

AYN RAND AND VLADIMIR NABOKOV: THE ISSUE OF LITERARY DIALOGUE

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Abstract

Ayn Rand is often put on a par with Nabokov, proceeding from the similarity of their creative destinies. The general vicissitudes of life forced the two writers to converge on one theme – the indisputable statement of the supreme value of a human life, by understanding the importance of the individual “I” over the public. The main problem of their poetic worlds is the question of self-identification, through the surrounding world and, finally, through language. As Russian immigrant writers, both occupy the position of “estrangement” in relation to both their own heritage and the environment to which they immigrated.

For a long time, Ayn Rand, the famous American literary writer and creator of the philosophic system of Objectivism – based on the principles of reason, individualism and rational self-interest – attracted the attention of her critics and readers only with her ideas, but her fiction remained beyond the scope of research and literary interests (though see, for example, Cox 1986). In recent years, interest in her novels has grown among literary critics (primarily among American scholars). Collections of articles on Ayn Rand’s literary art (see, for example, Mayhew 2005; 2006; 2009; 2012; Thomas 2005; Younkins 2007; Gladstein 1999; 2000; 2010) can be regarded as some evidence of this increased scholarly interest. However, despite several translations of her novels into Russian, Rand remains little known in Russia and other countries that were once part of the Soviet Union. Literary study of her works is nonexistent in these countries.

Rand is often put on a par with Vladimir Nabokov because of similarities between their creative destinies. Ayn Rand was born Alissa Zinovievna Rosenbaum in Saint Petersburg and, in spite of her Jewish origin, received an excellent education: Alissa briefly went to school with one of Nabokov’s sisters, Olga. But Rand’s life subsequently followed a different course from Vladimir

Nabokov's. The Nabokovs emigrated from Russia in 1918; Alissa Rosenbaum graduated from Petrograd University in 1924, majoring in a specific subject of "social pedagogy," and only in 1926, unable to bring other family members with her, did she head to New York via Riga, Latvia.

Nabokov began writing in English only in 1940, well after he had established himself as a writer in Russian. Alissa Rosenbaum had never written novels in Russian, although see Rand 1999, which compiles monographs she wrote in Russia, having studied at the State Technicum for Screen Arts in Leningrad. Her first English-language novel, built on memories about Russia, was written in 1934 and published in 1936 (the first Nabokov novel in Russian had been published ten years earlier). During her life, Rand wrote four novels, one play, and one short story. The writer never focused attention on her Russian (or Jewish) origin, and only in the novel *We the Living* was the action set in her motherland or the temperament of the protagonist (Kira) similar to Alissa Rosenbaum's. In 1964, Rand spoke in her *Playboy* interview about Nabokov as a brilliant stylist—whose subjects, sense of life, and view of man were so evil that no amount of artistic skill could justify them. She admitted that she had read only one and a half of his books: it was *Lolita* that Rand was not able to finish reading.

Summarizing Nabokov's and Rand's literary conceptions, D. Barton Johnson noted that Nabokov wrote modernist novels that broke new ground in both Russian and American literature; Rand wrote Russian novels in English, transforming the traditional Russian didactic novel of ideas into something that we might loosely label "Capitalist Realism." While the Russian-American Nabokov stands at the crossroads of modernism and postmodernism, his compatriot Rand remained stalled at the intersection of ideology and aesthetics (Johnson 2000, 64). In his important work *On Nabokov, Ayn Rand and the Libertarian Mind*, Bell-Villada tries to "pair" the two writers, but views Nabokov as the canonical figure, albeit somewhere near the edge of the canon (2013, 4).

In one of Bell-Villada's earlier articles, which appeared in this very journal, the scholar noted a major disjunction between the stances taken by each of these authors toward their Russian roots. Nabokov saw himself first and foremost as a Russian author; in his 1967 autobiography

