

Elena Tolstaia

Glory Pallid and Glory Justified: Nabokov's Two Portraits of Aleksei Tolstoy

The two mentors.

Young Vladimir Nabokov, an émigré Russian novelist working in Berlin, twice – in 1928 and in 1930 - depicted a fictional older Russian writer of some importance interacting with the young literary crowd. Such a personage is central in *The Christmas Story* that appeared in Berlin Russian-language émigré daily *Rul'* on the 25th of December, 1928.¹ He is a fictional figure, a Leningrad writer Novodvortsev, formerly well-known, now anxious to fit the Party line in literature. The venerable middle-aged Novodvortsev is a mentor of Soviet literary beginners.

Two years later, in 1930, Nabokov's novel *Glory* depicted a Russian émigré literary circle in Berlin of the 1920s gathering around a famous writer Bubnov, also fictional. Like Novodvortsev, Bubnov attracts beginning authors.

Novodvortsev coaches young Soviet authors in the spirit of the Soviet ideological clichés that Nabokov analyzed and parodied in his essay "The Triumph of Virtue" (1930). Bubnov in Berlin teaches young émigré writers to look up to highest literary models. The two writers have physical traits in common: both are heavy, have a huge forehead, and are balding.

The prototype and his political salto-mortale.

I believe both personages have the same prototype, the writer Aleksei Nikolaevich Tolstoy (1882-1945), at different stages of his literary career. After the Bolshevik coup he, already an author of some standing, emigrated for Paris and in 1919-1921 wrote a novel

¹ Nabokov did not republish the Russian original of this story; it appeared only in the 1999 Russian Collected Works: *Rozhdestvenskii rasskaz. Vladimir Nabokov. Collected Russian Language works. In Five Volumes. Volume Two. Sankt-Petersburg, 'Symposium,' 1999. Prior to that the story was published in English: Vladimir Nabokov. The Christmas Story. The New York Review of Books, November 16, 1995 (one newspaper page; available in the internet).*

about the revolution that made him a key figure in the literary and political life of the Russian diaspora. However, Tolstoy was dissatisfied in Paris and left for Berlin in the autumn of 1921. He had been invited as editor of a new Russian-language newspaper that was supposed to unite Soviet and émigré writers and presumably “stay above the struggle”. The project was initiated by the Soviet journalist Mikhail Koltsov in the then independent Riga where he headed local Agitprop (Soviet propaganda) unit. Tolstoy visited Koltsov in Riga in the beginning of 1922 and accepted the project. Life in Berlin was extremely cheap: centrally situated, it was attracting both émigré Russian intellectuals from France and Soviet intelligentsia who with the start of NEP (new economic policy) were again allowed to travel abroad. Dozens of Russian publishing houses opened in Berlin, and for a short period it became a Russian literary capital. It was an ideal place to install a crypto-Soviet organ that would tempt the émigré intellectuals with hopes of reconciliation and return.

The newspaper, *Nakanune* (On the Eve) followed the ideology of the emigre group “Smena vekh” (“Change of Landmarks”) headed by historian Nikolai Ustrialov (1890-1937). It proclaimed priority of national goals over social struggle calling upon the emigres to support Soviet Russia - the vein of political thought often referred to as National Bolshevism. The group had emerged in Moscow in the spring of 1918 where it published the original newspaper *Nakanune*.

The new *Nakanune* was secretly financed from Moscow and supervised by the Russian provisional embassy, but had a private fictitious owner in Berlin. Its purpose was to morally undermine and split the Russian émigrés. Tolstoy headed its Literary Supplement that allegedly would enjoy full autonomy and be politically neutral. But the truth about the real bosses of *Nakanune* transpired very soon after its pilot issue appeared at the end of March 1922. Tolstoy was called upon by the Paris-based Writers’ Union to explain his behavior. His answer was a passionate patriotic manifesto that caused a storm of vilification in émigré press.

In his *Literary Supplement to Nakanune* Tolstoy gathered young émigrés and Soviet writers - in contrast to the aging circle of the leading Paris émigré monthly *Sovremennye zapiski*. He was in his prime, visibly flourishing, a leading writer, head of a literary school². There was a publishing house in Berlin at his disposal where he published

² Перхин В.В. А.Н.Толстой в русском Берлине (по материалам допроса Г.Д.Венуса в 1938 году). Русская литература (Санкт-Петербург). 2000. №1, passim. (Perkhin V.V. A.N.Tolstoy v russkom Berline (po materialam doprosa G.D. Venusa v 1938 godu). *Russkaia literatura* (St. Petersburg). 2000. No.1, passim).

several dozen of books including several new books of his own. In Moscow young writers thought it an honor to publish in *Nakanune*. Among them was Bulgakov, the one most welcomed by Tolstoy.

