YURY TYNIAOV AS NOVELIST

by

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(Under the Direction of Thomas Cerbu)

ABSTRACT

Yury Tynianov is famous for being a literary scholar in the school of Russian Formalism. But in his life he was a superb novelist as well as a literary scholar, though due to limited availability his works have remained relatively unknown in the Western world. Through close analysis of his masterpiece, Смерть Вазир-Мухтара (The Death of the Vazir Mukhtar) we come to a greater understanding of Formalism, history and the techniques of this great forgotten artist.

A comparative study between The Death of the Vazir Mukhtar and Heine Zaches by E. T. A. Hoffmann demonstrates the way that this novel correlated with other works in literary history and give weight to the placement of this text within the canon of world literature.

INDEX WORDS: Tynianov, Formalism, Griboedov, Hoffmann, applied literary theory.
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B.A. University of Washington, 2003

A Thesis Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the University of Georgia in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree

Master of Arts
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This work would not have been possible without the support, encouragement and assistance of Dr. Thomas Cerbu, Dr. Elena Alexandrovna Krasnostchekova and Dr. Mihai Spariosu. Many hearty thanks go to my parents as well for their enduring patience with my endless and, no doubt, boring digressions about Tynianov, the Formalists specifically and the lovely Russians in general. I would like to thank Sarah and Layne Bradley as well as Sarah and Clint Ricker for patience and kindness in the midst of my anxiety regarding this thesis. I also wish to thank my office-mates Meg DeLong and Ben McFry for all the laughs in times of duress, and last but never least I wish to thank Christopher Burns whose constancy, rationality, and patience have imbued this work with its own version of those same qualities.
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INTRODUCTION

“Il me confiait tout, c’était un ami unique”¹
La Mort du Vazir-Moukhtar (507)

«Мне доверял он все, друг единственный,»
Смерть Вазир-Мухтара (421)

Yury Nikolayevich Tynianov was born in 1894, the second son of a successful Jewish doctor in the small town of Rezhitsa in Latvia. His parents were well-educated and, in order to ensure the same for their children, they gave them Russian names instead of the more traditional Hebrew or Yiddish names, thus breaking with the custom of their community. His older brother followed in the footsteps of their father and became a successful doctor. Nikolai Arkadevich Tynianov saw something different in his second son.²

They worked hard, parents and children, and the two boys were sent to Pskov to a secondary school. Later, despite his disciplinary problems, Yury was awarded a position at Saint Petersburg University, where he entered the department of Slavic languages and literature. Enrolling in the notorious Vengerov seminar changed the course of his life.

Tynianov wrote of this period of his life, “I came to the Pushkin seminar, to Vengerych [diminutive of Vengerov], through the side door and started studying Pushkin…after running across Kiukhel’beker, I fell in love with him and dumped Griboedov.”³ It was the material he read, studied and wrote about during this seminar that would bring him to utilise different talents in later years, in addition to introducing him to his fellow Formalists.

³ Joseph, footnote, 75.
In general, scholarship treats Tynianov almost exclusively as a theorist, and as one of the founding members of OPOYAZ, and of Formalism. While partially true, this presumption is an over-simplification. Boris Eikhenbaum and Victor Shklovsky are the true founders of Formalism and OPOYAZ, and it was through his association with them that Tynianov came to be closely linked with that school of thought. Eikhenbaum and Shklovsky were determinedly applying a scientific approach to the study of literature, while Tynianov quietly applied a mixture of biographical, thematic and theoretical approaches to his own analysis of the works of nineteenth-century writers like Dostoevsky, Gogol, Kuchelbeker, and Pushkin. It is in this spirit of Tynianov’s treatment of literature that I will approach my topic.

The first chapter of my thesis will deal with Tynianov as a literary theorist. Modern-day literary scholars treat Tynianov almost exclusively as a theorist. The analysis of the novel illustrates the necessity for studying Tynianov’s fictional as well as theoretical works. Tynianov himself saw the subject matter of his novel Smert’ Vazir-Mukhtara (The Death of the Vazir-Mukhtar) as applied literary theory; concluding this chapter are several examples from the text itself which will illustrate his approach.

The focus of chapter two is to examine Tynianov’s novel itself. Yury Tynianov as the novelist is relatively unknown, and how he viewed the development of his own career is illuminating to the book as well as to the man. He manipulates historical documentation for his own purposes, as well as addressing the significance of literature to Russian culture. An understanding of this manipulation is necessary in order to appreciate Tynianov’s experimentation with the novel as form. The thematic elements within the novel give it the timelessness that is inherent in all great works of literature. This chapter will conclude with a

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4 Society for the Study of Poetic Languages.
comparative analysis of three specific scenes from the novel and how those scenes are treated in translation in order to explore the forgotten nature of this text.

The final chapter of this thesis is a comparative analysis of Smert’ Vazir-Mukhtara and a fairy-tale by E.T.A. Hoffmann titled Heine Zaches. The idea for this comparison came from a dissertation written by Larry Philip Joseph at Stanford University in 1994. While he mentioned the comparative possibilities between these texts, his ideas were never fully fleshed out. There are many similar character and thematic elements between the two texts, which provide an interesting contrast in the blending of history and fairy-tale.

My thesis will conclude with an assessment of the relevance of Tynianov, his art and his scholarship to the literary world of today. What we learn from Tynianov, his approach to literary theory and his artistic expression will be addressed. Tynianov knew, due to the (seemingly) incompatible nature of his two careers, that people would remember him either as a scholar or as a novelist, but not as both. I will therefore, close this thesis by examining the ways that Tynianov is remembered, his literary legacy, and the value of that legacy to future generations of literary scholars.

I would like to conclude with a word about sources. Tynianov’s theoretical essays, primarily those on Formalism, exist in numerous translations. The same cannot be said of his novels. Smert’ Vazir-Mukhtara has been translated into French, as La Mort du Vazir Moukhtar, by Lily Denis and her 1969 edition is my primary text. I have however cross-referenced Tynianov’s original Russian, in the edition published by Sovietskii Pisatel in 1948. There is an English translation by Alec Brown of Smert’ Vazir-Mukhtara, published under the title Death and Diplomacy in Persia. It is, however, deplorable and woefully inadequate for any serious study of the book. I have chosen to discuss certain scenes which were either entirely omitted

from the English or severely condensed, in order to illustrate the need for an adequate translation in English. Any discrepancy in the spelling of names is a result of the spelling chosen by the authors whose works are cited.
Chapter 1:

Yury Tynianov by Moonlight

“Un homme guindé et de petite taille s’est emparé de mon imagination.”

La Mort du Vazir Moukhtar (15)

«Человек небольшого роста, желтый и чопорный, занимает мое воображение.»

Смерть Вазир-Мухтара (9)

The novelist Rebecca West wrote that the problem with men is that, “they are so obsessed by public affairs that they see the world as by moonlight, which shows the outlines of every object but not the details indicative of their nature.”¹ Most literary scholars have a similar problem when it comes to the Russian literary theorist and novelist Yury Tynianov. Various publications over the past sixty years show that the majority of literary scholars see Tynianov only by the moonlight of his theoretical works and not by his creative endeavors. Tynianov was a member of the Society for the Study of Poetic Languages (OPOYAZ) and a lecturer in the department of Slavic Literature at the State Art Historical Institute (GIII); nevertheless the last eighteen years of his life were devoted predominantly to creative writing, culminating in the publication of three novels: Kiuklia, Smert’ Vazir-Mukhtara, and Pushkin, as well as several short stories and some film screen-plays. The novels and short stories are (admittedly) very Russian in subject matter and style, and the notable absence of good translations in English provides some excuse for this limited knowledge of Tynianov. Still, a lack of translations and the Russian subject matter are not adequate excuses for scholars not to have addressed a significant portion of Tynianov’s life.

Contrary to popular opinion, Tynianov was not one of the founding members of the school of thought referred to as Russian Formalism. That honor belongs to Victor Shklovsky and Boris Eikhenbaum, who were later joined by Boris Tomashevsky. When Tynianov finished his degree at Saint Petersburg University, he was already familiar with these men from various seminars, and it was through their connections that he obtained a lecturing position at the GIII. Also through their connections and his own membership in OPOYAZ he was able to publish his first critical piece, titled “Dostoevsky and Gogol.”

Russian Formalism, as we know it today, originated out of a desire to create a “scientific” method that can be applied to literature. This method centers on defining what makes literature literary, on understanding the use of literary devices (such as the usual suspects of symbolism, metaphor), on identifying features of narrative and imagery, as well as their trademarks of defamiliarization and the “dominant.” Formalism evolved around the turn of the twentieth century in Saint Petersburg, Russia. Up until this time, Russian literary scholarship had tended to analyze literature from historical, biographical or psychological perspectives. During a Pushkin seminar given by Semyon Venegrov, students were given the intellectual liberty to explore different means and methods of literary analysis. As Formalism gradually evolved and began to take shape, Eikhenbaum narrowed the Formalist approach in these words: “We did not, and do not, possess any such ready-made system or doctrine. In our scholarship, we value theory only as a working hypothesis with the help of which facts are disclosed and take on meaning, that is, they are apprehended as immanent properties and become material for investigation.”

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2 This statement is a deduction made after reading numerous critical articles referencing Tynianov as a founder of Formalism; see bibliography for specifics.
4 Joseph, 69.
this sense, Formalism itself creates an appeal for scholars of all literature, not strictly scholars of Russian literature.

Tynianov’s theoretical works have been translated and read because of their wide applicability. As Eikhenbaum states above, the worth of literary theory lies only in its usefulness for analyzing literary texts, and, as such, has created a greater demand for translations of Tynianov’s (and other Formalists’) theoretical essays rather than their novels. For example, one can extract a statement like Tynianov’s, “a word does not have one definite meaning. It is a chameleon, in which not only various shades, but even various colors arise with each usage,” and apply it to any kind of literary analysis, although this statement is particularly apt to analyzing texts in translation. The rationale of isolating Tynianov as only a theorist rather than as a multifaceted theorist and artist is shown by the range of scholars for which his theoretical writings are useful.

In addition to the wide range of applicability of Formalists’ texts, these theoretical writings do not have unstated prerequisites. Tynianov’s novels, on the other hand can be appreciated without a great understanding of Russian history and culture, but such appreciation is limited to stylistic, structural and thematic elements. Knowledge of Russian history, culture and literary history opens up the world of the novels in extraordinary ways. Theoretical writings do not function in this way. Anyone sufficiently literate can read (and after a time) decipher Tynianov’s and the Formalists’ theoretical writings, that is to say what the Formalists were addressing, without knowing Russian history or culture. From this perspective it is understandable why there are literary scholars who do not know that Tynianov also wrote literature.

