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Mickiewicz and the Romantic Tradition

A review of Anna Spółna's *Dialogi z Mickiewiczem. Aktualizacje tradycji romantycznej w nowej i najnowszej poezji polskiej* [Conversations with Mickiewicz. Revisions of the Romantic Tradition in Contemporary Polish Poetry], Radom: Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Technologiczno-Humanistycznego im. Kazimierza Pułaskiego, 2017), 392 pp2.

'Dialogi z Mickiewiczem' by Anna Spółna is an ample, vital collection of reviews of Romantic traditions in the Polish poetry of the last quarter of the century. It is a voice in the discussion on the presence of Romanticism in the art of post-modern times. The publication is devoted to Adam Mickiewicz, the most widely-known symbol of Polish Romanticism and a point of reference not only for poets but also for the promoters of Romantic ideas, yearning to build upon the foundation of a character rooted in the national spirit. This role model, as it is pointed out by Spółna, 'has become subject to manipulation' as well as became a sort-of creation, that is on the one hand treated as a peculiar fixing of sociopolitical ideologies in the tradition regarded as the most patriotic and nationalistic in the history of Polish literature, and on the other, as a private patron or an aphorist on duty, whose loose quotes or phrases taken out of the poetic context are exploited in building lapidary takes on modernity.

The author of the reviewed book does not rely on the pompous image of the poet's creative output nor his caricatured forms but rather attempts to present a multifaceted and multidimensional mode of employing the poet's biography and legacy. She presents multiple areas in which the literary heritage was embraced, including bibliographic references, suppositions, anecdotes and tales accumulated around the poet (p. 13). The references to Mickiewicz's oeuvre are of a heterogeneous character and manifest themselves on different planes and in multiple contexts

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² A broader take on Anna's Spółna book was published in Polish in issue 30, 2018 of the journal 'Świat i Słowo'. This review is, in its significantly shortened form, translated to English by Przemysław Malec. Quotes from the reviewed piece will be annotated with a page number in the brackets.

- institutional, anniversarial, school-related, critical, poetic, messianic, and occasional (e.g. the catastrophe of 10 April 2010). On one hand, these are intertextual, *strictly* literary, relations, built on quotes, paraphrases, transformations or allusions, on the other, they are the possible strategies and occasions which employ the creative output of the Romanticist to preserve common myths, and create a literary cliché functioning whenever and wherever a nationalistic and patriotic shell is needed.

In order to investigate such a rich source material the author employs various resources, referring inter alia to the theory of intertextuality as well as using other, not only native, methodological approaches, such as the theory of the Anxiety of Influence influenced by Harold Bloom³, Reception Theory by Wolfgang Iser and Hans Robert Jauss or Deconstructionism (p. 16), utilised previously in the study of Romanticism. This methodological diversity allows us to investigate the phenomenon of the post-humous life of Mickiewicz from different perspectives and set a broader context for the discussion on Romantic manifestations that can be observed in modernity.

Spółna begins her considerations with a review of centennial texts, and school interpretations and references to the poetry of Adam Mickiewicz, which form a foundation for the later associations about the national bard in the minds of the masses. These are those that are used more often than not to create dialogues connecting the Romantic Era and modernity. It needs to be remarked, though, that those are not the only sources of references to Romantic literature as knowledge on the topic of Romanticism tends to be mediated by the schematicised and conventionalized pictures perpetuated by popular literature (which draws from schemes presented and taught during the school period), or the repetitiveness of conventional interpretations along with a lack of reflective (renewed) reading. On the occasion of various types of anniversaries, above all related directly to the life of Mickiewicz, but also national ones, the poet becomes appropriated, inserted into the reference framework of a given occasion. This part of the work is an extraordinary compendium of the studies of the works of the author of *Dziady* and his biography, anniversary issues, and publications dedicated to his oeuvre, which consists of a tremendous amount of content that was meticulously verified, organised and subjected to critical deliberation. In this section, the potential of Mickiewicz's creative output is confronted with questions and needs of people of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries.

The essential part of the monograph, however, presents a relation with Mickiewicz that is much stronger and more profound, which was unveiled within the works of poets of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, meticulously selected by the author. In the second chapter, a dialogue with the bard becomes linked with biographies of such authors as Jarosław Iwaszkiewicz, Tadeusz Różewicz or Jacek Podsiadło. The poets of three generations face Mickiewicz's texts and confront them in a specific manner, therefore, discovering the common ground between them and the poet.

³ See e.g. a book by M. Bąk, *Twórczy lęk Słowackiego. Antagonizm wieszczów po latach*, Katowice 2013.

