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Jan Potocki's Unstable Turkeys

ABSTRACT

This study presents two distinct moments in Jan Potocki's engagement with Turkey, separated by more than twenty years. The first concerns his journey to Egypt in 1784, when the 23-year-old stopped for two months in Constantinople, a formative experience that nurtured his enduring passion for the Orient. The second moment occurs in 1806–1807, when, serving as an adviser to the administration of Tsar Alexander I and as a knowledgeable connoisseur of the Near East, the Caucasus, and Central Asia, he approached the Turkish question with the dispassionate, strategic perspective required for developing imperial policy under the looming threat of Napoleon's conquering campaigns.

KEYWORDS: Jan Potocki, Turkey, Russia, Orient, Travelogue

STRESZCZENIE

Jana Potockiego niestabilne Turcje

Niniejsze studium przedstawia dwa momenty w relacjach Jana Potockiego z Turcją, dwa momenty oddzielone ponad dwudziestoletnim okresem. Pierwszym była podróż, którą 23-latek odbył do Egiptu w 1784 r., zatrzymując się najpierw na dwa miesiące w Konstantynopolu. Było to dla niego fascynujące doświadczenie, które miało trwały wpływ na jego niesłabnącą pasję do Orientu. Następnie, w latach 1806–1807, jako doradca cara Aleksandra I i znakomity znawca Bliskiego Wschodu, Kaukazu i Azji Środkowej, podszedł do kwestii tureckiej z bezstronną i wyważoną perspektywą, właściwą rozwojowi polityki imperialistycznej w obliczu zagrożenia podbojami Napoleona.

SŁOWA KLUCZE: Jan Potocki, Turcja, Rosja, Orient, literatura podróżnicza

In Jan Potocki's personal life, his trip to Turkey and Egypt in 1784 was by no means his first, but it represented an important stage in the education of the 23-year-old. The splendid report on this journey was also the first text he would

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publish, thereby acquiring an inaugural significance in relation to the abundant and multifaceted work that would follow. Finally, this text is invaluable both because it offers a highly original vision of Turkey and because of its literary dimension, which reveals, in the context of travel, a particularly elaborate philosophy of journeying and an aesthetics of writing.¹ The following pages do not present a study of the traveler's orientalist knowledge, nor of his experiences as a traveler and reader in relation to the knowledge and clichés circulating about Turkey among his contemporaries (Reychman, 1973; Sinko, 1982; Bałczewski, 2000; Siemieniec-Gołaś, 2013; Kupiszewska, 2022). Rather, they present the traveler's account and attempt to understand the contradictions and paradoxes that marked Potocki's relationship with the Ottoman world, situated between fascination with a highly prized culture and political calculations imposed by entirely different circumstances.

Jan Potocki left his estates in Podolia at the beginning of April 1784. By that time, he had already acquired considerable experience as a traveler. From childhood, his mother had kept him constantly on the move between Krakow, Warsaw, and Vienna, and then, at the age of 13, he and his brother Seweryn were sent to live with a tutor in Switzerland, where they stayed for three years. His mother visited them regularly and sometimes took them to Paris, Spa, or other destinations. At the age of seventeen, Jan enlisted in the Austrian army, which was preparing to fight in the War of the Bavarian Succession. However, there was hardly any actual combat, and the soldiers were left bored in the garrisons. Potocki, stationed for a time in Bude, immersed himself in all the reading material he could find. His passion for history and the sciences was firmly established and never left him. However, he was never merely a cabinet scholar; the wider world always called to him. Throughout his life, he read extensively, but he never thought without observing, touching, and feeling. For him, antiquities – which were to become the focus of his interests – could only

