

# THE GENIUS OF SLAVONIC POETRY

WATSON KIRKCONNELL

**W**HY should we waste time over the poetry of the Slavic peoples? With the rich treasure-house of English at our immediate disposal, with the accredited wealth of the Classical and the Romance languages, and even of the Teutonic group, urging their legitimate claims upon us, why should we essay the mastery of more difficult and unfamiliar tongues? Should not Slavonic literature be left in outer darkness, where Celtic and Sanskrit wail unheard?

If poetry were only a matter of beauty of structure, such rude questionings might well be allowed to prevail. The beauties of Slavonic verse are many, it is true; in spite of general weakness in the architectonics of large works of art, there are in the several Slavic literatures legions of shorter poems whose perfection of form is a joy for ever. Yet since life is short, and the graces of more accessible literatures seem inexhaustible, the scholar might well refuse to give years of toil to Russian, Polish, Czech, or Serb-Croat if they offered him only beauties similar in kind to those of more familiar languages.

There is not, indeed, among the Slavs, any marked originality in literary type. Slavic literature is, in point of form, almost wholly derivative. The *byliny*, or sagas, were introduced by the Scandinavian masters of the land in the ninth century; Russian liturgical poetry owed everything to Byzantine hymnody; France contributed the standard neo-classical *genres* in prose and verse in the eighteenth century, and since that time virtually all forms in imaginative literature—lyric, epic, drama and novel—may be traced back to West European originals. We cannot turn to the Slavs, as to the ancient Hellenes, for significant creativeness in prosody or design.

Differences in the texture of language are, it is true, of some account; the association of palatalized consonants with an abundance of vowels almost as great as in Italian produces in such a language as Russian an effect wholly distinct from that of any non-Slavic tongue; yet after all, these phonetic distinctions are largely the differences of various musical instruments. There may be great

differences in quality and overtone between violin and guitar and harp, but in the last analysis our interest is more in the music played than in the medium that transmits it.

Our problem is, indeed, still more fundamental, and may be briefly stated. Poetry is above all an expression of human experience, and we read it for the joy of enriching life through its revelations. Is there, then, we must ask, any valuable quality of experience which we may find only in the poetry of the Slavonic peoples? Has race or history begotten in their literature any vision of life or depth of emotion so distinct and so precious that we may be justified in toiling to gain it for ourselves?

There are some, indeed, to whom such a problem is inherently futile. Generalization as to race in literature is, they say, dangerous and deceptive; its advocates sail madly over literary seas with a paradox for pilot, and arrive at some imaginary port "that never was, on sea or land". When French literature emphasizes epic heroism in the tenth century, romantic sentiment in the twelfth, salty realism in the thirteenth, graveyard melancholy in the fourteenth, sensuous beauty in the later sixteenth, rhetorical polish in the seventeenth, rationalism in the eighteenth, and volcanic emotionalism in the early nineteenth, is it not safer to assume that racial or national qualities are chimerical, and that fashion and circumstance determine the qualities of the literature in any age? How, we are asked, can the passionate tenderness of Catullus be equated with the urbanity of Horace or the harsh indignation of Juvenal? What common factor can we find among Chaucer, Spencer, Swift, Richardson and Hardy? Such criticism is salutary, but not final; it will warn us against too hasty conclusions, but it will not keep us from affirming what the common man has guessed and the scholar has experienced, that nations and races do impress individual qualities upon their literatures. International movements of thought and art—feudal, Renaissance, Neo-Classical, Romantic—may succeed one another in all countries like successive epidemics, each with its own bacillus and symptoms; yet the fact remains that different countries react to these movements in different ways. The Renaissance literatures of Spain and England, for example, while begotten by Italy, took on also the spirit of the lands whose pregnant genius bore them, and we feel in them personalities as distinct as those of unrelated individuals. Dominant throughout eight centuries of French literature, in spite of all fluctuations of school and fashion, we find a consummate sense of form in prose and verse, an inimitable vein of pure comedy, and an unsurpassed gift in narrative fiction. Surely all these instances

are significant of real underlying differences of spirit, springing perhaps from race, and hence, in the nearer centuries, from the distinct mixtures of races which make up all the miscegenated peoples of Europe.

Ethnologically, the Slavs represent such a special blending of types. Lacking the Mediterranean element altogether, they are the merging of a broad-headed Alpine majority and an earlier rufous, dolicephalic minority with Nordic affinities. Only in Eastern and Southern Germany is this particular blend elsewhere to be found, and it is possible to trace spiritual relations between these cognate groups whose media of expression happen, by the accidents of history, to be Slavic and Teutonic respectively.

Let us now attempt, with this theoretic basis of justification, to examine Slavonic literature for unique elements of value and experience.

Melancholy is the first Slavic characteristic which would occur to the casual reader. Russian fiction implies, for most North Americans, gloom, depression and tragedy. The mention of Polish and Serbian poetry calls up echoes of lamentation over national disasters at Praga or Kossovo. Even their folk-songs seem to have a tragic bent. Strangely enough, this alleged melancholy is so far from being unique or unmitigated that I question whether we can accept it as valid for the purposes of our present search.