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Formalism’s primary focus has always been to analyze the specific “literariness” of literature. Still Tynianov himself preferred to apply a hybrid form of analysis to literary texts. Larry Joseph explains it in this manner, “Tynianov consistently strove in his seminar work to combine a stylistic analysis with biographical interpretation and thematic explication.” The writings of Tynianov, Eikhenbaum and Shklovsky illustrate their reluctance to limit themselves to only one means of analysis as a way of determining meaning.

As much as literary theory illuminates the stylistic, thematic and structural qualities of a given work of literature, literature too may lend itself to illuminating literary theory. An example of this symbiotic relationship is Tynianov’s novel Smert’ Vazir-Mukhtara. Fredric Jameson addresses this mutual illumination as, “Art is…a way of restoring conscious experience, of breaking through deadening and mechanical habits of conduct, and allowing us to be reborn to the world in its existential freshness and horror.” This approach to art fits nicely with one of the assertions of the Formalists, that a given historical moment can be removed from its context and analyzed in and of itself alone. Jameson states, “a…theoretical advantage…permits a new concept of literary history: not that of some profound continuity of tradition characteristic of idealistic history, but one of history as a series of abrupt discontinuities, of ruptures with the past, where each new literary present is seen as a break with the dominant artistic canons of the generation immediately preceding.” Tynianov illustrates one of these “ruptures with the past” in the novel. The so-called Decembrists’ uprising of December 14, 1825 is the central event of the novel, which takes place four years before the action of novel itself, and illuminates Griboedov’s final expedition to Persia.

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7 Joseph, 71.
9 Jameson, 52.
From the first sentence of the novel: “Sur une place glaciale, décembre 1825 vit disparaître les hommes de 1820 (11)”--«На очень холодной площади в декабре месяце тысяча восемьсот двадцать пятое года перестали существовать люди двадцатых годов (7)». Tynianov introduces the reader to the technique of isolating a given historical event (the Decembrist uprising of 1825) and using the frame of the subject (Griboedov’s final mission to Persia) in order to illuminate both the thematic element of the uprising as well as the character of Griboedov; and in both cases he is illustrating Formalist techniques by their application in a work of art. Tynianov furthers this campaign towards the end of his prologue by writing: “Les hommes de 1820 eurent la mort difficile, parce que leur époque avait succombé avant eux (14)”--«Людям двадцатых годов досталась тяжелая смерть, потому что век умер раньше их (8)». Tynianov further complicates his work by using the past, the Decembrist uprising and the riot that will kill Griboedov, to illuminate his own time and the October Revolution. Just as Griboedov and the other men of 1820 had a more difficult death because their times were broken before their deaths, so too did Tynianov and his colleagues.

Lest anyone should think that Tynianov abandons this thread in the course of the novel, he periodically returns to it. For example, as Griboedov attends a dinner where military men are in company, one of them inquires of Griboedov if he has had a chance to see his son, who was exiled to the Caucasus for his minor involvement in the Decembrists’ uprising. At a later point, when Griboedov thinks of his loved ones, Tynianov writes, “Qu’ils soient sauvés tous ceux qu’il avait jamais aimés: Alexandre Odoïevski, Nina, Thaddée, Katia et...Sachka. Qu’ils soient sauvés, qu’ils connaissent une vie paisible, discrète, qu’ils en passent tranquillement les étapes (436)”--«Пусть спасутся все любимые им когда-то: Саша Одоевский, Нина, Фаддей, Катя и— Сашка. Пусть спасутся они, пусть их жизнь будет тихая, незаметная, пусть они спокойно
пройдут ее (360)». By the inclusion of Alexander Odoevski the reader is taken back to the Decembrist uprising and his involvement with the Northern Society;\textsuperscript{10} and if one is very familiar with Griboedov then he is also reminded by this reference that Griboedov shared the same apartment as Odoevski and was very likely a Decembrist himself. Tynianov alludes to the closeness of this relationship when Griboedov writes a letter addressed to Paskevitch on his friend’s behalf: “Il mit la lettre...à Odoïevski...Odoïevski était enfermé dans une casemate sibérienne, il fallait attendre une occasion—des années (437)”--«Отложил и письмо к Саше. Саша сидел в сивирском каземате, и нужно было ждать случая—годы (361)». Tynianov accomplishes a great deal with a small amount of writing, reminding his readers that this book is about the Decembrists, and also that the present is likewise such that one must be cautious. It is not possible to write and send a letter to someone who is exiled to Siberia at any time; there has to be a reason to send the letter, like an anniversary. Similarly, in Tynianov’s own time, one could not simply act as one desired, there had to be obvious and non-threatening motives behind all of one’s actions. This disguised reference to Tynianov’s own time leads us to the second characteristic of applied formalism, which is that of defamiliarization.

Stylistically, defamiliarization is one of the few elements that sets literature apart from ordinary, otherwise entertaining texts. Jameson comments on this defamiliarization: “Only pre-existing things—objects, institutions, units of some kind—can be defamiliarized; just as only what has a name to begin with can lose its familiar name and suddenly appear before us in all its bewildering unfamiliarity.”\textsuperscript{11} Tynianov plays with defamiliarization since, more than any “object,” he defamiliarizes a person, namely, Alexander Griboedov himself. Griboedov is made


\textsuperscript{11} Jameson, 70.
in the novel into a liminal figure through his intimate involvement with the central group of Decembrists and his almost miraculous escape from conviction.

Griboedov had lived with Alexander Odoevski, the leader of the Northern Society, prior to traveling to Ekaterinengrad to join Yermolov. From there, on the fourteenth of December 1825, he wrote to a friend: “At this very moment in St. Petersburg, an appalling blood-letting is taking place.” His comment confirms suspicion that he was himself a Decembrist, though he would deny the fact under extensive questioning. Prior to his arrest, several of his friends and known Decembrists were interrogated. Kelly writes: “The most damning statement came from Obolensky, who claimed that Griboyedov had been received as a member a few days before leaving St. Petersburg, though he himself had not been present. Two other minor figures, Briggen and Orzhritsky, also claimed that they had heard him mentioned as a member.”

Griboedov was imprisoned in the Peter and Paul Fortress from February 24, 1826 until March 31, 1826 when he was declared innocent of all charges. Kelly continues: “On 12 July, Ryleyev, Nikita Muravyov, Kakhovsky, Pestl’ and Bestuzhev-Ryumin were hanged on a common gallows in the courtyard of the Fortress of St. Peter and St. Paul.” The loss of the majority of his friends and colleagues (those who were exiled to Siberia or the Caucasus) in the reprisal of the uprising creates the sense of having outlived his own generation which Tynianov refers to in the prologue.

Tynianov grounds this defamiliarization in the reference to himself at the end of the prologue, where he writes: “Un homme guindé et de petite taille s’est emparé de mon imagination. Il repose, immobile, les yeux luisants, encore mal réveillé. Il a tendu la main vers

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12 Kelly, 126.
13 Kelly, 135.
14 Kelly, 137.
15 Kelly, 139.
les lunettes posées sur la table de chevet. Il ne pense rien, ne dit rien. Rien n’est encore décidé
(15)"--«Человек небольшого роста, желтый и чопорный, занимает мое воображение. Он
лежит неподвижно, глаза его влестят со сна. Он протянул руку за очками к столику. Он
не думает, не говорит. Еще ничего не решено (9)». Tynianov is using the present tense to
describe a man who had been dead for nearly one hundred years. From the very beginning of the
novel Griboedov is defamiliarized for the readers, and he will be similarly defamiliarized from
himself in the course of the story.

Tolstoy provided the classic example of defamiliarization by using a horse as the narrator
of his story “Kholstomer.” It is the foreignness of the horse’s perspective “that makes the
content of the story seem unfamiliar.”16 The public had been saturated with defamiliarization by
Tolstoy and a wide range of other authors, so Tynianov explored a technique that is essentially a
kind of post-defamiliarization. When Tynianov states that, “le temps venait de se briser:
c’étaient les insurgés qui fuyaient sur les corps de leurs camarades, l’époque elle-même qu’on
torturait (12)"--«Время вдруг переломилось восставшие бежали по телам товарищей это
пытали время (7)», he is describing the Decembrist uprising as having broken the time in two
and defamiliarized all social mores from that moment on. Tynianov also shows that the uprising
of 1825 divided the population into the men of 1820 versus those of 1830. In breaking the age,
Tynianov is able to defamiliarize the whole society around Griboedov, which is seen from his
point of view, yet he is a man of 1820 who does not belong in this world because he has outlived
his times.

Finally, Tynianov’s novel sets itself apart by the language that it employs. In the words
of Victor Shklovsky, “Poetic imagery is a means of creating the strongest possible impression.”17

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16 Victor Shklovsky. “Art as Technique.” Lemon and Reis 3-24 (14).
17 Shklovsky, 8.
Tynianov uses poetic imagery throughout the novel. Already in the prologue he writes, “Ceux qui expiraient avant l’heure, la mort les prenait par surprise, comme l’amour, comme la pluie (13)”--«Людей, умиравших ранее своего века,, смерть застигала внезапно, как любовь, как дождь (8)». This language refers as much to the Decembrist uprising and those who died either at the gallows or in exile, as it does to the death that is coming for Griboedov in the novel, the death that would come for the Tsar and many others after the October Revolution, and the death that was creeping in on everyone because of war or starvation. The beauty of Tynianov is that his choice of wording takes the reader off guard: instead of something violent or abrupt, death comes like a caress, like a lover, like the fall of rain. The application of this technique sets Smert’ Vazir-Mukhtara apart not only as a great novel, but as a great example of literary theory applied.

In Smert’ Vazir-Mukhtara, we are able to see Formalism fully illuminated rather than only by moonlight. Through Tynianov’s use of Formalist techniques, in his applying literary theory to literature, the theory itself serves its purpose rather than appearing in isolation. Through the novel we are better able to see and understand Tynianov’s attraction to Formalism, as it enabled him to experiment as an artist as well as a historian. Jameson writes, “Thus, by his practice of the form, Tynyanov must have been able to see himself, not as fulfilling literary history, but as taking part in but one moment of a genuinely historical succession.”18 Tynianov sets himself apart as a theorist because he does not just tell his audience what he wants them to know. He also shows them what he wants them to know.

