

THE PHILOSOPHIA PERENNIS TRADITION IN EIGHTEENTH-CENTURY RUSSIA. THOUGHT AND DOCTRINE OF THE UKRAINIAN PEREGRINE AND DROPOUT-PHILOSOPHER H.S. SKOVORODA

(Elisabeth von Erdmann/University of Bamberg)

This article examines H. S. Skovoroda's thought and poetics in the context of the concept of *Philosophia perennis* – as participating in the one Eternal Wisdom that persists throughout all times.¹ I will examine how Skovoroda achieves an ontology of poetics and a poetics of ontology in the context of *Philosophia Perennis*, which came to his attention twenty-five years earlier than Freemasonry came to Russia, thus introducing a new impulse into the area of the Russian Empire of the 1750s. This context allows for a coherent reading both of his works and the form in which he lived his life.

Skovoroda's life and thought in the context of Freemasonry, Enlightenment and *Philosophia perennis*

According to exponents of the concept of *Philosophia perennis*,² Eternal Wisdom is one wisdom existing throughout different times, wisdom sharing in divine wisdom, which flows through all traditions and systems of knowledge and finds its fulfillment in Christian salvation.³

The philosopher and poet H. S. Skovoroda (1722-1794) was a nonconformist, constantly in conflict with religious institutions, and he lived on the road for twenty years. I regard his life not only as a context but even more so as the exterior form of his practicing ancient wisdom, as a concretization of the metaphor for the pilgrim journeying to his homeland, the *peregrinatio ad patriam*, the return of the creature to its source, to God.

Therefore, his way of life shows some remarkable characteristics. He discontinues his education at the Religious Academy in Kiev,⁴ the very core of the training. He refuses to take up the profession that was expected of him in the

¹ See E. von Erdmann, *Unähnliche Ähnlichkeit: Die Onto-Poetik des ukrainischen Philosophen Hryhorij Skovoroda (1722-1794)* (Köln, Weimar, Wien: Böhlau, 2005).

² For example, Nicholas of Cusa, Pico della Mirandola, Ficino, Reuchlin, Eriugena, Dionysius Pseudoareopagita, Origen, Augustine, Roger Bacon, Augustinus Steuchus, Heinrich Alsted and many others. See W. Schmidt-Biggemann, *Philosophia perennis: Historische Umrisse abendländischer Spiritualität in Antike, Mittelalter und Früher Neuzeit* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1998).

³ See Schmidt-Biggemann, *Philosophia perennis*; D. P. Walker, *The Ancient Theology: Studies in Christian Platonism from the Fifteenth to the Eighteenth Century* (London: Duckworth, 1972).

⁴ Founded 1632 by the metropolitan Petro Mohyla (1627-1646), in 1694 promoted to an academy. See D. Vishnevskii, *Kievskaja Akademia v pervoi polovine XVIII stoletija* (Kiev: Tip. I. I. Gorbunova, 1903).

Orthodox priesthood. He stays in constant strife with the authorities and finally withdraws from social life altogether.

During his training Skovoroda acquired knowledge of languages and antiquity, as well as access to patristic and other sources, Jesuit rhetoric and poetics, and was at this time educated in scholastic thought and argumentation. In view of the breaking off of his studies and his conflicts I come to the conclusion that the theology taught in Kiev and the movements which influenced the culture, education and religion in the Russian empire, did not correspond to Skovoroda's thought, and it was not predominantly in the Kiev Academy where he became acquainted with the concept of *Philosophia perennis*, but there he learned of its constituents and sources.

Skovoroda did not convey the concept of *Philosophia perennis* by composing a poetics, ethics, metaphysics nor *clavis scripturae* as other philosophers, religious teachers and authors did. His thoughts are hidden in tractates and dialogues aimed toward use.

It cannot be established when, where and from whom Skovoroda integrally espoused the tradition of Eternal Wisdom, and the concept of *Philosophia perennis*. Most certainly he did not develop the concept of a flowing together of all sources, images and predications in a Platonic-Christian standard but rather based his thoughts on a substantiated concept, which he had adopted as well as practiced and extended in his cultural surroundings. His travels to West Europe⁵ make the dimension of additional accessible sources impossible to calculate. His contexts cannot, therefore, be determined evidentially, but can only be inferred from his texts.

The question has always been raised about Skovoroda's connection to Freemasonry.⁶ For while his texts contain allusions and images characteristic of Freemasonry, such as the image of the cornerstone [*kraeugol'nyy kamen'*], the cube [*chetverougol'nyy kamen'*] and the omni-visual eye [*vsevidyashcheye oko*], nevertheless there are no biographical points of contact between him and Freemasonry. In membership lists there is no mention of him.⁷ If he had belonged, he would have been listed since membership in Freemasonry was not kept secret. If no membership is listed then most probably none existed.

Freemasonry reached its greatest extent in Russia between 1770 and 1790,⁸ a time when Skovoroda had already composed many of his works. His concept of thinking had already been determined by the 1750's,

⁵ L. Makhnovets', *Grigorii Skovoroda. Biografiia* (Kiev: Naukova dumka, 1972, 1972), p. 39 ff.

