

<https://lithub.com/a-new-translation-of-the-caucasus-by-taras-shevchenko/>

introduction by Toras Koznarsky, Prof., University of Toronto

Taras Shevchenko (1814-1861), Ukraine's national bard, laid the foundations of Ukrainian literature and had a profound impact on Ukrainian national identity.

Shevchenko was born a serf in a village in the Kyiv region and was orphaned when he was eleven years old. As a boy, he was an agricultural worker and engaged in menial labor. A deacon at his church taught him to read and write. From his early years, he showed a passion for drawing, learning from local icon-painters and doodling whenever the opportunity presented itself. At the age of fourteen, he became the personal servant of the man who owned him. While accompanying his master on a trip to St. Petersburg, Shevchenko became acquainted with artists at the Imperial Academy.

*Recognizing his talent, the artists launched a fundraising campaign, and in 1838, he was bought out of serfdom from his owner for 2,500 rubles. Shevchenko enrolled in the Imperial Academy of the Arts and his career as an artist progressed. All the while, he found emotional and creative refuge in poetry. His first collection, *Kobzar (Blind Bard)*, appeared in St. Petersburg in 1840 and was noticed by the critics and enthusiastically received by the Ukrainian intelligentsia and educated gentry.*

*In the 1840s, while traveling in Ukraine with a plan to draw a series of landscapes and historical sites, Shevchenko befriended members of the Ukrainian intelligentsia. This circle of friends became the basis of the Brotherhood of Saints Cyril and Methodius, an organization that supported a federalist union of Slavic peoples, the emancipation of the serfs, and pondered plans for reviving Ukrainian cultural life. During this time, Shevchenko wrote some of his most forceful and radical poems, including "The Caucasus," which were gathered in the collection *Try lita (Three Years)*.*

In 1847, the members of the Brotherhood were arrested and taken to a St. Petersburg prison and interrogated, their papers confiscated and closely examined by the police. Shevchenko received the harshest punishment: exile to the steppes of Kazakhstan, where he was conscripted as a rank-and-file soldier into the imperial army for a term of 25 years. Russian Tsar Nicholas I personally forbade Shevchenko from writing and drawing.

Despite the prohibition, Shevchenko continued to write in secret, in small self-made notebooks that he hid in a boot leg. Only after the death of Nicholas I did the appeals by various high-positioned supporters to free Shevchenko meet with success. Released in 1857, he revived his skills as a graphic artist. He continued to write until his death in 1861—a month short of the imperial decree abolishing serfdom in the Russian Empire.

The poems in the album "Three Years" were prohibited in the Russian Empire and were circulated in manuscript form clandestinely. Many were first published in 1857 in a

collection of political verses by Pushkin and Shevchenko that appeared in Leipzig, beyond the purview of the Russian censorship and secret police. Among these is “The Caucasus.”

The Caucasus, by Taras Shevchenko, Translated by Alyssa Dinega Gillespie

For my dear Yakiv de Balmen^[1]

Oh, that my head were a spring of water and my eyes a fountain of tears! I would weep day and night for the slain...^[2] Jeremiah 9:1

Past mountains, more mountains: enshrouded in clouds,
Deep-seeded with mourning, deep-watered with blood.

There, since ancient times, the eagle

Mutilates Prometheus,

Each new day it claws to tatters

Ribs and heart still beating.

Crushes, though it won't devour

His blood: throbbing, vital —

Once again, his mauled heart quickens,

Once again it smiles.

Never will our staunch soul perish,

Nor our cherished freedom.

The Devourer won't plough furrows

On the ocean's bottom.

Living souls he won't enshackle,

Living words enfeather.

And he won't come near God's glory,

Great God in His splendor.

It's not for us to feud with Thee!

It's not for us to judge Thy deeds!

Our lot is just to weep, weep, weep!

And mix into our daily bread

A bloody mash of tears and sweat.

The executioners torment,

While still our drunken justice sleeps.

When will she awake from slumber?

When wilt Thou, exhausted,

Settle down to rest already,

God? Let us live also!

We believe in Thy vast power

And Thy living spirit.
 Rise up justice! Rise up freedom!
 Then to Thee entirely
 Every tongue will speak in worship
 Always and forever.
 Meanwhile, rivers hasten onward,
 Tainted, bloody rivers!

Past mountains, more mountains: enshrouded in clouds,
 Deep-seeded with mourning, deep-watered with blood.

And that's the place where we, benign
 In our great mercy, hunted down
 Pathetic freedom — naked, gaunt —
 And set the dogs on it. The bones
 Of many soldiers languish there.
 And what of blood, and what of tears?
 Enough to slake all emperors' thirst,
 Their kids' and grandkids' too; to drown
 Them in the tears of widows. Or
 In maidens', shed without a sound
 At night! Or mothers' hot outpourings!
 Or elder fathers', wrung like blood.
 Not rivers—but a full sea rush,
 A fiery sea! O glory! glory!
 To hounds, borzois, brute huntsman-boors
 And to our little father-tsars
 Glory.

