

A Dialogue on Sigizmund Krzhizhanovsky

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A Dialogue on Sigizmund Krzhizhanovsky

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Editors' Note

In October of 2016, an international symposium was held on the campus of Indiana University, Bloomington, devoted to the belatedly emerging work of the early twentieth-century author Sigizmund Krzhizhanovsky. The phenomenon of Krzhizhanovsky's re-discovery and introduction to English readers as a major figure of European Modernist literature, hidden from the world until the last decade of the twentieth century, provides an ideal scenario for how the institutions of publishing—through selection, translation, editing, design, and marketing—help to shape our understanding of which texts are included within the category of “world literature,” along with the very idea of what “world literature” means.

Denied publication in the Stalinist period and published only after the disintegration of the Soviet state, Krzhizhanovsky was labeled “the Russian Borges” upon reaching print in 1989. He rapidly achieved the status of a lost literary master in Russia, where the full edition of his collected works became a sought-after rarity. New York Review of Books Classics has published three volumes of his fiction in English and is preparing two more volumes to follow. Already the subject of numerous dissertations, articles, and books in Russia, Krzhizhanovsky has recently attracted increasing attention in Anglophone criticism as well, with article clusters devoted to him in flagship academic journals. Of particular interest for this special issue is the question of what it means to appear as a “classic” *ab ovo* when it is a work published in translation?

Moreover, in Krzhizhanovsky's case, his ethnic, national, and literary affiliations complicate our understanding of world literature. A Pole from Ukraine who wrote in Russian in ways that pay tribute to Greek, Sanskrit, German, English, Latin, and Spanish literatures among others, Krzhizhanovsky's "world" certification requires a certain reimagining of the term world.

The symposium in question, the first in the United States to focus exclusively on Krzhizhanovsky, featured some twelve scholars and translators notable for their work on the author and the early Soviet avant-garde—theorists, historians, and translation studies scholars who are actively engaged in the question of how such a classic author is reconstructed, virtually from scratch, for a contemporary English audience, thereby adding an important and timely case study for the subject of rhetoric and translation. In the excerpt below, you will hear the voices of Jacob Emery and Alexander (Sasha) Spektor, the conference organizers; Russell Valentino, a faculty member at Indiana University and president of the American Literary Translators Association; Anne Fisher, translator of Ilf and Petrov's *Twelve Chairs*; Miriam Shrager, a faculty member at Indiana University who is currently working on a translation of Vladimir Propp; Anthony Anemone, associate professor of Russian at the New School and translator of a volume by Daniil Kharmis; Caryl Emerson, professor emeritus at Princeton and translator most notably of works by Mikhail Bakhtin; and Benjamin Paloff, who teaches at the University of Michigan and has authored several volumes of poetry and numerous translations from Central European languages. While the symposium participants are at work on a collection devoted to Krzhizhanovsky's growing global oeuvre—their collaborative translation of an anthology of his non-fiction is under contract with New York Review of Books Classics—the opening dialogue of the conference organizers, and the brief open-forum exchange that followed, provides a concentrated and suggestive point.

Dialogue

Jacob Emery:

This conference has grown out of fifteen years of conversations about Krzhizhanovsky that Sasha and I have been having since graduate school, ever since Sasha lent me his fresh copy of *Stories for Wunderkinder*. As we aged out of our bohemian wastrelhood into sedate, settled bourgeois life we have continued these

discussions, and we'd like now to model for you in this public forum our recurrent conversation, especially as it touches on Krzhizhanovsky's non-fiction work, which has not enjoyed the degree of translation and attention that much of his fiction has, but which we feel to be in many ways of a piece with that fiction.

Krzhizhanovsky was himself a fan of dialogic genres and much of his writing takes the form of a poetic interrogation—a sort of Turing test in which ideas and beings probe each other's respective reality. We cannot actually stage for you a dialogue between Being and Non-Being, as some of Krzhizhanovsky's pieces do, but we can at least suggest the dialogic nature of his work by opening with a bit of a framing conversation, which we will then open up to include all of you, we hope, in the following hour and over the course of the next day and a half.

