

That is pious and disingenuous. There are things in this book about Beatty's romantic life that will make some readers squirm and may alarm the children. Alas, Bening never really figures in the book. I say alas, because she is unusually intelligent and may be a better actress than her record shows. If we are still interested in Beatty after five hundred pages—and I must say that after that many pages the reader must make a big effort to stomach his relentless controlling urges—then his transforming marriage and his fatherhood deserved attention.

Biskind believes in Beatty's "extraordinary body of work." My feelings are more mixed. And Biskind leaves Beatty wondering whether to make the Howard Hughes film that he has considered for decades. Are we living in the same world, author and reader? Beatty is seventy-three this year. Howard Hughes was seventy when he died. There was a time when the odd spell of Howard Hughes may have carried a necromantic allure—if we are to believe in a mouldering neurotic who knows enough about life for his fears to be tragic. Anyway, a far more energetic and decisive director—Martin Scorsese—has already done a version of Hughes in *The Aviator*, which never gathered rentals to match its cost, and left every impression that Hughes's last years were a life not worth living, let alone watching.

I don't believe that Beatty can any longer muster the will or the money for a geriatric vanity. One of the failings in *Star* is that it does not follow the money tightly enough. Beatty came into pictures starting at zero: his family had no unusual means. He made himself wealthy, but he became a big loser of studio money over the years. Biskind says that sometimes Beatty had to act and to direct so as to make a project financially sustainable. But I would need to know the details to have the case proved: money is always in the details. Beatty had a halcyon moment, from the late '60s until the late '70s, when studios craved his presence. Today those studios barely exist. The sums of money are beyond reach. I doubt that there is a studio left (or an audience) that would pay a dollar for Beatty to pretend to be anyone.

This sort of creative challenge existed once. It may remind some readers of Orson Welles, who spent time on *Citizen Kane* playing with the idea of what he might look like in old age. Repeatedly, *Star* describes the pains taken by Beatty to protect his perishing looks as shooting went on. He was fanatically protective of the image he nursed of himself, whereas Welles, even at twenty-five, was

possessed by a cheerful self-destructiveness. Welles had ego, but he was willing to look like death if it furthered a film. Beatty has smothered himself and his creativity by trying to stay young. One of the great things about *Citizen Kane* is that its vision (the exultant gaze of a brilliant kid) is shaded by glimpses of an eventual failure and solitude. Welles had a rueful foreboding that made his youthfulness seem all the more vibrant. Beatty, by contrast, was a sultry kid, baleful, dangerously without humor, and asleep in dreams of himself.

Warren Beatty is an emblem for our last cluster of male movie stars: he is the same age as Jack Nicholson, Robert Redford, and Dustin Hoffman, and near enough to Al Pacino and Robert De Niro. All of them have lived beyond the natural span of their own stardom. There is a sadness about them now. De Niro and Pacino work on—and on—and their new

films are, now more than ever, ordeals. Nicholson has said that he is washed up on the shore beyond the tide-line of good scripts. Redford seems as lost and as vacant as ever. Stars are not necessarily self-aware or intelligent, but once they shone. Now these vets huddle together in soft-focus, in scenes that use doubles.

*Star* is expert reporting but grinding to read, and it bespeaks an oppressive interest in movieland maneuvers. But it shows why, once upon a time—before AIDS, before Polanski, before special effects and monster budgets—a great-looking guy with his wits about him might think it would be fun to make a movie. And so it was, even if fun is a boy's sport. Now the fun has gone out of American film. The rush of celluloid no longer lives and moves or believes in its own ninety-minute sensation. It isn't even celluloid, and it's never ninety minutes. Warren Beatty begins to seem like Norma Desmond. ♦

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## Jaroslav Anders

# THE WIZARD

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ADAM MICKIEWICZ:  
THE LIFE OF A ROMANTIC  
By Roman Koropeczyj  
(Cornell University Press, 549 pp., \$45)

IT WAS POLAND'S peculiar luck to receive its literary matrix, its cultural subtext, the source of its national mythology, from the hands of a provincial genius, a Romantic poet and mystic, in the first half of the nineteenth century. Imagine the creative possibilities, and the inevitable perils, of such a provenance. I can almost smell the floor wax in my old school in Warsaw and hear the thirteen-syllable couplets rolling gently like ripples on a vast, calm lake through all twelve books of *Pan Tadeusz*, which was introduced by our teacher as "the Polish national epic" that captured all the Polish virtues—chivalry, courage, patriotism, compassion. It was written, he taught us, by Adam Mickiewicz, who was not only "the greatest Polish poet of all time" but also a *wieszcz*—an archaic Polish word denoting wizard, soothsayer, bard, and prophet, all rolled into one.

