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PUSHKIN AND OVID

Although their friendship had not flourished long,
They were united by a great regard.

Adam Mickiewicz, *Digression*

ABSTRACT. Schade, Gerson, Pushkin and Ovid (*Puszkin i Owidiusz*).

Alexander Pushkin knew what he shared with Ovid. Both were exiled, having enjoyed a splendid life, both were highly gifted, and not too shy of erotic adventures – of which they speak amply in their poetry. The Russian formalist Tynyanov pointed at such similarities, inventing the literary genre of 'docufiction'.

Keywords: 'docufiction'; Tynyanov; Stendhalian; Pnin; Propertius.

Throughout his lifetime, Ovid tells us a lot about his life. As a young man, what he writes has often to do with love, be it fulfilled, be it unrequited. Encouraging the reader to identify the narrator with the author, Ovid suggests that his own experiences are at the origin of many a good piece of poetry. This makes Ovid seem very modern. In fact, he may be compared to Stendhal. Both reveal and exhibit their personality, at the same time hiding it though, by no means giving away everything. Curiously, Stendhal even went so far as to make his own erotic secret the secret of a novel's protagonist. Perhaps, Ovid anticipated this. In any case, Stendhal's and Ovid's literary works are often confounded with their lives. Because both Ovid and Stendhal published directly egotistical passages,[1] as well as the works of both are much defined by their various loves, it is small wonder that both are suitable subjects for a genre called 'docufiction'.[2]

Revealing episodes from his private experience, which should have better remained unpublished, Ovid caused himself more harm than good. His *ante litteram* Stendhalian blurring of the boundary separating narrator and author

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[1] On Stendhal's *Armance* v. Hamm 2009: 241–248.
[2] In the case of Stendhal v. recently Guégan 2013.

attracted much curiosity. Surely, it pushed the sale of his works, but it also made him notorious. A fascinated reader, however, was tempted to inscribe himself in such a splendid relationship between the author and the narrator. As it happens, Ovid appealed much to Alexander Pushkin, who expressed his sympathetic feelings in a long poem dedicated to Ovid.[3] Pushkin's biographer Yury Tynyanov (1894–1943) speculated further about their relationship.[4] In his biography[5] he makes a teacher of Pushkin at Tsarskoye Selo, Nikolaj Koshanski (1781–1830), perceive his young pupil in such a way that makes young Pushkin resemble young Ovid (Ch. II 9, 1: 1995, 377 = 1987, 452).[6]

Furthermore, Tynyanov invented a more impressive scene. Being about to kiss his first girlfriend, Natalya, he makes Pushkin actually remember Ovid. Having read Ovid's *Art of Love* twice, a French translation of which he discovered in his father's secret cabinet of books,[7] Pushkin knows exactly how to proceed. Or so he thinks, Tynyanov imagines (Ch. II 10, 10: 1995, 418 = 1987, 502). Not everything, however, goes according to the plan, i.e. comes close to what Pushkin read in Ovid. Apparently, and disappointingly, Ovid did remain silent about some side-effects of kissing young women in the dark. Trying to re-enact Ovid, Pushkin fails.

In Tynyanov's later years, when he wrote his biography, such parallels between Russian and Occidental literature were considered to be indicative of

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[3] Cf. Schneider 2008, 173–175, Kahn 2014, 402–405.

[4] Peters 2016, 388–393.

[5] The work is unfinished; it was first published in the early thirties in Moscow. The first two parts appeared in 1937, the hundredth anniversary of Pushkin's death, and their subtitle reads РОМАН. On the famous book which inaugurated the genre of 'docufiction', v. Thun 1982, 1984, 61–110, and Veldhues 2003, 342–353 (most valuable contributions, time of publication has occasioned a peculiar mode of speech though). Tynyanov's seminal work is most impressive indeed, not in the least for obtaining such local ingredients as would allow him to inject average reality into the brewery of his individual fancy. But there is something else. Much gifted as a narrator, Tynyanov regarded an innovation, i.e. a product of his fantastic, personal imagination, if inspired by authentic, genuine stuff, as more important to the understanding of an author's mind, more helpful in revealing him, than anything guaranteed by fact (Thun 1982, 61 with n. 25, where she cites from Tynyanov's polemical "The false Pushkin," Mnimyj Puškin). In Tynyanov's biography of Pushkin, all is subjected to this one purpose. Or in Tynyanov's words, "where the document ends, I begin" (cited in Thun 1982, 78 with n. 78). Tynyanov also 'pushkinised' his style while writing the biography of Pushkin (80).

