

Leonid Ushkalov

Catching an Elusive Bird

The Life of Hryhorii Skovoroda

Translated from the Ukrainian by Natalia Komarova

ibidem
Verlag

UKRAINIAN VOICES

Collected by Andreas Umland

- 51 Vaktang Kipiani
Ukrainische Dissidenten unter der Sowjetmacht
Im Kampf um Wahrheit und Freiheit
ISBN 978-3-8382-1890-8
- 52 Dmytro Shestakov
When Businesses Test Hypotheses
A Four-Step Approach to Risk Management for Innovative
Startups
With a foreword by Anthony J. Tether
ISBN 978-3-8382-1883-0
- 53 Larissa Babij
A Kind of Refugee
The Story of an American Who Refused to Leave Ukraine
With a foreword by Vladislav Davidzon
ISBN 978-3-8382-1898-4
- 54 Julia Davis
In Their Own Words
How Russian Propagandists Reveal Putin's Intentions
ISBN 978-3-8382-1909-7
- 55 Sofia Atlanova, Oleksandr Klymenko
Icons on Ammo Boxes
Painting Life on the Remnants of Russia's War in Donbas,
2014–2021
Translated by Anastasya Knyazhytska
ISBN 978-3-8382-1892-2

The book series “Ukrainian Voices” publishes English- and German-language monographs, edited volumes, document collections, and anthologies of articles authored and composed by Ukrainian politicians, intellectuals, activists, officials, researchers, and diplomats. The series’ aim is to introduce Western and other audiences to Ukrainian explorations, deliberations and interpretations of historic and current, domestic, and international affairs. The purpose of these books is to make non-Ukrainian readers familiar with how some prominent Ukrainians approach, view and assess their country’s development and position in the world. The series was founded, and the volumes are collected by Andreas Umland, Dr. phil. (FU Berlin), Ph. D. (Cambridge), Associate Professor of Politics at the Kyiv-Mohyla Academy and an Analyst in the Stockholm Centre for Eastern European Studies at the Swedish Institute of International Affairs.

Leonid Ushkalov

Catching an Elusive Bird

The Life of Hryhorii Skovoroda

Translated from the Ukrainian by Natalia Komarova

ibidem
Verlag

Bibliografische Information der Deutschen Nationalbibliothek

Die Deutsche Nationalbibliothek verzeichnet diese Publikation in der Deutschen Nationalbibliografie; detaillierte bibliografische Daten sind im Internet über <http://dnb.d-nb.de> abrufbar.

Bibliographic information published by the Deutsche Nationalbibliothek

Die Deutsche Nationalbibliothek lists this publication in the Deutsche Nationalbibliografie; detailed bibliographic data are available in the Internet at <http://dnb.d-nb.de>.

Cover illustration: "Roots and Silhouette" by Ivan Ostafychuk, 1976. With kind permission.

**УКРАЇНСЬКИЙ
ІНСТИТУТ
//ІІІКНИГИ**

Dieses Buch wurde mit Unterstützung des Translate Ukraine Translation Program veröffentlicht.

This book has been published with the support of the Translate Ukraine Translation Program.

ISBN-13: 978-3-8382-1894-6

© *ibidem*-Verlag, Stuttgart 2024

Originally published under the title: "Ловитва невловного птаха: Життя Григорія Сковороди" by Dukh i Litera Publishing House, Kyiv, Ukraine, in 2017.

Alle Rechte vorbehalten

Das Werk einschließlich aller seiner Teile ist urheberrechtlich geschützt. Jede Verwertung außerhalb der engen Grenzen des Urheberrechtsgesetzes ist ohne Zustimmung des Verlages unzulässig und strafbar. Dies gilt insbesondere für Vervielfältigungen, Übersetzungen, Mikroverfilmungen und elektronische Speicherformen sowie die Einspeicherung und Verarbeitung in elektronischen Systemen.

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in or introduced into a retrieval system, or transmitted, in any form, or by any means (electronical, mechanical, photocopying, recording or otherwise) without the prior written permission of the publisher. Any person who does any unauthorized act in relation to this publication may be liable to criminal prosecution and civil claims for damages.

Printed in the EU

Contents

Prelude.....	7
1 “Once upon a Night My Mother Brought Me into the World” (1722-1734: Chornukhy).....	27
2 “I Shout: O School, O Books!” (1734-1741: Kyiv-Mohyla Academy)	45
3 “I Was in a Certain Place, Where the King’s Chambers Are...” (1742-1744: The court chapel)	83
4 “In My Beloved Hungary” (1745-1750: On the roads of Europe)	111
5 Pereyaslav, a Sad City! (1750-1753: Pereyaslav Collegium and others)	141
6 “Let All Carnal Things Pass Away!” (1753-1759: Kavray, Trinity-Sergius Lavra)	157
7 “The Holy Garden of the Highest Sciences” (1759-1762: Kharkiv Collegium, Starytsia).....	181
8 “I Despise the Croesi, I Do Not Envy the Julii...” (1762-1768: In and around Kharkiv)	199
9 “Happiness Does Not Depend on Heaven, nor on the Earth” (1768-1769: Kharkiv Collegium, Guzhvinske)	231
10 “The Whole World Disappeared from before My Eyes” (1770-1772: Husynka, Kytaiv Hermitage, Ostrohozsk).....	255
11 “A Flute and a Sheep Are More Precious to Me than a King’s Crown” (1773-1794: lifelong wanderings)	275
Finale.....	299

Prelude

A hermit lived in deep solitude. Every day, as soon as the sun rose, he went to a large garden. There lived a beautiful and surprisingly humble bird. The hermit contemplated with interest the amazing features of this bird, had fun catching it, and so quietly spent his time. The bird deliberately sat down close to him, encouraged him to catch it, and seemed to be a thousand times in his hands, but he could never catch it. "Do not grieve, my friend," said the bird, "that you cannot catch me. You will spend an eternity trying to catch me, and never catch me, but only be happy." And then one day a friend came to see the hermit. They greeted each other and started a friendly conversation. "Tell me," the guest asked, "how do you find comfort in this wild desert? I would die of boredom here . . ." "As for me," said the hermit, "I have two amusements: a bird and the Beginning. I always catch the bird, though I can never catch it. I also have a thousand and one cleverly tangled silk knots. I look for the Beginning in them and can never untangle them . . ."