⁶ Von Erdmann, *Unähnliche Ähnlichkeit*, p. 45 ff.

⁷ A. I. Serkov, *Russkoe masonstvo 1731-2000: Entsiklopedicheskii slovar'* (Moskow: Rosspen, 2001), p. 941 ff.

⁸ D. Smith, *Working the Rough Stone: Freemasonry and Society in Eighteenth Century Russia* (DeKalb: Northern Illinois Univ. Press, 1999), p. 19 ff.

contemporaneous with development of Freemasonry in Russia. But to be sure, contact with Freemasonry would have been possible during Skovoroda's stay in St. Petersburg between 1741-1744,⁹ during foreign travels from 1745-1750, or, as is also postulated, from 1745-1746 and 1750 to 1753.¹⁰ Skovoroda did not live according to the rules of Freemasonry. He kept no secrets and refused to submit to any group discipline.

I therefore conclude that Skovoroda's thought developed independently from Freemasonry in the Russian empire, he nevertheless did practice and teach the thinking of *Philosophia perennis* that came to the attention of the Russian Freemasons, and perhaps also the Rosicrucians (via I. P. Elagin or N. I. Novikov, for instance) some twenty-five years later.¹¹ Skovoroda, whose thinking is known for its syncretism, its apparent references to contradictory sources and traditions, offers an important impulse for realizing the diversity cultural influences in regions of the Russian Empire of the eighteenth century, and toward reaching an extended understanding of the Enlightenment in this area.

Analogy: a principle of *Philosophia perennis*

Skovoroda's texts display the concept of *Philosophia perennis* as a basic structure and only then allow a coherent reading when this concept forms the platform for his figural illustrations, images and terms.

His oppositions are a consistent realization of the signification of all being, such as is characteristic for *Philosophia perennis*, for, from its standpoint, whenever signification of the Divine is not realized, then the holiest thing becomes evil and is marked for death.

Skovoroda incorporates very many, at times apparently contradictory sources and traditions into his thought, heathen as well as Christian, especially Biblical. These include his use of Aesop, Augustine, Basil the Great, Cicero, Clement of Alexandria, Cyril of Turov, Demosthenes, Epicurus, Euripides, Gregory the Great, Gregory of Nazianze, Hermes Trismegistus, Horace, Hieronymus, Homer, John Chrysostomus, John of Damascus, Origen,

⁹ In Pereiaslav and Kavrai, where Skovoroda frequently stayed, there were no lodges during his lifetime, and in Kharkiv only from 1783.

¹⁰ See M. Borodii, "Do biografii Grigoriia Skovorodi: kilka novoviiavlennikh dokumentiv," *Slovo I chas*, 11-12 (1997), pp. 10-20.

¹¹ I. P. Elagin authored mystic works, as for example *Ancient Secular and Spiritual Wisdom or the Science of the Freemasons*. See G. V. Vernadskiy, *Russkoe masonstvo v tsarstvovanie Ekateriny II* (Petrograd/St. Petersburg: Izdat. Imeni N. I. Novikova, 1999), p. 185.

Orpheus, Ovid, Philo of Alexandria, Plautus, Plato, Plutarch, Prokopovych, Pythagoras, Seneca, Virgil, Zoroaster and others.

Skovoroda adheres to the method of combining everything with everything in the manner of the fifteenth, sixteenth, and especially the seventeenth century. He thus connects with the old option of the unity of the religions, the mediation of Hellenic traditions, Neo-Platonic philosophy, Christianity, Judaism and Islam, all encompassed by Christian salvation. This unity of the religions, first pursued by the Church Fathers and later by the Renaissance, is based on the idea of God inspired mainly by Neo-Platonism.

The idea of God relating to the Source as the One who creates everything in His likeness and is identical to nothing of it connects the relevant traditions, the systems of denotation and relevant authors. In all of Skovoroda's ideas, explanations and images, even when they appear so contradictory, is reflected the same structure. This is probably the reason he refused to present a systematic exposition of his philosophic pre-requisites.

He thus follows the old model of analogy – dominating all being – of everything realizing the relation to everything and going to the Source while simultaneously maintaining the difference from the Source¹².

It is my premise that Skovoroda placed not only the highest value on the realization of the signification character of all being, which is the sign of the Source, but also made it the aim of his life, his teachings, his writings and his thinking to refuse to be measured by any social or religious criticism other than Eternal Wisdom, which remains unchanging throughout time and is a part of Divine Wisdom. This was his message to mankind.

Everything is an image of God

The distinctive character of this paradigm is its relation to God and wisdom. With His wisdom – that facet of God that is external – He created first the spiritual world, the primordial world, and then the material world which he informed with the spiritual world. This is the reason that – in this tradition – the word, the language of God, dominates, since by way of divine language the material world comes into contact with the spiritual. And Skovoroda thus insists on a two-nature doctrine in creating and interpreting signs.

Skovoroda conceives of wisdom as a constitutive component of the Neo-Platonic-Christian God-image, which therefore is integrated in God's names.

