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Akim Volynsky in the Two Worlds

Introduction

1

In keeping with the spirit of phenomenal unluckiness which pursued him wherever he turned in his life, even now, more than eighty years after the end, Akim Volynsky is the last of the Pleiades of Russian modernist critics, those masters ruling the minds and the moods of the early 20th century, to return to the Russian reader. So far, only three of his books have reappeared in print: *Kniga likovaniy: Azbuka klassivcheskogo tantza (The Book of Jubilations: A Primer of Classical Dance*, Leningrad, 1925), *Leonardo* (St. Petersburg, 1900), and *Dostoevsky* (1906). His *The Russian Critics* (1896) and *Leskov* (1898) remain bibliographic rarities, his gazette and magazine articles, except for those on ballet, have never yet been collected, to say nothing at all of the unpublished writings. It was only in the early 1990s that Professor Stanley Rabinovich (Amherst, USA) published the correspondence of Volynsky and Zinaida Gippius, as well as Volynsky's previously unpublished memoir article about Gippius, for the first time ever in English coming up with a full-fledged appraisal of Volynsky's literary output. The publication of these letters took place during the same period in *Minuvshee*, in parallel with the appearance of a number of articles, including some written by the present author.

Last year, the contemporary academic rethinking of Volynsky reached a new stage: an article by Aleksey Vdovin appeared, titled "*K istochnikam chetvertoy glavy Dara V. Nabokova*" ("To the Sources of the Fourth Chapter of *The Gift* by V. Nabokov")¹, in which the Nabokovian creative excursus into the history of the Russian critics of the sixties is read in light of Volynsky's book *The Russian*

¹ NOJ / HOЖ: Nabokov Online Journal, Vol. III / 2009.

Critics.

This is a remarkably significant shift, which indicates how central Volynsky is for 20th-century literature. Consider that up until and including the present time, academic and research discussions of Volynsky have still not overcome the inertia of the apologetic mode of discourse; still functional are the traditional legends, which can be reduced to a principal four: that Volynsky "was all about denying"; that he attacked the people who shared his own views; that he wrote poorly in Russian; and, most important of all, that, for some reason, he applied the desiccated and wholly inappropriate philosophical yardstick to literature. The article about the reception of Volynsky by Nabokov is a case in point, showing how primary the philosophical criterion seemed to be to Volynsky.

For this reason, it gives me considerable satisfaction to note that in an article by a German researcher, the name of Volynsky finally attains an appropriate setting:

The traditional power of Russian criticism and its talent for prophesy are both based on program articles, beginning with the yearly surveys by Belinsky, through the essays by the Symbolist critic Akim Volynsky, through the theorizing criticism by the Formalists Tynyanov and Eichenbaum, the articles by the thinkers of the Thaw Vladimir Pomerantzev and Vladimir Lakshin, and reaching up to the texts betokening the Perestroika period.²

An influential but disliked critic, acknowledged only posthumously and for only a brief moment in the late twenties of the last century, on the eve of "the intensification of the class struggle"³, during the 1890s Volynsky combined political leftism with a national-religious cultural position (to the waking dread of both "leftists" and "rightists"), thus constructing the platform on which the most gripping developments in Russian intellectual life of the approaching century would take place. But he himself turned out to be quite uninvolved in the success of his enterprise; and there has been no memoirist who was able to avoid racking

² Birgitte Menzel, "Peremeny v russkoy literaturnoy kritike. Vzglyad cherez nemetskiy teleskop" ("Changes in Russian Literary Criticism: A View through the German Telescope"), in *Neprikosnovenny Zapas (Untouchable Reserve)* 2003, №4 (30).

³ *Pamyati A.L.Volynskogo (In Memoriam of A. L. Volynsky)*, I, collection of articles ed. by P. Medvedev (1928).

his brains over this riddle.

2

Akim L'vovich Volynsky (Chaim Flekser, 1863-1926) came to Russian journalism from the Jewish press, bringing with him memories of the extreme radicalism and proud dignity of the Petersburg gazette *Rassvet* (*Daybreak*, 1882-1884), the first Palestinophile periodical in Russia, where he had matured and come into his own; he also brought with him recollections of conflict in the more moderate, assimilationist, Russian-language Jewish periodical *Voshod* (*Sunrise*) headed by Adolf Landau. The conflict might have brewed, firstly, around the overtly universalistic views of the youthful Volynsky, who attempted to make a group of his friends consolidate around *Voshod*—a coterie of young Russian and Jewish poets brought together by their love for Biblical verse; he published a number of pieces by Russian poets on Old Testament themes, including "Isaiah" by Merezhkovsky.⁴ Their desire to combine liberalism and the religious issue (a combination seen in those days as unnatural) soon became their joint platform in *Severnyi Vestnik* (*Herald of the North*): its failure at *Voskhod* had taught Volynsky nothing. Another possible reason for the journal's disenchantment with Volynsky may have been his continuing loyalty to the deceased *Rassvet* that he flaunted at the very pages of *Voshod*. The most likely reason for the conflict, though, seems to be the harshness of his criticism of the nascent Jewish-Russian literature in his series of articles on the important writer Lev Levanda looks. He had to leave *Voshod* and Jewish journalism and started working as a Russian literary critic.

