

From Sign to Sound: Rendering Linguistic Play in Krzhizhanovsky's *The Poetics of Titles*

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The recently rediscovered Russian writer Sigizmund Krzhizhanovsky (1887-1950) is a stylistic master, a polyglot whose fluency in English, German, Latin, Polish, and other languages deeply informed his modernist prose. His preferred genre of “experimental realism” is now available to an English audience in Joanne Turnbull and Nikolai Formozov’s excellent translations, while Karen Rosenflanz’s keen insight into Krzhizhanovsky’s intricate paranomastic play allows readers with no access to the Russian to appreciate the skill behind his seemingly effortless virtuosity.¹ Notwithstanding these extant models and explications, every translator of Krzhizhanovsky must still sit face-to-face, or rather, page-to-page with his (mostly) Russian text and make her own creation, slowly filling her empty page with letters, taking her cue from Krzhizhanovsky to replicate, as best she can, his authorial design. But what is that cue?

This essay gives my own reflections on that problem—in the form of a craft talk on a work in progress, rather than an academic analysis of a completed project—and describes the features of Krzhizhanovsky’s own writing that helped me develop a preliminary translation strategy for *The Poetics of Titles* (*Poetika zaglavii*), Krzhizhanovsky’s 1925 (published in 1931) meditation on the function of titles that predates Gerard Genette’s own delightful, rigorous study of that paratext by several decades.²

The most important element of this translation strategy, I suggest, is sound. Now, it’s common knowledge that Krzhizhanovsky’s prose explores the literalization of metaphors and emphasizes the physicality of cognitive and perceptive processes. It’s a natural extension of this abiding concern that in both his fiction and his non-fiction, the process of reading is

1 Turnbull and Formozov’s translations include *Memories of the Future* (2009), *The Letter Killers Club* (2011), *Autobiography of a Corpse* (2013), and *The Return of Munchausen* (2016), all from NYRB Classics. Rosenflanz’s monograph, which also examines Krzhizhanovsky’s formidable erudition in the areas of mathematics and metaphysical philosophy, is *Hunter of Themes: The Interplay of Word and Thing in the Works of Sigizmund Krzhizhanovsky* (New York: Peter Lang Publishing, 2005).

2 As an aid for readers who don’t know the Cyrillic alphabet, I have transliterated all Russian text into Latin letters and italicized it.

emphatically haptic,³ sometimes even to the point of physical violence:

I walked through the bedlam of letters, my pupils drawn taut at first, then, as I tired, drawn jerkily here and there. I tried to look past and through them, but they rudely yanked my eyelids up and kept crawling under my eyelashes, ever more of them, in a continuous stream of patches and blots.⁴

He took several packs of uncut books with him. But the war invaded his plans, and instead of cutting pages he had to cut bodies.⁵

Oh, how hateful all those people seemed to me back then, the ones who disemboweled the latest editions of journals with their paper knives and surrounded my beaten, winded name with tens of thousands of eyes.⁶

So it's no surprise that voice, as a physical phenomenon, also has a special place in Krzhizhanovsky's understanding of literature and its production and reception. In his entry for "The Reader" in the 1925 Dictionary of Literary Terms, Krzhizhanovsky writes, "In the beginning, when the book was rare, it had listeners, not readers. But gradually the author's reception moves from the epoch of speech to the epoch of the eye (*iz epokhi skaza k epokhe glaza*): the sounds of words go mute and become entrenched in those conventional little signs, letters."⁷ Later in the same entry, Krzhizhanovsky writes: "The poet, though, must [...] force the reader to receive even the individual word not as a single logical sign, but as a changing flow of sound."⁸ He even distinguishes titles of plays from book titles because originally, play titles were pronounced out loud: "The title of a play is different from the

3 I.e., having to do with the sense of touch. My use of this term derives from Gary Frost's article "Reading by Hand," inspired by Frank R. Wilson's book *The Hand* (1998). Frost's piece is available at <http://www.arts.ucsb.edu/faculty/reese/classes/artistsbooks/Gary%20Frost,%20Reading%20by%20Hand.pdf> (last accessed 1/5/2017).

