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Nabokov and Chekhov: Affinities, parallels, structures

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Recalling in a 1964 interview the books he “relished especially” between the ages of ten and fifteen, Vladimir Nabokov listed a number of English, French and Russian writers. Among the Russians, he named, in this order, Chekhov, Tolstoy and Alexander Blok. His great love for Pushkin, he went on to say, came later, between the ages of twenty and forty.¹ This early commitment to the writings of Anton Chekhov continued for a lifetime, as is illustrated in Nabokov’s calling him “my predecessor” in a 1956 letter to Edmund Wilson.² The attachment finds its ultimate confirmation in “Anniversary Notes” (1970), where Nabokov proclaims his great love for Chekhov while stating that he is unable to rationalize this feeling the way he can his admiration for the greater literary art of Lev Tolstoy. After an obviously unfair summary of Chekhov’s work as “a medley of dreadful prosaisms, ready-made epithets, repetitions, doctors, unconvincing vamps, and so forth,” Nabokov concludes with the lyric confession: “yet it is his works which I would take on a trip to another planet.”³

There are a number of evident affinities between these two authors which bind them and at the same time place them outside the traditions associated with Russian literature of the 19th and 20th centuries. The most striking is of course their respective early immersion in the biological sciences, Chekhov through medicine and Nabokov through lepidoptery. One of the best contemporary Russian Chekhov scholars, Vladimir Kataev, has pointed out that Chekhov’s views on both medicine and literary art were formed under the impact of the lectures of his professor of medicine, Grigorii Zakhar’in, who stressed the importance of studying not the generality of an illness but the particular impact of a given injury or infection on each individual patient. Kataev shows how Chekhov extended this individualized approach from medicine to literature, firmly rejecting the standard thinking and stereotypes in both areas.⁴

In an early programmatic Russian poem, bearing the English title “Biology,” Nabokov portrayed himself dissecting a linden leaf and a “crucified frog” in a laboratory, and then returning with his newly gained knowledge to his room, where poetry and his muse await him.⁵ Decades later, he was to re-assert this position in one of his interviews: “Only myopia condones the blurry generalizations of ignorance. In high art and pure science, detail is everything.”⁶ It is this respect for details and facts that accounts for Chekhov’s insistence on getting the correct botanical and popular names of a plant he saw growing on Sakhalin and his fascination upon learning that one of the mongooses sold to him in India was actually a palm civet; and this is what led Nabokov to object to Walter Arndt’s and Robert Lowell’s confusion of flea with roach, aspen with ash, wolfhound (*volkodav*) with a wolf, and pine trees with firs in their translations of Pushkin and of Mandelstam into English.

In the never-ending search for the correct equation between life and literary art that has for two centuries been central to Russian literature, Chekhov and, after him, Nabokov turned their gaze in a direction most of their countrymen would not have thought of looking. In a letter to

¹ Vladimir Nabokov, *Strong Opinions* (New York, St. Louis, San Francisco, Toronto: McGraw-Hill Book Company, 1973), p. 43.

² *The Nabokov-Wilson Letters*, Simon Karlinsky, ed., (New York, Hagerstown, San Francisco, London: Harper & Row, 1979), p. 297.

³ *Strong Opinions*, p. 286.

⁴ Vladimir Kataev, *Proza Chekhova: problemy interpretatsii* (Moscow: Izdatel'stvo Moskovskogo universiteta, 1979), pp. 87 ff.

⁵ Vl. Sirin (Nabokov), *Gornii put'* (Berlin: Grani, 1923), p. 55.

