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The Flemish Revival: An Archaizing Movement? Comparisons with Greco-Roman Antiquity[1]

The revival of a vigorous Netherlandic language and literature in Belgium, which started in the second half of the nineteenth century, is a remarkable event in cultural history. One might see a parallel in the revival of the Hebrew language and literature in the context of the Zionist movement and the establishment of the state of Israel in the first half of the twentieth century, but there are also notable differences. First of all, Hebrew had ceased to a be a truly vernacular language already by the beginning of the Common Era, being mainly used by the Jewish communities for liturgical purposes and biblical and Talmudic exegesis. In Palestine Aramaic was then the commonly used vernacular. However, even in the Christian communities, and even when it was not or barely understood, Hebrew retained the prestige of being a classical, in fact a sacred language. By contrast, Flemish, i.e. the Netherlandic language as it developed first in the Spanish and then in the Austrian Netherlands and finally in Belgium, remained an important vernacular language, but lost the literary status which it had enjoyed during the later Middle Ages and into the sixteenth century, when it had been able to compete with the French language in socio-cultural prestige. By the mid-nineteenth century, it is fair to say, the identity of the cultural elite of the recently created nation-state of Belgium was French. Not until the twentieth century, in fact only after the Second World War, did the Netherlandic language cease to be both politically and socio-culturally a lower-class language. For some decades now, in fact, it has become numerically dominant in the civic and political life of Belgium. This revival has also re-established Belgian Dutch as a language with a high-culture literature enjoying international recognition.

A century or perhaps even half a century ago, a not particularly sympathetic observer of the Flemish revival might have characterized it dismissively as an archaizing movement animated by historical and cultural nostalgia, and if this person had been a classicist as well, might have compared it to the two most important archaizing trends and movements in Greco-Roman antiquity. The more limited of the two was the archaizing movement in the Latin literature of the second century, represented by such authors as Fronto, Aulus Gellius, and Apuleius. (2) These authors detected - rightly or wrongly - a loss of creative and expressive vitality in the contemporary Latin language and literature, and recommended, by way of explicit advice or by the example of their own writings, a return to the inspiration that could be derived

not from the now classical authors of the Late Roman Republican and the Augustan eras - from authors of prose such as Cicero and Livy and from poets such as Vergil and Horace - but from the pre-classical authors of the third and second centuries before the Common Era, from the prose author Cato the Elder, the epic poet Ennius, and above all, the comic playwright Plautus, who stood out especially in their eyes for his rich and inventive use of the Latin language. This archaizing movement led to some interesting, even creative experiments with the literary language, notably in Apuleius' major work of prose fiction, **The Golden Ass**, but basically it represented a dead-end in the evolution of the Latin language and literature, as the vernacular and regional forms of Latin were destined to evolve into the various Romance languages over the next millennium, while the far more fixed literary language was to receive its truly substantial impetus for revitalization from Christianity.

The archaizing movement in the Greek language and literature, which dominated the Greek culture of the first two centuries of the Common Era, had much broader and more lasting effects, with political realities also coming into play. During the last two centuries B.C.E., virtually the entire Greek-speaking world had come under Roman rule. By the beginning of the Common Era, the dominant Greek elites had come to positive terms with this reality, an accommodation made easier by the fact that Greek remained the dominant language of the eastern half of the Roman Empire and that most Romans had always readily recognized the superiority of Greek culture and had modelled significant aspects of their own high-culture (e.g. most of their art and literature) after it; indeed, by the second century of the Common Era, the dominant elites of the Greek world had been effectively co-opted into the power structure of the Empire. However, political Romanization did not lead to loss of cultural identity, and the first two centuries of the Common Era were marked by a very conscious and deliberate reassertion of cultural identity by the Greek-speaking upper classes of the Empire. The most important instrument for this reaffirmation was the classical Greek language and literature of the fifth and fourth centuries before the Common Era, an era already regarded in later Greco-Roman antiquity as the golden era of past Greek civilization. The culturally dominant form of Greek had then been the so-called Attic Greek, the Greek dialect spoken and written in Athens, which was at that time the cultural centre of the Hellenic world. At the height of this golden age, approximately the second half of the fifth century B.C.E., the so-called Sophists, with their penetrating questioning of traditional beliefs and their highly self-conscious rhetorical shaping of the Greek language and literature, had given the most conspicuous intellectual and cultural leadership to the Greek world, and it was not surprising that many of the leading Greek authors of the first and second centuries of the Common Era saw themselves as standing in the tradition of the Sophists - hence the designation of "Second Sophistic" for the dominant high-culture Greek language and literature of this period. (3) These classicizing, or in my terms, archaizing authors, quite deliberately spurned the postclassical form of Greek, the *Koine* or "Common Language," that had developed during the so-called Hellenistic period, the roughly three centuries following the classical period, when Greek became a world language spoken by millions of non-native speakers. (This *Koine* was also the form in which the Greek Christian Scriptures were written and was to evolve, over the centuries,

into modern vernacular Greek.)

