

KANTIAN ZOMBIES IN MODERNITY'S GRAVEYARD: BENJAMINIAN ALLEGORY AND THE  
CRITIQUE OF ENLIGHTENMENT IN SIGIZMUND KRZHIZHANOVSKY

by

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Kantian Zombies in Modernity's Graveyard: Benjaminian Allegory and the Critique of Enlightenment  
in Sigizmund Krzhizhanovsky

Thesis directed by Professor Mark Leiderman

Sigizmund Krzhizhanovsky (1887-1950) is known for his dense, surreal fiction that engages extensively with philosophical figures and concepts. His literary method of experimental realism brings abstract ideas to concrete life, exploring conceptual frameworks in fantastic allegory. This theoretically rich and historically oriented method resonates strikingly with Walter Benjamin's analysis of allegory in his *Trauerspiel*; reading them together, we can gain a clearer sense of Krzhizhanovsky's critical dimensions. This project narrows in specifically on the use of allegory in his interactions with the works of Immanuel Kant, often made to stand in for the Enlightenment project broadly conceived. Taking up three stories that illustrate the breadth of his engagement with Kant, this project closely reads the connections Krzhizhanovsky draws between the Kantian worldview and the catastrophic violence of the twentieth century. In reading his allegorical interactions with Kant through a Benjaminian lens, we see that Krzhizhanovsky is centrally concerned with the violent potential at the heart of the intellectual foundations of modernity. Tracing the decay of reason and Kantian subjectivity, Krzhizhanovsky presents the Enlightenment impulse as akin to a ruinous disease transforming humanity into a society of zombies.

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## 1. Introduction

Так вот и с моим мозгом: я завожу его, как заводят скверные дешевые часы; сунешь меж зубов бутерброд,- глядь, в голове и затикало, и зашевелилось острыми колючими стрелками. Зубец за зубец, строка за строку - и возникает метафизическое что-то. А потом также внезапно . . . сижу пустой, будто и без пульса, и без "я". Предупреждаю: записи эти так и пойдут: бутерброд – метафизика – бутерброд – метафизика (“Швы,” 400-01)

That's how it is with my brain: I wind it as you would a cheap pocket watch; I poke a sandwich between my teeth – and lo and behold, in my head there's a ticking, and the hands jerk forward. Gear tooth by gear tooth, phrase by phrase – a metaphysical something starts up. Then just as suddenly it balks, sinks back, and I sit empty, as if I had no pulse and no “I.” Bear in mind, these jottings will work like that: sandwich – metaphysics – sandwich – metaphysics (“Seams,” 64)

The themes and tone of the above quote – the erudite mixture of metaphysics and humor, philosophical abstraction and vivid physicality – exemplify the writing of the 20<sup>th</sup> century Russian author Sigizmund Krzhizhanovsky. Recent reviewers have hailed him as “one of the greatest Russian writers of the last century (Chandler), comparing him to such titans of world literature as “Borges, Swift, Poe, Gogol, Kafka, and Beckett” (Randall), and yet he is a writer of “brilliant originality” (Rosenflanz 20) with his own inimitable style. In his intellectually rigorous, deeply bizarre, and extremely funny works, Krzhizhanovsky is a rich and “truly unique” (20) example of Russian literary modernism.

Sigizmund Dominikovich Krzhizhanovsky (1887-1950) was born in Kiev to a family of

Polish heritage.<sup>1</sup> Moving to Moscow in 1922, and encountering continuous difficulties in trying to publish his fiction, Krzhizhanovsky supported himself lecturing at universities, writing articles, and translating. He died after succumbing to alcoholism and, in a particularly cruel twist of fate, suffering a stroke that left him with the inability to read. His fiction was largely unpublished and unread in his lifetime, and only in the last few years has he begun to receive any critical attention in the West. Even Russian criticism is still relatively sparse and recent, as his literary texts only began to be published during perestroika after their rediscovery by the scholar Vadim Perel'muter, coinciding “with the appearance of a plethora of rediscovered works,” which may have “deprived [his oeuvre] of the full attention it deserves and demands” (Rosenflanz 20). The last ten years have seen the publication of several of his texts in English translation, along with a number of journal articles and one monograph in English; thus, we seem to be poised at the beginning of serious critical engagement in the West with this brilliant, difficult, and very nearly lost author.

As mentioned, Krzhizhanovsky's works are at once highly intellectual and strikingly physical; directly alongside his abstract philosophical musings and dense intertextual references dance a plethora of fantastic and animated objects. As N.L. Leiderman points out, these objects are used to bring the abstract concepts into the realm of the physical: “by means of objects, details, and things, a system of thought is materialized, turned into matter” (515); the story plays out in taking an abstract premise to its often ludicrously concrete and literal conclusion, and “возникающего при отчуждении как естественный, логичный (в логике "экспериментального реализма") результат” (Kalmykova)<sup>2 3</sup>. In this process of dismantling

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<sup>1</sup> For a detailed biography in English, see Rosenflanz

<sup>2</sup> alienation arises as a natural, logical (in the logic of 'experimental realism') result

<sup>3</sup> Footnoted English translations with page numbers refer to published translations listed in the works cited; those

abstractions and running experiments on the fragments, delving in “к "атомарности" телесного и психофизиологического” (Biriukov)<sup>4</sup>, Krzhizhanovsky “extracts from their formal meaning a palpable, thing-like aspect” (Leiderman 519). Taking this literary device of making abstract ideas into physical objects that is at the heart of so many of Krzhizhanovsky's works as the starting point of inquiry, this project will explore this dynamic use of allegory. Several broad questions are raised in taking Krzhizhanovsky's use of allegory seriously: what kinds of abstract systems of thought does he choose to embody in this way? How might this formal restructuring of an idea alter its very content? What is Krzhizhanovsky's ultimate point about the nature of objects, ideas, and writing itself? Tracing this method through several of his short stories, this project will provide a nuanced understanding of Krzhizhanovsky's use of allegory as a form of critique, explicating the connection between the formal and the conceptual in his uniquely vibrant brand of what he calls “экспериментальный реализм” (378)<sup>5</sup>.

Krzhizhanovsky's works incorporate many famous figures from the German philosophical tradition, both in terms of their abstract ideas and as actual characters, including Johann Gottlieb Fichte, Friedrich Heinrich Jakobi, Friedrich Nietzsche, and Immanuel Kant. The works of Kant in particular are often made to stand in for the “worn-out, irrelevant philosophical worldview” (Ballard 554) against which Krzhizhanovsky mobilizes his allegorical attacks. Ballard observes that Krzhizhanovsky was “persistently fascinated” (557) by philosophy, especially Kant and the German Idealist tradition. The theories of Kant, that “объекто-ненавистник” (557)<sup>6</sup> seem to have deeply disturbed Krzhizhanovsky; the role of fiction for him

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without page numbers are my own. Some published translations have been adjusted to give a more literal sense of the original.

<sup>4</sup> to the atomicity of the corporeal and psycho-physiological

<sup>5</sup> experimental realism

<sup>6</sup> object-hater

is in part to provide “salvation from transcendental idealism” (557). The vivid, animated objects of Krzhizhanovsky's allegorical world are set explicitly against the world of metaphysics and metaphysicians: “множество, разорванность, пестротность явлений лишь мучает метафизика” (53)<sup>7</sup>. While Krzhizhanovsky is here referring to the theater, these same qualities are present in his prose works as well, and are especially fitting descriptors of the role that allegorical objects play in his stories. Thus, Krzhizhanovsky's use of allegory is in some sense antagonistic, the form itself a philosophical weapon. While Krzhizhanovsky may at times give “short shrift to the nuances and significance of Kant's work” (556), the idiosyncratic ways in which he (mis)reads, reinterprets, and represents Kantian philosophy in allegory are highly significant. In playfully literalizing Kant's worldview, Krzhizhanovsky is in fact embarking on no less of a project than a critique of Enlightenment itself.

Both Ballard and Rosenflanz place considerable emphasis on Krzhizhanovsky's contrast among the worlds of *бытие*, *быт* and *бы*<sup>8</sup> that he sets out in “Философема о театре.”<sup>9</sup> For Rosenflanz, “the ontological level of fiction, that of *by*, takes precedence over reality, the world of *byt*” (34), while Ballard explores “the subjective, as-if world” (558) of *бы*, “identical to the theater” (559), as the basis of Krzhizhanovsky's general “positive and renewing theatrical worldview” (554). *Бы* disrupts or overrides not only the everyday world of *быт* but also the metaphysical realm of *бытие*, “the space of Plato's Forms and Kant's noumena” (Ballard 559). This is perhaps not a terribly surprising position for a writer of fiction, and the privileging of theatrical or fictional truth over all other forms of truth is certainly not unique to Krzhizhanovsky. What makes Krzhizhanovsky so compelling is his method; for instance, siding

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<sup>7</sup> multitude, interruption, diversity of phenomena only torment the metaphysician (Ballard 559)

<sup>8</sup> Being, everyday-life, as if (Ballard 558)

<sup>9</sup> “A Philosopheme About the Theater”

with Shakespeare over Kant, he writes: “Кант вынимает весь мир, от звезды до пылинки, из глаза: есть ли что вне субъекта, он не знает. Шекспир делает мир -- пером, молотком и кистью -- для глаза, для зрителя” (45)<sup>10</sup>. “Metaphysics never shows itself before an audience; it never requires an opening night, or the physicality of an actor's body” (Ballard 556); thus, merely by exploring metaphysical questions allegorically, transforming Kant and Kantian concepts into an “*объект, реальный мир*” (384)<sup>11</sup>, Krzhizhanovsky's choice of form already constitutes the beginnings of his critique of Enlightenment philosophy.

To better understand the subtlety of Krzhizhanovsky's use of allegory, we will turn to the work of Walter Benjamin, “who tried to redeem that clumsiest and most belabored of formal devices” (Hansen 664) in his *Trauerspiel*. The metaphorical category of allegory, in its most straightforward definition as “embodying of an idea in a character or an emblem” (664), was for a long time derided as reductive or stilted: “the old prejudice against allegory was both that it insisted on putting one thing in the place of another . . . and that this connection was rigidly, and rather abstractly, coded” (Tambling 1). However, in unsettling these “older senses of allegory altogether” (2), Benjamin may provide us with some tools to construct a more productive and modern understanding of allegory that better captures the sophistication of Krzhizhanovsky's method and overall project.

In Benjamin's analysis, allegory is both a form of expression and an inner experience. “Allegory arises from an apprehension of the world as no longer permanent” (Cowen 110), and this sudden intuition of transitoriness takes a form that is “fragmentary and enigmatic . . . an

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<sup>10</sup> Kant takes the whole world, from a star to a speck of dust, away from the eye: whether there is anything outside the subject, he does not know. Shakespeare makes the world – with pen, hammer, and brush – for the eye, for the viewer

<sup>11</sup> object, a real world (Ballard 557)

aggregation of signs” (110). For Benjamin, this process of “transforming things into signs is both what allegory does – its technique – and what it is about – its content” (110). The form is not simply a neutral representation of the real, abstract content. Rather than a “conventional relationship between an illustrative image and its abstract meaning” (Benjamin 162), Benjamin insists that the formal method of allegory is inseparable from its content, or indeed even *is* its content. In allegory, “any person, any object, any relationship can mean absolutely anything else” (175), thus, this fragmentation, both in being and language, means that “the fragment stands for anything, nor is there anything but fragments, whose being declares the absence in them of inherent meaning” (Tambling 161). The allegorical figure points to “precisely the non-existence of what it presents” (Benjamin 233), signifying non-being.

Indeed, we can even see this intertwining of form and idea in Kant himself: “even when Kant, modernity's arch-formalist, describes the immanent concerns of a reflexive judgment, he claims that in such judgments one begins by meditating on a particular object 'for which the universal has to be found'” (Hansen 667)<sup>12</sup>. Thus, allegory a once antagonistically objectifies those ideas that strive to be most abstract and universal and reveals the object-like, formal component at the core of all content.

