

Francis Skaryna's Biblical Prefaces and Their Place in Early Byelorussian Literature*

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Francis Skaryna, without doubt the most outstanding figure in the whole of Byelorussian cultural history, achieved high distinction not only as a translator, engraver and printer, but also as an original writer in both prose and, to a lesser extent, verse: to him belong the creation of a genre of short prose essay that was new in both form and content, and, in addition, of the first examples of Byelorussian vernacular poetry.

Since the War much valuable research has been done on Skaryna's life and work, particularly important being the biographical studies of Vitaūt Tumaš in New York,¹ the discovery of the date of the *Mataja podorožnaja knižica* ('Liber viaticus', 1522) by Alexander Nadson,² and the work on Skaryna's language at the Byelorussian Academy of Sciences in Minsk.³ The doors to study of Skaryna as a writer were opened by the publication of his collected prefaces, postscripts and synopses by Aleś Koršunaŭ in 1969.⁴ Since then a number of descriptive and analytical articles have appeared in Byelorussia, but, as we noted some ten years ago,⁵ the emphasis has always been on the content rather than the form of Skaryna's writing, examining his exegetical commentaries mainly from the point of view of their national and, particularly, humanistic and social ideas,⁶ and at times degenerating into plain distortion in crude attempts to present Skaryna as a secular writer in conflict with the Church; an extreme example of the latter is the tendentious essay by M. Praškovič which disfigures Koršunaŭ's 1969 edition.⁷ Such modern attempts at exegesis seek justification for their casuistry in Skaryna's poeticization of allegorical and aphoristic language, reflected in the following description of Solomon's proverbs:

Ест бо в сих притчах сокрита мудрость, якобы моць в драгом камени, и яко злато в земли, и ядро у вореху.⁸

(For in these proverbs is concealed wisdom, like strength in a precious stone, like gold in the earth, and a kernel in a nut.)

Literary form, rather than content, provides the main focus of this article, but a good idea of the latter will no doubt also emerge from the illustrative examples of Skaryna's technique and style. Skaryna's purpose in publishing his translations and commentaries was, of course, principally educational (the word didactic does scant justice to the breadth and wisdom of his work) but fine literary judgment and sensitivity stand out in all Skaryna's original writing. A strong indication of his aware-

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ness of form, if such proof be needed, may be found in the recently discovered 'hidden' acrostics in some of his poems.⁹

In the present survey Skaryna's prose and verse will be discussed separately, although the division is, at least in some degree, artificial. Skaryna himself linked rhetoric with grammar and logic as one of the three literary sciences (*nauki slovesnye*), whereas poetry (*stixi*) was associated with music.¹⁰ However, much of his best original prose sounds like poetry, with numerous rhythmic repetitions and regular cadences, whilst one of his four verses, in some ways the most beautiful, is written as prose, albeit with line divisions indicated.¹¹

Any consideration of Skaryna as a writer must take account of the strong links between Skaryna's own writing and the books of the Bible to which his commentaries were attached. Although he saw himself as part of a tradition of biblical commentary epitomized by St Jerome,¹² his poetics frequently seem influenced by those of the Old Testament, particularly in his propensity for enumeration and use of imagery. Skaryna's prefaces were, moreover, addressed to a far wider audience than St Jerome's or, indeed, the Latin commentaries of Nicolas de Lyra in the Czech Bible of 1506. In his preface to I John he particularly commends John for addressing an audience of all ages (*PP*, p.124), and in his Preface to the whole Bible he expresses the same sentiments, praising the Bible's appeal to all conditions of men:

Написаны теж и зовнутрь, понеже не только докторове а люди вченые в них разумеють, но всякий человек простой и посполитый. . .

И тако младенцем и людем простым ест наука, учителом же и людем мудрым — подивление. Яко река дивная мелка — по ней же агнецъ брести можетъ, а глубока — слон убо пливати мусить (*PP*, pp.60-62).

(The books of the Bible are written openly in that they can be understood by not only doctors and learned people, but by any simple, common man. . .)