The revival of classical Greek was to lead to a rather unfortunate bifurcation of Greek as a living language which lasted until quite recently. By the late Middle Ages, Greek had evolved into very distinct two forms: on the one hand, there was the so-called *demotike* Greek, the Greek "of the people, "which was really the fully evolved and, in fact still, evolving Greek language, the language of ordinary discourse that by the later Middle Ages was beginning to find its way into written literature in such genres as folk ballad and lyric; and other hand, there was also the *katharevousa* Greek , literally, the Greek "in its pure state," highly classicizing and archaizing in its grammar and vocabulary. (4) The latter remained and still remains the Greek of the liturgy of the Orthodox Greek Church; indeed, the Greek of the Modern Greek Bible is astonishingly archaic, far more archaic, comparatively speaking, than the English of the King James Authorized Version or the Dutch of the Statenbijbel are in comparison with present-day English or Dutch. (I remember showing the Modern Greek Bible some years ago to a student of mine who was a native Greek speaker, and being told by him that he could not understand most of it. - that, as he put it , only some very old people in Greece could still make sense of it). The *katharevousa* remained until well into the 1970's the language of nearly all government, legal, bureaucratic, scholarly and high-level journalistic discourse - the military junta in power in Greece from 1967 to 1974 even made a short-lived attempt to re-establish the *katharevousa* as the language of instruction in the schools. Fortunately for the consolidation of the position of the "demotic" language, since the nineteenth century and increasingly so in the twentieth century, "demotic" Greek became the form of Greek chosen by the leading Greek authors for their literary works; this ultimately gave the "demotic" language a contemporary prestige and potency which could no longer be matched by the *katharevousa*. Even so, it is astonishing that for many centuries the high-culture form of the Greek language was one that was highly archaic and, certainly in its grammar and vocabulary, stood at an extremely far remove from the popular language.

It is plain that the two major movements of linguistic and literary archaizing in Greco-Roman antiquity offer little scope for comparison with the revival of Netherlandic language and literature in Belgium. Neither of these were founded on an appreciation of the continually evolving vernacular language; they were elitist endeavours to bring the classical languages and literatures back to a highly idealized past.

The ultimate fate of the *katharevousa* in the history of the Greek language poses a warning against an excessive linguistic standardization that ignores the realities of a well-established vernacular. This caution also applies to the status of the Netherlandic language in both Belgium and The Netherlands. Thus, on the one hand, I applaud the efforts by the Dutch and Flemish governments, especially through the organ of the Nederlandse Taalunie, to promote the use of a standard Dutch, "Algemeen Nederlands," "General Dutch," in both countries. The standard Dutch that is being promoted is certainly, in the words of one enthusiastic proponent, Franz Van den Bosch, writing in a recent issue of the *Nieuwsbrief: De Orde van den Prince*, "a supple, elegant, refined, and 'natural' instrument of language," "een soepel, zwierig, verfijnd, en 'vanzelfsprekend' taalinstrument"(5) – and I might add, a

thoroughly contemporary and modern Dutch as well; there is nothing archaizing about "Algemeen Beschaafd Nederlands." And I fully agree with the same author (6) that it is very misleading, as still happens even in reasonably educated non-Netherlandic circles and publications, to refer to the Netherlandic language spoken and written by more than six million Belgians as Flemish in the sense that it represents a language different and distinct from Dutch, much in the way that German is.

On the other hand, the standardization of Dutch should make generous allowance for the flourishing of national and regional forms of the language, especially in, but not restricted to, to the spoken language. The relatively harmonious co-existence of different national forms has worked very well for the English language (and other major languages); no one, would speak, even in the loosest possible manner, of British, Canadian, and American English, as constituting "different" languages. Thus, I find the use of the pronoun *gij* in modern Flemish Dutch quite distinctive and charming, although, of course, in the Dutch of the Netherlands it is unacceptably archaic. Also, I am not bothered by the gallicisms in Flemish Dutch – which remind me a bit of the gallicisms that have today crept into Canadian English, especially the English of central and eastern Canada, such as "subvention" for "subsidy."

Thanks to the modern Flemish revival, the Netherlandic language now counts more than twenty-one million native or near-native speakers in Belgium and The Netherlands, and is certainly not a declining folkloric remnant, but, even in this age of cultural globalization dominated by American English, a vibrant living language - vibrant both on the vernacular and the high-culture level. The existence and flourishing, unofficially at least, of two distinct national forms of the language I regard as a sign of cultural vigour and richness fo dr the Netherlandic language and literature.

Notes

1. This article is based on a paper given at the annual meeting of the Canadian Association for the Advancement of Netherlandic Studies at the Université de Sherbrooke in June 1999.

2. On the archaizing tendency in the Latin literature of the second century A.D., see Gian Biagio Conte, *Latin Literature: A History* (translated from the Italian), Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1994, 580-581 .

3. On the Second Sophistic, see Albin Lasky, *A History of Greek Literature* (translated from the German), London: Methuen, 1966, 829-845.

4. On the role played by the *demotike* and the *katharevousa* in the formation of the modern Greek language, see Robert Browning, *Medieval and Modern Greek*, second edition, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983, especially chapter 6, "The development of the national language."

5. *Nieuwsbrief: De Orde van den Prince*, April 1999, p. 6. This is the newsletter of De Orde van den Prince, a Belgian-Dutch binational association promoting the linguistic and cultural unity of Flanders and the Netherlands.

6. *Ibid.*, p. 7. See now also the nuanced and balanced views of Luc Devoldere on the

issue of Flemish Dutch in his recent article, "Het gemene best is de taal," in *De Orde van den Prince*, July-August 2001, p.3-7.