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ABSTRACT

Performing Suicide: Transformation of the Superfluous Man in Soviet Drama

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In my dissertation, I unveil a concept of the dramatic protagonist in Soviet drama that I propose to call a modern superfluous man. To note, this is not an attempt to trace the entirety of the superfluous man tradition from its origins to the present but rather a selective consideration, confined to the examination of two periods in the development of Russia—the 1920s and the '60s-'70s—when Soviet society was undergoing great ideological battles. My research focuses on the three distinctive twentieth-century plays by Iurii Olesha, Nikolai Erdman, and Aleksandr Vampilov that showcase major developments in Soviet drama and theater and represent shifting conceptions of selfhood in Soviet cultural discourse.

Colin Wright in his 1988 article "'Superfluous People' in the Soviet drama of the 1920s" already applies this term to the Soviet context, identifying "superfluous" characters as socially useless individuals, deeply flawed in a moral sense. I further build on this comparison to develop a more comprehensive concept based on Olesha's metaphor of the beggar in relation to the dramatic hero**.** My project, however, is essentially different in approach and focus: I refer to the superfluous man as a literary trope and an apt metaphor to draw typological parallels with the image of a social outcast in Soviet Russia and do not look for weak-willed and ineffectual heroes in the twentieth-century drama. Rather, I aim to define conceptually this qualitatively new character who emerged out of the transformed environment in the 1920s and was made into a 'beggar.' In my analysis, I go outside the framework of the literary hero and also explore his real-life prototype—the role of the artist in society and the autonomy of creative practice in the new historical context, when "art directly merged with politics."

Specifically, my dissertation focuses on the use of fake suicide as a dramatic and theatrical device for character development, which results in the figurative death of the protagonist who functions as the author's projection of the self. This cultural phenomenon could be called, to paraphrase Svetlana Boym, suicide in quotations marks. Further adopting Boym's metaphor, my intention, similarly, is to "reopen, or make visible the numerous quotation marks" around the word *suicide* through the lens of performance. The performative aspect of fake suicide in drama is a new topic in literary studies that has not been previously pursued in the vein of tragicomedy and romantic grotesque. The three plays under discussion were widely studied by scholars but not in the context of authorial mischief, subversive self-identity. At the same time, underneath the concept of fake suicide, as I see it, lays a generic feature of Soviet culture, which was inspired by the conflict of identity in the Soviet period and points to the implied connection between the literary fate of the author and his text in the Soviet Union.

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Finally, I dedicate this dissertation to my parents, Aleksandr and Natalia Maksimovich.

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Introduction.

The Beggar as a Performative Identity of the Superfluous Man in Soviet Drama

In my dissertation, I unveil a concept of the dramatic protagonist in Soviet drama that I propose to call a modern superfluous man. To note, this is not an attempt to trace the entirety of the superfluous man tradition from its origins to the present but rather a selective consideration, confined to the examination of two periods in the development of Russia—the 1920s and the '60s-'70s—when Soviet society was undergoing great ideological battles. My research focuses on the three distinctive twentieth-century plays as an introduction to the concept of the superfluous man in the Soviet drama, starting from early Soviet decades and closing with the post-war generation of Aleksandr Vampilov (1937-1972). From satirical representations of this hero in two early Soviet plays—Iurii Olesha's Kavalerov in *The Conspiracy of Feelings* (*Zagovor chuvstv*, 1928) and Nikolai Erdman's Podsekalnikov in *The Suicide* (*Samoubiitsa*, 1928)—I move to the examination of the modern embodiment of this character type in Vampilov's Zilov in *Duck Hunting* (*Utinaia okhota*, 1967). All three plays demonstrate an "overt concern with questions of death, resurrection, and personal identity,"[1] which is intensified and complicated through the tragicomic portrayal of their heroes' struggles. Although writing in the 1960s, stylistically, Vampilov goes back to the 1920s—it is a return from the overwhelming dogma of Socialist realism to a rediscovery of modernist poetics. So then, there is a direct link between the earlier twentieth century theatrical avant-gardists and Vampilov whose poetics is inspired by a prior Russian absurdist tradition sparked by Nikolai Gogol, Aleksandr Sukhovo-Kobylin, Mikhail Bulgakov, and Nikolai Erdman.

[1] Wachtel, Andrew. *Plays of Expectations: Intertextual Relations in Russian Twentieth-Century Drama* (Seattle: University of Washington, 2006), 14.

Colin Wright in his 1988 article "'Superfluous People' in the Soviet drama of the 1920s" already applies this term to the Soviet context, identifying "superfluous" characters as socially useless individuals, deeply flawed in a moral sense.[2] I further build on this comparison to develop a more comprehensive concept based on Olesha's metaphor of the beggar, which I will discuss below, in relation to the dramatic hero. After all, the conflict between the individual and society, or the dominant culture, lies at the heart of the superfluous man phenomenon: the character's exclusion is defined in relation to society owing to a set of historical, social, and moral reasons. However, I do not consider this Soviet hero as a complete revival of the nineteenth-century tradition since no such term as "superfluous man" circulated in Soviet literary criticism. Nonetheless a lot of comparisons were made by critics in this regard, one of which I listed above as an example. My project, however, is essentially different in approach and focus: I refer to the superfluous man as a literary trope and an apt metaphor to draw typological parallels with the image of a social outcast in Soviet Russia and do not look for weak-willed and ineffectual heroes in the twentieth-century drama. Rather, I aim to define conceptually this qualitatively new character who emerged out of the transformed environment in the 1920s and was made into a 'beggar.' In my analysis, I go outside the framework of the literary hero and also explore his real-life prototype—the role of the artist in society and the autonomy of creative practice in the new historical context, when "art directly merged with politics."[3] Following the 1917 Revolution, as Nina Gourianova emphasizes, "the new political system fundamentally changed the social function

[2] In particular, Wright groups the following works in the category "Plays with Soviet 'superfluous people'": Valentin Kataev's *The Embezzlers* (1927), M. Bulgakov's *Zoika's Apartment* (1925); Nikolai Erdman's *The Mandate* (1925) and *The Suicide* (1928), Vladimir Maiakovskii's *The Bathhouse* (1928) and *The Bedbug* (1928), A. Faiko's *Man with a Briefcase* (1928), and other. See Wright, A. Colin. "'Superfluous People' in the Soviet Drama of the 1920s." *Canadian Slavonic Papers / Revue Canadienne Des Slavistes* 30, no. 1 (1988): 1-16.

[3] Gurianova, N. A. *The Aesthetics of Anarchy: Art and Ideology in the Early Russian Avant-Garde* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2012), 6.

of art,"[4] urging artists to revise their aesthetical ideologies in response to ideological pressure from the state.

In the late 1920s Iurii Olesha (1899-1960) was considering writing a novel with the main character as a 'beggar' (*nishchii* in Russian).[5] In his notebooks, he relates a brief encounter he had with Vladimir Maiakovskii, in which the latter credits Olesha with writing the novel *Nietzsche* instead of *The Beggar*.

> "Olesha's writing a novel called *Nietzsche*." He'd just read a note in the paper's literary chronicle section. I knew there was nothing there about a novel called Nietzsche; rather, it was about the one called The Beggar . . . "*The Beggar*, Vladimir Vladimirovich," I corrected him, taking enormous pleasure in the fact that he was associating with me. "The novel's called *The Beggar*." "It's the same thing," he answered brilliantly.[6]

Maiakovskii was punning: the word for "beggar" in Russian is *nishchii*, very similar in pronunciation to the name of the German philosopher. Olesha evidently enjoys this wordplay, giving in to Maiakovskii's indulgent tone and sharing in his sarcastic irony. By drawing parallels between Nietzsche and *nishchii*, Maiakovskii fashions an amalgamate term and a provocative image of a moralizing beggar or a street philosopher who diligently searches for truth.

Following this exchange with Maiakovskii comes the most insightful observation of Olesha, who appeared to be astounded by the realization of a genuine affinity between the two figures: "And in fact, hasn't somebody writing a novel about a beggar—and you have to take the period and my tendencies as a writer into consideration—hasn't such a person read a lot of

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[4] Ibid., 279.

[5] The conception of the novel about a beggar dates back to the time when Olesha was working on his play *The Conspiracy of Feelings* (1928-1929). Many sources, including Olesha himself, mention the dramatist's abortive attempts to write a novel (or a short story) *The Beggar*, from which only the title survived. For example, see Ladokhina, 2017; Gus'kov and Kokorin, 2017; Ozernaia, 2013. Olesha himself mentions his novel in his memoirs, *Kniga proshchaniia* (1999).

[6] Olesha, Iurii K. *No Day Without a Line: From Notebooks by Yury Olesha,* ed. and transl. Judson Rosengrant (Evanston, Ill.: Northwestern University Press, 1998), 105-6. "— Олеша пишет роман «Ницше»! Это он прочёл заметку в отделе литературной хроники. Нет, знаю я, там напечатано не про роман «Ницше», а про роман «Нищий». — «Нищий», Владимир Владимирович, — поправляю я, чувствуя, как мне радостно, что он общается со мной. — Роман «Нищий». — Это всё равно, — гениально отвечает он мне." Olesha, Iurii K. *Kniga proshchaniia*, ed. Violetta Gudkova (Moskva: Vagrius, 1999), 145.

Nietzsche?"[7] Indeed, Nietzsche's individualistic conception of the human being, governed by freedom of spirit and independent from confining social conventions is close to Olesha's artistic credo. Rather than defining the beggar in terms of one's social status or psychological condition, Olesha underscores his character's independence: "The real beggar," he used to say, "does not need anything, he does not ask anyone for anything!"[8] As N. Gus'kov and A. Kokorin further clarify, Olesha conceives of 'beggarliness' (*nishchenstvo*) as "the highest form of spiritual freedom: man's independence from worldly possessions, material and social benefits."[9]

Olesha never wrote his autobiographical novel *The Beggar*. Instead, he persisted in shaping this concept in dramaturgy, incarnating the idea of homelessness of the pre-revolutionary intelligentsia in the 'beggar' character of his plays: the homeless artist Nikolai Kavalerov, the doomed actress Elena Goncharova, and the unsuccessful fellow-traveler Zand.[10] The playwright reinvents himself in his 'beggar protagonist' who, above all, values his existential freedom and individuality of expression, even more so in the conditions of ideocracy when openly declared opposition was socially isolating. Thus, Olesha's type of the proud beggar becomes a new formula to portray a rebellious character of the early Soviet period, whose goal is survival.

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[7] Ibid., 106. "В самом деле, пишущий роман о нищем—причём надо учесть и эпоху, и мои способности как писателя—разве не начитался Ницше?" Ibid., 146.

[8] "Но настоящему нищему ничего не надо, он ни у кого ничего не просит!" N.A. Gus'kov and A.V. Kokorin A.V. "Chudotvorets, zavistnik i «istinnyi nishchii»—Olesha" in *Zavist'. Zagovor chuvstv. Strogii iunosha* by Iurii Olesha, ed. Aleksei Dmitrenko and Elena Petrova, 331-71 (Sankt-Peterburg: Vita Nova, 2017), 359. All translations from Russian my own unless otherwise noted. Olesha differentiates between the beggar on the street who lives by alms (the "psychological beggar") and the "real beggar" among whom he numbered himself: "У кого вы просите? Настоящие нищие — это мы, а вы уличный психологический нищий старик! Но настоящему нищему ничего не надо, он ни у кого ничего не просит!" (Ibid.) This type of beggar figures in Olesha's last unfinished play *Zand's Death* (1930–32).

[9] "Истинное нищенство, по Олеше, — высшая форма духовной свободы: независимость человека от собственности, от материальных и социальных благ, разграничений и предрассудков." Gus'kov and Kokorin, 358.

[10] Ozernaia points out that in the late twenties-early thirties Olesha was "literally obsessed with the theme of the beggar" and being unable to realize it in prose fiction he persisted in shaping this concept in dramaturgy, producing plays in which the protagonist presents a type of the beggar character and serves as the author's alter ego. See Ozernaia, Irina. "Linii sud'by poputchika Zanda" in *Zavist'. Tri Tolstiaka. Vospominaniia. Rasskazy* by Iurii Olesha, 9-55. Moskva: Eksmo, 2013.

While I primarily define "beggar" as a concept of personality, which represents the author's ideological and ethical position in a Soviet context—and do not treat beggars as a socioeconomic group of materially deprived people, who were not supposed to exist in the first place[11]—the character's self-identification with a 'beggar' should be understood in both a literal and figurative sense. On the one hand, the 'beggar type' connotes a contemplative state of mind of passive, rather than active, character that serves as artistic figuration of the concealed conflict between the individual and the Soviet system. On the other, the protagonists are 'beggars' in a very practical sense: they are literally reduced to begging for professional survival, and through their performance we can glean the repercussions of the tremendous social change that they endured. The cultural mask of a 'beggar' allows the character (and the author) to resort to buffoonery in order to deviate from the script of ideology and preserve individual creativity and forbidden autonomy of self-expression.

It is no coincidence that Olesha, Erdman, and Vampilov come to literature from periphery, both geographical and ethnic, and collectively represent the multiethnic, multiconfessional, and multilingual identity which was suppressed from the "official iconic uniformity"[12] of Socialist realism. Iurii Olesha, whom Victor Peppard calls "an archetype of Eastern Europes's cultural and ethnic crosscurrents,"[13] was born of Polish Catholic parents and raised in pre-revolutionary Odessa. Nikolai Erdman (1900-1970), a Moscow Jew, has Baltic-German roots. While Aleksandr Vampilov comes from East Siberian village of Kutulik and was partially of Buriat origin.[14] In

[11] Officially, there were no beggars in the Soviet Union. Naturally, they existed, but according to the Soviet statistics, they did not. The Socialist principle, "He who does not work shall not eat," was put in place to alleviate poverty, since everyone was supposed to work and receive commensurate wages.
[12] Boym, Svetlana. *Death in Quotation Marks: Cultural Myths of the Modern Poet* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1991), 21.
[13] Peppard, Victor. *The Poetics of Yury Olesha* (Gainesville: University of Florida Press, 1989), 4.
[14] The playwright's last name – Vampilov – is derived from the forename of his great-great-grandfather, the Buriat Vampil.

contrast to the older generation of Symbolists, for instance, who were born into refined culture of the capitals, these three authors belong to a new democratic generation who did not have connections in the literary and theatrical circles, and their path to success was incomparably harder, especially because they wrote outside the mainstream. Nevertheless, they all in one way or another resisted "assimilation" to the dominant culture, and intentionally maintained distance to preserve their cultural autonomy and imbue their works with their distinctive vision and style.

Their plays belong to the nonconformist tradition of Soviet drama and encountered numerous bureaucratic hurdles before they could finally reach the stage. While *The Conspiracy* enjoyed a brief run during 1929-31, *The Suicide* remained banned for several decades and appeared in print and on stage only posthumously.[15] Both Olesha and Erdman, after a short period of fame, spent the last decades of their lives in relative obscurity. The author of *The Suicide* was exiled in 1932 without the right to resume his residence in Moscow. Olesha did not write any significant work after 1934, which marked the beginning of his period of "putative silence." Finally, Vampilov, harassed by censorship, all his professional life fought to advance his works for stage. In the late '60s, unnerved by the perpetual state of uncertainty regarding the fate of his plays, he repeatedly talks in his letters about committing professional suicide, i.e. stopping writing plays for good, because, he sensed, the artist should not make compromises. His *Duck Hunting*, written in 1967 was not performed in the capitals for another ten years.[16] The ban of their works and the

[15] *The Conspiracy of Feelings*, although written expressly for Vakhtangov Theater in 1928 and staged both in Moscow and Leningrad a year after, already in the early '30s was banned owing to its explicit ambivalence toward the new world. The play was first printed in Leningrad's "*Krasnaia gazeta*" shortly after its premiere on the Vakhtangov stage on March 23, 1929. (See Olesha, Iruii K. *P'esy: Stat'i o teatre i dramaturgii* (Moskva: Iskusstvo, 1968), 375.) Erdman's play written in 1928, was banned for fifty years. The Soviet premiere of *The Suicide* took place only in 1982 in Moscow Academic Theater of Satire and the play was published only five years later.
[16] *Duck Hunting* premiered at the Theater of Russian Drama in Riga at the end of 1976. However, its Moscow productions by Ermolova Theater and MKhAT took place only in 1979.

writers' subsequent fate are inseparable from each other and represent an inextricable part of the cultural context.

With the cultural revolution and professional purges performed by the ideologues of the proletarian hegemony in arts, the annihilation of individual entrepreneurship was followed by the appearance of centralized cultural institutions fully subsidized by the state. The newly established Bolshevik government sought to enlist the intelligentsia's support in instilling socialist consciousness and Marxist ideas into the masses. As Sheila Fitzpatrick points out, in the early 1930s, the intelligentsia was reinstated as a privileged class and "never lost the privileged social and economic status they had recovered and acquired in the aftermath of the Cultural Revolution."[17] If anything, this assertion sheds light on the reality of Olesha and other fellow travelers of Soviet power who "preferred self-destruction to staged radical conversion."[18] The Bolsheviks posed socialism for the "cause which claim[ed] a monopoly of the truth,"[19] and it could be argued that only those remained artists who, on the contrary, chose not to follow the lifeless imitation of socialist realist dogma.

Although the official establishment of the Socialist Realist method dates from 1934, at the First Congress of Soviet Writers, artistic and intellectual freedom had begun to evaporate much earlier. Many state resolutions were passed before that gradually transformed the cultural environment of the consolidating ideocratic state. As Evelyn Bristol points out, already in 1925 "the Central Committee of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union passed a resolution enunciating a comprehensive position on questions on literature and art."[20] Thus, the year of 1925

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[17] Fitzpatrick, Sheila. *The Cultural Front: Power and Culture in Revolutionary Russia* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1992), 14.
[18] Kahn, Andrew, M. N. Lipovetsky, Irina Reyfman, and Stephanie Sandler. *A History of Russian Literature* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2018), 674.
[19] Bentley, Eric. *What Is Theater? A Query in Chronicle Form* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1956), 267.
[20] Bristol, Evelyn. "Turn of a Century: Modernism, 1895-1925" in *The Cambridge History of Russian Literature*, ed. Charles A. Moser (Cambridge, U.K.: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 387.

could be considered a benchmark of decline of independent thought since the politicization in literature and arts was becoming more and more prominent.[21] From the latter half of the 1920s, the harassment of censorship and aggressive attacks of the Russian Association of Proletarian Writers (RAPP, 1925-32) on "anti-Soviet" artists, became an everyday reality. Furthermore, tolerance for artistic pluralism evaporated when Anatolii Lunacharskii was forced to step down as Commissar of Enlightenment in 1929. Finally, the late 1920s witnessed the Cultural Revolution (1928-32) and the adoption of the First Five-Year Plan, when the old "bourgeois" intelligentsia "was under collective suspicion of counterrevolution and sabotage."[22]

Nevertheless, in the late twenties, despite a widespread "sense of powerlessness and vulnerability"[23] that consumed the Soviet intelligentsia, it was still possible to negotiate publications and production details. Olesha's two plays *The Conspiracy of Feelings* and *A List of Blessings* (1930) were staged by the Vakhtangov Theater in Moscow/Bolshoi Dramatic Theater in Leningrad, and Meyerhold Theater in Moscow respectively. In the early 1930s, three theaters were competing to direct Erdman's play *The Suicide*.[24] Such great "cultural arbiters" of the 1930s,[25] to use Fitzpatrick's expression, as A. M. Gorkii and Konstantin Stanislavskii personally appealed to Stalin to allow them to exploit the latter play's artistic potential. Nevertheless, from 1925 the intellectual and political climate was rapidly changing, and by the late twenties the situation of the writer outside of the mainstream had become ominous. Thus, although these two works—Olesha's *The Conspiracy* and Erdman's *The Suicide*—were written technically outside of the socialist

[21] An indication of that could be considered the exile of the intelligentsia on what became known as "philosopher's ships" in 1922. The early Soviet government deported hundreds of Russian intellectuals charged with ideological opposition who could contaminate the fledgling Soviet society.
[22] Fitzpatrick, 11-12.
[23] Ibid., 7.
[24] The stage production was ultimately banned and was not revived until 1982 by Moscow Theater of Satire. It was directed by Valentin Pluchek, Meierkhold's student. The play's first publication took place in Germany in 1969. In the USSR it appeared only in 1987.
[25] Fitzpatrick, 10.

realism, the pressure on writers and the propagandistic powers of RAPP and its proponents were at their zenith.

Conceptualization of the beggar-philosopher as the author's performative identity in drama revolves around the character's feigned death and his implied resurrection. In exploring this idea further I am indebted to Andrew Wachtel who developed an interpretation of the fake suicide plot in his essay on intertextual clusters in Leo Tolstoy's play *The Living Corpse*.[26] In it, Wachtel analyzes the theme of conversion through faking suicide in Tolstoy's didactic play, grounding his discussion in the long-standing tradition of fake deaths in Russian drama and establishing Tolstoy's presentation of the living corpse as the "central subtext for subsequent treatments of the theme in Russia."[27] Among the literary heirs of the fake suicide theme Wachtel names such heterogeneous texts as Maiakovskii's *The Bedbug* (*Klop*, 1928), Erdman's *The Suicide*, V. Nabokov's novel *Despair* (*Otchaianie*, 1936), and Bulgakov's novel *The Master and Margarita* (*Master i Margarita*, 1928-40). However, in my analysis of the dramatic aspect of the fake suicide and its effect on the protagonist I go beyond the scope of his discussion. Firstly, I readdress the focus of this concept strictly to Soviet drama. Secondly, methodologically and conceptually, I expand my inquiry: in the fake suicide theme I see a 'staged' suicide for a certain gain, rather than romantic 'pathos'; faking suicide, primarily, as a certain social mischief, in which the character's self-identity is rerouted through the author's perception of the self.

In engaging the performance of suicide, its tragifarcical aspect, I first and foremost refer to Aleksandr Sukhovo-Kobylin's *Trilogy*,[28] and in particular his black comedy *Tarelkin's Death*

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[26] See A. Wachtel's essay "Intertextual Clusters: *The Living Corpse* in Russian Culture" in *Plays of Expectations*, 8-28.
[27] Ibid., 8.
[28] Aleksandr Sukhovo-Kobylin's *Trilogy c*onsists of *The Wedding of Krechinsky* (*Svad'ba Krechinskogo*, 1854), *The Case* (*Delo*, 1861), and *Tarelkin's Death* (*Smert' Tarelkina*, 1869) and presents is a bitter satire directed against official corruption and inhumanity.

(*Smert' Tarelkina*, 1869)—a unique play in the Russian classical repertoire for its uncompromising portrayal of corruption and inhumanity in tsarist Russia; the work that, in my view, made an astounding impact on the development of tragicomedy in the 1920s. The play's protagonist, Kandid Tarelkin, stages his death in order to blackmail his employer. Yet his plan goes awry, and the buffoonery abruptly resounds with a tragic force when Tarelkin subsequently becomes unmasked, interrogated and expelled. Sukhovo-Kobylin's eccentric character who induces both pity and disgust, and whose unseemly, yet relatable, exploits are rendered in the form of a tragifarce, deeply rooted in the Gogolian satirical tradition, presents far greater importance to the development of my concept of the dramatic hero than Tolstoy's didactic drama does. Thus, rather than further developing Tolstoy's psychological and deeply religious theme of failed individual redemption I center my discussion around the infinitely suggestive metaphor of "deathless death" (*bessmertnaia smert'*),[29]which expresses Tarelkin's ingenious revolt against oppression and inhumanity. The stance of a hero who asserts himself through transgressive self-presentation, is closer to the conception of characters in the plays of Olesha and Erdman who "became interested in the combination of satire and tragifarce as a compelling theatrical reflection of the social and political situation in the country."[30] In this respect, Sukhovo-Kobylin's buffoon protagonist is our main dramatic prototype, a direct link to the heroes of Olesha, Erdman and Vampilov for whom the nineteenth-century grotesque comedy of Gogol and Sukhovo-Kobylin, as well as the classical drama of Griboedov and Pushkin, was acknowledged precursor traditions.

The performative aspect of fake suicide in drama is a new topic in literary studies that has not been previously pursued in the vein of tragicomedy and romantic grotesque, rather than pathos.

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[29] "Бессмертная смерть." Sukhovo-Kobylin, A. *Trilogiia: Svad'ba Krechinskogo. Delo. Smert' Tarelkina* (Moskva: Gosudarstvennoe izdatel'stvo khudozhestvennoi literatury, 1959), 229.
[30] Listengarten, Julia. *Russian Tragifarce: Its Cultural and Political Roots* (Cranbury, N.J.: Associated University Presses, 2000), 123.

The three plays under discussion were widely studied by scholars but not in the context of authorial mischief, subversive self-identity. My choice of plays is motivated by astounding similarities of the plot dynamic that cannot be explained away as mere coincidences but, on the contrary, speak to the unity of character type. The three plays analyzed in this dissertation feature a grotesque character,[31] cynical and mischievous, prone to playing antics, who is in contradiction to the society that surrounds him. Unlike Tolstoy's saintly protagonist in *The Living Corpse*, our hero is manipulative; he is not driven by lofty ideals but his "main aim is to use existing conditions to [his] own advantage."[32]

The drama of the individual is acted out as a comedy of situations and resolves in a kind of atypical—"comic"—catharsis. Indeed, Aristotelian perception of catharsis in tragedy[33] undergoes mutation in the nineteenth-century Russian literature, where laughter often serves as an expression of the utmost degree of human suffering. As Joseph Frank points out, we find "the presence of the functions of the tragedy in the nineteenth-century Russian novel"[34] where the farcical can provoke purification of emotions. The protagonist of Ivan Turgenev's novella *The Diary of a Superfluous Man* (*Dnevnik lishnego cheloveka*, 1850), for instance, affirms the primordial power of laughter that far surpasses that of tears: "laughter not only accompanies tears to the end, to exhaustion, to the point where it is impossible to shed any more of them,—not at all! it still rings and resounds at a point where the tongue grows dumb and lamentation itself dies

[31] By "grotesque" I broadly mean a combination of contrasting elements as it was defined in Vs. Meierkhold's 1912 essay "The Fairground Booth." The grotesque character presents a clash of opposites: he is simultaneously funny and pathetic, induces both disgust and sympathy.
[32] Wright, "'Superfluous People' in the Soviet Drama of the 1920s," 1-16.
[33] I refer to Aristotle's idea that tragedy will arouse "pity and fear" in such a way as to effect "the proper purgation of these emotions." Aristotle, *The Poetics* in Butcher, S.H. *Aristotle's Theory of Poetry and the Fine Arts. With a Critical Text and Translation of "The Poetics"* (1894). 4th ed. (New York: Dover, 1941), 23.
[34] Quoted in *Conformity's Children: An Approach to the Superfluous Man in Russian Literature* by Ellen. B. Chances (Columbus, Ohio: Slavica Publishers, 1978), 176. In her book on the superfluous man tradition Chances also notes "the migration of the tragic form from the drama to the novel." Ibid., 172.

away."[35] It is in this hysterical laughter as a culminating moment of despair, in the dark humor that "aris[es] from the depths of discomfort [and] repression,"[36] that tragedy finds its refuge and its liberation.

Admittedly, the Greek idea of catharsis takes on a different aspect in Russian drama as well, particularly in the Gogolian satirical tradition where we find a different type of liberation and transformation—"laughter through tears," which Robert Maguire directly identifies with catharsis.[37] Maguire further clarifies the generic similarities between Aristotelian concept of catharsis and Gogol's aesthetic vision: "Gogol wrote only comedies, no tragedies. Yet his idea of the nature and purpose of the drama is highly reminiscent of Aristotle . . . because of . . . the image of sickness and restoration to health that runs through both."[38] Gogol believed that through laughter we could discharge what is "ugly [in us] both physically and spiritually"[39] and "restore . . . the soul to its natural, harmonious condition."[40] So then, laughter for Gogol serves the purpose of self-exploration and manifests a person's potential for humanity. Gogol achieves this tragicomic effect through "transformation of mirth into sadness,"[41] which fascinated Meierkhold who calls it "the conjuring trick of Gogol's dramatic style."[42] Meierkhold's theatrical revivals of Gogol and

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[35] Turgenev, Ivan Sergeevich. *The Diary of a Superfluous Man*, trans. I.F. Hapgood (New York: C. Scribner's sons, 1907), 70. "Смех не только сопровождает слезы до конца, до истощения, до невозможности проливать их более -- где! он еще звенит и раздается там, где язык немеет и замирает сама жалоба." Turgenev, Ivan S. *Dnevnik lishnego cheloveka* (London: Glagoslav E-Publications, 2013), 57.
[36] Bentley, 262
[37] See Robert Maguire. "Laughter as Catharsis" in *Exploring Gogol* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1994), 306-8.
[38] Ibid., 306.
[39] Ibid., 307.
[40] "Just as we have laughed at all the nastiness in another person, let us laugh magnanimously at our own nastiness, such as we may discover in ourselves!" These are excerpts from Gogol's "The Denouement of *The Inspector General*" (1846). Quoted in Maguire, 306. In this piece, Gogol compares "laugher to a bright light, which illuminates the dark areas of the soul, referred to variously as 'nastinees' (*merzost'*), 'low passions' (*nizkie strasti*), which are 'bad' (*durnoe*) and 'sinful' (*porochnoe*)." Ibid.
[41] Quoted in Meierkhold, V.E. *Meyerhold on Theatre*, ed. and trans. by Edward Braun (New York: Hill and Wang, 1969), 211.
[42] Ibid.

Sukhovo-Kobylin in the 1920s greatly influenced the development of this grotesque satirical comedy in Russian literature and theater in early twentieth century.[43]

The depiction of "smashed" lives in Chekhov's plays, too, is markedly "anti-tragic," which further reveals the shifting boundaries of tragedy, its hero and pathos, at the turn of the century. Chekhov not only mixes tragic and farcical notes—he redefines "high" and "low" genres and subverts the reader's expectations. As Julia Listengarten maintains, one of the leading genres of the twentieth century becomes tragifarce—"an extreme form of tragicomedy, in which the farcical . . . world is the other side of tragedy," which receives "a new philosophical base that dwelled on the futility of characters' aspirations and the foolishness of their condition."[44] In this respect Chekhov's plays *The Seagull* (*Chaika*, 1895) and *The Cherry Orchard* (*Vishnevyi sad*, 1903) belong to the genre of tragifarce and demonstrate Chekhov's novel conception of human drama, in which tragedy and comedy swap places and a person's suicide becomes an object of derision, not of tragic pathos.

Finally, to return to Maguire's discussion of Gogol, when analyzing the latter's reformation of self in "An Author's Confession" the scholar uses the term "self-catharsis" as synonymous to "self-illumination," "self-analysis", "self-purification."[45] Here, Maguire talks about the conversion of the author, rather than his audience, achieved through a confessional narrative. In this respect, we can make a similar claim in regard to Olesha, Erdman and Vampilov who all pursue "self-

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[43] I refer to Meierkhold's stunning productions of Sukhovo-Kobylin's "comedy-joke" *Tarelkin's Death* in 1922 and Gogol's *The Inspector General* in 1926. Both plays were staged in the spirit of tragic grotesque. As Herold Segel suggests, "It was this production, more than anything else, that brought about a renewed interest in Sukhovo-Kobylin's *Trilogy* and led to the emergence of the work as an influence on the drama of the 1920s." See Segel, Harold B. *Twentieth-Century Russian Drama: From Gorky to the Present* (Baltimore and London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1993), 220. Meierkold's production of *The Inspector General* as a tragifarce, rather than a slapstick comedy, allowed to explore the tragic, metaphysical dimension of Gogol's spiritual drama, which owes its "disturbingly lachrymose" effect to its frequent "transformation[s] of mirth into sadness." (See Meierkhold, *Meyerhold on Theatre*, 211.)

[44] Listengarten, 16.

[45] Maguire, 310-11.

catharsis" through performing exorcism in their writing. For them, catharsis means a liberation from (or survival of) the trauma of the artist who, very much like his protagonist, turned out to be an outcast and a superfluous fellow-traveler in the process of socialist building.

At the same time, underneath the concept of fake suicide, as I see it, lays a generic feature of Soviet culture, which was inspired by the conflict of identity in the Soviet period and points to the implied connection between the literary fate of the author and his text in the Soviet Union. Unlike prose fiction, drama is more attuned to self-fashioning, impersonation, and embodied action. The liberating power of performance, as Iurii Lotman contends, "g[ives] the individual new possibilities for behavior [and] free[s] him from the automatic power of group behavior, from custom."[46] The distinctive feature of the three plays is that they involve an element of catharsis, paradoxically triggered by the performance of fake suicide, which leads to the protagonist's symbolic resurrection. By catharsis I mean "cleansing" of a soul, a spiritual conversion that is achieved through self-revelation in a moment of existential crisis.[47] In a broader sense, I also refer to literature's Aristotelian function which "allow[es] us to experience tragic feelings without having to live through tragic circumstances."[48] The "external time" of dramatic genre (i.e. the duration of its presentation),[49] owing to its spaciotemporal and event-like qualities, moves fast and allows for immediacy of perception. Generally, dramatic narrative is condensed into several scenes

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[46] Lotman, Iurii. "Iskusstvo zhizni" in *Besedy o russkoi kul'ture: byt i traditsii russkogo dvorianstva (XVIII-nachalo XIX veka)*, ed. R.G. Grigor'ev (St. Petersburg: Iskusstvo-SPB, 1994), 198-99.

[47] Catharsis (from the Greek κάθαρσις *katharsis* meaning "purification" or "cleansing") – one of the central concepts of Aristotle's *Poetics* – defines the goal of the tragic poet: by depiction of human vicissitudes so to provoke the spectator's feelings of pity and fear that such emotions in them are finally purged. (See *Routledge Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed. Edward Craig (London: Routledge, 1998), 218.)

[48] Paloff, Benjamin. *Lost in the Shadow of the Word: Space, Time, and Freedom in Interwar Eastern Europe* (Evanston Ill.: Northwestern University Press, 2016), 18.