And thus children and simple people will learn whilst teachers and wise people will be amazed. Like a wondrous river it is shallow enough for a lamb to ford it, but deep enough to make an elephant swim.)

Expressions of Skaryna's own very similar aims are found throughout his prose commentaries and, very typically, in the following four-line epigraph to the Preface to Job:

Богу в троици единому ко чти и ко славе,
Матери его пречистой Марии к похвале,
Всем небесным силам и святым его к веселию
Людем посполитым к доброму научению.¹³

(For the honour and glory of God, one in Trinity/For the praise of His mother, Immaculate Mary,/To the entertainment of His heavenly powers and saints,/For the good education of common people.)

The majority of Skaryna's exegetical writing is to be found in the prefaces (*predislovija* and *predmovy*) with which he introduced his Prague publications and the first of those produced in Vilna. Most of the postscripts are brief, sometimes little more than colophons, although they characteristically reflect Skaryna's pride as a doctor of medicine (a distinction he obtained in Padua in 1512) and as a citizen of the 'famous city of Połack', as well as his concern for the wellbeing of his fellow-men, the 'common people'. Skaryna's later publications are mostly introduced not by Prefaces but by Synopses (*skazanija*) which, making extensive use of quotation, relate the contents of the particular book with very little analysis or original commentary. In terms of literary style, too, they are lucid but very plain, and what imagery there is comes directly from the Bible, such as, for instance, the comparison of the different parts of the body with different members of the Christian Church which directly echoes I Corinthians 12: 12-28. There exist altogether sixty-one postscripts, twenty-six prefaces and twenty-four synopses, and the chronological tendency towards the latter genre with their lack of original thought and literary quality seems to parallel, though not exactly, the decline in standards of typography and engraving in the Vilna editions.¹⁴

It is these exegetical prefaces, then, which are the best examples of Skaryna's original writing. A frequent procedure in these prose miniatures is to quote a few words from the biblical text and then to elaborate on them with a detailed explication that at the same time draws attention to the practical lessons that may be learnt from reading the Scriptures. It is by comparison with these rich philosophical essays that the plain narration of the *skazanija* seems so flat. Many didactic passages are introduced by rhetorical questions, which often introduce long enumerations, as in the following example from the Preface to Skaryna's first publication, the Prague *Psaltir'* (Book of Psalms) dated 6 August 1517:

И что ест, чего в псалмох не найдешь? Нест ли там вѣличества божия и хвалы его?

Там ест справедливость, там ест чистота, душевная и телесная. Там ест наука всякое правды. Там мудрость и разум досконалый. Там ест милость и друголюбство без лъсти, и вси иншии добрые нравы якобы со источника отголь походятъ. Там ест великая тайна о бозь и троици едином и о воплощении господа нашего Исуса Христа, и о вмученьи его невинном, и о воскресении из мертвых. Там ест надежа востания из мертвых и вечного живота, боязнь страшного суду и вечного огня. Там ест многих скрытых таин зъявление. Вси тые речи якобы у великом сокровици в сей малой Псалтыри найдешь (PP, pp.10-11).

(What will you not find in the psalms? Is not there the greatness of God and his praise?)

In them there is justice, spiritual and bodily purity, knowledge of every truth, wisdom and perfect intelligence. Kindness and charity without hypocrisy, and all other virtues flow thence as from a spring. There is the great mystery of God one in Trinity, and of the incarnation of Our Lord Jesus Christ, His passion and His resurrection; hope of resurrection from the dead and eternal life, fear of the last judgment and eternal fire, and the revelation of many hidden mysteries. You will find all these things in this little Book of Psalms as if in a great treasure-house.)

It is again characteristic that in the *skazaniya* the readers are addressed not so much by questions as by phrases like 'Here you will find' and 'You should know'. Other notable examples of enumeration are to be found in the Preface to Ecclesiastes listing human vanities (PP, p.28), the Preface to the Acts of the Apostles describing the blessing brought to earthly life by Christ's teaching (PP, p.120), the Synopsis of Deuteronomy with its daunting catalogue of human sins and errors (PP, p.94), or the Preface to Proverbs which contains the following description of the spirit of wisdom:

В ней воистинну ест дух разумности святой, единый, различный, смысленый, скромный, вымовный, движущийся, непосквѣренный, истинный, сладкий, чистый, стальной, добротливый и всякую иную имеющий в собѣ добрую цноту (PP, p.20).

