

# *Pushkin Review*

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Roman Koropecy. *Adam Mickiewicz: The Life of a Romantic*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2008. xvii + 549. ISBN 978-0-8014-4471-5. Cloth.

On the first page of this excellent new biography, Roman Koropecy relates how, in 1968, the Polish communist government, which had hitherto praised Adam Mickiewicz as the country's first patriotic poet, banned a production of his drama *Forefather's Eve*. Its anti-Russian sentiments made them nervous. Reading this as a non-Slavist scholar of Byron and romanticism, I wondered to what extent Mickiewicz, known in cliché, after all, as "the Polish Byron," united creativity on the page with activity on the street. Indeed, Part III of *Forefather's Eve* (the part which, I surmise, the communists banned), is one long depiction of the way Russia is attempting to wipe Poland and Polish culture from the face of the earth. Action is the only possibility left when you leave the theater, and the communists were, from their own perspective, correct to ban it. In other words, Mickiewicz is not "the Polish Byron": the analogy is false. Byron was all in favor of revolutions abroad (a revolution at home might have caused a fall in the value of his holdings in government funds), but he could have gone back home from exile any time he wanted, while Mickiewicz had already been exiled from Poland once, before the Polish Uprising of 1831—albeit to the comforts of St. Petersburg, Odessa, and Moscow—and had he tried to return to Poland post-1831, he would have been at the very least sent to Siberia. Yet, as Koropecy writes, "Byron came to share the same space in Mickiewicz's pantheon as Napoleon" (45). In 1822, we find Mickiewicz writing in a letter, "I read only Byron, and cast aside books if written in a different spirit, since I don't like lies; if there's a description of happiness, family life, this rouses my indignation as much as the sight of married couples and children; this is my only aversion" (46–47)—which puts an interesting, if sad, gloss on Mickiewicz's interpretation both of "lies" and of Byron's version of "happiness": this last has indeed very little to do with marriage, or children. Byron was a bad husband and an indifferent father: Mickiewicz, as Koropecy shows, outgrew the adolescent distaste for breeding shown in this letter, married, and had six children, towards whom he was affectionate in the normal way. He became, indeed, "the Byron of his country, but a moral and Christian Byron" (247) if that isn't too glaring a contradiction in terms. When Mickiewicz translated *The Giaour*, it became accepted as a virtual Polish poem in its own right precisely because he changed the Giaour's deathbed sneers at Christian consolation into pious acceptance of the same.

Koropecy gives much space to Mickiewicz's time in Russian exile, which was, paradoxically, "more hospitable and invigorating ... than even

Poland itself" (73). In Russia, liberals were more confidently vocal—at least at the time of Mickiewicz's sojourn. This section is extremely well-researched, and is especially good on Mickiewicz's relationship with Pushkin. Pushkin, along with most of his non-Polish-speaking friends, sensed Mickiewicz's greatness without being able to see it, while the conservative Mickiewicz, who knew Russian and could thus read and appreciate Pushkin (though see below), was offended by the coarseness of Pushkin's talk at table, or in his cups.

Not only were Mickiewicz's Crimean Sonnets first published in Russia, but so was *Konrad Wallenród*, his tale of the medieval Lithuanian who disguises himself as a Teutonic Knight, and becomes leader of the order in order to undermine it from within. It's a long, strange, almost incident-free narrative, in which all three main factors—the Teutonic Knights' appetite for action, the slow discovery of the protagonist's identity, and the end of his romantic yearnings—have to be subjected to deferrals which can only be ended by his death. Said at the time to be a "Byronic hero," perhaps because of his suicidal gloom, Wallenród is excluded from that category by his taste for alcohol: all the best Byronic heroes are ascetics. But the poem is and was justly interpreted as an allegory of the alien Mickiewicz among the oppressive Russians: it's a marvel Mickiewicz got away with it and that it didn't (at first) damage his friendship with Pushkin—to whom Mickiewicz gave an inscribed *Complete Byron*. "Egyptian Nights," Pushkin's curtailed attempt at caricaturing Mickiewicz the Improviser, was not written until after the Polish Uprising of 1831. The Polish Revolt of that year drew from Pushkin his unpleasant and chauvinistic *To the Slanderers of Russia*, to which Mickiewicz replied with a new coda to *Forefathers' Eve*, likening Pushkin to a barking dog and himself to a silent snake. Thus "the Russian Byron" and "the Polish Byron" finally fell out—as Byronists tend to.

By the time Mickiewicz came to write his great masterpiece *Pan Tadeusz* (1834), he had abandoned Byron and compared his "poem, 'however immodestly,' to Walter Scott" (214). In a way, the poem was a group collaboration by Polish exiles in Paris, who supplied Mickiewicz with anecdotes and the items of Lithuanian folklore (208) that make *Tadeusz* such a rich cultural repository. And yet it met with a lukewarm initial reception: Juliusz Słowacki and Cyprian Norwid both sneered at it (219–20).

Koropecy is also very good on the lectures on Slavonic culture that Mickiewicz delivered at the Collège de France and which display "a none too certain grasp of the material" (269). Looking through them reveals the poet claiming, for example, that Ol'ga is the heroine of *Eugenii Onegin*: a bit like claiming Celia as the heroine of *As You Like It*. The students did not leave Mickiewicz's lectures better-informed, though they had been in excellent company: George Sand and Chopin often attended. About Andrzej Towiański's Messianism, which afflicted Mickiewicz in Paris as it did many others, Koropecy is informative, as well as discreet in his judg-

ments. The fact that Mickiewicz aspired to convert the tsar himself to it (337) alone speaks volumes about the way it turned his brain.

Having rejected in *Pan Tadeusz* the fanciful Byron in favor of the epic Scott, Mickiewicz then stopped writing poetry completely and attempted to emulate the practical/political Byron—with even less success than Byron himself had had. Koropecyjk relates with gloomy, convincing detail Mickiewicz’s final trip to Turkey, where he tried to raise a Jewish brigade to fight the Russians—“Oh, poets!” as someone was heard to comment (451). He died of cholera instead.

Roman Koropecyjk’s book is by far the best biography of Mickiewicz yet written. It deserves a place on the shelf next to T. J. Binyon’s *Pushkin: A Biography* (HarperCollins 2002), which, of course, it complements in many useful ways.

*Peter Cochran*