“Extra Hungariam non est Vita”
and the Baroque in 18th and Early 19th Century Hungary

Gábor Vermes

A self-congratulatory tone emanated from some of the communications by noble delegates at the diet of 1764/1765; one of them, Ferenc Rosty, bragged about the long hours he and his fellow delegates had spent in discussing issues at the sessions, “but God has kept us there.” In a lampoon he was called “a true patriot.” This diet signified either the highest glorious or the lowest obnoxious point in the eyes of those contemporaries who observed the Hungarian nobility’s political role. It is therefore especially significant to evaluate these nobles’ mental make-up. The above-mentioned adjectives entail praise or blame, and as late as 1953, C.A. Macartney was still thinking in such categories. One should rather attempt to understand the mentality of those who belonged to this powerful estate by placing them in their own time and place, with the system of values they had then and without passing either a worshipful or a denigrating collective judgement on them.

It was imperative from the point-of-view of their mental equilibrium to maintain their own sense of permanence. “The roots of the Magyar nobles’ separatism went deep,” wrote T.C.W. Blanning, “deep into their history, deep into their self-interest, and deep into their institutions.” Notwithstanding the occasional presence of progressive officials in the noble-led counties and the slow trend toward the greater inclusion of the less illustrious nobles into the corridors of power, the primary aim of the counties was self-perpetuation, with emphasis on the preservation of noble power and privileges in their “self-interest,” to use Blanning’s word. Without the nobles’ authority and privileges, economic, social and political power, their feelings of self-worth and very reason for being would have ceased to exist. Their self-justification rested in
As far as they were concerned, a long and unbroken line connected them to their pagan ancestors, the conquerors of the Danube basin, and to King St. Stephen and to all the other kings and heroes who had defended their country against foreign invaders in past centuries. Their reverence for old traditions and laws signified their belief that the past sanctioned the present, obliterating in their minds any line that would have separated the two. Naturally then, the powerful emotion accompanying their sense of permanence abhorred any rupture in their venerated tradition.

In order to minimize such a rupture, any, or, at least, much “contamination” by the outside world had to be avoided. The patriarchal ideal of “extra Hungariam non est vita” followed logically from this xenophobia, although this idea was usually implied rather than explicitly stated by the nobles themselves. As Andor Tarnai demonstrated, German and Slovak students, studying at the University of Wittenberg, brought this saying back to Hungary during the second half of the sixteenth century. Then and later it reflected the Hungarus-patriotism of Lutheran non-nobles, their attachment to the country rather than to any particular ethnicity. Nevertheless, by the late eighteenth century, the saying had acquired its somewhat more widespread and self-congratulatory meaning as well. A minor poet, József Mátyási, upon experiencing sophisticated conversation, nice homes and fine food in Germany, in 1792, felt compelled to disavow, in his own words, “extra Hungariam non est vita.” Clearly by then, it came to imply ignorance and a corresponding lack of curiosity about the outside world. This attitude had already been the target of scorn during the eighteenth century and attracted even more attacks in later years. “The small lands the men from the countryside live on,” wrote József Kármán in 1794, “define their entire horizon. . . . When they say the whole world they mean their own county at best. . . . There is emptiness is in their heads… [and] the blossoming of talents is hindered by their lazy and wild way of life; . . . prejudices, ignorance, and blindness are the consequences.” This and later criticisms are somewhat too harsh, not so much for their not being factually accurate, but for placing the blame for those facts on the protagonists themselves. Given the generally low level of education, economic and social self-interest, and the staunchly conservative political stands of most Hungarian nobles, the peace of mind they craved depended on their not being disturbed or even informed by too much outside influence. As Ákos Beothy, himself a member of a distinguished noble family, wrote in the late nineteenth century, his forbears’ parochial attitude reflected their attempt to attain exactly such a peace of mind.4
Looking at the world from a narrow vantage point did, however, distorted their scale of comparisons. Self-imposed isolation went together with a sense of grandiosity, based on their own historical narrative of unparalleled heroism. “Our ancestors intimidated the entire world,” Count József Gvadányi stated. Other examples of grandiosity were the frequently expressed idea that the eyes of the world, certainly of Europe, were permanently fixed on Hungary, always with curiosity and at times with awe. Even a well-educated noble, a onetime member of the queen’s bodyguard, the writer Sándor Bárczi voiced such thoughts. In a pamphlet, published in 1790, he admonished his fellow Hungarians to pass “sensible laws” that then would draw the attention of Europe in its entirety. This inflated sense of being Hungarian came to the fore in many of the speeches held even at the 1790/91 diet, where simultaneously and in sharp contrast to the 1764/65 diet, some reform proposals were advanced as well. In his introductory remarks, Personalis József Urnényi stated that the Hungarian laws were rooted in “eternal permanence,” promoting “good morality, piety, and the furthering of public good.” He then added, “The entire world is watching us.” The Lord Chief Justice, Count Károly Zichy, seconded this idea: “We have an immense reputation in the whole world,” Zichy said. “Nations and their rulers are watching every move we make, so it is imperative that we return to the ways of our ancestors.” Speeches by prelates mirrored those of the nobility. “Our ancient laws should be made permanent,” declared Prince József Batthány, Hungary’s prince primate.

