother's. As he stood  
With his back leaning at the wooden doorcase,

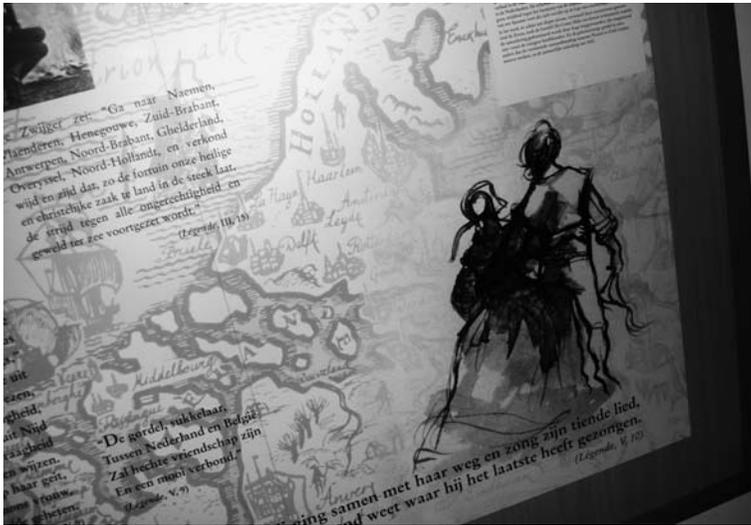
This jolly vagrant, maybe much like I,  
Was humming indistinctly, making up  
The lyrics of a new song, yet unborn...  
So what of it? Let all my life consist  
Of vagabondage and of dissipation,  
And let me stand in vain in view of kitchen,  
Enjoying banquets by a distant smell,  
Let all my clothes wear out and look like rags,  
And let my boots eventually fall apart,  
And even let me loose my minstrel skills...  
So what of it? I other things desire...  
But let me follow in this vagrant's footsteps  
And let me heel-and-toe this land of mine,  
And whistle like a lark at every door  
To hear in reply a rooster's crow!  
A bard without a lute, a swordless knight,  
I'll see the days, which like those golden cups  
Be overflowed with cow's milk and honey...  
And when the last fatigue will seize me, then  
I'll sleep that mortal sleep that has no waking,  
And let them on my tombstone neatly carve  
My coat of arms: a heavy aspen staff,  
Above an owl beside a wide-brimmed hat.  
And let them add these words: "Here rests in peace  
The jolly vagrant who has never cried."  
A passer-by! If you love, like he did,  
This wind, these songs, this nature and this freedom, —  
Do tell him: "Calmly sleep, my dear comrade,  
You've sung enough and now it's time to rest!"

## TILL ULENSPIEGEL

### *A Monologue*

They burned my father at the stake. Insane  
My mother went from torture, and at that  
In tears I abandoned my dear Damme.  
My father's sacred ashes I collected  
Into a pouch to wear it on my chest, —  
So that these ashes knocking at my chest  
Kept calling me to vengeance and perdition!  
I travel wide: from Damme to Ostende,  
And then to Antwerp from both Liège and Brussels.  
With my fat Lamme we are riding donkeys.  
I'm known to all: the ever-wandering fowler,  
Who caged birds is carrying to the market;  
The cantinière, who hands me with a smile  
A mug of golden effervescent beer,  
Accompanied by hot and juicy ham.  
At city fairs I perform my songs  
About Flanders and good old Brabant,  
And all the Flemish feel down at their hearts,  
Which long had grown fat and so much used to  
The dreams of fragrant soups and amber beer,  
The freedom spirit and the nation's pride.  
I'm Ulenspiegel. There's no single village  
Where I'd have not been to, no single town  
Whose squares wouldn't have heard my ringing voice.  
And Claes' ashes still tap at my heart,  
I follow their beat by singing calmly  
My lingering songs. In them will every Fleming  
Discern the languid motion of the channels,  
Where there are silence, swans, and wooden barges...  
With comfortable fire in the hearth





Before him crackling gaily, he remembers  
 The hours of contentment, peace and languor,  
 When feeling tired of a day of work  
 He sniffs the smells of beer and roasted meat  
 While steeping in a lazy golden slumber.  
 I sing, "Hey, butchers, you don't need to kill  
 More calves and piglets! Choose a different stock.  
 A different prey awaits you. Stick your knives  
 Deep into different animals. Their blood  
 Let spill onto your racks. Go stick those monks  
 And hoist them upside down like slaughtered pigs  
 Above your meat row counters for display."  
 And I go on, "Hey, blacksmiths, you don't need  
 To shoe workhorses and to mend saucepans!  
 Good battle swords and pointed spearheads  
 Are wanted now so much more than horseshoes,  
 Do slowly pour the streams of molten lead  
 Into the throats of ruddy, lardy monks,

