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Greatness ?

OF

Taras Shevchenko

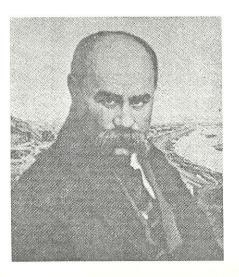
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World literature has some great names which have become symbols of the nations to which they belong. Thus, Shakespeare is generally recognized as a majestic achievement of England, Dante represents the biblical wisdom of Italy, while Goethe is a synonym of the constantly investigating spirit of Germany. In the Slavic world, Mickiewicz and Pushkin are glorified among the Poles and Russians respectively.

However, none of these five giants of world culture had exerted such an influence on the development of his respective nation as did Taras Shevchenko (1814-1861), the great Ukrainian poet laureate and national hero. Son of simple enslaved people, he rose from obscurity to the heights of world literature and became an ardent defender of human rights, "a prince in the realm of spirit," "a Great Power in the commonwealth of human culture." Shevchenko's inspired poems aroused Ukraine "lulled to sleep by the enemies," as he said, showed her the glorious past of her sons, drew attention to the terrible nineteenth-century serfdom and predicted for her a great free future. Thus, Shevchenko began the formation of the modern Ukrainian nation. His work was carried on and completed by Ivan Franko, Michael Hrushevsky and others.

To understand the greatness of Taras Shevchenko and his significance for the Ukrainian nation, one must understand the epoch which preceded the poet's appearance. As early as 1709, after the unhappy battle at Poltava, the comparatively independent Ukraine (it had been completely independent under Hetman Bohdan Khmelnytsky) lost her importance as a state. Tsar Peter I, actually the Russian invader, forbade publication of Ukrainian books in 1720. Little by little Ukraine declined politically during the eighteenth century. The Zaporozhian Kozaks' order of Sitch, the only defender of the country, was treacherously uprooted by the Russians in 1775, and the autonomy of Ukraine was completely destroyed a few years later. Almost all the East Ukrainian territories gradually became the province of the Russian Empire while the West Ukrainian lands fell under the Austrian-Polish rule. The Ukrainian gentry, enticed with privileges, became either Russianized or Polonized and subsequently left their people without any social and cultural guidance. At the beginning of the nineteenth century, the concept of Ukrainian nationality had almost disappeared, and Ukraine, forcibly divided between Austria and Russia, vanished from the political arena, as well as from geographical maps of the world.

Moreover, the serfdom, introduced by the Russian Empress Catherine II in the previously free Ukraine turned the freedom-loving Ukrainians into nameless serfs, downtrodden and illiterate "Ivans without kith and kin." No wonder that Shevchenko himself was born a son of a serf. Fortunately, his talent as a painter helped him to gain freedom in his twenty-fifth year.

What did represent the Ukrainian literature before Shevchenko's time? The works of the sixteenth-seventeenth centuries written mainly in the bookish Church Slavic language, with a slight Ukrainian colouring at times, were incomprehensible and practically inaccessible to the nineteenth-century readers. Moreover, the policy of Russification had swallowed the best Ukrainian writers, such as Teofan Prokopovych (1681-1736) and Stefan Yavorsky (1655-1722). It had partly absorbed even the Ukrainian philosopher Hryhoriy Skovoroda (1722-1794). Modern Ukrainian literature in the spoken and generally understandable language made its first feeble steps only at the end of the eighteenth century. Ivan Kotlyarevsky (1769-1839), Hryhoriy Kvitka-Osnovyanenko (1778-1843), Markian Shashkevych (1811-1843) and a handful of other poets and writers were among the first to make the initial efforts to create it. Since Ukrainian had been spoken almost exclusively by villagers, it was regarded

as a laughing-stock because of its so-called stinted development. In fact, the majority of Ukrainian elite did not use it, preferring either Russian or Polish, the tongues of the ruling landlords.

