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‘To Attract the Attention of that Snobbish Queen’

Dousa's Latin Ode to Elizabeth (1573) in its historical context

Chris L. Heesakkers

*Dominico Britanno suo Almam matrem
Amstelodamensem relicturo hoc quaecunque
munusculum ad commercia Britannico-
Theoticas spectans necnon et amici communis
Joannis Adriani manes commemorans l.m. d.d.
Christianus Belgico-Batavus*

In his second collection of Latin poetry, entitled *Nova poemata* and published in the spring of 1575, the young Dutch humanist Janus Dousa inserted an Alcaic Ode, *D. Elisabethae, Britanniarum Reginae, Principi Opt. Max.*, ‘To the godly Elisabeth, Queen of England, the best and greatest sovereign’. It is followed by a second ode, *Ad Gulielmum Cecillum Borlaei Regulum, regioque apud Anglos aerario Praefectum, cum ei Odam praecedentem mitteret*, ‘To William Cecil, Lord Burghlei, High Treasurer in England, when he sent him the preceding Ode’ (*Nova poemata* [=NP], sign. Gi verso / G iij verso and G iiij verso / G vj recto). The contents of the latter poem leave no doubt that the Odes were written in England, in the vicinity of Cecil's house or office. It is known from other sources that Dousa had sailed to England three years earlier, towards the end of 1572, on a diplomatic mission to Elizabeth to persuade her to support the Dutch resistance against the Spanish governor, the Duke of Alva.

The mission appears to have been rather informal, since no archival records of it are

known. There seems to be no evidence in Dutch archives, and the only trace in the State Papers of the British Public Record Office is a letter of recommendation by Dousa's friend Hadrianus Junius to Cecil, containing the names of the delegates Dousa and Theodorus Neopyrgus (Nieuwburg). Junius was familiar with England and English circumstances, since he had stayed in England for several years and had dedicated works of his own hand to three successive English monarchs. The letter has been published by our regretted friend, the late J.A. van Dorsten (*Poets*, Leiden 1962, p. 25), who, for that matter, did not notice it had already been published in Junius' *Epistolae* (Dordrecht 1652, p. 255-256), be it with the date November 13, while Van Dorsten gives October 17, and with only the two delegates' initials.

Most early monographs on the Dutch Revolt, such as those by E. van Meteren, Ev. van Reyd, Pieter Bor and Hugo Grotius, describe the year 1572 without even hinting to the mission. A few words are devoted to it in the works by Johannes Meursius and Pieter Cornelisz Hooft. Meursius' *Auriacus* as well as his *Albanus* mention as its members Dousa, Niveldius (Willem van Zuylen van Nyeveld) 'and others', and summarizes the contents of their message as follows: 'They had to inform Queen Elisabeth about the distresses of the fatherland; how the Duke of Alva, against all divine and human law, was going to crush The Netherlands; that they, therefore, had taken up arms in order to protect themselves, their wives and their children, and had come to pray her to help the distressed with military and financial support out of pity for such an unjust fortune' (*Gulielmus Auriacus*, Leiden 1621, p. 285: *Per hoc tempus legati in Angliam abiere, Ianus Dousa Nordouicus, Gulielmus Niueidius Arentsbergius, alijque: qui reginae Elizabethae patriae aerumnas repraesentarent: Albanum praeter ius omne, fasque, Belgium oppressum ire; ideoque arma sumpsisse, vt vxores, liberosque contra vim, libidinemque tutarentur. ac venisse supplicatum, vti sortem tam iniquam commiserata, milite afflictos, et stipendio, adiuuaret.*). Meursius may not be the most trustworthy historian of the events, since he mentions a second mission of Dousa and others to Elizabeth in 1575-1576, which contradicts the biographical facts of Dousa's life. The Dutch monograph by the famous P.C. Hooft incidentally refers to the mission and adds three names to the two mentioned by Meursius (*Nederlandsche Historien*, in *Werken IV*, 1703, p. 299). The name Neopyrgus, found in Hadrianus Junius' letter to Cecil, may be a mistake for Niveldius. The mission is also recorded in a contemporary manuscript chronicle, which I have not been able to consult (*Utrechtse kroniek over 1566-1576*), fragments of which have been published by H. Brugmans, (*Bijdragen en Mededelingen van het Historisch Genootschap* 25, 1904, p. 102, referring to fol. 93v of the manuscript).

