



**Roman Koropecykj.** *Adam Mickiewicz: The Life of a Romantic.* Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2008. xvii + 549 pp. \$45.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8014-4471-5.

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## Polish Literature and Its National Hero

In 1822, the Polish poet Adam Mickiewicz informed his friend Franciszek Malewski: “I’m living a truly literary life, I breathe only verse and nourish myself on it” (p. 44). His characterization of himself in this statement was the result of a brief but intensive phase in which he studied world literature, while taking a sabbatical in Vilnius. It can also be considered a leitmotif of Roman Koropecykj’s biography on the life and work of Poland’s outstanding poet, as implied in the subtitle, *The Life of a Romantic*. The biographer writes in his introduction: “Like his heroes Napoleon and Byron, Mickiewicz saw life itself as a page upon which one must write a poetry of deed. He was the quintessential European romantic” (p. x). Mickiewicz desired to transform the poetic word into deed, logos into praxis.

Koropecykj inverts this method by describing the poet’s deeds and experiences and delivering outstanding translations of excerpts from Mickiewicz’s work, making it approachable for readers. This is what makes this biography extremely useful for university teachers who know the difficulties that non-Polish students face when dealing with texts from Polish romantics. Both the messianic ideology in Mickiewicz’s play *Dziady* (*The Forefather’s Eve*) and the biblical style in his work *Księgi narodu polskiego i pielgrzymstwa polskiego* (*The Books of the Polish Nation and Polish Pilgrimage*) (1866) are difficult to understand. To complete his comprehensive book the author adds a detailed bibliography and a helpful index.

The method Koropecykj chooses, interweaving historical facts and fiction, can be regarded as traditional, but it is also an efficient means to write an enormously readable and thought-provoking study. He inserts long quotations from letters, journals, memoirs, and other documents from the poet and

his contemporaries. In thirteen chapters, he recounts the different phases of the poet’s life, from his early childhood to his death, following an infection with cholera. In a postscript, he focuses on the festivities in 1890 in Cracow on the occasion of the transportation of Mickiewicz’s corpse from Paris to the Wawel. In this part of the book, Koropecykj also sheds light on the complicated history of the poet’s fame after his death and his significant impact on Polish intellectuals.

What Koropecykj intends to achieve in his work is pointed out in its preface: the poet is meant to be understood as a vehicle to transport understanding for Poland as a nation as Mickiewicz’s authority had a strong influence on all later literary generations “down to the rappers of Poland’s postsocialist blocs” (from “blokiersi” for the Communist housing projects that circumscribe the lives of a special “lost” youth generation after 1990) (p. ix). Moreover, he managed to blend all Polish literary tradition from the Middle Ages. But not only his work as a poet had a formative influence on Polish culture, but also his life inspired his compatriots as it was marked by prosecution and emigration since Russian authorities had started to survey student activities at the University of Vilnius. Despite his ideals regarding martyrdom and messianism, Mickiewicz did not tolerate the acts of humiliation exerted by Russian organs silently. On the contrary, the creator of such works as *Konrad Wallenrod* (1830) fought oppression openly until his death in Istanbul where he had intended to raise a Polish legion to combat Russia in the Crimean War. This is why the famous Polish literary critic Jarosław Marek Rymkiewicz once labelled the poet’s life as the “archetype of Polish life.” Many Poles recognized in his life their own fate, which, since the partitioning of the country at the

end of the eighteenth century through the end of socialism, had been marked by brutal foreign rule. It is not surprising that every Polish generation created and propagated its own Mickiewicz myth, which, in most cases, tended to transfigure his life and work in a hagiographic way, making his legend appear more important than his personality. A curious example is found in Mieczysław Jastrun's biography on Mickiewicz, published in 1949, as the Polish poet tries to interweave nationalist and patriotic elements of the myth with socialist-revolutionary elements.

Koropecykj wrote this book from an American perspective. Unlike many Polish authors whose presentation of the national poet's greatness might disconcert foreign readers, Koropecykj approaches the topic without using common stereotypes. Recent biographers' (hagiographic) approach to the Mickiewicz myth is one reason why an English translation of a Polish publication would not have satisfied the need for an English biography on Mickiewicz. Younger Polish biographers have tried to deconstruct a myth that is hardly known in Western countries. By contrast, Koropecykj also approaches "delicate" issues of the poet's life, for example, his erotic relationships in his youth; his dandyism; his family life; the mysticism after the doctrine of Andrzej Torwiański, around the

middle of the nineteenth century a charismatic and influential leader of a Christian sect and one of the founders of Polish "messianism"; his religiousness and his complicated attitude to Catholicism and Judaism; his Jewish mother (a fact that was still contested in the Polish press in the year 2000); and so on. Being American, the biographer does not need to conceal the truth to continue the myth. Yet he does not need to polemicize to heat the debate about Mickiewicz.

Finally, the greatest merit of Koropecykj's book is that it points out Mickiewicz's significance for European intellectuals. The exiled Polish poet was more famous in Europe in his lifetime than the Russian poet Alexander Pushkin. Mickiewicz was a *European* intellectual whose works were marked by Christian and Jewish ideas whereas Pushkin embodied Russian nationalism and the country's isolated position. By showing Mickiewicz as a representative of an all-European identity, Koropecykj reminds us of something that was lost due to the formation of the blocs in the second part of the twentieth century and that is about to be regained in a painfully slow process. In addition, two other influential romantic poets marked the Polish movement: Juliusz Słowacki and Zygmunt Krasiński. They also deserve to find such a skilled biographer as Koropecykj.

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