

DANYLO HUSAR STRUK

What is the Meaning of “sin” in V. Vynnychenko’s *Hrikh*?

Vynnychenko, like Tolstoy (who suffered a moral crisis because of this), believed in the necessity of absolute consistency in human behavior. Such consistency was certainly hard to come by and Vynnychenko found himself constantly questioning the moral values of society. Many of his works were written precisely in order to test the validity of society’s moral laws.¹ Such was certainly the case with the play *Hrikh* (Sin), written sometime before 1920²

Although Vynnychenko often mentioned works he was writing or working on, curiously and unexplainably no reference to *Sin* occurs before the *Shchodennyk* (Diary) entry for 8 October 1921. Laconically Vynnychenko records that the play opened in Lviv. This, of course, refers to the famous Zakharov production which shook the Galician theatrical world.³ All of the other references to the play which occur in the *Diary* (and there are nine such in the whole second volume) relate to either it being staged or translated into German.⁴ One mention claims that it is more popular than the play *Erekhnia* (The Lie).⁵ Yet one cannot help wondering why Vynnychenko never wrote anything about working on the play (as he did with others, *Zakon* (The Law), for example), nor about any difficulties with the meaning of this three act play. The reason for this may lie in the fact that for Vynnychenko the “meaning” of this play was more than self-evident. And, certainly, at first

1. For a discussion of how Vynnychenko tests society’s moral laws see my article, “Vynnychenko’s Moral Laboratory” in B. Rubchak (Ed.), *Studies in Ukrainian Literature*, The Annals of the Ukrainian Academy of Arts and Sciences in the U.S., Inc. Vol. XVI (1984–1985). New York, 1986, 275–289.

2. There is some discrepancy as to the date of writing and publication. B. Romanenchuk in *Azbukovnyk* gives the date as 1922 (p. 114); the title page of the play itself gives 1920; and the *Shchodennyk* mentions it for the first time in 1921.

3. See V. Blavatsky, “Moï debiuty,” *Arka*, No. 2, (1948), 15–23, and especially 20–1.

4. See V. Vynnychenko, *Shchodennyk: Tom druhyi 1921–1925* (Edmonton, 1983), pp. 53, 59, 185, 303, 338, 379, 452, 541, and 659.

5. *Ibid.*, p. 338.

reading, everything seems clear enough. But a closer perusal does not allow for facile answers to even such basic questions as “what is sin” and why is the play given this title?

Outwardly, at least, the play seems to have only superficial connection with sin, at least “sin” as we are accustomed to understand that word. The dramatic intensity in the play comes from the anguish that Maria, the heroine, experiences having been trapped by the policeman Stalynsky into betraying her revolutionary comrades. Why, if such is the central issue of the play, did Vynnychenko call the play “sin”—why not *betrayal* or *for the common cause*—if one were to be a bit more ironic? The answer lies in Vynnychenko’s understanding of the word *sin*.

Sin: because of a headache from towelling, because of haste *allowed myself to get angry and become agitated*.⁶

The quotation is one of many such comments scattered through out the second volume of Vynnychenko’s *Shchodennyk*.⁷ To make the point obvious that he knows very well what he is talking about Vynnychenko underlines the word “sin” and the given transgression. But, “angry” “agitated”? One rushes to ask wherein lies the sin? Precisely in anger. Anger is one of the seven capital sins.⁸ Yet the question posed by the reader as to where is the sin in the above quotation occurs because sin has been so trivialized by man that true sin is no longer easily recognized. Vynnychenko’s point is precisely that. Even those who adhere to formal religion often do not recognize true sins as they are identified by the Christian religion. What then can one say about really great sin? People, like Olena Karpivna in the play, are so taken up with superstition that they miss the real meaning of sin. Part of the inherent irony in Vynnychenko’s play *Sin* lies precisely in this contradiction between what is real sin and what people think sin is. In his pursuit of ethical absolutes, Vynnychenko was constantly troubled by the hypocrisy around him, especially among his socialist-revolutionary friends. In his article (written in response to many critical attacks on his works) “Pro moral’ panuiuchykh i moral’ pryhnohlenykh” (About the Morality of the

6. Ibid., p. 340.

7. See Ibid., pp. 356, 358, 373, 376, 379, 412, 419, 439, 444, 487, 49 : 516, 569, 582.

8. Others are: pride, avarice, luxury, envy, gluttony, sloth. See V. Palachovsky, V. *Sin in the Orthodox Church* (New York-Tournai-Paris-Rome, 1966), p. 70.

