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THE MAN

AND

THE SYMBOL

PUBLISHED BY THE ASSOCIATION OF UKRAINIANS IN GREAT BRITAIN

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# TARAS ŠEVČENKO: THE MAN AND THE SYMBOL

by

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ninetieth anniversary of the death of  
Taras Ševčenko to the Association of  
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## I

Personality and reputation are not commensurate terms, for although they are obviously connected, the connection between them is not organic. A man may be greater or less than his reputation, and his reputation may grow or diminish in harmony with the fluctuating fashions of thought. Essentially a man's reputation is not a projection of his personality, as the branch is of the tree, but rather a reflection, like his image in a mirror, and this being so, it is determined by the nature of the reflecting surface—here the human environment—which is clearly subject to the influence of place and time. The career of Taras Ševčenko illustrates all these things, except the ebb of a reputation, for in the ninety years since his death his fame has grown unabated with the turbulent growth of Ukrainian self-consciousness. To-day he is still the symbol of his country's unslaked passion for freedom from tyranny in all its forms as he once became in the first flush of youthful ardour.

Ukrainian literature in its modern sense begins almost with Ševčenko in the first half of the 19th century, although its recorded beginnings go back to the introduction of the Cyrillic alphabet and of Old Bulgarian literature at Kyjiv in the 10th. The modern phase is represented before Ševčenko by Ivan Kotljarevs'kyj, whose language, unlike that of earlier Ukrainian authors, exclusively reproduces the contemporary vernacular. This was also used by another outstanding precursor of Ševčenko—Hryhorij Kvitka Osnojvanenko, as well as by an entire school of Kotljarevs'kyj's imitators, all of whom focused their attention on depicting Ukrainian life and manners. The careers of Ševčenko's two precursors overlap into the Romantic period, but neither had the temperament to profit by the emancipating effect

of the new literary fashion. And so it fell to Ševčenko to express Romanticism, especially its later phase, in Ukrainian literature. The advent of Ševčenko 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 the 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, for 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. This man moreover was acutely aware of social and national injustice and was not afraid to indict his people's enemies and to make them feel the sting and lash of his tongue. Here apparently was another Burns, yet, all in all, Ševčenko 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.

The comparison with Burns, whom Ševčenko knew at least by repute, is instructive. Both men belonged to the peasantry and to a nationality other than the dominant one; both, as writers, were to some extent self-made; both wrote partly in the vernacular and partly in an alien literary language; both were highly emotional, impressionable, not markedly strong in character; both endured the indignity of social ostracism; and both died comparatively young. But the differences between the two poets are probably as considerable as the similarities, and perhaps the most glaring difference is that of legal status. This may appear to contradict our statement that both belonged to the peasantry. But in fact it does not. Although a man of the people, Burns was a free man, whereas Ševčenko was born a serf, who obtained his freedom only at twenty-four and only to enjoy it for nine out of the forty-seven years of his life. This is a fundamental fact in Ševčenko's biography

and cannot be too often or too strongly emphasised. It set the tone of his poetry; it inclined him to identify himself with the meanest of his compatriots, who till 1861 were the chattels of mainly Polish and Russian landowners; it gave him his strong feeling for the soil of the Ukraine; and it enabled him to see clearly the social and national evils which beset his unhappy country. Ševčenko also differs from Burns in being an artist not only in words, as Burns was, but with brush and pencil. Indeed Ševčenko the artist was as widely known in his own time as Ševčenko the poet. And there is a third point in which the two poets are different: Burns's freedom was never circumscribed and marred by imprisonment, whereas Ševčenko's freedom was merely a brief interval in a life of ignominious duress.

Ševčenko, as a man-of-letters, was known to his contemporaries by two books of verse—"The Minstrel" (*Kobzar*) and "The Haydamaks" (*Hajdamaky*). Only a small part of the first, as it is now constituted, appeared in 1840, two years after his emancipation from serfdom by purchase through the kind offices of his Russian friends Žukovskij and Brjullov. In content it is partly lyrical and partly narrative, while "The Haydamaks" (1841) is wholly narrative; in tone both are predominantly lyrical. Both draw on native folk-lore as well as on the Romantic balladry of Western Europe, and there is a great deal in them that comes from the poet's own experience whether direct or vicarious. Thus, for his "Haydamaks", Ševčenko made use of his grandfather's eye-witness stories of the peasant revolt of 1768 (*kolijivščyna*), imbuing them with the vitality of passionate memory. An expanded edition of "The Minstrel" came out in 1860, and since Ševčenko's death early in the following year other writings of his have come to light. To-day his complete works include prose as well as verse, and the prose is for the most part in Russian. Although generally inferior as writing to his verse,<sup>1)</sup> it has

