Contents

Introduction

Yuri Tynianov (1894–1943) has left an indelible mark on Russian literature of the twentieth century and beyond. In the early 1920s he carved his name as a gifted and influential Russian literary theoretician and Formalist critic. What is now known as the Formal School in Russia and Russian Formalism in the West started in St. Petersburg as the Society for the Study of Poetic Language (OPOYAZ) on the eve of the Great War. Its founder, Viktor Shklovsky, the leader of a circle of young intellectuals and literary theorists, boldly asserted that "the literary work is pure form, it is neither thing nor material, but a relationship of materials"[1]. Tynianov joined in autumn 1918 and together with Shklovsky and Eikhenbaum formed an intellectual nucleus of the group, its so-called "triumvirate." After OPOYAZ disbanded in 1923 Tynianov became a leading light of its successor, the Russian Formal School, in which he worked prolifically until the late 1920s.

The February and October Revolutions of 1917 swept away not just the tsarist regime but an entire Russian civilization. The harrowing experiences of the First World War and the political upheavals that followed brought along drastic and irreversible changes to the very core of society and its culture. Many avant-garde artists and literary critics close to them philosophically, and in some instances personally (like the Formalists who were close to Russian Futurism), were enthralled by the idea of revolution as a means of acquiring a "new vision." They believed that it is through new art that "modern, bourgeois, conventional man with his tired assumptions might be jolted out of his epistemological

1 Viktor Shklovsky, "The Resurrection of the Word," in *Russian Formalism: A Collection of Articles and Texts in Translation,* ed. Stephen Bann and John E. Bowlt (Edinburgh: Scottish Academic Press, 1973), 41–47.

rut and helped to 'see' and therefore '*be* anew.'"[2] The energies unleashed by the Revolutions were now directed at the radical transformation and momentous rebuilding of life and culture. The Formalists threw themselves into the struggle against the old academe and for the emphatically new "science" of literature studies. A post-Revolutionary "Renaissance man," driven by the firm conviction that social revolution should necessitate a profound transformation of culture and the arts, Tynianov was vigorously engaged in a variety of genres: he was an active critic, essayist, polemicist, public speaker, editor, translator of Heine, an innovative screenwriter, and theorist of the then still silent cinema. His main passion, literary theory, was never his exclusive concern. Formalists were empiricists, and in their view, theory could never be divorced from the *practice* of writing. Shklovsky famously argued that "to be an ichthyologist one doesn't have to be a fish." And then qualified his polemically categorical pronouncement by stating that he himself was "a fish turned ichthyologist, a writer analysing the art of literature."[3] His Formalist colleagues, Eikhenbaum and, in particular, Tynianov could easily describe themselves in the same terms.

Tynianov turned to historical fiction in 1925, after the authorities appointed a new director and restructured the State Institute of the History of Arts where he had been lecturing during the previous five years. The Formalists' approach to the study of literature had been officially denounced as isolationist and reactionary, and a full-scale campaign was launched against them by the Marxist-leaning Institute of Comparative History of Occidental and Oriental Literatures and Languages. Tynianov stayed on at the Institute until spring 1930 when the Institute was "reorganized" yet again (in practical terms, disbanded). On December 1, 1925 he published his first novel with an enigmatic title, *Küchlya,* about Pushkin's little-known fellow-student from their Lycée years, Wilhelm Küchelbecker. The choice of a protagonist from Pushkin's intimate milieu was emblematic of the Formalists' spiritual affinity with Pushkin's circle (significantly, Tynianov's own research into Küchelbecker began in Prof. Semyon Vengerov's Pushkin seminar). Like the Silver Age artists

2 Katerina Clark, *Petersburg, Crucible of Cultural Revolution* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1995), 30.

3 Viktor Shklovsky, *Bowstring: On the Dissimilarity of the Similar*, trans. Sh. Avagyan (Champaign, IL: Dalkey Archive, 2011), 295.

before them, the Formalists were keen to re-mythologize the experience of twentieth-century Russia in terms of an apparent cyclical return of the early nineteenth century with its European war and social upheavals and the flourishing of Romanticism and utopian idealism. The December uprising of 1825 had a particular fascination for the young scholar as the pivotal event of the literary period at the heart of his research.

