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Transcendence of Exile: Nabokov's St. Petersburg

In her memoirs, *Kursiv Moi*, Nina Berberova proudly accentuates her connection with Vladimir Nabokov as a Russian writer, a writer who elevated Russian immigrant literature and made other Russian immigrant artists immortal by the sheer fact that they knew him. Nabokov's ascent is not accidental. He, as other representatives of the first wave of the Russian immigration, possessed an incredible ability to survive in exile without succumbing to, and feeling inferior towards, the Western world, thus standing out on the horizon of immigrants in Europe, making his way into immortality. The devotion and faith in art—as well as pride in their own national origins that Nabokov, Berberova, Stravinsky, Rachmaninov, Bunin, and Khodasevich exhibited and managed to maintain—as and is striking in comparison with later exiled artists from different parts of the world. Julia Kristeva emphasizes recent immigrants' feelings of inferiority towards the West in her study of exile, *Strangers to Ourselves*. Pierre Bourdieu in his novel work, *La Double Absence,* claims that in order for immigrants to survive in exile, they need to inherit or acquire at least two of three kinds of capital: financial, cultural, or social. At the beginning of the twentieth century, most Russian immigrants took only cultural and social capital with them when they left St. Petersburg, a tormented, anguished city that remained nonetheless dear to them. This city, as a magnificent cultural center, invested them with ever-lasting nostalgia and social capital (numerous friends, colleagues who lived, thrived in art and public life), as well as cultural capital (Pushkin's legacy, the

grandeur of St. Petersburg's architecture, modern developments in literature, painting, theatre, ballet, opera, and music). Katherine Clark astutely notes: "Petersburg was originally conceived as a seat of power, and also a city of science and culture. [. . .] [It] was always considered more secular and cosmopolitan" (6-7).

Vladimir Nabokov absorbed the stirring, exciting, and seething atmosphere—later materialized as cultural capital—that reigned in St. Petersburg, so that when he found himself on a foreign soil, he longed for his former (*preznij*) St. Petersburg. Alas, this return could have never happened in reality, but only on the pages of his many works, as Aleksei Zverev states in his article "Literary Return to Russia" (302-303). As David Bethea suggests, Nabokov's kinship with Khodasevich—which represents social capital—laid the foundation for the dawn of Nabokov as a modern prose writer (452). Aleksandr Dolinin numerous times has underscored that it is Russian literature that underlies Sirin's oeuvre: "Whatever Parisian Adamovich or American Nabokov would say, Sirin's works are fed by Russian literature, and in turn, feed Russian literature; these works develop only in a dialogue with it; in pushing off from what seems to him alien and dead, and in claiming as one's own what he recognizes as related (*rodstvennij*) and alive" (translation mine, 13-14).

In this paper, I will analyze Nabokov's *The Gift,* to show how Nabokov uses his cultural capital to portray grand St. Petersburg, how these rich recollections saved him in exile and gave him a sense of mission—the revival of dying Russian culture in the West.

One of the most frequently quoted passages from *The Gift*, delivered by memoirist Sukhoshchekov, describes Nabokov's view of Pushkin precisely: "They say that a man whose leg is cut off at the hip can feel it for a long time, moving nonexistent toes and

flexing nonexistent muscles. Thus will Russia long continue to feel the living presence of Pushkin" (98-99). For Nabokov Pushkin was always present. As it has been underscored by many Nabokovians, (e.g., Vadim Stark, Sergei Davydov, Aleksandr Dolinin) Nabokov's works are subtly woven from Pushkin's motives and themes. In *Invitation to a Beheading*, the name of the main hero is Cincinnatus, and if we translate it from Latin into English, it will mean "curly," just as Pushkin's hair was curly. Cincinnatus feels an incredible affinity with Pushkin, being indifferent to death and believing that poetry is immortal.

