THE GARLAND COMPANION TO

Vladimir Nabokov

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with 'black-hundred' White Russians and do not mix with the so-called 'bolshevizans,' that is 'pinks.' On the other hand, I have friends among intellectual Constitutional Monarchists as well as among intellectual Social Revolutionaries" (*SO* 96). And therefore I have saved for a closing quotation what I consider his clearest statement of his politics, one that is itself strikingly tolerant: "Since my youth—I was 19 when I left Russia—my political creed has remained as bleak and changeless as an old gray rock. It is classical to the point of triteness. Freedom of speech, freedom of thought, freedom of art. The social or economic structure of the ideal state is of little concern to me. My desires are modest. Portraits of the head of the government should not exceed a postage stamp in size. No torture and no executions. No music, except coming through earphones, or played in theaters" (*SO* 34–35).

Charles Nicol

NOTES

1. Boyd, 1991, p. 84.
2. Boyd, 1990, pp. 168–69. Boyd notes that this debate was held on November 28, 1919; Nabokov had described it as taking place the following spring and as his only political speech. Boyd does not mention one problem: Nabokov precisely dated the speech that he claimed to have borrowed as having been given by his father on January 16, 1920 and published the following week, two months too late to have been of use in November.
3. Bishop, p. 237.
4. Boyd, 1991, p. 256.
5. Ibid., pp. 85, 311, 372.
6. "What Faith Means to a Resisting People," p. 212.

"POSHLOST'"

"Poshlost'" (or "poshlust" in Nabokov's punning transcription; he also transliterated it "poshlost") is a Russian word that Nabokov introduced into the English language. It refers to the broad range of cultural, social, and political phenomena under the category of "inferior taste."[1] Nabokov elaborates on the concept in his book *Nikolai Gogol* (1944): "The Russian language is able to express by means of one pitiless word the idea of a certain widespread defect for which the other . . . languages I happen to know possess no special term. . . . English words expressing several, although by no means all aspects of *poshlust* are for instance: 'cheap, sham, common, smutty, pink-and-blue, high falutin', in bad taste, . . . inferior, sorry, trashy, scurvy, tawdry, gimcrack' and others under 'cheapness.' All these however suggest merely certain false

values for the detection of which no particular shrewdness is required. . . . [B]ut what Russians call *poshlust* is beautifully timeless and so cleverly painted all over with protective tints that its presence (in a book, in a soul, in an institution, in a thousand other places) often escapes detection" (*NG* 63–4).

In his 1950 lecture on "Philistines and Philistinism" (*LRL* 309–314), Nabokov expanded the concept with additional features. "Poshlust" or "poshlism" is the mental essence that emanates from a "smug philistine," a "dignified vulgarian," a "bourgeois" (in a Flaubertian, not a Marxist sense—for it reflects "a state of mind, not a state of pocket" [*LRL* 309]). "Poshlust" always presupposes the veneer of civilization, but the values enjoyed by the philistine as genuine are by implication a fraud. Manifestations of "poshlust" range from petty to cosmic: they include the harmless kitsch and make-believe of advertisement, the banality of mass culture, the automatic exchange of platitudes, trends, and fads in social and cultural life, bogus profundities, pseudo-"great books," hackneyed literary criticism, political propaganda, totalitarian forms of government, organized cults and anthropomorphic notions of the "beyond," and much more. For example, shoddy thinking such as comparing Senator McCarthy to Stalin or Hitler, and concluding that "America is no better than Russia" or that "We all share in Germany's guilt" is "poshlust." "Listing in one breath Auschwitz, Hiroshima, and Vietnam is seditious *poshlost*. Belonging to a very select club (which sports *one* Jewish name—that of the treasurer) is genteel *poshlost*" (*SO* 101).

Nabokov treats "poshlust" with lofty disdain and impish mockery. It should be understood, however, that when he attaches this "deadly label" to something, it is an act of aesthetic judgment as well as a moral indictment. To expose and exorcise "the demons of *poshlust*" (*NG* 69) in their various disguises is not the pursuit of a *bête noire* by a cranky pundit—it constitutes an essential part of Nabokov's aesthetic and ethical mission.

