

Borowski, Andrzej

Claude Backvis (1910-1998)

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Andrzej Borowski (Poland)

CLAUDE BACKVIS
(1910-1998)

1. An epitaph

I owe the Professor an epitaph. You may have seen all kinds of epitaphs. I would like my epitaph on Claude Backvis to be like one I see every Sunday in the main altar of the Kraków Dominicans' church of the Holy Trinity. It is a tombstone of Filippo Buonaccorsi, known as Kallimach, which survived a great fire of Kraków in 1855. Even a fleeting glance at old Polish culture is likely to have brought to the interested person's eyes the portrait of the Italian humanist, as a book illustration, for instance, showing him the way many of his contemporary Kraków friends saw him and wanted him to be remembered. The humanist is shown in his *studiolo*, tangled in his folded cassock and amidst rolled sheets of paper, piles of books in the backdrop, a jumble of things on his desk – a dynamic lively view, very different from those hieratic Gothic-Barock epitaphs you come across in so many Polish and, yes, Belgian churches. That association of Italian Renaissance humanism with that boreal late Gothic pre-Renaissance is only one reason why the Brussels philologist and humanist, a friend of Poles and of Poland in love with Old Polish culture, comes to my mind when I look at the Kallimach epitaph. That was how I remembered Claude Backvis in his own *studiolo* in the first floor of a house at 20, Bosveldeweg street, an unusually spacious study for the erudite and “book worm” he was, where all kinds of publications brought in systematically from Poland, Paris and London (émigré books as well) did not heap up in piles the way they usually do in homes of humanists today. It was a bright, large and warm room, the air occasionally stirred by the sinuous smoke winding up from a lunch-crowning cigar. There was also his wife, Mrs. Simone, whose often concerned eyes were blurred by a shadow of pessimism (I thought it was Spanish pessimism), which got more obvious after her dachshund Coralie's death, and also much later, when she walked me to the garden door to tell me about the Professor's operation.

This, then, is a first ad-lib sketch of the backdrop to an epitaph to Claude Backvis. This picture must be supplemented with the landscape of the Brussels or suburban Brussels borough of Ixelle whose citizen the Professor was,

living on the outskirts by the fields and groves. He pointed out the name of his street was of Flemish origin, meaning simply a wood path, a short passage once really cutting across somebody's clearing. If that was so, those must have been old times, because Backvis's house surrounded by a garden stands by a picturesque little alley in a peripheral village stretching by larger plots of land and meadows with grazing horses. Whenever we went out for a stroll along those hawthorn-lined pathways Backvis used to take a few lumps of sugar with him. It was for the horses, which knew him and indeed looked to their good giver coming along. The professor jokingly (or was it?) attributed that weakness for horses to the sympathy he cherished for Sarmatism, the epitome of Old Polish culture. Or, more properly, his sympathy for "Sarmaticism" [*sarmackość*], a category he thought out, conceived, and supported with a carefully worded rationale he himself designed without succumbing to excessive psychologizing or any those stereotyped thoughts a historian of the mind so often bumps into in his progress as well as in his errancy.

2. Citizen of a commune

Claude Backvis was a citizen of a commune. He was fond of the old Polish word *okolica* ("neighborhood"), this first-rate equivalent of the Flemish *gemeente*, the French *communauté*, the Greek *koinon*. Brussels, in his eyes, was an array of such communes. He was born on April 24, 1910, in the Dutch-speaking commune Schaerbeek, an uninspiring working-class place that has changed little of its looks to this day. He spent his life in the higher-up Walloon part of the city on the opposite end of Brussels, in Ixelle (though he preferred to call it by its Flemish name Uccle), closer to the newly built university, which in his better times he used to walk up to, along those meadows and grazing horses. A heavily built and muscular man, he felt at home in the reduced scale of his commune, amidst low houses that used to be built, you can say, to man's natural size, in the winding little streets lined with tiny outlets and tobacco shops where he bought his cigars, newspapers and stamps, and a couple of unpretentious inns where he enjoyed hosting his friends by tables covered with chequered cloths and attended to by waiters in dungarees reminiscent of the industrial epoch. That is how Claude Backvis' neighborhood had inculcated itself on my mind. That, too, is how I recall his first lecture in social philosophy, a long presentation of historic and modern Belgium he delivered during a stroll along the pathways of Uccle commune. The professor made no secret of his youthful socialist leanings, which with his different experiences developed into a sense of solidarity with all groups of people that were held captive by totalitarianism. His sense of solidarity was in the first place Poles and Russians, the groups he felt closest to in his heart, but of course he tended to view our and Slav affairs above all through his own experiences as a proletarian of