18 Jameson, 91.
In 1924 Yury Tynianov was lecturing as the State Art Historical Institute and translating for the Smolni Institute. By the end of that year he had published his critical article “Dostoevsky and Gogol” in addition to his first book of literary theory, the Problem of Verse Language. These successes as a literary scholar make it all the more puzzling that, a year later, Tynianov turned to fiction. Highlighting this puzzle is the well-circulated story of how Tynianov came to write his first novel on Wilhelm Kuchelbeker. He had given a lecture on the poetry of Kuchelbeker that had turned out unsuccessfully, and was returning home with a friend of his who had attended the lecture. In the course of events he talked through much of Kuchelbeker’s biography with such feeling and style that his friend stopped him to ask why he had not spoken of that in the lecture. His friend then engaged him to write a short pamphlet on Kuchelbeker’s life. That pamphlet became an extensive novel and set Tynianov on the path of his other two novels. Tynianov wrote of this transition in his autobiography:

“In 1925 I wrote a novel about Kjuxel’beker. The transition from scholarship to literature was by no means an easy one. Many scholars considered novels and fiction in general to be hackwork…The greatest of revolutions had to take place for the chasm between scholarship and literature to be bridged. My own fiction arose, in the main, out of discontent with the history of literature, which skimmed the surface, depicting men, movements and the development of Russian literature indistinctly. The “universal mishmash” that the literary historians created
demeaned the writers of the past and their works. A need to get to know them better, to understand them on a deeper level—that is what fiction was for me.”

In Smert’ Vazir-Mukhtara, it is notable that he depicts “men [and] movements” in depth, and he gives them the details that he wanted to read. This detailing sets Tynianov apart as an artist, a historian and a scholar.

The turn from literary theory to writing fiction does not appear to have come naturally to him, although his friend and colleague Boris Eikhenbaum states otherwise, “Who should be a writer if not someone who has thought through himself the theoretical problems of literature?”

The Breschinskys also argue that, “He was, after all, a born artist, something the scholar within him had been unwilling to admit and revealed only to close friends in informal situations.” His choice is noteworthy; he was, after all, a writer writing mostly about other writers.

Angela Brintlinger writes that, “In the years after the Revolution, regardless of where they were living, Russian writers began to turn towards biography as a way of understanding the past and their literary predecessors, as a way of thinking about their own times and themselves as writers.” She later expands on the question:

“Scholarship on biography suggests a special relationship between the author and the subject, particularly in the case of biographies by writers about writers. As George Eliot said, “a biography by a writer has a double interest, from the glimpses it gives of the writer as well as his hero.” When the...novel is not strictly autobiographical it often benefits from a certain...kinship between one writer and another that can serve as the stimulus for the work and add a special dimension to the relationship between the author and the subject.”

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5 Breschinsky, “Jurij Tynjanov Between Kjuxlia and Puškin” (289).
6 Angela Brintlinger, Writing a Usable Past (9).
7 Brintlinger, (17).
Tynianov’s choice of subjects, Kuchelbeker, Griboedov, and Pushkin, was neither random, nor did it follow a popular trend. It was a deliberate choice made by a man who in some way identified with each of his heroes.

The Breschinskys write that, “Tynjanov…viewed the individual as a creature of his time, linking personality with history. His style is…modernistic, biting, full of irony, deliberate ambiguity, and subtle understatement. Literary manipulation of documentary material is a prominent feature of Tynjanov’s emotionally charged works, which makes them all the more exciting.”

It is clear that Tynianov was connecting the Decembrists (the men and the movement) to the October Revolution and in this way, connecting Griboedov with Tynianov himself.

Eikhenbaum confirms this connection between the Decembrists and the October Revolution by stating, “History is, in effect, a science of complex analogies, a science of double vision: the facts of the past have meanings for us that differentiate them and place them, invariably and inevitably, in a system under the sign of contemporary problems. Thus one set of problems supplants another; one set of facts overshadows another. History in this sense is a special method of studying the present with the aid of facts of the past.”

This approach to history is evident already in the prologue of the novel, since it encourages readers to view the action of the novel (the events of 1829) “through the filter of the 1920’s.”

Tynianov is also connecting himself as a scholar, a writer and a man with his subject, so that the novel, while it is ostensibly about Griboedov, is also about its author. Outwardly Tynianov and Griboedov had one very significant characteristic in common. Both men had

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8 Breschinsky, “On Tynjanov the Writer” (2).
analytical careers, Tynianov as a literary theorist and lecturer, Griboedov as a diplomat, and both of them were creative writers as well. Angela Brintlinger comments on some of these similarities:

“The author [Tynianov] himself had much in common with his central hero. While not autobiographical, the novel was certainly auto-referential. Both Tynianov and Griboedov started new careers because of political pressure; Griboedov found himself unable to write poetry after the failure of the Decembrist revolt and turned to a project for transforming the Caucasus as an outlet for his creative instinct, while Tynianov was forced for economic and political reasons to curtail his formalist studies and turn to belles lettres.”

This passage illuminates the similarities between Tynianov and Griboedov, but it also subtly displays the typical attitude of literary scholars towards Tynianov. That he “was forced for economic and political reasons to curtail his formalist studies” implies that Tynianov would never have willingly chosen to write fiction as an experiment in the application of theory.

This assumption is insular and not entirely correct. Tynianov states in his autobiography (quoted above) that “many scholars considered novels and fiction in general to be hackwork,” though he never believed that novels or creative fiction had to be less intellectually rigorous than scholarship. Brintlinger apparently assumes that in turning to fiction Tynianov abandoned his interest and work in Formalism, which is a narrow way of reading his novels. A greater understanding of Tynianov as a creative writer and of his novel Smert’ Vazir-Mukhtara, specifically, is acquired by examining the ways which Tynianov twists and manipulates history to illuminate certain moments and shifts in Russian history and literature.

It is useful to address the differences between Western and Russian views of history and literature. The Western perspective on history views a completed action in the context of all

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11 Brintlinger, Writing a Usable Past 29.
12 The categories of “Western” and “Russian” are not (of course) mutually exclusive although for the moment it is simpler to address them as such. I find this approach useful when reading Smert’ Vazir-Mukhtara.
that came before it and all that has followed. In historical texts, authors treat their sources as infallible and unquestionable. Andrew Wachtel writes, “In the West, in the course of the first half of the nineteenth century, ‘the historian became king, all of culture heeded his decrees; history decided how the Iliad should be read; history decided what a nation was defining as its historical frontiers, its hereditary enemy, its traditional mission.’ At a stroke, the historian supplanted the philosopher as guide and counselor.”

The Russian view of history is at once more passionate and more complex. Wachtel writes, “Russians insist, sometimes even in the face of evidence to the contrary, that their nation’s past is unlike that of any other country.” As much as Russians see their nation’s past as different from all others, there is an undertone of distrust in historians that flavors Russian literature from the October Revolution to the present day. Wachtel writes, “Russia turns out to be a strange hybrid: it is not exactly that Russians do not believe in the importance of historical narrative, it is simply that they have not trusted historians to provide it. When history is provided by novelists it is frequently accepted willingly. Ultimately then, the Russian case looks extremely strange when compared to either Western European or non-Western traditions.”

The Russian distrust of historians is perhaps compensated for by their reverence for their national literature. John Lawrence writes, “Russian writers came to express the conscience of the nation. Therefore, ‘Russian nineteenth-century literature as a whole became to the ordinary educated Russian a substitute for the church.’ Hence the intense concern of nearly all Russian

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14 Wachtel, 1.
15 The most obvious example is of course Mikhail Bulgakov’s novel The Master and Margarita, where the devil insists that “manuscripts don’t burn” when in fact it was widely known that many of Bulgakov’s peers had burned all of their manuscripts in an attempt to escape the Purges.
16 Wachtel, 16.
writers for the state of society.”17 This tradition shaped Tynianov as well as his more celebrated peers: Gumilov, Akhmatova, Mendelstam, Bulgakov, Pasternak, and Babel. Tynianov’s statement that a “writer never invents anything more beautiful or powerful than the truth”18 sprouted from Dostoevsky’s statement that, “One can express incomparably more about our history through fidelity to poetic truth than through fidelity merely to history.”19 No wonder, then, that when Smert’ Vazir-Mukhtara was published in the Soviet Union in 1927, it garnered such critical praise; it is a great wonder, rather, that the novel is not now considered a classic work of Russian literature.

Tynianov is famous for saying, “I begin where the documents end.”20 Evelyn Harden expounded on this statement by saying, “He began where the documents ended in another sense…he reconstructed figures when there were no documents or when the documents concerned only other people.”21 An example from the novel is the character of Sashka as Griboedov’s possible half-brother. Tynianov writes, “Sachka était son frère de lait…Se pouvait-il qu’ils fussent frères par le sang ? Il lui semblait qu’on avait dit une chose de ce genre devant lui (436)”--«Сашка был его молочный брат…неужели Сашка и впрямь его единокровный брат? Словно что-то в людской говорили об этом, при нем (360)». Thus, without any concrete documentation he made an educated surmise based on the closeness of their friendship and the similarities of their names, Griboedov is Alexander Griboedov and Sashka is Alexander Gribov.

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18 Brintlinger. Writing a Usable Past 23.
19 Wachtel, 13.
21 Harden, 171.
Another example of Tynianov’s playing with history occurs when Griboedov’s plan has been rejected by Nesselrode and Rhodophinikine, and Griboedov has returned to his hotel where he is joined by his friend Bulgarin.

“Je vais t’organiser une lecture. Où veux-tu que cela se fasse ? Chez-moi ?
--Ma foi...non, dit Griboïedov.
Ce qui mortifia l’autre.
--Comme tu voudras, on peut la faire ailleurs...Chez Gretch, chez Svinine, proposa-t-il d’un air maussade.
--Eh bien, mettons chez Gretch, répondit Griboïedov comme s’il lui faisait une concession. Mais que ça ne soit pas une lecture, non, un simple dîner (162).”

«Я устрою твое чтение. Где хочешь? Хочешь у меня?
--Нет, пожалуй,—сказал Грибоедов, и Фаддей обиделся.
--Как хочешь. Можно не у меня... Можно у Греча, у Свиньина, -- сказал он хмуро.
--Так, пожалуй, у Греча,—сказал, как бы уступая, Грибоедов,— и только не чтение, а так, обед (131).»

