ABAI KUNANBAYEV
(1845-1904)

Look deep into your soul and
ponder on my words:
To you I am a puzzle, my person
and my verse.
My life has been a struggle, a
thousand foes I braved,
Don't judge me too severely—for
you the way I paved.

Abai

Abai addressed these heartfelt lines to the generations to come, to his countrymen for whom he strove to pave the way to a more enlightened, better life. He carried his poetry like a burning torch through the gloom of ignorance and prejudice that enveloped the Kazakh steppes, revealing new horizons to his people and the promise of a new dawn.

To his milieu he was a puzzle. But to us he is very clearly the luminary of Kazakh literature, the light of Kazakh poetry. Now that Kazakhstan has acquired statehood, and the Kazakhs—their proud national identity, Abai has found appreciative and enlightened readers where once he was denied understanding. He is read and admired by all the peoples of our great socialist state.

"Don't judge me too severely," he begged. Far from judging him, Soviet people in their thousands and millions revere the memory of this outstanding poet.

It is 109 years since Abai's birth, and 50 since his death.* But if the road chosen by a poet is the road followed by his people, he does not die.

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In our story of Abai, told objectively and truthfully, we pay a tribute to the memory of this poet who chose to share the thoughts, cares, struggle and suffering of his people.

The great Kazakh poet was born in 1845 into the nomadic clan of Tobykty, in the Chinghis Mountains in Semipalatinsk Region.

His father, Kunanbai, a stern and wilful steppe ruler, was an elder of the Tobykty clan.

Abai's childhood years passed in the oppressive atmosphere of discord which generally prevailed in

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* This article was written in Russian by Mukhtar Auezov in 1954, for the 50th anniversary of Abai's death.—*Ed.*

polygamous families. Kunanbai, it must be said, had four wives. The children were always quarrelling among themselves, as did their mothers, the rival-wives. Luckily, Abai's mother Ulzhan was a wonderful woman, and with her innate reserve, tolerance, and soundness of reasoning, she managed to make a real home for her son in those conditions, which was a rare thing in such families. Ulzhan loved him best of all her children, and affectionately called him Abai (which means thoughtful, circumspect) instead of Ibraghim—the name given the boy by his father. And Abai he remained for the rest of his life.

Ulzhan and her son, living as they did in unspoken alienation from Kunanbai, found moral support in Zere, Abai's paternal grandmother. This wise and kind old woman, who had herself tasted the full measure of a rightless wife's plight, pinned all her hopes on her grandson who was the apple of her eye. There was a world of difference between the gentle upbringing and the loving care lavished on the boy by these two women and the harsh treatment he was given by his father, and the child's soul was therefore not allowed to shrivel in the rigorously cold climate in which it was doomed to develop.

Abai was first taught at home by a hired mullah, and then his father took him to Semipalatinsk and placed him in the Ahmet-Riza madrasah. A diligent and extremely gifted boy, Abai learnt a great deal in the five years he was there. The other pupils, mostly overage and much older than Abai, spent all their waking hours cramming verses from the Koran which they did not understand, praying, fasting, and carrying on endless and stultifying debates over the letter of the Shariat. As for Abai, he had other interests besides mastering the wisdom of the Arabic scholastic teaching on the dogmas of the Islam. Poetry had already taken possession of his heart and mind. He had felt the first stirrings of this predilection when he was a little boy listening to Zere's stories. When he grew a bit older he tried to memorise the tales, legends, heroic sagas and historical songs recited in the village by the folk bards. Finding himself in the stifling atmosphere of the madrasah, Abai sought relief in the classical and popular literature of the Orient—a blessed oasis in a stark desert. While interested in Oriental languages, he felt a desire to learn Russian as well and to know more about Russian culture. And so, defying the strict rules of the madrasah, he started attending classes at the local Russian school, asking permission of none.

