

Rediscovering Mikola Husouski: *Carmen De Statura Feritate Ac Venatione Bisontis* In The Light Of Niccolo Machiavelli's *The Prince*

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ABSTRACT

The dawn of the Renaissance saw the appearance of two literary masterpieces – *The Prince* by Niccolo Machiavelli (1469-1527) in the Florentine Republic and *Carmen de Statura Feritate ac Venatione Bisontis* [*The Song about the Bison, Its Stature, Ferocity and Hunt*] by Mikola Husouski (1470-1533) in the Grand Duchy of Lithuania. Nevertheless, the destiny that awaited the two works was fundamentally different. *The Prince* (1515) became the cornerstone of political science, providing the basis for the emergence of Machiavellianism, and its revolutionary and often extreme ideas and principles acquired universal acclaim. *Carmen de Statura Feritate ac Venatione Bisontis* [*The Song about the Bison, Its Stature, Ferocity and Hunt*] (1523), in its turn, was soon forgotten and rediscovered only three centuries later, just recently becoming a masterpiece of the Belarusian and Slavic literature.

It is through the symbol of the bison that the long poem celebrates the valour and noble free spirit of its native land, provides an image of an ideal ruler, glorifies the persona of Vytautas the Great (1344/1350-1430) – the ruler of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania, as well as acquaints the reader with the beauty of the state, which, at the time of the poem's creation, was situated beyond the borders of the Holy Roman Empire, and was often regarded as a land of savages and barbarians, populated by fiends and ogres.

The paper aims to trace the history of the poem, as well as to examine the attempt of *Carmen de Statura Feritate ac Venatione Bisontis* [*The Song about the Bison, Its Stature, Ferocity and Hunt*] to create an image of an ideal ruler and to glorify the valour of the native land. In addition, the paper analyses the significance of the poem in the retrospective of the major postulates introduced by its contemporary *The Prince*. It scrutinizes the similarities and differences with the revolutionary work, as well as highlights the overall importance of the poem for the Belarusian and Slavic literature.

Keywords: Ruler, State, Power, Machiavelli, Husouski

Mikola Husouski'yi Yeniden Keşfetmek: Machiavelli'nin *Prens* Işığında Mikola Husouski'nin *Carmen De Statura Feritate Ac Venatione Bisontis*

ÖZ

Rönesans'ın doğuşu iki edebi başyapıtın ortaya çıkışına şahitlik eder. Niccolo Machiavelli'nin (1469-1527) Floransa Cumhuriyeti'nde yazdığı *Prens* ve Mikola Husouski'nin (1470-1533) Büyük Litvanya Dükalığı'nda yazdığı *Carmen de Statura Feritate ac Venatione Bisontis*'tir [*Bizon, Onun Endamı, Öfkesi ve Av Hakkında Söylemi*]. Fakat bu iki yapıtın kaderleri temelde birbirinden ciddi bir farklılık gösterir. *Prens* (1515) Makyavelizm'in temellerinin atılmasına öncülük ederek dünya siyasi, felsefe ve kültürel tarihinin temel taşlarından biri haline gelmiştir, kitabın devrimci ve bazen uç noktalarındaki fikir ve prensipleri uluslararası alanda büyük ve vazgeçilmez bir beğeni kazanmıştır. Diğer yandan *Carmen de Statura Feritate ac Venatione Bisontis* [*Bizon, Onun Endamı, Öfkesi ve Av Hakkında Söylemi*] (1523) ise kısa sürede unutulmuş ve üç yüzyıl sonra yeniden keşfedilmiştir. Kısa süre sonra da Beyaz Rus ve Slav Edebiyatı'nın temel taşlarından biri olarak uluslararası alanda beğeni kazanmıştır.

Bizon sembolü aracılığıyla anavatanının kahramanlığın ve şanlı özgür ruhunu öven uzun bir şiirdir. *Carmen de Statura Feritate ac Venatione Bisontis* [*Bizon, Onun Endamı, Öfkesi ve Av Hakkında Söylemi*] ideal bir yöneticinin portresini çizer, Büyük Litvanya Dükalığı'nın hükümdarı Büyük Vytautas'ı (1344/1350-1430) yüceltir, aynı zamanda da okuyucuya şiirin yazıldığı zamanlarda Kutsal Roma İmparatorluğu'nun sınırları dışarısında yer alan zebani ve gulyabanilerden oluşmuş sanılan, kimi zaman da yabani ve barbar yaratıkların yaşadığı yer olarak düşünülen ülkesinin güzelliklerini ve gerçek yüzünü gösterir.

