

DEFYING INTERPRETATION:  
ALLEGORY AND IDEOLOGY IN JURIJ OLEŠA'S *ENVY*

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“What does this mean?” asked Kavalero­v quietly.  
“Why do you keep asking that?” said Ivan angrily.  
(Jurij Oleša, *Envy*; 1989: 112)<sup>1</sup>

Like so many passages of Jurij Oleša's 1927 novel *Envy* (*Zavist'*), Kavalero­v's question and Ivan's answer can be read as a comment on both the events of the novel and on the interpretation of the text itself. Oleša's novel belongs to that peculiar class of parodies that, according to Gary Saul Morson, target “a particular *audience* or *class of readers*” (1981: 115; italics in the original). Such parodies imply that “readers must not be too ready to accept the invitations authors extend, and that reading is an action which, like any action, can be performed responsibly or irresponsibly” (114). The object of Oleša's parody would best be termed a particular reading *strategy* rather than a class of readers; by repeatedly confounding attempts at interpretation that occur *within* the text, Oleša's novel calls into question the very possibility of interpretation *of* the text.

Given the uncertain status of interpretation in *Envy*, the novel's problematic reception in the Soviet Union of the 1920s could only have been expected. Guy Houk has argued that the controversy surrounding the novel is a sign of Oleša's “failure to recognize his culture's code” (1987: 8). While this approach is particularly helpful for understanding the polemic that *Envy* provoked, I would suggest that Oleša not only understood his culture's code, but offered the novel as a complex parody of it. Soviet citizens were under

increasing pressure to demonstrate ideological commitment (*idejnost*) and “party-mindedness” (*partijnost*). Though *idejnost*, *partijnost*, and *narodnost* (national or popular spirit) would only become the holy trinity of Socialist Realism in the 1930s, several years after the publication of Oleša’s novel, Socialist Realist doctrine to a large extent enshrined what was already becoming customary in hard-line communist criticism in the 1920s. According to Lenin, no cultural production could be free of ideological content: “The absence of *partijnost*’ in bourgeois society is nothing but hypocritically camouflaged, passively expressed affiliation with the party of the full-bellied, the party of the rulers and of the exploiters” (Mathewson 1958: 328). An individual writer’s ideological deviations were not just idiosyncratic mistakes, but eventually came to be seen as part of a conspiracy to undermine the Soviet state through seemingly innocent works of art and literature.<sup>2</sup> In effect, the problem of *idejnost*’ and *partijnost*’ reveals itself to be essentially one of interpretation: the doctrine of *idejnost*’ and *partijnost*’ insisted on the attribution of political significance to what in other times might be considered mundane.

Written in a country that considered itself encircled by hostile forces on all sides, *Envy* is replete with falsified events, enemies who exist only in the imagination, and conspiracies that prove to be mere fantasy. The novel’s parody of the paranoid obsession with hidden ideological content ultimately implicates the readers as well as the characters, obliging the readers to fall victim to the very interpretive dilemma that *Envy* portrays. Rather than “master” his readers by depriving them of key information, Oleša manipulates them with an abundance of interpretive riches. For if *Envy* is “about” anything at all, it concerns the very pitfalls that arise from overreading. Filled with discussions about the old world versus the new, the novel practically begs to be overread; Oleša’s work, however, is just as surely a “sadok sudej”, a “trap for judges”, as anything ever penned by a Russian futurist.<sup>3</sup> Readers who submit to this trap find themselves unwittingly recapitulating the very plot of the novel: like the protagonists of *Envy*, the reader projects ideological significance onto a seemingly mundane story.

*Envy* is commonly perceived as a drama of the old world’s struggle against the new.<sup>4</sup> Andrew MacAndrew’s preface to his translation of Oleša’s novel provides a particularly succinct version of this reading, in which Andrej Babičev is “the new Soviet managerial type”, Volodja, Andrej’s protégé, is “the man of the future”, and Valja, Volodja’s girlfriend and Andrej’s niece, is “the future itself”. As for Kavalarov, “Oleša’s alter ego”, he is an object lesson for the intelligentsia, his fate exemplary of “one of the possible plights awaiting a sensitive and imaginative man in the new Soviet society” (MacAndrew 1967: xii-xix). MacAndrew’s analysis is so useful (and so typical) precisely because it is so reductive. Like the heroes of a morality play, each character is rendered the embodiment of an abstract concept or a

specific social or intellectual type. Though the term is rarely used in Oleša criticism, many readers approach Oleša's work as allegory.<sup>5</sup>

"Allegory", however, is a notoriously slippery term.<sup>6</sup> Traditional conceptions of allegory as an "extended metaphor" that "says one thing and means another", or as a fixed representation of "something usually abstract [...] by something else concrete" (Clifford 1974: 4-5; Fletcher 1982: 2; Cook 1967: 99) have been challenged by the work of Maureen Quilligan, who situates allegory within the realm of word play. According to Quilligan, allegory does not "mean one thing and say another", but simultaneously expresses the "multiple meaning" inherent in the language of the text; rather than being arranged "vertically" around "different levels of meanings, [...] all allegorical narrative unfolds as action designed to comment on the verbal implications of the words used to describe the imaginary action". Quilligan's view of allegory has more in common with puns than with exegesis or allegorical interpretation; indeed, puns provide "the essential basis for the narrative structure characteristic of the genre" (Quilligan 1979: 27-28; 53; 33).<sup>7</sup> Essential to the recent rehabilitation of allegory as an art form is the distinction between allegory (a mode of writing) and *allegoresis* (a mode of reading). Quilligan argues that critical approaches to allegory must be based on "the reading of allegorical narratives", rather than on *allegoresis*, the process by which critics treat non-allegorical texts as allegories (Quilligan 1979: 32). True allegory arises only through a "polysemy, inherent in the very words on the page", rather than through interpretive explorations of the text's "hidden" meanings.

