

Michał Kuziak

The Slavic Barbarian in Adam Mickiewicz's Paris Lectures

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Michał Kuziak
Uniwersytet Warszawski

The Slavic Barbarian in Adam Mickiewicz's Paris Lectures*

I

Adam Mickiewicz's view on Slavic nations is more complicated than has been presented thus far. What has mostly been noticed is that he idealised Slavs in his Paris lectures (see Cieśla-Korytowska). But this idealisation has its specific complexities, obscurities and ambiguities—which are characteristic not only for a work in formation, in which the concept is still being shaped, but also for an idea recognising/creating an unstable identity, in this case the Slavic identity (these issues were referred to by Rudaś-Grodzka). An example of such ambiguities is the motif of the Slavic barbarian—and the accompanying concept of the necessity (at least a potential necessity) of destroying European culture—which has been marginalised in the interpretations of the lectures but which seems striking in the thoughts of a poet so profoundly and consciously immersed in European cultural tradition.

Some other contexts, mostly overlooked so far, are also significant, especially the ones connected with the issues of colonialism and orientalism (Said 1ff.) characteristic of European discourse in the 18th and 19th century. The view of the Slavs that emerges from the Paris lectures is dialogic—partly in the sense that it constitutes an answer to the above discourse. Mickiewicz voiced his opinions on Slavic nations in the context of slavophile thought

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(this issue has been written about—see Walicki) and the Western reflection on Slavs. Mickiewicz saw this problem himself as he felt compelled to tell the truth about the Slavs, arguing with the existing archive of knowledge about them. The deliberations on the Slavic barbarian presented in his Paris lectures also constitute an answer to the orientalising of the Slavs and are an attempt to go beyond either idealistic or negative stereotyping of these people.

And, last but not least, there is the issue of language that Mickiewicz applies to speak about the Slavs. This language changes throughout the Paris lectures just as if the author was striving to escape the trap of the initially adopted language, originating from the works of Johann Gottfried Herder who underscored the pastoralness of the Slavs, the noble savages of Europe, but also showed their inability to create their own civilisation. The passage about the Slavic barbarian, associating the nation not with an idyll but with sublimity, becomes the conclusion of the search for a new language to talk about the Slavs.

II

In order to understand the uniqueness of this conclusion one has to start at the beginning, that is at the question of what and how Herder wrote about the Slavs as Mickiewicz initially assumes Herder's point of view. The passage of *Outlines of a Philosophy of the History of Man* dedicated to the issue of Slavic nations is frequently referred to as the Slavic chapter, albeit it seems a slight overstatement since it is but a minute fragment, modestly separating the abundant chapters on other nations. It did, however, become the starting point of a Slavic renaissance occurring at the turn of 18th century in Europe and it was, to a greater or lesser extent, accepted by the Slavs themselves as the language of their identity.

On the one hand—and this drew the attention of the Slavs—Herder listed a catalogue of characteristics which at first glance may seem positive and idealistic. They result from connecting Slavic identity with the countryside, from the idyllic nature of a nation consisting of quiet and hard-working farmers, shepherds and craftsmen who sold the products of their land and industry (but, as the philosopher notes, the Slavs also built cities and followed mining

and casting of metals; it seems noteworthy that Mickiewicz omits this statement thereby radicalising Herder's discourse).

On the other hand, though, one has to remember that Herder's remarks come from within the orientalisising discourse responsible for creating the opposition of Us vs. Others. In this opposition it is Us who possess the values related to civilisation (such an opposition does not, however, exclude the sympathy for the oppressed nor the criticism of the oppressors; see Wolff 284ff.). As we read in Herder's text: "It is unfortunate for these people, that their love of quiet and domestic industry was incompatible with any permanent military establishment, though they were not defective in valour in the heat of resistance" (Herder, 1966: 483). It seems therefore that the Slavs lacked the skill of self-organisation. They also did not make their mark in history. Other nations threatened their "gay and musical" lives (*ibid.*) and oppressed the Slavs who were helpful and hospitable up to the point of excess, freedom-loving, averse to military conquests or plundering while being submissive and obedient. But as Herder also notes, when they were oppressed, the Slavs' character changed into "the artful, cruel indolence of a slave" (*ibid.*). This issue, it seems important to note, will be accounted for by Mickiewicz (along with Slavic laziness and sybaritism described by the philosopher), who follows, as we will see, the logic of the moral economy of messianism which proves that the Slavs have already done their penance.

