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## NIKOLAI CHUKOVSKII AND KONSTANTIN VAGINOV

Nikolai Korneevich Chukovskii (1904-1965) is best known today in the Soviet Union as the author of a series of popular biographies of famous explorers and sailors of the 18th and 19th centuries, and of historical novels and patriotic stories about the Civil War and World War II.<sup>1</sup> His successful career within the official parameters of Soviet literature, as well as the conventional quality of much of his writing, provide a striking contrast to the life and works of his younger sister, the "nonconformist" novelist and memoirist, Lidiia Chukovskaia.<sup>2</sup> And yet, as a young writer in Petrograd in the 1920s, Chukovskii lived at the very center of the literary and artistic avant garde and numbered among his friends most of the major literary figures of the city. Many years later, Chukovskii devoted a significant amount of time and energy to fascinating literary memoirs of some of the major literary figures of his youth.<sup>3</sup> Even today, almost 25 years since Chukovskii's death in 1965, several of his memoirs have not yet appeared in print. Among these is an account of the life and works of his friend and colleague, the poet and novelist Konstantin Vaginov (1899-1934).<sup>4</sup> Published below for the first time, Chukovskii's memoir represents an extremely significant addition to the valuable but incomplete portraits of Vaginov in memoirs left by, among others, Veniamin Kaverin,<sup>5</sup> Nikolai Tikhonov,<sup>6</sup> Nina Berberova,<sup>7</sup> Leonid Borisov<sup>8</sup> and Ida Nappel'baum.<sup>9</sup>

While his sketch of Vaginov's role in the literary life of Petrograd in the 1920s is largely familiar from the accounts of other memoirists, Chukovskii provides new details about Vaginov's early years, his family history before and after the revolution, as well as about the years leading up to his death in 1934. Chukovskii's memoir, in fact, is unique for the completeness of its biographical narrative, beginning in the 1890s with the Siberian courtship of Vaginov's gendarme father and millionairess mother, and ending in 1934 with his parents accompanying their son's body to Leningrad's Smolensk cemetery.<sup>10</sup> In addition, through his use of well-chosen anecdotes, Chukovskii conveys the personal qualities, including the eccentricities (e.g., his fear of running out of wine, his dislike of electricity, his love of collecting kitsch oddities), which won Vaginov so many close friends from the literary and artistic circles of post-revolutionary Petrograd. Chukovskii's descriptions of Vaginov's friendliness, modesty, tact and kindness are echoed in the accounts of other memoirists, for example, Ida Nappel'baum's moving "Pamiatka o poete."

On the other hand, Chukovskii's memoir is probably most important for his articulate and convincing reading of Vaginov's intellectual background and literary legacy. Like many members of his generation, Vaginov was strongly influenced by the cyclical theories of history made popular by Oswald Spengler's *Decline of the West*.<sup>11</sup> The narrator of Vaginov's first novel, *The Satyr Song (Kozlinaia pesn')*, mentions Spengler's influence among the local intelligentsia: "S nekotorykh por, s opozdaniem na dva goda, v gorode, -- ja govoriu o Peterburge, a ne o Leningrade, -- vse zarazheny byli shpenglerianstvom" (KP, 52). But Vaginov did not merely apply Spengler's version of the cyclical and inevitable rise and fall of civilization to the contemporary situation in Russia. Rather, he adapted it to his own idiosyncratic cultural views, in the process creating a mythological version of the significance of the October revolution in the history of Russian culture.

