

# James Roney

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"Mickiewicz. Słowo i czyn", Alina  
Witkowska, Warszawa 1975 :  
[recenzja]

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stic unity—and the rifts in sequential ordering—of the four poems. The tracing of the linear course taken by the problematic of the four poems, together with the quotations of acknowledged judgments made by previous historians of the poet, serves to resolve problems of a philological nature. The weight of demonstration has been apportioned between the main disquisition and the footnotes. The commentary's references considerably enrich our factography concerning Słowacki. They introduce numerous corrections into the researches of E. Sawrymowicz, S. Makowski and even supplement the statements made by J. Kleiner in his *Kalendarz życia i twórczości Juliusza Słowackiego* (*A Chronicle of the Life and Work of Juliusz Słowacki*).

Sum. by Alina Siomkajło  
Transl. by Paul Coates

Alina Witkowska, **Mickiewicz. Słowo i czyn** (**Mickiewicz. Word and Deed**), Państwowe Wydawnictwo Naukowe, Warszawa 1975, pp. 366.

This is in many ways an unusual book. First of all, in this age of specialized studies and even more specialized scholarly languages it is becoming increasingly unusual for someone to attempt to write about an author's entire literary production. Witkowska has not only done this but also added the philosophical writings and life of an author about whom volumes of specialized studies have already been written. What makes her study more unusual is that it does not follow the traditional pattern associated with "life and works" studies. These studies were often criticized because they sometimes became parodies of both the author and his works as pop psychology deprived both his actions and his writings of their original motivation. In addition, literary scholars complained that the author's works usually were little more than an appendix to his biography.

Witkowska has taken another approach in writing this book. First of all, she has moved all of the traditional "scholarly apparatus" to the footnotes in order to preserve the fluidity and continuity

of her discourse. Secondly, as the two terms just used suggest, her language bears a closer resemblance to that of the romantics she is studying than to the often consciously artificial language of some forms of scholarship. If that artificial language is designed to insure intellectual distance and an objective relationship to one's subject, then the language used by Witkowska conveys emotional closeness and a subjective experience of the works and events under discussion. Witkowska's book in fact represents a very personal experience of Mickiewicz's life and works, an experience which she invites the reader to share. Since this experience is based on a thorough knowledge of both primary and secondary sources, the book represents a high level of popular scholarship.

Yet the reader has the feeling that there is something more than the demands of popular scholarship behind Witkowska's approach to her subject matter. The subtitle to her book is "word and deed" in contrast to the more traditional "life and works." It is obvious that Witkowska has chosen words in which Mickiewicz and his contemporaries would have described his poetry and life. In other words, her book is an attempt to understand Mickiewicz in his own terms rather than to classify him according to the terms of twentieth century scholarship. In order to avoid misunderstanding it must be added that for Witkowska understanding Mickiewicz in his terms means understanding him in the same manner as a romantic would have understood him. Briefly, it means reading his life and works as two closely interrelated plot lines and attempting to grasp, or more exactly, to experience, the meaning behind them. It is this experience which she then attempts to convey to the reader. One cannot help wondering if her choice of format and language is based on the belief that the more abstract, specialized languages are incapable of communicating such an experience. If so, one also cannot help noticing that she is repeating the original Romantic revolt against the abstract language of the eighteenth century. A discussion of the issues involved here such as the relationship between subjectivity and objectivity in scholarly research is, unfortunately, beyond the scope of this review.

The remainder of the review will be devoted to a brief summary of some of the many interesting interpretations made by Witkowska. In the first chapter "Philomat and Gustaw" she describes the youth

and early poetic works of Mickiewicz. Witkowska points out that Mickiewicz's upbringing on a rural estate after the social mixing caused by the partitions brought him into contact with many classes and exposed him to Byelorussian and Lithuanian folklore. The next important influence on him was when as a young student in Wilno he helped form a society dedicated to the Classical ideals of duty to the state stoicism and friendship. *Żywila* published in 1819 is concerned with these ideals as its heroine kills her husband for betraying his country. Witkowska shows that *Grażyna* (1822) is a large step forward because of Mickiewicz's synthesis of the universality of Classicism with the concreteness and historical interest of Romanticism. His *Ballady i romanse* (*Ballads and Romances*, 1822) show his poetic maturity and conveys his belief that both nature and the legends of the folk contain a deep truth which the poet can perceive.

The rest of the chapter is concerned with *Dziady* (*Forefathers*) Part IV, discussed in relation to foreign influences and Mickiewicz's own unhappy love. Witkowska asserts that he could have written such a work only when his job as a provincial teacher separated him from his friends in Wilno. Alone he could experience both loneliness and an all-consuming, unsuccessful love. The play itself is built on the opposition between Gustaw's Romantic outbursts of feeling and the reason and restraint of the Priest.