In the first place, no one who is familiar with Krylov or Alexey Tolstoy will deny the existence in Slavic of a rich vein of humour. In the second place, the Slavs have by no means a monopoly of tragic emphasis. All great literature is tragic in its approach to life. Homer's *Iliad* and Sophocles's *Oedipus Tyrannus* face the world's evils with unflinching eyes; Dante's *Divina Commedia*, Shakespeare's *King Lear* and *Othello*, Milton's *Paradise Lost*, Thomas Hardy's *Dynasts*—works such as these are not blind to the darker side of life; the older West European epics, the *Poetic Edda*, the *Cattle-raid of Cooley*, *Beowulf*, the *Poema del mio Cid*, the *Song of Roland*, and the *Nibelungenlied*, are all inherently tragic. The folk-poetry of every people is full of disaster and heart-break; indeed it is only in the sentimental and idealistic falsification with which, in romance and lyric and novel, Western Europe has sought since the twelfth century to amuse its idle womenfolk, that the essence of tragedy has been consistently eliminated.

Slavic melancholy is thus akin to the great tradition in all other European literatures. It is, however, manifestly more prevalent and pervasive in Slavic than in any other literature except the Celtic, and in that single parallel lies, I believe, its chief ex-

planation. Even though Celts and Slavs may wear their rue with a difference, there is a fundamental kinship between the Serbian *Kosovka Djevojka* and the grieving maiden of the Irish Jacobite laments. Both races have known a more tragic history than that of other peoples. The Slavs have been the quivering bulwark of human flesh and blood upon which has broken, over and over again, the storm of merciless Asiatic invasion, not to mention the conquering violence of those Teutons to the West and North whose existence that bulwark had preserved. The Celts, similarly, have for two thousand years been hounded and harried by Roman, Anglo-Saxon, Scandinavian and Frenchman, till to-day their speech is almost extinct along the rugged coastlands of North-Western Europe. It is inevitable that such a history of distress and defeat should be reflected in their literatures. But it would be uncritical to assume that melancholy was therefore an inherent quality of their genius.

A far more unmistakable element in the Slavic personality is simplicity of expression. Like ancient Greek or modern German, but more noticeably than either, the Slav tells a plain story, an unvarnished tale. The golden torrent of Shakespearean metaphor and the soaring pinnacles of Shelleyan imagination are alien to the Slavic genius. The common yet fundamental themes and experiences of life are treated with a matter-of-fact simplicity which at the same time transcends the commonplace by its rightness, its perfect balance, its natural sincerity, its inevitability, its transfiguring beauty. Herein lies one of its chief attractions to a foreign student. The poetry of a Pushkin or a Mickiewicz can be appreciated only in the original, and there it constitutes a new experience to the English mind, which at first declares it insipid and colorless, but soon thrills to find in it the pure daylight of experience unstained by the dome of many-colored glass which some other literary traditions interpose. There are, of course, individual exceptions; the Czech, Antonín Sova, approaches Shelley in his richness of figure and fantasy; but the main tradition from Pushkin to Anna Akhmatova is one of monumental simplicity and power.

A corollary to this simplicity of treatment is an approach to certain elemental aspects of humanity that embarrasses the prudery of the English-speaking world. The impression made on the modern Anglo-Saxon mind by many of the great Slavic writers is, as Mrs. Virginia Woolf has suggestively put it, "that of men who have lost their clothes in some terrible catastrophe". All the disguises and reticences which centuries of petticoat government have imposed upon our literary conversation are ruthlessly stripped

away; and when the Slav proceeds with a masterful subtlety unapproached in English to dissect the inmost complexities of human impulse and motive, we are inclined to be repelled by the strange immodesty of it all, however much we may feel its astounding reality and power. Perhaps we feel unconsciously that a sinister and unfamiliar spirit imperils the cloud-capt towers of romantic idealism which we have reared on foundations of seemingly silence. The sentimentalist lingering under soft summer moonlight would curdle at the thought of his beloved's dead body slashed by lancets in a medical laboratory. Often we would not merely see life as in a glass, darkly; we would ask for softly tinted lights of illusive loveliness. Perhaps this mood is justified for certain ages and races; yet there are so many possible approaches to the highest significance in life that we shall with real peril close our eyes to the Slavonic interpretation. For Slavic Europe, lacking those influences of feudal romance which have changed the whole tone of West European poetry since the twelfth century, has built its own temple of values on a simpler basis of reality. Its literature, as we penetrate its strangeness, reveals a soul of unusual power and beauty. It may lack the idealization of womanhood, the passion for discovery and creation, and the genius for organizing and controlling life which are typically Teutonic; it may not have the architectonic sense of sweetly ordered beauty and the urbane development of fine arts of living that we associate with the Mediterranean mind; but at its best, it seems to me, it is marked by two transcendent qualities: universality of sympathy, and a deeply religious attitude towards life.

