

A FEW WORDS ON *PAN TADEUSZ*

by GEORGE R. NOYES

It was just a half century ago, in the autumn of 1898, when I was studying at the University of St. Petersburg, that I first made the acquaintance of *Pan Tadeusz*. Sitting in the classroom of Jan Łoś, later a scholar of rare distinction and, I am proud to say, a good friend of my own, I made my way through its opening pages. I read the poem also in company with three or four young Poles who were attending the University. One among them, Roman Morgulec, appealed to me by his glowingly upright personality, fine as that of Łoś himself. Thus memories of two loyal Poles are blended with my memories of a loyal poem. I promptly realized that that poem was a work worthy of affection and homage, that I had made no mistake in trying to learn Polish at the expense of time that would have made my Russian less imperfect. What charmed me first in *Pan Tadeusz* was the author's childlike point of view, mingled with his own consciousness that his point of view was childlike.

Let each man recall his memories of his mother as he knew her in the days of his childhood. Was she not the fairest of women? Was not all about her tingled with her own loveliness? Was not the lace that she wore on Sundays the rarest and most delicate of fabrics? Yes, even the china bowl that stood on her breakfast table was more shapely than a Grecian urn. Even the milk that she gave him with his porridge was a trifle whiter than that served in other houses. Each of us cherishes these childish self-deceptions, smiles at them, yet is proud of them; but he never speaks of them. For with our feeble powers of speech, if you or I should tell of these memories we would be ludicrous.

Yet some masters of expression have told of their wholesouled delight in the world that surrounded them as children. Here for example are words from Thomas Traherne, an English mystic of the seventeenth century:

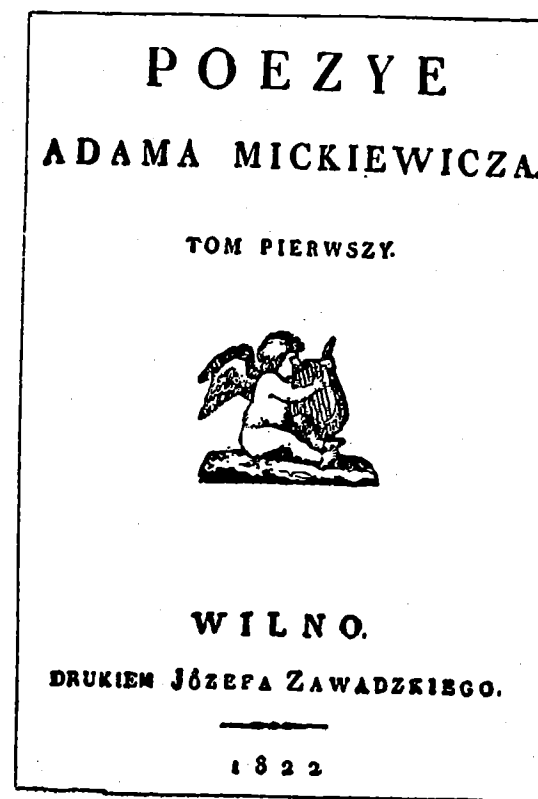
Certainly Adam in Paradise had not more sweet and curious apprehensions of the world, than I when I was a child. All appeared new, and strange at first, inexpressibly rare and delightful and beautiful. I was a little stranger, which at my entrance into the world was saluted and surrounded with innumerable joys. . . . The dust and stones of the street were as precious as gold: the gates were at first the end of the world. The green trees when I saw them first through one of the gates transported and ravished me, their sweetness and unusual beauty made my heart to leap, and almost mad with ecstasy, they were such strange and wonderful things. The Men! O what venerable and reverend creatures did the aged seem! Immortal Cherubims! And young men glittering and sparkling Angels, and maids strange seraphic pieces of life and beauty! Boys and girls tumbling in the street, and playing, were moving jewels. I knew not that they were born or should die; but all things abided eternally as they were in their proper places.

Even so, but with greater variety and with greater skill, Mickiewicz tells of the quiet manor of Soplicowo and the fields and forests about it. Zosia's garden, in which she plays with the village children, is more magnificent than a royal park. When she feeds the chickens she is as graceful as the Goddess of Love. The Judge's belt is more gorgeous than any ever woven in India. No frogs sing so sweetly as those of Poland. The forests of Lithuania are more mysteriously wonderful than those of tropical America.