Ruling and the Morality of the Downtrodden⁹) he puts forth his objections to this prevailing hypocrisy:

I, for example, despite my belief in the bright clean teachings of socialism, felt myself a moral criminal—I frequented prostitutes, sometimes liked to have a drink, for the sake of conspiracy had to lie to my own friends, be dishonest with the closest people, perform often unjust and brutal acts. All of this did not correspond to the model of a socialist, a person of a higher morality, a hero and a saint. . . . Of course, this bothered me, forced me to struggle with myself, to pay even closer attention to my surroundings. But that which I began to notice here not only did not calm me, but rather created even a greater bewilderment and anguish. I realized that the majority of My companions also were not saints, that their daily and even party life did not correspond to the high models of former revolutionaries. To a greater or lesser degree they did, in fact, the same things I did.¹⁰

It is in light of this preoccupation with a double standard of morality that one must view the meaning of the word "sin" for Vynnychenko and hence the meaning of this play.

Several years later, in 1924, Vynnychenko noted in his diary that he would like to write a novel about his life and in it "Show the relative nature of 'sins,' show evil, [the inherent] 'flaw,'"¹¹ and mock the superstition concerning 'sacred things.'"¹² Vynnychenko never got to write this novel but already in the play *Sin* he managed to mock religious superstition. In fact, the accepted religious notion of sin is the foil for what Vynnychenko feels is truly sin. The whole play is replete with imagery and nuances relating to the accepted notion of sin in the religious sense.

The characters in the play are divided into two groups: the revolutionaries and the gendarmes. In the first group the protagonist is Maria Andriivna Liashkivska. She is the character who more than most scoffs at convention and at notions of conventional sin. Her opposite in this and one who constantly points to such sins is her friend's aunt, Olena Karpivna. Her friend, Nina, (nicknamed, Mufta) is there as the conventional feminine opposite, as the soft and cuddly female presence in a man's world. She really does not care nor think too much. Her husband, the leader of the revolutionary cell to which Maria belongs, is also the object of Maria's secret love. Anhelok

9. V. Vynnychenko, "Pro moral'panuichykhi moral'pryhoblynykh," *Hash Holos* (1911), nos. 9–10.

10. *Ibid.*, 458.

11. Vynnychenko uses the word *gandzh*.

12. *Shchodennyk*, vol. 2. p. 462.

and Mykhas' — one older and one quite young — are fellow revolutionaries. Seredchuk, Mykhas' father, a simple worker who wishes well for his son and is troubled by the fact that his son's company will get the latter into trouble and prevent him from finishing school, completes this "cell."

On the police side the chief character is the inspector Stalynsky. Nizdria (literally 'Nostril'), the closet snoop, Vakhmister, and Prystav are all minor characters at the disposal of Stalynsky's power and authority.

The play is divided into three acts. In the first act, Maria skirmishes with Olena Karpivna, she teases young Mykhas about not yet knowing the "sin of love," and she teases her friend Nina by telling her of a monk who shut himself up in a cell after he killed three persons and thinks that he committed a **great sin**. She then suggests that perhaps Nina's husband Ivan and she are lovers. Nina is shocked, does not believe Maria and after Maria's insistence that Nina should perhaps consider such a possibility, Nina protests that Maria could not dare do such a thing. In answer to this Maria tries to explain:

Why? Sin, as your aunt says? . . . There is no sin in the world. Do you understand? There is none, it has disappeared, died. You can tell this to your aunt. Sin has remained still in caves, among the monks and among [various] cave-thinking aunts. And nowhere else. God's truth . . . Go to the front and you will become convinced immediately. There in one hour so many wonderful sins take place that all of the cave monks and aunts could not pray them away in a million years. A man lies in a trench, for example, holds a rifle in his hand and 'bang-bang' kills people. Every aunt will tell you that to kill is a great sin. Or the following: a group of people runs into another and . . . they kill, rob, rape, and torture them. And then they sit down and laugh, drink, sing, and brag. And its a great sin, my dear, to steal, rob, rape women . . . Is this not true? And what does the aunt say about this? And how many sins are committed there against the seventh commandment? Husbands betray wives, wives husbands, lovers; doctors have female harems, sisters of mercy have male harems, they trade and sell. And more? Courageous heroes rip off wounded comrades, they kill them off, steal from the dead, fight over the stolen goods. And the main thing, main thing, my dear, is that there is no sin in all of this. . . . I myself have killed over ten Germans. And even now I can kill anyone you want and I will feel no sin. And you are telling me that 'I would not dare.' I betrayed my own husband under his very nose with a friend of his and you say 'would not dare.'

