

The Dual Image of the West in the Eyes of the Poles

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THE APPEAL of the West has always been one of the most vivid topics in the history of Poland, an intellectual challenge for thinkers, an inspiring subject for men of letters and an important element of Polish self-identification. Since the very beginning of the Polish state in the early Middle Ages the dichotomy West-East, or the opposition between Western civilization and native, homely ideals, has nourished our politics, our philosophy and poetry. For the founders of the state, the rulers of the Piast dynasty, and for the Polish Church, the West was always the reference point. From the end of the Middle Ages and through the period of the Renaissance Poland was in union with the Grand Duchy of Lithuania, and the country expanded to the East of Europe; nevertheless the ties with Western culture grew thicker and stronger and reached a climax in the 16th century. The following age witnessed a weakening of these ties ; the Counter-Reformation and the reversals of political fortune in the 17th century inspired the native, closed culture of the Polish gentry who called themselves Sarmatians. The Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth and its citizens became isolated from the intellectual trends and changes of European civilization.

The Enlightenment disturbed this frame of mind, but also revealed the notion of Polish backwardness. It was the period of creating—or inventing—the basic ideas of modern European culture, including the idea of civilization; at the same time the idea of suburbs arose; the East—to use the catchy words of Larry Wolff—was invented. Poland found herself in the middle of this distant and dusky suburb.

One of the fundamental notions of Sarmatism was the idea of Poland as the bulwark of Europe; the old sense of being a part of the European, Christian world turned during the 17th century into a conviction that Poland was a Christian knight—*miles Christianus*—defending the borders of the Christian world against the barbarians. In the second half of the next century, some circles inspired by the new philosophy—including the last king Stanisław August Poniatowski—dared to destroy this self-complacency. They noticed and recognized Poland's backwardness for what it was, postulated new state reforms and pointed to an ideal—the West. The West of public liberties, republican ideas, efficient administration and healthy economy; the West of deep thinkers, of artists of unique ability and centres of inspiring atmosphere. The former was best embodied by England, or the image of England; the latter was incarnated by Paris, the city of light.

'England! you are more able than other nations, you—land of equality, freedom and happiness', wrote the outstanding Enlightenment poet, Julian Ursyn Niemcewicz, in 1787.¹ These lines conveyed the demands of moderate reformers who carried their efforts into effect by the Constitution of May 3 1791, and then defended these effects in the war against Russia in 1792 and the rising led by Tadeusz Kościuszko in 1794. For the radicals, the France of the Jacobin revolution was the model. The energy, efficiency and good results of the Jacobin government made an impression upon its Polish followers, while the extremes of the revolution were justified by the outer and inner threat. Paris became—and for a century remained—the capital of European civilization, a sacred place for enlightened Poles. Thus Niemcewicz appealed to his countrymen:

... ten sobie ubliża, Kto ma za co, a nie chce jechać do
Paryża; Uczą pielgrzymkę odbyć światłe nasze wieki, Polakom do Paryża,
Turczynom do Meki.²

¹ *Anglio! celniejsza nad wszystkie narody, I Kraju równości, szczęścia i swobody!* ('Oda pisana rzucając Anglię 1787' in Niemcewicz 1803, 510).

² Niemcewicz 1816, 28.

He offends his own dignity
who can afford to go to Paris but yet does not go ;
That is what our enlightened ages teach:
Let the Poles go to Paris, and the Turks to Mecca
on pilgrimage.