Furthermore, for Benjamin, allegory is always historiographical and infused with melancholy: in allegory, “everything about history that . . . has been untimely, sorrowful, unsuccessful, is expressed in a face” (166). In contrast to a traditional poetic emphasis on wholeness, timelessness, and transcendence, allegory “looks at history, which it reads as a 'landscape'” (Tambling 117). While the symbol – or, indeed, any representation that pretends to

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<sup>12</sup> For an exploration of the perhaps self-undermining correspondence between form and concept in Kant, see Paul de Man, “Phenomenality and Materiality in Kant.”

universality – relies on the permanence and unity of the natural world, allegory reveals that this unity is always already shattered. This “allegorical physiognomy of nature-history, which is put on stage” in allegorical works, is “present in reality in the form of a ruin. In the ruin history has physically merged into the setting. And in this guise history does not assume the form of an eternal life so much as that of irresistible decay” (Benjamin 178). At the “heart of the allegorical way of seeing” is the understanding “of history as the Passion of the world; its importance resides solely in the stations of its decline” (166). The allegorical figure is a shard, a broken fragment of the mournful piling-up of history, “a rune” (176) readable only as a history of its own shattering.

While both writers are products of the same tumultuous era – even briefly residing in Moscow at the same time – it may initially seem strange to read the animated, often riotously funny worlds of Krzhizhanovsky through the mournful, melancholic lens of Benjamin. However, Benjamin himself argues that modern, secular allegory can only be comedy: “only comedy accorded the allegorical the rights of citizenship in the secular drama” (191). Furthermore, “just as earthly mournfulness is of a piece with allegorical interpretation, so is devilish mirth with its frustration in the triumph of matter” (227). Krzhizhanovsky's laughter is in no way opposed to his Benjaminian mourning, and indeed may even serve to highlight it – the broken world, the bits of matter that signify nothing but non-being, can only result in the “shrill laughter” in which “mind is enthusiastically embraced by matter” (227).

In this analysis, I will explore three short stories which, taken together, constitute a loosely bound trilogy on Kant as the intellectual foundation of modernity and the Enlightenment project broadly conceived. While Krzhizhanovsky certainly has other stories that build on this theme, these three stories illustrate in a condensed way the process and progression of his larger

critical project. In the first, “Катастрофа”<sup>13</sup>, he allegorizes the Kantian mode of relating to objects, painting Kant's theory of cognizing the world through the faculty of reason as resulting in utter chaos and deadly emptiness; in literalizing Kant's conceptions of pure space and time, Krzhizhanovsky illustrates the violence at the heart of all universalizing concepts. The second story, “Жизнеописание одной мысли”<sup>14</sup>, is “Catastrophe”'s obverse: rather than the destructive force the idea exerts on the world, this story shows the way the world corrupts and erodes the thought, reducing it to an empty, epigrammatic shell; the rich specificity and situatedness of a thought is ground down by its transmission into an empty signifier. The final story we will examine is “Автобиография трупа”<sup>15</sup>, which moves from objects and ideas to the Kantian subject itself. The subject as a vehicle of reason, the carrier of the objects and ideas of the previous two stories, is portrayed as a sort of semi-life, a walking corpse; furthermore, this final story reveals that the whole ruinous history reflected in these three stories turns out to be highly infectious, a societal disease that continues to spread and intensify. All three stories elucidate the connection between the Kantian worldview and the tragic violence of the twentieth century; in the end, we will see that in his engagement with Kant, Krzhizhanovsky allegorically traces the destructive potential at the heart of the Enlightenment project, illustrating the inevitable decay of this impulse towards reason into a violent social disease.

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<sup>13</sup> “Catastrophe”

<sup>14</sup> “The Biography of One Thought”

<sup>15</sup> “Autobiography of a Corpse”

## 2. “Catastrophe” (1919-1920): Questioning Reason

Krzhizhanovsky's early story “Catastrophe” drops us into a universe of heterogeneous things – “камни – гвозди – гробы – души – мысли – столы – книги” (123)<sup>16</sup> – peacefully wheeling along their personal orbits in their own little plot of space and time. This is disturbed by the philosophical activities of a certain “Мудрец” (123)<sup>17</sup>: Immanuel Kant himself. This Sage's thought first attempts to pry into the very heart of these things, “выискивая и вынимая из них их *смыслы*” (123)<sup>18</sup>, before ascending to the heavenly or universal realm. Eventually, his theoretical dealings result in the titular catastrophe: all objects and creatures, great and small, are seized by panic and flee this universe. Humans and centipedes, Kant's own bookcase, “прихрамывая на трех ногах” (126)<sup>19</sup>, and the stars themselves all run away. The vibrant (and often quite funny) chaos of their escape gives way to the stagnant, chilling chaos of an empty abyss, a world cleansed of objects and events. Finally, with the Sage's death, things rush back in, and the original order seems to be restored.

“Catastrophe” is an early and condensed example of themes that Krzhizhanovsky returns to repeatedly; as Vladimir Toporov points out, “опустошение и его результат -- пустота -- образуют важную или даже главную тему” (509)<sup>20</sup> in a great number of his stories, and the manner in which this “‘минус’-пространство” (476)<sup>21</sup> is presented demands that it be read allegorically. The game being played here initially seems quite clear: Krzhizhanovsky is literalizing Kant's abstract theories of time, space, and cognition, humorously allegorizing his philosophical ideas in the concrete figures of physical objects in the physical world. This is

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<sup>16</sup> stones – nails – coffins – souls – thoughts – tables – books

<sup>17</sup> Sage

<sup>18</sup> searching and removing their *meanings* from them

<sup>19</sup> limping on three legs

<sup>20</sup> devastation and its result – emptiness – form an important, or even the main, theme

<sup>21</sup> ‘minus’-space

especially apparent regarding Kant's key ideas of pure space and time: all that remains after the panicked escape of real objects and events is the Sage, a few old books, and “пространство, чистое от вещей [и] чистое (от событий) время” (128)<sup>22</sup>. In his project of determining the process and scope of reason itself in the *Critique of Pure Reason*, Kant writes that he must proceed as if “all the material and assistance of experience are taken away” (A: xiv). After turning away from the things of the world, he determines that space and time are pure a priori intuitions of the mind. Thus, to determine the universal – pure space, pure time, pure reason – Kant holds that one must first artificially erase all particulars; here, the objects literally obey, and space and time become “жутко-пустыми, точно кто опрокинул их и тщательно выскоблил и вытряхнул из них все вещи и события” (128)<sup>23</sup>.

Furthermore, and on an even more fundamental level, “Catastrophe” clearly allegorizes Kant's assertion that mind shapes the world. The basic premise of the First Critique is that, since he asserts that we have synthetic a priori cognition of objects (that is, knowledge derived neither from experience nor from the definition of the object itself), in some way “the objects must conform to our cognition” (B: xvi). He embarks on his project of defining and analyzing the structures of the mind because these structures shape and make possible absolutely everything we can extract from the world; or, as Krzhizhanovsky phrases it, “все смыслы, друг другу ненужные и несродные, стаскивала в одно место: мозг Мудреца” (123)<sup>24</sup>. The shaping force of cognition is made into a literal, physical force, exerting pressure on outside objects and meanings and attempting to bend them to its will; in Krzhizhanovsky, as we shall see, the objects

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<sup>22</sup> space, pure of things [and] pure (of events) time

<sup>23</sup> eerie-empty, exactly as if someone had tipped them and carefully scraped and shook from them all things and events

<sup>24</sup> all meanings, unnecessary and heterogeneous to each other, it pulled to one place: the brain of the Sage

resist this assault.

Furthermore, the common concerns that arise in readers of Kant's theory of mind over the possibilities of solipsism and the reduction of the world to mere illusion are also present in the story. Left in a universe of only a few old books and his own “I,” and “описав 'Формы чувственности’” (131)<sup>25</sup> in a world totally cleansed of any sensory experience, the Sage finally asks the fatal question: “явь ли я” (131)<sup>26</sup>. This destroys his whole careful project: the “I” takes flight, “говоря вульгарно”<sup>27</sup> (131), and “тут и приключилась Мудрецу смерть” (131)<sup>28</sup>. While Kant himself devotes a great deal of energy to showing that his theory is not solipsistic and rigorously objects to the view that holds “the existence of objects in space outside us to be either merely doubtful and indemonstrable, or else false and impossible” (B 274), the primacy this “explicitly anthropocentric model of cognition” (Allison 52) places on the shaping power of the subject continues to raise concerns about a reductive privileging of the mind over things “to the detriment of the world” (Bryant). In “Catastrophe,” the solipsistic potential at the heart of this theory of mind seems to cause the whole edifice to implode; the denigration or removal of the real, external object causes the mind to fold in on itself to the point of annihilation.

Not only do our own mental structures shape our experience, but we might say that in fact the entire underlying goal is to actually reshape the world, for Kant as well as for Enlightenment thought broadly conceived. Setting out his intentions in the introduction to the First Critique, Kant boasts that his system of reason will “sever the very root of materialism, fatalism, atheism, of freethinking unbelief, of enthusiasm and superstition, which can become generally injurious,

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<sup>25</sup> inventorying the “Forms of Sensuality”

<sup>26</sup> whether I am reality

<sup>27</sup> speaking vulgarly

<sup>28</sup> the Sage died right then and there

and finally also of idealism and skepticism” (B xxxv). In his essay “What is Enlightenment?” Kant defines the project of Enlightenment as one of personal and political liberation: just as the self must break free from its shackles of “self-incurred tutelage,” so too must the political and social organization reflect and encourage this emergence of the rational individual. To achieve Enlightenment, “nothing is required but freedom” – but only that freedom “to make public use of one's reason at every point.” Enlightened man builds an enlightened world, and an enlightened world builds an enlightened man; thus, Enlightenment itself is inherently about social transformation: “it is a public process [underpinned by] a conception of reason as a kind of norm that depends for its validity on the structured freedom and open scrutiny of communication,” resulting in the “social ideal of a self-regulating culture of enlightenment” (Deligiorgi 7). Thus, when we see what sort of world reason actually builds in “Catastrophe,” we get a first glimpse of the full scope of Krzhizhanovsky's critical project.

This freedom and individualism of human reason, that privileged force which shapes the world both in terms of perception and in terms of the socio-political, is built on the foundation of universalization. To properly use reason is to apply concepts, to cognize objects mediately “by means of a mark, which can be common to several things” (B 377). However, as Krzhizhanovsky shows, this universalization immediately gives thought capacity for violence. Restructuring the concrete and specific into the broadly universal, this violence is present not only in the abstract realm of ideas, but at the level of individual subject and individual object. Reason's inquiry into the world is framed in “Catastrophe” as an assault, a universalizing torture of the heterogeneous and irreducible objects undertaken “со всеми его орудиями пытливости: двойными крючкообразными §§-ми, зажимами точных дефиниций и самовязью парных

антиномий” (125)<sup>29</sup>. Even though “всякой вещи, как бы мала и тленна она ни была, несказанно дорог и нужнее нужного нужен ее собственный неповторяемый смысл” (124)<sup>30</sup>, Krzhizhanovsky holds that the universalizing thought “не знала сострадания” (124)<sup>31</sup>. This process of universalization, imposed on the irreducible world, can only result in chaos and emptiness for Krzhizhanovsky: “катастрофа была неотвратима” (124)<sup>32</sup>.

Allegorical thinking itself is born of this failure and chaos, the mournful reading of this history: “in allegory the observer is confronted with the *facies hippocratica* of history as a petrified, primordial landscape. Everything about history that, from the very beginning, has been untimely, sorrowful, unsuccessful is expressed in a face – or rather a death's head” (Benjamin 166). What do the faces of Krzhizhanovsky's allegorical objects reveal about this particular mournful history? What other histories might be lurking here, bringing to allegorized life that which we are told is closed and complete?

