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The Cultural Background of Folk Tales

Theoretical and practical studies on the folk tale, attempts at outlining its history or at least explaining its specific features, have attached great significance to those elements which produce impressions of the old or even very old times. Early students of the tale from about the mid-19th century tried to uncover in it relics of primeval beliefs as well as elements of mythology, and what is more, they even considered the tale to be product of old myths which survived in environments of different cultures. Anthropologists explained some components of it by referring to beliefs and customs of the primitive peoples and that is why certain studies on the tale used such terms as totem, taboo, exogamy etc. Archaeologists, on the other hand, linked glass mountains with the existence of old fortified settlements and ramparts; students of ancient legal systems accentuated such matters as kinds of punishment meted out to the criminal characters: in fairy-tales they were condemned to the stake, mutilation by harrows or tearing apart by horses. By means of anthropologic, archaeologic and ethnographic data one tried to answer such intriguing questions as where and when the tale (known today as the folk tale) was born, how old it is and what its origins were. These questions will be dealt with in the following chapter but if we wish to take a possibly objective stand in respect of a number of divergent attempts at explaining them it is necessary to have a closer look at the relationship between the folk tale and its cultural background as well as at the function of those elements of the tale which are distinctly different from that background as something divergent and undoubtedly older.

The folk tale, alive in a milieu in which it has a function analogical to that of written literature in other social strata recreates by its very nature in a certain way elements of spiritual, social and material cultures of its environment. Thus, in regions with rich traditions of church life we come across numerous religious legends and tales; it can be observed in the materials collected by Oskar Kolberg and his successors in the Cracow region. In Pomerania the especially rich in this respect area is the region of Chmielno, and in Silesia—Piekary. In mountain areas where brigands plied their trade for centuries—in Podhale, Podkarpacie, Silesian Beskid or in the Świętokrzyskie Mts—the world of brigandish adventures crops out in diverse forms while in the mining regions, old and new ones, one is often struck by specific cycles of tales related to the dominant form of making a living there.

In the Kashubian area, where until recently black arms of a windmill placed on a high foundation were a fixed item of the landscape—we come across innumerable tales about milling; in other parts of the land the devil is caught in a vise but here he is placed on a millstone and subjected to milling. Interesting are the variations of the Kashubian “Belfagor,” in which the curing of a possessed woman was replaced with the fixing of a broken down mill. Undoubtedly, the tremendous popularity of the “Three Spinners” tale (AT 501*) in the Kashubian area, which in other parts of Poland occurs very rarely, can be accounted for by the local condition, manufacturing of linen, yarn and cloth in that region.

Not all of these elements are equally lasting, as evidenced clearly by social phenomena harassing the rural life in the past and now pushed into oblivion. In tales recorded ca. 1870 in Silesia by Lucjan Malinowski and in the Podkarpacie tales some twenty years older we come across numerous references to the long-term military service. Heater of hell’s kettle (AT 475) especially adds fuel to fire the cauldron in which his officers are fried; in the *Spirit in Blue Light* (AT 562), in a variant from Bochnia, the hero orders a genius to flog higher ranks, and in the tale about the resurrection of the “Treacherous Wife” (AT 612) aversion of a soldier to a severe non-commissioned officer or an officer becomes an important factor. These elements disappear entirely from variants told by younger

* All abbreviations refer to the Arne—Thompson systematics of folk tales. See also Krzyżanowski’s explanation to be found on pp. 144—148 of this volume.

story-tellers, who had never been in service for such long periods. The same is true with reference to serfdom, very much alive in those territories where that institution existed. In a tale about "Gifts of the North Wind" (AT 563), or rather in its variants, the recipient of gifts loses magic objects and recovers them later, but the older versions end with the hero spending his gold to buy himself out of serfdom. In a tale about "A Husband Persecuted because of his Beautiful Wife" (AT 465A) in the oldest Polish variants the persecutor appears in the person of the landlord helped by a villainous steward. From newer variants the serfdom background has completely disappeared. Similarly, in A. Gliński's text or in the Bielorussian variants of *Division of a Prize* (AT 1610) the scene is set at a manor where the master commands *haiduks* and has the right to order flogging but in its newer forms the setting is the royal court because serfdom has already been forgotten. Particularly interesting from this point of view is an allegorical tale about a "Bridge to the Other World" (AT 471). The hero journeying across the beyond meets with a series of strange developments and he can grasp their sense only when in heaven or after his return to the earth. The allegorical images present diverse kinds of rural sinners, we have a careless priest or a landlord who cheats the peasants at the distribution of the land. The characteristic thing, however, is the absence of any marked social accents; in a related plot of "Three Hairs from Devil's Beard" (AT 461) appears only once an evil steward condemned to tortures in hell. Consequently, reverberations of social relations are so poor in our folk tales that they are hardly discernible, history in its impersonal but generally felt form has not been reflected here.