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<sup>1)</sup> S. T. Aksakov wrote to Ševčenko of the latter's Russian story "A Pleasant Stroll not without a Moral" (*Progulka s udovol'stviem i ne bez morali*): "It is incomparably inferior to your talent as a

the characteristics of his literary temperament and is valuable as an autobiographical record throwing considerable light on certain periods of his life. His "Diary" (Dnevnik), limited to the crucial years 1857—1858, is particularly illuminating on the notable change in his psychology which was the inevitable outcome of ten physically and morally degrading years of exile in the Kazakh steppe<sup>2</sup>). His correspondence, both Ukrainian and Russian, covers a much longer period than the "Diary", and even substantial parts of his nine Russian stories (e. g. "The Artist"—Čudožnik) are apparently little-modified transcripts of his own experiences, their verisimilitude being in some cases heightened by the use of actual names (e. g. Brjullov's). On the other hand his only play "Nazar Stodolja", which remained for decades in the repertory of the Ukrainian theatre, has no autobiographical significance.

The core of Ševčenko's literary art was and remains his Ukrainian verse, and the impact of this on his contemporaries and on succeeding generations is usually explained by reference to its "national" character (narodnist'). His poetry has been equated with Ukrainian folk-songs (pisni) and folk-ballads (dumy), because they share a common vocabulary and style. The Russian critic K. Čukovskij avers in one of his pre-revolutionary essays<sup>3</sup>) that his collation of the verse of "The Minstrel" with equivalents in Maksymovyč's edition (1843) of Ukrainian folk-songs has

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poet. You are a lyrical poet, an elegist; your humour is not happy, your jokes not always funny. True, where you refer to nature, where you have to do with painting, everything you say is beautiful, but this does not redeem the shortcomings of the story as a whole". (See A. Beleckij, "Russkije povesti T. G. Ševčenka" (in M. Ryl'skij i N. Ušakov, Taras Ševčenko V, Moscow, 1949).

2) In a letter to Ja. G. Kucharenko (22.IV.1857) Ševčenko wrote on the occasion of his release: "Ten years of duress, my only friend, have destroyed, killed off my faith and hope. And both were pure once, unspotted as a child taken from the font—pure and strong as a polished diamond... But what cannot the chemical retort do?"

3) See Marietta Šaginjan, Taras Ševčenko (Moscow, 1946).

persuaded him that there is not a line of Ševčenko's poetry which cannot be paralleled from the folk-songs. This seems to be an exaggeration at best, although there can be no doubt that Ševčenko's verse is permeated with elements of folk-speech. Dobroljubov,<sup>4)</sup> the Russian radical, reviewing the second edition of "The Minstrel" (1860), drew a parallel between Ševčenko and Kol'cov and found that the former had closer and firmer ties with the common people. Prima facie then it would seem that Ševčenko's verse is folk-poetry. And yet statistics show that hardly more than fifty per cent of the total number of verses in "The Minstrel" are written in the measures of Ukrainian folk-song and that thirty per cent of the verses are iambic, i. e. in a metre directly at variance with the predominantly trochaic movement of the folk-songs.<sup>5)</sup> Even the typical folk-song measures are not used in the manner of the folk-songs, but as, for instance, the characteristic ballad "Perebendja" shows, are blended in a very individual fashion. The Soviet Ukrainian poet Maksym Ryl'skyj, summarising, in his Ševčenko commemoration address of 1939, the investigations of philology in the sphere of Ševčenko's prosody, points out that Ševčenko's metrical heritage consists of two main patterns of rhythm — that of the kolomyjka verse (alternating lines of eight and six syllables, with a general trochaic movement and great freedom in stressing) and that of the koljadka verse (lines of eleven and twelve syllables, with a general grouping into amphibrachs and an equally free stress on either side of a fixed caesura).<sup>6)</sup> The kolomyjka rhythm may be illustrated by—

Ne ženysja na bahatij,  
Bo vyžene z chaty.  
(1845)

(Don't marry a rich bride, for she'll chase you out of the house), and the koljadka rhythm by—

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<sup>4)</sup> Sovremennik LXXX, St. Petersburg, 1860.

<sup>5)</sup> See M. Šaginjan, op. cit.

<sup>6)</sup> Bjuulleten' No. 2 stenogrammy VI plenuma SSP, Kiev, 1939, p. 95.



Otak u Skutari kozaky spivaly;  
Spivaly serdehy, a sl'ozy lyllys'...

(Hamalija, 1842)

(Thus the Cossacks' sang in Scutari — the wretches sang, and their tears flowed).

