ZYGMUNT KRASIŃSKI

DRAMATIC WORKS

TRANSLATED BY
CHARLES S. KRASZEWSKI

GLAGOSLAV PUBLICATIONS

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1812 – 1859

Do You Not Know?

ZYGMUNT KRASIŃSKI, THE REACTIONARY AND INQUISITIVE ROMANTIC

As far as I know, Zygmunt Krasiński is the only bard of Romantic Poland ever to be punched in the nose.

This happened whilst he was a student at Warsaw, which at the time lay in the Russian partition of Poland. A student demonstration was taking place, in support of Polish independence, and Krasiński, whose father Wincenty was a Tsarist general, took the brave — or foolhardy — course of being the only person to break the striking students' picket line. The story is given a literary treatment in the author's *Unfinished Poem,* which Krasiński intended as an introductory work to his masterpiece, the *Undivine Comedy*:

> I see those staircases, spiralling like snakes, and that turning, that stony entrance, where you first appeared to me! I was a bold boy, was I not? Although immature and of slender strengths? I had come from home — I strode through them all with pride seated upon my brow, conscious of their hatred — but then again, why? Unconscious! — They tightened round me in a ring, an ever tighter ring, jeering "Little lord! Little lordling!" — as if it were a shameful thing to be able to point out where any given one of my forefathers had sacrificed his throat for the sake of the fatherland, and in which crypt of which church he rests. God! It was then that Hell was first born in this breast — the breast of a child!

It is Czesław Miłosz who hands down the anecdote about the young Krasiński.[1] Although the future poet may have been animated by a praiseworthy desire to defend his father's honour — for unlike

1 Czesław Miłosz, *The History of Polish Literature* (Berkeley and London: University of California Press, 1983), p. 243. It was a slap, rather than a punch.

Wincenty, Zygmunt was no supporter of the Tsarist occupation of his country — the upshot of it is the same: Krasiński's devotion to Polish independence, which we have no reason to doubt, seems to have had its limits. For, scion of an ancient magnate clan — one of twelve or so families who constituted the blue-blooded "one percent" so to speak — it is worth considering whether or not he was also acting in defence of his caste.

Such seems to be hinted at in the above-cited passage, as the Youth (Henryk) still bristles at the memory of his classmates' jeering: "as if it were a shameful thing to be able to point out where any given one of my forefathers sacrificed his throat for the sake of the fatherland!" During an age when nationality was ever more associated with the common people, the "folk," in his plays, Krasiński associates Polish nationhood with Polish history, and the historical families who made it. In a heated exchange between Aligier and Pankracy towards the end of the *Unfinished Poem*, the former responds to the latter's revolutionary apotheosis of the people with:

> Pankracy! Pankracy! Where do you come from? And who was it poured the Polish language into your spirit? Who, Polish customs? Who set within you the desire for freedom? The strength of action? Were you born in the future? Of course not! So, what exactly are you, although you lack fathers that you can name, if you are not a son of the Polish Commonwealth? Tell me — what might you be able to say on the earth, with what might you form your lies, with what would you commit your treason, with what misappropriate the past, if not with all the gifts she has given you? You ungrateful thing! Who would give ear to your voice on behalf of the people, who among your own land, or among strangers, if not for the sword of Bolesław Chrobry, the immaculate person of Jadwiga, the wise love of Zygmunt, the fortitude of Batory, the Roman virtue of the Zamoyskis, the heroic death of the Żółkiewskis, the heroic life of Czarniecki, the toils of Sobieski and his great European Deed? Without them there is nothing. And you choose to stand upon nothing? Why do you rise up against History and Immortal

Of course, that makes little difference: it was a personal affront that might have had serious consequences in that age of duels.

> Deeds? Against that, which you yourself cannot do without, cannot make one step, or pronounce one single word? It is the very breath of your lungs! Lead further, man, if the Lord's blessing rests upon you; lead your own nation further! But lead your nation not out of its national identity, as the cruel tyrant would, those who have torn the motherland apart! Be not her fourth hangman, given by Hell in addition to the other three! Pankracy! Pankracy!

Now, for most Poles of the period stretching between the complete loss of independence in 1795, and its restoration following World War I in 1918, the universal tragedy was the carving up of the once powerful country between Russia, Prussia and Austria. For Krasiński, the jettisoning of the history of the noble republic for an internationalist's dream of levelling all to universal democracy, would be just as tragic a partition. It would divide the classes, and in so doing, destroy the poet's idea of what the Polish "nation" is: a paternalistic, hierarchically organised society, with the nobility playing its God-given, natural role as leaders, with the broad swaths of the faithful and loyal peasantry gratefully accepting their tutelage — and with the rising mercantile bourgeoisie grudgingly allowed their own place in the top-heavy mosaic, as long as they behave themselves, avoid greed, and prove themselves adept at wielding both rapier and rosary.

Perhaps this is why the vision of guillotines is so frequently found in the closet-dramas of this reactionary Romantic. Zygmunt Krasiński is deathly afraid of the democratic Pankracys of the world slicing the noble head of his society from the obedient, healthy body of the peasantry. Should that happen, he feels, it would lead to the death of both. It is for this reason that Aligier (the spirit of none other than Dante Alighieri, who leads young Count Henryk on his journey in the *Unfinished Poem*) chides Pankracy (who is said to represent, in part, the more republican-leaning Adam Mickiewicz),[2] with the words: "Pankracy! Pankracy! Choragos of the Polish chorus, yourself not a Pole at all! You who are constantly repeating 'the People, the People,' whilst 'the Nation' is never found on your lips!" For the "people" may indeed signify those merely united in language and custom, but the "nation" can only be the entirety of the historical complex that is

2 Cf. Alina Witkowska, *Literatura romantyzmu* (Warsaw: PIW, 1986), p. 205.

Poland, led by those magnates, kings, and nobles. For Krasiński, it's all, or nothing.

