

The Strange Case of Pushkin as a Polyglot and Nabokov

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One of the things that may trouble readers of Nabokov's commentary is his underestimation of Pushkin's knowledge of languages. Nabokov asserts, "When Pushkin tried to teach himself English at various odd moments from the early 1820's to 1836, he never went beyond the beginner's page" (162). He illustrates how Pushkin did *not* master the language in several examples he has found in Pushkin's manuscripts. Edmund Wilson questions Nabokov's underrating of Pushkin's knowledge of English: "Mr. Nabokov does not seem to admit that Pushkin's competence in languages was considerable."¹ He also produces some examples that testify to Pushkin's competence in English, insisting that Nabokov must have been very well aware of them. To Wilson's challenge, Nabokov only insists that Wilson should consult the examples he has produced,² which sounds far from persuasive, in contrast to his counter-arguments on other issues raised by Wilson.

According to Brian Boyd, Nabokov originally "supposed that Pushkin had a perfect command, not only of Russian and French, but of English, German and Italian," though in his finished commentary he asserts that Pushkin knew no language well except Russian and French.³ Nabokov says that Pushkin could not read Byron, Coleridge and other English Romantics in their original language, but only read them in French translations. On the other hand, as Boyd points out, Nabokov proves Pushkin's command of English in his notes, which obviously belies his assertion above.⁴ Nabokov seems to try to impress upon readers by all means that Pushkin did not read Byron in his original language, but in Amédée Pichot's translation, which, however, Nabokov judges to be inaccurate and just "readable."

Nabokov's evaluation of Pushkin's French also puzzles readers. He affirms that Pushkin was a poor linguist: "[E]ven the fluent French . . . lacked personal tang and, judging by his letters, remained throughout his life limited to a brilliant command of eighteenth-century ready-made phrases" (162). Wilson questions this judgment, too, but Nabokov says he can reply only "that Mr. Wilson's notion of such competence and my notion of it are completely dissimilar."⁵ In the commentary, Nabokov often points out Pushkin's Gallicism. Sometimes a reader tends to doubt whether or not an expression that seems commonly used, should be defined as Gallicism. On one hand, it

may be understandable that Nabokov intends to intensify the importance of French in Pushkin's works by too nervously pointing out their Gallicism. On the other hand, the reader suspects, Nabokov's evaluation of Pushkin as a French writer was too strictly given.

The reader would like to naively ask: Who was better in French, Pushkin or Nabokov? Indeed, Nabokov learned French in his childhood from a Swiss governess (Cécile Miauton, aka "Mademoiselle O"), and sometimes spoke the language with his family. In Paris he published a story and an essay in French, and even had the possibility of becoming a French writer. However, he actually grew up after the French era had ended in Russia, when aristocrats usually talked, and students learned, in Russian. Growing up as a trilingual child, Nabokov's first language was nothing but Russian. On the other hand, Pushkin was raised at the time of the French language's control over Russia. Most of his childhood conversations with his family, and his studies, were in French. Being one of the first students accepted by the Tsarskoe Selo Lyceum, he was educated in Russian exceptionally at that time, but he knew French literature well and was so dedicated to it that he was both respected for and made fun of his Francophilia. As almost all the books kept in the library at the Pushkin Museum in Moscow are in French, this language can be considered his substantial first language, even though it should not be called his "mother tongue." Could it be possible that Pushkin had such a poor command of French as Nabokov judges? As even a learner of a foreign language could judge the quality of a native speaker's writing style, it is natural that Nabokov, who was extremely good in the language, could be critical of Pushkin's French. On the other hand, Nabokov's underrating might be due to his hope of impressing upon the reader that Pushkin's Russian was much superior to his French. Still, we cannot help feeling something obscure in his underrating.

In his commentary to the eighth chapter, Nabokov seems to try to denounce Pushkin's dedication to French literature. He discusses that Pushkin's nickname, "the Frenchman," comes from the metaphor for France, "monkeys and tigers," rather than from Pushkin's Francophilia, well known in his school days. To prove it, Nabokov brings up the fact that Pushkin added to his signature, "the Frenchman," in the minutes of the annual reunion of the Lyceum alumni, "A cross between a monkey and a tiger" (135-36). His gloss is interesting enough, but at the same time, it makes the reader wonder why Nabokov should try to separate Pushkin from French literature. Nabokov's assertion looks even more mysterious when we remember his desire to

position Pushkin in the tradition of European literature.

