From another point of view, despite the fact that much of the criticism accuses him of turning literature into a beautiful cultural game, of creating characters who are alien to Russian literature, the writer manages, in a manner much more precise than that of many of his contemporaries, to rearticulate ideas and images from the classic Russian literature. This he does by means of the playful approach of provoking "difficult reading", in other words, the conscious efforts on the part of the reader to reach the work's meaning, by signifying in a variety of ways, many of them pointing in different directions, his relations to the literary tradition.

In the last twenty years the most popular way of reading the Russian poet and prose writer Vladimir Nabokov has been the interpretation of his work at the level of intertextuality. Dozens of studies approach the many references to the “alien word” (chuzhoe slovo) in this author – allusions, quotations, reminiscences, stylistic figures, motifs, characters… Their use is in some studies interpreted as fundamental to meaning in Nabokov’s prose.

The structure of Nabokov’s novels presupposes two component parts – an explicit background and a hidden literary one which “lies beneath the waterline of the Nabokovian textship, but it is there, in the depths, that the issues of artistic existence are tackled: the truth and falsity of the authorial persona are determined in the face of eternity.” (Shadurski 2004) The references to the “alien word” are significant for giving the opportunity for decoding the meanings conveyed in the texts of the anagrams and crosswords connoisseur. For the artist, the turning to writers and texts from the classic Russian literature is significant not only as a means of asserting the space occupied by the Russian spirit; it is also evidence for the deep dynamic of appropriation and distancing from the artistic principles of the classics. The description of the way in which the multiplicity of references functions helps achieve a more comprehensive insight into the worldview of an artist who, in various interviews, notes and literary archives, has mystified writing and constructed a variety of quite different ethical-aesthetic messages.

Among the Russian authors to whom Nabokov’s novels most often refer and with whom his prose enters into active critical dialogue, are Pushkin, Gogol, Dostoyevsky, Chekhov and to some extent Tolstoy and Turgenev. Clearly discernible are the intertextual links to the traditions of the “silver age” – to the symbolists A. Bely and A. Blok, to I. Bunin, to N. Gumilyov and B. Pasternak (Skonechnaya 1996: 207, Fateeva 2006: 198, Zaharieva 1999). Many of them are simultaneously the writer’s teachers and opponents.

Pushkin is not just an important but an emblematic figure for Nabokov. In The Gift the reader comes across the acknowledgment that the poet has entered the writer’s bloodstream. The matreshka-texts reveal Pushkin’s verse, prose and play-texts while the English translations of Eugene Onegin, Mozart and Salieri, A Feast in the Time of Plague, done by the writer, are a sign of his striving to enter the classic’s laboratory, to unravel the mystery of his art. The Pushkin intertext is significant throughout the writer’s literary career, it turns out to be a kind of a litmus test, but it appears at its richest and most varied in the “Sirin” period. The Pushkin reminiscences, allusions, quotations make up a colourful carpet whose threads interweave themes from various works (the carpet image of existence is a constantly recurring one in a series of works). The functions of these references are different. The fate of the writing character in Nabokov’s novels often depends on the way he regards Pushkin (Shadurski 2004). The reflected image of Pushkin’s words persists throughout The Gift (the protagonist is called Fyodor Godunov, while the butterfly in the novel has the name Orpheus Godunov, referring associatively to the myth of the ancient Thracian poet, symbol of art, and to Pushkin’s tragedy - Boris Godunov), Despair, Invitation to a Beheading, Ada, Lolita, Pale Fire… The first “Russian” novel, Mary (1926), apart from the unequivocal reference it makes to Blok
and his “Verses about the Beautiful Lady”, begins with an epigraph which is a verse by Pushkin (“Having recalled intrigues of former years, having recalled a former love”), articulating in this way two major themes in Nabokov’s artistic world: the motifs of memory and of life as a novel, which are rethought and reiterated in Nabokov’s other novels.

The transformations of the functions performed by the reminiscences from the classic poet allow one to trace the aesthetic evolution of the immigrant writer. To Pushkin again is related the theme of escape, of seeking peace (“жиз- ни мышей беготни”), of the double. As Brodsky notes, it is as if all of Nabokov’s novels are about “the alternative of existence”, about the possibility of escape. This is clearly visible in Despair whose protagonist is not only given the name Hermann (like the character in Pushkin’s Queen of Spades) but also seeks escape, and commits murder while the whole narrative contains direct intertextual references to a number of texts by Pushkin, which are connected in a strange manner in the character’s mind. (Fateeva 2006: 229)

