

Borowy. Reymont



REYMONT

REYMONT is the only literary name of his generation in Poland which became known abroad and acquired a certain popularity. His principal works have been translated into many languages and sympathetically reviewed. In 1924 he received the Nobel prize for literature. Curiously enough, in Poland, he is less appreciated, although he is, of course, read and liked, and was honoured officially. There are not many Poles who would consider him as the greatest of modern Polish writers. And, certainly, there is in him neither the richness of Żeromski nor the imposing unity of Wyspiański, the continued spiritual growth of Kasprowicz nor the artistic perfection of Leopold Staff¹. Perhaps, in a sense, he is more typically Polish than any of these.

The first thing to observe about him is certainly his plainness and easiness. "Reymont's work"—writes the distinguished critic A. G. Siedlecki—"classically clear, translucent in every description, in every chapter, on each page, and in each sentence, speaks for itself . . . There is in it nothing which should require an exegesis. All is said, without anything being left; the very depth of the author's intention is everywhere reached. There are no two ways of understanding any of the ideas expressed. From the flow of scenes and the march of contents the sense of the work emerges imperiously." There is, indeed, nothing nervous, nothing fragmentary and nothing complicated in his books. And these words may define all his merits, as well as all his shortcomings.

His was the talent of a realist and of an impressionist. As another contemporary critic, Zygmunt Wasilewski, points out, "he played from sight in his art; when he took up his pen he had no other desire than to describe things as they appear." And he was at his best when he followed freely this genuine inclination of his talent. His nature was elemental, and it enabled him to express what was general and typical for certain forms of life. "With his naked eye"—says Wasilewski again—"he was not able to make discoveries about more complicated kinds of culture, but he seized, as nobody else from their biological side, every type and every social sphere where primitive instincts are at play." He was greatly favoured by the spirit which prevailed at the time of his initiation into literature. It was in the hey-day of naturalism. And naturalism proved beneficent to Reymont by the acknowledgment which it gave his

¹ See the present writer's "Żeromski", *Slavonic Review*, vol. XIV, p. 403; "Wyspiański," *ibid.*, vol. XI, p. 617; "Kasprowicz", *ibid.*, vol. X., p. 28; "Leopold Staff," *ibid.*, vol. XI, p. 145.

kind of talent. It was an exceedingly happy convergence of a gift with the ruling artistic currents.

And the literary activity of Reymont was well prepared by his experience in life. It was an adventurous life and as varied as one could desire for a future novelist.

Ladislas Stanislaus Reymont was born in 1867 as a son of a village organist. The family was numerous (there were nine children) and the house was poor. A stern rule was maintained by the father. Reymont preserved reminiscences of his lessons in music at which every false note was punished by a stroke from a stick. The impressionable boy used to escape from home to the enormous forests near by, where his uncle worked as a surveyor. He grew familiar with nature and acquired an exact knowledge of the life of woods and fields. He was also early attracted by reading. One of the strongest memories of his childhood was Słowacki's tragedy *Lilla Veneda*, a copy of which was brought home by his brother and which he read secretly in the night by the light of the moon. This episode developed in Reymont a passion for books. It was his first school in literature. But his normal education fared less well. He prepared for the examination to a secondary school in the town of Łódź, and at this examination he failed. A series of new attempts followed, without any better success. He was apprenticed as a tailor, and after four years' work was registered at the Guild, but then he saw that he "could not stand" the trade and returned to his parents. He was regarded as a disgrace to his family and bewailed as a broken character. He was already eighteen. He wrote a great number of poems, but felt himself that they were of no worth. He "ran after everything and then loathed it," as he confessed himself. He joined a theatrical touring company. He attached himself to his new profession more than to the previous one, but he was manifestly lacking in talent as an actor. Nevertheless, he led the life of a strolling comedian for more than a year, and with his company visited many parts of the country. But he realised that his future on the stage was hopeless. He did not like compromises and middle positions. So we see him soon as a novice in the monastery of Częstochowa. He spent some months there, and once more returned home. By the help of his father's friends, he obtained a minor position on the railways. He had a bad reputation, of course; so the job he was given was of the lowest kind, and at the lowest salary. He supervised workmen on a railway extension. He lived for two years in a