¹² Proclus realized analogy as the main principle of being and thinking. See W. Beierwaltes, *Proklos: Grundzüge seiner Metaphysik* (Frankfurt am Main: Klostermann, 1979).

Being part of this wisdom means changing the direction of the path taken into the material world. It makes knowledge matter possible, which on the one hand means differentiating two natures while assuring the return to God on the other.

The concept of *Philosophia perennis* is thus universal. It is a basic position, which conceives of world, life, language, all texts, systems of knowledge and traditions as an image of God, as a manifestation of Divine Wisdom, as the external facet of God according to Christian model of unity. Participation in divine wisdom thus determines the purpose of ethics and life, the design and interpretation of texts. In this way, the world itself becomes an image of God and returns everything back to the Source.

Thus, in this tradition the world is read as a text that follows certain rules of an image theory and manifests itself as such in mankind's consciousness. The development of this ancient concept was to a great degree influenced by the Church Fathers. The idea of philosophy being integrated into Divine Wisdom through all ages allowed all the pagan traditions to be incorporated into a Christian unity of thought. Christianity, to prove its superiority, lay claim to every thought and every image which the mainly Judeo-Hellenic tradition had to offer.

Therefore, the historicizing method of legitimating,¹³ which was applied by philosophers of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, sought proof of the correspondences residing in heathen philosophy and Christian theology. They included various texts, which in some cases reached far back into the pre-Christian period. For instance, the correspondence between philosophy and revelation had been pursued back to the time of Clement of Alexandria and Origen. Philosophy becomes concealed theology, whereby the Scriptures in principle serve as the investigative standard.

This tradition was summarized and presented during the Renaissance by, among others, Augustinus Steuchus in 1540 and given the name *Philosophia perennis* – Eternal Wisdom¹⁴.

Skovoroda and *De perenni philosophia* by Augustinus Steuchus

A comparison between *De perenni philosophia* by Steuchus and the philosophy of Skovoroda comes to mind, as a great number of similarities do exist. They offer, however, only a possibility and not a proof of Skovoroda's use

¹³ Schmidt-Biggemann, *Philosophia perennis*, p. 646 ff

¹⁴ A similar synopsis was presented by Franciscus Patricius, *Nova de universis philosophia* (Zagreb; Sveučilišna Nakl. Liber, 1979). See also von Erdmann, *Franciscus Patricius in der Tradition der philosophia perennis: Zur Bildtheorie*.

of this source, since the concept of *Philosophia perennis* appears in quite a number of various sources.¹⁵

The tradition of Eternal Wisdom sees itself as a *translatio* occurrence reaching back to the beginning of the world. The genealogies hereby enlisted are, however, historically incorrect. An oral *translatio* begins with Adam, Enoch, Abraham, Noah, whereas a written *translatio* follows Zoroaster, Moses, Hermes Trismegistus, the Druids, King David, Orpheus, Pythagoras, Plato, the Sibyls and others.¹⁶

Characteristic for this tradition is the frequent reference to ancient and pagan theologians and philosophers, the authorities of the genealogies and authors availed upon and to the Chaldeans, Egyptians, Hebrews, Hellenes and others. All these sources are submitted to a uniform method of reading.

Steuchus continually describes this tradition and genealogy: “Sapientia quoque praeter eam quam secum detulissent veteres coloni, a Chaldaeis pervenit ad Hebraeos, excipio quae scripsit Moses, ab Hebraeis ad Aegyptios, ab his ad Graecos; a Graecis ad Romanos.”¹⁷ “Usque ab origine mundi, ab Adam, Noe, Abraham aliisque antiquissimis, posteritati praedictam.”¹⁸ “Primi igitur omnium sunt Chaldaei, ab his Hebraei, Aegyptii, Phoenices, novissimi Graeci, post Romani sunt nati. Omnes autem hos e quibus quidam clariores extiterunt, constat tum per illam a primo homine descendente Theologiam, tum toto mundo resonantibus oraculis, notum habuisse, Deum immensam, immutabilemque naturam, alteram ab aeterno Mentem genuisse, eisdem eam etiam nominibus, quibus extrema postea maiorque theologia, vocantes, nunc Filium Dei, nunc Vocem Dei, nunc Verbum, nunc Mentem, Sapientiamque: eamque omnium fuisse rerum creatricem asseruerunt.”¹⁹

Skovoroda also operates continually, but unsystematically, in this genealogical area according to which the Greeks were to have obtained true wisdom from the Egyptians and Hebrews²⁰. He continually expresses the

¹⁵ Von Erdmann, *Unähnliche Ähnlichkeit*, pp. 159-70.

¹⁶ Schmidt-Biggemann, *Philosophia perennis*, p. 646 ff.

¹⁷ “The wisdom that has been passed on by the old colonizers, came from the Chaldeans to the Hebrews, apart from the things that Moses had written, from the Hebrews to the Egyptians, and from them to the Greeks; and from the Greeks to the Romans” (Augustinus Steuchus, *De perenni philosophia* (New York, London; Johnson Reprint Corporation, 1972), p. 4).

