

ADAM MICKIEWICZ



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I

Ignorance of Poland's history and of the Polish language, the particular difficulty of understanding the destinies of a nation which, for almost two centuries, lived under the yoke of foreign domination and rose time after time to fight for her freedom at the cost of immeasurable sacrifices; a nation retarded in her normal historical development by the powers that occupied her territory — these are the reasons why the masterpieces of our literature have remained until today unknown or little known to the reader, even to one well versed in world literature. To understand the greatest era in our literature, a period which brought forth a galaxy of great poets, the foreign reader must be acquainted with certain events in the history of Poland, and will have to exert his imagination: and even this may not always suffice to make up for his unfamiliarity with the language. When Sainte-Beuve wrote of "The Books of the Polish Pilgrims", he asked that his liberal and republican readers imagine for a moment that they themselves were Irishmen or Poles. Still he realized that this assignment was not easy.

When writing about Mickiewicz one must, therefore, first and foremost, speak of his importance to the Polish people and of his influence upon the Slavonic literatures, although the political activity of this poet transcended the confines of one country and one language, and although he was one of those rare artists who, while profoundly nationalist are at the same time supra-nationalist and internationalist in spirit and in their work. Were one to compare Mickiewicz's significance to the Poles with Victor Hugo's significance to the French, such comparison would be incomplete, notwithstanding their

resemblance. Both of them were great poets and politically active men; each featured in his works not only his nation's past and contemporary life but also predictions of the future toward which their eyes were directed. And yet, Poland's singular destinies in history make it impossible to grasp what Mickiewicz really meant to the Polish people by comparing him with the writer of any nation which developed under normal historical conditions.

The intimate relationship between a writer's life and the fate of his country finds a telling proof in the tragedies suffered by Polish creative artists during the period of foreign domination. Some died in exile, others perished forgotten by the world. One of the greatest Polish and Slavonic poets, Juliusz Slowacki — incidentally, a great antagonist of Mickiewicz's — died in exile in Paris, little known and not at all appreciated. Only a few score of people attended the funeral. But 77 years later, when the poet's ashes were brought to Poland at the demand of the nation, millions of people accompanied his casket to Wawel — Poland's Westminster Abbey, the pantheon of national fame where Polish kings, Kosciuszko and Mickiewicz repose.

Still more completely forgotten and unrecognized died the successor to Mickiewicz, Slowacki and Krasinski — Cyprian Norwid, poet-philosopher, and one of the most famous modernizers of poetry, and not only Polish poetry. The frequent re-evaluation of our writers has almost become a normal procedure with us. And the greatness of these dead is best proved by the fact that new aspects come to light with each successive evaluation.

Always and everywhere, great literature aroused anger and gave rise to the most contradictory opinions; no wonder, since it turned time-honored traditional concepts of the world upside down and played havoc with the well-established order on earth and in heaven.

Nor was Mickiewicz spared these processes of revaluation and readjustment to the requirements of the times. On more than one occasion, Polish reactionaries tried to prove that he was their patron!

The posthumous history of his ideas was by no means less stormy than was his life.

II

Adam Mickiewicz was born on December 24th, 1798 — three years after the third partition of Poland — at Zaosie near Nowogrodek, in Lithuania which was, at that time, part of the Polish Republic. His father, Mikolaj, formerly a soldier with Kosciuszko, was a lawyer in Nowogrodek; his mother — Barbara Majewska, daughter of a superintendent of an estate. The environment into which he was born and where he grew up was that of the small, impoverished gentry, a social stratum which was at that time already highly differentiated, but in the main conservative. The tsarist regime was keeping Lithuania and Byelorussia in a state of economic backwardness. The lot of the peasant there was much harder than in Congress Poland. Cut off from the rest of the world, the countryside round Nowogrodek, a land of valleys and hills, virgin forests and vast groves, had remained faithful to old customs. Of Nowogrodek, the ancient town of Lithuanian dukes, only the glorious memory had survived. Legends and fairy tales and ghost stories were passed on by word of mouth among the local folk. They did leave their mark on the boy's vivid and impressionable imagination. As a son of small gentry, of a father who was an educated man, a lawyer familiar with the ideas of the Age of Enlightenment that still survived, he did not feel separated from the local folk. In later years he was to recall the country of his youth, enamoured with the language and the fairy tales of the Byelorussian people.

