Cultural Precedence and Reciprocity between Eastern Europe and Western Europe

Some American Reflections on Jerzy Jedlicki’s “Europe’s Eastern Borderland”

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Jerzy Jedlicki’s provocative essay on Poland’s cultural “provincialism” as “Europe’s eastern borderland” takes an unsparing view of Poland’s hierarchical relation to “the major centers of European culture, situated south or west.” As an American, I want to begin by noting that one might take a similarly severe view of America’s cultural provincialism, at least until the twentieth century became an “American century.” America was for a long time, in terms of cultural significance, “Europe’s western borderland,” with culture, to a considerable degree, imported from Europe to America.

During the sixteenth century, in the age of the Renaissance, when Jan Kochanowski contributed to the creation of a vernacular culture in the Polish language (as distinct from Latin culture), he wrote self-consciously about the challenge of obtaining recognition for Poland’s new cultural status.

O mnie Moskwa, i będą wiedzieć Tatarowie,
I różnego mieszkańcy świata Anglikowie;
Mnie Niemiec i waleczny Hiszpan, mnie poznaną,
Którzy głęboki strumień Tybrowy pijają.

Forty years ago, Czesław Miłosz quoted this verse in 1969 in his landmark English-language History of Polish Literature, and then, of course, translated it into English, ignoring Kochanowski’s couplet rhymes in favor of an elegant free verse translation:

About me Moscow will know and the Tartars
And Englishmen, inhabitants of diverse worlds.
The Germans and the valiant Spaniard will be acquainted with me
And those who drink from the deep Tiber stream.

Miłosz 1983: 66
Kochanowski expressed a new Polish cultural confidence and at the same time, to be sure, some sense of the challenge involved in impressing Polish achievements upon other Europeans—a challenge that perhaps, as suggested in Professor Jedlicki’s essay, Poland did not ultimately meet.

Yet, the free verse of Miłosz’s English translation hints at the affinity that he seemed to discern between Kochanowski in the sixteenth century and America’s greatest nineteenth-century poet, Walt Whitman. Consider the following passage from Whitman’s *Leaves of Grass*:

We do not blame thee, elder World, nor separate ourselves from thee,  
(Would the son separate himself from the father?)  
Looking back on thee, seeing thee to thy duties, grandeurs, through past ages bending, building,  
We build to ours today.

Mightier than Egypt’s tombs,  
Fairer than Grecia’s, Roma’s temples,  
Prouder than Milan’s statued, spired cathedral,  
More picturesque than Rhenish castle-keeps,  
We plan, even now, to raise, beyond them all,  
Thy great cathedral, sacred industry, no tomb,  
A keep for life for practical invention.

As in a waking vision,  
E’en while I chant, I see it rise, I scan and prophesy outside and in,  
Its manifold ensemble.  

*(Whitman 1904:160)*

Kochanowski in the sixteenth century was helping to create a Polish vernacular literature that would give Poland its distinctively Polish culture, no longer homogenously Latin. Whitman in the nineteenth century was undertaking the analogous challenge of creating a distinctively American poetry, even while continuing to use the English language that bound (and continues to bind) America to England, its former imperial master.

The first edition of *Leaves of Grass*, published in 1855, eight decades after the American Declaration of Independence, announced the advent of a distinctively American poetry that problematically continued to use the imperial language of England—problematically only because, by the test of language alone, American poetry could not be distinguished from English poetry. When, one generation later, Henry James began to produce his brilliant corpus of American novels, the stylistic distinction was not absolutely