

TARAS
SHEVCHENKO

THE NATIONAL POET OF UKRAINE

BY

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PROFESSOR AT THE UNIVERSITY OF PRAGUE

WITH PREFACE BY

PROFESSOR R. W. SETON-WATSON,

D. LITT., F. B. A.



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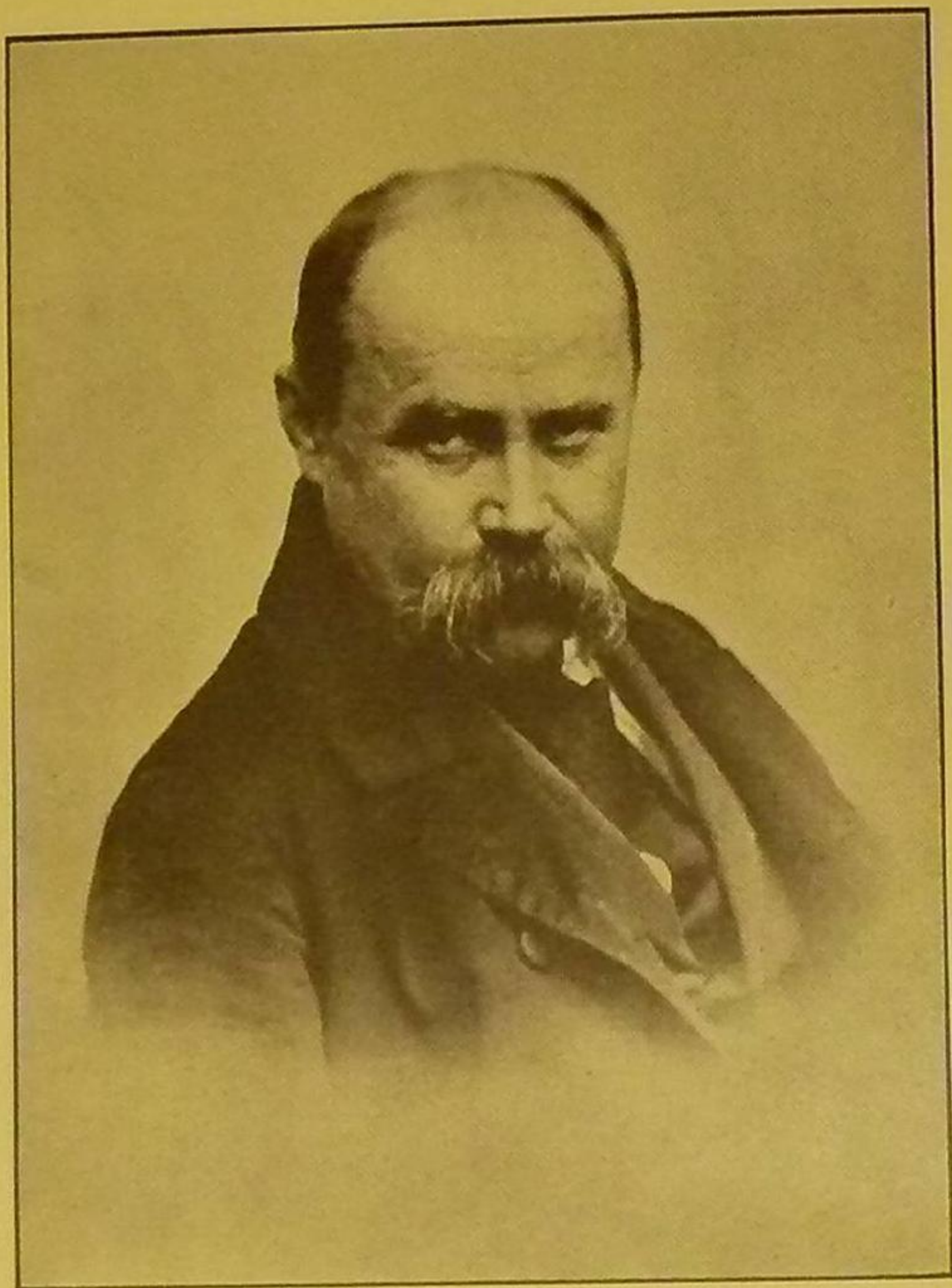
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PREFACE.

There is no more tragic and original figure in the whole history of modern poetry than that of the Ukrainian peasant-poet Taras Shevchenko, to whom a fitting tribute is here paid, on the 75th anniversary of his death, by the most distinguished living Ukrainian historian. He has sometimes been called "the Burns of the Slavonic world", and it is certainly possible to draw an analogy between two men of rude native genius, whose songs gushed out from their native soil as springs of limpid and living water, and who overcame every obstacle of birth and environment. But here the resemblance ceases, for while Burns became the spoilt darling of a free and democratic nation and fell a victim to misfortunes which were very largely of his own creation, the unhappy Shevchenko lived under the grinding tyranny of perhaps the most autocratic of all the Tsars, and found himself severely cramped and hampered in all his efforts

towards literary expression. I know of no more repulsive incident in the long story of national repression than the deliberate orders issued by Nicholas I that the luckless poet in his remote banishment, should be deprived of every kind of writing material and closely watched so that he could neither commit his poems to paper nor cultivate his very considerable natural gifts as an artist. This order remained in force for three years, and he never recovered anything that could be called real liberty.

Today Tsarism belongs to the limbo of the past, and the new "totalitarian" tyrannies plague the greater part of our disunited Europe. But though Ukraine is more enslaved than ever, the songs of Shevchenko are known to all her sons in Europe, Asia and free America, and will continue to play an inspiring part in the movement for national liberty.

R. W. Seton-Watson.

Before we write about Shevchenko, the national poet of Ukraine, let us say a few words about his native country, that was better known in Western Europe about two centuries ago, than it is now. The latter may appear a paradox, but to be convinced of its truth it is only necessary to read the books of quite a number of travellers and historians, French, English, Dutch, Italian and German, who wrote at that time about Ukraine. The first of these and the best known was Guillaume Levasseur de Beauplan, author of the „Description de l'Ukraine“ (1640). The first English translation of this very interesting and reliable book appeared in 1704. Among the historians let us name Pierre Chevalier who wrote „Histoire de la guerre des cosaques...“ (1663), translated into English by Edward Brown in 1672. At the same time there appeared a series of communications about the Cossack wars against the Poles in contemporary English papers such as: „The Moderate Intelligencer,“ „The Perfect

Diurnal," „Mercurius Politicus," „Several Proceedings" and others. In the XVIIIth century the best known work about Ukraine is that of Jean Sherrer, author of the „Annales de la Petite-Russie ou Histoire des Cosaques de l'Ukraine" (1788). English travellers such as Edward Dan. Clarke and Joseph Marshall, historians such as Bernhard Connor, professor at Oxford and Charles Whitworth, diplomat and politician, give in their respective books an account of what they themselves saw in Ukraine or repeat information culled from other sources, chiefly French and Dutch.