THE NATION, AND NATIONALITY

Questions of nationality, ethnic loyalty, and social castes play an important, and sometimes troubling, role in the plays of Zygmunt Krasiński. One often speaks of his conservatism. This may be fair, especially when he is compared, politically, to Mickiewicz, Słowacki, or the younger, fourth bard, Cyprian Kamil Norwid. But he is not the conservative that his father was — although devotion to that father, despite their political differences, is what shaped the poet's outlook on caste. Wincenty, once an officer in Napoléon's Grande Armée waging war against the Russian Empire, went over to the dark side after the Congress of Vienna, accepting a post in the Tsarist forces, and, as a result, implicitly accepting the partitions as a fait accompli. He became (to his son's chagrin) a stalwart defender of the Muscovite system. As if poor Zygmunt needed any more reminders of this equivocal situation, the scathing depiction of the Tsarist ball in the third part of Mickiewicz's *Forefathers' Eve* is set in the Warsaw salon of his father Wincenty.[3]

Like his father, Krasiński was fiercely attached to the idea of patriarchy. References to fathers abound in his works, whether that be the Count's (or Aligier's) pious defence of ancestry, or the immediate duty it imposes upon fathers and sons in present moments of crisis — as during the showdown-like summit of Pankracy and the Count in the *Undivine Comedy*:

> PANKRACY
> Time mocks us both. If you're tired of your own life, save at least that of your son…
>
> HUSBAND
> His pure soul is already reserved for heaven — and on earth, his father's fate awaits him.
> *He lets his head droop in his hands, then rises.*

3 Miłosz, p. 243.

Yet whereas it can be argued that Count Henryk — known in the play as "the Husband" — dies defending the feudal system that he has inherited from ages past, his earlier incarnation as "the Youth" in the *Unfinished Poem*[4] sets national patriotism on the same level as loyalty to family, or caste. In a ritualistic initiation scene, when he is brought before the massed "choruses of the nations" and the quasi-sacerdotal figure of the "President," to offer himself as one more soldier in the moral struggle to speed on the coming Age of the Spirit, nationality is depicted as a primary characteristic of the human person, following hard after his individual identity:

> UNSEEN CHORUS
> Let him pronounce before us the merited name, the sacred name with which he was christened when born as a man.
>
> YOUTH
> Henryk.
>
> UNSEEN CHORUS
> Let him now confess the name common to the spirits, for whose sake the Lord determined that he should live and die, when He ordained his birth among them on the earth.
>
> YOUTH
> Poland.

For Krasiński, then, it is clear that, whatever it also may mean for the creation of the human soul, the foresight of God predetermines his or her role on earth as sealed to a particular nation, among which he or she must live and act, and to which he or she must dedicate herself — or else:

> POLISH CHORUS
> Thou, our brother thrice over, thou spirit among spirits, thou man among mankind, thou Son of Poland among Her sons,

4 A prequel of sorts to the *Undivine Comedy*, which gives us the backstory of Count Henryk's youth. Krasiński worked at it during the 1840s and 1850s. It was only published after his death.

> we greet thee! And now as a spirit merely in the guise of a man, know that thou art only a man under the appearance of a Pole; shouldst thou take upon thee another guise, thou shalt fall lower than cattle!

Such rather strongly conceived theories are problematic, to say the least. People "take upon themselves the guise" of another nationality quite frequently, and for divers reasons. Perhaps marriage leads them to a different country, where they settle for good. Perhaps it is life-threatening political or religious oppression in their native land that spurs their emigration. In neither case can such a person be classified as a traitor "fallen lower than cattle," nor, we trust, would Krasiński consider them as such. The latter case prompts an even bigger question: do we not owe a greater debt of loyalty to right action, to justice, to the Good which concerns every man and woman, than we do to the nation to which we are haphazardly attached by the accident of birth?

Of course, such questions do not occur in the context provided by Krasiński. It seems obvious that the Unseen Chorus is warning against frivolous action, or, which is part of the main nexus of conflict in these plays, international movements inimical to nationality.

In considering questions of nationalism and ethnicity in plays like the *Undivine Comedy* and the *Unfinished Poem*, we must remember that Krasiński was a person caught in pincers: between love and respect for a father upholding political views abhorrent to him and most of his generation, and the desire to prove himself in service to his nation enchained. In choosing exile over the danger of being associated with Russian servitude because of his father, who once (to his son's great embarrassment) officially presented him at the court of the Tsar in Sankt Petersburg, perhaps the desire to identify himself ethnically as a Pole was all the more exacerbated. Given his background, how might Krasiński, living in political exile in Paris, *not* put the following lines into Count Henryk's mouth, in that dramatic face-to-face meeting with Pankracy on the eve of the decisive battle:

> HUSBAND
> No use. You'll never understand me. Because every single one of your fathers has mixed his dust with the common mob, like a dead

thing, not like a man of strength and spirit. *He raises hand toward portraits.* Look at these figures — the very spirit of Fatherland, of home, family, a thought inimical to yourself, written in the furrows of their brows, and whatever was in them now lives in me. But you, fellow, tell me — Where is it your land lies? In the evening you stake your tent on the ruins of someone else's home; at sunrise you strike camp and wander elsewhere. You've not found your own hearth yet, nor will you ever, as long as one hundred repeat with me "Praise to our fathers!"

