



## Adam Mickiewicz

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### Introduction

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In his CDAMM article on '[Polish Messianism](#),' Damian Cyrocki looks at various influential figures. Here is an excerpt on one figure: Adam Mickiewicz (1798–1855).

### Adam Mickiewicz

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Adam Mickiewicz, a poet and mystic, made known his messianism for the first time in 1832 in *The Books and the Pilgrimage of the Polish Nation*. This work is one of the foundations of Polish Messianism. The author compared the partitions of Poland to the passion of Jesus, and its liberation to his resurrection.

Over time Mickiewicz's messianism, especially under the influence of [Andrzej Towiański](#), began to subordinate national elements to universalist elements. Mickiewicz's messianism of the 1840s ceased to be exclusively Polish and became French-Slavic (Walicki 1978, 1). At that time, regaining national independence ceased to be an end in itself, as the nation began to be perceived by Mickiewicz as a tool that enabled individuals to incorporate the truths they received from God. The fight for a free Poland was significant only because it had a certain historic (even cosmic) mission to fulfil (Mickiewicz 1933, 341).

This was nonetheless closely related to how Mickiewicz and his contemporary Messianists perceived the nation. For them, the nation was above all a union of spiritual beings who pursued a common goal of spiritual progress. The concept of reincarnation (palingenesis) played a major role in this. Each spirit went through various incarnations aimed at causing its progress on the way to spiritual perfection. The more developed spirits were obliged to lead the less developed ones (Mickiewicz 1914, 10).

Mickiewicz tried to go beyond both rationalist philosophy and tradition. Progress in his understanding was associated with breaking conventions, which is why this approach is often referred to as revolutionary messianism. For Mickiewicz the Enlightenment brought about a number of social harms, such as excessive intellectualism, hedonism, utilitarianism, separation of knowledge from morality, and far-reaching individualism. He was also convinced that authentic reforms have never resulted from the progress of knowledge alone (Mickiewicz 1935, 425–26). Tradition was still close to his heart because it resulted from

divine revelation, but, if used badly, it could seriously hinder spiritual development. This approach allowed him to draw inspiration from various sources. He admired Martin Luther (1483–1546) and Emanuel Swedenborg (1688–1772), who, through spiritual work and rejection of their own egos, were able to open communication with heaven (Kowalski 1909, 154). He also drew inspiration from representatives of French Utopian Socialism and thinkers such as J. G. Fichte (1762–1814) and F. W. J. Schelling (1775–1854), who proclaimed that the mind is capable of grasping knowledge without the mediation of the senses (Tilliette 2015).

Mickiewicz was convinced of the coming of a new era in which more developed spirits would lead others to direct contact with God. However, the victory of love had to be preceded by wars and disasters. In this configuration, Poland's martyrdom appeared as the culmination of wrongs and political crimes committed by nations. Mickiewicz believed that the European nations had been gradually exhausting their spiritual strength and piety for a long time. Inept lawyers and theologians who had no living contact with heaven had replaced God's lawgivers, apostles, and miracle workers, possessed by the spirit of God. The church became a bureaucratic institution and morality collapsed. Moreover, exaggerated intellectualism began to develop (Mickiewicz 1845, 16–17).

This did not mean, however, that the antidote to this situation was provided by a return to the past. Mickiewicz, together with Russian Slavophiles and German representatives of conservative Romanticism, criticised intellectualism, but he did not seek refuge in traditional forms like the others (Walicki 1968, 156). The Polish bard believed in a revolution that would lead to the advent of a new spiritual era and new forms of piety. The road to this kingdom was to be cleared, as has already been indicated, by the Slavs and the French. The Slavs were the least contaminated with sin and had vivid memories of their spiritual homeland, despite the fact that they adopted Christianity later than the French or Germans. They resisted the virus of rationalism and industrialisation for the longest (Kowalski 1909, 171). The French, in turn, represented mobility. Thanks to their spiritual development, they retained the greatest divine spark. The leadership among the Slavs should fall to Poland, which humbly endured suffering like Christ and at the same time was able to positively assess the values of revolutionary France (Walicki 1978, 7).

The kingdom of God was to consist of unselfish individuals who would be able to communicate with God through revelation (Mickiewicz 1955, 409–10). These entities went through a series of incarnations, were ready for sacrifices, and did not need intermediaries. Mickiewicz expected the appearance of an ideal man who would combine the zeal of the first apostles, the sacrifice of the martyrs, the simplicity of the monks, and the courage of the French soldiers (Mickiewicz 1845, 247). This man was supposed to be immune to the temptations of rationalism and industrialisation, and he was not burdened by the past (Szymański 2017, 5). The whole concept could symbolise an individual or an entire nation, as was often the case in Jewish thought (Brueggemann 1998, 143).

Although Mickiewicz was a student of Towiański, their paths eventually parted. The Polish bard turned out to be too revolutionary, while his religious master recommended passivity and waiting. Towiański believed that the fulfilment of a mission is conditioned by an internal (spiritual) transformation. It could not be a militant action, for only continuous moral improvement can hasten the realisation of God's kingdom on earth. Mickiewicz could not agree with this idea (Starzyńska-Kościuszko 2016, 58).

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## Article information

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