We shall not here enter into causes why Western Europe formerly showed more interest in Ukraine in the past than it did in the XIXth century. No doubt it is because this country disappeared from the political arena, which we consider to be a great misfortune for Europe. It is certain, however that in the XVIIth and XVIIIth centuries there were far more books and information about Ukraine than there were in the XIXth.

It is interesting to note that travellers who visited the country and historians who wrote

about it were moved not only by the desire for information but manifested sympathy with the Ukrainian people and their ardent aspirations for liberty. All readers of Voltaire know his words in his „History of Charles XII of Sweden“ about the Ukrainians, allies of this king against Russia: „L'Ukraine a toujours aspiré à être libre.“

Yet it is impossible to assert that during the XIXth century there was no mention of Ukraine in European letters. It is enough to name Prosper Mérimée and Alfred Rambaud for France and W. R. Morfill and George Rolleston, professors at Oxford, for England, and their articles about Ukrainian folklore and literature in English reviews*) in the 70's and 80's. At present „The Slavonic Review“ edited by the professors of the School of Slavonic Studies, King's College in London, keep in touch with the national and literary movement of the Ukrainian people. But to tell the truth, the Ukrainian problem is among the questions that are the least known and studied in Europe,

*) *The Athenaeum, The Saturday Review, The Westminster Review.*

though by no means the least important.

The poetical works of Shevchenko occupy quite an exceptional place in the life of the Ukrainian people. If the great national poets of West European nations, whether by laying down new paths in literature or opening new horizons to thought, have been more or less forerunners of great moral or esthetic movements and have contributed to the revival of national sentiment in their native countries, Shevchenko was in his country the national prophet in the true sense of this word. His inspired words aroused his people from lethargy, from the torpid inertia into which they had been plunged as a result of their lost struggles for independence. Shevchenko's passionate appeal revealed to the Ukrainians the sentiment of national unity, inspired them with confidence in their national dignity and gave them the wish to take their place among other nations.

In order to understand the important part that Shevchenko has played in the history of his people, though he was only a poet and had no weapons other than his poetic word, it would be necessary to describe the sur-

roundings in which he was born and grew up, and which nurtured his poetic genius.

Shevchenko's poetic work bloomed like a marvellous flower that sprang entirely from its native soil,—soil that had seen so many great aspirations bloom and fade, such heroic enthusiasm, and which had been soaked with blood and tears in the course of its tragic history.

Having lost their independence after the Mongolian invasion in the XIVth century, the Ukrainians found themselves successively under the Lithuanian and then the Polish supremacy. In the middle of the XVIIth century they succeeded in throwing off the Polish domination under the great Ukrainian Hetman Bohdan Khmelnitski surnamed then the „Cromwell of the East.“ To him Oliver Cromwell sent messages with expressions of friendship and invitations „to stand up against the Papists.“

Unfortunately the Ukrainian State, deprived as the country was of natural frontiers that would protect it against invasions, had not the peace necessary to consolidate and strengthen itself and was unable to main-

tain its independence. After a period of wars, as terrible in ruin and desolation as was the Thirty Years War in Germany, and in which the neighbouring states, Poland, Muscovy and Turkey, participated, Ukraine was divided between Muscovy and Poland. The Dnieper, the principal river of the country, was adopted as the boundary: the right bank was taken by Poland, the left being annexed by Muscovy.

It is true that the left bank of the Dnieper (Poltava and Chernyhiw provinces) retained a wide autonomy, with the Hetman, the army, its own administration, its finances. Muscovy needed a century and a half to gradually destroy this autonomy and to reduce Ukraine, at the end of the XVIIIth century, to the status of a Russian province. The defeat at Poltava in 1709 of the united forces of Charles XII of Sweden and the Ukrainian Hetman Mazeppa by Peter I served as a justification to the Russian government for the breach of the Treaty of Pereyaslav which Muscovy and Ukraine had concluded in 1654. Still, a century and a half of autonomy rendered possible the development of a national

culture. It served later as a basis for the reconstruction of the historical tradition.

The lot of the provinces on the right bank of the Dnieper, which, ruined and devastated, fell to the share of Poland, was different. The upper classes of the population were „polonised“ and the lower were enslaved by the landowners. The population remembered only too well their recently lost liberty and profoundly resented this oppression. For this reason the XVIIIth century presents a series of bloody uprisings of the Ukrainians against the Poles. In the midst of these conflicts Poland ceased to exist. Nevertheless the annexation of this part of Ukraine by Russia, after partition of Poland, did not bring amelioration in the social and economic conditions of the Ukrainian population. Russia did not follow the example of Austria and Prussia, which immediately starting reforms in the annexed Polish provinces, contributed greatly to the prosperity of these lands. Catherine II, on the contrary, took advantage of this annexation in order to introduce serfdom in all its vigour in the part of Ukraine on the left side of the Dnieper, where it had never existed before that time.

Slavery in Russia has been sufficiently depicted by well known Russian authors in a series of literary works, so that we need not dwell long on it here. The oppression of one human creature by another, the arbitrary power of the owner, the complete degradation of human dignity and the economic stagnation produced by this social evil are sufficiently evident. It is possible that in compensation to the Ukrainians some fairness or equity was shown to them by history. One of the greatest denunciators of the social and national oppression of the Ukrainians, whose invectives dealt slavery the most effective blow, was born under the thatched roof of a destitute peasant-serf. It was in the province of Kiev, cradle of Cossack liberties, where among the population there still dwelt the memory of the exploits of the Cossacks, and where the contrast between the heroic past and the present misery was only too poignant.

Taras Shevchenko, the younger son of a poor peasant serf, was born on February 25, 1814, in a village, in the province of Kiev. He lost his mother at the age of seven and his father a few years later. On his death-bed

the father of the future great poet, in bequeathing his poor possessions uttered, we are told, these prophetic words: „To my son Taras I leave nothing. He will not be an ordinary man: he will turn out either someone very great, or a great scamp, thus in either case my legacy will be of no account to him.“ We cannot but admire this intuition of a father, who despite his drudgery for daily bread, guessed the chief characteristics of his son. At an early age, little Taras showed a desire for instruction and a strong inclination to draw.

