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**Dialogue with the Absurd.  
Notes on the dramaturgy of Mikhail Volokhov**

'The absurd has as many shades and degrees as the tragic,' Vladimir Nabokov noted in his lectures on Russian literature,<sup>1</sup> and Mikhail Volokhov's dramaturgy<sup>2</sup> seems to confirm this opinion and indicate that 'absurdist artistic worlds can be created by various means'.<sup>3</sup> Absurdism in literature means, let us recall, the rejection of traditional forms in dramaturgy, i.e. from various realistic forms of birth, from plot, character, psychologism in the image of a person. Absurdism appears where the internal logic is violated, which is replaced by a number of associations, cause-and-effect relationships are destroyed, the logical and temporal sequence disappears, where there is no intrigue, and a specifically understood action unfolds in a circle. The aim to use all absurdist techniques is considered to achieve the effect of irrationality of what is happening on stage in the artistic world, and therefore these techniques are usually accompanied by such aesthetic categories as: paradox, grotesque, humour. Another important reason for turning to absurdism (we are talking about the proximity of the Absurd to existentialism) is, as Dmitry Tokarev notes, the desire to express 'the feeling of the absurdity of being experienced by a person who has realized the mechanicality of human existence'.<sup>4</sup> Mikhail Volokhov (as well as founders of the literature of the absurd Daniel Harms and Alexander Vvedensky<sup>5</sup>) creates literature that 'does not represent a total absence of meaning, but on the contrary, a different meaning that does not fit into everyday logic, destroying, as a rule, established logical connections'.<sup>6</sup> In Volokhov's work, we really observe various means by which the author achieves the above-mentioned effect of absurdity. The key to understanding it is considered, on the one hand, a direct connection with the Western theatre of the absurd, represented by Eugène Ionesco (who was a friend of Volokhov's), and the most important question for the father of the absurd is the crisis of communication and the problem of the absurdity of language and the language of the Absurd. On the other hand, there are very strong links with existentialism, which gave rise to the author's interest in philosophizing and thus determines not only the problems of artistic utterance (existential and metaphysical principles in Volokhov's plays, i.e. the struggle of Good with Evil, a person in a borderline situation, death, conscience, redemption, etc.), but also strongly affects its form.

Volokhov's philosophizing often takes the form of a treatise or is placed within the framework of a traditional dramatic genre, i.e. it resembles an ancient Greek tragedy, which is observed within the theatre of the Absurd, which, as Martin Esslin states:

...concerned with the basic realities of life, occupied with relatively few fundamental problems of life and death, issues of isolation and communication ... can manifest grotesquely, superficially and irreverently, returning to the initial, religious function of the theatre – the opposition of man to the sphere of myth and religious truth. Like ancient Greek tragedy, medieval mysteries and baroque allegories, the theatre of the Absurd aims to tell the public about the precarious, mysterious position of man in the universe.<sup>7</sup>

Regarding scandalously brilliant plays that dialogize with the worldwide cultural and philosophical context, critics characteristically portray Volokhov in different ways, for example, as a classic of the Russian avant-garde, as Alexander Zotov said. He believes that 'Dead Man's Bluff' was 'absolutely therapeutic and shocking for Moscow and Russia and the entire highly elite Western world, and from that the phenomenon of 'new drama' grew in Russia'.<sup>8</sup> Julius Edlis, in turn, speaks of him as a 'marginal' playwright who, with his texts, 'discovers something new in the history of drama', and Olivier Schmidt claims that this is a playwright who 'belongs to a galaxy of writers who write in very condensed metaphorical colours, who never bridle their image in the form of a complex or self-censorship', that this is 'an author who writes about what others only think about, but never formulate'.<sup>9</sup> Andrey Zhitinkin draws attention to the most important aspect of Volokhov's work:

The avant-gardism [of Volokhov – L. M.] consists in the fact that he absorbed the school of the Western theatre of the Absurd while remaining a deeply Russian classical writer – he does not, unlike other modern writers, diagnose the surrounding evil, but simply embeds this evil of ours into the structure of World Fatality, bringing to the absolute Stanislavsky's testament about the truth of life.<sup>10</sup>

