If not for my childhood, I wouldn’t understand history. If not for the revolution, I would not understand literature.

—Iurii Tynianov

Tynianov’s New Mythology of the Decembrists

Iurii Tynianov (1894–1943) spent most of his career challenging accepted conventions of Russian literary criticism and history, beginning with his work as a graduate student in S. A. Vengerov’s graduate seminar and ending with his historical novels. Tynianov’s novel Kiukhlia (1925), based on the life and art of the Decembrist poet Vilhelm Kiukhelbeker and titled after Kiukhelbeker’s nickname, was commissioned by Kornei Chukovsky at Kubuch publishers as a popular brochure for young readers in honor of the Decembrist centennial. One of the few literary works produced for the centennial, it diverged significantly from a children’s story by the time it was finished. Only one other novel written for the centennial, Severnoe siianie (Aurora borealis, 1926) by Maria Marich (1893–1961), had staying power and was reprinted 20 times into the 1960s. (Soviet print runs did not necessarily indicate popularity but instead reflected what the authorities considered an ideologically useful work and what the public should be reading. Hence the huge print runs of Lenin and Stalin’s collected works, for example, compared to the dearth of volumes of Akhmatova and Tsvetaeva). Aurora borealis
did not match *Kiukhliia*’s literary quality or provide a new perspective. Chukovskii attests to *Kiukhliia*’s uniqueness, calling it “remarkable” for its recreation of the epoch, elegance of its overall composition and psychological richness, and affirmed its acclaim: “Immediately after its appearance in print *Kiukhliia* became the most beloved book of both old and young Soviet citizens, from twelve to eighty years of age. It has become clear that it is really a universal book—both for the highly qualified and the so-called mass reader, for the academician and for the fourth-grade schoolgirl.” Given its popularity, the novel serves as a barometer of the Decembrists’ appeal to Soviet readers of the 1920s. Though built upon earlier representations, *Kiukhliia* ultimately created a new mythology of the Decembrists.

Unlike the authorities, who debated the efficacy of claiming the Decembrists as forefathers, the intelligentsia quickly seized the opportunity. Clark suggests that Tynianov and other members of the intelligentsia explored the allegorical potential of 1825 in the official genealogy to grapple with their own concerns: “Eighteen twenty-five emerges in their works not just as a revolutionary high point, but more as a nodal point leading to the 1830s and 1840s, that is, to Nikolaevan Russia, which became a particular obsession of intellectuals around this time as an exemplum, generally presented in the grotesque mode, of stagnation, bureaucratism, obtuseness, and provincialism.” Boris Gasparov sees a mythological fusion of the eras of the early nineteenth and early twentieth century in modernist writing; the idea of “the age’s turning point” (*perelom veka*) penetrated texts produced in the 1920s and early 1930s by authors including Pasternak and Tynianov. As these associations were very much in the air at the time, Tynianov’s depiction of the split in Russian society caused by the Decembrist revolt may be viewed as a historical parallel to the societal rift created by the Russian revolution.

Scholarly consensus regards Tynianov’s novels as an intrinsic part of his theoretical and critical work, whether one contends that Tynianov merely extended his scholarly research into fiction or that he specifically used fiction to criticize the current regime. Tynianov explains his shift from literary theory to the novel: “My fiction arose, for the most part, from dissatisfaction with literary history which glided from one common point to another and unclearly represented people, currents and the development of Russian literature…. The need to become more closely acquainted with them and to understand them more deeply—that’s what fiction was to me.” Andrew Wachtel observes that Tynianov blurs the boundaries between history, literature, and the