

Academic Biography in the Context of the Anti-Formalist Campaign of the 1930s¹

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Abstract

The paper is focused around two biographical themes. Theme one is history of demolishing Leningrad school of dramatic theory developed in the State Institute of History of Art (GIII) in the 1920s. In 1931, the GIII was closed by a Sovnarkom resolution and transformed into Leningrad division of the State Academy of Art Studies (LOGAIS) established by the same resolution. Theme two is description of the ‘academic traumatism’, traumatic behavior and its biographical effects caused by destruction of a whole scientific trend during the anti-formalism campaign of the early 1930s. Based on archival documents (from the Russian State Archive of Literature and Art), shorthand notes and reports on discussions of the 1930s, we analyze behavioral tactics of initiators, participants and victims of the longstanding stigmatization and catalog absolutory, denunciative and repentant narratives. In particular, this paper analyzes the unpublished letter to the editors of *Rabochiy i Teatr* journal written by Alexander Slonimsky, one of the key players in development and obliteration of dramatic theory associated primarily with Alexei Gvozdev’s group and with transformation and dissolution of the leading humanities institutes. The text of the letter appears to be engrained in the complicated mosaic of measures aimed to discredit Meyerhold’s theater practice and Gvozdev as the leader of the scientific school. Deliberate misinterpretation and corruption of self-descriptions along with reconstruction of biographies are some of the most crucial factors that affected reception of cultural projects and their creators in the 1930s and later.

Keywords

formalism, anti-formalism campaign, destruction, academic institutions, biography

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«Kak vse novatorskie dvizheniya, formalizm byl zhiv predvzyatost'yu i neterpimost'yu...»
«Shklovskij govoril kogda-to, chto formalizm, idealizm i proch. – ehto vrobe zhestyanki, kotoruyu privyazali kotu na khvost. Kot mechetsya, a zhestyanka gromykhaet po ego sledam. “I tak vsyu zhizn”...»

«Iks, sobirayas' 15-go vystupit' v IRKe s dokladom o “sotsial'nykh kornyakh formalizma”, govorit: “Nado imet' muzhestvo priznavat'sya v svoikh oshibkakh”. B. skazal po ehtomu povodu: – YA perestay ponimat', chem, sobstvenno, muzhestvo otlichaetsya ot trusosti. Chto zhe – zhalet' o formalizme? Net. Budem zhalet' o napryazhenii sil, so-provozhdavshem formalizm.»

(Ginzburg, *Zapisnye knizhki* 2002, 38; 96;101; 119)

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The cultural and political destruction of formalism was unprecedented in its scope. Central and peripheral sources of such destruction are hard to identify and systematize (Plotnikov 2014). The epidemic unfolded in waves, ebbing and flowing, invading the domains of science, literature and the arts. Given the wide scope of the anti-formalism campaign, we can talk, indeed, of an extraordinarily destructive ‘concentration of efforts’. These destructions progressed along different coordinates at the same time—breaking up of close friendships in the private sphere paralleled by indictments in the public space—and underwent several phases: from the ‘rehearsals’ of the second half of the 1920s to the devastating pre-war climaxes of 1936–1939, only to resurface, after a short pause, in 1947–1953.

What did the “Thirty Years’ War” leave behind? What role did it play? It appears that an essential part of political, career, ideological expectations coincided with the uncontrolled rampancy of irrational power pervading each and every sphere of Soviet life. These expectations resonated with the energy and impulse of destruction, provoking an inner anxiety of reconsiderations and an endless psychosis of theoretically justified polarizations. Multi-volume proceedings and shorthand notes, whether published or buried under tons of other records, are physical evidence of treachery, apostasy, squealing and denunciations, of the mass-scale stigmatization that lasted for decades.

Analysis of the documents revealed the following: 1) Soviet repression mechanisms combined rational, ‘engineered’ procedures with unpredicted, spontaneous elements; 2) such organization obviously caused an extremely nervous response of society akin to clinical forms of severe mental disorders; 3) stigmatization-focused party conferences of the 1930s produced a rigid genre system. Similarity of genres consisted in uniformity of the mechanisms and methods applied: a group of members infecting each other would excruciate a selected object of destruction on behalf of the mythic ‘majority’.

