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# MICKIEWICZ'S DRAMATIC POEM "FOREFATHERS' EVE" AS MILLENARIAN PROPHECY

In the following explication of Mickiewicz's *Forefathers' Eve*, we refer to the first two acts, numbered 2 and 4 by the poet, as Parts 1 and 2 of a three-part dramatic poem. Though these two acts appeared some nine years before the final portion, we hope to show that the three parts constitute a dramatic whole. The problem of *Dziady: Widowisko*, traditionally called Part 1, and of the Digression, a series of poems tacked on to the end of Part 3, we will deal with in a later study; at any rate they do not affect the thesis of this paper.

We have used the term "dramatic poem", rather than "drama in poetry" or "poetic drama", because *Forefathers' Eve* is more properly a poem rather than a play: it is intended primarily to be read and not to be staged. This should be clear at least from the opening ballad and the Digression, neither of which could be staged and yet both of which form an integral part of the work as a whole. The use of "dramatic poetry" was not peculiar to Mickiewicz, but was in fact rather common among the Romantics. One might cite Byron's *Manfred* and Shelley's *Prometheus Unbound* as other examples; and yet Mickiewicz produced a much more mature work than either Byron or Shelley, because through the figure of Konrad he went beyond nineteenth-century prophecy, beyond the rejection of romanticism into a far-reaching vision of what is taking place in this century, in our own time. Prompted by the same tragic situation of Poland which caused Krasiński in *The Undivine Comedy* and Słowacki in *Kordian* to be prophetic, Mickiewicz also fixed his gaze on the future, but with more startling results. *Forefathers' Eve* was the product of a fierce internal struggle, and this leads us to the final reason for calling the work a dramatic poem, namely, that its purpose is not dramatic, but lyrical: *Forefathers' Eve* is the chronicle of the poet-prophet working out his life definition.

„Przywróć nam Dziady". This line from Part 2 of *Forefathers' Eve* expresses the attitude of the people participating in the pagan ritual called "Dziady": give

us back our "dziady", our ancestors. Save them. If Poland were to speak prophetically to the world about the world's uncertain future, this surely is what that deeply pious and traditionally Catholic people would say. For this reason Mickiewicz chose that ancient ritual as the mythical symbol for his prophecy of the millenium. The celebration itself, a conjuring of the souls of the dead, to provide food and prayer for their salvation, is very similar to the Catholic Mass, with the conjurer as priest, the dead as the word or revelation, and the food as eucharist. But it is nature's mass: its roots are not in history but in the primeval heart of mankind. It is popular rather than institutional, romantic rather than classical. And so the play itself is a sacrament, a symbol effecting what it symbolizes. Grounded in tradition, it prophesies and is a symbol of a prophetic spirituality grounded in tradition. The meaning of the play, then, is the same as the meaning of the ritual: give us back our ancestors.

Perhaps we should begin with a note about our method of interpretation. Fiction and drama are universal human languages: their vocabulary is symbolism and their syntax is plot structure. By plot structure we mean simply what Aristotle called the beginning, middle and end of a story. Plot is moral action in which the recognition of (1) a problem results in (2) a new ideal, and the synthesis of condition and ideal effects (3) the resolution. The archetype of these three parts is Dante's *Divine Comedy*: the *Inferno*, the source, the Heart, causes Dante to seek the *Purgatorio*, the ideal, the Mind; and from these two the *Paradiso*, the complete person is synthesized: the saints, as stars in heaven, have the fires of heart and the altitude of mind in perfect equilibrium.

Mickiewicz's play begins on Forefathers' Eve, the night before All Souls Day, when traditionally the Polish people would gather in their churches and entreat conjurers to call up the souls of the dead. On the particular night which Part 1 depicts, three apparitions are conjured up: they are, of course, the Heart, Mind and Person phases of the plot structure of Part 1. The first ghosts to appear are those of two children, Joseph and Rose. They are symbolic of the heart of mankind, which has sought to be innocent and pious, to share the bliss of children. This, as the children tell us in the play, is what has barred mankind from the kingdom of heaven: "He who has never tasted bitterness / Will never taste sweetness in heaven". So the children ask for two mustard seeds, from which Christ said that the kingdom of heaven grows, and which represent bitter experience, an analogy to the Tree of Life, source of the knowledge of good and evil. The giving of the seeds to Joseph and Rose (i. e., to Joseph and Mary), symbolic of conception, is a promise of the Second Coming of Christ.

