

A Critical Review

Andrii Danylenko, *From the Bible to Shakespeare: Pantelejmon Kulish (1819–1897) and the Formation of Literary Ukrainian* (Ukrainian Studies), Boston, MA: Pace University, 2016. 472 pp.

Background and Overview

On first learning about this volume as a member of the Shevchenko Scientific Society, I immediately experienced a “must have” moment. Before revealing why, let me say more about the formal aspects of this monograph, priced as it is at a hefty \$89 (US) in hardback. Twelve pages of Introduction precede the three hundred eighty-five pages of text. These are followed by a bibliography of forty pages (including twenty-eight entries of the author’s publications) and indices of twenty pages. The learning and industry are deep and wide. Modern technology has enabled Danylenko to display and discuss different systems of transliteration and fonts accommodating variations in Cyrillic spelling, including Church Slavonic. Documentation occurs internal to the text in streamlined form, thereby reducing footnotes to a minimum. I regard this work, measuring 9.5 x 6.5 inches, to be well worth the price as a reference tool.

Although not a professional philologist, nor the child of one, I spent the first eighteen years of my life hearing, reading, and memorizing passages from “the Kulish Bible”. At the end of this period, I came under the influence of its successor, “the Ohijenko Bible”. Each Sunday, the Pastor of our little Ukrainian Baptist Congregation, the Rev. Dr. Leon Zhabko-Potapovych, would hold up galley proofs that he and Professor Ivan Ohijenko (by then Orthodox Metropolit Ilarion of Canada) had corrected in preparation for the Bible’s publication in 1962 by the British and Foreign Bible Society (BFBS), the same body that had produced Kulish’s translation just over half a century earlier. Largely under these influences, I subsequently pursued a doctorate in New Testament from Cambridge University, whose library houses archival material pertaining to both works. Such a background causes me to register the scope of this review. Since my profession has been that of teaching and researching Scripture (see Academia.edu), I have limited my analysis to the first two hundred ninety pages of the book – that portion dealing with the Bible. (My competence does not lie in Shakespeare studies.) In addition, I have read the Introduction (as above) and Conclusion (pages 374–385). With research knowledge of Russian, Polish, and Church Slavonic I was able as an amateur (i.e., “lover”) in this area to appreciate the author’s detailed accounts of Kulish’s efforts.

Several observations need to be made at the outset. 1) In addition to his various translations, Kulish published numerous original works on a variety of subjects and genres, including fiction. He is viewed as the first authentic Ukrainian journalist. With Taras Shevchenko and Mykola Kostomarov, he belonged to the secret Brotherhood of Sts.

Cyril and Methodius.¹ The number of secondary works about him and his aims is vast. 2) Kulish's goal in both original and translated oeuvre was to unite the Ukrainian people (then under both Habsburg and Tsarist regimes) and to lift their cultural awareness by creating a standardized form of Ukrainian using the entirety of Scripture and selected, classic works of European civilization – chiefly by Shakespeare. 3) Although Kulish was in regular “conversation” with predecessors and contemporaries who had translated portions of the Old or New Testaments into Ukrainian, he was the first to do so for the whole Bible [minus books of the so-called “Apocrypha”, or “Deuterocanon”, a more neutral term].² To this end, he was aided by younger contemporaries, with whom he disagreed sharply at times on various matters. The title page to my copy of the translation credits Ivan Nechuy-Levytsky (for Ruth, 1-2 Chronicles, Ezra, Nehemiah, Esther, Daniel) and Ivan Puljuj (for the Psalter), the latter assisting Kulish with the Gospels and shepherding the translation to completion in 1903³ – Kulish having died six years earlier.⁴ However, the bulk was accomplished by the principal's prodigious efforts. 4) Danylenko regards analyzing the quality of his translation from the biblical languages as being beyond the scope of his thesis. The BFBS's policy required that it be done in the vernacular, with as close to a word-for-word equivalent that natural usage would allow (86).⁵

The author repeatedly makes the point that, with SE Ukrainian as the vernacular base, Kulish's appropriation of Polish, Russian, Church Slavonic, regional dialects, neologisms, invented forms (“Kulishivky”), and features from earlier eras⁶ illustrates his philosophy of “language hybridization as a norm” (108). At the same time, such elements are fewer and more evenly distributed than those by other translators who had rendered only portions of the Sacred Text. Nevertheless, though lauded for its intent, Kulish's result pleased almost none of the major critics on both sides of the Zbruch river, including such prominent figures as Ivan Franko and Mykola Kostomarov (383–385, and throughout). Nor did Orthodox and Greek Catholic hierarchs lend their approval. Although it is the case that all languages (gradually, over time) adopt and adapt “foreign” elements, this synthetic effort produced an artificial result. It became a magnificent failure (385).

Evaluation and Suggestions for Further Research

¹ Although all shared a common commitment to the unification of Ukrainians in matters of culture and language, Kulish differed sharply regarding its political manifestation.