Speak, Memory, he lovingly evoked his idyllic, privileged childhood and youth in that country. By contrast, Rand had little to say about her country of her origin, and on the Phil Donahue show, she dismissed Russia—both czarist and Bolshevik—as a land of “mysticism.” Later in the same article, Bell-Villada (2001, 188) added that for all their differences, Nabokov and Rand continued, each in their fashion, the Russian tradition of the novel of ideas, be it Chernyshevsky’s or Dostoyevsky’s. The last remark can easily be disputed if one recalls Nabokov’s attitude toward Chernyshevsky and his “poetic” and ideological views, clearly presented in *Gift*. A further aspect, emphasized by Jane Yoder (2003), in her reply to Johnson (2000) and Bell-Villada (2001), is that both authors miss Nabokov’s adoration of the poet Alexander Pushkin (2003, 398). Pushkin is interesting for Nabokov not only as the author of *Eugene Onegin* (1833), where the prototype superfluous man was born; he expressed his adoration of Pushkin in the same *Gift*, where the protagonist Fyodor Godunov-Cherdyntsev “feeds on” Pushkin, learning from him the appropriateness of words and the marginal clearness of their connection (1990, 87). The same words can refer to Nabokov himself, for whom Pushkin was to some extent an idol, a teacher, even an icon of tradition, and not just Russian tradition.¹

However, the general vicissitudes of life forced Nabokov and Rand to converge on one theme—an indisputable statement of the supreme value of human life, by understanding the importance of the individual “I” over the group, as proven by a preference for the English form of the pronoun “I,” which is always spelled with a capital letter. However, in approving the priority of the individual, according to Mimi Reisel Gladstein (2000, 29), Rand is too categorical: goodness is measured by the value and uniqueness of an individual life, notably everything that supports and enriches life is good, and anything that interferes with or destroys life is evil. The artistic works of a philosopher style their position as a thinker to one degree or another. But Rand’s novels in their poetics and themes are more complex than a simple listing of the main provisions of a philosophical doctrine.

Speaking about her novel *We the Living*, the writer did not consider it to be a product of Naturalism, even though it depicts many accurate details of Russia during the time and place in which she lived. Rand is interested in human values and the choices characters face. She views herself as a “Romantic Realist” ([1958] 1996, xvii). Rand characterized her first novel as being as close to an autobiography as she would ever write (xviii). But for Rand it is not even a story about Soviet Russia in 1925; it is a story that encapsulates the theme of the individual versus dictatorship (xvii).

We the Living is a novel about memory, where imagination turns real, experienced events into the artistic ideas. In this sense, it is similar to Nabokov’s novels of the “Russian” period, especially his *Mashen’ka*. As immigrant writers, both Nabokov and Rand occupy the position of “detachment” or “estrangement” in relation to their own cultural and historical heritage as well as to the culture, history, and present situation of another environment, which the authors enter with the intention not only to observe but also to exist within.

The novels even present similar realities of life. An exit visa is a longed-for object for Rand’s heroine, for whom a foreign country becomes a bizarre paradise, a promised land, something mysterious and unattainable. Kira associated all the best with the word “foreign,” but another meaning of the word is “strange, supernatural,” even “alien.” At the cinema, Rand’s heroine manages to peep into this “otherworldly” life, the life in which people are happily laughing and dancing in the glittering halls, running along the sandy beaches, their hair flying in the gentle breeze. But gradually, the word “foreign” in Kira’s story is replaced by the word “other” (that other world), and Kira understands more clearly the strangeness of life in which neither she nor her favorite places exist. Consequently, the protagonist’s death on the way to a distant dream about foreign countries is necessary.

Kira’s words echo in Mashen’ka’s letter to Ganin: she is cold, creepy, sad, but the idea pierces her mind that “somewhere far, far away, people are living in a completely different way, having another life” (Nabokov [1926] 1989, 82). But for Mashen’ka, this “other” life is associated

not with an unattainable dream of foreign lands, but with the love that she has lost, and in fact, “if there is no love—there will be no life” (83). Only when they reach the so-desired “abroad,” Nabokov’s characters tend to go somewhere further, somewhere, no matter where, just to leave. “Let me just get to Paris—says the poet Podtyagin—there’s free and untrammeled life” (58), but he does not know that the ordeal of obtaining a visa will send him to a completely different world. Ganin goes somewhere else too, realizing that there is no return to the past and there is no other life. The past for Nabokov’s heroes lives in reminiscences and dreams, distorting images and feelings in a world of memories. Podtyagin dreams of a Petersburg, a Nevsky, that doesn’t resemble itself, “houses with oblique angles, with solid ultrageometrical shapes, and the sky is black. . . . It’s scary—ooh, scary—that when we dream of Russia, we remember not its beauty, but something monstrous” (77–78). Podtyagin’s nightmare comes true in Rand’s novel; the Argunovs return to the starving, ruined postrevolutionary Leningrad. Structurally, the description and characterization of Petrograd (as Rand and her heroes continue to call it) are placed exactly in the middle of the book; they seem to divide the first bright period of Kira Argunova’s life, full of love, hope, and belief, and the second period of life, built on lies, losses, and deaths. And the symbolic entry into this new phase of life is the story of Petrograd “standing on skeletons,” raised by man against the will of nature, the city where trees seem to be “rare strangers, sickly foreigners in a climate of granite, forlorn and superfluous” (Rand [1958] 1996, 217).