Such is the charm that first captivates us in *Pan Tadeusz*. Yet three hundred pages of unalloyed childlike appreciation of beauty in the commonplace, even though clothed in the perfect verse of Mickiewicz and set forth with his complete mastery of expression, would become mawkish and tiresome. Hence that appreciation is only one of many sources of delight that Mickiewicz blends harmoniously in *Pan Tadeusz*. First of all he unites it with a sane and kindly humor, "the smile of Mickiewicz," a trait totally lacking, for instance, in the passage that I have quoted from Traherne. He praises the forests of Lithuania seriously, but he is aware that the Polish frogs and chickens are after all no better than those of other lands and that only the memories of his childhood endow them with any peculiar charm. The result is that the atmosphere of Mickiewicz seems childlike

(as for similar reasons does that of Chaucer), but it never becomes childish.

This radiant humor pervades the whole poem. The actors in the epic of Mickiewicz are, with one exception, decidedly commonplace



TITLE PAGE OF MICKIEWICZ'S FIRST VOLUME OF POEMS

persons. The poet is amused by their weaknesses and their whimsicalities; but, again with one exception, he always views with kindness and affection the men and women whom he has created. Tadeusz is a gallant lad, but he is comically limited in his intellectual outlook. His uncle, Judge Soplica, is an upright soul who loves his country, but he has even more serious limitations of intellect and of character.

The sly, somewhat cowardly apparitor Protazy is made genuinely lovable by his loyalty to the Soplica family. Even the corrupt, ludicrous, Russified fashionable lady Telimena is a likable person; she has "a kind heart."

Yet childlike appreciation of beauty, combined with radiant, kindly humor, would not make *Pan Tadeusz* truly great were they not blended with stalwart courage and mature faith. *Pan Tadeusz* is childlike in its atmosphere and it is humorous, but it is far from being a comic poem. Mickiewicz describes a time that is dead and that can never be revived in quite the same form. But the spirit that animated that time, the spirit of old Poland—that is not dead nor can it ever die. From memories of his childhood Mickiewicz passes into courageous aspirations for a glorious future, to be gained by faith and consecration. He loves his country not only as a child but as an earnest, thoughtful man.

The one character in *Pan Tadeusz* whom Mickiewicz never finds in the least degree humorous is Jacek Soplica, the roistering village champion who has become an unselfish servant of his country, and who appears in the poem as Father Robak, "the worm," the man of vigorous energy who has been transformed from the incarnation of pride into the incarnation of humility. He is the embodiment of unselfish service to his native land and of cooperation with other men. Jacek is human; he has faults and he makes mistakes, but his ideals are those of loyalty and of service, and he is faithful to them. The scene at his deathbed has a high seriousness unmatched elsewhere in all Polish literature.

In *Pan Tadeusz* Mickiewicz expresses his patriotism through love for Poland, not through hatred for other lands. For small men it is easier, above all in times of strife, to hate the enemies of their country than to render unselfish service to that country. During the recent war too many people in the United States were busy cursing the Germans rather than in upholding the ideals that the Nazi government was trying to crush. So in 1832 Mickiewicz had written the third part of his *Forefathers' Eve* (*Dziady*), a poem inspired by the failure of the revolt of the Poles against the Russians; a poem which, one regrets to say, voices his hatred of Russia even more

than his love for Poland. It is a work of genius, but not of the highest genius. Yet before the close of that same year he began to compose *Pan Tadeusz*. In that poem he is calm and serene. He can find good even in the Russians. Captain Ryków, the only Russian who plays a part in the epic, is an upright, kindly soldier, who respects the Poles and likes them, and the Poles regard him with similar feelings. Major Płut—the name means *rascal*—the basest figure in the poem, the only actor in it whom Mickiewicz regards with no gleam of kindness, is a renegade Pole. A gardener's little girl does not envy her landlord's daughter for her gorgeous raiment; she is occupied by the interests of her own home, knowing few anxieties beyond it, and no hatreds. Her brother, when he fights for his country against its oppressors, hates his foes not as human beings, but as instruments of tyranny, as representatives of a wrong ideal. So in *Pan Tadeusz* Mickiewicz gives glowing expression to his love of Poland, almost unmixed with hatred for the Muscovites. This is true patriotism, patriotism inspired by love of one's neighbor and leading to love of all mankind. Mickiewicz has returned to childlike sympathy and childlike love for all men. "Whosoever shall not receive the kingdom of God as a little child shall in no wise enter therein." Mickiewicz has become as a little child; and, entering into the kingdom of God, the kingdom of love, beauty, and poetry, he has led into it, with him, all his readers, both Poles and Americans.