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CICLO XXXI

CONGRUENCES WITH THE PAST.
ON VLADIMIR NABOKOV'S SELF-TRANSLATED VERSES

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A colored spiral in a small ball of glass, this is how I see my own life. The twenty years I spent in my native Russia (1899-1919) take care of the thetic arc. Twenty-one years of voluntary exile in England, Germany and France (1919-1940) supply the obvious antithesis. The period spent in my adopted country (1940-1960) forms a synthesis – and a new thesis.

Vladimir Nabokov, *Speak, Memory*.[1]

[1] Vladimir Nabokov, "Speak, Memory," in *Novels and Memoirs 1941-1951*, ed. Brian Boyd (New York: The Library of America, 1996), 594.

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PRELUDE

Корни, корни чего-то зеленого в памяти, корни пахучих растений, корни воспоминаний, способны проходить большие расстояния, преодолевая некоторые препятствия, проникая сквозь другие, пользуясь каждой трещиной.

Vladimir Nabokov, *Drugiye berega*.[2]

Roots, roots of remembered greenery, roots of memory and pungent plants, roots, in a word, are enabled to traverse long distances by surmounting some obstacles, penetrating others and insinuating themselves into narrow cracks.

Vladimir Nabokov, *Speak, Memory*.[3]

[2] Vladimir Nabokov, "Drugiye berega," in *Dar, Priglaѣheniye na kazn', Drugiye berega, Veѕna v Fial'te*, ed. Vadim Stark (Moskva: Slovo, 1999), 522.
[3] Vladimir Nabokov, "Speak, Memory," 626.

THE INCORRUPTIBLE TRANSLATOR

An Introduction

> I have no hesitation in arguing that this polylinguistic matrix is the determining fact of Nabokov's life and art.
>
> George Steiner, *Extraterritorial.*[4]

> Наука начинается с того, что мы, вглядываясь в привычное и, казалось бы, понятное, неожиданно открываем в нем странное и необъяснимое.
>
> Yuriy Lotman, *Analiz poeticheskogo teksta.*[5]

Vladimir Nabokov – or we should say Vladimir Sirin, as he made himself known among the Russian émigré community of the '20s and '30s – is hardly ever remembered as a poet. His fame as the unscrupulous literary father of *Lolita* (1955) has left little space for his other novels, let alone his verses. Yet, as a young Russian author, he mostly thought of

[4] George Steiner, "Extraterritorial," in *Extraterritorial. Papers on Literature and the Language Revolution* (New York: Atheneum, 1976), 7.
[5] Yuriy Lotman, *Analiz poeticheskogo teksta. Struktura stikha* (Leningrad: Prosveshcheniye, 1972), 34.

himself as a poet. The present work does not aim at offering a comprehensive study of Nabokov's poetry. The stubborn researcher and the curious reader might be fortunate enough to find some essays and few academic studies on the subject. My purpose is to contribute to the exegesis of Nabokov's poetics through a comparative analysis of his self-translated poems.

Nabokov's bilingualism constitutes one of the most relevant aspects of his literary production. Many Russian writers emigrated from their native country during the 20th century and were forced by circumstances to reinvent their careers starting from their language of choice. While Sergey Dovlatov remained faithful to his Russian tongue, Iosif Brodskiy took advantage of the English he learnt in his youth as a self-taught gulag prisoner. Contrary to most of them, though, by the time he left his country, Nabokov had been a "perfectly normal trilingual child in a family with a large library."[6] Much has been written about Nabokov's biography. The two-volume research by Brian Boyd (*Vladimir Nabokov: The Russian Years*, 1990; *Vladimir Nabokov: The American Years*, 1992) remains to these days the most thorough work ever written on his life. Previous biographical works include Andrew Field's critical biography *Nabokov: His Life in Art* (1967) and Mariya Malikova's study of Nabokov's autobiographical motives in her *Avto-bio-grafiya* (2002). There is no need to go through a full account of Nabokov's life for the purpose of the present research. It might be of use, however, to mention some of the most crucial junctures of his personal and literary experience in the light of his linguistic journey.

Vladimir Vladimirovich Nabokov, born in 1899 in what was then the imperial capital of Saint Petersburg, left Russia with his politically engaged aristocratic family in 1917, during the turmoil of the Revolution. His father's liberal principles and participation in the political scene as a kadet meant he vehemently rejected Bolshevism. Coherently with their values, his Anglophile parents had employed English and French governesses and

[6] Vladimir Nabokov, *Strong Opinions* (New York: Vintage Books, 1990), 43.

tutors to give their children a progressive education. It was only in 1905 that Vladimir Dmitriyevich had decided it was time they properly learnt how to read and write in Russian. From 1919 to 1922 Nabokov was student at Trinity College, Cambridge, where he specialised in Modern and Medieval Languages with a focus on French and Russian (after having spent a semester majoring in Zoology). Nabokov's knowledge of English was the result of a gradual learning process, a scholarly interest as well as a legacy of his parents' broad-minded education. Even so, Nabokov chose Russian as the language of his literary debut and hold on to it until 1940, despite his emigration to Western Europe. Russian was the language he associated with his land and childhood, both of which he had abruptly lost. Russian was the language of his father, whom he lost dramatically in 1922, when in Berlin he fell victim to a political assault on Pavel Milyukov, the former Russian Minister of Foreign Affairs, who escaped unharmed. During the European period, as we might call it, Nabokov lived between England, Germany and France. He was a destitute author/private teacher/sport instructor who stubbornly persisted in his wish to become a professional émigré writer. He chose Sirin as his pseudonym, a powerfully expressive noun which would evoke the anthropomorphic bird of Slavic folklore and, to better-read ears, the Saint Petersburg Symbolist publishing house founded in 1912 by Mikhail Tereshchenko. A couple of weeks before the Nazi invasion of Paris, Nabokov fled Europe with his Jewish wife Vera and their six-year-old child Dmitriy. In the New Continent he invented yet another version of himself. Sirin became Professor Nabokov, who taught Russian Literature at Wellesley College and Cornell University while contributing to advancements in Lepidoptery at Harvard – his deep admiration of butterflies came perhaps only second to Tolstoy's novels. It was after the outrageous success of *Lolita* that he was able to quit his teaching career and engage full time in writing and translating. By then, he had become a prominent English author and a translator to/from Russian. In 1961 the

Nabokovs moved to Switzerland. From his private quarters at the luxurious Montreux Palace Hotel, Nabokov never gave up dedicating himself to writing.

As illustrated in this approximate biographical sketch, Nabokov's identity is a combination of multiple facets. Talking of himself, he once said: "I am an American writer, born in Russia and educated in England where I studied French literature, before spending fifteen years in Germany."[7] He lived in between languages and cultures in that ubiquitous space that is hybridity. Critics have often observed the fluid style of his prose. Comparative studies of his self-translated novels have offered valuable insights into Nabokov's theoretical and practical approach to that particular art that is self-translation. I am persuaded, though, that an in-depth analysis of his self-translated poetry would prove equally worthwhile.

Self-translation as an independent branch of Translation Studies has not developed to its full potential yet. Still, the fact that some writers have made the effort to translate their words into a language different from their own seems to me too much of a testimony to their profound dedication to the advancement of their work and of literature in general to leave it uninvestigated. The case of poetry, in particular, poses some pivotal questions: can poetry be translated by the very same person who wrote it? Should we consider self-translated poems new original creations? I do agree with Alexandra Berlina when she writes that "poetry translation and self-translation are, to [her] mind the most fascinating parts of [the] creative continuum, all the more alluring when combined."[8] Thanks to self-translations we can gain access to a poet's most private rooms through the back-door.

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[7] Nabokov, *Strong Opinions*, 26.

[8] Alexandra Berlina, *Brodsky Translating Brodsky: Poetry in Self-Translation* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2015), 6.

The first ever volume entirely dedicated to self-translating poets was published in 1970 in New Zealand. In his collected lectures held in 1968 at the University of Otago, Professor Leonard Forster captures the ultimate essence of self-translation:

> the use of a foreign language affords a further possibility: the words are not burdened with irrelevant associations for the poet, they are fresh and pristine. This is their appeal, particularly for a poet who has his great work behind him, in which he has exploited the resources of his mother tongue to the full.[9]

Forster's overview offers a broad diachronic perspective of multilingual versification, from the diglossic alternance of Latin and vernaculars during the Middle Ages to Dadaist experimentations with words and the juggling of forms and sounds within Concrete poetry.

It is not by chance that the interest towards self-translation was sparked during the 1970s. As Susan Bassnett highlights,[10] those were the years when the Polysystem Theory, mainly initiated by Itamar Even-Zohar, began to gain pace in the broader field of Translation Studies, opening the door for the subsequent Cultural Turn of André Lefevere and Susan Bassnett and the theory of the translator's invisibility notoriously formulated by Lawrence Venuti, both of which developed during the '90s. Since then the practice of self-translation has been struggling to gain academic attention. According to Jan Walsh Hokenson and Marcella Munson, the reasons for such a significant neglect are at least two. Firstly, literary canons hardly ever welcome hybrids. Secondly, the self-translated text exists simultaneously in two different systems, thus escaping any exact classification: "are the two texts both original creations? Is either text complete? Is self-translation a separate genre? Can either version belong within a single language or literary tradition? How can

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[9] Leonard Forster, *The Poet's Tongues: Multilingualism in Literature* (Dunedin: The University of Otago Press, 1970), 66-67.

[10] Susan Bassnett, "The Self-Translator as Re-Writer," in *Self-Translation: Brokering Originality in Hybrid Culture*, ed. Anthony Cordingley (London: Bloomsbury, 2013), 13-14.

two linguistic versions of a text be commensurable?"[11] Though there can be no definite answer, a thorough analysis of the corresponding texts as the synchronic manifestation of a twinned thought should be able to provide researchers with enough questions to keep their spirits up. Textual intersections and overlaps are to be carefully scrutinised. Thus, when comparing two linguistically divergent versions of the same text we shall investigate stylistics:

> in literature, style is what is most often "lost" in translation, to judge by centuries of critical dispute. To focus on style is not to fall back into a Paterian aestheticism, but rather to construct a bridge across the sterile binaries of form and substance, faithful and free translation, foreignizing and domesticating translative modes. […] Granting that languages and cultures differ, how can an individual style become translingual? And how do we measure the changes made when, in the case of self-translators, they are often lexically indefensible but culturally astute, effectively transposing the reading experience from one medium into another?[12]

At the same time, we ought not to lose sight of what Riffaterre has defined "the unit of significance:" if we only take the "units of meaning" into account or, in other words, if we segment the text in sentences and clauses looking for losses and improvements, we risk ignoring the value of self-translation as a form of re-writing.[13] Consequently, the close-reading method, while operating through a compare and contrast approach, must overcome the concept of identity altogether by giving prominence to functional equivalence, as suggested by Laura Salmon: "identità ed equivalenza sono concetti radicalmente diversi, un progetto di identità è tanto "ridicolo" quanto insensato, ma un progetto di equivalenza è proprio quello su cui lavora un professionista."[14] Such concepts

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[11] Jan Walsh Hokenson and Marcella Munson, *The Bilingual Text: History and Theory of Self-Translation* (Manchester: St. Jerome Publishing, 2007), 1-2.
[12] Ibidem, 166-167.
[13] Bassnett, "The Self-Translator as Re-Writer," 24. Riffaterre's quote is taken from: Michael Riffaterre, *Semiotics of poetry* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1978), 6.
[14] Laura Salmon, "Il processo autotraduttivo: definizioni e concetti in chiave epistemologico-cognitiva," in *Autotraduzione e riscrittura*, ed. Andrea Ceccherelli et al. (Bologna: Bononia University Press, 2013), 82. The

as markedness, functional correspondence, reversibility,[15] as well as horizontal - symmetrical / vertical - asymmetrical correlation and infralinguistic / supralinguistic self-translation[16] will help us draw some conclusions on Nabokov's self-translated verses.

Above all, the present work consists in the comparative study of "parallel or multi-version" texts as a method for close reading:

> switching from implicit to explicit comparison often makes the analysis clearer and more intellectually honest. Every translation is a metatext that can enrich the understanding of both source and target texts, of their languages and cultures. Brilliant solutions can be as illuminating as misunderstandings; stylistic, psychological and sociological approaches can all be gratifying. Comparison reveals aspects of both the original and the translation that might have otherwise gone unnoticed.[17]

Comparative analysis of self-translation as a methodological approach gives us the opportunity to come back to form, structure and the content they frame with a fresh perspective.

The criterion adopted for the corpus selection is rather straightforward. It was in fact Nabokov himself who chose among what he considered his most representative Russian poems, written between 1917 and 1967, dwindled down the assortment to thirty-nine of them and translated those. The resulting bilingual collection was published under the title *Poems and Problems* by the American publishing house McGraw Hill in 1971. In addition to the Russian poems and their English translation, it contains fourteen texts originally composed in English, all written after Nabokov's emigration to the US, and

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quote ("ridicolo") comes from Bassnett's lack of distinction between identity and equivalence (Susan Bassnett, "Quando una traduzione non è una traduzione?," in *La traduzione: teorie e metodologie a confronto*, ed. Mirella Agorni (Milano: LED, 2005), 238).

[15] Salmon, "Il processo autotraduttivo: definizioni e concetti in chiave epistemologico-cognitiva," 81-89.

[16] Rainer Grutman, "Beckett e oltre: autotraduzioni orizzontali e verticali," in *Autotraduzione e riscrittura*, 52-55.

[17] Berlina, *Brodsky Translating Brodsky: Poetry in Self-Translation*, 5.

eighteen chess problems. Donald Barton Johnson has summarised the collection as follows:

> the 1971 *Poems and Problems* contained 39 Russian poems (with English translations *en regard*), spanning much of Nabokov's poetic past. As one might expect, *Poems and Problems* was heavily weighted toward the post-1923 collections. Nine from the 24 poems in *Vozvrashchenie Chorba* and all 15 of those *Stikhotvoreniya 1929-1951* were retained. Nothing from the 1916 *Stikhi* or the 1923 *Grozd'* was kept, while *Dva puti* and *Gornii put'* were represented by a single poem each. Most surprising was Nabokov's inclusion of eight published but uncollected poems: five from the late twenties and early thirties, and three postdating the 1952 collection. Yet more surprising was the presence of five poems, ranging in date from 1917 to 1939, never previously published. Thematically, the hitherto uncollected and unpublished poems are a combination of Russian nostalgia and mementoes of important events in Nabokov's life. *Poems and Problems* is an important work in the Nabokov canon. […] *Poems and Problems* is Nabokov's most stringent statement on his Russian poetry.[18]

Along with lepidopterology, Nabokov had a strong passion for the game of chess. As the title of the collection suggests, poems and (chess) problems, are both combined in a single volume. In the introduction, Nabokov writes: "problems are the poetry of chess."[19] In this respect the title is rhematic[20] – it introduces the reader to the genre of the volume, which, as indicated on the cover page, is split in two consecutive parts, one pertaining poetry, the other chess. Nevertheless, *Poems and Problems* could also be read as a metaphor, alluding to a more thematic content. Nabokov does not see a great divide between verses and chess problems, which are rather perceived by him as two sides of the same coin. The process of composing (and translating) poetry might seem more instinctual and creative whereas that of generating chess puzzles more rational and mathematical. But this is not the case. Poetry and chess, Nabokov objects, have much more in common than we might

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[18] Donald Barton Johnson, "Preliminary Notes on Nabokov's Russian Poetry: A Chronological and Thematic Sketch," in *Russian Literature Triquarterly*, ed. Carl R. Proffer et al. (Ann Arbor: Ardis, 1991), 312-313.
[19] Vladimir Nabokov, *Poems and Problems* (New York: McGraw Hill, 1981), 15.
[20] The term is used according to the definition given by Genette in: Gérard Genette, *Paratexts. Thresholds of Interpretation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 86-89.

have ever imagined: "originality, invention, conciseness, harmony, complexity, and splendid insincerity."[21] Thus if (chess) problems are a form of poetry, could the reverse be a valid affirmation as well? In other words, can we think of poetry as the conscious and rational formulation of a problem? I think we should. This is particularly evident in Nabokov's *Tri shakhmatnykh soneta* [Three Chess Sonnets, 1924] – which, however, did not make it into *Poems and Problems* – in which the rigid structure imposed by the chosen form reflects that of a chessboard: "движенья рифм и танцовщиц крылатых / есть в шахматной задаче" [the movements of rhythm and winged (female) dancers / are in a chess problem].

I am putting forward here the idea that Nabokov must have thought of poems as riddles for him to compose and for readers to solve. Nabokov's verses, especially those of his more mature production, invest much effort in interweaving complex themes with likewise articulate constructions and modulate rhythms. Nabokov frequently alluded to jigsaw puzzles and enigmas as necessary to develop and enhance any form of intellectual reasoning. That Nabokov thought of his poems like chess problems is testified by his commentary to *Rasstrel* [The Execution, 1927] – which is included in the collection – where he writes: "the exclamation in this stanza ["но, сердце, как бы ты хотело, / чтоб это вправду было так" – "but how you would have wished, my heart, / that thus it all had really been"] is wholly rhetorical, a trick of style, a deliberately planted surprise, not unlike underpromotion in a chess problem."[22] His poetry, be it narrative or not, is equally orchestrated so as to lure the reader in through a well thought balance between predictability and unpredictable exceptions. For this precise reason, I believe, Nabokov never ventured out of structure. He experimented different meters and rhyme schemes, he

[21] Nabokov, *Poems and Problems*, 15.
[22] Nabokov, *Poems and Problems*, 47.

combined them, decomposed their architecture and reframed it. But he never lost faith in what poetry has for centuries been whispering to our ears: meters, rhythms, iterations.

Poems and Problems owes its name also to another question reverberating through its pages: can poetry be translated? Nabokov provides his readers with enough material to persuade them that yes, such an endeavour can be effectively achieved. His thirty-nine English versions are a testimony to his work as a translator who engaged in mediating both other writer's oeuvres as well as his own among different languages. "Language is the only reality that divides this universal art into national arts" said Nabokov during his closing lecture on 19th century Russian literature[23] (in translation) at Stanford University Summer School in 1941. From his translation of Lewis Carroll's *Alice in Wonderland* [Anya v strane chudes, 1923] up to those of his own novels and poems, Nabokov proves the potential of literature to overcome linguistic barriers. George Steiner defined him an extraterritorial writer, one who is "linguistically "unhoused," […] a poet, novelist, playwright not thoroughly at home in the language of his production, but displaced or hesitant at the frontier."[24]

As Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn pointed out in his 1972 letter to the Royal Swedish Academy, in which he put him forward as a candidate for the Nobel Prize, Nabokov was able to be a translinguistic and cross-cultural writer, still managing to forge and preserve a very distinct individual voice:

> это писатель ослепительного литературного дарования, именно такого, какое мы зовем гениальностью. Он достиг вершин в тончайших психологических наблюдениях, в изощренной игре языка (*двух* выдающихся языков мира!), в блистательной композиции. Он совершенно своеобразен, узнается с одного абзаца – признак истинной яркости,

[23] Vladimir Nabokov, *Lectures on Russian Literature*, ed. Fredson Bowers (New York: Harcourt, 1981), 199.
[24] Steiner, "Extraterritorial," 3.

неповторимости таланта. В развитой литературе XX века он занимает особое, высокое и несравнимое положение.[25]

What makes Nabokov's poetry and literary production at large so revolutionary is the unpredictability of his language, his ability to prove wrong "the equation of a single pivot language, of native deep-rootedness, with poetic authority."[26] Poetry is, I would argue, the repository of his linguistic originality, the recipient of his unhoused sensibility. As remembered by Donald Barton Johnson, Nabokov's verse production has suffered an unfair amount of simplistic interpretations and reductive readings, especially after its introduction to the Soviet canon following Gorbachev's *glasnost'*: "initially presented by Yevtushenko and Voznesenskiy and focusing on the omnipresent theme of nostalgia for the lost homeland, it presented a relative innocuous point of entry. Further, the poetry's highly traditional nature insured its acceptability for a wide audience."[27] As the close reading of some selected texts will prove, Nabokov's poems are anything but an innocuous point of entry. Instead, they pose relevant questions on the nature of versification, prosody and the poet's role. If anything, their bifurcated tongues raise dilemmas.

Allographic epitexts[28] have played an important role in the subdued reception of *Poems and Problems*. The collection received negative reviews at the time when it began its circulation. John Skow criticised Nabokov's use of obscure words such as "caprifole" in *The Rain Has Flown*. In his words, Nabokov becomes "a provincial linguistic pedant," "an

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[25] Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, "Shvedskoy Korolevskoy Akademii," *Novaya gazeta* 473, no. 1 (12-18 January 1998): 8. Solzhenitsyn's italics.

[26] Steiner, "Extraterritorial," 6.

[27] Barton Johnson, "Preliminary Notes on Nabokov's Russian Poetry: A Chronological and Thematic Sketch," 316. Barton Johnson refers to: Andrey Voznesenskiy, "Geometrida ili Nimfa Nabokova," *Oktyabr'*, no. 11 (1986): 111-114 and Yevgeniy Yevtushenko, "Stikhi (Bilet; Rasstrel; K Rossii; Bezumets, Kakoye sdelal ya durnoye delo)/Predisloviye Ye. Yevtushenko," *Ogonek*, no. 37 (September 1987): 8.

[28] "The epitext is any paratextual element not materially appended to the text within the same volume but circulating, as it were, freely, in a virtually limitless physical and social space." Genette, *Paratexts. Thresholds of Interpretation*, 344.

overrefined rhymester," "a pleasing and self-pleased illusionist."[29] The following are just some of the comments on the collection:[30]

> it's pleasant to have a book of poems that does not propose the salvation of the world for its immediate object. But it will have to be said, on the other side, that Nabokov's poems written in English are in large part deft and neat and not much more, some of them not far from cute. […] So maybe the Russian poems – mostly youthful ones written during the twenties and thirties – are of a greater ambition and a greater power. But that is not a thing I was able to determine from the translations. Maybe it will be best to regard this book as a sort of souvenir for the author's many readers, the record of some diversions of a master.[31]
>
> Although the English poems are insubstantial, the chess problems, recently composed, exhibit Nabokov's characteristic dexterity and complexity.[32]
>
> I can see some slight resemblance between Nabokov's problems and his New Yorker poems, which are full of witty ingenuities and cunningly planted shocks, slyly forcing the vernacular into a classic mode and refurbishing the banal with baroque elaboration. This type of verse can often be either facetious or sentimental – and there is a very faint hint of both qualities here.[33]
>
> Art is also a game, with Nabokov as a player whose approach to writing is that of an intellectual puzzle-maker producing artefacts which are all clever construction and stylistic acrobatics, an aesthete trapping glittering bejewelled butterflies in his lepidopterist's net.[34]
>
> Although it is slyly deceptive, *Poems and Problems* emphasizes the deception and artifice of which Nabokov is capable both through the translations of the Russian poems and the array of chess problems – a sort of metaphor for the chop-logic that characterizes fictional worlds.[35]

What all these critical reviews fail to do is to discuss the authentic core of *Poems and Problems*: self-translation. Nabokov's self-translated poems demand to be read

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[29] John Skow, "Drinker of Words," *Time*, June 14, 1971, 67-68.
[30] For a more detailed account of how *Poems and Problems* was received by American critics see: Paul D. Morris, *Vladimir Nabokov: Poetry and the Lyric Voice* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2010), 64-68.
[31] Howard Nemerov, "All the Virtues, Including," *The New York Times*, July 25, 1971, 5.
[32] Anonymous, [Mention of *Poems and Problems*], *The Booklist*, September 1, 1971, 27.
[33] Frances Wyndham, "Ivory-and-Ebony," *The Listener*, July 27, 1972, 116.
[34] Konstantin Bazarov, "Poet's Problems," *Books and Bookmen*, October, 1972, XII.
[35] Marianne K. Hultquist, "Views of Nabokov," *Prairie Schooner*, no. 47, 1973, 271.

simultaneously, as two moments of the same breath. No critical analysis, therefore, can attain a proper and adequate judgement of the collection without taking self-translation into account as its dominant trait, instead of a merely functional feature for the pleasure of bilingual readers or refined connoisseurs.

