Symbolizing (the Real)
Mickiewicz

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In memory of Dr. Eligiusz Szymanis

There are two biographies of Adam Mickiewicz. The essence of the first, the one most familiar to generations of the poet’s readers, was captured most saliently by Tomasz Lisiewicz in his 1894 painting *Apotheosis of the Wieszcz*. There is nothing remarkable in the concept itself: the figure of an author surrounded by various products of his literary imagination. What is remarkable is Lisiewicz’s rendering of the author. Mickiewicz is depicted lying on his deathbed, his face modeled on August Préault’s 1867 funerary medallion of the poet’s head that Préault had in turn modeled, ostensibly, on the plaster cast of Mickiewicz’s face taken a few hours after his death in 1855. I say ostensibly, because the French sculptor reworked the features of a prematurely aged fifty-six-year-old’s death mask to resemble those of a much younger— one might say eternally young—Mickiewicz. By affixing his own rendering of this “rejuvenated” face onto a depiction of Mickiewicz dying among characters from *Forefathers’ Eve*, part 2, *Grażyna*, *Konrad Wallenrod*, *Forefathers’ Eve, part 3*, and *Pan Tadeusz*, Lisiewicz is suggesting not only that Mickiewicz’s life was coextensive with his poetry, but that it in effect ceased in 1834, after he had completed his major poetic works (never mind that he continued to compose verse until the end of his life—most notably, the so-called Lausanne lyrics—much less that he lived another twenty very eventful and very productive years).

In this respect, Lisiewicz’s painting could very well serve to grace the dust jacket of what is arguably the summa of pre-World War II Mickiewicz scholarship, Juliusz Kleiner’s monumental two-volume monographic study of Poland’s national poet, published in 1948. Combining as it does extensive biographical and historical research with meticulous philological analysis, Kleiner’s book draws a thickly detailed portrait of Mickiewicz’s life, times, and works—but only up through the appearance of *Pan Tadeusz* in 1834. To be sure, Kleiner intended “to publish a final volume” of his study—but he never did (he died in 1957), and in any case, as he himself declares in the foreword to the second volume’s first edition, he considered his “two-volume monograph of Mickiewicz the poet to be an integral, completed work.” Implicit in this gesture is not only that Mickiewicz’s life neatly bifurcates into two distinct periods, the first culminating in and at the same time ending with *Pan Tadeusz*, the second consisting of everything that came after; but that the essential,
perhaps even the only, Mickiewicz worth knowing is Mickiewicz “the poet.” What’s more, in a baring of the device if there ever was one, Kleiner chose to title the first volume of his study, which chronicles the poet’s life and works up through the publication of Sonnets in 1826, The History of Gustaw, that is, after the hero of Forefathers’ Eve, part 4; and the second, The History of Konrad, which traces the poet’s life from 1828 to 1834, by conflating it with the hero of Konrad Wallenrod (1828) and Forefathers’ Eve, part 3.

As a work of high philological scholarship, Kleiner’s monograph thus formally sanctioned a basic truth about the reception of Adam Mickiewicz in the century preceding its publication. Its subject, as Eligiusz Szymanis would have it, “is . . . not so much the Mickiewicz who lived in a specific time and in specific conditions, but the Mickiewicz who is identified with the heroes or the lyric subject of his own works”; the Mickiewicz, in other words, encoded in what George G. Grabowicz calls the poet’s “symbolic autobiography.” And since the critical (but not sole) effect of this autobiography was the (self-)projection of the poet as wieszcz, Poland’s national bard and prophet, whose vision was understood as at once shaping and channeling the ethos of his collective, there was no place in the reception for biographical facts that might distort or, indeed, contravene that image—no place for, say, Mickiewicz’s questionable behavior during his arrest and interrogation in 1823 or his cunctation in response to the outbreak of the November Uprising, but no place also for his affair with Karolina Kowalska, the “anti-Maryla,” or, indeed, any other ladies he may have bedded subsequently. Thus, as Grabowicz observes, “in the reception these real life ambivalences recede . . . into the shadow . . . ,” emerging only as “structured absences of the historical record.” But then too, to quote Szymanis again, “There was no place for anything that was not in the poetry . . . no place . . . for Celina or contacts with Towiański,10 for the Italian Legion or La Tribune des Peuples or the Jewish military formation in Turkey. By this account, then, the autobiographical narrative that ostensibly concluded with Pan Tadeusz, a narrative inscribed in a corpus of poetic texts that in its published form was closed by 1834, some twenty years before Mickiewicz’s death, in effect conditioned the reception of the entire remainder of his life as itself a “structured absence” insofar as it remained unsymbolized in and as poetry.11