Küchlya gained an instant success with readership and critics alike. Tynianov continued to write historical fiction, and when the atmosphere around him became more sinister and the political ambience increasingly more dogmatic, his novels provided him with a creative outlet and a means of clothing his theoretical constructs with the flesh and blood of historical characters. They also gave their author a safe vantage point from which he could analyse and obliquely comment on his own ever grimmer times. From 1928 on, feeling the academic ground slip from beneath his feet, Tynianov was forced to abandon theory; what replaced this, his novels, reflected his personal intellectual odyssey as well as the concerns and the disillusionments of the wider intelligentsia at the very moment when the trap of historical circumstance was being sprung. The novels that followed, *The Death of Vazir-Mukhtar* (1928) and *Pushkin* (1936–1943), and the three novellas, *Lieutenant Kijé* (1928), *Young Vitushishnikov* (1931), and *The Wax Effigy* (1933) cemented his fame as a historical novelist of extraordinary power and influence and, to a certain extent, eclipsed his renown as a scholar. These days for the general reading public in Russia Tynianov is known first and foremost as the author of outstanding historical fiction with its primary focus on Russian history and literature of the nineteenth century. And it all started with his first novel: *Küchlya* propelled Tynianov to fame and established his reputation as the founding father of the Soviet historical novel. It has been a fondly loved minor classic of twentieth-century Russian literature ever since, published in runs of millions.

Tynianov died young, at the age of forty-nine, leaving his last novel about Pushkin uncompleted and his readership wondering how many more historical characters he could have brought back to life and what artistic heights he could have reached had his life not been so cruelly cut short. For a couple of decades following his death from multiple sclerosis in 1943, Tynianov's scholarly works were out of print. Nor were they sufficiently studied. Official Soviet literary criticism rejected the Formalist

concepts of the specificity and autonomy of poetic language and literature, and for many years Tynianov's artistic works, highly regarded by his contemporaries familiar with the theoretical principles of the Formal method, were read in isolation from the context of their creation.

The novel *Küchlya* was commissioned by an obscure publishing house, Kubuch,[4] on the instigation of the children's poet and literary critic Korney Chukovsky, as an educational novella for a teenage readership, although the book almost inevitably went its own way. Like many ventures in those times, it was dictated by dire financial necessity, decided by chance and due to be delivered at short notice (the publication was timed for the 100th anniversary of the Decembrist uprising that had taken place on December 14, 1825.) By all accounts, it was written in a remarkably short period of time, in fact, in a matter of weeks, rapidly evolving into a "proper" novel, considerably longer than anticipated. Shklovsky maintained that the novel "appeared to have already lived in Tynianov's imagination and he only flung open the door to where it had been waiting for him. . . He raised Küchlya from the dead."[5]

Indeed, Tynianov the literary scholar rediscovered Küchelbecker for his age and restored his name to the canon of Russian literature. He was the first to look into Küchelbecker's writings, which had remained mostly unpublished until the twentieth century.[6] He transcribed and annotated Küchelbecker's archive, which he had bought from an antique book dealer in 1928–1929. He wrote about Küchelbecker in his scholarly

4 Publishing house founded in 1925 in Leningrad by the Commission for the Improvement of Students' Living Conditions; published educational literature in various fields of knowledge, primarily in science and technology. Profits from the sales of publications went to student organisations; ceased to exist in 1935.

5 Viktor Shklovsky, *Yuri Tynianov: Pisatel' i uchenyi* (Moscow: Molodaia gvardiia, 1966), 67.

6 The fate of Küchelbecker's literary heritage is also peculiar. He first published while still at the Lycée but in his lifetime a relatively small number of his works saw the light of day (mainly in literary journals such as *Son of the Fatherland*, *The Neva Spectator*, *The Champion of Enlightenment and Charity*, and *Mnemosyne*). Before 1825 only one of his works, "The Shakespearean Spirits," was published as a book-length edition. After the defeat of the Decembrist revolt, political state criminals such as Küchelbecker were banned from publishing. A few of his works found their way into the press anonymously or under an assumed name of V. Garpenko in 1835, 1836, and 1839.

articles "The Sham Pushkin" (1922), "*The Argives*, Küchelbecker's unpublished tragedy" (1929), "The Archaists and Pushkin" (in *Archaists and Innovators*, 1929), "Pushkin and Küchelbecker" (1934), "Küchelbecker's French Contacts" (1939), and "The Plot of *Woe from Wit*" (published posthumously in 1946). In 1929 he edited Küchelbecker's diaries and in 1939 a two-volume edition of Küchelbecker's *Selected Works*, many of them hitherto unpublished, and supplied them with an introductory biographical essay. With some inevitable additions, amendments, and rectifications, every subsequent edition of Küchelbecker's works has been based on Tynianov's ground-breaking research. And yet, paradoxical as this may sound, and notwithstanding Tynianov's painstaking effort invested in his investigation of Küchelbecker's legacy, it is a work of *fiction*, the novel *Küchlya*, that remains the fullest, most vivid, and enduring testament to Küchelbecker.

