STANISŁAW WYSPIAŃSKI

ACROPOLIS

THE WAWEL PLAYS

TRANSLATED BY
CHARLES
S.KRASZEWSKI

GLAGOSLAV PUBLICATIONS

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THE WAWEL PLAYS

by Stanisław Wyspiański

Translated from the Polish and Introduced by Charles S. Kraszewski

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Stanisław Wyspiański

1869 – 1907

Introduction

Two lyric poems by the multi-talented artist and poet Stanisław Wyspiański (1869—1907) will serve to place the works included in this book in their proper historical context. The first is a reminiscence of his childhood and of his father Franciszek, a well-known sculptor:

> U stóp Wawelu miał ojciec pracownię,
> wielką izbę białą wysklepioną,
> żyjącą figur zmarłych wielkich tłumem;
> tam chłopiec mały chodziłem, co czułem,
> to później w kształty mej sztuki zakułem.
> Uczuciem wtedy tylko, nie rozumem,
> obejmowałem zarys gliną ulepioną
> wyrastający przede mną w olbrzymy:
> w drzewie lipowym rzezane posągi.
>
> [At the foot of Wawel my father's atelier was placed. / A great white vaulted chamber, / Animated by a crowd of images of the dead; / There, as a little boy I wandered, and what I felt, / Later I forged in the shapes of my art. / At that time, by emotion only, and not rational understanding, / I grasped the outlines, moulded in clay, / which grew before my eyes into giants: / statues, carved in lime wood].

Franciszek Wyspiański's art can still be seen in Kraków: for example, in the church of St. Anne, on St. Anne's street, stands his sculpture of St. Jan of Kęt, very much in its appropriate place, for the church of St. Anne is associated with the Jagiellonian University, and St. Jan is one of its most worthy alumni. The influence of the sculptor-father on the young Stanisław Wyspiański cannot be overstated, of course. Although he did not follow in his father's footsteps per se, as a sculptor, he superseded him as an artist, becoming not only one of the most important dramatic poets of the Polish nation, but also the most important painter of the fauve-like, Art Nouveau

period, which took on the name of Młoda Polska, Young Poland, in that portion of the Austro-Hungarian Empire.

Yet in consideration of the development of this most Cracovian of artists, it must not go unmentioned that the house too, in which the young Wyspiański wandered about those developing sculptures, must have made its own deep impressions on the boy. It still stands today, on the corner of Kanonicza Street and Podzamcze, literally at the foot of Wawel Hill, that centre of princely and royal power that predates the Polish nation itself. Originally built in the fourteenth century, it is known as the House of Długosz, named after one of its most well-known inhabitants: Canon Jan Długosz (1415—1480), who both served at the cathedral on Wawel Hill, and composed one of the most important chronicles of the Polish nation. That chronicle, which commences with the legendary times of the Cracovian region, and strives to reconstruct a memory of the ancient pagan traditions of the Polish nation, is one of the precursors of the dramatic fantasies that Wyspiański went on to compose. When one reads the introductory didascalia to Wyspiański's play on King Bolesław the Bold, it is as if that little boy comes alive before us:

> *I had a dream, and in my dream I saw*
> *Such things to which my heart leapt yearning:*
> *There ghostly figures trod, all bearing swords,*
> *Shields of leather, and some heavy items*
> *Of leathern armour. Dressed in glowing robes,*
> *The train, wrapped in the colours of the moon,*
> *Stood before Wawel castle, and my eyes.*

That little boy never stopped gazing up at the imposing castle on the hill across the street from his father's atelier. It was always to enjoy an almost obsessive place in his consciousness. As a young artist, he won a competition to create stained glass windows for the Wawel Cathedral; as a recruit of the Austro-Hungarian Army, the hill was the location of the main garrison in the city; images of the castle constitute an important element in his oeuvre as a painter, and, of course, it is there that he set the action of the four plays included in this translation. In 1904, when Emperor Franz Josef agreed to withdraw the troops from the hill and return it to the Polish people, Wyspiański, along with his friend Władysław Ekielski, set about reimagining the Castle and the adjacent buildings as a centre of Polish

nationhood, which was to contain both cultural and religious structures, as well as a seat of government for the Polish lands — the autonomy of which was one of Wyspiański's great desires (although he was to die more than ten years before that goal was finally achieved).

