PAN TADEUSZ

by JÓZEF WITTLIN

I

TO THE WORLD at large Polish literature is known as an unknown literature. True, a few outstanding works of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries appeared and were read in translation. One can hardly say, however, that they achieved any degree of popular success. The only exception, perhaps, was *Quo Vadis?*, and—who knows?—maybe it was that very novel which deterred foreign readers from pursuing further the works of Polish authors. "The world" preferred to be carried away by the writings of other contemporaries of Sienkiewicz: Zola, Tolstoy, Ibsen, Hamsun, Kipling, Maeterlinck.

What is the reason for such coldness toward Polish literature, particularly on the part of the so-called "Western World"? Various explanations were advanced. Some put the blame on the long years of the country's political subjection, others on the economic destitution of the nation, on its wretched geographical position, or even on hostile propaganda. That the devotees of Russian, Swedish, Norwegian, and Danish literature should shun the literature of Poland some tried to attribute to the exotic character of the latter's subject matter, the quaintness of its folklore, its national mysticism intelligible only to the initiated. Even in the best of Polish books they detected a stamp of purely local sentiment and fancy which makes it difficult for the foreign reader to submit freely to the charm of any work. And so there developed among Poles deeply concerned about the prestige of their national culture a sort of complex based on bitter resentment against "the world." "They accuse us of mysticism," they say, aggrieved, "and so they ignore us. Yet, look how they wallow in the mystical depths of Russian or Spanish writers. They are thrown off by our folklore, our magic, our superstitions and rites, but see how readily they go all overboard for the far weirder antics of really exotic people." And so those whose

national pride has been hurt are apt to fall into one of two extremes: they either accuse their native literature of being trivial, purely local in character, and therefore unworthy of wider renown, or else they consider it so great and lofty that none but the well-trained natives can scale its cloud-topped peaks. But a dispassionate observer will soon discern the true crux of the matter in the fact that those soaring peaks of Polish literature rise out of its poetry, not its prose. And even the best translations of poetry often lack what in the psychological jargon of Ehrenfels is called "Gestaltqualität." Or, to put it in less abstract terms: translated poetry is like denicotinized tobacco.

Yet translatable or untranslatable poetry will be born. In the case of Poland not only did the Muses decree that our language produce a rich lyrical poetry as far back as the sixteenth century, in the days of the Renaissance, but, Slavic Muses that they were, they made the nineteenth century Romantics (who, incidentally, were rather closely related to Lord Byron) write even historical novels in verse. Herein lies the secret of the unpopularity of Polish writings abroad. Polish literature has produced no *Don Quixote,* or *Wuthering Heights,* nothing comparable to *The Human Comedy, Madame Bovary* or *Brothers Karamazov.* Instead, however, Poles do possess *Grażyna, Konrad Wallenrod, Forefathers' Eve,* and, of course, *Pan Tadeusz,* to mention the works of Mickiewicz alone.

And why go further? Mickiewicz is enough. For had no one else ever written a word of poetry in Polish, there still would have been enough to nourish amply the aesthetic sensibilities of the Poles. True, when Mickiewicz was alive his compatriots—as frequently happens in exile—often made life miserable for him. Nevertheless, even then he was acclaimed as the greatest Polish poet. He made his mark from the start, from his poetic debut.

To a people overwhelmed by captivity and misfortune he became an authority even in matters which actually have little in common with poetry. He became a "bard," a spiritual leader, like the Celtic bards or Hebrew prophets. Even though, born in Lithuania, he knew Poland proper hardly at all (he spent only a few weeks in the district of Posen), even though he never set foot in Warsaw or

Cracow and spent most of his rather short life abroad, he has expressed almost to perfection Poland's nature and man, and all that the Polish heart holds dear. From Paris, where he lived, his personality radiated upon all who read in Polish and felt like Poles. And today to the educated Pole excerpts from Mickiewicz's works are like verses from the Holy Scripture. Or, to make a less lofty comparison, Polish sensibility is so saturated with his poetry that its lines have become like arias of famous and even a trifle hackneyed operas: in joy or sorrow they rise unbidden to our lips. The figure of Mickiewicz as it appears on countless monuments has passed into eternal glory and the halo which surrounds it is so great that all attempts to bring the poet closer to us, by revealing his human traits, even his weaknesses, have been decried by the general public as nothing short of sacrilege. Aside from their admiration and respect Mickiewicz has also won the love of posterity. Long after his death (and still within my own not so remote memories) it was customary in drinking circles among the so-called "intelligentsia" to sing a song-toast ending with the words:

> To the health of Mickiewicz let us drink
> He brings us moments so sweet.
> All cares dissolve in that nectar divine,
> The singing of his lute.

I have never heard of revelers in the United States toasting in similar fashion Edgar Allan Poe. Yet, Poe was not only a great poet but, alas, a great alcoholic as well.