¹⁸ “From the beginning of the world, this has always been predicted to the following generations, by Adam, Noah, Abraham and by other Ancients” (*ibid.*, p. 560).

¹⁹ “The first of all were the Chaldeans, from them the Hebrews, the Egyptians, the Phoenicians, the new Greeks and the Romans were born. It was known to all of them, and to several other more famous nations, that emerged from them, that this theology (or wisdom) came from the first humans and their oracles echo in the whole world. It is also known that God’s immeasurable, unchangeable nature was brought into existence by another eternal divine principle, that has been referred to with the same names as the great theology (or wisdom); God’s son, God’s word, the Word, the divine wisdom; and it has been added that she (i.e. the divine wisdom) is the creator of all things” (*ibid.*, p. 7).

²⁰ For example, he identified Pythagoras's triangle as Egyptian: “egipetskii triugol.” See H. S. Skovoroda, *Povne zibrannia tvoriv: u dvokh tomakh* (Kyiv: Naukova dumka, 1973), 2:153.

concept to include all traditions: “Ne zakliuchayte bogovedeniia v tesnote palestinskoi. Dokhodiak k bogu i volkhvy, sirech’ filosofy.”²¹ He and Steuchus mainly prefer collective terms for the traditions which serve as the base for their thinking and writing. They continually refer to the ancients, Egyptians, Greeks, eternal, ancient theology, philosophy and wisdom, to Egyptian, Chaldean and Greek theology and philosophy.

Skovoroda projects the concept of wisdom back to the beginning of the world and refers quite often to Adam, Noah and Moses as well as Abraham, Zoroaster and Hermes Trismegistus. It is his opinion that Eternal Wisdom became watered down during the ages, even spoiled and should thus be handed down in secret signs in order to protect it from corruption. Skovoroda and Steuchus continually speak of the secret of wisdom: “tainaiia premudrost’” [“secret wisdom”];²² “mysteria veterum philosophorum” [“the mystery of the old philosophers”].²³

Method and goal of the concept of *Philosophia perennis* allow Skovoroda to refer unproblematically to all sources, authorities and philosophies. He applies the encompassing strategy of *Philosophia perennis* in such constructions as: “nazyvalsia u drevnikh” [“was called by the ancients”];²⁴ “iz iazycheskoi bogoslovii” [“from the heathen religion”] (1:447). He speaks of Egyptian and Hebraic theology: “bogosloviie evreiskii” (1:154); “bogosloviie egipetskiie” (1:154). Skovoroda calls Egyptian theology the mother of the Hebraic (1:154),²⁵ he describes how Moses among others adopted the image of the snake for divine wisdom from the Egyptians (2:29) and refers frequently to these theologies: “u drevnikh egiptian” [“with the old Egyptians”] (1:423); “u drevnikh grekov” [“with the old Greeks”] (121); “u ellin” [“with the Hellenians”] (2:12); “u drevnikh”, “drevniie” [“with the ancients, ancient”] (1:202); “u iazychnikov” [“with the heathens”] (423).

We find corresponding terms and references in Steuchus’ book *De perenni philosophia*, which could have been Skovoroda’s source: “Aegyptia theologia” [“Egyptian Theology”]²⁶; “Theologia Graeca” [“Greek Theology”] (p. 11); “Chaldaica Theologia” [“Chaldean Theology”] (p. 11); “Theologia hebraica” [“Hebrew Theology”] (p. 11); “apud Aegyptios” [“with the Egyptians”] (p. 9); “apud Hebraeos” [“with the Hebrews”] (p. 9); “apud

²¹ “Don’t restrict God’s appearance to the narrow Palestine (history). The magicians and the orphaned (i.e., heathen) philosophers also came to (experience) God“ (*ibid.*, 1:250).

²² *Ibid.*, 1:313.

²³ Steuchus, *De perenni philosophia*, p. 121.

²⁴ Skovoroda, *Povne zibrannia tvoriv: u dvokh tomakh*, 1:423. The next few references in the text also refer to this source.

²⁵ See also J. Assmann, *Moses der Ägypter: Entzifferung einer Gedächtnisspur* (Frankfurt am Main: Fischer-Taschenbuch-Verlag, 2004), pp. 24 ff., 37 ff., 118 ff.

²⁶ Steuchus, *De perenni philosophia*, p. 7. The next few references in the text also refer to this source.

Graecos antiquos Theologos” [“with the ancient Greek theologians”] (p. 339); “apud omnes gentes” [“with all people”] (p. 490); “apud veteres” (p. 9); “apud priscos” (p. 2); „in prisca Theologia, apud Chaldaeos, Phoenices, Aegyptios, gentes vetustissimas” [“In the first theology among the Chaldeans, the Phoenicians, the Egyptians and other old nations.”] (p. 98).