In fact, *Master Thaddeus* is a rather silly Dumas-like adventure story about a feud between two noble families that finally overcome their differences in the face of a common Russian enemy. The poem is riddled with the clichés of ad-

venture narratives: castles with dungeons, duels, concealed identities, mortal sins confessed on a deathbed, a young gentleman's agonizing choice between a worldly coquette and an innocent angel. And so we jaded fifteen-year-olds thought that we were a bit too advanced for all that. Besides, the country in the poem was called Lithuania, not Poland—and if you really cared to check, it was set in what is now Belarus, and in my school days was the Belorussian Soviet Socialist Republic. What is more, the Poles (or whoever they were) portrayed in the epic did not seem particularly pleasant. They were quarrelsome, short-tempered, vindictive, given to drink, and often quite dumb. And was killing the wounded, comical Russian officer in his sickbed really a chivalrous act? Was it smart to start a little Polish-Russian war because said officer, having come to the rescue of a Polish family harassed by its neighbors, wanted to dance with a Polish lady?

And yet there was something in the flow of the images in Mickiewicz's epic poem, the persistence of rhyme, the not-infrequent comic relief, that transformed this crude and rather violent story into a

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pastoral idyll in which everything was exactly as it should be, everything and everybody was perfect, death had no dominion, and in the end all will be forgiven—neighborly squabbles, ancient trespasses, lovers' distress, and even the incredible naïveté of the tale. It was through *Master Thaddeus* that many of us first experienced poetry, and it was good.

Still, why the aura of near-religious veneration that surrounds this work, the lump in the nation's throat and the tear in the nation's eye? We were told to worship Mickiewicz because our parents worshipped him, and their parents before them. They used to memorize his verses and they found in them answers to life's most important questions. Moreover, the situations described in his works had a strange way of repeating themselves again and again in the nation's history. We were raised on the belief that Adam Mickiewicz somehow managed to express the deepest secrets and the innermost yearnings of the Polish soul. But was this really true, and if so, why? How does one become a *wieszcz*? Why do we need a *wieszcz*, when other nations seem to do perfectly well with mere poets? And what precisely are we supposed to do with our *wieszcz*?

There is no question that Mickiewicz is a pivotal figure in Polish literature. He is a key to the Polish mentality, if only because many Poles choose to believe so. But he is also a mystery and a dilemma. He was a complex and paradoxical figure, even by Romantic standards, and his relevance and impact on Polish literary culture is still a subject of heated debate. In Polish literary criticism, the many questions that surround his life and his work are often referred to as "the Mickiewicz enigma." For foreign readers, the enigma is compounded by the fact that there are practically no translations into any of the major languages that do justice to his poetic imagination and his poetic language.

And until now there was no good contemporary biography of Mickiewicz in English. Roman Koropeckyj's long but highly readable, almost novelistic, account of the poet's life fills this gap. Without trying to solve the "Mickiewicz enigma," it eruditely and intelligently reveals the many strands of the story—personal and historical—that gradually transformed the poet into a larger-than-life figure, until (as Koropeckyj writes in the introduction) the name of Mickiewicz "served as a point of reference whenever the survival of the Polish nation was at stake, and whenever ideas about its fate needed legitimation."

ADAM MICKIEWICZ was born on December 24, 1798, in the hamlet of Zaosie, near a town that the Poles called Nowogródek, and the Russians called Novogrodok, and the Lithuanians called Naugardukas, which is today Navahrudak in eastern Belarus. For centuries, the area belonged to the Great Duchy of Lithuania, which encompassed lands inhabited by Lithuanians, Belarusians, Ukrainians, and Poles, and which, together with a much smaller Kingdom of Poland further west, constituted a dual state known as the Polish Commonwealth. It was both an elective monarchy and a kind of direct participatory democracy open to all titled nobility from the Kingdom and the Duchy. Once a major European power that extended its influence over most of Central and Eastern Europe, this unique political entity declined rapidly in the eighteenth century, and finally was dismembered by its powerful neighbors, Prussia, Austria, and Russia, with much of the former Grand Duchy of Lithuania falling to Russia.

Mickiewicz's family held a Polish title of nobility and spoke Polish, though they might have had mixed ethnic roots. Like most families of their class, they were steeped in rural traditions, nostalgic about the golden years of the Commonwealth, pious, patriotic, and guided by a strong sense of civic duty. They regarded themselves as both Polish and Lithuanian, though the meaning of those two terms probably had a different resonance for them. Poland was a large, unifying political idea, while Lithuania—meaning the former Grand Duchy of Lithuania—was the actual land, the people, their customs, their historical memories.

In the spring of 1812, Mickiewicz witnessed Napoleon's march on Moscow and then his disastrous retreat, which Poles experienced as yet another blow to their national aspirations. A few years earlier, having conquered the Polish lands occupied by Austria and Prussia, Napoleon restored a rump Duchy of Warsaw, and Poles, who had flocked to his banners, hoped that Napoleon's final victory over Russia would restore Poland to its former glory. Despite Bonaparte's defeat, the cult of the French emperor survived in Poland longer than in his native France, and for Mickiewicz he remained a semi-divine figure. At the end of the Napoleonic wars, the Congress of Vienna preserved the limited autonomy of the Duchy of Warsaw, now renamed the Congress Kingdom, but placed it under Russian suzerainty. Lithuania remained a Russian province, closely watched from the Russian imperial seat in St. Petersburg.

