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Zofia Stefanowska

## On the Dantesque Character of Part Three of Mickiewicz's *Forefathers*\*

A comparison with Dante suggested itself even to the first readers of Part Three of *Dziady* (*Forefathers*). Bogdan Zaleski wrote to Nabelak (November 3, 1832): "it will be a large, original and national poem, a kind of our *Divina Commedia*,"<sup>1</sup> and Niemcewicz, extolling Part Three as "a lofty, subtle, witty and historical work," encouraged the author: "I cannot see anyone but Mickiewicz who would be able to write an epic poem on our uprising, parallel to Dante."<sup>2</sup> Both Zaleski and Niemcewicz had in mind a presumed work, of which Part Three, published just then, was to be only an augury, a fragment, and both referred to the rank of this work in the national culture rather than to its genetic relationships. It can be assumed, however, that it was not by accident that Dante's name appeared in this context, and that Part Three suggested to its readers some parallels with *Divine Comedy*.

Genetic relationships were taken up by 20th-century scholars: Igna-

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\* Note of the Editor: The text presented here is one of the studies included in: Z. Stefanowska, *Próba zdrowego rozumu. Studia o Mickiewiczu* (*The Test of the Common Sense. Studies on Mickiewicz*), Warszawa 1976.

<sup>1</sup> Cited after M. Dernałowicz, *Od "Dziadów" części trzeciej do "Pana Tadeusza". Marzec 1832—czerwiec 1834* (*From Part Three of "Forefathers" to "Pan Tadeusz". March 1832—June 1834*), Warszawa 1966, p. 118 (*Kronika życia i twórczości Adama Mickiewicza—Chronicle of Adam Mickiewicz's Life and Work*).

<sup>2</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 157. "Deportations, mothers, children, Siberian wilderness" — thus in Mr. Jingle's style Niemcewicz characterized the themes of the poem in his letter to Prince Czartoryski (*ibidem*, p. 115).

cy Chrzanowski, Zofia Szmydtowa, Zygmunt Sitnicki,<sup>3</sup> who pointed out many, perhaps even too many (here I refer to Sitnicki) analogies between Part Three of *Forefathers* and *Divine Comedy*. What mainly drew the scholars' attention was, of course, the graveyard scene, with its infernal agonies of the Doctor and Baykoff, the model of which was sought in Dante. It was pointed out that Baykoff's metamorphoses had their source in Canto XXV of *Inferno* with its similar use of lower animals, amphibia and reptiles, and in Canto XIII with its black bitches hunting the soul of Giacomo da Sant Andrea. Canto XXVIII could further be added here as providing the model of a head separated from the body (Bertrand de Born). Some similarity could also be discerned between the situation of the Doctor's Phantom and Pope Nicholas III from Canto XIX; as Nicholas III will be replaced in his infernal pit by Boniface VIII, and the latter in turn by a still greater sinner, Clement V, so the Doctor's torment will change with the death of „that child-murdering devil,” the Senator: it will be the Doctor then who will take over the role of a sieve through which the molten metal is poured.

All those concurrences are not, as we can see, highly significant, and it was not without justification when Brahmer noted sceptically that “ingenuity in inventing infernal punishments is, after all, limited.”<sup>4</sup> The very multitude of possible references arouses some doubts; anyhow, it should be stressed that if Mickiewicz in his scene IX was inspired by *Divina Commedia*, he treated it in the Romantic fashion, as a repertory of ghastly scenes in the horror style. Similarity of details may be deceptive, and listing probable

<sup>3</sup> I. Chrzanowski, *Podobieństwa i pokrewieństwa pomiędzy “Dziadów” częścią trzecią a “Boską komedią”* (*Similarities and Affinities of Part Three of “Forefathers” and “Divine Comedy”*), [in:] *Wśród zagadnień, książek i ludzi* (*Among Problems, Books and People*), Lvov 1922, p. 298–309; Z. Szmydtowa: *Dante a romantyzm polski* (*Dante and Polish Romanticism*), [in:] *Poeci i poetyka* (*Poets and Poetics*), Warszawa 1964, p. 326–327; *L'Italia nel romanticismo polacco*, [in:] *Il romanticismo*, Budapest 1968; *Mickiewicz jako tłumacz z literatur zachodnio-europejskich* (*Mickiewicz as a Translator of West European Literature*), Warszawa 1955, p. 158–174 (on Mickiewicz's translations from *Divina Commedia*); Z. Sitnicki, *Mickiewicz a Dante* (*Mickiewicz and Dante*), “Pamiętnik Literacki”, XXXVIII: 1948, p. 355–366.

