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## DISCOVERING MISSING MASTERWORKS OF THE FANTASTIC: THE RUNAWAY WONDERS OF SIGIZMUND KRZHIZHANOVSKY

The ghost of posthumous critical appreciation plays its cruel joke on all but the readers still alive and fortunate enough to share in the discovery of a great writer. Such a spectre, sadly, shadowed Sigizmund Krzhizhanovsky, an unjustly unknown Russian modernist who, in his day, had to contend with the life-threatening instabilities of Bolshevik and Stalinist Russia, a country where writing fantastic tales, prohibited by the dictates of Soviet Realism, could mean execution for treason. Krzhizhanovsky's book reviews and encyclopedia entries found print, but he encountered considerable hardship publishing his experimentalist work during his lifetime; his over one hundred short stories and five novels gathered dust in a government archive until 1979, and only recently have gained well-deserved acclaim over a half-century after his passing in 1950. This Russian master's translated tales, which now number a novella, *The Letter Killers*, and two collections of short stories, *Memories of the Future* and *Autobiography of a Corpse*, have left twenty-first century critics suddenly gushing with a backlog of overdue accolades. Bill Marx of *The World*, for example, declared the late writer an "impish master of the fatalistically fantastic" whose "morbidly satirical imagination forms the wild (missing) link between the futuristic dream tales of Edgar Allan Poe and the postwar scientific nightmares of Stanislaw Lem." Critical opinion of Krzhizhanovsky has finally caught flame, illuminating his name alongside more famous countrymen like Leskov and Gogol, and twenty-first century reviewers generously apply adjectives like "Kafkaesque" and "Borgesian" to his hallucinatory fictions.

Comparisons aside, Krzhizhanovsky should be deemed fascinatingly original. He deals in metonymy and minutiae, and is fond of what Adam Thirlwell, in this introduction to *Autobiography of a Corpse*, terms "the peripheral." These stories suddenly undergo fantastic transformations and specialize in runaway plots; hijacked by strange agencies,

the tales like to take off in unanticipated directions, and exult in chasing rabbits down rabbitholes. An unlikely double confiscates “The Phantom:” a stillborn child specimen springs to life during an obstetric exercise and pursues the young medical student who presided over the exercise; the student is turned unwitting Dr. Frankenstein. Early in “Someone Else’s Theme,” the story is derailed by strangeness as a character who will soon enough steal the plot solicits the narrator:

“I wonder, citizen, if you wouldn’t like to acquire a philosophical system? With a double embrace of the world: a precept for both the micro- and macrocosm. Formulated according to strict and exact methods. An answer to all the great questions. Well, and...the cost is not out of the question.” (*Memories* 54).

This enterprising philosopher, one Saul Straight, who arrives from the periphery—the narrator doesn’t see him enter the restaurant—even shares that his “philosophy of life” may be available in a payment plan, in affordable installments. What narrator, or reader, for that matter, could possibly resist such an outrageous pitch?

An overheard tale-within-the-original-frame-tale from the fictional periphery about the Eiffel Tower running amok overwhelms both narrator and reader in “The Bookmark.” This runaway Eiffel Tower tale-within-a-tale, related by a complete stranger, continues for several pages, and begins audaciously.

“Or take this. I call it ‘The Tower Gone Mad.’ The gigantic four-footed Eiffel Tower, its steel head high over the human hubbubs of Paris, was fed up, you see, fed up with having to listen to that hurly-burly street-entangled life strewn with clangs, lights, and clamor. As for the muddleheaded creatures swarming at its feet, they had equipped the inside of its pointed crown poking through the clouds with global vibrations and radio signals. The space inside the tower’s needlelike brain now began to vibrate, began to seep down through its muscular steel interlacements into the ground, whereupon the tower wrenched its iron soles free of the foundation, rocked back, and lunged off. (17)

Note the curiously doubled Eiffel Tower here: one tower maddens the story told by the stranger, and another deranges Krzhizhanovsky’s story. Both towers literally run off,

and in the latter case, the escapade fantastically hijacks the tale's frame and foundation. Krzhizhanovsky's ludic work frequently showcases playful metafictional games in his narratives, and Rosemary Jackson's revolutionary fantastic is visible: its "muscular steel inlacements," "needlelike brain," and "iron soles" are indeed all "fed up," a ready escapee from the state-sanctioned prison of realism.

