

What impish meanings lurk  
beneath the plot of  
Nabokov's latest novel? The  
scholar who decoded "Ada"  
uncovers some of the Russian  
allusions and hidden trapdoors  
in "Transparent Things."

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# Russian Transparencies

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BY SIMON KARLINSKY

In November of 1925 *The Rudder*, a Berlin newspaper of Russian émigrés, published "The Return of Chorb," a short story by its regular contributor V. Sirin. Of course V. Sirin was the pen name of Vladimir Nabokov; "The Return of Chorb" was the story that first introduced many of the themes, language mannerisms, and structural devices that are today generally recognized and universally admired as peculiarly Nabokovian. The writer himself must have recognized the importance of this story in his literary development, for he selected it to open a volume of his prose and poetry that was published in 1930 and that bore the same title as the story.

The complex, multilevel structure of "The Return of Chorb" defies simple summary or paraphrase. Still, at its basic level of narration, the story tells of a sensitive, penniless young émigré writer who, despite her parents' disapproval, marries the daughter of a conventional, upper-middle-class family in a small German town. On their honeymoon trip the young bride is suddenly and absurdly electrocuted when she steps on a harmless-looking wire. To exorcise his despair and convert his brief marriage into a sort of existential art work that will repose in his memory in all its evanescent perfection, Chorb sets out to retrace, in reverse order, every step of their honeymoon trip, thus converting the irrevocably lost past into a deliberately willed future of his own making. This plan eventually brings Chorb back to his bride's home town,

*Simon Karlinsky's annotated Letters of Anton Chekhov will be published soon.*

where he attempts to notify her parents of her death; he fails, because they are out attending a performance of Wagner's *Parsifal* (this is where the story begins). To supply the final touch to his act of exorcism, Chorb needs to spend the night in the same hotel room that he and his bride had shared after their wedding. He cannot face this portion of his ordeal alone, and he hires a streetwalker to provide the living female presence required for the project. They sleep chastely in separate beds, as Chorb and his bride had once done in the same room. The next morning he wakes up with a scream, first thinking that his wife has been returned to him, then realizing that his experiment in encapsulating the past is over and that he has accomplished what he set out to do. As the puzzled prostitute is leaving the room, she encounters in the door Chorb's indignant and incomprehending in-laws. At this point the story ends.

"The Return of Chorb" contained, as mentioned, a number of themes and situations that Nabokov's subsequent fiction has made familiar, among them the confrontation between the sensitive artist and the smug, unimaginative bourgeois and the notion of converting a chosen course of action in a person's life into the equivalent of a work of art (e.g., the function of murder in *Despair* and of travel plans in "The Aurelian"). The story's unique originality, however, resides in its skillful combination of two narrative time spans of unequal duration. The story of Chorb's courtship, marriage, loss, and return is narrated simultaneously with the account of events that cover

the few hours between Chorb's visit to his in-laws' apartment late on the night of his return and his encounter with them early the next morning. This particular time structure, some of the story's plot elements, and even one or two of its characters have now all been reincarnated in Nabokov's new novel, *Transparent Things*. This is not to say for a moment that the novel is an augmented translation of the short story or even a reworking of it into larger form. No, the novel and the early story are separate and distinct literary creations. But just as the unpublished Russian story "The Magician" was the bud out of which *Lolita* was to grow and as another of Nabokov's Russian stories "Extermination of Tyrants" (1938) was to give rise ten years later to his novel *Bend Sinister*, so did "The Return of Chorb" provide the basis and the initial point of departure for the new novel. "Perhaps if the future existed, concretely and individually, as something that could be discerned by a better brain, the past would not be so seductive: its demands would be balanced by those of the future. Persons might then straddle the middle stretch of the seesaw when considering this or that object. It might be fun," we read on the very first page of *Transparent Things*, and these words might serve as a capsule summary both of the novel and of "The Return of Chorb." Written recently, while Nabokov was supervising the translations into English of his two earliest Russian novels, *Mary and King, Queen, Knave* (1926 and 1928, respectively), *Transparent Things* thus forms an elegant and highly interesting bridge between the mature master who

wrote the complex *Pale Fire* and the labyrinthine *Ada* and the remarkably sophisticated literary beginner of almost half a century earlier.

