



Nabokov, Ayn Rand, and Russian-American Literature or, the Odd Couple

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Barton Johnson Don, « Nabokov, Ayn Rand, and Russian-American Literature or, the Odd Couple », *Cycnos*, vol. 12.2 (*Nabokov: At the Crossroads of Modernism and Postmodernism*), 1995, mis en ligne en juin 2008.

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revue électronique éditée sur épi-Revel à Nice

ISSN 1765-3118

ISSN papier 0992-1893

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EPI-REVEL

Revue électronique de l'Université Côte d'Azur

Nabokov, Ayn Rand, and Russian-American Literature or,
the Odd Couple

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Vladimir Nabokov and Ayn Rand (*née* Alisa Rozenbaum), born in imperial Saint Petersburg, Russia, in 1899 and 1905 respectively, became bestselling American writers in the late 1950s. Their chef-d'oeuvres, *Lolita* (1958) and *Atlas Shrugged* (1957), were, almost concurrently, bestsellers. Compatriots, coevals, and fellow writers, forced into emigration by the Russian revolution, Nabokov and Rand had much in common, but drew upon very different aspects of their shared cultural heritage. Nabokov, the aesthete, and Rand, the ideologue, made strange bedfellows on the *New York Times* bestseller list. In life, the ideologue and the aesthete never met, although they may have strolled past each other on Nevsky Prospekt in the teens, or, for that matter, in Manhattan during the fifties.

Most of Ayn Rand's admirers and detractors are little aware of her Russian cultural background and its impact on her intellectual and literary development. Rand, who briefly went to school with one of Nabokov's sisters, grew up in a very different cultural milieu from the Nabokovs. With Rand as with Nabokov, however, there was the governess who imparted French and German (but alas not English), extended family visits to Western Europe, and summers in the Crimea where later the Rozenbaums, like the Nabokovs, vainly waited out the young Bolshevik regime. At the end of their Crimean sojourn, however, the Rozenbaums returned to Petrograd, and the Nabokovs moved on into exile.

Rand left Bolshevik Russia after graduating from Petrograd University and a brief stint in film school. Arriving in the U.S. in 1926 she got various jobs in the (then silent) film industry by sheer drive and persistence, despite her minimal English. Her first job was as an extra in Cecil B. DeMille's biblical epic *King of Kings*. She also began writing in English. For a time, she had been in the studio script department, and her first successful literary effort was a play called *Night of January 16th*. The 1935 play setting is a murder trial with the jury played by members of the audience.¹ The play ran briefly on Broadway and has left its trace in literary history due to a single improbable fact. A struggling young attorney played the role of the D. A. in a little theater production staged in his home town of Whittier, California. In the same theater group he was to meet Pat Ryan, later known as Pat Nixon (Ambrose 92-93). Had it not been for Ayn Rand's play...?

The young emigre Nabokov, like Rand, found occasional work as an extra in the booming German film industry and also soon turned to writing plays. Like Rand, he was eventually to script his best-known book for Hollywood, but his most direct impact on political history was when *Lolita's* British publisher, Nigel Nicholson, a prominent Conservative MP, was voted out of office by an outraged constituency (Boyd: AY 378).

Ayn Rand was never expansive about her Russian (or Jewish) origins, nor does Russia figure in either of her blockbusters, the 1943 *The Fountainhead* or the 1957 *Atlas Shrugged*. It is present only in Rand's first and least known novel. *We the Living* (1936) depicts a fiercely independent and fearless young woman, Kira, and her relationship with an unbelievably handsome aristocratic counter-revolutionary. There is also a high-minded and decent Cheka officer who loves Kira. All three are ultimately destroyed by the Bolshevik regime. Although the novel did not do well in the U.S., it was made into a war-time film extravaganza in Italy

¹ Rand's gimmick of an audience jury and alternative endings may well come from a popular Russian pastime of mock trials of literary characters. Nabokov, for example, played the role of Pozdnyshev, the wife-murderer of Tolstoy's *The Kreuzer Sonata* in a theatrical mock trial in 1927 Berlin (Boyd, RY 261).

before being withdrawn when it was realized that its theme might be taken as anti-Fascist, as well as anti-Soviet.

