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The Renaissance in Poland : an outline

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Articles

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Genesis of the Renaissance in Poland

The Renaissance in Poland has its own specific features. It should be remembered, however, that none of the subsequent epochs in the history of literature was so concurrent with the changes in the entire Latin Europe.

The genesis of an epoch does not exhaust its senses. The culture of an epoch is the answer to the questions which arise during the social changes. Since the amount of outlooks and the number of styles appearing in the culture is limited, or at least smaller than the amount of social situations, borrowings in intellectual life are inevitable.

Poland entered upon the period of ideological and political upheavals which were troubling western and southern Europe as a strong, united and economically prospering country. However, the Polish middle class in the 15th and 16th century, contrary to that of western Europe, was debarred from political life. It lost its position in favour of the nobility and gentry, who in turn limited royal power, extorting privileges, often egoistically short-sighted, for themselves. In spite of this in the 16th century the landowning gentry became the leader of reformatory changes, formulating the programme of the executionist movement (the execution of the laws and the execution of estates) and consolidating the Polish model of parliament and civil liberty, admired and envied by the contemporaries, but viewed as the germ of the future downfall of the state by posterity.

And yet Renaissance culture was not a culture and ideology of a definite class or social group. As a culture of individualism and mundane solutions it effectively served the epoch of transformation, and in this sense satisfied the aspirations of various social groups: from a nobleman building a magnificent and modern residence to a peasant and a plebeian for whom learning and Humanistic refinement were means for changing their class and social status.

Late Medieval and Late Gothic Culture

The 15th century in Poland brings the flourishing of scholastic thought and of late Gothic art. The Academy of Cracow, renewed in 1400, becomes one of the most important centres of learning in central Europe and attracts many foreigners. Polish diplomats, clergymen and laymen visit Italy, take part in religious discussions held at councils, supporting the conciliar orientation and adhering to the doctrine deprecating the use of force in converting pagans to Christianity. All this, though in itself not a symptom of the Renaissance, will soon facilitate the adoption of Renaissance ideas. The Middle Ages/the Renaissance dialectic is quite peculiar: the Renaissance brings a definite negation of the preceding epoch and produces a new model of man. At the same time, however, this transition is evolutionary and, which is more important, takes place at the time of the great activity of late medieval culture. The term "late medieval" can sometimes be misleading, and therefore, when considering art and, after certain adaptation, also the sphere of literature, it is better to use the term "late Gothic," the latter referring to a style which is nature-oriented, pays attention to detail and abounds in realities. This style will flourish in the literary works of Rej, at the time when the Polish language becomes a flexible and adequate tool of description and dialogue.

Travelling Artists

On the tombstone of Philip Kallimach in the Dominican church in Cracow there is a slab which is cast according to the design of Wit Stwosz. The tomb of one of the first Polish humanists is adorned with a piece of Gothic sculpture. There is something symbolic in this combination of the Humanistic idea of *in memoriam* with the

late Gothic form of the “broken” style, in this meeting of two great artists – Kallimach from Tuscany and Wit Stwosz from the Rhineland. It is interesting to note that this coexistence of the Italian and the Gothic will be long-lasting. The king and the nobility hired architects from Italy, the gentry and the middle class, on the other hand, brought ready-made products from Germany, particularly from Nuremberg. Sometimes, however, the Italian artists coming to Poland yielded to the pressure of local, north-European taste: thus, for example, the tombstone of King Olbracht, chiselled by Francesco of Florence, combines the style of Tuscany with the Gothic one.

Scholars and artists travelled throughout Europe, either called by art patrons or in search for a new public. At the end of the 15th century and the beginning of the 16th century Poland attracts many foreigners, both Humanist writers and Renaissance artists; this does not mean, however, that Poland plays only a passive role of a recipient of foreign art and culture. It is true that the first artists came from abroad, but the Polish royal court and the nobility consciously performed the function of patronage, while the Cracow University was responsible for the intellectual atmosphere of the capital and was held in high repute in Europe.

