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THE SYMBOLS OF H.S. SKOVORODA  
A DESCRIPTION AND ANALYSIS

by

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A dissertation submitted to the Faculty of Graduate Studies of  
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## ABSTRACT

The subject of this thesis deals with the essential nature and function of symbols in the life and thought of the Ukrainian philosopher-writer, Hryhorii Skovoroda.

Since much confusion and misunderstanding has always surrounded Skovoroda's philosophic and literary creativity, this dissertation's primary objective attempts to show that his thought can often be greatly simplified and more easily understood once he is approached symbolically, rather than by the traditional methods of literal interpretation.

The thesis is composed of three chapters and an appendix which contains a select number of illustrations and symbolic sketches which are directly related to the study.

In the first chapter, various interpretations concerning Skovoroda's life and works are discussed, followed by a critical examination of some existing problems associated with the current state of research on Skovoroda as a whole. Chapter two sketches the evolution and subsequent influence of symbols on the philosopher with special emphasis directed toward the purpose of his philosophic terminology, graphic symbols, and stylistic method of expression. Finally, the nature and function of Skovoroda's symbolic images and terminology is carefully described and analysed as they are respectively related to some of the more important themes found within the broad spectrum of his metaphysical thought.

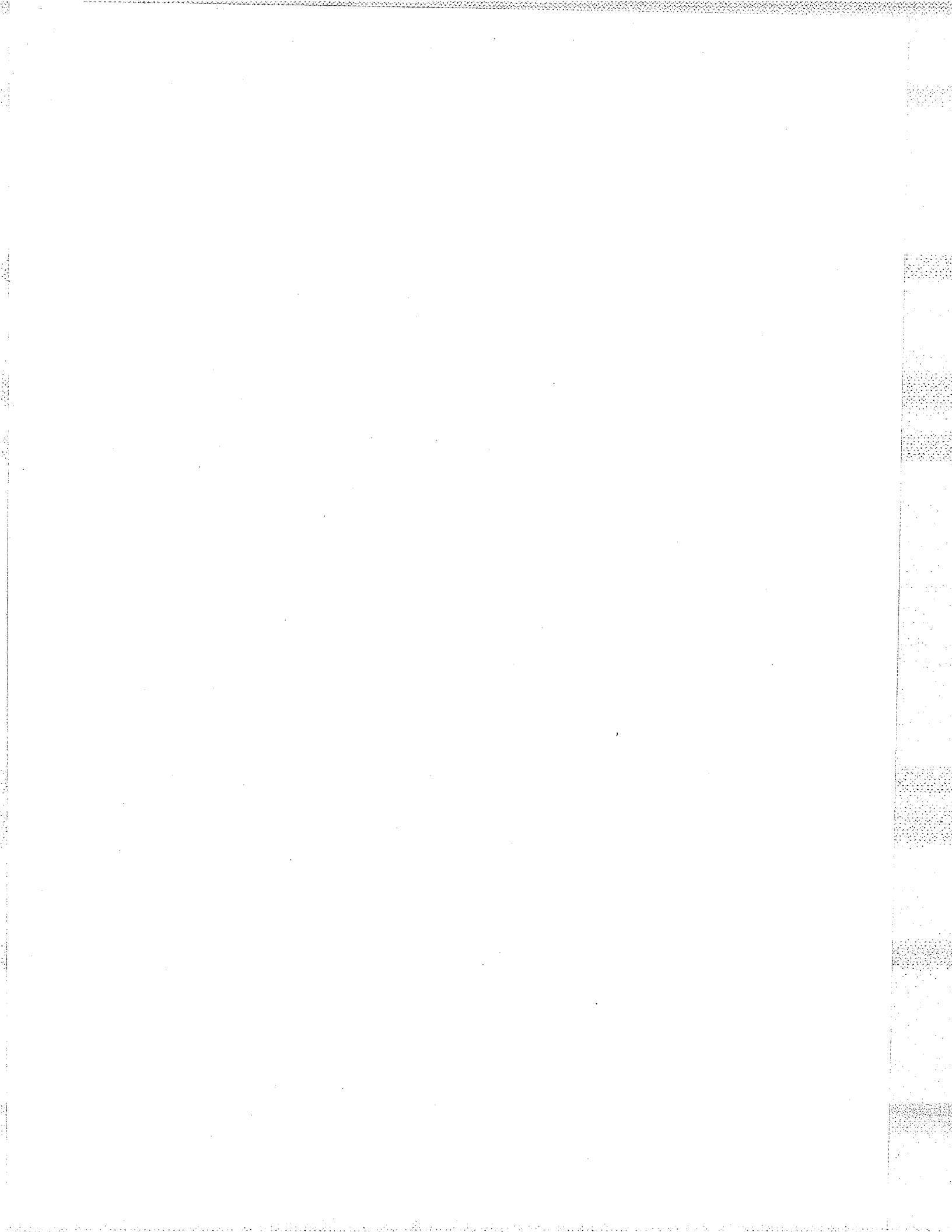
On the basis of these investigations, it was found that substantial evidence conclusively supports the contention that the philosophy of Skovoroda is greatly simplified and more easily comprehended whenever he is approached from the symbolic point of view and in accordance with his personal method of expression, namely, by means of his philosophic termin-

