

An Introduction to the Polish Literary Experience: reading, living, translating presently in Brussels

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Abstract: The focus of this article is the experience of Polish literature in today's Brussels. The research aims to illustrate the presence of this literature through three main aspects. Firstly, the act of reading. Polish literature will be examined to identify its readership in Brussels. Secondly, the aspect of living literature in Brussels will be explored, discussing events such as meetings with authors, literature festivals, awards, book fairs, etc. as a promotional tool. The discussion will also include an author living in Brussels, Grażyna Plebanek, and her perspective on the city. Lastly, the role of translation in promoting Polish literature in Belgium will be briefly highlighted through the introduction of three key figures in the field.

Key words: Brussels, Polish literature, Polish literature abroad, multiculturalism, reading literature, living literature, translation, dissemination of literature.

Czytać, żyć i tłumaczyć: wstęp do polskiego doświadczenia literackiego we współczesnej Brukseli

Abstrakt: Niniejszy artykuł bada obecność polskiej literatury w Brukseli, koncentrując się na trzech kluczowych aspektach. Pierwszym z nich jest akt czytania, w którym analizowane będzie zainteresowanie literaturą polską wśród mieszkańców Brukseli. Drugim aspektem jest życie literackie, obejmujące wydarzenia takie jak spotkania autorskie, festiwale literackie, nagrody i targi książki, które promują literaturę polską. W tej części omówione zostaną również doświadczenia Grażyny Plebanek, polskiej autorki mieszkającej w Brukseli, oraz jej spojrzenie na miasto. Trzecim aspektem jest rola tłumaczenia w promowaniu polskiej literatury w Belgii, z naciskiem na trzy kluczowe osobistości w tej dziedzinie.

Słowa kluczowe: Bruksela, literatura polska, literatura polska za granicą, wielokulturowość, czytanie literatury, literatura żywa, przekład, upowszechnianie literatury

The country of Belgium is often challenging to comprehend due to its intricate composition. Indeed, the so-called "Plat Pays" is a federal constitutional monarchy with a parliamentary system divided into three

autonomous regions (Flemish Region, Walloon Region, and Brussels-Capital Region) and separated into three linguistic communities: Dutch-speaking, French-speaking, and German-speaking. Each of these communities also correspond to one of the three national languages. Due to the linguistic tripartite and complex history, Belgium has drawn its cultural traits from the neighbouring countries. Consequently, the French-speaking Belgians are inevitably influenced, relate to, and share certain characteristics of French culture, given the intrinsic link between language and culture. A similar phenomenon can be observed among Flemish-speaking Belgians, who are influenced by Dutch culture, and German-speaking Belgians, who are influenced by German culture. The three regions are not identical in terms of language, culture or tradition and therefore function in different ways. Nevertheless, there is one location where all of the languages and cultures converge: the city of Brussels. There, a synthesis of Belgian regional traditions exists. Brussels can be characterised as a unique entity, the distinctive nature of which can be attributed to two underlying phenomena. Firstly, Brussels is the capital of Belgium. The metropolis has naturally become a place where all national folklore and languages coexist, as it lies at the crossroads of the Latin and Germanic traditions, the two main elements of Belgian cultural heritage. As one of the three autonomous regions and the meeting point of the three linguistic communities, the capital plays a key role in the fair representation of all local, regional and national cultures. Secondly, as the seat of many European institutions and international organisations, such as NATO, Brussels has become a multicultural and multilingual city due to the presence of officials, cosmopolitan workers and expatriates who have brought their cultures to Brussels. As demonstrated in the following example:

Of the 1,048,491 Brussels residents counted in 2008, 295,043 (28.14%) were not Belgian nationals. When the number of Belgian citizens of foreign origin is added the figure rises to 50% of the population who have non-Belgian points of reference (Deboosere et al, 2008). Although members of the population are diversely affected by the city's international position as such, this high proportion of residents coming from a variety of horizons is the basis for the city's links with numerous spots on the globe. On the margin of the "official" internationalisation, encouraged by the authorities and major economic operators, these links also spawn the development of "globalisation from below" networks (for example Matonge (Central Africa), Rue de Brabant (Maghreb), Saint-Gilles (Poland), city centre (Asia),...). Certain international conflicts (Middle East, Congo) thus also deeply affect Brussels society¹.

Naturally, Brussels has developed into a significant cultural hub, offering new prospects and expanding the scope of possibilities. Brussels could be considered a cultural oasis, representing a multitude of people and their national cultural backgrounds. It would be wrong to define Brussels as simply a Belgian city, because it is in fact a city that embraces multicult-

¹ E.Corijn, C.Vandermotten, J-M. Decroly, E. Swyngedouw, *Brussels as an international city*, In: "Brussels Studies", Brussels: Synopses 2009, nr 13[online], p. 2.

turalism and is built on the many influences and cultural representations that exist there, as we can see in the excerpt below:

The composition of the Brussels population is becoming increasingly diverse, but the share of inhabitants that have the Belgian nationality has remained relatively constant over the past few years due to the numerous changes in nationality (...). Since 1st January 1989, there have been more than 200,000 changes in nationality in Brussels, leading to more children being born as Belgians. The share of the Belgian population below the age of 18 is larger than the age groups that belong to the active population. Therefore, nationality is no longer a reliable indicator of the extensive diversity in origin and cultural background of the Brussels population. Taking nationality at birth into account, 46% of the Brussels population is not of Belgian origin. Adding the children that are born as Belgians to parents who migrated, means that more than 50% of the Brussels population comes from abroad or is born to parents who migrated.²

The diversity is reflected in the cultural landscape of the city, which manifests in various ways. One such manifestation is literature, which frequently in this metropolitan context helps to introduce a nation's culture. Literature serves as a conduit for the multicultural population, enabling them to narrate their cultural heritage, but also to explore the cultures of others. The acquisition of knowledge through texts is not the only objective of literature; the act of engaging with literature, whether through reading, attending events with authors, attending literary festivals and book fairs, or otherwise, is also an essential part of the literary experience. The objective of this article is to illustrate how cultural exchange occurs through the medium of literature, with a particular focus on the Polish literary experience in Brussels. In addition, the article will demonstrate the various methods and formats in which Polish literature is presented, represented and disseminated within the local cultural context of Brussels. The experience of Polish literature in Brussels encompasses three distinct dimensions: reading, living, and translating. These dimensions will be further developed in the following text.

1. Reading Polish Literature in Brussels

The first encounter with Polish literature in Brussels is through the act of reading. The city is home to a diverse readership with an interest in Polish literature. The characteristics and composition of this readership influence the direction and content of discussions on Polish literature in the metropolis. These readers can be grouped into three distinct categories and each one of them play a significant role in perpetuating Polish literature in its written form in the capital. The first type of reader is the *explorer*, who uncovers a new universe through literature. Such readers, often from Brussels and with no ties to Poland, tend to categorise Polish literature as

² P. Deboosere, T.Eggerickx, E. Van Hecke and B. Wayens, The population of Brussels: a demographic overview, in "Brussels Studies [Online]", Synopses, Online since 12 January 2009, p. 8.

Slavic, failing to discern its true origins. Cécile Bocianowski provides an explanation for this observation in the following statement:

W Belgii znajomość autorów polskich – i uwaga ta zdaje się także ważna dla recepcji literatury polskiej we Francji – jest o tyle ograniczona, że przeciętny czytelnik, nie interesujący się kulturą czy literaturą słowiańską, często nie potrafi odróżnić pisarza polskiego, czeskiego czy węgierskiego. Literatura polska jest najczęściej postrzegana przez francuskojęzycznego czytelnika jako literatura słowiańska, a nie specyficznie polska³.

[In Belgium, knowledge of Polish authors – and this remark seems also important for the reception of Polish literature in France – is so limited that the average reader, not interested in Slavic culture or literature, is often unable to distinguish between Polish, Czech or Hungarian writers. Polish literature is most often perceived by a French-speaking reader as Slavic literature, not specifically Polish.]