As a fourteen-year-old youth he lived through an experience that told on all his environment: the entry of Napoleon's armies which passed through Nowogrodek in their march on Russia. The poet's father, who had been collaborating with the

emissaries of the Duchy of Warsaw, did not live to see the Napoleonic forces arrive. Three years later upon his graduation from a Dominican College, young Mickiewicz matriculated at the Vilna University. That university whose pride were Jan and Jędrzej Śniadecki, eminent professors of mathematics, astronomy and chemistry, Groddeck, outstanding connoisseur of ancient art, Joachim Lelewel, distinguished historian and progressive thinker, was the centre of intellectual life in Lithuania carrying on the best traditions of the National Educational Commission; from here, the ideas of the Age of Enlightenment spread throughout the country. The relatively liberal rule of Tsar Alexander was at that time favourable to the development of cultural life. Thus the Vilna University and the Czacki Lyceum in Krzemieniec were the leading centers of the intellectual movement in Poland of that time, along with Warsaw; they went even further than the capital in their liberalism and in their undisguised sympathy for freemasonry, as well as in their promotion of the philosophic and social tenets of the Enlightenment.

After his first year of study, Mickiewicz was awarded the degree of candidate of philosophy. In the following year he transferred to the faculty of literature and arts. He studied ancient literature, rhetorics, and world history. Philology was taught by Gottfried Ernst Groddeck, pupil of Christian Gottlob Heyne, professor in Goettingen, who interpreted ancient history in the new Winkelmann-Lessing spirit. The young student's interest in literature was awakened by Leon Borowski, professor of literature who based his theory of style in literature on the antique and on Herder.

More, however, than any other professor, it was Joachim Lelewel, very popular among the students, who influenced Mickiewicz's ideology. One of the earliest poems Mickiewicz dedicated to that great erudite and fervent republican who later on was to play an historic part during the November uprising and as an emigré. That poem, still written in the pseudo-classical style and overloaded with erudition, describes

the history of mankind from the ancient Greeks and Romans up to the French Revolution, in accordance with Lelewel's teachings, i.e., with an emphasis on human progress and faith in humanity. Striking in this poem of a youth is the humanistic universalism of the author. "That you are from the Niemen, a Pole, a European... And the sun of truth knows of no East and no West..." Vilna University had given its alumnus not only knowledge but also a deep feeling of world citizenship.

An important event in the poet's life at that period was his joining of a secret organization of university youth which became active in 1817 under the name of "Philomaths' Society".

A great number of secret societies conspired underground in the Europe of the Holy Alliance. Freemasons' and Carbonaries' organizations were gaining strength, and the number of clubs of sworn rebels against the social order, against autocratic régimes was growing. Tsar Alexander dreamed of directing the Freemason movement into calmer channels and, with this end in view, he joined a masonic lodge. Lithuanian masonry did not have to go into hiding at first. The Philomaths barely came in contact with freemasonry. In a short period of time, they underwent an obvious evolution: from general ethics and self-education they turned to political and patriotic aims. Mickiewicz was one of the most active founders of the society. He described the tasks which the Philomaths had set for themselves as follows: "The aim of the society is universal welfare. with particular stress laid upon more education, and of inculcating, by the means of education, morals and a sense of nationality..." Such a formulation was broad and general enough to allow of an inclusion of patriotic and revolutionary aims.

Soon after, another secret society, the Philarets, was created in addition to the Philomaths. The membership of the new society increased rapidly and succeeded even in establishing contact with the youth movement conspiring in Russia.

The fact that the Philomaths and the Philarets intended to draw their members not only from among university students

but from the broad circles of Polish youth, proves that those who had set themselves the task of inculcating in the young people the sentiment of moral purity and of love for their homeland, were in reality setting up an organization which could, under favorable conditions, become a union in the fight for political freedom.

To Mickiewicz, his participation in the work of the society proved of the greatest value. Here were formed those of his friendships to which he was to remain faithful. Here he first felt the joy of common interests and fraternity with people professing the same ideals. In the midst of the naive, and often somewhat schoolboyish work of the society, the young student was maturing into a social worker and revolutionary poet.

The joy he had felt among his young friends remained in his memory and was later to light up the darkest nights of his precarious life.

