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The Prologue to the *Narcissus* of Hryhorii Skovoroda as a Philosophical Testament

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Abstract

The article points out the composition and publication of the dialogue *Narcissus* and its Prologue, why the figure of Narcissus is for Skovoroda so unusually positive and why it is connected to the theme of “know thyself.” The article also draws an unprecedented parallelism between the “sacred narcissism” of Skovoroda and the “heroic frenzies” of Giordano Bruno. The theoretical meaning of the Narcissus’ figure in Skovoroda’s philosophy is the link between epistemological idealism, self-love (which is a strong ethical and personal commitment, a love of own character and fate) and deification. From the ontological point of view, it is suggested that Skovoroda’s ontology is a Christian Plutarchism: a transformation (by Platonizing and Christianizing it) of the Stoic individual *hegemonic* into an ability to grasp the invisible divine, in a perspective close to St. Augustine. Finally, we find, in Skovoroda’s philosophical testament, an original synthesis of Latin culture and humanism with modernism and Hesychasm’s spirituality.

Key Words: Narcissus, know thyself, heroic frenzies, Plutarchism and Stoicism in Skovoroda, Skovoroda and Bruno.



Composition and Publication of the *Narcissus* and its Prologue

The composition of the dialogue *Narcissus. A Deliberation on the Topic: Know Thyself* followed a complex itinerary; the dialogue, written in 1769–1771 (i.e., two years after the abandonment of the teaching post at the Kharkiv Collegium), constitutes one of the first of Skovoroda’s philosophical works¹; previously, after about 1750, he had written poems, apologues, moral fables and a didactic treatise. At the end of his life, in 1794, Skovoroda wished to precede with a Prologue [Prolog],²

1 In 1768, Skovoroda had drafted a treaty of ethics (*The Primary Door to Christian Ethics*) which he used as a textbook for the course which he held at the theological Kharkiv Collegium; disagreements with the episcopal authority on the content of the treaty led Skovoroda to leave his post and to abandon teaching. Unclear is the timing of another dialogue entitled *A Symphony Called the Book of Askhan of Self-Knowledge*; according to Ushkalov and other scholars, it was written shortly after the composition of the *Narcissus*.

2 “Feci Prologon et in ‘Narcissum,’ id est, in Librum: ‘NOSCE TE IPSUM.’” Letter to M. Kovalynsky, April 2, 1794: Hryhorii Skovoroda, *Povna academichna zbirka tvoriv*, ed. Leonid Ushkalov (Charkiv;

his beloved philosophical “first child” (as he calls it),³ which assumes the meaning of a true philosophical testament.

We have two autograph copies of the dialogue; the Prologue is not present in them and the name of Narcissus appears neither in the title nor in the text. The inclusion of the name of Narcissus (Narkiss) in the title came from a letter of 1790 to Mykhailo Kovalynsky in which Skovoroda claims to have found the text of the dialogue among the papers of a friend of his, a priest⁴; thus the new entitling should date back to a time just after the preparation of the second autograph copy, which was not composed before the end of 1788,⁵ while the Prologue should not be, as mentioned, prior to 1793–1794.

It is to be noted that the works of Skovoroda are calligraphic manuscripts; their publication in print was posthumous. From 1720, the Russian authorities (after the attempted secession of Mazepa) applied strict control over the printing in the part of Ukraine under the Hetmanate, prohibiting the publication of non-religious books, hindering the release of original works, and allowing only reprints; the Mohyla Academy had to resort to printing some of their materials abroad, especially in Germany.⁶ In 1767 the governor of Slobozhanshchyna had asked the Senate imperial permission to set up a printing press at the Kharkiv Collegium, receiving a rejection.⁷ In such conditions, to which is added the isolation of Skovoroda from educational or religious institutions, writing for publication was not even contemplated.

It was therefore not until 1798 that the first edition (incomplete) of *Narcissus*, which also represented the first of Skovoroda's work to be printed, was published in St. Petersburg; the dialogue was published anonymously and with a different title, by the imperial librarian and historian Mykhailo Antonovsky, a Freemason and a former student of the Mohylian Academy. Important components of the first Russian Masonic movement were animated by a strong spirituality of Christian origin⁸ which had significant elements of affinity with the inner asceticism proposed by Skovoroda, made known to the Petersburg Freemasons by Ukrainian affiliates⁹;

Edmonton; Toronto: CIUS-Majdan, 2011), 1186.

3 This is said at the beginning of the Prologue, repeating what Skovoroda had already written in a letter of 1790 (Letter to M. Kovalynsky of 26 September 1790: Skovoroda, *Povna academichna zbirka tvoriv*, 1185).

4 Letter to M. Kovalynsky of 26 September 1790, 1186.

5 On autographed copies and their dating it is useful to consult the critical edition of the Skovoroda's works of 1973: Hryhorii Skovoroda, *Povne zibrannia tvoriv u dvokh tomakh* [*Collected Works in Two Volumes*], vol. I, (Kyiv: Naukova dumka, 1973), 498–99. There are also six manuscript copies of the autographs (one of which is preserved in Romania).

6 Iaroslav Isaievych, *Ukrainske knyhovydannia. Vytoky, rozvytok, problemy* [*Ukrainian Publishing Activity: Origins, Development, Problems*] (Lviv: Instytut Ukrainoznavstva im. Krypiakievycha NAN Ukrainy, 2002), 262.