In "The Runaway Fingers," the story Gray Campbell's short play in this issue of *Phantom Drift* dramatizes, Krzhizhanovsky transforms the fugitive fingers of a famous pianist's right hand into main characters, digits so deft that they abscond mid-performance with the fictional musical concert, and with the story itself, that other performance, reconfiguring the fiction itself as their own fable or shadowplay. The synecdoche is all the more apt and believable, of course, the more a reader considers a pianist's skilled fingers: their many arpeggios and ascending scales, their dynamic crescendoes, pianos to triple fortissimos, and all their captivating progressions, their movements performing movements which have been known to steal an audience.

Other daring narratives deliver similarly stunning speculative conceits, most potently dosed with humor. "Yellow Coal" shows readers a world which harnesses the power of human spite as an energy resource and carries this satirical premise to unexpectedly comedic lengths. "The Unbitten Elbow," an absurdist tale all too appropriate today amidst the current glut of untalented talent shows and talentless celebrities, follows the rising star of a man absolutely obsessed with biting his elbow.

Absurd and fantastical intertwine in Krzhizhanovsky's work, as do metaphysical questions and impossibilities. In Bergsonian fashion, this author represents consciousness as a complicated, unstable, mutable, mystifying state—in fact, consciousness may just be the secret subject of many of these tales. The protagonist of "Bridge over the Styx" discovers just how mystifying consciousness can be, as he awakens to the sight of an oversized talking white toad, hypnagogic and unblinkingly lurid under his night table lampshade, persisting in asking him the directions to death as if he should be an authority. "Quadraturin" and its narrator, Sutulin, is visited by a man trafficking in a tubeful of secret substance which enlarges rooms. Sutulin applies this wondrous substance used to his apartment walls and awakens in the morning elated to find that sometime that night, quadraturin had enlarged his "matchbook-sized" apartment:

Two voices began to whisper. Then by degrees of sonority, from piano to *mf*, from *mf* to *fff*—they cut into Sutulin's sleep.

"Outrageous! I don't want any new tenants popping out from under that skirt of yours... Put up with all that racket?!"

"Can't just dump it in the garbage..."

"I don't want to hear about it. You were told: no dogs, no cats, no children..."

At which point there ensued such *fff* that Sutulin was ripped once and for all from his sleep; unable to part eyelids stitched together with exhaustion, he reached—as was his wont—for the edge of the table on which stood the clock. Then it began. His hand groped for a long time, grappling air: there was no clock and no table. Sutulin opened his eyes at once. In an instant he was sitting up, looking dazedly around the room. The table that usually stood right here, at the head of the bed, had moved off into the middle of a faintly familiar, large, but ungainly room.

Everything was the same: the skimpy, threadbare rug that had that had trailed after the table somewhere ahead of him, and the photographs, and the stool, and the yellow patterns on the wallpaper.

But they were all strangely spread out inside the expanded room cube.

"Quadraturin," Sutulin thought, "is terrific!" (*Memories* 6-7)

Sutulin succeeds in barricading and evades his landlady and hence never lets any guests enter his "apartment"—which, on some level, might represent his consciousness. The reader can't be sure how quadraturin is working, exactly—is it a hallucinogen multiplying Sutulin's perception of space(after all, he does complain of a headache), or is this substance truly expanding spatial dimensions and accomplishing the impossible? Unquantifiable substance that it is, "Quadraturin" nonetheless stays stable long enough to become one of Krzhizhanovsky's finest and most purely fantastic stories. The "duration of uncertainty" Tzvetan Todorov found definitive of the fantastic is everpresent, and the uncertainty is never resolved, which means readers may witness a rare instance of what Todorov would deem the purely fantastic.

Like Sutulin, modern readers may have more and more marvels to look forward to: as Krzhizhanovsky's tales continue to be translated into English, we can be thankful for these new irrealsities which so powerfully relocate our walls and allow our consciousnesses to grow beyond manmade boundaries, as this prolific Russian master defamiliarizes and

renovates modern space with strangenesses dreamed up in Moscow over a half century ago. For its defiance of past totalitarianism, and for both the resplendent present, and the bright future—that yet-to-be-discovered fantastic of Sigizmund Krzhizhanovsky—*Phantom Drift* is grateful.

#### Works Cited

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