The son of a petty nobleman, Grzegorz of Sanok (1407–1477), a travelling scholar, then a tutor to the children of noblemen and, finally, the Archbishop of Lvov, was perhaps not a great artist, though he wrote epigrams, epitaphs and comedies, but he certainly was a great individuality, one that could serve as a model for the literary portrait of a modern protector of art and learning. Kallimach, who had to leave Rome because he was suspected of belonging to the plot against the Pope, found refuge in the Archbishop’s residence.

Konrad Pickel (1459–1508), also known as Celtis, one of the most outstanding neo-Latin poets, arrived in Cracow in 1488 to complete his studies at the University which was already famous for its faculty of mathematics and astronomy. But study was not his only aim, he wanted also to organize theatrical and literary life; he searched for both the teachers and the audience. He founded in Cracow – like in other towns which he visited – a literary society called *Sodalitas Litteraria Vistulana* where the intellectual elite of Cracow was centred as well as formed.

Cultural Patronage

The son of a Gdańsk brewer called Flachsbinder took the opportunity of the king's grant and went to Italy to study. After his return he found himself, thanks to the patronage of Piotr Tomicki, the protector of the Academy, in the king's chancellery and began his brilliant career. The person in question is the famous Latin poet Jan Dantyszek (Joannes Dantiscus, 1485–1548). Dantyszek, later on the bishop of Chełmno and Warmia, a diplomat, a dignitary of the imperial court, maintained relations with the most distinguished intellectuals of Europe. He patronized a gifted poet and Hebrew scholar, Jan Campensis, brought him to Poland and encouraged him to paraphrase the Psalms (*Psalmorum... parafrastica interpretatio*, Cracow 1532).

Jan Łaski the Younger, an enthusiast of Erasmus of Rotterdam, bought the latter's library, leaving it, however, to its former owner and his master for life-long use; this was an elegant form of subvention. After the death of Erasmus the library was brought to Poland from Basel by Andrzej Frycz Modrzewski, of Łaski's household.

Polish cultural patronage was a non-formal institution, going beyond the state and class boundaries. A poor plebeian could probably never have improved his condition but for the help of a magnate. In turn, the ex-plebeian, having reached a certain position, repaid his debt by patronizing another young and promising adept. In this way at the beginning of the Renaissance in Poland the plebeians entered into the intellectual elite. The majority of scholars, masters and doctors of the Academy, poets and writers of that time were not of the noble origin.

Stanisław of Bochnia (Stanisław Kleryka, 1504–1562), having obtained a post at the king's court, saw to the education of his nephew, Łukasz Góra, the son of poor middle-class parents from Oświęcim. Góra, later known as Łukasz Górnicki, once ennobled, was inclined to think that a courtier should be a nobleman.

The son of a peasant from Januszkowo would probably have ended his education in Żnin or Poznań, had it not been for the help of the Crown Marshall (Polish: *marszałek wielki koronny*), Piotr Kmita, and Andrzej Krzycki, a poet and a bishop, who dis-

covered the talent of young Klemens, writing under the latinized name of Janicius.

The royal patronage in Poland was not a systematic literary institution, but it was sometimes very generous: Mikołaj Rej, for example, came into quite a fortune owing to the grants of land from king Sigismund I. Many poets and scholars had the title of the secretary to His Majesty (e.g. Jan Kochanowski). The court of king Sigismund August abounded in brilliant, creative individualities, making Cracow an active centre of literary life.

Królewiec

An important role was also played by Królewiec. The ex-Grand Master of the Teutonic Knights, the Prussian prince Albrecht, having turned Protestant supported Polish dissidents. A liegeman to the Polish king, he was independent enough to conduct his own cultural and religious policy. The Królewiec printers also served the needs of dissenters from Poland, and its University, founded in 1544, soon was to become the centre of the Reformational thought. The open-handed prince was ready to gain his followers with his generosity. It was thanks to his support that Jan Kochanowski was able to study in Italy.

