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"Poeta i prorok. Rzecz o profetyzmie Mickiewicza", Wiktor Weintraub, Warszawa 1982 : [recenzja]

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Book Reviews

Compte rendus de livres

Wiktor Weintraub, **Poeta i prorok. Rzecz o profetyzmie Mickiewicza** (*The Poet and the Prophet. On Mickiewicz's Propheticism*), Państwowy Instytut Wydawniczy, Warszawa 1982.

Wiktor Weintraub's book is an imposing work; as a monographic attempt at presenting Mickiewicz—both the man and his work—from the point of view of his prophetic disposition, it is also summative of the earlier studies of this brilliant comparativist. The subject, requiring not only knowledge and competence of the higher order but also access to many sources and studies that are not available in Poland, has for quite a long time interested Weintraub, a thorough-going critic, cautious in formulating generalizations, a scholar whose erudition covers vast realms of European Romanticism.¹

The reader is struck with the richness of material as well as with a specific eruditional sumptuosity which he may even at first find somewhat overwhelming and confusing in following the main line of argument. More thorough reading will reveal, however, a construction that is consistent and coherent, and the general argument will emerge clearly from this abundant material gathered in the fifteen chapters of the book (fragments of which were published earlier in English, Italian and also in Polish); such a reading will prove all the more rewarding, since some of the problems are treated by the author in quite an unorthodox manner.

Underlying Weintraub's book is the belief in an extremely close relationship between Mickiewicz's propheticism and his gift for

¹ His most significant works concerned with the problem are: *Literature as Prophecy. Scholarship and Martinist Poetics in Mickiewicz's Parisian Lectures*, 's-Gravenhage 1959, and *Profecja i profesura. Mickiewicz, Michelet i Quinet (Prophecy and Professorship. Mickiewicz, Michelet and Quinet)*, Warszawa 1975.

improvisation, regarded by the poet himself as a sign of spiritual superiority and of his having been chosen by God. Mickiewicz saw himself as an inspired prophet after the famous improvisations performed during his stay in Russia; the fullest literary expression of his prophetic attitude is to be found in Part Three of *Dziady* (*Forefathers*), in *Księgi narodu polskiego i pielgrzymstwa polskiego* (*Books of the Polish Nation and the Polish Pilgrimage*) and in the lectures on Slavonic literature which he delivered in the Collège de France (the so-called Parisian Lectures)—works that can be fully grasped and comprehended only in the context of their prophetic intention and character.

While tracing possible impulses and circumstances that could have borne on the very formation of Mickiewicz's prophetic predispositions and aspirations, Weintraub focuses first on the preliminary period—that of Wilno and Kowno (Vilnius and Kaunas)—and on spiritualistic and mystical trends as they manifested themselves both in the general atmosphere of Wilno at the time and among the poet's closest associates (e.g. Zan's fascination with mesmerism and Swedenborg's writings). The detailed and thoroughgoing discussion of the so-called Wilno "magnetism" allows the author to grasp its actual influence on that vision of the supernatural which started forming in Mickiewicz's early poems. It is still, however, far from approaching real propheticism—the poet does not attach yet much importance to his gift for improvisation which, though it reveals itself quite often, is still availed of only on social occasions and treated as helpful in a kind of parlour game.

It is Mickiewicz's Berlin improvisations of June 1829 which first betray a definitely crystallized prophetic attitude: ecstatic trances of the poet, elated by his own might, and magically, as it were captivating his audience, are accompanied by a growing sense of complete union with supernatural forces and, consequently, by an exceedingly proud belief in his own unique artistic powers (hence his presumptuous belief in his superiority to Goethe and Schiller). Trying to reveal the fascinating mystery of the birth of Mickiewicz's prophetic calling, Weintraub traces nearly day by day—on the basis of sound sources—the gradual growth of the poet's talent for improvising, from his first tentative performances to the superb eruption of prophetic inspiration.

