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# **Essays on the Spread of Humanistic and Renaissance Literary Civilization in the Slavic World (15th-17th Century). An Introduction**

Giovanna Siedina

The topic “The Spread of Humanistic and Renaissance Literary Civilization in the Slavic World” is too vast to approach it within the confines of a brief contribution essay or of a single monograph. Therefore, after a few preliminary observations, I will move on to outline my intent in publishing the contributions gathered in this volume as well as the elements which unite the essays.

The Renaissance age, whose impact manifested in various forms and levels of intensity throughout the Slavic world, has been the subject of study over two centuries. The bibliography on this topic, starting from the works of J. Burckhardt, G. Voigt and J. Michelet, is immense. Despite this long history of inquiry, the discussion on a whole series of issues is still open, first of all with regard to the chronological context of the European Renaissance. In fact, according to some scholars, who consider the Renaissance as a repeatable phenomenon and typologically similar to other similar phenomena which occurred before and after it, the Renaissance proper was preceded in the West by three different “Renaissance” or rather “renovations”: the Carolingian revival of the 8th and 9th centuries and those of the 10th and 11th and 11th and 12th centuries. Some scholars place the beginning of the European Renaissance in the 12th century; while others characterize the 13th and 14th centuries as a proto-Renaissance, that is, only a preparation for the true Renaissance<sup>1</sup>. However, the great majority of specialists share the opinion that the Renaissance was an era that sought a synthesis of values that began in the mid-

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<sup>1</sup> For a detailed and insightful examination of the difference between the Middle Ages and Humanism-Renaissance in the reception and interpretation of the classical world and the novelty of Renaissance thought, see Garin 1987: 85-100.

14th century and ended at the end of the 16th century, even if some extend it to the mid-17th century, taking into account the 'chronological lag' of the countries of the Eastern Europe.

In the literature on the subject, historical interpretation and the question of how to properly define the Renaissance has long been and is still under discussion. The Renaissance is generally regarded as an era of extraordinary cultural flowering, as a radical change in culture or as a transition stage, and sometimes in the most literal meaning of the word, as a recovery (re-establishment) of classical antiquity. Scholars are increasingly inclined to consider it as a historical-cultural era, but to this day there is no full consensus in the academic community either on the criteria of 'determination' of the Renaissance, or on its definition.

Some scholars consider the Renaissance as a typological phenomenon, which occurred in different areas at different times, but in the presence of similar socio-economic conditions and with similar characteristics, a sort of necessary stage in the history of world culture marking a renewal of the activity of a people or group of peoples defined in the context of spiritual culture after a long period of stagnation or decay. Among them N.I. Konrad sees it as a universal phenomenon, an "obligatory stage in the passage from the Middle Ages (every Middle Ages) to the Modern Age (every Modern Age), from feudalism to capitalism"<sup>2</sup>.

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<sup>2</sup> Graciotti 1988: 225; Konrad 1965, in particular 274-280. I will briefly recall here N.I. Konrad's conception of a "world Renaissance", contained in the collection of essays *Zapad i Vostok* (1966) and well exposed by Graciotti (1988). Konrad considers the Renaissance as a typological phenomenon, as a natural stage in the history of world culture, which begins in China in the 8th-9th centuries, continues in Asia Minor, Iran and India in the 9th-15th centuries and reaches its fulfillment in Europe in the 14th-15th centuries.

Those who reject this theory emphasize the uniqueness of the Renaissance era in Italy and Western Europe, and deny the use of this word to characterize similar or precursory phenomena of the Renaissance, or even development models that claim to be universally valid, but “abstract from the historical detail”, as Graciotti writes<sup>3</sup>. Therefore, this current of thought considers the Renaissance as a non-repeatable historical-cultural phenomenon, with its specific tasks, which took place in a defined time and place.

The coexistence of two different conceptions of the Renaissance, already starting from the end of the 19th century, gave rise to the aforementioned discordance of opinions.

