

*Shevchenko's Unforgotten Journey*

GEORGE LUCKYJ

SHEVCHENKO'S  
UNFORGOTTEN JOURNEY

George Luckyj

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**George Luckyj**

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# Acknowledgements

THE IDEA FOR THIS BRIEF biographical sketch of Taras Shevchenko's life was born when I was translating the scholarly biography of the Ukrainian poet by Pavlo Zaitsev in 1986. I decided to write a different story of this life, to set Shevchenko in the wider context of Ukrainian intellectual history as well as to capture his unique personality. A great deal is known about Shevchenko's life, and my account consists of 90 per cent factual material and ten per cent fiction. I have attempted to give a new emphasis to this life story, without reproducing all the details of a full biography. Some of his poetry is offered in translation and some illustrations have been provided.

I wish to acknowledge the use of the following sources. All the translations of Shevchenko's poetry have been adapted from C. H. Andrusyshen and Watson Kirkconnell's *The Poetical Works of Taras Shevchenko* and are used here with the permission of the publisher, the University of Toronto Press. Other translations have been adapted from W. Kirkconnell's *The Ukrainian Poets*. The translations by R. Macguire and J. Malmstead (A. Bely's *Petersburg*) have been used with the permission of the translators. The excerpts from Gogol's "Dikanka" were translated by Constance Garnett. The final "duma," translated by G. Tarnawsky and P. Kilina, is reprinted with the permission of the publishers, The Canadian Institute of Ukrainian Studies and Harvard Ukrainian Research Institute. Special thanks are due to Christine Borsuk and Jennifer Glossop for their expert editorial assistance. I would also like to thank Ralph Lindheim for initiating me into the arcane knowledge of the computer. Last but not least I wish to thank my wife, Moira, for her whole-hearted collaboration.



# Part One

## To St. Petersburg

*O Moroz, gallant warrior,  
Great Cossack of renown,  
The whole Ukraine, brave hero,  
Laments as you go down.*

### DUMA ABOUT MOROZENKO

PAVEL VASILIEVICH ENGELHARDT was enjoying life. In 1828, he inherited a large part of his father's estate in Ukraine even though he was illegitimate. The Engelhardts, as their name suggests, were of Baltic German origin, but they served the Russian empire with devotion. In return, they received land and more than 8000 serfs. Five years before he was born, in 1793, this part of Ukraine, which was occupied by Poland, was, after the second partition of Poland, ceded to Russia. Polish culture and tradition were still quite strong in that part of the world and the Polish language was widely used. Engelhardt himself spoke it well. He divided his time between Vilnius, where he served the tsar in a military capacity, and his splendid manor house near the village of Kyrylivka, on the right bank of the Dnieper. In addition to being a landowner (his estate was run by a manager) he was a guards officer and an aide-de-camp to the governor of Vilnius, which was quite a distance away.

It was summertime. All the guests had departed, and the dinner plates had been cleared away by the servants. Engelhardt was left alone with his thoughts. They were mostly occupied with city life in Vilnius and St. Petersburg, which he visited regularly even though he had to travel there by carriage. Yet sometimes he also thought of Kyrylivka, which he enjoyed so much. Here, in the beautiful orchard and park, he could relax and let his memory speak softly. Perhaps he was not, after all, born to be an official, but rather a Russian *barin*, a gentleman of

leisure. He recalled the events of his life on his estate, this peaceful haven.

In the year he had received his Ukrainian estate he had recommended that a 14-year-old serf, Taras Shevchenko, enter his service to perform the duties of a page boy. Engelhardt liked the youngster whom he called "quick-witted." Taras was issued with a uniform and admitted to the manor. His duties were not onerous. He would hand his master a pipe or fetch a book or a glass of water. The walls of the rooms were adorned with engravings and the atmosphere here was quite different from Taras' home. Sometimes, when there was nothing to do, Taras would recall his childhood.

Taras had two brothers and three sisters, one of whom, Kateryna, he was especially fond of. She helped to nurse him when he was small. Hryhorii Shevchenko, Taras' father, was a little different from most peasants in Kyrylivka. Unlike them, he was literate and there are reasons to believe that he came from an old, impoverished Cossack family. His father Ivan, Taras' grandfather, lived to be 90 and had witnessed the peasant rebellion in 1768. At that time the peasants were still serfs of the Polish landlords and magnates, not enserfed by Russia, as they became 20 years later. They harboured memories of the Cossack Ukraine, when their rights were defended by the Cossacks, the real rulers of the countryside. The leaders of the rebellion, Ivan Honta and Maksym Zalizniak, were Zaporozhian Cossacks who seized, with their forces, the town of Uman. They were crushed by the Russian army under General Mikhail Krechetnikov, who crossed the Dnieper River and routed the rebels. All these terrible events were narrated by grandpa Ivan to a rapt audience including his little grandson.

Taras' father was often allowed to become a *chumak*, that is, to travel to distant places to purchase salt, fish, and other goods. He would take his favourite son with him. These were the first journeys in Taras' life and he treasured their memory. Not only did he visit new places, such as the town of Uman, but lying down in a cart driven by his father, he could observe the sky during the day and at night let his fancy roam freely. He imagined that there must be some pillars holding up the sky, and he wondered how to get there. After all, in Ukrainian, the Milky Way was called the Chumak Pathway.

Taras' early life was full of hardship. Later, he described his home as "an old, poor house, though whitewashed outside, covered with a thatched roof. Near the house grew an apple tree and a dense orchard stretched at the back." Much later Taras referred to his life at home as hell. Most peasants, including his brothers and sisters, accepted this



Figure 1: Schevchenko's birthplace (1843)

hell as something inevitable, perhaps sent by God. But occasionally old pagan beliefs survived in popular customs and folkways. Easter eggs were painted every year as talismans against evil spirits. Spells and charms were used to avert illness and bad fortune. People's spirits not only persevered, they were indomitable.

On one occasion the curious little boy decided to walk through the fields to find the pillars that propped up the sky. He got lost and was brought home by some *chumaks*. However, he had experienced an environment different from home. The world opened up to him, and he welcomed it without any fear. Was this only the natural curiosity of a peasant boy, or was there also an unusual adventurousness? On that occasion, while walking through the fields, Taras noticed many grave-mounds dotting the landscape. These were, he learned later, of two kinds. First, they were ancient *kurhans* (Turkic for a hill), sometimes dating back to Scythian times. These round mounds of about 100 metres in diameter served in ancient times as burial grounds for warriors and their weapons. Then, there were Cossack *mohylas* (gravemounds) from the 17th century, where the Cossacks were laid to rest. One such *mohyla*, which the little boy did not see but learned about from his grandfather, was the famous *Savur* mohyla. This, the

legend claimed, was the burial place of the famous Cossack Savur, who fell fighting the Tatars. To the little boy the gravemounds brought both a sense of the unknown and the presence of history.

Once, on a trip with the *chumaks*, little Taras clung to his father when the train of wagons approached the steep bank of the river Dnieper. The *chumaks* stopped, unharnessed their horses, and were ready to take a rest. They soon lit a fire under a cauldron and boiled some fish and kasha. While eating and relaxing they started to sing sad *chumak* songs about their wanderings. Taras listened for a while but then ventured to the brink of the riverbank and looked across. There were green islands in the middle of the wide and mighty Dnieper, and his eyes gazed on the blue distance beyond. He was elated.

In Ukraine (or, as the Russians called it, "Little Russia"), the conditions of serfdom were different from those in Russia, where there was communal control (*obshchina*). In Ukraine, individual landholding persisted, and the peasants did not practice the so-called communal repartition of land. The serfs eked out a meagre existence, working most of the time for their landlord. Serfdom was introduced into Ukraine in 1783 by Catherine II, who had also destroyed the Cossack stronghold on the Dnieper, the Zaporozhian Sich. Before that time Ukraine enjoyed the semi-autonomous rule of the Cossack Hetmans, from 1648 till the ill-fated battle of Poltava in 1709 in which the combined forces of King Charles XII of Sweden and the Ukrainian Hetman Ivan Mazepa were defeated by the armies of Tsar Peter I. Both these rulers, Catherine and Peter, the destroyers of an ancient freedom, were hated in Ukraine and were later castigated by Shevchenko.

The sense of history was still alive in Kyrylivka. Old memories of better days could not be erased. On the contrary, they shone brightly. Songs preserved many glorious as well as sad happenings, and they nourished the imaginations of sensitive children who gathered on warm summer evenings in the orchard to listen to the old *dumy*. Their poetic, lyric language found eager listeners. What they lost by not going to school, they gained through oral discourse.

However, Taras managed to receive some education partly from his father, who, in his spare time, read to him the *Lives of the Saints*, and partly from an abusive village church cantor named Bohorsky, who occasionally beat Taras by giving him several lashes when the cantor was drunk. Much later Taras recalled how Bohorsky's pupils were "his absolute slaves." Shevchenko had to "carry out his orders with total obedience, since there was nobody to defend me." At this early age Taras wrote down some of the verses of the well-known itinerant philosopher Hryhorii Skovoroda. He also heard many folk songs

glorifying the Cossacks. He loved to sing them, too, since, as a contemporary reported later, "He learned new songs very quickly and sang them well." Even as a boy he had a good voice. (Singing, especially in a small choir, is a favourite Ukrainian recreation. It has survived to the present day, and visitors to that country are sometimes astonished by the readiness of everyone to sing in a choir. Like the Welsh, the Ukrainians excel in this art, which comes naturally to them and has a long tradition.)

When Shevchenko's mother died in 1823, his father married a widow with children of her own. Taras' stepmother was, proverbially, unkind and even cruel to her stepson. Sometimes, when things became unbearable, Taras ran away to a neighbouring village to stay with his sister, Kateryna, who had married. Then, when Taras was eleven, his father died. His father, on his deathbed, said, "My son Taras does not need anything from my estate. He will not be an ordinary man. He will either be someone very good or a good-for-nothing. In either case my bequest will be of little help to him."

When Taras was 13 years old he was still tending sheep beyond the village. However, he was also fond of drawing, although most of his work then was done with rough charcoal on cottage walls or on the reverse side of cheap prints.

These memories gathered as Taras sat in Engelhardt's comfortable manor. They prompted him to draw with the pencils he found in the room, while his master was away on a visit. When Engelhardt unexpectedly returned home and found Taras drawing by candlelight, he had his servants give the young artist several lashes for creating a fire hazard. Physical abuse of serfs was common. It was also practiced in schools — *spare the rod and spoil the child*. Life was altogether much rougher in those days. It is debatable whether physical violence left the scars then that it leaves on people today. It did not necessarily perpetuate itself in later generations. Shevchenko's life, full of abuse, had not led him to practice violence. On the contrary, he abhorred it. The lashing did not, however, stop Taras from his pursuit of art. Instead, he tried to find a teacher of painting. Since teachers were unavailable in Kyrylivka, he went to a neighbouring village and for two weeks was trained by a local painter of churches. Engelhardt took note of this and decided to take pageboy Taras with him when he was travelling to Vilnius. Perhaps there he could find an outlet for the boy's talent. The person in charge of this journey by horse-drawn carriage noted that Shevchenko was "suitable to be a house painter." Perhaps Engelhardt had it in his mind to apprentice Taras to a painter and to earn some money from the labour of this talented serf. It was Taras' artistic

talent that made it possible to go on the first extended journey of his life. He was naturally thrilled and expected to paint not only houses, but real pictures. His eagerness to follow his art drove him relentlessly. But the journey was to be full of surprises and adventures he was not expecting.

The best road to Vilnius was roundabout, through Kiev, Chernihiv, and Belarussia. Sometime in the late spring of 1830, Engelhardt's party, which included Shevchenko, set out for the distant city, which, at that time, was more Polish than Lithuanian, and was known as Wilno. They reached the city after several days of travelling through desolate countryside, changing horses at dilapidated towns and villages. Vilnius boasted a university and some fine churches. Its architecture alone captivated the young artist.

In Vilnius the party stayed at a tavern, which offered room and board. Soon they met some local people who spoke Polish rather than Russian. In a church, Shevchenko, who just turned 16, met a young Polish girl, the black-browed Dunia Husikowska. He spoke halting Polish with her and they got on famously. Taras found her quite appealing. As he often would in his adult life, he found himself in a moment of spiritual crisis. However, what began as a flirtation soon developed into an intellectual friendship. Dunia was an ardent Polish patriot and told Taras about Wilno, the town that the poet Adam Mickiewicz and the historian Joachim Lelewel had called their home.

Taras and Dunia walked down the old city streets, past the magnificent Cathedral of St. Stanislas, a neoclassical structure rebuilt in 1801. They were especially fascinated by the Gothic facade of the small St. Anne's church, which had so impressed Napoleon. The remains of Polish history could be seen in the imposing Pointed Gate (Ostra Brama) with its venerated picture of the Madonna. The university, founded by the Polish king, Stefan Batory, was a true centre of Polish culture, although it was closed at the time because of student disturbances. The city was on the eve of rebellion, and Taras and Dunia were filled with apprehension and wonderment. Taras, a peasant viewing a magnificent city for the first time in his life, was impressed not only by its architecture, but by the fact that all the citizens were free people, not serfs.

Dunia also read to Taras some of Mickiewicz's revolutionary poetry. To Shevchenko's undisguised approval she quoted the lines from Mickiewicz's "Ode to Youth": "*Arise! United stand! With chains of harmony let us encircle the vast world. / Our thoughts into one mighty focus hurled, Our spirit united, yet free!*" This romantic poetry challenged the very regime under which they lived. It was more

revolutionary than any painting Taras had seen. Perhaps with words one could express one's pent-up emotions better than with paints? Recited by this young girl, who was no serf, Mickiewicz's verses made a strong impression on Taras, who later told a friend that at that moment he "for the first time thought why we, unfortunate serfs, cannot be free people." Soon, the thought of freedom was reinforced by new events.

Engelhardt decided to stay in Vilnius for several months. He had not forgotten Shevchenko's artistic aspirations and apprenticed him to a well-known Lithuanian painter, Jonas Rustemas, who lectured at Vilnius University. At last, young Taras could learn something about oil painting from this 70-year-old master. New vistas were opening before him. In November, however, Taras witnessed the outbreak of the Polish uprising against Russia. The streets of the city were full of demonstrators, leaflets were passed around to everyone, and Russian soldiers were being targeted by snipers. All this overwhelmed Taras, who continued to see Dunia.

One day they were walking together near Ostra Brama when they came across a young man whose arm had been wounded by a bullet fired by a Russian soldier. He was bleeding profusely and in need of medical help. Taras and Dunia learned that his name was Ryszard. He did not want to be taken to the hospital because he suspected that the Russians would arrest the wounded Poles. He told them that he lived on Swietokrzyska Street, not very far from where he had been shot. He could walk, and all three of them went along to his home.

As soon as they reached his home, his mother came and examined his wounded arm. He had lost some blood and was glad to sit down. His mother made some tea and called his father, who was in his study. Ryszard's father, whose last name they never learned, expressed his thanks to them. He told them that the uprising had spread throughout Wilno and that the Poles expected a strong Russian counterattack. Ryszard's father was an ardent Polish patriot, who in 1811 had served in Napoleon's advancing army on Moscow. He was not in the mood to reminisce about it, but he was full of hatred for the Russians. Learning that Shevchenko was a Ukrainian, he shook his hand and claimed that Ukraine and Poland had a common enemy — Russia. Shevchenko spoke a little Polish, which pleased Ryszard's father.

In the meantime Ryszard was feeling better and was anxious to return to his comrades. Both his father and mother persuaded him to stay at home. They sent for a local doctor, who dressed his wound. As the four sat talking and drinking tea, a Russian patrol went by. Fortunately it did not come inside the house and they saw the caps of Russian soldiers disappearing past the window. Peace had returned at

least temporarily to this Polish home. When Taras and Dunia left to face the turmoil on Vilnius's streets, they were both relieved but not happy at what they had witnessed. The rebellion did not last long before it was put down, but Taras would never forget the panic among the Russians or the bravery of the Poles.

It was in Vilnius, too, that Shevchenko came to face the Jewish problem. As a Ukrainian peasant he did not particularly like the Jews; they were regarded as allies of the Poles and Russians and as exploiters of the peasants. Shevchenko, however, was never an anti-Semite. Much later he recalled a Jewish episode in the "most celebrated city of Vilnius." He described it in a somewhat melodramatic fashion, narrating in verse the love story of a Jewish woman and a Lithuanian man. The woman's father kills the young suitor and is, in turn, murdered by his own daughter. It is quite possible that during his stay in Vilnius Shevchenko saw the popular vaudeville *Success from Failure or Adventures in a Jewish Tavern*, which has, in one of its songs, the lines about the "most celebrated city of Vilnius." The play must have impressed Shevchenko, who might also have heard the story of the double murder there.

His master, Engelhardt, decided at once to leave Vilnius and to proceed to St. Petersburg. He was in such a hurry to leave that he left Shevchenko behind. Weeks later Taras had to make his own way to St. Petersburg, along with other servants forsaken by Engelhardt. Some areas of the country were controlled by Polish revolutionaries, and the refugees had an adventurous journey to the capital. Sometime in February 1831, Shevchenko arrived in St. Petersburg.

It was a combination of sheer luck and the ambition to become an artist that made this journey possible. But this 17-year-old serf had other advantages that are usually ignored by his biographers. He was not only an usually gifted and independent young man, he had had the good fortune to avoid much formal schooling and had therefore relied on developing his own resources and originality often stifled by schools. Had he gone to school he would have received a Russian education and might have accepted the dominant Russian culture. As it was, his education was informal, based on stories and folk songs and on a rich native tradition. For the Ukrainian serfs kept the old beliefs, celebrated the old folk festivities, and offered valuable homespun wisdom. All this was to provide, in a few decades, the awakening Ukrainian intellectuals with material for new cultural theories of romanticism and nationalism. Shevchenko did not have to study this native tradition; he imbibed it with his mother's milk. He was, thus, uniquely qualified to later become a member of the Ukrainian

intellectual elite. All this still lay ahead for he was unaware of his lucky star. He was proud, not ashamed, of his humble origins, and he never betrayed any desire to embrace the city with all its attractions. Although he was bent on an artistic career, this did not interfere with his love for his country.

St. Petersburg, of course, could be very tempting, especially for Ukrainians, many of whom lived in the city. Beginning in the 18th century, when they lost the last vestiges of political autonomy, they came in droves to the capital of Russia, enticed by new and attractive government posts. Ukrainian clerics, favoured by Peter I, came to Russia to help build a stronger church and empire. Others, former members of the Cossack *starshyna* (officer corps), were given Russian *dворянство* (nobility) and co-opted into government service. Ukrainian artists and writers also flocked to Russia, for it alone offered them fame and status.

At the time of Shevchenko's arrival in St. Petersburg, his countryman Mykola Hohol was publishing his first collections of stories in Russian there. He was to become the famous Nikolai Gogol, the first major novelist in Russia. To succeed as an artist one had to do it on Russian terms. This was, after all, how an imperial culture developed and flourished: not by promoting multiculturalism, but by absorbing all the non-Russian talent into what Russians called the "common pot" (*obshchii kotelok*). For centuries this policy worked successfully. But now and then someone was unwilling to sink into this melting pot — especially if he or she came from the Ukrainian peasantry.

For a while Shevchenko lived in Englehardt's apartment on Mokhova Street in St. Petersburg and performed his duties as a page-boy. Late in 1831 Engelhardt signed an agreement with the painter Vasili Shiriaev, apprenticing young Taras under a four-year contract. The terms of the agreement stipulated the pay Engelhardt would receive and made it clear that the pupil "would be obedient and humble" towards his teacher. Shiriaev was a hard taskmaster, and Shevchenko later compared him to the cruel village cantor. Several of Shiriaev's pupils lived in his apartment. They assisted him in decorating the walls of the houses of St. Petersburg's wealthy burghers.

In the little free time he had, Taras tried to paint portraits. One portrait by him of Engelhardt has survived. Engelhardt liked it and asked for a portrait of his mistress, which Taras duly painted. Gradually, having improved his technique, Shevchenko painted churches and, along with other pupils of Shiriaev, the large decorative panels in the Grand Theatre. These commissions were well paid, and although Shevchenko received only room and board, Engelhardt and Shiriaev

shared the profits. In one year alone this amounted to over 30,000 rubles.

During his work on the Grand Theatre Shevchenko met a sympathetic machinist, Petr Ivanovich Kartashov, who told him about the Imperial Academy of Fine Arts. Serfs were not admitted there. Shiriaev's apartment had a library and Shevchenko borrowed some books from it. He had now mastered Russian, which had still been rather shaky when he arrived in the capital. He read some poetry by Alexander Pushkin, but his favourite book was Jean Jacques Barthelmy's *Travels in Greece*, which he read in a Russian translation.

The routine at Shiriaev's was rather boring and the painting assignments not very exciting. The pseudo-classicist, style which was then in vogue, was also compulsory for Shevchenko. Taras was not satisfied with being a decorator-painter. Therefore, in the evenings, which in St. Petersburg were often very light, he went to the Summer Gardens to copy classical statues. The Summer Gardens were established in 1704, soon after St. Petersburg was built on the orders of Peter I. Forced labourers, among them Ukrainian Cossacks, were used in the construction. The gardens, located between the rivers Neva and Fontanka, occupied ten hectares. There were more than 80 stone statues in the gardens, which were also famous for their ironwork fencing, considered the finest in Europe. Not all the statues captivated the young Taras. He did not like the "ugly Saturn."

On one such occasion Taras met Ivan Soshenko, a student in the Academy of Fine Arts, who observed and liked Shevchenko's sketches. It turned out that Soshenko, too, was a Ukrainian and came from Vilshana, a village not far from Shevchenko's Kyrylivka. They quickly became friends, both sharing memories of home and both aspiring to become painters. Their meeting endured in both their memories. In an autobiographical novel, *The Artist*, written years later, Shevchenko recorded the meeting in these words spoken by Soshenko: "I came across a young man in dirty overalls, sitting on an upturned bucket...I stopped. The youngster looked round and began to hide something in his shirt.... 'Show me what you have sketched,' — I asked.... He was shy, but showed me a good sketch of Saturn. I found him very appealing and his face was quite feminine."

This meeting must have happened in the summer of 1835, for in that year, due to Soshenko's efforts, Shevchenko was enrolled as a member of the "Society for the Encouragement of Young Artists." The secretary of the society was Vasyl Hryhorovych, another Ukrainian who took an interest in Shevchenko, and who was also a professor at

the Academy of Fine Arts. These new friends soon realized that Taras had great talent and that he should enrol as a student in the academy. But he could do so only if he were a free man, not a serf. Still, he could visit the famous Hermitage Museum and feast his eyes on the paintings. The museum opened in 1764 and originally contained the art collection of Catherine II. It grew and spread to five different buildings, embracing one of the finest collections of art in the world.

At about the same time, Shevchenko met yet another Ukrainian, Yevhen Hrebinka, a minor poet who wrote in Ukrainian. Shevchenko visited him often and Hrebinka introduced him to works of the fledgling Ukrainian literature, among them the poetry of Ivan Kotliarevsky and the prose of Hryhorii Kvitka. Shevchenko borrowed their works as well as a manuscript of the "Istoriia Rusov," a romanticised history of the Cossacks by an unknown author who was widely read in Ukraine and Russia and had been praised by Pushkin himself. These books were a revelation to the young artist. His country's past came alive before him. What he had known only from stories and folksongs was confirmed by literary creations. Hrebinka told young Shevchenko not only about works written in Ukrainian but informed him of the latest literary trends abroad, many of which were just reaching Russia. In the West, a new literary movement, which had started in England and Germany and which some people called Romanticism, was now fashionable. Hrebinka had read Schiller's *The Robbers*. This new movement brought not only new ideas but pleaded for the use of the language as spoken by ordinary people. The Germans, in particular, were following their philosopher Johann Gottfried Herder, who wrote about the "national spirit" (*Volksgeist*) as the foundation of all culture. Herder praised the popular oral literature of the Slavic peoples and foresaw a bright future for Ukraine. Following Herder's call many collections of folk songs and legends appeared in print in Europe. Even in Ukraine one such collection, edited by Mykhailo Maksymovych, was published in 1827. Hrebinka lent his copy to Shevchenko.

All this was new and provocative. There were, as yet, no Romantic poets writing in Ukrainian, but their advent was assured. Art was not merely painting and decorating but also writing poetry. In 1834 Hrebinka published a collection of Ukrainian poems, and a year later a Ukrainian translation of Pushkin's long poem *Poltava*. It is certain that Shevchenko read them, but he must also have read Gogol's Ukrainian *Dikanka* tales which appeared in 1831. Gogol was also in St. Petersburg at that time, immersed in the study of Ukrainian history, but the two probably never met.



**Figure 2: Karl Briullov (1835)**

Soon, Shevchenko's Ukrainian friends began efforts to free him from serfdom. Russian help was essential. In 1836 they approached Karl Briullov, a Russified descendant of French Huguenots who was the leading painter in Russia. He had just returned from Italy and his huge canvas *The Last Days of Pompei* had been widely acclaimed. He was a Freemason and a man of great influence despite or perhaps because of his liberal views. Hryhorovych and Soshenko introduced Shevchenko to Briullov, who was pleased with his sketches. He was ready to join the campaign for his liberation. The men in Briullov's circle represented a small but influential libertarian group in Russia. Even before the abortive Decembrist anti-tsarist rebellion of 1825, the Russian writers Nikolai Novikov and Alexander Radishchev exposed the injustices of serfdom. The memory of the Decembrists, five of whom were executed and over 100 exiled, was still very much alive in liberal Russian circles.

The Freemasons were allowed to operate in Russia under Tsar Alexander I and were not so much dedicated to political change as to individual self-perfection. They emphasized philanthropic activities and were very concerned with alleviating the cruelties of serfdom. They were given to secrecy and conspiracy, which appealed to many liberal-minded Russians. In 1822 a ministerial decree banned all secret societies, including Masonic lodges. Their activity, however, continued underground. The prospect of liberating a serf, therefore, was very appealing to Briullov and his friends.

After several approaches to Engelhardt, whose obstinacy prompted Briullov to remark that Shevchenko's owner was a "fat pig in mercenary slippers," it was agreed that the sum of 2500 rubles was to be paid for the young artist's freedom. Other prominent Russians joined the campaign: Count Feodor Tolstoy, Count Mikhail Velgorsky, an accomplished musician, the painter Aleksey Venetsianov, and the poet Vasily Zhukovsky, who was the tutor to the tsarevich. Even the Russianized Nikolai Gogol later claimed that he had assisted in this effort.

