

Andrzej Borowski, *Iter Polono-Belgo-Ollandicum. Cultural and Literary Relationships between the Commonwealth of Poland and the Netherlands in the 16th and 17th Centuries*, Kraków: Księgarnia Akademicka, 2007, 216 pp.

The book of Andrzej Borowski [= B.] is probably the first attempt made by a Polish author to present to a foreign reader in a monographic format the aspects of the interesting history of the cultural and literary relationships between two lands with equally complex history: the “Commonwealth of Poland” and the “Low Countries”.

Polish scholars used to (and still do) make “the Italian journey” – *Iter Italicum* – when discussing the history of culture as well as the history of arts and literature. B. notes this Polish “Italocentrism” and is one of the very few to describe the “Northern path” leading to the Netherlands, an *iter* which was “particularly neglected so far” (p. 10) and which, in his eyes, is a very important one: an *Iter Belgicum* (namely to the Southern Netherlands) and an *Iter Ollandicum* (to the Northern Netherlands).

In the book of B. we find a large “cultural and literary field” of the contacts between Polish, Flemish and Dutch theologians, philosophers, poets and playwrights. Johannes Dantiscus, Jan Kochanowski, Maciej Kazimierz Sarbiewski or Jan Andrzej Morsztyn on the one hand and Erasmus Rotterodamus, Janus Secundus, Justus Lipsius or Joost van den Vondel on the other hand – and many more – represent a rich variety of these contacts.

The time span of the book (16th and 17th centuries) can be described as “early modern times”, but the main focus is (as B. himself notes on p. 8) on the years 1550–1650. However, the author begins with the Middle Ages (ch. II 1, pp. 53–60) and also later goes back to that period (namely to Thomas à Kempis, p. 152). The history of these Polish–Netherlandic connections is not very well known even by those Western-European scholars who are literary interested. The aim of B.’s book is to fill up the gaps in this knowledge.

The history of Poland and of the Low Countries is, as was said, indeed very complex. The reader can observe this complexity already in the names of these countries and their inhabitants, as used by the author. The terms “Dutchmen” and “Belgians” are used here in the modern meaning for the inhabitants of, respectively, “Holland” (today’s Kingdom of the Netherlands) and (today’s Kingdom of) Belgium – but (as the book title makes clear) B. speaks about the time when neither of the kingdoms existed. The author is aware of the problems connected with these names and these identities. In his “Introduction” (pp. 7–12) and in the first chapter (“Polish–Netherlandish Relationships: General Problems and Main Ideas”, pp. 13–52) B. explains, “who is who” (p. 14), but there is still some inconsequence to find here. Although he uses the phrase “*Netherlandish* culture” for the whole Low Countries (which is quite seldom in Poland and is to be praised), one meets quite often in the text the word “Belgian” for the Southern Netherlands only and the word “Dutch” for the Northern Netherlands. But the traditional Latin terms *Belgia* and *Belgae* denoted *all* of the Netherlands – with Luxemburg, Wallonia, Lille and Dunkerque as well. We should admit at once that the same problems are visible also in other countries: “Dutch” and “Flemish” are common words, “Netherlandish” is not.

But a foreign reader (for whom this book was written) will have much more problems with the use *and* the understanding of names relating to the Polish history and culture. Well, “Polish”... The title phrase “Commonwealth of Poland” was used to attract the reader’s attention, but officially it was the “Commonwealth of the Two Nations” which means: Poland *and* Lithuania. For Polish (literature) historians this is evident, but: is it also clear for a foreign reader? Should it not have been described more precisely (pp. 13–17)? There is also a passing remark (p. 111) that the state’s name should be completed with a third nation: the Ruthenians, today’s Ukrainians, who were also a part of this great kingdom – from Cracow up to Smolensk and from the Baltic Sea down to Kiev – this makes it even more complicated for the foreign reader. The inclusion of a map giving geographical

names of regions and cities would have been of some help. These names are also not always consequently used: we find (on p. 114) the Polish name of “Lwów” (which is today in the Ukraine, Ukrainian and English: Lviv), but the Lithuanian name of “Vilnius” (and not the Polish “Wilno”, trad. English: Vilna). We see (on p. 61) the old Polish name “Pożoń” (with the remark: “Pressburg, now Bratislava in Slovak Republic”) – but not the old Hungarian name for this city (Pozsony). And the same applies to B.’s use of Netherlandish names: they are sometimes given in Netherlandic and not in English or French – e.g. on p. 31, n. 18: Brugge, Gent, Luik (not: Liège), Leuven or Bergen (not: Mons), sometimes in English or in Latin – e.g. on p. 18: Antwerp, Brussels, Lovanium (not: Leuven or Louvain) and Leiden (not: Lugdunum Batavorum).