(Truly it contains the spirit of wisdom which is holy, unified, diverse, full of sense, modest, eloquent, flexible, undefiled, true, sweet, pure, stable, goodhearted, and possessing all other noble virtues).

The characteristic Old Testament flavour of these enumerations is shared by much of Skaryna's imagery.¹⁵ He also draws frequent parallels between events in the Old Testament and the Gospels, or comparisons between physical happenings in the Old Testament and man's spiritual condition. For example, Jesus's weeping as he entered Jerusalem is linked with Jeremiah's lament over the city,¹⁶ and the physical captivity of the Israelites in Egypt is compared to man's spiritual captivity.¹⁷

Comparisons, in fact, play a large role in all Skaryna's prefaces, many of them recurring in a variety of different contexts. Not surprisingly, the twin image of a doctor who heals bodies and a spiritual doctor is particularly favoured, a good example being found in the depiction of Paul at the beginning of the Preface to the Acts of the Apostles:

— он же, будучи лекарем тѣлесным досконалым, видяй вси речи телесные, иже суть суетны и минуши, возжелѣ быти лекарем душ наших, еже на образ и на подобенство прѣвечного бога створеных (PP, p.117).

(And he, being a skilled Healer of the body, seeing all bodily things which are vain and transient, desired to become a healer of our souls, which are created in the image and likeness of most eternal God.)

In the Preface to the whole Bible Skaryna promises knowledge of spiritual and physical medicine: 'В сей книзе вси лекарства, душевные и телесные, зуполне найдете' (*PP*, p.62), and medical images form something of a leitmotiv throughout the prefaces.

The image of a mirror also recurs frequently. Ecclesiastes is a mirror to Solomon's wisdom (*PP*, p.28), the Book of Job is held up as a mirror of long suffering, although full of good sense,¹⁸ and the Book of Judith is likewise a metaphorical mirror which will inspire 'not only women but also men to good deeds and love of native land, begrudging no labour or treasures for the common good and their native land' (*PP*, p.59). Whereupon follows one of Skaryna's most famous extended comparisons, celebrating his strongly felt sense of patriotism:

Понеже от прирощения звери, ходящие в пустыни, знают ямы своя; птицы, летающие по воздуху, ведают гнезда своя; рыбы, плывающие по морю и в реках, чувуют выры своя; пчелы и тым подобная боронять ульев своих, — тако ж и люди, игде зродилися и ускормлены суть по бозе, к тому месту великую ласку имають (*PP*, p.59).

(For just as the beasts prowling in the desert are born with a knowledge of their lairs, birds flying in the air know their nests, fish swimming in the sea and rivers sense their whirlpools, and bees and their like defend their hives, so, in the same way, men have a great love for the place where, by the will of God, they were born and raised.)

The manifest sense of national awareness in this passage and the homeliness of the images have probably been amongst the factors leading several commentators to find popular or folk elements in Skaryna's writing.¹⁹ Whilst there are occasional examples of folk phraseology and much vernacular vocabulary and syntax, the imagery's principally bookish nature can be clearly seen, as Viktor Kavalenka points out, in the references to the sea and desert above,²⁰ or, if it comes to that, to the elephant in the previously quoted excerpt from the Preface to the whole Bible: just a few of the elements not found in Byelorussian folklore. Nothing, moreover, could be further from popular culture than the already quoted enumeration in the Preface to Proverbs describing the spirit of wisdom (*PP*, p.20).