It was agreed that Briullov would paint a portrait of Zhukovsky, which would then be sold in a lottery. All this took a long time. In the spring of 1837 the portrait was ready. At about the same time Shevchenko fell seriously ill and was hospitalized. After a month of very high fever he slowly recovered. Briullov's portrait was sold. Many lottery tickets were bought by members of the imperial family who wanted to display their philanthropy. Finally the sum of 2500 rubles was raised and the money delivered to Engelhardt who, on April 22, 1838, signed the papers granting freedom to his former serf.

It was a typical spring day in St. Petersburg. Early fog was blown away by winds from the sea and the sky turned blue. In the evening it might rain, even snow. Soshenko was sitting in his room reading, when suddenly through the open window a jubilant Shevchenko jumped in, shouting "freedom." They embraced and cried. That night Briullov hosted a party in honour of Shevchenko. It was a happy occasion for everybody present and a great deal of Caucasian wine was consumed.

Early in the morning, exhausted but still elated, Taras returned to his rooms. It took him a long time to fall asleep. Just as the dawn was breaking. He dreamt about his home. Vague figures of former friends appeared. They were sad and melancholy, reminiscent of the artist's unhappy youth. Suddenly, a figure of a young girl came forward and, just before offering her kiss, said — "You have abandoned me." With a start Shevchenko woke up and slowly, still thinking of the girl's words, remembered that he was a free man.

# Part Two

## In Ukraine

HOW INTOXICATING, how magnificent is a summer day in Little Russia! How luxuriously warm the hours when midday glitters in stillness and sultry heat and the blue fathomless ocean covering the plain like a dome seems to be slumbering, bathed in languor, clasping the fair earth and holding it close in its ethereal embrace! Upon it, not a cloud; in the plain, not a sound. Everything might be dead; only above in the heavenly depths a lark is trilling, and from the airy heights the silvery notes drop down upon adoring earth, and from time to time the cry of a gull or the ringing note of a quail sounds in the steppe. The towering oaks stand, idle and apathetic, like aimless wayfarers, and the dazzling gleams of sunshine light up picturesque masses of leaves, casting unto others a shadow black as night, only flecked with gold when the wind blows. The insects of the air flit like sparks of emerald, topaz, and ruby about the gay vegetable gardens, topped by stately sunflowers. Grey haystacks and golden sheaves of wheat, like tents, stray over the plain. The broad branches of cherries, of plums, apples, and pears bent under their load of fruit, the sky with its pure mirror, the river in its green, proudly erect frame — how full of delight is the Little Russian summer!

Such was the splendour of a day in the hot August of eighteen hundred...eighteen hundred...yes, it will be about thirty years ago, when the road eight miles beyond the village of Sorochintsy bustled with people hurrying to the fair from all the farms, far and near. From early morning, wagons full of fish and salt had trailed in an endless chain along the road. Mountains of pots wrapped in hay moved along slowly, as though weary of being shut up in the dark; only here and there a brightly painted tureen or crock boastfully peeped out from behind the hurdle that held the high pile on the wagon, and

attracted wishful glances from the devotees of such luxury. Many of the passers-by looked enviously at the tall potter, the owner of these treasures, who walked slowly behind his goods, carefully wrapping his proud crocks in the alien hay that would engulf them.

On one side of the road, apart from all the rest, a team of weary oxen dragged a wagon piled up with sacks, hemp, linen, and various household goods and followed by their owner, in a clean linen shirt and dirty linen trousers.

With a lazy hand he wiped from his swarthy face the streaming perspiration that even trickled from his long moustache, powdered by the relentless barber who, uninvited, visits fair and foul alike and has for countless years forcibly sprinkled all mankind with dust. Beside him, tied to the wagon, walked a mare, whose meek air betrayed her advancing years.

Many of the passers-by, especially the young men, took off their caps as they met our peasant. But it was not his grey moustache or his dignified step that led them to do so; one had but to raise one's eyes a little to discover the reason for this deference: on the wagon was sitting his pretty daughter, with a round face, black eyebrows arching evenly above her clear brown eyes, carelessly smiling rosy lips, and with red and blue ribbons twisted in the long braids which, with a bunch of wild flowers, crowned her charming head. Everything seemed to interest her; everything was new and wonderful, and her pretty eyes were racing all the time from one object to another. She might well be diverted! It was her first visit to a fair! A girl of eighteen for the first time at a fair....

The river Psiol gradually came into our travellers' view; already in the distance they felt its cool freshness, the more welcome after the exhausting, wearisome heat. Through the dark and light green foliage of the birches and poplars, carelessly scattered over the plain, there were glimpses of the cold glitter of the water, and the lovely river unveiled her shining silvery bosom, over which the green tresses of the trees drooped luxuriantly. Willful as a beauty in those enchanting hours when her faithful mirror so jealously frames her brow full of pride and dazzling splendour, her lily shoulders, and her marble neck, shrouded by the dark waves of her hair, when with disdain she flings aside one ornament to replace it by another and there is no end to her whims — the river almost every year changes her course, picks out a new channel, and surrounds herself with

new and varied scenes. Rows of watermills tossed up great waves with their heavy wheels and flung them violently down again, churning them into foam, scattering froth and making a great clatter. At that moment the wagon with the persons we have described reached the bridge, and the river lay before them in all her beauty and grandeur like a sheet of glass. Sky, green and dark blue forest, men, wagons of pots, watermills — all were standing or walking upside down, and not sinking into the lovely blue depths.

Nikolai Gogol, *Evenings on a Farm near Dikanka*

*I have lost my heart into my rhymes,  
That you, in the dim coming times,  
May know how my heart went with them  
After the red-rose-bordered hem.*

W.B. Yeats "To Ireland"

THE YEAR WAS 1843. Five years had passed since that memorable day in April 1838. Shevchenko was a successful art student, a favourite pupil of Briullov. St. Petersburg, one of the most grandiose capitals of Europe, enveloped him in its glow and suffused his entire being. The life of a free man was at first intoxicating. Young Taras greedily accepted it. Despite his meagre means (he was on a scholarship) he went to theatres, concerts, operas, and ballets, where he admired Maria Taglioni, and he became a *bon vivant*. He also read a great deal, mostly English literature in Russian translation, and learned French. Some friends feared he was indeed dissipating. But he was not.

The temptations of city life proved, at first, too much for the ambitious young man. He wanted to succeed and realized that friendships could help him. Then there were women. He was always susceptible to feminine beauty. As an art student he painted many nudes and met the models later in town. He was no saint and occasionally visited disreputable places. He recalled later how "he sated his passions at Adolphina's." This Adolfinka, as he called her, was his favourite. His young life bubbled like wine he could ill afford. There was also the unfortunate marriage of his teacher Briullov to the gorgeous Emilia Timm from Riga. Two months later the tsar took Emilia as his mistress, and Briullov had to divorce her. He grieved partly in seclusion and partly, accompanied by Shevchenko, in taverns. These were the trials of a young artist as a man.

It slowly dawned on Shevchenko that his beloved Academy of Fine Arts was becoming, for him, a blind alley. He was an excellent student, but he was not satisfied with his work. The contemporary art, even that of the great and divine Briullov, was something he could not respond to. Once, when he was looking at an art collection, he recorded that "Oh, God, I saw lanky lifeless Madonnas, surrounded

by skinny cherubs." For some time he had hoped to continue his studies in Italy on a government grant. But these scholarships were awarded to students who had received gold medals for their work. For three years in a row Shevchenko received only silver medals and had to abandon dreams of Italy. It was, therefore, not unnatural that his thoughts should turn to poetry and to Ukraine. Perhaps his true calling lay elsewhere.

Shevchenko found himself giving in to an insistent yearning to write verse. The words in his native Ukrainian tongue came forth fluently and effortlessly. Later, in his diary, he would recall that as a student:

I wrote Ukrainian verses, which were to settle like a terrible burden upon my poor soul. Before Briullov's bewitching canvas I would fall into reveries and evoke in my heart my blind *kobzar* and the bloodthirsty *haidamaks*. In the twilight of his luxurious studio, as though on the torrid and wild steppes embracing the Dnieper, there passed before my eyes the martyred shadows of our hapless Hetmans. The vast steppe, dotted with its high burial mounds, unfurled itself to meet the edges of the sky. My beautiful, my unfortunate Ukraine preened herself before me in all her immaculate and melancholy loveliness.... And I grew increasingly pensive, and the eyes of my soul would not be torn from this panorama of enchanting beauty, which they so intimately knew, to which they were so intimately bound.

The young student could hardly, as yet, fully realize that in his attempts to transform these relentless visions into verse he had come face to face with his destiny. His first poem, "The Bewitched Woman," written in 1837, was in the form of a ballad. Close to German *Lieder*, ballads, according to Herder, were an expression of a people's soul. But this rather vague concept assumed in Shevchenko's poem not old clichés of oral literature, but, in the words of one scholar, "a new poetic form expressing the deepest and most intimate human experiences, ideas and philosophical interpretations of life." Very early in his poetic work Shevchenko was already conscious of his task. In a prologue to his poetry in 1839, he wrote:

*My pensive, heavy-laden songs  
My precious blooms, I vow!  
I've tended you, I've reared you up,  
Where shall I send you now?  
Go to Ukraine, my children dear,*

*To our own dear Ukraine;  
Wander like waifs by hedge and road,  
For here I must remain.  
There you will find a friendly word,  
And there a mood sincere;  
There you will meet an open heart.  
Nay, hints of glory hear...*

In 1840 Shevchenko published his first collection of poems, *Kobzar* (The Minstrel). These lyric and historical verses were inspired by his native land. The best sampling of them may be shown in one lyrical and one historical short poem:

*What use are coal-black brows to me?  
What use my hazel eyes?  
Those years of happy maidenhood  
What joys from them arise?  
Years of youth will pass away,  
Eyes will weep and beauty fade,  
Vanish like the rose.  
With the wind it goes..*

*There was a time in our Ukraine  
When cannon roared with glee,  
A time when Zaporozhian men  
Excelled in mastery!  
They lived as masters — freedom's joy  
And glory were their gain:  
All that has passed, and what is left  
Are gravemounds on the plain!*

The *Haidamaks*, a long poem that appeared in 1841, described a peasant rebellion in a romantic manner. The first collection received six positive reviews in Russian periodicals; the second drew sharp criticism from the well-known Russian critic, Vissarion Belinsky. But Shevchenko's renown grew, among both the intelligentsia and the peasants.

With somewhat mixed feelings, Shevchenko decided to return home for a visit. On the one hand he wanted to visit Ukraine, but he also wanted to discover something about its history and contemporary condition and to confirm his new dedication to writing poetry. He felt

acutely responsible for his own destiny. Early in May of 1843 Shevchenko and his old friend, the poet Yevhen Hrebinka, set out from St. Petersburg for Ukraine. Hrebinka's sister, Liudmyla, joined them. They took a mail coach along the Belarussian tract. Shevchenko had travelled this road once before years ago with his master Engelhardt, though in the opposite direction. Once again he beheld the unwashed villages alongside the road, the dirty postal stations where horses were changed, and, above all, the miserable peasants begging for food. All this was familiar to him but, nonetheless, dismaying and repugnant. A contemporary traveller along the same road wrote that "such a journey, without proper rest, was exhausting and fraught with danger and adventure."

Spring was very late that year, and nature did not provide the population with relief from what was for the most part, the simple drudgery of their lives. The surrounding poverty of Belarussia was aptly described in the memoirs of Shevchenko's friend, Nikolai Mombelli: "There was a general shortage of flour and, as a result, the bread was uneatable. Even though I am an opponent of physical punishment, I should like to see our emperor eating the bread of Vitebsk peasants for several days." Shevchenko's sentiments about the tsar were similar; he was soon to give them unrestrained expression in his clandestine poems.

The travellers passed Homel and reached Chernihiv in Ukraine, finally leaving the Belarussian tract. On May 25, one week after the commencement of their journey, they entered Chernihiv, the seat of an ancient principality and, in 1648, the headquarters of a Cossack regiment. Hardly a town, it was, rather, a collection of thatch-roofed houses without a paved main street; indeed, only some of the streets were laid with wooden logs. In the whole town there were only three stone houses.

Nizhyn was the group's next stop. It was here that Nikolai Gogol had received his schooling. Shevchenko had read some of Gogol's Ukrainian stories written in Russian. Later Shevchenko would dedicate a poem to him, but now he wondered whether Ukrainians like Gogol should not stick to their native language. Shevchenko insisted on contributing to the young Ukrainian literature. For Hrebinka, Nizhyn held many precious memories. Shevchenko hoped to look up his old friend from St. Petersburg, the artist Ivan Soshenko. The immediate goal of this journey for Shevchenko was Kachanivka, the private estate of the Ukrainian magnate Hryhorii Tarnovsky. Hrebinka, along with his sister, went on their separate way to his *khutir* "sanctuary."

Shevchenko had heard a great deal about Kachanivka from friends of the Russian composer Mikhail Glinka, who on his visits there had composed some of his best works. But the very sight of the estate surpassed all his expectations. The eighteenth-century manor, looking more like a palace, was surrounded by a park of 600 *desiatinas*, or nearly 1800 acres, all beautifully maintained in their natural state. The winding access road led to the main building over which a flag flew to signify that the owner was at home. Old Cossack cannons stood nearby, silent now.

Shevchenko was escorted into the building. The manor's ground floor was divided into several guest apartments for Tarnovsky's relatives and friends. Shevchenko ascended the carpeted, ornate staircase to the upper part of the mansion, the Great Hall decorated with portraits of Ukrainian hetmans. The furniture standing against the carved walls of the large room was in Empire style, probably of local craftsmanship. Here Shevchenko was met by the master of the house, who lost no time in pointing out to his visitor an orchestra platform, and informing him that the piano in the room was the one on which Glinka had composed his *Ruslan and Liudmila*. Tarnovsky prided himself on being a great connoisseur of art and music. "If you like Beethoven," he told Shevchenko, "we can play him for you." Later in the evening, the orchestra did, in fact, play Beethoven's Third Symphony to which an extra passage had been added composed by Tarnovsky himself. Shevchenko did not openly express his reaction to this extravagant, rather bizarre gesture. He had journeyed here hoping to paint Tarnovsky's portrait. Indeed, he was being treated as an artist and found this to be not at all unpleasant.

But on a solitary stroll through the grounds, Shevchenko had an unexpected encounter that brought one critical aspect of the reality of life in Ukraine into focus for him. Trees were already in leaf here, and birdsong filled the air. Shevchenko chanced upon an elderly peasant with whom he struck up a conversation. The old man, Prokip, worked in the apiary. He was very garrulous, almost indiscreet. Within a few minutes he had informed Shevchenko that his master, Tarnovsky, was in love with his own very beautiful niece, who was, in turn, hoping one day to inherit the estate. Furthermore, the guest learned, it had come to pass that in the neighbouring village a peasant girl had hanged herself after being seduced by this same landlord. It was a sad fact that there were many Ukrainian landowners who sentimentally and ostentatiously displayed a love for their native traditions, folklore, and culture, yet who simultaneously shamelessly exploited the peasants within their jurisdictions.

Shevchenko found that he could not tolerate such hypocrisy. He saw the lavish life at Kachanivka for what it was: an anomalous island in the midst of widespread destitution. Moreover, he knew full well that it was not the only one of its kind in this land. He had no illusions about the realities of life in Ukraine. He knew that the country had been raped and enslaved by Moscow as well as by the Russified Ukrainian landowners and bureaucrats who faithfully served the tsar. Shevchenko had recently declared in a letter to a friend: "I will not go to Little Russia, the devil take it, for there I'll hear nothing but weeping." Yet in a corner of his heart there lived an ideal, just as each of us reserves a place in our souls for a paradise.

Shevchenko's vision was nurtured by wide-ranging influences. A constant source of sustenance derived from the principles of the Enlightenment, the ideals of the French Revolution, and the Europe-wide Romantic movement, which was born of political and social upheavals across the continent and fed by the human spirit's yearning for unrestrained expression in the arts to counter the balance and control of the Classicist age. Nationalism, which gave form to the pride of powerful nations and to the strivings for freedom of oppressed ones, became an integral and compelling part of the Romantic movement and of the very breath of the 19th century. In addition to these pervasive surrounding forces, all the intense personal experiences of Shevchenko's young life continued to affect his impressionable psyche. They were never denied or suppressed by plans, ambitions, and desires of the moment, but always integrated anew into his maturing outlook upon the world. He was ever receptive to the vivid memories of the harsh realities and inequities of his serf origins and to the familiarity gained in childhood with the historical, national, and social perspectives of a mostly oral culture, all in a living Ukrainian language: the folk songs into which the people poured their hearts and invested their moral and political ideals; the *dumy*, lyric-epic poems about the Cossacks; and his grandfather's tales of Ukraine's tragic past. His father acquainted the youngster with the popular *Lives of the Saints*, which evoked worlds of wondrous archetypal motifs in the boy's imagination, and had initiated him into a communion with the almost mystical expanses of the Ukrainian steppes. Shevchenko never lost sight of the natural beauty of the country and of the basic goodness of its people, which existed in spite of the devastating misery of their existence. His close friend, the artist Willi Schternberg, had depicted scenes from the Ukrainian countryside as a series of canvasses, which deeply moved Shevchenko.



*M. Mebrensky*

Figure 3: Self-portrait (1843)

These factors converged to make a powerful claim on the young man's sensitive nature, on his creative imagination, on his genius. This, in turn, must have played a crucial role in determining Shevchenko's choice of activities, associates, friends, his further experiences, and the very direction of his life. What began as heartfelt sympathy for an ideal was fired by the stark contrast between this ideal and reality and by Shevchenko's growing conviction that there existed here a potential for great change, that progress towards achieving the essence of his ideal was possible, and that he himself must be involved, must play a role in the unfolding of this momentous and marvellous drama of liberation and rebirth. But destiny has a way of revealing herself only slowly to her human vessels, for they are bound by time.

Shevchenko was not preoccupied with his fate when he left Kachanivka, after paring his sojourn there to two weeks. He could not bring himself to spend more time in the company of his obtuse host who had pretensions to being a great patron of the arts. Later, in the novel *The Musician*, Shevchenko painted a sharp satire of Kachanivka and its master: the estate here bears the name Klenivka and its owner Klenovsky.

Having quickly recoiled from Kachanivka and intending to visit his family on the right bank of the Dnieper, in the village of Kyrylivka, Shevchenko took the best and shortest road to these parts which led through Kiev. In those days this ancient city had only 80,000 inhabitants. Its main street, Khreshchatyk, was under construction. Before reaching Kiev Shevchenko stopped at Brovary, a mail-coach station. He visited a tavern run by a Turkish woman whose coffee, served with home-brewed liquor, was famous. The Turks, along with other national groups, were well settled in Kiev. They were probably the descendants of the Turks who had fought the Cossacks in the 17th century. Now they were traders and innkeepers.

From Brovary the poet took a ferry to Kiev. The venerable city shone in the distance with the golden cupolas of its churches. Kiev's governor at this time was the notorious Dmitri Bibikov, one of the most cruel tyrants in the empire, especially keen on persecuting young Polish students who were plentiful at Kiev University. Kiev, on the right bank of the Dnieper, was under strong Polish influence. As an anti-Polish measure of the Russian divide-and-conquer policy, a temporary favour had been granted to Ukrainians: the creation of the Commission for the Study of Ancient Documents, which fostered Ukrainian research. The well-known apostate Russian writer Alexander Herzen characterized Bibikov as "full of gall, with blood in his eyes." Later Shevchenko himself would draw a portrait of this "tsarist corporal" in one of his

poems. Bibikov's deputy, Nikolai Pisarev, was widely recognized as a bribe-taker. Both these tsarist officials had special agendas devoted to uncovering secret political societies. These societies, which evolved in Russia in the middle of the century because of the oppressive regime, were not necessarily political and they numbered among their members Freemasons who preached self-improvement and general enlightenment.

In Kiev Shevchenko stopped at one of the taverns in Pechersk, perhaps the well-known Green Tavern. He soon discovered kindred Ukrainian spirits, known as the "Young Minds," who, together with him, two years later came to form the secret society, the brotherhood of Sts. Cyril and Methodius, dedicated to the abolition of serfdom and to freedom for Ukraine. In 1843 only a few of the future "brethren" were in Kiev. Among them were Panteleimon Kulish and Vasyl Bilozersky. Kulish, five years younger than Shevchenko, was the leading intellectual light of the small group, which was to evolve into a perceived threat to the tsar. At that time he was a teacher in Kiev and lived not far from the Cathedral of St. Sophia. Coming from an old Cossack family, he was of a different social background from Shevchenko. In addition to being very erudite and well read, he had tried his hand at painting and at writing poetry and prose in Ukrainian. In his memoirs Kulish recorded his first meeting with Shevchenko in Kiev:

I was sitting behind the easel, lost in the play of lines, tones and colours, when before me appeared the still unfamiliar figure of Shevchenko in a loose canvas coat and a cap pushed back like Cossack headgear.

"Greetings! And guess who?" these were Taras' first words pronounced in the captivating gay voice which endeared him to women and children.

"Don't you want to offer me a drink?" was the second sentence I heard from Shevchenko. I could not help but be astonished.

Kulish goes on to say that he did not like Shevchenko's "cynical" appearance. There was, indeed, a sharp contrast between them. Kulish was abstemious, orderly, and punctual while Shevchenko's ways were quite bohemian. Shevchenko, in Kulish's mind, represented the lower strata of Ukrainian society while he, Kulish, was a descendant of the Cossack officer corps. But in spite, or perhaps because, of these differences, the two became friends. In the days following their first meeting, they visited many places of historical interest around Kiev,

sketching and sharing impressions. Contented hours were spent along Shevchenko's cherished "Dnieper with its sacred hills," where he and Kulish also discovered their mutual love of fishing. Shevchenko was particularly moved by the threadbare ruins of the venerable Mezhyhirsky Transfiguration Monastery, whose origins dated back to the turn of the millennium. During the 17th and 18th centuries the monastery had been patronized by the Zaporozhian Cossacks, who often retired, on completion of their service, to live out their lives within its walls. But several years after the 1775 destruction of the Zaporozhian Sich and the abolition of the Hetmanate, the Russian government closed down the buildings and appropriated the land holdings. A fire gutted the monastery in the following year, whereupon a faience factory was built on its grounds. One of the many Cossack tales that Kulish related to Shevchenko was the story of the *otaman* Semen Palii who, at the crucial battle of Poltava in 1709, sided not with the Ukrainian Hetman Mazepa but with Peter I of Russia. According to this account, Palii retired to the monastery soon after the battle, perhaps realizing his blunder. In 1847, while already in exile, Shevchenko would write the poem "Chernets" (The Monk) about Palii, dedicating it to Kulish.

Kulish, having a deeper and more systematic education behind him than did Shevchenko, was inclined to dominate their relationship imbuing it with a certain air of patronage and pedagogy, though never without respect for Shevchenko's genius. He recounted to his new friend many details of Ukrainian history of which the poet was unaware. Shevchenko, a more colourful, intuitive, and imaginative personality than Kulish, would listen patiently and then recite some of his verses dealing with the Ukrainian Cossacks. Kulish was favourably impressed by the poetry, though he regarded it as rather bloodthirsty. Ideologically, Kulish was a moderate, prepared to encourage a slow, gradual process of enlightenment, with an aversion to the idea of revolution. Shevchenko tended to be more radical in his thinking.

From Kiev, Shevchenko went to visit his friend Hrebinka in his *khutir* near Pyriatyn. They rested and talked and visited Hrebinka's brother-in-law Svichka who lived nearby. Svichka ("candle") was "burned out" and in total decline. He was famous for having once bought all the champagne available in Kiev in order to treat his friends. Now he was living in near poverty. Hrebinka took Shevchenko to call at the estate of Mosivka, owned by the rich Tatiana Volkhovska. She was an 80-year-old dowager of Russian and German descent who lived a life of luxury. Her ornate residence was known as the Ukrainian Versailles. Her balls were famous and usually lasted several days and

nights. One such ball, which was celebrated annually on June 29 to mark her late husband's birthday, was in progress when Hrebinka and Shevchenko arrived. They met the cream of the local gentry. Everyone was speaking French, as was customary among the aristocracy and gentry of the empire throughout the 19th century. The recent fashion of "Ukrainophilism," as yet purely a sign of the romantic idealization of the native village and its commonfolk, accommodated the use of the "peasant language" — Ukrainian. Shevchenko was welcomed and made to feel at home; his poems were well known here, and very well received, and there ensued some reading and recitation of favourite verses.

The leading families at the Mosivka ball were the Seletskys, the Zakrevskys, and the Chuzhbynskys. Afanasiev-Chuzhbynsky, the poet and ethnographer, became a friend of Shevchenko and later described the poet at the ball as "a stocky man, with shining eyes which attracted attention." Another, less flattering description of Shevchenko by a visitor talked of him as "an artist by profession and a poet by vocation. Of medium height, broad-shouldered, strong and fit in body, pock-marked, with volatile, hazel, not bad-looking eyes, angular, awkward, dishevelled, unwashed, and carelessly dressed — that was Shevchenko's appearance, not at all elegant."

Among the other guests whom Shevchenko met at this estate were: Oleksii Kapnist, a former Russian revolutionary Decembrist and son of a noted writer of Venetian origin; Victor Zakrevsky, a landowner in the neighbouring estate Berezova Rudka, where Shevchenko would become a frequent visitor; and the artist Yakiv de Balmen, a man partly of Scottish and French descent who had travelled widely in Europe and was well informed about various freedom movements, particularly those in Poland. He so admired Shevchenko's *Kobzar* that he wanted to republish it in Polish transcription, with his own illustrations. Drafts of this project remained unfinished. Two years later, de Balmen was killed in the Caucasus, where he had been sent with the imperial army to battle the insurgents struggling against Russian occupation. On hearing of his friend's death, Shevchenko wrote the fiery poem "The Caucasus," dedicating it to de Balmen's memory. The poem is a scathing indictment of Russia's expansionist mentality and policies.

It might be instructive at this point to consider briefly the "Decembrists" in Russia at the beginning of the 19th century. This was a secret revolutionary movement centred in Russia and Ukraine, which had its origins in the dissatisfaction of Russian military officers who had come into contact with Western European liberal ideas during the

Napoleonic wars. The aims of the movement were an overthrow of the tsarist autocracy in favour of a limited monarchy and the abolition of serfdom in the empire. However, the military uprisings in St. Petersburg in December 1825 and in the Kiev region in January 1826 failed. The Decembrist movement in Ukraine was not interested in Ukrainian national aspirations. Although the movement was quashed by the tsarist forces, it nevertheless was a significant factor in fostering the convergence of national-political ideas and views among the Ukrainians, which later became much more fully articulated.

