mental emptiness, the play of mirrors of its spectacle." Like Retamar's *Caliban*, Yepez's play of mirrors brings him to include not only Olson but himself; not only the United States, but also Mexico and the rest of the late-capitalist world as complicit entities within "a system of imagistic relations…in which it is possible to process, eradicate, select, or re-formulate the mnemetic."

Jose-Luis Moctezuma

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Sigizmund Krzhizhanovsky, *Autobiography of a Corpse*. New York: New York Review Books, 2013. 256pp. $15.95

Writing in Moscow in the 1920s and 30s, Sigizmund Krzhizhanovsky's fiction went mostly unpublished in his lifetime, falling victim to its author's expansive style, ironic politics, and raging bad luck. A novel accepted in 1928 was later rejected by Soviet censors; collections of stories were championed by editor friends and scheduled for production, then lost when publishers folded under political pressure. Although he ran a few stories in magazines, the only volume printed in Krzhizhanovsky's lifetime was a slim 1931 monograph, "On the Poetics of Titles," a critical analysis of naming conventions. After his death in 1950, Krzhizhanovsky's lifelong partner, the actress Anna Brovcek, wrapped his manuscripts in brocade and hid them in a wooden chest for decades, waiting for the time when they could be published. Thanks to her efforts, his stories began to run in Russian literary journals in 1989. The joyously implausible plots and strange publication history of *Autobiography of a Corpse* only serve to underscore the discomfort these stories must have provoked when they were first written. Nearly a century later, the book still exemplifies absurdism's special capacity for prepolitical work, articulating those vague but acutely felt problems that lie beyond realism's grasp.

This approach was explicitly contrarian. In 1934, at the First Congress of Soviet Writers, Andrei Zhdanov famously proclaimed socialist realism as the official state style, with the goal of all art "to depict reality in its revolutionary development." Krzhizhanovsky doggedly advanced another view—to the detriment of his publishing record—rejecting both utopianism's and realism's constraints. "*Lo posible es para los tontos*," proclaims "The Elbow Biter," describing a freak determined (impossibly) to bite his own elbow—the possible is for fools. These stories are clean, colorful, and brimming with metaphysical logic made material through the daily stuff of 1920s Moscow. They show Krzhizhanovsky's excitement during his prolific early years in the city, confronting its housing shortages, print rivalries, and the difficulties of an infant experimental state. The conceits are wonders. In "Thirty Pieces of Silver," Judas Iscariot's coins from Gethsemene slide hand to hand across

Jerusalem in an elaborate map of continual exchange. Their spending seems propelled as much by the need to buy goods as by a generalized human love of black markets and criminal exchange. In "In the Pupil," a man grows paranoid about the "little man" reflected, then residing, in his lover's eye: "Leaning out of her round pupil window…I would look under her lashes for him, love's tiny organizer." In "Yellow Coal," the sci-fi hypothesis that fear and anxiety might be harvested as "bile," to be used as an alternative fuel (and an economic kick start) feels both bitter and prescient, and the vivid depiction of "kinetic spite" in broadly drawn crowd scenes is itself a laughing kind of warmth.

Joanne Turnbull's English translations preserve not only the contrarian style of these stories, but also a sense of the time elapsed since their writing, highlighting Krzhizhanovsky's imaginative talents at the level of plot and sentence alike while retaining the remote, formal tone of his prose. In the story "Autobiography of a Corpse" a rented room offers letters to the current tenant from the previous inhabitant. The mysterious letters include meditations on convexity and concavity—in which lens geometry models how extended contemplation can blur, distort, and distance memory—along with this personal aside:

> I remember she was young, her face a delicate oval. We were reading the same books, and so used similar words. After our first meeting I noticed that her myopically dilated pupils inside fine light blue rims, hidden (like mine) behind the lenses of a pince-nez, were affectionately, but relentlessly following me. One day we were left alone together; I touched her hands; they responded with a light pressure. Our lips moved closer together—and at that very moment the absurdity occurred: in my clumsiness I jostled her lenses with mine: caught in a wiry embrace, they slipped off and landed on the carpet with a high, thin tinkle. I bent down to pick them up. In my hands I held two strange glass creatures, their crooked metal legs so entangled as to form one hideous four-eyed creature. Quivering glints, jumping from lens to lens, vibrated voluptuously inside the ovals. I pulled them apart: with a thin tinkle, the coupling lenses came unhooked.

For this narrator, obsessive imagination opens a poignant observation into a replenishing site; tricks of memory and surreal analogy transform objects into nurturing thought structures. The letter writer never speaks to the woman again. But he elaborates a full sense of the "glassily transparent cold" that pervades his life, and his words cast such a spell that the walls of the small room, seemingly haunted, squeeze in on their new tenant.

Recent literary fiction has increasingly borrowed slipstream tactics to bend the confines of realism over the knee of the fabulous. When weakly deployed this mode can feel decorative: it exposes our willingness to be in

thrall to writing alone. But there is an urgency and political force to the inventions here, and a rigor to their peripheral limitations. In Krzhizhanovsky's novel *The Letter Killers Club*, friends convene to invent perfect concepts, articulating them to one another without writing. This same faith in conjecture as an intrinsically moral form shapes the most surprising elements of Krzhizhanovsky's short stories.

Denise Dooley

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Karl Ove Knausgaard, *My Struggle: Book One*. Translated by Don Bartlett. Brooklyn, NY: Archipelago Books, 2012. 441pp. $16

Karl Ove Knausgaard, *My Struggle: Book Two*. Translated by Don Bartlett. Brooklyn, NY: Archipelago Books, 2013. 573pp. $26

In her introduction to William Eggleston's book of photographs *The Democratic Forest*, Eudora Welty writes, "They focus on the mundane world. But *no* subject is fuller of implications than the mundane world! When you see what the mundane world so openly and multitudinously affirms, there is *everything* left to say." This statement reveals Welty's enthusiasm and generosity in proposing a critical stance toward art: the mundane, twentieth-century art's predominant subject of choice, enables an attitude of openness and affirmation about the world. It also changes the artist's position in her work: if there is everything left to say, then the work of saying it, the struggle to find what there is to say, is part of the artwork. This conception of the mundane is taken up in Karl Ove Knausgaard's monster, 3,600-page work, *My Struggle*. The book's project is to record and shape an attitude towards the world, and he means to include, describe, and appraise absolutely *everything*. One sense of the title is about art: Knausgaard's struggle is to make the mundane more than mere detail and less than mere implication. The work demonstrates how an exhausting, encyclopedic style is necessary to the ethical and aesthetic ambitions of narrating a life.

The death of Knausgaard's father is the backdrop for the events of Book One. His father leaves his family and his profession, takes up with another woman long enough to have a daughter, then abandons girlfriend and infant, moves back in with his mother, and drinks himself to death. Though the style is thoroughly descriptive, including pages of uninterrupted dialogue, *My Struggle* fudges the nontrivial distinction between autobiography and novel. Knausgaard's intention to "write reality"—as he puts it—contains an implicit criticism of fiction, as if an invention were somehow insufficiently recalcitrant to the writer's craft: