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Is Shevchenko a Symbol of Universal Freedom?

[There has recently been a great deal of controversy in the American press concerning the merits of erecting a monument to Taras Shevchenko in Washington, D.C. Because few of the disputants pretend to any knowledge of the literary qualities of this Ukrainian poet, we have asked Professor Luckyj to clarify this important point.]

THE ANSWER must be a qualified "yes." Qualified not so much because of any ambivalence in the poet's attitude to freedom, but because his critics, interpreters, and promoters have distorted his image. To them Taras Shevchenko appeared and still appears today not as a poet, but as the national hero of the Ukraine, the prophet of Ukrainian political destiny, and the founder of modern Ukrainian literature. It is, curiously enough, the scholars who, for the last century, have been trying to reduce Shevchenko to a "national poet" to whom freedom was primarily a national and not a human concept. The Soviet scholars have added greatly to this confusion by fitting the poet tightly into the Marxist interpretation of history and by giving Shevchenko's universality a definite Soviet Russian mold. It has become virtually impossible to penetrate the dense barrage of words which has been laid around Shevchenko's own work. It is not too much to say that the greatest and most widely read poet of the Ukraine has still to be rediscovered in his own country.

The reasons for the creation of legends, myths, and cults about Shevchenko are real enough. A poet who at the age of thirty-three was arrested for writing revolutionary verse and belonging to a secret society, who was deported for ten years, and who died four years after his release had to be a martyr. And martyrs must have a cause to die for. There is no denying that, in Shevchenko's case, the cause for which he lived and suffered might appear to be political. To challenge the accepted belief that the Ukrainian language could be used only in

comedy, burlesque, or folk poetry; to attempt the creation of a Ukrainian poetic language capable of expressing all shades of feelings and thought; to revive in brilliant colors the glory of the Cossack Ukraine; and, finally, to protest in the most daring language the political and social enslavement of his country by Russia—these endeavors are surely enough to mark him as a political writer and rebel. The ardor and vehemence of Shevchenko's patriotism which stir his readers emotionally rather than intellectually have been deplored by such prominent Ukrainians as Panteleimon Kulish, Mykhailo Drahomanov, and Mykola Khvylovy. They feared that the promoters of the various Shevchenko cults and the builders of monuments would find enough material in his life and work to pass him off as a rabble-rouser. Their apprehension that commemorations, hero-worship, and a general ballyhoo in honor of Shevchenko would obscure vital aspects of his poetry, have proved justified.

Before attempting to discover the core of his poetic message, it might be useful to trace briefly the major facts of his life and literary activity. Despite the fact that he was born (1814) a serf, Taras Shevchenko's youth was not one of totally unrelieved gloom and unhappiness. Orphaned at eleven, he found some consolation in the exercise of his talent for drawing. It was Shevchenko's intelligence which finally led to his promotion as a page boy to his master, Engelhard, who took the fifteen-year-old youth with him on his travels to Kiev and Vilno. It is noteworthy that Shevchenko's first glimpse of a revolutionary movement came during a trip to Poland in 1830. Throughout his life some of Shevchenko's best friends were Polish revolutionaries. Apprenticed to various painters while still a serf, Shevchenko at last found friends, his countrymen in St. Petersburg, who were so impressed with his talent that they organized a campaign to buy his freedom for him. This feat was accomplished with the direct help of such Russian celebrities as the painter Briullov and the poet Zhukovsky. A free man at 24, Shevchenko could at last enroll as a student of the Imperial Academy of Fine Arts in St. Petersburg, where during 1838-45 he became one of the most brilliant pupils. The curriculum of the Academy was comparable to that of a university. He was no longer an "untutored peasant," as many of his critics later thought of him. Shevchenko soon attracted the attention of Briullov and became a regular member of his circle. This meant contact with the sophisticated world of art and ideas.

It is likely that Shevchenko began writing several years before his first collection of poems, *Kobzar (The Minstrel)* appeared in 1840. A year later his long narrative poem *Haidamaky* was published. During the period of his greatest creative activity (1840-47), the poet made one long visit to the Ukraine in 1843 and a second one in 1847, when he was also appointed art instructor at Kiev University. The second visit was cut short by Shevchenko's arrest in April 1847 on charges of belonging to a secret Ukrainian society, the Brotherhood of Saints Cyril and Methodius, and of writing revolutionary poetry, some of which was apparently circulating in manuscript form. The sentence, without a proper trial, was exceptionally harsh because, in addition to deportation as an ordinary soldier to the Orenburg Separate Corps, Shevchenko was forbidden, on the express order of Tsar Nicholas I, to paint and to write. It was fortunate

that during the next ten years of exile (1847–57) Shevchenko succeeded in eluding this provision of the sentence. Following his release, he found it safer to live in St. Petersburg; later, in 1859, he was re-arrested for a short time during a visit to the Ukraine. His health severely undermined, he died in 1861. He was unmarried.

