

Title: Defying Empire, Defying Fate: Narration as a Mode of Resistance
in Ryleev's "Voinarovsky"

Author: Polina Rikoun, Ohio State University

This paper examines the conflict between two opposing views of history in Kondratii Ryleev's "Voinarovsky" (1823-24), a long narrative poem where the title hero recounts his participation in the failed rebellion of the Ukrainian hetman Mazepa against Russian imperial rule. Contemplating his defeat, Mazepa expresses two opposing views of history: one is fatalistic, another allows for human agency. At first, the defeated hetman laments that his failure was fated, and that he must accept it as final and irreversible. However, his resignation quickly turns to defiance: "I will not be a slave of fate," he declares, "Why should I not dare to battle fate/ If I dared to battle Peter?" (217; lns. 78-89; translation mine). Mazepa's words imply that fate and empire are allied against him, and that Peter the Great personifies fate; nevertheless, he resolves to resist. Thus the poem raises a question: Even if empire was fated to win, must one accept its victory, or do people have the power to reverse it?

At first, the poem adopts the latter view, exploring what it means to defy fate and what modes of resistance one can devise in such an unequal struggle. For the poem's protagonist, Mazepa's nephew and ally Voinarovsky, defying fate means overcoming the constraints of exile. Isolated in remote Siberian forests, Voinarovsky can no longer take any meaningful action on Ukraine's behalf, and suffers acutely from forced inactivity. But having met Müller, a German expatriate turned Russian historian and ethnographer, Voinarovsky finds a way to serve Ukraine once again. He manages to convert Müller into a Ukrainian patriot by telling him how he joined Mazepa's rebellion. Voinarovsky's narrative has such a powerful impact because it triggers an emotional "chain reaction" where the narrator's and listener's mutual sympathy generates love for Ukraine, and patriotic fervor in turn reinforces personal affection. Grounded in the ethics of sentimental friendship and civic duty, characteristic of Decembrist discourse, narration becomes a powerful mode of resisting the victorious empire and "autocratic fate" (220; ln. 163; 227; ln. 414).

But in the poem's ending, Ryleev suddenly undercuts the subversive force of his narrative, negating the ethos of sentimental friendship and civic duty and yielding the last word to fate. Examining how Ryleev transforms narration into a mode of resistance, this paper also attempts to explain why he retreats from his defiant position and ends the poem on a fatalistic note.

Ryleev, K. F. *Polnoe sobranie sochinenii*. Ed. A. G. Tseitlin. Leningrad: Academia, 1934.