

AUTOBIOGRAPHY OF A CORPSE

SIGIZMUND KRZHIZHANOVSKY

Introduction by

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THIRTY PIECES OF SILVER

And he cast down the pieces of silver in the temple,
and departed, and went and hanged himself.

And the chief priests took the silver pieces, and said,
It is not lawful for to put them into the treasury,
because it is the price of blood.

And they took counsel, and bought with them the
potter's field, to bury strangers in.

Wherefore that field was called, The field of blood,
unto this day.

I

WITH THESE four verses I could fill a dozen tomes and turn them into ten adventure novels. In fact, let's review the images: a handful of coins thrown down on the temple flags; a man's neck in a noose; an avaricious potter none too mindful of the money's smell; a striking title—"The Price of Blood"; a burial ground for straving strangers; and a masterful last verse that takes that square of earth earmarked for the dead by its four corners and stretches it unto... But that will depend on who decides to develop this theme—a realist, a Symbolist, or a Romantic.

I've been circling round the third verse for a long time and once I got inside, though by a different door: I tried to picture the potter's field, cracked and sere with the scorching heat, strewn with dry-needed thorn branches, a hundred square cubits or thereabouts,

surrounded by cart tracks and paths, a web of roads delivering strangers done straving. Here the theme asked me a question: Why had the chief priests in buying land for a burial ground bothered only about foreigners and not about their own, not about Jerusalemites, or even about themselves? The fourth verse explains: the price of blood. The chief priests, who conducted the proceedings against Jesus with a subtle grasp of canon law, cannot be accused in this case of improvidence: One cannot bury one's own in earth besmirched with blood, whereas with strangers one needn't stand on ceremony. Farther on, however, the theme began to frown: strangers there were many, land there was little; the bodies multiplied, not so the burial ground. The field of blood, like a pool without drainpipes (the kind never found in math primers), was soon filled to overflowing and the theme brought to a standstill; one had to apply to the ghosts trailing over the graves, to appeal to restless strangers who even in death could not lie still till Judgment Day. In short, one had to resort to the sorts of stale Romantic stunts that neither censorship nor good taste (a rare coincidence!) will let pass.

So then, still circling the third verse, I entered it through "bought" and chose for my hero the thirty pieces of silver: unromantic, ringing, countable, and relatively imperishable. After all, who and what remained of this gospel story about deaths: one man was crucified; another hanged himself; still others (the strangers) were buried one after another in the field of blood. Only the thirty ringing coins remained in circulation; wherever those silver pieces roll, my story shall follow. I'll begin.

2

These were ordinary pieces of silver: smooth round edge, clear impress of numbers, harsh metallic voice. But, evidently, they had been stamped with something peculiar to them alone, those thirty: The silver pieces that bought strangers rest were strangers themselves who knew no rest—the silver itch stamped into them kept flicking

them from palm to palm, flinging them from purse to purse until they... But let's proceed in order.

Caiaphas gave the coins to Judas; from Judas they returned at once to Caiaphas's treasury; but the treasury refused them—so they went to the potter. The potter wrapped all thirty in a rag and strode unhurriedly through the streets toward the north gate; he lived outside Jerusalem, beyond the city wall, and expected to reach home by sunset. But the silver pieces would not lie still in their tightly knotted rag, so the potter turned into a tavern and untied the rag. He spent first one silver piece on drink, then another—and soon all thirty, merrily clattering onto the counter, had rolled from the potter to the tavern keeper. Here, in the manner of writers of legends, one might easily invent that the potter asked for some white wine but instead was given red, which tasted of blood, and so on—however, since I am not inventing, but telling the honest truth, I must confine myself to the fact that the potter staggered as far as the north gate and grabbed hold of the city wall; beyond the gate there was nothing to grab hold of but the ground, which the potter did not fail to do. The morning chill woke him; his head felt like lead, in hand he had—not a single piece of silver.