The *explorers*, particularly those from Europe and Belgium, have a nuanced understanding of 20th-century Polish history. The majority of those readers are aware of the devastation caused by the Second World War and are conscious of the impact of the Soviet regime during the latter half of the century. Some of those readers are familiar with the events in question, having either been direct witnesses or having acquired their knowledge of the subject matter at school. Others have been informed about the events through various forms of mass media, including the broadcast media, but especially through cinema. Bocianowski further elaborates on this topic, stating:

Pod tym względem polskie kino jest lepiej znane, gdyż nierzadko spotyka się belgijskich znawców kina polskiego, którzy mają swojego ulubionego polskiego reżysera. Należy więc zacząć od obserwacji: czytelnik polskiej literatury w Belgii należy do pewnej niszy; niemniej jednak, o ile nie można niestety mówić o masowym odbiorze literatury polskiej, o tyle istnieje rzeczywiście belgijskie grono czytelników zainteresowanych literaturą polską⁴.

[In this regard, Polish cinema is better known, as it is not uncommon to meet Belgian experts in Polish cinema who have their favourite Polish director. Therefore, we should start with an observation: the reader of Polish literature in Belgium belongs to a certain niche. However, while we cannot talk about the mass reception of Polish literature, there is indeed a Belgian group of readers interested in Polish literature.]

Nevertheless, the aforementioned historical subjects continue to hold a fascination for Belgian and European readers, who are inclined to pursue further knowledge about these historical periods. They often do so through the medium of studies, testimonies and literature. Bocianowski, however, observes that Polish literature remains relatively unpopular in Belgium, as well as in Brussels, and reaches only a limited demographic. Despite this lack of popularity, a small number of Polish authors have successfully had their books reach Belgium. To illustrate, Ryszard Kapuściński's literary reports continue to captivate readers across Western Europe, especially in the French-speaking community. The French publishing house Flammarion's

³ C. Bocianowski, *Jak nas czytają za granicą? (Ankieta 1)*, In: "Czytanie Literatury", Łódź: Łódzkie Studia Literaturoznawcze 2015, nr 4, p. 343.

⁴ *Ibidem*.

release of his complete works in French in 2014 serves as a testament to his success. The editor of the publication wrote about this achievement as follows:

Depuis sa mort, en 2007, on ne cesse de redécouvrir le reporter exceptionnel qu'il [Kapuściński] était. Ce volume rassemble ses plus grands textes ainsi que des extraits d'un recueil de jeunesse inédit en français. Lire « Kapu », c'est rencontrer non seulement un formidable témoin du XXe siècle, observateur inlassable des conflits et des révolutions (de la guerre civile en Angola à la chute des régimes dictatoriaux en Éthiopie ou en Iran, des soubresauts de l'Amérique latine à la désintégration du bloc soviétique), un homme de terrain au regard d'ethnologue, qui a pour maîtres mots curiosité et empathie, mais aussi un écrivain de talent, explorateur passionné de la frontière entre écriture documentaire et littérature, dans la lignée d'un Albert Londres ou d'un Truman Capote⁵.

[Since he died in 2007, we have continued to rediscover the exceptional reporter that he was. This volume brings together his greatest texts as well as extracts from a youth collection previously unpublished in French. To read "Kapu" is to meet not only a formidable witness of the 20th century, a tireless observer of conflicts and revolutions (from the civil war in Angola to the fall of dictatorial regimes in Ethiopia or Iran, of the upheavals of Latin America to the disintegration of the Soviet bloc), a man in the field with the perspective of an ethnologist, whose keywords are curiosity and empathy, but also a talented writer, passionate explorer of the border between documentary writing and literature, in the tradition of an Albert Londres or a Truman Capote.]

Other examples include Polish writers who were awarded the Nobel Prize in Literature, which subsequently facilitated the dissemination of Polish literature in Belgium. The older generation may be familiar with Sienkiewicz's *Quo Vadis*, which is regarded as a classic of world literature. The younger generation, however, will appreciate the originality and intricate simplicity of Wisława Szymborska's poetry. More recently, Olga Tokarczuk has emerged on the Belgian literary scene, having been awarded the prize in 2018. Finally, it is important to refer to both Stanisław Lem and Andrzej Sapkowski, esteemed authors in the realm of science fiction and fantasy. Their literary works have been adapted into numerous films and video games, thereby achieving international renown, even in Belgium.

The second type of reader is the *Polish reader*, who often is a member of the Polish diaspora and is therefore familiar with the language and culture of their native country. Readers from this category wish to remain informed about developments in their homeland. In their article *Polish Immigration in Belgium since 2004: New Dynamics of Migration and Integration?* François Levrau et al. present a comprehensive overview of the demographic shifts and socio-economic impacts of Polish immigration to Belgium since 2004. Their report states that "*In 2008, 30,392 Poles were officially living in Belgium; this number increased to 43,085 in 2010*"⁶. A level that has remained consistent since 2010⁷. A notable proportion

⁵ R. Kapuściński, *Oeuvres*, Paris: Flammarion, 2014, p. 5.

⁶ F. Levrau and others, *Polish Immigration in Belgium since 2004: New Dynamics of Migration and Integration?*, In: "Ethnicities" 2014, nr 14.2, p.310.

⁷ Statbel (the Belgian statistical office), *Aperçu statistique de la Belgique*, Bruxelles 2020, p. 15.

of this population actively maintains a relationship with their linguistic heritage. It is evident that the Polish diaspora in Belgium holds a strong attachment to their homeland, and this sentiment is often instilled in their children. Indeed, young members of the Polish community have the option of furthering their knowledge of the language and history through a parallel educational system in so-called Polish schools, which are supported by the Polish government. Such institutions are present in a number of countries, including Belgium, where the best known are situated in Antwerp and Brussels. As part of the academic curriculum, students are required to engage with Polish literature. The required reading list is designed to provide students with an introduction to Polish literary works. With regard to adults, they sometimes participate in or organize various events with the objective of promoting literature. For instance, there are a few bookstores in Brussels that are exclusively devoted to Polish literature. Nevertheless, it is worth mentioning that not all Poles in Brussels are necessarily involved in Polish literary life.

The final category of readers is that of the *specialists*. This category includes all cultural representatives from various cultural centres and institutions representing Poland in Brussels and the European Union. It also features representatives and offices of various Polish regions, members of official institutes, as well as scholars, students, researchers, and professors from Belgian universities where there is a department of Polish studies, present in the capital. The *specialists* encourage the dissemination of Polish literature and culture to the residents of Brussels through a range of initiatives, including meetings with authors, conferences, and lectures that sometimes might even take place within the premises of the Polish Embassy in Belgium. They also often arrange literary panels on days dedicated to Polish culture, such as the annual Polish Day in Brussels at Cinquantenaire Park. Furthermore, Polish studies departments at Belgian universities frequently organize events with the objective of promoting Polish literature. One such example is the activities of the Free University of Brussels (Université Libre de Bruxelles or ULB).

2. Living Polish Literature in Brussels

In order to gain a full understanding of a literary work, it is essential to engage with it in a proactive manner. One of the most common locations for such engagement is a university. At these institutions, scholars are immersed in teaching, sharing, and discussing literature, thereby making it more accessible to students and the general public. The Free University of Brussels (ULB) has a faculty dedicated to Language, Translation, and Communication, which is home to the oldest Slavic Studies department in Belgium. The department

was established in 1925 by the Polish government⁸ with the specific objective of conducting research into Slavic languages, literatures, and cultures. One of the department's sub-divisions is the Chair of Polish Studies. Over the course of nearly a century, the "*Brukselska polonistyka*"⁹ has amassed a substantial historical legacy, guided by a series of esteemed professors. Professor Dorota Walczak-Delanois, currently in charge of the department, recounts the history of her predecessors in the following sentences:

Tout d'abord, en 1925, la chaire de polonais et de slavistique fondée par le gouvernement polonais est occupée par Waclaw Lednicki (1891–1967), (...). Lednicki a été un fin connaisseur de la littérature française, russe et polonaise. Il a enseigné à l'Université Jagellonne, à l'Université libre de Bruxelles, à Harvard University et à l'Université de Californie à Berkeley. Claude Backvis (1910–1998), né à Bruxelles, (...) va continuer l'œuvre pédagogique et scientifique de son prédécesseur, consacrée à la fois à la Russie et à la Pologne (...). Son successeur dans l'enseignement et la recherche polonaise, Marian Pankowski (1919–2011), via sa prédilection pour la poésie puis les romans et les pièces de théâtre, va activer, en plus du travail académique, sa double appartenance à la langue polonaise et française, dans son écriture littéraire. Alain Van Crugten (né en 1937) va également pouvoir joindre les connaissances d'un germaniste et d'un slavisant en tant qu'académicien et écrivain. Derrière ces faits biographiques se trouve aussi son ressenti d'appartenance : appartenance à la culture et à la civilisation européennes d'avant-guerre, à la culture francophone ou à la ville de Sanok transportée dans le cœur de Bruxelles (...). Le professeur Alain Van Crugten, qui m'accueillit en 1998 au sein de la slavistique, dit avec son humour habituel qu'en slavistique, à Bruxelles, il y avait eu des spécialistes de l'Histoire, du baroque polonais et du théâtre polonais, et qu'à présent s'y trouvait un spécialiste de la poésie polonaise d'avant-garde. C'est cette poésie justement qui me servira fréquemment dans la recherche et dans les cours pour raconter aux étudiant/e/s les aléas de l'identité polonaise au travers des textes littéraires et historiques¹⁰.

