

TARAS SHEVCHENKO

SELECTED WORKS

POETRY AND PROSE

with Reproductions of Paintings by T. SHEVCHENKO

PROGRESS PUBLISHERS
MOSCOW

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Taras Shevchenko. Self-Portrait. 1840.
Oil

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CONTENTS

	<i>Page</i>
The Bard of the Ukraine. By <i>Yevgen Kirilyuk</i>	11
POEMS	
The Bewitched	23
Oh Thoughts of Mine	30
Perebendya	34
Katerina	37
The Night of Taras	60
Haidamaki	65
Introduction	72
The Churchwarden	74
The Third Cock's Crow	81
The Red Banquet	85
Hupalivshchina	91
Gonta in Uman	95
Epilogue	104
Foreword	109
Hamaliya	111
A Maiden's Nights	117
A Dream	119
Don't Take Yourself a Wealthy Bride	136
Envy Not the Man of Wealth	137
The Heretic	138
The Servant Woman	150
The Caucasus	167
To the Dead, the Living and the Unborn	173
The Days Go By	181
My Testament	183
The Lily	184

It Doesn't Matter Now to Me	187
"Forsake Not Your Mother!"	188
To N. Kostomarov	190
Beside the Cottage	191
The Princess	192
The Sun Sets	205
I Was Thirteen	206
The Monk	208
The Outlaw	212
Kings	218
Marina	226
Unwashed Is the Sky	236
Young Masters, If You Only Knew	237
The Lights Are Blazing	240
Dear God, Calamity Again	241
The Half-Wit	242
Fate	245
A Dream	246
I'm Not Unwell	247
Isaiah. Chapter 35	248
To My Sister	250
Mary	251
The Hymn of the Nuns	275
Oh Shining World	276
To Likera	277
Neither Archimedes Nor Galileo	278
The Days Go By	279
Surely the Time Has Come	280

PROSE

Autobiography	285
The Artist	289
Diary	404

NOTES

General Editorial Remarks	457
The Historical Background	458
Notes	460

THE BARD OF THE UKRAINE

*By Yeugen Kirilyuk,
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Taras Shevchenko, the brilliant national poet of the Ukraine, is one of the classics of world literature. His all-embracing humanism, deep and genuine folk character, and revolutionary ardour make him comprehensible and close to the hearts of the people of all nations.

Shevchenko lived at the time when his homeland was split in two by the Russian and Austro-Hungarian monarchies, and the mass of the Ukrainian people—the peasantry—was in serf bondage to feudal landowners. The people waged a ceaseless struggle for their social and national emancipation.

Taras Shevchenko (1814-1861) was born into a serf family in the village of Morintsy, in the Kiev Province. He experienced the severity of forced labour from earliest childhood, knew and felt the sad plight of “the poor, unsmiling muzhik”, surrounded by the magnificent ever-smiling nature of the Ukraine.

He lost his mother before his ninth birthday, his father died two years later. But while the masses of the serfs were illiterate, the orphan waif received an elementary education: in return for heavy task-work the boy did for a sexton, the latter allowed him to attend classes he conducted for boys of more favoured circumstances. Taras early began to display artistic talent. This was not simply the urge to draw, which is common among children, but an overpowering calling. Despite threats and beatings, he drew everything he saw or heard of, using a pencil, charcoal, chalk—whatever he could lay his hands on. Taras dreamed of studying art under a good teacher, but landed in his master's manor instead, first as a kitchen-boy and later as indoor *kazachok* (lackey). When he was fourteen years of age Shevchenko was taken away from his native Ukraine by his master, Baron Engelhardt. They lived for some time in Vilno (Vilnius), where Taras was once cruelly punished for daring to light a candle and draw at a time when his master was away at a ball. Engelhardt later realised that Shevchenko would never make a good lackey, and decided to make him his “court” painter.