Poems and Problems gives us the rare chance to observe Nabokov's practice of self-translation specifically applied to his verses. The collection constitutes a precious corpus in itself. First of all, the poems were selected by the author himself. Secondly, the volume comprises poems written at different stages of Nabokov's progression as a poet and as a writer. Thirdly, as a consequence of the aforementioned chronological principle, the texts are diverse in themes, motives and stylistic features. Finally, the collection was published towards the end of Nabokov's career (and life), therefore representing a testament of his work as a poet and as a translator. Though some poems have been appreciated as individual stand-alone creations, especially the Russian source texts, they have not been sufficiently taken into account as self-translated pieces of poetry. While they are able to stand on their own, the English translations were not written as originals and require to be read in the light of their Russian counterpart. On the other hand, the source texts cease to be monolithic pieces of literature once they are given a second life in another language. Therefor it is only by considering them as self-translations that we will be able to fully appreciate their worth.

As stated by the members of the Belgian Groupe μ, "la creazione poetica è una elaborazione formale della materia linguistica."[36] Stylistics, thus, provides the essential tools to study the form of individual discourse. This was clear to formalist Boris Tomashevskiy at least since 1925, when in his *Teoriya literatury* [Literary Theory] he wrote: "учет основных явлений, сопутствующих установке на выражение, совершенно необходим

[36] Gruppo μ, *Retorica generale. Le figure della comunicazione* (Milano: Bompiani, 1976), 26.

для понимания конструкции художественных произведений, и поэтому стилистика является необходимым введением в поэтику. Проблемы стилистики являются специфическими проблемами художественной литературы."[37]

The identification of tropes, as a form of "stilisticheskaya okraska"[38] [stylistic tint] serves as the guiding principle for the present work. As Lotman states, "пара взаимно несопоставимых значимых элементов, между которыми устанавливается в рамках какого-либо контекста отношения адекватности, образует семантический троп. В этом отношении тропы являются не внешним украшением, некоторого рода апплике, накладываемым на мысль извне, – они составляют суть творческого мышления."[39]

While morphological and syntactical figures (metaplasms and metataxis respectively) are used to support the analysis, the poems selected for the present work are sorted according to semantic and logical tropes (metasemes and metalogisms respectively). The close reading of *Dozhd' proletel / The Rain Has Flown* functions as an introduction to Nabokov's poetics and practice of (self-)translation. In the chapter titled *Inache govorya / In other words* Nabokov's intertextuality is investigated. The descriptive nature of some of his verses emerges especially through dialogical allusions (*Eshche bezmolvstvuyu / I Still Keep Mute*) and ekphrastic depictions of mundane objects (*L'Inconnue de la Seine; Snimok / The Snapshot*). In the second chapter, *Prozrachnyye veshchi / Transparent Things*, the attention converges on synaesthesia (*Tikhiy shum / Soft Sound*) and synecdoche (*Oko / Oculus*), two particular manifestations of metonymy and metaphor respectively, and employs metasemes to explore the poetic form (*Nepravil'nyye yamby / Irregular Iambics*). Nabokov's articulate

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[37] Boris Tomashevskiy, *Teoriya literatury. Poetika* (Moskva: Aspekt Press, 1996), 29.

[38] "Стилистическая окраска тропа заключается в том, что, в отличие от привычного обозначения предмета или явления постоянно соответствующими ему, привычным словом, происходит перераспределение признаков, так что на первый план выступают признаки, обычно запрятанные среди других, образующих понятие или представление." Boris Tomashevskiy, *Stilistika* (Leningrad: Izdatel'stvo Leningradskogo universiteta, 1983), 194-195.

[39] Yuriy Lotman, "Ritorika," in *Izbrannyye stat'i v trekh tomakh*, vol. 1, *Stat'i po semiotike i tipologii kul'tury* (Tallin: Aleksandra, 1992), 168-169.

interplay of topographical and chronological coordinates is scanned in the *Interlude* (*Bezumets / The Madman*). In *S drugoy storony / Then Again*, we move forward to metalogisms as a way to achieve surprise and estrangement (*Nomer v gostinitse / Hotel Room*; *Formula / The Formula*; *K Kn. S. M. Kachurinu / To Prince S. M. Kachurin*). The chapter *Molchi / Speak Not* attempts a reading of Nabokov's metapoems through the figure of ellipses (*Neokonchennyy chernovik / An Unfinished Draft*; *Kakoye sdelal ya durnoye delo / What Is the Evil Deed*; *O pravitelyakh / On Rulers*). Having illustrated some of Nabokov's most prominent rhetorical devices and recurrent motives, the longer poem *Slava / Fame* will serve as a vehicle for some final conclusions.

Once it has been translated, can a poem be independent from its source text? Are self-translated verses self-sufficient or should they be read in the light of their counterpart? How can the reading of a self-translation inform that of original poems? Can poetry be doubled, split in two equal halves, twinned without losing its integrity and evocativeness? Can a poet be incorruptible when he/she is called to wear the self-translator's mask? These are some of the questions that will resonate through the following chapters and, hopefully, be answered. Let us then venture out in the realm of Nabokov's self-translation. Close readings and comparative analysis will be our walking sticks, stylistic elements and rhetorical tropes our breadcrumbs.

Notes on the texts

Unless otherwise stated, the source for all the poems analysed in Vladimir Nabokov's Russian-English self-translation is the volume *Poems and Problems*, edited by Nabokov himself and originally published in 1971 for McGraw Hill. For the purpose of the present work the 1981 paperback edition has been used (see the section *Bibliography* for the detailed bibliographical reference). Another important source text is Nabokov's *Stikhotvoreniya* (Akademicheskiy proekt, 2002), where both Russian and English poems are anthologised.

Each Russian poem is presented in the original form followed by my literal translation – which has no ambition at poetic taste and only serves a pragmatic function – and Nabokov's self-translated English text. Some poems are presented as a whole, others stanza by stanza, mostly depending on their length, in order to make the analytical process clearer and, hopefully, easier to follow.

For the Latin transcriptions the BGN/PCGN Romanization system for Russian (British standard) has been used.

In the commentaries to the poems, I have often used the pronoun *he* referring to the poet and/or poetic persona. Whilst it may be considered today as ideologically biased, the male gender has been preferred for the sole reason that my author of choice was a man. The use of more politically correct variants, such as he/she or (s)he, would have been, in the present case, redundant.

As regards to critical material, I have consulted texts in four different languages: Russian, English, French and Italian – three of which I, a passionate intruder, have been eavesdropping on for many years now. I make it a rule to employ originals whenever possible. In those cases, however, when the source material belongs to a linguistic medium I unfortunately do not possess the knowledge of, or when the original text has eluded my research, I have trusted the invaluable work of translators.

Дождь пролетел / The Rain Has Flown

> С анализа формы должно бы начинаться всякое суждение об авторе, всякий рассказ о нем.
>
> Vladislav Khodasevich, *O Sirine.*[40]

Nabokov's *Dozhd' proletel* seems the most convenient place to start our journey. Its two stanzas open the volume *Poems and Problems* and have always been considered by Nabokov his first successful attempt at versification. The poem was first anthologized in *Al'manach "Dva puti"* [Almanac "Two Paths," 1918], which he edited with one of his Tenishev schoolmates, Andrey Balashov, during the Russian revolution. Its verses describe the details of nature after a sudden rainfall and epitomise Nabokov's first approach to poetry. According to the date recorded in *Poems and Problems*, it was written in May 1917. The lack of any reference to the feverish state of Russia in that very same period increases the idyllic out-of-time quality of the experience contained in these verses.

Nabokov's Russian text
Дождь пролетел
Дождь пролетел и сгорел налету.

[40] Vladislav Khodasevich, "O Sirine," in Boris Averin, ed., *V. V. Nabokov: Pro et contra. Materialy i issledovaniya o zhizni i tvorchestve V. V. Nabokova*, vol. 1 (Sankt-Peterburg: Izdatel'stvo Russkogo Khristianskogo gumanitarnogo instituta, 1997), 241.

Иду по румяной дорожке.
Иволги свищут, рябины в цвету,
Белеют на ивах сережки.

Воздух живителен, влажен, душист.
Как жимолость благоухает!
Кончиком вниз наклоняется лист
И с кончика жемчуг роняет.

Literal translation
The rain flew past/by
The rain flew past/by and burnt up in flight.
I walk/am walking / go/am going along the/a scarlet/rosy path.
(The) orioles whistle/are whistling, (the) rowans are in bloom/are blooming,
(The) catkins on (the) willows turn/are turning white.

The air is vivifying, humid, fragrant.
How good the honeysuckle smells!
With the/its little tip downward the/a leaf inclines itself
And from the/its little tip drops the/a pearl.

Nabokov's English translation
The Rain Has Flown
The rain has flown and burnt up in flight.
I tread the red sand of a path.
Golden orioles whistle, the rowan is in bloom,
the catkins on sallows are white.

The air is refreshing, humid and sweet.
How good the caprifole smells!
Downward a leaf inclines its tip
and drops from its tip a pearl.

Dozhd' proletel has a simple regular structure which mirrors Nabokov's belief in formal precision, especially in his earlier production. In both the Russian and the English versions, each stanza is composed of two one-line sentences and one longer two-line phrase. The original text is built on four verses in dactylic tetrameter which alternate with four more in amphibrachic trimeter. The resulting eight verses are divided in two quatrains

and follow the alternate rhyme scheme AbAb CdCd.[41] Rhymes are mainly grammatical as in the adverbial forms "na letu," "v tsvetu," the diminutives "dorozhke," "sirezhki" and the verbs "blagoukhayet," "ronyayet." The only two rhyming words that do not correspond to each other in their morphological function are the short form adjective "dushist" and the noun "list," though both have masculine endings.

While preserving a rhythmical structure, Nabokov's self-translated text replaces the dactylic meter with the iambic pace. The first English stanza is devoid of rhyme. However, it becomes more detectable in the second one, as in "sweet" (/iːt/) – "tip" (/ɪp/) and "smells" (/ll/) – "pearls" (/rl/). These slant rhymes make the second part of the poem more regular and more dynamic at the same time, its tempo becoming more perceptible. The increasing sound play may suggest a gradual identification of the lyrical voice with the surrounding nature, the rhythm of the mind attuning with that of the outside world. The phonic effect is also enhanced in the English version, where the sequence of monosyllabic words in the first two lines and the last one reproduces the musical cadence of rain falling on leaves.

A rather complex evocative weave of sounds characterises the Russian text. In the first stanza, the iteration of the liquid /r/ preceded by the occlusive consonants /g/ (/sgʲeˈrʲel/), /d/ (/dʲeˈroʐkʲe/) and /t/ (/ˈsviɕːɯt-rʲɪˈbinɨ/) reproduces the sound of rain dripping among trees, while the alveolar liquid /l/ in the first verse intensifies its evanescence. In English, the voiceless labiodental fricative /f/ combined with the liquid /l/ in /fləʊn/ and /flaɪt/ highlights the ephemeral character of the rain.

In the middle section, compound consonantal sounds prevail: the voiced fricative /ʐ/ is combined with the voiceless velar plosive /k/, as in dʲeˈroʐkʲɪ/, /sɪˈrʲoʐkɪ/, and with the

[41] For want of visual immediacy, I will use capital letters for masculine rhymes instead of Nabokov's notation, as illustrated in his *Notes on Prosody*, according to which feminine rhymes are indicated by vowels and masculine rhymes by consonants.

nasals /n/ in /ˈvlaʐən/ and /m/ in /ˈʐimələstʲ/. Along with the voiceless fricative velar /x/ in /ˈvozdʊx/ and /bləgɐʊˈxaʲɪt/, this evokes the passage of wind between leaves and branches. The third verse of the original poem also presents an interesting iteration: the voiced labiodental fricative /v/ is initially combined with the voiceless alveolar fricative /s/ in /ˈivəlgɪ-ˈsviɕːʉt/ and then with the voiceless alveolar affricate /t͡s/ in /v-t͡s vɪˈtu/; this, together with the frequent use of the vowel sound /i/, twice stressed, reproduces the distinctive whistle of birds. The English combination of the voiced labio-velar approximant /w/, in /swiːt/, /ˈwɪsl/ and /waɪt/, with the voiceless alveolar fricative /s/, in both /swiːt/, /ˈwɪsl/ and /ˈsləʊs/, is aimed at the same result.

In the last two Russian verses, the combination of the nasals /n/ and /m/ with the affricate /t͡ʃ/ in /ˈkont͡ʃik(əm)/ and /ˈʐɛmt͡ʃʊk/ sounds like water lightly trickling over plants or puddles. The equivalent effect is enhanced in the English version, where the repetition of both voiceless and voiced plosives /d/, /t/ and /p/ is so dense it almost seems to imitate a drumming rhythm. Both the Russian original and its English translation show Nabokov's determination to catch and instill in his short poem the sounds of nature, reproducing in the reader's mind the complexity of its acoustic resonances.

Dozhd' proletel has a sharp dense syntax. There are no subordinate sentences: "i" is the only (coordinating) conjunction and it is used at the two extreme opposites of the poem – in the very first and last line – thus stressing the polarisation of its structure. All verbs belong to the imperfective mode and are prevalently in present tense, with the exception of the first two predicates, which describe completed actions and are therefore in perfective mode. The Russian prefixed verb "prolete[t']" is neutralised in the English "to fly," without any specifying preposition. While in Russian language prefixes are one of the most prominent tools to qualify an action, especially when a perfective mode is used, the English chronological distribution works as well without any further morphological element. Both

perfective verbs in the opening line, "proletel" and "sgorel," are turned into the present perfect of "has flown" and "[has] burnt up," instead of simple pasts. This allows to extend the consequences of the two actions right into the present time of the poem, when the lyric voice describes a scene of rain which has left the surrounding nature wet, its colours refreshed. While in the original text the rain is abrupt and impetuous, in the English version it becomes more moderate and ephemeral due to the extension of the time span.

Hence, the contemplative nature of the poem is strengthened in its self-translation. Nabokov's preference for present simple forms, as in lines 2 and 4, makes the tone more descriptive than narrative, the attention is drawn towards the subject, the natural elements and their present qualities. The verb "tread" shifts the focus from sequential progress to circumstantial specification. Instead of addressing the dynamic movement suggested in "idu," the English verb lingers on a more expressive connotative note. No verbs are referred to grammatical subjects, except "idu," where it is implied, and the corresponding "I tread." For mere grammatical reasons, the English verse tends to emphasise the active presence of the lyrical subject. All the remaining verbs are referred to rather specific nouns indicating birds, plants and climatic manifestations. Inanimate objects and phenomena are thus given the ability to perform actions through frequent personifications. Most importantly, in both stanzas the author's perspective, initially extended to a broader all-embracing view, gradually narrows down to a single detail: the catkins and the pearl. In Russian both "serezhki" and "zhemchug" have a literal and a figurative meaning: while the denotative equivalent of "serezhki" is aments, "zhemchug" indicates a pearl; at the same time, if we take their connotative meaning into account, "serezhki" also stands for earrings while "zhemchug" could suggest the image of a raindrop.

The presence of "serezhki" and "zhemchug," both of which are polysemous nouns, in such a short condensed poem cannot be considered a mere coincidence. As a matter of

fact, denotative and figurative meanings are intertwined in an entangled web of correspondences between nature and jewels, thus evoking a feminine presence. The analogy between nature and the female subject is one of the most recurrent tropes in poetry. It was not new to Mikhail Lomonosov, the father of Russian iambic tetrameter (first illustrated in his *Khotinskaya oda* [The Hotinian Ode, 1739]), when in 1744 he wrote *Kratkoye rukovodstvo k ritorike* [Brief Manual of Rhetoric]. In the first ever Russian manual on the art of discourse and its exegesis, Lomonosov also reflects on the essential role of comparison, anticipating the concept of metaphor: "уподобление рождает пространные и притом прекрасные идеи, ежели многие свойства, части или действия двух подобных вещей между собою прилично снесены будут."[42] To demonstrate his theory, Lomonosov inserts a short unpublished poem where he depicts the scene of a sunrise charged with pathos. Aurora, the classic goddess, paints the fields of an intense red and wakes the birds to their songs.

Сходящей с поль златых Авроры
Рука багряна сыплет к нам
Брильянтов, искр, цветов узоры,
Дает румяный вид полям,
Светящей ризой мрак скрывает
И сладким песням птиц взбуждает.
Чистейший луч доброт твоих
Украсил мой усердный стих.
От блеску твоея порфиры
Яснеет тон нижайшей лиры.

Literal translation
Coming down from (the) golden fields Aurora's
Crimson hand scatters/is scattering to us
Brilliants, sparkles, flower decorations,
(She) gives/is giving a scarlet/rosy tone to (the) fields,
With a/the shining chasuble (she) covers/is covering the darkness
And to sweet songs (she) wakes/is waking the birds.
The purest ray of your kindness
(Has) adorned my zealous verse.
Thanks to the shine of your purple
The tone of my lowest/poorest lyre becomes/is becoming clearer and clearer.

Lomonosov's poem combines two very different traditions: that of the widespread Western ode and that of the then rising Russian syllabo-tonic versification, on which he

[42] Mikhail Lomonosov, "Kratkoye rukovodstvo k ritorike na pol'zu lyubiteley sladkorechiya," in *Polnoye sobraniye sochineniy v 11 tomakh*, vol. 7, *Trudy po filologii 1739-1758 gg.*, ed. V. V. Vinogradov et al. (Moskva: Izdatel'stvo Akademii Nauk SSSR, 1952), 41-42. "The comparison generates extensive and therefore beautiful ideas, since many properties, parts or actions of two similar things will be brought together in the most appropriate manner."

himself worked.[43] Nabokov was well aware of Lomonosov's poem, since he translated it in English as part of the notes to his much debated 1964 version of *Yevgeniy Onegin*. The following is Nabokov's translation:

> From golden fields descends Aurora
> On us with crimson hand to strew
> He brilliants, sparks, festoons of Flora,
> To give the fields a rosy hue;
> To hide the dark with her bright cloak
> And birds to mellow songs provoke.
> Most pure, the ray of blessings thine
> Doth ornament my zealous line;
> Grows clearer in thy purple's fire
> The tone of my most humble lyre.[44]

In Lomonosov's text the iambic tetrameter remains constantly unvaried except for verse 9, where the second foot has no word accent (scuds, which are discussed in chapter 2.3, would have become more common in Lomonosov's later poems and much more frequent in Pushkin's oeuvre).[45] Nabokov's version is so faithful to the formal aspects of the poem that it even reproduces the unaccented syllable in tonic position, though anticipating it to verse 8. The substandard variations of "zlatoy," an elided form of *zolotoy* [golden], and "ot blesku," a colloquial version of *ot bleska* [thanks to the shine], are neutralized in Nabokov's translation, where the archaic diction is reproduced in the Middle English auxiliary "doth," the possessive pronoun "thine" and its apocopated version "thy."

Syntax also has a retrospective look to it. As compared with modern Russian standard distribution, adjectives and nouns are often presented in inverted order, as in

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[43] Nabokov proved how the rhyme scheme used by Lomonosov (babaccedde, according to Nabokov's notation as explained in note 39) was in fact a reversed calque from Ronsard's *strophe de dix vers* (ababeeciic), subsequently made popular by Malherbe in the West and Derzhavin in Russia (Vladimir Nabokov, "Notes on Prosody," in Aleksandr Pushkin, *Eugene Onegin. A Novel in Verse*, vol. 3, *Commentary and Index*, ed. Vladimir Nabokov (New York: Pantheon Books, 1964), 485). This further contributes to establish Lomonosov's role in mediating between Western and Russian culture.

[44] Aleksandr Pushkin, *Eugene Onegin. A Novel in Verse*, vol. 2, *Commentary and Index*, ed. Vladimir Nabokov (New York: Pantheon Books, 1964), 522.

[45] Nabokov, "Notes on Prosody," 488-489.

"pol' zlatykh" [golden fields], "ruka bagryana," "dobrot tvoikh," as well as nouns and specifications, such as in "tsvetov uzory," verbs and complements, as in "rizoy mrak skryvayet" and "k sladkim pesnyam ptits vzbuzhdayet," or even entire sentences, as in the opening verse "skhodyashchey s pol' zlatykh Avrory / ruka bagryana syplet k nam" [bagryana ruka skhodyashchey s[o] zlatykh pol' Avrory syplet k nam] and the closing statement "ot blesku tvoyeya porfiry / yasneyet ton nizhayshey liry" [ton nizhayshey liry yasneyet ot blesku tvoyeya porfiry]. Anastrophes and frequent enjambements disrupt the conventional word order, interfering with what Yuriy Tynyanov, in his essay *Problema stikhotvornogo yazyka*, defined *tesnota stikhovogo ryada* [tightness of the verse line] and giving the verses a highly solemn tone that is typical of 18th century poetry. This characteristic of Lomonosov's poem becomes even more distinctive in Nabokov's version. The English translation keeps the inversions and the enjambements mostly unvaried, thus highlighting the relevance of such syntactic choices. This happens, for instance, in "chisteyshiy luch dobrot tvoikh / ukrasil moy userdnyy stikh" translated as "most pure, the ray of blessings thine / doth ornament my zealous line," where the caesurae after the initial comma and the possessive "thine" confer a special prominence to "pure" and "blessings." In other cases, some verses are neutralised and given a more contemporary taste, as in the simplified line "to hide the dark with her bright cloak:" here the original syntactic order is lost[46] as is the reference to the clerical vestment.

Colours are central in Lomonosov's stanza. The chromatic spectrum of intense red emerges in the adjectives "bagryana" and "rumyanyy" as well as in the noun "porfira," the imperial cloak that often adorns not only emperors but also the Virgin Mary and other

[46] Tomashevskiy identifies the presence of the verb at the end of the sentence as one of what he defines "inversivnyye formy:" "[тяготение к постановке глагола на конце предложения] это своеобразная норма XVIII в., ломоносовская норма, которая придерживалась латинской конструкции фразы." Tomashevskiy, *Stilistika*, 265. This seems to be the case in the English poetry of that time as well. In Thomas Gray's *Elegy Written in a Country Church Yard* (1750) the verb is equally postponed: "full many a gem of purest ray serene, / the dark unfathomed caves of ocean bear."

religious subjects in icons. Spirituality and wealth are thus interlaced as they do with such a visual force in the sumptuous splendour of Orthodox temples. Some words can be spent in regard to the collocation "bagryana ruka." Pushkin also used the same co-occurrence in *Yevgeniy Onegin*. In his meticulous commentary,[47] Nabokov investigates the origins of this ancient epithet dating back to Homer's *Iliad* and *Odyssey*. It was through the British literary canon that it reached its utmost popularity. In William Shakespeare we find the expression "long purples" referred to Aurora's hands (*Hamlet*, 1609) and in Edmund Spenser "now when the rosy-fingered Morning faire / weary of aged Tithones saffron bed, / had spread her purple robe through deawy aire" (*The Faerie Queene*, 1590). Then the attention seems to have shifted from the physical detail of Aurora's hands to the colour shade of her advance. In John Dryden we read "the purple morning rising with the year" (*The epithalamium of Helen and Menelaus*, 1685), "Aurora had but newly chas'd the night, / and purpled o'er the sky with blushing light" (*Palamon and Arcite*, 1700) as well as "with purple blushing, and the day arise" (*Aeneid*, 1697). Also John Milton in *Paradise Lost* (1667) wrote "or when morn / purples the East" and "impurpled with celestial roses smil'd."[48] In all these excerpts the rosy tint is not clearly distinguished from the more purplish one. This is due, according to Nabokov, to the etymological root the French *pourpre* and the English *purple* share: they both come from the Latin *purpura*, which in its turn originated from the Greek *πορφύρα*; only, French has progressively associated a red tone to it while English has shifted towards violet, as summarised by Nabokov: "the bright-red variety of purple does crop up as a Europeanism in Shakespeare and other poets of his time, but its real ascendancy, of short duration happily, comes with the age of pseudoclassicism, when Pope seems to have

[47] Pushkin, *Eugene Onegin. A Novel in Verse*, vol. 2, 520-521.