Wilhelm Karlovich Küchelbecker (1796–1846) is possibly one of the most striking, contradictory, and tragic figures in all of Russian literature. Leo Tolstoy in a letter to the philosopher and publicist Nikolay Strakhov in 1878 described Küchelbecker as an "affecting" man of a specific type, men who are "not really poets but convinced that they are poets and passionately devoted to their make-believe vocation." Nabokov defined him as "a curious archaic poet, an impotent playwright, one of Schiller's victims, a brave idealist, a heroic Decembrist, a pathetic figure," who "only at the very end of a singularly sad and futile literary career, and in the twilight of his life produced a few admirable poems, one of which is a brilliant masterpiece, a production of first-rate genius—the twenty-line long 'Destiny of Russian Poets.'"[7]

The novel *Küchlya* is often and somewhat misleadingly viewed as a preparatory and even auxiliary text to Tynianov's life-long ambition to write a novelistic biography of Pushkin. Pushkin already features as a supporting character in the first two novels of Tynianov's loosely termed *trilogy* about Russian poets (Küchelbecker and Griboyedov). Exploring the life of Pushkin's classmate and life-long friend was a godsend to Tynianov for the potential insights this could provide into Pushkin's formative years.

7 Vladimir Nabokov (ed. and tr.), *Verses and Versions: Three Centuries of Russian Poetry* (Orlando, FL: Harcourt 2008), 64.

The strangely sounding title of the novel immediately points to their shared *alma mater*, the Tsarskoe Selo Imperial Lycée, as "Küchlya" was Wilhelm's nickname provided for him by his fellow-students—among them some future poets and revolutionaries, such as Delvig and Pushchin. Some of the boys were fond of him, even though he was mercilessly tormented for his strange physical quirks (he was lean, deaf, and had a stammer), for his poor Russian (he spent his pre-Lycee years at a German-language school), for his fiery temperament, unbridled ambition, phenomenal diligence, and obsessive versifying. The comic and intriguing titles of the novel (*Küchlya*) and of its first chapter ("Willie") immediately undermine any expectation of a "canonical" biography like those of cherished national heroes or of men of greatness.

To the end of his life Pushkin remained deeply attached to what he considered his *real* home and his *real* family—the band of fellow-lycéens. The Tsarskoe Selo Lycée was founded by Alexander I in 1811 and at the time was the most innovative and academically advanced institution of education in the entire country: all teaching was conducted in Russian. Its egalitarian ambience, absence of corporal punishment, lenient and respectful treatment of the boys, highly knowledgeable professorial staff, some of whom became father figures for the pupils, whose own fathers were either neglectful (like Pushkin's) or dead (like Küchelbecker's)—all this made an appreciable difference to the boys' worldview and sense of identity, shaping their passion for intellectual distinction and hatred of mediocrity. The Lycée was established with a view to educating the Tsar's younger brothers, Grand Dukes Nicholas and Michael. But, significantly, the Lycée also offered free entry to any nobleman, even to a destitute small-fry. It placed on an equal footing representatives of the aristocracy, old and new, and the offspring of the families on the fringes of the nobility, such as Küchelbecker's, whose father was a university-educated minor Saxonian nobleman.[8] The ethos of the school, its challeng-

8 Karl Ivanovich Küchelbecker, a Baltic German, studied Law at Leipzig University at the same time as Goethe and Alexander Radishchev, the Russian writer later exiled by Catherine the Great for his harsh social critique of contemporary Russia. Unlike the also impoverished Pushkin, who on his father's side traced his roots back to the ancient boyars who served with the Grand Prince of Kiev and Vladimir, Alexander Nevsky (1221–1263), Karl Küchelbecker's nobility was very recent, received before his move to Russia in the 1770s. He died of consumption in 1809.

