INTRODUCTION: TRUTH AND AMBIGUITY ON THE ROAD TO TEHRAN

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For the casual reader, Yury Tynyanov's 1927 novel *The Death of Vazir-Mukhtar* requires some context. A tale of political intrigue? A story of cultural clashes on a grand scale? An international thriller? Modernist fiction at its best? The novel is all these things and more. Within a few pages, Tynyanov's prose grabs readers and compels them forward, in a cryptic man and complicated life of his novel's protagonist, Russian poet and diplomat Alexander Griboedov. Now the novel is finally available in a full English translation that conveys the nuance and the drama of the original.

A MAN OF THE 1820S WRITING IN THE 1920S

The Death of Vazir-Mukhtar was penned almost a hundred years ago, based on events that took place almost two hundred years ago. At the time he wrote it, Yury Tynyanov (1894–1943) was living in Leningrad, which only a few years earlier had been Petrograd, and St. Petersburg before that, the capital of the Russian empire. In 1917,

the Romanov dynasty that had ruled Russia for three hundred years had been violently overthrown, and the Bolshevik faction of the Russian Communist Party seized power, intent on creating a new social structure and new state institutions. These were heady, sometimes terrifying days, which saw rapid changes. Tynyanov was a witness to and even participant in those transformations.

But intellectually, and perhaps emotionally, Tynyanov was living in another era entirely. Literary historians have categorized the first third of the nineteenth century as a Golden Age for its startling poetic and artistic productivity. But politically it was cursed—rent by revolution and corrupted by imperialistic greed. The pure talent during the Golden Age kept Tynyanov fascinated, and he saw parallels in the historical past that might very well illuminate his country's present and future. He chose to spend a significant portion of his time and energy researching and thinking about a society that seemed to have disappeared a century earlier.

It is easy to see the similarities Tynyanov found between the 1820s and the 1920s. Both eras were marked by revolutionary change. The Romanov rule came to an end in 1917, but it had been threatened numerous times before. The most serious challenge to the autocracy came in December 1825, in the form of the Decembrist uprising. Tsar Alexander had died unexpectedly, and a group of army officers took advantage of the confusion to demand government reforms. Liberal officers led approximately three thousand troops to rebel and refuse to swear an oath to the new tsar, but when Nicholas's guards fired on the offending demonstrators, the revolt ended almost as soon as it had begun.

The subsequent investigation lasted for months, and many of the participants were arrested and ultimately exiled to Siberia. Five of the ringleaders were publicly hanged. This event hung like a cloud over the ascension of Nicholas I to the throne, and his harsh reaction set the tone for his repressive reign. More immediately relevant

to Tynyanov's literary interests, the Decembrist revolt can be said to have claimed a sixth victim: though five of his compatriots were hanged, Alexander Griboedov was ultimately sent away on a distant assignment, a doomed diplomatic mission in far-off Iran, from which he never returned.

In the wake of the 1917 October Revolution, it was natural to make comparisons with the unsuccessful Decembrist Revolt and to consider the human costs and cultural repercussions of violent regime change. Politics was in the air as the new Soviet state was coming into being, and people with an analytical cast of mind gathered data, considered models, and tried to understand the forces shaping the world they lived in. One explanation was Marxist determinism, and Tynyanov and his colleagues were intensely interested in the role of the individual and his relationship to larger structures and systems.

Further, in those early years in Petrograd, particularly after the seat of government shifted back to Moscow, the young idealists in the former tsarist capital continued to create and spread culture. Tynyanov helped to form a cohort of intellectual workers who were finding their way in the new Soviet environment, in an echo of the group of Golden Age writers that so fascinated him. In Leningrad, they walked among buildings that continued to resonate with imperial Russian grandeur, an appropriate backdrop for a writer who was so preoccupied with the Pushkin era.

Indeed, as a historian, scholar, and literary theorist in those years, Tynyanov found fruitful material in the vivid types of the 1820s: fiery and impulsive Wilhelm Küchelbecker, who was a participant in the Decembrist uprising; Alexander Griboedov, who traveled throughout the Russian empire and beyond in his service to the state; and the greatest Russian poet of them all, Alexander Pushkin. These were the characters who populated Tynyanov's research, teaching, and fiction, and they remained touchstones for him throughout his life.