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- 1 Potocki published this report twice: first in Paris in 1788 (*Voyage en Turquie et en Egypte fait en l'année 1784*) and a second time the following year in Warsaw in his own Imprimerie Libre, with the addition of the *Voyage en Hollande effectué en 1787*. A Polish translation was produced immediately in 1789 by Julian Ursyn Niemcewicz: *Podróż do Turcji y Egiptu z przydanym dziennikiem podróży do Holandyi podczas Rewolucyi 1787* (reprinted in 1849 and 1924, then revised by Leszek Kukulski in 1959). Several modern editions of *Voyage en Turquie et en Egypte* exist: by Daniel Beauvois, Paris: Fayard, 1980; by Serge Plantureux, Paris: Corti, 1999; by Éditions du Jasmin, Paris: 2000; and by François Rosset and Dominique Triaire in volume I of the edition of Potocki's works (Louvain: Peeters, 2004), reprinted in pocket format by GF in 2015 with a new introduction. It is this GF edition that is cited below as (Potocki, 2015). While several important studies focus on the Egyptian part of this journey, relatively few address the Turkish portion, apart from the presentations in the Beauvois and Rosset/Triaire editions. Notable works include Bałczewski (1985; 2000), Chymkowski (2008), Siemieniec-Gołaś (2013), and Kupiszewska (2013; 2016; 2017; 2022). There are also a few studies in Turkish to which we have not had access.

be understood through the insights they offered to the observer of ruins and geology, to the surveyor and draughtsman of sites, and to those who shared in the lives of people where gestures, customs, and rites were living traces of the past. Potocki embodied all of these perspectives at once. His first fields of practice were the vast Poland of the time (which still stretched almost as far as the Black Sea), Austria, Germany, Switzerland, France, and also Hungary, followed by Italy and the Mediterranean, which he crossed from sea to sea for two years as a Knight of Malta assigned to the fight against the Barbary pirates. The latter were certainly the enemy, but their world fascinated the young man. Raised on the eastern fringes of Poland, he had always been in contact with his Tartar and Ottoman neighbors; here, it was the Arab world of Africa that revealed itself to him, and which he had the opportunity to experience during the three weeks he spent in Tunisia in 1779 (Neaimi, 2003). He spent several more years traveling between Italy, Vienna, and Poland, with excursions to Carniola, Hungary, and Serbia. By the time he returned to Poland at the end of 1783, he had already seen much of the country and, above all, had experimented with every possible form of travel: educational, recreational, scholarly, and military, both on land and at sea. Roads, footpaths, rivers, and the sea were all familiar to him, as were the luxuries of rich mansions and embassies, as well as the simplicity of huts and the fragility of tents. Nothing stopped him; everything interested him.²

This was the training he had acquired in the *ars peregrinandi* when he set off for Turkey, with Egypt in his sights. The reasons for his journey are not well known. The extensive Egyptological work he later carried out suggests that he was deeply drawn to the land of the pharaohs; however, we should be cautious of *a posteriori* explanations. There is no way of knowing whether Potocki went to Egypt to satisfy a budding passion, or whether it was this trip that inspired or confirmed it. Furthermore, it is possible, as Daniel Beauvois has suggested, that the journey also had certain aspects of a political mission (Beauvois, 1977). To understand this, we need to briefly consider the political situation in Central and Eastern Europe on the eve of the French Revolution.

The Polish throne had been occupied since 1764 by Stanisław August Poniatowski, then a protégé of Catherine II. This young king, who seemed to have no role other than that of a puppet, had to contend with the hostility of various factions within the Polish nobility; some criticized him for his subservience to Russia, while others feared he would attempt to strengthen his power by limiting the extensive freedoms enjoyed by the great families of the Polish aristocracy in the unique system of noble republic that characterized the country. After much tension and difficulty, the king finally succeeded in gaining some

2 For more details on Jan Potocki's eventful life, see: Rosset and Triaire (2004). Specifically about his travels, see: Kotwicz (1935), Ziętańska (1973), Reychman (1974), Ryba (1993), Klene (2010), Baliszewski & Muszyńska (2018), Rosset (2018), Triaire (2020).

