

STANISLAV MERKUSHOV 'THE PROBLEMATICS OF RUSSIAN DRAMA OF THE ABSURD 1980-90s - MIKHAIL VOLOKHOV'

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The core problem raised in the plays of Mikhail Igorevich Volokhov, the problem of truth and related issues of understanding morality and the distinction between good and evil, are solved at several levels and associated with the removal of two main prohibitions: the veto on use of language in all its variety of forms, and the veto on discussion of the most important subjects for humanity, which are also the most often suppressed.

The playwright M. I. Volokhov is positioned by critics as a rebel and provocateur, and by researchers as a striking representative of the Russo-French theatre of the absurd. When he himself responds to legitimate questions about his identity as a writer in relation to the geographic territory, he perceives himself as the author of the 'Russian mentality', having lived primarily in Russia since 1996: "I cannot write plays in the French mentality. It is not my native element, anyway. I can only write in the Russian mentality. By means of Russian problematics" [Cit: Booker 2016]. In the article 'Dialogue with the Absurd. Notes on the Dramaturgy of M. Volokhov' the literary critic L. Miesowska gives her own definition of the artistic specificity of his plays, referring to a number of authoritative opinions (i.e. those of A. Zotov, Y. Edlis, O. Schmidt, A. Zhitinkin, E. Boyakov): "in the dramatist's plays one can find allusions to the texts, ideas, treatises and 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' (from the Latin, *Credo quia absurdum*), written by Tertullian, the apologist of early Christianity, best describes the worldview of Mikhail Volokhov" [Miesowska 2016: 633]. From our point of view, M. I. Volokhov, in addition to all that has been said, is a methodical destroyer of taboos, both in literature and, consequently, in human consciousness.

Most frequently the aspect that gives grounds for superficial denial or rejection of M. I. Volokhov's literary work and the polemics associated with it has been related to an excess of taboo vocabulary in his plays. The playwright stopped all questions on this topic with an answer about the absence of the reception of obscene language in his own works as an end in itself: "This is the language of characters. <...> If a Russian soldier cursed during the war, there would still be a sacred message of protecting the country, the motherland. There is no vulgarity here. That is, it is not the obscenity itself that is shameful, but the fact that it reveals the *inconsistency* of a person" [Cit: Booker 2016; italics added by S.M.]. In the second part of the quoted (and highlighted by us) extract from this

interview there is simply an understanding of the specifics of the functional use of swear words and expressions as a resource for the ritualization of certain areas of the text, returning to the original purpose of such vocabulary. In this regard we present the opinion of B. A. Uspensky about the primordial archetypal aspect of obscene language, which explains its abundant presence in the plays of M. I. Volokhov: "Swearing had a distinctive cult function in Slavic paganism, <...> it is widely represented in various kinds of rites of obviously pagan origin — wedding, agricultural, etc. — that is, in rites somehow related to fertility: swearing is a necessary component of such rites and is certainly of a ritual nature" [Uspensky 1981: 49-53]. M. I. Volokhov asserts the absence of a profane principle in his plays of obscene language unconsciously applied in opposition to the sacred principle. Moreover, in the most complete edition of the playwright's works to date ([Volokhov 2016]), all the plays, including the most well-known to the reader and especially the lexically demonstrative 'Dead Man's Bluff', have been reworked for almost complete replacement of obscene words, not by euphemisms, which could create the opposite effect, depriving the plays of their characteristic sincerity and, on the contrary, vulgarizing them, but by language even more prominent in comparison with obscene lexemes. In any case, uncensored vocabulary let us propose this word as absorbing the meaning of the presence of not only obscene language, but also of any special, uncensored vocabulary) is, according to the playwright, "an X-ray of the spirit. The 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" [Volokhov 2006]. Indeed, the use of obscene language by the author is not accidental, and that is why at the beginning of performances of the first Russian production of the play 'Dead Man's Bluff' its director A. Zhitinkin warned the audience that the author writes "in Russian *mat*, but this is not the language of the actors, but the language of heroes," adding that it is necessary "to be patient for 8-10 minutes, and then the story of the heroes <...> will entice you" (Volokhov M., 'Dead Man's Bluff', directed by A. Zhitinkin, 1996).

After overcoming the initial barrier associated with the obscene lexicon, the reader, firstly, paradoxically finds himself inside the living, vital, Russian language, 'suprema' and 'infinima' (to borrow terminology from mathematicians), which are transformed by M. I. Volokhov so that all thematic boundaries are destroyed – the playwright manoeuvres away from the apparent 'small-earth' to global problems, then to metaphysical ones, and eventually approaches the monumental image of the 'global chaos of the early 21st century' [Razlogov 2016]. Here we are talking not only and not so much about the play 'Dead Man's Bluff', in which the element of censure of Soviet totalitarianism is very strong, although now with an introduction to the global level of philosophical analysis of the causality and 'genetics' of any totalitarian device. We are talking now about all eighteen works of M. I. Volokhov, which are distinguished by the formulation of universal problems relevant to humanity at all times, presented through archetypal realizations. The individual's problems move into macro-areas, into metaphysical spheres, correlating with the discovery of the absurd as a unifying principle. "The absurd is the meaning of life and the construction of any form and content in it together," says M. I. Volokhov [Dialog 2016: 558]. The generation of form and content occurs by creating an Image (according to M. I. Volokhov, with a capital letter), and "An Image is always a Whole and the essence of the Whole lies in the Absurdity" [ibid].

In this way, by choosing a real character in the play 'Chikatilo's Calvary' (1994; the 'censored' author's version was published in 2016), the effect of extreme realism and, synchronously, the absurdity of the narrative is achieved. Both Chikatilo's monologue and the details of the maniac's villainies begin to be perceived documentarily as a documentary chronicle of events, which is facilitated by the parallel perception of the published text and the film (the film 'Chikatilo's Calvary' was released in 2005, with M. Volokhov simultaneously acting as director, cameraman and actor). The paradigm of 'author - hero - reader' ceases to be an abstraction and is highly concretized. The 'idea - man' model acquires categorical resonance: "Ideas are immaculate - no dirt sticks to them. Enter into the idea to become a person. I see. Sin, as a structural axiom of life, like words, must be redeemed immediately" [Volokhov 2016: 412]. Then - and here M.I. Volokhov argues with F. M. Dostoevsky, more precisely, with his novel 'Crime and Punishment' - no matter how terrible the sin, it can always be justified by a timely admission of guilt. M. I. Volokhov reveals the hypocritical, artificial mechanisms of 'conditional self-repentance', by virtue of which 'it is possible to implicate everyone', as revealed by F. M. Dostoevsky in 'Crime and Punishment' [ibid: 415]. But notably the same playwright wrote about this in his essay-manifesto 'The Theatre of Kairos in Essence', emphasizing that the aforementioned novel by the great writer is 'the most 'modern' Western novel because of the speculative repentance of the murderer Raskolnikov', which 'actually morally resolved our social, bloody revolution' [Dialog 2016: 556]. It is also worth noting the formal proximity-polemic of the texts by M. I. Volokhov and F. M. Dostoevsky: just as V. V. Nabokov called F. M. Dostoevsky's novels overgrown plays [Nabokov 1996: 183], so, in fact, M. I. Volokhov, on the contrary, calls his plays short detective novels: "I always want to write a novel, but it turns out as a play. This is my 'dramaturgical' organism" [Dialog 2016: 551].

**Representation of the Absurd in Russian Literature
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P. 11

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