This is the view that emerges from Herder's Slavic chapter. In the *Journal of my Voyage in the Year 1769* he also writes about the future of Europe which belongs to the Slavs and is connected to them realising the idea of their full humanity: "its [the Slavic nation's] spirit from the northwest will spread over Europe which now lies asleep and make a spiritual conquest of it" (Herder, 1969: 90). This particular notion seemed to resonate particularly strongly in the 19th-century Slavic countries and also in the works of the Polish poet.

As Said notices, the orientalisising discourse—when paired with Western discourse of modernity and of the progress of civilisation—is responsible for the violence against others (see Said 4ff.), in this case the Slavs. At the same time one must add that Herder demanded a holistic approach to these nations, the creation of "a general history of *this race*" (Herder, 1966: 484). He also presaged changes—which were possibly the political aftermath of the Enlightenment

thought—that would lead to the liberation of Slavs and their return to their happy old lives.

III

An important dialogical context for the discussion about the Slavic nations in Mickiewicz's Paris lectures is Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel's thought which constitutes one of the most important modern discourses of hegemonic character, legitimising the dominance of the West as the source and model of rationality (see Gall). Hegel's thought on the Slavs is in its main outline identical to Herder's as Hegel also derives Slavic characteristics from these peoples' agricultural origin; however, he makes the orientalisising discourse more radical by abandoning both the sympathy resulting from the oppression of these people and the prophecy concerning them. Curiously enough, Mickiewicz states in his lectures that Hegel nonetheless speaks of a future Slavic mission (a thought, as the poet-professor claims, that proved inspirational to Russian authors).

According to the philosopher, Slavic countries are the ones who appear on the stage of history too late and hence cannot contribute to it. Also, they are in constant contact with Asia which has a negative stigma. In his teleological vision of history, which also takes progress into account, the philosopher assumes that: "The History of the World travels from East to West, for Europe is absolutely the end of history, Asia the beginning" (Hegel 121). Hegel justifies the exclusion of Slavs from the historical discourse:

These people did, indeed, found kingdoms and sustain spirited conflicts with the various nations that came across their path. Sometimes, as an advanced guard—an intermediate nationality—they took part in the struggle between Christian Europe and unchristian Asia. The Poles even liberated beleaguered Vienna from the Turks; and the Slaves have to some extent been drawn within the sphere of Occidental Reason. Yet this entire body of peoples remains excluded from our consideration, because hitherto it has not appeared as an independent element in the series of phases that Reason has assumed in the World. Whether it will do so hereafter, is a question that does not concern us here; for in History we have to do with the Past. (Hegel 367)

Therefore we learn about the marginal and inferior position of the Slavs and, most of all, about their lack of autonomy. Interestingly, Hegel treats all Slavic nations as one entity—"the great Slavonic nation" (Hegel 366)—without distinguishing particular nations and cultures, sometimes merely mentioning Poland and Russia.

And one more passage from Hegel's work which develops Herder's view of the Slavs:

The Slavonic nations were agricultural. This condition of life brings with it the relation of lord and serf. In agriculture the agency of nature predominates; human industry and subjective activity are on the whole less brought into play in this department of labor than elsewhere. The Slavonians therefore did not attain so quickly or readily as other nations the fundamental sense of pure individuality—the consciousness of Universality—that which we designated above as political power, and could not share the benefits of dawning freedom. (Hegel 439)

It was therefore the peasant state of the Slavs which was responsible for their identity deficits; Slavic passivity and formlessness come from their fatalistic dependence on their natural conditions.

