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THE GIFT: NABOKOV'S  
AESTHETIC EXORCISM  
OF CHERNYSHEVSKII

Врад ли кого-либо Владимир Ильич так любил,  
как любил Чернышевского.

(It is difficult to imagine any one whom Vladimir  
Il'ich loved more than Chernyshevskii.)

N. K. Krupskaja

When *The Gift* was serialized in *Contemporary Annals* it appeared without chapter 4 which contained the satirical biography of Chernyshevskii.<sup>1</sup> The suppression of the novel's key chapter by the journal's editors (all of whom were former Socialist Revolutionaries) was, according to Nabokov, "an unprecedented occurrence, quite out of keeping with their exceptional broad-mindedness for, generally speaking, in their acceptance or rejection of literary works they were guided exclusively by artistic standards."<sup>2</sup> Although it occurred with the consent of the author, the rejection of chapter 4 remains a rare example of political censorship "from the left" in the annals of émigré history, largely unredeemed by the fact that in the 1960s American editors purged from Chernyshevskii's revolutionary classic *What Is to Be Done?* the key chapter containing "The Fourth Dream of Vera Pavlovna."<sup>3</sup>

The Russian liberals in exile could not tolerate Nabokov's desecration of the venerated icon of the freedom fighter Chernyshevskii. Iconoclastic in his art and supremely irreverent in his strong opinions, Nabokov views Chernyshevskii's political radicalism and conservative aesthetics as direct antecedents of Lenin's political tyranny and of the aesthetic doctrine of Socialist Realism. Not unlike Turgenev, who saw in Chernyshevskii and his disciples "literary Robespierres" capable of "chopping off the head of the poet Chénier," Na-

1. *Sovremennye zapiski* (Paris), Nos. 63-67 (1937-38).

2. *Strong Opinions* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1973), p. 65.

3. *What Is to be Done?*, Benjamin R. Tucker's translation revised and abridged by L. Turkevich (New York: Random House, 1961). The omitted chapter, "Vera Pavlovna's Fourth Dream," may be found in Ralph E. Matlaw's edition of *Notes from Underground and The Grand Inquisitor* by Fyodor Dostoevsky, with relevant works by Chernyshevsky, Shchedrin and Dostoevsky (New York: E. P. Dutton, 1960), pp. 157-77.

bokov presents Chernyshevskii as directly responsible for Russia's cultural wasteland. One should also keep in mind that during the decade when Nabokov wrote *The Gift* in exile, scores of independent and original talents were being physically annihilated in the Soviet Union. Ironically, these repressive policies were based to a significant degree on Chernyshevskii's own radical social and aesthetic theories, for which the freedom fighter himself had been arrested and exiled to remote Siberia.<sup>4</sup>

The point I would like to make in this essay, however, is that even if Nabokov had never written the notorious chapter 4, in which he "slaughtered" the "sacred cow" of Russian liberal and radical intelligentsia, it would still be possible to read *The Gift* as a dialogical novel which in its remaining four chapters challenges and refutes the aesthetic theories, art, and life of Nikolai Gavrilovich Chernyshevskii. Without belittling Nabokov's novel or inflating the significance of Chernyshevskii's ideas, I would like to propose a reading of *The Gift* as a polemical extension to one of Chernyshevskii's thoughts. Inimical to most art and literature though he was, Chernyshevskii was fully justified in his belief that "if someone were to take some miserable, forgotten novel and carefully cull all its flashes of observation, he would collect a fair number of sentences that would not differ in worth from those constituting the pages of works we admire." (268/251)<sup>5</sup> It seems that in writing *The Gift* Nabokov followed Chernyshevskii's advice up to a point, the difference being that instead of "some miserable, forgotten novel" Nabokov used the entire oeuvre of Chernyshevskii, carefully culled from it the "flashes of observation," and collected "a fair number of sentences" with the sole purpose of demonstrating how much they "differ in worth from those constituting the pages" of *The Gift*.

I know of no other novel which would better fit M. Bakhtin's notion of the "double-voiced discourse" developing between the "authorial word" (*slovo avtora*) and the "alien word" (*chuzhoe slovo*), be it quoted, paraphrased or implicitly present in the form of a "trace." From its very first page (actually already from its cover) Nabokov's novel emerges as a programmatic anti-Chernyshevskii manifesto. The title, *Dar*, and the name of the hero, "Fëdor," meaning "the gift from God" and alliteratively echoing the title (FëDAR), stand in direct contrast to Chernyshevskii's dubious "Prologue" in *Chto delat'?*—dubious because one is not quite sure whether Chernyshevskii's

4. Cf. Simon Karlinsky, "Nabokov's Russian Games," *New York Times Book Review*, 18 April 1971. See also his excellent discussion of *The Gift*: "Vladimir Nabokov's Novel *Dar* as a Work of Literary Criticism: A Structural Analysis," *Slavic and East European Journal*, 7, No. 3 (Autumn 1963), 284-89.

5. All quotations from *Dar/The Gift* are to the following editions: *Dar* (New York: Chekhov, 1952) and *The Gift* (New York: Capricorn, 1970) with page numbers given in the text parenthetically in the respective order.

