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Poshlost and Nabokov’s Posh-lust

In his critical biography Nikolai Gogol, Vladimir Nabokov introduces his readers to the term poshlost, a Russian word for which he claims there is no English equivalent. It is his assertion that this word embodies the very essence of the characters found in Gogol’s Dead Souls. But what does poshlost mean? In Nabokov’s descriptions of the word, his definition of poshlost is not clear. Instead, he addresses instances of poshlost found in situations concerning a wide variety of topics from materialism to German culture. He then goes on to describe the plump physical characteristics of poshlost, yet no other sources that I am aware of embrace such qualities in the word. Nabokov’s attempt to relay to his readers the meaning of poshlost only spawns the creation of a new word he dubs poshlust, in which a “u” has been put in place of the second “o.” It is his poshlust and not the Russian пошлость that he speaks of in his analysis.

In Nabokov’s discussion of the “certain widespread defect” (63) for which only the Russian language has a term, never once does he tell the non-Russian speaking reader how Russians define it. Instead, he presents his readers with a variety of English synonyms ranging from “sorry” to “highfalutin,” and then challenges their credibility by stating that his Roget’s Thesaurus, from which half of these synonyms were taken, “incidentally lists ‘rats and mice’ under ‘insects’” (64). By discrediting his source, Nabokov is telling his readers that his list may be faulty as well and should not be trusted. His synonyms become superfluous and the reader is left frustrated and confused. To further discredit his synonyms, Nabokov adds that his examples such as “trivial, trashy, smug, and so on do not cover the aspect it takes” (66) to comprehend poshlost in what he calls its ideal form. What these other facets of the word may be is his English-
speaking readers will never know, for he neglects to inform them. All they are left with is the knowledge that his list of synonyms cannot be trusted.

One must then wonder how Russians define the word. In Max Vasmer’s Russian Etymological Dictionary, considered by many to be the most comprehensive work on Slavic etymology, the Russian пошлость derives from the Old Russian word пошьль, meaning “старинный, исконный, прежний, обычный” (“ancient,” “primordial,” “previous,” “usual”). These notions of antiquity present in three of the four synonyms are completely nonexistent in Nabokov’s definition. Other meanings offered by Vasmer include “общий,” “всеобщий,” “низкий,” and “подлый,” meaning “general,” “universal,” “low,” and “mean.” Once again, Nabokov’s chosen synonyms seem to fall short. In fact, out of the thirteen examples Nabokov gives, the only synonyms he presents that match anything listed in Vasmer’s text are “common,” “scurvy,” and possibly “tawdry.” All other notions of poshlost offered by Nabokov—“cheap,” “sham,” “smutty,” “pink-and-blue,” “highfalutin,” “in bad taste,” “inferior,” “sorry,” “trashy,” and “gimcrack”—don’t make the grade.

In his explanation of poshlost, Nabokov alters the spelling of the word to the more phonetic-friendly poshlust to help his English-speaking audience better understand the true pronunciation of the word. However, the juxtaposition of his poshlust with some of the various models he presents to define it leave new implications for the word that never before existed. His poshlust becomes posh-lust, suggesting an overpowering and even sexual desire for that which is posh. This new implication is justified in his narrative on how families are often depicted in American advertisements. The family is shown huddled around a product, in awe over its splendor. Nabokov states that what makes the scene poshlust is its suggestion that “the acme of human happiness is purchasable and that its purchase somehow ennobles the purchaser”
(67). After this statement, *posh* begins to separate from the word, leaving the reader with an all new understanding of the word that is inaccurate. The words *posh* and *lust* further separate in Nabokov’s description of how the family acts after the product has been introduced to the household. “The mother clasps her hands in dazed delight, the children crowd around, all agog, Junior and the dog strain up to the edge of the table where the Idol is enthroned; even Grandma of the beaming wrinkles peeps out somewhere in the background” (66). Each member of the family seems overtly drawn to the “Idol.” It is almost as if they are lusting over it in all its high-class, stylish—need we say posh?—glory.