In this respect, and all other things being equal, Władysław Mickiewicz’s four-volume biography of his father constitutes the proverbial exception that proves the rule. But by the same token, it also calls the very nature of that rule into question—or, rather, stands it on its head.

As a biography, Władysław’s was, by all accounts, deemed a failure, despite the vast amount of new material it presented. For one, it was only too obvious that Władysław put his own filial devotion to his great father ahead of even the most basic precepts of life-writing. Intent on projecting an image of Mickiewicz that was nothing less than hagiographical (literally: the word żywot, of course, immediately conjures up the “life” of a saint), Władysław made sure that it should remain
immune to anything that in his eyes might impugn its integrity, and, for that matter, the good name of the family. To this end, he censored and even destroyed what he felt were compromising documents, distorted and obfuscated facts, and leveled hysterical, often ad hominem attacks on anyone who dared question his father’s behavior or motivations. The upshot was a biography that is almost embarrassing in its adoration of father, one that, as Tadeusz Boy-Żeleński famously remarked in 1929, contributed mightily to transforming Mickiewicz into “a monument of bronze.”

But while there is much truth to Boy’s assessment, I would argue that his criticism, like that of others, misses the point. The cause of Władysław’s failure lies elsewhere: by choosing not to discuss Mickiewicz’s poetry *qua* poetry, he deprived his readers of (the ritual) reiteration of the symbolic narrative that, as both Szymanis and Grabowicz remind us, constituted Mickiewicz’s status as a national bard. What Władysław focused on, instead, was his father’s thoughts about and actions in the world, hoping to demonstrate that these, as much as or even more than the poetry, served to guarantee Mickiewicz’s place in Poland’s pantheon of national heroes. Indeed, particularly in this regard, Władysław took his role as his father’s heir most seriously, insisting that Mickiewicz’s political wisdom was just as relevant for the sons’ generation—and beyond—as it was for the fathers’. He therefore devoted not only over half of his four-volume biography to the last twenty years of his father’s life, but also published separately a history of the Italian Legion (1877); a volume of Mickiewicz’s political writings (1870), including articles from *La Tribune des Peuples*; and two volumes of Towianist documents (1877) (making sure, though, to first expunge the name of Ksawera Deybel, Mickiewicz’s “second wife,” as it were, in the carnal no less than spiritual sense).

Let me be perfectly clear: in his refusal to privilege Mickiewicz the poet at the expense of Mickiewicz the politician or Mickiewicz the Towianist or, for that matter, Mickiewicz the family man, Władysław was in no way attempting to subvert the received image of his father. On the contrary, he sought to construct a biographical narrative that he firmly believed would complement and flesh out the one encoded in the symbolic autobiography and thus imbue the iconic image of Mickiewicz with even greater luster. Yet in doing so—and as the fate of his biography would seem to confirm—Władysław inadvertently bared a profound paradox at the heart of the Mickiewicz phenomenon, one that forces us to recast the dynamic of its reception.

In his study devoted to Mickiewicz’s self-fashioning and its reception, Szymanis argues that the final twenty years of the poet’s life “became only a backdrop to the great, earlier works. [They] did not enrich the [Mickiewicz] legend, and even time and again were at odds with it.” “Mickiewicz the man,” Szymanis continues,
achieved was a result of a mode of reception at odds with the intentions of the author—a mode of reception that displaced pronouncement with metaphor and created astonishing tropes out of simple truths the actual proportions of which were difficult to accept.15

These are perceptive observations, but they require some elaboration.

