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The Stubborn Persistence of the Baroque.

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The Stubborn Persistence of the Baroque

And hardly surprising, too. Baroque is omnipresent in our country. So obvious, in fact, that it is almost invisible. In Greater and Lesser Poland it overshadows other styles, and not only in churches. To the east of the Vistula, the entirety of the perceptible past is baroque: older buildings are rarer and less visible. Though turbulent and cruel, the 17th century was also a period when the eastern provinces reached their cultural zenith, a time when Hosius' efforts began to bear fruit. Religion indeed commenced to shape the everyday life of local communities. It was around that time that the gentry of all ranks, not solely the most affluent ones, started sending their boys off to schools and adopted customs and ceremonies that were soon to be identified simply as "Polish." The break of the 18th century, despite, or perhaps regardless, of its political disasters, was also when the Polish language evolved and acquired features that it still retains. This is how the concept of "baroque" became associated with the idea of "Polishness," and how a historical style became identified with a national identity. Such identification itself is nothing irregular: the "classical" was for a long time identified with the "French." What is rather more surprising is the fact that many Poles, even our intellectual elite, remain unaware of this connection, whether in our Christmas carols, our love of rhetoric, or the affinity for the theatricalization of interpersonal relations. This is why, in order to truly understand the presence of the baroque in the 20th century Polish literature (or culture), one must first fully realize that the baroque is something deeply familiar to us, and something perceived not in historical but rather in geographical terms.

The baroque is such a common presence in Poland that it is almost anonymous. As a "bare fact" it is rarely problematized, neither provoking discussions, nor enforcing ideological choices. The baroque is omnipresent in Poland – yet, paradoxical-

cally – it rarely gave birth to timeless masterpieces, and when these were born, they also tended to die swiftly, like Krzyżtopór, the most magnificent of palaces. The Renaissance effortlessly produced mighty talents, such as that of Jan Kochanowski, but the baroque seems to have oddly lacked a powerhouse capable of phrasing its problems in universal terms. Therefore, in order to be understood today, they need to be modernized or reinterpreted by our contemporaries. The most spectacular of such re-interpretations came from Gombrowicz: it identifies the “Pole” with the “baroque man” or with the “Sarmatian”. Such identification, however, is not instantly obvious, it has to be reconstructed, or worked out.

At the end of his life, weary of the Western *episteme*, of all the Freudianisms, scientisms, and structuralisms that dissolve the Self in doctrines and systems, Gombrowicz talks of his *Diary* as an attempt by a “Polish bumpkin or perhaps a country gent to enter European culture... This particular gentle manner was bred into me and is something incredibly resistant... so I walk around with a thoughtful air and without much interest, exactly as if I were a nobleman walking in his orchard, there, in the country side, and every once in a while, trying this or that product (like a pear or a plum) I say: – Hm, hm, this is good but this one is too hard for me... I would describe myself as a Polish gent who has found his *raison d'être* in the distrust of form.”¹

Gombrowicz searches for a method that would allow him to transform and restage himself to his own liking ...but also to the liking of others, preferably neighbors, in other words, he sees personality as a kind of game.

Hence there is the image of landed gentry (neither lesser nobility, nor aristocracy), someone freely ruling over fashions, customs and culture instead of yielding to them. An image with numerous literary antecedents as well, immediately bringing to mind Potocki, who wrote as much for himself as for his neighbors, it brings to mind Pasek and Rej, incessantly talking (writing) while walking around his lands. Hardly anything could be more anachronistic than being a Sarmatian but being one can hardly be criticized once you have proven your thorough knowledge of Nietzsche and Sartre! On the contrary, it helps in gaining a perspective also on the mighty sages.

“The point is exactly that I come from your rubbish heap... Now, when you look out the window, you can see that a tree has sprung up on that trash heap, a tree that is a parody of a tree” (36).