Brintlinger asserts that, “K.A. Polevoj attests in his memoirs, such a reading and dinner did occur in St. Petersburg in 1828, and Krylov, Puškin and Greč all attended. However, the event did not take place at Bulgarin’s.”22 The gift of Tynianov is in taking a scene like this one that is mundane and grounded in reality, and making it sharper, almost bittersweet, by the contrast between Bulgarin’s immediate reaction “Ce qui mortifia l’autre,” «Фаддей обиделся», and his later reaction, “Thaddée sourit. Son crane framboise rayonnait.” «Фаддей улыбнулся. Малиновая лысина засияла.»

Tynianov took his work very seriously, and wrote of his own treatment of history:

“I still think that creative literature differs from history not by its ‘invention’ but by a larger, closer and more vital understanding of people and events, a greater concern for them. A writer never invents anything more beautiful or powerful than the truth. ‘Invention’ is a coincidence which comes not from the matter itself, but from the artist. And when there is necessity, rather than coincidence, that’s when a novel begins.”23

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23 Brintlinger, Writing a Usable Past 23.
In reality, though, Tynianov did not “invent” a great deal of his fiction. He had studied these men and their times for more than a decade; in some respects he knew them better than his own people and his own times. Larry Joseph describes a letter that Tynianov wrote to his friend and colleague Victor Shklovsky:

“For him the literary culture of the nineteenth century was as if second nature, a kind of…second home…He never stopped mentally trying to see into that distant era…In that home he fraternized with Pushkin and Küchelbecker, Katenin and Chaadaev, with Bulgarin and Griboyedov, and with Tyutchev and Admiral Shishkov. He new the history and prehistory of their relationships, the gossip of their wives, their literary and personal polemics, their hopes, their ambition[s], and their jealous[ies].”

When a writer knows his subject this well, it is no surprise that he is able to “begin where the document ends;” it is only a wonder that he is able to fictionalize enough of it that it avoids plagiarism. With such a familiarity with his subjects, then, it is no surprise that “Tynianov thought of his own work as being precise, controlled, and responsible.” Tynianov was not engaging in “hackwork,” but in sincere experimentation with the novel as form, history as subject, and formalism in application.

Although Tynianov reached into the past for its subject matter his novel shares stylistic elements with the avant-garde movement. The Breschinskys write that, “Having resolved the dual question of form (the novel) and content (Russian subject matter), Tynianov further asserted the need for ‘deformation.’ The notion of re-creating the world by shattering it and gluing together the pieces particularly appealed to him. He had but one reservation: that the fragments, fused by the poet’s vision, be recombined into a composite whole.” Part of what motivated Tynianov in the writing of fiction was, “breathing the breath of contemporaneity into precisely

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24 Joseph, 98.
the supposedly defunct art that…his radical artiste friends spurned.”

Tynianov did what no one else had done before, he wrote about the nineteenth century through the lens of the twentieth century, and by so doing was able to write about Griboedov’s age as well as his own; it is this dual treatment of two time periods that brings about the culmination that Renato Poggioli writes about:

“every age attains the fullness of its own time, not by being, but by becoming, not in terms of its own self but of its relative historical mission and hence of history as an absolute. This means that for moderns the consciousness of historical culmination, or the fullness of time, is at once granted or denied to each epoch, it is not the present that brings the past to a culmination, but the past that culminates in the present, and the present is in its turn understood as a new triumph of ancient and eternal values, as a return to the principles of the true and the just, as a restoration or rebirth of those principles.”

By reaching back to the writers of the nineteenth century, Tynianov was able to filter their genius into his own age, but in a way that illuminated them as they had never been before.

Poggioli later states, “only evolution can decide whether or not a given writer is really avant-garde by demonstrating that he has individualized and prefigured, with exactitude and lasting efficacy, the fundamental qualities, evolutionary tendencies, and social functions of particularized human types.”

In Smert’ Vazir-Mukhtara, Tynianov “individualized and prefigured” not only social functions—the inanity of bureaucracy (Nesselrode and Rhodophinikine) and the innate corruption inherent in the political system (whether the Tsar or Lenin). But he also “individualized and prefigured” human types that would be repeated later—for instance, Katia, Lenotchka and Nina as types of Margarita in Master and Margarita, or the poet/diplomat divided by necessity in Isaac Babel’s Red Cavalry Stories. And there is the

27 Joseph, 97.
29 Poggioli, 171.
thread of colonization that weaves through twentieth-century literature. No doubt, some scholars would argue that Tynianov is not avant-garde since he looked too much to the past, made no great changes, began no new trends, and changed nothing. These scholars should reread his novels, particularly Smert’ Vazir-Mukhtara, through the lens of the twenty-first century, and consider whether Tynianov was not in the forefront of a literary movement.

Brintlinger addresses Tynianov’s technique of using the past and manipulating it when she writes, “In Smert’ Vazir-Muchtara Tynianov uses the reader’s knowledge about Griboedov, while at the same time creating his own concept of the character.” Indeed, today Griboedov is primarily known for his only play Gore ot Uma (Woe from Wit), though he also wrote a variety of poems. In the novel, Griboedov swings like a pendulum between his desire to write and his inability to do so. Griboedov asks Bulgarin: “Crois-tu que je sais écrire? Car j’ai des choses à dire. Pourquoi suis-je donc muet, muet comme une carpe (78)?” Thus, Tynianov correlates the production of multiple works to the title of “writer.” Griboedov compares himself to Pushkin throughout, because Pushkin writes almost without ceasing, and Griboedov is “a man of one play” who wants to write but can not.

His vacillation appears early in the novel when he delivers the Turkmanchay treaty, Tynianov describes Griboedov: “D’une part, celui qui roule carosse est un homme célèbre, auteur d’une célèbre comédie et diplomate en plein essor, son allure est desinvolte, détachée, il emporte un traité de paix célèbre à Pétersbourg. D’autre part, la rue possède son aspect, son existence matérielle et n’accorde aucune attention à l’homme célèbre. La célèbre comédie n’a été ni portée à la scène ni éditée (37)”

знаменитый мир в Петербург. С другой стороны—улица имеет свой вид и вещественное существование, не обращает внимания на знаменитого человека. Знаменитая комедия не поставлена на театре и не напечатана (26)». Thus for Griboedov productivity is nothing without publication.

Тинянов возвращается к этой теме, когда Нессельроде назначает Грибоедову другую миссию в Персию. Грибоедовская первая реакция: “Et puis, je suis écrivain et musicien. J’ai donc besoin de lectures et d’un auditoire. Or, que trouverais-je en Perse (152)?”--«И притом же я автор и музыкант. Следственно мне нужен читатель и слушатель. Что же я найду в Персии (123)?». AGAIN TINYANOV SHOWS THAT A WRITER NEEDS READERS IN ORDER TO MAKE HIM A WRITER. He also indicates the possibility that Griboedov’s diplomatic career is to blame for his limited productivity.

Тинянов также использует эту сторону характера Грибоедова для критики социальной ценности писателя. В письме к своим сыновьям, Настасье Федоровне, она пишет: “Même moi, je dis qu’il n’y a rien de tout cela dans ton vaudeville, mais on ne me croit pas. Et voici le fruit des coulisses de théâtre, de ce cirque (387)”--«Я и то говорю, что нету этого ничего в водевиле, да не верят. И вот плоды театральных кулис ристалищ (318-319)». For Nastassia Feodrovna, as well as the majority of Moscow and Saint Petersburg society, literature and its writers have no social value, which is why she pushes her son to accept the diplomatic mission to Persia. They see social value only in the aristocracy or those who occupy ministerial positions.

Stylistically the novel is fragmented. Tynianov essentially defamiliarizes the structure of the novel from cohesive chapters into segments of varying lengths in order to emphasize the fractured nature of the times and society in which Griboedov is living. His survival of the Decembrist uprising gives him this unique perspective. This fragmentation functions as a
literary mosaic, piecing together the different elements of Griboedov’s character and of his age—elements which in turn reflect Tynianov’s age.

Michael Ondaatje has adopted his own version of this literary mosaic in his novel *The English Patient*. Where Tynianov uses the image of the swinging pendulum within Griboedov and between different elements within the novel, Ondaatje uses the recurrent image of the mirror. *The English Patient* centers on the stories of four central characters, but the protagonist is the army nurse Hana. Ondaatje uses the recurrent image of the mirror to reflect light, through the fragments of text, on Hana’s character, on her experiences in the war, and on human nature under extreme conditions. Hana is suffering from shell-shock and stops looking at herself in mirrors or reflections of any kind. This period ends when she accidentally catches a glimpse of herself. Ondaatje writes:

“She went into the room she shared with the other nurses and sat down. Something flickered in her eye as she sat, and she caught the eye of a small round mirror. She got up slowly and went towards it. It was very small but even so it seemed a luxury. She had refused to look at herself for more than a year, now and then just her shadow on walls. The mirror revealed only her cheek, she had to move it back to arm’s length, her hand wavering. She watched the little portrait of herself as if within a clasped brooch. She. She peered into her look, trying to recognize herself.”

Just as Hana cannot recognize herself in the context of her own time and circumstances, so, too, Griboedov cannot recognize himself outside the context of his former friends and associates. Later Ondaatje states: “A novel is a mirror walking down the road.” Through the medium of the novel that Ondaatje chooses to reveal truth, and through this recurrent image, the reader comes to see Hana as the bearer of that truth.

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32 Ondaatje, 91.
Similarly, Tynianov uses the fragmentation of his novel as a metaphor. Just as with a mosaic, if one stands too close, all one sees are the separate and distinct pieces; but if one stands at a distance the pieces blend to form a cohesive whole. In Smert’ Vazir-Mukhtar and The English Patient, the authors have chosen fragmentary structures in order to reveal minute detail, as well as forcing the reader to see the larger perspective. Structural fragmentation enables the defamiliarization of people and times, beyond the previously defamiliarized objects and situations in the more traditional novel. This structural choice also enables Tynianov to employ certain themes, which function as bridges between the two time periods. These themes consist broadly of death, the swinging pendulum, and the problems inherent in liminality.

