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Shevchenko and Pushkin: Deconstructing Imperial Narrative

ABSTRACT

This article examines the intertextual dynamics between Taras Shevchenko's *The Caucasus and The Dream* and Alexander Pushkin's narratives where the author justifies imperial expansion and assigns roles and identities to Russia's multinational colonies. Through ironic references and subversive recontextualization, Shevchenko critiques the glorification of Russian imperialism based on the falsified "knowledge" about the colonized subjects and challenges Pushkin's portrayal of Russia's dominance in the Slavic world. The analysis highlights Shevchenko's use of hypertextuality to deconstruct Pushkin's vision of imperial grandeur, contrasting it with Shevchenko's advocacy for a future grounded in Slavic equality and mutual respect.

KEYWORDS

Shevchenko; Pushkin; deconstruction; hypertextual links; imperial narrative; "knowledge"

1. Introduction

In 1993 in *Culture and Imperialism*, a sequel to seminal *Orientalism*, Edward Said extrapolates his earlier ideas about the Western misrepresentation of the Orient as the uncivilized, primitive Other into the realm of literature to demonstrate the intricate connection between the colonial policies of the empire and literary texts produced by the most celebrated authors of the time. He develops a method based on what he calls a contrapuntal reading, intending "to focus as much as possible on individual works, to read them first as great products of the creative or interpretative imagination, and then to show them as part of the relationship between culture and empire" (Said, 1996, p. xxii). Almost ten years before Said, Gayatri Spivak employed a very similar analysis and deconstruction of *Jane Eyre* emphasizing the decisive role of literature in the cultural representation of the empire and *the worldling* of the Third World, i.e. the creation of the colonized space through the falsified and imposed "knowledge" about the colonized (Spivak, 1985).

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Regrettably, the traditional “orientalist” approach to postcolonial literary criticism leaves out internal colonialism within Europe. Said (1996) acknowledges the selectivity and constraints inherent in his exclusive emphasis on the British, French, and American imperial experience, yet he is cognizant of the fact that Russia’s domination in Central Asia and Eastern Europe is neither benign nor any less imperialist. Among the reasons for this selectivity, he lists his background as a native of the Arab world, cultural centrality and, most importantly, the idea of the overseas rule of the empires as mentioned earlier (pp. xxii – xxiii).

In the latter part of the 1990s, the domain of postcolonial literary studies underwent a further expansion that encompassed the conventional West-East dichotomy, incorporating the concept of internal colonialism within the European context. The initial significant research focused on the case of Ireland (Michael Cronin’s *Translating Ireland*, 1996, and Maria Tymoczko’s *Translation in a Postcolonial Context*, 1999)¹. It was inevitable that this evolution would have implications for the field of Russian literature criticism, with its entrenched elements such as the enigmatic Russian soul, the existential torment of the superfluous man, and the compassionate portrayal of “the insulted and the injured”.

An Australian scholar of Ukrainian descent, Marko Pawlyshyn, was among the pioneers in suggesting the use of the term *postcolonial* in reference to post-Soviet Ukrainian literature (Pawlyshyn, 1992). Ewa Thompson’s *Imperial Knowledge: Russian Literature and Colonialism* (2000) explores how the canonized Russian narrative manifests itself as a *textual empire*, a direct textual expression of Russian imperial “knowledge” assigning cultural identities and roles to the colonizer and the colonized (Thompson, 2000, p. 55). While Thompson analyses Russia’s Central Asian and Polish colonial narratives, Myroslav Shkandrij’s *Russia and Ukraine: Literature and the Discourse of Empire from Napoleonic to Postcolonial Times* (2001) examines a discourse of empire in the nineteenth-century Russian literature and a counterdiscourse in the Ukrainian literature. Unfortunately, at the time of publication both books received very little if any attention in academia where “non-Russian Slavic studies partake of the politics of invisibility” (Thompson, 2015, p. 10). Numerous departments of Russian and Slavic studies have been encouraging students to acquire knowledge of Russian literature, culture and language with the elements of *other* Slavic cultures, pushing the latter to the background and presenting via a Russian-dominated lens.

Thompson expands Said’s list of reasons for bracketing off internal, namely Russian, colonialism from the postcolonial studies. In addition to the contiguous character of expansion, it comprises the cultural superiority of the colonized over

¹ Cronin uses the term *translation* not only in the narrow sense of a transfer of texts from one language into another but as a broad metaphor for the subjugation of Ireland by Britain: “Translation at a cultural level – the embrace of English acculturation – is paralleled by translation at a territorial level, the forcible displacement and movement of populations” (Cronin, 1996, p. 49).

the colonizer and their common race (Thompson, 2000, pp. 1–15). In her essays on Ukrainian-Russian cultural relations, Vira Aheyeva adds to the aforementioned appropriation of the cultural heritage of the colonized (Aheyeva, 2022, p. 11).