In these processes, it is very difficult to go back to the very sources, to identify the reference point and the original drivers, to observe climaxes, peaks and valleys, to define precisely the impact zones and their boundaries, to see how cold, elaborate premeditation moved to the phase of zero control.

It is clear that anti-formalist events triggered by resolutions or materials published by the national party press unfolded according to a schedule, and falling behind this schedule was as dangerous as the slightest deviation from the general line. The documents disclose the ‘fanlike’ nature of expansion of such events, which penetrated every corner of the sociocultural sphere, the controlled timetable, the ‘rotation system’ in this annihilation campaign, the way meetings and discussions turned into multi-day marathons, the ‘relay baton’ handed off from one professional association to another. Special importance should be given to the cumulative nature of uniform scenarios: the major storylines divided into independent peripheral branches. For instance, a report could provoke debate. The debate, in turn, would be focused around another speech, involving either individual participants or a consolidated group. In the end, grounds for stigmatization would multiply creating a burst effect: all vectors of the campaign, coming apart and huddling back up, came together to form a meta-story of total destruction. Thousands of pages of shorthand notes and proceedings represent an enormous memorial to the ‘devastation’ genre.

Long years of devastation gave birth to a devastation narrative and provided for permanent sites where anti-formalist roles were distributed and consolidated. ‘Admission of mistakes’, ‘correction of mistakes’, ‘repentance’, ‘amendment’, ‘apostasy’, ‘turning from the disciple, follower and adherent of yesterday’ into a whistle-blower —these are the roles that mass-scale destruction psychosis rests upon. At the turn of the 1920s and 1930s, the discussion climate changed dramatically: in the new political system, the object of persecution was meant to be physically destroyed, instead of the original idea of keeping the opponent alive. Alexander Slonimsky, philologist, Pushkinist and one of the eye-witnesses of the era, wrote in his diary, “Ne stoit predpolagat', chto ehvolyutsiya proizoshla vnezapno. Perekhod ot odnih metodov raspravy k drugim zalozhen byl v samoj prirode veshhej” (Slonimsky 1962).

Further, Slonimsky recalls the fervor of the furious debate of the 1920s on the ‘formalist method’ and makes perceptive conclusions about the rise of the special military rhetoric and verbal clichés that would later inundate the language of the time. He cites one of Viktor Shklovsky’s catchy phrases frequently quoted by his contemporaries. At one of the disputes, Shklovsky addressed his Marxist opponents, saying, “U vas armiya i flot, a nas chetyre cheloveka. Tak chego zhe vy bespokoites?” (Ginzburg 1991, 146).

Slonimsky comments: Perhaps, talking about “army and fleet”, Shklovsky wasn’t referring to the Soviet state as such, which had recently launched a mass-scale campaign against the formalist school, but was making a transparent hint to Lev Trotsky, one of the Bolshevik leaders of the epoch, whose name would soon be included in the most dreadful blacklists. It is obvious that Trotsky’s article *Formal’naya shkola poezii i marksizma* [Formal School of Poetry and Marxism] published in 1923 in *Pravda* (No. 166 of July 26) had virtually declared war on formalism on behalf of the official Soviet ideology. The same year, the article was republished in Trotsky’s collection of essays *Literatura i revolyutsiya* [Literature and Revolution] (pp. 130-145) issued in 1924 in an expanded edition.

The war against formalism yielded some ‘byproducts’, too, having created a ‘factory of biographies’, ‘biographical legends’, myths and anti-myths. Participants and on-lookers on both sides of the fence ‘earned their capital’ of reputation, biography and interpretation, while attacking, defending or waving the white flag at the war. This gave rise to one of the most propagated themes, the theme of ‘corrupted biography’ (similar to corrupted files that cannot be opened with any converter software), when huge pieces of life and work would be taken out of biographies, forming gaps that couldn’t be filled. In such situations, many facts about professional activities were simply thrown away. ‘Forced’ gaps were especially pervasive in academic biographies. The mechanisms of ‘re-dressing’, as well as repeal of important events and time periods, can be clearly seen if we explore biographies of the generation whose artistic maturity fell on the pre-war era. Slonimsky is a typical representative of that generation.

