

REVIEW ARTICLE

**The Baroque and Enlightenment in Byelorussia:
Towards a Revision of the Periodization of Byelorussian Literature**

BY

ARNOLD McMILLIN

Maldzis, A.I. *Na skryžavaŭni slavianskich tradycyj*. 'Navuka i technika', Minsk. 1980. 352 pp. Index.

The complaint, often voiced on the pages of this journal, that there exists no satisfactory account of Byelorussian history is reflected also in our very imperfect understanding of the development of Byelorussian literature. Nowhere is this more so, perhaps, than in what Adam Maldzis appropriately terms the '*terra incognita*', of the period from the second half of the 17th to the end of the 18th centuries, the subject of his most important monograph to date. Readers of this scholar's earlier works, such as *Tvorčaja pabracimstva* (1966), *Padarožža ŭ XIX stahodździe* (1969), and *Tajamnicy staražytnych schoviščau: Da historyi bielaruskaj litaratury XVII-XIX stahodździaŭ* (1974), for example, will not be surprised at the present study's lucid and readable style, or the rigorous investigative scholarship that lies behind almost every page of the text. But whereas Dr Maldzis' earlier writings had tended to be concerned with the byways of scholarship, with frequently disparate though fascinating detail, and the filling in of *lacunae*, in *Na skryžavaŭni slavianskich tradycyj* (At the Crossroads of Slavonic Traditions) he invites, indeed demands, from us a complete reassessment of the traditional periodization of Byelorussian literature. No longer can readers be expected to believe that Old Byelorussian literature ended only at the beginning of the 19th century, a view that, whilst inherently improbable, has been widely accepted, perhaps through inertia, and reiterated as recently as 1975 by one of Dr Maldzis' less talented predecessors, P.P. Ochrimenko ('Problemy periodizacii drevnej belorusskoj literatury', in *Voprosy literatury narodov SSSR*, I, Kiev — Odessa, 1975, p.207; see also Id., *Belorusskaja literatura vtoroj poloviny XVII-XVIII vekov*, Homiel, 1957). By dint of extensive original archive work Adam Maldzis has rediscovered and rescued from oblivion an extensive body of largely manuscript literary works of the late 17th and 18th centuries,

in a variety of Slavonic and classical languages, which in the majority of cases looks forward to the new age of Byelorussian literature rather than back to the traditions of Old Byelorussian writing as had been previously suggested. The case for major re-assessment was in urgent need of presentation and this has now been done with scrupulousness and conviction. In a word, the case is won.

The monograph falls into two main sections, devoted respectively to the Baroque and to the Enlightenment. Each is in turn thematically subdivided, often according to the literary genres that existed and, indeed, in some cases flourished during this period. The thematic division, together with an excellent index of nearly a thousand names, greatly enhances the monograph's value as a reference work, without in any way impairing its qualities as a lively and absorbing narrative.

Although both the Baroque and the Enlightenment are perceived as falling outside the period of Old Byelorussian culture, and particularly literature, Dr Maldzis draws a clear and perhaps unexpected distinction between the earlier part of this transitional age when there took place a number of indigenous developments such as the efflorescence of the love lyric and (as part of a general secularization of literature) of frequently macaronic humorous and parodic carols and other songs, as well as the more general expansion of humour and satire in both prose and verse, and, not least, the strengthening of the puppet theatre tradition which was, in fact, to be one of the main links with the age of Enlightenment and the 19th-century Sentimentalism which followed it. In strong contrast, the Enlightenment itself, characterized here as 'an age of harsh conflict', was considerably less productive for Byelorussian literature proper. The normative tendencies of this period, particularly the return to lofty themes and styles, found little response in Byelorussia, and the few surviving works of this kind are portrayed as part of a slowing down rather than acceleration of development, a concomitant phenomenon being, of course, the increasing spread of polonization which reached its apogee at this time. The middle and low styles which had formed the backbone of the Byelorussian Baroque were squeezed into an invidious and, indeed, unliterary position. In this case the link, bypassing lofty Polonized Classicism was with the early 19th-century development of Romanticism, when the Baroque orientation on folklore was revived. In Dr Maldzis' view writers of the Baroque and Romantic periods shared several basic ways of creative thinking, reflected, for instance, in the many similarities between their characteristic systems of imagery.