In this tragic time for the declining Ukraine, Shevchenko appeared and proclaimed as early as 1838:

Have your love, you black haired maidens, But avoid the Moskals (Russians—Y.S.), For the Moskals—they are strangers, And they treat you foully . . . For the Moskals—they are strangers, And they always mock you.²

His poem "Kateryna" from which we quote was not only a story of an honest Ukrainian girl, seduced and abandoned by a Russian officer, but a symbol of a Ukraine defrauded by Russia.

In another of his poems, Shevchenko pictured the Russians' behaviour in the occupied Ukraine:

Cruel Russians rob and pillage What their eyes can notice; There are even opened graveyards In the search for money.³

As a result of the Russian tsarist takeover of Ukraine, the robbed and enslaved Ukrainians, descendants of the freedom-loving Zaporozhian Kozaks,

Move up to work; they're dumb and mute; Their children follow them afoot.

Shevchenko does not have a problem in finding the cause of that evil and the Ukraine's tragedy. He fully understands it and, thus, proclaims that the gradual decline of Ukraine originates in the Russian tsarist policy, which has brought serfdom. To destroy it, the poet turns his creative power toward the glorious past of Ukraine as to a bright milestone:

At one time in Ukraina Cannons roared like thunder; At one time the Zaporozhtsi Knew the path to power. So they ruled and they acquired Glory, yes, and freedom . . .4

In other words, for the oppressed Ukrainians the only solution is liberation, regaining of freedom. Shevchenko, therefore, openly calls for an uprising:

Rise and break your chain! Water liberty with blood-drops Of the foeman slain! ("My Last Will").5

The poet directs his appeal for an uprising not only to Ukrainians. The Caucasian peoples, who fight the advancing Russian armies of imperialist Russia, appear to him as brothers, "crusaders for holy freedom." Shevchenko addresses them in his poem "The Caucasus":

Keep fighting—you are bound to win! God helps you in your fight! For fame and freedom march with you. And right is on your side.⁶

Without any doubt, the poet deeply believes in the final result of an uprising—in victory:

Ukraina will arise,
Drive away the dark of prison,
Make verity gayer,
And the captive rebels risen
Will rejoice in prayer.

These lines, as well as "The Caucasus" and "My Last Will," were written in 1845 when the secret political organization, the Brotherhood of Cyril and Methodius, existed in Kyiv. It advocated the abolition of serfdom and the liberation of Ukraine and other Slavic countries from foreign yoke. Soon the poet became closely associated with this organization, the members of which highly praised his poems and regarded him as a national prophet of Ukraine.

It was quite obvious for the tsarist government of imperialist Russia that Shevchenko became a spiritual leader of the downtrodden Ukraine, which strove for freedom and independence. When the poet arrived in Kyiv from Petersburg, after his successful graduation from the Academy of Arts, he was hastily arrested by the gendarmes and brought back to the Russian capital for interrogation. After the hearing, at which he behaved manfully, he was deported without trial to the special Orenburg corps in Asia to be kept under harsh discipline. The Russian tsar Nicholas I wrote the following words on the document bearing the sentence: "Under the strictest surveillance, with prohibition to write and to paint." The poet spoke of this: "I am punished and I suffer, but I don't repent!" Motifs of liberation never leave his mind thereafter.

Thus, Shevchenko for the first time in Ukrainian literature raised his powerful voice calling for an uprising and liberation from Russia's yoke. He laid a foundation for Ukraine's independence when he proclaimed:

In your home, you'll find your justice And your strength and freedom.8

Obviously, the signal greatness of Taras Shevchenko lies in the fact that his name became a symbol of Ukraine's struggle for freedom and independence from Russia. To a great extent, he was, and is, a champion of justice and liberty for all men of earth.

We have many authentic evidences concerning Shevchenko's views of his native country. Jakub Jatowt, a Polish revolutionist in exile, met the Ukrainian poet in 1850:

I spoke to Shevchenko on various topics for a long time. He did not like the Poles (Polish landlords who took over Ukrainian lands—Y.S.) and could not bear the Russians. An independent Ukraine was the goal of his dreams, a revolution was his aspiration.