Not long after the Mosivka ball, Shevchenko paid a visit to the Zakrevskys at Berezova Rudka. It was here that he met Victor Zakrevsky's sister-in-law, Hanna, wife of Victor's brother Platon. Her beauty at once captivated the young poet who lost little time in falling in love with her. She must have returned his affection, for life in Berezova Rudka was rather dull, especially for women. Some women among the gentry were fairly well educated. Victor Zakrevsky's sister, Maria, was a talented pianist and another sister, Sophia, wrote novels. Hanna's husband and Victor were at the helm of the so-called "Mochemordy" (wet mugs), a male society of drinkers, many of whom, aware of the gross inequities of their time, espoused progressive social and political ideas. Shevchenko enjoyed the company of these "wet mugs," as he himself was not averse to an occasional drink, but particularly because most of these men were liberals who treated their peasants humanely and well. Victor Zakrevsky actually gave away much of his land to them and was content to live in a simple cottage among the cherry trees with a young peasant woman.

Early in July, Shevchenko accompanied Oleksii Kapnist on a brief visit to Yahotyn, the residence of Prince Repnin, whom the poet had also met at Mosivka. The old prince was a descendant of a line of the Rurikid dynasty in Kievan Rus'. At one time he had been the military governor in Ukraine but had been removed from this post by Tsar Nicholas I because of his sympathies with Ukrainian autonomists and his persistent defence of Ukrainian interests before the Russian government. He was the elder brother of the Decembrist Sergei Volkonsky, whose son had lived in Yahotyn while his father was in exile in Siberia. The prince was in good health, despite his 65 years. His wife was the granddaughter of the last Hetman of Ukraine, Kyrylo Rozumovsky. They had an unmarried daughter, Varvara. Their spacious palace, built of wood, had stood at one time in Kiev but had been moved and rebuilt in Yahotyn.

"When we returned into the garden," wrote Varvara Repnina, "it was raining. On reaching home, Kapnist returned to the garden in

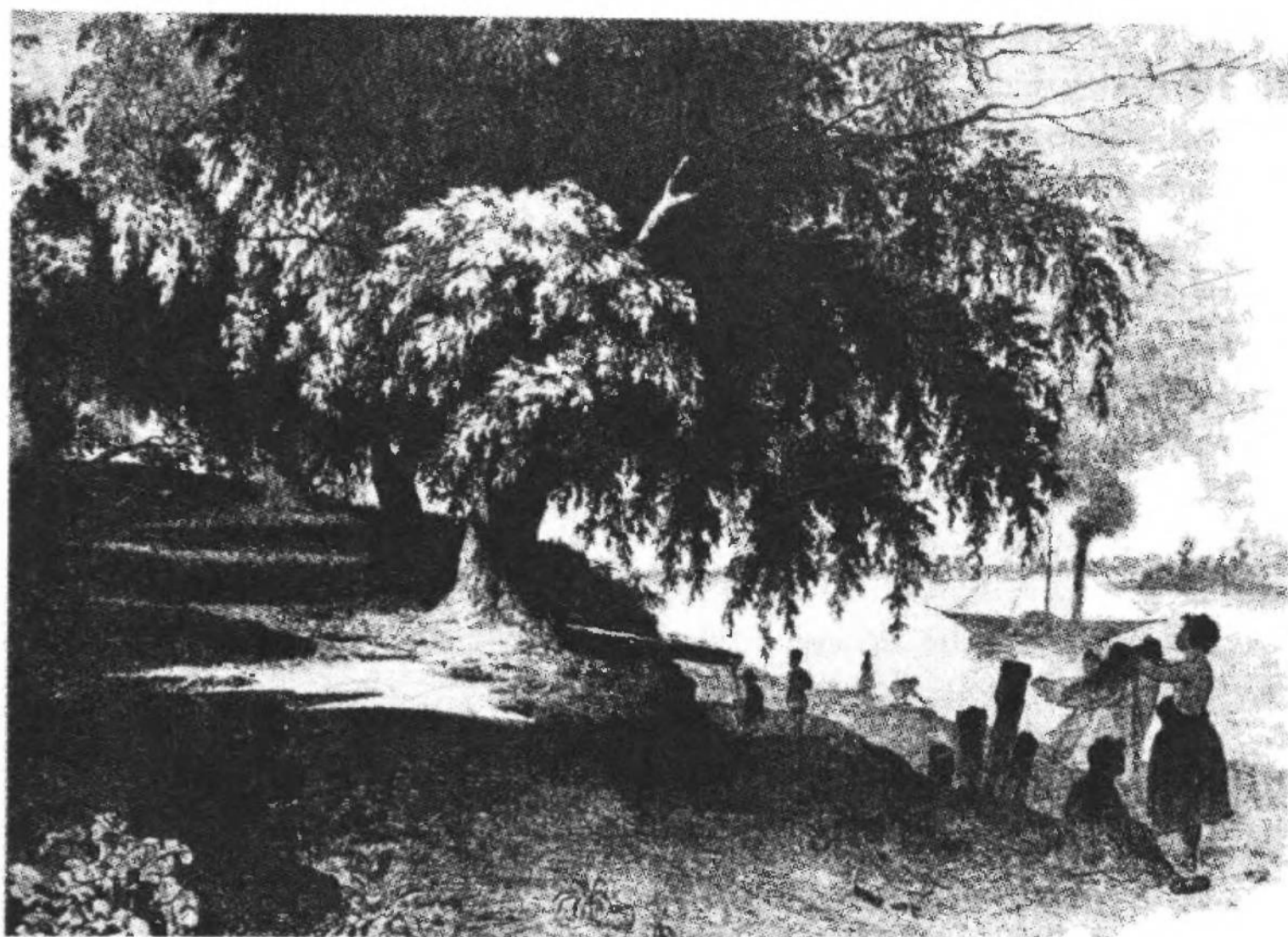
search of the newcomer. I went to the balcony and saw both of them come in, completely soaked." Kapnist and Shevchenko stopped briefly there, viewed the art gallery, and Shevchenko made plans to return at a later date to paint a portrait of the prince and his family. Kapnist was anxious to take Shevchenko to neighbouring villages to visit friends. They spent a few days back at Berezova Rudka, then travelled to many estates where they were often invited to stay by the landowners. These landowners, whether Ukrainian or Russian, varied greatly from each other in their attitudes towards their serfs. Shevchenko was deeply perturbed and angered by some landlords' cruelty and disdain in their dealings with their peasants. He did not hide his resentment of their inhumane behaviour, often confronting them with his feelings about their actions; this frequently served only to reinforce his pain and distress.

While travelling through these areas of central Ukraine, Shevchenko carefully observed the landscape, sketched historical monuments, and even conceived a plan to produce a series of drawings on historical as well as folk themes, with commentary in accompanying text, which he tentatively called "Picturesque Ukraine." It would not only be a work of art and of popular enlightenment, but was seen by Shevchenko as perhaps bringing some profit, so that he could buy freedom for his brother and sister. He shared these ideas with his new friends.

The country he travelled through was lovely. A Russian traveller, to whom the mild Ukrainian climate was reminiscent of Italy, has left the following impression of this part of the world:

Under the radiant sky of the South, in happy Little Russia [that is what the Russians called Ukraine], April brings heavenly pleasures: the air, the birds, the greenery, the rivers — everything captivates the traveller. He wants to stay outdoors, to be enraptured with nature, to settle for ever on a shady *khutir*, not far from Kiev... or to see the majestic waves of the Dnieper, whose banks never change. They will remain the same, picturesque and calm, while entire kingdoms perish.... Not far from here, he can see a wide valley with sparkling streams, running through thick groves, and in the distance white peasant cottages.... In the quiet evening he can feel everything to be peaceful and fragrant. The traveller's heart rejoices; after a day of sorrow it rests quietly....

Was this an evocation by a romantic, or was the Ukrainian scenery truly exceptional? Shevchenko was particularly saddened when, on visiting the island of Khortytsia further south on the Dnieper, the



**Figure 4: Environs of Kiev**

stronghold of the Sich, as it was called, of the Zaporozhian Cossacks in the 17th century, he found its heritage to be utterly neglected, scorned, and abandoned. After destroying it in 1775, Catherine II had leased it to Serbian and German colonists, and now, as Shevchenko later wrote, potatoes grew on this ground, in the same earth that had been so abundantly watered by the blood of the generations of Cossacks who had died in its defence. A decade later, Shevchenko's friend Afanasiev-Chuzhbynsky visited the same area and left this account:

The island of Khortytsia is very picturesque, especially in the spring when between its wild craggy banks there sparkle green trees that add a gay appearance to the gloomy granite boulders. The island, like the riverbanks, is high and in the distant past formed part of the left bank of the Dnieper. Its surface is covered with all kinds of fruit trees. There are also high gravemounds, testifying that it was once inhabited. Scythians and Pechenegs have left here their traces. Bloody battles must have been fought here....

Likewise, during his stops at the ruins of Chyhyryn, the former capital of the hetman state, and Subotiv, the residence of Bohdan

Khmelnysky, hetman from 1648 to 1657, Shevchenko confronted the essence of the tragedy of Ukrainian history. The relics symbolized all that was at once great and catastrophic in Ukrainians' struggle to define and develop their identity as a society and a nation. Here, within the span of a tumultuous decade, there had emerged a powerful centre around which millions of Ukrainians of all social strata could and did begin to organize their common hopes and to defend their own interests. But here also followed the disillusionment born of the failure to maintain these accomplishments, and the subsequent dissipation of energy and resolve under both external and internal forces. Standing alone, newly under Moscow's overlordship, without trustworthy allies in the entire circle of nations attending its borders, grappling with the sudden dearth of strong leadership, the structure of the nascent nation collapsed. The hard-earned constructive sensibilities gave way to incessant internal strife, thus weakening and exposing the country to foreign intervention and partitioning. External predators and internal decrepitude enhanced each other's influence in a pathetic, ruinous cycle of dissolution, which lasted for years. Shevchenko absorbed these lessons of history, perceiving them to be embodied in these ruins. His most powerful political poetry would scrutinize them and lay them bare for every one of his compatriots to comprehend.

Shevchenko was anxious to visit his native village, Kyrylivka. He parted company with his new friends in Kiev and made his way home. For it was still his home, although both his parents had died when he was still a child. His grandfather, Ivan, whom Taras remembered so fondly, was still living, having married for the third time at the age of 80. The old man said that he was waiting for freedom from serfdom, but that it had not yet come. Shevchenko's older brother, Mykyta, looked like an old man, beaten down by hard work. His sister, Yaryna, was married to a drunkard. His younger brother, Yosyp, had recently married and the couple were expecting their first child. Life went on despite the interminable hardships of serfdom. There was little hope for the future, no discernible end to or even mitigation of this bleak existence. The village seemed to the poet "dark and deaf," unchanged, unenlightened, unredeemed by the passing of the years. His anguish deepened when Mykyta, after insistent questioning by Shevchenko, told him the tragic story of Taras' childhood sweetheart, Oksana Kovalenko. The prettiest girl in the village, she had been seduced by a Russian soldier, a common occurrence in those days. Unwed, she bore a son returned to the village where she lost her sanity and drowned herself. This account wounded Shevchenko profoundly. The insanity

and the death of this friend from his early years were to leave on the young poet a scar that never fully healed. The story is immortalized in his poetry, where the theme of the seduced woman and her bastard child is elevated to a symbolic level.

On returning to Yahotyn, Shevchenko was extended a warm welcome. He was given a suite, which for a long time thence was referred to as "Shevchenko's study." It consisted of a working room, a bedroom with a washstand, and a sitting room. Shevchenko painted there in serene peace and quiet, and joined the Repnins for meals, though most regularly for tea. He listened to the old prince's memories of the Decembrist uprising and to his description of his efforts to publish the first history of Ukraine by Bantysh-Kamensky. The Repnins became important patrons of the young Shevchenko, who loved them above all for their liberal opinions. The family circle in which the poet found himself included not only the old prince and princess, their daughter Varvara and a married son, Vasili Nikolaevich, but had long since expanded to embrace also the family physician, Ferdinand Fischer, the tutor, Roman Strandman, and two orphaned sisters, Hlafira and Oleksandra Psiol. Hlafira was a young painter whose company the poet found very agreeable; her sister wrote poetry in Ukrainian but was too shy at first to show it to Shevchenko. Later, however, he read and praised her poem "Holy Water."

The friendliest relationship developed between Shevchenko and Varvara, who was several years older than him. She was well educated, knew several foreign languages (though she did not know Ukrainian), and conducted a voluminous correspondence with her teacher and mentor in Switzerland, Charles Eynard. Upon getting to know Shevchenko, she wrote a novel in Russian, *Devochka* (A Girl), in which, thinly disguised, she portrayed her friendship with him. Apart from a portrait of Varvara Repnina, painted by Hlafira Psiol, the following description of her by one of her friends has been preserved: "She was energetic and even enthusiastic. She was a mature young woman, thin, with large, lively eyes...good-natured, clever, and cordial. She was the kind benefactress of the less fortunate, whom she helped a great deal." Princess Varvara shared her parents' liberal views; she was vehemently ashamed of her country's cruel regime, of its social injustices. In her personal life she had experienced great disappointment, for her stern mother had forbidden her to marry her father's aide-de-camp, the brother of the poet Baratynsky. No wedding took place. For solace, she had turned to religion, mysticism, and charitable work.

As Varvara came to know Shevchenko better, her highly strung and sensitive nature embraced him as her white knight, as a "saintly and

radiant" emissary of Apollo, as an enchanter and genius upon whom she could lavish all her resources to guide him in achieving his destiny. As she fell in love with Shevchenko, she became very possessive of him; she perceived herself to be his guardian angel, to whom was entrusted the protection of his soul in the face of all sorts of wordly temptations, and was very jealous of anyone and anything that revealed the man in his total self, which often did not coincide with the holy icon she had created in her heart's fancy. Her letters reflect her neurotic personality. In one of them, written in November 1845 to Eynard, her thwarted eros is clearly evident. She writes, "*qui me présente des tableaux brûlants de passion et quelque fois même de volupté.*"

In the evening the guests gathered to hear Shevchenko recite his poetry. Varvara left her impression in her diary: "If I could only tell you what I experienced during the recitation! What lofty thoughts, what beauty, what excitement, and what pain. My face was wet from crying, but I felt happy because I felt pain in my heart. I was deeply moved. After the recitation I did not say anything. I was lost for words. It was like listening to music. Later I told him that I would buy for him a golden pen." This aristocratic young woman found the poet even more enchanting than his verse. For his part, though he was fond of Varvara and had a great deal of respect and admiration for her, even at times a certain reverence towards her, he simply did not love her in the way she wished he would. This led, naturally, to the emergence of tension within their relationship. Although Shevchenko had told Varvara on many occasions that he had never met a more kindred soul, he felt uncomfortable with her increasingly confessional revelations and gradually became more aloof.

This delicate impasse was resolved by Kapnist, who was an old and close friend of the Repnins. He convinced Princess Varvara that the intimate relationship she envisaged between herself and Shevchenko was inappropriate, that such a marriage would never survive, indeed, would be disastrous because of the discrepancy in their social positions. He advised Shevchenko to leave Yahotyn so as to avoid provoking any further embarrassing scenes. The poet did, in fact, take his leave several weeks later; he and Varvara parted as friends. She would remain an active and committed promoter of his artistic and literary efforts and a source of moral support in the years to come. (For more details see the chapter on correspondence.) Before leaving Yahotyn, however, Shevchenko was involved briefly in an unsuccessful undertaking to stage a new opera, *Mazepa*, for which he was to write the libretto. The project fell through because the composer of the music, Petro Seletsky, who was also a local marshal of the nobility and



**Figure 5: Varvara Repnina (1845)**

a man of very reactionary views, did not agree with Shevchenko's portrayal of Hetman Mazepa as a defender of Ukraine and of freedom against the tyrannical Tsar Peter I. Seletsky preferred to view the famous hetman as a traitor to Russia, and would not relinquish his position even when confronted with Alexander Pushkin's half-sympathetic appraisal of Mazepa in the long poem *Poltava*.

Shevchenko's first, long and moving visit home to his native land, was drawing to an end. He called once more, perhaps for the last time, at the Zakrevskys, who were good friends of his by now to admire Hanna, whose portrait he was painting. He felt happy in the presence of a woman he really loved and who ignored the sentimentality of high society. His relationship with Hanna remained unfulfilled; she was a married woman and would not take a lover. But she remained in his life as one shining facet of his ideal beauty.

He stopped briefly in Kiev, where some landowners of his acquaintance took him along to the *kontrakty*, the famous Kiev fair, which provided a grand social occasion for the gentry from all over Ukraine. Champagne flowed freely here, bands played, amateur theatre companies presented cabaret-style performances. Estates changed hands as a result of victories or losses at cards; some landlords lost fortunes while others made new ones. The return route to St. Petersburg led through Moscow, which Shevchenko reached early in 1844. Here he met the acclaimed actor Mykhailo Shchepkin, about whom he had heard so much at Yahotyn. Shevchenko also came to know Professor Osyp Bodiansky, a historian, Slavacist, and ethnographer who defended the independence of the Ukrainian language and literature. A strong mutual admiration is evident from their subsequent correspondence. In late February Shevchenko arrived in St. Petersburg.

What did Shevchenko bring back with him to St. Petersburg from his travels in Ukraine? His experiences had been many and varied, and the impressions he had garnered were potent and disturbing. He had perceived the whole country to be subjugated. The people's sense of history and their own place within it was fading quickly in the daily struggle for a meagre existence. How long would it be before their sense of their basic humanity would begin to ebb? A person's feeling of his or her own self-worth may be sustained to some extent by other values, but some sense of responsibility for his or her destiny within the context of the community is indispensable. Could it be that the peasants' desire for freedom would be stifled and finally extinguished altogether? And was it conceivable that the inhumanity of the Ukrainian gentry would now finally give way to a respect for the

dignity of fellow human beings? Could these lords, indeed, forever persist, degrading others and dishonouring themselves?

Having witnessed all this at this juncture in his life produced a subtle change in Shevchenko. There burgeoned within his consciousness a definitive centre of concern, whose source was inside him but whose orientation was outside himself. His personality became focused in a new way. At this centre stood Ukraine. He realized that his relationship with his people, his responsibility towards them, and, indeed, towards their ancestors and their children was the most vital matter in his life. He realized that his liberation from serfdom had plucked him out of the large identification with the serfs of Ukraine and had set him down at some distance from the field of battle. He had, in effect, climbed out of his familiar matrix and into a new, larger one. He was now able to interact with the first matrix, his homeland, in a way that would have been impossible had he not separated from it. His visit home helped to crystallize his identity vis-a-vis Ukraine. No longer was he only one of its people. He was now distinct from his people and able to build a relationship with them, for a creative relationship can exist only between independent entities. The daimonic, indwelling force, which is at the same time the creative power, found an ideal mould in his contact with his country. Ukrainianness became Shevchenko's sustaining theme.

*The garden's lord, a poet young,  
I walk the night with quiet tunes  
And from my loaded arm is slung  
A basket full of ripened moons.*

B.I. Antonych

IN ST. PETERSBURG once again, Shevchenko continued the work he had started during his journey. He had decided to expand the *Picturesque Ukraine* project into a series of annual issues, with 12 pictures in each. In the title he deliberately used the word "Ukraine," not the more common "Little Russia." In his poetry, too, he used "Ukraine," although he never employed the noun *ukrainets* (a Ukrainian). Giving his country back its old name — *Ukraina* — was, on the poet's part, almost a political act, liberating it from being little Russia. Shevchenko was not the first to do so, but his practice was of great importance at that time. He published an announcement of the book in the press and soon put out the first part consisting, at that point, of six sketches. The illustrations portrayed the well-known landscapes and historical monuments and figures of Ukraine, as well as folk customs and traditions. A typical example was the drawing "Gifts at Chyhyryn," depicting Turkish, Muscovite, and Polish envoys bringing gifts to Cossack Hetman Bohdan Khmelnytsky. The sketch "Matchmaking" illustrated the traditional Ukrainian custom of a suitor sending matchmakers to the young woman who had caught his fancy and whom he would like to marry. In a letter to the Chernihiv governor, requesting support for his undertaking, Shevchenko wrote: "It seems to me that if this country of mine were the most miserable in the world, I would still consider it more beautiful than Switzerland or Italy. Those who see it claim that they would want nothing more than to live and die in our beautiful land."

Impressions garnered during the months in Ukraine were also coalescing into poetry, and the words Shevchenko wrote during his return trip and on his arrival in St. Petersburg were a potent distillation of the pain and shame he had felt on treading so much of the ground of Ukraine. This pain is particularly evident in a short but powerful poem

“Chyhyryn” written in the course of his stopover in Moscow and dedicated to Mykhailo Shchepkin. As mentioned earlier, Chyhyryn was the one-time capital of Cossack Ukraine; this poem picks up on another, “The Ransacked Grave,” composed four months earlier, shortly before Shevchenko’s departure from Ukraine. “The Ransacked Grave” marks the poet’s first venture into political utterance in his verse. The poem opens with a lament for Ukraine-Mother, asking that she explain to him what has happened to her, why she is wasting away.

*O gentle region, fair Ukraine,  
dear beyond every other!  
Why are you plundered and despoiled,  
why do you perish, Mother?  
Have you not prayed, before the dawn,  
for fortune in the strife?  
Have you not taught your wavering sons  
to live a virtuous life?*

Her answer poignantly blames Hetman Khmelnytsky for his folly in handing her fate over to the Russian tsar, and she is equally critical of many more of her own children, the generations of those who had turned away from her to serve Moscow, to better their own lives at the cost of her very existence. Several brief concluding lines of the poem introduce, with consummate subtlety, the motif of the burial mound ransacked by order of the government in Moscow. The pillagers who sought riches will find nothing therein — but the poet knows what truly lies hidden in these Cossack graves: he now tells us only that, were this essence exhumed, Ukraine’s tears would flow no longer. Though he does not specify the identity of this elixir in the present poem, later poems make it clear that it is freedom itself that lies buried deep within these gravemounds in the Ukrainian steppe.

On July 8, 1844, Shevchenko wrote the long comedic poem *The Dream*. The vision of the 580-line poem is truly Dantesque. A dream enables the poet to fly over Ukraine and see the horrors of daily life for the common people. Everything is covered with blood and tears. At the same time it is a picture of great natural beauty and unspeakable human misery. The poet’s flight brings him finally over the capital city, St. Petersburg. A military parade is in progress. Tsar Nicholas loved military pomp and participated in it. Shevchenko draws a savagely satirical portrait of the tsar and the tsarina — “the shrivelled mushroom.” The tsar’s servile entourage is further ridiculed when the tsar, to show his absolute power, strikes one of his subordinates in the face,

who then strikes the one beneath him, until all are soundly thrashed, all the while yelling salutes to the tsar. There follows a sharp personal attack on Tsar Peter I and Tsarina Catherine II, the two monarchs who "crucified" Ukraine. Tsar Peter is singled out for special condemnation since his capital, St. Petersburg, was built on the "bones" of the Cossacks. He is the true "executioner" of Ukraine. The survey of the Russian capital ends with a sharp rebuke of the poet's Ukrainian compatriots, who, having forgotten their own language, went to serve the tsar. They are dismissed as traitors, but the hatred of Russia is balanced somewhat by self-criticism.

Shevchenko's political poetry was very quotable. This quality later proved almost a disadvantage since many frequent quotations tend to become clichés. At the end of December, Shevchenko wrote a short poem "To Gogol" in which he paid tribute to his great countryman who chose to write in Russian. But Shevchenko admonished Gogol for ignoring Ukraine's evil fate. It was not a time to laugh, as Gogol did, but to cry. "The Dream" and other poems he wrote at this time were not for publication, but Shevchenko made some copies of them for his best friends.

In several of his shorter poems Shevchenko paid tribute to the pioneers of modern Ukrainian literature. He showed a sense of literary history and his own place in it. But while he praised some predecessors, such as Kvitka-Osnovianenko, he also criticized others, such as Kotliarevsky. He pleaded for originality and independence: "You could say that [Kotliarevsky's] *Eneida* is good but is still ridicule in Muscovite vein....Do not pay attention to the Russians. Let them write as they like and let us write as we like."

In March 1845, the academy's council conferred on Shevchenko the title of Artist. His seven-year academic study had come to an end. On March 25, Shevchenko secured a document from the academy attesting that he was proceeding to the Ukrainian provinces on an "artistic assignment." He left St. Petersburg immediately and travelled first to Yahotyn to visit the Repnins. Princess Varvara was in deep mourning after the recent death of her father. She had written a letter to Shevchenko describing her father's funeral. It had almost turned into a demonstration with the peasants carrying their defender's coffin in procession through the town. Shevchenko did not stay at Yahotyn very long. He thanked the princess for her efforts in financing and distributing the publication *Picturesque Ukraine*.

He next visited some old friends in the neighbourhood, including the Zakrevskys at Berezova Rudka. He also went to Kiev where, through an old friend and benefactor of Kulish, Shevchenko secured a



**Figure 6: Hanna Zakrevska (1844)**

temporary position with the Kievan Archeographic Commission. Under its auspices he travelled widely, sketching all the time. He studied his native land with insatiable zeal and enthusiasm. Developing a keen interest in the newly established science of archaeology, Shevchenko took part in the excavation of some gravemounds like those he saw as a small boy on his trip to the pillars that propped up the sky. He also spent some time sketching the sights of Kiev and of his beloved river, the Dnieper, which wound its way through the heart of the city.

He then revisited his native village Kyrylivka. There he saw a pretty young girl he had met on an earlier visit, Feodosia Koshyts, the daughter of the local priest. The attraction to the girl had grown stronger and he decided to propose marriage. However, Feodosia's parents did not want her to marry a former serf. The marriage was cancelled and Shevchenko, very disappointed, went away to spend some time with Andrii Kozachkovsky, a physician and friend in Pereiaslav. The latter had formerly been in the Russian navy and had returned from a voyage around the world. Now he practised medicine in Pereiaslav but spent most of his free time on a nearby *khutir*. Shevchenko visited him there on the bank of the Dnieper. The beautiful panorama later fed his nostalgia for Ukraine, when he was in exile. "You will remember," he wrote later, "that wonderful evening, the wide, distant panorama and in the middle a long mauve ribbon and beyond it shone a golden-domed cathedral in Pereiaslav. What a marvellous, solemn silence." In his diary Kozachkovsky marked August 15, 1845 as a "most wonderful day." Looking across the Dnieper, he, Shevchenko, and other guests sang Ukrainian songs. "These songs," wrote Kozachkovsky, "are full of deep meaning. Apart from their gay and sorrowful notes, they reflect the patriarchal life of Ukraine, her simple and heroic character, her glorious and sad history and her enchanting landscape. That is the reason Ukrainian songs serve the common people as a source of self-respect and moral strength, which has protected their nationality from alien influences." A few days later the poet went to visit Vasyl Tarnovsky, an enlightened landlord in Potoky. Not all landowners were bad. Tarnovsky had been Gogol's schoolmate at Nizhyn, and later had studied at Moscow university. He was in favour of liberating the serfs. At Potoky Shevchenko stayed two weeks, painted a self-portrait, and grew fond of paddling in a little boat across the river at sunset.

