

Byelorussian Renaissance Verse

BY

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The earliest examples of verse composition in Middle Byelorussian are connected with the name of Francis Skaryna, the first Byelorussian printer and universal genius. In literary history he is known as the author of the *Prefaces* or introductions to the various books of the Bible which he printed in Prague in 1517. In several of these he placed short rhymes or verses in which he explained the significance of each book, and added a few of his own reflections. Thus in the *Preface* to the Book of Esther, the content of the verse is related to that of the book:

Не копай под другом своим ямы,
Сам ввалишься в ню.
Не став амане, мордохею шибенице
Сам повиснеш на не.

Dig not a pit before thy friend — thou shalt fall therein.
Set not up, O Ammon, a gallows for Morduch — from it thou shalt hang.

Elsewhere, in his *Preface* to the Book of Exodus, the Doctor of Polack gives a version of the Ten Commandments done into naive rhyme which may have been devised to instruct children or simple folk in the essential tenets of the Faith.

Веруй в Бога единого
А не бери надармо имени его
Помни дни светые святыи
Отца и матку чтити
Не забивай ни едина
И не делай грѣху блудна
Не вкради что дружнего
А не давай сведенцтва лжива
Не пожедай жены ближнего
Ни имения или речи его.

Believe in One God, but take not his name in vain etc.²

However, Skaryna's verse fragments are hardly poetry and were not sufficiently substantial to make any impression in Byelorussian literature. Another sixty years were to pass before any significant new verse was to appear, but from this time the development was more fruitful.

¹) Biblija Fr. Skaryna, *Esfir* Praga 1517-1519, 1.2.

²) E. Karskij, *Belarusy* t. III, 2. SPbg 1921, p. 27.

As in many countries in Western Europe, the end of the sixteenth and early XVIIth centuries were to bring religious strife to Byelorussia. Calvinism made its appearance in about 1540 and it brought in its train a variety of anti-Trinitarian sects. This provoked a vigorous Catholic reaction which found expression in the Counter-Reformation, and which in turn constituted a serious threat to the Orthodox Church. The more learned of the Orthodox clergy busied themselves by conducting polemical disputations with the Jesuits, and this struggle was to give birth to a new form of literature. Since the cost of publication was usually born by members of the Orthodox nobility or by a confraternity, the author of a polemical work felt obliged to express his gratitude to his patron. This he would sometimes do by composing an "epigram" or panegyric on the coat-of-arms of the nobleman or corporation, and the custom soon achieved considerable popularity.³

The form of the verse was simple enough: each line contained a certain number of syllables — usually twelve or thirteen — with a caesura and, of course, a rhyme.⁴ The description of heraldic devices proved a welcome opportunity for the poet to indulge his taste for allegory, and not infrequently, his inclination for lyrical expression.

The development of poetry during this period was naturally enough concentrated in the cultural centres of the land — the cities and the monasteries. In the first two decades of the XVIIth century the focal point of this literary activity was Vilna, which was not only the seat of the illustrious Jesuit Academy, but also a bastion of Orthodox learning. In the following decades a further though less important development of verse forms took place in Polack.

Among others, the outstanding literary figures of this period were Andrei Rymša, Leū Mamonič, Jan Paškievič and Stefan Zizany. A literary circle also flourished in the Monastery of the Holy Trinity in Vilna, and it was there that the first book of *Homilies* was printed in 1616. The principal achievement of this school was the publication of a significant quantity of religious and polemical prose works, although it is evident that the monks were also concerned with cultivating poetry. An examination of any of the books they published shows that they frequently placed short verses under the engravings and decorations that graced the pages of these volumes. These verses were the true beginnings of Middle Byelorussian poetry.

In Polack as in Vilna, the centres of cultural life were the Jesuit Academy (founded 1581) and the Orthodox and Uniate Monasteries. A little more is known about this literary group than about its counterpart in Vilna: its most noteworthy representatives were Ihnat Jeūlevič, Symon Polacki, and to a lesser degree Filatei Utčycki.

³) M. I. Praškovič, *Bielaruskaja paesija kanca XVI — pačatku XVII st.*, Veści Akademii Navuk BSSR, serija Hramadskich Navuk, Fasc. 2, p. 78.

⁴) E. Karskij, *Geschichte der Weissrussischen Volksdichtung und Literatur* Berlin/Leipzig 1926, p. 109; Praskovic, *op. cit.*, p. 78.

