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Miracular Sensitivity in the light of Early Modern Polish Collections of *Miracula*

Scholars often tend to see early modern religious culture as a transitional phase that paved the way for the modern disenchantment of the world. The Reformation's assault on superstition, the Tridentine purification of Catholicism, and nascent rationalism are believed to have overcome medieval irrationalism and belief in miracles. Such an image is gravely simplified, of course, but nonetheless remains influential, despite the efforts of many researchers who have tried to revise the picture of early modern as well as medieval religion. For instance, a miracle is perceived to be a medieval thing – mainly due to numerous studies on medieval hagiography, which is one of the favourite subjects of medievalist research. Early modern miracles are less known and dwell in the shadow of Bollandist hypercriticism, despite the fact that it was early modern times when the miraculous became 'democratic'. Concurrent with development of the web of pilgrimage sanctuaries, the number of people who were convinced that they had experienced a miracle in Catholic and Orthodox Europe rose steadily through the 16th, 17th and up to the middle of 18th century. Not only this, they also left written testimonies.

In my opinion, a satisfactory method of historical enquiry into wondrous events has yet to be developed, in spite of the fact that historians have at their disposition a very interesting and abundant supply of sources for this subject. The core of this material is made up by books of miracles from the Middle Ages and early modern period, while for modern times, books of supplications and expressions of gratitude are still continued in

catholic sanctuaries. The enormity of the diverse data that can be derived from these sources makes it possible to pursue various paths of enquiry. The most popular type of research is the reconstruction of the history of a sanctuary and the geographical scope and social outreach of its cult (Szwarga 1967; Nastalska 1997). Another interesting line of enquiry is the textual analysis of the records in search of the traces of oral prayers (Kwiatkowski 1977), or the examination of the poetics of those texts (Kowalski 1994; Bull 1999; Flory 2000). On the other hand, some studies (Kmiecińska-Kaczmarek 1971; Moody 1992) have taken what I consider to be a blind alley, in that they pursue a “rationalizing”, medical interpretation of health problems and miraculous recoveries, which comprise most of the recorded cases described in miracle books. Fortunately, the subject has also been taken up by scholars of the social history of medicine, who focus on cultural interpretations of illness and recovery (Gentilcore 1995; Gélis 2004).

Worth mentioning is the fact that catholic theology ascribes to history an important role in the process of recognizing a miraculous fact. According to Edward Kopeć (1966: 11–12) – whose ideas have been taken up by Marian Rusecki (1996: 470–474) – the theological task of recognizing a miracle is ascribed to the discipline of history, which – on a par with philosophy and the applied sciences – is supposed to explore and explain the so-called *ontic* element of a transcendental fact. The aim of historical research in this context is to verify whether the fact in question actually took place, and in what circumstances. Applying to this purpose standard procedures of historical research would guarantee the validity of a statement about the uniqueness of the fact with “the same surety, which can be derived from historical research with regard to all historical facts” (Rusecki 1996: 474).

It is pleasing to hear such an optimistic opinion on the cognitive capabilities of history. However, a historian who deals with the testimony of a person who experienced a miracle (or with testimonies of its witnesses) is not able to affirm „with surety” anything more than that this testimony has actually been delivered. Such a statement may seem to be of minor importance, but the determination of the actuality of events does not constitute the only objective of history, not even the main one. The principal field of a historian’s interest is a human being in his/her inalterable subjection to the transience of time. From this point of view, testimonies recorded in books of miracles constitute great value as sources, since they can reveal to the historian a complex world of social representations, sentiments, and individual experiences and longings of people of the past (see also an older criticism by Charles James Wright, 1930: 42–81).