It will be so much more to their taste  
Than Burgundy or finest Xeres wine.  
Hey, shipwrights, you don't need to build more boats  
For carrying beer barrels to and fro.  
Take seasoned timber: planks of pine and spruce,  
Use braces of cast-iron and of steel  
To build the liberation man-o'war!  
The Flemish women for its sails shall weave  
Of finest threads the whitest, strongest cloth,  
And like a bull preparing for a fight  
With an enraged pack of hungry wolves,  
This battleship will put out to the sea,  
Its canons pointing at the riotous coast."  
And Claes' ashes still tap at my heart.  
And my heart is now bursting, and my song  
Acquires vehemence, and I am short of breath,  
A burning sore comes closer to my tongue, —  
I sing no more, but, like a vulture, wail,  
"Hey, Flemish soldiers, for how long have you  
Your steeds forgotten, striding in their stead  
The public house benches? You don't need  
To use your daggers just for cracking nuts,  
Or with the spurs to scratch your itching heads  
And reek of booze in vilest harlots' dens!  
Lo! Swords are flashing, cities are aflame  
Prepare for battle! The last hour has struck.  
And everyone, who to lark's trill responds  
With rooster's crow, is in our battle ranks.  
The Duke of Alba!  
This fight  
Your fatal fall does portend;  
The crop is ripe, and the reaper  
The sickle on his sole does whet.



The tears of orphans and widows,  
Which flow from their lifeless eyes,  
Are weighing like drops of lead  
On cups of the judgment scales.  
The sword is our only hope,  
In it our spirit trusts.  
The skylark begins his song, -  
The rooster returns the call.

## TILL ULENSPIEGEL

### *A Monologue*

I'm not that strong to don a suit of armor  
Or wear a battle-helm! But I will cross  
Th'entire land as a free-roaming minstrel.  
Beside a tavern's door I'll sing the song  
About my Flanders and my dear Brabant.  
As a sharp-sighted mouse, I will sneak  
Into the Spanish camp; as gentle breeze,  
I'll sweep through places, which are mouse-proof.  
And several comic songs I will compose,  
Which mock the Spanish. And these songs will be  
By each and every Fleming learnt by heart.  
I'll paint a hog on a high paling fence  
Then add a mangy dog, and write below:  
"This is our King accompanied by Alba."  
As a buffoon, I'll stay with Flemish counts  
And when at last their feast comes to an end,  
And embers start to lose their purple glow,  
And goblets lie forsaken, I will pluck  
The strings and switch to a quite different song,  
"You, whose brave swords brought glory to Gravelines,  
You, owners of the vast and rich estates,  
Where roseate barley ripens, how could you  
Bend to the yoke of vile and filthy Spaniards?  
The time has come. The trumpet call was heard.  
But now your steeds are fat from too much oat,  
The saddles, your grandfathers used in battle,  
Are all in cobwebs, hundred years old.  
Your gardener for a starling-house took  
The helm he mounted on a creaky pole,  
There noisy birds are bringing out their young.

The famous sword has also come in handy:  
They're chopping deadwood with it, and the lance  
Is used to stake the nodding wall of pigsty!  
And thus I'll cross all of my native Flanders,  
With loyal lute and painter's brush in bag,  
And always wearing my point-eared cockscomb.  
But when I see that all the seeds I'd sown  
Now all came up with wheat-ears full of sap,  
And it is time to reap, and o'er the field  
The equinoctial days already passed.  
I'll crush my lute against a sharp-edged rock,  
I'll break my brush in two against my knee,  
I'll doff and throw away my jester's cap,  
And go ahead of murderous Flemish crowds  
As their leader. And they will advance,  
They will attack, led by Till Ulenspiegel!  
From the death-fire I'll collect the ashes  
Of my dear father, and these wrathful ashes  
I'll sew into an amulet-bag for wearing,  
Sewn to a lanyard, always on my chest.  
And if I happen to forget my duty,  
Be it lovemaking or excessive drinking,  
Or when fatigue deprives me of my will, —  
Let Claes' ashes hit me in the heart, —  
To fill me with new strength and energy  
Enkindling me with newer, brighter flame.  
And then my living heart will throb with wrath  
Replying to the hit from dead man's ashes.