The study of Renaissance culture is further complicated by the very nature of the transition period from the Middle Ages to modern times. It was a period riddled with contradiction<sup>4</sup>. As Graciotti points out, the Renaissance is an era that sought to synthesize the values of the medieval world with those that already belonged to the new world. Its task was “to reconcile the old theological culture with the new anthropological culture”, and for this reason, the scholar emphasizes, “that civilization was so changeable and so fragile” (Graciotti 1988: 240). He identifies three constitutive elements of the Renaissance: the rebirth of classical culture; the cult of art and *humanae litterae*; and the centrality of the creator man (*homo faber*) in the perspective of Renaissance philosophy. Distinctive features of the Renaissance, alongside the birth of individualism and intellectual emancipation, are the discovery of the value of man as an individual and the secularization of human thought. As noted by Graciotti, as regards Slavic

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<sup>3</sup> Graciotti 1988: 227.

<sup>4</sup> As I have already said in footnote 1, for a careful examination of some constants of the relationship between the Middle Ages and the Renaissance see the chapter *Interpretazioni del Rinascimento* in Garin 1987, in particular pp. 95-100.

languages and literatures, the confusion between the Renaissance and other types of 'rebirth' or 'awakening', typologically different, could be avoided by using the Slavic term exclusively to name the different historical-social-cultural 'awakenings'. Instead, to characterize the Italian Renaissance and the cultural phenomena (literary, artistic, philosophical) that participate in it or inherit some elements, it would be preferable to use the loanword derived from the term *Renaissance* (e.g. in Russian *renesans* and the adjective *renesansnyj*).

A similar terminological confusion has occurred with the term "humanism". This term, as Graciotti points out (1988: 218), characterized by a marked etymological polysemy, and which in current usage has the meaning of 'cult of man', is also widely used in the meaning of "philanthropy", of "humanitarianism", that is, in a timeless and non-spatial sense. However, one should keep in mind, when talking about the Renaissance, that the term Humanism characterizes one of its phases or components, in particular linked to the relationship with the ancient world and to the cult of classical letters (cf. Graciotti 1988: 218-222). Already Goleniščev-Kutuzov in 1963 warned against the use of the term "humanistic" (in Russian *gumanističeskij*) next to the term "progressive" to define phenomena that have nothing in common with Humanism-Renaissance (Goleniščev-Kutuzov 1963b: 5).

It is therefore important to consider Humanism and the Renaissance as "two facts of the same historical process, [...] which between the 14th and 16th centuries spiritually renewed the face of Europe" (cf. Graciotti 1988: 222).

The works by Goleniščev-Kutuzov (1963a and 1963b) constitute a milestone in the study of the spread of Humanism and the Renaissance in the Slavic, especially East Slavic, world. For what concerns this area, the scholar reconstructed the penetration of humanistic concepts and ideas that beginning with the 15th century were spread in the Ruthenian area thanks to young men

who had studied in Western European universities and academies. He also illustrated the ways of dissemination of humanistic ideas and practices in Russian culture, apparently more impervious to them, among which was the Greek influence. Goleniščev-Kutuzov stresses that a good number of intellectuals of Greek origin who subsequently taught in Galicia, Lithuania and Moscow, came from islands dominated by Venice. Therefore, these intellectuals had come into direct contact with centers and representatives of Italian Humanism and had absorbed the new currents of thought and artistic experience.

As for the Slavic countries, in past decades scholars have developed various conceptions of national 'Renaissance'. The idea was gradually established that the Renaissance was not exclusively a Western European phenomenon, but that it also characterized the Western Slavs, some of the Southern Slavs, and partially the Eastern Slavs. Critics generally recognize that the Renaissance took on different forms, importance and 'intensity' in the various Slavic cultures<sup>5</sup>.