While one scholar sees the insistence on separating *allegoresis* from allegory as symptomatic of our contemporary critical *zeitgeist* (Bruns 1988: 384), isolating meaning encoded in the text from interpretations imposed upon it can be more than just an academic debate: under the right political conditions, the imposition of meaning onto "innocent" texts can bring an abrupt end to one's artistic career, and perhaps one's life. Where writers like the Serapion Brothers were adamant about the apolitical nature of their works, hard-line critics associated with such journals as *On Guard* (*Na postu*) dismissed such claims as disingenuous. "Literature in a class society cannot be neutral," resolved the First All-Union Conference of Proletarian Writers in 1925; "it must serve one or another class" (Vjačeslav Polonskij, as quoted in Brown 1969: 29). For the hard-liners, the subtle distinction between allegory and *allegoresis* would be a moot point; for them, all texts are allegories of politics, of class struggle or, at best, of the path from "spontaneity" to "consciousness" (Clark 1985: 16). To an "apolitical" writer or critic, the "On Guard" approach is *allegoresis* at its worst, but the proponents of the developing "party-minded" (*partijnyj*) criticism felt they were merely focusing on the ideological content that "fellow-travelers" hid behind rhetorical smoke-screens.<sup>8</sup> Paraphrasing Jon Whitman, Bruns calls *allegoresis* "philosophy's

way of reading” (1988: 385); in the Soviet context, *allegoresis* is the only critical approach consistent with the spirit of *idejnost*.

Though it was the political interpretations of *Envy* that tacitly placed the novel within the realm of allegory, allegorical readings of Oleša are not restricted to politics alone. Arkadij Belinkov provides the perfect synthesis of MacAndrew’s allegorical reading with the problem of the alienated artist; in Belinkov’s view, the central concern of all Oleša’s writing is the relationship between the poet and society (1976: 185).<sup>9</sup> Where Belinkov sees this conflict from a sociological standpoint, Kazimiera Ingdahl examines it in terms of “the debate on the problems of art that was central to all of Russian modernism” (1984: 10). Even when politics is not primary, allegorical interpretations of Oleša abound. Michael Naydan views ‘The Cherry Pit’ (‘Višnevaja kostočka’) as a contemporary tale of the Garden of Eden (1989: 273-285). William Harkins’ Freudian interpretation of *Envy* treats every aspect of the novel as sexually significant, from Babičev’s sausage to Anečka’s bed (1966: 443-457).

These approaches are quite persuasive, and I by no means intend to refute them. The above examples simply serve to highlight the remarkable capability of Oleša’s work to produce allegorical readings. Certainly the bulk of Oleša’s work appears to have an allegorical dimension, from *The Three Fat Men (Tri tolstjaka)* to *A List of Blessings (Spisok blagodejanij)*. The apparent allegory of *Envy* is problematic only in that it is not merely present, but too present. It is not just readers who see the stories allegorically; the characters themselves display an equal knowledge of their allegorical function. Indeed, an allegorical interpretation of *Envy* would be nearly impossible without the “complicity” of the characters; it is as though the dwellers of Plato’s cave were suddenly accorded the power to explain their plight. Andrej terms Volodja the “new man”, while Ivan refers to Valja as an “incubator” of the future. The reader can never be the first to offer an allegorical interpretation of Oleša: if we read *Envy* as allegory, it is because Kavalero and his fellow protagonists have already “read” the work in the same light. When Harkins discusses the widow Anečka Prokopovič’s role as a castrating female and sexual threat, it is Kavalero who points him in this direction: “The widow Prokopovič,” Kavalero tells his readers, “is a symbol of my humiliated masculinity” (Oleša 1989: 28; Harkins 1966: 450-452). Oleša’s strategy is to create the opposite of what Umberto Eco calls an “open” work; instead of allowing the reader the maximal interpretive leeway, the creator of the “closed” work tries to ensure that his or her creation is engaged “in the only possible right way – that is, the way the author of the work had prescribed” (1989: 5-7).<sup>10</sup> For Eco, the traditional allegorical work is almost always “closed”, since medieval allegories resort to “figures and emblems” that are already “prescribed by [...] encyclopedias, bestiaries, and lapidaries” (1989: 6). Oleša, I would argue, has his equivalent to the medieval

dreambook in the Soviet iconography that was already established by the time his novel appeared. The very phenomenon of the literary *popuťik*, “fellow-traveler”, can be seen as a tacit acceptance of the world-view expressed by *idejnost*. Soviet rhetoric of the 1920s was largely framed in terms of a Manichaean struggle between the “old” world and the “new”; to be a fellow-traveler, one did not have to successfully embody “new-world” values, but rather to accept the terms of the debate themselves, to agree that there was, indeed, a new world that was fighting against the vestiges of the old, and therefore to view everyday phenomena through the lens of this particular ideological struggle. After a decade of discussion of the “new Soviet man” and the coming triumph of the “new” world over the “old”, Oleša’s readers could be expected to interpret the novel in such terms, especially when this struggle is invoked so frequently by the novel’s protagonists.

