

The end of the "Year of Juliusz Słowacki"

# A Poet of Europe

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**The Romantic poet Juliusz Słowacki used a modern language and remained open to diverse cultures and traditions – making him one of the Polish writers who fit squarely into the pantheon of European culture**

Now that the commemorative-year events marking the 200th anniversary of Słowacki's birth back in 1809 have drawn to a close, a certain question arises: What next? Now we have seen yet another renaissance of public interest in Słowacki's life and work. "Yet another" because it seems that Poland reveres its Great Poets – Adam Mickiewicz and Juliusz Słowacki – in a kind of cyclical alternation. This latest "Year of Juliusz Słowacki" was proclaimed by the Polish parliament, the Sejm, in January 2009. As usual, the commemorative events included a multitude of research conferences and a revival of popularization efforts, but it will not be until some time has elapsed that the lasting impact can truly be gauged.

## A modern patriot

Słowacki in part owes his current high standing within the Polish literary pantheon to shifts that have occurred within the national tradition in the wake of Poland's regime change in 1989. This Polish national tradition was previously informed by the notion that as long as the nation continued to fight for its independence, Poles had to devote their lives to patriotic ideals, harbor an unwavering love for their homeland, heroic and deeply rooted in religious faith, and be ready to perform reckless acts and to abandon personal ambitions and dreams. This sort of Romantic tradition and the related models of behavior had as their patron Poland's other great Romantic poet, Adam Mickiewicz. But following Poland's transformation of 1989, this paragon proved to be anachronistic, ill-suited to the new reality. The hierarchy of values has been changing, and a different model of "being Polish" and being patriotic has risen to the fore. Here, the patron of such change is Słowacki.

It was Słowacki who believed that even when one's nation is in captivity one should not remain isolated in

emigration, cut off from the world for the sake of some idealized love for one's homeland. He was indeed a true patriot (as confirmed by his actions: he was the only one of Poland's preeminent Romantic writers to actively take part in the November Uprising of 1830–31; moreover in 1848 he returned from Paris to join the Greater Poland Uprising). He wrote patriotic verse, yet never gave up on making the best of every moment of life, every opportunity to experience the contemporary world. He did not shut himself up within the confines of Polish and classical tradition, but passionately visited around towns and museums, traveled, and marveled at the advancements of civilization and technology. When we say that Słowacki was a European, it means that he was aware of being a coequal participant in everything he saw and described.

## A European Romantic

Against the canvas of European Romanticism, Słowacki rose to his highest stature as a playwright. I believe that he surpassed the most well known figure, Victor Hugo, considered to reign supreme. Słowacki was a fan and aficionado of the theater of his day, and he was free to write what he wanted since his texts, written in Polish, did not attract the attention of censors. But his plays were blocked from production on the stage: abroad he was an unknown author, at home his plays were banned.

The end of the 19th century brought a time of great popularity for Słowacki's plays. They are wonderfully written, leave a lot to the imagination of the director and scenographer, and have long been part of the core repertoire of Polish theaters. Quite a few new productions appeared during the previous anniversary year, held in 1999. But the question remains: What is it that drives us to reach for Słowacki's works? A noble yearning for masterful art, or perhaps some reflection of contemporary existential dilemmas?

There is no doubt that Słowacki was a precursor to a new model of life, a new stance towards the world, a new hierarchy of values and also of poetry. He is considered a European poet through and through. Quite simply Słowacki was a man of Europe, one who took an interest in life, art, culture, and local events wherever he was. He began every day by reading newspapers; other Polish emigrants on principle remained focused upon Polish affairs.

Słowacki's authentic interest in politics and in new trends of art seems well aligned with our contemporary mindset. His critical view of émigré attitudes and squabbles, which he vented in his poems *Anhelli*, *Beniowski*, and



This monument to Juliusz Słowacki stands on Warsaw's "Bank Square" in front of Warsaw City Hall

*Fantazy*, erupted in a geyser of irony. Słowacki used the Romantic irony that had been introduced into literature by the Germans as a way of getting at the truth – by laying bare falsehood, viewing the world from a distance, from different perspectives, by stripping away the mask of hypocrisy.

Słowacki was a poet of the imagination. "The imagined becomes real," he wrote, convinced that poetry as a product of the imagination nonetheless has vast creative power, able to transform the world, to smash it and build it up anew. This is very close to our contemporary apology of poetry.

### Experiments with form

We are only now beginning to truly appreciate the magnificence of Słowacki's grotesquerie. When he reached Paris in 1830, discussion of the grotesque was then underway, inspired by Victor Hugo. The author of *Hernani* tried to translate elements of this aesthetic theory into the language of the theater. But without success, because the conservative audience was not prepared to receive such experiments. Several years later similar attempts were made by Słowacki: boldly introducing grotesque conventions into his drama *Silver Dream of Salomea*. He did indeed make masterful use of the possibilities offered by the grotesque style, combining the macabre with the pathos of exalted patriotism. But none of it met with any understanding and both works were condemned by the Polish audience. It is

thus understandable that one of the leading Polish literary theory reference books, *Słownik terminów literackich*, names Witkacy, a writer who worked nearly a century later, as the author of the first Polish grotesque works. The problems with finding a permanent place for Słowacki's works within the Polish tradition force us to be more determined about questioning that tradition itself. Should it really be the past that determines the future fate of an author's works?

It is unfavorable for poetry – and for Słowacki – when an artificial division is imposed between discriminating "tradition" and "modernity" or vivid art. Such a division means establishing an *a priori* hierarchy of values and broadens the scope for manipulation. As a consequence, the works of the Romantics, of Słowacki, end up being evaluated by different criteria than modern works – they are isolated from readers behind a high wall.

But if we can forget about dates, then texts from different epochs may be juxtaposed side-by-side in a common space, without academic commentaries, and given coequal treatment. And the most surefire method of ensuring that Słowacki's poetry speaks to his "late grandchildren" is ensuring its widespread availability. ■

#### Further reading:

Kowalczykowska A. (2008). *Słowacki*. Wrocław: Wydawnictwo Dolnośląskie.