There is only one slender justification for mentioning *We the Living* in connection with Nabokov. One of the motifs of Rand's dreadful revolutionary epic is the folk quatrain (*chastushka*) "Yablochko" or "Little Apple" (Johnson). The beginning is always "Oy, yablochko, /Kuda kotishsya," i.e., "Little apple, where are you rolling?" The closing couplet may be anything, but one popular version was "Na Chrezvychaiku, / Ne vorotishsya," i.e., "to Cheka HQ, / and you won't be coming back." The *chastushka* was especially popular in the Crimea where the Rozenbaums and the Nabokovs spent the civil war years. Nabokov introduced it into both *Bend Sinister* and *LATH!* In the latter Vadim Vadimovich is fleeing across the Russian border in 1918 when he is challenged by a Red border guard: "And whither may you be rolling (*kotishsya*), little apple" (*yablochko*)?" Vadim coolly shoots him dead. One is tempted to link this episode to Nabokov's March 1918 Crimean encounter with a "bow-legged Bolshevik sentry" who threatened to arrest the young lepidopterist for signalling a British warship with his butterfly net (*Speak, Memory* 131).

Nabokov left Russia in 1919 at twenty, but arrived in America only in 1940. Alisa Rozenbaum, age 21, left Russia for America some seven years later, burning her manuscripts behind her. Like Nabokov after his arrival, she was never to write again in Russian nor, after *We the Living*, use Russian settings. Two years after *We the Living*, her short novel *Anthem* appeared in England. This tale of a lone dissenter in a monolithic future totalitarian state has marked, if unacknowledged, similarities to Evgeny Zamyatin's brilliant novel *We*. Zamyatin's manuscript, written in Petrograd in 1921, circulated among students at Petrograd University where Rand was studying. Rand's almost schematic novella is, like Zamyatin's, set in a remote future long after some unspecified disaster. It is the tale of a rebel in an anthill-like city-state where the citizens have no personal names, but rather labels like "Equality 7-2521." The key thematic development is the hero's discovery (in old books) of the word "I." In fact, in the manuscript version held in the Library of Congress, the book's title is *Ego*, which, on reflection, Rand may have felt to be uncomfortably close to Zamyatin's *We*.

Nabokov's *Invitation to a Beheading* was published serially in 1935-36, but Rand was probably unaware of it since she apparently did not follow Russian writing. Nabokov did, however. Not long before beginning his own very different dystopia, he admiringly read Zamyatin's *We* (Boyd: RY 415). Thus the Nabokov and Rand books have a faint dual kinship: one, through the tie with Zamyatin; and two, as their authors' responses to the Soviet regime and its ideology.

In the late thirties Rand began writing the novel that made her name — *The Fountainhead*, which, incidentally, was to be published by the Indianapolis firm of Bobbs-Merrill that had put out *Laughter in the Dark*, Nabokov's first American book publication, some five years before. Rand's epic of architect Howard Roark who blows up his visionary *chef-d'œuvre* when its design is altered by meddling, self-serving social do-gooders was greeted with bad reviews, but the author's fame grew, especially after the release of the hit film *The Fountainhead* in 1949 (Lane 60, 66-67).² Starring Gary Cooper and Patricia Neal, it was scripted by Rand herself. By the time *Atlas Shrugged* hit bestsellerdom in 1957, Rand was already something of a celebrity.

Atlas Shrugged is a mystery of sorts. The economy is breaking down and no one knows why. As the novel wends through its 1 200 pages, the mystery is resolved. John Galt, a shadowy inventor of genius, sickened by a social ethic that increasingly demands subordination of the gifted few (captains of industry and science) to the needs of the undeserving envious masses,

² The novel was still on the *New York Times* bestseller list on July 1, 1945. Fifty years have not softened the critical response. A recent *New Yorker* article retrospectively reviews the top ten novels of July 1945 and finds *The Fountainhead* even more hilariously dreadful than did the original reviewers (Lane).

masterminds a secret strike. One by one the harassed leaders of industry vanish, abandoning their empires, leaving society to sink ever deeper into its disastrous mediocrity. Meanwhile, Galt and his friends create a hidden mountain community built on rational egoism and *laissez faire* economics. When society comes to the point of collapse (as it does at the end of the novel), they stand ready to resurrect it according to their principles.