Bu araştırma *Carmen de Statura Feritate ac Venatione Bisontis*'in [*Bizon, Onun Endamı, Öfkesi ve Av Hakkında Söylemi'nin*] ideal hükümdar imgesini yaratma çabasını ve anavatanının kahramanlıklarını yüceltme çabasını incelemenin yanı sıra, şiirin var oluşunu ve tarihçesinin izini sürmeyi de amaçlar. Yazı aynı zamanda Niccolo Machiavelli'nin başyapıtı'nın *Prens* tarafından ortaya çıkarılan yenilikçi ve ileri varsayımlarının ışığında Husouski'nin *Carmen de Statura Feritate ac Venatione Bisontis*'i [*Bizon, Onun Endamı, Öfkesi ve Av Hakkında Söylemi'nin*] önemini analiz eder. Bu makale şiirin Slav edebiyatı açısından önemini etraflıca vurgulamasına ek olarak Machiavelli'nin devrimci bir çalışma ile benzerliklerini ve farklılıklarını da mercek altına alır.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Hükümdar, Devlet, Güç, Machiavelli, Husouski

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1. Introduction

The fourteenth, fifteenth, sixteenth and the following seventeenth centuries, or the period of the Renaissance, are traditionally regarded as the Golden Age of the European civilization with its active revival of classical thought, introduction of scholarly, as opposed to ecclesiastical learning, and incessant generation of knowledge. The uniqueness of the period can be attributed to the great geographic discoveries by Magellan, da Gama, Cabot, Cortés and Columbus; major artistic achievements of the Renaissance trio comprising Leonardo da Vinci, Michelangelo Buonarroti and Raphael; and massive perturbations in the spheres of science, theology, literature, politics, education, etc.

Nevertheless, despite these radical transformations taking place at the top of the society, the general public was still immersed in the fragmented, feudal and harsh everyday reality, retaining the main characteristics of the slowly withdrawing Middle Ages. Agricultural economy, widely-spread illiteracy, church-dominated existence, destructive wars, enormous demographical and geo-strategic perturbations, reshaping the layout and questioning the sovereignty of many European and Asian states, greatly hindered the possibility of change.

It was at that turbulent time, that two literary masterpieces were created – *The Prince* by Niccolo Machiavelli (1469-1527) and *Carmen de Statura Feritate ac Venatione Bisontis* [*The Song about the Bison, Its Stature, Ferocity and Hunt*] by Mikola Husouski (1470-1533). Both writers shared a common name - Nicholas, both lived for about half a century, and both were sent on multiple missions to the papal court in Rome – Machiavelli, representing the Florentine city-state, to that of Julius II; and Husouski, representing the Grand Duchy of Lithuania¹ and the Kingdom of Poland, to that of Leo X, who was the one to procure Machiavelli's release from Medici's imprisonment. What is more, both masterpieces contained their own vision of an ideal ruler. One cannot exclude a possibility that two scholars might have even met each other at the pontifical court.

Nevertheless, the destiny that awaited the works of the two was as different, as their biographical details similar. *The Prince* (1515), inspired by the persona of the power-seeking Italian cardinal and nobleman Cesare Borgia (1475-1507), caused revolution in the art of state administration, provided the basis for the emergence of Machiavellianism, and received universal acclaim. *Carmen de Statura Feritate ac Venatione Bisontis* (1523), in its turn, written almost a decade later and, most probably, greatly influenced by the themes of *The Prince*, was soon forgotten and rediscovered only three centuries later, just recently becoming a masterpiece of the Belarusian and Slavic literature. It is through the symbol of the bison that the long poem celebrates the valour and noble free spirit of the native land, provides an image of an ideal ruler, glorifies the persona of Vytautas the Great² (1344/1350-1430) – the ruler of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania, as well as acquaints the European reader with the beauty of the state, which, at the time of the poem's creation, was situated beyond the borders of the Holy Roman Empire, and was often regarded as a land of savages, populated by fiends and ogres. It was in the year 1980, marking Husouski's 500th anniversary, that the UNESCO included the writer's name into the list of outstanding representatives of world literature.

Allan H. Gilbert in the work *Machiavelli's 'Prince' and its Forerunners* argues that the important books of the world should be studied for their universal significance, ultimately important for that alone. At the same time, they

¹ The Grand Duchy of Lithuania was an Eastern European state of the 12th-18th centuries. Founded by pagan, Baltic Lithuanians in the second half of the 12th century, it soon expanded beyond the boundaries of the traditional area of Lithuanian settlement, acquiring large parts of former Kievan Rus with its nucleus in the present-day Belarus. In this way it covered the territory of present-day Lithuania, Belarus, Ukraine, Transnistria and parts of Poland and Russia during the period of its greatest extent in the 15th century. Also see Suziedelis, 2011; 119.

² Vytautas the Great (1344/1350 - 1430) was a Lithuanian Grand Prince, the ruler of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania from 1392 to 1430. He supported economic development of his state and introduced many reforms. Under his rule Lithuania slowly became more centralized, as local princes were replaced by the duke's governors. Also see Miskunaite, 2006; 4-8.

may also receive historical consideration because they are phenomena in the life of mankind; indeed, their universal meaning is likely not to be altogether plain when their historical position is not clear. If the work appears as the representative of a type, it cannot be historically intelligible until its typical qualities are clear, nor the original contribution of the author be estimated. (Gilbert, 1968; 5)

In this respect, the paper aims to analyse the history of *Carmen de Statura Feritate ac Venatione Bisontis*, as well as the attempt of the poem to create an image of an ideal ruler and to glorify the valour of the homeland. In addition, the paper analyses the significance of the work in the retrospective of the major postulates introduced by its contemporary *The Prince*. It examines the similarities and differences with the revolutionary work, as well as highlights the overall importance of the poem in the Belarusian and Slavic literature.