3

But the silver itch stamped into the thirty had only just begun its stravaging from palm to palm, from fingers to fingers. Having received the pieces of silver, the tavern keeper began waiting for more. But the thirty, it turned out, had played him a mean trick. When his regular customers learned that the proceeds from the prophet's blood (now the talk of Jerusalem) had wound up in the tavern where they were drinking, they dashed the wine from their cups, paid up, and demanded change. The tavern keeper offered them the pieces of silver—one to one man, two to another, more to a third—but the pious drunkards roared:

"The price of blood!"

"Tainted coins!"

"Give us others!"

The tavern keeper swore that these were others, but since all silver pieces look alike, his customers eyed the coins, shook their suspicious heads, and demanded others still. The coins leapt from palm to palm, clattered onto tabletops, and soon got mixed up—the tainted with the untainted—spinning round the room in a mad silver dance. Then the benches emptied, and the tavern keeper crawled about on all fours scraping up the scattered contents of his money bag.

A day went by, then another; not a single person set foot in the tavern. Weary of waiting for takers, the wine soured. The tavern keeper uncovered the clay vessel, took the dipper, and tasted: vinegar.

"Damned potter," he muttered, and decided to act. He opened his money bag and, sighing and counting, began to pick out the thirty: He remembered that the potter's coins were new and unworn, fresh from the minter. Even so, the tavern keeper was soon muddled; matching this coin with that, the poor man came up with a collection now of twenty-nine, now of thirty-one pieces of silver: The right ones or the wrong ones—who could tell?

Meanwhile the potter, having slept himself sober, returned home and went back to making pots. But before three days had passed the door of his hovel flew open and in walked the tavern keeper. Flinging the silver pieces to the floor, he said, "Take all thirty."

With that, he raised his stick and began smashing pots. Now and then he stopped and, wiping away sweat, asked, "Well, how many more? How much is that amphora? Two didrachmas." Thwack! "And this vase? Half a silver piece. Count it." Clonk! "The lamp. Five denarii? The lamp too." Crash!

His reprisal complete, the tavern keeper tossed his stick on top of the shards and turned his back.

"Hey, my good man!" the potter called after him. "You still have ten leptons' worth. I don't need the extra. Take it!"

A clay basin clipped the tavern keeper's back.

Home again, the tavern keeper expected business to return to normal. The tables had been scrubbed clean; new wine was foaming

in the jugs; the doors stood wide. But no one set foot in the tavern. The superstitious tavern keeper scrabbled again in his money pile: Perhaps one of the cursed thirty was still hiding there? Many of the silver pieces seemed suspect—he fished them out, one after another, so as to give them to beggars. But the beggars, who knew where the silver pieces had come from, refused the tavern keeper's charity. He brought the money to a harlot, but even she would not sell a night for the price of blood. In despair, he threw the money on the road. Even that did not help. Misfortune would not forsake his house. "Perhaps because of a certain one?" thought the tavern keeper, re-examining the look and ring of the remaining coins. As another night drew in, another fistful of silver pieces tumbled into the dust on the road. The mysterious coins were found by strangers setting off with the dawn, and by peasants bringing produce to the city by night: The desecrated silver disappeared into purses and sacks, around the city and the world. What Judas had sown was soon reaped. Having thrown almost all of his money away, the poor tavern keeper smashed his head against the wall like a cheap pot. And a good thing he did, too, for had he gone on living, my story about the thirty silver pieces might have run to thirty chapters and been suspected of Romanticism, or even mysticism. Having done with the tavern keeper, it's time to skip from this episode to the next: from the smashed head to the broken pots.

4

The potter raked up the potsherds and pitched them out; then he collected the silver pieces but did not pitch them out; instead he began thinking where to palm them off. No doubt the tavern keeper had told everyone what happened. The potter would have to bide his time. But before a day had passed, a venerable-looking old man knocked at his door and, glancing all about, asked, "Have you got the thirty?"

"What thirty?" the potter feigned ignorance. "And even if I did, what of it?"

"I'll give you twenty for the thirty. No one will give you more."