[First, in 1925, the chair of Polish and Slavistics founded by the Polish government was occupied by Waclaw Lednicki (1891–1967), (...). Lednicki was a fine connoisseur of French, Russian, and Polish literature. He taught at the Jagiellonian University, the Free University of Brussels, Harvard University, and the University of California in Berkeley. Claude Backvis (1910–1998), born in Brussels, (...) continued the educational and scientific work of his predecessor, dedicated to both Russia and Poland (...). His successor in teaching and researching the Polish language, Marian Pankowski (1919–2011), through his predilection for poetry then novels and plays, enabled, in addition to academic work, his dual belonging to the Polish and French language, in his literary writing. Alain Van Crugten (born in 1937) was also able to combine his knowledge as a Germanist and a Slavic scholar in his career as an academician and writer. Behind these biographical facts, there is also his feeling of belonging: belonging to pre-war European culture and civilization, to French-speaking culture, and to the town of Sanok transported to the heart of Brussels (...). Professor Alain Van Crugten, who welcomed me into the Slavic Studies department in 1998, said with his usual humour that in the department, in Brussels, there had been specialists of History, Polish Baroque, and Polish theatre, and that now there was a specialist in avant-garde Polish poetry. It is precisely this poetry that I will frequently use in research and in classes to tell students about the vagaries of Polish identity through literary and historical texts.]

⁸ D.Walczak-Delanois, C.Bocianowski, in *Wytłumaczyć i przetłumaczyć. La Pologne et la Belgique au travers des expériences pédagogiques, scientifiques et littéraires à l'Université libre de Bruxelles*, In : *La Pologne Des Belges : Évolution d'un Regard (XXe–XXIe Siècles)*, ed.Przemysław Szczur, Kraków: Unum Press, 2021, p. 128.

⁹ Department of Polish studies in Polish.

¹⁰ *Op.cit.*, p. 127–128.

The department of Polish Studies has benefited from the contributions of specialists with expertise in a range of disciplines, including the history of literature, translation, theatre, prose and poetry. Each of them has brought a unique perspective to the department, enriching the learning experience for students, and has played a crucial role in maintaining the presence of Polish language and literature in the educational system of Brussels. In order to encourage students to continue their studies of Polish literature, professors have also employed the use of narration and textual analysis as fundamental teaching instruments. The act of storytelling, when taught and analysed, imbues literature with a tangible quality that amplifies its impact and reception. The text thus becomes a tool, providing context and structure to a cultural environment. The acquisition of languages, transmission of historical information and appreciation of cultural nuances frequently occur through the medium of text, as it serves as an intermediary between cultures and allows the reader insight into the author's perspective. This, in turn, facilitates a deeper understanding of the other's culture. The teaching of these skills is conducted in an engaging and beneficial manner, enabling students to learn in an enjoyable and effective way. Professor Walczak-De-lanois offers some information about the methodology she employs to teach Polish literature and language in Brussels:

La notion ludique d'apprentissage par les jeux et l'amusement permet la valorisation du savoir-faire tout en introduisant un savoir pur sur la langue et un savoir contextuel sur la littérature (...). J'ai ainsi choisi la pédagogie active et les « ateliers » créatifs pour mon enseignement (...). Cependant, j'aimerais citer quelques expériences en guise d'exemple : 1. L'expérience des ateliers de traduction (...). 2. L'expérience de l'élaboration d'un spectacle qui a été présenté à la Journée portes ouvertes de l'université et au Consulat de la République de Pologne à Bruxelles (...). 3. La création par les étudiants de leurs propres poèmes à la manière du Moyen Âge ou du poème libre contemporain (...). En cours de littérature, dans la rencontre de la poésie et de la langue polonaise, la (re)découverte de la lecture de poèmes se trouve justement face à différents aprioris et à des expériences rarement positives remontant aux temps de l'école. Il y a encore autre chose : le texte littéraire en format de poème permet, en l'occurrence, dans un petit laps de temps durant lequel se déroule l'unité d'enseignement, c'est-à-dire le cours, la leçon, de se mesurer avec le défi de l'analyse, du savoir sur les courants littéraires ou les histoires littéraires, avec efficacité et sans la contrainte d'avoir trop peu de temps¹¹.

[The ludic notion of learning through games and amusement allows the valorisation of *savoir-faire* while introducing pure knowledge of the language and the contextualization of literature (...). I therefore chose active pedagogy and creative “workshops” to teach (...). However, I would like to cite a few experiences as examples: 1. The experience of translation through workshops (...). 2. The experience of producing a show that was presented at the University's Open Day and the Consulate of the Republic of Poland in Brussels (...). 3. The creation by students of their poems in the style of the Middle Ages or a contemporary free poem (...). In literature class, through the encounter of poetry and the Polish language, the (re)discovery of the reading of poems finds itself faced with different preconceptions and rarely positive experiences dating back from high school days. There is something else: the literary text in poem format allows, in this case, in a small period during which the teaching takes

¹¹ *Ibidem*, p. 130–132.

place, in other words during the course, the lesson, to measure oneself with the challenge of analysis, of knowledge of literary current or history of literature efficiently and without the constraint of having too little time.]

The teaching of Polish literature is done through play, exercise, and translation, i.e. active teaching that embodies literature and combines practice with theory, while at the same time offering the possibility of linguistic progress and knowledge acquisition. However, there are many constraints on teaching philology abroad, as Professor Walczak-Delanois mentions: the lack of time, but above all the indirectly noticed inequalities caused by the heterogeneity of the student body. Indeed, students from a variety of social classes, and cultural and educational backgrounds attend the same courses. For example, some students may possess prior knowledge of Polish history or literary theory, while others may lack such familiarity. Students may also be of diverse ethnic backgrounds: some may be Belgian nationals, others Polish, while still others hail from other countries. Therefore, it is the teacher's task to adapt their lessons to the level of each class, which is complicated by this type of student group. It is of the utmost importance to acknowledge and address these differences when lecturing, to ensure that all students have an equal opportunity to learn. However, literature remains a crucial and unavoidable component of the process of learning the language, as it provides invaluable insight into the culture.

Another methodological strategy employed by Professor Walczak-Delanois for teaching literature is that of organising literary events. She explains this approach as follows: "*L'explication et la traduction, la recherche personnelle des équivalents culturels pour la meilleure compréhension de la matière ont lieu aussi durant les rencontres avec des écrivains*"¹². As a result, the chair of Polish Studies frequently convenes meetings with writers, poets, artists, and literature specialists, which prove to be highly beneficial for students. Such encounters afford students the chance to engage directly with authors and their works, aiding them in experiencing literature in a more meaningful manner as they actively connect with it. These encounters have been occurring on a regular basis for over two decades and are often open to an audience external to the university. The Polish Studies department has welcomed a number of distinguished visitors over the years. One such guest was none other than Olga Tokarczuk herself. In her own words, Professor Walczak-Delanois describes this meeting, as transcribed here:

Une de ces rencontres restera à jamais gravée dans la mémoire des étudiants et des professeurs : c'est la rencontre avec Olga Tokarczuk qui nous a raconté, dans un petit local, comment elle voulait écrire des poèmes et comment elle était devenue écrivaine. À l'issue de cette rencontre, elle a reçu un cahier fait en cours par l'équipe des étudiants et profes-

¹² *Ibidem*, p. 131. Translation: The explanation and translation, the personal search for cultural equivalents for a better understanding of the material also take place during meetings with writers.

seurs. On y trouve un ensemble de pastiches de son style et leurs mains dessinées en guise d'hommage au talent de cette écrivaine, longtemps avant l'attribution de son prix Nobel¹³.