However, it seems to us that the limitation of such a large and diversified phenomenon to the national horizon has not, up to now, allowed us to fully grasp its various 'declinations' and its overall scope; in my opinion, an areal type approach would be more profitable. In this regard, it seems to me important to recall here the discussion on the pre-Renaissance *Predvozroždenie* by D.S. Lichačev (1958) and the Slavic-Orthodox Revival by R. Picchio (1958: 197) about the Hesychast movement and the recovery of the Cyril-Methodian heritage connected to it. Despite the different approaches, scholars have found in this case that it was a unitary and supranational movement, "within which the

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<sup>5</sup> See, among others, the seminal works of Goleniščev-Kutuzov (1963a and 1963b) and the essays collected in Graciotti, Sgambati 1986.

various souls of the Slavonic civilization actively interacted” (Alberti 2010: 160)<sup>6</sup>.

The need to introduce new perspectives to evaluate the relationship of the Eastern Slavic world, in particular Muscovy / Russia, with Humanism and the Renaissance is argued by Garzaniti. Generally, the shared opinion was that in Muscovy medieval culture maintained its dominant position until the Baroque period. Recent research provides a different perspective on that relationship. In the first place, Garzaniti stresses the need to step away from crystallized interpretative schemes and free ourselves from established axioms characterizing Humanist and Renaissance scholarship, which generally influence research on Eastern Slavic culture. As the scholar states, “the most evident of these avenues is the national-driven interpretation, which views all cultural manifestations as part of a separate linguistic, literary and artistic canon, following the dominant paradigm of the 19th century”. Another interpretative approach that needs revision is the separation between secular and religious culture, a separation which was not as clear-cut as one might imagine. Notwithstanding the quest of philosophical research and political science for greater autonomy respectively from theology and moral precepts, in early modernity the “intertwining between a recovery of antiquity and the renewal of Christianity remained inextricable”. What they both shared was a new concept of the individual. Garzaniti illustrates the importance of re-evaluating the activity of expatriate Greek intellectuals coming from the Byzantine world. Indeed, their contribution not only in the rediscovery of classical culture, through their research on the Greek and Hellenistic heritage and on the translation from Greek into Latin, but also in the preservation of the patristic,

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<sup>6</sup> “al cui interno le varie anime della civiltà slavoecclesiastica hanno interagito attivamente”. Already N.I. Goleniščev-Kutuzov (1973) had spoken of the pre-Renaissance regarding South Slavs in connection with Byzantium.

theological and philosophical legacy is not negligible. Finally, another aspect that needs re-evaluation is the role that Humanistic and Renaissance ideas played in the development of the cultural identity of Russia, when the latter grew not only in accordance with, but also in opposition to them.

Tatiana Matasova's essay is devoted to Russian culture and to its reception of elements of Renaissance culture. One of the paths to understanding the nature and degree of the changes brought about by Renaissance influences on Russian culture is the analysis of the reception of the most significant Renaissance texts. The scholar does such an analysis of some copies of the Old Russian translation of the First book of Pomponius Mela's *Cosmographia, sive De Situ Orbis*, known also as *De Chorographia – Geografija* in Russian scholarship. Pomponius Mela's *Cosmographia* was one of the most appreciated ancient texts by Renaissance humanists and scholars and considered an example of outstanding ancient Latin. The text of the First book of *Cosmographia* is a vivid compilation of known facts about Europe, Asia, and Africa in the ancient world. It provides information about the topography, nature and important places of the described lands, as well as the habits and customs of native peoples. The comparison of the five extant Russian copies of the Old Russian translations of *Cosmographia* suggests to Matasova the existence of at least ten copies of the Old Russian translation of the First book of *Cosmographia*. Moreover, the author draws the conclusion that the translation was made not from an incunable, but from a manuscript. As to the possible translator, Matasova speculates that he may have been a member of the influential Tarchaniota family (of aristocratic Greek origin, with ties to the Palaeologus). As to the central issue, how could such a markedly pagan work was perceived by Russian scribes, the author analyses the translation and comments on a few passages. These passages clearly demonstrate that in Muscovy the information provided by *Cosmographia* was not considered 'objective', but was rather interpreted through the prism of



biblical analogy.