From Potoky Shevchenko went to visit his beloved sister Kateryna in the village of Zelena Dibrova. Here he listened to itinerant minstrels and noted their songs chanted to the accompaniment of the *bandura* or *lira*. With his brother, Varfolomii, he discussed plans for the cre-

ation of village schools. The plans proved unrealistic under the existing conditions.

One of the longer stops in Ukraine was the village of Marianske on the estate of O. Lukianovych, whose family portraits Shevchenko painted. The poet kept somewhat aloof from his hosts, preferring to talk with the peasants. In the evenings he would take part in their gatherings in the village streets. He liked to sing and dance and enjoy himself. But he also found the time for writing serious poetry. It was in Marianske that he wrote a long poem *The Heretic* about the Czech freedom fighter Jan Hus. For some time Shevchenko took an interest in Czech history and struck up a friendship with a Czech musician, V. Jedlicka. In the historical figure of Jan Hus, the poet glorified not only the Czech struggles against the Germans and the Vatican: in the very first lines of the poem he made it clear that "lies and slavery reign everywhere, and the tortured people are silent." The poem, dedicated to the Czech scholar Safarik, was a protest against the subjugation of Shevchenko's native land.

While visiting a part of Gogol's country of birth, the town of Myrhorod, Shevchenko completed a long poem in three parts, *The Great Vault*. He called it a "mystery," for in symbolic and veiled form he discussed the injustices perpetrated on Ukraine by Russia. It is clear from the poem that the poet strongly condemned Russian rule in Ukraine. Yet, in an epilogue to the poem, Shevchenko, while berating Bohdan Khmelnytsky for his union with Russia in the 17th century, saw the moment when the "great vault" would crack and crumble and a liberated Ukraine "will rise, dispelling the dark slavery."

While staying in Myrhorod, Shevchenko could not have been unaware of the memories of people who lived there. Not only Gogol but Hryhorii Skovoroda visited the little town frequently. In the nearby village of Sorochyntsi, immortalized in Gogol's short story, Shevchenko saw the splendid baroque church built by Hetman Apostol in 1732. Some of the poems conceived that summer found their final form towards the end of 1845. They were all inspired by his experiences in Ukraine. One of the poems, usually referred to as a "friendly epistle," castigates in vehement terms those Ukrainians who had forsaken their heritage and had gone to serve Moscow. Like a biblical prophet, Shevchenko lamented the evil fortunes of his country, but he also pointed toward self-knowledge and regeneration.

*Come to your senses! Human be,  
Or you will rue it bitterly:  
The time is near when on our plains*

*A shackled folk will burst its chains.  
The Day of Judgment is at hand!  
Dnieper will speak across the land;  
Hundreds of streams will surge in flood  
To bear along your children's blood  
To the blue sea...*

Biblical themes inspired the poet and he freely translated several of David's psalms. Dangerously ill in December 1845, the poet wrote a most memorable "Testament" in which he called on his compatriots to "break the chains and sprinkle freedom with our enemies' blood."

*When I shall die, pray let my bones  
High on a mound remain  
Amid the steppeland's vast expanse  
In my belov'd Ukraine;  
That I may gaze on mighty fields,  
On Dnieper and his shore,  
And echoed by his craggy banks  
May hear the Great One roar!*

*When from Ukraine that stream will bear  
Over the sea's blue sills  
Our foemen's blood, at last shall I  
Forsake the fields and hills  
And soar up to commune with God  
In His eternal hall.  
But till that day of Liberty  
I know no God at all.  
Bury me thus — and then arise!  
From fetters set you free!  
And with your foes' unholy blood  
Baptize your liberty!  
And when in freedom, 'mid your kin,  
From battle you ungird,  
Forget not to remember me  
With a warm, gentle word!*

This inspired verse was written at a time when Shevchenko was still painting. The question arises: how could the same man write fiercely romantic poetry while painting classicist portraits and landscapes? The contrast between the poet and the painter is startling. But, then,

poetry for him was the mother tongue of mankind, while the art of painting was a mere craft. The two were kept apart. The poetic harvest of the second Ukrainian summer was complete. It reaffirmed Shevchenko as a leading spokesperson of an oppressed people, who, in powerful language, appealed to them to shake off their yoke. This was no longer romantic posturing but a serious call to action. Could a radical change be brought about by poetry alone? Perhaps what was needed was a group of dedicated young people who could provide leadership? Was he aspiring to such a role?

Early in April 1846, Shevchenko settled in Kiev for a longer period of time. He lived in the centre of the city, at one time on Khreshchatyk Street, opposite the Bessarabian Square. He had a small stipend from the Kiev Archeographic Commission, which helped him with living expenses. A new friend he met in Kiev was Mykola Kostomarov, a teaching assistant at Kiev University. Kostomarov, of mixed Ukrainian and Russian birth, was a young historian who, earlier in Kharkiv, developed a strong belief in the role of the common people in history. Since he lived in Ukraine he tried to study its history from archival sources. Kostomarov later recorded that he felt "deep affection" for the poet, who lived nearby. They soon became devoted friends and it was during meetings in Kostomarov's apartment that Shevchenko met several other students. One of them was Vasyl Bilozersky who, in a letter to a friend, wrote that Shevchenko's poetic "genius was akin to religious feeling." Shevchenko read to Kostomarov and his friends the poems he had composed the previous year and they all received them with enthusiasm.

The group gathered around Kostomarov formed the nucleus of what soon became known as the Brotherhood of Sts. Cyril and Methodius. This secret scholarly circle of young Ukrainians was dedicated to the cultural and political regeneration of their country. They based their ideology on a mixture of Christian doctrine and nationalism, with special attention to the idea of liberating the peasant serfs. Kostomarov embodied these ideas in what later became known as *The Books of Genesis of the Ukrainian People*. Derived from Polish sources, it traced Ukrainian history to ancient times, recorded the injustices suffered by the Ukrainians, and forecast their future as a free republic in a Slavic commonwealth. Shevchenko took no part in the drafting of the books, yet he was kept in touch and was very sympathetic to the brotherhood. Among its leaders were Kostomarov, Hulak, Bilozersky, and Kulish, who was temporarily absent in St. Petersburg but who corresponded with his Kievan friends. He compared them to a "Christian commune." Shevchenko's poetry, read at their gatherings,

provided the necessary elan; it was regarded as "an archangel's trumpet." The secret brotherhood had a constitution but no formal organizational structure. Its membership was small, not exceeding two dozen men. Yet in Ukrainian intellectual history it is rightly regarded as the first modern political body. Its effect on future developments was profound.

Very few secret societies remain secret for long. The brotherhood was no exception. In the spring of 1847 many of its members left Kiev for a while. Shevchenko was invited to be best man at Kulish's wedding. Kulish was marrying Bilozersky's sister and the wedding was held in her village. The ceremony was traditional, and there was much singing and dancing. In the meantime, in Kiev, a newly admitted member of the brotherhood, Oleksii Petrov, was busy writing a report denouncing his comrades to the police. Arrests soon followed. At that time Shevchenko, having left Kulish's place, was making his way to Kiev to attend, as best man, yet another wedding, this time that of his friend Kostomarov.

On April 5, while waiting for a ferry on the right bank of the Dnieper, he was arrested. On him police found manuscripts of his poems. Soon, all the leading members of the brotherhood were apprehended and despatched to St. Petersburg to be cross-examined by the dreaded tsarist secret police, the so-called Third Section. Shevchenko's behaviour during and after his arrest was noteworthy. He was calm, defiant, even in high spirits. The policeman who escorted him remarked that "it was difficult to tell who was being arrested, because of his carefree manner." During the trial the poet answered ten questions with a simple "don't know," not wishing to implicate his comrades. He admitted writing rebellious poems but explained that they reflected the views of many ordinary people. On the whole, he remained unrepentant, which annoyed the tsarist gendarmes. Another member of the brotherhood, Mykola Hulak, was also steadfast before the police. But all the others, especially Kostomarov, broke down, pleaded guilty, and repented of their activities. Shevchenko's behaviour can best be explained in his own words, spoken to a gendarme: "No devil has brought me here, but my own Muse." It was also his Muse that helped him to rise above the tragic circumstances of the moment. He was strangely detached from the proceedings of the trial and, in moments when he was left alone in his cell, wrote some memorable poems, which he dedicated to those "who were in chains with me."

He did not flinch when the sentence was read out to him. He was judged to be the most dangerous offender and was sentenced to penal servitude in exile for life as a regular soldier in the Orenburg Corps.

The other "brethren" drew sentences of short or long terms of exile. There was no public announcement of the trial or its outcome. The tsar himself took a personal interest in the case and with his own hand added that Shevchenko should be forbidden to write or to sketch during his sentence. The chief prosecutor, Count Orlov, wrote in his report that Shevchenko was the main culprit because his poems could have stirred a desire for an independent Ukraine. It seemed that an end was put to such ideas once and for all.

Yet poetry proved stronger than the tsar's edicts. Some poems Shevchenko wrote in prison, notably his "Cherry Orchard," are filled with nostalgia for an idyllic Ukraine. Others are more sombre. In one, "It's All the Same to Me," he agonizes at the thought that "evil men will one day put to sleep" his country only to awaken her later "plundered and in flames." The poet wants to meet his friends again, so that "words of truth and love may be carried into the steppes." All these sentiments are unashamedly nationalist as well as humanist, and to a people who were forcibly denied their nationality, they were potent political messages.

The sentence of penal servitude meted out to Shevchenko put an end to the freedom he had enjoyed for less than a decade. Before 1838 he was a serf, now, in 1847, he became a prisoner in exile. What this meant became clear to him even during the trial in St. Petersburg. The heavy sentence was not a surprise to a man who knew tyranny well. In practical terms it meant above all a loss of friends like Kostomarov, Kulish, and others. He would especially miss Kostomarov's mother, whom he had met in Kiev. Like her she was a former serf and shared with him memories unknown to the gentry. In Kulish, Shevchenko would lose not only a friend but also a mentor. The second, even more grievous loss would be his poems. An unpublished collection of them had been seized by the gendarmes. And he was, from now on, forbidden to write. What harder punishment for a poet could there be? But the urge to create could not be tamed. In the years 1848-50 Shevchenko continued to write, defying his superiors and hiding his poems in the folds of his high boots. All this, however, was still ahead on the morning of May 30, 1847 when the sentence was read out to him.



# Part Three

## Exile

THE SUN WAS SLOWLY SINKING beyond the horizon which was as flat as the sea. Above, the sky turned a transparent green tinged with lilac. Suddenly dark, elongated clouds appeared and were frozen in the splendour of this heavenly ocean, like bluish-grey whales. The steppe spread out underneath the sky, immeasurably vast, ending at the horizon. Feather-grass, still retaining the silky appearance of spring, stood motionless and appeared white in the distance, looking like an evening fog. The steppe was bone dry; no dew or any moisture anywhere. A snake-like unmarked rivulet could be seen in the distance. There were no trees beside it, and it looked like the hidden track of infrequent horses or camels. Even the wooden poles, marking the *versts* (distances) were preserved only here and there; some had fallen down, rotting in the thick brambles showing their raspberry coloured caps.

The horse-drawn *tarantas* sped along amid clatter and din. A metal bolt was noisily banging an axle. A cloud of dust rose behind the vehicle. The horses trotted quickly, although it could be seen that they were tired. Sometimes they were near exhaustion and could not sustain the swift pace. But the coachman lashed them again and again with a leather whip.

"They must be waiting for me in Orenburg since you are in such a hurry," said one of the travellers ironically. He was a man wearing a felt hat and an old military overcoat slung over a crumpled dinner jacket and a dirty white shirt without a tie. "You'd better shut up, you *khokhol* poet, and don't write any more slanderous verses," retorted the angry military escort, sitting nearby. "It would be better for you and for me if you didn't write at all. We wouldn't have to travel to the ends of the earth." Shevchenko silently shrugged his shoulders.

The horses didn't let up. The leather whip danced rhythmically on their spines. The acrid smell of horse sweat and wet leather permeated the air.

The loose bolt on the axle banged louder. Dust swirled around the travellers irritating their throats and eyes. Their bodies, shaken by the long trip, were sore.

It was getting dark. The sun was fading fast, while from the East there rose a bluish summer night, unexpected and beautiful after the white nights of the North. "Thank God, I can see a city," the coachman cried out, pointing ahead with his whip. But the gendarme sitting next to him could not see anything apart from some sort of stone structure in the steppe, looking like a mosque with a nearby minaret. Shevchenko looked at it and recognized the building as one designed by Briullov's brother, Alexander. However, he did not want to pronounce the name of his beloved teacher in front of the gendarme. He merely gazed at the slender minaret which seemed almost to touch the first stars. The night was dark and forbidding. The *tarantas* passed through the city gate and the exhausted and swaying horses stopped in front of the barracks. The coachman without getting down poked his whip into the shutters of the guard-room. At last, a guard, reeking of vodka, opened the door and the travellers went inside. "Where is the duty officer?" demanded the gendarme sternly.

Zinaida Tulub, *In the Boundless Steppe beyond the Urals*

*Have you built your ship of death, O have you?  
O build your ship of death, for you will need it.*

D.H. Lawrence

THE DISTANCE FROM ST. PETERSBURG to Orenburg, where the poet was to serve his sentence, was just over 2500 kilometres. Shevchenko, with a police escort, covered it in eight days. They travelled fast in a horse-drawn police wagon, stopping only to change horses and have something to eat. Later, in one of his stories, the poet wrote that they travelled so fast that "all the spaces flitted by so quickly that I could not remember much of what I saw." They raced through the desolate steppes along the river Samara, crossed the small city of Buzuluk and arrived in Orenburg in the evening on the ninth of June. The city was situated on the border of the Russian empire and was therefore a fortress guarded by two battalions of soldiers. In their ranks were many political and other prisoners, many of them former Polish revolutionaries. The city housed the headquarters of the Orenburg Corps and a cadet school. The military character of the city could be sensed from the many uniformed men on the streets.

Shevchenko spent his first night in Orenburg sleeping on the floor in the guardroom. He was exhausted and in the morning stayed in bed reading the Bible, the only book he was allowed to bring with him. Later, they gave him a bath and a haircut. On the same day he was fitted with a private's uniform. How humiliating it must have been for a man who had always castigated the Russian empire to appear now as a soldier defending and expanding its borders. The decade of the good life in St. Petersburg was to be succeeded by the squalor of penal servitude. Conditions in the barracks would throw him back to the poverty of his childhood. At the moment utter gloom invaded his mind and only his native stubbornness helped him face the new reality.

The news of the poet's arrival spread very quickly among Ukrainians living in the city. Next day, two of them, Fedir Lazarevsky and Serhii Levytsky, came to see Shevchenko in the barracks. They persuaded the commandant to let the poet come and stay with them while he was awaiting posting to one of the battalions. The three enjoyed themselves eating and singing in Lazarevsky's apartment. Shevchenko

had a fine baritone voice and loved singing Ukrainian folksongs. He also recited from memory his poem *The Caucasus*. His mood was defiant. He possessed a solitary fire. The poet stayed in Orenburg for a few days, making friends with some Poles who lived there as exiles.

In the middle of June, Shevchenko was sent to the fortress of Orsk. On the way there, in the village of Ostrovna, he discovered a Ukrainian settlement and spent the night with his compatriots. Many were scattered throughout the empire, but they had kept their language and customs. On approaching Orsk, Shevchenko recorded later, he realized that the local Kirghiz population justly called it a "dirty city." The natives here were Kazakhs, but in Russian at that time all the central Asian peoples were called Kirghiz.

Worse than the appearance of this fortress was his life in the barracks of the third company. Most days were filled with military drill. The barracks were infested with vermin, the company of soldiers was degrading and stifling. The poet was hoping to receive some mail. He had written letters from Orenburg to his friends in Ukraine and St. Petersburg. Would they reply, daring to write to a political prisoner? He might soon find out, since mail came to Orsk once a month.

The first lucky break in Orsk came when Shevchenko was introduced to the battalion commander, General Dmitry Isaev, who was a cultured man. Learning that Shevchenko was a former pupil of the famous painter Karl Briullov (who in St. Petersburg society was known as Charles the Great), he invited the poet to his home and later asked him to tutor his children. More importantly, on orders from Isaev, Shevchenko was allowed to leave the hated barracks and live in a private home. The grateful poet was a frequent visitor to the general's family, and they enjoyed his company and conversation. Perhaps, under the protection of this enlightened Russian general, Shevchenko became bold enough to write poetry again. He hid his poems, written in small booklets, in his army boots and did not show them to anyone, not even to Lazarevsky's brother who visited him in Orsk. Altogether, in the second half of 1847 he wrote sixteen poems, some of them quite long. But most of them were brief and revealed the complex mood of an exile. In one of them he assessed his own present situation: it was his poetry that made him "live in torment in a foreign land — yet, I don't regret it." Now that he had some peace, even solitude, his Muse came back to him. He begged that his "heavy-laden verses, darlings of my art, do not forsake me and my stricken heart." Naturally, his thoughts turned to Ukraine and they supported him here, in barren exile. Ukraine was idealized — villages there were as "gay as any Easter egg," and the "blue hills beyond the Dnieper" beckoned to him.

He bewailed the loss of his homeland and his youth, lost to him for ever. Yet precisely here in the deserted and bleak steppes his patriotism was undiminished: "I love my Ukraine so that for her sake I'll lose my soul."

His own suffering was joined with the suffering of his native land, which arose before his imagination not only in its natural beauty but in its bloody history of Russian subjugation. He wrote a longer poem, "Irzhavets," about the consequences of the battle of Poltava in 1709 in which Hetman Mazepa allied with the king of Sweden Charles XII was defeated by Tsar Peter I. Shevchenko regretted that not all the Cossacks supported Mazepa at this critical moment, and he depicted the devastation of Ukraine by "Peter's dogs." A sense of the tragic history of his country was ever present, but it did not obscure the universal theme of the poems. In one of them the poet asked — "Why do we live? What is our will? Why do we die with a wistful mind?"

In a long poem, *The Princess*, Shevchenko returned to his old archetypal topic of the illegitimate child. Here the tragedy was deepened by the rape of the young princess by her own father. The reverberations of this crime were not only social but human and personal. The trauma of the seduced Oksana Kovalenko was reawakened. Like many of his other poems, this poem represented symbolically his autobiography. The frequent theme of the seduced and raped woman led the author to identify himself and sometimes his country with her bastard, who had become the victim of an evil act. However, the dominant theme in these poems was his own destiny, his longing for Ukraine and his fear that he might have "to wait in silence for my fatal end." His sense of national mission was strengthened by his determination that "although my heart is bruised and torn by sorrow, I may gladly bring it here to rest upon the Dnieper hills." A little later, in Kos Aral, Shevchenko would recall in a poem his love for Hanna Zakrevska, imploring her "to bring in your train my youth's lost years — let there rise up before me like a sea's magic the broad villages with cherry orchards."

Altogether, the poetic harvest at Orsk was very rich. Shevchenko defied the official ban on writing and proved to himself that no one could stop his creative drive. Next, to satisfy his artistic urge, he was going to try to draw. But drawing would be more difficult than writing, for where would he find the pencils and where would he hide his drawings? He had so far received no mail, but on October 22 he wrote a letter to his friend Lyzohub in Ukraine asking him to intercede on his behalf with Princess Repnina, who had friends in high places. In December he wrote again to Lyzohub begging him to send him pencils

and paints as well as Shakespeare's works. He also wrote directly to Varvara Repnina. Finally, he received a reply from Lyzohub, written on December 31 from Odessa. It was not until March 1848 that the promised paints and Shakespeare arrived from Lyzohub. The poet was so overjoyed that he did not sleep all night and kissed each single container of paint. In May Shevchenko received official permission to draw and paint.

In February the poet at last received a reply from Princess Repnina to his earlier letter. She urged him to pray and to bear his suffering with dignity and resignation. His friends had not forgotten him and would pray for him and intercede on his behalf with the authorities. He must submit to his fate, which had been sent by God. Shevchenko replied with a long letter, written over three days, at the end of February. He was deeply grateful to Repnina, whose religious feeling he respected. He also told her that he had started a diary but had burnt it after a few entries. Further, he asked her to send him Thomas a'Kempis' *The Imitation of Christ*. He also complained that he had recently suffered from scurvy. His spirit, however, was unbroken.

The princess fulfilled his request to intercede with the authorities almost immediately. She wrote, in French, to Count Orlov, asking him "to show that he can do good things. I am defending here the hapless Shevchenko whom I knew well. That is why I can say that no matter how grave was his offence, he has already paid for it dearly." To this courageous letter came Orlov's short reply in which he rudely denied her request to pardon "this depraved criminal."

In his letter to Repnina, Shevchenko mentioned the possibility of being sent to the banks of the Aral Sea. This surmise proved correct, for in May he was included in an expedition to study the Aral Sea. The decision was taken on the advice of Captain Aleksei Butakov, who was to lead an expedition to the Aral Sea and who had met Shevchenko in Orsk. Butakov, a Russian born in Ukraine, became friendly with the poet and helped to lift the ban on painting and drawing. As a member of Butakov's expedition, Shevchenko would sketch and draw. Above all, the poet would no longer be under army control. This was most welcome.

Around the north shore of the Aral Sea, Russian forts were being built as springboards for further imperial expansion. These outposts of the Russian empire were being made ready for further conquests to the east and south. Russian plans were made for the eventual subjugation of the central Asian khanates of Kokand and Khiva. Subjection of the semi-nomadic Kazakhs was viewed as a "civilizing mission." With the defeat and death of Kenesary Kasymov in 1846, Kazakh resistance

was virtually at an end, but only by 1868 were all Kazakh lands annexed by Russia. The Russian frontier was the so-called Syr-Daria line stretching from the north of the Aral Sea to Lake Issyk Kul. The khanates of Bokhara, Kokand, and Khiva were harder nuts to crack. They had strong local traditions and resisted aggression. The conquest of these khanates in the second half of the 19th century brought the frontiers of the Russian Empire to the borders of Persia, China, and Afghanistan. Ostensibly, however, Butakov's expedition was purely scientific. It was to gather facts about the exploration of an uncharted sea. Butakov was a naval officer of considerable experience who, in 1840-42, navigated around the world.

The leader of the expedition was a cultured and progressive-minded man who realized that Shevchenko's sketches would be invaluable to him. Photographs were yet unknown. In the middle of May the expeditionary force was ready to leave Orsk. It consisted of 1500 Bashkirs driving their horse-drawn wagons, a detachment of infantry, two companies of Orenburg Cossacks, two cannons, and a disassembled boat transported by land. It ended with 300 camels, driven by Kazakhs, and a closing company of Ural Cossacks. The entire force was over a mile long. Shevchenko was one of the marchers. He quickly became so tired that he had to be picked up by a wagon. Later, in his story "The Twins," he described the ordeal of this expedition:

On the second day we woke up at sunrise. It was a soft, bright and beautiful morning. I drove with the forward Ural Cossacks at the head of the transport and could abandon myself to my quiet sorrow and to the observation of surrounding nature. This was a flat steppe without the slightest elevation, a limitless steppe covered with white feather grass like a table-cloth. A lovely, but at the same time a sad view. There were no bushes, no gulleys, nothing but a flat expanse with feathergrass which stood motionless as if petrified. There was no rustling of grasshoppers, no chirping of birds. Not even a lizard would sparkle with a gay, graceful spine. Apart from the feathergrass everything was laid waste. Deathly still and lifeless. Only from behind could be heard some gigantic monster — the moving transport.

In two days Shevchenko witnessed a new sight. The omnipresent feathergrass caught fire and he was asked to paint, during a stopover, a watercolour of the steppe on fire. The painting survived and is a fine record of events in that desolate countryside.

The expedition crossed minor rivers and came to the fort of Kara-Butak, where the tired poet met the cartographer from Orenburg, Karl Gern, who later became his close friend. Whenever the transport stopped, Shevchenko sketched various landmarks, sometimes of Kazakh historical interest, like the grave of their leader Dustan. He drew closer to the local nomads, visited their *yurtas* (huts), and used their hooded carts. His spirits were good and he bore the daily hardship with his usual endurance. Sometimes he even sang and joked.

In June the expedition reached Raim fortress on the right bank of Syr Daria. Huge barracks dominated the place and Shevchenko learned that the fortress had been built on the spot where the native chieftain Raim was buried. Everywhere there were silent and not so silent reminders of conquest. The stopover in Raim was longer because the boat *Constantine* had to be assembled and slipped into the river. From there, along the Syr Daria, it navigated to the Aral Sea. For three months the schooner sailed along the Aral Sea banks exploring the entire area. The vegetation and marine life were luxuriant. It occurred to no one at that time that the same Aral Sea would, in 150 years, be dry as a result of the ruinous ecological policies of the Soviet Union that deflected its waters to irrigation schemes.

Shevchenko was very busy sketching. His drawings were very professionally executed. His attention to detail, already exhibited during his years in the academy, proved to be a real asset. Sometimes his sketches were minor works of art, as, for instance, the one of a beetle drawn on the earth near a cactus. To the usual travails of sea voyage was added another difficulty. Much of the food taken aboard had deteriorated and the crew had little to eat, mostly dried rusks. However, in September the schooner returned to the mouth of the Syr Daria and the food provisions improved.

Shevchenko took the opportunity of leaving the expedition for Raim, where he received mail from Ukraine. Some of the letters mentioned the revolutionary events of 1848 in Western Europe. Shevchenko welcomed the news and planned to write a poem about them. The winter of 1848 was spent by the expeditionary crew on the island of Kos Aral. Everybody lived in newly built barracks, which, strangely enough, contained a small library. Winter was quite severe and the books were welcome. To pass the time and to procure more food, outings were organized to hunt animals. On one such hunting trip Shevchenko watched the killing of a tiger. Butakov left the following description of the *tigre royal*: "It had bright-orange fur with black stripes, was very fat, and was six feet four inches long from nose to tail." Shevchenko painted the dead animal. He also spent some time



**Figure 7: Self-portrait (1847)**

with the Kazakhs. He drew Kazakh children and in one drawing they are threatened by a Russian fist stuck out of the window. The impressions of the subjugated Kazakhs caused the poet to write some poems in which he recalled the oppression of his own country. Altogether 72 poems, some of them quite long, were written during the winter in Kos Aral. They resemble the poems written a year earlier in Orsk. Loneliness, yearning for Ukraine, its tragic history and cruel present, occupied his poetic imagination as before, but now his vision was deeper and more personal. His country's oppression was seen in the wider context of God's justice or the lack of it. His own desolation did not lead to self-pity but to a calm resolution to endure. This rare mood is caught in the following poem:

*A cloud is floating, following the sun;  
It spreads its scarlet coat-flaps in the sky  
And calls upon the sun to settle down  
On the blue sea and there be covered up  
As, with red quilts, a mother might her child.  
One's eyes rejoice to see it...One brief hour,  
One's heart relaxes and communes with God...  
Meanwhile the fogbank, like an enemy,  
Covers the sea and all the rosy cloud  
The thick grey mist spreads darkness in its wake,  
And in that darkness it enshrouds one's soul  
So one cannot know where one should go.  
One awaits dawn as children do their mother.*

This other non-political or prophesy-laden dimension of his poetry came to be appreciated only much later. For the myth of Ukraine as a beautiful but violated country came from the depth of the poet's being. His lyrical poems, written in exile, also come from that deep level. In them the poet escaped to his home once more — to Ukraine. But there was also another, less deep level of his poetic self. After all, he was surrounded by Russians and Russian language. How long would he be able to resist these facts when he turned to writing?