[48] All the quoted verses of the present paragraph come from: Samuel Johnson, *A dictionary of English language: in which the words are deduced from their originals, and illustrated in their different significations by examples from the best writers: to which are prefixed, a history of the language, and an English grammar*, 2 vols. (London: J.F. and C. Rivington, 1785).

deliberately conformed to the French use of *pourpre;* Pope's pupil, Byron, followed suit."[49] Due to the influence French language and culture exercised over imperial Russia, *purpurnyy* is closer to the French meaning of *pourpre*. Consequently, it alternates with its equivalents *bagryanyy*, *bogrovyy*, *porfirnyy* and *rumyanyy*, all indicating crimson red. As suggested in Nabokov's note, it was Pope who finally canonised, for the British tradition, the rather typical occurrence of the colour purple with the appearance of Aurora. In his translation of Homer, he wrote: "till rosy morn had purpled o'er the sky" (*Ilyad*, 1715-1720) and "with rosy lustre purpled o'er the lawn" (*Odyssey*, 1726).

In his translation of Lomonosov's ode, Nabokov chooses to translate "bagryana" as "crimson," consciously avoiding the purple tones. This detail, though apparently superfluous, enriches the reader's perception of Lomonosov by reconnecting his text to its classic roots. This also proves another relevant point: Nabokov prefers his translation to be unidiomatic as long as he can preserve the philological integrity of the original text. Translation should be first and foremost an exercise in exegesis. This is also confirmed in his version of *Yevgeniy Onegin*, where the verses "но вот багряною рукою / заря от утренних долин" are coherently translated as "but lo, with crimson hand / Aurora from the morning dales."[50]

At the same time, though, Nabokov was perfectly aware of and responsive to semantic collocations, or frequently co-occurring words. Lomonosov's "rumyanyy vid," for instance, becomes Nabokov's "rosy hue." Nabokov himself more than once used the adjective *rumyanyy* in its most frequent collocation with the noun *shcheka* to indicate blushing cheeks: in *Universitetskaya poema* [University Poem, 1926] we read the line "и по щеке румяно-смуглой" [and along the dark-scarlet cheek] and in the cycle *Sem' stikhotvoreniy* [Seven Poems, 1956] "на румяной щеку земли" [on the scarlet/rosy cheek of

[49] Pushkin, *Eugene Onegin. A novel in verse*, vol. 2, 521.
[50] Alexandr Pushkin, *Eugene Onegin. A novel in verse*, vol. 1, *Introduction and Translation*, trans. and ed. Vladimir Nabokov (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1990), 221.

the earth]. I would argue that in the English translation of Lomonosov's *"Skhodyashchey s pol'…"* the use of the combination of "rosy" and "hue" is not casual in the least. On the contrary, this collocation is extremely marked in English language literature, where it is used to describe the healthy complexion of youths and the transitory cyclic stages of nature, such as seasonal (spring and autumn) or circadian (dawn) rhythms. For this reason, we can easily find this exact collocation in 18th and 19th century odes. In his *Ode on a Distant Prospect of Eton College* (1741), Thomas Gray describes the glowing health of youth: "gay hope is theirs by fancy fed, / less pleasing when possesst; / the tear forgot as soon as shed, / the sunshine of the breast: / theirs buxom health, of rosy hue, / wild wit, invention ever new, / and lively cheer, of vigour borne."[51] The same collocation is used by John Keats in his *To Autumn* (1819): "where are the songs of spring? Ay, where are they? / Think not of them, thou hast thy music too, – while barred clouds bloom the soft-dying day, / and touch the stubble-plains with rosy hue."[52] In both Gray and Keats the co-occurrence is located at the end of the verse, therefore in rhyme position. Whether he was aware or not of Gray's and Keats's "rosy hue," Nabokov used it to translate Lomonosov's "rumyanyy vid," evoking the same allegorical allusion to prosperity and youth as well as transience, according to the English Romantic tradition.[53]

Going back to Lomonosov's *"Skhodyashchey s pol'…"*, another significant trait can be detected in the religious subtext mediated by the presence of the pagan goddess Aurora. The nouns "riza" refers to the religious semantic field while "bril'yantov," "iskr," "ukrasil,"

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[51] Thomas Gray, "Ode on a Distant Prospect of Eton College," in *The Works of Thomas Gray*, vol. 1, *Poems*, ed. Rev. John Mitford (London: William Pickering, 1847), 13.

[52] John Keats, "To Autumn," in *Poems* (London: Chiswick Press, 1897), 243.

[53] See also Lord Alfred Tennyson's *Boyhood* ("each object that we meet the more endears / that rosy morn before a troubled day; / that blooming dawn – that sunrise of our years – / that sweet voluptuous vision past away!" Alfred Tennyson and Charles Tennyson, "Boyhood," in *Poems by Two Brothers* (New York: Thomas Y. Crowell and Co., –), 51) and *Tithonus* ("thy cheek begins to redden through the gloom, / thy sweet eyes brighten slowly close to mine, / ere yet they blind the stars, and the wild team / which love thee, yearning for thy yoke, arise, / and shake the darkness from their loosened manes, / and beat the twilight into flakes of fire" Lord Alfred Tennyson, "Tithonus," in *Tennyson: A Selected Edition*, ed. Christopher Ricks (London: Routledge, 2007), 586-587).

"ot blesku" and "porfira" all imply material ostentation. In Nabokov's translation the merging of wealth, prosperity and power is emphasized by the added presence of Flora, whose "festoons" of flowers decorate nature at its awakening. Though it could be read as an arbitrary choice on Nabokov's part, the appearance of Flora may again result from a conscious allusion. Apart from preserving the rhyme scheme, it can be traced back to Edmund Spenser's *The Faerie Queene* (1590-1596), where the "royall Dame" is Queen Elizabeth I. Her grandiose magnificence is celebrated here through an articulate simile to Aurora in her "purple pall" adorned with Flora's "girlonds."[54]

In 1742, two years before *Kratkoye rukovodstvo k ritorike*, Lomonosov had already composed the following verses as part of a longer ode. There, he similarly combines female presence, nature and power:

> Как лютый мраз она прогнавши
> Замерзлым жизнь дает водам;
> Туманы, бури, снег поправши,
> Являет ясны дни странам,
> Вселенну паки воскрешает,
> Натуру нам возобновляет,
> Поля цветами красит вновь;
> Так ныне милость и любовь
> И светлый дщери взор Петровой
> Нас жизнью оживляет новой.

These verses are taken from *Oda na pribytiye eye Velichestva Velikiya Gosudaryni Imperatritsy Yelizavety Petrovny iz Moskvy v Sanktpeterburg 1742 goda po koronacii* [Ode on the arrival of Her Highness the Great Sovereign Empress Elizaveta Petrovna from Moscow to Saint Petersburg in 1742 for (her) coronation, 1742]. This is just the first of a long series of odes that Lomonosov dedicated to the Empress who highly appreciated and cultivated his talent. It is therefore the Russian sovereign's face hiding behind Aurora's mask in

[54] Edmund Spenser, *The Faerie Queene*, vol. 12, *Morall Vertues* (London: William Ponsonbie, 1596), 47.

"Skhodyashchey s pol'… ." Though formally adherent to the source text, Nabokov's version reconnects Lomonosov's ode to the British literary tradition through a target oriented version where such semantic elements as "crimson hand," "Flora," "rosy hue" and "purple" are brought to the forefront thanks to their ability to evoke some of the most resonant names in English language poetry, from Gray to Spenser and Keats, and their primary sources, namely Homer's classic epics.

The simplicity of *"Skhodyashchey s pol'…,"* therefore, is only apparent. The sense is thrice removed from its surface through an articulate juxtaposition of allegorical plans: the ode to Aurora (I level) becomes a celebration of the creative moment inspired by the contemplation of the surrounding nature (II level), ultimately becoming a eulogy of the Empress as the highest incarnation of both temporal and secular power and, consequently, the primary source of any inspiration (III level).

How does all this inform the reading of Nabokov's *Dozhd' proletel* / *The Rain Has Flown*, then? The self-translation does not reproduce the allegorical meaning suggested in the adjective "rumyanyy," previously discussed. The scarlet tone of the path is diluted, together with its allusiveness, into a more opaque red. Nevertheless, the sense of colour is accentuated through the internal rhyme "tread" – "red" and the evocative presence of the rowan, with its red berries.

For all its simplicity, Nabokov's poem offers its readers glimpses of some of his most distinctive traits: formal rigor, rhythmical cadence, fixed rhyme scheme, lyrical intonation, experiential nature of the content. Because of this, his poetry might be considered anachronistic in comparison to the Modernist / Symbolist current that was representative of the Western and Russian literary canon at the time when Nabokov was known as Sirin and identified himself as a poet. However, this is true only in part.

In his memoir *Speak, Memory* (1967), Nabokov describes the moment when the creative spark was lit for the very first time and "the numb of fury verse-making"[55] finally overcame his senses. The author does not mention the title of his first poem. Anyway, its description seems to allude to *Dozhd' proletel*:

> the storm passed quickly. The rain, which had been a mass of violently descending water wherein the trees writhed and rolled, was reduced all at one to oblique lines of silent gold breaking into short and long dashes against a background of subsiding vegetable agitation. Gulfs of voluptuous blue were expanding between great clouds – heap upon heap of pure white and purplish gray, *lepota* (Old Russian for "stately beauty"), moving myths, gouache and guano, among the curves of which one could distinguish a mammary allusion or a death mask of a poet. […] A moment later my first poem began. What touched it off? I think I know. Without any wind blowing, the sheer weight of a raindrop, shining in parasitic luxury on a cordate leaf, caused its tip to dip, and what looked like a globule of quicksilver performed a sudden glissando down the center vein, and then, having shed its bright load, the relieved leaf unbent. Tip, leaf, dip, relief – the instant it all took to happen seemed to me not so much a fraction of time as a fissure in it, a missed heartbeat, which was refunded at once by a patter of rhymes: I say "patter" intentionally, for when a gust of wind did come, the trees would briskly start to drip all together I as crude an imitation of the recent downpour as the stanza I was already muttering resembled the shock of wonder I had experienced when for a moment heart and leaf had been one.[56]

The excerpt describes a scene of harmonious correspondence between nature and the human self. Creative inspiration is the answer to the surrounding environment which, in its turn, gets in tune with the rhythm of the poet's thoughts, the modulation of his rhymes, according to the Romantic correspondence between outer fluctuations and inner feelings. The verses, however, manifest a certain attention towards symbolic details. "Serezhki" and "zhemchug" turn nature into an allegory: if in Lomonosov the source of inspiration is initially recognized in the aurora and then gradually transferred from an impersonal female figure to the sovereign, Nabokov's first verses are similarly ignited by a

[55] Nabokov, *Speak, Memory*, 542.
[56] Ibidem, 543.

nature that is, like a woman, adorned by jewels. Though still referring back to Romanticism, Nabokov goes beyond its limits and ventures out in that forest of correspondences where smells, sounds and colours reverberate into each other:[57] "that summer I was still far too young to evolve any wealth of "cosmic synchronization" (to quote my philosopher again). But I did discover, at least, that a person hoping to become a poet must have the capacity of thinking of several things at a time."[58] A very similar definition is given in his essay *The Art of Literature and Commonsense*, where the creative process is described as "a sudden live image constructed in a flash out of dissimilar units which are apprehended all at once in a stellar explosion of the mind."[59] Or, again,

> the idea of sequence does not really exist as far as the author is concerned. Sequence arises only because words have to be written one after the other on consecutive pages, just as the reader's mind must have time to go through the book, at least the first time he reads it. Time and sequence cannot exist in the author's mind because no time element and no space element had ruled the initial vision.[60]

What Nabokov states about his "cosmic synchronization" is not very far from French Symbolist poet Charles Baudelaire's definition of *barbarie*:

> je veux parler d'une barbarie inévitable, synthétique, enfantine, qui reste souvent visible dans un art parfait (mexicaine, égyptienne ou ninivite), et qui dérive du besoin de voir les choses grandement, de les considérer surtout dans l'effet de leur ensemble. […] Il s'établit alors un duel entre la volonté de tout voir, de ne rien oublier, et la faculté de la mémoire qui a pris l'habitude d'absorber vivement la couleur générale et la silhouette, l'arabesque du contour. Un artiste ayant le sentiment parfait de la forme, mais accoutumé à exercer surtout sa mémoire et son imagination, se trouve alors comme assailli par une

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[57] Charles Baudelaire, "Correspondances," in *Les fleurs du mal*, ed. M. Jacques Crépet (Paris: Louis Conard, 1922), 17. Konstantin Bal'mont translated it in Russian as *Sootvetstviya* (1912).
[58] Nabokov, *Speak, Memory*, 544. The philosopher in question is a figment of Nabokov's imagination. "Vivian Bloodmark" is one of the anagrams Nabokov derives from his own name and uses to increase his polynomial and, consequently, authoritative presence.
[59] Vladimir Nabokov, "The Art of Literature and Commonsense," in *Lectures on Literature*, ed. Fredson Bowers (San Diego: Harcourt, 1982), 379.
[60] Ibidem, 379-380.

> émeute de détails, qui tous demandent justice avec la furie d'une foule amoureuse d'égalité absolue.[61]

It is in this very anarchy of details that Nabokov wants his readers to get lost, freed of any kind of subordination or hierarchical principle. This is what happens with *Dozhd' proletel* as well: in *Speak, Memory* Nabokov dates the poem back to 1914[62] whereas in *Poems and Problems* and *Al'manach "Dva puti"* the date is 1917. Mariya Malikova has defined Nabokov's inconsistency as a form of double exposition that allows him to actively intervene on his autobiographical account through overimposed layers of self-falsification:

> здесь Набоков использует характерный для него поэтики двойной экспозиции: впечатление, послужившее толчком к сочинению стихотворения, позволяет идентифицировать его не с традиционной романтической элегией, апострофирующей условную возлюбленную, а со стихотворением 1917 года «Дождь пролетел», самым ранним из включавшихся Набоковым в сборники.[63]

Hence, we can presume that Nabokov might have merged two different experiences, that of the writing of the first poem in 1914 and that of the first overwhelming inspiration in 1917, in order to produce a coherently improved self-projection, as suggested by Paul Morris:

> in Nabokov's chapter-length retelling, the poem is essential as a sign of his awakening into an exceptionally privileged form of consciousness, the consciousness of the artist-poet. Essentially, Nabokov identifies poetic creation as an epistemological enterprise, the expression of a fundamental impulse to apprehend the surrounding environment, and then to recast it according to the inclinations of the poet's imagination.[64]

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[61] Charles Baudelaire, "Le peintre de la vie moderne," in *Œuvres complètes de Charles Baudelaire*, vol. 3, *L'art romantique* (Paris: Calmann-Lévy, 1887), 74-75.

[62] "In order to reconstruct the summer of 1914, when the numb fury of verse-making first came over me, all I really need is to visualize a certain pavilion." Nabokov, *Speak, Memory*, 542.

[63] Mariya Malikova, "Zabytyy poet," in Vladimir Nabokov, *Stikhotvoreniya*, ed. Mariya Malikova (Sankt-Peterburg: Akademicheskiy proekt, 2002), 7.

[64] Paul Morris, "Vladimir Nabokov and the Surprise of Poetry: Reading the Critical Reception of Nabokov's Poetry and "The Poem" and "Restoration"," *Connotations* 15, no. 1-3 (2005/2006): 46.

On the other hand, the Symbolist concept of *barbarie* emerges in Nabokov not only in the form of contradictory statements, but also through a thick web of correspondences. In *Dozhd' proletel*, as in Lomonosov's *"Skhodyashchey s pol'…,"* we can detect a declaration of poetics, a short descriptive composition where each verse is a step down to the ultimate source of the creative impulse. As Yana Pogrebnaya states, "все творчество Набокова пронизано стремлением вернуться к началу, разгадать прошлое, оставить его «при себе»."[65]

Then if Lomonosov's inspiration comes from a woman, namely the Russian Empress, the presence of "rumyanyy," "serezhki" and "zhemchug" in *Dozhd' proletel* also reveals the allusion to a female entity. In *Poems and Problems*, the poem is followed by a brief note. There, Nabokov explains the origins of such a peculiar expression, *"letit dozhd',"* "rain is flying"," as "borrowed by the author from an old gardener (described in *Speak, Memory*, Chapter Two *et passim*) who applied it to light rain soon followed by sunshine."[66] In the second chapter of *Speak, Memory* we find the following description of an intense rainfall at Vyra, that "unreal estate"[67] where Nabokov spent part of his childhood. Dmitri is "the smallest and oldest of [the] gardeners:"[68]

> and sometimes a prodigious cloudburst would cause us to huddle under a shelter at the corner of the court while old Dmitri would be sent to fetch umbrellas and raincoats from the house. A quarter of an hour later he would reappear under a mountain of clothing in the vista of the long avenue which as

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[65] Yana Pogrebnaya, *Plot' poezii i prizrak prozrachnoy prozy. Lirika V. V. Nabokova: Monografiya* (Moskva: Flinta, 2016), 18. The quotation is taken from Vladimir Nabokov, *Sobraniye sochineniy: V 4 t.*, vol. 4, ed. Viktor Erofeev (Moskva: Pravda, 1991), 171.

[66] Nabokov, *Poems and problems*, 19. Nabokov's italics.

[67] Nabokov, *Speak, Memory*, 387. Notice the wordplay with the English expression "real estate".

[68] Yana Pogrebnaya considers Egor to be the old gardener. In the Russian version, *Drugiye berega*, that Pogrebnaya quotes, Dmitri is not mentioned. Nevertheless, Nabokov might have referred to his most recent autobiography, namely the English *Speak, Memory*, in his 1971 note to *Dozhd' proletel*. It seems even more likely when we take into account the fact that Dmitri is mentioned in that very same second chapter where the episode of the rainfall and the creative spark are narrated.

> he advanced would regain its leopard spots with the sun blazing anew and his huge burden unneeded.[69]

Nabokov's memory of the rain is closely linked to that of his mother who loved picking mushrooms despite adverse weather conditions. This is how the writer observes her coming back from one of her frequent walks: "she would be seen emerging from the nebulous depth of a park alley, her small figure cloaked and hooded in greenish-brown wool, on which countless droplets of moisture made a kind of mist all around her."[70] The figure of Nabokov's mother and the surrounding nature merge into each other to the point that the woman, her head covered under a green and brown hood, becomes herself a part of it, her distant shape and colours reminding those of a mushroom. The poem *Byl krupnyy dozhd'. Lazur' i shire i zhivey…* [There Was an Insistent Rain. The Sky Is Wider and More Lively…, 1921) plays with the same – though inversed – simile in verse 8: "и скромно гриб стоит, как толстый человечек"[71] [and meekly stands a mushroom, like a corpulent person].

In the author's memoir Nabokov's mother is a recurring presence. On one occasion we can peer at her proudly showing off her jewels and family treasures to her child's fascinated eyes:

> sometimes, in our St. Petersburg house, from a secret compartment in the wall of her dressing room (and my birth room), she would produce a mass of jewelry for my bedtime amusement. I was very small then, and those flashing tiaras and chokers and rings seemed to me hardly inferior in mystery and enchantment to the illumination in the city during imperial fêtes, when, in the padded stillness of a frosty night, giant monograms, crowns, and other armorial designs, made of colored electric bulbs – sapphire, emerald, ruby – glowed with a kind of charmed constraint above snow-line cornices on housefronts along residential streets.[72]

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[69] Nabokov, *Speak, Memory*, 389.
[70] Ibidem, 390.
[71] Nabokov, Vladimir. "Byl krupnyy dozhd'. Lazur' i shire i zhivey…," in *Stikhotvoreniya*, 238.
[72] Nabokov, *Speak, Memory*, 382.

Saint Petersburg is transfigured into a woman whose beauty is adorned with precious stones – an empress in her regal attire. Through the intimate memory of his mother, Nabokov rediscovers that of his native country, of Saint Petersburg and Vyra. The "serezhki" pending from willow branches and the "zhemchug" dropped from the leaf reawaken the memory of his mother and that of his land. Nature nourishes Nabokov's memory in a sort of Wordsworthian recollection in tranquility. This is how the writer describes the process of his (first) experience of versification:

> the throb of some utterly irrelevant recollection (a pedometer I had lost) was released from a neighboring brain cell, and the savor of the grass stalk I was chewing mingled with the cuckoo's note and the fritillary's takeoff, and all the while I was richly, serenely aware of my own manifold awareness. […] and I picked up the thread of my poem. […] The fervor I had been trying to render took over again and brought its medium back to an illusory life.[73]

"Для Набокова же «воспоминание» и «напоминание» о любви," writes Boris Averin, "– почти все творчество."[74] Nabokov distinguishes two different types of inspiration, as suggested in Russian language: *vostorg* and *vdokhnoveniye*.

> the Russian language which otherwise is comparatively poor in abstract terms, supplies definitions of two types of inspiration, *vostorg* and *vdokhnovenie*, which can be paraphrased as "rapture" and "recapture." The difference between them is mainly of a climatic kind, the first being hot and brief the second cool and sustained. […] the pure flame of *vostorg*, initial rapture, […] has no conscious purpose in view but […] is all-important in linking the breaking up of the old world with the building up of the new one. When the time is ripe and the writer settles down to the actual composing of his book, he will rely on the second serene and steady kind of inspiration, *vdokhnovenie*, the trusted mate who helps to recapture and reconstruct the world.[75]

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[73] Ibidem, 547.
[74] Boris Averin, "Nabokov i nabokoviana," in *V. V. Nabokov: Pro et contra*, vol. 1, 846.
[75] Nabokov, "The Art of Literature and Commonsense," 378. Nabokov's italics.

Memories require *vdochnoveniye*. They demand to be acted upon, they stay in the writer's mind so that the world can be "reconstructed" by him through the gesture of writing. In the act of "napominaniye" [mention] there is, above all, the chance given by time to be remembered thus feeding imagination, as Gennady Barabtarlo claims:

> memory was for [Nabokov] the only, yet conclusive, evidence of one's own place in time, and thus a necessary but sufficient means of feeding the imagination that informs the space of consciousness, prodding, steering, and improving one's memory. If we invest the word "imagination" with the artificial sense of "creating images," we can arrive at a familiar Nabokovian postulate that the grafting of memory onto imagination and the infusion of imagination into memory is not only a condition of art but perhaps also its cryptic essence, if art is to be understood as man's attempt to imitate the creative force of his Creator.[76]

Averin agrees when he asserts that "Набоков, как и Бунин […] часто одно и то же событие передает дважды. Вначале как непосредственно происходящее, а затем повторяющееся в воспоминании."[77]

Memories, creative imagination and artistic research are synthesized in Nabokov's verses, where the past is constantly revivified through words. It is no coincidence that *Dozhd' proletel* / *The Rain Has Flown* opens the self-translated collection of *Poems and Problems*: "само стихотворение «Дождь пролетел» для Набокова в 1970 году, во время составления сборника «Poems and Problems», было мостом в «потусторонность», в навсегда утраченное прошлое: мир детства, юности и родины."[78] From mere material immanence, be it nature or artificial objects, Nabokov derives his autobiographical meditations consistently broadening the borders of his own personal experience towards philosophical and reflective horizons and eventually envisaging, even further than that, the possibility for metaphysical contemplations. This progression has been called

[76] Gennady Barabtarlo, "Nabokov's Trinity (On the movement of Nabokov's themes)," in *Nabokov and His Fiction. New Perspectives*, ed. Julian Connolly (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 134.
[77] Averin, "Nabokov i nabokoviana," 855.
[78] Pogrebnaya, *Plot' poezii i prizrak prozrachnoy prozy*, 16.