I want to begin with an image from Krzhizhanovsky's essay "Dramaturgy of the Chessboard:" the Idea as a dagger lodged in the scabbard of someone's head. Once it comes out, it becomes a frightening autonomous force, seeking out a new scabbard in which to sheath itself—that is, someone else's head. This is obviously the way Krzhizhanovsky conceives of his own unpublished work, which is waiting in manuscript to be let out and lodged in the darkness of someone else's head, his unknown future reader. What do we think about the English language as the place in which Krzhizhanovsky's words are now coming to rest and finding a home? Especially his non-fiction work, which we hope is shortly to follow his fiction in translation into English? What kind of gap or wound is created in literature, in English, by these new ideas appearing in this new genre?

Alexander (Sasha) Spektor:

I'd like to continue with your idea of a wound in thinking of Krzhizhanovsky's place in world literature, in Russian literature, and of Krzhizhanovsky the writer of both philosophic fiction and fictional philosophy. I think what we have here is a philosopher poet, someone who is trying to straddle two realms. A good point of entry may be Tyutchev's *Silentium*. Tyutchev: a philosopher-poet as well. Consider the paradox of the poem, where the warning about the destructive effect of matter and words on the life of the mind can only be expressed in words. Krzhizhanovsky is evidently very preoccupied with this division of the philosopher and the poet. In fact, in his philosophical essay "Idea and Word," he writes that "For the poet, human language is too abstract; for the metaphysician, it is too sensual" (*Dlia poeta chelovecheskii iazyk slishkom*

abstrakten, dlia metafizika—slishkom chuvstvenen). So what we experience as we read his text is the tension between these two languages—of philosophy and poetry—and the author trying to choose which to use. Thinking about framing Krzhizhanovsky and trying to understand his place in Russian and world literature, I was surprised at his encyclopedic knowledge of Russian literature, his thorough knowledge of the tradition, on the one hand, and his insularity from it, on the other. In Modernism such falling out of tradition is not uncommon. In many ways this is how we define Modernism: an attempt to erase or to reject the tradition, as, for example, in Russian Futurism. But Futurism eventually finds its way back into tradition. It becomes part of tradition. With Krzhizhanovsky we do not necessarily have this return, quite possibly because of the circumstantial effect of his being hidden from the reading public for almost half a century. Yet with Krzhizhanovsky the condition of not being part of the literary tradition becomes permanent; it transcends circumstantiality and can be seen as an integral factor of his poetics. I am thinking here of one particular metaphor—and it is a key metaphor for Krzhizhanovsky that appears in numerous places in his prose—the crack. It is as if Krzhizhanovsky himself continues to hide in one of the cracks induced by the many fissures of Modernism. Falling into the crack, being stuck in this in-between region, is a leitmotif of many of his major works such as *Autobiography of a Corpse*, “The Collector of Cracks,” *In the Pupil*, *The Letter Killers Club*.

As I was rereading these works for the conference, I was struck by the particular psychodramatic nature of the transformation you mention: the journey of an idea into life, of an idea into language. I was struck by how consistently he describes this process as traumatic. The somber seriousness of many of Krzhizhanovsky’s works comes, I believe, from his understanding of this process as a loss, a loss of currency. I imagine the crack as a philosophic equivalent of no-man’s land. I don’t believe it is an accident that in *Autobiography of a Corpse* the philosophic predicament of the narrator is written against the backdrop of World War I, where the experience of treating human life as a statistic, as pure matter, is accompanied by a complete loss of meaning, the transformation of “I” into nothing. The transfer of ideas into words, as they enter into reality through language can be compared to this ultimate loss of meaning.

