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Socio-Cultural and Historical-Political Themes in V. Nabokov's Novel *Camera Obscura*

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Annotation. Despite the fact that V. Nabokov paid attention to the social and socio-cultural characteristics of the characters and space, a significant part of the information about the period of their formation is given retrospectively, goes beyond the boundaries of the plot actions. This indicates, on the one hand, the shift of socio-cultural and political issues to the periphery of the figurative and motivic-thematic structure of the novel, on the other hand, that Nabokov implicitly shows interest in this area, creating an unaccented in the narrative, but capacious image of German society of the 1920s. The analysis revealed the following: methods of describing the city's socio-cultural locations and episodic non-plot characters (depersonalization, non-mention, opposition, etc.); a collective image of different social groups of German society, as well as V. Nabokov's views on contemporary historical and socio-cultural processes taking place in Europe. The writer expresses a negative and ironic attitude towards the proletariat, because its representatives demonstrate an aggressive strategy of behavior to satisfy physiological and social, but not human spiritual needs, and are characterized by a lack of morality and erudition. Nabokov also notes the aggressive replacement of elitism by mass art, which leads to the intellectual degradation of the society. Flirting with the tastes of the masses and value relativism leads representatives of the bourgeois intelligentsia, embodied in the image of Bruno Kretschmar, to the inability to resist the expansion of the social lower classes, both in the cultural and social spheres of life.

Keywords: literature of the Russian diaspora, image, motif, socio-cultural space, image of the proletarian, non-plot characters, mass art, Nabokov

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Социокультурная и историко-политическая тематика в романе В. Набокова «Камера обскура»

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Аннотация. Несмотря на то что В. Набоков уделял внимание социальным и социокультурным характеристикам пространства и персонажей, существенная часть информации о периоде их становления дается ретроспективно, выходит за границы сюжетных действий. Это свидетельствует, с одной стороны, о смещении социокультурной и политической проблематики на периферию образной и мотивно-тематической структуры романа, а с другой — что Набоков имплицитно проявляет интерес к этой области, создавая неакцентированный в повествовании, но емкий образ немецкого общества 1920-х годов. В процессе анализа раскрыты приемы описания социокультурных локаций города и эпизодических внесюжетных персонажей (обезличивание, неупоминание, противопоставление и др.); собирательный образ разных социальных слоев немецкого общества, а также взгляды В. Набокова на современные ему исторические и социокультурные процессы, протекающие в Европе. Писатель выражает негативное и ироничное отношение к пролетариату: его представители демонстрируют захватническую стратегию поведения для удовлетворения физиологических и социально-бытовых, а не духовных потребностей, характеризуются отсутствием нравственности и эрудиции. Набоков также констатирует агрессивное замещение элитарного искусства массовым, что приводит к интеллектуальной деградации общества. Заигрывание со вкусами масс и ценностный релятивизм приводят представителей бюргерской интеллигенции, воплощенной в образе Бруно Кречмара, к неспособности противостоять экспансии социальных низов как в культурной, так и в социальной сферах жизни.

Ключевые слова: литература русского зарубежья, образ, мотив, социокультурное пространство, образ пролетария, внесюжетные персонажи, массовое искусство, Набоков

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Introduction

Nabokov's creativity began in the 10–20th of the XX century – the time of major events and important historical processes, including the First World War, the October Revolution and the Civil War in Russia, which led to mass emigration. These events could not but affect the personality and creativity of the writer, whose art was devoted to the authentic German and Russian emigrant reality in the 1920th and 1930th.

However, Nabokov's multiple direct statements about his non-political nature and rejection of active forms of social and public activity led to the formation of a biographical myth, which affected low interest of researchers in this aspect of his work. In our opinion that the priority of other topics does not mean that the writer's prose does not illustrate his ideas about the socio-cultural and historical-political processes of the early twentieth century. This was convincingly shown by A.A. Nakaryakova (Nakaryakova, 2015, pp. 194–195), providing an analysis of the images of the characters in Nabokov's novels involved in politics and social activity and providing a bibliographic review of the works of other researchers¹ (Chekalov, 2004; Eliseev, 2007; Pitzer, 2016), proving the writer's attention to historical and social processes.