The most outstanding characteristic of wisdom is that it itself is just as old as God is. Terminologically Skovoroda connects numerous references to the wisdom of the ancients, to eternal wisdom, to divine wisdom. He speaks of the most holy antiquity: “sviateishaia drevnostei drevnost” [“the holy ancient antiquity”].²⁷ One encounters statements such as this repeatedly: “Chto drevnee, kak premudrost’, istina, bog” [“What the ancients (knew), as wisdom, truth and god”] (1:298). He most frequently describes this wisdom as “bozhiia premudrost’” [“divine wisdom”] (1:149); “bozhestvennaia premudrost’” [“godly wisdom”] (1:379).

Steuchus mentions in his book “sapientia vetustissima” [“oldest wisdom”];²⁸ “divina theologia” [“divine theologia”] (p. 53); “divina sapientia” [“divine sapientia”] (p. 352); “philosophia nostra divinissima” [“our godly wisdom”] (p. 563); “antiquissima Aegyptiorum Theologia” [“the old Egyptian theology”] (p. 51). Besides the term *Philosophia perennis* Steuchus often applies the terms “sapientia aeterna” [“eternal wisdom”] (p. 114) and “sapientia infinita” [“infinite wisdom”] (p. 45).

One most significant correspondence to the term *Philosophia perennis* is found in Skovoroda’s term *the one eternal divine wisdom*: “odna ona vechnaia siia premudrost’ bozhiia.”²⁹ He also uses the expression “istinnaia premudrost’” [“true wisdom”],³⁰ whereas Steuchus applies the following terms: “vera illa sapientia” [“true former wisdom”];³¹ “theologia vera” [“true theology”] (p. 490); “philosophia vera” [“true philosophy”] (p. 569).

Similar to Steuchus Skovoroda also adorns dominating figures of the tradition with the predicate of age: “drevnii Epikur” [“the old Epicure”];³² “drevneishii mudrec Falis” [“the old wise man Falis”].³³ Steuchus writes for example: “vetustissimus Pythagoras” [“the old Pythagorus”].³⁴

²⁷ Skovoroda, *Povne zibrannia tvoriv: u dvokh tomakh*, 1:298. The next few references in the text also refer to this source.

²⁸ Steuchus, *De perenni philosophia*, p. 16. The next few references in the text also refer to this source.

²⁹ Skovoroda, *Povne zibrannia tvoriv: u dvokh tomakh*, 1:149.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 1:133.

³¹ Steuchus, *De perenni philosophia*, p. 35. The next few references in the text also refer to this source.

³² Skovoroda, *Povne zibrannia tvoriv: u dvokh tomakh*, 1:127.

³³ *Ibid.*, 1:413.

³⁴ Steuchus, *De perenni philosophia*, p. 590.

In his texts Skovoroda repeatedly sets down the main positions of the concept of Eternal Wisdom such as it had been handed down in many texts. The main postulate of Eternal Wisdom is the participation in God's thoughts. He equates the three divine persons synonymously with "Sei est' premudrost' i promysl bozhii [...] otets, syn i svyaty dukh."³⁵ Christ as the *Logos* and Wisdom form the type of all divine communication and the return to the Source in the tradition of *Philosophia perennis*. Skovoroda carries through, as did Steuchus, the typical identification of All Wisdom in Christ: "Khristos est' premudrost' bozhii".³⁶ And as Steuchus writes: "qui Sapientiam tantopere celebravit, vocavit Filium Dei".³⁷

In agreement with Nicholas of Cusa, whose thinking encompassed the whole concept of Eternal Wisdom,³⁸ Skovoroda explains the Trinity as the divine self-representation and prefiguration of the world. Instead of applying the expected Christian arguments, he uses, as did Nicholas of Cusa, the reasoning of Pythagoras who held the status of translator in the genealogy of Eternal Wisdom.³⁹ Time and again Skovoroda expresses the main meaning of the tradition, which is that the many-faceted divine wisdom has always remained the same, albeit in varying forms and through varying ages. "A raznoobraznaia premudrost' bozhii v razlichnykh ... rizakh... v drevnikh i nyneshnikh ... iavlyayetsia edina i tazhde."⁴⁰ "Vechnaia siia premudrost' bozhii vo vsekhn vekakh i narodakh neumolknno prodolzhaet rech' svoiu" (1:149).⁴¹ "Esli kto odnu iz nikh znayet, tot znaet vse. Esli b ty uznal Moiseia, uznal by i Khrista, ili esli b Khrista uznal, uznal by Moiseia, Iliiu, Avraama, Davida, Isaiiu i protchiikh" (1:205).⁴²

This results from the emphasis in the tradition that the God of the Jews and pagans is one and the same. Skovoroda phrases this basic tenet as follows: "Edin bog iudeev i iazykov, iedina i premudrost'" (1:305 and 1:250).⁴³

Wisdom expresses itself in the tradition as that facet of God, which appears as his exterior, which creates, determines and connects everything. He therefore describes it as God's invisible countenance: "bozhii nevidimoe litso"

³⁵ "That is wisdom and godly providence ... the father, the son and the holy ghost" (Skovoroda, *Povne zibrannia tvoriv: u dvokh tomakh*, 2:98).

