1825/1936: Consonances of Two **Godunovs**

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I would like to begin this conversation by foregrounding several features of *Godunov* which illuminate Meyerhold's seemingly uncharacteristic interest in Pushkin's classic from 1825, and which suggest, moreover, that Meyerhold's engagement with the vintage masterpiece cannot be explained as a simple case of "reconciliation under duress". These quintessentially Meyerholdian elements in *Godunov* belie the assumption that the avant-garde director's turn in 1936 to Pushkin's text signalled a surrender to the exigencies of Socialist Realist doctrine. Indeed, had Meyerhold been able to realise this production of *Godunov*, the result would have been not a mere exercise in obeisance to the canon, but rather, as many have suggested, an achievement that would have outstripped even his most celebrated masterpiece, the 1926 staging of Gogol's *Inspector General* ("Revizor"). *Godunov* was, in short, the perfect material through which to realise the vision and aptitude that were particular to Meyerhold. Three aspects of Pushkin's text are the basis for this accordance: firstly, the text's fragmentary structure; secondly, its emphasis on the mediated nature of experience; and lastly, its foregrounding of theatricality.

A pastiche of 25 discrete and unnumbered scenes, Pushkin's *Boris Godunov* defied conventions of classical drama that, after Aristotle, had famously insisted on the three unities of place, time, and plot. The action of the play moves unremittingly among diverse locations between Moscow and Poland over the span of seven years. Given the extreme disjointedness of the episodes, it is all the more surprising that Pushkin seemed decidedly uninterested in endowing his play with a clearly articulated storyline, the one element that would have been capable of staunching the dispersal of the play's scenes over so many sites and historical moments. Whereas the plot of Pushkin's source, Nikolai Karamzin's Godunov, was propelled by the distinct diegetic trajectory that describes the path from Godunov's illegitimate seizure of power to his own fall, fittingly, at the hands of another impostor, Pushkin exploded the compact architecture of this pat storyline with its overpowering sense of narrative necessity. He left the spectator with more questions than answers: why, for example, does the monk Grigorii decide to become the False Dmitrii? Simple *Wanderlust*? Or, why does the populace turn against Boris after years of benevolent rule?

Formally disjointed and hermeneutically opaque, this compositional montage *avant la lettre* found its ideal director in Meyerhold. For decades Meyerhold had cultivated a dramaturgy that spotlighted, paradoxically, what was missing from the stage, the intervals between the scenes, and the frustratingly obscure moments that thwarted straightforward interpretation. This manifest preference for mystery and semantic ambiguity, evident already in his early symbolist productions like *The Fairground Booth* ("Balaganchik"), developed out of Meyerhold's conviction that artistic creation was an inherently subtractive process. Aesthetic production is not a generative act at all, Meyerhold instructed, but an act of erasure, of restraint, of calculated impoverishment. Absences and intervals are necessary so that the spectator's fantasy can inhabit the artwork in the act of reception. Because the spectator's imagination is stimulated only when information is missing, when the code becomes discontinuous and broken, gaps in the work provoke the spectator to complete the composition in her mind, to fill in the blanks. As late as 1930, Meyerhold wrote that "we now construct each play on the assumption that it is still incomplete when it appears on the stage. We do this consciously because we realise that the spectator is the one who makes the most important amendments to the play."[3] In this regard Meyerhold's stage provides a vivid lesson in production art: the aesthetic encounter becomes an act of labour for an audience that is itself made complicit in the composition of the theatrical illusion. According to Meyerhold, it is ultimately the audience that stages the play, not the director. The problem with naturalistic theatre, conversely, is that it is too explicit, too detailed, and as a result leaves no task for the audience to carry out. In a 1906 essay, Meyerhold quoted Schopenhauer's remark that "Wax figures have no aesthetic force despite the fact that they represent the consummate imitation of nature. Because they leave nothing to the fantasy of the spectator, they cannot be considered artistic creations."[4] Meyerhold's *Godunov* is replete, so to speak, with absence: not only the enormous lapses in causality between the discontinuous scenes, but also the visual poverty upon the stage of props and naturalistic decoration – a poverty quite remarkably captured in the minimalist stage designed by Princeton's Architecture School.

My second point concerning mediation in *Godunov* relates to a different kind of absence in the play, namely the absence of any direct encounter between the two rival characters. Even though each looms ever-present in the mind of the other, a first-hand confrontation between the two never takes place. Despite the seeming inextricability of the fates of Godunov and the False Dmitrii, in Pushkin's text the two plotlines seem strangely disconnected. The fierce rivalry between the protagonists transpires obliquely, and always via second-hand information provided by a host of messengers. In this regard, it is the intriguer Shuisky who should be seen as the play's central figure. "In place of confrontation and causality," Caryl Emerson and Robert Oldani noted about the structure of *Godunov*, "what does link events is rumor".[5] In this atmosphere of conjecture

and misinformation, and in the absence of any personal experience with the adversary, anxiety and paranoia flourish. Boris is challenged by a spectre whom he has never seen and who exists for him only as a character in a series of secondhand accounts. However real the threat to Boris may be, it remains an asymptotic one – and thus all the more ubiquitous and ominous. Boris will never know this opponent who is available to him only in the words of intermediaries. The eighth scene of *Godunov*, for example, plays out the disjuncture between Otrepiev "in the flesh" and his verbal description on a wanted poster: there Godunov's soldiers, incapable of reading the royal broadsheet, fail to recognise that their quarry stands before them and mistakenly seize a friar in Grigorii's stead. *Godunov* is ultimately a play about the infelicities of communication and the manipulability of language. One of the Patriarch's remarks would indicate as much: "The trouble these men of letters cause me," he states, underscoring the roots of the plot against the Tsar in the domain of the signifier.

