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PANTELEIMON KULISH:
A UKRAINIAN ROMANTIC CONSERVATIVE

The Ukrainian national revival dates from the early nineteenth century and is closely tied to Romanticism. The greatest Ukrainian romantic poet, Taras Shevchenko (1814–1861) was also the chief promoter of the national awakening of his country, which had lost the autonomy it had enjoyed under Cossack rule in the seventeenth century. The Cossack past fuelled the romantic imagination of Shevchenko and his contemporaries who, under the influence of German idealist philosophers (Schelling, Herder) and Russian and Polish Romanticism, attempted in their works to carve out a new national identity for the Ukraine. When this identity began to emerge in mid-century it owed its existence to these men of letters, primarily poets. Among them was Panteleimon Kulish (1817–1897), second in importance to Shevchenko. Although one of his first works was a long poem 'Ukraina' (1843), Kulish was more drawn to the historical novel and was strongly influenced by Walter Scott. His poem was written in Ukrainian, but his first historical novel, *Mykhailo Charnyshenko* (1843) was in Russian. Kulish gradually changed to Ukrainian in his prose, thus sustaining the efforts of Ukrainian writers to establish a new literary language and to stress their cultural separateness from Russia. Unlike Shevchenko, who was born a serf, Kulish came of an impoverished family descended from the Cossacks. His formal education was scanty in the sense that he never completed the *gymnasium* and only audited lectures at Kiev University, but, endowed with high native intelligence, he read widely in foreign languages and became steeped in the study of Ukrainian folklore and history. This was also the main preoccupation of the small circle of Kievan intellectuals led by Kulish, the historian Mykola Kostomarov and the poet Shevchenko. Shevchenko, who had gained his freedom from serfdom and who now lived and painted in St Petersburg, was the author of a small collection of poems *The Minstrel* (Kobzar, 1840) which became the cornerstone of modern Ukrainian literature. Soon, in 1845, Kulish left for St Petersburg.

A few months before his departure from Kiev, Kulish, Shevchenko, Kostomarov, and a few others formed a secret society – the Brother-

hood of Sts Cyril and Methodius, dedicated to the enlightenment of the peasants and the creation of a pan-Slavic union of which Ukraine would be a constituent member. The 'brethren' were particularly dedicated to *narod* (the people), a word which in both Russian and Ukrainian could also mean *nation*. Modern Ukrainian nationalism is often traced to this origin and to this particular Kievan cycle. Yet, as is often the case, the application of the term 'nationalism' is an oversimplification. Within the Brotherhood there was a wide spectrum of views, though there was also general agreement as to the ultimate goals. While some (Shevchenko) were more radically inclined, Kulish held a conservative position. In 1846, while still in St Petersburg, he even published a small 'pocket-book' for landowners, in which he opposed the abolition of serfdom and pleaded for a more humanitarian treatment of serfs by the landlords (Hladky, 1846). This was written while his friend Shevchenko was fulminating in his poems against the tsar and the entire tsarist system of government. Kulish's conservatism is usually explained by Soviet critics as being due to his class origin, but there is more to it than that. He himself recognized that, at the age of 28, he was a conservative by temperament. In his autobiography, written in the third person, Kulish stressed his 'aristocratism' which showed itself in "the orderliness of his tidy person". He "loved order in things and time . . . searched for an equilibrium of heart and mind" and his ideal was "cold energy, silent yet unconquerable by either happiness or sorrow" (Kulish, 1868). These qualities and aspirations of the young Kulish were hardly those of a Romantic. His departure from that stereotype was, however, facilitated by the conservatism inherent in Ukrainian Romanticism which managed to combine the individualism and radicalism of Western European Romanticism with the specific task confronting it in the Ukraine. This task was, first of all, to rediscover and preserve the national way of life. Research in folklore and history was aimed at the conservation, not the demolition of old values. This research was encouraged by the official policy of the tsarist government which, in the 1830s, embarked on the development of *narodnost* (nationality or national spirit) as the third part of the official slogan "autocracy, orthodoxy, nationality".¹ The originator of, the spokesman for, this tsarist policy was the minister for public instruction, Count Uvarov, and although he "assigned a passive and secondary role to the people" (Thaden, 1964), the romantic nationalists and the Slavophiles used the official doctrine for the propagation of their ideas. There were also other supporters of what became known

