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GOGOL'S TALE "NEVSKY PROSPEKT" AND NABOKOV'S ESSAY "CAMBRIDGE"

Nabokov composed "Cambridge" while studying at this second-oldest English university (1919–22). The essay appeared in Russian on October 28, 1921, in the Berlin-based émigré daily *Rul'* (*The Rudder*). Almost a century later, it was translated into English by Brian Boyd and Anastasia Tolstoy and included in the volume of Nabokov's uncollected essays, reviews, interviews, and letters to the editor, entitled *Think, Write, Speak* (2019).

In his tale "Nevsky Prospekt" (1835), Gogol, a native of the Ukrainian countryside, describes the daily regimen in the main thoroughfare of St. Petersburg, the Russian imperial capital, in which automaton-like creatures act in the same manner day after day. He depicts the Avenue in its morning hours, at noon, throughout the afternoon, and in the evening, each period bearing a unique characteristic. For example, "At twelve o'clock tutors of all nationalities descend upon Nevsky Prospekt with their young charges [...] But as two o'clock approaches, the governesses, tutors, and children are fewer; and finally are crowded out by their tender papas walking arm in arm with their high-strung wives in gaudy dresses of every possible color" (Gogol, 1: 209).

A somewhat modified scheme, suggested by a British Slavist, Richard Peace, with regard to "Nevsky Prospekt" (see Peace 97), divides the tale into the following sections:

1. Sarcastic praise
2. Early morning until midday—empty
3. Noon until two o'clock—educational

4. Two o'clock until three—display
5. Three o'clock until four—procession of civil servants
6. Four o'clock until dusk—empty
7. Digression—Piskarev and Pirogov stories
8. Nighttime—meditation

Taking a cue from his illustrious predecessor, Nabokov depicts mundane existence in this historic university town. He, too, observes and describes the daily routine with the eyes of an outsider, but in his case, contrary to Gogol, he looks at “this provincial little English town” (*Think, Write, Speak* 3; hereafter *TWS*) from the perspective of a recent denizen of the Russian imperial capital:

In the mornings, grabbing notebooks and regulation cloaks in a heap, these doughty lads hurry to their lectures, making their way single file into the lecture halls, sleepily listen to the mumblings of a wise mummy on the rostrum, and, awakening suddenly, signal their approval through the pulsating stamping of their feet [...] After lunch, pulling on their lilac, green, and blue jackets, they fly off like crows in peacock feathers to the plush fields where balls will thwack until dusk [...] By five o'clock everything wakes up again, crowds throng to the tea shops, where toxically bright pastries glisten on every little table like fly-agaric mushrooms. (*TWS* 3–4)¹

¹ It would be more in line with a similar passage in Nabokov's overseen translation of *Glory* to render these metaphorical poisonous mushrooms, “mukhomory,” as “amanitas” (see *Glory* 102).

When applied to Nabokov's essay, Richard Peace's modified scheme would be as follows:

1. Restrained praise
2. Morning until lunch—educational
3. Students after lunch until dusk—athletic and recreational
4. Townspeople at that same time—lull
5. From five o'clock on—bustle
6. Digression—English / Russian mindset, Cambridge rules of conduct, delving into history
7. Nighttime—meditation

Like Gogol's narrator who muses toward the end of the tale when describing nocturnal St. Petersburg ("How strangely, how unaccountably Fate plays with us!" (Gogol, 1: 237), Nabokov's narrator also muses toward the end of the essay when describing Cambridge at night and contemplating "the whims of fate" (*TWS* 6). However, while Gogol's tale begins with the tongue-in-cheek adoration ("What splendor does it lack, that fairest of our city thoroughfares?" (Gogol, 1: 207) and ends with the full-throated condemnation ("It deceives at all hours, the Nevsky Prospekt does") (Gogol, 1: 238), Nabokov's essay, for the most part, is devoid of negativity or criticism. The only two exceptions are the opening paragraph, containing the narrator's initial and admittedly biased perception of Cambridge that turns into restrained praise, and the later paragraph that stereotypically juxtaposes the predictable "round and solid world" of the English and the impulsive, full of "that inspired whirlwind, that throb, that radiance, that dancing frenzy," the

world of the Russians (*TWS* 4).² Throughout most of it, however, the essay is permeated with good-natured humor and eventually shifts toward meditative poetization of the townscape. Nabokov concludes the essay on a melancholy note: “I begin to think still more deeply, about much, about the whims of fate, about my homeland, and about the fact that my best memories grow older every day, and so far nothing can replace them...” (*TWS* 6). The essay’s final clause in its tonality brings to mind the finale of “The Fair at Sorochintsy”: “Sad is the lot of one left behind! Heavy and sorrowful is his heart and nothing can help him!” (Gogol, 1: 33).

The narrator’s ponderings “about my homeland” are preceded by his nostalgic cry “that you feel you’d give every drop of blood to see again some bog near Petersburg” (*TWS* 4). This expression of homesickness in Nabokov’s essay constitutes the main difference from Gogol’s tale, and no wonder.³ After all, Gogol moved to St. Petersburg of his own volition and on occasion visited his birthplace, which at the time was part of the Russian Empire. Nabokov, on the other hand, had to flee St. Petersburg, as the entire country of his birth was turning totalitarian. He was prevented, forever as it happened, from visiting it other than in his imagination, and this trauma at the time of his composing the essay was painfully fresh in the young writer’s mind.

In conclusion, Nabokov adopted, with some modifications, the Gogolian model for his essay. Like Gogol eighty-odd years before him, Nabokov looks at his new place of residence, its townscape, modes of transportation, clothing, and food establishments, with the eyes of an

² This “whirlwind,” associated with the Russian mindset, evokes Poprishchin’s lamentation in the last entry of “Diary of a Madman” (see Gogol, 1: 258) and the end of Part I of *Dead Souls* (see Gogol 270). In both Nabokov’s essay and Gogol’s respective works, the Russian word for “whirlwind” is “*vikhr*’.”

³ Although Gogol expressed his nostalgia by the very virtue of writing stories with the Ukrainian setting, “Nevsky Prospekt” as part of the so-called Petersburg cycle does not contain this sentiment.

outsider.⁴ However, while Gogol, a Ukrainian provincial, inspects the quotidian being in the Russian metropolis; Nabokov, a native of the Russian imperial capital, observes the monotony of life in a provincial English town, the seat of a famous university. The main dissimilarity between the two works lies in the manifestation of nostalgia in Nabokov's essay as a consequence of his sudden and irreversible severance from his land of origin.

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⁴ While in translation these food establishments are rendered as “cafes” and “tea shops,” respectively, in the original Russian they are called “*konditerskie*” in both works.