[6] The teacher characterises Pushkin's "playful" (or, rather, "flirting") writing as defined by "weightlessness, freedom, buoyancy, technical virtuosity, sociability, and a light conversational tone": лёгкость, развязность, воздушность, механическая подвижность, общежительность, болтливость. However, "the vividness of his lines is indecent"; on the whole, it is nothing else than "erotico-over-refined-musico-superficial," which Pushkin's teacher abhors (1995, 375 = 1987, 449 sq.): прозвал эротико-вкусо-музыкально-верхолетной.

[7] Nabokov (1981, II 59) thinks that "Pushkin's knowledge of him was mainly derived from *Œuvres complèttes* (sic) *d'Ovide*, translated into French by J. J. Le Franc de Pompignan (Paris 1799)."

"reactionary, bourgeois cosmopolitanism"[8] – in other words, insolent, or suicidal. Given that perspective, this rather audacious mirroring somehow reflects on Tynyanov himself, as will be discussed later. On closer inspection though, there are many more things common to both Ovid and Pushkin, and shared between them, than Tynyanov thought of.

Like Pushkin, who at the age of 12 was sent by his class-conscious father to a recently established private school at Tsarskoye Selo, situated in a wing of Catherine's palace in the Tsar's own 'village',[9] Ovid was sent to Rome by his father, in order to study rhetoric. It would be a great start for a career in politics, as well in Tsarist Russia as in Imperial Rome. We know this from Ovid himself, who reports lavishly on his life in long, late elegies. In particular, he does so in the first and last of *Tristia* 4 (texts referred to by Pushkin).

Speaking of himself and his brother, Ovid mentions 'the city's men, distinguished in the liberal arts we attended upon': "imus ad insignes Urbis ab arte viros" (*Tristia* 4. 10. 16). As it happens, Seneca the Older, the philosopher's father, reports that Ovid as a student was considered to be a good declaimer: "tunc autem cum studeret habebatur bonus declamator" (*Controversiae* 2. 2. 9).

This Seneca was born more than 30 years after Ovid died, and not much is known about his life. His knowledge, however, of the contemporary schools of declamation suggests that he spent some time in Rome. According to this insider knowledge of his, Ovid distinguished himself from the crowd, declaiming far more cleverly (*longe ingeniosus*). He became a victim of his own prodigality though. He could not arrange his speech such that the arguments would follow each other in a rather sensible way. Instead, he ran through the commonplaces in no fixed order: "sine certo ordine per locos discurrebat," as Seneca puts it (l.c.). Seneca gives to understand that Ovid was fairly careless, a fault of which Ovid not only was aware but which he, perversely, enjoyed: "non ignoravit vitia sua sed amavit" (*Controversiae* 2. 2. 12). Following a biographical custom, Seneca illustrates what he says by an anecdote (l.c.).[10] Ovid, as the story goes, once asked by friends to suppress three of his lines, asked in return to be allowed to make an exception of three which should remain. In other words, he wanted to single out three lines he considered to be his best, and which he wanted to be saved, while they wrote down the lines they wanted to be removed. The sheets of both contained the same verses. In those days of his youth, Seneca remembers, Ovid's speech could be regarded as simply poetry put into prose: "oratio eius iam tum nihil aliud poterat videri quam solutum carmen" (*Controversiae* 2. 2. 8). Much later in his life, Ovid is to say the same of his poetry.

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[8] Erlich 1965, 141.

[9] Lotman 1995, 31 = 1989, 24.

[10] The fact, however, that one knows right from the beginning how it will end makes it likely that the story is not necessarily true. Despite, or just because of, it being artificially contrived, the story conveys brilliantly what Seneca intended to say.

Seneca may be only echoing Ovid, or a rumour connected with Ovid's by then half-mythic personality. In any case, recalling his youth, Ovid in retrospect remembers himself already as a boy – to whom heavenly, sacred things much appealed – being ever drawn stealthily aside by the Muse, to do her work: "at mihi iam puero caelestia sacra placebant / inque suum furtim Musa trahebat opus" (*Tristia* 4. 10. 19 sq.). In his younger days still influenced by his father, however, Ovid tried hard to write prose, and not to compose poetry: "scribere temptabam verba soluta modis" (24). However, he always failed to do so, and "whatever I tried to write was verse", he concludes: "et quod temptabam scribere versus erat" (26).