The dialogical origin of Volokhov's plays was also noted in 2006 by Eduard Boyakov, at the time artistic director of the Praktika Theatre: 'Volokhov is archaism, traditionalism and, as it were, Shakespeare. In Volokhov's plays there is this almost folklore orientation to the archetype, tradition, even to a certain theological context, referring to the ideas of the 'new Theodicy''.<sup>11</sup>

Thus, in the plays of the playwright one can find hints of texts, ideas, treatises, the philosophy of Aeschylus, Sophocles, Shakespeare, Racine, Corneille, Camus, Sartre, Genet, Shestov, Dostoevsky, Gogol, Mikhail Bulgakov, Leo Tolstoy, Kierkegaard, Heidegger, Nietzsche and Tertullian. The quote 'I believe, for it is absurd' (*Lat.* Credo quia absurdum), the author of which is considered to be Tertullian, an apologist of early Christianity, best describes the absurdist worldview of Mikhail Volokhov.

It is best expressed in four texts by the playwright, of which he himself says that 'these are like Four Times Unity'<sup>12</sup>. These are the plays: *Dead Man's Bluff Game*, *The Great Consoler*, *Chikatilo's Calvary* and *The Immaculate Conception*. They touch upon issues of the crisis of spirituality essential for the theatre of the Absurd, the struggle of Good against Evil, a person in a borderline/final situation of a personality crisis, lost cultural values, the destructive influence of totalitarianism on personality, the crisis of communication, devaluation/ depreciation of language, etc.

It is also seen in the linguistic absurdity inherent in every one of Volokhov's texts, regardless of what problem the author touches on. The playwright is mainly interested in *mat*, obscenity, about which he himself said 'this is an X-ray of the spirit. Ozone of speech. This is a sacred, super-genial language that enhances art, if it exists, and sweeps it to zero if it is the art of naked kings', moreover, 'if a work with profanity performs the sacrificial function of High Repentance, then *mat* heals people, society, the world – like earthly poison in the hands of a real healer'.<sup>13</sup>

The ease with which Volokhov turns to *mat* (his plays are written entirely in obscenities) is not due to the need to shock the reader, but rather follows from a peculiar understanding of the essence of the theatre. Volokhov claims that in his plays 'the main thing is not the *mat*, but the thought, since the theatre is not the place for relaxed but vulgar guffaws'.<sup>14</sup> He admits that the theatre for him is 'a small cathedral where people gather in order to contemplate – to see the Truth'<sup>15</sup> And indeed, this can happen during a reading/performance, if the consumer manages to overcome the *mat* in the process of perceiving the work, if it is possible not to perceive the *mat* as alien and hostile to literature and the theatre. Those readers/viewers who are lucky will be able to dive into the months with the characters of the play to the very depths, to the deepest depth of human unhappiness and suffering. Edlis tries to justify Volokhov's tendency to write in continuous obscenities with the words: 'as you surface again, the *mat* already seems to be just a sign of something like a caisson disease of society as a whole'.<sup>16</sup>

Volokhov writes about the mental and spiritual diseases of modern man in his most famous play, *Dead Man's Bluff*. This is a dialogue between Arkady and Felix, the KGB assassins who, during the play, talk and sort things out with each other, and consequently with the whole world. In this way they pay off their past. As they talk they describe in detail, with all the subtleties, their methods of action and the effects of their

work. Thus they introduce into the play a clear 'Soviet background' and the absurdities of those times. They mock the Newspeak and list the goals of 'Cainism' (with an error) in sarcastic statements about the past:

You must respect science, Arkasha. Especially in this scientific country. Here every college-educated ignoramus scientifically learns that at any given moment in any given point of free space you may be scientifically taken by the balls for some unknown reason and sent to jail. And the criminals in the joint will put you on trial in their own scientific way. They'll fuck you in the ass scientifically.<sup>17</sup>