In contrast to the Russian émigré setting of Nabokov's early novels and the meticulously observed America of *Pnin* and *Lolita*, the new novel is set in the writer's most recent place of residence—Switzerland. While the Swiss background is captured and artistically transformed with the usual Nabokovian precision, the present-day American setting of some of the novel's other scenes is not quite so on-target. The book-publishing customs Nabokov describes and the American literary groupies (for whom Yevtushenko is the sort of sexual magnet that Mick Jagger is for their less literate brothers and sisters) are all an undeniable part of our reality. But the episode in which the opening night of an avant-garde play is sabotaged with bombs detonated by its own supporters reminds one how long Nabokov has been absent from these shores and raises the possibility that he might eventually come to see America through that same haze of "beautiful distance" through which Gogol saw his Russia when he was writing the second part of *Dead Souls* in Rome.

Like Nabokov's other recent novels, *Transparent Things* contains its requisite complement of ostentatiously displayed false doors that turn out not to work and a few hidden trapdoors that do. The fictional character of the German novelist R. has been lent a few of Nabokov's own more superficial traits (he resides in Switzerland, writes in English, and publishes his books in America). Already several critics have sprung at the bait and hastened to identify R. as the author's self-portrait. This is as wide of the mark as the similarly hasty identification of Van and Ada with Nabokov and his wife that some of our otherwise thoughtful commentators on Nabokov had suggested after the publication of *Ada*. Not only is everything that really matters about R. totally unlike Nabokov, but his constant mangling of idiomatic expressions and popular sayings is rather obviously derived from the similar trait of Zina Mertz's disagreeable stepfather in *The Gift*—surely a character who could not by any stretch of the imagination be mistaken for the author's self-portrait.

Multilingual puns and literary allusions—something that we've come to expect from Nabokov—are present in *Transparent Things*, but in a more subdued form than in its immediate predecessors. People speak Russian with French words and French with English words ("And now one is going to make love"). People go skiing at resorts whose French names suggest falling and being swallowed up by avalanches. The heroine's Russian mother (she is

either Chorb's Russian mother-in-law, transplanted bodily from the story, or else that lady's direct descendant via Luzhin's mother-in-law and the mother of Zina Mertz) is the author's excuse for introducing several rather arcane Russian allusions, which would otherwise have been hard to account for. "Villa Nastia," the residence of the Chamars, may sound exotic enough in English, but the reader should try to imagine a "Villa Minnie" or a "Villa Louella" in order to grasp the relative level of this name's elegance in Russian. Sergei Rafalovich, an obscure émigré poet remembered, if at all, only because the young Nabokov devoted a critical essay to his work back in 1927, peeks for a second out of a Franco-Russian pun that involves snowdrifts. Armande sports a Chudo-Yudo pajama—the name comes from Russian folklore and means roughly "a marvelous monster" (it is best known as the standard epithet and form of address applied to a kindly and helpful whale in Pyotr Ershov's children's classic, "The Little Hump-backed Horse"). A nineteenth-century Russian novelist materializes suddenly in the Geneva hotel to which Hugh Person brings a whore during his first visit to Switzerland. We are told that this writer stayed at that same room some ninety-three years ago, and we are supplied with various other intriguing details: he spent some time at the local casino, he knew German better than French, he was on his way to Italy, he was meeting his friend the painter Kandidatov, and he had just begun a novel with the provisional title *Faust in Moscow*.