The mediaeval centre of Wyspiański's hometown of Kraków remains today much as it appeared during the poet's lifetime. Wyspiański was exceptionally sensitive to the history and the ancient monuments of his city. As a student of the great historical painter Jan Matejko, he participated in the conservation of many of the mediaeval structures in and around Kraków, including the polychrome walls and vault of the Basilica of St. Mary on the Main Market Square. One of the newer buildings which was to play an important role in Wyspiański's life was the Municipal Theatre, whose imposing bulk still stands at the end of Szpitalna Street. That street itself takes its name from the Hospital of the Holy Ghost, a mediaeval structure that was razed in the 1890s to make room for the new theatre. Wyspiański's master, Matejko, who was no less sensitive to the sacredness of the remnants of his city's past, protested vigorously against this move. One of Wyspiański's younger contemporaries, Tadeusz Boy-Żeleński, recorded the following exchange between Matejko and the municipal authorities during his unsuccessful campaign to halt the destruction: *Panie artysto, rzekł jeden z dygnitarzy miejskich urażony, przecież i my każdy kamień w Krakowie znamy i kochamy. — Tak, każdy kamień, który prowadzi od Hawełki do Wencla* ["My dear sir," replied one of the exasperated municipal dignitaries, "we know and love every single stone here in Kraków!" — "Sure you do," rejoined Matejko, "Every paving stone between Hawełka and Wentzel's!"] — two popular cafés on the Main Market Square.

Which returns us to that second poem of Wyspiański's, composed in accord with Matejko's sentiments (who returned his honorary citizenship in protest of the destruction of the ancient building, and swore never to exhibit his paintings in the city more):

> O, kocham Kraków — bo nie od kamieni
> przykrości-m doznał — lecz od żywych ludzi,
> nie zachwieje się we mnie duch ani zmieni,
> ani się zapał we mnie nie ostudzi,
> to bowiem z Wiary jest, co mi rumieni
> różanym świtem myśl i co mnie budzi.

Im częściej we mnie kamieniem rzucicie,
sami złożycie stos — stanę na szczycie.

[O, I love Kraków — for never by stones / have I been offended — only by living people. / But the spirit in me will never waver or change, / Nor will the enthusiasm in me ever cool, / for these are from that Faith, which nourishes / my thought with its rose-coloured dawn, and which invigorates me… / The more stones that you throw at me / the higher grows the stake — at the summit of which pedestal I shall stand.]

Today, the poet does indeed stand on a pedestal, surrounded by figures from his dramas, in the form of a 1982 statue by Marian Konieczny erected outside the main building of the National Museum in Kraków. The central figure of Wyspiański seems to be musing, summoning to life the sculpted characters at his feet. Both this dream-like quality captured by Konieczny, and the poet's own professed preference for stone people over those of flesh and blood, characterise his approach to drama. After all, no human figure makes its appearance in the play *Acropolis* at all. Rather, the stage of this unusual, magical-realistic play is entirely populated by the statues and embroidered figures of Wawel Cathedral, who come alive during the night stretching from Holy Saturday into Easter Sunday.

WYSPIAŃSKI AND POLISH MONUMENTAL DRAMA

Such fantastical characters — be they the magically awakened silver angels, who patiently bear the weight of St. Stanisław's reliquary tomb during the daylight hours in *Acropolis,* or the Werewolves and other "Water Folk" that appear in *Wanda* — set Wyspiański's plays firmly in the tradition of Polish Monumental Drama, which was initiated by Adam Mickiewicz during the Romantic era.