Krzhizhanovsky holds that using objects as Kant does – as this kind of inert matter to be coolly dissected and used as a backdrop against which the realm of the subjective emerges – devalues both subject and object. We can read this in Krzhizhanovsky's slightly altered quote from Kant's Second Critique: “звездное небо *над нами*, моральный закон *в нас*” (125)<sup>33</sup>, to which we will return in our analysis of “The Biography of One Thought.” This formula is presented as uniquely destructive, even more so than Reason's analytic torture instruments; the real trouble begins when Kant, returning from the abstract, travels via this route “*сюда*, на

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<sup>29</sup> with all of its weapons of curiosity: the double hooks §§, the clamps of precise definitions, and the ligatures of paired antinomies

<sup>30</sup> each thing, no matter how small or ephemeral it may be, needs more than anything its own incredibly dear and singular meaning

<sup>31</sup> did not know compassion

<sup>32</sup> catastrophe was inevitable

<sup>33</sup> starry sky *above us*, moral law *within us*

землю” (125)<sup>34</sup>. Adorno and Horkheimer frame this Kantian gap – that “ineliminable duality or distinction in kind” (Allison 52) of objects *there* and subjects *here* – as a fundamental feature of the thinking of modernity, and this “single distinction between man's own existence and reality swallows up all others . . . between logos . . . and the mass of things and creatures in the external world” (5). It is in the attempt to bridge this gap through logos, through reason, that violence is done to the external objects. With this “subjection of all existing things to logical formalism,” Adorno and Horkheimer read the nullification of the subject, the object, and the possibility of real knowledge; Kant interacts with objects “merely to note their abstract spatio-temporal relationships, by which they can be seized” rather than “to think of them as surface, as mediated conceptual moments which are only fulfilled by revealing their social, historical, and human meaning” (20). In “Catastrophe,” Krzhizhanovsky acts out both the disastrous consequences of seizing objects in this Kantian manner and, through allegory, draws out the richness and historicity of the irreducible objects’ “поверхности и грани” (123)<sup>35</sup> while avoiding doing them further violence. Expressing in an animated moment the whole mournful history of the idea, allegory allows history to speak in the ruined moment of the object.

Indeed, as we can see, it is the things themselves – the private, irreducible essences at the core of all beings – that resist this universalizing purity and rapacious cognition in Krzhizhanovsky's allegory. Down to the smallest speck of dust, “лучами – шипами – лезвиями граней, самыми малостью и тленностью своими выскальзывают вещи из познания” (124)<sup>36</sup>; indeed, when necessary, they will trudge on wooden legs or fling themselves from their

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<sup>34</sup> *here*, to earth

<sup>35</sup> surfaces and edges

<sup>36</sup> with rays – with spikes – with the blades of edges, with their own very smallness and ephemerality, things slip from cognition

orbits to flee the violence of thought. Along these same lines, Benjamin argues that the function of allegorical personification “is not the personification of things, but rather to give the concrete a more imposing form by getting it up as a person” (187) – to allow the complex moments of the irreducible objects to speak out their history without reducing their concreteness.

Furthermore, simply by making subjects into objects and objects into subjects, the previously mentioned gap between these two modes of existence is radically subverted. As Benjamin argues, in allegory “any person, object, or relationship can mean absolutely anything else. With this possibility a destructive, but just verdict is passed on the profane world: it is characterized as a world in which the detail is of no great importance” (175); in other words, this is a world violated by the universalizing thought. Making a subject into a destructible object or an object into a grotesquely animated subject, then, directly comments on this violently reductive universalization on which Kant's project is predicated, the form itself constituting a challenge of this fundamental cornerstone of Enlightenment thought.

Contained within the critique, however, is a corresponding positive gesture involving the very power and vibrancy of the object that we've just explored: “all of the things which are used to signify derive, from the very fact of their pointing to something else, a power which makes them appear no longer commensurable with profane things, which raises them to a higher plane, and which can, indeed, sanctify them. Considered in allegorical terms, then, the profane world is both elevated and devalued” (Benjamin 175). Through allegory, the objects are given – or perhaps restored to – their dignity; by pointing to or standing for the sorrowful history of an idea, they are also allowed to re-inhabit their own individual, irreducible object-ness – “очутившись снова в таких милых, таких *своих* гранях, [вещи] не могли вдоволь нарадоваться, что они –

они” (130)<sup>37</sup>.

However, this direct and even moving call for a deepened respect for the irreducibility of things – and, by extension, the irreducibility of the human soul – seems oddly indebted to Kant's own idea of the noumenal. While we are scolded “не трогайте, дети, феноменов: пусть живут, пусть себе являются” (124)<sup>38</sup>, enjoined to be “всегда сострадательны к познаваемому”<sup>39</sup> and to respect the “неприкосновенность чужого смысла” (124)<sup>40</sup>, in some ways it seems we do not have a choice. After all, the things themselves “самыми малостью и тленностью своими выскальзывают . . . из познания” (124)<sup>41</sup>. While clearly more allegorical in its attribution of agency to objects and inflected with the language of compassion, this seems to be building on Kant's distinction between appearances and the radically unknowable *Ding an sich*. As Kant argues, our “cognition reaches appearances only, leaving the thing in itself as something actual for itself but unrecognized by us” (Bxx) – or, in other words, “выскальзывают вещи из познания” (124)<sup>42</sup>. Subtracting our “subjective constitution that determines [a thing's] form and appearance” (B 62), the remainder left over is wholly outside the realm of the knowable, is “beyond nature” (B 334) – something like the “смысл вещи, ее суть” (124)<sup>43</sup>. Why, given Kant's avoidance of the things-in-themselves, would Krzhizhanovsky accuse him of trying “проникнуть в глубь, и еще в глубь, до того *interieur*'а вещи” (124)<sup>44</sup>? Why use Kant's own ideas positively in a critique of Kant? Might this indicate that the ultimate idea being critiqued is

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<sup>37</sup> finding themselves again in such lovely, such their own edges, they could not rejoice enough that they – were they.

<sup>38</sup> children, don't touch the phenomena: let them live, let them exist

<sup>39</sup> always compassionate towards the knowable

<sup>40</sup> inviolability of the *foreign meaning*

<sup>41</sup> with their own smallness and ephemerality slip . . . from cognition

<sup>42</sup> things slip from cognition

<sup>43</sup> *the meaning of the thing*, its essence

<sup>44</sup> to penetrate into the depths, and further into the depths of the very *interieur* of the thing

not Kant's at all?

The possibility of an allegorical critique extending beyond Kant is counter-intuitively driven home by the story's very emphasis on Kant as the sole antagonist. The story concludes with deceptive finality: the Sage dies, and all things “бросились опрометью назад, в свой миги и грани” (130)<sup>45</sup>. Events and things “снова прочно и изящно стоят на своих местах”<sup>46</sup> as we the readers can “легко убедиться, потрогав пальцами самих себя, страницы этой книги” (131)<sup>47</sup>. This wild, catastrophic history is emphatically past, and “сейчас, когда Мудрец отмыслил и истлел, мы вне опасности” (132)<sup>48</sup>. The repetitive insistence of this conclusion points to irony; the very emphasis on closure leaves us with the strongest sense of openness as we run our fingers uncertainly over the story's pages.

The final twist of the story occurs outside of the fictional text itself, in the form of the date it was written: 1919-1920. The presence of this date immediately following the tidy, comforting conclusion of the story is perhaps the most profoundly dark bit of humor in “Catastrophe.” Krzhizhanovsky wrote this vision of material and ontological security as the world and its political and social structures quite literally burned around him in the Russian Civil War. The turbulent history of “Catastrophe” is not dead, not a “petrified, primordial landscape” – the past, distilled in the death's head of the Revolution, is staring him right in the face.

The emerging Soviet state and its Marxist-Leninist ideology can be read in the background of this text as a Benjaminian ruin. As described above, allegory is in some way fundamentally *about* history and historiography, and this “allegorical physiognomy of nature-

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<sup>45</sup> rushed headlong back to their own moments and edges

<sup>46</sup> again stand firmly and gracefully in their own places

<sup>47</sup> easily verify, having touched, ourselves with our own fingers, the pages of this book

<sup>48</sup> now, when the Sage is finished thinking and has decayed, we are out of danger

history, which is put on stage in the [allegorical work], is present in reality in the form of a ruin. In the ruin history has physically merged into the setting. And in this guise history does not assume the form of an eternal life so much as that of irresistible decay” (178). Krzhizhanovsky is reading the ruins of history with Benjaminian melancholy: Kant has decayed into another “catastrophe” – the universalizing bulldozer of vulgar Marxism and the utter chaos of civil war; furthermore, this decay was inevitable, the violence and sorrow inherently contained within the Enlightenment project itself.

This story exemplifies several of the stylistic and thematic elements that define Krzhizhanovsky's work. He returns almost obsessively to these same elements over and over throughout his career: the figure of the philosopher, and Kant in particular; the uneasy and unresolved parallels (or contrasts) between Enlightenment philosophy and Soviet Marxism; and the play of vibrant, destructive objects in a style that is at once exuberantly profuse and almost unspeakably mournful. These elements get at the heart of Krzhizhanovsky's project. This content is always inextricably intertwined with the formal structure of allegory, that tremendously productive contrast “between the cold, facile technique and the eruptive expression of allegorical interpretation” (Benjamin 175), the “linguistic virtuosity” (207) that transforms objects, subjects, and language itself in the service of a new and destabilizing historiography. What emerges, as we shall see, is a subtle and in many ways unfinalizable allegory of modernity itself.

## 2. “The Biography of One Thought” (1922): The Categorical Imperative between Subject and Object

Written in the same year as “Catastrophe,” “The Biography of One Thought” immediately suggests itself as a complementary story, exploring the same broad ideas with the same basic theoretical framework while also, in many ways, seeming to be its antithesis. The titular thought is the very same statement that contributed so mightily to the destruction of the world in the previous story: “звездное небо надо мною – моральный закон во мне” (139)<sup>49</sup>. This story turns its attention from the objects of the world to the idea itself, providing us with a biography – or eulogy – of the Thought. While in “Catastrophe” Krzhizhanovsky allegorizes the violence that the thought does to the world, in “Biography” the reverse process is taken up: here we see the violence that the world does to the thought. How can this seemingly opposite portrayal of the interaction of world and thought be reconciled with the model of Krzhizhanovsky's critical project we've just explored?

The opening sections of “Biography” greatly resemble the post-“Catastrophe” world. The Thought is born from or causes an alteration of the world; the Sage births the thought in a park, “разомкнул ограду садика, бросив ее к пределам мира: рванул путаницу дорожек - и вдруг раскружились в пути: широкие, узкие, торные, битые и заросшие терном - из близей в даль” (140)<sup>50</sup>. As in “Catastrophe,” this chaotic emptiness recedes – indeed, here “длилось это секунд десять” (140)<sup>51</sup> – but in this story we remain with the Thought, now living “в мирозерцании” (141)<sup>52</sup> in the Sage's skull. This worldview, in turn, resembles the pure time

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<sup>49</sup> starry sky above me – moral law within me

<sup>50</sup> opened the fence of the garden, throwing it to the end of the world: grabbed the jumble of paths – and they all suddenly began spinning on the way: wide ones, narrow ones, smooth, beaten, and overgrown with thorns – from nearby to the distance

<sup>51</sup> it lasted about ten seconds

<sup>52</sup> in the worldview

and space left over after the escape of the objects in “Catastrophe”; unlike the world, which is “сплошь загроможденное вещами” (141)<sup>53</sup>, in the worldview “не грязненное вещью пространство: оно давало просозерцать себя насквозь – от безначальности до бесконечности” (141)<sup>54</sup>. The parallels with the destructive interaction of universalizing thought and irreducible objects in “Catastrophe” is clear; however, unlike this previous story, the allegorical personification in “Biography” is mainly confined to the Thought itself, drawing a distinction between worldview and world. We will return to the significance of this distinction below, simply noting here that the connection between the two stories is certainly intentional, but that the world in “Biography” seems to be allowed to retain its heterogeneity, while the pure realms of the worldview are confined to Kant's own head.

However, Kant and his Thought are less vilified in this story than the process of the Thought's transmission. The passing of the Thought into first handwritten and then typed and published language, and from thence to a maxim to be memorized and transmitted through the educational system, is described as a sort of slow dismemberment, a gradual, violent corrosion of the passive and helpless Thought. When the Sage sits down to write out the Thought, she “отпрянула назад: 'Не хочу в буквы' . . . Борьба была недолга, хоть и упорна: Мысль выскальзывала из-под пера, выпрыгивала из слов и путала буквы” (141)<sup>55</sup>. Although the Thought resists, so similarly to the objects slipping from cognition in “Catastrophe,” the Sage eventually prevails, and “печальной черной строкой лежала Мысль” (141)<sup>56</sup>. This unpleasant, even cruel manipulation of the Thought into physical text leads to her even greater abuse at the

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<sup>53</sup> completely cluttered with things

<sup>54</sup> space was not contaminated with things: it allowed itself to be contemplated through and through – from beginninglessness to endlessness

<sup>55</sup> drew back: “I don't want to go into letters.” The fight was short, but also tenacious: Thought slipped out from under the pen, jumped out of words and confused the letters

<sup>56</sup> Thought lay in a sad black line

hands of others: she is roughly grabbed by the typesetter and squeezed “как в тисках” (142)<sup>57</sup>; the reader Shtump, “схватив строку за левый ее край” (143)<sup>58</sup>, drags her into his own text and “приказал Мысли стать эпиграфом” (144)<sup>59</sup>; “цитаторы кромсают ее меж ножничных лезвиев” (145)<sup>60</sup>; and finally, passing “из рук в руки”<sup>61</sup> and living “от экзамена до экзамена” (145)<sup>62</sup> among students, she “стала просить о смерти” (146)<sup>63</sup>. Thus, the critique seems directed more towards the process of Enlightenment as education, the systematic alteration of the world through this specific mode of interacting with texts. This mode of reading is clearly framed as violent, dramatizing the process of the decay and corruption of the idea touched on in “Catastrophe”’s Soviet subtext.

