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Nabokov and Some Poets of Russian Modernism

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In the first of two imaginary conversations that the protagonist of Nabokov's novel *Dar* (*The Gift*) has with the poet Koncheyev, the great flowering of Russian poetry at the turn of the century, sometimes called the Silver Age, is evoked and illustrated by fragments from poems by Konstantin Balmont and Aleksandr Blok¹. The protagonist mentions that in his early youth he "accepted ecstatically, gratefully, completely, without critical carpings, all the five poets whose names began with 'B' — five senses of the new Russian poetry."²

To be sure, Fyodor Godunov-Cherdyntsev in *The Gift* is not the author's self-portrait, as Nabokov pointed out in the foreword to the English translation. But Fyodor's literary beginnings and preferences do coincide with Nabokov's, as can be seen from the author's various autobiographies³. Anyone familiar with Russian poetry of the Symbolist and post-Symbolist periods, can identify with great ease four of those five poets, whose names begin with B: Valery Briusov and Konstantin Balmont of the senior generation of Symbolists (poets first published in the early 1890s) and Aleksandr Blok and Andrei Bely among the junior Symbolists (those who made their literary debuts in the first decade of the 20th century). There is no other modernist poet, among those who were active between 1890 and the 1920s, whose name begins with B and who could be placed on the same level with these four.

But if one thinks about this question for a number of years and takes into consideration Nabokov's often unpredictable and inexplicable literary tastes and preferences, one will come to see that the fifth poet must have been Ivan Bunin (1870-1953). Bunin was Russia's first Nobel Prize winner for literature and a writer noted for his lush if traditional prose, the prose which Anton Chekhov has compared to bouillon concentrate and Nabokov has characterized as "brocaded" and masterfully parodied in the Russian version of his autobiography⁴.

Famed for his fiction, Bunin was little-known as a poet. There are, however, numerous testimonies on record to Nabokov's exceptionally high opinion of Bunin's poetry. In 1929, Nabokov published a review of Bunin's volume *Selected Poems*⁵ where he proclaimed the entire poetry of Russian Modernism obsolete and forgotten and called Bunin the most important Russian poet since the death of Fyodor Tiutchev in 1873, thus immolating on Bunin's altar such magnificent 20th century poets as Aleksandr Blok, Osip Mandelstam and Vladislav Khodasevich, all of whom Nabokov is known to have admired. No other Russian poet or critic one can think of ever shared with Nabokov this excessive valuation of Bunin's poetry.

In a private conversation, I heard the late Véra Nabokov state that her husband was a significant poet of the Bunin school. Nabokov himself wrote in all three versions of his autobiography that he prefers Bunin's poetry to his prose, a position as strange as voicing a preference for Nabokov's own verse over his novels. The existence of such a thing as a "Bunin school of poetry" is also something that would puzzle literary historians. There have been major 20th century Russian poets who have deliberately used the verbal guise of 19th

¹ Vladimir Nabokov, *Dar* (New York: Izdatel'stvo imeni Chekhova, 1952), p. 85 without attribution of the cited poetry. In English, *The Gift* (n.p.: G.P. Putnam's Sons, 1963), p. 88, with attribution to "poor old Balmont" and Blok.

² *The Gift*, *ibid.*

³ Brian Boyd, *Vladimir Nabokov. The Russian Years*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1990), pp. 462-465.

⁴ Vladimir Nabokov, *Drugie berega* (New York: Izdatel'stvo imeni Chekhova, 1954), pp. 243-244.

⁵ Vladimir Nabokov, "Iv. Bunin" in *Rasskazy. Priglasenie na kazn'. Esse, interv'iu, retsenzii*. (Moscow: Kniga, 1989), pp. 373-376. Originally published in *Rul'* (Berlin, May 22, 1929). Annotations to the 1989 Moscow volume cite Nabokov's eulogistic epistle in verse addressed to Bunin the poet, p. 520. A review of the same collection of Bunin's poetry by Vladislav Khodasevich, while favorable, does not go to the laudatory extremes of Nabokov's review. Khodasevich offers a detailed explanation for the incompatibility between Bunin's poetry and that of his Symbolist contemporaries. See Vladislav Khodasevich, "O poezii Bunina." *Vozrozhdenie*, n° 1535 (Paris, August 15, 1929).

century poetry, Osip Mandelstam or Vladislav Khodasevich with his utilization of the language and style of Pushkin and, to a greater degree, of Evgeny Baratynsky in order to express his own, acutely modernistic sensibility.