[49] "Narrative entails movement through time not only 'externally' (the duration of the presentation of the novel, film, play) but also 'internally' (the duration of the sequence of events that constitute the plot)." See Jahn, Manfred. "Narrative Voice and Agency in Drama: Aspects of a Narratology of Drama." *New Literary History* 32, no. 3 (2001): 659-79.

in which action unfolds within a few days, if not hours, allowing the audience to experience the character's vicissitudes of life in real time. Only through eccentricity and comedy are characters able to liberate themselves and speak openly about their disengagement from life.

In my analysis, I go beyond the literary, and explore the complex understandings of selfhood in the Soviet era through the notion of the performativity of identity.[50] In my dissertation, I primarily use the terms "theatricality," "performance," and their derivatives, not as they relate to conventions of drama but in their figurative sense, as a metaphor for social life, to characterize "scripted or self-conscious social and cultural behaviors beyond the theater stage."[51] In analyzing character development through the fake suicide device, I am primarily interested in textual performativity, which foregrounds the "constructed, collaborative and contingent nature of all human communication and interaction"[52] in dramatic text. To borrow Richard Schechner's "distinction between what 'is' performance and what functions 'as' performance,"[53] I pursue the second kind, in which "anything at all can be considered 'as' performance by shifting our focus from 'being' to 'doing', from static existence to dynamic unfolding process."[54]

The event of the fake suicide of the passive-aggressive hero and his subsequent unexpected reappearance is dramatized in various forms in the three plays under discussion. As the title of my dissertation, "Performing Suicide," indicates, I essentially view faked, staged suicide in drama,

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[50] "Performativity" refers to the "ways that . . . identities are constructed iteratively through complex citational processes." The basic premise of performativity of identity is that identity is constructed through one's own repetitive performance of identity. See Parker, Andrew, and Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick. Introduction to *Performativity and Performance*, ed. Andrew Parker and Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick (London: Routledge, 1995), 2. L. Austin's initially formulated this term and Judith Butler subsequently elaborated it. On performativity of identity, see for example Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity.* New York: Routledge, 1999.
[51] Buckler, Julie A, Julie A. Cassiday, and Boris Wolfson. *Russian Performances: Word, Object, Action* (Madison: The University of Wisconsin Press, 2018), 3. The conception of theatricality as a social convention, which emphasizes attentiveness to self-presentation, was explored in sociological and anthropological approaches to human behavior by Erving Goffman, Victor Turner, and Elizabeth Burns, among others.
[52] Buckler et al., 4-5.
[53] Ibid., 3.
[54] Ibid.

where "performance" is understood as "a mode of ideological critique"[55] and a suicide attempt as "an instrument for the performance of critique."[56] As the authors of *Russian Performances* note, the term "performance" does not have an exact equivalent in Russian and is translated differently depending on its contextual meaning.[57] For our purpose, it's closer to the term *predstavlenie*, which "implies assertion, the emphatic presentation that is enacted for an audience, even when the performance itself is a simulation or even dissimulation."[58] Through the performance of suicide we can examine social change and the "shifting boundaries between normalcy and deviance"[59] in the Soviet context where suicide functions as a cultural marker of the epoch in which everything becomes political and subject to regulation.

In Erdman's and Olesha's plays, the hero deliberately brings his suicide to the public eye, turning it into a socially significant act. Public suicide is a form of protest and always has a political aspect to it. In *The Conspiracy of Feelings* and especially *The Suicide* we deal with cases of political suicide, conceived by the respective protagonists as a last act of resistance, which necessitates the presence of an audience and, in our case, betrays mere histrionics. Consider, for example, Kavalerov's childish threat: "I'll just hang myself right here in your doorway,"[60] or Podsekalnikov's provocative rhetoric: "I'll shoot myself before your very eyes."[61] These two utterances are manipulative in their nature and suggestive of retaliation and provocation rather than

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[55] Worthen, W.B. "Foreword: Performing Russia" in Buckler et al., *Russian Performances*, xv.
[56] Ibid.
[57] They propose classification of "performance" as *predstavlenie*, *vystuplenie* and *ispolnenie*. For detailed description of each term see Buckler et al., 18-20.
[58] Buckler et al., 23.
[59] Brintlinger, Angela, and Ilya Vinitsky. Introduction to *Madness and the Mad in Russian Culture* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2007), 13.
[60] Olesha, Yury K. *The Complete Plays*, ed. and trans. by Michael A. Green and Jerome Katsell. (Ann Arbor: Ardis, 1983), 16. "Вот возьму и повешусь у вас над подъездом." Olesha, *P'esy*, 19.
[61] Erdman, Nikolai R. *The Major Plays of Nikolai Erdman*, ed. and trans. John Freedman (Australia: Harwood Academic Publishers, 1995), 100. "Я сейчас же у вас на глазах застрелюсь." Erdman, N.R. *Samoubiitsa* (Ekaterinburg: U-Faktoriia, 2000), 22.

signs of authentic despair. Although Podsekalnikov eventually refuses to kill himself, he comes to envision his suicide as a meaningful act of protest, and the news about his upcoming death widely circulates well in advance, attracting new "customers." Other characters, too, desire to profit from his death and express their dissatisfaction through Podsekalnikov's timely suicide. We find quite another situation, however, in Vampilov's predominantly lyrical play *Duck Hunting*, in which the character, alone in his apartment, impulsively reaches out for his rifle. But he never finishes what he intended. Rather, he starts performing for himself, and for us, the spectators. Nevertheless, the characters' professed willingness to die serves as a powerful outlet for social criticism and as a critical tool to deconstruct Soviet mentality, bringing to light the absurdity of this life.

It is not surprising that the figure of the superfluous man in drama finds its most expressive embodiment in the *emploi* of outsiders, buffoons, eccentrics, and drama queens with their penchant for histrionics, confessional outpourings, and a tendency to bring action to the point of fake suicide. Despite outer appearances, however, I disagree with Colin Wright that "all the superfluous men . . . find no solutions to their own lives but are simply slaves to the inadequacies of their own natures."[62] Such a view perpetuates the notion of the superfluous man as an overly emotional, weak and incapable being, and ignores the complex situational factors in which the eccentricity of performance becomes the single outlet for expressing one's position and a testament to one's moral struggle. In the case of the Soviet 'beggar,' the hero does possess something of "a cynical freedom from any affiliation, obligation, or idolization,"[63] which Mark Lipovetskii attributes to the "Soviet trickster". At the same time, the character's potential for ambiguity and shape-shifting is motivated by his need to belong, to find his purpose in life.

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[62] Wright, "'Superfluous People' in the Soviet Drama of the 1920s," 1-16.
[63] Lipovetsky, Mark. *Charms of the Cynical Reason: The Trickster's Transformations in Soviet and Post-Soviet Culture* (Boston: Academic Studies Press, 2011), 37.

Why not portray a typical representative of his time in a positive vein as an able leader, without discrediting him through buffoonery? After all, despite his lack of belonging, the character is no fool. But in the Soviet authoritarian context, where "internal consistency and the all-powerfulness of one idea [were] achieved at the cost of its complete conceptual isolation from reality and the practical destruction of reality,"[64] everything was turned inside out, so to speak. From the mid-1920s, Soviet Marxists began to perceive literature as "a form of class consciousness"[65] and any ambivalence or neutrality was read as a sign of anti-Soviet ideological protest. Fellow travelers' perceived lack of utility to the state and society became a new definition of their superfluous status and a reason for their discrimination and harassment: together with many other categories of "former people" they got in the way of the selective breeding of the new Soviet man.

As mentioned above, the main focus of my dissertation is the use of fake suicide as a dramatic and theatrical device for character development, which results in the figurative death of the protagonist who functions as the author's projection of the self. This cultural phenomenon could be called, to paraphrase Svetlana Boym, suicide in quotations marks.[66] Further adopting Boym's metaphor, my intention, similarly, is to "reopen, or make visible the numerous quotation marks"[67] around the word "suicide," which figures in dramatic texts and in life as a survival strategy for the protagonist and his real-life prototype.

In her fascinating study *Death in Quotation Marks: Cultural Myths of the Modern Poet*, Svetlana Boym investigates the process of how the poet's "cultural self is both fashioned and

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[64] Epstein, Mikhail. "Methods of Madness and Madness as a Method" in *Madness and the Mad in Russian Culture*, ed. Brintlinger and Vinitsky, 263-82 (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2007), 276.
[65] Mathewson, Rufus W. *The Positive Hero in Russian Literature* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1975), 6.
[66] I refer here to the title of Svetlana Boym's book *Death in Quotation Marks: Cultural Myths of the Modern Poet* (1991).
[67] Boym, 2.

disfigured in the process of self-conscious writing"[68] by building a set of literal associations around Roland Barth's metaphor of the "death of the author." In fact, Boym's interpretation of literary death as a device of "the poet's own 'self-defense,' the figurative murder of poetic alter egos (biographically or culturally imposed images of the poet),"[69] comes closest to my vision of the role of fake suicide as an artistic mechanism. Among the many dimensions that Boym tackles to analyze the relationship between the author's life and text, one stands out in particular, given my focus on performativity of social identity—namely, the "relationship between textualizing and living out," i.e. the mutability of art and life when the "real-life" *person* and the literary *persona* become conflated.[70] Specifically, when discussing the workings of image making as understood in the Symbolist term "life-creation" (*zhiznetvorchestvo*), she points to the twofold influence of literature on life. In addition to a more conventional approach to this phenomenon as a projection of the author's self onto the literary image, she discusses the validity of the reverse relationship, when "a literary image can turn into a poet's 'second nature,' and the poet's 'real life' might become indistinguishable from the created one," which, as she argues, is the case for Mayakovskii.[71] For my discussion of the protagonist-playwright relationship both approaches prove to be relevant.

Erving Goffman's insights provide yet another perspective on viewing the concept of selfhood in the context of self-dramatization. In his pioneering study on human behavior *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* (1959), Goffman employs the metaphor of *teatrum mundi*, or the theater of the world, to explain the dramaturgical principles that govern our social

[68] Ibid.
[69] Ibid., 12.
[70] Ibid., 2.
[71] Ibid., 6.

encounters.[72] His basic argument emphasizes the difference in human behavior when we are in the presence of others versus when we are alone: "When the individual appears before others, he knowingly and unwittingly projects the definition of the situation, of which a conception of himself is an important part."[73] In Goffman's critical vocabulary, these two modes of perception correspond to the "front stage," reserved for self-presentation, and the "back stage" where people can be themselves. So then, all people are divided into observers (audience) and observed (performers), and, just as an actor on stage is affected by the presence of the spectators in the theater, so is a person in daily life when interacting with others.

Applying Goffman's dramaturgical perspective on social interaction to a Soviet context allows one to comment on the moral implications and consequences of theatricality. Under totalitarian rule, individuals naturally were "concerned with maintaining the impression that they are living up to the many standards by which they and their products are judged."[74] In the late 1920s, marked by its imposed cultural refashioning, the "front" and "back stages" of social identity supposedly merge to produce a new Soviet man ("the ideal of man-machine"[75]) whose behavior would mirror his consciousness. During this time of intense surveillance, of "ever-present fear of being unmasked"[76] people were acutely aware of their public image and the skill of "engineering

[72] The idea of "theatricality of daily life" in literary and sociological contexts, broadly understood as the relationship between art and life, was also explored in the works of Iu. Lotman, L. Ginzburg, M. Gasparov, E. Burns, S. Boym, and others.
[73] Goffman, Erving. *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday Anchor Books, 1959), 251.
[74] Ibid.
[75] In her book on technology and the arts in the Russian avant-garde poetics Julia Vaingurt points out, "In 1927 . . . the machine aesthetics and the ideal of man-machine were widely disseminated in Soviet culture." See Vaingurt, Julia. *Wonderlands of the Avant-Garde: Technology and the Arts in Russia of the 1920s* (Evanston, Ill.: Northwestern University Press, 2013), 133.
[76] Pinnow, Kenneth M. "Lives Out of Balance: The 'Possible World' of Soviet Suicide during the 1920s" in *Madness and the Mad in Russian Culture*, ed. A. Brintlinger and I. Vinitsky, 130-49 (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2007), 142.

a convincing impression"[77] became a crucial survival technique to keep up "a social façade."[78] And so, the element of theatricality became intricately interwoven into the fabric of social interaction to cultivate one's public image (or the social self), with one's real-life self and literary persona seeking refuge behind the closed curtain.[79]

Thus, the metaphor of theater is closely linked to concepts of identity and individuality expressed through performance. As historian Kenneth Pinnow sums up, "At various times the act of taking one's own life has symbolized either the loss of self-control or the expression of personal autonomy."[80] However, in the context of the Soviet reshaping of identity, the representation of suicide receives yet another purpose—it becomes a self-fashioning device that allows the writer to develop an external perspective on reality through positioning the protagonist as an extension of the self, "rerouting [. . .] literary perception through his own highly aestheticized ego."[81] In this respect, the plays presented in my dissertation can be called solipsistic to varying degrees, "since everything gets filtered through the experience of the main character."[82] As Lidia Ginzburg points out, it is possible to present oneself through a character directly, semi-directly, and completely

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[77] Goffman, 251.

[78] As Pinnow notes, "ever-present fear of being unmasked, keeping up a social façade negated the possibility of a true sense of belonging in Soviet society." See Pinnow, Lives Out of Balance," 142.

[79] One can further extrapolate that this division of the self and the view on life in post-war literature developed into the allegorical tradition known as Aesopian language "that lay at the very heart of Russia's 'second culture' during much of the Soviet period." (See Baer, Brian James. "Literary Translation and the Construction of a Soviet Intelligentsia." *The Massachusetts Review* 47, no. 3 (2006): 537-60.) In my view, this second culture grew up not only in response to ideological censorship but to an ongoing need to keep up appearances, manifesting the lack of a true sense of belonging in Socialist society.

[80] Pinnow, "Lives Out of Balance," 130.

[81] Langen, Timothy and Justin Weir. "Editor's Introduction: Revolutions in Drama" in *Eight Twentieth-Century Russian Plays* (Evanston, Ill.: Northwestern University Press, 2000), xiv.

[82] Ibid. In this respect, the plays under discussion could also be defined on some level as monodramas. Nikolai Evreinov's definition of the genre describes a monodrama as a play in which a protagonist, like a focal point, concentrates the entire drama. In his essay, "Introduction to Monodrama" (1909), Evreinov asserted the need for a theater in which the audience's sympathy and attention would be focused on a single protagonist, whose moods, feelings, and inner struggles would be uniquely reflected by changes in lights, music, stage sets, and the other characters in the play. See Evreinov, Nikolai. "Introduction to Monodrama" in *Russian Dramatic Theory from Pushkin to the Symbolists: An Anthology*, ed. Lawrence Senelick, 183-99. Austin: University of Texas Press, 1981.

indirectly.[83] In my analysis, the author's presentation of self spans a wide diapason, from self-reference to a self-portrait constructed through creative defacement.

I trace character development primarily by focusing on two types of interactions: character-character and reader-character relationships. However, there is a third type of artistic connection that informs my argument yet lies outside of strictly literary polemics: the implied connection between the author and his autobiographical protagonist, between the fate of the author and his text in the Soviet Union. Although it is not uncommon for a literary character to be endowed with autobiographical undertones, I am looking for a specific relationship here, which is, in my view, closely connected with authorial exorcism through the character using "the power of words"[84] and dramatic resonance. The questions I am interested in asking here are: What function of self-expression does this autobiographical hero serve in relation to his author? What words, phrases, expressions most tellingly connect the author with his protagonist? What role does the play as a whole and its main hero in particular play in forging the author's artistic persona? In each of these plays the author writes about himself, creating a sort of fictional autobiography by placing his protagonist in circumstances that will allow him to fully express his own inner oscillation and moral struggle.

In exploring these questions, I apply the concept of authorial exorcism developed by Ilya Kutik, which he defines as an act of encoding into the text something that the writer doesn't want to come true and which, at the same time, begs for resolution.[85] Exorcism is achieved through the power of words, i.e. the power of re-enactment through characters and plot; when the author uses

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[83] As Ginzburg wrote in 1928, "It is possible to write about oneself directly. It is possible to write semi-directly: a substitute character. It is possible to writer completely indirectly: about other people and things as I see them." Quoted in Van Buskirk, E. S. *Lydia Ginzburg's Prose: Reality in Search of Literature* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2016), 8.

[84] I draw on Ilya Kutik's interpretation of exorcism in his book *Writing as Exorcism: The Personal Codes of Pushkin, Lermontov, and Gogol* (Evanston, Ill.: Northwestern University Press, 2005), 3-5.

[85] For further analysis see Kutik, *Writing as Exorcism* (2005).

his character to advance his personal goal. What could be the reason behind the exorcisms for such disparate writers as Olesha, Erdman, and Vampilov, who all turned out to be superfluous in the era of socialist building? I contend that these authors produced their respective dramatic works as conscious attempts to survive their life, "fighting on the paper" with their existential concerns and creating drama, both staged and real. The difference is whether they simultaneously sought to repel an ominous future (like Olesha and Erdman) or exorcise their present, dramatizing a profoundly pessimistic view of Soviet society in its decline (like Vampilov). Through their buffoon protagonists they struggled against the "self-prophecy" of the writer, reinventing themselves in their heroes, voicing through them their unsettling confessions.

Structurally, my analysis of the superfluous man tradition in the Soviet context consists of four chapters and a conclusion. Examination of the rich precursor tradition vis-à-vis dramatic techniques and subject matter comprises chapter 1 of my dissertation. The three subsequent chapters, which showcase major developments in Soviet drama and theater and represent shifting conceptions of selfhood in Soviet cultural discourse, follow the dynamic of the 'beggar' character's appearance, disappearance, and reappearance in dramatic context. The juxtaposition of those contrasting settings and characters' exploits who all strive to assume, if only temporarily, human guise and defend their life from the assertion that it's not needed, allows us, as if through rotating kaleidoscopic plates, to reconstruct the narrative of the existential and philosophical struggle "conducted below the visibility bar."[86]

[86] Emerson, Caryl. "Foreword" in Krzhizhanovsky, Sigismund B. *That Third Guy: A Comedy from the Stalinist 1930s with Essays on Theater* (Madison: The University of Wisconsin Press, 2018), xi.

In chapter 1, I examine the nineteenth-century precursor tradition to establish the genealogy of the Soviet 'beggar.' On the one hand, I draw a parallel with the nonconformist tradition of the superfluous man, where the social conflict and the character's defiant stance are refracted through the discourse of madness. On the other, I engage a dramatic aspect of the fake suicide theme and discuss the main precursors of the suicide in comedy. Encroached upon by the demands of stringent censorship,[87] Olesha, Erdman and later Vampilov fashion tragicomic characters who by their defiant behavior provokes and antagonizes society, yet whose revelations leave a deep mark on people's conscience. They provoke response by trespassing social regulations and norms of decency; this is their dramatic way of communication, the "weapon" by which they assert their paradoxical moral power.

In chapter 2, I begin my investigation of the 'beggar protagonist' in Soviet drama with Olesha's play *The Conspiracy of Feelings*, a dramatic version of his earlier novel *Envy*. I compare the novel vis-à-vis the play to analyze the concept of the hero in Olesha's drama and explore how the character's self-definition as a 'beggar' is intricately interwoven with the dramatist's tragic perception of the self. In the 'beggar protagonist' the playwright prognosticates his apprehensions about the fate of a writer and, more broadly, of any other-minded individual in the totalitarian state. Thus, the dramatist seeks to perform some kind of exorcism and overcome "the psychology of the prisoner," as Irina Panchenko terms it,[88] by gaining the freedom of self-invention. Through a pattern of self-identification and self-annihilation, self-fashioning and defacement, the playwright sets a trajectory for character development. Performance of a constructed self to the point of faking

[87] In both pre-revolutionary Russia and the Soviet Union, there were two levels of censorship for theatrical works. A play could be published if it passed the regular censorship, but it could only be staged if approved by a second, more stringent, censorship committee.

[88] "Преодолеть психологию заключенного." Panchenko, Irina. *Esse o Iurii Oleshe i ego sovremennikakh. Stat'i. Esse. Pis'ma* (Accent Graphics: Montreal, 2018), 288.

suicide triggers catharsis and spiritual renewal, allowing the character (and the author) to transcend the frustrating material environment through emotional purge.

Chapter 3 showcases a qualitatively different approach to portraying a cultural struggle in the aftermath of the revolution. This chapter examines the character development in Erdman's biting satire *The Suicide* and uncovers the tragedy of a person "sentenced" to suicide. In this play, Erdman evokes the Russian tradition of absurd and grotesque drama that begins with Gogol in the first half of the nineteenth century and continues through Sukhovo-Kobylin. The "harsh incongruity," to borrow Meierkhold's terminology of grotesque,[89] between the festive crowd and the tragic appearance of Podsekalnikov is precisely what gives the play its disturbing quality. Erdman employs Gogolian intrigue by fashioning a character, who is unknowingly drawn into a conspiracy, and in the process of his resistance, exposes the many threads that he was being pulled by, including the inhumanity of his profiteers. The regenerative power of laughter through tears manifests the purging force of catharsis in Erdman's spiritual drama, whom Stanislavskii called "a Soviet Gogol." This reference not only provides an insight into the playwright's arsenal of dramatic techniques, but sheds light on his literary fate of the superfluous artist whose phantasmagorical perception of reality was incompatible with the principles of proletarian art.

In the second half of the twentieth century, Aleksandr Vampilov, Vasilii Shukshin, and Venedikt Erofeev turn to the folklore tradition of buffoonery as the only means to overcome the "varnished reality" of Socialist Realism. In chapter 4, I turn to Vampilov's play *Duck Hunting*, which became one of the emblematic dramatic works of the 1960s. In *Duck Hunting*, Vampilov reintroduces to drama the character type of the superfluous man in his main hero, Viktor Zilov, in order to voice his astounding confession. I argue that this character is the embodiment of

[89] Meierkhold, *Meyerhold on Theatre*, 138.

Vampilov's pain, which came from moral degeneration and a loss of ideals of the generation of the 1960s. In the play, the protagonist's drive for self-destruction and the writer's battle for survival, present two sides of the same coin, and the character's fake suicide reverberates with a tragic note of the destruction of the artist.

In the Conclusion, I touch upon how this trend further developed in post-Vampilov dramaturgy but leave detailed deliberations on this topic to my next project. Specifically, I hope in future to investigate further the line of Erofeev's dramaturgy together with other playwrights who came to the fore in the eighties in their relation to national and cultural self-identity during the late Soviet period.

Chapter 1.

The Genealogy of Character: From the Superfluous Man to the Beggar

These homeless Russian wanderers are wandering still,
and it will be a long time yet, it seems, before they disappear.
Fedor Dostoevskii, "Pushkin Speech," 1880[90]

The concept of the superfluous man (*lishny chelovek*), which took shape in Ivan Turgenev's novella *The Diary of a Superfluous Man* (1850), has since become one of the most common formulas of Russian literature and, subsequently, Russian literary criticism. The superfluous man definition came to be widely applied to a particular type of character in Russian nineteenth-century literature. It was most commonly used to refer to certain misfits, beginning with A. Griboedov's Chatskii and A. Pushkin's Eugene Onegin and extending to Turgenev's heroes. Scholars who provided critical evaluation of such characters often viewed them as tragic or Romantic heroes, unsuccessful because of society's inability to respect or understand the individualist.[91] Furthermore, in her book on the evolution of the superfluous man tradition*, Conformity's Children: An Approach to the Superfluous Man in Russian Literature,* Ellen Chances contends that "the tradition of superfluity . . . resurfac[ed] in the 1920s in a familiar shape, as if recycled from the previous century."[92] While I agree with Chances on the continuity of tradition, I offer a new perspective on the development of the successor tradition in the Soviet period, which, I argue, was

[90] "Эти русские бездомные скитальцы продолжают и до сих пор свое скитальчество и еще долго, кажется, не исчезнут." Dostoevskii, Fedor. "Pushkinskaia rech'" in *Polnoe sobranie sochinenii v tridtsati tomakh*, v. 26 (Leningrad: Nauka, 1984), 129-149.
[91] Chances, iii. Specifically, I refer here to the following scholarly contributions on the superfluous man phenomenon: Seeley, Frank F. *From the Heyday of the Superfluous Man to Chekhov: Essays on 19th-Century Russian Literature*. Nottingham: Astra Press, 1994; Chances, *Conformity's Children*, 1978; Mathewson, *The Positive Hero in Russian Literature*, 1975; Rogers, Thomas F. *Superfluous Men and the Post-Stalin Thaw: The Alienated Hero in Soviet Prose During the Decade 1953-1963*. The Hague: Mouton, 1972; Berlin, Isaiah. *Russian Thinkers*, ed. Henry Hardy and Aileen Kelly. New York: Penguin Books, 1979; Patterson, *Exile: The Sense of Alienation in Modern Russian Letters.* Lexington, Ky.: University Press of Kentucky, 1995; Gifford, Henry. *The Hero of His Time: A Theme in Russian Literature*. London: Arnold, 1950; Jackson, Robert L. *Dostoevsky's Underground Man in Russian Literature*. 'S-Gravenhage: Mouton, 1958.
[92] Chances, 142.

completely transformed rather than merely recycled. As I have discussed in my introduction, with the building of the Soviet state and the overall imposition of the new ideology from the mid-1920s, which caused a radical restructuring in all spheres of life, the reasons behind "superfluity" and its manifestations in literature become qualitatively different.

The very idea of the superfluous man as the embodiment of eccentric nonconformity with an element of alleged madness, sprang up in drama where the hero's independence of character was rendered through transgressive self-presentation and oral performance, heightened with dramatic irony. This dramatic character with a penchant for histrionics and declamation originated in Griboedov's comedy *Woe from Wit* (*Gore ot uma*, 1825) and was later captured by Turgenev in the conflicting personality of his superfluous man who agonizes over his "ridiculous sufferings."[93] They are invariably tragic heroes, regardless of whether they are winners or losers, conformists or not. Yet the presence of tragedy is not synonymous with a character's defeat, it's only symptomatic of it, which often disturbs the judgment of critics and readers alike. Henry Gifford, for example, elucidates the complexity of the superfluous character's notorious defeat: "The Chatskys sow, but they do not reap. Yet theirs is the victory, even though they do not know it."[94]

There seems to be a constant fixture in the superfluous man phenomenon: this figure, on the one hand, invariably embodies some sort of alienation or rupture, but on the other, serves as the source of many profound and uncomfortable insights into the human condition. Historically, there was a sharp cultural divide between the aristocracy and the rest of the nation owing to the privileges of the former's noble birth and western education and presented historic necessity.

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[93] "Смешные страдания." After yet another fiasco, with a bitter self-irony, Turgenev's protagonist remarks: "When sufferings reach such a pitch that they make our whole inward being crack and creak like an overloaded cart, they ought to cease being ridiculous...But no!" See Turgenev, *The Diary of a Superfluous Man*, 70.

[94] Gifford, 57. Here the author almost verbatim repeats Goncharov's opinion about Chatsky's character quoted in his book earlier: "The role of Chatsky is to suffer: it cannot be otherwise. Such is the role of all Chatskys, although at the same time it is always victorious. But they do not know of their victory, they only sow and others reap—and that is mainly why they suffer: through having no hope of success." Quoted in Gifford, 55.

Within that already alienated fraction of population, the superfluous man presents a further layer of alienation: he's estranged not only from the common people but from his native caste as well. His skepticism and romantic longing for freedom represent a reaction against rigid social rules that he's unafraid to violate.

It is precisely this romantic grotesque that appealed to modernism and somehow it found its quintessential embodiment in drama. In my dissertation I am concerned with tracing the genealogy of this character type from the nineteenth century to the twentieth while establishing the superfluous man as a literary prototype of the Soviet 'beggar' grotesque character. Specifically, I see typological continuity between Griboedov's eccentric hero from *Woe from Wit* and Pushkin's Evgenii from *The Bronze Horseman* (*Mednyi vsadnik*, 1833), which depict the crisis of individualism in the conservative society and autocratic state respectively. In these characters not only do I perceive Turgenev's superfluous man of the nineteenth-century psychological prose, but the subversive tradition of social critique presented in the figure of an erratic protagonist—"a dangerous dreamer"[95] or the supposed madman.

I focus on a social aspect of the three Soviet plays as a dramatization of the artist's "strained relationships with the culture in which they were produced,"[96] one that is inseparable from the literary fate of their authors. In my discourse, I refer to "suicide" and "insanity" (or "madness") not in terms of individual pathology but as dramatic devices to portray a clash of discourses on the cultural front and convey the crisis of individuality in the socialist state. To paraphrase Mikhail Epstein, I explore the poetics and metaphysics of suicide, rather than its clinical aspect.[97] Suicide

[95] Gifford calls Chatskii "a dangerous dreamer." See Gifford, 21.
[96] Todd, William M. *Fiction and Society in the Age of Pushkin: Ideology, Institutions, and Narrative* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1986), 8.
[97] See Mikhail Epstein's article "Methods of Madness and Madness as a Method" in *Madness and the Mad in Russian Culture*, ed. Brintlinger and Vinitsky, 263-82.

and a state of madness, understood as forms of death, or its mocking imitation, create a threshold situation and liminal state, conducive to a reassessment of values and inner transformation, and as such serve to express the protagonist's utmost degree of social protest. As the contributors to the volume *Madness and the Mad in Russian Culture* maintain, "In a certain sense, the history of insanity in Russia is the history of the relations between the Russian radical intelligentsia and the conservative elements of society and government."[98]

In terms of character type, Griboedov's *Woe from Wit* presents an important precursor tradition, in which the protagonist's "resistance to prevailing public opinion"[99] merits comic accusations of madness. The drama of Chatsky as a ridiculed outcast, laughed at by society on account of his despair perceived as sudden tantrums, indeed, finds a deep resonance with the subsequent treatments of superfluous characters in the Soviet period, and raises the question of the social implications of madness theme in modern Russian culture. Chatsky's madness, "inevitable for a thinker in a society of fools,"[100] conveys a metaphor for political accusations in "otherwise-mindedness."[101] Moreover, madness here serves as a method of social criticism,[102] for the question of madness, as Angela Brintlinger points out, is "inextricably connected to the question of who diagnoses the insanity."[103] Since Griboedov, social nonconformity has been charged with a positive valency in Russian culture. Analyzing the conflict between the individual and society, Chances underscores the play's strong critical vein, categorizing *Woe from Wit* as a "rare case in

[98] Brintlinger and Vinitsky, 23.
[99] Chances, 33.
[100] Brintlinger and Vinitsky, 23.
[101] I am using M.Epstein's term here. See his article "Methods of Madness and Madness as a Method." As notes Brintlinger in her introduction to the volume, "With the same readiness, political accusations of insanity were accepted by Nikolai Novikov, Petr Chaadaev, Vsevolod Garshin, Leo Tolstoy, and many others." Brintlinger and Vinitsky, 23.
[102] For more discussion on madness as a critical method see M. Epstein's article "Methods of Madness and Madness as a Method."
[103] Brintlinger and Vinitsky, 23.

which society's mores do not triumph" and "the outsider wins a moral victory."[104] Thus, Griboedov coins the type of character whose opposition to society defies "the advantages of conforming to the status quo"[105] and renders him morally superior. Following Griboedov's example of Chatsky, modernist dramatists created characters whose ideological madness serves as a critical method and allows them to criticize the state right from the stage.

For instance, in the course of Olesha's play, Kavalerov twice is discredited through the accusation of madness, in reality and in his dream, and the character development in the play unfolds through Kavalerov's progressive disfiguring as he succumbs to a somnambulant state. His perceived madness is used to invalidate his judgment as well as physically incapacitate him. Erdman's suicide-to-be, Semyon Podsekalnikov, intoxicated with his freedom, compromises his sanity in the eyes of others by openly declaring his dissatisfaction with Soviet reality—a suicidal topic for any authoritarian regime. Finally, to account for his rebellious hero in *Duck Hunting* Vampilov uses a contemporary colloquial term "psycho" (*psikh*) which gained its significance with the emergence of the dissident movement in the 1960s and the state's policy to use psychiatric incarceration as a means of political repression.

When in 1929 Olesha sarcastically remarks that to some spectators all the characters in *The Conspiracy of Feelings* may appear insane,[106] he appeals precisely to the cultural construct of mental illness (and not its medical aspect) in the society where "deviation from these norms in social behavior and beliefs was labeled ridiculous, eccentric, or [in the extreme] insane."[107] And

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[104] Chances, 35.
[105] Ibid.
[106] The full statement goes as following: "I can already predict the opinion of the bureaucratic spectator that all the heroes in my play are insane." Senelick, Laurence, and Sergei Ostrovsky. *The Soviet Theater: A Documentary History* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2014), 297. Olesha, *P'esy*, 257.
[107] Todd, 3. To draw a parallel with the social mores of the nineteenth-century polite society, which did not tolerate a violation of social conventions: "Local aberrations from the universal norms of polite society could appear in literary works, but only as the stuff for comedy or satire, just as deviation from these norms in social behavior was labeled (depending on the circumstances) ridiculous, eccentric, or insane." Ibid.

he uses his character's alleged insanity as a lever: as his hero progresses in his forcefully imposed insanity, he becomes less resistant to external pressure: "It's all the same to me. I've gone mad. Do whatever you like."[108] Under the oppressive conditions of ideocracy, which M. Epstein interprets as "a philosophical madness that takes possession of the masses and becomes a material power,"[109] the characters' insanity as a manifestation of other-mindedness, too, becomes their "inevitable diagnosis"[110] and reveals commonality with Chatsky, whose denunciatory speech distills down to a single question: "And who are the judges?" The act of rejection by society, as Griboedov illustrated by Chatskii, conveys a strong potential for social criticism and bitter sarcasm as it brings into focus the moral portrait of the "judges" and redirects attention to the reverse side of the rhetoric, namely "how, to what end, under what conditions, and with what ideological, social, economic or philosophical preconceptions the insanity is diagnosed."[111]

Despite the popularity of Pushkin's Eugene Onegin of the eponymous novel in verse as an iconic representative of the nineteenth-century superfluous man tradition, for our inquiry Pushkin's second Eugene, the hero of his subsequent work, *The Bronze Horseman*, shows more relevance for drawing typological parallels with the early Soviet period. Unlike Onegin's weary nonconformism, Eugene from the narrative poem is a social misfit par excellence, whose alienation from society and rupture of identity the author expresses by turning him into a grief-stricken lunatic.

