

Classic Poetry Series

Adam Mickiewicz

- 4 poems -

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Adam Mickiewicz (24 December 1798 – 26 November 1855)

Adam Bernard Mickiewicz (Lithuanian: Adomas Bernardas Mickevicius) was a Polish (Polish-Lithuanian) poet, publisher and political writer of the Romantic period. One of the primary representatives of the Polish Romanticism era, a national poet of Poland, he is seen as one of Poland's Three Bards and the greatest poet in all of Polish literature. He is also considered one of the greatest Slavic language or European poets. He has been described as a Slavonic bard. He was a prominent creator of Romantic drama in Poland and has been compared both at home and in Western Europe to Byron and Goethe.

He is known primarily as the author of the poetic novel *Dziady* and national epic *Pan Tadeusz*, which is considered the last great epic of Polish-Lithuanian noble culture. Mickiewicz's other influential works include *Konrad Wallenrod* and *Grazyna*. All served as inspiration during regional uprisings and as foundations for the concept of Poland as "the Christ of Nations."

Mickiewicz was active in the struggle to achieve independence for his homeland, then part of the Russian Empire. Having spent five years in internal exile in central Russia for political activities, he left the Empire in 1829 and spent the rest of his life in emigration, like many of his compatriots. He settled first in Rome, later in Paris, where he became professor of Slavic literature at the Collège de France. He died, probably of cholera, at Constantinople in the Ottoman Empire, where he had gone to help organize Polish forces to fight against Russia in the Crimean War. His remains were later moved to Wawel Cathedral in Kraków, Poland.

Life

Adam Mickiewicz was born at his uncle's estate in Zaosie (now Zavošse) near Navahrudak (Nowogródek) in what was then the Russian Empire (now Belarus). The region was on the outskirts of Lithuania Propria and had been a part of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania until the 1795 Third Partition of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth. The area had historically been inhabited by ethnic Lithuanians, although at the time of his birth it was largely Belarusian. Belarusian folklore would exert a major influence on his work along with Lithuanian historic themes. The region's upper classes, such as Mickiewicz's family, were however either Polish or polonized. The poet's father, Mikolaj Mickiewicz, was a lawyer, and a member of the petty Polish nobility (*szlachta*) of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth and bore the hereditary Poraj coat-of-arms.

Mickiewicz enrolled at the Imperial University of Vilnius. His personality and later works were greatly influenced by his four years of living and studying in

Vilnius. He took a strong interest in Polish, Belarusian, and Lithuanian history, which later became important themes in his poetry. In 1817, together with Tomasz Zan and other friends, he created a secret organization, the Philomaths, that advocated progressive causes and independence from the Russian Empire. Following graduation, in 1819–23, under the terms of his university scholarship, he taught secondary school at Kaunas.

In 1823 he was arrested, investigated for his political activities, specifically his membership in the Philomaths society, and in 1824, banished to central Russia. He had already published two small volumes of miscellaneous poetry at Vilnius, which had been favorably received by the Slavic public, and on his arrival at Saint Petersburg found himself welcomed into the leading literary circles, where he became a great favorite both for his agreeable manners and his extraordinary talent of improvisation. In 1825 he visited the Crimea, which inspired a collection of sonnets (*Sonety Krymskie — The Crimean Sonnets*) with their admirably elegant rhythm and rich Oriental coloring. The most beautiful are "The Storm," "Bakhchisaray", and "The Grave of Countess Potocka".

In 1828 appeared Mickiewicz's *Konrad Wallenrod*, a narrative poem describing the battles of the Teutonic Knights with the heathen people of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania. In it, under a thin veil, Mickiewicz represented the sanguinary passages of arms and burning hatred which had characterized the long feuds of the Russians and Poles. The objects of the poem, though obvious to many, escaped the Russian censors, and the poem was allowed to be published, complete with the telling motto, adapted from Machiavelli: "Dovete adunque sapere come sono duo generazioni da combattere — bisogna essere volpe e leone." ("Ye shall know that there are two ways of fighting — you must be a fox and a lion.") This striking long poem contains at least two revered subsections, including the *Alpuhara Ballad*.