³⁶ "Christ is God's wisdom" (*ibid.*, 1:131).

³⁷ "When wisdom is gathered completely, it is called the Son of God" (Steuchus, *De perenni philosophia*, p. 51).

³⁸ Schmidt-Biggemann, *Philosophia perennis*, p. 63 sqq.

³⁹ Von Erdmann, *Unähnliche Ähnlichkeit*, p. 104 sqq.

⁴⁰ "But the diversity of the godly wisdom with the heathens, in the ancient days and nowadays ... will appear as unity in the future" (Skovoroda, *Povne zibrannia tvoriv: u dvokh tomakh*, 2:55). The next few references in the text also refer to this source.

⁴¹ "This eternal godly wisdom continued to speak in all centuries and among all peoples."

⁴² "If one knows one of them, then he will know all. If you recognize Moses, you would also recognize Christ, and if you recognize Christ, you would also recognize Moses, Elijah, Abraham, David, Isaah and the others."

⁴³ "The God and the Jews and the heathen in the same, and their wisdom is the same as well."

(1:365), the living word: “zhivoe slovo” (1:149), the form of God: “obraz bozhii” (1:149), as the natural portrait and natural impression of God – “prirodnyi ego portret i pechat” (1:147). Steuchus writes: “sapientia ... non est alia, quam pietas, cognitioque Dei, & cum eo similitude.”⁴⁴ “Sentis illam Sapientiam, quam perhibent etiam Hebraei fuisse mundi creatricem.”⁴⁵

It is typical for the tradition to identify ancient wisdom with God. Moreover, equating God with all other knowledge gives Skovoroda’s thinking its underlying structure. His frequent identifications and series in which “odno”, “odno zhe”, “vse to odno», “to zhe» appear are conspicuous.⁴⁶

Skovoroda and Steuchus both stress the emblematic status of the world and see the world as the representation of God’s image: “imago Dei”⁴⁷; “idol deirskii”⁴⁸; “obraz bozhii”⁴⁹; “Signum” [“Sign”]⁵⁰; “pechat” [“seal”]⁵¹. Steuchus speaks of God’s traces as “vestigia”⁵², whereas Skovoroda often applies the term “sledy bozhii” [“the traces of God”].⁵³

Typologically equating pagan and Christian figures is one characteristic of the *Philosophia perennis* tradition. Skovoroda like Steuchus continually mentions equivalence pairs and applied comparisons: Isis and Jesus (1:426); Epicure and Christus (1:89); Minerva and Nature (1:423); Jupiter and Christus.⁵⁴ For wisdom Skovoroda uses the names Sophia, Minerva, Christ, Isis, Athena, Genius.⁵⁵

Skovoroda’s predilection for interchanging philosophy and theology may also be traced back to Steuchus. Steuchus writes on what was known of God and His names in the ancient theology of the Chaldeans, the Egyptians and the Greeks. He relates the terms given to the agents of these theologies – wizards, magi, philosophers and priests: “Hoc omne antiquissima Chaldaeorum, tum Aegyptiorum, demum Theologia Graecorum cognovit. Principes Chaldaicae Theologiae fuerunt, quos patria lingua Magos, quasi sapientes, sive Philosophos & Sacerdotes appellabant.”⁵⁶

⁴⁴ “Wisdom is nothing else than compassion, the knowledge of God and his resemblance” (Steuchus, *De perenni philosophia*, p.581).

⁴⁵ “You feel this wisdom of which the Hebrews say, that it created the world” (*ibid.*, p. 13).

⁴⁶ Skovoroda, *Povne zibrannia tvoriv: u dvokh tomakh*, passim.

⁴⁷ Steuchus, *De perenni philosophia*, p. 17.

⁴⁸ Skovoroda, *Povne zibrannia tvoriv: u dvokh tomakh*, 2:135.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 1:149.

⁵⁰ Steuchus, *De perenni philosophia*, p. 16.

⁵¹ Skovoroda, *Povne zibrannia tvoriv: u dvokh tomakh*, 2:20.

⁵² Steuchus, *De perenni philosophia*, p. 68.

⁵³ Skovoroda, *Povne zibrannia tvoriv: u dvokh tomakh*, 1:379. The next few references in the text also refer to this source.

⁵⁴ Steuchus, *De perenni philosophia*, p. 352.

⁵⁵ Skovoroda, *Povne zibrannia tvoriv: u dvokh tomakh*, 1:423.

⁵⁶ “All this was discovered by the old Chaldeans, then the Egyptians, and only then by the Greek theology. The leading men of the Chaldean theology have been called magicians, or philosophers and priests in their mother tongue” (Steuchus, *De perenni philosophia*, p. 7).