Indeed, we can see that the violence of this whole biography is illustrated in the language of melodrama; the Thought is feminine, forced to suffer the indignities of her masculine abusers while thinking wistfully “о своем первом” (144)<sup>64</sup>, like a betrayed lover. Thought, in being forced against her will into the physicality of text, is portrayed as a bodily subject made to suffer under the violent process of life. Indeed, our sense of the Thought’s subjectivity is actually created through this melodramatic pain. The suffering and forced contortion of the Thought – in essence, her objectification – is what makes the reader view her as a subject. This all comes across in a fairly ironic mode because, of course, this pitiable “fallen woman” is not a subject being immorally taken as an object, but an abstract idea – neither subject nor object. The over-the-top melodrama of the Thought’s tragic biography, with its exaggerated innocence and

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<sup>57</sup> like in a vise

<sup>58</sup> grabbing the line by her left edge

<sup>59</sup> orders Thought to be an epigraph

<sup>60</sup> quotators shredded her between scissors’ blades

<sup>61</sup> from hand to hand

<sup>62</sup> from exam to exam

<sup>63</sup> began to beg for death

<sup>64</sup> about her first

exaggerated villainy, seems to mask – or, perhaps, winkingly point towards – an actually fairly nuanced exploration of morality itself.

The Thought whose melodramatic downfall we witness contains in herself a reference to moral law – the law within is equated with the stars above as permanent, universal sources of wonder. In the slow destruction of the wondrous moral law itself, then, we are given a portrait of immorality in the dastardly treatment of this innocent subject. Indeed, Kant formulates this as a definition of immorality: treating a subject as a means to an ends, as a reducible instrument – as an object. This allegory, then, brings the categorical imperative to theatrical life – and critiques both its foundational assumptions and its decay.

Kant's morality depends on the unique freedom of the subject, which in turn depends on a clear-cut, eternal divide between the subject and object worlds. For Kant, “freedom is an *idea* [that is] constitutive . . . of one’s conception of oneself as an agent . . . not a fact that we might discover about ourselves” (Allison 90). Freedom itself is defined as a causality independent of the laws of nature, and morality is contained within these concepts of autonomy and freedom of the will. While you as a rational being must “act so that you use humanity, as much in your own person as in the person of every other, always at the same time as an end and never as a means” (4:429) because “rational nature exists as an end in itself” (4:428), this is explicitly contrasted with non-rational beings, which “have, if they are without reason, only a relative worth as means, and are called *things*” (4:428). This is the very gulf between mind and world explored in “Catastrophe,” and visible in this story as well at the moment of the Thought's creation: “все – стена, деревья, белое пятно платка, солнце, земля, листья, скамьи – все, до последнего луча и блика, вывалилось из зрачков: был – Мыслящий и Мысль, и ничего меж ними”

(139)<sup>65</sup>. The world has no place in the formulation of the moral law; “the moral law within me” is predicated on the exceptionality of the thinking subject as an autonomous will, set against the backdrop of the object world's “heteronomy of efficient causes” (4:446). Again, as in “Catastrophe,” the subject is *here* and the objects are *there*; this Enlightenment gap is no less crucial in our dealings with morality than in our dealings with objects.

The entire edifice of morality, then, is built on the foundation of the distinction between subject and object, ends and means. The Thought, however, is neither subject nor object; in allegorizing the Thought as both feeling subject and textual object, or as an immorally objectified subject, Krzhizhanovsky brings the inadequacy of this dual categorization to the fore. The act of thinking “the starry sky above versus the moral law within” bridges the very gap it attempts to articulate; the Thought itself, as a thought, breaks the very opposition that it expresses. Grounded on these premises, Krzhizhanovsky finds the idea of the moral law to be empty and absent – the destruction of the Thought in “Biography” is inevitable, contained within the Thought itself.

This story adds another source of violence to the universalizing thought we saw in “Catastrophe”: the instrumentalization of that which is non-utilitarian, but with the understanding that this cannot be reduced merely to the mistreatment of subjects as objects. The Thought, too, demands to be read as a “mediated conceptual moment” (Adorno and Horkheimer 20), as inextricably intertwined with the rest of the endlessly multiple and irreducible world, not a mere tool to be used in the service of seizing the world in enlightened reason. This is especially clear in the Thought's abuse at the hands of Shtump, whose name is evocative of the German *stumpf* (blunt or obtuse). The flattening, stereotyping pressure of Shtump changes the Thought from a

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<sup>65</sup> everything, down to the last ray and patch of light, fell away from the pupils: it was – the Thinker and the Thought, and nothing between them

moment to a maxim, causing the decay of both the moral law within and the starry sky without. As he reduces the thought to a detached, instrumentalized epigraph, “вдруг звездное небо, как-то странно пожухнув, обвисло стеклящимися, как глаза мертвецов, звездами; звезды протянулись шеренгами по диагоналям и параллелям оквадратившегося небо” (143)<sup>66</sup>; with this dimming of the stars, “моральный же закон, приплюснутый теменем Штумпа” (144)<sup>67</sup> can easily fit among the other maxims banally “украшающей аллеи общественных садов” (144)<sup>68</sup> – nuggets of non-wisdom from “Цветов не рвать” to “Чужих жен не любить” (144)<sup>69</sup>. Rather, Krzhizhanovsky suggests that thought and morality must be conceived as situated, in contact with the world; otherwise, we see how the impulse decays into stagnancy: “изучавшим 'науку о правильном поступке' не было, собственно, времени на поступки: ни на правильные, ни на неправильные” (145)<sup>70</sup>.

Thus, while the flawed foundations of the moral law are certainly critiqued, as we have seen, the Thought – and even Kant – do not seem to bear the burden of the sins depicted in the story. Indeed, we might say that Kant and the Thought are even presented in positive terms, at least in comparison to the reductive, banal violence of the other characters. The vertiginous and even sublime moment of the Thought's birth is continually contrasted with the dull, conventional later readings. Peering out from behind the low brows of her readers, she sees a world “с короткими горизонтами, с вещами, прочно вправленными в дюймы и метры пространств. Мысль знала: обода этих горизонтов никогда и никуда не кружат, вещи, заслонивши друг

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<sup>66</sup> suddenly the starry sky, having somehow strangely dried up and dulled, drooped with stars becoming glassy like the eyes of the dead; the stars stretched in rows along the diagonal and parallels of the quadranted sky

<sup>67</sup> the same moral law, flattened by Shtump's parietal

<sup>68</sup> decorating the paths of public gardens

<sup>69</sup> do not pick the flowers / do not love another's wife

<sup>70</sup> those who studied “the science of correct actions” did not, in fact, have time for actions: neither correct nor incorrect ones.

друга друг другу, никогда не разомкнутся, не прозияют далью” (144)<sup>71</sup>. The Sage may have betrayed her, may have contained a kernel of violence in his philosophizing, but at least he was expansive, whereas “теперешние хозяева, если и взглядывала на небо, то разве лишь перед дождем: брать или не брать зонтик” (145)<sup>72</sup>.

Thus, if “Catastrophe” asks its readers to consider “приятно ли было бы вам, если б, вынув из вас вашу суть, отдали бы её в другой, враждебный и чуждый вам мозг” (124)<sup>73</sup>, then “Biography” makes us reflect on the transformation of the vibrant, specifically situated Thought into a flat, stereotypical maxim, a blank signifier that reveals its emptiness in being used for universalizing, instrumental purposes. The Thought, for all its flawed predication on the gap between subject and object, was born of wonder, of an attempt to describe the awe of world and self; it is in the flattening, maxim-making process of the Shtumps of the world that the mournful allegory emerges – again, reading the inevitable decay contained within the Enlightenment impulse.

As mentioned above, the distinction emphasized throughout “Biography” between worldview and world is key. When Thought is “среди огромного, на диво сдуманного и сложенного *миросозерцания*” (140)<sup>74</sup>, we see that these “были лучшими ее днями” (140)<sup>75</sup>. While the world outside is still the messy, irreducible, heterogeneous world of “Catastrophe,” the Thought does not want to penetrate this world and has no urge to universalize itself: “Мысль

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<sup>71</sup> with short horizons, with things firmly reduced to the inches and meters of spaces. Thought knew: the rims of these horizons never circled anywhere; the things, blocking each other to each other, never opened themselves up, never gaped as distance

<sup>72</sup> the present masters, if they did look at the sky, did so only before a rain: to take or not to take an umbrella

<sup>73</sup> consider whether it would be pleasant for you to have your essence removed from you and given to another brain, hostile and alien to you

<sup>74</sup> amid the huge, miraculously thought-out and coherent worldview

<sup>75</sup> were her best days

откачнулась назад: в *миросозерцании* куда лучше, чем в *мире*” (141)<sup>76</sup>. The Kantian picture can be accepted as a worldview – even as a productive worldview – but must coexist with multiple perspectives, multiple and multifarious worlds. It must itself be regarded as a mediated moment, situated among the world. It is the dual urges toward universalization and instrumentalization that result in the degeneration of the Enlightenment impulse– to the point of erasing its content itself, leaving it standing only as an empty signifier, a maxim, a ruin, or a grave.

And indeed, this story does end in the grave; as in “Catastrophe,” the Sage dies – “в черепе его были не мысли, а черви” (145)<sup>77</sup> – and at last the Sage and the Thought “снова . . . остались вдвоем” (146)<sup>78</sup>, as the words of the Thought are inscribed on his tombstone. Indeed, Kant's actual tombstone in present day Kaliningrad is in fact inscribed with this very statement. For all its noble impulses, the Thought is predicated on emptiness, and thus inevitably ends up standing emptily as a gravestone: “не садик мудреца тянулся теперь к ней ветвями деревьев – крестовая роща сомкнула вокруг нее свои крестовины” (146)<sup>79</sup>. Again, in reading the melancholy history of the Enlightenment thought, we see a ruin that can only reveal its own failure: “съжившееся небо ее, роняя звезду за звездой . . . обеззвездилось – и зияло черного ямой вверху. И черной яме вверху жаждалось одного: скорее – в черную яму внизу” (146)<sup>80</sup>. In allegory, the abyss of the grave below reveals the void of history. The mournful decomposition and presence as ruin that Benjamin identifies as markers of allegorical

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<sup>76</sup> Thought reeled back: into the worldview where it was better than in the world

<sup>77</sup> in his skull were not thoughts, but worms

<sup>78</sup> again . . . were alone together

<sup>79</sup> now it was not the Sage's garden that stretched its tree branches to her – a grove of crosses closed its cross-pieces around her

<sup>80</sup> her shrunken sky, dropping star after star . . . had de-starred itself, and yawned like a black hole overhead. And this black hole thirsted for only one thing – to get, as soon as possible, to the black hole below

historiography are here – and elsewhere in Krzhizhanovsky's works – literally embodied in the corpse and the tomb. As Benjamin argues, characters “die because it is only thus, as corpses, that they can enter into the homeland of allegory. It is not for the sake of immortality that they meet their end, but for the sake of the corpse” (217); this “martyrdom thus prepares the body of the living person for emblematic purposes” (Benjamin 217). This intersection of corpse, text, and history in allegory will be further explored in “Autobiography of a Corpse.”

### 3. “Autobiography of a Corpse” (1925): The Suicide of the Kantian Subject

After exploring the destruction of the world by the thought and the destruction of the thought by the world, Krzhizhanovsky embarks on a full deconstruction of Enlightenment subjectivity in his 1925 story “Autobiography of a Corpse.” Drawing on the Kantian subject as the embodiment or vehicle of reason, this story moves beyond the relationship of individual mind and world and delves into the issue of the other, exploring the way that the worldview functions on an interpersonal or societal level.