Abai began writing poetry while still at the madrasah. Among the few of these early attempts which have survived we find lyrical fragments, epistles and love poems obviously written under the influence of

classical Oriental poetry, and also some impromptu verses composed in the manner of the *akyns*.*

Being a serious and diligent pupil, Abai could have derived much benefit for himself as a future poet from even the little education the madrasah had to offer. But Kunanbai had different plans for his son.

In the continual struggle for power over the clan which the Kazakh elite was engaged in, Kunanbai made plenty of enemies among his rivals and he felt he had to train his sons and nearest relatives to carry on with the fight. And so he did not let Abai finish his course of study at the madrasah, but ordered him back to the village instead, where he drew him into the investigation of lawsuits and coached him in the duties and administrative functions of a future head of the clan.

Very soon Abai found himself involved in a tangle of intrigues. Since he had to deal with men experienced in clan feuds, he learnt the techniques of verbal tournament—a subtle art which called for eloquence, wit and resourcefulness. The cases were decided not by the tsarist court, but by the Kazakhs' common law which had existed for centuries, and in order to carry or disprove a point a man had to be perfectly versed in Kazakh oral lore. Abai soon earned the reputation of a brilliant, witty orator, and as he further polished his speaking skill he gained an even higher appreciation of the impact of poetic speech. Whereas Kunanbai and the men of his set quoted only the sayings and aphorisms of their ancestors, the clan elders, Abai was able to cite poets and *akyns* whose *aitysses*, or public poetic competitions, he always made a point of attending.

Abai's first imitative verses were inspired by his youthful infatuation with the classic poets of the Orient. As he imbibed the traditions of folk Kazakh poetry, his work became more mature and original, and in these verses we can already see the individuality of the future poet taking shape.

According to many of his contemporaries Abai began to write poetry—impromptu verses and epistles—when he was only twelve years old. However, very little of this early work has survived—a few verses and references to other forgotten and lost poems. There are the opening lines of his poem dedicated to Togzhan, the girl he loved, and a prose account of the *aityss* in which the young Abai competed with Kuandyk, a girl *akyn*. His earliest verses might have been discovered and more details of his life might have been learnt from letters, memoirs and recollections of his contemporaries, but the written language was so poorly developed in

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* *Akyn*—a folk bard.—*Ed.*

Kazakhstan that there are simply none. Another factor of no little importance in this lack of material was the general attitude to Abai taken by the *bais*,* an attitude typical for the whole of that feudal set-up. While the ordinary people were full of admiration and respect for the *akyns*, the family-proud *bais* were wont to say with smug arrogance: "Allah be thanked, we've never had a *baksy* or an *akyn* in our clan." This scathing attitude to professional poets explains why none of Abai's early verses, or even recollections of his appearance on the poetic scene, have survived in his native parts. Abai himself was influenced by this disrespect for poets, and often passed off his poetry for something written by his young friends.

Drawn against his will into the family feuds and litigations, Abai refused to connive in his father's ruthlessness and injustice, and very often went against Kunanbai's wishes and interests by taking a fair and unbiassed stand in settling various disputes. His son's new-fangled notions irritated old Kunanbai terribly: it annoyed him that Abai sought his friends and advisers among the common folk, and that he showed such admiration for Russian culture. Arguments flared up more and more often between the wily, masterful father and the truth-loving, recalcitrant son, and their clashes threatened to end in a complete rupture. Abai was 28 when it did finally happen.

Now he was free to do what he wished with his life. The first thing he did was resume his studies of Russian, which he had not been able to do since his madrasah days.

He made new friends among the *akyns*, the gifted young Kazakhs, usually not very high-born, and the Russian intellectuals he met in Semipalatinsk. He was 34 years old when he took up poetry again, but he still circulated it as the work of his young friends. Abai, already an educated man, spent the next ten or twenty years studying Kazakh folk art, Oriental poets, and Russian classical literature. And only in the summer of 1886, when he was already 40, did he venture to sign his new, splendid poem "Summer" with his own name. From that day his poetic career seemed to acquire new impetus, and the remaining twenty years of his life were extremely prolific.