Zamość

The most distinguished patron of learning and art was the chancellor Jan Zamoyski, himself an outstanding writer and orator, a competent leader and an enlightened, tolerant statesman; in his youth Zamoyski was the rector of the students of the Padua University and doctor of law. He not only supported such great poets as Kochanowski and Szymonowic, but also accomplished an imposing task: he founded a new institution of higher education. At first, dissatisfied with the state of the Cracow Academy, he attempted to set up in the capital Collegium Regium, modelled upon the Collège de France, and then, when these plans, constituting a threat to the influence of the Counter-Reformational Church on education, were thwarted by Cardinal Stanisław Hozjusz, Zamoyski founded the Academy in Zamość (1594), for which he tried to gain prominent European scholars. During his lifetime the Academy was developing promisingly, it declined, however, after his death.

Education

Poland of the late Middle Ages could boast of a very well developed network of parochial schools: it was rated at about 3,000 schools at the end of the 15th century. Studium Generale in Cracow, renewed in 1400, was the second-best university (after the Prague University) in central Europe. The development of mathematics and astronomy bore fruit—Copernicus, who began his studies in Cracow, to complete them in Bologne, Padua and Ferrara, may serve here as a symbol. At that time, in the last decade of the 15th century, Cracow witnesses the lively interest in the Humanist Learning, whose conflict with traditional scholasticism will reach its summit in the 40's and 50's of the 16th century.

The number of parochial schools further increases in the 16th century; it is estimated that every second parish could boast of having a school. Naturally, the children of wealthy families had their own tutors.

The Renaissance in Europe produced a new type of school—a school of secondary or higher education level, called, in the Greek fashion, “gymnasium” or “academic gymnasium,” where rhetoric, poetry and classical languages were taught. The most famous gymnasia in Poland were those for the middle class in Toruń and Gdańsk and those for the dissident gentry in Pińczów (1558), Secymin and Lubartów.

The name “academy” or “neo-academy” was used to denote schools with a programme of humanistic education. Such a “neo-academy” was founded in Poznań in 1519 by bishop Jan Lubrański. As the so-called “academic colony” it was subordinated to the Academy of Cracow, but in fact it was fairly autonomous. One of its graduates was Klemens Janicki.

Jesuit Education

The Jesuit, invited to Poland by Cardinal Stanisław Hozjusz, considered the education and upbringing of the youth in the spirit of the renewed Catholicism to be their primary task and they concentrated mainly on secondary education. The first Jesuit college was set up in Braniewo in 1564, and by the end of the century

the Jesuits had more than ten schools effectively rivalling not only with dissenters' schools but also with the faithful to Catholicism Alma Mater of Cracow. Jesuits schools had the virtue of being free of charge and open for the gifted youth not only of noble birth; the standard of the Jesuit education was generally high and its curricula designed for flexible adaptation of the Humanism. The college in Wilno (Vilnius), set up in 1570, was granted university status by king Stefan Batory in 1578 and became the university of Lithuania (Szkola Główna Wielkiego Księstwa Litewskiego).

The Reformation in Poland

In some countries (Spain, France) the Counter-Reformation after the Council of Trent resorted to repressive measures, thus prolonging and aggravating the religious wars (the massacre of the Huguenots, St. Bartholomew's night in Paris), whereas in others it took a mild course and used political methods and persuasion. This was the case in Poland, where religious conflicts were neutralized by the principles of the "gentry democracy" with its scrupulous observance of personal liberty. Sigismund I tried to stem the interest in religious novelties by his edicts, interdicting studies at the dissenters' universities abroad and banning Lutheran publications. These edicts were effectual only inasmuch as they somewhat delayed the flourishing of the Reformation, which progressed after Sigismund August's accession to the throne. Despite the edicts not a single stake was lit in Poland and Lithuania, and people still journeyed to Wittenberg and brought the banned publications.