[One of these meetings will remain forever engraved in the memory of students and Professors: it was the meeting with Olga Tokarczuk who shared with us, in a small classroom, how she wanted to write poems and how she became a writer. At the end of this meeting, she received a notebook made in class by the group of students and teachers. Inside [of the notebook] there was a set of pastiches of her style and their hands drawn as a tribute to her talent as a writer, it was long before she won the Nobel Prize.]

Among the numerous noteworthy meetings held at the university, it is worth mentioning the one with the late Paweł Huelle in November 2003. In December of the same year, the poet and translator Julia Hartwig visited the ULB campus to participate in a morning devoted to poetry. In 2004, two literary matinees were organised: one in March with poet Natalia Pietrucha and another in November with writer and NIKE prize winner Joanna Olczak-Ronikier. In May 2005 and February 2006, Marian Pankowski and Alain Van Crugten, the former heads of the Polish Studies department, returned to the university to discuss their respective works with students at the ULB. In November 2013, the renowned poet Szczepan Kopyt was invited to talk about his socially engaged poetry at an event held at the Maison des Arts of the ULB. In 2014 and 2016, respectively, Grażyna Plebanek, who is currently based in Brussels, and Jaś Kapela were invited to participate in events. In 2017, a meeting was convened around the performer Monica Drożyńska, during which the discussion centred on her story as an artist and the concept of embroidered words. On 29 November 2018, a conference titled “*Quasi-literary collages*” was held at the Maison des Arts of the Free University in Brussels. The conference featured an intervention by Michał Rusinek, author, president of the Wisława Szymborska Foundation, and professor at the Jagiellonian University. In the same year, an exhibition was organised at the Napiórkowska Gallery, near the Mont des Arts in Brussels. The exhibition presented 25 collages by Wisława Szymborska, the 1996 Nobel Prize for Literature laureate, imported from the Wisława Szymborska Foundation in Krakow. It was inaugurated on 30 November with a conference entitled “*La traduction intersémiotique: Bons mots et collages de Wisława Szymborska*” and was jointly organised by the Polish Studies department at the ULB and the Polish Embassy in Belgium. Following this, the poet and translator Krzysztof Siwczyk and his translator into French, Isabelle Macor, were the main guests at the event “*Découpage et collage du sensible*”, which was held in March of the following year. The discussion centred on the process of poetic creation and translation, with particular focus on the insights and methodologies of two keynote speakers. In November of 2021, a session with Julia Fiedorczuk was hosted for the students. In more recent times, the Department of Polish Studies at the ULB has organized an international conference entitled “*Du Poème*

¹³ *Ibidem*, p. 133.

*en prose jusqu'au Slam: sur l'évolution du récit poétique du XIXe au XXe siècle/Od Poematu prozą do Slamu: O ewolucji powieści poetyckiej od XIX do XX wieku*¹⁴. The three-day conference, which was held from 4 to 6 December 2023, concluded with a performance of slam poetry. Belgium was represented by Marie Darah and Ines Bernoux, while the Polish slam scene was represented by Smutny Tuńczyk (Sad Tuna). More recently, during the last meeting at the ULB, internationally renowned poet Ewa Lipska and musician Leszek Wiśniowski were invited guests and delivered a presentation of their show “*Awaria Świata*”. The show is a collaborative encounter between the two artists who have successfully combined the lyricism of poetry with the openness of music, thereby creating a unique artistic expression that transcends the limitations of either medium alone. The intricate sounds of jazz and the beautifully crafted poems interact in a manner that reveals the intricate complexities of our broken world. The songs featured in the show are original compositions, skilfully crafted to intertwine with the poet's poems from two collections, namely *Czytnik linii papilarnych*¹⁵ and *Pamięć operacyjna*¹⁶. This representation took place on 15th April 2024. The event was organised with the support of the Faculty of Letters, Translation and Communication, the Department of Languages and Literature, the Philixte and Tradital Research Centres, the Department of International Relations of ULB, the Małopolska Region Representation in Brussels, the Polish Institute in Brussels, the Embassy and Consulate of the Republic of Poland in Brussels. These events demonstrate the continued vitality and representation of Polish literature in the Belgian and European capital. It is through such events that literature is brought to a diverse audience, allowing the different types of readers mentioned in this article to actively engage with it. The experience of literature is not only a matter of reading texts, but also of meeting the authors of these works. On the one hand, such encounters facilitate the discovery of literature through an author and their distinctive literary universe. On the other hand, they are an invitation to the opening up of a different literary landscape, a different culture in the broadest sense. Through such encounters, one learns to understand, to visualize, to comprehend and to live literature so as to create one's own version, one's own interpretation of the culture that one discovers through the writers and their texts. Meetings with authors, poets, and other artists can be highly beneficial for the public, students, and organisers,

¹⁴ Translation: From Prose poem to Slam: on the evolution of the poetic narrative from the XIX to the XXI century. Organized with the help of the Polish Institute Brussels, the Embassy of the Republic of Poland in Belgium, the regions of Wielkopolska and Małopolska, the Tradital and Philixte research centres of the ULB. With the support of the ULB, the Adam Mickiewicz University of Poznan, the non-profit organization “Elles sans frontières”, the French Embassy in Belgium, and the University of Liège.

¹⁵ E.Lipska, *Czytnik linii papilarnych*, Kraków: Wydawnictwo Literackie, 2015.

¹⁶ E.Lipska, *Pamięć operacyjna*, Kraków: Wydawnictwo Literackie, 2017.

as well as for the artists themselves. Such discussions frequently involve in-depth reflections upon the role of literature in the contemporary world and the manner in which it addresses a range of social issues, including feminism and ecological concerns. They also touch on a critical examination of socio-cultural perspectives. During these meetings, the public is able to gain a more direct and tangible understanding of Polish literature, which often leads to a deeper engagement with literature and texts. Ultimately, these encounters pave the way to a more playful approach to the learning of literature, enabling the diverse cultures embodied by the students and the general public to connect and interact with the one being studied. Those events, as they are located in Brussels, provide a valuable opportunity for Polish literature to benefit from international exposure. The direct presence of authors and their texts in the city simplifies the immediate dissemination and promotion of Polish culture across Western Europe.

In addition, in a more European context, Polish literature can also be promoted through alternative means, such as book fairs, literary festivals, and prizes. The European continent is home to a number of prestigious literary awards, including the Nobel Prize, the International Booker Prize, and the European Book Prize. Nevertheless, one award that is *de facto* based in Brussels stands out as a potentially valuable promotional tool: the European Union Prize for Literature (EUPL). The EUPL is an annual prize funded by the European Commission, which was established in 2009 with the objective of promoting and supporting young authors from the European Union. It is organised by the Federation of European Publishers (FEP) and the European and International Booksellers Federation (EIBF). The following is an explanation of the manner in which the award is implemented:

The aim of the European Union Prize for Literature (EUPL) is to put the spotlight on the creativity and diverse wealth of Europe's contemporary literature in the field of fiction, promote the circulation of literature within Europe, and encourage greater interest in non-national literary works. The Prize competition is open to 41 countries currently involved in the Creative Europe program. Each year, national organisations in a third of the participating countries nominate potential winning novels, making it possible for all countries and language areas to be represented over a three-year cycle. The Prize is financed by the Creative Europe program of the European Union, which aims to achieve three main goals: promote cross-border mobility of those working in the cultural sector, encourage the transnational circulation of cultural and artistic output, and foster intercultural dialogue¹⁷.

Over time, a number of Polish authors have been selected by the jury, including Jacek Dukaj in 2009, Magdalena Parys in 2015, Marta Dzido in 2019, and Piotr Pazinski in 2012. These individuals went on to win the prize in their respective years. The intention behind the establishment of the prize is laudable. The prize winners are awarded a sum of 5,000 euros and institutional support to assist with the translation and promotion of their books.