As a state of mind, "poshlust" knows neither class nor national boundaries. "An English duke can be as much of a philistine as an American Shriner or a French bureaucrat or a Soviet citizen" (*LRL* 310). The epitome of "poshlust" for Nabokov was Soviet Russia, "a country of moral imbeciles, of smiling slaves and poker-faced bullies" where, thanks to its special "blend of despotism and pseudo-culture" (*LRL* 313), the ability to discern "poshlust" all but atrophied. But to the Russians of Gogol's, Tolstoy's, or Chekhov's time and culture it was Germany that had always seemed "a country where *poshlust*, instead of being mocked, was one of the essential parts of the national spirit, habits, traditions and general atmosphere, although at the same time well-meaning Russian intellectuals of a more romantic type readily, too readily, adopted the legend of the greatness of German philosophy and literature; for it takes a super-Russian to admit that there is a dreadful streak of *poshlust* running through Goethe's *Faust*" (*NG* 64). Nabokov, who in his early novels frequently mocked the German brand of "poshlust," is aware that "To exaggerate the worthlessness of a country at the awkward moment when one is at war with it [the year

was 1944]—and would like to see it destroyed to the last beer-mug and last forget-me-not,—means walking dangerously close to that abyss of *poshlust* which yawns so universally at times of revolution or war" (*NG* 65).

However, the prime domain of "poshlust" is art and literature. Here Nabokov focuses on cases "when the sham is *not* obvious and when the values it mimics are considered, rightly or wrongly, to belong to the very highest level of art, thought or emotion . . . *poshlust* is not only the obviously trashy but also the falsely important, the falsely beautiful, the falsely clever, the falsely attractive" (*NG* 68, 70). Yet, Nabokov finds it often difficult to explain why exactly an acclaimed work of literature, full of noble emotion, compassion and best intentions "is far, far worse than the kind of literature which *everybody* admits is cheap" (*NG* 70): "The trouble is that sincerity, honesty and even true kindness of heart cannot prevent the demon of *poshlust* from possessing himself of an author's typewriter when the man lacks genius and when the 'reading public' is what publishers think it is" (*NG* 69). Among the symptoms that signal the presence of "poshlust" in a work of art, Nabokov lists "Freudian symbolism, moth-eaten mythologies, social comment, humanistic messages, political allegories, overconcern with class or race, . . . case histories of minority groups, sorrows of homosexuals . . ." (*SO* 101, 116). The philistine lives under the delusion that "a book, to be great, must deal in great ideas" (*SO* 41). For Nabokov any form of didacticism, moralism, utilitarianism, or anything that compromises the aesthetic purity of a work of art belongs to the realm of "poshlust."

Some insight into the more consummate aspects of "poshlust" can be gained from the list of acclaimed authors or works that Nabokov reviles. A random sampling that I have compiled from his *Strong Opinions* includes the four doctors—Dr. Freud, Dr. Zhivago, Dr. Schweitzer, and Dr. Castro (115), Sir Bertrand Russell, the peace activist (98), the "awful Monsieur Camus and even more awful Monsieur Sartre" (175), Mann's "Death in Venice" (101), the "execrable" D. H. Lawrence (135), the book for boys about "bells, balls, and bulls" by Hemingway (but Nabokov loved "The Killers" and his "wonderful fish story," and considered Hemingway better than Conrad [80]).

Among great Russian writers Nabokov "dislikes intensely *The Karamazov Brothers* and the ghastly *Crime and Punishment* rigmarole" with its "sensitive murderers, soulful prostitutes," and murky mysticism (*SO* 148, 42); yet he considers *The Double* Dostoevsky's best work (84). He detests Tolstoy's *Resurrection* and "The Kreuzer Sonata," but considers *Anna Karenina* and "The Death of Ivan Ilych" to be masterpieces of nineteenth-century literature (*SO* 147). Nabokov loves Gogol's *Petersburg Tales*, his plays, and *Dead Souls*, but loaths his folklorism, "moralistic slant," "utter inability to describe young women," and his "obsession with religion" (*SO* 156). In his adolescence, Nabokov relished the works of Wells, Poe, Browning, Keats, Flaubert, Verlaine, Rimbaud, Chekhov, Tolstoy, and Blok. Between the ages of 20 and 40 his favorites were Housman, Rupert Brooke, Norman Douglas, Bergson,