"trekhmernyy" ["trinitarian system"] by Barabtarlo: "Набоков […] изобрел свою *систему*, в которой точное описание воспринимаемой данности не просто ведет к высшим и более сложным фазам художественного исследования, но и является необходимым и непременно предварительным условие возможного в дальнейшем метафизического эксперимента."[79] The importance of the causal link that lies at the basis of any aesthetic process is again a lesson given to Nabokov by his mother:

> to love with all one's soul and leave the rest to fate, was the simple rule she heeded. "*Vot zapomni* [now remember]," she would say in conspiratorial tones as she drew my attention to this or that loved thing in Vyra – a lark ascending the curds-and-whey sky of a dull spring day, heat lightning taking pictures of a distant line of trees in the night, the palette of maple leaves on brown sand, a small bird's cuneate footprints on new snow.[80]

Any immanent object becomes a trace for the explorer of memory, an opportunity for the mind to remember, to be inspired and create. As Nabokov phrases it,

> the passage from the dissociative stage to the associative one is thus marked by a kind of spiritual thrill which in English is very loosely termed *inspiration*. A passerby whistles a tune at the exact moment that you notice the reflection of a branch in a puddle which in its turn, and simultaneously, recalls a combination of damp green leaves and excited birds in some old garden, and the old friend, long dead, suddenly steps out of the past, smiling and closing his dripping umbrella. The whole thing lasts one radiant second and the motion of impressions and images is so swift that you cannot check the exact laws which attend their recognition, formation, and fusion – why this pool and not any pool, why this sound and not another – and how exactly are all those parts correlated; it is like a jigsaw puzzle that instantly comes together in our brain with the brain itself unable to observe how and why the pieces fit, and you experience a shuddering sensation of wild magic, of some inner resurrection, as

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[79] Barabtarlo, "Troichnoye nachalo u Nabokova. Ubeditel'noye dokazatel'stvo," 210-211. Barabtarlo's English version: "Nabokov […] evolved a *system* in which precise description of the outward reality not only leads to higher and more complex phases of exploration by artistic means but is a required precondition for any philosophical or theosophical experiment." Barabtarlo, "Nabokov's Trinity (On the movement of Nabokov's themes)," 121, 124. Barabtarlo's italics.

[80] Nabokov, *Speak, Memory*, 387. Nabokov's italics.

> if a dead man were revived by a sparkling drug which has been rapidly mixed in our presence.[81]

If memory awakens the past, inspiration draws the writer to the future, "it is the past and the present *and* the future (your book) that come together in a sudden flash; thus the entire circle of time is perceived, which is another way of saying that time ceases to exist."[82] Self-translation is but a way, perhaps the most profound, to let oneself be carried back to the past when the original text was written and make it coexist with the present. Ultimately, self-translated poems are given the chance to live again in another language, another culture, another milieu that will hopefully grant them a longer future.

They rarely constitute the justification for improvement – where and if needed – though. Sometimes changes can be barely perceptible. Yet in *The Rain Has Flown* they acquire a meaningful value in the light of what has been discussed so far. On the phonic level, the English self-translation increases the impression of raindrops falling over leaves (as they continue doing after rain) through the quick succession of monosyllabic words in the opening and in the closing lines; this, together with the increasing rhyme in the second stanza, testifies the poet's growing sense of identification with the natural environment and its power to evoke an emotive response on his part. The variation of the meter and the loosening of the rhythm give the poem a more contemporary taste and allow it to be assimilated by English speaking readers. The use of the verb "tread" and the tense choices give the poem a more pensive self-absorbed tone and protract the time span of the descripted scene by extending the consequences of the past right into the present of the meditative writing and (re)reading in a constant flow of recollections. Moreover, avoiding continuous predicates, the cyclic, seasonal nature of actions becomes more evident. Memories allow Nabokov to trace back the "red path" and walk along it anytime, by virtue

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[81] Nabokov, "The Art of Literature and Commonsense," 377.
[82] Ibidem, 378. Nabokov's italics.

of the creative impulse. The reference to the "pearl" is still evocative enough to the attentive reader.

In 1830 Fedor Tyutchev wrote the poem *Uspokoyeniye* [Appeasement]:

	Literal translation
Гроза прошла – еще курясь, лежал	The storm (has) passed by. Still smoking, lay
Высокий дуб, перунами сраженный,	A/the tall oak, stroke down by (the) thunders,
И сизый дым с ветвей его бежал	And a/the blue-gray smoke from the branches escaped
По зелени, грозою освеженной.	Through the green, refreshed by the storm.
А уж давно, звучнее и полней,	And already long ago, louder and fuller,
Пернатых песнь по роще раздалася	The song of (the) feathered (birds) in the grove (has) resounded/was resounding
И радуга концом дуги своей	And a/the rainbow with the end of its arch
В зеленые вершины уперлася.[83]	In the green crests (has) set/was setting.

Tyutchev's *Uspokoyeniye* has much in common with Nabokov's *Dozhd' proletel*, starting from the incipit. Like the former, the hemistich "groza proshla" contains a weather phenomenon, though more intense. It also associates it with a verb of movement introduced by the prefix "pro-," which highlights a dynamic passage. The link between the two poems is also attested by Nabokov's 1944 English translation:

> The storm withdrew, but Thor had found his oak,
> and there it lay magnificently slain,
> and from its limbs a remnant of blue smoke
> spread to bright trees repainted by the rain –
>
> – while thrush and oriole made haste to mend
> their broken melodies throughout the grove,
> upon the crests of which was propped the end
> of a virescent rainbow edged with mauve.[84]

[83] Fedor Tyutchev, "Uspokoyeniye ("Groza proshla – eshche kuryas', lezhal…")," in *Polnoye sobraniye stikhotvoreniy*, ed. A. A. Nikolaev (Leningrad: Sovetskiy pisatel', 1987), 87.

[84] First in: *The Russian Review* 4, no. 1, (1944): 45; then in: Vladimir Nabokov, trans., *Three Russian poets* (Norfolk (CT): New Directions, 1944), 36 and in: Vladimir Nabokov, trans., *Pushkin, Lermontov, Tyutchev* (London: Lindsay Drummond, 1947), 55.

Nabokov's version, preserves the iambic pentameter and the alternate rhyme scheme. His voice nonetheless intrudes when it comes to the content. The original "perun" is reminiscent of the Slavic pagan god of thunders. To a Russian ear the noun used by Tyutchev is intensely evocative: it comes from the same Indo-European root (*pьrati*) of *bit'* [beat], *porazhat'* [strike] and the flower *perunika* [iris] for its deep violet colour,[85] which resonates in Nabokov's "mauve" tint of the last verse. Nabokov's version makes the reference explicit and substitutes it with its Norse equivalent, Thor, whose name equally shares its etymology with the English thunder mediated through the Old English *thunor*.[86] The god strikes an oak, a tree traditionally associated with Perun and Thor in both Slavic and German mythology. Nabokov, though, enhances the violence of the scene giving the oak human "limbs" instead of Tyutchev's neutral "vetvi." The oak thus becomes a "slain" human corpse, not just a "srazhennyy" tree. Like in *Dozhd' proletel*, the grove is "repainted" by the rain.

Tyutchev's presence in *Dozhd' proletel* can be detected in its structure. Nabokov's poem duplicates the two quatrains and the alternate rhyme scheme of *Uspokoyeniye*. Yet Tyutchev's poem, contrary to Nabokov's, moves its focus from the particular ("dub," "pernatykh") to the more general ("po zeleni," "v zelenyye vershiny"). While Tyutchev shows how the self is absorbed in the surrounding space by removing the poet's presence altogether, Nabokov puts the subject at the centre of the scene ("idu" / "I tread") and shows how the lyric voice is able to detect hidden assonances between his own thoughts and the wordless yet meaningful utterances of nature. Even more importantly, though, the original "pernatyye" is exemplified in the pair of "thrush and oriole." Nabokov's choice of words, again, may not be casual at all. The thrush is a rather symbolic bird in English language poetry. In both Keats's Romantic *What the Thrush Said* (1818) and Hardy's late-

[85] *Etimologicheskiy slovar' Fasmera*.
[86] *Online Oxford Dictionary*.

Victorian *The Darkling Thrush* (1900) the bird inspires hope and optimism. On the other hand, the Russian word for "oriole," "ivolga," is common in Russian poetry. In Sergey Esenin it becomes the metaphor for the "toska veselaya" [cheerful melancholy]. In Anna Akhmatova it develops into a full premonition of sadder times to come:

	Literal translations
Плачет где-то иволга, схоронясь в дупло.	An/the oriole cries/is crying somewhere, hiding in a hollow.
Только мне не плачется – на душе светло.[87]	Only I won't cry – in the/my soul there is light.

Я слышу иволги всегда печальный голос	I hear the oriole's always mournful voice
И лета пышного приветствую ущерб[88]	And of the luxuriant summer I welcome the loss

Similarly, in Nabokov's version of Tyutchev's *Uspokoyeniye* the orioles are caught "mending" their "broken songs." Furthermore, in the light of his *Dozhd' proletel*, Nabokov's specification in "thrush and oriole" acquires an extremely significant value. While the thrush might be used as a naturalizing element to the average Anglophone reader, the oriole is rather foreignising for its less frequent presence in English language poetry. What Nabokov might have done is in fact to insert a reference to his *Dozhd' proletel* through the addition of the "oriole." This cross reference would thus hint at Tyutchev's poem as a possible source for Nabokov's inspiration to compose *Dozhd' proletel*. This seems to be the case. In his Russian novel *Dar* [The Gift, 1937-1938] Nabokov describes a fleeting rainfall followed by the appearance of a rainbow:

> еще летал дождь, а уже появилась, с неуловимой внезапностью ангела, радуга: сама по себе, она повисла за скошенным полем, над и перед далеким леском, одна доля которого, дрожа, просвечивала сквозь нее. Редкие стрелы дождя, утратившего и строй, и вес, и способность шуметь, невпопад, так и сяк вспыхивал на солнце. В омытом небе, сияя всеми

[87] Sergey Esenin, "Vytkalsya na ozere alyy svet zari…" in *Polnoye sobraniye sochineniy: V 7 t.*, vol. 1, *Stikhotvoreniya*, ed. Ju. L. Prokushev (Moskva: Nauka, 1995), 28.
[88] Anna Akhmatova, "Ya slyshu ivolgi vsegda pechal'nyy golos…," in *Izbrannoye*, ed. I. K. Sushilin (Moskva: Prosveshcheniye, 1993),18.

подробностями чудовищно-сложной лепки, из-за вороного облака выпрастывалось облако упоительной белизны.[89]

The protagonist's father, whose expedition is being narrated, exclaims: "ну вот, прошло!"[90] Then, having climbed on the top of a hill, he enters into a rainbow: "милая моя! Образчик элизейских красок! Отец однажды, в Ордосе, поднимаясь после грозы на холм, ненароком вошел в основу радуги, – редчайший случай! – и очутился в цветном воздухе, в играющем огне, будто в раю. Сделал еще шаг – и из рая вышел."[91] As Pogrebnaya maintains, the passage opening the second chapter of *Dar* might be interpreted as an intertextual reference to *Dozhd' proletel* and, through that, to the autobiographical episode told in *Speak, Memory*.[92] After all, Nabokov considered himself a "specialist in such dull literary lore as autoplagiarism."[93] Moreover, in 1918 Nabokov must have had Tyutchev's poem in mind already, when writing *Posle grozy* [After a/the Storm]:

Все реже, реже влажный звон;
кой-где светлеет небосклон;
отходят тучи грозовые,
жемчужным краем бороздя
просветы пышно-голубые,
и падают лучи косые
сквозь золотую сеть дождя.[94]

Tyutchev resonates in words denoting weather, such as "groza" [storm] and "nebosklon" [rainbow], as well as in colours, with "pyshno-golubyye" [fluffy light blue]. These are mixed with Nabokov's use of "vlazhnyy" [humid], "dozhd'" [rain], "zhemchuzhnyy" [pearl-like] and "zolotuyu" [golden], as in *Dozhd' proletel*.

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[89] Vladimir Nabokov, "Dar," in *Dar, Priglasheniye na kazn', Drugiye berega, Vesna v Fial'te*, ed. Vadim Stark (Moskva: Slovo, 1999), 59.
[90] Ibidem.
[91] Ibidem.
[92] Pogrebnaya, *Plot' poezii i prizrak prozrachnoy prozy*, 13.
[93] Nabokov, *Speak, Memory*, 383.
[94] Nabokov, "Posle grozy," in *Stikhotvoreniya*, 93.

In 1914 Osip Mandel'shtam composed *Ravnodenstviye* [Equinox]. There the songs of orioles in the woods correspond to the vowel sounds in verses: "есть иволги в лесах, и гласных долгота / в тонических стихах единственная мера." Here again poetry and nature imitate each other in a continuous web of reciprocal references. Their harmonization triumphs in line 5, where the verb *ziyat'* [to gape] indicates the sun rising up while also evoking the noun *ziyaniye* [hiatus], pertaining poetics. The polysemic nature of Mandel'shtam's lexicon is similar to that of Nabokov's *Dozhd' proletel* and later verses.

Nabokov's poetry is a continuous attempt at recovering his past and, through that, the Russia he remembers. "For Nabokov," John Burt Foster asserts, "the emphasis should fall on the subsequent effort of will required to extract and develop the fortuitous spark of connection between buried past and oblivious present."[95] Memory is at the very core of Nabokov's versification, both as the sum of individual experiences as well as the conglomerate of shared, collective knowledge preserved through literary texts. His verses are informed by other poets not just as the result of an unconscious mnemonic process but more as the product of a determinate wish to reminisce and be aware of the present through the memory of the past. This is the force that drives Nabokov's translations, where intervention is but a way to draw the source text towards the ultimate English reader: though retaining the foreignising elements of the original, Nabokov lets his own voice be heard in other poets' words. The translated text acquires meaning as a fraction of the past on which the translator impresses his own stamp in the form of his poetic conscience. Thus, translation allows verses to live within a new present. Sirin, however, is treated differently. His own memories being still vivid in his mind at the moment of self-translation, Nabokov choses to preserve his self-translation as close to the Russian original as he possibly can.

[95] John Burt Jr Foster, "Nabokov and Modernism," in *The Cambridge Companion to Nabokov*, ed. John W. Connolly (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 97.

The result, though showing a certain degree of attention towards the Anglophone audience, is hardly naturalizing to the target reader. Nevertheless changes and variations do happen. In *Dozhd' proletel*, as demonstrated above, they enhance the value of some acoustic features, giving prominence to the intricate web of correspondences, and accentuate the meditative nature of the poem by acting upon the predicative components.

1917 was the year Nabokov, by his own admission, first felt the urge of his creative impulse. 1917 was the year Russia was upset by the impetus of the Revolution. By then Symbolism was coming to an end while avant-garde poets were reaching their utmost popularity. Nabokov's structured verse sounded already anachronistic, imbued as it was with outmoded sounds and timeworn pace. Still, to a young poet it must have been the only weapon against the building tension. Cadenced recurrence against time quickly moving forward. Order against chaos.

Self-translated poems are but another exercise in self-discipline. Form and content are often at conflict. Should the former be sacrificed in order to preserve the latter? Nabokov seems to give a positive answer in the foreword to *Poems and Problems*, when he writes: "whenever possible, I have welcomed rhyme, or its shadow; but I have never twisted the tail of a line for the sake of consonance; and the original measure has not been kept if readjustments of sense had to be made for its sake."[96]

The Rain Has Flown proves Nabokov's point: only one rhyme survives, rhythm is adapted to the target context, content is faithfully reproduced. And yet even the most "incorruptible translator"[97] must come to a compromise, especially when "englishing [his] own verse."[98] Involuntary changes and necessary adjustments are inevitable when

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[96] Nabokov, *Poems and Problems*, 14.
[97] The words are taken from Nabokov's 1952 poem *Rimes* (Berg Collection, see: Malikova, "Zabytyy poet," 41-42).
[98] Nabokov, *Poems and Problems*, 14.

venturing up the steep cliff of verse translation. Even more so when a poet is required or wishes to give his poems another chance. "Like a potentate swearing allegiance to his own self or a conscientious priest blessing his own bathwater,"[99] a self-translating poet is fully aware of the creative process behind his/her work. Self-translation is a game of chess with one's own self. Each move a possible gain, each choice a potential loss.

[99] Ibidem.

PART 1

THESIS

1. ИНАЧЕ ГОВОРЯ / IN OTHER WORDS

On Intertextuality

> Interpretation takes over at the very point where the text would seem closest to an objective recording.
>
> Michael Riffaterre, *Intertextual Representation: On Mimesis as Interpretive Discourse.*[100]

In 1926, while living in Berlin, Nabokov wrote the verses of *Ut pictura poesis*, a poem he dedicated to the Russian painter Mstislav Dobuzhinskiy (1875-1957), who, during his Russian childhood, had also happened to be his drawing teacher.

	Literal translation[102]
Воспоминанье, острый луч,	Recollection, sharp ray,
преобрази мое изгнанье,	transfigure my exile,
пронзи меня, воспоминанье	pierce me, recollection
о баржах петербургских туч	of the barges of Saint Petersburg storm-clouds
в небесных ветреных просторах,	in the celestial windy expanses,
о закоулочных заборах,	of the alleyway fences,
о добрых лицах фонарей...	of the dear faces of headlamps…
Я помню, над Невой моей	I remember, on my Neva
бывали сумерки, как шорох	there used to be such twilights, like the rustle
тушующих карандашей.[101]	of shading pencils.

[100] Michael Riffaterre, "Intertextual Representation: On Mimesis as Interpretive Discourse," *Critical Enquiry* 11, no. 1 (September 1984): 159.
[101] Nabokov, "Ut pictura poesis," in *Stikhotvoreniya*, 306.

The opening word, "vospominaniye" [recollection], condensates the most relevant of Dobuzhinskiy's teachings, as remembered by Nabokov in his adult years:

> he made me depict from memory, in the greatest possible detail, objects that I had certainly seen thousands of times without visualizing them properly: a street lamp, a postbox, the tulip design on the stained glass of our front door. He tried to teach me to find the geometrical coordinations between the slender twigs of a leafless boulevard tree, a system of visual give-and-takes, requiring a precision of linear expression, which I failed to achieve in my youth, but applied gratefully […] to certain camera lucida needs of literary composition.[103]

In the first stanza of *Ut pictura poesis*, memories of Russia are alluded to in the list of "tuch[i]," "nebesn[yye] prostor[y]," "zakoulochn[yye] zabor[y]" and "lits[a] fonarey." The technique of enumeration confers to hypothyposis a sharper rhythm and an increased degree of vividness through rapid and not necessarily logical shifts. "Elenco. Ecco una tecnica che indubbiamente conduce all'evocazione di immagini spaziali senza creare pertinenze,"[104] to use Umberto Eco's words. The absence of predicates contributes to the timelessness of the picture, ever present in the author's mind. As made clear in the second stanza, the sequence of recollections is sparked by a painting. The scenes are so lively that the poet feels almost compelled to jump into the painting:

	Literal translation
Все это живописец плавный	All this a/the graceful painter
передо мною развернул,	in front of me was unfolding/unfolded,
и, кажется, совсем недавно	and, it seems, quite recently
в лицо мне этот ветер дул,	on my face this wind was blowing,
изображенный им в летучих	[this wind] painted by him in the flying
осенних листьях, зыбких тучах,	autumn leaves, the loose storm-clouds,
и плыл по набережной гул,	and a rumble floated/was floating along the quay,
во мгле колокола гудели –	in the darkness the bells hummed/were humming –

[102] An English version of the poem exists in Dmitriy Nabokov's translation (Vladimir Nabokov, *Collected Poems* (London: Penguin, 2013), 27). For the purpose of the present work, however, I have preferred a literal version.
[103] Nabokov, *Speak, Memory*, 435-436.
[104] Umberto Eco, *Sulla letteratura* (Milano: Bompiani, 2002), 203.

собора медные качели...[105] the brass swings of the cathedral…

The reader is given a visual representation of poet's recollections through the painting described by the poet himself. Memories unfold in front of the poet's and the reader's eyes. The picture is so close to the poet's mental images that he is taken over by it, as suggested by the description of sensorial perceptions in "veter dul," "gul," "gudeli." The poet is ultimately engulfed by his nostalgic recollections, his retrospective attitude metaphorically represented in his wish to jump into the painting:

	Literal translation
Какой там двор знакомый есть,	What a familiar courtyard there is,
какие тумбы! Хорошо бы	what curbstones! How good it would be
туда перешагнуть, пролезть,	to walk in/jump there, to pass through,
там постоять, где спят сугробы	stand there, where snowdrifts sleep
и плотно сложены дрова,	and woodpiles tightly stacked together,
или под аркой, на канале,	or under the/an arch, on the/a canal,
где нежно в каменном овале	where fondly in the stone oval
синеют крепость и Нева.[106]	the fortress and the Neva turn blue.

The enumerated details are now coupled with predicates: snowdrifts sleep, woodpiles are tightly stacked onto one another, the Peter and Paul fortress and the river Neva turn blue. Natural and architectural elements are animated once the poet is able to revisit them, though only briefly, in his mind.

Each of the three stanzas depicts a different tableau through a *mise en scene*: in the first, the exiled poet mentally visualises and verbally evokes scenes from Saint Petersburg; in the second, the observer's perspective includes the painter, caught in the action of painting the scenes recollected (and previously verbalised) by the poet; in the third and final stanza, the poet projects himself into the picture as if osmotically absorbed in its fresh paint. The three representations are juxtaposed as simultaneous: two of them develop in the poet's mind, one is being painted in reality. Yet the three stanzas shift across time: the first

[105] Nabokov, "Ut pictura poesis," 306.
[106] Ibidem.

refers back to the past of childhood memories, the second moves to the present of the painting, the third steps into the future of an envisioned paradoxical return to the past. The result is a cyclic montage of visual impressions brought into focus through a structured verbal composition. Visual art and poetry reciprocate each other: words describe the painter's strokes on the canvas, colours mimic memories survived and expressed in words. Thus, the Horatian phrase contained in the title becomes a literal affirmation: through visual art memory is restored and instilled in poetry.

Kak lyubil ya stikhi Gumileva [How I Loved Gumilev's Poems] was written many years later, in 1972. There, Nabokov explicitly praises Nikolay Gumilev's literary production. The second, and last, stanza is originally enclosed in inverted commas:

> «…и умру я не в летней беседке
> от обжорства и от жары,
> а с небесной бабочкой в сетке
> на вершине дикой горы.»[107]

What is presented by Nabokov as a direct quotation from Gumilev is, in point of fact, a mimetic reproduction of the fourth stanza in Gumilev's poem *Ya i Vy* [Me and You, 1917]:

> И умру я не на постели,
> При нотариусе и враче,
> А в какой-нибудь дикой щели,
> Утонувшей в густом плюще.[108]

Nabokov reproduces the rhythm of the original verses and their rhyme scheme. The first few words, "i umru ya ne," are left unchanged to facilitate the reader's process of

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[107] Vladimir Nabokov, "Kak lyubil ya stikhi Gumileva," http://lib.ru/NABOKOW/stihi.txt?iframe=true&width=900&height=450.