To define it simply, Polish Monumental Drama is a theatrical tradition that widens the stageable area of the theatre to include the world of the dead, of eternity. It is more than just a morality play, although that mediaeval dramatic tradition is quite near to Monumental Drama in its philosophical underpinnings. Both the morality play and Polish Monumental Drama start from the position that man is more than an animal moving through this earthly life, from birth until extinction. They put forth the teachings of

the Christian tradition, which form the basis of European culture, asserting that man is a composite being of body and soul. Death does not bring existence to an end; it is merely a transition into a different state of being, in which man will interact directly with the beings that belong to the spiritual realm — God, angels and saints, the departed — who are hidden from his earthly eyes. This is not to say that these inhabitants of eternity do not, at times, manifest themselves among the living here and now. From the perspective of Polish Monumental Drama, we inhabit the shaded area of a Venn diagram: that area in which the worlds of the living and the dead, of time and eternity, intersect.

As we note above, Polish Monumental Drama provides us with a wide "stageable area;" in fact, one that is almost limitless. Werewolves and Witches appear in *Wanda; Acropolis* comes to an apocalyptic end with the glorious irruption of Christ/Apollo onto the scene. As a theatrical tradition that urges us to willingly suspend our disbelief in favour of the spiritual and extraordinary, Polish Monumental Drama draws on a wide range of supernaturally-focussed writing, from the Lenore-like folk ballads of the dead hero returning to reclaim his lover, to the sophisticated cosmology of Dante's *Divine Comedy*.

Polish Monumental Drama is an exceptionally vibrant current in Polish theatre. Coming into existence in the 1830s, examples of it can be noted throughout the twentieth century. It spans literary and cultural periods, but it is not monolithic, in that it is not immune from the surrounding ideological atmosphere; it is constantly in flux, as the decades come and go. During the Romantic age, which in many respects was an age of faith, the Dantean character predominates. Both Adam Mickiewicz's *Dziady* [Forefathers' Eve] and Zygmunt Krasiński's provocatively entitled *Nieboska komedia* [Undivine Comedy] are morality plays in that they accept the Christian cosmology enunciated by Dante, and the message they deliver to the reader is an affirmation of the eternal hierarchy of right and wrong, reward and punishment, proffered by the Christian *Weltanschauung*.

Skipping some hundred and fifty years, the most recent practitioner of Polish Monumental Drama is Tadeusz Kantor. Like Wyspiański, almost exclusively associated with Kraków, the painter-dramatist Kantor is best known for a trilogy of "theatrical spectacula" staged to great acclaim in the late 1970s and early 1980s. *Umarła klasa* [The Dead Class], *Wielopole, Wielopole* and *Niech sczezną artyści!* [Let the Artists Croak!] introduce to the stage an odd mélange of characters both living and dead. But while

it would be wrong to suggest that Kantor was *not* affected by religious speculations in his work,[1] the contemporary, sceptical approach to the supernatural that characterises the twentieth-century mind reduces the reality of the otherworldly characters to an exploration of memory. As he refers to it in the theoretical writings that accompany *Let the Artists Croak!*, our memory does not proceed in a chronological fashion. When we come across the dead sharing the stage with the living in one of Kantor's spectacula, or various versions of one character — child, man, aged man — on stage at the same time, we are to understand the stage as a kind of box of negative photographic plates, tossed on top of one another without rhyme or reason, with the disparate images superimposed on the screen of our imagination.

With Wyspiański, who appears at nearly the midway point between the Romantics and the twentieth century avant-garde, the Monumental approach is different as well. Wyspiański introduces his "eternal" characters neither from the pages of Christian hagiography, nor from the theories of psychoanalysis, but rather from the traditions of Polish/Cracovian legend, as a way of understanding what it means to be "Polish" in a Europe where the country that bears that name no longer exists. Influenced by Nietzsche in the realm of philosophy, and by Wagner in the fields of synaesthetic art,[2] Wyspiański is most interested in exploring the mythical essence of his nation. It is legend and ethnic lore which most fully make up the eternal, and fantastic, portions of his Monumental stage.

