

VLADIMIR NABOKOV AND WOMEN AUTHORS

by Maxim D. Shrayer

She had imagination—the muscle of the soul—and her imagination was of a particularly strong, almost masculine quality.

Nabokov. *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight*

I have been reading—after Fielding—a very curious fat book, with incredible Victorian coils of cogness about it—Daniel Deronda by G. Eliot.

Nabokov to Edmund Wilson, June 20, 1953

In Nabokov's epistolary short story "The Admiralty Spire" (1933), the *Vorgesichtliche* is a Russian novel by an unknown émigré author published in one of the Baltic countries in the interwar period. The novel's title, *The Admiralty Spire*, borrowed as it is from the prologue to Pushkin's *The Bronze Horseman*, catches the eye of the protagonist, who is a professional Russian writer. He picks it up, reads it, and then dashes off an indignant response to the author. Although the name printed on the cover is a male one, Sergei Soltsev, the protagonist opens his letter with an address to a woman. He conjectures that the author of the novel is a female who obtained private information from his first beloved, a Russian by the name of Katya, with whom he had not been in touch for sixteen years. Now, as the middle-aged, caustic émigré writer reads a mediocre and overwritten tale of his own first love, the maimed memories provoke him to seek literary revenge. And avenge himself he does! In addition to a number of transparent parallels with the Tamara chapters of Nabokov's autobiographies, the story pre-

sents a series of authorial gestures, that—dismissive as they may be—attempt to parse a poetics of women's writing. What does Nabokov mean when he proclaims that "every sentence [of this novel] buttons to the left"? In thinking of Nabokov's uneasy relationship with women authors, I am bewildered by the readiness with which some of Nabokov's critics apply an omnibus solution to this rather complex problem. Must one take as a guiding principle a remark Nabokov allowed himself in a letter to Edmund Wilson in the context of discussing a reading list for his fiction course: "I dislike Jane [Austen], and am prejudiced, in fact, against all women writers. They are in another class" (May 5, 1950)? Was Nabokov indeed misogynistic as a reader of and writer about women authors?

First, briefly, what do we know about Nabokov and women writers? A number of them, both major and minor, have speaking parts in Nabokov's biography. Among others, they include, in order of their first appearance, the Russians Zinaida Gippius, Marina Tsvetaeva, Raisa Blokh, Zinaida Shakhovskaya, Nina Berberova, Anna Prismanova, Aleksandra Tolstaia, and the Americans Mary McCarthy, Katherine White, and Dorothy Parker. Among Nabokov's correspondence files at the Library of Congress, one runs across a curious handwritten note, signed by the first wave émigré poet Anna Prismanova. Undated, it was most likely given to Nabokov during one of his visits to Paris in the 1930s. In the top right corner one notices the words "Proshu peredat'" (Please pass on) while the word "Parizh" (Paris) is written beneath the text and Prismanova's signature. The note is a quatrain in iambic pentameter, written out as six lines of prose:

V. Sirinu

Byvaiut ljudi-zolo-
tye ruki, byvaeit i
iz plameni stena....
Byvaeet golos, dannyi
na poruki, no zhizn'

zhivaiia-golosu tsena.

In a literal translation, the note reads as this: "There are people with gold hands, there are walls of fire... There is a voice released on bail, but only life itself can put a price on such a voice." What is Prismanova cautioning Nabokov against?

