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**NESTED REVELATIONS: BELY TRANSLATIONS AND
MISPLACED PAGES IN 'AFTER BLOK'**

Introduction

There's a curious document in the Berg collection, with a curious title to match: 'After Blok'.

It's one of the many lectures on Russian literary history that wasn't included in Fredson Bowers' collections. Most have straight-forward titles. In cases where they aren't simply named for the writer/s each lecture focuses on (eg. 'Avvukum', 'Tyutchev', 'Karamzin and Zhukovsky'), they have self-explanatory titles like 'The Proletarian Novel' or 'The Soviet Drama'. 'After Blok' is the odd one out. Aleksandr Blok might indeed be in it, but not very much, and he definitely isn't the focus. Most of it is actually about Andrei Bely and *Petersburg* (1913, rev. 1922), the only one of Nabokov's "greatest masterpieces of twentieth century prose"¹ not represented by a lecture in one of Bowers' books.

So why is it called what it's called?

Thankfully, there's a clear enough explanation: 'После Блока' ('After Blok') is penciled, very lightly, at the top of the fifth page.² It's only written in one place, though, and doesn't look like it was intended as a full-blown title. If I had to guess, I'd say its title would have been something closer to what's written in the heading of every page: "XIX-XX". This is a lecture about fin de siècle Russian writing, in other words.

Its innocuous title is almost certainly why 'After Blok' has escaped wider attention from Nabokov scholarship. Yet strangely enough, a sizeable chunk *has* appeared in an edited collection about Bely. Retitled 'On *Petersburg*', a shortened version of 'After Blok' was transcribed by Brett Cooke for inclusion in *Andrei Bely's Petersburg: A Centennial*

¹ Vladimir Nabokov, *Strong Opinions* (1973), (New York: Vintage, 1990), p. 57.

² Thanks to Stephen Blackwell for pointing this out.

Celebration (2017).³ And while explanatory footnotes do help clarify where it came from, for some reason Cooke hasn't noted that his transcription only includes half of what's in the archive. Where his version cuts off, there are five typescript pages still to go. As far as I'm aware, the rest of these have never been published.

Nabokov on Bely

Other than the mere fact of his advocacy for *Petersburg*, hitherto we haven't known many of Nabokov's thoughts on Bely. 'After Blok' gives us much more of an idea. It is interesting to learn, for instance, that late-career Bely was less to Nabokov's liking:

This queer rhythm and treatment of the language [in *Petersburg*] was eventually pushed by Bely to such extremes that his method began to obscure his intention instead of emphasizing it (*Finnegans Wake*). [...] His later work [...] is often almost unintelligible.

One also learns what Nabokov thought about Russian Symbolism's flirtations with the occult:

Bely was a very odd personality—just on the brink between genius and lunacy. He became wildly enthusiastic about absurd philosophies; during his last years and to his death he was an anthroposophist. Unfortunately, I cannot devote any more space to this lurid, exotic, aggravating, entrancing phenomenon.⁴

Hugely eccentric as a religious movement, Anthroposophy was equal parts Goethean *Einbildungskraft* as Blavatskian theosophy, having developed out of Rudolf Steiner's split with the Theosophical Society in 1912. Becoming a devoted follower not long after *Petersburg* was first published, Steiner's anthroposophy gradually worked its way into Bely's subsequent work. In a letter from 1927, Bely called the composition process of *Kotik Letaev* (1919) an "anthroposophical academic task"⁵.

³ Vladimir Nabokov, 'On *Petersburg*' in Olga M. Cooke (ed.), *Andrei Bely's Petersburg: A Centennial Celebration* (Boston: Academic Studies Press, 2017), pp. x-xiii.

⁴ Vladimir Nabokov, 'On *Petersburg*' in *Andrei Bely's Petersburg* (2017), p. xii.

⁵ Vladimir A. Alexandrov, *Andrei Bely: The Major Symbolist Fiction* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1985), p. 154.