In the analysis below I use the terms “miraculous consciousness” (*świadomość mirakularna*) and “miraculous sensitivity” (*wrażliwość mirakularna*), which have been elaborated by the Polish anthropologists Jacek Olędzki and Andrzej Hemka on the basis of their research on contemporary manifestations of religious culture at Catholic sanctuaries in Poland (Olędzki 1989; Hemka and Olędzki 1990). These terms are highly useful for historical analysis of the miracles recorded in early modern sources, provided that they are made more precise, as their inventors employed them rather inconsistently and sometimes even interchangeably. Thus, I am fully aware that my reading of the terms “miraculous consciousness” and “miraculous sensitivity” may slightly differ from the meaning intended for them when they first were introduced by Olędzki and Hemka.

I would define miraculous consciousness as the capability/potential aptitude to perceive a supernatural event (an event that contradicts the

natural state of things) and to understand it in terms of religion, in accordance with the Church's teaching on miracles. Therefore, miracular consciousness requires two kinds of knowledge. Firstly – a common one, acquired by life experience and which provided a basis of reference for distinguishing an extraordinary event. And secondly – a religious knowledge, resulting not only from Church education, but also from the adoption of the Christian worldview, which made it possible to interpret an extraordinary event as a potential miracle. Thus, miracular consciousness is a phenomenon referring to social representations and comprising, as such, a component of the religious mentality.

In contrast, the term miracular sensitivity denotes the personal ability to experience miracles. In other words, it can be used to describe the functioning of the above-mentioned miracular consciousness in individual cases. How did people make use of their potential aptitude of perceiving the world in terms of the miraculous? Or rather, how did this aptitude manifest itself? Therefore, miracular sensitivity is a dynamic phenomenon. It varies depending on the diversity of psychological profiles which existed in a given society, but it changes also in the life course of an individual. I would like to point out some factors of these variations within the context of social realities in the early modern Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth.

As sources, I use handwritten and printed collections of *miracula* from selected early modern Polish sanctuaries. The records of miracles can be qualified as utilitarian texts, which usually bear no sign of literary processing. Aleksandra Witkowska's research on the inner structure of records of miracles, (although it was based on medieval records it is valid, with some qualifications, also for early modern records) showed their predominant conventionality (Witkowska 1977), which happened to be disrupted only by the necessity to report a new and unique story. From the

formal point of view, records of miracles served as a documentation of the activity of a sanctuary for internal, administrative purposes of the Church. During visitations of the bishopric, a visitor would often order a local priest to set up a book for recording miracles. For the purpose of appropriating the supernatural properties of a cult object, such handwritten books were necessary to provide documentation. It was for this reason that scribes often employed a legalistic style for records, or, more exactly, the form of judicial minutes with attempted objectivity and specificity. The adaptation of these records to devotional publications played a secondary role, and although it did at times occur that an editor, with hindsight, gave them a literary character, the adaptation usually confined itself to the selection and classification of original records.

However, from the viewpoint of a person who had experienced the miracle, the delivery of an account of that event could have a completely another meaning. Jacek Olędzki pointed this out while analyzing “inscriptions” (as he called them), that is “metal tablets with lettering on them, or sheets of paper with writing on them and whole books such as memoranda books and albums” which one can find in any sanctuary nowadays (Olędzki 1989: 147). Broadly speaking, all of these sources represent written testimonies of people who experienced God's grace. Olędzki classified them as thanksgiving offerings, which “represent signs of wonder, or recordings of miraculous events using imagery [in our case: using textual imagery. TW]. These offerings usually indicate refinement of the religious consciousness of a donor and its devotional exaltation, or, in other words, they are symptoms showing that a donor's religious consciousness is marked by more or less intense miraculous sensitivity” (Olędzki 1989: 147).

We may assume that likewise in the early modern era, the deposition of testimony about a miracle was of great importance to a believer. Not only did it record an experienced miracle, but also – and above all – it testified the profound respect and affection for a heavenly patron who was supposed to have caused the event. However, the devotional character of such testimonies did not contravene the meticulous descriptive realism that is peculiar to them. Jacek Olędzki understood that phenomenon to be “an oscillation between what I would call a miraculous sensitivity – a desire for miracle or simply for marvel – , and a practical endeavour, a sense of practice, a necessity of actual things, the things essential and common” (Olędzki 1989: 147).