*topos* of modesty is not a sincere profession of faith: "I am an author without talent who doesn't even have a complete command of his own language. But it matters little. Read on at any rate, kind public. Truth is a good thing which compensates even for an author's faults. This reading will be useful to you, and you will experience no deception, since I have warned you that you will find in my novel neither talent nor art, only the truth."<sup>6</sup>

Unlike the industrious and pragmatic "new people" of *Chto delat'?*, the Count Fëdor Godunov-Cherdyntsev is in a curious way one of the last literary offspring of Russia's "superfluous men." This proverbial non-utilitarian idealist spends a large part of his life reclining on a sofa, and worrying about one thing: how to write well. Fëdor shares his intolerance toward Chernyshevskii's aesthetic maxims with such unlikely allies as Turgenev and Dostoevskii. The latter, in a familiar intonation calling to mind some of his ethical pronouncements, condemned the "aesthetic crimes" of the new men of the 1860s: "... the artistry of a writer rests in his ability to write well. Hence, those who do not think much of artistry admit that it is permissible to write poorly. And, once one agrees that it is *permissible* [*pozvolitel'no*], then the next step from here leads to the statement that *one ought to write poorly*." (Dostoevskii's italics)<sup>7</sup>

*The Gift* is a *Künstlerroman* covering three years of Fëdor's aesthetic education. It is interesting to note that Fëdor's development as an artist loosely parallels the path of the history of Russian literature of the nineteenth century. Chapter 1, which covers the years of Fëdor's poetic apprenticeship and contains his juvenile verse, corresponds to the Golden Age of Russian poetry, the early 1820s. Chapter 2 is Fëdor's Pushkin period. Following Pushkin's example of the 1830s, Fëdor makes his own transition to prose with Pushkin's "Journey to Arzum" serving as inspiration for Fëdor's imaginary exotic journey to Central Asia. At the end of the chapter, Fëdor informs us that the distance from his old residence in chapter 2 to the new one in chapter 3 "was about the same as, somewhere in Russia, that from Pushkin Avenue to Gogol' Street" (164/157). Chapter 3 brings us to the 1840s, Fëdor's Gogol' period. Reading *Dead Souls* is a perfect exercise in detecting *poshlust*, while Gogol's art of the grotesque sets a stylistic example of how *poshlust* should be mocked.<sup>8</sup> Fëdor applies this new skill in his biography of Chernyshevskii in chapter 4, where he reenacts the literary polemics of the 1860s. Chapter 5 is a recapitulation of all the previous themes, leading to the eternal themes,

6. *What Is to be Done?*, p. 12.

7. "G. [Dobroliu]-bov i vopros ob iskusstve." *Vremia* (Feb. 1861), quoted from *Dostoevskii ob iskusstve* (Moscow: Iskusstvo, 1973), p. 69.

8. Nabokov discusses *poshlust'* in his book *Nikolai Gogol* (New York: New Directions, 1961), pp. 63-74.

such as death, religion and immortality, of Dostoevskii and Tolstoi. By the end of chapter 5 Fëdor's last work is born, *The Gift* itself. With this novel, which one critic has called "the greatest novel Russian Literature has yet produced in this century,"<sup>9</sup> Nabokov/Fëdor makes his entry into modern Russian literature, *The Gift* representing a part of that tradition.

In the introduction of *The Gift*, Nabokov states that the "heroine" of *The Gift* is "not Zina, but Russian literature." While Zina makes her first appearance some 200 pages into the novel, Nabokov introduces his "heroine" in the very first sentence: "One cloudy but luminous day, toward four in the afternoon on April the first, 192— (a foreign critic once remarked that while many novels, most German ones for example, begin with a date, it is only Russian authors who, in keeping with the honesty peculiar to our literature, omit the final digit). . . ." The omission of the final digit is only a small token in comparison with the overdose of honesty contained in the April Fools' date. As a matter of professional ethics, it is prescribed by the author at the outset of his novel in order to undermine any trust in the reality which lies beyond the text. Likewise, Pushkin began his *Novel at Caucasian Spa* with the sentence: "On one of the first days of April 181. . .," and arranged the birth of the "late" I. P. Belkin on April 1st.<sup>10</sup> Chernyshevskii's novel does not pass this "test of honesty": *Chto delat'?* begins "On the morning of the eleventh of July, 1856."

If the "heroine" of *The Gift* is Russian literature, then its plot could be characterized as the ongoing struggle between "pure art" and all the utilitarian varieties of "pseudo-art" serving social, moral, religious, philosophical, ideological, didactic, and other extra-artistic purposes. On the level of real literary personalities, Pushkin and Chernyshevskii represent the two hostile lines in the history of Russian culture. According to Fëdor, Pushkin is Chernyshevskii's "most vulnerable spot; for it has long become customary to measure the degree of flair, intelligence and talent of a Russian critic by his attitude to Pushkin" (285/267). The radicals of the 1860s not only dethroned Pushkin, but also took over the journal *Sovremennik* which Pushkin had founded, and used it as a tribune in their campaign against pure art. Chernyshevskii, for example, published *Chto delat'?* in *Sovremennik* while he was in prison.<sup>11</sup> In his clairvoyant poem of 1828 "Poet i tolpa" (The Poet and the Rabble), Pushkin has left a foreboding of the dark utilitarian times to come.

9. Andrew Field, *Nabokov: His Life in Art* (London: Hodder and Stroughton, 1967), p. 249.

10. Melville began "The Confidence Man" with this date and so did Joyce in *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*. The last entry of Hermann's diary in *Despair* is dated April 1st, and All Fools' is also Gogol's birthday.

11. In the 1930s, when Nabokov was writing *The Gift*, the Paris critics Adamovich and Ivanov ventured a similar assault on Pushkin and his legacy in Russian literature. Their main opponents were Khodasevich and Nabokov.

[ЧЕРНЬ]

"Зачем так звучно он поет?  
 Напрасно ухо поражая,  
 К какой он цели нас ведет?  
 О чем бренчит? чему нас учит?  
 Зачем сердца волнует, мучит,  
 Как своенравный чародей?  
 Как ветер, песнь его свободна,  
 Зато как ветер и бесплодна:  
 Какая *польза* нам от ней?"

[ПОЭТ]

Молчи, бессмысленный народ,  
 Поденщик, раб нужды, забот!  
 Несносен мне твой ропот дерзкий,  
 Ты червь земли, не сын небес;  
 Тебе бы *пользы* все—на вес  
 Кумир ты ценишь Бельведерский.  
 Ты *пользы, пользы* в нем не зришь.  
 Но мрамор сей ведь бог! . . . так что же?  
 Печной горшок тебе дороже:  
 Ты пищу в нем себе варишь.  
 (My italics)

[THE RABBLE]

Why is the poet's song so ringing?  
 How vainly does it strike our ear.  
 Is there a purpose in his jingling?  
 What is the lesson he brings near?  
 And why, like a capricious wizard,  
 does he excite and break our hearts?  
 Like blowing wind, his song is free,  
 But also just as fruitless.  
 What use is it to us?