What he did write so effortlessly in his youth, much later in life Ovid is to regard as stupid. He did wrong several times, Ovid regretfully recalls in one his letters, sent from his exile to friends in Rome. He did not only compose one foolish *Art of Love*: "stultam conscripsimus Artem," as he puts it (*Ex Ponto* 2. 9. 73), but also other, not less unwelcome poems. He sinned further, eschewing to be asked more though: "praeterea peccarim," as he says, shying away from giving more details about his wrongdoing that may hide beneath the *Art of Love* alone, continuing: "quaerere noli / ut lateat sola culpa sub Arte mea" (74 sq.), begging a fictitious reader for mercy. This Ovidian insight into himself again may be echoed by Seneca, who considered Ovid to be somehow spoilt by repetition: "nescit quod bene cessit relinquere," as he puts it (*Controversiae* 9. 5. 17), incapable of leaving well alone, being not content to say a thing well once: "non est contentus unam rem semel bene dicere." Ovid overdid it indeed.

We may catch a glimpse of what Ovid alludes to, and what is taken up by Seneca the Older, by one short poem of his earliest published collection, *Amores*. A first-person narrative reports a successful sexual encounter during lunch-break, described in logical sequence (*Amores* 1. 5): three passages of eight lines describe the atmosphere (1–8), the struggle to remove the mistress' clothing (9–16), and her naked beauty (17–24). The final couplet refers to the opening couplet, both evoking the midday physical relax. The rhetorical question at the end of the third part 'why recount each charm?' is, disappointingly, repeated in the final hexameter 'who wants to know more?' Indeed, no further revelations are to be expected.

Ovid echoes Propertius 2. 15 – the only other description of such an encounter. They resemble each other, at first sight.[11] The narrative element in Ovid, however, is much greater than in Propertius.[12] Propertius first dwells in memory on what

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[11] Both poets, for example, refer to the tantalising delay caused by the mistress' tunic (Propertius briefly in line 6, Ovid lavishly in lines 13–15), both drawing attention to the light, which is suitable for sexual intercourse (Propertius in line 3 sq. & 11 sq., Ovid in lines 3–8).

[12] Writing more than twice as much as Ovid does, Propertius praises rapturously a night of happiness spent with Cynthia, with the lights put out – only to come up in the end (2. 15. 49–54) with a commonplace known from Catullus (*c.* 5. 5. 5–7). Now let us love with spirits raised

passed between him and the woman (1–10), re-living a part of it dramatically in imagination, as if in the present (11–30). Then, transported with delight (31–40), Propertius finally reflects on the contrast between lovers and grim war, urging the woman to live their love to the full. Ovid, however, controls and registers his emotions. Subtly analysing the twilight, for which he employs six lines (3–8) – one shutter of the window open, the other closed, the light being such as when night has gone and still the day is not sprung, etc., Ovid marvellously catches the moment's languishment, its emotional *chiaroscuro*, its mingled clearness and obscurity, with no extraneous thoughts allowed to include. This makes Ovid's text as unheard of as are large parts of the *Art of Love*.

Many passages from the *Art of Love* appear rather explicit. Moreover, the atmosphere they convey is frightfully repetitive.[13] To a Victorian, who looks upon sexual scandal as the arch-disgrace, the subject-matter of Ovid's *Art of Love* is too 'near the knuckle', i.e. it is about sex in a way some people would find unacceptable. It has aged badly, and the scale does indeed range from the saucy through the inappropriate to the downright shameful. For those who think that flirting makes the world go round, however, Ovid's *Art of Love* "offered top tips about how to find and keep a lover, even a married one. It was all in the thrill of the chase: staking out territory, patience, careful personal grooming, trips to theatres and games, elegant *billets-doux*, secret signs, subtle compliments, a degree of acting up, thoughtful gifts, careful risk-taking and, most of all, privacy"[14] – the loss of which, however, ruined Ovid, as too much light does often spoil many a love story.

