THE METHOD
OF SYMBOLIC INTERPRETATION
OF GRIGORY SKOVORODA

For a long time Grigory Savich Skovoroda (1722–1794) attracted the interest of his contemporaries and many later historians primarily by his life. Such an interest seems to be a little strange, since at first glance he did not have a very eventful life. He was born at the end of 1722 in the Ukraine in the family of a Cossack with little land. This was the time of gradual elimination of the Hetman’s political autonomy. The Ukraine was becoming a regular province of the Russian Empire. But the Cossacks still continued to maintain their personal freedom. One of the consequences of such freedom was the opportunity to receive an education. A widespread network of village schools existed in the Ukraine at the time. Further education could be continued in a seminary. The institution of higher education at that time was the Kiev-Mohyla Academy. In all types of schools teaching was provided by local clergy. Education in village schools was conducted in Ukrainian, and at the Academy it was conducted in Latin. Upon graduation from the village school in 1734, Skovoroda entered the Kiev-Mohyla Academy where he studied intermittently until 1753. The Kiev Academy at the time provided both higher and secondary education, so that the usual period of study in the Academy was 10 years. Skovoroda finished four lower classes (preparatory class fara, lowest class infima, grammar, and syntax) and six higher classes (poetics, rhetorics, philosophy, and theology). However, Skovoroda did not want to become a clergyman and did not complete his education in the final year. According to the unanimous opinion of his biographers, Skovoroda was the best student of the Academy, and he particularly succeeded in theology. Concerning the education provided by the Kiev Academy, historians note a scholastic type of learning. Education was based on the model of Jesuit colleges which were also the source of courses and textbooks. The Academy prepared preachers and polemicists who were supposed to protect the authority of the Church by their skillful use of quotations and rhetorical devices. The Academy did not provide a
thorough philosophical education and was even less concerned with the development of critical thinking in its students. The studies were focused on practical philosophy associated with ethics and politics. The Academy produced rigorists and doctrinarians aimed at achieving a successful Church career. From the well-known figures of the time who taught Skovoroda we can only name George Konissky who gave courses in poetics and philosophy at the Academy, emphasizing the moralizing aspect in his teaching. The teachers of the Academy, including Konissky, often combined scholarship with literary writing. This manner was also adopted by Skovoroda. He learned well the subjects which were taught at the Academy and during his whole life he faithfully continued the traditions of the Kiev-Mohyla Academy. In 1742 he moved to St. Petersburg and became a singer in the choir of the Court chapel. After staying for two and a half years in the capital city, Skovoroda returned to Kiev in order to complete his education, but in 1745 left for Hungary as a part of the mission of General Vishnevsky. The purpose of the mission was the purchase of Tokaj wines for the tsar’s court. Skovoroda also had to carry out the duties of a clerk at an Orthodox church which was at the mission. Skovoroda stayed abroad until 1750. He visited the neighboring lands, including Vienna, but more detailed information about his stay abroad as well as about his life in St. Petersburg has not been preserved. Skovoroda himself never alluded to it. When he returned to the Ukraine, he started teaching. In 1750–1751 he taught poetics in the Pereyaslav seminary. From 1755 to 1759 as a home teacher Skovoroda lived on the estate of the landlord S. Tomara. From 1759–1769 Skovoroda intermittently taught ethics, poetics, Greek and Latin in the Kharkov Collegium. During these years he wrote his first works. From 1769 until his death in 1794, he led the life of a wanderer. At that time he wrote his major works — the philosophical and religious dialogues with didactic contents. A circle of admirers, belonging to various social classes formed around Skovoroda; they shared a love for moral instructions which he would willingly give. They, in turn, provided their “teacher” with shelter, fed him and supported him. Thus Skovoroda was remembered by his friends in the first place as a teacher of life and spiritual mentor.

The favorite disciple and friend of Skovoroda as well as his first biographer, Mikhail Kovalinsky, describes the spiritual outlook of his teacher in the following way, “His spirit removed him from all attachments and making him a stranger, a wanderer and roamer, it produced in him the heart of a citizen of the world, who has no relatives, no pos-