

**“The Truth of Testimony: as Related in the
Context of Aletheia and Aletheuo”**

On January 26, 2005, Oprah Winfrey featured author of *A Million Little Pieces* James Frey on *The Oprah Winfrey Show*. Initially, the bestselling book sold over 3.5 million copies as Winfrey and her book club raved about Frey's memoir, citing the book as "nothing you ever read before" (A Million Little Lies). However, when media sources at The Smoking Gun discovered that *A Million Little Pieces* contained a great amount of fiction, the memoir's American audience was infuriated, and the majority of Frey's readers felt "conned" (A Million Little Lies). At first, Winfrey "defended Frey, but soon changed her mind and berated him on her TV show" (Italie). Furthermore, the mother of the girl allegedly killed by Frey and detailed in the memoir stated, "as far as I know, he had nothing to do with the accident ... I figured he was taking license...he's a writer, you know, they don't tell everything that's factual and true" (The Smoking Gun). Random House may grant those readers who felt "defrauded" by the book full refund, for many of these readers believe that memoirs should convey truth (Italie).

Likewise, many people feel *Testimony: the Memoirs of Dmitri Shostakovich as related to and edited by Solomon Volkov* is fraudulent. Shostakovich's wife Irina Shostakovich even states in "Shostakovich Memoir a Shock to Kin" that she "could not see how [Volkov] could have gathered enough material from Dmitri for such a thick book" (Whitney C7). Even though this fact diminishes Solomon Volkov's credibility, the majority of critics deem the book inaccurate because some details in the memoirs do not line up with facts. For example, there are cited discrepancies on when Shostakovich planned or completed his Seventh Symphony in one chapter of the memoirs. However, one must realize that *Testimony* is an oral account, and it is impossible to replicate oral history, for the interviewer may lose information in the process. In addition, "oral history depends upon human memory and the spoken word. The means of collection can vary from taking notes by hand to elaborate electronic aural and video recordings" (Moyer). As

Dmitri Shostakovich related his accounts to Volkov, Volkov ultimately decided what material he placed in the memoirs, and there are no written documents to verify the accuracy or inaccuracy of these accounts. Nevertheless, such debates on Frey and Volkov's compositions revolve around truth, a topic that may be very difficult to define. However, for efficient analysis the individual can reduce truth to two differing Hebrew definitions *aletheia* and *aletheuo*, which may enable the writer to understand his obligation to truth.

Vine's Expository Dictionary of Old and New Testament Words defines *aletheia* as "the reality lying at the basis of an appearance, the manifested, veritable essence of a matter" (Vines 645). Primarily, the writer should consider this aspect of truth when creating composition. The Ancient Greek philosopher Aristotle once stated, "the aim of art is to represent not the outward appearance of things, but their inward significance" (Aristotle). Therefore, the composer should fulfill his or her responsibility to *aletheia* by remaining true to his or her artistic instincts and producing work that aligns with the writer's conscience. Obvious crimes such as plagiarism go against *aletheia* when the composer uses deceit and claims another composer's work as his own. The writer should also avoid producing composition that euphemizes a tumultuous state of affairs such as Adolph Hitler's Mein Kampf as a vast amount of innocent individuals were murdered in the Holocaust due to propaganda (Eksteins 4).

The writer also has a responsibility to the Hebrew verb *aletheuo*, meaning "to deal faithfully...with anyone" (Vine 645). In accordance with *aletheuo*, many individuals abide by the Golden Rule, and the composer is no exception. The writer should fulfill the obligation to *aletheuo* by honoring his or her words to fellow man. One can understand the difficulties of fulfilling the writers' obligations to *aletheia* and *aletheuo*. Nevertheless, *Testimony: The Memoirs of Dmitri Shostakovich, as related to and edited by Solomon Volkov* can act as a manual

of instruction for the writer to understand truth; for the memoir becomes didactic, a beautiful embodiment of truth, through Solomon Volkov, acting on *aletheia* and *aletheuo* as he relates Dmitri Shostakovich's life.