Here we are led to one of the more troubling aspects found in Krasiński's masterpiece. Such words in Husband-Henryk's mouth, with keywords like "where is it your land lies?" and "In the evening you stake your tent on the ruins of someone else's house; at sunrise you strike camp and wander elsewhere," to say nothing of "you've not found your own hearth yet," cannot but conjure in our minds images of anti-Jewish sentiment. Consider the scene of the conniving Jewish converts on the eve of the decisive battle:

CONVERT
My villainous brothers, my vengeful brothers, my dear brothers, let us suck at the pages of the Talmud as at a milky breast, a life-giving breast flowing with strength and honey for us, and for them — bitterness and poison!

CHORUS OF CONVERTS
Jehovah is our Lord, and no one else! He has scattered us everywhere, winding us around the world of the venerators of the Cross, our masters proud, stupid, illiterate, like the folds of an immense reptile. Let us spit thrice to seal their doom — thricely may they be accurst!

CONVERT
Let us rejoice, my brethren. That Cross, our enemy, undermined, rotten, now teeters over a puddle of blood, and once it falls, it will never rise again. Now only the bluebloods defend it.

CHORUS
The labour of ages is consummated, our labour sad, painful, dogged. Death to the bluebloods! Let us spit thrice to seal their doom — thricely may they be accursed!

CONVERT
On freedom without order, on slaughter without end, on conflict and malevolence, on their stupidity and pride we shall establish the power of Israel. We've only this handful to deal with — only this handful of bluebloods to topple into the abyss; then we shall sprinkle over their corpses the dusty ruins of the Cross.

CHORUS
The Cross, our holy sign; the water of baptism has joined us to the nations; those who held us despised ones in contempt, the despised, have been duped into believing in our love!
The freedom of the people is our law — The good of the people our goal — The sons of Christians have believed the ruse of the sons of Caiaphas!
Centuries ago our fathers put our enemy to torture — We shall torture Him again today and He will rise no more from the dead!

CONVERT
A few moments more, a few more drops of viper's venom, and the world is ours, ours, O my brethren!

CHORUS
Jehovah is our Lord, and no one else. Let us spit thrice to seal their doom — thricely may they be accurst!

This is hard to read. Krasiński's converts are conniving hypocrites, who have accepted initiation into the Christian religion of the majority among whom they live, only so as to undermine their adopted society all the more easily under the cloak of assimilation. If one of the great values of the *Undivine Comedy* is the manner in which it foresees the Marxist and totalitarian upheavals of the twentieth century,[5] one of its

5 "The *Undivine Comedy* is a rarity in world literature by virtue of its

great vices is this canard of the Jewish Convert "sleeper cell," to use the modern terminology of our terrorist nightmares.

It is surprising how, on the one hand, the same man can be so prescient about the dangers that can be unleashed by the ideology of class warfare, and yet so viciously insouciant as to peddle the baseless stuff that pogroms are made on. Nor is it a mere aberration. In the later *Unfinished Poem*, the "merchant-kings of the world" that haggle over the price of the blood of the labouring class are presented as members of the "wandering generations of the East," one of whom purchases the goblet of gore at the price of a diamond unpinned "from the purple band on his brow," and this is one of the nails of the True Cross, "which crystallised on the night in which your God expired. On the next morning, my great-great-grandfather pried it from the wood."

De mortuis nil nisi bonum. One would like to place such passages in a context that would, if not exculpate the author, at least explain why he chose to express himself thus. The *Undivine Comedy* is no more a political broadside than the *Divine Comedy* is a work of theology. These are words placed in the mouth of fictional characters, and in the context of an artistic argument for national identification, national loyalty. And yet, it is hard to even attempt a contextualisation of these sentiments without appearing to be an apologist for racism, which we completely, utterly, reject. Zygmunt Krasiński, as a thinker sensitive to universals and eternal truths, ought to have known better. Certainly, by contrast, Adam Mickiewicz, who treated Jewish topics with much more sympathy in his writing, and underscored complete civil rights for the Jews as one of the "Declared Principles" of the revolutionary legions he formed when he set about practical action, is seen in a much better light.

There is no excuse for any sort of racism, and we will not be apologists for it. Out of fairness to Krasiński, however, we must point out that it is the "stateless" condition of the Jewish diaspora that rankles him. For in his oddly Hegelian understanding of the manner in which the history of the world is tending through the ages from

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dialectical conception of *The* Revolution (not just any revolution). It is difficult to believe that the *Comedy* was written when Karl Marx was scarcely a stripling, more than eighty years before 1917 in Russia." Thus Czesław Miłosz in "Krasiński's Rereat," in Wacław Lednicki, ed., *Zygmunt Krasiński: Romantic Universalist* (New York: PIASA, 1964), p. 219.

infancy to maturity, it is through nationalism that the "fulfilment" of man's history is to be effected. This is how he puts it in the catechetical portion of the *Unfinished Poem*:

> PRESIDENT
> Speak on! Now, Christ was God, in one man?
>
> YOUTH
> Yes.
>
> PRESIDENT
> And who will be Christ in all people?
>
> YOUTH
> Humanity, I reckon!
>
> PRESIDENT
> But when? It was not yesterday. And not today? So, when?
>
> YOUTH
> At the final, greatest moment of Humanity's fulfilment!
>
> PRESIDENT
> And who shall bring about this fulfilment? Where are the members of that body in which one spirit resides? What sort of rites are celebrated in this Church universal, varied, and established by God? Where are the hues of that rainbow, from which the shining whiteness shall arise?
>
> YOUTH
> But I am not mistaken, Father, am I? It is of nationalities that you wish to speak?
>
> PRESIDENT
> Thou hast said it thyself.