The journalist Shtamm, also known by the pseudonym “Идр” (508)<sup>81</sup> arrives in Moscow in need of a room. Upon finding one, a letter addressed only to “Жильцу комнаты № 24” (511)<sup>82</sup> slips its way into his hand. It is a letter from the previous resident of the apartment who has recently committed suicide, and the majority of the story is taken up with reading this “autobiography of a corpse.” Shtamm – and the reader – are forced to follow the corpse's impossible, fantastic, and oppressive thoughts on life, the self, and society; as the corpse puts it:

Одна старая индийская сказка рассказывает о человеке, из ночи в ночь  
принужденном таскать на плечах труп -- до тех пор, пока тот, привалившись к уху  
мертвыми, но шевелящимися губами, не рассказал до конца историю своей давно  
оттлевшей жизни. Не пытайтесь сбросить меня наземь. Как и человеку из сказки,  
Вам придется взвалить груз моих трех бессонниц на плечи и терпеливо слушать,  
пока труп не доскажет своей автобиографии (513)<sup>83</sup>.

The corpse, paralyzed by his absurd logic, represents the Enlightenment subject. In shouldering

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<sup>81</sup> From the Russian и др., и другие: Etal, et al.

<sup>82</sup> Resident, Room No. 24 (3)

<sup>83</sup> An old Indian folktale tells of a man forced to drag a corpse night after night on his shoulders – until the corpse, its dead but moving lips pressed to his ear, had finished telling the story of its long-finished life to the end. Don't try to throw me to the ground. Like the man in the folktale, you will have to shoulder the burden of my three insomnias and listen patiently, till the corpse has finished its autobiography (5)

the burden of this history, we will see the way that the destructive modes of thought explored in the previous two stories disseminate and degenerate – both within the corpse's story and outside of it, in its relationship with the reader. In tracing the philosophy of the corpse and analyzing the somehow carnivorous relationship of the letter with the reader, we will see how Krzhizhanovsky allegorizes the ruinous movement of history in the social sphere, the past devouring the present and the future in a way analogous to the spread of a fatal disease.

The corpse informs us early on that he wears glasses. The presence of this “стеклистый придаток” (513)<sup>84</sup> marks him as a stereotypical intellectual; moreover, the lenses stand in for the faculty of perception, always standing between the self and the world. This intellectualized perception is the corpse's only point of contact with the outside: “стоит втолкнуть мои двояковогнутые овалы в футляр -- и пространство, будто и его бросили в темный и тесный футляр, вдруг укорачивается и мутнеет” (513)<sup>85</sup>. As we can see, because these perceptual lenses so fundamentally inform his access to the world, he is unable to wholly differentiate between perception and the world: “иногда, когда протираю замшей мои чуть пропылившиеся стекла, курьезное чувство: а вдруг с пылинами, осевшими на их стеклистые вгибы, и все *пространство*” (513)<sup>86</sup> – again, as in “Catastrophe,” the specter of Kantian solipsism rears its head.

However, while in “Catastrophe” the literalized powers of cognition and the question of “явь ли я” (131)<sup>87</sup> seem to cause the total annihilation of self and worldview, in “Autobiography” the focus shifts to the implications for the subject's relation to other subjects.

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<sup>84</sup> glassy adjunct (5)

<sup>85</sup> I have only to poke my biconcave ovals back into their case, and space, as of it too had been thrown into that dark and cramped case, suddenly contracts and grows dim (5)

<sup>86</sup> sometimes, when I wipe my slightly dusty lenses with a piece of chamois, I have an odd feeling: What if, along with the specks of dust that have settled on their glassy concavities, I'm wiping away all of space? (5)

<sup>87</sup> whether I am the world

The corpse's glassy perceptual adjunct – and, more significantly, his constant, keen awareness of it – results in a major failure of intersubjective relations that shapes and informs the rest of his worldview. The corpse had a girlfriend of sorts who also wore glasses; they attempt to kiss, but “в этот-то миг и приключилась нелепица: неловким движением я задел стеклами о стекла; сцепившись машинками, они скользнули вниз и с тонким, острым звоном упали на ковер” (514)<sup>88</sup>. He is horrified to discover the glasses fused into “одно отвратительное четырехглазое существо” (514)<sup>89</sup>, and he runs away, never to attempt contact with her again. This episode occurred “много лет тому назад” (513)<sup>90</sup>; the corpse's current state of extreme alienation seems to stem directly from this failed moment of connection to the other.

The uncanniness of this moment is striking, as is its profound effect on the corpse. This intellectualized perception, formalized and categorized by thinkers like Kant, creates an impossible barrier to the other. Because this understanding of perception, as we have already explored, is predicated on the gulf between the subjective self and the world of objects, the other – in its living, human sense – cannot be assimilated into this worldview. This distancing from the other caused by the foundational gulf of Kantian epistemology is driven home in a particularly apt play on words: “меж 'я' и 'мы' – ямы” (522)<sup>91</sup>. The other is neither the self as subject nor simply an object; it can only be understood as an abstract maxim, as a “философема о чужом 'я': не мое 'я' мыслится чужим и чужеродным, непревратимым в 'ты’” (522)<sup>92</sup>. Again, we see the reduction of the incommensurable, the flattening to maxim of living vibrancy fundamentally

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<sup>88</sup> at that very moment the absurdity occurred: In my clumsiness I jostled her lenses with mine; the devices locked together, slipped off, and landed on the carpet with a thin, sharp tinkle (6)

<sup>89</sup> one hideous four-eyed creature (6)

<sup>90</sup> many years ago (5)

<sup>91</sup> 'I' and 'we' are separated by gulfs (12)

<sup>92</sup> the philosophical principle about someone else's 'I': The 'I' that isn't mine is seen as foreign and foreign-born, untranslatable to you (12)

required by the perceptual *яма*<sup>93</sup>. Brought into the realm of intersubjectivity, we see how this moves from intellectual violence to the erasure and oppression of the other; furthermore, as the story progresses, we can trace the movement from this failed connection between two subjects to the broadly societal and institutionalized physical destruction of the other.

Perception cannot link profoundly with the other, cannot embrace and kiss a non-self. Again, this applies not only to the stuff of the world, as in the previous two stories – although that is certainly present, as in his maxim “vacuum horreat naturam” (516) – but explicitly to the relations between subjects. Thus, he must give up “все эти опыты с дружбой, эксперименты с чужим 'я', порыванья дать или взять любовь” (516)<sup>94</sup>, instead constructing “сплющенного мирка, в котором все было бы в здесь, – мирка, который можно было бы защелкнуть на ключ внутри своей комнаты” (516)<sup>95</sup> – precisely the worldview we have already seen in the bony cranial room of the Sage's brain.

The corpse's state following this moment of failed contact is very similar to death. He felt as though he had “в темноте наткнулся на труп” (514)<sup>96</sup>; following this failure, in his “новом трупьем положении” (514)<sup>97</sup>, he knows that this “стеклисто-прозрачный холод . . . не слабнет” (514)<sup>98</sup>. Cut off from contact by his glassy adjunct, the corpse enters a state of non-being. He begins to think of himself “как о двояковогнутом существе, которому ни вовне, ни вовнутрь, ни из себя, ни в себя: и то и это – равно запретны. Вне досяганий” (515)<sup>99</sup>. The

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<sup>93</sup> gulf [more literally, pit or hole]

<sup>94</sup> all those passes at friendship, experiments with another person's 'I,' endeavors to give or take love (8)

<sup>95</sup> a flattened little world in which everything would be in my here – a little world that one could lock away inside one's room (8)

<sup>96</sup> tripped over a corpse in the dark (6)

<sup>97</sup> new corpse-like condition (6)

<sup>98</sup> glassily transparent cold . . . would not abate (6)

<sup>99</sup> as a biconcave creature inaccessible both outwardly and inwardly, from within and from without: both were equally forbidden. Beyond reach (7)

non-being of the world and the non-being of the self are intimately tied: each exacerbates the other, spreading both within and without like a contagion.

Thus we see that his ever worsening vision – or his reduction to mere perception – means that “55% солнца для меня нет” (513)<sup>100</sup>; this loss of connection with the world is directly tied to his intellectualism, his reading: “книжные строки и отняли у меня половину зрения (55%)” (517)<sup>101</sup>. Indeed, the corpse prefers to live in the world of books, to move through a network of signs instead of vibrant objects and irreducible others; the worldview, separated from the world and disconnected from the other, can only harden into empty signifiers. Directly recalling “Catastrophe,” the corpse tells us that “пространство . . . нелепо огромно и расплзлось своими орбитами, звездами и разомкнутостью парабол в беспредельность. Но если вобрать его в цифры и смыслы, оно с удобством умещается на двух-трех книжных полках” (516)<sup>102</sup>. The “нагромождение этих вещей” (516)<sup>103</sup> is discarded in favor of “молчаливые черные значки”<sup>104</sup> that “слишком хорошо умели быть покорными и мертвыми” (517)<sup>105</sup>. These letters stand like gravestones, like Benjaminian ruins, emptily signifying nothing but their very lack of meaning; in their deadness, we can only read the mournful history of loss.

And yet, as mentioned, this deadness of the signifier is not benign; its emptiness spreads like a cancer through the reader, reducing him to an empty corpse. Indeed, here we can get our first hint of Krzhizhanovsky's self-critique in this story: writing and allegory in many ways become the very object of analysis. We will return to the issue of self-critique later in this

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<sup>100</sup> 55 percent of sunlight doesn't exist for me (5)

<sup>101</sup> the lines in books deprived me of half my eyesight (55 percent) (8)

<sup>102</sup> space . . . is absurdly vast and has expanded by its orbits, stars, and yawning parabolas to infinity. But if one tucks it inside numbers and meanings, it will comfortably fit on two or three bookshelves (8)

<sup>103</sup> sheer accumulation of those things (8)

<sup>104</sup> silent black signs (8)

<sup>105</sup> knew only too well how to be meek and dead (8)

analysis, here only noting the questions that begin to arise: if, as Benjamin argues, allegory is the signification of non-being, meaning “precisely the non-existence of what it presents” (233), then what are we to make of its prominent role in the proliferation of this deadening emptiness? How might allegory not only look back, like Benjamin's *Angelus Novus*, on the mournful remains of history, but also contribute to the spread of modernity's fatal disease?

After establishing an understanding of the subject as the solitary, isolated bearer of reason, the corpse introduces a rather contradictory aspect: the soul. The soul is introduced though its loss: at night, putting away his books and his exhaustive research project on the letter “T,” he can hear his soul “с тонким и острым звоном, капля за каплей” (518)<sup>106</sup> slowing dripping away into emptiness, a phenomenon he terms “*психоррея*. Что значит – истечение души” (518)<sup>107</sup>. The drips have the very same “знакомый стеклистый звук” (518)<sup>108</sup> as the entangled spectacles; the loss of the other echoes and reverberates, wringing out the last remnant of the corpse's non-intellectualized self.

As he slowly loses this indefinable quality of the soul, the corpse also begins to be haunted by the apparition of a 0.6 person, a statistical figure he once read in a book on geography. He sees this horrible *полусущество*<sup>109</sup> in a flat, snowy field like a geometrical plane, “расчерчено на прямоугольные верстовые квадраты . . . и нигде – ни травинки, ни хотя бы обмерзлого камня, пятнышка” (518-19)<sup>110</sup>. The 0.6 person frightens him, but his eyes “будто срослись с пустыми мертвыми глазницами 0,6” (519)<sup>111</sup>, and the 0.6 person continues to

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<sup>106</sup> with a thin sharp tinkle, drop by drop (9)

<sup>107</sup> *psychorrhoea*. Meaning: soul seepage (9)

<sup>108</sup> familiar glassy sound (9)

<sup>109</sup> semi-being

<sup>110</sup> divided into right angled square miles . . . and not a blade of grass anywhere, not so much as an ice-covered rock, not a speck (10)

<sup>111</sup> seemed to have fused with the dead empty sockets of 0.6 (10)

haunt him “в дни пустот” (519)<sup>112</sup>. He emphasizes that this creature is “не призрак, видение, сонная греза. Нет, просто так: примысл” (519)<sup>113</sup>. This 0.6 person, immediately following his exploration of the soul, is a figment of the human subject. The figment is like an uncanny double of the soul; although it is a number, it is weirdly incommensurable: “не просто половина, не получеловек, нет . . . в неполноту -- как это ни противоречиво -- вкрадывался какой-то излишек, какое-то 'сверх” (518-19)<sup>114</sup>. In the flattened landscape of the worldview, the figment's “мелкая, десимметрирующая дробность” (518)<sup>115</sup> is not the soul, but rather the faculty of reason – the “over and above” of the transcendental Kantian subject. The 0.6 subject is said to supplant the world of soul, of contact, of the living kiss – to substitute or perhaps explain this “surplus” of the subject – but it does not and cannot. The process of quantifying the unquantifiable creates only monsters – and again, this monstrousness is contagious, fusing with the corpse's eyes.

