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Beyond the Symbol: A Ground-Breaking Study of the Portrait of Francysk Skaryna

Илья Лемешкин, Портрет Франциска Скорины. К 550-летию со дня рождения книгоиздателя = Ilja Lemeškinas, *Pranciškaus Skorinos Portretas. 550-ąsias gimimo metines minint* = Il'ja Lemeškin, *Portrait de Francisk Skorina. En commémorant le 550ᵉ anniversaire de sa naissance, (1470–2020),* (The Portrait of Francysk Skaryna. To mark the 550th anniversary [1470–2020] of the publisher), (*Travaux du Cercle linguistique de Prague*, nouvelle série, vol. 10), Vilnius–Prague: Institut national de langue lituanienne / Cercle linguistique de Prague, 2020, 298 p. ISBN 978-609-411-266-9 / ISBN 978-80-87269-58-9

Despite the large number of publications devoted to Francysk Skaryna's life and work, various aspects of his life and legacy still remain unelucidated. Moreover, the interpretation of Skaryna's various 'appearances' range from Renaissance intellectual, physician, book publisher and royal gardener-botanist, to fervent Christian and educator of 'ordinary people', the last highly politicised. Largely because of this 'electrified' halo around him, Skaryna's portrait, an engraving printed twice, in 'The Book of Wisdom of Jesus, Son of Sira' on 5 December 1517, and 'The Four Books of the Reigns' on 8 October 1518, turned into a symbol, transformed in the public consciousness into a rigid icon, surrounded by stereotypes which were not supposed to be seen in it.

Ilya Lemeshkin does not destroy this symbol, but puts it in the context of the early sixteenth-century Bohemian lands, *where and when* the portrait was created. Unlike the often involuntary, present-day perspective of contemporary historians, the research carried out by Lemeshkin is based on a powerful analysis of sources, and on the context of Francysk Skaryna's epoch, which brings Skaryna studies to a qualitatively new level. Furthermore, this is the first work that summarises views on the configuration, symbolism and authorship of his portrait, opening up great possibilities for understanding the Ruthenian Bible (Бивлия руска).

Considering the fact that the publication of Lemeshkin's work acquires particular significance in this jubilee year, we should recognise the outstanding courage of the author, who originally based its title (for the 550th anniversary, 1470–2020) on his discovery of the alphanumeric combination мз. While for centuries generations of Skaryna studies specialists took it as the 'monogram' of an anonymous engraver, Lemeshkin shows that these letters in the bottom left-hand corner of the xylographic portrait of Francysk Skaryna in fact have a perfect right to be there. Moreover, considering the artistic tradition of the early sixteenth century, they *have to be* there, to indicate the age of the person portrayed.

This characteristic *ad rem* manner of Lemeshkin's work, far from being rotund, is based on a rigorous artistic, structural and semantic analysis of numerous sources from the late 15th and early sixteenth century, with a thorough adherence to the context. One by one, Lemeshkin dispels the myths that have accumulated in Skaryna studies due to the underestimation of this context, historiographical inaccuracies, and inattention to sources (hence the importance of working with originals emphasised by the author).

The structural division of the monograph seems to be completely justified. The book contains nine chapters, correlated with three main themes on which the author focuses:

(1) a meticulous historiography, classification and terminology (the chapters 'Review of Sources and Pseudo-Sources' and 'A Portrait Genre in the Context of an Illustrative Apparatus of the Ruthenian Bible (Бивлия руска)'

(2) an analysis of Skaryna's portrait against the wide theological background and the context of the Ruthenian Bible itself ('The Motivation for the Publication of the Portrait in the "Book of the Wisdom of Jesus, the Son of

Sirach" and in the "Four Books of Kings'" and 'The Genesis and Morphological Characteristics of F. Skaryna's Portrait. The Biblical Context of its Use')

(3) a 'reading' of Skaryna's portrait in the light of portrait semantics (paintings and engravings) in the context of the Czech and German realities of the late fifteenth and the first half of the sixteenth century ('The Alphanumeric Combination мз in the Context of the Portrait Genre' and '*Musca depicta* on F. Skaryna's Portraits'; 'The Portraitist of F. Skaryna' and 'The Location of the Printing Shop').

