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ЧЕХОВ, NABOKOV, AND THE BOX: Making a Case for Belikov and Lužin

In recently rereading Nabokov's lectures on Čexov, I started wondering whether there are any affinities between the two authors. Nabokov mentions one of them, the Nabokov family's dachshund puppy whose grandparents had been Dr. Anton Čexov's dogs.¹ In a more serious vein, Simon Karlinsky entitles one of his articles "Chekhov and Nabokov: The Lesser Russian Tradition."² For Karlinsky, the pairing of the two resides in their respect for the art form, as distinct from the ideological issues which constitute the literary domain of the "greater Russian tradition."³

In response, Nabokov wrote, "Mr. Karlinsky's 'Nabokov and Chekhov' is a very remarkable essay, and I greatly appreciate being with Anton Pavlovich in the same boat — on a Russian lake, at sunset, he fishing, I watching the hawk-moths above the water. He [Karlinsky] is right. I do love Chekhov dearly. . . . it is his works which I would take on a trip to another planet."⁴ And in a letter to Edmund Wilson, Nabokov called Čexov his predecessor.⁵ Placing Nabokov and Čexov in the same literary orbit, then, is highly appropriate.

It strikes me that Nabokov, in *Zaščita Lužina*, is doing the same thing as is Čexov in *Čelovek v futljare*. It is this similarity that I shall now address. In order to show the connections between Čexov's *Čelovek v futljare* and Nabokov's *Zaščita Lužina*, we shall have to examine box imagery in both works — what the boxes are, how they function, and what they mean.

As we know, Čexov underscores the image of a case, a box, by creating a frame story. He emphasizes the box by having the narrator Burkin tell the story as he is sitting *within* the barn, "concealed by darkness." Marva's inability to get out of her village, to leave her stove, her box, prompts Burkin's tale about Belikov, the teacher of Greek. The contours of Belikov's box are familiar to all of us — his coat, galoshes, umbrella, and his bedroom, "... tiny... like a box" ("... маленькая, точно ящик").⁶

Belikov is afraid of authority figures. If a newspaper article prohibits something, "... everything was clear. . . for him — these things were prohibited once and for all" ("это было для него ясно. . . ; запрещено — и баста.")⁷ A little later we are told, "The slightest infringement or deviation from the rules plunged him into dejection. . ." ("Всякого рода нарушения, уклонения, отступления от правил приводили его в уныние. . .").⁸ When he goes to speak to Kovalenko, his worst fear is that his superiors will discover some kind of improper behavior. He will tell the "director" about Var'enna's and Mixail Savvic's bicycle ride. He is a

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· afraid that his superiors will find out about his embarrassing tumble down the stairs.

He teaches the Greek languages, a fact which, in the debate about the classical languages raging in Russian educational and political circles of the nineteenth century, places him in the ranks of the conservatives, those clinging to the past. It turns out that Belikov is a child-person, afraid of sex and afraid of life.⁹ He will not hire a female servant because people might talk. He enjoys being with Var'enka and after her song he, "with a honeyed smile" ("сладко улыбаясь"), pays her his ultimate compliment: "The Ukrainian tongue in its sweetness and delightful sonority is reminiscent of the ancient Greek." ("Малороссийский язык своею нежностью и приятною звучностью напоминает древнегреческий.")¹⁰

He likes her, but something keeps him from taking any decisive action. What is this "something"? Why is he prevented from marrying her? She is not adverse to the idea. Belikov, at the very *moment* when he has the opportunity to move forward to the next stage of life, when he has the opportunity to climb out of his box of "shoulds," "rules," and "galoshes," panics. He backs down. He adds another layer of protective covering. Čехов writes, ". . . the decision to marry seemed to have a painful effect on him, . . . and [he—E.C.] seemed to retreat still further into his shell" ("... решение жениться подействовало на него как-то болезненно, . . . и [он—E.C.], казалось, еще глубже ушел в свой футляр").¹¹

