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"Europejskość i polskość literatury
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Book Reviews

Comptes rendus de livres

Janusz Pelc, *Europejskość i polskość literatury naszego renesansu* (*The European and Polish Character of the Literature of Our Renaissance*), Czytelnik, Warszawa 1984, 644 pp., ill.

The new book of Janusz Pelc presents the epoch in this very twofold way. The extensive volume of studies is an outcome of the author's many years' research on Renaissance culture and it gives a coherent and compact synthesis of the period. This synthesis becomes especially stimulating because it is focused on the problem of the traditions which are still vivid for the modern Poles. This question was posed already in the "Introduction" written in 1981, and then it recurs through the whole work bearing further questions: of the identity of modern Polish culture and of our Renaissance. Since if we want to develop a multivocal culture trustfully open to many ideas, the pluralism of approaches to the achievements of the past is indispensable. For nowadays, apart from the important heritage of the Romanticism and Baroque, also the legacy of the Renaissance constitutes a part of vital tradition.

The Renaissance understood as a fragment of the lasting and prolific past is an easily recognizable epoch. Did it come into being in the close connection with contemporary Western culture, merely contributing to it and accepting its values from a distance? Or did it rather uncover at that very moment our own specificity, a distinctive characteristic of Polish culture? What was the Polish Renaissance like, then? National, European or universal? These are the main problems, the roots of Pelc's book, which is a consciously shaped attempt to answer the above questions. However, after studying the whole volume, the reader becomes convinced that the questions were not very well formulated, and that they even made it difficult to understand the epoch. And, since understanding is

the way to identity, the author shows the Renaissance era in a different way and understands it more deeply: he presents the literature and culture of the Renaissance in Poland as a wonderful union of native and foreign elements which are inseparable, mutually important, and equally prolific. Thus at the very beginning of his work (and also further on) Pelc stresses—borrowing from works of Henryk Samsonowicz and especially of Władysław Tatarkiewicz—the achievements of the late Middle Ages in Poland. In this period Polish culture was becoming rooted in Central Europe and was establishing ties with Renaissance Italy. In the end of the 15th century Poland has already mature and receptive culture. With its medieval heritage, Polish culture absorbs Renaissance novelties as a crystallized formation. The ideas from Renaissance Italy deepen the identity of Polish culture. They neither suppress it nor create it. After all, these ideas reach a European country which is linked with the West and they simply make it easy for Polish culture to strengthen its own specific features.

This thread of argument is a great value of Pelc's book. He opposes the popular image of the Polish Renaissance as the period of greedy and passive absorption of Western culture. It was neither passivity (suggesting helplessness) nor greed (lacking in selection). The book describes Polish culture immersed in a wise dialogue with all ideas reaching the country, presents the radiation of Polish culture abroad and its constant presence both in the East and the West of Old Europe. Thanks to this dialogue Poland was one of the chief creative forces in European culture of those days. When, in the last chapter of the book, Pelc mentions the Renaissance changes in the Royal Castle at the Wawel Hill as a proof of the communion of Poland with European art (and culture in general), his words sound not only credibly but also symbolically: they constitute the significant conclusion of his ambitious synthesis of our Renaissance. If already in the Middle Ages Polish culture could create its own lasting values, retaining universally European traits at the same time, then the Renaissance become a process of inheriting, transforming and enriching medieval achievements. Medieval themes were continually vital in the literature of the Polish Renaissance. Pelc stresses this fact accurately. Some writers employed them out of inertia (Rej), but, what is interesting, often they were

a specific preparation of Baroque literature (the hymns of Dantyszek and Grochowski). However, the vitality of the Middle Ages intensified, in a paradoxical way, the development of the Polish Renaissance which made use of classical heritage often borrowing from mediaeval works, and although it looked for models in Greek and Latin poetry, it never stopped to treat the Bible in a similar way. The Renaissance changes adopt numerous medieval forms and ideas, and, thanks to this, the exchange between the Polish culture and Europe expands and augments.