The leitmotif of the examination of Francysk Skaryna's portrait in the context of Czech-German portrait painting/graphics of the epoch leads us through the entire monograph. For the first time in historiography, Lemeshkin expresses the idea of the potential specific usage of the portrait, suggesting its possible utilisation separately, and/or its binding into a complete set just occasionally. Following this hypothesis, the author puts forward convincing answers to many 'puzzles' that have tormented Skaryna scholars. Thus, Skaryna's age (indicated in his 1517 portrait by the Cyrillic letters мз, where the upper crossbar of the letter з apparently serves as a diacritic sign *titlo*, showing its numerical meaning) is represented in the portrait completely in accordance with the portraiture tradition of the time. Let us emphasise that this decoding is the first scientifically grounded solution of the 'мз enigma' in Skaryna studies. Personally, we would also add that Lemeshkin's explanation of the мз is perfectly endorsed by the fact that these former letters, if they were the 'monograms' of some artist or engraver, as most researchers think, are not found anywhere else in the Ruthenian Bible (Бивлия руска) of Francysk Skaryna.

The author also tries to explain the symbolism of another famous sign in Skaryna's portrait, the 'sun and crescent-moon'. In doing so, he connects the engraving *The Coronation of the Mother of God as the Queen of Heaven* (previously named after Mikalai Shchakatsikhin as *Jesus Christ and the Fiancée*)[1] with the iconographic image of the Assumption. Therefore, the sign of the 'sun and crescent-moon' turns out to be in the context of the cults of Theotokos and Christ (p. 77).

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[1] Мікалай Шчакаціхін, 'Гравюры і кніжныя аздобы ў выданьнях Францішка Скары-ны', in: *400олецьце беларускага друку: 1525–1925*, рэд. У. Пічэта, В. Дружыц, Я. Дыла, З. Жылуновіч, Я. Лёсік, М. Шчакаціхін, Менск: Инстытут беларускае культуры, 1926, с. 197.

We prefer to put aside the fact that Lemeshkin's argumentation involves a certain 'slippage of the senses' and confusion between three different iconographic types: the Assumption of the Virgin, the Coronation, and the Immaculate Conception ('A woman clothed in the sun'). We could also note the absence of references to the Italian Renaissance (even in the case of Albrecht Dürer, to whom the author so often refers). The most important thing is that, for the first time in historiography, Skaryna's famous sign of the 'sun and crescent-moon' is clearly excluded from the notorious context of 'personal eclipses' (p. 82).[2]

It is imperative to emphasise that Lemeshkin's work provides a thorough survey and analysis of historiography, spelling out its key problems: the history of imprints of Skaryna's portrait, their versions (with мӡ, with a five or six-legged fly, and without these elements), and their preservation. Simultaneously, the author clarifies the long history of *quiproquo* associated with copies of the portrait, which have introduced many mistakes into Skaryna studies (as an example, we could quote the letter '-л' artificially added by the copyist Alexandr Florov, and subsequently disseminated as an original). It is useful to note that the spelling proposed by Lemeshkin (based on the original portrait and a letter of Ferdinand I dated 29 January 1552), дѡктѡр ˮрлнцısкъ