In *The Bronze Horseman*, Pushkin evokes a memory of the historic flood as a foreground to social conflict. The hero's (and the author's) suppressed conflict with the state forces its way in

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[108] Olesha, *The Complete Plays*, 52. "Мне все равно. Я сумасшедший. Делайте, что хотите." Olesha, *P'esy*, 71.
[109] Epstein, "Methods of Madness and Madness as a Method," 276.
[110] As Brintlinger points out, Chatskii "demonstrably accepts the diagnosis [of insanity] as inevitable for a thinker in a society of fools." See Brintlinger and Vinitsky, 23.
[111] Ibid.

despite the picture of utter devastation and death caused by the flood, and the human catastrophe unfolds against the backdrop of natural catastrophe. By 1917, the revolutionary flood of the epochal remaking—in its fury resembling Pushkin's description of the enraged Neva—transformed Russian reality, casting ashore the survivors of the old world who found themselves in a state of internal exile: those who were made "sub-human" (*razzhalovali*),[112] "were purged" from the workforce (*vychistili*) and "expelled from life" (*vygnali iz zhizni*).[113] This ontological and existential predicament of the human being, the condition of a fundamentally displaced individual in the new world, Olesha calls a 'beggar.'

The violence and upheaval of the 1917 October Revolution caused a fundamental restructuring of economy, politics, and society, bringing a new wave of fictional characters left outside the mainstream. The imposition of the new Soviet government and with it—a new culture and socialist moral values—resulted in feelings of detachment and exile, that literally made many people foreigners in their own land. To note, the historic superfluous man, too, is often compared to a foreigner in his native land, yet as Isaiah Berlin points out, in the nineteenth century the aristocratic class as a whole comprised "a small managerial and bureaucratic oligarchy, set above the people, no longer sharing in their still medieval culture; cut off from them irrevocably."[114] By contrast, to live in a state of internal exile in the Soviet Russia, to exhibit signs of maladjustment and ideological nonconformity meant to find oneself in a position close to that of the metaphorical 'beggar'. In the context of the Soviet 1920s, this term could be broadly applied to a large quantity

[112] Erdman, *The Major Plays*, 160. "Разжаловали." Erdman, *Samoubiitsa*, 214.
[113] "Вычистили," "выгнали из жизни." Olesha, Iurii. "Nishchii, ili Smert' Zanda." *Sovremennaia dramaturgiia*, no. 3 (1985): 189-219.
[114] Berlin, 117.

of people who could not reconcile their "before" and "after" identities in the post-revolutionary Russia and like Olesha, identified themselves with those "caught between two worlds."[115]

While the literary term "superfluous man" did not find its place in the Soviet official rhetoric, another term, less ambivalent and with more pronounced derogatory connotations, widely circulated in literary and social criticism of the 1920s to categorize writers who did not bow to the dogma of proletarian hegemony (*diktatura proletariata*)—"fellow travelers" (*poputchiki*). This term was invented by Anatolii Lunacharskii and popularized by Leon Trotskii in his treatise *Literature and Revolution* (*Literatura i revolutsiia*, 1923) where it was widely applied to the representatives of the pre-revolutionary cultural intelligentsia.[116] Despite Lunacharskii's original intent to circumscribe a group of artists who although sympathized with the Bolshevik regime were not themselves members of the party, this accusatory label quickly transcended the sphere of literary activity. In the polemics of the 1920s, literary and political discourses intertwined[117] in an effort to define a positive hero of socialist construction, reminiscent of the progressive and utilitarian "new people" of Chernyshevskii's prescriptive epic *What Is to Be Done?* (*Chto delat'?* 1862). Similar to the way Chernyshevskii's novel found its rebirth in the early Soviet period, the man of action became the model figure of Soviet society. Against the rhetoric of socialist labor heroes and a demand for production art and novels, the "fellow traveler" becomes an ideologically

[115] "Я вишу между двумя мирами." Quoted in Viktor Shklovskii. "Glubokoe burenie" in Olesha, Iurii K. *Izbrannoe*, 3-10 (Moskva: Khudozhestvennaia literatura, 1974), 9.
[116] Under the umbrella term "fellow travelers" Trotskii included: futurists, imagists, the Serapion Brothers. See Trotsky, Leon. *Literatura i revoliutsiia* (Moskva: Gosudarstvennoe izdatel'stvo, 1924), 87.
[117] Leon Trotskii in his definition of the fellow traveler, draws no distinction between literary and ideological discourses, providing the following definition in 1924: "Попутчиком мы называем в литературе, как и в политике, того, кто, ковыляя и шатаясь, идёт до известного пункта по тому же пути, по которому мы с вами идём гораздо дольше. Кто идёт против нас, тот не попутчик, тот враг, того мы при случае высылаем за границу, ибо благо революции для нас высший закон." See Trotsky, 148. As Boym clarifies, "In the Soviet Russian context of 1924, literary and ideological discourses were rivals, viewed as intimately linked and co-dependent, even when the political referent appears to be technically absent from the literary or critical text." See Boym, 22.

negative term, signifying the passive observer, kind of "Soviet flaneur," critically and artistically inclined.

Marginalization of the fellow traveler became a direct consequence of the "climatic conflict of culture and power,"[118]the eternal conflict between the individual and collectivist society. Iurii Olesha was one of the first playwrights to convey on stage the confrontation and challenges of the writer "who tried to survive the process of the world's remaking."[119] The publication of his novel *Envy* in the late 1920s brought Olesha fame and recognition, but also unleashed a wave of criticism upon him. The resulting identity crisis caused Olesha to reassess his perspective on the artist's purpose and place in socialist society. In his next work, the play *The Conspiracy of Feelings*, Olesha re-enacts his traumatic experience as an artist in a society that no longer values art, through the line of the grotesque and satire reinventing himself in his twisted protagonist—a 'beggar', parasite and opportunist who resorts to provocation, tricks, and self-humiliation to prove his perceived worth.

In nineteenth-century Russian cultural discourse, the word "beggar" (*nishchii*) has strong associations with the Christian concept "poor in spirit" (*nishchii dukhom*),[120] which denotes an individual who renounces earthly possessions and physical pleasures for a higher purpose. The Gospel beggars are poor in spirit but rich in faith, indifferent to worldly temptations and endowed with inner freedom. Hence, they are not "beggars" by circumstance but of their own free will and volition—an act that requires courage and utmost concentration of moral effort.[121]

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[118] Fitzpatrick, 7.
[119] Kahn et al., 531.
[120] In the New Testament *nishchii dukhom* / being "poor in spirit" describes one of the conditions for obtaining beatitude. This is the first blessing out of eight, known as the Beatitudes, with which Christ opens his Sermon on the Mount in the Gospel of Matthew: "Blessed are the poor in spirit: for theirs is the Kingdom of Heaven." (Matthew 5:3) (In Russian it goes as following: "Блаженны нищие духом, ибо их есть Царство Небесное.")
[121] It is noteworthy that Olesha conceived of his own nonconformism in terms close to the concept of *nishchii dukhom*. As E. L. Mindilin recollects, once, when Olesha saw a beggar on the street he addressed him with indignation: "У кого вы просите? Настоящие нищие — это мы, а вы уличный психологический нищий

In contrast to this embodiment of moral integrity, the 'beggar' protagonist in Olesha's and Erdman's plays acquires markedly anti-Christian connotations: he is lacking, but not in spirit. Far from concerning himself with exercising self-control to the point of giving up his life, the protagonist's goals revolve around his own self; he strives for material gain, even to the point of faking his death. Thus, in the modernist interpretation of the beggar character, the Christian tenet transforms into its antithesis. The 'beggar' is given centrality as a concept of troubled, restless personality who would not subdue his will but assert himself through transgressive self-creation to advance his personal interests.

For Olesha, the controversial guise of a 'beggar' serves as an "imposed cultural mask"[122]— the author's suppressed identity of failure, professional ostracism and marginality. Although Olesha dubs his protagonist a 'beggar' in *The Conspiracy of Feelings* (1928), it is only in his 1934 Soviet Writers' Congress speech that he fully discloses his deep connection to this concept, which he elsewhere terms his "lizard self."[123] Olesha actively shaped a provocative view of himself by "mak[ing] a public display of his lowliness,"[124] repeatedly confessing his inability to develop proletarian themes; masking his sarcasm and irony with his own self-humiliation. Such attitude could be viewed as a form of protest, anywhere from social parasitism to social nonconformity.

The presence of a beggar in the newly fashioned society defied the socialist revolution of human nature as it "violated visions of the Soviet ideal male as strong-willed, optimistic, and

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старик! Но настоящему нищему ничего не надо, он ни у кого ничего не просит!" Quoted in Gus'kov and Kokorin, 359.

[122] Boym, 34.

[123] In one of his speeches Olesha talks about so-called "lizard themes" which continue to torment him and from which there is no escape; the themes of failure, solitude, and marginality. In the Introduction to the scenes from "Chernyi chelovek" he clarifies: "If the writer Zand busies himself with a new, great theme, with the live joyfulness of a "sunny" theme, despite this, one way or another, that black lizard theme, with its stinking tail and its venomous head, will poke through the new work." Olesha Iu.K. "Chernyy chelovek." *30 dnei*, no. 6 (1932): 27-31.

[124] Hunt, Priscilla H., and Svitlana Kobets. *Holy Foolishness in Russia: New Perspectives* (Bloomington, Indiana: Slavica Publishers, 2011), 2.

politically conscious."[125] It contradicted the officially endorsed view on reality as constantly evolving toward a better state, and compromised utopian ideals by a picture of decline, degradation, and decay. That is why comparing oneself to a beggar was considered to be unabashedly confrontational, provocative of socialist mores.

Olesha's speech, which could be counted among his artistic works, serves as a demarcation line and a pivotal moment in his creative trajectory, which involves a moment of recognition and renunciation. The motif of fake suicide, which first took shape in Olesha's drama, culminates in his speech where the artist publicly "executes" himself[126] by accepting the necessity to assimilate to the new regime and retracting a lot of his past work as toxic.[127] While critics were quick to notice Olesha's sincerity, self-criticism, repentance, and use of narrative devices,[128] few interpreted his demonstrative affirmation of the Soviet reality and his promise to write for the radiant socialist future as a token of the author's retraction—an act of artistic suicide.[129]

The segment of Olesha's speech in which he talks about the beggar emotionally, stylistically, and semantically stands out within the fabric of the text and strikes a powerful cord in the audience: "I stand on the steps of a pharmacy and beg; my nickname is the writer."[130] In this

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[125] Pinnow, "Lives Out of Balance," 133.

[126] Irina Ozernaia points out to Olesha's preoccupation with the theme of death and murder from his early career: "В черновиках и ранних произведениях писателя фабула убийства присутствует часто, представлена ярко и нередко носит характер публичной казни." (See Ozernaia I. "Perevodnye kartinki Iuriia Oleshi." *Novyi mir*, no. 6 (2019): http://www.nm1925.ru/Archive/Journal6_2019_6/Content/Publication6_7207/Default.aspx)

[127] To note, retraction was a common practice for self-preservation. Nikolai Erdman was required to retract his subversive play *The Suicide*. V. Shkolvskii's article "Monument to a Scientific Error" (1930), in which he rejects his formalist theory, can serve as another example.

[128] See, for example, the interpretations of P. Markina, V. Erlich, M. Slonim, A.M. Gorkii, I. Panchenko, and G. Zhalicheva.

[129] Among those, for example, is Anatoly Smelianskii who directly calls Olesha's retraction his "self-murder." See Smeliansky, A. M. *The Russian Theatre after Stalin*, trans. Patrick Miles (Cambridge, U.K.: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 32. Olga Ladokhina also discerns a warning in Olesha's words: in calling himself a beggar "Олеша даёт понять, что любой писатель, любой персонаж и любой человек может превратиться в нищего, изгоя общества." See Ladokhina, O. F., and Iurii D. Ladokhin. "*Odesskii tekst": Solnechnaia literatura vol'nogo goroda: iz tsikla "Filologiia dlia eruditov"* (Moskva: Ridero, 2017), 13.

[130] This is an excerpt from Olesha's Speech to the First Congress of Soviet Writers translated by Andrew R. MacAndrew. See Olesha, Iurii K. *Envy and Other Works*, trans. Andrew R. MacAndrew (Garden City, N.Y.: Anchor Books, 1967), 214. "Стою на ступеньках в аптеке и у меня кличка «писатель»." Olesha, *P'esy*, 326.

portrayal of his detachment from a society, in which cultural values had mutated, his role is close to that of a clown or a buffoon, placed outside of the social hierarchy. His confession expresses the artist's true desire for freedom from politics who perceives art as an "autonomous kind of exploration."[131] However, the electrifying effect of penetrating sincerity of the beggar narrative is erased by the declamatory, pathos-filled ending, in which the writer glorifies the communist future and its makers. The result is a disturbing feeling of disparity between the exposition of the problem and its resolution—between deeply personal intonations of the story about the artist's "outsiderhood and chosenness"[132] and the concluding optimism and enthusiasm about his ostensible "return of youth."[133] As a beggar, the artist is set "above" construction sites, which further underscores his alienation.[134] But in the end of his address, Olesha disavows his character, saying that thinking himself a beggar was mere self-pity and promises to suppress his "lizard self"—his 'beggar identity'—and preoccupy himself exclusively with "sunny" themes of socialist building. With this claim he essentially abandons his own artistic platform, which is an equivalent to self-destruction. Thus, the author's pseudo-suicide is encapsulated in the act of admitting to wanting to write independently of politics and surrendering to the party line.

By resorting to artistic compromise, by not being truly who he is, the artist commits professional suicide and assumes the borderline position of the 'beggar.' This choice testifies to the artist's integrity and moral struggle as one who endured persecution and underwent figurative self-murder, as opposed to a sense of complete resignation and futility of existence. From

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[131] Mathewson, 3.
[132] "Изгойство и избранность." Gudkova, Violetta. "O Iurii Karloviche Oleshe i ego knige, vyshedshei bez vedoma avtora" in *Kniga proshchaniia*, ed. V. Gudkova, 5-24.
[133] Olesha enthusiasm was captured in the title of his speech as it first appeared in "*Literaturnaia gazeta*" (1934)—"The Return of Youth" ("*Vozvrashchenie molodosti*").
[134] Although this nuance is not reflected in the English translation, the sentence similarly underscores the artist's alienation from the scenes of the socialist building: "I pass by construction sites, scaffoldings, lights." See Olesha, *Envy and Other Works*, 215. Compare to the Russian original: "Прохожу ночью над стройками." Olesha, *P'esy*, 326.

performing exorcism in his drama by figuratively killing his poetic alter ego, the 'beggar', Olesha undergoes the "agony of killing [his] vision and voice" in real life.[135] Thus, the figure of the 'beggar' in Olesha's creative work and life acquires a cultural meaning—it serves as a metaphor for the literary death of the artist, not his physical suicide. Olesha goes virtually silent for twenty years after the 1934 speech. If that isn't artistic suicide, what is?

The full imposition of Socialist realist dogma on mainstream literature, visual arts, and other aspects of Soviet culture, resulted in the mandating of strict state censorship that did not tolerate any elements of grotesque, modernist, existentialist writing, nor the fantastic and irrational, because all culture was politicized and even aesthetic expression placed under state ideological control. Stalin's death and Khrushchev's de-Stalinization speech at the Twentieth Party Congress (1956) ushered in so-called Thaw period in the arts (the late 1950s and 1960s),[136] which precipitated "a change in the larger culture concerning the perception of self and the relations of self and the world."[137] The Soviet intelligentsia that came to prominence during the Thaw—the "sixties" generation—acutely felt the need and moral responsibility to reexamine and reevaluate their recent past.

The modernist trajectory of grotesque and tragicomedy that was subdued in the 1930s began to reappear from the 1960s onward in the nonconformist literature of Andrei Siniavskii, Ven. Erofeev, Vasilii Aksenov, Andrei Amalrik, and Vampilov, allowing us to trace the continuity from the early twentieth-century tradition to the late Soviet aesthetic practice. The political period of the Thaw marked a very brief timespan when the state censorship was slightly loosened. But

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[135] Speaking of Olesha's identification with the beggar on the First Congress of Soviet Writers, Anatolii Smelianskii notes: "He [Olesha] spoke of the agony of killing one's vision and voice. Basically, he was legitimizing this self-murder, trying to justify it aesthetically." See Smeliansky, 32.

[136] "The Thaw" period draws its name from the 1954 novel of this title by Ilya Ehrenburg, in which the writer criticized the events of recent history and expressed hope for change.

[137] Fuchs, Elinor. *The Death of Character: Perspectives on Theater After Modernism* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1996), 8.

this "limited toleration"[138] already permitted the publication of several modernist works from the 1920s and early '30s[139] and produced a new wave of contemporary literature which was struggling to present itself as much free of black-and-white propaganda as possible and which addressed the emotional and even spiritual needs of the individual.

As I have mentioned above, in the status of the *fellow traveler* of the Revolution in the ideocratic Soviet state of the late 1920s I see a possible parallel with the nineteenth-century idea of the superfluous man who reappears under the guise of the 'beggar.' The "spectacle of comic agony"[140] of the 'beggar protagonist' is dramatized through his performance of suicide (both for himself and for his audience). I would like now to discuss the main precursors of the dramatic treatment of the suicide theme in comedy. Olesha, Erdman and later Vampilov continued to innovate with a dramatic aspect of suicide by reworking the rich precursor traditions—the Gogolian comic vein of the grotesque and absurd and the Chekhovian subtle fluctuation between tragedy and farce. In their plays, the character development takes a decisively mischievous turn: the tragicomic portrayal of the character's struggle is shown through performativity of identity—an ever-evolving state of liminality through which he discovers his own humanity. The idea of suicide avails the character the opportunity to engage his life and the life of others from the standpoint of a "dead person" and differentiate between authentic and artificial constraints of human existence. By employing a fusion of comic and tragic effects, the playwrights create a dynamic in which the protagonist's ostensible drive for self-destruction is both reflected and

[138] Segel, 456.
[139] For example, some of the works of Bulgakov, Erdman, Olesha, Zoshchenko became available to a wide readership for the first time in the 1960s.
[140] Bermel, Albert. *Comic Agony: Mixed Impressions in the Modern Theatre* (Evanston, Ill.: Northwestern University Press, 1993), 2.

refracted in the theme of the author's professional suicide—his "imposed cultural mask,"[141] of the 'beggar.'

Chekhovian tradition of tragicomedy provides a good foundation for considering the main precursor of the suicide in comedy. Anton Chekhov, admittedly, has earned a reputation of a keen artist for portraying the human condition of alienation in all its complexity. His works have many weak-willed, alienated, yet comic and pathetic heroes and heroines, consumed with an existential crisis or just boredom.[142] However, those "spineless and unhappy creatures [which] Chekhov depicted by the dozen in his stories and novelettes"[143] have little to do with the modern superfluous heroes dramatized by Olesha and Erdman. Chekhov is important to us primarily for his innovations in dramatic style and technique, bridging the realist tradition and modernism, and as an idiosyncratic successor of Gogol's tradition of tragicomedy. My main focus is on the suicide as a plot device in comedy, not tragedy, where the character's crisis is refracted through the prism of tragicomedy and grotesque. In this respect, Chekhov's play *The Seagull* (*Chaika*, 1895) is one of the main predecessors of the comic treatment of this theme in drama. Although Treplev's suicide results in real death, the author defined his play as "comedy" to convey the "ambiguity of personality and situation."[144]

The other notable example of grotesque suicide is Tarelkin's death in Sukhovo-Kobylin's eponymous play. Although the motifs behind each suicide and their outcomes are markedly different, the treatment of the character's death, cast in a tragicomic light, is what allows us to make this connection. The suicide in comedy, in effect, represents the conflict between form and

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[141] Boym, 34.
[142] For instance, the protagonist Ivanov of Chekhov's eponymous play is an iconic representative of the nineteenth-century superfluous man—a social type of the "prematurely old, bored, and disillusioned intellectual" who in the end escapes life by committing suicide. See Slonim, Marc. *Russian Theater, from the Empire to the Soviets* (Cleveland: World Pub. Co., 1961), 120.
[143] Ibid.
[144] Hirst, David L. *Tragicomedy* (London: Methuen, 1984), 126.

content, and serves as the source of the grotesque in each of the plays,[145] making them "both subjectively painful and objectively comic."[146]

Tragicomedy conveys the dichotomy of existence through a synthesis of contrasting elements, which is reflected in the very name of this genre. The French absurdist Eugène Ionesco defines tragicomedy through its ability to maintain balance between the comic and the tragic and create tension in the audience.[147] The dramatic effect of tragicomedy lies in ambiguity of representation and perception, which is communicated through the "colliding juxtapositions of the grotesque"[148]: reality and fiction, life and lifelessness, falsity and truth, comedy and tragedy, the commonplace and the supernatural (or the fantastic). Employment of a complex interplay of contrasts also makes it a suitable genre for expressing the state of liminality, depicting an oscillating protagonist on the verge of suicide. As such, the grotesque serves as the primary device of tragicomedy, which allows for expression of its controversial essence at play.[149]

According to Chekhov, comedy can be more pessimistic than tragedy, for it "sees the intransigent folly of man and is concerned with his inability to change."[150] *The Seagull* tells a story of a superfluous artist, weak-willed and ineffectual, who prefers to live an illusion rather than to confront reality, and in his protagonist's erroneous conception of life the dramatist perceives a source of comedy: "a failure who runs away from life is not the subject for a tragedy," Chekhov

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[145] As Meierkhold points out in his 1912 essay on the grotesque "The Fairground Booth", "The art of the grotesque is based on the conflict between form and content." See Meierkhold, *Meyerhold on Theater*, 141.
[146] Chekhov, Anton P., and Trevor Griffiths. *The Cherry Orchard* (London: Pluto Press, 1978), iv.
[147] Ionesco rejects the interpretation of tragicomedy as a "dramatic synthesis" of comic and tragic elements; instead, he maintains, they "do not coalesce, they coexist: one constantly repels the other, they show each other up, criticize and deny one another and thanks to their opposition they succeed dynamically in maintaining a balance and creating tension." Quoted in Hirst, 114.
[148] Posner, Dassia N. *The Director's Prism: E.T.A. Hoffmann and the Russian Theatrical Avant-Garde* (Evanston, Ill.: Northwestern University Press, 2016), 33.
[149] I draw on the definition of the grotesque proposed by Frances Connelly, in which she underscores the "active" function of the grotesque: "The grotesque is best understood by what it does, not what it is. It is an action, not a thing—more like a verb than a noun." See Connelly, Frances S. *The Grotesque in Western Art and Culture: The Image at Play* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 2.
[150] Hirst, 122.

maintained.[151] If, in line with the Gogolian conception of comedy, what is comic is also "disturbingly lachrymose,"[152] Chekhov reverses this logic: what might initially seem sad or outright tragic, can also be funny, serve as the embodiment of life's comedy if, for example, it's "the characters themselves who . . . provide the only major obstacle to [their] self-fulfillment or enjoyment, to living as distinct from merely existing."[153] Such characters, for Chekhov, were not the subjects of tragedy but of comedy, and Treplev certainly belongs to that category. Thus, Chekhov is more concerned with the implied comedy of man's futility, the absurdity of the human condition, rather than with the tragic manifestations of his actions. *The Seagull*, therefore, is a comedy "not in spite of the suicide . . . but in part because of [it]."[154] Herein lies the grotesque.

Unlike the physical suicide of Chekhov's protagonist whose intention never was to make it public or to profit from it in any way, in *Tarelkin's Death* we deal—conversely—with the character's metaphorical self-murder devised for a certain gain. Sukhovo-Kobylin's mordant satire combines a comic treatment of the subject with seriousness of intention and presents the embodiment of Gogolian laughter through tears. It follows the opportunistic exploits of a scoundrel, the petty clerk Tarelkin, who fakes death in order to appropriate his neighbor's identity and continue doing his dirty deeds with impunity. Sukhovo-Kobylin, the master of Gogol's technique of "transformation of mirth into sadness,"[155] employs the buffoon protagonist and his

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[151] This excerpt from Chekhov's notebooks is quoted in Magarshack, David. *Chekhov the Dramatist* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1960), 193-94.
[152] As Meierkhold put it in his interpretation of *The Inspector General*, "the treatment was comic, but the overall effect disturbingly lachrymose." This "transformation of mirth into sadness" produces the perception of laughter through tears and constitutes Gogol's dramatic style of the tragic grotesque. Quoted in Meierkhold, *Meyerhold on Theater*, 211.
[153] Gottlieb, Vera. "Chekhov's Comedy" in *The Cambridge Companion to Chekhov*, ed. Vera Gottlieb and Paul Allain, 228-38 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 234.
[154] I agree with Richard Gilman who maintains that *The Seagull* is a comedy, "not in spite of the suicide and other painful events but in part because of them." See his chapter on *The Seagull* in his book *Chekhov's Plays: An Opening into Eternity* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1995), 70-101.
[155] Meierkhold, *Meyerhold on Theater*, 211.

fake suicide for unmasking and condemnation of corrupt officialdom in the process of which the character exposes his own vulnerability. Although at the beginning Tarelkin devises a clever scheme and expects to profit from his suicide, after having been unmasked, he falls prey to his own machinations. The same miscalculation bedevils other characters of his ilk: Podsekalnikov, Kavalerov, and Zilov, even though they were not initiators of that scheme. In the end, they all fall victim to the arbitrariness of bureaucratic power and the callousness of the human heart.

According to Meierkhold, "the grotesque mixes opposites, consciously creating harsh incongruity."[156] Therefore, the grotesque character presents a clash of opposites, which powerfully communicates the multifaceted essence of human experience. He is simultaneously funny and pathetic, induces both disgust and sympathy. The combination of the two extremes—"a tragic hero and a clown, both Hamlet and Petrouchka"[157]—aptly captures the dramatic dichotomy of such buffoon characters as Kavalerov, Podsekalnikov, and Zilov. For example, a liar and profligate, Zilov, is driven to seek the truth and judges people according to moral standards he does not live up to himself. Such characters produce an unsettling effect by provoking "the audience's mental and emotional oscillation between perceptual planes,"[158] which mimics that of the protagonist. Thus, the grotesque disorients and destabilizes the audience's expectations, causing the fourth wall to disappear by reminding the audience of the fiction they are watching and trigger the recognition of the self. As Frances Connelly explains, the cultural significance of the grotesque lies in "mak[ing] possible the vicarious experience of the kind of liminality that has been methodically eradicated by rational inquiry and technological advances."[159]

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[156] Ibid., 138.
[157] Hirst, 106.
[158] Posner, 56.
[159] Connelly, 17.

These embittered, pessimistic protagonists, the new superfluous men do not stand in an "authoritarian relationship to the reader,"[160] but allow for identification through affirming man's humanity in his fallibility, and recognizing that weakness, compromise, and defeat are elements of all men's lives. They are hurt and terrified, unlike the Soviet model hero who is over-confident and infallible in his virtue. As such, they present a contrast to the "utilitarian, machinistic, indifferent world"[161] of Socialist utopia and elicit sympathy for their pain, deprivation and defeat. Their innate humanity makes our hearts "vibrate with the pain of self-identification"[162]—this is the reason for their enduring fascination. Despite the many mishaps that plague their existence they do not cross the final line—they do not commit to self-destruction: death to them turns out to be a more fearful prospect than life. Through a horrible zigzag of emotions, they come to grasping, more intuitively than intellectually, that any alternative is preferable to this demonic darkness and that despite progressive ideals "it is the human condition that directs the social condition, not vice versa."[163] In the next chapter I begin my investigation of the 'beggar protagonist' with Olesha's play *The Conspiracy of Feelings*, which explores the marginalized position of a newly born Soviet citizen under the nickname of the *intelligent*.

[160] Mathewson, 8.
[161] Vaingurt, 145.
[162] Slonim, 131.
[163] Ionesco, Eugène, and Donald Watson. *Notes and Counter Notes* (London: J. Calder, 1964), 95.

Chapter 2.

"I'm a Beggar in This Frightful New World"[164]: Between Disfiguring and Fashioning of Self in Iu. Olesha's Drama

We regard the roles that we adopt as means of imposing ourselves on society. It is only gradually that we come to realize the extent to which the role can impose itself upon the "self" which plays it.
Elizabeth Burns, *Theatricality*

"You thought *Envy* is the beginning? It's the end."
Iurii Olesha[165]

The Conspiracy of Feelings (*Zagovor chuvstv,* 1928) was the first of two plays, in which Olesha dramatized the "impasse"[166] of the intelligentsia, bringing into the spotlight the beggar character, Nikolai Kavalerov, from whom everything has been taken away and who struggles to find a way out of an existential crisis. In this chapter I analyze the trajectory of Olesha's reinvention of self through his autobiographical hero in the novel *Envy* (*Zavist'*, 1927), and the plays, *The Conspiracy of Feelings* and *The Beggar*, *or*, *The Death of Zand* (*Nishchii, ili Smert' Zanda*, 1930–32). I examine the playwright-protagonist relationship in the context of Olesha's stylistic evolution of the beggar character who serves as authorial alter ego, tracing the process of how the "cultural self is both fashioned and disfigured in the process of self-conscious writing."[167] By making his autobiographical character, Nikolai Kavalerov, a parody of an artist, deeply flawed in a moral sense, Olesha adds a layer of identity to his artistic persona and begins his self-myth of degradation,

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[164] Olesha, Iurii K. *The Conspiracy of Feelings*, ed. Daniel C. Gerould and Konstanty I. Gałczyński. (London: Routledge, 2002), 32. This is one of Kavalerov's lines which gave the title to scene four. "Я нищий в этом новом страшном мире." Olesha, *P'esy*, 56.
[165] "Так вы думали, что «Зависть» – это начало? Это – конец." This is a line from Olesha's conversation with Veniamin Kaverin which took place before the 1934 Soviet Writers' First Congress. Quoted in Panchenko, 380.
[166] "Бездорожье." On the eve of *The Conspiracy*'s 1929 premier on the stage of Bolshoi Dramatic Theater in Leningrad, the literary journal "*Krasnaia nov'*" published an interview with the author, in which Olesha clarifies: "В лице Кавалерова я хотел изобразить представителя той части интеллигенции, которая находится на бездорожьи…" See Olesha, *P'esy*, 377.
[167] Boym, 2.

in which the author through his character follows a Nietzschean cycle of regeneration, finding creation in destruction and rebirth in death.[168]

As in *Envy*, in the subsequent play, *The Conspiracy of Feelings*, "the action takes place in the 1920s in Moscow."[169] Olesha portrays a struggle between the old, pre-revolutionary, and the new, socialist world, which belongs to the proletariat; a class-free society. He situates his characters within the context of the rising socialist culture to illustrate the asymmetry of ideological views and power imbalances. The author tells a story about two brothers, Andrei and Ivan Babichev, and how their lives changed in the aftermath of revolutionary turmoil in a country struggling to get on its feet. While Andrei finds himself in the vanguard of the Bolshevik movement and becomes a man of consequence, the director of the Food Industry Trust, his younger brother Ivan becomes "king of the vulgarians."[170] Their relationship is further complicated by the presence of the twenty-eight-year-old Nikolai Kavalerov, a homeless poet, whose ambivalent attitude toward both muddies the symmetry of diametrically opposed ideological stances. To avenge the old world's feelings and values Ivan conspires with Kavalerov to murder Andrei. Kavalerov mediates between the two "kings" and frustrates the expectations of both. In the end he chooses to pursue his own path, since neither that of Andrei nor of Ivan could satisfy his yearning.

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[168] Here we deal with a reverse process of literature's influence on life, when "a literary image can turn into a poet's 'second nature,' and the poet's 'real life' might become indistinguishable from the created one." See Boym, 6. Zhalicheva also explores Olesha's "mythology of 'degradation'", which she defines as the author's perception of his creativity as an interplay of poverty and magnificence, obscurity and giftedness. See Zhalicheva, Galina A. "Narrativnye strategii v zhanrovoi strukture romana (na materiale russkoi prozy 1920-1950-kh gg.)." PhD diss., Russian State University for the Humanities, 2015.

[169] Olesha, *The Complete Plays*, 14. "Действие происходит в наше время в Москве." Olesha, *P'esy*, 15. By adding this line to the end of the dramatis personae, the playwright makes it clear that this play is written by a contemporary for his contemporaries.

[170] Ibid., 53. "король пошляков." Ibid., 73.

If *Envy*, one of Olesha's "avowedly autobiographical works,"[171] contains a self-portrait in the person of Kavalerov, then, by the same token, we can look for a version of Olesha's self-portrait in *The Conspiracy*. I'm interested in tracing how Olesha revises his self-portrait in *The Conspiracy*, as well as how the beggar character mutates in his last "most dangerous 'fellow traveler' play"[172] *The Death of Zand*, which, in the early '30s, the dramatist was already writing "for the drawer." The three works feature different versions of the beggar protagonist who progresses from being submissive and powerless to becoming a beggar who "does not need anything," and "does not ask anyone for anything!"[173] This is Olesha's definition of a "real beggar" (*nastoiashchii nishchii*)—a Nietzschean concept of personality that prioritizes a person's right to individuality and to use free will to disconnect from the world. For, in Olesha's view, the artist serves society by distancing from it in some sense.

