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“I AM NOT ALIVE”: A BIONIAN READING OF LIFE AND DEATH IN BALZAC’S *LE COLONEL CHABERT*
AND TYNIANOV’S *PODPORUCHIK KIZHE*

Despite having been written nearly a century apart, Honoré de Balzac’s *Le Colonel Chabert* and Yuri Tynianov’s *Podporuchik Kizhe* (*Lieutenant Kizhe*, in English) form a remarkable pair: Balzac’s novel chronicling the struggle of the living though legally dead Chabert, and Tynianov’s novella depicting the exploits of the non-existent though legally living Kizhe. Indeed, Tynianov’s text presents a sort of narrative chiasmus of Balzac’s tale. Important to both texts, moreover, are the motifs of life and death, which provide a sort of thematic structure within which the narratives of these works are developed. In effect, one might say, that it is this very thematic structure that invests the texts’ protagonists with the characteristics of both life and death. Yet, while Chabert’s existence may be called a life, albeit one defined in terms of his erroneously documented death, Kizhe’s existence can be considered its logical negation: not death, but another state of being entirely that I will call here “non-life.”

I stress here the distinction between death and non-life because it seems that, in both texts, life and death are as much socio-political and legal constructs as they are organic or ontological states—that is, the chronological, biological beginning and ending of a “life.” In other words, life and death in these works become collective conceptual spaces into which one may enter, or from which one may be excluded. Because of his legal status as a dead man, for example, Chabert is forced, despite his still-beating heart, to inhabit the social and political, if not biological, realm of death. By contrast, Kizhe’s legal status as a living being forces him, a negative entity, a non-life, to occupy the legal and political world of “life.” Existing only on paper in the form of a typographical error, Kizhe, a non-life, enjoys full participation in the social and legal context in which he “lives.” The protagonists of both texts thus occupy liminal

spaces: that is, Chabert and Kizhe find themselves caught between the realms of life and death, belonging to neither and yet to both at once. In this gap between states, the protagonists come to take on or are otherwise endowed with the characteristics of both life and death.

Thus, while the approach taken in one text may, at first glance, appear to be a kind of conceptual inversion of the approach taken in the other, in the following pages I demonstrate that, in fact, Balzac and Tynianov grapple with different framings of the same ontological question: what, indeed, constitutes a human life? This question is evoked by Chabert himself, who wonders aloud about his “bizarre existence”¹ to his lawyer Derville: “Suis-je mort ou suis-je vivant”/ “Am I alive or am I dead?”² A version of this same question finds itself articulated in Tynianov’s text as well, not by Kizhe, of course, but by the lieutenant Siniukhaev, who serves as an uncanny double to the non-existent Kizhe. Mistakenly declared dead by the very same clerk whose spelling error breathed life into Kizhe, Siniukhaev begins to doubt his own state of being alive. Finally, in a moment of clarity he announces to his father, “я не живой”/ “I am not alive.”³ This latter statement is, to say the least, a curious, if not “scandalously” impossible,⁴ declaration.

¹ Honoré de Balzac, *Le Colonel Chabert* (Paris: Gallimard, 1999), 79/29. English translation: Honoré de Balzac, *The Colonel Chabert*, trans. Andrew Brown (London: Hesperus Press Limited, 2003). When citing, I give first the page number of the French edition followed by the page number of the translation.

² *Ibid.*, 85/31.

³ Iurii Tynianov, *Podporuchik Kizhe*, in *Iurii Tynianov: Sochinenia v trekh tomakh*, Vol. 1 (Moscow: Gosudarstvennoe izdatel'stvo khudozhestvennoi literatury, 1959), 347/37. English Translations: Yury Tynianov, *Lieutenant Kijé in Lieutenant Kijé and Young Vitushishnikov*, trans. Mirra Ginsburg (Boston: Eridanos Press, Inc. 1990). As with the Balzac text, when citing, I give the page number of the Russian edition followed by the corresponding page number in Ginsburg’s translation.

⁴ See, for instance, Edgar Poe’s short story, “The Facts in the Case of M. Valdemar” and what Roland Barthes once termed its “scandalous utterance”: “I am dead.” In Roland Barthes, “Analyse d’un conte d’Edgar Poe,” in *L’Aventure sémiologique* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1985), 329-358.

Rather than give his statement in the affirmative; that is, rather than speaking the words “I am dead,” Siniukhaev resorts to litotes, a fitting use of a negative rhetorical device given the existential situation that Tyanianov presents in his novella. This is because the lieutenant is not yet dead, though he will eventually “die.” Instead, like Kizhe, Siniukhaev is pulled toward the chasm between life and death, toward liminality. Yet, whereas Kizhe inhabits the space of non-life, Siniukhaev comes to occupy a similarly negative though utterly distinct realm that I will call, by a kind of natural dialectical extension, “non-death”—a space that is eerily reminiscent of death and yet is *not* death. It is in the state of non-death, too, that Chabert finds himself. Like Siniukhaev, Chabert is a dead man before the law and is therefore excluded from participating in life. Thus, Kizhe, Siniukhaev, and Chabert each present a paradox, situated at the heart of these two works: these characters are ontological subjects defined both by the absence of life (social, political, and/or biological) and by death, itself not the absence of life, but its natural, biological conclusion. In other words, these characters are entities, bounded by negative space, which are attempting or forced to occupy positively inflected conceptual spaces.