As was said, the monograph of B. is in the first place meant for a foreign reader. But then: a reader not very well acquainted with Polish history might be a little bit embarrassed with phrases like “Gniezno Doors” (p. 55), “Ducal Prussia” (p. 59), “Victory at Obertyn” (p. 74) or “the Siege of Smolensk” (p. 136, n. 118) and would be grateful for an explanation. The same could be said about references to some (important) Polish personalities like Bishop Stanislaus or King Boleslaus (p. 88–91), or the noble families of Ostrogski, Potocki and Lubomirski (p. 132).

On the other hand, however, the book is of course also meant for Polish readers. This is surely the reason that there is in the book a series of portraits of important South- and North-Netherlandic personalities (Nicolaus Cleynaerts, Hugo de Groot, Thomas à Kempis, Joris van Lanckvelt, Justus Lipsius, Janus Secundus, Otto Vaenius and Joost van den Vondel) – and no one portrait of a Polish personality. Also it is Polish readers who would appreciate more detailed information about historical events like the “Netherlandish revolution (p. 147), “the ‘Spaanse furie’” (p. 8) or “the Siege of Breda”. The last one (from 1624) was connected by of B. with a visit of the future Polish king Wladislaus IV. Vasa; we can feel here the author’s tacit praise of the victorious Spanish army under the Italian general Ambrogio Spinola.

And this is not surprising: B. writes his book from the Polish point of view (e.g. on p. 18) – and also from the Catholic perspective. He writes not about the Polish *Protestants* but about the Polish *dis-senters* (this word is in common use in Poland with the meaning: “they went – alas – off the Catholic way”); neither he writes about a *Protestant Bible* in Polish language; he mentions the *Bible of Brześć* (p. 69), but not the Protestant affiliations of its co-author Johannes à Lasco. And when he mentions the fact that more Latin works were translated into Netherlandic in the Northern Netherlands than in the South, he explains this fact by stating that “publishing houses there were much more democratic and intent on satisfying the readers with no formal humanist education” (p. 87). But another explanation could be given: the culture of the North was bound with Protestantism, with the mother tongue and with the city culture and not with the Catholic Church in which Latin dominated.

The religious situation influenced of course the relationships between Poland and the Low Countries. The humanistic contacts were possible by using Latin as communication language *and* by free possibilities to develop *both* Catholic and Protestant religious groups – and those possibilities existed in Poland in the second half of the 16th and the first half of the 17th centuries. In later decades the situation changed rapidly. B. writes that “the opportunity [of the ‘Netherlandish connection’ with Poland] was lost, alas, in the second half of the 17th c.” (p. 12). It was so because of the strong Counter-Reformation movement in Poland, beginning from 1658 on, after the defeating of the Protestant Swedes occupying Poland in the years 1655–1660 (who were, this should be stressed, supported by the Protestant inhabitants of Poland). This was the reason that contacts between Poland and the Northern Netherlands almost ceased in the second half of the 17th century.

With the Catholic Southern Netherlands there were more vivid contacts even later. Besides the religion also the common Latin language was very helpful here. The classical education on both sides brought many fruits. This classical profile is a characteristic feature also of the book itself and its author. There are many quotations from Latin in his book (e.g. on pp. 30, 41–43, 46 f., 67 f. and 119) – and they are not translated into English. Otherwise we find passages in Polish which are translated into English, so that a foreign reader can understand them; also Netherlandic quotations are rendered in English.

B. points out that the Netherlandic language was, also in the 17th century, not very well known in Poland. A characteristic example is the Polish translation of some Netherlandic verses of Jacob Cats made by an unknown Polish reader (B. mentions the book of Janusz Pelc who found the source, see p. 187, n. 50). This Polish translator used – only – the Latin versions given by Cats, and not the Netherlandic ones. Otherwise, Polish students coming to Netherlandic universities did not need to speak this language; the universities both in the South and in the North – as all other universities in Europe – used Latin as language of instruction.