The theme of the beggar as a recurring motif in Olesha's art and life has been widely acknowledged and examined from multiple angles: from a narrative device in his fiction[174] to the author's philosophical position to a self-fashioning technique in real life. Many studies investigate Olesha's role as self-mythologizer owing to his conscious carnivalization of life by upholding the cult of the beggar in Soviet society.[175] For example, Polina Markina explores the concept of the beggar as Olesha's behavioral strategy and an existential attitude, which she explains in terms of "the philosophy of poverty," also drawing parallels with the aesthetics of holy foolishness

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[171] Beaujour, Elizabeth K., "The Imagination of Failure: Fiction and Autobiography in the Work of Yury Olesha" in *Autobiographical Statements in Twentieth-Century Russian Literature*, ed. Jane G. Harris (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1990), 124.
[172] Irina Ozernaia describes *The Death of Zand* as "Olesha's most dangerous 'fellow traveler' play." See Ozernaia, "Linii sud'by poputchika Zanda," 19.
[173] "Но настоящему нищему ничего не надо, он ни у кого ничего не просит!" Gus'kov and Kokorin, 359.
[174] For example, Zhalicheva describes the beggar character as a narrative device in *Envy* that blocks or radically changes the plot. See Zhalicheva,"Narrativnye strategii."
[175] For the discussion of the concept of the beggar in the context of Olesha's performative mythology see critical studies by Polina Markina, Ol'ga Ladokhina, Andrew Kahn, Violetta Gudkova, Elizabeth Beaujour, Irina Panchenko.

(*iurodstvo*).[176] Olesha's self-fashioning devices in creating his "constructed self" have been discussed mainly in relation to his diaristic prose[177] and the novel *Envy* (*Zavist'*, 1927). While scholars have tended to focus on Olesha's marginal tatus as a "beggar" starting from the early thirties, after he abandoned any attempts to bring his beggar character to the stage,[178] I argue that Olesha's performative self-presentation began earlier and his stylized everyday behavior was informed by his previous stylistic experiments in drama. The artist followed a trajectory from the fashioning of self in his characters to the fashioning of self in real life.

Michiko Komiya rejects any autobiographical connection between the author and *Envy*'s protagonist, arguing that the negative portrayal of Kavalerov as a "second-rate poet," a drunkard and socially useless individual radically breaks with Olesha's self-image and, therefore, cannot be viewed as the author's alter ego.[179] Yet the "real-life" *person* and the literary *persona* are never identical but related, and "the figurative murder of poetic alter ego"[180] could be considered as "the poet's own 'self-defense'"[181] and an exorcising strategy. In my analysis, the author's tendency to reduce Kavalerov to a nonentity and condemn him to moral and physical torment, while at the same time turning him into a rebel, parallels Olesha's own inner "rebellion" as he more and more

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[176] See Markina, P. V. *Tvorchestvo Iu.K. Oleshi v literaturno-esteticheskom kontekste 1920-1930-kh godov (I.E. Babel', V.P. Kataev, M.M. Zoshchenko)*. Barnaul: Altaiskaia gosudarstvennaia pedagogicheskaia akademiia, 2012.
[177] For self-fashioning devices in Olesha's diaristic prose see Wolfson, Boris. "Escape from Literature: Constructing the Soviet Self in Yuri Olesha's Diary of the 1930s." *The Russian Review* 63, no. 4 (2004): 609-20; Gudkova, Violetta. "Avtor, liricheskii geroi, adresat v pisatel'skikh dnevnikakh v Rossii 1920-1930-kh godov: Mikhail Bulgakov i Iurii Olesha." *Revue Des études Slaves* 79, no. 3 (2008): 389-403.
[178] In 1933 Olesha stops working on his last play *The Death of Zand,* which remained unfinished, where the beggar character is presented in his most striking and uncompromising form.
[179] Analyzing a series of transformations of Kavalerov's character in the numerous drafts of *Envy*, from the "reasonable intelligent" (*razumnyi intelligent*) distinguished by talent and education, to an image of the grotesque mediocrity, Komiya rejects any grounds for assuming autobiographical connection between the author and his anti-hero: "Such a tendency towards character reduction is highly improbable when creating an autobiographical hero." See Komiya, M. "The Autobiographical Myth in Ju.K. Olesha's Novel *Envy*." *Studia Litterarum* 3, no. 3 (2018): 162–175.
[180] Boym, 12.
[181] Ibid.

projects himself onto his character—the beggar-*intelligent* doomed to failure in the new Soviet world.

Critical interpretations generally view *The Conspiracy* as inferior to its novelistic source.[182] William Harkins expresses what seems to be a general attitude in literary criticism toward this issue: "Olesha's strongest stylistic elements find little or no place in his dramas."[183] Olesha was primarily seen as a prose writer, and his reputation as an artist was firmly established on his use of imaginative devices—not for nothing was he dubbed by his fellow literati "the king of metaphor." As Gleb Struve points out, "Olesha's theme was by no means new to Soviet literature [...] It was the treatment of this hackneyed theme that was new and fresh."[184] Moreover, in view of his unsurpassed craftsmanship in prose writing, some scholars interpreted Olesha's subsequent "persiste[nce] in the field of dramaturgy" as an indication of or, at least, a contributing factor to his decline as an artist.[185] Nevertheless, although *Envy* immediately earned its author a place in the literary pantheon, it was dramatic art that ultimately become Olesha's creative laboratory where he conducted his major experiments for devising a new "hero of our time." [186]

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[182] Such view on the play share W. Harkins, E. Beaujour, and R. Hallett, among others. Less prevalent point of view on the relationship between the two works, treats *The Conspiracy* as an original work, which reconceived the novel, and not simply imitated it. This perspective is favored by such scholars and critics as Anatolii Lunacharskii, Viktor Shklovskii, Michael Green, Jerome Katsell, and Irina Panchenko.

[183] Harkins, William E. "Jurij Olesa's Drama Zagovor Cuvstv" in *Zbirnyk na poshanu professora doktora Iuriia Shevel'ova: Symbolae in Honorem Georgii I. Shevelov*, ed. Iurii Shevel'ov et al. (Miunkhen: Universitas Libera Ucrainensis, 1971), 135. To note, this attitude is very common when dealing with any type of "adaptation" of a literary text. Thus, for example, critics (especially litero-centric Russian critics) always think that a film version is worse than the original and spend their time pointing out the perceived lack of some features of the text, rather than validating this "lack" as the film's intrinsic value, in accordance with the director's intention.

[184] Struve, Gleb. "Current Russian Literature: IV. Yury Olesha." *The Slavonic and East European Review* 13, no. 39 (1935): 644-49.

[185] For example, William Harkins makes this point in his article: "That Olesha persisted in the field of dramaturgy was to his credit as an artist. But his persistence was perhaps a factor in his premature and unexpected artistic decline." Harkins, "Jurij Olesa's Drama Zagovor Cuvstv," 135.

[186] In this respect we can draw a comparison with the situation of Mikhail Bulgakov, who has also been more celebrated as a prose writer than dramatist, although the latter role occupied an even more prominent part in his life

Olesha's persistence in dramaturgy marked a notable period in his career, which punctuated his evolution as an artist during the transitional period from the late 20s to the early 30s—the years leading to the hegemony of Socialist realism, and, not coincidentally, to his subsequent period of "putative silence." Olesha strived to create a "dialectical drama," which he defined through collision of opposing forces.[187] Drama was his laboratory for exploring the issues first posed in *Envy*: the new and the old in post-revolutionary Russia; the problem of the coexistence and interaction of the new man type and his antithesis embodied in the figure of Kavalerov, whom the epoch made into someone "vulgar, unwanted, and quite insignificant." The themes of resistance, compliance, and, survival in the new conditions take further shape in dramatic dialogue.

In order to analyze character development in Olesha's drama, I now turn to an investigation of the relationship between *Envy* and *The Conspiracy of Feelings.* The two works, set apart by only two years, already belong to different ideological and political stages in the development of the early Soviet regime. *Envy* had to undergo many alterations in order to become *The Conspiracy*. I argue that these changes, conditioned in part by the constraints of the performance medium, were also motivated by the author's desire to rethink the fate of his autobiographical hero and redefine his place in the new world. Although the two works demonstrate substantial overlap in the cast of characters and plot, the play, written for the Vakhtangov Theater, "did not repeat the original source at all"[188] due to the stylistic evolution of the main character—his shift in exercising performative power. This difference can be illustrated through juxtaposing the finales of the two works as they elucidate Kavalerov's fate.

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than it did in Olesha's. This issue has to do with a general critical belief that drama is simply inferior to poetry or prose.

[187] "I observe disparate forces and bring them into collision to create drama." Olesha, *The Complete Plays*, 245.

[188] As a theater critic and historian Pavel Markov shrewdly remarks, "«Зависть» [. . .] драматургически совсем не повторял[а] сво[его] первоисточник[а]. «Заговор чувств» отнюдь не является инсценировкой «Зависти»." Pavel Markov. "Iurii Olesha" in Olesha, *P'esy*, 5.

The novel ends on Kavalerov's "reduction to zero."[189] Contrary to his intention, Kavalerov goes back to the widow Prokopovich and resumes his degrading affair only on much worse conditions: as *one of* her lovers. At the end, the author surrenders Kavalerov to his worst fear, strips him of any hopes, making him believe that his life is over, and no future awaits him other than a "return into the bosom of Anechka Prokopovich."[190] The fact that Kavalerov is undoubtedly one of the characters with whom Olesha most sympathizes and identifies on some level, yet whose symbolic death[191] crowns the novel, prompted me to look more closely into how the author reconceives his protagonist's fate in the play.

The finale of *The Conspiracy* actually has two versions: the original one written in 1928 and a revised version, which was printed in Olesha's *P'esy* (1968). In the first "bloody" finale, the murderous plot of the novel is fully realized, only instead of Andrei, at the last moment, Kavalerov kills his mentor Ivan, thus symbolically annihilating his past and earning a place for himself in the new world. This version of the play was staged by the Vakhtangov Theater and Bolshoi Dramatic Theater and performed for two years. The last scene was characteristically entitled "I Murdered My Own Past."[192] The murder was supposed to rehabilitate Kavalerov and help integrate him into the new regime. By contrast, the alternative version of the final scene is "purged of its violence."[193] In the new ending, we find Kavalerov unwilling to commit any murder: he neither kills any of the Babichevs nor achieves death by "succumbing to the allure of a cavernous landlady's bed."[194]

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[189] Harkins, "Jurij Olesa's Drama Zagovor Cuvstv," 133.
[190] Struve, "Current Russian Literature: IV. Yury Olesha," 644-49.
[191] As Vaingurt points out, "By becoming indifferent and succumbing to the allure of a cavernous landlady's bed, they achieve death." See Vaingurt, 145.
[192] Olesha, *The Conspiracy of Feelings*, 51. "Я убил своё прошлое." Olesha, *P'esy*, 375.
[193] Beaujour, Elizabeth K. *The Invisible Land: A Study of the Artistic Imagination of Iurii Olesha* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1970), 107.
[194] Vaingurt, 145.

More importantly, the play's revised finale contains a possibility for redemption: the author zooms in on the borderline state of his protagonist whose future prospects remain in question.

I build my analysis on the second version of the play's finale which I find more convincing. Olesha wrote *The Conspiracy* within a few months and already in early 1928 presented the first variant of the play to the Vakhtangov Theater's artistic council. After that, however, it took Olesha a full year to implement the revisions suggested by Glavrepertkom to get an approval for staging.[195] This delay not only evidences Olesha's meticulous attitude to language but rather, points toward a serious need for ideological concessions that the dramatist had to implement. The wave of criticism surrounding the publication of *Envy* compelled Olesha to rethink the novel's ambivalent finale in its stage adaptation, which can explain the conformist ending of the play's original version—Kavalerov's ideological murder.[196] Whether or not this was Olesha's original intention, before the interference of censorship, we do not know. It is not clear when exactly Olesha revised the final scene after the play had already been already successfully produced by two theater companies. But given that the proletarian critic V. Kirpotin in 1935 still condemns *The Conspiracy*'s murderous denouement as utterly unconvincing,[197] we can suppose that by the mid-thirties, even if the revised ending existed, it was not yet known to the public. Therefore, I find the second (or revised) version of the ending, written approximately in the late '30s, more authoritative, because by that time Olesha already lost any hope for *The Conspiracy*'s revival on stage, and therefore had

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[195] See Olesha, *P'esy,* 375.

[196] Explaining the changed finale, Harkins points toward the need for concessions: "No doubt the changed ending helped to make the play more acceptable in 1929 than the novel had been in 1927." (See Harkins, "Jurij Olesa's Drama Zagovor Cuvstv," 123). Given the reality of 1929, Olesha had to work on making his play more acceptable to the censors and more "accessible" to the masses.

[197] "Развязка пьесы создаётся ударом бритвы Кавалерова [. . .] Нет развязки, потому что Кавалеров мог бы с таким же успехом убить Андрея Бабичева. Завершающий удар без всякой переделки и перестановки во всем предшествующем ходе пьесы может быть механически направлен в любую сторону. Это лучшее доказательство его искусственности. Он обрывает спектакль, но ничего не решает." See Kirpotin, Valerii. "Olesha dramaturg" in *Proza, dramaturgia i teatr* (Moskva: Gosudarstvennoe izdatel'stvo "Khudozhestvennaia lieratura", 1935), 151.

no need to conform to the ideological demands in developing his ever-evolving concept of the 'beggar.'

Olesha conceptualizes the genesis of a dramatic work in philosophical terms as "an argument, a tournament,"[198] accentuating the necessary presence of competing voices in order to juxtapose divergent angles and test the validity of his ideas on his characters. Hence a play becomes a tool for self-exploration; a product of a painstaking creative process—the "result of a debate with oneself."[199] The conflict resolution in the play is intimately connected with resolving the dramatist's own moral dilemmas, and the play reflects the author's position in his character's. Such interdependence shows that Olesha views his protagonists essentially as extensions of his own personality, as mediums for grappling with ideas.

Moreover, as Elizabeth Beaujour points out, Olesha deemed the dramatic genre to be more suitable for dealing with the so-called "black lizard themes"[200]—the themes of isolation and estrangement, which, as Olesha maintains, "could only be scotched, not killed, unless the artist works [them] out of his system, managing to incarnate them" in his writing.[201] Such logic suggests that this is the only way to free oneself from them. Beaujour thus reframes Olesha's approach to drama in terms of therapy, stressing the liberating power of the text when performed by someone else. The scholar further indicates that participating in the rehearsals of his plays was a "purgative moment" for Olesha: "During rehearsals Olesha as author could discuss his characters' problems

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[198] Olesha, *The Complete Plays*, 245. "Спор, турнир." Olesha, *P'esy*, 285. Here, Olesha refers to his prospective play *The Black Man* (*Chernyi chelovek*, 1931) that remained a fragment.
[199] "Результат спора с самим собой." See "Rech' na dispute «Khudozhnik i epokha»" in Olesha, *P'esy*, 270.
[200] Olesha, *The Complete Plays*, 235. "Чёрная тема-ящерица." Olesha, "Chernyi chelovek" in *P'esy*, 272. Olesha's graphical description of his character's obsession echoes Dostoevskii's imagery: "the black lizard theme will poke its foul-smelling tail or poisonous head out of his new creative work. [. . .] How to kill the lizard theme... you know that the chopped-off parts of lizards grow back again! There are many such themes, a whole nest of poisonous lizards." Ibid.
[201] Beaujour, *The Invisible Land*, 102-3.

impersonally. Played out by someone else, they were no longer his private obsessions, trapped within him."[202]

Furthermore, the dramatic genre allows the author to distance himself from the action in comparison to the self-absorption of the novelistic narrative, and to achieve a sideward view on the self through one's character(s). Transition from introspective monologue to dialogue signifies Olesha's attempt to give Kavalerov more autonomy in the play and at the same time, mobilize him to action. From the observer's point of view the character proceeds to direct interaction. As Victor Peppard points out, "Kavalerov and Ivan Babichev in *Envy* are portrayed as outsiders who can only observe but not participate in the life of the successful people of the world."[203] In the play, however, instead of indulging in reverie, Kavalerov is forced to openly confront his audience and defy his rejection. Theater as an art form allows for a different degree of identification with the character, for viewing oneself from the position of another, which ultimately helps one to acknowledge oneself. As I will discuss below, this angle of detachment enables the dramatist to more effectively separate himself from his autobiographical character—his spiritual double—and undergo purgation.

In *The Conspiracy*, Olesha dissects the socio-historical conflict by "fictionalization of personal experience through the creation of a hero,"[204] his spiritual double, to explore his misfit position through the eyes of his superfluous hero. The implied playwright-protagonist relationship, in my view, is closely connected with performing exorcism through the character who embodies the author's battle for self-understanding. In writing, exorcism is achieved through the power of

[202] Ibid., 103. As Beaujour further clarifies, "The drama is the only form of literature which enables an author to influence the behavior of live people, to manipulate them, to force them to share his dreams. In the theater the text takes on the stuff of an objective reality." Ibid.
[203] Peppard, 4.
[204] Van Buskirk, 67.

words, i.e. the power of re-enactment through characters and plot; when the author uses his character to "fight on paper with [his] inner demons"[205]—his existential concerns and create drama, both staged and human. In Olesha's case, the figure of a beggar as an embodiment of self-prophecy becomes the author's mechanism to fashion and disfigure himself in his writing.

It is common knowledge that Olesha admitted a personal affinity with *Envy*'s protagonist in his speech to the First Congress of Soviet Writers in 1934: "Yes, Kavalerov did look through my eyes. Kavalerov's colors, light, comparisons, metaphors and thoughts about things were mine."[206] Consequently, the rest of Kavalerov's personality, his "dark" sides are his own: like his sense of internal homelessness, his perceived uselessness, defiance and eccentricity of behavior—socially-conditioned traits that come into conflict with his gifted personality. Instead of full projection, we deal with Olesha's reinvention of self: rather than directly mirrored, the author's self-image in the character is purposefully distorted. In addition to poetic sensibility, Olesha projects another trait on his fictionalized self—the fate of failure. While both the author and his protagonist share intense nostalgia for the old world, a substantial difference remains: Olesha is a successful writer, while Kavalerov is an epitome of mediocrity. To the extent that *Envy* indeed contains Olesha's self-portrait, it is, as Beaujour specifies, a "radically self-censored self-portrait."[207]

While in *Envy* Olesha stresses his affinity with Kavalerov in a spiritual sense, in *The Conspiracy of Feelings*, the stance of a beggar underlies the connection between the author and his protagonist. While self-identification as a beggar sums up the protagonist's social alienation and moral degradation, it does not define the author in the same way. Kavalerov is surely a second-

[205] Kutik, 3.
[206] Olesha, *Envy: And Other Works*, 214. "Да, Кавалеров смотрел на мир моими глазами. Краски, цвета, образы, сравнения, метафоры и умозаключения Кавалерова принадлежат мне." Olesha, *P'esy*, 325.
[207] Beaujour, "The Imagination of Failure," 124.

rate poet, unlike Olesha. What comes to the fore, however, is the author's fear that even a first-rate poet is unlikely to succeed in the new conditions of socialist building and imposed equality: as Kavalerov remarks, "the nature of fame and glory has changed"[208] and so have the criteria for becoming an artist and defining one's talent. That is why Kavalerov-the-beggar serves as a version of Olesha's future self, a possible direction that his fate could take.

Their "demonstrable kinship"[209] in *Envy* should not be viewed as that of full identification or approval. In fact, it may be that of disapproval, defiance, and fear, creating an autobiographical character in order to externalize a conflicting view of himself—that of a failure and a victim. Posing Kavalerov as a Soviet superfluous man who cannot find his place in the new world, Olesha repeatedly draws attention to Kavalerov's notorious "predilection for defeat."[210] Since Kavalerov embodies Olesha's phobia by presenting one of his possible futures, the playwright's systematic creative uncrowning of his hero—"not allow[ing] Kavalerov to fulfill a single dream, positive or negative"[211]—could be viewd as his strategy aimed at highlighting not affinity but glaring disparity between them. In *The Conspiracy of Feelings*, Olesha further seeks to separate himself from his "lizard self" in Kavalerov—to play out and exorcise a possible scenario of his future life by manipulating his fate through Kavalerov. Thus, the beggar character becomes a creatively disfigured interpretation of his own persona, developed in response to the grotesque inversion of Soviet reality in which "a man with an unspoiled curiosity and an ability to see the world in his own way could be vulgar and worthless."[212]

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[208] Olesha, *The Complete Plays*, 21. "Природа славы изменилась." Olesha, *P'esy*, 26.
[209] Erlich, Victor. *Modernism and Revolution: Russian Literature in Transition* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1994), 202.
[210] Mathewson, 15.
[211] Beaujour, "The Imagination of Failure," 125.
[212] Olesha, *Envy: And Other Works*, 215. "Человек со свежим вниманием и умением видеть мир по-своему может быть пошляком и ничтожеством." Olesha, *P'esy,* 326.

In contrast to the novel's focus on the hero's inner world, in the play, Olesha concentrates on examining social conflict, emphasizing his character's misfit position: "at the juncture of two epochs he turned into someone deprived of his past and having no hopes for the future. He turned into a beggar."[213] This is a state of inner strife that powerfully communicates the character's metaphysical predicament as well: Kavalerov is a person who has lost his presence in life. In this respect, Kavalerov provides an outlet for projecting Olesha's own borderline state of exclusion. Even among the already-marginalized literary group of fellow travelers, Olesha "got used to considering himself alone."[214] Olesha's personal sense of isolation anticipated the fragmentation of Soviet society during the 1930s purges—the process of the "systematic weeding out of undesirable members of the party and the workforce in general."[215]

As Olesha points out, in *The Conspiracy*, Kavalerov devises a new survival strategy to assert his authority and demand validation of his feelings: he "decides to maintain the audience's attention on himself."[216] His foolery ostensibly aimed at attracting attention, becomes an outlet for channeling his existential crisis. The protagonist's intention to focus attention on himself as a means of retaliation, provides a segue into discussing the play's exuberant theatricality and the hero's identity crisis that takes the form of tragicomic performance. Indeed, the play features many instances when Kavalerov succeeds in temporarily engrossing attention. Not by coincidence, these are the most tragic, revealing scenes, which betray the character's yearning for transcendence. Echoing Dostoevsky's underground man, Kavalerov resorts to provocation, tricks, and outright

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[213] "На грани двух эпох оказался он лишенным прошлого и не имеющим надежд на будущее. Оказался он нищим." Olesha, *P'esy*, 257.
[214] "Привык себя рассматривать одиноким." See "Rech' na dispute «Khudozhnik i epokha»" in Olesha, *P'esy*, 271.
[215] Wolfson, Boris. "Escape from Literature," 609-20.
[216] "Решает задержать внимание публики на себе." Olesha, *P'esy*, 257.

humiliation to prove his perceived worth, namely that he is "a man and not an organ stop."[217] His buffoonery allows him to assume an equal, at times dominating, stance, and explains the provocative edge of his rhetoric and pervasive eccentricity of his behavior.

The remainder of this chapter demonstrates, through the study of selected excerpts, Kavalerov's line of rebellion, which at times is suppressed and presented indirectly through innuendo-laden jokes or excursion into the subconscious, and at times resurfaces in ~~a~~ dialogue. In my analysis of the character development in the play, I focus on Kavalerov's trajectory of symbolic death and rebirth, in which the hero's suffering brings a sense of liberation from his misery and empowers him to assume an independent stance. In particular, I examine Kavalerov's means of attracting the attention of his interlocutors, which serves as an expression of his protest and provides insight into his inner struggle by exposing the tension between external manifestations of buffoonery and their internal implications.

The play begins with a conversation about the nature of one's "personal fame," the role of "human personality"[218] and the fate of talent in the new Soviet reality revealing a big divide between Kavalerov, a "wretched lumpenpoletarian"[219] and Andrei Babichev, a "famous man."[220] Thoughts about social uselessness and exclusion preoccupy Kavalerov from the start and shape his way of interaction. His provocative self-introduction already conveys a rich flavor of bitterness verging on self-abasement, characteristic of Kavalerov's discourse in general: "And here I am, a wretched lumpenpoletarian, already living a month under the roof of a famous man."[221] Further into conversation, however, he swiftly changes his rhetoric, as if disputing his earlier self-

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[217] Dostoevsky, Fyodor. *Notes from Underground: And the Grand Inquisitor* (New York: Dutton, 1960), 28. "Человек, а не штифтик!" Dostoevskii, F.M. *Zapiski iz podpol'ia* in *Sobranie sochinenii*, vol. 4 (Moskva: Gosudarstvennoe izdatel'stvo khudozhestvennoi literatury, 1956), 158.
[218] Olesha, *The Complete Plays*, 16. "Личная слава," "личность." Olesha, *P'esy*, 19
[219] Ibid., 15. "Жалкий люмпенпрлетарий." Ibid., 17.
[220] Ibid., "Знаменитый человек." Ibid.
[221] Ibid. "И вот уже месяц, как я, жалкий люмпенпрлетарий, живу под кровом знаменитого человека." Ibid.

definition, and eagerly asserts his rights: "I want my own glory. I demand recognition."[222] His rhetoric is shaped by his thirst for retaliation—to expose "those building the new world"[223] who made him a beggar.

In the play, the theme of a beggar is presented through a bifurcated lens, where the character's subjective view of himself comes into conflict with objective reality. We observe the protagonist's "logical destruction"[224] by objective forces, which makes Kavalerov experience his exclusion from life both literally and metaphorically, in reality and in a dream. As Olesha explains, in modern drama, given the unlikelihood of having firearms at one's disposal, death onstage should take the form of logical, not physical, destruction, when "man is transformed not into a corpse, but a zero."[225] The hero vehemently protests against such reduction to nothingness and his resistance is marked from the start with his insistence on his right to "deal with myself any way I please,"[226] even at the cost of his death. Kavalerov's short monologue in favor of a "stupid suicide"[227] as a manifestation of free will, is a key passage for penetrating his psychology and grasping the gist of his rebellion.

> You demand a sober approach to life. That's why I'm going to create something patently ridiculous, on purpose. I'll perpetrate a piece of brilliant mischief. On purpose. You want everything to be useful, but I want to be useless. For example, I might just finish myself off. For no reason; out of mischievousness. To prove that I have the right to deal with myself any way I please. Namely, to commit a stupid suicide. And right at this very time when so many people are talking about clarity of purpose. Yes, hang myself. I'll just hang myself right here in your doorway.[228]

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[222] Ibid., 16. "Я хочу моей собственной славы. Я требую внимания." Ibid., 19.
[223] Olesha, "The Author about his Play" in Olesha, *The Conspiracy of Feelings*, 58. "Строители нового мира." Olesha, *P'esy*, 261.
[224] Olesha, "Notes of a Dramatist" in *The Conspiracy of Feelings*, 60. "Логическое уничтожение." Olesha, *P'esy*, 294.
[225] Ibid. "Человек превращается не в труп, а в ноль." Ibid.
[226] Olesha, *The Complete Plays*,16. "Распорядиться собой, как [ему] угодно." Olesha*, P'esy*, 19.
[227] Ibid. "Глупое самоубийство." Ibid.
[228] Ibid. "Вы требуете трезвого подхода к вещам, к жизни. Так вот нарочно я сотворю что-нибудь явно нелепое. Совершу гениальное озорство. Нарочно. Вы хотите, чтобы всё было полезно, а я хочу быть бесполезным. Взять, например, и покончить с собой. Без всякой причины. Из озорства. Чтобы доказать, что я имею право распорядиться собой, как мне угодно. Именно: глупое самоубийство. И как раз теперь, когда столько говорят о целеустремленности. Да, повеситься. Вот возьму и повешусь у вас над подъездом." Ibid.

On the one hand, Kavalerov conceives of suicide as a prank to annoy Andrei Babichev, his benefactor. On the other, he sees in it a way to uphold his right of individual freedom that is not conditioned by rational choice or any rewards.

Through a string of antithetical claims, Kavalerov arrives at a paradoxical assertion: "I want to be useless." The challenge behind these words is even more pronounced than in his intention to commit suicide. In the epoch of utilitarian ideals, proclaiming oneself a useless, harmful element of society was tantamount to self-destruction. While physical death marks a stop to one's life, the stigma of social parasitism places a person outside the system and condemns him to non-existence. In my view, by embracing social uselessness as his conscious choice and moral prerogative, Kavalerov redefines the concept of utility in art that lies outside of the realm of logic. His ostensible drive for nonconformity becomes his ideological rebuttal in the face of a "sober approach to life."

Furthermore, Kavalerov's insistence on his own significance marked in the passage by a string of first-person verbs: *I'm going to create*, *I'll perpetrate*, *I want*, *I have the right*, stems from the perception, on the contrary, of his extremely marginalized stance. Following Dostoevsky's underground man, Kavalerov's discourse is informed by his awareness of a lack of privilege as compared to his rival—the "man of action" who similarly to the 1860s, in the early Soviet period became the model figure of Soviet society. In a parodic twist, however, the result of Kavalerov's promising bravado, the ultimate achievement that would crown his undertakings, culminates into a grotesque gesture: "I'll just hang myself right here in your doorway." This fantastic threat in part gets actualized in the play's revised finale, which closes on a similar, demonstrably provocative action, when instead of committing a murder Kavalerov collapses in a pose of final resignation or silent protest.

As I have shown, the rhetoric of deprivation and subsequent retaliation becomes the governing principle in shaping Kavalerov's self-presentation in *The Conspiracy*. Yet his struggle is portrayed in a predominantly comic light: Kavalerov's disgruntlement often provides an occasion for demonstrating his sparkling wit and flair for improvisation, mocking death itself. As the play progresses, however, the mood changes from jocular to somber, and from the farcical representation of death in the form of self-mockery, the action focuses on the character's tragic attempts to channel his existential despair through ambushing his interlocutors with an unsettling confession and then confronting a painful vision of self through the distorted lens of a nightmare. These experiences punctuate the character development as he morphs into a "zero", and from utter disillusionment lead him to retrieving a conceptual anchor in life.

The author sets the stage for transformation by using Kavalerov's jealousy as a pretext for provoking a scandal. Returning in the early morning to Andrei's place he meets the beautiful young Valia, Ivan's adopted daughter, and is dismayed at the thought that she might have become "already his [Andrei's] wife."[229] This suspicion mortifies him, shatters his last hopes and dreams about the triumph of beauty, purity, and innocence that Valia personified for him and drives him to proclaim himself a beggar. The anatomy of a scandal could be visually presented as a zigzag line, in which Kavalerov's wave of indignation, temporarily suppressed, eventually resolves in the extreme emotional disturbance that prompts Kavalerov, very much to his own dismay, to break off any ties with Andrei and Valia. From harsh criticism Kavalerov switches to begging and then back to criticism.

Addressing his rebuke to Andrei, Kavalerov turns to the metaphor of the beggar to describe his abysmal sense of deprivation—the loss of self: "everything belongs to you. And I'm a beggar

[229] Ibid., 41. "Уже стали его женой." Ibid., 56.

in this frightful new world. Give me Valia, Andrei Petrovich."[230] Ironically, Kavalerov's absurd demand for Valia, which outwardly serves only to underscore his clownish behavior, helps to unpack the nature of his alienation by uncovering his spiritual needs. By posing Valia as a remedy to his condition of a beggar Kavalerov reveals his longing for love and compassion, which alone could replenish his soul. By aspiring to Valia's affection, he's asking to fill in the void in his soul; he calls for the return of his youth, purity, and freshness—for life itself. Hence by deeming himself a beggar, the hero accentuates his deprivation in a metaphysical sense, and not in terms of material comfort.

Kavalerov's stance of a beggar is manifested through his failure to evoke a response from his interlocutor that would give meaning to his claims. The thought that he has lost Valia brings him to the verge of revelation and fuels his subsequent harangue against the transgressor, Andrei Babichev, who supposedly defiled his ideal: "I'll go to war with you [. . .] for the sake of this girl who has been deceived by you, and for the sake of tenderness, feeling, for the human personality, for everything you're suppressing in life."[231] His pompous rhetoric grows into an open challenge, accusing Babichev of "exert[ing] moral pressure,"[232] denying any possibility of reciprocal affection between him and Valia. And then suddenly, with a single stage direction—"Suddenly Kavalerov notices how threatening Andrei's silence has become"[233]—Olesha reverses the flow of Kavalerov's outpourings and makes him backtrack on his words, dismissing his earlier allegations as the "ravings of a drunk."[234] This change proceeds mutely: Kavalerov receives no verbal cue from his audience. His affirmative claims: "I'm speaking with perfect calm. I'm not drunk or

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[230] Ibid., 42. "Всё принадлежит вам. А я нищий в этом новом страшном мире. Отдайте мне Валю, Андрей Петрович." Ibid.
[231] Ibid. "Я буду воевать против вас [...] за девушку, которая обманута вами, за нежность, за пафос, за личность, за всё, что вы подавляете…" Ibid., 57.
[232] Ibid., 41. "Оказываете . . . моральное давление." Ibid., 55.
[233] Ibid., 42. "Замечает вдруг, как грозно молчание Андрея." Ibid., 57
[234] Ibid. "Пьяный бред." Ibid.

excited"[235] are mirrored in his subsequent detraction: "I'm only joking, I'm drunk," "My nerves are shot; I'm all worn out and on the verge of a breakdown."[236] Apparently, he's not serious, calm or sober after all. The ambivalence of his attitude reflects the character's inner division, which makes him by turns attack and detract, make claims and invalidate them.

Similar to such Dostoevskian characters as Ippolit from *Idiot* and the underground man, Kavalerov takes his listeners by surprise and imposes his confession on them, in which every outburst is less conclusive than the one before.