ology.

Although the study of symbols in Skovoroda has by no means been exhausted, this thesis is an attempt to take a small step forward in deepening and expanding existing research on this topic.

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## CHAPTER ONE

### SKOVORODA, A PHILOSOPHER OF MISUNDERSTANDING

#### Introduction

Most scholars of Slavic thought are generally agreed that the distinguished Ukrainian philosopher-writer of the eighteenth century, Hryhorii Skovoroda is basically an unknown entity in world philosophical circles.

In 1972, on the occasion of the 250<sup>th</sup> anniversary of his birth, many important scholarly seminars and publications re-focussed worldwide academic interest on his life and works, which had gradually declined to a state of intellectual dormancy. It was at one of these commemorative seminars held in New York City that J. B. Rudnyc'kyj underscored the existence of what he termed as "a conspiracy of silence" <sup>1</sup> against Skovoroda which continued to obscure him from the ranks of the world's most noted philosophers. Rudnyc'kyj contended that,

" . . . it should be stressed that unlike his great contemporaries, J. J. Rousseau, Denis Diderot, Francois Marie Voltaire, Immanuel Kant, and others, Skovoroda is mostly unknown to basic Western reference works (e. g. "Encyclopedia Britanica", "Americana", "Grolier", "Chamber's", etc.) or to most compendia of the history of world philosophy." <sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> J. B. Rudnyc'kyj, "Tribute to Skovoroda". The Ukrainian Review (London, The Association of Ukrainians in Great Britain, Ltd, 1973), Summer edition, Vol. XX, No. 2, p. 17. The above article is the text of a paper, delivered by Prof. J. B. Rudnyc'kyj at the annual meeting of the American Association of Teachers of Slavic and East European Languages (AATSEEL) in New York, Dec. 29, 1972, closing Skovoroda celebrations in America in 1972. Prof. Rudnyc'kyj is Vice-President of the Association.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid., p. 16.

In 1933 Dmytro Chyzhevs'kyi stated in the preface to his Fil'osofia H. S. Skovorody that although Skovoroda's biography was well known in literature according to existing sources, there was little unanimity amongst scholars regarding his literary or philosophic works. <sup>1</sup> Furthermore, besides one or two rare exceptions <sup>2</sup> any attempt to systematically analyze the works of Skovoroda was, for some reason, avoided. <sup>3</sup>

Chyzhevs'kyi noted that no other philosopher in the world has been so variously and diametrically interpreted as Skovoroda. For example, of the 250 studies devoted to Skovoroda by 1933, Chyzhevs'kyi maintained that of these, no less than 250 variant viewpoints were expressed regarding that philosopher's influence in past, present and future facets of Ukrainian cultural life. <sup>4</sup>

The scope and object of this essay is to approach Skovoroda's creative works from the standpoint of his symbolic images which appear to play a major role in the simplification of his entire metaphysical thought. Along with this symbolic approach, Skovoroda will be examined within the historical context of his particular epoch and according to his personal method of expression, namely, by means of his symbolic terminology.

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<sup>1</sup>  
Dmytro Chyzhevs'kyi, Fil'osofia H. S. Skovorody (Varshava, Pratsi Ukrain's'koho Naukovooho Instytutu, 1934), p. 3. Hereafter cited as, Chyzhevs'kyi, Fil'osofia, p.

<sup>2</sup>  
Ibid., p. 3. Chyzhevs'kyi cites V. Ern's Hryhorii Savvykh Skovoroda, Zhyzn' i Uchenie (Moskva, 1912) as the first genuine attempt to analyze the works of Skovoroda.

