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Renaissance Studies at Polish universities – an overview

While Renaissance Studies in Poland flourished in the 1950's and 1960's they were at that time inspired and influenced by communist educational policy. Thus the Renaissance was presumed to be a 'secular' and 'progressive' period, lasting in the Polish context from the latter years of the 15th to the end of the 16th century. It served as counterpoise to the 'reactionary' Middle Ages, and to the Age of the Baroque as well, since both were thought to be heavily influenced by Catholic Piety. From the late 1980s there has been a growing interest in Medieval and especially Baroque literature and even authors previously interested in Renaissance studies (such as Janusz Pelc, the most distinguished among them) shifted their interest to Baroque culture. A major scholarly journal *Barok (The Baroque)* was established in 1994 by literary and art historians; many valuable studies devoted to the 17th century have since been published. This interesting context serves as the backdrop to the evolution of Renaissance Studies at Polish universities.

Most Polish academic scholarship on the Renaissance – whether textbooks, book chapters or journal articles – especially from the late 1960s onward was no longer ideological in orientation and was devoted to the most significant aspects of the period, especially to literature. Above all, scholars focused on the Renaissance's most distinguished representative, Jan Kochanowski, whose life and work was extensively discussed in Janusz Pelc's monograph *Jan Kochanowski. Szczyt renesansu w literaturze polskiej (Jan Kochanowski. The Climax of the*

Renaissance in Polish Literature, 1st ed. 1980, 2nd ed. 1987, 3rd ed. 2001). This 700 page monograph was used in Polish Studies departments together with *Renesans (The Renaissance)* by Jerzy Ziomek (1st ed. 1973, eleven editions until 2012, 553 pages). Since 2005, however, when the Bologna process was officially introduced in Poland (with 3 year BA programs and 2 year MA programs replacing 5 year MA programs) there has been a tendency in Polish Studies departments to condense the study of the whole history of literature (from the 12th to the 20th century) to 3 years (new BA) and not 5 years (old MA). Thus the study of Renaissance literature and culture has been reduced in a significant way. In addition, at many universities traditional courses in the history of literature were replaced by „monographic lectures” which discussed selected problems of early modern literature at a professor's discretion.

A tendency to publish much less extensive Renaissance textbooks has been one noteworthy consequence; the process started as early as in 1987 when the shortened version of Jerzy Ziomek's textbook was published: *Literatura Odrodzenia (Renaissance Literature, Warsaw 1987, 290 pages of a pocket book format)*. From the mid-1990s a few new textbooks were published. They were apparently intended to serve the new educational realities at Polish Studies departments after the changes introduced by the Bologna process: *Literatura renesansu w Polsce (Renaissance Literature in Poland)* by Janusz Pelc (Warsaw 1994, 295 pages), *Literatura*

polskiego renesansu (Polish Renaissance Literature) by Piotr Wilczek (Katowice 2005, 200 pages) and *Renesans (The Renaissance)* by Adam Karpiński (Warszawa 2007, 282 pages).

This brief list represents a broader, significant trend in recent university teaching of Renaissance culture. As the author of one of these textbooks I must admit I was not fully aware of the scope and significance of the process underway. When my textbook, *Polish Renaissance Literature* was published in 2005 (the year of introducing the BA + MA (3+2 years) Bologna system at Polish universities) a colleague observed that I was a market-sensitive author since I had predicted the students' need for a smaller, less extensive book on Renaissance literature. This was not my intention. And yet clearly, in my capacity as an associate professor teaching classes on early modern literature, I had caught on that students needed less extensive and more readable textbooks to prepare for their exams. The textbooks which were still compulsory in 2005 at the University of Silesia in Katowice where I was then teaching were the following: *Średniowiecze (The Middle Ages, 908 pages)* by Teresa Michałowska, *Renesans (The Renaissance, 553 pages)* by Jerzy Ziomek and *Barok (The Baroque, 742 pages)* by Czesław Heras. Altogether they constituted 2203 (!) pages of a large format. It was unrealistic to use them as the only textbooks, especially because the students were obliged to read for a two semester course of early modern literary history not only textbooks but also about one hundred (!) literary primary sources from Medieval, Renaissance and Baroque literature. These were not drawn only from Polish culture, but from all of Europe.

Nowadays the study of Renaissance literature at Polish Departments is in crisis. University curricula are designed according to the new theoretical tendencies and are formulated under growing influence of modern literature departments in accordance with the demands of stu-

dents who are usually not interested in studying pre-20th century literature. Students do not have any deep knowledge about literary history when they enroll in a university. Fundamental changes in curricula at the secondary level have done away with that prospect, there is no longer any systematic course. Literature is taught in a larger cultural context, and read in fragments selected by textbook authors, then winnowed down some more by teachers. So there no longer exists what was in place when I attended secondary school in the late 1970's: an extensive, compulsory school canon of Polish literature, in part focused on the Renaissance.

