Teaching *Poshlost*: Texts and Contexts

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Being a “teacher of literature,” I tend to focus on Vladimir Nabokov’s strangeness and difficulty as a writer, but as a Russianist, it is always tempting to see things the other way around: in practical terms, Nabokov’s close connection with American culture means that his work, however challenging, can potentially serve U.S. students as a more easily negotiated path into the broader field of Russian literature, a kind of gateway drug, if you will. After all, the usual obstacles of translation appear to have been hauled away, at least at first glance, and while other Russian writers might demand knowledge of unfamiliar ideological contexts in order to be understood “correctly,” Nabokov, with his self-professed “vague old-fashioned liberalism,” seems by contrast much nearer to American mores and manners.¹ On the other side of all the puzzles and puns, some students perceive a kindred spirit, and what is more, the author himself declared the same affinity: “It is in America that I found my best readers,” Nabokov tells one interviewer in 1962, “minds that are closest to mine.”²

Of course, 1962 is not 2022. Are we still Nabokov’s “best readers”? After all, contexts and values change or, better, become contested, or they decay with time and have to be articulated anew. How much does that change, or render contestable, the way we should read a book—any book, but especially Nabokov’s books? To what degree, for that matter, is the context in which they were written still properly accessible to us, to what degree does their material existence as writing already unmoor them from that context,
from the values they would bear? Does a proper reading of a book have to reproduce or mimic the context of its original production in toto (think Nabokov’s translation of Alexander Pushkin’s *Onegin*) or is it folly to imagine we can do so (think *Pale Fire* or the translation machine in *Bend Sinister*). This is one problem we have to consider, one that Nabokov’s works themselves seem to raise persistently.

Here is another: in reading Nabokov we find that there are in fact some particularly Russian cultural obsessions that need to be reckoned with, and one of the most important of these is no doubt the seemingly untranslatable concept of *poshlost’*, which Nabokov first glosses for his Anglophone audience in *Nikolai Gogol* (1944) as “not only the obviously trashy, but also the falsely important, the falsely beautiful, the falsely clever, the falsely attractive.”

*Poshlost’* is both a regular theme in Nabokov’s fiction and anathema to his aesthetics, one of the wellsprings of his art and its kryptonite, as it were; accordingly, in the monograph course I teach on his work I usually devote one or two lectures to elaborating the concept for my students, both in regard to how Nabokov seems to understand it and the way it operates more broadly in Russian culture. Nabokov is often credited with introducing *poshlost’* as a new word to the English language,⁴ and at the peak of his post-*Lolita* celebrity discussion of the term became modish enough in the United States that a publication as middlebrow as *Time* magazine could run an article on it, hailing both the word’s novelty and its necessity even as it clumsily mispronounced it as “push-lost.”⁵ That Nabokov introduced the word into English is true, though only to a point: the literary critic D. S. Mirsky mentions it in 1927, in a chapter on Gogol in his history of Russian literature (defining it as “self-satisfied inferiority”), but Nabokov brings it to a substantially larger auditorium and, of course, with considerably more artistic verve.⁶ However, it is also the case that, unlike Russian words such as “intelligentsia,” *poshlost’* has hardly ventured off on its own since. After all, for a word to belong to a language, it has to become to some degree common, and in English *poshlost’* still really belongs to Nabokov alone.

In Russian culture, however, the circumstances are rather different—the word circulates, it has a history. To begin giving students a sense of this, one obvious place to start is the dictionary. Kuznetsov’s *Bol’shoy tolkovyi slovar’ russkogo iazyka*, for instance, records three basic meanings for *poshlost’*, or rather the adjectival form *poshlyi*, from which the abstract noun derives:
1) Base, insignificant \[nichtozhnyi\] in relation to the spiritual or moral. *Poshlyi person, poshloe society, poshlaia milieu.* Expressing, revealing such qualities. *Poshlyi tone, poshlaia grin.*


If we consider these senses separately, we see that there is nothing so inef-fable about them that they resist translation into English in and of them-selves. Rather, the main problem seems to be a lack of a single English word that encompasses all three at once, “banality, lack of spirituality, and sexual obscenity,” as Svetlana Boym, for instance, catalogues them in her own more recent (and very useful) analysis of the concept.\(^8\) Nabokov, writing in his monograph on Gogol a half century earlier, appears to be saying something similar, that “various aspects of the idea which Russians concisely express by the word *poshlost’* [...] are split among several English words.”\(^9\) Yet if we look back at the gloss of *poshlost’* in Nikolai Gogol I’ve cited above—that *poshlost’* is “not only the obviously trashy, but also the falsely important, the falsely beautiful, the falsely clever, the falsely attractive”—we should already sense that Nabokov is aiming for something more complicated than the standard dictionary definition, and that at the same time he is setting some parts of that definition to the side. What is the difference? Once students have the dictionary definition of *poshlost’* in hand, their task is to read Nabokov’s defini-tion closely and try to figure it out.