A partial explanation of this phenomenon comes from studying the quantitatively rich category of tales based on beliefs regarded to be a specially significant domain since they form an obvious and clear link between the folk tale and the system of beliefs and views inherent to the rural milieu. In these tales we encounter plenty of demons both favourable and hostile to man, hags and witches, lamias of both sexes, nightmares, wild women, dwarfs, water-and-cloud spirits. They enter into permanent contact with man, make his life easier or more difficult, depending on his ability to adopt an appropriate attitude towards them.

The distinctive feature of the entire pandemonium of folk tales is

that the same properties are ascribed to different creatures in different regions. It is possible to see, although not without difficulties, that a tale about "The Princes in the Shroud" (AT 307), liberated from the spell by a soldier hiding in the choir stalls, the altar or the pulpit, has similar variants about ghostly masons, who climb a pile of coffins to reach the daring man watching their exploits (Polish T 307*), or the characteristic Cracow versions in which hags try to flush a boy from a big bowl under the church ceiling because, after all, the sets of images of lamias, specters and blood sucking witches are so close to one another that they may get confused. But the story is different when we have tales about changelings. In those areas that are familiar with the notion of evil dwarflings (*kraśnięta*)—Kashubia, Pomerania, Silesia and Great Poland—and where the dwarflings are related to many diverse events, we come across a very common tale about a changeling, which can be recognized by certain specific features. When a mother wants to get her own child back she beats the foundling and then the dwarflings take the changeling away and return the human baby. But there are vast areas of Poland where the concept of dwarflings does not exist and their function is fulfilled there by other demons, especially wild women to whom one attributes lot of other features as well.

The motifs discussed so far appear as beliefs or as tales based on them; a commonly known tale about "Devil's Midwife" (Polish T 504) bears only a story-like character. At an invitation from a toad a poor girl goes to the underworld as a midwife of a demonic creature. Before returning she is given a prize, a handful of rubbish, which she brings to the world in all or in part only to see that the seeming rubbish is gold. At times a tale has a significant epilogue, particularly often in the Kashubian area. A girl who in spite of prohibitions or by accident rubbed her eye with a baby's bathwater perceived with this eye a demonic creature at a market. When asked which eye it is, she points to it and immediately the eye is gone. In the Kashubian area this demonic creature is an evil dwarfling (*kraśnię*); in other places it is a mischievous spirit (cloud man), elsewhere—just a devil. Once again, in the framework of an identical narrative scheme, in the identical verbal composition different contents appear depending on the character of beliefs familiar in the area a given version comes from.

The same can be said about an anecdote about a "Water spirit" (Polish T 4060). A peasant is lying in ambush to catch a trespasser in a meadow and suddenly he sees a kelpie (*wodnik*) busy with making in a moonlight a pair of shoes for himself. He wallops the spirit with a stick. The stupid demon thinks that the beating comes from the moon and with a shout "You should rather shine than beat!" he throws himself into the water. The kelpie, however, is not a fixed item here; in most of other familiar variants the function is taken over by other water-and-cloud spirits, or at times, just by a devil.

In humorous stories about a silly monster and a smart man—such like the flushing out of the mill devil by a Gypsy the Bear Catcher (Polish T 957, cf. AT 957), the squeezing of the devil in a vise (AT 650 and AT 1159), the chasing away of a devil caught by an old hag in a bast loop etc.—there are not only demonic figures, the water spirit or the devil, but also, as in the last two plots, just a bear, one that has the gift of speech, a common property of animals in fables. Once again we observe here the phenomenon mentioned above. When the structural pattern of a given plot is not changed at all or partially only, the belief stratum is changeable, the demonic partner of man bears all kinds of names, the constant element is only his function in the plot and its participation in the action. That case deserves even more attention because the belief stratum may disappear and very often it does so in the life of a social group, but in general it is always something more durable than social system phenomena and historical institutions. A grandson at the end of the 19th century was a total stranger to the experience of his grandfather, who was a serf and served in the army for seven or twelve years, but the system of beliefs in existence of water-and-cloud spirits, kelpies or hellhags was still common to both of them.