All in all, Machiavelli's innovations established new terms and new modes in political writing and political life. He was and still is so important a figure that nearly all political discussions have to take account of *The Prince* and orient themselves in relation to its principles. In this respect, Louis Althusser claims in *Machiavelli and Us* that

We read Machiavelli and he takes us by surprise, and leaves us pensive. As if the first thought, which we thought we had grasped on a first reading of his works, stayed in the mind in the form of unexpected thoughts; as if sentences, associated in our memory, combined in new formations yielding novel meanings; as if, from one chapter to the next, like the landscapes of this great walker, new perspectives were disclosed to us: all the more gripping because they had been made out sooner. Machiavelli grips us. (1999; 4)

This might have been the case with Mikola Husouski as well, who was undoubtedly enthralled by Machiavelli's ideas to such an extent that they found their reflection in his major poem. It is for this reason that Husouski, just like his Italian counterpart, attached a great degree of significance in *Carmen de Statura Feritate ac Venatione Bisontis* to the treatment of such issues, to cite just a few, as being a strong ruler, gaining glory, advancing one's country's power, dealing with foreign occupations, making conquered people love you, taxation, allocation of offices and, ultimately, success.

2. History, Geography and Legacy of *Carmen de Statura Feritate ac Venatione Bisontis*

Ancient philosophers believed that fame is the sun of the dead. Thus, Mikola Husouski was one of the few who exemplified the statement. Fame came to the writer only after his death; yet, not in the matter of years, but that of centuries.

The life of the poet is surrounded by the mystery of time. This justifies the attempt of present-day Poles, Lithuanians, Ukrainians and Belarusians to claim Husouski as a representative of their national literatures. However, *Carmen de Statura Feritate ac Venatione Bisontis* implicitly answers the question of Husouski's geographical origin by portraying the author as a great patriot of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania and a renowned connoisseur of traditions, beliefs and occupations of Belarusians largely populating the Duchy at that period of time:

Aequabam socios saepe labore meos,
Flumina equo fidens altumque Borysthenis alveum
Tranabam, per aquas aufugiente fera:
Non ut acerba libens vitare pericula nolim,
Sed sociis et in hoc cedere turpe fuit. (Husouski, 1980; 135-1393)

[Among adventures that befell me in my native land was that of hunting, in which I equalled if not exceeded others. We forded forest streams and swelling waters of Borysthenis in pursuit of a beast. I would have willingly remained behind, have it not been the shame of abandoning my comrades.]

³ From now on references will be made to the line number(s) in *Carmen de Statura Feritate ac Venatione Bisontis*.

Thus wrote Husouski, reflecting on the personal experience of a bison hunt in the days of his youth. Borysthenis or Dnepr, as it is known today, runs not in Poland and not even Lithuania, but on the green plains of Belarus and vast steppes of Ukraine. The grasslands of Ukraine, however, have never witnessed the presence of the mighty bison.

All in all, Husouski was born in 1470 in a small village of Usa (Usava), in what is now central Belarus, in a family of a ducal yeoman. The name of the hamlet throws some light upon the semantics of the poet's surname Husouski, standing for 'originating from Usa'. The recollection of the writer's youth is well depicted in the poem:

Me pater instituit latebras lustrare ferarum
Suspense et strepitus emoderante gradu;
Edocuit dubios illic cognoscere ventos,
Ne notet insidias nare vel aure fera
Meque nives inter gelidas sudare co, git
Impingens humeris grandia tela meis,
Caedibus oblectans oculos, latratibus aures. (Husouski, 1980; 124-131)

[Since the early days, my father trained in me the stealthiness of step when crossing the wilderness, the sharpness of sight when tracing the beast's den, attention and concentration, the absence of which makes hunting futile – one step in the flow of wind is enough to frighten away the beast.]

Husouski's later years were spent in Krakow and Bologna, which makes us suppose that both centres of European learning might have served as *alma mater* for the poet. The recent discovery of the poet's testament has thrown some more light on the pattern of Husouski's life. The fact that the will was composed in 1518 near Volkovysk (central Belarus), allows one to conclude that at the time of *Carmen's* composition the poet was ordained and was enlisted as a clerk in Peramyshlensk eparchy. Furthermore, in 1520-1522 Husouski became part of an ambassadorial mission on behalf of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania to the papal seat of Leo X, headed by a philanthropist and the poet's friend Erasmus Vitellius, well-known at most European courts as a skilful diplomat. The aim of the mission was to motivate Leo X to create an alliance among European states so as to counter the threat from the Ottoman Empire and its vassals – Crimean Tatars, conducting regular raids to the lands of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania and the Kingdom of Poland. Thus, it was the time spent within the walls of Rome that inspired Husouski's literary career.

Quite often, the appearance of a masterpiece depends on the will of chance. *Carmen de Statura Feritate ac Venatione Bisontis* was no exception from the rule. Pope Leo X was well known for his refined taste of poetry and art, as well as a great interest in hunting. Therefore, the stories narrated by Erasmus Vitellius, describing the beauty of Belarusian forests and their richness in game, influenced the Pope to such an extent, that he expressed an ultimate desire to commemorate his impressions in the poetic form, solidifying the image of the bison as the sole ruler of the Belarusian wilderness. As Ivan Saverchanka puts it, "Vitellius had no doubts regarding the possible author of the poem, obviously having in mind his friend, young and talented Mikola Husouski" (1992; 57).

