INTRODUCTION

> When the Thinker placed a clean sheet of paper before the Thought, it jumped back: "I won't be put into letters!" But the old man went about his business. The struggle was brief, albeit hard-fought.
>
> "The Life and Opinions of a Thought" (1922)

The Russian modernist Sigizmund Dominikovich Krzhizhanovsky was born into a Polish-speaking Catholic family near Kiev in 1887. He died in his adopted city of Moscow in 1950, largely unpublished and unperformed. Over a period of twenty-five years, while working in editorial offices and freelancing at various jobs (lecturer in the Acting Studio of the Moscow Chamber Theater, proofreader for the *Great Soviet Encyclopedia*, research assistant for radio broadcasts, translator and stage adaptor), he wrote a dozen plays, provocative essays on Shakespeare and on the philosophy of theater, and some hundred and fifty experimental prose works ranging in length from novellas to one-paragraph miniatures, usually organized in cycles.

Krzhizhanovsky's hero everywhere is the *idea* or concept (*mysl', zamysel*) trapped in the brain. His recurring plot: how to release an inner thought into the outer space of the world at the right time with enough nourishment so it will survive, make contact, explore —without being freighted down or fused with anything else. This idea needs space to test itself and must remain separate from what surrounds it. Traps and obstacles to this process exist both inside the

brain and beyond it, but they are more metaphysical than political. Although Krzhizhanovsky's unhappy fate encouraged his early Russian rediscoverers to seek anti-Stalinist subtexts everywhere, at stake in his writings is something more fundamental than the Gulag, the Bolshevik housing shortage, or even freedom to talk and move. In his 1929 tale "Someone Else's Theme," Krzhizhanovsky lays out this concept in the eccentric person of Saul Straight.* The stars are bright in the sky because of their "eternal separateness." Music, like happiness, succeeds only if it knows moments of silence or pause. And people, most of the time, "are too close together to be close to one another." We perish not because of loneliness but because of entrapment and over-embracement.

Thus the enormous value, in art and in life, of the journey and the dream. In an early article, "Argo and Ergo" (1918), Krzhizhanovsky remarks on the difference between the route of the poet—the Greek galley *Argo*, sailing away into a land of myths—and the realm of the scientist, whose duty it is to bring a thing ever closer to its explanation ("ergo": the result of a cause or a *because*).† No matter how precisely a physical thing, whether human body or artifact, might be measurable from the outside, there is always a "spiral of distance" trapped within it, which the artist is obliged to protect. The contents of this spiral are so fragile and individuation is such delicate work that the artist must strive tirelessly to remain unencumbered, with eyes that see in all directions. The people with the best ideas travel light. Usually these people are failures. *The Letter Killers Club* (*Klub ubiits bukv*) is Krzhizhanovsky's most ambitious fictional variant on this theme.

The novella was written during an intensely creative patch, between 1925 and 1927. Although Krzhizhanovsky read selections of it aloud to enthusiastic friends and fellow poets, the text was rejected

* Savl Vlob, literally "Saul Straight-at-your-forehead" (or, straight between the eyes). The story is included in Sigizmund Krzhizhanovsky, *Memories of the Future*, translated by Joanne Turnbull (NYRB, 2009), 53–85.

† S. D. Krzhizhanovsky, "Argo i Ergo" (1918), edited and with an introduction by Vadim Perelmuter, *Toronto Slavic Quarterly* 21 (Summer 2007): 1–8.

for publication in 1928. It did touch upon politically sensitive topics, to be sure, but the philosophy of the whole did not depend on them. Why kill letters of the alphabet? Krzhizhanovsky pitches his argument here higher and deeper than the concerns of secret police or censor. According to the Club's president, a thought or conception, in its quest for creative life, must separate itself from the written word, which traps it like a zoological specimen on the printed page. Writers are "professional word tamers." A bookcase full of pinned-down words spells the end of the imagination. Thus do the seven Club members—who call themselves not writers or readers but conceivers—commit to pre-literature, delivering elaborate emancipatory improvisations to one another on Saturday evenings, without paper or publisher in sight. To these separatists from writerdom and converts to booklessness, even the spectacle of a public performance is suspect. "To dramatize is to vulgarize," says President Zez. The free word must fly direct from the speaker's mouth to the listener's imagination with no intermediaries, no footlights. But as we discover, a concept with *all* its letters killed—grown up in the dark, not tested by the sun—can also lead to disaster. A pure conceiver is matterphobic. To be communicated at all, a thought must retain a recognizable contour; it must have somewhere to go in real space and leave a palpable trace.