7 Isaievych, *Ukrainske knyhovydannia*, 293.

8 On the late 18th century Russian Freemasonry see: Raffaella Faggionato, *A Rosicrucian Utopia in Eighteenth-Century Russia: The Masonic Circle of N. I. Novikov* (Dordrecht: Springer, 2010).

9 Leonid Ushkalov, *Esei pro ukrainske baroko* [*The Essays on Ukrainian Baroque*] (Kyiv: Fakt, 2006), 150.

close to Freemasonry we also find Kovalynsky.¹⁰ We may exclude, however, any form of affiliation on Skovoroda's part to Freemasonry, both for his natural shyness for any organization, and for his repeated hostility to "sects"; authoritative scholars such as Yefremov and Sumtsov also excluded his membership, although both see contact points between the doctrines of Skovoroda and those of Russians Freemasons.¹¹ On the other hand, Kovalynsky reports that Skovoroda said: "I do not know the Martinists, their reasoning or their teachings."¹²

Narcissus and "Know Thyself"

The figure of Narcissus is unusually positive for Skovoroda, and connected to the theme of "know thyself" declined in the Augustinian sense. He was driven, conceiving this association, by an iconographic tradition, which can be traced back to certain late medieval representations of Narcissus as a symbol of the contemplative life¹³; this image then flowed into certain texts of emblems of the modern era and was associated in two known cases to the Delphic-Socratic motto. We know the importance of the emblematic in Renaissance and Baroque¹⁴; even in the Kyiv Academy the emblematic was held in high regard; the typography of the institute had printed several volumes of emblems, while in private libraries of the leading Ukrainian intellectuals there were several emblematic encyclopedias published in the West, as in that of Stefan Iavorsky (which then went on to form the main part of the library of the Kharkiv Collegium).¹⁵ Skovoroda participated in this taste of his era and liked to illustrate his autograph with symbols and emblems, power of condensation and conceptual expression he greatly esteemed. He writes in the Introduction to the *Fables of Kharkov* (1774):

no color can describe the rose, the lily, narcissus in such a vivid way as the aura of celestial and terrestrial images which the invisible divine truth wonderfully creates in them, whence were born *hieroglyphica, emblemata, symbola*, mysteries, parables, fables, similes, proverbs.¹⁶

10 The same applies to the other favorite pupil of Skovoroda's, Vasyl Tomara; see: Leonid Ushkalov, *Hryhorii Skovoroda: Seminarii* (Charkiv: Majdan, 2004), 99. Tomara, who was the first private student of Skovoroda, who lived in the house of his father for a few years, pursued an important career in imperial administration and then appeared as one of the participants in the conversation described in De Maistre's *St. Petersburg Dialogues*.

11 See: Serhii Yefremov, "Masonstvo v Ukraini," ["Freemasonry in Ukraine,"] *Ii: Nezaleznyi Kulturolohichni Chasopys* 54 (2009): 169.

12 Mykhailo Kovalynsky, *Zhizn Grigoriia Skovorody*, in *Skovoroda Povna akademichna zbirka tvoriv*, 1368. Russians Freemasons were sometimes called "Martinists" for their appreciation for the French theosophist Louis Claude de Saint-Martin.

13 Alessandra Ugucioni, "L'iconografia di Narciso nel *Roman de la Rose*, esempio di amore cortese," in *Studi per Pietro Zampetti*, ed. Ranieri Varese (Ancona: Il Lavoro Editoriale, 1993).

14 Mario Praz, *Studies in Seventeenth-century Imagery* (Roma: Edizioni di Storia e Letteratura, 1975).

15 Leonid Ushkalov, "Hryhorii Skovoroda," in *Povna akademichna zbirka tvoriv*, 36.

16 Skovoroda, *Povna akademichna zbirka tvoriv*, 155. On symbolism in Skovoroda see: Dmytro Chyzhevsky, *Filosofia H. S. Skovorody* (Warsaw: Institut Scientifique Ukrainien, 1934), 26–49.

In 1788 in St. Petersburg the new edition of the only Russian text of emblems was issued, and Skovoroda was definitely able to consult it while attending the patrician houses of Slobodshchyna; among the nobles who gave him hospitality there was, for example, the deputy governor of the province, in whose house Skovoroda actually lived in the last months of his life. The 1788 edition of the book, issued with the title (changed from the previous edition) *Emvlemy i simvoly*, was addressed directly to the spread of noble and public heraldry among the aristocrats and among state officials.¹⁷ However, Skovoroda surely already knew the first edition of the book, printed in Amsterdam in 1705 by order of Peter the Great, as he copied by hand and inserted in the dialogue *Alfavit* (1775)¹⁸ emblem no. 718,¹⁹ which is entitled “Narcissus” and subtitled “Know Thyself.”