Two illustrations may further support this nobility’s tenacious adherence to this sense of permanence. One was the fiction of their constitution, a collection of customary laws in fact. It was László Péter who had pointed out that Montesquieu visited the diet in 1728 and was impressed by the Hungarian noble delegates, an impression that was further enhanced by the events of 1741. Montesquieu believed that he witnessed a separation of powers in Hungary between the monarch and the estates, in that “the two powers were interconnected yet existed independently side by side.” That did flatter the nobility and Montesquieu’s *L’esprit des lois*, published in 1748 and translated into Latin in 1751 became “a bible for the nobility.” Furthermore, they, the Hungarian nobles, learned from Montesquieu “that what they possessed was a constitution rather than just a collection of customary rights.” By making it tangible and old at the same time, powerful imaginary ties to the past were established. At the 1708 diet, the estates were discussing some arcane financial matter, when a Catholic clergyman told the Lutheran representative Pál Okolicsányi that he was prepared to support ancient laws, including one initiated by King Louis in the 1520s that ordered the burning of Lutherans at
the stake. A large pandemonium broke out at the diet and the Catholic clergyman was roundly denounced. The imagined past could not be disturbingly different from the present it was assumed to resemble.\(^8\)

This last example shows how pride and inflated self-esteem were inextricably intertwined with anguish and agony. The sense of permanence was perpetuated not only by a self-servingly creative manipulation of history but also by vigilance against anybody or anything that appeared to threaten the assumed perennial harmony. Fear of not being able to eliminate such threats kept agony alive along with the inflated sense of being Hungarian that in turn made the agony of losing such elevated status even more excruciating.

The sense of exclusivity and superiority was by no means a monopoly of the Hungarian nobility but one that was shared by nobles all across Europe. Sir Francis Bacon supposedly said, “Nobles are born to rule.”\(^9\) Even if this saying is apocryphal, it accurately reflected an overriding sentiment among the nobles. One can then further narrow the scope of a search and look for patterns that closely approximated the parochial mentality of the Hungarian nobility. In doing so, three major criteria stand out: first, relative isolation from the mainstream of European social and political developments, second, a strong sense of collective heroism projected back to their country’s past, and finally, a sense of defensiveness against real and imagined slights.

