

P R E F A C E

A mighty current in the intellectual life of Europe known as Romanticism characterizes the period between 1798 and 1855 — the years of Adam Mickiewicz's life and creative work. Mickiewicz, a true son of his epoch and Poland's national poet, deprived of political freedom, dedicated his life and creative work to the cause of the liberation of his fatherland and the liberation of the peoples of Europe. During the revolutionary uprisings of 1848 Mickiewicz, convinced that only the revolutionary solidarity of subjugated peoples can guarantee them victory in the fight against the alliance of Europe's tyrants, was in the ranks of those struggling for the democratic movement. Mickiewicz's poetry, like that of other Polish revolutionary romanticists, played a particularly important role in the struggle of the Polish people for liberty and social justice. The very first works of this poet were for his contemporaries not only a source of deep aesthetic delight but simultaneously a political and moral directive. The poet was well aware of the significance of his creative work since at the end of his life he gave one of his most famous poems the title *Political Pamphlet*.

Mickiewicz was born in 1798, near Vilna in Lithuania, which after the collapse of Poland in 1795 had been incorporated into the Russian empire. He was the son of one of many impoverished noble families and therefore had to stand on his own feet from the earliest years of his life. The grant of a scholarship enabled Mickiewicz to finish his studies in literature at the University of Vilna where the academic standard was then very high. As a student he was one of the founders of a clandestine youth organization, the so-called "Philomaths" (Friends of Learning), set up for patriotic purposes. Mickiewicz's first literary efforts during that particular period are strongly under the influence of the tradition of the Enlightenment. The young poet, however, soon concluded, that the traditions of 18th century liberalism no longer sufficed as an ideological and artistic programme for national literature, which should be a guide for the people in their struggle for independence and the abolition of feudal oppression. Mickiewicz was conscious of the need for such poetry which would appeal to the widest strata of readers, and would speak in a simple language about the feelings of the man-in-the-street. In the years 1822—1823 he published two volumes of his *Poems*, including ballads based on folklore songs and two parts of the drama, *Forefathers' Eve*, that interlaced with ancient folk rites relates the love tragedy of Gustaw abandoned by his beloved. In the poem, *Grazyna*, Mickiewicz took as his subject the historic battles between the Lithuanians and the Teutonic Knights, and condemned the attitude of those who sought to compromise with the enemy of the fatherland.

The publication of the first works of Mickiewicz inaugurated the period of Romanticism in Polish literature that concerned itself with the most important problems of national life, which the elite and unrealistic work of the contemporary "pseudo-classicists" tended to ignore.

The works of West-European authors, above all of Byron, exerted great influence on Mickiewicz who gradually matured as a romantic poet. Mickiewicz gave expression to his love for Byron's poetry by translating fragments from *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage*, *The Dream*, *Euthenasia*, *Darkness* and finally *Giaour*. Byron's poetry captured his imagination and set an example of heroism. Proof of this is a statement made by Mickiewicz at a later period. "Everything that tormented the mind, that disturbed the souls of the young generation found its faithful reflection in Byron's works and his life."

In 1823 Mickiewicz was arrested in connection with the trial of Vilna youth belonging to clandestine organizations. The Tsarist authorities investigated the case thoroughly, suspecting that they were on the track of a subversive political plot aimed at restoring national independence. After one and a half years spent in prison Mickiewicz was banished to central provinces of Russia. In 1824 the poet left his native land, never to return again.

Mickiewicz arrived in Russia with a halo of fame as a recognized Polish revolutionary poet. Progressive Russian circles welcomed him most enthusiastically. Immediately after his arrival in Petersburg Mickiewicz formed a friendship with Ryleiev and Bestushev, poets associated with the Decembrists who were fighting the tyranny of Tsarism. A most cordial and sincere friendship developed between him and Alexander Pushkin, the greatest Russian poet. In Russia Mickiewicz wrote further works: *Sonnets* (1826), the collection of *Crimean Sonnets* recording his impressions of his travels to Crimea, and *Konrad Wallenrod* (1828). In this poem Mickiewicz once more returned to the subject of the historic wars between the Lithuanians and the Teutonic Knights, imparting thereto the stamp of actuality. The hero of the poem sacrifices his personal happiness and his honour in order to destroy the mortal enemy of his fatherland. In view of the bondage of the Polish people and because of the growing revolutionary tendencies among the patriotic Polish youth, *Konrad Wallenrod* was a challenge to struggle against the conqueror. That is precisely how it was understood by Polish revolutionary circles, and also the "pseudo-classicists", who, always ready to come to terms with the Tsar, feared the influence which Mickiewicz's poetry exerted on conspiring youth. The poet's retort to the criticism of the Warsaw "pseudo-classicists" is similar to the answer Lord Byron gave his critics in the satire entitled: *English Bards and Scotch Reviewers*.

In 1829 Mickiewicz succeeded in obtaining a passport, enabling him to go abroad. First he left for Germany where he paid a visit to Goethe in Weimar. He spent some time in Italy, where he made the acquaintance of many outstanding personalities and writers, as for example that of James Fenimore Cooper. Mickiewicz's travels helped to deepen his great erudition. He developed a profound understanding of the ancient culture of Italy at its source, studying *The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* by the English historian Edward Gibbon.