Skovoroda too states that the keepers of this wisdom were Greeks, priests, magi, magicians, Chaldeans, philosophers and prophets: “Inde takie nazyvalisia magi, ili volkhvy, inde khaldei, gimnosofisty; u ellin – iiereii, sofi, filosofi, ierofanty i protchaia.”⁵⁷ He stresses the basic concept of *Philosophia perennis* as the unity of revelation and science. Consequently he uses the terms prophet and philosopher as synonyms: “Sie to est’ byt’ prorokom ili filosofom” [“This means to be a seer or a philosopher”] (1:367); “imia est’ tozhe – prorok i filosof” [“the name is seer or philosopher as well”] (1:292). He insists on consulting the pagan philosophers and magicians to the same degree as the Church Fathers (1:325) and speaks of natural proclaimers of God as “prirodnyia bogoprovedniki” [“hermit”] (1:398): “Togda oni v nature i v knigakh vol’no iskali nachala” [“Back when they freely searched for the beginning in nature and in books”] (2:13).

With these comparisons the *Philosophia perennis* establishes the convergence and the essential identity of the oldest lines of wisdom with Christian teachings. Skovoroda uses the characteristic terms of the tradition in order to expose the ubiquitous, if hidden, Wisdom in all images, stories, rites, traditions, books and men of God. One repeatedly comes across his phrasing “vse vo vsem” [“all included in all”] (1:353 and passim).

Poetics as an extensive of creation

The concept of *Philosophia perennis* has fundamental consequences for Skovoroda’s poetics.⁵⁸ It demands the unconditional realization of the representational quality. Language is an exemplary medium for the realization of images in the manifestation since the Source first expresses itself in the word and it is the word, which leads the manifested back to its Source.

Therefore rendering and interpreting was always the focus of applied Eternal Wisdom. This tradition brought about theories consistently well thought through, which pertained to the convergence of being and language, and text and world. The resulting poetics principle perceives true literature as a replica, in the sense of reflecting the essence of being.

The principles which Skovoroda uses to interpret written language and the world are thus the principles of his poetics. Epistemology, hermeneutics and art theory coincide. The image by which the world is structured consists of visible

⁵⁷ “The Indians called those men magicians, or soothsayers, Indian Chaldeans, ascetics; the Hellenians called them priests, sophists, philosophers, high priests and so on” (Skovoroda, *Povne zibrannia tvoriv: u dvokh tomakh*, 2:12sq). The next few references in the text also refer to this source.

⁵⁸ Von Erdmann, *Unähnliche Ähnlichkeit*, p. 281 sqq.

and invisible nature and dominates art and language. The exterior is the container, the medium of presentation and the image, which accommodates the contents differing from it and is of immense value.

Skovoroda practiced Eternal Wisdom from the standpoint of Christianity. The Bible, in its allegorical-typological exegetical tradition, is therefore the paradigm for the relation between Source and Creation. In it everything is pictorial and, pointing ahead, stands for true reality. The Old Testament is thus a prefiguration, an anticipation of the New Testament. In this way everything is connected to everything, everything stands in relation to everything else, ever increasingly rising up to the Source. The interpretation of world, philosophy and all other systems of denotation is methodically and in regard to the contents informed by the Christian allegorical-typological exegesis of the Bible in which the spiritual world of divine thought, wisdom and the history of salvation are realized.

This *poesis* follows an ontological structure of *dissimilar similarity*, of analogy, which must be recognized by way of pre-knowledge of the real truth as participating in Divine Wisdom, if it is to be imitated by analogy and realized in its own medium. Following the model of the Bible, *poesis* thus expands the magnitude of divine creation. The Source, which creation had invested into the manifestation, or the spiritual meaning, renders the poetic results into analogies of the Source and of its paradigmatic manifestation in the Bible.

In the interpretation Skovoroda, therefore, insists on two-fold perception, the literal and the figurative, and the typological relation of all images to one another. In *poesis* he likewise demands the realization of the allegory and the typology. By way of constant reflexive visualization of literary usage of analogy and typology, set in the frame of Christian salvation, form and contents of his modelled language fall into one. Skovoroda realized herewith the reflexive exemplification put forth in the *Philosophia perennis*. Theme and method of poetics are constant proof and completion of illustrating the world as an image of God.

From the application of poetics' rules gleaned from representational theory, knowledge of the world comes about, from which in its turn the representational rules are produced. This circular process visualizes and interprets in endless approaches. Skovoroda conceives of the world as a text, which must be interpreted and formed following the model of the Bible.

The typical expressions for images such as hieroglyph, reflection, shadow, trace, mirror, imprinting and stamp, and also memory are constantly in use by

Skovoroda: “sten”, “sen”, “sled”, “tropinka”, “znamenie”, “znak”, “pechat”, “pamiat”, “zertsalo”, “obraz”, “figura”, “otblesk”.⁵⁹

The analogue transfer of the Source – God – and of the analogy’s ontological structure impressed upon the world from it/Him, onto the author and *poesis* renders poetry a medium of co-creation and return of the world to the Source, a world which in poetry has become language. The design and interpretation of texts become an analogy to creation, history of salvation and ethics as a path to bliss. The poet participates in creating the Being and returning it to the Source. Thus, he is involved in the work of Eternal Wisdom.

This is because the world becomes the image of God only through the realization of the imagery executed by man as the mediator (*homo mediator*). In the consciousness of man and in the application of the rules gleaned from the Bible exegesis for interpreting and designing texts in relation to life, knowledge and world, a release of the Source into the world and the return of the world into the Source come about.