The nobility of Spain certainly qualified. There, the entire nobility was perceived as theoretically one, with the poorest hidalgo and the richest grandee alike belonging to it, even though the former was often an object of ridicule. Honour to them was more important than anything else, inherited from what they thought were “ancient Visigothic” values. The concept of nobility, the *hidalguia*, “was a perpetual reward for the preservation of Spain” implying that the Spanish nobles too had their own sense of permanence. Indeed, it was the Spanish nobility, along with a militant Catholic Church, that fought the “reconquista,” the re-conquering of Spain from the Moslem Moors. Following the successful completion of that struggle, fears continued about a Moslem comeback and the assumed subversion by *moriscoes* and *marranos*, Moslems and Jews who were converted to Christianity respectively but were not trusted at all. Monarchs were not necessarily disdained by these nobles, but very tellingly Benito de Penolosa y Mondragon said the following in 1629, “Being a hidalgo is sufficient to say that one owes nothing to the king.” The encroaching state with its “utilitarianism and bureaucratism of the eighteenth century” undermined the nobles’ “aristocratic paternalism.”\(^10\) Such a process surely liberated some of the nobles, but others must have felt a re-occurrence of fear and anguish in new forms.
The nobles in Poland provide another example. “The late medieval and early modern Hungarian and Polish-Lithuanian monarchies” wrote R. J. W. Evans, “display some extraordinary similarities,” that included strong resemblances between the sejms and the diets and in the respective mentalities of the two nobilities. True, Polish nobles, the szlachta, developed the fantasy of having descended from the Sarmatians, warriors who lived in the third century north of the Black Sea, while Hungarian nobles flaunted their extraction from the Huns, but in both cases, their “noble patriotism was exclusive, atavistic and ritualized.” Other similarities included the reverence both the Hungarian nobility and the szlachta had shown for their representative institutions and the law, and finally, they both “drew in on themselves” in the eighteenth century. In the Hungarian case, this was a defensive measure against threatening changes that they felt were coming from the West, while the Polish reaction had to do with the multiple adversities that had inflicted Poland in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, resulting in anarchical conditions at times. In both instances, the bulk of these nobles resolutely defended their privileges, their “golden freedom,” as the Poles called it. Along this line, to the szlachta, the Sarmatians were conquerors which filled the Polish nobles with a powerful sense of superiority not only vis-à-vis the huge serf population in Poland itself but also over other nations. This feeling resulted in a great deal of “theatricality….in a colorful and oriental guise in dress, rhetoric, and manners” which in turn gave a lasting cultural unity to the szlachta across the Commonwealth, but it proved incapable of adapting to changing circumstances. It became inseparable from the ‘golden freedom’ and intolerant Catholicism.” In Hungary as well as in Poland nobles entertained a grandiose vision of themselves, while, at the same time, they were both afraid of their noble universe being undermined and subverted by internal and external adversaries alike.

For all these similarities there were considerable differences between the nobility’s situation in Hungary and Poland. The occasional baroque exuberance in Hungary was no match to the relentless Sarmatian excesses in Poland. Nor was the republicanism of the szlachta a stabilizing step in comparison to the Hungarian nobles’ monarchism. On the contrary, because, the odd fusion of Polish privileges, rooted in the Middle Ages, with the republican idea of civic virtues, borrowed from the Ancient World, were in fact leading to “phases of stagnation and then decay.” Polish nobles did not only revere their institutions and the law but the monarchy as well as long as their kings remained weak. Consequently, the Polish state declined while the Hungarian nobles’ loyalty to their monarchs, notwithstanding their problematic egocentric obstinacy and the few exceptions during the reigns of Joseph
II and Leopold II did end up strengthening the state. Somewhat ironically, because while the Polish state was fully sovereign, the Hungarian state was not.

Another major difference had to do with the power relations between the better-off untitled nobility and the aristocracy. There was tension and conflict between these two in both countries, but while in Hungary the control of the counties was firmly in the hands of the former, certainly by the middle of the eighteenth century, in Poland, from the late sixteenth century on, the influence of the magnates grew. They consisted of a small number of families, and their growth in power further undermined the theoretical equality of the szlachta, although the voices of lesser nobles could not be completely stifled and there was a steady drumbeat of “anti-magnate feelings within (the) political life” of the country.\textsuperscript{16}