But neither the schoolmaster of his native village with his primitive methods of teaching, nor the local icon-painter, an inveterate drunkard, from whom the young Taras hoped to learn the elements of the art of painting, could satisfy him. When he asked the steward of the estate for permission to apprentice himself to a painter in another district, he was ordered into the kitchen of the manor-house as a scullion. From the kitchen the young Taras passed to the antechamber into the personal service of his owner. In this capacity he followed him first to Warsaw, then to Vilna and lastly to St. Peters-

burg. There, Taras already a youth of eighteen, at last obtained permission to be apprenticed to a painter and decorator. His owner, flattering himself with the hope of employing his own artist on his estate, decided at last to make use of this talent for drawing. But the new master, little more than a house-painter, was a selfish man who only exploited his pupils by hiring them out for his own benefit. As for the art of painting, he could not teach Taras anything that the latter did not know himself.

No wonder that the young artist looked out for himself, visiting picture-galleries, spending frequently those well known clear summer nights of St. Petersburg, in the public park, the Summer Garden, drawing the statues of mythological gods and goddesses. There, quite by chance, he made an acquaintance which was decisive for his future and preserved to the Ukraine her greatest poet. One of the students of the St. Petersburg Academy of Arts, Soshenko, noticed Shevchenko thus sketching. Ukrainian himself, Soshenko recognised a compatriot in this poor youth, miserably clad, became interested in him and finally introduced him

to the famous artist Carlo Brulov, then Director of the Academy of Arts. The latter, having found the young Taras decidedly gifted, encouraged him to pursue his work. But Shevchenko could not be received as a student in the Academy, as it was not open to serfs; on the other hand, his owner would not hear of letting him free without the usual money. Professor Brulov raised the necessary sum by raffling a portrait of the poet Zhukovski which he had painted for this purpose. Shevchenko was bought out of serfdom, received in the Academy of Arts, and became one of Brulov's favourite pupils. Thus the poor apprentice to a house-painter joined the society of cultured men, made friends with artists and authors, especially in the Ukrainian colony of St. Petersburg, and set himself to complete his more than rudimentary education. He was by that time already twenty-four years old, negotiations with his owner having been long and arduous.

At this time Shevchenko was for the first time visited by his poetic Muse. As he himself said later, it was in Brulov's studio that he would let himself be carried away

by his imagination, far away into his native land. The natural beauty of the Ukrainian landscape, images of his native village, reminiscences of the historic past appeared before his dreaming eyes. Before him passed the tragic shadows of the Ukrainian Hetmans, his native steppes strewn with high burial mounds, the whole heroic past of Ukraine; his own native land appeared to him as a beautiful, melancholy image. His poetic imagination wove and embroidered the fabric of his first poems.

The modest youngster hid his first poetic efforts. Their discovery was due to an accident, as was his gift of drawing. A young Ukrainian landowner, on a visit to St. Petersburg, gave the funds necessary for the publication of the first volume of Shevchenko's poems which appeared in St. Petersburg, in 1840, with the title of „Kobzar“, „The Bard“, as wandering minstrels in Ukraine were called.

This volume and those which followed were received with great enthusiasm in his native country and made the name of the author immediately celebrated in the Ukraine. When, during his summer holidays he visi-

ted his country, he was received with enthusiasm and recognised and celebrated as the national poet. The oldest aristocratic houses were opened to the former serf, the best representatives of the country gentry sought his friendship. People much in the public eye desired to have their portraits painted by him. He won the affection of one of the greatest ladies of the country, Varvara, daughter of Prince Repnin, Governor General of the Ukraine, and was hospitably received by the prince at his family seat. We know now more about this love from Varvara Repnin herself, from her letters to Charles Eynard, a Genevan patrician and friend of her parents, whom she met during their stay in Geneva, and who remained for a long time a kind of spiritual guide to her. These letters have been only recently published.

In 1845 Shevchenko received his diploma, left the Academy and was appointed teacher of drawing at the University of Kiev. This was the happiest time of his life and the future seemed to be opening favourably before him. He planned a journey to Italy to study art. But fate had something other than

happiness in store for him. Above the head of the poet began to gather black threatening clouds and it was not long before the storm broke. In Kiev, Shevchenko made friends with a number of Ukrainian patriots having at their head Kostomariv, professor of history at that University. This group of lofty idealists set themselves the task of disseminating ideas of moral perfection, patriotism and humanitarian principles among the young generation. Their practical aim was: the advocacy of religious liberty, the education of the people and the abolition of serfdom. As they believed in the power of Christian morals and evangelical truths, for their motto they chose the words from the Gospel: „Know the truth and the truth will set you free.“ In honour of the Apostles of the Slavonic lands, this society was called the „Brotherhood of SS Cyril and Methodius.“ It was of course a secret society, but the government was soon informed of its existence. In the eyes of the police it became „a seditious and dangerous body,“ all its members were arrested, brought to St. Petersburg and imprisoned in the fortress of SS Peter and Paul. An inquiry was

opened, followed closely by the Tsar Nicholas I. himself. The members of the society were accused of wishing to separate Ukraine from Russia, of overthrowing the autocratic power, and Shevchenko, as a popular author of patriotic poems, was considered especially dangerous. He was sentenced to banishment and to military service for life without promotion, as a common soldier, in a little garrison hidden on the Asiatic frontier of Russia. The Tsar having added with his own hand to the sentence „with the express prohibition of all writing and drawing.“

Shevchenko gave a vivid image of his feelings during imprisonment in the poem written in the fortress of SS Peter and Paul in St. Petersburg:

I care not, shall I see my dear
Own land before I die, or no,
Nor who forgets me, buried here
In desert wastes of alien snow;
Though all forget me, — better so.

A slave from my first bitter years,
Most surely I shall die a slave
Ungraced by any kinsmen's tears;
And carry with me to the grave
Everything; and leave no trace,
No little mark to keep my place

In the dear lost Ukraina
Which is not ours, although our land.
And none shall ever understand;
No father to his son shall say:
—Kneel down, and fold your hands and pray;
He died for our Ukraina.

I care no longer if the child
Shall pray for me, or pass me by.
One only thing I cannot bear:
To know my land, that was beguiled
Into a death-trap with a lie,
Trampled and ruined and defiled...
Ah, but I care, dear God; I care!

