

The Nabokovian



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AN ANTI-LOCUST CAMPAIGN IN NABOKOV (AND PUSHKIN)

In *Father's Butterflies*, *Second Addendum to The Gift* (in B. Boyd & R. Pyle, eds., *Nabokov's Butterflies*, 2000, pp. 198-234, translated by D. V. Nabokov), Fyodor Godunov-Cherdyntsev writes about his father: "He detested applied entomology—and I cannot imagine how he could work in present-day Russia, where his beloved science is wholly reduced to anti-locust campaigns or class struggles against agricultural saboteurs" (213).

In the original Russian text of *Vtoroe dobavlenie k "Daru"* (*Zvezda*, 2001, No. 1), the last part of this sentence reads: "...gde ego ljubimala nauka splosh' svedena k pokhodu na saranchu ili klassovoĭ bor'be s ogorodnymi vrediteliami." One can notice that the pun in this phrase is on the dual meaning of "vrediteli." Agricultural (*ogorodnye*, i.e. vegetable garden) *vrediteli* are insect "pests." However, during Stalin's era the word "vrediteli" in general referred first of all to human "saboteurs" who were to be denounced, arrested and executed. In the original Russian phrase, the meaning is heavily weighted toward insects, thus creating a "class struggle against insects." "Agricultural saboteurs," of course, can only be humans but not insects.

As there is no matching pun in English, this phrase is difficult to translate. Dr. Brian Boyd kindly pointed this out to Dmitri Vladimirovich Nabokov, who agreed with the alternative translation suggested by Dr. Boyd, "class struggle against the sabotage of vegetable-garden pests."

“Pokhod na saranchu” (anti-locust campaign), besides being a reference to a very real problem which faced applied entomology in southern Russia and the USSR, is of course also Nabokov’s hidden reference to the famous incident involving Pushkin during his exile in Odessa, in southern Russia. On May 22, 1824 Count Vorontsov, in writing, ordered young Pushkin (who was assigned to his office as a clerk) to write a report on a locust infestation. Pushkin reported, in verse, “The locust flew, flew, / And landed / Sat, sat, ate all, / And left again.” (“Sarancha letela, letela / I sela./ Sidela, sidela – vsio s”ela / I vnov’ uletela”). This verse was long considered apocryphal, but was later found in Vorontsov’s letter to Anton Fonton (N. Eidelman, “Sarancha letela...i sela”, *Znanie-sila*, 1968, No. 8-9). This is one of the few entomological poems in Pushkin (other than Prince Gvidon’s triple metamorphosis into a mosquito, a fly, and a bumblebee in the “Tale of Tsar Saltan”).

The Old World locust in question (*Locusta migratoria*, the eighth Egyptian plague) should not be confused with a “locust” of the eastern USA, which is indeed not a locust (=grasshopper) but a cicada—as Shade once explained to Kinbote (*Pale Fire*, Commentary to Line 238).

—Victor Fet, Department of Biological Sciences, Marshall University