

## To the Problem of Critical Reflection, or Akim Volynsky on The Problem of Philosophy of The World

### Eleştirel Düşünme Sorununa ya da Akim Volynsky Dünya Felsefesi Sorunu Üzerine

### К Проблема Критической Рефлексии, или Аким Волынский о Проблема Философии Мира

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#### Abstract

The article analyses Akim Volynsky's system of value orientations. The article focuses on a number of paradoxical judgements of the critic due to the contradictory nature of his worldview and the incompleteness of his critical system as a whole. The aim of the article is to examine the critic's polemical concepts reflected in his assessments of literary criticism of the 1960s and decadence. The subject of the article are articles, critical essays, correspondence materials of Akim Volynsky, the object is his system of value orientations. The novelty and relevance of the article lies in the fact that Akim Volynsky as an art theorist and critic is one of the contradictory figures of the late 19th - early 20th century, therefore, his works, directly derived from his ontological orientations, deserve a more objective study. Phenomenological, historical-typological, structural methods, as well as the method of content analysis were used in the analysis.

**Keywords:** Intellectual, critical reflection, crisis consciousness, world model

#### Öz

Bu makale Akim Volynsky'nin değer yönelimleri sistemini analiz etmektedir. Makale, eleştirmenin dünya görüşünün çelişkili doğası ve bir bütün olarak eleştirel sisteminin eksikliğinden kaynaklanan bir dizi paradoksal yargısına odaklanmaktadır. Makalenin amacı, eleştirmenin 1960'ların edebiyat eleştirisi ve dekadans değerlendirmelerinde yansıttığı polemik kavramlarını incelemektir. Makalenin konusu Akim Volynsky'nin makaleleri, eleştirel denemeleri, yazışma materyalleri, nesnesi ise onun değer yönelimleri sistemidir. Makalenin yeniliği ve önemi, bir sanat kuramcısı ve eleştirmeni olarak Akim Volynsky'nin 19. yüzyıl sonu - 20. yüzyıl başının çelişkili figürlerinden biri olmasında yatmaktadır, bu nedenle doğrudan ontolojik yönelimlerinden türetilen eserleri daha nesnel bir çalışmayı hak etmektedir. Analizde fenomenolojik, tarihsel-tipolojik, yapısal yöntemlerin yanı sıra içerik analizi yöntemi de kullanılmıştır.

**Anahtar kelimeler:** Entelektüel, eleştirel düşünme, kriz bilinci, dünya modeli

#### Аннотация

В статье представлен анализ системы ценностных ориентиров Акима Волынского. Сделан акцент на ряде парадоксальных суждений критика, обусловленных противоречивостью его мировидения и незавершенностью критической системы в целом. Цель статьи: рассмотреть полемические концепции критика, которые нашли отражение в его оценках литературной критики 60-х гг. XIX в. и декадана. Предметом статьи стали статьи, критические очерки материалы переписки Акима Волынского, объектом - его система ценностных ориентиров. Новизна и актуальность статьи состоят в том, что Аким Volynsky как теоретик искусства и критик является одной из противоречивых фигур конца XIX – начала XX века, следовательно, его труды, непосредственно вытекающие из его онтологических ориентиров, заслуживают более объективного исследования. При анализе были использованы феноменологический, историко-типологический, структуральный методы, а также метод контент-анализа.

**Ключевые Слова:** Онтология, критическая рефлексия, кризисное сознание, миромоделирование

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## Introduction

As an art theorist and critic, Akim Volynsky is one of the most controversial figures of the literary process of the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Note: Until the 1950s there was a ban on mentioning his name, although in the 1920s he headed the Petrograd branch of the Writers' Union and the board of the World Literature publishing house. Many of Akim Volynsky's studies in the field of cultural philosophy, comparative cultural studies, the works of F. Dostoevsky and N. Leskov are bibliographical rarities to this day. The first significant assessments of his literary and critical activity were made in the works of E. Tolstaya (Israel) and B. Menzel (Germany). Attempts at a scientific approach to Akim Volynsky's legacy in the last decade can be seen in the articles of V. Kotelnikov, L. Pild, K. Sozina and others. B. Menzel notes the following fact: "The traditional strength of Russian criticism, its ability to prophesy, is based on programme articles, beginning with V. Belinsky's annual reviews, through the essays of the symbolist critic Akim Volynsky, the theoretical criticism of the formalists Y. Tynyanov and B. Eichenbaum, the articles of the thaw thinkers Vladimir Pomerantsev and Vladimir Lakshin, up to the pioneering texts of the perestroika era" (Menzel, 2003: 150).