Various verse-forms developed from the epigrams on coats-of-arms — *chronologia* (i.e. verse calendars), songs, elegies, polemical rhymes, declamations, versified prayers and psalms. The earliest development would appear to have been Andrei Rymša's *Chronologia* which was published in Astroh in 1582. Rymša unfortunately gives no details about himself in any of his works: even the years of his life, his birthplace and occupation are unknown. He did, however, reveal that he was a Byelorussian Lithuanian by birth (Ličvin), and he appears to have been in the service of Prince Christopher Radziwill. The literary legacy that he left is also somewhat sparse, consisting only of four poems, one prose work in Polish and a translation from the Latin. The *Chronologia* is obviously an early work having no particular merit, composed by Rymša, perhaps when he was in attendance at the school of Astroh. In it he displays his linguistic erudition, but little imagination or talent. In his somewhat dreary catalogue of the months the author gives his reader the names of the months in three languages — Old Slavonic, Hebrew and "the vernacular" (i.e. contemporary Byelorussian). Each month is dedicated to a certain event in the Scriptures, which was supposed to have taken place in that month, and Rymša goes on to give the exact date of the event, even though the Bible itself fails to observe such precision.

Месяца илюля, по гебрейску *тамус*, просто *лупец*.
 Моисий побил таблицы з приказаньем Божим.
 А мы грешим што часок, ни ся страхом трвожим.
 илюля 17 дня

In the month of July, in Hebrew *Tammus*, in simple speech *Lindens*, Moses brake the Tablets that bore the Lord's commandments, And we sin every hour, and know not sin's alarmments.

July 17th day.

As an example of panegyric verse, Rymša's epigrams which were written after his coming to Vilna in 1585 have a greater literary significance and reveal something of his outlook on life as well as his poetic talent. Of particular interest are the verses dedicated to Prince Leū Sapieha and to Count Skumin. The former which was printed in the *Lithuanian Statute*⁶ of 1588 has its own distinctive structure. The first four lines are an introduction in which the author speaks of himself and of his ability to judge a man by his merits:

Въсе можем своим оком лацно обачити.
 Дольжыню и шырокость шнуром пазначыти
 И чоловека можем познати по твары
 Если в себе не маеть лишнее привары.
 Але, где цнота себе обрала смелость
 Которая зацные завжды дома буди
 И клейноты розьдаеть . . .

⁵) Praškovič, *op. cit.*, p. 79; A. Korsunaū, *Chrestamatyja pa staražytnaj Bielaruskaj Literatury*, Akad. Aavuk BSSR, Miensk 1959, p. 328.

⁶) I.e. the Code of Laws of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania.

Divers things we may with ease discern with our eyes; length and breath we may measure with a plummet line; and a man we may judge by his countenance — unless he has some unwonted blemish. But where virtue hath found for herself a dwelling, there resideth prudence in all things, and manly valour which ever abide in noble houses, and scatter jewels round...⁷

He then goes on to portray the characteristic traits and virtues of Prince Sapieha, but strangely enough, the political achievements of the Chancellor, who was one of the great Statesmen of Renaissance Byelorussia, are not recounted. In the concluding lines the author expresses the hope that the Sapieha family might enjoy many years of life, glory and fame in this world and a fruitful posterity.

The epigram for Count Skumin appeared three years later in an edition of the Epistles printed in Vilna in 1591. In comparison with the Sapieha epigram, Rymś a is more specific in relating the achievements of the family.

Бо не по одной реце плавал и з делами
 Служены господару розумом, силами,
 Не чужому, своему, и отчызне милой,
 Трафляючи недруга по шы отылой.
 Тот герб здавна в его дом з матки назначоно,
 Бо такие прыметы у нем обачоно.
 Иж водные послуги мѣл отправовати,
 Тымся господарови и вѣсим подобати.
 К тому еще два гербы видит быть насподе,
 Тых достали предкове его на свободе
 Будучи. А цнотую оных доставали.
 Веру з мужством отчызне своей заховали.
 Вер ми, гербов не дають в дому сядящому,
 Але з татарми в полю часто гулящому
 Не з голою рукою, з шаблею острою,
 Завжды будучы готов до смертного бою.