as 'official nationality' – the promoters of nationalistic Orthodoxy. All those groups, including the Romantics, were deeply conservative. The new policy encouraged Ukrainians to explore their own *narodnost* as well as to look for support among other Slavs, not necessarily Russians, but Czechs and Poles. Kulish himself became very friendly with the conservative Polish writer Michal Grabowski and other Polish intellectuals. It became clear to him that the Ukraine, caught in the middle between Russia and Poland, had to reach an understanding with both her neighbors rather than develop in isolation. This view, which he developed later and to which he held fast all his life, was not shared by many Ukrainian nationalists. Yet it was the hallmark of his conservatism, since, "conservatives glorified in variety. Everywhere men were different because everywhere they were steeped in particular national and local traditions and customs" (Dowler, 1982, p. 12).

The activities of the Kievan circle came to an abrupt end in the spring of 1847. Early that year Kulish and his newly-wed wife were on their way abroad. They planned to go for an extended tour of Western Europe and Shevchenko was to join them later. The Kulishes reached Warsaw in March. Everything looked very promising. Then, without any warning, Kulish was arrested during a reception in Warsaw. The other members of the Brotherhood of Sts Cyril and Methodius were swept into the police net at the same time and all of them were brought to trial *in camera* in St Petersburg. Informed of the existence of the Brotherhood by a student's denunciation, the Third Section (the secret police) charged the Ukrainians with illegal clandestine activity. The interrogation of the accused lasted over a month, after which stiff sentences were handed down to nearly all the members of the Brotherhood. The most severe punishment was meted out to Shevchenko, who was sentenced to serve for life as a private in the Orenburg Corps. After ten years of exile this sentence was abrogated and the poet was released, unforgiving and unchanged in his attitude of no compromise with the regime. Kulish was to be exiled to Tula for a period of three years, a sentence which was comparatively mild. Yet the arrest and the interrogation, during which he denied his participation in the Brotherhood, were a great trauma for him. Not only was his career (he had been promised a university appointment) halted, but he was convicted of disloyalty and crime. Although privately he never acknowledged his guilt, soon after the trial he began to write penitent letters of recantation, hoping to alleviate his sentence by submission. Shevchenko be-

haved more courageously and the harshness of the sentence produced no submission in him. Kulish, however, cringed before the authorities and yet had to remain in exile until December 1859, when he regained his freedom.

The bitter years of exile did not make him abandon the Ukrainian cause. After his liberation he slowly returned to it, but now his approach was dictated by caution and circumspection. Tsarist repression very often resulted in compromise rather than in continued defiance. It is the defiant ones, however, who were preserved for posterity. This is one of the reasons why Shevchenko's name is better remembered today than Kulish's. A prodigious and prolific writer, Kulish set out first of all to complete the work he had begun earlier. He published his two-volume collection of Ukrainian folk literature *Notes on Southern Rus (Zapiski o iuzhnoi Rusi, 1856–57)* and the novel *The Black Council (Chorna rada, 1857)* in Ukrainian. They alone secured him lasting fame in Ukrainian literature. In the epilogue to the novel, which he published in Russian in the Slavophile journal *Russian Conversation (Russkaia beseda)*, he pleaded for the unity of Russia and the Ukraine, each with a different culture, but with a common historical origin (Kievan Rus). In future, the Ukrainian contribution would be in the field of culture, Russia's in politics. The call for this symbiosis was not popular among the Ukrainians, while the Russians were at no time likely to consider them as equal partners. It was regarded as the creed of a solitary eccentric and went unheeded by either side. Kulish, in the meantime, started to work on the first biography of Gogol, who was to him the embodiment of such a symbiosis, as a writer of Ukrainian origin contributing his masterpieces to Russia. At about the same time Kulish became acquainted with the Slavophile Sergei Aksakov, whom he visited on his estate. In March 1855 tsar Nicholas I died and many intellectuals greeted the ascendancy of the new tsar, Alexander II, with high hopes. Kulish was sympathetic to Aksakov's ideas about the peasantry being the backbone of Russia's renewal. But at the same time Kulish envisaged the task of the Ukrainian intelligentsia being, as he wrote to Aksakov, "to reach that time when the seeds they have sown will produce a rich harvest and may even feed the tribe [the Russians] which now ridicules them."² A fully developed Ukrainian culture, he believed, must rest on folk culture, but, unlike the Slavophiles who based culture on the Russian peasant commune (*obshchina*), Kulish wanted the free peasant homestead (*khutir*) to be the basic unit in the Ukraine. He himself had been born