With life experience came complete disillusionment in the morals and the entire moral code of the world of feudal laws and clan rule, and Abai tried to break away from it and sever all his ties with that milieu. Having been made an unwilling party to those endless feuds between the clans in his youth, he now clearly

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* *Bai*—landlord, reach peasant.—*Ed.*

saw the harm done by these feuds to the interests of the people, and began to understand the true purpose of the animosity between the clans artificially fanned by the tsarist authorities in pursuit of their policy to "divide and rule". He now saw the *biys** and elders as the colonialists' placemen. Abai wondered dismally about the destinies of his people, and the thought of the ignorant, oppressed and rightless masses tormented him. The verses written in his mature years are full of grief for the tragic plight of a backward people.

In the very first poems written in the period of his new maturity, Abai endeavoured to show his countrymen the real causes of their sufferings. In his sincere and trenchant verses he exposed and condemned the vices of the clan elite, the feudal lords and the officials, and urged the masses to seek enlightenment which alone could show them the way to a new and better life.

By a happy chance, Abai made the acquaintance of some Russian revolutionaries who had been exiled to Kazakhstan in the 1870s and 1880s. They were intellectuals who upheld the revolutionary-democratic ideas of Chernyshevsky and Dobrolyubov. One of them, Y. P. Mikhaelis, was the closest associate and the most active helper of Shchelgunov, a well-known Russian revolutionary writer, and was actually a relative of his. Mikhaelis was quite young when he came to Semipalatinsk, more or less the same age as were Leontiev and the other revolutionaries who were exiled there later.

Abai's acquaintance with these people soon developed into real friendship. In the summer they came to his village as his guests, and in the winter Abai maintained a regular correspondence with them. These Russian intellectuals helped Abai in his self-education; they selected his reading for him and answered his questions.

The exiles studied the life, conditions and geography of the country that had become their home, and developed as publicists and sociologists. They became the first disseminators of culture in this backward land, zealously promoting education and a more enlightened way of life. They looked upon enlightenment as an essential weapon in the struggle against the existing regime. They considered it their primary duty to acquaint people like Abai with the Russian classical heritage, with progressive Russian writers, and Russian culture in general.

Abai became an ardent champion of friendship and brotherhood between the two national cultures, convinced that this was the only way of rescuing his people

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* *Biy*—a judge.—*Ed.*

from the age-old slough of ignorance. In his poetry he tried to explain to the Kazakhs that the Russian people were one thing and the tsarist officials quite another.

Abai's Russian friends, while helping him to acquire knowledge, also learnt a great deal from him, for Abai was extremely well versed in the history, common law, poetry, art, economy and the social system of many peoples related to the Kazakhs.

Abai held the Russian progressives in profound esteem and shared in their ideals, since their striving for a spiritual liberation of the peoples of Russia from oppression and shackling ignorance was the cause he himself was championing in his own country.

He loved Pushkin, Lermontov, Krylov, Saltykov-Shchedrin and Tolstoi, and after that memorable summer of 1886 when he openly embarked on his poetic career Abai started translating Krylov, Pushkin and Lermontov into Kazakh, acquainting his countrymen for the first time with these great writers.

Having an excellent knowledge and understanding of Kazakh folk music, Abai composed several melodies for those of his verses, primarily, whose form had never been used in Kazakh poetry before (octaves, sextants, etc.). He also wrote music for his translations from *Eugene Onegin*.

By this time the name of Abai himself—poet, thinker and composer—had earned countrywide popularity and esteem. *Akyns*, composers and singers came from all over Kazakhstan to see him and learn from him. Some of them, following Abai's own example, assiduously educated themselves. They studied Russian literature and wrote historical and romantic poems.

Abai's popularity was a magnet that attracted not only the Kazakhs, but also many other free-thinking people of the Eastern world (mainly, young Tatars), people who had been forced to leave home to escape the persecution of the authorities, and exiles from the Caucasus. These last were fugitives from Siberian hard-labour camps making their way home through the steppes of Kazakhstan, and they stayed for months in Abai's village. Little by little, this village became the centre where all the progressive-minded people of the time converged.

