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## Culture of the Baroque in Poland

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Janusz Tazbir (Poland)

## CULTURE OF THE BAROQUE IN POLAND

### 1

In no other period, the Middle Ages the 20th century, has Poland created such original and different cultural forms as she did during the Baroque. The culture of the Renaissance came to the lands on the Vistula and the Dnieper belatedly the same can be said about the Enlightenment. Only the Baroque emerged in the Commonwealth of Poland practically at the same time as in other European countries, that is at the turn of the 16th century. Everywhere it was marked by the weakening of superior, supranational ties which lay at the very heart of things during the preceding and following periods. In Poland it blossomed out in Sarmatism, the meaning of the term being still a matter of controversy. According to the majority of Polish historians of culture, Sarmatism means a certain cultural formation amalgamating the political philosophy and the mentality of the gentry (particularly those of middle-income stratum) and its life style, its customs and likings expressed, among other things, in a community of artistic tastes.<sup>1</sup>

With regard to the relationship between Sarmatism and the Baroque, two opposing opinions have been propounded. The first has it that 17th century Poland was the home of the Sarmatian Baroque in the same way as there existed a Spanish, Italian or English Baroque. Thus, it would be a specific branch of the Slavonic Baroque described by Anggyal and Tapié.<sup>2</sup> Władysław Tomkiewicz, an outstanding expert in 17th century art and history, said once: "It should be borne in mind that despite its special features Sarmatism was an offshoot of the Baroque tree, whose

<sup>1</sup> Cf. T. Ulewicz, *Il problema del sarmatismo nella cultura e nella letteratura polacca (Problematica generale e profilo storico)*, "Ricerche Slavistiche", 8 (1960), Roma, 1961. S. Cynarski, *The Shape of Sarmatian Ideology in Poland*, "Acta Poloniae Historica" 19 (1968), and J. Tazbir, *The Sarmatian Baroque*, in: *History of Poland*, Warszawa, 1968, pp. 262-266. A special issue, No 4 (16), of the journal "Teksty" (Warszawa, 1974) has also been devoted to this question.

<sup>2</sup> E. Angyal, *Die Slavische Barockwelt*, Leipzig, 1961, and V.-L. Tapié, *Le Baroque*, Paris, 1961, pp. 121-123.

roots fed it and whose branches, spread over almost the whole of Europe for a century and a half."<sup>3</sup> The adherents of this theory point to the identity of artistic and Sarmatian tastes and to strong influences of the period on the gentry's life style. This is fairly right considering that Sarmatism was the outcome of a symbiosis of the Polish gentry's political ideology with the Baroque tastes and the artistic culture moulded by them.

But it does not seem possible to identify the whole of the culture of the Polish gentry in the 17th century, that is Sarmatism, with the Baroque. For, on the one hand, we have a subculture limited to a certain social class, and on the other, an artistic and literary trend which penetrated to the majority of social groups and milieus. One cannot call the court of the Vasas (the dynasty which ruled in Poland for eighty years (1588-1668)<sup>4</sup> Sarmatian, as there are countless examples of the influence of the Baroque culture there. Sarmatism only partly infiltrated the cosmopolitan milieus of the great nobles who were strongly attached to the western culture; likewise, it was not very successful with the Lutherans in the towns of Royal Prussia. But the case of the dissenting gentry, Calvinist or Socinian, was different. In the Polish Commonwealth there was no separate moral Protestant culture as there was a Huguenot culture in France or a Puritan culture in England. The Socinians were expelled from Poland (in 1658) for their incompatibility with the Sarmatian ideology and faith (which was undoubtedly Catholic), not with the Sarmatian life style which had its followers even among the Polish townfolk.

The notion of the Baroque does not cover all the components of the Sarmatian culture. For what does it mean beyond the realm of literature and the arts (painting, sculpture, architecture)? The authors of writings about the socio-economic relations, the art of war, or the political ideas of the Polish gentry, can do very well without the term "Baroque". It would be difficult to speak about the Baroque doctrine of the royal power, the relations between the lord and the serf, or the Baroque concepts of the gentry's privileges. The influence of the times seems to have been felt only in the form (E.g. in a taste for rhetoric exaggeration and panegyrics) but never in the content of the political doctrine of Sarmatism.

In western Europe the Baroque coincided with the blossoming of court culture and absolutism; Sarmatism with its followers in thousands of small manor houses professed the principle of the "golden freedom". This freedom meant the respect of the rights of an individual member of the gentry and only of the gentry. It should be noted, however, that by the end of the 18th century, in Western Europe there were three to four nobles per 100 inhabitants, while in Poland the ratio was eight to ten. Only the gentry in Poland enjoyed the equivalent of the English *Habeas Corpus* (here called "Neminem captivabimus" in Poland) which ruled that a member of

<sup>3</sup> W. Tomkiewicz, *Kultura artystyczna (Artistic Culture)*, in: *Polska XVII wieku. Państwo-Społeczeństwo-Kultura*, Warszawa, 1977, p. 309.

