

THE COMPLETE CORRESPONDENCE OF

HRYHORY SKOVORODA

PHILOSOPHER AND POET

TRANSLATED BY ELEONORA ADAMS AND MICHAEL M.NAYDAN

EDITED BY LILIANA M.NAYDAN

GUEST INTRODUCTION BY LEONID RUDNYTZKY

GLAGOSLAV PUBLICATIONS

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This translation is dedicated in memoriam to Taras Zakydalsky, who devoted his scholarly life to the study of Skovoroda

A Note on Hryhory Savych Skovoroda

The present English translation of Hryhory Skovoroda's letters tells us much about the Ukrainian philosopher whom, to paraphrase his own self-assessment, the world tried to capture but did not succeed. The collection crystallizes a powerful, all-encompassing image of a polyglot sage, talented poet, fancier of the muses, and a profound mystic whose thinking is steeped in Greco-Roman antiquity and illuminated by Christianity. The letters also reveal some of the contradictions inherent in the author's character and his work. He combines, "the astuteness of the serpent, with the simplicity of a dove"; he enjoys the solitude of a hermit but also delights in lengthy conversations with friends and, although a vegetarian, is not averse to participating in lavish banquets. He travels all over Europe while pining for his native Ukraine. He is known as a wandering university while rejecting teaching positions in institutions of higher learning. He expounds on the most profound metaphysical problems with simple and down-to-earth language. His teaching is practical and didactic while mitigated with fervent Christian love. He is pure and pious of heart with a childlike faith along with a sharp, penetrating intellect. These qualities of mind and soul, as well as the eccentricities in his life, make him a mysterious enigma that will anon and forever attract people from all walks of life.

In writing this Introductory Note I have requested two of the leading Western Skovoroda scholars, the American Stephen Scherer and the German Roland Pietsch, to dwell briefly on the reasons for Skovoroda's enduring popularity among Ukrainians. Here are their respective assessments:

"Hryhory Skovoroda's links to educated landowners and ecclesiastics are well-known. For them he was a sophisticated religious philosopher. But there is

also clear evidence that Skovoroda was connected to the illiterate lower classes. For them he was a strannik [a holy wanderer] who showed them by word and deed how to live more virtuous lives. The combination of Skovoroda's intellectual and ethical influence on Ukrainians of such disparate types which began during his own lifetime, but has continued to the present, demonstrates the unusual impact which he has had and will continue to have on the Ukrainian people." (Stephen Scherer, Central Michigan University, Mount Pleasant, Michigan, USA)

"Hryhory Skovoroda understands philosophy in its original meaning as the 'love of wisdom.' It is an all-encompassing way of life. His philosophical quest is focused basically on eternal Wisdom (Sophia perennis), which has always been valid for all times and for all peoples. As a result, his original thinking is filled with images, similes and symbols. With these similes and symbols he reveals and veils at the same time the purpose of his philosophy which is the knowledge of self as knowledge of God. Many of his similes, symbols as well as his poems have become part of Ukrainian folk wisdom. Skovoroda's philosophy breathes the air of freedom and therefore he has become a national prototype for the Ukrainian people which reminds us that the search for an eternally valid truth and wisdom is the best foundation for a life with dignity." (Roland Pietsch, Ukrainian Free University of Munich)

For Hryhory Skovoroda the mystical life was a "soaring toward the Lord." The English language translation of his correspondence sheds considerable light on his life's path both as a man and as a profound thinker.

Leonid Rudnytzky Professor Emeritus La Salle University

A Note on the Translations

At a time when Europe was undergoing the Enlightenment with a focus on the rational and empirical reasoning, Ukrainian philosopher-poet Hryhory Skovoroda (1722–1794) was creating and living his philosophy of the heart that combines common sense logic with profound Orthodox Christian spiritual faith. Skovoroda was one of the most learned and well-read men of his time. His 125 extant letters, published for the first time in English translation in this volume, comprise a testament to his voracious and capacious mind as well as to his profound lifelong friendship with Mykhailo Kovalynsky and devotion to Christian philosophical principles. He wrote his letters primarily in Latin and in Old Church Slavic, with extensive quotations from Ancient Greek and Roman literati as well as from the Bible and other religious writings. These translations were executed by Eleonora Adams and myself from accurate Ukrainian translations of the Latin letters and from the original Old Church Slavic versions published in three sources: the 1973 two-volume collected works Soviet-period edition of Skovoroda's writings, the 1994 two-volume Ukrainian language edition of his writings, and finally the most recent and most authoritative academic edition of his works edited by Leonid Ushkalov and published in 2011. We have tried most closely to follow the 2011 edition. The translation has not been an easy task to say the least, and I applaud the resolve of my co-translator Eleonora Adams in taking on this difficult project.