In the case of his *Amores*, Ovid claims to have taken much inspiration from Corinna. He mentions her in *Amores* 1. 5. 9, and in many other of his elegies (as Propertius does Cynthia). We may have guessed already that Corinna is not her real name, and Ovid confirms our suspicion, writing that 'my genius had been stirred by her who was sung throughout the city, whom I called, not by a real

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high, he writes, and 'while there is light, Cynthia, do not disdain the rewards of life' (49: "dum lucet, fructum ne desere vitae"), for perhaps tomorrow's day already shall round our destinies, he concludes (53 sq.): "nobis, nunc magnum spiramus amantes, / forsitan includet crastina fata dies", a statement similar to Catullus, who asks his Lesbia a thousand kisses, because, as he put it, once life's short light has set, only the sleep of one unbroken night remains to be slept: "nobis, cum semel occidit brevis lux, / nox est perpetua una dormienda. / da mi basia mille," etc.

[13] In order to be successful with women, we men, for example, are recommended not to shave our legs, neither should we curl our hairs, because this would render us effeminate and henceforth unattractive to women, and we would rather resemble eunuchs (*Ars* 1. 505 sq.). And women are advised, among many other things, on how to properly behave before and during sexual intercourse, how to recline in a most favourable way, for example, or how to feign pleasure in such a way as not been caught (*Ars* 3. 772, 801).

[14] *The Spectator*, November 11, 2017: 24, as Peter Jones writes in his weekly column on classics, this time under the heading *The wily courtesans who won more respect than modern-day feminists:* "In ancient Rome, all the sexual power was in the hands of the hetaira."

name, Corinna': "moverat ingenium totam cantata per urbem / nomine non vero dicta Corinna mihi" (*Tristia* 4. 10. 59 sq.). Surely, it was an error to write such poetry, an aberration to compose such poems. It is the error's monstrosity that made Ovid speak of *carmen et error* (*Tristia* 2. 207).[15]

Error condemned him, but not a crime, Ovid repeatedly claims. That the 'cause of the exile decreed me is an error, and no crime': "scite, precor, causam … / errorem iussae, non scelus, esse fugae," he begs the spirits of his parents to know (*Tristia* 4. 10. 89 sq.); and 'which mistake led me astray, and that there is fault in my deed, but no crime': "scit … , quis me deceperit error, / et culpam in facto, non scelus, esse meo," the Muse does know, he claims (4. 1. 23 sq.). Now, Ovid can only compare himself to Odysseus, the stock-example of a heart suffering to excess: "exemplum est animi nimium patientis Ulixes" (*Ex Ponto* 4. 10. 9).

Compared to Ovid, however, Ulysses suffered not too hard, his troubles were far from non-stop. Instead, Odysseus enjoyed plenty of peaceful interludes, ironic Ovid lightheartedly, or sarcastically, infers: "placidae saepe fuere morae" (12). Six years spent with pretty Calypso cannot be called exactly a hardship, he adds: "an grave sex annis pulchram fovisse Calypso / … fuit" (13). And it is not a sorrow to hear girls sweetly singing, nor did the lotus have a bitter taste: "nec bene cantantes labor est audire puellas / nec degustanti lotos amara fuit" (17 sq.). To get its juices, Ovid offers gladly part of his life – since the juices bring oblivion of country: "hos ego, qui patriae faciant oblivia, sucos / parte meae vitae, si modo dentur, emam" (19 sq.).

Actually, the place where Ovid has to live is pretty awful. Lands without a leaf, arrowheads smeared with poison: "hic agri infrondes, hic spicula tincta venenis" (31). It is so bad that nobody in Rome believes it – 'yet believe you must', Ovid appeals to his imaginary reader: "crede tamen" (37). His soul proved himself inconquerable though, his mind disdained to yield to trouble, drew on its strength: "indignata malis mens est succumbere seque / praestitit invictam viribus usa suis" (*Tristia* 4. 10. 103 sq.). The long wanderings which Odysseus survived, finally reaching home – unfortunately, Ovid was driven through them only to reach the barbarians, the shore that unites roaming native bowmen, as he says: "tacta mihi tandem longis erroribus acto / iuncta pharetratis Sarmatis ora Getis" (109 sq.).

The terribly painful experience of an entire life separates these statements, which come from the end of an elegy, from its beginning (and already mentioned), when youngish confident Ovid spoke so coquettishly of his ability to transform everything into poetry (*Tristia* 4. 10. 26): "et quod temptabam scribere versus erat." This contrast did not escape Pushkin. He, too, was tremendously gifted, and everything he wrote became a verse. That he spoke and wrote in French before

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[15] Thus, he created a powerful image, coined a strong expression, using a hendiadys connecting two substantives with *and* instead of an adjective and substantive, thus expressing a single complex idea by two words.

he could write in Russian is only one of the many anecdotes connected with his prodigality.[16] Not unlike Ovid, he sketched himself as a socialite, prominent in fashionable society, fond of entertainment, an erotomaniac perhaps, unhappy though, in his thinly disguised self-portrait, published under the title of *Yevgeniy Onegin*.[17] Among other passages, right from the first book, already chapters 28–34 may illustrate his character.

