

**Key Note Address:  
Nabokov and Saint Petersburg**

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ABSTRACT

The paper traces the origins of Vladimir Nabokov, the most un-Russian writer in Russia, to Saint Petersburg, the most Western Russian city. After immigration Nabokov's "Western" choice -- his discovery of self (and his consequential rewriting of a Russian world into an American one) -- originated in his personal circumstances. Born in Saint Petersburg, he was able to take on and succeed in a historic journey, a journey that took him from an enclosed nature of the 19th century Russian culture to an opposite extreme -- openness of the 20th century America.

## **Key Note Address: Nabokov and Saint Petersburg**

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It is customary to see Vladimir Nabokov (1899-1977) as a quintessential case of success in the American “Land of Opportunity”: the writer journeyed from the obscure Russian exile Sirin (under this pseudonym Nabokov wrote in Russian) to the American author of world-famous *Lolita* and unique *Invitation to a Beheading*. A Russian nobleman, who moved to America in 1940, presents an exceptional case of transformation from a dreamy Russian intellectual to a decisive Western individual.

According to Nabokov a person’s behavior is based on a certain set of values—i.e. rationality, linearity of a “Weberian man” vs. circular, spiritual irrationality of the Russian *sobornost’* (universality of one’s soul). Nabokov’s “Western” choice and his consequential rewriting of a Russian world into an American one originated in his own journey that took him from an enclosed nature of the 19<sup>th</sup> century Russian culture to an opposite extreme—openness of the 20<sup>th</sup> century America. Moreover, the success of his journey in some degree could be defined by Vladimir Nabokov’s St. Petersburg origins.

St. Petersburg has always been a “West” within Russia. And even if the city was more a Russian dream of the West than the West itself, the island rather than

the land, the window rather than the door, Russia had never come closer to the idea of being Western as it did in the form of St. Petersburg.

Erected miraculously almost overnight within the gloomy marshes of the Gulf of Finland, Saint Petersburg, with its straight wide prospects, First-Second-Third-etc. Lines, marble embankments along the Neva river, Parisian fashions and German tradesmen, urban factories, military schools and navy shipyards, was a celebration of everything that homely, peasant, sleepy, landlocked Russia was not.

For almost 300 years Saint Petersburg had remained the Atlantis of Europe: Russia's perfect and unattainable dream of the West, and of itself. It also has been a Western dream of Russia—of what landlocked and “circular” Russia could ever become—to correct a circular village-like composition of Nikolai Gogol's *Dead Souls*, to overcome the Moscow geography of an enclosed commune.

Like all Petersburgians Nabokov insisted that a Russian of his heritage—with the liberal and linear city traditions—didn't have to live in the West to become Western. But as much as he felt Western individually in the 1900s he, like his Petersburg, was an exception to the rule rather than the rule itself. Russia's overall cultural concepts *were* in stark opposition to those of the West (and he himself certainly didn't always live according to those Western norms): [charity in Russia vs. justice in the West, envy vs. greed, love vs. law, personal ethics vs. institutions, ritual vs. protocol, and so on.]

Nabokov had to leave Russia in order to really become Western, not only conceptually—in line with liberal teachings of the Tenishev school, where he

received his education, but practically: in America he had to start living (and writing) according to Western, not Russian, norms. Critic Georgy Adamovich, Nabokov's much disliked compatriot in emigration, claimed that Nabokov's writing presented only a "novelty of narrative technique and not a novel perception of life,"<sup>1</sup> a far cry from a Russian tradition of a soulful hero in a socially conscious settings of many Russian novels.

Before the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989 and a consequential 1991 collapse of the Soviet Union the Russian reader, much like Adamovich, overwhelmingly honored Nabokov as an emigrant writer, but intellectually, emotionally and philosophically had difficulties relating to him as a Russian author. Sirin was a deception and brilliance of his style was often seen as a facade that covered up the emptiness (understood in Russian as lack of the moral message for the common good) of his content. His gliding images seemed nothing more than just smoke screens and mirror reflections.

An enclosed and autocratic country (despite St. Petersburg), Russia then didn't have a sufficient frame of reference for understanding, let alone appreciating, Nabokov's solitary experience—his individualistic characters, created even before his American years—Ganin (Mary), Godunov-Cherdyntsev (The Gift), Martyn (Glory) and his own practical achievements.

From generation to generation the conscious, calculating accumulation of personal gains and open pronouncements of successes had been in conflict with other Russian cultural values—unlimited hospitality, humility, belief in miracles

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<sup>1</sup> Quoted in Simon Karlinsky, "Nabokov and Chekhov: the lesser Russian tradition" in Alfred Appel, Jr. and Charles Newman, eds., *Nabokov: Criticism, Reminiscences, Translations and Tributes* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1970, pp. 7-160), p. 8.

and material sacrifice. After all, the Russians reasoned, fate should be taking care of those who can't take care of themselves.

Nabokov, on the other hand, without being at all religious well fit the bill of that infamous “devout Puritan, who is basically concerned only with himself and thinking of his own salvation...,”<sup>2</sup> so well described by Max Weber. The secret of Nabokov's American success was that in opposition to Russian advocates of communalism and anti-rationalism he vehemently disapproved of any form of communal thinking—“I do not write for groups” (*Strong Opinions*, 114). The writer not only accepted a Western way of relating to the world, he made it his own, abandoning the usual Russian patient spiritual suffering and concerns for the non-materialistic soul. Not for nothing he called himself “an English child” (*Ibid.*, 81), expressly stressing on another occasion, “I learned to read English before I could read Russian” (*Speak Memory*, 57) and “The kind of Russian family to which I belonged—a kind now extinct—had, among other virtues, a traditional leaning toward the comfortable products of Anglo-Saxon civilization” (*Ibid.*). Not for nothing as of 1940s English became the primary language of his prose.