<sup>4</sup> M. Brahmer, *Dante, le grand émigré, et le romantisme polonais*, [in:] *Comparative Literature. Proceedings of the Second Congress of the International Comparative Literature Association*, vol. 2. Chapel Hill, N. Y., 1959, p. 620.

reminiscences does not lead to any relevant conclusions; I will dwell then only on those which perform an important function.

Such a significant Dantesque motif in scene IX of Part Three is to me the prophecy, pronounced by the Doctor's Phantom, of infernal punishment for the Senator, whose historical prototype was still alive at the time when Mickiewicz wrote his poem. The prophecy of damnation is then a prophecy *ex provisu*, if we can use the term "prophecy" in relation to such events as death and the hereafter. When he engaged the supernatural authority against his political enemy, Mickiewicz undoubtedly followed in Dante's wake:<sup>5</sup> in scene VI he made this enemy's soul the sport of devils, making the still alive Senator suffer infernal agonies just like Dante placed in Ptolomea the souls of the living: Alberigo dei Manfredi and Branca d'Orio (Canto XXXIII). To the latter Mickiewicz referred again after many years in "La Tribune des Peuples", comparing the conservatists in the National Assembly to Dante's damned:

Semblables à ce damné de Dante dont le corps se promenait sur la place publique de Gènes pendant que son esprit hantait les conciliabules infernaux, nos rétrogrades n'assistaient à l'Assemblée que corporellement; leur esprit était ailleurs, il stationnait dans les antichambres de l'empereur Nicolas...<sup>6</sup>

—like the Senator's spirit, we may add. This can be treated as an autoreminiscence and a proof that while writing scene VI of Part Three Mickiewicz bore in mind Canto XXXIII of *Inferno*.

Political topicality of Part Three, topicality of Polish-Russian conflict and disillusionment with the passive West, everything that was propaganda, lampoon, satire and polemics, Mickiewicz provided with the eschatological sanction, imposing upon God and His angels the role of guarantors of liberation, and making Providence the backer of the national cause. Obviously, all this was not calculated arbitrariness, but rather an expression of the desperate need to discover such an order of things, both earthly and heavenly, which would warrant victory to the righteous, not only in heaven but on earth as well. To overcome the chaos of events (for a defeat

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<sup>5</sup> M. Bakhtin in his book on F. Rabelais mentions Renaissance satirical texts, where historical figures were placed in Hell even though they were still living; we do not know, however, whether Mickiewicz ever came across this tradition.

<sup>6</sup> "La Tribune des Peuples," Edition phototypique, Wrocław 1963, No 116.

of one's country is always felt as chaos), to introduce God into history, to enclose history in the network of Providence's plan, thereby combining religion and politics in one coherent and self-explaining system – this was the most profoundly Dantesque intention of the poet. *Commedia* was a work of such a universal, all-embracing order, of full consistence of all spheres of human experience: physical, ethical and historio-political, it presented a perfectly integrated and clear system of relations contained in God's plan.<sup>7</sup> Dante's political ideology, with all its passionate references to his times, was included in this system as one of the elements of general harmony.

