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# Portrait of an Artist, or Adam Mickiewicz in the Eyes of Pencho Slaveykov: Władysław Mickiewicz's Discovered Letter<sup>1</sup>

## Abstract

The text is an introduction to a *Letter* by Władysław Mickiewicz (1838–1926) discovered in the Petko and Pencho Slaveykov Museum in Sofia and addressed to Pencho Slaveykov (1866–1912), the Bulgarian modernist, outstanding poet and critic. The *Letter* reveals a fragment of the potential correspondence between Mickiewicz and Slaveykov, but also compels us to invoke the context of very extensive Polish-Bulgarian contacts and the extremely interesting perception of the oeuvre of Adam Mickiewicz (1798–1855), especially *Pan Tadeusz* and *Forefathers' Eve*, in Bulgaria.

**Keywords:** Władysław Mickiewicz's *Letter*, Pencho Slaveykov, Adam Mickiewicz, *Pan Tadeusz*, *Forefathers' Eve*.

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The *Letter* that we are publishing in issue 12 of *Colloquia Humanistica* (2023), written by Władysław Mickiewicz (1838–1926), the son of one of the bards of Polish literature, Adam Mickiewicz (1798–1855), was discovered by Katia Zografova in the Museum of Petko<sup>2</sup> and Pencho Slaveykov in Sofia. Pencho Slaveykov (1866–1912), was the Bulgarian modernist poet from the Thought group and one of the editors of *Мисъл* [Thought] magazine (1892–1907).<sup>3</sup> The *Letter*, dated 8 February 1899, discloses that Władysław Mickiewicz had learned from “a Polish periodical” that an article about his father Adam Mickiewicz written by Slaveykov (1866–1912), had been published in the modernist journal *Мисъл*. This seemingly unremarkable piece of information reveals some very remarkable cultural and historical contexts in the Polish-Bulgarian space.

## Polish-Bulgarian Contacts

The matter of Polish-Bulgarian contacts, and especially the impressive reception of Adam Mickiewicz’s oeuvre in the late 19th century, has been explored many times by Bulgarian and Polish researchers alike (Iwanowa & Borow, 1956, pp. 150–171; Sujecka, 1988, pp. 305–314). However, new materials keep surfacing.

Adam Mickiewicz died in 1855 in Constantinople /Tsargrad/Istanbul<sup>4</sup> in the Ottoman Empire. During the Crimean War, in September 1855, he travelled to Istanbul on behalf of the French Ministry of Education to conduct research on the culture of the South Slavs. The actual purpose of this expedition to the Ottoman Empire was to set up a Polish Legion. The idea

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<sup>2</sup> Petko Slaveykov (1827–1895) was a Bulgarian poet, publicist, politician and folklorist from the period of the Bulgarian National Revival (19th century), and he was father of Pencho Slaveykov.

<sup>3</sup> Written in French, Władysław Mickiewicz’s *Letter* addressed to Slaveykov was discovered by Zografova at the Petko and Pencho Slaveykov Museum in Sofia (Основен фонд, ч I р 30, инв. номер 40). The *Letter* will be published in volume five of the poet’s collected works: *Пенчо Славейков. Събрани съчинения в 5 тома. От Трявна до Брунаме*. Захарий Стоянов [Zakhari Stoyanov] София– Sofiya. Four volumes have been released so far (2022–2023). The fifth volumes will be published in the next year (2024). We are publishing *Władysław Mickiewicz’s Letter to Pencho Slaveykov* in issue 12 of *Colloquia Humanistica* by courtesy of Ms. Zografova.