Nabokov doesn't mention this, but Bely actually wrote to Blok about Steiner in quite some detail in May of 1912. Here he describes the first time he saw Steiner address a crowd:

On his face, a face breaks apart, and from there, another looks out, in order to set free a third face, the second one having been broken apart in its turn. [...] Surrounding him – illuminating rays; on his chest swims an illuminated cloud, changing colors [...] His *aura* is unbelievable, and almost always visible, but at points of tension in his talk, it becomes blinding (I don't know if you see the aura – already more than a year ago, I began to see it at times).⁶

Bely appears to be trying to recruit Blok into Anthroposophy. It didn't work, although obviously not for lack of trying.

Gennady Barabtarlo suggested that “Nabokov was a mystic after a fashion”⁷. It may be more apt to say Nabokov was a mystic despite himself, and however begrudgingly. His late-career work, particularly, was consistently preoccupied with matters surrounding death, the otherworld, and the afterlife, and via J. W. Dunne Nabokov mixed dreams and dreamworlds in there too. Anthroposophy appears to have intrigued Nabokov, enough to cradle it in ambivalent epithets: “lurid, exotic, aggravating, entrancing”. *Insomniac Dreams* (2017) is a welcome reminder of how attracted Nabokov could be to mystical pseudo-science. He took the hugely eccentric *An Experiment With Time* (1927) seriously enough to keep his own dream diary. Subsequent observations in the unpublished part of ‘After Blok’ make it clear Nabokov was no stranger to the ominous esotericism of Silver Age Russia.

Inspiration doesn't always behave itself. It isn't just the things we admire that spark all our best ideas; innocuous things do that too. It's the innocuous things one learns about Nabokov from the archives that always floor me the most. I love knowing that Nabokov thought

⁶ Andrei Belyi, ‘A Letter to Aleksandr Blok’ in Andrei Belyi, Margarita Voloschin and Assya Turgenieff, *Reminiscences of Rudolf Steiner* (New York: Adonis Press, 1989), pp. 78-79.

⁷ Gennady Barabtarlo, ‘Chronic Condition’ in Vladimir Nabokov, *Insomniac Dreams: Experiments with Time* by Vladimir Nabokov, ed. Gennady Barabtarlo (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2018), p. 13.

Anthroposophy was “aggravating” and “entrancing” at one and the same time. It means it got to him, *somehow*, although in precisely which way, and apropos of what details, is left up to our imaginations to fill in. There’s a lot we can take from Nabokov’s deceptively compact discussion of Bely. Now we know he thought Bely’s later works venture too far past the veil into their own ornately mystical otherworlds to always be followable. One could make similar comments about Nabokov’s late work, as well, although that’s straying from the matter at hand. And anyway, that Nabokov could be a touch hypocritical is hardly newsworthy...

Bely by Nabokov

There’s another reason this short lecture warrants special attention, and a rather unexpected one at that. Nabokov’s discussion of *Petersburg* includes translated passages from the text. Innocuous enough, at first glance, but where did these translations come from? One of Cooke’s footnotes reminds us that *Petersburg* “first appeared in a complete English translation by John Courmos in 1959.” Brian Boyd has suggested (in correspondence with Cooke) that ‘After Blok’ was mostly likely written in “late 1940 or early 1941, when Nabokov wrote about a hundred lectures on Russian literature in hopes of teaching at American colleges.”⁸ For reasons I’ll get into in a moment, I think it was probably written about a decade later than that. Either estimate sees these translations appearing quite a while before Courmos’s version. For lack of any further proof regarding their authorship, Cooke plays it cool here, so cool we all missed it: “This essay appears to contain one of the first partial translations of *Petersburg*.”⁹ The passive voice isn’t necessary here: these translations are Nabokov’s.

We have strong evidence elsewhere in the Berg Collection: some of Nabokov’s teaching material for SLAVIC 150 survives, including a reading list with Nabokov’s handwritten notes beside each item. The date up the top is “Spring, 1951- 1952”. Most of Nabokov’s notes are about which translation he should use in class. Bernard Guilbert Guerney’s *A Treasury of Russian Literature* (1932) is a required text, for example, and four items on the list have “in Guerney” scribbled after them. And while Nabokov has named specific texts for every other prose writer on his list, next to “Belyi” he has simply typed “*Fragments*”. This is revealing enough on its own, but the handwritten scribble next to *that*

⁸ Vladimir Nabokov, ‘On *Petersburg*’ in *Andrei Bely’s Petersburg* (2017), p. xiii, note 3.