Having advanced the notions of non-life and non-death, I find it necessary to turn my attention for a moment to the theoretical framework according to which I developed these concepts: namely, psychoanalysis. Yet, I must clarify that I have not relied on the more traditional psychoanalytic approaches, those more established in literary criticism such as the theories of Sigmund Freud or Jacques Lacan. Instead, in my readings of Russian and French novelistic fiction, I turn to the theory of the British psychoanalyst Wilfred Bion. As Bion and his thought are little known both inside and outside the field of psychoanalysis, in the present essay, I offer an interpretation of several of his core theoretical concepts: the alpha- and beta-elements, the alpha-function, and the container and the contained paradigm. That is, I put forth a heuristics,

a way of reading Balzac and Tynianov, informed by Bion's thought, which accounts remarkably well for the ambiguous, uncertain or undecidable socio-political and ontological states presented in these texts. These Bionian concepts have allowed me, moreover, to develop a typology of being which is not possible, I think, in different psychoanalytic frameworks. Rather than offer a comparative assessment of Bion as opposed to Freud or Lacan (or, for that matter, any other discursive figure with the field of psychoanalysis), I offer only an explanation and adaptation of Bionian psychoanalysis as a free-standing illustration of its merit as a theoretical framework and interpretive tool for the study of literature. Before treating the Bionian concepts mentioned above, however, I will return to the two texts that are the subject of this analysis, providing a brief summary of each work.

THE LIVES OF DEAD MEN

An installment in Balzac's *La Comédie humaine*,⁵ the 1832 novel *Le Colonel Chabert* is the story of the titular colonel, who, after fighting against the Imperial Russian army and having subsequently been mistakenly pronounced dead at the Battle of Eylau,⁶ returns to Restoration Paris in the wake of the Napoleonic regime in order to lay claim to his former life. A dead man in the eyes of the law, however, Chabert finds himself without rights and thereby unable to reclaim all that he believes to be his: his name, his fortune, and his wife. Chabert's widow, having amassed a small fortune, remarried and taken the name of the ambitious Count Ferraud,

⁵ *La Comédie humaine* is a massive collection of interconnected novels, depicting life in Paris from the period of the Restoration (1815-1830), the era in which *Le Colonel Chabert* takes place, and the July Monarchy (1830-1848).

⁶ The Battle of Eylau (1807) saw Napoleon's army face off against the Imperial Russian forces of Tsar Alexander I.

and given birth to two of the count's children, refuses to nullify the Colonel's death certificate, a gesture that would effectively restore him to "la vie social."⁷ With her fortune and family at stake—for she would be guilty of bigamy were she to have married Ferraud while her first husband was still alive—the Countess refuses to validate the Colonel's claim to his old name, insisting instead that he is an imposter of her dead husband. Chabert, utterly bedraggled and unable to turn to his once-beloved wife for aid, wanders the streets of Paris, visiting the offices of various lawyers in the hopes that one of them might believe his bizarre tale and agree to help him collect the necessary documents that would prove the truth of his story and thereby legitimize his claim to legal "life."

Not until Chabert meets a young lawyer, Derville, does he find an ally.⁸ Derville takes on the Colonel's case and, understanding the precarity of his client's situation as well as that of the Countess,⁹ he presents the two disputing parties with a compromise: Chabert's widow will nullify her late husband's death certificate, thereby restoring to him his rights, if he will void their marriage certificate, thus upholding the legitimacy of the Countess's marriage to Ferraud, preserving her new life as a wealthy Parisian socialite, and protecting her legal rights to her two small children. Despite Derville's intervention, the negotiations nevertheless fall apart, for neither party is able to accept the terms of the compromise. Finally, after discovering that the

⁷ Balzac, *Le Colonel Chabert*, 72/23.

⁸ Having been spurned by all other law offices in Paris, Chabert is advised by Godeschal, Derville's chief clerk, to visit his boss at his private residence at one o'clock in the morning, the time when he is most active at work. Derville is an important recurring character in Balzac's *La Comédie humaine*.

⁹ The Countess's predicament is further complicated by the fact that Count Ferraud is seeking a pretext for divorce in order that he may marry the daughter of an aristocrat. An ambitious man, the Count sees no reason to remain shackled to his current wife, when a more promising—that is, a socially and politically advantageous—bride is within his grasp.

Countess aims to have him banished to an almshouse, Chabert confronts her once more and thereupon renounces his name and his former life forever: “Je ne réclamerai jamais le nom que j’ai peut-être illustré. Je ne suis plus qu’un pauvre diable nommé Hyacinthe, qui ne demande que sa place au soleil”/ “I will never lay claim to the name which I have perhaps given lustre to. From now on I’m just a poor devil called Hyacinthe who merely wants his place in the sun.”¹⁰ In the final pages of the novel, Balzac’s protagonist, residing now in a hospice for the elderly, reaffirms his denouncement, this time in front of Derville: “Pas Chabert! pas Chabert! je me nomme Hyacinthe, répondit le vieillard. Je ne suis plus un homme, je suis le numéro 164, septième salle, ajouta-t-il en regardant Derville avec une anxiété peureuse, avec une crainte de vieillard et d’enfant”/ “‘Not Chabert! Not Chabert! My name is Hyacinthe,’ replied the old man, ‘I am not a man, I’m number 164, room 7,’ he added, gazing at Derville with timid anxiety, the fear of an old man and a child at once.”¹¹ Chabert, or rather the name Chabert, is thus laid to rest, while the person who once bore that name, Hyacinthe wastes away in the hospice, a place of non-death, a liminal space that is at once outside of society, outside of social and political life, and yet inscribed in it.¹²

Though Yuri Tynianov’s 1927 novella is not a direct response to Balzac’s novel,¹³ the two stories’ striking similarities cannot but invite comparative scrutiny. Tynianov’s *Podporuchik Kizhe* recounts the unexpected non-death of Lieutenant Siniukhaev and the preposterous non-life

¹⁰ Ibid., 153/75.