Abai's close friendship with the exiled revolutionaries worried the local authorities. When a report on Abai, in which he was described as a menace to tsarism, reached the military governor in Semipalatinsk and the governor-general of the Steppeland region, he was put under secret surveillance. The local police and administration watched his every step and sent in regular reports on this dangerous character who boldly exposed the vices of the existing order and enjoyed enormous prestige.

Meanwhile, the number of Abai's admirers grew with every year. His influence now spread to the towns as well. His verses, and those of his friends, were learnt by heart and his songs were sung. The plots of the novels by Russian and Western authors which Abai had read and narrated to his listeners were passed around in their oral rendering. Among the more popular narratives were Alexandre Dumas's *The Three Musketeers* and *Henry of Navarre*, a Russian folk legend about Peter the Great, Le Sage's *Le Diable boiteux* (which went under the title of *The Lame Frenchman*), novels about the pioneers of the American West, Lermontov's poems, and numerous Eastern poems: "Shah-nameh", "Leili and Mejnun", "Kör-Ogly" and others. Many of Abai's friends who had received a European education followed his example and helped to spread these oral narratives among the Kazakhs.

Abai's own children—his daughter Gulbadan and his sons Abdrahman and Magavya—went to a Russian school in town. Abdrahman was later educated at Mikhailovskoye Artillery Academy in St. Petersburg. Gulbadan and Magavya returned to the village after finishing school only for reasons of poor health.

Both Magavya and his elder brother Akylbai were poets. The work which is generally considered Magavya's best is the poem "Megdag-Kasym" (written on his father's advice) which tells the story of a slave struggling against his owner, a cotton planter in the Nile valley. Akylbai's contribution to literature was the romantic poem "Daghestan".

These poems, like Abai's own works, were circulated among the readers in handwritten copies, and, more popularly still, in the oral rendering of the *akyns*, who also acquainted the Kazakh listeners with their interpretations of Pushkin and Lermontov.

The literary, educational and social work of Abai and his friends was wholly directed against the backwardness, corruption and prejudices of the pillars of the feudal village world, and more concretely against the high-born, ignorant and ruthless local rulers who oppressed the people. In fact, it was aimed against the whole system of tsarism, supported by these *bais* and officials.

Abai's writings, his clear social programme, and his contempt for the powers that be, evoked the rabid hatred of the feudal lords. Acting at one with the high officials and the venal junior-clerk class of intellectuals, they waged war—a dirty war fought by foul means—against Abai personally and the ideas he disseminated. Abai was too popular to be fought openly. And so they used every underhand method they knew. Orazbai, one of the elders and Abai's mortal enemy, rallied those of the rural and urban elite who had a bone to pick with the poet. They hounded Abai's friends, slandered Abai

himself, and finally, in 1897, with the obvious connivance of the authorities, made an attempt on his life. The offices of the governors, the uyezd chiefs and the tsarist courts were cluttered with reports on Abai penned by the clan elders who accused the poet of being "an enemy of the white tsar", of "inciting the people", and of "scorning the customs, rights and conventions established by our fathers and forefathers". Finally, the Semipalatinsk police descended on Abai's village and made a search in his home. And then the chief of the Semipalatinsk police himself brought a whole platoon of gendarmes and had the whole village searched.

The governor of Semipalatinsk also made several attempts to get rid of Abai, but he was afraid of provoking the wrath of the masses and so he did not go beyond isolating him from his exile friends. The authorities examined all the letters addressed to him by friends and readers in remote parts of Kazakhstan, and kept some of them on file.