This is how Hryhorii Skovoroda's favorite parable about the hermit and the bird sounds, which he told at the very beginning of his treatise *Silenus Alcibiadis* or *The Serpent of Israel*. The joy of solitude, the "bird"-truth that you forever catching without the hope of ever catching it, silk knots-labyrinths, knowledge of the nature of things as the only one accessible pleasure without poison—in short, life as an eternal search for the Truth-Beginning, as an endless throwing off of veils from the Absolute . . .

A hundred years after Skovoroda's death, in 1895, the brilliant Kharkiv intellectual Dmytro Bahalii, quoting the parable of the hermit and the bird, exclaimed in amazement: "What a profound insight into the truth that is accessible to the human mind in its relative character, serving, however, as the constant source of his eternal progress! What deep worship of it as the highest goal of human life!"

That's exactly right. And this is where our old philosopher saw the deepest meaning of his own life. After all, it could not be otherwise, because for Skovoroda life and scholarship were inseparable. "He lived as he taught, and taught as he lived," Bahalii said, and

the great writer and moral philosopher Leo Tolstoy, having read Bagalii's 1894 edition of Skovoroda's works, added: "Skovoroda taught that the sanctity of life is only in the deeds of goodness." What does this mean in essence? What is the meaning of human life as the eternal pursuit of an elusive bird? It seems to me that no one was able to understand this more deeply than the greatest Ukrainian philosopher of the 19th century, Olexandr Potebnia.

In May 1991, a few months before Ukraine gained its independence, Yurii Shevelov in his article "Olexandr Potebnia and the Ukrainian Question" noted that Potebnia's writings contain only "occasional references to Skovoroda." This is true. There are few references to Skovoroda in Potebnia's writings. Maybe this is the reason why the topic "Skovoroda—Potebnia" has not been really considered by anyone. For the most part, there were only occasional observations. Sometimes these observations were in the form of broad generalisations, such as Mykola Sumtsov's opinion that "in terms of worldview and moral philosophy" Potebnia was close to Skovoroda. Sometimes they are more specific. For example, Domet Olyanchyn in his book *Hryhorij Skovoroda (1722–1794): Der ukrainische Philosoph des XVIII. Jahrhunderts und seine geistig-kulturelle Umwelt*¹ argued that in his works *Thought and Language* and *Language and Nationality* Potebnia "best develops the following ideas Skovoroda's: 'Probably, language is like life, and life is what the heart is'. The language contains thoughts, truth, wisdom, ideals that create life under the influence of the development of the heart," Potebnia also said. But most often it was pointed out that Potebnia was "an another Skovoroda" in terms of his lifestyle. Already Mykhailo Khalansky in his article "In Memory of O. A. Potebnia," published on the pages of the fourth issue of the *Russian Philological Bulletin* in 1891, wrote:

1 "Тригорій Сковорода (1722–1794): український філософ XVIII століття і його духовно-культурне середовище" [*Hryhorij Skovoroda (1722-1794): The Ukrainian Philosopher of the Eighteenth Century and His Spiritual and Cultural Environment* (Berlin-Koenigsberg, 1928)].

“Potebnia was an exceptional person, a man ‘not of this world’; such people appear once in a lifetime. In the history of Kharkiv’s own cultural life, with his charm, his aura of fame, he resembles the famous local philosopher of the last century, the ‘Ukrainian Socrates’ Skovoroda, whose sayings the deceased was fond of quoting”.

Indeed, there are many similarities in both their lives and their worldviews. For example, they both felt astonishingly keenly the abandonment of the world by God. In other words, a characteristic feature of their worldviews was the notion of “persecuted Truth,” a perception that everywhere in the world, Untruth reigns and the victory of Truth over Untruth, that is Christ over Antichrist, is possible only beyond the earthly life and human history as such. I think that this idea is generally characteristic of the worldview of Ukrainians, and especially since the 18th century, because that is when the lyre-players’ (*lirnyks*) *Song of Truth and Untruth* became popular. And the authorship of this incredibly deep, wistful, and at the same time bright song was attributed to Skovoroda both during Potebnia’s lifetime and later. Mykola Sumtsov, reviewing the *Political Songs of the Ukrainian People of the XVIII-XIX centuries* published by Drahomanov in 1899, specifically emphasised that *The Song of Truth and Untruth* “is still known among the people as ‘Skovorodian’. It is difficult to say whether Potebnia knew about this, but I do not have the slightest doubt about his perception of the world as a field of struggle between Truth and Untruth.

Here is a very revealing episode in this regard. On 18 August 1862 in a letter to his university friend Ivan Bilykov, Potebnia described his travel to St. Petersburg. He said that there was nothing worthy of attention on the way, except one story:

“On the distance from Kharkiv to Moscow gubernia the conductor of the stagecoach in which I was travelling kicked coachmen in the teeth four times. It was very nice and instructive to hear the shaggy and bearded representatives of darkness referring to civil and human laws, but the representative of civilisation had only one answer for them: ‘be quiet, so fuck!’. The fourth time I modestly told the conductor that he had no right to beat people <...>”.