B. describes also these academic contacts (pp. 79–82 and 160–162). He calls the *peregrinatio academica* of that time “the fast-food technology of university education so popular among the peregrinating youth in the 17th c. Poland” (p. 106) – and it was so not only in Poland. Both at the Catholic university of Louvain and at the Protestant university of Leiden there were rather short stays in a longer journey made by the Germans, French, English, Italians – and of course also by the Poles. There were very many of them: the Catholics went mostly to Louvain, the Protestants had as their first goal Leiden. In this latter city we find representatives of as important Polish families as those of Rej, Opaliński, Koniecpolski, Pac, Morsztyn (on p. 181 B. mentions the poet Zbigniew Morsztyn as the one who never went to the Netherlands) – and the most important: the Calvinist prince Janusz Radziwiłł (also known under his Lithuanian name as Jonas Radvilla).

B. names in his book very many persons who were active on the field of the Polish–Netherlandic relationships. Besides Dantiscus and Sarbiewski or Secundus and Vondel we find also as important men as Wespazjan Kochowski or Szymon Szymonowic and, on the other side, Ericius Puteanus, Nicolaus Vernulaeus or Carolus Utenhove (“a Pole in his soul”, p. 63).

But the most important of all of them was Justus Lipsius. B. gives him the most place in his book (pp. 108–139). Lipsius – the most significant philosopher and scholar after Erasmus – is till today rather unknown in Poland. And he surely deserves more attention – so it was a very good decision of the author to discuss him in detail. Numerous books, articles, essays on the works of Lipsius – first of all on the *De constantia libri duo* from 1584 and the *Politicorum libri sex* from 1589 (both quite soon translated into Polish) – appeared in the world. Not many – in Poland...

B. presents the great philosopher in the mirror of his contacts with the Poles. Lipsius became *Poloniae lumen et columen* and he “substantially influenced the literary culture of the Baroque humanism in the Commonwealth of Poland of the 17th c.” (p. 111). The phrase “Baroque humanism” (later in the text we find “Polish ‘Lipsianism’ and the beginnings of the Polish Baroque”, p. 123) shows again “the Polish perspective” of the author. In the Polish history and literature the 17th century is always connected with the term “Baroque”. Is then Lipsius baroque? With his theory of Neo-Stoicism and with his classical background he is a man of the Renaissance – and the reception of his thought in his two main works is also in the 17th century a Renaissance reception. B. writes about “Lipsius’s humanism” – but says that this humanism of Lipsius “should be treated as a Baroque one”. We find ourselves in the Baroque on a different stage, a stage of a new philosophy that “calls all in doubt” (to speak with the words of John Donne), of a theory of passions, developed by Descartes, of metaphysics... Was Lipsius so?

At the end of B.’s book there is a rich bibliography given for the reader interested in the cultural and literary relationships between Poland and the Low Countries; he should however take a look into both the chapter “Bibliography” and the footnotes in the text – both are complementary. Some more titles could perhaps have appeared here: e.g. the Polish version of Lucia Thijssens *1000 jaar Nederland–Polen* (translated in 2003 by Jerzy Koch as *Polska i Niderlandy. 1000 lat kontaktów*), or the works of Janusz Małek about Johannes à Lasco.

Also the poetical translation of Herman Hugo’s *Pia desideria* by Aleksander Teodor Lacki (as *Pobożne pragnienia*, Cracow 1673) could have been mentioned. As well as some important personalities between the Low Countries and Poland – like the chief army engineer of Maurice of Orange, Simon Stevin (on p. 165 we find however the name of Wilhelm Appelman as the Dutch artillery commander).

Unhappily there are quite many typographical errors in the book: the proof-reading should have been done more carefully (they start already on the first pages; the most visible are in the spelling of the names on the included portraits). Let us here use the elegant formula from the 16th century: “The reasonable reader will be so kind to find them”.

I would like to repeat: the book of Andrzej Borowski shows us a rich variety of the contacts between the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth of the Two Nations and the Low Countries. It is a good introduction for anyone wanting to learn more about the literature and culture of these two lands and invites the reader to an interesting intellectual journey.

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