To be fair, Tynyanov became interested in Griboedov and his era even before the Bolshevik Revolution. A Jewish student from the provincial western reaches of the Russian empire, he arrived at St. Petersburg University in 1912 and immersed himself in questions of biography and history, enrolling in a famous seminar that focused on Pushkin and the Golden Age, led by Professor Semyon Vengerov. Although Vengerov was an empiricist whose method involved compiling vast amounts of material on individual authors, a number of his students moved away from empirical studies. Instead, they chose new theoretical approaches to literature, particularly developing an interest in studying literary devices and how literary works were constructed. This group of theorists—which came to include Boris Eikhenbaum and Viktor Shklovsky, along with Tynyanov—entered literary history under the label of formalists.

But by the mid-1920s, Tynyanov had begun to write historical fiction amid a set of challenges in his day-to-day life. In postrevolutionary Russia, he had to scramble for opportunities to lecture and publish in a progressively more and more ideologically charged atmosphere. After Lenin's death in 1924, writers and artists were increasingly forced to accommodate themselves to new political pressures coming from Moscow. Marxist historicism did not permit engagement with literary devices, and literary evolution—a subject of inquiry that increasingly had driven formalist theory—was quite clear under Marxism. The teleological narrative of art bringing the masses from naïveté to political consciousness did not fit with formalist ideas of cyclical development.

At home, Tynyanov struggled to feed his wife and daughter and to keep their apartment heated in the cold Russian winters. When formalism fell out of favor, Tynyanov was fortunate to have an escape route: away from esoteric exploration of poetics and toward the kind of literary work that sold and paid, and, most important, was not subject to censure or censorship. Tynyanov threw himself

into becoming a biographical novelist. True to his beloved Golden Age, the writer focused in particular on the three poets he had long appreciated: looking at their literary output and their relationships to each other, to wives and families, and to the tsar and his ministers.

In the end, Tynyanov wrote three novels, one each devoted to Küchelbeker, Griboedov, and Pushkin, and all set in this same time period, the first third of the nineteenth century. He was aware of a change in his own status as he took up fiction:

The transition from scholarship to literature was not all that simple. Many scholars considered novels and *belles lettres* generally to be hack-work. . . . My fiction arose primarily from a dissatisfaction with the history of literature which tended to skim the surface and present the people, currents and development of Russian literature in a vague way. Such a “universal blur” diminished the works and the old writers. A need to get to know them better and understand them more deeply—that’s what fiction was for me.

That need, as well as the resulting intimacy in the portrayals of his characters, are part of why Tynyanov’s novels remain beloved today.

In the novel about Griboedov, Soviet readers were lured by the international intrigue and the sense that its protagonist was doomed to a bloody and ignominious death. After all, there’s something fascinating about inexorable doom. Post-Soviet readers also love to read and reread the novel, finding in Tynyanov’s portrait of Griboedov a hero who differs significantly from the writer they read in school, the author of a satirical play about Moscow society, *Woe from Wit*. Whether a transparent indictment of greedy and callous leaders or a luridly amusing anecdote about worldwide conspiracies, *The Death of Vazir-Mukhtar* has earned its place as a favorite Russian novel.

GRIBOEDOV: A HERO BORN FOR FICTION?

It is hard to imagine a life more similar to the plot of an adventure novel than that of nineteenth-century poet and diplomat Alexander Griboedov: Griboedov's theatrical vocation in Petersburg and beyond, which produced comedies filled with racy scenes and witty dialogue, his diplomatic career in such exotic places as the Caucasus and Iran, and his tragic demise in a Tehran massacre make for a dramatic story. What's more, Griboedov was the quintessential traveler. And travel makes good fodder for fiction.

Although noble in name, Griboedov was impoverished, having given up his rights to the family money to secure a dowry for his sister, and thus he had to work for a living. He was an amateur composer and a wonderful pianist, and he wrote both plays and poetry, but playing music and scribbling verses was not likely to provide sufficient income. Government service was his only option.

Beginning in 1813, Griboedov served in the imperial armed forces in the war against Napoleon, though he did not see much action, working instead among the local population to secure provisions and fodder for the troops and their horses in the region where the Russian empire abutted Europe. After the war, he went to St. Petersburg, and in late 1817, Griboedov was hired as a translator in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Like many educated men of his time, Griboedov knew numerous languages: at minimum Russian, French, German, Latin, and Persian, with some Turkish and Arabic, and Polish thrown in to boot. Then, as now, the ministry in many cases hired translators for a specific purpose: to send them abroad.

A life of diplomacy meant that from 1818 through the end of his life in January 1829, Griboedov found himself on the road: in European Russia, throughout the Caucasus, and repeatedly between St. Petersburg and Tehran. Indeed, he trekked back and forth on the

Georgian Military Road six times from the Russian capitals to the Iranian cities of Tehran—home of the shah—and Tabriz—seat of the crown prince.