¹¹ Ibid., 163/81.

¹² cf. Michel Foucault, *Naissance de la clinique*, “Préface.”

¹³ The impetus for its having been written was, apparently, a pair of historical anecdotes. See Iu. D. Levin, “Ob istochnikakh *Poporuchika Kizhe*,” in *Rol’ i znachenie literatury XVIII veka v istorii russkoi kultury: k 70-letiu so dnia rozhdeniia P. N. Berkova* (Moscow: Nauka, 1996), 393-396.

of Lieutenant Kizhe, with the former erroneously declared dead and the latter written into existence when a young military clerk, fearful of the punishment he will undoubtedly suffer for his tardiness in fulfilling his duties, incorrectly copies an imperial decree:

[...] сделал он две ошибки: поручика Синюхаева написал умершим, так как Синюхаев шел сразу же после умершего майора Соколова, и допустил нелепое написание—вместо ‘Подпоручики же Стивен, Рыбин и Азанчеев назначаются’ написал: ‘Подпоручик Киже, Стивен, Рыбин и Азанчеев назначаются’. Когда он писал слово: ‘Подпоручики’, вошел офицер, и он вытянулся перед ним, остановился на к, а потом, сев снова за приказ, напутал и написал: ‘Подпоручик Киже’.

[...] he made two mistakes: he entered Lieutenant Siniukhaev as dead, since Siniukhaev's name followed that of the newly deceased Major Sokolov. He also made the following absurd entry: instead of “and the Second Lieutenants Stiven, Rybin, and Azancheev are appointed,” he wrote “and the Second Lieuten. Nants [Kizhe],¹⁴ Stiven, Rybin, and Azancheev are appointed.” An officer had come in while he was writing the word “Lieutenants,” and he sprang up to salute him, leaving off the “n.” Then he returned to his work and, in confusion, wrote Lieuten. Nants.¹⁵

Unable to bear the weight of the decree's words, Siniukhaev struggles for some time to come to terms with his new condition; namely, the state of non-death in which he suddenly finds himself. As a dutiful lieutenant, Siniukhaev is accustomed to regarding the words of an imperial decree with special reverence, for “[о]ни имели не смысл, не значение, а собственную жизнь и власть. [...] Приказ как-то изменял полки, улицы и людей, если даже его не исполняли.”/ “[w]hat they carried was not simply meaning, but a life and power of their own [...] Even if it was not obeyed, an order somehow changed regiments, streets, people.”¹⁶ These “special words,”

¹⁴ In the original Russian, the mistake the military clerk makes is the joining of the last syllable of the word *podporuchiki* (“second lieutenants”) and the emphatic particle *zhe*, which has no English equivalent. Thus, Ginsburg has rendered the mistake in English as “Second Lieuten. Nants.” The joke falls rather flat in English because though *zhe* carries no meaning in itself it, it does have semantic significance. “Nants,” on the other hand, does not.

¹⁵ Tynianov, “Poporuchik Kizhe,” 328/9.

¹⁶ Ibid.

qua performatives, have the power to shape intersubjective reality, to change people, to grant or dispossess them of life.¹⁷ Siniukhaev’s non-death and Kizhe’s non-life are illustrative of the illocutionary force of the words of an imperial decree; it does not matter that Siniukhaev’s psychic, or even corporeal, reality might directly contradict the meaning behind such words, as he must inevitably succumb to their power. And so, he does: after much confusion, the late lieutenant arrives at the realization that, contrary to all appearances, he is, in fact, not alive. Severed from military service and excluded from the world of the living, Siniukhaev spends the remaining days of his existence wandering the streets of Saint Petersburg, tracing circles around the imperial capital city.

It is from the emperor, Pavel I,¹⁸ that the “special words” acquire their power to affect, indeed, to define reality; and it is from him that the name “Kizhe” comes to life: “Придирчивый глаз Павла Петровича ее извлек и твердым знаком дал ей сомнительную жизнь - описка стала подпоручиком без лица, но с фамилией.”/ “The captious eye of Paul Petrovich extracted it, and with a firm hand invested it with dubious life: the error became a Lieutenant—without a face, but with a name.”¹⁹ Thus, as is Siniukhaev’s death, Kizhe’s life is in every respect a matter of official record. Lieutenant Kizhe, as a legal entity, is subject to the laws of the Russian Empire and, moreover, to the whims of the capricious emperor. When the emperor’s postprandial meditation is disrupted by someone’s shouting the word “guard” (“караул”),²⁰ the enraged ruler

¹⁷ See J. L. Austin, “Lecture I,” in *How to do Things with Words*, ed. J. O. Urmson and Marina Sbisa (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1975), 1-11.