Shevchenko was seventeen when he arrived in Petersburg, then the capital of the Russian empire. Engelhardt apprenticed him for four years to a painter, Shirayev. In Petersburg he became acquainted with the outstanding artist Karl Bryullov, who was a professor at the Academy of Arts, the noted poet Zhukovsky, the artist Venetsianov,

the connoisseur of arts Vyelgorsky, and also his fellow-Ukrainians, the artist Soshenko, the writer Grebinka and others. They became deeply interested in the gifted serf youth and sought to have him admitted to the Academy of Arts, but he was barred because of his status as a serf. So they bought his release from bondage for a large sum of money, and on April 22, 1838, when he was twenty-four years of age, Taras Shevchenko received his certificate of freedom from serfdom.

In Petersburg, while he diligently applied himself to painting and graduated from the Academy of Arts, he devoted himself with mounting fervour to poetry, which (according to his own testimony) he began to write during the white nights of 1837. And this proved to be his true calling. While he was to be an artist by profession all his life and eventually was awarded the title of Academician in engraving, poetry was always his true passion, in which his artistic brilliance and revolutionary spirit found their clearest expression.

It was in Petersburg that Shevchenko's first Ukrainian verses were born: romantic ballads, lyrical elegies and songs (*The Bewitched*, *The Wild Wind*, *The Water Flows Into the Blue Sea* and others). In them the poet adopted and developed the chanting style and imagery of the kobzars (folk minstrels). He had often listened to them in his childhood as they sang folk songs of the legendary past of the Ukraine, of how the free Cossacks defended their homeland from its enemies, and of the heroic figures of the peasant rebels, the Haidamaki.

As a blind minstrel, plucking at the strings of his kobza, sings of the wide Dnieper River with the pale moon swimming in the sky above it, of the maiden abandoned by her lover, of the spacious steppe dotted with grave mounds under which lie the bones of heroes, of the military campaigns of the Cossacks and of the struggles of the people for freedom and right, so did Taras Shevchenko "talk with the people" in his verses. The struggle of the Ukrainian people with their enemies provide one of the main themes in Shevchenko's poetry.

In 1840 a small book of verse appeared in Petersburg, entitled *Kobzar*. It contained only eight poems, but that booklet shook all Russia and the whole Slavic world. Some of his early verses were also published in Yevgen Grebinka's Ukrainian almanac *Lastivka* (*The Swallow*). And in 1841 Shevchenko's biggest work, *Haidamaki*, an epic poem about the armed struggle of the Ukrainian Cossacks and peasants against the Polish feudal gentry in the eighteenth century, was published as a separate book.

Shevchenko was firmly rooted in the Ukrainian literary tradition. In his youth he had read the poet and philosopher G. Skovoroda, he

knew and deeply appreciated the works of Kotlyarevsky, to whom he penned an elegy, Osnovyanenko, to whom he addressed a poetic message, and others. He also studied the rich treasure trove of advanced Russian literature: Pushkin, Lermontov, Koltsov, Gogol, etc. (It is worth noting that even in his early period he was also writing poetry in the Russian language.) He was conversant with and learned from the gems of world literature. Thus, he could recite many of Mickiewicz's poems in the Polish original, and tried his hand at translating some of them. He knew Byron's works well. In his foreword to the projected new edition of the *Kobzar* in 1847 Shevchenko mentions Walter Scott and expresses his high esteem for Robert Burns. In his novel *The Artist*, written in exile when he had no library or reference book at hand, and in other novels written in that period he mentions Shakespeare (*The Tempest*, *Othello*, *Hamlet*), Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe*, Richardson's *Clarissa Harlowe* in the French translation, Oliver Goldsmith's *The Vicar of Wakefield*, Ossian, Edward Gibbon, Byron, Scott (*Woodstock*, *Kenilworth*, *The Fair Maid of Perth*, *Quentin Durward*, *The Antiquary*), Charles Dickens *David Copperfield*, *Nicholas Nickleby*) and others.

But even in his first ballad to come down to us, *The Bewitched*, Shevchenko was not an apprentice, not an imitator. There was no such period in his work. His early poem *Katerina* is a peerless work on the life of the people in his own time, just as the poem *Haidamaki* is an outstanding work on an historical theme. Shevchenko stepped to the forefront of Ukrainian literature from the very start. This was due not only to the young poet's brilliance, but mostly because he was a genuine people's poet. It is characteristic that the title of his first slim booklet of poetry, *Kobzar*, was later applied to all collections of Taras Shevchenko's poetry and to the poet himself.