But Ivan Bunin as a poet, both in his themes and his language, is a wholly 19th century figure, untouched by the revolution effected in the 1890s by the Symbolists in the metric, thematic and stylistic aspects of Russian poetry. There was no way for Nabokov or anyone else to follow him as a poet, except through imitating the standard verse of the pre-Symbolist age.

We know that Nabokov disliked the idea of literary schools, groups and influences, being always interested in a writer's individual achievement. But in his outline for a course on Russian poetry during the period 1875-1925, cited by Brian Boyd from the notes of my Berkeley colleague, Richard Buxbaum⁶ (who was a student in that course), we find three schemes of literary filiation and succession, unique in Nabokov. The schemes are: (1) Tiutchev-Fet-Blok; (2) Benediktov-Bely-Pasternak; (3) (Pushkin)-Bunin-Khodasevich.

The first triad is easy to interpret: it represents Russian Symbolism and its nineteenth-century precursors. Mid-century poets Fyodor Tiutchev and Afanasy Fet adumbrated the use of accentual verse and metaphysical themes developed and perfected by Symbolists such as Aleksandr Blok. The second triad is also easily decipherable: it is a genealogy of the word-conscious, verbally innovative poetry of Russian Futurism, but with a built-in malicious trapdoor. The poet Vladimir Benediktov (1807-1873) achieved a resonant success with his first collection, published in 1835. His poetry amazed his contemporaries with its exacerbated metaphorism, carried at times to a *reductio ad absurdum*. For a few years, contemporaries considered Benediktov a serious rival to Pushkin. Then, an annihilating review by the radical utilitarian critic Vissarion Belinsky dealt Benediktov's reputation an irreparable blow (as the novelist Ivan Turgenev remembered, all of Russia saw Benediktov as a major poet on the eve of Belinsky's review and as a nonentity on the day after it).

Now, Nabokov devoted the whole of Chapter Four and a good portion of Chapter Three of *The Gift* to exposing the inadequacies of the critical school engendered by Belinsky, the school of which the protagonist of Chapter Four, Nikolai Chernyshevsky, was a prominent exponent. The first edition of the complete Russian text of *The Gift* is prefaced by a note about the deletion of Chapter Four and "one epithet" during the original publication of the novel in the journal *Contemporary Annals*.⁷ The deleted and reinstated epithet in Chapter Three was the qualification of Belinsky as "an appealing ignoramus" (*simpatichtnyi neuch*).⁸ And yet Nabokov went on accepting till the end of his days certain literary judgements that descended from the Belinsky-Chernyshevsky school. They formed the basis of his views on French 17th and 18th century neoclassicism (cf. his scorn for Racine and Molière), on much of 18th century Russian literature and on early 19th century Russian writers of verse comedies. This is also whence the idea of Benediktov's poetry as deserving nothing but contempt comes. In his 1970 epigram on Boris Pasternak, Nabokov tried to destroy him by stressing the affinity of his poetry to that of Benediktov.⁹ But there has been a partial rehabilitation of Benediktov by students of Russian Futurist poetry who can now see in his work an anticipation of the favorite trope of the Futurists, the "developed (or, more precisely, 'unfurled') metaphor" (*razvernutaia metafora*) as exemplified by Mayakovsky's extended comparison of a heart aflame with love to a burning house in his long poem *The Cloud in Trousers* or Pasternak's 1915 poem *Improvisation* (*Improvizatsiia*), entirely built on the metaphor of playing the piano as birds feeding their clamorous nestlings.¹⁰

So while Nabokov was entirely right about the affinity of Pasternak (and other Russian Futurists) to Benediktov, this juxtaposition is no longer as odious as he might have thought.

⁶ Brian Boyd, *Vladimir Nabokov. The American Years* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1991), p. 137.

⁷ See note 1 above.

⁸ Personal communication from the author.

⁹ Vladimir Nabokov, *Stikhi* (Ann Arbor: Ardis, 1979), p. 296. Nabokov likened Pasternak to Benediktov as early as 1927: Nabokov, *Rasskazy. Priglasenie...*, p. 346.