Joyce, Proust, Shakespeare and Pushkin (*SO* 42–43). Poe and Brooke later lost their thrill, but Shakespeare and Pushkin remain for Nabokov the two greatest literary geniuses. Nabokov singled out Joyce's *Ulysses*, Kafka's *Metamorphosis*, Bely's *Petersburg*, and the first half of Proust's *In Search of Lost Time* (*SO* 57, 85), in that order, as the greatest achievements of twentieth-century prose. But he dismisses *Finnegans Wake* as "a formless and dull mass of phony folklore" (*SO* 71).

In his book on Gogol, Nabokov compiles from among the characters of European fiction a list of typical perpetrators of "poshlust." We find here Polonius and the royal pair in *Hamlet*, Rodolphe and Homais from *Madame Bovary*, Laevsky from Chekhov's "The Duel," Joyce's Marion Bloom, young Bloch in *Search of Lost Time*, Maupassant's "Bel Ami," Anna Karenina's husband, and Berg in *War and Peace* (*NG* 70). An analogous list can be made up of characters from Nabokov's own works. I would include here Luzhin's impresario Valentinov (the evil variant of "poshlust") and Luzhin's in-laws (the harmless variant) in the novel *The Defense*; Hermann and his act of murder conceived as a work of art in *Despair*; M'sieur Pierre and the "art" of execution in *Invitation to a Beheading*; N.G. Chernyshevski, as a literary character in chapter 4 of *The Gift*, and Zina's stepfather Shchyogolev; the dictator Paduk from *Bend Sinister*; the biographer Goodman in *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight*; Lolita's mother and Clare Quilty in *Lolita*, to name only the major ones.

It is not mere coincidence that Nabokov first elaborates the notion of "poshlust" in his book on Gogol, the greatest master in Russian literature of depicting and mocking this vice. Nabokov guides the reader through a gallery of Gogol's "poshliaki" and "poshliachki" (male and female perpetrators of "poshlust"), pauses before the more exquisite cases of "poshlust," and comments on the "gusto and wealth of weird detail" with which Gogol paints these "sleek, plump, smooth, and glossy" creatures (*NG* 71). However, even this most Gogolian category owes something to Pushkin. Reflecting on the reception of *Dead Souls*, Gogol wrote: "[Critics] discussed my case a lot. They analyzed various of my facets, but failed to identify my main essence. Only Pushkin discerned it. He used to say to me that no other writer before me possessed the gift to expose so brightly life's *poshlust*, to depict so powerfully the *poshlust* of a *poshlusty* man [poshlost' poshlogo cheloveka] in such a way that everybody's eyes would be opened wide to all the petty trivia that often escape our attention. This is my main quality, it belongs exclusively to me, and is lacking in other writers" ("The Third Letter à propos *Dead Souls*," 1843).[2] If Gogol's statement can be trusted, it would be fair to say that Nabokov in his interpretation of Gogol views his subject through Pushkin's eyes. Of all Russian writers it was Pushkin's artistic and moral code that Nabokov made into his own, and whose explicit and implicit presence permeates most of Nabokov's literary and critical works (see "Nabokov and Pushkin" in this volume).

The elusive concept of "poshlust" deserves one last gloss with regard to the cultural background that shaped Nabokov's values and contributed to such a low tolerance for anything that did not meet his high standards. The anglophile Nabokov family descended from ancient Russian nobility of colossal cultural and material wealth. In addition to several million rubles and a two-thousand acre estate, which were to be lost in 1917, the firstborn Vladimir inherited even greater wealth: "the beauty of intangible property, the unreal estate" (*SM* 40) of future memories of a perfect boyhood, spent in Russia's "most fantastic city," St. Petersburg, and amidst the luxury of Northern fauna and flora at the country estate in Vyra. Surrounded by books and butterflies (he became an expert entomologist before he was ten), loving parents, and experiencing his first love affair, Nabokov developed a lifelong passion for everything precious and passing. Brought up by private tutors to speak French, English, and Russian, he had read by the time he was fifteen more of the great works in his three languages than most native speakers of them read in a lifetime.