Slonimsky was first of all a Pushkinist, a belletrist, and an educator. His Pushkin-oriented journey in science and literature was consolidated in the obituary (Aleksyev 1963–1966, 108-111). Up until now, researchers have been mostly referring to Slonimsky’s Pushkinist and circum-Pushkinist studies.

However, interest in Pushkin, which revealed itself as early as his university years, went along with other concerns until the mid-1930s. Beginning from 1916, Slonimsky developed friendly and strong collaborative relationships with OPOJAZ members, such as Viktor Shklovsky, Boris Eikhenbaum, Viktor Zhirmunsky, Boris Tomashevsky, and Osip Brik. Slonimsky’s name would always be mentioned together with Sergei Bondi, Mikhail Kleman, Lev Yakubinsky, Lev Lunts, Roman Jakobson, and would often be

printed in magazines of that time, like *Kniga i revolyutsiya*, *Rabochiy i teatr*, etc. It is no coincidence that *Tekhnika komicheskogo u Gogolya* [Gogol's Technique of the Comic] written in 1923, five years after Eikhenbaum's article on Gogol's *Shinel* [The Overcoat] was published, continued the formalist method of analysis. Slonimsky would focus on theory of literature and contemporary art criticism at the confluence of literature and theatre. In the 1920s–1930s, he was one of the key players in development and obliteration of theatre studies associated primarily with the group led by Alexei Gvozdev and with transformation and dissolution of the leading Humanities institutes. The latter included the State Institute of History of Arts (GII), which was closed in 1931 by a Sovnarkom resolution and transformed into Leningrad division of the State Academy of Art Studies (LOGAIS) established by the same resolution (Kumpan 2011). Quite illustrative was an episode of the total liquidation of Gvozdev's group and the dramatic redesign of theatre and historical projects managed by employees of the Leningrad sector.

Meanwhile, the 'Slonimsky's experience', his simultaneous presence in academic and literary, theatrical milieus of the 1920s–1930s, was in many ways not just typical. It was archetypal and indicative, as individual episodes of his biography allow for a comprehensive reconstruction of the destruction practices that killed the scientific school. However, the nature of these practices was extremely sophisticated and nonlinear, making us realize that we are dealing with matrix-like, network-based processes. Their 'mycelium' is sometimes hard to reconstruct, because it is not always easy to find the points of reference, the ways of expansion and mating, and the releases of 'products' of destruction from the internal, bureaucratic academic or theatrical backstage into the public, open space of newspapers and journals. Involvement of mass media mechanisms in the devastation campaign appears important and is yet to be studied.

We will start describing stages of reconstruction of destruction contexts from analyzing *Pis'mo v redaktsiyu* [A Letter to the Editor's Office] written by Slonimsky on April 27, 1931 (Slonimsky 1931, 1-7).

Although there is nothing special in writing such letters (the heated discussions of the 1920s–1930s on the one hand, and the exceptional reinforcement of the national repression machine on the other, provoked an outburst of epistolary enthusiasm in diverse social groups), the very text of Slonimsky's epistle, its explicatory and 'repentant' narrative, allows to describe and visualize the overall devastation scenario. Implementation of that scenario, together with double recording (in internal shorthand notes and reports published in *Rabochiy i teatr* in 1931), makes it possible to restore the logics (and alogism, too) behind the efforts of all participants.

Slonimsky's *Pis'mo v redaktsiyu* is a historical document, some structural and stylistic layers of which require particular commenting, so we are citing the whole letter below:

Дискуссия о театроведении в ЛОГАИСе сложилась крайне неудачно. Запутанный доклад А.А. Гвоздева направил прения по ложному пути, и центральные вопросы остались неосвещенными. Занявшись критикой доклада, оппоненты не имели достаточно времени для того, чтобы подробно аргументировать собственные положения, а попутные их высказывания своих точек зрения, благодаря недостаточной аргументации, часто приводили к неправильному толкованию. В частности, неправильно было понято и мое выступление. Что и вынуждает меня объясниться.

Дискуссия так и не выяснила, почему именно в области театра (а следовательно, и театроведения, так как теория неразрывно связана с практикой) буржуазные традиции и влияния оказались столь сильными и живучими. А от

решения этого вопроса зависела и оценка позиций театроведения в прошлом и настоящем.