Quotes (sometimes allusions) from Russian poetry (e.g., Marina Tsvetaeva) are woven into the absurd dialogues of former murderers, morgue workers, where they 'treat' the blind men of neurology. These dialogues are interspersed with scenes of rough sex. As a result of combining within the framework of one image the depicted reality of high and low principles, the spheres of sacrum and profanum, a depressing picture of a potential 'inhuman apocalypse' is obtained, from playing to the gallery with 'good murders in the name of mind-numbing ideas'.<sup>18</sup>

A little more complicated is the picture of the Absurd in the play *Paris Bound*. Here the characters are two fugitive convicts who intend to find freedom in Paris, and therefore escape from Siberia on the roof of a freight car. The plot is typically absurdist, reminiscent of the Western theatre of the Absurd by Samuel Beckett or Eugène Ionesco, as well as the plays of the Russian playwright Alexei Shipenko, particularly his *Moscow–Frankfurt. 2000 Metres above the Surface of the Soil*, where two clowns travel on the wings of an airplane, take bad walks in the universe and discuss the topic of the state of humanity at the end of the 20th century.

In Volokhov's play the convicts escape and during the journey they consume their companions on the run, or rather eat their heads. In the end Shaft and Globe never reach Paris because Shaft kills Globe and eats his brains, then in the finale falls dead. Thus, murder/death (Volokhov's favourite theme) ends the cannibal convicts' journey to freedom.

Their dialogues are filled with arguments about the essence of God, existence, the values of literature, classical music (they refer to Mozart, Mendelssohn, Chopin, Tchaikovsky), etc.<sup>19</sup> They treat each other either rudely and swear, or tenderly and affectionately, with sympathy: 'This is a small and problematical world ... Nobody understands us heartfelt cannibals like we understand ourselves'; 'Paris will screw us, eat us, when they see we're Christian cannibals'; 'We can't eat one another, mate. One can eat the other, the other gets eaten'; 'On the whole Jew meat isn't bad'.<sup>20</sup>

Creating a picture of cannibal convicts, Volokhov philosophizes with humour (or rather with a bitter smile) and forces the reader to ask the question: Who am I? For myself and for another person? The writer shows that in all of us 'lies and total aggression can be detected', because, as Eduard Boyakov explained the meaning of the play, 'These are all our inner prisoners. Such are the monstrous creatures that live in each of us',<sup>21</sup> terrorizing us internally, as the Presnyakov brothers would say, referring to Heidegger. Perhaps for these reasons, Volokhov endows the most striking scenes (cannibalism or homosexual sexual intercourse) with features of ritual actions, a kind of communion:

GLOBE. I get your drift, don't get upset, no need to waste nervous energy.

Treat yourself to a bit more. (*Chews an ear off Syomochka's head, gives it to Shaft.*)

Love for the President truly lies in the stomach.

SHAFT. You pervert. (*Takes the ear, eats.*)

Tasty, your Syomka's real tasty – you can tell who's who, Globey.

GLOBE. I can do the same for you in Paris, Shafty.

SHAFT. I'm not asking much – just excite the English cunt for the good of us all, for the good of the lost world, cunt. I'm ready to sacrifice my own body, my own energy. Fuck knows who'll appreciate the altruism of my fucking cock. Mankind shows nothing but ingratitude to those that offer excitement.

GLOBE. You have to overcome the ingratitude and excite the cunts night and day. A harsh destiny to bear.

Build yourself up with a high-calorie tongue.

(*Gnaws off Syomochka's tongue and gives it to Shaft.*)

SHAFT. You're spoiling me, daddy. (*Eats the tongue.*)

Nutritious and tasty, what more can I say.

GLOBE. Only the finest shit here, as they say.

Want to try some brains?

(Offers Shaft Syomochka's brains.)

SHAFT. Grand merci, daddy! (Eats Syomochka's brains.)

Like a baton of white bread, like honey.

We'll split Ilya's brains, too. (Splits Ilya's skull open on the wagon roof.)

Here's an invigorating segment of brain, daddy. (Gives Globe a piece of brain.)

GLOBE. Thank you! (Eats the brain.)