After graduating from a local Dominican gymnasium, Mickiewicz enrolled in a Polish university in Vilno, now Vilnius, where after the obligatory courses in mathematics and physical sciences—it was still the Enlightenment in this part of Europe—he devoted himself to history, classical literatures, and modern languages: French, German, and English, which helped him immerse himself in Western Romantic literature and philosophy. I imagine that life must have looked to the young and ambitious people of that time a little the way it looked in the 1970s for my own generation in communist Poland. The relatively free access to foreign ideas only heightened the frustration with our own inert and oppressive reality. The powerful need to find refuge in learning led to the hectic devouring of books and languages and all the terms of modern intellectual discourse, and to the formation of tight-knit unofficial groups in which we could feel free and relatively safe—but all along there was a nagging sense that all this cosmopolitanism was futile, that our dreams would never be fulfilled, that all that really awaited us, unless we sold out to the regime, was a schoolteacher's existence.

Vilno in the early nineteenth century witnessed a similar frenzy of self-improvement and self-organization, and Mickiewicz was one of its leaders. From his earliest days at the university he was a member of numerous circles and groups with mysterious-sounding names—the Philomaths, the Philareths, the Radiants—all of them "secret," that is, operating without the required governmental authorization. They were not much different from typical learned fraternities, except that under the Russian administration they inevitably assumed a political character. Koropeckyj observes that these young activists shared the idea that "the nation's survival depended not on pedigree, but on civic responsibility and moral uprightness, which, in turn, was a function of education." They must have believed that some day all this intellectual ferment would produce some results, although they probably did not know how or when it might happen. In the meantime, they were producing a surfeit of un-utilized knowledge and sophistication that would come to define the very notion of the Eastern European "intelligentsia." In 1822 Mickiewicz published *Ballads and Romances*, his first book of poetry. For some time he had been under the spell of the German and English Romantics, and his book was the Polish equivalent of Wordsworth and Coleridge's *Lyrical Ballads*—a poetic

manifesto of the new Romantic sensibility and a challenge to the neo-classical tastes of the literary establishment.

Two years earlier, he had to accept an assignment as a teacher of Latin and history in a gymnasium in the town of Kovno, where he complained of boredom and exhaustion, and worried that his muse would be stifled by the drudgery of small-town life. Salvation came in the form of a crisis—the first of a series of crises that radically changed the course of the poet's life. In 1823, a Russian senator named Novosiltsov, trying to ingratiate himself with the emperor, started a vigorous investigation into unauthorized student activities in Vilno. Names were named and arrests followed. Mickiewicz, at the time back in Vilno on a sabbatical from his teaching job, was seized in November 1823 and imprisoned in a town cloister. At a trial, twenty dangerous “instigators” were named, Mickiewicz among them. Two colleagues took most of the blame on themselves and were sentenced to prison, followed by exile in remote Russian provinces. Mickiewicz and the others were ordered to report immediately to the empire's capital and accept appointments in the imperial government service chosen for them by the Russian authorities.

It is quite possible, as Koropecy suggests, that on one of his several visits to the Russian capital Mickiewicz rented an apartment in the same house as a fledgling writer from Ukraine named Mykola Hohol-Janovskii—the future Nikolai Gogol. They did not know each other then, and would meet only years later in Paris. But Mickiewicz's experiences in Russia often verged on the Gogolesque. Having summoned the Polish troublemaker to its capital, the empire obviously had no idea what to do with him, and it kept shuttling him from one fictitious position to another. From St. Petersburg Mickiewicz was ordered to go to Moscow, then to Odessa, then back to Moscow. In Odessa, he actually received a salary for holding a job that did not exist. (“They're paying us to eat oranges,” he quipped in a letter.) In Moscow he was granted an official *tshin*, a civil-service rank of “district secretary” (the third-lowest in the fourteen-grade table of ranks), which gave him the right to wear a uniform and be addressed as “Your Nobleness,” but was not accompanied by an appointment or a salary.

And so the dissident but suddenly re-

spectable poet had more than enough time to play tourist and establish contacts with the Russian intellectual elite, which already included a fair number of Polonophiles. He soon became friends with two prominent Russian poets, Aleksandr Bestuzhev and Kondraty Ryleev, future conspirators in the Decembrist coup. In Moscow he was introduced to Nikolai Polevoi, a writer, publisher, critic, and all-around literary powerhouse. He met Prince Viazemskii, a friend of Pushkin, and soon was spending time in the company of Pushkin himself. The story of their mutual fascination, rivalry, and bitter feud over Poland's aspirations to independence is one of the more interesting literary tales of the time.



Adam Mickiewicz, 1839

As his fame was growing, he inevitably fell within the orbit of Princess Zinaida Volkonskaya, the czar's confidante and Pushkin's “Queen of Muses and of Beauty,” who reigned over one of the empire's most illustrious salons. It was the first time that Mickiewicz enjoyed warm personal relationships with so many writers and intellectuals. In Russia he was a great hit. “Now that Goethe has grown silent and Byron is no more, Mickiewicz—and of this we should be proud—is not only Poland's premier poet, but is, perhaps, the first of all poets living today,” wrote Polevoi in a typically rapturous response to the publication of Mickiewicz's new poems in Polish.