In Hegel's discourse political power is the fulfilment of historical rationality as it allows the real freedom to be realised, taking minorities into consideration. As the philosopher notes, Poland was not capable of keeping its independence. It collapsed trying to accomplish the unreal freedom. The philosopher criticises free elections, magnates enslaving the whole nation and the attempts to eliminate Protestantism in the old Poland. A nation devoid of political power has no place in the holistic logic of history. It becomes excluded from the European discourse of civilisation.

At this moment the introductory parts of Mickiewicz's lectures, whose topics are later elaborated on, begin to gain a fuller meaning; their aim was either to explain the civilising and historic contribution of Slavs (a whole, diversified and developing Slavic continent) and their antiquity or to explain why there has been no such contribution (e.g. by underscoring that the Slavs defended Europe from the invasions of Asian empires, constituted the bulwark of Christianity—and they created themselves during these fights) and also to

argue their openness to the West.¹ Similar thoughts are presented in those parts of the lectures where Mickiewicz talks about the idealised regime of the old Poland; there are also notions like the resistance to Protestantism, diversifying the Slavic nations and emphasising the relationships of the Slavs, especially Poles, with Europe. Also, the reference to Hegel may explain Mickiewicz's emphasis on a spiritual model of community (as opposed to a material state), the criticism of naturalistic determinism or rationalism which, as it turns out, goes beyond the epistemological plain. The author says: "Hegel does not specify in which kingdom God currently resides; but according to his system, it is not difficult to guess that God is now in Prussia. The political God has become a Prussian" (IX, 232).²

Moreover, it seems the philosophy of action, emphasised by the poet professor as the specificity of Slavic thought, is related to challenging the notion of history's rationality and to demanding its radical recreation.

IV

Let us move on to the subject of the Slavic barbarian(s) in the Paris lectures. The appearance of this figure in Mickiewicz's thought results from the logic of Slavic discourse in his lectures or, to be more precise, from the logic of critical distortion of this discourse. On the one hand, if the Slavic barbarian appears in the pejorative context in the modern European discourse (as opposed to the figures of modernity), then the poet-professor extracts this figure from this discourse and uses it—rewrites it—for the purposes of his own discourse, giving it a subversive meaning.³ On the other hand (and this issue will be discussed

¹ I have already addressed this subject (see Kuziak, 2010).

² All quotes from Mickiewicz's texts have been translated based on the following edition: *Dzieła*. Warszawa: Czytelnik, 1955. The Roman number refers to the volume, the Arabic—to the page.

³ One should note here a cultural—aesthetic—rehabilitation of barbarians which has already been done in the period of Romanticism (and which also was a manifestation of orientalisation). Namely, they are connected with the founding myth of modernity, especially the Middle Ages, where the Romantics searched for their roots. Mickiewicz does a similar thing in his *Preface* to his *Ballads and Romances*. We read for instance that "the Northern hordes mixed with local people settled on the ruins of the Roman empire were to awake

again in this paper), the Slavic barbarian becomes a sign of radicalising the Slavic author's discourse that was initially influenced by the modernity. In the first two courses of his lectures Mickiewicz refers to the achievements of civilisation as to a significant value, carefully pointing out that the Slavs did have such achievements and also emphasising the benefits (both pecuniary and spiritual) for the West from studying Slavic nations.

The figure of the Slavic barbarian appears in the 3rd and especially the 4th course of Paris lectures (the 11th lecture of this course is entitled *Barbarians. The Infinite Human*). The author, having critically discussed European culture, literature, philosophy and Church, looks for a model of power, charisma and action. He seeks to transform mid-19th century Europe which has found itself, as he claims, in crisis. One should also underscore that he became fascinated by the strength of the Asians, whom Hegel orientalised. Earlier Mickiewicz divided the Slavs into Western Slavs, connected to the universe of Roman culture, and Eastern Slavs, leaning towards Asia. In this opposition the former, especially the Poles, were granted positive characteristics; the latter included Russians.

