

Molly W. Wesling

Language and the Disorder of Reality in Saltykov-Shchedrin's "Господа Головлевы"

Rusycystyczne Studia Literaturoznawcze 17, 26-34

1992

Artykuł został opracowany do udostępnienia w internecie przez Muzeum Historii Polski w ramach prac podejmowanych na rzecz zapewnienia otwartego, powszechnego i trwałego dostępu do polskiego dorobku naukowego i kulturalnego. Artykuł jest umieszczony w kolekcji cyfrowej bazhum.muzhp.pl, gromadzącej zawartość polskich czasopism humanistycznych i społecznych.

Tekst jest udostępniony do wykorzystania w ramach dozwolonego użytku.

Language and the Disorder of Reality in Saltykov-Shchedrin's *Господа Головлевы*

Molly W. Wesling

Throughout *Господа Головлевы* especially in the unctuous character Porfiry Golovlev, Saltykov-Shchedrin examines the relation between language and reality, and the idea of the distortion of the world through words. Porfiry's unique logic, his reduction of words into diminutives, and his manner of order in experience provide a lens through which to view the reigning chaos of Golovlevo. Although a relationship to the spoken word dominates the lives of all the Golovlevs, Porfiry's attempts to order the chaos around him by means of language become a major focus of the novel.

The vignettes of life at the family estate of Golovlevo unfold within the bleakest of provincial landscapes, where events rarely engender action, and everything that does happen seems as predetermined as in a tragic play. The plot of the novel is structured around a succession of deaths. When the narrator explicitly outlines the three reasons for the degeneration of a certain class of family—idleness, unfitness for any task, and hard drinking—the message is abundantly clear. Furthermore, „truth” in the Golovlev's world ceases to function as a moral principle; it exists in word only. Porfiry lacks even the most rudimentary sense of morality. In *Господа Головлевы* Porfiry commits the very sins he claims to abhor. He lies, cheats, commits adultery, attempts incest, and plays a part in the deaths of two of his sons. Yet through all this, until the very end of his life, he remains convinced of his innocence.

In a digression, the narrator outlines the peculiarly „Russian” brand of hypocrisy which develops in a man completely alienated from the usual conventions of human society. This hypocrisy, he says, is fostered by the unchecked freedom with which the Russian country squire rules over his isolated domain. Porfiry, known also as Judushka (little Judas) or Krovopivushka (little Bloodsucker) to his family, takes on this role and proceeds to act out the narrator's worst fears.

Although many parodistic features of *Господа Головлевы* have been documented, the novel has the hallmarks of satire, including the implicit „moral standard”¹ of the intellectual narrator, a distorted picture of the provincial gentry, Porfiry's burlesque pretentiousness, and the prevailing notion that Golovlevo's only crop is chaos. Saltykov's style has been compared to that of the Irish satirist Jonathan Swift (1667—1745), whose work Saltykov knew only superficially². In light of this comparison of styles, Frederik N. Smith's study *Language and Reality in Swift's „A Tale of a Tub”*³, in particular the chapters entitled *Language and Madness* and *Reality and the Limits of Mind*, contains observations that are strikingly relevant to the case of Porfiry. Smith maintains that in *A Tale of a Tub* (written 1696—1697), Swift „was using style... as a way of working toward some important truths... And what remains constant in all his satire is his willingness to let style, rather than plot or character, carry the burden of his message.”⁴ According to Smith, style is „neither the same as a writer's ideas nor the vehicle for his ideas, but rather his habitual means of arranging concepts, experiences, and implications into a significant form”⁵. Saltykov seems to have been writing toward some important truths as well, namely, the corruption inherent in Russia's land-owning system at the time of the emancipation of the serfs. In *Господа Головлевы* an „arrangement” of linguistic experiences both rescues the narration from the monotony of its plot and predicts the extinction of the Golovlevs.

Porfiry's character possesses many of the traits Smith attributes to Jonathan Swift's protagonist, the so-called Modern Author in *A Tale of a Tub*. In particular, Porfiry exhibits some of the documented characteristics of the language of schizophrenics, including bombastic wording and trivialities couched in high-flying phrases. The gradual deterioration of Porfiry's personality in *Господа Головлевы* follows a pattern of estrangement. The trivial force of Porfiry's speech causes people to numb their senses. In the following passage the narrator compares the enormous power of the „poshlost” of Porfiry's tirades to the experience of walking past a cesspool:

¹ N. Frye: *Anatomy of Criticism: Four Essays*. Princeton [1953] 1973, p. 225.