⁶ *Strong Opinions*, p. 168.

his publisher-friend Aleksei Suvorin of November 3, 1888, Chekhov pointed out the similarity of the basic laws that govern natural processes and artistic creation: "We know that nature has a, b, c, do, ré, mi, fa, sol, and curves, straight lines, circles, squares, green red, blue. We know that all this in a given combination will yield a melody or a poem or a picture, just as simple chemical elements in a given combination yield a tree or a stone or the sea, but all we know is that they are combined; yet the principle according to which they are combined is concealed from us. Anyone who is at home with the scientific method senses intuitively that a piece of music and a tree have something in common and that both the one and the other are created in accordance with identically regular and simple laws. Hence the question of what these laws are."⁷

In his 1966 interview with Alfred Appel, Jr., Nabokov ridiculed C.P. Snow's assertion of the unbridgeable gap between the two supposedly separate cultures, the literary and the scientific ones. Nabokov maintained that natural science has its artistic side and that the arts require scientific truth: "I certainly welcome the free exchange of terminology between any branch of science and any raceme of art. There is no science without fancy, and no art without facts."⁸

The ability to regard imaginative literature and their own artistic talent as a phenomenon of nature was what absolved both Chekhov and Nabokov from the endemic sense of guilt which Russian writers felt when they did not put their art in the service of some sociological, political, theological or, perhaps, personal cause. No comparable guiding ideas or principles are to be found in the writings of either Chekhov or Nabokov. This is what led to the remarkably parallel negative reception of their work, — of Chekhov's by the radical utilitarians of the 1880s, then by some of the turn-of-the-century Symbolists, and of Nabokov's by the emigré critics of the 1930s and again by certain English and American writers after he had acquired a reputation in the West. The recognition of each writer's magnitude by their senior colleagues (of Chekhov's by Tolstoy, Leskov and Korolenko and of Nabokov's by Bunin, Khodasevich and Zamiatin) was accompanied by a steady chorus of critics of the most diverse stripe decrying each writer's lack of human warmth, cruelty toward his characters, and general aimlessness of his art.⁹ There is an almost hallucinatory recapitulation of the 1904 comparison of Dostoevskii to Chekhov by Zinaida Gippius, for whom Dostoevskii represented the warmth, spirituality and humanity of Russian literature, while Chekhov stood for the cold of death, emptiness and indifference, in the similar comparison by the American novelist Joyce Carol Oates between Dostoevskii and Nabokov. Oates could not have possibly known the 1899-1904 essays by Gippius on Chekhov, but in 1973 she, too, wrote that while Dostoevskii "lavished love on everyone" (how about the French, the Poles, or the Jews, one wants to shout), Nabokov "exhibits the most amazing capacity for loathing that one can find in serious literature, a genius for dehumanizing [...]"¹⁰

As has been indicated so far, Anton Chekhov's outlook on life, society and art was highly congenial to Vladimir Nabokov. But what was it that Nabokov could have learned as a

⁷ A.P. Chekhov, *Pis'ma* (Moscow: Nauka, 1976), III, 53.

⁸ *Strong Opinions*, pp. 78-79.

⁹ On the initially hostile reception of Chekhov's writings, see Simon Karlinsky, "Russian Anti-Chekhovians," *Russian Literature*, The Hague, XV (1984), pp. 183-202. On the reception of Nabokov's writings by the critics of Russian emigration, see Gleb Struve, *Russkaia literatura v izgnanii* (New York: Izdatel'stvo imeni Chekhova, 1956), pp. 278-290 and Sergej Davydov, *"Teksty- Matreshki" Vladimira Nabokova* (Munich: Verlag Otto Sagner, 1982), pp. 37-51. On the critical reception of Nabokov both in emigration and in America, see Phyllis A. Roth, "Introduction," in Phyllis A. Roth, ed., *Critical Essays on Vladimir Nabokov* (Boston: G.K. Hall & Co., 1984) pp. 1-38.

