

Classic Poetry Series

Juliusz Slowacki

- poems -

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Pan Beniowski - Final Part Of Canto Five

Surging like a vast current of salmon or sheatfish,
Coiling up and down like an iron serpent
That rears now its torso, now its head,
The armed horsemen breast the prairie grass. --
But hold! my song's device breaks down:
My Muse begs a rest, having drained her cup
Empty of sweet nectar; and so, farewell
To you, on that steppeland rise,

My pair of golden, sun-drenched statues!
My iron ranks wallowing in the grass and herbage!
One needs here the yearning of a Malczewski--
The kind found in men who are half angels.
One ought to sing here; meanwhile I weave fables.
Whenever I stir up the ashes of my homeland
And then raise my hand once more to the harp,
Specters from the grave rise before me--specters

So lovely! So transparent! Fresh! Alive! Young!
That I am incapable of shedding real tears over them:
And yet I lead them in a dance about the valleys.
They take from my heart whatever they like:
A sonnet, a tragedy, a legend or sublime ode.
It is all that I have, all that I cherish and believe in.
Believe in. . . You ask me, my dear reader,
What I believe in? If I told, it would raise a furor.

In the first place, this rhyme which scoffs and reviles
Has a political credo: these are Dantesque regions
You have entered. I believe with a pagan's heart
In Shakespeare's rhymes, in Dante and in Homer.
I believe in the commonwealth of an only son --
In our case it was that surly fellow--Mochnacki!
Though he never stopped spinning his mighty dreams,
He allowed the Dictator to stretch him upon a cross.

I believe that he came into being in human form
And went to the Great Judgment that lights up
Our land; on the way, he dropped in on the Aristocracy
And bided in that flameless Hell for three days;
Then in a little book he passed judgment on his brothers:
Those who are upright and those who feel no shame;
In him I believe, and in his two unfinished books:
I believe in all the saints of our émigré circles,

And in their spiritual communion with our nation;
In the forgiveness of sins committed by our leaders

And the resurrection of our elected Sejm under Herod
Which being a very amusing body will constitute
The best proof of the resurrection of the body--
The supreme instance of bodily resuscitation;
And finally, secure as to the future, I should add
That I believe in the life everlasting of that Sejm.

Amen... This amen chokes me, catches in my throat
Like the amen Macbeth uttered. -- Still, I believe
That like cranes chained to the wing the nations are making
Progress . . . that knights rise out of the bones. . .
That the tyrant cannot sleep when he bloodies the bed
Or robs the eagles of the youngest brood. . .
That fire and serpents and fear are his bedfellows. . .
All this I believe--yes--and in God as well!

O God! Who has not felt You in the blue fields
Of Ukraine where the level plains arouse
Such sadness in the soul that ranges over them! --
When, accompanied by a windy hymn,
The dust which Tartar hordes drenched in blood
Takes wing, shrouds the golden sun in ashes,
Blurs, reddens it, then suspends it in the sky
Like a black buckler with blood-shot eyes --

Who has not seen You, Almighty God,
On that great steppe, under a lifeless sun,
When the mounds on which all crosses stand
Bring blood to mind--or crooked flames;
When far off thunders a sea of bent-grass,
Burial mounds cry out with a terrible voice,
The locust unfurls its black rainbows, and the garland
Of graves melts away into the distance;

Who has not felt You in the terrors of nature:
In the great steppe or on Golgotha's hill
Or among columns surmounted not by a roof
But by a moon and an untold number of stars;
And who in the zest and ardor of youthful feeling
Has not felt that You exist, or, plucking daisies,
Has not found You in those daisies and forget-me-nots?
Yet still he seeks You in prayer and good deeds:

No doubt he will find You -- no doubt he will --
I wish small-hearted men a humble faith
And a peaceful death. -- Jehovah's flashing face
Is of vast measure! When I count up the layers

Of exposed earth and see the bone piles
Lying there like the standards of lost armies
At the foot of mountain ridges -- skeletal remains
That also bear witness to God's being --

I see that He is not only the God of worms
And things that creep and crawl upon the dust:
He loves the booming flight of gigantic birds;
Puts no curb on stampeding horses. . .
He is the flaming plume of proud helms. . . Often
A great deed will sway Him where a tear-drop
Shed on the church doorstep will not: before Him
I fall down prostrate -- for He is God!