² А. С. Бушмин: *Щедры и Свифт*. В: *idem: Художественный мир Салтыкова-Щедрина*. Ленинград 1987, s. 363.

³ F. Smith: *Language and Reality in Swift's „A Tale of a Tub”*. Columbus: Ohio State UP 1979.

⁴ *Ibidem*, p. 3.

⁵ *Ibidem*, p. 5.

Пошлость имеет громадную силу; она всегда застает свежего человека врасплох и... быстро опутывает его и забирает его в тиски. Всякому, вероятно, случалось, проходя мимо клоака, не только зажимать нос, но и стараться не дышать; точно такое же насилие должен делать над собой человек, когда вступает в область, насыщенную празднословием и пошлостью.⁶

The narrator graphically conveys the effect of Porfiry's words on others, while playing with the figurative and concrete meanings of the word „клоака” or cesspool. A bit later in the text the image of the cesspool is reinforced by the peasant's statement that Porfiry can „rot” a man with his words (p. 174).

Another feature of schizophrenic language is a subject's inability to distinguish between „the literal and the figurative, the particular and the general”⁷. Literalization of metaphor, aphorism and parable provide the most common example of the merging of literal and figurative worlds in *Господа Головлевы*. For example, characters themselves recall biblical stories (with added, ironic twists): Stepan returns home thinking of himself as the Prodigal Son (p. 30); Porfiry's sons overhear Porfiry asking the priest how much money it would cost to construct the Tower of Babel (p. 83). The text contains numerous other biblical references and aphorisms. Porfiry constantly distorts their meanings to serve his own inner logic, which is marked by his ignorance of the conventions of the world around him.

Porfiry's use of diminutive forms, really a kind neologistic deformation of words, carries language beyond mere colloquial usage. He calls his mother „маменька,” „голубышка” and „паинька” throughout the novel. Fish are „рыбки”, mushrooms „грибки”, and cabbage „капустки” (p. 80). He uses the diminutive adjectives „хорошенько” and „смирнехонько” (p. 115), „хорошенький” and „сладенький” (p. 200). Virtually every sentence uttered by Porfiry contains diminutives, and no proper names are safe. Such excessive use hints at what Smith calls „a connection between linguistic corruption and moral corruption”, consistent with the character of Porfiry.

The schizophrenic often experiences difficulty accepting a fictitious situation. Porfiry has problems with the word „кажется,” and on three occasions he directly reprimands a speaker for uttering it (p. 150, 198, 225). But paradoxically, he himself indulges and even takes great pleasure in creating fantastic mathematical calculations. The basis for his activity lies in the presumed unassailability of „science.” In an imaginary conversation with the dead elder Ilya, he tells the peasant „it's not I, but the numbers talking... Science... doesn't lie!” (p. 220). Later in the same fantasy he reiterates to his dead mother that „numbers are holy, they don't lie” (p. 224). Sings that Porfiry uses

⁶ М. Е. Солтыков-Щедрин: *Господа Головлевы*. В: *idem: Собрание сочинений*. Т. 13. Москва 1972, p. 165. All subsequent quotations refer to this text.

⁷ F. Smith: *Language and Reality...*, p. 104.

the act of calculation to manipulate and blot out reality appear early in the text. While Yevprakseiyushka gives birth to his son, Porfiry tries to drown out her moans by engaging in senseless calculations (p. 189). Finally, the narrator puns on the word „account” in relation to Porfiry’s slow journey toward death: „... все расчеты с жизнью покончены” (p. 258). „The Modern Author,” writes Smith, „uses matematics the same way he uses rational argument — as a tool for systematizing experience; and the greater abstraction of number promises that it will succeed in quieting reality where logic, print, and literary form have not.” Porfiry’s calculated attempts at „quieting reality” succeed until he is faced with death.

