

History and Characters in Puškin's Epic Poems (Poltava)

ÁGNES DUKKON

ELTE TFK Irodalomtudományi Tanszék, Budapest, Kazinczy u. 23–27, H-1075
E-mail: dukkon@gandalf.elte.hu

Abstract: The author of this paper analyzes the inner world of certain Puškin's poems (motifs, topoi, characters) taking Byron's influence and the poet's reflections on history into consideration. Puškin inherited the structure of genre, the literary character of rebellious hero and the other "obligatory" elements of romantic epical poem (exotic surroundings, nocturnal scenes, extreme emotions etc.) from Byron. A closer influence of the English pattern can be observed only in the early poems of Puškin (The Prisoner of the Caucasus, The Fountain at Bakhchisarai). But the tricks, motifs and necessary "accessories" he employs become the vehicles of increasingly meaningful thoughts which allow the genre to rise to such a level that it could keep its canonised place in the Russian literature even after the vanishing of romanticism. From the mid-1820s the historic events of the period, the repression of the Dekabrist uprising and also the new direction in Puškin's interest are reflected in his works. Among them the epical poem Poltava is considered by the experts the example of overcoming Byron's previous influence. What is followed in this paper is the treatment of the different tragic connections between power and individual by Puškin.

Up to now Žimunskij's study, *Byron i Puškin*, published in 1924, can be considered one of the most significant analyses of the romantic epic. The author's original intention was to give a monographic description of Byron's poetics. He wished to focus on genre and style. Since, however, during the 1920s it was difficult for a Soviet scholar to have access to West-European sources, emphasis eventually shifted to the Byron–Puškin comparison. From the Foreword written to the 1969 German edition (also published in the 1978 Russian edition) we learn that Žirmunskyj meant to concentrate on the general features of the genre as well as on the patterns typical for the poetic works written during the period. That seems to explain why no mention is made of any of the epic poems of the contemporaries, of Baratinskyj, Žukovskyj, Ryleev or Lermontov for example. The detailed comparative analysis surveys the gradual changes of the genre, to be more exact, the way Puškin creates a typical Russian pattern by using the English model as a starting point. The tricks, motifs, and necessary "accessories" he employs become the vehicles of increasingly meaningful thoughts which allows the genre to rise to such a level that it could remain popular in the Russian literature even beyond the end of Romanticism.

Besides the above problems connected with the poetics of form, I see the inner world of some poems of Puškin intriguing enough to beg for clarification, as their meanings are far too difficult to define, since we do not have any reliable

objective measurements to discuss them with the precision formal problems of the poetics of the genre can be assessed. Interpretation perhaps will forever depend upon the subjective response of the reader.

When in the exchange of letters Goethe and Schiller the problem of Faust is raised, Schiller seem to seek a clue to the ideology of the poem for ever, whereas Goethe's response is invariably elusive: he rejects Schiller's queries by saying no more than "I must have done it unconsciously" (Walkó 1982: 140–146). Puškin's attitude to poetry seems to be similar to what Goethe must have meant: life in his work is rich, colorful, exuberant; it can not be reduced to one particular meaning. Yet some significant insight is granted to the reader at the end of the work. Maybe, it is just one single picture, e.g. the waves of the concentric circles in the river at night where the Circassian girl threw herself (The Prisoner of the Caucasus). Some rhymes – *воля/доля* (The Gypsies) – which start a process of association, may serve as a clue to the poem's interpretation (Bočarov 1973).

A strong influence of Byron can be observed only in the early poems of Puškin (The Prisoner of the Caucasus, The Fountain at Bakhchisarai). Since the middle of the 1820s, however, a change can be seen in the choice of topic, in elaboration, and in his way of thinking. The historic events of the period, the repression of the Dekabrist uprising, and also the new direction in Puškin's interest (reading historical studies, collecting material for Boris Godunov, reading Shakespeare after Byron) are reflected in his various works, including his poems. Already in The Gypsies he turns away from the myth of the rebellious hero, who has been a constant element of the first period of Romanticism. Aleko is defined by three different factors: by his soul (his jealousy), by the rules of natural existence and forces (in Russian: *стихия*), and also by the survival of conventions of the abandoned civilization (he regards Zemfira's unfaithfulness as marital infidelity, and takes revenge, although they were not legally married). The rebellious hero turns out to have neither a coherent ideology, nor selfknowledge. His knowledge of the world is most subjective, which is not enough to solve the main conflicts of his life. Even Zemfira's father, the old Gypsy, the child of nature, was able to obtain deeper wisdom from his disappointment (caused by the loss of his beloved partner, Mariula, who goes away with somebody else without saying a single word) than Aleko, the child of civilization from his own life. However, Puškin does not idealize the world of Zemfira's father either, as he does not mean to preach Rousseau's ideas. Instead, he offers the rhymes of *dolia* (fate/share) and *volia* (freedom/will) as food for thought, which can lead to many different conclusions:

Ты не рожден для дикой доли,
Ты для себя лишь хочешь воли.
(Puškin 1978: 526) (Cursive: *Á.D.*)

These rhymes echo in his great lyrical poem, starting *Пора, мой друг, пора...*, ten years later:

На свете счастья нет, но есть покой и *воля*
 Давно завидная мечтается мне *доля* –
 (Puškin 1978: 346) (Cursive: *Á.D.*)

Puškin attempts to follow the man's carrier in the co-ordinates of fate and freedom. He can exploit both epic and narrative forms to the same ends.

It is understandable why the epic poem *Poltava* is considered by the experts the example of the victory of Byron's influence (e.g. Žirmunskij 1978, Lotman 1984, Debreczeny 1997 and others). The psychological complexity of the characters, and also that of the historical background significantly differ from the romantic pattern. However, Puškin does not reject the traditional methods completely, only puts the emphasis on a different place (Debreczeny 1997: 125: "The first 147 lines of canto I, on the other hand, fully belong to the traditional authorial persona of the lyrical verse tale, whom we might call the romantic poet. Unlike the dedication, which contains no clichés, Maria's description is replete with traditional epithets and similes" etc.). There is not an absolute central figure in this poem, in contrast to Byron's poems, where the focus is usually on one particular character (e.g. *Lara*, *The Giaour*, *The Corsair*, *The Bride of Abydos*, *The Prisoner of Chillon*, *Manfred*, *Cain* etc.), and epical and dramatic elements prevail over lyrical ones. However the epigraph is cited from Byron's *Mazeppa*. In the version he used the Ukrainian hetman's name as the title, but later on, as a result of revision it was replaced by the scene of the *Poltava* victory, signalling the modification in the structure of the genre. He depicts characters and fates embedded in historical perspective in a more objective way than Byron in *Mazeppa*, which is a passionate monologue, *Mazeppa's* staccato narration evoking running away, rushing, and suffering. It is interesting that some contemporary critics as F. Bulgarin and N. Nadeždin accuse Puškin of imitating Byron's *Mazeppa* and of unrealistic portrayal of Maria's character: they think her love to *Mazeppa* too extreme, too incredible. The others, as Žukovskij, Vjazemskij, on the contrary, consider this poem the best of Puškin's works. The poet answers the objections in the periodical review 'Dennica' in 1831 and points out the mistakes of the obtuse critics. (Пушкин 1988: 153–155)

Poltava consists of three cantos and an epilogue, and this rhythm is repeated in the structure of the story: *Mazepa's* story, *Maria's* story and one episode from Russian history are interwoven with one another and evaluated in the epilogue which brings the reader up to the poet's time. It allows searching for hidden references to Puškin's own epoch (the repression of the *Dekabrists*) and the stormy period of Peter I: to tragic connections between power and the individual.

1. *Mazepa*-line

Puškin give complexity to this character by casting light upon him from different angles. There are different types of narrative techniques throughout the poem. Paul Debreczeny's analysis is also based on this point ("The key to understanding the poem, in my opinion, is Puškin's blending of contradictory narrative voices", Debreczeny 1997: 124). *Mazepa* can be seen through *Maria's* eyes, who

is completely overpowered by his influence, through her parents', Kočubej and his wife's point of view, who used to be friends with him and become his enemies after their daughter's elopement, furthermore through his own men, political brothers-in arms, his enemies, and through the stylised picture of the "narrator" (Debreczeny 1997: 127) From all these angles he is described as a demonic lover and a fiendish intriguer who has power over other people's soul. He wins Maria, who prefers this old man voluntarily to her young suitors. He makes Kočubej hoist with his own petard, and gets him executed by Tsar Peter, whom he betrays to Charles XII, because he thinks this to be the only way to attain Ukraine's independence. However Mazepa's demonic power is enough only to start a chain of destructions, or maybe, only to accelerate this process launched by fate, since we are not capable of catching the "very first move": we wonder whether it is Maria's smile, or the young Ukrainians' longing for freedom, or Mazepa's unconscious rebellion against old age (he still has strength to be a good lover and a good general). Maria becomes insane when it turns out that her father's death was caused by her lover, and also indirectly by herself. Charles loses the battle against Peter at Poltava, which leads to the loss of Ukraine's independence, and so Mazepa's only choice is to run away with the Swedish king.

