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No. 9

W. J. LINDAL

TARAS SHEVCHENKO

HIS MESSAGE TO HUMANITY



Winnipeg

Canada

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LITERATURE

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Серія: ЛІТЕРАТУРА

За редакцією М. І. Мандрики

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ТАРАС ШЕВЧЕНКО

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TARAS SHEVCHENKO

His Message to Humanity

It is little short of impertinence that I, a Canadian of Icelandic origin, should address an audience or readers of Ukrainian descent on their greatest poet, and their idol, Taras Shevchenko. However, there is some justification for my boldness. I am not a Ukrainian and am not biased. Whatever I say is purely objective, based upon the poetry of Taras Shevchenko, as revealed in translation, and his life's story as told in biographies and recent commentaries.

I am going to state the conclusion I have reached and then endeavour to substantiate it: first by the comments of eminent non-Ukrainian critics, and secondly, by reference to some of his poetry.

The conclusion is this: Taras Shevchenko is a universal poet whose message is part of the great drama of human life on Earth.

THE OUTSIDE AUTHORITIES

Clarence A. Manning, a leading American authority on Ukrainian literature:

"Taras Shevchenko, the son of a serf with his fanatical faith in the victory of democratic ideals and despite all obstacles, made himself one of the great poets of the Slavonic world, and his fame will live as long as that of his contemporaries in the other literatures. No one of them believed more firmly or voiced more clearly an unyielding and uncompromising belief that democracy, truth and freedom would win the day and no one worked harder or suffered more to bring it about."

Alfred Jensen, a Swedish man of letters, who has written a biography of Shevchenko says:

"Taras Shevchenko has been not only a national poet, but also a universal genius, one of the lights of humanity."

W. H. Matthews, a British scholar, in an essay on Taras Shevchenko:

"The advent of Shevchenko was sudden and startling and carried the more responsive of his compatriots off their feet in a wave of fervent admiration. Such a poet had not been known in Ukraine before. His vivid singing, emotional verse, both lyrical and narrative had a familiar ring and movement, for it was the language of Ukrainian folk-song with its recognisable epithets, subtle stressing, and simple charm of manner. And yet it was not folk-poetry. The poet's personality shone through the words with an unmistakable radiance, and it was the personality of a man who loved his country not only in the aureoles and heroisms of its past, but even more in its contemporary state of abject humiliation.

Former President, Dwight D. Eisenhower, at the unveiling of the monument to Taras Shevchenko, Washington, D. C.:

"In unveiling this memorial to the great nineteenth century Ukrainian poet we encourage today's poets in Ukraine, in Eastern Europe and around the world, to embody in their poetry mankind's demands for freedom, for self-expression, for national independence, and for liberty for all mankind".

Another way of judging Taras Shevchenko is to examine the type of poet he has been compared with. W. K. Matthews says:

"Here apparently was another Burns, yet, all in all, Shevchenko was more influential than Burns, for the latter lived and died in the Age of Enlightenment, when interest in the lot of the downtrodden was only just beginning to win the attention of serious compassionate men."

A. Grigoriev, the eminent Russian critic, says:

"Shevchenko was the last bard and the first great poet of a great new Slavonic literature."

The two revolutionary poets, Sándor Petöfi of Hungary and Taras Shevchenko of the Ukraine never met but their

call to hang tsars and emperors and kings has a common ring and appeal. This was Shevchenko' fervent hope and wish:

"May hangmen cut them off, these tsars, the hangmen of humanity."

SHEVCHENKO AND JONSSON

I like to compare Shevchenko with one of Iceland's rural poets, Hjalmar Jonsson. All that needs be said here is that if Hjalmar Jonsson had developed a feeling of resentment towards his native country and its people it would have been understandable. Instead, on the occasion of the thousandth anniversary of the founding of Althing, the Parliament of Iceland, he composed a poem of lofty sentiment and deep love of land. To translate depth of feeling, expressed in forceful poetry, from one language into another is almost impossible. Here is an inadequate attempt to translate, in free verse, one of the stanzas:

"To thy bosom do I press me
"Nurtured by thy drops of blood
"I do swear to be thee loyal
"Ever true whate'er befalls
"But the one who dares betray thee,
"May he poisoned rot and perish."