<sup>4</sup> Cf. M. Bogucka, *The Vasa dynasty in Poland, Kur- lige Vitterhets, Historie och Anttikvitets, Akademiens Arsbok*, 1977, pp. 176-186.

the gentry could be imprisoned only following a valid court judgment unless he had been caught red-handed while committing the crime of manslaughter, arson, theft or rape. Despite far-reaching differentiation, the whole gentry had absolute equality in law, irrespective of property and position on the social ladder. The whole class had the right to vote and to be elected to the chamber of deputies without the consent of which taxes could not be imposed, the gentry called to arms, wars declared, or laws passed concerning that class. Beside those privileges, there was also a well-developed territorial autonomy and class representation, and all regional differences were very much respected.<sup>5</sup> There was also a deeply ingrained conviction that the freedom of expressing, in word and writing, of one's own political, social and religious ideas was unlimited, theoretically at least. In the matter of fact, opinions on this subject differed.

William Bruce, who visited Poland at the close of the 16th century, wrote, visibly shocked, that "any gentleman may speake without daunger, whatsoever he thinketh, which may cause greate stirrs, seditions, troubles, yealousyes etc."<sup>6</sup> On the other hand, the "golden freedom", that is the Polish social system, had considerable enthusiasts among the Hungarian and Silesian gentry, as well as among Russian boyars. Also many of the gentlemen in Ducal Prussia still insisted in the second half of the 17th century that they wanted to be returned to the rule of the Polish kings. The attractiveness of the system proved more important than the differences in the language, religion, culture or customs. The Prussian gentry, caught in the wheels of a modern administration which was building a strong state at the expense of the purses and privileges of its citizens, looked with envy across the frontier to their neighbours, where every squire was master in his own manor and a potential candidat to the throne.

Yet, the Polish gentry seemed not to notice that the political system of the Commonwealth had ardent admirers in the neighbouring countries such as Ducal Prussia, Bohemia, Muscovy or Hungary. Although the most famous 16th century political writer, Stanisław Orzechowski, wrote that Pomerania, Mazovia, Russia and, particularly, Lithuania, had united with Poland (he meant, primarily, the Lublin Union Act 1569) because they wanted to share the same freedom, yet he had in mind only the component parts of the Commonwealth. It was generally estimated that the political structure of a state should be adapted "to the nature of the peoples and nations." And this was the reason why the Polish gentry, while deeming its own system perfect, did not try to impose it on its neighbours, convinced that the "golden freedom" was compatible only with the Polish national character.

Nor did the writings praising this freedom reach outside the boundaries of

<sup>5</sup> Cf. C. Backvis, *les Thèmes majeurs de la pensée politique polonaise au XVI<sup>e</sup> siècle*, "L'Annuaire de l'Institut de Philologie et d'Histoire Orientales et Slaves" 14 (1957), passim.

<sup>6</sup> *Relation of the State of Polonia and the United Provinces of that Crown Anno 1598*, ed. C. H. Talbot, in: *Elementa ad fontium editiones*, vol. 13, Roma, 1965, pp. 106-107.

Poland: curiously enough, no work explaining the theoretical foundations of this Polish system has ever gained major popularity in the West. There has been one exception to this rule: the essay by Wawrzyniec Goślicki, journalist and politician, entitled *De optimo senatore* (1568). Twice published in English, it became extremely popular in England; among Goślicki's readers was William Shakespeare. Goślicki, who pointed to the responsibility of the throne before the people (i.e. the gentry) and considered that power was vested in the senate, could be said to have in a certain measure influenced the English political thinking.<sup>7</sup> But it would be an exaggeration to maintain, as some scholars have endeavoured to do, that his role in relation to the writers of the English revolution was the same as that of Jean-Jacques Rousseau in relation to the writers of the French Revolution. Such suppositions are too far-fetched: yet it is worth noting that even the opinion of the conservative gentry saw in the United States' struggle for independence a rebellion of free citizens against a despotic monarch who dared to infringe the privileges once granted them. So it was an exotic, overseas version of a rebellion of the gentry against the king, well-known in the history of Poland. The language of Sarmatian republicanism was particularly suited to rendering all the terms used by the leaders of the French revolution. As early as the 17th century, the vocabulary of the chamber of deputies included such notions as liberty, equality or democracy, although they were applied to one estate only.<sup>8</sup>

Each new event in Europe was greeted by the gentry either with fears that it might adversely affect the Polish freedom, or with satisfaction that such excesses as the Massacre of St Bartholomew would not be possible in Poland, a land of free people. Suffice it to recall that one of the causes of the hatred felt for the Habsburgs by practically the whole gentry was their absolute rule in Bohemia and Hungary. Jakub Sobieski (father of the future king), who travelled in France early in the 17th century, was horrified by the Bastille where — he wrote — the Bourbons could lock up anybody and let him rot. Similarly, Polish Catholics condemned the Spanish and Italian inquisition considering its judicial procedure an infringement of the gentry's privileges, since people were imprisoned and sentenced to death following an anonymous denunciation. A writing in praise of Thomas More emphasized that he defended not only the Catholic faith and the pope but also the rights of his country and class freedoms against a tyrannical monarch.<sup>9</sup> It has been rightly remarked that Jan Kochanowski, the outstanding poet of the Polish Renaissance, began the dedication of one of his works (*Satires*, 1563) with words which no French poet would have penned: "My Lord (this is the grandest title among free people)".