During the Russian years, Nabokov reviewed a number of books by women as well as their contributions to émigré collections and periodicals. Here is a tentative, probably incomplete catalogue of names and works, arranged according to the years in which Nabokov's reviews appeared. 1927: poetry of Irina Kondratovich and Ekaterina Tauber. 1928: poetry collection by Raisa Blokh (*Moi gorod* [My City]) and chapbook by Marian Stoian (*Kham* [Vulgarian; also the Old Testament name Ham]); poetry collection by Nina Snesareva-Kazakova (*Dasviatitsia imia tvoe* [Hallowed Be Thy Name]); poems of Anna Prismanova. 1929: Marina Tsvetaeva's drama in verse; Tsvetaeva's essay with translations of Rilke's letters, K. Imantseva's poetry, and criticism by Nadezhda Melnikova-Papoushek; collection of stories by Avgusta Damanskaia (*Zheny* [Wives]); novel by Irina Odoevseva (*Izoida* [Isoidel]). 1931: poetry by Ekaterina Tauber, Sofia Krasavina, and Tatiana Shiltman; novel by Nina Berberova (*Poslednie i pervye* [The Last and the First]). 1940: collection under the co-editorship of Zinaida Gippius (*Literaturnyi smotr* [Literary Inspection]) with an essay by Lidia Chervinskaia (with the exception of the latter review, Nabokov's reviews appeared in the Berlin émigré newspaper *Rul'* [The Rudder]). Thus, Nabokov's reviews analyzed poetry by 10 women, prose fiction by 3 women, and criticism by 4 women, a total of 17 authors in 13 reviews. Only one review—that of Berberova's novel *The Last and the First* (1929)—is outright positive. The review of Damanskaia's stories is cautiously encouraging. The rest of Nabokov's criticism about women authors is in the destructive vein, ranging from laconically dismissive remarks in passing ("Ek. Tauber, who generally writes very clearly and very tediously") to entire reviews pro-

elled by morbid irony (about Irina Odoevseva's novel: "All of this is written, as they say, 'dryly,'—which for some reason is considered an achievement—and in 'short phrases,'—which is also, they say, a plus"). Are Nabokov's reviews of women authors on the whole more negative than his reviews of male authors? Probably not, although they do betray two gender-specific tendencies. The first has to do with Nabokov's misgivings about the influence of Anna Akhmatova, the second with his aversion for female narrators in prose.

Finally, a memorable cohort of female authors passes through Nabokov's fiction. This bilingual procession sets out in *Glory*, where Martin loses his virginity in the arms of Alla Chernosvitova, a fictional poetess and a composite caricature of the women of the Russian Silver Age. Alla's poetry, as the reader finds out, "left [Martin] somewhat perplexed. When he said that Constantinope was anything but amethyst-colored, Alla objected that he was devoid of poetic imagination" (*Glory*, 30). Next comes the "Madam" of "The Admiralty Spire," allegedly a female belletrist hiding behind a male pseudonym. I should add that in 1937, Nabokov also composed a not very successful parody of Tsvetaeva's jaggedly emotional verse, while both *The Gift* and his last Russian story, "Vasily Shishkov," brilliantly poke fun at Zinaida Gippius, who informs the character of Christopher Mortus in the novel and makes a cameo appearance in the story as "an ample female (a translstress [sic], I believe, or perhaps a theosophist) with a gloomy little husband resembling a black brelogue" (*Stories*, 498). The procession of Russian female litterateurs completes its journey with the character of Pnin's ex-wife Liza Wind, who "wrote verse—mainly in halting anapaest" (*Pnin*, 44). Vladimir Vladimirovich, Nabokov's namesake and the narrator of *Pnin*, unequivocally connects Liza with a kind of crude version of the cultural mythology surrounding the life and poetry of early Anna Akhmatova: "she went on with her psychodramatics and her lyrical overpositing, laying all over the place like an Easter rabbit, and in those green and mauve poems—about the child she wanted to bear, and the lovers she wanted to have, and St. Petersburg

(courtesy Anna Akhmatov)—every intonation, every image, every simile had been used before by other rhyming rabbits” (*Prin*, 44-45). While in *Glory*, Alla’s character, but not her verse, seems to carry something of the mythologized aura of the early Akhmatova, in *Prin* Liza is most certainly an epigone of Akhmatova’s verse: she imitates several emblematic poems from the collections *Evering* (1912) and *Rosary* (1914). In addition to an Akhmatovesque poem that Liza recites to Prin during her visit to Waindell, the reader’s knowledge of Liza’s verse also comes from a poem the narrator quotes while recollecting his prewar encounters with Prin’s ex-wife. We find out that Liza asks the narrator, who is a Russian writer, “if she could send [him] for appraisal a batch of her poems” and later sends him “a fair sample of her production [...] the kind of stuff that émigré rhymesterettes wrote after Akhmatova” (*Prin*, 180-181). This episode reenacts—some fifteen years later—the main events of the story “Vasily Shishkov” and also—if I may so speculate—one of Nabokov’s real life meetings with émigré female poets in Berlin, Prague or Paris.