The crack appears as the moment of materialized non-being, and in Krzhizhanovsky’s works we often find the theme of fragmentation of wholeness, the horror of it, and the inescapability of this kind of fragmentation. This might be a very Russian

tradition after all, starting with the nineteenth-century religious realists like Tolstoy and Dostoevsky and then proceeding to the symbolists of the early twentieth-century and eventually to Krzhizhanovsky. A tradition in which word is thought of as a perfect but nevertheless dead form for the thought. In “Idea and Word,” Krzhizhanovsky compares words to skulls, and indeed, they become perfect metaphors for each other: each can be thought of as matter that has to be re-animated by the thought. Krzhizhanovsky takes this idea to its limits; hence, he imagines words as automatons or humans as live corpses animated by someone else’s thought. Here I am thinking of the dystopian scenario from *The Letter Killers Club* where people are zombified and become instruments of another’s will. Reading his texts we are in the constant presence of a sense of loss: existential loss, but also philosophic loss as it materializes in the process of physical fragmentation.

Jacob Emery:

There is a loss. However, that loss also becomes the condition of another kind of productivity. There is another crack that runs as a theme through a number of Krzhizhanovsky’s works and that is specifically the *rasshchep pera*, the split in the nib of a fountain pen, without which the pen cannot write and which actually conducts this black ink, the pure potentiality of writing, out to the nib so that it can become materialized as visible language on the page and then persist to a kind of posterity. This gap that opens up and conducts this Styx-like blackness through itself onto the paper becomes the condition of the existence of literature in the first place. It becomes the condition of being and writing. In his novel *The Return of Munchausen*, Munchausen is a character that exists only in writing, a literary character who, because of the laws of supply and demand that govern existence itself, has managed to come out of his book and play a certain role in world affairs. At the end of that book there is a confrontation between fiction and non-fiction, between the monstrosity of reality and the monstrosity of the exaggerating fabulist. Munchausen has fallen ill at the end; he is surrounded by alphabet blocks; he is trying to reconstitute himself from the medium in which he exists, writing, from the ground up. The poet Udding comes to visit him and shows him a number of newspaper articles and press releases from the Soviet Union, the contents of which are even more absurd than anything that Munchausen has managed to come up with in his fabulous tales about Russia. And Munchausen says, “I’ve always loved this game that’s played between phantasm and fact. And phantasm has always and inevitably won, always and inevitably

won, until finally I ran into a country about which one cannot tell lies.” He says this phrase over and over again, “*strana, o kotoroi nel’zia solgat’*.” The phrase echoes the title of one of Krzhizhanovsky’s essays, on literary geographies, “Countries that do not exist, “*strany, kotoryh net*.” There is some cosmic conflict between these literary countries that outstrip belief in their nonexistence and this other country that in its monstrous reality surpasses the imagination itself. Krzhizhanovsky finds himself at that juncture and places his imaginary literary character in the middle of all the alphabet blocks, this materialization of language, the building blocks of language, with which he is trying to construct a new existence for himself.

Alexander (Sasha) Spektor:

It is interesting that you talked about the *rasshchep pera*, or the split in the pen. This image comes from one of the imbedded stories in *The Letter Killers Club*, “Notker the Stammerer,” which is a very interesting piece because it is a fictional story about a non-fiction person, a story about a fictional character’s effort to write a piece of non-fiction, a biography of the ninth-century Benedictine monk Notker the Stammerer. Once again, we have an attempt at transforming or crossing over the gap between fantasy and reality. In the same story we find another image of a crack, but now it’s the image of crossing over, of bridging the gap, not disappearing into it, which becomes important. The scene in question is the one in which the researcher who is writing Notker’s biography imagines his subject having a vision that becomes an inspiration and the visual image for the chorale “*In media vita—mors*.” In this vision, Notker sees the builders of the bridge hanging over the abyss on the beams of the future bridge, and he hears them singing, which is a beautiful visual image of notes situated on a musical staff. So on the one hand, the bridge directs our attention to a crack, an absence, but on the other, it suggests a continuum, not a lacuna. It is a duration of time and space, as if Krzhizhanovsky is trying to bridge the shores of idea and matter. In this sense, we can think of Krzhizhanovsky’s genre of experimental realism as something that purports to unite these two seemingly incompatible realms of idea and matter. Language and matter serve as inspiration for ideas, creating a kind of a double movement: from ideas into language certainly, but also from language back into ideas.