To further establish the sexual connotations of *poshlust*, Nabokov offers to his audience yet another example full of lusty implications. *Poshlust* is present when “kind people send our lonely soldiers silk hosed dummy legs modeled on those of Hollywood lovelies and stuffed with candies and safety razor blades” (67). The image conjured from such a description is that of a man lustfully eyeing his gift, imagining it springing into life and taking on the form of Betty Grable as he sits on his cot in the barracks. That he could find sexual solace in an object so garishly absurd becomes the newest highlighted undertone to Nabokov’s term.

Nabokov not only spoke Russian and English fluently, but French and German as well. With his extensive knowledge of other languages, his ability to create multi-lingual word play was exceptional, and his play on words is a common occurrence in his works. In his novel *The Gift*, for example, Nabokov’s Russian pseudonym “Sirin,”—in Russian, Сирин, the name of a character in old Russian mythology that takes the form of a “multicolored bird, with a woman’s face and bust, no doubt identical with the ‘siren,’ a Greek deity, transporter of souls and teaser of sailors” (Connolly 21)—is hidden throughout the novel in the form of the word “канарейка,” meaning “canary.” In French, the word for canary is “serin.” Thus, two
transformations take place across three different languages: “Сирии” becomes “serin” becomes “канарейка,” or “canary.” A similar transformation takes place in Nabokov’s treatment of poshlost in his book on Gogol: пошлость becomes poshlost becomes poshlust becomes poshlust. Just as a character from old Russian mythology morphs into a canary, so too does poshlost take on a whole new meaning based on the phonetic qualities it shares with two English words.

In confronting native Russian speakers today about the meaning of пошлость, a healthy schism erupts. Russians of an older generation see пошлость as “commonplace” or “kitsch,” while there is circumstantial evidence that Russian-American teenagers and young adults will use the word interchangeably with “pervert.” Where did these explicitly sexual connotations in the word originate? When Nabokov’s book was first published in 1944, it “probably [did] more than any other work of criticism in this country to spark an interest in Gogol among readers who know no Russian” (Maguire 54). Nabokov’s book and his term poshlust were suddenly famous, and the word and concept are still generally known today from his remarks and attacks. It is possible that Nabokov’s definition produced such an impact that it altered the way in which Russian-Americans of a newer generation now conceive пошлость. Where does Nabokov get his lusty definition of the word? In describing poshlust, Nabokov says that “among the nations with which we [Russians] came into contact, Germany had always seemed to us a country where poshlust, instead of being mocked, was one of the essential parts of the national spirit” (64). He then retells a story once told by Gogol of a German Lothario who woos a young German woman by swimming in a nearby lake with swans. In this story, poshlust is a “German who tries to be winsome” (Nabokov 65), and the word turns into a Russian slur against Germans, like “fritz”—or rather фриц—in Gogol’s Nevsky Prospect. Once again, poshlost has been transformed into a
word of Nabokov’s own creation, devoid of the general, universal, mean, or low aspects of the word that Vasmer stresses in his definition.

Aside from Germany, Nabokov refers to literature as being one of the best breeding places for poshlust. Examples of books that he claims “distill the very essence” (68) of this word, however, are never given. Instead, he assumes that the reader can distinguish on his or her own what this “obvious trash” (68) is. In an interview on poshlust with author Herbert Gold in the 1960s, Nabokov stated that “many accepted authors simply do not exist for me. Brecht, Faulkner, Camus, many others, mean absolutely nothing to me. I must fight a suspicion of conspiracy against my brain when I blandly see accepted as 'great literature' by critics and fellow authors Lady Chatterley’s copulations or the pretentious nonsense of Mr. [Ezra] Pound, that total fake.” If even the best critics cannot distinguish a great piece of literature from what he calls “pretentious nonsense” that embodies poshlust, for Nabokov to expect his readers to be able to do the same is unreasonable.