Fate, too, was generous to Nabokov. He was born on Shakespeare's birthday (April 23) in the last year of the last century, which marked the centennial of Pushkin's birth. The first two decades of this century, known in the history of Russian culture as the Silver Age, have seen the best Russian poetry since Pushkin's Golden Age (Blok, Bely, Bal'mont, Briusov, Maiakovsky, Khlebnikov, Gumilev, Akhmatova, Mandelshtam, Pasternak, Tsvetaeva, Esenin). During these years Nabokov wrote poem after poem with that "terrifying facility" for lyrical verse that for a Russian of his generation was often "as much a part of adolescence as acne."[3] Later he studied at the private Tenishev Institute, an emphatically liberal and nondiscriminatory school, which produced another celebrated alumnus, Osip Mandelshtam, the greatest Russian poet of the twentieth century. Nabokov was to draw on this wealth for the rest of his life and to distribute it generously among the heroes of his fictions and their readers. The "exorcism" of the "demons of *poshlust*," who threaten to engulf civilization in universal dullness and tedium, constitutes the core of Nabokov's aesthetic, ethical, and philosophical profession of faith. Its values inform most of Nabokov's works and "strong opinions." Let me conclude with one such opinion: "In fact I believe that one day a reappraiser will come and declare that, far from having been a frivolous firebird [an allusion to Nabokov's pen name 'Sirin'], I was a rigid moralist kicking sin, scuffing stupidity, ridiculing the vulgar and cruel—and assigning sovereign power to tenderness, talent, and pride" (*SO* 193).

Sergej Davydov

Notes

1. Nabokov discusses "poshlust" in the following texts: *Nikolai Gogol*, pp. 63–74; *Strong Opinions*, pp. 100–101; and the essay, "Philistines and Philistinism,"*Lectures on Russian Literature*, pp. 309–14.
2. Gogol, 1959, vol. 6, p. 151.
3. Boyd, 1990, p. 96

THE REAL LIFE OF SEBASTIAN KNIGHT

Throughout his work Vladimir Nabokov has explored the terra incognita beyond the borders of consciousness, to glimpse other worlds ordinarily unperceived.[1] Such diverse characters as Hermann Karlovich in *Despair* and John Shade in *Pale Fire* speculate upon consciousness after death, while Cincinnatus C. in *Invitation to a Beheading* and Art Longwood in "The Ballad of Longwood Glen" enter invisible realms. Others transform themselves to enter the invisible realms of the minds of their fellow characters. Fyodor Godunov-Cherdyntsev in *The Gift* habitually tries "to imagine the inner, transparent motion of this or that other person. He would carefully seat himself inside the interlocutor as in an armchair, so that the other's elbows would serve as armrests for him, and his soul would fit snugly into the other's soul—and then the lighting of the world would suddenly change and for a minute he would actually become Alexander Chernyshevski, or Lyubov Markovna, or Vasiliev" (35–36).

Nabokov's first English novel, *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight*, is a complex elaboration of this metamorphic theme, as the narrator, V., writes a biography of his dead half brother, the novelist Sebastian Knight, relying on memory, interviews, Sebastian's books, and intuitive conjecture. V. concludes "that the soul is but a manner of being—not a constant state—that any soul may be yours, if you find and follow its undulations. The hereafter may be the full ability of consciously living in any chosen soul, in any number of souls, all of them unconscious of their interchangeable burden. Thus—I am Sebastian Knight" (202–203). V.'s book, "beguiling and melancholy," in Moynahan's phrase,[2] is the result of a poignant yearning for communion with an aloof half-brother whom V. says he hardly knew, even when they were boys. Nabokov has reversed the ancient fraternal theme: Cain and Abel, like Oedipus and Jocasta's sons Eteocles and Polynices, become fatally estranged, whereas Sebastian's death brings V. and Sebastian close together at last.

The distant relationship of Sebastian and V. reflects Nabokov's behavior toward his younger brother Sergey, and Sebastian resembles Vladimir in other ways: both are born in 1899, flee Russia as a result of the Revolution, attend Cambridge University, live in Europe, and write brilliant, idiosyncratic