Nevertheless, *Envy* is not allegory. The instances of complex wordplay and punning in *Envy* at times call to mind Quilligan’s definition of allegory, while the repeated connections between characters and abstract qualities such as “the new world” or “envy” suggest that the novel might conform to allegory’s more traditional definition. Yet the puns, while ever-present, do not consistently drive the narrative, and the associations between people and ideas are adopted and discarded at will. Rather, *Envy* can be considered a case study in *allegoresis*, a tale about men who insist on reading their own lives *as if* they were living an allegory. By encoding the allegorical interpretation within the thoughts and dialogue of the novel’s characters, Oleša makes *allegoresis* a part of the characters’ psychology: the “text” which the characters analyze is also the world in which they live. When translated into novelistic psychology, the dogged search for non-literal meaning that characterizes *allegoresis* becomes the conviction that everyday life is but a stage for ideological struggles and vaguely understood conspiracies. Oleša’s characters are unable to live in an unmotivated, everyday world that simply exists; rather, everything around them must be significant. This concern for meaning is most conspicuous in the characters’ pronouncements about each other. Oleša’s heroes constantly project their feelings on other people, making assumption after assumption about others’ attitudes toward them, about their hidden motives and secret desires.<sup>11</sup> According to Elizabeth Beaujour, this need to “project an imaginary control” over one’s surroundings is a reaction to the perception that the world is “malevolent and threatening” (1970: 38).

In most of Oleša’s work, this unrelenting projection does not result in *allegoresis*. For example, in Oleša’s autobiographical sketch ‘I Look Into the Past’ (‘Ja smotrju v prošloe’), Dosja, the narrator, complains of adult suspicion that “children’s conversations, thoughts, and desires always contained something indecent” (“podozrevalos’ [...], čto v detskich razgovorach, mys-

ljach, želanijach vseгда zaključeno nepriličnoe”). According to the narrator, Dosja’s parents were convinced that he suffered a psychological “disorder” of a “sexual character” (“besporjadok, imejuščij seksual’nyj smysl”), and that he “kept his hands under the blanket” (“On, naverno, deržit ruki pod odejalom”). Dosja’s response is indignant: “They were the ones who imposed this desire on me. I was always under suspicion. They looked at me, testing me, reading sexual thoughts that I didn’t have” (“Oni mne navjazывali éto želanie. Ja byl vseгда pod podozreniem. Oni smotreli na menja ispytajušče, čitali vo mne seksual’nye mysli, kotorych ne bylo”; Oleša 1965: 174-175). Unlike Kavalerov, however, the narrator is presented initially as the object of projection rather than its subject; if the narrator is to be believed, he is merely a victim of his parents’ suspicious nature. Yet close examination of the passage reveals that the source of projection is indeterminate: his parents never actually say that Dosja “kept his hands under the blanket”; rather, the words describe Dosja’s interpretation of his parents’ worried looks: “They glanced at each other; and I saw that this was the alarm expressed in their glance” (Oleša 1965: 175).

Despite the fact that he is already twenty-seven years old, Nikolaj Kavalerov, the narrator of *Envy*’s first half, seems no more secure in his relationships with adults than the young Dosja of ‘I Look Into the Past’. Kavalerov, rescued from the gutter by Andrej Babičev, is intimidated by the imposing figure of this “great man” of the new world, the Director of the Food Trust. In attempting to understand the successful, energetic Babičev as a phenomenon, Kavalerov treats him as a riddle that must be unraveled, a code to be cracked. The very first paragraph of the novel is devoted to Kavalerov’s examination of Andrej, and it ends in a moment of exegesis; Kavalerov tells the readers that the wordless, apparently senseless tune hummed by Babičev in the bathroom “can be interpreted” (“možno tolkovat”) as:

How nice it is to live... Ta-ra! Ta-ra!.. My innards are resilient... Ra-ta-ta-ta-ra-ree... My juices flow correctly... Ra-ti-ta-doo-ta-ta... Contract, intestine, contract... tram-ba-ba-bum!

Как мне приятно жить... та-ра! та-ра! Мой кишечник упруг... ра-та-та-та-ра-ри... Правильно движутся во мне соки... ра-ти-та-ду-та-та... Сокращайся, кишка, сокращайся... трам-ба-ба-бум! (12)

Upon first reading, this passage seems merely amusing, but, as we read further, we see that this example is typical of Kavalerov’s insistence on identifying meaning where there may well be none to be found. We are easily dazzled by Kavalerov’s skills as a narrator, by his startling metaphors and unique visual perspective; whether he wants to or not, Kavalerov is doomed

to “think in images” (“myslit’ obrazami”). Much of his verbal artistry, however, is tied to his capacity to overread.

