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LATIN AS A CULTURAL IDENTITY: A CENTRAL EUROPEAN CASE

ABSTRACT. Bering Piotr, Latin as a cultural Identity: a central European Case.

Central Europe entered in the sphere of Christian and Latin Civilization later than the Western part of the continent. As a result, the new members of this community had to import most of their ‘cultural goods’, but the imports were in a relatively short time recognized as their ‘own’. This general process can be testified to by the stage plays. The use of Latin lasted in Central Europe much longer than in Western Europe and coexisted with the native languages, including in the theatrical output. The theatrical output is significant in this respect as it presents, among other sources, the mutual relationship that existed between Latin and the native language.

Keywords: Latin; Poland; Christian play; social exclusion; cultural periphery; bilingual text.

The phenomenon of the survival of Latin till our present times is still not sufficiently explained. Latin as a language was spoken broadly in the Middle Ages and in the Early Modern period. This statement is unanimously accepted by the scholars. Although some scientists like Wilifried Stroh¹ have emphasized too much the fact that Medieval and Renaissance Latin soon became a dead language, this point of view must be revised if we take into consideration the huge number of grammars and monographs that were devoted to transformations in Latin in later periods.² Modern neo-Latin studies deliver much evidence for the long lasting vitality of Latin.³ It should be emphasized that examinations into the use of Latin in the Early Modern period are combined with research on Latin as a specific cultural code. Apart from my investigation there remains a sphere of linguistic interferences between Medieval Latin and vernacular languages.⁴ An examination of Latin and its heritage offers a significant contribution to the history of ideas. It is partly these factors which spurred me to analyse the mutual relations between Latin and Polish in the late Medieval theatrical output.

¹ Stroh 2007.

² For further references and examples, see Stotz (1998–2004).

³ Undoubtedly the most important of these are the studies of IJsewijn (2015).

⁴ For references to the Polish language see the inspiring book by Weysenhoff-Brożkowska (1991).

The cultural role played by Latin in this period is still full of gaps and unclear. Statements on late Latin from an excellent work written by Françoise Waquet *Latin or the Empire of a Sign*,⁵ which has deeply influenced the mainstream of studies on Latin status, are not obvious for Central Europe.⁶ On the contrary to the West-European situation, in Poland Latin denotes any form of social exclusion.⁷ This language was more widespread among the many social shifts in Early Modern Poland than in the western part of the continent. Andreas Cellarius, a Dutch traveller to Poland, who wrote the oldest Dutch description of Poland (1660), emphasized that even a simple herdsman or a ploughman was able to give directions in Latin.⁸ It is possible that this statement is only an anecdote, but even if it is so, it casts some light on a remarkable role played by Latin in Poland, which can be a surprise for people from abroad. This phenomenon of such a unique status of Latin in Poland and more generally in Central Europe is not sufficiently explained and remains an intellectual challenge for scholars. Unfortunately the preserved written records (such legal agreements and oaths) did not testify to any special status of Latin. On the other hand, a broad use of Latin among Polish people cannot be denied.⁹

The reason for this can be explained within the category of ‘cultural youth’. This notion was established by the Polish scientist Jerzy Kłoczowski. In his remarkable book *Młodsza Europa* (Younger Europe) he pointed to the temporal differences in the development of Central and Eastern – mainly Slavic – Europe.¹⁰ The younger recipients of Latin culture had to accept more the intensive new rules, social habits and ways of thinking than the inhabitants from France, Germany or Italy. Very similar statements have been made by Norwegian and Danish scholars who worked on a project focusing on the Latin centre and peripheries in the Middle Ages. Their conclusion shows without any doubt that cultural patterns were observed more strictly on the edges of the Latin civilization than in the older centres.¹¹ This phenomenon may not be easily understandable at first consideration. But it is, nevertheless, wholly logical. The new members of the Latin community had to observe all the rules in order to prove themselves to be true Christians and true civilized people. Similar evidence may

⁵ Waquet 2001. The original text, *Le latin ou l'empire du signe*, was published in French in 1998 in Paris.

⁶ See Axer (2004: 20–21).