Thus, Husouski received a chance to attain universal fame. Moreover, it was the possibility to tell the world of the history, valour and noble spirit of his motherland, to call Christian Europe to assist the Grand Duchy in its fight with the Ottoman Empire, as well as to glorify the poet's humanist vision of a wise, dignified, strong and progressive Renaissance ruler that appealed the author most. Thus, no doubt acquainted with the revolutionary contents of Machiavelli's work, Husouski continued the theme of power introduced by *The Prince*. Nevertheless, the author rejected Machiavelli's principle *the end justifies the means* and glorified the image of a ferocious, but, yet, wise and considerate bison, rather than the figure of a sly and cunning fox.

What is more, Husouski was well aware of the fact that the picture of his homeland, even in the eyes of the most educated men, was far from being flattering. Most often it was based on myths and legends, describing the Duchy as a mysterious world of monsters, roamed by fiends and ogres. Therefore, the poet's aim was to enlighten the European reader with the realistic account of the Duchy, the mission,

which was greatly concurring with the overall educational and illuminating mission of the Renaissance itself.

The poem was composed in Latin – European *lingua franca* of that epoch. As far as the Grand Duchy was concerned, Latin was the language of administrative acts, religious masses, ceremonies, and education. It was impossible to imagine a progressive Lithuanian-Belarusian who would have been ignorant of Latin. Hence, it was pure logic that instigated Husouski to choose the language of Rome as a medium of *Carmena's* narration. As a consequence, *Carmen de Statura Feritate ac Venatione Bisontis* was destined to become the first ever written realistic depiction of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania, glorifying its nature, beauty, traditions and inspirations of its people.

The year 1523, the time of *Carmen de Statura Feritate ac Venatione Bisontis's* completion, appeared to be tragic for Rome. The plague paralysed the whole of the Apennine peninsula, collecting its terrifying harvest. The Christian capital could not cope with its monstrous spread. Therefore, it was the Tiber (not the comforting abyss of cemetery grounds), which accepted in its final embrace the victims of the curse. As Zmitser Sanko puts it in the work *150 Pytanniau i Adkazau z Gistoryi Belarusi*, “it was the time of emotional upheaval experienced by the poet, witnessing - in the very heart of Christianity - thousands of people abandoning their belief in Jesus Christ and performing sacrifices to pagan gods” (1994; 117). Husouski's outrage found its depiction in the poem-prayer *To St. Sebastian* (1523), in which he implored God to forgive Romans openly straying in their beliefs.

Neither bishop Vitellius, nor Pope Leo X was spared by the treacherous plague. As a result, left without powerful patrons, the poet lost the possibility of publishing *Carmen de Statura Feritate ac Venatione Bisontis* in Rome. Relying on his own means, Husouski finds his way back to Krakow – at that time capital of the Kingdom of Poland. It was there that the writer hoped to find support of the Great Duchess of Lithuania and Queen of Poland, Bona Sforza – a descendent of one of the most powerful Italian noble families. Husouski's hopes were not fruitless, as in the year 1523 the poems comprising his Roman period saw their publication in Krakow.

This fact found its reflection in the opening lines of *Carmen de Statura Feritate ac Venatione Bisontis*. The poetic edition opens with the poet's dedication to Bona Sforza, in which he beseeches the latter, as well as her royal spouse to take under their majesties' protection all the talented people of the realm, so that they could work for the good of the state with no concern, whatsoever, about the means of procurement. In this respect, Husouski exemplifies ancient Greece and Rome, the glory of which depended on both, the development of human mind, and that of body. However, the writer's appeal remained unaddressed and the poet was soon forgotten.

The last years of Husouski's life were spent in severe poverty and illness. Nevertheless, the poet continued writing, creating: *Nova et Miranda Victoria de Turcis Mense Iulio* [*New and Glorious Victory over the Turks in the Month of July*] (1524) and *Life and Deeds of St. Hyacynth* (1525). According to Ivan Saverchanka, “after this time his life again disappears in mystery, coming to its end somewhere about 1533” (1992; 61).

As it has been mentioned at the beginning of this study, European fame and recognition came to Mikola Husouski only in the twentieth century, when his masterpiece *Carmen de Statura Feritate ac Venatione Bisontis* was translated into Belarusian, Polish, Lithuanian and Russian. Thus, a contemporary of Machiavelli, his colleague in the art of diplomacy, a promoter of progressive humanist ideas and a stern believer in the ideal of a strong, noble and enlightened ruler remained forgotten for almost four centuries. Nevertheless, the angle of Husouski's vision, the power of his ideas and the themes addressed in his works remain acute even in our chaotic age.

3. Thematic Structure and Symbolic Representation of Motifs in *Carmen de Statura Feritate ac Venatione Bisontis*

To grasp in full the significance of themes and symbols presented in the poem, one should understand the essence of Slavic history and culture, with its microcosm of worldviews, as well as its peculiar spirituality, which have their roots in the basic tenets of the Christian Orthodox Church.