“Parody of a tree” is a obviously a reference to *Trans-Atlantic* where Gombrowicz rewrites and distorts the scenes of *Pan Tadeusz* through a bloated, grotesquely elevated style reminiscent of the Sarmatian 17th and 18th centuries. At the same time, he draws us into a highly suspicious scheme that results in the triumph of the “son’s-land” over “fatherland,” a direction exactly the opposite to the one Mickiewicz set out for.

It is not my task today to talk about *Trans-Atlantic* but I will say this: the author is fully aware of a kinship, or even a crossover between the characters. His familiar

¹ Based on the translation by Lillian Valee, slightly modified for the purpose of this essay. Gombrowicz, Witold. *Diaries. Volume I*. Northwestern University Press: Evanston, IL. 92. (AW)

nobleman in the orchard is a direct descendant of the “Sarmatian gentry.” It is inferable from the style, an amalgam-speech combining the language of Pasek, Rzewuski as well as Gombrowicz, allowing the writer to be himself while wearing a costume. His famous “distrust of form” is a contemporary version of the interplay of truth and disguise, illusion and reality that the baroque was truly obsessed with. Again, the baroque and Polishness prove strangely close to each other: actually, the same. If only Poles were not so much ashamed of their Sarmatian baroque (or their baroque Sarmatism)! If only they could refrain from emulating the supposedly “more mature” ones, from losing themselves in systems and ideologies, and remained, instead, “who they are” – that is, gave in to the writer’s ludic playfulness!

The rhetoric of *Trans-Atlantic* – “Not that I ask anyone to have these old Noodles of mine, this Turnip (haply ever raw)” (3)² – is instantly recognizable: it was born of the panegyric eloquence of the baroque. Its obvious abuse of hyperbole, ostentatious exaggeration, is augmented by the brevity and directness of the image. A juxtaposition so artificial, and so grotesque, that it cannot be taken literally. The reader immediately recognizes it as a stylistic device, a word-play, and that is precisely what allows the writer to smuggle a subversive, even scandalous, message in his work. The Sarmatian gent bowing emphatically to the ground before the duke signaled with the same kind of exaggeration that his discourse of tribute is also merely a convention or game, and that – highly fluent in rhetoric and despite his humble bows – he sees himself equal to his superior. And so, the baroque poetics of illusion or appearance makes a comeback.

In Miłosz’s work the presence of the baroque heritage is more moderate, or maybe simply less pronounced. One does hear direct echoes of 17th and 18th century poetry:

Beauty and kisses,
Fame and its prizes,
Who cares?

Doctors and lawyers,
Well-turned-out majors,
Six feet of earth.

Rings, furs, and lashes,
Glances at Masses,
Rest in peace.

Sweet twin breasts, good night.
Sleep through to the light,
Without spiders. (216)³

² After: Gombrowicz, Witold. *Trans-Atlantyck*. transl. Carolyn French and Nina Karsov. New Haven: Yale University Press. 1994. 3. (A.W)

³ Unless indicated otherwise, all quotations from Miłosz are based on the translations published in *New and Collected Poems: 1931 - 2001* (Ecco, 2003). (A.W.)

Then again, one can find everything, and even more, in Miłosz's poems, and so baroque, too, must be found in his work – especially as re-imagining his homeland he simply had no other way than to revisit baroque: was Vilnius not its capital?

This presence will be easier to understand once we think of Miłosz's imagination and the potential he ascribes to poetry: especially from 1968 onward he never ceases to insist that he believes art, especially poetry, to be an imitation, a mimesis, and takes it as gospel that “the world exists independently from...the speculation of the mind and the play of imagination.”

Mnemosyne mater musarum he repeats. Indeed, poetry is born of memory, but it comes to life through imagination which saturates the remembered details (image) of reality with meaning. Miłosz speaks of an “eternal moment” and wants imagination to introduce spatial order to the visible world. What does it mean, though, to saturate with meaning, to signify? Probably to categorize details into larger (or higher) wholes (leading to the maximum mobilization of contexts), but also to reveal a hierarchy anchored in nature, revealing itself through symbols and rested upon – at the end of the day – the mystery of God. By immobilizing and sanctifying space, poetry replays and immortalizes being: this seems to be the metaphysical sense of “salvation,” a word that Miłosz was so fond of, using it also in the moral, even in the political sense.