Shevchenko became known as a poet after the publication of the *Kobzar*, which made him famous in his native Ukraine. The collection (114 pages long) contained six shorter lyrical and historical poems, a ballad, and a longer narrative poem, *Kateryna*. St. Petersburg critics acknowledged Shevchenko's poetic talent but deplored the fact that he wrote in Ukrainian. A favorable review of *Kobzar* in *Fatherland Notes*, attributed since 1954 to the great Russian critic Vissarion Belinsky, may on first reading sound like a defense of Shevchenko's writing in Ukrainian. "Here," declared the Russian critic, "are the poetic *dumy*, the historical legends and fascination of abandoned love and the artless story of Katerina's love, in a word, all the elements of the folk poetry of the south of our fatherland." Why should he not write in Ukrainian, asked Belinsky, "if Mr. Shevchenko grew up in Little Russia, if destiny has placed him in such relation to the language in which we write and communicate—i.e., Russian—that he cannot express in it his feelings? If from his youth his impressions assumed the forms of the southern dialect, should he therefore bury his talent in the earth? Must the sacred sounds be silenced in his soul only because some gentlemen in stylish tail-coats do not understand these sounds, do not or will not understand the native echoes of the Slavic tongue, the echoes fleeting from the south, from the cradle of glory and religion of Russia. . . . Moreover, books written in Little Russian such as . . . Shevchenko's *Katerina* will undoubtedly be of great benefit to the south Russian common readers."¹

To some writers this might have appeared to be a compliment, although the allusion to the poet's inability to write in Russian could hardly be so regarded. However, Shevchenko, in publishing *Kozbar*, had a different aim in mind than to contribute to the treasure trove of "the folk poetry of the south of our fatherland" or to amuse simple Ukrainian readers by writing verse in their "dialect." His ambition was to prove the existence of a separate Ukrainian people and language by creating literature in Ukrainian. That this was his aim, and that he did not wish to remain merely a bard of the south Russian region, may be seen in his second long narrative poem, *Haidamaky*. Belinsky, having perfectly well understood Shevchenko's intention, attacked it bitterly:

Readers of the *Fatherland Notes* are familiar with our opinion about works of so-called Little Russian literature. We shall not repeat it here and will only say that the new attempt, songs by Mr. Shevchenko, this privileged, it seems, Little Russian poet, convinces us more than ever that works of such a type are published for the pleasure and edification of their authors only; there seems to be no other public for it.²

It is important that this is the prime objection of Belinsky to the poem. It is true that later in this review he speaks sarcastically of the poem itself, which, indeed, is rather bloodthirsty and melodramatic; but this attack was merely

adding insult to injury. The main point was that it was impossible to write long and successful poems in Ukrainian. That this attitude was characteristic of Belinsky's scepticism as to the possibility of a Ukrainian literature may be seen from another of his reviews, written in the same year, for the almanac *The Swallow*, edited by Hrebinka, which also contained some poems by Shevchenko:

We face an important problem. Is there in the world a Little Russian language, or is it only a regional dialect? From the answer to this there follows the second question: Can a Little Russian literature exist and should those of our writers who are Little Russians write in Little Russian?

As to the first question it can be answered yes and no. A little Russian language actually did exist at the time of Little Russia's distinctiveness and it exists now in the memoirs of the folk poetry of those glorious times. But this does not mean that the Little Russians have a literature; folk poetry is not yet literature.³

For Belinsky the answer was clear: those Ukrainians who had literary ambitions must write in Russian. "How significant," he went on to argue, "is the fact that Gogol, passionately in love with Little Russia, nevertheless chose to write in Russian and not in Little Russian."⁴ Although by 1840 the vogue for Ukrainian themes in Russian literature was fading, Belinsky saw no possibility of a Ukrainian literature fully developed in all its genres and appealing to the sophisticated reader. For this reason he and Shevchenko remained adversaries, despite the zealous efforts of Soviet scholars to reconcile them. In 1847, in an unpublished preface to the second edition of *Kobzar*, Shevchenko wrote clearly enough: "Do not pay attention to the Russians. Let them write in their own way and we shall follow our own."⁵