Nabokov and Rand shared more than just the happenstance of time and place of birth. They shared a milieu in which Nikolai Chernyshevsky was a revered figure in the pantheon of the anti-establishment intelligentsia. Doubtless, neither found much to fancy in Chernyshevsky's socialism. Yet in a sense, both writers-to-be responded to the Chernyshevsky tradition in ways that fundamentally shaped their future work. Rand took her utilitarian view of literature (and style) from Chernyshevsky — although substituting a very different ideological content. Chernyshevsky's famous 1863 novel *What is to be Done? From Tales about the New People*, written in prison, became the progenitor of Socialist Realism and Rand's Capitalist Realism — although in both cases the "realism" was anything but "real." Rand, by the way, divided literature into "Naturalism," an odious value-free approach that focussed on the seamy sides of man and society, and "Romanticism," which exalted the feats of the principled rational individualist (Branden 24). Although her professed model was Victor Hugo (Branden 24-25), any connoisseur of Russian literature will recognize Chernyshevsky's ascetic revolutionist Rakhmetov as a major prototype of her literary heroes and heroines. Rakhmetov was, of course, the foremost representative of "the new people" heralded in the subtitle of *What is to be Done?*

Both Chernyshevsky's opus and Rand's *Atlas Shrugged* center upon a young woman who is or becomes an entrepreneur. She is one of the new people who will, after the collapse of the old society, build a better, rational world. Just as John Galt displays his ideal community to Dagny Taggart, Chernyshevsky's heroine, Vera Pavlovna, offers her dream vision of a new perfect society. Each novel ends with the old world on the verge of being replaced by the new — although the message is obviously much muted in Chernyshevsky's work. Both novels are cast as mystery melodramas full of didactic harangues. And, not least, both have been seen as monuments in the women's rights movement.

The Soviet *Short Literary Encyclopedia* sums up *What is to be Done?* as a "publicistic, socio-philosophical, educational novel," something "almost unknown in earlier Russian literature." The description fits Rand's *Atlas Shrugged* like a glove, and if her opus is not the first American novel to do so, it is a fine example of that Russian genre transferred to American soil. Not surprisingly, Rand's literary manifesto sounds quite at home in the context of Socialist Realism: "The motive and purpose of my writing is *the projection of an ideal man*" (*Romantic Manifesto* 161).

Nabokov explicitly took Chernyshevsky as the starting point of his evaluation of the Russian literary tradition and his own place in it. In his novel *The Gift*, Nabokov incorporates a biography of the martyred Chernyshevsky which intimates that he was "the bad seed" in XIXth and XXth century Russian cultural (and political) history. It was, according to Nabokov, Chernyshevsky's example that displaced the aesthetically-based Pushkin tradition and supplanted it with the utilitarian anti-aesthetic tradition that was to end in Socialist Realism. Nabokov saw his own work as an attempt to reassert and advance the aesthetically based view. Chernyshevsky was thus a touchstone for both Nabokov and Rand.

Nabokov and Rand nicely illustrate the old saw that no discerning person should like both Dostoevsky and Tolstoy. Rand repeatedly expressed her admiration of Dostoevsky for "his superb mastery of plot-structure and for his merciless dissection of the psychology of evil" (*Romantic Manifesto* 55). As she says of *Crime and Punishment*, "Dostoevsky reveals the soul of a criminal all the way down to his philosophical premises" (68). One suspects that what Rand really admired about Dostoevsky was his gift for melodramatizing philosophical

and moral issues. Ideologically, Rand, the ultra-individualist and militant atheist had little in common with Dostoevsky. Tolstoy was Rand's *bête noire*: "I cannot stand Tolstoy, and reading him was the most boring literary duty I ever had to perform, his philosophy and his sense of life are not merely mistaken, but evil, and yet, from a purely literary view point, on his own terms, I have to evaluate him as a good writer" (55). Nabokov held, of course, quite contrary views of the two giants of Russian literature. Disposing of Dostoevsky with his "Bedlam turned back into Bethlehem" aphorism (*Gift* 84), he regarded Tolstoy as the only A+ in Russian prose (Boyd: AY 115).