There is nothing, at least at first glance, esoteric in his, if I may say so, scandalously traditional poetics. It would not have been criticized by Fr. Sarbiewski, one of the greatest masters of the 17th century lyric. He believes that *ens et pulchrum convertuntur*: that beauty and being converge. It is the source of his admiration and love of everything that has ever existed, even if only for an instant, everything that he wishes to save and nourish.

His poetry, however – poetry, not poetics! – abounds with contradiction and unrest. Kochanowski saw a world filled with God's “generous gifts” and by worshipping the creation also worshipped the Creator but already a generation later this blessed balance was distorted. And our times, Miłosz's times? The moments of completeness – or balance – seem fleeting, impermanent: things, devoid of presence or at least reliance on God, appear to be devoid of being as well, losing corporeality, materiality that brings such joy to senses.

Out of trees, field stones, even lemons on the table,
Materiality escaped and their spectrum
Proved to be a void, a haze on a film. (328)

Being unravels, just as letters “turn silver-pale” and “fade.” All seems reduced to a volatile particle play and disperses eventually, dissolving in the mathematician's equation... a contemporary equivalent of the ancient *memento mori*. But the torment does not end there: contemplation of beauty (in other words, awe over beauty) may as well be the source of its own damnation. Is loving creation enough to claim loving God? or, even worse, perhaps the poet needs God only to justify or grace his own aesthetic endeavors? How difficult it is today to negotiate between the religious and

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the aesthetic! In Miłosz's work this difficulty becomes an important artistic theme. His artistic condition, one he cannot discard, appears to him increasingly suspicious. He feels somehow distant, maybe even damned:

At a certain distance I followed behind you, ashamed to come closer (...)
Perhaps it is true that I loved you secretly
But without strong hope to be as close to you as they are. (357)

The origins of the tear that Miłosz alludes to are not unknown: it first appeared in the baroque, spawning further questions and doubts. One could even say that this tear is inseparable from the baroque. 17th century religious rule would seem to have encouraged clear and austere forms but it yielded, also in churches, to forms incredibly rich and prolific. The baroque teems with a joy of life, a possessive kind of energy that was to give birth to modern Europe – Miłosz himself admits to an incredible “voracity” for things. He wishes for the memory and imagination to save and restage everything he has ever tasted and loved, as the writers of the baroque – especially in Poland – who wanted to store everything in their opulent catalogues. But at the same time he cannot do without a religious sanction, sensing that the world is full of evil and can be only saved by an Absolute Being. This is hardly surprising, as the theological educational model implemented in Europe after the Council of Trent, seems to have survived the longest in that “other” Europe that Miłosz so much admires.

It suffices to read a few poems dedicated to Fr. Chomski to understand this fully. Especially the first lyric, from 1934, reveals a baroque spectacle of salvation and damnation – a spectacle that for a long time and through convoluted means was associated by the critics with “catastrophism,” surrealism, or even romanticism. The baroque's religious background (and baroque religiousness) sometimes manifests itself directly in Miłosz's work. When he speaks of salvation, damnation, suffering etc. his imagination brings forth scenes, characters and images of the 17th and 18th century, as in “The Master” where a baroque composer analyses the relation of music (i.e. – art) and evil. Or in “From the Rising of the Sun...,” where the poet presents himself (or his doppelganger) as a Calvinist preacher. Finally, when Miłosz talks about himself, he talks about someone who has seen three centuries of human fate: the 18th century, whose living presence he still sensed in Vilnius, had yet to become enlightened.

