

## 'Repentance'

First let me comment on the obscene language in Volokhov's drama 'Dead Man's Bluff'. What have people used for centuries to build their houses, all over the world? Adobe. Adobe is made from dung, straw and clay, but mainly dung. Here dung is building material and not shit. Bunches of heather and other fragrant herbs were hung on the walls because the odour never fades. And people lived in those houses: loved, died and gave birth – life went on. In Volokhov's plays obscene language plays two roles: firstly as construction material from which the characters 'build' their dwelling; secondly as a very important constituent of the play's vocabulary. This is not abuse, emphasis or slang but a new, revived language – revived by life itself. Because it is illicit, prohibited, the play's language becomes an integral constituent and the effect is 'telling the truth about life'.

This kind of play is impossible in traditional Russian drama (plays with obscenities are written over there in America, not here). Of course it may be just euphemism: for instance, the phrase 'fig off' in Solzhenitsyn's novel 'One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich'. It means 'fig off' and nothing more. In Volokhov's play euphemism is impossible – this is a different kind of language not heard in ordinary conversation, but perhaps people think this way. We may not actually speak with this debased lexicon, but our morality has been so degraded that while uttering decorative turns of phrase we think on the moral level of this language... I would call the play eschatological. Eschatological by its reference to the end of the world. What will happen at the end of the world and afterwards.

Why is this play so realistic? The action takes place in our world, which is certainly close to destruction, in a very real sense. For example, if we cannot find a cure for AIDS in the near future, mankind will become extinct as a biological species. This is not an abstract apocalyptical tableau, but stark reality. AIDS can be contracted through a mother's milk, not only by sexual contact. Mankind has the capacity for sexual relations, and when you fall in love you forget AIDS. How absurd if Juliet tells her beloved: climb over the balcony and don't forget to wear a condom. The modern age is threatened by eschatological danger, hence the appearance of such literature. Apparently we lead a normal existence in the noosphere – we walk, eat, stand in queues, love, divorce, earn wages, drink vodka and so on. It seems we are walking on firm ground. But suddenly we realise that monstrous processes – the subterranean boiling magma until now separated from us by a stratum of hard earth – are right beneath our feet! Although walking on magma and living in the crater of a volcano, we are too afraid to peer inside the crater. Petrushevskaya writes that it is wrong, inconvenient and terrible to live in a crater: we are vulgar, vile, uncultured and quarrelsome because we live in that crater, and if transported elsewhere, even a concrete-panel apartment, we would live normally. Volokhov has placed his characters inside a volcanic crater, in the middle of an eruption. Recently a Leningrad TV programme reported a unique coincidence. The same girl was raped four times in one evening by four different people. Or just imagine what it's like to live in Kazan – a city inhabited by murderers, tens of thousands of them, aged from eight to sixteen.

Anyway, Volokhov has peered into the fiery volcano. Of course this is a generalisation, a metaphor – not everyone lives in the fiery volcano, yet.

The principal character in his play is not a KGB or CIA agent, neither a pederast nor a murderer. He is the same as you and I. But in this life we can be pederasts and murderers, KGB agents and CIA agents. The barriers are down. Everything is possible. Some say that Volokhov's play is too Western. Not at all – this play is very Russian! Volokhov has invented nothing new – he just took another step forward. It is more

frightening, more profound than Mrozek's 'Immigrants', and the temperature inside the volcano is 1000 degrees higher. Everything is possible. Look at Dostoyevsky: if there is no God, everything is permissible. Volokhov's characters are driven to extremes beyond which there can only be God, otherwise there is no hope. This is the eschatological boundary, it is eschatologically just. Either there is a God, or that's it – the end, nothing. Nothing. And there really is a moment in the play where you catch your breath at the purity, the joy of seeing such purity. They are in such dire straits. They repent to the very end – this is where the catharsis lies. They have come to the end, without stopping halfway, hiding nothing. Although lies are everywhere. So 'Dead Man's Bluff' is filled with metaphors throughout, like the Bible. Suppose Methuselah never lived 840 years. Suppose the Red Sea never parted to release the Israelites from Egypt, and so on. This is symbolic. As in the play. It's a groundbreaking play. Not simply a metaphor in itself, but entirely composed of metaphors. And the play's finale is grandiose. Let me overstep the boundary, otherwise I cannot stand before God – kill me. I cannot live like this any more. This is a repulsive, horrible, monstrous play. You can't take your eyes off it. Why? You feel sorry for the characters. They are insignificant wretches – they couldn't be more insignificant.