² This limitation was imposed by the BFBS (177), to which Orthodox Church supporters somehow agreed. However, this did not prevent Kulish from translating deuterocanonical texts independently.

³ The New Testament was made available as early as 1871.

⁴ It is odd that, for all of his contribution, Puljuj's name makes no appearance in the Index on p. 429.

⁵ Danylenko also examines Kulish's experiments in rendering biblical texts poetically and in paraphrase.

⁶ For several instances of this verdict, see pp. 152, 200–201, 220, 249, 277–78.

Thus, there is something unintentionally misleading about the title of this fascinating book: the phrase after Kulish's dates should have read something like "His Attempts to Form a Literary Ukrainian." Unless I missed something, Danylenko offers no baseline definition for, nor examples of, "literary Ukrainian". Is it a matter of style, sentence structure, subject matter, vocabulary, etc? Nor does he suggest the means by which normalization of such a standard would take place. Which (and whose) criteria were to be used in determining – for an entire people – what "normal" and "standard" are or should be? How was standardization of the language possible without *formal* academic and ecclesiastical approval plus *governmental* implementation throughout a *politically-united* Ukraine (both Western and Eastern)? Such *official* authorization came only during the eighteen-month period of the Ukrainian National Republic (1919–20) and, ironically, during the 1920s under the Soviets.⁷

Until then, I propose that something less formal and more organic had taken place. Somewhat ironically, it was the largely-Protestant, London-based BFBS, that sponsored, approved, and realized Kulish's efforts – thereby granting it a measure of formal standardization.⁸ While he viewed the project as central to elevating Ukrainian culture, the publisher (with classic, Protestant conviction) saw it primarily as a vital means for the people's spiritual renewal.⁹

One is aware of the impact that the King James Version of 1611 made upon the development of the English language, especially among literate Protestants (and illiterate ones who listened in on liturgical readings and sermons).¹⁰ Even into the twenty-first century, one encounters both clergy and laypersons who write, speak, and pray in "King James-ese". Some scholars argue that translation of the Semitic Scriptures into vernacular Greek (koine) created a kind of sacred, vernacular Greek that influenced the language of those who wrote the New Testament. Neither of these phenomena enjoyed formal authorization.

⁷ According to the Preface of my edition of the Ohijenko Bible, the editor reports that, already at the end of the 1920s (approximately twenty-five years after the publication of the Kulish Bible), Protestant and Orthodox Christians felt the need for a new translation "more academic [or "scientific"] and better responsive to the conditions of the contemporary literary language": більш науковий і краще відповідаючий вимогам сучасної літературної мови. In 1936, Professor Ohijenko had agreed to do the translation, aided by a committee of several members. Three years later, the first draft of the entire Bible was ready. Because the War intervened, making corrections and editing did not resume until 1947. By the time that the first edition appeared in 1961, only Metropolyt Ilarion and Zhabko-Potapovych had survived (or were available) to complete the task. Of course, during the thirty plus years since the project was conceived, Ukrainian had continued to develop. It does so today at a rapid pace (esp. so far as borrowing from English is concerned).

⁸ I am awaiting word from the BFBS [now Bible Society] about the total number of Bibles that were printed and distributed.

⁹ The Preface to one edition of the Ohijenko Bible cited above states both as the goal of the new translation.

¹⁰ The sixth English translation since 1390, its success was assured by aggressive Royal authorization.

It makes me wonder if Kulish’s translation had an analogous impact on those who heard, read, and memorized it throughout Ukrainian lands and the Diaspora, particularly among “People of the Book”: Protestant Christians, especially among Evangelical ones (Baptist and Pentecostal). Even though the Orthodox supported the BFBS effort, neither Orthodox nor Greco- and Roman Catholic hierarchies had historically encouraged reading of the Bible by laity prior to the reforms of Vatican II in the early 1960s.¹¹ Subsequently, additional restrictions were imposed by the Soviets. Traditionally, an Evangelical service lasts at least two hours – twice on Sunday (and at least once during the week). During that time, three or four laymen (gender specificity deliberate) preach text-based mini-sermons interspersed with congregational hymn singing, prayers, and choral music. Exposition of a biblical passage by an ordained pastor concludes the proceedings. The amount of Scriptural text encountered is remarkable. Furthermore, assiduous reading and memorization of the Bible at home is fundamental to this tradition’s understanding of spirituality. Though now too late, would it have been possible by modern analytical methods to detect how much of this usage impacted the grammar, syntax, style, and vocabulary of these Ukrainians? Although few of that generation will have survived into the twenty-first century, their documents – both official and unofficial, ecclesiastical and lay – might provide a certain kind of data worthy of analysis. Perhaps Kulish succeeded informally, among them at least, far beyond what both he and his critics might have realized.

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¹¹ For the author’s estimate of the Greek Catholic response, see p. 17 (and, more broadly, pp. 54–55 and 65).