## THE ENCOUNTER

I was lassoed by food — her noose is tight.  
She rises as a giant, epic threat,  
Her clasp is indestructible and dire,  
She lies and waits, exuding perspiration...  
On that day in Odessa at the market,  
I lost my way amidst tomato piles,  
I ran astray in watermelons maze,  
Sweet cherries led me to a *cul-de-sac*,  
I was immured within the walls of curd,  
Whose oozing whey had moistened cobblestones,  
And porous cliffs of yellow ripened cheese  
Now threaten me with fatal avalanche.  
Add one degree of heat, — and melted butter  
Will spurt like lava from a wooden barrel,  
With yellow pustules bubbling on its way,  
And splash the pavement, soaking me as well.  
There are obtuse and blue-faced rutabagas,  
Accompanied by ratlike tapered carrots  
And cabbage heads with wavy locks, and turnips  
Whose tops are swept up in a sort of plume,  
Around me with a ruthless resolution  
They are heaped up in wicker baskets, carts;  
They are piled up on sack cloths in the dirt.  
And to command these esculent battalions,  
As monuments to gluttony, are standing,  
Besmeared with the sun's own blood and pus,  
The owners of this omnipresent food.  
I am alone among this hostile swarm  
Of people in the shelter of their food,  
They sweat under the sun of Hadji-bey,  
Their faces drip with purest, hottest fat.

I rush between their bellies, huge and tight,  
Between their breasts, like watermelons round,  
Between their pupils, where reflected are  
All kinds of root crops that this land can yield.  
I'm all alone. The vast Odessa sun  
Rose up above me in his heavy might,  
He hits the soil, the grass, the carts alike,  
His bristling rays directing upright down.  
I whistle in despair, — this call of mine,  
Consisting of three trills and two clucks, soars  
Up like a homeless lark above the crowd.  
But hark! A rooster's rampant, vibrant crow  
Returns my call over the wall of food,  
My chanticleer, you crow no matter what,  
You crow in days of battles and uprisings  
I look around, — it is he, no doubt,  
My long-time friend, my Lamme, my companion,  
He's here and will surely lead me out  
To my dear comrades, lost so long ago!  
He is the fattest and perspires the most;  
So his striped shirt's already damp with sweat,  
And his potbelly's rather fearsome bulge  
Sways to and fro above the dusty pavement  
His face, sanguineous like the setting sun,  
Is colored by the baking oven rouge,  
And his primordial youth is showing up  
On his so poorly shaven round cheeks.  
My long-time friend, my clumsy, awkward Lamme,  
Just as before, you are so fat and carefree,  
Just as before, this round fourfold chin  
Adorns your happy, smiling face.  
We cross the market square, passing by  
The fish stalls, as the crow flies, to the place,



Where that good old beer cellar still exists,  
Its door now bears a neatly stenciled sign:  
“*Pivnaya goszavodov Pishchetrest*”<sup>1</sup>.  
There sit we at the square marble slab,  
Sit sipping beer and eating crayfish, while  
Each crayfish looks a crimson-armored knight,  
Who like Don Quixote whiskered is and weak.  
I speak about my problems, I complain,  
But Lamme shakes his head, while breaking off  
The crayfish claws. He sucks their fluid out,  
Then smacks his lips and gazes, sipping beer,  
To where there slowly floats across the pane  
The orb of the Odessa briny sun,  
A spanking breeze is whirling street refuse,  
It chases pegs, rotates them on the road.  
All’s eaten up, all’s drunk up. On the dish  
The emptied crayfish armor sadly lies,  
And next to it — the crayfish’s cardinal miter.  
And Lamme says, “Well, now the time has come  
To talk to you. You have become so weak,

Your idleness commands your jaundiced eye,  
Your countenance is sour, your tongue is sharp,  
You look for us, but we are everywhere,  
We are a legion, we in forests roam,  
We lead the horse of every village ploughman,  
We blast the fire in every blacksmith’s furnace,  
We pound the books with each and every scholar.  
We’re plenty. We are stationed everywhere.  
If not a bard, then who on earth has to  
Tell people of the joy already bygone