Since the first day of the full-scale Russian invasion of Ukraine, the Slavic studies academia has been slowly but inviolately unveiling the Russian imperial grand narrative kept under wraps of “deeply humane Russian culture”. The masks were dropped even by Russia itself. The State Hermitage Museum’s director, Piotrovsky, openly expressed the jingoistic goals of the Russian cultural expansion as “a kind of special operation” and “a powerful cultural offensive” a few months after so-called “special operation of Russia in Ukraine” (Leigh, 2022, p. 133). However, when on the first days of the invasion Ukrainian cultural professionals and organizations called on the international community to impose cultural sanctions on Russia, German PEN declared that “the real enemy is Putin, not Pushkin”. Putting aside the argument of Russia’s constant and very successful attempts at instrumentalizing culture for political influence, Pushkin is responsible for shaping and disseminating imperial “knowledge” about the colonized nations via his resonant narrative and the status of the greatest Russian poet.

2. Pushkin’s imperial profiling narrative: assigning roles and identities to the colonized

Pushkin, according to Thompson (2000, p. 62), “was probably the crudest jingoist” of all the Russian writers. Thompson elaborates on this claim:

Pushkin can be credited with the first fully successful artistic formulation of Russian imperial consciousness. [...] He conjured up an image that had never before existed in Russian literature: a proud Russia destined to rule over the “miserable Finns” and other races it had conquered; a Russia replete with humble and admirable patriots who discharged their duty faithfully in the faraway Caucasus; a Russia whose upper class equated in sophistication and education the most refined circles in the West. (Thompson, 2000, pp. 60–61)

Pushkin’s narrative is imbued with the most consistent assignment of roles and identities within the empire with a distinct marginalization and moral condemnation of the defeated: Russian heroes, knights (*bogatyr*s), statesmen, men of wisdom are contrasted to the conquered violent savages, predators, traitors, villains or wretched, pathetic, intellectually deficient creatures.

Nevertheless, this artistic profiling of the subjugated nations differs. Pushkin’s “Southern” texts, particularly, his early poem *The Prisoner in the Caucasus* (1821) describing the Circassians as *predators* and *villains* build up the most obvious imperial discourse in its manipulative mission “to extend civilization” to the savage Orient. Even seemingly positive description of the Circassians’ everyday life in the author’s endnotes to the poem shows condescending superiority: their hospitality is typical of “all savage peoples” (Pushkin, 1975, vol. 3, p. 105)

while their “pleasant yet monotonous songs” glorify “*temporary* success of the Caucasian weapon, the death of our heroes, treasons, murders” (Pushkin, 1975, vol. 3, pp. 103–104). The outrageously violent and inhuman treatment of a young Russian captive by the Circassians highlights the opposition between civilized “Us” and uncivilized “Them”. Pushkin’s narrative intricately reverses the poles of victimhood, as the poem was written amid the genocidal massacre exerted in Chechnya and Dagestan by General Yermolov highly praised in the epilogue to the poem.

Susan Layton highlights another characteristic of Pushkin’s representation of “the Southern colonized” as the classical Orient: given that people from the Northwestern Caucasus, the region Pushkin speaks about, self-identified as Adyge, the word *Circassian* used in the poem is not entirely accurate (Layton, 1997, p. 84). The aforementioned conforms to Said’s theory of the distorted, conflated image of the Orient that eliminates all national distinctions. The word *Circassian* is a perfect sample of what Sudhansu Kumar Dash (2016, p. 48) defines as an “over-inclusive term” reflecting “the discourse of political homogeneity”.

Said’s argument about the feminization of the Orient viewed by Europe in “its backwardness, its silent indifference, its feminine penetrability, its supine malleability” (Said, 1978, pp. 206–207) is traceable in Pushkin’s depiction of an enamored Circassian maiden who saves the prisoner and commits suicide recognizing his superiority. Consequently, as Ethan Helfrich keenly observes, “the Caucasus and its people in *Prisoner* provide the foreign “other” for which Russia’s identity as a European power can be based upon. The expansion of empire and the direct contact with non-Russians allow for Pushkin to formulate this “other” (Helfrich, 2015, p. 24).