The Preface to Proverbs is one of Skaryna's major pieces of exegetical writing, and his tendency to metaphorical language reflects the genre of proverbs, just as it does that of the parables in the New Testament. The purpose is the same, and in it Skaryna is supremely successful: to present sometimes complicated and difficult ideas in a form that is clear and simple in composition, yet deeply thought, and polished in form. The language of Skaryna's prefaces, postscripts and synopses is notably concise and lucid with none of the convolutions of some of his successors, such as Ciapinski. This lively and flexible though inconsistent Middle Byelorussian language, which was so important to the patriot Skaryna (no-one else showed such a keen concern for language until

Bahuševič at the end of the 19th century) helps to keep even the most extended passages of imagery from turgidness and complications that might confuse his readers from amongst the 'common people'.²¹ Few of the latter would, perhaps, have a clear idea of the effect of fire on gold to which Skaryna compares the testing of Job by suffering (*PP*, p.13), but the extended image of Christ and his apostles like a bridegroom with his wedding party in the Preface to the Song of Solomon is a splendid piece of explicatory writing, complementing the images of the Song itself (*PP*, pp.31-32).

Skaryna makes little use of hyperbole as such, but when he occasionally paints too broad an image the results are less successful than in his more characteristically simple manner. The already quoted image of a river which lambs can ford, but elephants must swim from the Preface to the whole Bible (*PP*, p.62) perhaps verges on the ridiculous, and the following image from the Preface to the Book of Joshua, though relevant to the book, also seems to lack the felicity of the great majority of Skaryna's writing:

Той Исус Навин обреза сыны Израилевы ножами каменными. Господь же наш Исус Христос, иже ест камень угольный, обреза сердца наша словы своими святыми.²²

(Joshua circumcised the sons of Israel with stone knives. Our Lord Jesus Christ who is our cornerstone has circumcised our hearts with his holy words.)

As has been said, much of Skaryna's original writing reads like poetry in prose. A good example of this rhythm and elegance may be found in the following passage from his Preface to the book of Psalms:

Псалом ест щит против бесовскимъ нощнымъ мечтанием и страхом, покой деннымъ суетам и роботам, защититель младых и радость, старымъ потеха и песня, женамъ набожная молитва и покраса, детямъ малымъ початокъ всякое доброе науки, дорослымъ помножение в науце, мужемъ мощное утверждение (*PP*, p.10).

(A psalm is a shield against devilish nocturnal dreams and fears, peace in daily cares and labours, a defender and source of joy to the young, entertainment and song for the old, a pious prayer and adornment for women, the beginning of good instruction for small children, an increase in learning for young people, and for men, great strengthening.)

By comparison with such splendid writing, Skaryna's four verses, completely lacking in imagery, have few if any literary qualities, but are none the less important in terms of versification, anticipating as they do future prosodic developments. Indeed, the history of Byelorussian poetry may be said to date from 1517 with the already quoted four-line epigraph to the Book of Job.²³ Two other poems were printed in 1519: a paraphrase of the Ten Commandments in the Preface to

Exodus (PP, p.74), and a short verse summarizing the contents of the Book of Esther:

Не копай под другом своим ямы,
 Сам ввалишься в ню.
 Не став, Амане, Мардохею шибенице,
 Сам повиснеш на ней (PP, p.109).

(Dig not a pit before thy friend,/Thou shalt fall in it thyself./Set not up,
 O Ammon, a gallows for Morduch,/Thou shalt hang from it thyself.)

The apparently original *Molitva nabožnaja ko presvjatej bohorodici Marii* (Pious Prayer to Mary the Most Holy Mother of God) which appears after the acathistus in the *Liber viaticus* of 1522 may also be regarded as a form of poetry, although the lines are not presented as such. Exiguous though this poetic corpus is, it presents considerable prosodic interest. Of the four verses, the first is roughly syllabic, with an almost regular number of syllables and a caesura after the eighth syllable in each line. Skaryna's model was probably contemporary Czech or Polish versification, but two dactylic line-endings indicate that from the start he felt able to adapt foreign practice to native needs. The lines comprise two pairs of rhyming couplets, notable for the fact that their final words play an identical syntactic role.²⁴

The significance of Skaryna's verse lies almost exclusively in its influence on (or — perhaps more realistically — anticipation of) later developments in Byelorussian versification.²⁵ Much easier to recognize is the influence of his Prefaces on the general development of Byelorussian national culture and, in more specific terms, on the genre of preface writing in the following century. Also important, though as yet insufficiently studied, was the effect on Byelorussian literature of Skaryna's popularization of the Bible itself.²⁶

