Sounds and Words: Reflections on Reading Skaryna

BY

HANS ROTHE

It is only with great trepidation that I venture to publish my reflections on Skaryna, for I do not have the results of research of my own to offer. All I dare to do is to pose questions, so this will be a somewhat dubious paper consisting almost entirely of questions.

I

With Skaryna not everything seems to be questionable however.1 We know that he came from Polack; but only because he specified this again and again. There is no document to prove it.2 Again, we know that he studied at the Universities of Cracow and Padua, from which latter university he received a doctorate in medicine;3 we know that he printed his version of the Bible in Prague between 1517 and 1519 and in Vilna between 1522 and 1525. But after this the questions start to arise.

Why did he stop at Vilna and not continue further? Why did he not continue to print when he was in Prague for the second time after 1535? Why did he begin with the Old Testament and not, as was usual for the time, with the Gospels?4 I suppose one can find answers to these questions. But many others follow. Was he really ever in Copenhagen?5 And what is more important, was he in Moscow around 1527? And if he was, how could he have been lucky enough to get out again?6 Many others who stood under the suspicion of heresy were not able to leave: Maksim Grek is one such example. In addition we would like to know more than we do about his relations with duke Albrecht in Königsberg and with the king of Poland7 and about his stay in Breslau.8

If it was evident in Moscow whether one was a heretic or not, this was not necessarily clear outside Russia. Indeed we must ask, what did Skaryna confess to be? To my knowledge the question has not yet been answered whether he confessed to be Roman Catholic, pravoslavnyj, or — as some scholars seem to think — Protestant.9 To phrase the question more precisely: did he confess at all to being anything more specific than a Christian? What are we then to think of the Christianity of Skaryna, who was the first Eastern Slav to print a translation of the Bible in the vernacular? The first Eastern Slav, but not in the Eastern Slavonic area.

Yet a further question to be posed is whether Skaryna was, as one can read in many serious books,10 a man of the Renaissance.11 This opinion
can be interpreted as follows: he was a man of the new humanism of the 15th and 16th centuries. But was he really? The breeding ground of the new humanism and of the Renaissance was the Latin language. It is not known whether Skaryana ever wrote a single line in Latin. We can assume that he must have known fairly good Latin when he came to Cracow from the Bernardine school in Połack. Is it then not appropriate to ask why a man who knew this language and who felt the spirit of the time completely avoided the use of the international language of all hommes de lettres? What about his Latin and his humanism?

II

When discussing the question of language, is it permissible to ask which one he used? The received opinion seems to be that for the holy texts of the Bible he used an individual version of Church Slavonic with a certain mixture of Polish and Czech words. In the forewords and postscripts he is said to have written in his vernacular, Byelorussian; but did he really?

To begin with this last question: is it possible to decide definitively what his language was? If one takes one of the conventional and reliable phenomena of phonetics, ê, then we find that it is identical with e. Skaryana writes é where it is etymologically unjustified: nerukotvorényj predkove. But on the other hand he writes prišol (51), znašol (30). No different to Moscow Russian or Ukrainian, it seems. At any rate it is not an example of Ukrainian ikan‘e with respect to ē. However is it really so? Skaryana writes vši instead of vse; this is all right as it is ‘praslavjanski‘, Old Church Slavonic and Old Russian. But he also writes vsich as well (29): ‘pobil vsich vragov‘ (52), ‘so vsich knig‘ (71). As for the genitive and the locative this again is Old Russian, although they are very peculiar forms, analogous to moich, which have not as yet been explained. And what about the accusative? This is an analogical formation; but is it not also a common East Slavonic form used outside Muscovite Russia? And how are we to explain the fact that Skaryana also uses vše, vsech in spite of and parallel to vši, vsich?

Further examples from phonetics are pertinent here. Skaryana writes naučenie, but in Prague at this time we already find navčati, albeit very rarely. Later on in Vilna navčenie is usual and we also find v nich instead of u nich (144, 146) or vtekši instead of utekši (149). Furthermore Skaryana writes, almost without exception, pokrytš, ryba; that is, he already has a new y for an old i. But is this Byelorussian? Again it seems that this is characteristic of non-Russian East Slavonic.