4 "Postmark: Moscow" ("Shtempel': Moskva," 1925). Russian text in the edition of collected works, Sigizmund Krzhizhanovskii, *Sobranie sochinenii* (St. Petersburg: Simpozium, 2001-10), vol. I, p. 516. This edition will be referred to hereafter as SS by volume and page number. All translations are my own.

5 "The Phantom" ("Fantom," 1926), SS II, 551.

6 "The Letter Killers Club" ("Klub ubiits bukv," 1926), SS II, 13.

7 "The Reader" ("Chitatel'," 1925), SS IV, 691.

8 *Ibid.*, p. 693.

title of a scientific treatise, a novel, a novella, or anything else, in that it is exceptionally sensuous. I emphasize that word. In Shakespearean times, that title went out into the street with a drummer and a trumpeter. [...] It was a sound title.”⁹ In the syllabus of his Literary Studio for Young Writers in Kiev in the early 1920s, he writes, “language is essentially speech (*skaz*), not soundless letters.”¹⁰ Scholars have also noted Krzhizhanovsky’s attention to sound: Irina Belobrovtsseva has examined the way he creates a phonosphere out of repeated sounds, syllables, suffixes or roots, and words, in order to highlight semantic rhymes, parallels, or echoes, concluding of his stories that “the author counted not only on them being read (*de visu*), but on them being read aloud (*de auditu*).”¹¹ And finally, we mustn’t neglect biography: in his youth, Krzhizhanovsky trained to be an opera singer.¹²

Given Krzhizhanovsky’s emphasis on the physical nature of language and reading, it is especially poignant that, in his lifetime, there was a drastic reduction in the need for physically handling instruments in order to make or consume books, since the paper knife and the compositor’s stick went from being tools required to make and read books to being outmoded encumbrances, or at best, souvenirs. But as far as translation is concerned, Krzhizhanovsky’s continual emphasis on physicality, his specific interest in the physicality of the voice and sound, indicates that the target text should reproduce, where possible, the extent and effect of the original’s audible soundplay.

Sound clearly influences Krzhizhanovsky’s idiolect. Take the sentence, “*Bezlitstost’ ochelovechivshegosia This and That peredalas’ i litsevym listam knig*” (literally, “The facelessness of a personified This and That is transferred to the face pages of books”).¹³ He plays on *litso* (face) and *list* (sheet, page, leaf), but he also lends the sentence a palindromic structure by creating the word *bezlitstost’* for the beginning, to be echoed by *litso* at the

9 “The Play and Its Title” (“P’esa i ee zaglavie,” 1939), SS IV, 622. “Sound” in this case is used to distinguish it from “silent,” as in silent film and sound film.

10 SS IV, 810.

11 Irina Belobrovtsseva, “Uslyshannyi mir: o ‘fonosfere’ Sigizmunda Krzhizhanovskogo,” *Toronto Slavic Quarterly* 14 (Fall 2005). <http://sites.utoronto.ca/tsq/14/belobrovceva14.shtml>. Last accessed 10/31/2016.

12 From a presentation given by Vadim Perelmuter at the symposium *Planting the Flag: The Nonfiction of Sigizmund Krzhizhanovsky* (held 10/21-22/2016 at the University of Indiana at Bloomington).

13 “The Poetics of Titles” (*Poetika zaglavii*, 1925), SS IV, 23.

end. That is, instead of using the perfectly reasonable and widely used *bezlikost'* (anonymous),

prefix *bez-* [without] + Old Church Slavonic root *lik**
[face] + abstract noun suffix *-ost'* [ness]

—where, let's admit, the morphological links between *lik** and *litso* would've been enough for most writers, he makes these ties redundant by creating his own parallel, perfectly understandable, but nonstandard word *bezlitsost'* (anonymous):

prefix *bez-* [without] + modern Russian word *litso* [face]
+ abstract noun suffix *-ost'* [ness].

It should also be mentioned that this sentence occurs, of course, in the section entitled *Litsa i "litsevye listy"* (literally, "faces and 'face pages'"). Fortunately for the translator, the English words "face" and "page" are already assonant; rarely, every once in blue moon, a bit of the translator's work does spring fully formed out of the original words, like Athena from Zeus's head.