¹⁸ Emperor Pavel I (sometimes rendered in English as Emperor Paul I, as is the case in Ginsburg’s translation) reigned in Russia from 1797-1801.

¹⁹ Tynianov, *Podporuchik Kizhe*, 338/24.

²⁰ In her translation, Ginsburg renders this exclamation as “help.”

decides that the perpetrator must be punished. Unable to determine with whom the fault lies, however, the aide-de-camp to the emperor—a clever man and the only other person save the young clerk aware of the illusory nature of Kizhe’s so-called “life”—decides that the absentee lieutenant will serve as a satisfactory scapegoat. So, Lieutenant Kizhe is sentenced to a public flogging (where his absence seems not to disturb anyone, even the flogger responsible for issuing the punishment) and exile in Siberia. His life’s journey does not end there, however, and, with time, Kizhe manages to marry, have a child, and even achieve the rank of general—all *in absentia*, of course. “Это была действительность”/ This was reality.”²¹ Tynianov’s novella presents a compelling portrait of a life (really, Kizhe’s liminal existence), which is at once three-dimensional, that is, it is a fully formed, even ideal, life, and two-dimensional, void of substance, flat, quite literally, in the sense that it exists only on paper (and via the performative power of bureaucratic platitudes).

ALPHA-ELEMENTS, BETA-ELEMENTS, AND THE ALPHA-FUNCTION

I want to turn now to Bion’s relevance for literary analysis and, in particular, the present analysis of Balzac’s and Tynianov’s works. To do so, I will begin this section with an explanation of what in Bion’s psychoanalytic apparatus he termed the alpha- and beta-elements. According to Bion, these elements are the most basic of *pre-thought* elements.²² They are not themselves thought but, in the case of beta-elements, unprocessed, unintegrable pre-thought material, and, in the case of alpha-elements, the building blocks of thought. Whereas beta-

²¹ Ibid., 338/24

²² Wilfred Bion, *Learning from Experience* (London: William Heinemann Medical Books, 1962), 6-7.

elements remain in the pre-thought stage, alpha-elements may be worked upon by unconscious mechanisms for the production of thought. Despite this notable difference, the source of beta- and alpha-elements is the same: in everyday life, one takes in innumerable sensorial and emotional data that are then processed unconsciously by what Bion called the alpha-function.²³ The successful processing of these sense impressions and emotional experiences results in the production of alpha-elements, which are “suited to storage [in the unconscious] and [are] the requirements of dream thoughts.”²⁴ Dream thoughts, a concept that Bion borrows in his own theoretical works from Freud’s *Traumdeutung*,²⁵ refer to the latent, or “concealed,” thoughts comprising the content of an individual’s dreams.²⁶ The dreams may then be recalled later by the individual in the analytic session for the purposes of interpretation. One can conclude then that alpha-elements and the alpha-function are therefore necessarily linked to the formation of narrative. Without an operative alpha-function, the individual is not able to narrativize their sensorial and emotional experiences; they are unable to tell their story. Though alpha-elements may not be articulated, they give rise to thoughts that are translatable into a narrative form, accounts in the scene of the analytic session.

Frustration of the alpha-function resulting from internal or external forces can render it inoperative, while the sensorial and emotional data remain unchanged. These unmodified data

²³ Ibid., 6.

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Bion employs many of the concepts of psychoanalysts who preceded, in particular, Freud and Melanie Klein. He felt the closest theoretical affinity with the latter. Bion does not stray from the original meanings of the established terms that he chooses to borrow. See Bion, “Introduction,” in *Learning from Experience*, vii-x.

²⁶ Sigmund Freud, “The Psychology of the Dream Processes,” in *The Interpretation of Dreams*, trans. James Strachey (New York: Basic Books, 2010), 586.

Bion called beta-elements. In contradistinction to alpha-elements, beta-elements cannot be incorporated into the unconscious and are hence “not amenable to use in dream thoughts but are suited for use in projective identification. They are influential in producing acting out.”²⁷ The individual has a need for the expulsion of beta-elements which can, as Bion notes, take the form of what is known in psychoanalysis as a *lapsus*, a form of acting out. Sometimes violent, this acting out can be expressed verbally or physically and may appear to have no direct relationship to the unprocessed emotional and sense impressions. Beta-elements are unbearable, and so the individual projects them into another person—e.g., the analyst, a parent, a friend—in the unconscious hope that they will be processed by the other’s alpha-function and re-introjected into him in a new, tolerable form; that is, as alpha-elements. (I say “into,” for in Bionian psychoanalysis, an individual is a vessel, a container, for emotional and sensual experiences.) However, a subsequent failure of this outward projection of beta-elements into another person, either because the recipient of the beta-elements was unable to perform the requisite operation (i.e., the alpha-function) on the intolerable, undigested emotional-sensorial data, or because the resultant elements remain indigestible to the one projecting the beta-elements, results in further estrangement from the unbearable experience. Further, “attacks on the alpha-function, stimulated by hate or envy, destroy the possibility of the patient’s conscious contact with himself or another as live objects [...] This state contrasts with animism in that live objects are endowed with the qualities of death.”²⁸ In other words, attributing to others the qualities of death is a transitive as well as reflexive act; frustration of the alpha-function results in a kind of estrangement from oneself as well as others.

²⁷ Bion, *Learning from Experience*, 6.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 9.