Театр, как сложный механизм, нуждающийся в солидной материальной базе, всегда отличался меньшей подвижностью, чем, например, литература, которая является продуктом индивидуального творчества и осуществляется при помощи столь легкого снаряжения, как чернила, перо и бумага. Если отдельные актеры (Мочалов, Щепкин, Комиссаржевская и др.) и были иногда выразителями передовой общественной мысли, то театр в целом в большинстве случаев находился во власти консервативных или прямо реакционных тенденций (это касается особенно б. «императорских» театров). Стоит только сопоставить идеологический уровень театра и литературы. Уже с 90-х годов прошлого века марксистская мысль разнообразными путями проникала в литературу («Мужики» Чехова, Горький, вся группа беллетристов «Знания» и пр.). Тогда уже возникает марксистская критика и закладываются основы марксистского литературоведения. Таким образом, и пролетарской литературе, и марксистскому литературоведению было на что опереться.

А пролетарский театр, равно как и марксистское театроведение, приходится строить буквально на пустом месте, точнее на преодолении реакционного буржуазного наследия. До сих пор нет еще подлинного пролетарского театра (Не «Крыша» же ТРАМа!), нет и марксистской теории театра. Недаром и резолюция бригады аспирантов ЛОГАЙСа отмечает, что молодые товарищи, свободные от «гвоздевичины», «не сумели противопоставить марксистско-ленинские театроведческие воззрения господствовавшей в дискуссии эклектике». Почему не сумели? Потому что нет еще марксистско-ленинской практики театра, а теория без практики невозможна. Отыскать зародыши этой практики (так, как это сделала литературная дискуссия), определить метод театра и театроведения — вот задача, которая стояла перед дискуссией и которую она ни в малой мере не выполнила, увлекшись личной полемикой с Гвоздевым.

Сказанное объясняет, почему и театр и театроведение до сих пор не могли еще освободиться от буржуазных влияний, засилье которых идет гораздо дальше, чем это кажется с первого взгляда. Традиции реакционной буржуазной драмы, помимо сознания драматурга, сказываются в таких пьесах, которые провозглашаются чуть ли не образцом пролетарской драматургии. А это опаснее всего, так как ведет к дальнейшему укреплению вредных буржуазных влияний и в драматургии, и в театре. Трезвое признание нищеты гораздо полезнее, чем мечтательное богатство.

В связи с этим приходится рассматривать и вопрос о буржуазных течениях в театроведении. Все театроведение пока что в той или иной степени находится под влиянием буржуазных теорий. Внутри этого буржуазного театроведения можно различить только два основных направления: попутническое и реакционное. С этой точки зрения и следовало подходить к оценке вчерашнего дня, для того чтобы на основе полного понимания этого вчерашнего дня, определить наше *сегодня* и строить наше *завтра*. Без всестороннего учета всей обстановки, непрерывно менявшейся на протяжении революционных лет, не поможет никакая «самокритика», особенно если она принимает слепой, панический характер.

Меня обвиняют в «воинствующем формализме» за попытку объяснить историческую роль мейерхольдовского «Ревизора». Но те, кто клеймят сейчас, в 1931 г., мейерхольдовского «Ревизора» и его защитников, забывают об одном: о расстановке классовых сил на театральном фронте в 1926 г. Никто не станет выдавать «Ревизора» за пролетарский спектакль. В этом спектакле ярко выразились настроения мелкобуржуазной интеллигенции. Но какой? Той самой, которая сейчас выдвигает *левых попутчиков*. Кто решится оспаривать право Мейерхольда, с которым недаром до последних своих дней солидаризировался Маяковский, на титул *левого попутчика*, если не союзника?

Отрицающие за Мейерхольдом это право должны были бы прямо указать, что же именно противостояло «Лесу» и «Ревизору» как пролетарское искусство (или как зародыши его). Но этого ни разу не сделали сегодняшние критики Мейерхольда и его бывших «соратников». Не сделали, потому что им пришлось бы откровенно ссылаться на «Конец Криворыльска».