Nabokov and Rand shared a much more immediate literary context than that of the nineteenth century. If the aristocratic young Nabokov breathed in the *recherché* atmosphere of the Symbolists, Alisa Rozenbaum (whose self-made father owned a pharmacy) was of the affluent *bourgeoisie* whose family reading matter probably tended more toward such bestselling writers as Anastasiya Verbitskaya (who far outsold Tolstoy), Leonid Andreev, and Mikhail Artsybashev whose *Sanin* titillated the Russian reading public. Verbitskaya's and Artsybashev's ideological potboilers featured socially and sexually emancipated heroines and heroes spouting half-baked Nietzscheanism. With sensationally overwrought plots, crude didacticism, and clumsy prose, their novels, at least in part, find their Russian origin in Chernyshevsky's *What is to be Done?* The literary line of descent from Chernyshevsky's mess of pottage to Gorky's 1906 *Mother*, with a segue through the Verbitskaya, Andreev, and Artsybashev school, to Ayn Rand's ideological epics of the forties and fifties is clear enough.

The ideas of Nietzsche were much in the air in the early decades of the century (Rosenthal). For the Russian Symbolists, he was the artist-philosopher and herald of modernism; for Verbitskaya, Andreev, Artsybashev, *et al.*, he was the advocate of the "übermensch," the man or woman not confined by the morality of the herd (Clowes 317; Rosenthal 28). John Burt Foster has recently argued that the young Nabokov, who is thought to have read *Thus Spake Zarathustra* during his Crimean exile, seized upon Nietzsche and his concept of the "eternal return" as part of his search for literary modernity, before turning away toward other models (40-44, 49-51). Rand's heroes and heroines are direct descendants of those of Verbitskaya and Artsybashev, popular vulgarizers of Nietzsche. It says much that the first book Rand bought in the United States was *Thus Spake Zarathustra* (Branden 45).

Nabokov's and Rand's bestsellerdom led to a very strange situation in American literature in the late 1950s when *Atlas Shrugged* and *Lolita* shared the limelight. One was a stylistic masterpiece that was widely condemned for its affair between 12-year-old Lolita and Humbert Humbert; the other, the clumsy mega-epic of tycoon Dagny Taggart and John Galt, the neo-Nietzschean superman who proclaims "[...] I will never live for the sake of another man, nor ask any other man to live for me" (993). Very few American readers were aware Rand and Nabokov were, respectively, continuing and/or reacting against aspects of their native Russian literary traditions: Rand continuing the "realist" (in Nabokovian quotes) utilitarian tradition *à la* Chernyshevsky as filtered through a "pop" Nietzsche, and Nabokov the modernist aesthetic inherited from the Symbolists, who had arisen in revolt against the Chernyshevskian tradition.

We know what Ayn Rand thought of Nabokov and *Lolita*. In a 1964 interview, she cited Mickey Spillane as her favorite writer. When asked about Nabokov, she replied: "I have read only one book of his and a half — the half was *Lolita*, which I couldn't finish. He is a brilliant stylist, he writes beautifully, but his subjects, his sense of life, his view of man, are so evil that no amount of artistic skill can justify them" ("Playboy Interview" 40). One cannot but note how closely her condemnation of Nabokov resembles her damnation of Tolstoy. We can imagine what Nabokov might have said about *Atlas Shrugged* by reading his estimate of *What is to be Done?* in *The Gift*. Here he mocks Chernyshevsky's book for its "helplessly rational structures," its appeal to "rational egoism," and concludes that "the idea that calculation is the

foundation of every action (or heroic accomplishment) leads to absurdity” (293-94). The ideas attacked by Nabokov lie at the very center of *Atlas Shrugged* whose author held rationality to be man’s highest virtue.

In spite of their manifest differences, it is instructive to look at the parallels in the lives of the two Russo-American writers. Both born to comfort and affluence in Petersburg; lives disrupted and remade in consequence of the Russian Revolution; exile and writing in new languages; the loss of European family members in WW II; literary fame as English-language writers; that fame magnified by hit films — Rand’s 1949 film *The Fountainhead* and Kubrick’s 1962 *Lolita*; beatification through interviews in *Playboy* (1961 and 1964, respectively); and ultimate canonization through the establishment of Nabokov and Rand Archives in the Manuscript Division of the Library of Congress where the literary remains of the odd couple now rest side by side. And, Oh yes, The Resurrection!: both Nabokov and Rand are now being published in their native land.

Since their deaths in 1977 and 1982, Nabokov and Rand have assumed the status of contemporary classics, although, I would guess, rarely mentioned in the same breath, or by the same person. Not only do their works remain in print, but special anniversary editions appear. The stature of *Lolita* and *Atlas Shrugged* is such that their heroines have become stock reference points for feminist literary critics. Spearheaded by Linda Kauffman’s essay, feminist critics have risen up in righteous wrath at aesthetically oriented interpretations of the novel, while others have approvingly cited Ayn Rand’s heroines as role models of self-empowerment (Gladstein 1978).³ Both novels have become icons of a popular culture far transcending the world of literature. Videos of *Lolita* and *The Fountainhead* do a brisk business. A new film version of *Lolita* is promised, and a TV mini-series of *Atlas Shrugged* is rumored.