Schaerbeek and citizen of the Kingdom of Belgium, which he was fond of saying was the size of Poland's central province Mazowsze. Now I know how strongly his devotion to his native "neighborhood," or, as they prefer to say these days, his "homeland," motivated Claud Backvis to study the federal polity that fascinated him in the First Polish Commonwealth and the multiethnic culture of lands constituting the entity known as "Old Polish" culture. Backvis was first of all a historian of political ideas, a philologist intrigued by Polish parliamentarianism, a system of representation of interests of different neighborhoods in a manner that made them coincide with the *raison d'état*, the well-being of the Polish Commonwealth. He sought to make students attending his lectures at Slavic faculty in Brussels share that fascination of his. That was sometimes an exacting experience to the "Polonocentric" students at the Slavic faculty who – as Professor Frans Vyncke, a disciple of Backvis's and Slavic and Polish philologist of Ghent once told me – preferred to listen to lectures about more recent Polish writers known in Belgium and Holland through translations, especially Władysław Reymont, Jarosław Iwaszkiewicz, later also Witold Gombrowicz or S. I. Witkiewicz. However, the learned citizen of Uccle commune kept to that fascination as his main line of study throughout.

3. A Polish philologist at the "heart of Europe"

Belgians call Brussels the "heart of Europe", *het hart van Europa*. What they mean is not its topographic location but the shape of the old town, which is encompassed (as all fortified European cities used to be) by a pentagonal perimeter of streets now running along the old town walls. Upon that symbolic iconography Brussels imprinted its later and latest political significance as the capital of united Europe. As a Polish philology professor, Claude Backvis had a deep sense of significance of working at that spot of Europe. He valued highly the past and its monuments, especially the Brussels "Polonica". Whenever we crossed the Mont des Arts bridge he used to recall the old seat of the university and, close by, Polish ambassador Jan Dantyszek's presumed place of residence in the second and third decades of the 16th century. He was also keen to point to places of memory of Lelewel, and other Poles. At the house of Erasmus in Anderlecht, you would hear the professor mention the humanist's relations with Polish intellectuals in the "Golden Age" of Polish humanism. The "Polonotropism" of Claude Backvis's Slavic interests was not just a professional reflex of a scholar whose career took him from classical philology towards Eastern Europe and its modern intellectual heritage. The Middle Ages had no strong hold on Backvis, even though his knowledge of monuments of medieval art, which were so typical of his native Brabant, especially in that unique *ordre flamboyant*, was excellent. He felt an intellectual, and probably emotional, affinity to modern humanism in its Renaissance edition as well as the one that pervaded

Europe's intellectual life late in the 19th century. That was no doubt attributable to the "spirit of the times" between the two world wars. But the very circumstance that a chair of Slavic studies was created in Brussels also played a part, as did the personal influence of Waław Lednicki, who took charge of the chair in 1926 (an influence Backvis always remembered with candid emotion). However, the most important factor leading up to the "Polonization" of Backvis's humanistic interests was his surprise (if not enrapture) with the Polish intellectual and literary culture he was "discovering"¹. I am making a point of the motivational effect of the psychological element deliberately. It casts fresh light on Backvis's methodology, which used to be wrongly interpreted as allegedly proof of his allegiance to neopositivist objectivism and dispassionateness. Indeed, Backvis's own manner of conducting humanist studies, including Polish studies, was a personalistic brand of human studies, one which is deeply rooted, cognitively as well as morally, in dialogue (direct or indirect, via text) with another person.

Backvis's vivid, indeed even passionate, sympathy with Polish culture, the old Polish one as well as modern and most recent culture, was a straightforward spin-off of his interest in concrete individuals: those he met personally and individuals whose faces, characters, personalities he construed from texts they produced. His was no mindless affection or emotion. A separate point to mention is Backvis's subtle Flemish irony. He kept it in his studies of books and human characters. I can remember him recalling his predecessor in the chair, Waław Lednicki. Backvis spoke of him as "grand seigneur", capped with a warm yet impish smile. The same warm impish smile showed when he recollected his 1932-1934 stay in Poland, as "the happiest years in my life". He idealized neither the times nor the people. He had a revisionist's temperament, which gave him an off-beat perspective on the 16th-century Polish authors writing in Latin, on Polish Baroque poets' artistic value, or lastly, on works by Polish Romantics. The last-named research area was dominated by works by Mickiewicz, Krasiński, and Backvis's absolute favorite Słowacki, in whose works Backvis in a stroke of genius heard echoes of Polish Baroque poetry.

