

Strange Bedfellows: Ayn Rand and Vladimir Nabokov¹

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Ayn Rand (née Alissa Rosenbaum) and Vladimir Nabokov (pseudonym—Vladimir Sirin) born in imperial Saint Petersburg, Russia, in 1905 and 1899 respectively, became best-selling American writers in the late 1950's. Their chef-d'oeuvres, *Atlas Shrugged* (1957) and *Lolita* (1958), were, almost concurrently, bestsellers. Compatriots, coevals, and fellow writers, forced into emigration by the Russian revolution, Rand and Nabokov had much in common, but drew upon very different aspects of their shared cultural heritage. Rand, the ideologue, and Nabokov, the aesthete, made strange bedfellows on the *New York Times* bestseller list.² In life, the ideologue and the aesthete probably never met, although Alissa Rosenbaum was a schoolmate and close friend of Olga Nabokov who was three years younger than her brother.³ In 1917 Alissa was eleven or twelve to Vladimir's worldly eighteen.⁴ Nonetheless, they may have exchanged glances at the Nabokov home or on nearby Nevsky Prospekt in the teens or, for that matter, in Manhattan during the fifties.⁵

Few of Rand's admirers and detractors were more than marginally aware of her Russian cultural background and its impact on her intellectual and literary development prior to the 1995 publication of Chris Matthew Sciabarra's ground-breaking *Ayn Rand: The Russian Radical*. Although Rand and Nabokov shared a cultural heritage, they came from very different social milieus. The aristocratic Nabokovs were very rich and enormously cultured; the Rosenbaums were of the bourgeoisie. With Rand as with Nabokov, however, there was the governess who imparted French and German (but, alas, not Nabokov's English), extended family visits to Western Europe, and

summers in the Crimea where later the Rosenbaums, like the Nabokovs, vainly waited out the young Bolshevik regime. At the end of their Crimean sojourn, however, the Rosenbaums returned to Petrograd, and the Nabokovs moved on into exile.

Rand left Bolshevik Russia after graduating from Petrograd University with a degree in history and a brief stint in film school. Arriving in the U.S. in 1926, she got various jobs in the (then silent) film industry by sheer drive and persistence, despite her minimal English. Her first job was as an extra in Cecil B. DeMille's biblical epic *King of Kings*. She also began writing in English. For a time, she had been in the studio script department, and her first successful literary effort was a play called *Night of January 16th*. The 1935 play setting is a murder trial with the jury played by twelve onstage members of the audience. The play has alternative endings, depending on the jury's vote.⁶ The play, which ran briefly on Broadway and had a long run in summer stock and community theater productions, has left its trace in literary history due to a single improbable fact. In 1938, a struggling young attorney played the role of the D.A. in a little theater production staged in his hometown of Whittier, California. In the same theater group, he was to meet Pat Ryan, later known as Pat Nixon (Ambrose 1987, 92–93). Had it not been for Ayn Rand's play . . . ? Rand was, incidentally, to meet Richard Nixon in 1947 when she was "a friendly witness" in hearings conducted by the House Un-American Activities Committee (B. Branden 1986, 200–204).

The young émigré Nabokov, having completed his Cambridge degree in 1922, also found occasional work as an extra in the booming German film industry and turned to writing for both screen and stage. As with Rand, cinema was to have a considerable impact on his writing. Indeed, his 1931 novel *Camera Obscura*, known in its English version as *Laughter in the Dark*, was an attempt to write a novel "as if it were a film," replete with scenes mimicking different types of camera shots (Appel 1974, 258–59).⁷ Like Rand, he was eventually to script his best-known book for Hollywood, but his most direct impact on political history was when *Lolita's* British publisher, Nigel Nicholson, a prominent Conservative MP, was voted out of

office by an outraged constituency (Boyd 1991, 378).

Rand was never expansive about her Russian (or Jewish) origins, nor does Russia figure in either of her blockbusters, *The Fountainhead* (1943) or *Atlas Shrugged* (1957). It is present only in Rand's first and least known novel. *We the Living* (1936) depicts a fiercely independent and fearless young woman, Kira, and her relationship with an unbelievably handsome, aristocratic counter-revolutionary. There is also a high-minded and decent Cheka officer whom courageous Kira beds in order to secure medical treatment for her tubercular lover. All three are ultimately destroyed by the Bolshevik regime. Although the novel did not do well in the United States, it was made into a wartime film extravaganza in Italy before being withdrawn, for fear that its theme might be taken as anti-Fascist, as well as anti-Soviet. The film, which does full justice to the book, features a very young, stunning Alida Valli and Rossano Brazzi.

There is only one slender justification for mentioning *We the Living* in connection with Nabokov. One of the motifs of Rand's dreadful revolutionary epic is the folk quatrain (chastushka) "Yablochko" or "Little Apple" (Johnson 1982). The beginning is always "Oy, yablochko, / Kuda kotishsya," i.e., "Oh, little apple, whither rollest thou?" The closing couplet may be anything, but one popular version was "Na Chrezvychaiku, / Ne vorotishsya," i.e., "to Cheka HQ, / and you won't be coming back." The *chastushka* was especially popular in the Crimea where the Rosenbaums and the Nabokovs spent the civil war years. Nabokov introduced it into both *Bend Sinister* and *Look at the Harlequins!* In the latter, Vadim Vadimovich is fleeing across the Russian border in 1918 when he is challenged by a Red border guard: "And whither . . . may you be rolling (*kotishsya*), little apple (*yablochko*)?" Vadim coolly shoots him dead. One is tempted to link this episode to Nabokov's March 1918 Crimean encounter with a "bow-legged Bolshevik sentry" who threatened to arrest the young lepidopterist for signaling a British warship with his butterfly net (Nabokov 1966, 131).

Nabokov left Russia in 1919 at twenty, but arrived in America only in 1940. Alissa Rosenbaum, age 21, left Russia for America some six years later, burning her manuscripts behind her. Like

Nabokov after his arrival, she was never to write again in Russian nor, after *We the Living*, use Russian settings. Two years after *We the Living*, her short novel *Anthem* appeared in England. This tale of a lone dissenter in a monolithic future totalitarian state has marked, if unacknowledged, similarities to Evgeny Zamyatin's brilliant novel *We*. Zamyatin's manuscript, written in Petrograd in 1921, circulated among students at Petrograd University where Rand was studying. Rand's almost schematic novella is, like Zamyatin's, set in a remote future long after some unspecified disaster. It is the tale of a rebel in an anthill-like city-state where the citizens have no personal names, but rather labels like "Equality 7-2521." The key thematic development is the hero's discovery (in old books) of the word "I." In fact, in the manuscript version held in the Library of Congress, the book's title is *Ego*, which, on reflection, Rand may have felt to be uncomfortably close to Zamyatin's *We*.⁸

Nabokov's *Invitation to a Beheading* was published serially in 1935-36, but Rand was probably unaware of it since she apparently did not follow Russian writing. Nabokov did, however. Not long before beginning his own very different dystopia, he admiringly read Zamyatin's *We* (Boyd 1990, 415). Thus, the Nabokov and Rand books have a faint dual kinship: one, through the tie with Zamyatin; and two, as their authors' responses to the Soviet regime and its ideology.

In the late thirties, Rand began writing the novel that made her name—*The Fountainhead*, which, incidentally, was to be published by the Indianapolis firm of Bobbs-Merrill that, some five years before, had put out *Laughter in the Dark*, Nabokov's first American book publication. Rand's epic of architect Howard Roark, a man who is utterly contemptuous of society's demands, blows up his visionary chef-d'oeuvre when its design is altered by meddling, self-serving social do-gooders. Put on trial, he defends his vision so eloquently that the jury acquits him. The novel was greeted with largely negative reviews, but the novel was still on the *New York Times* bestseller list on 1 July 1945. The author's popular fame grew, especially after the release of the hit film *The Fountainhead* in 1949. Fifty years have not softened the critical response. A 1995 *New Yorker* article that

retrospectively reviews the top ten novels of July 1945 finds *The Fountainhead* even more hilariously dreadful than did the original reviewers (Lane 1995, 60, 66-67). It is a pleasant conjecture that the 1949 film, starring Gary Cooper and Patricia Neal and scripted by Rand herself, was among those seen by Humbert and Lo (or their creator) during their travels of that same year.

Nabokov's first "American" novel, *Bend Sinister* (1947), had almost as much difficulty finding a publisher as did Rand's *Fountainhead*. Although Rand's novel was blatantly ideological and plain-spoken in style while Nabokov's novel was saturated in Shakespearian and Joycean allusions and wordplay, the protagonists of the two works share a certain similarity. Nabokov's hero, Adam Krug, an iconoclastic philosopher of genius, is so persuaded of his own invulnerability that he ignores the pressures of the new "Ekwilist" revolutionary government to conform to their dictates. The new government aims not merely for social and economic leveling but even equal shares of consciousness for all. Although Krug sees his friends disappear one by one, he remains intransigent. Only when his small son's life is in the balance does he realize his defenselessness. The Rand and Nabokov novels share the central figure of the lone genius, indifferent to the crowd. But Rand's hero triumphs; Nabokov's dies within the framework of his fictional world, only to be rescued by the intervention of the author who steps in to save his character.

By the time *Atlas Shrugged* came out in 1957, Rand was already something of a celebrity. *Atlas Shrugged* is a mystery of sorts. The economy is breaking down and no one knows why. As the novel wends through its 1200 pages, the mystery is resolved. John Galt, a shadowy inventor of genius, sickened by a social ethic that increasingly demands subordination of the gifted few (captains of industry and science) to the needs of the undeserving envious masses, masterminds a secret strike. One by one the harassed leaders of industry vanish, abandoning their empires, leaving society to sink ever deeper into its disastrous mediocrity. Meanwhile, Galt and his friends create a hidden mountain community built on rational egoism and laissez-faire economics. When society comes to the point of collapse

(as it does at the end of the novel), they stand ready to resurrect it according to their principles.

A Shared Milieu

Nabokov and Rand shared more than just the happenstance of time and Russian birth. They shared a milieu in which the martyred radical literary and social critic Nikolai Chernyshevsky (1828–89) was a revered figure in the pantheon of the anti-establishment intelligentsia.⁹ Doubtless, neither Rand nor Nabokov found much to fancy in Chernyshevsky's socialism. Yet, in a sense, both writers-to-be responded to the Chernyshevsky tradition in ways that fundamentally shaped their future work. Rand took her utilitarian view of literature (and style) from Chernyshevsky—although substituting a very different ideological content. Chernyshevsky's famous 1863 novel *What is to be Done?: From Tales about New People*, written in prison, became the progenitor of Socialist Realism and Rand's Capitalist Realism—although in both cases the “realism” was anything but “real.” Rand, by the way, divided literature into “Naturalism,” an odious value-free approach that focused on the seamy sides of man and society, and “Romanticism,” which exalted the feats of the principled rational individualist (B. Branden 1986, 24; Rand 1969). Her own work she rather oddly termed “Romantic Realism.” Although her professed model was Victor Hugo (B. Branden 1986, 24–25), any connoisseur of Russian literature will recognize Chernyshevsky's ascetic revolutionist Rakhmetov as a major prototype of her literary heroes and heroines. Rakhmetov was, of course, the foremost representative of “the new people” heralded in the subtitle of *What is to be Done?*

Both Chernyshevsky's opus and Rand's *Atlas Shrugged* center upon a young woman who is or becomes an entrepreneur. She is one of the new people who will, after the collapse of the old society, build a better, rational world. Just as John Galt displays his ideal community to Dagny Taggart, Chernyshevsky's heroine, Vera Pavlovna, offers her dream vision of a new perfect society. Each novel ends with the old world on the verge of being replaced by the new

—although the message is obviously much muted in Chernyshevsky's work. Both novels are cast as mystery melodramas full of didactic harangues. And, not least, both have been seen as monuments in the women's rights movement.¹⁰ The Soviet *Short Literary Encyclopedia* sums up *What is to be Done?* as a “publicistic, socio-philosophical, educational novel,” something “almost unknown in earlier Russian literature.” The description fits Rand's *Atlas Shrugged* like a glove, and if her opus is not the first American novel to do so, it is a fine example of that Russian genre transferred to American soil.

If Chernyshevsky's 1863 *What is to be Done?* is the grandmother of Socialist Realism, the birth-mother is Maxim Gorky's 1906 *Mother* which tells of the radicalization (and martyrdom) of the widowed mother of a young factory worker, a revolutionary, who attempts to organize a strike. After his arrest, his mother, a pious peasant woman, picks up the red banner but is eventually beaten to death by the police. The crudely propagandistic Russian novel was written, oddly enough, in the Adirondacks where Gorky had retreated after being expelled from his New York hotel when it was discovered that he was not married to his companion. Gorky had come to America to rally foreign support for the Russian workers movement that had been badly mauled in the Revolution of 1905. The novel, written for the express purpose of sanctifying its heroes and heroines and demonizing their opponents, first appeared in *Appleton Magazine*—thus, giving an American family magazine the honor of publishing the foundation work of Socialist Realism. A heavily censored Russian edition appeared the following year in 1907. Gorky himself conceded the book's weakness, describing it as “a purely propagandistic piece, written in a moment of spleen.” Katerina Clark in her *The Soviet Novel: History as Ritual* carefully establishes the links between Gorky's potboiler and Chernyshevsky's *What is to be Done?* (1985, 28 and 52–67).

Rand would have been apoplectic at any comparison to Gorky, but *Atlas Shrugged* is not without its similarities to *Mother*. *Atlas Shrugged*, the premier novel of “Capitalist Realism,” mirrors the *Mother* of Russian Socialist Realism both in technique and in its idea of the virtuous uniting to throw off the chains of their oppressors. Until its

completion, Rand's novel was called *The Strike*—a title that reflected both the book's origin and plot. Deeply disappointed at the initially slow reception of her earlier novel *The Fountainhead*, Rand had been told that "People can't accept your moral philosophy in fictional form." She should write non-fiction to get her ideas across. It was her "duty." People "needed" it. Rand, rebellious at the thought, replied "What if I went on strike. What if *all* creative minds went on strike?" Then she added: "That would make a good novel" (B. Branden 1986, 218–19).

In 1934, Socialist Realism was officially declared the sole legitimate category of Soviet literature and Gorky's *Mother* was its foundation work:

It demands of the artist the truthful, historically concrete representation of reality in its revolutionary development. Moreover, the truthfulness and historical concreteness of the artistic representation of reality must be linked with the task of ideological transformation and education of workers in the spirit of socialism. (Tertz 1960, 148)

Certain working corollaries follow from this. A key phrase is "reality in its revolutionary development," which in practice means not reality, but "a reality" interpreted in terms of the ideal overarching goal of the inevitable achievement of a Communist society. A second corollary is "the positive hero," described by one Soviet writer as "a peak of humanity from whose height the future can be seen" (172). Doubt and ambiguity are unknown to these heroes.

It is instructive to compare Rand's views on literature with the tenets of Socialist Realism. Rand vehemently identifies herself as the successor of the great Romantic writers of the past. Such writers, she says, "did not record the events that *had* happened, but projected the events that *should* happen; they did not record the choices man *had* made, but projected the choices man *ought to make*" (Rand 1969, 113). Elsewhere she writes: "The *primary* value [of art] is that it gives [the reader] the experience of living in a world where things are as *they ought to be*" (171). In other words, the proper role of the writer is to

describe events from the point of view of some ideal goal. Just as Socialist Realism demands the "positive hero," Rand states: "The motive and purpose of my writing is *the projection of an ideal man*" (161). Rand's Howard Roark and John Galt are poured from the same cultural mold as Chernyshevsky's Rakhmetov and Gorky's hero, Pavel Vlasov, and such worthy successors as Pavel Korchagin, the hero of Nikolai Ostrovsky's Socialist Realist classic *How the Steel was Forged* (1934). They, like their authors, Chernyshevsky, Gorky, and Rand, were *never* in doubt about "What is to be Done?" Although Rand despised the political ideology of Socialist Realism, her view of art had much in common with it. Her slogan—"Art is the technology of the soul" (170)—is reminiscent of Stalin's dictum: "Writers are engineers of the human soul" (Terras 1985, 429). Both statements reflect Russian cultural tradition.

Nabokov explicitly took Chernyshevsky as the starting point of his evaluation of the Russian literary tradition and his own place in it. In his novel *The Gift*, Nabokov incorporates a biography of the martyred Chernyshevsky which intimates that he was "the bad seed" in nineteenth- and twentieth-century Russian cultural (and political) history. It was, according to Nabokov, Chernyshevsky's example that displaced the aesthetically-based Pushkin tradition and supplanted it with the utilitarian anti-aesthetic tradition that was to end in Socialist Realism. Nabokov saw his own work as an attempt to counter this view and to reassert and advance the aesthetically-based view. Chernyshevsky was thus a touchstone for both Nabokov and Rand.

Nabokov and Rand nicely illustrate the old saw that no discerning person should like both Dostoevsky and Tolstoy. Rand repeatedly expressed her admiration of Dostoevsky for "his superb mastery of plot-structure and for his merciless dissection of the psychology of evil" (Rand 1969, 55). As she says of *Crime and Punishment*, "Dostoevsky reveals the soul of a criminal all the way down to his philosophical premises" (68). One suspects that what Rand really admired about Dostoevsky was his gift for melodramatizing philosophical and moral issues. Rand, the ultra-individualist and militant atheist, had little in common with Dostoevsky. Tolstoy was Rand's *bête noir*. "I cannot stand Tolstoy, and reading him was the most boring literary

duty I ever had to perform, his philosophy and his sense of life are not merely mistaken, but evil, and yet, from a purely literary view point, on his own terms, I have to evaluate him as a good writer" (55). Nabokov held, of course, quite contrary views of the two giants of Russian literature. Disposing of Dostoevsky as "Bedlam turned back into Bethlehem" (Nabokov 1963, 84), he regarded Tolstoy as the only A+ in Russian prose (Boyd 1991, 115).

Nabokov and Rand shared a much more immediate literary context than that of the nineteenth century. If the aristocratic young Nabokov breathed in the *recherché* atmosphere of the Symbolists, Alissa Rosenbaum (whose self-made father owned a pharmacy) was of the affluent bourgeoisie whose family reading matter probably tended more toward such best-selling writers as Anastasiya Verbitskaya (who far outsold Tolstoy), Leonid Andreev, and Mikhail Artsybashev whose *Sanin* titillated the Russian reading public. Verbitskaya's and Artsybashev's ideological potboilers featured socially and sexually emancipated heroines and heroes spouting half-baked Nietzscheanism. With sensationally overwrought plots, crude didacticism, and clumsy prose, their novels, at least in part, find their Russian origin in Chernyshevsky's *What is to be Done?*. The literary line of descent from Chernyshevsky's mess of pottage to Gorky's 1906 *Mother*, with a segue through the Verbitskaya, Andreev, and Artsybashev school, to Ayn Rand's ideological epics of the forties and fifties is clear enough. Rand's heroes and heroines are direct descendants of those of Verbitskaya and Artsybashev, popular vulgarizers of Nietzsche.

The ideas of Nietzsche were much in the air in the early decades of the century (Rosenthal 1986). For the Russian Symbolists, he was the artist-philosopher and herald of modernism; for Verbitskaya, Andreev, Artsybashev, et al., he was the advocate of the "*Übermensch*," the man or woman not confined by the morality of the herd (Clowes 1986, 317; Rosenthal 1986, 28). Not even the proletarian Gorky was immune to aspects of Nietzscheanism. Like Chernyshevsky before him, Gorky was a radical humanist, an atheist who promoted Man to the stature of the Godhead (Terras 1985, 181). Perhaps the most commonly cited (and parodied) line from his work is "Man! How

magnificent! It rings proud! Man!" from his play *The Lower Depths*. If Rand's atheism is rather muted in her fiction, her deification of Man is all the more prominent. In her "Introduction" to the twenty-fifth anniversary edition, she proclaims "the sense of life" that *The Fountainhead* dramatizes is "man-worship," a statement that is no less true of *Atlas Shrugged*. That same "Introduction" reports that the manuscript of *The Fountainhead* originally bore an epigraph from Nietzsche's *Beyond Good and Evil*: "The noble soul has reverence for itself." Rand says that she removed the epigraph because Nietzsche's irrationalism was philosophically offensive. She admired only "his magnificent feeling for man's greatness" (Rand [1943] 1971, x). In fact, Rand's early reverence for Nietzsche was considerably greater than she later suggested. Not only had the novel's opening epigraph been drawn from the German philosopher but she had apparently considered using epigraphs from Nietzsche for each part of *The Fountainhead* (Rand 1999, 217). Leonard Peikoff, in his "Foreword" to *Journals of Ayn Rand*, remarks how the journals reflect her waning involvement with Nietzsche (1999, ix). Nonetheless, it says much that the first book Rand bought in the United States was *Thus Spake Zarathustra* (B. Branden 1986, 45).¹¹

John Burt Foster has recently argued that the young Nabokov, who is thought to have read *Thus Spake Zarathustra* during his Crimean exile, seized upon Nietzsche and his concept of the "eternal return" as part of his search for literary modernity, before turning away toward other models (1993, 40–44 and 49–51).

Nabokov's and Rand's bestsellerdom led to a very strange situation in American literature in the late 1950's when *Atlas Shrugged* and *Lolita* shared the limelight. One was a stylistic masterpiece that was widely condemned for its affair between 12-year-old Lolita and Humbert Humbert; the other—the mega-epic of tycoon Dagny Taggart and John Galt, the neo-Nietzschean superman who proclaims "I will never live for the sake of another man, nor ask any other man to live for me" ([1957] n.d., 993). Very few American readers were aware Rand and Nabokov were, respectively, continuing and/or reacting against aspects of their native Russian literary traditions: Rand continuing the "realist" (in Nabokovian quotes)

utilitarian tradition à la Chernyshevsky as filtered through a “pop” Nietzsche; and Nabokov—the modernist aesthetic inherited from the Symbolists, who had arisen in revolt against the Chernyshevskian tradition.

We know what Ayn Rand thought of Nabokov and *Lolita*. In a 1964 interview, she cited Mickey Spillane as her favorite writer. When asked about Nabokov, she replied: “I have read only one book of his and a half—the half was *Lolita*, which I couldn’t finish. He is a brilliant stylist, he writes beautifully, but his subjects, his sense of life, his view of man, are so evil that no amount of artistic skill can justify them” (1964, 40). One cannot but note how closely her condemnation of Nabokov resembles her damnation of Tolstoy. We can imagine what Nabokov might have said about *Atlas Shrugged* by reading his estimate of *What is to be Done?* in *The Gift*. Here, he mocks Chernyshevsky’s books for their “helplessly rational structures,” their appeal to “rational egoism,” and concludes that “the idea that calculation is the foundation of every action (or heroic accomplishment) leads to absurdity” (293–94). The ideas attacked by Nabokov lie at the very center of *Atlas Shrugged* whose author held rationality to be man’s highest virtue.

It is hardly surprising that Rand’s and Nabokov’s favorite writers were polar opposites. For the nineteenth century, Rand held Victor Hugo’s flamboyant blockbusters in the highest esteem; Nabokov—the austere and elegant Flaubert. For the twentieth century, Nabokov singled out Joyce’s *Ulysses*, followed by Kafka’s “The Metamorphosis.” Rand, on her side, wittily called upon the reading public “to cease being satisfied with esthetic speakeasies, and demand the repeal of the Joyce-Kafka Amendment” (Rand 1969, 136). For Rand, the great era of Romanticism, the source of all inspired literature, ended with World War I and the death of playwright Edmund Rostand of *Cyrano* fame.

It is striking that both Rand and Nabokov chose non-Russians as their favorite writers. Given the consistent polarity of their literary tastes, it is little short of amazing that they agreed on Russia’s leading Symbolist poet, Alexander Blok. In part, this may have to do with Blok’s role as the unofficial poet-laureate of Sankt Peterburg. Not

only was he the darling of the city’s Symbolist intelligentsia but even town prostitutes sometimes assumed the sobriquet of his “Neznakomka,” the mysterious unknown woman of one of his most popular verses. Nabokov invokes Blok three times in his autobiography: once—as harbinger of a doomed society; once linking him with the assassination of his father; and, lastly, to a final glimpse of Tamara, his first love. Nabokov’s early poems often echo Blok and at least one is dedicated to the poet (Bethea 1995 and Dolinin 1991). Rand’s admiration for Blok is harder to understand, although she perhaps shared his sense of impending apocalypse—a sense that permeated Petersburg society in the early years of the century. She said little about Blok but once described him as “a magnificent poet,” although his “sense of life” was “ghastly” (Sciabarra 1995b, 390)—a comment remarkably similar to her observation about Nabokov and *Lolita*. Sciabarra makes the somewhat surprising argument that Blok’s appeal to Rand lay in their common admiration for Nietzsche who was a central figure for the Russian Symbolists (31–35). Blok’s debt to Nietzsche is beyond dispute (Dendeshi 1998). Although Rand certainly owed her *Übermensch* ideal to Nietzsche (as well as to Chernyshevsky et al.), her emotional, literary and philosophical proclivities were remote from those of the Symbolists who were very much self-aware religious mystics.

Rand’s obsessive rationalism and Nietzschean scorn for the weak stand in sharp contrast to Nabokov’s vision of the “otherworld” and insistence on the moral superiority of the victim. The two Russians, born with the century, looked at the world in very different ways. Nabokov was the gifted, ever observant naturalist with a profound love of the natural world and the precise language to render it in words. Rand had little interest in the natural world. Her admiration was for technology, a product of man’s rationality. Her admiration was abstract, however. Like Nabokov, she never learned to drive. Hers was a world of mental abstractions. Nabokov was a sportsman; Rand loathed all physical activity. She was, however, an ardent “Scrabble” player—as was Nabokov. Rand and Nabokov were both formidable polemicists, although Nabokov reserved most of his combativeness for his published interviews, while Rand built her

novels as polemics, as well as writing a series of philosophical essays. Both were staunch American patriots and regarded the rise of the New Left with apprehension and loathing—perhaps as an echo of their shared Petersburg youth. Notwithstanding their profound differences, the pair shared certain key values: an absolute dedication to free will and the supremacy of the individual consciousness, as well as a strong distaste for Plato, Freud, Sartre, and Noam Chomsky.

There are also striking parallels in the lives of the two Russo-American writers: Both born to comfort and affluence in Petersburg; lives disrupted and remade in consequence of the Russian Revolution; exile and writing in new languages; the loss of European family members in World War II; literary fame as English-language writers; that fame magnified by hit films—Rand's 1949 film *The Fountainhead* and Kubrick's 1962 *Lolita*, beatification through interviews in *Playboy* (1961 and 1964, respectively); and ultimate canonization through the establishment of Nabokov and Rand Archives in the Manuscript Division of the Library of Congress where the literary remains of the odd couple now rest side by side. And, Oh yes, The Resurrection: both Nabokov and Rand are now being published in their native land and language.

A Shared Revival

Since their deaths in 1977 and 1982, Nabokov and Rand have assumed the status of contemporary classics, although, I would guess, rarely mentioned in the same breath, or by the same person. Not only do their works remain in print, but there are special anniversary editions. Both writers are the subjects of biographies containing more or less scandalous tidbits. Andrew Field's *VN: The Life and Art of Vladimir Nabokov* (1986) created a furor with its bizarre suggestion that Nabokov addressed his mother as Lyolya, a diminutive of "Lolita." More than one article has suggested (on no basis whatsoever) that Nabokov's interest in young girls was not altogether fictional (Centerwall 1990). Rand's former chief disciple, Nathaniel Branden, tells the story of his affair with Rand who was twenty-five years his senior (1989 and 1999).

Both figures have societies and journals devoted to the study of their works. The International Vladimir Nabokov Society publishes *The Nabokovian* and *Nabokov Studies* as well as sponsoring the elegant website ZEMBLA at <http://www.libraries.psu.edu/iasweb/nabokov/zembla.htm>. Ayn Rand's life and thought is the focus of *The Journal of Ayn Rand Studies* and of several websites and e-mail discussion lists.¹² Her estate finances a foundation (the Ayn Rand Institute, <http://aynrand.org>) devoted to furthering her ideas. An Ayn Rand Society meets annually as part of the Eastern Division of the American Philosophical Association, and other, less "orthodox" groups devoted to Rand's thought include The Objectivist Center <<http://objectivistcenter.org>>.

Little seems to be said about Rand's novels, although they continue to sell very well, especially among the young. Amazon.com in a recent survey of book (sales?) of the century ranked *Atlas Shrugged* at eighth and *Lolita* at thirty-eighth. Nabokov's *Lolita* found a place on several lists of the twentieth century's hundred best books, as did *Pale Fire*, while Nabokov himself made the BBC's Centurion list of the greatest artists of the century.

The stature of *Lolita* and *Atlas Shrugged* is such that their heroines have become stock reference points for feminist literary critics. Spearheaded by Linda Kauffman's essay (1993), feminist critics have risen up in righteous wrath at aesthetically-oriented interpretations of *Lolita*, while others have approvingly cited Rand's heroines, such as Dagny Taggart, as role models of self-empowerment (Gladstein 1978). This last is a sticky issue since Rand's heroines, although rugged individualists to a fault, also yearn to be raped by a dominant male. Cf. "That was the degradation she had wanted and she hated him for it" (Lane 1995,66). Feminist theoretician Susan Brownmiller terms Rand "a traitor to her own sex" (Gladstein and Sciabarra 1999, 65).

Both novels have become icons of a popular culture far transcending the world of literature. The names of both authors and their fictional characters occur in crossword puzzles. Videos of *Lolita* and *The Fountainhead* do a brisk business. Adrian Lyne's remake of *Lolita* starring Jeremy Irons and Melanie Griffith created a furor, in

part because of newly heightened public sensibility to child abuse. A U.S. theater distributor for the Lyne film could not be found until after the TV cable company Showtime broke the barrier. A vain attempt by the International Vladimir Nabokov Society to have a U.S. postage stamp honoring Nabokov's 1999 centenary apparently fell victim to the frenzy. Ayn Rand, by contrast, was honored with her own stamp and was the subject of two films. Showtime did a version of Barbara Branden's *Passion of Ayn Rand* that won an Emmy for Helen Mirren as Ayn and a Golden Globe award for Peter Fonda as her husband, Frank O'Connor. Producer Michael Paxton received an Oscar nomination for his 1998 documentary *Ayn Rand: A Sense of Life*. A long-rumored mini-series of *Atlas Shrugged* is in production for TNT. Several of Nabokov's earlier novels have been made into films, and *Ada* is again under development.

Both Nabokov and Rand are enshrined in pop music. As Nabokov remarked, "*Lolita* is far more famous than [I] am." Sting and The Police had "Don't Stand so Close to Me" bespeaking the perils besetting a teacher and his pupil. The singer likens himself to "the old man in that book by Nabakov." More recently singer Freedy Johnston makes a similar allusion in lines from his song "Delores": "Delores was her middle name / She'd read the book and everything / Now I know how old I am." Another singer, Nick Cave, himself a novelist, advises young readers to turn off Bukowski and on to *Lolita*, which he elsewhere credits with being number one on a list of nine things that changed his life.

Although her novels cannot compete with *Lo*, Rand's name and books have also penetrated deeply into popular culture. The early novel *Anthem*, recommended on one reading list as ideal for discussion in high school English classes (Gladstein 1999, 38), provides inspiration and plot for an interminable twenty-minute *Singspiel* entitled "2112" by the rock group Rush. A Simon and Garfunkel song converts Rand's name into a verb: "I've been Ayn Randed, / Nearly branded, / a Communist, / 'cause I'm left-handed . . ." Rand allusions in films include the movie *Dirty Dancing* in which the Ivy League hero, a *Fountainhead* fan, impregnates and abandons his working class girl friend. The heroine of the film *Singles*, after

dumping her boyfriend, is seen reading *The Fountainhead* as a sign of her newfound self-esteem. The television show "The Simpsons" had an Ayn Rand Day-care Center with the Aristotelian wall slogan "A is A," the title of a section in *Atlas Shrugged*. And speaking of Simpsons, a news item reports that the youngest member of the O. J. Simpson jury was seen reading *The Fountainhead*.

Both Rand and Nabokov's novels have created spin-offs such as Mary Gaitskill's *Two Girls, Fat and Thin* (1991) and Gene Bell-Villada's *The Pianist Who Liked Ayn Rand* (1998). *Lolita* derivatives are too numerous to mention. One, Pia Pera's *Lo's Dairy*, a retelling of Nabokov's novel from *Lolita*'s point of view, sparked legal controversy over copyright issues.

Nabokov and Rand came onto the public scene during the fifties and both names remain in the news. Apart from *Lolita*, I suspect Rand is the better known among the American reading public. Although Rand is not without her readers abroad, she lacks the international acclaim of Nabokov who has been translated into every major language in the world. With the end of the Soviet regime, he has been proudly hailed by his Russian countrymen as perhaps the leading author of the last century. Much of his work is now even available in China. There are close to a hundred volumes of critical studies devoted to him, while articles number in the thousands. His centenary in 1999 was marked by a series of international conferences that ranged from his native St. Petersburg, where the family home is now a museum; to Cambridge where he attended Trinity College; to Germany where he launched his exile writing career. France, where he spent three years, celebrated with a conference at the Sorbonne. Cornell, where he taught for a decade, held a major festival, as did Montreux where he spent his final years. Papers from all of these and yet others will be published. The Library of America has put out Nabokov's English novels in a handsome, annotated set, while France has honored him with an elegant Pléiade edition and Germany's premier publisher is issuing a twenty-five volume set. The Russian publisher Symposium is completing what will be the fullest edition with an elaborate editorial apparatus.

Rand wrote for a very different audience. The novels that

brought her fame continue to be very widely read, although they have not been part of the literary canon. They are often discussed not as works of literature but as social and philosophical argumentation. Only in the last decade or less has Rand's work moved beyond cult status and begun receiving serious academic attention. This very academic journal offers a welcome relief from the publications of "true believers" of diverse stripes. It will be interesting to observe the fallout from the Rand centenary in 2005.

Nabokov and Rand have both left substantial legacies to their adopted country. If we limit our purview to literature, we might try to sum up the contributions of the Russo-American odd couple: Nabokov wrote modernist novels that broke new ground in both Russian and American literature; Rand wrote Russian novels in English, transforming the traditional Russian didactic novel of ideas into something that we might loosely label "Capitalist Realism." That Saint Petersburg and the Russian Revolution cast forth two such diverse figures on the American scene is one of the greater oddities of twentieth-century literature.

Notes

1. This article is an updated and expanded version of a paper written in the early nineties and first delivered at the second international Nabokov conference, "Nabokov: At the Crossroads of Modernism and Postmodernism" in Nice, 22-24 June 1995. It first appeared under the title "Nabokov, Ayn Rand, and Russian-American Literature or, the Odd Couple," in the conference proceedings, in the French journal *Cyenos* 12, no. 2 (1995): 100-108. I would like to thank several colleagues who shared their knowledge of Nabokov and Rand in popular culture: information on Freedy Johnston and Nick Cave was supplied by Jeff Edmunds and Jake Pultorak; Suellen Stringer-Hye discovered the electronic text of "A New Lo"; Richard Stringer-Hye spotted the communication on "The Lolita Society"; Brian D. Walter called my attention to the Rand-Rush conjunction, while Shoshana Milgrim-Knapp and Scott Holleran supplied other Rand trivia. Chris Matthew Sciabarra pointed out the Rand allusion in an episode of the TV show "South Park" and much else—for which, my thanks.

2. Cf. Rand's comments "Believe me, I am a good propagandist . . ." and "I am not an 'artist' . . ." (1995: 387 and 429) versus those of Nabokov: "I am neither a reader nor a writer of didactic fiction. . . . For me, a work of fiction exists only in so far as it affords me what I bluntly call aesthetic bliss. . . . There are not many such books. All the rest is either topical trash or what some call the Literature of Ideas, which very often is topical trash coming in huge blocks of plaster"

(Nabokov 1970, 316-17).

3. Olga and Alissa were schoolmates in 1917, and perhaps earlier. Olga, born in 1903, died in 1978. Her surviving sister, Elena (b. 1906), when first queried, did not remember Alissa. In subsequent correspondence with Sciabarra, Elena Nabokov recalled Alissa as "a dear friend of my sister," but remembered her "only dimly" since she, now ninety, was only eleven in 1917. She also recalled that Alissa had "returned for many visits" to the Nabokov home on Morskaya Street (Sciabarra 1999, 5-6).

4. In *Speak, Memory*, Nabokov makes it clear that contact between the two older brothers and the younger sisters and brother was quite limited. He remarks that the latter trio "belonged . . . to the remote nurseries which were so distinctly separated from . . . [the] elder brothers' apartments in town house and manor" (1966, 256).

5. Unless otherwise noted, all biographical information on Rand is drawn from the Barbara Branden biography; that for Nabokov, from Brian Boyd's biography.

6. Rand's gimmick of a jury drawn from the audience and alternative endings may well have derived from the popular Russian pastime of mock trials of literary characters. Nabokov, for example, played the role of Pozdnyshv, the wife-murderer in Tolstoy's "The Kreuzer Sonata" in a theatrical mock trial in 1927 Berlin (Boyd 1990, 261).

7. The very different ways in which the two writers drew upon cinema in their work is instructive: Rand drew on the strong, simple, confrontational plots typical of early films, while Nabokov was interested in matters of visual technique.

8. Others have noted the similarity. See Pierpont 1995 and Gimpelevich 1997.

9. For a survey of Chernyshevsky's crucial role in the history of Russian literature, see chapter 5 of Mathewson 1975.

10. It is not by chance that *What is to be Done?* was reissued by the London publishing house Virago in 1982 as part of their series of feminist classics. A representative collection of feminist essays on Rand may be found in Gladstein and Sciabarra 1999.

11. For an excellent survey of the Rand-Nietzsche nexus, see Sciabarra 1998.

12. Indeed, both Rand and Nabokov have entered cyberspace with e-mail groups devoted to their life and work. Discussion of Rand is featured on such lists as OBJECTIVISM-L and humanities.philosophy.objectivism. Apart from the Nabokov Electronic Discussion Forum, NABOKV-L, Nabokov often figures in discussions on literary and arts.rec lists. One of the more interesting and ambitious contributions was Chuck Hamil's story entitled "A New Lo: or, Everybody into the Meme Pool," a sort of wild cyberpunk projection of *Lolita* focusing on the further adventures of Charlie, Lo's first lover. It even contains patches of Frenglish poetry and, if nothing else, is highly inventive in its use of language. E-mail also brings news of a "Lolita Society," a web porn site, that is the target of a diatribe about pedophilia on a list for "private investigators, law enforcement, and information brokers."

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