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Babikov Andrey

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Babikov Andrey, « On Germination of Nabokov's "Main Theme". In his Story "Natasha" », *Cycnos*, vol. 24.1 (Vladimir Nabokov, Annotating vs Interpreting Nabokov), 2006, mis en ligne en mars 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

On Germination of Nabokov's "Main Theme". In his Story "Natasha"

Andrey Babikov

Lawyer

On the basis of a first reading of yet unpublished Nabokov's story "Natasha" (1921) and its juxtaposition to other important Nabokov's compositions of 1921, this paper will consider the question of the genesis of Nabokov's "Main Theme" (hereafter) in its interconnections with his original poetics.

Interest in the early Sirin, sparked in recent times by the 1997 publication of "The Tragedy of Mr. Morn,"¹ has attracted an important group of observers to the relationship of the earliest forms of several themes and devices employed by Nabokov to their appearance in his more mature writings. Thus, looking at Nabokov's essay "Rupert Brooke", which was written in the spring of 1921, D.B. Johnson came to the fair conclusion that Nabokov's early writing was influenced by the creativity and personality of the English Georgian poet: "Rupert Brooke played a crucial role in the formulation of the potustoronnost' [or "hereafter"] theme that was central to much of Nabokov's later art and life."² G. Barabtarlo, in his articles "Jack in the Suitcase"³, and "Nabokov's Trinity: On the Movement of His Themes,"⁴ pursued an attempt to remove all of Sirin from the 1924 story "Vengeance" as well as the earlier "The Tragedy of Mr. Morn", which actually contained a wide range of typical Nabokovian devices and themes, along with a whole collection of characteristic motifs. In "The Real Life of the Writer Sirin," recently released in Russia, A. Dolinin draws our attention to the presence of the theme of the hereafter in Nabokov's 1920's Berlin poems, in which he tries to

¹ *Zvezda*, SPb., n° 4, 1997.

² D. Barton Johnson, *Vladimir Nabokov and Rupert Brooke // Nabokov and his Fiction: New Perspectives*, Ed. by Julian W. Connolly (London: Cambridge University Press, 1999), p. 193.

³ G. Barabtarlo, *Aerial View* (N.Y., Bern: Peter Lang), 1993.

⁴ G. Barabtarlo, *Sverkayuschii obruch: o dvizhuschei sile u Nabokova*. (SPb: Giperion, 2003), p. 205 – 263.

express “the mysterious unseen connections of the living with the dead”⁵.

Researchers’ have understandably sought to discover within Nabokov’s early, sometimes ingenuous, openly apprentice-like works his first expressions of the theme of the hereafter. As noted by Vera Nabokov, the peculiarly devised hereafter serves as the ethical-aesthetic basis of his art⁶ and a clear sense of the way Nabokov first started developing this theme would allow for a better understanding of the meaning and structure of his mature works.

However, in the essay about Brooke’s poetry, in which Nabokov first touched upon the theme of the hereafter, in the role of admirer, although also an independent-minded interpreter and translator of Brooke’s fluid symbols, we do not find anything that promises the future Nabokov, the unequaled master of ironic play with devices and narrative forms. One might think that this key theme was not expressed as it could have been simply because Nabokov was writing about another’s material. But such an assumption is contradicted by an example of the same straightforward expression of the hereafter theme in a story Nabokov wrote several months after the essay about Brooke, in August, 1921.

That unpublished story, the holograph draft of which is kept in Nabokov’s archives in the US Library of Congress, entitled “Natasha” (the diminutive form of the Russian Natalia), tells about a case of, as it were, metaphysical clairvoyant experience.⁷ Readers know very little about this story: only the short summary of it included in B. Boyd’s book on Nabokov’s Russian Years.⁸ Nabokov wrote “Natasha” in Berlin, where he was on his holiday from Cambridge with his family from the 13th of June through the 7th of October⁹. The

⁵ A. Dolinin, *Istinnaiia zhizn’ pisatel’ia Sirina* (SPb.: Akademicheskii Proekt, 2004), p. 33.

⁶ Vera Nabokov, Foreword V. Nabokov, *Stikhi* (Ann Arbor: Ardis, 1979), p. 4.

⁷ Vladimir Nabokov Archives Collection of the Manuscript Division, The Library of Congress, Washington, D. C. “Natasha”, box 8. Misdated as “1927”.

⁸ Nabokov signed it as “V. Sirin. 25-26-VIII-21” but the last “21” looks like “24” because of a slip of the pen. That is why B. Boyd, I think, believed that this story was written in 1924 B. Boyd. *V. Nabokov: The Russian Years* (L.: Vintage, 1993), p. 234.