Irina calls Kira “the recluse of Petrograd” (232). These words can lead to certain parallels with the final unfinished autobiographical poem by Wordsworth “The Recluse.” It is a poem about a man, nature, and human life, showing alienation from urban life and longing for something true and real. It is significant that characterizing Kira, the word “recluse” is intertwined with the city, because the author called Petrograd “a monument to the spirit of man,” the city that has no legends, no folklore, no soul, but mind. And who knows, as Rand writes, perhaps it’s a coincidence, but “in the language of the Russians Moscow is ‘she,’ while Petrograd has always been ‘he’” (220). This city is becoming an integral part of Kira’s life, a symbol of her strength and determination, and

eventually the reason for her destruction, because she is only a weak woman, unable to resist male power. Kira's story is to a certain extent a representation of what Nabokov's *Mashen'ka* had to pass through before she was able to rejoin her husband. Alferov wonders how his wife was able to survive the years of terror, yet he was sure that she would arrive blooming, cheerful, because "femininity, beautiful Russian femininity is stronger than any revolution, misery and terror" ([1926] 1989, 30). Reading Rand's novel we realize how right and wrong Alferov was: Kira was able to survive everything—misery, terror—but the soul of a man is dying from everyday contact with evil. And the only thing that can give a person some strength is the belief in life, a deep feeling that you are still alive.

The understanding of the importance of life permeates the entire novel from the first page to the last, strengthening the existential effect of Rand's work. The first, not quite conscious, feeling that she holds an unprecedented gift, comes to Kira when she is thirteen years old reading the legend of the Viking, the final words of which are a call to "a life which is a reason unto itself" (1983, 180). Admitting this thought unreservedly, Kira cannot share the views of the new government, which wants her to fight for life, to kill for its sake, and even to die. Kira is just dreaming of her life. The right to life is as inseparable from the person as the right to be born. "We the Living" is not just a phrase in the title of the novel; it is the sense given to a man by a power higher than any political party, and therefore not coming under ordinary earthly laws. Kira's cousin Irina, about to be exiled to Siberia, knowing that she will never come back, cannot get rid of the strange feeling that she can be deprived of her life, so precious and rare, so beautiful for her, only because somebody doesn't understand life's significance. And the only thing she continues doing is repeating the question, "What is it, Kira? What?" ([1958] 1996, 324).

Kira is also not destined to find the answer to this question. In the scene where she indicts Andrei, whom she used to consider her true friend, and even more, she states the basic postulate of human life: we feel alive, not when we eat and digest food, or work and produce more food, but when we know what we want, and we want to turn our desires into reality. However, Kira does not

understand that in their essence, Andrei's views of life are not so far different from her own. Back at the beginning of their relationship, Andrei told Kira that if their souls met and after heavy fighting had torn each other to pieces, they would see that they had the same root (97). Rand wants to show that a person may have the right thoughts and even do the right things, but yet the evil around him consumes all the best he could do.

The language of this work helps the writer visualize the correctness of her position—a living voice coming from the heart, and the dead language of bureaucracy. For the first time, this contrast is shown in the scene where an official completes a form for Kira. With dry, harsh words the official describes her appearance (medium height, gray eyes, ordinary mouth, no particular signs), but the narrator keeps intervening, as if to save the reader from his narrowness of perception. For Kira is not just of average height but slender, with sharp swift movements that seem to be “an unconscious reflection of a dancing, laughing soul”; and her eyes are not just gray but dark gray, resembling the color of “storm clouds, behind which the sun can be expected at any moment”; and her mouth is not just ordinary, but thin, long, and “at a slight movement made a wrinkle in the corners of her lips” (27).