<sup>4</sup> All three of the city’s names are significant: Constantinople was the name introduced by Emperor Constantine the Great in 330, meaning the city of Constantine and used parallel to the name “Emperor’s City”, and in the Slavic languages in the Balkans – Tsargrad (Цариград), i.e. City of the Tsar (Emperor). The name Istanbul was not introduced officially until 1930, i.e. in the times of the Republic of Turkey.

to organise a separate formation composed of Jews was born, according to researchers, during Mickiewicz's stopover in Burgas, in the Bulgarian lands of the Ottoman Empire (Fabianowski, 2015, p. 277; Janion, 1998, pp. 27–36).<sup>5</sup> However, the idea to make military use of Jewish runaways from the Russian army during the Crimean War had appeared in the conservative-liberal Hôtel Lambert political camp of Prince Adam Czartoryski (1770–1861) a little earlier than that (Janion, 1998, p. 30). Both formations were meant to be used in the fight against tsarist Russia.<sup>6</sup> Mickiewicz was thus a part of the ambitious plans of Hôtel Lambert and Czartoryski himself to extricate the South Slavs from under Russia's influence. Russia had been the protector of Orthodox believers in the Balkans since the peace treaty ending the fifth Russian-Ottoman war of 1768–1774, signed on 21 July 1774 in Küçük Kaynarci. From the beginning, though, Russia's policy concerning Orthodox believers differed from that towards Orthodox Slavs in the Ottoman Empire (Bádenas de la Peña, 2016, pp. 53–62). Czartoryski was counting on taking advantage of this difference and, among other things, tried to get France and Britain interested in funding scholarships for gifted young people from Slavic lands in the Balkans. Czartoryski's agents set up schools and printing houses and propagated Catholicism (Popek, 2017, pp. 122–124). Hôtel Lambert incorporated the Bulgarians into its plans for Poland's revival, and the path to winning the support of the Roman Curia was to get the Bulgarians to enter a union with Rome (Smokhovska-Petrova, 1973, pp. 51–80). The presence of Polish agents in Serbian, Romanian and Bulgarian lands started relatively late, in the 1840s (Popek, 2017, p. 122), but had a substantial impact on Serbian politics (Trifunović, 2015, pp. 67–73) and on the Bulgarian national revival (Skowronek, 1994; Żurek, 2006).

## Pencho Slaveykov and Adam Mickiewicz

Scholars are of the opinion that Slaveykov's fascination with Adam Mickiewicz's poetry began as early as the 1880s (Dinekov, 1966/2023, pp. 574–575). The young Slaveykov read Mickiewicz in translations thanks

<sup>5</sup> The whole information about this idea is available in the Polish Library in Paris (Bibliothèque Polonaise de Paris) under the signature MAM 1233.

<sup>6</sup> However, Slaveykov claimed that Mickiewicz had arrived in Bulgarian lands, which were part of the Ottoman Empire at the time, to incite the Bulgarians to start an anti-Turkish uprising (Slaveïkov, 1899, pp. 158–171).

to a very popular anthology produced by a classic of Bulgarian literature, Ivan Vazov (1850–1921), in 1884. Among other works, it contained *The Crimean Sonnets* and excerpts from *Pan Tadeusz* and *Konrad Wallenrod*.<sup>7</sup> But it was an article about the author of *Pan Tadeusz* written by Konstantin Velichkov (1855–1907), a politician, writer and artist, that turned out to be decisive for the reception of Mickiewicz by the young Slaveykov. Velichkov juxtaposed Mickiewicz with the greatest poets of world literature: Johann Wolfgang Goethe (1749–1832), George Gordon Byron (1788–1824), Friedrich Schiller (1759–1805), Alexander Pushkin (1799–1839) and Victor Hugo (1802–1885) (Dinekov, 1966/2023, p. 575; Magnuszewski, 1967, p. 21; Velichkov, 1885, pp. 166–173). This direction in the development of the Polish Romantic poet's image in the eyes of the author of *Song of Blood* (1911–1913, *Крвава песен*) turned out to be very inspirational and became well-grounded thanks to the lectures of German philosopher Johannes Volkelt (1848–1930) that Slaveykov attended during his studies in Leipzig. Slaveykov knew no Polish and read Mickiewicz mediated by Russian and German translations, but this did not prevent him from treating Mickiewicz's work as his inspiration for the poem *Song of Blood*<sup>8</sup> about the Bulgarian April Uprising of 1876, on which he worked his whole life and which he never finished. Many scholars have sought parallel influences of Homer's *Iliad* and Mickiewicz's *Pan Tadeusz* (Dąbek-Wirgowa, 1973, pp. 149–174), but also *The Spirit King* and *Anhelli* by Juliusz Słowacki (1809–1849) (Bobek, 1933, pp. 645–648).