At the same time, they manifest their own discreteness and their own rules of using the poetic context, different from Mickiewicz's, hence giving the poetry of the author of *Pan Tadeusz* a new, unobvious context. It seems that "Each of them manifests a need of a poetic dialogue with Romanticism in a different manner" (p. 18) - Iwaszkiewicz, by looking for a discreet satiation of extreme emotional states and pseudonymization of his own sexuality (his series of poems titled *Droga*); Różewicz, by posing questions on the identity of the poet and somewhat sketching an autoportrait with the help of an anecdotal work with Mickiewicz playing the role of the main character (*Ten to też*); and Podsiadło, by turning towards a particular sonnet – *Stepy Akemańskie* [*The Steppes of Akerman*], in order to tell "his own existential tale of loneliness, focus and absolution" (p. 138) while marking at the same time his own creative separateness (*Życiowy rozbitek*).

In the following chapters, the connection between Mickiewicz and the poets gains a more obscure and ambiguous character, for it becomes veiled by a layer of irony, and wordplay, expressing the authors' distance towards the poetic authority. The works of Marcin Świetlicki, Tomasz Różycycki and Agnieszka Mirahina are analysed to testify to their attachment to the bard's oeuvre which formed their authorial existence, but also constitute an attempt at separation, and escape from it, going beyond the spaces of Romanticism. The aforementioned authors' stance towards the movement is thus quite elusive, and the status of the Romantic traditions becomes undermined. Różycycki treats the poetic ideals of Romanticism - as succinctly observed by Spółna - with 'ironic suspicion'. Mirahina, on the other hand, in her cycle *Widmowy refren* executes a postmodern mechanism of playing with meanings, or - maybe - rather going beyond the meanings of texts comprised of fragments, quotes, and traces of somebody else's words immersed in the Romantic context. The most distinctive, however, example of attachment to Mickiewicz that is analysed by the scholar is the poetry of Świetlicki, which is evidenced by a ghastly character, a living dead, employing the topos of Mickiewicz's balladic phantom and Gustaw, who wanders the city (Kraków), immersed in its topography and ghostly atmosphere, where everything exists, but at the same time is merely a shell, crumbling and withering away. The directness of references and clear origins of the motifs is, however, treated with an ironic distance, positioning the author's approach towards Romanticism somewhere 'between an addiction and mockery' (p. 182).

An interesting part of *Dialogi z Mickiewiczem* is a chapter devoted to references to *Pan Tadeusz*. They signify a need to create a poem about the meaning and capacity of epic poetry, being a 'test of capacities that the holistic tale bears in the decentralised, postmodern world' (p. 221). The analysis of four pieces - Różycycki's *Dwanaście Stacji* [*Twelve Stations*], Kurek's *Oleander*, *Dystychy dla Eugeniusza Alisanki* by Zadura, and *Sopliców* by Marcinkiewicz - leads to rediscovering 'Mickiewicz's archdesign' in different manners and reveals its various capabilities of recreating, conjuring and influencing. The longevity of *Pan Tadeusz*, as well as the spirit of epic poetry, becomes

indisputable, however, the manner of handling motifs and parodying the original is very diverse and subject to change depending on its relation with the content and genre. The outcome of the 're-writing' of *Pan Tadeusz* is altered through defying rather than honouring the tradition.

The questions of sacrifice, heroic death, and devotion to the motherland are handled differently in the so-called post-Smoleńsk poetry, whose distinct characteristics (that is, 'reproduction of the Romantic tradition of speaking on death in accordance with the tenets of Tyrrhenian movement in poetry and the messianistic, sacrificial ideology' [p. 261]), and aesthetic indicators, which are entirely different from those in the previously mentioned pieces, give that genre a stigmatising character. As a result of the mass experience of loss, tragedy, and even martyrdom, poets felt enabled to use the mythos associated first and foremost with Polish Romanticism, present in the collective consciousness. Spólna refers to this phenomenon in the chapter *Mesjanizm: reaktywacja*, where she recounts and analyses numerous examples of commemorating the catastrophe of 10 April 2010 in the spirit of Romantic slogans. Those are the pieces from poets, who, thanks to their works, initiate 'the process of moralisation and sacralisation of the victims to the catastrophe' (p. 285) and elevate the suffering of the nation after the tragic accident to the rank of virtue.

The monograph *Dialogi z Mickiewiczem* ends in a chapter that is vital for the sake of summarising the phenomenon of actualising the Romantic tradition in modern times. It organises miscellaneous forms of the presence of Romantic tradition in the work of the poets and critics positioning themselves 'against Mickiewicz'; presents the interlacing of Romanticism with the poetry of the last quarter of the century; and enumerates the stances of researchers involving themselves in the discussion on the topic. Finally, it prompts questions and reflections on whether Mickiewicz is still essential and whether he is becoming a national addiction, a necessity even when it seems imperative to contest his authority and repress his stigma.