The over-arching methapor in *Господа Головлевы* is Porfiry Golovlev’s fragile „web of empty talk” (сеть пустословия), which hovers over every verbal exchange in the novel. Family members react to Porfiry’s customary chatter by smiling sourly, as if to say „there’s the spider again, off spinning his web!” (p. 75) Arina Petrovna remarks several times to herself that Porfiry is fashioning a noose for her, and Pavel experiences the same sensation. More than one character wonders why Porfiry doesn’t choke himself with his senseless chatter. The servant Fedulych utters perhaps the most powerful statement about the effect of Porfiry’s words on others: „Словами-то он согонить человека может” (p. 174). In Saltykov’s novel, each member of the Golovlev family who comes into contact with Porfiry ends up as his victim in one way or another.

After the frist comparison of Porfiry to spider spinning his web, the notion of the verbal „сеть” or „паутина” occurs throughout the text. The word „опутать” or „entangle” is used to describe the death of the matriarch Arina Petrovna, who, unable to endow any of her offspring with her energy, instead dies completely „entangled” (опутанная, p. 253) in idleness and empty talk. In one of Porfiry’s fantasies, he imagines a world where he can freely „entangle the whole world” in a net of oppression and insuld (p. 216); troubled by the arrival of his son Petenka, Porfiry braces himself with the conviction that nothing will make him diverge from his web of empty and thoroughly rotten aphorisms, in which he had wrapped himself from head to foot (p. 119).

The fragility of this web of words is illustrated explicitly in two instances. When Porfiry impregnates his mistress during a religious holiday, he begins to fear the consequences. Interstingly, a „word” marks the two points of unraveling in Porfiry’s life: „One single word suddenly intruded itself upon him, snapping the thread (нитка) in two. Alas! that word was ‘fornication’.” Later, Yevprakseiyushka rebels and the household order Porfiry depends upon comes crashing down: „True, all this artificial arrangement hung by a thread” (волосок); and suddenly everything was to crumble away at one stupid word (дурацкие слова). Yevprakseiyushka’s threat to leave Porfiry constitutes the „word” that severs household order from its mooring.

The „word” takes on special meaning for various members of the family. For Stepan and Petenka the word represents the boundary of power, while their sister Anninka justifies her tawdry life as a provincial actress by clinging to the words „sacred art”. The narrator tells us that Anninka made these words into the motto of her life.

Often, the seemingly empty remarks made by Porfiry and other characters find meaning later in the novel — such as the garbled prophecy uttered at Porfiry’s birth, Vladimir Mikhailych’s prediction of Stepan’s demise, Arina Petrovna’s vision of Porfiry at Stepan’s funeral, and Porfiry’s unwitting presentiment of his own death. Thus a network of vague foreshadowings emerges from the gloom of Golovlevo.

Porfiry attempts to shirk moral judgment by peppering speeches with passive constructions and then hiding behind the impersonality of his utterances. At other times he insists on the very literal meaning of words, a device similar to Gracie Allen’s comic routine, but with horrible and disturbing, rather than comic, effect.

Porfiry’s supposed fear of his mother’s curse points to another way in which words dominate the lives of the Golovlevs. This irrational fear bothers Porfiry only until Arina actually carries out her threat; the third chapter closes with her drawn-out exclamation „Прро-кли-ннаю” (p. 134). The curse is mentioned five times in the novel before Arina actually verbalizes it. Due to this build-up, the occasion of the utterance signals one of the few points of dramatic conflict in the novel. Porfiry had anticipated a scene of thunder, candles snuffed, curtains rent asunder, the face of Jehova illuminated by lightning. Once realized, the curse scene does not match up to his expectations. As a result the curse’s power over him is negated. The episode shows Porfiry to be ruled more by his own internal logic than by the actual events taking place around him.

In addition to Porfiry’s stage-set and to Anninka’s real acting experiences, references to play-acting and role-playing are associated with other members of the family. The notions of imitation and of rehearsed lines contrast markedly with the spontaneity of natural speech. Porfiry is, of course, the master of canned aphorisms and stale — albeit distorted — phraseology. His reliance on the scripts of ritual can be seen as another branch of his ready-made mode of existence. Porfiry’s special rituals include funeral dinners, farewell dinners, masses for the dead, prayers, and ceremonial sleigh departures. The pomp with which he carries out these duties has the mark of theater performance. As the narrator observes, Porfiry „had thoroughly mastered the technique of praying” (p. 125). In her old age Arina Petrovna becomes his captive audience, a „faithful listener to his empty talk” (p. 101). Anninka says Porfiry „can’t tell stage-acting from real life” (p. 163). And in the last weeks of Porfiry’s life, he is reduced to speaking „like an actor who remembers with

difficulty the lines from some long-ago role" (p. 231). Finally, he becomes impatient for the natural „dénouement" (развязка) — the „tying up" of his life, which would put an end to his unbearable confusion (260).