All the above brings me to a very curious letter Nabokov wrote to Zinaida Shakhovskaia on 25 July 1933 (the letter is at the Library of Congress). I will quote a long passage in a literal English translation from Nabokov’s Russian:

It so happens that recently I have been reading many books of the female gender [knig zheneskogo polia]. *Facts Only*, *Sir* [Tol’ko fakty, ser. 1933] by Mrs. Kunina, for instance, and *The Body* [Telo, 1933] by Mrs. Bakunina. The first is far from being untalented, but she writes unevenly, breaking into a gallop, and the ending is no good. The second is not very talented, but writes as if she were washing the floor à grandeaun, noisily wringing out the black-wet rag over a bucket, from which she then lets the reader drink: altogether a boring and crippled book. My translator [Doussial Ergaz, published (in French) a book of stories, which were praised by [Mikhail] Osorgin (whom she also translates). Also: everything written by Virginia Woolf

and Katherine Mansfield. [This means that Nabokov was likely to have read, among Woolf’s other books, *Mrs. Dalloway*, *To the Lighthouse*, *A Room of One’s Own*, and *The Waves*; and also Mansfield’s three lifetime collections of stories, *In a German Pension*, *Bliss*, and *The Garden Party*]. You might read, say, *Orlando* [1928]: this is an exemplar of first-rate posthost. Mansfield is better, but there is also something terribly irritating about her, a banal fear of banality and this flowery sweetness. Her *Journal* [1927] deserves some attention. I even felt like writing an essay about these ladies [ob etikh damakh], but I kept myself from doing it.

Just as Lolita’s class list belongs, in Nabokov’s own admission, to the “nerves” of the novel, this passage in the letter to Shakhovskaia occupies the position of the spinal cord in the body of Nabokov’s writings about women authors. Written after *Glory* and Nabokov’s reviews of the late 1920s and early 1930s and containing a sizable reading list, the letter tells of Nabokov’s engrossment in the works of Russian and English women authors. If one also considers the fact that Nabokov’s letter was written in July of 1933, only two months after he had composed “The Admiralty Spire,” one arrives at an intriguing juncture in Nabokov’s career. If the fictional statement of “The Admiralty Spire” and the epistolary one of the letter to Shakhovskaia summarize Nabokov’s response to writings by women, what is one to conclude about his position?

My strategy has been to reread the works by women authors whom Nabokov is known to have read and/or reviewed while also assessing both the meaning and fairness of his critical remarks. I have also sought to identify the possible correspondences between the writings by women to which Nabokov responded and his fictional women authors. Finally, I have wondered whether the fiction by women authors that Nabokov had reacted to ended up leaving a trace in his own prose.

I will start with Nabokov’s responses to Russian female poets. The leitmotif here was that Anna Akhmatova

had had a detrimental impact on women's poetry in emigration. Consider these comments: "It would be embarrassing to find fault with Irina Kondratovich. Most female poets like to write 'mouth' [rot] instead of 'lips' [guby] and to extol sorceresses, silks and Pierro with Columbine. And Ekaterina Tauber has a feature pertaining to all poetesses [poetessami]. This is the use of the form "you" [the Russian formal *ty*], not "thou" [the familiar *ty*]. Her poems have not been spared the ruinous influence of Akhmatova, a lovely poet [poetessy prelestnoi], no doubt, but one who should not be imitated." Nabokov concluded his review of Raisa Blokh's collection *My City* (1928) as follows: "Thus in the end all this [poetry]-golden. It's [svetlen'ko] and slightly permeated with Akhmatova's cold perfume (something almost unavoidable in women's poetry)-may give the undiscriminating reader the impression of something pleasant, simple, birdlike." And here is a very telling opening of the review of Irina Snegareva-Kazakova's collection *Hallowed Be Thy Name* (1928): "Anna Akhmatova impacts contemporary female poets in a detrimental fashion. She originated this mixture of feminine sinfulness and devoutness [smes' zhenskoi grekhovnosti i bogomolnosti]: ironically, in 1946 Stalin's henchman Andrei Zhdanov would characterize Akhmatova as 'a nun and harlot, with whom harlotry is mixed with prayer!'" In *Gloriy*, Nabokov writes this of the poetess Alla: "her own poems, so sonorous, so spicy, always dressed the man in the polite form (you, not 'thou')... One of them... began thus:

On purple silks, beneath an Empire pall,
You vampirized me and caressed me all,
And we tomorrow die, burned to the end:

Our lovely bodies with the sand will blend (*Gloriy*, 29). In the Russian original, the second line is: "On vsiu menia laskal, vpvivalas' rrom vampirizmy" (literally: He caressed me all, stinging me with his vampire's mouth). The image of an Akhmatova epigone acquires caricatural proportions in *Prin*, where as late as the 1940s and early 1950s, Liza's poetry continues to overflow with stock images

from Akhmatova's first two collections. In the following example, Alla's poem finds a most direct antecedent in Akhmatova's famous "Vse my brazhniki zdes', bludnitsy..." (We are all drunks here, harlots, 1913).

Alla in <i>Prin</i> :	Akhmatova in <i>Rosary</i> :
la nadelia temnoe plat'e.	Ty kurishi' chernuiu trybku.
I monashenki ia skromnei:	Tak stranen' dymok nad nei.
Iz slonovoi kosti raspiat'e	la nadelia uzkuu iubku.
Nad kholodnoi postel'iu moel	Chub kazat'sia eshche s'ime!
(I have put on a dark dress	(You smoke a black pipe.
And am more modest than a nun:	How strange is the thin smoke
An ivory crucifix	rising from it.
Is over my cold bed [<i>Prin</i> , 56]).	I put on a tight skirt,
	To look even more slender.)

Did Nabokov object to Akhmatova's poetry or just the appropriation of her literary legacy by female poets? What did he resent, literary personae fashioned specifically after the *femmes fatales* of the early Akhmatova or any female poetic voices speaking to the woman's condition? (According to Lidia Chukovskaia's *Notes about Anna Akhmatova*, Akhmatova regarded *Prin* as a direct jibe at her, while Chukovskaia herself noted this in her memoir: "I also do not like the book... but does it lampoon Akhmatova [paskvil' li na Akhmatovu?] or parody her female epigones [parodiia na ee podrazhatel'nitsy?] it is difficult to say"). On thing seems clear: In reviewing émigré poetry, Nabokov convincingly advanced the notion that Akhmatova's influence upon female poets had been deleterious, and he chose the victims of his remarks accordingly. It is curious, for instance, that he never picked a fight with the poetry of Irina Odoevseva, a much better poet than most of those whom Nabokov critiqued, and one whose signature in poetry was robust and muscular ballads quite far afield from Akhmatova's poetics. Moreover, of all the women poets whom Nabokov discussed in his reviews, only two, Marina Tsvetaeva and Anna Prismanova, represented real competition for Nabokov, and in both cases he failed to offer grounds for

his dismissive remarks at their expense.

Another case in point are Nabokov's reviews of and remarks about fiction by Russian women authors. Here the responses are far less uniform than those addressed to female poets. Nabokov's review of Damanskaia's collection, *Wives* (1929), proves that he was capable of an objective evaluation of a woman's literary work. Damanskaia's stories, although ably constructed, suffered from a flatness of language as well as a superficial, Baedeker-like tone of descriptions, and probably deserved Nabokov's lukewarm review. In his acerbic review of Odoevtseva's *Isolde* (1929), Nabokov correctly pointed out the novel's principal faults—a bric-à-brac set of characters, including a Scottish aristocrat in love with a precocious Russian teenager, a contrived ending with both a murder and a double suicide, voyeuristic sensualism aimed at stirring the imagination of the middle-brow émigré reader.

While Damanskaia's stories and Odoevtseva's novel had very little in common save their authors' gender, the two Russian novels that Nabokov discussed in his letter to Shakhovskaia do share a central feature of their poetics. Nabokov paired up Ekaterina Bakunina's *The Body* and Irina Kunina's *Facts Only*, Sir not only because they were both published in Berlin in 1933 and their authors' rhyming last and first names caught his punning eyes. Both novels are narrated by female protagonists and in places employ Woolfian interior monologue. Disrelishing female narrators, Nabokov attached Virginia Woolf's minor Russian imitators in a private letter while electing not to demolish them in a critical essay.

