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Transcending Linguistic and Cultural Boundaries: A Story of Friendship Between Ira Aldridge (1807–1867) and Taras Shevchenko (1814–1861)

Abstract

The text presents the unique friendship between Ira Aldridge (1807–1867), the first Africa–American tragedian and Taras Shevchenko (1814–1861), Ukrainian artist, poet and painter. They met for a short time in 1858, when Aldridge came to St Petersburg to play Shakespeare with a German troupe. Since their lives' experiences were similar – Aldridge suffered from racial discrimination, while Shevchenko was born as a serf – their friendship was instantaneous. Shevchenko appreciated Aldridge's theatrical skills and Aldridge highly valued Shevchenko's art. Aldridge's portrait painted by Shevchenko is a memento of their meetings and friendship and is exhibited in the Moscow Tretyakov Gallery.

“What is a friend? A single soul
dwelling in two bodies.”

(Aristotle, *The Nichomachean
Ethics*, Book VIII)

In Book VIII of *The Nichomachean Ethics*, Aristotle distinguishes three kinds of friendship. The first two types, one based on utility and the other on pleasure, are short-lived. Our needs and pleasures can change over time, and in such cases friends are not motivated by anything essential to the nature of the friend. The third kind of friendship, the one based on goodness is, according to Aristotle, the highest level of *Philia*, rendered in modern translation as “brotherly/sisterly love,” one of the highest forms of Love. It is a friendship in which both friends enjoy each other's characters, admire the other's goodness and help one another strive for goodness. The philosopher also calls it a “complete friendship between people who are good and alike in virtue” (Aristotle 261–262).

Prima facie Ira Aldridge, born in New York and the first African–American Shakespeare tragedian, had little in common with Taras Shevchenko, the national Ukrainian bard and artist born in the village of Moryntsi.¹ Yet it seems that

unpredictable destiny desired “the beaten way of friendship” (*Hamlet* 2.2) to connect their lives as an essential part of international art, elements of which manifest themselves in activities such as theatre, painting, and Shakespeare studies. Though their places of birth were separated by the Atlantic Ocean and nearly the entirety of the European Continent, their provenance exposed them to similar social, political and cultural deprivation and hardship. In New York, Aldridge was born a free man as the 1799 the Gradual Manumission Act was in effect; nevertheless, even up to his emigration to Great Britain in 1824, he experienced various instances of racist prejudice, discrimination and even physical abuse. Despite the full of adversity of the vicissitudes of working in the theatres on the British Isles, his love of theatre eventually brought him the international recognition and fame which reached its apogee during his Continental tours (1852–1867).

Born as a serf, Shevchenko also experienced a difficult life. He worked for a while as a shepherd in the household of a wealthy land owner, who later promoted him to the position of valet and took him to St. Petersburg. After years of hardship, great talent helped Shevchenko achieve liberation from serfdom (1838). Yet his engagement in political activities, expressed mainly through his art, resulted in banishment to the Kirghiz steppes, imposed by Tsarist authorities, where he was made to perform military service. The assistance of members of the Russian aristocracy, in particular artist and Vice-President of the Imperial Academy of Art Count Fyodor Petrovich Tolstoy (1783–1873), who praised and revered Shevchenko as a poet, playwright, drama critic and painter, led to his release from exile. When Shevchenko was allowed to return to St. Petersburg he resumed his work at the Imperial Academy of Fine Arts.

Thus, the friendship between Aldridge and Shevchenko was based on similar experiences. Aldridge, who died at the age of sixty, spent the early years of his life in a country where most Blacks were slaves, and his next twenty seven years working in British theatres, touring mainly provinces where he was frequently the object of racist denigration and hate. The last fifteen years, which he spent playing in Continental European theatres, eventually brought well-deserved international appreciation of his artistic talent. Shevchenko, who died three years after his release from exile at the age of forty seven, had been a serf for twenty-four years, a free man for nine, a Russian soldier for ten, and under police surveillance for four. Ira Aldridge died knowing that his dream of freedom for the blacks in America had become a fact. However, Shevchenko, on the day of his death, was unaware that Russian peasants were set free under the Imperial decree issued in St. Petersburg on March 5.