The next ghost to be conjured up is that of the aristocratic overlord. He is symbolic of the mind of man which has been far too guilty of oppression and exploitation to enter the kingdom of heaven. Separated from its human origin, it cannot be redeemed by human reform. This is made clear through the intervention of the Raven and the Owl: the people are willing to give the overlord the two grains of



wheat he has requested, but in the name of vengeance the birds prevent them. The birds, then, are symbolic of the desperate revolutionary, who stands in the way of reconciliation and thereby postpones the coming of the kingdom.

The final ghost to appear is the maiden, who is symbolic of the spirit or will of mankind: she cannot enter the kingdom of heaven because she has not affirmed this life. Her hope has been other-worldly: her frustration is represented by her futile attempt to grasp the lamb and the butterfly, symbols of innocence and resurrection. The maiden's story is the story of alienated spirituality: her name is Zosia (Sofia: wisdom): she has rejected the old lovers (Oleś, or Alexander, the representative of Greece; Józio, or Joseph, the representative of Israel; and Antoś, or Anthony, the representative of Rome); she has lived nineteen summers, that is, the nineteen centuries of Christianity, and she has died. Her only hope, then, is that some young man will touch her to the earth and thus enable her to enter the kingdom of heaven. The conjurer promises her that she has only two years to wait for this to take place.

Part 1 is the presentation of the problem of the play, man's historical problem: the failure of the past. It ends with a promise granted because the people have faced the truth. An unsummoned ghost appears symbolic of something that lies hidden from men. He is Mickiewicz come to bring redemption to Poland. He is the romantic poet come to save the people of the world. He is the Christ of the New Testament come to redeem the people of the Old Testament. He is the Messiah come to redeem the Tribe. He is the present come to redeem the past. He is the mind come to redeem the heart.

Part 2 takes place during the last three hours of the day, the end of the past. (Part 3 will be at midnight, the beginning of a new day, the future.) In Part 2, the ghost that had appeared at the end of Part 1 comes as a hermit, the estranged romantic poet, to reveal to a priest in three stage hours his experience of the ideal of the primacy of heart over mind. He calls these hours the Hour of Love, the Hour of Despair, and the Hour of Warning. In the Hour of Love, the recognition of his loss of faith, symbolized by Maryla, causes him to flee sorrowing through the world with a burning heart that would melt granite or gold. At the end of this hour, in the conversation with the glowworm, he realizes finally that his heart will ever burn and give light regardless of how painful and terrible it is. This is his acceptance of his prophetic role, an acceptance which is symbolized by the hermit's baptism of himself: he washes his brow with water and, after several other references to the baptismal rite, assumes the name of Gustav, the man of taste ("gust"), the artist. Thus, the Hour of Love offers prophecy as an ideal opposed to the piety represented by the two children in Part 1.

The second hour is the Hour of Despair. It is the story of Gustav's own mind: how he fell in love with the faith, how he saw civilization (his old home) in ruins, his father and mother dead, without heir, and finally how he saw that the faith was married to worldly power. He saw then what he must do: he must sacrifice



himself. Reason must depose itself so that the heart can be the guide of life. The ideal, then, is not rule, as represented by the overlord in Part 1, but self-sacrifice as symbolized by the suicide of the romantic poet. The baptism was an acceptance of life; the suicide an acceptance of death. Gustav is now prophet of both heart and mind. The final hour, the Hour of Warning, is his prophecy.

Gustav's prophecy, of course, will present an ideal opposed to the spirituality symbolized by the maiden, Zosia, in Part 1. Her problem was that she had never been rooted to the earth: spirituality was not of the people. Gustav's answer to this is the plea for the return of Forefathers' Eve: "Przywróć nam Dziady", not "dziady" in the sense of ancestors, as we used the word in the opening paragraph of this paper, but "Dziady" as the name of the ritual. Give us back Forefathers' Eve: give us back the earthly religion that springs from the people. The playwright has Gustav point to the earth when he makes this plea.

Gustav, then, represented the romantic answer to the problem of the crisis of history. When he published Parts 1 and 2 in 1823, Mickiewicz was giving the world a complete play — as complete as he could make it at that point. It contained an analysis of the problems of the past and the solution provided by the Christ-figure of the romantic poet. But through his later experiences, Mickiewicz came to realize that the romantic poet was not Christ, but anti-Christ. After nine eventful years his visions of past and present had been complemented with a vision of the future: heart and mind had been synthesized into person. The result was Part 3.

To begin with, then, Mickiewicz had to purge himself of Gustav. Thus, in the Prologue, we see a lone prisoner scratch on the wall of his cell a notice of Gustav's death and of the birth of a new hero, Konrad. It will be Konrad's assignment to reveal or confess the sins of Gustav and by the mediation of a priest, Father Peter, and a maiden, Eva, to atone for the romantic past.