The conductor replied that he was doing it for the sake of the passengers, that Potebnia was a “harmful person,” and the passengers, in turn, promised that if the coachmen complain about the

conductor, they would testify that he did not beat them. And this story brought to Potebnia's mind a folk song:

"Oh, the daisies grew up on a par with fence,
And the grass is everywhere, all over the place;
Oh, there is no truth in anyone,
But in God alone".

Yes, Potebnia adds sadly, the truth is only in God and maybe also a little in those "bastard men < ... >, while they are so far being beaten, and not are already beating." And the mention of the song "Oh, the daisies grew up . . ." is not accidental. It was Potebnia's favorite song, through the prism of which he looked at the whole world and at his own life. At least in November 1863, Vasyl Gnylosyrov wrote in his diary:

"Ol. Op. handed over his book *Thought and Language* with the inscription 'To my beloved countryman'... and a portrait of him signed in St. Petersburg on 23 August 1863; on the other side it is written: 'Oh, the daisies grew up on a par with fence <...>.' (And in relation to these lines Potebnia, they say, noted that Kostomarov, who wrote them down, did not understand their meaning. I understand it as follows: a worthless herb is on par with fence, and silk grass covers the abandoned field where cattle will trample it. That is the way of the world; that is why they say that there is no truth in the world. They sing in Galicia: 'Pity the silk grass for this field; Pity me, the young, for this fool'. So is the grass on the field unnecessary, or what? I liked this little poem and often repeat it when I think about my hardships".

We can say that Potebnia's whole philosophy is imbued with the thought "there is no truth in the world," as it sounds in the psalm attributed to Skovoroda. Serhiy Yefremov once said of Panas Myrnyi that he could have used "the cry of the people's soul" as an epigraph to all his works: "There is no truth in the world, no truth to be found," because they all give one or another illustration of this conclusion from the folk worldview.

I would say the same about Potebnia, even though his works are not fiction, but scientific. I will give just one example: Potebnia's review of a collection of folk songs by Yakov Holovatsky. In it,

Potebnia, referring to the vicissitudes associated with the ban on the Ukrainian language by the Ems Ukaz of 1876, wrote:

“There are two kinds of nationalists: those who take the position of the devourers (A) and those who take the position of the devoured (B). Morality and truth are more on the side of the latter; about the former, one can often say: ‘Maybe you, Muscovite, are a good man, but your shenelia (resp. theory) is villainous’. They’re running around with the consciousness of their superiority: their way to the ideal of human development is ostensibly the best; who does not want to go where they are driving, sins against the reason of history. They are pleased to consider success as a measure of dignity; but from the point of view of B, one can argue that the weed chokes out the grass and the wheat”.

And then Potebnia quotes the song: “Oh, the daisies grew up” Thus, with the words of this song, understood as a variation on Skovoroda’s theme of “there is no truth in the world,” Potebnia introduces a purely academic issue into the context of the struggle between Christ and the Antichrist. Some people say, he continues, that in the field of language, as elsewhere, there is a normal “struggle for existence” in which there are winners and losers. But only a person who has a cruel heart can speak about this calmly, someone who does not care that for the losers it is “a grief and that they are treated only as ethnographic material. If you justify it by saying that it had happened before, then you can justify cannibalism, too.” And another time Potebnia would write:

“People used to burn and torture for the sake of religion, to please God, without realizing that the cruel deity who demanded blood was just their own (mythologically speaking) cruel heart.”

This is also a Skovoroda motif. It is from this motif comes the idea that social harmony is possible only if our hearts are pure. Sometime in 1862–1863, during his stay in Germany, Potebnia wrote to Bilykov:

“The only reliable progress is the one that starts with individuals and spreads out in circles, the one that comes from within society. If we want to connect the university, society, the whole nation, we must first of all purify our hearts and thoughts. Power, influence, and material wealth will follow naturally.”

Of course, Potebnia, like Skovoroda, interprets the “heart” as the deepest basis of the human self, its *essence*, something that can hardly be understood with the help of reason, something that makes a person rebel against logic at some point, because only this rebellion can preserve his or her *self*:

“<...> A decent person may be aware of many advantages of a foreign people over his own, but when it comes to summing up and saying that a foreign people is generally better than his own, he will refuse to make a logical conclusion, because he not only knows the calculable features of his own people, but also lives with their hopes, feels their future in himself. This is similar to how a person wishes for the intelligence or beauty of another, but does not want to become that other completely, does not want to exchange his or her *self* for someone else’s.”

So how do you make your heart pure? Potebnia’s answer is simple: fill it with love. And this also connects Potebnia to Skovoroda, who interpreted love as God’s presence in the world. Let us recall his lines:

“Doesn’t love unite, build, create, just as enmity destroys? Doesn’t John, the most beloved disciple, call God love? Isn’t the soul dead if it is deprived of true love, that is, of God? Are not all gifts, even the language of angels, nothing without love? What gives the foundation? – Love. What creates? – Love. What preserves? – Love, love. What gives pleasure? – Love, love, the beginning, the middle and the end, *the alpha and the omega*.”

And Potebnia thinks in the same way as Skovoroda. For example, he tries to understand why the Ukrainian mythological epic disappeared without a trace:

“*Why?* Because of the deep disconnect between the educated and uneducated classes, the former’s disregard or disdain for the latter; the absence of the love that only makes possible the creative interaction of high and low, new and old currents of thought. From above, there is radicalism, narrowness of understanding, and dryness of heart. (Who loves and knows cannot be a radical).”