As Galina Tvaranovich views it in *Na Shliabah Danniiai Belaruskai Litaratury*, the evolution of Slavic culture and history encouraged,

its most progressive thinkers to revise the role of the ethnic unit in the world history of the Western European Renaissance, whose orientation on the antiquity, as well as its growing denial of major Christian principles were absolutely alien to Slavic mentality, which in the course of centuries was forced to be one of the few to counterattack the spread of Islam, to defend its ethnic borders, as well as its cultural and spiritual values. (2004; 5)

In this retrospective, *Carmen de Statura Feritate ac Venatione Bisontis* can be rightfully called the masterpiece of the Slavic-Belarusian Renaissance, with its spiritual and moral values going back to the misty times of Efrosinia Polotskaya⁴ and Kirill of Turov⁵. The poet succeeds in promoting its unique character, which, alongside with radical, progressive and humanistic reforms in politics and administration, had its primary roots in Byzantine culture and early Christianity, rather than ancient Greek and Roman archetypes. The author portrays himself as a true follower and preserver of Christian Orthodox ideals, devoutly adhered to in the Grand Duchy of Lithuania alongside with other religions.

All in all, *Carmen de Statura Feritate ac Venatione Bisontis* is a long poem of 1073 lines and is preceded by Mikola Husouski's address to Bona Sforza's personal secretary Ludovicus Alphius with a plea to make his work known to her majesty, the Queen of Poland:

Hunc tibi commendo parvum, Ludovice, libellum
Et rogo, tu primum perlege, quicquid erit.
Si nihil invenies, quod tantae laederet aures
Principis, exigui muneris instar eat.
Non ego, sed tua te virtus designat, ut istud
Efficias; cupio debitor esse tuus. (Husouski, 1980; 1-6)

[Oh, Ludovicus, I dedicate this honest book to you, begging you to penetrate into its depths. In case you decide it contains nothing to please the Queen, let it remain simply as my gift to you. It is not me but your intelligence and talent that advise you to act so; always indebted to you.]

The address is followed by the dedication to Bona Sforza herself, in which Mikola is describing his bad luck regarding the impossibility of publication of *Carmen* in Rome due to the sudden death of his patron Leo X. At the same time, the poet is implicitly expressing hopes for the possibility of the queen's assuming future patronship over the writer's literary activity. Important, in this respect, are Husouski's views concerning the role of philanthropy in the development of arts and sciences, as well as the importance of spiritual growth for the progressive advancement of the state:

In suo statu hac temporum malignitate respublica retineatur, quam virtute animi magis, quam vi corporis niti tam Graeci quam Romani documento sunt, apud quos arma semper tum maxime, dum litterae, floruerunt et labentibus primum ingeniis debilitatae vires sunt, quibus lapsis imperium corrui et servitus imposita est. (Husouski, 1980; 15-18)

[The state depends more on the might of spirit, than that of the muscle - the fact, which both, Greeks and Romans can testify. Their grandeur was the greatest when sciences were flourishing. Hence, the demise of talents brought about the disintegration of power, leading to the subsequent collapse of the state, falling under the rule of slavery.]

Further on through the narration Husouski addresses Sforza's majestic self-esteem by underlining the importance of scholarship and learning for promoting the image of the country among European states:

⁴ Efrosinia Polotskaya (1110-1173) was a daughter of the Prince Svaytoslav Vseslavovich. At the same time she was Lady-Superior of the St. Saviour Nunnery in Polotsk, an enlightener, the first woman in Rus, canonized by the church. Also see Kon and Rassel, 2015; 11.

⁵ Kirill of Turov (1130-1182) - was Bishop of the Turov Borisoglebsk monastery and an exponent of Byzantine tradition on Russian soil. His simple life, scholarly background, and reputation of sanctity drew many would be followers, while some of his progressive theological ideas have survived the centuries. Also see Golitsin and Peterson, 2010; 186.

Mihi vero compertum est, Serenissima Domina, quo affectu felicitatem huius regni desideres et quam multa super eius bono statu cogites et loquaris. Sed profecto non video, quo plus ei prodesse queas, quam si te bonis artibus praestes favorabilem ac benignam, ex quibus et reipublicae plurimum commodi ac ornamentum processerit et celebris tui nominis fama hac via maxime se laudibus suorum permiscebit. (Husouski, 1980; 26-29)

[I am well aware, Your Majesty, how great is your strive for the glory of the kingdom, how enormous is your anxiety about the advancement of the state. Nevertheless, you have hardly any means to succeed, unless you demonstrate your genuine interest in the endorsement of arts and sciences, toiling for the good of the kingdom. Thus, the eminence of your name will become even grander with the growing fame of your disciples.]

Hence, the poet puts a special emphasis on the significance of enlightenment and superiority of learning, as well as the exceptional possibilities of people to generate new ideas, provided they are given necessary support by the state.