Of all of Mickiewicz's writings none in Poland is better known nor more beloved than *Pan Tadeusz; or, The Last Foray in Lithuania, a Story of Life among Polish Gentlefolk in the Years 1811 and 1812, in Twelve Books in Verse.* To the Poles this is truly a Holy Book, even though its contents are rather secular. It is so sacred, indeed, that many of its devotees refuse to notice its often satirical tinge. For the poet, though not without an indulgent and forgiving smile, has dealt here with some of the national faults, and in particular with the defects of the class which in his days constituted the sole and colorful façade of the nation—the landed gentry. Actually, *Pan Tadeusz* is not so much a Polish Bible as a sort of Koran full of earthly charms and of promise of delights in the life to come. It is a nostalgic work, and that is how it was born—under the painful pressure of nostalgia. It was written by an exile for other exiles, in Paris, between 1832 and 1834, and so under the still fresh impact of the disaster which befell Poland in the so-called "November Insurrection," the Uprising of 1830 and 1831. The nostalgic character of the work explains many of its peculiarities. The numerous and magnificent descriptions not only of banquets but also of culinary preparations of Lithuanian dishes might lead us to suspect that the author had not always had enough to eat. Or that he wanted thus to brighten the lot of his hungry fellow exiles. Anyhow, the entire book is so profusely larded with every ingredient of earthly bliss that at times it gives the impression of being the glorious hallucination of a soul driven out of Paradise. Professor Manfred Kridl in his beautiful essay on Mickiewicz in the book *Great Men and Women of Poland* [1] has justly called *Pan Tadeusz* "an epic idyll." For it provides an instance, rare if not unique in all of the world's literature, of an idyll combined with an epic fairly brimming with violence and bloodshed. Mickiewicz himself admitted that at first he intended to write something light in the vein of Goethe's *Hermann und Dorothea.* But, as happens so often, the subject led the author, and not the other way around. Mickiewicz fell under the spell of a world of which the background only was idyllic. And so, perhaps against the author's will, was born a monumental epic poem which has no equal in nineteenth century literature. As a matter of fact the nineteenth century had abandoned this form of versified narrative; and only a few of its attempts, such as the works of Frederic Mistral and of Karl Spitteler, may be termed successful. On the whole, and that is true of Goethe's poems, too, there wafts from these long-winded versified yarns a breath of solemn boredom.

Anything else can be said about *Pan Tadeusz,* but never that it is a bore. There is a charm and a harmony about it that hold the reader spellbound throughout all of its twelve admirably balanced and skillfully contrived books. Humor—and a truly Olympian humor it is—steps in whenever the scene threatens to become too glum, while lyrical invocations and incomparable descriptions of nature temper the bitterness of satire. *Pan Tadeusz* has been likened to the epics of Homer. This, to my mind, is not a fortunate comparison. The Polish epic not only lacks a mythical background but its whole subject matter is modern, and, as we shall see a little later, is not unlike the subject matter of a well-constructed novel. Homer's descriptions of nature tend to be conventional and recur again and again like a liturgical refrain. In *Pan Tadeusz* each of the many sunsets and sunrises has its own hue, almost a countenance of its own. The great epics of Homer ended more or less sadly: the *Iliad* with the burial of Hector; the *Odyssey* with the massacre of suitors, both innocent and guilty. There is no optimism in Homer—only man's fatalistic submission to the gods and to the will of that Moyra who guides the gods in their course. *Pan Tadeusz* ends not only with the Christian penance of a great sinner but, likewise, with a love match between the descendants of two feuding families. And more: it ends on a mighty chord of patriotic hope, the hope felt by all of Polish nobility in Lithuania, of liberation from the Tsarist yoke. Delirious joy fills the last pages of the book all aglitter with Napoleonic standards and eagles which, side by side with Polish standards and Polish eagles, are setting out on their way to Moscow.

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[1] New York, Macmillan, 1941, p. 201.

For the benefit of foreign readers unfamiliar with *Pan Tadeusz* let us also point out the importance of the role which crime plays in this idyll. One might almost venture to define it as a sort of "Crime and Punishment" set against the background of a delightful Arcadia. An Arcadia over which ramble innumerable good-natured eccentrics, movingly anachronistic Don Quixotes who live no less on the memories of past glories than on the delicious specialties of Lithuanian cooking. This Arcadia, to be sure, also swarms with hotheads ever prone to bloodshed. But the crime and punishment here transcend the limits of a purely private affair. Mickiewicz managed to weave with admirable skill the tempestuous passions of his protagonist, Jacek Soplica, the future Father Robak, into the broad loom of authentic history. For the locale of the story lies right in the path of Napoleon's armies marching on Moscow, and the action takes place from the fall of 1811 to the spring of 1812. And in the personal

tragedy of Jacek Soplica, conceived somewhat in the manner of Walter Scott, the fate of the individual is closely linked to the fate of the nation—it becomes purified through heroic deeds and acquires patriotic overtones. Jacek Soplica's crime, though it smacks of national treason, is presented without any morbidity. On the contrary, Mickiewicz treats it with a serenity so complete that one might be tempted to call it "Latin" if such a race-conscious definition had any sense whatsoever. So let no foreign reader who wishes to get acquainted with this epic imagine that he is about to enter a world in any way similar to the dark and fathomless worlds of Dostoievski. If we insist on looking for some analogies with Russian literature we might perhaps say that the Russian Captain Rykov who appears in *Pan Tadeusz,* and who, incidentally, is friendly to the Poles, might be a distant kin of the characters of Gogol, and that the Count, at times, reminds one of Gogol's hero, Khlestakov.