Three years prior to his death (which occurred in 1926), Volynsky again concentrated on Jewish subjects: he wrote a number of outstanding articles, two of which, dealing with the Habima Theater, appeared in *Zhizn' iskusstva* (*The Life of Art*), a gazette where he was in charge of the ballet section. The articles discuss Jewishness and the Jewish People, putting forth ideas unprecedented, at least, for

⁴ This publication was not taken into account by Merezhkovsky bibliographers.

the Russian-language press. Habima took these articles with it like a priceless talisman everywhere on its wanderings, bringing them eventually with it to Eretz Yisrael. This interest of Volynsky's is what accounts for his "Rembrandt" (1924), a gigantic unpublished monograph,⁵ in which he outlines a comparative typology of the Russian and Jewish cultures, tracing this through such favorite themes of his as gestures, intonations, mimic, home, and family relationships.

In the interim between his modest debut in Jewish journalism and his infatuation with the Jewish theme in the old age stretched his entire life. Throughout these thirty years, Volynsky walked well nigh Christianity, even going so far as to study mystical practices on Mt. Athos; however, he was never baptized. At times he took an interest in Jewish issues, becoming involved in providing relief for victims of the Kishinev Pogrom here, or signing his books to Josef Khazanovich for the Jewish National Library in Jerusalem (of which the latter was founder) with promises of coming soon himself.

Upon making his move into Russian journalistic criticism in the late 1880s, Volynsky brought along with him the same intellectual orientation which he had proclaimed back in his Russian-Jewish critical phase. Volynsky looked at Russian literature with different eyes, as compared with most of his contemporaries. A wanderer from a neighboring oppressed minority culture, Jewish nationalist and narodnik that the young Volynsky was, he energetically called on the Jewish intelligentsia to drop their "universal" social ideals in favor of a spiritual and physical rebirth of their people. This meant acknowledging the people's values among which faith was central. The transfer of this "minority" thinking into Russian literature allowed him to see what was not as clearly visible to others.

What had enabled this vision? At the close of the 19th century, Volynsky equipped himself with Enlightenment universalistic categories: Spinozistic pantheism and the Kantian "Light of Reason" as an appliance for illuminating his own view of

⁵ It was accompanied by a number of essays published in 1923-1924 in the *Zhizn' iskusstva* gazette, and by a smaller unpublished book "The Hyperborean Hymn," (1923) (which he presented to the Habima Theater as to "an ideational union of people"). For further detail, see: Yelena Tolstaya, *Mir posle kontza: Raboty o russkoy literature XX veka* (*The World after the End: Writings on Russian Literature of the 20th Century*, Moscow: RGGU, 2002).

Russian culture considered *sub specie aeternitatis*. From this archaic height he could best appreciate the true size of Tolstoy and Dostoevsky, those two great archaists. The key measure, or the universal idea of the monotheistic rational "Spirit" turns out to have been imported from a neighboring culture, the gestating Russian-Jewish culture just then in the process of gathering and integrating the heritage of the German-Jewish Enlightenment or Haskalah. Among the varieties of Russian-Jewish synthesis realized in the course of the Silver Age of Russian literature, the version implemented at the early stage of the ideational creative work of Akim Volynsky appears as the one to have been studied the least.

Very likely, his "theological" criticism infuriated his readers precisely by the unasked for enormity of its measuring standard. Our hypothesis is that what we are facing here is really a point of view always externally situated with respect to the inner scale of values in Russian culture; Volynsky's approach is active, it is competitive, and it is also alien to such a great extent that, in contrast to the Judeo-Christian thinkers of the *Vekhi* (Landmarks) collection,* Volynsky was largely turned down by Russian culture.

3

In the dim Chekhovian time—in the late 1880s—a strange literary periodical opened in St. Petersburg under the name of *Severny Vestnik* (*Herald of the North*). It had been founded by two extravagant, emancipated, highly educated aristocratic narodnik ladies. A noteworthy feature of the new publication was its Semitophilia: specifically here was the point where entry into Russian literature was granted to the Jewish-Russian poets Minsky and the "half-and-half" Nadson.

Severny Vestnik immediately changed the map of the literary-political everyday routine. It should be remembered that in the then super-politicized Russian society, a strict ideological polarization was in effect. A number of generations had grown

* Collection of essays by Russian thinkers and publicists, subtitled: "*Sbornik statey o russkoy intelligentsii*" ("Collection of Articles on the Russian Intelligentsia"). The collection appeared in 1909 in Moscow. *Translator's note.*

up with the certainty that spiritual values such as God, idealism, beauty, all connote oppression, ignorance, or feudalism. Atheism, by contrast, along with the natural sciences, turned out to be on the side of the suffering people. Tolstoy, in this system of values, was a retrograde and a benighted bigot, Dostoyevsky a renegade, and Gogol a fanatical reactionary. Poetry, except for Nekrasov's, was almost unknown. Art and verse were tolerated only insofar as they were useful, that is, if they contained "practical" information or "honest ideas." All this entailed, alas, an intellectual and artistic shallowness. The reader, glum and despondent, turned to foreign literature.

