

The European “Republic of Letters”

on the history of literary awareness (15-17th centuries)

Conceptual thought about language, literature, and poetry stretches back to the earliest stages of culture. In archaic times, aesthetic deliberations began to filter into both literary works and philosophical discourse. Some of the Greek philosophers (such as Democritus of Abdera in the 5th century BC) were the earliest interpreters and commentators of artistic endeavors. The writings of Plato (427-347 BC) were fundamental for the history of aesthetic and literary awareness; his concepts of the poet’s divine frenzy and imitative art served as an inexhaustible source of theoretical inspiration for his successors. The history of literary awareness proper was ushered in by the Poetics of Aristotle (384-322 BC), a work that gave the study of literature an autonomous status, and at the same time set up a conceptual framework in the field that would remain in force for centuries. In the Middle Ages, aesthetic and literary thought would be undertaken as part of encyclopedic studies at the intersection of grammar, rhetoric, and philosophy. As early as in the 12th and 13th centuries, however, Latin works devoted to the art of poetry and versification began to appear. Such medieval poëtriae and artes versificatoriae addressed a combination of linguistic, stylistic, and rhetorical issues.

Various authors made certain statements of a meta-poetical nature: the great Italian poet Dante Alighieri (1265-1321), in his Divine Comedy, used poetry to discuss poetry itself, as well as art and beauty. Petrarch and Boccaccio were forerunners to a new way of thinking about

poetry and literature. Yet the true breakthrough in the history of aesthetic and literary awareness would come in the epoch of the Renaissance. A new approach to language, oration, literature, poetry, art, and even more widely to culture, became one of the most important foundations upon which Europe’s ideological commonwealth was built. Dozens of treatises and theoretical works attested to the blossoming of aesthetic and literary thought in Europe, which integrated the national cultures in a special way. Polish culture also fell within the orbit of these developments in awareness.

The Ideas of Humanism

The 15th-century Italian humanist Giannozzo Manetti, in his *On the Dignity and Excellence of Man*, recognized the “ingenious and subtle art of speech” as one of the creative human mind’s greatest achievements. Such exaltation of man-the-speaker and man-the-writer should not, however, be credited to Renaissance humanist anthropology – except in that what had at first been perceived as a gift (in tales that still retained a mythological nature) then gradually acquired the traits of a wonderful discovery, an invention made by man himself. Writing, written texts, and books, a motif that had already been present in antiquity and in the Middle Ages, took on particular significance. When Francesco Petrarch mentioned “discourse between spirits, transcending the centuries,” he was above all thinking of a magnificent boon that enabled people not only to contact others living far away and to exchange thoughts in a comprehensive way, but also to leap across temporal barriers, to record past events for posterity, and to substantiate the future as a thing of the present. Gallus Anonymous’ *Polish Chronicle* contains an enthusiastic praise of writing: “Never would the words and chivalrous deeds of the Romans or Gauls be so widely known throughout the [whole] world if written records had not preserved them for the memory and emulation of their successors. So too vast Troy, even though it lay deserted and in ruin, was passed down to everlasting memory in the works of poets. Walls razed to the earth, towers toppled, spacious and pleasant squares standing empty, and the palaces of kings and princes serving as the

dens and lairs of wild animals – yet Troy and its Pergamum are still famed, through the voice of inanimate letters...”¹

In Richard de Bury’s 14th-century work *Philobiblion*, we encounter not only declarations about the eye-opening value of books, whereby the barriers of time and space can be overcome, but also a kind of apotheosis of writing and reading: “How highly must we estimate the wondrous power of books, since through them we survey the utmost bounds of the world and time, and contemplate the things that are as well as those that are not, as it were in the mirror of eternity.”² The author further develops his own laudation of books – how much in the humanistic vein already! – asserting: “By the aid of books we remember things that are past, and even prophesy as to the future; and things present, which shift and flow, we perpetuate by committing them to writing.” And he concludes: “occupation with letters or books is the life of man.”

Petrarch pays homage to books at a somewhat later date, seemingly in tune with the words of *Philobiblion*’s author: “Gold, silver, gems, purple raiment, a house of marble, a well-tilled field, paintings, a steed with splendid trappings: things such as these give us only a silent and superficial pleasure. Books delight us profoundly, they speak to us, they give us good counsel, they enter into an intimate companionship with us.”³ It was Petrarch that the Italian humanists of the 15th century saw as marking the beginnings of the great rebirth of antiquity. His role is perceived in a similar way by the modern Renaissance scholar Eugenio Garin, who believes that Petrarch was fully aware of the significance of writing and the need for dialog with the great ancient masters. With time, these early, pre-Renaissance views crystallized ever more distinctly, such as in debate over the place held by the humanistic sciences within the model of culture, then under transformation. For the humanists of the Italian Quattrocento, reflection upon the *litterae* (literature and scholarship) became a matter of great import, taking on a new character. Eugenio

¹ Volume III. Based on a Latin to Polish translation by R. Grodecki.

² Chapter 15. English translation by E. C. Thomas.

³ *Epistolae de rebus familiaribus*, III, 18, Letter to Giovanni dell’ Incisa. English translation by W. Calhoun.

Garin writes about this period: “The *litterae* are about to return with all their fertility, to form whole men, not just scholars. (...) the conversation with the great minds of past ages, to which the *studia litterarum* lead us, is by no means a form of «vulgar erudition.» It is, on the contrary, a discovery of the common human links and the development of the ideal basis for a commonwealth.”⁴ It was specifically 15th-century humanism that supplied the stimuli for shaping a particular cultural concept – the world of a spiritual community, transcending the borders of time and space.

We do not have many studies that address the history of the concept and term *respublica litteraria* (or *respublica litterarum*) in the 15th, 16th, and 17th centuries. It is with all the greater satisfaction, therefore, that we can draw attention to the observations noted in this regard by Juliusz Domański, the author of *The Text as Establishing Presence* (*Tekst jako uobecnienie*). He managed to hunt out rare traces marking the presence of the “republic of letters” notion – its precursors in the mid-15th century and its first explanations at the end of the 15th century. Domański writes: “According to what I have managed to find in connection with the «republic of letters» concept (*respublica litterarum*, *respublica litteraria*), meaning the society of those who practice writing and literature, of people who write and read, the origin of this new idea should be sought in the writings of the 16th-century Spanish humanist Juan Luis Vives, who was almost a contemporary of Erasmus of Rotterdam and maintained quite intensive contacts with the latter. (...) There are many indications that the first humanist to employ the Latin term *respublica litteraria* and who subsequently developed not so much this term as the notion of a community of people who write and read, with all the connotations we have traced in this book, was Erasmus of Rotterdam, already cited so many times here. In his *Antibarbari* from 1494 he used both this term and its synonym *societas* or *sodalitas litteraria* to refer to everyone who supports the *antiquae* or *politiores litterae* against the attacks made against them by the «barbarians.»” Juliusz Domański associates the concept of the society of those who write and read

⁴ *Italian Humanism – Philosophy and Civic Life in the Renaissance*, English translation by P. Munz.

with the concept of «establishing presence» (*uobecnienie*, a textual bond established between those currently alive and those who have passed away).