Belinsky, on the other hand, was embittered by the obstinate Ukrainians; after the arrest of Shevchenko, he could not refrain from this chauvinism, which he expressed in a letter to Annenkov written in December, 1847:

Common sense can see in Shevchenko only an ass, a fool and a scoundrel, and above all a bitter drunkard and a lover of spirits because of *khokhlatsky* patriotism. This *khokhlatsky* radical wrote two lampoons, one on the emperor and other on the empress. . . . I did not read these slanders and none of my friends read them (which shows that they are not at all good but only flat and silly), but I am convinced that the slander of the empress must be outrageously foul because of what I said earlier. Shevchenko has been sent to the Caucasus as a soldier. I am not sorry for him; if I were his judge I would be no less severe. I feel a personal animosity toward this type of liberal. They are enemies of all progress. With their impudent stupidities they provoke the authorities and make them suspect of a rebellion where there is none and provoke measures which are sharp and disastrous for literature and enlightenment. . . .⁶

The clash between Shevchenko and Belinsky underlines the political aspect of Ukrainian Romanticism, which is nevertheless vital. In the Ukraine, Shevchenko and his contemporaries became spokesmen for the national idea precisely because this was to them the most important dimension of the freedom which they sought as men and artists. To be sure, it may also be argued that this emphasis, ironically enough, brought them closer to the position of Belinsky. For what Shevchenko did for the Ukrainians, Belinsky did for the Russians—created the idea of a "national literature" and "national culture." Both over-

stressed the national and political importance of literature, and this emphasis has been, up to the present day, a detriment to both literatures.

However, the political and social concern of the Ukrainian Romantics and their activities as members of the Brotherhood of Saints Cyril and Methodius did not distract them from universal ideals. Their brotherhood, for instance, was not, as was charged, an organization of radicals, but rather a society for popular enlightenment and Christian spiritual fellowship aimed at the union of all Slavs (Kostomarov's *The Books of the Genesis of the Ukrainian People* is the clearest evidence of this). When Soviet scholars claim that Shevchenko was the "brother" who was furthest to the left and most acutely aware of the injustices of serfdom, they ignore the belief which shines through all his major works: that these injustices may be overcome by the moral regeneration of man and the restoration to public life of Christian love and tolerance.

The realization of this fact was not blunted during his long and painful exile and did not turn Shevchenko into a moralizer. His outlook on life was formulated in the mid-forties before he was arrested, and it did not change substantially after that time. Four separate but complementary elements of this outlook may be discerned. First and foremost there is Shevchenko's love for his native land, its way of life, its people and history. Shevchenko is in earnest when he says that for the love of his Ukraine he "would forfeit his soul." The overflow of these feelings often leads to sentimentality and endless yarn-spinning about the beautiful Ukrainian maidens and their luckless fate ("Petrus"). Poems such as these are among the weakest of Shevchenko's productions. Concurrent with this great love is a feeling of hate for the oppressors of the Ukraine, especially the Tsars and their officials, bureaucrats, and soldiers. In his indignation Shevchenko resembles the Old Testament prophets (he wrote imitations of Hosea, of Isaiah, of Ezekiel, and of some of the psalms) though his fulminations are directed not only against the Russians but also against his own countrymen, especially those who sold out to the Russians ("The Dream"). If Shevchenko's patriotism did not go beyond the exaltation of Ukrainian history and country life (at times one feels a surfeit of both), he could rightly be classed as a nationalist and his concept of freedom as parochial. However, combined with this fierce patriotism is a profound and everpresent concern for justice and charity among men. The fight for the future of his country could be won, he believed, only in the bigger battle between good and evil in the soul of man.