In the late 1880s, Volynsky together with his friend and fellow Merezhkovsky joined the circle of *Severny vestnik*. In 1890, the periodical came under the control of Volynsky's group. *Severny vestnik* dared to combine political leftism with free discussion of religious and spiritual issues. From its pages, the young Chekhov and Merezhkovsky declared war upon tendentious literary compositions.

In 1891, Volynsky in print attacked Nicholas Mikhailovsky, a most influential critic who had become a hateful opponent.⁶ An ever intensifying polemic ensued, leading to Mikhailovsky's publicly insulting Volynsky. An attempt at reconciliation did not correct matters. Following Mikhailovsky, who had at some length taken issue with a phrase used by Volynsky, the entire press, especially of the anti-Semitic kind, went in for taunting the Jewish critic. Even Volynsky's friends criticized him for his polemic with Mikhailovsky. In an 1892 lecture Merezhkovsky scathingly referred to Volynsky as to "an accidental arrival." Volynsky, on his own risk and responsibility, undertakes a "reevaluation of values"; to the accompaniment of ululation from the right and the left at once, he attempts to educate the Russian reader in the eternal values of the spirit: philosophy, religion, and esthetics, teaching the reader, in a way reminiscent of

⁶ Volynsky republished the chapter titled "*Talant i iskra Bozhiya*" ("Talent and the Divine Spark"), an excerpt from *Karyera Oladushkina (Oladushkin's Career)*, a novel by N. K. Mikhailovsky, accompanying this with a harsh commentary. (*Severny Vestnik* 1891, № 1, pp. 150-166).

Matthew Arnold, not to be satisfied with everyday routine tendentiousness and naturalistic verisimilitude. Merezhkovsky had tried to do the same thing, also with no success, until he had mastered the belletristic form and gone on to a synthesis of criticism and belletristic writing, which made him famous, achieving for him the renown of the first critic in all of Russia.

Never satisfied, unlike Merezhkovsky, with impressionistic touches, but rather reaching out for an investigation of the historical reasons for the modern decline of literature, Volynsky initiated an all-out attack against the pillars of Russian criticism, beginning with Belinsky. His chief complaint against it was the absence in it of a substantial philosophical foundation. What this amounted to in practice was that Volynsky required that criticism have a worldview incorporating the recognition of the existence of independent metaphysical values; his criticism was referred to as "theological." He considered utilitarian, tendentious literature a symptom of the bourgeois, and called for a spiritual evolution.

Volynsky devoted his life to the study of the "spiritual in art"; his theoretical conversations with Tolstoy in Yasnaya Polyana anticipated, in part, the problematic of the latter's treatise "What Is Art?," then still in the future. In his first significant literary work, *"Nravstvennaya filosofiya grafa L'va Tolstogo"* ("The Moral Philosophy of Count Leo Tolstoy"),⁷ he attempted to oppose Mikhailovsky's thoughtless attacks on the writer with a profound analysis of Tolstoyan religious searches. Although Volynsky did not accept the Tolstoyan negation of metaphysics, which he saw as stemming from lack of the personal element in the Russian psyche, he, in contrast to most Russian critics, pronounced his philosophy of non-resistance to be the most significant event in Russian intellectual life.

In 1893, Volynsky begins to publish a series of most scrupulously grounded literary-historical essays,⁸ tracing the history of Russian criticism as the struggle

⁷ *Severny Vestnik* 1891, № 10, pp. 185-216.

⁸ A series of articles in *Severny vestnik*, in the "Literaturnye zametki" ("Literary Notes") section, during the period 1893-1895, later collected into the book *Russkie kritiki* (*The Russian Critics*, St. Petersburg, 1896).

against Russian poetry, particularly against Pushkin. *The Russian Critics* (1896) is a sort of utopia which reconstructs earlier debates, letting the vanquished have the right of say. Volynsky explains how, following Bakunin, Belinsky failed to understand Hegel; in a different argument with Belinsky, he attempts to rehabilitate Gogol's "Selected Passages from Correspondence with Friends;" he hears out Yurkevich and Pyotr Lavrov in great detail, the two who had been subject to attack by Chernyshevsky and Antonovich. He also outlines life stories of Russian critics, often tragic, with compassion, which does not prevent him from disagreeing with them. Already as early as his *The Russian Critics*, together with "denying," he also "affirms," moving to the forefront the figure of Dostoyevsky-as-critic who had reconciled Russian poetry with Russian civics, and Herzen, who had combined the love of liberty with ideational a-dogmatism. *The Russian Critics* reads partly as a novel about literature, and partly as a research work in literary studies. But the press was furious when it read *The Russian Critics* as an attempt to struggle against the monopoly of Belinsky, Chernyshevsky, and Pisarev; the book was crushed. *Severny vestnik* saw the rage of both the right and the left descend upon its head. Volynsky was subjected to a pitiless boycott. Among the few who were able to appreciate *The Russian Critics* for what the work was really worth were Rozanov, who kissed the author on both cheeks for it, and I. Yassinsky, who wrote about the wonderful Russian style and the noble, austere spirit of this book.⁹ In the articles by Volynsky and Merezhkovsky that particular hierarchy is constructed, which finally, by our time, came to be perceived as the natural in Russian literature, and which is to us habitual, with Pushkin, Tolstoy, and, beginning in the sixties, also Dostoyevsky in the center.