This statement finds its confirmation in such records in registers of miracles as the one by Regina Kaszubina from the neighbourhood of Raków (a town in northern Little Poland, also the former religious centre of the Polish Brethren), who testified in 1711 that “her cow was choking; it tumbled down and began to die. [Regina] pleaded for its life to the Virgin Mary of the Raków parish church, who is renowned for miracles, and the cow recovered instantly, much to astonishment of many people, and thanking for this benefice she paid for the Mass” (Sandomierz, Diocesan Library, Ms. G. 1244: fol. 13). The fact that what Regina Kaszubina wished for was so ordinary does not mean that she lacked of miraculous sensitivity. The loss of a cow could seriously impair the stability of a household, so stakes were high.

What is important here is Kaszubina’s fundamental conviction that a miraculous intervention in her everyday life genuinely happened, and that the source of that event was the mediation of Virgin Mary. This anticipation of a miracle, or – more precisely – the eagerness to interpret favourable events as miraculous ones designates early modern miraculous sensitivity. In

fact, miracular sensitivity describes the intimate feeling of intense divine custody, rather than miracles in the strict sense of the word. Begging for supernatural intervention did not contravene taking rational actions, however even if these actions succeeded, they would be deemed to be not effectual enough to having produced the desired effect. The beneficiary was thoroughly convinced that all his/her actions would have fallen through had they not received the heavenly support they had begged for.

This pattern is clearly visible in such miracle tales as the one of a petty nobleman called Ostrowski, who in 1752 was looking for a job of the manager of a manor: “he spent a long time without an office and although he applied [for a position] in several places, he did not get one. But as soon as his wife entrusted this affair with Saint Anthony of [the miraculous image in the Podolian village of] Krasne, he [ie. Ostrowski], having arrived at Krasne, was to his astonishment appointed governor of the estate by the *starosta* Ułanowski, and he acknowledges that this has happened thanks to the grace of the graceful Saint Anthony [who worked this benefice from within] in this image” (Lviv Scientific Library, f. 5, op. 1, Ms. 3683: 12).

Undoubtedly, such an attitude was common in a society which did not share our modern understanding of what constituted a ‘coincidence’, nor calculated probability. However, some people were much more sensitive towards the miraculous than others, or at least their miracular sensitivity manifested itself in more spectacular ways. An example of this were visions, which accompanied the miraculous events or foreshadowed them. Sometimes they took on the form of apparitions, which were so ephemeral and ambiguous that nobody dared to interpret them, but their prodigious character remained beyond doubt. For example, in the village of Studzianna (in central Poland/ district of Opoczno), shortly before it became a famous pilgrimage centre, a woman called Słończewska spotted,

on the hill, “a woman clad in white and said to the girls, who were working nearby: ‘look over there, who is that lady?’ but before they looked around, she vanished” (Potocki 1728: 19–20).

Usually, though, those who saw it could recognize the apparition. It was the miraculous image of the Holy Family from the Studzianna sanctuary, which appeared in 1637 at the bed-side of Agnieszka Błaszczczyńska, the wife of a scribe of the Cracow land court. Of course, only the sick woman could see it, but since she eventually recovered, the veracity of the vision became affirmed (Potocki 1728: 112–113). Sometimes a beneficiary of miraculous healing could even see a heavenly person performing the miracle. The Mother of God, again from the same image from the church in Studzianna, appeared in a dream to a peasant who was struck with fever. She „gave him some water to drink and when he awoke, he instantly began to recover and soon regained health” (Potocki 1728: 55).