Other family members echo Porfiry's behavior. Stepan „играл...роль не то парии, не то шута", Arina Petrovna „любила разыграть роль" of a respected mother, and Lyubinka „доигралась" and committed suicide. Anninka shudders when she remembers a slobbering fellow actor who made gestures on stage that were not written into the play. In the chaotic world of *Господа Головлевы* actors are more likely to deviate from the script, while non-actors busy themselves playing roles.

References to a metaphorical stage on which a story unfolds — a fairly common device in 19th century realistic novels — are embedded in the narration. The phrase, „на сцене первенствовала праздничная сторона жизни" (p. 154) refers not to an actual stage, but to Anninka's youthful projections of her future life. Likewise, „Семейство, которое выступает на сцену в настоящем рассказе, уже знакомо нам" (p. 57) has the effect of under lining the ficional quality of the text at hand. This effect is compounded by a reference in the same passage to the „положения действительных лиц" (p. 58).

Just as the narrator in *Господа Головлевы* establishes a boundary between his world and the world of the story, the characters in the novel perform a similar function, undermining the dichotomy of real world vs. fictional story implied by the narrator. For example, Arina loves to tell the epic „skazka" of her conglomeration of power. Pavel hallucinates an entire „glupo-geroicheskii roman" in which he and Porfiry are the heroes. Vladimir Mikhailych wrote „вольные стихи" and admired the naughty poems of Barkov.

The „web of words" and theatrical metaphors that I have discussed above demonstrate the extent to which Saltykov puts reality under interrogation. The narration dwells exclusively on the merging of fantasy and reality in the minds of four characters. Stepan, Pavel, Arina and Porfiry all experience a kind of lingering hallucination before death. Stepan's speech patterns parallel the disintegration of his mind due to alcohol. Pavel meets a similar fate. His speech changes: „As Pavel became more addicted to drink his conversations became more fantastic" (p. 66). Both Arina and Pavel create „fantastic realities" (p. 59, 66); both lose their ability to act in the world of the living. Porfiry undergoes the same pattern of withdrawal and gradual cessation of communication with those around him — „he tried to stifle every protest, he closed his eyes to the anarchy that reigned in the house, made himself scarce, said nothing" (p. 214). When Anninka sees Porfiry on her last trip home, she asks Yevprakseyushka if Porfiry has really stopped talking nonsense. „He always used to talk" answers Yevprakseyushka, „and all of sudden he's grown silent" (p. 230).

Porfiry's hallucinations before his death are even more distorted than those of his relatives, though the images suggest the same kind of struggle in an unknown realm. In his „ecstasy” Porfiry becomes airborne and regards a hellish scene where people have become dehumanized, utter involuntary speeches, twitch uncontrollably. During this hallucination we learn that Porfiry sprouts wings (p. 217). „Dehumanization” is a theme that runs throughout *Господа Головлевы*. Perhaps, like many of the presentiments that are expressed in the text, this vision too is prophetic. Later, the intoxicated conversations between Anninka and Porfiry end with both participants in a stupor; they become subdued versions of the distorted people in Porfiry's vision, and retire to their separate „lairs” like dull-witted animals.

Human and animal worlds merge in *Господа Головлевы*. As William Mills Todd has noted, the „controlling patterns futility, travesty, and recurrence finally obliterate distinctions between man and animal, man and his food, man and his environment”⁸. This merging of worlds manifests itself in words such as „логовище” (above), in comparisons such as that of people to dogs and children to puppies. One relative ate out of the same bowl as the dog (p. 29). Porfiry moves towards his mother „like a snake” (p. 137); throughout the novel he addresses others, especially his mother, as „голубушка”. At one point the narrator asks rhetorically why not a single feather has remained in the „nest” of Golovlevo.