Историческая оценка боев вокруг Мейерхольда должна была бы стать предметом особого исследования, и главный упрек, который нужно адресовать А.А. Гвоздеву, в том и заключается, что он непростительно смазал значение этих боев, впервые размежевавших различные театроведческие течения. Точно так же нельзя разрешить всю мейерхольдовскую проблему сплеча и бросить обвинения в «воинствующем формализме» тем театроведам, которые желают добросовестно в ней разобраться. И какая непоследовательность! В № 10 «Рабочего и театра» в рецензии В. Голубова «Последний, решительный» в постановке Мейерхольда называется (при всех оговорках) «крупной победой советского театра». Что ж, спрашивается, разве «Последний, решительный» не находится в исторической связи с «Ревизором»? А если так, то обвинение в «воинствующем формализме» может ложиться и на тов. Голубова и на редакцию, поместившую его рецензию?

Главные грехи «гвоздевщины» (из которой я себя не исключаю) заключаются совсем не в защите Мейерхольда, а в злоупотреблении «левой фразой» и в провозглашении самодовлеющего театрального искусства, независимого от литературы. Театральный сепаратизм неизбежно толкал ленинградских театроведов в формализм, а то и в прямую реакцию, тем более опасную, что она прикрывалась крайне заносчивой «левой фразой». Вот в этом грехе я рад покаяться, так как давно его осознал.

В заключение должен со всей решительностью отвергнуть попавшее в отчет утверждение Гвоздева относительно моего будто бы «нежелания учиться у марксистов». Утверждение это просто неслепо. Ничего подобного я не высказывал, что можно установить по стенограмме.»²

² The debate on dramatic theory in LOGAIS was far from successful. Gvozdev's confusing report took the discussion the wrong way, while the central issues remained uncovered. Having plunged into criticizing, the opponents had no time to argue substantially their own points, while the opinions they dropped in-between were often misinterpreted due to insufficient argumentation. Specifically, my speech was misinterpreted, too, which makes me feel necessary to explain myself.

The debate never found out why it was in theater (and, hence, in teatrology, as theory is inseparably associated with practice) that bourgeois traditions and influence turned out to be so persistent and strong. Meanwhile, answering this question would have determined assessment of dramatic theory principles in the past and at present.

As a complex mechanism that constantly requires a solid material base, the theater has always been less flexible than literature, for instance, which is born through individual creative work with a help of paper and a simple ink and quill set. While individual actors (Mochalov, Shchepkin, Komissarzhevskaya, etc.) have sometimes served a mouthpiece for progressive social thinking, the theater itself has been mostly and largely dominated by conservative or blatantly retrograde trends (this is especially true for former 'imperial' theaters). One has only to compare the ideological level of theater and literature. Marxist philosophy has been pervading literature in many ways since as early as the 1890s (Chekhov's *Muzhiki* [Peasants], Gorky, all *Znaniye* belletrists). It was then that criticisms of Marxism were born and the foundation for Marxist literary studies was laid. Therefore, both proletarian literature and Marxist literary studies had a solid base to rest upon.

Contrariwise, proletarian theater, just as Marxist dramatic theory, has to be built literally from scratch, or rather from suppressing the retrograde bourgeois heritage. So far we don't have a true proletarian theater (TRAM's *Krysha* [The Roof] is definitely not an example! (Author's note: This is about a comedy written by A.N. Gorbenko, a young Komsomol playwright. The play was first performed on November 21, 1925 in the Gleron House of Communist Youth Education, stage director

M.V. Sokolovsky, designer A.F. Zonov. The team of young communist playwrights, including A. Gorbenko, N. Lvov, I. Skorinko, P. Marinchik and others, produced plays specifically for TRAM, touching upon the pressing issues of everyday and cultural life of youth workers. TRAM is an abbreviation for Workers' Youth Theatres (Teatr Rabochey Molodyozhi), which were growing out of amateur-talent groups of workers, beginning from the mid-1920s. The Leningrad TRAM, headed by Sokolovsky in 1925–1933, was the first professional theater of young workers. In 1936, the TRAM was merged with the Red Theater to form the Leninsky Komsomol Leningrad State Theater) or Marxist teatrology. It's no coincidence the team of LOGAIS post-graduate students point in their resolution that young comrades who are free from «gvozdevshchina» «couldn't offer the Marxist-Leninist approach to dramatic theory as an alternative to the eclecticism that predominated in the debate.» (Author's note: Slonimsky mentions *Rezolyutsiya udarnoy brigady aspirantov LOGAIS o burzhuaznykh techeniyakh v teatrovedenii* [Resolution of the Leading Team of LOGAIS Post-Graduate Students on Bourgeois Trends in Teatrology] published in *Rabochiy i teatr* on April 21, 1931. This article will be discussed below). Why couldn't they? Because theory is impossible without practice, and there is still no Marxist-Leninist theater practice. The goal of the debate was to find the seeds of this practice (just as the literary debate did) and to define the method of theater and dramatic theory. However, the debate got embroiled in personal polemic against Gvozdev and never achieved its goal.