[108] Nikolay Gumilev, "Ya i Vy," in *Polnoye sobraniye sochineniy v desyati tomakh*, vol. 3, *Stikhotvoreniya. Poemy (1914-1918)*, ed. M. Basker et al. (Moskva: Voskresen'ye, 1999), 145.

recognition. Some cases of homophony can be detected in the rhyming sounds: Gumilev's rhyming couple "vrache" - "plyushche" becomes Nabokov's "besedke" - "setke," where the ending vowel is the same, though the original masculine rhyme becomes feminine, thus resulting in the consequent reduction; similarly, Gumilev's rhyme "zhary" - "gory" is rendered by Nabokov into "posteli" - "shcheli," where the vowel sound shifts to the front. The symmetrical structure is also preserved by Nabokov: the second verse contains two nouns connected by the coordinating conjunction "i," the third verse opens with the disjunctive "no," the fourth morphs into a new setting, antithetical to that presented at the beginning of the stanza. The content, however, is adapted to Nabokov's own experience through lexical permutations. While Gumilev is declaring his refusal to take part in the prosaic (post-revolutionary Bolshevist) society, as represented in "postel'," "notarius" and "vrach," Nabokov follows the same path stating he does not intend to die in the sterile comfort of a "besedk[a]," of excessive "obzhorstv[o]" and oppressing "zhar[a]," but pursuing his ambitions, metaphorically represented by a "babochk[a]." If Gumilev's setting is at first gloomy and then becomes exotic, the atmosphere in Nabokov's verses similarly moves from claustrophobic to lush. Both poets, however, use the attribute "dik[iy]," which highlights their standing out as poets with an idiosyncratic voice, who would not conform to the Bolshevist/Soviet regime. Moreover, Nabokov's last verse reproduces Gumilev's vertical trajectory but inverts the direction of the movement: Gumilev falls into a crack in the soil; Nabokov climbs on the top of a mountain. Through his poem, Nabokov is finally able to redeem the poet's aspiration towards distinctiveness. And he does so, almost paradoxically, by mimicking Gumilev's disillusioned verses.

Two rhetorical techniques draw poetry closer to preexisting texts. Mimesis, as a form of *imitatio*, allows the poet to evoke somebody else's presence in one's own writing. In Genette's wording, imitation "displays on the same level imitations of turns from one

language to another, from one state of (the same) language to another, from one author to another; above all […] it regroups figures which in their formal operation are not only figures of construction strictly speaking but of syntax in the broad sense, of morphology, or even (most of all) of vocabulary."[109] In this case, however, poetry does not cross over the borders of verbal articulation. Words might be quoted, rephrased or alluded to, still they act upon a verbal source material.[110]

Ekphrasis, on the other hand, consists in a verbal depiction of non-verbal texts (hypothyposis), namely images. In César Dumarsais's classic definition, it is a form of description where "on peint les faits dont on parle, come si ce qu'on dit étoit actuèlement devant les yeux, on montre, pour ainsi dire, ce qu'on ne fait que raconter; on done en quelque sorte l'original pour la compie, les objects pour les tableaux."[111] Testifying the persistence of ekphrasis through to Postmodernism, Italo Calvino defines it as "un'impressione visiva,"[112] "costruzione a parole di un'immagine,"[113] "metarappresentazione"[114] where the readers' perceptions are not mediated by their usual sense of sight but introspectively evoked.

Both mimesis and ekphrasis are highly involving, they interact with their object *in absentia* and require to actively participate in recognising, decoding, envisioning. They both demand introjection on the reader's part, evocative language on the writer's. For this reason, we may use Michael Riffaterre's broad definition of intertextuality as opposed to intertext:

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[109] Gérard Genette, *Palimpsests: Literature in the Second Degree* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1997), 75. Genette does not consider imitation a trope *per se*: "imitation is not a figure but rather the mimetic function accorded to any figure, provided only it lends itself to the process" (Ibidem).

[110] For the purpose of the present analysis, the terms mimesis and ekphrasis are used to distinguish two different types of intertextuality.

[111] César Dumarsais, *Les tropes*, vol. 1, edited by M. Fontanier (Paris: Belin-le-Prieur, 1818), 151.

[112] Eco, *Sulla letteratura*, 195.

[113] Ibidem, 213-214.

[114] Italo Calvino, *Lezioni americane. Sei proposte per il prossimo millennio* (Milano: Mondadori, 2002), 91.

> an intertext is a corpus of texts, textual fragments, or text like segments of the sociolect that shares a lexicon and, to a lesser extent, a syntax with the text we are reading (directly or indirectly) in the form of synonyms or, even conversely, in the forms of antonyms. […] In contrast, intertextuality is not just a perception of homologues or the cultivated reader's apprehension of sameness or difference. Intertextuality is not a felicitous surplus, the privilege of a good memory or a classical education. The term indeed refers to an operation of the reader's mind, but it is an obligatory one, necessary to any textual decoding. Intertextuality necessarily complements our experience of textuality. It is the perception that our reading of the text cannot be complete or satisfactory without going through the intertext, that the text does not signify unless as a function of a complementary or contradictory intertextual homologue.[115]

Art voiced in articulated sounds, verses moulded into new shapes and forms: poems disclose new meanings embedded in a composite coexistence of texts or, in Lotman's terms, *tekst v tekste* [text within text]: "«текст в тексте» – это специфическое риторическое построение, при котором различие в закодированности разных частей текста делается выявленным фактором авторского построения и читательского восприятия текста. […] Текст приобретает черты повышенной условности, подчеркивается его игровой характер: иронический, пародийный, театрализованный смысл и т. д."[116]

While *Kak lyubil ya stikhi Gumileva* operates on the level of a more explicit intertext through imitation, a certain degree of intertextuality can be detected in Nabokov's *Eshche bezmolvtstvuyu / I Still Keep Mute*. In *L'Inconnue de la Seine*, as in *Ut pictura poesis*, the poet focuses on the aesthetics of representation while in *Snimok / The Snapshot* he concentrates on mirroring and specular reproduction. What these poems have in common is their intertextual potential. Nabokov makes use of different levels of intertextuality in order to expand the limits of his own texts through, as Lotman would say, the distorting surface of reflecting words: "между двумя текстами устанавливается зеркальности, но то, что

[115] Michael Riffaterre, "Intertextual Representation: On Mimesis as Interpretive Discourse," 142-143.
[116] Yuriy Lotman, "Tekst v tekste," in *Izbrannyye stat'i v trekh tomakh*, vol. 1, *Stat'i po semiotike i tipologii kul'tury* (Tallin: Aleksandra, 1992), 155.

кажется реальным объектом, выступает лишь как искаженное отражение того, что само казалось отражением."[117]

1.1 *Еще безмолвствую / I Still Keep Mute*

In 1944, writing about one of Russia's most well known poets of the 19th century, Nabokov stated: "his poetry […] reveals (in the thirties!) elements which characterize the fin de siècle renaissance of Russian poetry (also called decadence, also called symbolism – the student ought not to bother much about these terms) which in its turns was partly influenced by similar trends in French poetry."[118]

It is Fedor Tyutchev Nabokov is praising here. His *Silentium*, published in 1833, would become an anthem to Russian Symbolists. Konstantin Bal'mont,[119] Vyacheslav Ivanov[120] and Dmitry Merezhkovskiy[121] were all inspired by Tyutchev's adverse opinion on the overabundant expression of intimate feelings and thoughts.

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[117] Ididem, 159.

[118] Nabokov, *Three Russian Poets*, 37.

[119] "Тютчев писал символические стихотворения еще в 30-х годах 19-го века, и удивительное его стихотворение "Mal'aria", которое справедливо могло бы занять место среди лучших стихотворений в "Les fleurs du Mal", было написано в 1830-м году, т. е. гораздо раньше, чем Бодлер выступил с такой яркой определительностью. […] Все наиболее талантливые поэты современной России, Брюсов, Сологуб, Зинаида Гиппиус, Мережковский и другие, видят в Тютчеве лучшего своего учителя." Konstantin Bal'mont, "Elementarnyye slova o simvolicheskoy poezii," in *Gornyya vershiny. Sbornik" statej*, vol. 1 (Moskva: Grif", 1904), 83.

[120] "В поэзии Тютчева русский символизм впервые творится, как последовательно применяемый метод, и внутренне определяется, как двойное зрение и потому – потребность другого поэтического языка. В сознании и творчестве одинаково поэт переживает некий дуализм – раздвоение, или, скорее, удвоение своего духовного лица." Vyacheslav Ivanov, "Zavety Simvolizma," in *Sobraniye sochineniy v 4 tomakh*, vol. 2, ed. O. Deshart (Bryussel': Foyer Oriental Chrétien, 1974), 589.

[121] "Для чувства и воли нет времени: они движутся в вечности; только мысль, сознание -- во времени. Чем сознательнее, тем современнее. Тютчев поэт сознания – вот почему он "современнейший из современников". […] Его болезнь – наша: индивидуализм, одиночество, безобщественность." Dmitriy Merezhkovskiy, "Nekrasov i Tyutchev," in *V tikhom omute: Stat'i i issledovaniya raznykh let* (Moskva: Sovetskiy pisatel', 1991), 418.

	Literal translation
Молчи, скрывайся и таи[122]	Be silent, conceal yourself and hide
И чувства и мечты свои!	Both your feelings and your dreams!
Пускай в душевной глубине	In the depths of (your) soul
И всходят и зайдут оне	Let them rise and pass
Как звезды ясные в ночи:	Like bright stars at night:
Любуйся ими и молчи!	Admire them and be silent!
Как сердцу высказать себя?	How can the/your heart express itself?
Другому как понять тебя?	How can someone else understand you?
Поймет ли он, чем ты живешь?	Will he understand what you live by?
Мысль изреченная есть ложь.	An/the uttered thought is a lie.
Взрывая, возмутишь ключи:	Stirring, you perturb the springs:
Питайся ими и молчи!	Nourish yourself with them and be silent!
Лишь жить в самом себе умей:	Only in yourself manage to live:
Есть целый мир в душе твоей	There is a whole world in your soul
Таинственно-волшебных дум;	Of secret-magic thoughts;
Их заглушит наружный шум,	The external noise deadens them,
Дневные ослепят лучи:	The daytime rays blind them:
Внимай их пенью и молчи!	Listen to their song and be silent!

As noted by Nina Koroleva, repetition is the most prominent trait in Tyutchev's poem: "настойчивое повторение – этот художественный прием превалирует в стихотворении, построенном как призыв, как убеждение, как стремление объяснить."[123] Repetition also emerges in its symmetrical structure. Nouns and verbs are often presented in pairs, such as in "i chuvstva i mechty," "vskhodyat i zaydut," "lyubuysya […] – i molchi," "pitaysya […] i molchi" and "vnimay […] i molchi." Other structural components follow a ternary pattern: a variation on three imperatives constitutes the opening verse, three rhetorical questions occupy the first half of the second stanza, the initial imperative "molchi" is repeated three times at the end of each stanza, if we exclude its first occurrence as the very first word.

The poem takes the form of a warning advice directed to an addressee, whose voice we do not hear. Koroleva considers the absence of dialogue as a possible evidence that the

[122] For his translation Nabokov used the version published in *Sovremennik* XLIV, no. 3 (1854): 12.
[123] Nina Koroleva, "F. Tyutchev. Silentium!," in *Poeticheskiy stroy russkoy liriki*, ed. Georgiy Fridlender (Leningrad: Nauka, 1973), 152.

poem might be instead self-reflective: "вновь и вновь перечитывая стихотворение, перенасыщенное повелительной интонацией убеждаемся, что оно не носит характера спора и у него нет адресата – инакомыслящего с которым спорят. […] В стихотворении «Silentium!» нет полемики. Скорее оно утешает отчаявшегося, объясняет растерявшемуся (другому, себе?), как жить в мире."[124]

Nabokov's 1944 translation intervenes on Tyutchev's poem quite ostensibly. The semantic component is adapted to the necessities dictated by the faithful reproduction of the original rhymed couplets and the iambic tetrameter as well as by Nabokov's own poetic voice.

Silentium – Nabokov's English translation[125]

Speak not, lie hidden and conceal
The way you dream, the things you feel.
Deep in your spirit let them rise
akin to stars in crystal skies
that set before the night is blurred:
delight in them and speak no word.

How can a heart expression find?
How should another know your mind?
Will he discern what quickens you?
A thought once uttered is untrue.
Dimmed is the fountainhead when stirred:
Drink at the source and speak no word.

Live in your inner self alone:
within your soul a world has grown,
the magic of veiled thoughts that might
be blinded by the outer light,
drowned in the noise of day, unheard…
take in their song and speak no word.

[124] Ibidem, 153.
[125] Vladimir Nabokov, trans., "Silentium," in *Verses and Versions. Three Centuries of Russian Poetry Selected and Translated by Vladimir Nabokov*, ed. Brian Boyd and Stanislav Shvabrin (Orlando: Harcourt, 2008), 237.

While Tyutchev's poem is characterised by a rather colloquial diction, at least for the years it was written in,[126] Nabokov's linguistic register is more sustained, as it becomes apparent in the imperative form "speak not" (instead of a more neutral don't/do not speak), in some lexical variants such as "akin" (instead of like) and "fountainhead" (instead of spring), as well as in some syntactic inversions, such as "expression find" and "dimmed is the fountainhead." The imperative at the end of each stanza is reinforced into a firm, almost pleonastic, "speak no word."

While the first stanza is focused on the value of introspection, the second shifts toward the external world of communication and interactions, questioning their authenticity. Nabokov's translation conforms here to the more colloquial tone of the original, its straightforward diction preserved. The three rhetorical questions are equally insistent in Nabokov's words. Still, the inversion in "expression find" and the choice of "quicken" contribute to attributing to the assertive reproach a literary intonation. The composite adjectivation in "tainstvenno-volshebnykh shum" is dissected in the hendiadys of specification "the magic of veiled thoughts," where the sense of undisclosed truths is possibly increased once is segmented.

Tyutchev's *Silentium*, especially in the case of Symbolist poetics, can be effectively considered a code-text, as defined by Lotman:

> этот текст может быть осознан и выявлен в качестве идеального образца (ср., например, роль «Энеиды» Вергилия для литературы Возрождения и классицизма) или оставаться в области субъективно-неосознанных механизмов, которые не получают непосредственного выражения, а

[126] "Лексически «Silentium!» выдержано в нейтральном стиле лирики 1830-х годов, с редкими вкраплениями слов высокого стиля (форма множественного числа «оне»; «звезды» вместо «звёзды» – в параллель ломоносовскому «Звездам числа нет, бездне дна»; построение фразы-афоризма по типу римской ораторской тезы: «Мысль изреченная есть ложь»). […] «Мысль изреченная» – это не просто мысль сказанная, произнесенная. Это еще антоним к слову «неизреченная», гораздо более привычному и употребительному в высоком стиле. Значение этого слова – необыкновенный, неописуемый: неизреченный свет, неизреченная доброта. Следовательно, изреченная – это еще и обыкновенная, отказавшаяся от неизреченности. Думается, что для читателей XIX века этот смысл слова «изреченная» был гораздо более явен, лежал ближе к поверхности текста, чем для нас." Ibidem, 156.

> реализуются в виде вариантов в текстах более низкого уровня в иерархии культуры. Это не меняет основного: текст-код является именно текстом. Это не абстрактный набор правил для построения текста, а синтагматически построенное целое, организованная структура знаков.[127]

Right in the middle of the 20th century, Tyutchev's poem offers a clear and detached view of what he considered the main fault of Romanticism, namely the inevitable clash between overgeneralisation and the exaltation of individual experience.[128] In this respect, we may reevaluate *Eshche bezmolvstvuyu* [I Still Keep Mute, 1919] as Nabokov's personal response to it. The opening adverb *eshche* might be read as a direct answer to Tyutchev's invitation to silence:

Nabokov's Russian text
Еще безмолвствую
Еще безмолвствую и крепну я в тиши.
Созданий будущих заоблачные грани
еще скрываются во мгле моей души,
как выси горные в предутреннем тумане.

Приветствую тебя, мой неизбежный день.
Все шире, шире даль, светлей, разнообразней,
и на звенящую на первую ступень
всхожу, исполненный блаженства и боязни.

Literal translation
I do not speak yet
I do not speak yet and strengthen (myself) in silence.
The contours of future creations beyond the clouds
still hide in the darkness of my soul,
like mountain crests in the fog at daybreak.

I greet you, my inescapable day.
The distance is/becomes wider and wider, brighter and more varied,
and on the sounding (on the) first step
I go up/ascend, filled with bliss and fear.

Nabokov's English self-translation

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[127] Lotman, "Tekst v tekste," 150.
[128] Koroleva, "F. Tyutchev. Silentium!," 153.

I still keep mute
I still keep mute – and in the hush grow strong.
The far-off crests of future works, amidst
the shadow of my soul are still concealed
like mountaintops in pre-auroral mist.

I greet you, my inevitable day!
The skyline's width, variety and light
increase; and on the first, resounding step
I go up, filled with terror and delight.

Nabokov's poem presents an iambic rhythm both in Russian and English, with six and five tonic positions in each verse respectively. The original alternate rhyme AbAb CdCd is preserved only between lines 2-4 and 6-8 with a mirroring effect in the lexical choices, whereby "amidst" includes "mist" and "light" is included in "delight." This reflects the two main vectors in the poem: from introspection and contraction in silence to expansion in nature and in the speaker's perceptiveness in the first half and viceversa in the second. The opening stanza advances from the external space inwards, to the poet's own soul which takes on the characteristics of the natural environment. In the second stanza, on the other hand, the poet's introspective judgement, as expressed in "neizbezhnyy" / "inevitable" and especially in the English parameters of "width, variety and light," is projected onto the outer world. The correspondence between the writer's soul and the surrounding nature is increased in Nabokov's self-translation, where the original "grani" is rendered as "crests," enhancing the subsequent simile "kak visy gornyye v predutrennem tumane" / "like mountaintops in pre-auroral mist" where nouns and adjectives normally used within the semantic field of nature acquire a metaphorical meaning.

Nabokov's *Eshche bezmolvstvuyu / I still keep mute* is the author's personal response to Tyutchev's words of wisdom: *Silentium* has become a fundamental reference model for Symbolist poets, who are "still" inspired by Tyutchev's approach to life and versification. This might be confirmed by Nabokov's use of lexical components from Tyutchev's poem in

the Russian original of *Eshche bezmolvstvuyu*: Tyutchev's initial imperative "skryvaysya" is rendered by Nabokov into the indicative "[grani] skryvayutsya;" "vo mgle moyey dushi" echoes Tyutchev's "v dushevnoy glubine;" Tyutchev's simile "kak zvezdy yasnyye" is reproduced in Nabokov's "kak visy gornyye;" Nabokov's final "vskhozhu" is reminiscent of Tyutchev's "[chuvstva i mechti] vskhodyat." Furthermore, Nabokov's English self-translated text also hints at *Silentium* as mediated by Nabokov's own English translation: the poet's "future works" are "still concealed" as urged in Tyutchev's imperative "conceal;" Nabokov's "pre-auroral" backdrop evokes Tyutchev's stars setting "before the night is blurred."

While the original *Eshche bezmolvstvuyu* is already including Tyutchev's text, Nabokov manages to create a web of intertextual exchanges through both translation and self-translation. Let us remind Genette's definition of allusion:

> I define [intertextuality] […] as a relationship of copresence between two texts or among several texts: that is to say, eidetically and typically as the actual presence of one text within another. […] In still less explicit and less literal guise, it is the practice of *allusion*: that is, an enunciation whose full meaning presupposes the perception of a relationship between it and another text, to which it necessarily refers by some infections that would otherwise remain unintelligible.[129]

Allusions become even more evident when reading Nabokov's *Na smert' A. Bloka* [On Blok's Death, 1921]:

> Пушкин – радуга по всей земле,
> Лермонтов – путь млечный над горами,
> Тютчев – ключ, струящийся во мгле,
> Фет – румяный луч во храме.[130]

[129] Genette, *Palimpsests: Literature in the Second Degree*, 1-2. Genette's italics.
[130] Nabokov, "Na smert' A. Bloka," in *Stikhotvoreniya*, 67.

Here Tyutchev is metonymically represented through his *Silentium* in both "klyuch" [fountainhead], taken from the original verse "vzryvaya, vozmutish klyuchi," and in "vo mgle" [in the darkness], as present in Nabokov's own *Eshche bezmolvstvuyu* as discussed above.

Yet, again according to Lotman, a code text, in order to be properly defined as such, should also undergo a process of transformation, by which it becomes able to forge new meanings:

> вторая функция текста – порождение новых смыслов. В этом аспекте текст перестает быть пассивным звеном передачи некоторой константной информации между входом (отправитель) и выходом (получатель). Если в первом случае разница между сообщением на входе и на выходе информационной цепи возможна лишь в результате помех в канале связи и должна быть отнесена за счет технических несовершенств системы, то во втором она составляет самое сущность работы текста как «мыслящего устройства».[131]

This is what happens in Nabokov's *"Zhivi. Ne zhaluysya, ne chisli"* [Live. Do Not Complain, Do Not Count, 1919], where the poet's credo is expressed through a calque of Tyutchev's diction in the opening sequence of three imperatives (as they also appear in the title) and in the consequent dogmatic tone of the whole poem. If, however, Tyutchev's text educates about the importance of introspection, Nabokov's verses anticipate his peculiar notion of the hereafter, informing the reader that "смерти нет" [there is no death]. [132]

Similarly, *Eshche bezmolvstvuyu* retraces Tyutchev's teaching. The evanescence of "chuvstva" and "mechty" is transmuted into the more concrete essence of "sozdani[ya]," though "budushch[iye]." In this respect Nabokov's second stanza goes beyond its mould in that it proclaims Nabokov's encounter with the "neizbezhnyy den'" of his future prospects, metaphorically alluded to in the increasingly wide, varied and luminous horizon.

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[131] Lotman, "Tekst v tekste," 151.
[132] Nabokov, "Zhivi. Ne zhaluysya, ne chisli," in *Stikhotvoreniya*, 86-87.

> Следовательно, текст во второй своей функции является не пассивным вместилищем, носителем извне вложенного в него содержания, а генератором. Сущность же процесса генерации – не только в развертывании, но и в значительной мере во взаимодействии структур. Их взаимодействие в замкнутом мире текста становится активным фактором культуры как работающей семиотической системы.[133]

Therefore, while Nabokov's first stanza can be read as a dialogical response to *Silentium*, in the second stanza Tyutchev's address to an external audience is morphed into an act of self-assessment on Nabokov's part. Thus, more than a monological statement, *Eshche bezmolvstvuyu* may be interpreted as a performance of *avtokommunikatsiya*, according to Lotman's definition: "в системе "Я – Я" носитель информации остается тем же, но сообщение в процессе коммуникации переформируется и приобретает новый смысл. Это происходит в результате того, что вводится добавочный – второй – код и исходное сообщение перекодируется в единицах его структуры, получая черты нового сообщения."[134]

Nabokov employs Tyutchev's source text not as a simple "soobshcheniye" but as a "kod:" he does not simply revisit it in his own verses; rather, he establishes a dialogue with it and uses it as a starting point to demonstrate how his own poetics has been influenced by the introspective cognition contained in *Silentium*: "текст несет тройные значения: первичные – общеязыковые, вторичные, возникающие за счет синтагматической переорганизации текста и сопротивопоставления первичных единиц, и третьей ступени – за счет втягивания в сообщение внетекстовых ассоциаций разных уровней – от наиболее общих до предельно личных."[135]

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[133] Lotman, "Tekst v tekste," 152.
[134] Yuriy Lotman, "O dvukh modelyakh kommunikatsii v sisteme kul'tury," in *Izbrannyye stat'i v trekh tomakh*, 77.
[135] Ibidem, 172.

