

Exile

By John Glad

The forbearers of today's intelligentsia were embedded in the peasantry, and it was they who created folk art and literature. Selectively plucked from the vast sea of humanity, these individuals now exist in an international intellectual/cultural community. At breakfast they watch a television newscast about a civil war in Africa, a collection of Borges' short stories stands on the bookshelf, and a Chinese landscape painting hangs on the wall. They check their Indonesian manufactured watches, slip on their Italian shoes and jump into their Japanese cars to go to work for international conglomerates. Their basic life style is the same, whether they live in Buenos Aires, Chicago, or Beijing.

But man's capacity for clinging to myth is virtually infinite. The writer may be a Eastern European living during the Soviet Pleistocene who still perceives himself as a specifically Chinese, Romanian, or Ethiopian novelist, poet, *etc.* Or he may be a Jew from just about anywhere (the late Stalinist code word was "rootless cosmopolite") whose Jewishness does not extend to speaking the language of his purported cultural identity or even munching on a matzah during Passover. But the first principle of propaganda theory is that people believe what they want to believe. And biology, remember, cries out to the artist that his survival depends on his place in the tribe.

Once driven into exile in, say, Paris ("I don't care what you do with me, Brer Fox," says he, "Just so you don't fling me in that briar patch"), the artist finds himself locked out of mythlandia. He is declared to have been "cut away from the common loaf" (a favorite form of dismissal in the former Soviet Union). Formerly confident in eternal life as a loyal member of the tribe, the artisan become impostor (*samozvanets* in Russian, meaning *self-appointed*) now awaits a solitary end in an alien world.

When international conflicts flare up, artists perceived as turncoats may be denounced by the tribal leaders and are fortunate to be championed by the tribe's opponents, but in the end they too are ignored, like all the other intellectuals. Of 600 first novels written, only one ever appears in print. To be ignored is the cruellest of punishments. Art becomes a hobby – like philately.

Having lost their world and despairing of attracting interest in the West, Russian poets brought with them the acmeist tradition, renaming it the "Parisian note." The Acmeists had reacted against the Romantic conceits of Symbolism, which saw the artist as a "genius" creating in moments of inspiration. Mandelshtam declared he preferred to be an artisan rather artist, and his imagery was indeed often that of stone and building timber. Igor Chinnov in an interview with me described how Paris's Russian poets viewed themselves as the pall bearers of culture and how for that reason they intentionally sought out the "eternal" themes of life and death, the image of a "bird" rather than a "swallow."¹

Look at the dysfunctional kindergarten of Russian émigré writers. During the Cold War they generally disliked each other and were usually despondent, despite the

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accolades they received for largely political reasons. Yury Miloslavsky summed up the situation at a Wheatland Conference on literature in exile:

And that's the mildest thing that could be said of us, unless we mention the inevitable kicks in the ass — usually delivered with weary scorn: "Get out of here" or (sometimes with the vexed nervousness of a man trying to rid himself of a hated wife who doesn't want him to go to a bachelor's party): "Fuck off, you goddamned bitch!" Less frequent is the resounding, well-aimed kick: "Get lost, you scum, or you'll get what's coming to you...." Having flitted off to a respectable distance, we snap back: "Just wait, you'll wish you hadn't been so short-sighted, but by then it'll be too late; I'll be back — in spirit, if not in the flesh."

It's clear, however, that no one will regret your loss, nor will there be anything, or anybody, to come back to, for the gap left by your departure soon begins to be filled with healing balm from within. To blame the cruelty of the administration or threaten to reveal the whole truth and thereby show up the state in its true colors is ridiculous. Even if anyone other than the narrator (himself a great champion of truth) shows interest in the exile's pitiful inside information, his intrinsic untrustworthiness and refusal to acknowledge defeat (and exile is just that — defeat, not victory!) will soon alienate even the sympathetic listener — assuming, naturally, that polling exiles is not part of his job.²

When the artist relocates to a new country and a new culture, he may or may not interact with that culture. Paradoxically, even though the roots of modern Russian literature lie in Western European literature, the interwar period was not one of extensive interaction between Russian émigré literature and the various Western European literatures surrounding it. In noting this estrangement, Vladimir Nabokov claimed the Russian émigré community possessed a higher culture and greater freedom of thought than the Western world in which the exiles found themselves.

