

## SHEVCHENKO'S MIND AND THOUGHT

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This popular sketch of Shevchenko's philosophy by the late Academician, Stepan Smal Stockyj, was written in 1914 and published in his *T. Shevchenko; Interpretatsiyi* (Warsaw, 1934). It appears here as a tribute to the greatest Ukrainian poet on the ninety-first anniversary of his death.

Has anyone among us the self-confidence to define the significance Shevchenko had for us in the past, still has in the present and will have in the future? Or has Shevchenko's bequest to the Ukrainian people perhaps been exhausted?

The answer is that it is inexhaustible since Shevchenko's works glow with eternal truth, everlasting beauty, and most profound goodness. They are constantly revived by their own power, generating fresh thoughts, awakening new life. This power is indeed magical, for it moves the souls and consciences of Shevchenko's countrymen so deeply that their hearts are fired in spite of their stony indifference, so that a never ceasing revolution is created in their thinking, their understanding, and their conduct. Such is the power of a great and true art, to penetrate to the very core of man's being, that he is forced to think, to understand, to suffer, to rejoice, to weep, to love, to hate, and finally to act. All readers of Shevchenko's works must have been under the spell of this power, often feeling unable to express in words what they had learned with their hearts.

The fact that Shevchenko, a peasant serf, was a prophet and martyr for the cause of truth and liberty as well as a poet shows what great moral and cultural forces and treasures lie hidden in the undifferentiated masses of the Ukrainian people. These treasures must be the more valued if we consider that even serfdom could not destroy them. Serfdom was that "hell on earth," that deep sea of lawlessness, depravity, immorality, bestiality, and cruel exploitation of the weak by the strong, revealed to us in image by Shevchenko.

Serfdom was the most terrible scourge brought by the Muscovite protectorate to the Ukraine. The people were literally transformed into slaves, and the moral degradation it brought about was indeed

terrible for both the enslaved and the slaveowners. Serf and master were equally enslaved under the curse of bondage which consisted always of a hierarchy of bondsmen some of whom in their despotic tyranny over others had no desire or urge to work themselves, regarding all labor with contempt and looking upon their neighbors as machines.

The Ukraine, once free and, during the times of the Hetmans and the Sich, led by her freedom loving Cossacks and possessing many free state institutions as late as the eighteenth century, fell into such bondage that Ukrainian noblemen and landowners became inhuman slavedrivers, themselves tied to the system so faithfully portrayed by Shevchenko in his *Epistle* and *A Dream*.

Where there is serfdom and injustice, where a "people are harnessed to a heavy yoke and plow up and sow evil," where "people are sold or lost as stakes in cardplaying," where "trade is carried on in truth and human blood," where "henchmen tyrannize the people," and "the people full of hate are raging against the masters," there nothing good can spring.

Where springs no sacred liberty  
No goodness shall there ever be.<sup>1</sup>

The times into which Taras Shevchenko was born, the son of a peasant serf, were full of terror like the time of his childhood and his youth. Even during the reign of Alexander I, Russian absolutism was considerably strengthened as a result of Napoleon's unsuccessful campaign. After the suppression of the Decembrist rising in 1825, extreme reaction, and, as Herzen described it, brutality, imbecility, cynicism, and inhumanity beyond the scope of ordinary language to express held complete sway in Russia. Suffice it to say that Belinsky, the most enlightened Russian of that time, compared the reign of Nicholas I to the rule of a gang of thieves and robbers.

In such a time Taras Shevchenko had the courage to demand economic, social, and political liberties for the people. For this he paid dearly at the hands of the tsarist police, but set against that

<sup>1</sup> All translations from Shevchenko's poems in this article are literal and do not aim at poetic effect.

cold bestiality all the brighter shone his genius which in its glory equals such great names as those of Gogol and Turgenev, the pride of Russian literature of that time.