Belikov wants to control his environment. He wants to keep things at the status quo. He builds his own box in order to shield himself from ongoing life. The appearance of a woman, sex, life — the very things which could make him grow, sends him back to his "box" ("ящик"). He recedes still further into the box, to the last box in the series, the best shield of all from life — death, the coffin, the "гроб". The statement in Čехов's notebooks which was supposed to serve as a key to the entire "little trilogy" ("маленькой трилогии") remains, in its essence, in the final version of *Čelovek v futljare*. In the notebooks we read, ". . . in [his—E.C.] case, as he was lying in the coffin, it seemed that he was smiling: he had found his ideal. . ." ("... в футляре, когда лежал в гробу, то казалось улыбался: нашел идеал. . .")¹² In the final version, the sentence becomes: "Now, as he lay in his coffin, the expression on his face was gentle, pleasing, even cheerful, as if he were glad at last to be put into a case which he would never have to leave. Yes, he had achieved his ideal!" ("Теперь, когда он лежал в гробу, выражение у него было кроткое, приятное, даже веселое, точно он был рад, что наконец его положили в футляр, из которого он уже никогда не уйдет. Да, он достиг своего идеала!")¹³

The problem is his fear of life. He cannot move forward to the next natural stage. He builds boxes in order to shield himself from life. Life rushes in, and he builds the box of death in order to protect himself.

Nabokov's *Zaščita Lužina*, I believe, treats box imagery in exactly the same way. The main character, with his big head (he is shaped like a pawn), an E.T.-like, Schulz Charlie Brown look-alike, is a child-person. His problem, too, is fear of life. He, too, cannot move forward to a post-child existence. Life rushes in, and he, too, builds a box of death. How, exactly, does this structural pattern,

common to both of these works, function in Nabokov's novel? Let us see.

Critics usually view *Zaščita Lužina* as a novel about the artist. The theme of the creative personality, unfit for life in mundane reality, is often the focus of scholarship. The point is made that Lužin's extraordinary gift for chess (read "art") is what prevents him from functioning in everyday human life. Chasing Nabokov's chess imagery through the pages of the novel is of great value in reading *Zaščita Lužina* on one level.

However, it seems to me that something else, much closer to the pattern of Čехов's *Čelovek v futljare*, is also essential to an understanding of the novel.

I believe that one can trace the same basic pattern which we saw in *Čelovek v futljare*. From the very beginning of *Zaščita Lužina*, before the appearance of chess in his life, Lužin has problems moving forward. He *always* wants to stop the clock of time. Within the very first pages of the book, we find him, when confronted with the next natural step to growth, crying, hiding, trying to run away. When his father tells him that he will be called Lužin, the little boy buries his head in the pillow, much as "the man in a case" buries himself in bedclothes. When he is waiting on the train station platform, he sees a small girl eating an apple (Belikov's Varen'ka had spoken of other forbidden fruits in her first encounter with him). Soon thereafter, little Lužin begins crying, for he cannot stand the thought of what awaits him in the city — change. Nabokov's attacks on Sigmund, the Viennese quack, notwithstanding, we read that Lužin had always been frightened of the Peter and Paul Fortress cannon. Other childhood memories, childhood rituals of walks with his governess, milk in a silver cup, he treasures. He shudders at the thought of the next step — school. Nabokov's narrator declares, "In exchange for all this came something new, unknown and therefore hideous, an impossible, unacceptable world. . ." ("Взамен всего этого было нечто, отвратительное своей новизной и неизвестностью, невозможный, неприемлемый мир. . .")¹⁴

And then, just as with Belikov, Lužin climbs into a box — the "house" ("дом"). He climbs into a window and goes into the attic, another box. And, writes Nabokov, "He settled himself on a box" ("Он устроился на ящике").¹⁵ Incidentally, a lady's bicycle (intimations of *Čelovek v futljare* to tease the reader) is nestled among other box images — a trunk, a photograph — and, oh, yes, of course, ". . . a cracked chessboard. . ." ("... шахматная доска с трещиной. . .").¹⁶ It is important to note that Nabokov's first mention of chess is at a point when we see Lužin in a box among boxes. Lužin spends the rest of his days attempting to shield himself from the onward march of time. Lužin spends the rest of his life trying to crawl into the box of chess. Sometimes we see the three-dimensional box, as for instance, when the musician first explains to Lužin that the "box" ("ящик") he is holding contains the chessmen.