⁷ See more on this topic, Waquet (2004A: 449–452, 456–457).

⁸ Prędoła 2008: 102–104. It should be emphasize, that the Dutch author has written this description based mainly on various Polish sources.

⁹ Circumstances of the use of Latin in Early modern Europe are analysed by Axer (2004A: 28–31).

¹⁰ Kłoczowski 2003: 17, 42–57. Unfortunately this book is almost unknown outside Poland. In my opinion it gives a great contribution to studies on European identity and its territorial differences.

¹¹ See more on this project and its results in Bagge (2004: 90–99; 2005; 2006: 221–256).

be found nowadays: the first generation of the Turkish *Gastarbeiter* in Germany tried precisely to adopt the western lifestyle. Only the second generation brought change and emphasized its own culture.

Latin, obviously, played the first role in the cultural transfer. Western Civilization based on Christianity has put written text in a central point of an intellectual life. The only widely-accepted and understandable language code was Latin. These quite banal remarks should be emphasized because they explain the situation which new members of Civilization must have faced. Vernacular languages – among them Old-Polish – were unable to describe new notions, abstracts and ideas. Latin was the only logical solution.¹²

If we analyse the emergence of the European nations during the Middle Ages,¹³ we can state that this process was most advanced in Western Europe, especially across a large area. The early attempts at thinking on national categories were at first noticeable in the Carolingian monarchy. To the east from its borders were living tribes speaking other languages. The origins of the German nationality are still being discussed among scholars. In Italy this process had its own dynamic, which created a modern unitary state no sooner than in the 19th century. But all these phenomena were played out some centuries earlier than similar ones in Central and Eastern Europe. The time shift is evident. Although it is not the main or even an important reason for explaining the power of Latin in Eastern Europe, it cannot be lost from view.

Returning to the main topic, it should be emphasized that the new members of the Western Civilization very quickly internalized all the main religious and cultural streaming. Saint Stephan, the king of Hungary, was a grandson of the first baptized Hungarian leader. Presumably very intense activity on the adopting of universal values gave splendid results in the next generations. But almost all ‘cultural goods’ had to be imported.

The origins of the Polish theatre are unexplained. On the contrary to Scandinavia, the scholars are unable to reconstruct any form of old-Slavic, pagan or folklore ceremonies.¹⁴ The first form of theatre in Poland was a religious theatre. It was closely related to the Church and the plays were performed obviously in Latin. But neither Latin nor Christianity was unfamiliar to the actors, writers and partially the audiences.¹⁵ The entrance into the Latin and the

¹²Such statements are widespread in Polish historiography. Cf. J. Dowiat (1985: 201–202, 206–212).

¹³Although much time has elapsed since its first publication, the book is still valuable, Zien-tara (1985). It was translated into German *Frühzeit der europäischen Nationen* (Osnabrück 1997). I use the Polish version. For more detailed studies see: Dunbabin (2000). Cf. *Państwo* (1990).

¹⁴See important remarks on this question formulated by Gunnell (2011: 13–40), also Lewański (1981: 68).

¹⁵Lewański (1966: 11) has stated that religious performances were partially understandable for the audiences who did not speak or read Latin.

Christian culture began to bring its first fruits. Naturally it was not yet a period for the use of the native language, which was occasionally used in theatrical plays.

Characteristic to the Polish Medieval dramatic output is a unique mixture of Latin and Polish. This is not only a multilingual ‘puzzle’, but a set of some rules organizing the inner structure. It should be added that a relatively similar situation could be found in German plays from the 13th century.¹⁶ For a more detailed examination a late redaction of *Cena Domini* from c. 1550 has been chosen.¹⁷ In the manuscript the rubrics are written in Polish, while the main text, based on Biblical passages, is composed in Latin.¹⁸ The two different linguistic streams are separated:

Pyrwy kor to ma śpiewać nabożnie:

<Versus:>

Venit ergo ad Simonem Petrum et dixit ei Petrus:

A to wstawszy Piotr ma śpiewać:

<Antiphona:>

Domine, tu michi lavas pedes?