Arriving at a party, the narrator-author is drawn into the crowd immediately. Much attracted by the ladies' beauty, he becomes half-crazy about delicate, elegant feet, and their dancing movements (28). He pretends, however, to be no longer given to erotic adventures, to be somehow weary of it, or outright blasé. Instead, addressing the husbands of the women present, he recommends himself to act as a chaperon to their wives; and addressing them, he recommends himself to act as chaperon to their daughters (29). Once having been obsessed by party-going, the narrator returns to his beloved theme – the elegant ankles of young women (30). He cannot forget them, though they disappeared, as did his youth (31). In the following, driven by his poetic craft, the narrator sketches high-flying images of himself and his – be they imaginary, or real – former mistresses (32 sq.). The beautifully exaggerated image is amply developed, reaching a kind of climax or apogee (34). Whether this is Pushkin or Ovid is hard to tell (34. 5–8): "Again imagination seethes, / again that touch / has fired the blood within my withered heart, / again the ache, again the love!" as Vladimir Nabokov renders it (1981, 110). The narrator, however, is disillusioned, feels betrayed, and becomes a victim of his self-pitying (again translated by Nabokov, 35. 1–4): "And my Onegin? Half asleep, / he drives from ball to bed, / while indefatigable Petersburg / is roused already by the drum."

Onegin-Pushkin does not, however, regret the time spent with erotic affairs. Quite the opposite is the case. He hopes these days return. But they will not, and the sadness of this state of affairs makes him deplore himself. Pushkin does so in two poems which date from the early 1820s, [18] i.e. from the same period to which we owe his poem on Ovid. Another, slightly later poem, which dates from the late 1820s, sums up Pushkin's frame of mind and, at the same time, shows how he moved on.[19] The exact date of composition was noted by Pushkin,

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[16] Perhaps Pushkin himself is at the origin of this anecdote, as it is the case with, for example, Vladimir Nabokov. He claimed to have read English before he read Russian (Golla 2017, 4, from an interview in 1958).

[17] Pushkin worked on his extravagant poem, filled with jaded young aristocrats and bored damsels on their country estates, with intermissions, for more than eight years (from 1823 to 1830), and at nearly a dozen places, as far away from each other as Odessa is from Petersburg. Pushkin's letters on his *Onegin* are discussed by Nabokov 1981, 68–73.

[18] *Gesammelte Werke* I 131–133, East-Berlin & Weimar 1968, in Russian, *Soinenija*, Mockba 1962, I 116–118.

[19] *Werke* I 318 sq., in Russian, I 282 sq.

and this curious detail is at the beginning of a fairly famous scene of literary interpretation.[20]

Professor Timofey Pnin, the anti-hero of Nabokov's first successful novel written in English, is a Russian emigrant, who teaches Russian literature at an American university. He suffers excruciating experiences, among which the dreadful pronunciation of his name as "Professor Pun-neen" (22) is only the least humiliating. The narrator's irony suggests, and indeed, it goes without saying that, as it is with Onegin and Pushkin, it is with Pnin and Nabokov:[21] the last two being professors of Russian literature in post-war, east coast, provincial, dreadful American colleges,[22] the former two playboys in early 19th-century Petersburg, both characterised by "subtly subversive, libertarian dandyism".[23]

Despite this parallel, which echoes the "self-glorifying analogy Ovid-Pushkin," itself being yielded by Pushkin's "Augustus-Alexander parallel" (Greenleaf *ibid*.), both unable and unwilling to control their fantastic imagination, these professors have something important to say about Pushkin's "morbid habit he always had – wherever he was, whatever he was doing – of dwelling on thoughts of death and of closely inspecting every passing day as he strove to find in its cryptogram a certain 'future anniversary': the day and month that would appear, somewhere, sometime upon his tombstone" (56).[24] Rather difficult to decide who speaks – perhaps Professor Pnin or, rather, Professor Nabokov, lecturing on Chekhovian lassitude *avant la lettre*.