ing curricula, goals, and procedures were based on the State Secretary Mikhail Speransky's rationalist ideas on education: his faith in the power of education seemed unshakeable, not only in respect of the acquisition of knowledge, but also as a tool for society's moral improvement. At his suggestion the sciences were eliminated at the Lycée in favor of the humanities and of physical education; these aimed at producing civically minded members of society. Speransky envisaged that, after graduation, the students would be appointed to government posts according to their achievements, and promoted to high office in the military and civil services. Events would unfold differently from how Speransky had imagined them. The plans for the Grand Dukes' education changed. Tsar Alexander abandoned the course of reforms and turned instead to reactionary politics and religious mysticism. Speransky himself was replaced in his role of the Tsar's advisor by the strict Artillery General, Count Arakcheyev, then fell from grace, and was exiled to a minor administrative post in Siberia. The window of historical opportunity for change, progress, political and social freedoms, so much anticipated in post-1812 Russian society, was thus quickly shut. These frustrated expectations led to the formation of a network of conspiratorial groups, or secret societies, and the December uprising. The only way to change Russia's shameful backwardness, to abolish thriving serfdom and corrupt and inefficient bureaucracy, and turn towards large-scale social, judicial, industrial, agricultural, and administrative reforms seemed to be a constitutional monarchy in which the new tsar would turn his attention to internal affairs in order to address the serious issues of the empire.

The harsh suppression of the uprising and the unnecessarily humiliating execution of the main conspirators by hanging (tsar Nicholas was unwilling to spill blood) permanently alienated the progressive part of the Russian elite from the tsar and his government. In total, over five hundred men were investigated. Almost three hundred were found guilty; five were sentenced to death and executed (Ryleyev, Pestel, Kakhovsky, Bestuzhev-Ryumin, Muravyov-Apostol); a hundred and twenty rebels were exiled to hard labour or to a permanent settlement in Siberia. The Decembrists were amnestied thirty years later, on August 26, 1856, when Alexander II ascended the throne and restored their rights, privileges, and titles. But the amnesty arrived too late for Küchelbecker: after 1825 he spent ten years imprisoned in solitary confinement in various

fortresses and the rest of his days in Siberian exile (as Tynianov puts it, "sentenced to death and condemned to life"), disenfranchised, expunged from the history of Russian literature, and largely forgotten.

By the beginning of the twentieth century, traditional historical fiction with its rigid conventions had fallen from favour while biography, on the contrary, experienced a marked increase in popularity. In search of a "new vision" in literature, Tynianov set out to write a "new novel." He revamped and blurred the boundaries of the rigidly structured traditional historical narrative, creating an experimental genre imbued with the aesthetics of high modernism. "I begin where the document ends," Tynianov famously stated, in an apparent contradiction; artistic truth for this particular scholar often seemed to have greater value than factual accuracy. In a letter to Shklovsky from March 31, 1929, Tynianov wrote: "I see my novels as experiments in scholarly fantasy. I think that *belles-lettres* on historical material will soon completely pass, and there will be *belles-lettres* on theory." His play with form may be broadly seen as a scholarly experiment that derives from his literary theories on literary genres and literary evolution. In this novel in particular, the genres of literary-historical research, biography and fiction most happily merge. Tynianov is least of all interested in eulogizing, defending, or excusing his protagonist, instead offering his reader artistic prose informed by a level of research unique in both depth and extent in a novel which provides penetrating and comprehensive insights into his subject, excluding any simplifications and generalisations.

A decade later in the preface to his novel *Pushkin* Tynianov would reassert his novelistic credo: "In this book I would like to approach the artistic truth about the past, which is always the goal of the historical novelist."[9] As this claim suggests, Tynianov's novel, though based on documents, is not their slave and is only true to the author's concept of the protagonist. A mere accumulation of facts without aesthetic distillation and qualitative transformation is worthless. The chronicle method in the studies of artistic lives had failed to show how the facts of lives and history relate to creativity. Tynianov sets out to prove that the biographical

9 Quoted in Yuri Tynianov, *Lieutenant Kijé* and *Young Vitushishnikov*, trans. M. Ginsburg (Baltimore, MD: Eridanos Press, 1990), 14.