In the spring of 1849 the *Constantine* set out to sea again, exploring the eastern bank. The crew, including Shevchenko, was tired and often exposed to severe storms; drinking water was rationed. In September their mission was at last completed and they returned to Orenburg. Here Shevchenko spent some time finishing and sorting out his sketches and drawings. He was given an assistant, a Polish exile, Bronislaw Zaleski, who in time became a close friend. Through him

the poet met other Poles with whom he shared his anti-Russian sentiments. Shevchenko did not wear a uniform and lived in private quarters, at first with Lazarevsky and later with Karl Gern, whose sister was married to a Pole. The poet felt very much at home in Gern's household. Several evenings were spent in lively conversation. Musical soirees were held with Shevchenko singing some folk songs. After the rigours of the Aral Sea expedition the poet could finally relax among friends, write poetry, read books, and paint. With secret yearning he watched this gaiety, which had not been vouchsafed to him. He painted some oil portraits of his friends, although officially the ban on painting (as different from sketching) had not been lifted. The ambience in Orenburg was not as good as in St. Petersburg, but it proved to the poet that he could enjoy life and new friendships. He had much to offer to others and he seized the pleasures of life with both hands.

Among the pleasures of life in Orenburg was the company of women. Lazarevsky wrote in his memoirs that "during the soirees with ladies present, the constant companion of Taras was the Tatar woman Zabarzhada, known for her beauty." Shevchenko was always drawn to beautiful women. In St. Petersburg, as an art student, he drew and painted voluptuous nudes. He was an impulsive man, a man of physical and emotional appetite. That women also found him attractive could be seen during his travels in Ukraine, when Varvara Repnina and Hanna Zakrevska fell in love with him. Now, in Orenburg, he felt old temptations stirring again. He was, after all, in his prime, just 36 years old. That he found a woman very appealing may be seen from a poem that he wrote at that time:

*Both with your supple form and with your beauty  
That is so innocently young and sweet  
I feast my waning eyes, and as I gaze  
Intent upon you, in a fashion strange  
I pray before you as before a saint.  
In my advancing years pity begins  
For this your heavenly beauty. What hereafter  
Will be its fate in life? Who will become  
Your blessed guardian-angel in this world?*

This mildly erotic fragment from a poem is also an epitaph on the poet's youth, which, in his words, "passed, alas, without adventure." The feminine principle, gentle and caring, is opposed in Shevchenko's poetry to the masculine domineering element. This tension between

women and Cossacks also characterized early Ukrainian stories, especially "Taras Bulba" by Gogol. In Shevchenko, the feminine element prevailed. The feminine side of his nature led to the more sympathetic portrayal of women than men. The identity of the woman who inspired the poem is not clear. Was it the Tatar beauty, or was it, perhaps, Sophia Gern, to whom the poet was also drawn? That she was the wife of a friend would not ultimately have mattered so much. Was not Hanna Zakrevska in Ukraine also the wife of a friend?

Just when the poet was beginning to enjoy life a little, a new blow struck him. It also involved a woman. She was Sophia Gern, the wife of his new friend Karl. Shevchenko discovered that she was betraying her husband with a junior officer, Nikolai Isaev (no relation to Dmitry Isaev). The poet told the husband about it. The offended Isaev, who probably thought that liaisons with married women were not unacceptable, denounced Shevchenko to his commandant, General Obruchev, accusing the poet of wearing civilian clothes and of painting, both contrary to orders. Obruchev ordered the poet's quarters to be searched. Forewarned, Shevchenko destroyed some letters and, with Gern's assistance, hid his poems, and had only a few books seized by the gendarmes who arrested him. On Obruchev's orders the poet was sent on May 12 to Orsk fortress.

The pleasant sojourn in Orenburg came to an abrupt end. The case was reported back to the Third Section in St. Petersburg and Shevchenko was sent back to barracks, "under strict surveillance." However, during the investigation it was found that not only Shevchenko but his superiors were blamed for his indulgence in painting. They were reprimanded and the poet was given a new destination: the fortress of Novopetrovsk on the peninsula of Mangyshlak on the eastern shore of the Caspian Sea. On his way there, in the city of Uralsk, Shevchenko met a Polish exile, Jakub Gordon, who, in his memoirs, wrote: "I talked to him about his exile....His dream was an independent Ukraine and his desire was a revolution. One could say that he saw the world through rosy spectacles." Jakub remarked that life is a cracked mirror, but Shevchenko did not agree.

*For a further union, a deeper communion  
Through the dark cold and empty desolation,  
The wave cry, the wind cry, the vast waters  
Of the petrel and the porpoise.  
In my end is my beginning.*

T.S. Eliot

THE FORTRESS OF NOVOPETROVSK was small and rather squalid. Set in a desolate steppe, it consisted of large barracks for 200 soldiers, quarters for 20 officers, the commandant's house, a small infirmary, and a church. Attempts were made to plant some trees there, and, later Shevchenko planted a willow that grew and prospered. The poet was received with mixed feelings. On the one hand he was posted to barracks and put under strict orders. Military drill became his daily duty. The drill was conducted under the personal supervision of Captain Merkul Potapov, who took a strong dislike to Shevchenko. He personally searched the poet's pockets and humiliated him with all sorts of pointless questions about military procedure. In addition Potapov often conducted the drill in a half-drunken condition. He was motivated by the pure sadism that was often inherent in the servants of imperialism.

On the other hand, some officers and the commandant, Colonel Anton Maevsky, liked Shevchenko for his behaviour and intelligence. Maevsky was a widower and he later hired the poet to be a tutor to his children. Yet, on the whole, Shevchenko felt wretched and wrote to his friend Kozachkovsky in Ukraine that he could not "say anything good about this place." He was worried that his sparse correspondence would become even sparser. He kept in touch with Varvara Repnina, but she had been warned by the police not to write to him.

Was the poet to be condemned to solitude and misery, both very hard to bear? Initially, conditions at Novopetrovsk could, at their worst, be likened to a concentration camp. The complete loss of freedom, physical and mental suffering, and the tyranny of the drill sergeants drove the poet to what one former inmate of a prison camp described as "apathy, the blunting of the emotions and the feeling that

one could not care any more." It was a regression to a more primitive form of intellectual and emotional life. This state was not prolonged but nevertheless was very damaging. In his free moments Shevchenko sought escape by reading the Bible and Shakespeare. Being the kind of individual he was, he was unbroken and tried to preserve his inner freedom. The same would happen a century later to some Soviet dissidents in concentration camps and in exile. Where did their strength come from? Very often it was from Shevchenko's example. His life story they knew well and valued it no less than his poems.

It was at that moment, in desolate Novopetrovsk, that Shevchenko made a curious decision. He would give up writing Ukrainian poetry, and would instead try to write Russian prose. Such a decision could only have come out of utter despair. But that, more or less, is what he did for the next six years. From that period only one short Ukrainian poem has been preserved. At the same time, according to his own words, he wrote over 20 long stories in Russian and kept a personal diary in Russian. Only the diary and nine of the stories have survived.

Later, scholars would try to puzzle out this momentous decision. Some would say that the poet was betraying his true calling, others that he was trying to accommodate the Russians. Still others would point to the "other, adjusted self" of the poet, who, after all, lived in a Russian empire. The striking fact, however, was that his Russian prose was mediocre while his Ukrainian poetry was unsurpassed. Was this lapse into Russian brought about by the harsh conditions of exile? His friend Kulish, on reading Shevchenko's Russian "novels," advised him to burn them. A prominent Russian writer, Sergei Aksakov, also advised against publication because "it would be beneath your huge (*ogromny*) poetic talent." Yet Shevchenko wrote assiduously in Russian, in the process recalling some Ukrainian folkways and history. He seems to have been unaware of its low quality.

Another, more likely reason for changing to Russian prose might have been the fact that, at that time, Ukrainian prose language was still quite undeveloped. This may be seen from Shevchenko's short preface to the unpublished *Kobzar* in 1847, which he wrote in very quaint Ukrainian. Yet, perhaps he had to satisfy something that only researchers into personality changes under the stress of incarceration may be able to explain.

The poet could not suffer alone. He struck up a friendship with another soldier from Ukraine, Andrii Oberemenko. Later, in his Russian diary, he wrote "apart from his simple kindness I loved him for the fact that during his 20 years in the army, that cheap and dreadful

life had not extinguished his national and human dignity. He remained faithful in every respect to his splendid (*prekrasnoi*) nationality."

In May 1851 Shevchenko was included in a new expedition to search for deposits of coal on the Mangyshlak peninsula. He was delighted to see his old friend Bronislaw Zaleski among the members of this small party of explorers. Left behind were the hated barracks, and temporary permission was granted him to draw the landscapes around Kara-Tau. Blowing sand and scorching heat of 40° Celcius made his work difficult. But he enjoyed talking to his old friend Bronislaw. Altogether Shevchenko completed more than 60 sketches of the surrounding scenes, many of them done on his knees (there was no table) inside a *kibitka* (covered cart).

Life became a little easier on the return to Novopetrovsk. The commandant showed some kindness in allowing Shevchenko to take part in a play by Ostrovsky in which the poet acted very well. However, an attempt to gain permission for Shevchenko to paint the local church failed. There was very little to read and the poet wrote in one of his letters that "it is not lack of freedom, but my solitude that is my greatest enemy in this desert."

In 1852 Shevchenko learned of the deaths of his beloved teacher Karl Briullov and his famous compatriot Nikolai Gogol. He did not know that Gogol had died in Moscow, almost insane, by refusing to eat. Like Shevchenko, Gogol spent most of his creative life out of his country. He wrote his best works in Italy. However, Gogol's life as an exile was far more comfortable than Shevchenko's. Not only was he a free man but he also received a regular stipend from the Russian government. The two men never met and Shevchenko regretted this. As early as 1844 he had dedicated a poem to Gogol, in which he wrote "You laugh, my great friend, and I weep." He recognized Gogol as a great comic writer whose satire he much admired. He knew and highly valued Gogol's masterpieces *The Inspector General* and *Dead Souls*. Although he never mentioned Gogol's early Ukrainian tales, he wrote to Repnina that he virtually worshipped Gogol's talent.

Very different was Gogol's view of Shevchenko, unknown to the latter. Just when the poet was languishing in Novopetrovsk in 1851, a few months before his death, Gogol had a long conversation about Shevchenko with a Ukrainian writer, Danylevsky, and the poet's friend Bodiatsky. We have the following account of it by Danylevsky. Bodiatsky was anxious to find out Gogol's opinion of Shevchenko's poetry, "There is much impurity (*degtiu mnogo*) in his poetry," said Gogol, adding that he did not like Shevchenko's language. When Bodiatsky pressed him for a more precise answer, Gogol said: "We

should write in Russian....The dominant and only heritage for Russians, Ukrainians, Czechs, and Serbians should be the language of Pushkin...Russians and Ukrainians have twin souls..." Danylevsky noted that Bodiansky was very upset by Gogol's words. Yet there was no reason to protest this opinion. It came from a Ukrainian who, like many of his compatriots regarded himself as a Little Russian. Shevchenko, on the other hand, despised such people and believed that Ukraine should liberate itself from Russia.

Another death in 1852, that of Shevchenko's friendly commandant Maevsky, caused the poet much grief. He tried to find relief in attempting to sculpt in clay and alabaster. After all, sculpting was not forbidden to him. The new commandant, Major Iraklii Uskov, proved to be a compassionate man who relieved the poet from performing the compulsory drill. Uskov's wife, Agatha, was especially fond of the poet, who by now had lost almost all his hair and wore a beard. She left some memoirs in which she speaks fondly of Shevchenko: "He did not enchant us at once. He had an open face, a noble high forehead with a large bald patch which made him look quite important. He talked fluently and gracefully. On getting more closely acquainted I found him to be an honest, truthful, and moral person. He avoided large gatherings and never played cards." However, later on, the poet discovered her to be "an empty and privileged beauty" whom he slightly ridiculed in one of his long stories. Their relations remained cordial but platonic. Perhaps, despite her conventionality, he was drawn to her physically.

At that time the poet corresponded with Bronislaw Zaleski, to whom he secretly sent his sketches for possible sale. Shevchenko's contacts with Polish exiles continued to be very strong. It was Pole, Zygmunt Sierakowski, who first raised the question of trying to intercede with the authorities for an amnesty for the poet. Sierakowski overcame exile by becoming an officer in the Russian army and moving to St. Petersburg. He took an active part in the Polish armed uprising in 1863, was captured and hanged by the Russians. In 1855, Countess Anastasia Tolstoy, the wife of the vice-president of the Academy of Fine Arts in St. Petersburg, began efforts to have the poet released.

Uncertain as to whether he was allowed to paint and draw, Shevchenko sketched a great deal. He drew portraits of both the Uskovs and sketched various landscapes and Kazakh children who reminded him of his own bereft childhood. In 1856 he was seized with an ambition to draw an allegorical series of sketches, "The Parable of the Prodigal Son," which had been in his mind for a long time. He

completed eight sketches out of the planned 12 and they are true masterpieces. Ostensibly they have little to do with the Bible and are usually regarded as a disguised, biting satire of imperial Russia. The striking half-naked, Cossack-like hero is portrayed in various scenes of the desolation, filth, depravity, and brutality of Nicolean Russia. The atmosphere is one of utter gloom and despair. The hero, whose face recalls Shevchenko's, stands stoically among the drunken and degraded inmates of Nicholas's vast barracks. He is impassive yet unyielding and he knows that he has to come back to his father. What he had committed was "a sin against heaven," but he will be forgiven and reunited. Like so many other prodigal sons, Shevchenko depicted the physical horror and spiritual anguish of his contemporaries and of himself.

Was a return of this prodigal son possible? The momentous events of a year earlier had made it more likely. In 1854 a war broke out between the Western powers (Britain, France, Austria) and Turkey on the one side and Russia on the other, which came to be known as the Crimean War because decisive battles were fought in the Crimea. The war ended in 1856 in a defeat for Russia. Disheartened by the failures of his army, Tsar Nicholas I died in March 1855, shortly before the fall of the Crimean fortress port of Sebastopol. This defeat marked a great blow to Russia's imperial might and to her influence in that part of the world.

The news of the war and especially of the sudden death of the tsar reached Novopetrovsk. At first the possible repercussions were hard to predict. They could lead to a tightening but also to a loosening of imperial power. Shevchenko naturally hoped that, as the new tsar was crowned, there would be, as was customary, a chance for an amnesty. But the wheels of the tsarist bureaucracy moved very slowly. The poet waited and continued drawing and writing his Russian stories. It was not until February 1856 that Princess Anastasia Tolstoy wrote to him that serious steps were being taken in St. Petersburg to secure his release. The coronation of Tsar Alexander II was at hand. However, it brought the poet no freedom. In April of that year he wrote to Countess Tolstoy that he "was near despair when he heard the bad news."

Shevchenko's friends, especially Zaleski and Sierakowski, tried to encourage his hope. In February 1857 the poet wrote to Zaleski that he hoped to travel to St. Petersburg soon. This was because a month earlier Lazarevsky had written that the tsar had issued an order to free Shevchenko. Of course, the whole procedure had to go through the proper channels. In April the poet replied to Lazarevsky: "Devil knows

what they are doing with me." The real stumbling block in St. Petersburg to Shevchenko's final release was the tsar's mother, Alexandra Fedorovna. She objected to it because she could not forgive the poet for comparing her in one of his poems to a "shrivelled mushroom." Her objections were at last overcome. Unknown to Shevchenko as yet, the family of Count Tolstoy, in St. Petersburg, celebrated the news of his release with a bottle of champagne. The Count's daughter later wrote that "we all ran about the house and rejoiced that they had freed Shevchenko." However, it was not until months later that the news reached the poet.

In the meantime, in order to relieve the mental strain that tormented him, the poet started, in June 1857, to keep a diary, which he wrote in Russian. He sensed the coming of liberty for himself and for others. He heard a rumour, which was based on truth, that the new tsar had appointed a committee to look into the possibility of abolishing serfdom. For Shevchenko this would be an even greater prize than personal freedom. But he did not know then that the day of peasant liberation would not come until 1861. Everything proceeded at a snail's pace. Some letters, books, and best wishes, as well as small sums of money sent by friends, were reaching Shevchenko almost every week. The poet made plans for the future, such as devoting his art to engraving, and he promised to review Kulish's book, in which his poem "The Servant Girl" was published anonymously. In a letter to his friend Kukharensky, to whom he sent a new poem, he wondered whether he "had grown older in the last ten years of imprisonment." He added: "I shall go crazy from constant waiting." His diary, which he wrote for himself and not for publication, has a pleasant air of intimacy. It is full of sharp observations, of a mood of expectancy and frustration, interspersed with wit and anecdotes. The author poured out his hatred of the military men whom he was about to leave for good. They were an uncouth and drunken lot, dehumanized by barrack life. In his description of them the most frequently used word is *vile*. However, in one of the first entries, he wrote this about himself having lived in such a hell:

All this inscrutable misery, all kinds of degradation and profanation passed and, as it were, touched me not. They did not leave any trace on me. Bitter experiences passed by me as if they were invisible. It seems to me that I am just the same as I was ten years ago. Not one feature in my inner self has changed. Is this good? Yes, it is. At least it seems so to me. And I am grateful from the bottom of my heart to my almighty Creator that he prevented

the terrible experiences from touching with their iron claws my convictions and my youthful religious beliefs.

However much he praised his Creator, Shevchenko's life was his own creation. The privations of his youth had hardened him so that he could withstand almost anything. In his diary he related his dreams in great detail. They were mostly of his old Ukrainian friends, but also of his days in the academy. He wrote that he wanted to return there and devote himself to engraving. In this way his art would be available to people who could not afford to have original pieces of art. He liked to read while drinking tea from a favourite copper teapot, but he was also eager to meet any new interesting people who might visit the port city. In the meantime, he wrote, "It is sad, indescribably sad. I cannot sleep at night and I am full of anguish."

Even stronger than his fondness for his teapot was his attachment to his diary. In writing it the poet found consolation and solitude, which "after ten years of barrack life is like a true paradise." A somewhat similar sentiment was expressed a little later by another exile, the great Russian novelist Fedor Dostoevsky in *Notes from the House of the Dead* (1860). At the same time Shevchenko's diary revealed the real man without the poet's mask. No great creative effort was needed; yet the random notes were all the more valuable. As one scholar later wrote: "a great poet rises in these pages as a great man." The immediacy of the self-portrait is startling.

Shevchenko was aware of the temptation to strike a pose, but he resisted it: "The devil whispers into my ear: write whatever you want, lie as much as possible." Satan was defeated by what became a rather photographic but nevertheless very revealing account. The diary records the poet's innate fearlessness and outspokenness. After all, he was still in captivity, yet he was bold enough to scold the military establishment, the imperial order, and Tsar Nicholas himself, whom, after Herzen, he called "Hindrance" (*tormoz*). Not only did he not hide his political views, he flaunted them. Ten years of penal servitude had left him unrepentant. The poet proudly noted, "I told myself that they will not make a soldier out of me. And they didn't." His deep Christian beliefs told him to forgive his torturers: "In the depth of my soul I forgive my tormentors and only ask almighty God to save others from abuse by these half-human creatures." Free to roam in the neighbourhood of Novopetrovsk, Shevchenko penned the following impression of a Russian village:

The Great Russian village is, as Gogol said, a heap of grey logs with black openings instead of windows, forever dirty, forever wintry. You won't see a green twig anywhere, only in the distance impenetrable green forests may be seen. There is here a strange antipathy to the charms of nature. It is quite different in Ukraine. There, a village is full of hospitable houses in the shadow of cherry orchards. There the poor *muzhik* is surrounded by nature. Oh, my beautiful and pleasant native land! Will I soon breathe your fresh, life-giving, and sweet air?

It was in solitary prayer that the suffering poet often found his consolation. But his visits to a Russian church were not always very successful. The best religious meditation was only possible in seclusion. While sitting on a rock far from the barracks he concluded, "I owed my gratitude to almighty God for allowing me to walk along this thorny path without wounding myself or losing my human dignity." Another political prisoner, Fedor Dostoevsky, who served his sentence a little later than Shevchenko, observed through one of his characters that "it is impossible for a convict to be without God."

Shevchenko's meditations in solitude were not devoted only to God. He thought a great deal about his own life and destiny. Aware that he had the talent to speak for the oppressed, he wondered if this task could be accomplished. After all, nothing might be left of him for future generations. He might simply be annihilated by the tsar's ruthless regime. On the other hand, some inner voice told him to be of good cheer, to hope that all his privations would pass and that his work would survive. Without realizing it he was a Romantic poet *par excellence*, sure of his immortality. One of the books someone had loaned to Shevchenko was a work on aesthetics by a Polish writer, Karl Libelt. He read it carefully, responding often quite critically to the idealistic view of art. He was impatient with Libelt's rather rarefied and lofty tone. "For a man endowed with divine feeling," wrote the poet in his diary, "such theories are empty phraseology, even worse, charlatanism. If only these lifeless theorists of aesthetics would, instead of theories, write a history of art, then this would be of some use." Did not this impatience with theory foreshadow our own scepticism about much of the modern academic word-spinning of today?

Armed with permission to leave Novopetrovsk Shevchenko took a boat to Astrakhan, a major port on the Caspian Sea, at the mouth of the Volga River. On August 6, 1857 he recorded his impression of the city: "a large heap of stinking dung. What is the reason for this disgusting filth?" He could find no answer, although he guessed that



**Figure 8: Self-portrait (1851)**

“there could be some political or economic mainspring for it.” He could not buy a sausage or fresh fish, although “Astrakhan supplied half of all the sturgeons to the huge Russian tsardom.” He also failed to find a bookstore. After a week in this unattractive port, the poet boarded the ship *Prince Pozharsky*, which was to take him up the Volga to Nizhny Novgorod.

Just before boarding, a rich Russian merchant, Sapozhnikov, offered the poet a place in his cabin. Shevchenko accepted and gave his ticket to a poor traveller who could not afford the price. The atmosphere was much more congenial. Some passengers became quite friendly. They all talked, played cards, and at night listened to a former serf, Panov, playing the violin. “Three nights in a row this recently freed miracle worker lifts my soul to the creator of eternal harmony with the captivating sounds of a marvellous homemade violin. He elicits from his own instrument the bewitching melodies of Chopin’s *mazurkas*.” Shevchenko’s favourite composers were Mozart and Rossini. Under the influence of music, for which the poet had a real passion, a sombre prophecy of industrial revolution came into his mind:

Great Fulton and Watt! Your young child, growing by leaps and bounds, will soon devour the knouts, the thrones, and crowns swallowing up diplomats and landowners, playing with them like a schoolboy with candy. What the encyclopedists started in France will be fulfilled throughout the entire planet by your gigantic child of genius. I prophesy this without a tremor.

The banks of the Volga unfolded in their majestic natural beauty. They were “steep, picturesque, and fascinating.” So much so that the poet was forced to neglect his journal. Yet he recorded even that. On August 31, the boat stopped at Saratov and Shevchenko visited the town. He managed to find the house where the mother of his good friend Kostomarov lived. They talked of the good old times in Kiev and the visitor left her one of his poems. The city itself left a bad impression. “Everything here smells of Russia — that is of back bacon, burning, and abomination.” The voyage past Simbirsk and Kazan was uneventful. The poet read, conversed with fellow passengers, and listened to a certain Nina Alexandrovna’s account of the contents of Byron’s *Don Juan*. The liberal-minded captain of the *Prince Pozharsky* showed Shevchenko copies of Russian publications that Alexander Herzen, the incorrigible dissident, was issuing in London. The poet avidly read the banned journals and, again in sheer

defiance, drew a portrait of Herzen. On September 19 the travellers spent the last evening playing cards and drinking champagne. After almost a month they had reached the port of Nizhny Novgorod, which was enveloped in fog.

On the first day of his stay in Nizhny Novgorod Shevchenko received some good and also some bad news. His arrival was greeted by progressive-minded citizens who welcomed the ex-prisoner. But at about the same time he was being welcomed, the man who offered him his apartment, Nikolai Brylkin, told him that the police were looking for him. It turned out that, according to the chief of the police, Shevchenko had taken the wrong route in coming here and that his orders had been to go through Orenburg. What was to be done now? His new friends, very sympathetic to him, advised him to tell the police that he was sick. A doctor was found to give him the necessary certificate and the poet was allowed to stay in Nizhny Novgorod. His health had, indeed, been severely undermined by the privations of long exile. Shevchenko was enraged by these attempts to keep him from venturing to St. Petersburg. "These are true executioners," he wrote to Kukharenko, "ten years of slavery was not enough for them." Finally, he was allowed to stay in the city for the next six months. There was nothing else he could do. During that time he continued to write his journal.

Perhaps the mood of the citizens of Nizhny Novgorod was strengthened by the liberal atmosphere of Russia upon the accession and coronation of Tsar Alexander II. In any case Shevchenko, as a victim of the previous regime, was lionized and invited to visit the best houses and families. They included such high officials as Constantine Schreiders, aide to the governor-general. Many Russian officials at that time were hoping for the abolition of serfdom and other reforms. Shevchenko was to them a living witness of old injustices. Some of the Russians the poet met had links to the Decembrists of the 1820s. They too were returning from exile.

Meeting people did not stop Shevchenko from reading. "I have read everything," he wrote to Anastasia Tolstoy, "that has appeared recently. I regaled myself with it." Yet sometimes meeting people was unpleasant. In the memoirs, an incident in Nizhny Novgorod is described. When the poet was on one of his visits, met a former district police officer who boasted that he had beaten the peasants black and blue. Shevchenko, we are told, left the house in tears. Sometimes the poet mingled with the crowds of peasants on city streets. On one occasion he encouraged them to protest against the landlords. He

must have had some doubts as to whether the new tsar would be a true reformer.