A fairly reliable trait of Byelorussian vis-à-vis Ukrainian seems to be the third person singular of verbs. Skaryana writes almost without exception budetš, pišetš and Ukrainian hard budet is scarcely to be found. Again this smacks of Old Russian. But how Skaryana may in fact have pronounced these forms can be seen from forms like zastavica (160). It should be remembered here, however, that this phenomenon is
considered to have come from Polish and can also be found in the northern Great Russian area.

The position is similar with Byelorussian akan’ě. This is something, however, which again is characteristic not only of Byelorussian but of Moscow Russian as well. More reliable or typical might be double forms, as for instance: desjat’ — deset’, pamjat’ — pamet’, svjatyj — svetij. And here we can learn something about the accent: svjatyj cannot be Church Slavonic, but svetij must be East Slavonic svetůj.¹⁶

The question now arises as to whether these phenomena, taken together, form the basis of Byelorussian as distinct from Ukrainian, Moscow and Novgorod Russian, and Polish? Would it not be more appropriate to maintain that phonetically and phonologically Skaryna wrote in a type of common East Slavonic which showed more archaic than innovatory traits?

While the situation of Skaryna’s phonetics is confused, one finds downright chaos if one leaves this subfield of linguistics and looks at other areas of his language. Skaryna switches from videči, živući (20) to pišušču (93); from svjatago to svjatogo. There seems to be no logic behind this. The impression of randomness is if anything strengthened if one looks at the field of word forms. Here one finds forms such as potom and zatym, sego radi and sego dlja; dokonano, konaet, dokonavajtšja (57) and končaetšja (36); one finds počaty (42) which may be Russian, but more frequently one finds Polish počenši (43, 49, 50) or the form počése (66) which has been adapted to East Slavonic; one usually finds Polish (or Czech) moc, moco but sometimes the Church Slavonic form moščno (20). One finds menovati (22) or pervomenovanye (9), which seems to be Czech, and vyšeimenovaných (74), which is Church Slavonic. Was this nothing more than a chaotic form of ‘Neo-Slave commun’, such as some famous Slavonic scholars of our time have spoken, who are said to have forgotten their own mother tongue but could not speak any other Slavonic language properly either!?  

III

It is not certain that this problem of defining Skaryna’s language can be solved by linguistic methods only. However I venture to suggest here that it might be possible to solve the problem in question from the vantage point of stylistics. Not only do we find — like Borkovskij — ‘lek-sičnja varianty’,¹⁷ but also lexical variation as a stylistic device. This is most apparent in his skazanija or forewords, where he describes the contents of the text in detail. These descriptions are sprinkled with the phrase ‘and then’ for which one finds Church Slavonic forms, alternating with East Slavonic potom and Polish zatym (69, 70, 74, 87); or East Slavonic za nimi and the supposed Polish form za tymi (66f.); or Polish teže and East Slavonic takže (13); or Church Slavonic paki inoe and Polish teže inye (83). Or one finds in the declension of the genitive plural učitelej — učitelev (9f.) or tyseščej mužej — tyseščej mužev (5d).

¹⁶

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Or — as is already known — we have po vsich — pobiti vsech (73). It seems to be clear that all these examples do not occur by accident or because Skaryna could not decide which form to use or because he did not know the language well enough. The reason seems to be the desire for stylistic variation as in all cases it is striking that both sets of forms occur in immediate juxtaposition.

But again one may ask whether it is really a stylistic device of Skaryna's or the inability to think coherently. Most of the above examples concern the organization of grammar, but organized grammar is a consequence of the organization of thought. This is, by the way, one of the reasons why Old Russian can be so unsatisfying.

I would like to offer just one further example of this. The most conventional form of hypotactical construction is what is called connection by a relative pronoun: 'which, who' and so forth; in East Slavonic kotoryj, in Church Slavonic iže. Now one finds that Skaryna used the corrupted late Church Slavonic form eže in every possible case. But of course he knew the declension iže — egože — jaže and so forth as well as other forms. So one finds, for instance: 'o divech, eže... — o tajnach, jaže... ' (14). I might add at this point that it is necessary to bear in mind that Skaryna usually used the form iže in accordance with the function of the pre-Latinized Old Polish iže; Modern Polish że; the East Slavonic čto is extremely rare.