The author no longer seeks to justify the Slavs nor does he point out their cultural heritage or historic deeds. He also does not create any economic systems in order to convince the West that there is a substantial benefit in getting acquainted with the East. Moreover, he does not accept the concept of a rich pre-Christian Slavic culture (such an opinion was voiced for instance by Zorian Dołęga-Chodakowski). The idea of a different spiritual culture of the Slavs (founded on the category of civilisation deficiency) also seems to be emphasised in a different manner than in the first two courses of Paris lectures. This notion no longer constitutes a purely cognitive phenomenon; it turns out to be primarily the source of the will to act. The poet-professor notes that contemporary Slavs have ceased imitating the West.

the long-asleep imagination and initiate a new type of poetry" (V, 190). A similar aesthetic thought can be found in the Paris lectures: "Indeed, whenever Western, Greek or Roman armies, or even crusaders, crossed the lower Danube, they abandoned, so to say, the realm of history and entered the land of poetry; and whenever they moved even further, towards the Don River, they submerged in the land of tales and legends. And vice versa, barbarian leaders, leaders of nomadic hordes, were known only by an uncertain tale as long as they remained beyond the Danube; but once they crossed the Danube, they entered history" (VIII, 41).

Mickiewicz is aware how the figure of the barbarian functions in the hegemonic discourse—to put it in modern categories. He notices the violence lying at the core of seemingly neutral cultural discourse: “Civilised societies, when they reach their ultimate development, call every new nation barbaric” (XI, 467). In the 3rd course of the lectures he presents the historical connections between Slavs and barbarians (“Our history is therefore connected more than any other with the history of barbarians” [XI, 407]) and links the currently discussed sculptures depicting barbarians with the depictions of Slavs, pointing out the history of the Slavic people inscribed in these monuments (“srb”): from greatness (military service by the kings of Nineveh at Babylon), through enslavement to redeeming sacrifice.

Mickiewicz scrutinizes the sculpture of the *Barbarian* (*Arrotino*), arguing that it could not be of Scythian origin and persuading the reader that the figure has Slavic physiognomy. He sees that the figure could be a Slavic torturer: “. . . with his errant gaze painfully fixed on his victim, he shudders to think that he has to torture him but his silent smile reveals that he cannot hinder the necessity” (XI, 242f).⁴ The author, similarly to Herder, describes the obedience of a Slavic slave (his tamed physical strength) and, also similarly to the German philosopher, Mickiewicz notices a gradual corruption of this character, as seen in the sculptures of caryatids, showing—according to the Polish poet—slaves who “have come to the perdition of all moral feelings, already devoid of both will and movement” (XI, 244). There is, however, an optimistic solution to this story, based on messianism and the concept of redeeming sacrifice. According to the author, the sculpture depicting the *Dying Gladiator* (whom Byron recognised in his *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage* as a Dacian and Mickiewicz—as a Slav; see Sinko 521) was to be the proof that “. . . the Slavic nation is ready to adopt Christianity” (XI, 246).

It seems that Mickiewicz's thoughts on barbarism were based on the interpretation of barbarian invasion of the ancient world (and the criticism of the civilisation model linked with it). The author argues with the view that the barbarians stopped the development of civilisation (“[that] they interrupted the

⁴ Marta Ruszczyńska, who puts the Slavic barbarian in the title of her paper, deals in her article with everything but the passages directly connected to this issue. These fragments are of main interest in this article (see Ruszczyńska).

progressive march of human spirit, that they stopped the flight of imagination, destroyed sciences and pushed humanity back into the darkness” [XI, 467]) and that the only positive aspect of their actions may be the rejuvenation of the Western race. The poet-professor assumes that providence sends the barbarians. In his approach progress is a spiritual, not a substantial phenomenon. Those who had invaded Europe and pushed it into the Middle Ages were the people of the Word, who gave saints and warriors to the world, lived wishing to achieve grand deeds and to transform the face of the world.