The universality of Slavonic is something far more pervasive than the noble insistence of Burns in *A Man's a Man for A' That*, or the emotional eloquence of a Rousseau, harping upon the fundamental rights of man. It is not related to the universality of intellectual interest in a Holberg, a Da Vinci, or a Goethe. It is rather more akin to the spirit of Shakespeare, though without the aristocratic bias of his work. Dostoevsky, in hailing Pushkin as the greatest and most representative Slav, called him *vse-chelovek* (pan-anthropos) because he felt him to be as wide as all humanity in his powers of comprehending experience. Universality of understanding passes naturally into universality of sympathy. Transcending all the group intensities of Slavic nationalism and Pan Slavism is a broad affection for the human race, expressed in Antonín Sova or Leopold Staff or in the wartime message of Maxim Gorky: "We look forward to an atonement of the evil dispositions in men's hearts, and to the reconciliation of their exacerbated differ-

ences. The wheat will spring again in the fields drenched with human blood, and flowers will deck the graves of the fallen. Then the divided peoples will once more walk together on the great, broad, common path of progress. We believe and hope!"

More striking still is the depth of Slavic mysticism which finds the whole world symbolic of eternal spiritual principles. In an age when the dry heat of aggressive rationalism tends more and more to make an arid desert of imaginative literature, we may welcome a poetry which protests that life is more spiritual than material. The harsh arrogance of our behaviorists and the destructive negations of our bio-chemists seek to reduce humanity to senseless automatism; and while many of us deprecate any mere escape into irrationalism or dogmatic obscurantism, our age needs to realize anew the significance of the individual human personality by virtue of fundamental mysteries at the heart of existence. This mood of marvelling intuition is dominant in Slavonic literature.

It is different in many ways from the mysticism of other ages and peoples. It is not the systematic theosophy of Neoplatonism, so alien to the lucid naturalism of the Hellenic spirit proper. It is not the sublimation of troubadour love and Platonic metaphysics which brought a *vita nuova* to Dante and to such spiritual disciples as the Catalan Auziàs March and the English *Pearl*-poet. Neither is it the medieval ascetic contemplation of the divine sought by St. Bernard of Clairvaux, or the ecstatic communion with the God-man experienced by Santa Teresa. The sober-suited pietism of the Cambridge Platonists or of William Law and George Fox is insignificant beside it; while Wordsworth and Coleridge appear as apostles from Germany rather than as originators of an independent cult. It is in Germany, indeed, more than half of which approximates in racial blend to the Slavic compound, that there has arisen a school of mysticism resembling the Slavic in nature and importance. The land of Eckhart, Tauler, Paracelsus, Boehme and Schelling is perhaps the most famous in the history of European mysticism. But when, in the eighteenth century, the pollen of that German mysticism fell upon the opening flowers of Slavic literature, there soon matured something rich and strange, a spirituality different from anything known before, and of singular importance to the modern mind.

To some, its most striking characteristic is a pessimistic passivity, closely akin to Buddhistic nihilism, as found in the later moods of Tolstoy or Kasprowicz. (This same quality has been found by many critics as far afield as Schopenhauer, von Hartmann, Eminescu, Leopardi, Clough and Thomas Hardy, and has been

ascribed to temperament or to the widespread disintegration of aristocratism in the modern world). To others the chief phase in Slavic thought is a sort of Brahmanic pantheism, as manifested in much of the poetry of such men as Balmont, Theer and Brezina. Others, again, would turn to such Slavs as Soloviev for a reaffirmation of orthodox Christian philosophy. Still others are struck by the inverted mysticism, or Satanism, of a Sologub. But to me Slavic literature has a mystic or religious quality over and above all such fluctuating phases of expression. It is a profound sense of life as a spiritual experience. Eliminate all dogma, all creed, and all formal religion, and to the Slav you have still, not the mechanic futilities of Western materialism, the puppet-show of "cunning casts in clay", but a universe in which man's experience is intensely meaningful.

Its most intense expression in prose is in the novels of Dostoevsky, but it permeates much of the poetry of Slavdom. Kazimierz Tetmajer's aspiration after the ideal, Alexander Blok's even more passionate yearning, marred though it was by spiritual discord, the soaring idealism of Antonín Sova, winging his way through "adventures of courage"—these are manifestations of the quality we seek. It is implicit in much of Pushkin and Lermontov. It becomes an articulate *boznost* in the historian Palacky. The Serbian Nyegosh knows it in his *Lucha Microcosma* and the Czech Neruda in his *Písne kosmické*. Its most dithyrambic expression has come in the poetry of Otakar Brezina, whose *Vetry od polu, Stavitele chramu*, and *Ruce* proclaim with Blakelike ecstasies of imagination his sense of the whole universe as a vast manifestation of divinity.

Whether this profound sense of the reality of the human spirit be a wisdom born out of age-long suffering, or whether it be an inherent racial attitude towards life, its presence makes Slavic literature of vital interest to us to-day. It is not merely that the very survival of poetry depends on man's belief in personal and spiritual values. All the finest qualities of human experience are impossible without such a faith. And in this age of magnificent but perilous *Erklärung* we must welcome all that will help to keep alight the torch of the spirit of man.