As I look back at those years of exile, I see myself, and thousands of other Russians, leading an odd but by no means unpleasant existence, in material indigence and intellectual luxury, among perfectly unimportant strangers, spectral Germans and Frenchmen in whose more or less illusory cities we, émigrés, happened to dwell. These aborigines were to the mind's eye as flat and transparent as figures cut out of cellophane, and although we used their gadgets, applauded their clowns, picked their roadside plums and apples, no real communication, of the rich human sort so widespread in our own midst, existed between us and them

If such a Robinson-Crusoe statement could be made by Nabokov, a writer who supposedly read English before he learned to write Russian and whose cosmopolitan credentials were certainly above reproach, how much more was it true for other Russian refugees! After World War II this attitude was retained, producing little cross-pollination between Russian émigré literature in America and the Anglo-American tradition, such stars as

Brodsky and Solzhenitsyn notwithstanding. Russians in Europe both before and after 1917 generally saw themselves as European but often realized that the Europe they loved was an imagined entity. Once more I quote Nabokov:

*What has happened to those originals who used to teach natural history to Russian children — green net, tin box on a sling, hat stuck with pinned butterflies, long, learned nose, candid eyes behind spectacles — where are they all, where are their frail skeletons — or was this a special breed of Germans, for export to Russia, or am I not looking properly?*³

Paradoxically, this passage was more true of Nabokov's fellow Russian exiles than of him. Many of them held to a traditional Realism inherited from the grand tradition of nineteenth-century Russian writers.

Nabokov doggedly pursued evasive tactics and intentionally put the researcher onto false leads in referring to his own art. It is difficult to lend credence, to cite but one example, to his claim that *Invitation to a Beheading* was not influenced by Kafka. Nabokov both influenced and was influenced by Western European literature. His emigration can be classified as *osmotic penetration*.

With the break-up of the USSR, after decades of beating their chests over Ovid's "bitter bread of exile," Russian and East European exile writers abruptly discovered that they could now "go home." For the exiled poet and cabaret singer Aleksandr Vertinsky the water and even the stars were "alien," and he returned to Russia. But most opted to stay put. Solzhenitsyn made incredible demands upon the Russian government, stating adamantly that he would not return if each and every one of them was not satisfied. Incredibly, they were. And he was left with no choice but to pack his bags for Moscow or eat his words. Boris Khazanov declared he would vomit if he were forced to go back. Eduard Limonov returned because there was more demand for a fascist politician in Russia than for a Russian tailor in Paris, and until recently he was a shaven prisoner in a Saratov prison.

But most stayed in what used to be called "the West." Their wives work, and they receive welfare payments from the state. They scrape together a little money to subsidize the publications of their works back home, and like Spinelli in Thomas Mann's *Tristan*, they sit home reading their own works, occasionally persuading friends to write reviews. They are mad, cheapened gods who talk to themselves. They

have, to a significant degree, lost their tribal roots, and their condition can best be characterized as *hermetic dispersion*.

And even if, strictly speaking, Soviet communism never promised the artist eternal life, at least his works could “live on forever.” He had only to clutch to his bosom the immutable aesthetic code of Socialist Realism, much as the artists of ancient Egypt held to their aesthetic creed. Then too, there were the apartments, refrigerators, automobiles, and paid vacations for “creative” purposes that were lavished on members of the Writers’ Union. Now the centrifugal gods long to return to their former position of eternal servants in a centripetal universe, but as Tom Wolfe put it, “You can’t go home again.” The home that they knew, the USSR, no longer exists.

References

1. *Besedy v izgnanii*, Moscow, Knizhnaya palata Publishers, Moscow, 1991; *Conversations in Exile*, Duke University Press, 1993.
2. Yury Miloslavsky. “Aequae et ignis interdiction,” in *Literature in Exile*, edited by John Glad, page 10, Duke University Press, Durham/London, 1990.
3. V. Nabokov. *Speak, Memory. An Autobiography Revisited*, London 1969.

John Glad’s book Future Human Evolution: Eugenics in the Twenty-First Century (Hermitage Publishers, 2006) may be downloaded free of charge at www.whatwemaybe.org.