The first edition of the book was addressed specifically to artists and naval craftsmen. It was a sort of emblematic encyclopaedia commissioned by the Tsar to a Dutch printer and edited by the Russian-speaking Pole, Elias Kopijewski²⁰; almost exclusive sources of the book were two works published just before in Amsterdam by Daniel de la Feuille, who in turn used emblems found in previous collections. In particular, the emblems numbered 709 to 840 of the Russian collection reproduced those of *Devises et emblemes d'amour*, published in 1696 by de la Feuille under the pseudonym Giuseppe Pallavicini²¹; among the sources used for the latter work, the one linking the figure of Narcissus to the Delphic motto is *Thronus Cupidinis* published in Amsterdam in 1618 and reissued in 1620. In *Thronus* symbol no. 29 is entitled “Nosce te ipsum” and depicts Narcissus, who is mirroring himself in a stream; a commentary in Latin refers to the usual overestimation of the self that afflicts humans. In previous emblematic literature, another known case in which there was an association between the Delphic motto and the figure of Narcissus is *Emblemata. Partim Ethica Et Physica, Partim vero Historica & Hieroglyphica* of Nikolaus Resner, published in Frankfurt in 1581²²; the image is in Book III of the text, in the emblem XXVI on page 137, and wishes to warn against pride.

The date of publication of the *Emvlemy i simvoly* (1788) and the decision to give a new title to his first dialogue (1790), lead us to assume that the renewed vision of the emblem of the Russian collection suggested to Skovoroda the new title and the figure of the protagonist of the Prologue. It was not an extrinsic solution because the dialogue, while never referring to Narcissus, encouraged self-knowledge. On the other hand, Skovoroda changed the symbolic relationship suggested by the emblematic iconography we have mentioned: his Narcissus was

17 Anthony Hippisley, “Introduction” to Nestor Maksimovich-Ambodik, *Emvlemy i simvoly* (1788). *The first Russian Emblem Book* (Leiden: Brill, 1989), xxxiii passim.

18 Skovoroda, *Povna academichna zbirka tvoriv*, 686.

19 *Symbola et emblemata Jussu atque aspiciis Petri Alexeidis* (Amsterdam: Henricus Wetstein, 1705), 240–41.

20 A reprint of the book had been made in 1743, as many copies had been lost; see: Dmytro Chyzhevsky, “An Introduction to the Life and Thought of H. S. Skovoroda,” in *Hryhoryj Savyč Skovoroda. An Anthology of Critical Articles*, ed. R. H. Marshall and T. E. Bird (CIUS: Edmonton 1994), 44.

21 On the iconographic sources of *Emvlemy i simvoly*, see: Hippisley, “Introduction,” xiv passim.

22 Nuccio Ordine, *La soglia dell'ombra. Letteratura, filosofia e pittura in Giordano Bruno* (Venezia: Marsilio, 2003), 194–95.

no longer merely the symbol of self-love or of the encouragement to know oneself in order to tame the instincts of pride, but it became the protagonist of the main message of his philosophy, namely the passionate *indiamento* (deification). It is a mature fruit of his reflection; as in *Alfavit*, the portrayal of Narcissus was traditional, that is, one who is deceived by exterior images and does not understand the need to know oneself.²³ The originality of Skovoroda's new choice is accentuated by the absence of reference to Narcissus in Neoplatonic literature and Christian Neoplatonism, unless in a negative sense and never in association with the theme of self-knowledge. In the literature of the Ruthenian Baroque, little accustomed to erotic themes,²⁴ there is only one previous use of the figure of Narcissus,²⁵ which helps to make Skovoroda's Narcissus even more original.

Epistemological Idealism, Self-Love and Deification

In the Prologue to the *Narcissus*, Skovoroda then does not follow, except marginally, the plot of deception and death that afflicts the protagonist of Ovid's poem. He also does not appear affected by the negative symbolism that, in Plotinus and Ficino, makes Narcissus the victim of his fatal mistake in thinking that the uncertain and material world is the real world. The death of Narcissus, in Skovoroda, is a joyful metamorphosis, as he says in the Prologue: "Oh my dear beloved Narcissus! Now from a creeping caterpillar you have arisen as a winged butterfly. You have been resurrected!"²⁶ It is therefore a step on the road to deification, while self-love is not stigmatized; on the contrary, it is considered a necessary moment in the journey towards truth, through a miracle:

The miracle that appeared in the waters to Narcissus.

Tell me, O beautiful Narcissus, did you see something in your waters? Did someone appear?

RESPONSE. In my waters [...] I beheld on the linen cloth of my body which flowed, an image not created by human hand [...]. My flesh is the enchantress who showed me my Samuel. I love this one, and I melt, I disappear, I am transformed.²⁷

This setting, as well as being very original for the symbolism of Narcissus, puts the relationship between man and God, between creature and principle, in terms which are quite different from those of Ficino and Plotinus, who are the most important theoretical references of the theme of *indiamento* (although Skovoroda's interest in their work does not seem to be significant). In Plotinus there prevails a certain "automatism," of an emanationistic nature, in the return of the creature to the Principle, given the neither creationist nor personal nature of the individual soul in the Neoplatonic processional scheme; it follows, among other things, that the soul yearns, in Plotinus' view, not so much for unification, as a reunification with the