respect and implementing the only agenda that truly interested him: a program to modernize his country and its institutions in line with the European Enlightenment. He brought artists, soldiers, scientists, agronomists, and various advisers to Warsaw, mainly from France, Germany, and Switzerland. He also managed to reduce the resistance of the magnates, particularly that of the powerful Potocki clan. Unfortunately, he lacked political firmness, which would prove fatal in the precarious situation of Poland, surrounded by three powerful neighbors – Austria, Prussia, and Russia – who were only waiting for a favorable opportunity to overthrow the sovereign and divide his kingdom. By the time Stanisław August openly expressed his desire for reform, he had lost Catherine II's support, and it had become clear by the time of the first (partial) partition of Poland in 1772 that the main threat to the country came from Russia.³ Unable to resist or even attack its neighbor head-on, Poland could try to work on the diplomatic front by providing some form of support to Russia's military enemies, Sweden and Turkey. A Potocki could have been well chosen to carry out a mission in this direction, particularly as this family owned immense territories on the eastern borders of the Kingdom of Poland, in other words, in the immediate vicinity of the Tartars and Ottomans. The culture and customs of the Turkish world, in particular its administrative and political practices, were not foreign to the Potockis, especially not to Jan, who from a very young age had shown a special interest in the cultures of *others*, which in Podolia were mainly Jews, Tartars and Turks. Jan Potocki had certainly shown a worrying propensity for eccentricity at a very early age, but his adventurous nature, the experience he had already acquired of the world in its most diverse dimensions, his mastery of languages and the vast knowledge that already set him apart could make him an envoy of choice. The king, who was not short on finesse, took an interest in this young subject; he appreciated him for his many qualities, even if he feared his unpredictability. The account of his journey, in its first part to Constantinople, does not contain any clear clues leading to the conclusion that it was a mission commissioned by the King of Poland, but the text also speaks in strange silences that highlight certain information, in particular those that mention the relations maintained by the young Pole, in Constantinople, in diplomatic circles and even, at the same time, with the embassies of France, Russia and Venice, states that were clearly rivals, if not enemies, when it came to Ottoman affairs. The hypothesis of a diplomatic mission by Potocki is therefore quite plausible, even if the nature and stakes of this possible mission remain opaque.⁴

3 On Stanisław August Poniatowski, see at least Fabre (1963), Zamoyski (1998), and the edition of the king's *Mémoires* (Poniatowski, 2012).

4 It is also surprising that Potocki makes no mention of any meetings he may have had in Constantinople with his compatriot Józef Mikosza, who had been staying there since 1782. Stanisław

However, to understand Potocki's personal, intellectual, and ideological relationship with Turkey, it is not sufficient to examine only the pages of his youthful journey. We must also consider the various political writings he produced some twenty years later. Taken together, this dyptic reveals a complex and often contradictory picture, balancing the fascination of the young traveler with the political positions dictated by exceptionally tense circumstances.

The Voyage en Turquie et en Egypte is presented as a collection of letters addressed to the traveler's mother, Anna Teresa Potocka de domo Ossolińska, although it is known that these letters circulated more widely. Additionally, there exists a manuscript (not translated into Polish) with enriched content, written for King Stanisław August, in which one can find several passages of uncensored material produced during the tense period of the Great Sejm. For example, when discussing the Tartars from Crimea, Potocki provides the king with exclusive observations that are far from flattering, particularly regarding Russia and its perfidious methods of conquering foreign territories:

J'ai vu à Kerson un de leurs Princes nommé Bahatyr Guerai, frère aîné de Sahin Guerai, et légitime successeur du trône. Il s'était rendu aux Russes à condition qu'ils le renverraient à Constantinople. On le lui permit, mais au lieu de lui tenir parole, on lui fit faire le tour de la mer Noire et on le mena à Kerson où il est retenu prisonnier, avec son fils Selim, et quelques-uns de ses sujets qui ont voulu suivre sa fortune. C'est à des traits semblables, plus souvent qu'à leurs victoires, que les Russes sont redevables de la plupart de leurs conquêtes, aussi jamais nation conquérante n'a-t-elle été aussi haïe (Potocki, 2015, p. 15).⁵

Similar observations (the one quoted is by no means unique) reveal the young traveler's attitude. Amid the ongoing and repeatedly renewed conflict between Russia and Turkey, his sympathies appear clearly aligned. Everything he recounts about the Turkish world he personally experienced confirms this alignment beyond doubt. Potocki's engagement with this world goes beyond

August had sent him there to teach Polish language and history. In 1787, Mikosza published an important work on the general state of Turkey, which was soon translated and published in German (Siemienieć-Golaś, 2017).