### Adam Mickiewicz: Pencho Slaveykov's Etude

Slaveykov's article devoted to Mickiewicz and published in *Мисъл*, the increasingly prestigious journal of Bulgarian modernists (Slaveykov,

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<sup>7</sup> This was the anthology *Българска христоматия или сборник от избрани образци* (Vazov & Velichkov, 1884), meant for the upper years of secondary school, which testifies to the actual reception of Mickiewicz's poetry in Bulgaria. The second edition of the anthology followed quickly, in 1889. In the inter-war period, selections of Mickiewicz's poetry received new translations, not mediated by Russian this time, as had been the case with that first anthology, but based on the Polish originals. The translation of extensive excerpts from *Pan Tadeusz* by great Bulgarian poet Dora Gabe (1888–1983) was very highly valued. A complete translation of this poem into Bulgarian was produced in 1959 by another great Bulgarian writer, Blaga Dimitrova (1922–2003). Her translation received an award from the Polish PEN Club.

<sup>8</sup> However, Swedish scholar Alfred Jensen believed that Slaveykov's *Song of Blood* was not an imitation of Mickiewicz's *Pan Tadeusz* but, rather, that one should speak of a common source of inspiration for both works, namely Homer's *Iliad* (Jensen, 1912/1931, pp. 11–17).

1899, pp. 158–171),<sup>9</sup> provides the context for the letter written by Adam Mickiewicz's son Władysław that is published in issue 12 of *Colloquia Humanistica*. In the *Letter*, Władysław asks to be sent a copy of the Bulgarian magazine because, as he explains, he collects all translations of his father's works and articles about him.

Slaveykov's article contains a brief introduction outlining what makes (great) poetry, followed by two sections: one discussing *Forefathers' Eve*, the other devoted to *Pan Tadeusz*. This 14-page *Etude* (as its author calls it) offers very powerful confirmation of a fascination with the Polish Romantic poet's oeuvre that lasted throughout Slaveykov's life. Slaveykov left ample proof of his extremely personal attitude towards Mickiewicz's poetry and towards the poet himself. In 1909 he made a stop in Warsaw on his way to Moscow, where he was to attend celebrations connected with Nikolai Gogol (1809–1852), and immediately made his way to Adam Mickiewicz's statue in Krakowskie Przedmieście Street. Although he did not like the statue, describing it as excessively monumental, highlighting the poet's coat instead of his face, and failing to show all that is eternal in the poet and the person, this visit testifies to his enormous fascination with the author of *Pan Tadeusz* and his poetic genius (Slaveykov, 1959, pp. 118–119).<sup>10</sup>

Comparing Polish poetry, and Mickiewicz's poetry in particular, to the literature of ancient Greece stems from the conviction of the author of *Song of Blood* that poetry is a treasury of national values:

Поезята е съкровище въ което всекой народъ влага на съхранение всичко онова, що има той свое ... И когато животътъ на народа прѣстане въ дѣйствителность той остава спасень въ поезята му. Тѣй исчезнѣлата прѣди вѣкове Еллада живѣе и до день- днешень, въ творенята на нейнитѣ гениални пѣвци, – най-вече въ Илиада. ... Сжщото можемъ каза смѣло и за поляцитѣ: и да изчезнѣхъ тѣ, както старитѣ Елини, за прѣдъ духовния погледъ на челоуѣчеството тѣхния животъ, животътъ на една велика нация, е съхранень въ произведенята на нейнитѣ гениални пѣвци – най-вече въ Панъ Тадеушъ. (Slaveykov, 1899, p. 158)<sup>11</sup>

<sup>9</sup> Researchers believe that the *Etude* was produced after Slaveykov's return to Bulgaria from Germany and was connected with the Mickiewicz jubilee celebrated in 1898 (Magnuszewski, 1967, p. 23).