But they could not isolate Abai from the people. An outspoken and dauntless fighter against the evil doings of the administration, *biys*, clan elders and all the other authorities, Abai earned the reputation of a sage to whom people could turn for counsel in their troubles and misfortunes. Whole clans and tribes from regions far and near sought his advice and begged him to settle their disputes for them, even long-standing land claims and such like cases. Very often he was called in on cases of raids and murder involving different regions, too baffling for the authorities to solve. These cases were tried at specially convened large meetings, called "extraordinary conventions", where decisions were passed on the payment of damages to the poor peasants who had been victimised, and on the punishment to be meted out to the clan rulers whose endless feuds and intrigues caused the population so much grief and damage.

Abai, who had no official standing, was sometimes elected arbiter. He took on these cases solely to avert more disputes and new raids, and to put the curb on the men who were fanning the feud between the clans to flames.

Abai's public activity and poetry were especially appreciated by the young people. They were always asking the *akyns* to sing Abai's songs at popular gatherings, weddings, ceremonial feasts and funeral banquets. Kazakh young men quoted lines from Abai to tell their sweethearts of their love. When girls in Abai's village got married they usually took away with them to their new home a handwritten collection of his verses, poems and precepts.

His growing fame maddened the envious, ignorant elite, who did everything to poison life for him and

for his friends. No means were too ugly or foul, and the worse they hurt the better. They set Abai's nephews and his brother Takezhan against him, and resorted to threats and slander to drive a wedge into his relations with his own family.

The death of his son Abdrahman, the heir of his cause and a gifted, educated young man, came as a terrible blow to Abai, whose staying power was being so sorely tried by the atmosphere of malice and hatred that was smothering him. Abdrahman had been ill with tuberculosis since his student days in St. Petersburg, and not long after receiving his commission as lieutenant of the field artillery in Verny (now Alma Ata) he died. This was in 1895, and he was only 27 years old.

Abai gave an outlet to his grief in stirring poems that have a tremendous dramatic impact. He mourned his son as a father, and as the defender of the people who had cherished the hope that this young man, brought up in the finest traditions of the Russian democratic, progressive thought, would shape into a staunch fighter. And now hope was gone. He had to fight on alone.

But fate had another blow in store for Abai, who was already shattered by his terrible loss, exhausted by the endless struggle, and hounded by the stupid, spiteful mob of *bais* and clerks. His son Magavya, the gifted poet, also died from tuberculosis.

Utterly crushed and broken in spirit, Abai fell ill. He refused to see the doctor or take any sort of treatment, and died in his village home, surviving his son Magavya only by forty days. Abai was 59.

He was buried close to his home in the Zhidebai valley not far from the Chinghis Mountains.

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The last publication of Abai's literary legacy in Kazakh makes two thick volumes. Included here are his verses, poems, talks with his readers ("Exhortations") and numerous translations—the precious fruit of many long years of reflection and endeavour, inspired by the noblest desires and emotions.

Three great sources fed the work of this wise poet.

One, was the oral and written art of the ancient Kazakhs, an art assimilated by Abai with unerring discrimination to enrich his own poetry.

The second was Tajik, Azerbaijanian and Uzbek classical poetry. Interest in the cultures of its neighbour peoples, observable from the beginning of the 19th century, has undoubtedly benefited Kazakh culture.

The third source was Russian and, through it, world literature. In Abai's time, the very tapping of this rich source—especially the great Russian classics who until

then were totally unknown to the Kazakhs—was a major progressive factor. It gave an impetus to the development of Kazakh culture.

Such was Abai's genius and individuality that though he did draw freely from these three sources he kept his talent untainted by imitativeness and never once struck a false note. He organically absorbed the old and the new cultures, while fully retaining his own inimitable personality as an artist and thinker.

By drawing from Western cultures—remote from the Kazakhs and as yet unassimilated by them—Abai enriched his inner world with new ideals, besides enlarging his range of expressive means. Like Pushkin, Abai is international in his ideological and moral concepts, yet he is a profoundly national poet and, indisputably, a poet of the people.