The outbreak of the November 1830 uprising in that part of Poland annexed by Russia profoundly affected the poet. He wanted to participate in active fighting, but before he could even reach the country the uprising collapsed. His despair in the presence of the people's defeat and, simultaneously, his faith in ultimate victory, gave expression to the drama entitled Part III of *Forefathers' Eve* (1832), the crowning point of which is *The Great Improvisation*.

In 1832 Mickiewicz joined the Paris group of emigres who after the defeat of the uprising had sought refuge in France. He engaged at once in lively journalistic

activity, publishing the *Books of the Polish Nation and Pilgrims* and writing a couple of articles for the periodical *Polish Pilgrim*. In his statements Mickiewicz gave expression to his conviction that soon a European revolution would break out which would abolish despotic monarchical governments and the corrupt bourgeoisie, liberate the oppressed peoples and usher in an era of brotherhood and justice. He pointed out to the Poles that cooperation with democratic movements was the only path leading to the liberation of their homeland. When his hopes for the imminent outbreak of the revolution and his return to Poland were disappointed, his statements began to be permeated by deep pessimism, combined with efforts to escape from the problems of his times into the sphere of mysticism and religious fancies. However, before the burden of life in emigration once and for all put an end to Mickiewicz's poetic work, he presented his people with his masterpiece — the epic poem, *Master Thaddeus*.

Mickiewicz himself once compared his poem with Walter Scott's historic novels. *Master Thaddeus* as a matter of fact, reminds the reader of the profound historic realism in Scott's novels, of his splendidly outlined human characters and customs of the past, the subtle humour with which he paints his heroes. In this work Mickiewicz gives precedence to the struggle for the liberation of the fatherland, linking historic events of the recent past (the period of the Napoleonic wars) with the present.

The remaining years of his life Mickiewicz devoted to political and scientific activities. In the academic year 1839—1840 he was appointed professor of Latin Literature at the Lausanne University. In December 1840, upon the invitation from the French Government, he was given the chair of Slavonic Literature at the Collège de France in Paris. He lectured on this subject until May 1844, when the French government suspended him from his duties, charging the poet, according to a publication of the Ministry of the Interior, with "permitting himself to attack the social order, the Government and the Catholic religion." Mickiewicz's lectures were during the last period strongly under the influence of the mystical doctrine, taught by Andrzej Towianski who had set up a sect of which the poet was at that time a member.

The revolutionary uprisings throughout Europe in 1848 provided an occasion for Mickiewicz to champion the cause of Poland. Already before the outbreak in Paris of the February revolution, whose slogans won the poet's full support, he hastened to Rome to form there a Slav legion that was to join with the Italians fighting against Austria, with the object of liberating Slavic peoples from the Austrian yoke. Mickiewicz was received by Pope Pius IX whom he told of his hopes and expectations for the good results of the revolution, and shaking his arm he cried: "Sire, you may be sure that the spirit of God is now under the blouses of the Paris working men."

In spite of the fact that efforts to organize the Legion encountered great difficulties, Mickiewicz did not relax. In March 1849 he founded in Paris a French daily *La Tribune des Peuples*, a paper of the international political emigration, promoting a European revolution. Mickiewicz realized that the road towards the liberation of his fatherland lay in the alliance with the peoples of Europe. In the more than 70 articles he had contributed to *The People's Tribune*, the poet attacked all kinds of counter-revolutionary forces, and also fought against the reactionary policy of the Vatican. As a result of the chicaneries on the part of the French

Government, the proclamation of these principles first caused the suspension of the publication and, later, its decline.

Once again and, alas, for the last time in his life, this relentless champion of his native cause rose to fight for the liberation of Poland suffering under the yoke of her three oppressors. In the year of 1855 during the war fought by England, France and Sardinia, as allies of Turkey, against Tsarist Russia, Mickiewicz set out to Turkey to participate in forming a Polish Legion to fight against Russia. There, falling victim to the epidemic of cholera then raging in Constantinople, sudden death overtook him on November 26, 1855.

The body was taken to Paris and buried in the cemetery at Montmorency, where it was exhumed in 1890 and placed in the Wawel Cathedral in Cracow, a Polish national shrine that corresponds to Westminster Abbey in London. Here among the tombs of the Polish kings, of Prince Jozef Poniatowski, the hero of Napoleonic Wars, of Tadeusz Kosciuszko, leader of Polish peasantry in the national struggle for liberation in 1794 and general in Washington's army in the American Revolution, lies the greatest poet of Poland who could truthfully say with Konrad, the hero of the *Great Improvisation*: "I and a nation's mighty heart are one."

Not only the writings of the poet but also his efforts and endeavours and all his activities devoted to the liberation of his fatherland had been through the successive century an example, inspiration and stimulus for Polish people, seeking to regain the sovereignty and political independence of their country, to establish ever after a system based on social justice.

Since 1945 the editions of his works have gone into millions of copies which demonstrates how People's Poland has drawn upon her progressive tradition and revolutionary heritage embodied in the work of her greatest man of letters.

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