A poet's task, according to Shevchenko, is not to entertain nor to assuage either his own or his reader's cravings, nor to feed the whims of a sensitive soul enveloped in spleen. It is an obligation so deep and serious, so noble and highminded that few of the world's great writers could match it. Shevchenko places the poet together with the prophet, sent to earth by "God out of love for his children," in order that men might learn God's love and wisdom, and who then teaches people "how to live," and "instills the message of love, truth, goodness — and the highest value of all; *bratolyubiye*, (love of one's neighbor)." A poet similarly strives to guide his people.

All his life Shevchenko dedicated himself to a ceaseless struggle for truth and liberty. These he vigilantly defended and for these he suffered. Against the torturer and tyrant who crucified the people, against lord and lordling he let fly his barbed words, in defense of injured humanity and of subjugated Ukraine. Yet this was done not out of hatred for the tyrants, but out of a most profound love for mankind and from a desire that the tyrants, too, should recognize their inhumanity.

He teaches us

To walk along good paths,  
 To love the holy God,  
 To care for a brother,  
 And to do good to everyone.

He commands us to "defend the truth," even "to die in its defense," while his testament calls on us to "break the chains of slavery."

Love, truth, and freedom formed for Shevchenko the basis of both individual and collective national life. They are those moral forces which permit us to reach the highest level of perfection and culture, and which will bring "peace and happiness to men on earth."

Shevchenko's poetry is permeated by the keenest moral sense which not only wakens our conscience and steels our hearts, but lifts our souls ever higher, towards the ultimate truth, to God. Amid the rottenness and moral depravity of the Russia of his day, amid the obscurantism of obsessed bureaucrats, when

Ukraine, in a deep sleep

Lay covered with weeds, abloom with mildew,  
In puddles, in mud hid her heart,  
And into the cold hollow let in the snakes

Taras Shevchenko becomes the prophet of a new life, proclaiming it in the language of unprecedented courage which like a "double-edged knife slits apart the rotten heart and drains away the infected blood." The hearts of his countrymen he enlivens with "pure and holy Cossack blood," tearing off "the chains of evil night," which "shackle the free intelligence," and wakening everyone to new life.

Although it would be true to say that with Shevchenko Ukrainian literature ceased to be the pastime of the aristocracy, the ethical tendency of Shevchenko's poetry is based not only on the deeply moral instincts of a peasant soul but is rooted also in the European philosophy and literature of his time. As a result of the French Revolution which broke out because of the spiritual upheaval of the eighteenth century, shaking the foundations of the old social and political order, progressive-minded people all over Europe sought to discover the principles of a new and better way of life, wanting to understand the purpose of life in all its aspects, and hoping to arrive at a system which would be both good and secure. Since any political action in this direction was impossible at that time, all efforts were devoted to the inner life of man. Hence greater significance was ascribed to human emotions, and a deep lyricism marks that epoch in literature. Man, his relations to his fellows, to society, and to the world at large became the subject of both philosophy and poetry, while poetry itself became more philosophical.

In the moral morass then spread over the whole of Russia and

the Ukraine, there loomed before Shevchenko social and ethical problems which, because of conditions in the Ukraine, impressed themselves more vividly upon him than upon contemporary Russian writers. Conscious of his high calling, he painted, analyzed, and critically dissected life in the Ukraine, uncovering most painful wounds in the social system, and with his poetic gift enabling others to see that evil reflected as in a mirror, while appealing to them to realize the evil of their ways. In particular, the woman's hard lot finds the deepest compassion in Shevchenko's poetry.

Shevchenko became most fully aware of social injustice during his three journeys across the Ukraine undertaken between 1843 and 1845. In spite of the great receptions given in his honor by Ukrainian landlords, they made most unhappy impressions on the poet. In his letters to Kukharenko (1943-44) he wrote: "Last year I was in the Ukraine,<sup>2</sup> at the Mezhyhorsky Spas, and Khortytsya, and wherever I went I cried. Our Ukraine has been so plundered by the infidel Germans<sup>3</sup> and the Muscovites, confound them all, that there seem to be no people left, but the cursed Germans, and nothing is heard but laments."