But these two types of rhythm are subtly varied, and the presence of iambic and anapaestic metres adds to the rhythmic richness of Ševčenko's verse.

It must be plain from the foregoing technical details that we have to do here with more than a simple imitator of folk-songs, who, as Milton in his "L'Allegro" said inaccurately of Shakespeare, "warbled his native woodnotes wild". For like Shakespeare, another author with a defective early education, Ševčenko was an uncommonly sensitive and impressionable man, quick to learn, and able to transform acquired knowledge to his own use and to give it the stamp of his unique genius. A sober study of Ševčenko's poetry convinces us of this, even though we can easily pick out its folk-song elements. But as we read his "Diary" we continually marvel at the variety of his interests and information, the maturity of his understanding, his balanced judgment in the fields of literature and aesthetics,<sup>7)</sup> and his high moral standard. It is difficult, after reading the "Diary" and the stories, to conceive Ševčenko as the semi-literate peasant of Turgenev's description,<sup>8)</sup> and we may well imagine that in his early St. Petersburg days, when he unobtrusively laid the foundations of his artistic technique and wrote the mature sequences of "The Minstrel", he followed literary developments in the intervals of painting. We learn from his story "The Artist" that

7) Cf. for instance his assessment of Eugene Sue and his review of Karl Libelt's *Estetyka czyli umnictwo piękne*.

8) "Ševčenko had read... very little (even Gogol' was familiar to him superficially), and he knew even less" (see *Literaturnyje i žitejskije vospominanija*, Leningrad, 1934, p. 257). We get a similar impression of Ševčenko from the reminiscences of the Ukrainian historian N. I. Kostomarov.

Brjullof, Ševčenko's teacher and friend, encouraged him to love books and to read poetry aloud, although he objected to Ševčenko's cultivating verse, because it interfered with the latter's studies at the Academy of Art.

We have examined the technique of Ševčenko's verse and can now briefly review its subject-matter. Like the technique which it informs, this is varied, but can be reduced to a number of dominant patterns. There is, first, the recurrent theme of the seduced girl, which obsessed Ševčenko and may have been partly suggested to him by both Russian and Ukrainian authors, but the obsession of the theme was due to the fate of his first love, the village-girl Oksana Kovalenkova. Less personal are the historical themes centred in the exploits of the Cossacks and the haydamaks, which may be resolved into symbols of the struggle of the Ukrainian people against foreign oppression. Ševčenko's very life is bound up with the theme of the exile's longing for his homeland, which is as intense in the lyrics of his St. Petersburg days as in those which he wrote in the Caspian steppes. Other attitudes which show no slackening of intensity are those of opposition to the Tsarist order and of anti-clericalism, the second of which has led the Soviet critic to diagnose atheism in Ševčenko. Opposition to Tsar and Church, as the executive organs of Russian tyranny, which supported the minor, if no less galling tyranny of the serf-owning Polish and Russian landowners, was innate in our poet, whose childhood knew the hair-raising stories of his grandfather and whose manhood had felt the heavy hand of Nicholas I and his henchmen. Ševčenko's frequent and caustic attacks on the Russian monarchy and the Orthodox Church in league with it have given Soviet criticism cause to regard him as a "revolutionary", and it is characteristic of this view that in 1939 the University of Odessa published a symposium with the title "The Great Poet-Revolutionary". We cannot deny that there are passages in Ševčenko's verse, and especially in his Russian prose, which lend colour to such a view, but scrutiny of his biography shows that Ševčenko was no activist, for all his radical opinions, and belonged to no revolutionary organisation, although he had friends in the liberal

Society of St. Cyril and St. Methodius and appears to have been acquainted with N. G. Černyševskij. This Russian radical, incidentally, quoted Ševčenko as his authority on Ukrainian conditions when he attacked the anti-Russian policy of the L'viv "Word" (Slovo) as a member of the dominant nationality in the Russian Empire, to whom foreign criticism of his country was as repugnant as it had been to Pushkin.<sup>9</sup>) What drew Ševčenko to the Russian „revolutionaries" in his latter days was an unrelenting hatred of established authority—both that of the landowners and that of the Russian government. These had been the twin sources of his miseries from his birth. And how intense those miseries could be we realise, for instance, from the pages of his "Diary", in which he complained on 19th June 1857: "If I had been a monster, a murderer, even then a more fitting punishment could not have been devised for me than that of sending me off as a private to the Special Orenburg Corps. It is here that you have the cause of my indescribable sufferings. And in addition to all this I am forbidden to sketch". To these words he subsequently adds the scathing remark: "The heathen Augustus, banishing Naso to the savage Getae, did not forbid him to write or to sketch. Yet the Christian Nicholas forbade me both". Is it strange then that Ševčenko's highly-strung nature, prone to extremes of feeling, as the superlatives in his letters and "Diary" show, should have resented such treatment and the many humiliations of military discipline, which in his case only stopped short at running the gauntlet? Is it to be wondered at too that after ten years of exile, broken in health (partly indeed through his own unwisdom) he should on occasion have been unable to restrain violent and even obscene outbursts against the powers that had wronged him?

Ševčenko, as we have just hinted, had his moments of weakness as well as considerable strength of character. Such moments of weakness led him into contradictions.

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<sup>9</sup>) See N. G. Černyševskij, "Nacional'naja bestaktnost'" (Sovremennoje Obozrenije, July, 1861), reprinted in *Iz literaturnogo nasledstva N. G. Černyševskogo* (Saratov, 1937), pp. 101—102.

The warm defender of feminine virtue confessed in a letter to his physician and friend A. O. Kozačkovs'kyj in 1852<sup>10)</sup> that he could not boast even then "of a very chaste mode of life". In spite of this however Ševčenko's unchanging dream was of love, marriage, and domestic felicity in his native Ukraine. This dream continually recurs almost as a Leitmotiv in his verse and it closes the last poem he wrote before he died.<sup>11)</sup>

Although Ševčenko never married, love played a significant part in his career,<sup>12)</sup> and several of the women he was attracted to, including the peasant-girl who jilted him towards the end of his life, were the subjects of his pictures, for Ševčenko was a portraitist as well as a painter of landscapes and historical canvases. To understand him completely, as we must, it is necessary to study his work in that other field of art which he made his own.<sup>13)</sup> Here the influence of Karl Brjullof was of capital importance, even if it did not rise, except in the earliest phase, to the plane of inspiration. Ševčenko's careful and accurate draughtsmanship, his attention to detail, and his ability to seize and reproduce a slightly stylised likeness were all the results of Brjullof's precept and example. But the static quality of Brjullof's Classical art found no reflection in Ševčenko's practice. Between 1838 and 1847 Ševčenko passed through his period of apprenticeship to art, working mainly at the St. Petersburg Academy. By 1840 he was already illustrating books with engravings, and his subsequent visits to the Ukraine provided him with practice in portraiture and with fresh impressions. 1847, when he was exiled to Orenburg, was a critical year in his life. Yet what seemed at first like catastrophe to the artist was

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10) See M. Šaginjan, *op. cit.* p. 188. "The Minstrel" contains inter alia a lengthy epistle to this friend (A. O. Kozačkovs'komu).

11) *Čy ne pokynut' nam, neboho* ("Shall we then, give up, my poor dear").

12) See M. Šaginjan, *op. cit.* pp. 129—224.

13) See I. L. Boljasnyj, "Ševčenko—chudožnyk" (in *Velykyj poet-revoljucioner*, Odessa, 1939, p.p. 215—259).

not without its blessings in the long run. When Ševčenko was allowed to sketch in 1848 he made admirable use of his keen vision to solve completely the mystery of light and shade, which had fascinated him in the sunlight of the Ukraine and now possessed him in the intenser light of the Caspian sands. Brjullof was no longer at hand to demand exclusive adherence to Classical and Biblical themes. Ševčenko's natural curiosity was attracted to landscape and ethnographic detail, although he could still practice portraiture by depicting at least himself. The work he did in exile is chiefly in water-colour and pencil. His choice of theme shows that he had largely outgrown his taste for Romantic and literary subjects and now prefers, as in his "Diary" and stories, to reproduce the seen and the known.<sup>14)</sup> Soldiers, the "Kirgiz", especially "Kirgiz" children, and the sun-scorched arid landscapes, with their wide expanses, rugged bluffs, and rare vegetation—such things figure in the exiled Ševčenko's sketches and paintings. Yet when he returned to the capital in 1858 we find that he had brought with him a set of illustrations to the parable of the Prodigal Son. These however are not done, as they might have been, in a Brjullof-style Biblical context, but are "modernised" and given realistic touches, like the verse-adaptations of the Scriptures which he made in his later years.<sup>15)</sup> The transition from Romanticism to Realism, which represents a change in European art and thought in the middle of the nineteenth century, may therefore be followed as plainly in Ševčenko's painting as in his literary work.

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<sup>14)</sup> E. g. the picture "Running the Gauntlet" (R. Kara špicrutcnami).

<sup>15)</sup> E. g. the paraphrase of Psalm XL (1859) and the adaptation of Hosea XIV (1859).

## II

We began this essay with an attempt to detach Ševčenko from his reputation and we have considered him apart from it. Let us now consider him as a symbol, for this is one of the forms which a man's reputation may invest. All Ševčenko's literary work is closely bound up with his love and longing for the Ukraine. It is only in the concrete visual detail of painting that his thoughts seem at times to be completely removed from his native landscapes and memories. Now it is the patriotic aspect of Ševčenko's work, especially of his poetry, which first endeared him to his compatriots and has since made him the personification of the Ukrainian's thirst for liberty and independence. One might interpose here that the patriot Ševčenko of, say, the celebrated "Testament" (Zapovit) of 1845, in which he calls on his own to bury him and to rise and break their chains, and, echoing a passage of *La Marseillaise*, "to spatter freedom with evil enemy blood",—that this Ševčenko is only a fragment of a much larger whole, that his patriotism is only one aspect of his many-sided personality. It should be further pointed out, as the Soviet critic is only too apt to do, that this emphasis on Ševčenko's patriotism ignores his strong social consciousness, his "atheism", his very real anti-clericalism. To be sure it does; but at the same time there is no denying that his patriotism plays a highly important part in his poetry and has been rightly chosen by nationally-minded Ukrainians for special emphasis, just as the rather less important social criticism in his work has been emphasised by those intent on proving his revolution-

ary affiliations.<sup>16)</sup> Ševčenko's patriotism is that of the artist who is primarily a man of feeling. With him it is not a shibboleth, but a profound emotional experience. Nevertheless it has binding power and it can serve, as Ševčenko knew well himself, as a call to arms. Study of those lyrics in which he speaks of his country not merely as an object of longing, but as the future home of his liberated compatriots, shows that he tried to project his sense of national equity into the future and to visualise this as an age of personal freedom in the homeland. So we find him, in his "Friendly Epistle to My Compatriots" (1845), urging them not to seek freedom and brotherhood abroad, but in their native Ukraine, in their own homes, where they will find "their own truth, strength, and freedom", and imploring them to create a new age by embracing one another in brotherhood. These words hold good to-day as they did when they were written over a hundred years ago, although conditions in the Ukraine are in some respects very different from what they were then. But the realisation of the ideal expressed in Ševčenko's words is prevented by circumstances for which Ukrainians themselves are not collectively responsible. An intolerant alien power still presides, as it did in Ševčenko's time, over the destinies of their country and has even succeeded recently in uniting under its control all the Ukrainian-speaking lands. The presence of that power has led to an exodus of Ukrainians from the Ukraine in moments of crisis since the emancipation of the serfs after Ševčenko's death made collective movement possible. In consequence of this a notable part of the Ukrainian people now lives outside the national frontiers. The existence of such a body of emigrants<sup>17)</sup> is a sure sign of an abnormal state of things at home. But it is by no means the only sign, for the long history of the Ukraine has been an abnormal history of repeated annexations since Kyjiv

<sup>16)</sup> See Ja. S. Parchomenko, "Hart polumjanoho revoljucionera" and L. P. Nosenko, "Ševčenko i rosij'ska revoljucijna demokratija" (in Velykyj poet-revoljucioner, Odessa, 1939).

<sup>17)</sup> Cf. the Irish emigration to the U.S.A. after the potato famine in the 19th century.

fell to the steppe tribes in the early 13th century. This state of nearly unbroken national servitude brings vividly to mind the career of the great and lovable man whose anniversary we are celebrating to-day. Ševčenko's story is that of his native land in microcosm. No wonder then that his inspiring words are especially treasured by all those of his compatriots who have experienced the bitter anguish of exile and who still love and have not lost their faith in a regenerate Ukraine.



## NOTE ON TRANSLITERATION

Ukrainian is written in the Cyrillic character of Byzantine Greek origin. This is represented here, to preserve textual unity, according to the International (Czech-style) system of transliteration, which differs from the English-style system, as used in "The Slavonic and East European Review", only in a few details. The values of the un-English letters and those used in an un-English fashion are as follows:—

- c = ts (as in "lots")
- č = ch (as in "church")
- ch = ch (of Scotch "loch")
- j = y (as in "yet")
- š = sh (as in "shore")
- šč = shch (as in "Ashchurch")
- ž = s (as in "leisure")

To pronounce Ukrainian names and words we must also know that h is voiced, and not voiceless, as in English; that y has approximately the sound of i in "sit"; that the apostrophe after certain letters indicates the palatalised or "soft" quality of the consonant sounds they represent; and that stress, as in English, is irregular and mobile, and has to be learnt with each word.

The Russian names and words which figure in the text are also transliterated according to the International system.

W. K. M.

