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**Taras Shevchenko's *Hajdamaky*: Reception, Collective Memory and the Making of the National Poet**

Abstract

Taras Shevchenko's long poem *Hajdamaky*, written in 1841 and published a year later in St. Petersburg is by far his most prominent, most canonic and still most discussed work. From the beginning it generated controversy, particularly in its Polish, but also the Ukrainian (19<sup>th</sup> century) reception and in some quarters it continues to generate controversy to this very day. It is the poet's longest poem (over 2,500 lines) and it deals with what was still then a highly fraught subject: the broad and bloody peasant and Cossack uprising of 1768, the *kolijivshchyna* (in Polish: *koliszczyzna*) in West Bank Polish Ukraine that for many was emblematic of revolutionary apocalypse and which also—both in Polish and Ukrainian historiography—was seen as precipitating the partitions and ultimately the collapse of the Polish Commonwealth (1772, 1792 and 1795). The Romantic, Byronic (and gothic) poetics of the work, its open and complex narrative form and particularly its generic fluidity—its epic qualities are challenged by its many lyrical digressions and the whole, moreover, is framed as a dramatic piece—mask to some degree the work's deeper programmatic purpose: confronting and reviving collective memory.

The satiric opening of the poem broaches the question of language (and of prescribed or “proper” literary topics), and asks whether one can resurrect a long-dead past in a language, i.e., Ukrainian, that is also presumably dead. The quick response by the leading critic of the day, Vissarion Belinsky, was unequivocal: both the language, and the literature were without prospects and fated to merge with the all-Russian; and the work itself was provincial trash and a distraction. In time, other Russian critics, like Dobroliubov, were more conciliatory and supportive, although official Russian policy was soon to rule decisively against Ukrainian literary “separatism” (i.e., in 1847, 1863 and 1876). The Polish reception focused on the poet's seeming glorification of the uprising in which many Polish gentry, as well as Jews and Ukrainian uniates (Greek Catholics) were massacred and on the Russian-inspired Orthodox Church's blessing of it, (cf. particularly Michal Czajkowski's novel *Wernyhora*, 1838, which served in some respects as a source for Shevchenko). Later Polish studies, particularly by Guido Battaglia, Shevchenko's first biographer, show that the poet, while depicting it specifically distances himself from the carnage and hate in the uprising and stresses (in the “Foreword”) the need for reconciliation and national amity between Poles and Ukrainians. The broad Ukrainian response in the course of the 19<sup>th</sup> century was both enthusiastic and critical, with such major major figures as Kulish, Drahomanov and Franko challenging both Shevchenko's implicit populism and his flawed historicism.

In the 20<sup>th</sup> century, especially under the Soviets, the poem came to be seen as the centerpiece of the Shevchenko corpus *and* as an exemplary historical work, one that captures both the historical moment and the spirit of the *narod*, the people. Curiously, both the communist and the nationalist ideologies came together in this, even while stressing respectively the disparate social and the “state-building” sides of the equation (or mythologem). In fact, the ideological readings and the inertia of the canon (and the curriculum) have all but totally instrumentalized the poem into a surrogate for patriotic propedeutics.

As *Shevchenko’s Hajdamaky: the Poem and its Critical Reception* shows, a close rereading of the work reveals a very different pragmatics. The poem’s seeming historicism is in various and consistent ways subordinated to and reformulated by archetypal and mythical structures and its core message devolves above all on a search for topoi of collective memory which can serve as a means for reviving collective identity and vitality.

Central in this is a symbolic reformulation of the uprising in multiform Biblical topoi of apocalypticism (of God’s holy vengeance and the workings of the *herem*—and with it of collectivism and collective punishment), of popular eschatology, and above all of sacrifice (in which Abraham’s binding of Isaac, the *akedah*, serves as a key model)—and which structurally holds forth the promise of resurrection.

This symbolic core—of sacrifice transformed into self-sacrifice and of Ukraine raised to the level of a sacrum—also animates the course of Shevchenko’s ever more conscious articulation of his role as carrier of the Word (which *Hajdamaky* initiates, and his subsequent poetry elaborates, and the reception in time confirms): as a “prophet.” In a manner consistent with other such figures (particularly Mickewicz and Pushkin)—it also shows the self-fashioning of the National Poet.