Such an extreme reversal of what Bion refers to as “animism” may be found in Balzac’s novel. In *Le Colonel Chabert*, Countess Ferraud refuses to recognize her first husband as a living man. Rather, she insists on his death; she acts out, endowing him with the very essence of death. Her false claim is supported by a regime just as eager to forget the Colonel and the bygone era to which he belongs. Chabert understands this himself: : “J’ai été enterré sous des morts, mais maintenant je suis enterré sous des vivants, sous des actes, sous des faits, sous la société tout entière, qui veut me faire rentrer sous terre!”/ “I was buried under the dead, now I am buried under the living, under the whole of society, which is trying to push me back down into the earth”²⁹ Particularly striking about this passage are the words “sous des faits” (“under the facts”), which Brown curiously omits from his translation. Just as in *Podporuchik Kizhe*, one’s subjective reality may contradict the “facts,” that is, the narrative of reality defined by the words of those who wield power. In *Le Colonel Chabert*, it is the word of the law that determines the facts, and it is “society,” in Balzac’s tale, that invests these words with this special power. Chabert, as a remnant of the Napoleonic era, has no place in the Paris of the Restoration; he cannot be incorporated into it, and so he must be “[pushed] back down into the earth.” In this way, Chabert himself becomes a sort of beta-element, and society the “individual” who cannot tolerate his existence and thus tries to expel him. The alpha-function, it is therefore possible to claim, is present in both the individual person as well as in collective bodies of people, with the latter acting, and even thinking and feeling, in line with the shared experiences of its composite members.

A similar example is presented in Tynianov’s novella. After reading aloud that Lieutenant Siniukhaev has died of a fever, the commander of the late Siniukhaev’s unit cannot

²⁹ Balzac, *Le Colonel Chabert*, 74/25

help but notice the dead man is standing in his usual spot. Ready to confront Siniukhaev, the commander approaches his subordinate, when suddenly “Он вспомнил, что поручик Синюхаев, как умерший, отчислен от службы, и сдержался, потому что не знал, как говорить с таким человеком.”/ “He remembered that Lieutenant [Siniukhaev] was separated from the service by reason of death, and restrained himself because he did not know how to speak to such a man.”³⁰ As does the Countess with Chabert, the commander does not recognize Siniukhaev as living man. It is worth noting, however, that whereas Countess Ferraud’s refusal to acknowledge Chabert is, in fact, alive is motivated by her desire to maintain hers and her family’s social standing, the commander’s failure to recognize Siniukhaev as a “living object,” derives from his unquestioning faith in the “special words” of the imperial decree—the words trump the reality of what he sees before him. It is not up to him to determine the facts.

And neither is it up to Siniukhaev: “Ощущая руку, лежащую на эфесе, некоторое стеснение от туго стянутых портупейных ремней, тяжесть сегодня утром насаленной косы, он как будто и был жив, но вместе с тем он знал, что здесь что-то неладно, что-то непоправимо испорчено.”/ “From the sensation in his hand, which rested on the hilt of his sword, from the slight constriction caused by the tight belt, the heaviness of his pigtail, which had been freshly greased that very morning, it might be inferred that he was alive, but at the same time he knew that something was amiss, something was irreparably spoiled.”³¹ Again, subjective, sensual reality (here, touch rather than vision) is subordinated to some narrative of reality determined by a greater social power. The responsibility to determine what is real is deferred to this higher social power, but this bears the risk that one might be expelled from social

³⁰ Ibid., 334/18.

³¹ Ibid., 334/17

life should one's interpretation of reality not coincide with or contradict that of the higher social power. Indeed, Siniukhaev is not only "separated from the service," but he is also severed from life altogether. And this is a fact that he, like his commander, is totally ready to accept: "Он ни разу не подумал, что в приказе ошибка. Напротив, ему показалось, что он по ошибке, по оплошности жив. По небрежности он чего-то не заметил и не сообщил никому."/ "The possibility of an error in the order never entered his mind. On the contrary, it seemed to him that he was alive through some oversight, some blunder on his own part."³² It is Siniukhaev that is mistaken. That he may still be breathing is merely an unattended to oversight, the consequence of which is that he is neither dead nor alive, but somewhere in between, in the state of non-death.

It is because of their relationship to society and their subsequent transformation into its beta-elements that Chabert and Siniukhaev come to occupy the space of non-death. This reversal of animism, or the endowing of living objects with the characteristics of death, I suggest, engenders the liminal spaces of non-life and non-death. Yet, to fully account for what is at stake in this textual dynamic that sends us into the domain of the collective or the political, we will need to enlist from Bion a further conceptual frame.

THE CONTAINER AND THE CONTAINED

As noted above, the potential to project emotions and experiences into an other suggests the presence of a vessel—a container, as Bion came to call it—something to hold in that which must be contained. This is the core of Bion's container-contained paradigm. A complete

³² Ibid.

reformulation of Freud's structural model of the super-ego, ego, and the id,³³ the container and the contained model may represent any number of relationships. The terms container and the contained are, in other words, multivalent but fundamentally metonymic: a container may be a group of people and the contained one of its individual members; a word and one or more of its meanings; an individual and his conception of his own identity. The relationship between these entities may be further characterized in one of three ways: commensal, symbiotic, or parasitic.³⁴ Put plainly, the relationship may be neutral, positive, or negative. A commensal, or neutral relationship entails that the two entities coexist without disturbing each other. There is no growth, but neither is there any damage done to either the container or the contained. A symbiotic relationship occurs when there is positive confrontation between the container and the contained. The container and the contained develop in tandem and, as a result, there is growth, either on the part of the container, the contained, or both.