Let us examine more closely the influence which these three main sources had on Abai's writing. Very often, we find these different influences organically blended and interpenetrating, which is natural for the work of a mature poet. Therefore, when dealing with Abai's work we can only speak of these elements as the predominant characteristics of this or that period.

His output of the 1880s is mostly devoted to the mores and manners of a Kazakh village, and the life of his contemporary society. At the same time he makes a serious reassessment of his countrymen's spiritual values and announces his new poetic programme aimed at transforming society. These poems have a strong affinity with national traditions, and yet it is precisely here that we see most clearly how much his poetry differs from folk art.

Abai does not simply follow the canons of national poetic tradition, but expands the vocabulary, the imagery and the stylistic techniques of oral art and peoples it with new thoughts and emotions expressive of his own world outlook. His poetry, first and foremost, voices his disapproval of the existing social order, of village life especially, with its backwardness and obscurantism, with the feuds fought by the corrupt elite, and the hopeless and destitute condition of the working people. A great number of his verses, for instance "Old Age Is Here—Sad Thoughts, Poor Sleep and All", "O My Luckless Kazakh, My Unfortunate Kin", "At Last I'm the Villagers' Head", and "If by Chance in Some Strange Class" ruthlessly stigmatise the ignorance, pettifoggery, venality, parasitism and spiritual poverty of the men who ruled the destinies of the Kazakhs. Abai's novel attitude to the family, to parental duty, to the upbringing of children, and—most important of all—to women, was voiced distinctly in his poetry, and it stemmed from higher moral principles than anything known in Kazakh literature before.

The wretched lot of the women in the East, frequently described in folk poems and songs, is here portrayed from a different angle. Abai reveals the very soul of the woman, her thoughts and feelings, of which so little is said in the old poems where the circumstances of her tragic life are mainly described. Abai shows us that she is capable of truly great love if she chooses her lover herself, and that she can put up a fierce fight if her hard-won happiness is threatened. The Kazakh woman—wife or mother—is the mainstay of the family, Abai says. He glorifies her readiness for self-sacrifice, her wisdom, her loyalty as a friend, and her generous heart. Passionately denouncing such aspects of the Kazakh marital institution as paying bride-money, polygamy and enslavement, he demands equal rights for women.

He lashes out at narrow-mindedness and idleness of the old village, and extols energy, will power and industriousness. He shatters the canons of the didactic poetry that prevailed before his time. In his poetic programme, expressed in "Not for Amusement Do I Write My Verse", and "Poetry, the Queen of Literature, Implies", he sharply criticises his predecessors, the *akyns* Bukhar-jirau, Shartanbai and Dulat, who embodied the reactionary ideology of the feudal khans, and calls their poetry "patchy" and "full of imperfections and faults". What Abai holds against them is that they made no attempt to struggle against backwardness and narrow-mindedness, that they offered the young generation no spiritual nourishment whatsoever and, if anything, deterred progress. And Abai proclaims it the lofty mission of new poetry to serve the people, to promote everything that will help to re-educate and change society for the better. Abai proclaims that only toil and a resolute struggle for their rights will win people independence from the *bais*, and only a stubborn pursuit of knowledge will assure a better life for the next generation. Abai does not preach enlightenment in general terms. The whole pattern of his poetic thinking and his imagery orients Kazakh society to Russian, and via Russian, to world culture. In these poems he reassesses the mainstays of Kazakh society: age-old traditions, common law and the moral code. He declares that a man's worth is measured by his intellectual powers, sincerity, honour, and his useful activity and not by his dumb adherence to threadbare customs and traditions.

Abai preached enlightenment through closer contact with Russian and world culture. He did not believe that the language barrier, the different religions, or the difference in historical development should be obstacles on the road of his own people to progress. He simply swept all these obstacles away! Just learn, assimilate

culture developed over the centuries, wherever this may be! In the name of this great historical task, in the name of enlightenment for his native country, he declared war on all the obsolete principles and lashed out at all the advocates of this backward and moribund philosophy.

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Abai took an attitude peculiarly his own to Oriental poetry, and to the ancient and modern culture of the Middle East.

