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## “I’m a Beggar in This Frightful New World”: Between Disfiguring and Fashioning of Self in Olesha’s Fictional Autobiography

This article analyses the trajectory of Iurii Olesha’s reinvention of the self through his autobiographical hero in the novel *Zavist’* [Envy, 1927] and two plays, *Zagovor chuvstv* [The Conspiracy of Feelings, 1929] and *Nishchii ili smert’ Zanda* [The Beggar, or the Death of Zand, 1930–32]. This essay examines the playwright-protagonist relationship in the context of Olesha’s stylistic evolution of the beggar character in drama who serves as authorial alter ego, tracing the process of how “one’s cultural self is both fashioned and disfigured in the process of self-conscious writing” (Boym 1991: 2). By making his autobiographical character Nikolai Kavalerov a parody of an artist, deeply flawed in moral sense, Olesha adds a layer of identity to his artistic persona and begins his self-myth of degradation. Through his character, the author enters a Nietzschean cycle of regeneration, finding creation in destruction and rebirth in death.

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*

Iurii Olesha’s notebooks bring to life an episode of his brief conversation with Vladimir Mayakovsky, in which the latter credits Olesha with writing the novel *Nietzsche* instead of *The Beggar*. Mayakovsky was punning: the word for *beggar* in Russian is *nishchii*, very similar in pronunciation to the name of the German philosopher (Olesha 1999: 145-146)<sup>1</sup>. When Olesha inno-

cently corrects this mistake, Mayakovsky dismisses the difference and ingeniously (or prophetically) equates the two notions. Following this exchange, comes the most insightful observation of Olesha who appeared to be struck by the reali-

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view, features the first embodiment of this character type. Although the novel *A Beggar* never came to fruition, Olesha continued to shape this concept in his subsequent plays. This point of view is corroborated by Olesha’s biographer, Irina Ozernaia. See her introduction, *Linii sud’by poputchika Zanda* (Ozernaia 2013: 9-55).

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<sup>1</sup> The conception of the novel about a beggar dates back to the time when Olesha was working on his play *The Conspiracy of Feelings*, which, in my

zation 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 Nietzsche?” (Olesha 1998: 106)<sup>2</sup> Indeed, Nietzsche’s individualistic conception of human being, governed by the freedom of spirit and independent from confining social conventions, is close to Olesha’s artistic credo. 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 could result in social isolation. Thus, Olesha’s type of the proud beggar becomes a new formula of portraying a rebellious character of the early Soviet period, whose goal is that of survival.

In his 1934 speech to the First Congress of Soviet Writers, Olesha famously declares himself a beggar and reveals his long-standing preoccupation with this concept, which he termed

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<sup>2</sup> “В самом деле, пишущий роман о нищем—причём надо учесть и эпоху, и мои способности как писателя—разве не начитался Ницше?” (Olesha 1999: 146). All translations from Russian my own unless otherwise noted.

elsewhere his “lizard self” (Olesha 1968: 272)<sup>3</sup>. In the speech, Olesha directly identified himself as a beggar to convey his sense of alienation and social uselessness: “I stand on the steps of a pharmacy and beg; my nickname is the writer”<sup>4</sup>. In this portrayal of his detachment from society, his role is close to that of a clown or a buffoon, placed outside of the social hierarchy. Olesha’s view of himself is shaped by the tragic perception of an ostracized artist in the Soviet country who has to “defend [his] art as an autonomous kind of exploration [. . .] finally independent of any political claims made upon it” (Mathewson 1975: 3). Hence, rather than describing one’s material status, the *beggar type* connotes a psychological and philosophical state of

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<sup>3</sup> In one of his speeches Olesha talks about so-called “lizard themes” that 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” (Beaujour 1970: 102).

<sup>4</sup> “Стою на ступеньках в аптеке и у меня кличка ‘писатель’” (Olesha 1968: 326). The text is available in English (Olesha 1967: 214).

mind and serves as artistic figuration of the concealed conflict between the individual and the Soviet system. The *beggar-protagonist*—the alter ego of the author—first appeared in Olesha’s play *The Conspiracy of Feelings* [Zagovor chuvstv] (1928), a dramatization of his earlier novel *Envy* [Zavist’] (1927). Broadly speaking, in the image of a beggar Olesha embodied the idea of homelessness of the pre-revolutionary intelligentsia.

