



## Introduction

*A dedication to Niccolo and a brief description of his lost work.*

He wrote of fathers later on  
From all the extant works we have  
Uncovered, though so much is gone,  
So much he deemed unfit to save,  
His gift he'd later dub a curse;  
The more the muse required, the worse  
The wounds of circumstance would bleed  
Upon the page, the words he'd read  
Which first he wrote to trap the light  
Of truth's chiaroscuro shades  
Revealed in those with fortunes made  
In state affairs, where wit trumps might  
And virtue falls to baser drives.  
He truly understood their lives.

*When my father Pyotr Kluger (the name is from Galicia originally) finally decided it might be wise to leave St. Petersburg in 1917, I was old enough to sense that all the trunks weren't being packed for the harsh sun I remembered of Odessa. This would be different. On a summer night out on the terrace of the old family home I watched my mother Sofia sew earrings and two necklaces into the hem of her overcoat – a*

*memory that now I still cannot quite believe, but yes, people did such things. Memories like these serve to me remind me that my God, I'm old.*

*My father had spent the first thirty years of his life in St. Petersburg moving up through the ranks of the Czar's military academy, eventually becoming a colonel in the Corps of Engineers. He fenced well, he rode well, while all the time cultivating the persona of some young bohemian drawn to painting and music and theatre because of his weakness for all the bad influences that corrupted the best officers. Even though he couldn't advance any further, he simply would not believe Nicholas and his inner circle would hold him back because he was Jewish. Such was his loyalty that when Nicholas abdicated, my father figured his time was up as well.*

*He took the family to London and he became Peter Kluge. He dropped the 'r' from our name because he presumed it sounded too Jewish and Kluge would simply read as German. He told anyone who asked that he wanted Olivia and me to be raised in the land of Shakespeare, not in the lands of Goethe or Voltaire (though the fact that Uncle Theodore had seen his jewelry shop in London flourish for over thirty years, ensuring we would settle in reasonably well, was closer to the truth) My father imagined that, for the last half of his life, he would gradually work his way up the rungs of London society to become the kind of Russian Jew the working class would despise.*

*That was quite an aspiration for the time, plausible as long as one doesn't have to worry about employment or dealing with the realities of always being seen as an upstart and outsider. I have become reconciled with my father's struggle for respect as a lackey for Connie – or I suppose I should get used to saying "Sir Constant" – Vidler and the auction house's various interests abroad. I realize now he was actually quite fortunate that Vidler had seen something in him and kept him working long after he had proven his limited usefulness – just as I was kept on well past my better days.*

And this was more a threat than cause  
To celebrate, when one is bound  
To serve, in spirit of the laws,  
Yet at the pleasure of those found  
To live above such harsh dictates,  
They soon enough found cause to hate  
The beauty of the telling phrase  
The way that character betrays  
All veiled designs and subtle tricks  
Within the plays he wrote to please,  
Where laughter is but brief release,  
The thorns of faith retain their pricks,  
His vision proved subversive, stark,  
A wisp of flame to pierce the dark.

And so, just like an architect  
Who'd rather sketch the perfect line  
That arcs and will not intersect  
To serve conventional design,  
He penned a treatise which he called  
"On Revenge," but then, unsold,  
Unread, he kept it to himself,  
As hidden as ill-gotten wealth.  
In it he writes of fathers who  
Enlist their sons as soldiers for  
The cause of settling a score,  
Injustices they'd felt accrue  
And shouldered stoically for years.  
The ledger is the boy's to clear.

And yet, what makes a son be deemed  
As good or bad is less about  
How virtue served the world or seemed  
To banish any cause to doubt  
The motives of a paragon.  
The cruel truth was that anyone

Could have their goodness come to naught  
 And, with a clarity of thought  
 That purges all his sceptic's pride  
 (the work is spiked with irony)  
 The author seems to smile when he  
 Declares that there's a slight divide  
 Between the towering heights of fame  
 And fortune's barren plains of shame.

Yes, shame is really what this work,  
 For all its artfulness, concerns,  
 The way the prince within the clerk  
 Must not reveal the way it burns  
 Yet try to let it stoke the fire  
 Which fuels the heart that never tires  
 Instead of blackening the soul  
 And hardening him within a role  
 Of introspective, humourless  
 Aggrievement with the fortunate  
 Who seem so poised, legitimate  
 In their much coveted success,  
 For if our lives confound each plot  
 We shape, revenge is best unthought.

It's difficult to read it now  
 And not detect within the prose  
 His ancient influences, how  
 The aphorisms sound so close  
 To Seneca's – that gimlet-eyed  
 Asperity that will not side  
 With unexamined sentiment,  
 Trusts what is done, not simply meant.  
 With acts heroic or debased  
 Are pentimenti that suggest  
 The self's a kind of palimpsest  
 Defined as much by what's erased

As what is proudly on display –  
 We never know what we portray.

This truth, so stark upon the page  
 Is really better understood  
 Within his writing for the stage.  
 Creating characters, he could  
 Effectively depict that strange  
 And subtle alchemy of change  
 That works upon each living soul,  
 The turns in plot that take their toll,  
 Reducing all the elegant  
 Designs of self-belief to just  
 An edifice that turns to dust  
 And rendering irrelevant  
 The rage against that tragic weight  
 Of time's imprint, the force of fate.

*As a young man working for Vidler's in Rome, I, out of necessity, had set myself the task of analyzing the pigments of paintings assigned to the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. It was then I met Antony Farrell, who was working in the Vatican library as an archivist (why I never seemed to question our chance meeting speaks of my naivete, the perpetual state of innocence I kept myself in). Antony encouraged me to look into the study of alchemy, because so much of the creation of pigments came from these hermetic texts. I realize this is now a firmly established basis for research but at the time such an approach was at best unorthodox; the damning adjective my father put down in a letter to me, from Istanbul, where he was then based, was "adventurous."*

*Yet I wagered that Connie Vidler would be open to my arcane ideas. High stakes indeed, putting both my own career and probably my father's on the line for the task at hand (determining what was real and what was fake in a whole estate's worth of artwork in Naples – one of my first big jobs), yet there was something in the fakery of alchemy, in its melodramatic occultism, that appealed to Connie Vidler. He came, over*

*the years, to feel that I had saved his name and business at a crucial time after the war and that this bold approach spoke well of my instincts.*

*Ocular is steeped in all of those esoteric alchemical references, I know. I was such an earnest student, and I felt I had to prove I understood its first principles. My ideal reader at the time was probably Antony Farrell. He has been practically the only reader, aside from my sister, until now.*