Furthermore, “Autobiography” traces the spread of psychorrhea and its failed supplantation by the 0.6 person from the individual subject to a collective, societal disease; we very quickly realize that the corpse is not unique in being afflicted with psychorrhea. After recounting the episode of his accidental attendance at a political meeting in the library and his detainment by the police, the corpse sees his mistake in thinking of psychorrhea as his own particular malady, hidden away “как стыдную болезнь” (521)<sup>116</sup>: “я не подозревал, что процесс психического омертвления мог быть ползучим – из черепа к черепу, с особи на

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<sup>112</sup> on empty days (10)

<sup>113</sup> not a ghost, a vision, or a sleepy reverie. No, it was just that: a figment (10)

<sup>114</sup> not just half, not half a person. No . . . the incompleteness, contradictory as this may seem, had been infiltrated by a surplus, by an 'over and above' (10)

<sup>115</sup> small, desymmetrizing fractionality (10)

<sup>116</sup> like a shameful disease (12)

группу, с группы на класс, с класса на весь общественный организм” (521)<sup>117</sup>. While we see this process begin in the individual subject, resulting from the individual worldview explored in this story as well as “Catastrophe” and “Biography,” it cannot remain in one skull – this Enlightenment subjectivity replicates itself in the societal structure. Indeed, as we saw in our analysis of “Catastrophe,” this alteration of the social world is a central goal of the Enlightenment project as such.

It is difficult to determine which side is being diagnosed with psychorrhea in this episode: is it the Revolution or the police? The corpse seems alienated from and oppressed by both sides; while this is fairly obvious in terms of the police's bayonets, we also see that, confronted by the chaotic horde of student activists announcing “лишние пусть уйдут” (520)<sup>118</sup>, the corpse feels that “слово 'лишние' вдруг стреножило мне ноги” (520)<sup>119</sup>, and he is bored and unhappy to be detained “вместе со всеми этими никак не нужными мне” (521)<sup>120</sup>. Similarly, while detained, he seeks refuge in the world of signifiers by glancing through the dictionary he's carrying, and happens to turn to an entry on ethics; the book's response strikes him as apt, because “ну разумеется: только она, старомодная и маловразумительная Ифика” (521)<sup>121</sup> could lock him up in this way. Is this the ethics of the police, or the ethics of the idealist revolutionaries with their long, unclear speeches? This lack of specificity seems to draw a parallel between both groups; psychorrhea and its associated maxims are simply a feature of all social and political life, and its oppressive force only grows stronger when metastasizing from an individual to a collective disease.

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<sup>117</sup> I never suspected that the process of mental deadening could be creeping – from skull to skull, from an individual to a group, from a group to a class, from a class to an entire social organism (12)

<sup>118</sup> anyone who doesn't belong should leave (11)

<sup>119</sup> the words 'doesn't belong' hobbled my legs (11)

<sup>120</sup> with all these people for whom I had no use (12)

<sup>121</sup> well, of course, only old-fashioned and less-than-intelligible ethics (11-12)

The violence of these social forces only increases as the story continues; eventually, the corpse is made to acknowledge the death of the other, indeed the mass death of the other, in references to the war. He admits, “первые дни войны слегка возбудили и меня” (526)<sup>122</sup>; whereas he had previously dealt with death as either an academic abstraction or a “диссоциация, мыслимая мною в пределах моего 'я', и только 'я'” (526)<sup>123</sup>, the mass, institutionalized death of the other forces him to examine it with “более широкие масштабы и обобщения” (526)<sup>124</sup>. Faced with this presence of death, the corpse gives up his scholarly labors on a work called “Кризис аксиоматизма” (527)<sup>125</sup>, instead taking to walking the streets in search of “новые партии . . . битой человечины” (527)<sup>126</sup>. The corpse is fascinated by the booklets put out by the government containing a “полный список убитых, раненых и без вести пропавших” (526)<sup>127</sup>, delighting in analyzing the lists of the dead in search of average results of common names. Thus we see how the grotesque physicality of death is again neutralized by signifiers, the dead signs pointing here to a very literal lack. Even in the one moment of real contact with the suffering other, with bodily pain and death in its irreducible reality, the corpse cannot see it clearly; pulling back the covering of an unguarded soldier's body – referred to coldly as a *мышь*<sup>128</sup> – the corpse finds that “перед внезапно запотевшими стеклами очков лишь прыгало и дергалось какое-то мутное пятно” (528)<sup>129</sup>. Again the glassy perceptual adjunct opens the gulf, and again this intellectualized perception attempts to reduce the irreducible: in this case, attempting to neutralize death itself.

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<sup>122</sup> the early days of the war slightly excited even me (16)

<sup>123</sup> dissociation that I imagined within the bounds of my 'I' and only my 'I' (16)

<sup>124</sup> broader and scales and generalizations (16)

<sup>125</sup> 'The Axiomatism Crisis' (15)

<sup>126</sup> fresh batches . . . of slaughtered human flesh (17)

<sup>127</sup> complete list of the dead, wounded, and missing in action (16)

<sup>128</sup> carcass

<sup>129</sup> before my suddenly fogged lenses was some sort of blurry smudge, jumping and twitching (17)

Indeed, this intellectualized perception, the whole edifice of Kantian subjectivity, *requires* an understanding of death as a mere maxim. The corpse can leave behind his study of the “The Axiomatism Crisis” because death has become his axiom. Death, for this worldview, is the one thing that escapes the shaping power of reason, an incommensurable event that cannot be wholly neutralized by signifiers. Therefore, it becomes the defining limit, that which exceeds the scope of reason and thus at once determines and is determined by the reasoning subject.

A reconsideration of death is central to Benjamin's exploration of allegory. For Benjamin, “death is no longer the line that separates finite being from itself” (Weber 154), no longer a defining axiom in the manner described above; rather, “death digs most deeply the jagged line of demarcation between physical nature and significance” (Benjamin 166). If the Kantian worldview, with the maxim of death as its determining limit, “pretends to a kind of deathlessness” in laying claim to this signifying power of nature, then “allegory, in contrast, starts with the dead fragments . . . allegory begins from death and the rejection of the organic power of nature and symbolism” (Tambling 117). The inability of the sign to capture death, rather than being pressed into the service of signification and subjectivity, is here placed front and center in its undeniable disconnectedness: it is in this very chasm between meaning and the world that allegory is born. If “the spirit itself is pure reason [and] it is not until death that the spirit becomes free” (Benjamin 217), then allegory picks up on the fact that, with death, “the body too comes properly into its own” (217): allegorical figures encounter death “not for the sake of immortality . . . but for the sake of the corpse” (217-18). The corpse, the bodily remainder or ruin split off and left behind by contained, transcendent reason, becomes the figure of allegory – and in this figure we read the melancholy history of the Enlightenment subject.

Ultimately, the corpse's autobiography shows us that the absence of the other leads

inexorably to subjugation of the other. The individual subjectivity's intellectualized perception, this conceptualization of the subject as the vehicle of pure reason, can never encounter the other in its wholeness. In “Autobiography,” this failure of Enlightenment subjectivity is made literal and social – mass politics becomes the physical elimination of the other, or in the corpse's words: “смерть превращалась в программную правительственно рекомендуемую идею” (526)<sup>130</sup>. Again we can see Krzhizhanovsky reading the catastrophic history of modernity in the mass of sepulchral ruins of the early twentieth century.

Thus, it seems that it would be easy to read “Autobiography” as another critique of the revolutionary ideology's murderous pedigree, as in “Catastrophe”; however, Krzhizhanovsky's actual representation of the Revolution in this story is far from straightforward. In many ways, the Revolution seems to be presented as justified and positive. In several allegorical moments as well as the corpse's own self-reflection and suicide, the story seems to point to a revolutionary vitality that is able to put an end to the deadened and diseased history of the subject. This is directly referred to as a “мятеж живых против мертвых” (536)<sup>131</sup>, as no less than a “борьба за планету Жизни со Смертью” (536)<sup>132</sup>. The triumph of collective life over alienated death seems to destroy our authorial corpse, giving rise to a new subjectivity predicated on a vibrant *мы*<sup>133</sup>.

In one episode, worn out by the frantic activity of banners and crowds in the streets, the corpse wanders into a cemetery to rest. Even there, however, he finds the monuments to the dead strangely unpeaceful: “кресты, откачнувшись к земле и замахиваясь своими крестовинами, будто приготовились к защите; самая каменная ограда кладбища казалась похожей на

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<sup>130</sup> death was turning into a programmatic, government-recommended idea (16)

<sup>131</sup> revolt of the living against the dead (24)

<sup>132</sup> fight for the planet between Life and Death (24)

<sup>133</sup> we

крепостную стену, ждущую осады” (534)<sup>134</sup>. Amid the agitated, undead activity of these ruins, a little girl appears, her golden curls tied with ribbons, her childish legs “упрямо, шаг за шагом, брали пространство” (534)<sup>135</sup>. This little girl is an obvious, even clichéd, symbol of innocence, new beginnings, or as the corpse puts it, “жизнь” (534)<sup>136</sup> – an allegorical figure for the Revolution itself. Indeed, with her “знакомый овал” (534)<sup>137</sup> of a face, she seems to be the daughter of his old girlfriend, that other of his failed attempt at interpersonal connection. Again, faced by this optimistic vision of new, collective life, the corpse runs away – the worn-out and destructive old subject is displaced by the positive, regenerative new.

His strange friendship with a truly living man towards the end of his autobiography also seems to contrast his corpse-like state with the revolutionary vitality of this other. After meeting on the street, they go for a drink; the corpse tells us that he barely touches his own beer, while the new man “залпом. И продолжал, глядя куда-то сквозь меня” (539)<sup>138</sup>, telling the story of his indestructibility in the war. The man is bursting with vibrant life, as are, it seems, many other new people: “завелись новые глаза. И люди. По-новому смотрят: не *на*, а *сквозь*” (537)<sup>139</sup>. The corpse even lends this man his books, which he proceeds to divide into two piles, saying “вот эти: мимо. А вон те: сквозь” (539)<sup>140</sup>. This ability of the new man to be truly alive and to move “through” seems to indicate a new vision of the human subject, rendering the corpse obsolete: around these new people with their new eyes, “под шелуху пустоты от них не

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<sup>134</sup> the crosses, reeling back and brandishing their crosspieces, seemed to be mounting a defense; the stone wall round the cemetery resembled that of a fortress under siege (23)

<sup>135</sup> stubbornly, step by step, conquering space (23)

<sup>136</sup> life (23)

<sup>137</sup> familiar oval (23)

<sup>138</sup> drained his glass in one gulp. And went on talking, while looking somewhere through me (27)

<sup>139</sup> new eyes have appeared. And people. They have a new way of looking at you: not *at* but *through* (25)

<sup>140</sup> these went past. Those went through (27)

запрячешь: зрачками всверлятся” (537)<sup>141</sup>.

These episodes make clear that the isolated Enlightenment subject cannot survive in this revolutionary world. Indeed, the corpse himself realizes that he can no longer live his “Dasein-Ersatz” (537): “теперь мне ясно: никакое 'я', не получая питания из мы, не сродясь пуповиной с материнским, обволакивающим его малую жизнь организмом, не может быть хотя бы только собой ” (522)<sup>142</sup>. He is even able to pass a judgment on his own thinking and the Enlightenment project that sounds very like Krzhizhanovsky's own critique; awakened by the Revolution, he now sees that “наше мышление было деформировано” (522)<sup>143</sup>. In his self-critique, the corpse may as well be talking about our two earlier stories: “Мысль мыслила или не дальше 'я', или не ближе 'космоса'. Дойдя до 'порога сознания', до черты меж 'я' и 'мы', она останавливалась и или поворачивала вспять, или делала чудовищный прыжок в 'звездность' -- трансцендент -- 'иные миры’” (522)<sup>144</sup>. Anything between these two reductive extremes simply “выпало из видение” (522)<sup>145</sup> – like the runaway objects of “Catastrophe” or the dismembered thought in “Biography.” Indeed, the corpse's self-critique is strikingly similar to Krzhizhanovsky's own claim in “A Philosopheme About the Theater” that metaphysicians “have hyperopic vision: they can only see from a distance, while things up close” – such as the other – “appear blurry and out-of-focus – as though not real” (Ballard 559); the revolution, therefore, would be aligned with the “positive and renewing” (554) theatrical or literary worldview he outlines in the same essay.