In *The Bronze Horseman* (1833), Pushkin’s unquestionable masterpiece, the Northern colonized is contemptuously relegated to the margins of history as a “poor foster-child in Nature’s keeping” (Pushkin, 2020, p. 4) and “ubogij chukhoniez” (Pushkin, 1975, p. 255)². Besides, claiming that St. Petersburg arose at the place of forests, swamps, and mean log huts, Pushkin disregards the previous historical presence of the Nyenschantz fortress and the town of Nyen, a significant commercial hub in Swedish Istria. Thompson (2000, p. 78) rightly defines the Finnish narrative in *The Bronze Horseman* as “imperialism at its purest” because “Peter’s right to destroy the Finnish way of life is taken for granted”. This argument surprisingly echoes the endnotes to the poem in the Soviet academic ten-volume edition, which asserts “full recognition of the rightness of Peter I, who could not consider the interests of an individual in his state-oriented “great thoughts” and deeds” (Pushkin, 1975, p. 466).

² The derogatory connotations of the latter failed to be fully conveyed in Lednicki’s translation “wretched Finns” (Lednicki, 1955, p. 141) or in Dewey’s one “poor Finns” (Pushkin, 2020, p. 3).

The Slavic colonized (Poland and Ukraine) are represented through the integrationist narrative, particularly in Pushkin's odes *To the Slanderers of Russia* and *Borodino Anniversary* from the infamous booklet *On the Capture of Warsaw* (1831), most probably commissioned by Nicholas I, Pushkin's "personal censor". Pushkin's menacing invective was addressed to the members of the French parliament who condemned the bloody massacre of the Russian army against the rebels and, more generally, to the whole of Europe that supported the Poles with the slogan "For your freedom and ours". In conformity with the idea of Russia's dominance in the Slavic world, Pushkin calls the November Uprising of Poland "Slavonic kin among themselves contending, an ancient household strife" (Shaw, 1845, p. 150). Yet the integrationist Polish narrative is intricately intertwined with the narrative of the hostile Other. As Shkandrij argues, "Russian literature portrayed Poland as an equally foreign and inimical "hydra" that required slaying by heroic figures" (Shkandrij, 2001, p. 30). This role assignment is made manifest in *Borodino Anniversary* with its glorification of the bloody suppression of the rebellion and, even more, in Pushkin's letter to Elena Khitrovo, Kutuzov's daughter: "So, our *ancestral enemies* will be finally exterminated" (Pushkin, 1977, vol. 9, pp. 355–356). The main attributive characteristic assigned to Poles in Pushkin's narrative is arrogance; e.g. the opposition of "the haughty Liakh" and "faithful Russ" in *To the Slanderers of Russia* and the mockery at "Warsaw's proud law" in *Borodino Anniversary*.

In his poem *Poltava* (1828), Pushkin foregrounds the integrationist narrative representing the Ukrainian colonized. In Pushkin's imperially biased interpretation, Hetman Mazepa's failed attempt to tear Ukraine away from Russia and restore its statehood under Sweden's protection acquires attributes of *violent crime* and *treason*: Mazepa is repeatedly described as "villain", "Judah", "traitor" and "corrupt soul" (Pushkin, 1975, p. 171–211). As Ivan Dziuba argues, all of the history of the Russian empire is full of complaints about *izmiena* (*treason*), search for *izmiena*, and prevention of the possibility of *izmiena*. The underlying rationale behind this phenomenon can be traced to the redefined interpretation of the concept: any resistance to the invaders was announced as "izmiena Otiechiestvu" (treason of Motherland) (Dziuba, 2008, p. 294).

Simultaneously, Mazepa represents the hostile Other (*enemy Mazepa, enemy of Russia*) whose clinging to the pre-colonial "bloody old days" impedes the ultimate integration of Ukraine and the erasure of its Otherness. The recurrent reference to Mazepa's advanced age (*arrogant old man, evil old man, living corpse, old kite*) emphasizes the predestined failure of Ukraine's outdated pursuit of self-governance. In contrast to this "old violent" Other, Mazepa's young lover Maria represents the feminine nature of assimilated Ukraine that in the end rejects its Otherness.

3. Rewriting the narrative: The misrepresentation of Pushkin and Shevchenko's literary relationship

The all-compassing imperial narrative constructed by the Russian empire, USSR, and eventually Putin's regime has always been "translating" Ukraine to the world as a secondary derivative "little Russia". Through the annexation or marginalization of Ukraine's cultural heritage, and the physical elimination of Ukrainian intellectuals and artifacts, Russia meticulously elbowed Ukraine out of the global cultural context. In the article with the telling title *Slavic but not Russian: Invisible and Mute*, Thompson mentions the case of Pushkin and Shevchenko to make manifest how unequal representation of Russian and non-Russian Slavic narratives in the public square makes them appear "insignificant, minor, marginal, low prestige, invisible to the naked eye". Consequently, "while books on the trivial aspects of Pushkin's poetry and life can be counted by the dozen, a silently accepted opinion about Shevchenko is that, well, he has little to say to contemporary readers, because he represents "local color" of interest to no one but ethnic Ukrainians" (Thompson, 2015, p. 12).