Glory to you too, blue mountains,
 Locked in ancient glaciers.
 And to you, our noble warriors —
 God has not betrayed you.
 You must fight on—you will triumph,
 God is helping, leading!
 At your back are justice, glory,
 And our sacred freedom!
Churek and *saklya*^[3] are yours alone,
 They weren't begged for or bestowed,
 No one will claim them for his own,
 Nor lead you, boy, away in chains.
 But in our land!... We're literate,

So we can read the Holy Writ!...
 And from the prison cell most crude
 Up to the most exalted throne —
 We're all alike: gold-clad and nude.
 Join us, and be enlightened! taught
 What price we set for bread and salt!

For we are Christians: churches, schools,
 All virtues, God Himself lives here!
 Except your *saklya* mars our view:
 Why is it standing there, austere,
 Without our say-so? Why don't we
 Just lob your stale *chureks* at you
 Like dogfood! Why aren't you obliged
 To pay us for the sun and moon!
 That's all we ask! We aren't pagans,
 We're true-believing, real-deal Christians,
 We're satisfied with little!... Although!
 If only you'd make friends with us,
 You'd learn an awful lot of stuff!
 Most of the world is ours, you know —
 Siberia alone is infinite,
 And prisons! peoples!... Countless sum!
 From the Moldovan to the Finn,
 In all their languages they're mum
 Because they're prospering! We have
 The holy monk who reads us speeches,
 Recites the Holy Bible, preaches
 About some tsar who pastured swine,^[4]
 And snatched away his best friend's wife,
 Bumped off the friend. Now's in paradise.
 So there you see, what sorts we have
 That get to heaven! You're still blind,
 The Holy cross will light your mind,
 Come learn from us!... Our way is gouge,
 First gouge then give,
 And straight to heaven,
 And all your kin pack off there too!
 Here in our land! What can't we do?
 We count the stars, sow buckwheat seeds,
 We curse the French. Get good receipts

For selling serfs, or else we lose
 Them playing cards... not Negroes, hmmm,
 But *you* know... Christians, only... *dumb*.
 We aren't Spaniards; God forbid
 That we should deal in stolen goods.
 We heed the law! Not like those Yids...
 By the laws of the apostles
 You should love your brother!
 Hypocrites and idle gossips,
 Damned by God our Father.
 It's your brother's hide you fancy,
 Not his soul you cherish!
 And you'll flay him by the lawbook,
 For your daughter's leather
 Coat, your bastard's future dowry,
 Wifey's fancy slippers,
 For yourself, a treat that neither
 Kids nor wife gets wind of!

For whom were you crucified, O
 Christ, God's Son, Creator?
 Was it for us, good folks, or for
 Words of truth... or maybe,
 So we'd make a mockery of you?
 Well, that's what it's come to.
 Temples and chapels, icon stands,
 Broad candelabras, incense clouds,
 And, posed before Thy image grand
 Untiring genuflections, bows.
 For theft, for bloodshed, and for war,
 For shedding brethren blood, they pray
 And then they bring as alms to Thee
 An altar cloth swiped from a fire!!
 We're enlightened! but still hanker
 To enlighten others,
 Show the true word's dazzling sunshine,
 See, to those blind numbskulls...
 We'll reveal all! Only let us
 Get you in our clutches.
 How to brick up solid prisons
 How to forge strong fetters,

How to wear them!... how to fashion
 Knotted knouts for lashings —
 All this we'll teach: only let us
 Seize your last blue mountains...
 Since we've heretofore impounded
 Both your sea and meadows.

And you, too, they drove here, my unequalled friend,
 My dearest, good Yakiv! No, not for Ukraine
 But for her assassin they forced you to spill
 Your gentle, sweet blood. You were fated to swill
 Foul Muscovite poison from the Muscovite chalice!
 O dear friend of mine! Unforgotten companion!
 Anon may your living soul soar in Ukraine,
 And fly with the Cossacks above river banks.
 On uncovered graves in the steppe cast your eye,
 Pour out bitter tears with the Cossacks in pain,
 And watch in the steppe for me when I'm set free.
 But, meanwhile, my meditations
 And my savage grieving
 I'll sow deep — and may they flourish,
 Whisper with the breezes.
 Quiet breezes from Ukraine will
 Carry on the dewdrops
 All my thoughts to you so distant!...
 With a brotherly tear
 You, my dearest friend, will greet them,
 Read them, soft and tender...
 And these graves, steppe, sea and me, you'll
 Suddenly remember.

1845

[1] A close friend of Shevchenko's during the period 1843-44, a Ukrainian count of Scottish descent who illustrated a collection of Shevchenko's poetry and presented it to him as a gift. De Balmen was soon called into active military service in the Russian Imperial Army in the Caucasus and killed there in the mountains of what is today Chechnya on 26 July 1845.

[2] New International Version, <https://biblehub.com/jeremiah/9-1.htm>, accessed 25 May 2022.

[3] *Churek* is a flatbread, and *saklya* is a house constructed from stone; both are characteristic of the Caucasus mountain cultures.

[4] The Israelite King David (approx. 950 BCE), who sent the military leader Uriah to war, where he was killed, in order to marry Uriah's beautiful wife Bathsheba.