Thus, true knowledge of the nature of things and love are inextricably linked in Potebnia’s mind. Perhaps he could repeat Skovoroda’s words: “Love is the daughter of Sophia.” And a little further on, in the notes on the theory of literature just quoted, “heart” appears once again:

“Those cases in the life of a people that resemble the violent death of an individual can be treated very easily with so-called objectivity, which is not really *wider knowledge*, but only *more complete indifference*.”

And as an eloquent example of such objectivity-indifference, Potebnia cites the reflections of Alexander Pypin, presented in his 1886 work “Episodes from Ukrainian-Polish Literary Relations”:

“<...> All such historical connections, the influence of one national element on another, the superiority of one and the subordination of the other, always form a two-sided phenomenon: one element prevails because it is inferior to the other, and if the consequence is severe and bitter for the subordinate element, the blame for this consequence also falls on this latter, on its own weakness, the insufficient development of its forces, and the reference to ‘treachery’, ‘violence’, etc. almost always indicates an unwillingness to understand the historical fact from its general aspects”.

To these words, Potebnia makes this surprisingly profound and wise comment:

“The tile has injured the skull, which is to blame because it is softer than the tile. The past is irreversible, but a heartfelt attitude to it teaches a lesson for the future: ‘Thou shalt not kill’.”

Thus, for Potebnia, true knowledge of the nature of things is unthinkable without a “heartfelt attitude” to the knowable. For him, science is a deeply ethical thing by its very nature. It turns out that in the field of academic knowledge, Potebnia appears to us as a true Christian, because all his sympathies are on the side of the offended and insulted. I want to say that Potebnia’s academic works have a deep religious background. And this also makes him akin to Skovoroda, especially if we consider that the religiosity of both thinkers had distinctly non-church features: Skovoroda confessed and received the Holy Communion before his death, only “having in mind the conscience of the weak, the infirmity of believers and Christian love,” and Potebnia, far from being a materialist, avoided church rites “including confession and communion.”

And what Skovoroda’s works did Potebnia read? Firstly, the ones published in the book *Works in Verse and Prose by Hryhorii Savvyich Skovoroda* published in 1861 in St. Petersburg, that is *The Garden of Divine Songs, Narcissus, The Poor Lark, The Struggle of the*

Archangel Michael with Satan, The Conversation Called the Two, The Dispute between the Devil and Barsaba, The Front Door . . . and some letters. Secondly, Potebnia read Skovoroda's works presented in Hryhorii Danylevsky's book *Ukrainian Antiquities*, including an excerpt from *The Dream*, a dedication to Opanas Pankov in the *Kharkiv Fables* cycle, several of the fables themselves, excerpts from some letters, *Every City Has its Own Manner and Rights*, and an excerpt from the dialogue *The Ring*. Finally, Potebnia read an autographed copy of his treatise *The Serpent of Israel*.

It was to this last work that Potebnia dedicated his only special work on Skovoroda. It was an essay delivered at a session of the Kharkiv Historical and Philological Society. Little is known about this essay. It seems that it was first mentioned in 1893 by Mykola Sumtsov:

"In the circle of Potebnia's close friends, once, about ten years ago, he gave a wonderful lecture on Skovoroda's philosophy based on the preface to his unpublished work *The Serpent of Israel . . .*"

The manuscript Sumtsov refers to here is an autograph of the second edition of the dialogue *The Serpent of Israel . . .* (the first edition of the work was entitled *Silenus Alcibiadis*). In 1879 it was presented to the Historical and Philological Society by Vasyl Spasky, a graduate of Kharkiv University, writer and activist of the Sloboda Ukraine education.

Sumtsov continues:

"Skovoroda's work is devoted to a mystical interpretation of the Bible, which has no value whatsoever. The only good thing is the preface to this interpretation, which contains general philosophical thoughts of a pantheistic nature. The language of the preface is strong and expressive. Skovoroda's philosophy was brilliantly illuminated in Potebnia's interpretation, and some of Skovoroda's national peculiarities in language and thought were skilfully shaded. Unfortunately, this essay by Potebnia was not published and was not preserved in his posthumous papers".

And this is all Sumtsov remembered about Potebnia's lecture a decade after he heard it. Even more vague references to this essay are found in the introductory articles by Bahalii to the 1894 edition of Skovoroda's works. They say, Potebnia "made an oral report" about *The Serpent of Israel*, but "no data has been preserved" because

“the society did not publish not only its works but nor did it publish its minutes.” Indeed, in the official papers of the society, we can only find the title of Potebnia’s essay. It sounds too simple to understand the content or even the main idea of the essay: “Extracts from H. S. Skovoroda’s unpublished work *The Serpent of Israel*.”

Is there really no chance of finding out what Potebnia said in his essay? Yes. And a “hint” on how to do this was given by Bahalii. “Traces of O. O. Potebnia’s acquaintance with this manuscript,” he says, “we find, however, in one of his printed articles,” noting in a footnote: “To the History of Sounds, II, 24–25.” Later, in 1921, this “hint” was used by Yarema Aizenshtok in his interesting article “O. O. Potebnia and Ukrainian Literature.” Aizenshtok claimed that Potebnia read the essay in 1879. However, apart from muffled news, almost no information about the report has survived, as the minutes of the society were lost during this time; and what we know about it from outside sources arouses our curiosity rather than satisfies it.