Similar people, says Mickiewicz, are appearing today, in the 19th century: these are the Slavs and (this may seem surprising but is compliant with the author's political plan) the French. As we read: “But neither one nor the other have found peace on earth so far. Neither industry nor philosophy could rivet the French spirit. Also no government could satisfy the Slavic spirit” (XI, 473). Both nations remain insatiable, at the vanguard of European revolution, living true Christianity (see Ruszkowski 131ff.). One has to remember, though, that the France Mickiewicz talks about is the France of Napoleonic legend, living “the military spirit” (XI, 433) while Slavs consist mainly of Poles (legitimised by their suffering and the resultant spiritual power), but also Russians (having their material power originating from Asia). These three nations are to change the face of Europe.

Mickiewicz constructs a parallel juxtaposing the times of the fall of Byzantium and the Islamic invasion with the 19th-century reality. When depicting the defeat of Greeks, he states: “Let us not regret those ruins of aqueducts, those grand cities torn down; the human spirit could have been petrified in them, just as now it is being petrified in some of the Italian cities, exposed to a horrible future” (XI, 432). The thoughts on barbarism become a part of the prophecy resulting from the hermeneutics of history (in this passage Mickiewicz refers to the work by the Russian author Sergei d'Oubril *A few thoughts in connection with the conflict between state and clergy*): “Such a state of affairs indicates better than anything else that an era is coming to an end. Such a state of affairs once brought barbarians to civilised countries. Now we can understand that the barbaric invasions were an act of Providence” (XI, 431). Barbarians, as the poet professor lectures on, appear in eras of decadence and excessive development of unproductive culture—“rich in words, unable to act” (XI, 432): “people

who devise systems, who invent social truths but who have done nothing and dared nothing, these are the people who bring the barbarians to you” (XI, 432). One of such eras is, according to Mickiewicz, the middle of 19th century (“Is European literature of the civilised nations not in the same state as were the literatures of Greeks and Romans in the 5th century?” [XI, 469]). Evidence may be for instance well-developed rationalism and the tendency to construct systems and doctrines, separation from spirituality and morality, the crisis of truth and also the emerging capitalism which can be associated with confusing values with capital.

The author presents the situation of Slavs suffering under foreign rule, rebelling against that state of affairs and waiting for a change. He admits, in accordance with the orientalisng discourse: “These people have remained passive so far; they cover immeasurable areas on the world map but are of no importance in the literary, artistic and politic history, in the history as we see today, in the history marked with buildings and written down” (XI, 279f.). He adds (also in accordance with the rules of the orientalisng discourse, this time emphasising the kenotic character of Slavic experience): “We, the Slavs, have nothing but a fresh memory of the country we come from, this country common to all people, the country where the soul stays. Having entered the world scene as the last, we still remember the pictures from our former spiritual homeland” (XI, 342). Therefore the barbarians bring the memory of the transcendent cultural source to Europe.

The above statement was taken from the 4th course in which Mickiewicz adopts the concept of the Slavs as a nation immersed in transcendence (which I have already discussed: Kuziak 1999). It transpires then that these people have a rich mythology—a fact which the author denied in the 1st course, pointing therefore to the reasons for the deficits of Slavic civilisation. The poet-professor summarises his thoughts on barbarism: “We have boldly accepted this name: we are indeed the barbarians of today” (XI, 467). This way the figure of the barbarian allows Mickiewicz to make a transition from seeing the Slavs the way Herder did (as a nation both virtuous and having certain deficits of civilisation) to perceiving them as a nation of power; it allows for a fundamental change in the language of this nation’s identity. Barbarism has also become a way to avoid the traps of orientalisation set in Herder’s discourse which fully show their

consequences in Hegel's thought—even if for the fact of joining the Eastern and Western nations.