## A Presentation of The Core Material

The collection of selected works by V. Toporov, *The Petersburg Text of Russian Literature*, notes the broad "conceptual" influence of Akim Volynsky on the literary process of the 1920s. In all likelihood, this assessment is made primarily because Akim Volynsky's criticism was philosophical and aesthetic. In addition, Akim Volynsky pointed out the value of philosophical and religious knowledge and proclaimed his model of an idealistic world view of culture, in opposition to the positivist one that "reigned" in that period. In this regard, he anticipated the solution of problems that would become topical in the cultural space of the twentieth century. However, his attempts to rethink the development of the literary process, to reconstruct the literary hierarchy remained unnoticed because they were superseded by the works of his colleagues (D. Merezhkovsky and other symbolist critics of the 19th and early 20th centuries). Furthermore, the theoretical research conducted by Akim Volynsky on the resurgence of idealism in philosophical and literary thought was not considered by the authors of the collection entitled *Problems of Idealism*. It was not deemed necessary by N. Berdyaev, S. Bulgakov and B. Struve to include the articles of their teacher in the collection. His analysis of the work of Russian writers was subjected to harsh criticism, while the books on F. Dostoevsky by N. Berdyaev and S. Bulgakov were largely based on the work of his teacher. Bulgakov's work was largely based on the concept of the critic's earlier works. Akim Volynsky's reputation was marred by a «certain negative opinion», which was attributed to the acerbic tone of his writing.

For an extended period, his work was disregarded and overlooked. Subsequently, the situation underwent a gradual transformation. The first bibliography of Akim Volynsky's works was published in 1915 in S. Vengerov's book, *History of Russian Literature of the Twentieth Century*. A new bibliography was subsequently produced by I. Vladislavlev in 1924 for the collection *Russian Writers*. This was followed by a further bibliography in 1928, produced by B. Vekker, which was included in a posthumous collection. In 1990, Evgeny Ivanova and A. Reitblat published a further bibliography. Nevertheless, given the considerable number of his texts that have yet to be published, in addition to the numerous manuscripts that remain unstudied, it becomes evident that the examination of Akim Volynsky's phenomenon is still in its nascent stages.

In the view of W. Duval, an intellectual is a figure of world literature or culture who has made a significant contribution to cultural philosophy, public discourse, and literary history, and who has become an iconic figure in the context of their contemporary historical era (Duval, 2005).

In this regard, it is possible to evaluate the contributions of prominent literary critics from the 19th and early 20th centuries. Nevertheless, Akim Volynsky's name is notably absent from the list of significant figures typically referenced by literary critics such as V. Rozanov, L. Shestov, and D. Merezhkovsky. This is due to the fact that his works have yet to be systematically organised, some of his articles are stored in archives, and his epistolary legacy has not yet been published. Furthermore, it is evident that Akim Volynsky is perceived as an unpopular figure by some, situated at a considerable

distance from the prevailing currents and trends of his era. He is known to have made several critical assessments of both the literary process that preceded him and the contemporary one. It is noteworthy that he was equally disliked at different points in the twentieth century. In the Soviet era, he was not pardoned for his uncompromising stance towards V. Belinsky and the 1860s. In the period spanning the twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. His stance on modernism was characterised by a polemical approach. Akim Volynsky is regarded as a notable philosopher and critic, an ironist aligned with the Heideggerian school and R. Rorty's system. He is also recognised as a connoisseur of culture, particularly ballet art, and as an author of original studies on Leonardo da Vinci, Rembrandt, and ancient culture. These aspects of his work are briefly mentioned in the studies.

It is widely acknowledged among contemporary scholars that the entirety of the Silver Age was permeated by the anticipation of profound syntheses. A number of Symbolist theorists, most notably Vyach. Ivanov, D. Merezhkovsky, and A. Bely, articulated these premonitions through their metaphysical and poetic discourse. However, Akim Volynsky was not the only individual to examine the potential and challenges associated with the pursuit of such a synthesis. It is evident that the primary issue in Akim Volynsky's system pertains to the philosophical critique of culture. In this regard, the critic, as observed by contemporaries, exhibited a multifaceted persona: a humble Dominican, a follower of Savonarola, and an inquisitor simultaneously. In all aspects of his life, he exhibited characteristics of asceticism, fanaticism, and heroism, combining "a remarkably intellectual depth with ideal constructions" (Zenkovsky, 2001: 738), which shaped the paradoxical nature of his thought. It is worthy of note that a considerable body of literature has been produced on the paradoxes of Russian critical reflection on this period. W. Schmid notes that the term "paradox" has its etymological roots in Greek, where it signifies a statement that contravenes the "doxa", or prevailing "truth", generally accepted opinion, and expectation (Schmid, 2003).