For in his missions he sailed not one, but many rivers, serving his liege-lord with wisdom and with strength — nay, not a strange lord but his own, and his dear country, smiting the foe in his stiff-neckedness. From ancient days these arms were appointed to his house through his lady mother, for virtues similar in him were manifest. And so by serving on the waters he pleased his liege-lord. Thereto thou seest two lower quarterings which his forebears did gain whilst they were free: these they did acquire by their virtue, for bravely they did keep faith with their country. Verily I say — arms are not bestowed on those who idle at home, but on those who often in the field sport with the Tartars, not with the naked hand but with the keen-edged sword, ever prepared for mortal combat.⁸

It is interesting to note the strength of Rymśa's patriotic feeling and sense of pride in the power and renown of the great Byelorussian magnates who had become the champions of the national cause. But apart from their historical interest, Rymśa's epigrams are not with-

⁷) A. Korsunaū, *Chrestamatyja*, pp. 328-329.

⁸) *Ibid.*, p. 330.

out literary merit. There is a solemn majesty in the flow of the verse which, together with the sober formalism of the subject matter, enhanced here and there with picturesque imagery, somehow evokes the sombre mood and charm of an Elizabethan pavane.

There are in existence several epigrams by anonymous authors which are very similar in content and style to those of Rymša. These writers have this in common — they show in their works that they are faithful Christians who staunchly confess their beliefs. Examples of such verses are to be found in the *Evanhelie tolkove* published in Vilna in 1595, the Vilna *Služebnik* printed in 1617 and the *Kazane Sv. Kirila* published in Vilna in 1596. In this latter works there appears an interesting verse in Polish on the coat-of-arms of Prince Astrozski in which the author praises the faith and valour of his patron. There are grounds for attributing the verse to Stefan Zizany, the rector of the Confraternity school in Vilna. The book was written by him — at least his name is subscribed to the Preface, and it is written in Polish and Byelorussian, both of which he knew well.⁹

One of the most graceful of all the armorial epigrams is an anonymous work in praise of the much admired Chancellor Leū Sapieha which appeared in the Vilna *Triodion* of 1609:

Кгды в вышних набоженство странах местце мает,
И рицерьская мужность к ней ся прилучает.
Где ростропность в порадах, справедливость в судех,
Где стачечность во всяких для отчизны трудах,
Там Бог благословляет, там слава значная
В тим доме заставаает на вѣки трѣвалая.
Тые всѣ в тобѣ цноты видим знамените,
Которыми тя пан Бог надарыл обфите.
Презацный сенаторе! Знат из вѣков давных
Тые ж ся найдовали и в предках твоих славных,
Што з гербов познаваем, — крыж — знак побожности,
Рука з сильным пострѣлом знаком есть мужности,
Три лелие разных цнот образ указуют,
Которие до неба простый путь справуют
И у людей еднают славу безсмертную,
Вѣк вѣком на потомствѣ пребывающую.

Whenas in high estate piety truly dwelleth,
Then added thereunto knightly valour eke excelleth,
Where in counsel prudence, justice in judgment deeming,
And in all deeds for one's land — dignity beseeming,
There God showereth blessings, and glory there redounding,
In that house aye dwelleth, through length of days abounding,
All these noble virtues we see in thee apparant
Which in profusion to thee the bord did warrant,
Most noble Senator! Known 'tis that in past ages
Thy famed ancestors eke bore these virtues, whose presages
Thine arms reveal: the Cross true piety implieth,
The hand with the strong dart bold valour signifieth,
The threefold lilies witness divers virtues given,
Which to mankind reveal the straight road unto heaven,

⁹) E. Karskij, *Geschichte...*, p. 110.

And among men proclaim glory — glory that dieth never,
But with his progeny for all time dwelleth ever.¹⁰

Transl. V. R.

Chancellor Sapiieha was not the only Catholic dignitary to attract the praise of the Middle Byelorussian poets, and the custom of offering commendatory verse was by no means restricted to one section of the community. Thus at the funeral of the Greek-Catholic Archbishop of Polack Jazafat Kuncevič the students of the the Jesuit Academy sang a graceful hymn on the theme of the arms of the Kuncevič family, in which the rose was taken as a symbol presaging the glorious martyrdom of the Saint.¹¹

In a period of religious strife it is not surprising that polemical verse also nourished in some profusion. The earliest example of this literary style appeared in a work *Poslanie do latyn iz ich že knih* published in Vilna in 1581, and explains the content of the book. In it the author attempts to identify the "Catholic heresies" in the teachings of the great Church Fathers of the West. Such were the thoughts of Christof Filaret in his *Apokrisis*. In his verse, which has little literary value, the author, in the name of the Orthodox Church, criticises those who had abandoned their faith:

Почто новых вещей ведети желаете,
Нову вещь, мене имея, презираете?