> Believe me, I'm sorry. I didn't know what I was saying. Please [. . .] Have pity on me. I lead a bad life, I get drunk, I'm conceited, I boast, I hate everybody, I envy everybody. There's a lot I want to do and I don't do a thing. It's very hard for me to live in this world of ours. [. . .] What should I do? Go away, clear out, is that it? But how can I leave like that [. . .]?[237]

This confessional monologue continues further, frequently punctuated only by a single stage direction "silence," which points to his listeners' inability or unwillingness to maintain a conversation. The challenge that Kavalerov perceives behind the silence, makes him swing again to the opposite extreme and convulsively accomplish a zigzag line. Losing any restraint, disregarding proprieties, he reaches the end of his fitful diatribe: "You're a sausage-maker, a damn sausage-maker who seduces this girl and . . .You rapist!"[238] He escalates his previous claims and recasts Andrei and Valia's relationship into that of and abuser and victim, ending on a final note of violence. He's driven by the sole desire to be treated as a human being, to implement a moral code according to which when insulted, one can demand satisfaction. But confrontation does not

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[235] Ibid., 41. "Я говорю совершенно спокойно. Я не пьян и не возбуждён." Ibid., 56.
[236] Ibid., 42-3. "Я шучу, я пьян," "Я изнервничался… я измотался… это неврастения…" Ibid., 57-8.
[237] Ibid., 43. "Ну, верьте мне, я раскаиваюсь… я сам не знал, что говорил. Ну, пожалуйста… [. . .] Пожалейте меня. Я веду нехорошую жизнь, пьянствую, заношусь, хвастаю, всех ненавижу: всем завидую… хочу много сделать и ничего не делаю… мне очень трудно жить на свете. [. . .] Что же мне делать? Уйти, да? Как же я уйду?" Ibid., 58. In the Russian text, the majority of the sentences end either with a question mark, exclamation point or an ellipsis, almost all of which are lost in the English translation. Such punctuation eloquently expresses the character's agitation who is caught in the web of confused thoughts.
[238] Ibid., 44. "Вы… колбасник… колбасник, соблазняющий девушку… Насильник!" Ibid., 59.

take place. Babichev, a "true rationalist,"[239] does not respond to Kavalerov's accusations, attributing the latter's agitation to his medical condition: "He's having one of his fits. There's nothing to be done about it."[240] This is his only reaction. Yet no response is itself a response. Reaching the apogee of his frenzy Kavalerov challenges Babichev to a duel and gets "killed"—he's ousted from Babichev's apartment and for a while disappears from his life.

In my view, the type of conflict that Olesha aims to portray is not to be articulated through a heated debate. Rather, it's destined to achieve resonance in silence and inaction and to reverberate with force against a mute opponent. Olesha intentionally constructs the scenes as if avoiding verbal or physical confrontation so that the character can fully express his view without external hindrance. The dramatist brings the forces into collision but gives voice only to one side—the losing side—to articulate the astounding confession of the person who deems himself a beggar.

In the play, the theme of physical death comes to the forefront primarily as a token of Kavalerov's grandiose mission of "the hired assassin avenging his century"[241] and forms a façade of action, while the logical destruction of Kavalerov unfolds in the background, in the realm of the unconscious and imaginary, in the absence of a word. As discussed above, the central scene of scandal in quotation marks turns into a portrayal of a person who futilely strives to provoke a response, thus underscoring his estrangement and isolation. This eerie sensation of non-existence is reproduced in the following scene of Kavalerov's dream, in which he literally loses his presence and experiences paralysis and atrophy of feelings. These two scenes represent consecutive culminating moments in tracing the character's inner transformation and demonstrate two parallel

[239] "Истый рационалист." Kirpotin, 151.
[240] Olesha, *The Complete Plays*, 44. "Это аффект. Что я могу сделать?" Olesha, *P'esy*, 59.
[241] Olesha, *The Conspiracy of Feelings*, 57. "Наёмный убийца века." Ibid., 261.

processes of experiencing exclusion: conscious and unconscious, real-time and imaginary, figurative and literal.

The scene of Kavalerov's nightmare presents a remake of his previous confrontation with Andrei and Valia, where the characters serve as Kavalerov's mental projections and take on his fears and unrealized hopes. The scene recasts Andrei, Valia and Kavalerov in a love triangle, only this time Valia, naturally, prefers to be with Kavalerov. His distressed consciousness reproduces Andrei's fearful image as man-machine and the romantic fragility of Valia who is destined to become his victim. In his dream, Valia's destruction becomes imminent: Andrei is ready to consummate their union but Valia resists his advances and appeals to Kavalerov for help. But the latter is unable to step in—whenever he raises objections or attempts to intervene, he is "unseen and unheard"[242] by them.

In addition to the moral suffering of losing his voice and appearance, in the dream Kavalerov also undergoes physical humiliation. When Andrei finally sees Kavalerov he immediately subjects him to a medical examination by an eerily robotic, sadistic doctor who pronounces him insane. The term "insane" here has nothing to do with the character's medical condition. Rather, insanity serves as an apt metaphor for Kavalerov's social maladjustment. Indeed, it is remarkable how much violence is compressed in this scene, which culminates in a perverted picture of Andrei's triumph through Valia's coercion and Kavalerov's forceful exposure.

In order to provoke transcendence, the author intensifies pathos, from picturing his character as a misfit and a buffoon whom no one takes seriously, to completely reducing him to an empty space, virtually a cipher—a nightmarish vision of subhuman impotence, invisible and desolate. Kavalerov's agony is further intensified by his inability to save his ideal from destruction.

[242] Olesha, *The Complete Plays*, 49. "Невидимый и неслышимый." Ibid., 67.

The distorted mirror of the dream allows the character to see himself as a moral and physical cripple, as well as contemplate the future of human race in a world where ethical norms are suspended. This painful image of the self triggers recognition of his suffering and sets in motion a process of the character's inner liberation.

Thus, the nightmare scene in *The Conspiracy* marks the point of character's symbolic death and awakening and profoundly impacts Kavalerov's subsequent behavior. When he appears in Ivan's company for a name-day celebration several days later he "has the air of a sleepwalker"[243] and seems fairly unresponsive to his surroundings. The hero's awakening, nevertheless, is already underway. Although Kavalerov remains largely apathetic for the remainder of the play, showing any sign of life only at the thought of a reenactment of his nightmare, it is evident that some thinking process triggered by the terrifying reality of his dream is unfolding at the back of his mind as he outwardly feigns indifference.

First and foremost, his changing attitude is manifested in his alienation from Ivan, his former mentor, whose convictions he no longer appears to share. Kavalerov expressly links his nomadic lifestyle with Ivan to the continuation of his nightmarish existence: "It all seems like a dream to me [. . .] Tell me, is this a dream? Will I wake up? I want to wake up!"[244] Just as he thirsted to put an end to his tormenting dream now he wants to wake up from his squalid life. As the celebration progresses, he exposes Ivan as a "confidence man!"[245] which further points to the change in his perception as he begins to discern deception and fakeness behind the grandiloquence of his idol's gestures and words. He begins to doubt his present state of implacable resentment: "Maybe I've made a mistake."[246] Thus, the vision of a nightmare transforms him; it contrasts his

[243] Ibid., 51. "Имеет вид сомнамбулы." Ibid., 71.
[244] Ibid., 52. "Мне кажется, что всё это сон [. . .] Скажите мне: это сон? Я проснусь? Я хочу проснуться!" Ibid.
[245] Ibid., 53. "Жулик!" Ibid., 73.
[246] Ibid., 59. "А может быть, я ошибся!" Ibid., 81.

previous assertions and makes him see things in a new light. The new Kavalerov does not want to make any compromise with his conscience and lie to himself.

On the other hand, with the metaphor of sleepwalking the playwright renders his hero's undecided state, where even his actions acquire blurry contours: it is not clear whether Kavalerov sleeps or is awake, whether he is conscious or unconscious. Olesha's stage directions make either alternative plausible: "From this point Kavalerov puts his head down on the table and remains a non-participant in what is happening. It is possible that he is asleep."[247] The author uses equivocal language to amplify the themes of ambivalent presence, duality of existence that point to some kind of gestation period that precedes the conflict resolution.

The revised version of the play ends with a dumb scene, fraught with ambiguity, in which we find the protagonist lying prostrate on the stairs of the stadium in a pose of final resignation or muted protest, claiming himself to be a part of this world. Kavalerov does not return to the widow Prokopovich. Instead of condemning his protagonist to the claustrophobic space of Anechka's bed, the dramatist transposes the action into an open space, full of light, life, and excitement, using the opening of the soccer match—Olesha's favorite pastime—as the play's finale. *Envy*'s finishing stroke—indifference and degradation—is transformed in this second version of *The Conspiracy* into a note of inner freedom, presenting a glimpse of a person who has made his moral choice. In the end, Kavalerov's refusal to kill either of the Babichevs, implies his liberation from the grip of the past and affirms the regenerative flow of life, symbolically signifying his destruction and

[247] Ibid., 54. "В дальнейшем Кавалеров кладёт голову на стол, пребывает безучастным к происходящему. Возможно, спит." Ibid., 74.

rebirth. As I have shown, the play takes a completely different direction from what Olesha off-handedly calls "an adaptation of my novel *Envy*."[248]

The evolution of Olesha's concept of the beggar continues in his last play, the fragmentary *The Death of Zand* (1930-32)[249] in which the dramatist's vision of the new character who emerged out of the transformed environment, receives its most striking and uncompromising form. In *Zand*, Olesha introduces the image of the "*intelligent* beggar" (*intelligentnyi nishchii*)[250] Fedor, who was unfairly purged from the workforce and doesn't wish to humiliate himself in order to restore his social position. Indeed, Fedor prefers to stay a beggar even when he has an opportunity to resume his employment and return to normal life. In the play, the character's decision to remain a beggar serves as a manifestation of his moral power, and not submission, as the only way to preserve his freedom, dignity, and individuality.

The seeds of Fedor's uncompromising spirit had already shaped Kavalerov's outlook on life. It is significant that in Olesha's earlier play Kavalerov chooses to complain about his respectable position as Babichev's protégé, even defy it at times, rather than enjoy its obvious benefits. Despite many occasions, he refuses to "shout hooray"[251] with Babichev and ingratiate himself with him. Kavalerov mourns his exclusion, but he also abhors his contemptible desire to reconcile himself with contemptible reality. In the pitiful protagonist of *The Conspiracy of Feelings*, we already see the blurry features of a person who would not choose comfort over the

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[248] "The Author about his Play: For the Production of *The Conspiracy of Feelings* at the Bolshoi Dramatic Theater" (*The Life of Art* [Leningrad], No. 52, 1929) reprinted in Olesha, *The Conspiracy of Feelings*, 57-58. "Переделка моего же романа." "Avtor o svoei p'ese" in Olesha, *P'esy*, 260-62.
[249] Mikhail Levitin combined Olesha's various drafts and fragments of the scenes and in 1986 directed the play *A Beggar or The Death of Zand* in the Moscow Hermitage Theater.
[250] See Olesha, Iurii. "Nishchii, ili Smert' Zanda.," 189-219.
[251] "I have no desire to shout hooray." Olesha, *The Complete Plays*, 21. "Я не хочу кричать ура." Olesha, *P'esy*, 26.

truth: the reasons for his morbid dissatisfaction run far deeper than reason. Such an attitude would largely determine Olesha's own position in life, which Viktor Shklovskii described as "the situation of a man who rejects all creature comforts only to be able to think in his own old way."[252]

The moment of Kavalerov's passive devastation epitomized in the words—"I'm a beggar in this frightful new world"—is replaced with open resistance. Kavalerov's envy toward the success of the man of action is contrasted with Fedor's independence and contempt for those who rejected him. If Kavalerov is a failure, Fedor is not—he's an example of moral integrity and honesty. He morphs into a beggar to preserve his sense of honor, which speaks to his moral superiority. When he's asked why he became a beggar, the character laconically replies: "out of pride" (*gordost'*).[253] As briefly discussed above, in all likelihood, Olesha modified the last scene of *The Conspiracy* after he wrote *Zand* and perhaps, Kavalerov's new stance in the finale—his demonstrable refusal to kill anyone and his voluntary withdrawal—was influenced by Olesha's attempt to give the beggar character a logical completion in at least one of his plays.

The beggar character in *Zand* also functions as a powerful outlet for voicing criticism and provides an unflattering commentary on current social conditions, picturing the communist regime as incompatible with fundamental human values of truth and freedom. In expressive strokes he paints a picture of moral degradation and absurdity of existence: "One's own thought became a crime"; "it is forbidden to think."[254] He categorically rejects popular beliefs in the socialist revolution of human nature: "I reckon, despite any technological advancements the human essence will never be transformed."[255] Finally, he condemns mechanistic "egalitarianism"

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[252] "Положение человека, отказывающегося от благ жизни для того, чтобы думать по-своему, только по старому своему." See Viktor Shklovskii, "Glubokoe burenie," 6.
[253] Olesha, "Nishchii, ili Smert' Zanda," 189-219.
[254] "Собственная мысль стала преступлением"; "Мыслить запрещено." Ibid.
[255] "Я считаю, что несмотря ни на какое развитие техники, человеческая сущность никогда переустроена не будет." Ibid.

(*uravnilovka*),[256] which was brought about by the eradication of cultural and ethical norms and where "people stopped being divided into the smart and the stupid."[257] Olesha himself both dreaded and had an infinite contempt for this kind of leveling on a massive scale, which aimed at erasing distinctions between people by stripping them of dignity and making them believe in the indisputable validity of one thing.

Furthermore, while the initial rejection (or purge) is not the character's choice, positioning himself as a beggar is. In his judgment, the hero exhibits an uncompromising freedom-loving spirit, and even an outmoded thirst for nobleness. To him, only two options exist: either honest service or becoming a beggar—"I don't want to work myself"; "I'm glad that I was fired."[258] In his resentment he reminds us of another noble rebel, Griboedov's Chatskii, who one century before Olesha's beggar similarly stigmatized opportunism and the moral uncertainty of social climbing in his famous pun "I'd gladly serve—servility is vile."[259] Mortified and disillusioned, Chatskii flees abroad, while Olesha's character has to "survive and endure without losing one's human image"[260] on his native soil. As did Chatskii, Fedor feels himself superior to the surrounding mediocrity, but instead of leaving proudly he has to stay proudly and "go out with a bang"[261] only in his imagination. The play remained unfinished, its protagonist's plight unresolved. In the early thirties, when creative freedom quickly began to evaporate, this type of character had already lost its license to appear on page and on stage.

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[256] Erlich, 212.
[257] "Люди перестали делиться на умных и глупых." Olesha, "Nishchii, ili Smert' Zanda," 189-219.
[258] "Я сам не хочу служить"; "я рад, что меня выгнали." Ibid.
[259] *Aleksandr Griboedov's Woe from Wit: A Commentary and Translation*, ed. Mary Hobson (Lewiston, N.Y.: Edwin Mellen Press, 2005), 36. "Служить бы рад—прислуживаться тошно." Griboiedov, Aleksandr Sergeyevich. *Gore ot uma: komediia v chetyrekh deistviiakh v stikhakh* (Moskva: Khudozhestvennaia literatura, 1961), 83.
[260] Quoted in Van Buskirk, 35. "О том, как бы выжить и как бы прожить, не потеряв образа человеческого." Ginzburg, Lidiia, *Zapisnye knizhki. Vosponinaiia. Esse* (St. Petersburg: Iskusstvo-SPb, 2002), 198.
[261] Olesha, Yuri K. *Envy*, trans. Marian Schwartz (New York: New York Review Books, 2004), 104. "Уй[ти] с треском." Olesha, Yurii K. *Zavist'* (Oxford: Pergamon Press, 1969), 71.

While the beggar character in *The Conspiracy of Feelings* and *The Death of Zand* serves as Olesha's mask of grotesque self-humiliation, the real-life performance of identity is dramatized by the playwright's growing conviction in the inevitability of adopting this ambivalent role as his survival strategy. By reinventing himself in the beggar protagonist, Olesha early on turns his life into a plot, manipulating possible denouements and creating a trajectory in which the fictional becomes real. Here we deal with a reverse process of literature's influence on life, when "a literary image can turn into a poet's 'second nature,' and the poet's 'real life' might become indistinguishable from the created one."[262] The author himself morphs into his character and frames the story of a person grappling with the burden of imposed social uselessness as the master plot of his own life.

In the next chapter, I follow the footsteps of Semyon Podsekalnikov—Erdman's version of the 'beggar.' I trace Podsekalnikov's transformation through the performance of suicide, which leads the character, through his symbolic death, to retrieve his sense of identity—to rise like a phoenix from the ashes.

[262] Boym, 6.

Chapter 3.

Between Metaphysics and Theatricality: Performativity of Identity in N. Erdman's *The Suicide*

> A productive art is one that explains why a person should go on living (after all, it cannot be from cowardice alone), and demonstrates or aims to demonstrate the ethical potential of life.
> Lidiia Ginzburg[263]

> Every man must have some place to go.
> Fedor Dostoevskii, *Crime and Punishment*[264]

The only production of Erdman's play, *The Suicide* (*Samoubiitsa*, 1928), which consisted of Acts 3, 4, and 5, was given by the Meierkhold Theater "in a workers' club at 11 p.m. on August 15, 1932" in the presence of the Party's Central Committee.[265] After the initial ban only Meierkhold continued to work on the play up to the invited dress rehearsal.[266] Hoping to override the censor's decision, Meierkhold requested a private runthrough of the work—a measure, which he successfully used before.[267] That 'ghostly' premiere, after which Erdman's play entirely disappeared from the Soviet repertoire for half a century,[268] had a decisive effect on the subsequent fate of both the dramatist and the director and represents an inextricable part of the cultural context. Erdman was arrested and exiled in 1933. In 1938, at the liquidation of his theater, Meierkhold was accused, among other things, of staging *The Suicide*—a play which "offered a perverted,

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[263] Quoted in Van Buskirk, 35. See Lidiia Ginzburg, *Zapisnye knizhki*, 200.
[264] "Ведь надобно же, чтобы всякому человеку хоть куда-нибудь можно было пойти." Dostoevskii, Fedor M. *Prestuplenie i nakazanie: roman v shesti chastiakh s epilogom* (Paris: YMCA Press, 1970), 19.
[265] Edward Braun supplies this date and location in his book, *Meyerhold: A Revolution in Theater* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 1995), 271. In October of 1932 Erdman's play was definitively banned.
[266] From "Resolution on the liquidation of the Vs. Meyerhold Theater," *Teatr* 1 (1938). Quoted in Senelick and Ostrovsky, 402.
[267] In the past, Meierkhold managed to obtain permission for staging Mayakovsky's *The Bathhouse* (*Bania,* 1929) by similarly requesting a private runthrough of a completed work.
[268] *The Suicide* was first performed in Britain by the Royal Shakespeare Company in 1979, three years before it received a belated Russian premiere. The next production of *The Suicide* in the Soviet Union was directed by V. Pluchek, Meyerhold's pupil, in the Theater on Taganka in 1982.

slanderous presentation of Soviet reality, subsisting on double entendres and even out-and-out anti-Soviet ranting."[269]

"Apparently," as Edward Braun notes, "the play was received well enough until the finale, but at that point [Igor] Ilyinskii as Semyon, following Meierkhold's direction, offered his revolver to Kaganovich and the others seated in the front row."[270] Following this remark Braun relates a fascinating account of the piquant circumstance that resulted in the play's final ban. The action refers to the scene at the cemetery, where the failed suicide Podsekalnikov, responding to accusations, provocatively offers his offenders to try out suicide and see how *they* like it: "Here's my pistol. Be my guest. Go on. Be my guest."[271] But instead of addressing his fellow actors on stage, Ilyinskii-Podsekalnikov motioned directly to the front row of the high-ranking officials, thus implicating that he holds them responsible for the hostility on stage and his own misery. "*You* push me to suicide," he seems to say with this provocative gesture. This historic moment that very possibly cost Meierkhold his career and later life, survives in the memoirs of his favorite actor, Igor Ilyinskii: "they [the party members] instinctively recoiled . . . They began to exchange glances."[272] The audience was positively alarmed by this disturbing action, recognizing the transgressive potential of the theater in dramatizing the power of the powerlessness.

Taken by surprise, the spectators' involuntary expression of fear mixed with discomfort perfectly mirrored the reactions of the real characters in the play. Creating a moment of self-recognition through utilizing metatheatrical technique communicates a politically transgressive message as it brings face-to-face the victim and victimizers. Reportedly, the committee itself

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[269] From "Resolution on the liquidation of the Vs. Meyerhold Theater." See Senelick and Ostrovsky, 402.
[270] Braun, 271.
[271] Erdman, *The Major* Plays, 161. "Вот револьвер, пожалуйста, одолжайтесь. Одолжайтесь! Пожалуйста!" Erdman, *Samoubiitsa*, 215.
[272] Quoted in Braun, 271.

perceived the play more as an "experiment in the field of politics" rather than in theatrical form, which they found to be "impermissible."[273]

So then, the finale of Meierkhold's one-off production unexpectedly brings the main character one-on-one with high-ranking spectators to confront them with the burning question of his existence: "What crime did I commit? I just live my life." In his simple response he brings up the absurdity of thinking that "living one's life" could be considered a crime, unmasking the lies on which oppressive power depends. In his rebuttal, Erdman's hero protests against the utilitarian approach to the individual as a block in building up socialism and cries out for mercy over socially conditioned justice. Thus, Meierkhold achieves the ambiguity of presentation through utilization of the grotesque and metatheater: on the one hand promoting the principle "theater is theater, not life"[274] by making explicit the theatrical aspects of presentation. On the other, making things exaggeratedly real, "fus[ing] ethical with aesthetic questions,"[275] and creating a contrast where the visual elements of performance speak louder than words. This experiment, as Ilyinskii recalls, "was the end for the production—and for the theater as well."[276]

This anecdote from an actual performance makes the play's political dimension obvious and enhances the unmasking effect of the "resurrection" scene in the finale: apart from demonstrating the play's exuberant theatricality, Meyerhold managed to make explicit the presence of the offstage audience to whom the act of suicide was ultimately addressed. This incident also elucidates the dramatic power of embodied action: as Erdman scholar and translator, John Freedman, notes, "it is not so much what the characters say, or even who they are, as *how*

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[273] Reportedly, Glavrepertkom's reason for banning the play was the following: "It is necessary to experiment in the field of theatrical form but to experiment in the field of politics is impermissible." Referenced in Braun, 270.
[274] Davis, Tracy C., and Thomas Postlewait. *Theatricality* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 13.
[275] Connelly identifies this as one of the functions of the grotesque. See Connelly, 3.
[276] Braun, 271.

they go about their business, and what the nature of their business is, that carries the play's central notions."[277] The committee's palpable sense of discomfort points to the director's (and the author's) skill for clothing metaphysical meaning in the grotesque. In fact, the entire play is built on this kind of "harsh incongruity"[278] between content and form, tears through laughter, dramatizing the plight of the individual in the spirit of the absurd.

In this chapter I analyze the evolution of the 'beggar protagonist' in Nikolai Erdman's tragicomedy *The Suicide* in the context of the intelligentsia's narrative of survival in and adaptation to the Soviet order in the late 1920s. In the figure of the main character, the "petty bourgeois" Semyon Podsekalnikov, Erdman reveals the depth of the cultural struggle of his generation. The playwright presents a version of the beggar character as a subaltern individual and a literary *lishenets*[279] who is stripped of his civil rights, including to existence. The character development in the play, shown through the device of a fake suicide, takes a form of transgressive self-presentation, through which the protagonist (and his author) asserts his moral right to be.

Erdman borrows the basic plot of a rigged suicide from Dostoevsky's portrayal of Kirillov's suicide in *The Possessed*: "In both works the intellectual offers to write the suicide note of the suicide victim."[280] In *The Suicide*, "Dostoevsky's terrible scene of psychological blackmail"[281] is refracted through the prism of farce. The unemployed Podsekalnikov, having been falsely suspected of suicidal intention, becomes a victim of manipulation at the hands of dissatisfied individuals. Representatives from various social strata compete for the right to use

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[277] Freedman, John. *Silence's Roar: The Life and Drama of Nikolai Erdman* (Oakville, Ont.: Mosaic Press, 1992), 135.
[278] Meierkhold, *Meyerhold on Theater*, 138.
[279] *Lishenets* was a person stripped of the right of voting in the Soviet Union of 1918–1936. Disfranchisement was a means of repression of the categories of population that were classified as "enemies of the working people." https://en.unionpedia.org/Disfranchisement
[280] Freedman, 145
[281] Ibid.

Podsekalnikov's death as ~~a~~ leverage to settle accounts with the new regime by expressing their disgruntlement in the latter's suicide note. The hero initially gives in to the idea of voicing a protest through his supposed ideologically meaningful death, seeing in it a source of long-desired recognition. At the end, however, he rejects the idea of suicide, "find[ing] in himself a reason for faith and for living."[282]

As Freedman notes, the state of immense misery of the play's protagonist makes him conducive to the "pathological state of mind"[283] peculiar to Dostoevsky's characters. Dostoevsky's preoccupation with the death theme is a commonplace in literary criticism. Known as a person who was spared from execution at the last possible moment and for whom "death bec[ame] a matter of direct experience,"[284] in his literary works Dostoevsky repeatedly comes back to conceptualization of this "most inaccessible of human experiences."[285] He consequently regarded this state of mind, the agony and terror that seizes a human soul when her final hour becomes known, as one of the most painful and at the same time, illuminating, otherworldly moments in life. This all leads to a fundamental question: "What could such a man tell?"[286] Naturally, the truth.

In *The Suicide*, Erdman offers his response to this tantalizing question by fashioning a sympathetic protagonist—a living suicide—in order to speak for the new superfluous man. Podsekalnikov's intended death obviates the need to fear and endows him with a unique privilege: to speak without self-censorship in the oppressive atmosphere where "only a dead man can say what a live man thinks."[287] The dramatist exposes the tension between physical death and social

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[282] Ibid., 146.
[283] Ibid.
[284] Paperno, Irina. *Suicide as a Cultural Institution in Dostoevsky's Russia* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1997), 136.
[285] Ibid.
[286] Ibid. "Dostoevsky was intensely interested in the experience of apprehending death directly, an experience he himself had at the time of his mock execution. What could such a man tell?"
[287] Erdman, *The Major Plays*, 110. "То, что может подумать живой, может высказать только мертвый." Erdman, *Samoubiitsa*, 137.

death[288] by pushing the protagonist to his limit, to this precarious zone in which the character thinks he has nothing to lose: "I'm dying anyway."[289] This state of transcendental freedom allows him the opportunity to openly say the truth. Characteristically, the hero's social death, his exclusion from society, makes possible his political life. Rather than physical destruction, the author presents death as a "culturally constructed process," in which the "awareness of a person's dying determines social interaction" and influences his presumed social value.[290]

Erdman effects character development through grotesque performativity of the dramatic text, where the process of faking suicide is presented through "a stylized repetition of acts."[291] The protagonist's identity is constructed through a series of performances which allow the character to test out his ideas by both miming and displacing social conventions. With each iteration of the plot device, the author brings his character closer to changing his perspective and revitalizing his senses. The dramatist employs a pseudo-suicidal hero who, through performance, deconstructs the meaning of socialist rhetoric, exposing the emptiness and uselessness of slogans in comparison with the "problems of a single human being."[292] By subjecting his protagonist to "death", the author makes him reconceive the relationship between the self and the world, and articulate his perplexity at the scale of discrepancy that had opened up in the 1920s between what the Soviet state professed to be and what it actually was. Hence, similar to Gogol's *The Inspector General*

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[288] The concept of social death was originally described by Orlando Patterson in *Slavery and Social Death: A Comparative Study* (1982) where he argued that the "dehumanization of enslaved Africans related to the enforced erasure of their culture and deprivation of what are now more widely considered universal human rights constructed a slave as a 'socially dead person.'" https://scholarblogs.emory.edu/gravematters/tag/social-death/
The state of being socially dead as a culturally constructed process was also discussed by Erving Goffman in the context of social interaction.
[289] Erdman, *The Major Plays*, 134. "Все равно умирать." Erdman, *Samoubiitsa*, 174.
[290] Králová, Jana. "What is social death?" *Contemporary Social Science: Journal of the Academy of Social Sciences* 10, no. 3 (2015): 235-248.
[291] Lester, David, and Steven Stack. *Suicide as a Dramatic Performance* (New Brunswick and London: Transaction Publishers, 2015), 43.
[292] Erdman, *The Major Plays*, 144. "В сущности, пустяки по сравнению с положением одного человека." Erdman, *Samoubiitsa*, 190.

(Revizor, 1835) and Sukhovo-Kobylin's *Tarelkin's Death*, Erdman's play betrays a metaphysical dimension behind the satirical one.

In this chapter, after examining the theme of resurrection and the existentialist dimension of the play, I transition to discussing the theatricality of the fake suicide device through the lens of metatheater as performance-within-a-performance The effect of dramatic suicide relies on the presence of the audience and renders it to some extent artificial. We can draw a parallel with acting onstage: as Davis and Postlewait suggest, "The artificiality exists not merely in the act but in the perception of it. The observer is crucial."[293] In my analysis I essentially create a contrast by juxtaposing diegetic and mimetic narratives, in which one kind of story is told and another is shown.[294] This dialectic develops through the so-called "interstitial moments when the familiar turns strange and shifts unexpectedly into something else,"[295] creating an atmosphere, in which tragic and comic elements, to quote Ionesco, "do not coalesce, they coexist."[296]

The Suicide was almost unanimously condemned for staging by the artistic-political council of the Vakhtangov State Theater in 1930. The proletarian critics and artists[297] accused the play of anti-Soviet tendencies that served to undermine rather than solidify the new system. Their accusations ranged from "ridiculing the Soviet public" to "propagating ... reactionary philosophy" to being "a crime against the class war."[298] Nevertheless, after the council's unfavorable verdict,

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[293] Davis and Postlewait, 20.
[294] In narratology, this is the difference between "diegetic narrative" and "mimetic narrative": one kind of story is told (diegesis) and the other shown (mimesis). See Jahn, Manfred. "Narrative Voice and Agency in Drama," 659-79.
[295] Connelly, 2-3.
[296] Quoted in Hirst, 114.
[297] Some of them include: Vs. Vishnevskii, V. Kirpotin, K. Lamberg, Svartsman, G. Artamonov, Khrustalev, Kiselev, and Shubin.
[298] From the transcript of the remarks made about *The Suicide* shortly after the reading of the play at the Vakhtangov Theater. Reprinted in Erdman, Nikolai, et al. *A Meeting About Laughter: Sketches, Interludes, and Theatrical Parodies*, ed. and trans. John Freedman (New York: Harwood Academic Publishers, 1995), 191-204.

K. Stanislavskii and A.M. Gorkii on the one hand, and Vs. Meierkhold on the other, for a long time did not abandon hope to see this play staged at their own theaters and eagerly engaged in rehearsals, setting off to demonstrate that the play's "social significance and artistic authenticity"[299] outweighed its political ambiguity.

Recent scholarly investigations have focused on the play's chronotope,[300] poetics of grotesque and continuity of tradition,[301] and the concept of suicide in Russian plays.[302] John Freedman's seminal study *Silence's Roar: The Life and Drama of Nikolai Erdman* (1992) also sheds light on many aspects of the play, including Erdman's intricate use of form and content, phonetic and rhythmic structure of the scenes, his language and the use of grotesque—what the scholar holistically calls the work's "dramatic architectonics."[303]

The theme of suicide in these works is treated more as a reflection of the "general atmosphere of the time" and "a common topic of discussion"[304] rather than an artistic device for character development that brings the plot to reversal. To note, the "problem of suicide" was a real issue in the 1920s during the so-called "transitional period" of NEP, which affected various groups of people, from the Red Army ranks to the Bolshoi Theater troupe, and, consequently, received wide coverage in popular press and literature of the time. Freedman cites an array of plays

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[299] From Konstantin Stanislavskii's letter to Iosif Stalin, dated October 29, 1931. Reprinted in Erdman, Nikolai. *P'esy. Intermedii. Pis'ma. Dokumenty. Vospominaniia sovremennikov* (Moskva: Iskusstvo, 1990), 283-84.
[300] See Kovalova, A. O. "Kinodrmadurgiia N.R. Erdmana: Evolutsiia i poetika." PhD diss., St. Petersburg State University, 2012.
[301] See Shevchenko, E. S. *Teatr Nikolaia Erdmana*. Samara: Samarskii universitet, 2006; Babenko, I. A. "Edinstvo modelirovaniia tipa grotesknogo geroia v dramaturgii A.V. Sukhovo-Kobylina i N.R. Erdmana kak fakt skhodstva khudozhestvennogo myshleniia dramaturgov." *Filologicheskie nauki. Voprosy teorii i praktiki* 7, no. 18 (2012): 38-42.
[302] See Ishchuk-Fadeeva, N.I. "Kontsept samoubuistva v russkoi dramaturgii («Samoubiitsa» N. Erdmana). *Vestnik TGPU* 7 (2011): 12-18.
[303] Freedman, 143.
[304] Freedman, 112. Lidiia Til'ga also explains Erdman's choice of suicide in the play by socio-historical situation of the time: the idea of suicide "is present in the historical air of this time almost like a material substance." See Til'ga, L.V. "Poetika drama rubezha 1920-1930-kh godov i motiv samoubiistva. M.A. Bulgakov «Beg». N.R .Erdman «Samoubiitsa». Opyt kontekstual'nogo analiza." PhD diss., St. Petersburg State Academy of Theatrical Art, 1995.

composed in the late 1920s and early '30s featuring characters who die from suicide, some of which were later re-written in a more positive vein in response to censorship demands.[305] By contrast, Erdman's play stands out precisely for demonstrating "the art of remaining alive, [which] was itself a form of a protest in an age that physically destroyed its perceived enemies."[306] After all, Podsekalnikov is the only character in the play who has the courage to decide to go on living "even though everything was pushing [him] to suicide."[307] Erdman dramatizes a five-act play, in which the character's frantic attempts to kill himself, ironically, prompt him to rediscover the value of life and share his dearly earned insights with others at the climactic moment—his own funeral. Instead of a mournful silence, the cemetery resounds with the primordial joy of a newly born person who regains his sense of identity.