Part Three of *Forefathers* was written in the epoch which painfully recognized the disintegration of the world vision, unintelligibility of experienced facts, and the conflict between morality and politics. After all, this consciousness of a split is the source of Romantic attempts at a synthesis of idea and act, of programmes aiming at Christianizing politics, of the 19th-century eruption of systems of philosophy of history, resulting from this effort to bring some order into the chaos of events. The author of *Forefathers* was one of those who aspired after a synthesis, after reconstruction of a total, coherent vision of the universe as an orderly system with its own laws and ends. And since the realm of the most painful sense of chaos, an experience most urgently calling for an explanation, was the national history of the preceding few years, consequently it became the point of departure for endeavours to integrate the broken *universum*. If in this effort Mickiewicz was inspired by *Divine Comedy* – and it was the greatest model of a work based on the principle of universal harmony – if, then, Mickiewicz turned to this model, he saw in it, above all, a chance of harmonizing history with the Providence's plan. Certainly, what offered such a chance was also the tradition – common to both writers – of the Christian interpretation of history as the area of realization of God's final designs. But it was *Divine Comedy* itself which as a poetic work showed clearly what was the intellectual assumption of the Christian philosophy of history: in Dante history has its continuation

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<sup>7</sup> It is especially emphasized by E. Auerbach, *Dante. Poet of the Secular World*, transl. by R. Manheim, Chicago 1961.

and final fulfilment in the other world, and it is in the aspect of these ultimate, irrevocable results, confirmed with God's judgement, that it is viewed. It is history seen from the eternal perspective—and yet hot with political topicality, it is immediately hardening, even with its actors still living, in the final form. It is not viewed as an impersonal force, but as actions of men endowed with the right of choice and moral responsibility, and thus as an ethical problem.

In comparison with *Commedia* Mickiewicz's synthesis is of a limited range: the Divine order concerns in it only one sphere of earthly life, i. e. history, and—we should add—it is short-winded history, without any deeper perspective (this will come into view in *Księgi narodu polskiego i pielgrzymstwa polskiego* — *The Books of the Polish Nation and Polish Pilgrims*). History here is still politics. Other spheres of human experience: science, poetry or love, are reduced to the national cause; God in this drama is a political God, fulfilling Himself in historical justice. Such an impoverishment of the world vision, this shortening of the distance between the current history and Providence, removal of systems mediating between political events and their eschatological sense, and—in effect—reducing the essence of man's vocation to his being a subject of history—all this was the price Mickiewicz paid for the supernatural sanction for Polish national aspirations. The human-divine order set up by Part Three is a very limited order. Perhaps it is realized as the secularization of the supernatural world rather than as the sacralizing of history. Extramundane forces are brought down to earth and driven into mundane events: it is on earth, in the space organized by man (a house, a graveyard) that devils strive for Konrad's soul and are chased away by exorcism, archangels judge the case of a sinner, Eve is entranced, Friar Peter is allowed a vision of the future, the Senator is tormented by devils, and an informer and a persecutor suffer infernal punishments. If we can see in these scenes analogues of Dante's Hell and Paradise (in flower apotheosis of Eve), it should be immediately added that both this Hell and this Paradise brought down to earth for the main part have double motivation, one in the order of supernatural things, the other in that of human things: physiological (Konrad's demonical possession as an epileptic fit), psychological (dreams of Eve.

Friar Peter and the Senator), and cultural (ecclesiastical calendar: Christmas and Easter in the scenes of the archangelic trial and Friar Peter's Vision, folk rite in the graveyard scene). And if Dante's predecessor in the journey through the other world, St. Paul, says: "whether in the body, I cannot tell; or whether out of the body, I cannot tell: God knoweth" (II Cor. 12,2), here we have no doubts: in the body.

Obviously, we can scarcely imagine such a reading of Part Three of *Forefathers* which would reduce the heroes' spiritual experiences to empirical causality: "— wiosną idą chmury, Z chmury piorun wypada: — taki bieg natury" ("We have clouds in spring, Thunderbolts fall from the clouds—it's a natural thing"<sup>8</sup>)—thus the Senator reasonably explains the Doctor's death. A reader who, following his example, would be inclined to interpret the events of Part Three according to rational motivation, would find the work absolutely resisting such attempts. It is not without significance, however, that here and there the author suggests a possibility of such a motivation, as if hesitating whether he should subject his poetic world to the supernatural forces altogether, or whether he should let it retain some of the logic of autonomous earthly experience. We can see in it a sign of how difficult it was for a 19th-century writer to interiorize what the previous century recognized to be a superstition.