A further difference had a somewhat ironic twist to it. In the early-mid eighteenth century Poland’s fortunes hit rock bottom. Although the author of the above quotes, Robert Frost denies that the magnate elite represented an oligarchy because of its inherent instability, still, in his words, an “anarchic stalemate” ensued in the eighteenth century, when, by 1721, “the Commonwealth’s international position (was) in ruins, its political system paralyzed and its economy wrecked.”\textsuperscript{17} The situation was so dire that a growing number of Polish noblemen saw no alternative to reforms. The reformers were determined to replace the weak elective monarchy by a constitutional one possessing stronger executive power. This movement began in the 1760s and climaxed in the Constitution of May 3rd, 1791, which declared the sovereignty of the nation, consisting of all the people in Poland. Although, in reality, the nobility preserved its leading role, “the old, class-based idea of a noble nation was gone forever.”\textsuperscript{18}

In contrast, in Hungary, conditions had never deteriorated to that degree; on the contrary, reforms by the Habsburg dynasty and the protection that Vienna provided to the country from any possible foreign threat secured a stability that not even noble recalcitrance could undermine. With the nobles’ control in the counties deeply-entrenched, the pressure for reforms was far less than in Poland, and consequently, this nobility could easily persevere in its domination at the 1790/91 diet and after.
The Baroque in Hungary

The Hungarian noble delegates’ exuberant offer to rescue their queen at the 1741 diet in Pozsony was a perfect piece of baroque theatre. Yet, it presaged not another flowering of the Baroque but the beginning of its decline. King Charles III was still wedded to a Baroque with heavy Spanish coloration, but the pomp and ostentation that were integral parts of that style cost a great deal of money, money that Maria Theresa could ill afford. Consequently, she eliminated or cut down the extravagant expenses that she had inherited from her father, although similarly to many of her predecessors before her, she too became a patron of arts, especially of music and ballet, and she completed the building of the great Schönbrunn palace. The transformation of her governing system into a more efficient bureaucratic administration was not conducive to anything so exuberant as the Baroque, thriving on monarchical and aristocratic patronage on a grand scale. The latter did continue to exist among rich families of the aristocratic upper crust; in their case, nothing stood in the way if the family in question chose the path of extravagance.

A good case in point would be the fabulously wealthy family of the Prince Esterházy, who carried on the baroque tradition of ostentation on a grandiose scale. Their residence in Eszterháza, near Hungary’s present-day border with Austria, was completed in the 1760s and was compared by the contemporaries to Versailles (their principal residence was in Kismarton, today’s Eisenstadt, in Austria). Prince Miklós Esterházy, the owner of both palaces, spent huge sums not only on their upkeep but on lavish entertainments as well. He employed Joseph Haydn as his composer and conductor of the Esterházy orchestra. At times, the prince threw parties for thousands of invited guests. The Hungarian writer, György Bessenyei, was enchanted by what he saw there. “The glory of our monarch and our nation demanded,” wrote Bessenyei, “that Eszterháza become a marvel. We had to show that French customs, nourished in Paris and London, could find a home in Hungary, which in turn will enhance the respect our country has among foreigners.” A few other aristocratic families in Hungary, such as the Pálffy, Erdődy, Csáky, Grassalkovich, and Forgách families, tried to imitate the grandeur at Eszterháza, but they could afford to do so only to a limited degree. Still, it was less the grandiosity of individual aristocratic families but of the court that truly mattered in a baroque society, and such grandiosity was increasingly missing from the court in Vienna.

Not only the dynasty but the Catholic Church too, another mainstay of the baroque spirit, proved unable to sustain the level of its previous extravagance, although individual bishops, such as Ferenc Barkóczy, bishop of
Eger and later prince primate of Esztergom, carried on a building and educational program, especially while still in Eger, that was unabashedly done in an impressively magnificent baroque manner. Still, growing state control over the churches under both Maria Theresa and Joseph II weakened that spirit, as did the spread of reform Catholicism, propagated by the Italian theologian Lodovico Muratori, which de-emphasized the external trappings of the Baroque in favour of returning to a more spiritual Christianity.\textsuperscript{20}