¹⁷ European Union Prize for Literature (EUPL), *What is the EUPL?*, European Union, <https://eu prizeliterature.eu/what-is-eupl>, accessed 26.04.24.

Nevertheless, the literary award has generated some debate amongst literary critics and specialists. The award has been perceived by some as a soft power tool for the promotion of European cultural values and political ideals, as it tends to recognise authors who espouse similar beliefs. There are concerns that the prize does not afford equal opportunity for all authors, given that those espousing the ideology of the European Union have a distinct advantage in terms of eligibility. Only those aligned with this perspective are considered for the award, and those selected are subsequently afforded significant exposure and attention. Therefore, it can be argued that the EUPL represents a potential instrument for conveying and shaping a common cultural identity across the entire Union. It is a framework that encourages a pattern of thought centred on linguistic, cultural and political issues and, in doing so, discriminates against authors who do not align themselves with these values. As Núria Codina Solà and Jack McMartin explicate in their article *The European Union Prize for Literature: Disseminating European Values through Translation and Supranational Consecration*:

The EUPL is an annual literary prize funded by the European Commission to support emerging writers and to promote the circulation of European literature within and beyond the European Union (...). We argue that the EUPL (along with other EU-sponsored prizes like it) can be understood as instruments of soft power, where (foreign) policy goals are achieved through the prizing of a certain set of aesthetic, political and commercial values associated with the European integration process¹⁸.

However, despite the ambiguity surrounding its real role, the prize offers a very valuable opportunity for authors to be published and have their work translated into the languages of the European Union. The prize is also beneficial for young authors who wish to expand their readership across Europe. Thanks to the wide scope that the prize covers, authors are able to stand out and share their works on a continental scale. The EUPL can therefore be regarded as a preliminary step towards the establishment of a unified European book market. Although the duality of its symbolism can be confusing, its promotional aspect towards an opening to Europe and translation remains appealing, as it provides a voice to countries that are often outside of the main literary trends of the European Union. Moreover, it offers a forum for authors from beyond the conventional European literary landscape, with a particular focus on those hailing from Central and Eastern Europe, including Polish literature. As explained by Núria Codina Solà and Jack McMartin:

(...) [T]his chapter explored the impact of European values on the EUPL's organisational makeup, winners' profiles, translation flows, and textual dynamics and put a finger on the double-edged ambivalences of prizing and translation as main consecratory strategies in

¹⁸ N. Codina Solà, J. McMartin, *The European Union Prize for Literature: Disseminating European Values through Translation and Supranational Consecration*. In *Culture as Soft Power*, ed. Elisabet Carbó-Catalan and Diana Roig-Sanz, Berlin/Boston: De Gruyter 2022, p. 344.

the cultural field. Both serve to enhance a literary work's symbolic and economic value and tend to amplify one another, a dynamic EUPL organisers are keen to exploit: having been translated into no more than four languages was a prerequisite for consideration; and once prized with the EUPL, winning books found publishers in an average of nine new languages. Each EUPL-consecrated work is also a carrier of political value(s), as demonstrated by the thematic analysis of the winning texts in the European Stories anthology. Although mutually imbricated in this way, prizing and translation are often at odds with each other and function as centripetal and centrifugal forces respectively when it comes to notions of linguistic and cultural diversity. In the context of the EUPL, translation creates a centrifugal movement that contributes significantly to the diversification of European literature beyond the dominance of Western European canonical works from major cultural and political powers such as Britain, Germany, France, Spain, or Italy, and the (semi-)central languages they claim¹⁹.

The prize helps European authors and literature become recognised and reach new audiences across the continent. The EUPL is one of the essential tool for the survival of literature in Europe and has become an integral part of literary life in the EU and Brussels. The award ceremony also plays an important role in the literary life of Brussels as a city. This year's award ceremony was held during the "Brussels Book Fair".

For over half a century, the book fair in the Belgian capital has been a prominent attraction for bibliophiles, annually attracting thousands of visitors. It serves as a meeting point for writers, poets, publishers, and booksellers. The organisers are dedicated to showcasing a diverse range of languages and regions, encapsulating this vision as follows: "*Au cœur de la Babel qu'est Bruxelles avec ses 184 nationalités, la Foire est le lieu où lecteurs.rices et auteurs.rices se mêlent pour créer de nouveaux archipels de mots et d'images*"²⁰. Annually, the fair bestows an exceptional regional guest with an honour. In the current year, the honoured guest was the European Union.

Alors que la Belgique assure la présidence du Conseil de l'Union européenne et que des élections européennes cruciales ont lieu dans quelques semaines, c'est l'Union européenne et ses littératures qui sont à l'honneur, cette année, à la Foire du livre de Bruxelles, autour du slogan fédérateur « L'Union européenne, c'est toi, c'est moi, c'est nous. » (...) ²¹.

[While Belgium holds the presidency of the Council of the European Union and crucial European elections take place in a few weeks, it is the European Union and its literatures that are at the forefront of honour, this year, at the Brussels Book Fair, around the unifying slogan "The European Union, it's you, it's me, it's us." (...)]

One of the honorary guests at the fair was the Polish novelist Magdalena Parys, representing Poland and its literary landscape. The majority of

¹⁹ *Ibidem*, p. 368-369.

²⁰ Foire du Livre de Bruxelles, *À Propos*. Foire du Livre de Bruxelles, Bruxelles 2024, Website : <https://flb.be/lassociation/>, accessed on 26.04.24. Translation: "At the heart of the Babel that is Brussels with its 184 nationalities, the Fair is the place where readers and authors mingle to create new archipelagos of words and images".

²¹ Foire du Livre de Bruxelles, *Dossier de Presse*, Bruxelles 2024, p. 1. https://flb.be/wp-content/uploads/2024/03/FLB2024_DP_GLOBAL.pdf, accessed 26.04.24.

attendees at the Brussels Book Fair are Belgian. Consequently, such events provide a valuable opportunity for foreign literature to engage directly with potential readers from diverse cultural backgrounds. Authors participating in these events are often prominent figures within the Polish literary community. The reception of Polish literature in Brussels is analogous to that of neighbouring countries and Polish literature is exported to Belgium through the form of translations. Nevertheless, for a work to be considered for translation, it must first have achieved a certain level of success in its original language. The Polish books that capture the interest of Belgian readers frequently encompass either works regarded as classics of Polish literature, including, for example, the writings of Sławomir Mrożek and Czesław Miłosz, especially if they are historical narratives or testimonies, or authors with a particular connection to Belgium, such as Marian Pankowski. Furthermore, the works of contemporary authors who have received literary recognition, such as Andrzej Stasiuk, Agata Tuszyńska, Szczepan Twardoch, and others, have also been available on the Belgian book market.

Another occasion on which literary works may reach new readerships in Brussels, in particular with regard to poetic works, is the *Transpoesie Festival*. The event is held annually around 26 September, the date marking the European Day of Languages and Linguistic Diversity. The European Union National Institutes for Culture (EUNIC) in Brussels has been organising this event since 2011, featuring panels of European poets chosen by the relevant national or cultural institutes in Brussels, who each represent a different European country. These poets often compose new original works for the occasion, which are written in their native language and subsequently translated into French and Dutch. Since its inception, 294 European poets have participated in the festival, resulting in the creation of 314 poems through this initiative. The participating poets write their texts around a theme proposed by the event organisers and then convene in Brussels during the festivities to discuss the topic. One of the defining characteristics of the event is the distinctive nature of the venues in which it is held. For example, when Natalia Malek was among the attendees last year (in 2023), the public had the opportunity to meet the Polish poetess during a lunch debate at Hannon House, a magnificent example of Brussels Art Nouveau architecture. Guests also had the chance to witness her performances in the Citizens' Garden, a beautiful garden situated adjacent to the Wiertz Museum, hidden behind the European Parliament building. The festival's locations play a pivotal role in fostering an engaging atmosphere, offering readers the opportunity to explore iconic Brussels sites and immerse themselves in European poetry. Since 2014 and the intervention of Tomasz Różycki, Polish poets have been invited almost every year: Wioletta Greg in 2016, Krzysztof Siwczyk in 2017, Jakub Kornhauser in 2018, and Krystyna Dąbrowska in 2019. The festival was maintained during the COVID-19 pandemic and adapted to an online format through Zoom and

was streamed live on Facebook. That year (2020), Kamila Janiak shared her poems with the public all over the world. Over the past few years, Julia Fierdoczuk (2021), Zuzanna Bartoszek (2022), and Natalia Malek (2023), Małgorzata Lebda (2024) have been afforded the opportunity to present their poetry in the European capital. These elements prove once again that Polish literature is fully present in the city and can be experienced differently each time.