This character emerges out of the transformed environment and in the Soviet context signifies “a change in the larger culture concerning the perception of self and the relations of self and the world” (Fuchs 1996: 8). Olesha (1899–1960) 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” (Kahn et al. 2018: 531). In his play *The Conspiracy of Feelings*, Olesha re-enacts his traumatic experience of the artist in a society that no longer values art, through the line of grotesque and satire reinventing himself in his protagonist, a homeless poet, or a beggar, which came to signify the same thing in the new hostile environment of the Soviet 1920s. In the beggar character

the playwright prognosticates his apprehensions about the fate of an artist and, more broadly, of any other-minded individual in the totalitarian state. Thus, the dramatist seeks to perform some kind of exorcism and to overcome “the psychology of the prisoner”<sup>5</sup>, as Irina Panchenko terms it, 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 feigning suicide triggers catharsis and spiritual renewal, allowing the character (and the author) to transcend the frustrating material environment through emotional purge.

In this article I analyze the trajectory of Olesha’s reinvention of the self through his autobiographical hero in the novel *Envy* and two plays, *The Conspiracy of Feelings* and *The Death of Zand* [Nishchii ili smert’ Zanda] (1930–32). This article examines the playwright-protagonist relationship in the context of Olesha’s stylistic evolution of the beggar character in drama who serves as authorial alter ego, tracing the process of how “cultural self

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<sup>5</sup> “Преодолевать ‘психологию заключенного’” (Panchenko 2018: 288).

is both fashioned and disfigured in the process of self-conscious writing” (Boym 1991: 2). By making his autobiographical character Nikolai Kavalerov a parody of an artist, deeply flawed in moral sense, Olesha adds a layer of identity to his artistic persona and begins his self-myth of degradation, in which the author through his character follows Nietzschean cycle of regeneration, finding creation in destruction and rebirth in death<sup>6</sup>.

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<sup>7</sup> to the author’s philosophical position to a self-fashioning technique in real life. Many studies investigate Olesha’s role as a self-mythologizer owing to his conscious carnivalization of life by

upholding the cult of the beggar in Soviet society<sup>8</sup>. 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 *iurodstvo*, or holy foolishness (Markina 2012). Olesha’s self-fashioning devices in creating his *constructed self* were discussed mainly in relation to his diaristic prose and novel *Envy* (Wolfson 2004, Gudkova 2008)<sup>9</sup>. While scholars tend to focus on Olesha’s exclusive status as the *beggar* starting from the early thirties, after he abandoned any attempts to bring his beggar character to the stage<sup>10</sup>, I argue that Olesha’s performative self-

<sup>6</sup> 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” (Boym 1991: 6). Zhaličeva 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 (Zhaličeva 2015).

<sup>7</sup> For example, Zhaličeva describes the beggar as a narrative device in *Envy* that either hinders or radically changes the plot (Zhaličeva 2015).

<sup>8</sup> 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.

<sup>9</sup> For the discussion of autobiographical elements in Olesha’s novel *Envy* see critical interpretations by Elizabeth Beaujour, Marc Slonim, Victor Erlich, Michiko Komiya, Galina Zhaličeva, Irina Panchenko, Victor Peppard, Nal’ Podol’skii.

<sup>10</sup> In 1933 he 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.

presentation began earlier and his stylized everyday behavior was informed by his previous stylistic experiments in drama. The artist follows the trajectory from the fashioning of self in the character to the fashioning of self in real life.

In her recent study Michiko Komiya rejects any autobiographical connection between Olesha and Kavalero, arguing that the negative portrayal of the protagonist 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<sup>11</sup>. Yet the "real-life" *person* and the literary *persona* are never identical but related, and "the figurative murder of poetic alter ego" could be considered as "the poet's own 'self-defense'" (Boym 1991:12) and an exorcising strategy. In my analysis, the author's tendency to reduce Kavalero to

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 projects himself onto his character—the beggar-*intelligent* doomed to failure in the new Soviet world. As Lydia Ginzburg points out, it is possible to present oneself through a character directly, semi-directly, and completely indirectly<sup>12</sup>. The present discussion focusses specifically on the playwright-protagonist relationship, in which the author reinvents himself in his hero through creative defacement.