Andrei Taganov, appealing to his comrades in the battle near Melitopol, calls them brothers and in simple words speaks about the life for which they are fighting, for bread and the land on which it is grown, the possibilities that a new state opens for them. Then his colleague Pavel Serov takes the floor, his speech brimming with cliches: “Down with the damn bourgeois exploiters! . . . Who does not toil, shall not eat! Proletarians of the world, unite!” (99–100). Perhaps an American reader cannot fully experience this scene, not being familiar with the triviality of these phrases, but by repeatedly using them in the course of the novel, Rand could not better reproduce the deadening atmosphere in which the events of the story take place. This feeling is at its peak in the funeral scene after Andrei has committed suicide, no longer willing to serve evil.

The words are another level of reality of Rand's novel, the illusory nature of the world emphasized by the frequent use of the “as if” construction. Talking of his counterrevolutionary

activities and the need to leave, Leo Kovalensky speaks as if biting into every word, as if all the hatred and despair came from the sounds themselves, not their meaning (100). Eventually Leo, who has lost his sense of life, yawns while discussing, as if not hearing his own words (300–301). Without sense, words lose their meaning; he who has nothing to say would rather remain silent.

Leo seems to Kira a being from another world, from many centuries distant, when he is standing near the table with the Primus (308). As if from another life, one without wars and revolutions, Andrei talks to Kira. And Andrei himself is compared to those who had once worn Roman armor; now, it was not armor but a leather jacket, serving the same function (287). Through Irina's words, Rand states an important truth—time is an illusion, it can pass very quickly if one stops thinking of it (325). Ganin from the novel *Mashen'ka* is also experiencing the transience, the uniqueness of human life, but in Nabokov's novels everyone is a whole world, and these worlds are unknown to each other, “not a reveler, not a woman, not just a passerby—but a tightly locked-up world full of wonders and crimes” ([1926] 1989, 38). Only the power of literature to display this wonderful world by holding back time at least for a moment gives the illusion of real memory that is able to overcome feelings of unreality and estrangement.

The song “Little Apple,” which rolls across the novel, becomes the leitmotif of memory and a warning to the main character. At the beginning of the novel, Kira hears this jingling melody on a train taking her to Petrograd; the song is heard next on a train taking Irina and Sasha to a labor camp in Siberia, with the famous refrain repeated: “Hey, little apple, where are you rolling?” (Rand [1958] 1996, 10, 325). The song is known to have many versions: Makhno's couplet, couplets from the Reds, their opponents' couplets, and others. In the first scene on the train, Rand offers her own modification: “And now there is no Russia, / For Russia's all sprawled, / Hey, little apple, where are you rolling?” (11). Thus, the writer laments the ruined country and crushed lives of people who did not know “where it was rolling.”

“Little Apple” is heard several times in Nabokov's works as well. First, it sounds in the novel *Bend Sinister* in the scene where Krug learns of his son's death, and on his way meets the

soldiers, uttering the famous refrain of the song: “Hey, little apple, where are you rolling?” ([1947] 1964, 201). In *Look at the Harlequins!* the main character, Vadim Vadimovich, traveling abroad in 1918, meets a Red Army soldier, who refers to him with the same words: “Where are you rolling, little apple?” (Nabokov [1974] 1996, 572). The novel’s hero is forced to shoot the soldier, and at this point, according to Johnson (2000, 49), some researchers find parallels with the event in Nabokov’s life that was described in his novel *Speak, Memory*. This episode is inserted into the Russian version of *Other Shores* (*Drugkiye Berega*) as an account of an incident in 1918 in the Crimea, where, as Nabokov described, “some Bolshevik guard, a lame fool with an earring in one ear, wanted to arrest me for signaling it, they say, English ships with a butterfly-net” ([1954] 2003, 127). Perhaps for Nabokov, as for Rand, the foolish song’s tune is directly connected with recollections of destruction and death, crushed homeland, and mangled memory.

Rand’s next work, *Anthem*, is mostly devoted to the word “I” itself. To some extent, it is the anthem to the art of writing, to people’s skills “to think words no others think and to put them down upon a paper no others are to see” ([1938] 1966, 5). But describing this kind of activity, Rand finds unexpected epithets: “secret,” “evil,” “precious,” as well as calling it a “sin” and “transgression.” The author shows us literally how words, repeated frequently, become worn out; there appears “green mold in the grooves of the letters and yellow streaks on the marble” (6); but, in Rand’s opinion, such decay happens to the words that have no sense, the words that emphasize the importance of the “We” and neglect the “I.” The pronoun “I” emerges only in the last chapter of *Anthem*, when the protagonist, with a number in place of a name, learns the great truth—that many words have been granted him, “and some are wise, and some are false, but only three are holy: ‘I will it!’” (89).