Unlike in the previous poems, in this particular one it is the characters where the greatest number of new elements can be discovered. Although historic and literary sources allowed Puškin to depict Mazepa merely as a personification of evil, he does not do so. Contrary to Byron, he does not describe him as an adventurer of great stature either. Puškin's hero is "more human" than those two mentioned above. Kočubej's execution is a forced move to some extent, since Mazepa is confronted with two choices: either he has him executed or he (Mazepa) gets killed because of being suspected of inciting the Ukrainian uprising. Puškin shows Mazepa in the course of struggling with his guilty feeling as well, not only through the eyes of outside narrators and from outside angles. While Kočubej is tortured in the prison of Mazepa's castle (may be is not aware of this), he suddenly realises the following: how will he be able to give an account of all this to Maria? It is the first time he faces the question of responsibility: is it fair to have tied a weak woman to a man who has been fighting the storms of fate?

Ах, вижу я: кому судьбою
 Волненья жизни суждены,
 Тот стой один перед грозою,
 Не призывай к себе жены,
 В одну телегу впрячь неможно
 Коня и трепетную лань.
 (Пушкин 1978: 556) (Cursive: *Á.D.*)

He is burdened with depressing thoughts while walking in the garden, and suddenly he can hear a dull moan or cry to which, driven by some inner force, he replies with an old, common battle-cry. This is the way how the present and the

past are confronted with each other: what the brothers-in-arms used to shout together happily in the battle-field has now been split up to a solitary wailing and shrieking.

The symbols of birds and animals are also remarkable in this poem. Kočubej names Mazepa “an old kite” (*старый коршун*), who chopped up his “little dove”. On top of this, Kočubej is also connected with the eagle metaphor (eagle-eyed):

А между тем орлиным взором
В кругу домашнем ищет он
Себе товарищей отважных.
(Пушкин 1978: 543) (Cursive: *Á.D.*)

The metaphor of eagle (*орел*) refers to the chivalrous warrior in Russian folklore. This allusion emphasises the relativity of angles and that of evaluation: the person whom Maria sees as an eagle (Mazepa) is an old kite (*старый коршун*) in the eyes of the jealous father.

The metaphors of deer and chamois are associated to Maria three times. The first time when the hetman asks for her hand in marriage, and the girl's real feelings are not clear yet:

Не серна под утес уходит,
Орла послыша тяжкий лет:
Одна в сених невеста бродит,
Трепещет и решенья ждет.
(Пушкин 1978: 538) (Cursive: *Á.D.*)

The “deer” (in Russian: *лань*), as a synonym for “chamois” (in Russian: *серна*) can be again found in the second canto, already cited, when Mazepa suddenly realises that his political plans contradict his personal happiness, and Maria becomes the victim of it:

В одну телегу впрячь неможно
Коня и трепетную лань.

The metaphor steed (*конь*), he uses for evaluating himself is the third possibility of the interpretation of the hetman's character. Kočubej definitely regards him as a predator (old kite), but in Maria's eye this bird of prey becomes noble, the eagle appears in the royal court of arms and also as an often used symbol of love poetry. When Mazepa discloses the plan of the Ukrainian uprising to her, she predicts twice that he will be crowned.

Твоим сединам так пристанет
Корона царская! (...)
Ты так могущ! О, знаю я:
Трон ждет тебя.
(Пушкин 1978: 550–551)

Mazepa is connected with three animal symbols: *конь* (self-portrait), eagle (Maria's valuation) and old kite (according Kočubej's point of view), while Maria and her father have only one constant animal symbol (*серна, орлиный взор*).

The third appearance of the “chamois” (*серна*) takes place at the end of the poem. After the lost battle Mazepa is running away together with Charles XII, and they spend the night near Kočubej’s decaying manor-house. Mazepa is woken up by the following vision: Maria is standing there in rags, with her hair let down, and with confused eyes. In her mad monologue different soul-stirring memories keep coming up, Mazepa’s figure suddenly doubles: there used to be a beautiful, loving look on this dark face, and in Maria’s eyes his character doubles too:

Я принимала за другого
Тебя, старик. Оставь меня,
Твой взор насмешлив и ужасен.
Ты безобразен. Он прекрасен:
В его глазах блестит любовь,
В его речах такая нега!
Его усы белее снега,
А на твоих засохла кровь"
И диким смехом завизжала,
И легче *серны молодой*

Она вспрыгнула. побежала
И скрылась в темноте ночной.
(Пушкин 1978: 570)

The “chamois” disappears in the dark now, but not in such a way as during her first metaphoric appearance (from before the eagle she did not hide behind the rock). As we have seen in the quotation above in Maria’s unbalanced mind Mazepa is divided into *ты* (you) and *он* (he), which definitely reflects separation between “then” and “now”. Mazepa’s gentle look, his snow-white moustache belongs to the past. Now his face is ugly, his look is terrible, the dry blood on his beard can be associated with the “bird of prey” image. The hetman gets his final punishment because of his miscalculation: in a challenging life, which is the battle-steed’s natural existence, he has taken the “week deer” as partner.