Kizhe's bizarre existence is one example of such a relationship. If one takes for the container Imperial Russia, its laws and its customs, then Kizhe, as one of its subjects may be construed as the contained. It is through his relationship with this greater structure that Kizhe is able to advance in life, to ““выполнить все, что можно было в жизни, и наполненный всем ЭТИМ: молодостью и любовным приключением, наказанием и ссылкой, годами службы, семьей, внезапной милостью императора и завистью придворных” (“[fulfill] all that can be fulfilled in life, having experienced youth and amorous adventure, punishment and exile, years of

³³ Joan and Neville Symmington, “Theoretical Disjunction,” in *The Clinical Thinking of Wilfred Bion* (New York: Routledge, 1996), 9.

³⁴ Bion, “Container and Contained,” in *Attention and Interpretation: A Scientific Approach to Psycho-Analysis* (New York: Basic Books, 1970), 72-82.

service, family, the sudden favor of the Emperor, and the envy of the courtiers.”).³⁵ Kizhe’s mobility is made possible exclusively due to the words of the imperial decrees. Each milestone in his life results directly from these powerful words: his initial coming into being, his sentencing to exile, his promotion to the rank of general, his marriage, and finally his death. Indeed, it is only through his relationship with the state structures of Imperial Russian that his life is possible.

It is worth stating, moreover, that Kizhe’s existence may be interpreted as a failing or, perhaps, an inversion of the alpha-function. I have noted above that communal bodies such as the governments of Restoration Paris or Imperial Russia, are capable of performing the alpha-function. Frustration of the alpha-function of a communal body is therefore also possible. Yet, rather than a living object being endowed with the qualities of death, in Tynianov’s novella, the inverse is true: Kizhe, a non-living object—a fiction generated by a spelling error—has been invested with the qualities of life by Imperial Russia and Emperor Pavel I, who as its patriarch is the source of the words’ “dubious” power. In other words, the material for a the narrativization of a life has been generated where it ought not to have ben. Indeed, Tynianov recognizes and highlights the ability of language to shape and even regulate reality. It is, however, not just any use of language that is capable of such a feat; in Tynianov’s novella, language is composed of tiers:

“Согласно императорского приложения за N 940 о неупотреблении слов в донесениях, следовало не употреблять слова "обозреть", но осмотреть, не употреблять слова "выполнить", но исполнить, не писать "стража", но караул, и ни в коем случае не писать "отряд", но деташемент.”

“According to the Emperor’s Order No. 940, prohibiting the use of certain words in reports, the word *inspect* was to be used in place of ‘review,’ *fulfill* instead of ‘execute,’

³⁵ Tynianov, “Podporuchik Kizhe,” 356/51.

and *guard* instead of ‘watch.’ Furthermore, ‘detail’ was not to be used under any circumstances; instead, the word to be used was *detachment*.”³⁶

Words are thus distinguished by their ability to produce action, to affect reality. Though ostensibly synonyms, “выполнить” (“to execute”) and “исполнить” (to fulfill), only structurally differentiated by the prefixes “вы-” and “ис-”, are of two separate orders of words; it is the latter that carries illocutionary force.

Verbs are not the only types of words to receive such treatment; those words describing individual persons as well as groups of people are likewise separated into two tiers: “Для гражданских установлений было еще прибавлено, чтобы не писать "степень", но класс, и не "общество", но собрание, а вместо "гражданин" употреблять: купец или мещанин.”/ In the case of civil statutes, it was further stated that the word *class* should be used instead of ‘grade,’ *assembly* instead of ‘society’ and *merchant* or *burgher* instead of ‘citizen.’”³⁷ As the container, the Imperial Russian state, through its use of language, provides a neat structure according to which its composite members conduct their lives. This linguistic ordering of social and political life on the part of the state determines not only what constitutes life but is furthermore able to engender life, or rather something resembling life and yet void of its essence—non-life. As illustrated by the stable progression of Kizhe’s life in relationship to the Imperial Russian state, non-life may, paradoxically, facilitate a symbiotic container-contained relationship.

Such a reliance on language to govern all aspects of social and political life is, according to Bion, illustrative of the nature of groups. In describing a special type of container-contained

³⁶ Ibid., 329/10

³⁷ Ibid.

relationship, which he called “the mystic and the group,” where the term “mystic” denotes any exceptional individual and the term “group,” refers, quite naturally, to the collection of people to which the mystic belongs, Bion notes that “[t]he group needs to preserve its coherence and identity” in the face of individuals whose impact on it might be perceived as detrimental; “efforts to do so are manifested in conventions, laws, culture, and language.”³⁸ This need “to preserve [the group’s] coherence and identity” may give rise to negative confrontation between the container and the contained; that is, it may lead to the third type of container-contained relationship that Bion identified: the parasitic kind. In this instance, the group, the mystic (the container and the contained, more generally speaking), or both are ultimately destroyed, literally or figuratively. Whereas to be destroyed literally is to say that one or both of the entities die, figurative destruction may entail equally radical outcomes: the dissolution of the group, the expulsion of the mystic from the group, or severe (perhaps violent and forceful) modifications to the identity of the mystic such that he can be sublimated, in an acceptable form, into the group, the “coherence and identity” of which may thereby preserved.