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[2]   This similar direction of research can be traced in recent works by other authors, e.g.: Сергей Темчин, 'Толгофский крест над ветхозаветной скинией на гравюрном портрете Франциска Скорины', in: *Lietuvos Didžiosios Kunigaikštystės kalbos, kultūros ir raštijos tradicijos: [straipsnių rinkinys],* sud. Sergejus Temčinas, Galina Miškinienė, Marina Čistiakova, Nadežda Morozova, Vilnius: Lietuvių kalbos instituto leidykla, 2009, p. 152–168; Сергей Темчин, 'Тау-крест в треугольнике на гравюрном портрете Франциска Скорины', in: Францыск Скарына: асоба, дзейнасць, спадчына, уклад. А. Груша, Л. Аўгуль [i iнш.], Мінск: Беларуская навука, 2017, с. 146–153; Ольга Шутова, '«…Абы братия моя русь, люди посполитые, чтучи могли лепей разумети»: пристальное чтение и вопрос о символике Франциска Скорины', in: Францыск Скарына: новыя даследаванні, уклад. Аляксандр Груша, Мінск: Беларуская навука, 2019, с. 126-160; Ольга Шутова, '«Бивлия» Франциска Скорины и Италия: источники, влияния, вдохновения', in: Берковские чтения: Книжная культура в контексте международных контактов. Материалы Международной научной конференции, Пинск, 29–30 мая 2019 г., Минск – Москва: Национальная академия наук Беларуси; Центральная научная библиотека им. Якуба Коласа; Российская академия наук; ФГБУН НИЦ «Наука» РАН; Центр исследований книжной культуры, 2019, с. 598–606; Ольга Шутова, 'Изучение интеллектуального пространства «Бивлии» Франциска Скорины в контексте Ренессанса: сюжеты, персоналии, философско-эстетические влияния и оформление' (forthcoming).

скѡрин, has a perfect right to exist; naturally, as an additional rather than as an alternative one. This spelling, a sort of autograph of Francysk Skaryna, has been discovered and conceptualised by Lemeshkin for the first time in historiography.

The author constantly focuses readers' attention on problems that were not considered earlier in historiography, or which were seen from false historiographical and ideological positions. Let us take as a striking example the fly depicted in the portrait of Skaryna, which was replaced in historiography by 'the bee, a sign of diligence' (p. 187). First conceived by Ivan Snegirev in 1830, this 'bee' totally overshadowed the eyes of Skaryna researchers for many years, with its more 'appropriate' symbolism. For the majority of them, as Lemeshkin puts it:

> Unfortunately, the artistic experience of the 15th and 16th centuries turned out to be completely unaccounted for. Nobody paid any attention to the fact that the fly sovereignly flies, sits and buzzes annoyingly in/on many eminent Renaissance masterpieces (p. 191).

Remarkably, analysing the 'fly phenomenon' in Dutch, German, Italian and Czech art, Lemeshkin explains convincingly the identification, meaning and symbolism of this seemingly repulsive insect, which actually turns out to be the very noble Renaissance *musca depicta*.

Another great line of the book is guided by the parallel drawn by the author between the portrait of Skaryna and Dürer's engraving *St Jerome in his Study* (*Der heilige Hieronymus im Gehäus*, 1514). Based on the similarity between the artistic and symbolic design of both engravings, Lemeshkin also places his study in the textual context of places in the Ruthenian Bible (Бивлия руска) where we find Skaryna's portrait. In the first case, the portrait figures in the context of Skaryna's speech on the translation merits of Ben Sira ('Book of the Wisdom of Jesus, the Son of Sirach') and his own publishing and educational role. Here, in a circular manner, the portrait concludes the artistic composition beginning on the front cover. Therefore, Lemeshkin interprets the engraving on the front cover not as a traditional 'dispute', but as a depiction of Ben Sira himself teaching people. Understood in this way, Skaryna's portrait at the end of the book representing our publisher as St Jerome, as Lemeshkin explains, looks

perfectly plausible. In the second case ('Four Books of Kings'), Skaryna, argues Lemeshkin, uses the same engraving, but already as an illustration of St Jerome.

This hypothesis, therefore, explains the absence in the second case of the indication of age (letters мз) and the fly, which, when portraying Skaryna in the first case, secularised the portrait (pp. 159, 192, 271). Consequently, the author shows that Skaryna could initially use his portrait in a double manner. To quote the author:

> The identification with St Jerome [...] lets the publisher represent himself with an attractive image of an authoritative Doctor of the Church, but simultaneously had the alternative positive effect, because it was possible to use the same image to represent the creator of the Vulgate himself (p. 140).