And again we must remind ourselves that Krasiński can have had no idea what sorrow and suffering nineteenth century nationalism's

dividing up of human beings according to ethnicity and language would lead to in the post World War I era. Whether or not the *Undivine Comedy* is a work that continues to speak to our world, nowhere else in the literature of Polish Romanticism are we confronted with writing that is so divided from us, by the yawning gulf of attitude and presupposition. Krasiński's words have a much different sound today, after Auschwitz.

The "national choruses," which greet the Youth in that strange underground chamber, are many and varied. We hear the Irish Chorus, the Italian, German and French Choruses, greet the initiate along with the Polish and Slavic Choruses; presumably, there is room for a Jewish Chorus, an Arab and a Chinese Chorus as well. For Krasiński, the main thing is to know who you are, and to be true to that ethnic identity. This, more than anything, seems to be at the bottom of his characterisation of the Converts, as, curiously enough, it is, in his basing of the character of Pankracy on Mickiewicz.[6] Again, one wonders whether or not Krasiński's insistence on ethnicity did not arise from concerns about his own identity. However, nationality itself is a stereotypical construct; in Krasiński's philosophy of historical determinism, it is the stereotype, not necessarily the truth, that shall set you free.

THE NEW AGE AND THE SOCIAL QUESTION

Despite the foregoing, it cannot be said of Zygmunt Krasiński that he is an unquestioning partisan of the caste from which he springs, and which he so values. He is no jingo who would declare "my people, right or wrong," as is evidenced from the — at times agonising — debate in the *Undivine Comedy* between Count Henryk and the revolutionary leveller Pankracy. Although he will not be swayed by the blandishments of that Moses of the new age, who, for some reason,[7] wishes to save

6 In a letter to Delfina Potocka dated 6 August 1847, Krasiński refers to Mickiewicz as "that little Jew" who "adds Jewish inflexibility to Lithuanian stubbornness." Cited by Artur Sandauer, *Pisma Zebrane* (Warsaw: Czytelnik, 1985), Vol. 4, p. 357.

7 According to Miłosz, "only the amalgamation of Pancras [*sic*] and Count Henry would produce a complete Man. And Pancras is wise enough to know this; hence his weakness for Henry, as a suppressed part of his own person." To this he

him and his son from amongst the thousands of nobles marked for tomorrow's slaughter, Henryk must give ear to the counter-argument made by Pankracy in response to his panegyric on the portraits of his ancestors, quoted above. What is more, Krasiński is sober enough to acknowledge the gripes of his class enemies by creating a speech of real emotional, logical, and… historical power:

> PANKRACY
> Oh, sure — praise to thy fathers and grandfathers on earth as in … Yes, there's quite a lot to look at around here.
>
> That one there, the Subprefect, liked to shoot at women among the trees, and burned Jews alive. — That one, with the seal in his hand and the signature, the "Chancellor," falsified records, burned whole archives, bribed judges, hurried on his petty inheritances with poison — To him you owe your villages, your income, your power. That one, the darkish one with the fiery eye, slept with his friends' wives — that one with the Golden Fleece, in the Italian armour, fought — not for Fatherland, but for foreign pay. And that pale lady with the black locks muddied her pedigree with her squire — while that one reads a lover's letter and smiles because the sun is setting… That one over there, with the doggie on her farthingale, was whore to kings. — There's your genealogies for you, endless, stainless! — I like that chap in the green caftan. He drank and hunted with his brother aristocrats, and set out the peasants to chase deer with the dogs. The idiocy and adversity of the whole country — there's your reason, there's your power. — But the day of judgement is near at hand and on that day, I promise you, I won't forget a single one of you, a single one of your fathers, a single scrap of your glory!

This is one of the most persuasive speeches enunciated by a revolutionary democrat, whether in this *Undivine Comedy*, or in the more reflective *Unfinished Poem*. Most often, it seems that the enemy party — the revolutionaries — are more motivated by a blind hatred of the old system, the nobility, Christianity, and authority in general, as well as a cynical lust to snatch power for themselves, than any true

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wisely adds, "But such a union can exist only in dreams." Cf. "Krasiński's Retreat," p. 219.

humanistic or just impulse toward the righting of wrongs. They are a blind, elementally destructive force. As he writes in a letter to Princess Izabella Sanguszko, "communism arouses seething passions in every human soul […] it is no joke to the hungry and the freezing."[8] In his treatment of the revolutionary masses, Krasiński can be just as dismissively stereotypical as he is of the Jewish Converts. And yet, the difference here is that, even though he paints them with a broad brush, he also recognises their complaints:

> FIRST LACKEY
> I did in my old master a'ready.
>
> SECOND LACKEY
> I'm still lookin' for my sweet baron. To your health!
>
> VALET
> Citizens, hunched over shoetree in sweat and misery, polishin' boots, clippin' hair — we've come to recognise our rights all the same. Health to the entire club!
>
> CHORUS OF LACKEYS
> To the health of our president, who leads us on the path of honour!
>
> VALET
> Thank you, citizens.
>
> CHORUS OF LACKEYS
> From the foyers, from our prisons, all together, with one strong push, we've broken free. Vivat! Don't we know the idiocy and whoring that goes on in the bluebloods' salons? Vivat! Vivat!

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8 Krasiński, letter to Isabella Sanguszko dated Heidelberg, 1 May 1851. Collected in Halina Gacowa, ed. "Nowe listy Zygmunta Krasińskiego do Izabelli z Lubomirskich Sanguszko z lat 1841–1851," in Jarosław Maciejewski, ed. *Archiwum Literackie: Miscellanea z okresu romantyzmu* (Wrocław: Ossolineum, 1972), vol. XV (2), p. 254. In referring to the appeal of revolutionary theory to the "hungry and freezing," Krasiński again shows some understanding of the topic; in a note, the editor adds that, at the time, "Krasiński had a foreboding of coming political upheavals in Europe."