The capital happens to be a place where literature can freely and actively exist. Indeed, Brussels is reputed to be a city with a long and distinguished literary tradition, having been the residence of numerous famous authors, including Victor Hugo and Charles Baudelaire. Even today, Brussels continues to attract prosaists and poets, sometimes from Poland, to stay here for shorter or longer periods. Among these writers is Grażyna Plebanek, who contributes to the vibrant literary scene of the city. Since 2005, the Polish writer, columnist, and author of novels has been residing in Brussels. In 2020, she further described her connection to the metropolis by writing a book entitled *Bruksela. Zwierzęcość w mieście* (2021)²². The book was issued by the publishing house *Wielka Litera* and was a part of the *Podróż nieoczywista* series. In this series, the books are written from the perspective of expatriate authors who create a literary travel guide for a Polish readership, offering them a unique perspective on the city in which they reside. The format selected by Plebanek in this literary work is noteworthy for its subjective approach. Indeed, the author guides the reader through a journey in the city, revealing the locations in Brussels that hold significance to her. She employs illustrations to portray and highlight the locations, monuments, parks, and streets that she frequents and admires. The writer introduces the reader to Brussels, also known as “Bru” in her narrative, which stands out because it is seen through her distinctive perspective:

Jestem w Brukseli beznadziejnie zakochana. Od lat nieobiektywna, oddalam się stąd na dwa, maksymalnie trzy tygodnie, bo już po kilku dniach czuję się jak na odwyku. (...) Pisząc tę książkę, opowieść o moim ukochanym mieście, chcę przemyścić jedną tylko radę: (...) Wyjdźcie na ulicę, (...). Idźcie tam, gdzie prowadzą zmysły i intuicja. Bądźcie brukselskim psem, kundlem przemykającym za tropem, który tylko jemu wydaje się ciekawy. Dziewczynką, która przykuca, żeby z tej perspektywy podziwiać świata. Chłopcem, który wypina się i sika na to, co reprezentacyjne i błyszczące. Bruksela nie szumi rzeką, bo rzekę tu замуrowano, ale jej opowieściami (...). Jest tyle Brukseli, ile patrzących, wachających, dotykających, jej poręczy, ścian, przysiadających na trawnikach (...). Nie oglądajcie tego, co wypada. Poznajcie jedną ulicę, jedną dzielnicę, jeden park – za to dobrze. Tak, żeby potem się śnił, wyświetlał pod zamkniętymi powiekami. To jest Bruksela²³.

[I am hopelessly in love with Brussels. I have been biased for years, I only leave for two, three weeks at most, because after a few days I feel like I'm in rehab. (...) While writing this book, a story about my beloved city, I want to smuggle in only one piece of advice: (...) Go out into the streets, (...). Go where your senses and intuition lead. Be a Brussels dog, a mutt

²² G. Plebanek, *Bruksela. Zwierzęcość w mieście*, Warszawa: Wielka Litera 2021.

²³ *Ibidem*, p. 15–19.

following a trail that only he finds interesting. A girl who crouches down to admire the world from this perspective. A boy who sticks out and pees on everything that is presentable and shiny. Brussels does not roar with the sound of the river, because the river was walled up here, but with its stories (...). There are as many Brussels as people are looking, smelling, touching, its railings, its walls, sitting on the lawns (...). Don't go and see the obvious sights. Get to know one street, one district, one park – but completely. So that when you dream, you could display it under closed eyelids. This is Brussels.]

The author's profound interest in the capital is evident throughout the book and in her interactions with the city. Brussels serves not only as a backdrop, but also as a transformative force in the writer's life. This symbiotic relationship between the individual and the urban environment is a recurring theme in literature set in urban areas, where the city becomes an instrument that shapes one's identity and one's experiences. Michael Ian Borer provides the following explanation of this phenomenon:

The roles of vision and sight will be discussed first simply because this sense accounts for the majority, or at least the most easily perceivable, of social ways people interact with strangers throughout the urban public realm (...). The creation of symbolic representations of the city is a coping mechanism necessary for dealing with the city's potentially overwhelming physicality and visual stimulation (...). Because the city is so large, these representations are essential for urban living. They become the foundation for a common language within and about the city. In their seminal article on the subject, Wohl and Strauss (1958) showed that people attach these representations to both natural and artificial objects. Artifacts located throughout the city (e.g. trees, rivers, parks, buildings, street corners, and neighborhoods) can all become symbolic markers. Some of these become synonymous with the city itself. These objects and places help groups identify the city and also provide a means for personal identification with the city²⁴.

Brussels holds a fundamental place in Plebanek's life, serving as a source of influence and inspiration. The city has provided her with the opportunity to discover her true self and has played a significant role in enriching her life, allowing her to establish herself, evolve, and thrive, as evidenced by her writing:

Moje miasto jest zwierzęce, pogańskie, boskie. Ludzkie, niekrólewskie. Z korzeniami i koronami, zapuszczeniem i świetlistością. Powtarzam za Erazmem z Rotterdamu, który mieszkał w Brukseli, (...), że ojczyzna jest tam, gdzie czujesz się u siebie. (...) To może być miasto. Proces adoptowania i bycia adoptowaną, wrastania w miasto jest jak rośnięcie drzewa. Słoje doświadczeń wypełniają lata słońca, ból nacięć. (...) Gdybym pisała tę książkę dziesięć lat temu, może powstałby bizantyjski spis adresów klubów, galerii, teatrów, które koniecznie trzeba odwiedzić. Jeśli pisałabym ją pięć lat temu, może byłyby to wędrówka po dyskusjach i działaniach aktywistów, o rozmowach o „Innym” o tym, dlaczego „białe” jest wciąż uniwersalne a norma pozostaje „męska”. Teraz, w dziwnym i niezwykłym 2020, powstał zwierzęcy przewodnik po podświadomości miasta²⁵.

[My city is animal, pagan, divine. Human, not royal. With roots and crowns, entrenchment and luminosity. As Erasmus of Rotterdam who lived in Brussels said, (...) that homeland is where you feel at home. (...). This could also be a city. The process of adopting and being

²⁴ M.I. Borer, *Being in the City: The Sociology of Urban Experiences*, In: "Sociology Compass" 2013, nr 7.1, 2013, p. 969–970.

²⁵ *Op.cit.*, p. 405–406.

adopted, of growing into the city, is like growing a tree. Jars of experience are filled with years of sun, and pain from cuts. (...) If I had written this book ten years ago, perhaps there would have been a Byzantine list of addresses of clubs, galleries, and theatres that are a must-visit. If I had written it five years ago, maybe it would have been a wander through discussions and activities of activists, about conversations about the “Other”, about why “white” is still universal and the norm remains “male”. Now, in the strange and unusual year of 2020, an animal guide about the city’s subconscious has been created.]

As the case of Plebanek shows, the capital of Belgium becomes a place where Polish literature is both produced and consumed. Writers from Poland visit Brussels to meet their counterparts, share their experiences and sometimes even settle there permanently. Polish literature is also made tangible through the texts that are discussed, presented or written there. Polish literature is particularly prolific in Brussels. This is evidenced by a number of factors. First, the city functions as a source of inspiration for Polish writers. Second, an interactive and reciprocal relationship exists between Polish literature and readers in Brussels. This is highlighted by the number of Polish writers whose works have been translated and published through the prism of Brussels, as is exemplified by the case of Grażyna Plebanek. One thing is certain: Polish literature can be experienced in Brussels, as it is unreservedly represented there.