It soon became clear that *Literary Supplement* was only an appendix to the servile pro-Soviet newspaper headed by a Soviet stooge, journalist Grigorii Kirdetsov (real name Dvorzhetskii, 1880-1938). Tolstoy tried to get free of *Nakanune* after it expressed support for the mass trial of the Socialist Revolutionaries in Moscow in September 1922. But was it obviously too late: his masters would not let him go. By the end of 1922 Tolstoy was boycotted by practically everybody in Berlin. The only thing left was to return at last to Russia – it is doubtful if that had been his intention when accepting the Soviet offer. But so he did on August 1, 1923, with no hurry, after half a year of preparations and a tentative visit to Moscow in May³. Many people followed him.

On his return to Soviet Russia Tolstoy rewrote his main book written in emigration, the novel about the revolution *Khozhdenie po mukam* (The Calvary), adjusting it to Soviet ideological requirements. He altered it from anti-Soviet to Pro-Soviet; in the later version its heroes, intellectuals, were made simpler; many symbolic scenes and metaphysical motifs were deleted. In 1928 Tolstoy wrote a sequel to it, *Vosemnadtsatyi god* (The Year Eighteenth) illustrating the moral defeat and decline of “the Whites” in the Civil war. The heroes predictably realize that they have erred and come over to the Soviet side, some earlier, some later. The novel is packed with undigested documentary material and boring in spite of some melodramatic or adventurous episodes. However, it demonstrated loyalty to the regime.

I presume that the Soviet literary maître Novodvortsev is a portrait of Tolstoy after his return to Russia, in late 1920s, when the writer was rehashing his émigré writings in the Soviet spirit while Bubnov is Tolstoy in Berlin in 1922-1923, at the peak of his creativity and during the newspaper campaign against him. I am certain that Nabokov could not help feeling strongly about Tolstoy, for a simple reason: he knew him well.

A family acquaintance.

Aleksei Nikolaevich had been a friend of his father Vladimir Dmitrievich⁴. They became friends in 1916 during their common visit to England with a group of other

³ That episode was described in Bulgakov's *Teatral'nyi roman* (Black Snow).

⁴ Vladimir Dmitrievich Nabokov (1870-1922), a criminologist, the second person in the Constitutional Democrats' party, member of Duma and editor of the liberal daily *Rech'* in 1904-1917.

Russian journalists that V.D.Nabokov headed. The elder Nabokov showed Tolstoy the early poetry of his son in Petrograd some time before the revolution. In 1919 the Nabokovs fled to England from where the father visited Paris and saw Tolstoy. In Berlin where the Nabokovs finally settled, Tolstoy helped young Vladimir publish his poems at *Rul'*, an émigré daily edited by Kerensky.

Vladimir Dmitrievich Nabokov was killed on March 28, 1922, while defending Petr Milyukov, the leader of his party and his own rival and political opponent, from the bullet of a Monarchist killer. Aleksei Tolstoy wrote for *Nakanune* an obituary full of superlatives, titled “Rytsar”(The Knight). Speaking at V. D. Nabokov’s memorial evening in Berlin on April 2, Tolstoy named him the best sample of the Russian race.

The young Nabokov was in 1922 a member of a literary group “Vereteno” (Spindle) organized by the writer Alexander Drozdov (1895-1963) that also strove to be “above the struggle” and called for a national reconciliation with Soviet Russia; it also included both émigré literary youth and a few young Soviet writers; there were contacts between “Vereteno” and *Nakanune*. Tolstoy visited the group at least once.

In late October 1922 “Vereteno” split; the immediate pretext was common indignation at *Nakanune*. A number of writers including Nabokov left “Vereteno” for “The Bronze Horseman”, an anti-Bolshevik literary group led by the famous Russian Symbolist editor Sergei Sokolov-Krechetov (1878—1936)⁵. The young formed a group of their own, “Veretenysh,” (Baby spindle) that published an eponymous journal full of satirical verse and caricatures aimed at Tolstoy.

In an interview given many years later, in 1966, Nabokov the writer said to his disciple Alfred Appel:

*Once, in 1921 or 1922, at a Berlin restaurant where I was dining with two girls. I happened to be sitting back to back with Andrey Bely who was dining with another writer, Aleksey Tolstoy, at the table behind me. Both writers were at the time frankly pro-Soviet (and on the point of returning to Russia), and a White Russian, which I still am in that particular sense, would certainly not wish to speak to a bolshevizan (fellow traveler). I was acquainted with Aleksey Tolstoy but of course ignored him.*⁶

⁵ Budnitskii, Oleg. “Bratstvo Russkoi Pravdy”: poslednii literaturnyi proekt S.A. Sokolova-Krechetova. *Novoe Literaturnoe Obozrenie*, 2003, No. 64.

⁶ Appel, Alfred. An Interview with Vladimir Nabokov. *Wisconsin Studies in Contemporary Literature*, vol. VIII, no. 2, spring 1967, p.127-152.

It stands to reason that the young Nabokov's decision to ignore Tolstoy was as late as the split in "Vereteno" in late autumn of 1922. Tolstoy's visit to "Vereteno" may be the source of the image in *Glory* of Bubnov as a mentor of an émigré literary circle.