Mickiewicz's mystical viewpoint formed, according to the author, in Russia, during the last sixteen months of the exile; it was then that the future author of *Forefathers* found himself on his "way to Damascus"—and it was also in Moscow and Petersburg that he began to be thought of as an inspired prophet-improviser. The one to play the role of John the Baptist in Mickiewicz's propheticism was probably Józef Oleszkiewicz, a painter, enthusiastic follower of Saint-Martin and his teachings, and an outstanding representative of Petersburg freemasonry. It was he who introduced the Polish poet into the world of theosophy and mysticism, and who interpreted—not entirely in accordance with the tenor of the Unknown Philosopher's writings—Mickiewicz's brilliant improvisations as revelations of the Lord's anointed. Gathering arguments and evidence that are to testify this thesis, Weintraub discusses those features of Saint-Martin's prophetic theory of poetry which could have borne on Mickiewicz's prophetic consciousness, gives a detailed characterization of the Russian circles of Saint-Martin's followers, and analyzes various statements, both by European and by Polish romantic poets, on the very essence and value of improvisation. He argues that Oleszkiewicz worked Mickiewicz into understanding Saint-Martin's conceptions in the way he himself understood them, that is, not quite in accordance with what his master had really meant. Saint-Martin, in claiming that words inspired by God come upon a man *à l'improviste*, and change a poet into a "chosen vessel" — into a prophet who is able to foresee the future—was far, however, from deifying poetic inspiration itself. To the Ambroise theosopher only fervent faith, spiritual purity and humility could lead to artistic creativity, the right to it being reserved to a saint only; and as the only subject matter worthy of being treated in poetry he regarded the great religious truths. Moreover, the poetic gift may hide in itself a dangerous satanic lure: the pernicious feeling of pride and self-admiration. Poetry was to him only one of the attributes of a charismatic leader and only one of the means he employs.

Weintraub demonstrates that the term "improvisation" as the romantics conceived it referred to two definitely different things: it meant the purest and the loftiest in its spontaneity and immediacy state of poetic inspiration (always as referring to the intimate creative process of an artist), but it also designated the frequent at

the time public performances of professional rhymesters (chiefly Italians) who with almost a juggler's skill could improvise in verse on any subject assigned by the public. These latter productions were treated as a specific phenomenon, adding glamour to the contemporary literary life, but devoid of any deeper spiritual values, as profaning the noble and sublime poetic calling. There was no improvisator till Mickiewicz's public appearance who would have proved an outstanding poet. It is due to his performances that the very question (absent in the West European Romanticism) of the prophetic character of the gift for improvisation arose in Russia, to become the subject of polemics in Odojewski's *Improvisator* and in Pushkin's *Egyptian Nights*; in both stories, however, the improvisator is stripped of any sublimity and denied signs of being a chosen one.

An eruption of propheticism is the Dresden part of *Forefathers*, the greatest prophetic manifesto of all Mickiewicz's works. But as a work that carries identification of an inspired artist with a prophet to its most radical conclusions, it reveals at the same time the inner tensions and unsurmountable antinomy of the prophetic attitude of the poet himself. In the figure of Conrad we find a conflict of the two contradictory conceptions of the prophet: one that is typically romantic, and the other Martinist; the drama depicts an attempt at reconciling them, with all the dizzy paradoxes of pride and humility such an attempt involves. Conrad, a great poet, endowed with immortal creative power, is a prophet in the name of his own nation, rebelling against God, so unconcerned and indifferent to suffering. This revolt, a manifestation of man's dignity and freedom, and an expression of the passion to make the world happier and perfect, is, nonetheless, Conrad's tragic guilt: for underlying the conflict is his Luciferic pride which makes him unable to see the mystical sense of history—the furthest-reaching designs of the Maker. And yet, Conrad, a blasphemer possessed with impious hatred, hubris and despair, is also a future Paraclete, a chosen one, and it is through him that God intends to save both Poland and the world. But first he must atone for his sin and undergo a spiritual transformation: he must, then, mature for his real prophetic calling, combining the innate prophetic gift with fervent religiousness, must subdue in himself the feeling of superiority

and—like the Biblical prophets—humble himself trustfully before God, submit himself to His will. On this way, full of hardships and stumblings, which is to lead the hero to the truth and perfection, the role of the initiator is played by Friar Peter, who foretells the future elevation of Conrad. Weintraub interprets Friar Peter's vision as an apotheosis of the religious and patriotic mission of Conrad. He sees the symbolism of the prophecy concerning "forty and four" as deriving from the spirit of Saint-Martin's writings and, consequently, as referring to an honourable sacral title rather than to a definite personal name of a charismatic man-saviour.

Mickiewicz gave the history of Conrad a somewhat autobiographical character, but the later vicissitudes in his own life—and work—indicate that the great poet was often a rather unruly partner of the humble prophet, since the consciousness of having been chosen is in its very essence a proud consciousness.