Lutheranism was popular in Poland mainly in towns, whereas the nobility and the gentry inclined rather to Calvinism and its democratic and republican principles.

The gentry Reformation allied with the executionist movement inasmuch as the demand for the execution of estates was frequently directed against the clergy. The situation was, however, more complicated: among the prominent executionists were also Catholics, among the magnates threatened by the execution were leaders and protectors of the Reformation. Religious movements were stimulated by the social conflicts, but the very course of such a movement was a picture of a complicated game in which individual characters

and spiritual needs of man were involved. The strife was not only for a cheaper or better Church: religion was not only a pretext and a substitute for other, non-religious aspirations and aims, but also the question of the mode of existence of the individual in relation to the community, and the question of the tactics of man, placed in the temporary, towards the eternity which awaited him. The Reformation arose from the resistance to the institutional devoutness and it created a model of the individual religiousness, putting the man before the dramatic choice which was to be made on his own responsibility. It is true that the tide of the Reformation receded in Poland after having partly, or even seemingly only, satisfied political demands of the gentry and that there followed a period of more and more frequent conversions; but, for one thing, some features of the Protestant mentality found their way to the post-Trent Catholicism (as in the type of mystic, individualistic devoutness), for another, Polish dissenters, even if less numerous, were not less active.

The Calvinists and the Polish Brethren

About 1550 Polish Calvinists began to organize themselves. The first synod took place in Słomniki in 1554 and in the same year the confession of faith was formulated (Stanisław Lutomirski's *Confessio*, printed in Królewiec, in 1556).

In the Calvinist Church, under the influence of ministers (clergymen), who were usually of the plebeian origin but were better educated than the nobility, there was a further schism in the 1560's, in effect of which there emerged the so-called Smaller Communion, the Polish Brethren, by their opponents named the Arians. They promulgated antifeudal watchwords and later radicalized the anti-Trinitarian doctrine, in the development of which an important role was played by an Italian emigrant, Faust Socinus (Fausto Sozzini, 1539–1640) and it was after him that they were also called the "Socinians." In the 17th century, after they were banished from Poland (1658), the Polish Brethren contributed to the shaping of European rationalism and deism.

Polish Toleration

The *sejm* (diet) of Piotrków, 1562–63, abolished the obligation of enforcing the sentences of clerical courts by the secular power.

It was a lasting victory of the gentry democracy and of the spirit of toleration; the Church was divested of the so-called *bracchium saeculare* ("the secular arm"), which elsewhere inflicted punishments, including the stake.

Besides, Polish clergy was not so very eager to persecute the dissenters. The idea of the Catholic Church for many bishops was the idea of a Church that would be independent of the See of Rome, i.e. autonomous and national. These projects were vigorously attacked by papal nuncios, who incited the king and the episcopate to resort to force. But though they succeeded in calling the recalcitrant bishops to order, in vain did they insist on the sword.

In 1570 representatives of various communions of the Reformed faith agreed on acting in solidarity (the so-called Concord of Sandomierz), but from this concord they excluded the Arians. Although the king's edict of 1564 had required that all the foreigners-dissenters should leave the country, it met with firm resistance of the Protestants and was restricted to the anti-Trinitarians only: and so the Arians found themselves menaced with expulsion. And then something quite unexpected happened: the Polish Brethren were shielded from the imminent danger by Cardinal Hozjusz, the bishop of Warmia and the leader of the Counter-Reformation. The Cardinal, a well-educated humanist, reasoned like an experienced politician: the expulsion of the Arians and the Arians only would be tantamount to indirect acceptance of other heresies. If it is impossible to expel all dissenters, then none of them can be expelled. Moreover, they should not be differentiated and divided into the better and the worse since all heresies are equally evil.