In light of this assessment, it is evident that Akim Volynsky's critical discourse is, in fact, characterised by a certain degree of paradox. His assessments are typically inflexible and at odds with the prevailing opinion of his contemporaries. Having freed himself inwardly from the power of thought stereotypes, he is irreconcilable in his assessment of his contemporaries, just as V. Rozanov was. Similarly to Rozanov, Volynsky is freed from the influence of preconceived ideas and is therefore irreconcilable in his assessments of existing value orientations. His paradox violates all established semantic hierarchies and tends to raise contradictory and often simultaneously insoluble problems. This aligns him with the context of deconstructivist thinking. (Semkiv, 2004). He made significant contributions to the field of literary and cultural studies, revising long-standing assumptions about historical periods, literary works, and philosophical and religious thought. Concurrently, he advocated for a universalist approach to literature and culture.

Akim Volynsky stated that he was influenced by the million allegories and metaphorical language observed by his father (who was engaged in the publishing industry) and the sensuality of his mother. It can be reasonably deduced that this was the reason behind his interpretive practice, which manifested a verticality, or aspiration towards the absolute, expressed in life-symbolic forms. This was a demand he made of verbal creativity, which he sought through an expansive plasticity, and which ultimately found its visual embodiment in ballet. "Accumulating the dreams of verticality," wrote G. Bashlyar, "we cognise the transcendence of being" (Bashlyar, 2004). However, the movement towards the Absolute frequently resulted in a divergence from human history and the concerns that burdened the spirit. He regarded knowledge of the divine as a form of subordination to the divine will. In his articles, he frequently reiterated the biblical assessment, as recorded in the Book of Job, in which the Lord addresses Job out of the storm: "Who is this one who darkens Providence with words without meaning?" From his perspective, the moment of rational comprehension is the moment of meaning; all other considerations are thus rendered inconsequential. Moreover, he held the view that the comprehension of the meaning of being is expressed in symbols and signs. The act of writing down these symbols and signs enables the comprehension of the essence that is valuable to humankind. "The world is a text, a Book". Akim Volynsky would, in an ironic twist, assert that he himself is a mere construct. "In essence, I am merely a literary work; I did not aspire to be anything more" (Volynsky, 1900: 60). Nevertheless, this book encompassed ideal meanings, irrational influences, and experiences of the divine that appealed to the heart rather than the mind. It also addressed the pursuit of

joy and holiness in a moment-by-moment mission.

It is noteworthy that Akim Volynsky, from an early stage of his career, produced a work entitled *The Theological and Political Teachings of B. Spinoza*. In this, he identified not only a logical formulation of the religious and philosophical intentions of the aforementioned Spinoza, but also an understanding of free thinking that had developed on a specific national and cultural soil. This thinking was expressed in the strong language of passion and conviction, and was informed by an awareness of Christian ethics "in the light of rationalism". Subsequently, Akim Volynsky continued to engage with the work of A. Schopenhauer and F. Nietzsche. All these influences determined the syncretism of his concept, reflected in *The Book of Great Wrath. Critical articles. Notes. Polemics* (Volynsky, 1904). The vocabulary used in the title accurately reflects Akim Volynsky's stance on the ideas that were prevalent during his lifetime. Furthermore, he sets forth his primary objective in the following manner: "The process of investigating, searching, and finding evidence" (ibid: 162). Akim Volynsky's interpretative principles are evident in his assessments of D. Merezhkovsky, Z. Gippius, O. Wilde and Vl. Soloviev and Vyach. Ivanov. It is important to acknowledge the impact of the personal dynamics between Ak. Volynsky and Z. Gippius, as reflected in Z. Gippius's narrative *Zlatotsvet* and her 99 letters to him. Additionally, it is essential to consider the poetess's assessments of Ak. Volynsky's literary work, Leonardo da Vinci, and his stance on decadence in general.

