

Hryhoriy Skovoroda (1722–94): Critic as Mystic

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Abstract

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The author demonstrates the connections between social criticism and mystical experience in the life of Skovoroda, who lived during the turbulent years when control over Ukraine passed from Poland to the Russian Empire, which, by 1780 under Catherine II, destroyed the last vestiges of Ukrainian independence. Following the ennoblement of the Cossack officer class and enservment of the Ukrainian peasantry, Skovoroda reacted with oblique censure often expressed in poems whose texts the author analyzes not only for their social critique but also for their personal context and theological and spiritual underpinnings. Skovoroda was also a critic of the Orthodox Church and the corruption of monastic institutions, including the famous Kievan Caves Monastery. The peripatetic Skovoroda preferred always to guard his freedom and solitude in a life that could in some measure be called “monastic” but was unattached to any formal community. The central discovery of Skovoroda was that each one must discover for oneself what one’s nature is, and act in accordance with it. In so doing, one will at the same time discover not only a connection with universal human nature but also human happiness and ultimately divine communion mystically experienced. To understand this mystical communion with the divine energies, the author draws on Pseudo-Dionysius and others, and analyzes two central events treated by Skovoroda, viz., Christ’s transfiguration and resurrection.



Introduction

This essay seeks to consider the compatibility of social criticism and religious mysticism. At first glance, social criticism and religious mysticism do not appear compatible at all. The first depends on a rational calculation of the social forces at work in society and the injustices which result from the operation of those forces. The second represents a non-rational departure from society's here and now and a yearning to identify with the infinite and eternal power which underpins the material world. How then do criticism and mysticism complement one another? Though generalizing about this possibility is difficult, the consideration of a specific example can help. The case of the Ukrainian thinker, Hryhoriy Skovoroda (1722–94), is instructive in this regard. Skovoroda lived during a socially chaotic time in Ukraine and, though he was not a militant social reformer, he did recognize the social and spiritual ills of his time. As a solution to these ills he advocated that each individual should live in accord with the divine economy or nature which was immanent in the material world. But he also practiced the mystical contemplation which facilitated the recognition of this divine economy and so made possible a life lived in accord with nature.

Criticism

When one considers Skovoroda's social criticism one must remember that Skovoroda aimed that criticism specifically at the eighteenth-century Ukraine in which he spent the vast majority of his life. It is also imperative to keep in mind the social and political developments which culminated in Ukraine by the latter years of the eighteenth century. Starting in 1648 with the Khmelnytsky rebellion, Poland began to lose control of Ukraine, which from that time onward fell gradually under the sway of the Russian Empire. The Russian control, which began to develop in 1648, was completed in the early 1780s when Catherine II destroyed the last independent political institutions in Ukraine.

Skovoroda, therefore, witnessed the Russian diminution and final abolition of Ukrainian independence. He referred indirectly, though adversely, to this development in his poem, “De Libertate.”

What is freedom? Is it any good?
 Some say it is like unto gold.
 But freedom is not like gold at all,
 For freedom to gold is like wine to gall.
 No matter how one embroiders it,
 My freedom I shall never forfeit.
 Glory forever, oh chosen one,
 Freedom’s father, heroic Bohdan.¹

Skovoroda’s criticism of Russia’s advance into Ukraine was articulated further by the following passage:

The hunter does not sleep. Be alert. Carelessness is the mother of misfortune. In fact, Great Russia considers all of Little Russia [Ukraine] as so many grouse. But why be ashamed? The grouse is a stupid bird, but not an evil one.²

¹ Skovoroda, “De Libertate,” in V.I. Shynkaruk et al. (eds.), *Hryhoriy Skovoroda: Povne Zibrannya Tvoriv*, 2 vols. (Kiev: Naukova Dumka, 1973), I, 91. This collection of Skovoroda’s works will be cited hereafter as PZT. All translations of Skovoroda’s works in this essay are the author’s. For a different interpretation of this poem see: Natalia Pylypiuk, “In Search of Hryhorii Skovoroda: A Review Article,” *Journal of Ukrainian Studies* (1990): 131–32. While Pylypiuk grants that “De Libertate” was Skovoroda’s only “political” work, she contends that it was not so much an adverse criticism of Russia as a commonly accepted rhetorical device used by Skovoroda to express a desire to preserve his own freedom.

² Skovoroda, “Ubohiy Zhayvoronok,” PZT, II, 119. Skovoroda’s attachment to Ukraine was profound, as witness his reference to Little Russia as “my mother” and Ukraine as “my aunt.” Skovoroda, “Lysty do M. Kovalyns’ koho,” PZT, II, 356. Skovoroda considered Little Russia as his mother because he was born in Little Russia or Hetman Ukraine. Ukraine was his aunt because he spent the greater part of his adult life directly east of Little Russia, in Sloboda, Ukraine, which he called Ukraine. M.I. Kovalyns’kiy, “Zhyzn’ Hryhoriya Skovorody,” PZT, II, 457.