There is a third character in the play. Whatever made them that way. Call it what you like – the course of history, or degradation of the human race. But we really have arrived at the brink. At a RSFSR Union of Writers plenary session someone declared: We are ready to kill for the sake of socialism! The cause no longer matters, since above all this transgresses the law of both God and Man – 'it is permissible to kill for the sake of a cause'. But killing is wrong! The human race has always killed, but always knew this was wrong!! Now it is apparently permissible. Dostoyevsky was the first to realise. The Grand Inquisitor states: It is possible to kill You, Christ, kill You, Christ the Saviour, for the sake of someone or other. Yes, if necessary we can kill, we don't need You, Christ, for the sake of whom we live. And Ivan Karamazov schools Smerdyakov to kill his father – 'exterminate the cockroach', as Ivan says. His intention is good – his father is loathsome. You see? All this is eschatology. Volokhov has peered inside – where I am afraid to look. This is the daring and bravery shown by a Saint Francis of Assisi, or a lunatic. I wouldn't have the strength to endure this truth and write it down. That is the nub of the matter, do you see? There are plenty of dramas about homosexuals: 'The Ballad of the Sad Café', 'Sweet Bird of Youth'. There are many plays about drug addicts, lesbians and murderers. But this is a drama about the human race. That is why he (the hero of the drama) wants him (the second hero). You thought it was only for a screw? He wants to escape from his loneliness, merge as one with another being, whoever it may be, he wants love.

There are no lies in this play, nor could there be. The heroes can lie about the KGB or the CIA, but they can't lie about life. Children are scared to enter a dark room because they are scared of seeing ghosts. You and I are reluctant to walk in the dark. Logically we understand there are no ghosts and corpses cannot rise from their graves in the cemetery. We know it. But we'd rather not walk through a cemetery at night. Nor do we like entering a dark room – especially a strange room.

...Not everyone can write such plays, but credit must go to the madman who evokes such wonderful dreams for mankind. Mankind needs wonderful dreams, particularly now, at this critical turning point. Physically, biologically and ecologically. First and foremost, we are in a state of moral crisis. Morality that was instilled in the Neanderthals, formalised several millennia later in Moses' Ten Commandments and then Christ's Sermon on the Mount. Why have the Commandments and the Sermon on the Mount stood the test of time? Because they make no further demand of man – these precepts are instilled in him by nature. Thou shalt not kill, for instance.

As for the subject matter of the drama 'Dead Man's Bluff', it is exclusively about lying. Lies about the KGB and his father, as well as the motives for murder. But what holds our attention? Why do we feel tension throughout, when there is virtually no plot? Because the plot develops in a spiral rather than a straight line. They talk about the KGB, then the CIA, then the KGB again; he killed, didn't kill, he was forced to kill, wasn't forced to kill. Motion driven by despair. The heroes are forever charging in one or another direction, impelled by despair. Suppose Arkady killed Felix, as he intended. Okay? The next day he gets a call: 'So you killed that Jew-boy, and you killed Felix. Here's your third assignment – kill another man. You don't want to? How come? You killed them, didn't you?' No way out. Even if he didn't kill Felix nothing will be changed by that – he still killed the Jew. We are talking about the canary. The canary is all they have left. Neither of them has anything else. One has it, the other wants to buy it. Most of all they both need it because the canary is from that other life and therefore without original sin. Possessing it is a kind of redemption. Why is the canary so important? It is like the dove carrying an olive branch at the end of the Flood. The canary is as important to the play as the finale with the razorblade. Why? Because there is a point when the principal character understands something (I won't presume to tell you) and what happens to them is not death, but worse than death. Finding the truth is also catharsis, when you hold your breath at the wonderful thing that happens as a result of all this ghastliness. ...There is something in this play that was absent from all other dramas written in the last few decades – let's say, after Tennessee Williams. That truth penetrates into deeper and more painful aspects than the truth disclosed by Vampilov, not to mention Petrushevskaya... The play introduces something new to the history of dramaturgy, for instance the fact that it could only be written in obscene language. Basically, Volokhov has delved deeper into that dreadful bottomless well. We all feared it was bottomless, but apparently this is not the case – Volokhov has shown us the lower depths. Interesting – they are playing cards. For what? For the canary! They are playing cards to win the only sacred object still remaining. Not for money. Money is of no use to them. Money would be used for yet another murder, or something of the sort. You understand? They are playing for their own selves. This is a very strange phenomenon – the American duel, called a 'Russian duel' in America. They put two bills in a hat and instead of shooting at one another, whoever gets the dud must shoot himself. You can see this duel as masochism and exhibitionism. Or alternatively, as a revelation. The principal characters' extraordinary self-revelation is what makes the play so extraordinary. If not justifying the repentant, we are at least inclined to withhold the death sentence. According to the Christian faith, the repentant sinner is saved from hell. He has killed and obviously sinned, but we forgive him – by God's law we must not kill. He has killed and must therefore be punished, but why does repentance before God and man matter? This is not logical. We are alarmed by the ferocity with which Volokhov's heroes repent. That is the secret of the play 'Dead Man's Bluff', the reason you can't look away. As you read you unintentionally learn about yourself. You may not be a pederast or a murderer, but you are confronted with the inevitability of repentance. Repentance is all we have left... In my opinion the force of this repentance makes Volokhov's drama an outstanding phenomenon.

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