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1 After his mother was abandoned by his Jewish father, Kantor was raised in the rectory of his uncle, a Catholic priest, in the small town of Wielopole. His youth was permeated by the religious observances of both the Catholic and the Jewish inhabitants of the town, and — as I assert in the article "Kantor's Crucifixions: the Use of the 'Village Lexicon of Suffering' in the Theatrical Works of Tadeusz Kantor," *The Polish Review* XLIV (1999) 2:151-182, Kantor makes use of familiar Jewish and Christian motifs in order to give voice to the sufferings and aspirations of the simple people who populate his intimate dramas. It gives his characters a way to understand their world and express their role in it.

2 See Czesław Miłosz, *The History of Polish Literature* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1983), p. 353.

THE PLAYS

Before we move on to a discussion of the individual plays included in this translation, a quick orientational note may be necessary. Our book presents four of Wyspiański's most important dramatic works dealing with Wawel. In Polish, they are *Legenda II* (1904), *Bolesław Śmiały* (1903), *Skałka* (1907) and *Akropolis* (1904). The dates given here relate to the publication of the plays in book form. Some of them premiered on stage only after they had been long available to the reading public. In the case of *Akropolis,* for example, its theatrical debut did not come about until 1926 — long after the poet's untimely death in 1907.

As the title of the play dealing with Cracovian prehistory suggests, *Legenda II*, the story of Wanda, was preceded by *Legenda (I)*, an early unfinished play from 1897, which Wyspiański completely overhauled two decades later. We have retitled our English version *Wanda*, in order to avoid unnecessary confusion arising from the ordinal number.

No doubt the reader will have noticed that, although we list four Polish titles in the paragraph above, our translation seems to contain only three plays. This is because of our conflation of the two works dealing with the bloody struggle between the crown and the altar, *Bolesław the Bold* and *Skałka,* into the composite drama entitled *Bishop, King. Bishop.* This is not a whim of our own. *Bolesław the Bold* was written first; later, Wyspiański returned to the topic in *Skałka.* Although both plays are integral dramatic works in their own right, we have it on good testimony — from the poet Leopold Staff, among others — that Wyspiański intended to combine both plays into one, as we do here, and was only prevented from doing so by his death. Our rearrangement of the two plays into one follows Wyspiański's instructions to the letter. It opens, as he wished, with Act I of *Skałka*, which is followed by Act I of *Bolesław*, then Act II of *Skałka* ensues, with the two plays alternating until all six acts have run their course.

In reading these plays in this interlocking fashion, the reader is struck by Wyspiański's deft pen. Although *Skałka* is a dramatic whole of its own, the poet must have had this composite plan in mind while writing the new play. Act by act, the action of the later drama flows seamlessly into the action of the earlier, and vice versa, like snug-fitting pieces of one puzzle. At no point do the interlaced plays jar; there is no need for explanatory notes or fudging so as to smooth the flow from one play into the other, and back again. We have not tinkered with the action or the words of either play one iota. The only exception to this rule deals with didascalia.

As Wyspiański was writing his works to be read as well as seen on stage, he developed the curious habit of composing stage directions in verse. *Bolesław the Bold* is fronted by a long verse introduction in which the poet describes, in somewhat mystical fashion, the "dream" he had one night concerning the ancient kingly seat on Wawel, and how he was entrusted with the theme by some none-too-defined spirit of the nation. Because Act I of *Bolesław* begins after we have already submerged ourselves in the action of *Skałka,* the sudden, extended appearance of the narrator's voice would interrupt the dramatic flow of the composite play. For that reason, I have excised those three pages of descriptive verse, which add nothing of value to the drama itself. The reader who wishes to consult them may do so in the Appendices, where I have moved them. The only other minor adjustment I have made to the text is in Act II of *Skałka.* Towards the middle of that act, Wyspiański describes the collapse of the pagan temple into the waters of the pond, and the resurfacing of two of the pagan idols, who circle the pond to meet in the centre of the stage and embrace. Wyspiański's description of this event veers into the overly-mechanical, as if he were sketching out how the complicated scene might be staged, for the benefit of those carpenters and mechanics who would be building the apparatus. It seems to me that this too disrupts the flow of the play, and for that reason I have simplified the description.