<sup>7</sup> Cf. T. Filipowicz, *The Accomplished Senator*, "Proceedings of the American Society of International Law," 1932.

<sup>8</sup> Cf. H. Hinz, *U źródeł nowoczesnej umysłowości polskiej* (At the source of modern Polish mentality), "Człowiek i Światopogląd" 1970 8 (61), pp. 14–15.

<sup>9</sup> J. Tazbir, *Thomas More et la Pologne*, "Moreana" 13 (1976), No 52, pp. 30–31.

Fot, though Molière and Racine were men of genius, it is worthwhile to "compare their dedications in order to realize that as men they were not really free".<sup>10</sup>

The Polish 17th century gentleman saw himself primarily as a free man, and, with regard to the rest of Europe, a creditor, not a debtor. He based his attitude on three dogmatic assertions, the first of which was his conviction about the perfection of the Commonwealth's political system. The second was his assumption that the Polish corn was indispensable to feed the rest of Europe; and the third, the belief that Poland was the bulwark of Christianity. This last assertion had two meanings, one temporal — we protect the safety of the continent at its south-eastern frontiers; and the other metaphysical. The fact that the Commonwealth of the gentry was surrounded by enemies of the Catholic faith was thought to stem from the will of the Divine Strategists who had allotted it precisely this place on the map of the world. Hence, despite constant fighting with Poland's neighbours during the 17th century, nobody at that time ever thought of complaining about unfavourable geographical position of this country.

## 2

As early as the 16th century, the Polish intellectual élite realized its affiliation to the European cultural community, though, of course, such a notion was not in use at the time. It was realized through the flow of students to the most renowned universities (at first, only Italian, later also German, Swiss, Dutch or French), the use of Latin in learned writings, official documents or correspondence, the exchange of fictional plots and proverbs. The cultural map of Europe was not identical with the geographical one. For the Poles felt that their country was not lying at the confines of the continent but in its very centre, somewhere on the coast of the Mediterranean. Like France, Spain or Italy, Poland belonged to the same cultural cricle: western and Latin. This was linked with the conviction of a common historical past in which the biblical stories constituted a kind of prehistory, and the wars waged by the ancient heroes filled all the European writers with pride. The enlightened Poles were also proud of living in a part of the world which took precedence over all others. When they wrote about Europe, they explained the achievements of its inhabitants not only by the natural resources or the climate of the continent. All the comparisons of Europe with Asia or Africa, made by Polish and other writers, extolled the gifts and industriousness of the Europeans thanks to which they had been able to outdistance the inhabitants of the rest of the world.

Both 16th century poetry in Poland (Mikołaj Rej, Jan Kochanowski) and Polish political writings of that time (Andrzej Frycz Modrzewski) provide examples of the intellectual élite's consciousness of the Polish contribution to European culture.

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<sup>10</sup> J. Lechoń, *Dzienniki (Diaries)*, vol. 1, London, 1967, p. 124.

They were convicted that not only was their country a part of Europe, but also that Poland had "features of her own and a separateness which should not be shyly concealed".<sup>11</sup> In the 17th century the Polish cultural separateness from the rest of the continent was consolidated and strengthened by Sarmatism. The western part of Europe ceased to impress Polish travellers. The gentleman-knight, who was the defender of entire Christianity, felt superior with regard to the English and Netherlandish "shopkeepers" (as some wrote). The elector of rulers, the holder—thanks to the "golden freedom"—of full political rights, looked down upon the subjects of an absolute monarch; the exporter of huge quantities of grain never doubted that this corn "fed and maintained a large part of Europe."<sup>12</sup> Lastly, the civil and religious wars in France, Germany or England aroused his satisfaction that the final victory of the Catholic Church over the Reformation, and of the gentry's democracy over absolutism had been won in Poland at a cost far lower than elsewhere. The power status of the Commonwealth which lasted until the mid-17th century, was often contrasted with the states of western Europe plunged in "terrible and cruel internal disputes."<sup>13</sup>

An enlightened Pole thought that Europe ought to be grateful to his country for its role of shield and granary for the whole continent. But only the element of political and religious conflict was perceived in the wars with the might of Turkey or Muscovy, never the protection of European civilisation. A gentleman felt he was a knight defending Christianity, not the western culture; the term Europe was often replaced by the notion of Christian community which included, beside Catholics, also the followers of the Reformed churches.<sup>14</sup> Here it is worth noting that the term *Respublica Christiana* survived the longest in countries bordering on the Muslim world, that is, beside Poland, in Spain, Austria and Hungary. At certain times they all called themselves the bulwark of Christianity.