The 17th century Spanish work *Republica literaria* by Diego Saavedra de Fajardo (1670) – inspired, it is surmised, by the work of Juan Luis Vives – employs the convention of a dream to discuss the common society of people of the pen and scholarship, the world of writing and reading. This dream vision of a “republic of letters” portrays reality through the poetics of the grotesque, the absurd, and mockery of humanistic daydreams about the “textual presence” of man.

Juliusz Domański, in his study, stresses how the earlier notion of the republic of letters, entailing a common presence in texts, transformed into a concept that encompassed the present-day society of writers and readers, without such temporal scope.

This *respublica litteraria* concept, present in humanistic and Renaissance thought, as well as later, in the 17th century, constituted an element of anthropological, cultural, aesthetic, and literary awareness. Initially, as Juliusz Domański notes, the concept was associated with the idea of textual presence transcending time, yet later became the contradiction of this original notion. Regardless of all these modifications, the “republic of letters” in its conceptual form led a very modest existence. It constituted but a trace of an established awareness that recognized the existence of a common society throughout the contemporary world. This community was a real, diverse, and richly-manifested embodiment of the literary and cultural commonwealth, brought into existence by dint of the ideas of humanism, the premises of imitative aesthetics, the rules of rhetoric and poetics, and literary and cultural conventions.

The humanist movement (14th-16th centuries) encompassed myriad fields of the intellectual life in European countries. There were a great many ideological threads, which frequently took on dissimilar cultural forms. Nevertheless, this fact did not undermine the internal uniformity of this movement, which was safeguarded by common premises of a most general nature that determined the professed model of culture. The topics of humanistic discussions included both affirming the primacy of philological competence and scholarship –

grammar, rhetoric, poetry, poetics – within contemporary knowledge overall, as well as selecting a single science or art to be ascribed the role of a universal discipline, enabling all of reality to be subsumed. Coluccio Salutati was of the opinion that poetry should be seen as just such a key to all fields of knowledge; Leonardo da Vinci advocated the fine arts, defined as the broadly-interpreted graphic skills (*scienza della pittura*); still others preferred theology, metaphysics, logic, optics, or mathematics. The anti-dialectical and anti-scholastic attitude represented the negative pole of 15th-century humanistic thinking, while striving to rebuild the traditional edifice of the arts and sciences comprised the positive Pole – although one far from being uniform, torn by many contradictory pursuits.

Such polarization constituted only one of the aspects of the rich sphere of phenomena that might be termed the humanistic understanding of culture. The promoters of humanism devoted considerable attention to cultural issues. The model of culture they attempted to create was intended to realize the fullness of humanity; in the words of L. Bruni: “they are called the *studia humanitatis* because they perfect and adorn man.” Set at the central point of this model were the humanities, which were given priority over natural knowledge. Creative cultural activity should, in the humanists’ view, involve the cultivation of art, literature, (non-scholastic) philosophy, ethics, history, politics, law, rhetoric, grammar, poetry, and poetics. Particular import was vested in language, as an instrument utilized by a range of various disciplines and skills, as a kind of manifestation of the unity among human minds and the bond of society. The humanist movement updated the personal rhetorical ideal of *vir bonus dicendi peritus* in practice, and in theory expanded its application, applying this convention to man in general, seeing it as a combination of the two threads characteristic of their own ideology: an apology of *humanae litterae* and an apology of the social nature of true humanity.

Many arts and sciences owed their rebirth and development to humanistic inspiration: philosophy, rhetoric, grammar, poetics, antiquarian and mythological studies, pedagogy and psychology, history, art and aesthetics, paroemiography, lexicography, encyclopedias, re-

ligious studies, modern-era historiography, and other traditional disciplines, including the natural sciences. The humanists also deserve credit for achieving a kind of integration of the humanities: by stressing the connection between thought and speech, they perceived the presence of rhetorical, grammatical, and poetic problems in philosophy and aesthetics, as well as the presence of ethical and philosophical issues in rhetoric, grammar, and poetics. In the 15th century, patristics and Biblical hermeneutics also fell within the scope of their philological and editorial efforts.

The most characteristic trait of humanism lies in its ties to literature, interpreted in a very wide sense – this was a cult of all antique writings, especially the poetic and rhetoric arts that had been bequeathed by antiquity. Among the humanists, two attitudes towards literature could be distinguished: for some it was a vehicle, a key to the wisdom and culture of past ages, an instrument for educating contemporary individuals; for others, literature and studies of it themselves became the goal, both as poetic and rhetorical creation, and as the linguistic perfection of forms of expression and as philosophical and historical knowledge. The former stance was more characteristic of the early stage in the development of humanism, the latter of a later stage: formalist tendencies appeared at the turn of the 15th and 16th centuries that led, in poetry, to an excess of mythologized adornments and an overly faithful observance of classical literature’s stylistic means and genre forms, and in rhetoric to a Ciceronian bent.

For the humanists, literature represented a guarantee of immortality and a record of history, and it was also, as it were, a “second nature,” an ideal mirror of nature itself – this was why imitating the world and people was considered to be a binding law for writers. The *topoi* of fame and immortality, adopted from antiquity, became one of the focal points of humanist thought. *Esse semper* – “to be always,” through everlasting fame – this was a desire that could be fulfilled, the feeling was, in the realm of culture. A prospect of everlasting life opened up before the artist and writer. It was in such a mindset, although far removed from European centers of humanism, that Paweł of Krosno wrote his poem *Carmen laudes poeticae artis continens et, quod poemata immortalia sint et incaduca*

In Poland, the first attestations of humanism appeared around the middle of the 15th century (such as Z. Oleśnicki's correspondence with E. S. Piccolomini, or the academic addresses of Jan of Ludzisko). The consolidation of this intellectual movement was aided by the literary activity of foreign writers from Germany and Italy who had close personal ties to Poland (C. Celtis, F. Buonaccorsi). Beginning at the end of the 15th century, there was a considerable surge in the infiltration of Italian and European humanist thinking in Poland. At the Kraków Academy, the *humanae litterae* found a place as an element in the didactic program. Humanism bore strongly upon scientific, legal, religious, and political thought, and the age of the full development of Latin humanist literature in Poland began. Humanist ideas also penetrated the burgeoning native literature (the works of Jan Kochanowski). The 16th century was for Poland a period of both full involvement in the humanist movement, and sometimes of its adaptation in line with the needs and possibilities of native culture. Humanism helped define Polish culture, and at the same time safeguarded its bonds to the culture of Renaissance Europe.