“It is not improbable, that had there been no revolution in Russia, I would have devoted myself entirely to lepidopterology and never written any novels at all” (*Strong Opinions*, 100), he once confessed.

Compassionate, traditional, mythical, circular, emotional, stagnant, sloth, steeped in Pushkin, Gogol and Oblomov Russia simply didn't care for the individualistic author at the time. Bright, talented Sirin, the future Nabokov, felt

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<sup>2</sup> Max Weber, *The Protestant Ethic*, p. 62.

and foresaw it even then. So he solitarily stared in his shaving mirror (“An artist should [not] bother about his audience. His best audience is the person he sees in his shaving mirror every morning” (Ibid., 18)) for a time, disregarding all other readers except himself, insisting in the words of Godunov-Cherdyntsev: “The real writer should ignore all readers but one, that of the future, who in his turn is merely the author reflected in time” (*The Gift*, 340).

After 1991, however, the change has been slowly sipping in—the West has finally come to Russia’s enclosed commune through the possibilities of travel and an overwhelming influence of the American culture, politics and economics: Nabokov’s smoke screens and mirror reflections of the St. Petersburg liberal Atlantis have turned into the genuine not only *okna* but also *dveri na Zapad* (windows and doors into the West).

In Nabokov’s writing the “devout Puritan” was formulated into an artistic *Solus Rex* (this image of the lone chess king provided the original title for the novel *Bend Sinister*), which was kin to American democratic individualism. Since 1991 Russia has become exposed to this kind of individualism, learning to live not in a closed and communal terrain but in its Western alternative—open and competitive, without borders, among different people, different countries, and different cultures, in a new solitude of multiple worlds.

Now Nabokov is read in the post-communist Russia, which slowly emerges from its “communalism”—a testimony to his wisdom. Nabokov, who stoically accepted that his audience in Russia would be a “room filled with people, wearing his own mask” (*Strong Opinions*, 18)—could be extremely delighted today: the whole country is wearing his mask.

With a country's tradition of passionate reading contemporary Russians read Nabokov into everything. In response to a carved bust of President Putin a few years back, Russians quoted Nabokov, "Portraits of the head of the government should not exceed a postage stamp in size" (Ibid., 35). Those who still stubbornly disregard material comfort recall his phrase about the "nuisance of ownership" (Ibid., 149); those who insist on individualistic values follow him in being "an indivisible monist" (Ibid., 85). Nabokov is translated, retranslated, and republished. There is even a *Nabokov Reader*, a guidebook for teachers on how and why to read Nabokov.

Students who study Nabokov are deft and determined—they recite passages of *Lolita* and *Speak, Memory* by heart in both English and Russian; they don't skip classes or make excuses as we did in my own time in the planned economy of socialism. Instead of pitifully crying over Akhmatova's *Poem Without a Hero*, or helplessly whispering about Solzhenitsyn's *Gulag Archipelago* in some kitchen, these level-headed kids of the post-post-communist new century put literature to practical use. They say they find nineteenth-century writers too dramatic, too pathetic—and those of the twentieth-century too critical, unhappy, and dissident. Post-communist literature is too trashy. But Nabokov is just right! "Something like *Prin*, but better."

These new Russian readers are taking revenge on Nabokov for his contempt of the Russian tradition of socially minded literature ("a work of art has no importance whatever to society" (Ibid., 33)). Those modern readers, who are gradually acquiring the traits of egoistic individualism that come with the freedom of choice, capitalism and open borders, following Nabokov's own

perception of art—"it is only important to the individual, and only the individual reader is important to me" (Ibid.)—have begun reading his books not only as art *but also* as books important to society, learning from them the hardest art of all—how to live for yourself, how to live on your own, and how to rely only on yourself for happiness.

A creator of elegant chess problems, Nabokov explained that he wrote his books only in order to please himself, in order to overcome the difficulties of composition: "I have no social purpose, no moral message; I've no general ideas to exploit, I just like composing riddles with elegant solutions" (*Strong Opinions*, 16). Yet through his novels he was composing a new, different—"Western" Russia with new elegant solutions.

Following his own sobering experience of Westernization the writer more than half-a-century in advance defined the rules of existence for a post-Communist Russian man in a new time, a cold world of banal rationalism, personal competition and individual comfort. He explained how this would change the benevolent, sloth and impractical Oblomov-like Russian attitude to life, he provided a literary manual for an unapplied Russian intellectual to become an efficient, pragmatic, western individual.

Although in his life time he vigorously rejected the notion of a social calling for an artist, he ultimately failed to escape the moral pathos of the Russian literary tradition—a poet in Russia is more than just a poet, exactly what Georgy Adamovich wanted him to be. Nabokov successfully "rewrote" Russian literature for us: Feodor Dostoevsky in *Invitation to a Beheading*; Nikolai Gogol in *Pale Fire*; Leo Tolstoy in *Ada, or Ardor*; Anton Chekhov in *Pnin*. "My favorite

creatures, my resplendent characters—in *The Gift*, in *Invitation to a Beheading*, in *Ada*, in *Glory*, et cetera—are victors in the long run," he wrote. Nabokov reinvented Russia's dramatic characters, adjusting them to the new Western realities of what may be a less dramatic and romantic, but surely a more comfortable and satisfactory life.

Nabokov of the 20<sup>th</sup> century is the most important cultural and literary phenomenon for Russia in the 21<sup>st</sup>. How to survive and succeed in this "Western" world, which Russia always deemed linear, cold and calculating, teaches us the art of Vladimir Nabokov.