But this occidental and cosmopolitan attitude of the leaders of the Polish Enlightenment made it extremely difficult for them to find followers. A majority of the gentry was still Polono-centric, xenophobic, and eager to defend their traditional values. New ideas, new discourse, new education, new fashion and manners were at the same time perceived as a means of outrage, an attack on the old world, on the real Poland. Western Europe, especially France, but also Switzerland or the United States, appeared as a symbol of revolution, an evil power threatening order, religion, public morals and the family. The bishop and poet Adam Naruszewicz wrote in one of his poems 'Nonsense':

Patrz no na tego mędrka, na ten łeb misterny,
Co opęchał kawiarnie Paryża i Berny,
Co głowę wymebłował modnymi nauki,
Umie robić pomadę, nastrzępiać peruki [...]
Jakby to na romansach i na brydniach lada
Dzielna cnota zawisła i gruntowna rada.³

Look at that know-all, that real fine pate
Who sniffed all the cafes of Paris and Bern,
Who has furnished his head with new fashions,
Who can curl wigs and mix his pomade [...]
As if brave virtue and thorough knowledge
Depended on such romance and nonsense.

Foreign manners and dress were so widely ridiculed that even the advocates of reform turned into defenders of native Polish customs. Distrust of foreigners was especially strong in relation to the closest neighbours, the Germans. Probably the most popular Polish opera of those days, *Cracowers and Mountaineers*, borrowed one of its plots from an old legend about Princess Wanda who would have rather killed herself than marry a German. Some of the best known lines of patriotic poetry were derived from this opera:

³ 'Głupstwo', in Naruszewicz 1882, 362.

watched the refugees with the same indifference. As one of those emigrant poets wrote:

Klaskano nam, pito zdrowie,
wydawano za nas bale –
Niech żyją polscy bohaterowie !
I w tym samym dziś zapale
Krzyczą: *Niech żyją Moskale!*⁵

Applauded and toasted we were
They gave us balls everywhere—
Long live the Polish heroes!
Now, in the same zeal,
Long live the Russians!, they squeal.

It was here that Polish romantic poetry arose, at the junction between the bright, idealized image of Western (especially French) democracy that the refugees bore within and the face to face confrontation with everyday reality. The leading poets lived in exile, mostly in France. Their disillusionment was reflected in their poetry; dark colours became even darker because of the romantic hierarchy of values: nature over civilization, feeling over scholarship, heart over skill, the country over the city. The three romantic poets — Adam Mickiewicz, Juliusz Słowacki and Zygmunt Krasiński—often gave expression to their fears and dislikes of the West, particularly Germany; critical remarks on French civilization were frequent, too. Mickiewicz described ironically the way the French parliament worked—with its quarrels, twaddle and the absurdities of assembly which the people of Europe looked upon as the cradle of democracy.⁶ In Krasinski's eyes the West embodied the evil powers of human history—the disorder of revolution and the bad order of money and of the machine. While Poles were suffering—he wrote in 1858 — there was

Wokół Europa - bez czucia - bez dumy –
Zgrzyt kół stalowych - parociągów szumy –
I do bram giełdy cisnące się tłumy.⁷

⁵ 'Wędrownka' [1833], in Goslawski 1864, 52.

⁶ Cf for instance A. Mickiewicz, *Dziady, część III. Ustęp, Przegląd wojska*, v. 248-269 (Mickiewicz 195 j, 294f; in English translation by G. W. Vaile: *Forefathers*, London 1968). For more about the assessments of the West by Polish romanticists, see Krasuski (1980).

⁷ 'W twoim ze śmierci ku życiu odrodzie' [18]8], in Krasiński 1980, 116.

A Europe around—with no pride—no pity—
Jar of steel wheels, engine charivari—
And crowds thronging to the Stock Exchange gates.

Słowacki showed instead a picture of idyllic Slavs who had lived peaceably and naturally before the Western aggressors (the Germans) had ruined their world.

Romanticists shared these particular views with conservatives. Many right-wing thinkers, confronted in exile with an industrial, bourgeois world, wrote countless dissertations, articles and brochures about the superiority of rural civilization, with no commerce, no haste, no envy. Another current, close to the Slavophile movement, proved to be intellectually more productive. In the middle of the century, especially after the fall of the revolutionary movements of 1848, some exile thinkers tried to revalue their habitual black image of Russia and to oppose the healthy world of the Slav nations to the rotten civilization of the West. Some of them even called upon the Poles to surrender to Russia as they believed the Russian tsar to be the redeemer of Europe; they were, however, labelled traitors by their countrymen. Still, the anti-Western feelings were quite frequent. The words of another poet, Cyprian Kamil Norwid, in a private letter, express them quite well: 'Europe is an old madwoman and drunkard', 'dull as a beetle, conceited, haughty and light-minded'.⁸

