

Discussion

Reply to D. Barton Johnson

Nabokov and Rand: Kindred Ideological Spirits, Divergent Literary Aims

Gene H. Bell-Villada

It may seem, at first, a strange pairing: Nabokov—the pure aesthete, and Ayn Rand—the militant ideologue. Granted, they do share the obvious twin facts of emigration from St. Petersburg and Bolshevik Russia, followed by eventual self-refashioning as American authors, highly successful ones. Yet, as D. Barton Johnson (2000) demonstrates in his pioneering essay in this journal, the biographical and other parallels between the pair serve mostly to underscore their vast and crucial differences in life-project and sensibility. Nabokov, after all, advocated for literature no aim or status other than that of providing aesthetic bliss, whereas Rand—with her talky, preachy novels—sincerely hoped to bring about sweeping changes in U.S. life. Nabokov pretty much relegated publicist fiction to the lowest rungs of art, and in his own pronouncements, he abjured such a debased approach to writing.

By contrast, Rand's fictions exude publicism, with their patently foregrounded (not to mention prolix and repetitive) ideological content. In a telling instance, Rand and her circle of friends expected *Atlas Shrugged* to spark a revolution when it came out to enormous fanfare in 1957. The twelve-hundred-page epic did achieve instant best-sellerdom, although not much happened in its immediate wake. Indeed, a brutal reality check soon followed when the book was widely excoriated by the critics—even in the *National Review*, in a lengthy attack written by none other than Whittaker Chambers.

Hence, while Rand's followers eagerly imbibed, the rest of America, for the time being, shrugged.

There is ultimately more to those binary oppositions, however, than meets the eye. Underlying such presumed literary divergences there exists a common deep structure going back to earlier debates, Russian and Western, concerning the role of society and art. And over the next few pages, I hope to delineate that common ground and identify what I see as the profound ideological and attitudinal affinities that, surprisingly, conjoin the two authors.

Let's begin with some of their targets. In their respective spheres, both Russo-Americans share a virulent distaste for any so-called "social" or "humane" conceptions, of literature in the case of Nabokov, and of political or ethical values in the case of Rand. Nabokov is still famous for his competitive dislike of literally hundreds of canonical authors, whom he frankly dismisses as trash. Though these dismissals may seem arbitrary, there is a method to his manias. In a kind of antisocialist realism, a Zhdanovism in reverse, he rules out as ipso facto inferior *any* art marked by "social content"—for instance, Balzac's descriptions of the French bourgeoisie, Conrad's of imperialism, Faulkner's of the deep south, even Picasso's *Guernica*, a protest painting and ergo unacceptable as art. Among the few authors spared Nabokov's dustbin are Flaubert, Joyce, and Proust, high Modernists with whose aestheticist side—as John Burt Foster (1993, 13–15) notes—the novelist readily identifies, even as their own struggles to represent larger realities and to be true to life in all its manifestations mean virtually nothing to him.

Rand for her part hated labor unions, socialists, the New Deal, family ties, charity, and whatever smacked of living for others, all of which to her view were guilty of the only unpardonable sin: altruism. In a 1964 interview with Alvin Toffler for *Playboy* magazine, she frankly states that to put friendship and family above one's productive work is, in her own word, "immoral" (Rand 1964, 7). Accordingly, in her novels, any time a character argues for family responsibilities or for the well-being of other people, that character is inevitably portrayed as a vicious, obnoxious, and/or devious villain. One might imagine how she felt about the hundreds of millions on this earth

who, in fact, choose to live for their children, next of kin, and communities rather than for individual success or wealth.

Still, Rand was aware of the intellectual attractions offered by Marxism as a tool for explaining history and culture. Her entire mission, her life's work, thus originated in a need to formulate an encompassing alternative to Marxist theory. Hence, her two major novels, *The Fountainhead* and *Atlas Shrugged*, culminate in long speeches in which the respective protagonist sets forth an entire philosophy of history, ranging from the world of brutish savages to the utopian capitalist present, and arguing for the ideal of a free, unfettered, completely egoistic individual. Following the critical failure of *Atlas Shrugged*, Rand would concentrate her productive efforts on writing non-fiction works in which the ramifications of her system were further explored or were applied to current events. The philosophical results were as crude as the Stalinism which, to her, was Marxism, but we'll return to that later.

Though Nabokov's purposes were not strictly intellectual, in his fiction he too set out to formulate a counter-model not just to Soviet cultural practices but to the entire tradition of socially committed literature, again, in Russia and in the West both. One sees signs of this in his lectures at Cornell, and in the prefaces and interviews he added to the new editions of his earlier works. In Nabokov's published *Lectures on Literature*, he largely shuns matters of intellectual, social, or historical background. In a telling instance, he finds "the sociological side" of Dickens to be "neither interesting nor important," and he manages to discuss *Bleak House* as a purely formal construct, brushing aside key aspects of Victorian times such as the legal system or the crusades on behalf of children—what Nabokov blithely pooh-poohs as "child labor and all that" (1980, 68, 65).

In his own novels, though, Nabokov does not exactly stand above sociologizing. Much of his work, by its very nature, is an implicit defense of Russian emigré culture, particularly novels such as *Glory*, *The Gift*, and *Invitation to a Beheading*. And then there are his own publicist—yes, publicist—interventions within fiction. Here, a contrast bears mention. While Rand's temperament was almost exclusively, even narrowly rationalistic, Nabokov's was, in John Burt Foster's words,

“radically empirical and individualizing,” to the point where “he dismisses abstract thought of all kinds” (Foster 1993, 50). I would take things further and say that Nabokov seemed to suffer from some sort of metonymic disorder whereby he could see every detail but could scarcely understand abstract thought, let alone produce it. About the only philosopher he seems to have much knowledge of is Henri Bergson, and when the novelist ventures his own general reflections on time, in *Ada* and elsewhere, the results are little better than gobbledygook.

This limitation did not prevent him from trying to get involved in the battle of ideas. In *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight*, his first novel in English, Nabokov mocks historically minded critics through the target furnished by a character, a mediocre hack named Goodman. At the same time, he implies artistic superiority for the smirking writer who remains at a lofty remove from collective ills like famine, unemployment, and war. And, in *The Gift*, clearly his bid at a major statement within Russian literature, the entire fourth chapter is a biography of Chernyshevsky purportedly written by the protagonist, a budding poet named Count Fyodor Godunov-Cherdyntsev. In this chapter, Chernyshevsky’s entire philosophy, including his social view of art, is taken apart and found wanting, and Chernyshevsky himself comes across as something of a fool. These are simply two of the most dramatic instances in which Nabokov, his anti-publicist claims notwithstanding, uses his fiction as a vehicle for intellectual and aesthetical polemic. *Bend Sinister*, which even Nabokov’s admiring biographer Brian Boyd describes as one of the author’s “less successful works” (1991, 105), is a fantastical portrayal of communist dictatorship, the ruling party here being dubbed “Ekwilists.” In addition, there are the potshots against Senator McCarthy’s opponents in *Pnin*, and the anti-Soviet asides in *Glory*, *The Defense*, and *Look at the Harlequins!* Nabokov may even be right on Chernyshevsky and certainly on the Soviet Union, but, as Borges once said, those who argue that literature must not preach doctrines really mean doctrines that differ from their own.

A certain pattern at the micro-level of Rand and Nabokov’s books further speaks for their world-view. Rand made no secret of

wanting to create and glorify great heroes. Fittingly, her novels are noted for their tall, strong, handsome, angularly jut-jawed, courageous, independent, solitary men of genius who are always right on everything. Their adversaries, by the same token, are unvaryingly unattractive physically and morally, and are portrayed as small infrahumans who lead second-hand lives—a favorite Randian term of condemnation. (Rand’s followers, when writing letters to the editor, regularly referred to her enemies as “cockroaches.”)

Several of Nabokov’s works, by the same token, focus on the attitudes and actions of a tall, handsome, breezy, Cambridge-educated youngblood who thumbs his nose at all sorts of social values, and for whom everything in some way turns out well. It’s not for nothing that the supremely talented protagonist of *The Gift* is an aristocrat, a Count. And correspondingly, most every Nabokov novel contains its share of subhuman nullities who are described scornfully as dogs, frogs, or toads. Again, in *The Gift*, one of the literary hacks is characterized as “loose-fleshed, gray-skinned, languid, his whole aspect resembling a peaceful toad that wants only one thing—to be left in complete peace in a damp place” (Nabokov 1991, 332).

Later in Nabokov’s life, this tic could turn quite cruel. The narrator of *Look at the Harlequins!*, for example, speaks of “a particularly stupid baby sitter,” and he remarks that “Mrs. Blogovo was a half-witted cripple” (Nabokov 1974, 139, 163). Big guns for small prey, actually. In real life, of course, fools can be seductive and even beautiful, while great individuals may seem quite unimpressive, but not so in the mythology of Rand and Nabokov. Scholars of each of these authors have noted the early influence of Nietzsche on their writings and world-view, and the pattern noted here presumably has its roots in a crude, vulgarized assimilation of Nietzschean thought (Foster 1993, 40–52; Walker 1999, 275–77). Or perhaps the genre in which Rand and Nabokov were working was not so much novel as romance, as defined by Frye in the *Anatomy*. At any rate, for Nabokov, the only thing that mattered was the individual literary genius and the unique, individual work of literary art. For Rand, similarly, all that mattered was the individual genius—architectural, industrial—and his individual enterprises (buildings, motors, a

company). As she herself once admitted, what interested her was the great and the exceptional. Greatness, alas, faces a world full of sordid or comic fools who do their utmost to trip up greatness and deny it its due.

Ironically, in their personal battles against the Soviet Union and everything it represented, both Nabokov and Rand assumed stances that were correspondingly as harsh and uncompromising as was their hated enemy. Nabokov's absolute aestheticism, his alleged rejection of ideas in literature, and his cult of inhuman, perfectly crafted works of art all add up to an ideology as dogmatic and extreme as were the official, "Zhdanovite" dictates of Socialist Realism. In similar fashion, Rand's absolute, pro-capitalist libertarianism is as intransigent and unforgiving as was the state-socialist, dictatorial Stalinist program of central planning and total control. The Soviets glorified the heroic, committed worker who, in the words of the *Encyclopedia Britannica* article on "Russia," "overcomes various saboteurs, spies or other obstacles in order to get the factory, farm, or construction site up and running" (958).

Rand's novels correspondingly glorify the heroic, embattled entrepreneur who overcomes those same obstacles, and at the end of *The Fountainhead*, the construction site is up and running. Rand is famous for having stated, in her *Playboy* interview, that the motive and "primary purpose [of her writing] is the projection of an ideal man" (1964, 13), which scarcely differs from the Soviet literary aesthetic of projecting the positive hero. As Johnson (2000, 55) points out: "Although Rand despised the political ideology of Socialist Realism, her view of art had much in common with it." As Rand (1969, 170) puts it in *The Romantic Manifesto*, "[a]rt is the technology of the soul," which—as Johnson (2000, 55) argues—is not that distant from Stalin's own conception of artists as "engineers of human souls."

The Russian debates were thus imported to U.S. soil, taking root and assuming new form here. Significantly, Rand and Nabokov each hated literary naturalism and abstract art, much as George Lukács and many other literary Stalinists did.

Some further parallels are worth mentioning concerning the

general opinions and the knowledge demonstrated by both authors. At various points in her writings, Rand bluntly asserts, as she does in "The Objectivist Ethics," that "there is no such entity as 'society,' since society is only a number of individual men" (Rand [1961] 1964, 14–15). Such recurring statements may well have been the basis for Margaret Thatcher's comment over British television, upon being asked about her idea of society: "There is no such thing as a society. There are only individuals and their families." Similarly, toward the end of Nabokov's *The Gift*, its protagonist, who comes fairly close to being the author's spokesperson, speculates on his ideal society: "where everyone keeps to himself and there is no equality and no authorities" (Nabokov 1991, 370). This is about as "libertarian" a vision as one will find in Nabokov, and it is of a piece with the rest of his stance.

Strong Opinions, the title of Nabokov's collection of interviews, is a phrase that well characterizes Rand's set of views. In both instances, however, those opinions seem to have been arrived at with sketchy knowledge of the respective subjects. As a philosophaster, Rand attacked, with bile and fury, such evil dwarves as Descartes, Kant, G. E. Moore, Wittgenstein, and John Rawls. Reports from her inner circle strongly intimate that she had never read them and instead had picked up a few formulaic, even false notions of their thought by chatting with acolytes of hers who did have a working knowledge of the tradition. (She even reviewed John Rawls's *A Theory of Justice* without so much as having read the book.) Nabokov for his part achieved some notoriety for his obsessive hatred of Freud, whom he routinely labeled "the Viennese quack" or the "witch doctor" (the latter a favorite Randian phrase) in lectures, interviews, and print. But there is little evidence from Nabokov of possessing any in-depth knowledge of psychoanalytic thought, his attacks being aimed rather at caricatures of sex-and-Oedipus or at the silliest specimens of Freudian literary criticism. He also lets fly at Karl Marx, as is to be expected, at Noam Chomsky, and even at, of all people, Einstein. I quote him in *Strong Opinions*: "while not having much physics, I reject Einstein's slick formulae" (Nabokov 1974, 116). The attack may possibly have been motivated by the emigré Russian's

dislike of Einstein's left-wing politics (Field [1963] 1977, 199).

What Nabokov most finds objectionable in Freudian theory is its practical consequences, the remote possibility that criminals could claim innocence by alleging hatred of their mothers. This, however, is like an adolescent's standard reaction on becoming aware of the philosophical problem of determinism. And determinism seems totally alien to both of our authors. Nabokov himself was a liberal aristocrat completely convinced of the autonomy of his own mind. In his lecture on *Madame Bovary*, he dispatches "environment" as "by far the least important" of forces that shape the human being. (Nabokov 1980, 126). Rand for her part was against any notion of social determinism, and even denied the existence of biological drives. (As we all know, in defiance of medical researches, Rand smoked like a chimney—and eventually got lung cancer.) Her frank yet devoted biographer, Barbara Branden, mentions Rand's "commitment to the idea that human beings are in no sense inevitably the creatures of their environments" (Branden 1986, xii).

There is a notable disjunction in the stance taken by each of these authors toward their respective Russian roots. Nabokov saw himself first and foremost as a Russian author, and in his 1967 autobiography *Speak, Memory*, he lovingly evoked his idyllic, privileged childhood and youth in that country. Rand, by contrast, had little to say about the country of her origins, and in her appearance on the Phil Donahue show she dismissed Russia—both Czarist and Bolshevik—as a land of "mysticism." It is thanks only to the very recent ground-breaking work of D. Barton Johnson and Chris Matthew Sciabarra that we have begun to realize how profoundly *Russian* a writer Ayn Rand actually is. For all their differences, moreover, Nabokov and Rand continue, each in their fashion, the Russian tradition of the novel of ideas, be it that of Chernyshevsky or Dostoevsky. Many an American college student has been drawn into the intellectual debates that lend drama to *The Brothers Karamazov*, and even the great down-to-earth realist Tolstoy felt compelled to include those long essays on historical determinism that punctuate and indeed end *War and Peace*.

And now, having so taken stock, one might note some rough, formal equivalencies in the work of Rand and Nabokov. Rand's

science-fiction novella *Anthem* corresponds to Nabokov's two "dystopian" fantasies *Invitation to a Beheading* and *Bend Sinister*. *The Fountainhead*, which glorifies the free, independent, arrogant architect, shows some striking resemblances to *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight*, Nabokov's defense of the writer joyously indifferent to all human suffering. And *Atlas Shrugged* is of a mold and on an ambitious scale not unlike that of *The Gift*, with Rand's climactic, lengthy chapter "This is John Galt Speaking" playing a structural and thematic role comparable to that assigned to the broadside against Chernyshevsky in Nabokov's chapter 4.

Certain obvious points of difference between the two Russo-Americans nonetheless bear mention. Nabokov is clearly a great writer, and will be remembered for the wonders of his prose instrument, his novelistic artifice, and his formal innovation. The Nabokov legacy is clearly present in novels like D. M. Thomas's *The White Hotel*, Ariel Dorfman's *Widows*, and A. S. Byatt's *Possession*, all of them the children of *Pale Fire*. Rand, by contrast, is at best a competent novelist who adds nothing to the development of the art of fiction. In time, she will eventually fade away to become a figure on the order of Samuel Smiles, Harriet Martineau, or Horatio Alger, whose publicist fiction is no longer read even though we know what they stand for. There is a long history of "self-help" philosophy and fiction in Anglo-American commercial publishing, and Rand's achievement stands among its more spectacularly successful instances. Jeff Walker (1999, 79) notes that "Rand will certainly never be ranked among the twentieth century's top novelists or philosophers"; rather he characterizes her as "a very smart, obsessed, philoso-fiction or propaganda-fiction writer, whose literature may be third-rate and whose philosophizing may be third-rate, but whose obsessions elevate the hybrid product to the level of the highly intriguing second-rate."

Of course, one major biographical aspect that sets off both these authors is the fact that neither of them ever held state power—unlike Soviet ideologues. Still, they had the satisfaction of seeing their ideas triumph in their adopted homeland. Nabokov's aestheticism was the all-but-official ideology of English departments on U.S. campuses

during the Cold War. And, since the Reagan election of 1980, a belief in the "free market" has become all but an article of faith in American political discourse. Jerome Tuccille, a libertarian journalist, published in 1972 a book entitled *It Usually Begins with Ayn Rand*, in which he starts out by remarking on how many an American adolescent turns conservative under the spell of Rand's novels, even though he or she may eventually feel some embarrassment over the earlier infatuation. It has been said, moreover, that, without the existence of Rand, there would be no Libertarian Party. Incidentally, two of the most prominent Randians are Alan Greenspan and Michael Milken. Greenspan showed up at Rand's doorstep as a callow twenty-one-year-old in 1948 and became one of her star disciples, never disowning the connection. Milken, for his part, joyfully confessed to having had twenty-six copies of *Atlas Shrugged* in his jail cell when serving his term for insider trading. In another instance, the governor of New Mexico, Gary Johnson, has often said that the United States needs more leaders who are like Ayn Rand characters.

Few would disagree that Nabokov's two greatest novels are *Lolita* and *Pale Fire*. Interestingly enough, neither of those books has much to do with Russian emigré issues. They thus enabled Nabokov to transcend the somewhat narrow, parochial, local-color aspects of his earlier works. Moreover, unlike any of his other fictional products, those two books' respective narrators, Humbert Humbert and Charles Kinbote, are crazy, a fact that puts all of their observations in an ironic and questionable light. In the case of Humbert, the anti-Freudian asides are entirely appropriate to him and hence unobtrusive; his sheltered French and English origins rule out any anti-communist snortings (indeed, the only major emigré moment is the hilarious escapade with the Czarist taxi driver); and the unliterary nature of the subject precludes any of those harangues about other authors that mar some of Nabokov's other work, and that make a book like *Ada* so unremittingly bilious and unreadable (to this reader at least). Nabokov's pair of unreliable and demented narrators hence allowed him to subsume and sublimate his manias.

By contrast, there is something obsessive and demented about *The Fountainhead* and *Atlas Shrugged*, and their neutral-to-sympathetic

narrative voice will convince only the converted or the innocent, particularly if the reader is, 1) American, and 2) teenaged. The Ayn Rand cult, let it be said, is very much an American phenomenon. Though she may boast a handful of admirers in the U.K., the (white) British Commonwealth nations, and Scandinavia, her work remains scarcely recognized beyond our shores. Every time I've had occasion to mention Rand to well-read foreigners, it's almost always the case that they've never heard of her. And when I explain to them Rand's ideas and values, they find such notions strange, puzzling, and even bizarre.

Finally, a personal note. My take on Nabokov is that of a lapsed Nabokovophile who was thoroughly hooked on him in the 1960s, when I was a developing literature student and a budding writer of sorts. I learned a lot from Nabokov about the craft of writing: about the need to avoid formula and cliché, and about the technical difficulties of narrative. He helped me see just what a complex chore it is to move a character from one room to another on the page. My discovery of the public Nabokov, the ideologue of the prefaces and interviews, who is a reactionary crank, a much smaller man than the writer, and a disconcertingly vain and ungenerous spirit, in time led me to temper my former admiration of him and seriously criticize him in my *Art for Art's Sake and Literary Life*. Still, without putting myself in the company of Thomas, Dorfman, or Byatt, I should say that my first published novel, *The Carlos Chadwick Mystery*, could not have been written without the inspiring example of *Pale Fire*. The book deals in part with a play script, a spoof of relativism written by the eponymous Carlos Chadwick and commented on in part by three different narrators, two of whom are simply too deluded to "get it."

My relation to Ayn Rand is also in some way personal. My father was an American entrepreneur in the Spanish Caribbean, whose general world-view much resembled that of Ayn Rand (though to my knowledge he never read her books in his life). A great deal of my adult intellectual existence has consisted of a lengthy debate with my father's and America's archetypal, formulaic individualism, an outlook that I've had occasion to satirize in newspapers and magazines. Moreover, when preparing to write my novella "The Pianist Who

Liked Ayn Rand," I studiously read all of Rand's work and raided it for juicy quotes, which I then placed on the lips of my characters, something I also did in my briefer satire entitled "Hitler Reconsidered." It was my own post-modern way of depicting the seductive spell those monomaniacal books can cast over the minds of susceptible young college students. The debate over the individual, the market, and society goes on, and not only in think tanks and academic corridors.

I'd like to end with a fitting anecdote about Nabokov, reported in a memoir by Donald Hall in the *New York Times Book Review* over nineteen years ago. It seems that sometime in the '40s, Hall and Nabokov, among others, were guests at the Utah home of James Laughlin, the legendary publisher of *New Directions*. Nabokov had been out in pursuit of a rare butterfly, and on his return he noted casually that he had heard "someone groaning most piteously down by the stream."

"Did you stop?" Laughlin asked.

"No," Nabokov answered, "I had to get the butterfly."

Next day, the lifeless body of an old prospector was found in what was subsequently called Dead Man's Gulch, in Nabokov's honor. It's a tale of selfishness of which, I suppose, Ayn Rand and her kind might not have felt unproud (22).

References

- Bell-Villada, Gene H. 1996. *Art for Art's Sake & Literary Life: How Politics & Markets Helped Shape the Ideology and Culture of Aestheticism, 1790-1990*. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press.
- . 1990. *The Carlos Chadwick Mystery: A Novel of College Life and Political Terror*. Albuquerque, New Mexico: Amador Publishers.
- . 1998. *The Pianist Who Liked Ayn Rand: A Novella & 13 Stories*. Albuquerque, New Mexico: Amador Publishers.
- Boyd, Brian. 1991. *Vladimir Nabokov: The American Years*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Branden, Barbara. 1986. *The Passion of Ayn Rand*. New York: Doubleday.
- Field, Andrew. 1963 [1977]. *Nabokov: His Life in Part*. New York: Viking.
- Foster, John Burt, Jr. 1993. *Nabokov's Art of Memory and European Modernism*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Hall, Donald. 1981. James Laughlin of new directions: Ezra Pound said be a publisher. *The New York Times Book Review* (23 August): 13, 22-23.

- Johnson, D. Barton. 2000. Strange bedfellows: Ayn Rand and Vladimir Nabokov. *The Journal of Ayn Rand Studies* (Fall): 47-67.
- Nabokov, Vladimir. [1963] 1991. *The Gift*. Translated by Michael Scammell, with the collaboration of the author. New York: Random House.
- . 1973. *Strong Opinions*. New York: McGraw-Hill.
- . 1974. *Look at the Harlequins!* New York: McGraw-Hill.
- . 1980. *Lectures on Literature*. New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich.
- Rand, Ayn. 1964. *The Playboy Interview*. Alvin Toffler, interviewer. (March). An Atlas Society Publication. Reprint.
- . [1961] 1964. The Objectivist ethics. In *The Virtue of Selfishness: A New Concept of Egoism*. 13-35. New York: New American Library.
- . 1969. *The Romantic Manifesto: A Philosophy of Literature*. New York: World Publishing Company.
- Russia. 1993. In *The Encyclopedia Britannica*, fifteenth edition, vol. 26: 943-98. Chicago: The Encyclopedia Britannica.
- Sciabarra, Chris Matthew. 1995. *Ayn Rand: The Russian Radical*. University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press.
- Walker, Jeff. 1999. *The Ayn Rand Cult*. Chicago: Open Court.