¹⁰ Boris Pasternak, *Stikhotvoreniia i poemy* (Moscow and Leningrad: Sovetskii pisatel', 1965), pp. 95-96.

The middle link of the genealogy-of-Futurism triad, Andrei Bely, is also absolutely on target. Despite his usual classification as a second-generation Symbolist, the idea that Bely the poet is the progenitor of Russian Futurist poetry has been postulated by both D.S. Mirsky and Vladimir Markov.¹¹ Nabokov's own involvement with Bely was in the latter's capacity as novelist and theoretician of versification rather than poet.¹² But Nabokov must have known Bely's poetry well enough to have placed it in the middle of the trajectory from Benediktov to Pasternak, injurious as he thought the first link of the triad must have been for the second and third.

It is the last of Nabokov's three filiation schemes (Pushkin)-Bunin-Khodasevich, that is hard to take. On the one hand it implies that Pushkin had no poetic progeny until Bunin and on the other it makes Vladislav Khodasevich, who was at one time a friend and disciple of Valery Briusov and an associate of Andrei Bely and Nikolai Gumilëv, into a literary descendant of Ivan Bunin — an impossibility in terms of both chronology and poetics.¹³ In his obituary of Khodasevich, Nabokov proposed a much more plausible genealogy: "This poet, the greatest Russian poet of our time, Pushkin's literary descendant in Tiutchev's line of succession [...]"¹⁴ The only imaginable way of getting the names of Pushkin, Bunin and Khodasevich into a meaningful sequence is by adding Vladimir Nabokov, the poet, as the descendant of the other three.

"I note incidentally that professors of literature still assign these two poets [i.e., Blok and Mandelstam] in different schools. There is only one school: that of talent," Nabokov told Herbert Gold in an interview in 1966.¹⁵ Nabokov's dislike for groupings and literary schools led him, as we can see here, to a negation of chronology and of the poets' voluntary choice of creative philosophies. Yet he repeatedly expressed his admiration for the new dimensions in themes and versification introduced into Russian poetry by the early Symbolists. He gave Briusov and Balmont credit for their pioneering, even if he wrote of their poetry with contempt.¹⁶

He gave no credit at all to the most profound and influential of the early Symbolists, Zinaida Gippius, the poet who inaugurated, on a regular basis, accentual verse, assonance rhymes and the mystical outlook that define the whole of Russian Symbolist poetry. With a reckless audacity worthy of Leo Tolstoy's judgement that Shakespeare, Beethoven and Baudelaire were inept artists, Nabokov claimed that Zinaida Gippius was surpassed in talent by her cousin, Nabokov's one-time teacher of literature, Vladimir Gippius.¹⁷ (Elsewhere, Nabokov

¹¹ D.S. Mirsky, *A History of Russian Literature*, Francis W. Whitfield, ed. (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1960), p. 463. Vladimir Markov. "Georgy Ivanov: Nihilist as Light-Bearer," in Simon Karlinsky and Alfred Appel, Jr., eds. *The Bitter Air of Exile: Russian Writers in the West 1922-1972* (Berkeley-Los Angeles-London: University of California Press, 1977), p. 140. ("[...] Tsvetaeva is an important component of another great twentieth-century triad — Mayakovsky-Pasternak-Tsvetaeva [deriving perhaps from Andrei Bely].")

¹² See Vladimir Alexandrov, "Nabokov and Bely" in Alexandrov, ed., *The Garland Companion to Vladimir Nabokov* (New York: Garland Publishing, Inc., 1995), pp. 358-366; and D. Barton Johnson, "Belyj and Nabokov: A Comparative Overview." *Russian literature* 9, n° 4 (1981), 379-402. About Nabokov's dependence on Bely's early theories of Russian versification, see G.S. Smith, "Notes on Prosody," *The Garland Companion...*, pp. 561-566.

¹³ On Nabokov's personal and literary connection to Khodasevich, see David Bethea. "Nabokov and Khodasevich," in *The Garland Companion...*, pp. 452-463. Particularly striking is the author's idea that Khodasevich saw in his friendship with Nabokov and in his critical championing of Nabokov's work a "passing of the torch" of Russian culture within the anti-Pushkinian milieu of Russian Paris in the 1930s. Bethea is quite right to stress that Khodasevich was the first critic to grasp the full extent of Nabokov's talent.