Not only did Nabokov employ various Pushkin's themes, motives, and symbols, but also he spent fifteen years compiling the invaluable commentaries to his literal translation of *Eugene Onegin*. Despite all the controversy this translation caused (the well-known feud between Nabokov and Wilson), the value of it is indisputable. Nabokov introduced the entire West to the heart of Russian Literature, Aleksandr Pushkin, situating him on the horizons of World Literature. Stark suggests that Nabokov includes Aleksandr Pushkin in the great stream of World Literature by drawing various parallels between Pushkin's oeuvre and works of French and English writers. What is essential about Nabokov's approach, however, is that he does not diminish or downplay Pushkin's individuality as well as national origin (776). In her memoirs, *Kursiv Moj*, Nina Berberova points out that Nabokov's commentaries cannot be compared to anything that was done before in the world of literature. There are no criteria that can be applied to his work, for he developed his own methods and his own standards. That's why there is hardly anyone who can judge his work. Nabokov was determined to revive and preserve

in exile Russian Literature, and Russian Literature in return propelled his fiction, enriching it.

In his introduction to *The Gift*, Vladimir Nabokov points out that the main protagonist of this novel is Russian Literature. But this novel is also about memory, or the "eyesight of memory," the imaginary return, and childhood. All these themes are tightly connected with Fedor's (the main character's) perceptions of St. Petersburg, or as Sergej Daniel' points out "St. Petersburg text of Russian Literature" (200). Thus, St. Petersburg not only becomes a place that spurs some powerful play of imagination or obsessive release of memory, but also provides Fedor with special eyesight and vision. "With a practiced eye he searched it for something that would become a daily sore spot, a daily torture for his senses. . ." (4). Fedor's attention to details and his ability to see beyond the surroundings help him to evoke deep memories and produce fertile states that engender literary plots. Moreover, the mind's eye of Fedor's memory is quite specific:

> As he crossed toward the pharmacy at the corner, he involuntarily turned his head because of a burst of light that had ricocheted from his temple, and saw, with that quick smile with which we greet a rainbow or a rose, a blindingly white parallelogram of sky being unloaded from the van—a dresser with mirror across which, as across a cinema screen, passed a flawlessly clear reflection of boughs sliding and swaying not arboreally, but with a human vacillation, produced by the nature of those who were carrying this sky, these boughs, this gliding façade. (6)

This momentary vision makes Fedor think about his recently published collection of poems, about the lost paradise of his childhood, about Russia, and St. Petersburg. The

imaginary St. Petersburg seems to frame and shape the descriptions of Fedor's life, be it his games with Tanya around the house, or his recollections of "hazy, gilded, berimed St. Petersburg," a St. Petersburg spring full of excitement and first butterflies (19).

Fedor repeatedly experiences "cosmic synchronization": something in the surroundings gives a jolt to his recollections of the past, awakening his creative abilities, providing him with clear vision. The swinging motion of the ghostly light on the wet asphalt spawns Fedor's most profound thought—one of the main themes of the novel — an idea how to achieve a transcendence of his exile:

> The street was echoic and completely empty. High above it milk-white lamps were suspended, each on its own transverse wire; beneath the closest one a ghostly circle swung with the breeze across the wet asphalt. And this swinging motion, which had no apparent relation to him, with a sonorous tambourine-like sound nevertheless nudged something off the brink of his soul where that something had been resting, and now, no longer with the former distant call but reverberating loudly and close by, rang out "Thank you, my land, for your remotest . . .," and immediately, on a returning wave, "most cruel mist my thanks are due…" (54)

In other words, exile spurs Fedor's creativity and powerful play of imagination. Recreating the world of his childhood—the world of St. Petersburg—in his writings helps him transcend his alienation and estrangement in the foreign land.

In conclusion, Nabokov carried into his exile invaluable capital—cultural capital. His memories of St. Petersburg or, to be more precise, the literary texture and the literary spirit of this city shape his art, enriching and refining it. His works are full of allusions to

Pushkin's works, and St. Petersburg provides him with the special vision, vision that is based on the attention to every detail that has a potential to evoke deep recollections and thoughts. In Nabokov's view, these recreated memories assist immigrant artists in the transcendence of exile and creation of magical art.

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