The Confederation of Warsaw

The crowning achievement of Polish juristic-religious thought was the Confederation of Warsaw, concluded in 1573 during the convocational *sejm*, in which all signatories, among whom were also Catholic senators, deputies and one bishop, pledged "to maintain peace and not to shed blood for a different faith or form in the Church..."

For many years this act was vehemently attacked and equally passionately defended. Towards the end of the century the religious conflicts aggravated, and there were numerous assaults on the Prot-

estant communities and street tumults led by pupils of the Jesuit schools, but all this was outside the law, which was in favour of toleration.

Printing

The success of the Lutheran Reformation was also due to the fact that it burst out more than half a century after the invention of printing. Obviously, neither the Humanism nor the Reformation were the effects of Gutenberg's invention; the recognition of the value of Antiquity, the discovery of the New World, the sense of individuality, the consciousness of historical changes, and the application of the movable type were all, so to say, constituents of one ideological and social process, which finally generated modern anthropology with its ideal of man as both the inheritor and the creator of values. In this sense printing, which as a medium of message should have been—and later on in fact was—neutral by nature, in definite circumstances became an ally to new ideas, for it disseminated them widely, the reception of books being more egalitarian than that of manuscripts destined for the elite. Printing was against all corporations and extreme professionalism. If the knowledge of the Bible had not been spread through printing, the Reformation would perhaps have remained a local heresy and an interuniversity dispute. Thanks to the printed book dialects of the outskirts of Europe became national languages.

The Beginnings of Printing in Poland

Gutenberg's invention quickly found its way to Poland and was used here earlier than in Spain, England and Sweden, and not much later than in Germany and Italy. In 1473 a travelling printer Kaspar Straube came to Cracow from Bavaria and was commissioned by the Bernardine monks to print a *calendarium* for 1474, Turrecremata's *Expositio super ... Psalterio* and St. Augustine's *Opuscula*.

The first Polish sentences were printed in 1475, in Wrocław, Silesia, when Kaspar Elyan, printing *Statuta synodalia dioecesis vratislaviensis*, added the Polish texts of the Lord's Prayer, Hail Mary and the Apostles' Creed.

In 1491 an embroider from Cracow, Sz wajpolt Fiol (Feyl), together with Jan Turzon, started printing in the Cyrillic alphabet for the Greek Orthodox, but he managed to print only several books when the Church censorship intervened and the press was closed down.

A printing-house of the longest history was that of Hieronim Wietor, established in 1518. After the death of its founder it was run by Łazarz Andryśowic, and then by his son, Jan Januszowski. Here *Esop* by Biernat of Lublin was printed, some of Rej's works, the first edition of Andrzej Frycz Modrzewski's *De republica emendanda* and most of Jan Kochanowski's works, also in posthumous editions.

Throughout the 16th century the main centre of typography in Poland was Cracow, with its several printing houses, to mention only that of Maciej Szarffenberg (then inherited by the Siebeneicher family) and that of Maciej Wirzbięta, who printed most of Rej's works.

The dissenters had their works printed by Wirzbięta, who himself was a Calvinist, but they also established specialized printing offices, connected with the centres of the Reformed faith: in Pińczów, Brześć, Nieśwież and Raków. The Calvinist Bible took its name from the place where it was printed and was called the Brześć Bible, whereas the Arian Bible, printed in Nieśwież, was known under the name of the Nieśwież Bible. The printing houses in Królewiec also worked for the dissenters.

Printing, conducive as it was to dissemination of the religious novelties, served all, not only the dissenters. Its beginnings were not connected with the dissenters, and later all the possibilities it offered for propaganda were eagerly used by the Counter-Reformation. Mikołaj Radziwiłł Sierotka established a printing office in Wilno and presented it to the Jesuits. It was here that Piotr Skarga's works were printed. But for many printers typography was first of all good business and a new art of book-making; they worked for many, without asking about the creed.