novel could be true to history in its own way, even without always being true to facts, for the facts of life can be overwhelming, and may even hinder the achievement of a successful story. He has to fill in the blanks and to provide not a literal interpretation of a life, but rather a symbolic one. This argument can be traced back at least as far as the Romantics, with Keats maintaining that only "very shallow people take everything as literal. A Man's life of any worth is a continual allegory—and very few eyes can see the Mystery of his life. A life, like the scriptures, is figurative."[10] To see life as such an allegory, to grasp its essence through telling detail, was Tynianov's particular gift. He imbues his narrative with literary texts created in the period he describes, in order to suggest deeper, timeless meanings; they assist his artistic imagination in filling in the gaps between the confirmed facts to suit his concept of Küchelbecker's persona. And when long-established facts do not conform to the concept, these are sometimes reshaped, chronology changed, motives reinterpreted.

With admirable flair and confidence, Tynianov presents a picture of Russian society, political intrigue, and large-scale historical events of the time. His novel is populated with the historical characters of the period: royalty and aristocracy, military leaders and secret service informers, statesmen and politicians, political rebels and their denouncers, peasants and serfs, all coming together in rich and lively tableaux. But the main character of the novel is Russian literature; its true heroes are writers, poets, philosophers, hack journalists, and the frivolous hostesses of literary salons. In this sense *Küchlya* is unashamedly "literature-centric." Tynianov makes the history of the literary process the propulsive force of the plot and explores complex concepts and ideas, as opposed to merely illustrating certain ready-made doctrines imposed on the writer by the political establishment. Furthermore, he enters into a polemic with the existing accounts of Küchelbecker's life—the reminiscences of his contemporaries and other factual sources. In his lifetime, and for a long time afterwards, Küchelbecker had been perceived as a laughable and inept third-rater. The imagination of the novelist arrives at a different version of the poet's personality and firmly establishes Küchelbecker's contribution to the formation of the Russian poetic tradition, to the Decembrist

10 Robert Gittings, *The Nature of Biography* (London: Heinemann, 1978), 13.

literary output, and to the literary process of the 1820s, including his influence on Pushkin's development as a poet.

Tynianov leaves his reader in no doubt that great writers emerge from the creative environments with which they engage, and Küchelbecker was the marginal figure who had a profound influence on Pushkin at the stage that mattered most—at the point of the burgeoning of Pushkin's own poetic genius. Tynianov's Küchlya is a tragi-comic and elusive character, an ideal protagonist for the Formalist technique of estrangement, which saw the major quality and function of art as provoking and prolonging a sense of wonder at the world, otherwise old forms of literature turn into a "convention, like a necktie," and become desensitized "like gums numbed by cocaine." True literature is engaged in *retardation* or *defacilitation*, "overcoming" old forms by devices, whether semantic, syntactic, or phonological, that force the reader to follow the text with intense conscious effort and thus sharpen perception. Küchelbecker provided ample material for the technique, as he was already a strange individual, a perceived abnormality, a freak. His strangeness was testified to by various people who knew him throughout his life. A lycéen, Baron Korf, for one, described him as having "an eccentric mind, fiery passions, an unbridled hot temper; he was almost half-crazed and was always up to the funniest of escapades." In "The Literary Fact" (1924) Tynianov discussed "freakery" [*urodstvo*] as the moving force of art and the source of new forms: "Every 'ugliness', every 'mistake', every 'irregularity' in normative poetics is potentially a new constructive principle."[11] And as it happened, Tynianov's strange protagonist who wrote freakish verses also strenuously asserted the necessity for poetic innovation. Tynianov plays on the two meanings of the word "weird" [*strannyi*]: anomalous (or atypical) and distinctively unique. In the same way as Pushkin was aware of his "African ugliness" and creatively reimagined it as a positive feature, so Wilhelm knew the effect his freakish appearance had on other people ("He was well aware of his ugliness and was used to curious looks") and, though feeling hurt, reconciled himself with this mark of distinction.