In his own maturation as a thinker, Krzhizhanovsky had passed through a similar disorienting moment, a choice between the work of the isolated clarifying brain and the products of the motley embodied world. It was a struggle, in his words, between "Kant and Shakespeare." As an adolescent he had been jolted by the Kantian model of cognition, its blurring of the line between "I" and "not-I," subject and object. Only the chance arrival of a volume of Shakespeare's plays, with their vibrant Hamlets, Rosalinds, and fully embodied Falstaffs, saved him from this "metaphysical delusion."*

* Sigizmund Krzhizhanovsky, "Shekspir i piatiklassnik," in "Fragmenty o Shekspire," *Sobranie sochinenii* (Collected Works), edited by Vadim Perelmuter (St. Petersburg: Symposium, 2001–2010), Vol. IV, 350–84, esp. 383–84.

The craft of the stage would eventually confirm reality as it is seen and touched. The actor is the first deliberately conscious matter-phile.

KRZHIZHANOVSKY, QUASI-PERSON

The Letter Killers Club is storytelling on the metaphysical brink. It contains some half-hallucinatory autobiographical motifs. Freshly arrived in Moscow from post–Civil War Kiev in 1922, age thirty-five, without work and often without food, Krzhizhanovsky found living quarters in a tiny, closet-like room in a former private mansion (Arbat 44, Apt. 5). It seems he sold off his books to finance a trip home to Kiev for his mother's funeral (this episode enters the novella). Upon his return he did not restock his library, relying instead on his excellent memory and imaginative gift. Walking the streets looking for a job, he fell in love with the capital. His ritual was to set out every morning at 9:45 on what he called "wanderings in search of the meanings of Moscow." From time to time he received writing commissions. One was for a guidebook to the city, which gave rise to an epistolary narrative "Postmark: Moscow,"* a tribute to the shapeless, cluttered, flammable, walled-in, labyrinthine and unmappable urban environment that is the backdrop for so many of his stories.

Even in the relatively pluralistic 1920s, however, Krzhizhanovsky's attempts to publish his work were dogged by a mix of bad luck, bad timing, and lack of influential patrons.† He was known as a "Kantian thinker"—which in Soviet parlance meant an "idealist" rather than the approved dialectical materialist. In 1932, Maxim Gorky casually assessed several of his stories and found them too intellectual, "more suited to the late nineteenth century" than to the

* "Shtempel': Moskva" (1925), in *Sobranie sochinenii*, Vol. I, 511–549.

† For a brief (and to date the only) overview of the writer in English, see the excellent monograph by Karen Link Rosenflanz, *Hunter of Themes: The Interplay of Word and Thing in the Works of Sigizmund Kržižanovskij* (New York: Peter Lang, 2005), biography on 1–21.

Soviet present and unnecessary to the tasks of the working class.* This verdict stuck to the author up to and beyond his death. When, in 1939, he was finally voted into the Soviet Writers Union, one of his sponsors explained the embarrassing delay by noting that Comrade Krzhizhanovsky, an erudite polyglot and drama critic, was "very modest and impractical, unable to do anything for himself."† More precisely, he was unwilling to revise on command, either for censors or for well-meaning collaborators and editors. He did try to do things for himself—although high-mindedly, rarely in a "practical" or politically savvy way. Having heard the verdict on his *Letter Killers Club*, in September 1928 he wrote Pavel Lebedev-Polyansky, chief censor at Glavlit (the central state agency for surveillance of printed materials) that "in view of the fact that Glavlit rejected for publication my books *Letter Killers Club* and *Collector of Cracks* for reasons that are contradictory and mutually exclusive, I consider the decision incorrect and request that you, Pavel Ivanovich, read them personally."‡ The negative decision was not reversed.

As Nazi troops approached Moscow, Krzhizhanovsky refused to be evacuated from his city. Similar to other marginalized writers, he even experienced some modest increase in visibility under conditions of total war. His libretto *Suvorov*, for example, was set to music in 1943 and performed to patriotic acclaim. But then the postwar repressions began. No collection of his prose ever made it through to print (only nine stories were published during his lifetime) nor any of his original plays to opening night.

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* See the text of Gorky's letter and outraged commentary on it in the editor's preface to the Collected Works, "Posle katastrofy," in *Sobranie sochinenii*, Vol. I, 25–31.