¹⁴ Vladimir Nabokov, "O Khodaseviche." Originally in *Sovremennye zapiski* (Contemporary Annals), (Paris, LIX, 1939). Reprinted in Nabokov, *Rasskazy. Priglasenie...*, pp. 400-402. In English, in the author's own translation, Karlinsky and Appel. *The Bitter Air of Exile*, pp. 83-87.

¹⁵ Vladimir Nabokov. *Strong Opinions* (New York: McGraw-Hill Book Company, 1973), p. 97.

¹⁶ On Briusov, *Drugie berega*, p. 243. On Balmont, Simon Karlinsky, ed., *The Nabokov-Wilson Letters* (New York: Harper Colophon Books, 1980), p. 43. On both, see "Iv. Bunin" cited in note 3 above.

¹⁷ Vladimir Nabokov. *Speak, Memory* (New York: G.P. Putnam's Sons, 1966), p. 238.

described Vladimir Gippius, who made his literary debut in 1893, as “a wonderful poet of the Bely school”¹⁸).

The animosity between Nabokov and Zinaida Gippius was reciprocal. She initiated it by requesting Nabokov’s father after the publication of his son’s first collection of juvenile poetry in 1916: “Please tell your son that he will never be a writer.”¹⁹ During their joint years of emigration, Gippius rejected Nabokov’s novels on the same grounds she had for rejecting Anton Chekhov’s fiction earlier: absence of mysticism and of Dostoevskian roots. The novelist and critic Dmitry Merezhkovsky who was the husband of Zinaida Gippius and whose views never differed from hers, classified Nabokov, together with Flaubert and Mark Aldanov, as a writer whose talent was ersatz: “Sirin, now — here you have a real mimicry of talent. The creature looks just like a twig, is the twig itself, but in fact it isn’t. His work may be a very delicate mimicry. And that in itself is a talent.”²⁰ About the fourth major figure of early Symbolism, in addition to Briusov, Balmont and Zinaida Gippius, the poet, novelist and playwright Fyodor Sologub, Nabokov had absolutely nothing to say.

Nabokov’s real link with Russian Symbolism came with the so-called second Symbolist generation: Viacheslav Ivanov, Aleksandr Blok and Andrei Bely. Nabokov had no interest in Ivanov but Blok and Bely were admittedly major influences.²¹ While Nabokov called Ivan Bunin the greatest contemporary poet only once, he bestowed that honor on Blok as well as on Vladislav Khodasevich in his writings and classes on several occasions each. Of the poetic schools (as a retired professor of literature, I do believe that such things exist) that descended from Symbolism while turning away from it, Nabokov had a great affinity with Acmeism and considerable difficulties with the several varieties of Futurism that came into being after 1910. The three principal Acmeist poets were Nikolai Gumilëv, Anna Akhmatova and Osip Mandelstam. It was Gumilëv who had the greatest impact on Nabokov. As Vladimir Alexandrov pointed out, Nabokov wrote admiring poems about Gumilëv as early as 1923 and as late as 1972.²² Nabokov’s high esteem for Mandelstam is also well attested. His attitude toward the poetry of Anna Akhmatova, which he called charming, is a bit problematic in view of his two wicked parodies of it in his novel *Pnin*.²³ But then, Nabokov also parodied the prose of Andrei Bely to which he owed so much, in a passage from *The Gift*, where he referred to it as “cabbage-flavored hexameters.”²⁴

Particularly fascinating is Nabokov’s interrelationship with the three major twentieth century poets who may be fitted into his second filiation scheme for the development of Russian poetry, Benediktov-Bely-Pasternak. These three are Vladimir Mayakovsky, Boris Pasternak and Marina Tsvetaeva. (Tsvetaeva would have bristled at the idea of being included among the Futurists or in any other literary school. But her verbally and metrically innovative mature poetry summarized all that was finest in the literary art of Russian Futurists. She was certainly aware that she was a poet of the same school as Mayakovsky and Pasternak).

