

THE IMAGE OF MUSCOVY IN EARLY XVII CENTURY POLISH LITERATURE

Luca Bernardini

Foreign travellers arriving in the early XVII century Moscow often felt they were in a political frame of unreal events: the reigning Tzar had “miraculously” escaped death thanks to a providential exchange of people, and succeeded in defeating the “necromancer” Boris Godunov, only to be in his turn – after his death – accused of witchcraft. On the other hand, after the death of the supposed Pretender, Vasilij Šujskij and his accomplices wanted to prove the real and royal identity of the corpse offered to the people as that of little Dmitrij Ivanovič making miracles and recoveries happen on his tomb.

It is not at all surprising therefore, that Muscovite reality has often appeared to many of the Polish observers arriving in the country after the *Smuta* events as marked by appearances, mirages, and real simulacra. The very character of Muscovites, accused of tending to “deceitfulness” if not even of lies and fraud, and the immense vastity of the country contributed to creating illusory figures hiding the facts of empiric historical and geographical reality.

The perception of reality by the foreign observers was made more complicated by the Muscovite passion for secrecy, and their tendency to adapt any anomalous situation to the immutable rules of an autocratic universe. Not only the political data, but everything concerning the real aspect of the territory seemed to undergo a process of mystification. Diplomatic delegations reaching the country were not permitted to move freely if not kept in virtual imprisonment. Jesuit Antonio Possevino, describing his stay in Moscow where he was an ambassador to Ivan IV, noticed in his *Moscovia* that “we were forbidden to leave our home and to send someone outside without great need” (Possevino 1611: 43). The obsession for secrecy seemed to spring up in Muscovites every time they perceived the remote possibility of a threat coming to their immense country, even if this came from a few individual foreigners. When the Polish diplomatic delegation led by Lew Sapieha, that had arrived at Moscow in 1600, expressed the desire to return to their country, owing to the *impasse* blocking the talks for

an everlasting peace between Muscovy and the *Rzeczpospolita*, the ambassadors realized they had been kept in utter isolation, surrounded by a curtain of mystery and hostility. Antonio Possevino had already described this way of limiting the view and the ability to observe by foreign diplomatic delegations, pointing out how ambassadors in Moscow were accommodated in a house surrounded by a huge palisade, “so that nobody can look into the home of others, or converse with anyone else” (Possevino 1611: 7).

The curtain drawn before foreign observers' eyes consisted not only in the top secrecy in which the data relating to the economic, social and historical reality of the country were kept, but in a complex system of camouflage consisting in the skillful manipulation of some of these data. Appearances were one of the essential pawns in the chess game of political and diplomatic relationships between the Muscovite state and other countries. Practically all the foreign embassies coming to Moscow felt they were in the middle of a huge theatrical play, i.e. they realized they were before an enormous stage set up in order to impress and frighten them. Eliaz Pielgrzymowski, secretary of Lew Sapieha's embassy to Boris Godunov, wrote in his report of the mission that upon their entry in Smolensk the Polish diplomats had noticed an enormous crowd gathered on the road, waiting for their arrival: they had seemingly been forced to leave their homes to be seen on the embassy's route (Pielgrzymowski 1601: 10). The imperial ambassador Sigmund Herberstein, who arrived in Moscow in 1526, also had had the same impression. He was certain there was nothing casual in the crowding of citizens of the capital around foreign diplomats: he was sure it was a way to inflate the real density of population by displaying the approaching ambassadors huge crowds of people, obliged to be seen on the road (Herberstein 1600: 93). Paweł Łęczycki would explain this in his translation of Giovanni Botero's *Relazioni universali* by pointing out how Muscovites were happy to impress foreigners by displays of strength, resorting to tricks in order to make crowds of people seem to be larger than they actually were: for this reason it could happen that the same group of Moscow's inhabitants had to run from one place to another, and therefore to meet the ambassadors' eye more than once (Łęczycki 1609: I: 159). Possevino seemed to believe that Paolo Giovio in his *De legatione Moschovitarum* had grossly overestimated the populations of many cities in Muscovy – as had happened in several