23 Skovoroda, *Povna academichna zbirka tvoriv*, 686–87.

24 Natalia Pylypiuk, "Skovoroda's Divine Narcissism," *Journal of Ukrainian Studies* 1–2 (1997): 35.

25 By Stefan Iavorsky (Jaworski), cited by Ushkalov in Skovoroda, *Povna academichna zbirka tvoriv*, 272.

26 Skovoroda, *Povna academichna zbirka tvoriv*, 232.

27 Skovoroda, *Povna academichna zbirka tvoriv*, 233.

principle that cancels itself.²⁸ In Ficino, on the other hand, there is a kind of “spontaneous” ascent on the part of the soul, which, having abandoned the outside world and recognized itself as spirit, by the virtue of divine grace rises to ideas and then to God.²⁹

In Skovoroda there is the theme, absent in his predecessors, of self-love, which is a strong ethical and personal commitment and a premise to the process of deification; then, in Skovoroda, awareness of the ideal nature of the real seems to precede and produce the recognition of the spiritual nature of man. This primacy of knowledge (and ethics) over deductive ontology, is significantly supported by the fact that in his writings Skovoroda mentions at least thirty times Plato (sometimes quoting directly from his works) and never Plotinus, as well as having a premise in Augustine. It can be explained, too, by a kind of philosophical modernism on the part of the Ukrainian thinker, who was no stranger to the themes of the Enlightenment³⁰ and certainly has introjected the epistemologism of modern (Cartesian-Leibnizian) philosophy.³¹

Platonism is clearly stated in *Prolog*, citing the “Book of Daniel”: “So you do not know that the outward appearance, the face, the flesh, the idol amounted to nothing? Do you not know, then, that this world is the idol of the Dura Plain?”³² The dialogue, especially in its first part, was animated by Platonic demonstration of the transience of opinions and feelings and by the sense of truth inherent in rising to the ideal world. It began, in the first conversation featuring the skeptic Luka and the Friend (aka Skovoroda), by denying validity to sensitive knowledge:

You, of course, know without a doubt that our eyes, ears, tongues, hands, feet and entire body accomplish nothing by themselves, but are completely enslaved by our thoughts. Thought [...] reasons, advises, makes definitions, commands. But our limited flesh, like a harnessed beast or tail, follows it willy-nilly. So you see that thought is our principal and central element.³³

Platonian is also the theme of the difficulty of getting out of the “cave” of opinions and sensitive certainties: “Counsel only develops slowly. Ah! The earth is sticky. One cannot quickly remove his foot from the sticky, carnal way of thinking. Having developed early in us, it is rightly

28 René Arnou, *Le désir de Dieu dans la philosophie de Plotin* (Paris: Alcan, 1921).

29 This difference does not seem to emerge in Roland Pich, “Skovorodynivskyi mif pro Narkisa v svitli romantychnoi konceptsii mifotvorchosti,” [“The Skovoroda Myth of Narcissus in The Context of the Romantic Conception of Myth Making,”] *Suchasnist* 10 (1995): 161–67, which presents Skovoroda’s deification as almost identical to that of Plotinus; see especially: 164–67.

30 Stephen P. Scherer, “Enlightenment Elements in the Thought of Hryhorii Skovoroda,” *Michigan Academician* 38 (2008).

31 On the modern rationalism in the Kyivan Academy in the eighteenth century: Valeriia Nychyk, *Kyievo-Mohylianska Akademiia ta nimetska kultura* [*Kyiv-Mohyla Academy and German Culture*] (Kyiv: Ukrainyskyi tsentr dukhovnoi kultury, 2001).

32 Skovoroda, *Povna academichna zbirka tvoriv*, 232.

33 Skovoroda, *Povna academichna zbirka tvoriv*, 236.

called superstition.”³⁴ Luka (the sceptic) admits in the fifth conversation: “An ingrained opinion is like the infant who grew into a giant.”³⁵

In the second conversation, to help the desire expressed by Luka to leave the darkness of sensitivity, the Friend advances some Pythagorean-Platonic conceptual demonstrations, also the result of an implicit awareness of the mathematical Platonism that supports the metaphysics of modern science. Before a mural painting, the friend asks Luka:

FRIEND. Tell me, what do you consider to be painting? The colours or the drawing hidden in the colors?

LUKA. The colours are not anything but dust and emptiness; the drawing, or the proportion and arrangement of the colours, that is the strength. But if that is missing, then the colours are simply filth and emptiness.³⁶

Widening the example to the building of a church, the Friend goes on to note that there is a general relationship between the symmetries, i.e., a project that is not only geometrical, but also takes on ethical and religious significance:

FRIEND. If you see an old church in Akhtyrka of brick and lime, but do not understand its plan, how do you think you have perceived and known it?

LUKA. Not at all! In this fashion I see only the extreme and worst externality in it, which a beast sees, but its symmetry or proportion and plan, which is the connection and principle to all the material, insofar as I do not understand that, I do not see it, because I have not seen its principle. [...]