Scene 1, the prison scene, represents the new world of the poet-prophet, a post-revolutionary world, in which the people are oppressed not by a traditional aristocracy and other-worldly spirituality, but more drastically and more cruelly by *Nowosilcow* — that is to say, a new power, *nowa sila*, the establishment and politics of modern dictatorship. In this situation Konrad is gloomy rather than arrogant. One of his fellow prisoners remarks of him: "But why does Konrad sit quietly gloomy, / As if he were counting his sins before confession?" We take it, then that after the other prisoners leave, when Konrad launches into his famous Improvisation, he is in fact confessing<sup>1</sup>. Though the Improvisation does not have the self-deprecating tone or intent of a confession, it is nonetheless, as Konrad himself puts it, a baring of his soul, an opening of his heart to God.

<sup>1</sup> This confession was the subject of an earlier article published by one of the present authors in a previous issue of this journal. The discrepancies between that article and this one arise from the fact that at that time the author did not understand the role of the confession in the total work. Once the confession was seen as related to the problem of how people can destroy their past and yet live according to it, then the present study was made possible.



In the Improvisation, Konrad discloses Gustav's three sins: in lines 1—94, the sin of separation from mankind through pride, of which Gustav was guilty in his Hour of Love; in lines 95—221, the sin of separation from self through despair, of which Gustav was guilty in the Hour of Despair; and in lines 222—314, the sin of separation from God through defiance, of which Gustav was guilty in the Hour of Warning through his denial of Christianity. What Konrad's speech betrays is that Gustav had been overcome by the same three temptations of Satan which Christ had resisted in Matthew, 4: 1—11<sup>2</sup>. Konrad's ruthless honesty earns for him the absolution symbolized by Father Peter's exorcism.

These first three scenes take place on Christmas Eve, and immediately after the exorcism, the singing of Christmas carols is heard. This birth of the real Christ, Konrad — the syllables of his name begin with Chi and Rho — as opposed to Gustav, the anti-Christ, is a fulfillment of the first section of Part 1: the mustard seeds have resulted in the birth of the kingdom.

The next three scenes contain dreams or visions: the first, Eva's, is a penance for Konrad's confession, the wearing of the rose exposed on her breast; the second, Father Peter's, a sin-by-sin atonement for the Improvisation; and finally, Senator Nowosilcow's, in which the horrible aspect of Gustav's pride in modern politics is promised its annihilation.

In scene 5, Father Peter atones for each of the sins which Konrad has confessed: the sin of pride is erased through Father Peter's opening acknowledgment of his own lowliness; the sin of despair is atoned for through a vision of the resurrection; and the sin of defiance is atoned for when the angels take Father Peter's soul and place it at the knees of his heavenly Father. With the atonement for Gustav's sins, Christ is symbolically among us once again in the person of Konrad. This is the Second Coming. But Christ is a sign of contradiction: "Do you think that I came to give peace on the earth? No, I tell you, but rather division. For henceforth in one house five will be divided, three against two, and two against three". (Luke, 12: 51—52.) The coming of Christ, then, brought about through the drama of the confession, is a clarion call for the final struggle, and the forces of evil make their appearance in scene 6, the Senator's vision. This scene is in all respects the exact opposite of Father Peter's vision: devils rather than angels, fall instead of resurrection, and transportation to hell rather than heaven. This is the separation of the wheat from the chaff, a direct fulfillment of the second section of Part 1, involving the two grains of wheat denied the overlord.

The stage is now set for the Last Judgment, and indeed, the final scenes of Part 3

<sup>2</sup> Gustav's Hour of Love represented a loss of faith (Maryla), whereas Christ defended faith with the proposition that "man does not live on bread alone but on every word that comes from the mouth of God". Gustav's Hour of Despair was a loss of hope, while Jesus had insisted that man should hope in the Lord and not put Him to the test. Finally, Gustav's Hour of Warning was an act of defiance, a *non serviam*, and therefore a loss of love, while Christ had rejected Satan with the pronouncement that "you must worship the Lord your God, and serve Him alone".

follow exactly the description of the Last Judgment given in Matthew, 25: 31—46. Scene 7, the Warsaw Salon, presents the separated nations (cf. verse 32); scene 8, the Vilno Salon, the act of judgment (cf. verse 33); and scene 9, Forefathers' Eve, the vision of the damned in hell and the son of man, Konrad, taking possession of the kingdom (cf. verses 34—46).