Upon graduation from the university (in 1819) he was appointed teacher at a secondary school in Kovno. His ties with the society were of necessity loosened.

This, however, was not the sole reason for his ever growing, insistent urge to write poetry; finding no outlet for his stormy temperament, he shuts himself off temporarily from the outer world and lives in the narrow circle of his own experiences; he feels the growing craving for solitude, and at the same time he flees it. The works of Schiller, Goethe and Byron open his eyes to the existence of worlds he hardly suspected. He had joined the society as a translator of Voltaire and a student of pseudo-classics, and he bid farewell to it as a romanticist at variance with himself.

III

The juvenile works of Mickiewicz were nurtured by the ideology of the Enlightenment; the form he used was reminiscent of the works of Stanislaw Trembecki, a poet, endowed with a magnificent gift of creating words, who combined his classical style with a lively sense of the language enriched by words drawn from the vernacular and by ingenious neologisms. At the same time he was subject to the strong influence of Voltaire whose "Maid of Orleans" the young poet translated freely. At that time he wrote his first mock-heroic poem "Kartofla" (Potato). It contains a sharp critique of every kind of contemporary obscurantism as presented to the people with the patent historical embellishments, and an estimate of the development of mankind right up to the poet's day. To centuries of ignorance and the reign of superstition, Mickiewicz holds up as a contrast a new era in human history which began with the American and the French Revolutions. He predicts the time when "The people-rulers... at their feet will see old temples crumble and out of the spark loose in Europe, will start new conflagrations."

The most outstanding and the most progressive work of that period was the "Ode to Youth" written in 1820. This poem, which has an unusual power of expression when considered against the background of Polish poetry of that time, combines within itself the language of freemasonic symbols with idealistic Schillerian rhetorics and welds the ideas of Enlightenment to the romantic contempt for reason, intoxicated with youth and ready to overthrow the universe. It soon became one of the most popular works of poetry; some of the locutions gradually became household words and were most widely quoted.

At the outbreak of the November uprising in 1830, the closing lines of the Ode were posted on the walls of Warsaw's City Hall: "Hail, hail, thou dawn of man's new liberty! Salvation's sunrise will disperse the night!"

This poem marked the turning point in the poet's development: the birth of Mickiewicz — the romanticist of action, the poet-revolutionary.



The first volume of Adam Mickiewicz's poetry was published in Vilna in 1822 — in an edition of 500 copies. It contained "Ballads and Romances", a genre of poetry then unknown in Poland. The strength of these poems lay in their language, which was not the literary but the spoken language. Instead of the conventional poetic metaphors he used simple, eloquent expressions. This poetry had the ingenuity and simplicity of folk imagination, but it recreated folk motives in its own way. Thus, for instance, a few sentences taken from a popular folk song grew, in the ballad "Lilies", into a moral drama. In these "Ballads" the common man, the peasant, the hunter, the maiden contend for happiness and a full life.

In Poland, where the people still carried the burden of feudalism, the lyrics of the young Kovno teacher paved the way to recognition of the human rights of the peasants, to the general awareness of their civil rights.

"Have a heart and look into the hearts" bids the program line in his poem "Romanticism". And indeed, such poetry touched the hearts, first and foremost, in contrast with pseudo-classical poetry which was intended to educate the people.

One must read what was written in Poland before Mickiewicz to be able to understand the great upheaval accomplished by that Vilna Philomath! "Ballads and Romances" were not poems in the strict sense of the term. They were a meadow in spring-time, a lake reflecting the silvery moon, the kiss of one's first sweetheart. That is what youth felt reading his lyrics. Certainly, Mickiewicz did have forerunners, one of whom deserves

to be mentioned in particular, namely, the popular and sentimental poet Franciszek Karpiński, but even he could not match the power of feeling which burst forth from young Adam's lyrics. Most astonishing of all was the weird world of wonders which the poet introduced in his ballads, the world of spirits, ghosts, mermaids; all of this was already well known in German and English poetry, in Poland, however, it was a delightful novelty.