Remembering both the slaughter of the French aristocracy during the terror of Robespierre and the more recent "Galician massacre," during which the Polish peasants, under the leadership of Jakub Szela (and instigated by the Austrian authorities) rose up and cut down the oppressive nobles who had been their masters (memories of which haunt the unfinished play *1846*), these vignettes of revolutionary cénacles lend first-hand weight to Pankracy's assertions, above. Rather than merely fashioning painted devils with which to frighten his noble readers, in passages like this, Krasiński dons prophetic robes to warn his "brethren" of the coming catastrophe, if they don't shape up:

> CRAFTSMAN
> Curses… Curses!
>
> HUSBAND
> What are you doing there under the tree, poor fellow? Why do you cast your eyes about so wildly, so moodily?
>
> CRAFTSMAN
> Curses to the merchants and factory directors! I wasted the best years of my life — When other fellows were out chasing girls, winning fame on the battlefield or sailing the open seas, I was slaving away in a cramped little space in a silk manufactory.
>
> HUSBAND
> Down the cup that you hold in your hand!
>
> CRAFTSMAN
> I haven't got the strength… can't even raise it to my mouth. I was hardly able to crawl here on hands and knees, and now I won't see any dawn of freedom rising for me… Curses to the merchants who sell silk, and to the bluebloods who wear it. Curses — Curses!
> *He dies.*

The words of the Chorus of Lackeys and the Craftsman contain a stinging criticism of the social system that had been in place up until then, from the lips of one of those who derived great advantage from it. The poet calls out his noble peers for their idiocy and whoring. Perhaps

they have little control over the former (depending on what exactly is covered by the broad term), but there is no excuse for the latter; Krasiński decries his own class here as hypocrites, strongly implying that, if it should come to such a levelling revolution against them, it is they who are at least partially to blame.

Not far from where I am sitting, the Polish Democratic Society (Towarzystwo Demokratyczne Polskie) had its headquarters, after having been forced to leave Paris for London. Headed by Wojciech Darasz, the Society was one of the many movements and organisations among Poles in exile who were struggling for Polish independence from the partitioning empires of Russia, Prussia, and Austria. What distinguished them from the rest were their social postulates. In their view, the nobility of Poland bore much of the blame for the failure of the 1830 uprising. Not only did they fail to mobilise the peasants under their influence to join the colours of the insurrectionist forces, but they were all too conservative in their political thinking, which means: they chose their own comfort and material stability over the independence of their nation. Zygmunt Krasiński, as the scion of one of the greatest magnate clans in Poland, was especially sensitive to such views, which, judging from his major plays, he entertained with some sympathy. It is not just the Lackeys and Craftsmen of the world who cry aloud for justice, acknowledging that Europe has had a less than stellar record of living out Christ's commandments of equality and brotherhood. Count Henryk himself is moved deeply by his antagonist's pleas and reasonings:

> HUSBAND
> Progress, the happiness of the human race… I myself once believed… Ha! here — take my head, if only... it come true… One hundred years ago, two hundred… a mutual agreement could still have… But now, I know… Now we need mutual slaughter, 'cos now it's only about a switch of places.

What does Henryk mean when he suggests that "one hundred years ago, two hundred… a mutual agreement could still have" been arrived at — a compromise which, presumably, would have cast oil upon the churning waters of social inequality, and forestalled the angry uprising of the masses? Is he referring to the stubbornness of the French king

Louis and the earlier British king Charles who might have saved their own heads, and those of so many others, by a more pliant acquiescence to the petitions of their aggrieved subjects? What matters is that Henryk himself is attracted to such "progress" and "human happiness;" he once had liberal tendencies, the like of which can still move his heart. But although Pankracy is correct in assessing that now "I've placed my finger right beneath his heart, and touched the nerve of poetry," Henryk cannot be finally moved: "Vain dreams — who will realise them? Adam died in the wilderness, and we won't get back into Eden." And is not Henryk at least a little bit right? Despite the vitriolic attitude of Pankracy towards traditional religion (one of the props of the social order he is attacking), something he shares with Robespierre earlier, and Marx later, all he is proposing is another sort of messianism, another sort of utopian parousia, which is just as unlikely to come about in our lifetimes, as is that foretold in the New Testament:

> PANKRACY
> From this generation, over which I brood with the strength of my will, the final tribe shall emerge — the greatest, bravest. The earth has yet to see such men: free people, lords of the earth from pole to pole. And the earth herself shall be one city flourishing, one happy home, one workshop of happiness, riches and industry.

And this is something for which Count Henryk has no patience. In one of the Dantean scenes from the *Undivine Comedy*, Henryk has the Convert (under duress) lead him among the revolutionary mobs, disguised, on the night before his meeting with Pankracy. (It is during this "underworld" journey that the hero of the play witnesses the conversation of the Chorus of the Lackeys, and holds his brief exchange of words with the Craftsman, both cited above). I'll have none of your idealistic claptrap, he tells Pankracy after shaking off that momentary lapse to sympathy, for, just as Peter Townshend and Roger Daltrey were to assert decades later, all this is just another case of "meet the new boss, same as the old boss:"

> HUSBAND
> […]I too know you, and your world. Amidst the shades of night I watched the dancing of the mob, upon whose necks you

climb upward, and saw all the old crimes of the world dressed up in new clothes, swaying to the rhythm of a new dance, the end of which, however, hasn't changed in one thousand years: dissipation, gold, and blood. But you were nowhere there to be seen. You didn't deign descend among your children, 'cos in the depths of your soul you hold them in contempt! A few minutes more, and if your reason doesn't abandon you, you'll hold yourself in contempt as well. Don't torment me any further.