In the nineteenth-century Russian cultural discourse, the word *beggar* (*nishchii*) has strong associations with the Christian concept *poor in spirit* (*nishchii dukhom*), which describes a state of mind distinguished by meekness, self-denial, and sacrifice, as one of the conditions for obtaining beatitude<sup>13</sup>. The Gos-

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<sup>11</sup> Analyzing a series of transformations of Kavalero'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" (Komiya 2018: 162-175).

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<sup>12</sup> 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 write completely indirectly: about other people and things as I see them" (Van Buskirk 2016: 8).

<sup>13</sup> 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

pel beggars are poor in spirit but rich in faith, indifferent to worldly temptations and endowed with inner freedom. While the Christian tradition elevates the beggar to a personification of benevolence and humility, the treatment of this term in the early Soviet culture has undergone radical transformation. In contrast to an epitome of Christian meekness, the beggar protagonist of the early Soviet drama in the plays of Olesha and Nikolai Erdman, acquires distinctly anti-Christian connotations: he is poor but not in spirit. Even more so, freedom of spirit is his only riches, his weapon to confront the hostile world and assert his paradoxical moral power. Thus, in modernist interpretation, the Christian tenet transforms into its antithesis, in which the beggar character is given centrality as a concept of troubled, restless personality who would not subdue his will but assert himself through transgressive self-creation. The cultural mask of a beggar allows him to resort to buffoonery in order to deviate from the script of ideology and preserve his individuality and moral wholeness. The beggar morphs into a tragicomic figure,

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the poor in spirit: for theirs is the Kingdom of Heaven" (Matthew 5:3).

who provokes and antagonizes society with his defiant behavior, yet whose revelations leave a deep mark on people's conscience.

In his fictional autobiography<sup>14</sup>, Olesha dissects the socio-historical conflict by "fictionalization of personal experience through the creation of a hero" (Van Buskirk 2016: 67), his spiritual double, to explore his misfit position through the eyes of his underprivileged 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. 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 (Kutik 2005). Exorcism is achieved through the power of words, i.e. the power of re-enactment through characters and plot. The author uses his character to "fight on paper with [his] inner

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<sup>14</sup> Rather than talking about autobiographical fiction in Olesha's writing, Elizabeth Beaujour proposes a new term, namely that we deal instead with "a series of episodes for a fictional autobiography" due to Olesha's use of self-fashioning devices (Beaujour 1990: 124).

demons” (Kutik 2005: 3)—his existential concerns and create drama, both staged and human. In Olesha’s case, the figure of the beggar as an embodiment of self-prophecy becomes the author’s mechanism to fashion and disfigure himself in his writing. Although the official imposition of the socialist realist method dates from 1934, artistic and intellectual freedom began to evaporate much earlier. From the latter half of the 1920s, the issue of censorship and aggressive attacks of the Russian Association of Proletarian Writers (RAPP, 1925–32) on *anti-Soviet* artists became an everyday reality. Furthermore, 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” (Fitzpatrick 1992: 12). Finally, the year of 1925 is generally considered to be a benchmark of the decline of independent thought since the politicization in literature and arts was becoming more and more prominent.

From the mid-1920s when literature became perceived as a form of class consciousness (Mathewson 1975: 6) and any ambivalence or neutrality were read as signs of ideological protest

(*bezydeinost’*), the situation of the writer outside of the mainstream becomes ominous. Although all of Olesha’s main works—the novel *Envy*, his three plays, and the screenplay *A Severe Youth* [Strogii iunosh] (1934)—were written technically outside of socialist realism, the pressure on writers and the propagandistic powers of RAPP and its proponents were at their zenith. Below, I trace authorial self-presentation in the novel *Envy* and subsequent two plays—*The Conspiracy of Feelings* and *The Death of Zand*—analyzing the concept of the beggar in the context of Olesha’s poetics of self.