Both Nabokov and Rand are enshrined in pop music. As Nabokov remarked “*Lolita* is far more famous than [I] am.” “Sting” and *The Police* had “Don’t Stand so Close to Me” bespeaking the perils besetting a teacher and his pupil. The singer likens himself to “the old man in that book by Nabakov.” Most recently singer Freedy Johnston’s makes a similar allusion in lines from his song “Delores”: “Delores was her middle name / She’d read the book and everything / Now I know how old I am.” Singer Nick Cave advises young readers to turn off Bukowski and on to *Lolita* which he elsewhere credits with being number one on a list of nine things that changed his life.⁴

Although her novels cannot compete with *Lo*, Rand’s name and books have also penetrated deeply into popular culture. The early novel *Anthem*, recommended on one reading list as ideal for discussion in high school English classes (Gladstein 95), provides inspiration and plot for an interminable twenty-minute *singspiel* entitled *2112* by the rock group “Rush.” A Simon and Garfunkel song converts Rand’s name into a verb in the line “I’ve been Ayn Randed.” Rand allusions in films include the movie *Dirty Dancing* in which the Ivy League hero, a *Fountainhead* fan, impregnates and abandons his working class girl friend. And the television show *The Simpsons* had an Ayn Rand Day Care Center with the Aristotelian wall slogan “A is A,” the title of a section in *Atlas Shrugged*.

Both authors have entered cyberspace with E-mail groups devoted to their life and work. Apart from NABOKV-L, Nabokov often figures in discussions on several literary and arts.

³ This last is a sticky issue since Rand’s heroines, although rugged individualists to a fault, also yearn to be raped by a dominant male. Cf. “That was the degradation she had wanted and she hated him for it” (Lane 66).

⁴ I would like to thank several colleagues who shared their knowledge of Nabokov and Rand in popular culture: information on Freedy Johnston and Nick Cave was supplied by Jeff Edmunds and Jake Pultorak; Suellen Stringer-Hye discovered the electronic text of “A New *Lo*”; Richard Stringer-Hye spotted the communication on “The *Lolita* Society”; Brian D. Walter called my attention to the Rand-Rush conjunction, while Shoshana Milgrim-Knapp and Scott Holleran supplied the remaining Rand trivia.

rec lists. One of the more interesting and ambitious contributions was Chuck Hamil's story entitled "A New Lo: or, Everybody into the Meme Pool," a sort of wild cyberpunk extension of *Lolita* focussing on the further adventures of Charlie Holmes, Lo's first lover. It even contains patches of Frenglish poetry and, if nothing else, is highly inventive in its use of language. E-mail also brings news of a "Lolita Society" which is the target of a diatribe about pedophilia on a list for "private investigators, law enforcement, and information brokers."

Ayn Rand's philosophy is featured on at least three E-mail discussion lists and her estate finances a foundation devoted to furthering her ideas. Little seems to be said about the novels, although they continue to sell very well, especially among the young.

Rand's obsessive rationalism and rampant Social Darwinism stand in sharp contrast to Nabokov's vision of the "otherworld" and insistence on the moral superiority of the victim. In justice to Ms. Rand, however, we must remark that she shared with Nabokov an absolute dedication to the supremacy of the individual consciousness, as well as a militant anti-Freudism.

Nabokov and Rand have both left substantial legacies to their adopted country. If we limit our purview to literature, we might try to sum up the contributions of the Russo-American odd couple: Nabokov wrote modernist novels that broke new ground in both Russian and American literature; Ayn Rand wrote Russian novels in English, transforming the traditional Russian didactic novel of ideas into something that we might loosely label "Capitalist Realism." If the Russian-American Nabokov stands at the crossroads of modernism and postmodernism, his compatriot Ayn Rand remained stalled at the intersection of ideology and aesthetics — a debate that is as current in today's America as it was in the time of Chernyshevsky. That Saint Petersburg and the Russian Revolution cast forth two such diverse figures on the American scene is one of the greater oddities of XXth century literature.

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