There's something to this assessment. We see with our own eyes how Pankracy, lord and master of the revolutionary mobs, assumes the distant air of the lords he seeks to overthrow, in relation to the people who acknowledge him their leader:

PANKRACY. And have you put the shoemakers' subscription into our strongbox?

LEONARD. With unfeigned enthusiasm they contributed — every one of them — they collected one hundred thousand.

PANKRACY. I'll invite them to supper tomorrow.

Similarly, when Henryk and the Convert come across the revolutionary warlord Bianchetti during that foray through the nighttime camp, it's hard not to appreciate, at least, the sardonic reasoning behind Henryk's conclusions:

HUSBAND
And what is the general musing on, may one inquire?

BIANCHETTI
See that space between the sycamores, Citizens? Take a good look. Up through there you can see the castle. With my glass I can even make out the walls, fosses and the four bastions.

HUSBAND
Difficult to take.

BIANCHETTI
Thousands and thousands of kings! One might steal along the ravine, undermine a bit and…

[…]

CONVERT
[…] So, what've you thought up, Citizen General?

BIANCHETTI
In thought
You may be my brothers in freedom, but not in genius. Everyone will learn of my plans… after my victory.
Moves off.

HUSBAND
To convert
Kill him. That's my advice. Because that's the way all aristocracy gets its start.

When we come to speak of the manner in which poetry, idealism, and, in particular, Byronism and "great soulled" Romantic tropes are dealt with in Krasiński's work, we will come across Henryk's guardian angel advising him to turn away from the dream world, and concentrate instead on practical love. Whether or not he is correct in so thinking, this is what the revolutionary movement is lacking, as far as Krasiński is concerned. It is for this reason that he sees republicanism, in its guise as revolutionary, or popular, democracy, not as progress, but rather as a simple changing of the ruling guard, and revolution itself — despite his constant harping on the need for Action — as nothing more than gratuitous bloodshed. As he says in his own voice, in his opening prose statements to Part III of the *Undivine Comedy,* the programme of the revolutionaries can be reduced to the following slogan: "Away with the heart, with superstition; long live the word of comfort and slaughter!" Witness also the words of Henryk, in his nocturnal reconnaissance, when he comes across the Chorus of Butchers:

CHORUS OF BUTCHERS

Poll-hammer, cleaver — them's our weapons, the shambles is our life! It's all the same, capon or count, swine or seigneur, we put to the knife.

Children of strong-arm, children of blood, we look with impassive eye on weaker, on whiter. Well and good, whoever hires us: be it the bluebloods to slaughter their cattle, be it the people to slaughter their lords.

Poll-hammer, cleaver — them's our weapons, the shambles is our life. O, the shambles, the shambles, the shambles!

HUSBAND

These I like — at least they make no pretensions to honour or philosophy.

Other examples of this gloomy view of social revolution can be cited. The real issue with the topic, as dealt with in the *Undivine Comedy,* is that we are offered no solution to the problem. The impatient revolutionaries want power and blood; the aristocrats and the old guard, whether they are able to sympathise with the demands of the long-downtrodden classes or not, have nothing to offer except resistance, and an insistence upon a paternalistic view of society which would keep the status quo in place. "I have placed my trust in the Lord, who gave my forefathers the right of rule," Henryk declares, rather quaintly, if not infuriatingly, to our tastes; and a little later, in the same interview he says to Pankracy:

> Neither you, nor any one of yours would have lived were it not for the grace of my fathers which nourished you, the power of my fathers that defended you, and them. In time of famine they gave you grain; in time of plague they founded hospitals, and when you'd lifted yourselves up from the levels of the cattle you tend to that of children, they gave you schools and churches. And during time of war they left you at home, knowing that you're not made for the battlefield.

He will, of course, learn that this is not the case; the common people may lack the scutcheons and the shining armour, but their anger — and numbers — will carry the day in the end.

No compromise can be reached. One of the constant themes in the plays of Zygmunt Krasiński is this philosophical intractability. After bringing the two implacable enemies Pankracy and Henryk together (Why? Is Miłosz's psychological assessment correct? Or was Krasiński writing blind, exploring, curious himself as to how their interview would turn out?) he has them part from each other, neither changed by the meeting:

> HUSBAND
> […] Your words dash themselves against their glory and shatter, just as, long ago, the arrows of the pagans did, against their breastplates. These words of yours can't even stir their ashes — they die away like the howling of a mad dog, racing about frothing until he croaks beside the road. And now it's time for you to take your carcass from my home. My guest, you leave a free man.
>
> PANKRACY
> Until we meet again, on the battlements of Holy Trinity. And when you run out of powder and shot...
>
> HUSBAND
> Then we'll meet at sword's-point.
>
> PANKRACY
> We are two eagles. But your aerie is shattered by the lightning bolt. *Takes up his cap of liberty.*Crossing this threshold, I cast a curse upon it befitting ancient trash. And you, you and your son, I devote to destruction.

It is the same at the conclusion of the *Unfinished Poem*. There, it is the President of that none-too-defined association of national spirits working to further the advent of God's Kingdom on Earth who chases the rebellious ones off with a curse, unable to compromise with evil. The young Henryk, an initiate to the society, is little more than a witness at this point. But, true to form, Pankracy (at the start of his career, though the play was written long after the *Undivine Comedy*) is unable to bend from his side, either:

PRESIDENT
Carry their coffins behind them — See them off to the very threshold of the mysteries. Open the wall of the underworld before them!