¹⁸ *The Nabokov-Wilson Letters*, p. 102. Rather than being a disciple of Bely, Vladimir Gippius (1876-1941) was one of the lesser initiators of Russian Symbolism. After his first collection of poems published under the name Vladimir G... s, each succeeding one appeared under a different pen name selected from among the lesser contemporaries of Pushkin (Vladimir Bestuzhev, Vladimir Neledinsky). According to the commentator E.V. Ivanova (in *Russkaia poeziia Serebriianogo veka. 1890-1917. Antologiya* (Moscow: Nauka, 1993), p. 146), Vladimir Gippius kept changing his outlook and poetic manner with each new pen name. After ca. 1910 he switched from poetry to criticism.

¹⁹ Cited from *Drugie berega*, p. 206.

²⁰ Galina Kuznetsova, “Grasse Diary,” entry for November 14, 1930, in *The Bitter Air of Exile*, p. 349.

²¹ On Nabokov and Blok, see David M. Bethea in *The Garland Companion*..., pp. 374-382.

²² Vladimir Alexandrov, “Nabokov and Gumilëv” in *The Garland Companion*..., pp. 428-433.

²³ See Lydia Chukovskaya, *Zapiski ob Anne Akhmatovoi* (Paris: YMCA Press, 1980), vol. 2, pp. 382-383. Akhmatova interpreted the two Russian poems in *Pnin* as a nasty lampoon (*paskvil’*) of her work; Chukovskaya, the chronicler of Akhmatova’s labors and days, thought the poems a parody on women poets who imitated Akhmatova. For confirmation of Chukovskaya’s position, see Alexander Dolinin’s annotation on Nabokov’s view of women poets who imitated Akhmatova in Nabokov, *Rasskazy. Priglasenie*..., p. 515.

²⁴ *Dar*, p. 177. In the English translation (*The Gift*, p. 179) these words are rendered as “the cabbage dactyls.”

The poetry of these three offers a close parallel to the lexically conscious, syntactically innovative aspects of Nabokov's mature prose, the quality which Western commentators unfamiliar with Russian literature have often attributed to the influence of James Joyce. The term "verbalism," initially launched by another stylistically innovative twentieth-century Russian writer, Aleksei Remizov, is applicable to the verse of these three poets, to Nabokov's and Bely's prose and to Remizov himself.

Curiously enough, Nabokov wrote parodies in verse on Mayakovsky, Pasternak and Tsvetaeva, though none of these parodies hit its target with such precision as the ones on Akhmatova in *Pnin*. These parodies were included in the posthumous collection of his Russian poetry, edited by Véra Nabokov (*Stikhi*, 1979), while the Akhmatova parodies are not to be found in the final section of the book, "Poems from Stories and Novels."

Of the three, Tsvetaeva was the only one Nabokov ever met personally. In the Russian version of his autobiography, Nabokov recalled how he accompanied Tsvetaeva "on a strange lyrical hike" "in a brisk springtime wind, over some hills of Prague," a stroll to which Brian Boyd assigned the date January 1924.²⁵ Nabokov apparently wrote a detailed account of his conversation with Tsvetaeva on that occasion in a letter to his then fiancée, Véra Slonim. After the publication of my first book on Tsvetaeva in 1966, the Nabokovs informed me of this letter, which was supposedly in their archive in New York, and promised to show me a copy. But in subsequent years that letter proved impossible to locate and was apparently lost.

Although Nabokov eventually came to admire Tsvetaeva's poetry, going to the extent of calling her "a poet of genius" and translating a stanza from one of her early poems into English,²⁶ he had little use for it during the late 1920s and throughout the 1930s, as his hostile reviews of it show.²⁷ In the late 1930s, both Vladimir and Véra Nabokov took an extremely hostile position vis-à-vis Tsvetaeva because of the pro-Soviet terrorist activities of her husband Sergei Efron. As subsequent revelations showed, the Nabokovs were right in their assumption that Tsvetaeva knew about her husband's and daughter's activities on behalf of the NKVD.²⁸

It was precisely during the year of the sensational revelations in the Russian émigré and French press about Sergei Efron's terrorist activities that Nabokov produced his parody of Tsvetaeva's style in the form of a brief groveling and worshipful ode to Joseph Stalin.²⁹ As Barry P. Scherr observed, the poem imitates Tsvetaeva's use of "startling enjambement."³⁰ Another trait on which Nabokov zeroed in was Tsvetaeva's sparingly used device of transmitting a word from one line to another and then rhyming the first half of that word. But the cacophonous verbal texture and the absence of any meter are most un-Tsvetaevan, the rhymes are also unlike her and, most untypical of all, is the sentiment of almost hysterical veneration of Stalin ascribed to her. A year before Nabokov's parody, Tsvetaeva wrote to a friend about her fear of returning to the USSR: "[...] I who cannot sign a salutary address to the great Stalin, for it was *not* I who called him great, and even if he is great, it is not my kind of greatness, and perhaps the most important thing — I hate every triumphant, bureaucratized church."³¹