It is difficult to give a true idea of *Pan Tadeusz* to people not brought up in the Polish tradition, of which the cult of Mickiewicz is so much a part. It is like trying to explain the contents and meaning of the Holy Mass to someone who had never heard of the New Testament. To what extent *Pan Tadeusz* became, in time, an object of veneration among the Poles is perhaps best illustrated by the following incident. Not long ago the Polish schools staged a mock jury trial. By means of popular vote the students were to decide the innocence or guilt of the hero of one of Sienkiewicz's best-known short stories: "The Lighthouse Keeper." This lighthouse keeper, on duty somewhere on the Panama coast, is an ex-soldier, an old Polish immigrant. He lives in his lighthouse, completely isolated from the rest of the world, and for years faithfully attends to his duties. Then, one day, the mail brings him from New York a package of books, among them—*Pan Tadeusz.* And that is his undoing. Immersed in his reading, he is assailed by hallucinations and forgets to light the beacon. This, as might be expected, brings on a shipwreck. Only the fact that no lives are lost saves him from prosecution. The story ends with the arrival of a port officer who is to take the old Pole to the consulate where his future fate is to be decided. Guilty or not guilty? The young Poles brought up on *Pan Tadeusz* turned in the verdict of "not guilty." To them, the reading of *Pan Tadeusz* justified the lighthouse keeper's lapse.

I decided to look at *Pan Tadeusz* with fresh eyes, to break away from the magic circle in which, like every Pole, I've lived since my childhood days. So I reread it in English, in the brilliant translation, in prose of Professor G. R. Noyes.[2]

The translator, though an American, also fell under the spell of the poem and has fully grasped what it means to the Poles. In the introduction to his translation he says:

> Perhaps no poem of any European nation is so truly national and in the best sense of the word popular. Almost every Pole who has read anything more than the newspaper is familiar with the contents of *Pan Tadeusz*. No play of Shakespeare, no long poem of Milton or Wordsworth or Tennyson is so well known or so well beloved by the English people as is *Pan Tadeusz* by the Poles. To find a work equally well known one might turn to Defoe's prosaic tale of adventure *Robinson Crusoe;* to find a work so beloved would be hardly possible.

But to an American who, unlike Professor Noyes, is unfamiliar with the Polish lore, *Pan Tadeusz* might easily appear as not unlike a highly poetic and romantic "Western story." It is full of violence, high-handed justice and anarchy that is quite incomprehensible to a law-abiding mind. Even Mickiewicz was aware of this since he deemed it necessary to supply a commentary even for the sake of his Polish readers. He gave it in an introductory note in which he writes:

> In the time of the Polish Commonwealth the carrying out of judicial decree was very difficult, in a country where the executive authorities had almost no police at their disposal, and where powerful citizens maintained household regiments, some of them—for example the Princes Radziwiłł—even armies of several thousand. So the plaintiff who had obtained a verdict in his favour had to apply for its execution to the knightly order, that is to the gentry, with whom rested also the executive power. Armed kinsmen, friends, and neighbours set out, verdict in hand, in company with the apparitor, and gained possession, often not without bloodshed, of the goods adjudged to the plaintiff which the apparitor legally made over or gave into his possession. Such an armed execution of a verdict was called a "zajazd" (foray).

The story takes place in Soplicowo, the country estate of Judge Soplica. Soplicowo lies in a charming nook of Lithuania. Lithuania had, since 1386, been joined with Poland by union, but had passed, after the third partition of Poland, under the rule of the Russian Tsar. Still—Poland was not far away. Right beyond the river Niemen lay the very small but independent Duchy of Warsaw, created by Napoleon. It was there that in the years preceding Napoleon's war on Russia the patriotically minded Lithuanians flocked to join Polish colors and serve under Polish generals. As we said before, Soplicowo lay on the trail which was to lead Napoleon to Moscow, and so on the trail of great hopes. While waiting for their political liberation, the inhabitants of the Soplicowo manor led a very pleasant life though under the shadow of crime. The crime, an old one, for it dates back to the days of Thaddeus Kościuszko, was committed by the brother of Soplicowo's present owner, one Jacek Soplica. We meet him in the poem, shortly before his death in the fall of 1811, under the assumed name of Father Robak (Robak means "worm") and in the garb of a Bernardine monk.

It is an ungrateful task to retell in one's own words the contents of a masterpiece. Still, if we must, we must. So, to begin it, back in the days of his youth Father Robak happened to fall in love with the daughter of his neighbor, the proud aristocrat, Pantler Horeszko. The Pantler showered him with marks of confidence and friendship, and entertained him often in his magnificent castle. But give him his daughter in marriage he would not. Incensed at the rebuff, for he knew that the beautiful Eva returned his love, her suitor shot the magnate. And he did so, as it happened, right after an unsuccessful attack of Russian troops against the Pantler's castle. For all this was taking place in the days of Kościuszko, shortly after the Constitution of May 3, 1791, had been proclaimed. The fairly numerous opponents of this Constitution had sought the support of Russian bayonets. Pantler Horeszko was an ardent partisan of the Constitution; he was forced, therefore, more than once to repel, arms in hand, Russian attacks upon his castle. Owing to an unfortunate coincidence, Jacek Soplica, his pride severely wounded, had set out to settle his personal accounts with the Pantler at the precise moment when defeated Russian troops were retreating from the Horeszko castle. The triumphant Pantler steps out on the terrace to watch the Russian flight. Just then Jacek shoots and kills him. Though it was pure chance that he should appear in the vicinity of the castle at that particular time, he is branded as traitor. No one believes his protestations that his act of vengeance was carried out on his own responsibility, and not in connivance with the Russians. He, the gallant young noble once so popular among men, the handsome Lithuanian Don Juan whom all women worshiped, must henceforth hide to escape general contempt. Out of despair he begins to drink and marries a woman for whom he does not care. His unloved wife soon dies, leaving him a son, and the wretched Jacek goes into exile. In hard, soldierly life he seeks to redeem his past. He fights for freedom wherever he has a chance. Time and again he has to pay the price of his heroism; imprisoned by the Austrians he even spends some time in the notorious fort of Spielberg. At last, battle-worn and sick of wandering, he takes the frock of a Bernardine monk, and out of humility assumes the name of Father Robak, implying that he is as lowly as a worm. As for his son, the child born of his loveless marriage, he is none other than the hero of the poem —Pan Tadeusz. Of course, the young man is never to learn the true identity of the sullen and mysterious mendicant monk who seems always to hover close by Soplicowo.