Though it is a powerful weapon, Kavalero’s insistence on interpretation does not always work in his favor: his “reading” of Babičev does not necessarily lead to the conclusions Kavalero would prefer. Initially, Kavalero’s description of Andrej’s actions and appearance appears calculated to inspire ridicule; Babičev’s enormous girth and awkward exercises provide more than enough ammunition for one who, like Kavalero, “entertains himself with observations” (“Ja razvlekajus’ nabljudenijami”; 14). By Chapter III, however, Kavalero admits that his surveillance is inspired by an even more hostile ulterior motive: “I want to catch him at something, to expose his weak side, his vulnerable spot” (“Mne chočetsja pojmat’ ego na čem-to, obnaružit’ slabuju storonu, nezaščiščennyj punkt”; 18). Kavalero recalls the first time he watched Babičev’s morning routine, when he was certain that he found his host’s Achilles heel. Once again, we are treated to an extended description of Andrej’s body, but this time it is clear that the body is being not so much observed as read. Staring at Babičev’s back, Kavalero almost cries out: “His back gave it all away” (“Spina vydala vse”). Babičev, Kavalero discovers, has a birth mark. To a man like Kavalero, raised on romantic tales of mothers who identify their kidnapped children by such marks, a birthmark is a sure sign of nobility, and thus an embarrassment to a confirmed Bolshevik (19). Kavalero’s triumph (“toržestvo”) is, however, short-lived, for when Andrej turns around, his chest displays a mark that, for a revolutionary, is nothing short of a badge of honor: a scar, resembling a “lopped-off branch”, inflicted by a bullet when Babičev was fleeing the tsarist authorities.<sup>12</sup> That Kavalero cannot give a determinate reading of the text of his host’s body is consistent with Andrej’s characterization: Andrej is a conglomeration of opposite traits.<sup>13</sup> But because the contradictory signs of Babičev’s body cancel each other out, Kavalero is unable to appropriate Andrej’s physical appearance as an ideological weapon.

Andrej is only the first of many characters onto whom Kavalero will attempt to project an interpretation. Before they meet, Volodja is a figment of Kavalero’s imagination, a “comrade in misfortune” (“tovarišč po nesčas-tiju”; 49) superimposed by Kavalero on the sketchy information available to him. In his letter to Andrej, Kavalero admits that his knowledge of Volodja is limited to his football playing, but he “has no doubt” that Volodja “has fled” from Babičev, “fed up with [his] mockery” (“Ne somnevajus’, čto tot Volodja Makarov sbežal ot vas, ne vyterpev izdevatel’stv”). By the end of the letter, Kavalero and Volodja have forged a firm alliance: “But I assure you, neither he nor I – we will never come back to you” (“No, smeju vas uverit’, ni on ni ja, my ne vozvratimsja k vam bolee”; 44). Just as he fantasizes the carefree “Tom Viriliri” from the sounds of church bells, Kavalero concocts a Volodja Makarov all his own. Both are the products of Kavalero’s brief

stay with Andrej Babičev, and both are ideal men whom Kavaleroŭ can never equal. For Kavaleroŭ, projection and interpretation are second nature; he projects in an almost indiscriminate fashion, attributing hidden motives not just to people, but to things as well. Indeed, it is in Kavaleroŭ's reaction to physical objects that the drive to discover hidden intent shows itself to be truly paranoid. The result is arguably the most famous passage in all of Oleša's writing:

Things don't like me. Furniture tries to trip me. One day some lacquered corner literally bit me. My blanket and I have always had a difficult relationship. When soup is served to me it never cools. If some piece of junk – a coin or a cufflink – falls off the table, it usually rolls under some furniture that's hard to move. I crawl on the floor and, raising my head, see the sideboard laughing at me.

Меня не любят вещи. Мебель норовит подставить мне ножку. Какой-то лакированный угол однажды буквально укусил меня. С одеялом у меня всегда сложные взаимоотношения. Суп, поданный мне, никогда не остывает. Если какая-нибудь дрянь – монета или запонка – падает со стола, то обычно закатывается она под трудно отодвигаемую мебель. Я ползаю по полу и, поднимая голову, вижу, как буфет смеется. (13)

Kavaleroŭ's enemies are not merely people or institutions, but the entire physical world. Kavaleroŭ's ideological opponents are perfectly at home in what Kavaleroŭ perceives as hostile surroundings. Thus when he proceeds to describe how Babičev puts on his suspenders, Kavaleroŭ comments: "Things like him" ("Vešči ego ljubjat"; 13).

The propensity to encode interpretations into one's observations is not limited to Kavaleroŭ alone; nearly every male character in *Envy* suffers from the same tendency.<sup>14</sup> Kavaleroŭ provides more examples because his voice dominates the novel's first half, but when other characters take their turns at narration, the result is the same. Indeed, Ivan Babičev appears incapable of telling a story that is not allegorical: his daughter's "defection" is seen in terms of political loyalties rather than personal choice (76), and his imaginary disruption of his brother's moment of triumph provides an opportunity to describe their ideological differences as a literal battle (88-94). Nor can Ivan resist making his allegories explicit: he tells Kavaleroŭ the story of his encounter with a beautiful young girl at a ball when he was thirteen years old, a story which ends with Ivan beating the girl out of envy for the attention she received. Leaving nothing to chance, Ivan finishes his tale by telling Kavaleroŭ, "I want to make an analogy. I have in mind the struggle between the epochs" ("Ja choču provesti nekotoruju analogiju. Ja imeju v vidu bor'bu epoch"; 78).



