

Nabokov and the art of poetry

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Abstract

This paper focuses on the impact that the genre of poetry had on Vladimir Nabokov's writing career. Poetry is the first step of every writer-to-be because many of them have started their writing career as a poet. While for the writer in general poetry is the starting point of the literary career and they later switch to prose, Nabokov continued to write poetry throughout his life, but critics have not paid sufficient attention to it. The poetic language he favored in his fiction stemmed from his love for the art of poetry. In Nabokov's novel "The Gift" poetry plays an important role. Nabokov, as an admirer of the Russian Formalism, showed a preference for the traditional form. Nevertheless, it will be argued that it is difficult to completely place his poetry under Russian Formalism.

Keywords: *poetry, Russian Formalism, Fiction, poetic language, writing career*

Introduction

Nabokov's fiction has been largely analyzed and studied but when it comes to his poetry, critics have only lately studied it. Mentioning the name of Vladimir Nabokov, one recalls his masterpiece "Lolita". "Lolita is famous not I" said Nabokov, "I am an obscure, doubly obscure novelist with an unpronounceable name." (Paris Review, 1967) At the time of publication "Lolita" was sold at 50 million copies. While Nabokov's novels have been regularly reissued, his poetry has been neglected. He wrote hundreds of poems in Russian but only 23 in English. We will focus on the later poems. Just like many other well-known writers, Nabokov started the literary career with poetry. Nabokov studied Russian poetry and prosody, and he spent his youth reading Pushkin and the Symbolists. In 1922 Nabokov published his first collection. At the end of his life he had prepared a volume of Russian verse for publication and it was titled "Stikhi" (Verses). It was published in 1979. Critics started to thoroughly study his poetry only after the publication of "Stikhi" and upon Nabokov's death. Barry P. Scherr

(Scherr, Ed. Alexandrov, 1995:608) states that after 1990 we have a boost of articles and introductions for collections of Nabokov's poems and we notice an increased interest in Nabokov's verse. Some critics such as Vladimir Soloukhin states that Nabokov's poetry stands at a higher level than his prose. "...he prefers the poetry to the novels and feels that Nabokov's poetry is on a par with that of Khodasevich" (Soloukhin, 1989: 16). Other critics do not share Soloukhin's opinion, but would state that Nabokov's poetry deserves attention.

More than 500 poems written in Russian language are known and around 20 written in English language, but many critics pretend that the number is greater, but we don't possess all the poems written during Nabokov's Russian period. Nabokov himself stresses this fact when he writes..."representing only a small fraction- hardly more than one per cent- of all the study mass of which I began to exude in my youth..."(Nabokov, 1970: 13). In "Stikhi", Nabokov published only the poems he felt worthy of publication by being selective. "Stikhi" of 1979 is a much larger collection than that of the previous "Stikhi" published when Nabokov was a young man.

In his youth, when Nabokov published his first collection of poetry, the theme of love predominates. As it happens with many famous writers, Nabokov later rejected many of his earlier poems. Later in his other published collections, the theme of exile predominates, as noticed in "The Return of the Chorb", 1929, which contains 24 poems accompanying the stories.

Nabokov rarely took the conventional path in writing poetry. In the collection "Poems and Problems", Nabokov has included some poems and some chess problems. The fact that he collected these in a single collection makes us believe that he pretended a poem to have the same characteristics with his favorite game, chess. He attributes the features of this game such as originality, insincerity, and invention to the art of poetry. Barry Scherr states that G.S. Smith (Scherr, Ed. Alexandrov, 1995:612) argues that Nabokov's idea to consider poems as an intellectual game is seen in his admiration for Andrey Bely's idiosyncratic ideas on Russian rhythm.

Poetry is not only important for Nabokov as a genre in itself. Poetry is always present even in his fiction. We can mention Nabokov's novel "Pale Fire", which is a pastiche, a mixing of genres, a typical postmodern literary work. It is made of a 999-line poem and the comments on it. The poem is after the "Forward" of the novel, which has the same title. The poem can be read separately or as a context of the novel it is part of.

Even in Nabokov's masterpiece "Lolita", we notice the use of poetry. In this novel, Nabokov employs poetic prose and we notice it since the very beginning: "Lolita, light of my life, fire of my loins. My sin, my soul. Lolee-ta: the tip of the tongue taking a trip of three steps down the palate to tap, at three, on the teeth. Lo. Lee. Ta. She was Lo, plain Lo, in the morning, standing four feet ten in one sock. She was Lola in slacks. She was Dolly at school. She was Dolores on the dotted line. But in my arms she was always Lolita. Did she have a precursor? She did, indeed she did. In point of fact, there might have been no Lolita at all had I not loved, one summer, an initial girl-child. In a princedom by the sea. Oh when? About as many years before Lolita was born as my age was that summer. You can always count on a murderer for a fancy prose style. Ladies and gentlemen of the jury, exhibit number one is what the seraphs, the misinformed, simple, noble-winged seraphs, envied. Look at this tangle of thorns." (Nabokov, 2000:9) Nabokov famously claimed the inability "to see any generic difference between poetry and artistic prose" (Nabokov, 1973:44). In Nabokov's masterpiece "Lolita", we come across many poems written by the narrator and at the same time protagonist Humbert Humbert. For example:

"Wanted, wanted: Dolores Haze.
Hair: brown. Lips: scarlet.
Age: five thousand three hundred days.
Profession: none, or "starlet"

Where are you hiding, Dolores Haze?
Why are you hiding, darling?
(I Talk in a daze, I walk in a maze
I cannot get out, said the starling).

Where are you riding, Dolores Haze?
What make is the magic carpet?
Is a Cream Cougar the present craze?
And where are you parked, my car pet?

Who is your hero, Dolores Haze?
Still one of those blue-capped star-men?
Oh the balmy days and the palmy bays,
And the cars, and the bars, my Carmen!

Oh Dolores, that juke-box hurts!

Are you still dancin', darlin'?
(Both in worn levis, both in torn T-shirts,
And I, in my corner, snarlin').

Happy, happy is gnarled McFate
Touring the States with a child wife,
Plowing his Molly in every State
Among the protected wild life.

My Dolly, my folly! Her eyes were vair,
And never closed when I kissed her.
Know an old perfume called SolielVert?
Are you from Paris, mister?

L'autresoirun air froidd'operam'alita;
Son fele -- bienfolest qui s'y fie!
Ilneige, le decor s'ecroule, Lolita!
Lolita, qu'ai-je fait de ta vie?

Dying, dying, Lolita Haze,
Of hate and remorse, I'm dying.
And again my hairy fist I raise,
And again I hear you crying.

Officer, officer, there they go--
In the rain, where that lighted store is!
And her socks are white, and I love her so,
And her name is Haze, Dolores.

Officer, officer, there they are--
Dolores Haze and her lover!
Whip out your gun and follow that car.
Now tumble out and take cover.

Wanted, wanted: Dolores Haze.
Her dream-gray gaze never flinches.
Ninety pounds is all she weighs
With a height of sixty inches.

My car is limping, Dolores Haze,

And the last long lap is the hardest,
And I shall be dumped where the weed decays,
And the rest is rust and stardust.” (Nabokov, 2000:255-257)

In the poems written when Nabokov was mature, we notice the presence of “the otherworldly”, which for Nabokov implies the sensation of a world beyond our world, something that can be felt but not explained. Nabokov’s main theme in all his *ouvenirs* “the otherworld”. Certainly, this could not be absent in his poetry. The theme of the otherworld is prominent in his poetry. It refers to some other realm or dimension beyond our own. It implies the perception of something beyond what a person normally sees. A poem of Nabokov titled “In Paradise” deals with the existence of the soul after death. In this poem he implies that even art for Nabokov is a way of transcending our world and living beyond it.

“My soul, beyond distant death
your image I see like this:
a provincial naturalist,
an eccentric lost in paradise.