Chukovskii locates the key to Vaginov's works in the latter's mythological treatment of the October revolution and the birth of Soviet culture. Vaginov's attitude towards the revolution was profoundly ambivalent: he looked upon the revolution as a necessary disaster, a tragic catastrophe which, however, brought in its wake not only destruction, but liberation as well. Chukovskii goes on to cogently describe how, in his poems and novels, Vaginov mythologized the history of Europe from the fall of the Roman Empire, through the Dark Ages, to the rebirth of classical learning in the Renaissance, into a vision of the cyclical death and rebirth of Culture itself. In the political, and therefore cultural, victory of the Bolsheviks over the Christian and humanistic culture of Romanov Russia, Vaginov recognized the beginnings of the same mythological process of the death and rebirth of Culture. While both revolutions of the dispossessed were necessary and, in some sense, just, Vaginov regretted the tragic cultural losses inevitably caused by the destruction of the ruling classes. But Vaginov's understanding of the tragic nature of revolutions was tempered by the belief that all ends contain within themselves the seeds of a new beginning. Chukovskii summarizes the central figures of Vaginov's mythology of the fate of Culture and the artist in a revolutionary age: Culture/Phoenix, forever reborn from its own ashes; the poet/monk, alienated and withdrawn from modern life to the Ivory Tower, where he will preserve Culture until the distant dawning of a new Renaissance; the poet/Philostratus, the last pagan intellectual in a world already converted to Christianity; Petersburg, the symbol of the Russian tradition, where the eventual resurrection of Culture would occur. Chukovskii's confident description of the birth of this myth in Vaginov's poems and its ironic transformation in the novel *The Satyr Song* has greatly influenced the works of all recent investigators of Vaginov's life and works.

The status of Chukovskii's text as a "boundary genre", that is, a text that straddles uneasily the genres of memoir and critical essay, accounts for both its strengths and its weaknesses. Its central flaw results from the author's blurring of the critical distinctions between Vaginov's life and his literary texts. That all of Vaginov's novels confront the relations between the art and the life of the poet, between real and imagined or mythological lives, complicates further an already complex issue.<sup>12</sup> Chukovskii runs into trouble when, in describing several aspects of Vaginov's biography of which he had no first hand knowledge (for example, the poet's early education, his experiences in Revolutionary Petrograd, his army service during the Civil War), he uncritically uses the evidence of Vaginov's poems and novels as if they contained nothing but autobiographical material. Without denying the presence of significant autobiographical information in, to take one example, Vaginov's portrait of the "unknown poet" of *The Satyr Song*, the cautious biographer must, in the absence of corroborating documentary evidence, reserve judgement on Chukovskii's unqualified identification of the "unknown poet" with the author of *The Satyr Song*.

Chukovskii is on much firmer ground in describing Vaginov during the fourteen years of their acquaintance. The history of their mutual friendship begins in 1920, in the poetry seminar run by Nikolai Gumilev (1886-1921) in the Petrograd House of the Arts,<sup>13</sup> and continues until Vaginov's untimely death in 1934. Both young poets participated in the poetic group the "Resounding Shell" ("Zvuchashchaia rakovina"),<sup>14</sup> composed of students and protégés of Gumilev. After Gumilev's execution in August 1921 for allegedly participating in the anti-Soviet "Tagantsev" conspiracy,<sup>15</sup> Vaginov and Chukovskii, along with most of Gumilev's circle, became regular visitors of the literary salon run by the Nappelbaum sisters. Elsewhere, Chukovskii has left an interesting portrait of the literary "Mondays" at the Nappelbaums, where many of the leading lights of Petrograd poetry met regularly between 1921

and 1925 to read and discuss poetry: "Каждый понедельник у Напгельбаумов читали свои стихи человек тридцать. Но по-настоящему волновали слушателей только пятеро -- Тихонов, Вагинов, Рождественский, Кузмин и Ходасевич. А увлекали сердца только [Тихонов и Ходасевич]."<sup>16</sup>

Chukovskii's memoirs describe how he and Vaginov stayed in close contact in the 1920s, participating in the same literary groups, and publishing in the same miscellanies and publishing houses. His description of Vaginov's opposition to Lenin's New Economic Policy (NEP) will be of particular interest to Vaginov's future biographer, as will his treatment of Vaginov's complex attitude to "the perestroika of the intelligentsia" in the 1920s. One point that Chukovskii does not stress is that the themes of Vaginov's novels and poems -- the role of the old Russian intelligentsia in the young Soviet state, the birth of the Soviet intelligentsie, the relationship between the new political regime and the traditions of Russian Culture -- make him a representative figure of his generation and place his works at the ideological center of Russian literature in the 1920s.

