

Hryhorii Skovoroda's Use of Folk Proverbs

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Abstract

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In 1817 Gustav Gess de Kal've noted Skovoroda's use of "odd expressions." Of the eight he mentioned, at least three were proverbs attested in published collections of proverbs. Despite this recognition of Skovoroda's use of proverbs at the beginning of the nineteenth century, it was not until the second half of the twentieth century that several Soviet authors produced scholarly studies of this phenomenon. While these pioneering efforts are of great value, they are not consistent in locating the proverbs in Skovoroda's particular works, linking them directly to his philosophical ideas and demonstrating attested versions of the proverbs in recognized proverb collections. This essay will respond to these deficiencies by discussing all of the proverbs used by Skovoroda in his cycle of poems, "Sad Bozhestvennykh Pesnei" (the Garden of Divine Songs) and in his cycle of fables, "Basni Khar'kovskija" (Kharkiv Fables). On the basis of this discussion, it is clear that Skovoroda used more proverbs than is usually observed, that he integrated them into his work to clarify his philosophical ideas, that nearly all of these proverbs are in recognized proverb collections and that, altogether, his use of proverbs demonstrates his ties to the people and popular culture.



Introduction

In one of the earliest published accounts dedicated to the eighteenth-century Ukrainian philosopher, Hryhorii Skovoroda, Gustav Gess de Kal've remarked on Skovoroda's use of "odd expressions."¹ Gess de Kal've gave a list of eight such expressions, at least three of which can be attested, in one variant or another, in collections of proverbs; "Starajsja manit' sobaku, no palki iz ruk ne vypuskaj'"² [Try calling a dog, but don't drop your stick]; "Kuritsa kudakhchet na odnom meste, a jajtsy kladet no drugom"³ [A hen cackles in one place, but lays eggs in another]; "Ryba ot golovy nachinaet portit'sja"⁴ [A fish begins to rot from the head].

Despite this early recognition of Skovoroda's familiarity with proverbs, there has not been a great deal of effort to study this phenomenon. The most important of the few essays devoted to this topic appeared in the Soviet Union during the last several decades of the Soviet era. P.M. Popov, the dean of Skovoroda scholars in the Soviet period, made a beginning statement on this question when he asserted that Skovoroda

¹ G. Gess de Kal've and I. Vernet, "Skovoroda, Ukrainskij Filosof," *Ukrainskij Vestnik* (part 6, 1817): 118–19. While two of Skovoroda's own works had been published in 1798 and 1806 respectively, the only earlier secondary reference to Skovoroda was the very short statement of V. Maslovich in 1816: V. Maslovich, *O basne i basnopistsakh raznykh narodov* (Khar'kov: Tipografija Universiteta, 1816), 118–19. M.I. Kovalinskij's famous biography of Skovoroda, although written in 1794, did not appear in published form until 1886: M.F. Sumtsov (ed.), "Zhitie Skovorody, opisannoe drugom ego M.I. Kovalinskim," *Kievskaja Starina* (September 1886): 103–50.

² Matvii Nomys, ed., *Ukrains'ki Prykazky, Prysliv'ia i Take Inshe* (South Bound Brook, NJ: Publishing Fund of Metropolitan Mstyslav, 1985), #5900. Nomys's original version was published in 1864 in St. Petersburg. Nomys gave this saying as follows: "Mani sobaku a z ruk ne puskaej kiiaku;" V.M. Mokienco et alia (eds.), *Bol'shoj Slovar' Russkikh Poslovits* (Moscow: Olma Media, 2010), 844. Mokienco's iteration was: "Sobaku mani, a palku derzhi."

³ Nomys, *Ukrains'ki Prykazky*, #5899. "Kurka kudakhche v odnim mistsi, a yaitsia klade v druhim." Mokienco, *Bol'shoj Slovar' Russkikh Poslovits*, 465. "Kuritsa kudakhehet na odnom meste, a jajtsa kladet na drugom."

⁴ Nomys, *Ukrains'ki Prykazky*, #6046. "Ryba smerdyt' vid holovy." Mokienco, *Bol'shoj Slovar' Russkikh Poslovits*, 776. "Ryba s golovy gniet"; "Ryba tukhnet s golovy."

was the first Ukrainian writer to consciously consider the role and significance of proverbs in literature. In particular, Popov found this attitude expressed by Skovoroda in the introduction to this cycle of fables, "Basni Khar'kovskija."⁵ I.V. Ivan'ov, another important Soviet contributor to the study of Skovoroda, generally agreed with Popov. He added to Popov's analysis the view that Skovoroda regarded proverbs very highly as a condensed form of folk wisdom, one which he used, along with sources such as the Bible and mythology, to understand the concrete problems of life.⁶ In another essay on this theme Ivan'ov argued for the importance of proverbs in the formation of Skovoroda's ethical teachings and, in this regard, he even cited particular examples, for instance, "Dobroe bratstvo luchshe bohatstva" [Good brotherhood is better than wealth] and "Gde byl? – U Druga. – Shchto pil? – Vodu, luchshe neprijatel'skago miodu" [Where were you? With a friend. What did you drink? Water, which is better than an enemy's honey].⁷

M.E. Syvachenko and O.V. Myshanych were two more Soviet authors who commented on Skovoroda's use of proverbs. Syvachenko made note of Gess de Kal've's list of "odd expressions," but also used his two-part article to identify some proverbs in Skovoroda's work and to find attested versions or variants of some of them in various collections – e.g., in the collections of Vladimir Dal', the eminent nineteenth-century Russian lexicographer, and Matvii Nomys. Beyond this, Syvachenko emphasized the degree to which Skovoroda "derived his philosophy directly from the mouths of the people, from living, oral everyday life."⁸ In the second part of his essay Syvachenko pointed out, with some details, though without much analysis, that Skovoroda used proverbs to support his social attitudes, his view of innate ability or "srod-

⁵ P.M. Popov, "Prysliv'i prykazky v khudozhnii literatury," in *Ukrains'ka narodna poetychna tvorchist'* (Kyiv: Radians'ka Shkola, 1958), 349.

⁶ I.V. Ivan'ov, "Zhyttevyi Shliakh I Formuvannia Svitohliadu," in *Filosofia Hryhoriia Skovorody* (Kyiv: Naukova Dumka, 1972), 53.

⁷ I.V. Ivan'ov "Prysliv'ia ta prykazky u tvorakh H.S. Skovorody," *Ukrains'ka mova ta literatura v shkoli* (#8, 1964): 32.

⁸ M.E. Syvachenko, "Do Istorii Ukrains'koi Paremiohrafii: H.S. Skovoroda," *Narodna tvorchist' ta etnohrafia* (#5, 1972): 26–27, 36.