[POET]

Quiet, mindless rabble!  
 You toiler, slave of need and care!  
 I cannot bear your caddish grumble,  
 you are a worm, not heaven's heir.  
 Demanding use from everything,  
 You weigh in pounds Apollo's worth.  
 What other use is there?  
 That marble is a god!—Big deal . . .—  
 To you a cooking pot is dearer,  
 You can prepare in it your meal.

Pushkin's poem, written in the year of Chernyshevskii's birth, reads like a blueprint for Fëdor's sally against Chernyshevskii in *The Gift*, which marks the centennial.<sup>12</sup>

Utilitarianism, however, is only one point of discord between Fëdor and Chernyshevskii. The other, more subtle point concerns the relationship between "art" and "reality." In his master's dissertation on "The Aesthetic Relations of Art to Reality" of 1855 written without drafts and without a single footnote,<sup>13</sup> Chernyshevskii has reached the following conclusion: "The creations of art are inferior to the beauty [found] in reality not only because the impression created by reality is livelier than the impression produced by a work of art, but because the creations of art are inferior to the beauty of reality . . . also from the aesthetic point of view."<sup>14</sup> No matter how different Fëdor and Chernyshevskii might be in their aesthetic outlooks, this is precisely the point that Fëdor also makes at the beginning of the novel, as he muses over his old poems about his childhood: ". . . what insulting mockery to affirm smugly that 'Thus a former impression keeps living / Within harmony's ice. . .'" (25/50). Not unlike Chernyshevskii, Fëdor realizes that neither his memory nor his poetry can capture the authentic, immediate life experience. The distorting medium of poetry threatens to turn even the finest of memories into a "fan of picture postcards" (24/29). Fëdor attempts to rescue his lyrics from falling flat by providing each poem with a commentary in prose. Mentally projecting his poems "in three dimensions, as it were" (16/21) back to "reality," Fëdor hopes to restore through the commentaries what was lost in the process of poetization.

Against his rather mediocre verse, Fëdor's prose commentaries stand out as the livelier part of chapter 1. Fëdor is aware of this, for he eventually gives up writing poems almost entirely. As Koncheev rightly perceived, Fëdor's poems are "but the models for, [his] future novels" (82/83). *The Gift* is just such a novel. Since it exists only as a mere mental draft of a future novel, still uncorrupted by the process of secondary poetization, the novel stands closer to the unmediated experience of "reality" which Chernyshevskii deemed superior to "art." As such, *The Gift* complies in spirit and letter with Chernyshevskii's master's dissertation.

12. *The Gift* begins on 1 April 1926, and ends on 29 June 1929: see Nabokov's foreword to the story "The Circle," in *A Russian Beauty and Other Stories* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1973), p. 254. It is justified to assume that Fëdor completed *The Life of Chernyshevskii* in 1928.

13. Cf. N. G. Chernyshevskii, *Polnoe sobranie sochinenii*, 15 vols. (Moscow: GIKhL, 1949), II, 819n, 821n (hereafter referred to as *PSS*). The university jury headed by Professor Davydov—a Schellingian—did not recommend the dissertation for certification; the degree was postponed by three years.

14. *PSS*, II, 91, point No. 13).

Among Fëdor's poems we find several which address the other major theme raised in Chernyshevskii's dissertation, namely, the mimetic relation between reality and art. In one of these poems, paraphrased in plain prose, Fëdor restores an ancient mechanical toy: a painted flowerpot with an artificial exotic plant, on which was perched a stuffed Malayan nightingale "so astonishingly lifelike that it seemed about to take wing." Upon several "vivi-fying turns" of a key the nightingale would ruffle its feathers, open its beak, and would, on occasion, begin to trill (18/13-14). Fëdor could not have chosen a better gimmick with which to annoy Chernyshevskii. Quoting Hegel (loosely and without acknowledgment), Chernyshevskii expressed his indignation: "Since it is impossible to achieve complete success in imitating nature, all that remains is to take smug pleasure in the relative success of this hocus-pocus; but the more the copy bears an external resemblance to the original, the colder this pleasure becomes, and it even grows into satiety or revulsion. . . . An excellent imitation of the song of the nightingale begins to bore and disgust us as soon as we learn that it is not a real nightingale singing, but some skillful imitator of the nightingales's trilling. . . ."15 "Why were so much time and labor wasted on it?" laments Chernyshevskii, and "what a pity that such lack of content can go hand in hand with such perfection of workmanship!"

The Malayan nightingale, however, proves to be extremely useful for Fëdor's future artistic career. The toy not only gives rise to a poem, but the mimetic exactness with which it reproduces reality comes in handy in Fëdor's travelogue in chapter 2. During this imaginary journey, Fëdor describes with the utmost mimetic precision of a natural scientist the exotic fauna and flora of Central Asia. At the same time, the stuffed, trilling bird, by being out of context, grotesquely distorts the reality it simulates. As such, it warns the young writer that mechanical mimesis may result in the artificiality of pseudo-realism. Fëdor's travelogue, simulating the remote and unseen exotic reality, remained, after all, unfinished.

Somewhat similar in its mimetic essence is the poem reproducing the other musical toy, the acrobatic clown performing on parallel bars. But unlike the nightingale who imitates life naturalistically, the mimetic gift of the clown is linked to the "spirit of parody that always goes along with genuine poetry" (18-19/24). This "spirit of parody" reaches its apex in the mock biography of Chernyshevskii, while the genre of parody becomes a permanent hallmark of Fëdor's art.