I tell you, Shafty, I never tasted such a good piece of brain.<sup>22</sup>

The ritualistic behaviour of the characters, the repetition of the actions they perform, the philosophy of murder created by the author all the time brings the theatre of Volokhov closer to the roots of theatre, to the religious, mystical beginning of stage art, as mentioned above in relation to the theatre of the Absurd. On the other hand, raising the difficult question of the Absurd as a defining principle, as the meaning of life and construction of any form and the content within it, Volokhov at the same time convinces us that 'the Absurd is a ubiquitous global reunifying life metaphor'.<sup>23</sup>

When constructing his anti-plays and the anti-heroes who 'inhabit' them, Volokhov each time seems to depict the underground man that resembles Dostoevsky's characters: Volokhov's underground anti-hero also feels unhappy and demands sympathy from others, he has a strong sense of superiority over others, but still remains an ordinary person and, by nature, he enjoys the fact that he fatigues himself and others at the same time. The externally scandalous aspect of Volokhov's works, including the linguistic aspect, as mentioned above, does not hide the philosophical conceptions of the world and the emotional saturation of his reasoning. In his plays other Dostoevskian 'ideas' resonate, such as 'Beauty will save the world' (*The Idiot*) or 'If there is no God, everything is allowed' (*The Brothers Karamazov*), as well as Leo Tolstoy's imperative of 'non-resistance to evil by violence'. In addition, Volokhov's dramaturgy gives a sense also of existentialist ideas, especially the idea of a borderline situation (Karl Jaspers), and existentialist categories of choice, freedom of choice, death, guilt, fear (Søren Kierkegaard's concept that 'fear is the vertigo of freedom'), internal terrorism (Martin Heidegger 'das Man') or the thesis 'hell is others' (*L'enfer c'est les autres* by Jean-Paul Sartre).

A full analysis of the above-mentioned connections with the theatre of the Absurd and existentialism is beyond the scope of this article due to the obvious limitations of form, but it is worth mentioning here as a characteristic example the play *Chikatilo's Calvary*. Here the writer strongly asserts that the end of the world has come, 'people are consuming each other', and we can only collect some remnants of humanity.

The drama is a monologue by Chikatilo, a prisoner awaiting his death sentence, a condemned man for which Volokhov used as a prototype Andrey Chikatilo (1936-1994), the most notorious Soviet serial killer.<sup>24</sup> Chikatilo the hero of this play sincerely confesses to the reader/ viewer, since the author is almost painfully concerned about the problem of Good and Evil, especially the question of the 'damage' of human nature, the 'distortion' that comes from original sin and is carried out in a person due to the freedom of choice between Good and Evil given to him by God, which tragically defines the whole existence of a person. Volokhov, working in his oeuvre, as we have already said, with underground man, creates here a picture, by his definition, of the 'last stage of the fall of man', i.e. a picture of 'Chikatilism'.

Chikatilo recalls and carefully describes the murders of children, trying to prove that others are to blame for everything, for example, parents who gave sweets and sensitivity to their children, as a result of which the children went to the dark forest with an unknown uncle for these sweets, caresses and tenderness. On the other hand, Chikatilo acts here as a metaphor for the absurdity of the existence of Humanity – he presents himself as a victim sentenced to death for his mercy:

I gave a blissful death to their darling kids, they remain innocent for time immemorial. For some reason they can't understand and appreciate that their kiddies went to a golden heaven, bypassed the sheer hell of life ... Certainly they suffered before dying ... You have to earn the ticket to paradise, by great torment.<sup>25</sup>

Chikatilo's monologue can be considered as a monologue of Humanity on the eve of self-destruction. But the absurdity of the tragedy of Chikatilo is also hidden in the fact that he cannot choose his death so as to get a

sense of euphoria, get complete satisfaction from pain and violence and maintain a sense of superiority over the world and a position of disregard for it: 'Give me a fucking executioner partner!!!'. To this, he says: 'Well, I'm not fucking interested in killing myself at all, for fuck's sake – it's absolutely fucking not my job to do.' In conclusion it is worth adding that Volokhov pays special attention in his plays not only to the absurdity of human existence, i.e. problems that have arisen as a result of a person's inability to use freedom and will. He also considers with great interest the absurdity and horror generated by the policy of totalitarian states and 'leading to the phenomenon of the birth of anti-humans'.<sup>26</sup> Chikatilo, trying to justify himself, makes an accusation against totalitarianism:

There's no Morality, there's only Truth on this Earth. ... Life only exists in Absurdity. I always acted according to the morality of our country.