⁹ *Ibid.* p. 183 – 184.

hero of this story, a young Russian maiden, having emigrated with her sick father, is telling her admirer, a Russian exile Baron Wolf, about the unbelievable events of her life. I would like to present a short extract from “Natasha”, kindly translated by Dmitri Nabokov:

“In the Middle Ages,” she said, gazing at the tops of the pines, “they would have burned me at the stake. I sometimes have strange sensations. Like a kind of ecstasy. Then I become almost weightless, I feel I’m floating somewhere and understand everything—life, death, everything... Once, when I was about ten, I was sitting in the dining room drawing something. Then I got tired and started thinking. Suddenly, very rapidly, in came a woman, barefoot, wearing faded blue garments, with a large, heavy belly, and her face was thin and yellow, with extraordinary eyes... Without looking at me, she went past and disappeared into the next room. I was not frightened—for some reason I thought she had come to wash the floors. I never met that woman again, but you know who she was? The Virgin Mary... “Богоматерь” in origin.

She later admits that she made the whole thing up along with the other supernatural experiences. But at the end of the story, when Natasha meets the ghost of her father, whose death she would learn about only in a few minutes, we recognize that she did not lie the first time, but that she did the second.

Nabokov’s open expression of the theme of the hereafter can be found nowhere else. From that point onward, he avoided directly addressing the theme, keeping the treasured inmost essence from cynics and agnostics, and for that he used a full arsenal of methods and devices well-studied by scholars. It was an idea that was important to him, and he did not want to be ridiculed by unbelievers. It is possible that, working on “Natasha”, Nabokov realized that the representation of direct contact between the living and the dead lowers and oversimplifies the theme of the hereafter. On the other hand, borrowed traditional narrative devices would not be good enough for the expression of the hereafter, since they do not allow for necessary distance between the object of narration and the author; relatively soon the art of Nabokov, like the art of Flaubert and Joyce, became in many ways an art of the distance between the author and the reader, between the personal experiences and trials of the hero, and between generally accepted ideas and personal opinions.

Thus, we can imagine that in the summer of 1921, Nabokov came to the conviction that for the development of his chosen theme he needed to invent his own personal stylistic tools. It is not a coincidence that in the same year of 1921, which was a very remarkable one for Nabokov, two months after “Natasha” he started writing a composition fundamentally different from all he wrote earlier. Nabokov created a poetic drama, “The Wanderers”, which he represents as a translation of a portion from an ancient English tragedy by Vivian Calmbrood. Thus, Nabokov creates his first distance system: under the mask of Sirin he depicts a person on yet a third tier—a fictional author, a “contemporary” of the English poet William Shenstone (1714–1763) whose mask Pushkin once needed for the mystification of his drama “The Covetous Knight”. The fictional name of the dramatist, besides being an open allusion to a practical joke, since it sounds like the French “calembour” (play on words), served Nabokov as an anagrammatically masked personal name—a device first used in “The Wanderers” and preserved in Nabokov’s arsenal, with many variations, up until his novels *Lolita* and *Ada*, where it appears as “Vivian Darkbloom”¹⁰.

There are other devices in the play that give hints about the future Nabokov. We find in it a whole accumulation of allusions to Alexander Blok’s poetry, within which Nabokov artfully places the signs of his own presence – autoreminiscence of the verse “Behind the Fog Floated the Fog...” (1921), written upon the death of Blok. In another place, Nabokov paraphrases Pushkin’s lines from the verse “’Tis time, my dear, ’tis time” (1834): “There is no happiness under the sun; only the elderly and children daydream about it; / there is no happiness, but there is an insane race / of the blind fiery giant...”¹¹ Here is, by the way, the first time in Nabokov’s art, as far as I can judge, a situation of two-sided allusion: to the famous lines by Pushkin: “There is no bliss on Earth, but there is freedom and peace,”

¹⁰ “Vivian Calmbrood” was not the first of Nabokov’s anagrams, it was a variation of “Dorian Vivalcomb”, which appeared for the first time as his signature in a letter to his parents from 25 of January 1921 (Vladimir Nabokov Archives, Henry W. and Albert A. Berg Collection of English and American Literature. The New York Public Library. Letters to Elena Ivanovna Nabokov).

¹¹ V. Nabokov, *Sobranie sochinenii russkogo perioda v 5 tomakh* (SPb.: Symposium. T.1. 1999), p. 650.

and to Blok's poem: "The worlds are flying. Years are flying. Empty..." in which the poet exclaims: "What is happiness? A short and narrow instant, / obliteration, a dream, and rest from anxieties. /Awaken – again the flight, insane, unknown / and heart grasping..."¹² Blok's "insane flight" was turned into an "insane race" by Nabokov. In "The Tragedy," Mr. Morn addresses this very poem by Blok polemically: "What is happiness? The fluttering of starry wings. What is happiness? A snowflake on the lips..."