FRIEND. So why do you not perceive that the unseen takes precedence in other creatures and not only in man? [...] Spirit sculpts everything-in-everything.³⁷

Having established the principles of a Platonic epistemology, there follows a cornerstone of Skovoroda’s metaphysics, namely the dual nature of the world, which has tones of a Stoic revised version of Plato’s *Timaeus*: “The whole world consists of two *natures*: one visible, the other invisible. The visible is called creation, but the invisible is called God. This invisible nature, or God, permeates and sustains all creation; it was, is and will be, always and everywhere.”³⁸

The discovery of spirituality is also for Skovoroda a personal *event*, to experience through knowledge and acceptance of one’s inner self. Here we have a clear roadmap for Narcissus, as Skovoroda summarizes in Prolog: “Whoever has seen clearly in the water the beauty of his own decay, has become enamoured not by externality or putrefaction, but by himself, by his own

34 Skovoroda, *Povna academichna zbirka tvoriv*, 237.

35 Skovoroda, *Povna academichna zbirka tvoriv*, 252.

36 Skovoroda, *Povna academichna zbirka tvoriv*, 239.

37 Skovoroda, *Povna academichna zbirka tvoriv*, 240.

38 Skovoroda, *Povna academichna zbirka tvoriv*, 253.

most essential point [*tochka*].”³⁹ At the beginning of the fourth conversation in the dialogue, the Friend had already warned of the importance of this exceptional work on themselves, saying, inspired by St. Paul: “True man and God are the same.”⁴⁰ Self-love, then, is the premise for the union with the Source of being, as the Prologue announces:

My Narcissus, indeed, burns, being kindled with the fire of love [...]. He cares for and talks about not multifarious or empty things, but about, for and in himself. He cares only about himself. That single thing is all he needs. Finally, all of him, like ice melting in the fire of self-love, is transformed into the source. Truly! Truly! Of whatever one has become enamored, into that he will be transformed. Everyone is that whose heart is in him. Everyone is where his heart is.⁴¹

So, having discovered himself as a person and drawn from the ideal nature of truth, man is ready to meet God, which is realized in the meditation of the “third world,” that is, the Bible, as Skovoroda explains in his last dialogue (*The Serpent's Flood*, 1790):

There are three worlds. The first is the common and inhabited world, where lives every being that is born. It consists of innumerable worlds of worlds, and is the larger world. The other two are the small and partial worlds. The one is the microcosm, that is, the small world or man. The other is the symbolic world, namely the Bible.⁴²

This is not a path that has a real term, since the activity of interpretation of the symbols is inexhaustible: God, according to a famous metaphor of Skovoroda (contained in *Silenus Alcibiadis*, 1775), is as an elusive bird a hermit was in love with; “the bird, approaching on purpose, urged him to chase it and a thousand times it seemed to rest in his hands, but he could never catch it.”⁴³

Narcissus, in the Prologue, confirms the possibility of this conceptual and personal route, emphasizing its mystic outcomes:

Narcissus: I love the source and the mouth, the spring and the *beginning*, the eternal streams which issue from the vapour of its own heart. The sea is decay. Rivers pass. Currents dry up. Streams disappear. The source breathes eternally with the vapour which vitalizes and refreshes. I love the source *alone* and disappear into it. For me everything else is the sewer, trash, dirt, a shadow and the tail...⁴⁴

39 Skovoroda, *Povna academichna zbirka tvoriv*, 231.

40 Skovoroda, *Povna academichna zbirka tvoriv*, 246.

41 Skovoroda, *Povna academichna zbirka tvoriv*, 231.

42 Hryhorii Skovoroda, *Dialog. Imia iemu: Potop zmiin*, in Skovoroda, *Povna academichna zbirka tvoriv*, 968.

43 Hryhorii Skovoroda, *Knizhechka, nazывaemaia Silenus Alcibiadis*, in Skovoroda, *Povna academichna zbirka tvoriv*, 735.

44 Skovoroda, *Povna academichna zbirka tvoriv*, 232.

Sacred Narcissism and Heroic Frenzies

Skovoroda's original theme of the self as a means for deification made him close to Bruno's "frenzied one" for their vicissitudes, as a means to elevate to a "burning contact" with God. Giordano Bruno seems to be one of the modern authors more akin to Skovoroda, for themes touched on, ontological solutions and lifestyle, although there are also very marked differences between the two. This theme of influences and affinities in Bruno's thought on Skovoroda has only been mentioned by a few scholars, but never probed or dealt with in depth.

It is hard to say how familiar Skovoroda was with the philosophy of Bruno: probably not beyond a general knowledge related to the reputation of Bruno revived by Toland at the beginning of the eighteenth century and which penetrated in the German circles of Wolff and his school,⁴⁵ from which Konysky probably took his knowledge that he divulged in the Mohyla Academy⁴⁶; texts of Bruno would be owned by the library of the Academy.⁴⁷ Finally, Skovoroda often cites "the Copernican worlds," perhaps because he had read the Russian translation of Huygens' *Cosmotheoros* (which appeared in 1714),⁴⁸ in which Bruno is mentioned alongside Cusano as a theoretic of the universe's infinity. We, however, have no record of the fact that the Ukrainian philosopher meditated on Bruno's doctrines. We must assume, therefore, a spontaneous convergence of Skovoroda and Bruno on similar themes, based on independent speculative itineraries, as indeed often happened in that age-old Neoplatonic tradition in which the two thinkers worked.