Mickiewicz’s symbolic autobiography, together with the “truths” it purportedly encodes, resonated as it did because it accorded so fortuitously with a specific horizon of expectations, that is, with both the broader conventions of romanticism and the more particular dictates of post-partition Polish national discourse. For every Jan Czeczot, who could make neither heads nor tails of “Ode to Youth,” there were many more Franciszek Malewskis, who recognized instantly the poem’s Schillerian (as well as Masonic) provenance.16 As for Forefathers’ Eve, part 4, Mickiewicz himself was forthright enough to reference the various inspirations (Goethe, Rousseau, Madame de Krudener) behind the figure of Gustaw for his readers. And beginning with “The Sailor,” all of his works, from the Crimean Sonnets to Konrad Wallenrod to Forefathers’ Eve, part 3, invariably evoked the name of Byron. Even Pan Tadeusz, which at first glance seemed out of place in this regard, stayed true to the expectations of its romantic readers insofar as the figure of Jacek Soplica was recognized to be yet another—and, as it turned out, last—in the series of his creator’s autobiographical projections. In this way the poem consummated the story of Mickiewicz’s own successive transformations, from romantic poet-lover (Gustaw) to poet-sybarite (the Odessa sonnets) to Byronic poet-pilgrim (Crimean sonnets) to national poet-avenger cum bard (Konrad Wallenrod) to national poet-prophet (Konrad/Father Piotr/the anonymous author of Books of the Polish Nation and Pilgrimage) to epic poet (Pan Tadeusz) who ushered his national collective into history while simultaneously erasing his poetic self.17 The communicative power of this trajectory was predicated on the poet/hero’s seemingly unquestioning recognition of the Polish national cause, with its insistence on an individual’s identification with vel subordination to it. And it was overdetermined by an arc informed by notions of fall and redemption, transgression and forgiveness, pride and humility, death and resurrection; articulated by angels and devils; personified in such figures as Fathers Piotr and Robak, the mystic rose and a crucified nation; and, most audaciously, prophetically channeling the voice of God himself. But if all of this situated the Polish national cause within a distinctly Christian religious space, at the same time it did so in ways that could be (and certainly were) perceived as not necessarily consonant with Catholic dogma. Yet the symbolic autobiography of “Poland’s Hero,” to use Ryszard Przybyski’s term for its protagonist18 would appear to account for this as well: were not the so-called Roman lyrics—“The Supreme Master,” “Evening Conversation,” “Reason and Faith”—evidence enough of Mickiewicz’s struggle with faith and his ultimate coming to terms with it? Of course, it depended on how one read them; Stefania Skwarczyńska’s article on the topic is, after all, entitled “The Controversy over Mickiewicz the Catholic.”19 The fact remains, however, that as poetry—that is,
as a symbolic utterance open to interpretation—these first-person lyrics could be made to fit neatly into the “plot” of the symbolic autobiography and in this way contain any inklings of heterodox tendencies by effectively sublimating them.

It would thus appear, at first glance, at least, and as Szymanis maintains, that it is the absence of such a (self-)symbolizing mechanism for the second, “nonpoetic,” half of Mickiewicz’s life that largely determined its fate in the reception. But one need only look (together with Mickiewicz) at the example of Byron, whose life was the myth, to recognize that there is something more at work here than the capacity of the poetic text to convincingly organize the image of its author. Simply put, the second half of Mickiewicz’s life was occluded from the reception because the words, ideas, and deeds that mark those final twenty years eluded integration into Polish national discourse as such and the horizon of expectations informing it. In this sense, those last two decades of Mickiewicz’s life must be viewed as being traversed by a fundamental, even traumatic impossibility or inconsistency that prevented them from being fully symbolized by that discourse. That inconsistency, the element that resisted, and to a certain extent still resists, symbolization, was Towianism.