other reports from ambassadors – because “they had not well understood the habit of Muscovites, who are used to gather men and place them in the main and highest positions of fortresses, while the Ambassadors of princes are received with exquisite honors” (Possevino 1611: 30). Not only the number, but also the appearance of people was skillfully manipulated in order to convey a sense of strength and wealth. In 1604, after two years of famine, Boris Godunov displayed his starving people in their best clothes, to impress Emperor's Ambassador Heinrich Von Logau (Bussow 1961: 98).

Not only the population size, but also the huge extension of the country – and of some of its cities – were proudly and gladly shown off by the Muscovites on the arrival of diplomatic delegations, in order to exert a sort of psychological pressure on the newcomers, to intimidate them and make them feel lost before the vastness of the spaces. Once in Muscovy, newcomers not only realised that they were the audience of a show where Russians played the role of extras, but they had the distinct feeling that their itinerary had been overstretched by frequent stops and unnecessary winding routes (Pielgrzymowski 1601: 6, Dyjamentowski 1901: 152). Elias Pielgrzymowski had described Lew Sapieha's embassy's entry to Moscow in October 1600. “Riding their horses [the Muscovite *pristavs*] led those gentlemen [the Polish diplomats] across the city going now through here, now through there, displaying the extension of the city: they were able to reach the diplomatic residence only in the evening” (Pielgrzymowski 1601: 6v). The huge Russian distances were further lengthened to confuse an alien observer as to the real size of the country. An anonymous Italian report of a journey to False Demetrius' Moscow gives the same impression of a desire to expand distances: as soon as foreign ambassadors had crossed the Empire's boundaries, they would feel as if they were facing a sort of lengthening of their itinerary. Diplomats staying in Smolensk waiting for instruction from Moscow could expect to stay there at least eight days, because the same *pristav* that had received them at the boundary, once sent to the capital to get their orders were subjected to the “law” of the increase of distances: “from Smolensk to Moscow... it is seventy leagues, although the Muscovites, to make their things look larger, make them to be one hundred”. When the ambassadors had received the approval for their arrival in the capital, they could

expect a further “removal” of their goal, because the Muscovite *pristav* “make the days short when travelling and go slowly to prove that the distance is greater than it is: from Smolensk to Moscow they stop at every Podvoda to change their horses”. A few years later the author of the memoirs attributed to Dyjamentowski would mention the same experience when moving from Vologda to the Muscovite-Lithuanian boundary. He had realized that “we had gone 40 verstas to reach the river Jagorta, which flows at only 20 leagues from Vologda. We couldn’t understand why they were taking us around the world, if it wasn’t because they wanted their country to seem extremely vast” (Dyjamentowski 1901: 152). Distances in Muscovy – which were large in themselves – were evidently increased in order to make them seem even larger, so that foreign observers would literally get lost and wouldn’t be able to make any form of careful analysis, or an accurate report of the reality they had met.

As weird as it may seem, statistical data such as those concerning the size – and number of inhabitants – of Muscovite cities, was exceptionally inconsistent. Yet this was one of the main ways of representing the territorial and urban planning aspects of Muscovy by foreign observers. As a matter of fact, Poles who arrived in Moscow to participate in the False Demetrius’ wedding with Maryna Mniszech and who were subsequently kept in captivity after Vasilij Šujskij’s *coup d’état* (May 27th, 1606) relished in the thought of revenge offered by the unique chance to disclose and spread all over the world news about the real demographic and geographic relevance of Muscovy (Łęczycki 1609: I: 3). For this reason, XVII century Polish translators of previous Western descriptions of Muscovy were particularly solicitous to correct any information related to the extension, appearance and population of Russian cities. The perception of the image of Moscow – and that of other Russian towns – seems to be conditioned for the Polish observers by the suspicions and mistrust caused both by the Muscovite political practice of making up a kingdom of appearances founded on the miraculous multiplication and increase of distances, and by a positive personal intent of denigrating anything they saw in Russia after the massacre committed during the “bloody wedding” of May 27th. Both Niemojewski (Niemojewski 1899: 23) and Łęczycki (Łęczycki 1609: III: 53) deemed that Moscow’s population had been overrated by Possevino and Botero, and pro-