Even Ivan's story about the huge soap bubble he allegedly saw when he was a child invites an allegorical interpretation. In the first chapter of Part II, Ivan's father punishes him for claiming that he could build a machine that controls people's dreams. When it seems that the boy's machine really has worked, he then brags to his friends that he can make a giant soap bubble that will float above the city, growing until it bursts. His father overhears his son's boast, and cannot wait until Ivan makes a similar claim to him. But when Ivan says nothing, his father thinks, "It seems he despises me. He must take me for a fool" (61). This would appear to be a straightforward instance of projection: Ivan's father transfers his own feelings of inadequacy to his son, feelings which are only exacerbated when he sees what indeed appears to be a soap bubble floating outside the window of their house. But the reader soon finds that the supposedly omniscient, third-person narrator has been playing a trick. First, he has Ivan say after the story that he planned the whole incident to make his father look like a fool; the object that Ivan's father mistakes for a gigantic soap bubble turns out to be nothing more than a hot-air balloon that was scheduled to pass by. Then the narrator points out that the entire story is highly improbable (balloons were rare in those days, especially in the provinces); the tale is just "make-believe" ("vydumka") or an "improvisation" on Ivan's part. In essence, the alert reader is forced to read this incident three times in three different fashions. The first reading shows the father to be paranoid. Upon the second reading, this paranoia seems to be justified, since Ivan was manipulating his father from start to finish. Finally, the story is revealed to be mere fantasy, told at some point by Ivan but re-presented in the third person by a mysterious narrator. Now the projection turns out to be on Ivan's part rather than his father's. It is Ivan who "makes up" the incident, and thereby supplies his father with a paranoid thought. In fighting an imaginary battle with his father, he projects on him still another projection. That the structure of the story turns out to be *mise en abyme* only reinforces the implied central pun that, according to Quilligan, is at the heart of true allegory. The third-person narrator refers to the story as Ivan's "novella about soap-bubbles" ("novella o myl'nych puzyrjach"), and yet, technically, only one soap bubble is mentioned in the text, and even it turns out to be imaginary. The plural, however, is appropriate when one considers the connotations of the Russian phrase "myl'nyj puzyr'" ("soap bubble") to refer to the elevation of a person of mediocre talent to greater and greater status. The implication is that one day, this mediocrity will burst and disappear. The other soap bubble could well be Ivan himself, a man whose words and threats always contain only empty air; indeed, Ivan is forced to admit to his unnamed listeners that his "experiments with soap bubbles did not lead to the results" for which he had hoped (62).

Perhaps the most complicated web of imposed meaning involves Andrej's relationship with Volodja. Babičev himself continually changes his

position on Volodja's role in his life. When Ivan confronts his brother with the possibility that he is keeping Volodja not because the latter is a "new man", but out of some bourgeois desire for a son, Andrej Babičev is thrown off balance. After giving the matter some thought, Andrej is eventually able to view the father/son relationship as an essential and natural part of the new world; initially, however, his response to Ivan's words is to defend himself from an unjust accusation. Rather than admit to this basic human feeling, Andrej initially prefers to turn Volodja into a personified abstraction:

As we cherish that new world, I cherish him. And he is dear to me as hope incarnate. I'll throw him out if I'm wrong about him, if he isn't new, isn't utterly different from me [...] I don't need a son, we are not a family. I am the one who believed in him, and he is the one who has justified my belief.

Как мы лелеем тот новый мир, так я лелею его. И он дорог мне, как воплотившаяся надежда. Я выгоню его, если обманусь в нем, если он не новый, не совсем отличный от меня [...] мне не нужен сын, я не отец, и он не сын, мы не семья. Я тот, что верил в него, а он тот, что оправдал веру. (80-81)

If Babičev has ever expressed such feelings to Volodja, verbally or non-verbally, then it should come as no surprise that the latter is so protective of his privileged position. He admits freely in his letter to Babičev that he is jealous, that he fears that "Kavalerov has taken [his] place" (45). Like his girlfriend Valja, Volodja is burdened with a more-than-human significance. For Valja the burden is too great, reflecting her father's ideals, which she does not share. But Volodja's significance is one that he himself has selected, and so Volodja does not recognize it as oppressive. It is Volodja who continually declares that he is the "new Soviet man", the "Edison of the new era". Nonetheless, the imposition of new-world idealism on his basically familial relationship with Babičev does cause Volodja to be insecure about the depths of the older man's feelings for him. After all, their relationship cannot be predicated on anything so bourgeois as a father's love for his son, and Volodja must "justify [Babičev's] belief" (81). Thus he constantly strives to achieve more, all the while worrying that someone might take his place.<sup>15</sup>