PANKRACY
My thanks to you, most reverend sir! We shall fight, you and I, for I — how well you spoke — I am the destroyer! But fear no treason — the surface of the earth will never hear of you, or your men!

PRESIDENT
Who has played Judas to the Idea, may yet turn Judas among men!

PANKRACY
No, no! You cannot think so of me!

PRESIDENT
The living hold no commerce with the dead. Enough already. Amen!

PANKRACY
The keys, the keys! Here is the threshold — How stuffy it is here! You ought not to strain your lungs so, singing in this atmosphere. Open it up, already!

UNSEEN CHORUS
Sing, sing them the funeral dirge to the end!

PRESIDENT
And now, let each say to them, "You are extinguished."

PANKRACY
Will this ritual ever end?

And finally, even in Krasiński's early-Christian costume drama *Irydion*, implacability seems to be an heroic attribute. Despite his sympathy for Alexander Severus, who, it seems, wishes to reform the Rome that Irydion hates so in a direction that ought to please the Greek, Irydion

will not join forces with the young pretender against Heliogabalus, whom both oppose, who incarnates in his person everything that both hate about corrupt Rome:

ALEXANDER
Son of Amphilochus, insult me not with equivocal words. For you owe me a debt of gratitude, that I do not believe my own eyes, although clearly, they testify to your perversity. Ah! I don't understand myself, why I always wished to trust you!

IRYDION
I thank you, Severus! If the fates had made me a man, and if I had wished to gladden my heart with the blessed gift of a man's friendship, it is you that I would have desired. But now, these bosoms of ours, which might have met in a friendly embrace, will confront one another only on the field of battle.

ALEXANDER
It is not too late yet — Abandon the tyrant! Peer out of the mist with which you have been engulfed and pronounce but one word of friendship, and I will never doubt of your faith. Irydion, where is your sister?

IRYDION
There, where fate has pinned her.

It is not odd that, in the semi-pagan world of *Irydion*, a lot should be made of moira, that destiny written in the stars that even the gods cannot oppose. But fate has no predetermining role in the Christian conception of history. Even though Krasiński's concept of God's plan for the world seems almost to shade into Calvinism, he never does abandon the tenet of man's free and unfettered will. As Aligier warns Pankracy for the final time before the schism noted above:

I warn you — because at this moment your future failure stands reflected before me! There is still time! You have free will! If you won't listen to me, perhaps you shall be powerful; perhaps you

> shall stand before people for a moment, a moment and a half. But you will fall away from the sight of God, and no trace of you will be found in His heart!

But perhaps this is one of the keynotes of Krasiński's plays. Man has a free will; in each of these plays, theoretically, peace might be restored, or preserved, by one of the protagonists coming to his senses and bending. Irydion could have joined his men to those of Alexander Severus, and cleansed Rome of its contagion. Yet he has vowed Rome's destruction, and nothing — not even common sense — can turn him from his determination. Pankracy could have stepped away from his disastrous heresy in the concluding scenes of the *Unfinished Poem*, but the hatred he bears the aristocracy will not permit him to lower the horns of his pride. Like Lucifer, whom in many respects he resembles, he can only exclaim *Non serviam!*

It is only the Husband, Count Henryk, who is in a completely impossible position when he and Pankracy meet at the crisis point of the *Undivine Comedy*. Pankracy offers him no compromise, nothing but shameful personal immunity from the massacre that looms over the other aristocrats, for himself and his son, in exchange for betraying his people (who, as we learn in the end, are rather base fellows anyway). But when Henryk, tempted, cries out that once compromise might have been possible, but now blood must be shed, he is merely speaking the truth. No synthesis can arise from this clash of thesis (revolution) with antithesis (reaction, status quo), and it is for this reason that, after the final victory of Pankracy's revolutionary forces, they themselves are overcome by, of all things, the Second Coming of Christ. It is an ending that appealed to Mickiewicz. In his discussion of the play, he writes:

> The end of this drama is sublime. I know of nothing comparable. It is that truth was neither in the camp of the Count nor in that of Pancras; it was above them; it appeared in order to damn them. […] The author has been accused from two sides: some have seen nothing else in his work but the expression of violent hatred for the ideas of progress: for he has exaggerated to caricature the language of modern reformers and heightened the character of their adversaries; others have blamed the

About The Author

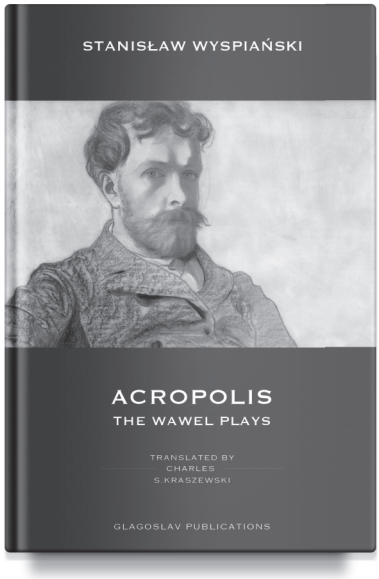
Zygmunt Krasiński (1812–1859) has been traditionally considered one of the "three national bards" of Poland, along with Adam Mickiewicz and Juliusz Słowacki. His fame mainly rests on his plays, especially the monumental drama *Nieboska komedia* (*The Undivine Comedy*, 1833-1835). *Irydion* (1835-1836) is the second closet drama which he completed during his lifetime. Set in the early Christian ages, in Rome, it is a broad allegory of Polish national aspirations in the face of the Russian occupation of his homeland. Two other dramatic works, unfinished and posthumously published, are included in this translation: *Rok 1846* (*1846*) and *Niedokończony poemat* (*The Unfinished Poem*), both of which were composed during the last decades of the author's life. The *Unfinished Poem* is of special interest, as it provides a look at the developmental years of the character of Count Henryk, the chief protagonist of the *Undivine Comedy.* Krasiński also wrote verse, chief among which is *Przedświt* (*Foredawn*, 1841-1843) and *Psalmy przyszłości* (*The Psalms of the Future,* 1844-1848), and fiction, such as the early novel *Agaj-Han* (1832-1833). Besides his plays, however, it is his copious epistolary output which is most highly valued by critics and historians of literature.

