

Congregatio mundi Today: New Perspectives on Guillaume Postel (1510–1581)

Ewa Łukaszyk

LE STUDIUM Loire Valley Institute for Advanced Studies / Centre for Advanced Studies in the Renaissance (CESR) / CNRS, University of Tours, 59 Rue Néricault Destouches, 37000 Tours, France
ewa.a.lukaszyk@gmail.com

This paper aims to reflect on the perspectives of a critical return to certain aspects of the Postelian heritage, while in the recent decades the figure of this heterodox Renaissance thinker has been downgraded from fascinating to merely secondary. Indeed, his equation between intercultural communication and universal concordia remains generally valid to the present day, even for those who do not share his Adamitic and cabalistic conceptions of language. On the other hand, his concept of congregator mundi appears as a valuable starting point for the discussion on the role and prerogatives of the intellectual as a mediator between human societies and the transcendent sphere. One may compare it with the recent thought of Giorgio Agamben, re-collocating the intellectual and the cultural critic in the line of the monotheistic prophets.

Keywords: Renaissance / Postel, Guillaume / universalism / millenarianism / ecumenism / universal restitution / Adamic language / Agamben, Giorgio / intellectual / prophet

In 1927, Émile Dermenghem opened his chapter dedicated to Guillaume Postel in *Thomas Morus et les utopistes de la Renaissance* by listing the contradictory opinions concerning this figure. Postel was characterised, by different authors, as a “monster resuming the heresies of all the centuries,” a fanatic, a madman, an incarnation of the satanic pride, or – quite on the contrary – as the greatest mind of his century (cf. Dermenghem 196). The seminal works that illustrated the following decades of the Postelian scholarship, such as *Concordia Mundi: The Career and Thought of Guillaume Postel* (1957) by William Bouwsma, developed a very similar, contrasting, dynamic and singularly attractive image, resuming the fascinating enigma of the Renaissance as an epoch appealing to our imagination. As Bouwsma wrote right on the opening page of his monograph dedicated to Postel, “he became a figure of mystery, about whom gathered an almost Faustian legend” (Bouwsma 1), namely the

one attributing his longevity to the presumed discovery of the elixir of life. Also Marion Leathes Kuntz and François Secret, scholars who published their most important works in the sixties and the seventies, maintained the aura surrounding this figure. More recently, nonetheless, the striking portrait has been replaced by the dull picture of Postel – a second-rank thinker whose writings are supposed to lack not only logic and clarity,¹ but also a deeper meaning. This shallow Postel – the maker of the nationalistic mythology of France – has made his appearance, for instance, in the work of Claude Gilbert Dubois, *La mythologie des origines chez Guillaume Postel: de la naissance à la nation*, published in 1994. In this book, Postel occupies the position of an early inventor of the expression *nos ancêtres les Gaulois*, the very quintessence of dull and manipulating schooling received by more than one generation of the French. In conclusion, across several decades of scholarship, the humanist has been downgraded from fury to platitude and from madness to boredom; quite a pessimistic outcome.

One might say this is a standard pattern in the scholarship. Books, topics, and figures, once regarded as controversial (or merely fashionable), fall out of favor, only to be brought back from oblivion in a new intellectual context. Indeed, in the vast and multiform work of Postel, anyone can find something that serves or reflects one's current state of mind, political views, interests, dynamics – or stagnation. Mentally shaped by the present-day humanities, one can become sensitive to the harmonic resonance between Postel's idea of universal restitution and the apocatastatic eschatology of Giorgio Agamben. Also, the Italian thinker is an example of a figure ready to fall out of fashion. Nonetheless, as one observes the ongoing exhaustion of Agamben as a political thinker, it is possible to foresee the return to his legacy of medievalist and a scholar dedicated to the study of early-modern age. This section of Agamben's writings, overshadowed by his importance as a critic of modernity, still requires to be put in the limelight. Much of Agamben's heritage lies beyond *Homo sacer* – he should be appreciated as an eschatological thinker deeply rooted in his medieval and

¹ In fact, the discursive organization of Postel's writings is very peculiar. Bouwsma provided an elaborate explanation why it should be so, mentioning, on the one hand, the temperamental factors, and on the other, the atmosphere of his time and, even more importantly, the aims of Postel's intellectual intervention. His writings had to remain chaotic and obscure if he was to operate a fusion of disparate materials and heterogeneous sources with which he had decided to work (cf. Bouwsma 98ss.). Subsequent scholarship appears to have become much more pitiless, tending to reduce Postel's obscurity to simple bad writing.

early-modern scholarship, possibly in a kind of anachronistic partnership with Guillaume Postel.