In terms of specific knowledge about Skovoroda and his penchant for copious citation in his letters, there has been an ever-expanding layering of knowledge added with each edition, with the 2011 edition being the most complete. References to each edition in footnotes will refer to the year of publication (1973, 1994, 2011) or editor (Ushkalov), footnote number, and page number. While the King James version of the Bible has been used for the

most part in the translations to correspond to Skovoroda's quotations when identifiable, at times it has been necessary to adjust the translation to convey a particular metaphor, word, or phrase that Skovoroda emphasizes in his discourse. Skovoroda mostly seems to quote directly from the Old Church Slavic or Russian Synodal Bibles, but on occasion he relies on memory or paraphrase. Greek, Latin and Old Church Slavic words or phrases in the letters appear in the original language only when highlighted for discussion by Skovoroda (with English translations glossed in footnotes). We have also tried to maintain Skovoroda's idiosyncratic capitalization and authorial underscoring, the latter represented by italics in the 2011 Ushkalov edition. Particularly in his later letters Skovoroda capitalizes the first letter of a word for emphasis and sometimes an entire word. While we have striven for consistency in translations of particular words or concepts, on occasion different contexts necessitate flexibility in translation. For example "Nachalo" and "konets" can be translated as "beginning" and "end" or as "alpha" and "omega." "Konets" at times can also be translated as "aim" in yet another context. Context determines the word choice. In our translations we have also tried to maintain the elegant and somewhat archaic feel of Skovoroda's writing style in the original. While it is impractical to present all the footnotes and references from the three editions of Skovoroda's writings in the translations here, we recommend that scholars engaging in more detailed research make use of the massive number of footnotes in the 2011 Ushkalov edition or an extremely useful Skovoroda concordance that is available online at http://www.artsrn.ualberta.ca/skovoroda/.

A Biographical Note on Skovoroda

The religious philosopher and poet Hryhory Skovoroda is called by many the Ukrainian Socrates. The contemporary literary critic Ivan Dziuba considers him the greatest Ukrainian mind ever and the prominent contemporary Ukrainian writer Yuri Andrukhovych calls him "the first Ukrainian hippie." Skovoroda was born December 3, 1722 to a poor Kozak (Cossack) family in the village of Chornukhy in Ukraine, which was then a part of the Russian Empire. He studied at the famed Kyiv-Mohyla Academy from 1738–1741 and at various other times in his life, but never completed his studies in theology. From 1741–1744 he lived in Moscow and Petersburg, serving in the imperial choir of Russian Empress Elizabeth I. He returned to Kyiv in 1744 and then spent 1745–1750 living in Tokai, Hungary where he was musical director of a Russian mission there. During his sojourn abroad all the members of his family died leaving him a complete orphan. After he returned to Kyiv in 1750, he then taught poetics in Pereyaslav from 1751-1752. For a large part of 1753-1759 he worked as a tutor for the son of the landowner Stepan Tomara in the village of Kovrai. After that he taught poetics, syntax, Greek, and ethics at the Kharkiv Collegium from 1759–1769 but left the position after personal attacks on his teachings. After undergoing a spiritual crisis, he decided to devote his life entirely to God and a life of poverty. For the remainder of his life he lived the life of a wandering religious hermit, completely renouncing material things. He traveled throughout Sloboda Ukraine (the part of Ukraine located along the current border with Russia) with just a Bible and flute in his knapsack along with a few other possessions.

¹ As noted here: http://www.wumag.kiev.ua/index2.php?paramЦ=pgs20032/78.

He stayed with various friends, often giving lessons in exchange for food and lodging. Three days before his death on November 9, 1794, he began to dig his own grave and requested an epitaph be placed on his tombstone: "The world tried to catch me but never could," meaning that the material aspects of earthly life never were able to seduce him.

None of Skovoroda's works appeared during his lifetime and first appeared in an edition published in 1837 in Moscow. The texts of Skovoroda's writings, mostly written in Old Church Slavic and Latin, were preserved largely by Skovoroda's close lifelong friend Mykhailo Kovalynsky, to whom he had sent or given manuscript copies. We also owe a great debt to Kovalynsky for penning a truthful and largely unembellished biography of Skovoroda. Skovoroda's extant writings consist of a collection of thirty poems entitled *The Garden of Divine Songs* along with other occasional poetry, a collection of fables under the title *Kharkiv Fables*, and seventeen philosophical treatises, the latter of which were mostly composed later in his life.