The image of Porfiry as the web-spinning spider, introduced early in the novel, is strengthened by the image of the „сеть” or „паутина” that inter laces the text, and by references to the „noose” he fashions with his eyes. Another, related image of Porfiry can ultimately be gleaned from the language of the text. Early in the narrative Arina Petrovna sends Porfiry's son Volodya to eavesdrop on him. Volodya reports back that nothing can be heard of Porfiry's voice: „Жужжит—и только” (p. 82). Later, when Arina Petrovna eavesdrops on a muffled conversation between Porfiry and Petenka, she notices a strange „buzzing” quality in Porfiry's voice. She thinks to herself: „Зудит! именно зудит!... вот и тогда он так же зудел! и как это я в то время не поняла!” (p. 129). Porfiry „buzzes” twice more in the novel (p. 167, 201). The „buzzing” has become a recognizable and permanent characteristic of Porfiry. If we recall the scene of Porfiry's fantasy, where he hovers over the earth as though he has wings on his back (p. 217), a new image begins to take form.

Several other references to „wings” can be found in the text. The first mention occurs when Porfiry recalls how one son, as a child, asked how could it be, if only angels have wings, that his father came in just now with wings? The anecdote, coming from the mouth of Porfiry, could at this point pass for

⁸ W. M. Todd, III: *The Anti-Hero with a Thousand Faces: Saltykov-Shedrin's Porfiry Golovlev*. In: „Studies in the Literary Imagination”. Vol. 9, No. 1 Spring 1976, p. 87—105.

more idle talk. But in fact, as we have seen in numerous examples, even the most trivial utterances in *Господа Головлевы* tend to reverberate and find their place in the scheme of the novel.

On many levels within the text, Saltykov reinforces through language the departure of the Golovlevs, especially Porfiry, from the reality of the human world. When Porfiry lies, cheats, prays and wheedles his subjects, he is truly oblivious to his own hypocrisy. He makes statements that foretell his own doom. Such is the case when he lectures a peasant on the virtues of humility by using himself as the paragon (a paradox already). Porfiry tells the peasant that although God has seen fit to bless him, he's not at all proud: „что я такое! червь! козявка!” (p. 226). Porfiry answers his own question „What am I?” by naming himself: he is a „worm”, a „tiny insect,” crawling perhaps from the cesspool of Golovlevo. In his final days, Porfiry the „Bloodsucker” parasite undergoes metamorphosis into a buzzing insect and hovers over the „fantastic reality” he has spun, doing battle with specters. Since Porfiry is not entirely to blame for what he has become, his life on earth has all the signs of purgatory — a waiting-room, neither hell nor heaven (but much closer to hell), where real and fantastic worlds have merged. He succumbst at last to alcohol. The wings that bear Porfiry a loft have no relation to angels, and his sudden glimmer of conscience in the last days of his life comes too late. Porfiry is both spider and fly. He is hopelessly ensnared in his own web of words.

Молли В. Уорслинг

ЯЗЫК И ДЕСТРУКЦИЯ ДЕЙСТВИТЕЛЬНОСТИ В ГОСПОДАХ ГОЛОВЛЕВЫХ САЛТЫКОВА-ЩЕДРИНА

Резюме

В статье проводится анализ стилистики произведения русского классика и доказывается структурная тождественность текста в плоскости стиля (план выражения), сюжета и структуры изображенной действительности. Трактующее как сатирическое это произведение содержит по существу попытку поставить диагноз далекий от стихии смеха. Применяющиеся приемы построения комических эффектов являются в сущности показателем психогенетической двойственности мира и повествовательного сознания.

Molly W. Wesling

**JĘZYK I DESTRUKCJA RZECZYWISTOŚCI
W UTWORZE *PAŃSTWO GOŁOWLEWOWIE* SALTYKOWA-SZCZEDRINA**

Streszczenie

Autorka przeprowadza analizę konstrukcji stylistycznej utworu rosyjskiego klasyka, wykazując homologię strukturalną pomiędzy warstwą stylistyki (konstrukcją planu wyrażenia), fabułą oraz strukturą świata przedstawionego. Interpretowany jako satyryczny, utwór ten w istocie zawiera próbę diagnozy daleką od żywiołu śmiechu, natomiast zastosowane w nim techniki konstruowania efektów komicznych w rzeczywistości służą ukazaniu schizofrenicznej dwoistości świata i narracyjnej świadomości.