As an example Aizenshtok cites Sumtsov’s testimony which I have already quoted. The matter is further complicated by the fact, says Aizenshtok, that “in Potebnia’s papers there are no signs of this report, or of any acquaintance with Skovoroda at all.” And yet, he continues, “in one of his printed works (*To the History of Sounds*, II, 24–25) we find a small note about Skovoroda with a reference at the end to the mentioned manuscript of *The Serpent of Israel*.” Aizenshtok then cites excerpts from this work by Potebnia, and finally draws the following conclusion:

“One could multiply the quotations, but the above is enough to appreciate these passing notes, which in few words, ‘on the occasion’, unfold before us the main features of Skovoroda’s philosophy. If we add to this Potebnia’s well-known views on Ukrainian culture and nationality, we will have a complete and clear picture of what exactly Potebnia read about Skovoroda”.

I think so too. And if we consider Potebnia’s notes about Skovoroda, presented in his work *On the History of the Sounds of the Russian language* as a “key to understanding” the content of his essay, it is worth to dwell on them in more detail.

"Etymological Notes," which refers to Skovoroda, Potebnia wrote in early 1879. They were first published in the April 1879 issue of the *Russian Philological Bulletin*, and the following year were reprinted in the book *To the History of Sounds . . .* In these notes Potebnia first talks about Skovoroda's most famous work, the song *Every City Has its Own Manner and Rights*:

"For about a hundred years now, blind people have been singing the song taught to them by Gr[igori] Savich Skovoroda < ... >, *Every City Has its Own Manner and Rights*; but of course, neither they nor the audience understand what the 'black Skovoroda' who baked 'white pancakes'² meant by the refrain:

*I have only one thought in the world,
I have only one thing on my mind,
How to die not without my reason.*

One might think that S[kovoroda] was a gloomy ascetic who never forgot the time of death and thus poisoned his life, but this is not true. S[kovoroda] taught with Epicurus, Horace, Seneca that *sera nimis est vita crastina: vive godie*³, that to live means to be 'cheerful and courageous' < ... >, and the cheerfulness of the heart can only be given by the desire for the elusive 'bird', for 'truth', for 'ista'".

In the last lines, Potebnia recounts Skovoroda's thoughts, expressed in a letter of dedication to Stepan Teviashov of the treatise *The Serpent of Israel*, which includes references to Epicurus, Horace and Seneca, and a quote from Martial: "Sera nimis est vita crastina; vive godie"⁴. And the mention of an elusive bird is nothing else but the legend of the hermit and the bird, told by Skovoroda at the beginning of the treatise—the legend which our old philosopher borrowed from the famous *Great Mirror*. And having made this introduction about the "bird"-truth, that is "ista," Potebnia provides the etymology of this favorite Skovorodian word:

"Ukr. *ista*, 'what you have', and therefore: a) capital <...>; b) essence, ουσία <...>. According to Skovoroda, the world consists of two natures: the visible one is called *creation*, the invisible one is called *ista*, *truth*, *blessed nature*, *god*, *spirit*. This latter permeates and animates the creation and, by its own will, identical with the universal law, turns it back into the gross matter that we call death <...>. However, this is only another kind of life, because, as Skovoroda says, 'the nobles' idea that the common people are black seems to

2 The Ukrainian word *skovoroda* means *pan*.

3 "It is too late to live tomorrow. Live today" (Latin).

4 Martial. *Epigrams* I, 15.

me ridiculous, as does the idea of the inveterate philosophers that the earth is dead. How can a dead mother give birth to living children? And how did white nobles hatch from the womb of the black people? <...>. Skovoroda was clearly aware of the relativity of knowledge, but within this relativity he considered as possible the cognition of 'ista' by studying its *symbols* in nature and in the works of human thought".

And then there is another etymological note. It is dedicated to the word *bovvanity*:

"Ukr. *bovvanity* < ... >, to be visible in the distance. < ... > The picturesqueness and place of birth of this word are clear to anyone who has seen a *bovvan* — a stone idol standing on a grave, almost on the edge of the horizon. Skovoroda: 'The light reveals everything that was hiding in the darkness' (*Talking About: Know Yourself*); 'we are like a resident of deep Norway who, after six months of winter gloom, sees a barely brightened morning and all creation beginning to emerge a little' < ... >. 'Let your eyes behold this temple night and day.⁵ Then they are not opened by day, but only at night, when one shadow and figure (i.e. allegory of the Bible) becomes visible' (*The Serpent of Israel*, manuscript of the Historical and Philological Society at Kharkiv University).

These etymological notes on the words *ista* and *bovvanity*, in my opinion, eloquently confirm Sumtsov's impression of Potebnia's essay. Potebnia did indeed provide a brilliant analysis of Skovoroda's philosophy, emphasising the national peculiarities of the old philosopher's language and thinking. But this is not the main point. The main point is that by saying that "Skovoroda was clearly aware of the relativity of knowledge, but within this relativity he considered as possible the cognition of *ista* by studying its symbols in nature and in works of human thought," Potebnia clearly correlates his own theory of cognition with Skovoroda's one. In his opinion, "a person cannot think otherwise than in a human way (subjectively). If we understand thinking as part of mental activity that manifests itself in language, then it is the creation of a coherent, simplified whole from an influx of perceptions. We are unable to imagine such a creation of thought as anything other than creation in its own 'image and likeness', as the introduction of the cognizer's

5 *Third Samuel* 8:29.

features into the cognizable; but the cognizer's features change in a certain direction, making possible the history of thought and of its human-likeness, or <...> the history of the human-likeness of thought".

What does this mean exactly? Potebnia explained it this way:

"We call a thing a connection of phenomena (traits, forces) that we consider separately from other connections. The unity of this connection lies in the fact that we are forced <...> to refer its constituent phenomena to one core, substance, to something that we imagine to be the carrier and *source* (cause) of these phenomena. Thus, in the thought of substance, we have the thought of causality. This 'something' is cognizable only in its substitutions, i.e. in phenomena; in itself, it is beyond cognition. Just as we say metonymically 'to read Homer', i.e., the works attributed to him, so we say metonymically: 'to cognize *ourselves*', that is, in our appearances...".