4. Backvis vis-à-vis Polish humanism and Old Polish democracy

A person's special interest in Poland and Poles of the "Golden Age" may appear self-evident in a scholar engrossed in classical culture from his earliest years (the often-mentioned Henri Grégoire was his master there) and deeply committed to liberal (initially socialist) ideas of his indigenous intellectual milieu. You can say, as he himself jokingly and happily conceded, Claude Backvis continued to some extent the critical yet sympathetic observation of the politics

¹ He described the road towards his fascination in an essay called "Jak doszedłem do studiów nad literaturą polską i nad Trembeckim", *Przegląd Współczesny*, January 1939.

and culture of the Polish Republic practiced by two of his fellow countrymen: the Dutch-born yet long-time inhabitant of Brabant, Erasmus of Rotterdam, and a Brabantian by birth and choice, Justus Lipsius. The observation I am referring to was done by way of scrupulous study of concrete issues that were very urgent (they always are) to the student personally and at the same time to his students, as well as Polish readers. They were issues of fundamental significance to democratic society (open society, in Karl Popper's term): building a state of law; regulating relations between individual rights and public interests; exacting civil duties from citizens. Even today a perusal of Backvis's 1957 study *Les thèmes majeurs de la pensée politique polonaise au XVIe siècle*² strikes the reader as a very topical meaning of the issues, as if the author in dealing with Old Polish political ideas could not shake off some nagging reflections on what were ideally modeled issues of the day. You cannot miss his emotional involvement in those issues when he discusses, for example, "the omnipotence of the people" or "civil courage", both notions you will come across in propositions made by high-caliber philosophers like Andrzej Frycz Modrzewski as well as "ordinary" (yet educated) deputies quoted in Sejm diaries. Likewise topical are perhaps his considerations of the "goodness of opposing tyranny". There is a striking clear distinction "between monarchy, even absolutist monarchy, based upon legitimacy and conservatism, and true tyranny, we today inappropriately call dictatorship". In his 1967 study *Individu et société dans la Pologne de la Renaissance*, Backvis wrote, "a particularly worrying side effect of specialization is the real power it gives people whom nobody has chosen to be depositaries of the common will, a power resulting neither from popular vote nor from eternally challengeable tradition, but from a necessity that is secret and mysterious if it cannot be brought up as a subject of a public debate". That such propositions (sometimes even bolder ones) could at all appear in print in Poland in 1975³ was perhaps due to the fact that it would occur to nobody (not even the censors) that such propositions may be found in a volume of essays on Old Polish culture (*Szkice o kulturze staropolskiej*), a collection put together carefully and "mischievously" in the best sense of the word, by Andrzej Biernacki, the editor of the book who also appended a superb pithy postscript to it. What the editor sought to achieve by bringing out Backvis's first book in Polish and in Poland seems clear and straightforward. Through the meaning attributed to it, and through the pick of thematically different studies included in it, the book followed the best tradition of 19th-century Polish human studies, which used to talk about the past while

² The studies are quoted here each in their original title and year of publication. For a complete bibliography of all studies published abroad and in Poland see the next of volumes published in Poland: Claude Backvis, *Renesans i barok w Polsce. Studia o kulturze*, selected and edited by Hanna Dziechcińska and Ewa J. Głębińska.

³ Claude Backvis, *Szkice o kulturze staropolskiej*, selected and edited by Andrzej Biernacki, Warsaw, 1975. The book contains the bibliography that was largely reprinted in the second volume, *ibid.*

being closely attentive of the present and concerned about the future. A later study, *L'origine de la Diète "viritim" pour l'élection du Roi en Pologne* of 1973, was written much in the same historiosophic vein. Backvis's discussion of the origin of the *viritim* type election in that study helped enormously to purge the then commonly accepted image of Old Poland's *szlachta*-dominated democracy of its ideological undertones. Backvis rounded up that discussion of Polish parliamentarianism and democracy at large with two nice essays on Jan Kochanowski, one on drama *Odprawa posłów greckich*, the other on *Satyr*, the satirical "senatorial vote". Incidentally, since Kochanowski is mentioned, Backvis was one of a bold minority of historians of Polish literature who considered his *Psalterz Dawidowy* as the poet's most significant work of his lifetime, rather than, as most historians do, his elegiac *Treny*.