From what has been said, it becomes clear why both theater and teatrology still cannot cast off the bourgeois trends that are much more pervasive than it seems at first glance. Traditions of retrograde bourgeois drama penetrate not only playwrights' minds but also the allegedly model proletarian plays, which is the most dangerous as it leads to further intensification of poisonous bourgeois effects in theater and in dramatic theory. Realistic acknowledgement of poverty brings much more positive results than dreaming about elusive luxury. (Author's note: Strikethrough)

Therefore, we also have to deal with bourgeois attitudes in dramatic theory. Now, teatrology is totally dominated by bourgeois theories to some extent. Inside this bourgeois science, only two major trends can be distinguished: fellow traveling and reaction. This is the point of view we should measure achievements of yesterday from and develop a thorough understanding of this yesterday to determine our *today* and build our *tomorrow*. Without a comprehensive regard to all of the conditions constantly changing throughout the revolutionary period, no 'self-criticism' will help, especially if it is blind and hectic.

I have been accused of 'militant formalism' for my attempt to explain the historic role of Meyerhold's *Revizor*. Those who stigmatize the play and its advocates now, in 1931, forget about the alignment of class forces in the theatrical battlefield of 1926. No one would pass *Revizor* off as a proletarian play. Yes, it reflects brightly the attitudes of petit bourgeois intelligentsia. But what kind of intelligentsia is that? The one that is promoting left-wing *fellow travelers* now, probably. Who will dare dispute the right of Meyerhold, with whom Mayakovski deliberately associated himself until the very last day, to be called a left-wing *fellow traveler*, if not an ally?

People denying this right to Meyerhold should specify what exactly can be opposed to *Les* and *Revizor* as proletarian art (or seeds of such). Yet, modern-day critics of Meyerhold and his former 'fellow soldiers' have never done that, otherwise they would have had to refer explicitly to *Konets Krivoryl'ska*. (Author's note: *Konets Krivoryl'ska* [The End to Krivoryl'sk] is a melodrama created by Boris Romashov and staged by Meyerhold in the Theater of Revolution in 1926. The play showed everyday life of a provincial town, its party elite, the Komsomol, local intelligentsia, the Whites hiding under false names. The play preserved features of crime chronicles. However, in 1931 Romashov was reckoned detestable even for the way he defined the theme (emergence of a new town) and depicted some of the characters (Roza Bergman, military commissary Mekhonoshev). Historical evaluation of fights around Meyerhold should be an object of specific study, and Gvozdev is to be mainly reproached for inexcusably belittling the significance of the fights that were the first to demarcate different trends in dramatic theory. Similarly, we cannot resolve the whole Meyerhold issue at one bout and throw accusations of 'militant formalism' at those dramatic theorists who are willing to sort everything out scrupulously. And what an inconsistency! V. Golubov in his review in issue No. 10 *Rabochiy i teatr* calls the play *Posledniy, reshitel'ny* [The Last, Decisive One] staged by Meyerhold "a major victory of the Soviet theater" (with all the reservations made). Well, the question now is, wasn't *Posledniy, reshitel'ny*

The document requires a number of comments:

1. First of all, the fact of publication was never proved. None of the issues of the journal included the letter.
2. It is no coincidence that the letter was addressed to the editors of *Rabochiy i teatr*. *Rabochiy i teatr* was one of the longest-running publications, by standards of its time, (1924–1937). From the early 1930s, the journal became the instrument of the Lensovet mass-media department. Its target audience consisted of young theater makers, working members of amateur-talent groups. The journal was a guidebook to the theater world, in its own way. *Rabochiy i teatr* collaborated closely with workers, professors and critics, and by the 1930s it had become one of LOGAIS testing grounds. Slonimsky and the people he mentioned in his letter organized seminars and debates together. Shorthand notes of those debates were published in the journal, which appeared every five days, so its publishing activity was rather high then. In 1935, however, the activity went down to make *Rabochiy i teatr* appear biweekly, and in 1937 the very concept was changed, and the journal became the party's instrument in the theater world.
3. Content of the letter refers to the myriads of teatrological discussions focused around the 'devastation theme'. The spring and the summer of 1931 witnessed consistent destruction of the Leningrad school of teatrology led by Gvozdev. The destruction culminated in March—April but didn't die out afterwards: almost every issue of *Rabochiy i teatr* contained 'battlefield reports', repentance letters, and reports on denunciation of idealism and formalism in theatre studies.
4. The author's title *O Meyerholde i "voinstvuyushchem formalizme"* [On Meyerhold and Militant Formalism], and likewise indication of the genre as *A Letter to the Editor's Office*, are both conventional. This is a structurally polysynthetic text: the 'extended reasoning' on historical and cultural aspects of natural discrepancy between theater and literature—a sketch of an article—is interrupted by the Meyerhold theme and then jumps feverishly, almost panicky, to accusations of Gvozdev, to attacks, self-defense, self-criticism, and self-justification. The emotional, intonation pattern of the text is no less important than its logical inconsistency.

The Meyerhold theme was pivotal for the theatrical argument of the 1920s–1930s discussed in the letter. The theme was one of the reference points for destructors' accusations. This moment was especially painful for Slonimsky and 'Gvozdev's group', as these theoreticians and practitioners had developed the closest collaboration inside their milieus by the mid-1920s. Meyerhold particularly appreciated Slonimsky's judgments and used his recommendations while working on *Revizor* [The Government Inspector]. In March 1926, Slonimsky at-

historically connected with *Revizor*? And if it actually was, could the accusation of 'militant formalism' be also brought against comrade Golubov and the editors who published his review?

The heaviest sin of «gvozdevshchina» (which I'm not dissociating myself from) is not at all defending Meyerhold, but misusing 'left-wing phrases' and proclaiming theatrical art as self-sufficient and independent from literature. Theatrical separatism inevitably pushed dramatic theorists of Leningrad to formalism or even to a blatant retrogression, all the more dangerous because it would always hide behind the exceptionally presumptuous 'left-wing phrases'. This is the sin I am happy to repent, as I realized it long ago.

In conclusion, I should reject flatly Gvozdev's documented assertion that I am allegedly "unwilling to learn from Marxists." This is just absurd. I never said anything like that, and the shorthand notes can prove it.

tended rehearsals in Moscow and delivered two lectures on the theater of Gogol to the Meyerhold Theater company. “Я считаю,” Meyerhold would say, “что из всех петербургских литераторов наиболеe точно мог бы определить нашу работу и принести нам большую пользу знанием прошлого, потому что у него очен' здоровый подхвост” (*Meyerhold repetiruyet* [Meyerhold Rehearses] 1993, 1; 258). Joint efforts of Meyerhold and Slonimsky in preparing the play gave birth to Slonimsky's article *Novoye istolkovaniye “Revizora”* [A New Interpretation of “The Government Inspector”] published in the Meyerhold Theater's collection of articles *Revizor* in 1927.

As we can see, in his letter Slonimsky refers to the common discussion context, distancing himself from Meyerhold and renouncing his own five-year-old speeches and aesthetic preferences. Still, he suggests evaluating the difficulty of war around Meyerhold from the historical point of view, making some generalizations, and only then drawing final conclusions. The Meyerhold ‘point’ was the axis for accusations of Gvozdev, a launching ground for Slonimsky to prepare his defense and attacks. “Gvozdev neprostitel'no smazal znachenie — ne samogo Mejerkhol'da — a istoricheskikh boev vokrug nego.”