Shevchenko was a true people's poet not only because he wrote in the Ukrainian language that was actually spoken by the people, thus laying a solid foundation for the Ukrainian literary language as a whole, and not only by the closeness of the *Kobzar* to the oral Ukrainian folk poetry (that trait was also common to the Ukrainian romanticists), but mainly because he expressed the thoughts, feelings and aspirations of the broadest sections of the Ukrainian people. At the same time his poetry is imbued with true humanism and internationalism. Let us examine, for example, *Haidamaki*, in which the struggle of the Ukrainian people against the Polish gentry is graphically described. In order to prevent enemies of the Ukrainian and Polish peoples from exploiting sections of the poem to foment national hatreds, Shevchenko wrote into it a ringing appeal for the unity and friendship of the Ukrainians, the Poles and *all* the Slavic peoples.

That appeal had nothing in common with reactionary Pan-Slavism which masked the expansionist policy of the Russian autocracy. In that same *Haidamaki* the young poet spoke in Aesopean language of Tsar Nicholas I, the gendarme of Europe, saying: "the executioner rules". Nicholas's censors passed those lines, but when the *Kobzar* was being republished in 1860 the "liberal" censors of Alexander II detected "sedition" in them and crossed them out.

When in 1843 Shevchenko returned to the Ukraine after fourteen years' absence, he heard his own songs and ballads from the lips of peasants and minstrels. Shevchenko visited his native district and saw his relatives and friends still bearing the heavy yoke of serfdom. He travelled a good deal through the Ukraine and was shocked by what he saw there.

On his return to Petersburg in 1844 Taras Shevchenko became acquainted with a number of free-thinking Russians who later formed the secret political circle of M. Butashevich-Petrashkevsky. He became a consistent revolutionary democrat, an active fighter against serfdom and the autocracy. In the poem *The Heretic* (about the great Czech patriot and reformer Jan Hus) and other works Shevchenko developed still further the theme of Slavic unity and brotherhood. In the poem *The Caucasus* he enlarged this theme to call for the joint struggle of all the peoples of the Russian empire against the autocracy. He openly attacked the whole feudal-autocratic order (*A Dream*, 1844) and called for a people's revolution (*To the Dead, the Living and the Unborn, The Cold Ravine, My Testament*). Tsarist censorship ruled out the possibility of having his works published, so the poet neatly wrote them out by hand in an album entitled *Three Years* (1843-45).

Back in the Ukraine, Shevchenko joined the secret political Society of Cyril and Methodius, in which he advocated a consistently revolutionary policy. In 1847 the society was exposed and its members were arrested and taken to Petersburg for trial. The cruellest punishment of all was meted out to Shevchenko. He was made a soldier and banished to distant Orenburg, the tsar personally adding to the sentence: "forbidden to write and to paint". From Orenburg Shevchenko was sent to the Orsk battalion.

By banishing him and making him a soldier (the term of army service at that time was twenty-five years), the tsar strove to kill the poet and artist in Shevchenko. But Shevchenko continued to write his freedom-loving verses both in the dungeon of the Third Department (political police) in Petersburg and in the Orsk fortress. The poet fashioned miniature notebooks, wrote his works in them in the tiniest of handwriting, and kept them concealed in the legs of his boots.

There were humane people even among the officers. Captain-Lieutenant Butakov took Shevchenko along as an artist on an expedition to explore the Aral Sea in 1848, i.e., he disobeyed the tsar's orders. On his return to Orenburg the poet lived in private quarters and wore civilian clothes.