Krzhizhanovsky constructed other words, too, like *inskriptorny* ("inscripted," used to describe titles that are written "in scriptum," that is, at the same time as their texts) and *lakonizator* ("laconizer"); the latter presents almost no difficulty for the translator, who may scavenge from the same Latin roots at will. As far as sonority goes, when the sound-alike Russian words are both from Latin roots, then things fall into place nicely: *lakonizator leksiki* = lexical laconizer.

This does lead to a larger question, though, of how to reproduce the feel of Krzhizhanovsky's swift tacking from Slavic to non-Slavic influences and back again. The boat of his prose never stops moving smoothly forward, the wind never goes out of his sails, but the two linguistic vectors still exert their own individual forces on the text. In this case, although it's an inexact analogy, I wonder whether it might be useful to think about deploying the divide in English between Anglo-Saxon words and French ones.

But to return to the issue of sound. Let's look at the first paragraph of *The Poetics of Titles* (italics in the block quote are Krzhizhanovsky's):

Desyatok-drugoi bukv, vedushchikh za soboi tysiachi znakov teksta, prinyato nazyvat' *zaglaviem*. Slova na oblozhke ne mogut ne obshchat'sia so slovami, spriatannymi pod oblozhku. Malo togo: zaglavie, poskol'ku ono ne v otryve ot edinogo knizhnogo tela

i poskol'ku ono, v parallel' oblozhke, oblegaet tekst i smysl,— vprave vydavat' seb^{ia} za glavnoe knigi.¹⁴

Here we have the paranomastic play of *d-u-v* in *desiatok-drugoi bukvy, vedushchikh*. We also have a palindromical structure in the second sentence, built on assonance and word repetition: *slova na oblozhke* is mirrored in *slovami [...] pod oblozhku*. We have more assonance: *v otryve ot edinogo knizhnogo*, we have *oblozhke, oblegaet*—even, if you expand it to syllables, *parallel' oblozhke, oblegaet tekst*. But perhaps most insistent is the way the passage calls out the vowel sound *a*, heard twice (due to vowel reduction) in each of its keywords: *zaglavie* (title), *slova* (words), *oblozhka* (cover). Look at the same passage again, where the vowels pronounced *a* are underlined, and you'll see that a whopping fourteen of the second sentence's twenty-five syllables are based on *a* (thirteen, if you insist that the unstressed reflexive particle *-sia* in *obshchat'sia* would not be pronounced as an *a*, which it is in the Muscovite accent, but then, Krzhizhanovsky wasn't originally from Moscow):

Desyatok-drugoi bukvy, vedushchikh za soboi tysiachi znakov teksta, prinyato nazyvati' zaglav^{ie}m. Slova na oblozhke ne mogu^t ne obshchat'sia so slovami, spriatannymi pod oblozhku. Malo togo: zaglav^{ie}, poskol'ku ono ne v otryve ot edinogo knizhnogo tela i poskol'ku ono, v parallel' oblozhke, oblegaet tekst i smysl,— vprave vydavat' seb^{ia} za glavnoe knigi.

The point is that any translation that doesn't take this soundplay into account isn't working hard enough, although the best way to do the work (substitution or transference if direct replication starts to sound light or humorous?) is still very much an open question.

And there's another issue: we also have an untranslatable (into English, at least) pun on *zaglavie* (title) and *glavnoe* (the most important thing/the main thing). The noun *zaglavie*, in turn, spins off into compound nouns such as *zaglavnyi shablon* (title template; occurs once), *zaglavnyi znak* (title sign or title letter; occurs 7 times), *zaglavnyi list* (title page; 12 times) and its synonym, *zaglavnaia stranitsa* (title page; twice), even *okolozaglavnye elementy* (paratitular elements; thankfully, once). Let's not forget the non-compound abstract noun, *zaglavnost'* (titleness; once). The piece begins its final wind-down with the inevitable *samoe glavnoe v zaglavnom* (the most important thing

14 Ibid., p. 7.

is in the most important title thing), where the coining of a new adjectival noun, *zaglavnoe* (the title thing), on the model of the extant *glavnoe* (the main thing), is a typically Krzhizhanovskian idiolectic moment.

