

NABOKOV'S "TORPID SMOKE"

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Nabokov's short stories are polished self-contained works of art, yet they can also be profitably read in the light of their place in his general canon. This place is determined by the time when each story was written and by the way in which other works enrich and elucidate the significance of its images.

In the prefaces to his novels and short stories Nabokov usually notes the time when they were composed. The dates of composition are, indeed, more important than the dates of publication, because they provide glimpses, perhaps by way of deliberate yet coded leakage, into the workings of his imagination. These glimpses are particularly interesting in view of Nabokov's own concern with the different aspects of a writer's calling.

Nabokov's short stories are sometimes treated rather like studies that a painter makes in preparation for a major picture.¹ In many cases, however, they may have served as repositories for what spilled over from longer works or as safety valves for the urgent material that had to be kept out of the novels lest it should interfere with their design. His 1935 story "Torpid Smoke," written at the juncture of *Invitation to a Beheading* (composed in 1934) and *The Gift* (written during the years 1935–37) constitutes such a safety valve. The plight of the young poet Grisha, the protagonist, is a hybrid of the tendencies manifest in Cincinnatus of *Invitation* and Fyodor Godunov Cherdyntsev of *The Gift*. Yet unlike Fyodor, this young poet gets no encouragement from his environment for his wish to devote himself to literature; unlike Cincinnatus, he cannot reject his environment.

His father seems to be cultivated, well-meaning, and pathetically human—a far cry from the obnoxious "parodies" that surround Cincinnatus. Yet he has prevailed on Grisha to study political economy (for economic reasons, no doubt) rather than "something quite different" (p. 31).² On the evening described in the story the

father is sitting alone in the dining room, while Grisha's sister is entertaining her boy friend in the parlor and he himself is lying supine in his room. He is "drugged by the oppressive, protracted feeling so familiar to him" (p. 27), a feeling that follows upon some "gentle mysterious shock" (p. 31) and that will resolve itself in poetry. Nothing much happens on the surface of the story: Grisha has to remove a particle of food from between his teeth; his sister asks him to get cigarettes from their father, with whom she has had a quarrel; after the brief visit to the dining room Grisha's languor finds sudden release in a flow of verse.

The imagery of the story ostensibly serves to increase the density of the setting. However, as usual in Nabokov, the imagery is also functional: it forms a subtle network of parallels and nuances that both point to the genuineness of the young man's talent and suggest a reason for the "puerile" quality of his "perishable" production (p. 33).

His languor set in when, while "trudging" on his father's errand after an ordinary day at the university and library (pp. 29–30), Grisha noticed the "wet roof of some pub on the edge of a vacant lot." The chimney smoke "hugged the roof, creeping low, heavy with damp, sated with it, sleepy, refusing to rise, refusing to detach itself from beloved decay" (p. 30). This synaesthetic image—visual, tactile, organic and empathetic—produced a "thrill" (p. 30) powerful enough to redeem the day. Grisha's evening is then spent under the influence of the torpor of the smoke.

Back in his room, he surrenders to a "languorous mist" (p. 29). The contours of his body seem to become indistinct, like those of the smoke: "the lane on the other side of the house might be his own arm, while the long skeletal cloud that [stretches] across the whole sky with a chill of stars in the east might be his backbone" (p. 29). In Nabokov's work a dissolution of identity suggests a closeness to the "involute abode,"³ the abode of aesthetic objects and of "infinite consciousness,"⁴ something like Borges's Library of Babel. That is where Grisha is heading when his perception of the room yields to images of "a sea horizon or a strip of distant land," "a remote mirage enchanting in its graphic transparency and isolation: a stretch of water . . . and a black promontory with the minuscule silhouette of an araucaria" (p. 27)—the motif of a voyage is probably inspired by one of Grisha's favorite books, *Shatyor (Tent)*, the collection of Gumilyov's "African" poems. Merging with the "involute abode," however, could