In 1937 on a visit to London Nabokov decided to decline an offer to meet Tolstoy: "Ona zhe (Budberg⁷) predlozhila mne svidanie segodnia s Aleks. Tolstym, no ia, kazhetsia, ne poidu" (The same (Budberg) offered me a meeting with Tolstoy today but it seems I'll not go⁸).

The writer Novodvortsev. "The Christmas story", written earlier, shows its hero at a more advanced age and at a later period, most probably, mid- or late twenties. The writer Novodvortsev is at his Leningrad (former Petersburg) apartment which he now has to share with other dwellers, as was the early Soviet custom. He is hosting a reading of a young peasant writer Anton Golyi. Golyi's story features, in Novodvortsev's parlance: "the image of that taciturn fellow, selflessly devoted to his laborer grandfather, who, not by dint of education, but rather through some serene, internal power wins a psychological victory over the spiteful intellectual."⁹

The quote points at Boris Pil'niak's much discussed novel *Golyi God* (The Naked Year, 1922) that has not one but two taciturn heroes, the Arkhipovs, father and son; the son, a Communist, is devoted to the father, a worker; they are so loyal to each other that they never argue about the ideological differences they have. They certainly are shown as possessing "an inner power" and as easy winners over the intellectuals and the former nobility who are driven out of their homes and persecuted. The literary allusion is supported by the young author's name Golyi (naked) that is an echo of Pilniak's title. Golyi is a penname in tune with the epoch: there were real authors Demian Bednyi (poor), Mikhail Golodnyi (hungry), Ivan Pribludnyi (a bastard), and so on. Bulgakov reflected the fashion in his writer Ivan Bezdomnyi (homeless).

Nabokov's Novodvortsev is a literary celebrity; even his silence is "venerable." May be that is why he can afford sitting in a frivolous pose:

Wearing a substantial pince-nez, exceptionally large of forehead, two strands of his sparse dark hair pulled across his bald pate, gray streaks on his close-cropped temples, he sat with closed

⁷ Nabokov means Maria Ignat'evna Budberg (1892-1974), who at that time acted as Tolstoy's English translator.

⁸ Nabokov, Vladimir. *Pis'ma k Vere*. M., KoLibri, 2017. P.318

⁹ Nabokov, Vladimir. The Christmas Story. *The New York Review of Books*, November 16, 1995. The text (one page) is available in the Internet; it has not been reprinted.

*eyes as if he were still listening, his heavy legs crossed and one hand compressed between a kneecap and a hamstring.*¹⁰

Fig.1

The hero of “The Christmas Story” must be an important author in Soviet Russia: the state has published his collected works in six volumes! His inner monologue shows that he does identify with the new, Soviet system of values. Indeed, the name Novodvortsev suggests moving to a new home. Novodvortsev sees himself as a new man and wants to be with the new and the young: “Among beginning, younger writers he felt free and at ease. His new life suited him to a T”¹¹. The English version somewhat differs from the Russian original: the word “writers” is added, the word “soul” deleted. Literally it goes like this: “Among the young, among the new he felt at ease and free. The new life was useful for his soul and fitting it to a T”¹². In the light of my hypothesis this passage can clarify the motif for Tolstoy’s changing sides: it is more about his soul; it might have been the choice of “the future” before “the past” rather selling himself out of greed.

And yet, Novodvortsev is sad. He feels undervalued. His fame, once real, is now state-encouraged, almost state-imposed; the critics are already ignoring his recent influence on the young: his high status may shatter any time. He may keep telling himself that “the new life” suits him only to cheer himself up.

The historical context. The author is trying to undermine his hero: “In an autobiography accompanying his complete works (six volumes with portrait of the author), he had described how he, the son of humble parents, had made his way in the world. His youth had, in reality, been happy. A healthy vigor, faith, successes.”¹³ The overall mode here is positive, a sympathy with the hero is felt. However, the passage implies that Novodvortsev had doctored his autobiography: in reality he was not quite a struggling self-made man of humble origins that he pretended to have been.

Novodvortsev has some merits in the eyes of the Soviet regime as a former adversary of Tsarism. It may seem that Nabokov is straight and well-meaning when telling his life story: “Korolenko had liked him. He had been arrested now and then. One newspaper had been closed down on his account. Now his civic aspirations had been

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Набоков Владимир. Рождественский рассказ. Собрание сочинений русского периода. В 5 тт. Т.2. СПб., «Симпозиум», 1999. С. 534-535. (Nabokov, Vladimir. Rozhdestvenskii rasskaz. Collected Russian Language works. In Five Volumes. Volume Two. Sankt-Petersburg, ‘Symposium,’ 1999, pp. 534-535).