This is not an exclusive feature of our folklore. Mentions have been made earlier about the legend in which God (Jesus Christ, St. Peter) rewards a hospitable poor woman while punishing her greedy neighbour. The tale is known from China, where the same event, i.e. multiplication of linen in the hands of the hospitable woman and water carrying by the unhospitable one are ascribed to god Fo (i.e. Buddha); in a related fable by Phedra, going back to the early years of our era, the god bears the name of Mercurius

Such instances, and many more of them could be quoted here,

cast a special light on the nature of the tale motifs and their function in plots. Consequently, the matter calls for a more detailed discussion.

In the fabular motif we can see clearly two aspects: reific and verbal, contentual and formal. The content of a motif is an event known to the narrator, a situation that happened or happens, a custom comprehensible to him and his listeners, some belief, a view familiar to all, a social arrangement. Mischief wrought by a village trickster, clerk's frauds, a just verdict by a ruler, intervention of a supernatural being, the wrong following from the system of slavery or serfdom, etc. etc., build the content aspects of the motifs. The content acquires a certain formal aspect and its expression is a verbal arrangement, easy to remember and to repeat, a symbol composed of images and words. Relationship between these two aspects is quite unusual, namely, the formal one is more lasting than the reific; an event passes by, a social system vanishes, a belief dies out or is uprooted by others while the image-word symbol, particularly when given an invariable formula, a verse form, lasts and survives over a much longer period of time.

Applying the formula of the motif structure $M = (a + b)$, in which the constant factor is the first member containing the story's motivation while the other is multiformed and decisive for the life of the plot, we can say that in the further development of the plot this invariable element (a) may undergo transformations, reduction or may even vanish and yet the motif continues to exist for some time. A significant illustration of this process is the history of a tale about a "Treasure Unravelling by Dogs" (Polish T 691), known in variants territorially quite distant from one another, and recorded in Slovenia (West Kashubia) and near Wadowice. In both variants a man witnesses the burying of a treasure, he overhears the magic formula which says that the money can only be collected by someone who will use a plough pulled by four black cocks (among Slovenians) or by six black dogs (Wadowice), the witness carries out the appropriate operation and takes away the treasure trove. None of the quoted variants explains why the magic formula sounds strange, why the plough must be pulled by birds or dogs, black ones, to boot. An explanation can be found in the classical domain of tales about enchanted treasures—in the brigand folklore of the

Tatra Mts. Although an authentic variant of T 691 from that region is not available we know its poetic reproduction in a Zakopane tale told in verse form by Maciej Szukiewicz. There, the condition for uncovering the treasure is to "plough it out with seven colts from one mare born on the same day and having the same colour and size." A solution is found by a young shepherd who makes a miniature plough from the dwarf mountain pine, attaches seven chickens to it and thus collects the money. In all likelihood it is the initial version distorted in later versions of the plot. The prime motif, a puzzle difficult to solve, passed into oblivion but the plot survived because the puzzle was replaced with an idea, illegitimate, to be sure, but attractive in its uniqueness, an idea brought in from the second part of the motif, from the very solution. And finally, in place of ingenuity there is a factor common to all fairy-tales—good luck, accidental overhearing of a magic formula.

One should add that the permutation of the motif is not exceptional among language creations. In that domain the formal aspect many a time lasts out the content, also in the field of traditional phenomena. This is proved by some proverbs, which at least are nothing but image-word symbols of certain events and circulate till the present although the event has been long forgotten. So we say "The soap deal of Zabłocki" although we do not know who Zabłocki was and what was his business concerning soap. And in cases such as "He jumped out like a 'filip' from a patch of hemp" only a comparative exegesis explains that 'filip' means a hare. Or still another one "The word has been uttered and the mare is at the fence." Only the discovery of a broken link between the proverb and a forgotten anecdote can account for the reific sense of the given symbol. The same goes for various swear-words. The formulas used nowadays meant something in the past but with the passing of time their initial sense totally evaporated while a set of words has survived useful as a means of expressing strong but vague emotions, as a sign of astonishment as well as discontent, pain or joy. Rather mild expletives such as "Burn him six times!" ("Pal go sześć") or "Give him to the hangman" ("Daj go katu") may serve as examples of this category. Born in torture chambers they are alive today, although institutions that gave them birth belong to the past. We could continue along that line and using the material from the

history of words prove how many live expressions are there in every language even though their literal values have faded away because their reific aspect is buried deep in the past.