In 1829, after a five-year exile in Russia, the poet obtained permission to travel abroad. He went to Weimar and made the acquaintance of Goethe there. After a cordial reception by the latter he continued through Germany all the way to Italy, which he entered by the Splügen Pass. He visited Milan, Venice and Florence, and finally established his residence in Rome.

There he wrote the third part of his poem *Dziady* (*Forefathers' Eve*), which adverts to the ancestor commemoration that had been practiced by Slavic and Baltic peoples; and *Pan Tadeusz*, his longest poem, which is considered his masterpiece. The latter epos draws a picture of Grand Duchy of Lithuania on the eve of Napoleon's 1812 expedition to Russia. In this "rural idyll," as Aleksander Brückner calls it, Mickiewicz gives a picture of the country seats of the Polish magnates, with their somewhat boisterous but very genuine hospitality. They are seen just as the knell of their nationalism, as Brückner says, seems to be sounding, and therefore there is something melancholy and dirge-like in the poem, in spite of the pretty love story that forms the main incident.

On the first line of *Pan Tadeusz* Mickiewicz wrote of Lithuania, calling it his "Fatherland", actually referring to his native Grand Duchy of Lithuania through the eyes of a political exile, and gives some of the most delightful descriptions of the skies and the forests of current Belarus and Lithuania. He describes the sounds to be heard in the primeval woods in a country where the trees were sacred. The depiction of clouds are equally striking.

In 1832 Mickiewicz left Rome, where his life was for some time marked by poverty and unhappiness, for Paris. There, on July 22, 1834, he married Celina Szymanowska, daughter of composer and concert pianist Maria Agata Szymanowska. Marital discord, and Celina's later becoming mentally ill, would cause Mickiewicz to attempt suicide in December 1838, by jumping out of a window.

In 1840 Mickiewicz was appointed to the newly-founded chair of Slavic languages and literature at the Collège de France. He was, however, destined to hold it for little more than three years, his last lecture being

given on May 28, 1844. His mind had become increasingly possessed by religious mysticism.

He had fallen under the influence of the Polish Messianist philosopher Andrzej Towianski. His lectures became a medley of religion and politics, and thus brought him under censure by the French government. The messianic element conflicted with the contemporary teachings of the Roman Catholic Church and some of his books were placed on its forbidden list, although both Mickiewicz and Towianski regularly attended Catholic masses and encouraged their followers to do so also.

A selection of his lectures has been published in four volumes. They contain some sound criticism, but the philological part is defective— Mickiewicz was no scholar, and it is clear that he was well acquainted with only two of the Slavic literatures, Polish and Russian, and the latter only to 1830.

A sad picture of his declining years is given in the memoirs of the Russian writer Alexander Herzen. Comparatively early, the poet exhibited signs of premature old age; poverty, despair and domestic affliction had taken their toll. In the winter of 1848–49, the Polish composer Frédéric Chopin, in the final months of his own life, visited his ailing compatriot and soothed the poet's nerves with his piano music. Over a dozen years earlier, Chopin had set two of Mickiewicz's poems to music.

In 1849 Mickiewicz founded a French newspaper, *La Tribune des Peuples* (The Peoples' Tribune), but it survived for only a year. The restoration of the French Empire seemed to kindle his hopes afresh; his last composition is said to have been a Latin ode in honour of Napoleon III.

In 1855 Mickiewicz's wife Celina died. On the outbreak of the Crimean War, he left his under-age children in Paris and went to Constantinople, the Ottoman Empire, where he arrived 22 September 1855, to organize Polish forces to be used in the war against Russia. With his friend Armand Levy, he set about organizing a Jewish legion, the Hussars of Israel, comprising Russian and Palestinian Jews. He returned ill to his apartment from a trip to a military camp and died on 26 November in his apartment on the Yeniköy street in Constantinople (now Istanbul), . He had most probably contracted cholera. The house where he lived in is now a museum.

After being temporarily buried in a crypt under his apartment in Constantinople (now Istanbul), his remains were transported to France and buried at Montmorency. In 1890 they were disinterred, moved to Poland, and entombed in the crypts of Kraków's Wawel Cathedral, which is shared with many of those who are considered important to Poland's political and cultural history.

Works

The political situation in Poland in the 19th century was often reflected in Polish literature which, since the days of Poland's partitions took a powerful upward swing and reached its zenith during the period between 1830 and 1850 in the unsurpassed patriotic writings of Mickiewicz, among others.

