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The return of 'our' Nabokov

More and more of Vladimir Nabokov's works are being published officially in the Soviet Union — but not without resistance from the old guard.

'No, never will anyone in the great spaces make mention of even one page of your work, the new savage will dwell in his savage ignorance, friends of steppes won't forget their steppes for your sake.'
From Vladimir Nabokov's 1942 poem *Slava* ('Fame')

'The great spaces' are, of course, Nabokov's native Russia which he fled in 1919. The gloomy prediction of his literary future in his native land was, however, not entirely correct. His name was mentioned (almost always scathingly) during the twenties and again, with increasing frequency, from the late fifties to the present. In recent years there were persistent rumours about the possibility of publishing some of Nabokov's early work and now, it seems, the rumours are verified.

The first public crack in the ice came in a July interview in *Literaturnaia Gazeta*, the official organ of the Soviet Union of Writers. The interview with Mikhail Alekseev, the editor of the literary journal *Moskva*, was devoted to the recent Eighth Congress of the Writers Union and discusses the 'spirit of renewal and reconstruction' that prevailed. In response to a question about what works that might formerly have faced difficulties were now in the 'editorial portfolio', the editor enumerated works by several Soviet writers and added, 'I think the time has come to return V. Nabokov to our reader; we shall try to publish his novel *The Defence*'. This 1930 novel about a mad chess master is Nabokov's first major work. Other hints of Nabokov's rehabilitation came from a post-Congress interview with leading Soviet poet Andrey Voznesensky, one of the contributors to the suppressed 1979 *Metropol Literary Almanac*: 'Nabokov is going to be published... It will be a

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revolution, because he is a writer with great influence on the younger generation of our writers. Even though he hasn't been published here, many people have read him. He doesn't write about politics directly, and that makes things easier'.

Chess was used as a stalking horse for the re-entry of Nabokov into 'official' literature. The honour of the first Soviet publication of Nabokov fell to the magazine *64: Shakhmatnoe obozrenie* ('The Chess Review'), which in its August 1986 issue included an excerpt from the Russian version of Nabokov's autobiography *Drugie berega* ('Other Shores'). The passage deals with Nabokov's career as a composer of chess problems — an important aspect of his life and as little known to most of his readers as his work in entomology. Nabokov speaks of the delights and dilemmas of the chess problem composer. He ends with a description of the creation of his most famous problem, elaborated shortly before his last-minute departure from war-torn France to the United States. Although the chess account is real, it is also metaphoric, and suggests a tacit parallel between chess problem composition and literary creation. The Soviet reprinting takes only one liberty with Nabokov's Russian text; a two-line omission in which Nabokov acidly comments on the sad state of Soviet chess problem composition.

More interesting than the excerpt itself (entitled 'A Night of Labour and Felicity') is the accompanying mini-essay by the well-known Soviet writer Fazil Iskander, one of the editors of the ill-fated *Metropol Literary Almanac*. Iskander tells of his 'patriotic pride' at hearing an American professor describe Nabokov as 'the best contemporary stylist in English-language prose'. Iskander reacts: 'All the same, he is ours. The time has come, it seems, to print him in his homeland.' He brushes aside Nabokov's anti-Soviet sallies and claims (somewhat dubiously) that 'The yearning for Russia, which bursts through in his novels, is probably the most pervasive lyrical stream in his work.'

The policy of introducing Nabokov by way of smaller circulation, specialised journals was further reflected in a second publication, *Knizhnoe Obozrenie* ('The Book Review'), the organ of the Soviet publishing

industry (24 October, 1986). Five poems from the late twenties, contrasting nostalgia for the homeland and the rootlessness of émigré life, appeared with a preface by Jakov Markovich. Markovich observes that Nabokov is primarily a masterful prose writer whose works show a Western orientation that is sometimes alien to the traditions of Russian literature. Nabokov's poetry, on the other hand, is 'deeply realistic' and firmly rooted in the Pushkin tradition.