Both Aldridge and Shevchenko were victims of national and social injustice in their motherlands. In a way, they both suffered from political, social and cultural exile. The first African American tragedian could not return to the USA because he would never be allowed to practice his art there. After the

dissolution of the African Grove Theatre in New York (1823), African Americans were mainly depicted on white stages as stereotypical characters –such as the Sambo, the Uncle or the Mammy. These racist presentations, usually in whiteface, presented them as happy, contented and dim-witted. In other words, at that time in the USA there was no place for Aldridge to play Shakespeare's characters in professional theatres. When, as an accomplished artist, poet and writer, Shevchenko received permission to visit his native Ukraine, where he had planned to eventually live and work, he was arrested by the Tsar and his officials for his involvement in a subversive organization. His last trip to the Ukraine (1859) also ended in his arrest, that time for "blasphemous and subversive speeches," and he was made to return under strict police surveillance to St. Petersburg. (Zaitsev 123)

The lives of these two artists show many parallels, not only in their experience of severe oppression, but also in their experience of social, cultural and political denigration and exclusion. Their only weapon was their artistic talent: fighting against impossible odds, Aldridge and Shevchenko managed to follow their vocations and receive recognition and fame. Although forbidden by the Tsar to paint or write as part of his punishment during deportation to the far eastern part of Russia, Shevchenko was not afraid to practice his art in secret. Aldridge, despite being described in pro-slavery London newspapers as "a thick-lipped, Nigger, who should be sweeping the streets" (*Figaro in London*, 22 September, 1832) attempting to perform *Othello* (1833), found enough courage to play in the Covent Garden Theatre, for which the audience gave him standing ovations.

Furthermore, Aldridge and Shevchenko earned their international recognition as the result of both hard work and their many famous and powerful friends and admirers drawn by their artistic creativity. The list of those who knew and remembered Aldridge, often enthusiastically, was not limited to colleagues and professional acquaintances such as Ellen Tree, Edmund Keene, Charles Keene, J. Philip Kemble, and Madge Kendall. Among people who stayed in touch with him and took a special interest in following his career were also representatives of the literary and artistic world; among whom were Sir Walter Scott (1771–1831), Tyrone Powers (1791–1841), Sir Edward Bulwer-Lytton (1803–1837), Hans Christian Andersen (1805–1875), baron von Humboldt (1779–1859), Franz Liszt (1811–1886), Charles Dickens (1812–1870), and Jenny Lind (1820–1887). The space here does not allow for a comprehensive list of all the friends and admirers of Shevchenko's talent. The extent of his fame is best reflected in the numerous translations of his works and various reviews of his poetry during his life time, which can be found in Ukrainian, Russian, Polish, Czech, German, French and Italian.

The question remains as to what circumstances brought these two artists together. How did a son of the American slaves and a son of the Ukrainian serfs

become close friends? The answer to these questions is provided by the people who were present at their meetings and later gave meaning to the events, situations, and things they saw, felt, heard, and, in some cases, experienced. Reading their texts (memoirs, recollections, diaries, letters and newspaper articles) we are struck by their impressions, the dynamics of the significance they gave to Aldridge and Shevchenko's encounters, presenting them as a friendship of the good – the kind of friendship which is central to the human condition.

Aristotle says in *The Nichomachean Ethics* that “the relationship of the friendship of the good takes time and intimacy; for as the saying goes, you cannot get to know each other until you have eaten the proverbial quantity of salt together.” (Aristotle 264) Yet, according to the narrations of the witnesses, in Aldridge and Shevchenko's case their mutual appreciation was instantaneous. The first encounter of these two talented artists turned them into life-long friends.

The story of their first meeting can be fully reconstructed from *Recollections* (1913), a text written some years later by Ekaterina F. Yung, who as a fifteen year old girl (Ekaterina Tolstoy), found herself in the center of the St. Petersburg cultural maelstrom evoked by Aldridge's appearance on the stage.² As the daughter of Count Fyodor Petrovich Tolstoy, the Vice-President of the Imperial Academy of Arts, Ekaterina was a privileged member of Russian high society and had first-hand access to Aldridge, who arrived in St. Petersburg in 1858 with his German troupe and started his repertory of Shakespeare's plays with *Othello*. She also knew Shevchenko very well since the artist had lived in her parents' house as a guest of honor for a few years.