Ties to the Tarchaniota family also characterize the 'protagonist' of V. Stojanović's essay, dedicated to Michael Marullus Tarchaniota's poem *De laudibus Rhacusae*. The first part of the article reconstructs a tentative biography using the scarce information available for this poet; the second part provides an analysis of Marullus' aforementioned poem. Quite interestingly, Stojanović demonstrates that Marullus' description greatly departs from reality, in that his praise of Dubrovnik's wealth far exceeds that of the antique cities of Syracuse and Corinth. However, as the author states, Marullus' real goal is to praise freedom, especially *libertatem avorum*, since freedom in the Renaissance political thought represents a possibility for man to master his own destiny.

Žanna Nekrašević-Karotkaja's essay is devoted to the spread of the motif of *translatio imperii*. The scholar reconstructs the history of this concept that originated in Late Antiquity and the Middle Ages. It is a political stereotype of transfer of metaphysical world domination from country to country. The concept of *translatio imperii* accounts for the belief of the Byzantine kings in their exceptional right over emperors as legal successors of the old Rome. After the fall of Constantinople (1453), the concept of *translatio imperii* gradually lost its universal character and was interpreted within the confines of a nation. In the epic poetry of the Renaissance, the theme of *translatio imperii* can manifest itself in describing the history of a concrete dynasty that is fighting with another dynasty, albeit within the borders of the same country. Francesco Filelfo (1398-1481) mused on the concept of *translatio imperii* in the epic poem *Sphortias* dedicated to Francesco Sforza, an Italian condottiero. At the end of the 15th century, a new legend appeared that claimed the Byzantine origin of the Monomach's Cap. That, in turn, explains the religious and political idea of Moscow being the third Rome. Alternative theories emerged in the epic poetry of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth.

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The epic poem *The Prussian War* (Lat. *Bellum Prutenum*, 1516) by Ioannes Visliciensis depicts the events of the Great War with the Teutonic knights and the battle of Grunwald in 1410. The events became the symbol of political might of the Jagiellonian dynasty, Nekraševič-Karotkaja explains, and the poem provided a literary formulation of the concept 'Jagiellonian' patriotism for the first time. The author also explains how the German poet Johannes Mylius endeavoured to find commonalities between the Jagiellonian concept and the concept of *Sacrum Imperium Romanum Nationis Germanicae* his epic poem *Ἱερόνικων* in two books.

The goal of explicating the concept of *translatio imperii* in literature was to uncover the fundamental factor which laid the basis for another concept – *idea universalissima herois absolutissimi* (the universal idea of the most perfect hero, Sarbievius, *De perfecta poesi*, II, 7), which, in its turn, was thoroughly developed in the literature of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth. Nekraševič-Karotkaja demonstrates how the artistic expression of both the 'Jagiellonian' and Lithuanian (i.e., Grand Duchy of Lithuania) patriotism, with the insights of the concept of the transfer of empire, had an enormous impact on the formation of the national identity of the Belarusian, Lithuanian, and Polish peoples.

The Czech area is represented by L. Kysučan's essay with the ambitious title *Classical Tradition in the Czech Renaissance and Baroque Literature*. The scholar's aim is to map the key influences of the culture of classical antiquity in the literature of the Czech Renaissance and Baroque, covering the era from the first decades of the 16th century to the early 18th century. Since the stated theme is too broad to be satisfactorily dealt with within the limits of an article, the author decided to carry out his analysis in the form of case studies concerning examples of selected works of literature and selected motifs from ancient history.