Shevchenko himself very often spoke of Ukraine as a country distinctly different from Russia. After the severe and unjust attacks of V. Belinsky, a Russian chauvinistic scholar, who blamed the poet for the only "sin," that of writing in Ukrainian (!), Shevchenko advised his literary friends:

Do not pay attention to Russians. Let them write in their own language, and we shall use ours. They are a nation with their literature, and we, too, are a nation with our own literature... Brothers! Do not despair, but pray to God and work purposefully for the glory of Ukraine, our hapless (enslaved by Russians—Y.S.) mother.¹⁰

To be sure, these words taken from the preface, written in 1847 for the subsequent edition of the Kobzar (first published in 1840), became known to readers as late as 1906, because the Russian censors, appointed by the tsarist government, had been constantly deleting them.

Having discussed Shevchenko's political and social importance for Ukraine, let us turn to his literary and artistic achievements. Shevchenko was one of the foremost men of that time, highly self-educated, a graduate of the Academy of Arts in Petersburg. He received several silver medals for his paintings. He was acquainted with many masterpieces of West European literature. On the basis of the poet's correspondence and diary, we know that he read at least the following writers, many of them in the original (particularly, the French writers): Homer, whose songs he compared to Ukrainian epics, or dumy, Herodotus, Plutarch, Virgil, Horace, Ovid, Dante, Petrarch, Boccaccio, Ariosto, Tass, Chateaubriand, Béranger, Barbier, Dumas (père), Balzac, Eugene Sue, Voltaire and other Encyclopedists, Shakespeare, Defoe, Richardson, Goldsmith, Burns, Byron,

Walter Scott, Dickens, Goethe, Schiller, Koerner, Kotzebue. He knew Russian and Polish literatures. He did not know English, and read Shakespeare's plays in Russian and Polish translations.¹¹ It has been proved now that Shevchenko disclosed some influence of Shakespeare, Chateaubriand, and especially of Mickiewicz. Nevertheless, the ideas of the Polish poet were developed by Shevchenko "broadly and boldly, excelling that of the author 'Dziady'."¹²

Depicting the horror of Ukrainian reality under Russian serfdom, Shevchenko made a striking reference to Dante's Inferno:

My beautiful country, rich and opulent!
Who has not ravaged thee? If one were to recount
The true history of any
One of our gentry, one could horrify
Hell itself. And old Dante
Would be amazed at a petty landowner of ours. 13

We should point out also some similarities between Shevchenko and Robert Burns, though the Ukrainian poet "had larger influence" ¹⁴ upon the Ukrainian liberation movement than the Scotlish poet in his Scotland. In every respect Shevchenko was a greater poet than Burns. ¹⁵

The west European influence on the Ukrainian poet should not be exaggerated. Shevchenko remained a poet of unique originality. Because of this, he raised Ukrainian literature to a level of world significance. At the same time, he was one of the first authors who began to depict simple men, villagers, revealing their great human qualities.

Great variety of themes in Shevchenko's works was an unusual phenomenon in the Ukrainian literature of that time. First of all, the poet writes on Ukrainian life, pouring out his heart to express his attitude to it. As we have already pointed out, his long narrative poem "Kateryna" symbolizes Ukraine deceived by Russia. His epic masterpiece Haydamaky reflects the uprisings of the eighteenth-century Ukrainians against the ruthless Polish landowners in Ukraine, while his "Ivan Pidkova," "Hamaliya," "Irzhavets" and many others depict the heroic deeds of Zaporozhian Kozaks. In many meditative poems he arouses patriotic sentiments, as well as national pathos. He dedicates a great number of poems to the precarious conditions of the life of serfs and peasants.