The theme of death hovers over the text, from the prologue with the introduction of the Decembrists and the men of the 1820’s, to the end where the Vazir-Mukhtar “ceases to exist.” Tynianov weaves this theme throughout his text in a variety of ways, first of all through color. Griboedov is routinely described as being yellow as parchment, a lemon, or beeswax (presumably from the ill health suffered in Persia, and later worsened by suffering from a fever in Tiflis). Traditionally, yellow is the color of betrayal in Russian literature, although it also serves to create an air of suspicion—the Tsar suspected him of being a Decembrist; betrayal—his survival suggests of his betrayal of his friends who died for their involvement with the Decembrists; and finally death—the death of his friends and of his age hangs over him; and finally his own death, which follows him like a shadow throughout the course of the novel.

The pendulum swings constantly throughout the book. Griboedov has an inner pendulum which swings between the Chatsky and the Molchalin sides of him. It is notable that in St. Petersburg he is Chatsky and in Persia he is Molchalin; he is a poet and musician, but also a diplomat. In St. Petersburg he swings between Katia and Lenotchka, and throughout the book
his character is doubled by Sashka. The pendulum also swings between Persia and Russia, between Tiflis—where Griboedov longs to stay and live a peaceful life with Nina—and Tehran—where he goes to find his death violently. Brintlinger writes that “Tynianov’s own search for the truth…also sways like a pendulum; in the mirror-like affinity of his own times and the 1820’s, the present points back to the past, and the past points back to the present.”\(^{33}\)

This inability to rest in the present moment with no past and no future brings us to the final thematic element for examination: liminality. Larry Joseph argues that Tynianov himself identified with Griboedov because of his liminal position as a Russian of Baltic-Jewish extraction.\(^{34}\) Although he makes a brave effort he fails to convince that this identification stems from Tynianov’s birth. Needless to say, who we are differs enormously from who we become. Tynianov does identify with Griboedov. It is plausible that their divided interests—poet/diplomat and scholar/novelist—encouraged this identification, but it is more likely that Tynianov identified with Griboedov because he was forgotten. Griboedov was lost between times. He did not fully belong in his own time because he had the blessing and the misfortune to live in the time of Pushkin. He seems almost fated to have been forgotten. Likewise, Tynianov was not fashionable enough to belong in his own time. He had neither the flash of Bakhtin nor the poetic misfortunes of Babel, Mendelstam or Shalamov. And so, rather than dying with all the other writers that Stalin purged, Tynianov was lost between times and has been forgotten. He remains suspended between the nineteenth-century writers he loved, admired, and illuminated in fiction; and the twentieth century, in which he revolutionized literary theory and analysis, lectured on literature and died all too soon.


\(^{34}\) Joseph, introduction.
One of the difficulties in appreciating Tynianov in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries is that of translation. The issue is complicated by the conflicting opinions illustrated by two translators of the classic nineteenth-century Russian work, *Eugene Onegin*. The first position is that of Vladimir Nabokov, who writes in the preface to his translation, “Attempts to render a poem [I think that we can safely substitute any work of literature here] in another language fall into three categories: Paraphrasic:…with omissions and additions prompted by the…conventions attributed to the consumer, and the translator’s ignorance…Lexical: rendering the basic meaning of the words…Literal: rendering, as closely as the associative and syntactical capacities of another language allow, the exact contextual meaning of the original. Only this is a true translation.”\(^{35}\) It is all too easy to fall into the trap of agreeing with Vladimir Dmitrich and say that “the only good translation is literal!” The second position is that of Douglas Hofstadter, another translator of *Eugene Onegin*, who writes, “Yes, one is always lying, for to translate is to lie. But even to speak is to lie, no less. No word is perfect, no sentence captures all the truth and only the truth. All we do is make do.”\(^{36}\) A literal translation poses several problems when one is translating from Russian into English. The flexibility of Russian word-order first and foremost makes literal translation practically incomprehensible, but is lying really the alternative?

Alec Brown translated *Smert’ Vazir-Mukhtara* from 1936 to 1938 under the title *Death and Diplomacy in Persia*. As if the difference in the title were not enough to convince one of its inadequacy, there are substantial sections missing from the original, whose omission Brown defends by writing, “I have been guided by the only fundamental principle of translation…to re-


write, *as if I were the author himself*, gifted with the full power of English writing. It is highly unlikely that Tynianov himself would have abridged his own work in such a deplorable way, and though Brown was translating the novel while Tynianov was still alive, if the two had communicated on the subject of translation, it is probable that Brown would have mentioned it in the translator’s note. So what is to be done? Are all non-Russian speakers to be condemned never to know the fineness of Russian literature because translation is deceptive at best and impossible at worst? There is the potential for compromise. To render Russian into French or English in a comprehensible way is not impossible (as Pevear and Volokhonsky have shown with their great translations of Dostoevsky’s works). As an exercise in the art of translation and interpretation we will examine three scenes from *Smert’ Vazir-Mukhtar* in order to illustrate the variations in Tynianov’s language.

The first scene comes from the prologue. It is entirely missing from Alec Brown’s translation. He wrote in his translator’s note that, “It is a shortened version of Tynianov’s original, and in the editing the present publishers have played a large part. In this work they have shown a *pleasing blend of dash and delicacy*. *Mainly* material interesting only to Russian readers or those who are reasonably well acquainted with Russian literature has been cut.” That sounds reasonable enough, but who is to determine what is interesting or relevant to the readers, whether they are Russian or otherwise? The prologue is essential because it creates the bridge between the nineteenth century and the twentieth century; it introduces the themes of death and of liminality due to outliving one’s age, and it provides valuable insight into the mindset of Tynianov’s perspective as a novelist.

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37 *Death and Diplomacy in Persia*, trans. note, italics mine.
38 *Death and Diplomacy in Persia*, trans. note, italics mine.
As we have seen, in the prologue Tynianov writes, “Ceux qui expiraient avant l’heure, la mort les prenait par surprise, comme l’amour, comme la pluie (13)”--«Людей, умирающих раньше своего века, смерть застигала внезапно, как любовь, как дождь (8)». This passage introduces the reader to three significant things. First, who is “ceux”--«Людей», why does Tynianov choose something so purposefully vague at the beginning of a novel? Why not be specific and write the Decembrists, or Griboedov, or even as he later writes the men of the 1820’s? Tynianov is purposefully vague because Smert’ Vazir-Mukhtara is not a novel exclusively about one man, though Griboedov plays a substantial part, nor about many men, like the Decembrists or the men of the 1820’s. Smert’ Vazir-Mukhtara is about every man in every generation who finds himself lost between times, it is a novel about Yury Tynianov and the men of the 1920’s as much as it is about the Decembrists and the men of the 1820’s.

Tynianov goes on to write that these men are, “Ceux qui expiraient avant l’heure”--«умирающих раньше своего века». It should be noted that he does not specify at this time what kind of death. The potential is there for a spiritual death, a physical death, an ethical death, a death of principles, a death of fear, or a death of a version of the self. All that Tynianov does specify is that they are dying before their age (hour, time or period is the literal translation from the French, and century or age is the literal translation from the Russian). Is Tynianov implying that these people died before the hour fated for them to die, or before they were able to become what they were fated to become, or is fate not a factor here at all? The language is sufficiently vague that surely all of these implications are there. Tynianov is writing about those who died before they had fulfilled their potential in life, and before it was time for them to die.

He continues with, “la mort les prenait par surprise” «смерть застигала внезапно». These men, whoever they were or are or will be, are not expecting this death to come for them.
Logic follows that if Tynianov does not mean exclusively the Decembrists (and by Decembrists I intend those who actively planned and participated in the uprising), then all who participate in a violent revolt against an autocracy should expect death if they fail. And yet in this passage, death comes suddenly, by surprise, unexpectedly.

There are many things that come suddenly, by surprise or unexpectedly, but Tynianov chose to compare this death to love and rain, “comme l’amour, comme la pluie” «как любовь, как дождь». Why not something more threatening? Tynianov chooses love and rain because there are conflicting associations connected with them. They both have the potential to be gentle, soothing, comforting, as well as passionate, violent, and frightening. In addition to these conflicts, love and rain also have the most extraordinary ability of coming when one least expects, or is prepared for them. By choosing these words in this specific sequence, Tynianov is setting the stage for his novel; he prepares his readers for what lies ahead. By removing this section altogether Alec Brown has removed tremendous meaning from the entire text.

Our second example concerns a scene which is also for the most part missing in the Alec Brown translation. It is a dinner to which Griboedov has been invited. In attendance are mostly men of war as Tynianov calls them, military men who have fought the Tsar’s wars for most of their adult lives. The reader is asked to imagine Griboedov (average height, glasses on his nose and unpublished poet) in company with these men of war. And then Tynianov writes, “Simplement, librement et sans façon, les hommes de guerre l’aimaient comme s’il eût été des leurs (136)” --«Просто, свободно, без затей, военные люди любили его, как своего (108)».

Tynianov begins this observation with two adverbs and a prepositional phrase. He writes, “Simplement, librement et sans façon” --«Просто, свободно, без затей»; in English they are “simply, freely and without design.” The first question is to whom or what do we apply these
words? Are the men of war simple, free and without design? Is it the manner in which they accept Griboedov among them? At first glance one might imagine yet again that it could be both. But there is a brief list of the men who are in attendance at this dinner (the Alec Brown translation gives us this much but not more), and they include two princes, two counts and the new general military governor. One would assume behavior from these men to be more than “simple, free and without design,” so this describes the way in which they accept Griboedov as one of their own, they love him as they love their sons, their nephews, their cousins, “simply, freely and without design.” But does this love connote acceptance?

Tynianov writes, “comme s’il eût été des leurs” «любили его, как своего». The phrase translates roughly “as if he had been one of them.” This translation lends itself to interesting analysis because the eye is drawn to that “comme,” “as” if Griboedov is not in reality; and then again to the “eût été,” “had been.” The plu-perfect subjunctive, does not emphasize the love that these men supposedly bestowed upon him “simply, freely and without design.” On the contrary, it magnifies the differences between these men of war and Griboedov. He is most certainly not one of them or their own; he is an other, from another time.