<sup>3</sup>  
Ibid., p. 3.

<sup>4</sup>  
Ibid., p. 5.



## REASONS FOR SKOVORODA'S OBSCURITY

Soon after his death in 1794, Skovoroda's works sustained severe "censorship oppression" while a number of his other manuscripts were "not permitted to be printed".<sup>1</sup> This would explain why so few of Skovoroda's works were known in the nineteenth century.<sup>2</sup> Vladimir Ern suggests that the Ukrainian philosopher actually "guarded his manuscripts from his literary enemies" by specially preserving them for his closest friends.<sup>3</sup>

Since few of his works were approved for publication by the strict censors, no Skovorodaic school of thought was able to emerge immediately after his death to preserve his rich legacy for future generations.<sup>4</sup> Therefore, "just as in his lifetime he had had more admirers than disciples, so after his death there were many who were fascinated by his personality and would honour his memory, but few who showed an interest in his works and became absorbed in his ideas."<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> D. Bahalii, Ukrains'kyi mandrovanyi filosof Hr. Sav. Skovoroda (Kharkiv, 1926), p. 201. Quoted after Domet Olianchyn, "Tvory Hr. Skovorody i Moskovs'ka Tsenzura", Nasha Kul'tura (Zhovten', 1936), Kn. 10, p. 691. See Appendix, Table #1 which lists an example of a censored page from Skovoroda's "Alfavyt ili bukvar' myra".

<sup>2</sup> Olianchyn, op. cit., p. 694.

<sup>3</sup> Ern, op. cit., pp. 170-171.

<sup>4</sup> John-Paul Himka, "H. S. Skovoroda: His Place in Intellectual Tradition", Minutes of the Seminar in Ukrainian Studies held at Harvard University during the Academic Year 1971-1972. Cambridge, Massachusetts, 1971-1972, p. 83.

<sup>5</sup> Ivan Dziuba, "Ivan Dziuba on Hryhorii Skovoroda", The Ukrainian Review, (London, The Association of Ukrainians in Great Britain, Ltd., 1966), Autumn edition, Vol. XIII, No. 3, p. 67. (Translation of an essay by Dziuba, published December 4, 1962 in Literaturna Ukraina).

Once the works of Skovoroda began to gradually infiltrate into the world, a major obstacle that was to hinder their wide acceptance soon became apparent. In the early nineteenth century, Ukrainian or Russian philosophic terminology was almost nonexistent and many of the unique expressive terms which Skovoroda coined in his literary and philosophic works were not readily understood and therefore not retained in the subsequent development of those particular disciplines.<sup>1</sup> This same problem, as far as current Skovorodian studies are concerned, is still evident today with the absence of appropriate philosophic dictionaries or scholarly lexicons that would explain the various philosophic symbols and word structures employed by that philosopher in his works.

In a report entitled, "H. S. Skovoroda: His Place in Intellectual Tradition" delivered by John-Paul Himka at Harvard University in 1972, five "obstacles" were described which he considered to have "long impeded an assessment of Skovoroda's place in intellectual tradition". These may be summarized as follows: Skovoroda's obscure style, the varied interpretations of his philosophy, outright falsifications of his texts, inadequate biographical/archival research and inadequate editions of Skovoroda's works themselves.<sup>2</sup>

Rudnyč'kyj suggests that "the lack of comparative philosophical

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<sup>1</sup> George L. Kline, "Philosophy", Dictionary of Russian Literature (Westport, Connecticut, Greenwood Press, 1971), Edited by William E. Harkins, p. 289. (Originally published in 1956 by the Philosophical Library, New York).

<sup>2</sup> Himka, op. cit., p. 83.

studies of Skovoroda" must be seriously considered as another factor responsible for that philosopher-writer's obscurity in world recognition:

"Except for D. Čyževskij's and J. Mirčuk's efforts to link him with German mystics, and his Soviet Russian lineage "a priori" from M. V. Lomonosov, no serious study has been undertaken to compare Skovoroda to Descartes (with whom he shares some characteristics in outlook), to Rousseau (with regard to his 'encyclopedism'), to Voltaire (as far as his 'enlightenment' is concerned), or even to the classical philosophers, in particular Stoics (Zeno, Seneca, Epictetus, Marcus Aurelius) and idealists (Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle). On the other hand, the study of Skovoroda's relation to freemasonry and the sectarian movements (including Canadian "douxobors") is in a cradle stage."