At school (where, by the way, his teacher, imitator of Anacreontic verse, almost lost one galosh — another intimation of Čехов?.. as are, perhaps, mud-caked galoshes and cemeteries?), Lužin also searches for a box, hiding out, all hunched up, in womb position, in the wood-pile every recess, while the other boys go running and playing in the schoolyard. And again, even before chess

comes along, his mind creates “. . . optical metamorphoses. . .” (“. . . оптически[e] метаморфоз[и]. . .”) ¹⁷ Thus, his entrance into the world of the chess box and its two-dimensional variant, the chess square, is just another step along Lužin’s journey away from growth and life. Again, before chess, his father thinks, “He’s not well, he has a painful inner life of some sort. . .” (“Он нездоров, у него какая-то тяжелая душевная жизнь. . .”) ¹⁸

He is sent to his room for caressing his father’s mistress, his aunt — the little boy wants his father’s Queen? . . . — while playing chess for the first time. He then starts using that game as a substitute for, a defense against life, against growth, against sex.

Lužin’s problem is that he cannot get beyond one stage of life to another. He never wants to grow up and neither, it seems, do the people *around* him want him to mature. Lužin’s father is in the process of writing a novella, “Gambit,” about a musical, not a chess prodigy. Nabokov writes, “One thing he [Lužin senior—E.C.] decided for sure — he would not let this child grow up, would not transform him into that tactiturn [sic] person who sometimes called upon him in Berlin. . . ‘He will die young’ he said aloud, . . .” (“Одно он [Лужин старший—E.C.] решил твердо, — что не даст этому ребенку вырасти, не сделает из него того угрюмого человека, который иногда навещал его в Берлине. . . ‘Он умрет молодым, проговорил он вслух, . . .’”). ¹⁹ His mother expresses similar feelings of regret that he is not a child. Lužin’s nameless fiancée is described as possessing the ability “. . . to apprehend in life only that which had once attracted and tormented her in childhood, . . . to feel. . . pity for the creature whose life is helpless and unhappy, . . .” (“. . . воспринимать в жизни только то, что когда-то привлекало и мучило в детстве, . . . ощущать. . . жалость к существу, живущему беспомощно и несчастно. . .”). ²⁰ And we sense, throughout the novel, that it is this kind of pity for downtrodden and homeless beasts that she feels for Lužin. She certainly does not encourage the few sexual advances he makes. Lužin himself feels at home, only as he had as a child, when he enters the recreated Russian atmosphere of his fiancée’s parents’ home in Berlin.

In chess Lužin faces exactly the same problem. Valentinov, his chess father, warns him that he will not be a child prodigy forever. And in fact, Lužin never can get to the mature genius stage in chess. He does not move beyond the has-been prodigy stage. The same thing that happens to him in life happens in chess. This passage from the novel serves as an illustration:

Luzhin’s present plight was that of a writer or composer who, having assimilated the latest things in art at the beginning of his active career and caused a temporary sensation with the originality of his devices, all at once notices that a change has imperceptibly taken place around him, that others. . . have left him behind in the very devices where he recently led the way, and then he. . . seldom understands that he himself is to blame, he who has petrified in his art which was once new but has not advanced since then.

Looking back over eighteen and more years of chess Luzhin saw an accumulation of victories at the beginning and then a strange lull, bursts of victories here and there but in general — irritating and hopeless draws, thanks to which he. . . earned the reputation of a cautious, . . . prosaic player.

(Лужин попал в то положение, в каком бывает художник, который, в начале поприща усвоив новейшее в искусстве и временно поразив оригинальностью приемов, вдруг замечает, что незаметно произошла перемена вокруг него, что другие. . . оставили его позади в тех приемах, в которых он недавно был первым, и тогда он. . . редко понимает, что он сам виноват, он, застывший в своем искусстве, бывшем новым когда-то, но с тех пор не пошедшем вперед.)

