

Mold of the Earth

Bolesław Prus, translated by Christopher Kasperek

ONE time I happened to be in Puławy with a certain botanist. We were seating ourselves by the Temple of the Sibyl on a bench next to a boulder grown over with mosses or molds which my learned companion had been studying for several years.

I asked what he found of interest in examining the irregular splotches of beige, grey, green, yellow or red?

He looked at me distrustfully but, persuaded that he had before him an uninitiated person, he proceeded to explain:

“These splotches that you see are not inanimate dirt but — collections of living beings. Invisible to the naked eye, they are born, carry out movements that are imperceptible to us, enter into matrimonial bonds, produce offspring, and finally die.

“More remarkably, they form as it were societies which you see here in the form of the variously colored splotches — they cultivate the ground beneath them for the next generations — they proliferate, colonize empty places, even fight each other.

“This grey splotch, large as the palm of a person’s hand, was two years ago no larger than a penny. This tiny grey spot a year ago didn’t exist and comes from the great splotch that occupies the top of the boulder.

“These two again, the yellow and the red, are fighting. At one time the yellow was the larger, but slowly its neighbor has displaced it. And look at the green one — how its grizzled neighbor is making inroads into it, how many grey streaks, spots, clumps can be seen against the green background?...”

“A bit as among people,” I interjected.

“Well, no,” replied the botanist. “These societies lack language, art, learning, consciousness, feeling; in a word — they lack souls and hearts, which we human beings possess.

Here everything happens blindly, mechanically, without sympathies and without antipathies.”

A few years later I found myself beside that same boulder at night, and by the light of the moon regarded the changes that had taken place in the forms and sizes of the various molds.

Suddenly someone nudged me. It was my botanist. I asked him to have a seat; but he stepped before me in such a way as to hide the moon, and whispered something voicelessly.

The Temple of the Sibyl, the bench and the boulder vanished. I sensed about me a faint luminosity and an immense void. And when I turned my head to the side, I saw something like a schoolroom globe that shone with a faint light, as large as the boulder beside which we had been a moment before.

The globe slowly revolved, showing successive new areas. There was the Asian landmass with the little peninsula of Europe; there was Africa, the two Americas...

Looking intently, I made out on the inhabited lands the same kinds of splotches, beige, grey, green, yellow and red, as on the boulder. They comprised myriads of vanishingly small points, ostensibly

motionless, actually moving very lazily: an individual point moved at most by a two-minute arc in an hour, and that not in a straight line but as it were oscillating about its own center of motion.

The points joined, separated, vanished, came to the surface of the globe: but all these things did not merit particular attention. What was of consequence was the movements of entire splotches, which diminished or grew, showed up in new places, infiltrated or displaced one another.

The globe meanwhile kept making its rounds and seemed to me to execute hundreds of thousands of revolutions.



The Temple of the Sibyl in Puławy

“Is that supposed to be the history of mankind?” I asked the botanist standing beside me.
 He nodded in confirmation.
 “All right — but where are the arts, knowledge?...”
 He smiled sadly.
 “Where’s consciousness, love, hate, longing?...”
 “Ha! ha! ha!...” he laughed softly.
 “In short — where are the human souls and hearts here?...”

“Ha! ha! ha!...”
 His demeanor offended me.
 “Who are you?...” I asked.
 Just then I found myself back in the garden beside the boulder, whose shapeless splotches swam in the moonlight.
 My companion had vanished, but now I knew him by his mockery and melancholy.



BOLESŁAW PRUS



From Wikipedia: Bolesław Prus (Hrubieszów, August 20, 1847 – May 19, 1912, Warsaw), born Aleksander Głowacki, was a Polish journalist and novelist known especially for his novels *The Doll* and *Pharaoh*.

An indelible mark was left on Prus by his experiences as a 15-year-old soldier in the 1863 Uprising, in which he suffered severe battle contusions, followed by imprisonment at Lublin by Tsarist Russian authorities.

At age 25, in Warsaw, he settled into a distinguished 40-year journalistic career that helped prepare his compatriots to be competitive in a modern world increasingly dominated by science and technology. As a sideline, in an effort to appeal to Poles through their aesthetic sensibilities, he began writing short stories.

Achieving success with the short stories, Prus decided to employ a broader canvas. Between 1886 and 1895, he completed four major novels on great societal questions. Perennial favorites with his countrymen are *The Doll* (*Lalka*) and *Pharaoh* (*Faraon*). *The Doll* describes the romantic infatuation of a man of action who is frustrated by the backwardness of his society. *Pharaoh*, Prus’ only historical novel, is a study of political power; and while reflecting the Polish national experience of the previous century, it also offers a unique vision of ancient Egypt at the fall of its 20th Dynasty and New Kingdom.

This story and image of the Temple of the Sibyl in Puławy were taken from Wikisource (http://en.wikisource.org/wiki/Mold_of_the_Earth?oldid=475760 and http://en.wikisource.org/wiki/Image:Puławy_swiatynia_sybilli.jpg) and are licensed through the GNU Public Documentation License.

This story was published as CLASSIC FLASH #2 on Flash Fiction Online (flashfictiononline.com)