In viewing also a sequel to Part Three of *Forefathers*, the Digression, from the prophetic perspective, the author stresses certain inconsistency between the pessimistic overtones of Oleszkiewicz's prophecy (uttered in the drama, since he is one of its characters) and the hopeful prophecy of Friar Peter. This observation conduces Weintraub to the conclusion that in the Dresden *Forefathers* treated as a whole there are two heterogeneous parts; not only do they differ in intensity and character of propheticism, as well as in literary facture (dramatic scenes—poetic narration), but they were also written at different times. This is a new argument supporting the thesis asserted by some critics that the text of the Digression is a rewritten version of the poetic diary kept by Mickiewicz in Russia.

In Weintraub's discussion of *Forefathers*, Part Three, we find a synthesis of what literary scholarship has ascertained up to the present and his own conceptions and analytical observations, frequently very subtle and illuminating (what seems especially noteworthy are his remarks on Swedenborg's influence on the organization of "the otherworld presented" in the drama). This holds true for the structure of the whole book.

What was to become a Bible for Polish émigrés after the November Uprising of 1830 was Mickiewicz's *Books of the Polish Nation*, a text from the border-line of literature and publicism,

where the poet's prophetic conceptions were translated into the language of topical political postulates. There he openly put himself in the position of the prophet explaining to his own nation God's decrees and unveiling future revelations, while at the same time enjoining the "pilgrims" (an elevated synonym for Polish émigrés) an ethical code of the highest heroism possible. In the *Books...* he idealized and sacralized the category of a chosen nation which had to fulfil—like Jesus Christ—the mission of political and social redemption of mankind. This translation of the principles of the radically reinterpreted Christianity into the realm of politics reflects how strongly activistically marked were Mickiewicz's messianic ideas: the coming of millennium must be preceded by a cruel and bloody revolution that will overthrow tyrants and quash the despotic, absorbed with material interests, selfish and non-religious in its rationalism world of the Western civilization. It is only after this disaster that the era of peace, freedom and universal brotherhood is to be triumphant. So the prophet of love is in his *Books...* also a bitter prophet of destruction.

His fellow-countrymen did not, however, accept Mickiewicz in the role of a leader. The consequent breakdown and collapse of the poet's prophetic attitude resulted in a work totally antipodal to propheticism, or even reverberating with a subtle polemics with it—in *Pan Tadeusz*. Its humoristic, lenient, tinged with nostalgia acceptance of the gentry world and its faults, orientation toward the past which is not—as it was in *Forefathers* and in *Books...*—pregnant with the future, but which, conversely, has disappeared forever, "gone with the wind"; parody of some romantic literary devices, characteristic of Mickiewicz's earlier works; critical view of Robak the Monk's ambitions and purity of intensions—all these are new elements in our poet. The so-called Epilogue of *Pan Tadeusz* is an overt evidence of the failure of passionate and impatient prophetic aspirations, a manifestation of loss of faith not only in the noble mission, but in the very sense of emigration. Yet the defeat of the prophet became, Weintraub argues, "a triumph of the full-blooded realist, the one who accepts life and loves it in all its richness and variety" (p. 321). The epic also proved how surprisingly vast was Mickiewicz's artistic scope.

The retreat from propheticism did not, however, seem final.

Weintraub stresses particularly strongly all manifestations of Mickiewicz's dissatisfaction with the epic, which clearly indicate that "the prophet, oppressed by the poet, was determined to claim his rights again" (p. 323). Some prophetic reverberations are soon to be heard in a cycle of moralistic maxims, entitled *Zdania i uwagi* (*Sentences and Remarks*), but a new gigantic outburst of propheticism was to come only with the Parisian lectures.

His detailed knowledge as well as a deep insight into Mickiewicz's prophetic attitude allow Weintraub to take a fresh look at the famous "improvisation duel" between Mickiewicz and Słowacki, which took place at Januszkiewicz's on December 25, 1840. Słowacki's utterance, meant actually as a tribute to his great adversary and as a desperate attempt at reconciliation, was taken by Mickiewicz as a challenge, especially because he felt deeply offended by Słowacki's very attitude—proud and lacking in deference—to improvisation as a form. The man who understood the gift for improvisation as prophetic and sacral could not recognize the author of *Kordian* as a real poet—a prophet, although in many other respects he highly estimated the poetic talent of his antagonist.

His lectures on Slavonic literature delivered in the years 1840—1844 in the Collège de France, at the time a university regarded to be the best and the most respectable scholarly institution in France, Mickiewicz conceived as a mission that would allow him to reveal to the world the prophetic truths. Weintraub—in contrast with most of Mickiewicz's critics—stresses the fact that prophetic ideas permeated the Parisian lectures from the very beginning to the end and that they were decisive in the choice of subject matters; their intensity increased with each successive course and finally, in his last, fourth course, "the prophet forced the professor away for good."