¹³ The Christmas Story.

fulfilled.”¹⁴ However, this passage is also subversive. If correlated with historical facts, it suggests that Novodvortsev by his age and political context could belong to the generation of “Znanie”, the circle of radical writers centered round Gorky’s eponymous publishing house at the turn of the 20 century. However, almost none of these writers accepted the Bolshevik terror – Leonid Andreev (whose volume is displayed on the hero’s shelf), Ivan Bunin, Alexander Kuprin, Evgenii Chirikov, Semen Yushkevich all left the Bolshevik Russia, and most importantly, so did Gorky himself in 1921. Vladimir Galaktionovich Korolenko (1853-1921) mentioned in the story was an exemplary fighter for minority rights under the Tsars who, an old and sick man, stayed under the Soviets but was to the end a staunch critic of Lenin’s policy of terror.

The phrase “one newspaper was closed because of him” alludes to the famous 1902 incident when the liberal newspaper *Rus’* was closed by the Tsarist authorities because of the feuilleton “Gospoda Obmanovy” (The Obmanovs) by the prominent journalist, a pillar of opposition, Aleksandr Valentinovich Amfiteatrov (1862-1938). The name “Obmanovy” (rhyming with “Romanovy” - the Romanovs) means “liars.” After the October 1917 Bolshevik coup Amfiteatrov wrote harsh criticism of the new regime in opposition periodicals until they were all stamped out in summer 1918, and finally left Russia to continue his struggle in exile. To sum up, there were no major prose writers left in Soviet Russia after the revolution: they were all in emigration. Novodvortsev seems the only one of this status left in the shop.

Tolstoy nearly became Number One writer in Soviet Russia in 1930s if it were not for Gorky’s return in 1932.

The taming of one’s talent.

Novodvortsev tries to adapt his writing to the Soviet literary norms. At the suggestion of a critic he decides to write about Christmas – but in a new way: “Christmas, new, special. This old snow and new conflict...”¹⁵ One problem is that the writer obviously has talent. Nabokov, partial for the visual aspect of prose shows that his hero can see like a true master:

The window gave on a courtyard. The moon was not visible.... No, on second thought, there is a sheen coming from behind a dark chimney over there. Firewood was stacked in the courtyard, covered with a sparkling carpet of snow. In a window glowed the green dome of a lamp—someone was working at his desk, and the abacus shimmered as if its beads were made of

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Ibid.

colored glass. Suddenly, in utter silence, some lumps of snow fell from the roof's edge. Then, again, a total torpor.

*He felt the tickling vacuum that always accompanied the urge to write.*¹⁶

However, Novodvortsev's precision sight and true artistic inspiration are spent on platitudes. In the finale of the story he produces something schematic and false:

"I'm on the right track, though," Novodvortsev said aloud, impatiently pursuing some thought that had slipped away. Then something new and unexpected began to take shape in his fancy—a European city, a well-fed, fur-clad populace. A brightly lit store window. Behind it an enormous Christmas tree, with hams stacked at its base and expensive fruit affixed to its branches. A symbol of well-being. And in front of the window, on the frozen sidewalk—

... He wrote about the fat tree in the shamelessly illuminated window and about the hungry worker, victim of a lockout, peering at that tree with a severe and somber gaze.

*"The insolent Christmas tree," wrote Novodvortsev, "was iridescent with every hue of the rainbow."*¹⁷

Nabokov's version of a "new Christmas" is grotesque: we see an obviously edible tree, not only lined with hams, but also itself fat ("dorodnaia"), and in front of it, a worker, hungry and embittered, who obviously wants to eat it all – the hams, the "expensive fruit", and the Christmas tree itself. One designed effect on the reader is the feeling that the author is offended by the tree more than the proverbial proletarian, but maybe for a different reason. How dares the Christmas tree please people out there, when here in Russia it is banned! "Novodvortsev's mutilated talent betrays his true feeling: it is clearly envy. There is also a hue of nostalgia when he remembers the decorations for the Christmas tree: "There was no place to buy that tinsel now, and they don't heap fir trees in the shadow of Saint Isaac's"¹⁸ any more..."¹⁹

Nabokov's narrative has pointers to the low quality of Novodvortsev's new writing. A neighbor knocks on his door asking for a pen, "desirably blunt". In Russian it is "tupen'koe", meaning not only "blunt", but primarily "stupid" with a diminutive shade

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Saint Isaac's cathedral is Russia's main church built in memory of Peter I (whose patron saint was St. Isaac); it stands in the center of St. Petersburg, a five-minute walk from Nabokov's house in Bolshaia Morskaia street.

¹⁹ The Christmas Story.

conveying contempt. In the essay “A Jubilee” (1927) Nabokov was mourning Russia’s being changed by “an ugly, blunt idea”²⁰, becoming stupid, provincial.

In the same ironic vein, Novodvortsev “selected a pen, moved a sheet of paper into place, tucked a few more sheets under it so as to write on a plumper surface...”²¹ In the Russian original “plump” referred to writing itself, “chtoby bylo pukhlee pisat’ ” (for plumper writing), which clearly suggests graphomania. Indeed, Tolstoy at that period was producing texts in enormous quantities, caring not for quality but for bulk, paid per unit at the best rate possible, to support the family of nine people at a comfortable level.

