

Title: Nabokov's Poem "Youth"

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Abstract:

In the year 1923, after nearly escaping the revolutionary coup of 1917, Nabokov found himself exiled from his Russian homeland. His poem "Youth," that I recently discovered in the Nabokov archives, is a seventeen-stanza poem written in Berlin in 1923. In it, 23-year-old Nabokov provides an account of his Russian childhood, Cambridge education and Berlin émigré life. It's a youthful version of his autobiography.

Immigration is frequently associated with physical suffering rather than absence of a central unifying purpose of existence. The chaotic, dreamlike illusion of reality makes immigrants accept it. Nabokov chooses not to equate appearance with reality. He accesses not only his intellectual and analytical powers, but also his intuitive inferences and his senses to complement his abstractions and ideas. Nabokov expresses emotions that take his mind beyond structural logic. They open up for him a possibility of an intelligent and creative enquiry. He reflects on his past, on traditional values, noble virtues of his generation. The tragic death of his father makes him think about the true meaning of freedom that is so essential and yet elusive for the wandering generation. Does identifying historic reasons lead them to a better understanding of reality, give purpose and provide emotional recovery?

Based on this poem, I would like to show how Nabokov's artistic and ethical vision have been shaped by emotional perceptions of his childhood, his father's influence, his own immigrant experience and by reality outside art, such as fleeing from a totalitarian political regime. I would like to suggest that stimulating our feelings turns our subjective experience into a living memory that Nabokov has preserved in his writings.