

## Discussion

Reply to D. Barton Johnson's "Strange Bedfellows" (Fall 2000) and  
Gene Bell-Villada's "Nabokov and Rand" (Fall 2001)

# The Silence of Synthesis

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Intrigue is latent within a Johnson-Bell-Villada-Sciabarra triangle wherein no one is silent. On a Rand-Nabokov-Dostoevsky geometry, Nabokov is silent. Construct a Tolstoy-Rand-Nabokov form and Rand is silent. There is no need now to draw more triangles but I am convinced the image of triads is fundamental to a Rand-Nabokov study.

Clearly Gene H. Bell-Villada (2001) does not approve of D. Barton Johnson's (2000) conclusion that both Rand and Nabokov became American patriots dedicated to shared key values of free will and "the supremacy of the individual consciousness" (60). His disapproval is not about faulty academic study but nefarious ideology. Bell-Villada (2001) accedes the success of both authors yet often dismisses Rand's writing as boring, didactic, and "crude" so as to disparage content (181, 183).

An interesting political parallel exists between the Williams College professor and Benito Mussolini. Branden (1964) reported *We the Living* was made into an Italian movie and attracted audiences during World War II. When it was brought to Mussolini's attention that not only communism but fascism was under indictment, the movie was withdrawn (91).<sup>1</sup> Bell-Villada's lapsed Nabokophilia comes from the same premise. More tenuously there is a Freudian level revealed by a quasi-slur applied to his own bourgeois (entrepreneurial) father (2001, 191).

Anecdotal evidence may make for delightful reading but serves a function much like gossip, dressed up like journalism. Repetition

of the Ayn Rand detractors from the pages of *National Review* or Rand's own snide remarks coincidental to the banned-in-Boston *Lolita* elucidate little.<sup>2</sup> As stimulant to further investigation, they become *non pareil*. Unfortunately, idle talk preempts gossip's archaic source as a word for godparent. It devolved into God plus Sib (for sibling) wherein the talk is authoritative and personal (Neufeldt 1996). Both professors have the needed professional authority and it is there, in my opinion, where the continuing study of Ayn Rand should concentrate.

Context matters in studying any subject. The subject odd coupling results in American parallels and contrasts steeped in Russian literary tradition. And the tradition is dancing with opposites. Johnson and Bell-Villada concur that in matters of artistic taste (what Rand might call "sense of life")—in style, role modeling, the flavor of favorites, social class—disparate works were produced by Rand and Nabokov. Rand's expository narratives echoed the sweep of a Victor Hugo, her favorite author. Nabokov's poetic puzzles were escapades with his favorite—James Joyce. Paired contrasts are found between bourgeois and aristocratic, which are not defined only by wealth.

Ideologue and aesthete (Johnson 2000) or *militant* ideologue and *pure* aesthete (Bell-Villada 2001) outline a basic dichotomy between Rand and Nabokov, yet they are said to share two key values. I think those key values are the synthesis and the dialectic much more complicated, even beyond the discourses so ably presented. Roots of style and content hark back to a novelist (Chernyshevsky) disdained by both Dostoevsky and Nabokov. Johnson (2000) deals with Chernyshevsky more fully in this journal than Bell-Villada, but the latter's book, *Art for Art's Sake and Literary Life* (1996), challenges Nabokov cruelly for that disdain because of his novel, *Dar (Gift)*. Both Johnson and Bell-Villada reference Sciabarra's *Ayn Rand: The Russian Radical* (1995) and know the penchant of Russian writers who attempt "to eliminate the distinction between egoism and altruism" (29). Selfishness is the unspoken but ever present *bête noire* of gossip over Nabokov and militant polemics over Rand. Even the objective term "counterfeit individualism" can be inferred and correlated with

the humanistic side of Marx and Engels "project(ing) a transcendence of egoism and altruism" (418). The emphasis here is on dialectical considerations and overlapping triads (Sciabarra 2000).

Meanwhile, the Russian literary tradition deals with the New Men and the Superfluous Men, terms coined by both Chernyshevsky and Turgenev. Writers and literary critics designed such opposing roles for the radical Russian revolutionaries. A rude and crude literary critic such as Belinsky often brandished such labels in the burgeoning upheaval in Russia during the nineteenth century. But the central issue concerns "the role of the positive hero" (Mathewson 1975). Michael Katz, translator of *What Is To Be Done?: From Tales about New People* (Chernyshevsky 1989), tells us it was Chernyshevsky who published the book that changed history, akin to America's *Uncle Tom's Cabin*,<sup>3</sup> publication dates notwithstanding. This makes for an historical triad among the Russian serfs' freedom and that of America's slaves. *Laissez-faire* capitalism pulsed as a silent but unknown ideal.

Chernyshevsky, who was a spokesman for the New Man, wrote from prison before his stint in Siberia.<sup>4</sup> Unlike Dostoevsky, his prison experience daunted him not. Katz considers it "fitting that a man who valued the intellect so highly and tended to treat people as personifications of ideas became himself the mythicized symbol of Russian radicalism" (15). Chernyshevsky dubbed his theory "rational egoism" to square individual self-fulfillment with community interests (17).<sup>5</sup>

The new men, then, were a credit to Lenin, capable of reforming society through knowledge and action. They stirred the Russian Marxists, claims Katz (32). Chernyshevsky's novel synthesized, Katz believes, even as it "overestimated the power of ideas and human reason to solve complex social problems" (36). Rand would know what to do! Johnson proves it as a segue into the Marxist doctrines of literature, pairing the building-engineering quotes of Rand and Stalin (2000, 55). More fundamental to the new men is the Soviet premise that "literature is ideology" (Mathewson 1975, 83). This is the litmus test for Bell-Villada whereby failed ideology is failed aesthetics.

Some thirteen years before *What is to Be Done?*, Ivan Turgenev published the story "The Diary of a Superfluous Man." As a character, he became an archetype, one who could so flamboyantly be modeled by Nabokov. What could be more superfluous to a Marxist than the highly intelligent aristocrat, poet, lepidopterist (butterflies, really!) discreet bon vivant, quite aloof from the plebeian? Nabokov's biographers Boyd (1990; 1991) and Field (1986) and his own *Speak, Memory* (1966) attest to these qualities. Bell-Villada (1996) places Nabokov in what is called the "art for art's sake" school, and devotes his peroration to anecdotal material and Nabokov's *Gift* treatment of Chernyshevsky. Explanation of "art-for-art's-sake" begins by using Oscar Wilde as symbol and attributing its history from the 1830s (3). Mathewson (1975) deals with the same phenomenon, stating: "Hamlet and Don Quixote also stand for the artist and the revolutionary respectively, the first dedicated to awareness at all cost, the second to action at all costs and that both share a common painful destiny" (109). The rankling remark for Bell-Villada (2001, 183) was one that the superfluous man, Nabokov, gave during his lectures at Cornell when *Bleak House* was part of his assigned curriculum—the absolute unimportance of Dickens' social conscience. The published Cornell lecture is so rich in the application of triangulation analysis, as well as what reading is all about, that I genuinely find the charge superfluous.<sup>6</sup> Mixed metaphors aid Nabokov's triangulation in *Bleak House* construction with Dickens juggling three balloons—and never snarling the strings (Nabokov 1980, 64).

Despite differing treatments of Nabokov's *Gift* and parallel reports on favorite Russian authors (i.e., Blok, the Symbolist poet), both Johnson and Bell-Villada miss Nabokov's adoration of the poet Alexander Pushkin. Boyd (1991) and others report the years he spent in translating the narrative poem *Eugene Onegin* (1833), where the prototype superfluous man was born. Hence, *Gift* has more profound connotations than a mere diatribe against Chernyshevsky. By ignoring Pushkin, a silent synthesis never speaks.

Britannica.com uncannily links the Superfluous Man as a Pushkin creation. *Eugene Onegin* is "the story of a Byronic youth who wastes his life, allows the girl who loves him to marry another, and lets

himself be drawn into a duel in which he kills his best friend." (Chernyshevsky (1869) used his character Rakhmetov in a similar role and Nabokov resented it, as seen in *Gift*.) One Russian critic describes the superfluous man as "an affliction peculiar to Russia and the by-product of serfdom" (2001). The New Men (westward looking, rational, and progressive Russian radicals) lost no love over a Byron or an Onegin. From Chernyshevsky on, new versus superfluous spawned major diametric titles: *War and Peace*, *Fathers and Sons*, *Crime and Punishment*. An *Austen Pride and Prejudice* was quite silent in Russia.

