

the world, and with Poland above all.”

In 1848, the wave of political and national unrest known as the Spring of Nations rolled over Europe. Italian patriots were pushing for the unification of Italian states and challenging Austrian rule in the north. For Mickiewicz, the events inaugurated a period of hectic political activity. He hurried to Italy with the intention of forming a Polish legion to fight with the Italians against Austria. (He also might have been trying to meet up with another American friend, the transcendentalist writer Margaret Fuller, whom he met a year earlier in Paris.) Militarily speaking, the legion was a laughable matter: it consisted of a dozen or so Polish artists residing in Rome. But their triumphant march to the Austrian front—or rather, their trip in two carriages—proved Mickiewicz’s uncanny gift for public relations. Wherever they went, the tiny detachment was preceded by enthusiastic press reports and greeted by crowds. After Mickiewicz’s departure—once again, he had no intention of joining the fight himself—the group grew to about one hundred men and took part in some military operations a few days before the Italians signed an armistice with the Austrians.

Back in Paris, Mickiewicz, with a group of Polish and French collaborators, started a French-language newspaper called *La Tribune des Peuples*. It opened its pages to a group of international, mostly leftist contributors who were reporting on liberation movements throughout Europe. In June 1849, the police of Louis Napoleon, the nephew of Mickiewicz’s beloved emperor, raided the offices of the paper and arrested some of its staff. Mickiewicz had to go into hiding for a while. Later the publication was re-opened, but all its Polish editors had to leave, and it collapsed soon afterwards.

At the outbreak of the Crimean War, the poet managed to have himself sent by a group of influential Poles to Constantinople, on a mission to assist in the formation of yet another legion, this time made of Cossack and Polish prisoners of war and deserters from the Russian army willing to fight on the side of the anti-Russian alliance. Discovering a fair number of Jews among the volunteers, Mickiewicz and Levy conceived of an idea to form a separate Jewish brigade that would fight against Po-

land’s oppressors and advance the Polish cause. What would be more beautiful, after all, than proud “Hussars of Israel” marching one day into independent Poland side by side with their Polish comrades-in-arms?

We will never know what might have come of this crazy but inspired idea, because in Constantinople Mickiewicz’s life came to an abrupt end. On the night of November 24, 1855, the poet suddenly felt weak. A clumsy attempt by a friend to escort him to the bathroom resulted in a bad fall and a fractured skull. Two days later he was dead. The cause of his collapse was probably an onslaught of cholera, but rumors of a poisoning immediately started to spread—during the years of his notorious, often divisive activity in Paris, the poet made some powerful enemies in the Polish exile community. Many observed that his end eerily resembled that of the idol of his youth, Byron, who died under similarly

mysterious circumstances in Greece.

In his lifetime Mickiewicz was a highly controversial figure. His writings, his “prophesies,” and his various activities in émigré circles met with enthusiasm, but also with vitriolic attacks. His transformation into a national icon took place a few decades after his death, when Romanticism as a literary movement was largely a thing of the past. The metamorphosis was completed in 1890, when the poet’s remains were moved from Paris to Kraków and welcomed by crowds, who laid him to rest in the royal crypt of the Kraków cathedral, next to a whole pantheon of Polish kings.

It was probably yet another Polish uprising—even more desperate and tragic than the previous one—that played the main role in this process of cultural beatification. Begun in 1863 as a spontaneous protest against conscription into the Russian army, this revolt was conducted mostly by ill-trained and poorly armed guerrillas that stood no chance against Russian regular forces. As Koropecyjk rightly observes, it was in fact a product of the Romantic disregard for reality, “the work of a generation brought up on the ideals of the Great Emigration, on Romantic poetry, messianism, conspiracies, and a concomitant willingness to sacrifice blood, if only for the sake of demonstrating the will to exist.” After its disastrous end, which was followed by public executions and the harshest repression that Poles had ever experienced, the nation’s elites seemed finally to abandon Romantic dreams in favor of more pragmatic, “organic” programs—improving education and living conditions, promoting business, raising the standard of living of the Polish peasant masses. But national independence remained the implicit goal of all these activities, and Mickiewicz’s messianic myth seemed a perfect tool to keep this goal alive—a form of reassurance that, despite all that it had endured, Poland still existed, if only in a purely spiritual and idealized form.

In the decades between the last “Romantic” uprising and Poland’s independence in 1918, the unwritten strategy of Polish survival rested on two complementary principles: on the surface, a realistic accommodation to prevailing conditions, and beneath the surface a contest of spirit and will in which, in Koropec-

To an Old Man Dying

(for Lucien)

“I’m coming back as a sea lion,” he said,
“To traverse the seven seas.
I’ll swim from Norway to the Coast of Japan,
Or not, whichever I please.”

“But how will I know you?” she asked, distressed.
“All sea lions look alike.”
“I’ll wear a gold candle that burns on my head,
And eye-glitter green as a pike.”

“I’m coming back as a lichen,” he said.
“To cling to an oak’s northern side.
I’ll contemplate life without saying a word,
And day after day abide.”

“I’m coming back as an osprey,” he said.
“I’ve hit on my ultimate wish.
Where all there’s to do is hang on the wind,
And fly and fuck and fish.”

“If you come back as a lichen,” she said,
“I’ll know which blossom is you.
I’ll scrape you screaming off the soggy bark
And boil you in my stew.”

If I find you’ve returned as some ear-piercing bird,
I’ll get out my trusty bow,
And the first time you soar past, you son of a bitch,
An arrow will bring you low.”

“For sharing the ache,” and she grabbed his lapel,
“The choices have narrowed to two.
Either come back as me with a hole in my gut,
Or simply come back as you.”

BRUCE DUCKER