On Vaclaŭ Łastoŭski's *Historyja biełaruskaj (kryŭskaj) knihi*

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This seminar provides an excellent opportunity for an exchange of ideas and thoughts which arise almost every time one uses Łastoŭski's *Historyja biełaruskaj knihi*, a work which, as an invaluable record of Byelorussian written literature, continues to occupy the place of honour among works devoted to research into Byelorussian language and literature before the 19th century.

The *Historyja biełaruskaj knihi*, subtitled 'An attempt at a descriptive bibliography from the end of the 10th to the beginning of the 19th centuries', has ensured admiration and wide recognition for its author, not only because of its impressive content, but also with regard to the conditions under which it was compiled and published.

It is well known that Łastoŭski worked on the book in emigration, without access to primary source materials (as he himself acknowledges in the preface), and almost entirely without other essential literature. He nevertheless succeeded in publishing his book in 1926 in Kaunas at the printing-house of Sakałoŭski and Łan with funds provided by the Byelorussian Centre in Lithuania. These circumstances, taken together with the dire shortage at the time of fundamental analytical work on the development of Byelorussian literature and the author's own highly individual view of Byelorussian history and literature, inevitably influenced the final form and content of the book; it was indeed the result of the pioneering ambition and initiative of one man.

Łastoŭski's *Historyja biełaruskaj knihi*, as he himself pointed out, was the first attempt to define Old Kryvian (Byelorussian) literature, as broadly as possible; at the same time it did not claim to provide a complete list of all surviving works of Byelorussian literature, let alone study each of them in detail. This is quite understandable for a number of reasons, ranging from the substantial ones already mentioned to the sheer physical impossibility of including, for example, all the documents of the *Metryka* of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania (all 556 fat volumes!), or of access to documents in various museums and archives outside Byelorussia. We must also bear in mind that, in addition to the author's wide-ranging and not always purely scholarly intentions, the aim of the book was to show that the literature of the Kryvian (Byelorussian) people can be dated back to the 10th century.

In his book Łastoŭski surveys more than 880 written works, books

and documents from the end of the 10th to the 18th centuries inclusive. Leaving aside any consideration of the author's subjective methods of evaluation and of the aptness of the principles used in selecting texts, we must recognize that Łastoŭski attempts to cover a range of texts that is not merely broad but positively vast and still relevant today.

The material is arranged chronologically by century. Each century forms a separate section, and each section (with the exception of the 12th, 13th and 14th centuries) is prefaced by introductory remarks on the period, especially on relevant historical and literary details. In this way the reader is introduced to the special problems of the period under examination.

Łastoŭski selected texts that differ widely in content and form, and in their use of the Byelorussian language; they range from the Gospels and the Psalter to inscriptions on coins, stones, crosses and charms. The number of texts arranged by century is as follows: end 10th–11th — 12; 12th — 22; 13th — 26; 14th — 59; 15th — 143; 16th — 253; 17th — 213; 18th — 157. In the period of the so-called 'Old Russian' literary language there are a relatively small number of texts; the largest number, quite understandably, comes from the 16th century (more than 250).

Within each century the texts themselves are introduced chronologically; each is listed separately by title. Several entries are repeated in those instances where a text with the same title was published at different times in the same year or in various places (e.g. *Časoslov* published in Supraśl in 1722 and *Časoslov* published in Vilna in 1772). After the title comes the following information: date of compilation or printing, size, location of the original, dates and places of later copies/reprints, how they have been preserved. Bibliographical data on the literature concerned with each text is also included. In many instances Łastoŭski quotes extracts and on occasion gives the complete text. Information is also provided on the circumstances in which each document came to be written, and the most important secular works are summarized. From time to time the author justifies the inclusion of a particular text by adding a description of the language used. Numerous photocopies serve to illustrate the whole book.

The system used by Łastoŭski to provide details about each text is one that does not easily yield to reconstruction as it lacks a single underlying methodology. This is not so much because of the author's desire to provide the reader with as much information as possible, as it is the result of the nature of the texts themselves and the state of knowledge about them as it was at the time of writing. Łastoŭski was unable to use the descriptive methods already mentioned to the same extent for all the texts discussed. Several criticisms and doubts could be expressed as to the suitability of an *ad hoc* methodology, especially when used inconsistently in the text descriptions. For example: there are lengthy historical analyses of only some of the texts; biographies are not always provided; for some of the more important works, let

alone the less significant documents, examples of language are often completely lacking. Nevertheless Łastoŭski endeavoured to pass on to the reader all his knowledge about each work (including later copies/reprints), his doubts about certain dates (expressed by question marks and author's notes). He even gives the titles of works with which he was not directly familiar, e.g. the *Subotnik* on p. 512, a text copied in 1610 by the Uniate Archimandrite of Minsk Paisi Sachoŭski. It was completed 100 years later by Anton Zawadzki; it is not known whether the text has survived (information from vol. 8 of Wiszniewski's *Historia literatury polskiej*).

The central section of Łastoŭski's book comprises almost 630 pages and provides a composite picture of the development of Byelorussian literature up to the modern period. It confirms the opinion which the author expresses in his preface 'that our old literature and the modern language of the people shed light on each other', and raises a whole number of problems for scholars investigating Byelorussia's past, its written culture and especially the development of its literature and language.