This scene has an interesting intertextual reference: the double-faced Mazepa in the insane girl’s mind can be associated with the scene in Dostoevskij’s “The Possessed”, where the idiotic Maria Lebjadkina notices the demon on the face of Stavrogin. The previous legendary face of the prince becomes evil in her eye the same way as that of Mazepa in Maria’s mind. (We have to point out that from “Poltava” there lead ways to other works of Dostoevskij as well, namely to “The Housewife”, but we wish to discuss this problem in another essay.)

2. Maria’s story unfolds parallel with Mazepa’s, but they are closely connected. Her character is also depicted from different angles. In her parents’ and suitors’ eyes she is a maidenly and fragile girl. With his admiration, the young Cossack, who lacks the courage to declare his unrequited love, creates her heavenly alter ego. The Maria–Mazepa relationship is the complete opposite: the hetman evokes and sustains sensuality, earthly passion in her, this way he chains her to himself emotionally. When Kočubej employs a political method of lodg-

ing information against Mazepa to repay for being insulted by him, the sly hetman casts the charge back, and brings Kočubej to the scaffold. On the eve of the execution Maria questions him about the reason of his secretive behaviour. In the end Mazepa decides to come up with the following sinister alternative: whose side would she take if she were obliged to? The girl tries to head off this absurd question, but under the hetman's pressure she declares she would sacrifice everything for him (*Всем, всем готова | Тебе я жертвовать, поверь*). At this point the latent (hidden) Kočubej—Maria—Mazepa triangle become visible. To this triangle there was some subtle allusion in the First Canto, after Mazepa's marriage proposal and also their—the hetman's and Maria's—elopement. The loving father's most precious treasure is snatched by the lover of her father's age (remember the beginning of the poem: *Богат и знатен Кочубей ...*, but not because he owns a fortune and property, but because he has a beautiful daughter, *Прекрасной дочерю своей | Гордится старый Кочубей*). This inverted tragedy involves a richer and a far more interesting mass of problems than "ordinary triangles" in other romantic epic poems. Maria is not a traditional, passive woman, her character is more complex than that. In "The Fountain at Bakhchisarai" the poet depicts passion and innocence in two figures (Zarema—Maria), he follows the *topoi* even in the description of their appearance (Zarema is dark-eyed and dark-haired, a passionate southern type — Georgian — Maria is blue-eyed, fair-haired, maidenly — Polish). Maria in the "Poltava" is a more dramatic character: she accepts her passion towards her old godfather, Mazepa; she is not simply seduced and eloped but she herself participates in it. Obviously, Maria, who had the courage to reject her suitors and conducted so mysteriously, was able to respond to this unconventional passion with passion, and turn against the conventions. However, she could preserve some of her original innocence, something childish, since she collapses under her sense of guilt conscience when on the morning of her father's execution she is made to wake up to reality by her mother's unexpected visit. She is not sure what she liked about Mazepa. Her childish soul, which love has not been able to make firm yet, is broken by the cruel game of the "adults" and the "old".

3. Mazepa's, Maria's and Kočubej's drama takes place during the Russian-Swedish war. In order to be able to describe the historical background Puškin studied the available sources, e.g. the "Žurnal Petra Velikogo" recording the events under the reign of Peter I, and also Voltaire's *Histoire de Charles XII*, which Byron studied for the topic of Mazepa as well. In "Poltava" the historical events are emphasised only to such an extent as they are required for the background of the human tragedy. They function not just as setting but provide space for existence where the characters move, so space and motion cannot be disjointed from each other. In his earlier poems Puškin follows the Byronic pattern by laying stress on the main character's world (fictitious): the scene or space is emphasised, because they create exoticism, but there is less emphasis put on histori-

cal time, because for the subjective-type dramas (The Prisoner of the Caucasus, The Gypsies) any “time” is suitable the past as well as the present. “Poltava” marks new ways in this respect as well. The characters just as much as time and space do possess historical reality, fiction plays part only in the description of the relations and in that of connections, in the rearrangement of the facts (e.g. in real life Kočubej had more daughters, the one who eloped with Mazepa was called Matrjona etc.). In “The Prisoner of Chillon” Byron also provides a historical background, but it serves only to create “couleur local” for the prisoner’s monologue, but, like the exotic scenes it, does not infiltrate the “philosophy” of the poem. Byron’s experience about man, existence, and power is embodied in other forms and means. Puškin’s detachment from the English pattern shows that he has found his own way, from the romantic-historical approach he turned to a deeper historical philosophical direction, which can be discovered in his following works: The Bronze Horseman, Dubrovskyj, The Captain’s Daughter.

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