⁹ Vladimir Nabokov, ‘On *Petersburg*’ in *Andrei Bely’s Petersburg* (2017), p. xi, note 2.

is the real showstopper: “if I translate them, which I doubt.”¹⁰ Whatever his reasons for doubting, it would appear he overcame them. And that date: “Spring, 1951-1952”. If ‘After Blok’ contains the translations Nabokov envisioned, then that lecture was written about a decade later than previously thought. (And if ‘After Blok’ had been written in 1941, then why would Nabokov’s later teaching notes refer to its translations as something he might or might not undertake in the future?)

Luck is mostly on our side with these translations. They’re already available in *Andrei Bely’s Petersburg: A Centennial Celebration* (2017). This means, of course, that without necessarily realizing it Brett and Olga Cooke debuted not only most of an unpublished lecture by Nabokov, but his Bely translations as well. The bad news is that when you check their transcription against the original text in the archive, a number of mistakes become obvious.

One can offer nothing but gratitude to the Cookes for getting this first half of ‘After Blok’ out there for the rest of us to see. My hope is that correcting the small clump of errors I’ve stumbled upon in the version they put out will ensure its best possible iteration appears in whatever collection of Nabokov’s unpublished lectures eventually ends up being published. And there will be one eventually; these are simply too valuable to be left alone forever.

Nabokov’s Bely Translations

From *Petersburg* (Chapter 1, «Наша роль»/ “Our role”)

- 1 Petersburg streets possess one indubitable property: to turn
- 2 passers-by into shadows.
- 3 This we have seen in the example of the mysterious stranger.

¹⁰ Vladimir Nabokov, ‘Beginnings of Russian literature’ (New York Public Library Berg Collection, Nabokov Archive). A full title is typed up the top of the page I’m referring to: “SLAVIC 150. Modern Russian Literature. Spring, 1951-1952. Reading List for the Second Half of the Course.”

4 Having come into being as a mental image, somehow he got
5 connected with the senator's house; then reappeared upon the
6 avenue, following closely the senator in our tale.¹¹

Corrections

1. *to*: Cooke has “they”, but Nabokov has crossed that out and scribbled “to”. Elsewhere Cooke has treated the pencil-edits as representing the ultimate text.

From *Petersburg* (Chapter 6, «Невский Проспект» / “Nevsky Avenue”)

1 All the shoulders constituted a dense slowly flowing stickiness;
2 Alexander Ivanovich's shoulder glued itself onto it: got stuck in
3 it—so to say; he followed his shoulder in conformity to the law
4 of completeness of bodies; and thus was he flung onto the
5 Nevsky.

6 What is a caviar grain?

7 There, the bodies on the sidewalk become one body, grains of
8 the same caviar: and the sidewalks of Nevsky are so much
9 sandwich-surface; his thought was immersed in the thinking
10 capacity of the many-legged being, which was scurrying down
11 Nevsky Avenue.

12 Then silently they lost themselves in contemplation of the
13 numerous legs; while the sticky mass crawled: crawled along
14 and shuffled on its many passing feet; it was pasted together of
15 segments and every segment was a body.

16 There were no people on Nevsky; but there was there a crawling
17 clamoring centipede; the damp space poured together the
18 multiplicity of voices, forming a multiplicity of words; all words,
19 intermingling became merged in one sentence; and the sentence
20 seemed senseless; it hung over Nevsky Ave; and a black smoke
21 of unrealities hung over it.

22 And out of these unrealities, the Neva, swelling, roared and beat
23 against her massive granite parapets.

¹¹ Vladimir Nabokov, ‘On *Petersburg*’ in *Andrei Bely's Petersburg* (2017), p. xi.