The letters of Skovoroda, particularly the seventy-nine written to Mykhailo Kovalynsky, show various aspects of Skovoroda's personality and elements of his cordocentric Christian philosophy that are found in his poetry, fables, and philosophical treatises. The Bible as the word of God represents the core of his beliefs, yet with extensive quotation from ancient Greek, Latin, and other literary and philosophical sources that underscore the wisdom and continuity of thought from pre-Christian to Christian times. Skovoroda's fatherly advice, sometimes firm in nature, to Kovalynsky as well as his agapic love for him inform all those letters.

Michael M. Naydan Woskob Family Professor of Ukrainian Studies The Pennsylvania State University

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Hryhory Skovoroda (1722-1794)

Letters to Mykhailo Kovalynsky (1–79)

[Kharkiv] May 26 (27?), 1762

Greetings, most pleasant of all, young man, my esteemed [friend] Mykhailo!

As soon as we parted after our meeting, my soul was suddenly seized with a longing for you and with a strong wish to see you. I began to regret that I did not invite you into my museum, so that you would be in the company of others, especially because you obviously were somewhat saddened for other reasons and because of your most excellent uncle. This I explain as a feeling of exceptional respect with which you regard all your relatives. Yet I would not be surprised if you, young man, restrain from visiting me, sometimes because of fear and always because of shyness. That is what I, an old man, sometimes fear—and I am not at all proud of this, calling and chiding myself as lazy and weak. Believe me, dear heart, that today, too, I yielded to a childish fear, in not summoning up the courage to invite you in. Oh, if you could only look into my heart! But if I succeed in convincing you that I am ready to ignore everything, to conquer and to endure, then I will attempt to balance the fact that I sometimes display weakness with courage. But here for you, dear friend, are a few words about the Feast Day of the Holy Spirit, which, to be sure, are due him: "These all continued with one accord in prayer and supplication" (Acts 1:14).

Be well, my soul!

Your Hryhor[y] S[avych].

[Kharkiv] July 9, 1762

My most coveted [friend] Mykhailo!

You are already leaving us. Well then, go where your devotion and beneficence call you, go with Christ, and return under his care. May Jesus grant that you find your cherished parents at home well and happy, at least that they should know no anxiety and may all be at peace!

And may the High Martyr of Israel keep watch over you and your dear brother so that no misfortune may befall you on the way! Rest when you are at home, but avoid excessive inactivity, because

ἐπὶ πᾶσι μέτρον ἄριστον—
"in everything moderation is best in all things."

Excess begets congestion, congestion—illness, and illness—melancholy, and he who suffers from this cannot be called healthy. There is no time that does not lend itself to the pursuit of beneficial knowledge, and if you occupy yourself with subjects useful for this life as well as for the hereafter, in moderation, but consistently, then learning becomes joy not work. Whoever is engrossed in education loves it, and whoever loves it never ceases to investigate even though on the surface he may appear idle. If one truly loves anything, then as long as the beloved object is with him, he does not realize the enjoyment he derives from it, but as soon as that object disappears, he immediately feels love's cruelest suffering. Why is this? Because if one does not love beneficial education with his heart and soul, then every effort will be in vain. After all, even during times of idleness, love studies and contemplates, and the further it gets away from the goals, the more it strives toward them. I am well aware of how much you love your preoccupation with education, and I do not at all mean to imply that you need to be encouraged to study because you show your enthusiasm for the field of knowledge more than sufficiently. This kind of prodding is particularly out of place, especially right now during vacation time. I write about it only to let you know how I feel, and I am the kind of person who never tires of conversation

with friends. Note that people who love piety are particularly fond of young men and adolescents, pleasant, pure in heart, who were by nature gifted with auspicious talents. An isocrat usually calls them $\pi\alpha\tilde{\imath}\delta\alpha\varsigma$ $\theta\epsilon\tilde{\omega}\nu$, or children of God. That is why I direct my gratitude to your wonderful uncle, the *Archbishop*, the very reverend father Petro, for helping me to establish a friendship with you that I regard as good fortune for me. And in order for you not to miss me during the time we are apart, I have decided to write a few devout Greek maxims for you $\mu\nu\eta\mu\acute{o}\sigma\nu\nuo\nu$, that is to say as a memento. Whenever you might feel a desire to talk to me, look at these sentences and you shall feel as if you are speaking with me; remember at the same time the kinds of conversations your friend likes to have.