I argue that catharsis provoked by the realization of 'I exist' (*ia esm'*) followed by the spiritual rebirth of the character, is the main theme of the play. Scholars generally acknowledge Podsekalnikov's change of perspective prompted by the impression of near death: "through his fake suicide Podsekal'nikov has come to realize the value of his and any other individual human life."[308] However, Podsekalnikov's astounding revelation in the finale is often downplayed by attributing the reason for his intended suicide to a lack of comfort, cowardice, or his hurt ego.[309] Furthermore, Podsekalnikov's timid plea at the end for a "peaceful little life and decent pay"[310] pictured him in the critical literature essentially as a social parasite: "All Podsekalnikov wants are

[305] For the examples of the plays see Freedman, 116-17.
[306] Freedman, 13.
[307] As Nadezhda Mandelstam commented on the existential dimension of the play, "Это пьеса о том, почему мы остались жить, хотя все толкало нас на самоубийство." Erdman, *P'esy,* 442.
[308] Wachtel, 21.
[309] For example, George Genereux attributes Podsekalnikov's intention to commit suicide to his "fall in the status from family provider to dependency on his wife's income." See G. Genereux, "Preface to *The Suicide*" in Erdman, Nikolai. *The Mandate and the Suicide: Two Plays*, trans. M. Hoover, G. Genereux, and J. Volcov (Ann Arbor, Mich.: Ardis, 1975), 89.
[310] Erdman, *The Major Plays*, 160. "Тихая жизнь и приличное жалованье" Erdman, *Samoubiitsa*, 214.

creature comforts, a full belly, and the right to be left alone."[311] Such interpretations promote a perverse vision of freedom and happiness that makes them synonymous with materialism and positivism.[312] However, the conflict's complexity and Podsekalnikov's real dilemma are not directly connected to his material situation. This can be demonstrated by his mother-in-law's reaction to his ongoing unemployment, following Podsekalnilov's failure to become a bass tuba player: "Look how long we lived on Masha's salary alone. We'll just go on that way."[313] Moreover, his wife's reproach after discovering Podsekalnikov's sham suicide attempt, "What is it you want?"[314] also points to the character's relatively established material status, and that his suicidal thoughts came as a complete shock to his family members. Hence the main character's dissatisfaction and restlessness stem from his introspective analysis and betray a deeper yearning for transcendence, and could be aptly expressed with a more searching question: "Can one who has lost all faith in everything merely continue to subsist?"[315]

Although Freedman claims that "*The Suicide* may be addressed to the intelligentsia, but it is not about the intelligentsia,"[316] I think that his statement deserves further qualification. I believe, in a certain sense, Erdman's play *is* about the intelligentsia. This view can be corroborated by contemporary interpretations of the work by members of intelligentsia as well as Erdman's own artistic design. For example, Nadezhda Mandelstam directly projects Podsekalnikov's plight on the trapped situation of her own generation, commenting on the existential dimension of the play:

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[311] Genereux, "Preface to *The Suicide*," 91.
[312] Interestingly enough, some free adaptations of Erdman's play in the west end precisely on this note—on Podsekalnikov's accumulation of fortune, which presumably compensates for his suffering and turns him into a content Soviet citizen. For example, in *Dying for It* by Moira Buffini, the protagonist ends up with a large sum of money collected from petitioners, which as his mother-in-law put it, "he earned . . .by dying." See Buffini, Moira, and Nikolai Erdman. *Dying for It* (London: Faber and Faber, 2007), 116.
[313] Erdman, *The Major Plays,* 108. "Столько времени жили на Машино жалованье и опять проживем." Erdman, *Samoubiitsa*, 134.
[314] Ibid., 142. "Чем тебе не жилось?" Ibid., 186.
[315] Freedman, 145-46.
[316] Freedman, 135.

"This play is about why we kept living, even though everything was pushing us to suicide."[317] Her gaze peers behind the façade of grotesque philistinism to capture "the undercurrent of humanity"[318] audible throughout the play, in which human life is turned into a commodity that can be traded or just forfeited.

Nadezhda Mandelstam's testimony helps to reconstruct a tangible parallel between the tragicomic figure of Podsekalnikov and the struggle for survival of the prerevolutionary intelligentsia during the Cultural Revolution. It further indicates that on some level the intelligentsia could recognize itself in Podsekalnikov and identify with the themes of persecution, oppression, and alienation in the anti-individualistic society. Rather than finding veracious portraits of concrete individuals, one's sense of belonging emerges from the play's overall metaphysical message.

Authorial presentation of self in *The Suicide* is a curious and counterintuitive case due to Erdman's bold mixing of satirical and metaphysical, timely and timeless, staged and human. As I have discussed in the previous chapter, the Olesha-Kavalerov link in both *Envy* and *The Conspiracy of Feelings*, is easily identifiable: Olesha made no secret that his alter ego, however distorted and disfigured, is the homeless poet Nikolai Kavalerov who serves as the author's outlet for expression. While we will not find a similar assertion by Erdman in regard to his protagonist, we can still consider Podsekalnikov in the context of authorial self-fashioning. While Olesha presents himself through his character semi-directly as a "radically self-censored self-portrait,"[319] Erdman does it completely indirectly.[320] He further distances himself from his protagonist by

[317] "Это пьеса о том, почему мы остались жить, хотя все толкало нас на самоубийство." Erdman, *P'esy*, 442.
[318] "Тема человечности." Ibid.
[319] Beaujour, "The Imagination of Failure," 124.
[320] According to Lidiia Ginzburg, "It is possible to write about oneself directly. It is possible to write semi-directly: a substitute character. It is possible to writer completely indirectly: about other people and things as I see them." Quoted in Van Buskirk, 8.

disfiguring the image of the artist in the crooked mirror of grotesque, black humor, and exuberant theatricality.

Like Olesha's *The Conspiracy of Feelings*, *The Suicide* was written during Stalin's ascent to power at the end of the NEP period and fully reflects the changing conditions of the Soviet reality and the precarious position of the Soviet artist.[321] By taking for the point of reference an individual who "who ceased to belong and [was] expelled from normal participation in the community,"[322] the dramatist depicts a relatable condition of social alienation and creative crisis. He depicts a man on the edge whose social role became purely nominal: who is "still part of society although socially dead."[323] From this angle, we can consider Podsekalnikov as Erdman's projection of self and draw a dotted line from the image of literary *lishenets* to the writer's experience of "civic death" when the latter is denied the opportunity to write.[324] In a letter to Angelina Stepanova, in which Erdman informs her of the play's possible ban, he confides: "For me, this is not an authorial catastrophe, but a human one. I am not being killed, but robbed."[325] Permeated with the rhetoric of defeat and deprivation, Erdman, however, does not refer to the wounded ego of an artist whose work was rejected. The sense of his loss runs much deeper: he laments another triumph of the arbitrary power that stepped on the artist's song. Even before the ban of *The Suicide*, which put an end to his literary career, Erdman's collaborative works with Vladimir Mass written between 1928-1932 were repeatedly subject to severe criticism and rejected

[321] As the literary critic and scholar, V. Vulf, notes, "Духовная полуграмотность становилась нормой. Судьба художников начинала зависеть от случайностей, от мнения одного человека." See Vitalii Vulf, "Vmesto poslesloviia" in Erdman, *Samoubiitsa*, 585.
[322] Patterson, Orlando. *Slavery and Social Death,* 41.
[323] Králová, "What is social death?" 235-248.
[324] Freedman, 117.
[325] "Для меня это катастрофа не авторская, а человеческая. Меня не убивают, а обворовывают." Erdman, *Samoubiitsa*, 319.

for staging, which added, naturally, to the playwright's sense of anxiety and insecurity.[326] Against this background, the enormous success of Erdman's first play, *The Mandate* (*Mandat*, 1925), which was hailed by Lunacharskii as the "first Soviet comedy," only demonstrates the growing ideological pressure with the states' transition to the First Five-Year Plan in 1928. Almost immediately after his failure with *The Suicide* Erdman became a nonperson, and like his protagonist, he underwent a transition from the living to the socially dead, from a man to a 'sub-human.' His arrest, exile, and "nearly anonymous return to the 'living'"[327] largely defined his subsequent obscure existence.

Erdman's dramatization of the "effect of man's awareness of his finitude"[328] forms the most explicit focus of the play—its existential dimension. This awareness engrosses the main character completely, plunging him into a metaphysical abyss of hope and despair. The trajectory of action is presented as a series of fragmented episodes, each corresponding to a sporadic flash in the consciousness of the distressed individual, culminating in the hero's symbolic resurrection. Therefore, the play's structure could be roughly divided into two parts: "before" and "after" the fake suicide, with the three days that separate them. The first four Acts comprise the "before" period while the last Act, which takes place at the cemetery, presents the final revelation of the "resurrected" individual. The play unfolds in the direction of Podsekalnikov's journey toward unearthing the truth, punctuating his search for the meaning of life as he unlearns automatic perception of reality and is forced to make his moral choice.

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[326] John Freedman lists the following works authored by Erdman and Mass which were rejected by the censor during 1928-1932: "Telemachus," "The Divine Comedy" (1930), "Restructuring on the Move" (1932). "A series of four parodies of contemporary theater" ("The Tragedy of Hamlet, Prince of the Danes"; "The Work Whistle, or the Stomach Incision"; "New People, New Songs"; and "A Meeting About Laughter") planned as the second performance at the Theater of Satire in 1932 was also cancelled due to censorship problems." See Freedman, 111.
[327] Ibid., 2.
[328] Ibid., 129.

From the moment the suicide is announced, the paths of Podsekalnikov and the other characters begin to diverge: the closer the petitioners think they are to convincing Podsekalnikov to commit suicide, the more he is drawn to life. I trace his changing consciousness primarily through three scenes, spaced out as a dotted line, all leading to his disclosure in the finale—the speech at his own funeral. Podsekalnikov's "conversation" with a deaf-mute, his two banquet speeches, and the closing funeral scene, document the stages of the protagonist's increasing awareness as he progresses in his realization of the depth and bitterness of the "problems of a single human being."[329] After Podsekalnikov's death is scheduled for twelve o'clock on the following day and the joyous crowd disperses to attend to further arrangements, the suicide-to-be succumbs to doubts and anxieties. Boosting his confidence with an enticing image of a heroic farewell, when he is under the influence of others, his resoluteness, when left alone, treacherously falters. The balance is ever elusive: every attempt to fortify him and praise his grand gesture, ironically, makes him further question his decision. Having liberated himself from the fear of life, he has to confront the fear of death.

The thought of the finiteness of life shatters Podsekalnikov's worldview into puzzle pieces where the final picture is in question. And from that moment, without quite realizing it, he finds himself racking his brains in search of the ultimate key. Once the "suicide timer" is set he panics, and with eagerness, almost in frenzy, seizes the opportunity to share his burden with a random listener who incidentally pops up in his room. This one-directional, introspective "dialogue" with a deaf-mute further plunges him into an existential abyss where, faced with no objection, Podsekalnikov "pours out his doubts and anxieties to the boy only to discover he was talking to himself."[330] His evident agitation and repeated entreaties—"For God's sake don't interrupt

[329] Erdman, *The Major Plays*, 144-45. "Положение одного человека." Erdman, *Samoubiitsa*, 190.
[330] Genereux, "Preface to *The Suicide*," 92.

me"[331]—reveal his pervasive fear. This is what the character dreads: to keep silent and be lost in the brooding uncertainty. As he struggles to fit his doubts together into a comprehensive picture, he necessarily challenges the established moral code and exposes the flaws of the system. Podsekalnikov is eager to learn what lies behind the illusory value of Soviet rhetoric and morals. His attentive listener prompts him to articulate what's really at the heart of his quandary: "But what if the cage is empty? What if there is no soul? [. . .] Is there life after death or not?"[332] Those questions, remaining answered, continue to haunt him. Thoughts about the afterlife and the last judgement paralyze his consciousness with fear and, at the same time, awaken his heart for regeneration. The agony of a person sentenced to suicide reads as excruciatingly painfully as Dostoevsky's famous accounts of criminals sentenced to execution, when time accelerates and the remaining hours turn into a final countdown: "After all, the greatest, the most intense pain lies not so much in injuries perhaps, so much as the fact that you know for certain that in an hour's time, than in ten minutes, then in thirty seconds, then now, at this moment, the soul will take wing from the body and you will cease to be a man."[333] Thus, Podsekalnikov's spontaneous 'exchange' with the deaf-mute marks his departure from worldly concerns and strictly personal matters into an existential realm and uncovers his true needs.

In the following episode, the farewell banquet in the summer garden in which the characters gather together to celebrate Podsekalnikov's untimely departure, we find the main hero with a long face, thoughtful and low-spirited, alone amidst the holiday crowd. When prompted to speak, Semyon, awakened from his thoughts, blurts out what most preoccupies him, namely whether or

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[331] Erdman, *The Major Plays*, 123. "Ради Бога, не перебивайте меня." Erdman, *Samoubiitsa*, 158.
[332] Ibid., 124. "Ну, а если клетка пустая? Если души нет? [. . .] Есть загробная жизнь или нет?" Ibid., 159.
[333] Dostoyevsky, Fyodor, and Alan Myers. *The Idiot* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992), 23. "А ведь главная, самая сильная боль, может, не в ранах, а вот что вот знаешь наверно, что вот через час, потом через десять минут, потом через полминуты, потом теперь, вот сейчас—душа из тела вылетит, и что человеком уж больше не будешь." Dostoevskii, Fyodor. *Idiot: roman v chetyrekh chastiakh* (Moskva: Sovetskaia Rossiia, 1981), 22-3.

not the afterlife exists. This question circles back to his recent revelation with the deaf-mute that's evidently still on his mind. He resumes his inquiry, hoping to get an answer from a different audience, but the motley crowd turns out to be just as "deaf-mute" as his previous confidant. This phrase betrays Podsekalnikov's inner disturbance and reveals his relentless search for the gist, i.e. the ultimate purpose of his existence. But his concern is drowned in the festive bustle: no one cares about the answer to that. This is Podsekalnikov's only utterance before he's reminded of the time, and he's abruptly returned from being engrossed in contemplation to the reality of fast-approaching suicide and so rushes to stimulate his bravado with alcohol.

So then, Podsekalnikov's consent to commit suicide sets him apart from the rest of the crowd in two important respects. On the one hand he feels invulnerable due to his newly discovered freedom from life. On the other, he becomes consumed with an anguish known only to someone who is apprehending death. His senses are tantalized: the lack of response, which he encounters first from his deaf-mute "listener" and then from the insensitive crowd, fuels his existential search and leaves him ever restless. Both of these experiences—an extreme boldness and extreme humility—are inaccessible to the other characters who maintain a markedly voyeuristic stance. This is the battle that the protagonist endures, the two contradictory impulses that tear him apart: his certainty that life is not worth living and, separate from it, a distinct yearning, which suggests the opposite. The combination of these conflicting feelings, of freedom mixed with fear and uncertainty, continues to preoccupy him and inform his rhetoric in the unfolding scenes. Podsekalnikov frantically tries to find an anchor in life that he senses more intuitively than intellectually, and find the root cause for his undeniable unwillingness, despite all his misery, to pull the trigger. Although evidently consumed with fear, he cannot take cowardice for an answer.

Despite the main hero's effort to avoid a denouement that ends with suicide, the plot unwaveringly proceeds along the lines of conspiracy to a designated end—the cemetery. The cemetery as a place, which brings together the living and the dead, becomes an ideal mise-en-scène for unmasking a fake death and a fake life and triggering catharsis. Podsekalnikov's confession in the finale uncovers the drama of the individual, caught at the threshold of a revelation: "there lived a man. And suddenly this man was made sub-human."[334] In this context "sub-human" indeed becomes tantamount to death, non-existence. Here is the epicenter of pain that goes far beyond material deprivation: it's the loss of both moral and spiritual foci, and he strives to recover his self through his own disappearance. Podsekalnikov's frustration from losing his job exposes a deeper wound that no creature comforts could soothe: it's a sense of alienation from people (even his wife), from not being a part of the proclaimed "For everyone, for everyone,"[335] and the pressure to distill the meaning of existence in a spiritual vacuum. His anguished protest immediately evokes the whirlpool of literary allusions, most notably the little men of Gogol and Dostoevskii, those disadvantaged individuals whose social misfit position made them pariahs.

Podsekalnikov's frenetic attempts to shoot himself exhaust him, both physically and morally, as he makes a full circle and finally arrives at the astounding conclusion that he "can do anything" because he's alive and not because he's dead. He's revitalized by the sheer life force, by the affirmation of the fundamental human right. In his earnest attempt to share his newly gained insight he defeats the empty rhetoric of the revolutionary slogans by zooming in on the example of "one person who lives and fears death more than anything else in the world,"[336] by speaking from his own experience and not in the name of some 'ism.' Once again, he's at the "nothing to

[334] Erdman, *The Major Plays*, 161. "Жил человек, был человек и вдруг человека разжаловали." Erdman, *Samoubiitsa*, 214.
[335] Ibid. "Всем. Всем. Всем." Ibid.
[336] Ibid. "Один человек, который живет и боится смерти больше всего на свете" Ibid., 213.

lose" stage, yet this time his sense of moral superiority is nurtured by the revelation of the gift of life.

Overcome with relief that he doesn't need to play at being "suicidal," he completely goes off guard and hurries to pour his confession out to his listeners. Like a child who babbles with excitement about everything he sees, or a criminal, who was spared death at the last possible moment and still gasping for air, Podsekalnikov's disclosure is similarly oblivious of proprieties and social norms. He's unable to restrain himself: "Comrades, I don't want to die. Not for you, not for them, not for society, not for humanity, not for Mariya Lukyanovna."[337] His retrospective narration is full of compassion: he's condescending to the crowd's ignorance, whose allegations, from his point of view, are nothing more than demagogy.

What further testifies to Podsekalnikov's changed condition in the finale is his occasional excursion into third person narration when after having spent three days in a tomb, he provides a retrospective account of his life, talking about his old self as if it were a different person. He persistently draws his interlocuters' attention to his "otherworldly" experience of facing death. Moreover, he defines himself in relation to death as a "person who lives and fears death more than anything else in the world." With this utterance he uncovers another reality which became known to him and which imbued him with appreciation of the present moment. In other words, he undergoes an inner renewal, and experiences a liberation which enables him to make sense out of his life and put it in the form of a simple, yet profound, parable: "there lived a man. And suddenly this man was made sub-human." Despite enduring unfair treatment and deprivation, in the end he consciously chooses life: "However I can but I want to live."[338]

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[337] Ibid., 159. "Товарищи, я не хочу умирать: ни за вас, ни за них, ни за класс, ни за человечество, ни за Марию Лукьяновну." Ibid., 212.
[338] Ibid. "Как угодно, но жить…" Ibid.

As I have shown, over the course of the play, Podsekalnikov undergoes a spiritual change, in the end rising from the tomb and making his stunning reappearance to the people in order to assert his authority. This circumstance serves as a clear allusion to the figure of Christ. In the parodic light Podsekalnikov takes upon himself the role of a 'sufferer'. His ardous path through moral and physical ordeals, symbolic death and resurrection, further reveal distinct parallels with Christ, who subjected himself to voluntary death for the sulvation of mankind. In one of his self-references Podsekalnikov directly projects his 'mission' onto that of Christ: "I will suffer. I will suffer for all."[339] And from that moment his temptations begin: he becomes beset with a whirlpool of pressing questions and intangible obstacles incrementally mount upon him. Similar to Christ, he becomes a victim of conspiracy and in the end has to endure slanderous accusations. Most importantly, *The Suicide* uncovers another reality through Podsekalnikov's 'ordeals' and "establishes an individual's ability to find in himself a reason for faith and for living."[340]

While ostensibly focusing on the protagonist's inability to resolve his existential crisis, at the same time, the author invites us to ponder "the social conditions in which the idea of suicide becomes available, relevant, and appropriate for the suffering person."[341] The external pressure that dominates the stage action and is manifested in the characters' insistence on Podsekalnikov's suicide unequivocally translates into their steadfast belief that only death could petition on their behalf and effectively convey the message.

In this chapter's final section, I move from analyzing the personal impact of suicide on the human psyche to pondering its social and political implications as a performance, considering

[339] Ibid., 112. "Пострадаю. Пострадаю за всех." Ibid., 140.
[340] Freedman, 146.
[341] Ibid., 53.

suicide, first and foremost, as a communicative act intended for another. These two parameters—suicide's communicative nature and its overt theatricality achieved through the consciousness of viewing—inform my discussion of the play's social criticism delivered through a series of rehearsals, or mock suicide attempts.

The conception of suicide as a communicative act intended for the audience lies at the heart of the argument of David Lester's volume, which is summarized in its telling title: *Suicide as a Dramatic Performance.* The book investigates the phenomenon of suicide from cultural, sociological and psychological perspectives. He highlights the potential of suicide as a self-fashioning device, which enables a person to shape a certain presentation of the self in the eyes of the other and as such, it presupposes the presence of some audience.

Lester's study contends that some real suicides to some extent resemble a staged performance "in which suicidal individuals create a dramatic event by the choices that they make for their suicidal act, such as the method to use, which location, what to wear and what communications to leave for others."[342] All these arrangements betray the suicide's preoccupation with the reaction of others, with the difference their death is going to make. These are all potent factors for making a desirable impression on the audience, with the most effective of them—the suicide note itself, which serves as the person's last utterance. It is not a coincidence, then, that Erdman chose the suicide note as an ideal medium for transmitting his character's unclouded judgement—his dissatisfaction with Soviet reality. Moreover, in Erdman's uncompromising portrayal of the early Soviet time's inverted value system, the suicide note acquires a far greater importance than the person himself: it determines the person's worth, measures his achievement, and endows him with power to say what no one else dares.

[342] Lester, David. "Suicide as a Staged Performance." *Comprehensive Psychology* 4, no. 18 (2015): 1-6.

When suicide becomes perceived as a public act—and this is the case of Erdman's hero—it is in many ways conditioned by the person's desire to shape a certain presentation of the self and is aimed at provoking a response from the audience. The "dialogical dimension of communication"[343] constitutes the suicide's dramatic component when the person is driven by desire whether to conform to or dispute his social persona with this last definitive act. Initially, Podsekalnikov seeks to profit from his death and consents to suicide to boost his self-importance. After all, what draws our hero to suicide in the first place is a compelling self-image ignited in his imagination by the leader of the intelligentsia, Aristarkh Dominikovich, who is the first in line to take advantage of Podsekalnikov's "noble" decision and begins openly to trade in his life. Aristarkh's eloquence stirs an enticing vision of an extravagant farewell with "horses in white horsecloths,"[344] which leaves an indelible impression on Podsekalnikov. The idea of a socially significant gesture returns to him self-esteem, boosts his confidence—in short, lays bare his needs that until then remained unfulfilled. The effect of his revitalized sense of dignity can be read in his parting remark to his wife: "Don't forget that you bear the name Podsekalnikov."[345] Interestingly, the role of the vision of self and the protagonist's susceptibility to this vision also form a fruitful point of reference in Vampilov's existential drama: Zilov's experience of pondering his own death as if from a distance serves as a catalyst to his spiritual transformation.

Given that we deal with a literary suicide scripted by the playwright, the question arises, what are the implications of suicide's theatricality for the stage? As an act in the play, conceived for production on stage, suicide receives double theatricality. It becomes a performance-within-a-performance and functions as a metatheater technique to unveil the complex concept of the

[343] Lester and Stack, 54.
[344] Erdman, *The Major Plays*, 111. "Лошади в белых попонах." Erdman, *Samoubiitsa*, 139.
[345] Ibid., 112. "Не забудь, что ты носишь фамилию Подсекальникова." Ibid., 140.

audience in the play and deconstruct the meaning of suicide for both the performer and the spectators. The audience becomes, as it were, doubled: the unsympathetic voyeurs on stage are joined by the spectators in the theater. To draw on Wachtel's discussion of the metatheatrical techniques in the ballet *Petrushka* (1911), the effect is that "The doubling of the fourth wall causes it to disappear and unsettles spectator's expectations about their relationship to the onstage action."[346] But besides these two categories of spectators, there emerges a third type of audience—the shaping force and the real addressee of this expressive act, whom Podsekalnikov-the suicide no longer needs to fear. The meaning of the suicide then, is constructed through the kaleidoscopic rotation between the three audiences, as the action appeals to the characters on stage, people in the audience, and the off-stage puppeteers. As the performer comes to an understanding of the real meaning of his suicide in the process of rehearsing his role, so does the spectator, who follows the character onstage and heeds his dilemmas. The search for the meaning of suicide engrosses both the character and the spectator, who unwittingly join their efforts to stand against the conspiracy on stage.

Although the hero's intention to kill himself or find a reason not to, foregrounds the action and sustains reader's and spectator's attention as the major source of the comic in the play, behind this grotesque façade, emerges the necessity to pinpoint the power, which imperceptibly impacts the action on stage. In other words, "Who is the audience for whom suicide is an appropriate and acceptable choice of action as a response to perturbation?"[347] As the drama unfolds and Podsekalnikov succumbs more deeply to doubts about his chosen way of action, attention shifts from the revelry on stage to the intended recipients of this sacrifice—the pagan merciless gods whom the characters want to propitiate by bringing Podsekalnikov's suicide as their offering.

[346] Wachtel, 97.
[347] Lester and Stack, 54.

Meyerhold's 1932 short-lived partial production of *The Suicide* managed to hone in on the ambivalence of the audience-centric perspective by explicitly linking the dramatic performance with off-stage Soviet reality.

The concept of 'rehearsal' as a step in the iterative construction of identity through performance underlies the process of character development in the play. Erdman anatomizes the process of attempting suicide into a sequence of iterations, that run parallel to and construct Podsekalnikov's own repetitive performance of identity.[348] Moreover, all suicide-related preparations, from writing a suicide note to trying out the interior of the coffin, go through several stages of iteration, thus allowing the character to refine his understanding and stretch the line of reasoning to its logical extreme until it backfires. Rather than involving his hero in introspection to reassess his life as, for example, does Vampilov, Erdman makes Podsekalnikov develop awareness around the issue of suicide through fragmented sporadic re-enactments of its various aspects.

Thus, the character's performance of suicide presents a multi-step process: the idea of ideologically meaningful suicide at the expense of one individual life gets tested many times throughout the short span of the play, leading Podsekalnikov to reject it. Entrapped in a cycle of iteration the protagonist fully exposes the inconsistency and illogicality of his suicide attempts, debunking the popular hopes and expectations promised by the new Soviet regime. Even the fabrication of a three-word suicide note takes up two pages and is shown as an iterative process of revision and conflicting authorship. The mode of rehearsal also contributes to the perception of the protagonist as a buffoon and renders his intense suffering in the form of foolery. Ultimately, it

[348] For further discussion on the performativity of identity see Parker and Kosofsky Sedgwick, Introduction to *Performativity and Performance*.

is through rehearsals that the play acquires its pathos, which transforms a buffoon into a tragic hero, and farce into a tragicomedy.

At first, the thought of suicide doesn't much alter Podsekalnikov's view on life; it only prompts him to attend to the practical tasks of writing a note and bequeathing his valuables to his brother in Eletsk. He regards the idea of suicide as a provocative joke or a trick that he could play to avenge his wounded vanity. The full realization of what he has subscribed to comes to him much later, in the process of rehearsing his address to the "masses" and subsequent attempts to pull the trigger. Until then, he goes about his last preparations in a perfunctory manner and for the suicide note he uses a conventional Russian formula: "I blame none" (*nikogo ne vinit'*). Then, when asked directly for the reason behind his suicidal intention, he blames the composer for his disappointment in life, whose name triggered the memory of his recent failure to become a bass tuba player. This is Podsekalnikov's first, still unconscious attempt to begin deconstructing his experience, starting from the most recent episode and, eventually, proceeding further in rethinking his entire life, trying to understand how it all led up to the present moment. Moreover, the ideas put forth by the supplicants, make him further ponder the significance and consequences of his action. Their competing claims unlocked his own search for the real meaning of his suicide and, consequently, for the meaning of his life.

The dramatic resonance of the character's performance of suicide is achieved through recurrent action as further illustrated through Podsekalnikov's two consecutive farewell speeches, which take place at the banquet before and after the reading of his fictional suicide note. Delivered only minutes apart, the two monologues substantially differ in their level of intensity and the

question of ownership. These scenes punctuate Podsekalnikov's understanding of his role and allow him to "mount social criticism from behind a mask or persona of detachment."[349]

Podsekalnikov's first address to the "masses" on the subject of "who is to blame?" intentionally lacks any seriousness. He's fooling around, trying out the role of a suicide just to oblige his listeners, as if oblivious to the real meaning of this charade. He amuses the public with his clumsy, clownish performance and a script, rife with blunders. His pompous speech, full of clichés, comes through as palpably fake. His monologue ends on a farcical note: "How the hell can I tell them what I'm dying for, comrades, when I haven't even read my own suicide note?"[350] With this last facetious question, he seems to denounce any ownership for voicing his own dissatisfaction: all he does is follow instructions. However, behind the mask of derision, he's driven by the impetus to re-enactment, using buffoonery as an attempt to render his existential struggle into a crude grimace and muffle the raising fear with a caricature performance.

His second monologue, delivered moments after he finishes copying his suicide note, is equally grotesque, but here he digresses from his assigned role, for the first time demonstrating its explosive potential, i.e. the ability to act impulsively in defiance of all expectations. This is the pulsating heart of the play, a decisive moment in the protagonist's inner struggle when in a state of polyvaliance he finally finds a way to publicly articulate what tortures him: the stifling fear that perverts and stifles human relationships.

Thus, the sense of freedom endows Podsekalnikov with a unique status for an individual in a town in the USSR at the end of the 1920s—the designated time and place of the play. His professed independence makes Podsekalnikov indeed a perfect medium for voicing critiques

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[349] Prentki, Tim. *The Fool in European Theatre: Stages of Folly* (Hampshire, U.K.: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), 11.
[350] Erdman, *The Major Plays*, 132. "Как же я им скажу, за что я, товарищи, умираю, если я даже предсмертной записки своей не читал." Erdman, *Samoubiitsa*, 171.

unthinkable for the ostensibly content Soviet citizen. In view of his near death, he is not afraid of the authorities and this gives him an enormous power over others, the living. This makes him an other in their eyes, outside of the social hierarchy, impossible to manipulate. Podsekalnikov is intoxicated with the realization of his own power, akin to that of the omnipotent ruler. The tentative "what I can do?" at the outset of his speech instantaneously escalates to exultation: "My God! I can do anything. My God! I fear no one."[351] His commanding tone and patronizing attitude further define the power dynamics and point out to the subordination of the plotters who depend on their scheme: "Shush! All are silent [. . .] Don't interrupt me."[352]

We follow the hero's transformation from a clumsy clown, regurgitating assigned lines, into a fearless, emancipated individual savoring his triumph. From an obedient follower of instructions, he turns into an unpredictable "in-di-vi-du-al"[353] capable of any wild escapade, which he immediately proves by calling to the Kremlin. By enunciating every syllable in the word "individual", he vainly seeks to underscore his distinction from the vast Soviet masses, which are faceless and voiceless. All of a sudden, we see the scene transmogrified: for a moment, the victim and victimizers switch places and allow the viewer-reader to contemplate the reverse relationship, revealing the main character's transgressive power of a little man pushed to his limit. Podsekalnikov's escapade of reprimanding the authorities, unthinkable whether one considers himself dead or not, genuinely frightens the other characters.

Although Podsekalnikov's desire to live and the intention of other characters to persuade him to die develop incrementally and unfold in parallel, and there is no direct conflict between the parties prior to the funeral scene, as we have seen, Podsekalnikov's unpredictable whims at times

[351] Ibid., 134. "Боже мой! Все могу! Никого не боюсь!" Ibid., 174.
[352] Ibid. "Цыц! Все молчат [...] Не перебивайте меня." Ibid., 175.
[353] Ibid. "ин-ди-ви-ду-ум" Ibid.

are questionable or outright disruptive of social rules and regulations**.** In this respect, his call to the Kremlin is both, an apogee of his newly discovered earthly power and an attempt to divert himself from an existential fear that has crept into his heart. Forced to look at reality from the standpoint of a 'dead' person, he no longer heeds societal postulates and established beliefs. Under this new angle of otherworldliness, he's brought to the realization of another, unknown dimension that he futilely struggles to conceptualize. At the same time, the encroachment of death dictates that he should reassess his life, to draw conclusions and settle accounts. From a short-lived euphoria he returns to pondering the gist, to the question: "What have I lived for? For what?"[354] Thus, his call to the Kremlin testifies to a new spiral turn in his perception that lifts him above the callous, eerily inhuman crowd, in whose eyes he's been dead from the beginning.

In both banquet speeches, Podsekalnikov's personal responsibility and the degree of his seriousness remain highly ambiguous precisely because they could be dismissed as drunken ravings. Yet the playwright introduces enough subtlety to create a contrast between the two utterances. The first buffoonery prepares the stage for Podsekalnikov's second entrance where in addition to playing the fool he makes a prank phone call to the Kremlin—the perceived source of cosmic evil—to chastise the government politics. It seems as if the author first wants to blunt the vigilance of the plotters (and the censors) and then, switching registers, allows his protagonist to criticize the status quo at the top of his voice, provoking and antagonizing his spectators.

As George Genereux elaborates in his "Preface to *The Suicide*," Podsekalnikov's speeches may be interpreted in two ways: as a "protest against government practices" or a "complaint of a dupe."[355] This distinction problematizes the question of Podsekalnikov's responsibility: "since many of his [Podsekalnikov's] opinions evidently are nurtured in him by the anti-revolutionary

[354] Ibid., 135. "Для чего же я жил? Для чего?" Ibid.
[355] Genereux, "Preface to The Suicide," 91.

group, he is innocent."[356] The closing event of the play, the real suicide of Fedia Petunin and his reference to Podsekalnikov as an authority, lay bare how deeply the latter is disconnected from the web of allegations and instead, engrossed in~~to~~ finding his own path. Fedia's suicide note: "Podsekalnikov was right. Life really isn't worth living," is profoundly ironic because Podsekalnikov arrives at the opposite conclusion.

This alternative finale plunges characters and spectators alike into shock. On this abrupt note, the action is cut, and the stage disappears behind the closed curtain. Yet the uncanny sensation of characters paralyzed with fear lingers on. This completely unforeseen denouement fixates our senses back on the retribution and redemption—themes that saturate Gogol's spiritual drama *The Inspector General*—and reproduces an unsettling effect of the dumb scene.[357] The second and last finale definitively establishes the primacy of tragic pathos in Erdman's comedy.