Shevchenko's heart was deeply wounded at the sight of serfdom with its attendant inhumanities and the general national, social, and moral ignorance of the landowning class which, having no understanding of the people's and the country's needs, aped everything that was foreign with arrogance and pretension. After being away for fourteen years Shevchenko was now able at a very close range to see at the country balls, entertainments, and dances what filled him so much with disgust. That is why, according to Princess Repnina, he "folded his wings and fell upon the earth with all the weight of his heart." Princess Barbara Repnina, whom Shevchenko called his "guardian-angel," his "sister," and his "conscience," was very worried when Taras was sometimes seen at that time in the company of notorious drunkards. However, Shevchenko's poetry written during that period discloses the best of

<sup>2</sup> From 1829 to 1843 Shevchenko lived first in Vilno and then at St. Petersburg.

<sup>3</sup> Shevchenko often used the word "German" to describe the Russian bureaucracy.

reasons for his spiritual condition. This was the result of what he had seen and heard in the Ukraine. He wrote that

If one should tell the truth  
About any of these magnates,  
Hell itself would be afraid,  
And our lordlings would  
Surprise Dante himself.

His experiences during the journeys in the Ukraine led the poet to that utter despair which may be found in all his poems written between 1843 and 1846. Only by knowing what he had experienced can we understand his song (*dumka*):

Why am I sad? Why am I forlorn?  
Why does my heart, my poor child,  
Cry and lament?  
My heart is oppressed.  
What do you wish? What hurts you so?  
Do you want to drink, or to eat, or to sleep?  
Sleep my heart, sleep for ever,  
All uncovered and crushed.  
Let the hateful people rave.  
Shut your eyes, my heart.

By people, Shevchenko means here not the ordinary folk, but their masters, the hated landlords. Such was the dominant mood induced by Shevchenko's three years of sad experiences in his relations with people.

People whom

The heart was eager  
To love and live with

turned out to be "not men, but snakes."

It is not the poet's personal misfortune which is the source of his sadness. The reason is that

I do not see even one little child who is happy.  
All is in tears, in ruins,  
I would gladly hide myself

But I know not where.  
Whenever I look — there is no truth.  
Everywhere God is reviled.

Unlike those Ukrainian landlords who had invited him to their feasts, Shevchenko could not remain indifferent to human suffering. The thought of his suffering homeland seldom left his mind.

My songs fly out like a swarm,  
One presses on the heart, another rends it,  
The third is crying quietly  
Inside the heart, where God may not see it.  
To whom shall I show it?  
Who will welcome its message?  
Discover the power of its words?  
All are deaf and bent down,  
In chains, indifferent all. . .

What grieved him most was that people are deaf and indifferent to everything; although oppressed by heavy chains, they yet sell their children to Moscow and regard their service to the henchmen of the Ukraine as patriotism. No one dares to defend "honor, glory, equality and freedom of the land," as Taras Bulba did when he killed his own son, Andrew, or as Gonta, the hero of the *Haydamaky* did.

However, Shevchenko's deep love of mankind and his own country saved him from despair and spurred him to action. All his energies centered therefore on an attempt to rescue men from moral decay and to dispel the dark night over the Ukraine. He decided to follow his own advice, given in the poem *Tryzna*:

I shall sing no new song  
Of the glory of my fatherland.  
You must compose a stern psalm  
Of man's lawlessness.

Such stern exhortation we see in Shevchenko's *Dream*, *Ivan Hus*, *The Great Grave*, *Subotiv*, *The Caucasus*, *The Epistle*, *Kholodny Yar*, and the *Psalms of David*. In all of them the social and political evils in the Ukraine are exposed as immoral and placed be-

fore the judgment of men. In this way the poet states his case as it were before a parliament. Morality is regarded as governing not merely personal relations but society too and mankind as a whole, since it deeply affects the whole body politic.