One should not overlook the semantic field of “fat” in the story: the Russian family name Tolstoy comes from “tolsty” that means “thick,” “fat”. There is mention of Novodvortsev’s “tolstye nogi” (fat legs)²² rendered in “The Christmas Story” as “heavy legs”. The word “pukhlee” (plumper) adds to this suggestive chain of associations, as well as “dorodnaia” (fat).

Quotes from Aleksei Tolstoy in ‘The Christmas Story’: The Christmas tree.

Surprisingly, it has not been noticed that Nabokov stuffed the text of *The Christmas Story* with multiple allusions to Tolstoy’s émigré and pre-revolutionary texts. Thinking of Christmas Novodvortsev has a memory coming back to him:

*...a merchant's house and a big book of articles and poems with gilt edges issued for the benefit of the starving, and the Christmas tree in the living room, and the woman he then loved, and how all the lights of the Christmas tree were reflected in her wide-open eyes, as she picked a tangerine from a high branch.*²³

Tolstoy did take part in one major wartime charity literary project that the young Nabokov could know about. It was organized by liberal Petersburg intelligentsia to help the Jewish war refugees. The result was a collection of stories titled “Shchit” (*Shield*, 1915), edited by L. Andreev, F. Sologub et al. The collection was a luxury edition

²⁰ *Набокков Владимир*. Юбилей. Собрание сочинений русского периода. В 5 тт. Т.2. СПб., «Симпозиум», 1999. С. 647. (Nabokov, Vladimir. *The Jubilee. Collected Russian Language works*. In Five Volumes. Volume Two. Sankt-Petersburg, ‘Symposium,’ 1999, p. 647).

²¹ *Набокков Владимир*. Рождественский рассказ. Собрание сочинений русского периода. В 5 тт. Т.2. СПб., Симпозиум, 1999. С. 534. (Nabokov, Vladimir. *Rozhdestvenskii rasskaz. Collected Russian Language works*. In Five Volumes. Volume Two. Sankt-Petersburg, ‘Symposium’, 1999, p. 534).

²² *Op.cit.* p.531.

²³ *Op.cit.* p.535; *The Christmas Story*.

that became incredibly popular and was reprinted twice. Tolstoy took part in it with his war story “Anna Zisserman”.

The Christmas tree reflected in the eyes of the beloved is the quote taken from Tolstoy’s most successful book, *Detstvo Nikity* (The Childhood of Nikita, 1920-1922) where several chapters are devoted to a Christmas tree: “Nikita stretched his hand to Lilia. She gave him a hand and went on staring at the candles; **in her blue eyes, in each a little Christmas tree was burning.**”²⁴

Tangerines mentioned here may also point at *The Childhood of Nikita*:

*In the living room from floor to ceiling a Christmas tree was shining with lots, lots of candles. It stood like a tree of fire iridescent with gold, sparks, long rays. The light coming from it was thick, warm, smelling of pine needles, wax, **tangerines**, gingerbreads.*²⁵

It is from here that Nabokov might have taken the whole link: Christmas tree-tangerines-love.

In 1922, the tree was shown as an amazing religious experience, acting on all senses at once - an earthly incarnation of a Christmas star. In Soviet Russia, however, Christmas tree has been abolished; the writer understands he must now paint it in a negative light. Who decorates the Christmas tree nowadays? It must be “byvshie liudi” (has-been people):

*Emigrés weeping around a Christmas tree, decked out in their uniforms redolent of mothballs, looking at the tree and weeping. Somewhere in Paris. An old general recalls how he used to smack his men in the teeth as he cuts an angel out of gilded cardboard.... He thought about a general whom he actually knew, who was actually abroad now, and there was no way he could picture him weeping as he knelt before a Christmas tree.*²⁶

In 1915 Aleksei Tolstoy was at the Caucasian front as a war correspondent for *Russkie vedomosti*. In one essay he described General Liakhov (1869-1920) admiring his impeccably correct behavior with subordinates and his thoughtful care for the soldiers. But one does not even have to think of real generals here. Nabokov again employs a literary allusion. A general cutting figures out of paper is taken from Aleksei Tolstoy's wartime comedy *Nechistaya sila* (Evil Spirits, 1915) that focuses on corruption and espionage in

²⁴ Толстой Алексей. Детство Никиты. Собрание сочинений в 15 тт. Т.4. М.- Л. 1948. С.36. (Tolstoy, Aleksei. Detstvo Nikity. Collected works in 15 volumes. Vol. 4. Moscow – Leningrad, 1948, p.36).

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ The Christmas Story.

high echelons of civil service. The hero, old bureaucrat Mardykin, is equal to a general in rank, spoken about as a general and addressed as “Your excellence.” Mardykin derives from *morda*, *muzzle*. He is an old-style bully who would splash a glass of coffee into the face (so to speak, *v mordu*) of an awkward servant. Mardykin has a strange habit of cutting little devils out of paper, one every time he has sinned. As he is involved in large-scale criminal schemes the devils multiply. Novodvortsev’s imaginary general cuts out angels instead of devils, out of cardboard rather than paper, but that does not spoil the obvious allusion to Tolstoy’s comedy that was very funny and extremely popular with the public.