¹⁰ On the comparison by Zinaida Gippius between Dostoevskii and Chekhov, see Karlinsky, "Russian Anti-Chekhovians," pp. 186-187; Joyce Carol Oates on Dostoevskii and Nabokov, see her essay "A Personal View of Nabokov" in *Saturday Review of the Arts*, San Francisco, January 1973, pp. 36-37. Reprinted, with some later reservations, in Phyllis A. Roth, ed., *Critical Essays on Vladimir Nabokov*, pp. 105-109.

literary artist from the older writer? Chekhov's main discoveries in the sphere of narrative structure stem primarily from his aversion to readymade devices and stereotypes of every sort. In a relatively early story, "Agaf'ia" (1886), a railroad switchman, returning from work in the morning, finds out that his wife has spent the night with her lover. He goes searching for her and runs into her as she is about to cross a small stream on her way home. The last page of the story tells of Agaf'ia's inner struggle as she tries to walk toward her husband, while her lover watches but offers no help. The story ends with the words: "Agaf'ia suddenly stood up, shook her head and bravely walked toward her husband. She had apparently gathered her strength and made her decision."

When the story first appeared, some Russian critics maintained that Chekhov had no right to end the story at that point: the reader had the right to know whether the husband killed Agaf'ia, or gave her a beating or cursed her or forgave her. But as later critics, Charles Du Bos among them, pointed out, Chekhov's story depicted the attraction that a certain type of handsome idler (Agaf'ia's lover) holds for women and how women allow themselves to be used by such men. As to the ultimate reaction of the husband, whether violence, forgiveness or any other variant, *that* had been shown in too many earlier works of literature and Chekhov rightly felt no need to spell it out. It is from such structures in Chekhov that Nabokov must have learned to end his narratives at unconventional points: Anton Petrovich devouring a ham sandwich, too terrified to learn the real depth of his disgrace in "An Affair of Honor" ("Podlets"); or the recently wed, recently widowed Chorb (in "The Return of Chorb") about to be discovered by his indignant in-laws with a prostitute in a hotel room, under circumstances which the reader understands but which the protagonist couldn't even begin to explain.

Also shared between Chekhov and Nabokov is the device of having an egomaniac as either the narrator or a major character. Totally egomaniacal are the protagonists of Chekhov's stories "The Princess" ("Kniaginia," 1889) and "The Wife" ("Zhena," 1892). The first of these stories, told in the third person, is a portrait of a woman who lives in a self-created illusion that she is kind, loved and needed, but whom the reader comes to see as imperceptive, self-centered and a constant source of discomfort for everyone around her. "The Wife" is told in the first person by the smug, authoritarian husband, who gradually learns from others that the wife he thinks inept and in need of his guidance, is widely admired for her efficient work on organizing a relief agency to help the peasants during a famine. Others in Chekhov's gallery of egomaniacs are Professor Serebriakov in the play *Uncle Vania*, Kovrin the "The Black Monk" and, most probably, Laevskii in the early portions of "The Duel." The self-absorption of Chekhov's egomaniacs, their inability to see the life around them except through their own subjectively-warped optics, may have provided the model for the egomaniacs in Nabokov, above all for Hermann Karlovich in *Despair*, Kinbote-Botkin in *Pale Fire*, and, more remotely, Humbert Humbert in *Lolita*.

One of Chekhov's most original literary discoveries was that an announced or anticipated major event *not* happening could be as effective dramatically as if it had come to pass. Throughout *The Cherry Orchard* the reader or spectator expects Lopakhin to be married to Varya, because they both so clearly want it. In the last act they are deliberately left alone, so that the proposal can be made. Nothing happens, and the sight of Varya, left alone and weeping quietly, is much more arresting than the expected and familiar outcome would have been.