The last poem which I would like to mention in this context offers yet another type of mimetic distortion of "life" by "art." It is a poem about the profane art of advertisement. The heroes of the poem are a boy and a girl

15. PSS, II, 79; trans. in J. M. Edie *et al.*, eds., *Russian Philosophy*, 2nd ed. (Knoxville: Univ. of Tennessee Press, 1976), II, 18-19.

from an illustrated advertisement. Fëdor's poem (actually a trilogy in three stanzas paraphrased in prose) narrates their "real life" by means of assorted commercial ads which "document" the couple's exalted and totally absurd lives from cradle to coffin. In his attack on the *poshlust* of "the handsome demons" of advertisement, Fëdor is particularly eager to point out a "secret flaw, a shameful wart on the behind of this semblance of perfection" (20/25).

Advertising is clearly the most utilitarian of arts. The mockery of it in chapter 1 develops in chapter 4 into a more ambitious purge of all utilitarian values parading as art, while the technique of composing biography from absurd but carefully documented bits of information is applied to discredit the life and aesthetic tastes of Chernyshevskii. One may recall, for example, the decisive role which the banal pictures of lovelies in the shop windows on Nevskii Avenue (perhaps the same ones Akakii Akakievich admired?) played in the sentimental and aesthetic education of Chernyshevskii.<sup>16</sup> Fëdor makes the droll assumption "that during those minutes when [Chernyshevskii] was glued to the shop windows his disingenuous master's dissertation . . . was composed in its entirety" (251/235); that is to say, the beauty of "Life" (i.e., Nadezhda Egorovna) is superior to the beauty of "Art" (i.e., the lovelies which so fascinated Akakii Akakievich). "Thus in denouncing 'pure art' the men of the sixties, and good Russian people after them . . . were denouncing—in result of misinformation—their own false conception of it" (266-67/250). With characteristic haughtiness Fëdor compares Chernyshevskii in his aesthetic tastes to an "acetic [dreaming] of a feast that would make an epicurean sick."

Exposing, purging, and replacing sham values with true and legitimate ones is Fëdor's main occupation in *The Gift*. Throughout his life, Nabokov engaged in a similar kind of exorcism in his attacks on the Adamovich-Ivanov circle, in his book reviews, in *Lectures on Russian Literature*, and most notably in his book *Nikolai Gogol*, where under the untranslatable heading of *poshlust*, he compiled a sizable catalogue of sham values ranging from advertisement to Goethe's *Faust*. It becomes clear from Nabokov's account that the work of the "demon of 'poshlust' . . . is not only the obviously trashy but also the falsely important, the falsely beautiful, the falsely clever, the falsely attractive."<sup>17</sup> The beginning of "The Fourth Dream of Vera Pavlovna" is a good case in point:

16. These pictures in the windows of Junker's and Daziaro art shops are described in Chernyshevskii's diaries. See *N. G. Chernyshevskii: Literaturnoe nasledie* (Hereafter *Chernyshevskii*), 3 vols. (Moscow-Leningrad: Gos. izd., 1928-30); *Chernyshevskii*, I, 240, 245-46, 271 and *Chernyshevskii*, II, 41.

17. Nabokov, *Nikolai Gogol*, p. 70.



"Oh, Earth! Oh, mollitude! Oh, love! Oh, love, golden, beautiful, like the morning clouds above those mountain peaks!"

O Erd'! O Sonne!  
 O Glück! O Lust!  
 O Lieb'! O Liebe  
 So goldenschön,  
 Wie Morgenwolken  
 Auf jenen Höh'n.

[From Goethe's "Mailed"]

—Do you recognize me now? Do you know that I am pretty? No, you don't know yet, none of you knows me in my entire splendor."

An additional reason for quoting this passage is to suggest that the peculiar mixture of poetry and prose which seemed so unique in *The Gift* comes courtesy of N. G. Chernyshevskii, who embellished the "Fourth Dream" with poems by Schiller and Kol'tsov, in addition to Goethe.

One is tempted to say that even the device of auto-criticism which Fëdor so skillfully employs throughout *The Gift* comes courtesy of Chernyshevskii. Shortly after his master's dissertation appeared in print, it was given a rave review by a certain N. P. in *Sovremennik*, No. 6 (1855). Assuming the voice of the alleged reviewer, Chernyshevskii applauded the dissertation and praised the virtues of its author. The difference between Fëdor's and Chernyshevskii's auto-reviews; however, is again more important than the similarity. While Chernyshevskii's auto-review is a dithyramb, the majority of Fëdor's auto-reviews is devastating criticism.

For the men of the 1860s practical and social usefulness was the highest criterion of value. The more radical among them, such as D. I. Pisarev, valued a pair of boots higher than poetry. Illustrating this persuasion, Fëdor introduces Chernyshevskii into a typical scene from the life of a poor clerk. With Gogolian gusto, but without Dostoevskian sentimentality Fëdor depicts the "scribe" Chernyshevskii, darning his old trousers and mending his footwear.

He turned out to have no black thread, so what there was he undertook to soak in ink; an anthology of German verse was lying nearby, open at the beginning of William Tell. As a result of his waving the thread about (in order to dry it), several drops of ink fell on the page; the book did not belong to him. He found a lemon . . . and attempted to get the blots out, but he only succeeded in dirtying the lemon, plus the windowsill where he had left the pernicious thread. Then he sought the aid of a knife and began to scrape (this book with the punctured poems is now in the Leipzig University library; unfortunately it has not been possible to ascertain how it got there). Ink, indeed, was the natural element of Chernyshevskii (he literally bathed in it), who used to smear with it the cracks in his shoes

when he was out of shoe polish; or else, in order to disguise a hole in his shoe, he would wrap his foot in a black tie. (253/237)

In *The Gift* Fëdor too discovers a hole in his footwear. A "chill leak in his left shoe" (62/65) places the poet in the familiar position of Akakii Akakievich Bashmachkin, who was forced by the chill Petersburg weather to pay a visit to the tailor. As could be expected, Fëdor's cobbler flatly "refused to repair" the shoes, and Fëdor contemplates buying a new pair. His visit to the Berlin shoe store results in two important acquisitions: a pair of shoes and a rare glance into Hades which gives rise to a "metaphysical" poem about the Styx. Having placed his newly-shod foot under the fluoroscope, Fëdor sees "against the luminous background, his dark, neatly separated phalanges. With this, *with this I'll step ashore. From Charon's ferry*" (my italics, 74/76). This strange phrase is the nucleus and a preview of Fëdor's Styx poem, whose more complete version is given at the end of chapter 1 (86-87/87).