One does a few calculations based on possibly misread data on Hugh Person's subsequent Swiss visits and comes up with the approximate date 1867. And who stayed in Geneva in 1867? Fyodor Dostoevsky, of all people, that's who. What's more, he was on his way to Italy at the time, and he had just begun writing *The Idiot*, which originally bore the provisional title *Don Quixote of the Nineteenth Century*. But the rest of the information doesn't fit at all. Dostoevsky was accompanied by his wife in Geneva; they had just suffered the loss of their little daughter, Sonya, which crushed both of them; and he was not likely to have frequented the casino at the particular juncture of his life. Two years earlier Turgenev had stopped in Geneva on his way to Italy. He was by then the author of the story "Faust," which had a Russian setting, and he was meeting a friend in Geneva who was going to Italy to study the conditions under which Russian painters lived there. But the trip was called off at the last minute, and again the rest of the facts don't fit. The mind begins to reel. Gogol? But he is not exactly a novelist, and he usually traveled

to Italy by way of Vienna (although he did have a memorable stay in Switzerland, which Nabokov evokes so vividly in *The Gift*). Vladimir Odoevsky? Wouldn't *Faust in Moscow* be a highly appropriate title for his *Russian Nights*? Did he perhaps continue on to Switzerland and Italy after he visited Schelling in Germany?

It's obviously no use. Like the figure of Koncheyev in *The Gift*, which was an amalgam of several émigré poets, this writer is a composite figure combining features of a number of Russian writers of the nineteenth century. Or is he someone too obscure to come to mind? Only Nabokov knows for sure.

There are, however, aspects of *Transparent Things* that connect this novel to Nabokov's native literary tradition in ways more substantial than puns or literary games. The two ill-matched lovers, the seductive, sullen, sensuous, basically unkind, and not very intelligent Armande and the clumsy, socially inept, but inwardly sensitive and responsive Hugh—aren't they a transposition into modern terms of Tolstoy's Helene and Pierre from *War and Peace*? Scenes of sleepwalking, a crime committed in one's sleep, the abundance of prophetic dreams and premonitions, false presentiments of disaster and genuine prophecies not heeded, and finally the hero's clearly preordained and spectacular death by fire, all of them organized into an elegant verbal structure—this is all very close to a strain in Russian literature that can be termed Hoffmannesque. Normally, we would not expect to list Nabokov among the Russian followers of E. T. A. Hoffmann, that is, among such figures as that master magician of Russian Romantic prose Vladimir Odoevsky (to whose work Nabokov is apparently indifferent) and, in the twentieth century, the outstanding stylist Alexei Remizov (whose writings Nabokov does know and admire). There is much in *Transparent Things* that brings to mind the themes and images of these two predecessors, and in this respect the novel is a new departure for Nabokov.

In its essence, however, *Transparent Things* owes nothing to anyone but Nabokov. Once more he has managed to shape a formless, potentially threatening reality into a precise and transparent work of literary art while continually demonstrating for the benefit of attentive and imaginative readers the exact means employed for bringing about this transformation. In this sense all of Nabokov's novels are "transparent things," and their transparency is, to borrow Marina Tsvetaeva's phrase, the author's "ultimate victory over time and gravity." This is why one closes this little book, so full of tragic and violent events, with the final feeling of lightness and joy. □

# SR REVIEWS

## FILM & TELEVISION

### The Valachi Papers: Black Sheep in a Family of Films

Eventually I'm going to get around to talking about *The Valachi Papers*, but first I'd like to confess that I'm one of that aging generation of film freaks who grew up in the 1930s and who spent practically half of their childhoods in the dark of small-town movie theaters. And I remember that my favorite movies when I was young were gangster pictures—Bogart, Jimmy Cagney, Edward G. Robinson, George Raft, and the rest of Warner Brothers' live-in repertory company of bad guys in such movies as *Public Enemy*, *Dead End*, *The Roaring Twenties*, *High Sierra*, *Each Dawn I Die*, and *Little Caesar*. For some reason I never cared much for Westerns in those days, and I still don't. Show me a movie that opens with two men in black hats riding into town on horseback and my heart sinks. But show me the same two men driving into town in a black 1935 LaSalle sedan and I couldn't be happier.