Only in exceptional cases visions were more elaborate and narrative, and bore clear traces of the influence of popular devotional literature. Such was the vision of Jan Włodek, a noble servant, who received the grace of conversion in the sanctuary of Studzianna in 1675. As he admitted himself before the sanctuary’s scribe, he had led a sinful life before he experienced a series of dream visions: “firstly, the Lord Jesus Christ appeared in his dream and showed his angry face. Then an evil spirit [appeared], which tried to suffocate him; but when he was overcome with terrible fear, the Heavenly Mother of the Studzianna image turned up and solicited Her Son’s mercy for him, and forced back the evil spirit. – – For a second time did Satan show himself to this servant, willing to suffocate him, and again the Heavenly Mother fought the devil off, and said to him: ‘Do not be afraid, because I will not leave your side’. For a third time, again in a dream, the Lord Jesus with an angry face appeared to him and told this

servant: 'Begone! Step off me!' until the Mother of God came and asked Her Son: 'But where will he go, if You cast him aside?'. Having heard His Mother's appeal, Lord Jesus leniently turned His face to the said servant and told him: 'Consider it to be an unusual chance that my Mother solicited for you'" (Potocki 1728: 87). The author of this story showed not only his peculiar religious exaltation, but also outstanding talent to rework his inner experience into a closed narrative.

While studying miraculous sensitivity, we should always bear in mind that the psychological differentiation of individuals could be a major factor in their ability to perceive miracles. However, in historical research it is impossible even to estimate the influence of psychological factors, because we cannot reconstruct the psychological profiles of the people who delivered testimonies about their experience of miraculous intervention, and whose testimonies were recorded in the books of miracles at early modern sanctuaries. Even less can be said about those people in the past who did not experience miracles – and they would form the best comparative frame of reference. Sceptical attitudes towards supernatural events were only recorded in sources when they could serve as a part of the conversion story, in which a sceptic learned the hard way that a sanctuary did indeed possess miraculous faculties. Collections of miracles did not contain many such stories, but, when they were included, they represented important proof of the miraculousness of a given site, since they documented kratophany, which had been performed in the presence of a person who was not prepared to accept the miracle, or even denied the possibility of that phenomenon. Surely, this denial did not mean negation of miracles as a whole – in Poland, such an attitude was impossible within the baroque mentality. Sceptics looked suspiciously only at a particular sanctuary or simply lacked proper devotion to it.

One of those sceptics was Hieronim Kuropatnicki, a castellan of Kyiv. In 1672, during his stay in Piotrków he did not want to visit the nearby sanctuary in Studzianna, even though his acquaintances urged him to perform adoration to the miraculous image of the Holy Family. Moreover, he would say that “it was the devil, who deceitfully brought about the apparition at Studzianna in order to turn pilgrims away from their road to the miraculous image in Częstochowa [ie. to the most important sanctuary in Poland]” (Potocki 1728: 97; for the controversy over the image of Studzianna see: Zwoliński 1996: 257–266). Kuropatnicki was soon forced to change his mind. When participating in the electoral Sejm of 1674, he caught painful „scurvy” of the throat. He pledged (or only wanted to pledge) that he would make a pilgrimage to Studzianna, and doctors prescribed him bloodletting as a remedy. When he felt better the morning after the treatment, he – as he later testified – „ascribed it to the blood-letting, and not of the grace of the [miraculous] image in Studzianna, but instantly I felt greater pain not only in my throat, but in my mouth alike. So I humbly deprecated myself to the Virgin Mary deep in my heart and pledged with all my faith to visit the Studzianna sanctuary, and soon I became free of this upset” (Potocki 1728: 98).

The case of Kuropatnicki shows also another important component of miracular sensitivity: its changeability over the life-course of an individual. It is certainly a truism that people were more sensitive towards the miraculous in situations of personal crisis, for example when in danger of losing their lives or health. It is not astonishing then, that a certain Magdalena Cierpizka from the Subcarpathian village of Tryńcza, having toppled from a ferryboat into the currents of the river San in spring 1740, and, having almost sunk to the bottom, she “saw in front of her an Image of the Mother of God in great heavenly lightness, the same image, which hangs

in the church of Dominican Observants in the Rosary altar. And when I cried to her for help, I immediately got up to the surface” (Cracow, The Czartoryski Library, Ms. 3432: 11–12).