† Remark by V. M. Vol'kenshtein on February 13, 1939, at a meeting of the Dramaturgs' Section of the Soviet Writers Union of the USSR; see "Stenogramma Rasshirennogo zasedaniia Byuro sektsii dramaturgov ot 13–ogo fevralia 1939," g., RGALI f. 631 (Soyuz pisatelei), op. 2, ed. khr. 355, 48.

‡ "Zaiavlenie S. D. Krzhizhanovskogo na imia zaveduiushchego Glavnym upravleniem po delam literatury i izdatel'stv P. I. Lebedeva-Polyanskogo o peresmotre knig 'Klub ubiits bukv' i 'Sobiratel' shchelei,' 28 September 1928," RGALI f. 341 (Nikitina E. F.), op. 1, ed. khr. 261.

By the end of the war, Krzhizhanovsky had ceased all creative writing. He withdrew from literary society, feeling himself (in the words of his longtime companion, the theater pedagogue Anna Bovshek) a "played-out player, a loser, ashamed of his role but at the same time not ceasing to believe in his creative gifts and the usefulness of his work."* He succumbed to drink. When asked by friends what had driven him to it, he appears to have answered, in a line taken from his own (never staged) comedy-farce *The Priest and the Lieutenant*: "A sober attitude toward reality." Bovshek ends her memoir about Krzhizhanovsky in May 1949, on an event that resonates grimly with the book-and-alphabet-banishing activity of *The Letter Killers Club* two decades earlier. She remembers her husband "sitting in an armchair at the table, looking through a journal." She was on the couch nearby. "Suddenly my heart gave a jolt, I raised my eyes, and he was sitting there with a pale, frozen, frightened face. 'What's the matter?' 'I don't understand [he said] . . . I can't read anything . . . a black raven, black raven . . .'" A stroke affecting the visual portions of the left side of the brain had deprived him of the ability to recognize letters.†

Bovshek got her stunned husband to a clinic for tests. "He could write," she noted later, "but he could not read what he had written, and in general he could not read at all." Page proofs of his translation of the Polish Romantic poet Adam Mickiewicz lay on the table, and he could not recognize the lines of print as a language. To ascertain

* Anna Bovshek, "Vospominaniia o Krzhizhanovskom: Glazami druga," in *Velikoe kul'turnoe protivostoianie: Kniga ob Anne Gavrilovne Bovshek*, edited by A. Leontiev (Moscow: Novoe literaturnoe obozrenie, 2009), 10–66, esp. 60. Bovshek's memoirs, written fifteen years after her husband's death, are discreet, sentimental, and intensely loyal.

† In 2010, Oliver Sacks described the effect of such stroke-induced alexia (a "special form of visual agnosia") on a creative writer in his essay "A Man of Letters: A Neurologist's Notebook," *The New Yorker* (June 28, 2010): 22–26. The afflicted subject could still write, and fluently, only he could not decipher what he had written. "We think of reading as a seamless and indivisible act," Sacks notes, "and as we read we attend to the meaning—and, perhaps, the beauty—of written language, unconscious of the many processes that make this possible."

the extent of the brain damage, and having learned that her patient was a writer, the psychiatrist asked Krzhizhanovsky: "'Do you love Pushkin?'" Bovshek recalls the scene. "'I . . . I . . . [the sick man faltered] . . . Pushkin.' Then he burst into tears helplessly, sobbing like a child, holding nothing back and not ashamed of his tears." In their thirty years together, she had never seen him weep. This final alexic phase in the writer's life, his taking leave of alphabets, is also prefigured in *The Letter Killers Club*, and also at the very end.

RELEASING IDEAS BY STRIPPING BACK WORDS: THE FIVE SATURDAY EVENINGS

As a frame for his Club meetings, Krzhizhanovsky—a passionate Anglophile—had a rich choice of literary models. They stretch from the late fourteenth century with Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales* (pilgrims en route to a shrine passing the time in a storytelling contest, itself based on Boccaccio's plague-ridden *Decameron*) to the late nineteenth century, the far more sober gatherings of London gentlemen in the "scientific romances" of H.G. Wells. In the Russian 1920s, Krzhizhanovsky was surrounded by several masters of phantasmagorical modernist prose: Mikhail Bulgakov, Evgeny Zamyatin, Andrei Platonov. But his sources and contexts were even more cosmopolitan. Parallels can be drawn between Krzhizhanovsky's "travelers" and the world's classic adventure and quest literature, which was hugely popular in the Soviet period. Among his favorite books was Swift's *Gulliver's Travels* (less its moral message than its play with physical scale; in 1933, he reedited *The New Gulliver*, Aleksandr Ptushko's first animated stop-motion sound film); among his favorite themes was the fantastical German eighteenth-century adventurer and fibmaster in the Russian imperial service, Baron von Münchhausen (in the 1920s, Krzhizhanovsky wrote a novella called *The Return of Münchhausen**). His closest academic friends were Moscow scholars and translators of Shakespeare, Dickens, Swift, Wells, Shaw. Raised

* *Vozvrashchenie Myunkhgauzena* (1927–28), in *Sobranie sochinenii*, Vol. II, 135–262.

in a Symbolist milieu, Krzhizhanovsky surely also knew the French-Dutch decadent Joris Karl Huysmans as well as the Norwegian realist and chronicler of hunger Knut Hamsun.