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At this point, as an instructor, you actually have a choice between two texts in which Nabokov defines *poshlost’* that you can assign to your students, and each has its advantages and disadvantages for discussion. The first is the twelve pages of Nikolai Gogol that Nabokov devotes to unpacking the concept, while the second is shorter, “Philistines and Philistinism,” an essay included in Lectures on Russian Literature that recycles bits and pieces from the definition in the Gogol book for a more general audience, namely his European literature survey at Cornell. The latter text, pedagogically speaking, is a simpler option in some respects, but if you opt for Nikolai Gogol instead, it at least
warrants a few remarks. For one, “Philistines and Philistinism” slightly clarifies the gloss we started out with—here, *poshlost’* is “not only the obviously trashy, but *mainly* the falsely important,” etc.\(^\text{10}\) For another, the essay oddly enough seems considerably less bothered about the complexities of translating *poshlost’* into English, for toward its conclusion we find Nabokov renders the word succinctly and without any suggestion of remainder as “smug philistinism,” with “philistine” defined at the outset as “a full-grown person whose interests are of a material and commonplace nature, and whose mentality is formed of the stock ideas and conventional ideals of his or her group or time.”\(^\text{11}\) Lastly, if your course is primarily focused on *Lolita*, Nabokov’s least Russian novel, then “Philistines and Philistinism” is a logical supplementary reading if you want to explain, with less of an extended detour into Russian culture, what Nabokov means in his afterword when he writes, “Nothing is more exhilarating than philistine vulgarity.”\(^\text{12}\)

The word *philistine* of course comes with its own complicated genealogy. Most famously deployed in Matthew Arnold’s *Culture and Anarchy* (1868–1869), wherein Arnold implores Victorian England to see beyond its fetishization of the mere “machinery” of material culture in favor of its spiritual or aesthetic realization as “sweetness and light,” the term is quite explicit about drawing a line between those who would ostensibly “have” culture and those who would not. In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries students in German university towns used *Philister* as a derogatory term for uneducated local citizens, that is, non-students or “townies,” in the jargon of North American liberal arts colleges, and before that in ancient Israel it had a meaning similar to what *barbarian* implied for the Greeks.\(^\text{13}\) Today we might deem both of these historical uses elitist or exclusionary, but it is important to note that Nabokov, for his part, unlike Arnold, takes pains to deny that philistinism as a mode of being necessarily has anything to do with a particular body politic or political economy. “Philistinism is international,” Nabokov writes, “It is found in all nations and in all classes. An English duke can be as much of a philistine as an American Shriner or a French bureaucrat or a Soviet citizen.”\(^\text{14}\) Whether or not we want to take Nabokov at his word here, starting with examining the origins of the term can serve as a good way to begin asking students what the grounds for deciding what does and does not constitute *poshlost’* might be, if indeed the decision is not to be based on an us-them notion organized around national culture or class.
What is certain, in any event, is that in “Philistines and Philistinism” Nabokov clearly opposes *poshlost’* to what we might best describe as aesthetic education. Indeed, Nabokov even suggests that it is the latter that generates the former category: “It is possible that the term itself has been so nicely devised by Russians because of the cult of simplicity and good taste in old Russia,” he writes. Boym, interestingly, counts this statement as “one of the least ironic sentences in Nabokov, bordering on the banal,” and in her defense Nabokov’s subsequent claim, that “in the old days a Gogol, a Tolstoy, a Chekhov in quest of the simplicity of truth easily distinguished the vulgar side of things” strangely suspends, in a way that I like to think is very un-Nabokovian, any concerns we might have about irony when reading all three of the writers he lists in search of “truth.” After all, if one concurs with Nabokov’s general argument in *Nikolai Gogol*, then Gogol’s whole talent and tragedy consists precisely in the fact he could only convey the vulgar side of things—when he tried to go further, toward a Russian version of “sweetness and light” with the continuation of *Dead Souls*, he lost his genius as a writer.

Historically speaking, Gogol’s failure is part and parcel of a utopian branch of the discourse on *poshlost’* in Russian culture, one that imagines *poshlost’* as a malaise that must be transcended not just in individual works of art but collectively, by society as a whole. Boym’s study is particularly attentive to this aspect of the problem, drawing connections between the way nineteenth-century Russian literature dwells on *poshlost’* and how it later becomes a major fixation in the Soviet avant-garde (for example, Mayakovsky, Constructivism), a link Nabokov is not really willing or intellectually equipped to consider. In this regard, though, “Philistines and Philistinism” is also useful in that it gives us a slightly clearer hint than *Nikolai Gogol* does about one of the factors that draws Nabokov away from this utopian tendency, namely, his debt to the French novelist Gustave Flaubert, for it is Flaubert that supplies Nabokov here with one more one-word translation for *poshlost’*, one that Nabokov treats as effectively interchangeable with “smug philistine”—“bourgeois.” In both *Nikolai Gogol* and “Philistines and Philistinism” Nabokov warns his reader against confusing the Flaubertian sense of the term with the Marxist one: for Flaubert, “bourgeois” is not a class designation but a synonym for *bêtise* (“I call a bourgeois anyone who thinks basely”), or as Nabokov puts it, it is a “state of mind, not a state of pocket.” But what distinguishes Flaubert’s war on cliché from the Russian war on *poshlost’* is precisely Flaubert’s unrelenting irony. Unlike Gogol’s struggle with *Dead Souls*, in *Madame Bovary* Flaubert
harbors no aspirations toward rescuing characters like Emma Bovary or Homais from banality, or ultimately even escaping from it himself ("Madame Bovary, c’est moi!") , and the goal of his unfinished Dictionary of Received Ideas was even more radical: “If properly done,” Flaubert writes, “anyone who ever read it would never dare open his mouth again, for fear of spontaneously uttering one of its pronouncements.”21 We will come back to Flaubert.