Inside the Polish lands opinions were more divided. Liberals — faithful to the idea of evolutionary progress and to the conviction that Western achievements might be implanted in Polish soil — defended the image of modern civilization against the moralists. Democrats cultivated the Napoleonic legend and the revolutionary romantic myth of the Springtide of Nations (1848). The romantic and nostalgic image persisted towards the 20th century; the idealized tradition of the brotherhood of European peoples and of the leadership of France kept feeding young imaginations and inspiring poets in their struggle for freedom. At the time of World War I one of them wrote:

⁸ Letter to Konstancja Górska (1881), in Krasuski 1980, 272.

Poles can hardly live
Without Paris;
We would live
As savages in prairies [...].
There's the set. To bruise the head
On inventing your own thing —
What for? There's Paris.
There's everything.

At the turn of the 19th century two modern mass movements — socialism and nationalism—appeared on the Polish political horizon; both took on this dual tradition in their attitude towards the West. For the left wing the legacy of the French revolution, but also of Russian underground movements, was the natural reference point. The West, that is the West of factories, class-conscious workers, and their keen ideologists, was still the model to be followed; Paris preserved its position as capital of the progressive world. An outstanding writer and thinker of leftist views, Stanisław Brzozowski, wrote in his novel *Flames* in 1908:

Paris, the sacred city of mankind, has never been as great as in the days of the unforgettable Commune [...] Paris was reborn under guns and bombs as a capital of reason and humanity, f...] What, then, is Paris ? The city that calls through the centuries: nothing above Man, everything for Man. Paris—a word as sacred as the most sacred of all words: Man.¹¹

This humanistic and universal image of France and the whole of the West has always been an important element of the ideology of Polish socialists.

The tradition of Polish struggle for freedom was the first and richest source of inspiration for the nationalists. This approach also recognized the myth of a friendly Europe of which Poland was an integral part. But in the 20th century a significant shift took place: xenophobic, anti-German attitudes supplanted the old, mid-nineteenth-century views. In the interwar period the party of National Democracy pictured themselves as defenders of the inner (and only)

¹¹ *Paryż, święte miasto ludzkości, nigdy nie był tak wielki, jak za czasów niezapomnianej Kom-muny [...] Paryż narodził się znów pod armatami i bombami jako stolica rozumu i ludzkości. [...] Paryż, wiecie, co to jest Paryż ? Miasto, które wola stuleciami: nic nad człowieka, wszystko dla człowieka. Paryż, słowo tak święte, jak najświętsze ze wszystkich słów: człowiek.* (Brzozowski 1946 [1908], 280-282)

valid virtues: those of the Polish nation and the Catholic Church, as seen against the outer Capitalist and Jewish threats.

Forty years of Communist rule allowed this sense of abomination to hibernate while other fears connected to the East were magnified. Towards the end of Communist rule, most Poles—particularly the young—were decidedly pro-Western, influenced by the reality of life in the East rather than by philosophical reflection. In the 1980s, rock lyrics, either underground or semi-legal, quite often dealt with the division between the Western and the Eastern worlds. One such rock lyric, 'My street' gives a good example: 'My street is divided by a wall, The right side is shining with neon signs, The left side is darkened days and nights. I watch both sides from behind the blinds.' In 1989 the obvious aim was to break out from behind the blinds and to cross over to the shiny side of the street.

But since that year everything has reverted to normal. In newspapers and weekly magazines we can now find lines almost identical to those quoted above. The cradle of democracy and soulless capitalism, the hope of the Poles but also a threat—that is what the Janus-faced Western Europe represents. Ever since the Enlightenment or even before the dichotomy of this image has seemed to be the constant feature of Polish attitudes towards the West.

WARSAW

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