- 5 "I met in Kherson one of their rulers called Bahatyr Guerai, elder brother of Sahin Guarai and legitimate heir to the throne. He surrendered to the Russians on condition that they would send him back to Tsarograd. This was promised to him, but instead of honouring the word given, the captive was taken on a ship which, after sailing around the Black Sea, dumped him in Kherson, where he was imprisoned along with his son Selim and a few subjects who decided to stay with him. The Russians owe most of their victories to similar procedures, which is why among conquering nations there is none more hated."

The Guarai or Gerej Tartar family was one of the khans of Crimea; these khans, who were frowned upon by the Sultan of Constantinople who considered them too close to Russia, were now under the yoke of the Russians who had annexed Crimea in 1783.

mere sympathy: he feels a profound spiritual and cultural connection, one that few previous European travelers had shared – except, perhaps, Lady Wortley Montagu, some fifty years earlier.⁶ Potocki approaches these earlier travelers with both rigor and insight, critically examining their accounts:

Vous serez peut-être étonnée d'apprendre que dans le grand nombre de voyageurs qui abordent en cette ville, il en soit très peu qui puissent en rapporter des idées un peu exactes; rien cependant n'est plus vrai; les plus observateurs ont épuisé leur curiosité à visiter les monuments de la Grèce, et n'envisagent les Turcs que comme les destructeurs des objets de leur culte. Ils arrivent pleins de cette idée, se logent dans les quartiers des Francs, et daignent à peine traverser une fois le port pour aller voir la mosquée de Sainte-Sophie, et revenir chez eux (Potocki, 2015, pp. 55–56).⁷

The Voyage en Turquie et en Egypte is a rather enigmatic text, revealing the force of personal experience and reflection, while remaining silent on many matters – particularly those that may have touched on political or other vested interests. It is clear, however, that meetings and conversations of this kind must have occurred. In any case, the account of this journey stands as a highly subjective testimony, reflecting a genuine desire to understand a neighboring, yet profoundly foreign, nation along with its customs and culture in the broadest sense.

It is worthwhile to dwell briefly on what so captivated the young aristocrat from Podolia, who had already traveled extensively and encountered many different countries. For the purposes of this short essay, we will content ourselves with listing the main subjects that fascinated the traveller, providing a quotation from his text to illustrate each point. Potocki's observations are so clear and incisive that little additional commentary seems necessary.

– Inner peace and the cult of rest:

Les Turcs, jadis féroces guerriers, paraissent enfin être revenus à cette humeur douce et tranquille qui distingue les nations de l'Asie ... C'est aussi là [i.e. dans les reposoirs] que l'habitant de Constantinople vient étendre ses tapis et ses sofas, et jouissant en silence des beautés de la nature qui l'environne, il y passe

6 See the famous *Turkish Embassy Letters* written between 1716 and 1718, first edited in 1763.

7 “You may perhaps be surprised to learn that, among the great multitude of travelers who arrive in this city, very few possess the discernment to carry away any just notions of its manners or customs. Nothing, however, could be more erroneous; for the most diligent of observers, having wearied themselves with the inspection of the monuments of Greece, regard the Turks solely as the profane destroyers of that which they revere. They come possessed of this prejudice, take up their lodgings in the quarters of the Franks, and scarcely condescend to cross the port, save to glance upon the mosque of Saint Sophia, before hastening back to their homes.”

des journées entières plongé dans ces douces rêveries dont le charme ignoré des esprits actifs est si connu des âmes contemplatives (Potocki, 2015, pp. 78–80).⁸

– Respect for nature, especially trees, plants, and all animals:

Vous aurez sans doute entendu parler du soin qu'on prend à Constantinople des chiens et des chats qui peuplent les rues de cette ville. Mais ces animaux ne sont pas les seuls qui aient droit aux libéralités des Turcs. Un nombre infini de tourterelles et de ramiers qui habitent librement tous les toits vont au-devant des barques chargées de grain et ont l'air d'y exiger avec hauteur leur droits, fixé généralement à une mesure par sac. Les oiseaux aquatiques dont le canal est couvert se détournent à peine quand la rame est prête à les toucher, et leurs nids sont respectés même des enfants qui seraient partout ailleurs leurs ennemis naturels. Enfin la confiance mutuelle rétablie entre l'homme et les animaux semble quelquefois ramener l'observateur à l'enfance de la nature, mais ce qui achèvera sans doute de vous gagner en faveur des Turcs, c'est leur respect pour les arbres: les couper est un crime énorme qui fait murmurer tout le voisinage, aussi n'est-il rien qu'on ne fasse pour l'éviter (Potocki, 2015, p. 78).⁹

– Sociability and conversational culture:

Il ne me reste plus pour vous faire connaître les amusements du peuple turc qu'à vous parler des cafés; la plupart bâtis en forme de kiosque reçoivent l'air de tous les côtés et sont d'une fraîcheur admirable. Ils sont le rendez-vous des oisifs de tous les états; le vizir, capitain-pacha et le sultan lui-même y viennent souvent déguisés apprendre ce que l'on pense d'eux, car le caractère et les moindres actions des gens en place sont ici comme ailleurs le sujet favori de toutes les conversations; d'autres fois elles roulent sur la galanterie. Un conteur de profession rapporte

8 “The Turks, who were once renowned as fierce and unyielding warriors, appear at length to have reverted to that gentle and tranquil temper which so happily distinguishes the nations of Asia. It is likewise in these places of repose that the inhabitants of Constantinople unfurl their carpets and arrange their sophas; there, partaking in the silent delight of the beauties of Nature that encompass them, they pass entire days immersed in those soft reveries, the charm of which, unknown to the restless activity of worldly minds, is so perfectly appreciated by contemplative souls.”

9 “You will doubtless have heard of the care bestowed in Constantinople upon the dogs and cats that abound in its streets. Yet these creatures are not alone in enjoying the generosity of the Turks. An infinite number of turtle-doves and wood-pigeons, which roam freely upon every roof, attend the boats laden with grain, appearing to claim their portion, generally fixed at one measure per sack. The waterfowl that crowd the canal scarce stir when the oar approaches, and even their nests are held sacred by children, who elsewhere would be their natural persecutors. At length, the confidence re-established between man and beast oftentimes transports the observer to the very infancy of Nature; yet what will surely endear the Turks to you most is their veneration for trees: to fell one is deemed a grievous offense, inciting murmurs throughout the neighborhood, so that all means are employed to avoid such an act.”

l'aventure la plus nouvelle, en l'ornant de tous les agréments de l'élocution orientale (Potocki, 2015, p. 59).¹⁰

A simple philosophy of life, applied to daily affairs and founded upon a moral code, yet often observed with a lighthearted spirit:

Leur maxime est qu'il faut jouir et non paraître jouir. De là cette philosophie si douce qu'on ne retrouve que dans les écrits des Orientaux, qui ne s'exprime point par des paradoxes brillants, mais par des apologues d'une vérité frappante, et paraît chercher plutôt à s'épancher qu'à se répandre (Potocki, 2015, p. 79).¹¹

– The art of storytelling and wisdom expressed in countless apologies and tales recited at every meeting place and on every occasion:

Je ne sais trop comment vous trouverez les apologues des Orientaux; pour moi, je raffole de leur manière et je m'y suis essayé: les lectures que j'ai faites depuis près de deux ans m'ont rendu si riche en pensées orientales que je n'ai eu que la peine d'en grouper quelques-uns et de leur donner des cadres. Je suis bien sûr d'avoir réussi à conserver à mes figures leur physionomie orientale, mais je ne suis pas également sûr que cette physionomie réussisse en Occident (Potocki, 2015, pp. 63–64).¹²