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For my part, as useful as “Philistines and Philistinism” is, when I teach on poshlost’ I prefer to use Nabokov’s definition in Nikolai Gogol, first, because it allows for a more sophisticated approach to the topic, and second, because the text demands closer reading—to abuse the old writing and rhetoric classroom cliché, it shows more than it tells.

As said, when Nabokov starts out translating the “idea” of poshlost’ in Nikolai Gogol, or poshlust, as he unconventionally proposes transliterating it there, he declares that it has no single-word equivalent in English or the other European languages he knows, even though we know he will come up with ones in English and French later. But, for the moment, when it comes to finding other words to use as brass tacks, so to speak, he doesn’t really seem to be attempting to cover all three of the senses found in the dictionary equally:

English words expressing several, although by no means all aspects of poshlust are for instance: “cheap, sham, common, smutty, pink-and-blue, high falutin’, in bad taste.” My little assistant, Roget’s Thesaurus, (which incidentally lists “rats, mice” under “Insects”—see page 21 of Revised Edition) supplies me moreover with “inferior, sorry, trashy, scurvy, tawdry, gimcrack” and others under “cheapness.”22

All the dozen words that Nabokov proposes may overlap with the dictionary entry in one way or another, but of the first six a majority are more explicitly about value, specifically, they measure a devaluation of value, a frayed relation with it—we might see them as qualified versions of dictionary senses one and three. That Nabokov fills out the rest of his dozen with the aid of a thesaurus entry for “cheapness” would seem to confirm that this is the common denominator—and not, say, “smutty,” which is the only nod in his list toward dictionary sense two—although the demonstrable unreliability of this “little assistant” also suggests that positing similarities at the expense of differences
might be part of the problem as well. *Poshlust* here is sweetener (“pink-and-blue”) instead of sugar in your coffee, an inadequate substitute for the real thing, and as Nabokov will explain later, it “is especially vigorous and vicious when the sham is not obvious and when the values it mimics are considered, rightly or wrongly, to belong to the very highest level of art, thought or emotion.” In short, while values can be said to operate in all three dictionary senses of *poshlost*, Nabokov’s list of provisional English equivalents in *Nikolai Gogol* focuses more narrowly on their mimicry (“To imitate or copy minutely, uncritically, or servilely, usually so as to emulate or aspire to parity with, and frequently with ridiculous effect”—OED).

Nabokov is not alone in situating *poshlost* as a problem of value. Consider the following, from the Soviet critic Lydia Ginzburg’s notebooks from the 1940s:

*Poshlost* in essence is a perversion of value, an incorrect handling of value. *Poshlost* either affirms as a value that which for genuinely cultured consciousness is not a value, or degrades what is valued, or it takes values developed in a cultural milieu inaccessible to it and applies them in the wrong place and in the wrong way; it tears them from an organic connection. *Poshlost* cannot exist where there is an organic connection among values, i.e., culture. Therefore popular [*narodnoe*] consciousness in its intellectual manifestations cannot be *poshloe*.24

Ginzburg’s description of the concept has much to recommend it, and in some ways it is more serviceable than Nabokov’s—while Nabokov might find it difficult to explain to people why a novel that seems “chock-full of noble emotion and compassion” can be *poshloe*, armed with Ginzburg’s criteria we see quite readily how, for instance, Amor Towles’s *A Gentleman in Moscow* (a recent Russia-related “bestseller” innocent students keep asking me about) qualifies as such: Towles, a former “investment professional” who might have spent his entire life condemned by the whims of global capital to gaze out at the world from luxury hotels, retires to write novels instead, and, without any convincing knowledge of Russian culture, tries to relay the Soviet experience through the eyes of an imaginary Russian aristocrat sentenced by the Cheka to lifelong imprisonment—in a luxury hotel, of all places. Write about what you know, as they say, but when one’s values are utterly twenty-first-century American and bourgeois—that is, when one’s command of high culture finds
expression above all in an impeccable sense for wine-food pairings—one will have difficulty mimicking the manners of anyone else, much less a Russian count. Mimicking literary values for Towles proves no less of a challenge. As an exercise, one might have students look at an excerpt and imagine what Nabokov would have thought of it:

...standing in the empty corridor across from a half-eaten bowl of borscht, the Count felt less like a philosopher than a ghost.