The defeat of *The Suicide* campaign and the ban of Meyerhold's production in October 1932 draw a definitive line to the period in the arts which, in spite of the government's tightening restrictions, is remembered in cultural history for its drive for innovation and experimentation. The twenties were followed by gradually increasing total censorship, which peaked with the Great Terror of 1936-37 and resurged after the Great Patriotic War. Ultimately, only the Thaw allowed for a partial return to the artistic origins and continuation of this line of grotesque and tragicomedy. I will analyze the ramifications of the modernist tradition in my final chapter devoted to the theater of Aleksandr Vampilov.

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[356] Ibid., 92.

[357] To note, Meierkhold's 1926 production of *The Inspector General* was still playing in Moscow at the time when Erdman was working on *The Suicide*.

Chapter 4.

"Zilov is my own self"[358]: The Tragicomedy of Character and Authorial Self-Presentation in A. Vampilov's *Duck Hunting*

Duck Hunting (*Utinaia okhota*, 1967) is Aleksandr Vampilov's most famous and most controversial play. In *Duck Hunting*, Vampilov creates a distressed character, Viktor Zilov, who constantly slides back and forth from the ridiculous to the sublime and, having become completely disillusioned with his life, attempts suicide. Although the play was published in 1970, it premiered in Riga only in 1976 and its Moscow premiers followed in 1979.[359] The dramatist never saw *Duck Hunting* on stage: on August 17, 1972, on the eve of his 35th birthday, Vampilov drowned in the lake Baikal.

As Vampilov scholar, Nadezhda Tenditnik notes, the playwright "was astounded by the gross misunderstanding with which [*Duck Hunting*] was met."[360] When in 1968 the play was rejected for staging by the Irkutsk Drama Theater,[361] the playwright could not contain his frustration: "The play was censured by people who were behind the times, who do not understand and who do not know our youth. But we are like this! This is me, you understand?! Foreign writers write about the 'lost generation.' But didn't we have losses too?"[362] Vampilov parries claims about

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[358] As one of Vampilov scholars N.V. Pogosova recollects, "Vampilov sometimes used to say that Zilov is his own self." See Pogosova, N.V. "Zamknutyi krug ili spiral': byt i bytie v dramaturgii A. Vampilova" in *V mire Aleksandra Vampilova: materialy nauchno-prakticheskikh konferentsii*, ed. Sobennikov, A. S., 46-58. Irkutsk: Izdatel'stvo IGU, 2013.

[359] In 1979 the play was premiered at two Moscow theaters: in January at the Moscow Art Theater and in December at the Ermolova Theater. Also in 1979 "Lenfim" produced a film for television, called *Vacation in September* (*Otpusk v sentiabre*), based on *Duck Hunting*. The film was not broadcast until 1987.

[360] "Был поражен, с каким непониманием её [пьесу *Утиная охота*] встретили." Tenditnik, Nadezhda S. *Pered licom pravdy: Ocherk zhizni i tvorchestva Aleksandra Vampilova* (Irkutsk: Izdatel'stvo zhurnala "Sibir'", 1997), 3.

[361] In his monograph, Andrei Rumiantsev mentions that Vampilov read *Duck Hunting* to the artistic council of the Irkutsk Drama Theater shortly after the play was finished, in 1967-68. See Rumiantsev, Andrei. *Vampilov* (Moskva: Molodaia gvardiia, 2015), 215-16.

[362] "Пьесу осудили люди устаревшие, не понимающие и не знающие молодёжь. А мы – такие вот! Это я, понимаете?! Зарубежные писатели пишут о «потерянном поколении». А разве в нас не произошло потерь?" From recollections of R.V. Kurbatova. Quoted in Tenditnik, 117.

the distortion of contemporary reality and identifies himself and his generation as participants in Zilov's drama. The dramatist has filtered the predicament of his character through himself: he doesn't simply "observe" Zilov from a distance,[363]—he *is* a Zilov in some sense. Hence, one of the central questions of this chapter is to contextualize and explain Vampilov's self-reference in regard to his protagonist and uncover their spiritual kinship. In what way does Vampilov reinvent himself in Zilov? How are the author's voice and agency realized through his protagonist in *Duck Hunting*?

The play opens with a farcical scene in which Zilov receives a funeral wreath with an inscription from his friends. He is alone in his apartment, ready to set off on his annual duck-hunting trip with his friend Dima, but bad weather detains him at home. Frustration from the unforeseen confinement and the aftertaste of a bad "friendly" joke together precipitate a series of flashbacks of his misspent life, conveyed to the audience through fragmentary scenes in the present, where Zilov is speaking on the phone. Zilov receives the wreath, and, in the last act, he invites his friends to his own funeral repast to "finish what [his friends] set out to do."[364] The play goes full cycle and returns, in the finale, to its initial premise, where Zilov appears ready to go to duck hunting.

In this chapter I focus on the complex playwright-protagonist relationship, which in the play is realized through the multifaceted concept of duck hunting and culminates in the character's suicide attempt. The dramatist uses the device of fake suicide as a self-fashioning technique to overcome his creative crisis by gaining the freedom of self-invention. The play's protagonist,

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[363] In her book, I. Plekhanova points out that "the dramatist observes [Zilov] as his peer, that is, as a representative of his own generation." See Plekhanova, I. I. *Aleksandr Vampilov i Valentin Rasputin: Dialog khudozhestvennykh sistem: Monografiia* (Irkutsk: Izdatel'stvo IGU, 2016), 27.

[364] Vampilov, Aleksandr V. *Duck-Hunting; Last Summer in Chulimsk: Two Plays*, trans. Patrick Miles (Nottingham, England: Bramcote Press, 1994), 86. "Это дело я доведу до конца." Vampilov, Aleksandr V., *Izbrannoe* (Moskva: "Soglasie", 1999), 253.

Viktor Zilov, functions as Vampilov's alter ego—the performed self of a "poor, wretched author,"[365] as the playwright calls himself in all humility and self-irony. At face value, we see a social parasite for whom people are commodities and whose destructive behavior epitomizes the petty nature of evil that corrodes life and stifles human relationships. But in the image of his fidgety protagonist who vainly tries to escape this reality, the author weaves in a motif of his own drama—the artist's existential and philosophical struggle beneath the surface of the Socialist realist canon. By juxtaposing the hero and his real-life prototype, the author's text and life, I trace authorial self-presentation through character development in which the protagonist's self-destruction reverberates with a tragic theme of the destruction of the artist.

The playwright-protagonist relationship in *Duck Hunting* reveals several layers of identity that Vampilov activates through dramatizing visible and invisible conflicts. In my analysis I draw on Vampilov's *Notebooks* and excerpts from his correspondence, in which his discourse acquires a distinct affinity with the conventions of holy foolery, or *iurodstvo*. Following Vampilov's observation that "one cannot add anything to a character, one can only discover the new and unexpected in him,"[366] I discover in Zilov first *an artist* and then *a victim*—two identities that the character shares with his creator and which allow us to reconstruct the author's story of excruciating struggle for literary existence and to discern the provocative rhetoric behind the hero's buffoonery. These two ontological states—being an artist and a victim—represent a zigzag of Zilov's consciousness and profoundly express the "civic death" of the author, faced with insurmountable difficulties in getting his plays published and staged. Finally, the play's

[365] Vampilov, "Letters," in *Izbrannoe*, 711.
[366] "Добавить герою ничего нельзя, в нем можно только открыть то новое и неожиданное, что заложено и что ты увидел в нем одном." Vampilov, "From His Notebooks," *Izbrannoe*, 676-7.

confessional nature and its affinity with the genre of monodrama,[367] provide further ground for considering Zilov as Vampilov's projection of the self.

Vampilov combines different temporal planes, as well as different levels of reality to explore the clash of inner and outer conflicts at various levels of Zilov's consciousness. The structure of the play consists of three temporal layers: the present, Zilov's recollections, and the intermediate layer of Zilov's visions. Zilov's series of recollections of past events constitutes the bulk of the play. His phone conversations, which take place in the present, connect these episodes. Two scenes, also in the present, one in which a young boy delivers the funeral wreath, the other in which he departs, frame two imagined scenes that, in turn, enclose the recollections. Each recollection involves a play-within-a-play.[368]

The split focus of *Duck Hunting*, alternating present with past, creates a dialectical contrast and allows the audience to retrace Zilov's emotional dialectics throughout the play, and thus become a full participant in the drama. The playwright's stage directions reveal the protagonist's shifty personality by creating a contrast between what he truly feels and how he acts when in the presence of others. Therefore, the clues to understanding the dynamics of Zilov's consciousness are Zilov's soliloquies, visions, and the actions and words of the main character when no one on stage can see him. These scenes also function as metatheater techniques to reveal the unfailing presence of the author who is in constant dialogue with his reader: with no other character in sight they target the perfect listener—the audience.

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[367] For further discussion of *Duck Hunting* in the context of monodrama see Ivantsov, Vladimir. "Boga ne bylo, no naprotiv byla tserkov': Metafizika *Utinoi okhoty* A. Vampilova." *Toronto Slavic Quarterly* 2010 (Spring): 23-37.
[368] While the third flashback, where Zilov and his wife reenact the evening when they decided to marry, becomes, as Vreneli Farber has identified, "a-play-within-a-play-within-a-play." See Farber, Vreneli, *The Playwright Aleksandr Vampilov: An Ironic Observer* (New York: Peter Lang, 2001), 90.

The final scene, where, as if the initial scenario repeats itself, and the play winds up in the same place it started, continues to generate an animated debate among the scholars, who doubt Zilov's sincerity, let alone his conversion. Vampilov stirs ambiguity by "throw[ing] into focus the contrast between the essentially unchanged external world the hero inhabits and his inner world, which has been completely transformed."[369] Through the retrospective structure of the plot, Zilov becomes a viewer of his own life, and that vision, or rather self-reflection, provokes in him feelings of fear and disgust, at the end effecting catharsis. Vampilov achieves this spiritual metamorphosis through the intense human vulnerability of his character.

There's an extensive ongoing debate concerning the main character's condition in the finale, namely whether Zilov has been "reborn" by the trauma of his near suicide or whether he will resume his old egotistical attitude, "unaffected by catharsis."[370] Still others believe that Zilov changes for the worse and becomes spiritually dead like Dima.[371] There's ample evidence to support each side, including mutually exclusive deliberations on the subject by the author himself.[372] While I join the camp of scholars who maintain that Zilov undergoes a spiritual change as a result of confronting death, my approach to character analysis in the play is essentially different. Taking as the point of departure that Zilov is Vampilov's alter ego, I investigate character development in the context of authorial self-presentation by bridging the gap between the character's and the author's perspectives.

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[369] Vampilov, Aleksandr V., *The Major Plays*, trans. Alma Law. (United States: Harwood Academic Publishers, 1996), xiii.
[370] Faber, 92. Plekhanova also points to a "non-cathartic finale." (See Plekhanova, 27.)
[371] This point of view is articulated, among others, by V. Ivantsov; T. Prokhorova (See Prokhorova T., "Znaki obrashcheniia k lermontovskoi traditsii v p'ese A. Vampilova *Uninaia okhota*." *Acta Universitatis Lodziensis* 6 (2013): 65-7); S. Ioffe (Quoted in Plekhanova, 29); V. Kurbatov. (See Kurbatov, V. "Slovo o Vampilove" in *Mir Aleksandra Vampilova: zhizn', tvorchestvo, sud'ba: materialy k putevoditeliu*, ed. L.V. Ioffe et al., 5-10. Irkutsk: Irkutskii oblastnoi fond A. Vampilova, 2000.)
[372] Reportedly, on one occasion Vampilov said to Sergei Ioffe that Zilov changes but that's even worse (*strashnee*). On another, in 1972, in his conversation with his Moscow publisher I. Grakova, Vampilov responds that, he thinks, Zilov changes in a positive vein. Both conversations are quoted in Plekhanova, 29.

Although Tenditnik, Makhova, Pogosova, Antp'ev, Sushkov, and Konoplev mention the play's autobiographical nature and the Zilov-Vampilov connection, their references do not lead to extensive deliberations, and the topic of Vampilov's self-fashioning devices in the dramatic context remains largely overlooked.[373] Usually Vampilov's self-identification with Zilov serves as a segue into discussing the generation theme in *Duck Hunting*.[374] Critical investigations frequently treat Zilov as a hero of his time who represents both the plight of the individual and the moral struggle of his generation. But I think that there's a third *x* in this equation—the theme of the author's creative crisis and his psychic need to overcome it. The precarious position of the writer in the Soviet Union and Vampilov's debilitating efforts to publish and stage his work were almost exclusively discussed outside of Zilov's drama. Yet Vampilov not only "observes [Zilov] as his peer," as I. Plekhanova notes,[375]—he *is* Zilov in some way and this allows us to go beyond the generation problem and draw a dotted line between his protagonist's drive for self-destruction and the writer's battle for survival, which are two sides of the same coin.

Most interesting in this respect is N. Antip'ev's observation that "for the dramatist, this protagonist [Zilov] also became a test of his life path."[376] The critic also identifies two interconnected perspectives in the play, the character's and the author's: "The protagonist reconstructs all of the happenings, but the author controls the primary evaluation."[377] Here,

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[373] See the works of N. Tenditnik, M. Makhova, N. Pogosova, N.P. Antp'ev, B.F. Sushkov, N.S. Konoplev, among others. For example, N.P. Antip'ev notes that "the protagonist of *Duck Hunting* in his complexity turned out to be extremely close to the author himself." (See N.P. Antip'ev. "Viktor Zilov kak literaturnyi arkhetip" in *Mir Aleksandra Vampilova*, ed. L.V. Ioffe et al., 259-81 (Irkutsk: Irkutskii oblastnoi fond A. Vampilova, 2000), 268.) Elsewhere he writes that Vampilov is fairly close to all his characters, without putting any emphasis on Zilov and *Duck Hunting*. Ibid., 261.

[374] For example, Pogosova writes, "Vampilov sometimes used to say that Zilov is his own self. This character concentrated the features of Vampilov's generation." (See Pogosova, "Zamknutyi krug ili spiral'," 46-58.) Plekhanova also notes that "the dramatist observes [Zilov] as his peer, that is, as a representative of his own generation." (See Plekhanova, 27.)

[375] Plekhanova, 27.

[376] "Этот герой [Zilov] для драматурга явился также испытанием жизненного пути." Antip'ev, "Viktor Zilov kak literaturnyi arkhetip," 268.

[377] "Всё происходящее восстанавливает герой, но первичностью оценки владеет автор." Ibid.

Antip'ev refers to the unfailing presence of the author who speaks with his audience through the events that befall his protagonist. But he does not explain the author's perspective outside of Zilov's consciousness in the context of Vampilov's self-invention. By contrast, I am interested in Vampilov's personal motifs for creating a protagonist whose attempted suicide manifests in an extreme desire to live. I am concerned with unveiling where Zilov's drama ends and Vampilov's drama begins, focusing on the ever-elusive balance between the staged and the human.

Vampilov's connection with his hero can be interpreted on two levels: they share outer, biographical, and inner, spiritual parallels. Critics have noted that Vampilov writes about contemporary problems of his generation; his characters are his peers and his language effectively reproduces the atmosphere of the sixties. In this respect Zilov typified a cultural phenomenon of moral decline, degradation, and decay in the post-war Soviet society. Nevertheless, the autobiographical nature of the play and its hero pertains to the inner realm, in which outer circumstances are subordinate to the character's emotional experience. In other words, the author "designs his fate in that which could most fully reveal his inner life to the reader."[378] The outward appearances are a sham and the "events" are only decorations for creating emotional resonance between the author and his hero to allow for inner recognition. Rather than a directly mirrored image, Zilov is Vampilov's performed self of the man on the edge—a projection of the playwright's despair, fear, existential emptiness and helplessness against the wall of ideology. Through involving his hero in a cycle of symbolic death and resurrection, pain and relief, suffering and consolation, despair and overcoming this despair, the author seeks to perform exorcism and

[378] "Придумывает себе судьбу, в которой можно было бы наиболее полно раскрыть перед читателем свою внутреннюю жизнь." Likhachev, D.S. "Razmyshleniia nad Romanov B.L. Pasternaka *Doctor Zhivago*" in Pasternak, Boris L. *Doktor Zhivago: Roman, povesti, fragmenty prozy*, ed. D.S. Likhachev et al. (Moskva: Sovetskii pisatel', 1989), 5-16.

purify himself.[379]

To acknowledge, N. Konoplev in his recent article also refers to the idea of authorial exorcism in Vampilov's texts, which he associates with the latter's need to vent his "repressively blocked" state.[380] Vampilov, he maintains, uses his writing to purge himself from his own shortcomings by creatively reworking them into his protagonists: "Having endowed his constructed forms with his own (and also those characteristic of others') shortcomings A.V. Vampilov, being absorbed into his characters, passes through a school of purification."[381] These "shortcomings", Konoplev reasons, take root in Vampilov's social alienation and his low self-esteem as the "son of a purged teacher"—an inferiority complex which he tried to overcome through partaking in creative work.[382]

It should be recalled that Vampilov, a son of a schoolteacher, never knew his father who died when the future playwright was only a few months old. Valentin Vampilov was arrested and shot in 1938. He was rehabilitated in 1957, when Aleksandr was already a university student, ready to embark on a literary career. Aleksandr Vampilov's fate in this respect, naturally, was not unique: he belonged to "a generation of fatherless children [whose] fathers perished either in the labor camps or in the war."[383] While acknowledging this biographical detail as a possible influence on

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[379] Ilya Kutik developed the concept of authorial exorcism, which he defines as an act of encoding into the text something that the writer does not want to come true and which, at the same time, begs for resolution. See Kutik, *Writing as Exorcism*.

[380] "Репрессивно ущемленный." Konoplev N.S. "Aleksandr Vampilov i Valentin Rasputin v dialoge. Postanovochnyi reportazh" in *Aleksandr Vampilov i Valentin Rasputin: tvorcheskii potentsial "irkutskoi istorii": materialy mezhdunarodnoi nauchnoi konferentsii*, ed. Irina I. Plekhanova, 57-78 (Irkutsk: Izdatel'stvo IGU, 2017), 67.

[381] "Наделив своими (а также присущими другим людям) недостатками создаваемые образы, А.В. Вампилов, поглощённый ими, проходит школу очищения." See Konoplev, "Aleksandr Vampilov i Valentin Rasputin v dialoge," 57-8.

[382] "Сын репрессированного учителя, А.В. Вампилов испытывал социальное отчуждение, преодоление которого шло у него за счёт приобщения к художественному творчеству." Konoplev, "Aleksandr Vampilov i Valentin Rasputin v dialoge," 63. The scholar maintains that Vampilov perceived himself as "repressively blocked" and could not overcome this feeling for the rest of his life. Ibid., 67.

[383] Farber, 6.

Vampilov's art, Konoplev's interpretation of authorial self in drama tends to narrow down the problematics of Vampilov's art to the latter's need to combat social stigma and deal with the trauma of fatherless life.[384]

It is significant that Konoplev conceives the Zilov-Vampilov connection in terms of their mutual shortcomings, not virtues, evidently influenced by the protagonist's predominantly negative portrayal. Yet the agony and restlessness of the protagonist appeals to the playwright's own excruciating state of uncertainty and his fear of crisis. In Zilov's instability (*neuravnoveshennost'*), which Konoplev lists among the former's shortcomings, I see a positive beginning—a sign of Zilov's inner dissatisfaction with himself and a potential to shake off his complacency and awake from spiritual numbness. Moreover, I think that as an artist Vampilov outgrows his personal drama of the fatherless childhood and the leitmotif of his life distills into the need to realize his gift as a dramatist. Hence Zilov's despondency (*neprikaiannost'*) is an artistic recasting of Vampilov's own theme of the fate of the artist and his writings in the Soviet Union—the theme that transcends personal interests and biographical boundaries.

Vampilov and Zilov's spiritual kinship is expressed through their profound affinity for nature. The playwright puts many autobiographical undertones into his protagonist's inner world by entitling his play, *Duck Hunting*. Zilov's hunting preparations were intimately known to Vampilov, who himself was an inveterate hunter and frequented the taiga and Baikal. Moreover, the primeval nature of Siberia always served for Vampilov as an escape—a place where he could restore his inner equilibrium. He opposes arresting views of Baikal, the elemental force of the

[384] Konoplev's position to explain Vampilov's writing through a singular life event distinctly contrasts with the dramatist's own distrust of any formula for calculating the people's characters, which he called the method of a "slide ruler." See Vampilov, Aleksandr. *Ia s vami, liudi: rasskazy, ocherki, stat'i, fel'etony; odnoaktnye p'esy; iz zapisnykh knizhek; vospominaniia druzei* (Moskva: Sovetskaia Rossiia, 1988), 361-2.

"open sea,"[385] to the "fog of the inconsistencies and sloppiness"[386] of the mundane. Many a time he mentally fortified himself with thoughts about an upcoming outing into the wilderness. He repeatedly invited his friends from the capitals to visit him in Irkutsk, luring them with a Baikal trip: "Baikal now is quite a sight—you must see it."[387] However, the world of duck hunting was not only a place for recuperation—it was also a source of inspiration for Vampilov: he set his last drama *Last Summer in Chulimsk* (*Proshlym letom v Chulimske*, 1971) in a taiga village, imbuing the play with a distinctive local color.

Duck hunting in the play is more than a hobby or a leisurely escape from reality—through this devotion Vampilov imbues his character with poetic sensibility, makes him an artist in some sense. The world of duck hunting poeticizes Zilov's existence: when he talks about nature, he becomes a romantic, and when he declares his love for a woman, he uses poetic language and imagery gleaned from his hunting trip experience. As it did for Vampilov, nature holds a moral value for Zilov as a symbol of uncorrupted existence. Thus, the perception of duck hunting as a source of the sublime constitutes another level of the playwright-protagonist kinship and sets Zilov apart from the other characters. Such authorial position also points to the antagonist in the play: for Dima, another character who is fond of shooting ducks, conversely, hunting is a sport and nothing more. It is worthwhile only insofar it promises a catch.

Furthermore, Zilov's passion for duck hunting provides an outlet for expressing his innermost feelings—an escape in a Dostoevskian sense: "Every man must have some place to go," cries out Marmeladov in Dostoevskyii's *Crime and Punishment*.[388] Vampilov believed that if a

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[385] Vampilov refers to Baikal as "окрытое море." Vampilov, "Letters," 712.
[386] "Туман неувязок и разгильдяйства." Ibid.
[387] "Байкал сейчас такая штука, что – спешите видеть." Ibid., 711.
[388] "Ведь надобно же, чтобы всякому человеку хоть куда-нибудь можно было пойти." Dostoevskii, Fedor M. *Prestuplenie i nakazanie*, 19.

person has an idea, a dream, even an illusion, his life still has a purpose. Hunting is also the only subject that moves Zilov to speak "sincerely and with feeling"[389] according to the stage directions. For Vampilov, it is a sign that Zilov is still alive—the basic premise that is in question from the outset. So then, the meaning of duck hunting in the play gains its significance through the unfolding of multiple contexts: it is not only the character's favorite past time—it is what makes Zilov a poet; it is what keeps him alive. "Only there can you feel like a real human being,"[390] the hero confesses to himself. Thus, duck hunting acquires metaphysical connotations, as a journey "to the other shore" which lies beyond this reality. In the play, it marks a withdrawal from everyday life and symbolizes freedom from ideology, bureaucracy, and the conventions imposed by the state and by society—life as such. By the same token, the destruction of this dreamy world in the character's soul entails death, or "spiritual bankruptcy" which the author believed to be the worst of all evils.[391]

So then, Zilov's destruction of the self, which culminates in his fake suicide, can also be interpreted as the destruction of the artist. It is significant that the bleak prospect of suicide takes over *after* Zilov mentally rejects the world of duck hunting, first metaphorically killing the poet in himself, mimicking the destruction of the author, and then proceeding to realize the metaphor with his hunting rifle. Devaluation of duck hunting symbolically represents both Zilov's loss of escape and the artist's literary death. It is at this moment that utter darkness falls onstage. The scene changes as the effect of both a physical action and the mental condition of the protagonist: he closes his eyes as he succumbs to suicidal thoughts. The darkness conveys a sense of dangerous presentiment that is meant to alarm the audience. The silence is oppressive and stimulates

[389] Vampilov, *The Major Plays*, 91. "Искренне и страстно." Vampilov, *Izbrannoe*, 233.
[390] Ibid. "Только там и чувствуешь себя человеком." Ibid., 234.
[391] "Ничего нет страшнее духовного банкротства. Человек может быть гол, нищ, но если у него есть хоть какая-нибудь задрипанная идея, цель, надежда, мираж—все, начиная от намерения собрать лучший альбом марок и кончая грезами о бессмертии,—он еще человек и его существование имеет смысл." Vampilov, "From His Notebooks," 635.

contemplation, as viewers are forced to take note of their own sensations.

Lastly, to enhance the metaphysical dimension of the play and achieve spiritual renewal in the finale, Vampilov activates the subtext of the victim by having the main character assume the place of the bird destined for destruction.[392] From a hunter, Zilov mentally metamorphoses into someone who is being hunted and persecuted—the prey. Ultimately, what makes Zilov's unsuccessful suicide a real near-death experience and not only a "vaudeville routine"[393] is this shift in perspective which provokes in him an emotional disturbance. By aiming at himself with his hunting rifle as if he is a target, Zilov identifies with the vulnerable and unprotected prey, realizing that he, too, is alive, like the very ducks that he cannot bring himself to kill. Feelings of fear and pity provoked by the sight of his own suffering overwhelm him and accomplish catharsis. The playwright mingles grotesque and sublime moods to present a performance of suicide in which the contexts of the hero and his author overlap, and the concept of *victim* ramifies: is this an exaggerated staging of self-pity or the author's protest against the destruction of the artist, his outcry for humanity?

Thus, duck hunting in the play functions as a double-edged weapon that exposes Zilov as both a master and a victim. On one hand, his approaching hunting trip makes Zilov's spirit soar "in the anticipation of happiness."[394] On the other, duck hunting makes him realize his own

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[392] Andrew Wachtel discusses the subtext of the victim on the example of two plays, Anton Chekhov's *The Seagull* (1896) and Henrik Ibsen's *The Wild Duck* (1884). See Wachtel, Andrew. "*The Seagull* as Parody: Symbols and Expectations" in *Plays of Expectations*, 29-49. I continue this row of subtextual associations with Vampilov's *Duck Hunting* (1967). The three plays trace a pattern of the protagonist's transformation: from the role of destroyer to the object of destruction. Vampilov employs this pattern but refrains from a fatal denouement. Instead, he focuses on symbolic death, not real, and offers a possibility of conversion, further amplifying the ambivalence of his character.

[393] In Farber's opinion, "The whole process of his [Zilov's] endeavoring to shoot himself looks like a vaudeville routine." See Farber, 91.

[394] Vampilov as F. Dostoevsky believed that, "happiness is in the anticipation of happiness" and the process of achievement means more than the achievement itself. "Счастье – в предчувствии счастья." Vampilov, *Ia s vami, liudi*, 294.

finiteness and confront his moral limitations. His improvised "hunt" on himself in the confines of his apartment provokes a bitter revelation that makes him gauge his life from a different angle, from outside of his own self, as it were. Thus, the author transposes him from dream to terrifying reality, forcing him to re-evaluate his life.

In order to shock Zilov out of his complacency and make him realize the consequences of his wanton behavior, the author shows the character his "end" by using the only language to which Zilov is responsive—the symbolic reality of duck hunting that presupposes hunter and prey, the living and the dead. Throughout the play Zilov appears impervious to criticism, "indifferent to everything," as he himself admits.[395] The words are profuse yet ineffective, perpetuating the vicious cycle of lies.[396] Actions speak louder, but even such gloomy events as death, abortion, and divorce cannot penetrate through the destructive power of lies and pretense that has become Zilov's second nature. And only finding himself with a rifle against his chest, when his recent burning desire to go duck shooting suddenly resounds with self-mockery, triggers a realization of his own corrupt life, being a victim of his own ego, trapped as prey destined for merciless destruction.

Having decided to "return a favor" with the wreath and play an ultimate trick on his friends, Zilov invites Saiapin and Kuzakov, as well as his hunting companion, Dima, to his "wake." As Zilov sets the stage for celebration with his hunting rifle, his friends suddenly arrive and become unwitting witnesses of his prolonged preparations, which definitively incenses Zilov. His recent traumatic experience makes him feel overcome with self-pity which expressively colors his subsequent brawl with his friends when he still bears the impression of his imaginary death. His perception of himself as a victim explains his acute sense of vulnerability and defensive tone, his

[395] Vampilov, *The Major Plays*, 191. "Мне всё безразлично." Vampilov, *Izbrannoe*, 233.
[396] For example, when Galina leaves Zilov, she tries to break from the vicious circle of lies: "no more talk. We've already said everything." Vampilov, *The Major Plays*, 190. "...не надо больше никаких разговоров. [...] Мы уже всё сказали..." Vampilov, *Izbrannoe*, 231.

ungrounded suspicions and accusations.[397] Zilov talks and behaves like a hunted animal at bay. I believe, instead of addressing his rebuke directly to Saiapin and Kuzakov, Zilov continues his inner conversation, continues to filter through himself his fear and pain. The two conceptual planes—the everyday and the otherworldly—merge in the image of death: a "friendly" prank metamorphoses into a real opportunity for self-destruction. Besides, throughout the play Zilov's words conveniently serve to distort the meaning and mask his true emotions. And so, rather than an honest attempt to clarify his relationship with friends, Zilov tries to distract himself from his recent vision that cast his whole life under a terrifying scrutiny.

When Zilov finally stays alone and no longer needs to use words, the memory of his recent trauma and his fierce confrontation with the "hunters" triggers catharsis that plunges him into a hysterical paroxysm. In the description of this scene Vampilov emphasizes the ambivalence of his character and the reader's inability to pinpoint Zilov's emotions: "It is impossible to tell whether he is crying or laughing, but his body continues to convulse."[398] As Zilov is lying on the sofa, his agitation, although visible, is violently suppressed. Vampilov deliberately does not give ~~a~~ closure, with the intention that readers will finish this play for themselves. Vampilov's attitude to his hero resonates with the position of his highly revered predecessor, Dostoevskii, who saw his artistic task in "find[ing] the man in man" through "portray[ing] all the depth of the human soul."[399] This

[397] There are other interpretations of Zilov's hysterical behavior in the scene with his friends. Muza Makhova, for example, treats Zilov's breakdown exclusively as a result of trauma from his friends' betrayal. However, this supposition makes Zilov look a very devoted friend himself, which is highly questionable, given his egotistical attitude and occasional disparaging references in relation to Saiapin, Kuzakov and Dima.

[398] Vampilov, *Duck-Hunting*, 90. "Плачет он или смеётся, понять невозможно, но его тело долго содрогается..." Vampilov, *Izbrannoe*, 258.

[399] Dostoevskii thus defines his artistic method in his notebooks: "With utter realism to find the man in man . . . They call me a psychologist; this is not true. I am merely a realist in the higher sense, that is, I portray all the depths of the human soul." (Quoted in Bakhtin, M. M., and Caryl Emerson. *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984), 60.) Interestingly, Vampilov's *Notebooks* contain a similar definition of his artistic purpose: to "preserve the human in man." See Vampilov, "From His Notebooks," 684. Mark Sergeev in his seminal article "Vokrug *Utinoi okhoty*" (1997) underscores Zilov's "unfinalized" (in Bakhtinian sense) and undecided condition. He condemns directors' arbitrariness in shortening or prolonging the staged version

means, M. Bakhtin explains, that, "Dostoevskii always represents a person on the threshold of a final decision, at a moment of crisis, at an unfinalizable—and unpredeterminable—turning point for his soul."[400] Discovering "the human in man,"[401] or the inner man, is also one of the driving themes of Vampilov's dramaturgy. His Zilov too, possesses this depth of character, and Zilov's innate potential for humanity constitutes the author's main object of presentation.

In Vampilov's refusal to provide exhaustive information I detect a similar intention to warn against categorical judgment, because that would mean robbing his hero of freedom and denying him the possibility of catharsis. The words "impossible to tell," on the contrary, suggests a deep undercurrent of emotions, inner complexity, layers of consciousness, and subtlety of perception. In fact, whether the character laughs or cries, does not matter: both emotions are equally powerful to bring about catharsis. Moreover, the "impossibility" goes beyond a binary opposition: Zilov is neither overcome with joy nor with misery[402]—he is being reborn; he transcends his own self through suffering. As Vampilov remarks in his *Notebooks*, "Human life begins and ends with tears."[403]

So then, Vampilov makes the ambivalence in the play an object of the readers' analysis: what is behind Zilov's composure in the finale? The playwright's directions about Zilov's facial expression are specific: "we see that his face is calm. We still cannot tell from his face whether he has been crying or laughing."[404] When Zilov looks up after his emotional outburst, this is the first

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of the play in order to "clarify" Vampilov's message in the finale. See Sergeev M.D. "Vokrug Utinoi okhoty" in *Mir Aleksandra Vampilova,* 124-32.

[400] Bakhtin and Emerson, 61.

[401] "[сохранить и приумножить] человеческое в человеке." Vampilov, "From His Notebooks," 684.

[402] For example, Makhova distills Zilov's conflicting emotions in the silent scene into a binary opposition of *raduetsia-ogorchaetsia.* See Makhova, M.S. *Khudozhestvennaia epokha Aleksandra Vampilova* (Moskva: avtorskaia redaktsiia, 2016), 128.

[403] "Человеческая жизнь начинается и кончается – слезами." Vampilov, "From His Notebooks," 635.