In the extensive introduction Łastoŭski raises several issues of a general nature. He outlines the ancient history of the eastern Slavs, paying particular attention to their contacts with other nations and countries, and to the adoption of Christianity. He also describes in detail the origin and development of writing among them with special emphasis on the classification of written texts according to their various genres and function in society. Short general descriptions are given in the following sequence: scriptural texts, liturgical texts, theological works, polemical literature, sermons, canonical texts, saints' lives, accounts of pilgrimages, chronicles, secular tales, legal texts and documents, books for Muslims (in Arabic script) and Jews.

The book is concluded by important supplementary material. The first of the supplements is entitled *Słoŭnik pomnikaŭ starakryŭskaj (bietaruskaj) piśmieŭnaści pavodle pryviedzienych u tekście wypisak* (Dictionary of Old Byelorussian literary texts on the basis of extracts quoted in this book). It contains some 1300 Old Byelorussian words, all taken from texts cited in the main body of the book, primarily legal documents and chronicles. According to Łastoŭski these words are typically Old Byelorussian and confirm the uninterrupted development of the Byelorussian language, and the mutual influence of spoken and written Byelorussian. The entries are listed in alphabetical order and illustrated by contextual examples. The meanings of the words are not given in a consistent fashion. In some cases words are explained with the help of synonyms, e.g. покутныя (=тайныя), паразити (=пабіць), or by means of Russian equivalents, e.g. полудзень (Russ. югъ), попудливость (Russ. вспыльчивость). The form of the dictionary entry is the form in which the word occurs in the text, e.g. брыдкаро, буде, заблудиль, жадаю, жменю. When the dictionary entries are closely examined doubts begin to arise as to whether all these words were in fact typical of Old Byelorussian, e.g. овшельки, рачыли, очевисте,

папэжъ, позвы, парсона, артыкулъ. There can be no doubt that such words formed part of the active vocabulary of the time, as can be seen from legal texts and chronicles. At the same time they are clearly of Polish origin or belong to the common Polish-Byelorussian or East Slavonic vocabulary. Further examples from the list are: звон, хоромы, бортники, борщикъ.

The second supplement is entitled *Vykaz imion i rečau* (List of personal names and objects). It includes all the names, sobriquets and other appellations given to the persons mentioned in the texts listed (historical figures, clerics, princes, copyists, printers, writers, politicians), as well as historical towns, lands and events. As a whole the list deserves special attention. Łastoŭski also lists all the printing-shops, together with brief historical details on place, date and type of print. Under the heading *Škoły* he deals with the history of education in Byelorussia, dividing it into three periods: to 1550, 1550-1650, 1650-end of 18th century. He gives information on the founders of schools (chiefly academies and *himnazii*), when and where they were founded, and on the type of education provided. It is interesting to note that, according to Łastoŭski, after the school reform of 1788 there were 24 upper and secondary schools, and each parish and monastery had its own primary school.

The third supplement is entitled *Vykaz starakryŭskaj piśmieńnaści pavodle źmiestu* (Old Kryvian literature listed according to content). Here all the works listed in the main chronological section of the book are divided into twenty groups, according to their subject-matter, form and purpose. Chronological and alphabetical arrangements are used within each group, and the reader is referred back to the place in the book where each text is discussed in detail. It is worth naming the groups and giving the numbers of texts in each: 1) scriptural texts — 127; 2) writings of the Fathers of the Church and religious literature — 47; 3) hagiographical literature — 38; 4) liturgical books, prayer books, hymn collections — 132; 5) cathectic literature — 25; 6) apocryphal writings — 36; 7) religious polemics — 55; 8) calendars — 8; 9) memorial literature — 10; 10) histories — 27; 11) artistic writing — 40; 12) diplomatic texts — 84; 13) legal texts — 61; 14) school textbooks — 19; 15) astronomy, astrology, cosmography and magical texts — 13; 16) military writings — 3; 17) travelogues — 3; 18) anthologies — 13; 19) charters, gifts, treaties, deeds, letters, wills, registers — 90; 20) works of art — 19.

As we can see the first eight groups are linked by their religious subject matter. They comprise more than half of all the texts, the most numerous being the Scriptures (127, including 48 Psalters and 42 Gospels) also liturgical texts, prayer books and collections of hymns (132).

It is interesting to identify those texts (and their location within the twenty groups) which appeared after the Union of Lublin in 1569, when Byelorussia was joined to Poland, and especially after the notorious Warsaw sejm of 1696 which adopted a resolution that all official docu-

ments should be written exclusively in Polish and not in Byelorussian. Of the 210 titles which appeared in the 17th century, 160 are religious in content; this tendency becomes more marked in the 18th century when 134 out of 157 titles dealt with spiritual matters.

In most instances the lists of titles are preceded by short historical information on the circumstances in which the texts were written and on the way in which they were distributed over the country. Łastoŭski also characterizes their language briefly. As an example I will quote the introduction to the 15th group on p. 751: 'the language of all the legal texts is almost completely free of foreign influence'.

A bibliography of the literature used by Łastoŭski, containing some 180 items, forms the fourth and final supplement. In view of the wide area covered by the book the literature cited can hardly be described as extensive. Nevertheless, as I have already emphasized, we must remember the difficult situation in which the book was written and printed.

This last objective observation cannot be ignored when evaluating Łastoŭski's book from the technical and conceptual points of view. It would indeed be possible to single out many imperfections, instances of interpretation which is not always completely objective, even technical mistakes and shortcomings. This, however, is not the purpose of my paper; I should like to conclude with the thought that this book, highly regarded when it first appeared, is now unjustifiably forgotten. No mention is made of it in even the most fundamental scholarly work on the history of Byelorussian language and literature. Yet it is in precisely these areas that Łastoŭski's book could inspire further research.