Hence, the whole poem condenses both a form of traditional, though cross-time, communication and a *self*-communicative act. It transforms Tyutchev's verses into a code text through which Nabokov's own poetics is affirmed: "функционально текст используется не как сообщение, а как код, когда он не прибавляет нам каких-либо сведений к уже имеющимся, а трансформирует самоосмысление порождающей тексты личности и переводит уже имеющиеся сообщения в новую систему значений."[136]

Tyutchev's subtext is embedded in *Eshche bezmolvstvuyu*, especially in Nabokov's semantic choices. Nabokov's English self-translation does not fail to reproduce some of the key features of Tyutchev's *Silentium* as mediated in its translation into English by Nabokov himself. Translation and self-translation are therefore vehicular to the identification of the code text for *Eshche bezmolvstvuyu* in Tyutchev's *Silentium*.

1.2 *L'Inconnue de la Seine*

Nabokov wrote *L'Inconnue de la Seine* in 1934, while still an émigré in Berlin. The original version of the poem, published in *Poslednіye novosti* [Latest News, 28 iyunya 1934] was followed by the inscription "Iz F. G. Ch.," which attributed it to Fedor Godunov Cherdyntsev, the protagonist of the novel *Dar* [The Gift], issued in *Sovremennyye zapiski* [Contemporary Annals] between 1937 and 1938. The fact that neither the character nor the plot of the novel bear any resemblance to the content of the present poem might indicate that by 1934 Nabokov had envisioned a different narrative for what was to become his most accomplished prose work of the European period. This seems to be

[136] Ibidem, 173-174.

confirmed by the fact that in *Poems and Problems* the inscription was not included, thus omitting the reference to *The Gift*.

The poem takes the form of an impossible dialogue between the poet's voice and an inanimate white mask. As the title hints at, the mask the poet is looking at is that of an unknown woman. Not only is the conversation surreal because the poet is talking to a mask and because the mask is the calque of an unknown woman's face, but also because the object in question is in fact a death mask.

Nabokov's Russian text
I - III stanzas
L'Inconnue de la Seine
Торопя этой жизни развязку,
не любя на земле ничего,
все гляжу я на белую маску
неживого лица твоего.

В без конца замирающих струнах
слышу голос твоей красоты.
В бледных толпах утопленниц юных
всех бледней и пленительней ты.

Ты со мною хоть в звуках помешкай,
жребий твой был на счастие скуп,
так ответь же посмертной усмешкой
очарованных гипсовых губ.

Literal translation
The stranger of the Seine
Hurrying up the conclusion of this life,
not loving anything on earth,
I look/am looking at the white mask
of your lifeless face.

In the (sound of) strings (that are) endlessly dying out
I hear the voice of your beauty.
In the pale crowds of drowned young ladies
you are the palest and most charming of all.

At least in sounds linger with me,
your lot was tight of happiness,

so answer with the posthumous smirk
of your charmed gypsum lips.

Nabokov's self-translation
L'Inconnue ∂e la Seine
Urging on this life denouement
loving nothing upon this earth,
I keep staring at the white mask
of your lifeless face.

Strings, vibrating and endlessly dying,
with the voice of your beauty call.
Amidst pale crowds of drowned young maidens
you're the palest and sweetest of all.

In music at least linger with me!
Your lot was chary of bliss.
Oh, reply with posthumous half-smile
of your charmed gypsum lips!

The original Russian version is written in anapaestic trimeter with a rhyme scheme that alternates feminine and masculine endings. In the English translation the rhythm, which is almost completely lost in the initial stanza, gradually gains momentum, increasingly reproducing the mounting tension of the poem and the main voice's escalating feelings towards the object of his desire. The rhyme is recreated only sparsely and does not constitute a structural principle in the translated version. As always, in his more mature approach to (self-)translation, Nabokov concentrates his efforts on the content.

Nabokov's original poem is imbued with references to Symbolism. It shares with Vladislav Khodasevich's *Spyashchey* [To the Sleeping (Lady), 1905] the same cadenced rhythm of magic spells and enchanting formulas. See for instance its first two stanzas:

Спи. Покой твой, сон невесты	Spi. Usni tvoy, son nevesty
Соблазняет черный клир.	Soblaznyayet cherny klir.
Но магические жесты	No magicheskiye zhesty
Охранят твой ясный мир.	Okhranyat tvoy yasnyy mir.
Спи, усни. Еще устанешь,	Spi, usni. Eshche ustanesh,
Упадешь в пыли дорог,	upadesh v pili dorog,

В тайну пропастей заглянешь,	v t*a*ynu pr*o*past*e*y zagl*ya*nesh,
Выпьешь чашу. Жребий строг.[137]	vyp'yesh ch*a*shu. Zhr*e*biy str*o*g.

As Nabokov would later do in his poem, Khodasevich imagines here a world in black and white, where "chernyy klir" [black clergy] and "yasnyy mir" [bright world] are chromatically juxtaposed. The "magicheskiye zhesty" [magic gestures] are verbalised in "spi, usni" [sleep, fall asleep], a collocation frequently met in Russian traditional folk lullabies. By way of Mikhail Lermontov's *Kazach'ya kolybel'naya pesnya* [Cossack Lullaby Song, 1838] and Nikolay Nekrasov's parodic *Kolybel'naya pesnya* [Lullaby Song, 1845], lullabies are gradually deprived of their reassuring words, often becoming an allusion to a forthcoming unpleasant event as in Lermontov's "да, готовясь в бой опасный"[138] [while preparing for the battle], or simply a comment on the reality of life, as suggested by Nekrasov in "стану сказывать не сказки – / правду пропою"[139] [I am not going to tell tales – / the truth I will sing]. Because of the sense of an impending misfortune or an imminent catastrophe, Modernist verses are often interspersed with lullaby motives, such as in Konstantin Bal'mont's *Domovoy* [The House-Spirit, 1906], Fedor Sologub's *Lunnaya kolybel'naya* [Lunar Lullaby, 1908] and Anna Akhmatova's *Kolybel'naya* [Lullaby, 1915], just to name a few. Their innocent tone and allusion to sleep become the intellectuals' oxymoronic expression of uncertainty and fear in the face of the apocalyptic pre-revolutionary present. Similarly, in his *Spyashchey* Khodasevich reproduces the chanting melody of lullabies while addressing his song to a sleeping beauty, predicting her imminent fall into disgrace.

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[137] Vladislav Khodasevich, "Spyashchey," in *Sobraniye sochineniy v vos'mi tomakh*, vol. 1, *Polnoye sobraniye stikhotvoreniy*, ed. Dzh. Malmsmad and R. Khyuz (Moskva: Russkiy Put', 2009), 253.
[138] Mikhail Lermontov, "Kazach'ya kolybel'naya pesnya," in *Polnoye sobraniye stikhotvoreniy v 2 tomakh*, vol. 2, *Stikhotvoreniya i poemy. 1837-1841*, ed. E. E. Naydich (Leningrad: Sovetsky pisatel', 1989), 26.
[139] Nikolay Nekrasov, "Kolybel'naya pesnya," in *Polnoye sobraniye sochineniy i pisem v pyatnadtsati tomakh*, vol. 1, *Stikhotvoreniya 1838-1855 gg.*, ed. V. E. Vatsuro et al. (Leningrad: Nauka, 1981), 17.

Khodasevich's enchanted tone is imitated by Nabokov in verse 8 of his *L'Inconnue de la Seine*. Here, the comparative "vsekh bledney i plenitel'ney ty" is reminiscent of fairy-tale poems, as in Aleksandr Pushkin's lines "ты, царица, всех милее, / всех румяней и белее"[140] [you, *tsaritsa*, are the sweetest of all, / the most rosy-cheeked and palest of all] from *Skazka o mertvoy tsarevne i o semi bogatyryakh* [Tale of the Dead Princess and the Seven Bogatyrs, 1833]. Nabokov's self-translation as "you're the palest and sweetest of all" reproduces the same effect, recalling the Grimms' formula "you, my queen, are the fairest of all" from *Little Snow-White and the Seven Dwarfs* (1812), while reintroducing Pushkin's presence in the superlative "sweetest." *L'Inconnue de la Seine* also reminds of *Spyashchey*, in the sleepless male character (Khodasevich's "я бодрствую, бессонный…" [I stay awake, sleepless…]) and in the key-word "zhrebiy." Nabokov's literal translation as "lot" preserves the complexity of the original Russian word derived from *zherebiy* meaning *chast'* [part] and evolved into indicating *sud'ba* [fate].[141] The noun "lot" is mostly used to designate "a portion assigned to someone,"[142] then also extending its domain to "a person's destiny, luck or condition in life."[143] Moreover, Nabokov's English verse skilfully takes advantage of the semantic richness of such an apparently simple word as "lot" creating an oxymoronic contrast with "chary."

Another important subtext to *L'Inconnue de la Seine* might come from Aleksandr Blok's *V kabakakh, v pereulkakh, v izvivakh* [In Taverns, in Alleyways, in Windings, 1904], where the speaking voice is, as in Nabokov's poem, lost in delightful sounds: "я остался, таинственно светел, / эту музыку блеска впивать…"[144] [I stayed, secretly enlightened, /

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[140] Aleksandr Pushkin, "Skazka o mertvoy tsarevne i o semi bogatyryakh," in *Sobraniye sochineniy v desyati tomakh*, vol. 3, *Poemy, skazki*, ed. D. D. Blagiy et al. (Moskva: Gosudarstvennoye izdatel'stvo khudozhestvennoy literatury, 1960), 345.
[141] *Etimologicheskiy slovar' russkogo yazyka Maksa Fasmera*.
[142] *Oxford Dictionary Online*.
[143] *Concise Oxford English Dictionary*, 2008.
[144] Aleksandr Blok, "V kabakakh, v pereulkakh, v izvivakh," in *Polnoye sobraniye sochineniy i pisem v dvadtsati tomakh*, vol. 2, *Stikhotvoreniya (1904-1908)*, ed. V. N. Bystrov et al. (Moskva: Nauka, 1997), 108.

to absorb this music of bliss…"]. The original synesthesia of "slyshu golos tvoyey krasoty" is equally expressive in its English form "the voice of your beauty call," a line where the visual traits of beauty are perceived through the hearing.

A preference for polished, refined words in the English translation is already evident from the first stanzas. The sense of a plot coming to its ending, suggested in the term "razvyazk[a]," is reproduced in the noun "denouement," imported from French. The word "maiden" provides for the feminine genre contained in the more synthetic "utoplennits[a]" [drowned woman] while also shifting the action back to the epoch when the poem was first composed or even earlier, being it a rather outdated term in the English vocabulary. The adjectives "posthumous" and "gypsum," with their evident Latin root, create an internal half-rhyme in correspondence of the young woman's "half-smile." The following two stanzas also open with two nouns derived from Latin, namely "immobile" and "convex," for the more neutral "nepodvizhny" [motionless] and "vypukly" [prominent].

Nabokov's Russian text
IV and V stanzas
Неподвижны и выпуклы веки,
густо слиплись ресницы.
Ответь, неужели навеки, навеки?
А ведь как ты умела глядеть!

Плечи худенькие, молодые,
черный крест шерстяного платка,
фонари, ветер, тучи ночные,
в темных яблоках злая река.

Literal translation
Motionless and prominent eyelids
tightly closed eyelids.
Answer, indeed (will this be) forever, forever?
How you were able to watch!

Slender young shoulders,

the black cross of (your) woollen shawl,
streetlamps, wind, night storm-clouds,
the dark dappled evil river.

Nabokov's self-translation
Immobile and convex the eyelids.
Thickly matted the lashes. Reply—
can this be for ever, for ever?
Ah, the way they could glance, those eyes!

Touchingly frail young shoulders,
the black cross of a woollen shawl,
the streetlights, the wind, the night clouds,
the harsh river dappled with dark.

The two central stanzas are dedicated to the ekphrastic description of the woman's death mask. The meticulousness of the vocabulary, especially in the self-translated text, has the effect of detaching the observer from the scene depicted in macroscopic, almost expressionistic details. The focus moves from the "veki" / "eyelids" to the even more minute "resnitsy" / "lashes," both unable to move. The absence of sensorial perceptions, namely sight, becomes the evidence for the absence of life. The speaker is so immersed in his contemplative state he projects himself back to the moment when the woman died, imagining the scene. The urban setting is again reminiscent of Blok's *V kabakakh, v pereulkakh, v izvivakh*, where the consecutive distribution of "в кабаках, в переулках, в извивах, / в электрическом сне наяву"[145] [In taverns, in alleyways, in windings, / in the electrical lucid dream] and further "были улицы пьяны от криков. / Были солнца в сверканьи витрин"[146] [there were streets drunken with screamings. / There were suns in the sparkles of shop-windows] are echoed in Nabokov's "fonari, veter, tuchi nochnyye, […] zlaya reka" / "the streetlights, the wind, the night clouds, the harsh river."

[145] Ibidem.
[146] Ibidem.

Blok's voice reverberates in *L'Inconnue de la Seine* also through his notorious poem *Neznakomka* [The Unknown (Lady), 1906], which Nabokov translated between 1948 and 1951 but never published.[147] The presence of an unknown woman, the "ispytannyye ostryaki" / "jaunty derbies," as well as the metropolitan setting in two of Blok's central stanzas are recreated in Nabokov's later verses.

И медленно, пройдя меж пьяными,	Slowly she makes her way among the drinkers,
Всегда без спутников, одна,	always escortless, alone,
Дыша духами и туманами,	perfume and mists emanating from her,
Она садится у окна.	and takes a seat near the window.
И веют дверными поверьями	And her taut silks,
Ее упругие шелка,	her hat with its tenebrous plumes,
И шляпа с траурными перьями,	her slender bejeweled hand
И в кольцах злая рука.	waft legendary magic.[148]

Nabokov's *Inconnue* inverts Blok's *Neznakomka*: the unknown lady is not alone, but followed by someone, she is not seated in a tavern but walks along the river Seine. And yet a detail remains almost the same: the "shlyapa s traurnymi per'yami" / "hat with its tenebrous plumes" takes the shape of Nabokov's "chernyy krest sherstyanogo platka" / "the black cross of a woollen shawl," where the sense of an impending death is suggested in the colour black and in the shape of the cross. Both Blok's and Nabokov's allusion to mourning recall Charles Baudelaire's *À une passante* [To a Passer-By, 1855], where the woman is described as "longue, mince, en grand deuil, douleur majestueuse."[149] Valeriy Bryusov's 1901 interpretive translation only metaphorically hinted at mourning in its opening verses "она прошла и опьянила / томящим сумраком духов"[150] [she passed by and intoxicated / with the tormenting gloom of her perfume]. Similarly, in his version of Blok's *Neznakomka*,

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[147] See Boyd and Shvabrin, ed., *Verses and Versions. Three Centuries of Russian Poetry Selected and Translated by Vladimir Nabokov*, 419.
[148] Aleksandr Blok, "V kabakakh, v pereulkakh, v izvivakh," in *Verses and Versions. Three Centuries of Russian Poetry Selected and Translated by Vladimir Nabokov*, 324-325.
[149] Baudelaire, "À une passante," in *Les fleurs du mal*, 161.
[150] Valeriy Bryusov, trans., "Prokhozhey," in *Stikhotvoreniya i poemy*, ed. D. E. Maksimov and M. I. Dikman (Leningrad: Sovetskij pisatel', 1961), 213.

Nabokov neutralises the adjective "traurn[yy]" [mourning] into a more generic "tenebrous." However, in their original creations Blok and, subsequently, Nabokov refer back to Baudelaire's source text and restore the physical evidence of death and mourning.

By comparing Nabokov's self-translated text and his translation of Blok's *Neznakomka* another important element comes to the forefront. The title attributed to the English translation of Blok's poem by Nabokov uses the adjective "strange" for "neznakomka," instead of the calque unknown. This shows a preference for a word bearing a French etymological root and connected to "étrange" – "étrangère." In *L'Inconnue de la Seine*, the title is in French, both in the original Russian version and in the English translation. The noun "denouement," meaning "the final part of a play, film, or narrative in which the strands of the plot are drawn together and matters are explained or resolved,"[151] is a word directly imported from French; similarly "posthumous," "gypsum," "immobile" and "convex" are all calques mediated through Romanic languages, thus derived from Latin. These barbarisms may be indicative of Baudelaire's subtext. This might be confirmed by observing Nabokov's translation of *Neznakomka*, where we find such words as "vociferations" ["okrik[i]"], "vista" [/], "tedium" ["skuk[a]"], "villas" ["dach[i]"], "sole companion" ["drug edinstvennyy"], "acrid and occult potion" ["vlag[a]" terpk[a] i tainstvenn[aya]"], "tenebrous plumes" ["traurn[yye] per'[ya]"], "meandres" ["izluchin[y]"]. After all, the image of the unknown lady was predominant in French Decadent verses and became likewise popular among Russian Symbolists thanks to Bryusov's and Innokentiy Annenskiy's translations from French in *Russkiye simvolisty* [Russian Symbolists, 1894-1895] and *Parnasisti i proklyatyye* [Parnassians and Maudits, in *Tikhiye pesni*, 1904] respectively. Thus Nabokov's original verses and their (self-)translation reflect this process of assimilation by referring back to Baudelaire's primary source and Blok's reworking of it.

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[151] *Oxford Online Dictionary.*

Nabokov's Russian text
VI - VIII stanzas
Кто он был, умоляю, поведай,
соблазнитель таинственный твой?
Кудреватый племянник соседа —
пестрый галстучек, зуб золотой?

Или звездных небес завсегдатай,
друг бутылки, костей и кия,
вот такой же гуляка проклятый,
прогоревший мечтатель, как я?

И теперь, сотрясаясь всем телом,
он, как я, на кровати сидит
в черном мире, давно опустелом,
и на белую маску глядит.

Literal translation
Who was he, I beg you, tell me,
this mysterious seducer of yours?
The curly nephew of your/my/the neighbour –
(with his) colourful tie, (his) golden tooth?

Or a haunter of starred skies,
friend with bottles, dices and cue,
the same damned reveller,
profligate dreamer as me?

And now, the whole body shaking,
he, like me, on the bed sits/is sitting
in a/the black world, long emptied,
and looks/is looking at a/the white mask.

Nabokov's self-translation
Who was he, I beseech you, tell me,
your mysterious seducer? Was he
some neighbor's curly-locked nephew
of the loud tie and gold-capped tooth?

Or a client of star-dusted heavens,
friend of bottle, billiards, and dice,
the same sort of accursed man of pleasure
and bankrupt dreamer as I?

And right now, his whole body heaving,
he, like me, on the edge of his bed,
in a black world long empty, sits staring
at a white mask.

As stated above, Nabokov's concluding stanzas develop the stereotype of the *flâneur*. It is interesting to notice that the corresponding Russian word "gulyaga" (from the verb *gulyat'*, to walk, and *-aga*, a pejorative suffix) is translated into a more general "man of pleasure" where the supposed presence of Baudelaire's poetics is significantly diluted. Three genuine questions are addressed to the mask regarding the identity of its seducer, one for each stanza. Though they are not rhetorical in essence – they concern a person's identity of which the reader is equally ignorant – they become pointless when we are reminded they are addressed to a mask. The attributes "kudrevatyy," "(zub) zolotoy" and "zvezdn[yy]" are translated in the three English compound words: "curly-locked," "gold-capped" and "star-dusted." Their sequential proximity increases the redundancy of the question. As in Blok's "*V kabakakh…*," Nabokov's last three stanzas paint the scenes set in the mundane world with bright colours, whereas the last two verses again remark the contrast between the black world of the man's psychological gloom and the white of the woman's purity, synecdochically summed up in her mask.

In his collection *Les fleurs du mal* (1857), Baudelaire's *Le masque* [The Mask] is dedicated to the sculptor Ernest Christophe, whose "statue allégorique" is here described in detail. This Decadent ekphrasis is embedded in the Romantic tradition dictated by John Keats's model in *Ode to a Grecian Urn* (1820). Baudelaire's personal contribution to the genre lies in the surprise effect of discovering that "la femme au corps divin, promettant le bonheur, / par le haut se termine en monstre bicéphale!"[152] The two-headed monster is the

[152] Baudelaire, "Le masque," in *Les fleurs du mal*, 36.

woman's contorted face almost hidden under an enigmatic mask. This powerful statue, originally called *La comédie humaine*, is an allegorical representation of life through the theatrical medium. Both *Ode on a Grecian Urn* and *Le masque* develop their lines as a verbalisation of a work of art. As in Keats's ode, where "beauty is truth, truth beauty,"[153] behind Baudelaire's cast of words there is still a work of art, a thing of beauty. In both cases the ekphrastic description complements visual art, words reproduce a unique creation.

On the contrary, Nabokov's voice is addressed to a death mask – an empty gypsum cast, a vestige of decayed beauty. Nabokov intersperses his verses with clues regarding the object of his description: it is the calque of a "drowned young" maiden, its lips are upturned in a "half-smile," the lashes are "matted," drenched in water and chalk. Apart from that, the title itself is indicative of the mask it alludes to, as pointed out by Donald Barton Johnson: l'Inconnue de la Seine "is the name of a death mask, supposedly of an anonymous young woman taken from the Seine. Widely reproduced, the mask was a popular item of decor in German and French households of the twenties and thirties."[154] Therefore Nabokov's ekphrasis consists in the visualisation of a mask without a face, whose identity cannot be disclosed, its words even more estranging because of that. What is more, Nabokov's verses are not the poet's alternative to artistic uniqueness. They verbalise a mass product, they are nothing more than another copy, another hand casting the mould in the production line.

In 1934, while Nabokov was composing his deliberately pompous description of a fashionable piece of kitsch design, Stalin's regime was coming closer to the ultimate formalisation of Socialist Realism. According to the principles of such a doctrine, art should function as an *exemplum* whose strength lies not in its exclusiveness but rather in its ability to include, not in its uniqueness but rather in its reproducibility. Only two years

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[153] Keats, "Ode on a Grecian Urn," in *Poems*, 237.
[154] Donald Barton Johnson, ""L'Inconnue de la Seine" and Nabokov's Naiads," *Comparative Literature* 44, no. 3 (summer 1992): 228, http://www.academicroom.com/article/linconnue-de-la-seine-and-nabokovs-naiads.

later, in 1936, Walter Benjamin would elaborate his ambivalent thoughts on the reproducibility of art, stating that "by replicating the work many times over, it substitutes a mass existence for a unique existence."[155] Though similarly based on the concept of repeatability, Socialist Realism differs from mass production on one fundamental level: *Sotsrealizm* does not pursue any aesthetic pleasure but only the aim of productive education. In 1933 Anatoliy Lunacharskiy had already pronounced the verdict of Soviet arts: "мы принимаем действительность, мы принимаем ее не статически, – да как же мы могли бы признать ее в статике? – прежде всего мы принимаем как задание, как развитие."[156] As dictated by Socialist Realism, art has an edifying purpose: "искусство имеет не только способность ориентировать, но и формировать. Дело не только в том, чтобы художник показал всему своему классу, каков мир сейчас, но и в том, чтобы он помог разобраться в действительности, помог воспитанию нового человека."[157]

Contrary to Socialist Realism, Nabokov's decorative item, though easily reproduced, is devoid of any educational or social value. It is nothing more than a *memento mori*, disruptive of any Socialist ambitions for a brighter future and constructive purposefulness. Nabokov's mask does not imply any moral predicament, so much so that the speaking voice identifies himself with the "accursed man of pleasure" at the end of the poem, whose redemption ultimately fails to be accomplished. The main speaking voice is as much removed from the idea of the "new man" as we can possibly imagine, his Decadent progenitors still resounding in his thoughts on pleasure, voyeurism and *flânerie*. Nabokov's ekphrastic depiction of a death mask might be interpreted as a literal response to Lunacharskiy's statement about "romantic" writers and their "carrions:"

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[155] Walter Benjamin, "The Work of Art in Its Technological Reproducibility," in *The Work of Art in Its Technological Reproducibility and Other Writings*, ed. Michael W. Jennings et al., trans. Edmund Jephcott et al. (Cambridge (USA): Harvard University Press, 2008), 22.
[156] Anatoliy Lunacharskiy, "Sotsialisticheskiy realism," *Sovetskiy teatr*, no. 2-3 (1933): 4.
[157] Ibidem, 5.