Now we find in Skaryna's forewords a very curious form of relative pronoun, which probably derived from Church Slavonic: on že instead of iže or kotoryj as in the following example: 'požitočny naboli tym, oni že chotjat imeti dobrye obyčae' (20). There are nine other instances in the forewords (31, 36, 97, 133, 135, 136, 147, 151), but the most illustrative example is the following: 'Glas Christov, on že est żenich; glas cerkvi Christovy, eže nevesta est; glas apostolov, sii že sut’ družina żenichova; glas otrokovicz, iže cerkvi Christovy znamenuet. Teže glas sonmišča żidovskago, oni že... ne prijaša zakona Christova' (31). No doubt this is a stylistic device with five varieties for one grammatical function. But in order to appreciate this, one must realize that the whole sentence is organized on the basis of parallels and analogies. This is not in my opinion a good example of well-organized thinking using syllogisms, but rather an archaic characteristic of truth by means of analogies, parallels and other rhetorical devices. But if this is plausible, then one must add that the roots of such organized thought and grammar are not archaic, but western. Here we again come up against the problem of Latin.

IV

It is true that we have not a line of Latin from Skaryna. But is it not a Latin model which we sense when we read: 'jako zakon života več-nago ljudej dostupiti učit.' (9) with the position of the verb at the end of the phrase? Skaryna himself knew this model and tried to copy it.
This we feel, if we compare the foreword to the Psalterion of 1517 with the second version of this foreword from 1525:

1517: ‘jako pišetь o tom v pervykh knigach Paralipomenon' (11)
1525: ‘jako o tom... pišetь' (155)
1517: ‘vsegda imeli desjatero božie prikazanie pred očima svoima’ (11).
1525: ‘vsegda desjatero prikazanie božie pred očima svoima imeli’.

This device can render a sentence artificial: ‘Potom knižka Tovi’f nauku otcem, jako imajut učiti syny svoja, kažetsy’ (66). And we can feel that a period which turned out fairly well was the model for another one which failed. Thus one finds quite reasonably: ‘V sej knize vse zakony i prava, imi žele ljude na zemli spravovatšja imajutь, popisany sutiь', immediately followed by: ‘Tu sprava vsjakogo sobranija ljudskogo i vsjakogo grada, ĝe ĝe verou, soedineniem laski i zgodoju pospolitoe dobrое pomnoženo byvаеть’ (62), which is much less lucid.

Again the model which proved to be most suitable for Skaryna consists of parallels, which may be formed in accordance with a Latin model: ‘Bolši v sobě sokrytych tain zamykajutь, neželi sja slovami pišutь’ (19); ‘I jako ot toe pervoe materi bytnosti ploti i krovi rodjaščesja priachom, tako i ot cerkvi christovy veru, laski i sily kreščajuščesja primum’ (33). This does not seem to be Old Russian. But was it really Latin which provided Skaryna with the impetus for these forms? I wish a Slavist who is also a really good Latinist would examine this type of morphology and phraseology and compare it with the style of some of the fathers of the Latin Church, e.g. Hieronymus and Ambrosius — to mention two scholars also referred to by Skaryna. These two are by the way the beloved fathers of the humanists.

V

If this does not turn out to be very reliable we may ask whether there is anything else which is or seems to be typically humanistic. I think that it is at least not medieval when Skaryna writes in the Book of Job: ‘... znajući že, iže est naivyššaja mudrostь rozmyšļenie smerti i poznanie samogo sebe' (15). Or when he regards the desire for fame of an author positively: ‘vozrěvnoval est tomu, daby ostavil teže i po sobě pametь, jako i predkové ego ostavili sutь, daby pametь ego ne zaginul vo věki’ (23f.). Or when he considers the Old Testament and Ancient Greek philosophy as equal: ‘vsja bo Salomonova i Aristoteleva božestvenaja i žitejskaja mudrostь v sej knize’ (24). Or finally, when Skaryna, ‘v lekarskich naukach doktorь', who after all wrote his forewords in the field of theology, examines the different laws without any immediate connection to the Bible text in question. He does this twice in the foreword to the first book of Samuel (the Book of Kings) (38) and in the foreword to the fifth book of Moses (95).

