

Minna Skafte Jensen, ed. *A History of Nordic Neo-Latin Literature*. Odense: Odense University Press, 1995. Illus. Pp. 380. ISBN: 87-7492-961-5.

A history of Nordic...*what?* Such, I suspect, is likely to be the general reaction to the topic of this useful book. Fastened, as most of us are, in the more or less modern vernaculars of Scandinavia, and wrapped in a sort of comfortable, liberal nationalism laced with vaguely international good-will, the very idea of a vital non-vernacular literary tradition in our neck of the woods is, well, disturbing. That such a tradition should exist well after the Reformation period - indeed, this book only begins with the Reformation - should give everyone at least a moment's pause to think about the relationship of language to culture.

For instance, in as conservative a country as Sweden, why should one expect the Reformation to produce the sudden annihilation of a vigorous Latin bureaucratic and pedagogical tradition, when the Reformation itself took most of the 16th century to settle in? Even in the mid-eighteenth century, Johan Henric Kelgren was taught in Latin at Skara. Furthermore, it was even being written in Sweden at the very end of the nineteenth century. To say nothing of its stunning re-appearance in modern Finland, where a wonderfully dotty group of Classicists at the University of Jyväskylä give the Radio Finland short-wave world five minutes a week of *Nuntiae Latinae*, and where Tuomo Pekkanen has translated the *Kalevala* into Latin (1987). These delights aside, the chief attention of this book is directed to the work in the seventeenth century.

The book begins with a general introduction by the editor, in which she points out that it is always risky to separate the Latin literature of the post-Reformation period from its vernacular counterpart. She speaks of the interplay of the two languages, often used by the same author for different

rhetorical purposes, as with Holberg, for instance, or Linné. She also underlines the importance of recognizing this Latin as being different from what came before, in the sense that it replaced the living, but vulgarized, mediæval tradition with the re-discovered Latin of antiquity, with *new* Latin. She emphasizes the new interest in the ancient classics (not least, Ovid) as often having a profound effect on the form of this new writing. She makes two other points of considerable cultural interest, as well. First, as the Reformation took hold, students were often sent to the Lutheran universities in Germany, where Latin played a major role in their education. Second, she notes a common interest all over the North in the study of history (one thinks of the brothers Magnus' histories of the Swedes). The material covered concentrates mostly upon "genres that in some sense might be called fictional" and includes "humanistic scholarship, while theology, law and natural sciences are only briefly touched upon" (p. 11). Alas, this does deprive us of some insight into the most consistent Latin writing in the eighteenth century - think of Linné's considerable output, to name but one for whom we are referred to "encyclopædias" for information.

The rest of the book is organized into two sections, the first covering the five Nordic countries individually and chronologically from the sixteenth century to the nineteenth. Each country gets here about thirty pages of history, not allotted, by the way, "in direct proportion to the amount of relevant literature extant. That would have been felt as a continuation of former Danish and Swedish imperialism, since the sum total of Neo-Latin texts from these countries multiplies that of Finland, Norway and Iceland many times" (p. 12). Such absurd reasoning in an historical study casts deserved suspicion upon the balance and judgement exercised in the whole enterprise. In a synoptic study such as this, presenting a rather unknown subject to a broader audience, the problem is, in fact, just one of proportion. The *res publica litterarum*, is not, in the end, equal, not even in democratic Scandinavia.

That said, each of the national chapters nonetheless presents a useful survey, if one largely limited to listing names and a few titles. It must have vexed the authors of a book in English about books in Latin not to be able to give samples of the language they are discussing and to offer anything more than generalities by way of comparison. In this sense, the "selected topics" which constitute the second part of the book, such as Karen Skovgaard-Petersen's on some sixteenth century political polemics, or Peter Zeeberg's on the inscriptions at Tycho Brahe's observatory on Hven, are more

able to explore some of the pleasures of this company,

There are things missing, of course. For instance, Olof Rudbeck is the *éminence grise* of Scandinavian historians and his *Atland* hovers over many of the histories written in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, but nowhere can I find its date (1679-, publication unfinished at his death in 1702) and only in the bibliography do we learn the fact that, though written in Swedish, there was also a contemporary Latin translation. Holberg, on the other hand, gets discussed in both the Danish and Norwegian chapters, though more fully in the former than in the latter.

The thirty-five page bibliography is much to be recommended. It is generous and up-to-date. There are many interesting illustrations, not just portraits of earnest clerics but also contemporary engravings used in the books of the time. Written in reasonable English, the book deals with the old *lingua franca* by way of the new one. (There seems to be an irony here.) As, however, we are talking about *Neo-Latin*, it is probably worth pointing out that the Finns are still leading the way, not only in the manner mentioned above but also by bringing a part of their current national culture into the fold. A recent CD by a well-known Finnish tango singer, Doctor Ammondt, contains six tangos in Latin, under the title *Tango triste Finnicum*.

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