(Transl. by E. L. Voynich.)

Also in the fortress was written the following short poem where in the person of the „Reaper“ the poet gives us the image of Death, as merciless destiny that spares none mortal:

Through the fields the reaper goes
Piling sheaves on sheaves in rows;
Hills, not sheaves, are these.
Where he passes howls the earth,
Howl the echoing seas.

All the night the reaper reaps,
Never stays his hands nor sleeps,
Reaping endlessly;
Whets his blade and passes on...
Hush, and let him be.

Hush, he cares not how men writhe
With naked hands against the scythe.
Wouldst thou hide in field or town?
Where thou art, there he will come;
He will reap thee down.

Serf and landlord, great and small;

Friendless wandering singer, — all,
All shall swell the sheaves that grow
To mountains; even the Tzar shall go.*)

And me too the scythe shall find
Cowering alone behind
Bars of iron; swift and blind,
Strike, and pass, and leave me, stark
And forgotten in the dark.

(Transl. by E. L. Voynich.)

Thus, like a second Ovid the Ukrainian poet dragged out long years in exile in a desert and forlorn country, in the humiliating position of a common soldier. The prohibition to write and to draw was his greatest torture. For having made a few sketches of this desolate landscape, Shevchenko spent eight months in prison and was transferred to a still more lonely garrison on the Aral Sea. It was only after the death of the Tsar

*) Change of metre as in original.

Nicholas I, following the Crimean defeat, that Shevchenko's friends obtained his release. But his health was undermined. He lived only four years more and died on February 26, 1861, in St. Petersburg, a few days only before the publication of Tsar Alexander II's manifesto abolishing serfdom. Cruel fate had not allowed to the poet the supreme joy of seeing his life's dream accomplished.

His despair and loneliness of this time are very poignantly rendered in one of the last poems written shortly before his death:

Thy youth is over; time has brought
Winter upon thee; hope is grown
Chill as the north wind; thou art old.
Sit thou in thy dark house alone;
With no man converse shalt thou hold,
With no man shalt take counsel; nought,
Nought art thou, nought be thy desire.
Sit still alone by thy dead fire
Till hope shall mock thee, fool, again,
Blinding thine eyes with frosty gleams,
Vexing thy soul with dreams, with dreams
Like snowflakes in the empty plain.
Sit thou alone, alone and dumb;
Cry not for Spring, it will not come.
It will not enter at thy door,

Nor make thy garden green once more,
Nor cheer with hope thy withered age,
Nor loose thy spirit from the cage . . .
Sit still, sit still! Thy life is spent;
Nought art thou, be with nought content.

(Transl. by E. L. Voynich.)

According to the wish expressed in his poem „The Testament,“ his remains were transported into Ukraine and buried on a steep bank of the Dnieper near the town Kaniv. From the top of the cliff a glorious view embraces the vast steppes spreading beyond the mighty river. A high mound of earth was piled on the grave of the poet. The iron cross that surmounts it dominates the country. In summer-time it serves as a beacon to thousands of pilgrims who come from all parts of Ukraine to render homage to the memory of the great national poet. An Englishman *) writing about it said: „The tomb of the poet is the object of special reverence among his countrymen, the Mecca of the Ukrainian patriots.“

*) W. R. Morfill.

The Testament.

Dig my grave and raise my barrow
By the Dnieper-side
In Ukraina, my own land,
A fair land and wide.
I will lie and watch the cornfields,
Listen through the years
To the river voices roaring,
Roaring in my ears.

When I hear the call
Of the racing flood,
Loud with hated blood,
I will leave them all,
Fields and hills; and force my way
Right up to the Throne
Where God sits alone;
Clasp His feet and pray . . .
But till that day
What is God to me?

Bury me, be done with me,
Rise and break your chain,
Water your new liberty
With blood for rain.
Then, in the mighty family
Of all men that are free,
May be sometimes, very softly
You will speak of me?

(Transl. by E. L. Voynich.)

Such was the life of the poet. What were his works? Shevchenko left a volume of poems entitled „Kobzar“, a name familiar to every Ukrainian. This volume is a kind of poetic microcosm or an enchanted mirror wherein Ukraine as a whole finds its reflection — its past and its present. After the appearance of this volume „young“ Ukrainian literature took its place among the other Slavonic literatures.

We said „young“ Ukrainian literature. It is a purely conventional term that does not mean that Ukrainian literature began at this date, nor in the year 1798, the publication of the „Eneid travestied“ by Kotliarevski which is considered the starting point of the modern period in Ukrainian literature, of its „Renaissance.“ The origin of Ukrainian literature goes back to the XIth century. The Muscovites, or the Great-Russians, were at that date a nation in formation and also made use of this literature. This is the reason why Russians even now appropriate to themselves the origins of Ukrainian literature as being theirs as well as ours.

The ancient Ukrainian literature can boast of many a brilliant and immortal page,

among which are the **Chronicles of Kiev, Volhynia and Galicia**, as well as the epic of the „Expedition of the Prince Igor.“ But this literature made use of an artificial language based mostly on the Slavonic idiom used by the church and distinct from that spoken in the country. In its successive development this language, exposed to different influences, underwent different changes and developed, but always kept its exclusively learned character as distinct from the vulgar tongue. It is under the conditions of this linguistic parallelism that the spiritual life in Ukraine went on for several centuries: State and Church, Law and Learning used this artificial language, the people used the other.

The written literature was couched in the former whereas it is in the latter that the people have created their wealth of unwritten tradition, especially the beautiful epics known as „Dumy of the Cossacks“ about which Professor W. R. Morfill and G. Rolleston wrote with such enthusiasm.

It is at the end of the XVIth century that the Muscovites adopted the literary Ukrainian language. And not only the language but also, as is now admitted by the Russians

themselves (for instance prince Trubetzkoi, professor at the University of Vienna), the Muscovites renounced their own literary tradition in order to adopt that of the Ukrainians and then transferred it to their own ground, such as it was cultivated in the principal cultural centre of Ukraine, the Academy of Kiev. Under Peter I the literary Ukrainian language became the official language of the Russian Empire, but detached itself from its prototype under the influence of spoken Russian.