It is quite possible that Russia created

the Mickiewicz we know. It boosted his self-confidence and launched his international career. Russia was his first taste of a cosmopolitan, intellectually vibrant society surpassing everything he could have found in Lithuania and even Poland. Was the relative comfort of his “exile” causing him moral discomfort? After all, many of his charming, brilliant, sophisticated friends and admirers were also czarist officials, courtiers, military commanders, even spies and provocateurs—people serving the very empire that occupied his country and sent his friends to prison. If he felt any ambivalence, he was careful not to bring it up even with the most trusted Russian hosts. Viazemskii describes him as “very intelligent, well mannered, animated in conversation, with manners that were politely delicate. . . . He did not play the political martyr.”

If there was a conflict in his soul, it probably found expression in Mickiewicz's long poem “Konrad Wallenrod,” a strange and dark tale of a Lithuanian boy kidnapped and raised by the Teutonic Knights, who finally becomes the order's grand master. It is an almost existentialist story of identity lost and recovered, and an act of personal sacrifice that is also an act of hideous betrayal. Koropecy is probably right to suggest that “Konrad Wallenrod” marks the poet's first serious moral crisis, and the beginning of his transformation from a Romantic dandy into a mystic and a seeker.

After almost five years in Russia, Mickiewicz was getting restless. After the czar's refusal to let him return to Lithuania, he finally obtained permission to travel to the West, ostensibly for medical reasons. After a sentimental fare-

well with his Russian friends, he boarded a steamer that took him to Lübeck; and as the shores of Russia started to recede in the distance he threw overboard some Russian coins with the czar's image. (But he kept his Russian passport, the only one he would ever have.) As Koropecy notes, the journey of the Polish “exile” to the West had all the features of the Grand Tour undertaken at that time by all the well born and artistically inclined. In Weimar, he paid homage to the eighty-year-old Goethe; in Rome, he met Felix Mendelssohn-Bartholdy; in Berlin, he heard one of Hegel's lectures (and was not impressed); in Bonn, he paid a visit to August Wilhelm Schlegel, the intellectual patron of German Romanticism.



In Prague, he conferred with a group of Czech poets who were staging a revival of native Czech literature.

Finally Mickiewicz moved on to Rome, where his old friend Volkonskaya had just moved her court from Moscow. He soon knew almost everyone of note in Rome. He struck up a friendship with James Fenimore Cooper and quickly enlisted him as America's leading advocate of the Polish cause. His popularity was a bit of a mystery, because most of his admirers had to take his greatness on faith. The publication of his poetry in French translation in 1829 helped a little, but as Koropecy observes, for many of his new friends, "that this Pole wrote poetry mattered only insofar as this was part of his image, as was the fact that this poetry was, as they were made to understand, Romantic and in the language of what was perceived to be an unjustly beleaguered people."

In 1830, the people rose up yet again in Poland. This ill-fated uprising was brutally crushed a year later, and what was

left of Poland was stripped of the last vestiges of autonomy. There followed decades of the systematic destruction of Polish identity and culture at the hands of Poland's occupiers. It was a devastating event that has etched itself forever in Polish memory. But Mickiewicz, already considered Poland's national bard, did not participate in it. His old friends in Lithuania were expecting him, and his poems were recited on the barricades—but the poet was nowhere to be found.

Mickiewicz had left Paris, where he was staying at that time, ostensibly with the intention to reach Poland, but his trip was strangely meandering and unhurried. He made detours, visited friends, and dallied until it was too late and he had to turn back, joining the stream of Polish refugees escaping to the West. Scholars still speculate about the poet's reluctance to take part in the national upheaval. Perhaps it was his loathing of any military action, and a premonition of its consequences. Shortly before the outbreak of the uprising, Mickiewicz wrote a poem that seemed to predict the course of events, and the price that the nation would have to pay. But such realism was unbecoming in the nation's leading Romantic. The experience must have scarred the poet with a sense of disappointment and failure that would linger throughout his life.

Hunkered down in Dresden, Mickiewicz started composing a Romantic drama—one of a series of plays begun back in Lithuania and connected by the motif of a pagan Belarussian ritual in honor of *dziady*, "the forefathers" or tribal ancestors, which was still being celebrated in Mickiewicz's times. *Forefathers' Eve*, Part Three, as the drama would be known, retells the story of the poet's imprisonment in Vilno. Locked in a cell in a Benedictine cloister, Mickiewicz's alter ego, a young poet named Konrad, rails against God's indifference to the suffering of innocent Polish youth. Claiming to be God's equal in creative genius and God's superior in compassion, the poet demands to partake in his omnipotence in order to set the world straight. Predictably, God remains silent, and the poet, tormented by demons, sinks into darkness.

