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A BLACKBIRD SITTING ON LETTER 'A'

For Roman Timenchik

In Nabokov's obituary, "In memory of A. M. Chyorny" (1932), we find no direct juxtaposition of Alexander Glickberg and Boris Bugaev's pen-names (Chyorny and Bely respectively), and yet it is there, thanks to a quote from Derzhavin: "He <...> was famous – the word about him was spread wide from 'the White Seas to the Black Seas'."¹ The fact that Nabokov quotes Derzhavin's poem "Pamyatnik" ["Monument"] to highlight the names of two modernist poets that had marked a whole period of the contemporary Russian literature is manifested in *The Gift* [*Dar*], where he discusses the topic.

The pairing of the pen-names (Sasha **Chyorny** ["Black"] and Andrey **Bely** ["White" in Russian]) was noted by Marina Tsvetaeva in her 1934 article, "Captured Spirit." dedicated to Bely's memory.² At that time Nabokov had already been working on *The Gift*.³ Although Sasha Chyorny is

¹ V. Nabokov. *Collected Works of the Russian Period in Five Volumes*. St. Petersburg: Symposium, 2000. Vol. 3, p. 704.

² "Lord, save and bless father, mother, nanny, Asya, Andrusha, Natasha, Masha and Andrey Bely... – *Well, pray for Andrey Bely, and now pray for Sasha Chyorny!* The funniest thing was that nanny had no idea that Sasha Chyorny ever existed and that she made him up herself as a counter to Andrey Bely (to contrast the colour-part in his surname) in her female rustic artlessness, changing

never mentioned in *The Gift*,⁴ it seems that his is the only name that can fill in the gap intentionally left whenever Andrey Bely's name is mentioned in the novel. What makes us match the two names? First of all, there is a certain chain of coincidences concerning both the real and the invented names of historical and fictional characters in *The Gift*, the pattern which, using Olga Skonechnaya's phrase, can be named the "black-and-white theme of the novel"⁵: the Chernyshevskys and Belinskys (with **black** and **white** colors in their etymological roots); the five poets whose names "start with the letter B" in Godunov-Cherdyntsev's imaginary conversation with Koncheyev;⁶ and Fyodor's great-grandfather, designated in Sukhoshchekov's memoirs as *Ch*. Some pairs-forming surnames also serve as a hint: **Strannolyubsky** / Rostislav **Stranny**, **Belinsky** (**Belenky**) / **Bely**, and **Popov** / **Popovsky** (Nabokov uses the latter pair in one sentence for a more striking effect).

The author's indication of the intentionally left gap also serves as a maneuver that distracts the reader from the sought-for image of the unnamed Sasha Chyorny. What could it be? In his review of Sasha Chyorny's "Satyrs," Nikolai Gumilev wrote: "He loves Nature humbly but passionately, and speaking of it he becomes a real poet."⁷ It is this aspect of Chyorny's creative oeuvre that appealed to Nabokov the most, judging by an observation that opens the obit "In Memory of A. M. Chyorny": "There seems to be no poem by Chyorny where you will not find a zoological epithet – thus, in a drawing-room or a study you can sometimes find a plush toy under a

the full name into a diminutive" (M. Tsvetaeva. *Collected works in Seven Volumes*. Moscow, 1994. Vol. 4, p. 221). This confrontation of Bely and Chyorny in the non-literary context, i.e. in the nanny's speech, makes it possible for Tsvetaeva to point to the connection between the pen-names without dwelling on the relations of the deceased. Although the history of their relations, from the caricatures by Chyorny the satirist of symbolists, including Bely, in 1900s to mutual attacks in 1920s, was nothing new to her, Mentioning Chyorny in the nanny's monologue also reminds of his reputation as a children's poet.

³ The short story "Rasskaz" [Tale] (later entitled "Krug" [Circle]) was published in March 1934, along with the poem "Iz F.G.-Ch" ["From F.G.-Ch"] (e.g. from the writings of Fyodor Godunov-Cherdyntsev), published in July of the same year [A. Dolinin and R. Timenchik. Comments. V. Nabokov. *Short Stories. The Invitation to a Beheading. Novel. Essays, Interviews, Reviews*. Moscow, 1989, p. 498.

⁴ Although his obvious presence in Nabokov's last Russian novel can be proven intertextually. See, Yuri Leving. Vladimir Nabokov and Sasha Chyorny. *Literary Review*. [Literaturnoe Obozrenie]. Russia. 1999, 1 (277), pp. 52-56.

⁵ O. Skonechnaya. The Black-and-White Kaleidoscope: Andrey Bely in V.V. Nabokov's memoirs. *Vladimir Nabokov. Pro et contra*. Moscow, 1997. Vol. 1, p. 667.

⁶ A. Dolinin noted the coincidence, with one exception, of Nabokov's five 'B'-s with five 'B'-s in M. Tsvetaeva's article "Geroi Truda" ["Hero of Labour"] (A.A. Dolinin. Commentary. V. Nabokov. *Collected Works of the Russian Period in Five Volumes*. St. Petersburg: Symposium, 2000. Vol. 4, p. 660).

