

REVIEWS

ADAM MICKIEWICZ: THE LIFE OF A ROMANTIC. By Roman Koropecyj. Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 2008. xvii, 549 pp., illustrations, notes, bibliography, index. ISBN (cloth) 978-0-8014-4471-5.

Roman Koropecyj begins his biography of Adam Mickiewicz (1798–1855)—Poland’s greatest poet, canonically speaking—with a jocular epigraph from a Polish hip-hop artist who suggests that Mickiewicz would make a good rapper if he were still alive today. The juxtaposition of this epigraph with an excerpt from Mickiewicz’s famous autobiographical lyric, a retrospective, somber summa of the poet’s life, seems to encapsulate Koropecyj’s approach to a task that is certainly not for a scholar who is faint of heart: writing a biography of the Polish “national poet” that re/presents Mickiewicz’s voice in its own historical, social, and literary context with a twenty-first century audience and its frame of reference in mind. This monumental biography—a somewhat risky adjective to use since the authorial design appears, *inter alia*, to remove Mickiewicz from the symbolic monument erected to him by Polish culture during the last two and a half centuries—is a tour de force. To begin with, it is meticulously researched, which is no small feat given the wealth of materials on Mickiewicz, as well as flawlessly written. Koropecyj writes with *sprez-zatura* and flair, a combination that makes Mickiewicz seem truly alive in a human, writer-next-door kind of way. At the same time, the biographer turns Mickiewicz into a character, a hero perhaps, of a romantic work of art and “of his time.” Mickiewicz the rebel, exile, pilgrim and wanderer, melancholic, *wieszcz* (poet-prophet, spiritual leader of the nation), *improvisatore*, thinker and scholar, “teacher and preacher” (p. 329), fighter for the Polish “cause,” political and military activist, “brother” in the mystical Circle of God’s Cause, a man deemed both a “genius” and a “fool” by his contemporaries (p. 205), fatal lover of many and husband of a “madwoman”—all these roles were played by Mickiewicz at various stages of his life precisely because his life, as unique as it was, was also molded by the romantic period. He was indeed the quintessential “romantic,” as the biography’s subtitle notes.

That is to say, this biography reads like a novel: it is simply difficult to put down, even for a hardened Polonist and native Pole for whom most of the peripeteias of Mickiewicz’s life are well known and for whom the unfolding of the poet’s life on the pages of a biography is hardly a suspenseful narrative. What makes the book particularly appealing to this kind of reader is its critical acuity and the interpretation of Mickiewicz’s life choices and literary works through the lens of today’s critical theory, with its tools ranging from psychoanalysis to deconstruction to reception and canon studies. However,

the other kind of reader, the one who wants to meet Mickiewicz for the first time or learn more about him, may have just as much fun reading this biography, because the dusty, transient, puzzling figure of an émigré East European nineteenth-century poet, citizen of an erased, nonexistent state and subject of the Russian tsar, hailing from provincial Lithuania but writing in Polish, who was exiled to Russia, settled and taught in Paris, and, strangely enough, died in Istanbul on a military mission, jumps off the pages of the book and takes one on a journey to these and other locales and cultures. In addition to its factual precision, judicious selection of ample materials, and careful composition, Koropecy's biography of Mickiewicz excels at turning the somewhat mundane task of retelling a life story into a point of departure for reflecting on philosophical issues that go beyond a given century, geographical location, or culture. The biography takes both initiated and uninitiated readers on an intellectual journey inward to explore the terms and ideas that a contemplation of Mickiewicz's life invites: displacement and diaspora, exile and emigration, national identity and language, memory and artistic representation, poetry and politics, and the writer's obligation and inspiration.