One may understand Chabert’s struggle to return to social and political life in Restoration Paris in precisely these terms. Like Kizhe (and Siniukhaev), Chabert belongs to a greater societal structure. And yet, his container is one that wishes to forget him, one which perceives him as a threat to its coherence—it would prefer to have him “rester mort”/ “stay dead.”³⁹ Like a ghost haunting the house he once called home, the Colonel must be excised from this new Paris that wants nothing more than to forget him and the era that he represents, namely, the Revolutionary and Imperial period (1793-185). And so, he is. Yet, to forget the past does not mean that it ceases

³⁸ Bion, “The Mystic and the Group,” in *Attention and Interpretation*, 63.

³⁹ Balzac, *Le Colonel Chabert*, 149/72.

to exist. Adopting the name Hyacinthe—in fact his given name—and banished to the periphery of society, Balzac’s protagonist lives out his remaining days in a hospice for the elderly. Though Hyacinthe still breathes, by the story’s end “le Colonel Chabert” is indeed dead. Restoration Paris has forcibly altered the identity of the being that once bore that name and rank such that it has become something else entirely—Hyacinthe, “not a man” but, in his own words, “a number,” “a room,” something neither alive nor dead.

ENTRE LA VIE ET MOI : ON LIMINALITY

Having outlined Bion’s concepts of the alpha- and beta-elements, the alpha-function, as well as the container and contained model and having shown that that these same concepts make it possible to grasp and unpack the implications of the liminal textual spaces of non-life and non-death in Balzac’s and Tynianov’s works, I wish now to return to these two states of being with which I opened this essay. To begin, in *Le Colonel Chabert*, non-death is inscribed in the society of Restoration Paris. It is manifested in physical form as the structures which Chabert is forced to occupy. It must be noted, however, that Chabert begins his journey back to Paris “sous des morts;” that is in a mass grave, a place of death *par excellence*. “[...] j’ai pu parvenir à percer la couverture de chair qui mettait une barrière entre la vie et moi”/ “[...] I managed to break through the blanket of flesh that had formed a barrier between myself and life.”⁴⁰ In this scene, an unambiguous, if uncanny, allusion to birth, Chabert attempts to break through a barrier of the dead and to return to life. This moment of rebirth will be undermined, however, by his already documented death. Instead, I suggest this is the moment at which Chabert truly enters the state of

⁴⁰ Balzac, *Le Colonel Chabert*, 69/21.

non-death. And from this liminal space, there is no return to the ostensible certainty offered by either life or death.

Even Chabert's seeming revitalization after meeting Derville (which ultimately turns out to be yet another false return to life) occurs in a place of non-death:

“En regardant de tous les côtés, l'avoué [Derville] finit par trouver, dans la partie de cette rue qui avoisine le boulevard, entre deux murs bâtis avec ossements et de la terre, deux mauvais pilastres en moellons, que le passage des voitures avait ébréchés, malgré deux morceaux de bois places en forme de bornes”

“Looking around on every side, the solicitor [Derville] finally found, in the part of the street next to the boulevard, between two walls built out of a mixture of bones and earth, two crumbling pillars made of rubble, which passing vehicles had knocked and dented, despite two pieces of wood set there as posts.”⁴¹

These crumbling pillars mark the home of Vergniaud, Chabert's temporary host while Derville works to procure the documentation that will prove Chabert's identity. The building itself is something between a ruin and a home. Indeed, it would appear that unfamiliarizing the familiar, rendering unrecognizable that which one takes for granted, is one of the tasks that Balzac sets himself in composing this novel: making a home is the site of ruin; a life is the epitome of death. So, Vergniaud's abode is not recognized as home, that is a place of domestic life, by others wealthy enough to navigate the streets of Paris in a vehicle, and so it is damaged, knocked and dented.

In this slum, Chabert seems to regain his former luster and has become almost a handsome man. The Colonel, however, carries himself as a man of the Napoleonic regime, an era that the Paris of the Restoration strives—indeed is even *legally* bound, according to the Charter of 1814—to forget. Chabert is a relic of the past, of a time better laid to rest, attempting to

⁴¹ Ibid., 91-92/35

occupy the present. Untethered as he is to time, there is no place for this man who was once a favorite of the Emperor; and so he can exist only in this peculiar place, the mouldering home of Vergniaud. That the walls in which Chabert's reversion to a Napoleonic colonel occurs are composed of bones and earth further underscores the liminal nature of this container; it is a home built of the dead. Indeed, the composition of Vergniaud's home recalls the mass grave, yet another container into which Chabert was thrown following the determination of his death. This container, the site of Vergniaud's domestic life, is, for Chabert, another grave, yet another place of non-death.

There is still one more transformation that Chabert undergoes, this time at the hands of so-called "justice": "[...] mais, dès qu'un homme tombe entre les mains de la justice, il n'est plus qu'un être moral, une question de Droit ou de Fait, comme aux yeux des statisticiens il deviant un chiffre"/ "[...] but as soon as a man falls into the hands of justice, he becomes nothing more than a moral being, a question *de jure* or *de facto*, just as to the eyes of statisticians he becomes a mere figure."⁴² In Balzac's novel, justice, the law, and society comprise an all-powerful political trinity. They are utterly distinct and yet inseparable, and together, they determine the "facts," to which Chabert's subjective reality is subordinated. His existence becomes "une question de Droit et de Fait"/ "a question *de jure* or *de facto*," to which his documented death serves as answer. A glaring discrepancy thus emerges between the "real" and "reality," with the latter of which determined by the reigning collective. That Chabert still breathes, despite being a dead man, cannot be reconciled by "la justice," as is suggested by the narrator's use of "chiffre." Translated by Brown as a "mere figure" and deriving from the Arabic *sifre*, the sign of zero, the void, "chiffre" may also be translated as "cipher," something unknown, a puzzle to be figured out.