One should note that Mickiewicz's reflection on the Slavic barbarian is also the conclusion of a messianic vision constructed in the Paris lectures, at the centre of which there is the image of a God combining characteristics of Jesus and Jehovah. The poet professor, arguing with the picture of Christ as a weak peasant (falsified by the Church—as he claims), refers to Michelangelo's *Last Judgement* showing anger as the Son of God's main attribute. In this perspective it is the Slavs who could be the tool of this anger, the scourge of God for the 19th-century Europe. At the same time the author dilutes the significance of the new barbarism: "Nobody will set fire to libraries, but let us hope that people will not attend them as much when the public life has become more illuminating" (XI, 478).

If we remember that the thoughts on the Slavic barbarian are presented by the author who—as I have mentioned before—formulated the model of civilisation for philomaths, which had stemmed from the Enlightenment vision of culture, we must realise the author's tragedy and despair. The way that led Mickiewicz to the concept of the Slavic barbarian had begun around the time he had written *The Books and The Pilgrimage of the Polish Nation* (in the 3rd part of *Forefathers' Eve* one may find the famous polemic with the pastoral image of Slavic nations and the replacement thereof with sublimity), where for the first time he so abruptly broke up with European cultural tradition for it had not remedied the partitions of Poland. Mickiewicz also exhibits barbarism in the style of his lectures which does not comply with academic standards—not only in the content but also by repeated violations of rhetoric and logic.

It is worth underscoring that Mickiewicz in ways universalises barbarism by making it inherent to Christian tradition. The barbarians, as it has been shown, are the true Christians who, by reviving the religion, will make its rules applicable to politics. This way they turn out to be the Other for whom Europe waits while at the same time they originate from a heritage common to all European nations.

The discourse on the Slavic barbarian is filled with sublimity—for it is a discourse of a great historic action, awaited by Mickiewicz who predicted that a catastrophe would happen to revive Europe. One cannot help but notice in Mickiewicz's thought on the history of the Slavs—on their exclusion from the European society by the West and their return in the 19th century—the realisation of the heroic myth, described by Joseph Campbell, presenting the initiation rite of a hero who shows a community the way to regenerate their powers (Campbell 34ff.).

Mickiewicz arrives at the discourse on barbarism by abandoning Herder's way of depicting Slavs and by addressing the orientalisng tendencies present there. According to the poet-professor, a Slav is not only a good savage of modern Europe, not only someone who will bring spiritual and moral rebirth but also someone who threatens 19th-century Europe with destruction; someone who does not want to be a suffering victim anymore.

Trans. Katarzyna Bielawna

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Summary

The article discusses the concept of barbarian and barbarism in Mickiewicz's Paris Lectures. The orientalisation of the Slavs by Herder and Hegel provides the context for this study. The author of the article presents how Mickiewicz originates his language from the works of Herder—who describes the Slavs as an idyllic nation, connected with the countryside—and later outlines the vision of the Slavs as a nation of power that wants to change the history of the 19th century.

Key words: comparative literature, romantic literature, the Slavs/the Slavic/Slavic mission, barbarism, postcolonialism, Paris lectures, Adam Mickiewicz, Herder, Hegel

Słowiański barbarzyńca w wykładach paryskich Adama Mickiewicza

Streszczenie

Artykuł poświęcony jest zawartej w prelekcjach paryskich Mickiewiczowskiej koncepcji barbarzyńcy i barbarzyństwa. Kontekstem podjętych rozważań jest orientalizująca Słowian myśl Herdera i Hegla. Autor wskazuje, jak polski romantyk wychodzi od myślenia Herderowskiego, ukazującego Słowian jako lud łagodny, związany z naturą, i zmierza ku wizji Słowian jako ludu mocy, pragnącego zmienić historię XIX wieku.

Słowa kluczowe: komparatystyka literacka, romantyzm, Słowianie/Słowiańszczyzna/misja słowiańska, barbarzyństwo, postkolonializm, prelekcje paryskie, Adam Mickiewicz, Herder, Hegel