According to Taras Zakydalsky's conjecture concerning "Skovoroda's Philosophy of Man" an "inadequate analysis of the key concepts of his theory of man has led to confusion and even inconsistency in some studies dealing with Skovoroda".<sup>2</sup>

From the Soviet viewpoint, P. M. Popov describes a simple three point outline in an effort to explain Skovoroda's secondary role in world philosophy: Skovoroda's work is itself contradictory; Skovoroda did not leave a clear, systematized exposition of his views; not all sides of his life, work, and Weltanschauung have been properly investigated.<sup>3</sup>

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1  
Rudnyc'kyi, op. cit., pp. 16-17.

2  
Zakydalsky, "Skovoroda's Philosophy of Man", Minutes of the Seminar in Ukrainian Studies held at Harvard University, 1971-1972, op. cit., p. 84.

3  
P. M. Popov, Hryhorii Skovoroda. Literaturnyi Portret (Kyiv, "Dni-pro", 1969), p. 40.

Although other valid reasons could be added to the above-mentioned summary to show why Skovoroda is still little known in the intellectual world, the given information leads one to the inevitable conclusion that the philosophy of Skovoroda has never really been properly understood in order that it might be justly evaluated and universally appreciated. Unfortunately, whenever any serious attempt has been made to further the studies of Skovoroda without approaching him through his symbols and philosophic terminology, it appears as if he has, more often than not, been more confused and misunderstood than before.

A brief survey of some of the many varying interpretations found in studies devoted to Skovorodian topics will clearly illustrate the validity of such a view.

#### VARIOUS INTERPRETATIONS

In a recent in depth biographical study on Skovoroda made by the Soviet Ukrainian scholar Leonid Makhnovets<sup>1</sup>, it was stated that in 1972 there were approximately 1,442 studies published on Skovorodian topics.<sup>1</sup> Since this figure would probably include only the known Soviet publications, it is enough to justify the assumption that there has been a remarkable resurgence of interest in Skovoroda in recent years.

These studies, however, have not always served to bring the works of that philosopher into clearer focus. Many, if not most of them, have seriously fractured and distorted his views by their unfounded and contradictory conceptions and assertions.

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1

Leonid Makhnovets', Hryhorii Skovoroda. Biohrafiia (Kyiv, "Naukova dumka", 1972), p. 3.

An attempt will be made to summarize in limited detail some of the more important differing viewpoints currently held regarding the nature and substance of Skovoroda's literary and philosophic works. This should convincingly substantiate the suggested premise that Skovoroda has, and remains to be generally misunderstood today, because his creative works and mode of self expression have been approached literally and haphazardly leading to confused conclusions.

In the first place, some Russian and Western scholars have, according to existent political tendencies, chosen to consider Skovoroda as "a Russian philosopher" rather than a philosopher-writer of Ukrainian origin. According to V. V. Zenkovsky "Gregory Savvich Skovoroda (1722-94) is noteworthy as the first Russian philosopher in the strict sense of the word" <sup>1</sup> having somehow experienced national metamorphosis:

"Although Skovoroda's development was closely connected with the ecclesiastical life of the Ukraine, he went far beyond its boundaries and was essentially in harmony with the Russian spiritual life. He is universally Russian in importance and occupies a legitimate place in the history of Russian philosophy." <sup>2</sup>

Earlier in his introduction to Skovoroda, however, Zenkovsky apparently contradicts himself when he says, "Skovoroda would be incomprehensible taken out of historical perspective, apart from the philosophic culture which developed in South Russia (Ukraine, JRP) around the Kiev Academy." <sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> V. V. Zenkovsky, A History of Russian Philosophy (New York, Columbia University Press, 1953), trans. by George L. Kline, 2 Vols., I, p. 53.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid., p. 54.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid., p. 53.