Wtóry kor to ma śpiewać:

Respondit Jesus et dixit ei:

A to Jezus ma śpiewać:

<Versus:>

Quod ego facio, tu nescis modo, scies autem postea.

Pirwy kor ma to śpiewać:

Dixit ei Petrus:

A to Piotr ma śpiewać:

<Versus:>

Domine, non lavabis michi pedes in eternum.

Wtóry kor to ma śpiewać wessele:

Respondit Ihesus et dixit ei¹⁹

(First choir should sing piously: / He cometh therefore to Simon Peter. / And Peter saith to him: / And Peter standing up should sing: / Lord, dost thou wash my feet? / Second choir should sing: / Jesus answered and said to him / And Jesus should sing: / What I do, thou knowest not now; but thou shalt know hereafter / First choir should sing: / Peter saith to him / And Peter should sing: / Thou shalt never wash my feet / Second choir should sing joyfully: / Jesus answered him).²⁰

¹⁶ See an elaborated paper delivered by Bažil (2012). The author suggests a different role played by Latin in French and German dramaturgy.

¹⁷ Kraków, Biblioteka OO Bernardynów, MS Graduale 18 RL, fols. 38–40. An accurate edition with commentary is given by Lewański (2001: 222–225).

¹⁸ Lewański 1966: 42.

¹⁹ Lewański 1981: 35; Lewański 1999: 224. A Polish and Latin orthography was slightly modernized.

²⁰ The English translation of Biblical passages based on Vulgate Douay-Rheims is available online (Vulgate.org).

Only a synthesis of both languages allows one to understand this passage wholly. In order to correctly understand and perform this text, the director, and perhaps the actors, must know both languages. The arrangement of the stage was also interesting. The audience heard only the Latin version. This language could at this moment be recognized as a sign of the *sacrum*. It helps to be a member of a sacred community taking part in the biggest Christian ceremonies. Latin does not exclude anybody from such a community, but creates a new one.²¹

A use of Polish could be understood mistakenly as a simple commentary for non-educated people. But in fact it is quite opposite. The under-educated members of clergy could not know Latin at a satisfactory level. Whether they wrote or read in Polish is also uncertain. The rubrics provide important instructions on how to perform, but content is composed in Latin. I suggest that for a successful performance it was recommended to know both languages. Moreover, the use of Polish in liturgical books (here *Graduale*) is a sign of advancement of vernacular language. Latin occupied still a dominant position in liturgy.²² As a linguistic system Latin was too remote from any Slavic (and German) language because of linguistic interferences. The separate streams of Polish and Latin in the same text can also testify to this phenomenon.²³

The central and most important Christian ceremony *Visitatio Sepulchri* was exclusively played in Latin. Only the song *Wstał Pan Chrystus* may be sung in Polish, but this exception was common in the liturgy throughout the whole of Europe; e.g. in Germany was sung *Christ is erstanden*.²⁴ But Latin remains the main factor in the inner structure of drama – not only as a set of instructions for the actors, but more as a unique intellectual spine. With but a small risk it may be stated that the semi-Polish text reproduces the Latin version. Moreover, it reproduces not only the words and sentences but also a specific kind of thinking. The Polish translators or compilers did not change these ideas or ways of argumentation.

One of the most impressive examples is offered by the medieval Polish planctus *Lament świętokrzyski*. It was composed entirely in Polish and it was preserved in one – unfortunately no more existed – copy written about 1470. It is impossible to estimate an origin of this text more precisely.²⁵ Also its use is

²¹The sacred character of the community taking part in Christian ceremonies has been emphasized by Kindermann (1957: 216). Cf. also a still useful book: Hardison (1965).

²²The strong presence of Latin in a liturgy is noticeable in Poland also in 16th and 17th centuries. It is mainly related to a victory of a Counter-Reformation. On using Latin in late 15th century in Church and a liturgy, see Michałowska (1995: 669–673) and Potkowski (1984: 67–73, 140–142).

²³Weyssenhoff-Brożkowska 1991: 9. Her statements on similarity between Latin and Romance languages converge with the main theses of Bažil (2012).

²⁴Lewański 1981: 59; Michałowska 1995: 275–276. A use of German in liturgical dramas has been comprehensively examined by Bažil (2012: 177–181).