Shevchenko received some books that Kulish had published and was very happy to read them. One of them was a Ukrainian primer for the peasants. He himself planned to write one later. Education of the common people was paramount in his mind. But, at the moment, the poet was regaining some of his earlier inspiration. In February 1858 the poet noted in his diary that "he felt an urge to write poetry." Even before that, at the end of 1857, he had written a short and then a long poem. His poetic power was undiminished, and he wrote in Ukrainian.

The short poem, "The Idiot" contains four lines that later caused a stir in Soviet Ukraine. The poem is a savage attack on Nicholas I and his officials. The poet asks:

*You miserable crew, when will you breathe your last?  
When shall we get ourselves a Washington  
With a new and just law?  
But some day we shall surely find him!*

The name of the first American president was treasured by those who cared for liberty. On several other occasions Shevchenko showed a keen interest in America. In his diary he mentioned San Francisco and New Orleans as great cities. And, after all, Robert Fulton, whom he elevated in his meditation on the industrial revolution, was an American inventor. In his Russian stories Shevchenko referred to Washington Irving and other American writers. Later, in St. Petersburg, he befriended the black American actor Ira Aldridge, who excelled in the role of Othello. Shevchenko left a portrait of him.

The long poem, one of his best, was called *The Neophytes*. Set in ancient Rome, it portrays the lives of the first Christians. Underlying this story there may be found a recreation of the tsarist regime in Russia with the despot Nero-Nicholas I prominently displayed. It is a philosophical poem rather than a satire and it has a deeply Christian message of love and regeneration. If the poet preached revolution, it had to be a spiritual one.

To cap his pleasant sojourn in Nizhny Novgorod Shevchenko wrote, in February 1858, a beautiful lyrical triptych "Destiny," "Muse," "Fame," which he recorded in his diary. In "Destiny" he proudly asserted, "We two have never left our pathway rough...and none can find one grain of falsehood that we've left behind." He is no less confident in the poem "The Muse:"

*You watched above me everywhere, and on  
Each day, my star, immaculately shone.  
Even the steppe, that place of desolation,  
In my far exile knew your approbation;  
Yes, even there, your beauty was revealed  
Like some unfading flower in a field.*

Finally, in "Fame" the ending shows a new optimism, even buoyancy:

*Let me, my precious one,  
Nestle against you when the day is done,  
And snug beneath your wing, my fortune made  
Turn me to slumber in refreshing shade!*

Shevchenko always regarded his talent as a divine gift. He was still in possession of it after years of incarceration. His faith in himself as a poet had been renewed, and he would continue to write lyrical and revolutionary poetry without fear. What was more, the restoration of his Muse was also a reaffirmation of his destiny (*dolia*). Like a Cossack, in a popular song, he was "not without a destiny." What precisely it meant was demonstrated in the last episode of his stay in Nizhny Novgorod.

His long poem, *The Neophytes*, Shevchenko dedicated to Mykhailo Shchepkin, his old friend from Ukraine. The actor made a special trip to visit the poet in Nizhny, and his visit was a truly unforgettable experience for both of them. The poet described it as "six days of a full, joyful, and reverential life." Shchepkin had a very close association with Ukraine and the two men could talk freely as two former serfs who had overcome their destiny. While in Nizhny Shchepkin appeared on the stage at the local theatre. Another non-Ukrainian who at that time attracted Shevchenko's attention was Maria Markovych, whose Ukrainian short stories were sent to him by Kulish, who, however, was afraid to visit Shevchenko. Maria wrote under the male pseudonym "Marko Vovchok" and became one of the first great prose writers in Ukraine. She was the wife of Opanas Markovych. He was a member of the Brotherhood of Sts. Cyril and Methodius, and shared Shevchenko's fate after the arrests of 1847.

The local theatre had a good repertoire of Russian and foreign plays. Shevchenko attended them regularly and it was there that he met a young actress, Katerina Piunova, who was 27 years his junior. He met her not only in the theatre, but at the homes of mutual friends and then at her apartment. In January 1858 the poet published a favourable

review of Piunova's acting in the local paper. However, the actress was not pleased with it. Perhaps she sensed that behind the reviewer's praise was a deep feeling for her, which she did not reciprocate. The infatuation of a forty 44-old man for a 17-year old girl soon led to an embarrassment. Shevchenko proposed and was rebuffed. His fantasy of Katrusia, the lovely young actress, was shattered. The poet even tried to intervene with her parents, but to no avail. The entry in his diary records his deep disappointment: "I saw her as a guardian angel, my future wife... and she placed me in a most unseemly position." For weeks he could not forget the intense disappointment. Years later, Katerina Piunova, in her memoirs, wrote that her parents were at fault for stopping this "courtship" and that she "could not value the great man properly, but I am proud that I did attract his attention." The desire to get married, which re-emerged a few years later, shows both the strong libido of the poet and, connected with it, his creative urge. As Shevchenko's contemporary, Schopenhauer, whom the poet never read, maintained, long before Freud, "the sexual passion is the kernel of the will to live and to create." However, for Shevchenko, the immediate response to his rejection was to drink more vodka than usual. Drowning his sorrow in alcohol had now become a bad habit.

The forced sojourn in Nizhny Novgorod was coming to an end. Shevchenko had all sorts of dreams about going to St. Petersburg, to Ukraine, or even of "fleeing abroad." On March 5 he received permission to return to the capital after a successful intercession on his behalf by Count Tolstoy. The journey to the heart of Russia was continued by sleigh. On the way, he met his old friend Butakov, from the expedition to the Aral Sea. Was it a bad omen? Not quite. Shevchenko's penal servitude was over. It had started in despair, but it ended in hope.

# Part Four

## Correspondence

EVEN A SUPERFICIAL READING of *Kobzar* will demonstrate that Shevchenko, the founder of modern Ukrainian literature, was much closer to the type of a poet-shaman and prophet than the founder of Russian literature — Pushkin.

This is perhaps because Shevchenko sprang up directly from the soil of his native and national culture. The lyrical hero in Shevchenko's poetry is always accompanied by visions of magical initiations, journeys into the past and future, ancestors and descendants. His images are those of a well, the tree of life or death, the paths of good and evil, crossroads, birds, as well as the moon, the sun, and the stars, the companions of historical spirits, mythical heroes and prophets of the past....

The symbolic image of the well, which I chose, is multifaceted and I have concentrated on those aspects which lead to the central idea through images of a suffering wanderer and a sinful people who follow active or passive evil. Here one must pay attention to the "well of past memory," the "well of culture" which symbolizes the collective national experience, the "well of humanity" which nurtures the poet's creativity. Jung's "collective unconscious" applies to these concepts, which point to the source of poetic genius without offering any explanation.

Literary critics and scholars have pointed out many times the "spell" or even "mystique" of Shevchenko's poetry. The problem is to find the key to this "spell" if contemporary science is capable of doing so. The task is difficult because intellectual study divides reality into different spheres (archaeology, history, ethnography, folklore, linguistics, etc.). It also tends to search for precise facts and their inter-relationship. A synthesis remains elusive....

Shevchenko escaped all mono-models, systems and ideologies. He belonged to the seekers of "truth and knowledge" but not within dogmatic verities. Hence today he is even more "modernist" than the modernists....Shevchenko's correspondence, his journal, the memoirs of his contemporaries, his own Russian prose, as well as what he knew of science, theology, and literature I have used as auxiliary material. These elements of the poet's biography reveal his central core and should be studied.

Leonid Pliushch, *Taras Shevchenko's Exodus*

*More than kisses, letters mingle souls.*

John Donne

SHEVCHENKO'S TRUE PERSONALITY is best revealed in his correspondence. More than 220 of his letters have been preserved. He was also the recipient of at least 200 letters. A closer look at some of them, assembled together, offers a unique insight into a fellow creature. Most of his letters are written in Ukrainian. They represent the "unedited" and unvarnished reflection of his personality. The poet's spontaneity comes to the fore because of his complete disregard for formality and etiquette. Words flow from his pen unhindered. In the history of Ukrainian correspondence his letters are the first to be both partisan and iconoclastic. His contemporaries adhered to conventional usage; he was a recusant and non-conformist. Shevchenko started writing letters in 1839 by addressing his brother, Mykyta, in Ukraine. Writing from St. Petersburg, where he had finally become a free man, studying at the Academy of Fine Arts, he wanted to re-establish contact with his family and his native land. He wrote with great fervour after an interval of more than a year, although it was ten years since he had left his native village. He proudly announced to Mykyta, "I live here without bowing to anyone. I am not afraid of anyone except God. It is a great happiness to be free, to do what I want...." As a free man of meagre means he sent his brother some money. He also implored him to write to him "not in Russian, but in our language." Listening to the native words he might cry a little, remembering his home. This insistence on the native language was repeated in his second letter to Mykyta, written four months later, in which he declared; "Don't write to me in Russian because I won't read it." Primarily, therefore, it is his native language that he values most. In a letter to the writer Hryhorii Kvitka in 1841, the poet further indulged in his attachment to Ukraine, recalling its natural beauty which he had experienced directly and intimately. St. Petersburg, he said, was odious because of its harsh climate. He begged Kvitka to send him some Ukrainian peasant costumes, presumably so that he could paint pictures of them. The

opposition between Ukraine and Russia is expressed chiefly in terms of physical nature and language. He was even trying to write in Russian, but he had no confidence whatever that he would succeed. His nostalgia for Ukraine grew even stronger when he wrote to Yakiv Kukharenko, whom Shevchenko addressed as "otaman." He complained to him that Russia was a "foreign land," referring to the "cursed St. Petersburg" and regretting having written a poem in Russian, "that stale language of the *katsaps* [pejorative for Russians]." In a revealing sentence he confessed: "Apart from God and the devil there is in our soul something terrible and heart-chilling...it is not my fault that I wasn't born a *katsap* or a Frenchman..." This "terrible" fate is precisely his Ukrainian birth.

Early in 1843 the idea of visiting Ukraine assumed paramount importance. Writing to Tarnovsky in January of that year the poet once more cursed "muddy St. Petersburg" and wanted to be in Ukraine "before nightingales sing...perhaps I'll escape to you after Easter." Shevchenko sent Tarnovsky his painting of one of his heroines, Kateryna. He told Tarnovsky that the Russians regarded him as "an enthusiast and a fool" and that he longed to be in Ukraine "even if I am regarded as a peasant poet." Tarnovsky was one of the few Ukrainians Shevchenko knew in Ukraine. He was anxious to visit Tarnovsky's estate, Kachanivka, and paint there. Yet, while he felt an overwhelming desire to return home, he had twinges of doubt. At the end of February, 1843, he writes to Kukharenko that he might travel abroad rather than to Ukraine, where he would "hear only crying." The visit, as described here earlier, was finally undertaken and led to the confirmation of his intense attachment as well as to a reassessment of his native land.

Once in Ukraine, Shevchenko's expansive nature showed no bounds. He literally wallowed in his Ukrainianness. A good example of this may be glimpsed in a letter written from Yahotyn to the "wet mug," Viktor Zakrevsky, brother-in-law of Hanna, with whom the poet was deeply in love. In his letter Shevchenko praised the "company of Bacchus," used four-letter words, and was thoroughly disreputable. No wonder that Princess Repnina strongly objected to his association with the "wet mugs" and warned him to avoid "these coarse people." But this was an aristocrat's censure and Shevchenko ignored it. He was in his element among the Ukrainian landowners, some of whom lived very simply. Tarnovsky was an exception. The poet re-entered this Ukrainian world with real abandon. He sang and drank with his guests and felt happy in their cherry orchards. The link with his native land was as physical as it was when, as a small boy, he was prevented

by his mother from eating earth. The attachment of Ukrainians to their soil (*zemlia*) is truly elemental. No wonder that Shevchenko wrote to Hryhorovych from Yahotyn: "Now I feel well, very well." Well enough to engage in another patriotic frivolity — the sending of a jocular hetman's "universal" proclamation to Mykola Markevych on January 22, 1844.

This intense love of country was soon translated into action. As Shevchenko set out to sketch various monuments in Ukraine he wrote to Bodiansky that he wanted to "depict how people live now and how they used to live." The intended project of publishing a series of sketches called *Picturesque Ukraine* became a real obsession. The poet, turned archivist, wrote to Tsertelev that "if God helps me to finish it, I would be ready to lie down in a coffin, since Ukraine would then not forget my miserable self." In the course of his expedition to historic sites he discovered ruin and devastation, which hurt him bitterly.

"The Muscovites have plundered our Ukraine," he wrote to Kukharenko, to whom he also sent these vitriolic lines of poetry:

*The Hetmans will rise,  
The Destiny will rise  
In a golden tunic  
And the Cossacks will sing.*

Kukharenko, who was something of a showman, was treated by Shevchenko as the last true descendant of the Cossacks. This love of the Cossacks and their ethos, an essential part of Shevchenko's patriotism, was later lampooned by his friend, Kulish. The last letter, written on February 1, 1847, to Kostomarov before their arrest, from "the glorious city of Borzna," showed Shevchenko's devil-may-care attitude to life ("I am still fond of drinking") but with more serious patriotic intention towards Ukraine. He referred to the Cyrillo-Methodian Brotherhood in these words: "I will not write to you of the brotherhood since there is nothing to write about; we'll cry together when we meet." A rather cryptic comment, but one that testified to his direct involvement in this secret society aimed at Ukraine's liberation.

Exile exacerbated Shevchenko's ardour for Ukraine. Writing from Orsk to Lazarevsky at the end of 1847 the poet complained that "I feel so wretched, so wretched, that if it were not for the hope of seeing my unhappy land one day, I would ask God to help me to die." The longing for Ukraine "makes me cry." It overwhelmed his good memories of St. Petersburg and turned him into a "refugee without a shelter."

Lyzohub's letters offered "words from my poor country." Yet gradually this distant, poor country became for the poet more than an object of nostalgia. He feared that he might be forgotten in Ukraine and greeted his faithful correspondent, Lyzohub, as his "only friend." He complained to Bodiansky, in 1850, that "God has not given me a good destiny (*dolia*). He did not allow me to end my life in Ukraine. My tears overflow when I remember it." He did not know why he was punished so severely. In other words, doubts began to occur to him about his mission as a Ukrainian poet. He was sure that he "would never see his hapless Ukraine," and he would die in the barren Asiatic steppes. This anxiety was born just as he was becoming aware of both his debt to Ukraine and the gifts he had for her. He ended in deep despair. In a letter to Artemovsky in 1852 he questioned the value of all reflection, "which destroys hope, this universal, beautiful deceiver. I did have hope, but then gave it up. I was not born for happiness, I was born, grew up in servitude, and I will die a soldier. May the end come quickly, no matter how it comes." It was, after all, his country, both real and imagined, that kept him alive; in exile, he was ready to die. Secretly, he hoped "to look but once on my friends on the Dnieper, Kiev, Ukraine, before I die."

Meanwhile, the poet continued to write and receive letters and praises but was often disappointed with the mail from Ukraine. He even penned a poem about it. In his letters he remembered Dante's dictum that "there is nothing worse than to remember happiness in times of despair." He was worried, in a letter to Bodiansky, that he might forget all he knew about Ukraine. However, from time to time his gloom disappeared, especially when he received a good letter from Ukraine. Replying to Kukharenko in April 1854, the poet transported himself momentarily to Ukraine, remembering the good times and his friends. He wrote with his usual abandon, full of folksy sayings and colourful adjectives. Occasionally, he quoted songs and verse and asked for more letters. He could not help recalling happy memories in Ukraine, although he swore that they brought tears to his eyes. Momentarily he cheered up when he thought of a new Ukrainian translation that he could produce. The old creative urge was constantly fed by native memories. He was very moved when his Polish friend Zygmunt Sierakowski wrote him a letter in Ukrainian.

Shevchenko greeted the long-awaited news of his possible release with enthusiasm because it opened the door to his return home. At Easter in 1857 he wrote to Kukharenko and promised to visit him soon. He established contact with Kulish and praised his new new

publications. But this enthusiasm was soon dampened by bureaucratic delays in obtaining his real freedom. Some instructions he received were deceptive. At one point he was told that he could travel wherever he wanted. The hope of returning to Ukraine, however, was soon dashed. After being detained in Nizhny Novgorod, Shevchenko was lucky to return to St. Petersburg. However, plans to travel to Ukraine did not leave him. Writing in 1859 to his brother the poet said, "I can't stay in St. Petersburg, it will smother me." And so, against many odds, he travelled to Ukraine that same year.

The trip proved to be a disaster. Apart from revisiting the old places Shevchenko was intent on achieving two practical objectives: buying a piece of land on the Dnieper in order to build a house, and helping to free his family from serfdom. Both ended in failure. He also proposed marriage to a village girl but nothing came of it. Much of his time he spent talking to peasants and inciting them to rebel even before the tsar granted them freedom. He also attacked the church, an ally of the tsarist establishment. As a result of all this, he was arrested and placed not in jail but under police surveillance. Frustrated and utterly disheartened, he left Ukraine and returned to St. Petersburg.

There are few letters from this unhappy period, and they are full of bitter disappointment. Having accomplished nothing and having been arrested for the third time crushed his dream, so carefully preserved during exile, of the ideal Ukraine. Perhaps he was expecting too much. In any case, his native land appeared beyond redemption. He found little consolation in the words written to him by Maksymovych: "Even if infrequently, send us word here to the banks of the Dnieper, where you left most heartfelt memories during your visit. On the right bank of the Dnieper you have become a mythical figure, already a source of fables and legends equal to those produced in ancient times." What would have pleased the poet even more had he known about it was the fact that many students in Kiev and Kharkiv swore to continue Shevchenko's work of enlightenment. Undoubtedly, he hoped that the country to which he had dedicated his life and work would remember him "with a warm, gentle word."

Second to his patriotism was his love of art. Very rarely did his letters reflect his thoughts on his own work. But this, surely, is common among poets and artists. What we find in Shevchenko's epistolary store is a complex but unified aesthetic credo, which also reveals his personality. His later responses to his beloved teacher, Karl Briullov, were not entirely uncritical. True, at first he was, as were his contemporaries, swept by admiration for Briullov's large pseudo-classical

canvases. Briullov's credo, his belief in the sublime beauty of classical art, was tempered by his determination to seek inspiration in nature. Shevchenko remembered that his teacher "did not allow one stroke without looking at a model." The models Shevchenko chose for his paintings and drawings, outside of the required copying in the Academy, came not from the classical heritage but from Ukrainian life. His style remained classicist, but the topics that attracted him were Ukrainian, except during his exile. Like Briullov, Shevchenko remained hostile to contemporary German art, which tended to be idealist and romantic in its search for "absolute beauty." He did not like the paintings of Alexander Ivanov, who was under German influence. Shevchenko's drawings and sketches were, on the whole, in the realist manner. His role in painting was minor. He was a first-rate portraitist and left many excellent watercolours and drawings. He was also an illustrator and late in life was, out of deep conviction, practicing engraving and etching (*l'eau forte*). In a letter to Aksakov, the poet stated his artistic credo: "I am an adherent of everything beautiful and noble on earth." Perhaps this rather vague conviction did not focus him as a painter. Shevchenko's real artistic talent lay elsewhere.

His poetry was very different and it is on this subject that we find curious meditations in his letters. He must have been flattered by many favourable responses from the readers of *Kobzar*. One of them was by Pylyp Korolov, a teacher of physics and mathematics in Kharkiv, who wrote to the poet in 1842, "I love you as a brother or even more so, because you were the first to sing about the Cossack glory, which is as true as God's word, and about the freedom that has passed, and the steppes and *mohylas* in Ukraine, over which a black eagle is circling...." Non-Ukrainians, like Varvara Repnina, also recognized Shevchenko's genius. She not only praised his poetry but offered advice:

Higher with your soul and genius! These should be your aims. Freedom, native land, self-denial and love — all these you have written about. Glorify them anew! These feelings are eternal. Do not let the lyre slip from your hands, do not place it on the steps leading to deceit, favouritism, and treason. Pray with your lyre, strike the mighty chords and glorify the Creator and the mercy of the Saviour....

However personal, this tribute was very genuine. Repnina also did not hesitate to criticize Shevchenko's poetry. Another admirer was Professor Osyp Bodiansky, who in 1844 wrote that he was stimulated in his Ukrainian research by Shevchenko's poetry.

Occasionally, Shevchenko's readers were aware that his works might offend the authorities. In 1846 his brother Varfolomii warned him in a letter that he might "lose his bearings" and say something "prickly." In the same year, writing from St. Petersburg, Kulish examined Shevchenko's muse very critically. He suggested many emendations in the hope that "all Ukraine should have a poet who would say to the whole world his mighty and harmonious word." Even in exile, Shevchenko received a letter from Oleksandra Psiol, to whom his poetry was religious and its creator a martyr for "everything sublime and beautiful." A Russian writer Aleksey Pisemsky wrote to Shevchenko in 1856 that he saw Ukrainians weep while reading his poetry.

Yet what is quite startling is Shevchenko's occasional confession, forced no doubt by the circumstances of exile, of what might be read as a repudiation of his own poetry. Writing in 1850 to the Russian poet Zhukovsky (a letter which was never mailed), whom he implored to intercede on his behalf, Shevchenko declared that "I fully recognize my crime and confess my heartfelt repentance." This could only refer to his poetry, for a few lines further on he assures Zhukovsky that he "never painted anything criminal." We know that, at about the same time, the poet maintained in his verse that he was not at all penitent. Yet, in 1853, in a letter to Artemovsky, he once more refers to his "accursed verses which led me here." This time might have marked the lowest point in his self-esteem as a poet. Similar "confessions" were common among Soviet dissident poets languishing in camps. The poet's critical attitude to his work was also influenced by the letters from some of his friends. Lyzohub, writing soon after Shevchenko's arrest, prayed that God would help him "to bear the cross" and be thankful to God "even if you are not guilty, for He punishes those whom he loves." A similar sentiment, implying Shevchenko's guilt in writing his poems, was later repeated by Lyzohub. Could it be that, momentarily at least, Shevchenko did feel guilty?

Yet the creative urge to write poetry in Ukrainian was not stilled even during the period when Shevchenko, in exile, was writing Russian prose. In a letter to Kozachkovsky in April 1854, he shows a real desire to "translate the *Lay of Ihor's Host* into our most beautiful Ukrainian language." In many poems hidden in his boots during his exile he remained defiant. Shortly before his death he declared in a poem "I am Walking at Night" that "I was lost in thoughts, / The very same thoughts I had before." The temporary hesitation about his revolutionary poetry, expressed in a letter to Artemovsky, may have revealed another side of the poet. Did Shevchenko realize that every poet's

dreams must vanish? Does any poet realize that? Yet the very nature of romantic poetry begs these very questions. For that poetry is, in Shevchenko's own words, like "an oak grove...[which] takes on a golden gown of purest white, then a costly mantle, and weary from its labours, lies down for the night."

*In all our earthly paradise  
No sight more wondrous greets the eyes  
Than a young mother who is blest  
With a small baby at her breast.*

T. Shevchenko

SHEVCHENKO THE POET SPEAKS through his verses and Shevchenko the man through his letters. His letters to and about women reveal most about his inner self. In an early letter to Kvitka (1841), Shevchenko offered to paint a Ukrainian woman for him, one of Kvitka's heroines. Then in 1843, in a letter to Tarnovsky, he described in some detail his own painting of Kateryna:

I have painted Kateryna when she takes leave of her *moskalyk* [Russian soldier] and returns to her village. An old man is sitting nearby, carving wooden spoons, and looks sadly at Kateryna. She, a poor wretch, withholds her tears, and lifts her red apron since, you know she [is pregnant]. The moskal races after his friends amid clouds of dust. A little mangy dog is chasing him and tries to bark. On one side there is a *mohyla*, with a windmill on top, and then only the distant steppe....

The painting of Kateryna may be regarded as a tribute to Shevchenko's young sweetheart, Oksana Kovalenko, who shared Kateryna's fate. The theme of the seduced woman rarely left the poet's imagination. The picture itself, of no great artistic quality, is one of Shevchenko's best known. He wanted to depict a Ukrainian woman in traditional dress, and Kvitka, who supplied him with some of women's clothing, was insistent on that.

A separate chapter in Shevchenko's relations with women was in his friendship with Varvara Repnina. It is best reflected in their letters, many of which have been lost. Those that remain tell of the intensity of this extraordinary relationship. At the end of November 1843 Shevchenko wrote her a brief letter with his impressions of her short novel *The Girl (Devochka)*, the manuscript of which she gave him in

Yahotyn. In a rather exalted mood he complained of his own misery and loneliness and welcomed her compassion and sympathy, which, although disguised, she expressed for him in the novel. He ended by saying, "I pray to you, my good angel, and you have confirmed my belief in the existence of saints on this earth!" In her correspondence with Charles Eynard, Repnina mentioned this letter, which was written after a recitation of Shevchenko's Russian poem "Funeral Feast" (*Trizna*) dedicated somewhat fulsomely to Repnina. "Next day," Repnina wrote, "I did not see him...but I was told that he was gloomy and distant and that he had left immediately after tea. I was with my mother and Princess Keikuatova and I was handed a note — it was from him.... This was not a love letter, but an expression of reverence for my spiritual anxiety and a belief that the weakness of his talent made him unable to express his feelings upon reading my manuscript." This letter of Shevchenko's might have reflected a turning point in her relationship with him, which from then on, as far as he was concerned, was just "sisterly." Repnina assumed the role of protectress perhaps a little unwillingly, but resolutely, even passionately. "Don't be cross," she wrote, "at my constant preaching. I love you too much not to tell you the truth. Forgive me." The hypersensitive princess confessed "I am your sister, your most sincere friend, your accuser...I am telling you as if you were my brother that I quite often saw you as I would never have liked to see you."

In her letters to Eynard, Repnina confessed that, "Shevchenko has occupied a place in my heart.... Not being fully conscious of it, I felt jealous of the attention he paid to Hlafira." And later: "My attraction to him increased more and more. Sometimes he responded with warmth but never with passion." Finally: "If I had seen love on his side, I would, perhaps, have answered it with passion...My feeling was so strong that I forgot my Bible." Even more ardent were Repnina's feelings in her novel, where Shevchenko appeared as Berezovsky (a reference to his frequent visits to Hanna Zakrevska in Berezovi Rudky). At the same time, full of jealousy, Repnina painted him as a rather complex individual:

He ate and drank as all mortals do. He could spend hours in idle pursuits and vulgar talk and he seemed to like that. He could be good to extreme weakness and thoughtless to the point of cruelty, indecisive and rash in his actions. One could not help loving him. For those who really loved him, he was a source of worry, ceaseless transitions from raptures to indignation, from sympathy to coolness.... When reading his verses he became

bewitching. His musical voice reproduced in his listeners the deep feelings which filled him at that time. He was endowed with more than talent, he was a genius, and his sensitive and virtuous soul tuned his flute to lofty and sacred things.