This is very striking in the second example where Skaryna makes the distinction between natural law (‘zakon priroženýj') and written or divine law (‘zakon napisanyj ili ot boga est danyj’).18
Here we enter the field of what I think Lord Shaftesbury called ‘inward form’. If we carefully analyse all these examples from phonetics, syntax, style, philosophy or simply thought then we find behind all of them a tendency to dualism. This is not however the medieval Manichaeans or Bogumile dualism of heaven and hell, Ormuzd and Ariman, but a parallelism of two ways of perceiving, understanding, judging, both different but equal in value. Laws, for instance, are written ‘(božiim) preizvolënîmi i ljudskimi pilnostjami’ (38). Jesus Sirach ‘privodit’ nas k mudrosti i k dobrym obyčaem putem razumu’ and then: ‘k dobrym delom putem prikladu’ (36). So does Solomon: ‘k poznaniem premudrosti putem razuma, povêdajući nam sovêtê židov’ and then: ‘putem prikladnym, povêdajući priklady svyatych otec’ (36).

VI

All these examples are familiar to every specialist on Skaryna. But then I would like to ask whether it might only be another aspect of this dualism of equivalents when Skaryna is so surprisingly uncertain in questions of language, in questions of lexicology. For instance, when he examines the laws he writes: ‘pisma i prava ili ustavy’ (38) or ‘prava ili zakon’ (95).

At this point we finally return to theology, or more precisely, to words and terminology which are used in every field of knowledge in order to elucidate what is intended by the author. These words must be fixed so that they can be used repeatedly and understood exactly with every repetition. But why do we then have ‘prava ili zakon’? Do we find this in the knowledge of God (theology) as well? It seems that we do but — if I may mention this by the way — we do not find it in the two-volume Sloûnik movy Skaryny. There are a number of words or meanings which are lacking in this work or given meanings which are incorrect. Here are a few examples. The Sloûnik does not give drugoljubstvo (10); pervomenovanyj (9); naboženstvo (82); doktor (86); pianosts (133) which does not have the meaning given to pijanyj, pijanstvo — ‘drunkenness’ but ‘one’s mind is carried off by the gospel of Christ’ (‘o pianosti vo blagovestovanii Christove’); grechočinienie (136); nestovstvo (146); tsâčeglagola-nie (147); poglêbnyj (148); primolva (150); pervosvjaščennik (151). This means that for the Christian terminology of Polish and Church Slavonic origin the Sloûnik is a crude bed of Procrustes.

Here I would like to pose the question: what is the linguistic basis of Skaryna’s Christian terminology? To a certain extent it is Polish, i.e. Latin. Skaryna most frequently uses laska (božija) but we can also find ‘v lasce milostivago boga’ (17) which is very close to being a synonym. On the other hand we find words in pure East Slavonic without exception: naroženie, nadeža. The expression for the Holy Virgin, the most important figure in the theology and pietism of the time, is very illustrative in this connection. Skaryna usually writes ‘iz prečistoe devici Marii’ (24) or ‘iz prečistoe devici materi svoeja Marii’ (31). This is defi-
nately Latin but only with respect to the noun. Only once in Prague does he use the Orthodox-Russian word *bogorodica* (15). Later on in Vilna he avoids *mater* completely.

However, one sees that already in Prague the expression is not definitely Latin with respect to the adjective. For instance when he writes: 'ego presvjatoe, preblagoslovenoe i prečistoe devici — materi Marii' (57). But in some cases Skaryna uses an adjective of Latin origin as well, twice in the following instance: 'z neporušennoe devici' (100, 102) — which probably derives from Latin *immaculata*; it is not mentioned in the *Sloŭnik*. But you can find there *sub verbo* 'porušati', a clear example of *ne porušajući* which is very amusing. The phrase is a fine example of poetry deriving from the old Christian mysticism of the fathers: 'On že [i.e. Jesus Christ the Son] proide utrobu Prečistoe devici jako soľsce sklo, ne porušajući zamákovu ranešťvnu eja' (76). You find the same example *sub verbo* 'panestvo' with the following definition: 'toe što panovaňnie', i.e. 'rule, ruling', 'reign'. The phrase seems to me to be quite clear and the *Sloŭnik* quite wrong. The meaning is 'virginity', Orthodox-Russian *devičestvo*, and the phrase has of course to be read: 'He went through the womb of the most pure virgin as the sun through glass without destroying the seal of her virginity'.

Thus we find that Skaryna in the Prague period did not decide whether to use Latin or Greek terminology.

