Taras Shevchenko (1814-1861) is the best-known and the greatest Ukrainian national poet. Throughout 2014, Ukrainians around the world have been celebrating the bicentennial of his birth. For the last two centuries, under various political and social circumstances, the representation of Shevchenko’s image and literary oeuvre have been appearing as an inexhaustible source for new understandings and interpretations of Ukrainian national identity.

On November 5, the Ukrainian Studies Program, the Department of Slavic Languages and Literatures, and the Russian, East European, and Eurasian Center, co-sponsored a talk on Taras Shevchenko by professor and prolific literary translator Michael Naydan. Michael Naydan is Woskob Family Professor of Ukrainian Studies and Professor of Slavic Languages and Literatures at the Pennsylvania State University. His major translations include works by Russian poets Marina Tsvetaeva and Olga Sedakova, and Ukrainian authors Lina Kostenko, Yuri Vynnychuk, Yuri Andrukhovych, as well as many others. Of his almost 30 books of published and edited translations, the most recent ones include: *The Battle of the Sexes Russian Style* (2013), a volume of Nazdezhda Ptushkina's selected plays (co-translated with Slava Yastrembski), *Herstories: An Anthology of Contemporary Ukrainian Women Prose Writers* (2014), and *The Essential Poetry of Taras Shevchenko* (2014), a small bilingual volume published in Lviv, Ukraine.

Given the abundant interpretations and analyses of Shevchenko’s life and poetry, Naydan decided to approach the great poet from a completely different angle – by looking at monumental representations of Shevchenko both within and outside Ukraine, and by drawing parallels between Shevchenko and the national poet of Scotland, Robert Burns.

Naydan began by analyzing public images of Taras Shevchenko in sculpture and observed two prototypes in monumental representations of the poet: the older “Father Taras” and the young “idealized Taras.” The Father Taras appears with mustaches like those the Cossacks often wore, as an emblem of 19th- and 20th-century Ukrainian identity, and with his eye looking down that accentuates the contrast to the public image of Stalin’s eye looking up. The young, shaved Taras is depicted as commanding, pushing forward, and bold. The statue in Washington, D.C., is closer to the representation of young Taras, who wrote his most famous book of poems Kobzar (1840). The monuments show him as the man who suffered over his lifetime, always longing for his homeland. Shevchenko is often portrayed wearing a coat or a cape as a reference to his years in exile, when he needed to keep warm from the cold St. Petersburg weather. The monuments preserve the memory of Shevchenko, showing him in various roles: as a revolutionary commissar in Kharkov, a thinker similar to that of Rodin’s, and a teacher and protector in Lviv, to whom, like to a sacred figure, young couples come to receive blessings on their wedding days.

Naydan concluded that all public imagery of Shevchenko is the essence of the very idea of the Ukrainian nation. “The Ukrainian nation wouldn’t exist without him, I always repeat,” Naydan asserted. He further explained that since Taras is considered to be the founding father of the
Ukrainian nation, there is no room for artistic improvisation and playing with his image. All monuments are extremely realistic because Ukrainians regard Shevchenko as a sacred symbol; an abstract statue would be considered a blasphemy.

In the second section of his talk, Naydan talked more about Shevchenko the poet by comparing him to Robert Burns. He singled out various overlapping facts and conditions in the two poets’ lives, and remarked on the similarities in their literary styles and in the way they approach the question of national and cultural identities. Akin to Burns’s interests in Scottish folk songs and myths, Shevchenko based his poetry on Ukrainian Kolomyiky folk songs. To illustrate that Ukrainian folk music was a source of inspiration for Shevchenko, Naydan played several clips of Kolomyiky songs and sang some of Shevchenko’s verses to show Kolomyiky rhythm in them. Comparable to Burns’ contribution in detaching Scots from the English language, Shevchenko elevated Ukrainian as a literary language – something very unique and separate from Russian.

Toward the end of his talk, Naydan shared with the public what Shevchenko means for him personally, and then linked his individual experience with the collective feelings of Ukrainians today. As a child, Naydan “hated” Shevchenko because his parents forced him to go to a three hour-long presentation about him. Although he first rejected Shevchenko, Naydan later reconnected with the poet once he willingly started reading his poetry. In this way, Naydan also rediscovered his Ukrainian identity. The contemporary situation in Ukraine caused Ukrainians to reconnect with Father Taras by rereading his poetry. The ongoing crisis there triggers yet another interpretation of the great poet as a single national figure in the world – seen as a god-like figure, a prophet who understood relations between the conqueror and the conquered. In this new political context, his prophetic verses about the colonial notion are quoted on a daily basis, underscoring how Russia appears as the empire yet again.

Jasmina Savic is a Ph.D. candidate in Slavic Languages and Literatures at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign with a graduate minor in Gender and Women’s studies. Her research interests include pornography in Russian postmodern and post-Soviet literature and culture. She received a B.A. in Serbian Literature and Language from the University of Belgrade in 2005, and a M.A in Slavic Studies from the University of Illinois at Chicago in 2009.