In the late 1930s a nationwide campaign was mounted to force Hollywood to stop making gangster movies. And it worked. Around 1940, Warner Brothers and the other major studios simply stopped turning them out.

Instead, Hollywood began making war movies such as *Across the Pacific*, in which Bogart, for example, was transformed from a bad guy like "Mad Dog" Roy Earl (*High Sierra*) into an all-American good guy fighting the Jap-a-Nazi rats. No new gangster movies of any note were made until 1948, when Cagney appeared in *White Heat*, a picture that was a throwback to the great Warner Brothers' films of the 1930s and one of the best gangster films ever. But *White Heat*, whose homicidal hero meets his end atop a blazing gasoline storage tank, didn't do especially well at the box-office. That was it for almost twenty years.

Then in 1967, along came *Bonnie and Clyde*, which was both an artistic and an enormous financial success, and

the form was very much alive again. Last year gave us *The Godfather*—a picture that has already grossed close to \$50,000,000 and proved for the first time that a gangster movie can be a box-office blockbuster in the class of *The Sound of Music* or *Mary Poppins*.

Inevitably, the success of *The Godfather* has caused a swarm of producers hastily to turn out other gangster movies that have to do with the Mafia, a circumstance that brings me around to *The Valachi Papers*. As much as I'm partial to gangster films, I have to say that *The Valachi Papers* is one of the most god-awful pictures I've seen in a long time. All but an insult to the Mafia, it is ineptly acted by an embalmed-looking cast headed by Charles Bronson, ludicrously written by Stephen Geller, and flatly directed by Terence Young in an episodic, semi-documentary style that was already out of date when it was used in B-movies like *Kansas City Confidential* in the 1950s. The picture isn't even one of those so-bad-it's-good movies that at least you can laugh at. Instead, it's simply so bad it's bad. And I'm scarcely alone in thinking so; just about every other critic in the country has also hated it. Ever since its release in early November, however, despite its disastrous reviews, *The Valachi Papers* has been making a fortune for its producer, Dino de Laurentiis. In a recent week, in fact, *The Valachi Papers* grossed \$587,000 across the United States, which made it second only to *Lady Sings the Blues* that week among the

Charles Bronson, as Joe Valachi, gets a much-deserved working-over.



fifty top-grossing films in the country. Why? Because America seems to have become obsessed with anything that has to do with the Mafia, particularly when it's a movie that contains gory depictions of torture and murder. Compared to *The Valachi Papers*, which even has a scene in which a mobster has his testicles cut off with a butcher knife, the gangster films that I used to see as a kid are as benign as *Chitty-Chitty Bang-Bang*.

The new gangster movies are filled with graphic and often gratuitous scenes of bloodshed and violence. And they are also made in color; when someone is shot, you get to see the crimson blood spurting out. New special-effect techniques, moreover, can make it look as though someone has literally had his face blown apart before your eyes. What these movies are trafficking in (and exploiting) is nothing less than the pornography of violence.

In contrast, when a character was gunned down in the earlier gangster movies, the director often tended to go for a reaction shot of a bystander instead of to a straight-on shot of the man being murdered. Besides, getting killed in black and white is at once less real and more stylized than getting killed in technicolor—you don't turn your eyes away from the screen in horror when Bogart is riddled in the last scene of *High Sierra*.

The gangster movies of the 1930s were also among the most cinematically interesting American films being made then. In sequences like those in which police cars chased sedans full of fleeing crooks, for instance, the quick-cut techniques of montage that had been developed in Russia by Eisenstein were used for the first time in American films. And the menacing patterns of light and shadow in pictures like *The Public Enemy* were borrowed from the German expressionist silents of the 1920s. In fact, several of the most famous American gangster movies of the Depression era were made by refugee directors from Europe, including Fritz Lang, who had made *M* (a classic example of a film about murder and violence in which absolutely no vio-