In the 17th and even in the 18th century, none of the Polish writers ever dreamed of praising the contribution of their fellow countrymen to the development of human culture. This seems understandable: the military successes or defeats are plain to see, whereas the achievements of culture are visible only from the perspective of the following centuries. What we are boasting of now was at the time thought "heretical" (the Socinian ideology), utopian or too radical (the conceptions contained in *De Republica emendanda* by Andrzej Frycz Modrzewski), or else incompatible with the teachings of the Church (Nicolas Copernicus theory). In the 17th century,

<sup>11</sup> J. Pelc, *Europejskość i swoistość polskiego renesansu* (European and specific features of Polish Renaissance), in: *Literatura staropolska i jej związki europejskie*, ed. J. Pelc, Wrocław, 1973, pp. 46–48.

<sup>12</sup> This opinion was expressed by the well-known 17th century politician and journalist, Łukasz Opaliński, *Wybór pism* (Selected Works), Wrocław, 1959, p. 146.

<sup>13</sup> J. Tazbir, *Kultura szlachecka w Polsce. Rozkwit—upadek—relikty* (Gentry Culture in Poland. Efflorescence, decline and relicts), Warszawa, 1978, p. 139.

<sup>14</sup> Cf. J. Tazbir, *Poland and the Concept of Europe in the Sixteenth–Eighteenth Centuries*, "European Studies Review" 7, 1977.

all these essential achievements of the Polish religious, socio-philosophical and scientific thought were not appreciated at their real worth.

Even belles-lettres was treated with condescension by the gentry in general; they saw in the more of an intellectual play or verbal fun than genuine artistic achievement. Only a few compared Kochanowski to Homer; the superiority of Kochanowski to Ronsard or Petrarch was claimed only by Mikołaj Kazimierz Sarbiewski, a Polish poet famous in Europe of the Baroque, who wrote exclusively in Latin. Anyway, the question of a writer's nationality was not important, if he was known only by his Latin works. In Poland, the Dutchman Erasmus of Rotterdam, the Scotsman George Buchanan or the Spaniard Juan Luis Vives were considered European writers, few people remembering their native countries. Outside Poland the same treatment was applied to Stanisław Hosius, Marcin Kromer or Sarbiewski who was sometimes called the Christian Horace (not Polish Horace!).

Nor did anybody boast of Poles playing the role of cultural links between the East and the West. It is only from foreign accounts that we learn that it was through Poles that western fashions, literature or art penetrated into Moldavia, Walachia, the Russian state or even into Persia (figurative painting). Everywhere, Polish writers, artisans and artists were appreciated, and the fashions and customs observed in the Commonwealth copied. The Polish theatre was very popular at the court of Muscovy, where, in the latter part of the 17th century, our language played a similar role to that of the French language in the entourage of Marie-Louise de Gonzague, successively queen to two Vasa kings, Władysław IV and John Casimir. Polish cultural influences contributed to the development of Russian music, painting and graphic art, and also made their mark on poetry and drama.

Lately, Soviet scholars have noted that in Russia the Baroque played the role of the Renaissance: it served to encourage the freedom of the individual, to secularize literature and to develop a belief in the human mind and science, in the urgency of progress and socio-economic reforms.<sup>15</sup> According to those scholars, a considerable part of the Renaissance ideology appeared in 17th century Muscovy thanks to the Polish intermediary. For it is at that time that Russian audiences and readers got to know our drama of the Renaissance, our historiography (the chronicles of Marcin and Joachim Bielski) and poetry (among others, the works of Jan Kochanowski). The old-Polish portrait painting had to some degree influenced the Russian "parsuny" (as portraits of exalted personages were called). But the convergence of artistic tastes does not necessarily stem from foreign influences. The emergence of similar patterns of living, of literary works with a similar climate, or ideologically convergent political writings can sometimes be explained by the similarity of class privileges or political aspirations.

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<sup>15</sup> Cf. D. S. Likhachov, *Razvitye russkoy literatury X-XVII vekov*, Leningrad, 1973, chapter on the Baroque.



Thus, if in the 17th century considerable similarities can be detected between the culture of the Polish gentry and that of the Hungarian, Bohemian or even Croat nobles, the reasons should be looked for elsewhere than just on the map (a relatively close neighbourhood). Suffice it to recall that on the distant Iberian peninsula our country was considered a fairy-tale land, lying somewhere beyond seven mountains. In spite of that, the nobles there exhibited a great similarity of features with the Polish gentry, both in ideology and in life style. Similarities between the Hungarian and the Polish gentry are even easier to explain. In this case the convergence of political attitudes (struggle against absolutism) and the geographical situation conditioned the cultural similarities. The strong element of knightly ideology, contained in Sarmatism could all the more appeal to the Hungarians as, like their Polish counterparts, they constantly waged wars with the Turks. And as the Poles claimed their descent from the Sarmatians, so the Hungarians looked for their ancestors among the Scythians and the Huns.