Renovatio antiquitatis

The 20th-century Italian historian of philosophy and culture Eugenio Garin notes that “the essence of humanism is most clearly defined by its attitude to the civilization of the past.” During the time of rebirth, classical antiquity began to be viewed as a distinct, closed chapter of history, as an epoch that could be studied and contemplated from a distance, its cultural achievements recovered and reconstructed. The revival of antiquity (*renovatio Antiquitatis*) and the study of antiquity (*studium Antiquitatis*) became the hallmark phenomena of the Renaissance. Modern studies of the genesis of the Renaissance (as an epoch) and humanism (as an intellectual current) uncover many common circumstances and convergences. Garin asserts: “Both phenomena stemmed from kindred factors of a political, social, and ideological nature. In the historical philosophy of the Renaissance, the genetic kinship of the rebirth and humanism was determined, among other things, by the *notion of the Renaissance*. (...)

This idea gave rise to a conviction that the cultural achievements of antiquity could and should be subjected to scholarly study and comprehensive restitution and imitation. The process of *renovatio antiquitatis* was of an exceptionally wide scope, but it chiefly encompassed the phenomena of art and literature. The widely-professed slogans of returning to antique sources (*ad fontes*), of seeking out and studying antique manuscripts, had already found advocates and implementers among medieval scholars and aficionados of literature (in the 12th and 13th centuries), especially in centers of the so-called French pre-Renaissance. Nevertheless, the undoubted achievement of the Italian humanists of the 14th and 15th centuries lay not only in expanding the resources of known classical works (Latin as well as chiefly Greek), but also in their new study, interpretation, creative reworking and release into the bloodstream of modern culture.”

Moreover, the process of *renovatio antiquitatis* obtains a significantly bolder and more advanced explanation in our modern times. Eugenio Garin is surely right in seeking the reasons for the phenomenon of classical revival in the profound cultural transformations that represented the **cause, rather than the consequence**, of the return to antiquity. Renaissance humanism reached a scale during this period that was incomparable to all preceding pre-renaissances. As Garin explains: “This then was not about a single author, Plato or Aristotle, or even about a single culture, Greek or Roman. It was about a certain world and a certain time, a certain *universum*: all of antiquity, not just Greek or Roman, but also Egyptian and Chaldean, Hebrew and Persian. It was about recovering, within a single temporal dimension – classical antiquity – the whole of active culture: poetry and theology, science and philosophy, as well as great historical prose and law, the monuments of architecture and machinery, sculptures and paintings, technology and customs, all the way down to household items – goblets and jewelry.” Commenting on the nature of the process by which antiquity was recollected and recreated, Garin holds that “the discovery of the ancients was not the cause, but rather the effect of a newly emerging culture, it was a response to a question – an answer (...) that is a consequence of this question.” And he concludes: “And so, if we wish to have a fuller grasp of this undoubted turn in

the realm of culture, taking place at a critical moment of profound transformations, we will have to staunchly insist on the assertion that it was not the discovery or reading of the classics that defined the new climate, but rather questions that stemmed from a crisis situation which invoked the ancients to supply answers through a return to sources, triggered by the already evident weaknesses of the period – although it was a great epoch in thought and in art.”

Everything that defined the essence of the Renaissance in Europe was also to be found in Poland. The Greco-Roman heritage was reactivated (*renovatio*), studied (*studium*), and imitated (*imitatio*) – and became an integral part of the emerging national culture. Early Polish culture became receptive to ancient philosophy, science, and literature. It also absorbed classical mythology (and its theory). A system of ties to the ancient legacy and a system of references to Greek and Roman tradition were established. Polish literature would see reminiscences and borrowings, citations and hidden references, travesties and paraphrases, and also, ever more frequently and clearly as time passed, what is most difficult for research to capture and describe: creative reworkings of past literary experiences into the new artistic reality.

The development of native culture in Renaissance Poland took place via two linguistic media, and things remained so even into the 17th century, even though the native Polish language had already then gained a decisive edge over Latin. The ideal of the national language and the drive to emancipate it coexisted with a cult of classical Latin. Latin was the written language of the earliest humanist poets: Laurentius Corvinus, Paweł of Krosno (who based himself upon 22 classical authors), the “Sarmatian Ovid” – Klemens Janicius, and Andrzej Krzycki. The signals of Renaissance humanism were received most potently in Latin-based poetic work. Beginning in the mid-16th century, the thematic, genre, and artistic image of Neo-Latin poetry in Poland became considerably enriched. Grzegorz of Sambor wrote eclogues replete with meta-poetical issues and literary criticism. Szymon Szymonowic, aside from employing Horatian meters, assimilated Pindar’s poetry (*Aelinopean* – 1589).

In the Polish Latin poetry of the 17th century, there were clearer manifestations of antiquity being adapted to fit Polish culture: there

were stronger and stronger Polonizing endeavors (modifying names, circumstances, motifs), as well as trends (beginning in the early 16th century) to Christianize and ultimately “Sarmatianize” the themes, beliefs, and ideas. The nicknames “the Sarmatian Horace” and “the Christian Horace” given to Maciej Kazimierz Sarbiewski attest to this trend. Later poets, lyricists (A. Kanon, A. Ines) and epic-writers, likewise wrote with the intention of making their Latin-based poetry part of the national literature; the epics of J. W. Ustrzycki (*Sobiesciados* – 1686) and J. D. Kaliński (*Viennis* – 1717) recorded historical events of import for Poland.

Neo-Latin prose in 16th- and 17th-century Poland demonstrates that a foreign language, adopted as part of the classical heritage, cultivated and developed after classical models, could serve not only as a means of artistic expression, but also an instrument for scientific discourse (Nicolaus Copernicus’ *De revolutionibus orbium coelestium* – 1543), legal treatises (Andrzej Frycz Modrzewski’s *De republica emendanda* – 1551), historiographic debate (Marcin Kromer’s *De origine et rebus gestis Polonorum* – 1568), bibliography (Szymon Starowolski’s *Scriptorum Polonorum Hecatontas*), and contemporary chronicles of historical events (W. Kochowski’s *Annales Poloniae* – 1683-1698).

Polish-language literature drew upon antiquity through the native idiom, but at the same time employing genres of classical, Greco-Roman provenience. There were elegies, eulogies, epicedia, epithalamia, odes, and epigrams. There were paraphrases of antique comedies (Piotr Cieleński’s adaptation of Plautus’ *Trinummus*, entitled *Potrójny z Plauta* – 1598) and humanist tragedies, adopting the formal model of Greek tragedy (Jan Kochanowski’s *The Dismissal of the Grecian Envoys* – *Odprawa posłów greckich* – 1578). In the Baroque epoch, the highest rung in the hierarchy of literary genres was occupied by epic poetry, which at the same time set the norm for all writing – at least, so believed the Polish theoretician (and poet) M. K. Sarbiewski, who elevated the epic poems of Homer and Virgil to the rank of poetic perfection (*De perfecta poesi, sive Vergilius et Homerus* – 1626). He maintained that the only true poet is a Christian one, who chiefly draws themes, plot elements, and motifs not from any

fantastic mythological tales, but rather from the Bible. The paradox inherent in Sarbiewski's theory is a foretoken of the subsequent grand dispute over the legacy of classical antiquity that would seize Europe in the 18th century.