Linguistically the word *urod* ("freak") with its prefix signifying rejection by *rod* (the Slavic root meaning "kinsfolk") defines someone who is excluded from the kin, who has broken away, become isolated, having

11 Yuri Tynianov, *Literaturnyi fakt* (Moscow: Vysshaia shkola, 1993), 129.

chosen for himself a life without love, without relatives, and hence lost vital reference points. In Tynianov's novel, Pushkin tells Wilhelm: "I love you like my own brother, Küchlya, but when I am no longer here, mark my words: you'll never have either a sweetheart or a friend. You're a difficult one." And Küchelbecker's freakery steadily increases as the novel unfolds. By the time we see him on the eve of the Decembrist uprising, he looks not just weird [*urodlivyi*] but, as Tynianov suggests, like a *yurodivyi* or Holy Fool. Such Fools for Christ in Orthodox Christianity renounced worldly possessions upon joining a monastic order, or deliberately flouted society's conventions to serve a religious purpose. In Küchelbecker's case, service to literature is a cult similar to a religious one. It demands self-abnegation and sacrifice. At the Lycée the boys refer to their dormitory rooms as "monastic cells" and to themselves as "monks," "sages," or "wise men," who lead lives of austerity and venerate the Muses. They are brothers (or brethren) of a fellowship of a particular kind. As Tynianov points out both in his biographical essay on Küchelbecker and even more so in his novel, Küchelbecker extolled the joys of friendship, as other poets extolled the joys of love. Küchelbecker's choices in later life are distinctly reminiscent of a *yurodivyi*—he is rootless and homeless, and he consistently challenges social norms by eccentric, shockingly unconventional behaviour.

Indeed, "eccentric," for Tynianov, is redolent with multiple significant connotations. Apart from the usual meanings of being off-centre, deviating from an established pattern or norm, or strangely fascinating, eccentricity interested Tynianov fundamentally as a characteristic of true revolutionary art, which broke away from the established habits of perception. This went back to his collaboration with the young Petrograd film directors, Trauberg, Kozintsev, Yutkevich, who, in their obsessive search for a new form, set up a group called FEKS (Factory of Eccentric Actors). Their manifesto "Eccentricity" (1922) outlined five basic principles based on negations—of the past, of the old, of the ossified, of high bourgeois culture, and of any authority, proclaiming instead clownery, spontaneity, and carnivalization as the main aesthetic principles of art.

The "de-automatizing" effect in *Küchlya* is further achieved by a rethinking not only of the protagonist but of the traditional artistic means such as plot and composition. This is mostly accomplished by extensive use of the literary equivalent of cinematographic techniques:

interchanging close-ups of the characters and lingering panoramic views of large-scale events, Eisensteinian rapid "shock-cutting" to create symbolic montage, metonymic use of detail and a system of highly visual recurrent leitmotifs, which create a particular narrative rhythm, such as road, sea, window, coffin, jail. Tynianov plays with the cognates of the Russian word "strange" [*strannyi*], and suggests yet another one, that of a "wanderer" [*strannik*] rejected by his country [*strana*]. The motif of wandering emerges as an important element of the novel's composition. Küchelbecker's travels to Europe are interpreted as a pilgrimage to the Europe of his Romantic dreams, the Europe of strong traditions of revolution and freedom-fighting, where Küchelbecker delivers lectures on Russian literature and history and is enthusiastically received as an equal by French and German cultural elites. At the same time, his trip represents his farewell to once cherished Romantic ideas, as he turns away from "gothic nonsense" and "that fearful Europe, the Europe of romantic visions, like the dreams of a drunk asleep in a dungeon." He's had enough of this: "Out into the fresh air!"—to the rougher and more authentic "language of the streets." Whatever Küchelbecker's personal literary evolution was, he was always the bearer of creative daring and ambition, and even when calling for a return to national roots, was paradoxically guided by a modernizing impulse. This idea was later developed by Tynianov in his collection of essays *Archaists and Innovators* (1929) and in particular in its central essay, "The Archaists and Pushkin." There, Tynianov introduced the concepts of a literary "archaist" and of an "innovator" in Pushkin's time and defined the main characteristics of literary "archaism."[12] The homogenous literary camp of the archaists is further divided, with all due caution, into "senior" and "junior" ones. The senior "archaists" (Shishkov, Khvostov, Shalikov), and the other members of the literary group "The Colloquy of the Lovers of the Russian Word," were opponents of Pushkin, while the junior ones (Griboyedov and Küchelbecker among them) were Romantics with nationalist leanings.

12 The "archaists" traced the origins of the Russian language either to Church Slavonic or directly to Greek, showed interest in lexical archaism, folklore, and the common language; rejected "smooth," "literary" style, which was associated with "eloquence" and "beauty"; emphasized the spoken rather than the written word, valued archaic syllabic poetry; and indulged in translation of foreign words into "genuine" Russian with often hilarious results.