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[20] Vladimir Nabokov, *Pnin*, chapter 3, part 3, first published in 1957, cited from the Penguin edition, 1960, 56 sq.

[21] Nabokov, however, establishes a complex relationship between the narrator and the protagonist, which is reminiscent of that between Gogol and Akaky Akakievich Bashmachkin, the protagonist of *The Overcoat* (1842), as Grabes points out (1975, 43–49). Nabokov lectured on the work (1944). He briefly continues Pnin's biography in a later novel of his *Pale Fire*.

[22] Pnin's intensely gloomy college, Waindell, appears already at the beginning of the novel; from 1941 to 1948 Nabokov "taught Russian at" Wellesley College; the novel is set in 1950 (1960, 8 sq.). Both Nabokov and Pnin come "from a respectable, fairly well-to-do, St Petersburg family" (1960, 18 sq.); Pnin is born in 1898, Nabokov in 1899. They are both obsessed by draughts and noise. Pnin is parodied for the first by a colleague, the head of the English Department, who imitates him (1960, 30): "'It blows from the floor, and it blows from the walls'" (1960, 30). And "during the eight years Pnin had taught at Waindell College he had changed his lodgings – for one reason or another, mainly sonic – about every semester" (1960, 52), we read. It follows a purple passage, in which Nabokov marvellously ridicules both of Pnin's obsessions (53), which were also his own. He himself could only write in a car, tenderly chauffeured by his wife, or parked in his car: "the only place in America with no noise and no draft," as he stated it in an interview in 1959 (Golla 2017, 19). The narrator of *Pnin*, Pnin's successor, shares the same two obsessions, as the novel's finale reveals (1960, 158 sq.). At the novel's very end, he notices Pnin driving away in a car. Unsurprisingly, during their early years in the US, the Nabokovs moved constantly, changing lodgings every year.

[23] Greenleaf 1994, 62.

[24] Examples illustrating Pushkin's obsession are given by Vitale 1995, 313 sq., 337.

At the beginning of the 1820s Pushkin travelled to the places where Ovid had to stay, more or less exactly 18 centuries earlier. He dedicated his longest extant poem to Ovid.[25] He, too, reaches the shore of which Ovid spoke (*Tristia* 4. 10. 110, *To Ovid* 14), he sees the snow as it was described by Ovid (*Ex Ponto* 4. 10. 32–4, *To Ovid* 9). To Ovid, it must have been dreadful to be there, Pushkin imagines (*To Ovid* 23–8), as to a man who since his youth despised the military, Ovid states himself (*Tristia* 4. 1. 71–4), now being forced to fight, as Pushkin writes (*To Ovid* 28).

Halfway through the poem, however, Pushkin changes the tone. Referring ironically to himself as an uneducated, rather uncouth Slav (*To Ovid* 54, neither of which is true), he states that Ovid deluded himself, then. Instead, now, the blue of the sky is marvellous, Russia's snow simply wonderful, and skiting on the ice a huge pleasure. Again, in this second part of Pushkin's panegyric poem, Ovid's own words are recalled. Ovid spoke of the winter that makes even the sea a highway for one on foot (*Ex Ponto* 4. 10. 32), and Pushkin imagines Ovid as enthusiastically, yet somehow cautiously skiting on the ice (*To Ovid* 78–81). Pushkin concludes the poem as he began it, comparing himself to Ovid, or rather identifying himself with him. He, too, he claims, composed poetry in an uncongenial atmosphere (*To Ovid* 99). He, too, was welcomed by the Muses (*To Ovid* 104, the poem's closure).

Being anxious to avoid misunderstandings, in some of his letters Pushkin mentions this poem (which is unusual for him, who does rather rarely return to his poetry in his letters).[26] The reason for his cautious wavering might be that, like Ovid, Pushkin was sent away from the capital, and just like Ovid, to such a dreadful 'social dead zone'.[27] Pushkin may have hoped to return, and unlike Ovid, in fact, he was allowed to. Pushkin, however, remained an enemy of the Tsarist government, as it is likely to assume for Ovid, too, if Ovid ever had been allowed to return. For those who can read between the lines, Pushkin alludes to his ambiguity, concealing a bit harsh reality. Claiming to have voluntarily travelled to this remote, godforsaken place (which is not true), he confesses to be at odds with the world, and with himself (which is quite true).

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[25] *Werke* I 156–159, in Russian, I 139–142.