Yes, a ghost, thought the Count, as he moved silently down the hall. Like Hamlet’s father roaming the ramparts of Elsinore after the midnight watch... Or like Akaky Akakievich, that forsaken spirit of Gogol’s who in the wee hours haunted the Kalinkin Bridge in search of his stolen coat...

Why is it that so many ghosts prefer to travel the halls of night?26

Without going into specifics, I am reasonably sure Nabokov would fulminate against Towles’s writing as “bogus profundity,” to use a pejorative from *Strong Opinions*, but with Ginzburg we can diagnose the matter in a less obstreperous and more clinical way. Simply put, *A Gentleman in Moscow* will be perceived as trivial by a reader who enjoys a degree of sensitivity to its ostensible cultural milieu exceeding that of its author. Kendall Jenner defusing a protest against police violence in the United States with a can of Pepsi—the subject of a commercial a number of my students spontaneously identified as *poshlost’* during discussion in a Nabokov course in 2017—seems ridiculous for the same reason, but it is at the same time worse because it depoliticizes values associated with Black Lives Matter more than it simply mishandles them; among critics of the ad, many pointed to the utter banality of the messages on signs held up by the protesters depicted in it (not “End Systemic Racism in the U.S.!” but “Join the Conversation!”).27 Another related example connected to state violence instructive for the classroom: in 2021, during the protests that followed the arrest of Russian opposition leader Aleksei Navalny, the poet Lev Rubinstein called out media personality Ksenia Sobchak for what he saw as a particularly *poshlaia* reaction to events that she posted on Instagram. Sobchak uploaded two videos, one of riot police brutally kicking an elderly woman in the stomach and sending her to the ground, the other of protestors playfully kicking around a riot policeman’s helmet as if it were soccer ball. “Personally,” Sobchak commented, “I find it unpleasant to watch any cruelty or violence. From either side.”
A sentiment we can all endorse, Rubenstein concedes, but if you ask in turn if there was actually a head in that helmet you’ll get a furious answer: “What’s the difference!”28 On a much broader scale, the same erasure is at work in the cult of memory that Putinism has constructed around the Soviet victory over fascism in 1945, which over the course of the past decade has absurdly turned fascist itself—it is designed to suppress difference. To the uninitiated, it looks like mere kitsch, but by its own logic it is not perverting values, but preserving them, or rather excluding them from the field of politics. Indeed, its de facto slogan, Mozhem povtorit’ (“We can do it again,” or literally, “we are able to repeat”) banks on a conviction that the values of the past can be repeated without loss or alteration of meaning, which is to say without poshlost’. The practical effect of course is to foreclose any debate in Russian society over the past and condition the country for war.

In this case, then, what is detected as poshlost’ might seem to depend on context, but we can’t “both-sides” the situation either. One tends to perceive differences; the other only enforces similarities. To run through one more example, a student armed with Nabokov’s definition of poshlost’ will probably be unable to account for how Josef Stalin could pencil the word poshliak (male personification of the concept) in the margins of the Soviet writer Andrei Platonov’s story “For Future Use” when he read it in a Soviet journal in 1931, a scholium that, given the influence of its author, put an almost complete end to Platonov’s public career as a writer.29 But with Ginzburg’s framework it is more comprehensible: under Stalinism popular values were held to be identical with Soviet ones, after all, and Platonov was showing them being handled by the proletariat in the wrong way. Of course, I do not think that under the term “popular consciousness” Ginzburg understands quite the same thing as Stalin, but then this is precisely what is at issue. The baseline or context that Ginzburg uses to determine what would and would not be poshlost’ is itself a concept that is inherently political, that is, open to dispute. Furthermore, as a foundation for culture I suspect Nabokov would reject it entirely—this, after all, is the very stuff of which propaganda photographs of “lovely Kolkhos maidens and windswept clouds” are made.30 And if we’re reading Ginzburg critically ourselves, we’ll also register the work the metaphor of organicity performs for her in her definition—it naturalizes a culture, casting it as a living thing with a determinate relation to its origin rather than one that is constantly negotiated and renegotiated as value, a category that is fundamentally abstract, fluctuating, and arbitrary.
Having marked this sleight of hand though, we can also see that Nabokov pulls off something akin to it in his own argument in Nikolai Gogol, for just as he links the problem of poshlost’ to value, he suddenly veers away from it, or, in a rather obscure way, seeks to dehistoricize it. Having cycled through his inventory of English words covering different aspects of the Russian term, Nabokov runs the rule over them again, as it were, and writes:

All these however suggest merely certain false values for the detection of which no particular shrewdness is required. In fact they tend, these words, to supply an obvious classification of values at a given period of human history; but what Russians call poshlust is beautifully timeless and so cleverly painted all over with protective tints that its presence (in a book, in a soul, in an institution, in a thousand other places) often escapes detection.31

Where the English terms only denote value judgments contingent upon the historical moment in which they are made, poshlost’ is “beautifully timeless,” it effectively acquires the character of a Platonic form, and, in a kind of Bizarro World inversion of the stated rules of Nabokov’s own art (“Find What The Sailor Has Hidden”), its detection becomes a process of camouflage and discovery, an “idea” revealing itself rather than the product of time grinding away at markers of value; not, what was once original is cheapened through repetition, but a matter of appearance and essence, outer and inner, falsehood and truth, the delineation of which moreover requires a certain “shrewdness”—talent, genius. The net result is that a historical judgment becomes an aesthetic one.32