It's worth noting that Polish Renaissance literature was bilingual. Latin is the language of some of the best works of Polish literature. It is also worth noting that Latin is no longer studied in secondary schools and is no longer compulsory in most Polish Studies departments. Yet even when Polish Studies demanded two years of Latin at the university level, the requirement was in no way connected with the study of Renaissance literature which was taught during the first year of studies. For that reason at least half of the Renaissance heritage was available only in translations from Latin. And the translated versions were usually very bad. Even the poetry of Jan Kochanowski (who wrote more than half of his poems in Latin) could not be fully enjoyed by students of the Renaissance. So it is not surprising that in 2012 the only university program in Renaissance literature in Poland is a two year MA program „Renaissance Literature and Culture” initiated a few years ago in the Classics Department of the University of Warsaw. It is devoted, however, mainly to European literature and culture of the period; there is no specific focus on Poland or for that matter Central Europe. A series of books, collectively entitled *The Renaissance Library*, is being published as a part of the program, and four volumes of translations with introductions have already been printed or are forthcoming: *Humanist Lives of Ancient Philosophers, Travel Writings* by Francesco Petrar-

ca, *On Famous Women* by Giovanni Boccaccio and *On the Donation of Constantine* by Lorenzo Valla.

The only academic centre in Poland which seriously develops Renaissance studies associated with the heritage of Polish literature is the Jagiellonian University, thanks to the efforts of Professor Andrzej Borowski and his pupils. Andrzej Borowski also published in 1992 a textbook entitled *Renesans (The Renaissance)*, devoted to the history, social life, art and culture of the European Renaissance (Warsaw 1992, 133 pages of the Introduction and 177 pages of an anthology of primary and secondary sources, Polish and European). This is until now the only general overview of all aspects of European Renaissance culture designed for a general reader. Thanks to Borowski and his mentor, the late Professor Tadeusz Ulewicz, there has always been at the Polish Studies Department of the Jagiellonian University strong emphasis on teaching Latin and using it for research on Polish Neo-Latin literature. Many MA and PhD theses have been devoted to Renaissance literature in Latin and Polish; there is a very active Centre for Renaissance Studies coordinated by Dr. Grazyna Urban-Godziek and it has organized numerous seminars, public lectures and conferences. The results of this research are published in peer-reviewed journals, *Terminus* most prominently. An interesting result of the work of this community of scholars is the internet *Library of Old Polish and Neo-Latin Literature* with a significant number of sources and translations published online (<http://neolatina.bj.uj.edu.pl>).

Another professional internet site devoted to early modern sources, including Renaissance literature (with some English translations), is *Staropolska Online (Old Polish Literature Online)*: <http://staropolska.pl> established by Professor Roman Mazurkiewicz of the Pedagogical University in Krakow. Most of the English translations published there were authored by Profes-

sor Michael J. Mikos of the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee. His *Polish Renaissance Literature. An Anthology* (Columbus, Ohio 1995) is the most comprehensive anthology of Polish Renaissance literature in English translation. I must, however, add the caveat that this does not mean that at Wisconsin or any other Slavic Department in America Polish Renaissance literature is studied in greater detail. The only literary work of the Polish Renaissance more widely known in the English speaking academic world is a slim volume of *Treny (Laments)* by Jan Kochanowski. The *Laments* became especially famous after 1995 when the translation of a Harvard professor, Stanislaw Baranczak, and a Nobel Prize winner, Seamus Heaney, was published by Faber and Faber. There are a few other translations of the whole volume of *Laments* – by Dorothea Prall Radin (1928), Michael J. Mikos (1995), Adam Czerniawski (1996, 2001) and Barry Keane (2001).

The evolution of Renaissance Studies at Polish universities from the 1950's and 1960's when it was a flourishing field that in due time also brought forth two later fundamental textbooks, Ziomek's *The Renaissance* in 1973 and Pelc's *Jan Kochanowski* in 1980 to the situation at the beginning of the 21st century when Renaissance studies have become an elitist enterprise could make an interesting, informative case study. Contemporary scholarship is more concentrated on literature written in Latin and has become a part of the world movement of Neo-Latin studies but with no deep roots in Polish Studies departments and with rather moderate interest in Classics Departments. Renaissance literature in Polish is now represented mainly by Jan Kochanowski (c. 1530-1584) and by Mikołaj Rej (1505-1569), who wrote in the vernacular exclusively. They, along with a number of lesser acclaimed authors, are all much less important for the new generations of Polish scholars and students. This tendency seems to be irreversible.

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Title

Piotr Wilczek, *Renaissance Studies at Polish universities – an overview*, in: *Teaching the Renaissance III*, ed. by Angela Dreßen and Susanne Gramatzki, in: kunsttexte.de, Nr. 4, 2012 (4 pages), www.kunsttexte.de.