Nabokov's attitude to Vladimir Mayakovsky, with whom he happened to share both the first name and the patronymic, is much simpler to determine. Though he included Mayakovsky, along with Blok and Khodasevich, in a course on Russian Modernism taught at Harvard in 1952,³² Nabokov identified this poet in both the Russian and the bilingual editions of his

²⁵ *Drugie berega*, pp. 242-243. Boyd, *Vladimir Nabokov. The Russian Years*, p. 221.

²⁶ *Speak, Memory*, p. 287. *The Bitter Air of Exile*, p. 93.

²⁷ For examples, see Nabokov, *Rasskazy. Priglasenie...*, pp. 346, 370 and 372.

²⁸ Simon Karlinsky. "Nekotorye problemy biografii Tsvetaevoi" (Certain problems of Tsvetaeva's biography), in Viktoria Schweitzer, Jane A. Taubman, Peter Scott and Tatyana Babyonyshev, eds. *Marina Tsvetaeva: One Hundred Years* (Berkeley: Berkeley Slavic Specialties, 1994), pp. 15-19.

²⁹ *Stikhi*, p. 257.

³⁰ Barry P. Scherr, "Poetry," in *The Garland Companion...*, p. 622.

³¹ Marina Tsvetaeva, *Pis'ma k A. Teskvoi* (Prague: Academia, 1969), p. 135.

³² Boyd, *Vladimir Nabokov. The American Years*, p. 212.

poetry, in notes to the poem “O praviteliakh” (“On Rulers”), as “a minor Soviet poet, endowed with a certain brilliance and bite, but fatally corrupted by the regime he so faithfully served.”³³

In the poem “On Rulers,” Mayakovsky is parodied only in the lines devoted to him (lines 52-60), especially in the suggestion that he would have rhymed the name Churchill with the Russian word “pereperCHIL,” overpeppered. Mayakovsky who knew no other languages but Russian and Georgian (which he learned as a child) was indeed notorious for his wrong stress of foreign names and words, indicating through his rhyming that he stressed both the first and the last names of the American President Woodrow Wilson on their last syllables. Otherwise, this poem does not break its lines into Mayakovskian “stepladder” (lesenka) pattern, nor does it use Mayakovsky-style rhymes, which Nabokov did in other poems dating from the same period, such as “Slava” (“Fame”).

Despite all this, Nabokov could quote some of Mayakovsky’s poetry when the occasion arose. In a new, much-expanded edition of *The Nabokov-Wilson Letters*, which is about to appear in German translation, appended to a previously unpublished letter from Edmund Wilson of December 1963 is a press clipping about Wilson’s difficulties with the Internal Revenue Service. Nabokov inscribed on the clipping a two-line citation from Mayakovsky’s poem “Conversation with a Tax Inspector About Poetry” (1926). Translated into English the citation reads: “Citizen tax inspector, /my word of honor, /Words cost a poet a pretty penny.” (Grazhdanin fininspektor, /chestnoe slovo, /poëtu v kopechku vletaiut slova³⁴).

If Nabokov began by disliking Tsvetaeva’s poetry and then came to admire it, and held a generally negative view of Mayakovsky’s, his views on the poetry of Boris Pasternak had their ups and downs over the years. The interrelationship of Nabokov with Pasternak has been studied by D. Barton Johnson and, in very great detail, by Robert P. Hughes,³⁵ it is on their research that the following remarks are based. Nabokov’s earliest mention of Pasternak’s poetry in a 1927 review of another, now forgotten poet is highly negative. Pasternak’s muse, says Nabokov, is popeyed and suffers from a goiter; Pasternak knows Russian poorly and expresses his ideas ineptly; and he brings to mind the poetry of Vladimir Benediktov. Forty-three years later in the already mentioned epigram, Pasternak was again likened to the unfortunate Benediktov.