In Ukraine, the land of its origin, this old artificial language and its literature fall into disuse during the XVIIIth century. Kiev is superseded by St. Petersburg and Moscow and becomes a provincial place. Young Ukrainians prefer the newly founded Universities of St. Petersburg and Moscow to the old Academy of Kiev. Literary and scientific forces are also attracted now towards the capital of the empire. In the future there would be an official and literary language in the Russian Empire common to both Russians and Ukrainians, and two popular idioms for everyday use — the Russian and the Ukrainian.

If this came to be realised, there would be for Ukraine, after the downfall of her political as well as cultural independence, the complete disappearance of the Ukrainian nationality. But this danger was averted by the vitality of the historic tradition in Ukraine, fortified by the great modern idea that came from the Occident that of a nation as a distinct unit. At the same time as the pillars of the Ukrainian State collapsed, when the Hetmanat and the Cossack constitution were abolished, the Ukrainian people received a new medium to express their national individuality: Ukrainian authors abandoned their ancient artificial language, refused the Russian and adopted the living Ukrainian tongue spoken by the common people. Ivan Kotliarevskí, in 1798, was the first to introduce this language in literature and thus opened a new period of the Renaissance of the Ukrainian literature.

At the beginning of the XIXth century Ukrainian authors were innovators not only in the matter of the language but also by introducing new ideas. They gave to modern Ukrainian literature a wholesome and democratic impulse and introduced human feeling.

Thus Gregory Kvitka as early as 1829, long before George Sand and Auerbach, introduced into literature the simple life of a peasant and discovered sincere and noble sentiments under the thatched roof. Romanticism found warm adherents among Ukrainian writers; still Ukrainian literature was weak and obscurely buried far from the great world. There was the treasury of folklore while the glorious past of the Cossacks was in itself a source of inexhaustible inspiration for a poet. The heroic epos of the Cossack period of the XVI-XVIIIth centuries comprises the so called „Dumy,“ long epic poems or short ballads recited with the accompaniment of the „kobza“ or „bandura.“ Some of them have been preserved up to our time and sang by popular bards-kobzars or bandurists. A number of these poems were taken down and published in the 70's of the last century. They excited great interest among European scholars, and were a fertile source of inspiration to the poets who lived at that time when in the Ukrainian literature as everywhere else the romantic feeling was supreme. We could draw here an analogy with the Scottish Border Ballads

that were such a source of inspiration to no lesser a man than Sir Walter Scott, the „Wizard of the North.“

But in order to draw inspiration from these treasures, to throw a bridge between the past and present, briefly to build up the poetical synthesis of national aspirations, there was needed a poet of genius. A genius alone could give to the young Ukrainian literature the right to influence the life of the Ukrainian people, and this could not be expected from more modest talents such as Kvitka, Kotliarevski, Artemovski, Hrebinka and others. That genius was Taras Shevchenko.

At the beginning of his poetical career Shevchenko was under the influence of Romantic literature, Russian and Polish. Without doubt he began by imitating the romantic poets he knew: Mickiewicz and Zhukovski: but this imitation is only superficial, for Shevchenko has his own means of expression and treats his romantic subjects in his own manner. The wealth of Ukrainian folklore was to him an inexhaustible source of subjects and themes. Popular superstitions and customs relating to the sun, moon, stars, rainbow, the fantastic world of fairies, pixies,

witches, and goblins interwoven with love-adventures, furnished him abundant matter which he worked up into graceful schemes.

In Shevchenko's ballads, such as „The Bewitched,“ „The Poplar-tree,“ „The Drowned,“ could be found analogies with the early poems of Mickiewicz and the ballads of Zhukovski. But he is independent of them when dealing with the beliefs of the Ukrainian people, which he succeeds in rendering into poetry preserving to perfection their spirit and form, whereas the ballads of Zhukovski are quite artificial works and have nothing, except their names, in common with the Russian poetic spirit.

Besides the fairy world of the Ukrainian folklore, Shevchenko's early poetical works are deeply rooted in the glorious and tragic memories of Ukraine. We find here an intense patriotic feeling. The past of the Ukraine was to him not only a source of sad memories and melancholy meditations, but an open wound that continued to bleed.

This conception of Ukrainian history was nourished in him by contemporary historical writers, especially by the anonymous work widely read at that time „The History

of the Ruthenians." The German traveller Kohl who visited the Ukraine in 1838 speaks of this book as most widely known in all classes of society. According to the opinion of Prof. Drahomaniv, no book, with the exception of the Bible, had a greater influence on the poet. Besides the written documents, Shevchenko found himself at the source of the oral traditions. He was a native of that part of the Ukraine where had taken place the most dramatic events of the Cossack wars and of popular insurrections. Many memories and popular songs relating those events and their heroes were preserved in his surroundings. The powerful imagination of the poet created an image of the past, a kind of a heroic poem: the image of a people proud and independent, fighting for their liberty first against the Turks and Poles and then against Muscovite absolutism and tyranny. The Ukrainian nation succumbed exhausted in these wars. The descendants of free Cossacks were dragging heavy chains of serfdom. The shadows of the national heroes fighting for the Ukrainian national liberties revived in his imagination. In his ears resounded the clamor and uproar of battles.

He becomes the bard of the Cossacks and recalls their past glory. In the poems such as „Nalivaiko,“ „The Night of Taras“ he shows their struggles against the Poles; in „Hamalia,“ „Ivan Pidkova“ he spreads before us wild frescoes of the Cossacks' campaigns against Constantinople and the Turks. In his epic poem „Haidamaky“ he records the fury of the popular rising of 1768 where cruel and dramatic episodes abound.

His poetical interpretation of Ukrainian history is in keeping with the historical conceptions of his time. In the historical and ethnographical works of his contemporaries, Markevich's „History of Ukraine,“ Sreznevski's „The Antiquities of the Cossack Zaporog,“ writings of Kulish and Kostomariv-everywhere we see the same glorification of the Cossacks Zaporog, the Hetmans and the Otamans.

Though having, in his early poems, idealised the past of Ukraine, Shevchenko could not but feel the contrast existing between the glorious heroic times and the present sad condition of the population. In his early poems we see already his profound sympathy for the victims of serfdom and with the precarious conditions of life of the peas-

ants. He pities especially women's lot, the least protected from social injustice and the arbitrary power of the lord. The image of young girls seduced and abandoned haunts Shevchenko's poetical work from his earliest poems. He gives us a whole succession of tragic heroines of this type. In his first long poem „Katerina“ he shows us a tragic lot of a young Ukrainian peasant girl seduced and abandoned by a Russian officer. She becomes a mother, incurs the scorn of her village and is repudiated by her parents who send her to Muscovy to join her seducer. Poor „Katerina“ finds the end of her troubles at the bottom of a pond and her infant son is picked up by beggars and becomes a guide to a blind wandering minstrel.