Thus both Fëdor and Chernyshevskii begin with holes in their shoes; for both (*Cherdyntsev* and *Chernyshevskii*) "ink" (*chernila*) is a "natural element" ("prirodnaia stikhia"). Yet once again the differences are more striking than the similarities. The utilitarian materialist Chernyshevskii annihilated poetry, turning a passage of Wilhelm Tell into a "hole" (nineteenth-century opponents called materialists of the Pisarev-Chernyshevskii stripe "nihilists"), while Fëdor ends by buying a new pair of shoes and saving his ink for more sublime endeavors, such as the penning of the Styx poem. Fëdor's poem, moreover, provides a footnote to Chernyshevskii's dissertation "The Aesthetic Relationship Between Art and Reality" by demonstrating how even the most pedestrian event, such as a "leak" in a shoe, can become transmuted into iambic verse.

On a somewhat different level, the Chernyshevskii/Fëdor subplots regarding footwear crisscross in chapter 4. As is known, Chernyshevskii seriously questioned the legitimacy of binary feet in Russian language and prosody, and proclaimed ternary meter (Nekrasov's "sobbing" anapaest, for example) more natural and superior to binary meter (Pushkin's "blue-blooded" iamb).<sup>18</sup> Commenting upon this misjudgement of the nature of Russian binary feet, Fëdor compared Chernyshevskii to the "cobbler who visited [Apelles'] studio and criticized what he did not understand" (272/254). Fëdor's remark is a direct allusion to Pushkin's 1829 parable "Sapozhnik" (The Cobbler) written in iambic pentameter and based on a tale by Pliny the Elder. In the poem, "art" is naturally placed above "boots," and the arrogant artisan is put in his place by the indignant artist:

18. See Chernyshevskii's 1855 essay "Sochineniia Pushkina: Stat'ia vtoraiia."

Картину раз высматривал сапожник  
 И в обуви ошибку указал;  
 Взяв тотчас кисть, исправился художник.  
 Вот, подбочась, сапожник продолжал:  
 "Мне кажется, лицо немного криво . . .  
 А эта грудь не слишком ли нага?"  
 Тут Апеллес прервал нетерпеливо:  
 "Суди, дружок, не свыше сапога!"

A cobbler, canvassing a painting,  
 Has found the footwear on it flawed.  
 The artist promptly fixed the failing,  
 But this is what the cobbler thought:  
 "It seems the face is slightly crooked . . .  
 Isn't that bosom rather nude?"  
 Annoyed, Apelles interrupted:  
 "Judge not, my friend, above the boot!"<sup>19</sup>

In his dissertation "The Aesthetic Relations between Art and Reality," Chernyshevskii proclaimed "reality" (life) superior to "art," and thus pronounced the "death sentence" for "pure art." Nikolai Gavrilovich not only "castigated (*kaznil*) 'pure poetry' wherever he found it" (267/250), but he taught generations of Russian critics to do the same. On the centennial of Chernyshevskii's birth Fëdor completes *The Life of Chernyshevskii*, in which he tries to refute the seminal thesis of Chernyshevskii's dissertation. In *The Gift* it is now the poet's turn to castigate his subject, and he does so by the very means which Chernyshevskii condemned as inferior—by "pure art." He summons refined artistry, ironic style, and an intricate compositional design to shape, manipulate, mock, and otherwise abuse the life of Chernyshevskii. Fëdor explains to Zina, however, that his travesty of Chernyshevskii's life has a serious side as well: "I want to keep everything as it were on the very brink of parody. You know those idiotic '*biographies romancées*' where Byron is coolly slipped a dream extracted from one of his own poems? And there must be on the other hand an abyss of seriousness, and I must make my way along this narrow ridge between my own truth and a caricature of it. And most essentially, there must be a single uninterrupted progression of thought. I must peel my apple in a single strip, without removing the knife."

19. Cf. with Chernyshevskii's criticizing of the pictures of the lovelies in Junker's show windows: "The Calabrian charmer's nose in the engraving was so-so: Particularly unsuccessful was the glabella as well as the parts lying near the nose, on both sides of its bridge" (250/234) and *Chernyshevskii*, I, 241.

(225/212) Fëdor's vivisection of Chernyshevskii is executed with a Gogolian scalpel, and it could indeed be said that the biography had added to the disreputable "civil execution" of Chernyshevskii an "artistic execution" of Fëdor's own making.

Ironically, in adding this insult to injury, Fëdor was guided by two Chernyshevskii's: the Berlin émigré Aleksandr Iakovlevich, a remote relative of the real Chernyshevskii, suggested the topic and the genre of "*biographie romancée*" (48/52), which combines "life" and "art," while the real Chernyshevskii supplied in his dissertation the magic formula of how "art" can be made superior to "reality": "The only thing, however, . . . in which poetry can stand higher than reality is in the *embellishment* of events by the addition of *accessory effects* and by making the character of the personages described correspond with the events in which they take part." (My italics, 266/249)<sup>20</sup> Fëdor exploits to the maximum Chernyshevskii's theoretical slip of the tongue. In *The Life of Chernyshevskii*, which is meant as a total subversion of Chernyshevskii's aesthetic theories, Fëdor sets off to restore the supremacy of "art" over "life." By "embellishing" historical "reality" with "accessory effects" Fëdor forces the facts of Chernyshevskii's life to follow the whims of the poet's design.