Many literary historians, including the author of this notice, have portrayed the period covered in Dr Maldzis' study as a bleak and impoverished one in the overall development of Byelorussian literature. *Na skryžavaŋni slaviŋskich tradycyj* helps to modify this general impression by unearthing a large number of hitherto unknown literary manuscripts; like 18th-century popular literature in Russia, writing of this age in Byelorussia was mostly manuscript — only rarely did Byelorussian works, such as occasional lyrics, get into printed editions. Stressing

the immense fluidity of linguistic boundaries, Dr Maldzis, whilst acknowledging, for example, that Ukrainian and Byelorussian Baroque are inseparable and indistinguishable, none the less claims for Byelorussia many individual works and collections like the Orša manuscript collection, to take but one instance, which Polish and Russian scholars alike have been too ready to attribute to Ukrainian sources. Apart from linguistic merging, linguistic diversity is also a prominent feature of this period, and Dr Maldzis' monograph describes writing in Byelorussian, Polish, Russian, Old Slavonic and Latin. Such variety, a characteristic feature of transitional periods in cultural history, is here presented as the highly fertile cross-fertilization of Byzantine-Orthodox and Roman Catholic traditions. Far from being a lull or *entr'acte* in the cultural process, this was an intensive episode, of much greater richness than had been previously supposed.

But however important the polemics and general shifts in received wisdom produced by this important study, it is the wealth of detail that gives it a fascination rare in Byelorussian literary criticism. In the Baroque period polyslavonic poets like Simiaon Połacki and, to a lesser extent, Andrej (Jan) Bielabocki are perhaps sufficiently well known, and the author is content to outline their activity, placing it firmly in its context at the beginning of a period during which the secularization and personalization of poetry was to develop apace, as *kanty* increasingly dominated *psalmy*. *En passant*, it may be mentioned that Dr Maldzis' predictable anti-clericalism is far milder than that found in many Soviet publications. In prose there took place a parallel development, whereby lofty ecclesiastical functions and also memoir literature which had earlier flourished in Byelorussian (Barkuľabava, Filon Kmita, and Fiodar Jeľušeuški, for instance) now passed to Polish, leaving 'low' satirical genres to Byelorussian, two well-known examples being the magnificent 17th-century satires *List da Abuchoviča* and *Pramova Mialeški*. Also satirical were many of the *pastšannia* which were published by the various factions in the religious polemics raging at the time. Dr Maldzis pays particular attention to the parodic *Kazanie ruskie* which he, interestingly, sees as a forerunner of the great anonymous satirical poems of the 19th century: *Enieida navyvarat* and *Taras na Parnasie*; a similar link is also perceived in such 18th-century parodic verses as *Uvaskresieñnie Chrystova i sašešcie jaho ŭ piekła*. It is, however, in the field of drama that the most interesting detail is provided. In the Rzeczpospolita of the 17th century three types of drama were known: court (serf) drama, school drama, and the popular puppet theatre. The first of these flourished particularly in the early Baroque age: acknowledging frankly the difficulty of providing exact statistics, Dr Maldzis believes that in the period of the Byelorussian Baroque there existed 14 school theatres from which about a hundred dramatic works have survived. An admittedly speculative attempt is made to indicate the regional distribution of theatrical activity, despite the incompleteness of statistics based on surviving programmes (manuscript until the 18th century when they began to be printed). Though not complete,

the number of known productions in this period presents very considerable interest: Połack 28, Hrodna 26, Pinsk 19, Navahrudak 13, Niašviž 11, Brest 10, Viciebsk and Orša both 6, Minsk 5, Mahiloŭ 4, Žodziški 3, and Słuck, Babrujsk and Mścistaŭ 1 each. Much attention is also given to the Orša Codex and Brückner's Koŭna collection amongst other sources, and, without a doubt, this study takes us further into the world of Byelorussian *intermedyi* than even Paulina Lewin's excellent monograph (*Intermedia wschodniosłowiańskie XVI-XVIII wieku*, Wrocław, 1967) or the early parts of Ja. K. Usikaŭ's *Bielaruskaja kamiedyja* (1964) had done.

In Dr Maldzis' persuasively presented view, the Enlightenment with its restrictively normative tendencies slowed down the development of Byelorussian literature, or at any rate the linguistically Byelorussian rather than multilingual parts of it. Amongst the writers of the period attracting the author's attention are the Jesuit polemicist Frańcišak Bahamolec (1720-84) and the well-known uncle of Vikienci Dunin-Marcinkievič, Stanisłaŭ Bohuš-Siestrancevič (1731-1826). The discussion of Poles and others who, like Frańciszek Karpiński and Jakub Jasiński, spent much of their lives in Byelorussia is fully vindicated by historical circumstances, a particularly striking illustration being the early 19th-century critic Ramuald Padbjareski's description of Jasiński as 'the first truly national Byelorussian poet'. In the poetry and prose of other Polish writers such as Zbigniew Morsztyn and Julian Niemcewicz Byelorussian themes abounded, just as they were to do later in the work of Mickiewicz.

Some of the figures in Dr Maldzis' account are already well-known, although they are frequently viewed from a new perspective, for one must not forget that the concept of the Byelorussian Enlightenment is a new one in itself. Others like Daminik Rudnicki, Siamion Zianovič and Tadevuš Kryšynski, as well as numerous anonymous authors, have never been discussed or, in some cases, even mentioned before, and the examples of their works in this monograph appear in print for the first time. Indeed, the publication of excerpts from hitherto unknown manuscripts represents one of the most fascinating parts of this study, whose thematic breadth encompasses many aspects of social and cultural life in addition to literature: science, politics, architecture, painting, music and the applied arts all figure, a typical example of Dr Maldzis' discoveries being Iosif (Michajaŭ syn) Jalenski, one of Byelorussia's first *šlachta* revolutionaries.