In the Warsaw Salon, we see the breakdown of historical institutions symbolized by a separation of government and people: at the table a general and several supercilious literati, speaking in French, express their frivolous opinions about frivolous things; at the door a group of young and elderly Polish patriots, speaking Polish, discuss the terrible events of these last days. That this is a caricature of Nowosilcow's relation to his subjects is shown by the general's remark that had the Senator been still in Warsaw, their dances would be more tastefully regulated. We are now prepared to see the Senator in action, to see him condemned by his own sins.

Scene 8 has the same threefold division as the Improvisation and Father Peter's vision: it is the prophecy of the victory of the humble over the proud, of hope over despair, and of union with God over defiance. Nowosilcow's pride is deflated by a woman of the court, who is shocked to hear how young Rollison has been treated. The suggestion of doom (that the princess will hear of this abuse of power) prompts Nowosilcow to deal with his lackey, the Doctor, for evidence to support his cause. His pride has led him, however, to a false hope, for the Doctor and his room go up in smoke by an act of God, a lightning bolt. This *deus ex machina* fulfills the prophecy of Part 1, when it was said that the overlord's crimes could not be wiped out by human agency. Thus, the millenium is to be inaugurated not by Spartacus (revolution) but by Christ (divine intervention on behalf of a faithful people). Significantly, this divine intervention comes precisely at the moment of judgment, when during the dancing of the minuet in the Ball scene, the wicked are placed on the left, and the good on the right.

Finally, then, scene 9, Forefathers' Eve, is the prophecy of the arrival of the millenium. The woman, who will not go into the chapel but asks the sorcerer to conjure up the ghost of a young man with strange eyes that she had seen on her wedding day — that woman is Gustav's Maryla, she who had married worldly power. She is now a widow. The sorcerer raises out of their graves two fresh corpses which the reader will recognize as the Doctor and General Bajkow, symbols of the wealth and power that surrounded Nowosilcow. The Senator, apparently, is still at his precarious post, but his props have fallen and the ghost of the Doctor awaits him with burning silver to pour through and through him for all eternity. The ritual time is almost over when the ghost appears as though unbidden, riding on horseback, leading fifty wagons northward. The wound is still fresh upon his breast and the small wound of Gustav's pride still sits darkly on Konrad's brow; but now he is free at last. Konrad, the Savior, is seen leading the simple people on their way into the future: Konrad, the poet becomes man of action, at last fulfills the promise to



the maiden, Zosia, for through him Maryla has come to Forefathers' Eve, the Christian faith has returned to its source, the heart of people.

Thus Poland, through Mickiewicz, has provided its prophetic message: that the new man will build his new world on the sacred foundation of his ancestors. For *Forefathers' Eve* makes it clear that the people will get back their "dziady", their ancestors, and that they will get back their "Dziady", their earthly religion.

This prompts us to conclude with a prophecy of our own concerning a third "Dziady": it, too, will be returned to the people, who have every right to demand that we give them back Mickiewicz's play. This is the final and the most urgent meaning of the moving plea: "Przywróć nam Dziady".

## „DZIADY” ADAMA MICKIEWICZA JAKO ZAPOWIEDŹ NOWEGO TYSIĄCLECIA

### STRESZCZENIE

*Dziady* Mickiewicza — poemat dramatyczny złożony z trzech części — przepowiadają nadejście nowego tysiąclecia, nowej epoki, ery duchowości zakorzenionej w tradycji. Pierwsza część *Dziadów* (przez Mickiewicza oznaczona jako część II) w formie udratyzowanej ukazuje bankructwo przeszłości: duchowość wspierała się bowiem na fałszywym wyobrażeniu ideału niewinności (zjawia dwojga dzieci), na okrutnej dla poddanych racji postępowania (widmo pana), na „życiu nie dla świata” (dziewczyna). W części drugiej (u Mickiewicza część IV) Gustaw rozwiązań dla czasu teraźniejszego, tj. okresu romantyzmu, poszukuje w przeszłości: duch winien być wieszcz, a nie pobożny (godzina Miłości); winien wspierać się na samopoświęceniu, nie na przepisach prawa (godzina Rozpaczy); powinien być ziemski, a nie spoza świata (godzina Przestrogi). Konrad w części III pojawia się, aby zdemaskować „grzeszność” rozwiązań Gustawa i odpokutować za nią. Staje się — poprzez sceny z widzeniem Ewy i Księdza Piotra — wieszczym symbolem nadejścia nowego Zbawiciela. Sceny końcowe zapowiadają Sąd Ostateczny: wtedy siły Szatana same się unicestwią, człowiek zrzuci z siebie wszelką polityczną i duchową niewolę, a ludziom przywrócona zostanie wiara.

Przełożyła Janina Kosińska