A dismissal of Shevchenko as a poet of mere "local colour", solely "for domestic use" and unworthy of mainstream literary attention goes hand in hand with the systematic obfuscation of his anti-colonial themes and critical stance toward Pushkin's imperial narratives. Soviet literary criticism traditionally portrayed Shevchenko as a deferential student of Pushkin, upholding Pushkin's moral and artistic authority as unassailable. This interpretation has persisted in more recent scholarship, often citing excerpts from Shevchenko's *Diary*, which confirm that he read Pushkin but do not adequately address Shevchenko's critical perspective.

The initial, and notably successful, endeavor to link Shevchenko to Pushkin was the Leipzig edition *New Poems by Pushkin and Shavchenko* published in 1859. In 1937, during the peak of the Great Terror, the USSR reissued the Leipzig edition to mark the 100th anniversary of Pushkin's death, with a clear political motive — to blend Shevchenko with Russian culture. Soviet Shevchenko studies underscored this unification mission: "The publication of works by two eminent poets from two fraternal nations holds significant symbolic weight" (Kyrylyuk, 1955, p. 11). However, the Leipzig edition is, in essence, a prime illustration of literary mystification. Initially, the title contains two intentional errors – referring to "new poems" by Pushkin, who had passed away more than two decades earlier, and a modified letter in Shevchenko's name (Shavchenko). Furthermore, six revolutionary anti-colonial poems by Shevchenko, including his powerful *The Caucasus*, were intermingled among four entirely apolitical minor poems by Pushkin and three poems falsely attributed to Pushkin. Lastly, as Ivan Ohiyenko astutely pointed out, the compact size of the book, its soft dark blue cover, and the introductory poem *The Prayer* (a free paraphrase of *The Lord's Prayer*) credited

to Pushkin, gave the impression of a Book of Prayers. These manipulations were orchestrated to divert the attention of censors and customs officials rather than to foster Russian-Ukrainian solidarity (Ohiyenko, 2002, pp. 149–150).

A more nuanced understanding of Shevchenko's views on Pushkin can be gleaned from the 1876 Prague edition of *The Kobzar*, the most representative collection of Shevchenko's works of the time, which includes memoirs from Shevchenko's contemporaries. These recollections reveal Shevchenko's deep-seated aversion to Pushkin's imperial narrative, particularly in relation to the poem *Poltava*, where Pushkin glorifies historical figures whom Shevchenko regarded as traitorous. Yakiv Polonskij reminisces: "Paying visits to Shevchenko, I learned from him that he did not like our poet, Pushkin, not because he considered him a bad poet but simply because Pushkin was the author of the poem "Poltava": Shevchenko viewed Kochbej as a mere weasel and scammer while Pushkin depicted him as Peter's loyal subordinate who was unjustly defamed and put to death by Mazepa" (Shevchenko, 1876, Vol. 1, p. IX). Mykhailo Mikeshyn also recalls how passionately Shevchenko "in the heat of the moment scathed Pushkins, and Dierzhavins, etc" (Shevchenko, 1876, Vol. 2, p. XV).

In his 1955 essay *Taras Shevchenko and West European Literature*, Munich-based Prof. Jurij Bojko concluded: "Shevchenko, who understood and felt Pushkin's talent, saw in him primarily the genius of a rapacious empire and did not hesitate to throw at him the scornful appellation of 'poetaster'" (Bojko, 1955, p. 30). The last statement is left unexplained, which makes it even more intriguing. We believe that the explanation can be found in the grotesque depiction of Tsarina Alexandra in Shevchenko's poem *The Dream*³. Tsarina is portrayed as a dried mushroom, lanky-legged, skinny, and suffering from the twitch. Yet of particular interest is the narrator's conclusion:

So this is what a goddess looks like!
Pitiable wretch!
And I, poor fool, not having seen
You ever once, you marvel,
Was even ready to believe
Your poetasters' drivel. (Shevchenko, 2008, p. 191)

Editors of some Soviet editions of *The Kobzar* in the endnotes helpfully provided a list of no names glorifying tsarina, as possible "dumb poetasters"⁴ from *The Dream*. For obvious reasons, they could not mention the most famous

³ The unflattering references to the royal family became the most aggravating circumstance in Shevchenko's indictment in 1847 when he was sentenced to military service as a private for an indefinite period in the Caspian steppes.