If a country has a fascist morality you gotta be a fascist – that's fucking moral and human, evolutionary. I'm not a fucking animal – I'm a fucking human, warm-hearted thinking boy ...

Stalin and Lenin created millions of victims, they gave an example of shocking maniacal deeds without grief, they hit the Communist bull's eye without glasses.

It is therefore impossible not to agree with Anna Kraevskaya, who notes the double role of the theatre of the Absurd. The researcher draws attention to the fact that the theatre of the Absurd, on the one hand, touches on the question of existence in the world, but on the other hand, from a satirical viewpoint, it exposes the absurdity of imaginary life in a totalitarian state, which forces people to exist in a false reality deformed by language, politics and the actions of society.<sup>27</sup>

Summing up all of the above, of necessity in an abbreviated and selective form, it is worth emphasizing that Mikhail Volokhov's dramaturgy is scandalous and often incites criticism for abuse of obscenities, but it is an unusual work, especially due to deep ties with the Gogol-Bulgakov tradition of devilry and devilry, with the legacy of Dostoevsky, Leo Tolstoy and the Oberiuts (mainly in the level of structural absurdity, which allows you to fully convey the extreme chaos and crisis of language/communication, and thereby emphasize the absence of a single integral image of an individual). The uniqueness of Volokhov's dramaturgy is also demonstrated in the sphere of rich and complex mutual relations with the Western theatre of the absurd and existentialism, which allows us to include Volokhov's plays in the broad global context of absurdist theatrical art.

<sup>1</sup> V. Nabokov, *Lektsii po russkoi literature*, Moscow 1999, p. 124.

<sup>2</sup> Mikhail Volokhov (b. 1955), Russian and French writer, playwright and drama theorist. A student of Yu. Edlis and G. Gorin. In 1987 he left for France, where he became world famous as a playwright and director when, with the assistance of Eugène Ionesco, his play *Dead Man's Bluff* was staged in French and German in France and Germany. Since 1995 Volokhov has been a member of the Paris PEN club, and since 1996 of the Moscow Writers' Union. He has written more than fifteen plays, including *Dead Man's Bluff*, *Lyudmila Gurchenko Lives*, *The Macbeth Chronicles*, *Kings of the Entrance*, *Rublyovka Safari*, *Lesbians Roaring Like a Tsunami*, *Paris Bound*, *Chikatilo's Calvary*, *Immaculate Conception*, *The Great Consoler*, *Diogenes. Alexander. Corinth*, *Kilimanjaro On Your Lips*, *Naked Snow Carelessly Gentle*, *The Companion*, *Forty-Eighth Degree of Solar Latitude*, *Bullets in Chocolate*, *His Majesty's Executioner*. Since 1996 he has lived predominantly in Russia. See the site: [www.volokhov.ru](http://www.volokhov.ru).

<sup>3</sup> M. Marusenkov, *Absurdopediya russkoi zhizni Vladimira Sorokina. Zaum', grotesk i absurd*, Sankt- Peterburg 2012, p. 204.

<sup>4</sup> D. Tokarev, *Kurs na khudshee: absurd kak kategoriya teksta u Daniila Kharmsa i Samyuelya Bekketa*, Moskva 2002, p. 7.

<sup>5</sup> Dmitry Tokarev, for example, mentions this in his previously mentioned study *Kurs na khudshee...* He also names other scholars with a similar view, and incidentally Vladimir Glotser and Mikhail Meilakh, who defines the works of Kharms and Vvedensky as the Russian pre-war theatre of the absurd. See: D. Tokarev, *Kurs na khudshee...*, p. 7.

<sup>6</sup> A. Kobrinskii, *Daniil Kharms*, Moscow 2009, p. 416–417.