Nor was the combined impact of the great aristocratic families, the Esterházy and the others compelling, because for all their glitter and glamour, they merely presented examples of their own “isolated private lives” rather than models that others could or would imitate. When a well-known traveler, Caspar Riesbeck took a trip to Hungary, he was struck by the sharp contrast between Prince Esterházy and his neighbours who looked to him like ghosts in comparison.\textsuperscript{21} Certainly, the broad masses of the nobility did not have the means to cultivate the baroque style, nor were they so inclined for the most part. Classical education and culture instilled in them a yearning for harmony, poise and a sense of balance that they identified as integral parts of their cherished Greco-Roman heritage. These attributes contrasted sharply with those of the Baroque, “ornate, florid, bombastic, excessive, and eccentric” in Rudolf Endres’ formulation.\textsuperscript{22} Historical reality of course is rarely so clear-cut. Just as the yearning for balance and poise coexisted, often in the same people, with quarrelsome litigiousness, so traces of the Baroque coexisted with devotion to the classical ideals. During the second half of the eighteenth century, not only ancient Roman texts but also French classical literature was being taught at Catholic schools which contained a healthy dose of the baroque spirit. The latter was hardly noticeable in the Protestant schools of course.\textsuperscript{23} Also, the classicist poets of that time were mostly Catholic priests who were naturally all touched by the Baroque as well to varying degrees. A similar fusion of style characterized the period’s architecture, where, “…the richness of the late eighteenth century Baroque during the last quarter of the century mingled with easily discernible Classicist elements.”\textsuperscript{24} Consequently, the overall mentality of the society cannot then be categorically characterized solely as Baroque; rather, it was an amalgam with Baroque as only one of several trends.

The illusion of its predominance derives from a particular proclivity of the Hungarian nobility. Much as their vast majority could not consistently afford either the expense or the exuberance of the Baroque and lived a relatively modest and confined life that accorded with their classical ideal of simplicity, their self-image as chivalrous and generous seigneurs did motivate
them to seize occasions when their natural inhibitions and circumstantial limitations would give way to unbridled, ornate, and excessive, that is baroque celebrations. Maria Theresa and her husband, Emperor Francis visited Pest-Buda in 1751. “One festival followed the other,” recorded the event a latter-day historian, adding the following, “bells were ringing, the canons of the fortress were roaring, red and white wine were gushing for the people, music was blaring, and the spectacle of illumination was not missing either.”

Pest-Buda was the scene of another celebration in 1780, when the country’s sole university, recently transferred from Nagyszombat (today’s Trnava in Slovakia), was inaugurated. The queen was planning to attend but was feeling ill; in fact, she died in that year. Count Károly Pálffy, deputy chancellor, represented her. He arrived to Pest in the company of festively attired noblemen on horseback and richly decorated coaches with an archbishop and other dignitaries in them. They were received by the honour guards of Pest-Buda and by delegations of students and professors. Flowery speeches and sumptuous banquets followed. The coronations were special occasions of baroque exuberance, and so was the memorable event in 1790, when the crown was returned to Buda from Vienna. Joseph II transported it there from Pozsony after having refused to allow himself to be crowned so to avoid taking the binding coronation oath. The loud jubilation that greeted the return of the crown appeared to vindicate the nobility through the restoration of historical continuity, a critical building block in their sense of permanence. Even the installation of lesser officials was cause for collective festivities. The one for the palatine, Archduke Alexander Leopold lasted for three days when he was invested with the office of lord lieutenancy of Pest County in 1791. In remote Zemplén County, the installation of Count Károly Pálffy as lord lieutenant in 1779 took place amidst “royal pomp” in Ferenc Kazinczy’s personal recollection. This baroque spirit did at times reach the urban population as well, but the very fact that it was tied to special occasions meant that its grandiosity was less an everyday reality than an occasional exercise of nostalgia, accompanied by extravagant flights of imagination and frenzy, in lives otherwise simply and modestly lived.