In Nabokov’s English prose the references to Pushkin have value and culture-related functions. In the Russian version of Lolita Humbert Humbert imitates Pushkin’s writing style, in Pnin the protagonist lives with reminiscences from works by Pushkin and in Ada the plot of Eugene Onegin appears though in its parodic version. The play with the classic poet’s texts, however, does not demonstrate a one-sided approach of downgrading. If Pushkin is in Nabokov’s bloodstream, then Gogol – the magician, the trickster whom Nabokov defines as the artist of the four dimensions, placing him thus above the “three-dimensional Pushkin,” is no less important for the author and Nikolai Gogol – a book published in the USA in 1944 – gives evidence of this. But then, in An Invitation of a Beheading, Gogol is to be found among Cincinnatus’ puppets, reminiscent of a rat; The Government Inspector, Nabokov claims, constructs crude characters, while Dead Souls gathers “a wonderful selection of vulgar individuals” (my translation). But according to his own words, the immigrant writer values not Gogol’s ideas but his language, “the intimate curves of language” (Nabokov 1999a) (my translation) or, as he writes in Gogol: “As in the scaling of insects the wonderful colour effect may be due not to the pigment of the scales but to their position and refractive power, so Gogol’s genius deals not in the intrinsic qualities of computable chemical matter (the “real life” of literary critics) but in the mimetic capacities of the physical phenomena produced by almost intangible particles of recreated life.” The writer reacts against those critics who search for the moral in Gogol’s texts for in art, he believes, there is no place for morals. (Shahtsovyka 1995: 77-79).

References to Dostoyevsky in Nabokov’s prose are considerable in number and are part of the references to the so called “Petersburg text” usually associated with the Pushkin – Gogol – Dostoyevsky – Belin – Akhmatova – Mandestam line. The openly demonstrated disapproval of Dostoyevsky is a well-known one – Shahtsovyka quotes Nabokov, who claims that in his lectures on Russian literature he leaves no more than ten minutes for this writer and in this way destroys him. But despite the incisive critique, the similarities between the two authors are more than a few (Shahtsovyka 1995: 80). The motifs shared by Queen of Spades and Crime and Punishment have been the object of study by Toporov (Toporov 1995) and Shadurski has found both works to make up the common hypotext of Nabokov’s Despair (Shadurski 2004: 39).

The pursuit of money, the envy motif: the feeling of being chosen, the motif of the double as well as that of insects, which are shared characteristics of the characters’ minds in Queen of Spades, Crime and Punishment and Despair (Hermann is persecuted by a and ace turned spider, Svidrigailov has visions of spiders, the butterfly is a compulsively recurring image) are only part of the whole intertext.

The themes of the pseudo-artist, of the feeling of being chosen, of evil and despair within the artist in the novel are further problematised by the interweaving of Gogol’s The Portrait and the artist’s terrible nightmare in Despair (on this see Stetsenko 1996; Shadurski 2004). In Nabokov’s novel the hypotexts of classic literature form a powerful semantic field.

They are used as variant retakes on problems central for the author, employed in his search for answers to the aesthetic issues that concern him. The references to Dostoyevsky are to a great extent determined by the fact that while he dissociates himself from the author of The Brothers Karamazovs, Nabokov cannot completely shake off his presence. Often the Dostoyevsky intertext is used in the ironic register, particularly whenever the motif of the double, of madness and the lack of coincidence of the I with itself reappears.

The Dostoyevsky intertext in the Russian version of Lolita is extremely important because apart from being a sign of the aesthetic debate between artists from different temporal context, as with the Pushkin references, it also becomes a touchstone for Humbert Humbert’s ethic and aesthetic status as well as for notions of art.

Together with this Nabokov parodies the stylistic methods of the author of “ideological novels”, polemizes with his structures, plot motifs and ideas (manic obsessiveness, the murder wish, the bifurcation of consciousness). O’Connor and St. Lem have written on the analogies between the lascivious characters: Stavrogin, Svidrigailov and Humbert Humbert (O’Connor 1989; Lem 1992).

The critical appreciation of the history of Russian literature, the legitimizing of one’s own art is most often in Nabokov’s texts achieved by means of reminiscences, references and quotations from text that have become classics of Russian literature. In this process, as a rule, the “didactic authors” remain outside of the author’s sphere of interests. Nabokov’s poetics of play is, in the words of A. V. Zlochevskaya, engaged in the “structuring of “co-authoring” relations of tension between reader and author in the process of “meaning unraveling” and simultaneously with the elaboration of a new ethical philosophical and aesthetic concept of the world.

Inferences about Nabokov’s appreciation of Russian classic literature can be drawn from his “Lectures on Russian Literature”, published in 1981,
which can be regarded as literary texts. These lay bare the author’s partiality with regard to certain elements of fiction writing and bear witness to his studious schooling in the style of classic authors like Pushkin, Gogol, Chekhov, Dostoyevsky - a foundational starting point from which Nabokov departs, but with filial respect, and goes on to elaborate his own fictional prose style. Not getting carried away by the formal specifics of Russian literature, the author preserves his loyalty to the tradition, without adopting the formal stance of worship of its idols.

References:

3. Erofeyev, V. 1990. Vladimir Nabokov’s Russian Oeuvre., Nabokov V.V. Collected Works in 4 volumes
5. Zverev, A. 1998. Skin Shedding/Foreign Literature, n.5
20. Fateeva, N. 2006. Intertext in a World of Texts

Information about author:

Magalena Kostova-Panayotova - Doctor of Philology, Full Professor, South-West University; address: Bulgaria, Sofia city; e-mail: magipkp@mail.bg