The results presented in the article are part of social-cultural space image investigation in the novels of V. Nabokov's 'Berlin' period. It is supposed to reveal not only the spatial images, possessing socio-cultural semantics, but also the position of the characters in expanse, as well as to consider other elements of the poetics of the work of art, leading to the writer's ideas about the socio-cultural, historical and social structure of society.

In *Camera Obscura* (1931, published 1933), Nabokov places three characters from different social layer at the center of the plot (Magda is from the "proletariat", her parents are doormen, her brother works in a "bicycle factory" (Nabokov, 1991, p. 330); Kretschmar is a burgher according to his

¹ Vasiliev, A.D. (2013). *Intertextuality: precedent phenomena: a textbook*. Moscow: Flinta Publ. (In Russ.)

income level, an intellectual by profession, is related to art criticism; his wife's brother runs a theater office, that is, they do not create works of art, but are involved in this sphere; Horn is a talented cartoonist from the lower social classes, working for the interests of the mass public, unburdened by property and leading, when his financial situation allows, a bohemian lifestyle. The plot of the novel can be read literally: as an expansion of mass art to the detriment of elite culture and as an attempt (honestly unsuccessful) to seize the lower classes (Magda) and 'different rank' creative bohemia (Horn) of the means and opportunities of the burghers (Kretschmar) (Poleva, 2005).

The plot lines of the characters are important for reconstructing Nabokov's understanding of the processes taking place in German society in the 1920s, but author places information essential for understanding the socio-cultural themes of the novel outside the plot. It is the subject of the investigation. Even if the analyzed information concerns the central characters, it does not determine the development of their plot lines. In our opinion, when creating the novel, Nabokov followed the strategy that he highly appreciated in A.P. Chekhov's works. In a lecture devoted to him, Nabokov noted that Anton Pavlovich, "without worrying about social or ethical constructions", that is, without making them an end in themselves, more accurately and fully reveals pictures of "hungry, confused, slavish, ill-fated, peasant Russia than many other writers like Gorky..." (Nabokov, 1999, p. 330). In this article we analyze the characteristics of German society in the 1920th, expressed beyond the plot (through the poetics of space and the representation of images of episodic and central characters).

This study complements the ideas about the 'urban', or more specifically, 'Berlin text', expressed in the works of Nabokov scholars (Krivolutskaya, 2008; Morev, 2008; Thomas, 2004; Willis, 2008; Willis, 2008(2)).

Results and Discussion

The events of the plot in *Camera Obscura* take place in Germany in 1928, which is directly indicated in the first chapter; some information about the biographies of the characters in the period of the 1910th and 1920th is restored retrospectively. The central characters are native Germans, the plot unfolds in Berlin. This allows the writer to achieve authenticity, i.e. complete immersion in the German 'environment'.

The socio-cultural space in the novel is embodied through images of the urban topos. Berlin is presented through descriptions of streets and public places, while cultural and historical loci, monuments, etc. are not

mentioned, which is a significant minus-device: the high, elite architecture of the city is not included in the area of attention of the central and secondary characters, although one of them is an art critic.

Nabokov uses the technique of depersonalization, to describe Berliners: the characters are depicted not through an external or psychological portrait, but by designating their occupations (motorcyclist), professions (coal miner, saleswoman, concierge), which have a clear social connotation, or in a completely general way through collective nouns (tenants, boys) (Nabokov, 1991, pp. 330, 331). Depersonalization can be seen even in the portrait details (two bald men playing cards on the balcony, a young man, curly, in a colorful jacket) (Nabokov, 1991, p. 331). In this the way of creating a social group image of people, where personal qualities are either not manifested or do not matter to the participant who perceive them.