The military successes paved the way for Polish cultural influence in the Slavonic countries under Turkish rule. The Croat poet and play wright, Ivan Gundulic (1583–1638), wrote a poem entitled *Osman*, which described the battle between the Poles and the Turks at Chocim (1621), and dedicated it to Prince Władysław Vasa. It was no accident that the most intense penetration of the Sarmatian culture into southern Europe occurred at the time of the victories of John III Sobieski, when hopes were high that he would liberate all Slavs from the rule of the Sublime Porte.

The two countries, Poland and Hungary, fell equally under the influence of eastern material culture. "Once, the Polish men's dress was different from the Hungarian," said the Hungarian Martin Csombor, who travelled in Poland in 1616, "but today there are only a few differences for both delight in Turkish dress."<sup>16</sup> This was true not only of clothes but also of arms, rugs and even hair style (heads were shaved clean except for a tuft of hair on top). The reason for this becomes quite clear after a look at the map. Poland's geopolitical situation made her particularly vulnerable to oriental culture which in the eastern territories of Europe constituted an almost native, not merely imported civilization. Poland's territorial expansion on the one hand, and the expansion of the Ottoman state, on the other, led to direct contacts with the world of Islam.

Many Poles had spent years in Turkish or Tartar captivity. A considerable number of fugitives from justice would go to the south-eastern confines of the Commonwealth, to Zaporozhe, where, living among the Cossacks, they would adopt oriental customs and habits. Lastly, the trade linking the Baltic and the North Sea with the Black Sea led through Poland. The south-eastern Polish voivodships were the gateway through which the influences of Asian culture and art flowed into Poland, and the towns which lay on that route were Brody, Kamieniec Podolski and Lvov.

Orientalization was nothing peculiar to Polish culture. It came much earlier

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<sup>16</sup> M. Csombor, *Podróż po Polsce* (Journey in Poland), Warszawa, 1961, p. 11.

to the Spaniards who for a long time had Arabs as their neighbours on the Iberian peninsula. After the expulsion of the latter, the Moors who stayed behind exercised their influence on customs, cooking, farming and — the waging of wars.<sup>17</sup> In the 15th–17th centuries, the peoples living in the Balkans also underwent some oriental-ization, while the Hungarians came under that spell almost at the same time as the Poles. Like the Spaniards, the Poles encountered representatives of eastern culture also on their own territory, to mention Armenians, Karaites or the Tartars settled in Lithuania. The popularity of oriental influences was enhanced by the shifting of the centre of gravity of the huge Polish-Lithuanian state eastwards: the manor houses of the Polish gentry and of the Ruthenian or White Russian-Lithuanian landowners lay mostly within the area of the direct influence of oriental culture. In the 17th century the language used in those borderlands strongly affected the literary Polish language.

The type of education also underwent a change. The people educated at western universities who spent their time in the Sejm or at the courts of the members of the ruling class were followed by a generation often brought up in Jesuit colleges only, who supplemented their education on the battlefields or in Turkish or Tartar captivity. They saw more Turks and Tartars than their ancestors living in the 16th century did Frenchmen, Dutchmen, Italians or Englishmen! No wonder then that it was the battlefields that began to dictate fashions instead of foreign courts. As far as dress or military equipment were concerned, they were taken over not only from the Turks.<sup>18</sup> As early as the first half of the 17th century, Polish writers noted that the ample and trailing furs (lined with ermine or sable) were copied from the Russians, the military coats, as well as the short and very tight-fitting jackets from the Tartars. Even native arms would be taken to local goldsmiths in order to be ornamented in the oriental style. In early 18th century, special Janissary formations and Tartar regiments were set up in the Polish army, in which served many Muslims recruited earlier from Tartars settled in Poland and Lithuania, or from Turkish prisoners-of-war.

The gentry looked askance at the people who affected French dress, suspecting that a courtier or magnate thus attired might plan the introduction into Poland of absolute rule (*absolutum dominium*), whereas wearing eastern clothing (and the richer the noble the more his dress recalled that of Turkish high officials) did not all mean a political taste for the social and political institutions of the Sublime Porte. In this respect the gap between Turkey and Poland was too big to seriously consider the Polish king wishing to imitate the sultan, while the fear of a Polish Bourbon

<sup>17</sup> Cf. S. Arnoldsson, *La leyenda negra. Estudios sobre sus orígenes*, Götteborg, 1960, pp. 19–20 and 91–92.

<sup>18</sup> A great deal of information on this subject is contained in the richly illustrated book by Z. Żygulski Jun., *Broń w dawnej Polsce na tle uzbrojenia Europy i Bliskiego Wschodu* (Arms in old Poland against the background of weaponry in Europe and the Middle East), Warszawa, 1975, *passim*.

or Habsburg seemed quite real, all the more so as members of those dynasties often solicited the Polish crown.