According to Yu. M. Lotman, Russian aristocrats of Pushkin's era generally wrote their private letters in French, often quoting French literary works.⁵ This convention looks to be a form of aristocratic sophistication; on the other hand, it may suggest a kind of limitation in their French as their "native" tongue, caused by the fact that it was not the language that had come down from their ancestors from generation to generation. That the social elegance of the aristocrats was imported from France, and denied Russian convention, suggests a kind of defection of Russian culture. Similarly, the prototype of Onegin can be found in European Romantic heroes, as Nabokov defines them.

In the commentary to the first chapter Nabokov spends six pages on the themes of "spleen" and "ennui," which have been so enthusiastically discussed by Russian and Soviet critics as particular to Onegin's distemper that they invented a special term, "Oneginstvo [Oneginism]," and spent thousands of pages on him as a "type." Nabokov proves that Onegin's mental malady was not particular to an era of Russia, but was widespread in Western Europe from the seventeenth through nineteenth centuries, by carefully tracing its first appearances; definitions; and various usages in Voltaire, Boswell, La Fontaine, Sainte-Beuve, Stendhal, Chateaubriand, Byron and other Romantics. Moreover, he introduces how "spleen" spread over to Europe so that many English tourists tried to commit suicide from such a distemper, how "spleen" marked the characters in nineteenth century English and French novels, and how they were mentally and medically treated in these works. Nabokov shows Onegin's personality as generated not only from Byron's Childe Harold, but also from the Romanticism of Western Europe. However, Nabokov does not highly value such a "type" inflicted by the "spleen" popular in English and French Romantic novels. He considers that Onegin should be separated from those clichéd characters because Onegin was recomposed in a unique way by Pushkin, who could create characters from both life and literature. Then he discusses how Pushkin's genius could create Onegin, such a vivid and unique character, from the pale European prototype. Then, we suspect again, there would be no problem if Nabokov would admit that Pushkin had better knowledge of French and English.

Throughout his commentary Nabokov engages the reader by his exact verification of facts. He estimates the time when Onegin and Pushkin walked on the Neva embankment according to the climate chart from Pushkin's library. He also entertains the reader by describing how delicious European

beefsteak used to be, and then shows the price of such a dish compared to a yearly subscription to a weekly magazine; and tells how many bottles of champagne were imported from France at that time. However, we find no such positivism in his underestimation of Pushkin's languages. Pushkin's knowledge of English probably was not enough to allow him to read Byron's works with ease, but at least he must have had some English comprehension, and somehow could have appreciated *Childe Harold* even partially. Why does Nabokov persist in asserting that Pushkin could not read Byron, except in an imperfect French translation?

It could be assumed that Nabokov needs to distance Pushkin from Byron so as to connect Pushkin and himself over a century. Pushkin, who stayed in Russia his whole life while longing to leave it, and Nabokov, who often visited Europe during his childhood and lived in Europe and the US as an émigré, do not seem to share much background. However, in Nabokov's works, the places he has known in Russia, Europe and the US are not described as they were, but always appear before the reader's eye via his "invention." All his protagonists have experienced serious loss and desperately struggle to fill the gaps between something precious that has been lost and themselves. The struggles are in the center of Nabokov's world, and they are done as extremely complicated maneuvers. Nabokov seems intent on finding and representing the same in Pushkin. The latter's genius, Nabokov asserts, made it possible for him to appreciate Byron even by Pichot's inaccurate and mediocre translation, by which we may imagine the complex relationship between Pushkin and European literature. Nabokov quotes from *Curiosities of Literature* by Isaac D'Israeli, the French translation of which Pushkin had, adding his comments:

. . . their [the gondoliers of Venice] sounds were hoarse and screaming . . . [but at a great distance, the vocal performance is] inexpressibly charming, as it only fulfils its design in the sentiment of remoteness [as Pushkin heard it—from Pichot's gondola, across a wilderness of liberty] (184-85).

This Pushkin reminds us of Humbert Humbert, who sees in the American countryside the trees he has viewed in *René* and *Atala*, described by Chateaubriand, who had never visited America before he wrote those novels. Commenting on Pushkin, Nabokov secretly but assertively suggests to the reader some clues to his own works and himself. It may be one of the greatest

thrills the reader is given while reading his commentary.

¹ Edmund Wilson, "The Strange Case of Pushkin and Nabokov," *A Window on Russia: for the Use of Foreign Readers* (New York: Farrar, 1972), 225.

² Vladimir Nabokov, *Strong Opinions* (New York: Vintage, 1990), 265.

³ Brian Boyd, *Vladimir Nabokov: The American Years* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1991), 350.

⁴ Boyd, 351-352.

⁵ *Strong Opinions*, 265.

⁶ Yu. M. Lotman, *Besedi o russkoy kul'ture: bit i traditsii russkogo dvoryanstva (XVIII-nachalo XIX veka)*. (St. Petersburg: Iskusstvo-SPB, 1994), 70-72.