And this fundamental "metonymity" of our thought means that we can only cognize ourselves by cognizing the world – and vice versa.

Potebnia says:

"Cognition of the world is also cognition of our *Self*. To arrive at the notion of our *Self* as a changeable *phenomenon*, we need a long winding path, whose moments are also moments of worldview. This path can be represented as a centrifugal spiral. The measure of everything is an individual, that is, his observation of himself. The concept of the causes of the external nature's phenomena is a transfer to the outside and an adjustment of observations of the causes in the sphere of personal life, in the sphere of the *Self*, and the *Self* cognizes itself in its external manifestations".

After all, the very notion of our *Self* is the result of a person's long-term observation of their own external manifestations.

"In order to come to the idea of our *Self* as our mental activity, as something unthinkable outside of this activity, it took a long, circular journey. It went through observations of the shadow, the reflection of the human image in the water, through dreams and painful states when 'a person is out of himself', to the creation of the concept of the soul as a double and a companion of a human being that exists outside of our *Self*...".

And in this case, our cognition "can be imagined as an endless peeling away of the veils of truth." This will be the very Skovoroda's catching of the beautiful "bird" of truth without hope of catching it, the true (highest!) purpose of man, his "fun," his happiness. And it is very significant that for both philosophers catching the "bird"

of truth is hermeneutics, that is reflections on the symbolic nature of the word. Only for Skovoroda this is a *sacred* word, while for Potebnia *a word as such*.

It seems to me that this issue was best presented in Potebnia's lectures of the late 1880s, as recounted by his student Vasyl Khartsiev. In them, Potebnia said that the path of human cognition is the constant overcoming of the anthropomorphic nature of our image of the world, that is, the path of separating our Self from everything around us:

"This process of developing a worldview by separating one's human Self from it is endless <...>. And in this eternal process of separation of the human Self, there is self-cognition and cognition of the world in the narrow sense".

Potebnia continued:

"But how is such self-cognition possible when our Self and our Not-self are a constant flux, a change, when what I want to cognize does not exist at the moment of cognition? In this regard, Goethe said: 'Cognize yourself! What does this mean? It means: be and at the same time not be. This saying of the good sages, despite its brevity, contains an internal contradiction. Cognize yourself! What good is it? If I cognize myself, I must immediately disappear (cease to be myself)'. This contradiction in the concept of self-cognition can be resolved in the following way: first, the Self is not something permanent and unshakably existing, contemplating itself and something else, but is as much a part of the flow that takes place in us, as a part that we observe outside of us. It is not a substance but a phenomenon. The real substance is unchanging, and the Self is a variable. We cognize not our present, which is elusive, but our past; in the same way, we cognize only the past of the world, of things".

Thus, Potebnia continues, "any cognition is historical by its very nature . . ."

"And how is self-cognition possible in this sense, that is, in the sense of cognizing one's past? To this we again find an answer in Goethe: how can one manage to cognize oneself? By self-observation? No! (Attempts at self-cognition through direct self-reflection is impossible). Act, and you will actually know who you are, what you have in yourself < ... >.

The primordial and, in addition, spontaneous action, implied by that self-consciousness, lies in the fact that the relentlessly disappearing state of our Self leaves tangible traces in the distinct sound. Perceptions flow through us like water through a water gauge, and from time to time a wheel turns in our Self and our body makes sounds".

These sounds, that is words, are not thought, but they are combined with thought.

“The sound becomes a hint, a sign of a past thought. In this sense, the word objectifies thought, makes it an object, puts it in front of us, becomes the action, the deed, without which self-knowledge is impossible”.

So, the word is a *symbol* of thought, and it is possible to cognize oneself and the world only in the word.

Potebnia explained:

“The world appears to us only as a course of changes that take place in ourselves. The task we have to perform is to continuously distinguish between what we call our *Self* and all other *Non-Self*, the world in a narrower sense. Cognizing ourselves is the other side of cognizing the world, and vice versa”.

This is what Potebnia’s thesis means: “a word is a means of understanding another as much as it is a means of understanding oneself.”

Of course, all of Potebnia’s work as a scholar is a grandiose attempt at self-cognition. And it is of paramount importance that he carries out this self-cognition on the basis of his native *Ukrainian* language. For Potebnia, the Ukrainian language is the key to understanding the nature of things and himself. I would venture to say that for Potebnia, the Ukrainian language was what the Bible was for Skovoroda—a “symbolic world of secret images.” In this sense, Potebnia’s ontology reminds me a lot of Skovoroda’s ontology. Skovoroda distinguished between “three worlds”: the small (microcosm), the large (macrocosm), and the symbolic (the Bible). Potebnia also distinguishes between “three worlds”: the human being (Self), the world around us (Non-Self), and the “world of symbols” (language). And all three of these worlds are possible only in the act of self-cognition, a kind of peering into the mirrors of symbols. If it is true that, according to Oleksandra Efymenko, Skovoroda turned self-cognition into “a magic key to all the secrets of all things,” then Potebnia did the same, and the problem of symbolism was fundamental for both thinkers. Skovoroda interpreted the images available to man as an endless string of symbols of the Absolute, and Potebnia considered symbolism to be a defining feature of human language.