According to her memoir, her father “had booked” for his family and friends “boxes close together and all went to see *Othello*, which inspired [them] so much that after the play [they] drove to Aldridge's hotel and waited for him there.” Though we might classify her exclamation “O Lord, what a sight that was!” as an expression of a teenager's exaltation, the atmosphere of the place and the number of people must have left upon her an indelible impression. After all, she used this expression as a seventy year old woman, recalling memories from adolescence. She also wrote in the *Recollections* that Starov, who was her private tutor, kissed the actor's hands – “his ‘noble black hands!’” – and she acknowledged her problems with translating everything “that was spoken, the mixture of Russian, French, English and German words,” giving as an excuse her “[s]haking with agitation and embarrassment” (qtd. in Lindfors, forthcoming).

No doubt Shevchenko, too, saw the premiere of *Othello* as he saw most of Aldridge's thirty one performances in Shakespeare tragedies staged during the actor's first visit to St. Petersburg. And he must have been just as deeply impressed by Aldridge's acting as everyone else, if not more. This is evident in

Shevchenko's letter, dated December 8, 1858, to his friend Mikhailo Shchepkin, an actor who lived in Moscow: "The African actor is here now; he does wonders on the stage. He shows us the living Shakespeare." (qtd. in Socha, 2013) Boris Sukhanov-Podkolzin, who at that time was Shevchenko's student, wrote in *Kievskaya Starina* (1885) some years later that his tutor had a boundless enthusiasm for Aldridge. Shevchenko apparently considered him "divine," and although he did not know the language of Shakespeare, he "deliriously bowed to the talent of the famous tragedian." (qtd. in Corbett 146)

One evening after the performance of *Othello*, Count Tolstoy invited the tragedian home to introduce him to local artists and intellectuals. Ekaterina F. Yunge recalled that Shevchenko arrived earlier and was busy in conversation when "[t]he actor arrived sharply at 7 o'clock. Thinking he was late, he stormed into the hallway as a whirlwind, tore his large coat off his shoulders, and brushed his curly hair with his hand." Judging by his behavior it looks as if, although "he was courteous to the invited guests, greeting everyone, Shevchenko was the only person of his interest." The stories Aldridge had heard about "the national poet," from "conversations with friends," must have given him the enough information, and the actor "recognized [Shevchenko] immediately – either by his anxious face, or because of the clothes he was wearing" (qtd. in Lindfors, forthcoming).

Ekaterina recalled that "without any special recommendation" Aldridge "headed towards" him:

The two artists stood in silence for a moment, attentively looking at each other. Then Aldridge stretched out his beautiful hands, embraced the poet, and started laughing. As if forgetting about the guests in the room, they sat down on a sofa and with [Ekaterina's] help spoke, listening to the unfamiliar sounds of a foreign language.

Noticing that the guests were watching them, the two friends embraced and began to walk quietly around the room, then hid in a different room, and there they had plenty to talk about. One of the invited guests noted in his memoirs:

Aldridge, who followed the social rules, came to a realization [of their situation] first. He turned to the guests and began reciting a monologue from *Macbeth*, which was banned in St. Petersburg. Then everyone sang together "Down the Mother Volga". Then the tragedian asked Shevchenko to sing about the Ukraine. He began singing and Aldridge started to sing along with his wonderful baritone, easily catching the melody of a Ukrainian song unknown to him. (qtd. in Lindfors, forthcoming)

Since neither Aldridge knew Russian nor Shevchenko English, their first encounter was mainly based on listening. Therefore, it might be helpful to recall here the well-known characterization of listening by Theodor W. Adorno (1903–1969),

a famous German, philosopher, sociologist and musicologist. In a different context, he classified listening as “a deep spiritual resource of Western civilization” (qtd. in Arnold 140). In the case of Aldridge and Shevchenko, their listening to each other’s voices and singing together must have allowed them to transcend the search for instant gratification, to set aside the routines of society, with its constant pursuit of immediate political, social or cultural rewards, and to put real spiritual values in the place of any fleeting daily desires.