⁹ Cf. :

The loftily Christian ideas of our Russian authors find a warm supporter in him. At the same time, Mr. Volynsky can least of all be castigated for commitment to any exclusive party whatsoever. Since we are taking up the issue, let us note that he thinks and writes in a vein much more liberal than all of our liberals. Two more words. Mr. Volynsky is constantly being reprimanded... for his language, and when the subject is brought up, everyone thinks back to "spiral lines" or something else of that kind.

The book to which I am referring, however, demonstrates that the author, if he only wishes, can do without unnecessary rhetorical escapades. It is written in a style that is austere, clear, and noble.

Quoted from N. Molostvov, *Boretz za idealism: Slovo pravdy ob A.L. Volynskom* (*A Fighter for Idealism: The Word of Truth about A.L. Volynsky*, Riga, 1902), p. 78.

In the mid-1890s, *Severny vestnik* is besieged by debt, but its subscription lists are growing. Volynsky's critical essays, a novel by Merezhkovsky, poems of Balmont and Sologub all have their share in shaping the image of the periodical. This is a publication sensitively responsive to European novelties, one that chooses first-class authors for translation. The same period is marked by a growing closeness between Volynsky and Merezhkovsky's wife Zinaida Gippius, with Volynsky in the role of her spiritual guide: she is intrigued by his severe maximalism. Their dialogue about love, God, and beauty is conducted under the sign of Dostoyevsky (not for naught does Gippius give one of the characters of her novella, under whose guise Volynsky can be discerned, the name of Kirillov¹⁰ —the name of one of the characters in *The Devils*, the most extreme of the spiritual searchers in Dostoyevsky, who challenges God). Out of the crucible of this love relationship Volynsky emerges as having become more open to esthetic experience, while Gippius, previously a novelist, steps forth as a poet of some significance. The culmination is the trip Volynsky takes together with the Merezhkovskys to Italy in 1895 (described by Gippius in her novella "*Zerkala*" ("The Mirrors")¹¹), when she puts her family life at stake; however, Volynsky breaks off his relationship with her. Shortly thereafter, Merezhkovsky leaves the periodical, whereupon immediately the scandal centering on *The Russian Critics* breaks out. Readers' interest in the periodical declines, and, in 1898, *Severny vestnik* ceases to exist.

All of Volynsky's literary criticism of the 1890s turns out to be remarkably of a piece: in his book on Leskov, he struggles against tendentiousness from the right and against tendentiousness from the left, against the exposition of daily life, against the anecdotal, and against the juggling of language; in his series of articles about the decadents, he fights against the fashionable immorality and pretentiousness. The same order of priorities prevails as in the tractate on Tolstoy. To naturalism, that is, to the petty-grade, to the grassroots, to the soulful (rather

¹⁰ See Z. N. Gippius, "*Zlatotzvet. Peterburgskaya novella*" ("Asphodel: A Petersburg Novella"), in *Severny vestnik* 1896, № 2, pp. 222-260; № 3, pp. 1-40; № 4, pp. 149-184. (I am grateful to Ye. V. Ivanova for this observation.)

¹¹ *Severny vestnik* 1896, № 11, pp. 1-47.

than the spiritual), and to decadence in which the healthy is confused with the ill and the spiritual with the lowly, he contrasts his phantom of the purely spiritual art. He seeks the spiritual horizons of Russian literature, questing for the "atharaxic philosophical contemplation of the universe" which should be capable of saving humanity from the decomposing effect of current trifles. From a modern point of view, "atharaxic philosophy" constitutes a rather bizarre combination. We will shortly see what he really meant.

In pursuit of the phantom of an alternative, purely spiritual art, Volynsky turns to art history. During the 1890s, he studies the Renaissance and specifically Leonardo as an artist who should provide him with the key to contemporary decadence. The living riddle of decadence is something Volynsky resolves by penetrating the atmosphere of the Renaissance, whose art he sees as mixed, impure, pagan-Christian, repulsive, temptingly naturalistic, and devoid of spirituality.

Throughout the 1890s, Volynsky conducts a campaign against his closest colleagues, the first writers of Russian modernism: while publishing them in his periodical he subjects them to hard but not ungrounded criticism, primarily for their lack of taste and love of cheap effects. He is disturbed by the confusion of the higher spiritual and the repulsively lower or trivial impulses in their work: by ambivalence, or the inability of making a choice between two initiating principles.¹²

His judgments concerning contemporary literature exude impatience: where is it, then, that art which is great? He is at his most prejudiced when dealing with writers in search of a renewal of ideas or forms. His complete lack of deference toward those authors, who live and work so close to him, enables Volynsky to comment upon things that, generally speaking, should not be commented upon in a laudatory review. This is why his readings of their work unswervingly provoked the fury and

¹² Cf. his "*Literaturnye zametki. Novoe techenie v sovremennoy russkoy literature*" ("Literary Notes: A New Current in Contemporary Russian Literature") in *Severny vestnik* 1896, № 12, pp. 235-264.

the surprise of Volynsky's friends (for instance, his strictures against Leskov¹³), but for the same reason, as well, for us these readings retain the precious imprint of the immediate response of a contemporary both intellectually and socially close to the text.

