

REVIEW ESSAY

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ON A. DOLININ'S COMMENTARY TO V. NABOKOV'S NOVEL *THE GIFT*

/ Комментарий к роману Владимира Набокова «Дар» /

A massive undertaking such as the one Alexander Dolinin has given us presents aspiring “reviewers” with a problem: How does one approach a work that, as annotation, is on a scale that has never yet been attempted in relation to Nabokov’s art? (Or, if Boyd’s “*Ada* Annotations” project is similarly ambitious, it remains only about half finished.) This enormous project, thirty years in the making, offers readers a luxurious wealth of discovery, collected passed-down knowledge, and, just as important, imagery that helps situate Nabokov’s last and greatest Russian novel in a broad (multi-)cultural, literary, and historical context. In some respects the images alone justify the entire project, but as Dolinin noted at the recent Nabokov Readings conference in St. Petersburg, the printed book makes many of them quite small, destroying the power of their effect. More on that below. Taken as a whole, Dolinin’s book constitutes an ambitious first step in producing a comprehensive commentary to Nabokov’s culturally dense novel. It is a book with numerous strengths and some gaps and limitations, many of which Dolinin promised, at the conference mentioned above, to address in the book’s likely next edition.

First of all, I want to acknowledge and admire the many valuable elements in this book—its depth of erudition, breadth of coverage, and ingenuity in uncovering visual materials. The sheer number and variety of images represent a trove of obscure, fascinating, and often beautiful visual links to a past from which we are separated already by many layers of history, war, culture,

technology, and loss. The extent of the collection, much of it surely very hard to find and rarely seen today, demonstrates the annotator's passion for bringing the émigrés' 1920s Berlin world to life for today's reader, following and facilitating Nabokov's dictum to his students to provide and imagine a given artistic world with visual precision. Along with many photos of relevant butterflies are images from paintings, photographs, and postcards of early-twentieth-century Berlin, including in particular one painted view of the Nollendorfplatz as if from the windows of the émigré-frequented Café Léon, where the Society of Russian Writers in Berlin meets in Chapter Five, by German-Jewish painter Lesser Ury (1925, p. 521), and photographs of the café where Zina and her mother dine late in the novel, the "Vaterland," "largest café in all of Europe," at Potsdamer Platz (p. 546). Similarly he includes amusing and instructive caricatures of Germans at the Grunewald by Heinrich Zille (p. 529). The problem of the images' size can be partly compensated in the e-book version, where the resolution allows even tiny illustrations to be increased just about to a useful scale, but the loss of color in both formats is a real shame. As Dolinin noted at his presentation, many discussions of colors (in butterflies and paintings) find no real correspondence to the black-and-white reproductions that were possible for this volume. What one really wants is a coffee-table-style book of all these images, in color, filling in whatever gaps, and all the colors, from Dieter Zimmer's sumptuous (but also black-and-white) *Nabokovs Berlin* (2001) or Leving's *Keys* (also rich in images). In the printed version of this new commentary, some images are the size of postage stamps, and practically tease rather than enlighten the reader—a sad result of production costs and what the market can bear, not the author's preference. Indeed, the book makes clear that a museum-scale exhibit, even of reproductions of these visual materials, would be a thrilling and inspiring event. The pressing need for such a large exhibition of *The Gift's* visual world is suddenly obvious.

As for the content of the commentary, this is, needless to say, by far the largest version of the growing stack of annotations that Dolinin has yet published. Since he has been adding to the commentary from version to version since 1989, it has expanded from around thirty pages to now around six hundred and fifty (though this version includes much ampler text-headings than the earliest commentaries had, and, of course, all the imagery is new). Throughout the commentary, Dolinin makes generous reference to scholars who have been first to discover various allusions hidden within the text. These create a sense of the depth of Nabokov's engagement with many

layers and languages of European culture; for example, particularly surprising is the allusion (discovery attributed to Boris Kats), via the Koncheyevesque German who chats with Fyodor in the Grunewald, to Joseph von Eichendorff's poem "In der Fremde" ["In a Foreign Land"]. Especially welcome here is the reminder from Kats that the poem had been set to music by Robert Schuman. That the whole Grunewald scene takes place under an oak tree, developing an oak theme from the novel's first word and connecting to the hidden poet's surname, makes for an especially Nabokovian moment (also attributed to Kats).