be as lethal as the tropical swamps imagined by a dying man in Nabokov's "Terra Incognita" (1931). "One of the main characteristics of life," says the narrator of Nabokov's *Pnin*, "is discreteness. Unless a film of flesh envelops us, we die. Man exists only insofar as he is separated from his surroundings. The cranium is the space-traveler's helmet. Stay inside or you perish. Death is divestment, death is communion. It may be wonderful to mix with the landscape, but to do so is the end of the tender ego."⁵ The "waltwhitmanesque"⁶ quasi-social "mixing" with the grasses of the landscape is physical death ("the dead are good mixers"); complete carnivalistic communion is loss of spiritual identity. The smoke of the chimney, a semi-transparent emblem of a mixture of matter and spirit, refuses "to detach itself from beloved decay" (p. 30), and seeks a quieting merger with the damp that has made it heavy. The young poet, however, resists that lure. Like *Pnin*, who extricates himself from his thoughts of death by (note the onomatopoeia) "gently *champing* his dentures, which" [retain] the residue of lunch-time "cottage cheese,"⁸ Grisha has a method of "measuring and marking himself off," that is, of regaining his discreteness, by palpating, with "the *tactile tip* of his tongue," "a shred of boiled beef firmly lodged in his teeth" (p. 29)—note the alliteration as in "the *tip* of the *tongue* taking a *trip*"⁹ to say "Lolita"). He forces himself to get up and look for a "nice, pointed little tool, to aid the solitary blind toiler" (p. 29), his tongue. Having found such a tool, a safety pin, he removes the mote and swallows it—"better than any dainties" (p. 30). In the hands of most other writers this episode might have been repelling, yet Nabokov knows how to salvage "average reality" (which might otherwise begin "to rot and stink"¹⁰) by endowing it with a quaint contextual meaning.

One must note that the corresponding passage in the Russian original of the story does not display the same richness of alliteration. In fact, the acoustic games pertaining to the image of the tongue in the English version seem to compensate the English reader for the loss of alliterations and assonances that exist in several other places of the Russian original and are impossible to reproduce in translation, for instance the *t*, *m*, and *n* interplay in "*tomnogo tumana*" ("of the languorous mist") or the evocative multiple sound patterns in the description of trudging on an errand, "*Kogda s porucheniem otca prishlos' peret' K Osipovym*," of the roof of the pub, "*Po mokroj kryshe traktira na kraju pustyrya*," and of the smoke, "*stlalsja*

otjazhelevishij ot syrosti sytyj sonnyj dym iz truby.”¹¹ The translation runs as follows: “there was that wet roof of some pub on the edge of a vacant lot, and the chimney smoke hugged the roof, creeping low, heavy with damp, sated with it, sleepy” (p. 30). It might be interesting to compare the effect of the two passages in terms of the Nabokovian synaesthesia, his *audition colorée*, yet that is beyond the scope of the present paper.¹²

The effect of the “pointed little tool” is re-enacted by Grisha’s reluctant visit to the dining room on his sister’s errand. He knows that his father secretly hopes for his company at evening tea, yet, impatient to regain his isolation and having “other things on [his] mind” (p. 33), Grisha does not oblige. He swallows his momentary remorse like the mote from his teeth:

With terrifying clarity, as if my soul were lit up by a noiseless explosion, I glimpsed a future recollection; it dawned on me that exactly as I recalled such images of the past as the way my dead mother had of making a weepy face and clutching her temples when mealtime squabbles became too loud, so one day I would have to recall, with merciless, irreparable sharpness, the hurt look of my father’s shoulder as he leaned over that torn map, morose, wearing his warm indoor jacket powdered with ashes and dandruff; and all this mingled creatively with the recent vision of blue smoke clinging to dead leaves on a wet roof. (p. 33)

The sting of conscience, soothingly distanced by the time-shift that turns it into a proleptic flashback (a “future recollection”) in which the images mingle to form a synaesthetic complex (the aesthetic, the anaesthetic and the synaesthetic are interconnected throughout Nabokov’s work), produces an outburst of verse as soon as Grisha regains his room. He knows that his poem will “wither” by the time the next one is printed, yet that does not matter. The story ends on a rhapsodic note:

at this moment I trust the ravishing promises of the still breathing, still revolving verse, my face is wet with tears, my heart is bursting with happiness, and I know that this happiness is the greatest thing existing on earth. (p. 33)

The ravishing promise of poetry asserts the young poet’s power,

his "gift." It is on such exquisite moments rather than on the volume of completed production that the self-esteem of Fyodor Godunov-Cherdyntsev is based in Nabokov's *The Gift*.