Another instance of the same overly demanding attitude was his approach to Chekhov. Purely "spiritual art" was something that Volynsky did not find in anybody's work: even Dostoyevsky is for him no more than a road leading to the art of the future. But if such art can exist at all, then it shines through in the later Chekhov, writings that won Volynsky over in the end.

The monograph on Leonardo,¹⁴ a most original piece of work, with brilliant observations and bold demystifying conclusions, leads Volynsky to the deep-seated issue in art: its dependence on the dark forces of nature. But, rebelling against this dependence, and in love with the neo-Christian quest of Tolstoy,¹⁵ Volynsky replies to the dark, archaic Dionysian ecstasies proclaimed by Nietzsche that the modern period has provided new ways of replenishing vital forces, the ways of Socrates, Buddha, Christ: all this implies the victory of light and harmony over chaos.¹⁶ He commits art to the monopoly of Apollo, the approach of whose future rule he proclaims some ten years prior to the appearance of the Moscow publishing house and the Petersburg periodical. And then, when, finally, his ideas gain control over the then current ways of thinking and when the periodical *Apollon*, in whose creation he played a major role, appears, he breaks with his colleagues at the new journal: Vyacheslav Ivanov and Innokentiy Annensky¹⁷—in perfect keeping with his age-old pattern.

¹³ Cf. A. Volynsky, *N.S. Leskov: Kriticheskiy ocherk (N.S. Leskov: A Critical Sketch)*, St. Petersburg, 1898).

¹⁴ "V poiskah za Leonardo da Vinci" ("In Search of Leonardo da Vinci"), I, in *Severny vestnik* 1897, № 9, pp. 179-196, and II, 1897, № 10, pp. 193-226; III, 1897, № 11, pp. 226-259; IV, 1897, № 12, pp. 191-243. "Leonardo da Vinci, ego zhizn' i nauchno-filosofskie trudy" ("Leonardo da Vinci, His Life and Scientifico-Philosophical Works") I, 1898, № 1, pp. 203-243; II, 1892, № 2, pp. 203-244; III, 1898, № 3, pp. 232-264; IV, 1898, № 4, pp. 185-222 (St. Petersburg, 1900).

¹⁵ Volynsky's support for Tolstoy came to the fore in his reviews of 1895-1896 of the 14th volume of the writings of L. N. Tolstoy and of "Vlast' t'my" ("Power of Darkness").

¹⁶ Cf. "Apollon i Dionis" ("Apollo and Dionysus") in *Severny vestnik* 1896, № 11, pp. 232-255.

¹⁷ Cf. A. V. Lavrov, R. D. Timenchik, "Innokentiy Annenskiy v neizdannykh vospominaniyah" ("Innokentiy Annenskiy in Unpublished Memoirs") in *Pamyatniki kul'tury. Novye otkrytiya. Pis'mennost'. Iskusstvo. Arheologiya: Ezhegodnik (Landmarks of Culture: New Discoveries, Writing, Art, Archeology: An Annual Publication)*, Moscow, 1983), p. 69.

His answer to the question about the possibility of contemporary idealistic art is to be found in Volynsky's series of works on Dostoyevsky, written at the turn of the century.¹⁸ To some extent he takes Rozanov as his point of departure, as well as, doubtlessly, Merezhkovsky, competition with whom left its mark on all of the 1890s for Volynsky; Merezhkovsky's lack of independence as a thinker and the compilation-like character of his writing are points that Volynsky never tires of reiterating. In contrast to Tolstoy, Volynsky reconstructs Dostoyevsky's profound system of values as centering around the "personal" idea, creating a kind of comparative metaphysical typology of the individual.

At this time he makes the acquaintance of German intellectuals of Freud's circle and obviously learns from them about the theory of psychoanalysis. This can be guessed from the fact that his series of articles on Dostoyevsky constitutes a psychoanalysis turned inside out, proceeding from faith in the benignity and "morality" of the unconscious foundations of human being. It is specifically the unconscious that, in his thinking, turns out to be coordinated along the axis of good and evil, and precisely by means of the unconscious does humanity turn out to be connected with the Divine: it is Raskolnikov's unconscious soul that gets in the way of the act of murder intended by his sick evil reason. The mental illnesses suffered by Dostoyevsky's characters—Stavrogin, Ivan Karamazov—just as in Freud, stem from the conflict between the different levels of the psyche, except that the conflict is understood in just the opposite direction: it is not the stagnated primitive levels of the psyche that are in revolt because they are in opposition to the psyche's rational echelons, but rather the healthy living unconscious foundations refuse to subordinate to the errant intellect.

¹⁸ Volynsky's articles of the early 1890s, collected in his book *The Russian Critics* (1896), followed by two sketches dating from 1897: "V kupe" ("In the Train Compartment") and "U Palkina" ("At Palkin's"), and then, finally, by the series of articles on *The Idiot*: "Velikiy bezumetz" ("The Great Madman," in the book *Bor'ba za idealism (The Struggle for Idealism)*, St. Petersburg, 1900), "Tzarstvo Karamazovyh" ("The Karamazov Kingdom," St. Petersburg, 1901), "Kniga velikogo gneva" ("The Book of Great Wrath," vol. 1-2, St. Petersburg, 1902, St. Petersburg, 1904), and "Dostoyevsky," vol. 1-2 (St. Petersburg, 1906). An excellent review of Volynsky's piece on Dostoyevsky was written by M. Shaginyan; cf. M. Shaginyan, "Dostoyevsky pod znakom Apollona" ("Dostoyevsky under the Sign of Apollo") in *Literaturny dnevnik (A Literary Diary)*, Prague, 1923), pp. 77-84.