Similarly, Joseph T. Fuhrmann begins his essay on "The First Russian Philosopher's Search for the Kingdom of God" by introducing Skovoroda as "a Ukrainian-Russian mystic and wanderer of the eighteenth century"<sup>1</sup>, and explains that "this is no reflection upon Skovoroda himself, merely a commentary upon the extent to which he has been appreciated by students of Russian intellectual history in the Soviet Union and abroad."<sup>2</sup> That Fuhrmann considers Skovoroda as "Russian" rather than "Ukrainian" is illustrated by such statements as "Skovoroda stands forth as the first true Russian philosopher"<sup>3</sup> and, ". . . Skovoroda, the most learned Russian of the period".<sup>4</sup>

In an apparent effort to justify these assertions, Fuhrmann attempts to explain his abovementioned views in the following manner:

"It is true, of course, that the "Russian" philosopher Skovoroda was actually Ukrainian by birth, residence, and immediate area of influence. By the late eighteenth century, however, the integration of the Ukraine into the cultural life of the Russian empire had gone so far that Skovoroda himself chose to write in Russian, with numerous letters in Latin and Greek, and this placed him, ultimately, within the overall framework of Russian history and culture. Moreover, although Skovoroda loved the Ukraine as his home, I find in him few elements of Ukrainian "nationalism", nor, for that matter,<sup>5</sup> dissatisfaction in being a "Russian subject".

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<sup>1</sup> Joseph T. Fuhrmann, "The First Russian Philosopher's Search for the Kingdom of God", Essays on Russian Intellectual History (Austin, Texas, University of Texas Press, 1971), Edited by Leon Borden Blair, p. 33.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid., pp. 33-34.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid., p. 34.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid., p. 36.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid., p. 38.

Richard Hantula of Harvard University, in a reference to Fuhrmann's essay, makes some key observations regarding the latter's attitude toward the use of Ukrainian by Skovoroda which is worthy of mention at this point:

"Nowhere do we find a reference to a work in Ukrainian, which is to say that Fuhrmann has apparently not read not only the large works of Cyzevs'kyj and Bahalij, but also many smaller but useful articles or monographs. Perhaps this is why he does not exhibit a very critical use of sources in describing Skovoroda's life. His so-called "Bibliographical Essay" fails to mention the invaluable Biobibliohrafija of 1968 (Xarkiv). He does of course use the 1961 edition of Tvory, which he criticizes: "Unfortunately its lengthy "Introduction" and notes . . . , as well as translations of Skovoroda's many letters written in Latin and Greek, are given only in Ukrainian, which means that these volumes will do remarkably little to elevate Skovoroda to something higher than the status of a provincial Ukrainian thinker." <sup>1</sup>

Many other similar quotations could be cited almost indefinitely showing how Skovoroda is often cast in the role of an "eighteenth century Russian" <sup>2</sup> rather than as a bona fide representative of Ukrainian cultural life.

M. I. Kovalens'kyi <sup>3</sup>, Skovoroda's first biographer, student, follower, and intimate friend described him as being born in 1722 in Chernuxy, a small Ukrainian village located between Kyiv and Kharkiv, in the Liuben-

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<sup>1</sup> P. M. Popov, Hryhorii Skovoroda. Literaturnyi portret (Kyiv, "Dni-pro", 1969), reviewed by Richard Hantula in Recenzija, Spring 1972 edition, Vol. II, No. 2, p. 43.

<sup>2</sup> Ern, op. cit., p. 48.

<sup>3</sup> Comprehensive archival research by Leonid Makhnovets' has revealed that Skovoroda's biographer was known as "Kovalens'kyi" rather than "Kovalins'kyi" as often used to date. See Makhnovets', op. cit., p. 7, ff.

skii region. <sup>1</sup> Ivan Franko spoke of Skovoroda as "probably the greatest figure in the spiritual circles of Ukraine in the eighteenth century". <sup>2</sup> After a brief sojourn in the West and a short visit to Moscow, Skovoroda remained within the borders of Ukraine until his death. <sup>3</sup> Once, when Catherine the Great invited him to settle in the intellectual milieu of St. Petersburg, Skovoroda replied to the emissary bearing this proposal: "Tell our little mother (matushka) the tsarina, that I will not abandon my homeland (the Ukraine). My reed pipe and sheep are dearer to me than a sovereign's crown". <sup>4</sup>

Most of the well known Ukrainian and Russian scholars describe Skovoroda as "a distinguished Ukrainian philosopher-writer of the eighteenth century" <sup>5</sup>, or "a great Ukrainian philosopher" <sup>6</sup>, or even more patriotically as "a great son of the Ukrainian nation". <sup>7</sup>

Often, a combination of such descriptive terminology is used in a context that definitely portrays Skovoroda as being a fundamentally Ukrainian philosopher. Typical of this approach is the characterization made by Makhnovets' who represents the traditional Soviet-Ukrainian interpretation:

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<sup>1</sup> D. I. Bilets'kyi (ed.), Hryhorii Skovoroda: Tvory v Dvokh Tomakh, Kyiv, 1961, II, p. 488. Hereafter cited as Skovoroda, Tvory, 1961, Vol. p.