At this point we should concentrate our attention on one of Shevchenko's most famous poems, The Great Grave, in which the poet symbolically pictures the history of Ukraine. Three souls represent three tragic periods of Ukrainian history. One had aided Hetman Bohdan Khmelnytsky in the unification of Ukraine with Moscovy, the second did not aid Hetman Ivan Mazepa in his war against Moscovy, and the third had participated in the destruction of the Kozaks' order of the Sitch. These three souls are followed by three crows symbolizing the Ukrainian, the Pole, and the Russian who express their views on their respective countries. Then three wandering folk singers give different opinions about the excavation of the grave. Finally, the poet depicts the disentombed "Bohdan's bones". However, Moscovy has not succeeded in finding the great grave in which presumably the independence of Ukraine is buried. This mysterious poem serves as Shevchenko's bitter protest against the devastation of Ukraine by Russia, whom he regards as the chief enemy of the Ukrainian people.

The poet, however, is not restricted to the Ukrainian themes only. He glorifies the restive nations of the Caucasus for their resistance to the Russian invading troops ("The Caucasus"), praises Jan Hus, the great Czech humanist ("Heretic"), sarcastically condemns the Russian monarchs Peter I, Catherine II and Nicholas I with their despotic system of government (comedy "A Dream"), denounces Russian serfdom (in many poems) and develops biblical themes ("The Prayer," "David's Psalms," long narrative poem "Mary"). He has even a narrative poem "Neophytes" on the life on ancient Rome and the early Christians. In it, Nero resembles the Russian tsar. Some eighty of his lyrical poems and ballads are set to music, mostly by the great Ukrainian composer Mykola Lysenko, and sung everywhere in Ukraine as folk-songs. 16

Shevchenko proved to be a great master of prosody; he could write in various manners with delicacy of expression. On the one hand he casts fiery invectives ("The Caucasus")) while on the other hand he presents tender lyrical pictures of village life, as in "A Spring Evening of Ukraine":

Close by the house the cherries flower, Above the orchard the beetles hum, Still singing, the girls homeward come, The tired plowmen's steps grow slower, And dames with supper wait at home. Close by the house they eat their supper; Just then the evening-star appears; As daughter serves, and mother fears That she may serve in ways improper, The nightingale's song stuns their ears. Close to the wall on the clay-benches The mother lulls her Nell and Bill, And falls asleep against her will. All fall asleep . . . But the sweet wenches And nightingales are singing still.¹⁷

One has to admit that the mastery of Shevchenko's eloquence is amazing. The Ukrainian poet posesses the power of aphoristic expression, the depth of feeling and thoughts. Particular attention to the musical side of verse is one of Shevchenko's unique poetic characteristics. For example, he frequently makes use of alliteration, especially that with the letter "L":

BuLo koLys' v Ukrayini —
ReviLy harmaty;
BuLo koLys' — zaporezhtsi
VmiLy panuvaty.
PanuvaLy, dobuvaLy
I sLavu, i voLyu —
MynuLosya; ostaLysya
MohyLy po poLyu.
(For translation, see "At one time in Ukrayina" above.)

Each line of this fragment has one or two letters "L" that give the verses a mellifluous fluency of expression. Shevchenko's eloquence proves that he precedes the French symbolists, great masters of music in verses, by many years. One might assume that the latter could have proclaimed Shevchenko their teacher, if they had known of the existence of his melodious verse.

Among Shevchenko's epithets we find strikingly original such innovations as : nebo nevmyte (the sky is "unwashed"), zaspani khvyli ("sleepy" or "drowsy" waves).

The Ukrainian poet's metaphors are very imaginative. The Dnieper River, "our strong grandfather roared with laughter—and the foam streamed down his moustache." High art of Shevchenko's poetry, as well as national ideas of liberation and their significance in the struggle for justice and freedom for all men made the Ukrainian literature "an issue of international importance." 18

The greatness of Shevchenko is well illustrated also by the fact that he, indeed, was the father of almost all styles in modern Ukrainian literature. Fundamentally a romanticist, he moved in the direction of realism in his later works; his "The Great Grave" is written in symbolistic manner; in some cases he was also an extreme modernist. He has such metaphors as a first-rate modernist of our time would easily accept: "Heart, close your eyes!"