As in the account of Byelorussian Baroque, so also in the survey of the Enlightenment much attention is paid to the development of drama and the theatre, a story of both continuity and change. In the early Enlightenment period, for instance, the Jesuit colleges continued to produce dramas as in the Baroque period, although with an increase in sophistication and worldliness. One distinctly new element was the educative function which the Enlightenment brought to Byelorussian drama. At this time, too, court theatres began to make use of local authors. At the Radziwiłłs' theatre at Niašviž, for example, most of the

plays performed were by Frańciška Uršula Radziwiłł (1705-53). There is also some evidence that attempts may have been made to introduce performances in Byelorussian.

Dr Maldzis constantly emphasizes the forward-looking, modern elements in drama of this time. One Polono-Byelorussian Uniate comedy from Zyrovičy, *Ślapy, kulhavy, potym pan i sielanin*, performed in 1751, is presented as clearly anticipating the later development of Byelorussian comedy. Also from the mid-18th century, the Orthodox *Deklamacyja* of Manuił Bazilevič is seen as essentially Baroque in form, though possessing the moral emphasis characteristic of the later period. However, the work of Bazilevič's pupils undoubtedly looks forward to the creation of individual dramatic heroes.

The development of school drama in this transitional period reached its apogee and logical conclusion in the works staged in the College at Zabiely in the Połack region. It was here that, on the basis of the *intermedyja* tradition, was born the first fully Byelorussian play, Kaetan Marašeŭski's well-known *Kamiedyja* (1787). The works of Marašeŭski and his colleague Michail Ciacierski (author of his own highly patriotic *Kamiedyja* and a Polono-Byelorussian free translation of Molière, *Doktar pa prymusu*) are better known than much of the material of this monograph. None the less Dr Maldzis presents an excellent picture of them both as dramatic writers in their own right and their works as interesting points of transition between the *intermedyi* and modern Byelorussian drama. The theatre at Zabiely was, in fact, the culmination point in the development of school drama which had lasted for two centuries in Byelorussia. Not only was the first comedy produced here on the basis of *intermedyi*, but it was also at Zabiely that genres were finally distinguished (incidentally, Marašeŭski's moralizing tragedy *Svaboda ŭ niavoli* is far less well-known than his and Ciacierski's comedies).

Byelorussia's transitional period lasted approximately half a century longer than in Poland or Russia, and there can be no doubt that Byelorussia's multilingual literature developed much quicker than Byelorussian literature proper. There may, however, be a positive feature in the fact that linguistically Byelorussian literature, barred from official functions and lofty genres, found other routes of development, particularly those related to folk traditions, such as songs and intimate lyrics, humorous and and parodic prose and verse, *intermedyi*, and school dramas, culminating in Marašeŭski's *Kamiedyja* and the recently rediscovered (like so much else in this book, by Dr Maldzis himself) *Pieśnia bielaruskich žaŭnierau 1794 hoda*. Both thematically and by virtue of their 'modern' colloquial language these works plainly belong to the new tradition, rather than to Old Byelorussian literature. Indeed *Kamiedyja* is linguistically similar to Dunin-Marcinkievič's macaronic *Sialanka* (1846).

The period covered by Dr Maldzis is an immensely complex one, but 'all this gave it distinctiveness, uniqueness, and individuality in the Sla-

vonian world'. Certainly, it will never again be possible to refer to the 18th century in anything but a strictly comparative sense as 'perhaps the bleakest in the entire spiritual history of Byelorussia', as did the present writer some years ago. Dr Maldzis' own work of enlightenment has continued with a further volume of rather less strictly literary history, *Bielarú u lusterku miemuarnaj litaratury XVIII stahodździa (Narysy bytu z zvyčajaj)* (Minsk, 1982), and scholars both inside and outside Byelorussia will look forward with eager anticipation to further pioneering studies by this highly literate, original, and scrupulous investigative scholar.

Authors of articles in Vol. V, Nos 3-4

- A. BARTOSZEWICZ, Dean of the Instytut Slawistyki, University of Warsaw.
- J. DINGLEY, Senior Lecturer in Russian, School of Slavonic and East European Studies, University of London.
- P. J. MAYO, Lecturer in Russian and Slavonic Studies, University of Sheffield.
- A. B. McMILLIN, Bowes Professor of Russian and Head of the Department of Russian, University of Liverpool.
- M. SIEKIERSKI, Research Fellow, Hoover Institution, Stanford University, California.
- V. SIENKIEVIČ, Journalist.
- J. ZAPRUDNIK, Journalist.