posed a smaller number of inhabitants, many of whom (stated Łęczycki) in that lapse of time had either been drowned or impaled. Łęczycki (1609: I: 159-160) thought it was pure folly to compare Novgorod to Rome; Niemojewski (1899: 12) revised his own judgement about Możejsk, “a bunch of huts”, previously described as a town “not at all bad”; Dyjamentowski (1901: 140) argued with Guagnino's description of Vologda, presenting it as a less equipped and defended and with fewer amenities than “the one sketched by certain cosmographs”. Such a display of sensitivity towards the issue of the real size of Russian towns was mostly caused by a hidden imperialistic project of conquest and a blatant need for some revenge on the “treacherous Muscovites”. Samuel Węślawski, author of *Victor & Victus Vincentius Corvinus Gosiewski*, published in Vilna in 1691, reported the opinion expressed at his time by Adam Olearius, a representative of Holstein's diplomatic mission which had arrived in Moscow in 1633, that “from afar Moscow reminds us of Jerusalem, but as we reach it, it looks rather like Bethlehem”¹ (Węślawski 1691: 266). According to Paweł Łęczycki, it was the inhabitants of the Muscovite capital who were responsible for the unacceptable comparison between Moscow – “a tiny town” – and Jerusalem: this derogatory reduction of Moscow's greatness and importance is entirely due to the Polish translator of the *Relazioni universali*, as there is no trace of it in Botero's original text. Łęczycki shows a typical Polish feeling for the problem of ascertaining the real demographic entity of Muscovy, and the real size and relevance of its towns. If Botero – using the information given in Possevino's *Moscovia* – had ascribed to Moscow a population of 30.000 inhabitants, the author of the Polish translation would take care – as it we have noted – of specifying that “nowadays in year 1606 it has no longer so many because many of them have been impaled or drowned” (Łęczycki 1609: III: 53). The first impression of the city, which was generally positive – due to the splendor of its churches and the vastness of its spaces – was often radically revised in order to deny any value to anything that was

1 It is worth to quote Olearius's words in Węślawski's latin translation: “*In-tuetibus (inquit) e longiquo Moscuam, videtur representari Hierosolyma: ubi vero intus ventus est, reperitur esse Bethleem, quod vocabulum in Germania significat Civitatem paupertatis*”.

Muscovite. *Podstoli's* Niemojewski way of describing Moscow is paradigmatic for the examined memoirs:

In the eyes of those coming to the city, it appears to be very large, but as soon as they are inside they can see how much space is taken by the palaces and their courts, the shops of merchants and other places meant for sale, and that the extension of the city is due to the very great number of churches, 700, and monasteries (Niemojewski 1899: 23).

Such a derogatory attitude towards the real size of Moscow and other Russian cities by the Polish observers must not be considered as only due to personal ill will towards the capital's population. Some time before Antonio Possevino had noticed that some of the Russian towns, such as Smolensk, Novgorod and Pskov, seemed to have more inhabitants than they really had "owing to the large spaces of Churches and houses", and that "the kingly city of Moscow... at first sight appears as a large city", but approaching and entering it one could realize that "the houses occupy a large part of the ground": the impression of its vastity was given both by "the large extension of many squares, mostly the main one [Red Square]" and by "the great circle taken by Churches" (Possevino 1611: 30-31). It is therefore easy to realize that Niemojewski's observations consist essentially in a translation of what the Jesuit Father had written 23 years before, also if it is not to be believed that derogatory or "diminishing" procedures have been applied only to the city of Moscow: in the first version of the *podstoli's* memoirs Możejask was described as a town "altogether not too bad" ("miasteczko niezłe"), whereas in the second version of his *pa-miętnik* Niemojewski would call it "a bunch of huts they call a town" (Niemojewski 1899: 12)². According to Dyjamentowski (or – according to some literature – Roźniatowski), the author of a dia-