Admittedly, Potocki also expresses distaste for the permissive promiscuity, various excesses such as the behaviour of opium addicts and the tolerance of their habit, the bizarre – though spectacular and somewhat artificial – ecstasies of the dervishes, the widespread corruption that enables a generous traveller to circumvent all barriers and prohibitions, and the lasciviousness of dancers,

10 "All that remains for me to recount concerning the diversions of the Turkish people is to speak of their cafés; most of these, built in the form of kiosks, are open to the air on all sides, and afford a most agreeable coolness. They serve as the rendezvous of idlers from every rank; the vizier, the capitan-pacha, and even the sultan himself oftentimes visit in disguise, desirous to learn what opinion is held of them, for the character and slightest actions of those in power are, here as elsewhere, the favorite topic of discourse. At other times, the conversation turns upon matters of chivalry, whilst a professional storyteller relates the newest adventure, embellishing it with all the graces and pleasures of oriental elocution."

11 "Their maxim is that one should enjoy and not appear to enjoy. Hence this gentle philosophy, found only in the writings of the Orientals, which is not expressed in brilliant paradoxes but in strikingly true apologues, and seems to be more interested in expressing itself than in spreading itself."

12 "I'm not sure how you'll find the apologues of the Orientals; for my part, I'm crazy about their style and I've tried my hand at it: the reading I've been doing for nearly two years has made me so rich in Oriental thoughts that all I had to do was group a few of them together and give them a framework. I am quite sure that I have succeeded in preserving the oriental physiognomy of my figures, but I am not equally sure that this physiognomy will succeed in the West."

both male and female, which he finds repulsive despite his well-known lack of prudishness.

But let us return for a moment to the matter of stories, which Potocki not only comments upon but also imitates, weaving into his account a rich series of tales that he composed himself, inspired by what he heard in the squares, on the streets, or – most frequently – in the cafés, as well as what he read in the portable library that accompanied him on his travels. In this collection of short narratives, one can discern the kind of synthesis often employed in Western culture toward the East, portraying it as a foreign yet coherent world, even though its components are widely disparate.

The stories composed by Potocki are set in Tsarograd, Indostan, Persia, and Samarkand. In them, the art of storytelling and literature situates Turkey within a broader, surrounding world – nearer or more distant – whose name, Orient, resonates more as a symbol than as a geographic designation. In this synthesis, Turkey and the Porta do not particularly stand out as exemplars of a despotic state ruled by violence and cruelty, as they commonly do in Western literary accounts of the time (Said, 1978; Berchet, 1992; Wolff, 1994; Hitzel, 2001; Neaimi, 2003; Hatem-Ibrahim, 2010; Kieniewicz, 2013). Instead, Turkey appears simply as one province within this mythical Orient. It may also be noted that, roughly a dozen years later, while travelling in the Caucasus, Potocki would revisit the relationship between Turks and other Eastern cultures – this time informed by ethnological and linguistic observations, and making precise distinctions appropriate to this very different discursive context:

La langue dont je parlais hier est en usage entre Kouba et Shabran, au-delà du Samour. Ce n'est qu'un dialecte persan; on appelle ce dialecte tat. En général, on divise la Perse en turc et tat. Les Turcs (descendants des Seldjoukides) habitent l'Azerbaïdjan et les Tads l'Iran; de ce mot «tat» vient le nom «tadzik» que les Ouzbeks de Boukharie donnent aux naturels du pays (Potocki, 2015, p. 344).¹³

After two months in Constantinople, Potocki departs the Turkish mainland, setting his sights on the next stage of the journey: Egypt, aboard a French vessel. It is noteworthy, incidentally, that he chooses French company at this point, even though France is, as is well known, Russia's political and diplomatic rival in Ottoman affairs. Yet this is not the focus here; rather, attention should be drawn to the personal and emotional tone of the final description that closes the Turkish episode in his account:

13 “The language of which I spoke yesterday is employed between Kouba and Shabran, beyond the Samour. It is merely a dialect of Persian, known by the name of Tat. In general, Persia is divided between Turks and Tats. The Turks, descendants of the Seljuks, inhabit Azerbaijan, whilst the Tats dwell in Iran. From this name, ‘Tat,’ is derived the term ‘Tadzik,’ which the Uzbeks of Bukharia employ to designate the natives of that country.”