Jacob Emery:

Krzhizhanovsky is a poet of metonymy, who works by subtracting from the whole that is being and leaving us with some kind of residue that serves as a signpost onto a larger but inaccessible phenomenon. I think Krzhizhanovsky's awareness of his own unpublishedness and the partiality of his public trace leads, in his non-fiction work particularly, into an obsession with doors that open onto a larger phenomenon. If we look through his non-fiction, we find theoretical essays about titles, about epigraphs, about introductions. All of these are small pieces that exist on the margins of some kind of larger phenomenon. The apotheosis of this impulse is probably his projected history of unwritten literature, of which we have only a prospectus to the unwritten work that he planned to write, in which he outlines a number of theoretical laws: the longer you live, the more projects you fail to carry through; the longer it takes to write a project, the more projects it spins off, which then fail to become realized in turn or leave traces only as notes in diary entries, or a passing conversation. How do we go about studying the literature that remains unwritten? How do we make an existent study of something that is by its nature non-existent? How do we make that non-existence a feature of our inquiry?

A couple of weeks ago I was in a used bookstore, flipping through *Beyond Life* by James Branch Cabell, an art-for-art's sake philosophical dialogue from 1919, and I noticed that it takes place in a library whose shelves are lined with unwritten works of literature. "Oh, many of the best works of Dickens are here," says the main character. "I think that Sheridan's last play that he thought about for thirty years is by far his best play. Why, there are works of genius here by people who never published a line." There is something about the time, obviously, the early 20th century in world literature—the shelves lined with potential literature and the relationship of the active writer to this mass of potential, which inevitably exceeds anything that anyone could write down. But Krzhizhanovsky resonates here in this connection beyond his time with Stanislaw Lem's books of introductions to works that do not themselves exist, or Thomas Carlyle's *Sartor Resartus*, which is supposedly a selection from a very long work called *The Philosophy of Clothing* by the German philosopher Diogenes Teufelsdröckh. Thus, there is a long tradition of presenting work in its partiality, which comes to inform for Krzhizhanovsky even a way of being in space. In an essay about the street names of Moscow, he speaks of one set of street names that refer back to the medieval history of Moscow and another that look forward to the utopian Communist future. The present disappears into a crack jammed between two

realities that exist only as metonymic suggestions, one of them a ruin, the other a promise. This in-between status has, on the one hand, a very negative valency, metonymy as the ruin of culture, as wreckage, and on the other hand, it is a world of imaginative promise, the suggestion of a universe of imagination that outstrips the petty foretaste to which we have access in our own life and our own writing.

Alexander (Sasha) Spektor:

Krzhizhanovsky's predilection for metonymy, which is one of the most unique features of his prose, speaks to this presence announced through absence, but it also makes life emerge in his works. His works are infested with metonymy and by metonymy, suggesting a different kind of subjectivity. Things come alive in his prose. Body parts and words come alive. In general, the sense of loss resulting from the crossing over from ideas into words, into language, is understood as a gendered loss in Krzhizhanovsky's prose, a man's loss of a woman. Hence, in *The Letter Killers Club* the idea for the club has its source in Zez's loss of his mother. In *Autobiography of a Corpse* the process of disintegration is similarly triggered by a thwarted tryst between a man and a woman. And the narrator of "The Collector of Cracks" begins to philosophize on the nature of absence as he realizes that his love for a woman is gone. In this sense, Krzhizhanovsky is a very male writer, a very gendered one, but in this metonymic explosion, we have a suggestion of a different kind of subjectivity, not ascribed to gender, as it happens in the story "Runaway Fingers," for example. In a very concrete sense we can conceivably trace the birth of the fantastic element in Krzhizhanovsky to the presence of metonymy or, rather, to the moment of transformation, when metonymy stops being metonymy and becomes personified, comes to life. As the narrator of *The Letter Killers Club* says at the end of the book: "Life. That's the word I will not give away."