The French translation is interesting compared with the Russian next to it because the Russian literally translates as “they loved him, as their own,” and as such it is decidedly more believable that these men of war really did love Griboedov, “simply, freely and without design.” The only thing to cause one to question is that «как»: Griboedov is still only an “as” not an “is.” But why? Why should these men of war love someone who is not one of their own? Perhaps he reminds them of their sons. And as the dinner progresses one of the generals asks Griboedov if he has seen his son by chance while in the Caucasus, where his son is living in exile for his Decembrist activities.
In order to give a fair portrayal of Alec Brown’s translation, we will examine a passage from the scene where the first of the kourours is delivered and general Sipiagin makes a speech. Tynianov writes, “Грибоедов смотрел на солдат, он кого-то искал взглядом внизу (196)”--“Griboyedov watched the soldiers. He was seeking somebody out (187)”. This statement is admittedly vague. Whom is Griboedov looking for and why? It is further confused by the absence of the section with the dinner among the generals. A reader who has read the above-mentioned interchange between one of the generals (Depreradovich) inquiring of Griboedov if he had seen his son, is reminded once again of this old father seeking news of his son. The French choice of words translates roughly to “Griboedov shot a glance of the eyes over the soldiers, there was one he was searching for.” It is interesting to note that this scene is a military parade; the first kourour is brought in as the first payment from the Persians for the war. The play on words by Denis in her translation does not reflect the literal translation from the Russian, but it comes closer to the overall tone of Tynianov’s novel. From the French it seems as if Griboedov is a hunter and he captures his prey in his sight, the one he searches for, not looks for, not watches for, but searches for. The implicit meaning is more deliberate, more methodical. Griboedov has come to this particular place (the rooftop) with the intention of searching for this man and finding him.

The Russian contrasts with the French in that it translates literally as “Грибоедов looked over the soldiers, he sought someone by glancing below.” In the Russian it is as if Griboedov is in a protective position; he watches over them to keep them from harm, from battle, from another war if possible. His search is also more casual, he is glancing below, and if the man happens to be there, then he will see him, but if not then he will not. Both of these are contrasted with Alec
Brown’s translation which reads, “Griboyedov watched the soldiers. He was seeking somebody out.” This translation has the tone of suspicion to it, Griboedov is almost paranoid, almost afraid of finding someone among the soldiers, and he is “watching” them rather than watching over them, he is anxious in this moment rather than attentive.

Tynianov continues the scene with, “Грибоедов нашел то, чего искал (196)”. And Alec Brown renders this passage, “But now Griboyedov had found what he was seeking (188)”. The French translation takes a more elegant turn of phrase, it loosely reads “Griboedov finally found the one he was seeking.” This phrasing is reminiscent of the *New Testament*, where Jesus Christ taught the parable of the pearl of great price, “a merchant man, seeking goodly pearls: Who, when he had found one pearl of great price, went and sold all that he had, and bought it.” Griboedov’s search for this man is sufficiently intentional to echo the merchant’s search for the pearl of great price, perhaps to Griboedov this man was a “pearl of great price,” he was also a survivor of the Decembrists like himself and yet unlike. This man was convicted for nominal involvement, while Griboedov escaped when he was more than nominally involved.

The original Russian translates literally as “Грибоедов нашел то, чего искал.” This statement is more abrupt, straightforward, but with a slight tone of resignation, as if Griboedov was unsure of why he was seeking this man in the crowd. Alec Brown translates this passage as, “But now Griboyedov had found what he was seeking.” His tone is also abrupt but in the sense of a sudden but purposeful cessation of current activity. Brown’s Griboedov is a man with a motive and the reader is constantly unsure of just what that motive is because Brown has so severely abridged the text.

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The scene ends with Griboedov collapsing in a faint. The Breschinskys argue that he does so “because he has relived the hanging of his comrades, the Decembrists. For a brief moment the balcony becomes a scaffold, with the crowds gathered below, the drums rolling, and the animated, pink, French-speaking ladies enjoying the spectacle of it all.”40 This scene, when viewed in the context of the dinner with the “men of war” who acknowledge for the reader Griboedov’s connection with the Decembrists, confirms their argument that it is a horrifyingly familiar moment for Griboedov, a moment that a man would not wish to live once, and most definitely not twice.

Chapter 3:

Tynianov Illuminated by Little Zaches:  
A Comparative Study of Smert’ Vazir-Mukhtara and Heine Zaches

“Il n’existait pas, il n’avait jamais existé.  
L’Éternité (516).”  
La Mort du Vazir Moukhtar

«Он не существовал ни теперь, ни ранее.  
Вечность (429).»  
Смерть Вазир-Мухтара

Fairy-tales, myths, and legends make up the mulch pile from which all stories come; and it is novels which make up the “reactualization” that Jakobson and Bogatyrev speak of when they write: “the reactualization of the literary works of a distant past is not uncommon, even when such works may have temporarily lost their vitality.”¹ The difference between fairy-tales and novels can be compared to that between an infant and the adult it becomes. The two are interconnected in that they are composed of the same elementary matter, but are fundamentally different from one another.

The decline in popularity of fairy-tales enabled Tynianov subconsciously to infuse his novel with some elements from E.T.A. Hoffmann’s fairy tale, Heine Zaches. As a Formalist, Tynianov was exposed to the comparative study of fairy tales and he was acquainted with the concept of their “reactualization” about which Jakobson and Bogatyrev wrote. It is this “reactualization,” in company with a statement of Tynianov’s, that clarifies the choice to compare Smert’ Vazir-Mukhtara and Heine Zaches. Tynianov wrote that, “The function of each literary work lies in its correlation with other works (just as the function of ‘literature’ as a whole

lies in its correlation with other cultural series).”

As an exercise in correlating two very different works of literature, as well as illuminating the “reactualization” of an earlier work, we may compare Smert’ Vazir-Mukhtara and Heine Zaches. The popularity of Hoffmann in Russia surpassed what it has been ever in the United States, as evidenced in Passage’s introduction:

“In Russia it was the rage to read him in Russian translation, in French or in the original German...Pushkin created the Queen of Spades on a Hoffmannian pattern...Lermontov’s fine but unfinished tale Shtoss is an ingenious reworking of a Hoffmannian theme. At least half a dozen lesser writers sought to synthesize the difficult Hoffmannian formula. Above all, Dostoevski, particularly in his early career, created new works by reducing Hoffmann’s plots and characters to bare skeletons and then fleshing them up again with his own substance.”

Given this history of reworking Hoffmannian prototypes, it is not surprising that such elements can also be found in Tynianov. He was shaped by the works of Pushkin, Lermontov, and Dostoevsky, so it is to be expected that in his own creative endeavors he should have built upon their foundations. The similarities between Smert’ Vazir-Mukhtara and Heine Zaches can be grouped into three general categories: mothers and other characters, similar demonstrations of affection, and fundamentally similar death scenes.

Strip a story down to its skeleton and often the most basic, essential element is character. The characters created by an author are the structural skeleton around which the story is fleshed out. Smert’ Vazir-Mukhtara and Heine Zaches share several combinations of comparable characters. The mothers of Little Zaches and Griboedov are both greedy and unfeeling women, they both try to exploit their sons for their own well-being, and they both benefit after the demise of their sons.

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The first example of the unfeeling nature of these women comes from Hoffmann’s tale. The mother weeps as she rants, saying, “we have to feed the young one fat even to our own misery and greater distress. The little runt will probably eat and drink more and more, but never work a day in his life! No, no, it’s more than a body can bear on this earth! If only I could die—just die!” Her unhappiness is comparable with Griboedov’s mother, who is described as greedy and pitiless. Tynianov writes, “Il [Paskevich] avait conseillé à Nastassia Fiodorovna d’accepter la Perse. Ainsi, tout se décidait derrière son dos, comme s’il eût été un enfant; et le pire, c’est qu’il le savait (21)”--« Он посоветовал Настасье Федоровне брать Персию. Так решали за его спиной, как за маленького; хуже всего, что он знал об этом (13)». One might argue that Griboedov’s mother is concerned for her son, she is interfering on his behalf, but the problem with this argument is that she is interfering with his life on her own behalf. She seeks glory and riches, not for her son but for herself, which makes Griboedov a pawn in his mother’s game. The novel further illuminates Tynianov’s own life in this respect as well because he had a very tense and combative relationship with his mother. Larry Joseph writes, “Tynianov…had the most difficult time…coping with his mother’s contradictions and restrictiveness, constantly clashing with her mostly over trifles…These tempestuous confrontations rent deep scars into his memories of childhood and adolescence, which he would later turn to advantage when creating the formidable termagant mother figures of his historical novels.”

Besides resenting their sons both mothers benefit once their sons are gone. In Hoffmann’s tale, Little Zaches is fostered by a local vicar. Once he is gone his mother says, “He has taken a burden off my shoulders and loaded it onto his own. Let him look to how he will

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4 Hoffmann, 4.
5 Joseph, 21.
carry it!...and the heaviest worry is gone along with him!”

Griboedov’s mother is more passively aggressive. She writes her son a letter from Moscow, “Mon cher fils, les mots me manquent pour te dire ma gratitude. Tu es le seul appui de ta mère, mon ami. Combien tu m’as obligée en m’envoyant sans tarder ces quatre mille pièces d’or sans lesquelles, imagine-toi, je ne sais comment je me serais tirée des griffes de mes créanciers (173-174)”--«Мой любезный сын! Не имею слов, чтобы тебя благодарить. Ты, мой друг—единственный помощник своей матери. Как ты меня одолжил, что сразу же и послал четыре тысячи золотом, не то, вообрази, не знаю, как бы и справилась с этими кредиторами (141)». Griboedov admits earlier in the novel that the title awarded him for his role in brokering the Turkmanchai Treaty was for him, but the gold he would receive in addition to the title would “liberate” him from his mother. The mother of Little Zaches tries to exploit him more overtly than Nastassia Feodrovna does Griboedov: “Then the woman [Little Zaches mother] began to sob and lament. ‘What do I get out of it now, that my little Zaches achieved high dignity and great wealth? If only he had stayed with me…If I carried him around in my woodbasket, people would have felt pity and tossed me many a pretty piece of money.’”

The final similarity between the mothers is illuminated by the deaths of their sons. After Little Zaches has died his mother weeps and bemoans her fate (see above), and in the course of events the Prince takes pity on her. Hoffmann writes, “The prince pressed a couple of gold pieces into old Liese’s hand…thus Little Zaches’s mother, without becoming exactly rich, did escape from all distress and all misery…” This response mirrors nicely that of Nastassia Feodrovna. With the news of Griboedov’s death spreading from Tehran to St. Petersburg and Moscow, Tynianov returns to give Nastassia Feodrovna a small mention: “La mère et la veuve

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6 Hoffmann, 8.
7 Hoffmann, 99.
8 Hoffmann, 103.
recevraient chacune une masse de trente mille roubles et chacune une pension, de cinq mille
roubles, mais pas en monnaie d’argent, en papier-monnaie. La vieille dame ne vivrait pas
longtemps, l’opération était économique (510)”--«Обеим, и матери и вдове, отпускалось по
30 000 единовременно и обеим пенсия, но уже не червонцами, а по 5 000 ассигнациями.
Старухе осталось жить недолго получалась экономия (423)». The similarities between these
two women strengthen the argument that Tynianov was influenced by Hoffmann’s Heine
Zaches.