Let us return to the author of *Absconditorum clavis*. Who was he, after all, and why does he deserve more than just a footnote in the history of the Renaissance intellectual becoming? Indeed, a variegated figure continually taking on new employments, he was a polymath and a polyglot, a utopianist, a Christian Kabbalist, a traveller, an ambassador on a mission to the Turkish sultan. He was also a professor teaching Greek, Hebrew, and Arabic at the newly created Collège de France, a prolific author of such works as *De Orbis terrae concordia*. A theoretician of the universal monarchy, he was obsessed with the idea of unity on every stage and level of the human life, going from the unity of lovers to the ideal world state. He was a linguist, or at least the author of one of the earliest grammars of Arabic, sometimes considered for this reason as the first Orientalist.² It was mainly by reflecting on the paradisaical origin of language that he gradually developed the thesis on the possibility of achieving a universal harmony beyond the diversity of cultures, ethnicities, and faiths, as well as general restitution of the world to its original, unspoilt condition (*restitutio omnium*). The restitution of the primordial Adamic language would put us back on the path of truth, wisdom, and knowledge (*via veritatis perdita*), because the return of the perfect language, offering the exact correspondence between the words and the things would guarantee unperturbed communication, as well as the possibility of unhindered rational persuasion.

I have just approximated Postel and Agamben. Indeed their falling out of fashion is not the only reason for this comparison. Were such a wordplay permitted here, one might say that between the pre-modern and the post-modern, the thing in common is that they are anti-modern in their way of conceptualizing the intellectual as a monotheistic prophet. (This is no longer the critical instance of the modern secularization, as it would be if one followed in the footsteps of Gramsci or Adorno.) The first essay

² Even if we know that it was not unusual for the late medieval – at least from the twelfth century on – and early-modern scholar to read Arabic; in fact, it was much more common then to read Arabic among the scholars than it is for most of us today, even if in western Europe we usually coexist with numerous Arabic-speaking populations. According to George Saliba, the reading knowledge of Arabic must have been not so rare in the erudite circles of the early-modern Europe. Such a hypothesis would explain the circulation of various scientific ideas between Europe and the Islamic world, even if we have no textual proof of the existence of any Latin translations. As the scholar claims, the astronomical and mathematical ideas “that were first developed in the Islamic world could have been transmitted to people like Copernicus without having those original Arabic works necessarily translated into Latin” (Saliba 116).

Creation and Redemption, included in Agamben's volume *Nudities*, initially published in 2009, is the central text to be remembered here. The key figure of the cultural critic, invested by Agamben with a redemptive function, is redesigned in post-secular terms and inscribed in an eschatological, rather than political, horizon.

Guillaume Postel had come very close to those redemptive terms as he designed the figure and the function of the *congregator mundi*, the principal agent of the universal restitution. This concept has to be understood in the first place as an answer to a diagnosis of his own time as an age in which the whole creation enters a crisis, a stage of dissolution. It is curious to observe how far we are from the supposed positive stance that is usually attributed to the Renaissance humanism and humanists. In fact, it was a time of "things falling apart," to borrow the expression used as the title of the post-colonial novel by the Nigerian writer Chinua Achebe. Arguably, the world of the humanists was one of the things falling apart just as much as the world of the native African cultures in the twentieth century. The religion wars in France that started when Postel was already an old man form a dismal background. Less obviously, the reality of what we might call, after Samuel Huntington, the "clash of civilizations" in the Mediterranean might have been just another painful dimension of shattered unity in the eyes of someone well versed in what used to be called, during the late Middle Ages, the *Arabica studia*.

This is why the idea of gathering and bringing things back together appears as central. However, I do believe we should search for the gist of this idea even deeper. What is more, it would allow us to associate the pre-modernity of Postel and the post-modernity of Agamben even closer. The idea of *congregatio mundi* as a function of cultural criticism consists mainly in an anti-analytic move. It is a project of re-establishing the wholeness and entirety of things destroyed by an excess of analysis – just as, arguably, the unity of Christendom had been destroyed by an excess of theology in the debate opened by the Reformation. For Postel, it might perhaps signify even more, just as the unity of the monotheistic religion had been destroyed by an excess of theology in the very beginnings of the Mediterranean history. In any case, what emerges as the source of all the evil is a splitting machine producing denominations.

On the other hand, *congregatio mundi* is a labor of approximating things, labour against an intellectual division that had been initially introduced by the birth of theology. Following the Agambenian thought, it is easy to suspect that the same splitting machine, or a

procedure of discursive division, is still at work in all the analytical disciplines of our contemporary humanities. This necessary theological procedure consists in multiplying fine distinctions and definitions, as well as the textual, philological precision. (Much of it is a typical humanist contribution.) In other words, the Renaissance humanism did not make the medieval theology obsolete; on the contrary, it added a lot to the development leading farther on the same path.