Up to this point, Mickiewicz's hero resembles Goethe's Faust, Byron's Manfred, and scores of God-challengers in Romantic literature. But the Polish rebel cannot be allowed to go defiantly to hell. A humble Benedictine priest, Father Piotr, en-

ters Konrad's cell, exorcises the demons, and leaves the poet seemingly reconciled with God. Yet the priest seems to be troubled by many of the same questions that had brought Konrad to the brink of damnation. When he falls asleep, he has a vision of Poland betrayed, tortured, and led to crucifixion—but unlike Konrad, he realizes that there is a higher purpose to God's seemingly cruel treatment of Poland. Just as God gave over His innocent son to suffering and death so that he could rise from the dead and wash away the sins of humanity, so has He now chosen the most innocent nation, the most truly Christian nation, to die and then rise "on the third day" in order to awaken the conscience of Europe and usher in a new era of Christianity. Poland, the Christ of nations! Its defeat is its triumph; its humiliation is its power and its glory.

Koropecy rightly points out that in *Forefathers' Eve*, Part Three, Mickiewicz not only created the classical Polish narrative of self-justification but also engineered his own transformation from a failed Romantic hero into a Romantic prophet mystically united with the nation in its sufferings and dreams. The role provided something of a moral alibi for him. His failure to join the actual uprising was of little significance, because in spirit he was there. His soul was one with the souls of the people; it fought and it died with them.

MICKIEWICZ WAS not quite the inventor of the doctrine known as "Polish messianism." The idea that Poland has a special spiritual mission among the nations of Europe had been present in Polish writing and philosophy for some time, and became especially prominent after the failure of the uprising in 1830. But it was Mickiewicz's version that became a strong and enduring national myth—especially since the poet, settled in Paris, soon developed it into a quasi-biblical story in two pieces of poetic prose called *The Books of the Polish Nation* and *The Books of Polish Pilgrimage*. These works tell the story of a second fall—the corruption and fragmentation of Christianity by power-hungry rulers culminating in the reign of the "satanic trinity," Frederick the Great of Prussia, Maria Theresa of Austria, and Catherine the Great of Russia. According to Mickiewicz, only Poland did not succumb to the general decline, preserving the true Christian spirit and turning away from the selfish material pursuits of other nations. For a time, therefore, it was rewarded with prosperity and free-

## At the Autopsy of Vaslav Nijinsky

They sliced the soles of his feet  
open, lengthwise then crosswise

to see if there was some trick,  
an explanation

for the man who could fly,  
the man who saw the godhead

with his naked eye.  
They pinned the flaps of skin

open like wings  
and searched inside the gristle

for a machine,  
a motor and spring, the wheel

inside the bone, the reason  
why.

He must have been playing  
a trick on them all this time,

the wool pulled tight  
over the collective cyclopic eye,

flashbulb-bright—  
he must have, he must have

lied. But the foot was that  
of a normal man

after all, after all that  
and they sewed his foot together again.

BRIDGET LOWE

dom, and its multinational domain was an example of true brotherhood among peoples. But the “satanic trinity,” unable to bear such righteousness in their midst, dismembered Poland and buried it. And yet Poland did not really die. Its soul left its body and descended from the public sphere “into the homes of peoples suffering in slavery in our country and abroad, in order to know their suffering,” and it is patiently waiting for the day of resurrection and triumph. *The Books*, translated into several languages, met with considerable resonance in Europe and were largely responsible for the elites’ interest in the Polish cause. They were praised, among others, by Mazzini and by Carlyle, despite his skepticism about their mystical content.

The publication of *The Books* also marked just about the end of Mickiewicz as a poet. Settled in Paris, which was the center of the Polish émigré community, married with a growing family, he tried to continue his “forefathers” cycle, but with little success. Shortly before his marriage to a woman with whom he would eventually have six children, he managed to complete the charming and swashbuckling “national epic” *Master Thaddeus*, which he seemed to treat partly as a potboiler and partly as a diversion during one of his bouts of melancholy. He was approaching forty, the age at which most European Romantics were either silent or dead, and he seemed to be losing interest in poetry. Instead he devoted most of his time to spreading his messianic revelation in *The Polish Pilgrim*, the journal that he started in Paris, and studying the writings of various European mystics. He published a series of meditations titled *Apothegms and Sayings from the Works of Jacob Boehme*, Angelus Silesius, and Saint-Martin, and for several years he was a member of the Circle of God’s Cause, a religious sect established by his Lithuanian countryman Andrzej Towiański.

Although he was preoccupied with Polish issues and spent most of his time among Polish expatriates, he did maintain contacts with French intellectuals. Encouraged by George Sand, he tried, with little success, to write plays in French, so as to augment his modest income from new editions of his poetry. The French literary critic Sainte-Beuve helped him to obtain a position as a professor of classical literature in Lausanne, Switzerland. But the real opportunity to influence Western minds seemed to open for him when he was offered a newly created chair in Slavic literatures at the Collège de France, where he soon became the close friend of two great and contro-

versial French historians, Jules Michelet and Edgar Quinet.

**I**N CONTRAST to classical literature, in which Mickiewicz had solid academic training, his knowledge of Slavic writing was fragmentary at best, and his views were highly idiosyncratic. From the very beginning, it was obvious that his students could expect a lot of enthusiasm and inspiration but very little real scholarship. Mickiewicz’s lectures were in fact literary improvisations, for which the poet prepared by listening to his wife play Mozart and pacing in his room well into the night. He delivered them without notes, switching from one subject to another and losing himself in endless digressions. He spun theories and grand generalizations, all delivered with great authority but with hardly any support in fact. They were “full of ideas, but by no means always clear,” as one of his friends politely remarked.