3. Translating Polish Literature in Brussels

Translation plays a crucial role in the experience of literature in Brussels. The city’s multicultural and multilingual nature, coupled with its strategic geopolitical location, necessitates a perpetual demand for translation services on a day-to-day basis. Similarly, the Polish language is subject to the same translation requirements. Translation is an essential component of the process of disseminating literature, as it enables the reach of literary works to be extended beyond the immediate circles of those who are familiar with the Polish language and Polish literature. Indeed, it may be observed that the general public in Brussels, for example, is not always conversant with Polish literature, so translation is indispensable. In discussions about Polish literature in the capital, the issue of translation often emerges as a topic of interest. In various manifestations, translation plays a significant role in helping the growth of the international literary landscape. The interest in literature often commences with the learning of languages, which in turn provides a foundation for studies in translation. By way of illustration, the Free University of Brussels (ULB) incorporates the teaching of translation into its curriculum. The process of translation allows students to learn the structure and composition of the language and to engage with literary texts. This immersion facilitates a deeper understanding of Polish literature and culture. Students practice translation after acquiring knowledge

of translation theory. A number of these exercises have been published in the scientific journal “*Slavica Bruxellensia*”. The following extract is a description of the circumstances surrounding those publications provided by Dorota Walczak-Delanois and Cécile Bocianowski:

La traduction a également fait partie intégrante du travail rédactionnel et des traductions proposées pour la revue *Slavica Bruxellensia* dont, sur la demande des étudiants et collaborateurs, la rédaction en chef est tenue de 2008 jusqu'en 2016 par Dorota Walczak-Delanois, avant la transmission de la rédaction à la jeune génération, en novembre 2016. La partie consacrée dans chaque numéro thématique à une traduction inédite sert encore et toujours à nos étudiants. Enfin, si une partie intégrante et très importante est basée sur la traduction des textes polonais vers le français, une autre partie est la transmission de savoirs intergénérationnels, comme lors de la rencontre à l'ULB avec Alain Van Crugten: «*Traduire c'est écrire et vice-versa* », le 2 mars 2017. À l'approche de l'anniversaire de la fondation de la slavistique et polonistique en 1925, nous préparons avec nos étudiants une anthologie des textes autour de ces parcours pédagogiques et scientifiques²⁶.

[Translation was also an integral part of the editorial work and translations proposed for the journal *Slavica Bruxellensia*, of which, at the request of students and collaborators, the position of chief editor was held from 2008 until 2016 by Dorota Walczak-Delanois, before passing the direction to the younger generation, in November 2016. The section devoted to a new translation of each thematic issue is still useful to our students. Finally, as an integral and very important part is based on the translation of Polish texts into French, another part is based on the transmission of intergenerational knowledge, as during the meeting at the ULB with Alain Van Crugten: “*Translating is to write and vice versa*”, held on March 2, 2017. As the anniversary of the founding of Slavistics and Polish Studies in 1925 approaches, we are preparing with our students an anthology of texts around these educational and scientific paths.]

The contribution of translators to the literary landscape is of incalculable value, particularly for students who recognise the significance of this profession. It is for this reason that translators, along with other speakers, occupy a central position in the literary life of Brussels. The participation of translators is of paramount importance during the majority of meetings with authors, as it helps with the exchange of ideas between the general public, who may not be proficient in the language, and the visiting writer. For example, at the ULB, during those meetings a system involving two translators is typically established, with one translating from, for instance, French to Polish, and the other translating in the opposite linguistic direction, from Polish to French. This approach has been demonstrated to be highly beneficial, as it simplifies the task for translators, enabling them to focus solely on one language, and it also organises the interactions. Translation also allows for exchange with a diverse audience, eliminating the potential for language barriers to hinder participation. In addition, given the importance of their work, the translators themselves are also celebrated

²⁶ D.Walczak-Delanois, C. Bocianowski, *Wytłumaczyć i przetłumaczyć. La Pologne et la Belgique au travers des expériences pédagogiques, scientifiques et littéraires à l'Université libre de Bruxelles*, In : *La Pologne Des Belges : Évolution d'un Regard (XXe–XXIe Siècles)*, ed. Przemysław Szczur, Kraków: Unum Press 2021, p. 137.

during evenings in their honour, arranged in a similar way to those for authors. Those invited at the ULB included Isabelle Macor and Francesco Annicchiarico, along with Miłosz Biedrzycki, Thibault Deleixhe, Isabelle Jannès-Kalinowski, Piotr Sommer and Alain Van Crugten. These evenings provide an opportunity for translators to present their work, discuss their methodologies, offer advice on their practices, and, above all, to share their relationships and experiences with Polish literature.

Besides, Belgium is home to a considerable number of translators. These individuals are employed by a variety of public and private sector organisations, including European institutions, private companies, the Belgian government, numerous non-governmental organisations, educational institutions, and other entities. Additionally, the list includes translators specialising in literary translation. The topic of translation in literature is extensive and would necessitate a dedicated article. This article will therefore provide a brief overview of the contributions of three notable individuals who have played a role in disseminating Polish literature in Belgium, particularly within academic and translational contexts. As stated above in this article, Belgium is a relatively small country, yet linguistically and culturally complex as it is divided along national linguistic lines, which are represented by three languages. In Belgium, translations are conducted in accordance with the language and linguistic landscape of the region in question. Translators are thus obliged to translate within the context of a linguistic space, rather than at the national level. In the northern region of the country, translators translate into Dutch, while in the southern region, they translate into French. Consequently, the former will be assimilated into the Dutch literary landscape, while the latter will be assimilated into the French literary landscape. This brings the northern part of the country closer to Dutch literary culture while the southern region becomes more integrated into the sphere of French literary culture. It should be noted that translated texts are not always automatically translated into all national languages. In this way, the function of the translator is not to translate a text for the benefit of a specific national entity but rather to ease the communication of a given text within the cultural context of a particular linguistic region. This phenomenon can be exemplified by the introduction of Kris Van Heuckelom, who has made a significant contribution to scientific research and the translation of Polish literature in the Flanders region of Belgium. Van Heuckelom is a professor at KU Leuven, an author, and a translator proficient in translating from Polish into Dutch. In an interview with Magdalena Machała for the scientific journal *“Konteksty Kultury”*, the translator explicates his methodology and translation techniques employed in rendering a Polish text into the Dutch linguistic and cultural context:

Ja również jestem tłumaczem i kiedy przekładam wiersze polskiego poety, najczęściej jestem zainteresowany tym autorem czy tekstem. W teorii Evena-Zohara chodzi raczej o różne normy kulturowe, do których przystosowują się poszczególni ludzie, więc ja, jako tłumacz

należący do podsystemu niderlandzkojęzycznego, podlegam pewnym prawom oraz regułom i kiedy chcę wprowadzić do tego podsystemu jakiegoś polskiego pisarza, muszę się do tych reguł przystosować. Według teorii polisystemów przekłady zajmują marginalne miejsce w danym systemie, ale niekiedy jednak tłumaczone teksty mogą się przenieść z peryferii systemu do centrum, jeżeli w danym systemie występują jakiś kryzys, konflikt czy luka²⁷.

[I am also a translator and when I translate poems by a Polish poet, I am usually interested in that author or text. Even-Zohar's theory is more about different cultural norms to which individual people adapt, so I, as a translator belonging to the Dutch-speaking subsystem, am subject to certain laws and rules, and when I want to introduce a Polish writer to this subsystem, I have to adapt to these rules. According to the polysystem theory, translations occupy a marginal place in a given system, but sometimes translated texts can move from the periphery of the system to the centre if there is a crisis, conflict, or gap in a given system.]

For him, the process of translation represents an instrument that allows two cultures to simultaneously meet and communicate. It is the responsibility of the translator to ensure that neither culture is unduly compromised throughout the process. The convergence of two socio-cultural heritages through literature permits the intersection of two distinct linguistic and cultural traditions, wherein translation becomes a conduit for the interconnection and exchange of socio-cultural concerns, as exemplified by the conjunction of Polish literature and Belgian languages. As evidenced by Van Heuckelom's case, the translator assumes the role of a conduit between the source language and the target language, facilitating the convergence of two cultures. This process enables the translation of a literary work that resonates with the translator and aligns with his cultural identity. Nevertheless, the standardisation of translation and the continual necessity to respond to the regulations of two distinct cultural and linguistic systems could impede the dissemination of literature as it originally exists. The process of translation does not fully restore literature to its original form. This may result in the cultural dimension being lost, which would be detrimental to the transcription in the target language. This is particularly pertinent in the Belgian context, where trilingualism and cultural diversity influence the reception of Polish literature in varying ways, contingent on the region and the language of the reader. Van Heuckelom occupies a significant position within the cultural landscape of Flanders, representing one of the academic domain of Polish culture, language, and literature in northern Belgium.