In any consideration of 16th-century Byelorussian literature Skaryna's prefaces cannot be ignored, and Vasil Ciapinski and Symon Budny are conventionally regarded as his direct successors. While such a connexion is self-evident, there is none the less a world of difference between the elegant lucidity of Skaryna's prose and the heavily baroque complexity of much of Ciapinski's syntax, or the broad balance of Skaryna's teaching and the fierce polemical tone that characterizes Budny's writing. Much scholarly work has been devoted to these connexions,²⁷ and also, in lesser degree, to the links between the heritage of Skaryna's work and other national literatures.²⁸ The role of Skaryna as an inspiration to subsequent writers is treated imaginatively by Ryhor Biarozkin who has drawn a number of somewhat fanciful parallels between the 16th-century universal genius and Maksim Bahdanovič, the short-lived but outstandingly gifted and erudite poet of Byelorussia's early 20th-century literary renaissance.²⁹ Be that as it may, the inspiration of Skaryna's life and work, including the exemplary reconciliation of complex ideas with unforced and lucid explication, elegant and polished writing with plain, sometimes even homely expressions in his original exegetical

writing, ensure for him an enduring and uniquely important place in the history of Byelorussian culture.

NOTES

1. See his contributions (some under the pen-name of Symon Braha) to *Zapisy*, old series 2, no. 2 (4) (1953), and new series 2 (1963), 3 (1964), 4 (1966), 5 (1970), 16 (1978), and 17 (1983).
2. 'Skaryna's Prayer Book', *The Journal of Byelorussian Studies*, II, no.4, 1972, p.339.
3. In addition to the valuable, though incomplete, dictionary of Skaryna's language see, in particular, the analytical articles of A.I. Žuraŭski, such as 'Mova drukavanych vydaŭniaŭ F. Skaryny', in *450 hod bielaruskaha kni-hadrukavaŭnia*, edited by K.K. Atrachovič and others, Minsk, 1967 [cited hereafter as *450 hod*], pp.277-304, and 'Jazyk predislovij Franciska Skoriny', in *Belorusskij prosvititel' Francisk Skorina i načalo knigopečatanija v Belorussii i Litve*, edited by A.A. Sidorov and others, Moscow, 1979 [cited hereafter as *BPFS*], pp.85-93.
4. Francysk Skaryna, *Pradmovy i paślastoŭi*, edited by Aleś Koršunaŭ, Minsk, 1969 [cited hereafter as *PP*].
5. Arnold B. McMillin, *A History of Byelorussian Literature from Its Origins to the Present Day*, Giessen, 1977, p.40.
6. See, for instance, Uładzimir Kalešnik, 'Pčala Skaryny', *Potymia*, 1979, no.9, pp.219-40; S.A. Podokšin, *Francisk Skorina*, Moscow, 1981; and Ja. I. Parecki, 'Raźvićcio Symonom Budnym ašvietnickich idej F. Skaryny', in *450 hod*, pp.229-43. Perhaps naturally, even those who have set out to describe Skaryna's prefaces as literature have concentrated on content. An example is the work of Professor Piotuchovič, a gifted early critic of Skaryna, writing before the publication of *PP*: Michal Piotuchovič, 'Fraŭcišak Skaryna i jaho litaraturnaja dziejašč', in *Čatyrochsotlećcie bielaruskaha druku 1525-1925*, edited by U. Pičeta, Minsk, 1926, pp.157-79. Apart from the present writer's own work, an exception is V.A. Čemerickij, 'Francisk Skorina i stanovlenie belorusskoj literatury', in *BPFS*, pp.71-76.
7. 'Francysk Skaryna', in *PP*, pp.167-82. Čemerickij's essay (see fn.6) is hardly better in this respect.
8. Preface to Proverbs. *PP*, p.20. For such an interpretation see Kalešnik, *op. cit.*, p.233. Aleś Koršunaŭ's spelling conventions, reproduced in this and subsequent quotations, are explained in *PP*, pp.5-6.
9. Skaryna's acrostics, first discovered by A.A. Turilov, are described in Vitaŭt Tumaš, 'Akraŭstychi Fraŭciška Skaryny', *Zapisy*, 16, 1978, pp.99-106.
10. Preface to the whole Bible. *PP*, pp.62-63.
11. See Nadson, *op. cit.*, pp. 357-58.
12. See Preface to Esther. *PP*, p.108.
13. Quoted from *Chrestamatija pa staražytnaj bielaruskaj litaratury*, edited by A.F. Koršunaŭ, Minsk, 1959, p.178. For some reason these lines are omitted from *PP*.
14. Michal Piotuchovič, however, found organic unity and indeed, little difference between Skaryna's Prague and Vilna editions. See Piotuchovič, *op. cit.*, p.175.
15. See Čemerickij, *op. cit.*, p.74, where the influence of biblical style on Skaryna is characterized as 'laconic, aphoristic, penetrating'.