[404] Vampilov, *Duck-Hunting*, 90. "…Мы видим его спокойное лицо. Плакал он или смеялся – по его лицу мы так и не поймём." Vampilov, *Izbrannoe*, 258.

time in the play that the audience sees his face. During all the action in the present, Zilov stands with his back to the audience. His "calm face" bears no traces of recent agitation. "Calm" is the only descriptor the author gives for his face, hitherto hidden from the audience, to mark his character's spiritual transformation. Similarly to the stage direction "sincerely and with feeling" that accompanies Zilov's monologue about the fascinating world of duck hunting, the "calm face," resounding in its contrast to Zilov's prior disturbance, manifests a dramatic change in our perception of the protagonist.

Zilov's composure indeed presents a radical break from his usual indifferent self as he appears to us in the present and in his recollections. His indifference, however, is manifested through restlessness in his behavior, the need to fill silence with words and time with actions. Numerous dialogues in the play operate as an exchange of repartees, as quick word play, where lies can pass for truth and vice versa. Throughout the play, Zilov resorts to using flattery, lies, and occasionally, a performance, to extricate himself from conflicts. Against this background of constant commotion, the silent scene and Zilov's subsequent "calm face" stand out in sharp relief. Such scholars as Ivantsov, Prokhorova, and Kurbatov interpret this change as a sign that Zilov becomes a second Dima—the only "relaxed" character in the play who always speaks matter-of-factly, in a straightforward and unemotional manner. They maintain that in the end Zilov turns into a cold-blooded hunter, "a murderer," devoid of compassion.[405]

In contrast, I believe Zilov's peaceful and self-controlled face communicates a temporary clearing of his mind, which has a sobering effect on him as he prepares to take the next step. And this change becomes apparent in Zilov's different attitude to Dima: when they speak on the phone Zilov does not complain to him or explain his feelings which, he knows, are unintelligible for the

[405] See the works of Ivantsov, Prokhorova, V. Kurbatov.

"lackey."[406] Instead, he adapts to Dima's practical language: "Yes, it's all over... Perfectly calm..."[407] Vampilov deliberately uses the same expressions that hitherto he reserved exclusively for Dima, to demonstrate, time and again, Zilov's affected resilience, which is epitomized in the contrast between the outward, essentially unchanged, manifestation of his emotions and their transformed inner essence. Besides, if Vampilov refuses to subject his character to physical death,[408] obviously concerned with the latter's prospects for reformation, would he condemn Zilov to moral death without any hope for redemption?

The reference "lackey" reveals Zilov and Dima's inner conflict and highlights the essential difference between them, in which one's shooting skill is secondary. First and foremost, their worldviews reveal their psychic needs or the absence of thereof and are represented in their disparate attitudes to hunting. Despite appearances to the contrary, the actual act of hunting interests Zilov little. For example, in his confession to Galina he notes: "I'm not much of a shot, but is that really important?"[409] This rhetorical question serves the purpose of self-revelation: what is important, he discovers, is to "feel like a real human being." His interaction with Dima, conversely, revolves mainly around practical details: transportation, shooting technique, hunting equipment. But even when they seem to discuss the best practices for shooting the prey (in Zilov's last recollection), Zilov is more concerned with the moral problem of killing, not the tactics. In his usual manner he camouflages his inner reservations as the feeling of insecurity of an inexperienced shooter. If anything, catharsis increases Zilov's inner rebellion against Dima's materialistic essence, his self-serving attitude and inability to see beyond his personal interests. That is why I

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[406] Vampilov, *The Major Plays*, 199. "Лакей." Vampilov, *Izbrannoe*, 1975, 235.
[407] Ibid., 206. "Да, всё прошло… Совершенно спокоен..." Ibid., 248.
[408] According to the memoirs of the director Roman Viktiuk, Vampilov originally intended to end *Duck Hunting* with Zilov's real suicide. See Rumiantsev, 231.
[409] Vampilov, *The Major Plays*, 192. "Конечно, стрелок я неважный, но разве в этом дело?" Vampilov, *Izbrannoe,* 247.

maintain that in the end Zilov chooses duck hunting and not Dima. That he goes there with Dima is an unavoidable constraint, the lesser evil, and should be read in line with Podsekalnikov's heartfelt conclusion: "However I can but I want to live."[410]

The split focus of the play between flashbacks and real time interweaves Zilov's past and present and creates a dialectical contrast. Unwillingly he turns into an alienated observer of his own life. Makhova treats Zilov's transformation as a process, as a gradually developing intention to commit suicide as he's watching his past unfolding before him: "the character's spiritual malaise grows into an overt rebellion against stratified lies, others' smugness."[411] Such an interpretation, however, casts *Duck Hunting* in the form of a serious psychological drama, discounting the play's expressively tragicomic bent, often rich with absurdist elements. Furthermore, the view of dramatism that goes crescendo is also incongruous with Vampilov's shifty character who constantly slides back and forth from the ridiculous to the sublime. The dramatist uses the fake suicide device to amplify fluctuation between tragedy and farce and zoom in on a singular transformative moment when a practical joke turns into reality. From performing a "vaudeville routine" Zilov is plunged into a metaphysical abyss where even the world of duck hunting becomes insipid and is reduced to the cheap greenery of the wreath.

The character development is driven by Zilov's eccentricity and performativity rather than his aptitude for introspection. For his character's conversion Vampilov uses a trivial incident—a prank with the wreath played by Zilov's friends. The playwright believed in the power of the moment, in coincidences that can suddenly change lives: "An incident, a mere trifle, a confluence

[410] Erdman, *The Major Plays*, 159. "Как угодно, но жить…" Erdman, *Samoubiitsa*, 212.
[411] "душевное метание [. . .] перерастает в герое в откровенный бунт против напластовавшейся лжи, самодовольства окружающих." Makhova, 123.

of events sometimes can become the most dramatic moments in person's life."[412] Zilov's moral revulsion does not build up gradually, peaking in a suicide attempt. Rather, his "sketch" with a rifle where instead of ducks he was hunting himself, suddenly sums up his life in one stroke, and exposes the senselessness of his existence.

Therefore, it would be incorrect to attribute deep psychological motifs to Zilov's suicide attempt and I disagree with interpretations that depict Zilov as his own merciless judge.[413] I believe, rather than punishing himself, Zilov wants to punish his "friends." When he, overwhelmed, impulsively grabs his rifle, he is consumed by his desire to retaliate, to make them feel guilty. He initially "plans" his suicide as a revenge, so he's driven by indignation and resentment, not by remorse or thirst for redemption. He simply decides to respond to a prank with another prank. The author intentionally highlights the comic side of Zilov's attempt to shoot himself: numerous interruptions, his awkward position, to show that he is not serious and thinks only about his friends' imaginary reaction.

The interconnectedness of these two notions—*artist* and *victim*—is the key to understanding Vampilov's perception of himself as an author (and his reflection in his hero). By analyzing the devices of affectation and performance in his correspondence I further trace the playwright's spiritual connection to his hero through the concept of holy foolery, which shapes a parallel reality of the artist's battle with himself and contains an "element of concealed provocation."[414] Just as the character's grotesque suicide attempt manifests in the tragic note of

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[412] With this line Vampilov opens his short story *Confluence of Circumstances* (*Stecheniie obstoiatel'stv*, 1958) which gave a title to his first book, published in 1961. "Случай, пустяк, стечение обстоятельств иногда становятся самыми драматическими моментами в жизни человека." Vampilov, *Izbrannoe*, 537.
[413] For example, Makhova interprets Zilov's suicide attempt as an "act of self-imposed justice" (*samosud Zilova*). She argues that Zilov "себя [. . .] судит нелицеприятно и строго, приговорил к смерти." Makhova, 126.
[414] Ivanov, S. A. *Holy Fools in Byzantium and Beyond* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 6.

the author's death, behind Zilov's buffoonery I discern a mask of *iurodstvuiushchii avtor*. I refer to *iurodstvo* in its secular meaning as a "playful cum subversive" mode of self-expression that could be employed in one's behavior, lifestyle, rhetoric and works.[415] Sergei Ivanov explains psychological motivation behind *iurodstvo* in the following terms: "Typically, a *iurodivy* today is a person who is aware that he looks pathetic in other people's eyes and pre-empts their contempt by exaggerated self-humiliation."[416] In Vampilov's letters from the period 1965-1970 we find multiple examples of such grotesque self-deprecation and play-acting, black humor and provocation as defense mechanisms for expressing his oppressed state and manipulating the impression of the audience.

What were the reasons for Vampilov's *iurodstvo*? An author who is in demand and whose work is recognized as relevant and important, feels no need for *iurodstvo*. Moreover, if an open protest, voicing dissatisfaction is tolerated by the power structures, the author similarly has no need to cloak his messages in a buffoon form and resort to indirectness, allegory, and inversion of meaning. *Iurodstvo* is always socially conditioned and has a purpose only when the message can be expressed in no other way. Vampilov the dramatist "plays the fool" (*iurodstvuet*) to counteract his perception of self as 'beggar'—a personification of the disfranchised position of the artist in a collectivist society. Vampilov's textual performativity distinctly reverberates with Iurii Olesha's theme, who almost half a century before him spoke of the "agony of killing one's own vision and voice."[417] Vampilov's "buffoonery" is born out of his burden of misery as an author who has to

[415] Hunt and Kobets, 16. For further discussion on holy foolery (*iurdostvo*) as a type of secular behavior see S. Ivanov's book *Holy Fools in Byzantium and Beyond* (2006) and A.M. Panchenko's article "Iurodsvto kak zrelishche" in *Voprosy istorii russkoi srednevekovoi literatury*, ed. D.S. Likhachev. Leningrad: Nauka, 1974.
[416] Ivanov, "Preface to the English Edition," vii.
[417] Smeliansky, 31-2. In his 1934 speech to the First Congress of Soviet Writers, Olesha famously declares himself a beggar to convey his sense of alienation and social uselessness.

appeal humbly to those in power: "Intercede [for me]!"[418] imitating the pitiful little man of Russian literature. In his rhetoric, there's an exaggerated sense of self-pity and pointed eccentricity, as well as authentic, essentially humanistic appeal.

Vampilov comes to literature from the periphery, both geographical and ethnic, and exemplifies a state of otherness against the backdrop of the "official iconic uniformity"[419] of Socialist realism. Being partially of Buriat origin, Vampilov was raised in the East Siberian village of Kutulik. The dramatist used to say that he "was born in Asia,"[420] deliberately separating himself from the capital or near-capital literati to highlight his individuality and infuse his art with authenticity, novelty and freedom that shaped his artistic credo and outlook on life.

By the time he finished *Duck Hunting* Vampilov had published only a book of stories and one full-length play, *Farewell in June* (*Proshchanie v iiune*, 1964), which was performed in several provincial theaters. Vampilov understood that unless his plays were to be staged in the capitals he did not exist as a dramaturg; that he was dead in the literary sense. Even though Vampilov was one of the most gifted young playwrights of his time, "it was horrendously difficult for …[his] plays to reach the stage."[421] The two years that he was working on *Duck Hunting* (1965-67) were permeated with a sense of despondency and insecurity: the playwright Vampilov was not yet born for the capital theaters. His initial attempts to get directors of Moscow and Leningrad interested in his work were unsuccessful. Ultimately, only posthumously did he gain national recognition. Shortly after his death in 1972, the so-called 'Vampilov boom' followed, when almost every theater in the country was staging at least one of his plays.[422]

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[418] This is a direct quote from Vampilov's letter to the dramatist Aleksei Simukov asking him for help in getting his play *The Elder Son* through the censor: "Алексей Дмитриевич! Вы нянчили обе пьесы, вы всегда были ко мне добры. Заступитесь!" Quoted in Vampilov, "Notes," *Izbrannoe*, 732.
[419] Boym, 21.
[420] "Я ведь родился в Азии." Quoted in Rumiantsev, 148.
[421] Smeliansky, "Preface," xxi.
[422] At this time Vampilov's writings were translated and staged in Europe and in the USA.

The bureaucratic obstacles that beset Vampilov in the late sixties reflect a broader context of sociocultural and political conditions of life and the tightening of literary and theatrical censorship in the late '60s and early '70s. Vampilov's correspondence with Elena Iakushkina[423] during 1965-72 allows us to reconstruct his debilitating fight for literary existence, which dominated his career up to 1970 and informed the author's tragic perception of himself as a "foundling"[424] of Soviet dramaturgy.

Vampilov's self-irony resurfaces throughout his correspondence, accentuating the author's sense of marginality and masking his uneasiness with a range of derisive epithets: a "distant relative," an "orphan," an "adopted son."[425] The author deliberately inverts the meaning of his words by switching registers and oscillating between clarity and obscurity, falsity and truth, irony and authentic feeling. For example, he combines a bombastic tone with an apologetic one and thus, discredits any attempt to take his words at face value: "generously forgive Your 'distant relative' for his poor manners. It's hard to be *comme il faut*. We have bears here, exclusively white bears."[426] Here he activates one of his frequent subtexts—his provincial origin, playing on the geographical and moral connotations of the concept "provincial" in the Russian cultural memory. In fact, his self-deprecation, only serves to "disguise his superiority"[427] over his counterparts whose talent was tempered in the capitals.[428] His tone, however, lapses into buffoonery only momentarily, and quickly recovers its seriousness. The volatility of Vampilov's writing style, which powerfully

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[423] Elena Iakushkina, the head of the literary section of the Ermolova Theater, was Vampilov's close friend and his guide in Moscow theatrical circles. They met in 1965 when Vampilov attended advanced courses at the Gorky Literary Institute in Moscow.
[424] "Подкидыш." Vampilov, "Letters," 697.
[425] "Дальний родственник," (698) "круглый сирота," (706) "ваш «приёмный сын»" (697). Vampilov, "Letters," *Izbrannoe*.
[426] "Простите великодушно Вашего «дальнего родственника» за скверные манеры. Трудно быть комильфо. У нас тут медведи, одни только белые медведи." Ibid., 698.
[427] Ivanov, "Preface to the English Edition," vii.
[428] As Vampilov observes, "Poets are born in the provinces, in the capital they die." Vampilov, "From His Notebooks," 666.

communicates his oscillation between several mental planes, provides insight into his utilization of modernist devices in drama for creating an intrinsically ambivalent character, Viktor Zilov, as his double. In 1965 he begins to work on *Duck Hunting*, a tragicomedy, in which the main character, much like his author, "got used to passing off the sad as comic."[429]

Characteristic, in this respect, is Vampilov's reaction to his "literary birth" in 1972 when a favorable review of his dramatic work by G.A. Tovstonogov appeared in "*Literaturnaia gazeta*". Vampilov regarded this incident as ~~a~~ proof of his recognition: "Let some people try to say now that there is no such author of plays. Who will believe them?"[430] His disparaging self-reference "such author of plays" only camouflages his strong emotion: it betrays his fear of non-existence, against which he struggled through the good part of the sixties. Another example relates to Vampilov's reaction to the first publication of *Duck Hunting* in the almanac "*Angara*" in 1970: "Although as such, this play now exists after all."[431] Both examples reveal Vampilov's reliance on the printed word: if it is printed, it exists. In bureaucratic circles, the fact of publication was often the first step in securing approval for stage production. In many cases, the work's appearance in print served as an affirmation of its value and as further proof of its compatibility with the demands of censorship.[432]

For Vampilov, his future as a dramatist very much depended on his ability to preserve the individuality of his style and artistic vision. His highest prerogative in art was to convey the truth;

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[429] "Привык грустное выдавать за смешное." Vampilov, "From His Notebooks," 649. Dina Shvarts, the head of the literary section of the Bolshoi Dramatic Theater in Leningrad, also remarks on Vampilov's manner of "draping that which is emotionally touching in humorous form." See Shvarts, Dina. *Dnevniki i zametki* (Sankt-Peterburg: Inapress, 2001), 271.

[430] "Пусть теперь некоторые попробуют сказать, что нет такого сочинителя пьес. Кто им поверит?" Quoted in Shvarts, 271-2.

[431] "Хоть так, да всё-таки эта пьеса теперь существует." Vampilov, "Letters," 719.

[432] In both pre-revolutionary Russia and the Soviet Union, there were two levels of censorship for theatrical works. A play could be published if it passed the regular censorship, but it could only be staged if approved by a second, more stringent, censorship committee.

not from the position of an observer or Tolstoian omniscient narrator who is beyond morality, but from the moral standpoint of the insider, as one of those individuals that he portrays in his plays. After 1967, unnerved and dispirited by bureaucratic delays and the absurdity of critical attacks, unable to work in a suppressed atmosphere,[433] he repeatedly talks in his letters about committing literary suicide, i.e. stopping writing plays for good, because he senses that the artist cannot and should not make compromises. As V. Rasputin summed up the author's role in *Duck Hunting*, "the hero is allowed to lie—the author is not."[434]

To sum up, *Duck Hunting* can be called a "tragic culmination"[435] of Vampilov's career, his own threshold as well as his character's. Vampilov disagreed that his play "lacks a protagonist with whom we can sympathize."[436] The play's main theme is metaphysical: it is the power of conversion and compassion through catharsis. By insisting that "we *are* like this" he intended the audience to reflect on his character's suffering, his potential, and his innate humanity—to call it "*my* drama." As I have shown, the author reinvents himself in his hero through creative defacement. By focusing on the process of self-examination and awakening of a spiritually numb individual Vampilov projects on his protagonist his own despair, angst and sense of marginality, bringing to light the absurdity of this life.

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[433] Vampilov's correspondence with Elena Iakushkina contains an excerpt from the discussion of his *play The Elder Son* by the censorship committee, as well as Vampilov's response to it. The playwright finds their criticism self-contradictory and interprets it as a "systematic attitude to all my plays as a whole." See Vampilov, "Letters," 703-7. "It feels like a funeral," Vampilov would write to Iakushkina in May of 1969, unnerved by the silence and perpetual state of uncertainty regarding the fate of his plays. See Vampilov, "Letters," 708.

[434] "Герою позволяется лгать—автору нет." Rasputin, V. "Preface" in Vampilov. *Izbrannoe*, 10.

[435] "Трагическая кульминация." Lakshin, V. "Dusha zhivaia" in Vampilov, *Izbrannoe*, 12.

[436] "Уязвимость пьесы в том, что она лишена героя, которому могли быть отданы наши симпатии." Solodovnikov, A. "Zhizn bez gorizonta." *Sovetskaia kultura* (1978), 4.

Conclusion

In Vampilov's 'existentialist' plays of the 1960s I see a continuity of the early Soviet tradition of the grotesque, absurd and fantastic, which stood in opposition to Soviet official drama and its conceptions of human beings as faceless functions of society. The modernist line of the 1920s and early '30s, deeply rooted in grotesque, was interrupted and repressed by Socialist realist practice in the 1930s. This tradition was eventually resurrected in old and new forms in the nonconformist literature of the 1960s-80s in the writing of A. Vampilov who has lived through an "interminable bureaucratic nightmare,"[437] and Venedikt Erofeev whose works were not allowed to be published or staged in the Soviet Union, very much like their inspirational sources from the twenties. Both Olesha's and Erdman's plays address the many problems of social readjustment created by the national upheaval of their day, in which the Soviet hero is promised fulfillment only through his acceptance of the institutions and values of the Soviet status quo. By contrast, Vampilov's works, created several decades later, transport us to the time of decay and deterioration of the Soviet system and offer a terrifying account of the state of "spiritual bankruptcy"[438] that consumed its citizens. The three plays question the possibility of changing human nature through socialist revolution—a call for readjustment of consciousness (*perestroika soznaniia*),[439] which was required of the dramatists themselves.

Contrary to the conventions of Socialist realism, these plays combine sublime with grotesque moods and demonstrate certain features of the romantic tradition. They have something in common with the bold versatility of Shakespearean theater, which freely mingles high with low,

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[437] Paloff, 4.
[438] "Духовное банкротство." Vampilov, "From His Notebooks," *Izbrannoe*, 635.
[439] The term "to readjust" (in Russian *perestroit'sia*) was frequently used in the criticism of the fellow travelers (*poputchiki*). See for example Kirpotin, *Proza, dramaturgiia i teatr* (1935). Olesha also refers to an expected shift as "readjustment of consciousness" (*perestroika soznainia*). See Olesha, *P'esy*, 267.

tragic with comic, and resists a uniform representation of the human condition. The modern hero, cast in the opportunistic mold, is compelled by the circumstances to go against the dogmatic protagonist of Socialist realism, and his grotesque and tragicomic portrayal serves as a token of his estrangement from Soviet reality. Nevertheless, the character's pathos of nonconformism lends romantic glamor to his underprivileged status and enriches the humanistic bent of the play.

The device of faking suicide in the plays relies on these very staged instances of dramatic irony, rather than on something that maps to the organic human experience of developing suicidal ideation. In Erdman's play, for instance, it starts on a whim, as a teenage tantrum that grows into emotional blackmail. Olesha's protagonist is driven by self-pity and egotism and never had a genuine attempt at suicide. In *Duck Hunting*, a chain of surreal circumstances leads the hero to act out his suicide with his rifle, but in doing so, he never loses sight of his audience, even if it is his own self. Yet the dramatic effect depends on the character's feelings to be genuine in order to provoke inner change and to transform the ongoing comedy of errors into the tragifarce—"the presentation of a distorted reality, in which absurd and fantastic things have tragic consequences."[440]

It should be recalled that the plays under discussion—Olesha's *The Conspiracy of Feelings*, Erdman's *The Suicide*, and Vampilov's *Duck Hunting*—are essentially situational comedies, with a fixed set of characters and a number of alternating settings. Only at the end the comedy forces its way into life, and everything is turned around and comes alive, disfigured by the intrusion of genuine shock and awe of the spectators who themselves feel like they are on the edge, only one step away from witnessing the real suicide onstage. This transformation resounds with the tragic

[440] In her book *The Russia Tragifarce: Its Cultural and Political Roots*, Julia Listengarten offers a definition of the genre of tragifarce, germane to the Russian dramatic tradition, which has a lot in common with Gogolian tragic grotesque. See Listengarten, 14.

theme of the author's confession. Human folly and the absurdities of daily survival serve as an inexhaustible source of the comic in the play. However, despite frequent instances of humor, the human note is audible throughout, and "through the grotesque the tragi-comic is manifested in the commonplace; and the commonplace of everyday life [is] transcended."[441]

Tragedy "is concerned with waste and destruction,"[442] but that is not the final message in these Soviet plays. Tragicomedy, as David Hirst points out, "sees evil, the corrupt potential of humanity, the danger; but refuses to accept that it must triumph,"[443] refuses to accept the status quo. This philosophical conception was shared, among others, by Griboedov, Gogol, Sukhovo-Kobylin, Chekhov, and their Soviet descendants: Olesha, Erdman, and Vampilov, who, through the line of grotesque modernism, continued to challenge the cultural assumptions and conventions of society. The three plays, therefore, could be more accurately attributed to the genre of tragifarce, which allows us to fully explore the character's dramatic potential for ambiguity and shapeshifting through the use of grotesque.

Although the playwrights demonstrably avoid denouements with real death by preserving a balance between the tragic and the comic, the inherent controversy of the act of suicide generates a rich cultural subtext in each of the plays. The dramatists' choice of fake suicide as a transformation device rests on the assumption that "both culture and concrete individuals experience and interpret suicide as a symbolic act that illuminates fundamental problems of human existence."[444] The author sets up his protagonist to transcend reality through the latter's right to commit suicide and whose near-death experience endows him with a revelation of life's true value. In the Soviet context, the character in his attempt to channel existential crisis, is "longing for

[441] Meierkhold, *Meyerhold on Theater*, 142.
[442] Hirst, 122.
[443] Ibid.
[444] Paperno, 17.

another identity in order to be oneself,"[445] and not a new person. The function of the dramatically attempted suicide is to imbue him with the necessary freedom to do so. Only from behind a mask are these characters able to transcend fear and oppression and articulate recognition of their own suffering. This half-fake, half-authentic performance of the person verging on suicide guides the character's transformation through a cycle of symbolic death and resurrection, through the stages of recogntion, articulation, and liberation in each of the plays. The character (and the author) needs a symbolic death in order to be reborn; needs to destroy his identity in order to reincarnate in the new form.

In the twentieth century, the suicide theme in drama as a transformation device, which brings the plot to reversal, is intrinsically connected with the concept of selfhood and struggle for survival in response to the Soviet experience. By the late 1920s, with the consolidation of the Bolshevik government fully underway, as Nikolai Erdman's character keenly put it, "only a dead man can say what a live man thinks."[446] The ideal candidate for this role becomes a prospective suicide, whose final hour is announced and who in the meantime, decides to re-examine his life. Thus, the hero's unconditional freedom of expression is achieved, paradoxically, through his intention to kill himself. The thought of impending death ultimately liberates the character, empowers him with the ability to drop lies and pretense, and above all, obviates the need to fear. Thus, the fake suicide device is what grants one the license to express dissatisfaction with impunity. This can only be possible for an outsider who *a priori* has nothing to lose, since his hours are numbered. This is exactly the state of detachment from the worldly concerns, which

[445] Patterson, D., *Exile*, 15.
[446] Erdman, *The Major Plays*, 110. "То, что может подумать живой, может высказать только мертвый." Erdman, *Samoubiitsa*, 35.

endows him with a sense of transcendental freedom—an essential prerequisite to transformative action through the power of words—to utter a revelation that threatens to invert reality.

The character development in the plays is not motivated by psychological or ideological insights: "Their place is taken by absurd chance which makes all human decision superfluous and even ridiculous."[447] The motif of suicide first appears in the narrative as a joke, an epatage gesture, or a mistake, causing some sort of a comedy of errors with slapstick, buffoonery, and mistaken identity. Then comedy turns into tragedy when the thought of suicide, after making a full circle, like a boomerang, returns to the protagonist, making an indelible impression on him through dream (Olesha), contemplation (Erdman), or vision (Vampilov), all of which have a strong influence on the imagination and fill the character with existential terror. The experience of pain refracted through imagination, provokes in the hero self-pity, fear and disgust; he empathizes with this vision and recoils from it. This fear of death instills in him a sense of the sublime. Transcendence of the character is prompted by developing an external perspective on the self. While suicide makes one aware of one's own limitations, the experience of the sublime, "interrupts man's finitude"[448] and elevates him. The characters have to have the courage to confront, if not to answer, the mystery of their existence—the open-ended question of how to live. The answer to this question becomes a point of contention and a knot of ambiguity.

Edmund Burke maintains that the experience of the sublime is provoked by "the strongest emotion [that] the mind is capable of feeling," which is the fear of death.[449] Other powerful emotions that may cause or enhance this experience are pain, terror, danger, and obscurity. The

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[447] Herta Schmid, "Postmodernism in Russian Drama: Vampilov, Amalrik, Aksenov" in *Approaching Postmodernism*, ed. Douwe Wessel Fokkema and Hans Willem Bertens (Amsterdam: Benjamins, 1986), 168.
[448] Burke, Edmund, "A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful," http://www.english.upenn.edu/~mgamer/Etexts/burkesublime.html.
[449] Ibid. Burke's treatise presents an examination of how sensation, imagination, and judgment are interrelated in the experience of art. Burke explains how sensation, imagination, and judgment determine the experience of pleasure and pain, and how pleasure and pain are represented by the aesthetic concepts of beauty and sublimity.

sublime, then, is our strongest passion, and it is grounded in terror. Burke calls this state of the soul astonishment, "in which all its motions are suspended, with some degree of horror."[450] So, the experience of the sublime marks a moment of suspense—for some, it may result in catharsis, for some not, but at any rate, it marks a pivot of existential crisis, fearful and disturbing, followed by recovery and transformation from the near-death experience.

The character's conversion should not be understood as a permanent change, yet it draws a definitive line between one's previous mental and emotional state and the present one, however fleeting. There's no doubt, for instance, that the finale of Vampilov's play constitutes a turning point for his protagonist: the dramatist himself admitted that Zilov changes.[451] What remains unclear, however, is whether this change is for the better or for the worse. At any rate, the character's purification of emotions, however temporary, takes place.

The appearance of such type of character in the Soviet period was in many ways conditioned by the author's need to come to terms with reality. Moreover, the fake suicide device with its potential to trigger self-revelation, allows one to comment ironically on contemporary reality and introduce an alternative perspective. This type of Aesopian hero, who couldn't openly voice his dissatisfaction in the ostensibly content Soviet Union, had to find an indirect way, very much like his author, to communicate with the audience. In fact, the character's alienation from society, which is often portrayed on stage through his inability to evoke a response from others, intensifies his connection with the audience, who in this way becomes his only listener.

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[450] Burke, Edmund. *On the Sublime and Beautiful.* Vol. XXIV, Part 2. The Harvard Classics. New York: P.F. Collier & Son, 1909–14; Bartleby.com, 2001. https://www.bartleby.com/24/2/201.html.

[451] In the conversation with his editor, I. Grakova, Vampilov admitted that in his opinion, Zilov at the end undergoes transformation (*meniaetsia*). Quoted in Plekhanova, 29.

Plays appearing in Russia during the fifteen years following Vampilov's death in 1972, owe many of their features to his pioneering work: the "new wave" of dramatists of 1980s, acknowledging their debt to Vampilov, came to regard themselves as the "post-Vampilov generation."[452] The main concern of these new artistic experiments in drama and theater became people's individuality or identity, which was undermined or lost in a sociopolitical reality. With the transition to post-Soviet reality the literary culture shifted from the issues of (self-)censorship and repression, prevalent in the late Soviet period, to the attempts to understand the contemporary society. But the questions of the artist's co-existence with authorities and, more broadly, the individual's relationship with the world around him; spiritual deadness of society, remained topical—they became the accursed questions of the 'New Drama' movement that emerged at the turn of the new millennium.

The playwrights of the 'New Drama' Ivan Vyrypaev, Oleg and Vladimir Presniakov, Vasilii Sigarev continue to engage the borderline, socially poignant themes dramatizing the protagonist's ever-evolving state of liminality through the prism of black comedy and tragifarce. Their uncompromising radical plays verging on absurdity raise existential, philosophical, and religious questions about human experience, and showcase the development of grotesque and absurd satire in Russian drama in the twenty first century. The dramatists are preoccupied with portraying a "spectacle of comic agony"[453] in the spirit of the tragic grotesque, drawing on the experiments of the theatrical avant-garde as well as employing elements from the Western dramatic tradition, especially the Theatre of the Absurd. Their protagonists are outsiders and social misfits whose antagonizing and poignant manner of self-expression is also a measure of their

[452] The generation of the playwrights that were influenced by Vampiov's poetics and came to prominence after his death include Liudmila Petrushevskaia, Vladimir Arro, Viktor Slavkin, Alekdandr Galin, Aleksandr Kazantsev, Semen Zlotnikov, Liudmila Razumovskaia and others.
[453] Bermel, 2.

humanity and who against the backdrop of philistine complacency and arbitrary sadism evoke a sympathetic response.

A good example to illustrate the continuity of tradition is a black comedy by the Presniakov brothers, *Playing the Victim* (*Izobrazhaia zhertvu*, 2003), which was staged by Kirill Serbrennikov in MKhAT the year after. Reminiscent of Vampilov's *Duck Hunting* both in style and in character type, the play follows the exploits of a deeply conflicted hero who is simultaneously "drawn to self-obliteration [. . .] and radical self-assertion,"[454] and whose character development unfolds through the performance of self. *Playing the Victim* admixes grotesque, farcical, and melodramatic elements. The title itself already points to the character's penchant for self-presentation and to the absurdist bent of the play. The main character Valentin (Valia) aids in police investigations; his job is to play the victim, i.e. the dead person to help reconstruct the chain of events. However, he envisions himself a victim in real life, too, blaming his mother and uncle for the death of his father who died from poisoning. His rebellion this modern-day Hamlet expresses through provocative, innuendo-laden jokes and transgressive performance, shocking his interlocutors with unsettling improvisations to the point of appearing insane. The play's heavy use of slapstick comedy and clownish disguise of its character serve as a background to reveal the themes of despair, aimless existence, and abrasive relationships. The protagonist plays various roles "but none of these roles accords with his own sense of self." In fact, the affairs in this metaphorical State of Denmark appear increasingly disturbed: having suspected his mother and uncle in the murder of his father, Valia poisons them and also his pregnant girlfriend. The play closes on a vision of Valia reuniting with his father which suggests the protagonist's death as well.

[454] Paloff, 8.

Other plays that are emblematic of this period are Sigarev's drama *Plasticine* (*Plastilin*, 2000) and *Terrorism* (*Terrorism*, 2002), another tragifarce by the brothers Presniakov. Both plays dramatize absurdities and cruelties of life, its everyday "terrorism"—the modern existential hell of the human condition, from which there's now escape. *Plasticine* depicts the drama of a teenager Maksim, who is routinely confronted with violence and humiliation, whose only escape is making models from plasticine; giving the world the desired contours. An exposition of human pain and abuse, the play ends with Maksim's rape and shortly thereafter, murder. By contrast, *Terrorism* is absurdly humorous and cruel at the same time. Similar to *Plasticine*, the main theme of the play is human suffering and depravity of society. The scenes are organized as a sequence of chained reactions, in which one act of abuse provokes another that provokes another and so on. Both plays focus on the petty and ubiquitous nature of evil that only assumes new forms but whose essence remains unchanged.

To conclude, the plays of the new movement continue the Russian tradition of transformative drama that resonates with the absurdist effort to rouse the reader-spectator from complacency and indifference through exaggerated portrayals of the crude absurdities and provoke the inner imitation. Dramatic agenda remains to "preserve the human in man,"[455] to use Vampilov's expression: to provoke epiphany that permits a transcendence of self and an identification with the needs of others, and to hold up a mirror in which "the dehumanized society dramatized on the stage reflects the dehumanized reality the audience lives in."[456] In the twenty first century, drama continues to serve "an unmistakably Aristotelian function by allowing us to

[455] "[сохранить и приумножить] человеческое в человеке." Vampilov, "From His Notebooks," 684.
[456] Genereux, "Preface to The Suicide," 93.

experience tragic feelings without having to live through tragic circumstances."[457] As Aleksandr Sukhovo-Kobylin keenly remarked, to shudder at evil is the highest form of morality.

[457] Paloff, 18.

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