It is common knowledge that *Envy* contains a version of Olesha’s self-portrait in his autobiographical hero Nikolai Kavalerov. Olesha admitted this affinity himself in his speech to the First Congress of Soviet Writers: “Yes, Kavalerov did look through my eyes. Kavalerov’s colors, light, comparisons, metaphors and thoughts about things were mine” (Olesha 1967: 214)<sup>15</sup>. However, instead of full projection, we deal with Olesha’s reinvention of self: rather than directly

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<sup>15</sup> “Да, Кавалеров смотрел на мир моими глазами. Краски, цвета, образы, сравнения, метафоры и умозаключения Кавалерова принадлежат мне” (Olesha 1968: 325).

mirrored, the author's self-image in the beggar is purposefully distorted. In addition to poetic sensibility, Olesha projects another trait on his fictionalized self—the fate of failure. While both author and protagonist share intense nostalgia for the old world, a substantial difference remains: Olesha is a successful writer, while KavaleroV presents an epitome of mediocrity. To the extent that *Envy* indeed contains Olesha's self-portrait, it is, as specifies Elizabeth Beaujour, a “radically self-censored self-portrait” (Beaujour 1990: 124). The question remains, however, why did the author make his “best and most favorite hero” (Panchenko 2018: 190) a failure, when presumably he had a choice to grant him a different future?

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-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” (Olesha 1983: 21)<sup>16</sup> 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.

Thus, their “demonstrable kinship” (Erlich 1994: 202) 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.” (Mathewson 1975: 15). 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” (Beaujour 1990: 125)—could be viewed as his exorcising strategy aimed at highlighting not affinity but glaring disparity between them. In *The Conspiracy of Feelings*, Olesha further seeks to separate

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<sup>16</sup> “Природа славы изменилась” (Olesha 1968: 26).



himself from his *lizard self* in KavaleroV—to play out and exorcise a possible scenario of his future life by manipulating his fate through his hero. The beggar character therefore becomes a creatively disfigured interpretation of his own persona, which grew in response to the grotesque inversion of Soviet reality where “a man with an unspoiled curiosity and an ability to see the world in his own way could be vulgar and worthless” (Olesha 1967: 215)<sup>17</sup>.

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 author and protagonist. 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”<sup>18</sup>. This is a state of inner strife that power-

fully communicates the character’s metaphysical predicament as well, as 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”<sup>19</sup>. Olesha’s personal sense of isolation anticipated the fragmentation of soviet society during the 1930s purges—the process of “systematic weeding out of undesirable members of the party and the workforce in general” (Wolfson 2004: 611).

The evolution of Olesha’s concept of the beggar continues in his last play, the fragmentary *The Death of Zand*, which tells a story of a *purged* individual, Fedor, and his subsequent fate as a beggar. It is in this play that Olesha fully explicates the mission of his beggar character, showing that the character’s decision to remain a beggar is his moral choice and survival strategy—the only way to preserve his freedom, dignity, and individuality. The guise of a beggar serves as an “imposed cultural mask” (Boym 1991: 34) which the author himself will later adopt

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<sup>17</sup> “Человек со свежим вниманием и умением видеть мир по-своему может быть пошляком и ничтожеством” (Olesha 1968: 326).

<sup>18</sup> “На грани двух эпох оказался он лишенным прошлого и не имеющим надежд на будущее. Оказался он нищим” (Olesha 1968: 257).

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<sup>19</sup> “Привык себя рассматривать одиноким” (Olesha 1968: 271).

in real life. Already in Kavalero­v Olesha paints an image of a rebel who, as the author gives us to understand, protests not without reason. Yet Kavalero­v primarily asserts himself through eccentricity of his character, which seems to be the only way to transmit his dissatisfaction. His rhetoric is shaped by his thirst for retaliation—to expose “those building the new world” (Olesha 2002: 58)<sup>20</sup> who made him a beggar. From the excerpts of *Zand* we can glean a portrait of the person who prefers to stay a beggar when he has an opportunity to resume his employment and return to normal life.

The roots of this uncompromising spirit already shaped Kavalero­v’s outlook at life. It is significant that Kavalero­v chooses to lament 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” (Olesha 1983: 21)<sup>21</sup> with Babichev and ingratiate himself with him. Kavalero­v mourns his exclusion but he also abominates his contemptible desire to reconcile himself with a con-

temptible reality<sup>22</sup>. In the pitiful protagonist of *The Conspiracy of Feelings*, the audience sees the blurry features of a person who would not choose comfort over the truth: the reasons for his morbid dissatisfaction run far deeper than reason. Such 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”<sup>23</sup>.

As mentioned earlier, in *Zand*, Olesha introduces an image of the *intelligentnyi nishchii*, the *intelligent beggar* (Olesha 1993: 144-191), a proud beggar who was unfairly purged from the workforce and who does not wish to humiliate himself in order to restore his social position. Besides, he is not afraid of voicing his strong opinions that defy the dominant ideology. The moment of Kavalero­v’s passive devastation epitomized in the words—“I’m a beggar in this

<sup>22</sup> Despite the evident success of *Envy* that brought Olesha enormous popularity, a lot of critics considered the novel and, consequently, *The Conspiracy of Feelings* as an attack on Soviet reality, a “diatribe against Bolshevism” (Olesha 1969: vii).