However, Nabokov’s position (which is also in a way ours: it does take talent to identify poshlost’) starts to look less secure if we take into account two complications: first, the temporality implied in the etymology of poshlost’, which Vasmer traces back to the past tense form of the verb “to go”, poshlo, making poshlost’ literally that which “has gone” or “what went”; and second, the fact that the signification of poshlyi itself clearly changes in Russian over time.33 Initially the word indicates nothing more than that which is traditional, habitual, or commonly used, without the negative connotations it accrues later; the relevant entry in Vladimir Dahl’s landmark nineteenth-century Russian lexicon, for instance, which was of course Nabokov’s constant companion in exile from his Cambridge years on, first lists “old, long-existing, that which has long been customary [chto izstari vedetsia]” as an obsolete sense
before moving on to others. Custom is repetition that would maintain value; we repeat it precisely to this end, because others have done so in the past. Just how, historically speaking, this sense of poshlyi flips over to its opposite, how it becomes repetition that erases value, is not necessarily clear: Boym contends that the negative sense of poshlost', what she calls “repetition gone sour,” develops into a stock idea among the Russian intelligentsia of the nineteenth century in response to anxieties of identity produced by post-Petrine modernization and the premium Romantic-era aesthetics puts on originality. As a concept, poshlost' would thus police the boundary between authenticity and imitation, but the underlying fear is that all culture—both traditional Russian and newly imported European—is mere fashioning, ungrounded. As Boym puts it, “How is it possible to distinguish between good and bad repetition? How do we draw the line between the conventions that constitute our cultural situation, and the trivialization that creates culture's malignant doubles?”

In light of the foregoing we may have ample reason to accuse Nabokov, as Boym does, of critical negligence for leaving most of these historical circumstances out of his account of poshlost', but on the other hand, we might also have to accept that in the main he tends to avoid handling questions through philosophical or historical generalizations when he thinks they can be better addressed through art. After all, that Nabokov recognizes in “Philistines and Philistinism” that poshlost’ presupposes an “advanced state of civilization” in which “certain traditions have accumulated in a heap and begun to stink” indicates that he is indeed aware of the problem as a historical one, even if the organic metaphor is still at work (instead of a green thumb, the critic of poshlost’ needs a nose for decomposition). Furthermore, we might also want to ask whether Nabokov’s fiction does not actually take up in a very complex and singular way some of the same general questions that Boym sees the concept of poshlost’ posing for Russian culture at large. Is it possible to distinguish between good and bad repetition? In the case of Speak, Memory, yes, triumphantly so, but in, say, “Return of Chorb,” The Luzhin Defense, or Lolita, the answers are decidedly less affirmative. Likewise, to return to a contrast I pointed out above, Nabokov exhibits an almost unshakable confidence that he can establish and accurately reproduce in English the contexts and conventions that constitute the Russian cultural situation of Eugene Onegin—but what is Pale Fire but a malignant double of the same project? Nabokov might well take a measure of refuge in Platonism in his definition of poshlost’, but in some of his writings he is more like a Kierkegaard, wondering whether the
difference between good and bad repetition is intelligible and, at the same
time, whether repetition, properly speaking, is even possible at all once irony
has a foot in the door.\textsuperscript{37}

If students have already read a reasonable number of Nabokov’s works
they should be able to grasp this relationship between \textit{poshlost’} and repetition
relatively easily, but if they are just getting started I like to conduct the follow-
ing exercise, which also doubles as further practice for pronouncing \textit{poshlost’}
properly in Russian, beyond the witty instructions Nabokov gives in \textit{Nikolai
Gogol}. I play the students a brief clip from 2014 of the Russian film director
Nikita Mikhalkov denouncing \textit{poshlost’} (again, the target is Ksenia Sobchak,
although this is more of a case of the pot calling the kettle black: Mikhalkov,
which a loyal mimic of state-sponsored values, even when the state exchanges those
values for others, is a notorious arch-\textit{poshliak} himself). In the clip, taken from
the cultural commentary program Mikhalkov regularly hosts on Russian state
television, he looks solemnly into the camera and, citing a famous line from
Chekhov, pronounces three words over Sobchak’s questioning the conse-
quences of the Russian war in Ukraine, as if he were a priest closing out a
sermon: “\textit{Poshlost’}...\textit{zveniashchaia poshlost’}!” The clip quickly spread as a meme
in Russia, and a number of Internet users uploaded it to Coub, a site that
generates gifs with sound so that the video can be run endlessly on a loop.
Watch it five or ten times, and each time, as Mikhalkov’s intonation rises on
the second syllable of \textit{zveniashchaia} (“resounding”) and the producers cue up
a dramatic melody to complement his pathos, you get a greater sense of what
damage sheer repetition can do to the meaning of an utterance.\textsuperscript{38}