<sup>10</sup> As he wrote to his life partner Mara Belcheva (1868–1937), after returning to his hotel in Warsaw he devoted an ode to Mickiewicz. During his stay in Moscow, on the other hand, he wrote a poem devoted to Gogol (Dinekov, 1966/2023, p. 577; Slaveykov, 1959, pp. 118–119).

<sup>11</sup> "Poetry is a treasury where every nation stores all that belongs to it ... And when the life of the nation ends in the real [world], [the nation] will survive in its poetry. That is how Hellas,

Adam Mickiewicz's *Pan Tadeusz* is the best example of such a national treasury. *Forefathers' Eve* is presented in the first part of the article and then contrasted with *Pan Tadeusz*. Although he sees poetic genius also in *Forefathers' Eve*, Slaveykov does not value it as highly as the Polish national epic, which to him is an example of perfect harmony that may only be compared with *War and Peace* by Leo Tolstoy (1828–1910), or with great epic works from the past, such as Dante's *Divine Comedy* and Homer's *Iliad*.

Regarding *Forefathers' Eve* as a mystical work, he compares it to Goethe's *Faust* and Lord Byron's *Manfred*, clearly favouring Mickiewicz's poetic work: "Това е поема на съмнението и безнадежността. Фаустовитѣ и Манфредовите избухвания на отчаеностъ, сравнени съ тия на Конрада, се показватъ просто като дѣтински лепетъ" (Slaveïkov, 1899, p. 161).<sup>12</sup> Written in visionary language, *Forefathers' Eve* is close to the Bible and Friedrich Nietzsche's *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, according to the Bulgarian poet. And though Slaveykov thinks this is not Mickiewicz's best work due to its loose composition, he values it for its visionariness, which – he writes – attains complete fulfilment in the Great Improvisation in Part III. The mysticism of *Forefathers' Eve* inclines Slaveykov to situate Mickiewicz on the same level as other great poets of Slavdom: Gogol, L. Tolstoy, Słowacki,<sup>13</sup> and Czech modernist Jaroslav Vrchlický (1853–1912). At the same time, however, invoking *The Books and the Pilgrimage of the Polish Nation* (1832) he claims that Mickiewicz (and other Polish émigrés) look at the world through Catholic mysticism, which shrouds common sense like fog and produces something one might call mystical patriotism (Slaveïkov, 1899, p. 164).

Writing about *Pan Tadeusz* in part two of his *Etude*, Slaveykov claims that Mickiewicz is the only one of the contemporary poets who has managed to combine the concrete in representations of the world with the poetic.

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which disappeared centuries ago, lives to this day in the works of its brilliant poets – above all in *The Iliad*. ... We may certainly say the same about the Poles: if they disappear like the ancient Hellenes, in the eyes of humanity their spiritual life is the life of a great nation, preserved in the works of great, brilliant poets – above all in *Pan Tadeusz*" [All quotations are given in the original notation; the English translations are based on my own Polish translations – Jolanta Sujecka & Joanna Dutkiewicz: JS & JD].

<sup>12</sup> "This is a poem of doubt and hopelessness. Faust's and Manfred's outbursts of despair seem mere childish babbling compared to the [outbursts] of Konrad" [JS & JD].

<sup>13</sup> Slaveykov was familiar with Mickiewicz's oeuvre, though he did not read it in the original; he knew less about Słowacki's works, erroneously attributing Słowacki's drama *Samuel Zborowski* to Mickiewicz (Slaveïkov, 1899, p. 163).

A certain naivety of outlook in the poem is, according to Slaveykov, made possible by distancing and the impossibility of returning to the country of the poet's childhood. Slaveykov sees Mickiewicz's characters as having a continuation in characters found in contemporary Polish literature, from Józef I. Kraszewski (1812–1887) to Henryk Sienkiewicz (1846–1916) (Slaveïkov, 1899, pp. 168–170).