²⁵Michałowska 1995: 448–457.

unclear. Some Polish scholars argued that *planctus* is a part of the no longer existing play from the 14th century.²⁶ A reason for this assumption is founded on the organization of text, in which an appeal to an audience is clearly recognisable.

Our source was very carefully analysed by an Italian scholar Sante Graciotti about a quarter of a century ago. The main thesis of his elaborate paper confirms the relationship between the Polish text and its Latin European ancestors. It was impossible to find any more direct influences. Neither German nor Italian influences can be testified.²⁷ On the contrary, the Latin tradition is quite clearly recognisable. Graciotti pointed out that the primary cultural ‘homeland’ is the Medieval Latin tradition. Any geographical indications are secondary. Of course, it is possible to investigate this source in order to find some relations to other vernacular cultures, but the results are not conclusive, especially compared to Latin. Unfortunately, we cannot reconstruct the missing links in the tradition. We also cannot be precise about the circumstances in which Latin was replaced by another language, but the Latin influence is undeniable.²⁸

This case is typical for Polish Medieval culture. The few educated people who knew how to read a script, and wrote in Latin were named the *litterati*. The native culture and language were not so well organized as Latin. This language had already established a huge vocabulary for social, religious phenomena and any abstract ideas, which could not be named in Polish. Latin offered a tool for thinking in a strict way.²⁹ It should be also emphasized that the use of a written word in all-day activities rendered our way of thinking more precise.³⁰ Latin, as a language of common communication, was used in diplomacy, in schools, in church and at the king’s and prince’s court. It provided a set of notions and methods for all writers. The period of Polish as a medium of literacy was still to come much later.

Latin was extremely attractive, because it offered a complete set of intellectual tools for almost any kind of mental activity, also for the first forms of the theatre. But this situation could not last forever. Rich in abstract and specialist vocabulary, the Polish language was gradually improving. Only a small percentage of new words were rooted in the Slavic background, with the majority of them being modifications of Latin words.³¹ The liturgy and literature belong

²⁶Michałowska 1995: 448–457; Lewański 1981: 79–80, 141; Bering 2006: 278–279.

²⁷Graciotti 1991: 105–139.

²⁸Despite the many years since its publication the book about the relationship between Latin and German in Medieval plays written by Wimmer (1974: 275–279) is still inspiring. Cf. also Bažil (2012).

²⁹See more on this topic in Geremek (1989: 117).

³⁰The highly valued studies on literacy and its influence on human thinking in Middle Ages have been conducted by scholars directed by Keller (*Pragmatische* 1992; *Träger* 2016).

³¹A concise introduction to Polish language in the Middle Ages is delivered by Mazurkiewicz (2015). A standard handbook for history of the Polish language: Klemensiewicz (2007).

wholly to the Latin sphere. Both were a cultural import, but what is mainly impressive is the fast process of its internalisation. In some cases the Latin and the Old-Polish parties and phrases create a whole and indivisible entity. Recently the manuscript of *Kazania świętokrzyskie* (*The Holy Cross Sermons*) has been analysed as a good example of this phenomenon.³² Both languages, Polish and Latin, have an equal position. A similar case can be found in Latin-English sermons; according to the studies of Siegfried Wenzel our sermons represent the ‘full C type’, in which both languages are equal.³³ The synthesis of languages builds a new aesthetic and literary quality.

I would like to risk a hypothesis that a similar case is not obvious or expected, however, for any stage production. There exist many sources which combine both languages. But they are rather clearly separated in manuscripts. In the text mentioned above, *Cena Domini*, two linguistic streams existed separately: In order to correctly understand and perform this text, the director and perhaps the actors had to know both languages. This case resembles the situation of *Kazania świętokrzyskie*; but when we take a closer look, we will notice that this text is bilingual only in reading. The audience hears only Latin. This example is not the only one, because in Polish and German plays the rubrics are composed in Latin: *Michael dicit, Raphael dicit, Tertius miles, clamabit, mutabit vocem*. The quotations come from the German *Wiener Osterspiel* and Polish *Historyja o Chwalebnyim Zmartwychwstaniu Pańskim*.³⁴ Despite these examples I would not risk a hypothesis that Latin was used as a technical language, which was intended only for people on stage, because in other passages of *Wiener Osterspiel* the audience is admonished in Latin: *Silete, silete, silete, silete, silentium habete*. Moreover – as it has been mentioned – the stage performance was so composed that the audience could partially follow it without knowing Latin. A gesture, mimic or a modulation of the voice compensates for the lack of understanding of the spoken words.³⁵