> там, где пахнет подобной «романтикой», – там пахнет мертвечиной. И не просто мертвечиной. Мертвецы, которые лежат на кладбище, нас не интересуют, и если их даже хоронят такие же мертвецы, мы говорим: «Пусть мертвые хоронят мертвых». Но мертвецы, которые сидят в служебных креслах редакций, которые, черт их побери, пишут романы или драмы, такие же мертвые, как они сами, – это ведь мертвецы, которые распространяют вокруг себя миазмы, отравляющие живую жизнь. Нет, извините, здесь не до терпимости.[158]

Nabokov's ekphrasis of death proves the contrary: even when it is about death, art is not deathly – its strings keep "vibrating and endlessly dying." Poetry thus, like any other artistic form, should not be about pragmatism but contemplation:[159] we, as readers, indulge in the meticulous description of the object as mediated by the lyric voice. In this respect, Nabokov's item is doubly desecrating: not only is the mask a self-indulgent celebration of nostalgia, it is also fundamentally devoid of any practical function, being it a common item of décor. Nevertheless, his meticulous description gives it the same status, the same cathartic potential as a work of art. The evocative power of the object becomes even more evident in Nabokov's English self-translation. There, the Russian verb "glyadet'," twice repeated in the original text, acquires two different additional shades: "star[e]," denoting a prolonged observation, and "glance," indicating a quick glimpse. While the act of glancing is associated with the woman, enhancing her evanescence, that of staring is attributed to the man contemplating the mask in a state of deep self-absorption.

And yet the mask is *not* a work of art strictly speaking. Unlike Baudelaire's, Nabokov's mask is not a theatre prop, not an integral part of a sculpture, nor is it a precious death masks cast on a sovereign's or a prominent intellectual's face. L'Inconnue's gypsum mask reproduces the features of an unknown young woman whose only virtue was

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[158] Ibidem, 6.

[159] In his 1957 definition of *sotsialisticheskiy realizm* Andrey Sinyavskiy wrote: "телеологическая специфика марксистского образа мысли толкает к тому, чтобы все без исключения понятия и предметы подвести к Цели, соотнести с Целью, определить через Цель." Abram Terts, *Chto takoye sotsialisticheskiy realizm* (Parizh: Sintaksis, 1988), 13.

her beauty. Neither is it an *unicum*. In 1902 Rainer Maria Rilke noticed the mask exposed on the shelves of a caster's shop in Paris and thus commented the vision: "seul visage anonyme vendu au milieu d'hommes célèbres et de reproductions d'œuvres d'art, "entre *L'Enfant à l'épine* et le *Beethoven mort*", l'aspect irrationnel et mystérieux du masque a assuré son succès commercial. Il ornait, paraît-il, un grand nombre d'intérieurs bourgeois du début du siècle."[160] Due to the widespread circulation of the mask, Nabokov must have been perfectly aware of it being a mass produced object that anybody could showcase on their mantlepiece or bookcase. This is particularly evident in the last stanza of his poem, when the mask becomes the intermediary between the two male characters, the lyric voice and the "soblaznitel' tainstvennyy" / "mysterious seducer." Because they both observe the same mask in two different places at the same time, they share the same experience as mediated by the same ubiquitous object. Yet the failure in catharsis – the main speaker still identifies himself with "the accursed man of pleasure" by the end of the poem – reveals its status as an item of kitsch design. *Poshlost'*, the Russian word for kitsch, originates from "пошьлъ," that is "старинный, исконный; прежний, обычный"[161] [ancient, original / native; previous, common]. Ergo, Nabokov's death mask is a literal representation of *poshlost'*: it stands for an object that is both retrospective and repetitive enough to be considered a thing of the past, lacking the aesthetic power of art and its cathartic potential.

According to Barton Johnson, however, Nabokov's tone is not derisive towards l'Inconnue[162] as a cultural phenomenon *per se*. What we might read in his words is rather a metonymy for representation and its reproducibility as a social and cultural phenomenon. If, on the one hand, the mask is a thing for the thing's sake, a pure self-indulgent form of

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[160] Hélène Pinet, "L'eau, la femme, la mort. Le mythe de l'Inconnue de la Seine," http://expositions.bnf.fr/portraits/grosplan/inconnue/. The quotations are Rilke's own words.
[161] *Etimologicheskiy slovar' russkogo yazyka Maksa Fasmera*.
[162] As clearly demonstrated by Barton Johnson in ""L'Inconnue de la Seine" and Nabokov's Naiads," 225-248.

re-presentation, rather than being stripped of its aura, it is increasingly mysterious and alluring, to such an extent it becomes the object of a mass cult. Therefore, while resolutely rejecting the vision of reproducibility as a way to attain any educational purpose, *L'Inconnue de la Seine* condensates Nabokov's contradictory approach to mass culture, his critical view of its *poshlost'* and his concurrent ability to exploit its means.

When *L'Inconnue de la Seine* is interpreted as an ekphrastic poem, its content becomes so much more relevant to the context where it belongs. Its intertextuality acquires a significant value on two different levels. On the one hand, the presence of Baudelaire's and Blok's verses creates a parodic effect, a pastiche almost grotesquely moulded in the plaster: of Baudelaire's "passante" and Blok's "neznakomka" only a death mask survives. Symbolism is a ghost of the past that keeps haunting the present with its vestiges. On the other hand, the ekphrastic depiction of the object might disclose Nabokov's reception of two dominant theoretical approaches to consumption that were both crucial in tracing a new path in terms of material and moral reproducibility. Hence, in its condemning both the didactic purpose of Socialist Realism and the mute compliance induced by mass production and kitsch, *L'Inconnue* can be read as an attempt at stressing the importance of individual reception. Lest art become a hollow calque.

1.3 *Снимок / The Snapshot*

Nabokov wrote *Snimok* in 1927 in Binz, a German seaside resort where he and his wife Vera felt "quite unseen by others and quite free of normal constraints."[163] These verses expand on that sense of freedom and express the feeling of being caught unawares in a casual picture. The poem casts four different characters: the main speaking voice and the

[163] Brian Boyd, *Vladimir Nabokov. The Russian Years* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1990), 274.

three members of a family, father, mother and child. The point of view shifts between that of the main voice and that of the camera pointed by the father toward the rest of his family.

Nabokov's Russian text
I and II stanzas
Снимок
На пляже в полдень лиловатый,
в морском каникульном раю
снимал купальщик полосатый
свою счастливую семью.

И замирает мальчик голый,
и улыбается жена,
в горячий свет, в песок веселый,
как в серебро, погружена.

Literal translation
A/the snapshot
On a/the beach at the almost lilac noon,
in a/the seaside vacational heaven,
a striped bather was taking a picture
of his happy family.

And the naked boy freezes,
and the wife smiles,
in the burning light, in the cheerful sand,
as in silver, she is plunged.

Nabokov's English translation
The Snapshot
Upon the beach at violet-blue noon,
in a vacational Elysium
a striped bather took
a picture of his happy family.

And very still stood his small naked boy,
and his wife smiled,
in ardent light, in sandy bliss
plunged as in silver.

Nabokov wrote the Russian text in iambic tetrameter with alternate feminine and masculine rhymes. The English translation, however, does not reproduce neither the

original rhythm nor its rhyme scheme. The translation becomes almost prosaic, thus enhancing the sense of casualness and informality expressed throughout the poem.

The first stanza contextualises the scene. The poem opens with an unusual description of the light at noon on a summer day. Rather than being bright and warm, its tone is painted with the colder shades of "lilovatyy" and the even colder "violet-blue" of the English translation. This might be an anticipation of the scene as it will appear in the picture, blurred by the high sun at midday. Alternatively, it might be a reference to the way the scene is perceived through the camera, the blinding light reflecting on the blazing sand and the radiant sea. The vacational "ray" becomes a more connotative "Elysium" in the English version, contributing to the creation of an almost surreal scenario. The hypallage "kupal'shchik polosatyy" / "a striped bather" – the bathing suit being striped, not the bather – suggests a more vivid and synthetic description of the man. While the original has more of a descriptive inflection, the English translation shifts the focus on the narrative sequence: the imperfective "snimal" is translated into "took / a picture," the past simple preferred to the continuous tense. The action is thus rendered more immediate and dynamic in the English text.

The second stanza further expands on these two different attitudes. In the original, Nabokov actualises the scene that is being immortalised in the photograph through the present tense of "zamirayet" and "ulybayetsya." In the English translation, the past simple of "stood" and "smiled" removes the scene from the reader's present by placing it back into the narrative past where it belongs. Moreover, the rigid structure of the Russian syntax is diluted in the less regular formal construction of the English sentences. The isocolon in "i zamirayet mal'chik […] / i ulybayetsya zhena" is lost in the English corresponding lines "and very still stood the small naked boy, / and his wife smiled," where the two subjects and their predicates are disposed in a less emphatic syntactic chiasmus. The colour shades are more realistic in the second stanza: the overwhelming silver tones of the "goryachiy

svet" / "ardent light" and "pesok veselyy" / "sandy bliss" are almost as blinding to the reader as they are in the actual scene. Again the hypallage involves the adjective "goryachiy" / "ardent," which denotes the tactile perception of warmth, referred to "svet" / "light" as well as "veselyy," attributed to "pesok" rather than to the human presence. The English version "sandy bliss" inverts the original use of adjective and noun but still preserves the displacement of the epithet "sandy," attributing a material quality to the feeling of "bliss."

Nabokov's Russian text
III-V stanzas
И полосатым человеком
направлен в солнечный песок,
мигнул и щелкнул черным веком
фотографический глазок.

Запечатлела эта пленка
все, что могла она поймать:
оцепеневшего ребенка,
его сияющую мать,

и ведерцо, и две лопаты,
и в стороне песчаный скат.
И я, случайный соглядатай,
на заднем плане тоже снят.

Literal translation
And by the striped person
pointed to the sunny sand,
blinked and clicked with its black eyelid
the photographic ocellus/shutter.

This film imprinted
all it could catch:
the stiffen child,
his beaming mother,

and a small bucket, and two spades,
and on the side a sandy slope.
And I, a/the casual spy,
in the background am also taken/photographed.

Nabokov's English translation
And by the striped man
directed at the sunny sand
blinked with a click of its black eyelid
the camera's ocellus.

That bit of film imprinted
all it could catch,
the stirless child
his radiant mother,

and a toy pail and two beach spades,
and some way off a bank of sand,
and I, the accidental spy,
I in the background have been also taken.

The three central stanzas describe the process of the camera imprinting the picture on the film. Again the hypallage "solnechnyy pesok" / "sunny sand" transfers the incorporeal quality of light onto the texture of substantial matter. This reproduces the principle of photography, which imprints onto the film the light reflecting on the surface of things. The personification of the camera, as suggested in the use of "vek[/]" / "eyelid," is strengthened in the English translation through the Saxon genitive of "camera's ocellus." Also, the English version plays with the phonetic effects more than the Russian original seems to do. Take, for instance, verse 11: the consecutive use of short words ending with the voiceless velar stop /k/ as in "blinked," "click" and "black" reproduces the rapid sound of the ocellus.

The fourth and fifth stanzas imprint on the page the scene caught in the photograph. The intertextual moment is captured here without the use of verbs and the insistent series of anaphoric conjunctions. Internal rhymes in the English "I," twice repeated, and "spy" as well as "bit" – "it" and the imperfect rhyme in "pail" – "spades" – "way" revive the internal coherence of the verses, otherwise fragmented. The increasing use of polysyndeton, both in Russian and in English, gives the verses a pressing rhythm.

The sense of the original "soglyadatay" is trivialised in the English "spy" for lack of a better word. The Russian noun comes from the juxtaposition of the prefix *со-*, which denotes congruency, and the verb *глядет'*, meaning to observe. While the term "spy" implicates a passive look, *соглядатай* attributes to the observer the active role of an involved witness, a contributor to the scene through the act of looking at it. In his English self-translation, however, Nabokov enhances the ironic contradiction of a "sluchaynyy soglyadatay" in the "accidental spy" – the involuntary witness of the original becomes a chance peeper in the English translation, utterly inadequate in his role.

Nabokov's Russian text
VI and VII stanzas
Зимой в неведомом мне доме
покажут бабушке альбом,
и будет снимок в том альбоме,
и буду я на снимке том:

мой облик меж людьми чужими,
один мой августовский день,
моя не знаемая ими,
вотще украденная тень.

Literal translation
In winter, in a house unknown to me
they will show an album to (their) grandmother
and there will be a picture in that album,
and I will be in that picture:

my figure among stranger people,
in one of my August days,
my unknowable to them
shadow, stolen in vain.

Nabokov's English translation
Next winter, in an unknown house,
grandmother will be shown an album,
and in that album there will be a snapshot,
and in that snapshot I shall be.

My likeness among strangers,

one of my August days,
my shade they never noticed,
my shade they stole in vain.

The final stanzas project the poem into the future, when the scene previously depicted in the act of being imprinted on the film will be finally printed on paper as an actual photograph. The intertextual hypothyposis develops here into a proper ekphrastic depiction of an image.

The anaphor structured on the Russian predicative construction "i budet" is rendered into a specification of place in the English "and in that," which highlights the displacement of the lyrical subject in relation to the future he is reflecting upon. The effect of the anaphoric repetition is even more evident in the English version, where the closing verses repeat "my shade they," the opposition between the subject and the strangers further contributing to the sense of removal and displacement expressed in the poem. The fact that the man has been included in the picture of a stranger family is perceived ultimately as an act of extortion or, worse, abduction, as suggested in "ukradennaya ten'" / "my shade they stole." The act of violence is rendered even more abusive by the fact that what has been stolen is not a mere object, but one's own "ten'" / "shade." The English adverb "in vain," which translates the rather colloquial "votshche," is given prominence by shifting it to the closing position, where it creates the most evident, though still imperfect, rhyme of the poem – "рифма всегда самая звонкая часть предложения," as Boris Tomashevskiy would say.[164]

Nabokov's tone, however, seems to be rather ironic. In this respect, the "vacational Elysium" acquires a determining value. I would argue that the choice of the attribute "vacational" is not casual, in that it indicates a span of time or a portion of space defined by

[164] Tomashevskiy, *Stilistika*, 272.

its emptiness, its *vacantia*. The fact that that vacant space should be occupied by an unknown person not just momentarily but as a permanent intrusion in the picture feels uncomfortable. This sense of displacement is highlighted, as discussed above, by the frequent use of hypallage, which reproduces the act of imprinting by transferring the epithet to a contiguous, though inappropriate, domain; similarly, the poem describes how a photograph transfers the image of a stranger in the intimate space of a family, where it does not belong. The frequent repetitions, especially in the form of anaphors, could be read as the linguistic symptom of embarrassment.

This feeling of inappropriateness is expressed in the very title of the poem, where "snimok" is translated as "snapshot." The Russian more colloquial and less technical synonym for photograph comes from the verb *snimat'* [take (away)], frequently used to indicate the process of recording an image by impressing it on a surface through the action of light. The English "snapshot" emphasises the contingency of the action by referring to "an informal photograph taken quickly, typically with a small handheld camera"[165] or "a casual photograph made typically by an amateur."[166] The word itself is loosely onomatopoeic and pleonastic: one of the meanings of the verb "to snap" is to "open or close with a brisk movement or sharp sound,"[167] which recalls the movement and the sound of the camera's ocellus, while the noun "shot," before indicating the photograph itself, has the meaning of a hit or stroke as well as the firing of a gun, thus suggesting a more "mass scale," industrial alternative to artistic photography.[168] Therefore it is not by chance that what is initially called a "picture" ultimately becomes a "snapshot." The patient process of taking it, the mother and her child standing still, the man's care in pointing the camera are all part of an operation that requires time and attention; the final result, the incongruous

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[165] *Concise Oxford English Dictionary*, 2008.
[166] *Merriam Webster Online*.
[167] *Concise Oxford English Dictionary*, 2008.
[168] See Walter Benjamin, "A Short History of Photography," *Screen* 13, no. 1 (1972): 5-26. The essay was originally published in *The Literarische Welt* of 18 September, 29 September and 2 October 1931.

presence of a stranger, though, impairs its value and turns the picture into a casual snapshot. The self-translation seems to prove this point, when the attention is drawn to the ephemeral quality of the photograph as condensed in the closing "in vain." This becomes even more evident in the use of verbs: the present tenses of the Russian original make the action of taking the picture ever current, ongoing; the English past tenses, conversely, provide for the transitory evanescence of the snapshot, its illusory objectivity.

Paul Valery's prediction on the ubiquity allowed by photography is presented here in a literal sense: "on saura transporter ou reconstituer en tout lieu le système de sensations, – ou plus exactement, le système d'excitations, – que dispense en un lieu quelconque un objet ou un événement quelconque. Les œuvres acquerront une sorte d'ubiquité."[169] Having been included in the picture, the man will continue existing in it as long as it will exist, independently of his own will. His presence is an excess in objectivity, which results in waste. Vacancy is a remote mirage. *Snimok* / *The Snapshot* anticipates Benjamin's comment on film: "the newsreel demonstrates unequivocally that any individual can be in a position to be filmed. But that possibility is not enough. *Any person today can lay claim to being filmed*."[170] While we know the camera must have caught the mother and the child, we have no actual evidence of the man's intrusion other than his own claim. Hence, overexposure is not just a matter of exceeding light entering the lens. A few years later, during his speech for the centenary of photography, Valéry stated: "dans chaque famille se conserve un album, un de ces albums qui nous mettent entre les mains les portraits devenus émouvants, les costumes devenus ridicules, les instants devenus ce qu'ils sont devenus, et tout un

[169] Paul Valéry, "La conquête de l'ubiquité," in *Œuvres*, vol. 2, *Pièces sur l'art*, ed. Jean Hytier (Paris: Gallimard, 1960), 1284.
[170] Benjamin, "The Work of Art in Its Technological Reproducibility," 33. Benjamin's italics.

personnel de parents, d'amis et d'inconnus aussi, qui ont eu quelque part essentielle ou accidentelle à notre vie."[171]

For all its apparent simplicity, *Snimok / The Snapshot* ultimately reflects on speculation in terms of a gnoseological approach. As a mirror of the real, pictures reproduce all they imprint ("запечатлела эта пленка / все, что могла она поймать" / "that bit of film imprinted / all it could catch"). The accumulation of details, though, does not guarantee objectivity. Rather, "technological reproduction is more independent of the original," Benjamin claimed, "for example in photography it can bring out aspects of the original that are accessible only to the lens (which is adjustable and can easily change viewpoint) but not to the human eye; or it can use certain processes, such as enlargement or slow motion, to record images which escape natural optics altogether."[172] The "erreur par excès"[173] subtracts the integrity of vision by forcing the presence of an intruder. The "soglyadatay" / "spy," on the other hand, invades the scene and speculates on his own presence in the eventual picture. There, he will survive as a mirrored shade, a specular negative of himself. Overexposure acquires a literal meaning in Nabokov's poem. It is not simply light overflowing in the camera and glaring its lens. In *Snimok / The Snapshot* overexposure is the presumption of objectivity, the saturation of space where any presence can be stolen in vain. After all, "is it not the task of the photographer […] to uncover guilt and name the guilty in his pictures?"[174]

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[171] Paul Valéry, "Discours du centenaire de la photographie," *Société française de photographie*, no. 10 (November 2001), 89-106, https://etudesphotographiques.revues.org/265#bodyftn12. The speech was held at the Sorbonne, Paris, on the 7 January 1939.

[172] Benjamin, "The Work of Art in Its Technological Reproducibility," 21.

[173] Valéry, "Discours du centenaire de la photographie," https://etudesphotographiques.revues.org/265#bodyftn12.

[174] Benjamin, "A Short History of Photography," 25.

2. ПРОЗРАЧНЫЕ ВЕЩИ / TRANSPARENT THINGS

On Metasememes (Synaesthesia and Synecdoche)

Затерявшись где-то,
Робко верим мы
В непрозрачность света
И прозрачность тьмы.

Maksimilian Voloshin, *"Mir zakutan plotno…."*[175]

In his English poem *Voluptates Tactionum* (1951) Nabokov foretells a distant future, an epoch he envisions as the "com[ing] of age" of sensory awareness, when it will be possible for people to touch smells, feelings and other incorporeal entities. The scene he describes has the avant-gardism of a sci-fi narrative: "grouped before a Magnotact, / clubs and families will clutch / everywhere the same compact / paradise (in terms of touch)."[176] While the Latin title, which could be loosely rendered as the pleasures of touches or contacts, retains the archaic allure of scientific nomenclature or the restraint of a wiseman's saying, the neologism coined to name a contraption of futuristic stamp (the Magnotact is

[175] Maksimilian Voloshin, "Mir zakutan plotno…," in *Stikhotvoreniya i poemy*, ed. V. P. Kupchenko and A. V. Lavrov (Sankt-Peterburg: Nauka, 1995), 102.
[176] Vladimir Nabokov, "Voluptates Tactionum," in *Poems* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1961), 27.

depicted as follows: "when you turn a knob, your set / will obligingly exhale / forms, invisible and yet / tangible – a word in Braille.")[177] is well ahead of its times. Despite the enthusiastic frenzy, though, the outcome is rather disappointing: "see the schoolboy, like a blind / lover, frantically grope / for the shape of love – and find / nothing but the shape of soap."[178]

As manifested in the frustrated tone of the concluding stanza, *Voluptates Tactionum* has a warning at its very core. Not against the "inevitable day"[179] of progress, but against words losing their symbolic meaning, against language being deprived of its figurative signification – a flat world of plain dull, but still elusive, matter. Ultimately, *Voluptates Tactionum* is an objection to mistaking litera*rines*s for litera*lism*, i.e. to depriving words of their magic.