Jacob Emery:

And each one of his favorite themes acquires a life of its own and ramifies through all of his work: for example, the cracks, the fountain pen, bubbles. Perhaps because his works are not published during his lifetime, their themes are plowed back into his imagination, sprout up anew in other works, to create something that is rich and self-communicating in its very insularity. Here the bubble is another metaphor of that world apart which drifts across the border, in this case, between languages. There is something

curiously translatable about Krzhizhanovsky in the sense that his whole oeuvre constitutes a hermetic world unto itself; every story refers to and picks up on themes from every other element of his corpus. The more of him you read, the more you become drawn into that world, more a part of it, and the more self-sufficient it becomes in terms of its own interlocking texture and structure across the entire system of works, which has declared independence from its context, even its linguistic context; Krzhizhanovsky's hope is that his works will survive that context and be viable in posterity.

Alexander (Sasha) Spektor:

It is interesting that when we talk about the translatability of Krzhizhanovsky, his insularity becomes, as you said, the potential for being translated into other cultures, into other languages. So Krzhizhanovsky as a philosopher is ultimately translatable, but then we also have Krzhizhanovsky the poet, the language innovator, who is very difficult to translate, and whose texts become kind of a wall against translation. In this sense, one of the goals of our conference should be to think whether or not Krzhizhanovsky can be translated and if so how. What does it mean to translate Krzhizhanovsky?

Jacob Emery:

As we open the question of translatability, I would like to mention one of my favorite spots in Krzhizhanovsky: a nice spot because it is in Latin, introducing a third language, a third point. It is that moment in *The Letter Killers Club* in which the middle of the word "silentium" is crossed out and appears as "s—um." The assembled characters, who are also all authors, creators of stories, say in response to this: "Oh, it's a nonsense phrase. It's a nonsense phrase and it's inscribed on the title page of a book as though it's the name of the author." However, the reader looks at it and realizes, "Oh, this is actually the Latin word for 'I am,' *sum*." Somehow "silence," by being effaced, crossed out, censored, destroyed, subtracted—that same procedure of metonymic subtraction that we have already observed—turns itself into this statement of material being that comes out in understandable language.

I think at this point we have given you all of our words. Except for "life," of course, which we always keep for ourselves. Perhaps we can now open it up to a larger conversation.

Russell Valentino:

A great introduction and very helpful. I kept jotting down things because I couldn't help it. Sasha, to your point about the difficulty of language being an impediment to translation, I'd like to say that it seems to me exactly the opposite. As soon as you say this to a translator, it becomes a provocation, an invitation to try. Precisely because you say it's impossible, they say, "I'm going to show you that it's not." I was struck by how many metaphors you were using that are also metaphors used to describe translation: the bridge, the crossing, the transfer, the deformation of language, the creation as a form of violence. And then this idea of transformation or creation or formation of idea into word as loss. We say "lost in translation" all the time. It is even the title of a film. Translation is almost always characterized as loss, especially translation of poetry. I disagree with both of those approaches. But the counterargument is always in terms of a kind of messy excess that is not intended. It just flies out of the pan. It's accidental, this stuff that we didn't intend in the translation, because we're tapping into other kinds of resources in the receiving culture's language that we were not quite conscious of. It's this messy excess, or remainder, that shows up, which is similar to the idea of the pen and all that ink spilling out.

The other thing that was so impressive to me in your comments was the emphasis on non-existing works, those that have not been written. And the absence of translation of Krzhizhanovsky, which is, in effect, an absence of Krzhizhanovsky; works that are not translated in effect die. And you only have an original when you have a translation of it. So there's a kind of phenomenological relationship that is very similar to what you were talking about, it seems to me, in these works that do not exist. His work doesn't exist in a very real sense until it gets translated and people then refer back to the source through the multiple new versions, and that's when it acquires life. It's the idea of *translatio*, as if we are carrying a saint's relics to their new sanctuary, and now there will be life in this new place.