Markovich's introduction drew the fire of Feliks Kuznetsov, the head of the Moscow Writers Organisation (*Literaturnaia Rossiya* 14 November, 1986, pp 6-7), who complained of a recent tendency to push the traditional 'greats' of Soviet literature into the background while foregrounding such 'equally talented' names as Pasternak, Akhmatova, Tsvetaeva, Mandelstam, and Bulgakov: 'And now this has been compounded by the latest vogue for... Nabokov.' (*Radio Liberty Research Bulletin* No 49 [3410] 3 December, 1986.) Kuznetsov complains that Markovich failed to mention 'that Nabokov went away to a foreign land and did not accept the revolution, Lenin, or Soviet power'. He concludes, rhetorically, 'Why are we creating another myth for ourselves — the myth of the "harmless" Nabokov?' Significantly, Kuznetsov was attacking a minor figure writing in a specialised publication while there was a much larger target available.

In October, the same month that Markovich's Nabokov selection appeared, Voznesensky, who chairs a new committee to re-examine Pasternak's work, contributed a much longer and more positive introduction to twenty-eight Nabokov poems in the traditionally conservative literary journal *October*, which boasts a circulation of 500,000. Printed under the bland heading 'From Our Literary Heritage', the poems are prefaced by Voznesensky's stunning essay, 'The Geometrid or Nabokov's Nymph.' Voznesensky explains why *October* is publishing Nabokov's poetry when other journals are issuing his much better known fiction. Nabokov's prose is that of a geometrician; calculated, contrived. His poetry is, on the other hand, 'not subject to control, higher, (a land) where spirit rather

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than matter cries out, no longer concealed under the author's coronal "device". Voznesensky's only negative comments refer to Nabokov's character, not his politics. In particular, he laments a late poem, 'Pasternak', in which Nabokov in effect accuses Pasternak of flashy triviality. Voznesensky points out Pasternak was the stronger poet, whose intonations linger in Nabokov's own verse. The preface ends with an *envoi*: 'Let Nabokov's nymph and geometrid fly to the light of the evening lamps of our readers.'

Voznesensky's selection, together with those in the *Book Review* presentation, make up more than a tenth of the poems Nabokov wished preserved. Ranging from 1917 to the 1970s, the poems are given in full with the signal exception of the long 1947 'To Prince S. M. Kachurin', which narrates the poet's imaginary incognito tourist visit to Soviet Russia. The omitted stanzas make reference to the speaker's leech-like interpreter, and the poet abandons the idea of his journey, realising his memories could only be sullied by reality. Most notable about Voznesensky's preface and selection is the complete absence of any political element and the variety of his selection. Samples from all Nabokov's stages of poetic development are represented — apart, of course, from the early overtly anti-Soviet one.

To date, the centrepiece of the Nabokov revival is the appearance of *The Defence* in the December 1986 issue of *Moskvá*, prophesied by editor Alekseev in his July interview. Beautifully constructed, relatively traditional in style, stronger than most in 'human interest', and almost devoid of anti-Soviet intonations, *The Defence* is a fine choice for Nabokov's novelistic debut. A long essay by Oleg Mikhailov, ominously entitled 'The Destruction of a Talent: On Vladimir Nabokov' prefaces the novel. An authority on Bunin, Mikhailov is the 'official' Soviet Nabokov specialist. Most important, he is the author of a long essay, 'Fidelity', in the journal *Nash Sovremennik* (No 1, 1974), in which he cites Nabokov as the prototypical exemplar of Modernism in Russian literature. Mikhailov gives a surprisingly full account of *Invitation to a Beheading*, quoting extensively from Nabokov's most political novel. The point of his argument, to be sure, is that the novel embodies the central elitist conceit of modernism — the self-proclaimed, self-pitying genius who is victimised by the brutish masses. Mikhailov also echoes a view of Nabokov that has many Western adherents: the virtuoso technician uninterested in meaning and morality.