Tynianov was also inspired by Hoffmann’s Mosch Terpin in his characterization of
Paskevich. Mosch Terpin is an inept scientist who rises in position and influence because of his
daughter’s relationship with Zinnober (Little Zaches). Paskevich is an inept military strategist
who rises (one suspects) because of assistance from Griboedov. Hoffmann writes, “Mosch
Terpin’s lectures were the most frequented in all Kerepes…He explained how it rains, thunders,
lightens, why the sun shines by day and the moon by night, how and why the grass grows, and so
forth, so that any child could not but understand it…He first established his reputation by
successfully demonstrating, after many physical experiments, that darkness derives primarily
from lack of light.”9 Hoffmann uses humor to indicate Mosch Terpin’s ineptitude, while
Tynianov is straightforward about Paskevich : “Or tout ce qui se disait de lui, c’est que c’était un
parvenu, un incapable et un imbécile. Oui, un imbécile : c’est ainsi que le traitaient, deux jours
après son départ, les gens qui le touchaient au plus près (292)”--« И вот, все знали о нем: он
выскочка, бездарен и дурак. Дураком его трактовали ближайшие люди уже через день по
отъезде от него (238)». Early in the novel when Griboedov is taking leave of his friends in
Moscow, it is Ermolov who first insinuates that Paskevich is revered as much as he is because
Griboedov “proofreads” Paskevich’s letters. Griboedov is angry and willing to challenge the

9 Hoffmann, 20-21.
men who have published this rumor, but noticeably he does not deny it. The most he is willing
to say is that he hates “these amusements (35).”

Tynianov also draws from Hoffmann’s tale through character interaction. In *Heine Zaches*, Zinnober plagiarizes Pulchin during a Foreign Service exam and by so doing obtains the position. In a similar situation, Rhodophinikine plans to plagiarize Griboedov’s Transcaucasian development plan. Pulchin tells how his exam had been conducted simultaneously with that of Zinnober. Because of a certain enchantment Zinnober was able to project himself onto the accomplishments of others, including Pulchin, so that for the examination committee it appeared as if Zinnober was responding brilliantly and Pulchin was behaving obnoxiously, although in truth the brilliance was all Pulchin’s.

Tynianov echoes this scenario when Griboedov is brought to present his plan to Rhodophinikine. Griboedov explains the plan in sufficient though not extensive detail, and Rhodophinikine responds enthusiastically. He ends the discussion by reminding Griboedov that he needed to speak to Nesselrode before making a final decision but leaves Griboedov optimistically. At the next meeting with Nesselrode and Rhodophinikine, Griboedov is given his post to Persia and told in ambiguous language that he should choose to comply. Although it is not explicitly stated that Rhodophinikine will plagiarize Griboedov’s plan, the reader is led to think so because of his reaction during the initial interview and the posting of Griboedov to Persia. Tynianov tells the reader explicitly through Griboedov that returning to Persia amounts to a death sentence. Nesselrode’s ineptitude as a foreign minister is summed up in one sentence, “Karl-Robert von Nesselrode ne parlait pas le russe (53)”--«Карл-Роберт Нессельрод не

10 *La Mort du Vazir-Moukhtar*.
11 Hoffmann, 45-46.
13 *La Mort du Vazir-Moukhtar*, 151-153 Смерть Вазир-Мухтара, 121-123.
говорил по-русски (39)». Тynianov is asking his readers, what kind of Russian Foreign Minister is he, if he does not even speak Russian in Russia?

Hoffmann alludes to government corruption at the end of the scene with Zinnober and Pulchin: “Only the madness of the people or, as I am almost afraid, vast bribery is to blame for our misfortunes. This accursed Zinnober is said to be immeasurably wealthy.”¹⁴ Тynianov plays on this theme of government corruption throughout his novel in order to correlate the corruption of the former tsarist and the new communist regimes. A good example of this motif in Smert’ Vazir-Mukhtara is the way in which people rise in rank based on whom rather than what they know. For example, in conversation Katia tells Griboedov about another ballerina who is very popular at the moment because of her rumored involvement with the Tsar. Soldiers in the Caucasus rise in rank if they fought for the Tsar on December 14th, but if they fought against him or were so suspected then they are demoted, even if they perform in exemplary fashion in the field. Similarly, in Tynianov’s time people were given jobs based on whom they knew in the government. And later people were purged because of what they knew.

Hoffmann and Tynianov both create interesting effects by way of their characters’ names. Both Little Zaches and Griboedov undergo name changes in the course of their stories, which represent changes in their personalities. In Heine Zaches, Little Zaches becomes Zinnober and changes the way that he is perceived by others. He begins life as an ugly changeling boy whom Hoffmann describes as, “a misshapen boy, hardly two spans tall, who…was now snarling and rolling on the grass. The thing’s head was stuck way down between his shoulders, a pumpkinlike growth took the place of a back, and directly beneath its chest hung the little legs as thin as hazel twigs, so that the youngster looked like a split radish.”¹⁵ By the time his name is

¹⁴ Hoffmann, 47.
¹⁵ Hoffmann, 4.
changed to Zinnober he appears completely different. Hoffmann writes, “inner inspiration did lend beauty to his features, so that frequently he did seem to me to be a charming, well-built youth, despite the fact that he hardly reached higher than the table.”

Griboedov’s name is composed of the roots of the word for mushroom “grib” and the root of the verb “to eat”-“ed.” In returning to Persia, Griboedov is more frequently referred to by his title the Vazir-Mukhtar than he is by his given name.

Tynianov describes Griboedov from the beginning as, “Un homme guindé et de petite taille (15)”–«Человек небольшого роста, желтый (9)». Throughout the time in Moscow and Saint Petersburg, Tynianov describes Griboedov as smallish, yellowish, and with glasses on his nose. Although he is not described as particularly handsome, his actions make him, if not admirable, at least captivating. For example, Griboedov goes to the theater and he observes several bald heads with abhorrence. He then recalls an incident in his youth when he applauded a bad actress on the bald head of the man sitting in front of him who was applauding the aforementioned actress in sincerity. Tynianov writes, “Dans ce temps-là, il était jeune et plein d’insolence…(66)”–«Он был молод и дерзок тогда (50)». While Griboedov is not handsome, nor truly admirable, the reader can not help but befriend him, he has his own charm, or perhaps charisma.

In Heine Zaches, it is the touch of Rosa von Belverde that soothes the snarling Little Zaches. At their first meeting Hoffmann writes: “Quiet, quiet, little June bug!’ and softly and soothingly stroked him across the head with the flat of her hand, from the forehead over and down to the nape of his neck. During the stroking the little fellow’s shaggy hair gradually smoothed down until it was parted, lay tight to the forehead, and fell in pretty, soft ringlets down

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16 Hoffmann, 39.  
17 Joseph, 251.
to his high shoulders and his pumpkinlike back.” Tynianov repeats this gesture when Griboedov goes to Katia for comfort. Tynianov writes: “Il serait peut-être resté plus longtemps, peut-être pour toujours, chez cette simple et blanche Katia qui lui caressait les cheveux comme les jeunes vachères caressent sans doute leurs infatigables gaillards, quelque part dans un fenil, sous un toit percé (156)”--«Он, пожалуй, остался бы и долье, пожалуй, остался бы и навсегда у нее, у простой белой Кати, которая гладила его по волосам, как гладят, верно, своих неугомимых молодцов молодые коровницы где-нибудь на сеновале под дырявой крышей (126)». Later, when Griboedov returns to Persia he will stroke his hair in a similar soothing gesture.

The death scenes in both *Heine Zaches* and *Smert’ Vazir-Mukhtara* bear strong similarities between them. Both Little Zaches and Griboedov are killed during riots. In *Heine Zaches*, Hoffmann writes, “Heaven knows how it came about, a muffled murmuring had begun among the mob to the effect that the ridiculous little monster up there was really Little Zaches, who had assumed the proud name of Zinnober and made his way up by all sorts of abominable lies and deceits. Louder and louder the voices rose…And with that, the people stormed the house.” Similarly, in *Smert’ Vazir Mukhtara*, a riot commences over the fact that Griboedov will not force the eunuch Hodja-Mirza-Yakoub to leave. Mirza-Yakoub was an Armenian born Russian who was taken and forcibly castrated because eunuchs were needed in the palace. He wanted to go back to Russia but because he was considered the property of the Shah, the people looked on his defection as an act of theft on Griboedov’s part, and rioted. In the course of events they killed Hodja-Mirza-Yakoub and everyone else in the house except for Maltsov, who

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18 Hoffmann, 5.
19 Hoffmann, 96.
escaped and gave the only known account of what had happened that night. Incidentally, his survival is the reason that most historians do not trust his account.\(^{20}\)

It is worth examining this death scene in detail. Griboedov meets his physical death after he has seen Sashka, and Doctor Adelung killed. Tynianov writes, “Des platras lui tombèrent sur la tête. Les poutres s’écroulèrent, il eut tout juste le temps de les éviter. Des hommes sautèrent d’en haut. Un *sarbaz* le frappa une fois, deux fois à la poitrine à coups de yatagan (487)”--

“Известка посыпалась ему на голову. Балки рухнули, он едва успел отскочить. Люди прыгнули сверху. Какой-то сарбаз ударил его кривой саблей в грудь, раз и два (403)”--

“Plaster poured down on his head. Rafters cracked. He only just sprang back in time. Men leaped down from above. A soldier struck him in the breast with a saber, then again (325)”.

Tynianov prepares his readers for Griboedov’s physical death by illuminating the ways in which he was already dead. The violent circumstances make the actual, physical death unclear. After all, this is a scene of chaos, plaster is falling, beams are collapsing, and people are massing around him. Tynianov leaves it to the reader to determine the manner of Griboedov’s death. It is fitting that Griboedov, who avoided the experience of the Decembrist uprising and the chaos that ensued, should find himself in a similar situation. Through the chaos of this moment, Tynianov brings his readers back to the Decembrist uprising as well as the Octobrist uprising.