Novodvortsev concluding sentence: “The insolent Christmas tree<...>**was iridescent with every hue of the rainbow**”²⁷ echoes literally *The Childhood of Nikita*: “In the living room from floor to ceiling a Christmas tree<...> stood like a tree of fire **iridescent with gold, sparks, long rays**”²⁸. Both Tolstoy’s book and the original of Nabokov’s story use here the verb ‘perelivat’sia’.²⁹ The system of allusions from Tolstoy’s widely known “The Childhood of Nikita” crowns the subterranean chain of links to him in “The Christmas Story”.

Nabokov casually mentions an inconspicuous household detail:

*By the inkstand stood something akin to a square drinking glass with three pens stuck into a caviar of blue glass pellets. The object was some ten or fifteen years old—it had withstood every tumult, whole worlds had shaken apart around it—but not a single glass pellet had been lost.*³⁰

This is the key to the entire biography of Alexei Tolstoy, in emigration and in Russia: the count lived perfectly well under all powers, remained intact in all storms. This was his most important principle, a motif mentioned in many memoirs of his contemporaries. So, “The Christmas story” is a “story with a key.”

Many years later Nabokov might have wanted to enhance the likeness of his writer to Tolstoy by translating the title of a Novodvortsev’s story mentioned in the narrative - “Gran’ ” (edge, fascet) - as “Verge,” stressing the temporal meaning that is similar to “eve”, the Russian “kanun” – cf. *Nakanune*, “on the eve”.

The writer Bubnov: “reigning justly”.

²⁷ The Christmas Story.

²⁸ *Detstvo Nikity*, p.36.

²⁹ *Rozhdestvenskii rasskaz*, p.535.

³⁰ The Christmas Story.

Two years later Nabokov wrote another literary portrait, based, as I believe, on the same historical person, only shown at an earlier stage. Nabokov had enough time to see Tolstoy through 1922, both in the days of his triumph and during the campaign in the press against him. The writer Bubnov is portrayed twice, at the prime of his career and in decline.

His image is introduced in chapter 33 of *Glory*: «The writer Bubnov (who used to point out with satisfaction how many distinguished Russian literary names of the twentieth century began with the letter B)...»³¹ The personage refers to the four leading poets of the Silver Age, Bal'mont, Briusov, Belyi, and Blok; so will later the writer Godunov-Cherdyntsev, the hero of Nabokov's novel *Dar* (The Gift, 1935-1937). The English version of the sentence suggests nothing but Bubnov's vanity. The Russian original, however, contains a rude but effective allusion into the bargain.³² The letter “Б” is a universally understood reference to the Russian “four-letter” equivalent for the word “whore.” The reader cannot fail to see the allusion. It must be a pointer to Bubnov's moral unreliability; a contemporary who identified the personage as Tolstoy would first of all think of the writer's “change of landmarks” as selling himself. I believe Tolstoy was after a leading position in the Russian literary scene like he had in 1919 in Paris for a short time before the coming there of stronger and more authoritative senior writers. Indeed, in Berlin in 1922-1923 he headed a newspaper and a publishing house and became a leader of a literary movement.

The scattered physical traits of Bubnov fall together into a face familiar from photographs: he was “a bearish, balding man of thirty, with a huge forehead, deep-set eyes and a square chin. He smoked a pipe, sucking in his cheeks deeply with every puff, wore an old black bow tie...”³³ The hero of *Glory*, the young Martyn, was “much taken with Bubnov's energetic, rotund delivery and with his quite justified fame.”³⁴

Bubnov is described in *Glory* as an oversize figure “reigning justly” over the émigré literary small fish:

Bubnov's flat was frequented by the émigré literary set – fictionists, journalists, pimply young poets; in Bubnov's opinion these were all people of middling talent, and he reigned over

³¹ Nabokov, Vladimir. *Glory*. London, Weidenfeld and Nikolson, 1972, p.140.

³² Набоков Владимир. Подвиг. Собрание сочинений русского периода. В 5 тт. Т.3. СПб., Симпозиум, 2000. С. 200. (Nabokov, Vladimir. Podvig. *Collected Russian Language works*. In Five Volumes. Volume Three. Sankt-Petersburg, 'Symposium', p. 200).

³³ *Glory*, p.140.