The validity of this assumption, which is the cornerstone of Shevchenko's outlook, may be challenged by critics who measure a poet's greatness by his commitment to the universal and human, rather than to national themes. They forget, however, that national liberty in the West is by and large taken for granted and is no longer a part of the search for the universal. In subjugated and underdeveloped countries, national freedom still remains a part of this wider system of values. It may be true that this inevitably limits the significance of a "national poet" and often reduces his work to a kind of tub-thumping. Yet many readers of Shevchenko feel that his most inspired lines relate to the meaning of fraternity (*bratoliubie*), the betrayal of the true god ("The

Heretic," "The Prophet"), the apocalyptic visions of divine justice ("Epistle"), and the unconquerable power of love-*caritas*. All these are supranational. At times these conceptions of national and universal freedom blend within a single poem ("The Caucasus") in the image of Prometheus, or in the poem "The Neophytes"; and sometimes Shevchenko writes poems in which the religious quest predominates. Because the latter are written in his usual nonconformist spirit (he satirizes the clergy and interprets the Bible imaginatively, not literally), Soviet scholars have obtusely maintained that his religious poetry is atheistic. Perhaps the most philosophical and at the same time the finest of Shevchenko's religious poems is "Mary." In this poem Jesus becomes a human God—the legitimate son of Joseph, a carpenter, and of Mary, a servant girl; and his message is received not as a great philosophy but as a prototype of the good life. Mary's suffering, great as it is has not been in vain:

Yes, that
 Was Thy sad fate, O mother dear!
 His brothers and disciples too,
 Unsteady men of little soul,
 Concealed themselves from hangmen cruel.
 They hid and then they separated,
 And Thou was forced to seek them out. . .
 By night they gathered round about Thee
 And came to grieve with Thee and mourn,
 But Thou, the greatest among women,
 Didst scatter all their fear and terror,
 Just as the chaff that blows away,
 With Thy most holy word of fire;
 Thou sendest at last Thy holy spirit
 Into their petty souls! ⁷

Last, there is Shevchenko's personal, lyrical poetry, in which a mood of detachment mingles with a preoccupation with his personal fate. These reflective meditations upon his own life are simple and unsophisticated, but linguistically most accomplished. At times, especially as they relate to exile, these poems tend to overflow with nostalgia and even self-pity. At their best they express a man's claim to happiness and personal freedom:

A little cloud swims to the sun,
 With all her crimson borders trailing,
 And beckons to the sun to sleep
 And covers it with rosy veiling,
 Cradled in the dark blue sea,
 As a mother lulls her child. . .
 Lovely to the eyes. . . And now,
 It seems, the heart is still,
 For one little hour of rest,
 With God speaks quietly. . .
 Like an enemy, the mist
 Falls upon the sea
 And the little rosy cloud,
 Darkness in its wake
 The grey mist rolls and billows out,
 And the silent dark

Throws its shroud upon the soul,
 And you don't know where to wander,
 Longing, longing for the light,
 Like small children for their mother.⁸

In spite of his education, which was considerable, and his friendship with some of the leading intellectuals of his day, unbroken even during exile, Shevchenko retained some of the striking characteristics of a rebellious peasant. He was always straightforward and robust, a quality that underlies his satire of tsarist bureaucracy ("The Dream") which, in a wider sense, we can still recognize today:

For quite a while, like puffed-up owls,
 The pair walked back and forth,
 Discussing something in low voices
 (One could not hear far off)
 About "the Fatherland," it seemed,
 And the new gorgets, and
 About the even newer drill-rules;
 Then the tsarina sat
 Down silently upon a stool.
 I look: the tsar comes up
 To the most senior in rank—
 And swipes him round the mug!
 With all his might! The poor chap licked
 His lips, then punched the belly
 Of his subordinate till it echoed. . .
 The latter a still lesser
 Acc hit between the shoulders; he—
 A lesser; and the lesser
 A smaller one, and he the petty;
 And beyond the threshold
 The petty ran with all their might
 Through the streets, and knead
 The remnants of the orthodox,
 Who start to yell and scream
 And shout and roar: "He's revelling!
 Our Little Father, our dear Tsar,
 Revels! Hourra! Hourra! Hourra-aa!"⁹

Shevchenko contrasts this to Ukrainian village life:

A village! And the heart again
 May rest. . . A village in Ukraine—
 Like an egg gay with Easter dyes:
 In woodland green the village hides;
 The gardens flower, homes gleam white,
 A mansion looms upon the height
 Like some strange marvel. On all sides
 Stand broad-leaved poplars; there again
 Is forest, forest-land, and plain,
 Blue hills beyond the Dnieper's tide. . .
 And high above, the Lord abides!¹⁰

The peasant way of life, not ideal in itself, is seen by the poet as constantly abused and corrupted by social and political systems. Symbolic of this is the

seduction of a village girl by a Russian soldier, a favorite theme of Shevchenko. There is no possible reconciliation between master and serf. Tyranny, based on human pride, stupidity, greed, and weakness must perish. In a Blake-like vision Shevchenko in his "Neophytes" warns "tyrants yet to come":