Clearly, this does not mean that Potebnia and Skovoroda understood the structure of a word or image in the same way. The only thing they have in common is that this structure is three-membered for both of them. Skovoroda distinguished in the words-images of the “symbolic world” three components: “simple image,” “creative image,” “formed image.” Dmytro Chyzhevsky once rightly said, that in this way Skovoroda distinguishes between “simple, bare being,” “being in the function of an image” and “the hidden meaning of an image.” Let’s take the image of the heaven as an example. According to Skovoroda, there is “a simple, formative heaven and a heaven of heavens.” “Simple heaven” is a sign of the “formative heaven,” which in turn is a sign of the “heaven of heavens,” that is, the “image of the formed,” or archetype. And the thought of Skovoroda as hermeneuticist moves from the simple image to the formative image, and from it to the archetype.

Meanwhile, the three-part structure of a word or image for Potebnia is different:

“Any successful etymological study leads us to the discovery that behind the meaning of a certain word is an idea, an image. <...> in general, we can say that from the very beginning, at the time of its emergence, any word, without exception, consists of three elements: first, a distinctive sound, without which a word does not exist; secondly, from the idea and, thirdly, from the meaning of the word”.

Can this still be interpreted at least partially as a consequence of Skovoroda’s influence on Potebnia? In his time, Chyzhevsky, speaking of Skovoroda’s symbolism, was very, very careful to note:

“Although not genetically related to the Ukrainian romantics of the nineteenth century, Skovoroda expresses a number of thoughts, that we will also find in Kulish, Kostomarov, P. Yurkevych, and perhaps even in Potebnia—this is the typicality and specificity of Skovoroda’s figure for Ukrainian spiritual history...”.

Later, Oles Bilodid and Serhiy Krymsky would draw a direct parallel between the structure of the image in Skovoroda and the structure of the word in Potebnia. Instead, I will not dare to say that Potebnia’s word morphology has a genetic connection with the morphology of images of the Skovoroda’s “symbolic world.” There is no doubt that the philosophy of Potebnia’s philosophy of

language stems from Humboldt. In particular, Potebnia's idea of the "internal form of the word" is much closer to the concept of *innere Sprachform*⁶ than to the corresponding concepts of Skovoroda. If there is anything inherently Ukrainian about this idea of Potebnia's Ukrainian, it is the fact that Potebnia's philosophy of language largely reflects the nature of the Ukrainian folk song word with its very expressive symbolism.

Potebnia wrote:

"Of course, symbolism, explicit and implicit foreignness < ... > cannot be considered features of Ukrainian folk song alone < ... >. But, despite this, it is precisely the special intensity of this phenomenon in Ukrainian songs should be attributed to the fact that it caught the eye of many exactly in them". Perhaps, as Ivan Franko believed, Potebnia even "slightly exaggerates the amount of symbolism in Ukrainian and Slavic folk songs in general." One way or another, the "special intensity" of the symbolism of the Ukrainian folk song word may well have left its mark on Potebnia's idea of the morphology of the word as such. At least, it is not only the fact that in his early works Potebnia was based on mythology, since this was, according to Pypin, the era of "complete domination of Grimm and his school." Potebnia would later strongly defend the principles of mythology and argue with those who did not want to consider the word as a symbol, denying the very possibility of the search for a clue to the human psychology through the language analyse. One of them was Herbert Spencer, who, criticising mythologists, wrote:

"To refuse to study the phenomena of the spirit by direct observation in order to study them indirectly, through the study of the phenomena of language, means to introduce additional sources of error. The interpretation of the development of thoughts has its own causes of delusion and error. The interpretation of words and grammatical forms also has its own causes of delusion and error. Therefore, to contemplate the development of the spirit through the development of language means to run a double risk. Of course, evidence from the development of words is useful as collateral, auxiliary evidence; but in themselves they are of very little use and cannot be equal in importance to evidence taken from the development of ideas. Therefore, the method of mythologists, who proceed in their arguments from the phenomena that

6 "Internal language form" (German).

symbols give us, instead of proceeding from the phenomena that things themselves give us, is a false method, one that leads to delusion”.

Commenting on these considerations, Potebnia does not spare irony:

“It turns out that [mythologists—L. U.] are like the dog from the fable who was carrying a piece of meat, saw the moon in the water, thought it was cheese, rushed into the water after it, dropped his meat, but did not catch the moon. But are mythologists really so stupid as to judge the moon by its reflection? I ask: how, by direct observation, remembering the symbols and avoiding double mistakes, did Spencer, and we after him, learn about such a phenomenon of the spirit as the belief of the inhabitants of the Orinoco coast that “dew is the spit of the stars”? < ... > If this belief had been embodied in a majestic image, the latter would have been a symbol, which also would require a verbal explanation to be understood. But it was otherwise: the traveller learned about it from a missionary (who heard it from the natives) and let the meaning of these words pass through his language, that is (as anyone familiar with the thesis of the inequality of one word to another will understand) he changed the content of the belief along with its form. Or is it cognition of things, not symbols? Another person’s soul is a dark forest, and even more so the soul of a distant ancient person. What it contains, can only be judged by the signs, the main of which is the word, the signs interpreted by the content of our own thought, that is, our own language”.

And this thesis about the “inequality of one word to another” leads us to another fundamental idea that connects Potebnia with Skovoroda: “unequal equality.” Of course, it’s not just about words here. “Unequal equality” is a universal principle. It can be formulated as follows: all things are equal because they are different. I would say that this is a vision of the world as a complex and beautiful unity of opposites, the idea that the world is only possible when it is diverse. The way in which Potebnia understood this idea is perhaps best described in the autobiographical novel *For Another’s Sin* by Dmytro Yavornytsky, his student, published in Katerynoslav in 1907. According him, professor argued:

“World history, world intelligence, and nature itself, all show us that everything has lived and is living in diversity, not in uniformity. Diversity in nature is its beauty; diversity of human race is the richness of human fates; diversity of understanding and of human intelligence is the basis of progress and culture”.