Anne Fisher:

I was struck by the "*silentium—sum*" combination and how the subtraction of a portion of the first word creates this new thing or this new idea. Krzhizhanovsky talks about that in his "Poetics of Titles": how if you take enough words out of a title, it becomes shorter and shorter. That is, in a sense, how poetry is created as well, by taking out all the words that you do not need so that what you have left fits together in a special way.

Jacob Emery:

There is economy, not in the Hemingway-esque way, but of a very different sort.

Alexander (Sasha) Spektor:

It is almost a formalist economy, this understanding of language that has to be cut down in order to be resurrected again.

Miriam Shrager:

I was thinking, besides the formalist approach, is this not also connected to his isolation? Tsvetaeva, at some point when she was very isolated in France, started to write like this, almost encoding her poetry. Very minimalistic. Is there some connection?

Russell Valentino:

It's lonely.

Miriam Shrager:

Very, very lonely. So is it connected? It is as if they are writing for themselves. They know that it will never be published, so it is essentially encoding something for themselves.

Anthony Anemone:

It is a really interesting issue. And I, too, wanted to say that I really enjoyed the introduction. But in particular the issue of the potential of language, the power of a writer to make the world, is especially interesting. One of the central questions that I have had about Krzhizhanovsky has to do with potential, with non-existence. Is it really about potential or is it already a kind of comment about the tragic social reality of this author whose life played out the way it did? This touches again upon the idea of isolation, the inability to communicate with people. So my question is... I do not expect an answer, but is the potential of language primarily a theoretical issue? Is it an issue about the social reality of this particular writer? Is it both? How does one play with those two ideas?

Jacob Emery:

This is a subject that I care very deeply about, and I think it can be understood in two mythic ways: the non-existence can be imagined

as the loss of something that once existed, or it can be imagined as the potential for something to rush in and take the place of that vacuum.

Caryl Emerson:

That is related to what I was going to say, Jacob, that really it is all in the crack. This idea of *shchel'*, which is a philosophy, it seems to me. That is, you can escape through it, you can survive by living in it because no one knows your name. It is a sort of flexibility, on the one hand. Nothing new is there unless something old has been shoved aside. But I was struck dumb, Sasha, by your comment that a crack is materialized non-being. That is a very negative reading of it, of course. But it is good. What it means is that it is non-being that has edges, and those edges are what keep you temporarily on this plane. By that I mean alive on this earth, having to eat and drink, having to interact with other people, having to call yourself an "I." But once you escape from that—and I think the thought that is wedged in the brain has a lot of potential—and once it gets out there, it is enslaved, it is at the mercy of others. So I think that your question, Tony, is absolutely right on. What is it that makes a crack a place of salvation, of escape, of loss? I can't really give a plus or a minus to it.

Benjamin Paloff:

Again, this is a really wonderful introductory conversation and so appropriate that it was formulated as a conversation. I think it is important in talking about the loss and the melancholy aspect of this, what Krzhizhanovsky describes repeatedly as this kind of infinite recursion, a recursive echo away from essence [...] The idea of a library filled with unwritten masterpieces is my experience of going to a bookstore in Shanghai and seeing a huge body of work to which I have absolutely no access. We get back to Russell's point about translation. Among Russian readers, and certainly among Anglophone readers, we actually have a preconception that this particular author directly contradicts the notion that anything worth reading is already available to us. And yet those of us who are engaged in translation know that there are major works by major authors that simply do not exist. In dealing with my students of translation, it has always been kind of a struggle to convince them, "Your favorite book is one you will never read because you don't know it's there."

Russell Valentino:

It is unwritten.

Alexander (Sasha) Spektor:

Returning to your point about the materialized non-being, I think we still have the voice coming from the crack. We might not have the full body, but we still have the voice. It seems there is still that trace of the presence in the non-presence. There is still something there even as a record of the fragmentation, the ultimate fragmentation.

Jacob Emery:

The crack opens sometimes, a metaphorical mouth that gives birth to the word.

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