All those popular and fantastic elements appeared even more forcefully in the second volume of Mickiewicz's poetry (1823) which contained the dramatic poem "Forefathers' Eve", Parts II and IV; also at that time, the poet wrote a dramatic fragment of "Forefathers' Eve", part I, which was not published until after his death. In the introduction to the poem we find the following information by the poet himself:

"Forefathers' Eve" is the name of a festival still celebrated among the common folk in many villages in Lithuania, Prussia, and Courland in memory of the departed forefathers. This festival goes back to pagan times, and was once called the feast of the goat (*koźciel*) over which presided the Wizard (*koźlarz*, *guślarz*), who was both priest and poet. At present, since the enlightened clergy and gentry have made efforts to root out a custom attended by superstitious practices and often by reprehensible excesses, the common folk celebrate Forefathers' Eve secretly in chapels or in empty houses not far from the graveyard. There they usually spread a feast of various viands, drinks, and fruit and invoke the spirits of the departed. It may be remarked that the custom of giving a banquet to the dead seems to be common to all pagan peoples, to the Greeks of the Homeric period, to the Scandinavians, to the Orientals, and to the Isles of the New World in our own times. Our Forefathers' Eve has this peculiarity, that it blends pagan ceremonies with ideas of the Christian religion, especially since All Souls' Day occurs about the time of that festival. The common folk conceive that by the proffered food and drink and by their songs they afford relief to souls in purgatory. The solemn

purpose of the festival, the solitary spot, the night hour, and the fantastic rites used to appeal strongly to my imagination. I often heard tales and songs of how the departed would return with requests or with warnings, and in each absurd fancy I could perceive a certain moral aspiration, and certain teachings represented to the senses in popular form. The present poem gives pictures in a similar tone; the ceremonial songs, the spells, and the incantations are for the most part faithfully, and sometimes literally, taken from popular poetry.”¹

★

Mickiewicz wrote “Forefathers’ Eve” in Vilna and in Kovno. He may have conceived it partly because of his heartbreaking experience with Maryla Wereszczak whom he loved deeply and who did not respond. But “Forefathers’ Eve” is more than a confession of an unhappy, frustrated lover. It is rather the confession of “a child of its century”, a great reckoning — both social and philosophic — with the times he lived in.

Part II which may seem rather operatic in form, is in fact a parable. The spirits from purgatory and from hell who have come to celebrate “Forefathers’ Eve” typify the various aspects of man’s fate. Thus the children ask for a grain of mustard, for there can be no human life without bitter suffering. The girl who is condemned to remain forever suspended between heaven and earth just because she never touched the ground while she was alive, sounds the warning that one may not live on dreams and on beauty alone and keep aloof from the realities of life, for there can be no humanity, one cannot be human without a thorough experience of things human.

The hellish spectre of an evil lord who knew no mercy in his lifetime may not expect to be ever forgiven by the peasants and serfs whom he used to maltreat. They swoop down upon him like a flight of night birds to take their just revenge. This scene, one of the most splendid in Polish poetry is a superbly dramatic protest against the oppression of man by man and an

¹ Translated by Dorothea Prall Radin, 1925.

allegory of crime and punishment. With it, young Mickiewicz joined the ranks of the revolutionary poets of romanticism. There can be no humanity without a human relationship of man to man. Human rights are the privilege of those who do not violate them.

...Him who never was human
No human can help.

Although he makes use quite freely of Christian motives, this time the young poet's ethics deviate from the evangelic principles. His sense of justice is severe and knows no mercy for those who violate human rights. "Forefathers' Eve" is a pagan festival and the same severe code of morals that prevails in folk songs and in primitive folklore is strictly observed by the author. And quite intentionally, the magic formulas and incantations in "Forefathers' Eve" were stylized versions of the spells, charms and chants of the Byelorussian folklore.

All the apparitions — symbols of crime and human shortcomings — enter the stage and fade away, and only the last, a strange ghost, remains, unable to forsake its secret love — the shepherdess.

The second part of the poem forms a separate dramatic unit called "Forefathers' Eve" Part IV.

★

Part IV of "Forefathers' Eve" was so violent an explosion of amorous passion, so candid and fiery a declaration that one would search all our preceding literature in vain for a counterpart. Boy-Zelenski, the outstanding essayist, translator and historian of literature wrote about this unique love poetry as follows: "For the first time in (Polish) literature a voice is heard that is the primal voice of all poetry: love for a woman. And it speaks so forcefully, with such elemental fire, as if something long repressed, something confined for centuries, suddenly exploded and rushed forth like a stream of lava."

Indeed there is something of the fiery stream of lava — something that cannot be quenched by the reasoning of his