

assassinate First Secretary Gomułka. His drinking, philosophizing, and a trip to Warsaw with a friend and the friend's son (the narrator) provide the canvas on which Pilch paints grotesque pictures of small-town life and ridicules the strivings of the little people. The real problem, i.e., communism and its numbing effect on millions of these little people, fades away from view; what is left is the grotesque powerlessness of those who lost.

The ill-conceived conspiracy does not work out and, toward the end of the novel, the narrator dives into fantastic realism. All this is supposed to be funny, and it is, up to a point. My point materialized somewhere in the first one-third of the book—I read the remainder with yawns punctuating the pages. The novel seems designed to derail anger at communism into a feeling of inferiority among those who lived under communism. We are told that they are irredeemable trash even though their lives are circumscribed by communist laws and police. Communism is made light of in this novel, while the small foibles of individual people are presented as monumental. There is no redemption—no Magna Carta or Shakespeare, no Joan of Arc, no George Washington. No victories are allowed to balance the present state of virtual nonbeing. Pilch seems to say that except for a small elite, his fellow citizens are trash and so they should so remain. Communism served them right—too bad it fell.

I invite the reader to ponder the puzzle of Pilch's popularity. Why should a third-rate work of fiction receive so much attention as to attract an English translator? Pilch is a feasible candidate for a writer of sketches in *Saturday Night Live*, but as a presenter of Polish life he is a caricature. ▲

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Pan Tadeusz

by

Adam Mickiewicz (1798–1855)

Book Seven

The Council

Argument:

The salutary advice of Bartholomew styled the Prussian. The martial views of Matthias Baptist. The political views of Mr. Buchman. Jankiel's conciliatory plea cut short by Pocketknife. Gerwazy's speech demonstrates the efficacy of parliamentary eloquence. Old Matthias's protestations. The sudden appearance of armed reinforcements breaks up the deliberations. Harrow! Hang Soplica!

Translated by Christopher A. Zakrzewski

It was the turn of the delegate Bartholomew Dobrzynski (the one who regularly plied the waterways to Königsberg) to say his piece. His fellow clansmen jokingly styled him “The Prussian” because he loathed the Prussians and yet loved to talk about them. He was well on in years and had seen much of the world in his travels. An avid reader of the newspapers, and a canny politician besides, he was able to shed a good deal of light on the discussions.

“So, my brother Matthias, friend and father to us all,” he concluded, “their aid is not to be sneezed at. In wartime I should count on the French as on four aces in the hand. Valiant folk, the French! Not since Kosciuszko's day has the world seen a military genius of the caliber of Emperor Bonaparte.

“I remember when the French crossed the River Warta in the year of grace Eighteen hundred and six. I was bidding abroad then, engaged in trading ventures in Gdansk. Having many kinsmen in the province of Poznan, I would ride down for a visit and hunt small game with Joseph Grabowski. (He is colonel of a regiment now, but at the time he was still living on his estate near Obiezierz.) Great Poland was still