In the mid-1890s, Volynsky is the first to introduce the dichotomy of decadence and symbolism. But at the end of the century, the Merezhkovskys, forgetting Nietzschean temptations and "beauty," approach Christian Orthodoxy in its ecclesiastical forms, and take up the negative criticism of "decadentism." Then Volynsky rehabilitates decadence as a necessary stage in the free spiritual quest which destroys dogma in order to direct itself toward a new, unknown ideal. Merezhkovsky understands Dostoyevsky as a road leading national consciousness to the Church. Volynsky pokes light fun at Merezhkovsky's sudden Orthodoxy, proposing instead his own conception of Dostoyevsky as a profoundly personal and entirely a-dogmatic religious vision.

Already back in his *Leonardo*, Volynsky was taken with the language of plastic representation, with deciphering the symbolic nature of the physical image in art. It may be that in Merezhkovsky's idea of Tolstoy, that "seer of the flesh," whom he opposed to Dostoyevsky as "seer of the spirit" we are in the presence of traces of these initially joint interests of the two critics. Volynsky, may be polemically, paints Dostoyevsky in particular as the seer of the flesh, brilliantly deciphering the mysterious passages in his writings based on the symbolism of the body. Volynsky was thus a pioneer who introduced the body in criticism in his studies on body symbolism in literature and art. He also was the first to speak of sexual psychopathology (in his studies on Leonardo and Dostoyevsky).

Volynsky of the 1890s turned out to be a prophet misunderstood and ridiculed. But the return of the Russian intellectual society to idealism, largely due to his own efforts, triumphed as early as the beginning of the new century as part of the platform of the "New Idealism." Pages from Volynsky's articles were, literally, being copied over by the dozen, without reference to the original publications, especially his works on Dostoyevsky,¹⁹ which had gone unnoticed at the time of

¹⁹ See: M. B. Ratner, "*Problemy idealizma v russkoy literature*" ("Issues of Idealism in Russian Literature") in *Russkoe bogatstvo* (*The Russian Wealth*) 1903, №№ 8, 9; anonymous review by A. Lunacharsky of "The Book of Great Wrath" in the periodical *Pravda* (*Truth* 1904, № 3), pp. 226-231; N. G. Molostvov, *Volynsky i noveyshie idealisty* (*Volynsky and the Newest Idealists*, St. Petersburg, 1905), as well as A. Gisetti, "*Ot knigi k cheloveku*" ("From the Book to the Man") in *Pamyati Volynskogo* (*In Memoriam of Volynsky*, Leningrad, 1928).

their first appearance in print. S. Bulgakov and N. Berdyaev, the religious philosophers who went on lifting whole pages out of these works, are even today still considered the real innovators in Dostoyevsky studies. In Germany, Volynsky's book on Dostoyevsky, his magnum opus in Russian literature, became a classic while in Russia it has only recently been republished.

At the same time, the younger generation of 1900s who were raised on Volynsky's books, never missed an opportunity to remind Volynsky that he had outlived himself and cannot pretend to have a role to play in contemporary literature.²⁰ Volynsky had to suffer the consequences of the loss of the periodical which, as he had thought, had fulfilled its purpose and was no longer called for: he was now being published only by second-rate periodicals (*Petersburgskaya Gazeta*, *Birzhevaya Gazeta*). The monographs which he had published, one after the other, in the early 1900s, no longer have the same lively resonance, nor the same audience, as before. By the middle of the first decade of the new century, Volynsky had been completely assimilated, digested, and, for all intents and purposes, cast out of the literary process: in the years of the first Russian revolution, when he, without grounds, acquired the reputation of a "rightist" thinker, his literary career is definitively undone. Ousted from literature, Volynsky studies art, questing for the spiritual horizons in Byzantine and Russian religious painting, studying frescoes and icon painting. At the beginning of the century, Volynsky is attracted to theater, which, to his mind, needs to be "theatrical," passionate, idealistic rather than naturalistic as in Stanislavsky's Art Theater; in this sense, he anticipates later historical developments. In 1905 he heads the literary department at the Komissarzhevsky Theater, even trying his hand at stage directing (under his "ideational tutelage" the year 1905 sees the production, and an excellent production at that, of "The Master Builder" by Ibsen). He also speaks out against Meyerhold, who replaced him and whom he considers the decadent perversion of theater. Finally, he turns to study the liturgical foundations of theater,

²⁰ See: Avreliy (V. Bryusov), "*Kniga velikogo gneva*" ("The Book of Great Wrath"), in *Vesy* 1904, № 2, pp. 67-68; A. Bely, "A.L. Volynsky: 'Dostoyevsky'," in *Zolotoe Runo (The Golden Fleece)* 1906, № 2, pp. 127-130.

finding finally the purely spiritual art for which he has been searching: it is ballet. Dance, for Volynsky, would become nothing other than the real, practical transformation of the flesh by the spirit.