---

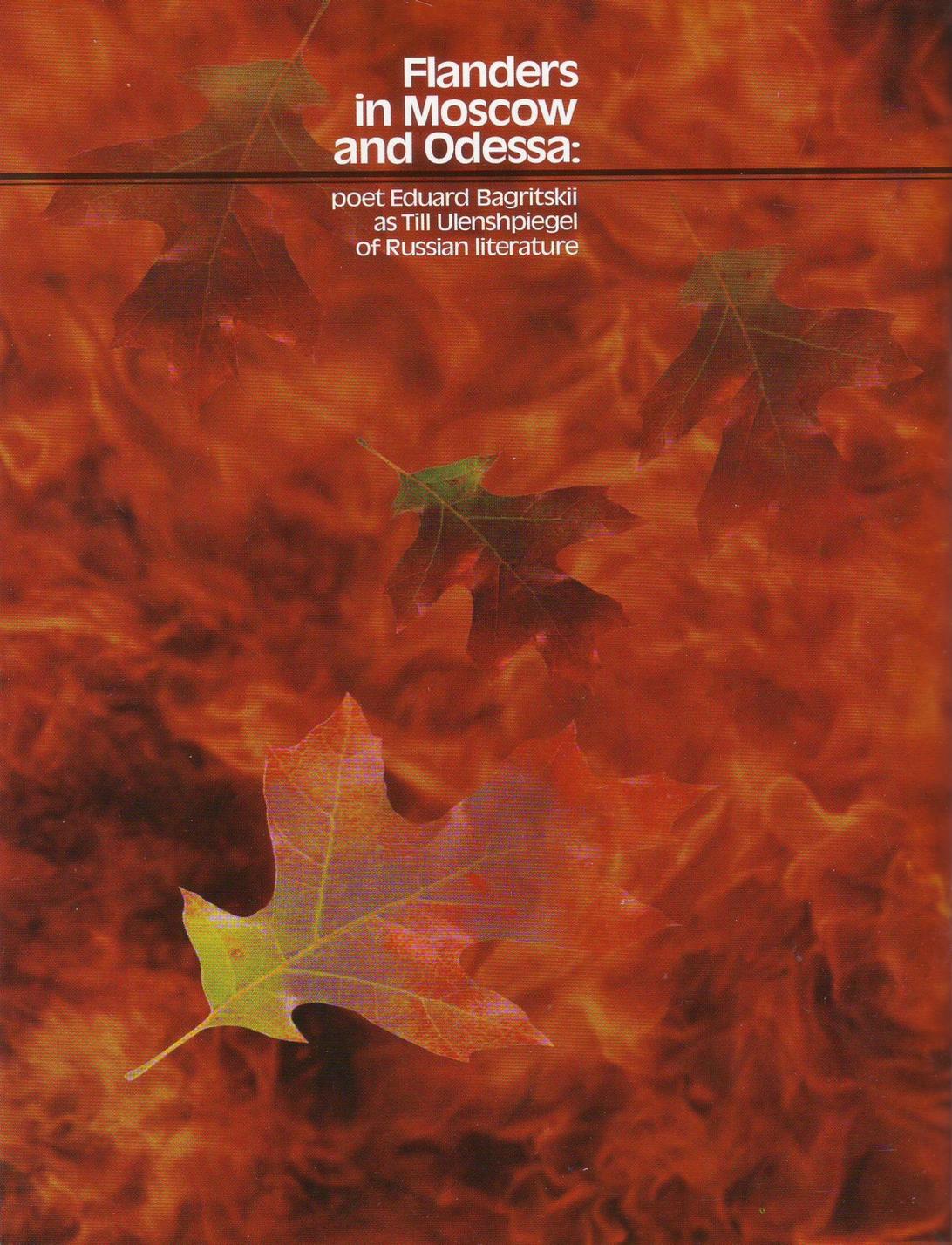
<sup>1</sup> This Soviet New Speak stands for “The beer house of the United Food State Breweries.” (B.M.)

And call them to the joy, which is to come?  
As long as stately floats above the road  
The huge and heavy orb of briny sun,  
As long as cool is water in the morning,  
As long as blood is fresh and birds are singing, —  
Till Ulenspiegel roams across the land.”

Hark! In the street the secret call is heard:  
A whistle followed by a trill of lark.  
So Lamme overthrows the table first,  
Then cranes his neck and with a special drawl  
Calls out his cock-a-doodle-doo.  
The door is now ajar a little bit,  
A young and freckled face does peer inside,  
The youth then draws his lips into a smile,  
Which is at once congenial and sly,  
And now we are examined by a pair  
Of very bright and very cunning eyes.

.....

I praise Till Ulenspiegel by my song!



# Flanders in Moscow and Odessa:

poet Eduard Bagritskii  
as Till Ulenspiegel  
of Russian literature