Many critics writing about Slaveykov and his oeuvre point out the internal contradictions in his views, his character and his works (Dinekov, 1966/2023, pp. 574–589). The analysis of Mickiewicz's works that he proposed in his *Etude* published in *Мисъл* is a reflection of those contradictions. The choice of *Forefathers' Eve* and *Pan Tadeusz* as works illustrating Mickiewicz's creative genius in fact appears as a parallel to his own, Slaveykov's, inner dilemma.<sup>14</sup>

The context for Mickiewicz and his poetry is provided by a series of portraits of great writers that Slaveykov published in *Мисъл*. He devoted separate sketches to Pushkin, Mikhail Lermontov (1814–1841) and Hungarian Romantic poet Sándor Petőfi (1823–1849). All of them were part of a programme of Europeanisation of Bulgarian literature being developed in *Мисъл* at the time. In this project, Mickiewicz was an example to follow, since "... се явява достоенъ прѣдставителъ на полския гений прѣдъ чуждия свѣтъ и на това се основава неговото общечеловѣческо значение" (Slaveïkov, 1899, p. 171).<sup>15</sup>

To the author of *Song of Blood*, the universal significance of Adam Mickiewicz's poetry is a sign of poetic value; it is – to paraphrase Slaveykov's quotation about Bulgarians – "... the finding of the person in the Pol ... " that Mickiewicz has accomplished.<sup>16</sup> In the eyes of the author of *Song of Blood*, the author of *Pan Tadeusz* is thus the ideal synthesis of a national, Polish, and world poet.

<sup>14</sup> The choice of *Forefathers' Eve* and *Pan Tadeusz* may also have been influenced by Volkelt's lectures (Magnuszewski, 1967, p. 28).

<sup>15</sup> "... he turns out to be a worthy representative of Polish genius before the world, and that is what his universal significance is based upon" [JS & JD].

<sup>16</sup> In the original often cited by critics, the quotation reads as follows: "Когато ми се удаде и в българина да открия човек [JS], моята радост не е по-малка от вашата" (Slaveïkov, 1959, p. 184) – "When I manage to find the person in the Bulgarian [JS], my joy is no lesser than yours".

## Archives

Polish Library in Paris (Bibliothèque Polonaise de Paris) under the signature МАМ 1233.

Писмото на френски от Владислав Мицкевич [Pismoto na frenski ot Vladislav Mitskevich / The letter in French from Vladislav Mitskevich]. Музей “Петко и Пенчо Славейкови”, София [Muzei “Petko i Pencho Slavejkovi”, Sofia / Museum of Petko and Pencho Slaveykovi, Sofia], Основен фонд, ч I р 30, инв. номер 40 [Osnoven fond, ch I, r 30, inv. nomer 40].

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## Portret Artysty, czyli Adam Mickiewicz w optyce Penczo Sławejkowa. Odnaleziony *List* Władysława Mickiewicza.

Niniejszy tekst jest wprowadzeniem do odnalezionego w Muzeum Petko i Penczo Sławejkowów w Sofii *Listu* Władysława Mickiewicza (1838–1926) do Penczo Sławejkowa (1866–1912), bułgarskiego modernisty, wybitnego poety i krytyka. *List* odkrywa przed nami fragment korespondencji W. Mickiewicza i P. Sławejkowa, a zarazem zmusza do przywołania kontekstu bardzo bogatych kontaktów polsko-bułgarskich i wyjątkowo ciekawej percepcji całej twórczości Adama Mickiewicza (1798–1855), a zwłaszcza *Pana Tadeusza* i *Dziadów* w Bułgarii.

**Słowa kluczowe:** *List* Władysława Mickiewicza, Penczo Sławejkow, Adam Mickiewicz, *Pan Tadeusz*, *Dziady*.



## Note

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