But the question remains: what role did Latin play on the stage? The existing sources testify to its broad use. At first it was the language of the liturgy and liturgical ceremonies, which were exclusively performed in Latin. In other genres can be found a concurrence of both languages – Latin and the native language. In some cases Latin was reserved for stage directions.³⁶ In others, the use of this language might have a special purpose, e.g. to create a more solemn character of a spectacle. The author of *Historyja o Chwalebnyim Zmartwychwstaniu Pańskim*

³²Mejor 2015: 51–88; cf. also Mika 2012.

³³Mejor 2015: 62; cf. Wenzel 1994.

³⁴See more on this topic: Bering (2006: 280–281). The best Polish edition of the play is *Historyja* (1971).

³⁵Lewański 1966: 11–14.

³⁶A good example of this situation is a German/Latin text of *Alsfelder Passionsspiel*. For more on it see Nowé (1996: 1–12).

in order to make a prologue more sublime uses some Polish words reserved normally only for the nobility.³⁷ A Latin liturgy is still present in this play: some scenes have their direct origin in the liturgy, whilst other psalms and antiphonies are sung in Latin.³⁸

In the late Middle Ages, rather characteristic to Poland and other countries from Central Europe, there existed a kind of “play” or a tension between Latin and the native languages. Where Latin came it was not only used as an intellectual instrument for expressing notions and ideas, but most of all an established cultural code. The acceptance of an imported system and its recognition as the society’s own led to an active use and a development of the Latin code. It is a unique case in Europe. The sentence *Ego nobilis sum, loquor Latine* can be mentioned as a suitable example. Although it comes from a 19th century novel, the importance of Latin in the late Middle Ages and Early Modern period describes its emergence.³⁹ Even more significant is the transformation from the foreign to the society’s own system. Naturally the language itself remained foreign, but its inner world was recognized as familiar, ‘our’, closely related to Polish manners and habits. The high status of Latin and – almost paradoxically – its broad use were significant features of Old-Polish culture.⁴⁰ The theatrical production and output can only partially testify to this process, but testify they do.

Latin in plays has achieved a special but not privileged position. It was used as a language of communication⁴¹ and also as a useful tool for staging plays. It co-existed with the Polish language. Both languages concurred and created an original entity. The advance of the Polish language was only partial, because Latin retained its importance. Even though it has been gradually declining in use, Latin has lasted in manuscripts and thinking.

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³⁷ *Historyja* 1971: 14.

³⁸ *Historyja* 1971: XVI–XVIII.

³⁹ Waquet 2004A: 449.

⁴⁰ Cf. a book exclusively devoted to this topic: Mikołajczak (1998).

⁴¹ See more: Waquet (2004: 461–477).

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LATEIN ALS KULTURELLE IDENTITÄT: DER MITTELEUROPÄISCHE FALL

Z u s a m m e n f a s s u n g

Das Mitteleuropa trat zur Lateinischen und Christlichen Zivilisation spät bei. In westlichem Teil des Kontinents wurden Latein und Christlichkeit schon fest etabliert, deswegen die neuen Mitglieder sehr schnell allgemein geltende Werte, kulturelle Verhalten und Güter „importieren“ mussten. Nach zwei Generationen in meisten Fällen wurden diese Importe schon als eigene anerkannt. Dieses Phänomen bestätigen auch Theaterspiele. Vom besonderen Wert ist eine Möglichkeit, die Spannung zwischen dem Latein und vernakulären Sprachen in Theaterstücken zu untersuchen. In vielen Fällen differenziert diese Spannung nicht die Sprachauswahl, sondern die Art des Denkens.