Needless to say, how much these considerations are close to the image of the Absolute that Skovoroda portrayed in his dialogue *The Primer of Peace*:

“God is like a rich fountain that fills different vessels according to their capacity. And above the fountain is this inscription: “*Equality unequal to all* “. There are different tubes pouring different streams into different vessels standing around the fountain. The smaller vessel has less, but it is the same as the larger one because it is just as full”.

But, of course, the idea of “unequal equality” is most often developed by Potebnia in the field of philosophy of language. Thus, in *Thought and Language* the scholar wrote:

“From the point of view of the history of language, the fragmentation of languages per se cannot be called a fall; it is not harmful, but useful, because without eliminating the possibility of mutual communication, it gives versatility to the common human thought”.

And like an echo of this very thought, the words from the work *Language and Nationality*:

“Considering languages as profoundly different systems of thinking techniques, we can expect from the alleged replacement of different languages in the future by one universal language only a lowering of the level of thought. If there is no objective truth, if the truth available to man is only aspiration, then the reduction of different directions of aspiration to one is not a gain”.

It seems to me that this is Skovoroda’s “unequal equality” presented in the Kantian coordinate system.

That is why Potebnia strongly denied Max Müller’s idea that four languages were sufficient for the development of European civilisation: French, German, English and Italian. In this regard, as Mykola Sumtsov testified, Potebnia said:

“Languages are a kind of organ of thought and approach it from different angles, and therefore, having achieved the unity of languages, we would be at a disadvantage. Now we approach thought from different angles and express its content from different perspectives, whereas then we would have to be content with one side of it. All unity would be reduced to the devouring of each other, as expressed in the Ukrainian proverb: ‘The goat tears the vine, the wolf tears the goat, the peasant tears the wolf, the Jew tears the peasant, the lord tears the Jew, the lawyer tears the lord, and three hundred devils tear the lawyer’.”

But this idea is perhaps most clearly expressed in Potebnia's review of Holovatsky's collection of Ukrainian folk songs:

"Just as it is unthinkable to have a point of view from which are visible all sides of a thing, as it is impossible a perception in a word that would exclude the possibility of another perception, so is an all-encompassing, an undoubtedly best nationality impossible. If the unification of mankind by language and generally by nationality were possible, it would be disastrous for universal thought, just as would so the replacement of many senses by one, even if it were not touch, but sight. For a person to exist, other people are needed, and for a nationality, other nationalities".

Quoting these considerations, Sumtsov added:

"These words express the reconciliation of civilisation and nationalism and the conscious service to both great forces of the modern age. These words reflect who Potebnia was in life and at the pulpit < ... >, Potebnia is a humanist and a thinker".

And Dmytro Bahalii called this Potebnia's idea the "basic thought" of the scholar about nationality, a thought that "shines through in all his works."

In short, Potebnia's idea of "unequal equality" is extremely important for understanding his philosophy. And ideas of Skovoroda are implicitly present in his reflections. It is no coincidence that Potebnia mentions Skovoroda when talking about nationalism. I mean Potebnia's thoughts on Dostoevsky's *Diary of a Writer*. After recounting Dostoevsky's ideas about the Russian people as God's chosen messianic people, Potebnia writes:

"This is an incomplete register of the signs of the Muscovite, centralist messianism, the faith of the humiliated and insulted, designed to reward him for his torment and humiliation before Europe and to instill in him a love for life". Dostoevsky's Muscovite messianism, as understood by Potebnia, is nothing more than a manifestation of an inferiority complex in relation to European civilisation, a compensatory mechanism, a "will to live" on the part of the humiliated and offended, associated with the belief in the end of the world, heaven on earth, so forth And such is the nature of any messianism, says Potebnia, contrasting it with the "consistent nationalism":

“This faith should be distinguished from nationalism, which consists in applying a few pedagogical rules to the lives of tribes and nations. It applies equally to all nations. For it, there are no chosen, anointed, or prophesied tribes. It is based on the principle of the peculiarity of languages and their influence on the nature of thought. Long ago, since the eighteenth century, it clearly said in our Rus that the people are an immovable mass (Skovoroda). As a national doctrine, it has no dogmas. It does not need monks from *Chetii Minei*⁷ as an ideal of life”.

Undoubtedly, Potebnia considered himself a “consistent nationalist,” because he, like no one else, with his entire work defended the idea that all people are different because they speak different languages, and language determines the nature of their thought. Moreover, according to Potebnia, “the only sign by which we recognise a people, and at the same time the only and indispensable condition for the existence of a people is the unity of language.” And it is very important that Potebnia considered Skovoroda to be the forerunner of this “consistent nationalism.” Obviously, Skovoroda’s idea of “unequal equality” fitted to the history of nations was very appealing to him. But no less appealing was Skovoroda’s educational pathos. The thesis “the people are an immovable mass” is nothing more than a paraphrase of the idea that Hryhorii Danylevsky attributed to Skovoroda:

“They say: the common people sleep, let them sleeping with a deep, heroic sleep; but from every sleep one wakes up, and who sleeps is not dead, nor is he a frozen corpse. When he get enough sleep, he will awake; when he get enough dreams, he will come to his senses and be vigilant”.

And what can “wake up” the people, this gigantic “immovable mass”? Science. And science is “the fruit of the efforts of a handful of scientists,” people who spend their whole lives catching the elusive “bird” – truth, that is, trying to answer the questions: Who are we? Where do we come from, where are we going?

7 *Chetii Minei* (“Monthly Readings”) – the church-religious collections in which “lives of saints,” legends, teachings, etc. were placed on the days of each month, according to the date of the church’s celebration of a saint. They originated in Byzantium in the 9th century. In Kievan Rus, they first appeared in the 11th century.