Shklovsky half-jokingly suggested that Tynianov should have entitled his book *Archaists-Innovators.* In his opinion, this would have more clearly reflected Tynianov's thesis: in spite of bitter rivalries and harsh polemics there were certain similarities between some branches of the seemingly irreconcilably opposed literary camps; the "junior archaists" were linguistically and often politically radical, perhaps even revolutionary, and unmistakably innovative in their approach to the renewal of poetic language. The heart of the matter, as Tynianov sees it, is that both the senior *and* the junior archaists were utopians, unhappy with the existing state of affairs—in literature, the state and society. Such paradoxes of literary evolution fascinated Tynianov, for whom the history of Russian literature was a chain of negations, a road offering no smooth transitions, for literary evolution in Tynianov's understanding has a non-linear character, where succession is never peaceful and occurs "not from father to son but from uncle to nephew."

The motif of travel, first introduced in the beginning of the novel with the fourteen-year old Wilhelm's failed escape to meet his sweetheart, Minchen, continues in a succession of travels that increasingly turn into the enforced flights of an outcast or a pariah, fleeing from persecution. Some of these travels fail to materialize or get aborted, like the elopement with Minchen, but throughout the novel Küchelbecker's inability to settle and his impulse for restless and almost irrational movement are always there. Wilhelm perceives this perpetual travel as a punishment and even a curse, like that of the wandering Jew. The strong sense of identification with that biblical character is highly appropriate: later, in his Siberian exile in 1840–1842, Küchelbecker would write a narrative poem, *Ahasuerus, the Wandering Jew*, remarkable even "despite its odd archaism, awkward locutions, crankish ideas, and a number of structural flaws, a major piece of work, with a harshness of intonation and gaunt originality of phrasing."[13] This imprecation appears to afflict not only Küchelbecker but also Pushkin and Griboyedov, who in the novel experience something like a curse, "as if with the prophecy: Thou shalt move from every place under the skies." They are dispatched to the margins of the empire (Küchelbecker and Griboyedov have to travel to the

13 Nabokov, *Verses and Versions*, 65.

war-ravaged regions of the Caucasus, where they could easily perish) or into the vast empire's impassable depths (Pushkin's exile into his Pskov region estate). These are the regions that Griboyedov in the novel calls the "ultimate extremity," "the land of oblivion." As a result of these enforced wanderings, all three poets arrive at a stark conclusion that in spite of their best efforts their lives "do not come out well" ("How sad," muses Pushkin in the novel, "God's my witness, how sad!").

Relentless movement with an unclear goal perfectly resonates with Küchelbecker's biography, full of frenetic, almost compulsive movement. By further combining the motifs of "noble" insanity (in Grech's characterisation of Küchelbecker in a conversation with Griboyedov) with that of wandering, Tynianov arrives at his portrayal of Küchelbecker as a quixotic tragi-comic personage who prefers glorious fantasy to quotidian reality. Cervantes's famous novel is about an idealist and his futile desire to change reality, and like Alonso Quixano, Küchelbecker is spurred into action by prodigious reading (in Küchelbecker's case not of chivalric romances but of Romantic poetry) and decides to set out to revive chivalry, undo wrongs, and bring justice to the world. Pushkin with his earthy wit and Griboyedov with his jaundiced scepticism act as Küchelbecker's Sancho Panzas, attempting to bring him down to earth and to pour cold water on their overheated friend, even though they cherish his ardour as "an elevating deception," which, in Pushkin's famous line, "is dearer to us than a host of low truths." As for Küchelbecker, he sees himself as more than a hapless knight. He is a poet aware of his calling, one with a mission, a herald of higher divine truths. In his "Prophecy" (1822), Küchelbecker set up a theme picked up by Pushkin in his own renowned "Prophet" (1826). Tynianov inflects his portrayal of Küchelbecker from the harmless idealistic Don Quixote to the homeless, peripatetic prophet who fights the Pharisees and who is scorned as an imposter. The prophet poet combines writing with political struggle and mystical service to an unknown God. He sees himself as a conduit for God-inspired creativity and transmitter of messages between the living and the dead.