Little Zaches drowns in a silver bedpan. But after he is removed and laid out he is strangely dismembered. Hoffmann writes, “…the valet dried his poor, unlucky master off with clean handkerchiefs, put him into bed, and covered him with silken cushions, so that only the little shriveled face remained visible.”\(^{21}\) By visibly reducing Little Zaches to “only the little shriveled face” Hoffmann dehumanizes him even further. His readers are not sad that Little


\(^{21}\) Hoffmann, 98.
Zaches has died; his death is the logical outcome of the choices he made in his life. Hoffmann reminds his readers that this tale is a fairy tale, where merit is rewarded and deceit and malice bring misfortune.

Tynianov, on the other hand, is not writing a fairy tale. He writes,

“Le Vazir-Moukhtar existait encore. Un kébabetchi du quartier de Shimroun lui avait brisé les dents de devant, quelqu’un avait envoyé un coup de marteau dans ses lunettes et l’un des verres lui était entré dans l’œil. Le kébabetchi avait enfoncé sa tête au bout d’une perche; elle était beaucoup plus légère que son panier de petits pâtés et il secouait sa hampe improvisée. Le Kafer était responsable des guerres, de la famine, de la tyrannie des chefs, des mauvaises récoltes. A présent, il voguait au-dessus des rues et, du haut de sa perche, riait de toutes ses dents brisées. Les gamins le visaient avec des pierres et atteignaient leur but. Le Vazir-Moukhtar existait. Un filou, un voleur emportait son bras droit où brillait un anneau rond en le serrant fortement, amicalement de sa main unique, sa main gauche (491)”

«Вазир-Мухтар подолжал существовать. Кебабчи из Шимрунского квартала выбил ему передние зубы, кто-то ударил молотком в очки и одно стекло вдавилось в глаз. Кебабчи воткнул голову на шест, она была много легче его корзины с пирожками, и он тряс древком. Кяфир был виноват в войнах, голоде, притеснениях старшин, неурожае. Он плыл теперь по улицам и смеялся с шеста выбитыми зубами. Мальчишки целились в него камешками и попадали. Вазир-Мухтар подолжал существовать. Правую руку с круглым престнем тащил, крепко и дружески пожимая ее единственною левою рукою, лот-вор (407)”

Tynianov began his novel addressing the men whose age was broken before they were, who had outlived their own age. And he ends his novel by breaking his hero apart the same way the age was broken apart, into recognizable but separate pieces. As much as he is addressing death in these passages, he is also addressing what it means to be alive. For hundreds of pages, readers have seen Griboedov in a liminal state of existence, he walks, he talks, he eats and drinks, but he does not really live. In being cut apart by an angry mob, Griboedov does not walk or talk or eat or drink anymore but he does continue to exist. Tynianov knew all too well that government is capable of erasing people from the record, from existence, capable of formally forgetting people,
of breaking them from themselves and from their age. But Tynianov also knew the power of the written word. He knew that even sitting in a drawer, hidden away from readers and from censors, the literature still existed. He knew that ink is sometimes thicker than blood and that something as unsubstantial as fiction could sustain life.

Perhaps Smert’ Vazir-Mukhtara is a fairy tale, in the sense that all stories come from the same mulch pile. Tynianov was a cautious and deliberate man. He knew when he sat down to write that “the function of each literary work lies in its correlation with other works.”\(^\text{22}\) The purpose of comparing the novel and this tale is to reaffirm the position owed Smert’ Vazir-Mukhtara. It belongs, not on dusty library shelves, not relegated to be read by only the very select few. This book cries out to be retranslated, and republished, to be read and talked over and taught, to be written about more frequently than once every few decades. It belongs with Heine Zaches as much as it belongs with Kipling’s Kim or Djebar’s L’Amour, la fantasia, it is a text for all texts.

CONCLUSION

One of the many challenges of this thesis has been the constant questioning of whether or not Smert' Vazir-Mukhtara constitutes “real” literature. I have asked this question dozens of times and come to the same conclusion. Smert' Vazir-Mukhtara is literature, and it shares many qualities with some of the finest literature that has been written. The Formalists define literature by its literariness, the quality of language that makes texts literature or not. They define literature by the literary devices used by any given writer. I would add to this definition that great literature exhibits a timeless quality, it endures from one age to another, and it has the ability to stand outside of its own time.

Through his manipulation of history, Tynianov shows that sometimes looking back is artistically and theoretically looking ahead; and that by returning to what has been done in the past, a creative, intelligent and unique man can make something entirely new. Tynianov would not have said that he was working for or against the avant-garde, or within any given artistic movement other than his own. He wrote Smert’ Vazir-Mukhtara through the experimentalism of the avant-garde, which is how the novel acquired some of its experimental qualities.

Tynianov’s questions regarding the role of literature and of criticism in literature have been carried on by present-day writers like Assia Djebar. Tynianov wrote that, “The function of each literary work lies in its correlation with other works.”¹ The image of the severed hand seems to be one clear point of contact between Smert’ Vazir-Mukhtara and Djebar’s novel L’Amour, la fantasia. In Tynianov’s novel there are two examples, the first is the severed hand of Doctor Adelung. The second, and more powerful, example is that of Griboedov’s severed hand. Tynianov writes: “Le Vazir-Moukhtar existait. Un filou, un voleur emportait son bras

¹Eikhenbaum and Tynyanov, 17.
droit où brillait un anneau rond en le serrant fortement, amicalement de sa main unique, sa main gauche (491)''--«Вазир-Мухтар продолжал существовать. Правую руку с круглым престнем тащил, крепко и дружески пожимая ее единственною левою рукой, лот-вор (407)». Perhaps it is only coincidence, but Djebar writes similarly of a dancing girl who had been killed by French soldiers in Algeria. She writes: “Meriem’s dying hand still holds out the button from the uniform: to the lover, to the friend of the lover who cannot help by write (167)”--“La main de Mériem agonisante tend encore le bouton d’uniforme: à l’amant, à l’ami de l’amant qui ne peut plus qu’écrire (237)”.

This connection to works from the past, like Heine Zaches, as well as the present, like L’Amour, la fantasia, demonstrates the relevance of Tynianov’s creative as well as theoretical writings. And yet, there is no definitive study of Tynianov’s literary style and the contributions of his novels to the canon of literature.

The significance of Smert’ Vazir-Mukhtara can not be overestimated. It is a novel that appeals to literary scholars of all varieties, from Marxists to Post-Colonialists, to Feminists and Gender theorists, to Structuralists, Post-Modernists and Formalists alike. Tynianov taught that, “it was illusory to think that researchers could insulate a literary work from social and historical considerations.” It is equally futile to think that one could insulate Smert’ Vazir-Mukhtara from the Decembrists, from the October Revolution, or from Formalism but that does not limit its applicability exclusively to these fields of interest.

Tynianov was never physically strong. He was small and sickly most of his life. Typhoid nearly killed him at twenty-three; he died of complications with multiple sclerosis at the age of forty-nine. Perhaps because of his uncertain health Tynianov was very concerned with his

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4 Joseph, 154.
literary legacy, with how he would be remembered. In a letter from Prague, Roman Jakobson remembered his friend. He writes,

“In spite of his artistic achievements and success, Yuri Nicolaievich categorically insisted upon critical literary investigations being his...vocation. This is what he said to me at the end of 1928, but ten years later, at the end of a draft of his autobiography, Tynianov summed up: ‘I gave up being a historian of literature, and became a writer of fiction.’...But even to his dying days, when unconsciousness was interrupted and recognition returned, he began to talk about theory of verse and theory of literature, according to the witness of a friend.”

Perhaps Tynianov got his final wish. He is predominantly remembered as a literary theorist, and there is little hope of his ever being very well known as a great novelist. Scholars over-classify in general and rather than say he was a novelist they prefer biographical or historical novelist. Either way, as a great novelist or theorist, Tynianov left us enough material to keep literary scholars busy for many generations to come.

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**Tynianov Timeline**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Event</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>October 18, 1894</td>
<td>Tynianov is born to Jewish family in Rezhitsa, Latvia.</td>
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<tr>
<td>1904-1912</td>
<td>Tynianov at gymnasium in Pskov.</td>
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<tr>
<td>1914</td>
<td>World War I</td>
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<tr>
<td>1916</td>
<td>Marries Elena Alexandrovna Zilber.</td>
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<tr>
<td>1917</td>
<td>Tynianov ill with typhoid, almost dies. Baby daughter, Ina, born. October Revolution, Lenin takes power.</td>
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<tr>
<td>1918</td>
<td>Completes degree in Slavic language and literature at St. Petersburg University.</td>
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<tr>
<td>1918-1922</td>
<td>Civil War</td>
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<tr>
<td>1919</td>
<td>Translates French for Smolni Institute.</td>
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<tr>
<td>1920</td>
<td>Enters into the Society for the Study of Poetic Language (OPOYAZ). Begins lecturing at GIII (State Art Historical Institute).</td>
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<tr>
<td>1921</td>
<td>First published work of criticism: <em>Dostoevsky i Gogol</em>.</td>
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<td>1924</td>
<td>Problem of Verse Language published. Death of Lenin.</td>
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<tr>
<td>1925</td>
<td>Publishes <em>Kiuklia</em> (first historical novel)</td>
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<tr>
<td>1926</td>
<td>Tynianov leaves lecturing position at GIII.</td>
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<tr>
<td>1926-1927</td>
<td>Tynianov works on film theory and practicum.</td>
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<tr>
<td>1927</td>
<td><em>Smert’ Vazir-Mukhtara</em> published (second historical novel), also, <em>Podporuchik Kizhe</em> published.</td>
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<tr>
<td>1929</td>
<td><em>Arkhaisty i Novatory</em> is published. Stalin comes to power.</td>
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<td>1931-1938</td>
<td>The Great Purges.</td>
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<tr>
<td>1932</td>
<td>Begins work on <em>Pushkin</em></td>
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<tr>
<td>1933</td>
<td><em>Maloletnyi Vitushishnikov</em> published</td>
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<tr>
<td>1935-1937</td>
<td>First and second parts of <em>Pushkin</em> published</td>
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<tr>
<td>1939</td>
<td>Tynianov awarded the order of the Red Banner of Labor.</td>
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<tr>
<td>1939-1945</td>
<td>World War II</td>
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<tr>
<td>1941</td>
<td>Hitler invades the Soviet Union.</td>
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<tr>
<td>1943</td>
<td>Third part of <em>Pushkin</em> published.</td>
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<tr>
<td>December 20, 1943</td>
<td>Tynianov dies of multiple sclerosis in Moscow.</td>
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