After this first personal encounter, Aldridge started visiting Shevchenko, who had his accommodation at Count Tolstoy’s place, on regular basis. Marie Trommer says in her monograph *Ira Aldridge, American Negro Tragedian and Taras Shevchenko, Poet of the Ukraine: Story of a Friendship* (1939) that Shevchenko “usually kept his room in great disorder but when he expected [Aldridge] he would clean it thoroughly” to honor his friend. (10–11) At the beginning, Ekaterina F. Yunge recalled, the tragedian experienced a problem with pronouncing Shevchenko’s name:

Aldridge used to rush in and immediately inquire, “And the artist?” That’s what he called Shevchenko because every attempt at pronouncing his name ended up with Aldridge laughing over these futile efforts, “Oh, those [sic!] Russian names.” Then we would call for Taras Grigorievich, and “the artist” would appear. (qtd. in Lindfors, forthcoming)

Although in order to communicate for a longer period of time Shevchenko and Aldridge required linguistic mediation, for the most part they understood each other very well and Aldridge and Shevchenko frequently spent some time together without any interpreters. Mikhail Mikeshyn (1835–1896), a Russian artist, who also attended the Imperial Academy of Fine Arts, wondered “God knows how and what they talked about” (qtd. in Corbett 149). But no matter to what extent others doubted their communicative skills, those who witnessed Aldridge and Shevchenko’s meetings stressed that both were artists and were therefore very emotional, observant and full of empathy. In addition, both had expressive faces and Aldridge was known for employing gestures to explain anything he wanted to convey when lacking the words. Present in various texts, the information that the artists – “locked in for hours, talking and singing,” stress that Aldridge and Shevchenko must have found ways of communicating, but that for this communication they needed separation from the rest of the world, a world which had not been exposed to their experiences.

There is little originality in arguing that the many common things in the lives of both men drew them together. What concerns me here, instead, is the fact that Aldridge (like Shevchenko) usually substantiated his achievements by recalling his past. Both were born enslaved and they had experienced hardship in their youth. Their freedom and fame – in Aldridge’s case for his theatrical

renditions of Shakespeare's characters, and in Shevchenko's case for his literary texts – allowed them to present their artistic masterpieces as superior sources of knowledge that even today make our current historical insight into the nature of slavery and serfdom fuller and deeper. At the same time they did not allow their contemporary admirers to forget that their respective peoples – the American Blacks and the Ukrainians – still lived in bondage. And both dreamed of, and worked toward, the day when their people would be free and equal with other nations.

Ekaterina F. Yunge explained the foundation of their deep affinity:

Shevchenko could not help becoming his [Aldridge's] friend. They had very much in common: both were pure, honest souls, both were real artists. Both had in their memories of youth gloomy pages of oppression. One, in order to get to the fervently loved theatre, took a valet's job with an actor; the other was flogged because he used a piece of candle when he drew.

In one of the central passages of her book, Ekaterina provides her personal opinion on the development of their friendship. She believed that it grew stronger and stronger as the two men learned more about each other. "I remember," she recalled, "how they were both moved one evening when I related to Aldridge the history of Shevchenko and translated to Shevchenko the life of the tragedian from his own words" (qtd. in Lindfors, forthcoming).

The personal aspect of the encounters between these two artists is profoundly significant to our understanding of their fascination with each other's professional achievements. Panteleimon Kulish (1819–1897) recalled Shevchenko's extraordinary viscerally-emotive response to Aldridge's art:

Spread out from fatigue and half-lying in a roomy chair was King Lear [Aldridge], and over him, literally on top of him, I found Taras Hryhorovych [Shevchenko]; tears like hail were raining from his eyes; his articulated disconnected, passionate words of distress and grace in a muffled loud whisper, all the while covering the great tragedian's grease-painted face, hands and back with kisses. (qtd. in Makaryk 106)

Seventeen years later, Sukhanov–Podkolzin reminisced in the journal *Kievskaya Staryna* an anecdote about Shevchenko's misbehavior in the theatre. Sitting in Mrs. Sukhanova's box, the poet became so "vociferous" in his "acclaim of the play that the audiences protested." Although after an apology Mrs. Sukhanova allowed him continue his stay in her box, Shevchenko's enraptured response to Aldridge's acting made her eventually flee the theatre in embarrassment (Corbett 146).