In his youth the influence of the Orient affected him quite strongly. He read all the Arabic-Persian epic poems and the great Eastern classics Firdausi, Nizami, Saadi, Hafiz, Navoi and Fizuli in the original (and partly in translation into the Chagatai). He imitated these poets and was the first to introduce the "aruz" meter into Kazakh poetry, and also a large number of Arabic-Persian words borrowed from these classics' vocabulary. Later, when he came to regard folk art as the most viable and fruitful source of true poetry he selected his favourites from Oriental literature to be his life companions, and these were: *1001 Nights*, Persian and Turkic folk tales and epic poems. People in the Kazakh steppes came to know and love "Shah-nameh", "Leili and Mejnun" and "Kör-Ogly" in Abai's oral rendering.

The traditions of old Oriental classical poetry are of course discernible throughout his writings, while in his love songs, lyrical meditations and the philosophical poem "Mas'hood" this influence is more manifest. But only as regards form and manner. The ideological content of his poetry, the profound awareness of the life about him, and the "earthly" approach to the material world and to human relations, refute his dependence on any models and testify to his complete originality.

Abai began his acquaintance with Russian culture with Pushkin, Lermontov and Krylov. Later he turned to prose and his favourites among the authors of the 1860s-80s became Lev Tolstoi and Saltykov-Shchedrin. He read Goethe, Byron and other West-European classics in Russian translation, and was sufficiently versed in antique literature as well. He translated some of Goethe's and Byron's poetry into Kazakh from Lermontov's Russian translations.

We know from the recollections of his exile friends (Leontiev and others) that Abai studied Western philosophers, in particular Spencer and Spinoza, and was interested in Darwin's theory.

He took a new approach to translating Russian literature at each new stage of his career. In Krylov he sometimes changed the "moral of the story" and in-

vented his own maxims better suited to the Kazakh way of thinking. Yet Lermontov he translated with meticulous care and fidelity. In craftsmanship, his translations of "The Dagger", "The Gifts of the Terek", "The Sail", "I Walk Into the Night Alone" and fragments from "Demon" remain unsurpassed till this day.

Abai had quite a special feeling for Pushkin, and the fragments he translated from *Eugene Onegin* are really an inspired rendering of the novel. He followed the ancient tradition of "nazir", quite lawful in Oriental poetry, which allowed a poet to interpret the themes and plots of his predecessors in a novel way. He knew such renderings of "Leili and Mejnun" and "Farkhad and Shirin", and the story of Iskander, or Alexander the Great, as told by ancient Tajik, Azerbaijanian and Ubzek poets. Abai himself adopted this manner in telling about Alexander the Great and Aristotle in his poem "Iskander" following the example of the Azerbaijanian classic Nizami and the Uzbek classic Navoi. In his poetic interpretation of *Eugene Onegin* Abai was very particular about rendering Tatiana's truly Russian nature. In his version, this poem took the form of an epistolary novel. He set Tatiana's and Onegin's letters to music, and by so doing made the repertoire of the *akyns* the richer for two beautiful love songs which became so popular that everybody sang them and young Kazakhs used the words in their own love letters to their sweethearts.

Abai's translations were a considerable contribution to the development of Kazakh literature, and they are evidence of his close contact with Russian and European literatures. But it is his original writings that show how really organically he absorbed this influence. It was undoubtedly owing to the beneficial influence of Russian poetic culture that Abai so boldly introduced new forms into Kazakh poetry, new themes, and a new social content. Although he translated less of Pushkin than of other Russian classics, his association with the great Russian poet left an unmistakable imprint on his own work. We see it in his lyrical meditations, in his realistic landscape painting, in his intimate understanding of a loving woman's heart, and in the universal nature of his social themes.

Only a poet who had profoundly assimilated the best in Pushkin and other great poets could have written these songs about the seasons of the year, these lyrical verses, these poetic meditations, the poetry about the mission of a poet, and the poem about Alexander the Great and Aristotle, entitled "Iskander".