Volkov's *Testimony* reflects the *aletheia* of Shostakovich's era, "apparently spent in fear and despair" as Volkov uses key accounts to prove this fact (Schonberg BR1). The arrest of Vsevolod Meyerhold in 1939 is one major example of the disgusting times of Shostakovich. In the memoirs, Volkov relates the fate of Meyerhold as Meyerhold directed Semyon Kotko in the Stanislavsky Opera Theater. Meyerhold was "arrested in the middle of it" and his "underground saboteur's nickname" became "Semyonich" (Volkov 132). Afterward, authorities shot Meyerhold in 1939 while he was imprisoned (Barba 180). What occurred after Meyerhold's disappearance was equally disturbing. Volkov uses the following account effectively to portray the genuine callousness of Shostakovich's times:

The director was arrested but the work went on as though nothing had happened. This was one of the terrible signs of the age, a man had disappeared but everyone pretended that nothing had happened. A man was in charge of the work, it had meaning only with him, under his direction. But he was no longer there, he had evaporated, and no one said a word. The name Meyerhold immediately disappeared from conversations. That was all. (Volkov 132)

Likewise, Volkov demonstrates how Shostakovich's life was often in grave danger as the leaders of Russia believed his music to be controversial. Volkov relates to the reader Shostakovich's era where "there was only one question of life or death: how did the leader like your opus" (96); and Stalin rarely liked Shostakovich's works. This fact is most evident in the January 28, 1936 issue of *Pravda* titled "Muddle Instead of Music," a scathing diatribe against

Shostakovich for his opera "Lady Macbeth." The article "expressed the opinion of the Party. But it actually expressed the opinion of Stalin" (113). In addition, the original article accuses Shostakovich's piece of "tickling the perverted tastes of the bourgeois with its fidgety, neurotic music" (Muddle Instead of Music). After reading *Testimony*, it is difficult for the reader to understand how Shostakovich survived Stalin's wickedness:

Sometimes it took only a trifle to make Stalin angry, a careless word. A man talked too much, or was in Stalin's opinion, too educated, or carried out Stalin's orders too well. That was enough. He perished. (Volkov 138)

Volkov desired that the memoir reveal the *aletheia* of Shostakovich's tragic era, and he succeeds in accomplishing this feat because of the vivid accounts he mentions.

Similarly, Volkov kept his obligation to *aletheuo* by honoring his promise to Shostakovich. Shostakovich desired, above all, that his "experience in this regard could also be of some use to people younger than [he]. Perhaps they wouldn't have the horrible disillusionment that [he] had to face, and would go through life better prepared, more hardened, than [he] was" (Volkov 276). Volkov enabled the latter generations to understand Shostakovich's life to the fullest. When reading *Testimony*, the reader can observe the tragedies of Shostakovich and his peers and understand how difficult the artists' lives were during the era; for "no single account portrays so nakedly, so brutally, the crushing hand of Stalin on Russia's cultural and creative life as that of Shostakovich in *Testimony*" (Chronology of Debate). Volkov also honored his promise to Shostakovich in that Volkov "'took measures' to get the manuscript to the West" after Shostakovich's death in 1975 because "Shostakovich stipulated that the book not be published until after his death" (Schonberg BR1). Shostakovich and Volkov's "agreement was in force" on the book's publication in 1979 (Volkov xviii).

For these reasons, scholars should view *Testimony* as composition with the sole purpose of portraying the devastation of Shostakovich's era and analyze the memoirs in the context of *aletheia* and Volkov's actions in the context of *aletheuo*. Volkov maximized the effectiveness of *aletheia* as he portrayed the terrible aspects of Shostakovich's life; for the deaths and horrors mentioned in the memoirs are characteristic of Stalin's reign of terror. Similarly, scholars should consider Volkov's credibility as composer as he endeavored to deliver Shostakovich's message, in accordance with *aletheuo*. The reader may consider *Testimony* controversial; however, Volkov has accomplished more good than harm as readers begin to understand a glimpse of the oppression that took place in the Soviet Union during Shostakovich's times, making *Testimony* truthful composition.

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