The external manifestations of baroque exuberance, both in the arts and in the festivities, were not the sole evidence of the Baroque in Hungary, which was woven into the tapestry of everyday life in a variety of ways, proving that various trends were not necessarily separated into neat compartments and isolated from one another. It was surely not at all unusual for an educated nobleman, brought up to appreciate the culture and the values of the Ancients, to enjoy the baroque poetry of an István Gyöngyösi at the same time. In the religious life of Catholics, the power and influence of the Church were
diminished by encroaching secularism and state interference, and that did make some impact on religious life itself; still, simultaneously, baroque piety flourished among the believers. The veneration of saints, and of the Virgin Mary in particular, became wide-spread in all the lands ruled by the Habsburgs. In Hungary, this cult was strengthened by the belief that St. Stephen offered up his country to Mary herself with Hungary becoming “Regnum Marianum.” The Jesuit order was dissolved in 1773, but before that date, Jesuit education and the Jesuit-led Maria congregations, the building blocks of a Regnum Marianum, fostered popular piety along with pilgrimages and religious processions. Even after the dissolution of the Jesuit order, in 1776, the papal nuncio, Giuseppe Garampi, visiting Hungary, expressed his doubts about some of the bishops’ reliability from the Church’s standpoint, but was delighted over the religious enthusiasm of the masses. The idea of Regnum Marianum fostered not only baroque piety but it reinforced a sense of permanence as well, specifically among Catholics in this case, because it suggested to them that their past was “unified and continuous.”

The nobility was also dominant in matters of culture, because what most people read in that period reflected, by and large, the literary taste of most nobles. A majority of the books in circulation were books on religion or prayer books. Equally popular were almanacs, containing all kinds of information, which were read by all who could read, including peasants. Poetry, especially the poems of the seventeenth-century poet István Gyöngyösi was also published, and his heroic baroque poetry resonated well with Hungarian noblemen a century later. Cheap and popular versions of baroque literature, in the form of trashy books, celebrating various heroes and kings, were sold at markets and widely read, as were collections of anecdotes, including one by János Kónyi, who aimed at amusing his readers with a rather crude sense of humour. Humour and biting sarcasm characterized the pasquill literature, which was a collection of topical poems, written anonymously while the diets were in session. Finally, there were baroque novels, some totally fantastic, such as Ignác Mészáros’s Kartigam and András Dugonics’s Etelka. The latter appealed to national vanities, while Fanni Hagyomanyai by József Kármán catered to the growing taste for sentimentality. Etelka was by far the most popular book. It was published in 1788, and the first one thousand copies were sold so quickly that a second and a third edition followed. The story reached back to the times when the Magyar tribes conquered the country. It was written in a folksy style, its plot was bizarre and muddled, bad history and bad literature alike, but it brought that period closer to the readers’ own times, thereby elevating their pride in what they thought was their history and
reinforcing their sense of permanence at the same time. Etelka herself was thought to embody the eternal virtues of Hungarian womanhood, while Róka, the evil councillor to the tribal chief Zoltán, came to represent all those who were betraying their nation.²⁸

NOTES


⁵ László Negyesy (ed.), Gróf Gvadányi József, Fazekas Mihály (Budapest: Franklin kiadó, 1904), 116; Sándor Baróczy, A védelmezett magyar nyelv [The protected Hungarian language] (Bets [Vienna]: Hummel-Verlag, 1790, re-published in Budapest in 1984), 15; Naponként való jegyzései az 1790dik esztendőben Felséges II.Leopold Tsászár és magyarországi király által szabad királyi várossába Budára rendelt s Posony királyi városába átáltetett s ugyanott, 1791dik esztendőben befjezet magyar országgyűlésnek [The printed proceedings of the 1790/91 diet] (Buda: Királyi nyomda, 1791), 4, 7, 16, 14.


⁷ The perpetuity of this constitution was taken for granted so there was no need to affix the adjective “ancient” to it. That happened later as a reaction to Joseph II’s perceived assault on that constitution in the second half of the 1780s. I am grateful to András Gergely for this information.
8 Dieta, 127-128.


14 Ibid., 5.

15 Lukowski, Liberty’s Folly, 86.


17 Ibid., 216.