The ties are striking. The Latin courtly poetry created during the reign of Sigismund the Old (the epithalamia by Paweł of Krosno, Dantyszek and Krzycki) are examples of the literary practice typical of European humanism. Biernat's of Lublin *Bajki* (*The Fables*) and his *Żywot Ezopa* (*Aesop's Life*) have their counterparts in other parts of Europe. There are a lot of such examples. Mutual bonds do not eliminate an individual character which is due to different tone, subject matter, or to outstanding creative powers. Here Pelc points out numerous phenomena from Rej, Orzechowski, Górnicki to the writers whose works radiated all over Europe: Frycz Modrzewski and Kochanowski. Their works not always deal with universal subjects. Sometimes they simply show how national identity was rising in that epoch. However, this is also a value. In Pelc's book there emerges the image of Polish culture which exists in Europe. Because in the Renaissance it existed in Europe and interacted actively. The writings of Frycz, Kromer, Hosius and Copernicus circulated in numerous editions in Latin and in translations. They were read and discussed. Polish culture was present in Europe.

The assumptions and the concept of the Renaissance era presented above constitute, as the author himself points out in the "Introduction" and in the last, fourth chapter of the book, entitled "The Perspectives," the bases of the central part of the work. It consists of three parts. In the first one ("Movements—Styles—Directions") Pelc reconstructs the most important conceptual categories of the period, presents the chronology of the Polish Renaissance, shows the literary life of the epoch and the tendencies in the development of literature, which is discussed here from the perspective of the broadly understood history of culture. In Part II ("The Metamorphoses of Writers and of Their Works"), Pelc concentrates

on three important writers: Rej, Kochanowski, Szymonowic. Part III ("*Topoi*—Symbols—Categories—Genres. Their Origins, Interrelations and Transformations") comes back to general problems and presents the lines of development in the literature of the Renaissance through the analysis of changes in aesthetic consciousness and in symbolic imagination.

The analysis of the term 'Renaissance' is based by Pelc on the presentation of various understandings of the word in that period: from Vasari, Boccaccio, Erasmus and Du Bellay (in their appreciation of Petrarca as the renovator of literature), to Luther (with his conviction that he was reborn thanks to his grasping the essence of the exculpation by faith), and to Polish authors, seen here against the background of the contemporary belief that an absolutely new spiritual and artistic formation is being built. Once again the unity of Poland and Europe is felt. This joint effort to create the identity of the new era comes into being in the process of transforming (renovating) the classical heritage. This was done by humanism as the main cultural trend of the Renaissance. Pelc views the Renaissance primarily as a philosophical movement (and also, but to a lesser extent, as a philological one). It was determined by the main trends of contemporary thought: Aristotelism, neo-Platonism, Epicureanism, neo-stoicism, scepticism. Thus it was a synthetic movement important for the further development of European thought. Pelc discusses the Reformation as a movement which was not always closely related to humanism. He writes about the reforms of Christianity (the reforms after the Council of Trent among them) characteristic of the Renaissance era. Pelc draws a very interesting parallel between Erasmus and Andrzej Frycz Modrzewski. Both of them were passionately interested in the renovation of Christianity, according to the ideas of irenism. Probably because of this stance, full of tolerance for other ideas, Erasmus becomes such a vigorous personality in Pelc's book, apparently more important to the author than Ficino or Pico della Mirandola.

This broad, colourful panorama of the epoch presented in the process of transformation (from the crystallization of early humanist ideas within the limits of the Middle Ages to characteristically late Renaissance manifestations of the mannerist style—interesting comments on Michelangelo) is a good illustration of Pelc's simple

method. He uncovers the natural links of Polish writers and thinkers with the culture of the European Renaissance. Relations with Erasmus (correspondence, popularity of his works) are especially significant. Thus it is possible to carry on the research: Pelc defines the place of the Polish Renaissance in the process of the development and maturation of the whole formation in Europe. One should be aware all the time that the dialogue between Europe and Poland in the Renaissance is an obvious phenomenon for Pelc. His book incessantly confirms this idea.