2 Such a sudden change in Niemojewski's feelings can be easily understood if we take into account the history of his text. The first version – nothing more than a travel diary – was written before January 1607, and extensively reworked only after the *podstoli's* return to Poland, in 1608. Rewriting his diary as memoirs, Niemojewski gave voice to resentment and bad feelings aroused by the massacre of May 27th, 1606, when the supposed Demetrius and many of his Polish followers were slain during the *coup d'état* organized by Vasilij Šujskij and his accomplices.

ry hastily attributed to Maryna Mniszech, he has taken advantage of his own observations to deny any authority to those who had described Vologda in less derogatory terms than those suggested to him as a result of his own resentment for being a deportee who longed to return home from Jaroslavl' rather than being moved to a town still farther away from Poland: "the town is infinitely less garrisoned and much more insignificant than Jaroslavl'... Its defensive potential is much weaker and can't be compared to that of the cosmographer's description" (Dyjamentowski 1901: 140). The "cosmograph" with whom Dyjamentowski polemizes is almost certainly Alessandro Guagnini, the author of *Sarmatiae Europae Descriptio* published in Cracow in 1578.

Often the description of Moscow's buildings is as polemic. Writing about the monastery in the Kremlin, Niemojewski wanted to underscore the lack of rationality and structural rigour in Muscovite architecture "tiny cells... built as always in Muscovy using round, not squared wood, very small and low" (Niemojewski 1899: 19). In the same way Niemojewski depicted the apartments of the *Velikij Knjaz*: "tiny wooden rooms with a low ceiling built using not squared timber". In the pictures of Moscow given by Niemojewski, one has the impression of a certain correspondence between the wild and chaotic space of the city and the narrow, oppressive atmosphere of their interiors. The only luxury in the hall of the False Demetrius' apartments would have been due to the ornaments that Mikołaj Wolski, Zygmunt's Vasa court marshal, had brought from Poland to Moscow, and only the throne hall seemed – according to the *podstoli*'s impressions – to be marked by a real imperial splendour. Dyjamentowski – who had seen at the Kremlin "wooden but decorous rooms" – was not of the same opinion, having obtained from the Tzar's residence an impression of simplicity and elegance (Dyjamentowski 1901: 152). Also another Polish participant at the *Smuta*'s events, Samuel Maskiewicz, noticed how much the False Demetrius had done to give the Kremlin a more solemn and splendid appearance. It was customary for all tzars to rebuild their own residence at the Kremlin in their taste, destroying those of their predecessors, and so it was that the Pretender's were the most beautiful, mainly because they had been decorated "in the Polish way", although for this very reason were later on destroyed by Vasilij Šujskij (Maskiewicz 1961: 146).

One piece of data regarding the urban organization of Moscow that has most interested Polish observers was its (obvious) correspondence to the political system and the social relationships in force in the country. The nobles coming from the *Rzeczpospolita* were surprised and puzzled by the fact that their Muscovite counterpart, the boyars, were obliged to settle and reside in the city, and as a general rule they were not allowed to live either in the country or in the villages. The centralization of the life of the boyars in the capital was remarkable as the political and social system of the *Rzeczpospolita* had the magnates living in country homes almost completely autonomous from central institutions. Samuel Węśławski stated quite clearly the causes for the concentration in cities of the Russian nobles: it was because of the likelihood of Muscovite people to raise riots and turmoil and their declared hostility to the nobility as an intermediate social and political class. This was what had compelled the Great Prince and all the most important nobles to reside in the Capital, with the strict prohibition for the *boyars* to go to their country estates except on especially set dates. At the same time, the Muscovite sovereign was thus able to keep under his control a nobility not averse to plots and manoeuvres (Węśławski 1691: 283).