[26] An early version is sent to a friend on March 24, 1821 (*Werke* VI 21 sq.). The following year, Pushkin fears that the poem cannot be published, because it might be censured, in a letter dated June 21, 1822 (VI 31). Later the same year, Pushkin proposes some changes, which regard the cited passage on peace-loving Ovid, in a letter dated September 4, 1822 (VI 38). At the beginning of the following year, he asks his younger brother Lew whether he likes the poem, in a letter dated January 30, 1823 (VI 46). In May 1821 Pushkin became a Freemason. He entered the branch established at Kišinëv (Chişinău): their name was 'Ovidius' (Vitale 1995, 426, Lotman 1997, 407–409).

[27] Lotman 1995, 66 = 1989, 100. – The expression comes from a poem by Clive James, *Grief Across the Water*, published recently in *The Spectator*, March 10, 2018: 14: "the greatest / Poet of his time was sent to languish / In the social dead zone of the lower Danube" etc.

Ovid might have written exactly the same. Doing his best to avoid causing offence, ingratiating himself with the Roman Tsar, he also would have claimed to have travelled voluntarily to this godforsaken place – still hoping to return one day to Rome. "He waited for release to come / and went on yearning, hapless one, / while roaming on the Danube's banks, / and bitter tears he shed", though, as Nabokov translates Pushkin's poem *The Gypsies*, begun 1823, published 1827 (Nabokov 1981, II 60). Surely, Ovid was at odds with himself, condemning his earlier work as lighthearted, trivial, and unworthy. Lighthearted like young Ovid, young Pushkin felt the same: 'May my glory be smaller than yours, our fates are equal', Pushkin concludes (*To Ovid* 97 sq.). He noted what they both shared, being only at half the age of Ovid.[28]

At Tsarskoye Selo, however, a few years earlier, did Pushkin think of Ovid when he kissed his Natalya, as Tynyanov suggested? As a 'formalist' strongly believing that a text comes only into existence when being read, Tynyanov is not to be blamed for what he thought right. Refusing to speak of a work's 'aesthetic quality' as if it were a Platonic idea, Tynyanov used the image of a bullet as a metaphor for a work's impact.[29] Just as a bullet cannot be properly judged according to its colour, taste, and smell, instead of which it is only rightly judged according to its dynamic, i.e. if it is fired, the quality of a work of literature becomes real, intense, only if it is read – and the result may differ, depending on the reader, not the author.

According to his view of literature, in order to create such an impact, Tynyanov invented a marvellous scene. He may be forgiven it, for the simple fact that Pushkin himself anticipated his innovation. In a cancelled part of *Onegin* Pushkin wrote that "not nature teaches us love, / but the first nasty novel" (1. 9), as Nabokov translates пакостный роман (1981, II 62) – a strong expression,

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[28] The so-called 'southern' or 'oriental' poems by Pushkin were early noticed by literary critics. Tynyanov cites from the monograph: O. Somov's *On Romantic Poetry* (published 1823), who inscribes Pushkin's poetry into a romanticised nationalist discourse. According to him, there does indeed exist something like genuinely Russian poetry, composed by poets who need not travel (and did not, as Pushkin, who never left Russia), but whose poetry comprises all the people who live on Russian soil. Among them, the author lists those living on "ancient Colchis, heirs of migrators who witnessed Ovid's exile" (Tynjanow 1975, 325, from an essay on Pushkin). The political atmosphere as well as the literary climate of the early 19th century favoured such poetry, as Adam Mickiewicz' slightly younger *Pan Tadeusz* may show (published 1834). Mickiewicz and Pushkin were friends, until Pushkin's Tzarist poem on the Polish uprising (Vitale 1995, 165 sq.). On the poetic impact of Mickiewicz on Pushkin, v. Lednicki 1956, 84–88. Pushkin portrayed Mickiewicz as the improviser in his *Egyptian Nights*; on his assumed debasing him, v. Lednicki 1956, 81 sq.

[29] Tynyanov speaks of this in his article *The literary fact* (or *On literary facts*), Литературный факт, published in 1924 (Striedter 1969, 402): Нельзя судить пулю по цвету, вкусу, запаху. Она судима с точки зрения ее динамики. Aside from Striedter (translated by Helene Imendörffer, again in Striedter 1971, 403), another German translation can be found in Tynjanow 1975, 223 = Mierau 1987, 366 (by Brigitta Schröder).