Bruno's mixture of naturalism and Hermeticism, which ontologically supports the protagonism of Bruno's "frenzied one," is foreign to Skovoroda, for whom the *prisca theologia* is valued not in view of Bruno's "Egyptian," solar and anti-Christian reform,⁴⁹ but in that of the Christian *philosophia perennis* of Steuco, Ficino and Leibniz.⁵⁰ Not surprisingly, in the first lines of the Prolog Skovoroda attributes the origin of the "parable" of Narcissus not to Ovid, but to

45 Saverio Ricci, *La fortuna del pensiero di Giordano Bruno* (Firenze: La Nuova Italia, 1990), 242–44; 366–67.

46 Mariia Kashuba, "Traktuvannia Heorhiem Konyskym problemy materii," ["The Interpretation of the Problem of Substance by Heorhii Konysky,"] in *Vid Vyshenskoho do Skovorody (z istorii filosofskoi dumky na Ukraini XVI–XVIII st.)*, ed. Valeria M. Nychyk (Kyiv: Naukova dumka, 1972).

47 They were part, along with those of many other Modern authors, of a legacy of Prokopovich: Anastasiia Nizhenets, *Na zlami dvokh svitiv. Rozvidka pro H. S. Skovorodu i Kharkivskiy kolehium [In the Intersection of Two Worlds: Research on Hryhorii Skovoroda and the Kharkiv Kolehium]* (Kharkiv: Prapor, 1970), 25.

48 Stephen P. Scherer, "The Narcissus: Skovoroda's 'First-Born Son,'" *Journal of Ukrainian Studies* 1–2 (1997): 56.

49 Frances Yates, *Giordano Bruno and the Hermetic Tradition* (London: Routledge, 1964).

50 On Skovoroda and the *philosophia perennis*, see: Elisabeth von Erdmann, *Unähnliche Ähnlichkeit. Die Onto-Poetik des ukrainischen Philosophen Hryhorii Hryhorii Skovoroda (1722–1794)* (Köln; Weimar; Wien: Böhlau, 2005).

“Egyptian theology,” which, he immediately adds, “is the mother of the Jewish one”⁵¹ stating that there is a sequence relationship not an opposition.

Moreover, we do not find in Skovoroda the whole tragic plot that characterizes the efforts of Bruno’s “frenzied one,” who is moved to the truth by the “vicious” refusal of peace and temperance, which in turn leads him to want the truth so much as to *hate himself*.⁵² Not surprisingly, Bruno’s “frenzied one” is best represented by Actaeon, who ended up devoured, because the fate of Bruno’s “frenzied one” is unfortunate in the sense that he must burn in the fire of love, die or become blind, and long suffer this condition, before having the final illumination and ecstatic contact with the truth.

At the centre of all Skovoroda’s philosophical efforts there is, instead, a tapping, not so much of suffering and transfiguring illumination, but of happiness and balance and therefore an enhancement of Hellenistic ethics, the *tranquillitas* which is associated with the *art of life* and the pursuit of happiness. He is in fact known to have professed an original⁵³ Christian Epicureanism which brought him to support a bold parallelism between Epicurus and Christ. The origins of this approach are in the suggestions from *Colloquia familiaria* of Erasmus (a book owned by the Kharkiv Collegium and definitely cherished by Skovoroda),⁵⁴ and in some ideas present in Basil of Caesarea and Clement of Alexandria, in addition to the affection Konysky felt for Epicurus.⁵⁵ Against Bruno’s dramaticism, plays another Epicurean element, namely the accessibility and naturalness of good, which in the Prolog is confirmed by the following passage: “Thanks be to the blessed God. It is His ineffable grace and power which makes the useless impossible and the possible useful.”⁵⁶

Skovoroda however does not seek a mere detached happiness, without discomposure, but a joyful *tranquillitas*, that goes beyond mere Epicureanism, in the direction of a Middle Platonian and Christian correction — in the wake of Plutarch, Philo and Basil — of the Epicurean ataraxia. In fact, the theme of the “joy of the heart” (*radost serdtsa*) as the purpose of life, and not a mere equanimity, often returns in the works of Skovoroda who, in a letter of 1765 to Kovalynsky, writes clearly: “Nihil curare, nihil dolere non est vivere sed mortuum esse: cura enim est animi motu et vita in motu consistit.”⁵⁷ Even early Stoicism’s *apatheia* is explicitly rejected by Skovoroda, who believes that passions can cooperate in achieving happiness: “Ergo, inquis, cum Stoicis

51 Skovoroda, *Povna academichna zbirka tvoriv*, 231.

52 Giordano Bruno, “De gli eroici furori,” in *Dialoghi filosofici italiani* (Milano: Mondadori, 2000), 799.

53 Ruthenian theology was generally anti-Epicurean; see: Leonid Ushkalov, *Z istorii ukrainskoi literatury XVII–XVIII stolit [From the History of Ukrainian Literature of the 17th-18th Centuries]* (Kharkiv: Akta, 1999), 129–30.

54 See the note of Ushkalov in Skovoroda, *Povna academichna zbirka tvoriv*, 115. On the influence of Erasmus on Skovoroda, see: Natalia Pylypiuk, “The Primary Door: At the Threshold of Skovoroda’s Theology and Poetics,” *Harvard Ukrainian Studies* 3–4 (1990).

55 Maria Grazia Bartolini, “Poesia e filosofia nell’Ucraina del Settecento. Motivi epicurei nel *Sad bozhestvennykh pesnej* di H. S. Skovoroda,” in *La poesia filosofica*, ed. A. Costazza (Milano: Cisalpino, 2007).