No wonder that in her letters she directed him to the "right path." In her long letter to Eynard, she described Shevchenko as "a child of nature, without any concept of decorum; but he has tact, goodness, and a high regard for everything holy; hence he is considerate, respectful of his elders, and loved by everyone." Even Varvara's mother, who insisted that her daughter tell her everything, could not help liking the poet.

Varvara's high opinion of Shevchenko the poet was not unnoticed by him. Here was a Russian princess praising his literary genius. No ordinary flattery, but perhaps it was a Russian admission of his Ukrainian talent. There is no doubt that under her influence he started to write a poem in Russian. Perhaps, for a moment at least, it may have seemed possible to him that he could contribute something to the Russian poetic heritage. But there is strong evidence that this was only a fleeting moment. His message was not meant for Russian readers. His reading of *Trizna* in the Repnin's drawing room was but a diversion or an act of youthful folly.

It was in her short novel about Shevchenko that Repnina made a very moving confession. Both of them were rather moody and she recorded these moods faithfully. She was tormented by Shevchenko's liking for "bad company." "She saw Berezovsky as hanging over a precipice, and she heard how people, prudent and worthy of respect, maintained that if Berezovsky did not shed this ruinous habit, he would undoubtedly perish in two years, forsake his poetic talent and become an inveterate drunkard." She was also an acute observer of herself: "She is 35 years old. What is an old maid? She is like a lyre with broken strings, save only the string of Christian love." It was Varvara's Christian faith that saved her. "I had terrible conflicts, agonizing scenes," she wrote to Eynard, "but I came close to God, because these scenes were often born of a sense of the beautiful and good." While Eynard tried to reassure her, she knew that ultimately she was "wretched, unkind, egotistically wistful, envious, jealous, un-subdued to God's will, only wishing to be alone." It is noteworthy that when, in an article in 1885, she read about her "mute (*nemaia*) love" for Shevchenko, she wrote a letter to the editor and said that there was no love, only a deep friendship. On Shevchenko's part, this sublimated relationship lasted throughout his exile. He often corresponded with

his "never-to-be-forgotten (*nezabvenny*) friend." In her turn, she did a great deal to alleviate his lot. After Shevchenko's death, Varvara Nikolaevna lived for 30 years in Moscow.

During the stopover at Nizhny Novgorod, when Shevchenko was trying to get married, he courted a young actress, Piunova, without success. There are no letters between them, but Piunova later wrote that the poet was hardly "an eligible bachelor, wearing, as he did, black coal-tarred boots, a coat of raw sheep-skin, and a simple lamb-skin cap, which flopped down." The desire to get married, however, became an obsession for Shevchenko in the remaining years of his life. Despite his declining health and his drinking, he set out to find a young wife. He wanted not only to have a companion but also to father children. During his last journey to Ukraine, Shevchenko was determined to find himself a wife. He met Kharytia Dovhopolenko, a servant of his brother Varfolomii, and promptly offered to marry her. As he had to leave Ukraine in a hurry because of police surveillance, he continued writing to his brother about Kharytia. "I like Kharytia very much..." he wrote to Varfolomii, "ask your wife to approach her on my behalf.... Perhaps she will say that she is poor and I am rich and proud. You tell her that I lack many things and sometimes don't have a clean shirt. My pride and vanity come from my mother, a poor serf.... I simply must get married, else sheer boredom will drive me from this world." And later he was no less insistent: "Now, about Kharytia.... You know that in my body and soul I am a son of our hapless people and I would not like to be united with the dog-like master blood.... Kharytia took my fancy although I saw her only briefly." Varfolomii Shevchenko did not agree with his brother. He felt that Kharytia was not a suitable bride for the poet. Kharytia herself also objected. In the end nothing came of it, but the episode illustrates Shevchenko's desperate state. He also approached Maria, the wife of his friend Mykhailo Maksymovych, with the same idea, that of finding him a bride. He remembered his recent visit to Maksymovych's home and wrote several times to Maria. There is even reason to believe that he had fallen in love with Maria, who wrote him fond letters and promised "to find a beautiful flower for our beloved Ukrainian." Shevchenko said to a friend in reference to Maria Maksymovych: "If I had a bride like that I would marry her and then die."

Shevchenko's pursuit of women was in stark contrast to the attitude of his good friend Kulish who, in the late 1850s, was also involved with several young women. Although already married, Kulish pursued his various platonic relationships through letters. The women he was attracted to (among them was Turgenev's lover, Maria Markovych)

were not peasant girls but educated, middle-class women, even blue stockings, whom he wished to educate further. Caught up in the wave of the emancipation of women in Russia, which led Nikolai Chernyshevsky to write a novel in 1863 about the "new woman," *What Is To Be Done*, Kulish expected to find in a woman an enlightened companion and comrade. He shied away from close physical contact and cultivated an atmosphere of sophisticated romance. All this was far from Shevchenko's intention. He wanted to find a loving, simple peasant girl, whom he would marry and who would look after him. Was there not in this contrast a reflection of Shevchenko's peasant origin, which meant so much to him?

This pathetic pursuit of possible young brides by an ailing man could lead only to another disaster. It happened in 1860 in St. Petersburg, when the poet became infatuated with a Ukrainian servant woman employed by a friend, Lykera Polusmakivna. The many sordid details of this "courtship" (the poet caught Lykera *in flagrante* with a butler) would have deterred anyone with less determination. As in the days when he was a young student, Shevchenko tried to "sate his passion." We know that he tracked down one of his earlier friends, Amalia Kloberg, who called him "Chevchenko." His friends tried, in vain, to protect him from himself. But, as always, he was headstrong and unflinching.

As for the ancient Greeks, Eros was for Shevchenko an impulse towards life, in opposition to Thanatos, the certainty of death. He sought and failed to find a union with a woman in order to procreate. Perhaps he regarded marriage and physical love as a talisman against death. It is curious, by the way, that death did not become a huge existential problem for Shevchenko. There was no despair or anxiety prompted by the thought of death nor Kierkegaardian "sickness unto death" evident in either his poetry or his letters. For him, the meaning of life was contained in its vitality, the view held by most peasants. Yet a vital urge to create something beyond himself drove him throughout his entire life. The deep anger he felt towards the powers-that-be was transmuted into creative and civilizing poetry easily accessible to most of his compatriots. In his love of his country, of his art, and of women he revealed his inner self. Throughout, in spite of constant frustration and pain, he showed a capacity for rebellion as the preservation of the human spirit. In this he achieved what Goethe says of Faust:

*For fate has put a spirit in his breast  
That drives him madly on without a pause.*



# Part Five

## Homecoming

ON VASILIEVSKY ISLAND, in the depths of the Seventeenth Line, a house enormous and gray looked out of the fog. A dingy staircase led to the floors. There were doors and more doors. One opened. And a stranger with the blackest of small moustaches appeared on its threshold. Rhythmically swinging in his hand was a not exactly small yet not very large bundle tied up in a dirty napkin with a red border design of faded pheasants.

The staircase was black, strewn with cucumber peels and a cabbage leaf crushed under foot. The stranger slipped on it. He then grasped the railing with one hand; the other hand (with the bundle) described a zigzag. The stranger wished to protect the bundle from a distressing accident, from falling onto the stone step, because the movement of his elbow mimicked a tightrope walker's turn....

Oh, you lines!

In you has remained the memory of Petrine Petersburg. The parallel lines were once laid out by Peter. And some of them came to be enclosed with granite, others with low fences of stone, still others with fences of wood. Peter's line turned into the line of a later age: the rounded one of Catherine, the regular ranks of colonnades.

Left among the colossi were small Petrine houses: here a timbered one, there a green one, there a blue, single-storeyed one, with the bright red sign "Dinners Served."

Sundry odours hit you right in the nose: the smell of sea salt, of herring, of hawsers, of leather jacket and of pipe, and of nautical tarpaulin.

Oh, lines! How they have changed: how grim days have changed them!...

From over there rose Petersburg: there buildings blazed out of a wave of clouds.

There, it seemed, hovered someone spiteful, cold. From over there, out of the howling chaos someone stared with stony gaze, skull and ears protruding into the fog.

All of that was in the mind of the stranger. He clenched his fist in his pocket. And he remembered that the leaves were falling. He knew it all by heart. These fallen leaves were the last leaves for many. He became a bluish shadow....

The stone curve of the Winter Canal showed its plangent expanse. The Neva was buffeted by the onslaught of a damp wind. The soundlessly flying surfaces glimmered, the walls that formed the side of the four-storeyed palace gleamed in the moonlight....

A carriage was traversing that place. And an equestrian statue stood out black and indistinct against the square. Visitors to Petersburg pay no attention to this statue. A magnificent statue!

The autocrat had raised this statue to his illustrious great-grandfather. He lived in the rosy stone castle. He did not languish long there. Between flurries of petty tyranny and fits of nobleness, his soul was being torn apart....

Andrei Bely, *Petersburg*

*The proof of a poet is that his country absorbs him as affectionately as he has absorbed it.*

Walt Whitman

IT WAS EARLY MARCH 1861. The cold wind whipped up snow flurries against the wing of the Academy of Fine Arts on Vasilievsky Island. In a small two-room apartment in the Academy building sat Shevchenko, utterly disheartened. True, he had just published a Ukrainian primer for the peasants, and a few days earlier he had written what was to be his last poem, but he was sick in body and spirit and did not look forward to his birthday on the ninth of the month. He was immersed in thought and recalled the last three years since he had come back here from exile.

St. Petersburg gave him a warm reception. He was invited out a great deal and met some leading Russian writers and critics. The famous novelist Ivan Turgenev met the poet and described him as “broad-shouldered, sturdy, like a Cossack....His head was almost bald, his forehead high and his lips were covered with long mustaches.” But the Russian writer felt that Ukrainians had exaggerated the poet’s importance. The Russians often labelled Shevchenko a “peasant poet.” This patronizing epithet was hardly a compliment. But Shevchenko did not yet know that another Russian critic, Apollon Grigoriev, disagreed with Turgenev. He placed Shevchenko even above Pushkin. Shevchenko, according to him, was “the last minstrel and the first great poet of a new, great literature.” In his personal life there were bitter disappointments. In June 1860 Shevchenko met Lykera Polusmakivna, a former serf, who was serving as a maid at the home of one of his friends. He proposed to her but, as with Piunova, was rejected. Following this disappointment the poet took to drink, which, in the course of time, impaired his health. Shevchenko remembered how Kostomarov had said that he “drank like an epic hero (*bogatyr*).” Another bad memory was the ill-fated trip to Ukraine where, after a few months, he was again almost placed under arrest.

Yet there were also good memories. His continued creative powers produced fine paraphrases of the psalms, where his voice was that of

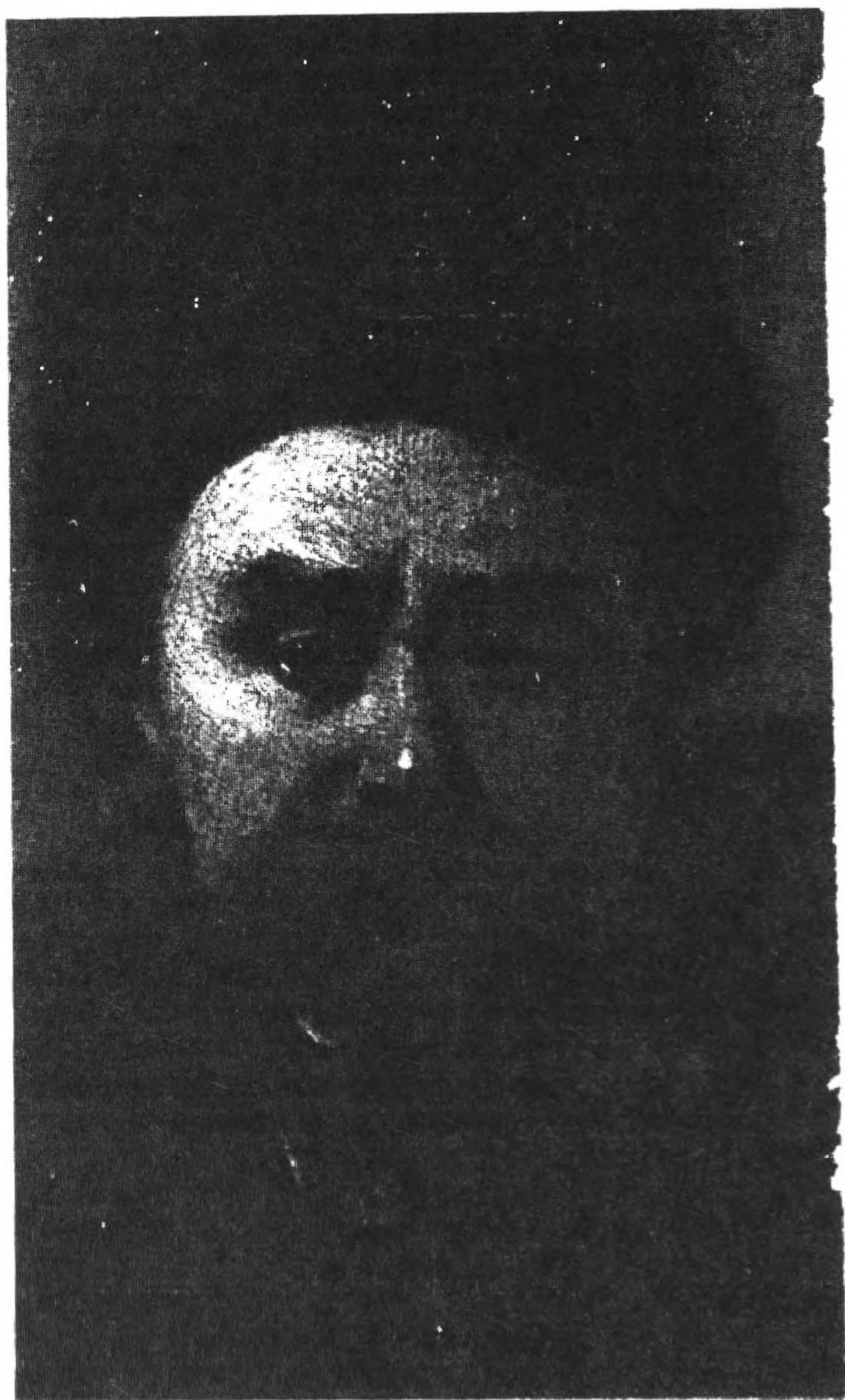


Figure 9: Self-portrait (1861)

a Hebrew prophet, and the religious poem *Mary*.

*You will be wrecked and perish, O Ukraine!  
No trace of you will tarry on the earth!  
Once you took pride in your prosperity  
And luxury! Dear land and innocent!  
Why does the Lord afflict you, why so harshly  
Lay punishment upon you?*

His old friends rallied around him and he became the toast of the St. Petersburg literary society. Occasionally he even participated in Russian social activity, when he signed a protest against anti-Semitism. As an artist he devoted himself with some success to engraving. He was still writing poetry and reflecting on his past life. Since his liberation from serfdom in 1838 he had spent only three years on extended visits to Ukraine. Three years in his homeland during 23 years of his creative life. One can, therefore, speak of him as an émigré poet living outside his native land. An American scholar, weighing the advantages and disadvantages of this, wrote that "the émigré writer's past life in the homeland, especially if it is distanced by time, somehow becomes predicated upon the past glory of his people; both of those times were happy times, and they were happy together. Even more characteristic are instances where the energies moving both of these temporal planes become fuelled by his imagination."

Shevchenko's place in literature was secure, but his disappointment with life was intense. Serfdom in Russia had not been abolished and his native land was still oppressed. The bond between him and his country was stronger than ever. In a short autobiographical note in 1860 Shevchenko characteristically wrote "the history of my life represents part of the history of my country." His heart was heavy, especially after the doctors told him that his heart and his liver were slowly giving out. He also had rheumatism and a touch of malaria. Old age did not come to him gracefully, on the contrary it sapped nearly all his energies. His apartment was cold and drafty and he was barely able to make himself a cup of tea. His poem, written a few days earlier, began:

*Should we not then cease, my comrade Muse,  
My dear neighbour, and make an end  
Of versifying useless rhymes?  
Shall we prepare a wagon for the time  
When we must travel that longest road?*

He was thinking of death when, on his birthday, Lazarevsky visited him. The poet was sitting, not lying, on his bed, and was short of breath. He asked Lazarevsky to write to Ukraine and seek help. Native air would be better for him than foggy St. Petersburg. Soon Doctor Bari came and diagnosed dropsy. The poet was now in intense pain and could only say "thank you" when telegrams came with best wishes from Kharkiv and Poltava. Then he dozed for a while. When he woke up he asked Lazarevsky if it were possible to travel to Ukraine, where he felt sure he would recover. Another physician, Dr. Krunevich, came and found the poet's lungs filling with water. The night was full of suffering, but the poet was still asking for some tea. At five o'clock in the morning he got up but after a few steps fell dead on the floor.

The morning came, calm and radiant. They laid out Taras's body on the bed. As was customary, a death mask was made of the poet's face. Everything was being prepared for a funeral. This was an end but also a beginning. No one was conscious of the moment's full gravity. A poet was dead and his work was now offered to posterity. He had built a myth of Ukraine that was to be passed on to "the living and the yet unborn," as he wrote. This myth was not an ideological or political construct, but was the outcome of his own being. He was not an intellectual preaching to the people. His message was implicit in the human material with which he was dealing. His own self, unknown even to himself, was revealed there. There were deep layers in it, which only decades later would be studied with new psychological tools. There was, of course, a great danger that his life and work would be misunderstood and simplified. That was unavoidable. Yet in his own life he did foster a link not so much with ideas as with his own people. Unwittingly perhaps he undertook the task of reviving their historical memory and their human dignity. He wrote that they "should love Ukraine in her dire time." These two — nation and humanity — always went together. Not just a free Ukraine, but the rule of God's law, *bratoliubie* (brotherly love) were his ideals. Man's dignity sprang from the equality of all souls in the sight of their Creator. Now it was up to those who were left to learn this central truth. If he was a prophet, then what was his prophecy?

Even before the funeral, Shevchenko's Ukrainian friends had gathered and decided to commemorate the poet by establishing a school for peasant children. This initiative was later blocked by the tsarist authorities. The friends also saw to it that the poet's personal possessions were preserved for posterity. They obviously thought of establishing a museum in his honour. The funeral was held on March

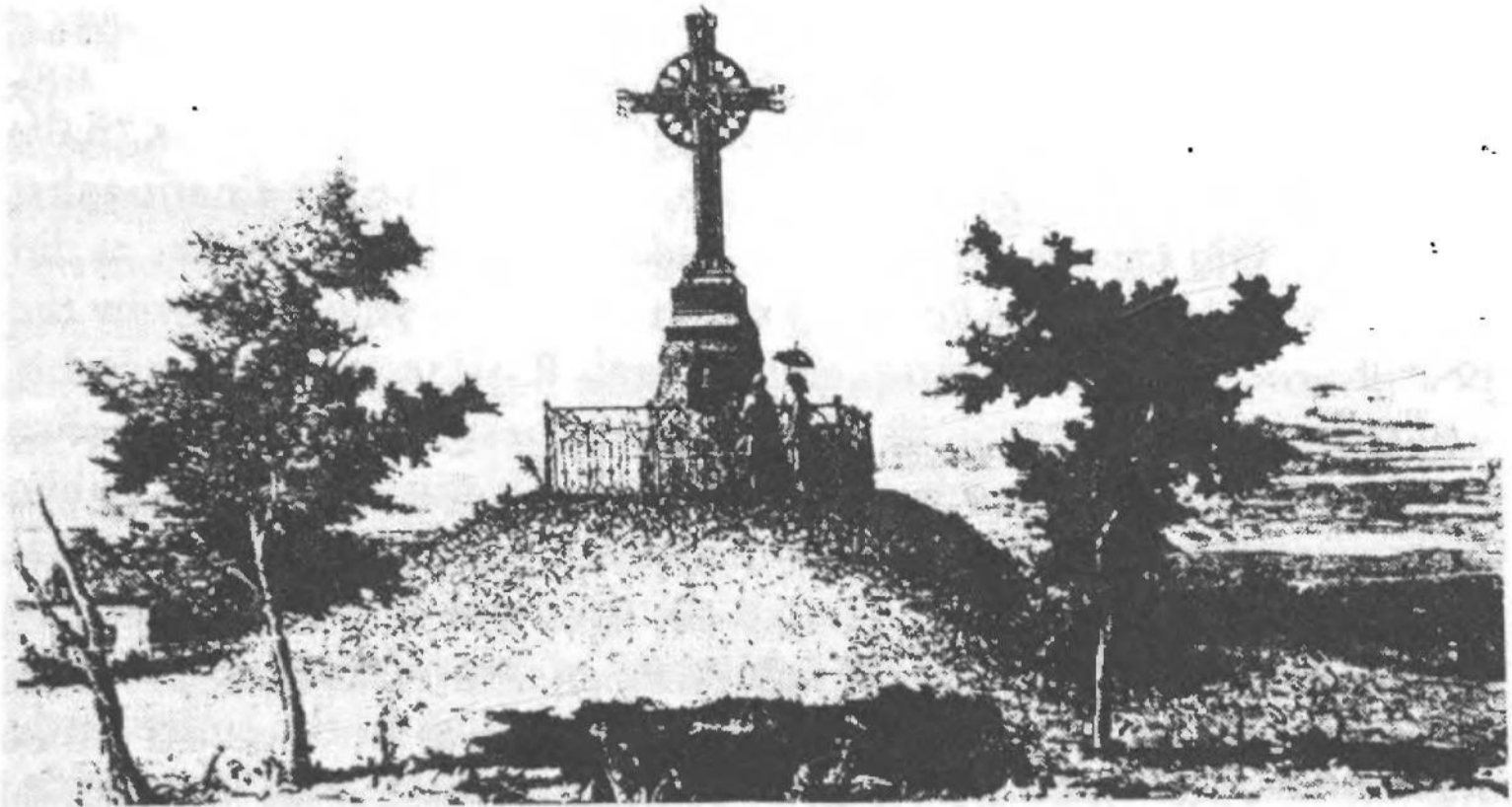


Figure 10: Shevchenko's grave

14 at the Smolensk cemetery in St. Petersburg. Present were the literary elite of Ukraine and Russia. Among them were Kostomarov, Kulish, Dostoevsky, Nekrasov, and Leskov. An eyewitness later recalled that the funeral was simple but impressive, free "from laurel wreaths and other theatrical paraphernalia." There were six eulogies. Perhaps the most eloquent was the one given by Kulish:

A poet such as Shevchenko is beloved not only by Ukrainians. Wherever he should have died in the immense Slavic world, whether in Serbia, in Bulgaria, or among the Czechs, he would have been at home. You were afraid, Taras, that you would die in a foreign place, among foreigners. This could not be! In the midst of your large family you went to your eternal resting place. No Ukrainian has had such a large family as you; no one ever received a farewell like yours. There have been great warriors in our native Ukraine; there have been great rulers. But you rise above them all and your family is the largest. For you, Taras, taught us that people were not made to be driven to their deaths, cities and villages were not made to be mere possessions; you taught us the sacred, life-giving truth.... Be confident, Taras, that we will observe your testament and will never turn from the path you indicated. Should we ever lack the strength to follow in your path, should it ever become impossible for us to proclaim the sacred truth without trepidation as you have done, then it would be far better for us to remain silent and allow your great words alone to speak the pure, unadulterated truth for all eternity.

An ardent admirer of Shevchenko, Kulish was also his first critic. Several years later he warned his compatriots against the poet's "half-drunken Muse," fearing that they would see in him only a nationalist firebrand. Old friends, Kostomarov and Bilozersky, also spoke, as did the representative of the Polish community. One Russian eulogy by the poet Kurochkin was heard, and several Russian writers, notably Leskov, left moving accounts of the funeral, testifying that the police had stopped further speeches at the cemetery. It was feared that public demonstrations might ensue. An obituary in Ukrainian journal *Osnova* in St. Petersburg compared the dead poet's role with that of Garibaldi. Herzen printed an obituary in his journal *Kolokol* in London, and Turgenev wrote about "the great loss to the entire Little Russian world." The echo of Shevchenko's death was very wide. Katerina Yunge, the daughter of Shevchenko's friend Count Fedor Tolstoy, was in Dresden at the time of the poet's death. At the requiem mass she remembered him and remarked that it was a bitter irony that he had not lived to hear the tsar's decree abolishing serfdom, which occurred a week after his death.

The dead poet's close Ukrainian friends soon made an effort to have the coffin moved to Ukraine, where Shevchenko wanted to "be buried near the roaring Dnieper." Permission to do this was obtained in May, and after resting for 58 days in St. Petersburg, the poet's remains were to be taken to Ukraine. Finally, the coffin was raised, covered, in Cossack fashion, with a piece of red cloth (*kytaika*) and moved along the city streets to the railway station. Two Ukrainians, Oleksander Lazarevsky and Hryhorii Chestakhivsky, guarded the coffin. On reaching Moscow, the coffin was taken to one of the main streets, Arbat, and placed for a while in a church. The coffin was taken from Moscow to Ukraine by horse-drawn carriage. It passed Orel and Tula and reached the Ukrainian border. From then on the cortege turned into a popular demonstration. Thousands of people lined up and said their farewells, and dozens of eulogies were spoken. There is a description of the arrival of the cortege in Brovary, on the outskirts of Kiev:

The coffin was covered with wreaths on the carriage, driven by a bearded coachman. The horses were walking with difficulty. One wreath had a ribbon with a woman's writing on it: Farewell, you dove-coloured eagle!

As soon as news of the approaching cortege reached Kiev, young people and students came to meet it. At first the police did not allow

the cortege to proceed through the streets, but later they relented. The coffin was placed at the Church of the Nativity, far from the centre of the city. The students unharnessed the horses and pulled the carriage themselves through streets full of people. At street corners they recited Shevchenko's poems. The police surrounded the church. The governor-general forbade any speeches. In the middle of the requiem mass a woman dressed in black placed a wreath of thorns on the poet's coffin, which caused a stir. The wreath was removed by the police. There was much discussion as to where the poet should be buried. Several suggestions were made all choosing a place on the banks of the Dnieper, which flows through the city. Yet finally Chestakhivsky prevailed. He said that Taras had told him that he wanted to rest at Kaniv on the Dnieper, not very far from Kiev. The coffin was transferred to a boat where Taras's brother and sister joined the procession. The chief of police at Kaniv ordered strict surveillance of the whole event. In Kaniv, the local church, to which the coffin was taken was full of peasants. Finally the place of burial was chosen on Chernecha Hora (The Monk's Mountain). Students dug the grave. A sea of humanity enveloped the scene. The grave was filled with earth, which was then piled up on top until it made a high gravemound — the Cossack *mohyla*.