As I note above, the conflation of the two plays into one is no mere caprice of my own. It was Wyspiański's idea. I do not know if this is the first book to present the plays in this fashion, but I have not come across any earlier such arrangements. If the reader approaches *Bishop, King. Bishop* as we offer it, he or she will be reading the plays as Wyspiański wished them to be read. However, our arrangement does not overly impede the progress of such readers who wish to read the plays as separate dramatic works. It will be noted that each of the divisions into acts is followed by a subtitle indicative of the original placement of the act, i.e. "Act II (Act I of *Bolesław the Bold*)." All one needs to do, in order to separate out the plays into their original order, is to follow the directions of the subtitles. Again, no planing was necessary to get the individual acts of both plays to fit together into the composite form: both *Bolesław the Bold* and *Skałka* are presented here in their entirety. So, however the reader chooses to read them, the integrity of the poet's words has been preserved.

Both of the plays are three acts long. It should be noted, however, that although the acts of *Bolesław the Bold* are further divided into individual scenes, those of *Skałka* are not.

Nothing needs to be said here, in general, about the *Acropolis* texts, save that Wyspiański did consider Wawel, both castle and cathedral, as a potential focal-point for Poland and Poles, no matter where they lived. It should be remembered that Wyspiański lived and died a citizen of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, at a time when the historical lands of the once large Polish Kingdom had been subsumed into Austrian, Prussian, and Russian partitions. Looking forward to that day when these three Polish sectors would be reunited, in independence or some sort of autonomous whole, Wyspiański offers Wawel (with its grand necropolis beneath the cathedral, containing the tombs of nearly all Polish kings, as well as that of the national bard Adam Mickiewicz),[3] as a special place of pageantry and reverence, analogous to the Acropolis of Athens. It is for this reason that we append *Acropolis. A Proposal for the Renovation and Expansion of Wawel* to this collection of dramatic works. The grand ideas for the rebuilding of Wawel Hill as a de facto centre of Polish nationhood and government, drawn up by Władysław Ekielski according to the discussions he had with the poet, provide thrilling evidence of the central place of Wawel in the work, and thought, of Stanisław Wyspiański, as well as a fitting context for the cycle of dramas we present to the reader.[4]

---

3 Mickiewicz's remains were transferred from Paris to Wawel in 1890. Wyspiański did not live to see the re-interment of the second great Romantic, Juliusz Słowacki, which took place in 1927. While we are on the subject of entombments, Wyspiański himself was interred in the crypts of the church on Skałka, a pantheon of Polish artists, which also includes the final resting places of Jacek Malczewski, J.I. Kraszewski, Czesław Miłosz and Jan Długosz, among others.

4 Speaking of cycles, Wyspiański saw *Acropolis* as the third and concluding portion of a cycle of dramatic works beginning with *Wesele* [The Wedding Feast] and stretching through *Wyzwolenie* [Liberation]. Although *Liberation* is tangentially connected with Wawel, its real focus is not on Wawel per se, as a historical locus and focal point of Polish legend. Rather, it is a continuation of the poet's polemics with the Polish poetic tradition, and for that reason we do not include it here. It has more in common with *Legion*, Wyspiański's play dealing with Mickiewicz's political aims. Perhaps, in the future, I will turn my hand to another anthology of the poet's works in English, which will be grouped around his interest in Mickiewicz: *Legion, Liberation,* and his notes on his groundbreaking production of *Forefathers' Eve.*

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I would like to acknowledge the Book Institute of Poland for their generous financial support of the publication of this book, and the National Museum in Kraków for their permission to reproduce the illustrations included in it. The reader will find the visual materials associated with the Wyspiański/Ekielski plan for the renovation of Wawel an immense aid to their understanding of that document.