peasant's hut. He felt himself to be at the very depth of misfortune. He did not know that during this time he was unconsciously collecting material for the work which was to give him celebrity as well as a great artistic joy. He was writing all the time; he did it for himself, without any further ambition. Different influences were moving in his mind. He read omnivorously. We know from his record that Sienkiewicz's historical trilogy meant for him seven days and seven nights exclusively given to reading. And he must have read others of Sienkiewicz's novels, as well as those of his outstanding contemporaries, Prus, Elisa Orzeszko and Dygasiński. He was acquainted in translations with Zola and many English novelists. He read everything. One day a report was asked of him about a local railway accident. He wrote it, but in such a literary style that the paper was sent back to him with the remark "You were asked for a report, not a short story." One day he collected some of his manuscripts and sent them to Warsaw to the well-known critic Matuszewski, who was at that time chief editor of the most influential Polish weekly of the period, *Tygodnik Ilustrowany*. The answer of Matuszewski was favourable. He took one story for the *Tygodnik* and singled out some others as worthy of publication. Reymont's first work was printed. He began to contribute letters from the country to one of the Warsaw papers. But this finally brought his railway employment to an end. He had to leave and, with 3 roubles and 50 kopeks, or about 7s., in his pocket, he went to Warsaw to begin a new life as a writer. After all he was only twenty-five. This was in 1893.

His first days in the new career were difficult. But this time he was persevering. He visited one day the well-known writer, Świętochowski who divined in him talent as a realist, and gave him excellent advice: to go with a band of pilgrims to Częstochowa. The monastery of Częstochowa has been a goal for pilgrimage for some centuries, but up to that time nobody had described the crowd on its way. And this neglect was striking in the age of naturalism when human documents began to be so eagerly collected. Reymont was attracted by the idea and executed it. The result was to be his first printed book (*A Pilgrimage to the Bright Mountain*, 1895), a splendid piece of *reportage*.

A year afterwards he published a novel dealing chiefly with theatre life, *The Comedienne* (1896). It was followed by *Fermentation* (1897), a novel in which he made profit of his railway experience. A series of short stories, mostly from village life, followed these books of a larger scope.

Somewhere about that time Reymont came to England. He was driven here by the desire to gain a deeper knowledge of occult movements. He met the celebrated Mrs. Blawatsky, but she chilled in him his theosophic ardour.

In 1899 *The Promised Land* appeared, a two-volume novel dealing with the great Polish industrial centre of Łódź. For this work Reymont had spent a certain time in the place itself. He even took a job as a factory worker in order to study his *milieu* carefully and accurately. The book denounced factory proprietors, their capitalist greediness and their abuse of the working people. The novel was first published as a newspaper serial. When Reymont was preparing the book edition, some of the factory managers made efforts to frustrate him. They exerted pressure on the censorship, and the novel was cut by about 4,000 lines.

Reymont's existence was at that period already more assured, though on a rather small scale. Literature did not bring in great incomes in those days in Poland, and Reymont, interested in the life around him though he was, was not capable of purely journalistic work.

His fortunes or misfortunes proved to be bound up with railways. He was a victim of a railway accident. He had dangerous concussion and received an indemnity from the administration of the railway. Modest though it was, this sum was of great assistance to him. His health was shaken, but he was free to go for a longer time abroad and give himself entirely to his literary work.

For a year and a half, it is true, he was unable to do anything. His state was grave; but after that time he recovered and instantly began to think about a saga of peasant life. He had written its first version in Rome (1900), but was not satisfied with it, and destroyed it. He went then to France, and began there the second version which gave to the book its final shape, enlarging four times its first dimensions. It took Reymont as much as seven years finally to execute his plan (1902-1909).

The Peasants—such was the simple title of his work—was Reymont's great success. And his recognition coincided with the culmination of his art. In later years he still wrote very much and in very different manners, but none of those works equalled the earlier ones. He wrote a book of impressions *From the District of Chetm* (1910), from the unhappy land whose population suffered at that time religious persecution from the Russian government. He wrote a series of short stories on Japanese *motifs* (it was just after the Russo-Japanese war); a set of tales about revolutionaries

and revolutionary movements (this was after 1905); then a series of fantastic stories reminiscent of Edgar Allan Poe and Rudyard Kipling. An occult² novel, *A Vampire* (1911), followed, the scene of which is partly placed in London; then, another novel about railway station life, *The Dreamer* (1910), and a series of travel impressions. Some years later Reymont conceived the idea of a large historical novel, partly after the manner of Sienkiewicz and partly in the manner of Żeromski's *Ashes*. Its subject was to be 1794, the year of the last infamous Diet of the old Poland and of the first glorious Polish rising against the invaders. This novel in three parts, of which the first was published in 1913 and the two others during the war (1916-1918), had a typical *succès d'estime*, but not of spontaneous recognition. Reymont wrote also a volume of mediocre short stories about the war (*Behind the Lines*, 1919).