4
Thus far we have largely kept to discussion of the first and third dictionary
senses of \textit{poshlost’}, but one thing students should also notice while compar-
ing Nabokov’s definition in \textit{Nikolai Gogol} with the dictionary is that the sec-
ond sense given in the latter, “containing something indecent or obscene,”
receives little direct attention. Those more acquainted with Nabokov’s work
ought to find this especially odd. After all, a whole series of patently \textit{poshlye}
female characters from his novels (for example, Martha in \textit{King, Queen, Knave},
Margot in \textit{Laughter in the Dark}, Marthe in \textit{Invitation to a Beheading}, Mariette in
\textit{Bend Sinister}, Armande in \textit{Transparent Things}) are characterized by a casually
soulless promiscuity, and Nabokov’s male paragons of \textit{poshlost’} are as a rule
no less crude when it comes to sex either—the difference perhaps is that their
crudeness often attempts to mimic artistic sense. A good local instance of this is M’sieur Pierre’s salacious conversation with Cincinnatus during their chess game in Invitation to a Beheading, but on a larger, more horrifying scale Humbert Humbert’s gestures toward aesthetic bliss as he describes statutory rape exemplify the pattern. Furthermore, that Nabokov skirts around obscenity in Nikolai Gogol seems all the more curious if we know something about Gogol, for it is not as if relevant examples of sexual indecency combining with other aspects of poshlost’ are difficult to find in his work as well (think Pirogov and the prostitute whom his doomed artist friend Piskarev chases after in “Nevsky Prospect,” Akaky Akakyevich mysteriously “playing the sybarite” in his bed in “Overcoat,” or simply the lewder allegorical angles of “Nose”). One critic suggests that Nabokov is limited in what he can say about the sexual side of poshlost’ by the more conservative social mores of his American audience in the 1940s, which would be ironic, but it would also explain why, apart from the presence of “smuty” among Nabokov’s partial English equivalents, the few references we do get to indecency in Nabokov’s definition are oblique: the punning transliteration of poshlost’ as poshlust, by which the Russian word becomes a kind of English portmanteau that fortuitously combines luxury with sensuous, despiritualized desire, or the fact that one of the French words Nabokov proposes as near models for pronouncing the “moist softness” of the final “t” of the Russian is émoustillant, “titillating.”

Finally, there is one of the more grotesque exhibits of poshlost’ Nabokov introduces, a photograph in a popular magazine of the “silk hosed dummy legs modeled on those of Hollywood lovelies and stuffed with candies and safety razor blades” that “kind people send our lonely soldiers.” It is worthwhile to have students analyze this specimen “cold,” and ask them what makes this especially poshloe in Nabokov’s eyes. Is it really the inordinate amount of “leg” that is being shown, as it were, which might well have scandalized the average upholder of public morals in 1944, or is it the gross incoherence of the image, a pinup turned piñata, that, among other things, points toward a popular ideal of female pulchritude via a “dummy” that unwittingly suggests its dismemberment? The assumption that it is the latter implies that sexual obscenity in and of itself is not the main factor in deciding if something is poshloe for Nabokov. It is not that it doesn’t matter at all though—it clearly does in the examples from his fiction we have mentioned above, and it is particularly urgent in a work like Lolita. But it is nevertheless telling that when Nabokov has to address the question of obscenity more directly in his
afterword to the same novel, he rejects the label of “pornography” not on the grounds that its subject matter is indecent but rather that as a rule, as a genre, it is unoriginal, in terms of style it is “limited to the copulation of clichés.” If we want to count this as contradiction or an evasion, we can, and we probably should if we don’t think that the only thing that matters in Lolita is style. But we should perhaps also be aware that the conceptual tension might well be at least in part one that Nabokov inherits from the culture. As Boym writes, “Many Russian native speakers perceive poshlost’ in relationship to pokhot’ (lust), although there is no etymological relationship between the two. Others, on the contrary, would deny the sexual connotations of the word (explicitly stated in the dictionary).” In everyday Russian speech, a poshliak is more often than not a boor who says crass things about women—think Trump in the Access Hollywood tape—but for a good illustration of Boym’s second point one can refer to the Russian poet Timur Kibirov, who, in a radio interview from 2004, vehemently insists poshlost’ and indecency ought to be separated as concepts “once and for all.” As support for his argument, Kibirov cites Henry Miller’s infamous 1934 novel Tropic of Cancer, which in his opinion certainly qualifies as indecent, but should not be considered poshlyi for one reason—because in terms of style Miller was doing something new (the choice of Miller as evidence is ironic, though, insofar as Nabokov would most likely have classed it with the modern novels “truffled with obscenities” and “the enlarged pores of dirty words” that he dismisses in Strong Opinions). Kibirov’s interviewer, the novelist Viktor Erofeev, counters that poshlost’ and indecency cannot be untangled so easily, that in the concept “one thing is superimposed on another.” This is certainly also the case in Nabokov. If morality proceeds from art in Nabokov rather than the other way around, then his reticence toward discussing indecency in any other terms than aesthetic ones makes sense—but if aesthetic values in Nabokov are themselves less stable than we think, where does that leave us?