Where then is humility's forerunner?--the man
Who contended with me like a god? I seek him still;
I'll cleave his head with a lightning bolt, just as yesterday
I dealt him a blow on the breast. Have you seen him?
His lips are seasoned with wormwood. . . The people
Who believed in him make a show of joy
Yet droop their heads, for they know it was my nod
That brought the Prophet-Bard back to life.

Bit by bit, I tore my heart to shreds,
Forged the pieces into firebolts and hurled them
At his face; each piece boomed like a crag
As if high in the sky I had shattered a god into bits
And now the pieces were raining down. . . I smashed him --
But what have I gained in the eyes of the people today?
The battle and victory took place high in the heavens --
People see nothing in me, but courage.

Indeed. . . My nation! If you had but seen
How lonely and sorrow-laden I was
Knowing that if my firebolt failed to pierce him,
The Lithuanians would seize me in their collective claws;
But then, recalling my nest in the eastern marches,
I beckoned to Kremenets Mountain that it rise up
And put that rabble to flight -- that it stand with me --
Or take up an inferior position beneath me.

For my sad heart breaks into pieces at the thought
That there are no noble-hearted souls taking my part;
That to no purpose do I cast impassioned words
Filled with tears, blood and brilliant flashes

On hearts that remain repellent to me -- I
Who also have a land that is rich in flowering meads,
A native land flowing with blood and milk:
And it ought likewise to love me.

If you -- you! -- are without hearts, then my heart
Shall feel for you; shall forgive without measure.
River Ikwa! Inundate this carpet of green meadows!
You too have renown, for it is as if your lapping waves
Were weighing matters of colossal moment with the Niemen --
It was you who forced old Niemen to confess
My greatness: that we are flowing forward to glory. . .
But he said: Let him go where we go.

But oh my Prophet-Bard! Where are you going?
What harbor beacon lights your way, and where?
Either you founder in the depths of Slavonic atavism
Or with your lightning mind you sweep up
The refuse and drive it at the Pontiff's triple crown.
I know your harbors and coastlands! I shall not go
With you, or go your false way -- I shall take
Another road! -- and the nation will go with me!

If it should chose to love, I shall give it a swan's voice,
That it might sing out its love. If it should chose to curse,
It will curse through me; should it chose to burn --
I shall furnish the heat: I shall lead it wherever God
Would take it -- to infinity -- in every direction.
My name will serve as a vessel for its blood and tears.
My standard shall never play it false: by day
It will shine like the sun, by night, like a fiery cloud.

Ah! So you show up at last, my knight?
Now I shall have at you with my sword!
First I shall show you the sun reflected in my shield,
Then before the sun I shall unbosom you of fear. . .
I shall reveal the falsehood in your latest orison,
And, with that falsehood shown, deal your death blow;
I gaze on your face -- green in the night like the moon --
So have you renounced the power of the sun?

I told you that you were like a Lithuanian deity rising
Out of a holy place embosomed by dark pines;
Clutched in your hand like a celestial moon was a cross;
On your lips, flashing like a lightning bolt, was the word.
And saying this -- am I not the son of song? A king's son! --
I fell. -- And you stepped up -- did you not? --

To place your foot upon me as though I were dead
And I rose -- having merely feigned terror and death!

You will always find me standing before your eyes --
Unshakable, proud and terrible. . . I am not you --
You are not an Eternal Flame. And even if you are
A god -- I at least am a living one!
Ready to lash a graven image with my snaking whip
So long as you drive this world down a false path. . .
I cherish our people more than dead men's bones. . .
I love -- but I am without mercy and tears

For the vanquished. -- Such is my panoply of arms!
And such is the sorcerer's magic of my thoughts!
Though you may oppose me today, the future is mine! --
Victory shall be mine -- beyond the grave. . .
The Troy of your poets shall fall at my feet,
No Hector's courage of yours will save her.
God has charged the future with my defense:--
I shall slay you -- draw your corpse behind me!

And let the ages pass judgment. -- Keep well, my Bard!
With you this song began, ancient deity!
I have laved your bays in a rain of burning words
And shown that a broken heart can be traced
Upon your bark -- your trembling leafage
Reveals a dry rot gnawing at your soul.
Keep well! Foes do not bid farewell like this,
Only two divinities -- upon opposite-facing suns.

Juliusz Slowacki