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[2] Adam Mickiewicz, *Pan Tadeusz,* tr. George Rapall Noyes, New York, E. P. Dutton, 1930, Everyman's Library.

Meantime, Eva Horeszko, following her father's wishes rather than the inclination of her heart, had married a wealthy aristocrat, only to die in exile when both she and her husband are deported to Siberia. Fortunately, however, her daughter Zosia, has remained in Lithuania. As might be expected, it is the penitent Jacek who takes the orphan under his wing, entrusting her upbringing to his brother, Judge Soplica, master of Soplicowo. And it is in Soplicowo that (in the first book of the poem) Pan Tadeusz and young Zosia meet. What follows is easy to guess: after many innocent intrigues the two young people fall in love and decide to marry.

The main plot of the story, however, is not this happy love affair; it is, instead, centered in the wretched feud between the Horeszko and the Soplica clans. In the foray from which the poem takes its subtitle, this feud reaches its climax. Several hundred Horeszko partisans raid Soplicowo. And again, as ill-luck would have it, Russians become involved in the private squabble of two Polish families. While the victorious Horeszko party, after freely imbibing from the Judge's well-stocked wine cellar, lies deep in slumber, there appears on the scene a whole battalion of the Tsar's infantry, a battalion of "dei ex machina," as it were. It is introduced so that the two embattled Polish factions may become reconciled and join forces against the common enemy of their country! Let us not forget that all this happens only a few months before Napoleon's armies are to march into the country, and takes place in an atmosphere already filled with thunder. This atmosphere is largely due to the work of the chief agent of the Polish "underground" in Lithuania, that mysterious monk, Father Robak. It has been his task to prepare the uprising in Lithuania in advance of the entry of Polish troops into that country.

The bloody incident with the Russian battalion ends as befits an idyllic epic. The Russian Captain Rykow whom we had occasion to mention before, and who is friendly to the Poles, offers them some sound advice. As a result, the commanding officer of the battalion, Major Plut, vanishes without a trace. The Poles, however, and particularly the younger ones among them, must immediately flee across the Niemen. They return a few months later dressed in resplendent uniforms, a part of Napoleon's army. Among them, it goes without saying, is young Tadeusz Soplica. The poem ends at just the right moment: with Polish troops under Generals Dąbrowski and Kniaziewicz making a stop at Soplicowo.

We must admire Mickiewicz's restraint in stopping where he did. He spared us the sight of Napoleon's defeated army fleeing from the ruins of burnt Moscow. Nor do we ever learn what became of the young officer, Tadeusz Soplica. Did he perish somewhere in the snows? Did he fall at Wiazma, Krasnoye, or Beresina? Or did he come back safe and sound to his beloved Zosia, to pursue by her side the life of a country squire? From what we know of his character and temperament we can only be sure that he was among those gallant Polish cavalrymen whom Napoleon's aid, Count de Ségur, mentions with such admiration in his famous book, *La Campagne de Russie.* Mickiewicz breaks off his narrative at a time of general rejoicing, a moment—so rarely experienced by Poles—when all hearts unite in elation and hope. Let us not forget that he wrote the poem in Paris, in the years 1832–1834, amidst the atmosphere of dejection prevalent then among Polish exiles. How differently do those years of the Moscow campaign appear when viewed through the eyes of Tolstoy in *War and Peace!*

The romance of Tadeusz and Zosia woven into the bloody history of Eastern Europe may be considered as a sort of *Romeo and Juliet* with a happy ending. But the comparison is fruitless. No drawing of analogy, no summary, no matter how detailed, can render the true content of *Pan Tadeusz.* For this content is the very substance of life, as well as the very substance of poetry.

To be sure, to the casual reader, life as depicted in *Pan Tadeusz* may seem somewhat extraordinary. Take, for instance, the daily routine of the Soplicowo manor: breakfast, hunting, mushroom-picking, lunch, flirting, and, from time to time, murder. A sort of never-ending party, a continual social season interrupted now and then by a more or less bloody brawl. Anything serves as an excuse for a round of banquets, sports, and hunting—even the court session which is to settle the long-standing litigation over the ownership of the ruins of the Pantler's castle, which stands on grounds that belong to the Soplicas. The chamberlain who arrives in state to preside over the court brings with him not a retinue of clerks, but his wife, and the daughters for whom, incidentally, he hopes to find good matches. The count who represents the opposite side, and who is the legal claimant of the castle, continually and without the slightest compunction takes part in all the banquets and hunting parties given by his greatest enemy, Judge Soplica. Nor does this prevent him, when the moment arrives, from yielding to the persuasions of the inexorable warden of the castle, and using force against his genial host. Peculiar, indeed, is this Lithuanian "Western."