Soon Mickiewicz was openly preaching his creed of Poland’s unique role in the spiritual renewal of Europe. Speaking to an international audience, however, he had to tread carefully. Romanticism, after all, was a period of awakening nationalisms everywhere, and the concept of a unique Polish destiny had its equivalents in Germany, France, Italy, Russia, and scores of smaller European nations that were beginning to vie for independence from the Hapsburg, Romanov, and Ottoman empires. Aware that every nation is, to itself, a chosen nation, Mickiewicz quickly developed a theory that each people has its own particular role to play in the great historical progress toward universal peace and brotherhood of nations.

Not only Poland but all Slavs, owing to their spiritual purity and authentic faith, were predisposed to receive the word of God—including, it seemed, the Russians, with whom Mickiewicz remained fascinated even after the trauma of the 1830 uprising. The French—the nation of historical action and world-transforming passion—were also a chosen people, and their grand universal dream of united Europe almost became reality under Napoleon. Now, with the help of Poland and other Slavic nations, France was expected to understand “the divine aspect of [its] own history,” and to challenge the legitimacy of the old dynastic power structure.

Then there was the original chosen nation, the Jews—“our elder brothers,” as Mickiewicz used to call them after his master Towiański. (Centuries later the phrase was adopted by Pope John Paul II.) Mickiewicz had always displayed a

strong, and for his times rather atypical, attachment to the Jews. They constituted about 10 percent of the population of the former Polish Commonwealth—about the same as the gentry, considered the core of the Polish nation; but they were all but invisible to the majority of Polish patriots and politicians of the time. Mickiewicz was one of the very few exceptions. On more than one occasion he stated that there could be no independent Poland without full rights for its Jewish population. In a draft of a constitution for Poland, he offered Jews “respect, brotherhood, assistance on the way to [their] eternal and terrestrial good, complete equality of rights.”

One of the more interesting characters in *Master Thaddeus* is a patriotic Jewish innkeeper, apparently a member of an anti-Russian plot headed by a Polish priest. Mickiewicz was married to a Frankist Jewish woman, and toward the end of his life he developed a particularly close, almost paternal relationship with his Jewish secretary, Armand Levy. Witnesses say that he reacted with rage and revulsion whenever he heard someone denigrate the Jews in his presence, which gave rise to theories that he himself might have had Jewish blood. In his lectures, he maintained that centuries of suffering and oppression had endowed the Jews with particularly deep self-knowledge and spirituality, and that the radiance of Jewish wisdom would soon shine upon the whole world.

**F**OR A WHILE, Mickiewicz’s lectures enjoyed great success. They were reviewed in newspapers and talked about in literary salons. They even became a sort of tourist attraction: crowds gathered to hear the raving “poet from the North,” ladies fainted, the audience responded with approval or protest. But eventually the fad began to pass, and the authorities—partly responding to academic criticism and partly concerned about the poet’s increasingly radical religious and political ideas—decided to terminate his appointment in 1844. (They agreed to keep paying him half of his salary.) The next few years are probably the most enigmatic period in Mickiewicz’s life. They seem to have been spent mainly in ministering to the charismatic Towiański’s mystical sect, and acting as the master’s surrogate after his expulsion from France. In the end, though, Mickiewicz decided that the master’s teachings were too quietist for his purposes, and he left to form his own spiritual circle, advocating “greater engagement with the world, and with Poland above all.”

In 1848, the wave of political and national unrest known as the Spring of Nations rolled over Europe. Italian patriots were pushing for the unification of Italian states and challenging Austrian rule in the north. For Mickiewicz, the events inaugurated a period of hectic political activity. He hurried to Italy with the intention of forming a Polish legion to fight with the Italians against Austria. (He also might have been trying to meet up with another American friend, the transcendentalist writer Margaret Fuller, whom he met a year earlier in Paris.) Militarily speaking, the legion was a laughable matter: it consisted of a dozen or so Polish artists residing in Rome. But their triumphant march to the Austrian front—or rather, their trip in two carriages—proved Mickiewicz’s uncanny gift for public relations. Wherever they went, the tiny detachment was preceded by enthusiastic press reports and greeted by crowds. After Mickiewicz’s departure—once again, he had no intention of joining the fight himself—the group grew to about one hundred men and took part in some military operations a few days before the Italians signed an armistice with the Austrians.

Back in Paris, Mickiewicz, with a group of Polish and French collaborators, started a French-language newspaper called *La Tribune des Peuples*. It opened its pages to a group of international, mostly leftist contributors who were reporting on liberation movements throughout Europe. In June 1849, the police of Louis Napoleon, the nephew of Mickiewicz’s beloved emperor, raided the offices of the paper and arrested some of its staff. Mickiewicz had to go into hiding for a while. Later the publication was re-opened, but all its Polish editors had to leave, and it collapsed soon afterwards.