Much earlier and much more concrete information about the mission is hidden in the Latin poetry of Dousa's *Nova poemata*. This booklet reflects the political developments of the preceding years, particularly in the town of Leiden, which had endured a suffocating and almost fatal siege in 1574 with a happy ending on October 3rd, and had soon afterwards enjoyed the foundation of the first Dutch university. Several months

after these great events, in which Dousa had played an essential part as the commander of the defence of the town and as the first member of the future university board, he had his *Nova poemata* published, ‘Printed in our new Leiden University in 1575’ (In nova academia nostra Lugdunensi excusum). An enlarged second edition followed the next year. There is, firstly, a vague reference to the stay in England in an iambic poem addressed to a certain ‘Guillelmus Erlaeus Britannus’. This Englishman (it is tempting to speculate whether the name Erlaeus has something to do with Borlaeus, i.e. Cecil) had been exceedingly kind to the ‘overseas guests’ (NP, sign. M i verso: transmarinos hospites) and had honoured Dousa's poetical genius with a laurel wreath, obviously under the influence of Daniel Rogers, Dousa's former fellow student in Paris, without really knowing the poet. Within the poem Dousa introduces himself as ‘being from Noordwijk and called Jan by his parents’, and declares himself willing to accept Erlaeus' friendship, provided undeserved praise be dropped in the future.

A more explicit reference is found in Dousa's extensive satire to his kinsman and fellow delegate Niveldius, whom Dousa reminds of their joint trip to England, ‘when they both had left their fatherland, had been driving for a long time not on land, but on the high sea, and finally, after a warm welcome at Gravesend, had been sent by rowing boat to London and from there to Kingston, to see the face of that sovereign, that Augustan sovereign who does not have, has never had and will never have her equal in learning, eloquence, beauty and piety’ (NP, sign. I i-r: ... cum patria simul a tellure profectos, / lactatosque diu non terris dico, sed alto, / Exceptos tandem hospitio Grauesanda Britanno / Remige Londinum porro transmisit, et inde / Kinstonum, illius visuros Principis ora, / Principis Augustae: cui vt est nil ...). In a letter to Daniel Rogers, who had travelled from Kingston to London to welcome him (NP, sign. Q vj recto: ad me Londinum Kinstono advolaris), Dousa modestly refers to the mission as a ‘legatiuncula’, an unpretentious mission which had been more favourable for himself in private than for the commonwealth (NP, 1576, sign. Q v-v: ... vsque ad annum LXXII quo felici meo magis, quam publico fato, in Britanniam vestram legatiunculam communi nomine obiui).

Some other scanty allusions to the mission can be found in another satire, addressed to his former teacher Henricus Junius (NP, sign. I vij recto : Non quia Londini me dum spe longius illinc / Invida tempestas, hinc publica causa moratur) and in a poem to Daniel Rogers (NP, sign. N iij recto: medijs vt in Britannis, / Londinique Lutetiam inuenirem).

Van Dorsten has suggested that Dousa's Ode to Elizabeth was his solution to the problem how ‘to attract the attention of that snobbish Queen’ (summary of Van Dorsten's paper at the International Congress for Neo-Latin Studies at Amsterdam, in its *Acta*, München 1979, p. 336-7). Since the Dutch opponents of Philipp II and his governor the Duke of Alva could not but be considered rebels against their legitimate king, a Dutch mission had no political and diplomatic status and consequently no admission to foreign monarchs. Therefore, in order to approach other governments in search of sup-

port for their desperate cause, the Dutch had to make use of other channels of international contacts. As for the erudite English queen, it would be a possibility to address her as a citizen of the ‘Republic of Letters’, the supranational humanist community of scholars and poets devoted to studying and writing classical and particularly Latin literature and culture. So, the best latinist among the members of the States of Holland, the twenty-seven-year-old nobleman Janus Dousa, was chosen to be their spokesman to the English government. Dousa, aware of what was expected from him, wrote the elaborate Latin Ode for the queen and sent it to her Treasurer Cecil, who was asked by means of another Ode to hand it to her Majesty. The erudite Elizabeth was supposed to appreciate such a cultural present, to read the Latin text and will thus become acquainted with the reasons of the presence of the Dutch mission, the miserable situation of the Netherlands and their need of help. So far Van Dorsten's intriguing view on the poem and its background.

However, the contents of the Ode to Cecil, seem to imply a slightly different interpretation of the aim and the context of the Ode to the queen. The Ode to Cecil may be summarized as follows:

Dousa will never forget the excellent meal and the day that made him Cecil's guest. A better New Year's Day seems impossible. Impressed by Cecil's sweet eloquence, he listened to him as to another Solon. However, immediately after the meal, Cecil's account of the queen's answer plunged Dousa's mind into sadness and darkness. He forgot the delicious food and was not able to get to sleep. His only refuge were the Muses, and he wrote this poem for the benefit of the Dutch and the commonwealth, so that the queen, Cecil and all who love justice understand Holland's misery and consider the people worthy of English support, and be willing to sacrifice Alva and his Spanish army to the souls of the pious. May Cecil listen to him and his poetry and cure his anxiety, even though this poetry does not herald Cecil's heroic achievements. Such may be left to more gifted poets. Dousa has experienced Cecil's efficient eloquence. Small wonder that the queen finds joy and comfort in it, as well as other learned Daughters of the Sea, among whom Cecil's wife is the most brilliant. How blessed is Cecil, for his noble birth, his trophies and most of all for his life companion. Lack of talent prevents the poet to go on in this vein.