This pun (which in the body of the piece branches out to include *glava*, “head” (as in, boss) and *golova*, “head” (as in, what’s on top of one’s body), extending as far out as *ozaglavlyvatel’*, “the one who gives a title”) might be considered the piece’s main theme, while a harmony or counterpoint is the recurrence of *titulblat* (title page; occurs 11 times) or *titul’nyi list* (title page; occurs 3 times).

It’s helpful to think of these repeated words and word variations in musical terms; but instead of a leitmotif, it is, as Martin Buber identified it, a Leitwort (or, in this case, Leitwörter).

By Leitwort I understand a word or word root that is meaningfully repeated within a text or sequence of texts or complex of texts; those who attend to these repetitions will find a meaning of the text revealed or clarified, or at any rate made more emphatic. As noted, what is repeated need not be a single word but can be a word root; indeed, the diversity of forms often strengthens the overall dynamic effect. I say “dynamic” because what takes place between the verbal configurations thus related is in a way a movement: readers to whom the whole is present feel the waves beating back and forth.¹⁵

Again, notice here the emphasis on physicality: the effect is *dynamic*; readers *feel*.

Most important, though, is how to render a sound palette that reflects these two constellations of words, all based on either the Slavic root *glav** or the Germanic word *titul* (where the Slavic root is, understandably, more lexically, semantically, and paranomastically productive). Unfortunately, the best English can do for *glav** is to split it into two roots, one bearing the semantic weight of “title,” the other carrying the sense of “main”; this necessarily kills the “dynamic effect” of the repetition of the sound. Even more unfortunately, this solution also complicates the secondary Leitwort of *titul*, since its translation—“title”—is identical to the translation of the primary Leitwort, *zaglavie*: “title.” The pleasing interplay of the original’s color palette (to use

15 Martin Buber, “Leitwort Style in Pentateuch Narrative,” in *Scripture and Translation* (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1994), p. 114. I am grateful to Ben Paloff for introducing me to Buber’s term.

a visual metaphor to express a phenomenon of sound) seems doomed to be rendered in black-and-white in its English version.

I hope that in this case, sound can again come to the rescue. We remember that sometimes, Krzhizhanovsky specifically uses one of the four synonyms open to him for “title page” (*zaglavnyi list*, *zaglavnaia stranitsa*, *titulblat*, and *titulnyi list*) because of its sonic palette. For example, in *po trebovaniu titulblata* (by the title page’s demands) and *bumazhnyi kvadrat titulblata* (the paper square of the title page) it’s clear that *titulblat* is the only option that provides the *as*, *bs*, and *ts* needed for the assonance and/or consonance.

In this sense, I wonder whether aiming to repeat a kind of “Leitlaut,” when a proper Leitwort is unavailable, might be one way of providing a similar dynamic, of making the target text feel/sound more like the source text. So I tried it out, translating *zaglavie* as “title” and *glavnyi* as “vital.” My current rendering:

We commonly call a couple dozen letters pulling thousands of characters’ worth of text behind them a *title*. The words on the cover can’t help but converse with the words tucked under the cover. Moreover, since the title is not discrete from the entirety of the book’s body, since in conjunction with the cover it does enclose both text and meaning, it’s entitled to our regard as the book’s most *vital* part.

This all may change, based on how the rest of the translation goes. And this first passage, although among the densest in *The Poetics of Titles*, is by no means the only challenge. Too, the very strategy I’m proposing creates its own challenges: how do you know when it’s enough?¹⁶ Too much rhythm, alliteration, assonance, or other patterning can be distracting, detract from the point. I suppose that after arming myself with as much knowledge as I can, and testing how various word combinations sound rolling off my tongue, I’ll ultimately have to count on my ear.

16 My thanks to Russell Scott Valentino for posing this question, to which I still don’t have an adequate answer. I am grateful to Jacob Emery and Sasha Spektor, who convened the Sigizmund Krzhizhanovsky symposium at the University of Indiana at Bloomington (Planting the Flag: The Nonfiction of Sigizmund Krzhizhanovsky, Oct. 21-22, 2016), where I was able to present a version of these remarks, and to everyone attending, from whose comments I learned a great deal.