Within the realm of the Greco-Roman rhetorical tradition, prosaic genres developed: oration (including political, parliamentary, school, banquet, and funerary speeches), homilies (which blossomed particularly at the turn of the 16th and 17th centuries; i.e. Piotr Skarga's *Sermons to the Sejm – Kazania Sejmowe – 1597*), and publicist commentary (a genre that can, in terms of Latin writings, boast the treatises of A. Frycz Modrzewski and S. Orzechowski), which addressed issues of philosophy, religion, and literary criticism (Stanisław Lubomirski's *Conversations of Artaxes and Evander – Rozmowy Artaksesa z Ewandrem – 1683*). Polish authors drew upon classical historiography (M. Bielski, Ł. Górnicki, M. Strykowski, W. Kochoński), parenetic thought, and philosophy: Sebastian Petrycy of Pilzno translated Aristotle's *Politics* (1605) and *Nicomachean Ethics* (1618), outfitting these translations with extensive commentary.

In both the Renaissance and Baroque epochs, Polish (and Latin-Polish) culture and literature harked back to the great repertoire of the antique *topoi*, to mythological symbolism (especially in Baroque times), to mythological themes, motifs (S. Twardowski's *Daphne*), and metaphor, and to stylistic, compositional, and genre conventions. It was thus involved in the great European cultural commonwealth. But it also had its own "flashes" of talent, innovation, originality, and at the same time what might be termed "Polishness." The Renaissance works of Jan Kochanowski (in both Latin and Polish) constituted just such an original reference to the Greco-Roman tradition: an almost model reference, yet at the same time a native, and also fully individual one.

Classical Discourse on Literary Theory

The foundations for the classical systems of poetics and rhetoric were laid in antiquity. It was then that the writing of literary theory discourse began (now stretching back 2,500 years). Such discourse was authored by Plato and Aristotle, by Horace, Cicero and Quintilian,

and by the scholars and writers of the Middle Ages. The Renaissance faced not only the task of recovering the theoretical heritage of antiquity, of renewing and adapting classical poetics and rhetoric; it also had to overcome its chronologically nearest predecessor – medieval theory, which by reworking fragments of the classical legacy in its own way had offered its own interpretation of literary texts. The European medieval heritage was still being referenced in the late 15th and early 16th centuries. There were preserved traces of influence exerted by the works of 12th and 13th century theoreticians (Geoffrey de Vinsauf, John Garland, Eberhard the German, Matthew of Vendôme), and the works of the medieval encyclopedists, metrists, and orators were known.

The early humanist study of poetry did not yet have much in common with scholarly poetic inquiry; while it had assimilated certain philosophical and theoretical concepts, it did not yet have either its own conceptual language or its own methodology. It initially constituted part of humanist literature and literary theory, and also multi-sided discussion about antique and modern poetry. At the end of the 15th century, however, there was a surge in scholarly and theoretical interest in poetry. Scholarly trends also escalated: classical views of poetry and the rules of creation came to be subject to ever more extensive reconstruction and ever more penetrating scrutiny.

The circle of wandering humanists (including Italians, Germans and Swiss) produced “arts of versification”, treatises written for the purpose of school teaching, generally small and containing a simplified theory adapted for the needs of teaching youth. Here we should especially mention *Ars versificandi et carminum* (1486) by Conradus Celtis, *Ars versificandi et carminum* (1507) by Heinrich Bebel, a student of Corvinus, *De versificandi arte opusculum* (1515) by the Swiss humanist Valentinus Ecchius, *De arte versificandi* (given the titled *Stichologia* by the publisher – 1518) by Ulrich von Hutten, and *Scribendorum versuum maxime compendiosa ratio* (1531) by Eobanus Hessus. This early humanist study of poetry was later continued by *Libri duo ad artem versificatoriam* (1534), a little tome by the Polish religious poet and writer Szymon Zacjusz of Proszowice (ca. 1507 – ca. 1591); by *Stichologia seu ratio scribendorum versuum* (Kraków

1544), a treatise by Christoph Hegendorph (who was briefly associated with Poland, having taught for some time at the Lubrański Gymnasium in Poznań); and by others. The influence of Horatian and Platonic thought about poetry is visible in this early humanist theory. Also evident is a dependence upon medieval poetic study and upon late classical grammar (as represented by the works of Donatus, Diomedes, and many others). Finally, the impact of humanist linguistic, rhetorical, and versological (prosodic and metrical) studies is likewise recognizable.

The restitution of classical theories became at the same time a stimulus for a new way of thinking about poetry. The concepts and rules that comprised classical poetry, discovered and reconstructed by 16th-century scholars, were at the same time expanded upon, variously reworked and extended. The situation was quite different, however, in terms of the legacy of medieval literary theory. In certain fields, it acted as an intermediary in the process of accessing classical theoretical thought, yet to some extent, having been transformed into a medieval *tradition*, it acted as an element in the wider cultural context which 16th-century theory was being defined in juxtaposition to. At the same time, however, this new poetics was diametrically different, in terms of its substance and quality, as well as its formal shape, from the medieval theory of poetry and the art of poetic creation.

The developmental rhythm of European poetics varied depending on when and in which country it emerged. The early 16th century saw initiatives of a more individual nature; the apogee of the development of poetics came from the 1530s to the 1590s. The theory of poetry advanced most rapidly and intensely in Italy, which also boasted the most numerous and profound achievements in this regard. Around the middle of the 16th century, there began to be a revival in literary theory interest in France, in part associated with the activity of the Pléiade group. In Germany, after the appearance of early Renaissance humanists, there was a certain slowdown in literary theory studies, although we cannot omit mentioning the works of such famed scholars as Johann Sturm (although he was more interested in rhetoric), and the achievements of such later theoreticians of poetry (writing in

Latin) as Georgius Fabricius. In England, the earliest significant treatises in poetic theory date from the 1670s. In Spain, the Horatian rhetorical current became prevalent in research on poetry beginning in the mid-16th century; Horace’s *Ars poetica* appeared in print, together with commentaries. Towards the end of the century, editions of this sort became increasingly more numerous, and larger, more independent works also appeared.

In Poland, somewhat more numerous works about poetry would only appear in the subsequent century; here the 16th century was an age of foreign, European poetics, which satisfied the needs of both lecturers and students, as well as a wider circle of experts, aficionados of poetry, and writers themselves. The early humanist treatises did see publication in Poland (Mancinelli, Ecchius, Hutten, Fulvius, Bebel, Hegendorph, Glarean), and references were made to other, imported texts. Laurentius Corvinus Novoforensis – a Silesian who was a pupil of Celtis and the master of Bebel, and whose true name was Lorenz Raabe – published a small treatise in Kraków dedicated to the local young people: *Compendiosa et facilis diversorum carminum structura* (1496). The work of the aforementioned Szymon Zacjusz of Proszowice, *Libri duo ad artem versificatoriam*, treating matters of prosody and versification, likewise appeared in Kraków in 1532. Yet compared to the development of poetic studies in Europe, these were quite meager achievements, enriched only to a small extent with points of literary criticism. This meant that the 17th-century Latin treatises by the Polish Jesuit, poet, and scholar Maciej Kazimierz Sarbiewski would be all the more striking as theoretical phenomenon.