The main theme, although it is not clearly visible in the narrative, is the First World War. Magda's father and both lovers (Kretschmar and Horn) belong to the same generation – the front-line soldiers of the First World War (it is also reported that the elder brother of Anneliese, Kretschmar's wife, died in the war) (Nabokov, 1991, p. 367). Nabokov, who pays close attention to details, probably does not accidentally mention Horn's evades conscription and the military experience of Magda's father and Kretschmar. It turns out that war for German interests, benefits unites representatives of different 'classes', but the post-war social position emphasizes the inequality between them. Magda's father, shell-shocked on the battlefield, drags out a miserable existence as a doorman, and although he is emotionally involved in the discussion of political issues and defends 'bourgeois republicanism', he is powerless to change even his own life. Kretschmar, having returned from the war unharmed, retained his indifference to politics and the high social status of an art critic. Neither Kretschmar's lack of interest in politics nor Magda's father's fruitless passion for it have any effect: everyone has their own fate, determined by both their initial social standard of living and their personal characteristics.

In an extremely laconic but succinct manner, Nabokov, in the system of main and episodic characters, outlines the wide range of views and moods of representatives of different social strata of Germany and different attitudes toward participation in a historical event, dictated by personal choice and values: Magda's father is ideologically involved; Kretschmar does not avoid participation, although he is indifferent to the socio-political side of life and could buy his way out; and Horn, Magda's second lover, evades conscription, abandoning his sick mother and emigrating to America. For Kretschmar, participation in the war is dictated by personal

values that are completely incomprehensible to Magda: ‘When he spoke about the war, about how he suffered in the trenches, she wondered why, if he was rich, why he was not behind the scenes of active military actions’ (Nabokov, 1991, p. 360). Horn’s lack of patriotism and civic consciousness is connected to his pragmatic thoughts and lack of conscience, since his main value is his own well-being. For Nabokov, this is a significant stroke in the portrait of an immoral character, but in German society his evades conscription is not condemned: Horn freely returns to Germany when it is no longer profitable to live in America. At the same time, participation in the war in itself does not indicate morality and decency for Nabokov, as evidenced by the unflattering image of Magda’s father and the lack of morality in life choice of Kretschmar.

Along with the socio-cultural characteristics of time period and characters, Nabokov introduces historical, social and socio-political ones. They are not given in details, but very concisely. In addition to the military, another cross-cutting theme is related to the image of the ‘proletarians’. Magda’s father was shell-shocked during the First World War, a domestic tyrant limited in his ideas about the world, and Otto’s older brother was his father’s political opponent. The area of their life are a suburban street, a house where their parents serve as doormen, a tavern, a shop, a bicycle factory where Otto works. Few Nabokov’s phrases about the relationship between father and son, conveys the political mood of two generations: “Otto <...> disdained the burgher republicanism of his father and, sitting in a nearby tavern, talking about politics, pounding loudly the table, exclaiming: ‘A man should eat first, yes!’” (Nabokov, 1991, p. 330). Taking into consideration the historical context of the novel (the economic crisis in Germany in the 1920th, the ideas of the National Socialists gaining popularity), the tavern (a drinking establishment used for political declarations) serves to ironically reduce not only the image of Otto, a socially small and personally shallow person who considers himself knowledgeable in politics, but also, probably, in the whole program of the National Socialist Party, voiced by A. Hitler, as is known, in a beer hall (the so-called ‘beer hall putsch’ of 1923). Otto’s ‘axiom’ also points to the value priorities of the German proletarian: satisfaction of physiological needs comes first, and he does not formulate any others.

Otto, a minor episodic character, but as his sister’s relationship with Kretschmar develops, is mentioned in the narrative several more times, and each of his appearances adds to the extremely negative image. And according to Nabokov’s personal fate and his attitude to the events taking place in his homeland, it can be assumed that the writer uses neutral, non-

autobiographical material in relation to him to more openly express his attitude to the proletariat in general historical and social context. In the image of Otto, the animal nature (bull's neck, rudeness), lack of intelligence (stupid face notes Kretschmar), his hate for 'capitalists who buy the daughters of the poor' is mentioned (Nabokov, 1991, p. 332).