At the outbreak of the Crimean War, the poet managed to have himself sent by a group of influential Poles to Constantinople, on a mission to assist in the formation of yet another legion, this time made of Cossack and Polish prisoners of war and deserters from the Russian army willing to fight on the side of the anti-Russian alliance. Discovering a fair number of Jews among the volunteers, Mickiewicz and Levy conceived of an idea to form a separate Jewish brigade that would fight against Poland’s oppressors and advance

the Polish cause. What would be more beautiful, after all, than proud “Hussars of Israel” marching one day into independent Poland side by side with their Polish comrades-in-arms?

We will never know what might have come of this crazy but inspired idea, because in Constantinople Mickiewicz’s life came to an abrupt end. On the night of November 24, 1855, the poet suddenly felt weak. A clumsy attempt by a friend to escort him to the bathroom resulted in a bad fall and a fractured skull. Two days later he was dead. The cause of his collapse was probably an onslaught of cholera, but rumors of a poisoning immediately started to spread—during the years of his notorious, often divisive activity in Paris, the poet made some powerful enemies in the Polish exile community. Many observed that his end eerily resembled that of the idol of his youth, Byron, who died under similarly mysterious circumstances in Greece.

## To an Old Man Dying

(for Lucien)

“I’m coming back as a sea lion,” he said,  
 “To traverse the seven seas.  
 I’ll swim from Norway to the Coast of Japan,  
 Or not, whichever I please.”

“But how will I know you?” she asked, distressed.  
 “All sea lions look alike.”  
 “I’ll wear a gold candle that burns on my head,  
 And eye-glitter green as a pike.”

“I’m coming back as a lichen,” he said.  
 “To cling to an oak’s northern side.  
 I’ll contemplate life without saying a word,  
 And day after day abide.”

“I’m coming back as an osprey,” he said.  
 “I’ve hit on my ultimate wish.  
 Where all there’s to do is hang on the wind,  
 And fly and fuck and fish.”

“If you come back as a lichen,” she said,  
 “I’ll know which blossom is you.  
 I’ll scrape you screaming off the soggy bark  
 And boil you in my stew.”

If I find you’ve returned as some ear-piercing bird,  
 I’ll get out my trusty bow,  
 And the first time you soar past, you son of a bitch,  
 An arrow will bring you low.”

“For sharing the ache,” and she grabbed his lapel,  
 “The choices have narrowed to two.  
 Either come back as me with a hole in my gut,  
 Or simply come back as you.”

BRUCE DUCKER

IN HIS LIFETIME Mickiewicz was a highly controversial figure. His writings, his “prophesies,” and his various activities in émigré circles met with enthusiasm, but also with vitriolic attacks. His transformation into a national icon took place a few decades after his death, when Romanticism as a literary movement was largely a thing of the past. The metamorphosis was completed in 1890, when the poet’s remains were moved from Paris to Kraków and welcomed by crowds, who laid him to rest in the royal crypt of the Kraków cathedral, next to a whole pantheon of Polish kings.

It was probably yet another Polish uprising—even more desperate and tragic than the previous one—that played the main role in this process of cultural beatification. Begun in 1863 as a spontaneous protest against conscription into the Russian army, this revolt was conducted mostly by ill-trained and poorly armed guerrillas that stood no chance against

Russian regular forces. As Koropecyjk rightly observes, it was in fact a product of the Romantic disregard for reality, “the work of a generation brought up on the ideals of the Great Emigration, on Romantic poetry, messianism, conspiracies, and a concomitant willingness to sacrifice blood, if only for the sake of demonstrating the will to exist.” After its disastrous end, which was followed by public executions and the harshest repression that Poles had ever experienced, the nation’s elites seemed finally to abandon Romantic dreams in favor of more pragmatic, “organic” programs—improving education and living conditions, promoting business, raising the standard of living of the Polish peasant masses. But national independence remained the implicit goal of all these activities, and Mickiewicz’s messianic myth seemed a perfect tool to keep this goal alive—a form of reassurance that, despite all that it had endured, Poland still existed, if only in a purely spiritual and idealized form.

In the decades between the last “Romantic” uprising and Poland’s independence in 1918, the unwritten strategy of Polish survival rested on two complementary principles: on the surface, a realistic accommodation to prevailing conditions, and beneath the surface a contest of spirit and will in which, in Koropecyjk’s words, “cultural artifacts, perforce,



functioned as simulacra for national institutions.” The figure of Adam Mickiewicz, domesticated and purged of its more controversial or eccentric aspects, served, as Koropeckyj remarks, “as a constant point of reference—the nation’s *wieszcz*, the first and the greatest, whose life and works at once shaped and embodied the ethos of modern Poland.”

As a political symbol, too, Mickiewicz proved to be unusually versatile. Over the years, practically all political factions have claimed him as their patron by subtly manipulating his image. Christian conservatives claimed him, despite his declared anti-clericalism and his “heretical” religious views; liberal democrats claimed him, despite the fact that he looked at parliamentary democracy with disdain; Polish nationalists claimed him, despite his open and inclusive concept of the nation; and even communists claimed him, naming their party organ *The Tribune of the People*, in homage to his *La Tribune des Peuples*. Instead of one Mickiewicz, the history of Polish literature seems to be peopled by a horde of squabbling Mickiewiczes—a measure of the fact that no group or faction in Polish public life can afford to ignore or reject his legacy.