This is just one triangulation. The essays by Johnson and Bell-Villada have extended my existing knowledge—and provoked a great deal of reading—of and about Nabokov. Coupled with my long-time interest in the relationship between *The Brothers Karamazov* and *Atlas Shrugged*, a subject that goes beyond the scope of the current paper, this research has piqued further questions with implications for Rand scholarship:

(1) Parricide: Parricide dominates the plot of *The Brothers Karamazov*, weighty enough material in itself. Students usually learn that the author's father had been assassinated by one of his serfs. It is a book about family and one does not get the idea of a revered paternity from the novel. The motherland penumbra extends as a fortress (Dostoevsky 1879). Reverential patrimony, by contrast, is the core of Nabokov's experience, the assassination of his own father—traumatic in an entirely different political milieu (Boyd 1990; 1991; Nabokov 1966). Family values and their loss permeate his work. Expatriation from the motherland is an extended diffusion. The same cannot be said for either Rand or Chernyshevsky yet their configuration of characters developed via rational egoism is strikingly alike. Dagny Taggart and Vera Pavlovna occupy similar positions to—and for—John Galt and Rakhmetov. Their families come from the new people—the exiles. The children are silent.

(2) Gaming: Gaming segues from the latter to a rather absurd designation of *Lolita Refined*.<sup>7</sup> A fascinating aspect of reading Nabokov is his layering of meanings, sometimes by the use of one single word. There are anagrams, homophones, structures, maps,

parodies, patterns, cinematography and more. The segue from the first suggestion above entails plotting spatial coordinates for the major characters in the *Karamazov*, *Atlas*, and question mark novel cited there and to see the gameboards so constructed. Alfred Appel, Jr. (in Nabokov 1991) offers a fascinating observation that Nabokov allows his characters to speak for an author's problems. Fyodor of *Gift* had to "take great pains not to lose either his control of the game, or the viewpoint of the plaything." Readers, once apprised, see Nabokov gameboards not only in *Gift* but in *Lolita* and spectacularly in *Pale Fire*. Appel patiently investigated all Nabokov's little games in his annotated edition of *Lolita*, translating the French, deciphering anagrams, alerting students to parodies, and thematic exposés. His introduction points out that, within *Lolita*, characters not only play chess but a double game that emphasizes Humbert's double name. It is "played back and forth across the gameboard of America and the overriding contest waged above the novel, between the author and the reader" (Introduction, lxv). The endnote explains America silently coming of age.

(3) Engineered Structure: Inferred by this line of thought is a measure of overlap between novels' game playing and their engineering. Essays in footnotes and recommendations in the Introduction afford Appel a fulcrum for exposition. For example, a note became an essay on *Alice in Wonderland* hidden in *Lolita* and *Homo Ludens* recommended as, in itself, an introduction to Nabokov (1991, 381-82; Introduction, lxv-xvi). Just one of the explorations of Johan Huizinga (1950, 120) is that "(a)ll antique poetry is at once and the same time ritual, entertainment, artistry, riddle-making, doctrine, persuasion, sorcery, soothsaying, prophecy, and competition."

(4) Brain Drain: As sketchily as the continuing subjects are presented above, I think another possible theme warrants concern: looking back upon a brain drain. A fair number of successful intellectuals departed Russia due to pogroms or the Bolshevik revolution. Even though Rand and Nabokov had quite different émigré experiences, they did escape and settle in America. Except for the émigré colony in Germany prior to the Second World War, I have not found any of the authors congregating, or perhaps, even caring

about other Russian existences. Around the biographic fringes one meets: Isaiah Berlin, professor, raconteur and essayist at Cambridge; Irving Berlin needing no introduction; Sergey Rachmaninoff whose music Rand favored; Igor Stravinsky who hid in Switzerland, going postmodern; Saul Bellow who thought his family did not spiritually emigrate. Portraits intimate a certain physiognomy common to Rachmaninoff, Stravinsky and Nabokov, specifically.

Mindful of how much can yet be gleaned from these subjects, among others, it still seems worthwhile to tease some dialectics from the literary criticism at hand. Major themes of opposites become more intriguing when triangulated with concepts. Here are some examples: fathers—sons—clans; crime—punishment—justice; truth—beauty—knowledge; create—destroy—power; aesthetics—standards—cultures; and virtue—vice—responsibility. These might seem jejune and naive yet we all know the mighty literatures that incorporate them. Triads are facile images and, in art, bring us to this postmodern age. Skew the geometric form just a bit and an élan emerges that draws a spiral. Vladimir Nabokov, Carl Jung, and the creator of the *élan vital*, Henri Bergson (1911), have played (not toyed) with the spiral image as a "creative evolution." In contrast to Rand's straight, elegant, linear logic, I believe another dialectic is visible. Rand defines logic as "the art of non-contradictory identification" (Rand 1957, 1016; emphasis mine), even though John Galt was speaking through her own art.