on a *khutir* and later in life he returned to this type of independent farming retreat. In 1861 Kulish published his *Letters from the Homestead (Lysty z khutora)*, outlining his conservative philosophy. Village life, especially on a *khutir*, he regarded as far superior to life in the city. Moreover, the village is Ukrainian, the city – Russian, and by sending children to city schools the Ukrainians risked losing their national identity. He was skeptical of modern urban civilization, except for America, where “it seems to have taken a good turn”.³ This retreat to the *khutir* remained Kulish’s credo even later in life, when he himself settled on one and was very aggravated by his rural existence.

Kulish’s conservatism was put to the test by events which unfolded in Russia, Poland, and the Ukraine in the 1860s. In 1861 serfdom was abolished. Kulish welcomed this turn of events and attempted, unsuccessfully, to translate the text of the tsarist proclamation into Ukrainian. The language of his translation proved unacceptable to the authorities. These authorities were preparing to further tighten the screws on the development of Ukrainian culture, and in 1863 the Minister of the Interior, Valuev, issued a secret circular, banning Ukrainian Sunday schools and prohibiting many publications in Ukrainian. While most Ukrainian intellectuals actively tried to oppose these measures Kulish obtained a high official post in Warsaw and was indirectly instrumental in the tsarist repression of the Polish movement after the unsuccessful uprising in 1863. It seems that Kulish deliberately chose to collaborate with the repressive regime, fearing that any open opposition would only lead to more severe repression. Such was the logic of a conservative, who hoped that the authorities would in time seek a dialogue with the opposition. As far as Russian official policy was concerned, this hope was as vain in 1863 as it was in 1983.

In the Ukraine things got worse, not better. While the Ukrainian intelligentsia began to organize cultural and educational circles, called *hromady* (communities), the government began new attacks on all those who were either involved in them or who worked for Ukrainian culture independently. In 1876 tsar Alexander II signed a secret *ukaz*, banning virtually all publications in Ukrainian. Kulish was very disappointed, but he was by now too far away from the mainstream of Ukrainian intellectual life to be able to join the opposition. Instead, after abandoning government service in 1867, he travelled and wrote, concentrating his attention on the Cossacks. He had discerned in the Cossack movement some individuals who had tried during the Cossack wars

against Poland in 1648 to enrol the help of wealthy magnates in their opposition to the abuses of Polish rule. Yet he came to the conclusion that the Cossack movement as a whole was both destructive and anarchic and he did not hesitate to condemn it *in toto* as the darkest period of Ukrainian history. Quite justifiably he linked the Cossack movement with the peasant *haidamak* rebellions of the eighteenth century, in which he saw only senseless bloodshed and violence. He scoffed at his contemporaries, populists and radicals alike, for seeking to glorify the Cossacks and emulate the *narod*. Peasants, according to Kulish, needed culture, not politics and to this task of bringing culture to the Ukraine, mainly through his translations of the Bible and Shakespeare, Kulish devoted the rest of his long life. His historical works, especially *The History of the Reunification of Rus (Istoriia vossoedineniia Rusi, 1874–7)* and *The Separation of Little Russia from Poland (Otpadenie Malorosii ot Polshi, 1888–89)*, although unpopular with his compatriots, were the first attempts at Ukrainian revisionist writing from a conservative point of view. Rejected and deserted by his compatriots he retreated to the *khutir* to continue his scholarly work alone. Before doing this he did occasionally show a desperate desire to demonstrate his frustration with official policy. The last time he did so was in 1882 when, on a visit to Galicia (the part of the Ukraine under Austrian rule) he decided to give up his Russian citizenship and become an Austrian subject. After a while, however, he changed his mind and returned to Kiev. Although on the surface controlled and rational, Kulish was a very emotional individual and was known to his friends as ‘fiery Kulish’. Unable to secure for himself a satisfactory position in government service and constantly frustrated in his efforts to pursue a literary and scholarly career, he was saved solely by his own extraordinary capacity for work and by the companionship of his long-suffering wife.