From these remarks on the nature of motif important consequences follow as regards the understanding of the essence of the plot. If we call a set of motifs a plot then the former description must be made precise: the plot is a set of motifs in which the formal aspect dominates the content to such an extent that at times it fully masks the disappearance of the latter, so much so that the plot cannot be possibly ascribed to any given location, linked with any specific cultural area since real features of that area have been totally obliterated.

Before drawing final conclusions from such a statement one must pose a question: what helps plots and motifs to survive and whether indeed their links to specific cultural milieux have been radically broken? Even *a priori* one can give a negative answer since everyday experience indicates that certain events are repeated, that this or that situation is to be found today as it could be found years before in the life of an individual; that these situations were also known to other individuals centuries ago as all kinds of historical documents prove. A classical example here is the already discussed Egyptian anecdote related by Wężyk, which recreates the plot of "Achikar." [...]

[The author recalls here a narrative by a Polish traveller Władysław Wężyk, who recorded in 1839 in Egypt the AT 922A tale as a real event. Then he quotes from contemporary press reports some other narratives, e.g. AT 939 and AT 1275.]

One could quote a dozen or so of similar examples, or even several scores of them, and yet all of them would belong to the same category of criminal, terrifying or comical repetitive events. Every lawyer conducting an investigation knows to what an extent certain situational stereotypes accompany certain crimes; every reader of police reports in press will notice how certain standard tricks work when city slicks con naive rural visitors and how these "deals" produce the same effects all the time, be it the selling of "Tsar's diamonds" or pretending to be an important person, a "consul," or other similar tricks. Does it happen so because every case develops here spontaneously and independently or does imitation play a consi-

derable role here, regardless whether induced by listening to stories, reading about it or what have you? It is impossible to tell. It is sufficient to notice that certain, highly charged with dynamism life situations repeat themselves over centuries in diverse social groups and that they make a factual equivalent of tale motifs, which give such situations the form of an image-word symbol. The same goes for numerous belief tales, including religious ones. Reading catalogues of miracles or series of stories about temptations experienced by monks and nuns, be it in Tebaida or among residents of the 14th- and 15th-century monasteries, we can see some monotony, an overwhelming part of the miracles are performed precisely according to one and the same pattern: tempters appear always at the same time, in the same form and with similar proposals.

And what conclusions can be drawn from these considerations? Sometime ago, somewhere a situation occurred finding its reflection in a tale motif and every now and then it could repeat itself and even recur periodically. Someone was a victim of a trick or a trickster: a soldier or an immigrant died from the hands of their close relatives or met such relatives in a dive where they had not expected to be at all; somewhere a "miracle" occurred, a paralytic was made healthy again, or a person considered dead was brought to life; somewhere and sometime an individual with a specific psychological structure was subjected to temptations, had contacts with the devil, paid for this voluntary tortures or was accused of casting spells, was condemned to the stake. Owing to such and similar situations tale motifs developed and grew popular thus leading to the formation of origins of tale plots.

But does it embrace all of them? Certainly not. Among the groups into which the entire material of folk tales can be divided there are two, which cannot be accounted for by life situations: the animal fables and, above all, the fairy-tales. Theoretically this difficulty can be overcome, even with ease. Let us suppose that the tale about "Urvasi," a winged wife running away from her husband, appears in a milieu where the motif of possessing wings is as common as today's motif of flying by plane, or the fable about a snake or a fox turns up in a group of humans in which a talking animal is as natural and comprehensible as the talking box known by us as the radio set. This supposition stems directly from the character

of the folk tale, basis of which is commonness, ability of migration and life in human environments at times very distant in time and place.