Оглядываясь на восемнадцать с лишним лет шахматной жизни, Лужин видел нагромождение побед вначале, а затем странное затишье, вспышки побед там и сям, но в общем — игру вничью, раздражительную и безнадежную, благодаря которой он. . . прослыл за осторожного, . . . сухого игрока.) ²¹

And what happens because of Lužin’s inability to make the next move? He creates a box of death. As he is having his nervous breakdown during the chess match with Turati, we read, “A phantom went by, . . . and began swiftly to stow the pieces away in a tiny coffin” (“Прошла тень и. . . начала быстро убирать фигуры в маленький гроб”). ²² The chess box has become a coffin. At this point, Lužin says, “It’s all over” (“Кончено”). ²³

In the replay of his pre-breakdown life that Lužin fashions, in the chess moves he creates, we see that the only thing that happens is that he builds yet another box of death. Lužin’s *mind* constructs the *illusion* that there is an opponent against whom he must construct a defense. And it is his attempt at controlling his environment, at controlling his life, that ultimately leads to *his* final box of death — a bathroom, with that famous window whose two halves mimic the two chess squares, the window through which Lužin leaps to his death. . . But what was that pencil drawing on the bathroom wall? Lužin’s creation: “. . . a cube casting a shadow” (“. . . куб, отбрасывающий тень”). ²⁴

Both Belikov and Lužin could have changed their fate, could have grown up. The fear of life permeating the being of each leads to the construction of boxes which ultimately result in destruction, in death. All we are left with is the box. Or. . . to invoke another figure from Russian cultural history, a black square (see the illustration of Kasimír Malevich’s “Black Square” on page 142).

Has this been a wild butterfly chase, as we followed the literary characters who wrap themselves up in more and more layers of cocoon? On the basis of the evidence, I submit that Čechov and Nabokov do indeed belong in the same box.

NOTES

1. Vladimir Nabokov, *Speak Memory* (New York: Grosset & Dunlap, 1951) pp. 27-28. Vladimir Nabokov, *Drugie berega* (New York: Chekhov Publishing House, 1954), pp. 40-41. Nabokov writes, "Have I given away Box. . . , that old brown dachshund fast asleep on the sofa?" Nabokov, *Speak Memory*, p. 63. The dog's name, in Russian, was "Boks." Nabokov, *Drugie berega*, p. 40.
2. Simon Karlinsky, "Nabokov and Chekhov: The Lesser Russian Tradition," *Triquarterly*, No. 17 (Winter 1970), 7-16.
3. *Ibid.*, p. 14.
4. Vladimir Nabokov, "Anniversary Notes." Supplement to *Triquarterly*, No. 17 (Winter 1970), 3.
5. *The Nabokov-Wilson Letters. Correspondence between Vladimir Nabokov and Edmund Wilson 1940-1971*, ed. by Simon Karlinsky (New York: Harper and Row Publishers, 1979), letter of February 29, 1956, p. 297.
6. The English translation appears in Chekhov, "Man in a Case," in *Anton Chekhov's Short Stories*, ed. by Ralph E. Matlaw (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1979), p. 177. The Russian text is from A. P. Čexov, *Čelovek v futljare*, in *Sočinenija*, (Moscow, 1977), X, 45.
7. "Man," p. 176; *Čelovek*, p. 43.
8. "Man," p. 177; *Čelovek*, p. 43.
9. It is interesting to note that in A. S. Neill's provocative book on education, he uncannily describes, without reference to Čexov's story, a real-life Belikov: "He betrayed his timidity in little things. On a bright summer's day he would take a raincoat and an umbrella if he had to walk half a mile. He said *no* to life." A. S. Neill, *Summerhill. A Radical Approach to Child Rearing* (New York: Hart Publishing Company, 1960), p. 126.
10. "Man," p. 178; *Čelovek*, p. 46.
11. "Man," p. 180; *Čelovek*, p. 48.
12. as quoted in Z. Papernyj, *Zapisnye knižki Čexova* (Moscow, 1976), pp. 132, 280.
13. "Man," p. 184; *Čelovek*, p. 52.
14. Vladimir Nabokov, *The Defense*, trans. by Michael Scammell in collaboration with the author (New York: Capricorn Books, 1964), p. 22; Vladimir Nabokov, *Zaščita Lužina* (Paris: Éditions de la Seine, 1930), p. 29.
15. *The Defense*, p. 23; *Zaščita*, p. 31.
16. *Ibid.*
17. *The Defense*, p. 29; *Zaščita*, p. 37.
18. *Ibid.*, p. 32; p. 40.
19. *Ibid.*, p. 78; p. 86.
20. *Ibid.*, p. 105; p. 115.
21. *Ibid.*, p. 97; pp. 106-07.
22. *Ibid.*, p. 140; p. 150.
23. *Ibid.*
24. *Ibid.*, p. 253; p. 265.