The tragic motifs of unrecognized talent, suffering, and redemption develop throughout and grow stronger towards the devastating finale of the novel. Thus, the novel becomes Küchelbecker's spiritual odyssey: he begins his journey as a ridiculed character who endures mockery, rude jokes, and cruel pranks, but as the novel unfolds and he suffers

spectacular failures and catastrophic defeats, he eventually turns into a flawed but quasi-saintly figure. His life is an endless chain of misfortunes, and he can only endure it because he has an unshakeable belief in literature and his service to it. Death comes when doubt in his creative powers creeps in. Not physical deprivation but emotional torment hammers the last nail into his coffin. His death is portrayed as a return to the garden of Eden, which is reminiscent of the Tsarskoe Selo gardens where he and his friends roamed, full of youthful ardour and idealistic dreams. It is a paradisiacal space for a reunion with the dear departed in the bosom of nature, the gentle sound of water trickling to the lamenting song of the nightingale, the emblem of Russia, and the Russian nightingale—Pushkin, his curly head, laughter, merriment, and the final moment of affection: the dear dead calling, "brothers" reunited. A symbol of love, the nightingale in Christian symbolism stands for pain and longing for Heaven. And Tynianov seems to be saying that there *is* no death, there is transcendence (or flowing) from one state to another, and what survives are "the intangibles": love and art. It is a tender ending to the relentlessly unlucky and unhappy life of a pure-hearted, passionate, and gifted man.

Originally, the novel had a subtitle: "The Tale of a Decembrist," which implied that it focused on the portrayal of the protagonist's path to Decembrism. Tynianov the historian pieces together and provides a striking account of the historical events triggered by the 1825 interregnum and of the uprising itself. The historical backdrop of his narrative is saturated with additional meanings. The motif of wandering continues to feature prominently in the Decembrist chapters of the novel to convey the disarray and irresolution in the ranks of the conspirators on the eve of and in the course of the uprising. To convey the idea that the rebels' activities were well-intentioned but inconsistent, and to an extent suicidal, Tynianov describes them in Shakespearean terms as "travellers who had only five minutes left before they departed for an unknown country, from which there was unlikely to be any return." The uprising was not sufficiently prepared and was to take place at a later date, in March 1826, but due to the sudden death of Alexander I it was moved to December 14, the day for which the official ceremony of swearing allegiance to the new Tsar was scheduled.

The uprising chapters are a painstakingly researched artistic reconstruction of one of the critical events in Russian history, which has

preserved its powerful and lasting hold on the Russian imagination. The outcome was violent and inglorious, but had a profound inspirational effect on generations of future revolutionaries. At the time when the novel was written, the new-born socialist state found it crucial to identify itself with the progenitors of the revolutionary movement and their indisputably altruistic service to noble ideals. Soviet writers were expected to highlight the threads stretching from the heroic past of a century ago to the no less heroic present. Tynianov was praised for his felicitous choice of protagonist, sincere and impractically quixotic, and thus well suited to reflect the idealistic illusions of the Decembrist ideology. But the author appeared ambivalent: in the final analysis, his protagonist was a poet, and the novel was primarily about his attempts to revolutionize *literature*. The entire essence of Küchelbecker's character is his striving for innovation, for what the Lycée's second headmaster Engelhardt called his "gargantuan projects," referring to his encyclopaedic knowledge of literature and history: "he has read all the books on earth about all things on this earth; has much talent, much diligence, much good will, much heart and much feeling"; "unfortunately all this lacks taste, tact, gracefulness, and measure." Pushkin, who in his Lycée years was the most prolific lampoonist targeting Küchlya, later in life extolled Küchelbecker as an intellectual and the most significant personality in the literary criticism of the 1820s. "Be it right or wrong, he always gives the reasons for his point of view and evidence to substantiate his judgments, which is rather rare in our literature. Nobody has ventured to contradict him, either because everyone agrees with him, or because nobody feels he can contend with an athlete who is, apparently, both strong and experienced."[14]

By removing the subtitle from the subsequent editions of *Küchlya* Tynianov seemed to admit that he has failed to produce a *celebratory* piece. The tenor of the novel is too sombre and too dark. The reader is left with the lasting image of the rebels' confusion, betrayals within their ranks, the deaths of innocent civilian onlookers, and the sinister aftermath of the uprising when the bodies of the dead are submerged beneath the ice on the Neva, the blood is scraped from the ground, and sprinkled over with fresh snow in a literal cover-up. The novel is written

14 Alexander Pushkin, "Notes on Küchelbecker's Articles Published in *Mnemozina*," in *Pushkin on Literature*, trans. T. Wolff (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1998), 169.