The annotations to Chapter Four threaten to overwhelm the work. It contains five hundred eighty annotations, more than double the next-most-annotated chapter, chapter two, which comes in at two hundred eleven. By comparison, chapter five has only one hundred twenty-six. On the one hand, this imbalance is natural: Chapter Four makes the most use of documentary material, which Nabokov (or Fyodor?) integrates through "distortion of the material" and other artistic practices, as discussed separately (with credit) by Irina Paperno. (However, it is surprising that Marina Kostalevsky's valuable treatment of Eikhenbaum's likely presence as a source for parts of Chapter Four is not referenced). The chapter's many quotations and mutations from Chernyshevsky's diaries, letters, and other sources are presented in as much detail as possible; a similar approach is dominant for Chapter Two and its sources in the great Russian and English explorers. However, the imbalance produced raises a methodological concern: an enormous amount of time and energy has been devoted to establishing these precise textual links to historical documents. That is certainly important and valuable, but is it actually *more* important than other kinds of textual elements that might receive commentary—for example, narratological elements (on which more below)? Or a similar comprehensiveness regarding changes made in the English translation, which may shed light on or at least complicate our understanding of the original? Or an effort to present, again, comprehensively, *all* the knowledge the field has accumulated regarding possible allusions, even if, in some cases, debatable? In this commentary, Dolinin has clearly chosen to give preference to direct and (mostly) indisputable textual connections, and placed the other sorts of, let's say, interpretive or potentially controversial, discoveries, onto a second, much less comprehensive plane, alongside the English transformations; narrative structure and its devices are given almost no attention whatsoever, except in the introduction and later some cases where devices are deemed to be deliberate echoes of those deployed by earlier authors.

More attention to narrative form would be especially valuable. For example, the novel's tendency to switch without warning between first- and third-person narration could be marked and discussed at crucial moments in the text, and also placed within a context of similar devices used by authors Nabokov is known to have read (there is a note to the effect in the introduction about the story "The Circle" and its relation to Joyce; more such comments would have been valuable). The contours of the novel's trickiness deserve attention in their own right, not only because they, too, are part of a literary tradition, but also because the novel sets out a highly idiosyncratic model for its own engagement and reception by a reader. It is not *only* presenting a story or *fabula*; it is also creating a meta-story out of its own *siuzhet*, and this is something that non-specialist readers will find particularly challenging and worthy of enlightenment in a commentary. Nabokov made this kind of *siuzhet*-related observation in his *Onegin* commentary beginning with that novel's very first lines, in which we are told that "it was, in fact, our poet's purpose to have his tale start opaquely and then gradually disengage itself from the initial vagueness." (*EO*, v2 p. 31, commentary to lines 1-5). In thus commenting on the very texture of the work itself, Nabokov helps its readers contemplate its aesthetic form and potential significance. *The Gift* deserves the same kind of aesthetically dense line-by-line commentary.

Another area that deserves expansion is the matter of how the novel changed when it was put into English, partly by Dmitri Nabokov, partly by Michael Scammell, with oversight and revision by Nabokov himself. In his introduction, Dolinin notes that when he revised the previous version of the commentary for the French Pléiade edition, which was translated from the English rather than from the Russian, he was able to add annotations on changes introduced in the English version. The commentary's approach to these, however, has many gaps, even some significant ones, and this is surprising in light of Dolinin's own extensive practice of studying changes in *Lolita*'s translation to elucidate difficult places and puzzles in the novel. The commentary presents a number of subtle changes, but here are just a few examples of what has been missed: in Chapter Two, as the narrative fades from the description of Asian exploration into a letter from Fyodor to his mother, the English adds quotation marks and the word "mother" to clarify the transition—which is invisible in the Russian (*SS5T* 4.320, *Gift* 138). This alteration makes for an important change in the narratological structure (the invisible transition on its own is worthy of commentary, too, as I mentioned above). The 1975 Ardis edition, the "last lifetime publication" which appeared

thirteen years after the translation, preserves the *Sovremennye zapiski* and Chekhov House versions. Another major change takes place in the same chapter, surrounding the poem Fyodor reads at the literary evening early in Chapter Two, “Однажды мы под вечер оба,” in which the lyric hero points to a swallow. In the English, this bird surprisingly transforms into a swift—a bird with similar habits but not even from the same taxonomic family (let alone genus); and there is more to the story. Yet another significant change takes place at the spot of a crucial puzzle’s posing, in chapter five: “где это уже раз так было—что качнулось?” To the original’s “что качнулось,” the English adds, “what had **straightened up** [and started to sway]?” The addition is significant, because it renders the puzzle’s solution more precise and less open to alternatives, since the added words make the lexical connection between the two scenes exact and emphatic: a butterfly flies off from a flower, and “цветок, покинутый им, выпрямился и закачался—that is, “straightened up and started to sway.” (*SS5T*, 4.315-16, *Gift* 315-16) (Dolinin kindly credits me for discovering this solution, but overlooks the English modification and its importance).

On a minor note, Dolinin points out that the “Дар II” fragment manuscript and other post-*Gift* unfinished (or unpublished) texts remain an area of scholarly debate and research. There is nothing new or definitive in this edition on those topics, but much to stimulate research and speculation. The exact chronology of the novel’s composition, too—even the dating of its first manuscript page—remains only partially illuminated, and one can look forward to future discoveries in these areas.