Niemojewski also considered another feature of the city of Moscow as due to the enslavement by the autocrats of the most influential classes, such as the lack of *kamienice*, masonry buildings, and of dwellings providing a *światlica*, a room for guests. Only under the new Tzar were some nobles allowed to build a masonry house “*ex speciali gratia*” (Niemojewski 1899: 27). For Polish observers the merit of having started to give Moscow a different urban outlook, thanks to the introduction of stone masonry, was thanks to the presumed Dmitrij Ivanovič, who gave the city a more solid, more “organic”, less fluctuating appearance. Urban planning choices made by the False Demetrius were seen as due to his will to relax the grasp of autocratic control over Muscovite society, and to introduce a greater degree of freedom and of personal enterprise. A question may arise concerning the chaotic image of wild Muscovite wooden architecture handed down by the memoirs of Polish travellers. Such building practice for the authors of *pamiętniki* should be considered only as a consequence of autocratic tyranny, as an after effect of the political system ruling the country. Other causes can obviously be – and were at the time – given for this

fact. There are other Western observers of the Muscovite reality who were keen to seek the reasons for this occurrence more in the sphere of economics and of geographic and climatic conditions, rather than in the political system. Giles Fletcher had written in his *Of The Russe Common Wealth* (1591) that wooden buildings in Moscow seemed to conform to precise rational and practical criteria, stemming mainly from the local climate and nature: “This building seemeth farre better for their countrie, then that of stone and bricke: as being colder and more dampish then their wooden houses, specially of firre, that is a dry and warme wood” (Fletcher 1591: 19). Polish commentators don't seem to have taken into account this kind of reasoning. In his examination of the main features of Muscovite civilisation, as it appeared in the first version of his travel diary, Niemojewski – as far as it concerned local dwellings – noticed that “nobody has even a tiny mansion, only wooden houses, built with round, unsquared timber... not to speak of tapestry” (Niemojewski 1899: 171). Paweł Łęczycki would add to this that only a few boyars of the Duma or very wealthy merchants owned an entertainment hall, economically built, with small windows and pitiable stoves, and a roof made of barely peeled boards. The lack of “światlice”, or guest halls, seemed to be a particularly serious matter to the *szlachcice*, who had a real tradition for hospitality – one of the pillars of the sarmatic way of life.

In describing the urban planning of Moscow and the poor wooden architecture of Russian buildings, Poles saw this as depending on the autocratic character of Russian rule: it was the Tzar – according to such a point of view – that decided who should live where, and even what materials a house should be built with (Niemojewski 1899: 171). In the first version of his memoirs, Niemojewski simply related in detail the building techniques employed in Muscovy, emphasizing the use of unsquared timber, the presence of doors so low that one had to bend to go inside, and the fact that roofs were not covered “gonty” (laths), but only with beech bark. In the following version of his *pamiętnik* the *podstoli* pointed out that the lack of houses built with squared timber in Muscovy was not due to casual causes, nor to ignorance of building techniques, but to an express prohibition. Niemojewski supported the opinion – with supporting evidence – that stone buildings were forbidden by the Autocrat:

In Ivan's times, a boyar who had been an ambassador to Poland had noticed our way of building, and when he got back he had an *izba* built with squared timber. As soon as the *Velikij Knjaz'* heard of it, he ordered the populace to splash the house with mud, and to pull it down, stating that he would make it look like everyone's else (Niemojewski 1899: 173).

We can only surmise how Muscovite architecture was seen in XVII century Polish, though, we do have an idea of the “archaetypical” quality likely to develop in a later literary *topos*:

Gdzieniegdzie drzewa, siekierą zrabane,
odarte i w stos złożone poziomy,
tworzą kształt dziwny, jakby dach i ścianę,
i ludzi kryjl i zowią się – “domy”.
(Mickiewicz 1955: 269)

Here and there – trees, cut with an ax
Peeled and set in stacks,
In a weird way, as of roofs and walls
Hide people and are being called “houses”.