However, if we ask “when?”, the answer cannot be limited to the statement that the faithful were prone to experience miracles when they were in urgent need. Miraculous sensitivity also intensified during certain periods of the liturgical year. Quantitative research has shown that a number of supernatural interventions increased during those feasts, when indulgence could be obtained at a given sanctuary, and during unique events such as the coronations of miraculous images, or solemn introductions of the images to newly built or rebuilt church buildings. For example, during the sumptuous two-day relocation of the image of the Heavenly Mother from Kamieniec Podolski to the reconstructed church in Tynna (in the region of Podolia) in 1717, probably every fall from a horse ended well because of the assurance given by Virgin Mary to the participants of this celebration. The anonymous author of a compendium collected testimonies of several people who declared that they avoided being hurt only thanks to custody of Mother of God. It shows how intense the devotional fervour which accompanied this religious event was (Lviv Scientific Library, f. 5, op. 1, Ms. 3674: 11).

Apart from this kind of collective events, which aroused the miraculous sensitivity of all their participants, we also encounter accounts of entirely individual reactions to some church rituals. We could describe these reactions as feelings of miraculous experience. Usually we cannot guess why this feeling appeared at that particular moment, but we may assume that it had a close bound with personal factors connected to experience of religion. However, the sources sometimes reveal circumstances that can explain to some degree this personal reaction. One

such case is, for example, the testimony of Katarzyna Wężowska, which was recorded in the book of miracles of the Heavenly Mother of Tuligłowy from a local sanctuary near Przemyśl in Subcarpathian Rus'. The testimony was recorded in 1763, but it refers to past events, when the heroine of the narrative was still a maiden (she gave a testimony being already married to the administrator of the village of Tuligłowy) and "having been so much frightened by a thunderclap that she suffered anguish, felt fear and embarrassment whenever she heard any noise". Once she observed exorcisms being performed on several possessed people in her parochial church in Tuligłowy and "became somehow so frightened that he felt feebleness, nuisance and anguish, and her hands trembled". So she laid prostrate in her face in front of the miraculous image of the Heavenly Mother and prayed for relief from these ailments. After the exorcism, the priest "asked her how she felt. She told him that, with some astonishment, she had felt something like a cold wind coming out of her body, the coldest of which was at her feet. And from that time onwards she regained her health" (Jaguściński 1769: 167). In this case a psychic strain, which had been caused by a fear of thunders, found its culmination and solution when Wężowska was observing exorcisms being performed. It took place parallelly to the exorcism itself (hence this „cold wind” coming out of Wężowska's body, which evoked the evacuation of an evil spirit). This strain had, however, taken on a different form, one which engaged the miracular consciousness of the person concerned.

Another important aspect of miracular sensitivity was its spatial dimension. Spatiality inscribed itself deep into the system of miraculous sanctuaries/ pilgrimage centres, which constituted a web of sacred places and found its counterpart in the popular belief of the "geographical disparity" of divine grace. This semi-magical mental pattern played its part

in arousing in the faithful an expectation that a supernatural intervention would occur at a particular place, namely – at a sanctuary. Moreover, the miraculous sensitivity of the faithful was additionally tensed up by his/ her own spiritual contribution of having taken the pains of pilgrimage upon themselves, and by the devotional atmosphere typical for such a journey. A pilgrimage could become a peculiar “quest for a miracle”, which sometimes ran from one sanctuary to another. The sources only inform us about those journeys which eventually ended with the fulfilment of a pilgrim’s needs. This was the case for a certain Eudochia, a blind woman from the region of Przemyśl, who travelled from one sanctuary to the other for eight years, until she finally got to a little known local shrine in Dederkały, a village in Volhynia. There, having prayed before the miraculous image of the crucified Christ, “she received the grace of God, her eyes could see, and she left the church alone [ie. without any help], and testified [had her testimony written down in the book of miracles], giving thanks to the Lord God Almighty, and told the people [about the miracle]” (Wrocław, The Ossoliński National Institute Library, Ms. 13768/II: 9).