Peculiar, too, the whole company of likable, titled idlers! Who, actually, works in Soplicowo that so many people may continually play? As far as that goes, in none of the romantic fictions of the age do the heroes lower themselves by toil. Nor, for that matter, did heroes of earlier periods. We do not know what was the source of Tristram's income, or what Lohengrin lived on, or how Don Juan earned the money required for his exuberant mode of life. Someone, somewhere, must have worked for them. And so, someone worked for the heroes of *Pan Tadeusz.* Invisible in the poem, they lived in Soplicowo, tilling the Judge's fields. They were the Lithuanian peasants, having no part in history as yet because they lived in serfdom.

The social status of peasant serfs does not have to be explained to Americans, familiar with the background of their own Civil War. The skin of Soplicowo serfs, however, was the same color as that of the Soplicas and of the Horeszkos. In the hour of general rejoicing, when Polish troops enter Soplicowo, and the engagement of Romeo-Tadeusz to Juliet-Zosia is being celebrated, Tadeusz, in a transport of joy and happiness, liberates his peasants and distributes land among them. Not without reason does the last book of the poem bear the title "Let us love one another," strange as it sounds to our modern ears. As we see, Mickiewicz, the future editor of *La Tribune des Peuples,* did not altogether omit introducing social touches in a spirit which in his days was quite revolutionary.

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As is the case with all objects of general worship, one can at times grow tired even of *Pan Tadeusz.* The most beautiful prayer will grow trite through daily repetition so that in the end its original deep meaning is lost to the ear. What ruined *Pan Tadeusz* for us was school. When I say "school" I mean the old schools of former Galicia.[3] For six months in every Fourth Form, school robbed the poem of all its charm, squeezed it dry of every bit of aroma. Any masterpiece read under compulsion can in retrospect become a nightmare. What subtle sadism, to poison young souls by means of poetry! There ought to be a law, protecting the masterpiece of literature; they should be preserved untouched in a sort of National Park of Poetry. My resentment toward school is not based solely on the memories of an ex-student. I also was a teacher, and it so happened that for three consecutive years I had to "work" on *Pan Tadeusz* with my class. That was quite long ago. Nevertheless, I afterwards avoided the poem, as one avoids the witness of a rather shabby deal. It was not until 1929 that, quite unexpectedly, I took it out of moth balls. As it happened, and the fact is not without significance to me, I did so in Paris where *Pan Tadeusz* first saw the light of day. Dazzled by its beauty, intoxicated by its fragrant greenness I felt as though I had found a buried treasure. Forgive me these personal digressions but without them my conscience with regard to *Pan Tadeusz* would not be clear. Strange as it may seem, it was Proust who led me, the prodigal son, back home to the Lithuanian epic. While reading *Du côté de chez Swann* I found myself transported through some secret channel of sensibility right in the midst of Soplicowo. There can be no question, of course, of any similarity of subject, and still less of technique. Yet there is something about these two so dissimilar works which somehow makes them kindred. It is as though the two poets wrote them—one in verse, the other, in prose—under identical pressures and suffering from identical venoms of the soul.

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[3] The part of Poland under Austrian rule.

What, to the modern reader, is most striking in *Pan Tadeusz* is that spiritualized realism which makes all of Mickiewicz's poetry recognizable at a glance. This dominant trait of his art appears as markedly in the Third Part of *Forefathers' Eve*. Here, too, we find an acuteness of observation that many a nineteenth century novelist might have envied the Polish poet. I believe that no one in Poland before Mickiewicz was able to transfer the reader so easily and painlessly into unfamiliar surroundings or draw him so completely into fictitious events and make him take part in someone else's life. I also believe that in all of Polish literature Mickiewicz alone knew how to stir, and by use of the simplest means, the whole sensibility of his reader. These means are not confined to metaphors and associations of ideas alone. *Pan Tadeusz* assails us through all our senses at once so that we not only see it, but hear, feel, taste, and almost touch everything it describes. We feel now warm, now cold; we smell the fragrance wafted from the woods and orchards; we are swallowed up by the primeval silence of the forests. We lose ourselves completely in its world of images and sounds. The reading of this fairly long book takes no effort on the part of either mind or imagination. It is an adventure. Nor does it disturb the serenity of the soul. We come out of the adventure without any sense of guilt.

The contemporaries of Mickiewicz reacted to *Pan Tadeusz* somewhat differently. They did not understand poetic realism; the passion for depicting everyday life in its most minute details was quite beyond their grasp. They were shocked by the language in which the very real people of the poem talk of very ordinary matters. And, amazingly, the poet himself shared the opinion of his Paris colleagues. That *they* felt as they did was hardly surprising. To them Mickiewicz was an inspired prophet and a spiritual leader: they could not grasp this sudden leap from *The Books of the Polish Nation and of the Polish Pilgrims* to a versified novel about ordinary people and human frailties. *The Books,* world famous in those days, had been published in 1832, and were thus the last of Mickiewicz's writings to appear before *Pan Tadeusz.* Written in a solemn, biblical style they had set their author somewhat apart from the world of simple mortals. Translated into many foreign languages they had lifted Mickiewicz in the eyes of his fellow exiles to the rank of a Polish Moses. With the appearance of *The Books* there almost sprouted upon the brow of the author the golden horns with which God had once adorned the brow of Israel's lawgiver. And here—after Mount Sinai, after the flaming Bush—an ordinary country place, Soplicowo, with its cattle, its fowl, and its people engrossed in their prosaic pursuits! No wonder that even the author himself made light of the work which was to make him immortal, just as the father of modern fiction, Giovanni Boccaccio, thought little of *The Decameron,* setting far less store by these "light" tales than by the didactic works which he wrote in Latin.