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<sup>141</sup> you can't hide from them under your husk of emptiness; they will bore into you with their pupils (25)

<sup>142</sup> now I understand: Any 'I' not nourished by 'we,' not umbilically attached to the maternal organism enveloping its small life, cannot begin to be at the least – itself (13)

<sup>143</sup> our thinking was deformed (13)

<sup>144</sup> a thought thought either no further than 'I' or no closer than the 'cosmos.' On reaching the 'threshold of consciousness,' the line between 'I' and 'we,' it would stop and either turn back or take a monstrous leap into 'the starry beyond' – the transcendent – 'other worlds' (13)

<sup>145</sup> lost to sight (13)

This broken, failed *Dasein-Ersatz* of Enlightenment subjectivity seems to be revealed as a destructive hoax in “Autobiography,” banished for the brave new world of the living “we.” Thus, if the Enlightenment worldview is like the corpse's “герметически запаянный стеклянный дутыш” (531)<sup>146</sup>, surrounding a single “тонкий-тонкий серебристый волосок”<sup>147</sup> with a “тщательно профильтрованная пустота” (531)<sup>148</sup>, then in many ways it seems that this story is suggesting that the Revolution is finally able “разбить стекло” (531)<sup>149</sup> – indeed, even that this violent shattering is the only way to release us from this captivity in the vacuum.

However, on the other hand, the very opposite movement can also be traced. Shtamm's wallpaper, after he has finished reading this autobiography, appears to have the very hair from the corpse's sealed glass ball woven into its pattern: “только сейчас он заметил: синие розы на стенах были в тонком, в ниточку, белом обводе” (542)<sup>150</sup>. The dead cannot be buried and forgotten so easily. Is the Revolution really the death of the old subjectivity – or merely the mutation and continued spread of the disease?

Here we turn to the carnivorous relation of the corpse to Shtamm noted in the beginning of our analysis. At the conclusion of his autobiography, the corpse triumphantly announces his true project: “мне издавна мечталось после всех неудачных опытов со своим 'я' попробовать вселиться хотя бы в чужое. Если Вы сколько-нибудь живы, мне это уже удалось. До скорого” (541)<sup>151</sup>. Like his own infection by the 0.6 person, the corpse menacingly informs

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<sup>146</sup> hermetically sealed glass vial (20)

<sup>147</sup> exceedingly fine strand of silvery hair (20)

<sup>148</sup> thoroughly filtered void (20)

<sup>149</sup> [to] break the glass (20)

<sup>150</sup> only now did he notice: The dark blue roses on the wall were trimmed with a thin – thin as a thread – white border (30)

<sup>151</sup> after all those failed experiments with my 'I,' it has long been my dream at least to inhabit someone else's. If you are at all alive, I have already succeeded. See you soon (29)

Shtamm “теперь и у Вас есть свой *примысл*” (541)<sup>152</sup>; again, the corpse is emphatically not a ghost – “я не стану Вам угрожать галлюцинациями” (541)<sup>153</sup> – but rather somehow inhabits or has infected his “мозг” (541)<sup>154</sup> through the “буквы на этих вот листах” (540-41)<sup>155</sup>.

Thus we see that the Enlightenment thought process, and the corpse in his missive to Shtamm, infect through signifiers, signifying non-being. The logic survives and infects, but only in its purest form – the elimination of the other. Yes, there is a new way of moving “through,” a new rhetoric of “we,” but the conclusion of this story suggests that they serve only to disguise the indelible violence on which society is predicated. The gleeful triumph of the corpse indicates that these new features do not constitute a severance from modernity, but merely its latest mutation. Whatever form it takes, the buried other lies beneath the societal edifice.

Throughout this analysis, we have noted the theme of contagion, with the destructive Enlightenment subjectivity moving through society like a disease. Indeed, this is made all the more clear in the figure of Shtamm: in both Russian and German, *штамм* / *Stamm* can refer to the strain of a virus, while his pseudonym *Идр*<sup>156</sup> paints him as the allegorical figure for the other as such. Thus, in his textual contamination, Shtamm becomes the new disease vector, off to infect new others. Furthermore, we've already noted that the corpse's malady seems to be a state of non-being; similarly, in this cannibalistic communication with Shtamm, he exists on the liminal border between life and death. This disease model coupled with the blurring of the line between life and death on a societal scale suggests the model of a kind of living dead, a zombie apocalypse of the psychorrheic subject. The corpse desires flesh, desires to spread his infection

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<sup>152</sup> now you too have your own figment (28)

<sup>153</sup> I won't menace you with hallucinations (28)

<sup>154</sup> brain (28)

<sup>155</sup> the last letters on these pages (28)

<sup>156</sup> Etal

to fresh brains – and this desire to consume and inhabit life is all that is left of his “I.” Like a zombie, the corpse is “a zero level of humanity, the inhuman / mechanical core of humanity” (Gabriel and Žižek 100); he is, as Jennifer Rutherford describes the zombie, “stripped of the two indivisible traits of the human – sociality and individuality” (30). Drawing an analogy with zombies may initially seem counterintuitive; after all, a zombie seems to be all of those features of humanity *except* the faculty of reason, a bare physical existence from whom the power of mind has been removed. And yet perhaps more important than the lack of reason is the zombie's lack of that other vital human aspect: the incommensurable excess of the soul. Denied his own soul, the corpse-zombie infects and destroys the soul of the other.

Again, we must turn to the strange, restless power of graves, in this story and the others. The zombie seems to be the Benjaminian ruin, but mobile and infectious – the tomb grows legs and moves forward to consume the future, or even the possibility of futurity. As Rutherford argues, “zombie fictional works drive the future into a cul-de-sac of no return. They hold out no promise, no hope, only the working through of what it is that makes the present an endless prolepsis of ruin” (9). Again, they are readable only as melancholy history, but this history is made ravenous, cannibalistic, and contagious; the failures of history have reached epidemic and fatal proportions and the ruins refuse to stay put in the grave.

The canonical zombie only emerges after World War II and can be said to embody an inherently postmodern understanding of horror in its concentration on the “spectacle of the ruined body” (Pinedo 92), “blur[ring] boundaries and mix[ing] categories” (93), and exposure of “the limits of rationality” (94). However, as we can see, Krzhizhanovsky may show us the failures of modernity that forced these dead to walk, illustrating this blurred line between life and death that will only intensify as the century drags on. Furthermore, it shows the shift from an

anxiety of the other to an anxiety of *others* – the transition to the mass, the horde, the diseased collective. This is not the “we” of true intersubjectivity, of the revolutionary crossing of the barrier between self and other, but the compulsory, destructive “we” of the zombie horde, the “brainless masses” that threaten to steamroll over any individual subject in their path.

As alluded to above, writing itself is implicated in this exploration of the disease vector of societal zombification; more specifically, allegory is implicated. There can be no better description of the corpse's project than Benjamin's description of allegory: the signification of “precisely the non-existence of what it presents” (233), bringing non-being to mournful, devouring life. Again, we can see that Krzhizhanovsky is here engaged with self-critique. Allegory itself is a ruin, animated by the dead of history, shambling forward like a zombie, and revealing nothing but its own non-being. The text contaminates, animating non-being and propelling it outwards onto the other. A final episode from the corpse's autobiography may shed some more light on this project of self-critique.

The corpse begins to fill his insomniac nights with solitary chess matches, “сам против себя” (529)<sup>157</sup>. He is comforted by the pointless, contained nature of chess thinking: “после длительной борьбы мысли с противомыслью, сосредоточеннейшей схватки ходов с ходами можно было ссыпать весь этот крохотный мирок, деревянный и мертвый, назад в коробку” (529)<sup>158</sup>. It makes sense that this quasi-world of thought and counter-thought would appeal to the corpse, illustrating as it does the non-being of signifiers shut up in the wooden vault of a worldview. However, he emphasizes a certain “особенность”<sup>159</sup> that begins to intrigue him,

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<sup>157</sup> myself against myself (19)

<sup>158</sup> after long struggles between thoughts and counter-thoughts, the most intense pitched battles between moves and countermoves, I could pour that whole tiny little world, wooden and dead, back into its box (19)

<sup>159</sup> peculiarity (19)

contrasting with his assertion that “никаких следов”<sup>160</sup> remains with him once the game is done: “выигрывали у меня почти всегда *черные*” (529)<sup>161</sup>. In chess exercises, the player is always white, and the other is black. The attempt to reduce the other and the world to an empty, intellectual game of dead signifiers cannot succeed – the irreducibility, the vibrant inner core of worldly objects and the other remains stubbornly incommensurable, and the game of signifiers becomes not representation, but rather violence. Krzhizhanovsky himself, writing out his intellectual allegories in black ink on the white page, is playing a game “сам против себя”: as Торогов argues, “слово 'труп' Кржижановский применял и к себе” (548)<sup>162</sup>; the corpse's first name, like Krzhizhanovsky's own, has nine letters, and “нельзя исключать, что за ней могло стоять имя автора” (548)<sup>163</sup>. Thus, we see that he is critiquing his own project as much as those surrounding him, rooting out and questioning the ways his own allegorical methods may be implicated in this tremendously violent history of modernity; and yet, on the other hand, he also seems to optimistically insist that the other will never be wholly defeated, that the other indeed holds the key to a kind of renewing destruction.

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<sup>160</sup> not a trace (19)

<sup>161</sup> black almost always won (19)

<sup>162</sup> Krzhizhanovsky also applied the word ‘corpse’ to himself

<sup>163</sup> it must not be ruled out that this may stand for the name of the author

## Conclusion

These three stories, taken together as a trilogy that exemplifies the ideas and methods Krzhizhanovsky returns to throughout his career, interrogate the Kantian worldview by bringing it to allegorical life. In animating the abstract, making it profoundly physical and social, the abstractions themselves are shown to be fatally flawed. In “Catastrophe,” the universalizing force of concept-creation and cognition is shown to be a violent attempt to reduce the irreducible; the pure intuitions of the reasoning worldview degrade and erase the heterogeneity of the living world. In “The Biography of One Thought,” we again see the universalized thought as violence, this time in the predication of morality on the universal maxim. Built on the reductive gap between subject and object, the application of the worldview to the world is revealed as a flattening, instrumentalizing force, and the thought violently undoes itself in its universalization. Finally, in “Autobiography of a Corpse,” we see a portrait of the subject as the bearer of the kind of destructive cognition described in these two previous stories. Paralyzed by this self-undermining worldview, we see the Enlightenment subject utterly unable to connect with the other, totally unable to live anything but an imitation life. Furthermore, we see the spread of this destructive worldview and its ruinous version of subjectivity through society, seeping “из черепа к черепу . . . как стыдную болезнь” (521)<sup>164</sup>, leaving hungry zombies in its wake. Thus we see that a worldview like Kant’s, “grown up in the dark, not tested by the sun . . . can also lead to disaster” (Emerson ix); indeed, in testing these Kantian abstractions through the animating sunlight of allegory, Krzhizhanovsky shows that the disaster is inevitable. In looking back with Benjaminian melancholy, we have seen that Krzhizhanovsky is reading the ruins of his present; so too is he looking forward, grimly prophesizing a future built on these faulty foundations that

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<sup>164</sup> from skull to skull . . . like a shameful disease (12)

resonates all too strongly with the coming disasters of the twentieth century. The Enlightenment idea undoes itself in Krzhizhanovsky's allegories, revealing the self-undermining nature of modernity's intellectual foundations that will play out socially in truly catastrophic ways.