Many Renaissance-era studies of poetics (including in the 17th century) were written in Latin. In Italy, works on the theory of poetry were being written both in Italian and in Latin. In France and England, the native tongues were clearly edging out Latin. Germany, on the other hand, only saw its first studies of poetics written in the national language at the outset of the 17th century, while Poland followed even later, in the 18th century.

Italian monographic studies worthy of mention include: *Dialogo del furore poetico* (1581) by G. Frachetta, *Del furor poetico* (1587) by L. Giacomini, *Dialoghi della inventione poetica* (1554) by A. Lionardi

and *De imitatione libri tres* (1541) by B. Ricci. There were also musings on comedy and tragedy, detailed analyses of the concept of “catharsis” through tragedy (for example in the work of L. Giacomini *De la purgazione de la tragedia* – 1586). Treatises were written about epic and lyric poetry (e.g. Pomponio Torelli’s *Trattato della poesia lirica* – 1594), about romance (e.g. G. B. Pigna’s *I romanzi* – 1554) and also novel-writing, which was eagerly included as part of poetic creation, even though, alongside verse, it also employed prosaic form. Works were also written about poetic narration (such as G. M. Verdizotti’s treatise *Breve discorso intorno alla narrazione poetica* – 1588), as well as essays on poetic language and means of self-expression.

Synthetic works, in turn, comprise a separate corpus of texts on the field of poetry.

Marco Girolamo Vida (ok. 1485-1566), an Italian humanist and poet, as well as a Church dignitary, produced *De arte poetica libri III*, one of the first Renaissance studies of poetics (ca. 1520, published 1527), which harks back to Horace in terms of its form (hexameter), title, and its conceptual and normative content, and also draws upon the findings of classical rhetorical theories. Giovan Giorgio Trissino (1478-1550), an Italian writer and poet (as well as a diplomat), wrote in Italian his 6-part *La poetica*, whose first four parts (which address versological and linguistic/stylistic matters) appeared in 1529, the remaining two in 1562. Francesco Robortello (1516-1567), an Italian scholar, commentator, translator, and publisher of classical works, particularly excelled in the field of poetic theory owing to his interpretations of Aristotle’s *Poetics* (*In librum Aristotelis de arte poetica explicationes* – 1548), his notes to Horace’s *Ars poetica* (*Paraphrasis in librum Horatii* – 1548) and his monographic studies of various genres (satire, epigram, comedy and elegy). The works of A. Segni and L. Salviati demonstrated a high degree of mature research and complex theoretical substance. The eminent Italian poet of the Renaissance, Torquato Tasso (1544-1595), also made contributions to the field of poetics; he repeatedly made statements on current literary issues, and furthermore wrote *Discorsi ... dell’Arte Poetica, et in particolare del Poema Heroico* (published in 1587) and *Discorso del Poema Heroico* (published in 1594). Vast and quite eclectic works in

the field of poetic theory were published by Antonio Sebastiano Minturno; the first was *De poeta* (1559), the second *L'Arte poetica* (1563), addressing many poetic genres and encompassing works written in Italian. A systematized, textbookish lecture on the chief issues of poetic theory was put together by Iulius Caesar Scaliger (1484-1558) in the work *Poetices libri septem* (published 1561).

French Renaissance study of poetics was first and foremost represented by: Thomas Sebillet (1512-1589), a lawyer by education, a literature expert and poetic theoretician by passion (the propagator of Italian culture in France), and the author of a little tome *Art poétique François*, 1548; Joachim du Bellay (1522-1560), a poet (a member of the Pléiade) and scholar, brought forth the treatise *La Déffence et illustration de la langue françoise*, 1549; Jacques Peletier (1517-1582), a scholar, translator, and poet, wrote *L'Art poétique departi en deus livres*, 1555; and the great French poet Pierre de Ronsard (1524-1585), the leader of the Pléiade, also wrote on literary theory issues, in *Abrégé de L'Art poétique François*, 1565.

The advancement of English awareness of poetry was furthered by the works of: Roger Ascham (1515-1568), author of *The Schoolemaster* (1570); William Webbe (active in the 1580s), author of *A Discourse of English Poetrie* (1586); George Puttenham, to whom *The Art of English Poesie* (1589) is ascribed; Philip Sidney (1554-1586), a prominent poet and writer, who penned a treatise/essay that discussed the evaluation of poetry and addressed certain theoretical issues – *An Apologie for Poetrie*, also known as *The Defense of Poesie* (both editions appeared posthumously, in 1595). In Spain, following the period of translations of and commentaries on Horace's *Ars poetica* (beginning in the mid-16th century), towards the end of the century there began to appear greater, more independent treatises on poetics. These included *El Arte poética* by Miguel Sánchez de Lima, 1580; *Arte Poética Española* by Juan Diaz Rengifo, 1592; and *Arte para componer en metro castellano* by Jerónimo de Mondragón, 1593.

A special and considerable role in proliferating knowledge about poetry was played by works associated with school teaching. These chiefly included *Poeticae Institutiones* (1594) by Jacobus Pontanus (Jacob Spanmüller). In the 17th century this work was repeatedly

published, refashioned, and utilized in myriad ways by scholars of poetry. Pontanus' "poetic rules" are a typical school textbook, addressed to a wide audience, with an extensive scholarly base and an broad set of subject and theme-based references.

In 16th-century Poland, the classical and medieval heritage in the field of poetic theory were known and drawn upon. Aside from the older tradition, the new tradition was also quite vigorous; European novelties were watched, newly-written works on poetics and rhetoric were imported, read, and commented on. But rarely were more independent attempts made at addressing issues of literary theory. Native initiatives in the field of poetic inquiry appeared sporadically and were marked by a clear dependence upon European studies.

Taking a fully comparative perspective leads us inevitably to the conclusion that early Polish theory of poetry (meaning theory as practiced in Poland) only achieved a significant degree of originality at the outset of the 17th century – in the treatises of M. K. Sarbiewski. Other theoretical deliberations did contain certain concepts and judgments that stemmed from independent research efforts (e.g. remarks on the topic of "*carmen Polonicum*," which attempted to outline a theory of Polish verse), but these attempts do not enable us to speak of Polish variants of 16th- and 17th-century European poetics. It was only at the outset of the Renaissance epoch that profound transformations took place in Polish literary life, and a clear advancement ensued in native literary criticism, literary theory, and the study of poetry.