He, having accidentally met his sister, whose fate did not bother him at all, and noticing her financial well-being, extorts money from Magda, directly formulating an opinion about the right to this, and not on his own behalf, but on behalf of the 'working class': "There can be no talk of stealing", Otto said angrily. "This money is not yours, but money sucked out of our brother one way or another" (*italics authors*) (Nabokov, 1991, p. 362). When he comes to Kretschmar's apartment, and his plan with blackmail fails, Otto tries to show pride, verbally displaying feigned nobility and refusing Kretschmar's money (Give this money to the unemployed man...), but in fact – not intending to return it, and even regretting that 'it is not enough' (Nabokov, 1991, p. 366). Nabokov ironically designates the indignation at Kretschmar's wealth and the desire to enrich himself at his expense as a social need: "The social need was satisfied, now it was possible to go and satisfy human needs" (Nabokov, 1991, p. 366). In this episode, it is again emphasized that Otto's needs are limited to physiological ones, and the social ones are under the question (to assert the right to take money from a rich man) and are certainly not directed toward high intentions or nobility.

There is another minor character in the novel, like Magda and Otto's parents, related to the Swiss affair case. This is Schiefermüller, who served in the central character's house. Kretschmar introduces himself by his name when communicating with Magda for the first time and with Otto for the only time. The narrator provides his condemning opinion of Magda and Kretschmar's immoral connection with her: "You know I feel ashamed when the other tenants look at this... (bad word). But he is a decent and wealthy gentleman..." (Nabokov, 1991, p. 399). It turns out that his point of view, although concretely pragmatic, are more moral than those of the bourgeois intellectual. Against the backdrop of the clearly negative and ironically presented image of the Peters family, the portrait of Schiefermüller, described in a few lines, proves that Nabokov does not transfer the features of 'proletarian' impudence to all workers.

In two or three episodes, Nabokov reproduces the relationships between representatives of one subculture. In particular, Otto is shown surrounded by his 'buddies', Horn and Kretschmar are guests at a dinner party in the latter's apartment. At first glance, the difference between the

‘proletarians’ and the creative bohemians is that the former are united by the same goals and views, act together, and the latter are disunited: they are divided into small groups by interests and argue, expressing different points of view on creativity, art. However, both are disunited.

Otto Peters teams up with his ‘friends’ for a while to realize their common interest (frighten Magda, extort money from her). They do not support or help each other in everyday life, even within the family. Moreover, outside the crowd they behave differently, which reveals the falseness of their social masks and their social strategy (blackmail, aggression for the purpose of enrichment). For example, Otto’s ‘friend’ Kaspar, having met Magda alone, behaves differently: he does not intimidate her, but talks to her nicely, even shows sympathy (regret), thinking that the role of a kept woman will not lead her to anything good: “The girl will die <...> She will certainly die. She should marry a simple, good man” (Nabokov, 1991, p. 405). And at the same time, he condemns Magda’s choice, noting that he would not marry such a woman. He also reports that her family has moved to a ‘bad neighborhood’ and that her ‘father won’t last long...’ (Nabokov, 1991, p. 405), but Magda, like, apparently, her brother, who left to earn money, remains indifferent to this.

Representatives of the art world and creative bohemia are described by Nabokov with no less irony than the proletarians. They are all different, but it turns out that moral values are not decisive for most of them. Leaving the family and going beyond the boundaries of moral norms led to a narrowing of Krechmar’s former circle of communication: “... it was interesting for him to watch how others stopped coming...” (Nabokov, 1991, p. 372), but the rest supported him or remained indifferent. The apparent relativity of values makes immoral acts acceptable, since there is no total condemnation; social values (family, maintaining communication within one’s circle) turn out to be less important than personal ones. Although Bruno is not ready for a long-term situation of living with a kept woman. Prefers to get out of the social circle due to traveling to different European countries.

The second thing that Nabokov emphasizes is the ignorance of certain representatives of the bohemian world. The famous actress Dorianna Karenina has not read the works of L.N. Tolstoy and does not associate her last name with the heroine of the Russian writer’s novel. At the same time, to maintain her fame, she publishes her photo with a toy guinea pig – a character of popular culture. It turns out that the ‘movie diva’ is less popular than the caricatured image of the experimental animal Chipi, which also serves as a device for Nabokov’s ironic depreciation of Dorianna’s image.