One such "embellishment" is no doubt the inverted circular sonnet which frames the biography of Chernyshevskii. Like the All Fools' date which opens *The Gift*, Fëdor's apocryphal sonnet functions as a disclaimer of sorts: the sonnet's sestet, which serves as an epigraph to *The Life*, acknowledges the impossibility of finding the truth (*istina* rather than *pravda*), while the octave, serving as an epitaph of *The Life*, offers two opposite, yet not mutually exclusive verdicts which history might pronounce on Chernyshevskii.<sup>21</sup>

20. Fëdor actually quotes Iu. Steklov's (real name: Nakhamkis) *N. G. Chernyshevskii: Ego zhizn' i deiatel'nost'* (hereafter *Steklov*), 2 vols. (Moscow: Gos. izd., 1928), I, 325, rather than Chernyshevskii's original text, *PSS*, II, 68); the meaning is, however, intact.

21. Fëdor's apocryphal poem calls to mind Nekrasov's 1874 sonnet dedicated to Chernyshevskii: "Ne govori: Zabyl on ostorozhnost'!/ On budet sam sud'by svoei vinoi!" (Don't say: He has forgotten caution!/ He himself will be to blame for his fate!) as well as Lenin's words about Chernyshevskii's fate: "Kak eë mozhet otsenit' chelovek, sovshennoe nevezhestvennyi i temnyi? On, veroiatno skazhet: 'Nu, chto zhe, razbil sebe chelovek zhizn', popal v Sibir', nichego ne dobilsia. . .'" (How can a totally ignorant and benighted person appreciate it? Most likely, he will say: 'So what, a man has ruined his life, ended up in Siberia, and achieved nothing' (V. I. Lenin, *Polnoe sobranie sochinenii*, 5th ed., 55 vols. [Moscow: Gos. lit-ry, 1958-65], XXXVIII, 336). Closer to the meaning of the agnostic sonnet is the statement of the émigré philosopher L. Shestov: "Istina est' to, chto prokhodit mimo istorii i chego istoriia ne zamechaet" (Truth is what passes by history and which history does not notice). ("Dobro zelo: iz knigi 'Exercitia spiritualia'," *Chisla* [Paris], No. 1 [1930], p. 178).

The circular movement of the inverted sonnet seems to affect the course of Chernyshevskii's life. The sequence of events, as they occurred in "life" (*fabula*), is totally subordinated to the sequence in which the poet narrates these events in his "art" (*siuzhet*). Fëdor begins with Chernyshevskii's youth and literary career, proceeds to his funeral, arrest and civil execution, returns to the funeral, then follows the hero into exile, through old age and death, and concludes with his birth.<sup>22</sup> However, the motifs and themes of Chernyshevskii's life only seem to lead an independent and haphazard life. As Fëdor informs us, "they merely describe a circle, like a boomerang or a falcon, in order to end by returning to [his] hand" (265/248).

By transmuting into his book the infinite revolutions of the apocryphal sonnet, Fëdor tries to escape the constraints imposed on a writer by the inevitable linearity of the narration, as well as by the "form of a book, which in its finiteness is opposed to the circular nature of everything in existence" (230/216). Fëdor strives to narrate the life of Chernyshevskii as one "continuously curving, and thus infinite, sentence" (230/216); "I must peel my apple in a single strip, without removing the knife" (225/212). Needless to say, this circular principle applies equally to the entire novel. Each chapter of *The Gift* goes through an analogous cyclical motion until the various circles become integrated into the spiral of the novel.<sup>23</sup>

One is tempted to suggest that even the circular mechanism that Fëdor has so successfully built into his narrative owes something to Chernyshevskii, or more precisely, to his longstanding preoccupation with physics. Chernyshevskii, who considered Lobachevskii "a complete fool" (269/252), spent five years of his life inventing a "perpetual motion machine," which, so he hoped, was to put an end to the material needs of mankind.<sup>24</sup> Chernyshevskii kept returning to this project until 1853, when his father, an Orthodox priest, pointed out to him the blunder in his calculations and persuaded his twenty-five-year-old son to drop the idea. Following the historian Iu. Steklov, Fëdor informs us that Chernyshevskii was already a high school-teacher and a bridegroom at the time he abandoned the project (244/229).<sup>25</sup> Again subverting Chernyshevskii, Fëdor successfully builds into his narrative a *perpetuum mobile* which refused to turn in Chernyshevskii's hands.

It has to be stressed that as far as the relationship between "reality" and "art" is concerned, the biographical and historical facts of Chernyshevskii's

22. Nabokov repeated this narrative strategem in his book on Gogol'.

23. For a discussion of this geometry, see D. Barton Johnson's "The Key to Nabokov's *Gift*," *Canadian-American Slavic Studies*, 16, No. 2 (Summer 1982), 192-93, and my "Teksty-matreshki" *Vladimira Nabokova* (Munich: Otto Sagner, 1982), pp. 194-99.

24. For the reference to Lobachevskii, see *Chernyshevskii*, II, 494; for *perpetuum mobile*, see *Chernyshevskii*, I, 405, 430, 546, 746n.

25. *Steklov*, I, 50.

life in Fëdor's biography are accurate. Even the most extravagant information, which one would be tempted to take as a pure figment of Fëdor's imagination, can be found in the existing literature. The most valuable source were the three National Heritage volumes of Chernyshevskii's diaries and correspondence published in 1928-30.<sup>26</sup> Fëdor occasionally adds a delicate "accessory" touch with which he "embellishes" the facts of Chernyshevskii's life. For example, the absurd passage in which Chernyshevskii mends his trousers is based on the following diary entry: "I began repairing my old trousers but had no black thread. Hence I undertook to dip [what I had] in ink. *Kurz* was lying open on the table. As I was waving the thread, several drops fell on the open pages (the beginning of *Wilhelm Tell*). Since the acid [which I applied] would not corrode the blots, I scraped them through with a knife." ("Tak kak kislota ne vyedala, ia vyskoblii ikh naskvoz' nozhom.")<sup>27</sup> Fëdor's remark that Chernyshevskii "only succeeded in dirtying the lemon" and that the "punctured" *Wilhelm Tell* "is now in the Leipzig University library" (253/237) belong to the "embellishments." These additions are no less effective than the minute omissions. The sentence from Chernyshevskii's diary "Ia rabotal i prodolzhal rabotat', no vykatilis' 3-4 slezy" ("I worked and continued working, but 3-4 tears rolled down"),<sup>28</sup> Fëdor renders: "Vykatilos' tri slezy . . ." ("Three tears rolled down . . ."). This elision gives him the pretext for the following mock-pedantic commentary: ". . . and the reader is tormented momentarily with the involuntary thought, can one have an odd number of tears, or is it only the dual nature of the source which makes us demand an even number?" (248/232)