⁷ N. Gumilev. *Collected Works in Four Volumes*. Moscow, 1991. Vol. 4, p. 240.

chair, and that communicates the presence of children in the place. A small animal in the corner of a poem is Sasha's brand, just as definite as an elephant on the rubber."⁸

In the almanac *Zhar-Ptitsa* [*The Firebird*], to which both V. Sirin and A. Chyorny contributed during the early 1920s, there appears another pen-name belonging to Nabokov's literary mentor – Turdus, a Latin word for "thrush."⁹ The close proximity of mytho-ornitological pen-names *Sirin* and *Turdus* in a magazine titled *The Firebird* could have hardly remained unnoticed by both poets. This leads me to suggest that it is none other but Alexander Glickberg, or Sasha Chyorny, who is embodied in *The Gift* as a live blackbird, sitting on the letter "A" (in the original):

Behind the brightly painted pumps a radio was singing in a gas station, while above its pavilion vertical yellow letters stood against the light blue of the sky – the name of a car firm – and on the second letter, on the "E" (a pity that it was not on the first, on the "B" – would have made an alphabetic vignette) sat a live blackbird, with a yellow – for economy's sake – beak, singing louder than the radio. [*The Gift*, 1991, 174]

It is not accidental at all that, in the Russian version, the blackbird crowns the second letter "A", while the first letter turns out to be "D".¹⁰ The automobile brand remains the same in both versions of the text (Daimler-Benz), but the Russian version stresses an unpronounced title of the novel, DA – *Dar*.

Nabokov may have been well aware of one of Alexander Chyorny's last poems entitled "Chyorny Drozd" ["Blackbird"], published in the *Poslednie Novosti* ["Latest News"] newspaper.¹¹ It

⁸ V. Nabokov. *Collected Works of the Russian Period in Five Volumes*. St. Petersburg: Symposium, 2000. Vol. 3, p. 703.

⁹ Sasha Chyorny used the same pseudonym "Turdus" in the magazine *Illustrirovannaya Rossiya* [*Illustrated Russia*] as well, where in 1925 he led a satiric column called "Boomerang." (On the history of the pen-name see: A. Ivanov's commentary in Sasha Chyorny. *Collected works in Five Volumes*. Moscow. Vol. 1, p. 446; the same, "Sasha Chyorny's Mask Theatre," in Vol. 3, pp. 22-24).

¹⁰ V. Nabokov. *Collected Works of the Russian Period in Five Volumes*. St. Petersburg: Symposium, 2000. Vol. 4, p. 355.

¹¹ *Poslednie novosti*. April 30, 1932. № 4056. p. 3.

is also interesting to note that this natural phenomenon, the appearance of a bird, should result from the combination of the poet's two literary masks – his pseudonyms "Black" and "Turdus."¹²

Just like a fairy from a Perrault's fairytale who always spoke last, Nabokov was the last among those who delivered their farewell speeches to Chyorny on August 13, 1932 (Chyorny passed away on August 5th). The transformation of the poet into a live bird, meaning that poets "shall not wholly die,"¹³ seems to have revoked the very genre of the obit.¹⁴



¹² In E. Soshkin's opinion, though, the secondary pen-name does not outshine the primary one at all: "A blackbird (*Turdus mericula*) is just a kind of thrush. Nevertheless, the thrush with black feathering seems to extrude its congeners out of the cultural perception, at times even being away from them in terms of the lexis, and is associated with a black bird as such: a black-coated thrush is called 'blackbird' in English (whereas the general name for the bird is 'a thrush')." E. Soshkin. Who Hid Under the Pen-name 'Sasha Chyorny.' *Eglantine. Historical and philological collection devoted to the 60th anniversary of Roman Davydovich Timenchik*. Ed. by Leving, Y., Tsivian, Y. and A. Ospovat. Moscow: Vodolei Publishers, 2005, p. 406.

¹³ A.S. Pushkin. "Pamyatnik" ["Exegi Monumentum"] (1836). Trans. by Avrahm Yarmolinsky. Nabokov also included his own translation of the poem in his book, *Three Russian Poets (Pushkin, Lermontov, Tyutchev)*. Norfolk, Conn.: New Directions, 1944.

¹⁴ Nabokov's image of Chyorny's earthy immortality, perhaps carries on polemics with M. Struve's poem "To A.M. Chyorny": "Embroidered with the gold of nights / Over the southern wave, / That land where yesterday/ You lived your earthy life of hardships, / And a little house amidst shifting sands/ You would not spot, / And your faithful dog / Cannot follow you. // I don't know what is up there / He who is kind to poets / He who wrote down in the book of his heart / Your every step along the line / He shall send his dear messengers / to meet you. / The first of the messengers brings clothes / To your soul. // Made of Ukrainian clouds, / Of Petersburg's storms / Inwoven in there slightly / There is the sky-blue of Toulougne: / The duffel coat, / And the same hat – like a mushroom cap,/ And the pipe full of ash/ Made of tobacco of Heaven, / And you are followed by a heavenly dog, / A fluffy white ball. // Please, at that near date, / When my hour has struck, / Do ask, my holy brother, / in your Heavenly home, / For Him who is kind to us, poets, / to send You for me, / So that with such a guide/ I rise in the eternal East" (*Poslednie novosti*. August 7, 1932. № 4155. P. 3).