As the poem continues, one can realize that instead of composing an amusing account of a bison hunt, the poet does something very different. The realism, sharp social criticism and progressive aspirations expressed in the work allow Husouski to create an unparalleled hymn of his motherland and an ideal ruler. The poem is saturated with Husouski's love towards his homeland, as a place unique and one of its kind. It is with great tenderness that the author admires the forest where he spent most of his childhood and youth. The poet describes nature as an elixir of youth and cheerful spirit. Remarkable is Husouski's description of the Belarusian wilderness, animals, birds and fish, which are so numerous that they populate not only multiple rivers and lakes, but also simple puddles under one's feet:

Frugibus externas soliti complere carinas,
Quicquid in externis gentibus exstat, habent.
Et quanquam rerum longe ditissima gens est,
Cuncta tamen nemori postposuere suo.
Sed non iccirco silvae placere virentes,
Quod dominis praestent commoda magna suis.
Prodeat ex illis flavae quod maxima cerae
Copia, navalis copia magna picis:
Illinc et pelles hibernis vestibus aptas
Instructus nummis, dum venit, emptor habet;
Illinc fluminibus vastum mittuntur in aequor
Robora, vel quae sint navibus apta cavis,
Vel quibus aedificet regio campestris et huius
Indiga materiae constituatque domos.
Arboribus vis est crescendi laeta, nec ullo
Maiores unquam vidimus esse loco. (Husouski, 1980; 241-257)

[It is abroad that we sell the harvest of our fertile fields and forests. While our riches are not inferior to foreign, it is the treasures of our native land that we value most. The Great Duchy is a country of wealth, concealing uncountable treasures under the natural greenness of its forests. It is the freshness of berries, the abundance of tar, the splendour of furs, and the plenty of honey and wax that attracts overseas merchants, generous to pay for shrubbery and bark to cover the roofs of their mighty lords' strongholds, as well as shipbuilding pines and oaks, rare in far-off lands. Our forests are, wondrously, swift to grow. One can hardly find such giant-like pines anywhere in the world. What a munificent gift the nature bestowed on us.]

Indeed, Husouski provides an interesting account of natural riches. At the same time he expresses a deep concern about the necessity of nature protection. As a consequence, the writer comes up with a rhetorical question challenging the reader to gratify nature for its affluent gifts:

Omnia deliciis quamvis sint plena, sed inde
Tarn vasto nemori gratia parva venit. (Husouski, 1980; 316-317)

[The nature was generous in displaying its wonders. Where is your gratification, then?]

Thus, the author brings forward the issue of environmental protection, quite revolutionary for its time, emphasising the fact that it is nature that is the source of all national riches and human happiness, and this is the reason why we must care for it.

What is more, Husouski underlines the importance of legends and myths as inseparable elements of folk culture. However, it is with great criticism that the poet addresses the brutality of some customs practiced at the time of *Carmen's* creation. According to the writer, it is lack of education and extreme dogmatism that make people commit various acts of violence, unthinkable in other circumstances. As an example of fierce behaviour, Husouski cites the famous instance of witch hunts, employing the technique of enforced drowning – symbolic purification by water - to determine the degree of possession by devil. Thus, once again the poet underlines the significance of enlightenment and promotion of humanistic ideas necessary for the progress of the human race.

At the same time, the poet introduces the image of a bison – a luminary of the title of the poem, a valiant giant and ruler of forests, and an obvious counterpart of brutality and barbarism. The author expresses a certain degree of pride regarding the fact that the beast could be still seen in the Grand Duchy of Lithuania, as by then it had been exterminated everywhere else. Therefore, it was only from such works as *Naturalis Historia* by the Roman philosopher Gaius Plinius Secundus that a common European could have found the description of the animal:

In nemore arctoo Plinius esse boves.
Nil fuit, ut tradunt veteres, atrocius uris,
Quos alit in silvis terra Polona suis.
Dicitur et toto nusquam locus alter in orbe,
Cuius eos saltu vivere fama ferat.
Proximus est feritate bison, vocat ille iubaium;
Hunc, melius qui vult noscere, pauca legat. (Husouski, 1980; 81-87)

[Plinius left his own description of the bison. He tells us that the impenetrable forests of the north conceal them in their wilderness. The creature is the wildest of all - the king of all animals. The beast grows freely, feeding on grasses growing in undulating planes.]

The bison is presented as an allegorical symbol of the motherland and the mark of its past glory. The animal, with all of its unprecedented power, is devoid of vengeance - it is gentle, peace-loving and caring; merciless and cruel, if seriously disturbed:

Saevitia superans animalia cuncta vel aequans
Humano generi non nisi laesa nocet;
Maxima inest tantum propriae custodia vitae
Maioremque animo fingere nemo potest. (Husouski, 1980; 147-151)

[The bison is the most furious of all. Yet, it will not attack a human being, no matter what the treatment is: just watches incessantly, taking notice of any slightest movement, guarding himself and his family.]

Husouski instils the bison with human characteristics: clarity of mind, farsightedness of vision, ability to decipher between the good and the evil. Just like the wise rulers do, the creatures take care of their hordes, thoughtfully, considerately, kindly; guarding them from outside threats, as well as imposing internal security. Hence, it is through the image of the bison that the author introduces his vision of an ideal ruler – noble, valiant, caring and protective:

Florigeros veterum campos et rura peragent:
 Nobis praescriptum est, per quod eamus iter.
 Iure suo excurrant ac libertate fruantur:
 Illi, cui scribo, non nisi vera placent. (Husouski, 1980; 222-225)

[It is with fervent decisiveness that bison guard their herd, instilling order into its ranks. The powerful never share authority with the weak, as muscle and recognition are the only tools to ensure one's supremacy.]