The subject of Nabokov's responses to women writers of prose, both non-Russian and Russian, awaits its further investigators. Jane Austen is clearly a case in point, and Simon Karlinsky famously stated in his 1979 introduction to *The Nabokov-Wilson Letters* that "with Jane Austen...it was [Edmund Wilson's] particular triumph to overcome Nabokov's typically Russian prejudice against women novelists." Ellen Pifer has been doing pioneering work on Nabokov and British female writers

(Nabokov and Mary Shelley; Nabokov and Austen). Three directions of future research on Nabokov and women authors strike me as the most deserving of future research. The first is the matter of Nabokov and George Eliot. I am puzzled by the lack of Nabokov's critical response to this British woman novelist with a male pen-name and the most Tolstoyan sensibility of all the Victorian authors. Does the death of Nabokov's reaction reveal more than it conceals? Equally intriguing is Nabokov's reaction to Katherine Mansfield. Could it be that in Mansfield's conscious (if not quite successful) emulation of Chekhov's style, the territorial Nabokov probably saw an act of trespassing on the boundaries of the artistic estate that he was charting for himself in the 1930s and even prior to switching to English? Perhaps even more fascinating is the case of Nabokov and Russian émigré women novelists. To take just one example, both Odoevtseva's *Isolde*, which Nabokov deplored, and Berberova's important novel *The Last and the First*, which Nabokov praised, are among the émigré subtexts of his novel *Glory*. As with his male contemporaries in exile, Nabokov absorbed fiction of varying quality by expatriate Russian women, and hypertextual reactions to the prose of émigré women are therefore likely to be found in his Russian and American works.

Let me then go back to the starting point of these provisional remarks, to the story "The Admiralty Spire." If Nabokov indeed wrote "The Admiralty Spire" (May 1933) in response to the novels by the Russian and English female authors he had read earlier that year and contemplated taking up in a critical essay, what sort of statement does his story make about female authors writing about themselves in the first person? There is so much brilliance in Nabokov's exiting trick in the story—recall his "An Evening of Russian Poetry," where "the conjurer collects his poor belongings/—the colored handkerchief, the magic rope / the double-bottomed rhymes, the cage, the song" (PP, 162). Having pierced one by one every secret bubble of the feminine persona who narrates the novel *The Admiralty Spire* and now addressing her

with the name of his first love, having deflated along the way his own "arrogant rubber fatman who...clowned around at the beginning." Nabokov's male author ends his epistolary diatribe with a salutary possibility: "perhaps, after all, Katya, in spite of everything, a rare coincidence has occurred and it is not you who wrote that tripe, and your equivocal but enchanting image has not been mutilated. In that case, please forgive me, colleague Solntsev" (Stories, 357). The possibility that the author of the wretched novel is not a female but a male actualizes a quintessential Nabokovian situation, where the ideal reader is the author's complete double, to whom it makes perfect sense that the male writer Vladimir Nabokov authors the male protagonist of the story "The Admiralty Spire" who is writing an epistolary review of the novel *The Admiralty Spire* by the male author Sergei Solntsev whom Nabokov also authored and who may or may not be a woman author lurking behind a fictional male façade. What troubled Nabokov about certain writings by women writers was certainly not the gender of their authors—he was, to be sure, above crude sociological misogyny. Rather, Nabokov probably considered it a mark of low artistry when a woman author created a feminine persona and told the story in her name. And yet, when in 1935 Nabokov undertook to compose a short story told by a woman, this resulted in one of his weakest works of fiction.

The voice of the pathetic heroine of "A Slice of Life" is a potpourri of everything Nabokov must have detested in women's writing and mocked in his reviews. This émigré woman leaves the room "without even consulting [her] mirror, just as [she] was—in the rumpled dress of a slatternly after lunch siesta." Of her black dress she says that she wears mourning: "for everybody, for everything, for my own self, for Russia, for the fetuses scraped out of me." In the "looking glass of the hallway" she sees herself "as resembling a forlorn little nun." Her gestures, her phrases, her looks of "gear sadness" and her "lips masked by the fringe of [her] black shawl" (Stories, 406-08) seem to have leaped to Nabokov's story from the verses of Akhmatova's epigones among émigré women. In the end,

this bleak feuilletonistic piece does not succeed as a parody of a woman's voice; instead drawing the reader's attention to the crooked seams of its own construction—as though a master blacksmith were doing needlework.

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