Finally, I acknowledge the patience and support of my wife Ola, to whom everything I do is dedicated.

Miami Beach
May 15, 2017

WANDA

(*Legenda II*)

PERSONS OF THE TRAGEDY

Krak, the Prince
Wanda
Chuckle (singer)
Burdock (singer)
Chorus

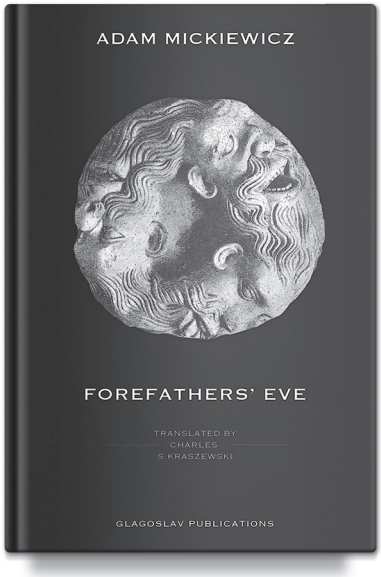
THE ACTION OF THE DRAMA TAKES PLACE ON WAWEL HILL.

ACT I

Ages ago, on this very hill
An old king lived, famous in arms,
Whose clothes were of a peasant cut,
Whose sceptre was a gnarled crook.
Mighty he was, swift, invincible,
A club of oak in his right hand.
Around him he gathered shamans wise,
Learned in simples and in song.
The seat of power he built himself:
Cross-wise the plan of the courtyards.
A palisade of pointed logs
With sentry-gates at intervals.
The walls were faced with planks of fir,
Around stood pillars clever-carved:
The runes and figures of his gods.
And from the shaded battlements
The Vistula — broad stream — was seen,
Upon which bobbed many a barge.

Forefathers' Eve

by Adam Mickiewicz



Forefathers' Eve [*Dziady*] is a four-part dramatic work begun circa 1820 and completed in 1832 – with Part I published only after the poet's death, in 1860. The drama's title refers to *Dziady*, an ancient Slavic and Lithuanian feast commemorating the dead. This is the grand work of Polish literature, and it is one that elevates Mickiewicz to a position among the "great Europeans" such as Dante and Goethe.

With its Christian background of the Communion of the Saints, revenant spirits, and the interpenetration of the worlds of time and eternity, *Forefathers' Eve* speaks to men and women of all times and places. While it is a truly Polish work – Polish actors covet the role of Gustaw/Konrad in the same way that Anglophone actors covet that of Hamlet – it is one of the most universal works of literature written during the nineteenth century. It has been compared to Goethe's Faust – and rightfully so...

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Although he never left his native Kraków except for relatively short periods, Stanisław Wyspiański (1869-1907) achieved worldwide fame, both as a painter, and Poland's greatest dramatist of the first half of the twentieth century. *Acropolis: the Wawel Plays*, brings together four of Wyspiański's most important dramatic works in a new English translation by Charles S. Kraszewski. All of the plays centre on Wawel Hill: the legendary seat of royal and ecclesiastical power in the poet's native city, the ancient capital of Poland. In these plays, Wyspiański explores the foundational myths of his nation: that of the self-sacrificial Wanda, and the struggle between King Bolesław the Bold and Bishop Stanisław Szczepanowski. In the eponymous play which brings the cycle to an end, Wyspiański carefully considers the value of myth to a nation without political autonomy, soaring in thought into an apocalyptic vision of the future. Richly illustrated with the poet's artwork, *Acropolis: the Wawel Plays* also contains Wyspiański's architectural proposal for the renovation of Wawel Hill, and a detailed critical introduction by the translator. In its plaited presentation of *Bolesław the Bold* and *Skałka*, the translation offers, for the first time, the two plays in the unified, composite format that the poet intended, but was prevented from carrying out by his untimely death.

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