⁴ In Vera Rich's translation, the derogatory attribute is omitted.

of them. Pushkin expressed admiration for the tsarina's beauty in his diary and devoted to her the poetic lines "the star Harita among the Haritas" (Pushkin, 1975, vol. 4, p. 420)⁵. The assumption that Shevchenko might allude to Pushkin or Zhukovskij, Pushkin's mentor and coauthor of the notorious *On the Capture of Warsaw*, appears quite plausible.

4. Subverting the Empire: Shevchenko's Anticolonial Counter-Narrative in Dialogue with Pushkin's Textual Hegemony

Shevchenko's poems *The Dream* and *The Caucasus* articulate potent anticolonial counter-narratives that engage in a subversive dialogue with Pushkin's "textual empire". Through the lens of postcolonial theory, these works can be seen as acts of resistance that challenge and dismantle the hegemonic discourses embedded within Pushkin's writings, which often function as instruments of imperial power and cultural domination. Shevchenko's verse destabilizes and deconstructs the imperialist ideology inherent in Pushkin's texts, reappropriating the narrative space to articulate a distinctly Ukrainian voice of defiance.

Shevchenko's hypertextual references to Pushkin operate as a form of intertextuality that not only engages with but also subverts the authoritative colonial discourse. By reinterpreting and recontextualizing Pushkin's literary tropes, Shevchenko disrupts the monologic nature of the empire's narrative, foregrounding the colonial subject's perspective. His polemical engagement with Pushkin reveals the constructedness of the imperial narrative, exposing its underlying assumptions and contradictions.

In the *Epilogue to The Prisoner in the Caucasus*, Pushkin glorifies the Russian conquest, symbolically represented by the image of the two-headed eagle rising at the scent of blood:

And then I shall celebrate the glorious time
when our two-headed eagle, scenting bloody combat,
rose up high against the disaffected Caucasus. (Pushkin, 2001, p. 147)

This imagery not only evokes the imperial power of Russia but also associates the conquest with a natural, almost inevitable, act of predation. In stark contrast, Shevchenko's poem *The Caucasus* begins with the image of Prometheus, a symbol of the indomitable spirit of the Caucasus, eternally punished by an eagle that sucks his blood:

⁵ Franko (1982, vol.35, p. 163) and Dziuba (2008, p. 256) mistakenly assume that Pushkin takes priority in insulting tsarina in his poem *Herons* (1831). However, though the poem was long attributed to Pushkin and even included in the Leipzig edition *New Poems by Pushkin and Shavchenko* (1859), Yevgenij Baratynskij authored it.

Chained to the rock, age after age
 Prometheus there bears
 Eternal punishment — each day
 His breast the eagle tears.
 It rends the heart but cannot drain
 The life-blood from his veins. (Shevchenko, 1963, p. 167)

The juxtaposition of these two eagle images is emblematic of the fundamental ideological divergence between Pushkin and Shevchenko. Pushkin's portrayal is underpinned by a belief in the moral legitimacy of Russian generals such as Tsitsianov, Yermolov, and Kotliarevskij, whom he exalts as “the scourge of the Caucasus” (Pushkin, 2001, p. 147). This uncritical celebration of imperial violence is further highlighted in Roger Clarke's translation, which, perhaps unintentionally, reveals the brutal reality behind Pushkin's poeticism by translating *siecha* (*battle*) as *carnage*: “And our daring general Tsitsianov, with head held high, / himself took part in the carnage” (Pushkin, 2001, p. 147).

This glorification of the carnage⁶ is deconstructed in Shevchenko's poem *The Caucasus*. Shevchenko employs a sarcastic tone to subvert Pushkin's glorification, addressing it to Russian imperialists depicted as hounds and keepers of the hounds at the service of the tsars (referred to as *tsars-batiushki*). The attempts to translate this untranslatable Russian realia into English — such as John Weir's version *rulers golden-crowned* (Shevchenko, 1963, p. 168), Vera Rich's *tsars, our 'little fathers'* (Shevchenko, 2008, p. 289), Clarence Manning's *tsars, our dearest fathers* (Bojko, 1956, p. 45), and Peter Fedynsky's *our patriarchal czars* (Shevchenko, 2013, p. 172) — all fall short of capturing the full weight of Shevchenko's irony. Shevchenko (2013) reserves true glory for the Caucasian heroes, whom he describes as *great knights, not forgotten by the Lord* (p. 172).

Shevchenko's assertion of the fundamental human right to live freely on one's native land — expressed in his lines, “Bannock and croft are all your own; / They were not alms, were not a gift – / No one will seize them for his own, / Clap you in chains and drag you off” (Shevchenko, 2008, p. 289) — stands in direct opposition to the imperial ambition embodied in Pushkin's *The Bronze Horseman*.⁷ The

⁶ The phrase was used by Pushkin's penfriend Pavel Vyazemskij who scathingly criticized Pushkin's poem: “Such glory makes your blood run cold and your hair stand on end. [...] Poetry is not the ally of executioners; [...] the poet's hymns must never be the glorification of carnage” (letter to A. Turgeniev from 27 Sept. 1827) (Vyazemskij, 1996, p. 127).