Equally copious was the legacy of Greek and Roman rhetoric inherited by the countries of Renaissance Europe. This encompassed Aristotle's *Rhetoric*, the treatise ascribed to Pseudo-Longinus, the treatise by Hermogenes of Tarsus, the widely-known *Rhetoric to Herennius*, and the writings of Cicero, among other works. Medieval theory produced many compendia comprised of classical works. This heritage was well-known during the period of the Renaissance and later, and also emerged in a collective edition in Paris: *Antiqui rhetores Latini* (1599). In the Middle Ages themselves, rhetoric became enhanced to include new directions of study, or even new disciplines: *ars praedicandi* (the art of the sermon) and *ars dictaminis* (the art of epistolography and broadly-defined prose).

Contemporary scholars draw attention to the varied developmental tendencies within Renaissance rhetoric. There was a fully humanist attempt at reintegrating classical rhetoric, which had become fragmented in medieval times, in tandem with a simultaneous drive to relate it to social life and to the education of the individual, in the secular and literary spirit of the *humanitas*. An important basis for this new tack was provided by the discovery of the full texts of Quintilian’s *Institutio Oratoria* and Cicero’s *De oratore* in 1416 and 1421.

One longstanding yet partially changed trend involved the continuation of currents of medieval rhetoric that had become fragmented into specializations, with rhetoric’s scope divided up among *ars dictaminis*, *ars praedicandi*, and *ars metrica*, and even, in the current of classical-leaning rhetoric, with invention distinguished from elocution.

Within the Polish tradition, examples of a departure from the comprehensive scheme of rhetoric can be found in Callimachus’ *Rhetoric*, a work inspired by George of Trebizond and encompassing only invention, or in J. Górski’s cycle in separate treatises that discusses only elocution: *De periodis* (1558), *De generibus dicendi* (1559), and *De figuris* (1560). The topics of the rhetoric period were also separately addressed by B. Herbest, polemicizing with Górski.

Under such circumstances, the reform of the *humaniora* carried out at the initiative of the Frenchman P. Ramus did not constitute a breakup of the formerly cohesive rhetorical theory, but rather an attempt at viewing the existing state of affairs in terms of a specific vision of modern-era culture and its needs.

Nevertheless, as early as the beginning of the 16th century, especially during its second half, prominent pedagogues and humanists made attempts at consolidating the full rhetorical scheme, chiefly on the basis of the writings of Aristotle, Cicero, and Quintilian (although the influence of Hermogenes was also strong in Reformation schooling).

Among the writers that put together a Renaissance model of rhetoric, the greatest impact upon Polish theory in the 16th century was exerted by J. Caesarius, whose 7-part Ciceronian *Rhetorica* (1534) was published in Kraków in 1538, by next F. Melanchton, whose *Rhetoric* was likewise published in Kraków in 1547 and 1550, and by

J. Sturm, author of *De universa ratione elocutionis* (1575) and other works pertaining to rhetorical didactics. The mainstay of Jesuit schooling was C. Suarez's *De arte rhetorica libri tres* (1560), based – as the extended title states – upon Aristotle, Cicero, and Quintilian (even though the Jesuit *Ratio studiorum* did not recommend the latter). Ambitions at presenting the full scope of rhetoric are evident in Poland in the brief compendia of S. Micanus' (Mikański) *Dialecticae et rhetoricae praecepta* (1561), J. Herbest's *Rhetorica* (1566) and *Rhetoricae compendium* (1567), and above all A. Romer's *De informando oratore libri tres* (1593). At the beginning of the 17th century, an extensive rhetoric was developed by the Gdańsk professor and systematizer of knowledge B. Keckermann, who advocated an orientation that was alternative to “Ramism,” dubbed “systematism” in logic and “neo-Ciceronianism” in rhetoric (following the terminology and research of W. S. Howell), and had a significant impact upon the development of scholarly views in Germany and England. His *Rhetorica specialis* (1608) encompassed a full course of rhetoric, and included many polemical and pedagogical remarks by the author concerning the current role of rhetoric in life and in school.

Jesuit education in the 17th century, while based upon a uniform program embracing Suarez's excellent textbook in rhetoric studies, did demonstrate the Jesuits' characteristic flexibility and liberalism as far as lecture methods and the theories taught were concerned. And so, alongside the consistently used and published textbook by Suarez and the popular work by the French Jesuit N. Caussin *De eloquentia sacra et humana* (1623), new treatments of rhetoric were produced at the numerous Polish colleges, in print and manuscript form, attesting not only to the writing ambitions of the individual lecturers, but also to a lasting interest in rhetorical theory and in the issues of rhetorical didactics. Judging by the foreign editions of certain works, the “Polish rhetoric school” was of significance in the Europe of the day. Wide prominence was gained by books penned by teachers from the college in Braniewo: M. Radau's *Orator extemporaneus* (1640) and Z. Lauxmin's *Praecepta artis rhetorices et praxix oratoria* (1648), repeatedly reissued by various, chiefly German publishing houses. Piarist rhetoric of good caliber was to be found

in M. Kraus’ *Manuductio institutionum rhetoricarum* published in 1687, and, among the publications of Pomeranian schools, in the writings of J. Mochinger, P. Titius, and others.

Aside from such comprehensive studies (of which many remained in manuscript form), monographs were also written on specific topics, including M. K. Sarbiewski’s lectures *De acuto et arguto* and *De figuris sententiarum*, ca. 1626/27. While the latter treatise was devoted to issues frequently selected beforehand and adapted by the author for schooling purposes, the former was topically innovative, highly timely in Baroque aesthetics and moreover hard to classify against the backdrop of extant rhetorical tradition; some placed it under the heading of invention (such as in Cicero), others under elocution (where the problem of wit was discussed by Aristotle). The issue of conceits was in Baroque rhetorics either a separately discussed topic, or a criterion through which all the parts and functions of the entire system of rhetoric were interpreted. An example of this sort of fundamentally conceitist rhetoric is *Phoenix rhetorum* (1672) by J. Kwiatkiewicz and his *Eloquentia reconditior* (1689), which dealt with “arcane expression.” This current had its own canon of models in 17th-century European rhetoric. These were the publications of J. Masen, A. Juglaris, E. Tesaur, P. Labbé, and others.

In the opinion of the contemporary Polish scholar B. Otwinowska, the fundamental trait of Baroque rhetoric lay in its departure from the full, proportionally balanced structure of theoretical rhetoric, deduced and synthesized from the non-uniform traditions of antiquity and late-Roman educational rhetoric by the scholars of the Renaissance, chiefly on the basis of the works of Quintilian.

Above all, however, the 17th century’s works of rhetoric were informed by the material of exemplification. While Renaissance rhetoric had had more scholarly ambitions – unifying and presenting a theory, Baroque rhetoric was clearly oriented towards the practice of self-expression. The theoretical schema, while in many cases very precise and subtle, constituted only a framework to simplify the plan of exercises and the breakdown of material. Rhetoric handbooks turned into copious storehouses of the myriad knowledge public speakers needed to possess about literature, erudition, and the specifics of

social life. They also became similar to the kind of collection that had been previously compiled and published separately, of citations, phraseology, and bookish erudition (*copia, elegantiae*, etc.), supplemented by information about current society, various lists of noble coats-of-arms (*allusiones ad stemmata*), secular and religious titles, examples of inscriptions, epitaphs, and miscellaneous formulaic sayings, even including whole speeches, letters, and sermons, real or fictitious, offered as models for emulation.