But the "concept of a concept" as Krzhizhanovsky portrays it cannot get on a ship and sail off to exotic continents. It is landlocked, stubborn, restless, blocked by malnourishment and poverty, on the border between waking and dreaming, in a tiny cubicle. It wants to roam but everywhere it is clipped, stuck behind a wall, forced to sneak out through a fissure, chink, crack, or seam. The Letter Killers, sitting in a circle in their bare room, wander back to the French Middle Ages, forward to a bioterrorist dystopia, back to ancient Rome, only to discover in their liberation from the printed word a new and perhaps more permanent enslavement. Krzhizhanovsky moves freely through the histories, myths, and literatures of the Western world. For all the Pan-European resonance of his travels, however, a Russian edge of starvation, shabbiness, technological backwardness, Bolshevik craziness, and desperate lyricism separates him from his illustrious predecessors among the storytelling pilgrims of early England or the intellectual circles of the bourgeois West—even their most eccentric fringe. The letter-killing narratives of this spectral brotherhood are of a special sort.

First comes Rar's story—actually a play—carved out of Shakespeare's *Hamlet*. Its major concept is doubling. For Krzhizhanovsky as drama critic, this procedure lay at the heart of Shakespeare's art. In the comedies it becomes "twinning"—which, after much antic mystification, creates a healthy, fertile revitalized organism at the end (blatantly with two sets of twins in *A Comedy of Errors*, more subtly in such festive comedies as *Twelfth Night* or *As You Like It*). In the tragedies, the concept of the double is expressed as "splitting," where one person is fatally divided into two warring parts, each paralyzing the other in irresolute "monologues" that invite the death of both—accompanied, of course, by much collateral damage.* In

* These ideas are discussed in three of Krzhizhanovsky's nine essays on Shakespeare. "Twinning" and "splitting" as two Shakespearean aspects of the doubles problem that figures into the *Hamlet* episode in *The Letter Killers Club* is discussed

Rar's revisionist version of *Hamlet*, the splitting starts before rehearsals begin: Guilden and Stern are two actors competing for the role of Hamlet. The hero of the story—also its concept—is the Role, and how consciousness might successfully inhabit a role. This theme sets the tone for the following Saturday's adventure, a three-pronged excursion into medieval France related by club member Tyd.

It is easy to view Tyd's contribution through Bakhtin's ever-popular concept of the carnivalesque—for ribald inversions, a Festival of the Ass, and nonstop blasphemies abound in it. But Krzhizhanovsky's interest probably lay elsewhere. A single concept drives Tyd's story, related to the anxiety about inhabiting a role that Stern experienced seeking Hamlet. The world contains people-plots and people-themes, Tyd tells the Club. People-plots are more common and more pleasurable because they acknowledge the complexity of the individual and beg you to gaze at it: here am *I*, in all my fascinating contradictions, an endpoint worthy of your interest. People-*themes* are rarer, more ascetic. They might also be rich and multivalent, but they don't beg you to watch. What they do doesn't matter and you won't see it. The intensely private Krzhizhanovsky loved this type. The lives of people-themes are plotless, eventless, almost egoless, since they are all about a quest to uncover something else ("someone else's theme"). Such people are innately "reticent, passive, part of an idea." To exist at all they must assume a role and continually remind themselves that they are playing it. Tyd's three variants on his story illustrate three different relationships with a "role" thus defined: folkloric-fantastic, doubled, and negatively defined, drained of all meaning.