After the peace treaties, he undertook a journey to America and depicted in a novel (1923) some of the peculiarities of the Polish emigrants in the United States. He took the risk of writing, finally, a long symbolical story, *The Revolt* (1924), a sort of contemporary *Roman du Renart*, in which he attempted to picture the tangle of present social ideas.

He died in December 1925.

Reymont's gift was that of an exceedingly keen observer. His friend, A. G. Siedlecki, quotes a very characteristic anecdote. One day Reymont met another writer on a Warsaw square. They stopped and talked for some time. And suddenly Reymont said: "Shut your eyes, please, and tell me what you have just noticed in the square." The other submitted to the examination, but proved not to have much to say. He resolved to take his revenge, and a short time afterwards retorted with the same demand. Reymont then turned his back to the street, closed his eyes, and began to enumerate an incredibly long list of details: the gestures of people, the colours of their clothes, the shapes of articles they carried, the peculiarities of carriages, of horses, and so on. The instinctive genius of observation is the fundamental element and the principle charm of Reymont's art.

Another important element was defined by himself in his interview with Frédéric Lefèvre (included by the French critic in his series *Une heure avec . . .*) "Le thème proprement romanesque d'un roman m'a toujours assez peu importé: j'aspire surtout à animer les masses." This was already distinctly marked in his first book: in the narration of the pilgrimage to Częstochowa.



He had begun this pilgrimage as a stranger to the crowd; gradually he became more and more united with the multitude, to feel at the end as if completely melted in it, and to find in this state a greater energy and a higher happiness. Lefèvre was perfectly right in observing that Reymont had thoroughly achieved "*unanimité*" in practice, before Jules Romains began to devise its theory.

It was from his own observations, chiefly concerning the masses and the surroundings which he had best known, that he had to draw his inspiration. The theatre, railways, factories, peasant farms: these were to be his great subjects.

The Comedienne has still many characteristics of a juvenile work. It is a story of a young girl who runs away from a cruel father and joins a theatrical company. She gradually loses all her illusions in life to the point of attempting suicide. The picture of the theatre world is the only merit of the book.

Fermentation is already a work artistically mature. It is a continuation of the former novel. Its heroine is saved from the action of poison, but not spared anxiety of soul. She tries to revolt against the impositions of life and to be her own mistress, but all in vain; she ends by marrying a "hearty" young land-owner. But the principal thing in the novel is the picture of the heroine's surroundings. Individuals are many and clearly delineated, but it is chiefly the whole which the writer seems to have constantly before his eye. We feel indeed vividly the atmosphere of a small provincial railway station. It is pure naturalism of a good kind. One of the personages in *The Comedienne* says: "Art . . . it is the wild liveliness of an impression upon the brain and upon the feelings, an impression which absorbs all and pours itself out upon everything, and tends, above all, to lose its own self." And such is the art of Reymont's novel. It is fresh, natural, energetic, and yet clear. "Nothing guarantees a harmony"—says Kołaczkowski in his enthusiastic study of that novel—"and nevertheless a harmony is there. No profound prospects of thought open, no individual hero steps into the front place. For the real heroes are here phenomena of life."

The Promised Land was more carefully constructed, the result of a deeper meditation. But this was not so much within Reymont's talent; that is the reason why on the whole it is a less convincing work than *Fermentation*. The main plot, of an ambitious upstart who, after a series of caddish actions, reaches his aim—becomes a rich man, and then realises that this attainment is

worthless to him, is rather cheap and theatrical. But the chief value of the novel lies in descriptions of the factories, the town, and their life.²

Reymont's qualities appeared at their fullest in his most celebrated work, the four volume saga of *The Peasants*.