Let me quote here part of an apocryphal but quite probable conversation which clearly brings out this point. Mickiewicz, having just finished *Pan Tadeusz,* was reading it to a group of his Paris friends. One of them, Bohdan Zaleski, a gifted lyrical poet whom Mickiewicz once called "the Ukrainian nightingale," remarked that some of the sayings of the poem's characters, and particularly the squabbles of the petty nobility, lowered the tone of a serious epic. To which Mickiewicz replied: "My dear man, I know exactly what you mean. Not only in the places you point out, but all through the poem the tone ought to be raised by half a note. This cannot be done offhand. I will do better, God willing, in another *novel* [italics are mine]—in 'The Son of Pan Tadeusz,' and, most likely, in the subsequent parts of *Forefathers' Eve.*"

Pan Tadeusz was a sudden burst of lucidity amidst an atmosphere loaded with mysticism. Its realism and its serene—one is almost tempted to say Apolline—optimism were bound to confuse not only the bard's followers in Paris but also his whole Polish public, somewhat used by then to his Byronism. A prophet is expected to live at all times in a state of wide-eyed ecstasy, in constant contact with the supernatural. Now a prophet, who, up to that time, had conformed in a fairly orthodox fashion to the tenets of Romanticism, peopling his poems with spirits and ghosts, had suddenly turned into a lucid narrator and had written a novel about people who were real and very much alive. A novel, despite the fact that he bound the chapters together with the strong bonds of verse—a thirteen-syllable meter that shimmers with all the hues of the rainbow. Herein, in the disparity between subject and form, lay the opening for criticism, which even the author himself apparently accepted, since he agreed with Zaleski's objections. Versification implied loftiness. And of loftiness, in the eyes of the Romantics, *Pan Tadeusz* had not enough.

It is difficult to understand today the obstinacy with which all Polish Romanticists, except young Zygmunt Krasinski, shunned unversified fiction. Perhaps this, too, was a matter of orthodox Byronism. In verse, and only in verse, they wrote numerous novels; dramas, too, though they could not even hope to see the latter produced on stage. They were writing them for a stage *in partibus infidelium*. As for the novels, perhaps they were deterred from the use of prose by its demand for verisimilitude. Prose does make this demand: even the tales of E. T. A. Hoffmann and E. A. Poe, so remote from reality in the ordinary sense of the word, use a technique akin to realism. These narratives are, for the most part, free of grandiloquence; no matter how weird the situations, the prevalent atmosphere is still that of everyday life; the most irrational happenings are subject to the laws of reality. Not so in versified novels. Here rhythm and rhyme put the reader, just as music does, in an exalted mood regardless of the contents of the story. Had Mickiewicz written his historical novel in prose, probably no one would have accused him of lowering its tone, nor would he have felt constrained to apologize for it and to promise to do better in the future.

The fact that he wrote *Pan Tadeusz* in verse cannot be ascribed to the trend of the era or to Mickiewicz's subservience to fashion. He wrote it in verse, rather, in spite of the prevalent fashion. At that time, all over Europe, and particularly in France, novels were being written in prose. Indeed, to judge this epoch by what has survived of it to our days, this was the golden age of the French novel. Let us not forget that in that very year, 1834, Balzac's *Père Goriot* was published. And *Le Rouge et le noir* by Stendhal had appeared in 1830. It does not seem likely that Mickiewicz, who was living in Paris and very much part of its literary atmosphere, should have been unacquainted with these two novels. The decision to write *Pan Tadeusz* in verse must have been, therefore, influenced by old habits and by Mickiewicz's awareness of his mastery in this medium.

Prior to Mickiewicz, Polish letters included a number of fairly good novels. On the whole, however, the genre was considered as light entertainment, unless it happened to be didactic. None of these novels in prose, purporting to "depict life," contained that fullness of life which characterizes *Pan Tadeusz*. None gave such a true picture of an epoch and its customs. Even if here and there we find among the earlier writings, works of fiction or memoirs which mirror faithfully the surface, the outer layer of life, they still lack that most important truth, which transcends mere reporting—the truth of poetry. Without it no novel survives its own times. The visions of reality of the early Polish novelists were either so pale and blurred or else so quaint and personal that today they no longer have the power to draw the reader within their own magic circles. Poetry was precisely what they lacked.

The poetic vision of *Pan Tadeusz* is based on honest and unbiased observation of a real world, a world firmly planted in space and time. This is the hardest sort of poetic vision, and the most binding as far as means of expressing it are concerned. The somnambulistic visionary, dreamer of nebulous visions, is far more free as an author. He escapes all control, nobody can hold him responsible for the world he depicts. Visions such as Shelley's or those of the Polish poet Słowacki altogether defy comparison with objective truth. But Tolstoy's vision of Russia in *War and Peace* and Mickiewicz's vision of the Lithuanian countryside in the same years of 1811–1812, are pictures of a real time and of definite places; no matter how much fictional element they contain, they can be checked against our own ideas of reality. And, as it turns out, they suffer nothing from such comparison. The people of Soplicowo are so real to us that we do not care where Mickiewicz took them from. What does it matter whether they were all products of his imagination, or whether they had been copied from living models by his memory? Either way, these people belong to real life and their creator belongs among the great visionaries of reality.