The first author to engage in Polish literary exemplification was M. K. Sarbiewski.

The technical means whereby rhetoric textbooks were structured frequently reveal a drive to update and concretize rhetorical theories and prescriptions, to relate them to the needs of society, to local needs, or even to the tastes of a specific circle or literary method. As the eminent expert on rhetoric B. Otwinowska notes, this principle gave rise to a certain aesthetic relativism, even pluralism, and to a clear association between rhetoric and the development of literature, which manifested and propagated the rhetorical trends of the day. While Renaissance and early Baroque rhetoric sought ideal, timeless models of the basis for creative self-expression and prose, Baroque rhetoric attempted to cater to the “tastes of the age” and had a corresponding impact upon didactics.

In the classical discourse of rhetoric and poetics, an especially important position was held by the notion of imitation (*imitatio*).

In his *Institutio oratoria*, the manual that had the greatest impact on the subsequent theory of imitation, Roman theoretician and orator Marcus Fabius Quintilian asserted: “there can be no doubt that in art no small portion of our task lies in imitation.” But at the same time he warned: “no development is possible for those who restrict themselves to imitation.” Finally, he concluded: “the man whose aim is to prove himself better than another, even if he does not surpass him, may hope to equal him. But he can never hope to equal him, if he thinks it his duty merely to tread in his footsteps: for the mere follower must always lag behind.”⁷

⁷ *Institutio oratoria*, Book 10, Chapter 2. English translation by H. E. Butler.

The notion of imitation became for many centuries the foundation of cultural, literary, and also linguistic awareness. In the times of Petrarch, the discoverer and adorer of Cicero (i.e. the 14th century), enthusiasm for the antique ideal did not eclipse faith in original artistic invention.

It was under the Ciceronian banner in the 15th century that the notions of the restitution and practical mastery of classical Latin emerged, and an entire set of concepts in literary criticism and criteria for literary assessment developed. In literary criticism, Ciceronianism chiefly boiled down to discussing stylistic issues. Attention was most frequently drawn by two particularly controversial issues: the problem of choosing one’s model for imitation and the problem of choosing one’s imitative approach. Some, such as Paolo Cortesi, chiefly favored Cicero – although not exclusively – as the optimal model for imitation; others like Giovanni Francesco Pico della Mirandola struck a more eclectic stance. Opinions were also divided as to how one should approach the model to be emulated. The ideal of faithful imitation, closely reproducing the prototype, subject to rigors that ruled out deviations, was juxtaposed against the proposal of imitation without such slavish coercion.

Within the program of reinstating the classical cultural reality, the idea of emulation played a significant role. Imitation in the wide sense was to be one of the paths that led to the realization of Renaissance dreams of “living antiquity.” The notion of imitation, closely bound up with the Renaissance idea – the rebirth of classical art and literature – belonged to the ideological *universum* of the newly emerging epoch; as such it existed seemingly outside of literary criticism, being among the factors that stimulated the development of certain trends in the field of such criticism, such as Ciceronianism, Horatianism, or Virgilianism. The same ideological contest that encouraged the development of Ciceronianism and the rhetorical categories of imitation also fostered reflection about imitation in poetry. Only in the 16th century, however, was there a clear revival in discussion about poetic imitation, which simultaneously became a significant component of the Renaissance study of poetry, as well as a perceptible element of poetic practice.

Debate about the models to be emulated embraced the outstanding works of the ancient poets: Homer, the Greek tragedians, Aristophanes, Virgil, Horace, Ovid, Propertius, Tibullus, Plautus, Seneca the Younger, and many others.

Quintilian highly esteemed Virgil, with whom he began review of Latin poets, as the writer who “had come closest to Homer”; but Quintilian already drew attention to certain intrinsic qualities of Virgil’s creative technique, which began to be glorified in the 16th century: a consistent artistic caliber and “care and diligence” (*cura et diligentia*) in writing. The cult of Homer, very strong in the 15th century, was still maintained in the next, yet with time the nature of emotional attitudes towards and appraisals of classical poetry became less transparent, and encountered various complications. This involved not so much choosing a model for poetry, as choosing genre models. Moreover, the growing prestige of many classical authors touched off a wave of lesser poetic cults. Ultimately, beginning in the mid-16th century, Virgil, dubbed the “king of poets” by the theoretician and lawmaker of poetic art J. C. Scaliger, would vanquish Homer. Virgil’s *Aeneid* not only attained the rank of the optimal model for emulation, it was also intended to mediate between writers and natural reality, as theoreticians and poets alike proclaimed it a “second nature.”

In Poland, beginning as early as in the 15th century, there was an awareness of the role played by the category of imitation in the humanist literary orientation. This awareness found expression in Ciceronian leanings and in the endeavor to imitate classical, especially lyric poets in Neo-Latin poetry. These experiences would be transplanted to the soil of literature written in the national language a few decades later.

Contemporary studies of early Polish imitation (in Poland this chiefly refers to the works of B. Otwinowska) show that theoretical deliberations took on a varied nature. These included sporadic calls for the emulation of ancient authors (especially Cicero), loose assessments of a particular author’s style in terms of how it related to such a model, and methodological guidelines for who to imitate and how to do so – evident first in letter-writing handbooks, later in rhetorical

manuals, more rarely in studies of poetics, and lastly in separate treatises discussing the practice of imitation and the choice of one’s model, such as V. Fabricius’ *Disquisitio de formis styli variis* (1619), S. H. Lubomirski’s conversation III “On Style” in his *Conversations of Artaxes and Evander* (1683), and wider discussions in early Polish print or manuscript studies of rhetoric.

Mono-imitative, Ciceronian theory was most clearly evident in the letter-writing manuals authored and printed in the first half of the 16th century. Jan Ursyn (*Modus epistolandi*, published in Poland in 1522) prescribed not just imitating the formulas, phrasings, and composition of Cicero’s letters in the most faithful way, he even sanctioned incorporating whole passages of these letters into one’s own. Such mechanical procedures were supposed to lead the artist to almost ideal imitation of his model. This process was frequently portrayed as “feasting on the nectar” of the emulated writer (the bee *topos*) or as “feeding on the milk” of the classical model’s “sweet speech” (the mother-and-child *topos*).

Nevertheless, the axiom of even the most faithful imitation did not free the artist from the obligation to “express himself,” to present his own views and assessment of the world. Both Ursyn and other writers frequently equate imitation and emulation, seeking and designating “new” Ciceros, Liviuses, Horaces, Tibulluses, Virgils, and Martials in the native, Polish literature. Monikers of this sort most frequently indicated that a given writer, in the opinion of his contemporaries, approached an ancient model most closely in stylistic terms, or occupied a position analogous to that of the classical authority within the cultural panorama of the times.