It is in his discussion of Vaginov's roman à clef *The Satyr Song* that Chukovskii's personal and detailed knowledge of the personalities and issues of Leningrad's literary circles during the 1920s pays the largest dividend. Without necessarily agreeing with all the details of Chukovskii's interpretation of Vaginov's first novel, one has to admit that decoding the prototypes of the novel's main characters is a necessary element of any serious reading.<sup>17</sup> Especially welcome is Chukovskii's information about Lev Vasil'evich Pumpianskii, his former French tutor, who was immortalized as Teptelkin, the main character of *The Satyr Song*. While Pumpianskii is rather widely known as a talented literary critic and one of the members of the Bakhtin circle, very few of his critical works have survived to the present and remarkably little is known of his biography.<sup>18</sup> Pumpianskii's importance for Vaginov's novel cannot be overstated: in fact, his transformation from an eccentric, mystical freethinker into the worst sort of "dogmatic citation-monger" ("начетчик и цитатчик"), described in the pages of Chukovskii's memoir, was, quite possibly, the impetus for the entire novel.

In the years immediately preceding Vaginov's death from tuberculosis, he and Chukovskii worked together on literary projects of a completely different type. Chukovskii describes their work in proletarian literary circles, as well as their participation in the compilation of an oral history of Leningrad factory workers called *Four Generations (Chetyre pokoleniia: Narvskaia zastava*, ed. S. Spasskii, A. Ul'ianskii. Leningrad, 1933).<sup>19</sup> Though Chukovskii's account is one of the only first-hand descriptions of Vaginov's life in the 1930s,<sup>20</sup> there is ample reason to doubt whether Vaginov's enthusiasm for the privileged official discourse of Stalinist literature and the world of the Leningrad proletariat was as great as Chukovskii would have us believe ("Вагинову, с его острейшим чувством истории, с его пронзительной любовью к родному городу, все это было глубоко интересно. Как ни странно, перед ним открывался новый мир, с которым он всю жизнь жил рядом и которого совсем не знал. К работе он отнесся влюбленно.."). Fully aware of his approaching death, and working feverishly on two novels which would remain unfinished at his death,<sup>21</sup> it is hard to imagine Vaginov willingly devoting his remaining time to collecting reminiscences of strikes by Leningrad workers.

And yet, despite these reservations about Chukovskii's occasional lapses of accuracy and memory, his memoir represents a priceless historical document for the student of the life and works of Vaginov. Chukovskii's privileged position as a close friend of Vaginov's for fourteen years, an insider in the Petrograd and Leningrad literary circles which Vaginov frequen-

ted in the 1920s and 1930s, and a writer who appreciated and valued Vaginov's literary work, make him a near ideal memoirist. The publication of this excerpt from his literary memoirs allows readers to share his insights into the enigmatic life and works of one of the least known, but most interesting members of the Leningrad avant-garde of the 1920s.

