

Koropecy, Roman. *Adam Mickiewicz: The Life of a Romantic*. Cornell University Press, Ithaca, NY and London, 2008. xvii + 549 pp. Illustrations. Notes. Bibliography. Index. \$45.00: £22.95.

KOROPECKYJ's biography of Poland's most influential yet controversial poet Adam Mickiewicz (1798–1855) fills a huge gap in Mickiewicz studies in English; it is one of very few biographical studies of the poet ever to appear and the only book-length study of his whole life for almost a hundred years (Monica Gardner, *Adam Mickiewicz: The National Poet of Poland*, London and New York, 1911). In Poland, in contrast, the volume of 'Mickiewicziana' is overwhelming, but accessible only to Polish speakers and focused primarily on Mickiewicz's significance for Poles, which, despite the thoroughness of research, has resulted in suppressions and distortions of both a personal and an ideological nature; the process of creating a cult, which began almost immediately after the poet's death, was marked, among other things, by the sanitization of Mickiewicz's memory by his son Władysław. The poet would be constantly invoked by Polish insurrectionists, cultural figures and politicians of all persuasions as the embodiment of Polish 'identity', manipulated also by the post-1945 Communist regime, and continuing to resonate after 1989. The first book-length biography, however, was written in French, by the Towianist Edmond Mainard (Paris, 1862), a work that is no less biased than the Polish ones. There have always been polemicists who have challenged the myths, notably Tadeusz Boy-Żeleński (1874–1941), but it is only relatively recently — since the early 1990s — that scholars have seriously investigated the hitherto unacknowledged areas of his life: his possible though unproven Jewish (Frankist) origins on his mother's side and the significance of this for his Towianist spirituality, his marriage to the Frankist Celina Szymanowska and his interest in creating a Jewish military formation within the Turkish army fighting in the Crimea; the depth of his commitment to Andrzej Towiański's messianic sect and his own use of the professorial podium to promulgate it; his sexual involvement with the Towianist Ksawera Deybel; his socialistic politics and feminism (he demanded total civil equality for women and Jews in the published 'principles' of his Italian legion). Koropecy discusses all these aspects, maintaining a judicious adherence to the attested facts.

The new biography would seem to do two things above all. First, to make Mickiewicz understandable to audiences outside the exclusively Polish; after all, he was a visible figure on the contemporary European stage, spent his formative years as a poet as a political exile in Russia (it was the salons of Moscow and St Petersburg that effectively launched his career), and then almost half his life in France (half the book, appropriately, covers 1835–55, i.e. the years after he ceased to be a poet as such); enjoyed a prominent position as a professor at the Collège de France, edited an influential socialist newspaper, and founded a fighting force (albeit an ineffective one) in aid of liberation movements. Mickiewicz's legacy therefore deserves understanding as a European one, not only as a 'nationalistic' Polish one (an important theme addressed in this book, and relatively unexplored by earlier biographers, is Mickiewicz's dualistic attitude towards Russia). Second, it tries to uncover

some truth about the elusive personality that lay beneath the partial portrayals and powerful myths. What emerges is a rather inconclusive, contradictory and not always attractive portrait. Koropecy reveals a changeable personality that blew with the wind; a life-long enemy of rationalism, dependent for action on 'arational' impulses. Koropecy shows how Mickiewicz's whole mentality, politics and sense of mission became dominated after July 1841 by his conversion to Towiański's sect, as though until this point he had been anticipating such an all-encompassing 'revelation'. His indecisiveness, even moral pusillanimity, before this point, is graphically characterized by his attitude to the 1830 Uprising, believed by many participants and subsequent commentators to have been inspired at least in part by his own *Konrad Wallenrod* (1828); instead of joining the uprising Mickiewicz tarried in Italy and Germany for fifteen months, finding excuse after excuse to put off the moment until it was too late; the evidence supplied by Koropecy adds weight to the argument that this failure to assist the national cause resulted in an enormous complex of guilt and inferiority, which the poet's subsequent, patriotic writings and political 'actions' were an attempt to assuage. Koropecy portrays an anxious soul driven by mystical interpretations of its own dreams and faith in its own powers of improvisation as well as by dreams of universal brotherhood (Mickiewicz never lost faith in the revolutionary legacy of the French, even after witnessing the coup of Louis-Napoleon). At times prophetic and visionary, at others depressed, self-pitying and irresponsible (especially towards his family but also towards his 'legionnaires' whom he abandoned in Italy), yet someone who could arouse utter devotion through his undeniable charisma and intellectual flair. In other words, what emerges is a life of 'the quintessential European romantic' (p. x) minus the hagiography.

Koropecy's text is not based on fresh discoveries, rather it brings together various extant sources (even in a work of 550 pages, however, it is not possible to include everything and the bibliography is selective), notably the *Kronika życia i twórczości Mickiewicza* (7 vols, Warsaw, 1957–96), otherwise not translated into English. He also thoroughly exploits Mickiewicz's correspondence, as well as contemporary correspondence about him. As author of *The Poetics of Revitalization: Adam Mickiewicz Between Forefathers' Eve, Part 3, and Pan Tadeusz* (Boulder, CO, 2001), he also draws on literary scholarship, both Polish and North American, but in the current work does not analyse literary works. He also brings to this project his own investigation of Mickiewicz biographies stemming from his doctoral research (Harvard, 1990). Much of the text is in quotation marks, comfortably woven into Koropecy's own sentences. Koropecy frequently allows the sources to speak for themselves, for Mickiewicz to explain or condemn himself out of his own mouth. This approach sheds questioning light on some standard assumptions: for example, that Marianna (Maryla) Puttkamer, née Wereszczakówna, was the initial tragic affair underpinning all Mickiewicz's future relations with women, including the literary. Likewise, he undermines assumptions about the 'madness' of Mickiewicz's wife, attempting in a sympathetic portrait to understand her mental illness, mindful too of how she suffered antisemitic attitudes among the Polish émigrés in Paris. He is strictly factual about Mickiewicz's controversial death: on the evidence, a death from cholera with no suggestion of deliberate

poisoning. Another, previously underestimated aspect of Mickiewicz's life is his dependence on the dedicated input of others in the editing, publishing and sale of his works. Much of his life was spent below the poverty line, and his family's upkeep was often saved by the generosity of friends, including his ex-lover Konstancja Łubieńska, whilst his 'eccentric' projects were financed by émigré aristocrats with whose politics his own did not coincide, such as Ksawery Branicki and Adam Czartoryski. Meticulously footnoted and indexed, balanced and highly readable, this will be a standard work for all students and researchers of Mickiewicz for some time to come; it is not the final word, but it is a major and lasting contribution.

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