<sup>2</sup> Ivan Franko, "Bibliohrafiia", Zapysky naukovoho tovarystva im. T. H. Shevchenka (L'viv, 1895), T. v, I, p. 79.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid., p. 80.

<sup>4</sup> Quoted after Joseph T. Fuhrmann, op. cit., p. 44. Text translated by Fuhrmann.

<sup>5</sup> Skovoroda, Tvory, 1961, I, p. XI.

<sup>6</sup> Grigorii Skovoroda, Sochineniia v dvukh tomakh (Moskva, "Mysl'", 1973), I, p. 5.

<sup>7</sup> Istoriia Ukrain's'koi Literatury u vos'my tomakh (Kyiv, 1967), II. p. 110.



"Мислитель філософ, художник слова, педагог, музикакомпозитор Григорій Савич Скворода належить до найвизначніших постатей в історії українського народу".

Dr. Vasyl Lev's essay on "Hryhoriy Skovoroda, A Ukrainian Philosopher" may well be summarized by the statement he made concerning Skovoroda's contributions to Ukrainian cultural life in that "he awakened in them a deep love for Ukraine".<sup>2</sup> Dr. Lev has noted that "In Ukraine, the Russian regime considers him (Skovoroda, JRP) a Russian as well as a Ukrainian philosopher and poet simply because he spent some time in Russia and wrote in literary baroque language, slightly influenced by the then official language".<sup>3</sup>

According to Ivan Dziuba, a noted contemporary literary critic in Ukraine, "Hryhory Skovoroda was no provincial philosophizing eccentric, but a profound and original thinker, a new and bold pioneer of human thought".<sup>4</sup> Dziuba goes on to describe Skovoroda as "a specifically Ukrainian philosopher" who may be readily compared to Shevchenko:

"What the two have in common is the truly Ukrainian conception of truth and conscience as immutable human principles. These principles are echoed in the popular philosophy of Ukraine, in Ukrainian folklore: inner stubbornness and rebellious attitude, protest against the flouting of human dignity, disdain for the trivial and superficial, and, finally, the hard struggle of the soul in pursuit of the genuine and hidden".<sup>5</sup>

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1 Makhnovets', op. cit., p. 3.

2 Dr. Vasyl Lev, "Hryhoriy Skovoroda: A Ukrainian Philosopher" The Ukrainian Review, op. cit., p. 13.

3 Lev, op. cit., p. 12.

4 Dziuba, op. cit., p. 68.

5 Ibid., p. 69.

These views reflect those of I. Mirchuk who insisted that the personality and creative works of Skovoroda featured and depicted those unique characteristic elements of the Ukrainian people of his day. This was a perfectly natural phenomenon because every creative writer is, in a very real sense, a child of his own epoch and social environment in which he was reared.<sup>1</sup> It is precisely in this Ukrainian national and cultural context that Skovoroda must always be studied:

"He cannot, in fact, be understood outside that historical succession of national figures and personalities like Ivan Vyshensky, the controversialists of the 17<sup>th</sup> century, Melchisedek Znachko-Yavorsky, the Cossack chroniclers, the Haydamaks, the fighters against the policy of the empresses Elisabeth and Catherine and of tsar Peter I, a policy which sought to destroy the distinctness of Ukraine (" . . . so that there be no dissimilarity")".<sup>2</sup>

From the evidence presented thus far it is obvious that should Skovoroda be approached and studied in any other national or cultural context than his own Ukrainian heritage, his philosophy and meaning will never be properly understood or appreciated:

"Only in this context and in the context of Ukrainian national philosophy and psychology can Skovoroda be grasped. For a full understanding of his work it is equally necessary to keep in mind the many important analogous examples in history of how the human mind and human conscience have withstood the pressures of a treacherous epoch".<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> I. Mirchuk, H. S. Skovoroda (Zamitky do istorii ukrains'koi kul'tury, Pratsi Ukrains'koho Istorychno-Filolohychnoho Tovarystva v Prazi (Praha, 1926), Vol. I, p. 22.

<sup>2</sup> Dziuba, op. cit., p. 69.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.