About The Translator

Charles S. Kraszewski (b. 1962) is a poet and translator. He is the author of three volumes of original verse (*Diet of Nails; Beast; Chanameed*). Several of his translations of Polish and Czech literature have been published by Glagoslav, among which may be found Adam Mickiewicz's *Forefathers' Eve* (2016) and Stanisław Wyspiański's *Acropolis: the Wawel Plays* (2017). His translations into Polish of the poetry of T.S. Eliot, Robinson Jeffers, and Lawrence Ferlinghetti have appeared in the Wrocław monthly *Odra*. He is a member of the Union of Polish Writers Abroad (London) and of the Association of Polish Writers (Kraków).

Acropolis – The Wawel Plays

by Stanisław Wyspiański



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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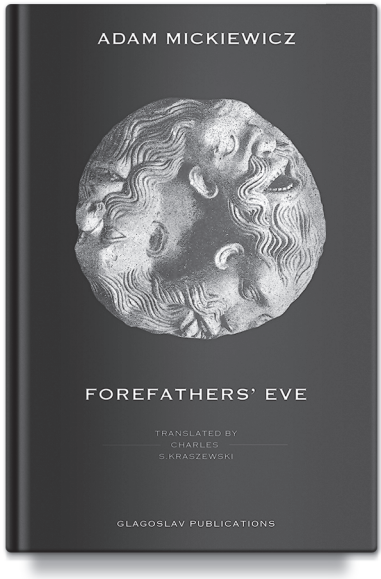
Forefathers' Eve

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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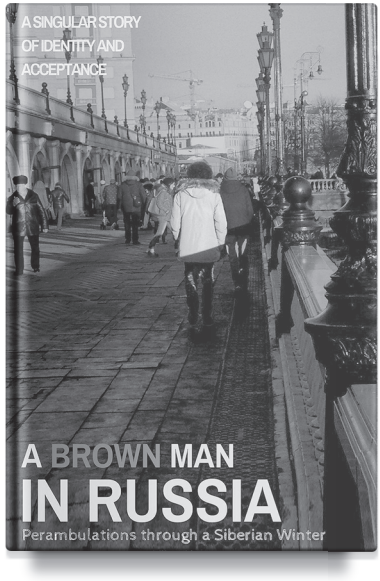
A Brown Man in Russia - Perambulations Through A Siberian Winter

by Vijay Menon



A Brown Man in Russia describes the fantastical travels of a young, colored American traveler as he backpacks across Russia in the middle of winter via the Trans-Siberian. The book is a hybrid between the curmudgeonly travelogues of Paul Theroux and the philosophical works of Robert Pirsig. Styled in the vein of Hofstadter, the author lays out a series of absurd, but true stories followed by a deeper rumination on what they mean and why they matter. Each chapter presents a vivid anecdote from the perspective of the fumbling traveler and concludes with a deeper lesson to be gleaned. For those who recognize the discordant nature of our world in a time ripe for demagoguery and for those who want to make it better, the book is an all too welcome antidote. It explores the current global climate of despair over differences and outputs a very different message – one of hope and shared understanding. At times surreal, at times inappropriate, at times hilarious, and at times deeply human, A Brown Man in Russia is a reminder to those who feel marginalized, hopeless, or endlessly divided that harmony is achievable even in the most unlikely of places.

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More coming soon…

"God hath denied me that angelic measure / Without which no man sees in me the poet," writes Zygmunt Krasiński in one of his most recognisable lyrics. Yet while it may be true that his lyric output cannot rival in quality the verses of the other two great Polish Romantics, Adam Mickiewicz and Juliusz Słowacki, Krasiński's dramatic muse gives no ground to any other. The Glagoslav edition of the *Dramatic Works* of Zygmunt Krasiński provides the English reader, for the first time, with all of Krasiński's plays in the translation of Charles S. Kraszewski. These include the sweeping costume drama *Irydion*, in which the author sets forth the grievances of his occupied nation through the fable of an uprising of Greeks and barbarians against the dissipated emperor Heliogabalus, and, of course, the monumental drama on which his international fame rests: the *Undivine Comedy*. A cosmic play, which defies simple description, the *Undivine Comedy* is both a de-masking of the Byronic ideal of the poet, whose nefarious, and selfish devotion to the ideal has evil consequences for real human beings, and a prophetic warning of the fratricidal class warfare that was to roil the first decades of the twentieth century. The *Undivine Comedy* is intriguing in the way that the author presents both sides of this question — the republican and that of the *ancien régime* — with sympathy and understanding. It is also striking how — in 1830 — the author foresaw the problems of the 1930s. As Czesław Miłosz once put it, Krasiński was insightfully commenting on Marxism while Karl Marx was still in high school. The *Dramatic Works* of Zygmunt Krasiński also include the unfinished play *1846*, which hints at how the author would have handled a work meant for the traditional stage, and the *Unfinished Poem* — the Dantean "prequel" to the *Undivine Comedy*, on which Krasiński was working at his death.

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