Kavalerov, Volodja, Babičev, and all the other protagonists of *Envy* lose sight of one basic fact: the drama in which they are involved is essentially domestic. Kavalerov, in his rivalry with Volodja, feels his struggle to be one between two world views, when it is initially a battle for a place on a couch. Babičev loves his "son" Volodja, but prefers to love him as "hope incarnate" rather than as an individual. Ironically, Ivan is able to see this failing in his brother, telling him that "symbolizing the new world in the image of an unremarkable youth [Volodja] [...] is nonsense" ("simvolizacija novogo mira

v obraze malozamečatel'nogo junoši [...] – èto čepucha"; 68). Yet here Ivan argues with Andrej's choice of symbols, but not with the possibility that a human being can embody an era. For Ivan has his own blind spot in that regard, having been sure that his daughter Valja was "the embodiment of everything wonderful from the old world". Indeed, Ivan abandons his conspiracy precisely at the moment that Ivan is forced to see the other Babičevs as his relatives rather than merely his ideological opponents. Throughout the second half of the novel, Ivan has been encouraging Kavalero to commit murder, not realizing that Kavalero's intended victim is none other than Andrej:

"[...] You said that I must kill your brother... What am I supposed to do?.."

Valja was sitting on the stone wall.

"Papa!" she shouted with a gasp.

Ivan grabbed her legs as they hung down from the wall.

"Valja, gouge out my eyes. I want to be blind [...]"

– [...] Вы сказали, что я должен убить вашего брата... Что же мне делать?..

На каменной стене сидела Валя.

– Папа! – вскрикнула она, ахнув.

Иван обхватил ее ноги, свисающие со стены.

– Валя, выколи мне глаза. Я хочу быть слепым [...] (98)

Having spent the entire novel lauding the virtues of the family, Ivan is suddenly confronted with the reality of the filial bonds that he has put in jeopardy. His discovery that he has been unwittingly plotting the murder of his brother is immediately followed by the appearance of his daughter, who destroys his resolve with one word: "Papa". Ivan's alienated family has returned with a vengeance. No explicit explanation of Ivan's surrender is present, but the scene is replete with hints to Ivan's motivation. Ivan is guilty of the very sin he identifies with his ideological opponents: he has underestimated the value of the family.<sup>16</sup> Like all the major characters in the novel, Ivan persists in seeing his personal life as a playing-field for ideological concerns, turning the personal into an allegory for the political.

Though Kavalero refuses to accept Ivan's decision to abandon the "conspiracy of feelings", Ivan's prefigures a similar decision that Kavalero subsequently makes at the soccer match. The soccer match is laden with allegorical significance: not only can it be read as a ritualized substitution for the rivalry between Kavalero and Volodja, but the competition between a Russian "team-player" and a German individualist invites an interpretation of the game in terms of the struggle between capitalism and communism, between the old world and the new. Though Volodja is hailed by his com-

rades as the chapter comes to a close, the final outcome of the match is never revealed; Kavalerov leaves before the game ends.<sup>17</sup> Kavalerov's decision not to stay and watch can be interpreted as an extended pun on the Russian phrase "vyjti iz igry"; Kavalerov has broken with Ivan only to follow in his master's footsteps and abandon the struggle.

In classical allegory, abstract concepts are personified in order to take part in the plot. As we have seen, *Envy* reverses the dynamic of personification allegory: rather than transforming the abstract into the physical, Oleša transforms the concrete into a vessel for the abstract.<sup>18</sup> Human beings in *Envy* are reduced to carriers of a higher meaning. Such is clearly the case for Valja, who is valued only partially for her personal qualities; rather, she is important as the allegorical embodiment of some greater concept. Her father Ivan tells Kavalerov that "woman was the best, most wonderful, purest light of our culture" ("ženščina byla lučšim, prekrasnejšim, čistejšim svetom kul'tury"; 75). He had searched for a woman who would embody "all female qualities", for "the feminine was the glory of the old era". He found "such a creature" right next to him: his daughter Valja. Valja herself wants no part of her father's fantasy; she leaves him, shedding her excess signification like an ill-fitting hand-me-down. Yet she remains nonetheless an empty vessel for projected meaning. In almost every description of her, she stands near an empty vase, an object whose very name in Russian ("vaza") sounds like Valja's own (Ingdahl 1984: 42). Ivan accuses his brother of wanting to breed her with Volodja, using her as an "incubator" to create a new human race (68). For Kavalerov, Valja is the "prize" that he will receive "for everything: for my humiliation, my youth, which I never managed to see, for my dog's life" ("Ja poluču Valju – kak priz – za vse: za uniženija, za molodost', koto-ruju ja ne uspel uvidet', za sobač'ju moju žizn'"; 46).