⁷ The translated volume of Shevchenko's selected works, published by Moscow Progress Publishers to commemorate the 150th anniversary of the poet's birth, carefully aligns the readers' reception with the prevailing ideological doctrines of the Soviet state. In the Introduction, Yevhen Kyrylyuk asserts that “the theme of Slavic unity and brotherhood” constitutes the central motif in Shevchenko's oeuvre. Kyrylyuk even goes so far as to reinterpret *The Caucasus* through this lens, suggesting that Shevchenko's poem calls for the united struggle of all peoples within the Russian Empire against autocracy (Kirilyuk, 1963, p. 14). This ideological reframing is further reflected in

introductory lines of that poem describe how the log huts of the “poor Finns” were swept away to make room for Peter the First’s violent ambition to “hack through” a window to Europe. Ewa Thompson’s observation is particularly relevant here: the Russian verb *prorubit’* (to hack through) connotes a violent action (Thompson, 2000, p. 78), a nuance that is somewhat lost in Dewey’s (Pushkin, 2020, p. 4) and Lednicki’s (Lednicki, 1955, p. 141) translations, where *cut through* appears far milder and less forceful.

The first important step to highlight Shevchenko’s anti-Russian counter-discourse was undertaken by Ivan Franko in his seminal article, *Temne Tsarstvo (The Dark Realm)* (1881). Franko analyzes Shevchenko’s exhortation to the defenders of the Caucasus, “Battle on – and win your battle!”, a maxim that has since become emblematic of Ukrainian freedom, as part of a hypertextual dialogue with Pushkin:

Shevchenko here stands so much higher than Pushkin who in his poem “The Prisoner of the Caucasus” unreservedly approves of the war against Circassians from the stance of greatness and glory of Russia and concludes his poem with proud words: “Give in, the Caucasus: Yermolov is coming!”, words, which are as distant from Shevchenko’s heartfelt words as a predatory war is from peaceful brotherhood. (Franko, 2009, p. 18)

It is not surprising that this unflattering comparison between Pushkin and Shevchenko was excised from Soviet editions of Franko’s works. Two additional deletions from Franko’s article further illuminate the problematic nature of Pushkin’s ode *To the Slanderers of Russia*. Franko critiques Pushkin’s nationalist lament, “Are we few?” by pointing out the inherent disregard for the human condition of the serfs (kholops), whose suffering is not mitigated by their number. Franko identifies this as a prime example of “St. Petersburg-Moscow centralism,” which recognizes no rights beyond that of brute force, ignores the inherent right of every nation to self-determination, and reduces the Slavic lands to mere provinces of Russia, destined to lose their national identities and dissolve in the Russian sea (Franko, 2009, p. 17).

Paradoxically, Soviet Ukrainian critics accused the title of the 1961 London edition of Shevchenko’s selected poems, *Song out of Darkness*, translated by Vera Rich, of bourgeois nationalism because the title’s epigraph explicitly references Franko’s *The Dark Realm*, approved yet abridged in the USSR. Unsurprisingly, this reference was also omitted from subsequent Soviet editions of Franko’s works, despite encapsulating the essence of his critique: “Indeed, in those two

John Weir’s otherwise competent translation of *The Caucasus* from the aforementioned volume. In his rendition, there is a subtle shift in emphasis from the theme of colonial oppression to one of social and class exploitation, as evidenced in the lines: “A hut, a crust – but all your own, / Not granted by a master’s grace, / No lord to claim them for his own, / No lord to drive you off in chains” (Shevchenko, 1963, p. 169).

poems, the poet painted the picture of a great Realm, that of Russia, that Realm of Darkness which oppresses Ukraine...” (Shevchenko, 1961, cover).

A year after the publication of *Song out of Darkness*, *Literaturna Ukraina*, the official organ of the Writers’ Union of the Ukrainian Soviet Socialist Republic (USSR), published John Weir’s⁸ review titled *Shevchenko in London Smog*, condemning the edition:

From the title through introductory articles and prefaces up to the endnotes — everything is sewn with a black thread: intentional attempts to use the name and works of Shevchenko for the anti-Soviet propaganda and support the views of the discredited Ukrainian bourgeois nationalists. (Weir, 1962, p. 3)

The paratexts in *Song out of Darkness* indeed made Shevchenko’s anticolonial narrative accessible to foreign readers. In his introduction, Victor Swoboda (1961) asserts, “It is hardly possible to find a more passionate, scathing, or damning invective against Russian colonialism and military imperialism than Shevchenko’s ‘The Caucasus’” (p. xxix). Even more unacceptable to Soviet officials was the emphasis on the “uncanny prophetic ring” of *The Caucasus* to contemporary readers, given that “exactly a hundred years later whole peoples were deported from the Caucasus to Siberia by another, though still Russian, regime” (p. xxix).