The burial of the poet had led to a spontaneous veneration of him by all classes of the people. The custom established then was to remember Shevchenko on each anniversary of his death, which was the day after his birthday. This adulation, understandable as it was, gave rise to a veritable cult of the poet, which solidified the national emotion but undermined his true understanding by outsiders. The cult, however, has survived to this day. The care of Shevchenko's grave at Kaniv later became the task of the Ukrainian "Old Community" (*Stara Hromada*) in Kiev. The memoirs of a leading activist Yevhen Chykalenko lovingly describe the efforts "to erect an iron cross at the *mohyla*, which could be seen from the banks of the Dnieper for at least 20 kilometres." A separate house was built nearby for the caretaker of the grave, which came to serve as a small museum. "A large park was established on the slopes of the grave and stone steps were built leading up to the cross." Much later, in 1939, a large granite monument of the poet at Kaniv replaced the cross. However, Shevchenko's long journey was not finished. Was he ever to be greeted by his "new and free family"?

*Spring again, and once more hopes  
In the sad heart germinate.  
Once more am I lulled by dreams,  
Visions of a happier fate.*

Lesia Ukrainka

IN THE POPULAR KIEV WEEKLY *Literary Ukraine* for May 11, 1992, a notice appeared on its first page announcing a new joint venture between Ukraine and France. The aim was to make a new film about Shevchenko as a possible French-Ukrainian co-production. A well-known French film director, Jacques Durand, was coming soon for a short visit to Kiev to discuss the idea with his Ukrainian counterparts. He was to direct the film, while Ukrainian filmmaker Oksana Shepitko was to be his collaborator and the film's producer. Academician Makar Vovk was asked to be the academic consultant.

The brief announcement set Kiev's artistic community abuzz. Four weeks later, with unusual speed for that part of the world, a preliminary meeting took place in the Kiev film studios among the three people mentioned above. The host, Oksana Shepitko, introduced Makar Vovk to the French guest who, as a former communist, had learned Russian. The three talked in Russian, thus avoiding the necessity of a translator. Jacques Durand, now in his fifties, had been to Kiev before during the Soviet era. He loved the sprawling city, which reminded him a little of Paris. Durand had had some dealings with the Dovzhenko Film Studios, the pre-eminent Ukrainian filmmaking group named after Oleksander Dovzhenko, whose name was well known in France. The French critic Georges Sadoul called his movie *Earth* "one of the 12 best films of all time." Durand was now visiting an independent Ukraine and hoped to make a film about Taras Shevchenko, whose biography in English he had just finished reading. He would have to rely heavily on his Ukrainian colleagues. Oksana Shepitko, a striking-looking brunette, was one of Ukraine's most promising filmmakers. Her peasant origin did not prevent her from becoming a fine artist; on the contrary, it led her art to some native traditions. She knew, as she sat there in the studio, that she would have to

guide their French guest to the heart of the film's topic. But she was a little nervous when, after the introductions, she plunged into a discussion by asking Durand how much he knew about Shevchenko.

"I have just finished an English biography about him," answered Durand. "He had a fascinating life, just the kind to make a good film. But tell me, would it be true to say that through his poetry, some of which I have read in French translation, he actually created Ukraine?" Shepitko and Vovk were startled. What did he mean — "created"? Ukraine had existed long before Shevchenko. Makar Vovk, a bearded academician, felt that he should ask for clarification.

"What do you mean, monsieur, by asking if the poet had created this country?"

"Please call me Jacques, and I will call you Makar and Oksana if I may," replied Durand. "I meant: did his poetry lead to the independent Ukraine, which you now have?"

"Yes, of course," both Makar and Oksana were quick to agree. "Your question goes deeper than that," continued Makar. "Some scholars believe that Shevchenko is unique in world literature for having awakened the national consciousness of an entire people. The British historian Seton-Watson even wrote that 'all Ukrainian nationalism can be traced back to Shevchenko's poetry.' This may be true, but, unfortunately, such a one-sided interpretation of Shevchenko as a national prophet may obscure a great deal of his poetry, which is universal rather than national." Makar paused, he did not want to lecture Jacques on Shevchenko's poetry. In any case, he would be more concerned with the poet's life.

Oksana felt compelled to intervene since the word "nationalism" had been mentioned, and she knew that in Western Europe this word had recently, especially after the events in Yugoslavia, acquired a negative connotation. "It would be simplistic," she said agreeing with Makar, "to reduce Shevchenko to being a nationalist. Besides, although he never used the word *nationalism*, Shevchenko defended not only national but human rights. He never appealed to tribalism, this lowest form of nationalism. Perhaps to some Ukrainians he is a nationalist rabble-rouser, but this was not his true message, which he summed up best in the word *bratoliubie* (love of one's fellow man)." She also felt strongly that apart from patriotic poetry he had written some very good lyrical poems. She remembered one stanza in its Russian translation by Boris Pasternak and recited it for Jacques's benefit. It was a meditation on destiny:

*Where art Thou, Destiny, ah where?  
My soul is stirred by none!  
If Thou begrudgest me fair fate,  
Lord, send a ruthless one!*

"This is not to disregard his role," interjected Makar, "as a political factor. After all, the first Ukrainian political party, RUP (Revolutionary Ukrainian Party), was formed in 1900 out of a student group that called itself "Taras Brotherhood." Under the colonial policy of tsarist Russia he became the obvious flag-bearer for ordinary people and intelligentsia alike. Relatively few important poems by Shevchenko were published in his lifetime. Indeed, almost immediately after his death the prohibition of Ukrainian publications intensified. In 1863 the notorious "Valuev circular" even denied the existence of a Ukrainian language. Then, in 1876, the tsar signed the so-called *Ems ukaz*, which banned all Ukrainian publications in the Russian Empire, except for collections of ethnographic material. This draconian measure was in force until 1905. After delivering his brief lecture, Makar stopped, somewhat embarrassed that he had to stress facts so well known to every Ukrainian. "Yes, I have read about the tsarist oppression of Ukraine," agreed Jacques. "But what was Shevchenko's fate in the Soviet era? After all, they did not ban him."

Makar felt that a further lecture was in order. Perhaps this former French communist imagined some kind of liberation for the poet under the Soviet regime. He continued: "It is interesting to observe the behaviour of Soviet forces after they conquered Ukraine in 1919. At first the Red Army soldiers trampled Shevchenko's portraits and banned his works. But very soon the Soviets changed their tune, not wishing to antagonize the Ukrainian population. Shevchenko was returned to his place of honour, but new, Marxist interpretations of his work were advanced by the Communist Party. He was now regarded as a son of the working people, a rebel against tsarist oppression. In the 1920s some solid Shevchenko scholarship developed in Ukraine despite the watchful eye of the Party. But the 1930s saw the onset of Stalinist policies, which led to the wholesale decimation of scholars. Their deaths numbered in the hundreds. In 1934 the Communist Party published its 'Theses' on Taras Shevchenko, declaring him to be a 'revolutionary democrat,' and a realist. The poet was reduced to a mouthpiece of the 'enslaved peasantry,' who 'showed elements of narrow-mindedness and religious superstition.' Tacitly, this devout Christian was assumed to be a precursor of Bolshevism. At the same time books were published that fabricated evidence purporting

to show the beneficent influence on Shevchenko of Russian radical thinkers with whom he had little in common, and some discussed Shevchenko's 'atheism.' From that time on, until the collapse of the Soviet Union, this perverted view of Shevchenko prevailed in Soviet Ukraine. Only rarely did good scholarly works appear, and even then they were written sometimes by Russian scholars and writers, like Zaionchkovsky, who published a definitive study of the Brotherhood of Sts. Cyril and Methodius, and by Marietta Shaginian, who discovered the relationship between Shevchenko and Hanna Zakrevska. Soviet Ukrainian editors of Shevchenko's works did not hesitate to censor some of his poems that were unpalatable to them. Sometimes lines about God were omitted from his *Testament*." Makar stopped, feeling that he was being carried away by a subject so close to his heart.

Oksana listened silently. She felt that perhaps enough had been said during this, their first session. She suggested, therefore, that they move to another room where a small repast (*perekuska*) was being prepared for them. Jacques and Makar did not object. Soon they once more sat down, this time around a table full of canapés, with some wine glasses awaiting them. There was the inevitable smoked sturgeon pate, Ukrainian black bread, and Crimean wine. Time went by quickly in pleasant conversation about the city of Kiev, which Jacques was anxious to explore. He had recently seen an album of pictures of the 19th century streets of Kiev and was surprised to note that many shop signs were in French. Oksana promised to take him out to see how these streets looked now. She reminded him that a French firm, Pathe Brothers, opened the first shop in Kiev selling films in 1907.

Two days later a chauffeur-driven car from the film studio picked up Jacques Durand from the Intourist Hotel on Hospital Street and brought him to a café in the Podil district in Kiev. Oksana Shepitko was already waiting for him. With her were two Ukrainian writers, one of whom, Oleh Zymaruk, might possibly write the scenario for the film. Jacques offered Oleh a Gaulois. Oleh, who knew some French, asked if the name of the cigarettes was connected to the phrase *esprit gaulois* and was told that it was. The group of four settled in an uncrowded corner of the café. Refreshments and drinks were brought. Jacques promised to try some Ukrainian brandy — *horilka*.

Conversation soon centred on the film. Jacques asked if Shevchenko's poetry was still admired in Ukraine. Was he to view the poet as a 19th century bard or as a poet whose tradition had lived on? Oleh and his friend Roman both wanted to talk about it. Finally, Oleh said that many 20th century poets emulated Shevchenko.

"During the Second World War," Oleh said, "the eminent filmmaker Dovzhenko wrote a scenario *Ukraina v ohni* (Ukraine in Flames), which found its way into Stalin's hands. Stalin was so furious when he read it that the film was never made. The original scenario was inspired by Shevchenko's lines "they will wake in flames the plundered Ukraine." For writing the scenario Dovzhenko was confined to Moscow and not allowed to visit Ukraine. Then, in the early 1960s, a talented though minor poet, Vasyl Symonenko, gained prominence because his verse reminded readers of Shevchenko. Symonenko was soon silenced. In his unpublished diary he wrote that Shevchenko celebrations were banned in Odessa because "it seems that someone here is still afraid of Taras." Another Ukrainian poet, Vasyl Stus, who died in 1985 in a concentration camp, was also compared to Shevchenko. Shevchenko is omnipresent in Ukrainian life today.

Before Oksana could add something, Jacques asked a question: "Was there ever a Ukrainian writer who disagreed with or criticized Shevchenko?"

In reply he received a long answer from Roman: "The adulation of Shevchenko was not universal. Mykola Khvylovy, the leader of the national-communist group of writers in the 1920s, spoke through one of his characters in the novel *The Woodcocks*: 'I have nothing in common with Taras Shevchenko, who castrated our intelligentsia. He fostered the dim-witted slave-enlightener, whose name is legion.' An even harsher condemnation of Shevchenko had come earlier from the leader of the Ukrainian futurist poets, Mykhailo Semenko. He wrote: 'Man, I am embarrassed for you. Your *Kobzar* smells of wagon grease and lard, the atmosphere you created is suffocating.' However, this iconoclastic Semenko, who was attacking more the cult of Shevchenko than the poet himself, later gave the name *Kobzar* to one of his own collections of poems."

Sensing that Oksana wanted to say something, Jacques turned to her asking how Ukrainian biographers regarded the main crises in the poet's life.

She replied: "The field of biography in the Soviet era was dominated by a stilted and one-dimensional portrayal of his life. The poet's life story was almost never treated analytically. True, this story may still appear as an example of great will power, so much accepted in the 19th century but so much disparaged today after the teaching of Sigmund Freud. His image is that of a man *driving*, not *driven*. Neurosis, as it is often perceived today as the actual force behind creativity, cannot be detected. Instead some people try to see a little known relationship between the poet and the people."

Jacques was interested in everything she said, for it gave him a clearer picture of what he might do. They spent another hour talking about Shevchenko, and Oksana promised to have another meeting with Makar Vovk, who was anxious to provide Jacques with more scholarly details. She explained that in many Soviet films about the poet scholars had always watched for ideological purity and that this habit might still be alive, even if the poet's life was now being de-Sovietized. She thought it would be very refreshing to see Shevchenko as a human being rather than a "friend of the working people" or a "national bard." She was against all bardolatry. Jacques agreed with her.

After leaving the café the four decided to walk along the Podil streets. There were no shop signs in French, but those they saw were freshly decorated. They passed the impressive Mohyla Academy, which, Oleh explained, was the oldest Ukrainian university, dating back to the 17th century. It was now "under new management." He asked Jacques which buildings in Kiev he admired most and was told that they were St. Andrew's Church and the Mariinsky Palace.

"You have good taste," said Oleh. "Both were designed by the Italian architect Bartolomeo Rastrelli, who was born in Paris, and were built in the 18th century under the imperial Russian regime." Jacques asked Oksana what she was doing that night and, with some regret, she told him that she had tickets to a comedy by Mykola Kulish, in which a great deal depended on understanding the language. It would be incomprehensible to Jacques. But, she said, they must one day go together to a Ukrainian movie, which he could watch and possibly enjoy without knowing the language.

The next session in the studio was held on Tuesday. All three, Jacques, Oksana, and Makar, were delving further into the content and form of the planned movie. Jacques asked how much Taras should appear in it as the peasant that he, after all, was. Makar voiced a strong objection: "The image of Shevchenko as a peasant," he argued, "was encouraged in the 19th century. The Russians regarded him so. The first Ukrainian socialist, Mykhailo Drahomanov, argued that the poet was 'ill-educated and peasant-loving.' Nothing could be further from the truth. To be sure, Shevchenko's behaviour with some of his friends and his fondness, late in life, for being photographed wearing a peasant fur hat might have given such an impression. But undeniable also was his four-year-long education at the Academy of Fine Arts, his wide knowledge of European literature, art, and music, and his keen sense of world history. Shevchenko never turned his back on the peas-

antry, but he was not one of them. He is comparable to many Latin American writers, who came from the people but rose to be spokespersons for human rights."

Jacques continued to probe into the Ukrainian scholar's image of the poet. Makar, who was in an expansive mood, obliged by talking about his personal view of the poet and the way he might appear in the film. Makar, whose wife was a musician, was always aware of what he called the "musicality of the poet." This quality was found, first of all, in his poetry, which has frequently been set to musical scores. His verse, he argued, was supremely musical and this quality must be reflected somehow in the film. The poet loved to recite his verse and was a good singer. Makar got so excited about it that he quoted from memory some lines from Shevchenko's lyrical follower, the poet Pavlo Tychyna, who in 1918, during the Ukrainian revolution, wrote:

*Upon a starry morning, lay you down  
And place your ear upon the ground.  
They come,  
It seems they seek Kiev from the thorps and hamlets  
Down highways and bypaths they skirt the hills.  
To their hearts' pulse they beat the glad words out  
They come, they come!  
They come indeed!  
And all like wine are laughing:  
And all like wine are singing:  
I am a mighty people,  
I am young!  
Lo, I have listened to your golden sound  
And I have heard.*

"This," Makar claimed, "is how Shevchenko should be perceived — as a great lyrical poet. The populist image of the poet, which prevailed in the 19th century, is obsolete. Shevchenko is a modern man, sensitive to the music of the spheres."

Oksana was a little taken aback by this sudden poetic digression by a member of the academy. She returned to her earlier argument: "Shevchenko's self was formed by the moulding and remoulding of a reality outside him. It implies a bond with others, primarily his own nation. Yet one must not put a label on him — 'a peasant rebel' or a 'national poet.' One must perceive a real person. Even his 'political' poems are not the cogitations of an intellectual, but, rather, they articulate popular beliefs and aspirations." She pointed out the fact that

even the Soviets failed to divest Shevchenko of his authority among his people. Instead they tried to appropriate and reinterpret him according to their wishes. "Shevchenko," she concluded, "must appear in the film as both man and a poet. He compared himself to Robert Burns, and some scholars have likened him to William Blake." Jacques listened patiently. After all, he was here to learn. He asked about the women in Shevchenko's life. They would reflect, best of all, his humanity. Jacques had read about the "affairs" the poet had had with Princess Repnina and with Hanna Zakrevska. He also knew about his later, unsuccessful attempts to get married. What should he make of all this?

Makar pointed out that the poet was not in love with Repnina, who adored him, and that his relationship with Hanna Zakrevska was most likely platonic. This would show a certain restraint and self-discipline in a young man who was very susceptible to feminine beauty. He reminded Jacques that love affairs in the middle of the 19th century were carried on in a different style. Important, too, were Shevchenko's strong, close bonds with many male friends, without today's connotations.

Jacques listened to this and smiled. No, he was not interested in "modernizing" Shevchenko's life to that extent. Makar tried to focus interest on two of Shevchenko's important friends — Kulish and Kostomarov. Both, especially Kulish, might be used in the film as foils to Shevchenko. Incidentally, it was not Shevchenko's prophecy about a free Ukraine that came true: the country was not liberated after a bloody revolution with "the sprinkling of foemen's blood." Kulish's prophecy, on the other hand, was fulfilled: the walls of Jericho came tumbling down.

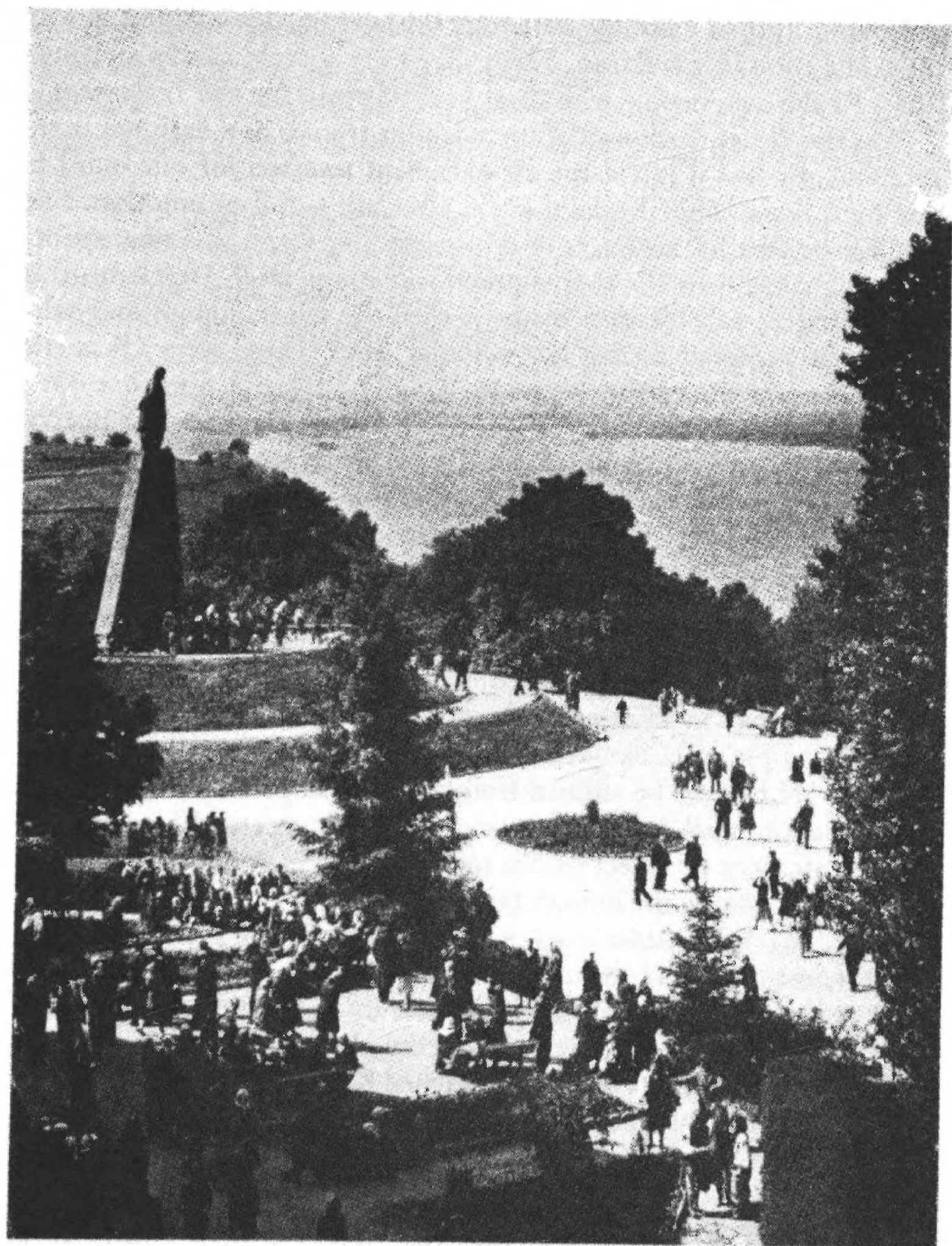
What he would aim for, said Jacques, was to re-create the spirit of the 19th century but also the intense human drama of Shevchenko's life, which transcends time. He was quite fascinated by the life story itself and, on the screen, would let it speak for itself. And he was very grateful to Makar and Oksana for their help. He also expressed a desire to visit some of the places in Kiev where Shevchenko had lived.

At 11 o'clock on May 22, the trio met to visit Shevchenko's Kiev. It was Friday, an ordinary working day for those who were still working. The streets were crowded and the place had a very different look than it had had in 1846 when Shevchenko described it as a "city of golden domes crowned with orchards and poplar trees." The golden domes and poplars were still there but no orchards. They started their tour at *Kozine boloto* (The Goat's Mud) in the downtown area, where in 1846 Shevchenko had shared quarters with Mykhailo Sazhyn. The house,

now at No.8a, Shevchenko Lane, was still standing. It had been converted into a museum where they could see the poet's clothes, his paint-brushes and pencils, as well as some old furniture. On the walls were reproductions of his sketches of Kiev. Makar explained that one of the sketches was of the Vydubysky Monastery, where Shevchenko had taken his friends for walks. The monastery was abolished on orders of the Soviet authorities in 1937.

From there they walked to the corner of Khreshchatyk and Bessarabka, where Shevchenko had lived in the house of the architect Beretti. The house was no longer there, but the house opposite, where Mykola Kostomarov lived with his mother, was still standing. Shevchenko and Kostomarov often met there. As Makar explained it was there that Kostomarov wrote his first impressions of Shevchenko's poetry: "it tore the curtain of life." Khreshchatyk, Kiev's Champs Elysée, was teeming with people. Even during working hours, but more so in the evening, this street was a favourite place for what Kievans called "strolling" (*huliannia*). Now the three Shevchenko devotees were proceeding along Khreshchatyk in the direction of Shevchenko Boulevard. It was famous for the chestnuts blossoming in May. Oksana observed that, unfortunately, chestnut blossoms have no fragrance.

They were well along the wide boulevard when they suddenly saw a large group of young people, probably students, marching along, carrying a portrait of Shevchenko. They were heading towards the corner of Shevchenko Boulevard and Volodymyrska Street, past the Hotel Ukraina. Something was going on. At that moment Makar remembered that it was May 22, the anniversary of the funeral of Shevchenko in Kaniv, a day celebrated by many people. Oksana recalled that on a similar occasion in 1964, when she was a teenager, police had dispersed the young demonstrators on the very spot where, in front of the Shevchenko monument across from the university, they were gathering for their celebration. She said that at that time a Canadian scholar was visiting her father in Kiev, saw the police action, and two days later, on May 24, witnessed a fire, allegedly set by the KGB, at the Library of the Academy of Sciences, which adjoins the university. The Canadian later reported it to the *New York Times*. On this particular day the three looked on as the demonstrators, unhampered, strode up the street. More people were joining them. Oksana could read some of the placards they carried. One was a quotation from Shevchenko: Then shall our day of hope arrive / Ukrainian glory will revive. These lines, written almost a century and a half ago, now had a new meaning. Taras's monument was covered with flowers. No one interfered with



**Figure 11: Shevchenko Monument at Kaniv (1939)**

this outpouring of emotion. Although this was not a revolution, it was the celebration of a collapse. There were fiery speeches and proclamations. At the end, people with tears in their eyes sang the *Testament*.

Was this extreme emotionalism a demonstration of a national characteristic, or was it just a special sentiment reserved for one man? It was hard to say. Shevchenko's work, after all, is full of emotion. But could it be that his message, in that particular form, was now spent, that an independent Ukraine required something else? After centuries of deprivation was Ukraine ready to shed the self-contempt and submission it acquired during her colonial past? These were Oksana's thoughts as the three were swept into a public euphoria. Someone once wrote, she remembered, that "the greatest test of Shevchenko's poetry will come if and when Ukraine becomes a sovereign nation." Will his image still be as vibrant once foreign domination has ended?

Even Jacques was affected by this outpouring of emotion. He asked Oksana and Makar if this scene they had just witnessed would be shown on TV that night and they said it would.

Makar was in a mood to offer more comment on the demonstration and its relevance to the present moment. He hoped that in the age that had just dawned in Ukraine the human aspects of Shevchenko would speak to people more eloquently than the old mythic image. Even this myth would have to be studied from a fresh perspective. To read him now is not so much to relive the struggle for justice and liberty as to find the strength to reflect on the meaning of life. And not just life in Ukraine but among the human family.

Soon, the first exploratory visit of Jacques Durand in Ukraine would come to an end. Before he left he wanted to visit Shevchenko's grave at Kaniv. It would offer an opportunity to see more of the country. The three friends, for by now they could be called that, took a boat on the Dnieper and in a few hours reached Kaniv. On the way they saw much industrial waste as well as some lovely scenery. Slowly, Jacques, Oksana, and Makar climbed the rather steep incline of the Shevchenko Monument. A group of visitors to Shevchenko's grave stood around a *kobzar*, who was sitting down, playing a *bandura*. The day was grey and the mood of the people was sombre but not unhappy. They had come here from all over Ukraine and from abroad. From the steps to the monument they could see the mighty Dnieper and the neighbouring green hills. A light breeze stirred the tops of the poplars. The sky was overcast. The place had a certain aura of its own.

Oksana was fighting back tears. Jacques, too, was deep in thought. Ukrainians, he realized, felt passionately about their poet. If he ever made the film, he would have to put some distance between them and

the poet, which all good art should do. Then, almost unexpectedly, all those who gathered there heard the soft music of the *bandura*. After a few chords the faint but clear voice of the *kobzar* could be heard. He was chanting a *duma* about the lament of a cuckoo, which was cooing:

O Cossack head, O young warrior's head,  
You journeyed in foreign lands,  
You rode fine horses,  
But now you need neither fine clothes  
Nor raven-black horses  
All you need is salvation from heaven!  
Oh, the Cossack is dead!  
But the Cossack's glory will never die nor perish,  
From today on forever.

The people gathered around the *kobzar* felt revived by his singing. They knew that their country was in deep crisis, but they were free to grapple with it. Their poet had brought them here. Shevchenko's fourth and last journey was finally over.