Indeed, Claude Backvis's repudiation of scholarly prejudice, of a tendency to permeate human studies, in particular history of literature, with ideology, can be said to have been the most distinctive feature of his research work. The results of that contesting attitude are among the Brussels' Polish philologist's proudest accomplishments. Backvis was one of those "disobedient" erudites. His afore-mentioned subtle irony lurks between the lines of his text that spawn a wealth of facts, findings and often stunning interpretations he collected with incredible diligence. His observations were mainly about two major topics: the Polish Latin literary culture of the 16th-17th centuries; and Polish Baroque literature. On the former of the two topics, Backvis deserves credit for his substantial contribution to "restituting" or perhaps "Polonizing" the Polish Latin literature. It is hard to imagine today that driven by a perverse perception of patriotism certain historians of Polish literature chose to ignore Latin texts written by authors who thought of themselves as Poles, in particular those belonging to the Political "Polish nation", the *szlachta*. His study *Quelques remarques sur le bilinguisme latino-polonais dans la Pologne du seizième siècle* presented in 1958 at the Moscow congress of Slavic studies and published in Polish in the above-mentioned first volume of *Szkice o kulturze staropolskiej* in 1973 sparked off a vivid debate. The Belgian Slavic philologist objected to the obsolete yet nonetheless widely accepted post-World War II reduction of "national literature" to texts written in Polish, and so to the detrimental idea that put the "national" literature in contrast to so-called "Latin-language" texts, which were often branded as "cosmopolitan" in either an "ecclesiastic" or "humanistic" variety. Such opinions were in fact neither new nor particularly revealing, if readers in the 1950s or 1960s reminded themselves of some great figures of the Polish humanist tradition beginning with Mickiewicz through to Aleksander Brückner, and well beyond him (to mention but Julian Krzyżanowski or Tadeusz Ulewicz). However, textbooks for school and college students alike then spread what Backvis called a "linguistic nationalism", which was typical not only of Polish literature scholars but of most

people studying Slavic literature as well. That “nationalism” or chauvinism had its roots in the Romantic or late-Romantic disposition to overrate the “indigenous” as distinct from universal culture, in particular classical culture. Some historians launched preposterous charges against writers who preferred the allegedly “alien” Latin to their native languages. Backvis rejected such accusations strongly, pointing to the complex nature of the linguistically and ethnically diversified literary culture which nonetheless remained essentially Polish (in the meaning of those times). With his study of 16th-century Latin-Polish bilingualism and two literary portraits: of Mikołaj of Hussow and Andrzej Krzycki (whom Backvis always held a “cynical plotter”, if not worse than that), Claude Backvis restored meaning and significance to a matter of fundamental importance to Polish Renaissance culture. His independent vision and assessment of literary values made it possible for Backvis to speak out with reserve of the so-called “plebeian” current of Old Polish literary culture which, in his view – and I very clearly recall him saying that – for ideological reasons was often touted and overrated out of any proportion to real accomplishments of Old Polish literary culture. He voiced that opinion, perhaps in less dramatic tones, in numerous reviews and asides. His diction, incidentally, was quite parenthetical, so much so that in some of his studies you may find comments and annotations taking more than one half of the printed folio. Above all, as a writer (and talker) Backvis was very polite, discreet, and never untoward in his irony. As I said before, Backvis was a great “Erasmian” ironist.

5. Backvis in dispute over the Baroque

His research work in Renaissance or humanist themes, then, creditably contributed to dispelling certain scholarly perceptions, as Claude Backvis initiated, or joined to back, some “revisionist” undertakings that challenged neopositivist, sometimes quasi-Marxist, contentions that bore the official stamp on them. To put it bluntly, Claude Backvis stood up against the imposition of ideological prejudice on the history of Old Polish literature and culture.