24 The crawling centipede is ghastly: down Nevsky, it runs
25 through the centuries; and higher, above Nevsky,—times are
26 running out. There above, things are changing; but here—all is
27 unchangeable; periods of time have their end. The human
28 centipede has no end; all segments change but it itself is the
29 same; the head is turned away beyond the railway station; the tail
30 is turned off on the Morskaya St; along Nevsky segment-footed
31 links are shuffling along.
32 A true scolopender.¹²

Corrections

4. *was*: No “was” in Cooke’s version.
9. *Avenue*: Erroneous “[Prospect]” in Cooke’s version. Nabokov has written “avenue”, although the “a” is larger than subsequent letters (as it is in a subsequent example below), which makes me suspect his handwritten capital A’s might often look like that.
11. *passing*: No “passing” in Cooke’s version.
15. *intermingling*: Cooke’s version adds a comma after “intermingling” which is not in Nabokov’s.
16. *Ave*: Here Cooke has added another “Prospect”, but this time without the square brackets for some reason. Nabokov’s scribbled an “ave” next to his Nevsky, which I’ve capitalized (as above, and for the same reason).
18. *Neva*: “Neva [River]” in Cooke’s version, which seems unnecessary.
20. *ghastly*:: Semicolon in Cooke’s version, colon in Nabokov’s.
21. *Nevsky,—*: There’s a comma before the m-dash in Bely. Nabokov kept it, but it hasn’t survived in Cooke’s version.
24. *beyond*: Cooke’s version has “from”; Nabokov’s, “beyond”.
26. *A true scolopender*: Although Nabokov has indeed translated this short final line, it has been crossed out in lecture text. Perhaps he decided to end the set passage one line earlier? I’ve restored it for completion’s sake.

Extra Pages

¹² Vladimir Nabokov, ‘On *Petersburg*’ in *Andrei Bely’s Petersburg* (2017), p. xi-xii.

Only five of the ten typescript pages in the Berg collection made it into Cooke's version of 'After Blok'. Where Cooke leaves off, Nabokov continues his discussion of Silver Age writers. He talks about Valery Bryusov, whose experiments with versification apparently influenced other, better, poets. Nabokov's comments are more-or-less in line with Ronald E. Peterson's in *A History of Russian Symbolism* (1993):

In general, one can say that Bryusov's greatest contributions to Russian Symbolism lie in areas other than poetry, specifically in such endeavors as organizing, editing, promoting, and setting standards, though he did improve on his early and immature verse.¹³

Nabokov doesn't mention how Bryusov helped kick-start Symbolism as a poetic movement in Russia by publishing a three-volume gambit called *Russian Symbolists* (1894-95). While its list of contributors appears to have been expansive, most were just pseudonyms for Bryusov himself and his friend A. L. Miropolosky. They hoped an inflated impression of the movement's liveliness would attract more participants. Amazingly, it worked.¹⁴

Next, Nabokov explores "the mystical ambiance of prerevolutionary Russia", as John E. Bowlit called it.¹⁵ He queries whether writers from different aesthetic or esoteric movements produce wildly different work; his gist is that they don't. According to Nabokov, Silver Age writers had more pressing things on their minds than fussy differences between the exact beliefs of groups like the Symbolists, Acmeists, and Futurists. Each helped in their own way to collectively constitute the anxious thurm pervading Russia at the time. Bely's multicolored schizomorphic Anthroposophy spoke just as well to this as Blok's luminous ice-blue Orthodoxy, for example.

It's at this point that Nabokov finally talks about Blok, very close to the end of a lecture that's wound up being named for him. He's used as an example of how eerie and foreboding the best writers were when Nabokov was a boy. The example he uses is from a poem in Blok's *Crossroads* (1902-1904).

¹³ Ronald E. Peterson, *A History of Russian Symbolism* (Amsterdam: John Benjamins Publishing Company, 1993), p. 24.

¹⁴ Ronald E. Peterson, *A History of Russian Symbolism*, pp. 22-23.

¹⁵ John E. Bowlit, 'Esoteric Culture and Russian Society' in *The Spiritual in Art: Abstract Painting 1890-1985*, ed. Edward Weisberger (New York: Abbeville Press, 1986), p. 181.

— Всё ли спокойно в народе?

— Нет. Император убит.

Кто-то о новой свободе

На площадях говорит.

— Is everything calm among the people?

— No. The Emperor has been killed.

They are speaking about new freedom in the squares.

(My translation)

This is precisely the image Nabokov gives his own twist to close out his lecture. Although made somewhat ambiguously, his point is that Blok's public orator seems almost like an eerie proleptical gesture to the Bolshevik Revolution when we read this poem now. With imagination, 'After Blok' takes on a euphemistic quality as a title with regard to the Soviet era more generally. It could almost be saying that, compared to what came before, that which came 'after' Blok in the history of Russian literature barely counts as a poetical movement at all. It's just what happened... after Blok...