*Laughs.*¹³

The question posed by Vynnychenko, therefore, is quite obvious. Given that there is no simple standard of behaviour, given that in conditions of

13. V. Vynnychenko, *Hrikh*, (Kiev-Leipzig, 1920), p. 9–10.

war people commit various acts which are sanctioned by the church and by society, how is one to decide if a given act is a sin or not? But as Vynnychenko stated in his essay, “On morality . . .” in 1911 so he shows in the denouement of the play *Sin*. Sin occurs when man is not honest with himself, when he rationalizes his actions, when he pretends that he is doing something other than in fact he is, or when the reason he gives for doing something is not truly the real reason.

In the context of a morality of those who rule and those who are subjugated, the world conveniently splits between two sides (as did the characters in the play). Since the two sides have different moral codes, what must be remembered is that the moral code of the ruling group very often is meant to keep the downtrodden in their subservient place. Therefore, for the downtrodden their highest goal and hence highest moral aim is to overthrow the ruling group. In a world where the end justifies the means, all is moral which leads to the desired end.

Yet what makes Vynnychenko so interesting is that he himself is very much aware that such schematic and simplified presentation rarely works in real life. The fault always lies with the human being. Maria’s betrayal, it would seem, is quite justified. She does it for the common good, or so she claims. But the audience knows, and what is more important, the enemy, Stalynsky, knows that this is not quite so. Her betrayal is not for the common good, but for her own benefit.

The “sin” occurs in act two—the act where those who rule, Stalynsky, and those who are downtrodden, the revolutionaries, are pitted against one another. Having caught the “revolutionaries” at the end of act one red handed, as it were, in possession of an illegal printing press he arrests them all including the two women in whose apartment the press was found. The interrogation, however, proves very difficult since all of the arrested have agreed to remain silent. Stalynsky cannot even get them to acknowledge his presence in the room. He tries several tacks until one finally works. He arranges a meeting between Maria and Ivan. The meeting convinces Maria that Ivan is in mortal danger. His health (tuberculosis has set in) will not survive further imprisonment. By a clever subterfuge Stalynsky learns through his eavesdropper that Maria loves Ivan. Armed with this knowledge Stalynsky works on Maria’s love indirectly. Stalynsky, however, is too clever a psychologist to suggest to Maria that she betray the cause in order to save her beloved. This, he knows, she would never do, not consciously. He therefore sets the trap very carefully. Stalynsky’s trap is ingenious.

First Stalynsky taunts Maria that although the revolutionaries pretend to be such big heroes by remaining silent they are cowards who refuse to

“fight.” When she finally breaks the silence to scorn him, he has her on the “hook” and slowly begins to reel her in. First he makes a crude pass at her convincing her that his main interest in her is sexual. He tells her that it “excites him” when she despises him and that he will have his way with her and that no amount of protesting will help her. Her feeble appeal to his “gentlemanly honor” has no effect and he begins to advance physically. She defies him, threatens to scream and swears that he will not get her without a struggle. He then puts forth the first subtle trap: he promises not touch her if she will tell him where they hid the printing press. Maria, of course, reacts just as he expected. She will never betray the cause just to save her own skin or female honour. Go ahead and rape me she tells him but the secret will never be revealed. He then lets her go back to her cell.