Where does he stand in relation to the Russian conservative thinkers of the day? Some, like Sergei Aksakov, exerted, as we mentioned, a strong influence on him. His early career in St Petersburg was assisted by A. Pletnev, the rector of the university and a staunch conservative. Yet neither of these men had a profound influence on Kulish because they showed no sympathy for the Ukrainian cause. The only Russian with whom Kulish was very much attuned in his view of literature was the critic, Apollon Grigorev. While belonging to conservative rather than radical intellectual circles, Grigorev considered himself a descendant of Vissarion Belinsky, whose historical criticism of literature he supplanted

with his own theory of organic criticism (Dowler, 1982, pp. 45ff). One of the tenets of this criticism was the view that “the artist was the full representative of the entire breadth of national life . . . and was the voice of the ideals of the whole people” (Dowler, 1982, p. 47). Moreover, art was inseparable from morality, while at the same time it expressed the national identity. This identity was contained not only in the life and more of the common people, as the Slavophiles believed, but in the life of the entire nation. Grigorev was cognizant of the birth of modern Ukrainian literature, wrote an article on Shevchenko (in which he also mentioned Kulish) and was very sympathetic to the Ukrainians. This alone would have endeared him to Kulish, since few Russian critics viewed Ukrainian literature favourably. But there was also Grigorev’s view of national literature as an organism which appealed to Kulish. This organism, rooted in national history and culture, was often compared by Kulish to a tree. It must be cultivated and watered but there must be no interference with its growth. Any attempts at social or governmental reforms were regarded by Kulish as threats to cut the tree or its branches and he rejected these radical measures as inadmissible. This, surely, was the hallmark of a true conservative.

At the same time Kulish was hostile to Russian revolutionary thinkers, whose philosophy also had its roots in conservatism. On several occasions he crossed swords with the arch-reactionary journalist of the time, Mikhail Katkov (1818–1887), who was also a great enemy of the Ukrainian cause. The Russian intellectual scene was divided between the radicals and the ultra-conservatives, and Kulish, quite properly, belonged to the moderate conservatives and was therefore outside the Russian intellectual battles. Among the Ukrainians he represented the right wing, but even here he was not doctrinaire and had friends among the Ukrainian socialists. Late in his life he corresponded with two prominent Ukrainian socialists, Mykhailo Drahomanov and Mykhailo Pavlyk, and admired their cultural activities while disagreeing with their politics. He was aware that a nation had to unite all its human resources, regardless of any political affiliations.

There is no evidence that Kulish was familiar with the writing of Edmund Burke, the father of European conservatism. Another conservative thinker, Friedrich von Savigny, was close to Kulish’s philosophy. Kulish translated into Russian part of Macaulay’s *History of England* and admitted that Macaulay’s Whig philosophy appealed to him. On another occasion, however, in a letter, he wrote that he was “not quite a

Tory and not quite a Whig". If conservatism stands for "protection of the social order – family, neighborhood, local community, and region foremost – from the ravishment of the centralized political state" (Nisbet, 1982), then Kulish may be called a conservative. Though never advocating political activism, through his publications he helped to create a sense of Ukrainian cultural identity which proved a great obstacle to tsarist authoritarianism. After 1882 Kulish retired to his *khutir* and lived the life of a recluse. He continued working tirelessly on two major scholarly projects: translations into Ukrainian of the Bible and of Shakespeare's works. With the help of others the Bible was published in Ukrainian posthumously, as were ten plays of Shakespeare in his translation. No mean achievement for one man, who was determined to build the nation's cultural foundations on traditional values and well-tested premises.

Kulish's reputation after the 1917 revolution underwent drastic changes. At first, during the liberal 1920s, he was highly regarded and his works were published and studied. A leading communist writer, Mykola Khvylovy, praised him as a "true European, a person who neared the Western European intellectual" (Khvylovy, 1925). Then, with the onset of Stalinism, Kulish was banned and labelled a 'bourgeois nationalist'. Today he is still virtually proscribed in the Soviet Ukraine. Some studies of Kulish have appeared in the Ukrainian Diaspora, where he is disliked for his pro-Russian views. The Soviet ban on Kulish is an attempt to eradicate from Ukrainian literary history a major figure whose views are unacceptable today chiefly because they were the views of a conservative.

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NOTES

¹ Cf. N. V. Riasanovsky, *Nicholas I and Official Nationality in Russia, 1825–55*. Berkeley, 1959.

² As quoted in G. Luckyj, *Panteleimon Kulish; A Sketch of His Life and Times* (New York, 1983), p. 66.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 111.

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