Ultimately, all of Krzhizhanovsky's catastrophes gesture towards the violent, totalitarian tendency of modernity, revealing its intellectual core. In uncovering the root of this social disease in systems of understanding and reason, we see that violent social systems are not perversions of the Enlightenment impulse, but rather their logical, inevitable endpoint: the worldview metastasized. A final, dramatic example of this tie between systems of reason and totalitarianism may be found in a section of the 1926 novella *Клуб убийц букв*<sup>165</sup>. While a detailed analysis of this larger cycle of stories is beyond the scope of this current project, a brief overview of this particular chapter will drive home the ultimate stakes of Krzhizhanovsky's critique of Enlightenment and the social world.

*The Letter Killers Club* tells the tale of a group of writers who gather to tell one another stories, rejecting the corrupting influence of the written word; the bulk of the novella is made up of the individual stories that they tell. The red-haired Das narrates the story we will concentrate on, a science fiction dystopia about the development and spread of a new kind of mind-control. Scientists are able to develop a method “социализировать психики” (63)<sup>166</sup>, turning “все наши in в ex” (63)<sup>167</sup>. The mind-control machines are called by such technical names as “дифференциальные идеомоторы, этические механоустановки, [и] экстериоризаторы” (61)<sup>168</sup>, or simply *exes*; the people who have been transformed by the *exes* are known as *exons*.

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<sup>165</sup> *The Letter Killers Club*

<sup>166</sup> [to] socialize psyches (54)

<sup>167</sup> every *in* . . . into an *ex* (54)

<sup>168</sup> differential ideomotors, ethical engine adjusters, exteriorizators (53)

After ingesting a strain of bacteria developed in the lab, the *exon* becomes a kind of robot, totally under centralized, mechanized control of the *ex* machines. The elite group in charge of society, on the other hand, are immunized against these bacteria with a compound known as “инит” (80)<sup>169</sup>. They seem well on their way to total takeover of the world by *ex*-ification, when suddenly an epidemic of suicide sweeps through the *exons* – a seemingly impossible exercise of personal will. It turns out that the brains of the *exons* are spontaneously developing a “защитная внутренняя секреция” (96)<sup>170</sup> – the very same compound of *init* – and are using this newly recovered freedom to self-deactivate. The elite deactivate all of the *exons*, and “десятки миллионов людей застлали землю неподвижными или слабо дергающимися телами” (96)<sup>171</sup>; the elite themselves die off, and the world seems to begin anew.

This parable is the ultimate allegory of the rational thought in society, the total supremacy of rational science; the Enlightenment impulse is manifested as power, control, homogenization, and the destruction of the internal life of the masses. The development of the *ex* is couched in the language of progress and enlightened social reform: the *exons* are constructed “согласно последним достижениям морали и техники” (64)<sup>172</sup> for no less of a grand purpose than rebuilding “всю человечью действительность заново, сверху донизу” (71)<sup>173</sup>. The sacrifice of the humanity of the “экс-людей” (75)<sup>174</sup> is totally logical “с точки зрения социальной этики и гигиены” (78)<sup>175</sup>, for the goal of saving “всего социального организма” (76)<sup>176</sup>. Again, as in “Autobiography,” we see the zombification of the subject in society, and again this is the logical,

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<sup>169</sup> *init* (66)

<sup>170</sup> protective internal secretion (79)

<sup>171</sup> tens of millions of people crumpled to the ground, their bodies motionless or feebly twitching (79)

<sup>172</sup> according to the latest advances in morals and technology (55)

<sup>173</sup> all of human reality, from top to bottom (60)

<sup>174</sup> *ex*-persons (63)

<sup>175</sup> as a matter of social ethics and hygiene (65)

<sup>176</sup> an entire social organism (64)

inevitable result of the structuring worldview.

If the reduction of the masses to wholly externalized cogs is logically inevitable, then so too is the rise of the murderous elite, the all-powerful *inits*. As the “умный, но жестокий” (81)<sup>177</sup> villain Zes puts it, “чем меньше управляющих, тем больше управляемость” (82)<sup>178</sup>. Again, this structural oppression is not an aberration, but a logical outcome of the rules governing the state. The seemingly incomprehensible possibility of a small group holding totalitarian and genocidal power over the masses in fact emerges directly and inexorably from the Enlightenment myth, “the morally elevating story of mankind emerging from pre-social barbarity” (Bauman 241). The enlightened state, in the reasoned pursuit of progress, views “the society it rules as an object of designing, cultivating, and weed-poisoning” (241); thus, totalitarian violence is “a product of routine bureaucratic procedures: means-end calculating, budget balancing, universal rule application” (245) – the banal, unthinkably cruel and thoroughly logical process of Zes’ “manageability.”

Within this story, one of the *inits*, the sensitive Moov, writes his own stories; in one, he writes about a child transformed to an ex with no memory of his previous existence. For this being, “не существует мира за пределами экса: экс для него трансцендентален, все же его собственные поступки представляются внешними вещами, как для нас предметы и тела окружающего нас мира” (91)<sup>179</sup>. Thus, put in philosophical terms, “ход машины, обуславливающий все объективно происходящее, представляется ему как бы третьей кантовской формой чувственности, в равных правах с временем и пространством” (91)<sup>180</sup>.

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<sup>177</sup> intelligent, but cruel (68)

<sup>178</sup> the fewer the managers, the greater the manageability (68)

<sup>179</sup> no world exists beyond the ex: the ex to him is transcendental, he sees his own actions as external things, just as we see objects and bodies around us (75)

<sup>180</sup> he sees the operation of the machine, which conditions all objective phenomena, as a third Kantian form of sensibility, on a par with space and time” (75)

Here, the rational takes the place of transcendental; the hidden mechanical workings of the world stand in for Kant's noumenal realm. Within the limits of his subjective cognition, the boy is able to imagine a world beyond, the world of "замыслов и волений *самих в себе*" (91)<sup>181</sup>, although of course he can know nothing "о возможности перехода от воления к поступку" (91)<sup>182</sup>. Thus we can see that this dystopian fable connects profoundly and explicitly to the Kantian model of subjectivity, the condition of the *exons* appearing as an allegory for the cognizing subject as a bearer of reason.

As in "Autobiography," themes of infectiousness and suicide prevail. The suicides in this episode of *The Letter Killers Club* are clearly a form of resistance, a sign that interiority and otherness cannot be wholly erased: taking one's own life is the most dramatic instance of the conflict "между волями машины и человека" (66)<sup>183</sup>, and the contagious phenomenon of suicide among the *exes* is taken to mean that "in восстало на ex" (96)<sup>184</sup>. Thus, we again see Krzhizhanovsky's relationship to Kant as one of profound ambivalence; on one hand, he is certainly figured once again as the progenitor of the long, disastrous project of this worldview of reason. On the other hand, however, in this new age of "научно-обоснованного и проверенного детерминизма" (76)<sup>185</sup>, there seems to be something redemptive in the Kantian vision of interiority and free will. Despite the deadening, externalizing forces of totalitarian control, the inner self – the soul, the transcendental subject – resists irreducibly; it is a melancholy reflection on the state of the world as ruin, however, that this resistance takes the form of suicide and, ultimately, apocalypse. The irreducibility of the soul and the totalitarian

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<sup>181</sup> conceptions and volitions in themselves (75)

<sup>182</sup> of the possibility of passing from will to action (75)

<sup>183</sup> between the will of the machine and that of man (56)

<sup>184</sup> *in* has risen against *ex* (79)

<sup>185</sup> scientifically substantiated and tested determinism (64)

social structure brought about by reason are irreconcilable; while Krzhizhanovsky wistfully recognizes the power of the inner self, so too does he insist that Enlightenment thought is inherently self-undermining, erasing itself in its contradictions.

The vision of millions of ex-humans crumpling to the ground at the flip of a switch reverberates powerfully with the cataclysmic episodes of violence to hit Russia and Europe soon after the writing of this novella, and the obvious connection with critique such as Bauman's, which emerges directly from the atrocities of the Holocaust and Stalinism, gives Krzhizhanovsky's critique an air of the oracular. Krzhizhanovsky seems to anticipate in a nearly prophetic way the catastrophes of the twentieth century, and the annihilating expansion of the worldview does indeed continue along the path he illuminates – the consequences of which are all too clear from our vantage point. His eerie prescience shows that he has captured, in a truly fundamental sense, something at the heart of what modernity *means* – that very something that can only be expressed in the allegorical, Benjaminian reading of history we've already explored.

If the twentieth century will go down in history “under the name of 'The Age of Camps', of flesh turned cancerous” (Bauman 266), then so too must it be “the *age of revaluation*: revaluation of the past, of its inherent tendency and hidden potential, of the meaning of the last few centuries of our joint history, of the 'modernity' that history spawned and left in its wake” (267). This age of revaluation is an age of historiography, of unraveling the meaning behind these incomprehensible ruins of violence. In this revaluation, we find that modernity “is not only about producing more and traveling faster,” but at its very core is about “fast and efficient killing, scientifically designed and administered genocide” (267); this seed of dehumanization and violence, as Krzhizhanovsky has shown, is present in the very intellectual foundation of modernity. Thus, just as in Benjamin's analysis of allegory, Krzhizhanovsky's allegory of

Kantian rationality and modernity truly embodies “the non-existence of what it presents” (Benjamin 233), exposing the self-erasure of the signified.

Indeed, “at stake was an aesthetically satisfying, transparent, homogenous universe free from agonizing uncertainties, ambivalence, [and] contingency” (Bauman 272) – in other words, “precisely the kind of universe dreamed up and promised by the philosophers of the Enlightenment” (272). The project was the creation of a new and triumphant world, a Kantian “kingdom of reason, the ultimate exercise of human power over nature” (272). As Krzhizhanovsky shows us, “прежней точно исчисленной гармонии не получалось” (95)<sup>186</sup>; the dystopian failure of this harmonious, enlightened universe is again revealed as inevitable.

If Krzhizhanovsky's vision of societal violence is somewhat prophetic, so too is his recurring theme of the zombie-like “brainless masses,” those creatures in the form of humans that threaten to devour humanity. As mentioned, Krzhizhanovsky's zombies are a very early formulation of the trope; the contemporary conception of zombies is usually considered to have its “genesis in Romero's *Night of the Living Dead* (1968)” (Rutherford 10), and the genre has always been associated with a particularly Western, post-World War II “political and social critique [which is] as important to the genre as its splatterfest” (10). The zombie genre is often associated with a critique of consumerist, alienated culture, the gluttony and corresponding waste of contemporary globalized society. This alienated, zombified culture is, in turn, again born out of the violence of Stalinism and the Holocaust, the problems of dehumanization and the meaning of “we” that arise from the “gulags, camps, and killing fields [and their] slag heaps of human waste” (27). Thus, we may say that Krzhizhanovsky's zombies are a prophetic vision of not only the institutional structures, as seen above, but also the cultural and interpersonal anxieties that

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<sup>186</sup> the old exactly calculated harmony . . . did not succeed (78)

inevitably arise from this intellectual foundation – the shambling, broken sociality of mass culture.

Furthermore, this piercing and prophetic vision is born from within the very structures he is critiquing, from the elements of self-critique we have noted in his stories. As we have seen, Krzhizhanovky is immediately striking in his intellectualism, his “heavy reliance on philosophical and scientific theories, in combination with sometimes obscure etymological wordplay” (Rosenflanz i). His writing is highly analytical, and Krzhizhanovsky himself was situated in a thoroughly intellectual, scholarly milieu: close friends with “Moscow scholars and translators of Shakespeare, Dickens, Swift, Wells [and] Shaw” (Emerson xiii), his “sources and contexts were . . . cosmopolitan” (xiii), and he was “highly attuned to the socio-political atmosphere, the scientific discoveries and intellectual debates of his time” (Rosenflanz 20). His critique does not make use of some outside paradigm, but rather draws out the self-defeating contradictions from within the intellectual paradigm, making use of both its form and its content to logically advance the project of reason to its absurd conclusions.

Indeed, this element of self-critique, of revaluation from within, is ultimately the most compelling reason to read him with Benjamin. Both thinkers commit themselves to the self-undermining thought, the expression that undoes itself in its expression; the fictional work, the thought itself, must be read as a ruin revealing its history of non-being. Only by engaging with the failed forms of the Enlightenment paradigm, the empty signifiers left as the detritus of history, can a true revaluation emerge: an accurate diagnosis of the disease, the description of its pathology, and its unpromising prognosis. Thus, in Krzhizhanovsky’s fantastic allegories, we see Kantian reason and the Enlightenment worldview in their inevitable self-erasure, the long march of this history’s suicide and zombification.

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