It should be said that, from our point of view, the explanation of the absence of the мз and the fly in the second imprint of Skaryna's portrait ('Four Books of Kings') may be more banal. Evidently, in 1517 ('Book of the Wisdom of Jesus, the Son of Sirach'), 'мз', indeed, as Lemeshkin astutely noted, meant '47 years old'. Nevertheless, a year later, in 1518 ('Four Books of Kings'), Skaryna was already 48, and those letters (мз = 47), turned out to be irrelevant. Idem for the fly, *musca depicta*, which was not only, as Lemeshkin convincingly shows, a sign of the artist's skill, the *trompe-l'œil* and the Renaissance fashion, but also a *symbol* creating the effect of a living presence, the so-called phenomenon of *still-lifes*.[3] The still-life genre was then in its early stages, and for Skaryna's contemporaries, still-life was actually *the* still-life. Therefore, the мз and the fly in 1518 have already lost their actuality and have been cut out. How can we explain the fact that Skaryna, if willing to use his portrait a second time as a portrait of St Jerome, removed the fly and age (мз) which revealed his personality, but at the same time left his own name ... right in the centre? Then again, the simplest explanation is not always the most correct one, and the interpretation of Francysk Skaryna's portrait 'secularised by fly' (*musca depicta*) and dated by the letters мз, as a paraphrase of St Jerome not only has the right to exist, but could bear further fruit in Skaryna studies.

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[3]   Anna Eörsi, 'Puer, abige muscas! Remarks on Renaissance Flyology', in: *Acta Historiae Artium Academiae Scientiarum Hungaricae*, 2001, vol. 42, issue 1–4, pp. 7–22.

The author's approach is clear from the following phrase:

we should not potentially read/interpret [Skaryna's portrait] on the basis of our contemporary experience or our personal preferences, but proceed from the premise how we *must see* it within the framework of the dynamically changing canon of Czech-German portrait art [italics in the original] (p. 270).

Based on a deep analysis of the vast artistic material of the time and the territory, comparing the artistic styles, plots and historical coincidences (for example, the presence of crypto-portraits in Skaryna's Bible), Lemeshkin puts forward the idea of the identity of the artist/engraver of the Бивлия руска. This idea is twofold; the choice of candidature between two main 'pretenders', the Master of the Litoměřice altarpiece and Bartoš Trnka (pp. 196–202), is conflicting, as its argumentation also sometimes seems to be.

It remains to be added that Lemeshkin's focus on German-Czech material as *the main environment* in which the 'Ruthenian Bible' was conceived still leaves room for an analysis of the Italian (Venetian) culture of publishing and art from which Skaryna *evidently borrowed*, as a number of authors have pointed out.[4]

Nevertheless, the very focus on the context of the creation of the Бивлия руска is a visionary accomplishment that will be of great importance to Skaryna studies. Lemeshkin analyses carefully the history of the Prague agglomeration, superimposing this 'grid' on the usage of the adjectives 'old' and 'great', which Skaryna employs in relation to the 'place of Prague' in his colophons. In this regard, it is extremely enriching to understand how real political and cultural events in Prague were actualised in the Бивлия руска (pp. 211–215). Moreover, the author resolves a longstanding dispute about the place of the publication of the 'Ruthenian Bible', and concludes that Skaryna rented Severin's printing shop on 'Half Golden Crescent', as well as revealing

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4   E.g.: Пётр Владимиров, Докторъ Франциск Скорина: его переводы, печатныя издания и языкъ, Санкт-Петербург: Тип. имп. АН, 1888, p. VI; Мікалай Шчакаціхін, *ibid.*, p. 213; Petr Voit, 'Ornamentation of Prague Hebrew books during the first half of the 16th century as a part of Bohemian book design', in: *Hebrew printing in Bohemia and Moravia*, ed. Olga Sixtová, Pavel Sládek, Howard Sidenberg, Barbara Day, Prague: Academia; Jewish Museum in Prague, 2012, pp. 126, 131, 133; Ольга Шутова, *ibid*.

the consistent and often simultaneous use of the press by various publishers, including Skaryna.