16. Preface to the Lamentations of Jeremiah. *PP*, p.111.
17. Preface to Exodus. *PP*, p.76.
18. Preface to the whole Bible. *PP*, p.65.
19. See, for example, Podokšin, *op. cit.*, p.139.
20. V.A. Kavalenka, *Mifa-paetyčnyja matyvy ū bielaruskaj litaratury*, Minsk, 1981, pp.73-74.
21. The translations themselves are basically in Church Slavonic with an uneven admixture of vernacular elements. On the distinction between the language of the translations and of the commentaries, see the already mentioned articles by A.I. Žuraŭski (fn.3) and A.N. Bulyko, 'Zapadnoslavjanskaja leksika v izdanijax F. Skoriny', in *BPFS*, pp.94-102.
22. *PP*, pp.55-56. The same image occurs in the Synopsis to Paul's Epistle to the Romans, drawn directly (like most of the material in the *skazanija*) from the text: 2. 28-29.
23. See fn.13.
24. For a comprehensive analysis of Skaryna's verse see P.N. Bierkaŭ, 'F. Skaryna i pačatak uschodnieslavjanskaha vieršaskładańnia', in *450 hod*, pp.254-61.
25. See Bierkaŭ, *op. cit.*; and Piotuchovič, *op. cit.*, p.174.
26. See Čemerickij, *op. cit.*, p.75.
27. Amongst general studies on Skaryna's influence, see: M.A. Aleksjutovič, *Skaryna, jaho dziejnašć i švietapohlad*, Minsk, 1958; L.A. Itigina, 'Belorusskie staropečatnye predislovija XVI — pervoj poloviny XVIII v. (prosvetitel'nye tendencii)', in *Tematika i stilistika predislovij i posleslovij*, edited by A.S. Demin, Moscow, 1981, pp.171-78; A.F. Koršunov, 'Tradicii Franciska Skoriny v izdanijax ego posledovatelej', in *BPFS*, pp.45-52; and G.Ja. Golenčenko, 'Knigi F. Skoriny v belorusskix, russkix i ukrainkix sobranijax XV-XVII vv.', in *BPFS*, pp.149-63. Specifically on Skaryna and Budny, see Ja.I. Parecki, *op. cit.*; on Skaryna and Ciapinski, see H.Ja. Halenčanka, 'Vasil Ciapinski — pašladoŭnik skaryninskaj spravy', in *450 hod*, pp.171-78.
28. On Skaryna's influence in the Ukraine see Pavieľ Achrymienka, *Letapis bratertva*, Minsk, 1973, pp.28-34; and Ja.D. Isaevič, 'Nasledie Franciska Skoriny na Ukraine', in *BPFS*, pp.170-75. On his relationship to Czech printing, see A.S. Mylnikaŭ, 'F. Skaryna i češskaje knihadrukavańnie', in *450 hod*, pp.179-93.
29. Ryhor Biarozkin, *Postaci: Artykuły pra paetaŭ*, Minsk, 1971, pp.85-89.

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