Miraculous sensitivity of a pilgrim increased the closer he got to the sanctuary. The closer the shrine was, the stronger a pilgrim anticipated the kratophany to come. In 1673, Benedykt Piotrowski, a Cistercian monk suffering from a grave headache, took on a vow to visit the miraculous image in Studzianna: “when he was riding from [the Cistercian monastery in] Pokrzywnica to Studzianna – – on the way his head was again afflicted with enormous pain, so he despaired whether he would be able to celebrate the Mass on that day. But when he yearned for Saint Mary and stopped his carriage two miles before Studzianna, the Virgin Mary appeared to him, together with Jesus Christ and Saint Joseph and They were in such postures as it was painted on the Image of Studzianna, and She touched his forehead

with Her saintly hand and She healed him immediately. He had never seen the miraculous Image of Studzianna before, but when he came to the shrine at last, he recognized that it is the same image which he had seen in his dream” (Potocki 1729: 211).

Not only humans were sensitive to this sacred geography of miraculous sites, but also demons, though they did not like to come close to a sanctuary. A certain Jan Tomkowicz, who took his possessed wife from one sanctuary to another, finally arrived at Ułaszkwce in Podolia. He could guess as early as half a mile before the sanctuary, that this would be the place where his wife would be healed. The demon inside her felt the miraculous power of the holy Icon of Ułaszkwce at the last lodging on their way to the shrine. They were getting ready for the journey in the morning when the demon made Tomkowicz’s wife “run off to the bush, where the devil thrust her under a bush with such a force, that I, who chased her, could hardly draw her out. Further on the way when we were coming closer to Ułaszkwce, he thrust her again under a stump and I could hardly rescue her. When we got near Ułaszkwce he found a piece of grease for carriage wheels and squeezed it into her mouth. I rushed to tear it out of her, whereupon my wife swallowed that grease even faster, and after this she weakened and almost fainted, and could not walk, so I brought my wife, or rather carried her on my back to the miraculous image. On the same day I brought her to the monastery, where they sang akathist to the Virgin Mary for the purpose [of healing Tomkowicz’s wife], and she laid prostrate on the floor, and demons pounded her heavily, raising her up and throwing her to the floor, hammering the floor with her hands, legs, and breasts, and they screamed: ‘oh, I kill this she-goat now!’”. After three days of prayers laying on the floor, attending Masses and after confession, the possessed woman got the divine grace before the miraculous icon of the Virgin Mary of

Ułaszkwice and the whole “regiment” of evil spirits evacuated her body (Przemyśl, State Archives, Collection: Archiwum Bp. Grecko-kat. w Przemyślu, Ms. 9403: 44–45).

The interpretation of testimonies, which were recorded in the early modern books of miracles, can take many different directions. The source material is rich, abundant, and lends itself to ‘thick description’ in the Geertzian sense’, so we can expect historians to showcase their creativity in this field of research (for example see: Bosiacka 2007). My proposition of using the category of miracular sensitivity in historical research attempts to overcome patterns locked into the disciplines of ‘social history’ and the ‘history of mentalities’ when writing the history of religion. The concept of miracular sensitivity lets a researcher focus on a person who faced the miraculous and thereby pursue particular traits of his/her personal religiosity. Assuming that miracles functioned as a medium in communication between men and the supernatural world, a historian can make hypotheses not only about past religious cultures and mentalities, but also about their differentiation depending on individual cases. This way, research in the cultural history of religion could reach beyond the analysis of communal phenomena. It could embrace also an individual facet of the religious experience of people from past times, in other words: problems which surpass the interests and methods of the traditional history of mentalities*.

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* I discuss the problem of interrelations and differences between cultural history of religion and history of mentalities in another article, see: Wiślicz 2004, p. 99 ff.

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