Mikhailov's prefatory essay to *The Defence* is equally tendentious. Nabokov is first seen as a stake in the battle between the Western view of Russian literature and the

Soviet one. Mikhailov offers a rather full survey of Nabokov's life focusing on the nostalgia for Russia in his early verse and in the novels, especially *The Gift*. Nabokov's growing estrangement from Russian realism and his decline into international modernism is shown indirectly by citations from his critical studies, especially on Gogol, in which he asserts that Gogol's works, 'like all great literary achievements, are a phenomenon of language, not ideas.' Mikhailov sees this as the tragic essence of Nabokov. Nabokov's art is a *nature morte*, preoccupied with surfaces and trivialities: 'His method is mystification, game, false hallucinations, "coloured hearing", parodies, ... crossword puzzles'. Art for Nabokov is 'the solution of a literary theorem'.

The Defence, although not without inklings of these later imperfections, is nonetheless 'warmer, more human' than the later works, perhaps because it is partly based on the life of a real man, the chess player Alekhin. In spite of its virtues, *The Defence* is typical of the later Nabokov in one respect. Luzhin is the extraordinary gifted loner who is alienated from his fellow men. The figure of the awkward boy who didn't fit in (whom Mikhailov sees as the precursor of the alienated genius figure) is traced through Cincinnatus of *Invitation to a Beheading* and Fyodor Godunov-Cherdyntsev of *The Gift* to *Lolita's* Humbert Humbert, who closes the circle. Mikhailov indirectly (and absurdly) implies a highly original interpretation of the Nabokovian hero and Nabokov's own creative psychology: disastrous overcompensation for childhood social rejection. Luzhin's compensatory genius and the fate it brings him to remains tragic, while Humbert Humbert's fate, on the other hand, represents 'the destruction of a talent'.

Oleg Mikhailov's farrago can perhaps be taken as the cautious official establishment position at the moment. There was a good Nabokov up to the early thirties who longed for his homeland and wrote semi-traditional novels. He became less good in the thirties as an elitist modernism alienated him from his audience. The English novels make a complete break with Russian literature, with *Lolita* marking the ruin of his once great talent. Mikhailov's essay is a very curious document, especially as the introduction to a groundbreaking development in Russian literary history. It is, however, not the only opinion, and contrasts sharply with Voznesensky's very positive introduction to Nabokov's poetry. Both essays obviously have some sort of official endorsement, and both appear in 'mainstream' journals.

Still other Nabokov publications are reportedly in the offing. Voznesensky mentions that Nabokov's critical essay

'Gogol' is to appear in *Novy Mir*, a journal which traditionally stands in the vanguard of Soviet literary liberalism. In a sense, Nabokov's critical writings on Gogol are more sensitive than his novels, for they demolish the sacrosanct Russian view of Gogol as a realist. There has also been mention of publication of *Mashenka*, Nabokov's first novel, as well as a one-volume 'selected works'. It is safe to predict, however, that Nabokov's English novels (with perhaps one or two exceptions) will remain beyond the pale.

The year of Nabokov's death, 1977, was, oddly enough, the banner year in which his Russian works were first publicly displayed in the Soviet Union. Ardis Press, the American publisher of Nabokov's Russian books, was permitted to display their Nabokov titles at the first International Book Fair in Moscow, where its entire stock was given out. But Ardis representatives were refused visas for the 1979 Book Fair, and Nabokov books found in the luggage of travellers continued to be confiscated. Nonetheless, considerable numbers of Nabokov volumes found their way into the Soviet Union, and members of the Moscow and Leningrad literary intelligentsia have usually read at least one or two Nabokov novels.

One hopes that Gorbachev's *glasnost* policy will extend to Nabokov's two finest Russian works, *Invitation to a Beheading* and *The Gift*, which are major contributions to twentieth century world literature.

Nabokov often despaired of being published in his native land, but his belief that no one would 'make mention of even one page' has not been borne out. Nor did Nabokov completely believe his prophecy. Other poems and other acts show that he nourished hopes. Why else would he have translated *Lolita* into Russian? The hope is most eloquently voiced in his poem 'What Is the Evil Deed?' Concerning the notoriety of *Lolita*, it is a response to a Pasternak poem written after the poet was forced to decline the Nobel Prize for *Dr Zhivago*. Nabokov, who admired and sometimes echoed Pasternak's poetry ends his own poem:

Amusing, though, that at the last indention,
despite proofreaders and my age's ban,
a Russian branch's shadow shall be playing
upon the marble of my hand. ■