The most explicit hypertextual reference to Pushkin’s imperial narrative can be discerned in the juxtaposition between the sarcastic depiction of the Russian empire in Shevchenko’s *The Caucasus* and the triumphalist assertion of its grandeur, both in territorial expanse and imperial mission, in Pushkin’s ode *To the Slanderers of Russia*. In *The Caucasus*, Shevchenko presents a biting critique of the empire’s vastness and its oppressive reach:

A good slice of world is ours;
Siberia, think! Too vast to cross!
Jails? People? Counting takes too long!
From the Moldavian to the Finn
Silence is held in every tongue...
All quite content... (Shevchenko, 2008, p. 291)

This stark irony directly contrasts with Pushkin’s celebratory tone in *To the Slanderers of Russia*, where the poet extols Russia’s immense power and unyielding unity:

⁸ John Weir (Ivan Fedorovych Viv’yurskiy), a Canadian of the Ukrainian lineage, translated into English 29 Shevchenko’s poetic works, a prosaic foreword to the poem of “The Haidamaky”, the narrative “The Artist”, the poet’s autobiographic letter and some excerpts from his diary. As a member of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of Canada, he was always welcome in Soviet Ukraine.

Or rather, shall they not, from Perm to Tauris' fountains,
 From the hot Colchian steppes to Finland's icy mountains,
 From the grey Kreml's half-shattered wall,
 To far Cathay, in dotage buried, —
 A steely rampart close and serried,
 Rise, Russia's warriors, one and all? (Shaw, 1845, p. 151)

Clarence A. Manning, one of the early translators of *The Caucasus*, was among the first to highlight this ironic intertextual link, describing Shevchenko's lines as "the answers to the proud boasts of Pushkin" (Manning, 1944, p. 496). Manning further notes that Shevchenko's critique extends beyond *The Caucasus*; in his poem *The Heretic*, Shevchenko directly challenges Pushkin's notion of Russia's dominance within the Slavic world. *The Heretic* is dedicated to Pavel Josef Šafárik, a prominent advocate of Slavic unity and equality. In the introduction to *The Heretic*, Shevchenko deliberately invokes Pushkin's chauvinistic metaphor of "Slavic streams merging in the Russian sea," repeating it three times but with a sharply different connotation. Whereas Pushkin's metaphor reinforces the idea of Russia as the central, absorptive force within the Slavic world, Shevchenko subverts this imagery to underscore a vision of a Slavic brotherhood of equal nations, where the "Slavic sea" symbolizes not Russian hegemony, but a collective and harmonious union of diverse Slavic peoples (Manning, 1944, p. 496).

Shevchenko's sarcastic portrayal of the silent, subjugated peoples in *The Caucasus* further evokes a pointed contrast with Pushkin's self-assured assertion of eternal fame in *Exegi monumentum*. Pushkin's verses proudly predict his renown across Russia's vast territories, where even the most remote and unlettered subjects will know his name:

Rumour of me shall then my whole vast country fill,
 In every tongue she owns my name she'll speak.
 Proud Slav's posterity, Finn, and un-lettered still –
 The Tungus, and the steppe-loving Kalmyk. (Pushkin, 2023)

This stands in sharp contrast to Shevchenko's modest and humble request in his *Testament*, where he envisions his memory being preserved not through imperial grandeur, but through the quiet, sincere remembrance of a free and united people:

Then in that great family,
 A family new and free,
 Do not forget, with good intent
 Speak quietly of me. (Shevchenko, 2008, p. 321)

In Shevchenko's poem *The Dream*, the depiction of St. Petersburg and the monument to Peter I establishes a significant hypertextual link with Pushkin's

The Bronze Horseman, which itself was a response to Mickiewicz's *Digressions* in the third part of *Dziady (Forefathers' Eve)*, triggered by the Polish uprising of 1830–1831. Despite recognizing the influence of *Dziady* on both poems, Soviet critics notably ignored Pushkin's role as an intermediary in shaping Shevchenko's narrative. This oversight was rooted in the Soviet glorification of Peter the Great as a "good tsar", a view reinforced by popular media and academic commentary.