First and foremost, Mickiewicz’s conversion to Towianism and his continued adherence to its fundamental precepts even after his break with the master in 1846 raised unsettling questions concerning the nature of the poet’s faith. Despite claims to the contrary on the part of both Mickiewicz and Towiański himself, the doctrine, with its belief in, among other things, metempsychosis, columns of spirits, and providential men, was anything but compatible with Catholicism, as were the practices and behavior that accompanied it.20 None of their contemporaries, be it on the democratic left or the republican right, but most obstreperously, among the ultramontane Resurrectionists, had any doubts in this regard.21 Moreover, this was not simply a matter of privately held mystical beliefs. On the contrary, Mickiewicz insisted on trumpeting them aggressively to anyone who would listen. After all, the final two years (1842–1844) of his lectures at the Collège de France were devoted to a blistering critique of the established Catholic Church on the part of a sectarian absolutely certain of the verities, based as much on his own meditations on the subject as on those of his heterodox teacher; its programmatic assault on reason and learning in any form made it all the more devastating. The Vatican had no choice but to eventually condemn the published versions of the lectures, *L’Église officelle et le messianisme* and *L’Église et le Messie*, to the Index in 1848.

Not surprisingly, then, it was above all this issue that required immediate resolution upon Mickiewicz’s death, insofar as integration of the poet’s image into the Polish national discourse would otherwise be impossible. About a week after Mickiewicz’s passing in Istanbul, Armand Lévy, the poet’s amanuensis and close friend of the family, noted in a letter to Władysław that upon hearing he was about to die his father said, “‘Then call me a priest’ (a Lithuanian, whom he liked very much).”22 The poet’s factotum in Istanbul, Henryk Służalski, recalled something similar in an account prepared a year later at the request of the family. In it, he identified...
the priest as one “Father Ławrynowicz,” for whom the deceased purportedly “had special respect.” Yet other eyewitnesses record only that “Ławrynowicz was summoned,” while one account—the most reliable, in fact—states that Mickiewicz “had no time to make a confession, made no mention of having a desire for one, and no one dared suggest that he should.” It was, however, Służalski’s and Lévy’s version of events that emerged as canonical, meant to establish once and for all that on his deathbed Mickiewicz had died a Catholic—and, hence, a Pole. In his sermon at the reinterment of the wieszcz’s remains in Wawel Cathedral in 1890, Father Władysław Chotkowski protested too much in this regard:

Since this is a Catholic nation, it thus buries him here in a Catholic cathedral as a Catholic because he was a Catholic. . . . This solemnity acquires additional luster in that a cardinal of the Holy Roman Church and the Prince-Bishop of Cracow as well as the princes of our Church, archbishops and bishops, are burying him in order to give proof that this was not some empty ceremony and national ritual, but that it was a Catholic service.

Of course, the very act of interring the poet in Catholic Poland’s national shrine symbolically sealed the question of his faith, while at the same time enforcing the inextricability of religion and nation. In fact, it may be argued that in the reception it was Mickiewicz’s devotion to the latter that served ultimately to redeem any ostensibly deviations from Catholic dogma in the poetry. After all, as one of the angel advocates in Forefathers’ Eve, part 3, declares in defense of the blaspheming Konrad, “He loved the nation, he loved much, he loved many.” But it was precisely the notion of nation—of what it means to be a Pole—and not just the notion of faith, that Mickiewicz managed to problematize, even before meeting Towiański.

To begin with (and something to which Juliusz Słowacki gave eloquent voice in canto 5 of Beniowski), there was always something peculiar about Mickiewicz’s demonstrative identification with his native Lithuania, and his concomitant mistrust of Poles from the other partitions. In this respect, and as bemusing as it was to many of his contemporaries, the invocation in Pan Tadeusz to a Lithuanian fatherland was only slightly more excessive than the demonstratively Rutheno-Lithuanian composition of his coterie during his years of emigration in France. Indeed, there is good reason to believe that the poet decided to participate in the November Uprising only upon learning that it had spread to Lithuania.