In a sense, Mickiewicz fulfilled the dream of many Romantic poets who claimed prophetic authority for their art. In his lifetime, he was Emerson’s “fervent mystic, prophesying, half insane under the infinitude of his thought.” After his death, he became Shelley’s “legislator of the World,” at least of the Polish world. His impact on the Polish mind may have been greater than that of the bards of other nations. But has it been for the good?

Much of modern Polish literature may be interpreted as a debate about Mickiewicz. “We all stem from him,” the statement by one of his disciples about Mickiewicz’s death, has long had a double meaning in Polish literary life. Some take it as an obligation to cultivate the root, others as an injunction to cut it off in search of one’s own authentic voice. Witold Gombrowicz, who often mocked Polish national myths and affectations, is perhaps the finest example of the latter attitude. *Ferdynand*, his best-known novel, includes a merciless screed against Polish Romantic pieties, and in his *Diary* he openly blames Mickiewicz for making Poles fall in love with a comfortable but totally false image of themselves.

Czesław Miłosz, on the other hand, openly acknowledged his debt to Mickiewicz and the Romantic tradition. Some of his poems, such as the famous “You

Who Wronged,” are so steeped in Romantic language and imagery that they might almost have been written by Mickiewicz. Miłosz often marveled at the childishness of Mickiewicz’s beliefs, but in *The Land of Ulro* he placed Mickiewicz among the great Romantic minds—Blake and Goethe being his favorite examples—that struggled to close the widening gap between “the world of scientific laws—cold, indifferent to human values—and man’s inner world.” According to Miłosz, Mickiewicz was one of the defenders of the spirit in the increasingly spiritless world of modernity—a writer who tried to resolve the dangerous opposition between the new sense of human insignificance in the world and the urge, “born of wounded pride,” to endow man with god-like pre-eminence. It is thanks to Mickiewicz, argued Miłosz, that Polish literature escaped most of the nihilistic tendencies of modernity and maintained a strong interest in metaphysics.

**B**UT SURELY IT IS time, at this late hour, to retire the sacred nonsense about Poland as the chosen nation, the endlessly martyred, endlessly self-scarifying, and endlessly untainted victim. Many Poles seem still to believe this myth and to live quite contentedly with its grotesque implications—for example, the belief in Poland’s absolute historical innocence, which makes otherwise reasonable people talk about “slander” whenever someone quotes this or that less illustrious (or downright obscene) event from Polish history, or suggests that other nations might have suffered as much, or even more, than the Poles. Following Gombrowicz’s example, one wants to call on one’s fellow Poles to grow up, or at least face their immaturity, and stop babbling on about national destinies, spirits, signs, and miracles.

But then one goes back to Mickiewicz—and one is seduced again. The myth proves surprisingly durable and, in Miłosz’s words, “strong enough to consume all who would resist it—horse, armor, and all.” And so it returns, generation after generation, in times of crisis and terror, compelling people to repeat the cycle of sacrifice and redemption, despair and hope. I am thinking of my late father, a man not given to Romantic raptures, a man with an exacting scientific mind and little patience for poetry, a Protestant in Catholic Poland, whose underlined copy of Mickiewicz I keep on my bookshelf. It is said that during the Warsaw Uprising in 1944 he performed acts of courage that could hardly have been expected from such a quiet, seem-

ingly timid man. My father knew from the outset that the uprising was going to fail, that it would end in slaughter, but he said that he and his colleagues felt it imperative to participate, and even believed in some sort of miracle. And it was a sort of a miracle that he, one of very few from his unit, survived the hecatomb.

Writing in Kraków right after the end of that war, Miłosz remembered—in his poem “A Nation”—“the purest of nations on earth when it’s judged by a flash of lightning,” a nation that is “ready to offer their lives to draw Heaven’s wrath on their foes,” but also a nation “thoughtless and sly in everyday toil,” and “stealing a crust of bread from a child’s hand.” The poem ends with something that sounds like an endorsement of Mickiewicz’s dream, precisely on the grounds that it is probably unattainable: “A man of that nation, standing by his son’s cradle, / Repeats words of hope, always, till now, in vain.”

In 1980, during the dangerous heyday of Solidarity, Miłosz’s poem “You Who Wronged” was inscribed on the monument to the Gdańsk shipyard workers who fell in the riots ten years earlier. Several months later, martial law was declared and Solidarity as a political movement was all but destroyed. But Solidarity was also a kind of messianic religious movement, which survived, just as Mickiewicz had predicted, in the homes of people “suffering in slavery.” Then, at last, came the crisis of communism, followed by a geopolitical shift, and unexpectedly the whole Cold War arrangement was over. That was history, of course—a set of objective circumstances and nothing else. But events of such magnitude always seem to call for a mythical reading. Sometimes the poets are not far behind the statesmen, and sometimes they even precede them. I am sure that many in Poland experienced the fall of communism as something written by a *wieszcz*: the third day had passed, the stone was removed, a Romantic prophecy was fulfilled in the miraculous year 1989. ♦

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