In "The Slavic Byron" Witkowska describes how Mickiewicz developed as a poet during his exile in Russia. She feels that it had a beneficial effect on him by freeing him from the effects of his unhappy love and exposing him to various cultures. In particular, he saw the Crimea as the Orient in miniature. It was also important that he entered Russia before the Decabrist revolt. In such an atmosphere he became a hero and first played the role of a famous Romantic poet. As a result, he first began to think on a European scale. Also, he first achieved success with women. The first poetic results of this were the *Sonety krymskie* (*Crimean Sonnets*) in which he developed a new poetic language. Witkowska describes the sonnets as both a physical and metaphysical journey. The hero has unknown sadness in his life of the Byronic hero. It is a sadness which he does not lose as he perceives the secrets of nature. Witkowska also notes that these secrets are apparently

incommunicable. *Konrad Wallenrod* shows the effect of history on the two basic human emotions: love and hate. Konrad, who lives in an occupied country, must sacrifice his love for the good of his countrymen. He must also adopt the methods of disguise and betrayal in order to succeed. The poem also contains the figure of a bard who represents the memory of the people. He both drives Konrad to his fate and assures his eternal life in the songs of the people.

In "Paradox of Faith" Witkowska describes Mickiewicz's two years of constant travel. She emphasizes the influence of his stay in Rome where he saw at first hand the ruins of Roman pride and the glories of Christian humility. This experience had a great effect on his later religious thought. It was also at this time that he developed his notion of Christ as God-Man, as the new Prometheus who could join heaven and earth because he lacked the pride of his Greek predecessor. Witkowska concludes that this view of Christ allowed Mickiewicz to escape from the continual paradox of faith that God is a slave of his slave since he cannot be conscious of existence without him. This period was important as a development away from Byronism. Witkowska notes that it means Mickiewicz's mysticism started before the failure of the November Uprising.

In "Time Rediscovered" Witkowska hypothesizes that Mickiewicz may have been against the revolution because it conflicted with his image of Christ and because his first-hand exposure to Russian power convinced him it was doomed to failure. At any rate, his hesitation caused him to lose face among the revolutionaries. Shortly after this he produced what Witkowska interprets as his three-pronged attack on time: *Księgi narodu polskiego i pielgrzymstwa polskiego* (*The Books of the Polish Nation and of the Polish Pilgrimage*) in which he uses the present to prophesy the future, *Pan Tadeusz* in which he connects the past in a continuum with the present, and *Forefathers* Part III in which he links the present with the universal time of Good and Evil.

After describing the well-known views of Mickiewicz as expressed in *The Books...*, Witkowska suggests that they are also a bold literary experiment since by presenting them as found manuscripts written by the people Mickiewicz denies literature and appears as the voice of the people. *Forefathers* Part III is most interesting for its three temporal planes: agrarian myth, historical and religious. Witkowska describes in detail the interrelations between the three. She also

notes that Konrad and the Priest repeat the opposition of Part IV and that this time there is a complete break with Byronism. Another important point made by her is that the Konrad—Peter opposition here corresponds to the Prometheus—Christ opposition which Mickiewicz developed in Rome. Witkowska makes the provocative, if unverifiable, statement that *Pan Tadeusz* may have been inspired by a visit to Pompei, that Mickiewicz wanted to preserve Soplicowo as nature had preserved Pompei. Soplicowo is a small, closed space based on Mickiewicz's memories of childhood. It is an idyllic place in harmony with nature. Witkowska asserts that in this small space each character develops heroic proportions as opposed to the anonymity Mickiewicz had observed in the capitalist society of the West. She praises the therapeutic value of the poem as a vision of a Polish past.

In the remaining chapters of the book "Brother Bard," "The Apostel of the New Messiah," "The Aroused Giant," "The Epoch of Realization," "Lectures Like Duels," "The Mystical Radical," "In Revolution One Must Be a Revolutionary" and "The Knight Errant of Revolution" Witkowska describes Mickiewicz's activity as a mystic and revolutionary. Of particular interest are her comments about Mickiewicz's complicated relations with Towiański and about the insanity and curing of Mickiewicz's wife. One is impressed by her attempt to understand the motivations of these two important influences (perhaps harmful) on Mickiewicz from their viewpoint. The wife, in particular, is presented as a victim of her situation. The account of Mickiewicz's death is also thorough and worthy of attention.

Sum. by James Roney

Marta Piwińska, **Złe wychowanie. Fragmenty romantycznej biografii (Une mauvaise éducation. Fragments d'une biographie romantique)**, Warszawa 1979.

Le livre associe des études sur la topique à celles sur la problématique existentielle du romantisme. L'auteur se propose d'y montrer l'idée romantique de la vie ou le mythe romantique de la vie, et cela d'une manière aussi concrète que possible, en se fondant sur