Both our major writers reveal in their work a thinly veiled presence of sensitivity patterns that were shaped by the 17th century and are marked by the baroque. Importantly, those patterns, models and stereotypes still resurface in contemporary Polish culture, including literature. Gombrowicz and Miłosz interpret them individually, without (or rarely) referring to the philosophy or literature of the baroque. The baroque heritage, however, even if by other name, is deeply seated in their work and they were both well aware of its presence.

It was put to use more openly – though perhaps also more superficially – by younger artists, especially poets among whom Mładeusz Gajcy seems to have been

the first. Gajcy was 20 years old when he was killed in the Warsaw Uprising. In his writing, the baroque reveals itself mostly as an escape route, a kind of disjointedness, the chaos of a world lived as a daily apocalypse...an escape wonderful and terrifying at the same time. A decade later Grochowiak became fascinated with baroque's eclecticism, a bizarre union of the sublime and the ugly, the latter of which was marked erotically. Bryll was shocked by the Sarmatian brusqueness, grotesque, clumsiness, all of which terrified but also clearly tempted him, if only because they seemed really ours, something really familiar.

This similarity of theme was sometimes also reflected by analogies in the poetics. The 18th century, in Poland as well, was fully recognized the specific and ornamental character of the poetic language, a stance represented also by the constructivist avant-garde and the postconstructivists (gathered around the "Zwrotnica" magazine in the 1920s), and the "linguists" of the 60s and 70s: already Tadeusz Peiper was fascinated by Góngora. Perhaps then, one could explain a "baroque" understanding of poetry as a self-analysis performed by language, as it was seen by Balcerzan, Karpowicz and young Barańczak.

The case of "classicism," as it has been put forth since ca. 1965 by Rymkiewicz and Ryszard Przybylski, is even more peculiar. Rymkiewicz believes that creative powers do not rely on originality; on the contrary, they are born of repetition. His own "repeating" assumes the possibility of reviving everything that we used to share at a point in time: share as human beings (hence the references to Jung and the archetype theory), and shared by heirs to a particular culture (hence – and following from the Curtius' model – the emphasis on the persistence of the literary topoi and – after Eliot – on the "objective" character of the poetic utterance). This is a peculiar literary program indeed, and without a doubt, one very exciting intellectually. At the same time, to speak candidly, not really that "classical" after all, considering the romantic ancestry of the archetype theory.

Perhaps then, we could speak of a latently-baroque program in his case? After all, Rymkiewicz favors English metaphysical poets, as well as Polish representatives of the early baroque, especially Naborowski. All of which leads me to a strange conclusion, one that is definitely risky. Is it time to admit, sadly, that we have lost the ability to fully grasp, sense and identify with the writing of the "classical" periods? That we can no longer be persuaded by the great commandments of order, appropriateness, harmony and moderation? And that our connection to the classical tradition is sustained – if it is sustained at all – through the baroque that, for those who were born too late, opened a gate, if not to Arcadia itself then at least to a place nearby? Even if it is not so, Rymkiewicz and his contemporaries seem to be saying this precisely through their poetic work.

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The baroque in Poland was strongly influenced by the Counter-Reformation (or Catholic Reformation, especially in its Jesuit form). It retained, especially at

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the very beginning, close connections to Rome: the Church of Saints Peter and Paul in Cracow was built only a few years after the Church of the Gesù in Rome. It was this cultural proximity that sensitized it to the growing complication of forms inherited from the Renaissance and embedded in the memory and imagination of artists and poets. But Polish baroque also relied on the not so distant medieval tradition, as well as the local ones, especially in eastern Poland where it slowly acquired its increasingly Sarmatian features.

Those three characteristics of the baroque in Poland continue to return today, subversively echoed and in a distorted manner: Gombrowicz winks at the reader, pretending to be a Sarmatian, Miłosz's work reaches back to its religious heritage, while other writers and poets reestablish their connection to the baroque through affinity for conceit and linguistic sophistication.

Translation: Anna Warso