„Katerina“ was followed by a series of similar poems and ballads: „The Nun Marianna“, „The Witch“, „The Waternymph“, „The Lily“, „The Princess“, „Petrus“, „Marina“, „The Vagabond.“ All these poems, his best perhaps in regard to their artistic form, deal with the tragic conditions created in the Ukrainian villages by the arbitrary power of the serf-owner over his subjects. The unhappy lot of young women victims of the

debauchery of their lords moves the poet in particular. And lastly, a long poem, „The Servant,“ describes the life of a mother who, after having exposed her child in order to be found by a rich and childless peasant-couple, enters their service and brings up her own son. On her death-bed she confesses to him that she is his mother. By purity of form, simplicity, almost biblical grandeur and the profoundly human idea of the expiation of an involuntary fault by a life of work and humiliation, this poem, it seems to us, could rank beside the masterpieces of world literature. „I know of no poet in the literature of the world who made himself so consistently, so hotly, so consciously the defender of the right of woman to a full human life.“ Thus says a modern Ukrainian poet Ivan Franko.*)

Since his first visit to Ukraine, in 1845, we see a marked change in Shevchenko's poetical work. Before this he knew only that part of Ukraine subject to Polish domination. Now he visited the Ukraine of the Het-

*) Ivan Franko: Taras Shevchenko. Slavonic Review. Vol. 3. London 1924/25 p. 116.

mans, that part of the country which preserved for more than a century its comparative independence and its national aristocracy. These Ukrainian nobles greeted Shevchenko now as their national poet.

But the impression made on Shevchenko by the social conditions here was no better: there also the past glory of the free Cossacks was no more, and the people were also enslaved. The Ukrainian nobles, bought over by the Russian government with privileges, and rights over their own countrymen, had forgotten the national traditions, forgotten the glorious past of their country, and were wallowing in crass materialism. The poet saw his native country in a different light, far different from the idealised image that he saw in his dreams in far away St. Petersburg. Everywhere he now saw oppression, the humiliation of human dignity, the demoralisation that even the best representatives of the dominating class no more noticed, but which painfully shocked him, the former serf. From this moment nothing could wipe out the heartrending image of this hell to which a once so beautiful land was reduced.

Everything leads us to think that during this visit to Ukraine Shevchenko made friends with some of the enlightened and cultivated representatives of the Ukrainian nobility, and under their influence his political and social opinions underwent a change.

He no longer viewed the historic past of Ukraine in the same idealized fashion. The idealization of the Cossack epoch gave place to a more critical view that sees the causes of present misfortune in the errors and faults of the national heroes themselves. Whereas before Shevchenko directed the point of his weapon against Poland and the intrigues of the Jesuits, his chief enemy is now to him the power that swallowed Poland as well as the Ukraine: it is Russia, or more exactly Russian Tsarism. It is to the absolutism of the Russian Tsars that he now ascribes the causes of all misfortunes that befell Ukraine. It was Catherine II that introduced serfdom in hitherto free Ukraine at the end of the XVIIIth century. The Russian Tsars destroyed the ancient liberties of the Ukrainian people. All his wrath, all his indignation are now concentrated on two chief representatives of the Russian Tsarism: Peter

I and Catherine II. A series of poems, most powerful and violent, are directed against these two monarchs, who, in the eyes of the poet, embody Russian despotism and tyranny.

The most perfect works of the poet, from the literary aspect, belong to this period until his imprisonment in 1847. Among his political poems „The Dream“ and the „Caucasus“ perhaps express his political opinions best.

„The Dream“ is a fantastic satire, inspired in form perhaps by Dante, but wholly original in content. He sees himself transported in a dream from Ukraine to St. Petersburg and shows us the panorama that opens before his eyes: the Russian capital built in the midst of swamps and marshes on the bones of thousands and thousands of workmen who perished in the most unhealthy working conditions on this poisonous soil. The next scene is an audience at the Tsar's and is drawn with expressions of the bitterest sarcasm. He shows us also the shadows of the Ukrainian Cossacks who, ordered in masses, as punishment from their native land to the building works of St. Petersburg, found also their death in the swamps; and the shadow

of the Hetman Polubotok who died in the fortress of SS. Peter and Paul for having defended before Tsar Peter the rights and liberties of the Ukraine. All these tragic shadows accuse the Tsar of cruelty and deceit. The monument of Peter I set up by Catherine II, with the inscription on it: „To the First from the Second,“ that was glorified as a symbol of the greatness of the Russian Empire, victorious and invincible, by the Russian poet Pushkin in his poem „The Rider of Bronze,“ wakes in the heart of the Ukrainian poet quite different reflections:

„This is the „First“ who crucified our Ukraine,
And the „Second“ gave the finishing stroke to the
victim.“

In the poem „The Caucasus,“ Shevchenko does not linger over the beauties of the landscape that captivated the Russian „Byronists“ Pushkin and Lermontov. He dwells no more on battles and romantic episodes of the war with the natives, that furnished so many happy subjects to those two poets. To Shevchenko, as to Shelley, the Caucasian mountains are the place where:

„From the dawn of the world
The eagle tortures Prometheus:
Every day pierces his breast
Tears out the heart...“

— the symbol of sufferings of the human race for the aspiration to the divine fire of liberty for which so many heroes have given their lives.

The indignation of the poet turned to the Russian Tsars, particularly Nicholas I and his system of imperial expansion which extinguished every spark of liberty on the expanses of the Russian Empire: „from Moldavia to Finland in all tongues, all keep the silence of happy contentment,“ says Shevchenko in derision. He accuses further the Tsars of „having spilt a sea of blood and tears big enough to drown therein all the Tsars and their descendants.“

The poet scourges this cruel political system that knows nothing better than „to build prisons and forge chains.“ He does not stop there, he accuses the whole of contemporary civilisation with its hypocrisy, its cupidity, this spirit of false Christianity that the Tsars, under the guise of bringing civilisation, wish to introduce into their vast empire

from the newly conquered Caucasus to the unlimited, unexplored Siberia.