At the same time Aldridge enjoyed Shevchenko's company so much that he always wanted to have the Ukrainian poet around. Though we do not have

his critical response to any of the poems written by his great Ukrainian friend, Aldridge must have been fascinated not only by their message, but also by their melody. As almost all people who knew them both stressed, the tragedian was enthralled with Ukrainian songs, and Shevchenko's poems are adaptations of the style and versification of Ukrainian folk songs. As we can learn from Mykola Ievshan's essay "Shevchenko As a Poet," he was famous for producing remarkably original poetry with complex and shifting metric constructions, assonance and internal rhyme, masterfully applied caesuras and enjambments, and sophisticated alliteration grafted onto a 4 + 4 + 6 syllable unit derived from the kolomyika song structure (Ievshan, 128–134).

As a token of friendship, Shevchenko offered to paint Aldridge's portrait. The actor accepted the offer graciously, and from that time forward they became inseparable. The tragedian came daily to Shevchenko's studio to pose, usually accompanied by the Tolstoy sisters as interpreters. So here we have the product of their meeting – Aldridge's portrait, which over time found its way to the Tretyakov Gallery in Moscow.

Analyzing this picture makes us wonder how, exactly, Shevchenko manages to speak to us through the painting of his friend and why it is that we have no problem in giving a voice to a face made of lifeless paint and assuming the presence of a living being, indirect though this presence may be. While these questions may seem rhetorical, they do, nevertheless, deserve an answer. Firstly, it is my opinion that in a way the portrait furthers the story of Aldridge and Shevchenko's friendship, it presents it, using Aristotle's expression, as a friendship of the good. Another part of the answer to my questions lies in the fact that it resonates with a number of other traces that Aldridge has left as an outstanding Shakespearean actor, traces not only of what he created, but also what he distributed, in the best tradition of African Americans who have achieved fame and professional success in world history.

It is important that Shevchenko did not paint his friend in any of his theatrical costumes. The canvass presents an enlarged face of a black man, dressed in an elegant jacket, white shirt and bow tie. His outfit seems to reveal and even stress his personal dignity, challenging and subverting the societal and cultural limitations imposed in the nineteenth century upon people of color. In other words, the picture recognizes Aldridge's humanity and, in a way, pays tribute to the whole black race. His smiling eyes and face also show him to be a sincere, nonchalant, trusting and loving person, which, as his Russian friends noticed in many texts, "showed that his character was very similar to Shevchenko's" (Kara -Mourza 201).

If we are convinced that the tragedian continues to speak to us from his portrait after all these years, we are no doubt giving in to an inclination that has defined our conception of humanity over the centuries. This is the drive to what Roland Barthes has called "the reality effect" (Barthes 127–149). And this

effect is achieved by Shevchenko who cleverly merged two seemingly opposite imperatives which simultaneously complement and feed into each other: a realist one and an aesthetic one. Drawn with Italian pencil and chalk against a brownish