The same, and even more so, is true of Claude Backvis’s contribution to studies of Polish and European Baroque literature. He was the first foreign Polish philologist, after Giovanni Maver, to “discover”, or “rehabilitate”, the poetry of Mikołaj Sęp Szarzyński. Backvis published his “*Manièrisme*” ou *baroque à la fin du XVI siècle. Le cas de Mikołaj Sęp-Szarzyński* (written as an “aside” to Golenishchev-Kutuzov’s book on the Renaissance in Slavic countries) one year before the appearance in Kraków of Jan Błoński’s *Mikołaj Sęp-Szarzyński a początki polskiego baroku*, which turned debates on intellectual and aesthetic currents in 16th-century Poland in an entirely new direction. So Claude Backvis can justifiably be called a precursor of modern studies of the Polish Baroque in Poland and abroad. Tactful and sensitive to Polish (or, in his word, “local”) research tradition, Backvis questioned theories that

tended to equate the Baroque with Sarmatism. Further, with sharp insight (as it turned out later) he redefined “Mannerism”, a notion many critics of culture (including Władysław Tatarkiewicz and Jan Błoński) uncritically applied to facts that fitted neither the Renaissance nor the Baroque patterns.

Polish 17th-century literary culture was a prime concern to Claude Backvis. Again, one can say Backvis was under the spell of that literary period, which he freely admitted in conversation. That spellbinding fascination of his was due to the “singularity” (*osobność*, another favorite term of his) of Polish culture, as in the 16th-century Renaissance humanism that impressed him with its deep understanding of freedom. Backvis thus devoted special little studies, or more properly contributions, on Waclaw Potocki, Samuel Twardowski of Skrzypna. Yet all the time he worked on a synthesizing study. A summary of his reflections, which he had completed by the time, was a truly monumental presentation he delivered at a 1990 INALCO conference in Paris as *Quelques traits majeurs de la poésie baroque en Pologne*, later published in Polish in the second volume of Backvis’s studies (*Renansans i barok w Polsce*, 1993). The presentation triggered little discussion then. It was clear that behind it was a huge amount of work, a finished book that held all answers to most questions one might wish to ask.

For several years I had the privilege of watching at close quarters that panorama being produced⁴, Backvis freely talked, especially during our walks, of his fascination with the “gentry” culture [*ziemiańskość*] or “Sarmaticism” [*sarmackość*], two terms he used to refer to the 17th-century Polish *szlachta* culture. He would talk about it in a detached manner, yet he added a touch of his personal warmth to his remarks when some detail of the landscape we passed stirred in his mind a reflection on it. I had a feeling the great Belgian Polish philologist was constantly engrossed in his thoughts, “clarifying” them day by day the way wine growers oversee the production of wine, and seeing it fill drop by drop his monumental synthesizing oeuvre about Polish Baroque poetry. During my visits to his home at 20, Bosveldweg, the host used to hold the door of a mahogany *escritoire* ajar to me, to nod at the steadily growing pile of white sheets of paper, and saying, during one of my visits, “This is going to be my panorama. I don’t know if I can finish it, so take a look at it at least as it is now.”

Fortunately he did finish it. He lived to see many expressions of great appreciation for the work that really has no match in Slavic studies. Quite simply, nobody writes such books any more. He was also happy to receive recognition from official quarters, when the reborn Republic of Poland through its envoy in Brussels presented assurances of its gratitude for the huge *Panorama* to the octogenarian Polish philologist. The “panorama of Polish Baroque poetry”, in two volumes and on over one thousand pages,

⁴ Claude Backvis, *Panorama de la poésie polonaise à l’âge baroque*, vol. I (pp. 607), vol. II (pp. 545), Bruxelles, 1995.

was acknowledged as really a notable production, not only in the world of Polish studies. It is among the most important publications dealing with older European poetry that appeared in Western Europe in the latter half of the 20th century. Indeed, the book is by itself on impressive evidence against opinions from different quarters that the time of synthesizing studies in universal literary theory is over. Not so. Such syntheses that give us a picture of elements the tradition of European culture is composed of are really needed today, if we are to apprehend the uniqueness, dynamics and future of this continent.