There, in a glade, a wild angel slumbers,
a semi-pavonian creature.
Poke at it curiously
with your green umbrella,

speculating how, first of all,
you will write a paper on it
then — But there are no learned journals,
nor any readers in paradise!

And there you stand, not yet believing
your wordless woe.
About that blue somnolent animal
whom will you tell, whom?

Where is the world and the labeled roses,
the museum and the stuffed birds?
And you look and look through your tears
at those unnamable wings.” (Nabokov, 2012:81)

Another theme used in Nabokov’s poems is that of exile, which is a prevalent theme in his fiction too. Another theme is that of poetry. Many of

his poems elaborate on the way a poet should write poetry. It has to be underlined that the themes I have mentioned so far are not treated in isolation as a poem, for example, treats several themes. Thus, in the poem “Rememberance”, we come across the theme of love, the theme of exile and the theme of nature.

Nabokov’s love for butterflies could not be neglected in his poems. It is part of his fiction and it would certainly be part of his poetry too. Barry P. Scherr (Scherr, Ed. Alexandrov, 1995:617) argues that the creation of verse is compared to an emerging butterfly spreading its wings. Nabokov observes nature in his poetry the same way he observes art.

Nabokov is known as a prolific translator. He makes use of bilingualism in some of his poems. For example in “Lines written in Oregon”:

Esmeralda! Now we rest
Here, in the bewitched and blest
Mountain forest of the West.

Here the very air is stranger.
Damsel, anchoret, and ranger
Share the woodland’s dream and danger.

And to think I deemed you dead!
(In a dungeon, it was said;
Tortured, strangled); but instead –

Blue birds from the bluest fable,
Bear and hare in coats of sable,
Peacock moth on picnic table.

Huddled road-signs softly speak
Of Lake Merlin, Castle Creek,
And (obliterated) Peak.

Do you recognize that clover?
Dandelions, l’or du pauvre?
(Europe, nonetheless, is over).

Up the turf, along the burn,
Latin lilies climb and turn
Into Gothic fir and fern.

Cornfields have befouled the prairies
But these canyon's laugh! And there is
Still the forest with its fairies.

And I rest where I awoke
In the sea shade – l'ombreglauque –
Of a legendary oak.

Where the woods get ever dimmer,
Where the Phantom Orchids glimmer –
Esmeralda, immer, immer.

1953

When it comes to the form of a poem, Nabokov is a conservative poet. He likes stanzaic forms, most quartains AbAb. Vladislav Khodasevich, a beloved writer for Nabokov used this form also. Nevertheless, Nabokov does not always employ traditional elements when it comes to English poems. "Lines written in Oregon" is made of three line stanzas, which is not a traditional form.

The poems on love, which sometimes also deal with Russia and a nostalgia for the past, predominate in his poetry in the collection *Stikhi (Verses)*. The first stanza of an early poem in English "Remembrance" may serve as an example: "Like silent ships we two in darkness met,/ and when some day the poets's careless fame/shall breathe to you a half-forgotten poem/ soul of my soul I want you to regret." (Nabokov, 2012:156)

The notion of Exile from Russia predominates. Loss is the major motif of this collection-especially that of time and one's homeland and of course the loss of his beloved, as we see it in the poem "The bridge":

"One night between sunset and river
On the old bridge we stood, you and I.
Will you ever forget it, I queried,
- That particular swift that went by?
And you answered, so earnestly: Never!

And what sobs made us suddenly shiver,
What a cry life emitted in flight!
Till we die, till tomorrow, forever,
You and I on the old bridge one night." (Nabokov, 1991:94)

Although Nabokov is mostly known as a renowned prose writer, he continued to write poetry all of his life. Many of his major characters in his novels are poets such as Humbert in “Lolita” or Pnin in “Pnin”, Fjodor in “The Gift”, John Shade and Kinbote in “Pale Fire” etc. Moreover, the language he uses in his novels is highly poetic and he makes use of the poetic prose. We can surely admit that poetry helped Nabokov be a well-known prose writer and it followed and inspired him throughout his literary career.

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