Great merit should be attributed to Shevchenko for his development of the Ukrainian literary language. He took the spoken tongue ignored by the enemies of Ukraine, mastered and polished it, as if a precious stone, and returned it to his readers—to enchant their ears. Shevchenko's language, capable of creating refined emotions, should be compared to enchanting music. No wonder that Ivan Franko, another great Ukrainian poet, advised his fellow writers to learn Ukrainian from Shevchenko's works.

As a painter, Shevchenko opened a new realistic period in Ukrainian arts. Some of his pictures have historical themes which reflect the Kozak period of Ukraine, but most of them deal with the village life. Depicting simple men with great love, he led the "academic art of painting to the new roads . . . making it peculiarly Ukrainian." ¹⁹

Finally, we should mention that Shevchenko ardently promoted the need of education for common men. Soon after his return from exile where he spent over ten years, he published his **Primer** in Ukrainian and distributed free copies through his country among the illiterate children.

Shevchenko's influence on modern Ukrainian literature has been tremendous. One of his first disciples, Marko Vovchok; whom the poet called his "daughter," depicted the life of serfs and their landlords and, thus, became "a bitter scourge of all the greedy and ruthless men." I van Franko, second greatest Ukrainian poet, developed Shevchenko's ideas of liberation in his new environment; he strove to unite all Ukrainians into a single independent state. Almost every Ukrainian writer of the last one hundred years experienced Shevchenko's impact one way or the other.

The works of Shevchenko have also influenced the writers of other Slavic nations. Nicholas Chernyshevsky and Nicholas Dobrolubov, the Russian revolutionary democrats, employed Shevchenko's ideas of liberation in their struggle against the tsarist autocratic system of government. The revolutionary democrats published his **Kobzar** in the Russian translation and spread it as a kind of agitation against serfdom.²¹ Thus, Shevchenko's poems exerted a great influence also on Russian public opinion and precipitated the issue of the so-called **krestyanskaya reforma** in 1861. We have enough grounds to compare Shevchenko with Abraham Lincoln who emancipated American Negroes. One has to bear in mind that the Ukrainian poet's anti-slavery works were written five to ten years prior to the novel **Uncle Tom's Cabin** (1852) by Harriet Beecher Stowe.

Under the Turkish yoke, the Bulgarian liberation movement which culminated in the establishment of an independent state in 1878 extensively employed Shevchenko's fiery poems either in Bulgarian translations or in adaptations. K. R. Zhinzifov borrowed not only the Ukrainian poet's motifs, but also the unique form of his verses.²² As N. T. Balabanov pointed out, Luben Karavelov considered Shevchenko "his first and almost only teacher, especially in poetics." Out of Karavelov's 191 poems, at least 133 are written in the metres peculiar to Shevchenko.²³ In 1939, at the observance of the 125th year since Shevchenko's birth, fourteen Bulgarian writers wrote in their letter to the Ukrainian writers in Kyiv:

Shevchenko's influence on the Bulgarian literature was . . . so important that one cannot imagine certain of our distinguished poets and writers without it, for example Luben Karavelov, Khristo Botev, and others. A part of the enthusiasm, which flamed in Shevchenko's poetry, passed into the blood and body of the Bulgarian nation at the time of its national liberation struggles.²⁴

Shevchenko exercised even greater influence on the poets Yanka Kupala and Yakub Kolas, the fathers of the modern White-Ruthenian literature. It should be mentioned that Maksim Gorky, a well known Russian writer, speaking of the poets who "embody a spirit of their respective nations" named Shev-

chenko first, with A. Pushkin and A. Mickiewicz following.²⁵ Apollon Grigoryev, another Russian critic, called Shevchenko "the first great poet of a great new Slavonic literature,"²⁶ and ranked him "as a poet above Pushkin."²⁷