Imitation in Polish Neo-Latin literature led to the absorption of many genre structures and the establishment of styles that writers later tried to transfer, with greater or lesser modifications, to the literature then being created in the national language. The Ciceronian ideal could be adopted in Polish within the scope of the phraseology, syntax, and composition of Cicero’s speeches, letters, and treatises, without the lexical rigorism that even in the domain of Latin literature was a point of the most intense dispute by humanists who prescribed the imitation of the entire heritage of antiquity. This ideal

could thus foster the establishment of certain literary norms and the more precise specification of the national literary language's lexicon, in the language of both prose and poetry – as is attested, for example, by an analysis of Kochanowski's language and conceptual affinities.

The 17th century, in turn, revered looser borrowings and preferred a sparkling mosaic of literary references. As B. Otwinowska notes, literary norms that were previously drawn wholesale from classical models were in this century adopted via the rules of rhetoric and genre, relying more upon the author's own talent than upon the prestige of the old masters. A certain canon of new models was established, both foreign and home-grown. Sarbiewski held up Kochanowski as a classic of Polish poetry, still for the purposes of imitation, but later poets treated Kochanowski, like the poets of antiquity, not as an imitative source but rather as a source of looser borrowings and literary allusions. Moreover, continuing a trend already extant in the previous century, of opposing literature of a classicizing and mythological bent (represented, for example, by Erasmus of Rotterdam, and in Poland by M. Rej), Counterreformation writers looked to the Christian sources of literary reminiscences, i.e. to biblical and hagiographical texts: "From this wellspring / letter keeping / my guide and Muse / doth draw her cues" ("*Z tego zdroja / Muza moja / po literze / koncept bierze*") boasted Kochowski in his "Offering Polish Poetry to the Most Holy Virgin Mary" ("*Ofiarowanie poesim polskiej N. P. Maryjej*").

The Collapse of the Common Cultural World

The theory of imitation was an integral component of the aesthetic program that, as Stanisław Balbus writes, involved "renewing a certain type of artistic models and establishing a certain kind of communication with a specific historical literary realm (...); overt programmatic emulation is particularly favored in literary periods when normative poetics held sway – i.e. in the modern era, during the period from the Renaissance to the end of the Enlightenment, inclusive of the decadent so-called pseudo-Classicism. (...) from the beginning of the Renaissance, a very important role in guaranteeing

the continuity and cohesion of European literature was played by the normative postulate of abiding by artistic rules – which were uniform to a greater or lesser degree, and overbearing to a greater or lesser degree, yet always derived from the normative poetics of antiquity. (...) This would bequeath European literature a communal, Classicistic bond all the way through the beginning of the 19th century. (...) The universal system of artistic rules derived from the rules of classical poetics and the universal models of literary works considered to be classics (and thus authoritative) acted, for at least three centuries, as two guarantees of cultural cohesiveness. For both of them, in turn, values were ultimately guaranteed by antique culture...” The modern Polish scholar’s opinions cited here captured and aptly expressed the essence of literary imitation, its notions and premises, as well as the writing practices that implemented it. “Programmatic imitation,” in Balbus’ opinion, involved the study of the masterpieces of the past, far-off yet assimilated as one’s own; it ensured the continuity of Mediterranean culture, the existence of a community with those who had set the models. The profound changes in the cultural situation that the watershed of Romanticism would bring led to the collapse and end of this Common World of Culture.

The end of this world also entailed radical transformations in the realm of literary and cultural communication. The *respublica litteraria* (*respublica litterarum*) – i.e. as Juliusz Domański terms it “the society of those who practice writing and literature, of people who write and read” – began to manifest increasing diversification. The symbiosis of Latin and the national languages waned (although in Poland this only occurred at the outset of the 18th century!); the commonality of semiotic systems and worldviews such as Jean Paul Sartre still perceived for the 17th century when he wrote that “the author and reader belong to the same world and have the same views on everything” began to ebb. The European republic of letters lost its traits of unity, in favor of “intellectual conversation” (as S. Balbus writes).

One question worth addressing is what impact the changed cultural situation had upon the previously extant community bonds. Without a doubt, the circumstances that had conditioned the existence of the European cultural and literary commonwealth either faded

or were transformed. The tradition of classical antiquity became the subject of long-enduring disputes and debates (the famous “clash between the ancients and the moderns”). **It began to pose a challenge for “people who write and read” to communicate with each other.** In the 19th century, common ideas, universal norms and aesthetic rules, widely copied masterworks ceased to act as guarantees of the continuity, the comprehensiveness, and the cohesion of European culture. What remained, however, was a rich repertoire of *topoi* and symbolism from antiquity as well as from Christian, Judaic, and Biblical tradition.

In the translator’s foreword to his Polish rendition of Ernst Robert Curtius’ monumental *European Literature and the Latin Middle Ages*, Andrzej Borowski writes: “European literature [therefore] becomes here not so much a distinguishing or discriminating concept with respect to other cultures of world literature, as a proposal for a certain way of looking upon the cultural commonwealth we call Europe.” Curtius himself views European literature – from Homer to Goethe and beyond, all the way to the 20th century – as a continuously enduring world, free of temporal boundaries. We should recall his famous statement: “The «timeless present» which is an essential characteristic of literature means that the literature of the past can always be active in that of the present. So Homer in Virgil, Virgil in Dante, Plutarch and Seneca in Shakespeare, Shakespeare in Goethe’s *Gotz von Berlichingen*, Euripides in Racine’s *Iphigenia* and Goethe’s. Or in our day: (...) the *Odyssey* in Joyce; Aeschylus, Petronius, Dante, Tristan Corbière and Spanish mysticism in T.S. Eliot. There is here an inexhaustible wealth of possible interrelations.”⁸

More than 20 years later, Denis de Rougemont, a philosopher and cultural historian of Swiss origin, alluded to Curtius’ statement in his *Open Letter to the Europeans (Lettre ouverte aux Européens)*: “our national literatures arose out of the differentiation (sometimes late) of the common basis that is European literature.” The literary commonwealth of Europe is safeguarded by the heritage of 26 centuries, a treasure-trove of both forms and topics present in our literature.

⁸ *European Literature and the Latin Middle Ages*. English translation by W. R. Trask.

De Rougemont notes: “Of decisive import is the similarity of genres, structures, and rhetorical figures, which we do not perceive because it is too obvious: it confirms the specific nature and fundamental unity of the literary and cultural life of Europe.”

Nevertheless, in de Rougemont’s analysis, the unity of 20th-century European culture is not reminiscent of the former cultural union that lasted until Goethe’s times, since this is now a **union of pluralistic culture**: “it is a community of antinomic values, of greatly varying provenience, combined in greatly varying proportions.” And thus the author of the *Open Letter to the Europeans* dubs Europe the “homeland of diversity” or even the “homeland of creative discord.” Such a concept of European cultural unity nevertheless stems from common roots and feeds upon the common Mediterranean tradition.

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