Wherefore seek ye to learn of new things, — would ye,
though having me, yet look to novelties?

The "new thing" or "novelty" to which the author refers is, of course, the acceptance of a new faith and a new way of life.¹² Other authors, such as Jan Kazimier Paškievič, composed verses in praise of their native culture and language:

Полска квітнет лациною,
Литва квітнет русчиною;
Без той в Полсце не пребудешь,
Без сей в Литвѣ блазнем будешь.
Той лациона язык дае,
Та без Руси не вытрвае.
Ведзь же юж Русь, иж тва хвала
По всем свете юж дойзрала;
Весели ж се ты Русине,
Тва слава никгды не згине!

Poland blooms with Latin genius,
Lithuania with Ruthenian,
Sans this in Poland thou'lt not prosper,
Sans that in Litva seem a jester,
Latin to one a tongue bestoweth,

¹⁰) A. Korsunaū, *op. cit.*, p. 332.

¹¹) This incident is based on a contemporary account perhaps by Fr. Kosinski SJ, and related in A. Guépin *Un apotre de l'Union des Eglises au XVII siècle — St. Josafat*, Tom. II, pp. 142-143, n. 1.

¹²) M. Praškovič, *op. cit.*, p. 83.

One sans Ruthenian downfall knoweth.
 Know then Buthenia grows thy glory
 Ripe in the whole world's territory.
 Be glad, Buthenian, the joy cherish,¹³
 For that thy glory ne'er shall perish.
Transl. V. R.

There is quite clearly in this verse a tribute to the role played by the Byelorussian (Ruthenian) language in the Grand Duchy of Lithuania, both as the official State language and as the literary. It illustrates the high patriotic feeling which flowed strongly through Byelorussian literature at a time when the individuality of the nation was being threatened with extinction. It should however be said that this patriotic feeling was not directed solely against the predominance of Polish life.¹⁴

In the early part of the XVIIth century the monk Vital of the Monastery of Brest, together with Hegumenos Afanasi Filipovič published their *Dioptra* in 1612 containing many verses which in content are essentially instructions and admonitions to assist monks in their quest for spiritual perfection.¹⁵

Byelorussian letters continued to be cultivated until the end of the XVIIth century, but by then the fire had gone. The followers of Rymša and Paškievič were few and uninspired, although a few names deserve some mention. The small group of versifiers who were active in Polack in the mid-XVIIth century, including Simeon Polacki, Filafei Utčycki and Ihnat Jeūlevič, may be described as the masters of the declamatory style. Of Polacki little need be said, for by language and sentiment he belongs more to the history of Russian than to Byelorussian literature. Jeūlevič and Utčycki were both archimandrites of the Epiphany Monastery in Polack. Utcycki is chiefly remembered for a declamatory verse he composed to celebrate the return to Polack of the miraculous Ikon of the Holy Virgin (1659). Jeulevic composed complimentary verses in honour of the Orthodox Bishop of Viciebsk, Mahileū and Mscislaū, Jazep Harbacki (1652).¹⁶ Their works have no particular merit or interest, and they represent rather the last flickerings of a dying culture.

Despite encouraging beginnings, the time was not ripe and conditions not suitable for Byelorussian verse to develop and flourish freely. The literary language itself was burdened with many Old Slavonic idioms and did not adequately reflect the richness and variety of the common speech. The themes of the poets were closely tied up with the political and religious conditions prevailing at the time which left but little scope for poetic thought. Nevertheless, the Middle Byelorussian poets and versifiers expressed their feelings and convictions in pithy verses and left behind an interesting contribution to the literary heritage of their nation.

¹³) A. Korsunaū, *op. cit.*, p. 335. This work was for long time of unknown authorship. It bears the date 22 August 1621.

¹⁴) The Russians were also the subject of considerable hostility. Cf. F. Kmita-Čarnabiłski, *Otписы (Reports)* of 1573-1574, *Akty Zapadnoj Rossij* III, p. 164-177.

¹⁵) M. Praškovič, *op. cit.*, p. 84.

¹⁶) *Ibid.*, p. 87.