The extremes of polemical judgements of Ak. Volynsky's statements about Z. Gippius's poetry collection *Mirror* can testify to the extremes of his polemical judgements. In his study, *On the Close*, M. Yampolsky posits that a mirror does not reflect "subjective consciousness and the object of contemplation." Instead, he suggests that it functions similarly to a telescope, bringing the seen closer. (Yampolsky, 2010). In several of his works, he persists in his meditations: «The proximity of the mirror renders it impossible to overcome the distance associated with twinning» (ibid: 108). In relation to these evaluations, it is pertinent to highlight that the critic discerned a duality within Z. Gippius's anthology, which was perceived to be shaped by her perspective. In contrast with the opinions of his contemporaries, he considered the collection to have been created under the influence of "inspired ideas" and to represent a kind of modern demonic fever. This is evidenced by the literary costuming and flirtatious ingenuity devoid of any sense. Ak. Volynsky notes in the poetry of Z. Gippius "fussy swish and rustle of silk-lined dresses", dialogues resembling "soundless whispering", monologues that are excerpts from other people's articles, as a result of which "occurs" poverty of psychological content, replaced by shouting. Simultaneously, he was drawn to the vertical dominant, characterised by lightness, elegance of form and the poetess's capacity to evoke a specific bodily appearance. This is the reason why he subsequently referred to Z. Gippius as a woman belonging to an era of legendary and mythological proportions. However, this observation was not noted by Z. Gippius, who made disparaging remarks about a certain critic in her memoirs, stating that they demonstrated a lack of understanding of art and wrote "ugly articles".

In the 1890s, Akim Volynsky articulated a clear distinction between the concepts of "decadence" and "symbolism", emphasizing their inherent opposition. This perspective was articulated in his article, *Decadence and Symbolism*, which remains a seminal work in the field. In his subsequent work, *The Struggle for Idealism*, he observed that both phenomena emerged concurrently in modern European literature. The first manifested as a critique of established philosophical perspectives, while the second represented a reinterpretation of artistic perceptions in a novel context. (Volynsky, 1894).

From Akim Volynsky's perspective, decadence represents a negative phenomenon, serving only to oppose materialism and positivism. In contrast, symbolism unites the real world with the divine, facilitating a connection with religious consciousness. This process of restoration enables the revelation of the eternal within the world of phenomena (Volynsky, 1895).

The acrimonious nature of the debate and the vehement nature of the critiques levied by the two polemicists led to a deterioration in relations between Akim Volynsky and Z. Gippius and D. Merezhkovsky. This ultimately resulted in the critic being excluded from his literary circle. Akim Volynsky's extreme subjectivity led to a profound sense of loneliness that was not amenable to external communication. This observation was duly noted by V. Kotelnikov. This quality of his nature was the defining characteristic of his categorical nature.

Akim Volynsky was of the conviction that literary criticism should be entirely autonomous, as its objective is not

contingent upon the utilitarian demands of the era, but rather aligned with the "eternal idealistic needs of culture" (ibid: 293). This understanding positions the concept as a means of attaining reliable knowledge and of extracting truths about human nature. This is why the critic was so vehement in his condemnation of the publicism that characterised the 1860s. Like K. Leontiev, he attributed this phenomenon to a form of primitivism associated with egalitarian tendencies and a simplistic understanding of faith.

K. Leontiev perceived the universal assimilation of faith as the inception of a secondary simplistic mixture, which he believed would result in the narrowing of the personality and the decline of the creative forces of mankind. Akim Volynsky posits that art provides a means of extricating oneself from this predicament, bestowing upon beauty a sublime symbolic significance. It is evident that he views literature as a poetic expression of the same idealism in images of new beauty. He is convinced that true art, apart from the consciousness of the artists, has always had this precisely symbolic character. The development of "eternal ideas" in the human creator conditions "the emergence of new refined forms enlivened by deep inner truth" (Volynsky, 1894: 118). It is evident that this interpretation appeared simplistic to D. Merezhkovsky, V. Soloviev and A. Beloi. In particular, it "divorced" Akim Volynsky from V. Soloviev's concept of a poetic triumvirate (comprising a tsar, a poet and a prophet) and from A. Bely's postulates about symbolism as a worldview. It might have been beneficial for Akim Volynsky to conduct a more objective investigation into V. Ivanov's concept of symbolism and A. Bely's ideas about the transformation of the symbolism of contemplation into the symbolism of action. However, he acted as a critic whose polemics, which often overshadowed the essence of the text, served as the driving spring of the text.