The illusion of realism in *Pan Tadeusz* is so powerful, even today, that a modern Polish critic accused Mickiewicz of glorifying in his epic the worst traits of the nobility. In my opinion the critic was mistaken: an epic poet does not glorify anything. His job is to reproduce as clearly as he can the vision he sees. That is why a true epic genius is essentially amoral. The epic poet treats good and evil with equal sympathy. That is what Homer did, and he, too, might be accused of glorifying crime in both the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey.* As a matter of fact, on another occasion I tried myself to prove that Ulysses was a highly immoral character and that his author did not set him up as a model for anyone. Mickiewicz in *Pan Tadeusz* is an epic poet, though a less inexorable one than Homer was. And a less unbiased one. Here and there a satirical or lyrical tone betrays where the sympathies or antipathies of the author lie. It is hard to tell who

was closer to Homer's heart: Hector or Achilles. He compels one's compassion for human sufferings no matter whether they occur on the right or the left bank of the Scamander river.

Mickiewicz neither condemns nor absolves Soplicowo. One thing is certain, however: he is homesick for it. If he glorifies anything, he glorifies life itself—the very existence of man, of mushrooms, of frogs. Under the circumstances, the heroes of the poem must differ somewhat from the typically romantic characters of Byron and Walter Scott. They differ, too, from the protagonists of Mickiewicz's previous poems where the "tone" was "half-a-note higher." Father Robak, alone, might possibly pass as one of the heroes in the earlier Mickiewicz's style. He is also, morally, the most interesting character of the story, and probably closest to the author himself. There is no denying that the shifts from *Konrad Wallenrod,* and from Konrad and Gustaw of the *Forefathers' Eve,* to the flirting golden youth, to young and old maids, to the Assessor and the Notary—a shift, that is, from supermen to very ordinary people—came about with the swiftness of lightning. Mickiewicz's earlier heroes might well have served as models for simple mortals. This model-like quality of Grażyna, and of Gustaw-Konrad, let alone Konrad Wallenrod, finds expression in their artificial manners, in their theatrical gestures and speech. If the characters of *Pan Tadeusz* were equally grandiloquent they could never have endured the normal life of Soplicowo and would have been doomed to die under some unusual circumstances. Or they would have turned into slightly grotesque figures like the Count, in whose person the author wanted to ridicule certain aspects of early Romanticism. The most solemn figure of the poem is that of Father Robak. His is the pathos of death. But even so, one is bound to admit that his deathbed confession does not quite fit the harmonious framework of the epic. Its style is too reminiscent of the emphatic monologues of the earlier Mickiewicz's heroes. The latter were, by and large, extraordinary men endowed with superhuman qualities of character and mind. Imagine describing at length a meal of that noble madman, Gustaw, of the Fourth Part of the *Forefathers' Eve!* Or enumerating the dishes with which Konrad, of the Third Part, might have restored his strength after wrestling with God and Satan in the

"Great" and "Small" Improvisations! The very idea is both absurd and shocking.

No, it would be highly improper to juxtapose such completely different works even though they were written by the same author. The beauty of *Pan Tadeusz* is a beauty per se and affects different areas of our sensibilities than does the beauty of the *Forefathers' Eve.* It is not meant to transform the reader's soul. The *Forefathers' Eve* clearly attempts to do just that. The author of this work was a moralist. He showed men who, like Prometheus, have challenged Heaven and pursue their fight in their own Slav fashion. Wars against Heaven in world literature have also their strategy and tactics, which are clamoring for a Clausewitz of their own.

The author of *Pan Tadeusz,* with incredible grace, turned angels into simple mortals. Romantic maidens and Byronic mistresses never possessed, in Poland, either body or sex. They had only souls. Summer or winter, in fair weather or foul, they trod the earth dressed in the same airy, lily-white raiments. Barefoot, of course. In *Pan Tadeusz* we have, at long last, real blood-and-flesh women. They dress in accordance with the season and with the fashion of the day. Indeed, they are very stylish. (Obviously Mickiewicz had an eye for feminine fashions.) To achieve their elaborate coiffures they resort to the use of curlers. They have definitely shaped bodies, and some of them, Telimena for instance, a definite weakness for sin. These ladies love and seduce, not ghosts, but normal, handsome, full-blooded young men. Were it not for *Pan Tadeusz,* anyone knowing Poland and Lithuania only from the previous works of Mickiewicz might have easily imagined that these lands were inhabited solely by Marylas, Aldonas, and Emilia Platers.[4] *Pan Tadeusz* is the book of the nation's life, just as its predecessors were books of the nation's death. Of death that was heroic.

One might think that there are no ghosts in *Pan Tadeusz*—gone are the spectres and apparitions from another world. Yet, it is not so. For has not all of Soplicowo, all that former Poland of "gentlefolk," become to Mickiewicz, the Paris exile, an apparition from another world? A spectre of a world irrevocably gone? It is in this that I see a distant kinship between the aura of *Pan Tadeusz* and the aura of Proust's work. The emotional basis from which both writings spring is the irrevocable "bygone-ness" of their respective, completely different worlds. This "bygone-ness" throws into relief the past and with unearthly radiance traces its contours. *Pan Tadeusz,* too, was written "a la recherche du temps perdu." And not only "du temps" but also "de l'espace," since it was written by an exile. This, likewise, explains the meticulosity with which every vanished scent, every savor, every picture and sound, every form and name is evoked from the shadow of death. Mickiewicz finds intoxication in even the sound of bygone Lithuanian names. He is like the last Apparitor who every night before he falls asleep rereads aloud the Court Calendar:

> To common men the Calendar seems a mere list of names, but to the Apparitor it was a succession of magnificent pictures. So he read and mused: Oginski and Wizgird, the Dominicans and Rymsza, Rymsza and Wysogird, Radziwiłł and Wereszczaka, Giedroyć and Rodułtowski, Obuchowicz and the Jewish Commune, Juraha and Piotrowski, Malewski and Mickiewicz, and finally Count Horeszko and Soplica; and as he read, he called forth from these names the memory of mighty cases. . . .