In his preface, Koropecy is right to give thoughtful responses to the implied reader's question: why write a biography of Mickiewicz in English (let's rephrase: who cares)? As the biographer points out, "to the non-Pole this name means very, very little, if anything at all." However, in the romantic period Mickiewicz's poetry "attracted enthusiastic readers in France, Germany, Russia, Italy, England, and even America," and he became a fixture in some of the most influential salons of Russia and Western Europe. Koropecy credits the poet's "charismatic presence, his intellect, his confidence, his forcefulness of expression and belief" as qualities that allowed "this exiled poet from Europe's backwater" to achieve the status of a "quintessential European romantic," admired by the finest minds of the epoch such as Pushkin, Gogol, Goethe, George Sand, Sainte-Beuve, Quinet, Michelet, Mazzini, James Fenimore Cooper, and Margaret Fuller. In Koropecy's view, this new biography of Mickiewicz seeks to do more than fill a void (its predecessors were two biographies of Mickiewicz written in English in 1911 and 1956, as well as three popular biographies translated from Polish): it also aims at restoring Mickiewicz to the larger context of European thought and literature. Koropecy convincingly argues that although there exists a plethora of Mickiewicz biographies in Polish, they "remain unsatisfying," because by and large they focus on the poet's "significance as a Pole for Poles...an inexhaustible source of national pride." What this new biography attempts to do, successfully, is to suspend Mickiewicz's "status of the national icon" and instead tell the story of "the human Mickiewicz, at once victim and beneficiary of tsarist repression, Polish patriot and habitué of cosmopolitan salons, pious Catholic and heterodox sectarian, womanizer and feminist, egoist and devoted friend, Bonapartist, mystic politician, and revolutionist." The

result is a rich yet delicately sketched-out narrative of a life “as misguided as it was sublime” (pp. x–xi).

It is impossible not to be impressed with Koropecy's thorough knowledge of his subject's every day and hour of life, the use of hundreds if not thousands of source materials, the range of his research from archives in Belarus and Ukraine to Switzerland and Turkey, as well as his excellent translations of excerpts from Mickiewicz's works accompanied by incisive interpretations. However, it is the structure of the narrative that makes this hefty tome a riveting read. The biography balances between providing a record of the poet's public life (outlining the trajectory of events and presentation of literary works) and delving into Mickiewicz's colorful private life, including the poet's impulsive marriage to Celina Szymanowska, a woman he hardly knew and whose progressive mental illness arguably influenced some of Mickiewicz's life choices, such as joining Andrzej Towiański's peculiar religious sect, a decision that in turn affected the poet's philosophy, his teaching at the Collège de France, and his political and literary activities. As Koropecy promises his readers in the preface, he discloses details of the poet's personal life that have usually made Polish scholars look the other way, including his liaisons with married women as well as the ménage à trois with his wife and Ksawera Deybel, a fellow sectarian, who bore Mickiewicz a child who was never officially acknowledged by the poet or his family. The discussion of the personal realm is relevant, not gossipy: the chilling story of Mickiewicz's prophetic dream, in which he received a visiting card that later turned out to be cut out of Celina's wedding dress and whose edges had drawings of “every imaginable instrument of torture” (p. 110), is beautifully woven into the biography as a potent symbol, linking Mickiewicz's early Russian years—during which he met his future wife, then a teenager in the care of her mother, pianist Maria Szymanowska, who was Mickiewicz's friend—with his later married life in Paris and Lausanne.

The postscript is a perfect coda that briefly traces the forming of the Mickiewicz legend in the second half of the nineteenth century, first shaped by his children and followers, and later by leaders of the Polish nation, in particular on the occasion of the 1890 public removal of Mickiewicz's remains from Paris to Cracow's Wawel Cathedral, the place of rest for Polish kings. But what makes Koropecy's biography truly stand out is his eye for details that are less glamorous but no less evocative, ones that Mickiewicz's hagiographers usually gloss over: we see Mickiewicz, a young teacher assigned to an unwanted post in Kowno, who complains to a friend that his “cough is dry” (1819; p. 25); Mickiewicz, too poor to pay a visit to Princess Volkonskaia in Moscow since proper attire, including an ascot and white gloves, as well as a fresh shave, were conditions sine qua non (1827; p. 86); and Mickiewicz in the midst of what he experienced as a “poetic rush” while working on *Pan Tadeusz*, his masterpiece that was soon to become the national epic, while at the same time having to

pawn a tiepin to support himself in Paris (1832; p. 207). In short, it is Mickiewicz the man before Mickiewicz the national bard whom readers of this biography may envision and remember most clearly and fondly.

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