They haggled—and finally agreed on twenty-five. The world's first currency deal had been struck. The old man, trying not to touch the silver taint, held out a leather pouch to catch the coins, tied it with three knots, and, bowing to the dumbfounded potter, disappeared into the dusk.

Upon entering his house, the pious old man washed his hands and read purifying prayers. Next morning the thirty pieces of silver were decanted from his leather pouch into the canvas sack of a publican come to collect taxes.

5

The publican who signed for the silver pieces was that same good publican whose record recalled the parable. The most honest of men, he was known and respected throughout the district. Urging his donkey on with his bare heels, he went from house to house calling in taxes and arrears with a little bell. In his decades of service, he had never pocketed a single drachma; perhaps now too he might have managed to deliver the thirty pieces of silver to the treasury, but having just begun his rounds, he still had to knock on hundreds of doors, to go a long and slow journey, whereas the silver pieces were bursting with impatience; the silver itch drove them from sack to sack, from palm to palm, from man to man, from country to country. The blameless publican squandered the silver pieces. How this happened, he himself could not understand. If it had been only the thirty, he might have replaced them. But the publican's donkey had a jolting gait: Judas's silver pieces got mixed up with the other coins; the silver shook the sleepy coppers and sluggish minas awake and, dragging them along, cleaned out the sacks. The publican did not wait to be tried: He tried himself and passed sentence. Heeding the

Scripture's advice, the publican, once a good man, hung a millstone round his neck and threw himself down a well headfirst.

6

The squandered coins scattered—as always happens—to gaming tables, to dens of depravity, to human dust; the coins that end up there never rust, they are slippery and nimble and know no rest.

Meanwhile the house of the suicide tavern keeper was sealed; his remaining money, in which pieces of Judas's silver still hid, was confiscated and sent to Rome, to the state treasury. Ten coins seized with wanderlust sufficed to wake the moldering silver and gold in those Roman cellars. The roused heaps of coins began looking for ways out of their sacks and over state borders; myriads of tiny metal disks stood up on their smooth or ribbed rims and bowled off round the world in search of markets and territories. Metal shields blazed a trail for the silver disks; so began the imperialist wars that forged a sedulous path for the thirty silver pieces forever running away from themselves. Before thirty years had passed, they returned to Jerusalem ahead of Titus's army. They destroyed the city walls, cast them down into the dust, as they themselves had once been cast down. Laid waste with fire and sword, the city of prophets and usurers finally knew the price of blood.

7

With each new paragraph I find it harder to keep pace with the pieces of silver. Words circulate more slowly than coins. The story I am trying without success to run down resembles a wheel with thirty spokes. At first it spins slowly, then faster and faster; the flickering spokes fuse into a solid metal disk, a sort of enormous silver piece that can never be hidden, either in the palm of Judas, who sold

Christ, or in the leather pouch of the polite old man who bought currency. If before I could linger at episodes about the potter, the publican, and I don't remember who else, now I must dispense with all images and ask for the help of dry, long-legged sketches.

We know that one silver piece sprang into a church box and straightaway started banging on the walls in alarm. In response, armor rattling, the knighthood rose up: The Crusades began. Another silver piece slipped into the pocket of a scholar-economist, and from his pocket there popped into his head the idea that later developed into his "theory of money circulation": Wealth was not in wealth, it turned out, but in the circulation speed of monetary units. The silver pieces rushed on, whirling ever more quickly round the spinning earth. Here John Law's sleek cheeks flash past, his mouth protruding like a money-box slot: In place of his "credo," now there were credits; the silver pieces sprouted paper wings. The carousel spun faster and faster. The thirty ringing coins racketed round the whole world. Open any reference book; it will tell you that all thirty European states . . . No, I positively cannot keep pace with the pieces of silver. They fidget from palm to palm, clatter into cash drawers, toss and tumble from continent to continent. Time has effaced their stamps and symbols: Now any one of them may be mistaken for a franc or a mark, a leu or a shilling. The thirty impersonal, indistinguishable, palm-worn pieces of silver will never be caught, and I cannot promise you, patient reader, that one of them wasn't slipped into your last pay packet. One oughtn't to be mistrustful, of course, yet I can't help wondering if it's really worth exchanging these ramblings of mine for a per-line fee. What if I should be paid for my story about pieces of silver . . . with pieces of silver?

own existence as independent, i.e., possess self-consciousness." (Translated by J. Sibree.)