Why, then, do Grisha's poems remain "puerile" and "perishable"? Is it merely youth or lack of experience that accounts for his obsolete, patly poetic diction ("modern *bereg* reverting to *breg*, a farther 'shore,' *holod* to *hlad*, a more classic 'chill,' *veter* to *vetr*, a better Boreas')? Youth is no explanation: among the books that had at one time or another "done his heart good" (p. 31), one finds an exquisite novel, *Le Bal du comte d'Orgel*, written by Raymond Radiguet a short time before his death at the age of twenty.

Fictional bibliographies of "real" works are usually very important in Nabokov. If among Grisha's favorite volumes there is a book that can refute a reductive explanation of his artistic failure, there is also a book that can offer a more specific diagnosis instead. This is *The Defense*, a novel by Sirin (Sirin is, of course, Nabokov's pre-war pen-name), which, among other things, describes another writer's tragedy. Ivan Luzhin, the father of the protagonist of *The Defense*, is a novelist who cannot write his swan-song book because he insists on excluding from it all the "purely personal, unbidden recollections, of no use to him—starvation, arrest, and so forth."¹³ For Luzhin such uncouth lumps as the Russian revolution are "an encroachment upon creative freedom" because "the general opinion [is] that [it] had influenced the course of every Russian's life; an author could not have his hero go through it without getting scorched, and to dodge it was impossible."¹⁴ The significance of any event is, of course, relative, and one cannot dodge anything that exerts a pressure. Yet dodging issues is precisely what old Luzhin wishes to do when unable to come to terms with the world's refusal to accommodate his sentimental humanism. His didactic "oleographic tales for youngsters"¹⁵ used to offer wish-fulfilling compensation for the inadequacy of his system of values, yet evasion must have made itself felt in the artificiality of his novellas.¹⁶ To adapt the words of another fictional writer, Mr. R. of Nabokov's *Transparent Things*, the excluded lump would still "remain recognizable by the shape of the hole left in the texture of the tale."¹⁷

It may seem that, unlike old Luzhin, the hero of "Torpid Smoke" does not fail to confront his plight. He knows that he is trapped between the happiness that accompanies creative experience and the price that he has to pay for it in personal relationships. He knows that

the price is the touch of cruelty without which he cannot attain the self-isolation indispensable to poetic experience and production. Yet though Grisha can honestly face the conflict between aesthetic pursuits and human commitments there seem to be other issues that he is unwilling to process.

Indeed, the "pointed little tool" that Grisha uses at the beginning of the story is a "safety pin." In the Russian original the pin is first referred to as "anglijskaja bulavka" (literally, "an English pin," which is the Russian for "safety pin") and then as bulavka, "a pin." In the English version, however, the word "safety" is not dropped on the second occasion. The translation thus activates an undercurrent of significance: Grisha's painful recognition of his callousness to his father, the prick of remorse that transforms diffuse poetic experience into energetic creation, is also a *safety device*, a defense mechanism that takes his attention away from another matter. The sliding door to the parlor where Grisha's sister is, as they now say, "fooling around" with her boy friend is closed. When Grisha is examining his table after the door has opened and the sister has thrust her head through it for a moment, "the shiny safety pin [has] disappeared" (p. 30): the situation threatens to get out of control.