The second source which Fëdor was extensively using in chapter 4 was the thoroughly documented biography of Chernyshevskii by the Marxist historian Iu. Steklov (1928). These two volumes are a veritable gold mine for a fiction writer as Steklov has collected here a score of biographical rarities and trivia on which he ingeniously comments.<sup>29</sup>

Just as he embellishes events of Chernyshevskii's life, Fëdor also occasionally improves on Steklov's biography. The "factual" amendments are entrusted to the "professional historian Stranoliubskii" whom the poet has invented

26. *Chernyshevskii*.

27. *Chernyshevskii*, I, 445.

28. *Ibid.*, p. 213.

29. *Steklov*. Fëdor makes ample use of the themes and motifs found in Steklov, such as Chernyshevskii's "angelic clarity," his myopia, his various spectacles, and the peripeties with the "machine for perpetual motion," as well as the superbly documented and witty account of Chernyshevskii's courtship and married life. Nabokov endowed Marthe, the promiscuous wife of Cincinnatus, in *Invitation to a Beheading* with some features of Ol'ga Sokratovna, that he found in Steklov.

solely for this purpose.<sup>30</sup> If the pedantic Steklov represents *history*, the amusing Stranoliubskii impersonates the *caricature* of history. Although Steklov and Stranoliubskii argue from opposite positions and reach contrary conclusions, the two share a predilection for trivial historical detail. I will mention one example where the clash between historical truth and the caricature of it produces the most peculiar "accessory effect." In the second volume of Steklov's work, the author describes at length Chernyshevskii's pathetic and prophetic letter from the fortress to Ol'ga Sokratovna (5 October 1862) in which he assures his wife that their lives will belong to history: "centuries will pass by, but our names will still be dear to people who will remember us with gratitude at times when our contemporaries will be long forgotten." Steklov comments on this letter:

After the words "... and I shall be a good teacher of people through ages, as was Aristotle" come the words: "I have begun speaking, however, of my thoughts: they are secret; you must not tell anyone about what I say to you alone" (*oni-sekret; ty nikomu ne govori o tom*). Here, on these two lines a drop (*kaplia*) has fallen and Chernyshevskii had to repeat the blurred letters. Was it a tear (*sleza*) extorted from the eyes of this virile man by the thought that, in essence, all these are but dreams never to be fulfilled, that his literary career is finished, that he will never be able to realize the grand designs swarming in his brain? Who will answer this question?<sup>31</sup>

Fedor's apocryphal historian will. Stranoliubskii endorses Steklov's conjecture that the drop was Chernyshevskii's tear, but he also claims that Steklov's description of it contains "certain inaccuracies" concerning the exact time and place:

Before us is Chernyshevskii's famous letter to his wife dated 5 December 1862 [sic]: a yellow diamond among the dust of his numerous works. . . . After the words "as was Aristotle" come the words: "I have begun speaking, however, of my thoughts: they are secret; you must not tell anyone about what I say to you alone" [*oni-sekret; ty nikomu ne govori o tom*]. "Here," comments Steklov, "on these two lines a teardrop has fallen and Chernyshevskii had to repeat the blurred letters." This is not quite right. The teardrop fell (near the fold of the sheet) *before* the writing of these

30. Even this fictitious historian, however, is not without a grain of historical truth. A certain Stranoliubskii—"the critic's father?" (332/310)—was the owner of a *dacha* where Chernyshevskii's son Sasha lived. See *Chernyshevskii*, III, 630.

31. *Steklov*, II, 378n.

two lines; Chernyshevskii had to rewrite two words, "secret" and "about" (one at the beginning of the first line, the other at the beginning of the second), words which he had started to trace each time on the wet place and which remained therefore unfinished [*se . . sekret, o t . . o tom*]. (Parenthesized Russian text inserted by S. D., 305/285-86)

At the outset of *The Life of Chernyshevskii* Fëdor states that he wants "to keep everything on the very brink of parody . . . And there must be on the other hand an abyss of seriousness" (225/212). Stranoliubskii's delicate "improvement" of Steklov is, of course, sheer parody; but where is the promised "abyss of seriousness?" Could this be a bizarre realization of the famous *smekh skvoz' slezy* (laughter through tears) metaphor, which would be very likely in this genuinely Gogolian chapter, or is Fëdor concealing from us still something else, in the manner, perhaps, of the allegorical figure in the opening sonnet?

Alas! In vain historians pry and probe:  
The same wind blows, and in the same live robe  
Truth bends her head to fingers curved cupwise;

And with a woman's smile and a child's care  
Examines something she is holding there  
Concealed by her own shoulder from our eyes.

The remonstrance over Chernyshevskii's "tear" is a perfect example illustrating Fëdor's quibbling method of hiding between the lines of historical truth (Steklov) and its caricature (Stranoliubskii) his own, relatively minor but precious "poetic truth." It is difficult to imagine that Fëdor, who in *The Gift* camouflaged many of his metered poems as plain prose, would have failed to notice the same device in Chernyshevskii, whom he so grotesquely emulates. The "tear," as recorded by Steklov, actually marks the beginning of a perfect, albeit purely accidental, iambic line in Chernyshevskii's letter: "oni-*sekret*; ty nikomu ne govori o tom." Under the impact of Chernyshevskii's tear, however, the iamb changes to "sobbing" anapaest: "*se . . sekret, o t . . o tom*." This change is of no further importance to the historian, but it is of interest to the poet, since the change from iamb to anapaest occurs in full accord with Chernyshevskii's own preference of ternary to binary meter (or for that matter of Nekrasov to Pushkin): "Chernyshevskii scented something democratic in the ternary meter, something which charmed the heart, something "free" but also didactic, as opposed to the aristocratic air of the iamb: he believed that poets who wished to convince should use the anapaest." (270-71/253) No doubt, Fëdor's improvement made Chernyshevskii's letter more "charming" as well as more "convincing."