The road novel is a classic genre—dating back to Homer, if not before—and Griboedov's traveling struck Tynyanov as the key to how to portray his fate. Scholars of Griboedov's literary work have blamed his peripatetic lifestyle for the content of his legacy: one significant play, a few additional comedies, some poems, and other fragments. Under different circumstances, he might have written insightful travelogues. But Griboedov joked about his failures as a travel writer in a letter to a friend:

I don't know how to spout erudition; my books are packed and there's no time to rummage through them; I shiver when it's cold and open up my coat when it's warm, don't check the thermometer and don't note down how much the mercury rises or falls, I don't fall to the ground to determine its qualities, I don't imagine when looking at bare bushes what type of leaves they may have.

Details of the flora, land, and climate did not interest the writer in particular, though he was an inveterate correspondent and wrote some vivid letters describing the travel itself. For example, he wrote about finding himself

on the floor in a nasty peasant hut, on a rug near a fire which offers more smoke than warmth; all around belled ravens and hawks are tied to stakes; if I'm not careful they will peck away at my overcoat. Yesterday we spent the night with the horses; at least we were sheltered.

Griboedov's mood seemed to lift when riding on horseback or moving through space, but when he stopped, he was hard-pressed

to focus on creative work. Complaining to his best friend, Stepan Begichev, in September 1825, Griboedov said that

the play of fate is intolerable: for an eternity I have been wanting to find some corner for solitude, and I cannot find one anywhere. Arriving here, I see no one, do not want to know anyone. This [quiet] lasts no more than a day . . . and [guests] burst in, bringing greetings, and this small town becomes more nauseating to me than Petersburg.

Proud of his verses, and particularly his unpublished play *Woe from Wit*, Griboedov nonetheless felt branded: "They consider me a cheerful person!" he lamented. After all, he had written a comedy, so he must be witty and clever, a great conversationalist. In fact, he loved isolation. It was certainly true that life on the road facilitated that state:

Believe me, it is wonderful to spend one's life riding along on four wheels; your blood is agitated, lofty thoughts wander and rush far from the usual bounds of vulgar experiences; your imagination is fresh, some kind of wild fire burns in your soul and does not go out. . . . But the stops, the two week or two month rest periods are disastrous for me, I begin to doze, or I get caught up in someone else's whirlwind, I live not within myself but for those people who are constantly with me, and often they are complete idiots.

Despite his reputation as a society man, Griboedov was a real scholar, which made it even more frustrating to be cut off from literary life and access to books. He wrote to friends and family asking for fresh newspapers from the Russian capitals or specific works of literature to be sent to him, and he longed for a decent library. In 1826, while under investigation and imprisoned in Petersburg after the

Decembrist Revolt, Griboedov took the opportunity to study and read voraciously, requesting new books of all kinds to be brought to his cell: poetry and histories, books on differential calculus and statistics, and geographies and atlases. He could not indulge his thirst for knowledge, for engagement with the world, during his travels, whether as a member of a traveling delegation or with the military.

Griboedov never got the chance to bring his chaotic travel notes into a more curated state, but his vast cache of letters and other writings, since published, represent a valuable chronicle of the diplomat's many journeys and his impressions along the way. And Tynyanov took advantage of these letters, drawing on them for the intonations of his hero's voice, as well as details of his life and travels. But the life was chaotic, and its end remains shrouded in mystery—to this day, no archive has been found in Iran. Tynyanov was free to invent his own conclusion.

RECEPTION OF THE NOVEL

The very title of the novel, *The Death of Vazir-Mukhtar*, complicates its genre designation. Not about life, but about death. Not about Griboedov, but about a “Vazir-Mukhtar.” Griboedov was sent to Iran in 1828 not as an ambassador, but with the lower rank of minister plenipotentiary to force compliance with a punitive peace treaty, possibly as further punishment for a part that he may have played in the Decembrist uprising. Scholars have written about Tynyanov's book as a biographical novel, but in fact it uses modernist devices to erase its hero rather than chronicling his life.

We might read the title through the formalist concept of *ostranenie*, “making it strange.” Viktor Shklovsky wrote in his 1917 essay “Art as Device” that the purpose of art is to activate our perception of things that we no longer see, to highlight the actual qualities of items or people with which we have become too familiar.