While Nabokov refuses to offer any examples of poshlust literature in his Gogol book, he is more than willing to supply his readers with examples of non-poshlust literature. These examples, however, fail to give the reader a better understanding of his definition of poshlust as they are works considered by the majority to be “obvious trash.” These are the American “pulp” novels, English “penny dreadfuls,” and Russian “yellow literature” that Nabokov claims contain “sometimes a wholesome ingredient” (68). Yet the very mention of pulp fiction incites the notion of poor-quality writing, and the wholesome ingredient that Nabokov mentions is not defined. What then is Nabokov’s audience to think? Suddenly, that which the public views as garbage is not poshlust while works by Nobel-prize winning novelists like William Faulkner and Albert Camus are.
In *Dead Souls*, Nabokov sees the plumpness and roundness of Gogol’s characters to be a physical trait of poshlust, and praises Gogol in his ability to portray poshlyaks so well. While many of the characters as well as objects—Korobochka’s “round-cheeked” (Gogol 173) carriage, for example—in the book are presented as plump or round, whether a reader should accept these physical traits as a representation of Nabokov’s poshlust is unclear. He labels the main character Pavel Chichikov the “legendary poshlyak” (73), yet he never supplies the reader with evidence of the “poshlyj” traits that would support his claim. He only tells us that “the poshlust which Chichikov personifies is one of the main attributes of the Devil” (73), yet what these attributes are Nabokov neglects to say. In a chapter entitled “Our Mr. Chichikov,” where thirteen paragraphs have been devoted to the word poshlust, all the reader learns is that Chichikov is round, while the aspects of his character that would make his roundness scream poshlust are never revealed.

When Nabokov first introduces poshlust in his book on Gogol, he states that “the absence of a particular expression in the vocabulary of a nation does not necessarily coincide with the absence of the corresponding notion but it certainly impairs the fullness and readiness of the latter’s perception” (63). He admits to his readers before even trying to define the word that his English-speaking audience’s understanding of the concept will be a struggle. Why then did he choose to use this term as the foundation of much of his arguments on *Dead Souls*? It seems unfair to his audience to expect that after reading his descriptions of different aspects of poshlust, “noted at random” (74), the reader’s understanding of the aspects will become connected in such a way as to form what he calls an artistic phenomenon. His mentioning that these aspects are noted at random reflects the inconsistency and patchiness of his explanation of the word. Had he better organized his thoughts on poshlust into something cohesive and strong, he would have
been confident in having successfully passed the phenomenon down to his readers, and questioning whether or not they understood his message would no longer be necessary.

In order to answer why Nabokov chose a foreign word to describe themes found in *Dead Souls*, one must question how doing so would benefit him or his audience. His decision is not helpful to his readers since—as he says so himself—it impairs their ability to understand what he is talking about. So then how would his decision benefit him? One might say that Nabokov’s use of *poshlost* is very much the same as how Gogol used the Ukraine in the 1800s. While Gogol is most famous today for *Dead Souls*, his tales on the Ukraine are what had made him a celebrity overnight in Russia during the 19th century. Russians at that time were mystified by the culture and history of the Ukraine. The country at that time was a foreign space they knew little about. Gogol was aware of the public’s fascination with the Ukraine and used it to spark the public’s interest in reading his work. Nabokov does the same thing with *poshlost*. It is a foreign word that mystifies his non-Russian readers and keeps them interested.

In conclusion, Nabokov’s use of *poshlost* in *Nikolai Gogol* is dishonest. Just as American advertisements try to trick the public with pictures of smiling families huddled around the latest product, Nabokov attempts to deceive his readers with his made-up *posh-lust* and its patchy definitions. He leaves cryptic explanations of the term in an effort to confuse his non-Russian speaking readers and captivate them with the unknown. As a result, instead of “an artistic phenomenon” for which only the Russian language has a word, he provides in his critical biography a term representing concepts so expansive that readers begin to wonder how the English language was ever able to get along without it.
Works Cited