In 1909, following the confrontation within the editorial board of *Apollon*, Volynsky is cast off to the periphery of the literary process. He works for the *Birzhevaya Gazeta*, which it was customary at the time to comment upon with a note of disdain, as about an unprincipled commercial publication operating under predominantly Jewish influence. It is here that he soon becomes a leading ballet critic. Behind the scenes, he is also drawn into affairs of the Jewish theater, becoming involved in its struggle for survival, supporting Jewish playwrights, advancing Jewish plays (writer Evgeny Chirikov, present at some of these proceedings, was indignant about the fact that the Jewish daily round of domestic life is an OK subject matter, while the Russian is not). Volynsky's role in helping the Jewish theater of the pre-Revolutionary years remains yet to be more thoroughly elucidated—all that is known is that he was the closest associate of Khodotov and Kugel, those principal patrons of the Jewish theater.

Volynsky becomes the mentor of the young disciples of literature studies in St. Petersburg, who first gather about Shatzkina's *Severnye zapiski* (*Notes from the North*). In 1916, he is appointed principal of the critico-bibliographic section at the *Birzhevka* (*Birzhevskaya Gazeta*), and invites Eikhenbaum and the young Shklovsky, the future Formalists, to take part.

But his real return to literature takes place after the Revolution. Even though Volynsky remains stoically convinced of the irreversibility of the outer changes taking place in Russia, he continues to persist in his idealism. He is unsuccessful in the attempt to emigrate for Italy, where he had begged for a "creative working assignment"; however, in recompense, he is for the first time ever surrounded by acclaim and general veneration. He becomes Chairman of the Writers' Union (*Soyuz pisateley*), and he works on the editorial board of *Vsemirnaya literatura* (*World Literature*); he also writes copiously for *Zhizn' iskusstva* (*Life of Art*),

where he heads a department and where he publishes, possibly in response to the challenge of the Formalist school, a series of essays applying to literature the formal concepts and methods of thinking accepted in art history. Precisely during the heyday of this NEP euphoria, in 1923, Volynsky composes his Jewish cycle: he is involved with Habima and the new Jewish agenda which made its appearance after the proclamation of the Balfour Declaration in Palestine and the revolutionary developments in Russia. His essays of the 1920s, for all intents and purposes, largely lay the real foundations for comparative Russian-Jewish cultural studies or even semiotics of culture. But the idyll is short lived: as early as 1925 he is jostled out of both *Zhizn' Iskusstva* and the ballet.

At the turn of the decade of the twenties, and possibly even a little earlier, Volynsky finds an audience as the strange and heroic prophet of a religion misunderstood, a creed in which Apollo is identified with Christ. Eikhenbaum was repelled by the "mystique" of Volynsky's deathbed "fanatical and fantastical" conception of the spiritual evolution of mankind²¹; its particular details—the "Tabor circles" within the human being and the spiral ascent toward the Spirit—are referred to in a passage by Olga Forsch.²² What is this, yet another version of anthroposophy or theosophy? Then what about his much discussed rationalism? Finally, at the very end, Volynsky did, despite everything, create a myth, thus proving consonant to Russian literature. He had to be chased into the catacombs together with it in order for this to take place.

Volynsky influenced many people who preferred not to admit it. Andrey Bely at the beginning of his career as a critic was a direct continuator of Volynsky.²³ The critical compositions by Anton Krayniy-Gippius convey an echo of Volynsky's ideas and valuations. (This pseudonym itself as if conflates Chekhov, that "*Anton Bedny*" ("Poor Anton") in Merezhkovsky's phrase, with the "extremist"—*krayniy*—Volynsky.) The young Chukovsky worshipped Volynsky to whom he

²¹ See: B. Eichenbaum, *Iz vpechatleniy ob A.L. Volynskom: Pamyati Akima Volynskogo (From Impressions of A.L. Volynsky: In Memoriam of Akim Volynsky)*, Leningrad, 1928), pp. 44-46.

²² See: O. Forsch, *Sumashedshiy korabl' (The Mad Ship)*, Berlin, 1929).

²³ Compare his notion of Chekhov in the generally well known article of 1904 in *Vesy*. This did not interfere with Bely's proclamation of Volynsky as being out of date. Cf. *Vesy* 1905, № 12, p. 68.

later became a rival and developed a dislike. In 1920s the elite of the younger generation of the literary bent all but deified him, from the brothers Gukovsky to Marietta Shaginyan. He hovers about the early prose of Konstantin Vaginov, standing behind Teptelkin from *Kozlinaya Pesnya* (*Goat Song**; the only example from the book written by Teptelkin is suspiciously reminiscent of a passage from *The Book of Jubilations*).

Volynsky often appears as a character in fiction, beginning with works by I. Yassinsky and Gippius of the 1890s, and to the early novels by Konstantin Fedin: *Bratya* (*Brothers*), *Goroda i gody* (*Cities and Years*) and Marietta Shaginyan: *Peremena* (*The Change*) in the 1920s, and, finally, the retrospective composition by Olga Forsch (*Sumaschedshiy korabl'*, (*The Mad Ship*), 1929) and the later Vladimir (Zeev) Zhabotinsky's *Pyatero* (*The Five*), 1936).