56 Skovoroda, *Povna academichna zbirka tvoriv*, 233.

57 Letter to M. Kovalynsky, August 1765, in Skovoroda, *Povna academichna zbirka tvoriv*, 1177.

postulas tu sapientem prorsus ἀπαθέα esse? Imo vero sic stipes erit, non homo. Restat igitur, ut ibi sit beatitudo, ubi moderatio, non ubi affectuum vacation.”⁵⁸ The state of active joy consists in indulging *srodnost*, that is, authenticity or affinity. This part of Skovoroda’s anthropology was developed in the aforementioned dialogue *Alfavit*, which proclaims the fundamental principle: “Without affinity, everything is nothing.” It is a perspective that values all individuality, which is treated as an individual substance in the plot of being, almost Scotus’s *haecceitas*: “There are a hundred affinities, and a hundred conditions, all reputable and legitimate.”⁵⁹ The right job, the right occupation is the culmination of the joy and of active human presence in the world.⁶⁰ Knowledge and action are therefore the means by which we reach happiness, which is nothing but the full realization of our potential.⁶¹

In essence, while using a eudemonistic language, Skovoroda’s moral philosophy cannot be called a form of Christian eudemonism. There are those who, rightly, have compared it to today’s personalism,⁶² so Skovoroda’s deification must also be seen as a call to pursue a self-construction that goes along with personal authenticity and that one profuses into a positive social activity.

Ontological Premises: Christian Plutarchism

It must be said, therefore, that the sources of Skovoroda’s deification are not Bruno’s, but go back to the Neoplatonic Patristic, corrected by Stoic themes; in addition, there are obvious influences from the Slavic-Byzantine religious tradition, but they are not dominant, because the Kyivan Collegium had marked a conversion of Ukrainian cultural life by a prevailing Slavic-Byzantine matrix to the Slavic-Latin. The Byzantine influence continued to be used throughout the liturgy against a background of mystical sensibility. On the other hand, compared to the so-called Western Second Scholastic, under whose influence it came, the Mohyla Collegium had both greater openness with respect to Renaissance Humanism, the Reformation or Enlightenment themes, and greater flexibility than the Western theological strands.

Self-knowledge is part of the “natural” cycle of things and being, as in the Stoic language, that binds the universal generator Fire and the individual fire or hegemonic. Skovoroda clarifies in the *Dialogue Among Five Travelers* (1772) that the best way to call God is to call him “nature.” “*Natura* is the Latin word which is equivalent to our terms nature and substance.”⁶³ In the sense, as he had stated in *Narcissus*, that “He Himself is the principle, and is all in all.”⁶⁴

58 Letter to M. Kovalynsky, winter 1763, in Skovoroda, *Povna academichna zbirka tvoriv*, 1118.

59 Skovoroda, *Povna academichna zbirka tvoriv*, 654.

60 Skovoroda, *Povna academichna zbirka tvoriv*, 651.

61 Cfr. Taras Zakydalsky, “Skovoroda’s Moral Philosophy,” in *Hryhoryj Savych Skovoroda*, ed. R. H. Marshall and T. E. Bird, 242–43.

62 Alexandre Koultytskyi, “Skovoroda philosophe de la connaissance de soi-même et précurseur du personnalisme,” in *Skovoroda philosophe ukrainien* (Paris: Institut d’Etudes slaves, 1976).

63 H. Skovoroda, *Razgovor piati putnikov o istynom schchastii v zhizni*, in Skovoroda, *Povna academichna zbirka tvoriv*, 506.

64 Skovoroda, *Povna academichna zbirka tvoriv*, 240.

There are few and fragmentary works on the relationship between Skovoroda and Stoicism; it is the exegete who has to rebuild it, since there are no decisive signs in Skovoroda on this point, important though it is. On the other hand, it was especially Neoplatonism (and not so much Stoicism) which accentuated the theme of “return” to God and the chance to do this by retreating into oneself: in *Enneads* Plotinus had said: “with our center we come into contact with the center of everything” (VI 9, 8). Endre von Ivánka has shown how Neoplatonism absorbed and spiritualized the Stoic ontological scheme of an originating Fire from which the other bodies descend, for cooling and removal; an outcome that had its premises in Cicero and then in the attempt made by Middle Platonism, in the first centuries of the Christian era, to give a Platonic content to the dominant Stoic philosophy.⁶⁵ Skovoroda had definitely drawn from his beloved Plutarch an attitude of this kind, enhanced by his wide and deep knowledge of Latin literature and of the Greek Patristics. Kovalynsky gives us evidence of Skovoroda’s favorite books in the days when he taught in the Kharkiv Collegium: “Plutarch, Philo Judaeus, Cicero, Horace, Lucian, Clement of Alexandria, Origen, Nile, Dionysius the Areopagite, Maximus the Confessor.”⁶⁶