Turkish dress would be imitated but not Turkish customs. Nor was there any fear that the Turkish or Russian language could drive out the Polish as was possible with the French or German. It seems that Sarmatism was fully aware of its superior position with regard to eastern culture. Another factor favourable to the adoption of oriental tastes and fashions was that no negative aspects were attached to the notion of the East. So much so that the gentry willingly traced its origins to the ancient Sarmatians<sup>19</sup> who, having left their settlements between the Don and the lower Volga in the first centuries of our era, conquered the territories stretching from the Dnieper to the Vistula (turning the native population into slaves). In the eyes of the Polish gentry, such Asian provenance was as good as the ancestral ties with the Romans Boasted of by the Lithuanian gentry.

Almost throughout Europe, the Baroque brought in its wake a taste for the exotic, yet whereas in the West it was inspired primarily by the newly discovered cultures of America or the Far-East, in Poland it was fuelled by the well-known civilizations of the Middle East. In France, England and the Netherlands the exotic was found mostly in decorative motifs, striking for their outlandishness; in Poland, the oriental influences combined with an orientalism which constituted an integral part of the daily life. Another difference was that in English, Dutch or French collections the exotic was represented also by objects coming from Turkey, the Crimea or even Poland, while here, because of the orientalization of tastes and the country's geopolitical position, artistic products of those countries did not, at least in the 16th-17th centuries, qualify as collector's pieces.

Yet at the same time, Sarmatism, like the Baroque, sought separateness and delighted in the exotic. In Poland only clothes, fans or images made of feathers and originating in countries discovered by far-ranging sailing expeditions, were deemed exotic. These were the objects collected by out connoisseurs. Thus, King Sigismund III Vasa would buy pictures made of ostrich feathers in the West Indies, in the manufacture of which the local artists attained near-perfection. The collections of Lithuanian great nobles (the Radziwills of Birza in Lithuania), originated in the 17th century, contained large numbers of "Indian" objects, imported from the territories discovered in the 16th century. They included exotic vessels, parts of clothing and pictures. Similar collections were also put together by well-to-do Gdańsk burghers.

The cultural syncretism of Polish Baroque consisted not only in its orientalization, for Sarmatism was made up of many elements, among which western culture was still playing a considerable role. In the 17th century, Poles still participated (on a smaller scale) in European cultural life, reading works written in Latin (later in French), following the trends in architecture and painting, etc. Yet, the eastern

<sup>19</sup> Cf. T. Sulimirski, *Sarmatians in the Polish Past*, "The Polish Review" 9 (1964), No 1.

and western impacts on Polish Baroque seldom merged together. The Orient influenced the decorative art, dress or arms, never ideology; while the West made its mark on Polish literature, architecture, and, to a certain extent, also on science. None of these two cultural systems had any essential influence on the social and political system of the Commonwealth of the gentry. Although, for instance, it would be easy to detect oriental inspiration in Baroque Poland art of war, there was nothing like the "golden freedom" in the Turkish, French or Spanish monarchies.

This fascination with the arts of the Orient had its negative external effects in that the wearing of oriental hair style, dress or arms created the opinion in the West that Poland was an extremely exotic country whose inhabitants revelled in oriental luxury. When the French (Jean Le Laboureur, Françoise de Motteville or Charles Ogier) likened the clothes, harness and the banquets of the Polish gentry to "the wealth and magnificence of the ancient Persians", their opinion carried not only astonishment but also judgment. For Asia and its inhabitants were associated not only with wealth but also with barbarity. If in the Middle Ages the powerful but little known countries of the East were much admired, the colonial conquests prompted the Europeans to think that not only their war techniques but also they themselves were superior to the Indians, the Japanese, the Red Indians or the Negroes. The slavery of the Blacks and the extermination of the Red Indians led to the conclusions about the natural inferiority of other continents and their inhabitants. Everything outside Europe should be — according to the French, English or Dutch — either adapted or liquidated, everything which did not conform to the general standards of European civilization deserved contempt and disregard.

So, if during all kinds of pageants, balls and processions, next to Red Indians, Arabs, Chinese, Persians or Turks, there were also Poles, if the "wild Americans" were replaced by people dressed "in the Sarmatian", Hungarian or Muscovite fashion,<sup>20</sup> it is clear that such a classification expressed a decidedly negative opinion about the fashions and artistic tastes of the gentry. Mme de Motteville wrote in her account of the entry of the Polish embassy in Paris in 1645, that it showed "the former splendour which came to the Persians from the Medes." Charles Ogier was reminded by the Polish voivodes praying in their national dress of "the adoration of the eastern kings who with great pomp and a long retinue of courtiers and camels... came to the Child Jesus."<sup>21</sup>

As a type of culture which was to constitute a symbiosis of the Asian and European influences it came decidedly at a wrong time (too soon? too later?), because it was then that Europe, starting its struggle for hegemony over the world, did not want

<sup>20</sup> Cf. J. S. Held, *Rembrandt's "Polish" Rider*, "The Art Bulletin", December, 1944, Vol. XXVI, p. 259, note 114.