The image of doors, closed, open or ajar, has a specific significance in Nabokov's fiction. In the poem "Vliublyonnost'" ("The Being in Love") in *Look at the Harlequins!*, this image is explicitly related to mystical experience. "Being in love" is not wide-awake reality, just as "a moon-striped ceiling" is "not the same kind of reality as a ceiling by day": when one is in love it is as if "the hereafter stands slightly ajar in the dark."¹⁸

In *King, Queen, Knave* Martha Dreyer violently slams the doors on the possibility of any relationship that is not strictly carnal; in "Torpid Smoke" it is Grisha's sister who must have propped the door between the parlor and his room by a chair, lest the doorleaves should "crawl apart" (p. 28). Grisha, however, seems to welcome the precaution. The presence of Gazdanov's *Evening at Claire's* among his favorite books brings in associations with the dream of love in which sweetness has a touch of decadence (as in "beloved decay" of "Torpid Smoke"), with love in which purity is strangely mingled with the tolerance of the sordid. The text of "Torpid Smoke" does not make it clear whether Grisha is suppressing his sexual urges or is still waiting to find his Claire (no pun intended), or is irritated by the somewhat shameless courtship behind the translucent door. This does not

really matter. What does matter is that he will not confront some aspect of his predicament.

Another sort of trouble that Grisha does not wish to face seems to be a cultural dilemma. A poet has his own access to extraordinary experience ("the hereafter standing slightly ajar"): he need not depend on falling in love. Grisha's evening is spent in an unlit room where "every object" has "shifted slightly under the influence of the outdoor rays" (p. 27); and "the noise of a car would curl up like a wispy column to be capitated by a honk at the crossing" (p. 28): the synaesthetic transformation of the familiar sound, which groups it with the images of the smoking chimney and, perhaps, the sister's cigarettes, is an experience of the kind that in *Speak, Memory* Nabokov describes as "leakings and drafts"¹⁹ that come, implicitly, from another dimension. Yet poetic experience alone does not turn one into a poet. "Beauty is momentary in the mind," says Peter Quince in Wallace Stevens's poem, "but in the flesh it is immortal." The hero of "Torpid Smoke" does not manage to capture beauty in the flesh of the linguistic medium. His tongue (*lingua, yazyk*) is but a "solitary blind toiler" (p. 29). The presence of Hoffmann and Hölderlin on his shelf suggests that he may be moving away from immediate contact with the living Russian language.

While her boy friend's "smart beige cap" and the bouquet of roses may suggest what attracts Grisha's sister in a suitor to whom her father objects, Hoffmann and, especially, Hölderlin may suggest the attraction that German culture holds for Grisha. (The legitimacy of this analogy may be supported by Nabokov's placing Pasternak's *Life, My Sister* on Grisha's favourite shelf—the title of Pasternak's collection connotes not an *Ada*-like incestuous romance but a sibling-like parallel between the lyrical hero and his somewhat estranged life.) In order to preserve the authentic life of one's own literary language during a permanent stay in a foreign country, one is well advised not to read books in the language of that country—Nabokov's own case is instructive: he avoided reading German books while in Germany but then read extensively in English before and after his arrival in America. Symptomatically, though most books on Grisha's shelf are twentieth century poetry and fiction, after the German authors there come only a volume of early nineteenth-century poetry (Baratynskii) and an obsolete Beadecker tourist guide to the no longer existing precataclysmic Russia. Grisha's language, the "solitary blind toiler," is facing a blind alley. The young man, however, does not acknowledge

the danger of a dead end. This is the second unconscious evasion that can lead the young poet to artistic dishonesty and thus further deprive his poems of the breath of authentic life.

The evasion that might have threatened the integrity of Nabokov's work is, however, the one of which Grisha is not guilty. What Nabokov had to face is, basically, the problem of realism in exploring the conflict between aesthetic pursuits and human commitments. The heroes of his novels are placed into circumstances that facilitate decision making. They are spared those moral ambiguities that arise when the claims of personal relationships drain or subvert creative energy. Cincinnatus of *Invitation to a Beheading* can make his way towards "beings akin to him"²⁰ because everyone in his "hastily assembled and painted world"²¹ has failed him, freeing him from human commitments. Fyodor of *The Gift* is also free to pursue his course: the people to whom he is wholeheartedly committed do not interfere with his writing. Yet Nabokov knew that not every artist was so fortunate. Artistic honesty demanded attention to the conflict between creativity and personal commitments in the case when the commitments impede the artist yet cannot be rejected as cavalierly as at the end of *Invitation to a Beheading*. In the design of *The Gift* there is no place for this theme. Therefore, (in words of the Foreword to *Mary*) Nabokov got rid of it,²² for a time at least, through "Torpid Smoke." That left him free to show the satisfactory balance between communication and isolation maintained by the protagonist of *The Gift*.