Shevchenko's poetry of the exile period reached a higher stage. In the brown, sun-baked steppe he nostalgically recalled his distant Ukrainian homeland, the wide, free Dnieper and the boundless black earth plains, the people and their sad lot. Again and again he conjured up his homeland's glorious past, its plight during the years of serfdom, and visions of the better days to be. He dreamed of a peasant rising, of final victory over the tsars and feudal gentry. In *The Princess, Marina, P.S.* (Pavlo Skoropadsky) he described typical feudal masters, in *Marina, The Outlaw and If It Should Chance* he presented types of the people's avengers. In *Kings* he openly called for the overthrow of the autocracy. In exile he continued to champion friendship among the nations, he made friends with Polish revolutionaries and addressed his poem *To the Poles* to them; he devoted many warm, friendly lines to the local Kazakh people, and also painted them.

In 1850 the poet was arrested again on charges laid by an officer, returned to Orsk for trial and then banished still farther away, to Novopetrovsk fortress on the Mangishlak Peninsula on the eastern shore of the Caspian Sea (today Fort Shevchenko). During this second period of his exile Shevchenko wrote a number of novels in Russian, hoping to get them published in periodicals. Some of the novels have the same plots as his poems *The Servant Woman, The Outlaw* and *The Princess*, while others—*The Musician, The Artist* and *The Journey*—have new plots. They contain much autobiographical material. Not one of the novels by Kobzar Darmograi (Shevchenko's pseudonym) was published during the author's lifetime.

Shevchenko was not immediately amnestied, as were other political prisoners, after the death of Nicholas I. He was released from banishment only after long and insistent intercession on the part of his Russian friends. Even then he was long denied entry to the capital and was forced to wait at Nizhny Novgorod (today the city of Gorky).

When he learned that his release had been granted, Taras Shevchenko started his *Diary*, a wonderful human document which provides us with a living portrait of the implacable revolutionary and deep thinker. For example, watching the steam-engine at work on a boat, he voiced prophetic thoughts on the revolutionary significance of the development of engineering and science, which would inevitably bring an end to the old order.

On his return to Petersburg, Shevchenko drew close to the outstanding public figures of that time, the Russian revolutionary democrats Chernyshevsky and Dobrolyubov, and the Polish revolutionary democrat Sierakowski.

In his last years Shevchenko's poetry reflected the flames of the peasant revolts, the revolutionary situation in the pre-reform Russia of 1859-61. The poet widely utilised Biblical settings and imagery for his passionate denunciation of the rulers and calls for a revolutionary uprising (*The Neophytes*, *Maria*, numerous "imitations" of Isaiah, Jezeziel and others). In the poem *I'm Not Unwell* Shevchenko appeals to the people not to place their hopes in the reform promised by the tsar, but to win their freedom with the axe. He dreamed of a republican form of government. In *The Half-Wit* he asks:

*When will we greet
Our own George Washington at last
With the new law of righteousness?*

For him Washington was a symbol—the president of a republic established on the basis of a constitution.

A notable page in Shevchenko's life was his friendship with the prominent British actor Ira Aldridge, an American Negro by origin, who came to Petersburg in 1858 to perform in several Shakespearean plays. Enthralled by his magnificent performance, Shevchenko and his friends greeted Aldridge with such enthusiastic applause that it evoked protests from prudish theatre-goers. Soon the Ukrainian poet-artist and the Negro actor met at the home of F. Tolstoi, the vice-president of the Academy of Arts, and became fast friends. Shevchenko painted a portrait of Aldridge, which bears the latter's autograph. Tolstoi's daughter wrote of this friendship in her memoirs: "These two individuals had more in common than just similar traits of character; in his youth one had been a serf, while the other was a member of a despised race; both experienced much bitterness in life, and both passionately loved their unfortunate peoples."

At this time, too, Shevchenko joined Turgenev, Saltykov-Shchedrin, Dostoyevsky, Marko Vovchok and others in an angry public protest against anti-Semitic diatribes in the journal *Illustration*.

In 1859 Shevchenko was finally permitted to revisit the Ukraine, where he again saw his relatives, who were still in serf bondage. He was soon arrested on charges of "blasphemy", however, and ordered to return at once to Petersburg.

Ten years of prison and exile had undermined the poet's health and he died when he was but forty-seven years of age. Shevchenko was buried in Petersburg, but later his remains were disinterred and borne