In Chekhov's most carefully crafted piece of fiction, "A Woman's Kingdom" ("Bab'e tsarstvo," perhaps more exactly rendered as "A Kingdom of Women," 1893), the wealthy heiress has a chance to escape from her loneliness and isolation through marrying a pleasant factory foreman she meets in the first section of the novella. This gradually becomes a possibility in the following sections. In the very end, however, the protagonist gives up this plan because of a chance remark made by an ignorant and snobbish servant, whose opinions

she herself holds in contempt. Yet the annulment of the expected outcome is not aleatory — it is prepared by the gradual exposition of the protagonist's character. Such a sudden, last-minute switch away from the expected ending is most striking in the first and most Chekhovian of Vladimir Nabokov's novels, *Mashen'ka* (1925, translated as *Mary*). The independent-minded and strong-willed Ganin has expended considerable ingenuity and effort to arrange a reunion with his one-time sweetheart, now married to another man and due to arrive in Berlin from the Soviet Union. But during the six days prior to her arrival, Ganin was achieving a Nabokovian (rather than a Chekhovian) existential project of affixing in his memory their earlier love. So, at the last moment, instead of going to the station to meet her, he leaves Berlin for good. As in Chekhov's "The Duel" and "A Woman's Kingdom," a careful re-reading of the text from the beginning will establish the motivation for the absence of the expected closure.

The abandonment of the protagonists' plans or their failure to achieve these plans, a usual plot strategem in Chekhov, is also frequent in Nabokov. Martha will not succeed in murdering her husband in *King, Queen, Knave*, Luzhin will not escape from the world of chess in *The Defense*, the protagonist of *Pnin* will not get to keep his job at Waindell College and Charles Kinbote will not convince any sane reader that John Shade's poem is about Kinbote's imaginary kingdom. The entire action of Nabokov's play *The Event* (*Sobytie*, 1938) hinges on the circumstance that "the event" of the title, expected by the characters for three acts, could not possibly take place, as the final scene reveals. The psychological and circumstantial causes for such failures are worked out with consummate art by both writers. An instructive comparison can be made between the fate of the servant Firs in the last act of *The Cherry Orchard* and the leitmotif of the misplaced keys in Nabokov's *The Gift*.

The loyal old Firs is a relic from the times of serfdom, a system he understood and accepted. When the family house and orchard are sold, arrangements are made for the ailing Firs to be sent to a hospital, where he can die peacefully. The young Ania inquires about Firs and is informed by the insolent young butler Yasha (who despises Firs for his old-fashioned ways) that he told someone to take care of the matter. Ania asks the clerk Epikhodov to check it, but Yasha gets angry that his assurance is not enough. Then Varya asks about Firs and is also told he's in the hospital. A few scenes later, the owner of the estate, Mme Ranevskaja, wants to know whether Firs has been taken to the hospital. Ania, who has heard three times that he has, assures her mother that Yasha — of all people — has taken care of Firs. When everyone leaves and the house is boarded up, Firs comes in. It turns out he's been left to die alone in the locked house. His abandonment is not only highly symbolic, but also very carefully prepared. The theme of keys in *The Gift* is worked out with equal care. Keys as a leitmotif have appeared in earlier chapters of the novel, but in Chapter Five this theme takes on a life of its own. Fedor's set of housekeys is stolen, together with his clothes, while he is swimming in a lake. Next day, Zina's family are moving away, which should enable Fedor and Zina to consummate their by now full-blown love affair. But in the eventful last pages of the novel, information is casually slipped in that Zina's and her mother's keys are locked in the apartment, that the janitor will not be able to unlock the door for them and that Zina is counting on Fedor's keys, now stolen, to reach the place where their happiness will be achieved. An inattentive reader may miss all this and be quite sure that the novel ends on the tonic chord of a familiar happy end.

With all the enumerated parallels, Chekhov and Nabokov are in many ways different writers. Their differences resemble the ones outlined by Koncheev in his second imaginary conversation with Fedor in *The Gift*, specifically the section that begins "you and I differ in

many things” and continues, “very mysteriously and inexpressibly, a rather divine bond is growing between us,” or, in Russian, *krepet dovol'no bozhestvennaia mezhdu nami sviaz'*.¹¹

¹¹ Vladimir Nabokov, *Dar* (New York: Izdatel'stvo imeni Chekhova, 1952), pp. 382-383. In English, *The Gift* (n.p.: G.P. Putnam's Sons, 1963), p.383.