Seen in this context, the discursive chaos, indiscipline, and obscurity of the Postelian writing seem to be a deliberate reaction against some excess of order, discipline, clarity, and precision. Postel, the madman, represents two things at the same time – the analysis led to its ultimate consequences, the analysis that somehow collapses under its weight, and the turn towards mysticism as a non-analytic perception of wholeness through insight. In a way, one might argue that he had become, paradoxically, an anti-humanist. As a consequence, he thoroughly deserved not only the epithet of a madman but also that of a receptacle of all heresies, in the measure that he had tried to establish his notion of congregation beyond the theological norms and practical boundaries of orthodoxy.

His synthesis is transgressive in two dimensions at once. Firstly, it is trans-historical, against theology as something post-lapsarian, as something that belongs to the historical world. The mystical wholeness of Postel is made from the double, Adamite and millenarian perspective, thought concomitantly in paradisaical and eschatological terms. While the language of theology is indeed not the language of Adam, perhaps it is even the very opposite of it. Secondly, the Postelian synthesis is trans-cultural, because the pre-lapsarian perspective abolishes the ethnic and cultural distinctions. Once again, Postel elaborates the consequences of this insight rather thoroughly, namely in his interpretation of the Moses's candelabra, till the point of collapse. The orderly discourse reaches exhaustion; it crumbles under its weight. This pre-modern process of discursive transgression brings to one's mind the post-modern metaphor of piercing our philosophical eardrum by continuous beating, explained by Jacques Derrida in the *Margins of Philosophy*.

If we admit the perspective of Postel, at the same time mystical and pre-lapsarian, all the religious divisionism becomes the very essence of what is secular, limited to the sphere of the post-lapsarian history; it appears as radically non-divine. This is how the political consequences of theologically induced division lose their foundation and legitimization. Moreover, this refers not only to the religious wars in Europe but also to the great "civilization clash" between various European king-

doms and the Turkish super-power. On the other hand, all the attempts at building bridges against theology and its consequences, including a possible alliance of France with the sultan in which Postel was personally implied as a member of the French embassy to the Sublime Porte, become justified and legitimate. For Postel, there is no radical distinction, no civilization clash. He treats the Muslims as a kind of quasi- or semi-Christians, combining the notions of *Ecclesia generalis* et *Ecclesia specialis*. Bouwsma (48) had once suggested that the second book of *De orbis concordia* was “almost a paraphrase” of the *Koran*. Although this judgment should probably not be taken at its face value and requires a more careful examination, there is some truth in it.

If we speak about the opening of the geographical horizons in the Renaissance, we should also consider these Mediterranean approximations. Quite importantly, nonetheless, they are not exactly a breakthrough, but rather a continuation of the relationships established already in the late Middle Ages. Postel is someone who follows the footsteps of such figures as Ramon Llull and others well versed in *Arabica studia*. His humanism appears in this context as a link in a chain; a chain that leads to our times. Quite worryingly, the contemporary conditions appear as similar to those of Postel. His embassy to the Turks had failed just as much as the contemporary attempts at transforming the Mediterranean into a zone of the countries allied with the European Union rather than its enemies. It was not so very long ago that negotiations were going on for the access of Turkey into the European Union. By now, this project may have become much like a dream of Postel, the madman. Under these conditions, the religious justification and incessant validity of a politically impossible project may easily escape our attention. In this aspect, one can notice a certain shallowness of the recent scholarship, reducing the contradictions – such a characteristic trait of everything that Postel wrote and did in his life – to clear, apparently logical statements. Ina Baghdiantz McCabe attempts at tracing a vaster landscape, affirming the following:

In Guillaume Postel’s writings, there was to be no East and West, and no divisions between Christianity and Islam; he had a universal vision of a united world at peace, albeit one with a clear hierarchy: France was at the helm of the universe. Postel imagined a world state under the rule of the French monarch..., who would unite all Christians, Jews, and Muslims once they understood what they had in common and forgot their differences (McCabe 15).

The approach of this scholar accentuates the political dimension of the Postelian thought; it contrasts it with the tone of the French crusad-

ing literature, yet at the same time inscribes in it as its continuation. Nonetheless, Postel's utopia cannot be entirely reduced to these terms. Yes, his Oriental project had a lot to do with disinterested, unstoppable curiosity of a scholar wishing to possess the knowledge gathered in the Muslim world. There was also an attitude of genuine respect and a sense of shared heritage, including not only knowledge understood as useful, pragmatic information, but also a more profound intellectual lesson. As an example, such a valuable paradigm of simplicity, economy, and concision is to be read in the Latin introduction to the Arabic grammar that Postel had written as an initiation into the arcane workings of a tongue that, in his intimate perception, no truly educated man should ignore:

Quid? quod videas dilucide et clare dictum apud Aben Sina uno aut altero folio tantum, quod vix Galenus cum suo Asiatismo quinque aut sex libris maximis absolvat? (Postel, *Grammatica* ii.v)

Don't you see that with his distinct and clear discourse, Ibn Sina, over a couple of pages, says more than Galen, with his Asiatism [i.e., florid style], can barely do in five or six volumes?³

Crucially, nonetheless, Postel's preoccupations should not be reduced to the mundane aspects, be it medicine or style. His dream of *restitutio omnium*, miraculous restitution of the primordial condition of the humanity, should be contemplated in the light of the Mediterranean mystical tradition, paradoxically intertwined with the analytical complexity of his conjectures.