Backvis viewed the Polish Baroque in a wary approach. He was mistrustful of stereotypes, prejudices, and ideological slant. His infallible instinct of a seasoned expert in European literature enabled him to discern, in a complex and differentiated web of phenomena, a subject that was both enchanting and important for understanding universal culture. He was particularly intrigued by the split nature of the “Sarmatian soul”, which on the one hand was utterly submissive towards Mediterranean classicism yet on the other was independent, ingenuous and imaginative vis-à-vis its paradigms, standards or injunctions. He owed that perspective in part probably to his favorite Słowacki, whose “Baroque heritage” Backvis acknowledged in a separate study before that. In his exploratory efforts Backvis went far beyond the limits Edward Porębowicz had set for the study of the style of the Baroque. Backvis was all along fascinated by the Polish mentality, especially its peculiar “philosophy of liberty” and the Polish national identity which crystallized during the Renaissance and kept its unique character through the 18th and 19th centuries. He felt the best way to explore those matters was by studying materials that were representative of marginal, or transitional, developments. So for his purposes as researcher of Old Polish literature he had, apart from Jan Kochanowski naturally, two favorites: Sęp Szarzyński, the first post in Baroque aesthetics in Polish poetry, and Stanisław Herakliusz Lubomirski, the figure at the end of the glorious road of that poetic current. I can recall an audience of students and professors attending Backvis’s lecture in Kraków in 1967. An auspicious time for the Polish Baroque set in at about that time, beginning with the publication of a 1965 anthology called *Poeci polskiego baroku* edited by Jadwiga Sokołowska and Kazimiera Żukowska, which has lasted to this day. Backvis spoke not only of Sęp but of the significance of the Polish Baroque to Polish culture at large. His brilliant perception of the “exploratory” potential of that research area, as well as his exact forecast of the direction literary research on the Baroque was likely to take, is evidenced by the following quotation from his latest book. Here is what he had to tell European readers, who had no idea of developments in Poland, explaining the thirty-year-old renaissance of interest in the Baroque in this country in his introduction to the *Panorama*:

“Dans ces derniers temps le baroque bénéficie d’une espèce de vogue parmi les intellectuels et les littéraires. On peut se l’expliquer par ceci que,

mis enfin dans la possibilité de connaître sans recherches trop éprouvantes les écrits qui l'illustrent, ils se sont avisés de ce que le tour d'imagination et d'expression qui y éclata répond à des connivances séculaires de leur sens de la beauté. Il est licite de se demander s'il n'y entre pas une autre raison encore. En un temps de cataclysmes où l'identité nationale a été mise en peril, il est au moins possible que le XVII^e siècle, qui ne présente assurément pas la meilleure des effigies de la Pologne du passé, exerce une attraction sensible parce qu'ils y retrouvent, si l'on me permet l'expression, la Pologne 'la plus voyante' ”⁵.

Backvis next “discovery” in 17th-century Polish literary culture was Stanisław Herakliusz Lubomirski, whom Backvis respected for who he called the poet's “singularity”. Backvis demonstrated that singularity of Lubomirski's in an erudite and brilliant fashion against a rich comparative backdrop, first in his excellent and well-received Warsaw lecture 1979 and later in a printed collection of contributions to the conference⁶. The interest he took in the matter was not fleeting or focused on a particular detail. Backvis had a knack of listening in to Polish poetry from the very beginning, that is, from the times he started his study on Trembecki which was eventually crowned with his 1937 book. It was already then that Backvis set himself one of his aims as researcher, teacher and writer, which was to cast a light and interpret phenomena in the Polish literature that were eminent, of prime significance, and at any rate important as representative of an epoch, a current, or a social group. He professed his allegiance to principles, to hierarchies of aesthetic and moral standards, his responsibilities – as professor and expert – for the quality of knowledge and for stirring his readers' sensitiveness to those categories as reflected in texts.

If I am right, it was ultimately those that made Backvis want to share with us, “Polish intellectuals and men of letters”, as well as “the other nations”, his enormous experience in years of listening in to the Polish Baroque poetry. The result was a fleet-footed, yet in no way superficial, synthesis of an array of complex and polysemous phenomena, one that in its frequent digressions probes the true meaning of “Polishness” yet at the same time provides a pristine clear French-style presentation. Another unusual feature of Backvis's synthesis is that it takes account practically of poetry written in Polish only. His decision to do that must have been a hard choice to Backvis, who, as will be recalled, once came up with a strong plea for bilingual Polish-Latin poetry of the Renaissance. Claude Backvis made no secret of the principle he chose to follow this time, declaring in his introduction to the *Panorama* a lukewarm interest in the poetry of M. K. Sarbiewski, perhaps the best known Polish Baroque poet in Europe, dubbed the “Sarmatian Horace”, unlike in the man's theoretical studies. That declaration was

⁵ *Panorama*, *ibid.*, vol. I, p. 11.