Analyzing Nabokov’s heritage and his longing to create a new hero—a strong and positive man in an individualistic sense—Khrushchyova saw the reason why the author rejected the Russian language: for the prime “I” of the Western world, which unlike the tiny Russian “β,” is not the last

letter in the alphabet (2008, 11). The same may apply to Rand's writing as well: they both support an egoistic way of thinking, the Western attitude to the world.

Rand's *Anthem* has certain parallels to Nabokov's novel *Priglashenie na kazn'* (titled in English *Invitation to a Beheading*). The protagonist in *Anthem* states that he was born with a curse—in his case with a mind that is too quick, because “it is not good to be different from our brothers, but it is evil to be superior to them” (Rand [1938] 1966, 8). So the hero has tried to fight his curse, to forget lessons, but he has always remembered them; he has sought to not understand what the teachers have taught, but has understood them even before the teachers have spoken.

Nabokov's Cincinnat has differed from other children of his age since childhood, but, realizing his difference from others, he has sought to hide this fact. He even learned to pretend he was transparent, using a complicated system of optical illusions, but when he was relaxing, his vigilance, his opacity, became obvious. Being different from others is Cincinnat's main crime. The whole novel is a peculiar invitation to his execution, to a particular performance, a play, that is being staged in the readers' eyes.

In the literature of the twentieth century, the implicit use of theatrical means to build new relations between the narrator and the reader was an important theme. The Russian scholar S. Lipnyagova (2006) understands so-called “theatricality” as a novel's poetic category that identifies a special type of inner organization of the text, on the level of structure, plotting, characters, and conflict, following the model of theatrical/stage perception or dramatic text (284). The artistic world of the novel entirely occupies the space of the “stage,” on the level of which the use of different languages and cultures is understood as an aesthetic and psychological category, connected with the perception of a person's inner life as a particular game space where the person can play various roles and model life situations through the laws of a theatrical performance directed at the reader.

In Nabokov's *Invitation to a Beheading*, Cincinnat, while meeting his mother, calls her irritably “a parody, the same as the rest.” Even her wet raincoat is seen by Cincinnat as “the property-man's failure” (Nabokov [1936] 1989, 323). During the conversation with Monsieur Piers,

Cincinnat asks for a three-minute break, after which he will finish this “ridiculous play” (370). Thus, the execution becomes a peculiar performance and acquires the form of a ritual, as a result of which the protagonist joins the creatures that are similar to him.

Rand’s hero also passes through a specific ritual, but his is in some ways more complicated than Cincinnat’s. The first stage of this ritual, according to Rand, is love, the discovery of another person for oneself and oneself in another person. The next stage is learning, acquiring new knowledge and new skills, which frees the prospects and inclination for self-development. Then comes the escape into the unknown, figuratively and literally—a walk through the Uncharted Forest, as if through Nothingness—and in the end, the hero and his beloved get the prize, the ability not only to live freely but, more important, to think freely.

Thus, to a certain extent the main problem of Nabokov’s and Rand’s poetic worlds is the question of self-identification, through the surrounding world and, finally, through language. Their works present existential aspects of human living, even aspects of alienation, because of the motives of estrangement, otherworldliness, and feelings of unreality that deepen the basic, “real,” plot line. The reality of a new language and immigrant experiences transforms their own memories into an artistic world, open to any form of the imagination.

A Note about Translation

The present author has worked with Nabokov’s *Mashen’ka*, *Priglashenie na kazn’*, and *Dar* in Russian and has translated the given quotations herself. All other Russian-language materials are also presented in the author’s translation and interpretation.

Note

1. Sciabarra tells us that when Rand studied at the Stoiunin Gymnasium, established by the in-laws of her college philosophy professor, N. O. Lossky, she befriended Vladimir Nabokov’s sister, Olga. Rand had taken a course on classical language. Her teacher assigned Pushkin’s *Eugene Onegin: A Novel in Verse*. Rand “wrote a paper on the

book's characters. The teacher gave her a lesson in literary causality, teaching her to judge characters and by specific incidents or actions" (Sciabarra [1995] 2013, 66).

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