If we take Dousa's text literally, it would imply, that a first appeal of the delegates to the queen had been unsuccessful, that Cecil informed Dousa about the queen's negative answer after a supper with him, which took place on or around New Year's day 1573, and that this disappointing reply caused Dousa a sleepless night as well as the composition of the Ode to Elizabeth. So the Ode is not the delegates' first, but their second appeal to the English queen for help, and it was not composed before the delegates left Holland

or during their travel, but in England, to be more specific, in Kingston. Dousa's suggestion that it had been written within one night, should not, of course, be taken too literally, since such indications of limited time to compose a poem are very topical in Neo-Latin as well as other literary texts.

Dousa opens his poem for the Queen with an allusion to the famous first line of Horace's first book of *Odes*: *Regina magnis edita regibus*, 'O Queen, offspring of great kings'. After this homage to her noble birth, Dousa hails Elizabeth as raised by the Muses. Many other Horation phrases throughout the poem prove that she is addressed indeed as a citizen of the Republic of Letters and a connoisseur of ancient Latin literature, a humanist, in short. In this sense 'every reference is topical' (Van Dorsten). On the other hand, however, Dousa's numerous historical details and references to the actual situation make the poem an effective justification of the revolt against Philip's governor Alva, who had so impudently and cruelly violated the legitimate ancestral rights of the Dutch population, which had been guaranteed once again by Philip himself when he had left the Netherlands in 1559.

According to the poem, Elizabeth has been the only monarch who, with God's help, dared resist the threatening decrees of the papal Council (of Trent). In the Netherlands it is not allowed to be a real christian. The Spaniards, who first attacked the kingdom of the Valois and caused the French massacre of St. Bartholomew, now ravage The Netherlands with all kinds of violence, and the Duke of Alva is devising worse cruelties. This tyranny of Philip's substitute is the reverse of the peace and golden age and the observance of the laws which the King had promised his subjects in the Netherlands.

In such a situation, the poet states, it is only logical that the Dutch people turn to the eloquent and just British monarch, who had always been the refuge of exiled christians. He hurries to add, however, that the Dutch do not want her 'to remove us from the laws of the King, to which we want to be faithful, but to snatch us from the jaws of the foreign robber who is to devour us' (NP G iij verso: *Non Regis vt nos legibus eximas / Nostri, esse cuius nos iuvat in fide: / Sed vt peregrini latronis Faucibus eripias vorandos*). To underline his statement, Dousa turns once again to examples of cruelty, this time the execution of the Counts of Egmont and Horne and Alva's pressure on the French king Charles to stop his favouring the Huguenots, all machinations which resulted in the massacre and the murder of Gaspard de Coligny. And what is even more, the attempts on Elizabeth's life with arms and poison were also the Duke's work. However, Heaven decided that the attempts missed their target.

Without any further argumentation Dousa adds that Heaven protected the Queen against those attempts so that there be a lady (G iij recto: *vt esset ... quae*) to relieve the Dutch from the slavish yoke and restore their ancestral rights. And confidently he ends his poem with the prayer that he soon may see his fatherland restored to its former prosperity by God and 'the queen of the rich island'. Then she will be praised in more dignified poetry which will survive the ages to come.

There is no indication whatsoever that Dousa's eloquent and strong plea for help had any success. As we have seen, he himself considered his 'legatiuncula' more fruitful for himself in private than for his country. Dousa could not foresee that his mission had indeed some use for the benefit of his fatherland. The intensity of the Anglo-Dutch relations, both political and cultural, was to increase substantially in the following years. It was, therefore, important for Holland to have spokesmen with English experience, and from then on Dousa was one of these. Small wonder that he was sent to England for deliberation in the hectic days after the murder of William of Orange in July 1584. In 1585 he was among the members of an embassy to Elizabeth, guided by the pensionary of Holland himself, Johan van Oldenbarnevelt. Many promising Leiden students, among them his oldest son, had joined Dousa, whom they knew as the prestigious trustee and, since some weeks, the librarian of their university. On the Queen's request Dousa stayed in England for several months after Oldenbarnevelt's return to Holland.

To thank the queen for her hospitality and benevolence, Dousa did not content himself this time with one Ode, but composed a complete collection for the queen, his *Odarum Britannicarum Liber Ad D. Elisabetham Britanniarum Franciae Hiberniaeque Reginam*. Obviously, Dousa's 15-year-old son prepared the edition, since he wrote the dedicatory letter to Daniel Rogers on behalf of his father. He also added his own *Britannicorum Carminum Silua* to his father's collection (Leiden 1586). The collection opens with Dousa's Ode congratulating Elizabeth with her birthday on September 7, 1585. Besides the Queen, we count among the addressees of individual poems in the collection old friends such as William Cecil and new ones such as Robert Dudley, count of Leicester, Philip Sidney, and many others.

As late as 1603, thirty years after his first trip to England, Dousa still gives air to his admiration for the English queen by inserting a *Diuae Elisabethae Serenissimae Britannorum Reginae Elogium* in his last collection of Poetry, his *Echo* (fol. 31). Indeed, his 'legatiuncula' had been most fruitful, at least for himself in private.