A quite interesting example illustrating this point is the word *pospolityj, pospolite*. The *Sloŭnik* gives the definition 'prostiyorj which is to be understood as 'simple, unlearned' and this is correct with respect to the example which follows: *pospolityj čelovek rovnaja carju preterpel est*. But what about the following examples which are lacking in the *Sloŭnik*: 'ljudem prostym pospolitym k požitku' (20); 'čelovek prostyj i *pospolityj*' (62); 'nad pospolityj beg žalostь pokaza' (56)?

To me a solution seems to lie in the following phrase: 'zakon ili pravo raznočinne sja ot ljudej nazyvaetь. Jedino pospolitoe, poneže ot vsekh narodov pospolite sobljudamo est... Drugoe pravo — jazyčeskoе, ot mnogich uto jazykov uchvaleno est... Inoe — carskoе. nekoe že pravo — ricerskoе ili voennoе... Inoe pak pravo mestieskoе, inoe morskoе, a inoe kupecskoе' (95-97). This is quite clear: *pospolite pravo* means 'obščee' as is unmistakably said afterwards: 'jedino pospolitoe... ot vsekh narodov pospolite', where the text continues as follows: 'Rovnaja svoboda vsem, obščee imenie vseh' (96). And I think there can be no doubt that this, apart from everything else, is for Skaryna also a philosophical term used very frequently in humanistic literature. Here I mean 'pospolite dobroе', Latin 'bonum commune', English 'common welfare' (11, 24, 62, 95, 106, 109).

But again this is not everything. In the foreword to Ecclesiastes we read the title at the beginning, as usual in the four languages: Hebrew, Greek, Latin and Russian 'a porusky i Sbornik' (26). Then follows: 'V sej že knize, rekomoj Ekkleziast ili Sbornik, pišet o nauce vseh ljudej *pospolite*... , v rozmaitých rečach ljudi na svete pokladajut mysli i
kochanija svoja: jediny... družii...’ (28). There follows a long enumeration and at the end a résumé: ‘Naricaetsja že sija kniga Sbornik, poneže ne ko jedinomu čeloveku v nej pisyet, no ko vsemu soboru ljudem, a ne jedinago čelověka mysl i kochanie javljaet, no vsego sobora’ (30).

Here one again finds the meaning of ‘commune’, ‘obšče’, ‘common’. But the meaning differs: pospolite seems to be used synonymously with sobor and that is one of the oldest theological terms we know in Greek orthodoxy. It means ‘the community of all people or saints as a whole, but each of them individually as well’.

VII

I have tried in the above to analyse some sounds and words. Having done this I would now like to try in conclusion to touch on one subject of real theology at least. What I mean here is the most serious question which arose in Skaryna’s Prague years, the question as to whether man can be saved by good works or by grace. Obviously he could not have known Luther’s doctrine of the salvation of man by God’s grace alone, simply because at that time Luther had not developed it. But of course Skaryna might have been acquainted with the criticism of the system of indulgence, that is paying for salvation with money or good works. Surely he must have heard of this criticism which arose in Germany. It cannot be doubted that he became acquainted in Prague with the doctrines of the Czech brethren. But did it really influence him?

In fact we find the following passage, albeit in 1525 in the Vilna Apostolos: ‘podobait rabom gospode svoej pokarjatisja vspominaja, iže my ne ot svoich del, no blagodatiyu božieju spaseni bychom’ (149). This is the only example I could find and it is a late one at that, but in his Prague forewords we read several times: ‘vera bez del mertva est’ (25), which is a quotation from the Epistle of James 2.17. Then we find: ‘dobraja dela i vere Christove potrebna suti’ (103).

And even later in the Apostol of 1525 Skaryna analyses St Paul’s doctrine of the old and new man. There is again a long enumeration of parallelisms introduced by the word dvojakij. But right in the middle we find a curious divergence: ‘Trojakuju smertь, duchovnuju, tělesnuju i eju že umiraem grechu i pochotem ego. Tako ž i trojakij život: duchovnyj, telēsnýj i im že živemy pravde vo dobrych delech’, (128). After this he continues again with dvojakij.