Edward Henry Lewinski Corwin has described Mickiewicz's works as Promethean, as "reaching more Polish hearts" than the other Bards of Poland (Zygmunt Krasinski and Juliusz Slowacki), and affirming George Brandes' assessment of Mickiewicz's works as "healthier" than those of Byron, Shakespeare, Homer, and Goethe.

As a young man, Mickiewicz was influenced by Belarusian folklore, as his native town was Navahrudak in Hrodna region of Belarus. After finishing a school in Navahrudak, he took a leading part in the literary life of the university circles at Vilnius. When the society of Philomaths was closed in 1823 by order of the Russian tsar he was arrested and exiled to Russia. While in the Crimea he wrote his sonnets. In France in 1835 Mickiewicz came under the influence of Towianski, a mystic, and ceased to write. Toward the end of his days he freed himself again of this peculiar thrall which Towianski

was able to exert over him.

It was while in Istanbul he wrote the Books of the Pilgrims, which have been called "Mickiewicz's Homilies".

Beside Konrad Wallenrod and Pan Tadeusz, noteworthy is the long poem *Grazyna*, describing the exploits of a Lithuanian chieftainess against the Teutonic Knights. It was said by Christien Ostrowski to have inspired Emilia Plater, a military heroine of the November 1830 Uprising who died in Lithuania. Another well known poem is the Oriental-themed piece *Farys*. Notable too are the odes to Youth and to the historian Joachim Lelewel; the former did much to stimulate the efforts of the Poles to shake off their Russian conquerors.

His son Wladyslaw Mickiewicz wrote a *Vie d'Adam Mickiewicz* (Life of Adam Mickiewicz, 4 volumes, Poznan, 1890–95) and *Adam Mickiewicz, sa vie et son œuvre* (Adam Mickiewicz: His Life and Works, Paris, 1888).

Translations into English (1881–85) of Konrad Wallenrod and Pan Tadeusz were made by a Miss Biggs. Christien Ostrowski rendered into French *Cœuvres poétiques de Mickiewicz* (Poetic Works of Mickiewicz, Paris, 1845). The most recent translation of Pan Tadeusz into English, in the rhyme and rhythm of the original, is by Marcel Weyland of Sydney, Australia.

Ethnicity

Mickiewicz had been brought up in the culture of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth, a multi-cultural state that had encompassed most of what today are the separate countries of Poland, Lithuania, Belarus and Ukraine. For Mickiewicz, a separation of that multicultural state into individual entities due to trends such as Lithuanian separatism was undesirable if not outright unthinkable. According to Romanucci-Ross, while Mickiewicz called himself a "Lithuanian", at the time the idea of a separate "Lithuanian identity", apart from that of "Polish" did not exist. The same source calls Mickiewicz a Polish poet. Mixture of those multicultural aspects can be seen in his works; his most famous poem, *Pan Tadeusz*, begins with the (Polish language) invocation, "O Lithuania, my fatherland, thou art like good health..." (Litwo! Ojczyzno moja! ty jesteś jak zdrowie..."), an invocation that translated into Lithuanian eventually became a part of Lithuanian anthem. It is generally accepted that Mickiewicz, referring to Lithuania, meant a historical region than a linguistic and cultural entity, and he often used the term "Lithuanian" to refer to the Slavic inhabitants of the Grand Duchy.

Mickiewicz's name is rendered into the Lithuanian language as Adomas Mickevičius. He was descended from an old Lithuanian noble family (*Rimvydas*) with origins predating the Christianization of the country. The Lithuanian nobility at that time was heavily Polonized and spoke Polish. The Cambridge History of Russia describes him as Polish but sees his ethnic origins as "Lithuanian-Belarusian (and perhaps Jewish)."[According to the Belarusian historian Rybczonek, Mickiewicz's mother had Tatar roots.

Some sources assert that Mickiewicz's mother was descended from a converted Frankist Jewish family. Other sources view this as improbable.

Legacy

Mickiewicz has long been regarded as the national poet of Poland, and a deeply revered figure in Lithuania. Monuments and other tributes to him abound throughout both countries as well as in Ukraine and Belarus.