When Ivan realizes that Valja will not play along with his attack on the new world, he proceeds to look for people who are "representatives" ("predstaviteli") of specific feelings that he associates with the old world: tenderness, pride, jealousy, love, "almost all the feelings that made up the human soul of the dying era" (71). His interrogator asks if he has found any such representative, and Ivan replies that he has found one: "Nikolaj Kavalerov. Envier" (73). Kavalerov looks to Ivan as the source of some purpose, some plan of attack against the people who have injured him, but Ivan merely looks at Kavalerov as the "representative" of a feeling, a functional character who can fit into his designs. Though we see the novel at first through Kavalerov's eyes, Kavalerov is not the initial source of allegorical interpretation in the novel. Even before Kavalerov's arrival, Volodja was considered by both Babičev and himself to be the embodiment of the new world, while Valja was a sign whose meaning depended on the man with whom she identified at the time. Ivan had already hatched his "conspiracy of feelings", while his brother Andrej Babičev was well on his way to creating the sausage and kitchen that

would build a new nation. Kavaleroŭ has stumbled upon a family that will not admit that it is just a family, and his own feelings of insecurity and inadequacy let him slip quite comfortably into their allegory, if not into their family itself. Though Kavaleroŭ's habit of "thinking in images" might appear to separate him from the other characters, Kavaleroŭ actually speaks their language: the language of allegorical thinking.

Always partial to dramatic reversals, Oleša puts the only argument against allegorization into the mouth of his master schemer, Ivan Babičev. If we view *Envy* as a cautionary tale about the perils of allegorical thinking, Ivan's final toast "to indifference" ("za ravnodušie") at last begins to make sense. Where Kavaleroŭ has learned at the soccer match that he cannot play the game, Ivan comes to realize that the game is not worth playing. Thanks to his ideological antics, he has lost his daughter, his brother, and anything resembling self-respect. If Valja was to be Kavaleroŭ's "prize", Anečka is Ivan's "consolation prize", and this time he has no intention of scuttling this more or less straightforward relationship (and only in Oleša could a love triangle involving an obese, masochistic widow be considered straightforward) with his shopworn allegorical thinking. Indeed, Ivan's praise of indifference as "the best human mental state" is preceded by an uncharacteristic denial of meaning. Having caught Ivan in bed with Anečka, Kavaleroŭ twice poses the "classic question" ("klasičeskij vopros"), "What does this mean?" ("Čto éto značit?"). Ivan's angry reply could serve as his new motto: "Why do you keep asking that? It doesn't mean anything" ("Nu, čego zaladili? Ničego ne značit"). The novel that began with Kavaleroŭ's projection of meaning onto nonsense (Babičev's bathroom song) would seem to end with an affirmation of the meaningless and a paean to indifference.<sup>19</sup>

Even as the novel finally leads us away from an insistence on interpretation, it raises an inevitable paradox. Though the toast to indifference comes at the end of the text, it cannot be said to be the final word in the novel's interpretation. Ivan's speech is only the last in a series of Oleša's lures to *allegoresis*; after all, if one concludes that the novel is "about" the need to abandon allegorical thinking in favor of indifference, the result is to replace one allegorical reading with another, to analyze the novel as if it were an allegory about the dangers of *allegoresis*. Even this interpretation is prefigured (and parodied) by one of the novel's characters; Ivan has merely replaced "feelings" and the "old world" with yet another abstract idol, indifference. Unlike Ivan's earlier abstract idol, "feelings", indifference cannot be elevated without rendering the choice of indifference absurd: it is impossible to *celebrate* indifference and still *be* indifferent, since the very act of praising proves that one is not indifferent to indifference.

Nonetheless, Ivan's rejection of significance does not necessarily preclude that his own revelation about the insignificance of interpretation has meaning, as long as this revelation is placed in its paradoxical context. If one

concentrates only on the second half of Ivan's answer ("It doesn't mean anything"), the result might be a nihilistic reading of the novel leading to an interpretive dead-end. The first half of Ivan's answer, however, might be more emblematic of Oleša's approach to interpretation precisely because it is not categorical: "Why do you keep asking?" Oleša breaks out of the cycle of allegorical interpretation, rejecting the world-view of *idejnost*' without thematizing that rejection and thereby rendering it simply "anti-Soviet", and hence complicit in the very same interpretive strategy that the novel rejects. Instead, *Envy* invites the reader to examine the impulse behind allegorical reading, a process in which we are nonetheless obliged to engage in order to pose the question.

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NOTES

- <sup>1</sup> All citations from *Zavist*' are from Oleša (1989). All translations are my own.
- <sup>2</sup> See, for example, Ždanov's 1946 attack on the journals *Zvezda* and *Lenin-grad*, when he declared that in Soviet literature "there are not and cannot be interests other than the interests of the people, the interests of the state. The task of Soviet literature is to help the state educate youth correctly" (Luker 1988: 30).
- <sup>3</sup> Cf. Robert A. Maguire (1968: 343), who calls *Envy* a "trap to catch the careless reader". Maguire was perhaps the first critic to observe that the traditional, schematic interpretation is too simple.
- <sup>4</sup> See, for example, Janet Tucker's recent monograph: "*Envy* is constructed on the basis of contrasts: between the old world and the new, long considered central to the work by critics, and the conflict between revolutionary dreamers and practitioners" (1996: 102). For thorough overviews of both Soviet and Western critical responses to *Envy*, see Barratt (1981: 1-6) and Houk (1987: 10-49).
- <sup>5</sup> Belinkov (1976: 52-122) calls Oleša's *Three Fat Men* an allegory during his extended critique of the work. Ronald D. LeBlanc compares the "allegorization" of the soccer match in *Envy* to a similar scene in Sinjavskij's *The Trial Begins* (1988: 62). Neil Cornwell (1980: 16-17) summarizes the standard reading of Oleša's novel "an allegory of the literary polemics of the 1920s", while referring also to the "Freudian allegory of castration and sterility complexes" discussed by Harkins (1966: 444) and Maguire (1968: 339-340). Protopopov (1968: 21) notes that Oleša "resorts" to allegory in his most famous novel. In his 'Olesha's *Zavist*: Utopia and Dystopia', Milton Ehre asserts that, although *Envy* flirts with allegory, Oleša avoids allegory's pitfalls by focusing on the comic and the incongruous and refusing to "reduce