³⁴ Ibid.

them justly, hearing out, with his hand over his eyes, yet another poem about nostalgia for the homeland or recollections of St. Petersburg (with the Bronze Horseman inevitably present) and then saying, as he unscreened his beetling brows and kneaded his chin, “Yes, that’s good.” Then, focusing his pale-hazel eyes on some fixed point, he would repeat “Good” with a less convinced intonation; and, one again changing the direction of his gaze, he would say “Not bad, and then, “Only, you know, you make Petersburg a little too portable.” And thus, gradually lowering his evaluation, he would reach the point where he muttered in hollow tones, with a sigh, “That stuff is all wrong, all unnecessary,” and dejectedly shake his head; upon which, abruptly, with vivid enthusiasm he would thunder out a poem by Pushkin. Once, a young poet took offence and objected, “That’s by Pushkin, and this is by me,” Bubnov thought for a moment and replied, “Still, yours is worse.”³⁵

In the original the personage is made more impressive: he reads Pushkin “s bleskom, s vostorgom” – literally: “burst out brilliantly, ecstatically with a poem of Pushkin.”³⁶

The verbal sketch of Bubnov is a very exact portrait of Tolstoy in Berlin. Photographs of that time confirm the details. We know that Tolstoy had hazel (karié) eyes and smoked the pipe. The characteristic somewhat theatrical gestures of Bubnov like the shading of his eyes with a palm of his hand recall in memory the extravagant body language by Bulgakov’s personage Bondarevsky in *Black snow* in whom Tolstoy is easily recognized - as well as the playful postures of Novodvortsev.

Fig.2

Bubnov enjoys the glory, his Russian is charming, he is brilliant in conversation, he imposes a cult of Pushkin on his audience. Interestingly, the hero of Nabokov’s largely autobiographical hero of *Dar* (The Gift) written five years later develops a similar Pushkin cult.

Like Novodvortsev, Bubnov’s is tortured by literary jealousy; he reigns over humble beginners but talented young writers drive him gloomy: “Then again, there would be occasions when some newcomer brought a really fine piece, whereupon Bubnov – especially if the piece was in prose – would grow strangely glum and remain out of sorts for a few days.”³⁷

Bubnov’s fall.

³⁵ *Glory*, p.141.

³⁶ *Podvig*, p.201.

³⁷ *Ibid.*

Bubnov's second portrait in *Glory* refers to the time when he becomes a target of an émigré literary row and the ensuing newspaper campaign against him. The reason for the row is not explained in the novel, not a word is said about its possible political nature. The hero did not meet Bubnov since spring. In autumn he visits the writer and sees a broken man:

*Bubnov was sitting on the bed, clad in black trousers and an open shirt, his face was swollen and unshaven, his eyelids inflamed. <...> He was not drunk but neither could one call him sober. His thirst had passed, but everything in him had been twisted out of shape and shaken loose by the hurricane; his thoughts wandered about looking for their old dwellings and finding only ruins. <...> "They're baiting me," Bubnov kept repeating fiercely, and his face with the deep orbits looked rather ghastly*³⁸.

The passage points to the wave of anti-Tolstoy's publications in the emigre press in connection with his work in *Nakanune*. In the novel it is the negative reviews of his books that bother the writer. He explains them by personal reasons: "[Bubnov] had a tendency to assume that all disparaging reviews of his books were inspired by extraneous considerations, by envy, personal dislike, or the desire to avenge an offence"³⁹. These negative reviews contradict the author's initial statement that Bubnov is a very good writer: "Bubnov, whose writing career had begun in exile, had already had three excellent novels brought out by a Russian émigré publisher in Berlin, and was now writing a fourth."⁴⁰ The literary biography summarized in this last sentence is very much like that of Tolstoy: after some success in 1915-1916 as a war journalist and playwright it was in exile that he became a leading prose writer: the three books mentioned in *Glory* might have been *Nikita's Childhood*, the first version of his revolutionary novel *The Calvary* and the science fiction *Aelita*. Originally published in émigré literary periodicals in Paris or Berlin, all three appeared as books in Berlin in 1922-1923.

Glory stresses the unreliability of Bubnov; he is a fickle friend, and, in many indirect meanings, a thief: he "steals" Martyn's girlfriend Sonia who did not really love Martyn; when Martyn was courting Sonia they together invented a fictional totalitarian land, the awful Zoorlandia; one day Martin reads about their Zoorlandia in a fresh Bubnov's novella in an émigré newspaper – obviously, Sonya had told him about it, and Bubnov "plagiarized" it. While complaining to Martyn on his hardships, Bubnov starts sobbing, but that does not prevent him from another "theft": soon Martyn buys a

³⁸ *Glory*, p.194-195.

³⁹ *Op.cit.*, p.195.

⁴⁰ *Op.cit.*, p.140.

newspaper with Bubnov's excellent new story for which he has "stolen" the striped college tie Martyn wore on the visit to him. A link is built between Bubnov's immorality and his recent literary failures: Martyn finds his novella about Zoorlandia horrible. The motif of literary theft may reflect Tolstoy's famous plagiarisms of mid-20s (as from Gleb Alekseev, Karel Čapek, and A.Vetlugin⁴¹ when he, in his special status of "the Soviet count," felt that everything was permitted to him and lost all shame.

The young hero of *Glory* is not a writer but a naive idealist eager to do something real to free Russia. He is sent by a secret émigré organization on a mission across a Russian border and disappears forever. The theme of a "return to Russia" thus becomes central in the novel. The return that Martyn chooses is secretly opposed in *Glory* to the return chosen by Bubnov's prototype.

"Envy" and "fame".