Jonsson, like Shevchenko, was at times apocryphal in his poetry as he painted word pictures which really described himself and his inmost thoughts. This is revealed in the poem he composed on the occasion of the visit to Iceland in 1874 of King Christian IX of Denmark, who attended a ceremony when Iceland was given sovereignty in her domestic affairs. The poet has Fjallkonan, The Maid of the Mountains, utter these words of anguish: (in the translation an attempt is made to conform to Iceland alliteration)

Behold, I am shrivelled to the bones,
My bosom hollow and my cheeks are pale.
The crust of lava and the clinkered rocks
Closely resemble my body frail.

Peace now prevails. But the young women all
And the sweet nightingale no silence keep".

THE HAYDAMAKS

In my view Taras Shevchenko wrote three poems which transcend all the others: *The Haydamaks*, *The Neophytes* and *Mary*. Manning regards *The Haydamaks* as Shevchenko's greatest poem. It is his longest and as has been said a "masterpiece of Ukrainian epic poetry".

One passage struck me very forcibly, as it would everyone who has knowledge of the struggle the national groups in Canada have to wage, in their efforts to maintain some knowledge of their mother tongues. Shevchenko had been advised to write in Russian and not in a "dead" language. Here is the advice:

"There let them lie' they'll say, 'until
a hard comes, noble souled,
To tell us in our Russian tongue
About these hetmans bold.
He is a fool who tells these tales
In dead Ukrainian,
And brings before us in bast shoes
Some nondescript young man,
A fool is he! At school he learned
But little for his pain;
Of Cossacks and the hetman age
Only the mounds remain'."

Here is Shevchenko's reply:

"Quite true, ye wise!
Your wisdom could be wrong!
You've given me a sheepskin coat;
Alas, it does not fit.
The garment of your own wise speech
Is lined with falsehood's wit."

"Forgive me! Clamour as you please!
I'll heed you not at all."

He did not follow the advice but wrote his poetry in the Ukrainian language and what was the result? Here I quote Manning:

"He took the Ukrainian language as it had been developed by Kotlyarevsky and his followers and by the force of his own genius made it into a language capable of expressing the most refined emotions and fully adequate to all the needs of modern literature."

THE NEOPHYTES

To me *The Neophytes* is Shevchenko's masterpiece. What makes it a masterpiece is not only the content but the circumstances under which it was written. Shevchenko was on his way back from exile in Siberia, and was detained at Nizhni Novgorod for six months pending instructions from St. Petersburg. One can easily imagine how he could have burst out in an invective, so strong that, if discovered, it would have sent him back to Siberia. But he sought another way. Calmly and carefully he planned how he could give expression to his pent-up feeling of outrage and injustice. He decided to resort to apocryphal writing and allegory. The scene is familiar to most Ukrainians. The poet lets his mind wander back to Rome in the days of Nero. Rome is Russia, Nero is the Czar and Neophytes the Ukrainian people. Here intermittent passages are selected.

"For some time now, a prisoner I stay
Like some dark thief in exile hid away. . .

"I will transport myself to that far time
When Rome obscene, with Nero in his prime,
In filthy orgies neared its sorry end
And a new day already did ascend. . ."

The poet's thoughts are transferred to Bethlehem:

"That was the time when over Bethlehem
A star was rising like a diadem,
The Word of holy Truth and Love arisen."