Déjà je suis à bord de la Sainte-Anne, corvette française qui doit me porter à Alexandrie. Votre pensée doit me suivre désormais au travers des sables brûlants de l'Afrique. Il est juste de l'arrêter encore un instant sur les rivages délicieux que je suis peut-être destiné à ne plus revoir. L'espèce d'enchantement que j'éprouvai en les voyant pour la première fois m'avait empêché de les décrire, et je les quitte sans que le prestige soit entièrement dissipé. Mais tandis que je veux vous les peindre, la vitesse avec laquelle nous nous en éloignons m'en ôte la possibilité. Déjà je ne vois plus ce bassin superbe toujours couvert de voiles aussi légères que le vent qui les enfle. Je ne vois plus l'amphithéâtre qui l'entoure, les minarets qui le couronnent, les murs imposants de ce sérail qui a vu tomber tant de têtes et gémir tant de beautés; enfin la vue n'a plus pour se reposer que de vastes cimetières. Là, entre les ronces et les cyprès, s'élèvent des milliers de tombeaux qui entourent la ville et servent de cadre au tableau magnifique dont j'ai voulu seulement indiquer quelques traits. Déjà hors de la portée de mes yeux, il se représente encore à mon imagination, mais lorsqu'il s'agit de décrire, l'imagination est pour les voyageurs un guide trop dangereux, et la raison m'avertit de finir (Potocki, 2015, p. 80).¹⁴

Indeed, in his later letters recounting the voyage and exploration of Egypt, the influence of that perilous guide, the imagination, becomes far less evident. Reason once again dominates the traveler's observations.

Reason, moreover, proves to be the guiding principle when Potocki later returns to matters concerning Turkey, or more precisely, Turkish affairs. This is especially evident in his historiographical writings, and in particular in *Essay sur l'histoire universelle et recherches sur celle de la Sarmatie*. Published in 1789, this work systematically compiles information from historians and chroniclers spanning antiquity to the Middle Ages, with the aim of reconstructing the development and transformation of various peoples and states in the Middle East and Central Asia (Niewójt, 2008). This careful synthesis of sources enables the historian to illuminate the complex interrelationships and distinctions that

14 "I am already on board the Sainte-Anne, the French corvette that is to bear me to Alexandria. Your thoughts must now follow me across the burning sands of Africa. Yet it is only fair to linger a moment upon the delightful shores that I may never behold again. The enchantment I felt upon first seeing them forbade all description, and I leave them still cloaked in a certain majesty. But though I would fain paint them for you, the very speed of our retreat denies me the power. Already I can no longer discern that superb basin, ever crowded with sails as light as the winds that bear them. I can no longer see the amphitheatre that encloses it, the minarets that crown it, the stately walls of the seraglio, which has witnessed so many heads fall and so many beauties lament; in the end, all that remains in sight are the vast cemeteries. There, among brambles and cypresses, rise thousands of tombs encircling the city, forming the sombre yet magnificent background of a scene of which I have only sought to indicate a few features. Though already beyond the reach of my eyes, it lingers vividly in my imagination; yet, when it comes to description, imagination is a treacherous guide for the traveller, and reason bids me bring my account to its close."

shape these peoples, within which the Turkmens and Turks naturally occupy their place.