More succinctly, then, I see Johnson illuminating the dynamics of both writers and Bell-Villada dimming them into stasis, thereby darkening an already somber room of Marxism. Rand readers are graciously invited to read Nabokov, and all readers are encouraged to see Rand as the Russian radical portrayed by Sciabarra. Dialectics encapsulated in personalities both real and fictional promote the philosophy of this journal. They hang, however, on a paradoxical "Nude Descending the Stairs"—all angles and triads of elbows, tits, knees.<sup>8</sup> The elegance is silent.

## Notes

1. R. W. Bradford challenges the conventional view of this story. See Bradford 1988. By implication, however, the folklore version seems validated by Henry Mark Holzer in a 2001 interview for *Full Context*. Holzer was the person to purchase the film and says Rand "even got reparations from the Italian government for their having expropriated the copyrights" (in Minto and Oyerly 2001, 1).

2. The camp "banned-in-Boston" phrase is like the *We the Living* reference in note 1 above. It conveys meaning, and a meaning quite intrinsic to Bell-Villada's commercialism thesis in *Art for Art's Sake*. In actuality, *Lolita* was refused publication in the United States, was taken up by Olympia Press in Paris, and gained some reviews in England before coming back home to New England. Even though it failed the US Army IPT ("instant pornography test"), it has retained a reputation for salacity, which could have banned it in Boston. See the "instant pornography test" in Appel 1991, xxxiv.

3. Revolutions in 1905 and 1917 followed the novel. Lenin adopted the title to popularize his political campaign in pamphlet form. Katz (1989) adopted the very same vocabulary to explain Cherneshevsky. "Readers will find a rich work of synthesis that creatively fashioned many of the salient ideas then current in Western Europe." Further, Cherneshevsky "established his own religion of atheism," and psychologized about human emotions as "the tension between egoism and altruism and between reason and irrationality" (36).

4. Personifying ideas, the hallmark of Dostoevsky and Rand, is anathema for Tolstoy lovers, as one of my former literature professors used to say. At the University of Denver in 1999, that literature professor, novelist Seymour Epstein, taught a "Faces of Evil" course wherein the textbooks were *The Brothers Karamazov* and *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone*.

5. Brian Boyd (1990) and Nabokov (1966) himself add the local color to the prison scenario as it was Vladimir's grandfather, Minister of Justice, who made the delivery of books to Dostoevsky's cell possible. Dostoevsky was jailed and disabused of his radical ideas, emerging to author *Notes from the Underground* and becoming the prophet of suffering (Bloom 1988, 212).

6. In the Cornell lecture, Nabokov (1980, 120) states: "All we have to do when reading *Bleak House* is to relax and let our spines take over. Although we read with our minds, the seat of artistic delight is between the shoulder blades. (...) The brain only continues the spine: the wick really goes through the whole length of the candle."

7. The following idea about *Lolita* may not be new but I have not yet come across it; further it cleans up the dirty book image. What we do know about the half-book Ayn Rand hated is that it is about America. Its plot reveals an unsavory decadence and flouts family values enough to elicit moral opprobrium. To place it in context, though, we can fairly well assume Nabokov's teaching and writing time in America was spent learning its culture—and loving it. It is also intellectual (schooled) folk wisdom that America was growing up, perhaps a teenager by the twentieth century among Western nations. Multicultural influences accompany the history. I invoke Johan Huizinga (1950) for his game theory, which, I think, Nabokov may have utilized. Writ on a much larger note card, *Lolita* is the United States and Humbert

Humbert is the decadence of European ideas.

8. Daniel Boorstin's essay, "The Great Separation," challenges the ordinary synonym pairing of paradox and contradiction (including the doxology of having to live with it) by pointing out the Greek *para* means "beyond" and *dox* means "common opinion." See Boorstin 1994, 171–73. The idea "beyond common opinion" evokes Nabokov's and Rand's coeval Duchamp in a postmodern world.

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