And then,

"Head down, upon a cross, Saint Peter died;
He like his Lord before, hung crucified.
The Neophytes to Syracuse were taken
In chains to the grim dungeons God-forsaken,

Peace now prevails. But the young women all
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"Head down, upon a cross, Saint Peter died;
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The Neophytes to Syracuse were taken
In chains to the grim dungeons God-forsaken,

Dark subterranean. And there your son
Alcides, your own child, your dearest one,
(Alcides, another name for Hercules, son of Alcmena
and Zeus)

Is rotting now in slavery and chains.
For you, O suffering one, no news remains
Of where he languishes and pines away!
You seek him in Siberia, nay, pardon
I should say Scythia, that barren garden"

Then comes the inevitable destruction:

"O ruthless Nero! From those darkened regions
God's sudden, righteous judgment will
surprise you"

And

"From every clime there'll answer to the call
The holy martyrs, children, one and all,
Of sacred liberty."

But there is a Christian forgiveness:

"And around your dirty deathbed as you die
They will appear in chains and will forgive you."

Rome, that is Czarist Russia (and the Ukrainian oppressors) suffers a slow death:

"To Rome the galley came, a week passed by."

"Not with a just and sacred thunderbolt
Shalt Thou be slain; but dull blades of revolt
Shall butcher thee or, as for some foul dog,
A club shall batter thee in epilogue."

The final curtain in the drama rises:

"And Mary's suffering Son redeemed you there;
His gospel touched your soul to heal and bless;
And to the public squares and palaces
Bearing the Word of Truth, the streets you trod
To praise the veritable, living God."

The Neophytes merits a place beside other inspired poetry such as Dante's "Divina Commedia", Milton's "Paradise Lost", Petrusson's "Passion Hymns", and Bunyan's allegory "Pilgrims Progress."

MARY

The poem, *Mary*, aside from its very unorthodox interpretation of the story of Jesus, Mary and Joseph, has an ending which in a most graphic way reveals the author's concept of the highest service a human can render here on earth, and the humility with which it is to be performed.

The narrative opens thus:

"In Joseph's house, a simple servant-maid,
Mary grew up. (Her holy master's trade
Was that of a carpenter or cooper good.)"

The poet goes on to depict the Annunciation as the arrival to Mary of "The Herald of Glad Things."

He continues:

"Then Mary for that youth her vigil keeps,
And as she waits for him, she sadly weeps;
Her girlish cheeks, her eyes and lips grow pale.
'How you have changed! Your youthful beauties fail
Mary, my precious lily', Joseph sighed,
'A change has come upon you, deep and wide!
Come, Mary, let us marry, I entreat,
(He could say: Lest they stone you in the street,
Yes, slaughter you without a single qualm.)
And we shall keep our small oasis' calm' "

Later:

"For everywhere the Holy Mother walked
Saw her Son's deeds and heard him as he talked."

The final scene refers to the Apostles:

"And in the name of Him you brought to birth,
Of your afflicted Son, to every land
They carried Truth and Justice, hand in hand;
While you, beneath a hedge, in tears again,
Soon died of hunger in the grass. Amen."

Soon died of hunger in the grass!

Taras Shevchenko saw clearly Mary's high, celestial duty; to give birth to Jesus, bring him up, watch over him, attend the final earthly scene when he was crucified. He could not picture a pretentious sepulchre for Mary. By

having Mary die in the grass Shevchenko shrieked to the world that service, no matter how noble and lofty, must be rendered in genuine humility.

THE LIMITLESS UKRAINE

One is not drawing on his imagination in saying that Taras Shevchenko gave birth to a Ukraine that will never die — not only the Ukraine within geographic limits — but a Ukraine wherever Ukrainians are, wherever they go, wherever the poetry of Shevchenko is read.

Neither is one idly inventing in saying that if the man who raised the Ukrainians, in their cries for freedom, to heights they had not seen before, had been asked to select his burial ground, he would not have chosen a monumental tomb. He would have selected to lie beneath a Cossack mound. Indeed it may be said that he lies buried in a Cossack mound and thus has made the Cossack mounds immortal.



EDITOR'S NOTE:

The Editor and Publishers acknowledge with appreciation the English translation of Shevchenko's poems quoted in this paper from: **The Poetical Works of Taras Shevchenko**. Translated from the Ukrainian by C. H. Andrusyshen and Watson Kirkconnell. Published by University of Toronto Press, 1964.

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