⁶ Claude Backvis, „Osobność” jako temat w twórczości i osobowości Stanisława Herakliusza Lubomirskiego, [in:] *Renesans i barok w Polsce*, Warszawa, 1993.

rather surprising, putting Backvis somewhat off the beaten track in recent surge of interest in Sarbiewski's poetry. Sarbiewski's poetry is certainly difficult to assess against a wider backdrop as long as no reliable critical complete edition is available. Backvis loathed above all to accept any panegyric poetry, a reluctance he consistently and candidly voiced always when referring to Andrzej Krzycki as a person and a poet. That idiosyncrasy may be one reason for Backvis finding Sarbiewski dull. However, despite his decision to pick Polish texts only to his *Panorama*, the study gives a clear account of the Polish Baroque poetry's "Latin character" in its stylistic (illustrative) as well as ideological aspects.

Ever since Heinrich Wölfflin's 1915 book *Kunstgeschichtliche Grundbegriffe*, which also appeared in a Polish translation⁷, the feature most closely associated with Baroque style is its "pictorial" character. Could that have suggested the idea, and even the title, of his work to Backvis? Its composition is likewise "pictorial". In the first three chapters Backvis describes the "backdrop". It includes a description of Poland's "desolate religiousness" (*une religion désolante*) of the time, struggling against occasional "fits of rashness" [*krewkość*]. This last word was one of the words Backvis used as keys to his interpretations⁸. An analysis of the *szlachta* optimism follows, showing that particular social group was not bothered by the disastrous run of historical developments. Lastly, Backvis discusses the role of men of letters in "Sarmatian" society.

Part two, called "Points of view and figures", deals with basic issues of the literary culture of the time, namely the diverse presentations of the world, the phenomenon of the "opera" in the context of Polish Baroque culture, the decline of the humanist "aesthetic discipline", new and traditional functions of ideology, lastly the Baroque "neomedievalism" and its folkloristic tones, and a survey of themes taken up by poets.

In volume two Backvis first takes up the aesthetics of literature, as well as genres and forms. He studies the "Sarmatian bluntness" [*Dosadność sarmacka*], the Baroque poets' predilection for things extraordinary, for the grotesque and fantastic, and characteristic features of the panegyric style. A long 200-page chapter, with could in fact be published as a standalone work, is devoted to the genres of the Polish Baroque poetry. The next one, nearly as long, is about style and prosody. I am sure now that those two chapters at least will surely become part of the Polish Baroque canon of knowledge. In the next chapter Backvis takes to "borderline" facts, for instance, the poetry of S. H. Lubomirski as well as S. Szymonowic and the brothers Opaliński. The concluding chapter is about the place the Polish Baroque poetry holds

⁷ Henryk Wölfflin, *Podstawowe pojęcia historii sztuki. Problem rozwoju stylu w sztuce nowożytnej*, Wrocław – Warszawa – Kraków, 1962.

⁸ *Panorama*, *ibid.*, vol. II, p. 474: „Ni chez lui [S. H. Lubomirski] ni chez Adam Korczyński (dans un format infiniment plus modeste) il n'ya trace de cette tension entre la morale de contrition et la 'krewkość', dont, par hypothèse de travail, j'ai fait le principe directeur du baroque pur.”

within European poetry. It is a relatively short chapter, but Claude Backvis, who began his literary studies by a tour of several European literatures, was perhaps the world's most seasoned living comparative literature experts who moreover had intimate knowledge of Polish literature. That is why his comparative study is very comprehensive, spanning a wide horizon of literary context. It also bolsters its propositions with evidence easily taken from all national literatures of Europe. The *Panorama* concludes with brief biographies of the most important authors, including the most pertinent bibliographic information on recent editions and major monographs. Written primarily with a view to foreigners committed to the study of Polish literature, they may as well attract individuals less intimate with Polish studies by its succinct opinions and judgments. There will be those who will put precisely the subjectivist opinions and descriptions, and even its selective pick of the information it proffers, forward as a major charge against Backvis's *Panorama*. That shows especially in what is a limited and slightly old-fashioned pick of bibliography of the subject. The Brussels Polish philologist, despite keeping close contacts to his Polish colleagues and even though he had stuck his home chock-full with books, was less and less in touch with the Polish literary critics' fast-growing literary critical production, especially in the 1980s. Other critics may charge Backvis with excessive subjectivism that shows in the above-mentioned dictionary of quasi-biographies of Polish authors. Rather than a collection of biographies, however, it is a gallery of biographic miniatures. You may find more keen observations in those brief blurbs than in many vast monographs.