In addition, to reinforce the human element, as well as to support the belief in the power of unification in the times of war and external threat, Husouski portrays the bison as an inseparable part of a group. If expelled from the community, the animal loses its power and status, and becomes as miserable as the humblest of creatures. Hence, Husouski voices his symbolic plea to the peoples of Europe to unite forces in the face of the Ottoman hazard inhibiting their external security:

Ambiguae postquam subiere pericula vires,
 Ut pecori praesit, praemia victor habet. (Husouski, 1980; 236-237)

[Once banished from the herd with its calm and unruffled existence, the bison fears even a stick.]

A significant number of lines in the poem are dedicated to the actual hunt on the bison, where the animal is trapped, pierced by arrows and spears. The act violates the beauty of its mane and butchers its flesh. Blooded and outraged the animal is aiming at revenge. Yet, forces gradually leave the beast – the bison is no longer able to counter the brutality of the senseless human violence and gives in to be slaughtered. Accordingly, Husouski expresses his greatest criticism of the mindless bison extermination, and raises anew the issue of environmental awareness.

At the same time, the poet continues to develop his vision of an ideal ruler and, consequently, equates the image of the bison with that of the brave and courageous Grand Duke Vytautas the Great, who brought the Duchy to unprecedented heights. The author idealises the image of the latter and considers him to be the paragon of a perfect ruler. According to Husouski, Vytautas is noble-hearted, just, attentive, mindful, as well as obliging, harsh and merciless towards enemies, villains and scoundrels. It is the Duke who teaches his soldiers the art of successful warfare, instructing them to be loyal to the cause, brave and daring. Husouski underlines the fact that the qualities most hated by the monarch were cowardice, treachery and villainy:

Immodice forsan videor digressus ab ilia,
 Sed tamen interea stare necesse fuit,
 Dum longo clamore feram cursuque fatigent
 Silva tot voces evariente viri,
 Vixque neci tandem coepit matura videri
 Sensibus: exhaustit singula membra furor
 Et sudore fluens crebro quatit ilia pulsu
 Spumaque iam toto corpore densa cadit
 Implicat ambiguos pedibus velut ebria gressus;
 Aspice, quam subita sit peritura nece.
 Nam satis ut visa est animo cepisse furoris,
 Desiliunt equites et removentur equi.
 Solis more suo gladiis accincta iuventus
 Prodit, ut haec ferro cominus icta cadat.
 Arboribus lectis mira vi pectoris astant
 Expositi ad saevam laudis amore necem,
 Enseque fulgenti tenui cum voce coruscans
 Pro se quisque trucem provocat arte feram.

Ocior et vento conspectum fertur in hostem,
Qui retro prosiliens arbore tectus abit.
Haec petitur summoque gradu magnique recessus
Impete, ut ardentem fulmineumque putes.
Solvuntur tactique cadunt ex arbore rami
Et fragmenta suae pondera mortis habent. (Husouski, 1980; 293)

[The Duke, the bravest of warriors, found great happiness in training his army, with courage being the primary honour. The sovereign himself chose the most valiant fighters, bestowing them with lavish gifts. The cowards, no matter how noble the breed, were dishonoured and sullied. Such was the judgement of the ruler, harsh but fair, valuing truth above all. Turncoats crawled at the feet of the righteous ruler, who was swift at pronouncing the verdict. The horror of punishment made the convicted confess their sins, imploring to die and to perish. Libellers were hated most, sent down to the ghastliest of tortures. The Duke inspected the suspect with the merciless of looks, detecting the sin on the spot. Ruthless punishment awaited the guilty – sawn into beast skins to be mutilated by wolfhounds. Harsh castigation lied ahead of judges accepting bribes to conceal the truth. As a reminder to all, the culpable were torn apart in retribution of their sin. The Duke eradicated every wrong, every transgression, thus cementing his fame in the present and for the days to come.]

As a consequence, the image of an ideal Renaissance ruler developed by Husouski seems to contradict the paradigm developed by his contemporary, Niccolo Machiavelli. For Husouski, the significance of a noble and valiant spirit greatly exceeded the importance of the ‘end justifies the means’ principle, encouraging one to make frequent recourse to such features as treachery, hypocrisy, bribery, falsity, etc. Nevertheless, the greatest similarity between the two was that both Husouski and Machiavelli were likewise driven by the common goal to create a role-model of a ruler able to unify the country in the face of an external threat – Holy Roman Empire, Spain and France in the case of Cesare Borgia (Machiavelli’s prototype); the Ottomans and Teutonic crusaders in the case of Vytautas the Great.