This is, thus, the application of poetic theory, the representation theory of *Philosophia perennis*, which establishes Skovoroda’s three-world doctrine, the two-natures-doctrine and poetic use to develop and constantly interpret images in order to employ them as metaphors for representational theory and to make its stance conceivable.

In this, Skovoroda achieves an ontology of poetics and a poetics of ontology in the context of *Philosophia perennis*, which came to his attention twenty-five years earlier than Freemasonry came to Russia, thus introducing a new impulse into the area of the Russian empire of the 1750s.

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⁵⁹ Respectively: “shadow, shadow, trace, small and narrow path, sign or omen, sign, seal, memory, mirror, appearance or image, figure, reflection or imprint” (Skovoroda, *Povne zibrannia tvoriv: u dvokh tomakh, passim*).

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Zusammenfassung

Der ukrainische Philosoph und Dichter H.S. Skovoroda (1722-1794) verbreitete mündlich und schriftlich eine Lehre, die das Konzept der Alten Weisheit, der einen Weisheit zu allen Zeiten als Teilhabe an der göttlichen Weisheit, vermittelte. Skovoroda bewegte sich damit in einer Tradition, die von den Kirchenvätern aufgegriffen und insbesondere in der Renaissance entwickelt wurde, in der Tradition der *philosophia perennis*, einer Option der Einheit aller Religionen, der Vermittlung von hellenischen Traditionen, neuplatonischer Philosophie, Christentum, Judentum und Islam unter dem Dach christlicher Heilsgeschichte.

Die langjährige Ausbildung an der Geistlichen Akademie zu Kiev und Reisen in das westliche Ausland ermöglichten es Skovoroda, die Quellen dieser Traditionen kennenzulernen. Eine Lektüre seiner Texte u. v. a. im Kontext des programmatischen Buches *Philosophia perennis* von Augustinus Steuchus (1540) zeigt eine überzeugende begriffliche und systematische Übereinstimmung seines Denkens mit dem überkonfessionellen Konzept der Alten Weisheit (*prisca sapientia*). Ungefähr 25 Jahre vor der Etablierung des Freimaurertums in den Regionen des russischen Reiches, die ihrerseits die hermetischen und esoterischen Traditionen der *prisca sapientia* rezipieren sollten, pflegte also der ukrainische Wanderphilosoph in seinen Lehren die

Einheit von Philosophie, Offenbarung und Theologie sowie aller religiösen Traditionen in einem Verständnis von Weisheit als dem Antlitz Gottes, an dem der Mensch durch die Realisierung der Bildhaftigkeit von allem Anteil haben kann.

Besonders tiefgreifende Auswirkungen zeigen sich am Gottesbegriff und der Bildtheorie Skovorodas. Die eine (neoplatonische) Struktur in allen Welten (Mikro-, Makrokosmos, Bibel), Denkfiguren, Bildern, Wissenssystemen, Texten und Aussagen begründen eine Philosophie, die nur als Teilhabe an der göttlichen Weisheit denkbar ist und eine Bildtheorie, die alles Existierende als Bild Gottes, als sein als Weisheit nach außen gewandtes Antlitz auffassen muß. Exegese, Textauslegung, Textproduktion und Poetik werden durch die Teilhabe an der alles durchdringenden Weisheit (der geistigen Primordialwelt) zu einer Realisierung der Zeichenhaftigkeit der Welt als Bild und Spur Gottes im Medium der Sprache und zu Mediatoren der Veräußerung des göttlichen Ursprungs über die Weisheit in die Welt und der Rückkehr der Welt zum Ursprung.

Außer der systematischen Übernahme des Denkens finden wir bei Skovoroda überaus häufig die für die philosophia perennis typischen Genealogien (Adam, Henoah, Abraham, Noach, Zoroaster, Moses, Hermes Trismegistus, David, Orpheus, Pythagoras, Plato usw.) sowie direkte Bezugnahmen in kirchenslavischer Übersetzung (zum Beispiel: bei den alten Ägyptern, Griechen, Hellenen, Heiden, bei den Alten, die geheime Weisheit, das Mysterium der alten Philosophen, göttliche Weisheit, ewige Weisheit, die eine wahre Weisheit und Theologie, ein Gott der Juden und Heiden und eine Weisheit, ägyptische, chaldäische und griechische Theologie und Philosophie usw.).

Die Bildtheorie und die Vermittlung der verschiedenen Religionen in der einen Geschichte der einen Weisheit zu allen Zeiten, der Skovoroda folgte, sollte sich als prägend für Poetiken der russischen Literatur erweisen, besonders für den Symbolismus. Das Phänomen Skovoroda bestätigt, wie vielschichtig die kulturelle Differenzierung im 18. Jahrhundert in den Regionen des russischen Reiches vonstatten ging, und zeigt, daß Esoterik und philosophia perennis konstitutive Bestandteile der Aufklärung seit der 2. Hälfte des 18. Jahrhunderts sind.