5

In my course, the classroom discussion on poshlost’ leads to a short writing assignment (500 words) in which students are asked to isolate and describe one example of poshlost’ from contemporary culture and then defend their selection according to their understanding of Nabokov’s criteria. The three extended cases that Nabokov describes in Nikolai Gogol—Gogol’s German Lothario, Pop the Proud Donor (U.S. advertising), and the literary
“bestseller”—are the primary models, and as these are not straightforward, we read through them together closely before they start the assignment.

As a warm-up, it is a good idea to first browse through a few entries from Flaubert’s *Dictionary of Received Ideas*—which Nabokov, in contrast with his own examples, of course refers to as “a more ambitious work.” The goal behind each of Flaubert’s entries is, in effect, to evoke whatever truth the average bourgeois of his age has been conditioned to utter on a given topic without thinking.

**BIBLE**: The oldest book in the world.

**DARWIN**: The fellow who says we’re descended from monkeys.

**GIFT**: It’s the thought that counts.

**GRAPESHOT**: The only way to make the Parisians shut up.

**MATERIALISM**: Utter the word with horror, stressing each syllable. Then we “brainstorm” (a word fit for an entry itself) to come up with contemporary versions, like these:

- **ANTIFA**: Stress on the second syllable, or you may have to explain what “fa” stands for.
- **CONSERVATIVISM**: Quote Winston Churchill.
- **INSTITUTIONS**: Our real strength.
- **INVISIBLE HAND**: Only the market has one.
- **REFLECT**: A nice verb.
- **SHOPPING FOR COURSES**: Use interchangeably with “deciding between,” it’s the same thing.

In coming up with their own entries, the focus on words as such will usually lead a few students to connect *poshlost’* with the familiar campus debates around political correctness and free speech. Among other things, what this presents you with is a particularly good moment to discuss whether a concept like *poshlost’*—such as Nabokov understands it, such as Russian culture understands it, such as we might understand it—is intrinsically conservative. Historically, as a discourse, in many ways it is: one was reminded of this watching Putin’s *Hunger Games*-style war rally for his Special Military Operation in Ukraine, ludicrously titled “For a World without Nazism,” at Moscow’s Luzhniki stadium in March 2022, when one of its celebrity performers, the film actor Vladimir Mashkov, recited for the crowd one of the
nineteenth-century poet Fyodor Tiutchev's more vehement Slavophile poems, which, as it happens, echoes in part Arnold’s rhetoric in *Culture and Anarchy*:

Чем либеральней, тем они пошлее,
Цивилизация – для них фетиш,
Но недоступна им ее идея.

The more liberal they are, the more *poshlye*,
Civilization for them is fetish,
But its idea for them is out of reach.

“They” is Europe. Tiutchev’s poem ends swearing that in Europeans’ eyes Russians will never be seen as “servants of Enlightenment...only as their slaves,” and Mashkov wasted no time in connecting the poem to the present: “the slaves today are those who attempt to be politically correct before Europe and America.”50 One has to resist the notion that Tiutchev, or Mashkov for that matter, speaks for all of Russian culture though—Lev Rubinstein provides us with a counter-example above, and as dark as things look in Russia today there are many others.

Even in Flaubert, one of the targets in the early plans for the *Dictionary* is the alleged mediocrity of “the modern democratic idea of equality,” and elsewhere in his correspondence he writes: “The entire dream of democracy is to raise the proletariat to the level of bourgeois stupidity.”51 On the other hand, the actual entries in Flaubert’s dictionary do not really spare anything (“POLICEMAN: Bulwark of society”). Nabokov himself has more positive views of democracy, of course, though he also has his own vexed issues with equality (see *Bend Sinister*), and some of the items he includes in the inventories of *poshlost’* he shares in *Strong Opinions* (“an overconcern with class or race”) sound at best like privilege speaking today, even if Nabokov was a vocal opponent of segregation in the United States; likewise, Nabokov’s dismissal of books about “the sorrows of homosexuals” appears incomprehensibly callous, especially given the fate of his brother Sergei in Nazi Germany.52 The question, for me at least, is whether the way we read Nabokov necessarily has to mimic our idea of who he was, or whether even trying to—emulating Nabokov, in 2022, without recognizing the differences—does not itself end up being a form of *poshlost’*. “I write for myself in multiplicate,” Nabokov says at one other juncture in *Strong Opinions*, “a not unfamiliar phenomenon on
the horizons of shimmering deserts.” The first clause seems like a closed circuit, a context that determines values, but the doubles Nabokov creates for himself are by his own admission mirages. They disappear as we get closer. What happens next is reading.