The story of (and in) "Torpid Smoke" may shed some light on similar cases in literary history: Conrad, for instance, could not complete *Under Western Eyes* without interrupting his work on that novel in order to write "The Secret Sharer"; Dostoevski had to interrupt the work on *Crime and Punishment* in order to dash off *The Gambler*. There were, of course, financial considerations in Dostoevski's case, yet it is significant how carefully, how almost completely, the theme of gambling is excluded from *Crime and Punishment*.

"Torpid Smoke" is a story about the possible human price of poetic inspiration. Implicitly, however, it is also a story about the channelling of creative energies. These energies are drained, to some extent, by personal commitments, yet they seem to be drained to a much greater extent by conscious or unconscious efforts to repress a clamorous unprocessed inner turmoil.

NOTES

1. Marina Naumann, for instance, notes that Nabokov's early short stories "provided sound training for his mature and better known work." *Blue Evenings in Berlin: Nabokov's Short Stories of the 1920s* (New York: New York University Press, 1978), p. 9. "Torpid Smoke," however, belongs to a later period than that discussed by Naumann, and its relationship with Nabokov's major works is of a different nature.
2. Here and elsewhere the references in the text are to the English version of the story in Vladimir Nabokov, *A Russian Beauty and Other Stories* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1973), pp. 25–33.
3. Vladimir Nabokov, *Pale Fire* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1962), p. 63.
4. Vladimir Nabokov, *Bend Sinister* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1947), p. 192.
5. Vladimir Nabokov, *Invitation to a Beheading* (London: Heinemann, 1957), p. 20.
6. Nabokov, *Bend Sinister*, p. 95.
7. Vladimir Nabokov, *Invitation to a Beheading* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1972), p. 93.
8. Nabokov, *Invitation to a Beheading*, p. 74.
9. Vladimir Nabokov, *The Annotated Lolita*, ed. Alfred Appel (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1970), p. 11.
10. "Average reality," says Nabokov in *Strong Opinions* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1981), p. 118, "begins to rot and stink as soon as the act of individual creation ceases to animate a subjectively perceived texture."
11. Vladimir Nabokov, *Vesna v Fial'te (Spring in Fialta)* (Ann Arbor: Ardis, 1956), p. 78.
12. Guidelines for the comparative analysis of *audition colorée* in Nabokov's Russian and English texts may be found in Donald Barton Johnson, *Worlds in Regression: Some Novels of Vladimir Nabokov* (Ann Arbor: Ardis, 1985), pp. 10–27.
13. Vladimir Nabokov, *The Defense*, trans. Michael Scammell in collaboration with the author, (New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1964), pp. 80–81.
14. Nabokov, *The Defense*, p. 79.
15. Nabokov, *The Defense*, p. 231.
16. As Wolfgang Iser has observed, the function of didactic literature is "not to produce an aesthetic object that will rival the thought system of the social world, but to offer a *compensation* for specific deficiencies in specific thought systems." Iser, *The Act of Reading: A Theory of Aesthetic Response* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1978), p. 101.
17. Nabokov, *Invitation to a Beheading*, p. 70.
18. Vladimir Nabokov, *Look at the Harlequins!* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1974), p. 26.

19. Vladimir Nabokov, *Speak, Memory: An Autobiography Revisited* (New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1966), p. 35.
 20. Vladimir Nabokov, *Invitation to a Beheading* (New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1959), p. 223.
 21. Nabokov, *Invitation*, 2 p. 51.
 22. Cf. Vladimir Nabokov, *Mary* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1970), p. xi.
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