The third Saturday is host to the novella's dystopian horror story, narrated by redheaded Das. It is a Krzhizhanovskian nightmare in which scientists—not mad exactly, but curious, and, like most eccentrics, cruel—devise how to separate the brain's directives from

in one of the first Ph.D. dissertations devoted to Krzhizhanovsky: Ioanna Borisovna Delektorskaya, "Esteticheskie vozzreniia Sigizmunda Krzhizhanovskogo (ot shekspirovedeniia k filosofii iskusstva)" (Moscow: Rossiisskii gosudarstvennyi gumanitarnyi universitet, 2000), 40–43.

the body's motor functions. What earlier was a question of personality and will (we assume a role in order to inhabit a consciousness or perform a service) is now reduced to anatomy. This preemptive vision of a Brave New World or Ministry of Truth has a distinctive Krzhizhanovskian feel to it. What marks it off from the later Huxley or Orwell, and even from Zamyatin's dystopian novel from 1921, *We* (which Krzhizhanovsky could not have read), is its exceptional sensitivity to the integrity of an organism. Interfere beyond a certain point, and humanness disintegrates irreversibly.

What is meant by "interference in the organism"? Mechanized human beings were a common theme of the 1920s, beginning with the Čapek brothers' robots in their play *R.U.R.* (1921). Krzhizhanovsky himself touched on the theme in a piece he wrote for the Moscow Chamber Theater's in-house newspaper in 1924, "Man Against the Machine." There he remarked that the atrocities of the recent war had turned "the human being, who by the maxims of European philosophy should be an aim in and of himself, into a *target.*"* Theaters should take care not to do the same (the implied culprit here is Vsevolod Meyerhold and his stylized biomechanics): "'People' under arms were called a 'crew,'" Krzhizhanovsky writes, "and those silent and submissive *ex*-persons unquestioningly obeyed the hole pressed into the iron." In these regimented military and theatrical scenarios, however, as soon as the brain is disarmed or reattached to its own organism, the body snaps back. It remembers its prior real life, realigns itself, perhaps even develops an immunity to its own automatization. Das's story in *The Letter Killers Club* takes these reflexes into account, but plays them out in a far more lethal way.

The fourth Saturday is given over to Fev's *Tale of Three Mouths*, another questing tale with a carnival concept. Ing, Nig, and Gni argue over whether the mouth was created for talking, kissing, or eating. They set out to interview the world on this question, but end

* "Chelovek protiv mashiny," written for the in-house publication of the Moscow Chamber Theater, "7 dnei Moskovskogo Kamernogo teatra" (1924), in *Sobranie sochinenii*, Vol. IV, 660–62, quotes on 660.

up in the stocks for thieving. As punishment, on pain of death, each must do without the one mouth-based activity by which he had lived. We have now moved in comic fashion around the head and face: dismembering Hamlet's monologues, detaching the brain, taping up the polymath mouth. The fifth and final tale, told by Mov, also hovers around the teeth and lips. It concerns a tiny gift from the mouth of the deceased Roman Mark Sept, the obol (copper coin) placed there to purchase his passage across the river Acheron. The slave girl Fabia, attending the body, uses it to buy herself some sweet dates.

Like every distinctly original writer, Krzhizhanovsky has his repertory, his own grammar of images through which to express favored paradoxes and insights. This final Roman tale can be stitched to a brief story written three years later, "Bridge over the Styx."* In setting and theme it is a model Krzhizhanovskian narrative. A man wakes up in his tiny room, reaches out his hand, and instead of a cold cup of tea on the bedside table he touches a clammy toad. "Excuse me, is it far from here to death?" it asks. The toad, one of those "frogs from the River Styx" that Juvenal sang about, somehow got lost in transit. It has defected from its muddy depths. Too much traffic of late, it says, mass deaths and cut-off lives silting down from Charon's ferry. "Down they slowly sink—dissociating into days and instants—through the fissures between droplets, down to us on the bottom. . . . turbid and faded deposits from days, silhouettes of acts and refractions of thoughts." It's unlivable, says the toad. There's too much matter to wade through. Let's build a bridge over the river and have excavators dredge up the Stygian ooze with "all of the world's sunken memories, all of the centuries passed into oblivion . . . We'll drain oblivion to the bottom. Death will deal out all its riches to the poor—obols and lives—and we shall see how you contrive to remain alive amid all those raised-up deaths."

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* "Most cherez Stiks" (1931), in *Sobranie sochinenii*, Vol. I, 496–507, quotes on 500 and 507.

"Bridge over the Styx" could have been delivered at a Saturday Club meeting, as a variation on Mark Sept and Fabia. It too is a meditation on life becoming death (or on life's obligation to the dead) shared by many Russian writers of fiction during those harrowing years. It is also an epitaph to the entire Letter Killers project. For that final challenge was another paradoxical task facing the members of this fantastical Club: how to keep their own ideas alive amid all the raised-up deaths that are the world of letters, literature.

—Caryl Emerson