As in other works, he is above all imposing as an observer. He criticised rather sharply the once famous experimental documentation of Zola. As he himself confessed, Zola's *La Terre* created the germ of his idea of writing *The Peasants*. He had visited the country of *La Terre*, and having re-read the work was so deeply irritated by it that he decided to write something on the same subject but true as *La Terre* was for him false. He said he had thought of making it a novel on French peasants. Afterwards the idea evolved, and it is a large picture of the everyday life of Polish villagers that he gave us. It differs indeed very much from Zola. M. Frank-L. Schoell in his interesting pamphlet *Les Paysans de Ladislas Reymont* confronts two characteristic passages from the two authors. They both concern the same subject: describing the monotonous recurrence of village events. But Reymont's picture is incomparably more detailed. If it is an amplification, M. Schoell rightly notices that it is an "amplification in depth." And his further remarks are equally exact: "Reymont takes his subject from a much nearer distance than his French predecessor; his vision is more penetrating, his analysis more complete. Observe with what an accomplished art he strives to drown what is personal in what is impersonal! It seems that the very accumulation of *faits divers* which fills up his chronicle is for him a sort of means to bind them more strongly with the collective life of the Village, this unique and almighty personality, a greedy devourer of individuals, absorbing and swallowing everything."

He elaborated a special technique for creating a general impression by a rich accumulation of details. It can be studied, for instance, in the following description of the broodings of the poor dying Kuba over the noises which come to him from the neighbouring house where a wedding is being celebrated, and from the road³:

From the house there came a torrent of angry words, a sound of running, and the dragging of furniture from one room to another.

"Ah, they are making ready for the bride's coming!"

² One of these descriptions has been translated by Paul Selver and included in his *Anthology of Modern Slavonic Literature*. The whole novel has been rendered into English by M. H. Dziewicki (Knopf, New York, 1927).

³ *The Peasants*, translated by M. H. Dziewicki (A. Knopf, New York, 1924-26). 4 Vols. Autumn, Winter, Spring, Summer.

Someone, though rarely, passed along the road: this time it was a lumbering, creaking cart, and Kuba, listening, tried to guess whose it was.

"That's Klemba's wagon. One horse—ladder framework; going to the woods for litter, I dare say. Yes, the axle rubs against the nave, so it creaks."

Along the road there was a continual sound of footsteps, talk, and noises scarcely to be heard at all; but he caught them, and made them out on the spot.

"That's old Pietras, going to the tavern.—Here comes Valentova, scolding: someone's geese have gone on to her field, belike.—Oh, she's a vixen, not a woman! . . . This, I think, is Kozlova, shouting as she runs—yes, it is! Here is Peter, Raphael's son . . . when he talks, his mouth always seems full.—This is the priest's mare, going for water. . . . Now she stops. . . .

And so he goes on.

This method suits admirably the general plan of the work, the greatness of which lies in its simplicity. The life of a peasant is dependent on the change of seasons. Every season has its peculiarities which recur periodically every year. A year forms a closed whole in this respect. And Reymont undertook the description of such a unit with all the completeness of a calendar. The work is divided into four volumes every one of them bearing the name of one season of the year: *Autumn, Winter, Spring, Summer*. In this plan the order of life itself imposed the lines of construction. Without any particular intellectual effort, it grew naturally and strongly. It is logical as well as it is elemental. This is also its basic originality. In other works on peasants, as for instance in *La Terre* by Zola, the portrayal of everyday existence formed only a background. In Reymont's novel it constitutes the very plasm.

The notion of periodicity is ever present here, and in his descriptions Reymont shows an astonishingly rich and faultless knowledge of village life. The reader becomes acquainted with the peasant house and with the agricultural work, with village amusements and great solemnities, with the forms of religious piety and with superstitions, with common gossip and with tales narrated only on rare occasions. We learn all about the villagers' native customs and about their relations to the external world of nobles, clergymen, Jews, Gypsies, and so on. We see the colours of peasants' costumes and those of the changing landscape. The village, Lipce, which is the scene of the novel is fictitious, but many other localities mentioned in the work are real. They direct the reader's imagination towards the centre of Poland—to be more exact—towards the southern part of the so-called dukedom of Łowicz, a district in which more old traditions are preserved in clothes and in everyday practice than in many other parts of the country. Reymont described them in their abundance.

Mr. Schoell gave his pamphlet on Reymont a sub-title *Les Paysans*

Polonais vus par un des leurs. This is misleading. Reymont was not himself a peasant. His family was descended from townfolk. In his childhood he was forbidden to play with village boys. When we bear these circumstances in mind, Reymont's encyclopædic knowledge of the peasants appears to us even more curious. It was all gathered by a man who can hardly be said to have taken any active part in village life, but looked at it in a rather melancholic way from the windows of his miserable hut. For it was chiefly in the time of his later youth, when he was a railway extension surveyor, that he became so familiar with the country.