But in the intervening period Nabokov occasionally wrote of Pasternak’s verse with enthusiasm, calling it “wonderful stuff” in a letter to Edmund Wilson and applauding Pasternak’s Nobel Prize on the basis of his poetry. Much has been written about Nabokov’s rejection of Pasternak’s novel *Doctor Zhivago*, which Nabokov was to mock and parody in both *Pale Fire* and *Ada*.³⁶

Nabokov’s recoil from *Zhivago* occurred, interestingly enough, on the same grounds as Igor Stravinsky’s, who wrote to a friend: “I read *Dr. Zhivago* in Russian and, with sadness, I confess my disappointment. Of course this is real *peredvizhnichestvo*. How strange to read such a novel in the age of James Joyce.”³⁷ (*Peredvizhnichestvo* refers to a group of primitively

³³ Vladimir Nabokov. *Poems and Problems* (New York and Toronto: McGraw-Hill Book Company, 1970), p. 133. *Stikhi*, p. 320. Nabokov vented his contempt for Mayakovsky as early as 1930, when he authorized Vladimir Weidlé to affix his signature to a declaration by a group of exiled Russian writers which read in part: “[...] nous, les écrivains russes, mieux informés que les étrangers de la situation actuelle de notre littérature, nous affirmons que Maiakovsky n’a jamais été un grand poète russe, mais uniquement un compositeur de vers attaché au parti communiste et au gouvernement de l’U.R.S.S.” “Autour de Maiakovsky,” *Les Nouvelles littéraires* (Paris, July 12, 1930).

³⁴ Vladimir Nabokov. *Briefwechsel mit Edmund Wilson 1940-1971*. Herausgegeben, mit Anmerkungen und einem einführenden Essay von Simon Karlinsky, unter Mitarbeit von Dieter E. Zimmer (Hamburg: Rowohlt Verlag GmbH, 1995), pp. 704-705.

³⁵ D. Barton Johnson. “Pasternak’s *Zhivago* and Nabokov’s *Lolita*,” *The Nabokovian*, n° 14 (Spring 1985), 20-23; Robert P. Hughes, “Nabokov Reading Pasternak,” in Lazar Fleishman, ed. *Boris Pasternak and His Times* (Berkeley: Berkeley Slavic Specialties, 1989), pp. 153-170.

³⁶ See Hughes, *op. cit.*

³⁷ Letter to Piotr (or Pierre) Suvchinsky of January 26, 1960, in Igor Stravinsky, *Selected Correspondence*, Robert Craft, ed. (London and Boston: Faber and Faber, 1984), Vol. 2, p. 359.

realistic, late 19th-century Russian painters, who proclaimed that the socially relevant aspect of a painting was more important than any pictorial values.)

As Robert P. Hughes pointed out, the 1970 Pasternak epigram follows Pasternak's own poetic manner quite faithfully.³⁸ It is thus not only an epigram, but also a successful parody. Nabokov's other poetic response to Boris Pasternak is his reply in verse to the latter's 1959 poem "The Nobel Prize." It was written in 1959, at the time when *Lolita* and *Doctor Zhivago* kept vying for first place on the American list of best-sellers, but published only in 1961, after Pasternak's death. Read by many as not only a parody but also a mockery of Pasternak's suffering, Nabokov's poem has been ably defended by D. Barton Johnson as "a tribute to Pasternak, the poet."³⁹

Vladimir Nabokov has written a number of fine and memorable poems in Russian and in English. Yet, of the fifteen major Russian poets, his senior contemporaries, discussed in this paper in relationship to him, he can be said to be comparable in poetic talent and achievement to only two: Ivan Bunin and Vladimir Gippius. Nabokov wrote poetry all his life. Does this mean that Joseph Brodsky had a valid point when he wrote that Nabokov was one of those writers "who to the end of their days strive to convince themselves and their associates that they are still and all, if not primarily, poets?"⁴⁰ No, not really, because Nabokov's novels, stories and memoirs contain enough genuine poetry to make him an equal of any poet of this century.

³⁸ Hughes, *op. cit.*, p. 169.

³⁹ Johnson, "Pasternak's *Zhivago* and Nabokov's *Lolita*," p. 23.

⁴⁰ Iosif Brodsky, in Marina Tsvetaeva, *Izbrannaia proza v dvukh tomakh* (New York: Russica publishers, 1979), Vol. 1, p. 7.