Presenting the beginnings and the development of the Renaissance in Polish literature, the author stresses the value of early manifestations of the Renaissance in Poland. He writes about the correspondence between Zbigniew Oleśnicki and Aeneas Piccolomini, about the activities and writings of Filippo Buonaccorsi called Kallimach (Callimachus), about the first association of humanists in Poland (*Solitas Vistulana*) organized in Kraków in 1489 by Kallimach and Celtis (Conradus Celtes). However, Pelc also mentions vigorous mediaeval elements in Polish Renaissance culture: for example, when he analyzes the famous gravestone of Kallimach made by Wit Stwosz. Pelc's attempt to use the category of literary generation in his research into the Polish Renaissance is especially valuable in his work. The generation of Latin poets (Dantyszek, Krzycki, Janicki, and others) is, for instance, a very distinct one. Janicki, whom it is still rather difficult to identify with any literary generation, is our greatest lyrical poet before Kochanowski; Pelc gives him a lot of attention. The generation of Orzechowski, Frycz Modrzewski, and Rej, bound with the year 1543 which was a turning point in the Polish Renaissance, is also important. In the mid-sixties there appears the generation of Kochanowski and Łukasz Górnicki. It will be still closely connected with the Reformation movement, but even more so with the Italian Renaissance, with the intellectual atmosphere of Padua. Each generation fulfilled a different role in the Polish Renaissance. The generation of Krzycki and Dantyszek strengthened the presence of the Renaissance style in our culture, the generation of Frycz and Rej was building its maturity, the generation of Kochanowski created the zenith of the Polish Renaissance which lasted till c. 1565. Since that year until his death Jan Kochanowski dominates Polish literature. After him, there came the close of the

epoch marked by the achievements of Klonowic and Szymonowic, and also connected with the patronage of Jan Zamoyski.

Generations. Centres (so Poznań with the Lubrański Humanist College, Kraków, then Zamość). Another feature of Pelc's method manifests itself here. What is characteristic: the attempt to build a synthesis of the epoch is accompanied by the author's effort to reproduce the progression of phenomena, their evolution, transformation and the rhythm of development (advancement—zenith—exhaustion). If this enriches the analysis of the interrelations of writers with their epoch, of their maturation and rootedness, the reader of the book may perhaps expect a less extensive reconstruction of the ideas, literary forms, and the inner world of the greatest masterpieces of the epoch. Pelc practises the history of literature which is sensitive to the historical background and the evolution of literary processes, thus it is rather carefully directed at the ergocentric research, although sometimes it makes use of immanent analysis. It is understandable that the important chapters about Latin poetry (including Janicki), about the dialogue and effigy as the specific methods of presentation characteristic of the evolution of Rej's writings, about the creative consciousness of Kochanowski, about the systematically Renaissance poetry of Szymon Szymonowic, the author of *Sielanki* (*The Idylls*) are all chapters about the metamorphoses, changes and evolution of writing. This method contributes to understanding of Kochanowski, shows the creative principle of Rej's technique in his witnessing the epoch (from the tumult of the Reformation polemics to the slowly crystallizing vision of a pious life), and also explicates the sense of Szymonowic's activities (from early Latin poetry following the mannerist conventions to the late *Idylls* demonstratively faithful to the aesthetics of the Renaissance).