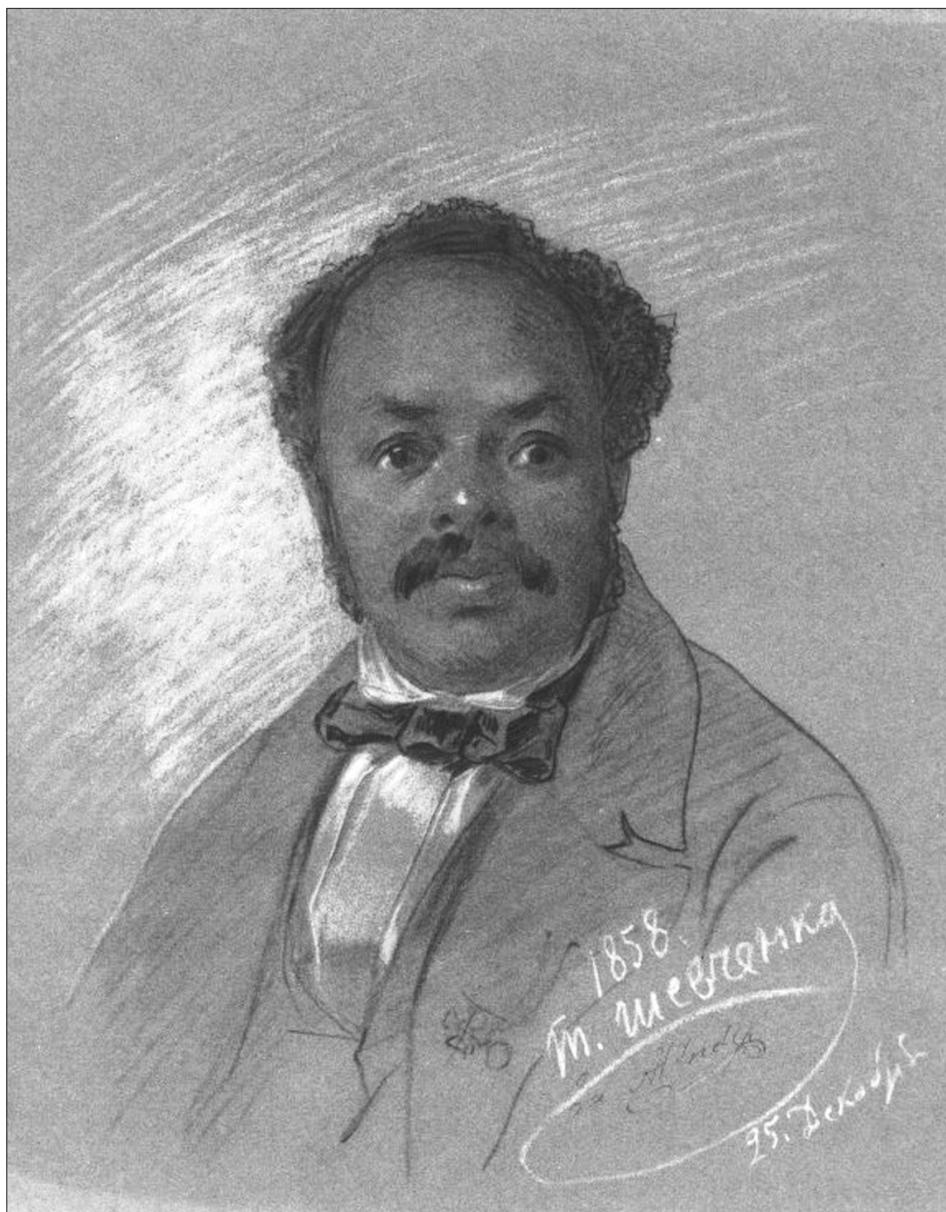


Fig. 1. Portrait of Ira Aldridge by Taras Shevchenko, 1858

background, the portrait plays with colors and lines. Its artistic lightness implies the good natured character of the sitter, his sensitivity and playfulness. Ekaterina F. Yunge, who witnessed Shevchenko's creative process, noted that the tragedian could not stay long in place. After a while he

began to squirm, we cried out to him that he had to sit at attention, he made faces and we could not keep from laughing. Shevchenko angrily stopped his work. Aldridge made a frightened face and once again sat for a while without moving, and then suddenly he said: "may I sing?" "Ah, you. . . All right sing," Then began a touching sad Negro song melody which gradually passed into a livelier tempo and ended with a mad jig by Aldridge around the studio. Following that he would act a whole, comic scene, because he was an excellent comedian. (qtd. Lindfors, forthcoming)

It is significant in more than one respect that Shevchenko's painting reveals that his meetings with Aldridge were both an experience of aestheticism and an experience of good friendship, the friendship with a real human being. After all, the portrait constituted self-evidence that both artists also understood the significance of the present. Aldridge did not wish his friend to work too much, and attempted to turn their meeting and his work into moments of enjoyment, while Shevchenko wholeheartedly responded to his encouragement, and allowed himself to be "caught up by the merriment and sang Ukrainian songs." Frequently, as witnesses of their meetings stressed, Aldridge and Shevchenko "became engrossed in conversation about the typical features of different peoples, about the similarity of people and folklore" (Lindfors, forthcoming).