It was not only the memory of mighty cases that Mickiewicz called forth from the past, but also the memory of matters that were small, idyllic or absurd, ominous or indifferent, every sort of matter of which life consists. It is this power of evocation which puts him in the ranks of the great epic poets of the world.

3

Before closing let us sigh nostalgically for the days when a literary work was, for its readers, not only a source of so-called aesthetic emotions or of moral shocks, but also a well of information. It satisfied curiosity, stimulated reflection, and entertained, while presenting in beautiful form the characters of people and the course of events. It made no difference if the people described really existed or if they were figments of the author's imagination, since there is sometimes more real truth in an artist's fancy than in accounts of "real life." In those bygone days it was also epic poetry, prose fiction, and personal accounts which spread gossip concerning prominent figures of the day, revealed what went on behind the scenes in royal courts and let the readers into the secrets of the world's great. Memoirs, chronicles, even simple letters turned into works of art, if their authors had the ambition to make them so. And ambitions, on the whole, aimed high. Even authors who gave no thought to the immediate or even posthumous publication of their writings clothed them in such form that later they became testimonials to the taste and style of their epoch.

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[4] Maryla, the love of young Mickiewicz, idealized in his poems; Aldona, a character in *Konrad Wallenrod;* Emilia Plater, a heroic leader in the Polish insurrection of 1830–1831.

There can be no doubt that today we are witnessing an impoverishment of literature. And that, in spite of desperate efforts from all quarters to renovate or to remodel almost every branch of poetry and prose. The reason is simply this: the growth of journalism, of photography, of cinema and radio, and, lately, of television, has forced the writers to abandon the surface of life and to seek its inner depth. It has compelled them to depict in words only those matters which cannot be presented in any other way. Except that, lately, we have been witnesses to a great confusion of the various fields of writing: combining journalism, for instance, with fiction.

The letters of the Marquise de Sévigné to her daughter, the Countess de Grignon, written with admirable perseverance over a period of more than twenty years, concerned, actually, only the addressee. Yet, today they are not only a classic of French prose; they also provide a vivid panorama of the era of Louis XIV. In these letters Madame de Sévigné told her daughter, who lived in the then distant Provence, all the news which Madame de Grignon would not otherwise have quickly learned; not even from the first newspaper which was just then being launched in France. In those days letters meant infinitely more than they do today. Today the art of letter writing is on the wane—not because people no longer know how to write but, more probably, because they have come to the conclusion that it would be hopeless to compete with newspapers and newsreels.

Do you want to know what goes on in London? Tune in the radio. Do you want to see what the ruins of Warsaw look like? Or how the reconstruction of that capital destroyed by the Germans is progressing? Don't ask for long letters from those parts; just glance through a photograph album or go to the movies and see the newsreels. Of course, if you insist, your private correspondent can always send you from some faraway place a picture postcard, or he can enclose in a short letter snapshots taken by himself. He can even send his own picture, taken against the background of the ruins.

Although the last war has spawned innumerable fat volumes of memoirs of its perpetrators, leaders and participants—some of them written by ghost writers especially engaged for that purpose—memoir writing as a separate form of literary art (which flourished once, particularly in the eighteenth century) now, actually, no longer exists. It would be useless to search among the best sellers of this branch of prose for new talents equal to Saint-Simon, Madame de Staal (not to be confused with Madame de Staël), Madame d'Epinay, or Madame du Deffand.

And yet, were it not for the many volumes of the memoirs of the Duc de Saint-Simon which in themselves are a work of art, the great cycle of Proust novels might perhaps never have been written. In both works, gossip has been, so to say, monumentalized, though by very different means. Where Saint-Simon describes a bare fact, providing it merely with a commentary, Proust, like a patient miner, burrows into the fact's most deeply hidden meaning. Formerly, events such as wars, conflagrations, plagues, and earthquakes reached the consciousness of the distant public only through the medium of individually colored, often distorted, accounts of writers. There were none of the syndicated visions of life and death which the press and the picture agencies and the radio networks are turning out in mass production today. Newsreels had not yet imposed upon the world their own brand of authentic or synthetic fragments of battles and catastrophies. The epic poet, the memoir and letter writer left much to the guesswork and imagination of the reader. He drew him into collaboration with his own creative fancy. The terrible earthquake which in 1775 turned practically all of Lisbon into a heap of rubble took its place in history and became memorable mainly through Voltaire and his *Candide.*

So, *Pan Tadeusz* for its time. All its charm as poetry apart, it can be considered simply as a well of information about the world and the times, unglimpsed by any camera eye, in which the poet's childhood had been spent. We will find in it quite a few gossipy tales about the authentic neighbors of the imaginary Horeszkos and Soplicas. It even contains several references to the Mickiewicz family.

We believe that the world of those days really looked just as the poet presented it. Indeed, the world always looks as poets, not reporters, present it. We believe that it is as it was seen by El Greco, Rembrandt and Cézanne, and not as it is seen by photographers.

Translated by RULKA LANGER