Far more troubling, however, and something that Mickiewicz’s association with Towiański served to exacerbate dramatically, was the poet’s ambiguous stance toward Russia and its people. On the one hand, of course, there was the poetry (although even here there is room for Wallenrod’s generous admission that “even Germans [aka Russians] are people”). But what was one to make of those four and a half years of exile in Russia, by all accounts more pleasurable than painful, and spent not only among Decembrists and their sympathizers, but also among the likes of Shishkov, Pogodin, and the Kireevskiis, with whom, moreover—and with numerous
others—he continued to maintain amicable relations until the end of his life? And did he not choose “a Russian and an Orthodox” (Vera Khliustin) to serve as godmother to his eldest son “at the very worst of times for [the Polish] émigrés”? How could one reconcile with the national narrative Mickiewicz’s fascination, expressed repeatedly in his Parisian lectures, with both the charismatic, “Mongolian” might of the Russian state and its rulers and the pure, “Slavic” simplicity and ardent faith of the Russian peasant? But even this could not fully explain Mickiewicz’s participation in a Towianist mass for the repose of Alexander I’s soul in 1843, and then, a year later, his work on Towiański’s letter to Nicholas I, with which the master as well as the brother Wieszcz hoped to achieve spiritual unity with Russia by converting the tsar. If mentioned at all, such egregious transgressions could only be chalked up to a momentary lapse of judgment occasioned by blind devotion to a man who in any case had always been suspected of being a Russian agent.

But how, too, does one make sense of Mickiewicz’s behavior during the revolutions of 1848–1849 when, rather than lend his support to a Polish uprising in Poznań, he opted instead to join the Italian struggle against Austria, quixotically hoping in this way to liberate all the Slavic peoples chafing under Habsburg rule? or the manifesto he wrote for the occasion, which, marrying as it did, in the spirit of Towianism, progressive ideas with nativist and mystical beliefs, declared, among other things, “equality in everything under the law” for women, Ruthenians, and Jews? Indeed, it was Mickiewicz’s remarkable concern specifically for the latter that proved perhaps most difficult to contemplate in his reception. By this I mean not only his interest in things Jewish, which manifested itself as much before as after his conversion to Towianism, or his efforts in 1855 to organize a Jewish legion in Turkey to fight side by side with Poles against Russia; but the very possibility of his own Jewish identity, which many of his contemporaries always suspected and which expressed itself repeatedly throughout the course of his life, from his marriage to a Frankist to his “glowering” indignation at hearing Jews disparaged: was it possible, as one observer put it, “to so love something that was foreign?”

It is, then, in this respect that one may speak of the symptomatic nature of Mickiewicz’s reception. For in occluding precisely these issues from the constitution of his image as Poland’s national poet, it effectively concealed the central fissures and inconsistencies, the traumatic core, as it were, of the Polish national narrative itself—the wisdom of insurrections, attitudes toward Russia, the role of the Catholic Church, the place of Jews—insofar as the last twenty years of the poet’s biography at once questioned and resisted that narrative. If indeed, to quote and paraphrase Renata Salecl, “the nation is an element in us that is ‘more than ourselves,’ something that defines us but is at the same time undefinable,” then the re-creation of Mickiewicz into its national bard became “the fantasy structure” through which Polish society came to perceive itself as a “homogenous entity.” In this sense, his reburial in Cracow in 1890 as a Catholic in a demonstratively Catholic ceremony constituted the final, albeit perverse, chapter of his symbolic autobiography.
Notes


3. While Préault’s “rejuvenated” rendering clearly owes something to David d’Angers’s 1834 bust of Mickiewicz as well as to the well-known daguerreotype of the poet from 1839, Lisiewicz’s, in turn, owes much to subsequent paraphrases of Préault’s original by Regulski, Andriolli, and Bronisław Zaleski in which the poet’s features seem to grow progressively prettier, and younger. Cf. Rosiek, *Zwęki Mickiewicza*, 218.


5. It is perhaps no accident that Kleiner’s was the only pre-World War II critical biography of the poet to have been republished for the bicentennial of the poet’s birth in 1998.


23. Ibid., 75.

24. Ibid., 72.
32. See, for example, Wacław Lednicki, *Przyjaciele Moskale* (Cracow: Gebethner & Wolff, 1935); and Bogusław Mucha, *Adam Mickiewicz czasów emigracji i Rosjanie* (Łódź: Uniwersytet Łódzki, 1997).

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