Shevchenko is beloved not only in his native Ukraine but far beyond her borders. His works are as vital as they were over one hundred years ago. Many of his aphoristic expressions may be applied to the present Soviet life. "From Moldavia to Finland all tongues are muted," because there is no freedom under the Soviet regime. The Ukrainian farmers, forcibly pressed into the collective or state farms, "move up to work; they're dumb and mute," as it was at the time of the unhuman Russian serfdom brought to Ukraine. Deported to the concentration camps in Siberia, to the camps of death, the patriots of Ukraine died "in the foreign land, in alien labour," as was the case under the tsarist regime. The Ukrainian "unbaptized Kozak children" grow up without religious education because the communists do not allow them to attend church. In brief, as Shevchenko expressed it in his time,

Ukraina is plunged in sadness . . . There is no one who can save her And the Kozaks perish;
Lost is the glory and the country;
Nowhere it is sheltered.²⁸

Because in Ukraine "nowhere it is sheltered," the Ukrainians are to be found now in every corner of the world, including Canada and the U.S. where they enjoy full freedom and a life of prosperity.

In Ukraine under the Soviet regime, the Communists falsify Shevchenko's works. Many editions of the **Kobzar**, especially pocket editions, lack such poems as "Subotiv," "The Opened Grave," "The Great Grave," "Chyhyryn," and others, in which the tragedy of Ukraine and the condemnation of Russia are clearly revealed. This falsification may be traced even in the Soviet publications of Shevchenko's works. Under Stalin, all the editions of the **Kobzar**, including the so-called "academic editions," had the passage in the poem "Chyhyryn" which reads as follows:

For what we harrowed with our lances The Tatar's ribs.²⁹

The 1956 edition, with Maksym Rylsky's introduction, shows the same lines differently:

For what we harrowed with our lances The Russians' ribs?³⁰

Thus, the Ukrainians utilized the difficulties of the Kremlin, caused by Khrushchev's struggles for power, and published in 1956, perhaps for the first time under the Soviet regime, the true original texts of Shevchenko's poems. The interpretation of the poet's works, however, has been constantly falsified; Shevchenko is shown as a friend of Moscow, although it is evident from his works that he hated Russia, the prison of nations, with all his heart.

The Ukrainians, either in Ukraine or abroad, solemnly commemorate Shevchenko on the centennial of his death. Every Ukrainian family has Shevchenko's Kobzar—at least in a pocket edition. Every Ukrainian family has his portrait, often next to the icon. Shevchenko's poems are read again and again, as a source of inspiration, by both the adults and youngsters. The poet's tomb on the hill near the Dnieper River is visited and revisited like Mecca by Moslems. Many streets and towns, schools and institutions have been named after Shevchenko, including the Shevchenko Scientific Society in New York. Shevchenko monuments have been erected in many Ukrainian cities, towns and villages. Among the recent ones, the Shevchenko monument in Winnipeg, Manitoba, unveiled in July, 1961, is considered as one of the best.

Major works of the Ukrainian poet have been, and are being, translated into many languages. For example, his "The Testament" has been rendered into forty-five tongues.³¹ There exist at least four English editions of Shevchenko's poems by the following translators: E. L. Voynich (1911), Alexander Jardine Hunter (1923), Clarence A. Manning (1945), and Vera Rich (1961). Separate Shevchenko poems have been translated also by Honore Ewach, Waldimir Semenyna, Percy Paul Selver, Sunray Gardiner, Helen Lubach Piznak,

Morse Manly, Yar Slavutych, and others.

Probably the first English-language account on Shevchenko was presented by Charles Dickens who published in 1877 a biography of the Ukrainian poet and found inspiration in his poems. He pointed out that "some of Taras's saddest poems... would apply almost word for word to our land." Among the best English-language critical studies of Shevchenko's life and works are: D. Doroshenko's Taras Shevchenko: The National Poet of Ukraine, Winnipeg. 1936: Clarence A Manning's explanatory notes to his translation of Shevchenko's Selected Poems, Jersey City, 1945; Europe's Freedom Fighter: Taras Shevchenko, Washington: House of Representatives Document No. 445, 1960; and W. K. Matthew's Taras Shevchenko: The Man and Symbol, Winnipeg: UVAN, 1961 (second edition).



FOOTNOTES

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