Origen made the first attempt to transform (by Platonizing and Christianizing it) the Stoic individual hegemonic into an ability to grasp the invisible divine: Stoicism, as it was a naturalistic and monistic pantheism, could not conceive of an invisible dimension of the Absolute nor a special knowledge on the part of individual intimacy. Among the possible solutions opened by Origen to Christian Neoplatonism, that envisaged by Skovoroda differs both from the fully mystical one (inaugurated by Evagrius of Pontus), and from Gregory of Nyssa’s opposing one. By amending the Neoplatonism of his deification of the soul (with implied depersonalization), Gregory of Nyssa favoured an Aristotelian epistemology and denied an autonomous intimate path towards God. Augustine, as we know, maintains firm the role of Grace and the ontological difference between creature and God, but, staying closer to the Neoplatonic sources, he is confident in the presence of an aspiration towards the divine. Criticizing those who seek God outside of themselves, he says, “they strive to go outside and leave their inner life, in whose intimacy there is God” (De Trinitate, VIII 7, 11). A subject on which Skovoroda’s Prolog dwells at length, using one of his beloved biblical metaphors:

Blessed is the man who finds in his own home the source of consolation and does not chase the wind with Esau, hunting in the wild. Saul’s daughter, Michal, who cast her glances out the window of her father’s house, is the mother and tsarina of all those who wander about the wilderness following that dissolute tramp, who, having been met by our shepherd, is driven home like a wild beast. Where does the demon drive you? “Return to your house.”⁶⁷

It is a Personalism, religious and epistemological at the same time, so much Pauline as intellectualist in the Platonic and modern science sense. Skovoroda even professes the eternity of the world: “as long as there the apple tree, there also its shadow.”⁶⁸ An intellectualism that

65 Endre von Ivánka, *Plato Christianus: Übernahme und Umgestaltung des Platonismus durch die Väter* (Einsiedeln: Johannes, 1964), 79–80.

66 Kovalynsky, *Zhizn Grigoriia Skovorody*, 1353.

67 Skovoroda, *Povna academichna zbirka tvoriv*, 231.

68 H. Skovoroda, *Dialog. Imia iemu: Potop zmiin*, 953.

is not, however, free of mystical tension, with a clear proximity to monasticism and Evagrian Hesychasm, that in Prolog — his philosophical testament — Skovoroda wanted to emphasize: “

Oh sea of my heart! Pure Abyss! Sacred source! I love you alone. I disappear in you and am transformed. Can you hear? This is what the fledgling eagle celebrates, the mother eagle's Theban wisdom.⁶⁹

The Philosophical Testament

One of the peculiarities of *Narcissus* and his Prologue also lies in the fact that they represent a marked biographical significance in the life of an “integral” philosopher, which Skovoroda wanted to be, focusing, in the middle of the journey of his life, only on meditation and writing. This choice was not without pain, internal and external. His permanent abandonment of teaching took place in 1769 after a conflict with the bishop of Belgorod, who had prohibited the use of a treatise on ethics which he had composed; but in the past Skovoroda had had disagreements with the church authorities and suffered slanderous accusations from colleagues and ecclesiastics. His difficult relations with the surrounding environment caused him, as is natural, pain and anguish. In a letter of 1764, he describes a previous exclusion from Pereiaslav Collegium (where he taught rhetoric) because of contrasts with the local bishop, “ejectus sum cum maximo dolore”⁷⁰; in another letter of the same year he speaks in a heartfelt way of unjust accusations that had rained down on him from colleagues and ecclesiastics, defining him as a “corrupter of souls or heretic” and “Manichean.”⁷¹ In the years which followed his decision to retire from teaching he suffered from attacks of anguish, and Skovoroda himself says in another letter that he had burned *A Symphony Called the Book of Askhan of Self-Knowledge*, one of his first philosophical dialogues, in a fit of rage. Related to these biographical data are also the “hypocrites” who are targeted in the second part of the *Prolog*; it is those who, in the name of common sense, reject both objective idealism and the mystical deification.⁷²

In this context, according to Natalia Pylypiuk, the dates of composition provide valuable clues to the reasons that led Skovoroda to write the dialogue; in her opinion, *Narcissus* was a kind of therapy to restore his inner equilibrium, while the Prologue was a sort of spiritual testament left to the new generations. Now, beyond the strictly biographical data, there was also a greater good at stake: namely the possibility of philosophy taken seriously and the entirety of philosophy as a synthesis of study and life. In the dedication of a philosophical dialogue shortly after *Narcissus*, Skovoroda had directly addressed his social condition, that of the first Ukrainian writer who devotes all his time to meditation and writing, without performing other social activities, “many wonder: what does Skovoroda do in his life? What does he do? [...] Joyful occupation [*zabava*], in Latin *oblectatio*, in Greek *diatribe*, in Slavic *glum*, is the summit, the

69 Skovoroda, *Povna academichna zbirka tvoriv*, 232.

70 Letter to M. Kovalynsky, spring 1764, in *Povna academichna zbirka tvoriv*, 1167.

71 Letter to Vasyl Maksymovych, winter-spring 1764, in Skovoroda, *Povna academichna zbirka tvoriv*, 1266–69.

72 Skovoroda, *Povna academichna zbirka tvoriv*, 231.

climax, the flower and the seed of human life. [...] I practise the commandments of the Eternal. [...] This is the diatribe and the rule of my life.”⁷³ In short, Skovoroda remained faithful to the humanistic ideals learned at his *alma mater*, where he took courses of rhetoric and poetics where the synthesis between *docere, delectare, movere* was exalted.

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73 H. Skovoroda, *Dialog, ili razglagol o drevnem mirie*, in Skovoroda, *Povna akademična zbirka tvoriv*, 476.

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