In Shklovsky's words, art "makes a stone *stony* again." This novel, too, takes an idea—a diplomatic negotiation over boundaries in the wake of a war between empires—and turns it into something unfamiliar. Using Persian words and titles turns an envoy into something exotic, a vazir-mukhtar. Griboedov, presented in the preface as a "man of short stature, yellow-skinned and prim," disappears, and readers follow instead a concept, a title, a fate.

So what did Tynyanov's contemporaries and countrymen make of this odd compendium of facts and stories, not about Griboedov and not about his life?

Boris Eikhenbaum, one of the most astute critics of the novel, asserted that Tynyanov was creating the genre of biography anew. In crafting his portrait of Griboedov, he believed, Tynyanov created an "intimate image," a lyrical story that revealed the hero's fate. It is not just a description of the chronological events of a historical personage's life, but also an explanation of those events and a search for their links with the era. The man who arises in the opening pages of the book is gradually pushed out of existence, until only his title remains. By combining research and fiction—in Shklovsky's words a "new genre," in Eikhenbaum's a "scientific novel"—Tynyanov was seeking to reveal some authentic truth about both one man's life and the more general laws that govern fate in every man's life. Instead of following the principles of the Marxist dialectic, or indeed the rules of socialist realism that had already begun to emerge at the time, Tynyanov found his own route to a truth about Griboedov.

Most famous, perhaps, is Maxim Gorky's reaction to Tynyanov's portrait. "Griboedov is remarkable," he wrote, "although I didn't expect to find him thus. But you showed him so convincingly that he must have been like that. And if he wasn't—now he will be." Here, perhaps we see the result of Tynyanov's successful creation of the intimate image, his use of the hero's own voice, and his deep understanding of the poet and his epoch.

In the 1960s, Tynyanov's biographer, Arkady Belinkov, added another dimension to this view. In his mind, *The Death of Vazir-Mukhtar* is a thinly veiled analogy between the reign of Tsar Nicholas I and Joseph Stalin. Themes of betrayal of the old ideals, cooperation with the government, and friendship with agents of the secret police echo circumstances from Tynyanov's own time. And when Griboedov fails and—friendless, alone, and isolated—perishes, the reader feels a horror and frustration: the individual cannot overcome the system, cannot fight his own fate. An allegorical reading like Belinkov's suggests that Tynyanov was aware of, and indicting, the processes and social organizations around him in the late 1920s.

Griboedov's more recent biographers argue that there is nothing true in Tynyanov's portrait at all. Scholar Sergei Fomichev has written that the novel's protagonist is "as artistically convincing as he is historically inauthentic," and biographer Ekaterina Tsimbaeva argues that Tynyanov's Griboedov is "openly at odds with the real Griboedov." But, Tsimbaeva agrees, this characterization seemed to Tynyanov "more interesting than the truth." We leave it to today's readers to decide for themselves.

THE NEW TRANSLATION

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The novel's prologue opens with a scene of tragedy, destruction, lost hope:

In the freezing cold square in the month of December 1825 the people of the twenties, those with a spring in their step, ceased to exist. Time was suddenly shattered; the crunch of bones was heard in Mikhailovsky Manège—the rebels fled over the bodies of their comrades—the times were on the rack; it was one great torture chamber (as they used to say in the days of Peter the Great).

With the translators Anna Kurkina Rush and Christopher Rush's choice of the word "shattered," the bitter cold climate wreaks havoc on the physical bodies of the reformers. In cold weather like that, sound travels sharply, and readers almost sense the "crunch of bones" physically, in their own bones. Empathy for the panicking rebels grows, thanks to this vivid description. And this is the background of the novel. Griboedov is described as one of the "transformed," those whose crushed hopes turned to vinegar rather than wine. The narrator aligns himself with Griboedov and his fate: "An old Asian vinegar fills my veins instead, and the blood seeps sluggishly, as if through the wastelands of ruined empires." From the first page, the Rushes have captured the immediacy and urgency of Tynyanov's prose, and the reader is hooked.

"Time was suddenly shattered." These words resonate backward and forward for both Soviet and post-Soviet readers. Tynyanov was writing about the "shattered" decade of the 1820s, but his novel was read in the wake of the bloody events of the first third of the twentieth century. Bread riots in Petersburg in 1905 gave way to frustrated noncompliance in the hopeless European war, for which Russian imperial troops were poorly trained and even more poorly supplied. By the time of the October Revolution, Vladimir Lenin was promising "Land, Peace, and Bread," but erecting a new Communist government on the broken shards of the tsarist regime turned out to be a difficult process for citizens and leaders alike. When Joseph Stalin ascended to power, he quickly turned all manner of Soviet people against each other, and the resulting Terror was far more bloody than the Decembrist Revolt. This political history looms in the background when reading the novel.