Notes

2 Ibid., 10.
5 “In Russian it means vulgarity or triteness, but...Nabokov so expands the definition that it makes one wonder how the English language ever got along without it.” “And Now, Poshlost’,” *Time* (December 1, 1967), 118; https://content.time.com/time/subscriber/article/0,33009,712044,00.html
6 “The aspect under which [Gogol] sees reality is expressed by the untranslatable Russian word *poshlost’,* which is perhaps best rendered as ‘self-satisfied inferiority,’ moral and spiritual.” D. S. Mirsky, *A History of Russian Literature from the Earliest Times to the Death of Dostoyevsky* (1881) (London: A.A. Knopf, 1927), 193–194. It is worth noting that both Mirsky and Nabokov, in emphasizing the role of *poshlost’* in Gogol’s art, are taking a cue from Dmitry Merezhkovsky’s Symbolist-era study *Gogol and the Devil* (1906).
7 Bol’shoi tolkovyi slovar’ russkogo iazyka, ed. S. A. Kuznetsov (St. Petersburg: Norint, 1998), 950. All translations from Russian are mine unless indicated.
9 Nabokov, *Nikolai Gogol*, 63.
11 Ibid., 309–310.
13 “Now, the use of culture is that it helps us, by means of its spiritual standard of perfection, to regard wealth as but machinery, and not only to say as a matter of words that we regard wealth as but machinery, but really to perceive and feel that it is so. If it were not for this purging effect wrought upon our minds by culture, the whole world, the future as well as the present, would inevitably belong to the Philistines. The people who believe most that our greatness and welfare are proved by our being very rich, and who most give their lives and thoughts to becoming rich, are just the very people whom we call Philistines. Culture says: ‘Consider these people, then,
their way of life, their habits, their manners, the very tones of their voice; look at
them attentively; observe the literature they read, the things which give them plea-
sure, the words which come forth out of their mouths, the thoughts which make
the furniture of their minds; would any amount of wealth be worth having with the
condition that one was to become just like these people by having it?” Matthew
Arnold, Culture and Anarchy, edited by J. Dover Wilson (Cambridge: Cambridge UP,
1966). On the origins of the word, see OED.

14 Nabokov, “Philistines and Philistinism,” 310.
15 Ibid., 313.
16 Boym, Common Places, 41.
18 “I am re-reading Bovary for the hundredth time. So good, So good!” Vladimir
20 Gustave Flaubert, Lettres de Gustave Flaubert à George Sand, précédées d’une étude
par Guy de Maupassant (Paris: G. Charpentier, 1884), lxiv; Nabokov, “Philistines
and Philistinism,” 310. On distinguishing between the Marxist and Flaubertian
senses of “bourgeois,” see also Lectures on Literature, edited by Fredson Bowers (San
21 Gustave Flaubert, The Letters of Gustave Flaubert 1830–1857, selected, edited, and
translated by Francis Steegmuller (London: Faber & Faber, 1979), 176.
22 Nabokov, Nikolai Gogol, 64.
23 Ibid., 68.
24 Lidia Ginzburg, Zapisnye knizhki, vospominaniia, esse (St. Petersburg: Iskusstvo-
SPb, 2002), 165.
25 Nabokov, Nikolai Gogol, 69–70.
26 Amor Towles, A Gentleman in Moscow (New York: Viking, 2016), 123.
27 Pepsi ultimately withdrew the commercial, but the full version is still available on
28 Rubinstein also cites Ginzburg’s definition of poshlost’ in his essay. See Lev
Rubenshtein, “‘Sam-to ponimaiut?’ Lev Rubinstein o posholst’ i shevelenii
khvostami,” MBKh Media, February 27, 2021; https://mbk-news.appspot.com/ser-
ces/sami-to-ponimayut/. Sobchak’s Instagram post: www.instagram.com/p/CKZd
0csleV/?utm_source=ig_web_copy_link.
29 Platonov’s story first appeared in Krasnaia nov’ 3 (March) 1931; the copy of the
journal with Stalin’s marginal notes can be viewed here: https://kkos.ru/blog/all/plato
nov-1931/.
national, folklore, class, masonic, religious, or any other communal aura involun-
tarily prejudices me against a novel....”; Nabokov, Strong Opinions, 113.
31 Nabokov, Nikolai Gogol, 64.
32 It is certainly not a coincidence that, in the course of defining poshlost’, the only other
thing to which Nabokov grants immortality is “authentic literature.” Ibid., 68.
38 One of the posts on Coub: https://coub.com/view/259flm. The original broadcast of Mikhalkov’s program, BesogonTV, on YouTube: (www.youtube.com/watch?v=LRG0FPqSepE; see 26:45).
39 “When people ask me for advice” about sex, says Pierre to Cincinnatus, who has not asked for advice, “I always tell them, ‘Gentlemen, be inventive. There is nothing more pleasant, for example, than to surround oneself with mirrors and watch the good work going on there—wonderful!’” Vladimir Nabokov, *Invitation to a Beheading* (New York: Vintage, 1989), 145.
41 Nabokov, *Nikolai Gogol*, 63, 64. The other French word Nabokov suggests is restiez (one assumes these are not chosen altogether at random).
42 Ibid., 67.
44 Boym, *Common Places*, 303n49.
52 Nabokov, *Strong Opinions*, 101, 116. Sergei Nabokov was first arrested by the Nazis for his homosexuality in 1941 and died in Neuengamme concentration camp in 1945.
53 Ibid., 113.