Both Nabokov's writers have psychological traits in common besides physical: envy for the young and jealousy of them. Novodvortsev keeps noticing his own influence in the work of the young and is angry that no one else is aware of it:

*And not the first time he had detected, in their immature narratives, echoes—not yet noted by the critics—of his own twenty-five years of writing; for Goliy's story was a clumsy rehash of one of his subjects, that of The Verge, a novella he had excitedly and hopefully composed.*⁴²

The motif of jealousy is soon repeated: the writer

*was waiting, meekly and drearily, in the hope that the critic might perhaps say the words that he, Novodvortsev, was embarrassed to pronounce: that the subject was Novodvortsev's, that it was Novodvortsev who had inspired the image of that taciturn fellow...*⁴³

Another semantic axis that connects the personage of the story with that of the novel is the motif of "fame". In the English version, Nabokov mentions Novodvortsev's "secure but pallid reputation." In the original it goes a bit differently: "prochnoi, no tuskloi slave" (durable but dim fame)⁴⁴. Nabokov preferred to translate 'tuskloi' as 'pallid.' The

⁴¹ Толстая Елена. Деготь или мед: Алексей Толстой как неизвестный писатель (1917-1923). М., РГГУ, 2006. С.546-551. (Tolstaia, Elena. *Degot' ili med: Aleksei N. Tolstoy kak neizvestnyi pisatel' (1917-1923)*. Moscow, RGGU Publishers, 2006, p. 546-551).

⁴² A Christmas Story.

⁴³ Ibid.

⁴⁴ Rozhdestvenskii rasskaz, p. 531.

adjective is repeated to hammer the motif in: “His name well known. But his fame was pallid, pallid (No tusklaia slava, tusklaia...⁴⁵).

In *Glory*, Bubnov’s fame is called “justified”.⁴⁶ The original has “zasluzhennaia (deserved) fame.”⁴⁷

The attitude here is quite different from the angry irony of the 1928 story. What might have happened in the two years between 1928 and 1930? The answer may be in the text of the novel: Bubnov “was writing a fourth [book], about Christopher Columbus – or, rather, about a Russian scrivener who by miracle became a sailor on a caravel of Columbus.”⁴⁸ A historical novel about a medieval Russian who is transported to European cultural space and witnesses great historical events suggests Tolstoy’s novel *Peter I* (1929) about the opening of the medieval Muscovy to the greater world. Tolstoy described new European realities in a juicy mixture of modern and old Russian; the book was strikingly successful. What *Peter I* meant to Alexei Tolstoy literary biography is hard to underrate. The writer was approaching fifty. For several years he had been in a deep artistic decline. Then suddenly he wrote *Peter I*. It was like pulling himself out of a quagmire by the hair. Even Bunin, Tolstoy’s enemy, congratulated him. That may be one reason why *Glory* has captured a more balanced approach to the older writer than “The Christmas story”: it showed that Tolstoy was a true writer again. . It might be for many other reasons: one of them probably was. Another reason must have been preserving Bubnov’s background status. Indeed, Nabokov stayed short of projecting on Bubnov any unacceptable political doings. Definitely it was not the desire to soar above politics: in “Tyrants Destroyed,” in *An Invitation to a Beheading*, in *Bend Sinister*, Nabokov meets evil face to face.

Many years later Nabokov said this to his pupil Alfred Appel’s about Tolstoy in Berlin:

*He was a writer of some talent and has two or three science fiction stories or novels which are memorable. But I wouldn’t care to categorize writers, the only category being originality and talent.*⁴⁹

⁴⁵ Op. cit., p.535.

⁴⁶ *Glory*, p.140.

⁴⁷ Podvig, p.200.

⁴⁸ *Glory*, p.140.

⁴⁹ Appel, Alfred. An Interview with Vladimir Nabokov. *Wisconsin Studies in Contemporary Literature*, vol. VIII, no. 2, spring 1967, p.127-152.

The science fiction stories Nabokov was referring to must be Tolstoy's novels *Aelita* (1923) and *Giperboloid inzhenera Garina* (1926). Possibly the author's refusal "to categorize writers" has a wider meaning here than categorizing them by literary genres.

For some reason, Nabokov scholars have not noticed Bubnov's striking resemblance to Aleksei Tolstoy in physical appearance or biographical detail. In the same interview Appel had asked Nabokov about a possible prototype of this figure and the answer was Ivan Lukash. Indeed, Bubnov speaks about "portable Petersburg" which is a phrase from a review article written by Lukash. But in all probability Nabokov lied to Appel. Ivan Lukash (1892-1940) was seven years older than Nabokov, a former White officer who after dabbling in war journalism came to Berlin where he became an insignificant historical writer. He was Nabokov's good friend and only co-author: they wrote together sketches for cabaret theaters. But he was neither a literary maître nor an immoral person. Indeed, Lukash's only feature in common with Bubnov is his baldness. Appel also asked Nabokov specifically about Tolstoy in Berlin obviously presuming some relationship between them; but Nabokov staunchly denied the very idea. His prose, however, tells another story.