<sup>7</sup> M. Esslin, *Teatr absurda*, translated by G. Kovalenko, St. Petersburg 2010, p. 412.

<sup>8</sup> A. Zotov, *V nekoroshei kvartire Mikhaila Bulgakova khoroshaya p'yesa Mikhaila Volokhova 'I v Parizh'*, Pravda.ru from 31.05.2006, [e-resource] <http://www.pravda.ru/culture/theatre/premiers/12-04-2006/81461-0/> [12.08.2014].

<sup>9</sup> The opinions of the above-mentioned Yu. Edlis, O. Schmidt, A. Zhitinkin and other quotes from the article *Velikaya Otychestvennaya Igra sovremennoi dramaturgii Mikhaila Volokhova*, included in the Culture section of the e-newspaper Pravda.ru from 12.04.2006, [e-resource] <http://www.pravda.ru/culture/theatre/premiers/12-04-2006/81461-0/> [09.09.2014].

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

<sup>12</sup> Volokhov himself used this terminology in his conversation with N. Struve. See: *The Theatre of Kairos in Essence – Mikhail*

*Volokhov's essay on the theory of theatre and art*, 'Literaturnye vesti' 2001, № 50, [e-resource] [http://volokhov.ru/site/?page\\_id=388](http://volokhov.ru/site/?page_id=388) [02.09.2014].

<sup>13</sup> M. Volokhov, *Mat lychit kak zmeinyi yad*, TRUD, № 146 from 11.08.2006, [e-resource] [http://volokhov.ru/site/?page\\_id=518](http://volokhov.ru/site/?page_id=518) [02.09.2014]. Hereinafter the text is quoted in the author's edition (punctuation, syntax, use of uppercase and lowercase letters).

<sup>14</sup> Ibid.

<sup>15</sup> *The Theatre of Kairos in Essence...*

<sup>16</sup> *Velikaya Otyechestvennaya Igra...*

<sup>17</sup> M. Volokhov, *Dead Man's Bluff*, [e-resource] <http://www.volokhov.ru> [02.11.2014].

<sup>18</sup> *The Theatre of Kairos in Essence....*

<sup>19</sup> The device of calling each other by different names in each remark resembles the technique used to construct the image of characters in Venedikt Yerofeyev's play *Walpurgis Night or The Steps of the Commander*.

<sup>20</sup> M. Volokhov, *Paris Bound...*

<sup>21</sup> *Velikaya Otyechestvennaya Igra...*

<sup>22</sup> M. Volokhov, *Paris Bound...*

<sup>23</sup> *The Theatre of Kairos in Essence...*

<sup>24</sup> Between 1978 and 1990 Chikatilo committed 53 proven murders; among the victims were: 21 boys aged 7-17, 14 small girls aged 9-17, 18 girls and women. They managed to shoot him before abolition of the death penalty in Russia.

<sup>25</sup> M. Volokhov, *Chikatilo's Calvary*, [e-resource] <http://www.volokhov.ru> [02.09.2014]. Hereinafter quoted from this resource.

<sup>26</sup> Anatolii Brusilovskii o Mikhaile Volokhove – 'Veryu, potomu chto absurdno!', [e-resource] <http://www.volokhov.ru> [02.09.2014].

<sup>27</sup> See: A. Krajewska, *Dramat i teatr absurdu w Polsce*, Poznań 1996, p. 14.

**Lidia Mięowska**

**A Dialogue with the Absurd:  
Remarks on Mikhail Volokhov's Dramatic Works**

**(Summary)**

The article presents an attempt to describe the oeuvre of the Russian and French playwright and theatre theoretician Mikhail Volokhov in the context of his relation to the Russian theatre of the Absurd of the 1920s, as well as to the 1950s western model of theatre of the Absurd, represented by Samuel Beckett and Eugène Ionesco. The author also discusses Volokhov's dramatic works in reference to the philosophy of existentialism.

**Keywords:** contemporary Russian drama, Absurd, theatre of the Absurd, Martin Esslin, Ionesco, Beckett, Volokhov.