The above divergence is both in the rhetorical structure of the phrase and in its theological content. Skaryna deviates in the most important point from the main doctrine of St Paul. But does this mean that he did not agree with the criticism of the Czech brethren and the Wittenberg reformers? Could it not be that here, as in any other field, Skaryna did not decide that only one path leads to the truth, and that he appears to have known different but equal paths?

If this is so then he really was a humanist, a northern humanist, who
sought God and was at the same time earthly. He would then have been the only humanist of the Eastern Slavs — although living outside his area — not only of his time but for about two centuries afterwards.

NOTES

1. Although old, still reliable is the book by P.V. Vladimirov, Doktor Francisk Skorina. Ego perevody, pečatnye izdaniia i jazyk, Izdatel'stvo Obshchego i Obshchego gosudarstvennogo universiteta, Leningrad, 1935; cf. also S. Braha, ‘Doktor Frańcisk Skaryna’, Zapisy, new series, no.5 (1970), pp.11-33. There is urgent need of a new and modern biography in a western language.

2. U. Pičeta, ‘Scoriniana’, in Čatyroxsotlečcie bielaruskaha druku, edited by U. Pičeta, Minsk, 1926, pp.284-327. Cf. Braha, ‘Łakalizacyjca żyćciapisu Doktara Skaryny’, Zapisy, new series, no.3 (1964), pp.9-34; id., ‘Pytańnie imia Doktara Skaryny ŭ źwiatle aktuľ i literatury’, Zapisy, new series, no.4 (1966), pp.184-216.

3. V. Tumaš, ‘Skaryna ŭ Padui’, Zapisy, new series, no. 5 (1970), pp.35-79.

4. The best study of Skaryna's Bible translation is still A.V. Florovskij, ‘Češ-skajaja biblia in istorii russkoj kul'tury i pis'mennosti. Fr. Skorina i prodolža-teli ego dela', Sbornik filologiccký, XII, Prague, 1940/46, pp.153-259. Again it seems very desirable to have a new study of this translation and, what is more, a reprint of the Skaryna Bible itself.

5. J. Sadoŭski, ‘Skaryna's stay in Denmark’, The Journal of Byelorussian Studies, II, 1, 1969, pp.25-28.

6. Braha, ‘Doktar Skaryna ŭ Maskvie’, Zapisy, new series, no.2 (1963), pp.9-36.

7. Braha, ‘Karol Albrecht i Skaryna’, Zapisy, old series, no.2 [4] (1953), pp.108-13; A.B. McMillin, A History of Byelorussian Literature from Its Origins to the Present Day, Giessen, 1977, p.42.

8. Tumaš, ‘Kanfiskata ŭ Vroclavie knihaŭ Biblij Skaryny’, Zapisy, new series, 12 (1974), pp.3-13.

9. Cf. G.Ja. Golčenkeno, ‘“Kalendër” Franciska Skoriny’, in Iz istorii knigi v Belorusii, Minsk, 1976, pp.26-39, here p.27.

10. Bibliographies to Skaryna: Vladimirov, op.cit., pp.I-XXVI; Tumaš, ‘Bibliarhcija Skarynijany’, Zapisy, new series, no.5 (1970), pp.181-268; McMillin, op. cit., pp.342-45.

11. See McMillin, op. cit., p.42.

12. ibid., p.41.

13. Vladimirov, op.cit., pp.247-317; McMillin, op.cit., pp.41, 43, 46.

14. The numbers in brackets refer to pages in: Francysk Skaryna. Pradmovy i pašlastoŭ, edited by V.V. Barysienka, Minsk, 1969.

15. Cf. W. Vondrák, Vergleichende slavische Grammatik, 2. Auflage, neubearbeitet von O. Grünenthal, Göttingen, 1928, II, p.95.

16. Cf. Vladimirov, op.cit., pp.282f.

17. Stoišnik movy Skaryny, compiled by U.V. Aničenka, Minsk, 1977, I, p.5.

18. Cf. Ja. Jucho, ‘Hramadskiia i pravavyja pohlady Skaryny’ Polymia, 1967, no.6, pp.175-80.

19. 3rd Earl of Shaftesbury [A.A. Cooper], Characteristics of Men, Manners, Opinions, Times, edited by J.M. Robinson, London, 1900, II, p.50; W.J. Schröder, ‘Form’, in Reallexikon der deutschen Literaturgeschichte, Berlin, 1958, I, pp.468-71, see pp.468-69.