<sup>21</sup> F. de Motteville, *Anna Austriaczka i jej dwór* (Anne of Austria and her court), Warszawa, 1978, pp. 90-92, and Caroli Ogerii, *Ephemerides sive iter Danicum, Sueticum, Polonicum...*, part I, Gdańsk, 1952, p. 172.

such a symbiosis at all. In the 16th–17th century the majority of the west-European countries had found themselves at a turning point in history. The development of Western Europe, often at the expense of less-developed countries of the eastern part of the continent, went forward by great leaps, while in Poland constant wars, the economic crisis and political anarchy were beginning to have their adverse effects. In this situation, the orientalization of the Sarmatian culture was, on the one hand, the result of the deepening split of our continent into its eastern and western parts, and on the other, it consolidated this very split by enhancing and petrifying the differences which separated Poland from France, England or Holland.

Sarmatism was probably one of the few attempts in the history of Europe at cultural intermediacy; this role is often played by peoples inhabiting cultural borderlands or living in diaspora (e.g. Jews). This bridge proved effective only in one direction: west to east; for the few elements of the Orient's material culture which, thanks to Poland, penetrated to Holland or France (e.g. oriental sashes) went into various collections but did not permanently affect the daily life style.

It is a paradox of history that the final triumph of Counter-Reformation in the lands on the Vistula and the Dnieper coincided with a demand for rugs, arms and pottery made by the followers of Muhammad. "The bulwark of Christianity" (as the Commonwealth of the gentry was often called in the 17th century) turned out to be a fortification conquered by the hostile world of Islam in one respect only: the influence of the material culture. Nowhere else (except, perhaps, in Spain) had the artistic tastes of Islam had such an impact on "the tastes of one of the most Catholic societies, that is the Polish gentry of the second half of the 17th century and the first half of the 18th."<sup>22</sup>

A similar paradox of history from the religious point of view seems to be the fact that the triumph of Counter-Reformation in Poland coincided with a cultural flourishing of various heretical centres, on the one hand, and with the decline in the intellectual level of Catholicism, on the other. Up to the mid-17th century, the Commonwealth of the gentry was still a refuge for all those who were persecuted for their religion in other countries of our continent. A similar role was played at the time only, it seems, by the Netherlands, though—officially at least—it did not accept anti-Trinitarians (Socinians) who could count on tolerance only in Poland and Transylvania. True, in the 17th century the Hungarian Unitarians did not publish any outstanding theological writings so that the burden of defending that denomination had to be borne almost exclusively by the Socinians, also called Polish Brethren. The Unitarian church in Transylvania recruited its priests and teachers from the Polish Brethren; and of the Hungarian Unitarians was marked by the strong influence of the catechism of the Polish anti-Trinitarians.

Socinian works published in Poland spread throughout the continent the de-

<sup>22</sup> T. Mańkowski, *Sztuka islamu w Polsce w XVII i XVIII wieku* (The art of Islam in Poland in the 17th and 18th centuries), Kraków, 1935, p. 113.

mands for religious tolerance and a rationalistic approach to religious affairs. The works of theologians such as Samuel Przykowski, Andrzej Wiszowaty or Jonasz Szlichtyng were discussed with vivid interest in English, French or Dutch intellectual circles. Moreover, it would not be an exaggeration to say that they had exercised a certain impact on the development of the early Enlightenment in those countries.<sup>23</sup> Anyway, the very freedom of public exercise of one's faith and of the propagation of one's own denomination, two aims of the gentry's efforts, was bound to influence in future other fields of public life. The fight for the freedom to celebrate services and convene synods prompted the later demands for freedom of assembly; the efforts to win unfettered publication of theological works prompted the demands for the freedom of printing; the demand for the free propagation of "God's true word"—the demand for freedom of speech.

The Polish "asylum for heretics" made it possible for the Bohemian Brethren, who were being, progressively, expelled from their own country (after 1627), to set up schools which later served as models for both Protestant and Catholic schools in many countries of Europe. Leading educational centres existed in Leszno (college of the Bohemian Brethren), Raków (Socinian academy), in Toruń and Gdańsk (Lutheran colleges). Leszno owed a great deal to the prestige and experience of Jan Amos Komenský who had been rector of the school from 1635. In Raków, many foreign followers of anti-Trinitarianism, mostly from Germany, used to lecture. In turn, Toruń and Gdańsk professors (including Bartholomew Keckermann) lectured at western universities.

In the 17th century, at the peak of their cultural achievements, the various "heretic" centres contrasted with the gradual sinking of the intellectual level of Polish Catholicism. The Reformation shook the Church in Poland compelling it to an extremely fruitful, from the cultural point of view, counteraction which often resulted in outdistancing the adversary. But when it ceased to be a genuine threat to Catholicism, and no new ones appeared such as Jansenism, libertinism or religious scepticism (all of which were unknown in Poland), the Counter-Reformation lost its former intellectual drive. When the adversary had been silenced or simply expelled (as were the Socinians in 1658), preaching, theology and denominational polemics declined, for they had been used in the first place to fight the "heresies."