⁴² Ibid., 157/77.

Indeed, Chabert's being, his non-death, is a cipher, but not one that can be solved within the prescribed social and political structures of Restoration Paris; so, society attempts to return him to the earth, to the grave out of which he crawled. Instead, however, his journey ends on the periphery of Paris, in a hospice for the elderly. Here, resembling something at once a child and an old man, Colonel Chabert and the life that made that name famous finally die. Here, Hyacinthe unravels irrevocably. The journey of Balzac's protagonists thus ends where it began: in a liminal space, a site of non-death.

In contrast to Balzac's novel, Tynianov's novella is devoid of physical manifestations of liminal space; there are no mass graves nor are there crumbling houses to contain Siniukhaev and certainly not to contain Kizhe. Yet here, too, a trinity occurs; not one composed of justice, the law, and society, but rather one consisting of Emperor Pavel I, the "special words," and society. Pavel I determines which words carry power; these words, thus invested with illocutionary force, determine reality, and society, for its part, upholds the narrative that the "special words" describe. It is notable, however, that the reader of *Le Colonel Chabert* witnesses a peculiar diffusion of the responsibility for the composing of "reality;" the onus falls not on one individual, a sovereign, for example, but instead dissolves among everyone in society. The origin of the power of the law is thereby dislocated, deriving from no single person but from the *polis*, as it were. On the other hand, as has been noted above, the narrator of *Podporuchik Kizhe* unambiguously identifies the source of the words' power as Emperor Pavel I. Curiously, the narrator undermines this apparently authoritative assertion, stating that the special words have "a life and power of their own." At first glance, this statement may seem to contradict the narrator's claim that, in fact, it is Emperor Pavel I who instills these words with life and power. This disjunction, however, underscores the liminal nature of language: it is both outside and inside

society, belonging to it and existing independently of it. In this way, the word in Tynianov's text becomes the instrument for the expression of liminality.

Indeed, in Tynianov's novella, the meanings of the words life and death, ordinarily understood to be fixed and unchanging, are destabilized; their certitude called into question by the liminal existences of Siniukhaev and Kizhe, which begin and end on the page:

“Имя его значится в "С.-Петербургском Некрополе", и некоторые историки вскользь упоминают о нем.

В "Петербургском Некрополе" не встречается имени умершего поручика Синюхаева.”

Он исчез без остатка, рассыпался в прах, в мякину, словно никогда не существовал.”

“His name was duly entered in the ‘St. Petersburg Necropolis’ and later mentioned in passing by several historians.

The ‘St. Petersburg Necropolis’ contains no mention of the dead Lieutenant Siniukhaev.

He vanished without a trace, scattered to dust, to chaff, as though he had never existed.”⁴³

Evidently, Kizhe's good fortune continues even after his death. Entered in the “St. Petersburg Necropolis,” he is granted some sort of afterlife, albeit only on the page. Kizhe's existence ends where it began, on the page, the error having become a man worthy of later mention by several historians, who serve, as it were, as keepers of the official record of “reality.”

Siniukhaev, however, is less fortunate, “vanishing without a trace [...], as though he had never existed.” This remark, however, is contradicted: in the very same sentence, corded off by commas, the reader encounters traces of Siniukhaev: “dust” and “chaff.” The “dust” and “chaff” are undeniable, if spectral, indices that there once existed a person named “Siniukhaev”. The function of this absurd statement is twofold: on the one hand, it is a recognition, on the part of

⁴³ Ibid., 356/51.

the narrator, of the late lieutenant's life—that life before the scribal error that transformed him into a (non)dead man; on the other, it solidifies Siniukhaev's status as a liminal being, as something that both is and is not.

CONCLUSION

Despite their differing approaches to the question posed at the start of this essay—namely, “what constitutes a human life?”—, Balzac and Tynianov arrive at similarly distressing conclusions; that is, what constitutes human life is not the individual's consciousness; it is not enough that one feels, thinks, and *is* on one's own. Rather, human collectives in the form of social and political structures determine what counts as a “life.” It is only from this recognition of the individual on the part of the communal human body that life is granted significance. Balzac's and Tynianov's texts illustrate the dangers of attempting a rigorous definition of life and death; efforts to do so, are intrinsically exclusionary and, at their worst, even violent. For to define a term is to sever from it all that it is not. This reification of life and death is flawed, for in Bionian terms, it may lead, as it does in Balzac's and Tynianov's texts, to the misrecognition of something as life; or, still worse, to the exclusion from life of something that is living. This exclusion of the living from life, this endowing of the live object with the qualities of death, as Bion described in his explanation of the frustration of the alpha-function, gives rise to what I have termed non-life and non-death—negative conceptual spaces that recall but are not life and death, respectively. And it is in these negative spaces, these gaps in between, that the liminal nature of “human” being reveals itself.

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