In 1898, the 100th anniversary of his birth, a towering statue by the sculptor Cyprian Godebski was erected in Warsaw. It is inscribed on the base, "To the Poet from the Nation."

Influences

Homer, Niccolò Machiavelli, Jan Kochanowski, Petrarch, Alexander Pope, George Gordon Byron, Johann Wolfgang Goethe

Influenced

Comte de Lautréamont, George Sand, Ralph Waldo Emerson, Théophile Gautier, Fyodor Dostoyevsky, Georg Brandes, Yanka Kupala, Friedrich Nietzsche

Works:

Grazyna (1823)

Sonety Krymskie (The Crimean Sonnets 1825)

Konrad Wallenrod (1828)

Dzaidy (1829)

Pan Tadeusz (1829)

Book of the Pilgrims (1855)

Chatyr Dah

The trembling Muslims kiss your foot and pray out loud,
O mast of the Crimean tall ship Chatyr Dah,
Minaret amid the hills and Padishah!
You, having fled above the cliffs into a cloud,

Stand at the gates of heaven, humbling the crowd,
And, like great Gabriel, guard lost Eden's house, your shaw
Of trees a cloak where janissaries keep the law,
Your turban thunderbolts and lightning for the proud.

And yet sun scolds our brows and fog obscures our ways,
Locusts poach our crops and Gavur burn our homes,
Always, Chatyr Dah, as motionless as domes

In Mecca, you remain indifferent to our days,
Creation's dragoman to what below you roams
Who only hears whatever God to nature says.

<small>— translated from the Polish by Leo Yankevich
first appeared in *the Sarmatian Review*</small>

Adam Mickiewicz

The Akkerman Steppe

I launch myself across the dry and open narrows,
My carriage plunging into green as if a ketch,
Floundering through the meadow flowers in the stretch.
I pass an archipelago of coral yarrows.

It's dusk now, not a road in sight, nor ancient barrows.
I look up at the sky and look for stars to catch.
There distant clouds glint—there tomorrow starts to etch;
The Dnieper glimmers; Akkerman's lamp shines and harrows.

I stand in stillness, hear the migratory cranes,
Their necks and wings beyond the reach of preying hawks;
Hear where the sooty copper glides across the plains,

Where on its underside a viper writhes through stalks.
Amid the hush I lean my ears down grassy lanes
And listen for a voice from home. Nobody talks.

<small>— translated from the Polish by Leo Yankevich
first appeared in *the Sarmatian Review*</small>

Adam Mickiewicz

The Calm of the Sea

Upon the height of Tarkankut

The pennant at the crow's nest rises with the breeze,
Shafts of sunlight play upon the water's breast
As on a bride-to-be who wakes to sigh and rest,
And wakes again and sighs for dreams that better please.

On naked spars the banner-shaped sails hang at ease.
The vessel is in chains now, leeward facing west,
Lulled by slow rocking. Passengers lampoon in jest,
Swabbies sigh to one another, slapping knees.

Blithe Sea! Among your jolly living creatures is
The polyp, sleeping in your depths when dark clouds swarm,
Wielding longish arms amid each starfish grave.

Sweet dreams! Below, a hydra of remembrances
Sleeps in the middle of mishaps and raging storm,
And when the heart is calm, its pincers flash and wave.

— translated from the Polish by Leo Yankevich
first appeared in *the Sarmatian Review*

Adam Mickiewicz

The Castle Ruins at Balaklava

These castles, whose remains are strewn in heaps for miles,
Once graced and guarded you, Crimea the ungrateful!
Today they sit upon the hills, each like a great skull
In which reptiles reside or men worse than reptiles.

Let's climb a tower, search for crests upon worn tiles,
For an inscription or a hero's name, the fateful
Bane of armies now forgotten by the faithful,
A wizened beetle wrapped in vines below the aisles.

Here Greeks wrought Attic ornaments upon the walls,
From which Italians would cast Mongols into chains,
And where the Mecca-bound once stopped to pray and beg.

Today above the tombs the shadow of night falls,
The black-winged buzzards fly like pennants over plains,
As if towards a city ever touched by plague.

<small>— translated from the Polish by Leo Yankevich
first appeared in *the Sarmatian Review*</small>

Adam Mickiewicz