Being a great patriot of his homeland, Mikola Husouski understood quite well that the well-being of a state depends, to a great extent, on good-neighbourly relations and peace among nations. Consequently, the author labels wars and conquests as the greatest evil tormenting the mankind:

Privato gerimus communia milite bella,
Ut sacra lex fratrum tutior inde foret.
Obruimur tali perTitusque evertimur hoste,
Qui totum Christi perdere nomen avet
Bellaque, non ut opes alt regnum comparet, infert,
Non ut in imperii laude superbus eat:
Efferat humani tantum sitis alta cruoris,
Ut sibi discordes religione necet
Utque per illorum caedes exerceat arma,
Proiciat canibus vulturibusque dapes.
Quo victore nihil poterit contingere morte
Utilius, nam plus vita doloris habet. (Husouski, 1980; 316-327)

[Wars and feuds, they cause nothing but sorrow and suffering. Year after year, we fight alone for the survival of the Christian brotherhood. The enemy surrounded our lands with the only aim to annihilate both, us and the name of Christ. The alien villain broke through our borders, claiming to have no interest in plunder. Instead, the infidels assert the name of their God and aver it to be the only true God by smothering people in blood and burning out their villages. There is only death and destruction on the path of the war.]

Therefore, Mikola Husouski speaks as a great humanist and an advocate of peaceful existence, as opposed to meaningless destruction.

Revolutionary in its essence is the theme of inequality of classes and great suffering imposed on common people by the state. Thus, instead of protecting their vassals from external and internal hazards,

the ruling class is more concerned with pursuing its personal power interests. It is the lords' petty grievances and tendency to resolve them through military force that bring nothing but misery and strife to the lives of peasants. Hence, in spite of glorifying the idea of a strong ruler, Husouski, in a way, criticises the system of feudalism and exhibits himself to be a great pacifist and supporter of social and class egalitarianism:

Interea quid agunt reges? dormire videntur?
 Heu nunquam minor his cura quietis erat,
 Nunquam solliciti fuerant magis. Ergo quid illud?
 Unus in alterius comparat arma caput.
 Funestas versant acies in caede suorum,
 Hoc oblectamen nunc sibi mentis habent.
 Miles utrimque cadens numeros in partibus aequat,
 Quemque regant, nullum iam superesse volunt;
 Per scelus immensum nostro sibi sanguine ludunt. (Husouski, 1980; 993-1002)

[The consciousness of the mighty sleeps in a deadly lethargy, having no concern for the wellbeing of the kingdom. The powerful are more troubled with the sharpness of their swords, so as to cut off as many heads as possible. Hence, wars, feuds and massacres become their only occupation and a source of genuine amusement, never mind the deaths of innumerable warriors on both sides of the front line. What are tears, blood and sufferings of the populace to the great - their sole concern being the preservation of power safeguarded through wickedness and human pain.]

Towards the end of the poem the author underlines the fact that at the dawn of the Renaissance the majority of the population was still dark and savage. Hence, Husouski once again emphasizes the importance of learning and enlightenment as a vital tool enabling people to oppose the oppression of a feudal state:

Deplorata adeo caecaque turba sumus.
 At reges, propfii quod roboris undique cernunt,
 Excerptunt cunctis dilacerantque modis,
 Illud agunt tantum, ne quis superesset porum,
 Qui curam Christi legis habere queant. (Husouski, 1980; 1020-1025)

[We are still a mob, while the mighty still suppress any attempt at freethinking, aiming to cut off the heads of those who stand up to assert their rights in the name of Christ.]

The author concludes the poem with a prayer addressed to Virgin Mary, asking her to protect the Grand Duchy, as well as its common people in the absence of a strong leader. At the same time Husouski articulates hope that rulers may follow his advice and adopt the principles of humanism, unification and peaceful co-existence with neighbouring states in order to lead their lands to a greater future.

Thus, the poem *Carmen de Statura Feritate ac Venatione Bisontis*, as well as the life of Mikola Husouski himself serve as a manual of patriotism, good citizenship and effective state administration. The poem settles in our memory as a glorification of one's love for the homeland, sharp criticism of senseless wars and a call for free, honest and enlightened life instilled with humanistic values.

4. Conclusion

Carmen de Statura Feritate ac Venatione Bisontis is one of the most vivid masterpieces of the Belarusian Renaissance in which Mikola Husouski, through the symbol of a valiant bison, attempted to portray the heights of human spirit, its unlimited capabilities and aspirations. At the same time, significant is its revolutionary character with regards to numerous instances of social criticism, discussion of class struggle, vassal-seigniorial relations, as well as revolutionary for its time ideas of pacifism and non-violent resistance.

What is more, Husouski is an unquestionable master of detail, instilling his descriptions with an enormous degree of realism and appeal to imagination. Therefore, one cannot underestimate the skill of his nature depictions, intentionally drawing the reader's attention to the innovative issue of environmental protection. During his life-time Husouski did not acquire the same degree of eminence as his famous contemporary Niccolo Machiavelli. It was possibly caused by the fact that the themes addressed in the poem were too idealistic and unattractive for his age, and, therefore, most probably misunderstood. As a result, the image of a ruler as a paragon of virtue was overshadowed by the great popularity of a scandalous, but, nevertheless, pragmatic Machiavellian role-model of a leader who should "act against mercy, against faith, against humanity, against frankness, against religion, in order to preserve the state" (Machiavelli, 1981: 63), for human beings have always been more enticed by the passion of a lion and cunning of a fox, than wise and noble power of a bison.

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