Turning now from the microcosm of Fëdor's *Life of Chernyshevskii* to a more universal level, I would like to raise the question concerning the literary tradition and genre to which Fëdor's biography can be linked. Nabokov once said: "Satire is a lesson, parody is a game."<sup>32</sup> *The Life of Chernyshevskii* seems to be both. On the one hand, the wit, nonchalant ease, and playful irreverence link Fëdor's biography to the parodic tradition of "Arzamas" and its travesties, skits, and galimatias with which Pushkin and his friends lampooned Admiral Shishkov, the Count Khvostov, and other "archaists" from "Beseda liubitelei russkogo slova." (Nabokov was a founding member of an émigré "Arzamas.") On the other hand, keeping his hero on the edge of the risible and lachrymose is something Fëdor learned from Gogol', and, like him, Fëdor wants to teach us a lesson. *The Life of Chernyshevskii* thus belongs to the satirical genre, but it is not a social satire.

Teasing and abusing the literary character by the devices of his own making, such as the *perpetuum mobile* or Chernyshevskii's various theoretical blunders ranging from philosophy to prosody, is a well known feature of the *Menippean satire*. According to Mikhail Bakhtin, the most essential characteristic of the Menippean genre is the creation of "extraordinary situations in which to provoke and test a philosophical idea—the word or the truth, embodied in the image of the wise man, the seeker after this truth" (point 3). Actually all fourteen points which Bakhtin lists as characteristic of the genre are relevant to Fëdor's text, in particular points 4—"extreme and crude naturalism," 5—"extraordinary philosophical universalism and extreme ideologism," 8—"maniac themes," 12—insertion of texts in various genres in prose and verse form, and 14—"topicality and publicistic quality" (*zlobodnevnost*).<sup>33</sup>

Another scholar of this genre, Northrop Frye, sees as a permanent theme in the Menippean satire "the ridicule of the *philosophus gloriosus*." But, unlike the "novel," which deals with "people," the "Menippean satire" deals with "mental attitudes."

Pedants, bigots, cranks, parvenus, virtuosi, enthusiasts, rapacious and incompetent professional men of all kinds, are handled in terms of their occupational approach to life as distinct from their social behavior. . . . The novelist sees evil and folly as social diseases, but the Menippean satirist sees them as diseases of the intellect, as a kind of maddened pedantry which the *philosophus gloriosus* at once symbolizes and defines. . . . At its most concentrated the Menippean satire presents us with a vision of the

32. *Strong Opinions*, p. 75.

33. Mikhail Bakhtin, *Problemy poetiki Dostoevskogo*, 3rd ed. (Moscow: I. Kh. L., 1972), pp. 192-200; trans. R. W. Rotsel, *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics* (Ann Arbor: Ardis, 1973), pp. 93-97.

world in terms of a single intellectual pattern. The intellectual structure built up from the story makes for violent dislocations in the customary logic of narrative, though the appearance of carelessness that results reflects only the carelessness of the reader or his tendency to judge by a novel-centered [or biography-centered] conception of fiction.<sup>34</sup>

By attributing *The Life of Chernyshevskii* to the "ser'ezno-smekhovoï" (serious/risible) genre of Menippean satire, it is possible to see behind the façade of mockery the depth of Fëdor's concern for the dismal fate of Russian literature, which he attributes directly to Chernyshevskii. Equally important is not to lose sight of the genuine attitude of Fëdor and his author Nabokov toward the real Chernyshevskii, Chernyshevskii the man, rather than the *bête noire* and the blackguard of Russian letters: "And on the other hand [Fëdor] began to comprehend by degrees that such uncompromising radicals as Chernyshevskii, with all their ludicrous and ghastly blunders, were, no matter how you looked at it, real heroes in their struggle with the governmental order of things (which was even more noxious and more vulgar than was their own fatuity in the realm of literary criticism), and that other oppositionists, the liberals or the Slavophiles, who risked less, were by the same token worth less than these iron squabblers." (228/214-15) Nabokov's real attitude toward Chernyshevskii, "whose works [he] found risible but whose fate moved [him] more strongly than did Gogol's" (the subject of Nabokov's next biography) should not be forgotten either: "What Chernyshevskii would have thought of [chapter 4] is another question—but at least the plain truth of documents is on my side. That, and only that, is what I would ask of my biographer—plain facts. . . ."<sup>35</sup>

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34. Northrop Frye, *Anatomy of Criticism* (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1973), p. 310.

35. *Strong Opinions*, p. 156. One last "plain fact" about Nabokov should be revealed at this point. Toward the end of the second volume, Steklov regretfully informs us that a certain Doctor *Bokov* failed to appear at Chernyshevskii's funeral ("doktor *Bokov* na pokhorony ne priekhal") (my italics). Due to his absence, Nabokov was deprived of the chance to see the last tear shed by Chernyshevskii (and copiously recorded by Pypin): "We were walking from the church gate to the parvis when, in the midst of singing and weeping, Ol'ga Sokratovna, unable to tear her eyes from Nikolai Gavrilovich's face, exclaimed in a sobbing voice: 'Darling, he hears us, he cries; Misha, look: a tear!' Misha looked and said in a voice choked by tears, 'yes, yes.' I looked too, and, indeed, in the inner corner of the left eye, I noticed a drop of transparent liquid" (*Steklov*, II, 643).