5. We can also see that Meyerhold was of much less interest to Slonimsky in 1931. Meyerhold was sent to ‘archives’ and used as an evidence, a reason for accusations and legal proceedings. Meanwhile, the main accused party was represented by Alexei Gvozdev, his school and “gvozdevshchina,” the formalist symptom he had produced. This stigmatic term infests all the materials published in *Rabochiy i teatr* in 1930–1931.
6. Alexei Gvozdev, dramatic theorist, the first historian of European theater, is understudied in many ways. Gvozdev was six years younger than Slonimsky, born in an educated merchant family. He entered the faculty of history and philology at Saint Petersburg University and graduated in 1913. After graduation, he worked as a teacher in different cities and villages. In 1920 he was invited to teach at Leningrad Pedagogical University and at the same time became head of a department at Institute of Art History. He had his first article published in the spring of 1914, the article being an attack against Vsevolod Meyerhold, who would later become his idol. In dramatic theory, Gvozdev pioneered the history of Western European theater, which hadn't existed in science of the pre-revolutionary Russia (Gvozdev 1987). His contemporaries would call him the master of confusion, emphasizing his phenomenal talent of perplexing and jumbling everything up (*GIII v vospomnaniyakh* [The State Institute of History of Art in Memoirs] 2003, 134).
7. Perhaps, it is no coincidence that Slonimsky was talking about Gvozdev's inconsistent and confusing speech in the first lines of his letter. Five years before that, Slonimsky and Gvozdev had been speaking the same language. This sharing of opinions could be seen in Slonimsky's reviews of Meyerhold's plays *Les* [The Forest] and *Revizor*, as well as in several newspaper reviews (the Theatrical October program, *Zhizn iskusstva*). Yet, their relationship entered a totally different phase in April 1931. Slonimsky found himself stigmatized and ranked among those who lambasted “gvozdevshchina”, remnants of bourgeoisie, fellow traveling and misoneism along with militant formalism. 1931 was the start of stigmatization that eventually brought Gvozdev down to death in 1939 at the age of 51.

8. Reconstruction of the whole course of the destruction debate allows us to uncover every link of the chain and to assume the date when and the place where Slonimsky's letter could have been published but hardly ever was. The letter appeared within the remarkable period as a response to the *Rezolyutsiya udarnoy brigady aspirantov LOGAIS o burzhuaznykh techeniyakh v teatrovedenii* and as a new series of reports on destruction of Gvozdev and "gvozdevshchina." April 17–21–27 were the epicenter and the culmination of 'attacks' against Gvozdev's formalism. The Resolution of young researchers is worth dwelling upon. In fact, analysis of Gvozdev's report *O burzhuaznykh techeniyakh v teatrovedenii* is a sentence pronounced by disciples to their teacher. The document contains ten paragraphs. In each of them, the authors analyze every detail, pointing to all of the previous and current wrongdoings committed by the theatrolgical sector and its creator and renouncing just about everything produced by the senior generation. The narrative becomes ever more hysteric as it comes to the end, which is probably a reflection of the real situation and a fair representation of the overall state of mind of the group. "Vystupleniya chlenov teatrovedcheskoj sekcii...nosili besprintsipno-sklochnyj kharakter, dokhodya dazhe do svedeniya lichnykh schetov i vo vsyakom sluchae imeya osnovnoyu tsel'yu ne obsuzhdenie doklada po sushhestvu, a samozashchitu i samoopravdanie." Finally, the last paragraphs (8, 9 and 10) openly call for reprisal and prove that the authors were willing to take matters into their own hands, to ruin the existing community of dramatic theorists and to bring in fresh faces.
9. Following the Resolution, materials of the report-associated debate were published. The debate included Slonimsky, Izvekov, Mochulsky and Piotrovsky. Each of the speakers cast blame on Gvozdev and their own colleagues. This cascade of self-recriminations, threats and evidence finally turns into a phantasmagoria put down as a creepy scenario. There were two prosecutors in that trial: comrades Burlachenko and Suslovich (who had edged away from Gvozdev's group just in time). In that play, they were assigned the role of pronouncing the sentence. Suslovich's point was that Gvozdev the King had got absolutely naked and was kicked by other kings who had been left just as naked after the debate. "Gvozdevshchina" was subject to housecleaning and immediate extermination. The fundamental result of the debate campaign was charging "gvozdevshchina" for subversive activities.

All these documents (shorthand notes, letters, and publications) are hard to interpret, as they reveal a multi-layered context when superimposed. The letter in question is a specific prism showing several projections that disclose numerous stitches and ruptures in lives and biographies of devastation contemporaries and in the history of institutions whose demolition and rebirth on ruins creates the epos of destruction.

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