This is not the only trace of this difficulty. Even more significant for the intellectual situation of the epoch is the fact that Mickiewicz's attempt at a unified vision of the world appeals to faith and feeling, and not to reason. The system of *Divine Comedy* was a perfect system, for it was rational. The system of Part Three is intuitive: reason had a secret part in its building, without direct approval of the author. A Romantic could aim at the harmony of the spheres—even if it were to be a partial harmony—only by neutralizing reason, or even only against reason since as a Romantic he was bound to see in it a factor of the disintegration

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<sup>8</sup> All quotations from *Forefathers* from the edition: A. Mickiewicz, *Forefathers*, transl. by Count Potocki of Montalk, Foreword by W. Weintraub, London 1968.

of the total cognition, separating human universe from the Divine beginnings and ends. It is well known that this attitude left its stamp on the text of *Forefathers*.

Distrust, or even hostility, towards the cognitive aspirations of human mind is most explicit in the words of the Second Archangel when he says of Konrad: "On sądów Twoich nie chodził badać jako ciekawy, Nie dla mądrości ludzkiej on badał..." ("It was not curiosity that bade Him search into Thy judgements..."); in Konrad's case this is an extenuating circumstance. "Mickiewicz [...]" does not shrink from an essentially reactionary attitude: the cognitive aspirations of human mind are condemned" — this is how Kleiner comments these words.<sup>9</sup> What a degradation of reason in comparison with *Divine Comedy*; for Dante the journey through Hell, Purgatory and Paradise is a journey through cognition, and cognition constitutes an important element of his inner rebirth. The bliss of Paradise is to a great extent the joy of gaining knowledge, and though the poet's mind must stop at borders which cannot be crossed by man, nowhere is the cognitive hunger judged as sinful (how many times Vergil and Beatrice encourage Dante to ask questions!). In Dante reason and knowledge come to man's aid on his way to salvation (if he does not misuse them), whereas in *Forefathers* those who are privileged are the innocent and simpletons. Mickiewicz's attitude precluded universal encyclopaedicness, did not permit any ordering system which would cover the whole of human experience. Harmony of the human and the divine in *Forefathers* is constantly threatened by the encroachment of heterogeneous elements upon it; this harmony cannot exist but in its self-limitation. In comparison with the system of *Commedia* it is only a fragment, and a system that does not cover the whole is only an apparent system.

Kridl, who set the "confusion" and "programmatic lack of construction" in *Forefathers* in opposition to the organic and homogeneous character of *Divine Comedy*,<sup>10</sup> surely took into consid-

<sup>9</sup> J. Kleiner, *Mickiewicz*, vol. 2: *Dzieje Konrada*, part I, Lublin 1948, p. 367; in these words we can see the expression of the wounded pride of the professional intellectual.

<sup>10</sup> M. Kridl, *Poezja w latach 1795–1863 (Poetry in the Years 1795–1863)*, [in:] *Dzieje literatury pięknej w Polsce (History of Literature in Poland)*, Part II, Kraków 1936, p. 60.



ration the above-mentioned differences. But for him, as well as for Borowy, who criticized *Forefathers* as a "hazardous mixture,"<sup>11</sup> these are differences of artistic value. Underlying such an opinion are both the personal taste of the scholars and the interpretation this taste dictates. If, however, the differences I attempted to describe and explain are viewed as differences of two distant cultural epochs, of two historical types of intellect, then we should rather find with admiration how vital proved to be for Mickiewicz a message from more than five centuries before.

Transl. by *Maria-Bożenna Fedewicz*

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<sup>11</sup> W. Borowy, *O poezji Mickiewicza (On Mickiewicz's Poetry)*, vol. 2, Lublin 1958, p. 160; for his sceptical remarks on comparing *Forefathers* with *Divine Comedy* see p. 132 and p. 180.