The second figure and an example for the French-speaking part of Belgium is Cécile Bocianowski, currently one of the most active translators dealing with Polish literary translation in french-speaking Belgium. She is a lecturer in Polish language and translation at the Free University of Brussels (ULB). In recent years, she has translated a considerable corpus of Polish literature. For example, she translated into French children's literature the prose

²⁷ K. Van Heuckelom, M. Machała, *Systemy i transfery. Z Krisem Van Heuckelomem rozmawia Magdalena Machała*, In: "Konteksty Kultury" 2020, nr 17.1, p.118–28.

of Brona Nowicka and Grażyna Plebanek, and more recently Agnieszka Szpila as well as the plays of Tadeusz Słobodzianek, Michał Walczak, Artur Grabowski, Marta Górnick, and Malina Prześluga. Additionally, she translated the poems of Aleksandra Dańczyszyn and Wioletta Grzegorzewska in the framework of the Transpoesie Festival. She also collaborated with Dorota Walczak-Delanois on the translation of the poems of Tomasz Różycki, Szczepan Kopyt, Jaś Kapela, Konrad Góra, and Tomasz Bąk.

In Brussels, however, the context is somewhat distinct. As a city where a multitude of languages and cultures converge, the field of translation is structured in a distinctive manner. Indeed, translation is no longer conducted in accordance with a singular linguistic and cultural context, but rather across a multitude of translation axes and languages. To provide an example, Alain Van Crugten is a prominent figure in the Brussels translation scene. Van Crugten is renowned for his translations of Belgian literature from Dutch to French, in particular novels by Hugo Claus. However, he has also been acknowledged for his translations of Polish literature, including the translations of Marian Pankowski, Bruno Schulz, and Stanisław Ignacy Witkiewicz's works. It is of interest to consider Van Crugten's opinions on the city of Brussels in the context of his experimentation with literature, as they allow us to gain insight into the particularity that Brussels embodies: a place where the personal meets the local and the international concurrently. Dorota Walczak-Delanois describes his conceptions as follows:

Alain van Crugten nous a confié un jour se sentir davantage bruxellois que belge ; en conséquence, nous retrouvons dans son œuvre les passages intéressants consacrés à l'identité, à leurs couleurs locales et communes : indo-européenne mais aussi fantasmagorique, inventée, comme dans son dernier roman, intitulé : *En étrange province*²⁸.

[Alain van Crugten once told us how he felt more like someone from Brussels than Belgian; consequently, we find in his work interesting passages devoted to identity, to their local and common colours: Indo-European but also phantasmagorical, invented, as in his last novel, entitled: *In a strange province*.]

Van Crugten suggests the presence of a distinctive socio-cultural ethos within the capital. It is a place where one is encouraged to adhere to their own personal values and beliefs. The city of Brussels is one in which the act of translation plays a pivotal role in facilitating the exchange of ideas within a multicultural milieu. The city is characterised by a diverse range of cultural levels, as evidenced in Van Crugten's work, which can be classified into three categories: the personal level, the local nuances, and the aspects that are common to all. The city is a reflection of the various cultural layers that are present within it. These layers interact, intersect and merge with one another. The city's multiculturalism exerts a significant influence on the artistic landscape at all levels, including that of the translator. Therefore, Van Crugten's expansive linguistic expertise and multilingual abilities empower him to translate at the juncture of heter-

²⁸ *Op.cit.*, p. 128.

ogeneous linguistic and cultural influences. Consequently, translation is no longer a simple binary exchange; rather, it is a complex construction that encompasses various levels of attempts to grasp the three cultural levels that Van Crugten incorporates in his work. In conclusion, translation ensures a better understanding among individuals and helps people connect through written texts. The significance of translation in Brussels lies in its ability to unite and harmonise diverse cultural backgrounds in one place. Moreover, it is thanks to translation that Polish literature is accessible and can be disseminated in Brussels.

4. Conclusion

As evidenced in Van Crugten's oeuvre, Brussels is a city where the concept of identity is of great importance. It is a unique location in which all cultures coexist in a manner that is distinctive from other urban settings due to the emphasis placed on the freedom of demonstration of one's cultural identity. This special characteristic of the capital city is a source of inspiration for Polish literature, as evidenced in this article and exemplified by the case of Plebanek, where a reciprocal relationship can be seen between her and the city. Brussels also represents an intriguing conduit for the promotion and dissemination of Polish literature. It serves as a platform for readers to discover and acquaint themselves with the literature, as well as for fostering comprehension and diffusion among those who are already familiar with it. The development of Polish literature in Brussels is shaped by the interplay of three levels of cultural identity, as outlined by Van Crugten: the personal, the local, and the aspect of common ground. The discovery of Polish literature thus occurs simultaneously at the three levels of cultural identity, as readers discover the literature for themselves through local events that facilitate engagement with a new culture, a new community, and a new literary tradition rooted in a common European cultural and historical background. This phenomenon also operates in reverse, with Brussels sometimes exerting an influence on Polish literature, as it plays an active role in influencing its expansion. Polish authors who participate in local events, such as book fairs, literary festivals, and meetings, benefit from the city's cultural environment and sometimes even flourish, thanks to the diverse readership, institutions, and cultures they encounter in Brussels, influencing them on the three levels of cultural identity as well. The Polish literary scene is active in Brussels as a result of the city's geopolitical suitability and cultural circumstances, which combine to create an optimal environment for the promotion of Polish literature. : This is evidenced by the presence of educational institutions, particularly universities, which have disseminated Polish literature in the Belgian capital for almost a century. Additionally, poets and writers frequently visit

and engage with the city, resulting in the production of texts, translations, and sales. Moreover, Polish literature is being promoted at various levels, including on a personal level for readers of Polish origin in Brussels, on a local level for the city's residents, and on a global level through the international and European population and institutions, thereby mirroring the aforementioned categories of cultural identity.

The multifaceted nature of Polish literature as it appears in Brussels, encompassing poetry, prose, translations, encounters with authors, academic institutions, festivals and awards, provides non-Polish readers with a unique opportunity to gain insight into Polish culture, to immerse themselves in a realm distinct from their own and to foster a bridge between the two cultural spheres. The integration of reading, living and translating literature as an immersive experience enables the perception of Polish literature as a unified and comprehensive entity. The previously mentioned initiatives also serve to legitimise Poland's position on the European stage, demonstrating that its cultural patrimony and its presence on the European cultural and literary chessboard are both well-founded. Consequently, literature represents a valuable instrument for advancing Poland's integration into the Western European cultural sphere. In Brussels, with its distinctive status, a cultural dialogue is initiated through literature, which serves to unite and connect disparate cultural entities. It can be observed that Polish literature and the city reflect each other, offering individuals from both sides the opportunity to discover their identity, to find their purpose and to thrive. Despite the relatively minor status and lack of awareness of Polish literature in Western Europe, the three levels of cultural identity in Brussels (personal, local and common ground) facilitate the free sharing and expression of its authentic nature. From a geo-cultural perspective, Polish literature is occasionally regarded as exotic in Brussels. Nevertheless, it is perceived as European, original and something with which it is possible to identify. This is because Brussels makes it resonate through its infrastructures and utilises this exoticism, not to marginalise it but to promote and integrate it into its multiculturalism. In conclusion, Brussels, occupying a distinctive dual position as both the national capital and the capital of Europe, has effectively guaranteed the accessibility of culture and its dissemination to its international community, while simultaneously enabling culture to retain its intrinsic authenticity. The metropolis, with its multiculturalism and independence, provides a secure environment in which culture, and in this case literature, is accessible to all. With regard to Polish literature, despite its geographical separation from the country of its origin, has managed to become established and develop within this particular context, due to the fact that it is fully accepted and able to expand freely in the capital. Finally, Polish literature has secured a foothold in the Belgian capital. Alive, in motion, and being experienced, it has flourished there for nearly a century, ensuring its continued presence in Brussels.

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