The Kazakh landscape and the life of a nomadic Kazakh village make the subject of the songs about the four seasons. But the poet gives his description from

an angle never met in Kazakh literature before, infusing it with new thoughts and feelings.

In the poetry about the mission of a poet, Abai juxtaposes the narrow-mindedness and shallowness of his set to the truthfulness, pride, independence and flight of the poet's inspired thought. On this subject, Abai's views remind us of Pushkin's.

Another remarkable thing is the similarity of themes in the work of Abai and Saltykov-Shchedrin. Abai never wrote prose, but in his satirical verse he ridiculed the officials, *biys* and clan elders with the same killing sarcasm. In one of his addresses to school pupils, Abai named Saltykov-Shchedrin as the writer who had painted the most lifelike portraits of officialdom and other oppressors of the people. There was both a literary and a political affinity between Abai and Saltykov-Shchedrin. It is not from incidental statements but from the content of Abai's work in its entirety that we see how resolutely he denounced the political system of his day, and therefore how thoroughly and sincerely he approved and understood the Russian classical writers who voiced their opposition to the government.

Following the aesthetic principles of Belinsky Abai placed his talent at the service of society. He also embraced the basic principles of Chernyshevsky's world outlook in that he did not simply depict the ugly truth of his contemporary world but passed ruthless judgment on it.

This lends a special meaning to Abai's friendship with the Russian exiles—those disciples of Belinsky, Herzen and Chernyshevsky.

We have inherited more than poetry from Abai.

There are his "Exhortations", in which we find a great number of aphorisms, wise and laconic sayings that have come to stay in Kazakh literature. It is difficult to define the genre of this work, for it contains the poet's philosophical and moralistic statements, expressing his social and political views, and trenchant satire. Abai seems to be holding a conversation with his reader, and his mood is serene in one verse, bitterly sarcastic in the next, and profoundly melancholy and even dejected in yet another one. Stylistically, each conversation is a perfectly finished piece of work. His reflections are expressive, terse and imaginative. Abai's exhortations often become the mournful confession of a person doomed to loneliness in the grim age of hopeless ignorance.

In those days, when Abai's poetry was circulated in hand-written copies, his "Exhortations" were included every time. Older people loved them especially, they embellished their speech with citations from this work, and carried on long discussions on the meaning

and the moral of Abai's maxims. Apparently, the author himself realised how well his thoughts were comprehended when stated in prose and, knowing the circle of readers who enjoyed this sort of writing particularly, he often tried to speak to them in their own idiom, using their own assessments of moral values.

Abai composed about twenty melodies, and he was as much of an innovator in this field as he was in poetry. His melodies greatly differed from the traditional folk music both in style and content.

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A proponent of critical thought, an enlightened and ardent champion of culture, a tragically lonely man in that grim semi-feudal, semi-colonial environment, Abai was an outstanding figure not only in the history of his own people but also in the history of the whole Middle East. He followed his own course through the darkness and bigotry of his day, paving the way for posterity.

Our generation reveres Abai as an amazing phenomenon. He towers like a spreading mountain cedar in the history of his people. He took the best from the many-centuries-old culture of the Kazakhs and enriched these treasures further with the beneficial influence of Russian culture.

By drawing on the spiritual culture of the Russian people Abai started the most progressive movement in the history of Kazakh social thought. Resolutely and consistently he smashed all the obstacles that hindered the introduction of Kazakh society to progressive Russian culture. By so doing he promoted the mergence of the two peoples in their common struggle against the reactionary regime that alienated them. Abai's poetry acquired a new meaning and popularity during the Great Patriotic War, which sealed with blood the brotherhood of all the peoples of the Soviet Union. And having gone through this great trial with us, Abai became even dearer and closer to us in spirit.

The glory of Abai, the real founder of modern Kazakh culture and the greatest Kazakh classical poet, shall never dim.

Mukhtar Auezov