The matter of which of others’ discoveries are incorporated here, of what is left out, even on the level of indisputable allusion, does not appear to be systematically addressed. A number of questionable, minor, or even refuted allusions discovered by others are included, but many quite plausible intertexts, including those established in published scholarship, have been overlooked. To take one striking example I discovered, which is also another moment where the English differs consequentially from the Russian, there is the change from Chapter Five’s “Боря поможет” (“Borya will help”, *SS5T*, 4.486) to “David might help” (*Gift* 311). Why did Borya become David? Yuri Leving in his *Keys to The Gift* presents a lengthy and detailed discussion of how this change marks and highlights a logical connection between Nabokov’s text and the Book of Psalms, (traditionally attributed to King David), especially Psalm 139. Leving’s lengthy and important treatment incorporates Dolinin’s views, and warrants, at a minimum, a brief summary and citation

(Leving, *Keys*, 223-231). On a lighter, perhaps more speculative note, there is widespread suspicion that a poodle's resounding footfalls and unclipped nails on the novel's last pages hint at Irina Guadanini (see, e.g., Jane Grayson, *Illustrated Lives: Vladimir Nabokov*, 76. Penguin, London/NY, 2002), whose affair with Nabokov had recently come to an end when he composed the final chapter; yet Dolinin averts his eyes from this background. He would, I think, protest that he is only interested in *literary* rather than *biographical* commentary. It is true that the commentary leans in that direction, but not entirely consistently: while it does appear to avoid discussing parallels between Konstantin Kirillovich and Nabokov's own father (discussed in the scholarly tradition, as, importantly, by Monika Greenleaf), it nevertheless examines the debate over Khodasevich's role as a biographical precursor for the character Koncheyev, with reference to Nina Berberova's descriptions of the real-life Nabokov-Khodasevich discussions. Contrariwise (but reverting to the "non-biographical" principle), the interesting history surrounding Véra Nabokov's partial reflection in Zina Mertz (presented by all the biographers—Field, Boyd, Schiff, as well as in Leving's *Keys*), and her rejection of that identification, is entirely suppressed, despite the fact that it is an obvious source of speculation and interest for many readers. Thus, literature, and the biographical people who are involved in the literary world, or are named directly in the novel, are apparently the only object of the commentator's attention. The "real world" of literary writers and critics exists as a kind of liminal space worthy of scholarly discussion, while the (mostly) non-literary layer of "real life" just adjacent to it is evidently not so worthy, even if its denizens are present in the text through hints. The dividing line is a bit arbitrary. An underlying, perhaps latent, conceptual predisposition emerges from these choices: it is the conviction that what is interesting in a literary work is precisely how it relates to the history of literary (and other artistic) works *to the exclusion of* its relationship to a possibly real world and the author's possible real inner life and relationships. And yet we, and Nabokov, care a great deal about the personal biographical episodes of Pushkin's life, and how they bore on the creation and appearance of *Eugene Onegin*. It seems entirely plausible, and even proper, that we might care equally about such things in connection with that novel's manifest descendant.

One can imagine a treasured commentary in which all of these components and prior scholarship would be richly addressed. Another important sacrifice in the current edition is its lack of reference to the pages of any actual edition of *The Gift* or *Дар*. This would make for awkward

use with anything but a digital edition, or a hand-marked copy with the annotation numbers (which are simply consecutive by chapter) written in. The best solution, of course, would be to publish a facsimile edition of the 1975 Ardis printing, and refer to its pagination—echoing Nabokov’s own treatment of *Onegin*. Dolinin announced at the recent Nabokov Readings that this book is already almost sold out, and that a new edition is envisioned; he has invited those who find omissions in his commentary to send information his way. Nabokov’s readers can hope that this commentary’s commercial success so far will spark the publisher’s enthusiasm for both a new facsimile edition and an enlarged set of commentaries. I feel there is a great deal of room for expansion. Although the book seems large already, and the prospect of creating a much larger commentary slim at best, there is a precedent. However ample it may seem at this point, it turns out that Dolinin’s commentary is still on a much smaller scale than Nabokov’s *Onegin* work: I have conducted a robust pseudoscientific analysis and determined that the ratio of commentary to text in this work is a little under two to one, based on word count; in Nabokov’s *Onegin* volumes, the ratio is roughly eight-and-a-half to one (not including appendices in either case). Nabokov had more space to work with for all those gossip stories, narratological and prosodic discourses, and arguments with prior scholars. Here’s hoping that the “Commentary to *The Gift* 2nd ed.” will quadruple in length—or, at least, double. And, of course, be translated into English.