#### Notes

- 1 *Russkie sovetskie pisateli-prozaiki. Bibliograficheskij ukazatel'*, vol.6, part 1, Moscow, 1969. *Kratkaia literaturnaia entsiklopediia*, t.8, 558-59.
- 2 *Handbook of Russian Literature*, ed. Victor Terras. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1985, 84-85.
- 3 "Vstrechi s Mandel'shtamom." *Moskva*, No.8 (1964), 143-52. *Pravda i poëziia: iz vospominanii*, Moscow: Ogonek, 1987, 20-21.
- 4 For standard accounts of Vaginov's life and works, see Ivan Martynov and A.V. Blium, "Petrogradskie bibliofily. Po stranitsam romanov Konstantina Vaginova." *Al'manakh bibliofilov*, vyp.4, Moscow: Kniga, 1977, 217-235; Leonid Chertkov, "Poëziia Konstantina Vaginova", K. Vaginov, *Sobranie stikhotvorenii*, Munich: Verlag Otto Sagner, 1982, 213-30, and T.L. Nikol'skaia. "Konstantin Vaginov: Kanva biografii i tvorchestva." *Chetvertye Tynianovskie chteniia*. Riga: Zinatne, 1988, 67-88.
- 5 "Zdvavstvui, brat. Pisať ochen' trudno." Moscow: Sov. pisatel', 1965, 64-65.
- 6 "Ustnaia kniga." *Voprosy literatury*, No.6, 1980, 123-25.
- 7 "Iz peterburgskikh vospominanii. Tri družby." *Opyty* (New York, No.1 (1953), 163-80. *Kursiv moi: Avtobiografiia*. Munich: Wilhelm Fink Verlag, 1972.
- 8 *Roditeli, nastavniki, poety. Kniga v moei zhizni*. 2nd ed. Moscow: Kniga, 1969, 87-91, 101-2, 104-6.
- 9 "Pamiatka o poete." Forthcoming in *Wiener slawistischer Almanach*.
- 10 An obituary of Vaginov entitled "Tiazhelaia poteria" appeared above Chukovskii's signature in *Literaturnyi Leningrad* on April 30, 1934.
- 11 The publication in 1923 of the first volume of *Decline of the West* in the Russian translation of A.A. Frankovskii, whom Vaginov may well have known through their common friend M.M. Bakhtin, was preceded by a popular and influential collection of essays entitled *Osval'd Shpengler i "Zakat Evropy"*, Moscow: 1922. In addition, one of the favorite books of Vaginov's youth was Edward Gibbon's *Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*. Chertkov, "Poëziia Konstantina Vaginova," 213.
- 12 See D. Segal. "Literatura kak okhrannaia gramota." *Slavica Hierosolymitana*, V-VI, 1981, 151-244.
- 13 Barry Scherr. "Notes on Literary Life in Petrograd, 1918 -- 1922: A tale of Three Houses." *Slavic Review*, No.2, 1977, 256-267. A.D. Zajdman. "Literaturnye studii 'Vse-mimoi literatury' i 'Doma iskusstv'." *Russkaia literatura*, No.1, 1973, 141-47.
- 14 See I. Nappel'baum. "Pamiatka o poete." Forthcoming in *Wiener slawistischer Almanach*.

- 15 Recent Soviet publications not only exonerate Gumilev of the charge of active counter-revolutionary activity, but also question the very existence of a "Petrograd Military Organization" (PVO) and a "Tagantsev" conspiracy. See G.A. Terekhov, "Vozvrashchias' k delu N.S. Gumileva." *Novyi mir*, No.12, 1987, 257-58, and D. Fel'dman, "Delo Gumileva." *Novyi mir*, No.4, 1989, 265-69.
- 16 N. Chukovskii. "Salon Nappel'baumov." *Pravda i poeziia*, 20-21.
- 17 According to Chukovskii, the prototypes for Teptelkin, Zaezratskii, Kotikov, and Troitsyn were, respectively, Lev Pumpianskii, Nikolai Gumilev, Pavel Luknitskii, and Vsevolod Rozhdestvenskii. Additional prototypes are provided by T.L. Nikol'skaia: Kostia Rotikov was based on I.A. Likhachev, the philosopher was M.M. Bakhtin, and the Irish poet was a portrait of the English poet, Douglas Harman. Nikol'skaia 1988:81.
- 18 For the most complete bibliography of Pumpianskii's works, see *The Bakhtin Newsletter*, No.2, 1986, 31-33.
- 19 This aspect of Vaginov's career is also described in Nikol'skaia 1988:76-77.
- 20 A memoir of the poet by one of the members of a proletarian literary circle which Vaginov helped conduct, A. Kapralov, unfortunately, remains unpublished. Nikol'skaia 1988: n 38,82.
- 21 While one of them, the unfinished *Garpagoniada*, has appeared in the West (Ann Arbor: Ardis, 1983), a second incomplete novel, supposedly set in 1905, was confiscated by the secret police shortly after Vaginov's death. Nikol'skaia 1988:78.