Interestingly enough, Kysučan realized that the historical motifs coming from

the classical world are present practically in all typical genres of Czech literature. The homiletic production, spreading at an extraordinary pace in the Baroque period, was greatly inspired by classical rhetoric. The same can be said of the Baroque theatre. Motifs from ancient history are not only enumerated and mentioned as pure facts by authors, but they are exploited with sophisticated intention as a medium of allegory, satire, irony or, in contrast, with emphasis upon highly praised virtues.

At the same time, studying texts of ancient historians (Herodotus, Thucydides, Sallust, Caesar, Livy, Tacitus) formed an inseparable part of the curriculum of both classical languages at that time. The author then concludes that the classical tradition is not only an accompanying ornament, but also an apparent constitutive element of Czech Renaissance literature.

Jakub Niedwiedz's paper is devoted to the question of imitation of maps in late Renaissance Polish poetry (between 1580 and 1630), a time of an incredible growth in Polish lyric poetry. The interest in cartography and the contact with maps, direct or indirect, changed the contemporary Polish poets' way of thinking. This was reflected in the need to translate maps into literary texts.

The main thesis of the paper is that poets widely used map-based techniques in constructing their poems. Imitation (Latin *imitatio*) played a crucial role in this process. The works of five poets were chosen to illustrate the ways of map imitation: S.F. Klonowic, K. Miaskowski, S. Petrycy, M.K. Sarbiewski and Sz. Szymonowic. The paper consists of three parts. In the first, the author aims at answering the question of whether in Polish poetry there are references to cartography at that time. He shows the existing similarity between cartographical representation of a river in poetry and on a map. In this example, the author shows the *topoi* used both in poems and maps. In the second part, the concept of map

imitation is discussed. Niedwiedz analyses the rhetorical tools which helped to forge poetical maps. In the third part of the paper, the author shows how the late Renaissance poets described the territory of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth, and thus he reveals the purposes to which map imitation was utilized by Polish writers of the time. Indeed, the author convincingly demonstrates that maps were one of the powerful ways with which the authors from Central-Eastern Europe dealt with the problem of defining their place in Europe and the world.

Finally, my article deals with the treatment of the broad theme of the reception of Humanism and Renaissance in two important histories of Ukrainian literature, respectively *Muza Roksolans'ka. Ukrajins'ka literatura XVI-XVIII stolit'* by Valerij Ševčuk (Kyiv, "Lybid'", 2004-2005), in two volumes, and *Istorija ukrajins'koji literatury* in twelve volumes (2014-) published by the Academy of Sciences of Ukraine Naukova Dumka. I remark that the disappearance of Soviet ideological constraints has brought about the possibility of analysing various aspects of this theme; multilingualism, the partaking of different cultures of the writers of the so-called *Pohranyččja*, and literature written in Latin, are just a few of the possible points of reference. However, some aspects still need to be studied more thoroughly. Among them, the supranational approach should be adequately considered when dealing with the spread of Humanism-Renaissance. At the same time the emphasis on the secular character of the 'new' literature should be properly considered. In the reality of the texts of the time, religion continues to be an integral part of mental, intellectual, political and cultural discourse.

The articles in this volume do not even remotely aspire to cover the spread of Renaissance Humanism in the Slavic world. They should rather be seen as the beginning of a dialogue among scholars on some aspects of the reception of Humanism and the Renaissance in the areas of their specialization. The goal of

this dialogue is a deepening of the knowledge of this reception and its re-evaluation. I hope that this dialogue will yield more fruits in the future.

## Abstract

In this article the author, after briefly recollecting different interpretations of the Renaissance, shortly outlines some modes that have characterized the reception of Humanism and the Renaissance in the Slavic countries and its study. She then illustrates the content of the essays gathered in the book, with a special focus on the novelty of their interpretative approach. The author argues the importance of abandoning the old national-driven interpretation, in favor of the adoption of an areal and supranational point of view which allows to analyze related cultural phenomena in a wider perspective.

## Keywords

Humanism, the Renaissance, Slavic cultures and literatures

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