'disgusting narrative', which Augustus may well have used for Ovid's *Art of Love*.[30] Trying to re-enact Ovid, however, Pushkin failed. Perhaps, Tynyanov was overdoing it a bit, as Pnin and Nabokov later did, too, all three Russian professors of Russian literature. Like the exiles Pnin and Nabokov, one fictitious, one real, the former invented by the latter, Tynyanov was hardly able or, at least, not much inclined to control his fantastic imagination, a fact that made him invent the literary genre of 'docufiction'.[31] Its *chiaroscuro* must have appealed to Tynyanov, as *chiaroscuro* always attracted Ovid.[32]

Tynyanov, however, was not only driven – which he was indeed, dying inch by inch – but also forced brutally. In 1923, a hellishly clever man attacked the literary critics and intellectuals of the 'formalist' school. Only "if confined within legitimate limits," he wrote, "the methods of Formalism may help to clarify the artistic and psychological peculiarities of literary form."[33] His pamphlet's title *Literature and Revolution* indicated what he thought was at stake. At its time of publication, shortly after the end of the horrific civil war, its author, the commander of the Red Army, Lev Bronstein, who called himself Trotsky, was at the height of his power. Only three years later he was dismissed, and finally tracked down by his best friend Iossif Djougachvili, who called himself Stalin, but his vicious attack on a group of literary critics galvanised many followers.

Sadly, literary theorising became an exclusive domain of farcical 'Marxism-Leninism', obsessed by 'social reality' and 'content'. Shklovsky, Eikhenbaum, Brik, the leading men from the *Society for the Study of Poetic Language*

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[30] Pushkin's autograph Nabokov refers to the one that is (was?) preserved in the Public Library of Peterburg (1981, I 85). The ninth paragraph in the first book of *Onegin* is deleted. Pushkin couches his line in a 'citation' from Chateaubriand (1768–1848). In another version, he 'cites' his words from both Mme de Staël (1766–1817) and Chateaubriand. Whether this is invented or not Tynyanov might have known.

[31] As Thun (1979, 358 sq.) proposes. In 1925, Tynyanov began with *Kjuchlja*, the biography of Pushkin's friend Wilhelm Karlovitch Küchelbecker (1797–1846), a real person, on which followed, in 1927, his *Lieutenant Kishe*, the biography of a completely fictitious figure, born out of a real scriber's error. Tynyanov included a portrait of Pushkin in his novel *The Death of Wesir Muchtar* (1927/8), a portrait which blurs the boundary between author and narrator in such a way that it may resemble a self-portrait of Tynyanov, as Thun (1982, 67 sq.) suggests.

[32] At the same time when Yury Tynyanov (1894–1943) worked on his 'biography' of Pushkin, a contemporary of his worked on a 'biography' of Molière. In 1933 Mikhail Bulgakov (1891–1940) finished his monograph Мольер, which was to be published only many years after his death. Quite naturally, Bulgakov dedicates much space to Molière's relationship to Louis XIV, drawing a picture, however, which resembles and mirrors the relationship between Pushkin and Nikolai I in such a way that a portrait of his own relationship to Stalin can be read between the lines. Anyway, an autobiographical reading is not only not to be excluded but rather suggested. On such 'co-presence of the present and past' in Tynyanov's 'docufiction' cf. Veldhues 2003, 392–403, 416–418.

[33] Cited from Erlich 1965, 100.

(ОПОЯЗ), had to turn to other fields. Their fellow Tynyanov relinquished literary scholarship to devote himself to 'docufiction', a genre at which he had already tried his hand.[34]

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[34] Erlich 1965, 140.

PUSHKIN AND OVID

S u m m a r y

Alexander Pushkin shares a lot with Ovid. They both mirrored themselves in their poetry, both carrying it a bit too far, and both were sent away from the capital. The mirroring, however, affects also some of those who worked on them. Vladimir Nabokov, for example, portrays himself, thinly disguised, as Professor Pnin in his first successful American novel. Working on Pushkin, Pnin has much to say, as would have Nabokov, who lectured on Russian poetry, and as did Tynyanov, who sketched an imaginary portrait of Pushkin. The 'formalist' doctrine comes to mind which claims that texts do only exist when being read – and Pushkin certainly did read Ovid. Perhaps, Pushkin even tried to imitate more than what he himself reveals, as Tynyanov suggested. However, are we to believe him? Or does he make it just look like that?