4

Guessing at the reasons for the inconsonance of Volynsky to the culture which failed to appreciate him, we wander among possible hypotheses.

Perhaps, the reason is that Volynsky was too learned for a critic, and too ideational for an academic man of learning?

Or else, that he was bizarre and exotic at every one of the stages of his career? A specialist in the Church Fathers cast as a ballet observer, a fighter against anti-Semitism, one of the first Russian Zionists—and that selfsame writer an infatuated interpreter of Dostoyevsky? The list of contradictions can go on endlessly.

Or was the matter that he turned out to be unable to remain loyal to temporary allies, and, without fail, at some point began to attack those who were supposed to be "his own"? So that by the early 1910s it became manifest that he had no social support backing him, so that he was simply no longer being listened to...

We must right away get rid of the version about his Jewish accent (which is not noticeable already at the turn of the century) and bad style. His 1891 phrase about the "new brain line" conjugated in all the possible and impossible ways by the press, will remain a singular instance—not even of a Jewish accent, but rather of

* Alternatively also rendered in English as "The Tower" and "Satyr Chorus." *Translator's note.*

an excessive expressivity of a critic clearly well read in languages with more unfettered norms than the Russian.

To this day, he is being reprimanded for having allegedly imported "external" or "disallowed" criteria into literary criticism: the philosophical, the theological, and the like. But the importation of such criteria is a general and basic feature of Symbolism, so that Volynsky was acting in perfect accord with his times. And indeed, behind Volynsky's criticism there is always an external or disallowed standard: the demand for "philosophy," or for "idealism," or else the call not for soulfulness, but for spirituality.

Something else was the reason for the annoyance with him, something that Merezhkovsky in a 1892 lecture labeled as "aridity." When looked into, this aridity turns out to be a feature not external, but essential to Volynsky's work.

Against the backdrop of the flowering of Symbolic art, of prerevolutionary culture of the elite with its "spontaneous" and "unconscious" dominant note, with its purely romantic desire for the Fall and for a dissolution in nature, in the masses, in chaos—that is, with its desire for death, Volynsky in a completely uncontemporary fashion was singing the praises of clarity, of rationality, of "harmoniousness," preaching the refusal of all unconscious and accidental elements in art. He attempted to find a counterweight to the Nietzschean "Dyonisian" "dark" ecstasies in ecstatic experience of the new "Apollonian" kind, which was all "light". He struggled against "Falls" and "falling away" of all types: into paganism, into barbarity, into nationalism, into conservatism. Struggled against atheistic prejudice in the form of bans on metaphysics and religion, and struggled against Satanism and the fashionable forms of confusing the spiritual with the sensory, always fighting in the name of Reason and Spirit, which were, for him as they had been in the 18th century, synonymous; he went on fighting in the name of universal Enlightenment truths, whose time had passed.

His unpopularity cannot be explained away by simple anti-Semitism; after all, his contemporaries, the Jews Gershenzon and Vengerov, were accorded considerable

recognition and acclaim. Was not the rejection of Volynsky at the turn of the century akin to the religious rejection commensurate with the denouncing-prophetic role, the role of the defender of the "true faith," which he attempted to take upon himself in culture?

Volynsky was in strident opposition to his colleagues from the religious-philosophic circles. Russian criticism, as he believed, had always only been an ideology of group platforms, with a grounding in the emotions rather than in the "eternal values" of the spirit. This feature, the "purely emotional attitude to issues of the spirit, while maintaining an outer reasonableness,"²⁴ — was something that in 1910 Volynsky singled out as principal for Russian culture. He found it disturbing: logic for an educated Russian is only a maid servant of his emotions; a Russian does not follow his spirit, but is locked into the surrounding circle of his emotional (psychological) travails. Consider this:

And behold, upon the soil of this very emotionality, the religious movement which I brought up at the beginning (the new religious consciousness of *Voprosy Zhizni* (the periodical *Questions of Life*)—H.T.) becomes for us mysterious like the Sphinx: Russia may become the new Bethlehem... unless this is just a new variety of an emotional running start and destruction, a new Gogolean troika rushing headlong in a direction no one can know...²⁵

This bitter comment of 1910 reads as if it had been made in 1918, anticipating the moods and mindsets of the collection *Iz glubiny* (*Out of the Depths*).

Critics turned mythopoeists as ideologues of a mass religious consciousness which had been frightening Volynsky as a "profanation" and a "compilation" had met with success of a kind that repelled the "critically minded" Volynsky.

What is this reminiscent of? This is, of course, the precious, momentarily slipping into oblivion type of Russian Jewish idealist, optimist, and rationalist, naively believing despite everything in the light of science and the inevitability of progress. Clearly, every time he risked looking flat and unappealing, risked being confused with well-behaved archaizer moralists, of whom there were plenty in Russian culture, especially among the Jews. In practice, however, he was a central figure in

²⁴ See: A. Volynsky, *Bog ili bozhen'ka. Kuda my idiom?* (*God Or Homey Image: Where Are We Headed?*, Moscow, 1910), pp. 25-32.

²⁵ *Ibid.*

the modernist camp, moving ahead of his times—but this was evident only to a small circle of admirers looking far into the distant future.