It is obvious that "The Wanderers" has a complex structure that anticipates the poetics of "The Tragedy of Mr. Morn" and of the mature Nabokov. Together with two other works written in 1921, the essay about Brooke and the story about meeting the ghost, this drama is the foundation of the whole future art of Nabokov. Probably, he realized very well what meaning the drama had for his own art. He understood that from this half-domestic (the drama was written firstly for his family) mystification grows the art of a new scale and meaning for him. In January 1924 he even planned to continue "The Wanderers", an intention confirmed in a letter to Vera: "After 'Mr. Morn' I will write the second—the final—act of 'The Wanderers'. Suddenly I really want to."¹³

In contrast to the story "Natasha", the theme of the hereafter in the play is represented cautiously. The appearance of Silvia, held deeply in a somnambular trance, and footpad Robert's love for the lost girl that are revealed by the end of the story, allude to it. In the next play, "Death", written in March of 1923, on the anniversary of his father's tragic death, again the hereafter becomes the central theme and is personified in the Blokesque well-known image of the maiden-star Stella, who never appears on the stage of "this" world.

The distance system developed by Nabokov in "The Wanderers" was modified by him two years later in "The Tragedy of Mr. Morn". In "The Wanderers" the author is present through anagram and autoreminiscence, and the assumed author—Vivian Calmbrood—is derived from the borders of the action. In "The Tragedy," Nabokov

¹² A. Blok, *Sobranie sochinenii v 8 tomakh* (Moscow, Leningrad, 1960), Vol. 3. p. 41.

¹³ Vladimir Nabokov Archives Henry W. and Albert A. Berg Collection of English and American Literature. The New York Public Library Letters to Vera Nabokov. 8 Jan. 1924.

for the first time delegates the author's rights to a secondary character—the mysterious Foreigner, who claims that Morn and all of his kingdom is only the fruit of his overactive imagination. This “drunk poet” from “cloudy reality” could be identified with Nabokov, and then the question of the author's presence would be solved, if it did not follow from the Foreigner's cues that he is in Soviet Russia where, in spite of the gloomy reality, he is creating his bright tale.

More subtly and consistently than in the prose story “Natasha”, the theme of the hereafter is developed in the poetic “Tragedy”.

From the very first lines of “The Tragedy”, which opens up with TREMENS' monologue (“Dream, fever, dream; dull shifts / of two guards...”), Nabokov forces the reader to pay attention to the connection between the Latin meaning of the seditious name—formed from “tremens” (“shaking”) and hinting, as some researchers have noticed, at the medical name of the blue devils, “delirium tremens”—and his chronic fever. However, this actual meaning serves only to cover the active meaning, which is read in the same way as professor Barabtarlo managed to read the name Sebastian Knight, as an anagram of the phrase “Knight is absent”, thus revealing the true meaning of the title of the novel, “The Real Life of Sebastian Knight”, which was a hint¹⁴. Similar to this anagram, invented by Nabokov at the end of the 1930's, the name of the malefactor Tremens, which is a simple rearrangement of letters in the Russian word for “mortal” (*ТРЕМЕСЬ—СМЕРТЬ*),¹⁵ sheds an unexpectedly bright light on the whole piece. An anagram in the incendiary's name expresses Nabokov's lofty irony towards his own *raisonneur*-character, since Tremens, the death herald and the furious exterminator of all the living, turns out to be mortal himself, when he is found at Dandilio's house and is executed on the spot. Sapient gray-haired old man Dandilio, who is also shot, and who is, evidently, given the same immortal nature as Cincinnatus C. in «Invitation to the Beheading», appears again in the final scene of “The Tragedy” as a “Gray-haired Guest” (“*Седой Гость*” in the original).

The given examples from Nabokov's early dramatic works are enough to come to the conclusion that it is in the dramatic genre and not in the stories—only one of which (“The Wood-Sprite”

¹⁴ G. Barabtarlo, *Aerial View*, p. 216.

¹⁵ Compare the name of one minor character in *Lolita—Rigor Mortis*.

[“*Нежить*”]) was published before he finished “The Tragedy of Mr. Morn” in 1924—that Nabokov’s first-way author strategy was formed. Nabokov involves the reader in the search for hidden meanings and themes, and offers him various lexical, logical, compositional, metaphysical, and other problems to solve. On the other hand, Nabokov at first tried to express the hereafter theme in essay and story genres, using traditional devices. The comparison of Nabokov’s first stories—“The Wood-Sprite”, “Natasha”, “Russian Spoken Here” and others—with five of his plays written in the first half of the 20’s shows that on this path towards a new writing strategy, his drama goes far beyond his prose. It is a paradox, particularly in the early plays inspired by Pushkin’s “Small Tragedies” and Blok’s “Lyric dramas”, that Nabokov mastered several stem devices of his multi-leveled narrative technique, for which his art is famed.

I would like to express my gratitude to Dmitri Nabokov for granting me the opportunity to become acquainted with Nabokov’s archival materials, and to use the quotation from his unpublished story in this article. Copyright © 2006 by Andrey Babikov

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