After Stalynsky calls Maria back he plays down his personal attack saying that he only wanted to scare her and that he really wants nothing more than to find out where the printing press is hidden. He is even willing to go so far in the pursuit of doing his job as to let *all of them go unconditionally* provided she tells him where they have hidden the printing press. When she looks at him in bewilderment and asks incredulously whether he is seriously suggesting that she become a *traitor* Stalynsky downplays the betrayal by accusing her and other revolutionaries of being egotists, of not wanting to *help* anyone but themselves. The devilish reverse psychology does the trick:

Wait. What possibly could you have against my proposition? That is only a concession on your part. Ok, let's say that it is a little betrayal. So what? Where is your noted readiness to *sacrifice yourself for the benefit of others*? And why are you ready to sit in jail and to consider yourself martyrs and heroes but are incapable of real sacrifice? Certainly, such a sacrifice is difficult, but is it not more difficult to know that because of your own moral purity, because of your *egotism* people close to you are suffering and dying? This should be of prime importance to you if you are such altruists. I repeat I will find the printing press in any case. I will starve you, lead you to suicide, will force the weaker of you into real *betrayal* . . . Is it not, therefore, wiser, more altruistic, to burden oneself with a little, almost minuscule, sin and thus save one's own [friends] from suffering, sickness, death and more weighty sins?¹⁴

Stalynsky baits his hook well. Maria is “snared” on the *altruism* of her act. She would never have betrayed her comrades in order to save herself but she is prepared to do so for the common cause. Herein lies the difficulty. Is she, in fact, doing this out of altruism? or is there a hidden egotistic motive? Stalynsky's success is based on the fact that he can see through her altruism.

14. Ibid., pp. 39–40.

When Maria finally realizes that she was fooling herself, that she was not honest with herself, that she was guilty of a crime which she had excused in the name of the common good, the sin will have been committed and it will be too late to reverse her actions. The only escape from Stalynsky's clutches is suicide.

Vynnychenko is once again exploring the validity of the postulate that "the end justifies the means." Is, in fact, a reprehensible act not reprehensible if done for a common good? Vynnychenko's treatment of this question in the play is not simple and certainly no clear answer is forthcoming. Maria seems to be on the right track, at least in terms of her outward pronouncements and actions. She betrays the group to save the group. Yet Vynnychenko intimates, mainly through Stalynsky and through various subtle nuances, that Maria is acting more to save her beloved Ivan (certainly a selfish motive) and not the group. The proof of her lack of honesty lies in the fact that she acts furtively. If she were honest with herself, if she really believed that she was acting for the good of the group, she would have told the members of the group that she revealed to Stalynsky where the press was hidden in order to secure their release. Since her *true* motive was to save Ivan, she could not really tell the group that it was she who had betrayed, she could not stand up and admit to her act because she *herself did not believe* in the justification of her act and such belief is the corner stone of morality based on being honest with oneself. Stalynsky could and does blackmail her into other betrayals for he alone realized that Maria acted not out of altruistic but out of very personal motives. His hold on her is therefore secure.

Vynnychenko develops the leitmotif of betrayal to strengthen the notion that to betray one's own is a weighty sin. Maria's capability to betray is brought out at first frivolously when she admits to having betrayed her own husband. The fact that she does not think it a wrongdoing is ironic in view of her final and more weighty betrayal. The fact, however, that she is NOT ashamed of it is proof of her being in total harmony with herself on this issue, in being honest with one's self. This, of course, in a world where there is no fixed moral code, is the only way one can know if one's actions are good or bad. Vynnychenko in juxtaposing Maria's personal betrayal (which she honestly believes was justified) against the second betrayal (which she tries but cannot justify even to herself) is driving the point home that it is not the act which is moral or immoral, it is the total circumstance. Only true unity of one's desire, will, and mind can guarantee proper "non sinful" behavior. Vynnychenko further underlines Maria's unclear attitude toward betrayal through some subtle dramatic irony. In act two Maria replies to Stalynsky's advances by calling his play-acting "The Love-Smitten Gen-

darme or the Kisses of Judas.” She is thinking of Stalynsky, but in fact in the relationship between Stalynsky and herself it is she who will be the Judas, hence the or in the title takes on a completely different meaning. Stalynsky, in fact, though despicable as a person, never betrayed his own. As he later explains to Maria:

. . . Why is this whole affair so troublesome for you and for me it is of no consequence? Because, you probably think, you are a righteous individual and I am such a scoundrel? Morals are of no importance here. It is because you, my dear, you are going against your own, and I am going against the enemy. You are selling your own kind. That’s what its all about. Do you understand? This is the greatest evil of mankind. Even we, the gendarmes, are incapable of it. . . .¹⁵