The most striking shift in Potocki's view of Turkey, evident in the writings of the author of *Manuscrit trouvé à Saragosse*, comes from his later advisory and political work for the cabinet of Tsar Alexander I on Eastern affairs. His change in attitude toward Turkey is profound. Personal, intellectual, aesthetic, and moral sympathies for a world of leisure, pleasure, and storytelling have no place. What remains is a cool, political assessment from a Russian perspective, framed by the context of the almost constant conflict with the Porte, which had entered another acute phase in 1806, at a time when Europe watched in disbelief at Napoleon's rapid advance eastward with the Grande Armée. In articles published in the *Journal du Nord*, a St. Petersburg newspaper under his editorial supervision, Potocki fiercely debates French publicists who, at Napoleon's behest, denounce Russia for its alleged constant and despicable aggression against the Ottoman Empire. For example, in February 1807, Potocki writes in response to French complaints about Russian imperialism:

Avant de répondre aux imputations du gouvernement français, nous observons que la Russie, sous le règne de Catherine, a eu avec la Turquie deux guerres sanglantes. Et qu'après des victoires décisives, elle s'est contentée de demander l'embouchure des fleuves, dont elle avait le cours, ce qui est même opposé à l'esprit conquérant. Les pays acquis alors par la Russie étaient des déserts (Potocki, 2004, p. 381).¹⁵

We see that here Potocki writes in a manner entirely opposed to Russia's imperialist and expansionist policies, in contrast to the explicitly anti-Russian note he had confidentially sent to his king some twenty years earlier. Similarly, in letters addressed to his cousin Adam Jerzy Czartoryski, the Tsar's Foreign Minister, as well as to his successor Andrei Budberg (from the summer of 1806), Potocki, drawing on his profound knowledge of the entire southeastern region of the Empire, advocates a calculated strategy aimed at limiting French influence in Eastern Europe and securing the Empire's southern provinces. Quite cynically, yet pragmatically, he argues that the Ottoman Empire should be preserved, however weak, leaving it even a sphere of influence over territories where Sunni Islam predominates, thereby keeping a weak, subjugated neighbor under control while maintaining the appearance – or illusion – of independence (Ranocchi, 2019). There is no place in this strategy for cultural sympathies, although

15 "Before replying to the imputations of the French government, it behooves us to observe that Russia, under the reign of Catherine, waged two bloody wars against Turkey; and that, after achieving decisive victories, she was content merely to demand the mouths of the rivers whose courses she had traced, an action even contrary to the spirit of conquest. The territories thus acquired by Russia at that time were deserts." (*Journal du Nord*, n° VI, February 1807)

Potocki's political reasoning is nonetheless grounded in the recognition of the fundamental national-state determinants that language, religion, and customs together constitute.

To conclude, let us consider what might explain these surprising translations. Jan Potocki's vacillations and upheavals in matters of national and political concern are well known, though they remain largely enigmatic (Beauvois, 1979; Triaire, 1991). His attitude toward Turkey provides a further example of this ideological instability. I would suggest, however, that particular attention should be paid to the fundamental differences between the pro- and contra- statements found in his writings regarding Turkey. These differences are not merely the result of shifting historical and political contexts between 1784 and 1807; the texts also exhibit distinct discursive frameworks, genres, and, in a broader literary sense, literary conditions. It is therefore useful to approach the Turkish themes in Potocki not from a narrow, language-centered perspective, but through a comprehensive prism of discourse. Seen in this light, the example presented here resonates broadly, much as the Oriental tales that so captivated our author extend beyond the immediate moral lessons they convey.

Finally, as a sort of coda, one might mention an apparently anecdotal episode in the life of the writer-traveler. During his stay in Constantinople in 1784 (he would never return to the country), Potocki enlisted the services of a Turk named Ibrahim, who remained loyal to his master until the latter's suicide in 1815. Count Jan and his servant, distinguished by his remarkable presence, formed an almost inseparable duo – an eccentric pairing that fascinated people in Warsaw. Ibrahim would soon prove far more capable than a mere servant; although he did not always accompany his master on his countless journeys, he performed the role of steward to perfection for this whimsical man, who was incapable of managing his own affairs. Ibrahim even oversaw the construction of the small manor house in Uładówka in Podolia, ensuring it bore the proper Oriental touch. The two lived there together for several dark years until the tragic end in December 1815. Thus, although Turkey had various and even contradictory incarnations in Potocki's mind and writings, it remained with him throughout his adult life, embodied in this good, faithful, and enigmatic servant (Ryba, 2010).

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