A new psalm unto the Lord,
 New praise let us proclaim,
 In righteous chorus with a heart
 Free from guile and blame.
 On tympanum and psaltery
 Let us sing forth His praises;
 How God smiteth the unrighteous,
 And the righteous aideth.
 The blessed ones in glory on
 Quiet couches speak the fame
 And praise of God, for aye rejoicing,
 Laud His Holy name.
 In their hands good swords they hold,
 Whetted and two-edgéd,
 For instruction to the people,
 And to the Gentiles, vengeance.
 Insatiate emperors they'll chain
 In fetters of strong iron,
 And the wrists of the far-famed
 With heavy chains they'll bind.
 And with righteous judgment will
 The unjust be condemned,
 And glory will arise forever,
 Glory to the blessed.¹¹

The call remained unanswered, and Shevchenko's dream of justice in this world, like the visions of many of his contemporaries, has remained unfulfilled. Some of the ideas for which he fought, however, have materialized. The foundation he laid for the modern Ukrainian poetic language has survived and supported a rich, new edifice of Ukrainian literature. Unable to do this for prose (Shevchenko's novels were written in Russian), he lived to see the publication of the great historical novel *The Black Council* by Kulish and of short stories by Marko Vovchok. Before his death he contributed to what before his arrest was but a wild dream of Ukrainian intellectuals—a Ukrainian periodical, *Osnova*. But even such small advances in the most immediate needs of his countrymen must in the end lead to more universal goals. Rightly or wrongly, Shevchenko regarded the liberation and advancement of his own country as merely a part of the movement for universal freedom. Both objectives were to him interdependent and did not necessarily need to be achieved by a violent overthrow of an unjust order, but by man's realization of his obligation to his fellow men. In the poem "There Had Been Wars and Military Feuds" he speaks of the revolution succeeding "without the axe," although in his "Testament" he calls on his countrymen to "break the chains." This realization ("there will be son, a mother and people on this earth") would also, he hoped, provide a guarantee against the abuses in the future. His faith in man's ultimate

victory over the iniquities which enslaved him remained unshaken. Thus, Shevchenko's last poem, written in a serene and nonvindictive mood, glows with his final optimism. It ends:

O'er turbid Lethe's unplumbed deep
 Our uncomplaining course we'll keep
 And sailing, bear within our boat
 Death's bright and hallowed antidote,
 My everlasting, youthful fame. . .
 Or else, may the deuce take the same!
 I well can do without renown.
 And if with vigor I go down,
 Along the banks of Phlegethon
 Or by the Styx, in heaven anon,
 As if by Dnieper's shore sublime
 In groves of immemorial time
 I'll build a hut and plant around it
 A belt of orchard-trees to bound it,
 To whose cool shade you'll fly unseen
 And I shall crown you as my queen;
 We'll talk of Dnieper and Ukraine
 And the glad thorns that dot her plain,
 And grassy mounds in endless spring,
 And then a merry song we'll sing. . .¹²

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NOTES

1. V. G. Belinsky, *Polnoe sobranie sochinenii* (Moscow, 1953-59), IV, pp. 171-72.
2. *Ibid.*, VI, p. 172.
3. *Ibid.*, V, pp. 176-77.
4. *Ibid.*, p. 178.
5. Taras Shevchenko, *Povne zibrannia tvoriv* (Kiev, 1939), I, p. 375.
6. Belinsky, *op. cit.*, XII, pp. 440-41. The word *khozhlatsky* is a derogatory term for Ukrainian.
7. Taras Shevchenko, *Selected Poems*, translated and with an Introduction by Clarence A. Manning (Jersey City, 1945), p. 210. For scholarly criticism of Shevchenko see V. Mijakovs'kyj and G. Y. Shevelov, eds., *Taras Ševčenko-1814-1861: A Symposium* (The Hague, 1962).
8. Taras Shevchenko, *Song Out of Darkness*, Selected Poems translated by Vera Rich (London, 1961), p. 95.
9. *Ibid.*, pp. 34-35.
10. Taras Shevchenko, *Poems* (Munich, 1961), p. 79.
11. Taras Shevchenko, *Song Out of Darkness*, pp. 105-06.
12. *The Ukrainian Poets*, Selected and translated by C. H. Andrusyshen and Watson Kirkconnell (Toronto, 1963), p. 103.