The Polish Counter-Reformation adapted itself skilfully to the local conditions, tradition and culture. It countered the blooming of native culture with the Polonization of religious culture, the demands for a national church with a further nationalization of Catholicism which in the hundred years since the acceptance (1577) by the clergy of the resolutions of the Council of Trent had become more indigenous than for the several following generations.<sup>24</sup> Polish Catholicism rested, first and

<sup>23</sup> Cf. Z. Ogonowski, *Der Sozinianismus und die Aufklärung*, in: *Reformation und Aufklärung in Polen. Studien über den Sozinianismus und seinen Einfluss auf das westeuropäische Denken*, in 17. Jahrhundert, Göttingen, 1977.

<sup>24</sup> J. Tazbir, *La polonisation du catholicisme après le Concile de Trente*, "Memorie Dimenicane" 4 (1973) della Nuova Serie, (*Umanesimo e teologia tra '400 e '500*).

foremost, on emotion and imagination. In this it was not so much different from the Spanish or Italian brand, which were almost as loud and colourful; the main difference lay in that its doctrinal content practically spent itself out in the constant, noisy and ostentatious demonstration of feelings, whereas the Italianization or Hispanization of Catholicism did not kill profound theological reflection on either the Iberian or Appenine peninsula.

However, it should be noted that Polish religious communities, particularly the Protestants, exhibited strong ecumenical features,<sup>25</sup> so often appealed to by Catholic theology in the time of Vaticanum II. In no other European country did religious life experience such early, numerous and persistent efforts towards reciprocal ideological tolerance as in Poland. As early as the 16th century, the Sandomierz Accord (1570) had been concluded by Calvinists, Lutherans and Bohemian Brethren, and there has also been some canvassing for a union of all the Christian denominations. Their representatives (with the exception, though, of the Orthodox Church and the Socinians) met at religious talks (*colloquium charitativum*) called by King Władysław IV Vasa in 1645, at Toruń.<sup>26</sup>

It follows from this article that the Polish "bulwark" became a melting pot into which the alloy of various civilizations brought new cultural values. This was favoured by the territorial community, the identity of class privileges and political ideals, and, lastly, the reference to the same national myth which assumed descent from Sarmatian ancestors. The culture which emerged from all these elements has been properly assessed only in recent years. Its genuine achievements have first attracted the attention of foreigners. German scholars and French intellectuals (including André Malraux) admired the old-Polish portrait painting; its exhibition in the National Museum (1977) became an artistic revelation. The latest studies carried out by art historians have revealed many valuable achievements of Sarmatian art in painting and sculpture as well as in architecture, wood carving, goldsmith, embroidery and cabinet-making. These discoveries have prompted one student to reflect: "The aspects of our art which were inferior to the art of Italy, France or Germany were perceived, but not the aspects which made it different."<sup>27</sup>

It was a foreign scholar (Claude Backvis) who first pointed to the independent values of the Polish political culture of the 16th and 17th centuries, one of the "most valuable and permanent aspects of which is the loftiness, subtlety and effectiveness of the political thinking engendered by it."<sup>28</sup> Should we analyse the frequency of various notions in the political writings of the gentry in the 16th-18th centuries, we would probably find that the most frequent was the word "freedom", the rarest

<sup>25</sup> Cf. K. E. Jordt Jørgensen, *Ökumenische Bestrebungen unter den polnischen Protestanten bis zum Jahre 1645*, København, 1942.

<sup>26</sup> A. Jobert, *De Luther à Mohila, La Pologne dans la crise de la Chrétienté, 1517-1648*, Paris, 1974, p. 375 ff., and J. Tazbir, *A State without Stakes. Polish religious Toleration in the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries*, Warszawa, 1973, pp. 87-89 and 189.

<sup>27</sup> T. Chrzanowski, *Żywe i martwe granice* (Frontiers Live and Dead), Kraków, 1974, p. 220.

<sup>28</sup> Backvis, op. cit., p. 355.

“fear.” The latter is mostly to be found in the context which says that a king who breaks the assumed obligations (called *pacta conventa*) should fear the gentry; on the other hand, the gentry was extremely rarely threatened with royal reprisals. “Education by fear” was a system unknown to the Polish gentry. This applied both to the political system and to religion. For the preachers, too, presented God not as an absolute ruler but as a kindly monarch whose rule was limited by His own goodness and man’s free will. Now wonder then that Backvis saw the fundamental feature of the old-Polish political culture in putting civic liberties above the ruler’s rights.

If the Polish culture of the Baroque has, in the past twenty-five years, been judged differently than previously, this has been due to two essential factors. First, the decline of the Europocentric assessment of world culture has caused it that justice has been rendered to the original achievements of the Sarmatian culture which combined native traditions with Asian influences, viewed earlier with contempt. Secondly, in the ideology of freedom of the 17th century Polish gentry, historians have perceived the condemnation of all manner of despotism, an aspect most topical in the 20th century which is filled to a considerable extent with struggles against different varieties of totalitarianism.