The tale about the “Monster Bridegroom” (AT 425A) in our Polish circumstances strikes us with exotism following both from the very situation and from lack of motivation for forces deciding about the course of events. But if we take a look at its oldest variant, the famous Apuleius fabula of the 2nd century A.D., the exotic elements disappear. The husband-monster is Amor whose divine power enables and facilitates the peregrinations and searchings or quests of his wife; the source of difficulties Psyche meets on her way is the anger of another deity—offended Juno. The princess is taken in her quest to Hades, which to the reader of the “Golden Ass” was more vivid and known more precisely than Hell is for today’s reading public. Psyche, after having found her lost husband, settles in the residence of gods winning eternal youth and immortality by drinking the potion given her by Hebe. Altogether, a charming tale reveals itself to us today as a set of formal motifs, separated from life, devoid of reific contents. When transferred into a milieu where we find it for the first time, the tale changes, its motifs swell with juices of reality and the fairyland wonderfulness so fantastic and conventional appears as real, deriving from an entire system of beliefs foreign to us now but at that time quite normal and common if not just plain. In this way we arrive at a homeland of a given plot, at a milieu in which it seems to be a perfectly normal product, at least normal to the same degree to which this can be observed in similar works from the times of Lafontaine, reflecting the classical culture of the Louis XIVth period. We know Apuleius’ tale not only from his literary version but also from folk tradition of different countries and thus we assume the existence of that tradition also in the homeland of a gifted African writer. Can we consider on this ground North Africa the birthplace of the tale about Amor and Psyche, or was that region only a more favourable place than ours for development and acclimatization?

Even if we go back fifteen hundred years before Apuleius, we shall face the same questions and doubts. They are provided by the famous tale about “Two Brothers” found in an Egyptian papyrus of the mid-13th century B.C. [...]

The Egyptian tale is woven from motifs alive even today; we have there an accusation of an innocent young man by a lecherous woman charging with an attempt at her virtue—and this reminds us of the biblical Joseph; than a cow gives a warning to the accused—as in the tale about “The Stepdaughter and a Bullock” (Polish T 511 = AT); a signal about brother’s death; the ruffled liquid (AT 300), and finally, the adventures of the husband reborn as an animal and a tree to take revenge on the treacherous wife (AT 590A = Polish T 568)—all these being both cultural and magic motifs. Were the latter motifs an integral component of religious beliefs of Egyptians three and a half thousand years ago? Egyptology cannot provide a sure answer yet there is no doubt that in those times they were much more natural than they are for us today, the more so that the elder brother, Anup, bears the name of a well-known deity.

Summing up, we can determine several issues very significant in terms of the cultural background of the tale but considerably different from the common views in this respect. It turned out that the only lasting element of the tale is the plot and a sequence of events and not beliefs or other factors justifying such a sequence. Adventures of Apuleius’ Psyche or of Anup from the Egyptian tale repeat themselves, continue to last till the present time as adventures of an anonymous princess or an anonymous youth so it is impossible to figure out that the former in “Golden Ass” was under care of her divine husband while the latter, judging by his own name, was divine by nature of his origins. The belief and religion elements have disappeared completely and their disappearance explains the previously stressed fact that in the tale of today fantasy comes without any justification. It also becomes clear in many instances the belief factors are a variable depending on an environment from which the given tale originates. The belief factors are not as lasting as they seem. Equally fragile are the cultural and social factors; a quick look on serfdom or long-term military service proved that within the span of one or two generations the memory of outdated institutions fades away.

Can it, therefore, be surmised that in the folk tale survived at least residues of ancient institutions, customs and beliefs that we recover today in life of primitive peoples? A paper on this issue by a Hungarian scholar A. Solymossy raises some serious doubts. Its

title is *The Pre-logical Thought and Miraculous Elements in Folk Tales* and it maintains that till now the tale shows a sizable admixture of primordial thinking—the pre-logical and pre-mythological, that is. Here belong such motifs as the following: 1) the bleeding of a knife or of a body of water signalling a misfortune (death) of a person far away, which is to reflect a view about the magic relationship between an object and its owner; 2) magic meaning of a name the knowledge of which brings its owner into possession of others; 3) unusual looks of the hero in *Amor and Psyche* or rather in those versions of it in which a mysterious person appears as an animal; 4) limitations on magic power which results, e.g. in stopping a chase or pursuit in a specific marked spot; 5) reincarnation of man in different forms based on a belief that “eternal life linked with continuous transformation of form is the destiny and fate of man.”

There is no doubt that these beliefs are archaic indeed but one can doubt whether age of these beliefs is a solid basis for conclusions about the origins and age of folk tales in which we come across them even today. It seems to me that it is not so. I base my doubts on observations concerning the specific features of tales. Anthropologists and ethnologists, who do not always know exactly these features, are easily prone to two interrelated errors. The first one is based on a view that the tale fixed in its structure, consolidated and preserved in residues cultural phenomena which used to be a norm wherever the tale was born and today either do not appear at all or only in the environment in which the tale is still alive. Stefan Szulc, the author of an interesting study on *Przeżytki w baśniach (Relics in Tales)* while discussing *The Escape* (AT 313A), a tale in which a young man returns home with a daughter of a sorcerer, maintains that “if we remove the fantastic element we will obtain a true picture of wife-snatching among the primitives”; elsewhere we find traces of polygamy or incest. However, how can one be so sure that the folk tale reflected normal and not unique phenomena, especially since the latter ones appeal with their uniqueness to the imagination of the author and his audience? After all the princess in *Mice Furcoat* (AT 510B) was and is interesting because she is a normally virtuous daughter of an abnormally vicious father. And secondly, we cannot have the certainty that the motif, with its

equivalents in beliefs and customs of primitive peoples, is an integral component of a tale and thus the tale is to be regarded as a product of some primitive culture.

A classical example here is *Robber Madey* (AT 756B), in which the most effective motifs include the overnight stay of a traveller in a chalet owned by a man-eater bandit. It would be absurd to surmise that such a tale originated among cannibals, because, in the first place, we know that it originated in 15th century in France, that means in a country in which cannibalism was non-existent; at least at that time, secondly, we know also that the given motif, typical in some areas today, did not enter the original composition. Thus we come across the second error in thinking about cultural relics in the tale. It is based on missing the fact that over the centuries-long life the tale underwent diverse transformations and acquired various elements which were topical in respective environments it went through during its way. The student of *The Escape*, hearing in it voices of distant centuries, forgets that *raptus puellae* was indeed an unusual event yet quite common over the whole of Europe until the 18th century and that the given tale could have traces of some events not from the times of Romulus and Remus but from much later periods.

This view can be supported not only by theoretic but practical considerations. The first of these considerations is the unconvincing vagueness of studies such as those quoted above, and here we can add as well an older study *Folklore as an Historical Science* (1908), a sizable book by a noted English ethnologist G. L. Gomme; the second is provided by analyses justifying skepticism. As an example, let me indicate a meticulous paper by a Polish scholar Stanisław Ciszewski on *The Tale about Midas' Ears* (1899).

This plot, popularized by Ovid, is known in Poland only from a literary version by Lucjan Siemieński. It deals with a king with donkey's ears who was ashamed of his handicap and killed all the barbers knowing his secret. Only one young man escapes death by swearing he would keep it to himself. Unable to hold the secret, he whispers it into a hole in the ground and a bush blooms upwards and then a pipe from the bush's branch declares the royal secret to all and sundry. The king seeing the miracle gives up his intention to kill the barber. We find this story in the Roman poet and in many

present-day variants from East and West. But there is also another version, common like the other one, among the Balcan peoples and it is familiar to Mongolian tribes: they link the king and the barber with a special blood relationship because the youth offers the cruel ruler a pie with an admixture of his mother's milk and thus has the chance to escape the punishment. To Ciszewski this motif seems to be original primitive one, older than that of generosity of Midas in Ovid's poem. Why? "The psychological value and its indispensability in the original structural design" is a subjective and arbitrary idea of the scholar; he himself stresses that the variants on the blood relationship are found only in the area of Moslem culture where foster family ties are an old and respected institution. Objectively from facts gathered by Ciszewski, it is possible to draw the conclusion that the tale being alive in the Moslem cultural area absorbed as its natural justification the expressive image of customs and thus they enriched it with its own original structure. That new element appealed better to feelings than the ruler's generosity, evidently alien to simplistic milieux.

In consequence, the common views on the sense of cultural relics in tales are not so much scientific hypotheses but arbitrary suppositions. It would be possible to draw from them correct conclusions if we come to know the history of every plot that contains alleged or genuine relics.

Transl. by *Bogusław Lawendowski*