I always think of these opening lines to *The Death of Vazir-Mukhtar* as Shakespearean, as evoking Hamlet with his cry "the time is out of joint" (act I, scene 5). And if Hamlet longed to "set it right," then so did the hero of Tynyanov's tale, Alexander Griboedov. Tynyanov

wrote this novel in part to demonstrate the connections between the two time periods—the first third of the twentieth century and the first third of the nineteenth. But for contemporary readers, the gloomy scenario seemed to reflect the unsettled atmosphere of the Soviet twentieth century, and even to predict the grief and suffering of Stalin's Great Terror.

Tynyanov's prose has proved notoriously difficult to translate. But this novel in particular requires a light touch, and not only because of its content. The modernist style includes sharp jump cuts and montage effects. Throughout the book, sentences loom up like dangerous brigands on a dark highway; they create not a colorful tapestry but a jagged surface, not a clear and straightforward story but an intricate pattern, a constant circling and juddering around and across the real meaning, a cryptic set of messages that the reader must struggle to decode. It is a game, not unlike the complex and dangerous diplomatic game that Griboedov was fated to lose in Iran.

The Death of Vazir-Mukhtar was first rendered into English in 1938 by the British translator Alec Brown, who retitled the novel *Death and Diplomacy in Persia*. This title helps to exemplify Brown's abridged and simplified project: Griboedov's Persian designation, vazir-mukhtar, is elided, and his death at the end of the novel is revealed up front. A death not for nothing, but due to a failure of diplomacy. And not Iran—which after all was the name of the country with which Griboedov negotiated the Turkmenchai Peace Treaty—but Persia, the more ancient and exotic-sounding label. As Brown described it, he and his publishers worked together to excise material that was only interesting to Russian readers, and he characterized their work as creating “a pleasing blend of dash and delicacy.” For British readers in the period between the wars, this was just the ticket.

In a way, Brown brought the novel closer to British understandings of what Russian fiction was supposed to be. The new title

follows the *This and That* tradition of Russian works—*Crime and Punishment*, *Fathers and Sons*, *War and Peace*—and transforms Tynyanov's novel into something more closely resembling the moral and ethical explorations of nineteenth-century Russian fiction. By highlighting Persia, the mysterious East, as the location, Brown deemphasized Britain's own possible involvement in the murder of Griboedov—still not definitively proved, but quite likely based on what evidence remains—and Brown's readers were left with the sense that the Russians deserved their fate.

But the British title hides how closely *The Death of Vazir-Mukhtar* resembles a nineteenth-century work of another type entirely: Leo Tolstoy's *The Death of Ivan Ilyich* (1886). Like Tolstoy's philosophical and tragic novella, Tynyanov's novel reveals its culmination at the very start; this biographical novel, like all lives, inevitably ends in death. *The Death of Vazir-Mukhtar* highlights the last year of the poet-diplomat's life, the inexorable progression as Griboedov approaches his fate, and again, as Tolstoy does in his story of the everyman Ivan Ilyich, Tynyanov renders the simplicity of childhood, the seduction of everyday life, of bureaucracy, and of ambition, and the hero's betrayal by circumstances that he thought he could control. It was not the Russians who deserved their fate, but any man foolish enough to think that he has control of his own destiny. Late in the novel, the hero thinks that he has followed the treaty to the letter; in Tynyanov's presentation, it is that inflexibility, that wrongheaded approach to Iranian culture, that caused Griboedov's death.

And now, with empires rising again in both of these geographic locales, I can't help but hear the echoes of Griboedov's tragedy. Iranians today, when they sense that they are being cheated in the marketplace, cry out "Ai, ai, Turkmenchai!" The treaty was a travesty, a deep and disastrous cultural misunderstanding, and its result was bloody. Whatever evidence of diplomatic manipulations may come

to the surface years from now, we will be able to channel Tynyanov in realizing that no diplomatic incident can be “enveloped, finally and irrevocably, in oblivion.” The truth will out. Eventually. And that is part of the ambiguity of Tynyanov’s novel.

The Rushes’ translation returns rich and important details to the experience of reading Tynyanov’s novel in English. The pacing is superb, the apparatus has been removed from the text but is available to readers who want to clarify who various figures are, and the sprinkling of Persian words into the text gives it just the right flavor. Not Brown’s exoticism, but the real experience. The vazir-mukhtar died; Griboedov lives. And now he lives on in this lovely and compelling English translation as well.