In this context, his articles provide insight into the concept of decadence as a decline from previous standards of morality, spirituality, and divine worship. They explore how decadence represents a shift towards a worldview that is antithetical to traditional values, prioritizing aesthetic experiences and forms of beauty that are devoid of moral and spiritual considerations. (Volynsky, 1895).

In this infinite and unending journey, humanity reveals itself through its most extreme personal instincts, reaching a point of frenzied and exhaustive expression. For example, the critic notes that in the case of Charles Baudelaire, P. Verlaine, and A. Rimbaud, the aesthetic cult is accompanied by an inner cry that results in a state of discord and division of the soul. In a further example, Akim Volynsky refers to the worldview of the Russian decadent N. Minsky, characterising him as a decadent of the mind and describing his ideas as a game played over the abyss of emptiness and reasoned falsity. This is particularly evident in his judgements about God, which is why his poetry is perceived as hollow and hunchbacked, tragic and maliciously cynical. (Volynsky, 1900).

Such is the poetry of D. Merezhkovsky, which claims to be philosophical, but in reality goes no further than modern book terms. The critic demonstrates meticulous attention to detail in the integration of disparate concepts and historical periods, harmonising the physical and the spiritual, and the figure of Venus with that of Christ, as it is done in a reasoning and logical retort, «with people made of paper, as F. Dostoevsky would say», - the critic writes (ibid: 175).

This kind of judgement demonstrates the polemical subjectivity of the critic. It was evident to him that the personalities of N. Minsky and D. Merezhkovsky could not be compared. However, his rejection of the general concept of decadence rendered his judgments unambiguous, as A. Chekhov observed, describing his dialogues as the consequence of superfluous "polemical fervour". It is noteworthy that Akim Volynsky was similarly expelled from the restaurant during A. Skabichevsky's jubilee, in a manner analogous to the expulsion of V. Belinsky from I. Turgenev's jubilee. This observation was documented by A. Herzen in his memoirs, "Stories and thoughts". Indeed, during this period, Akim Volynsky was expelled from the restaurant. Volynsky received support primarily from V. Rozanov, particularly with regard to the concept of the 1860s. In a letter addressed to E. Hollerbach, V. Rozanov will set forth the following argument:

This Flexer (Volynsky) was the first to undertake the extensive project of revising Russian literary criticism. By the 1880s, having held a prominent position since the 1860s, and arguably since the 1840s, it had become, in the work of A. Skabichevsky and N. Shelgunov, a form of disruptive criticism, a "garden of torment" ("or a world of torture" in a Chinese palace) of Russian literature, complicated by a pub and a tavern. In assuming the burden of ridicule, curses, and malevolence that came with his name and his role in literature, Flexer-Volynsky set out to reveal a "biblical hidden Truth

for Russian literature" (Volynsky 1895: 290).

V. Rozanov himself was more objective in his assessment of critical thought. However, the names of V. Belinsky, N. Chernyshevsky, and A. Grigoriev was not of the same caliber as A. Skabichevsky and N. Shelgunov. Concurrently, in his article *The Collapse of Idols*, S. Frank articulated a critique of the Russian literary and intellectual milieu of the 1860s, distinguishing it from the contributions of V. Belinsky. Frank identified this period as one of "the narrowing of the spiritual horizon," and highlighted Akim Volynsky as a notable exception, who openly challenged the prevailing orthodoxy by expressing negative views about the "inviolable" literary shrines. For this act of intellectual dissent, Volynsky was subjected to a public boycott and ultimately expelled from the literary community.

Nevertheless, regardless of the eventual outcome of his personal circumstances, it was inevitable that Akim Volynsky would be forever enshrined in the annals of cultural history.

### Conclusion

In light of the preceding discussion, the following conclusions may be drawn: The paradox of Akim Volynsky is that he was one of the first Russian literary critics to contribute to the *Severny Vestnik*, a journal that was open to Russian and European decadence. Akim Volynsky's polemical and sensational speeches were unparalleled in their impact, clearing the ground of the old "inheritance" but simultaneously isolating him within the literary movement he himself had initiated.

*Hakem Değerlendirmesi:* Dış bağımsız.

*Çıkar Çatışması:* Yazar, çıkar çatışması olmadığını beyan etmiştir.

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