For Mickiewicz the lectures were also a substitute of literary work (since the appearance of *Pan Tadeusz* he had been distressingly silent as a poet); treating them as improvisations, he never used any written text—trying to produce an impression that he spoke in an ecstatic trance. Hence their composition, which later commentators were to find so irritating, is amorphous—they lack in precision as to the facts referred to, and the quotations are often inexact.

The primary subject of the lectures viewed as a whole was the

messianically conceived historical mission of Slavs, especially Poles, and the destiny of France, while discussion of literature, philosophy or definite historical events performed merely an exemplifying or attesting function.

Discussion of literature dominates mainly in the first two courses. The idea that any really great literary work must have the prophetic and sacral character being his innermost belief, Mickiewicz tracked with persistent punctiliousness even the slightest signs of propheticism in old and modern literature (chiefly Polish). When judged from the point of view of literary historian, his interpretations are often avowedly farfetched and strained; and yet, some of his opinions are most sagacious and striking, especially his views concerning works of those of his contemporaries whom he found worth-noting.

Courses III and IV brought Mickiewicz's messianic philosophy of history to the full view. Weintraub positively repudiates the supposition, advanced by many critics, that the last-year lectures were an exegesis of *The Banquet* by Andrzej Towiański (founder of an emigration religious-mystical sect). Undeniably, many of the lecturer's statements expressed the obsequious cult of the very person of Master Andrzej and of his doctrine; but the prophetic conception of history and the severe criticism of the conservative, "official" Church (from the position of a hierophant of revolutionary Christianity) bear a distinct Mickiewicz's stamp. In his last course of lectures the poet, faithful to his own prophetic inspirations that had formed much earlier, struggled dramatically, though not overtly, with Mickiewicz-adherent of Towiański's doctrine. "The conflict between Mickiewicz and Towiański, which in 1846 resulted in the break, is already implied in the text of the course" (p. 420).

Weintraub regards the Parisian lectures, with all their chaotic-whimsicality and irreducible contradictions, as a great work, surprisingly original and profound, though also tragic and broken.

The apogee of Mickiewicz's propheticism, he concludes, are not the Parisian lectures, but Part Three of *Forefathers*, a work so frantically impudent in carrying propheticism to its most radical point, and yet so psychologically convincing and poetically great. There an inspired poetic word did the wonder—in *Forefathers* the poet saved the prophet, the one so rabid in his aspirations (pp. 435–436).

Some of Weintraub's interpretations will presumably provoke controversies and dispute among scholars concerned with Mickie-

wicz (e.g. chapters devoted to *Pan Tadeusz* and to the Parisian lectures may be found quite controversial); but it seems unquestionable that his illuminating and inspiring book will be reckoned among the best work on Mickiewicz written in the last few decades.

Sum. by *Marek Kwapiszewski*

Transl. by *Maria-Bożenna Fedewicz*

Teresa Michałowska, *Poetyka i poezja. Studia i szkice staropolskie (Poetics and Poetry. Essays and Studies in Polish Renaissance and Baroque Poetry)*, Państwowe Wydawnictwo Naukowe, Warszawa 1982.

The subtitle may suggest both a somewhat heterogeneous character of the book and the author's confinement to Polish literature only, but the reader will soon realize that this is not the case; for he is presented with an orderly, distinctly systematic whole, united by the primary idea of the interrelation between poetic theory and practice, and going far beyond the limits of Polish literary culture—the fact that is undoubtedly of some significance for a foreign reader. The book often refers to the European universum of tradition, and in her comparative approach the author shows an imposing orientation in modern European studies in this field. All this makes for the necessity of reading the whole book at once, for a gradual up-taking it by the reader; optional reading of only some selected parts diminishes the possibility of perception and full comprehension of the argument, developing on the basis of earlier information and insights.

The book consists of three parts: I – *Rodzaj i gatunek (Literary Genre and Its Variations)*, II – *W kręgu myśli o poezji (Thinking on Poetry)*, III – *Świat wyobraźni: przestrzeń i czas (Imaginary World: Space and Time)*. Each of these parts, and especially the first two, more closely interconnected, leads progressively, as it were, to a more specific differentiation of the presented material, such a differentiation being manifest not only in the passing from European to Polish poetic theory and practice, but also in the choice the author makes on the way; for in Part II Michałowska takes up—