The only thing he did not seize exactly was the idiom. The language of the book (of dialogues as well as of the narration) does not strictly correspond to that of the Łowicz peasants nor to any other particular dialect of Poland. It is a mixture of different elements, bold and dynamic, but not altogether adequate to the realistic tendency of the contents. In this respect Reymont remained far from the perfection attained by Casimir Tetmajer in his dialect stories *From the Rocky Highland*.

But it would be difficult for Reymont to express all his passion in the close set of a definite dialect. For, realist though he is in concrete details, he makes us at the same time feel his personal lyrical share in most of the scenes he describes. One of the most celebrated examples is his description of wedding dances. We know from Reymont's confession that, when he had come to that part of the book, he was caught up by such a fury of imagination that he wrote for three days and three nights with scarcely any interruption. He fell ill afterwards. And when the doctor had asked him what was the cause of his strange exhaustion, he answered: "What do you expect? I had danced for three days and three nights without stopping."

But the element of personal passion appears in *The Peasants* not only in passages like that. There is everywhere in Reymont's work a tendency to draw at more than life-size. And it is a peculiarity which has its good as well as its bad sides. Owing to it, the work gains in spontaneousness, in plasticity, in energy. Yet sometimes it leads Reymont to rather operatic effects. Such is, for instance, the passage describing the death of the old peasant Boryna. He rises in fever from his bed and goes in the night to the field to sow; performing the eternal gestures of a sower he dies. The scene was meant to symbolise the fundamental character and the primeval tradition of labour on the earth.

There is also something theatrical in the erotic plot of the novel,

and especially in the character of the chief heroine, Yagna : victim of an elemental love force which overpowers her and inflames many men around her. The crucial moment in her career as an unconscious Astarte comes when she kindles love in the heart of a young seminarist, and is expelled by the indignant peasants of the village.

But, in spite of some such moments reminiscent of melodrama, the novel abounds in truthful and convincingly presented human documents. Reymont's peasants are not idyllic. There are many vices in them. They are greedy, especially for earth, they are mistrustful, they are ignorant, they are full of violent and dangerous impulses. But Reymont, unlike Zola, does not deny good elements in them. And some of their traits are shown with plain truth as well as with a subtle delicacy. Such, for instance, is the simple and touching story of the old beggar-woman Agata, who centred all her dreams around her feather-mattress, entrusted to rich relations until the moment when it will be needed for her death-bed.

For many a year she (Agata) had set her heart upon one thing : to die (when Our Lord should call her) in her own village, lying in a cottage, on a feather-bed, and beneath a row of holy images upon the wall : as all goodwives die. And for many a year she had been saving against that last, that sacred hour !

Now at the Klembas', up in the loft, she had a chest, and within that chest a great feather-bed, with sheets and pillows, and new pillow-covers : all clean, and none of them ever used, in order to be always in readiness. There was no other place to put that bedding, for she never had a room or a bedstead to herself, but was used to sleep in some corner, on a litter of straw, or in the cow-house, according to circumstances, and as the people of the house allowed her. For she would never assert herself, nor make any complaints, being well aware that things take place in this world according to God's will, and are not to be changed by sinful man.

And yet—in secret, silently, and asking to be forgiven for her pride—she had dreamed of this one thing : to be buried like a village goodwife. For this she had long prayed in fear and trembling.

Naturally, therefore, on arriving in the village, and aware that her last hour was not far off, she set about considering whether there was anything that she had forgotten.

No. She had got all that was required. With her she carried a Candlemas taper that she had begged after a nightwatch over a dead body ; a bottle of holy water ; a new sprinkling brush, a consecrated picture of Our Lady of Cęstochowa, which she should hold when dying ; and a few score zloty for her burial, which might possibly also suffice for a Mass to be said, before the body, with candles and the rite of sprinkling performed at the church-door. For she never dreamed that the priest would accompany the body to the grave.

In such passages Reymont reaches much greater depth than in scenes of elaborate symbolism. For, as was cleverly remarked by the distinguished writer Boy-Żeleński, he really "thought with his pen : he had in himself something of a painter whose spiritual life is concentrated in his brush."

WACŁAW BOROWY.

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