In his poems Shevchenko lashes out not only against the tyrants themselves, but also against the hirelings of Moscow and Warsaw, against Ukrainian renegades. He is full of boundless compassion for his country's suffering, but also of anger against all those who have caused it. Inspired by an unshakeable faith in his people and by an everpresent hope that "truth and freedom will rise," Shevchenko rallies his countrymen with his famous "fight on, victory is yours." His is a genuine and deep patriotism which is not a blind love of his country but a love for all men, the most noble sentiment which found best expression in his poetry.

A keen reader of the Bible, Shevchenko follows Christ's teaching in that he is ready "to pray for the brute henchman," and fights against him not "with fire and sword," but with the help of "truth and love." These convictions Shevchenko came to hold while still a youth, when he read the Scriptures and "wrote down" the philosophy of Skovoroda; they are, in fact, a continuation of Skovoroda's philosophy. Much earlier than Tolstoy, Shevchenko came to the conclusion that "if love and holy wisdom" reigned among men and the teachings of prophets were listened to there would be no need "to forge chains and build prisons; no need even for a tsar."

The analysis of moral issues naturally led Shevchenko to the problem of religion, since ethics is an important element of religion. The official hypocritical attitude of the Russian Church also demanded a clear reply. Shevchenko's religion might best be described as a form of deism, not based on any dogma or strictures but spontaneous and free-spirited like life itself. He does not accept any compromises. Recognizing only one law of true religion, the law of boundless love and absolute truth and justice, he measures by it all human deeds. Love and truth are then his gods — everything else is a lie.

It is no wonder, therefore, that sometimes Shevchenko takes up an argument with God in the tone of a Moses or one of the pro-

phets from the Old Testament. Yet he does not fight the true God, he does not rebel against Christ, only against the hypocrisies of Christianity which had become a travesty of Christ's teachings. He fights against the Russian State Church which "enslaves paradise," and commands men to pray "for looting, war, and blood;" against Byzantinism, and such practices as it allowed; against those Christians who although they pray "behave like wild beasts to their fellow men," who "kneel down and hide from Satan behind the cross, but wish secretly that others should die of pestilence or other misfortune." Christ did not die in defense of such ethics and it is before the Christ of love and truth that Shevchenko bows. The Russian State Church was also attacked by Russian progressives such as Belinsky.

The inspired message of a new life, based on real democracy, respect for freedom, truth and equality "without slave or master," the new gospel which Shevchenko believed would bring "peace and joy to men on earth," was not sufficient in itself. It was necessary to support this new faith with examples in order to wake and sustain hope that "truth and freedom will rise," and to arouse men to action.

Since reality offered no such examples Shevchenko, following the spirit of romanticism, gathered them from the Ukraine's past. He paints, therefore, before the eyes of his countrymen wonderful pictures from Ukrainian history and especially from the Cossack period when "the famous Zaporozhians knew how to rule." He tells how the Cossacks travelled as "visitors" to the Turks, not in order "to pick pockets," but "to liberate their brothers from Turkish captivity and thus to gain glory;" how they lived like equals and defended their faith and freedom against the onslaught of the Poles, the Tartars, and the Muscovites alike. He points to the Cossack *mohylas* (burial mounds) those "witnesses of the grandfathers' glory," which are "full of our noble relics;" he shows how "at one time the Cossacks gave everything they had to their poor Ukraine," recalls "just Hetmans," and reveals his heart's sorrow that all this is now past and forgotten by the Cossacks' worthless heirs who are satisfied to "sit behind the stove," "to sow rye for the

landlords," "to work with a scythe, silent and bowed," while "knaves rule over Cossack children."