Soviet annotations to *The Kobzar* gently reproached Shevchenko for his "tendentious" and "one-sided" portrayal of Peter, condescendingly attributing this to Shevchenko's national feelings rather than recognizing it as a legitimate critique of imperial power. This selective reception was deeply influenced by the evaluative criteria established by prominent Russian critics such as Vissarion Belinskij, who praised *The Bronze Horseman* as "the apotheosis of Peter the Great," suggesting it was the most daring and fitting tribute that could only come from a poet worthy of depicting such a monumental figure" (Belinskij, 1981, p. 464). In stark contrast, Belinskij derisively dismissed Shevchenko's *The Dream* and *The Caucasus* as "lampoons", not worthy of serious consideration. Belinskij's bias is further revealed in his cavalier attitude, claiming that neither he nor any of his acquaintances had read these poems, and expressing satisfaction at Shevchenko's punishment of being sent to serve as a soldier for his literary works, a fate Belinsky claims he would have endorsed himself (Belinskij, 1959, p. 440).

In recent decades, Ukrainian scholars such as Yevhen Nakhlik, Oksana Zabuzhko, Volodymyr Panchenko and others have conducted comparative analyses of the works by Mickiewicz, Pushkin, and Shevchenko. Nakhlik argues that Shevchenko, whether consciously or inadvertently, constructed his "comedy" as a direct contrast to Pushkin's tragedy, effectively subverting the narrative of imperial magnificence (Nakhlik, 2004, p. 68). Oksana Zabuzhko asserts that unlike Mickiewicz and Pushkin, who both perceived St. Petersburg as embodying the "irresistible appealing greatness of evil" – fearsome for the former and awesome yet beautiful for the latter – Shevchenko employs open parody and grotesque deheroization to depict the imperial capital, rendering it almost pathetic in its grandeur (Zabuzhko, 2009, pp. 62–63).

This contrast is especially pronounced in the portrayal of Peter I. In the opening lines of *The Bronze Horseman*, Pushkin opts for a reverent, almost sacred tone, referring to Peter not by name but by the italicized pronoun *he*, underscoring the tsar's revered status: "Here stood *he*, wrapped in thought and drawn / To distant prospects" (Pushkin, 2020, p. 3). Conversely, Shevchenko's depiction of Peter is marked by utter contempt, symbolized by the omission of any pronoun in reference to the tsar, a detail that unfortunately eludes English translations due to syntactical constraints:

On it [a figure] rides bareback,
 In coat yet no true coat,
 Without a hat – some kind of foliage
 Binds his head about. (Shevchenko, 2008, p. 195)

Both poems include the detail of Peter's outstretched hand, but while Pushkin's Peter is portrayed with "splendid indifference" to the forces of nature, "suspended on high, with arm extended," Shevchenko's Peter is a figure of rapacious greed, his outstretched hand emblematic of an insatiable desire to "grab forever the entire world".

The motif of imperial greed is a recurring theme in Shevchenko's portrayal of Peter. In *The Dream*, the soul of Hetman Pavlo Polubotok, who was tortured to death in the Fortress of St. Peter and St. Paul, denounces Peter as an "asp insatiate", warning that on the Last Judgment Day, he will obscure God's light from the tsar's insatiable eyes. This image of Peter is further reinforced by Shevchenko's introductory description of a man with insatiate eyes scouring the horizon for new lands to conquer and plunder.

Shevchenko's profound animosity toward Peter I is vividly illustrated in the memoirs of Mykhailo Mikeshyn, who recalls how the colossal statue of Emperor Peter I haunted Shevchenko, like a ghost that seemed to crush him. Mikeshyn notes that this oppressive image of Peter often drove Shevchenko into fits of pathos, culminating in poetic recitations addressed directly to the clay replica statuette of the emperor (Shevchenko, 1876, Vol. 2, p. XV).

5. Conclusion

The ideologically driven interpretation of Soviet literary criticism imposed a reductionist reading on Shevchenko's complex and multifaceted work, subsuming its anticolonial essence under a more palatable narrative of class struggle and pan-Slavic solidarity. Such a reinterpretation distorts the original intent of Shevchenko's poetry and obscures the poet's profound critique of imperial oppression and colonial subjugation.

Shevchenko's strategic use of intertextuality serves to deconstruct and undermine the imperial ideology embedded in Pushkin's works. By recontextualizing Pushkin's language and imagery, Shevchenko both exposes the oppressive underpinnings of Russian imperialism and asserts a counter-narrative that envisions a different future for the Slavic world – one that resists domination and embraces the principles of equality and mutual respect.

In this context, Shevchenko's poetry can be understood as an act of symbolic decolonization, where the subaltern voice emerges as a powerful agent of cultural and political resistance. By reasserting the agency of the colonized, Shevchenko's texts challenge the legitimacy of the imperial center and contribute to the broader discourse of anticolonial struggle.

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