Eventually, the aim of Parts II and III of the book becomes to recognize and to reconstruct the epoch in motion. Part III presents the specific unity of Renaissance aesthetic consciousness. Kochanowski's famous formulation from his letter to Stanisław Fogelwerder is a manifestation of this unity. The poet wrote: "Poetyka nescio quid blandum spirans." Thus Pelc sees Kochanowski's thought about the elusive charm of poetry as a link of the chain of similar thoughts in European aesthetics (later on present in Pascal's and Leibniz's works, and before, as Tatarkiewicz, quoted by Pelc, proves,

already in the works of Alberti), originating as *topoi*, from the rich tradition of Plato, Aristotle, Saint Augustine and even Cicero. Writing about the above problem Pelc presents Jerzy Mańkowski's interesting hypothesis about the impact of Augustine and his visionary and mystical concept of *topos* on Kochanowski. The ties of Kochanowski with Renaissance neo-Platonism are also made clear at this stage of Pelc's argument.

The motif of Orpheus, who was presented in the Renaissance as a magician, sage and primarily as a poet who tames the wildness of nature, also confirms the homogeneity of Renaissance aesthetics. This motif was taken over and transformed in the literature of the Polish Renaissance, which desired, as in the works of Kochanowski, to match the old master. Pelc associates this cult of Orpheus with the cult of the biblical psalmist David. Both models of master poets were equally vivid in the Renaissance.

There are more examples of this homogeneity in the third part of Pelc's book. Thus there comes irony, as a figure of thought and as a trope, highly valued in the poetics and rhetoric of Renaissance humanists. Erasmus in *The Praise of the Folly* made a wonderful use of it, in Poland it was Kochanowski who excelled at practising it. There comes the facetious epigram. This literary form was represented in Poland by the texts of Krzycki and by Rej's *Fraszki (Trifles)*, and above all by Kochanowski's volume which became the background for the development of various forms in Polish lyrical poetry. Pelc's study *Jan Kochanowski w tradycjach literatury polskiej (Jan Kochanowski in the Traditions of Polish Literature, 1965)* should be mentioned here. It discusses a similar process, that is, Kochanowski's impact upon various forms of literature in later periods (the satiric poem is the best example). The comments upon the understanding of space and time in the Renaissance, placed in the end of the volume, reconstruct not only the basic ideas determining the Renaissance model of the world, which would probably be the chief aim of a scholar concerned about the history of mentality—see Aron Guriewicz's *Kategorie kultury średniowiecznej (The Categories of Medieval Culture)*, but also about the whole variety of changing images. In this context, there appears the analysis of the myth of Icarus (and of the famous picture by Brueghel) as a motif of the ascent beyond measure (against the

reason), and also as the motif of different times, in which Icarus (and also a Renaissance artist) could fulfil his purposes.

Pelc's book builds up a synthesis out of a great number of microanalyses. This makes his study very useful for historians of literature. The reader is offered the image of the epoch in motion and realized that the movement was a prolific dialogue of Poland with the rest of the West.

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Transl. by *Zofia Lesińska*

Swojskość i cudzoziemszczyzna w dziejach kultury polskiej (The Native and Foreign Trends in the History of Polish Culture), ed. by Zofia Stefanowska, PWN, Warszawa 1973, 411 pp.

In this review, the Polish words *swojskość* and *cudzoziemszczyzna* are generally translated as "native and foreign trends," a solution which can not render the various implications and connotations of the two concepts (in *cudzoziemszczyzna* the elements of fashion and approval for any kinds of import from abroad is very strong). These notions are deeply rooted in the linguistic and cultural consciousness of the Poles, which would be enough to give importance to the book under discussion. This can be considered a synthesis of Polish cultural history from the point of view of the attachment to local traditions and yet of the openness to foreign or, in any case, "alien" elements.

Foreign and *alien* do not pose the same terminological problems, since they render quite well the distinction between *obcy*, *cudzy* on the one hand, and *cudzoziemski* on the other, which is reaffirmed more than once in our book.

Historically, that which is not related to a certain native or local culture is by no means said to be *foreign* because of its nationality, but merely *outside* or *alien* (in Polish, precisely *obcy*, *cudzy*), outside the bounds of a certain social, political, economic, linguistic, ethnic or religious predominating group. This is even more obvious in those periods of history in which a regular consciousness of peoples' national membership was not yet shaped