Further betrayal leitmotifs are sprinkled throughout the play. Once the revolutionary group realizes that there is a traitor in their midst the references to betrayal intensify. Seredchuk, upon realizing that his son has been betrayed, remarks:

There are among you [the revolutionaries] horrible people. To take one’s own and to sell him to the enemy. Such a person . . . *Suddenly he jumps up and trembling with hatred* Such a one, such should be torn to pieces, the son of a bitch! He’s a Judas, the Christ betrayer, may he be cursed in all his days . . .¹⁶

The betrayal in a Christian context and the connection to the notion of sin is emphasized by the fact that the denouement takes place on Maundy Thursday. Once again Vynnychenko contrasts the notion of “religious” superstition and true evil. Nina remarks that her aunt—the representative of the superficial superstitious notion of sin—is troubled by the fact that the revolutionaries dare to sing on Maundy Thursday. Maria once again mocks such a notion of sin:

. . . this is not sin, Olena Karpinva. No, Olena Karpivna, there is sin, but it is not this, my dear. *Suddenly* Shall I tell you where there is real sin? . . . Oh, Olena Karpivna, if only all sinners in the world were as sinful as you and those who sing on Maundy Thursday!¹⁷

Even when Maria tries to fall back onto the accepted “end justifies the means,” when she tries to rationalize the betrayal by suggesting to Ivan that

15. Ibid., p. 64.

16. Ibid., p. 47.

17. Ibid., p. 49.

perhaps, hypothetically, the traitor did it for the good of a person close to himself, like his mother or wife, that it was done for “another’s” benefit, not out of egotistic motives, she is crushed by Ivan’s answer:

What right does he [the hypothetical traitor] have to sacrifice the good of the community in order to save a person close to himself!.¹⁸

Maria desperately tries to find compassion and understanding. She wants to convince herself that what she did was quite normal, that anyone would do the same. She persists in questioning Ivan if he would not “for the sake of a loved one” do something reprehensible to save that loved one. It is during this confrontation with her beloved Ivan that Maria finally realizes that she has committed a SIN because she has lied to herself. She did not cooperate with Stalynsky to save the revolutionaries, she did it to save her beloved Ivan. Though it was not to save herself it was done nonetheless out of selfish motives. She realizes that she is caught and that there is no way out for her:

If it were only this [the betrayal] you’d dismiss it with a wave of the hand, the hell with it. Right? But you were caught not only on this, but on the love itself. If you do not continue to betray, then that very person you love will again be tortured. Why then did you perpetrate the initial evil? Right? So you have to go on, to continue . . .¹⁹

She now realizes the extent and gravity of her position. Stalynsky knew this from the start and, armed with this knowledge, feels so safe and secure in it that he dares (wearing a slight disguise) come to see her among her fellow revolutionaries. He knows that she will not reveal who he is—to do so would mean to expose her complicity. There is, according to Vynnychenko, no penance which can atone her sin. Yet Stalynsky offers her one more possible solution: “Why don’t you be above all betrayals, above ‘your own kind.’”²⁰

Nonetheless, this stance of a Nietzschean superman is not, according to Vynnychenko, a way out of the moral dilemma. Only behavior based on honesty with one’s self can guarantee a safe path. As Vynnychenko stated so lucidly in his essay on the morals of the ruling:

18. Ibid., p. 52.

19. Ibid., p. 53.

20. Ibid., p. 69.

It is alright to lie to a policeman for it is suggested to me both by my brain and by my feelings that by being truthful with him I will destroy myself and my friends. It is all right to lie even to a friend when by this lie I save him. But when I lie to my friend and by this lie save myself, then I lie not only to him but also to my social consciousness.²¹

Thus the ultimate SIN, to answer the question posed at the beginning of this paper, is to *lie to one's self*. According to Vynnychenko—being honest with one's self assures a proper behavior no matter what the deed. Conversely, dishonesty with one's self allows for a rationalization of any and every deed and leads to the gravest of errors, or sins. Betrayal of itself is not necessarily a sin but, at the same token, the greatest sin is the betrayal of self through self-delusion.

21. Vynnychenko, "Pro moral," XS471.