The challenge of *congregatio mundi* gains importance precisely in our times of division, the age of things falling apart, apparently beyond any possibility of further negotiation. Such a vision of humanism, with Postel introducing the *Koran* into his vision of universal harmony, may appear harder, more difficult to be seriously taken for inspiration than the general, easy-going declaration of the community of human values. It is even more difficult to imitate today, in our post-secular times, the humanism of a mystical synthesis plaining over the theological spirit of division, binding together things that appear not to have been unified at any time. Contrary to the Adamite brethren that on many occasions formed Postel's social and spiritual context, we no longer share the belief in anything pre-lapsarian whatsoever.

This is precisely the challenge that the legacy of the humanism constitutes for our times. One is under the impression that the time

³ The translation made by the author.

that has come – or speaking the Agambenian language, the time that remains – is analogous to that in which Guillaume Postel wrote his *De orbis terrae concordia*. Indeed, he studied not only Latin and Greek, but also Arabic and Turkish not just because of an unstoppable instinct of linguistic acquisition characteristic to some forms of polyglot mania. It would also be an oversimplification to claim that, since Ramon Llull, such acquisition had a missionary or even a crusader finality. The secrets of those “heterophilic” affinities are hidden deep in the labyrinth of Postel’s internal contradictions. Heterophilia becomes an intellectual must not at the time of approximation, but at the most significant distance. What fosters and urges the dream of the universal restitution is the spectacle of the world appearing as irremediably torn apart.

WORKS CITED

- Agamben, Giorgio. *Nudities*. Trans. David Kishik. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2011.
- Bouwsma, William J. *Concordia Mundi. The Career and Thought of Guillaume Postel (1510–1581)*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1957.
- Dermenghem, Émile. *Thomas Morus et les utopistes de la Renaissance*. Paris: Plon, 1927.
- Derrida, Jacques. *Margins of Philosophy*. Trans. Alan Bass. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1982.
- Dubois, Claude Gilbert. *La mythologie des origines chez Guillaume Postel: de la naissance à la nation*. Paris: Paradigme, 1994.
- Kuntz, Marion Leathers. *Guillaume Postel: Prophet of the Restitution of All Things*. The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1981.
- McCabe, Ina Baghdiantz. *Orientalism in Early Modern France: Eurasian Trade, Exoticism, and the Ancient Régime*. Oxford: Berg, 2008.
- Postel, Guillaume. *Grammatica Arabica*. Paris: Apud Petrum Gromorsum, 1538.
- — —. *De orbis terrae concordia libri quatuor*. Basel: Joannes Oporinus, 1544.
- Saliba, George. “Arabic Science in Sixteenth-Century Europe: Guillaume Postel (1510–1581) and Arabic Astronomy.” *Subayl* 7 (2007): 115–164.

Congregatio mundi danes: nov pogled na Guillauma Postela (1510–1581)

Ključne besede: renesansa / Postel, Guillaume / univerzalizem / milenarizem / ekumenizem / univerzalna obnova / Adamov jezik / Agamben, Giorgio / intelektualec / prerok

Namen članka je osvetliti možnosti kritično reflektirane vrnitve zgodovinskega raziskovanja k nekaterim vidikom dediščine Guillauma Postela. Nekoč navdušujoče delo tega heterodoksnega renesančnega misleca je namreč v zadnjih desetletjih očitno degradirano na raven opusa drugotnega pomena. Njegovo enačenje medkulturne komunikacije z univerzalno slogo (*concordia*) je v splošnih potezah nedvomno veljavno še danes, tudi za tiste, ki ne sprejemajo njegovega adamitskega in kabalističnega pojmovanja jezika. Po drugi strani pa je njegov koncept *congregator mundi* dragoceno izhodišče za sodobno razpravo o vlogi in pristojnostih intelektualca kot posrednika med človeškimi družbami in transcendentno sfero, še posebej če ga primerjamo z najnovejšimi deli Giorgia Agambena, v katerih sta intelektualni in kulturni kritik spet postavljena v isto vrsto z monoteističnimi preroki.

1.01 Izvirni znanstveni članek / Original scientific article
UDK 130.2"15"