But the poet is no pessimist, he does not lose hope, he is certain that: „The spirit is immortal and free in spite of the tyrants, and human speech cannot be stifled.“ He is sure that „liberty will rise from the dead, though in the meantime there are flowing rivers of blood.“

When we think that this burning poem was written at the time of wars for the conquest of the Caucasus, wars that roused the enthusiastic patriotism of Russian poets and of Russian population on the whole, we can understand the impression this poem made on his contemporaries. It was also one of the reasons for the cruel persecution of our poet by Tsar Nicholas I.

Shevchenko bore all his life this hatred of Tsarism. He preserved it during the years of exile and returned the same enemy of despotism. A number of his last poems concern despots, tyrants, autocratic rulers not only in Russia but everywhere in the world. This hatred that he bore towards Tsarism is only equal to his hatred of slavery: to him these two phenomena were intimately related.

The introduction of serfdom in the Ukraine, as late as the end of the XVIIIth century, met with considerable opposition. In Ukrainian literature the starting point of the moral protest against it was „The Ode on the Desolation of Slavery,“ written in 1787 by Count Kapnist, a Ukrainian patriot who sought abroad, namely in Prussia, support for the national aspirations of Ukraine. In Russia public opposition to serfdom was begun by Radishchev's „Travel from St. Petersburg to Moscow,“ published in 1790. In the works of a Ukrainian poet of the beginning of the XIXth century, Hulak Artemovski, we find also a satire on the conditions created by the introduction of serfdom. The „Brotherhood of SS. Cyril and Methodius,“ as we have already seen, had for their immediate object propaganda against serfdom. Shevchenko especially fought against it and contributed much to its abolition by influencing liberal public opinion which at that time, directly after the Crimean defeat and the death of Nicholas I, played for a certain time an important part and induced the young Tsar Alexander II to initiate liberal reforms. The influence of some of Shevchenko's poems in

bringing about the abolition of serfdom could be compared with the effect of the publication of „Uncle Tom's Cabin“ on the anti-slavery campaign in the United States.

Together with the Bible, Shevchenko's favourite reading was Shakespeare, especially after having seen Aldridge in St. Petersburg, one of the best known Shakespearian actors of the time. He was a mulatto from the United States, and was introduced to the London stage through Kean. The two former slaves became friends and Shevchenko left a record of this friendship in his various sketches from „Othello,“ where Aldridge played the leading part and also his portrait in pastel.

As an apostle of liberty and enemy of all kind of oppression, Shevchenko goes beyond the narrow limits of his country and those of the Russian Empire. In his poem „The Heretic or John Huss“ he gives us the glorification of the Czech reformer, champion of religious tolerance. John Huss is represented not only as a religious reformer but as a prophet of social equality. The culminating point of the poem — the death of Huss at the stake — is the real glorification of the vic-

tory of spirit over the body. The poem „Neophytes“ brings us to Rome in the first centuries of the Christian era and shows us a Roman mother, who hitherto indifferent to religious matters, becomes converted to the new faith in the arena, over the torn body of her son, a Christian martyr.

One of the favourite subjects of the poet, love of a mother for her child, is often to be found in Shevchenko's works. He attains the highest point in „Maria,“ with the touching image of the Virgin where her life is treated in the simple ingenuous manner of the popular apocriphic legends. „The sacrifice of one's own individuality for works of mercy, the surmounting of one's own sorrows and the dedication of all one's strength to the noble dream of the welfare of humanity — this ideal of woman has been left to us by Shevchenko as his dearest legacy. No wonder then that he saw above all in the work of Mary, the Mother of Jesus, the highest moral achievement of mankind, the great idea of human love which is the foundation of Christianity.“*)

*) Ivan Franko: Taras Shevchenko. Slavonic Review etc.

According to the opinion of Alfred Jensen, a Swede scholar, author of one of the latest biographies of our poet, „Taras Shevchenko has been not only a national poet, but also a universal genius, one of the lights of humanity.“

In the last decade of our century there appeared a number of research works on the advanced views of the poet and on the influences that contributed to the formation of his political opinions. After a thorough study of his works, his letters and the books he read, the conclusion was arrived at that Shevchenko was more highly educated than was hitherto supposed. He read widely in Russian and Polish and had extensive knowledge of history and foreign literatures. With the intuition of a genius he resolved the most complicated questions. Vassyl Shurat, a Ukrainian scholar in Lviv, has shown that Shevchenko was well read in all that was published abroad by the Polish emigrants after the repulse of the Polish rising in 1830. Some said that this influence on the poet should not be exaggerated, but still his hatred of the Tsars was more or less nourished from this source.

To-day in Soviet Ukraine, they try to represent Shevchenko not only as the prophet he was, but as the ideologist of the coming social revolution. They say that Shevchenko was well up in the theoretical problems of socialism and proofs are being found by them that, in the beginning of the 40's he was intimately connected with followers of Fourier who had in Russia Petrashevski as their leader. In order to prove that Shevchenko sympathised with a social revolution, his editors and commentators in Soviet Russia go so far as to falsify the text of his poems, eliminating his words on God, religion, changing whole expressions, substituting other words, in short—all that does not agree with communistic doctrines.

It is certain that having joined the „Brotherhood of SS. Cyril and Methodius,“ Shevchenko's sympathy for liberty was certainly deepened. But in my opinion sufficient emphasis was not laid upon the fact that Shevchenko, during his visits to Ukraine much frequented the society of Ukrainian nobles among whom at that time there were persons holding advanced liberal views on politics, and interested in all social ques-

tions. In fact his closest friends were among the members of the Ukrainian aristocracy: Lizohub, Tarnovski, Princess Repnin, Count de Balmain, General Kucharenko, who did not abandon him during the hardest times of his exile; their letters, their anxiety about him and the steps they took on his behalf in order to alleviate his misfortune prove their solicitude. They appreciated him especially as a national poet and their influence on him was certainly important.

Can we, as is only too often repeated by communists to-day, consider Shevchenko as an ideologist of the social revolution? Evidently not. Those who assert it quote certain passages especially from the „Testament“ where the poet appeals to his countrymen „to break the chains“... They do not wish to understand that Shevchenko was far from desiring a bloody revolution, but that he foresaw it, menacing the dominating classes unless they made the decision to set their serfs free. He appealed to the whole Ukrainian nation, nobles and peasants, entreating the nobles to renounce their privileges and trying to bring about a good understanding between the classes.

the poet of having approved of the horrors he described in the „Haidamaky,“ because he drew a powerful image of this popular rising of Ukrainians against the Poles.