Extra Extra Pages

Imagine you're in the New York Public Library for a moment, and you're leafing through the 'After Blok' folder. If you've reached the point at which the last section ended, you will have made it through seven typescript pages. I believe 'After Blok' proper concludes here, which is a strange thing to say considering there are still three pages left in our manilla folder. What about them?

It's time to ask for the next folder now. Here's exactly what to ask for as it says on the label:

Nabokov, Vladimir Vladimirovich

[The short story in Russia]

Olesha and emigres. Typescript (incomplete)

draft of class lecture notes, with

his ms. revisions, unsigned and undated.

8 p.¹⁶

¹⁶ Vladimir Nabokov, 'The short story in Russia' (New York Public Library Berg Collection, Nabokov Archive).

It's worth noting that the square brackets around "The short story in Russia" are in pencil, and the apparent secondary title, 'Olesha and emigres', is scribbled at the top of the first page. As with 'After Blok',

Note that this lecture is currently listed as “(incomplete)”. What we have starts us on the fourth page. We know it’s the fourth page because Nabokov has typed “Sov. 4” in the header, and there’s a “Sov. 5” in the same spot on the next page. “Sov. 6” is next—which is, of course, expected by now—and the count continues until we reach “Sov. 11” on the eighth and last leaf. But where are the first three pages?

‘After Blok’ uses a different header from ‘The short story in Russia’: “XIX-XX”, a tab space, then page numbers one through seven. However, starting on the eighth page, the header and page numbers change to Sov. 1, Sov. 2 and Sov. 3. Side by side, each lecture’s headers proceed as follows:

<u>‘After Blok’</u>		<u>‘The short story in Russia’</u>
XIX-XX	1. [sic]	Sov. 4
XIX-XX	2	Sov. 5
XIX-XX	3	Sov. 6
XIX-XX	4	Sov. 7
XIX-XX	5	Sov. 8
XIX-XX	6	Sov. 9
XIX-XX	7	Sov. 10
Sov. 1		Sov. 11
Sov. 2		
Sov. 3		

Laid out like that the problem is easy to spot: the missing pages from ‘The short story in Russia’ are at the end of ‘After Blok’.

How might this have happened? Either it’s a cataloguing error, or Nabokov moved them himself. I lean towards the latter theory. In his usual double-spaced typescript, most of Nabokov’s lectures go for ten or eleven pages: probably as much as he knew he could deliver in an hour-long lecture. With the extra material, ‘After Blok’ suddenly totals ten pages. And if we imagine them back where they started, ‘The short story in Russia’ makes it to eleven. If it *was* Nabokov who moved these extra pages, then both lectures will have finished on time, perhaps even many years apart. If not, then one was too long and one was too short: so *two* lectures are out of joint, instead of just one. With these points in mind, plus those preceding on adjacent matters, it really does look like Nabokov might have recycled some old work to pad his runtime out one week.

it’s unclear what this lecture was originally supposed to be titled. For the sake of convenience, I’ll just refer to it by the first title.

Conclusion

Publishing archival material is complicated, and not just because of copyright. While exact fidelity to the surviving texts is ideal, it is not always so clearcut. If something wasn't published in its author's lifetime, it usually means it never had a final version. A lot of finish goes into getting something ready for a publication, and Nabokov's lectures just don't have that finish. They're covered in pencil-marks, ink-spots, strike-throughs, occasional misspellings: sometimes even coffee-stains! This was before printers and copiers, and by the looks of things Nabokov kept on using the same typed-up copies of his lectures for a while, steadily-accumulating pencil-marked tweaks as he went. Palimpsests like these tell stories, and every single one of them is gloriously mundane. While mostly harmless and usually unremarkable, mundane details can radically change how all this archival material fits together. Future editors of Nabokov's lectures will have an interesting choice when they get to these two lectures. If Nabokov used the same three pages twice, then into the body of which lecture should this somewhat ephemeral content be incorporated? Personally, I would take as definitive whatever version of each Nabokov most likely delivered. It should be printed twice, in other words: at the start of one lecture and the end of the other.

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