Since the portrait is signed by both artists, it gives uninformed viewers the impression that it was the result of two painters' collaboration. And in a way, this is true. In addition, both Aldridge and Shevchenko presented it to their mutual friend, Ekaterina Tolstoy, whose role as their interpreter helped them achieve deeper and fuller communication. In 1913 those sessions were reconstructed in a picture painted by Leonid Osipovich Pasternak (1862–1945), father of Russian poet, novelist and literary translator Boris Pasternak, the author of *Doctor Zhivago*.

On February 28th, 1861, the two friends parted forever. Shevchenko died in St. Petersburg shortly thereafter on March 10, 1861. Their friendship lasted beyond the grave, as evidenced by the fact that, when one of his future tours took Aldridge to the Ukraine, to the land Taras Shevchenko had sung and written poems about, he went to visit Shevchenko's grave. He wept, as Trommer notes, over his friend's grave, the grave which towered on a distant hill, about the Dnieper (13). Aldridge died six years after his friend in Lodz, Poland, which was at that time under the Russian partition.

It is not coincidental that these two artists, who through their work fought for freedom, died in exile. Aldridge died knowing that his dream of freedom for the

blacks in America had become a reality. However, Shevchenko, on the day of his death, was unaware that Russian peasants were soon set free under the Imperial decree. Nevertheless, he died happy at the thought that at least his relatives were no longer among the serfs for he had succeeded in winning their release by great effort a few months before the slavery abolition decree became known.

I view reading about and reconstructing the past as having conversations with the dead. And when we talk with the dead we usually become acutely aware of the temporary nature of these conversations, and of every conversation we lead in our life, for that matter. In other words, it makes us also aware of the interlocutors' and our inescapable and predetermined mortality. Speaking with the dead is an very personal act. We experience simultaneously loss and mourning, both for our own death as well as for the dead that we talk to. This may explain why I called the story of Aldridge and Shevchenko's meeting in St. Petersburg, the story of friendship, and even love.

It seems appropriate in this context to recall Cicero's attitude to friendship. In addressing his friends, Cicero argues that we also converse with ourselves:

For the man who keeps his eye on a true friend, keeps it, so to speak, on a model of himself. For this reason, friends are together when they are separated, they are rich when they are poor, strong when they are weak, and – a thing even harder to explain – they live on after they have died, so great is the honor that follows them, so vivid the memory. So poignant the sorrow. That is why friends who have died are accounted happy, and those who survived them are deemed worthy of praise. (qtd. in Derrida 5)

Good friends, as Aristotle has, are for life. When they die, they continue to live on in the memories of those who knew them, and we are in the privileged position to know Aldridge and Shevchenko not only from the texts written about them in the past, but also from the modern day events commemorating their achievements. Those, who appreciate their friends as we do, appreciate these two artists – our friends and the models to follow – and never say goodbye. The conversations that we have with the dead confirm that we continue the celebration of our friends beyond death. Aldridge and Shevchenko are dead, but we keep them, and their friendship alive in our conversations, TV programs, films, art, and this text.

Notes

- 1 The life of Ira Aldridge is based on the work by Krystyna Kujawinska-Courtney (2009), while Taras Shevchenko's biography is taken from the monograph by Pavlo Zaitsev (1988). If not stated otherwise, all translations are mine.
- 2 All citations from Ekaterina F. Yunge monograph *Recollections* are taken

from Bernth Lindfors's final (fourth) volume of his definite biography of Ira Aldridge, *The Last Years 1856–1867*, forthcoming in November 2015. As the reviewer of the volume for the University of Rochester Press I had access to this manuscript.

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