The above shortest possible synopsis of the book still does not do it full justice, though. The author's narrative, clear and intelligible, is also permeated with hidden meanings, shrewd observations, and illuminating allusions. Backvis illustrates his remarks with numerous quotations in Polish or Latin along with his own translations (often enough those are the first and only translations). Where necessary, Backvis spares no etymological, phonetic or even historical explanations, aware of turning mainly, if only for the time being, to non-Polish readers. An obvious feeling that the *Panorama* just has to be translated into Polish as soon as possible accompanies the reader right from the moment one starts reading it. The book came out at a time the debate about the Polish baroque had become much more to the point and sophisticated than it was twenty years before. In a sense, our knowledge of the diversity and differentiation of facts constituting the notion of the Baroque as a distinct and aesthetically identifiable epoch in the development of Polish literary culture had reached such detailed dimension that the details now make it difficult to envision the generally well-defined and intelligible notional construct we customarily call the Baroque current. To my understanding, that is great progress and an approximation to the historical reality, which is more important than even the most accomplished historical literary myth. Backvis's *Panorama* of Polish Baroque poetry is not a theoretical

structure based on definite pre-conceived assumptions or models. It is a truthful description of what are seen as the most characteristic phenomena in poetry. Backvis left the description of the Baroque artistic prose as a task someone else should take up, even though the characteristic effect of rhetorical culture on poetry cannot be doubted. Backvis's book helped us get a better understanding of the Polish literary Baroque, what it was, and of our vision of it.

6. Backvis and comparative literary studies

A Slavic philologist, especially a foreign one, has to be a comparative philologist. Or at least they must have a clear, well-considered and creative view of comparative literature, its proper research methodology, and the current "philosophy" of comparative literary studies. Claude Backvis was a "natural" comparatist in the sense that multilingualism is something like a civil duty to a Belgian, who is taught the official languages – French, Dutch and German – as well as the languages of European civilization – Greek, Latin and English, even at school. Backvis, as a Slavic philologist, could read Russian as well as Polish. He had got his Polish from a variety of sources, modern as well as Old Polish ones, so his Polish would occasionally spurt an unexpected funny archaism, as when at a restaurant he once grumbled about a pain he had in his *paszczyka* (the Polish term for jaw, but used only for big or wild animals). Backvis wrote no major article or study that would contain no erudite observation about such or other literary convergences or kinship. Identification of that type of relationships is a philologist's job, almost a reflex of those writing about ancient Greek or Roman culture. But there is the occasional observation that testifies to the writer's familiarity with recent and latest literary productions, which via a deft allusion may cast fresh light on an idea. Thereby the writer demonstrates not just his erudite orientation but indeed a broader spiritual culture of a mind taking delight in literature, music, painting. One of the finest products of applying that technique is Backvis first-rate 1957 study *Teatr Wyspiańskiego jako urzeczywistnienie polskiej koncepcji dramatu*. In a separate line of study Backvis explored literary and cultural contacts. There, too, it was only natural to Backvis to point to such contacts whenever that was called for to explain the origin of such or other literary fact. He devoted a lot of his research, and wrote dedicated studies on, Erasmus' of Rotterdam contacts to Poles and the reception his writings got in Poland. The same approach characterizes his study on the reception of the idea put forward by another great Dutch thinker, Justus Lipsius. Backvis would also look into literary visions of specific ethnic traits of different nations, which were called *descriptions gentium*. He dealt specifically with what Poles thought about Italy, and with the impact of the Turkish danger on Slavic minds.

7. A postscript

Claude Backvis died on May 16, 1998. He had a long life, and an interesting one, because it was filled with work. His heritage makes a prominent chapter in the history of Slavic philology. Above all, however, he deserved to be remembered by Poles for ever. One is tempted to repeat Wespazjan Kochowski's words and [paraphrase his "epitaph to the Belgian Justus Lipsius"]

*Belgowieć stawią głaz bogaci,
Moim Cię pismem czczą Sarmaci,*

(Generous Belgium a monument to thy memory will raise,
Through my writings let the Sarmatians sing your praise.)

*translated by
Zygmunt Nierada*