The Gutenberg Galaxy

The invention of printing was not only the invention of a temporary tool. Gutenberg started a new era, which nowadays is often called the Gutenberg Galaxy—the era of the gradual weakening of the

spoken-word culture and of domination of the silent-word culture. At the same time the printed word to the increasing extent was becoming the word of the author, the contact of the author with the reader was becoming the contact by choice, and institutional mediation was not necessary any longer. This brought about important changes in culture and in the structure of literary genres. Genres, originally intended for being performed, transformed into genres meant for reading; the song was not necessarily sung any longer, the sermon not always delivered and the dialogue was often only an imagined one.

In this sense the Renaissance is clearly the initial epoch—it marks the beginning of the modern culture.

The Renaissance Period

It is difficult to indicate precisely the beginning and the end of the Renaissance period, for they are blurred by complicated currents and trends. The beginnings of the Renaissance in Poland are to be sought in the second half of the 15th century, the end of the epoch falls on the first decades of the 17th century. An important feature of the evolution of literature in Poland in the Middle Ages, Renaissance and Baroque is the intermingling of the successive stylistic and cultural phases. The first signs of the Humanism appear in the second half of the 15th century, but some elements of the medieval (late Gothic) culture still persist to be influential in the first half of the 16th century and by no means do they bear a retrogressive character or that of a relic. In turn, the first symptoms of the crisis of the Humanist poetics and the first manifestations of a new style, which, even if in itself not the Baroque yet, prophesies the Baroque, can already be seen in the second half of the 16th century. On the other hand, as late as in the 17th century there still are such writers as e.g. Szymonowic, who identifies himself with the Renaissance.

The internal division of the Renaissance into periods can be more precise, though at the same time more conventional; the events and dates mentioned hereunder are to be treated as approximate caesuras rather than as actual turning points.

The Internal Division of the Renaissance into Periods

The first period is the period of the Pre-Renaissance, covering the second half of the 15th century until Sigismund I's accession to the throne (1506).

The second period—the early Renaissance—lasts from 1506 till 1543. The date 1506 is important insofar as it marks the beginning of the great Renaissance artistic enterprises (the rebuilding of the royal castle on Wawel Hill), of international activity of Polish diplomats and development of the court and chancellery. In the first two decades of the 16th century the first works of the eminent neo-Latin poets, Jan Dantyszek and Andrzej Krzycki, appear, printing develops and Biernat of Lublin becomes the author of one of the first Polish books. The period closes in 1543, with the untimely death of Klemens Janicki and the death of Copernicus at the age of seventy. In the same year Copernicus' great work is published in Nuremberg and begins a new era in the history of science. It is also in 1543 that Rej's *Krótką rozprawa między panem, wójtem a plebanem* (*Short Debate Between the Landlord, the Bailiff and the Priest*) and Andrzej Frycz Modrzewski's *De poena homicidii* appear.

The third period of Polish Renaissance literature is the period of flowering, starting in 1543 and closing with Jan Kochanowski's death, in 1584. This period covers all more important social and political events (the executionist movement, the summit of the Polish Reformation) as well as the work of the three most outstanding writers of the age: Rej, Kochanowski and Szarzyński. Also by his contemporaries the death of Jan Kochanowski was considered to be the end of the golden age.

The fourth period, 1584–1629, closes with the death of Szymon Szymonowic, the last poet who clearly formulated his identity with the Renaissance. This period is not, however, to be called the period of decline. It is true that Polish literature will have to wait long for poets equal to Rej, Kochanowski and Sep Szarzyński, and yet what follows is not degeneration but only a change of norms and taste. This change is not a very radical one, for the Antique and Huma-

nistic heritage still persists, and even generalizes, though in a different cultural constellation, called the Baroque*.

Transl. by *Maria-Bożenna Fedewicz*

* Note of the Editor. We are presenting here only that part of a chapter from Jerzy Ziomek's book, *Renaissance*, which deals with the specifically Polish situation. The lack of space makes it impossible to include in the present volume the whole chapter discussing Polish literature in relation to, and against the background of, the literature of western Europe.