Shevchenko saw also the darker sides of Ukrainian history. He concealed and adorned nothing, but subjecting everything to criticism, he showed his countrymen "famous and notorious Brutuses and Coclezes" in their true light. By comparison between actual conditions in the Ukraine and the historical past Shevchenko was the first Ukrainian writer to awake and sharpen the historical sense, this important discovery of humanism and the free thought of the eighteenth century which encouraged the advancement of all the sciences and of human progress in general. From the root of humanism sprang also the mighty conception of nationalism. In this respect Shevchenko was its first great exponent, declaring his love for the Ukraine in these famous words:

I love her so  
My poor Ukraine,  
I'll sacrifice my soul for her.

His love for the Ukraine, her language, customs, and her historical and cultural heritage he manages to combine with a deep love for other nations, even for those with whom his country waged agelong wars. Shevchenko is free from chauvinism or messianism, vices so characteristic of his contemporary Polish and Russian poets and writers. Shevchenko's love embraces all peoples; his ideal is best expressed by his wish that

All Slavs should be  
Like good brothers  
And sons of truth's sun.

Not only the Slavs, but all men:

To all on earth  
Send like-mindedness  
And good fellowship.

In this way, holding ever before his gaze the picture of a free Ukraine, Shevchenko envisages higher political and social organizations in the union of all Slavs and even of all mankind.

Shevchenko's historical poems roused the inflamed national feelings of his countrymen and reawakened in their consciousness what had been enveloped in a deep mist; they expressed what was deep in the hearts of millions of Ukrainian people and yet remained there unsaid; they spelled out the historical goal of the Ukraine.

That such an "untutored eye" could look into the depth of a nation's historical destinies and communicate what it saw in a pellucid style and limpid language with the help of images borrowed from rich folklore, and in words to stir human hearts so profoundly is surely a sign of true genius.

Shevchenko's language is rooted in the people's speech and reflects its varied musical rhythms. This is why he is justly called the Ukrainian *kobzar*.

These qualities alone do not explain his greatness. In forming his own outlook on life, Shevchenko dealt with the most varied problems in ethics, politics, religion, philosophy, government, and law. Yet amid all the schools of thought and philosophical tendencies Shevchenko managed to preserve his own independence and integrity; he was never led by some other "great authority," never followed blindly the great contemporary lights, and refused to bring "from foreign lands a great heap of big words." Whatever he learned from Herzen, Belinsky, Herzen's *Bell*, which he kissed on one occasion, and the Slavophiles, whom, like the Westerners, he knew well, he made his own and dissolved into an outlook which was solidly founded on his native experiences. His own watchword "do not copy, observe" Shevchenko applied not only to painting, but to learning and living in general. Whatever he teaches or preaches he does it not "according to the German models," so that "no one could understand it," but so that "truth be told by lips incapable of lie." Wherever we look in Shevchenko's writings, the truth we find is his own. In those writings the poet contributed his own philosophy, so deeply rooted in his native soil, to the world repository.

Shevchenko never wavered in his convictions; he did not bow to tyrants or compromise with the existing régime like Belinsky or Gogol. "I shall sell myself to no one," he wrote, "I shall not serve anyone." His influence on his contemporaries, and to an

even greater degree on the next generation, was profound. It would not be wrong to say that Shevchenko was most of all responsible for the great Ukrainian National Revival. He united the Ukrainian people around the idea of liberation. Overcoming the political partition of the Ukraine he prompted them to great cultural activities and progress and led them, as it were, into the world as a modern nation. That the Ukrainians have since striven to "break their chains" and have found sympathy for their struggle among other nations of the world, is chiefly due to Shevchenko's work and life.

Among his own people Shevchenko became great not by propaganda, but by the deep response which his ideas have found among the common people whose devotion to him became almost a religion.

Like our wide Dnieper  
His words flowed  
And fell deep into the hearts  
Scorching cold souls with fire.  
The prophet was beloved by the people  
Who prayed to him and often shed tears.

They pray and shall continue to pray. There is no power in the world to destroy the people's love for this great poet and prophet.

The poet's soul lives holy  
In its sacred works.  
We read and are reborn  
And sense that God's in heaven.