Another Polish traveller in Moscow – maybe the most famous one – some 230 years later was to wonder whether the chaotic Muscovite architecture should be seen as a result of tyrannical rule: in his *Droga do Rosji* Adam Mickiewicz voiced his suspicions about what might have been a connection between the “deconstructed” architecture of the Russian *izba* and the enslavement of its inhabitants. A question that was far from being “russophobic” and chauvinistic. In fact, during the same period, Pëtr Čaadaev bitterly noted in his *First philosophical letter* that while all over the world people were busy building, in Russia “we went on living cramped in our shacks made of hay and wood” (Čaadaev 1970: 57).

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Bussow, K.
1961 *Moskovskaja Hronika. 1584-1613*, edited by I.I. Smirnov, Izdatel'stvo AN SSSR, Moskva – Leningrad 1961: 401.

- Čaadaev, P.
1970 *Lettres philosophiques adressées a une dame*, présentées par François Rouleau, Librairie des Cinq Continents, Paris s.d. (1970): 294.
- Dyjamentowski, W.
1901 *Diariusz Wacława Dyjamentowskiego*, in: *Polska i Moskwa w pierwszej połowie wieku XVII*, Aleksander Hirschberg (ed.), Nakładem zakładu im. Ossolińskich, Lwów 1901: 11-166.
- Fletcher, G.
1591 *Of the Russe Common Wealth Or Maner Of Government By The Russe Emperour*, Thomas Charde, London 1591, in: *Russia At The Close Of The Sixteenth Century comprising the treatise "Of the Russe Common Wealth"*, by Dr. Giles Fletcher; and "The travels of Sir Jerome Horsey", Hakluyt Society, First Series, No. XX-MDCCCLVI, Reprinted, edited by Edward A. Bond, Burt Franklin, Publisher, New York, s.a., pp. [CXXXIV] 152.
- Herberstein, S.
1600 *Rerum Moscoviticarum Commentarii*, in: *Rerum Moscoviticarum Auctores varii*, Apud hæredes Andreae Wecheli, Francofurti 1600: 1-117.
- Łęczycki, P.
1609 *Relatiæ Powszechne*, w Drukarni Mikołaja Loba, Kraków 1609: I-III.
- Mickiewicz, S.
1961 *Pamiętniki Samuela i Bogusława Kazimierza Maszkiewiczów*, edited by A. Sajkowski e W. Czapliński, ZNIO, Warszawa 1961: 324.
- Mickiewicz, A.
1955 *Droga do Rosji*, in: *Dzieła, Utwory dramatyczne*, Czytelnik, Warszawa 1955: III: 267-275.
- Niemojewski, S.
1899 *Pamiętnik Stanisława Niemojewskiego (1606-1608)*, edited by Aleksander Hirschberg, we Lwowie,

Nakładem zakładu im. Ossolińskich, Lwów 1899:
336.

Olearius, A.
1658

*Viaggi di Moscovia degli anni 1633, 1634, 1635 e
1636. Libri tre cavati dal tedesco...*, Viterbo 1658:
222.

Pielgrzymowski, E.
1601

*Poselstwo i krótkie spisanie rozprawy z Moskwą y
traktatów w Roku 1601...*, Manuscript "Ossolineum"
4297, L'vivska naukova Biblioteka Im. Stefanika
NANU, L'viv 1601: 156.

Possevino, A.
1611

Commentarii della Moscovia, tradotti in italiano dal
nipote Giovanni Battista Possevino, In Mantova, Per
Aurelio & Lodovico Osanna Fratelli, Stampatori Du-
cali, 1611: [XII] 307.

Wesławski, S.
1691

Victor & Victus Vincentius Corvinus Gosiewski...,
Michaele Weslawski, Vilna 1691: 386.