For Meyerhold *Godunov* was first and foremost a drama about representation, and a disquisition into the illusionism of theatre itself. Traditional theatre is an art that relies on the ability of the actor to disappear, as it were, to replace his actual and present body on the stage with the image of a character who is absent and imaginary. The actor must strive in illusionistic theatre to become a likeness or reproduction of an "original" character. In this case, the character is the source, the actor the copy. But for Meyerhold, *Godunov* was a play populated by surrogates and proxies. The mediated nature of the antagonism between Boris and the False Dmitrii underscores the fact that experience is always already secondhand, that we know the world around us only through language and image. This understanding was the basis for Meyerhold's particular approach to actor training, which contained a trenchant critique of theatrical verisimilitude. According to Meyerhold, the actor should not aspire to become a faithful reproduction of a character; this would only amount, Meyerhold stated disdainfully, to the "slavish imitation of life". Meyerhold's theatre was instead one in which the actor was supposed not to imitate a character, but to imitate an actor imitating a character. One could call it a second-order theatre. In the beginning of the twentieth century, when the material conditions of a modern media society were still emerging, Meyerhold instructed the actor always to be aware of his status as a representation, as a likeness that is already mediated. For example, Meyerhold developed a system of what he called "pre-acting" (*predigra*) in which the performer developed a series of pantomimed hieroglyphs that summarised the content of the scene, and then presented these figures in advance of the actual action. Then, when the actual scene began, the actor would perform as his own double, acting "into" the emblems he had already displayed. In the system of "pre-acting", the dramatic event was in effect preceded by its image. In a documentation of the training system developed by Meyerhold for his actors, one of his students devised a remarkable exercise designed to confront the actor with his image:

> You admit the person being tested through the antechamber of a room where one of the doors is mirrored (the subject doesn't know this) and curtained. At a certain moment, as the subject approaches the door, the curtain falls away, revealing the mirror. The [skilled actor] will at that unexpected moment somehow react, become wary, or organise himself externally. He will take a correct position with regard to the space around him. Passing by that door with the mirror he will continue further in his imagination (to see, to know) himself in relation to his surroundings.[6]

By ambushing the actor with his own image, Meyerhold hoped to cultivate in the actor the skill of self-objectification, of seeing himself from the outside. The objective was to heighten the actor's awareness of himself as a performer and a representation. Theatre, Meyerhold reminds us, should be artificial, theatrical and spectacular. Just as he drew inspiration when he was younger from the variety show and *commedia dell' arte*, in his final decade it was the sport tournament and mass pageant. "The public demands spectacle", he wrote in 1930. "Recall that well-known formula 'bread and circuses': it continues to be actual to this day."[7]

The accent placed by Meyerhold on the showiness and artificiality of the stage, its express difference from quotidian life, leads me to the third Meyerholdian aspect of Pushkin's *Godunov*, namely the latter's emphasis on theatricality. Both Boris and Grigorii are fakes, actors each trying to outperform and rhetorically outmanoeuvre the other in front of an audience that is present on stage in the figure of the mercurial crowd. Just as Boris pretends to be the rightful Tsar, the Pretender (*samozvanets*) Grigorii claims to be Dmitrii. Pushkin's debt to Shakespeare's historical dramas is readily apparent here. While it is certainly true that *Godunov*'s preoccupation with inauthenticity and rhetoric can be read as a commentary on deception and duplicity, in the hands of Meyerhold this psychological matter is converted into an experimental meditation on metatheatricality. For Meyerhold, surface, appearance, and the realm of bodily extension were of greater import than psychological motivation. Today he is viewed as a member of a radically positivist generation of the Russian avant-garde that recognised only the empirically verifiable and calculable components of the artwork. It would nonetheless be inaccurate to say that emotion and psychological motivation were entirely irrelevant to Meyerhold – only that they were secondary. Confessing a sort of psychological agnosticism, Meyerhold conceded that there may indeed be inner emotional life, but even if this is the case, we cannot know it. Better for us to occupy ourselves, then, with what is demonstrable and manifest. This privileging of the physical over the psychological formed the most basic principle of his celebrated system of biomechanics. The behaviourist doctrine that provided the foundation of Meyerholdian biomechanics can be summed up in William James' teaching that we are sad because we cry, not that we cry because we are sad. Despite the conventional belief that Meyerhold's biomechanics and Stanislavsky's naturalism were completely irreconcilable – a polarity no doubt first put in place by the antagonistic bluster of the two directors themselves – Meyerhold suggested that the actual difference between their two techniques, one empirical and one psychological, could be reduced to a quite simple distinction: "Our system," he once stated, "is often contrasted with that of the Moscow Art Theatre, but that's not correct. [...] One can start with the psychological factors that will prompt the correct physical position. Or one can begin with the physical factors that will allow one to find the correct inner life."[8] Between the two poles of mind and body, the difference between Meyerhold and Stanislavsky is really just a question of which one you take as your point of departure. While Stanislavsky's system was built upon the primacy and autonomy of mental life, Meyerhold emphasised instead the influence that the environment exerts upon the self. It boils down to a question of causality – whether it is tears that occasion sorrow, in James' example, or sorrow that occasions tears. Whether the actor experiences an emotion is irrelevant if the task at hand, the task of theatre, is to display the emotion for the spectator rather than feel it. Not authentic feeling, but *zritel'naia emotsiia* – emotion that is visible – required not only a new type of actor, but also a new type of audience that was trained in the art of precise observation. Meyerhold's theatre, which emphasised spectacularity, rhetoric, and display, was consonant with the highly theatrical, even histrionic, nature of public life in post-revolutionary Russia.