Well then, let the first maxim be as follows:

- 1. Κάλλιστον ἐφόδιον ἔν τῷ γήρατι ἡ σοφία. "The best companion in old age is *wisdom*." or $\pi\alpha\iota\delta\epsilon i\alpha$, meaning knowledge, because man in old age is bereft of everything save knowledge.
- 2. Σεμνὸς ἔρως ρετῆς. "Sacred is love of virtue." Because one cannot disrespect him in whom one sees the temple of virtue, for wherever there is love of virtue there is dignity.
- 3. Φίλους ἔχων, νομίζε θησαυροὺς ἔχειν. "If you have friends, remember that you hold dominion over a treasure." Nothing, says Seneca, gives more joy than true friendship.
 - 4. Χαλεπὰ τὰ καλά. "That which is beautiful is difficult."
- 5. Ὁλίγη πρὸς κακότητα ὁδός. "The path to evil is short." But take one expression from the Holy Scriptures. Paul in his Epistle to St. Thomas (Chap. 1, end) writes:

Έστι δὲ πορισμὸς μέγας ἡ εὐσέβεια μετὰ αὐταρκείας.

"A great achievement is piety with satisfaction."

It is characteristic for virtue to worship God and to love thy neighbor. $A\dot{v}\tau\alpha\rho\kappa\epsilon i\alpha$ in Latin is called spiritual peace, in which man is satisfied with his fate. This is my memento to you: be happy with what you have. Stay well my friend, for whom I yearn most of all, my Mykhailo, and your wonderful little brother Hryts. May Christ help you day to day to grow up in virtue.

Your new friend Hryh[ory] Sk[ovoroda]. July 9, 1762.

[Kharkiv] end of August beginning of September, 1762

My Mykhailo, Rejoice in the Lord!

If you are not formally permitted to study the Greek language not only because you should not be overburdened, which happens as a result of unwise interference from certain people, then it is not time for you yet, as they say, to build an arsenal. But if you love me, then little by little, privately, you can study it, and you will learn it. Keep in mind that the best evidence of your affection for me will be your love for the Greek Muses, and if our friendship is dear to you, then be assured that it will last as long as you value integrity and Hellenic literature. Now then, be like the palm tree: the more it is restricted by a crag, the faster and more beautifully it strives to grow. This is the tree whose branches are placed in the hands of martyrs-victors, as can be seen on icons. Find an hour, and on a daily basis, but it must be on a daily basis, little by little, place into your soul, as if into your stomach, a word or a phrase, as though adding fuel to a fire, so that the soul can nourish itself and grow and not be stifled. The more slowly you learn, the more fruitful will be the study. Unhurried consistency accumulates more than expected. The help of a mentor, if there be need of it, is assured. Among your friends you have those who will prompt you, if you should be uncertain of something. If you decide to make use of my help, then nothing will bring me more pleasure. Even if I were not obliged by the services and kind deeds of your uncle, the very reverend Father Petro, then our friendship alone would be cause enough.

Your friend Hryh[ory] Skovoroda

If you should need to borrow any sum of money, as it [sometimes] happens, do not look for other creditors besides me, unless you think that in this matter

someone else would [behave] more delicately toward you than I. I know that you are unusually timid, and I consider that it is better for you to sin in this manner rather than be too bold. Nevertheless, sometimes it is appropriate to set aside shyness, of course only in matters of honor, especially now when necessity demands it. It would be senseless to suffer when it can be avoided. Could it be that you are afraid that I would regard you as a beggar, or as someone who comes from a poor family, if you come [to me] for a loan? Oh, I am not that way; I have already exalted poverty in the past.

I do favors for others, why shouldn't I do them for you and yours? If you yourself are embarrassed, then send our Oleksa; arrange matters quickly. If by chance a postman should be going (to Olshanok), send word to me by way of this Oleksa. I truly...

[Kharkiv, beginning of September, 1762]

Greetings, my only joy, my dearest [friend], Mykhailo!

I cannot tell you how pleased I am that you love the Psalms of David with such angelic devotion. These great qualities of your soul ignite in me fires of devotion to you, which, being born in virtue, will, I expect, last forever. I shall say nothing at this point about the style of your letter. Believe me, I felt as if I were hearing our Erasmus, so much is your letter imbued with true Latin spirit.