It was not in the least in Shevchenko's nature to incite to cruel actions prompted by the spirit of vengeance. It would be an error to consider his Muse as an instrument of violence. It is necessary to remember that Shevchenko was a profoundly religious man; that the Bible was his favourite book especially during the years of exile and that this influence left a marked stamp on his poetical work. Not only did he take biblical texts as mottos for several of his poems, but he also left translations and paraphrases of a number of Psalms and fragments of the Prophets. His whole work is deeply impregnated with a sincere faith in God as the supreme ideal of justice and goodness.

The idea of love and mercy runs through Shevchenko's poetic work from one end to the other. His most cruelly abused characters, his martyrs, his most tragic heroes forgive their oppressors and tormentors. In the „Neophytes“ the Christian martyrs forgive Nero; the unhappy man in the „Vagabond“

forgives the seducer of his sweetheart, the squire of their village, though he had an opportunity of satisfying his craving for vengeance. This high idea of mercy puts the work of Shevchenko on the highest level that human sentiment can reach.

Kulish, one of the Ukrainian literary critics and historians, himself a poet of merit, said about our poet: „the whole beauty of Ukrainian poetry was revealed to Shevchenko alone,“ wishing, no doubt, to say that no one penetrated as deeply as he the mysterious sources of the poetical treasure of the Ukrainian people and transformed in such a consummate manner the popular themes and devices of their folklore. The whole wealth of the popular poetry, from the ancient epics of the XIIth century relating the expedition of Prince Igor, down to the „Dumy“ rhapsodies of the Cossacks, and charming lyrical folk-songs, found its synthesis in the poetical work of Shevchenko. His power of expression, sweetness, tenderness and delicacy of sentiment, his wealth of images and rhythmic harmony — all is to be found there, and therein lay the secret of his magic pow-

er over all those who understand Ukrainian.

A beautiful appreciation of Shevchenko was given by Ivan Franko in an article written on the centenary of the birth of the poet, but printed only in 1924, ten years later, in the „Slavonic Review“:

„He was a peasant's son and has become a prince in the realm of the spirit.

„He was a serf, and has become a Great Power in the commonwealth of human culture.

„He was an unschooled layman, and has shown to professors and scholars newer and freer paths.

„He sighed for ten years under the Russian soldiery, and has done more for the freedom of Russia than ten victorious armies.

„Fate pursued him cruelly throughout life, yet could not turn the pure gold of his soul to rust, his love of humanity to hatred, or his trust in God to despair.

„Fate spared him no suffering, but did not stint his pleasures, which welled up from a healthy spring of life.

„And it withheld till after death its best and costliest prize — undying fame and the ever new delight which his works call forth in millions of human hearts“. (Ivan Franko: Taras Shevchenko, „Slavonic Review,“ Vol. 3, 1924, London).

Shevchenko's poetical works exercised a powerful influence on Ukrainian literature and the Ukrainian national movement. A. Grigoriev, the well known Russian literary critic, called Shevchenko „the last bard and the first great poet of a great new Slavonic literature.“ These words convey some idea of the place that Shevchenko occupies in Ukrainian literature. On the other hand, Kulish, speaking at the burial of the poet, said: „all that is really noble in Ukraine will gather under the banner of Shevchenko.“

His volume of verse, the „Kobzar,“ has been, since its first appearance, the most widely read book in the Ukraine. It is a kind of national Gospel. The memory of the poet is the object of exceptional veneration, and the day of his death (which is also his birthday) has ever since been celebrated as a national holiday.

On this day there is no place in his native country where a church service is not celebrated. Meetings, lectures and concerts are held in his memory with recitation of his poems, many of them having been put to music by our best composer Lissenko. This is often done not only in towns but also in small provincial places even in villages. Thousands of schools, libraries, popular reading-rooms and theatres, not only in Ukraine, but also in the Ukrainian colonies in America and Asia, are named after him, including the Scientific Society in Lviv, Galicia, which was the most important scientific body in Ukraine before the founding in 1918 of the Ukrainian Academy in Kiev.

The grave of the poet is an object of pious pilgrimages. As early as 1876 Emile Durand, a French scholar visiting the Ukraine, wrote: *) „The grave of the poet is never solitary. As soon as the first sunbeams in the spring have melted the snow that covers the country, pilgrims of a new fashion, merry lay pilgrims, come from all sides and stop at the foot of the barrow.

*) In the „Revue des deux Mondes.“

They make their meals in the open air sitting on the grass, recite and sing the poems of the poet according to their free fancy. It would be impossible to find elsewhere a poet to whom the almost illiterate crowd would thus render homage such as is usually reserved for sanctuaries or saints."

This homage has increased considerably since then. The war and subsequent events have hindered the erection of the monument of Shevchenko in Kiev for which considerable sums have been collected by popular subscription. Is it necessary to say that the most lasting monument to the poet is erected in the hearts of his countrymen and countrywomen?

The popularity of Shevchenko and his influence is not limited to his native country. In 1860, in his lifetime, his poems were translated into Russian by the best Russian poets. Several new editions and translations have since appeared, not only in Russian, but also in Polish, Bulgarian, Serbian, Czech and other languages. Bulgarian literature especially was influenced to a great degree by the poetical work of Shevchenko. The Bulgarians had fought so long for their national

independence, that they, more than others, found sympathy with his ideas so characteristic for the aspirations of national independence.

Besides the translations into Slavonic languages, there are also those in French, German, English, Italian, Swedish. In England there appeared in the „Westminster Review“ (1880), in the article of W. R. Morfill „The peasant poet of Russia,“ a biography of Shevchenko, and in 1911 a collection of Shevchenko's poems in a beautiful translation by E. L. Voynich with a biography of the poet. A. J. Hunter published in Winnipeg 1922 a volume of his excellent translations of Shevchenko's poems with biographical fragments and in 1933 there appeared, also in Winnipeg, a volume of „Ukrainian Songs and Lyrics“ translated by Honore Ewach, young and very promising poet, that contains half a dozen of Shevchenko's short lyrical poems; about twenty very good translations appeared in the „Ukrainian Weekly,“ New York, 1933-36, mostly by V. Semenyna.

The name of Shevchenko is to his countrymen a symbol of national sentiment and

of aspirations to national independence. Likewise his work is, for a foreigner who would wish to know the life, the soul and the spirit of the Ukrainian people, a true mirror which marvellously reflects the spiritual image of Ukraine.

§

*Some of Shevchenko's poems
in English.*

The Kobzar of the Ukraine. By Alexander J.
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