The representatives of the bohemian world keeping up empty conversations that do not demonstrate either high erudition or a genuine interest in each other's personalities (they discuss both the Angora cats of the singer Olga Waldheim and the new works of their colleagues 'in the shop'). The task of each is to present themselves favorably in society: Whether it's the noble surname 'von Korovin' (the particle 'von' in German indicates noble origin, but the combination with a Slavic surname serves as a device of ironic derogation), or knowledge of the work of contemporaries (how do you rate the works of Kumping, I mean his last series, gallows and factories, do you know?) (Nabokov, 1991, p. 376).

Magda's lack of integration into his social circle, her inability to maintain a small (phatic) talk was noted by Kretschmar himself: she either looked at her interlocutor with incomprehension, or "...spoke complete nonsense..." (Nabokov, 1991, p. 375). But this does not affect the evening as a whole: everyone is focused on themselves and is not demanding of others. Moreover, the failure of another is a reason for joy and gloating, since against the background of someone else's failure, one's own self-esteem increases (Dorianna will demonstrate this in another situation – after the screening of the film in which Magda made a talentless debut).

None of the three central characters of the novel is a hero, namely, deserving the author's respect or at least empathy. The characters who evoke Nabokov's sympathy are on the periphery of the novel's plot development – these are Kretschmar's wife Anneliese and her brother Max. One can talk about mirror-like parallelism in the depiction of Kretschmar's wife and mistress, which has already been discussed in studies (Poleva, 2005, pp. 107–113; Zlochevskaya, 2018), as well as the brothers of these two women. If Otto Peters is a bright representative of the proletariat, then Max Hohenwart is an 'example' of the old European bourgeoisie. Unlike Otto, Max is educated, perceptive, successful in business, ready to stand up for his sister and niece and, in general, embodies the keeper of family values.

He is described as a large, clumsy, with shortness of breath man who cannot act quickly. Max's external portrait metaphorically conveys the general characteristics of the European bourgeoisie, unable to react quickly to changes and respond to the expansion of the proletariat (embodied in the image of Magda and Otto). Education, involvement in art (Max comes from a family of a theatre entrepreneur, the owner of a theater office), wealth did not help to maintain the previous family way of life, but he, like his sister Anneliese, retains personal dignity, loyalty to his values.

Let us agree with A.V. Zlochevskaya that it is Anneliese who can apply for the status of the heroine of Nabokov's novel; the author endows her

with the ability to love sincerely and selflessly; to experience moments of “almost supernatural insights” (Zlochevskaya, 2018). She and her brother do not vulgarize their lives by confronting Magda, do not claim to the space of the family apartment, which is ‘occupied’ by Kretschmar’s young lover. At the same time, Max does not give in to the pressure of ignorance and vulgarity: he gives a direct assessment of Kretschmar’s actions, shows dexterity that came from nowhere in order to ‘crack’ Horn with a cane in the pre-final episode.

However, despite Nabokov’s obvious sympathy for these characters, they have no future in German society of the 1920s – the only child in the family dies. And in general, if we take into account the semantic code associated with children as an image of the future, it should be noted that Horn does not strive to leave offspring, Magda is sincerely glad that she is childless, and Kretschmar, having betrayed the family, is indirectly guilty of the death of his daughter.

Conclusion

The conducted research proves V. Nabokov’s interest in socio-cultural and political themes, which are embodied, among other things, in the extra-plot poetics of the novel. Detailing portraits of bright representatives of different groups of German society and putting them in a historical context, Nabokov creates an unaccented, but capacious image of German society of the 1920s. The expansion of mass art in the cultural sphere and the proletariat in the social sphere has no creative basis and puts the future of Germany under the question. The author’s open irony in relation to the German proletarians who want to improve their well-being or social status without working on themselves, by seizing the resources of other people, allows us to hypothetically assume that Nabokov used non-autobiographical material to frankly express his opinion on the processes in German society that correlate with historical events in Russia.

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