Be well, my soul! The poems are as excellent as is possible. Soon I shall return them to you with some corrections in order to make them more suitable for recitation. Remain in the future as you are now.

Your Hryhory

I shall conduct the teaching of the boys myself, accompanied by an organ; in the meantime take care to prepare our Maksym a little for singing from musical scores. Write me when I should come to you.

[Kharkiv, mid-September 1762]

Greetings, my most precious creature, most pleasant, Mykhailo

When I was leaving school at the usual time and began thinking about what I should do, suddenly there appeared before my eyes a person whom I think you know. What is his name? His name is Mykhailo! I am saying that you have suddenly started to appear in my soul. Whenever I meet with my Muses, I always see you in my thoughts, and I feel as if both of us are enjoying the enticements of the Muses at the same time and are walking together along the Helicon. I am convinced that you are enjoying the same things, the same enticements of the Camena. And in reality, for a complete and true friendship that ameliorates the harshness of life and energizes people, there must be between us not only a virtuous chastity and affinity of souls, but also a similarity of interests. And just for this reason many could not become my friends, because they did not study certain subjects or if they did, then these subjects were ones that were alien to my intellectual inclinations, even though in every other aspect they were like me. I admit to you my fondness for you: I would love you even if you were illiterate, I would love you—all else aside—for the quality of your soul and for your aspiration toward everything that is honorable; I would love you even if you were totally uneducated and unsophisticated. Now, however, when I see that you, like me, are enraptured with the literature of the Greeks (I do not need to tell you to what degree I value them) and the humanistic literature, which, when you leave aside Sicilian jokes, as they say, breathes beauty and wholesomeness into everything—then in my soul a love for you takes root and grows with every day, and there is nothing more pleasant in life for me than speaking with you and others like you. But, I am being summoned.

Farewell, Mykhailo!

Write three or four little poems for me and send them to me. What kind? You will ask. Whatever kind you like, because everything of yours is to my liking. It was good and devoted of you, my dear friend, to assign little Maksym

to watch over your infirm little brother. Nevertheless, do not heed careless advice of chance people who recommend one or another kind of medicine. In no other field are there more experts among the populace as in medicine, and there is nothing about which people know less, than about curing illnesses. Aside from widely used, simple medicines, discard all else. Avoid bloodletting and purgatives, as you would poisonous snakes. And if you like, come see me, and we will discuss this today.

Very affectionately yours, Hryh[ory] Savych.

The religious philosopher and poet Hryhory Skovoroda is described by many as the Ukrainian Socrates and was one of the most learned men of his time. He was a polyglot who knew the Bible virtually by heart, as well as the writings of the Church Fathers and the literature of Greek and Roman antiquity. The eminent literary critic Ivan Dziuba considers Skovoroda the greatest Ukrainian mind ever. And Yuri Andrukhovych, one of the most prominent Ukrainian writers of today, calls him "the first Ukrainian hippie" on account of his itinerant lifestyle and rejection of worldly life. The impact of Skovoroda's life and works has been well documented on major writers in future generations, such as Leo Tolstoy, Andrei Bely and Pavlo Tychyna, to name but a few.

None of Skovoroda's works appeared during his lifetime – they were first published in 1837 in Moscow. Skovoroda's extant writings consist of a collection of thirty poems entitled *The Garden of Divine Songs* along with other occasional poems, a collection of fables entitled *Kharkiv Fables*, and seventeen philosophical treatises.

The letters of Skovoroda are appearing in their entirety here in English for the first time, accompanied by a guest introduction by Leonid Rudnytzky.



Skovoroda was born on December 3, 1722 to a poor Cossack family in the village of Chornukhy in Ukraine, which was then part of the Russian Empire. He studied at the famed Kyiv-Mohyla Academy at various times in his life, but never completed his studies in theology. For a large part of 1753-1759 he worked as a tutor for the son of the landowner Stepan Tomara. After that, he taught several subjects at the Kharkiv Collegium for ten years, but left the position after personal attacks on his teachings.

After undergoing a spiritual crisis, he decided to devote his life entirely to God and to a life of poverty. For the rest of his days, he lived the life of a wandering religious hermit, traveling with just a Bible in his knapsack and few other worldly possessions. Three days before his death, in 1794, he began digging his own grave and requested that the following epitaph be inscribed on his tombstone: "The world tried to catch me but never could," meaning that the material aspects of earthly life were never able to seduce him.

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