<sup>23</sup> “Положение человека, отказывающегося от благ жизни для того, чтобы думать по-своему, только по старому своему” (Olesha 1974: 3-10).

<sup>20</sup> “Строители нового мира” (Olesha 1968: 261).

<sup>21</sup> “Я не хочу кричать ура” (Olesha 1968: 26).

frightful new world” (Olesha 2002: 32)<sup>24</sup>—is replaced with an open resistance. Kavalero’s envy toward success of the man of action is contrasted with Fedor’s independence and contempt for those who rejected him. If Kavalero is a failure, Fedor is not—he is 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 is asked why he became a beggar, the character laconically replies: “out of honor” (*gordost*) (Olesha 1993: 160).

In Olesha’s last play, the most critical of the contemporary reality and therefore “most dangerous” (Ozernaia 2013: 19) the dramatist attempts to demonstrate the falsity of the assumption of the socialist revolution of human nature and debunk the myth about the new Soviet man. Thinking ahead of his time, he depicts the imposition of the communist state in a phantasmagorical light, dramatizing the absurdity of contemporary reality represented by the imbalance between the “strength of social forces and the decline of the individual’s power” (Van Buskirk 2016: 37).

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<sup>24</sup> This is one of Kavalero’s lines which gave the title to scene four. “Я нищий в этом новом страшном мире” (Olesha 1968: 56).

The beggar character in the play functions as a powerful outlet for voicing criticism and provides an unflattering commentary on the 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” and “it is forbidden to think” (Olesha 1993: 153). He categorically rejects popular beliefs in the progressive improvement of man’s nature promoted by Soviet culture: “I reckon, despite any technological advancements the human essence will never be transformed” (Olesha 1993: 153). Finally, he condemns mechanistic *egalitarianism* (*uravnilovka*) (Erlich 1994: 212), which was brought about by eradication of cultural and ethical norms and where “people stopped to be divided into the smart and the stupid” (Olesha 1993:153). 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 socialist dogma.

Furthermore, while the initial rejection (or purge) was 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 an honest service or becoming a beggar, expressing: "I don't want to work myself" and "I'm glad that I was fired" (Olesha 1993: 152). His resentment is reminiscent of that of another noble rebel, Griboedov's Chatskii, who one century before Olesha's beggar similarly stigmatized opportunism and moral uncertainty of social climbing in his famous pun "Serve, willingly—be obsequious, never!" (Griboedov 1961: 83) Mortified and disillusioned, Chatskii flees abroad, while Olesha's character has to "survive and endure without losing one's human image" (Ginzburg 2002: 198)<sup>25</sup> on his native soil. As Chatskii, Fedor feels himself superior to the surrounding mediocrity, but instead of escaping he has to stay proudly and *leave with a slam* only in his imagination. The play remained unfinished, its protagonist's plight—

<sup>25</sup> "О том, как бы выжить и как бы прожить, не потеряв образа человеческого". Quoted in Van Buskirk 2016: 35.

unresolved. In the early thirties, when all signs of creative freedom quickly began to evaporate, this type of character already lost its license to appear both on the pages of Soviet literature and on the Soviet stage.

While the beggar in *The Conspiracy of Feelings* and *The Death of Zand* serves as Olesha's mask of grotesque self-humiliation, this performance 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 fictional becomes real. In his 1934 speech Olesha calls himself a beggar and voices a confession that expresses the artist's true desire for freedom from politics. In the end, however, Olesha disavows his character, saying that thinking himself a beggar was mere self-pity, and reaffirms his intention to write for the radiant future. He essentially abandons his own artistic platform which is an equivalent to self-destruction. From performing exorcism in his drama by figuratively killing his poetic alter ego, the beggar, Olesha undergoes the "agony of killing one's vision and voice . . . le-

gitimizing this self-murder”<sup>26</sup> in real life. 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. Olesha goes virtually silent for twenty years after the 1934 speech. If that is not artistic suicide, what is?

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<sup>26</sup> 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” (Smelianskii et al 1999: 32).

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