- 153 *Seymour*: Robert Seymour (1798–1836), a prolific British illustrator who drew the frontispiece and first seven plates for Dickens's *Pickwick Papers*.
- 154 *the waters of the Cocytus, Lethe, Acheron, and Styx*: In Greek mythology, four of the five rivers separating the underworld from the world above, the rivers of lamentation, forgetfulness, woe, and the surety of oaths sworn by the gods, respectively.
- 155 *the toad's sunken eyes*: When swallowing food, a toad's eyes drop down inside its head; this movement helps push the food down the toad's throat.

THIRTY PIECES OF SILVER

- 162 *Thirty Pieces of Silver*: The sum paid to Judas Iscariot for his betrayal of Christ (Matthew 26:15). Thirty silver pieces was apparently a pittance, the price of a gored slave (Exodus 21:32).
- 162 *And he cast down the pieces of silver . . .*: Matthew 27:5–8.
- 162 *cubit*: Roughly twenty inches.
- 164 *Caiaphas*: The high priest in Jerusalem the year Jesus was tried (John 11:47–54).
- 167 *that same good publican whose record recalled the parable*: The parable of the penitent publican who humbled himself before God in his prayers as opposed to the self-righteous Pharisee who exalted himself (Luke 18:9–14).
- 167 *Heeding the Scripture's advice*: The advice of Jesus: "And whosoever shall offend one of these little ones that believe in me, it is better for him that a millstone were hanged about his neck, and he were cast into the sea." (Mark 9:42)
- 168 *Titus*: Titus Flavius Vespasianus, the Roman emperor (79–81) who as commander of a Roman legion in Judea captured and destroyed Jerusalem (70).

- 169 *John Law*: A Scottish monetary reformer (1671–1729) who proposed a central bank as an agency for manufacturing money as banknotes, rather than as gold and silver.

POSTMARK: MOSCOW

- 170 *that "particular imprint" (to quote Griboyedov)*: In Aleksandr Griboyedov's play *Woe from Wit* (1822–24), Famusov remarks that "All Muscovites bear a particular imprint" (act 2, scene 5).
- 170 *Bryansk Station*: Now the Kiev Station.
- 171 *CC RCP (B)*: Once located at Staraya Square, 4.
- 171 *Church of Nine Martyrs*: At Bolshoi Devyatinsky, 15. A stone church built in the 1730s; the three-tiered belfry was added in 1844.
- 171 *PRAVDA*: Daily newspaper; official organ of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union.
- 172 *Kamer-Kollezhsy Val*: A twenty-three-mile-long earthen embankment around Moscow with eighteen barriers (customs checkpoints), which marked the city limits from 1742 to 1917. In the mid-nineteenth century the barriers were removed and the embankment replaced with streets that still exist today (Butyrsky Val, Gruzinsky Val, Presnensky Val, etc.).
- 172 *white mansion at 7b Nikitsky Boulevard*: Gogol spent his last winters in rooms on the ground floor; here he finished writing part two of *Dead Souls* and then burned it
- 172 *Shenrok*: Vladimir Shenrok (1853–1910), a historian of literature and a renowned Gogol expert.
- 172 *"Slavophilism"*: A nineteenth-century school of Russian social thought: part nationalist protest against borrowings from the West, part philosophical-historical assertions of the superiority of Russia's Orthodox-based traditions and culture.
- 172 *Khomiyakov's ramshackle house on Sobachia Square*: Aleksei Khomyakov (1804–1860), the religious philosopher and apostle of Slavophilism, lived in this house near the Arbat from 1844 until his death.