characters to a single dimension". Though Valja and Volodja are "wooden", Ivan "diabolical", and KavaleroV "driven", the novel's utopian dream of "a way out of human complication" is rendered "unconvincing" by the character of Andrej, a conglomeration of comic discrepancies between his "megalomaniacal pretensions and his bumbling body" (1991: 611).

6 Both the definition and value of allegory have engendered controversy since the nineteenth century, when Goethe elevated symbol at the expense of allegory (Fletcher 1982: 13-14). Allegory's "rehabilitation" began in the 1950's with the publication of Northrop Frye's *Anatomy of Criticism* (1973).

7 Quilligan's approach is not without its detractors; in her *The Fiction of Truth: Structures of Meaning in Narrative and Dramatic Allegory*, Carolyn Van Dyke charges that Quilligan "opens allegory up too far" (1985: 22).

8 In her 1934 speech, 'On Socialist Realism', Marietta Šaginjan attacks both allegory and Aesopian language as inappropriate to the new era: "It's clear that allegory – which is a means of disguise – is needed [...] when the political system will not allow [the artist] to express himself as he wishes. Therefore the artist is forced to use subterfuge [*konspirirovat*'], to go into the artistic underground and hide, unpunished, behind allegory" (1978: 150).

9 A similar argument is made by Nilsson (1965: 40-68), Piper (1970: 27-43), and Tucker (1982: 57-62).

10 The "closed" nature of allegory has been noted by many critics. Following Frye and Quilligan, Bruns recognizes that the impulse to write an allegory is to protect one's literary offspring from mistreatment at the hands of the reader: "The allegorical text preempts interpretation by inscribing itself with its own commentary; it is, redundantly, self-allegorizing" (1988: 385).

11 Both Elizabeth Klosty Beaujour and Andrew Barratt discuss the role of projection in Oleša's novel. In her *The Invisible Land*, Beaujour views KavaleroV's projections as a compensation for feelings of inadequacy (1970: 38), while Barratt notes that by "unconsciously projecting his own neuroses onto the world of objects", KavaleroV turns his narration into a "battle of the signs" (1981: 15).

12 Comparing Andrej's scar with Ivan's tree-like hand, Boris Thompson sees the former as a sign of the elder Babičev's rejection of his compromising heredity (1978: 150).

13 Barratt calls Andrej a "hybrid creature, a man of the nineteenth century who has placed his energies exclusively at the service of the twentieth century" (1981: 44). Andrej's ambiguity extends to his gender as well as his political affiliations: with his large breasts and preoccupation with kitchens, Andrej shows both masculine and feminine characteristics (Harkins 1966: 445).

14 Indeed, allegoresis in Oleša appears to be an interpretive disorder found exclusively among men. The women of *Envy* function allegorically for the men, but do not share the male habit of projection and overreading. This division along gender lines is characteristic of the all-male utopianism that forms one of the subjects of Oleša's novel; see Chapters III and IV of Borenstein (1999).

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- <sup>15</sup> Indeed, one can argue that the young man's relationship with his mentor, which began when Volodja saved Babičev's life, has been predicated on achievement from the very beginning.
- <sup>16</sup> The importance of "family drama" to the resolution of this particular plot is underscored by the scene's implicit connection to *Oedipus Rex*. Oedipus discovers that he has killed his own father and married his mother, but Ivan learns that he has been plotting the death of his brother. Like Oedipus, Ivan has discovered forgotten filial ties, and he demands a punishment that is appropriate to the Greek subtext: "Gouge out my eyes." Ivan is guilty of the very sin he identifies with his ideological opponents: he has underestimated the value of the family. The road to this Sophoclesian recognition scene has been paved throughout the entire novel. Not only does Kavalerov refrain from revealing his enemy's identity, but Andrej himself refers to the Greek tragedy that is parodied in this scene. Andrej, whose role here is brother rather than father, is not connected to any mother: who, he asks Kavalerov, is Jocasta? For more on the Sophocles connection, see Borenstein, Chapter IV (1999) and Tucker (1996: 60).
- <sup>17</sup> In his thorough analysis of the soccer match, Ronald LeBlanc discusses the significance of the absence of a final score (1988: 66-67).
- <sup>18</sup> Even Quilligan's radical departure from traditional conceptions of allegory recognizes the primacy of "personified abstractions" in allegorical narrative (1981: 163).
- <sup>19</sup> Robert Maguire calls the novel a "declaration of rebellion against 'significance' and 'meaning'" (1968: 343).

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