

CAPONEU - The Cartography of the Political Novel in Europe

Vladimir Nabokov

The Gift

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“It is the last novel I wrote, or ever shall write, in Russian. Its heroine is not Zina, but Russian Literature” (2017: viii). These words of Vladimir Nabokov from the foreword to his novel *The Gift* point to origins, motives, and future developments in the work of the famous writer. The origins are to be found in his great love for his native country and its language and culture; the motives are rooted in his disgust with the aftermaths of the bloody October Revolution of 1917 in Russia, while the future developments signal the experimental turn which defines Nabokov’s literary oeuvre.

The novel is about the experience of Fyodor Godunov-Cherdyntsev, a Russian writer living in Berlin after his family escapes from Russia in the wake of the Revolution. Exile, nostalgia, creative fervor, and love – all these are entangled in *The Gift* in a very interesting way by focusing on the literary endeavors of the protagonist on the background of the day-to-day prosaic encounters with poverty, inequality and philistine mentality in a very problematic historic period for Europe. This makes the novel a complex text without an obtrusively stated political agenda, yet a text that cannot be easily detached from the political context of the times. That much is probably enough to prompt the reader to identify Fyodor, the protagonist-writer, with the author, Nabokov, yet the latter states in the same foreword: “I am not, and never was, Fyodor Godunov-Cherdyntsev” (vii). Despite the numerous coincidental elements in the biographies of protagonist and author – Nabokov’s family also fled to Germany after the October Revolution and his father was later shot in Berlin by a member of a belligerent political fraction of the émigrés, and Nabokov’s own creative ambitions – *The Gift* is ultimately about the nostalgia for lost connections with the motherland, the memories of strong cultural origins, and the writer’s search to creatively reconstruct these connections in the present. The sense of the past is a defining element in the search for creative expression in the present, in a new environment that the writer tries to understand at least, if not to love.

There is the characteristic Nabokovian experimentation with narrative point of view through the interplay of the third person and first person singular, and also through the purposeful emulation of other writers’ styles, i.e. Pushkin’s, Gogol’s, Saltykov-Shchedrin’s, as if the protagonist, Fyodor – a writer himself – is searching for the right tone to match the voices of history, to embrace the long shadows of some of the titans of Russian literature. Ultimately, as he is going to realise, it is not so much coming to terms with those titans, but finding one’s own identity and facing the challenges of being an artist in a modern, hostile world which has forgotten the lessons of the Great War and is already on the threshold of World War II.

The Gift is Nabokov’s final novel written in Russian and by many accounts his best in his native language, but what will surprise the reader is that the English translation available now to a much wider reading public is equally impressive and effective. Partially translated by Nabokov’s son, Dmitri, and Michael Scammell, the text was revised and approved by the author himself for the

publication in English in 1963. The result is a brilliant example of rigorous translation in which the word and the spirit of the original source text do come alive in a vivid, unforgettable way.

Recommended Reading:

Alexandrov, Vladimir. Nabokov's Otherworld. Princeton, NJ: Princeton UP, 1993.

Blackwell, Stephen. Zina's Paradox: The Figured Reader in Nabokov's Gift. New York: Peter Lang, 2000.

Boyd, Brian. On the Origin of Stories: Evolution, Cognition, and Fiction. Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 2009.

Draguoiu, Dana. Vladimir Nabokov and the Poetics of Liberalism. Evanston, Ill: Western UP, 2011.

1952, First complete Russian edition

2017, Penguin Modern Classics

LANGUAGE: Russian/Русский

PUBLISHERS: Sovremennye zapiski / Современные записки, "Chekhov" Publishing House, Weidenfeld & Nicholson

CENSORSHIP STATUS:

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Conference: What is the Political Novel: Defining the Genre - day 3

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