This conclusion correlates perfectly with another discovery by Lemeshkin: the semantic and syntactic connections between the colophons of the 'Prague Bible' (1488), the first Prague incunabula 'Psalter' (1487), and Skaryna's Бивлия руска. This well-grounded thesis significantly changes our view on the textual sources of Francysk Skaryna's inspiration, shifting the emphasis from his borrowings from *Biblij Czěská, w Benatkach tištěná* (Venetia: Petrus Liechtenstein, 1506), previously put forward by Piotr Vladimirov and Anton Florovsky,[5] to the practically full-text quotations from the 'Bible of Prague' (1488).

The study will undoubtedly be an event of the utmost interest to historians, art historians, Skaryna researchers, book historians and specialists in other fields, for two reasons. On one hand, because this painstaking genealogical and dialectical work generalises numerous historiographical and source criticism controversies. On the other hand, Lemeshkin's monograph puts forward hypotheses that explain a wide range of 'enigmas' about Francysk Skaryna's portrait.

By offering an argumentation in-context, the author not only resolves disputes over the mysterious 'monogram' мз, which turns out to be quite a prosaic indication of the publisher's age, but also, going beyond the symbol, debunks certain myths, and 'desacralises' Francysk Skaryna's image. From the almost canonical 'moustache' that Skaryna received due to Snegirev's description of *a copy* of Skaryna's portrait (pp. 59-60, 268), to the iconographic prototype by Dürer (*St Jerome in his Study*, 1514), Lemeshkin also determines the exact location of its printing shop, as well as the author of the Бивлия руска engravings.

The author's conclusions find their logical continuity in the last chapter, 'Problems in the Visualisation of the Image of the Publisher, or Why it is Worth Renouncing the Orders of F. Skaryna'. Once again, it shows how strikingly contemporary the image of Francysk Skaryna seems to us today.

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5   Пётр Владимиров, *ibid.*, p. 128; Антон Флоровский, 'Češskaja biblija v istorii russkoj kul'tury i pis'mennosti', in: *Specimina Philologiae Slavicae*, b. 77, ed. Olexa Horbatsch, Gerd Freidhot, Peter Kosta, München: Verlag Otto Sagner, 1988, pp. 153–258.

The contemporary timbre of the book is accentuated by the author's impressive and convincing endeavour to follow Skaryna's innovative Renaissance spirit: 'F. Skaryna's prerogative is to promote the development of contemporary art, often provocative, unconventional, overstepping the boundaries of provincialism' (p. 265). Lemeshkin has created a general artistic concept of the book, enhanced by the extremely rich illustrative material (86 illustrations and six appendices), and by the contribution by the greatest artists of our time. Likewise, the participation of Ilya Kabakov, the illustrious conceptualist and famous master of Soviet avant-garde, unprecedented *per se*, helps us to see Lemeshkin's work on Francysk Skaryna as a sign of the vital and nonconformist character of his legacy. Kabakov's glorified *Fly*, which for decades provoked official conservative art, verges on Skaryna's *musca depicta*, from the sixteenth century to today. Going even beyond this, the author suggests to an astonished reader to 'watch' this emblematic creature by means of an image in motion created by the Czech artist Teresa Unzeitigová, using the monograph as 'a flipbook'. Then again, the historical context, always present in Lemeshkin's book, reconstructs the process of making xylography: the double frontispiece, manually included in the book (the author is the famous Czech artist and graphic designer Jiří Altman), shows the procedure of transferring an image from a cliché to the paper, i.e. spelling out the very essence of relief printing in Skaryna's epoch.

The monograph by Lemeshkin is highly professional, extremely informative, and filled with facts, names and associations attributed for the first time as relating to Francysk Skaryna. It presents a wide range of sources, and abundant and thoroughly documented quotations from originals, which will undoubtedly arouse great interest both among specialists and among the wider public. The meticulous bibliographical apparatus, quotations and names in their original script, which will surely become a valuable balm to the spirit for scholars and to a wide circle of history lovers, enhance the tremendous artistic and research value of Lemeshkin's book.