It was Andrey Belyy who reclaimed the "magic of words"[180] in what is still regarded today as one of the most comprehensive theoretical approaches to Symbolism. As early as 1910 he wrote:

> сама живая речь есть непрерывная магия; удачно созданным словом я проникаю глубже в сущность явлений, нежели в процессе аналитического мышления; мышлением я различаю явление; *словом* я подчиняю явление, покоряю его; творчество живой речи есть всегда борьба человека с враждебными стихиями, его окружающими; слово зажигает светом победы окружающий меня мрак.[181]

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[177] Ibidem.
[178] Ibidem, 28.
[179] Ibidem, 27.
[180] Andrey Belyy, "Magiya slov," *Simvolizm: Kniga statey* (Moskva: Musaget, 1910), 429-448. Belyy occupied a high rank in Nabokov's list of favourite versificators and prosody theoreticians, as his borrowings from Belyy's prosodic studies prove – see paragraph 2.3, on *Nepravil'nyye yamby / Irregular Iambics*, and also his discussion of Belyy's research on rhythm in Nabokov, *Dar*, 112 ("Несколько позже монументальное исследование Андрея Белого о ритмах загипнотизировало меня своей системой наглядного отмечания и подсчитывания полуударений, так что все свои старые четырехстопные стихи я немедленно просмотрел с этой новой точки зрения").
[181] Belyy, "Magiya slov," 431. Bely's emphasis. For want of immediacy, the passage has been reported here in accordance to contemporary Cyrillic orthography.

Belyy's is a writer's language, full of warmth and depth and richness, a spell itself. He describes language as *zvuk prostranstva*, the sound of space, the articulation of a point in which temporal and spatial coordinates meet ("слово – символ; оно есть понятное для меня соединение двух непонятных сущностей: доступного моему зрению пространства и глухозвучащего во мне внутреннего чувства, которое я называю условно (формально) временем.").[182] Poetry is *zhivaya rech'*, a living discourse which does not serve the purpose of logic significance: "смысл живой речи вовсе не в логической ее значимости; сама логика есть порождение речи […]. Главная задача речи – творить новые образы, вливать их сверкающее великолепие в души людей, дабы великолепием этим покрыть мир."[183] Poetic idiom, then, crosses over the borders of pragmatic signification, it violates obvious assumptions and shared grounds. It is meta-phoric, meta-morphic, meta-semantic. It is not functional to the purpose of communication. Rather, it creates and imbues language with new, fresh meaning. Again, as Belyy put it, "в звуке воссоздается новый мир, в пределах которого я чувствую себя творцом действительности; тогда начинаю я называть предметы, т. е. вторично воссоздавать их для себя."[184]

Another prominent Symbolist poet, Konstantin Bal'mont also reflected on the evocative power of poetic language, which he himself called, along the trajectory drawn by Belyy, *volshebstvo*. His strong belief in the principle of "соединение двух через третье"[185] [combination of two elements through a third], is first and foremost a matter of coincidence, structure and harmony in duality:

> в этом мире, играя в день и ночь, мы сливаем два в одно, мы всегда превращаем двойственность в единство, сцепляющее своею мыслью, творческим ее прикосновением, несколько струн мы соединяем в один

[182] Ibidem, 430.
[183] Ibidem, 433.
[184] Ibidem, 430.
[185] Konstantin Bal'mont, *Poeziya kak volshebstvo* (Moskva: Skorpion, 1915), 5.

> звучащий инструмент, два великие извечные пути расхождения мы сливаем в одно устремление, как два отдельные стиха, поцеловавшись в рифме, соединяются в одну неразрывную звучность.[186]

Much as he would have later disapproved of his style and translations from English and Anglo-American literature,[187] it does not seem preposterous to suppose that a young Nabokov might have been influenced by the reading of Bal'mont's essay, which first appeared in 1915. The latter's synesthetic study of Russian alphabetical sounds, as presented there, spills over into Nabokov's own *audition colorée* presented in both *Dar*, where it is attributed to his most beloved Fedor Godunov-Cherdyntsev, and *Speak, Memory*, as part of the author's own intellectual proceedings.[188] Also, in the aforementioned work, Bal'mont describes the moment of poetic inspiration as following rainfall ("одна капля, звеня, говорит о Вселенной, в одной капле, переливаясь, играют все цвета радуги. Так рождается стих, возникает напевный образ, человек видит себя в Мире, и весь Мир, отображенным, находит в себе"),[189] as it happens in Nabokov's *Dozhd' proletel* (see 0.2). Finally, Gerald Smith's quantitative study shows both Bal'mont's and Nabokov's preference for ternary measures (21.6% and 19.8% respectively, instead of 14.8% for Russian poetry from 1890 to 1935, 17.9% for Russian poetry from 1920 and 1940 and 10.2% for Khodasevich alone) as well as for classical iambs (63.7% and 63.8% respectively against 44.5% for Russian poetry from 1890 to 1935 and 54.0% for Russian poetry from

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[186] Ibidem, 7. The source material has been transcribed here according to post-revolutionary standard orthography.

[187] "То было время, когда автор "Хочу быть дерзким" пустил в обиход тот искусственный четырехстопный ямб, с наростом лишнего слога посредине строки (или иначе говоря двухстопное восьмистишие с женскими окончаниями кроме четвертой и последней строки, поданное в виде четверостишья), которым, кажется, так никогда и не написалось ни одно истинно поэтическое стихотворение. Я давал этому пляшущему горбуну нести закат или лодку и удивлялся, что тот гаснет, та не плывет." Nabokov, *Dar*, 113.

[188] "I present a fine case of colored hearing. Perhaps "hearing" is not quite accurate, since the color sensation seems to be produced by the very act of my orally forming a given letter when I imagine its outline." Nabokov, *Speak, Memory*, 381.

[189] Bal'mont, *Poeziya kak volshebstvo*, 17.

1920 to 1940),[190] which could confirm Nabokov's earlier interest in Bal'mont's versification.

In view of such significant correspondences, we may suppose that Nabokov's constant oscillation between two dimensions – past and present, here and there, real and imaginary – might have been informed by Bal'mont's dualism. This emerges especially when we take into account Yuriy Levin's definition of *bispatsial'nost'*:

> судьба Набокова, его жизненная ситуация, во всяком случае, в 20–30-е гг., может быть охарактеризована следующим образом. В основе лежит оппозиция Родина (P, Россия, Patria) / Чужбина (E, Европа, Exilium), причем само P раздвоено на P1 – собственно родина, Россия прошлого, – и P2 – советская Россия, – имеющие, однако, непустое пересечение, в которое входит, во всяком случае, «пейзажная» Россия. P1 наделена высокой ценностью, которая частично переходит и на P2. E – ценностно нейтрально, если не отрицательно. «Я» вынужденно покинул P1 – в момент ее разрушения и превращения в P2 – и оказался в E. Возвращение в P1 физически невозможно – лишь в воспоминании, ибо P1 находится в прошлом. При этом с P1 связано «совершеннейшее, счастливейшее детство» и «счастливая юность», и ностальгия в собственном смысле слова смешивается с ностальгией по прошлому. Возвращение в P2 физически возможно, но нереально по социально-политическим причинам.[191]

As a consequence to his much suffered emigration(s), Nabokov's language is an attempt at compromise: it looks for adjacencies, it sews the torn edges of experience. From geographical oppositions, it progresses towards metaphysical antinomies. Again, in Levin's words, "в 1-ой части рассматриваются тексты, в основе которых лежит биспациальность типа E/P [Европа-Exilium/Россия-Patria]. Особое внимание при этом уделяется инвариантной теме пересечения границы двух пространств. Во 2-ой части рассмотрены тексты, базирующиеся на оппозиции Re/Im [Real/Imaginary]."[192] I

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[190] Gerald S. Smith, "Nabokov and Russian Verse Form," in *Russian Literature Triquarterly*, 279.
[191] Yuriy Levin, "Bispatsial'nost' kak invariant poeticheskogo mira V. Nabokova," in *Izbrannyye trudy. Poetika. Semiotika* (Moskva: Yazyki russkoy kul'tury, 1998), 323-324.
[192] Ibidem, 325.

would again stress the importance of self-translation in terms of a theoretical polarisation and a pernicious yet crucial compromise with oneself.

In the English novel he entitled *Transparent Things* (1972) any object, be it natural or man-made (as well as the intricate plot itself, for that matter), is perceived as the conglomerate of its past and future history, a laminated adjacency of strata: "a thin veneer of immediate reality is spread over natural and artificial matter, and whoever wishes to remain in the now, with the now, on the now, should please not break its tension film. Otherwise the inexperienced miracle-worker will find himself no longer walking on water but descending upright among staring fish."[193] Language, a tension film spread over the current of being, allows us the benefit of choice: to float or either to drown into the depth of things. It is not by chance that *Transparent Things* is a novel built on a pattern of coincidences that, once disentangled, reveal its complexity, starting from the protagonist's name, Hugh Person, and its uncanny assonance with "you, person," a metasemantic generalisation of the novel's central character. "Throughout the novel," Boyd comments, "Nabokov continues to surprise us with the economy and inventiveness and disconcerting comedy of his disruption of conventional narrative technique, as he defines the powers of these transparent things."[194] Nabokov's language is meta-semantic because of its deceptive transparency: it lets the reader see through the pretense of its opaque skin, translucent to the light. One may brush against its surface or cut deeper in its flesh.

The present chapter is dedicated to the study of two types of metasememes in Nabokov's self-translated verses: synaesthesia and synecdoche. As indicated by their shared etymological root, they both act on continuity and cohesion, though on different

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[193] Vladimir Nabokov, "Transparent Things," in *Novels 1969-1974*, ed. Brian Boyd (New York: Library of America, 1996), 489.

[194] Brian Boyd, "Transparent Things," in *Russian Literature Triquarterly*, 119. In Boyd's close reading of the novel, the "transparent things" are in fact the ghostly narrators, a consequence, we may say, of Nabokov's view of reality – and language – as synchronicity.

premises. Synaesthesia forges coherence between incongruous senses; synecdoche forces uneven replacements. Synaesthesia is an attempt at symmetric impressions; synecdoche delights in asymmetries. What they have in common, though, is the illusion of keeping things together, of distilling complexity through synthesis.

Because they act on semantics, all the three poems observed here are metapoems. They reflect on the author's attempt at (re-)naming as the spark of inspiration and present a conscious orchestration of tropes as conveying the process of literary creation. They also develop a liminal space where to unfold. In *Tikhiy shum / Soft Sound* the disorienting experience of expatriation is reflected on a series of oxymoronic superimpositions and synesthetic shifts while illustrating the author's loving devotion to his mother tongue; set in a hotel room, in the space between earth and sea, the poem develops a sense of suspension. *Oko / Oculus* presents the synecdochic image of a cyclopic eye, putting the question of perspective and angle into focus, its isolation and removal questionable. *Nepravil'nyye yamby / Irregular Iambics* has the topic of prosody embedded in its structure and therefore introduces us to a further exploration of Nabokov's own systematic classification of iambic tetrameters; its involvement of synaesthesia, as an added layer of semantic complexity, and synecdoche, as a partial observance of conventional patterns, displays a new maturity on the author's part.

A metasemantic shift itself, the act of self-translation feeds into the creative process, often highlighting the sense of intermediacy, transition and transience that is already intrinsic to both synaesthesia and synecdoche.

2.1 *Тихий шум / Soft Sound*

"[*Tikhiy shum*] provides an excellent example of Nabokov's depiction of a humble experience which nonetheless reverberates with the whisper and hush of physically non-present forces, thanks both to the presentation of a concise plot and to the manipulation of the poetic potential of language."[195] As illustrated in the words by Paul Morris, Nabokov's poem has a much deeper intensity hiding behind its surface of apparent simplicity. While its verses depict the poet's ability to hear the murmur of his native country reverberating in the sea, the actual essence of *Tikhiy shum* resides in the evocative power of language, in the phonetic and semantic correlation between synchronic perceptions and diachronic memories, and in the light of this reading it will be here considered.

The poem was written in the coastal town of Le Boulou, in south-east France, where Nabokov was staying, in 1929, on the occasion of one of his longed for butterfly hunts.[196] Here geographical displacement results in the upsetting feeling of definitive, irreversible deracination.

Nabokov's Russian text
I-IV stanzas
Тихий шум
Когда в приморском городке,
средь ночи пасмурной, со скуки
окно откроешь, вдалеке
прольются шепчущие звуки.

Прислушайся и различи
шум моря, дышащий на сушу,
оберегающий в ночи
ему внимающую душу.

Весь день невнятен шум морской,
но вот проходит день незванный,

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[195] **Morris, *Vladimir Nabokov: Poetry and the Lyric Voice*, 22.**
[196] Boyd, *Vladimir Nabokov: The Russian Years*, 288.

позванивая, как пустой
стакан на полочке стеклянной.

И вновь в бессонной тишине
открой окно свое пошире,
и с морем ты наедине
в огромном и спокойном мире.

Literal translation
Silent/quiet noise
When in a seaside town,
in the middle of a cloudy night, with boredom
you open the window, in the distance
whispering sounds pour out.

Listen carefully and discern
the noise of the sea, breathing on the dry land,
protecting in the night
the soul that pays attention to it.

During the day the noise of the sea is indistinct,
but there passes the uninvited day,
clinking like an empty
glass on a glass shelf.

And again in the sleepless silence/quietness
open your window wider and wider,
and with the sea you are alone
in the enormous and calm world.

Nabokov's English translation
Soft Sound
When in some coastal townlet, on a night
of low clouds and ennui, you open
the window – from afar
whispering sounds spill over.

Now listen closely and discern
the sound of seawaves breathing upon land,
protecting in the night
the soul that harkens unto them.

Daylong the murmur of the sea is muted,
but the unbidden day now passes
(tinkling as does an empty

tumbler on a glass shelf);

and once again amidst the sleepless hush
open your window, wider, wider,
and with the sea you are alone
in the enormous and calm world.

Late cloudy night. Waves, a gentle breeze carrying their watery rhythm. A man standing by an open window. The scene unfolds on the brim between the circumscribed space of a room and the vast expanse of the see. Nabokov's language, its semantic nuances and phonetic echoes, charges such a liminal environment with the static tension of polar opposites. Words collide and flare up, losing their sharp edges and morphing into new shapes. This is evident from the very beginning of the poem, where "zvuki" / "sounds" are said to "prol[it'sya]" / "spill over," as liquids do overflowing the brim of a full container. As if water were pouring through the window, flooding the room, acoustic vibrations are given a tactile consistency. Ethereal waves become one with their palpable – marine – counterpart. Sensorial perceptions are shifted, their contours fade as the contextual domain of lexical units expands. Yet they do not lose their vigour. In a new guise, they gain in strength and effectiveness on the reader's capacity for interceded, empathic perception.

As a consequence of such a hybrid concurrence of senses, the sound pattern acquires a material substance, it becomes a phonic flood itself. Alliterations and consonances create a constant stream of modulated iterations. Once sounds manifest themselves as a material force, the poet's language considerably increases in phonetic complexity: lines 4 to 8 of the Russian original play with the repetition of the fricative sound /ʂ/ in combination with the plosives /b/ and /p/ as in "shepchushciye," "prislushaysya" and "oberegayushchiy," as well as the nasal /m/ as in "shum morya" and "yemu vnimayushchuyu," reproducing the sound of waves breaking on the shore, the sea's monologue of mute repetitions. The English version does not elude the phonetic play: the

combination of the voiceless fricative /s/ with a number of occlusive sounds as /d/–/t/, /b/–/p/ and /g/–/k/ in "whispering sounds spill," "listen […] and discern," "sound of seavawes" and "soul that harkens" are equally evocative to an Anglophone ear, a sibilant flow repeatedly breaking against a sudden obstruction. This proves Morris's claim that "while describing a natural event, Nabokov's manipulation of poetic language and imagery allows hidden dimensions of experience literally to sound forth in expression of a physical event which is also something more."[197]

Along the same line, the alliteration of the voiceless plosive /t/ preceded by the fricative /s/ in "pustoy / stakan […] steklyannoy" verbally articulates the sound it describes by reproducing its phonic effect. The English self-translation confirms the relevance of such a coincidence: as in the original version, exactly three voiceless postalveolar stops /t/ can be found in combination with as many nasal consonants in "tinkling […] empty / tumbler." This becomes even more perceptible once we focus on the term "tumbler," which has been chosen for its fitting consonantal structure, in spite of its more elaborate taste than the Russian simpler "stakan."

What the English version succeeds in doing more than its Russian counterpart is to further expand on the theme of sensorial perceptions through an increased sensibility for metasememes: a distinctly anthropomorphic "murmur" is preferred to the more neutral "shum" and is followed by the past participle "muted" translating a less connoting "nevnyaten." Through both "murmur" and "muted" the sea is felt as a living creature, a human presence caught in his "bessonn[aya] tishin[a]," his "sleepless hush." The search for more accurate synonyms in the target language, as in "harkens" and "hush," reveals Nabokov's intensified awareness of impressions and his utmost care to transpose them faithfully onto the paper. So much so that the self-translated language retains an onomatopoeic vibrancy to it, as discussed and proved so far. Also, the alliteration of the

[197] Morris, *Vladimir Nabokov: Poetry and the Lyric Voice*, 23.

approximant /w/ combined with the dental /d/ in the epizeuxis "window, wider, wider," specific to the English version, further corroborates the hypothetic wish on Nabokov's part to develop such an echoing consonance between the described phenomena and their phonic manifestations, presently the creaking sound of an old window encrusted with dried sea salt.

Despite its aura of childish playfulness, Nabokov did not shun himself from onomatopoeia. The poem *Sneg* [Snow,1930], also included in *Poems and Problems*, has a naïf "skrip, skrip, skrip"[198] appearing as its second verse, its English self-translation adapting the sound of steps onto fresh snow as "creak, creak, creak."[199] Later on, the Russian short-form adjective "skripuch" recreates the same phonic effect, implying an internal coherence; in the target version, Nabokov has "crumpy," which remains faithful to the intentions of the source text. The exclamatory aside following the two respective attributes "skripuch" / "crumpy," "(o, etot zvuk!)"/"(oh, that sound!)," proves the relevance of the onomatopoeic component of language while validating the emphatic effect of such a figure of speech, in spite of its apparent simplicity.

The poet's absorption in the natural environment is given prominence in the Russian title, where the term "shum," generally indicating a discordant or loud noise, is used in accordance to one of its frequent collocations, that is with wind, rain and other atmospheric agents – in this case condensed in the sea. As a consequence, the English version has "sound," which, though naming a regular set of phonic vibrations, equally collocates with natural phenomena. Hence, the poet's saturation with the surrounding sensorial stimuli is reflected onto the conscious use of frequently co-occurring words, so that the reader may also have the same experience of recognition, trust and confidence in the experience itself.

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[198] Nabokov, *Poems and Problems*, 62.
[199] Ibidem, 63.

In his 1830 *Stikhi, sochinennyye noch'yu vo vremya bessonnitsy* [Verses composed at night during insomnia], Pushkin had recounted a similarly enthralling immersion in nature, quite emblematic of Romantic poetry. His poem, though, ends on a questioning note:

	Literal translation
От меня чего ты хочешь?	What do you want from me?
Ты зовешь или пророчишь?	Are you calling or foretelling?
Я понять тебя хочу,	I do want to understand you,
Смысла я в тебе ищу...[200]	I am looking for a sense in you…

Reflecting on a similar experience of reflective self-absorption stirred by a deep identification with the surrounding environment, the second part of *Tikhiy shum* seems to provide readers with an answer. On the lookout for a reply to Pushkin's enquiring, the contemporary exile retraces the emotive path of the Romantic soul, his endless wandering. Nevertheless, Nabokov's is not a linear progression but rather a circular involution, a short circuit even, where the final arrival coincides with the point of departure, their contact potentially destructive.

Nabokov's Russian text
V-VIII stanzas

Не моря шум – в тиши ночей
иное слышно мне гуденье:
шум тихий родины моей,
ее дыханье и биенье.

В нем все оттенки голосов
мне милых, прерванных так скоро,
и пенье пушкинских стихов,
и ропот памятного бора.

Отдохновенье, счастье в нем,
благословенье над изгнанием.
Но тихий шум не слышен днем
за суетой и дребезжаньем.

[200] Aleksandr Pushkin, "Stikhi, sochinennyye noch'yu vo vremya bessonnitsy," in *Sobraniye sochineniy v desyati tomakh*, vol. 2: *Stikhotvoreniya 1823-1836*, ed. D. D. Blagoy et al. (Moskva: Gosudarstvennoye izdatel'stvo Khudozhestvennoy Literatury, 1959), 318.

Зато в полночной тишине
внимает долго слух неспящий
стране родной, ее шумящей,
ее бессмертной глубине.

Literal translation
Not the noise of the sea – in the silence/quietness of the night
another hum(ming sound) is audible to me/I can hear:
the noise of my quiet homeland,
her breathing and beating.

In her there are all shades of voices
(that are) dear to me, so quickly cut short/interrupted,
and the singing of Pushkinian verses,
and the murmur of the memorable coniferous/pine forest.

Repose, happiness are there,
the blessing of exile.
But the silent/quiet noise is inaudible during the day
because of the bustle and rattle.

But then in the midnight silence/quietness
the sleepless ear listens carefully at length
to the/its native land, her noisy,
her deathless depths.

Nabokov's English translation
Not the sea's sound…In the still night
I hear a different reverberation:
the soft sound of my native land,
her respiration and pulsation.

Therein blend all the shades of voices
so dear, so quickly interrupted
and melodies of Pushkin's verse
and sighs of a remembered pine wood.

Repose and happiness are there,
a blessing upon exile;
yet the soft sound cannot be heard by day
drowned by the scurrying and rattling.

But in the compensating night,
in sleepless silence, one keeps listening

to one's own country, to her murmuring,
her deathless deep.

From stanza 5 to the end, Nabokov focuses on the memories awakened by the sound of the sea. Quite unexpectedly, it is not the actual experience of expatriation that is recalled here, though, at least partially, it also happened by sea. It is rather the soothing sound of the Russian language, its lulling rhythms, as unforgettable as a melodic refrain because so intimately known.

The preference for adjacency and contact between senses betrays the author's convoluting path and is again manifested in the English "reverberation:" unlike the original "guden'e," which univocally implies the sense of hearing, the term reverberation, while primarily designating a sound elongating in time and expanding in space, might also refer to the mirroring effect of a reflecting surface, like water or glass. The self-translated version keeps exploring and commenting upon such a mismatch of sensorial perceptions, as in "soft sound," where the pairing of touch and hearing is again exclusive to the English text. This manifested coherence between incongruous senses constitutes the very essence of the title as well: while the Russian original juxtaposes the oxymoronic notions of silence ("tikhiy") and noise ("shum"), yet remaining consistent with the sense of hearing, the English text breaks the rules of rational integrity and crosses over the boundaries of logic sense by suggesting a continuity between discontinuous units – the adjective "soft" being primarily attributed to palpable items and only by extension to sounds. This we might call synaesthesia, a form of perceptual condition consisting in the cerebral experience of "leakings and drafts" between senses, without them being protected "by more solid walls,"[201] as Nabokov himself would define his (and his mother's) syndrome, which manifested itself as a form of "colored hearing."[202]

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[201] Both quotations are from: Nabokov, *Speak, Memory*, 382.
[202] Ibidem, 381.

A germ of such an attempt at reproducing the unusual functioning of the poet's mind can be detected in the Russian original as well and, again, serves as the ultimate proof of Nabokov's wish to merge and blend a set of unrelated sensations: the "ottenki golosov" / "shades of voices" perform a similar modulation of senses, different voice inflections treated as chromatic tones. Once more the natural environment is given anthropoid features when the "bor[/]" / "pine wood" is said to have the ability to emit "ropot" / "sighs." Through such an increasingly intense sequence of sensorial displacements, the poem reaches its climax: what the sound of the sea stands for is not really itself, but rather the harmonious rhythms of the Russian woodland nature, compared now to the rise and fall of a breathing pattern. Nabokov's verses literally encapsulate here Belyy's assumption that "слово создает новый, третий мир – мир звуковых символов, посредством которого освещаются тайны вне меня положенного мира, как и тайны мира, внутри меня заключенные; мир внешний проливается в мою душу; мир внутренний проливается из меня в зори, в шум деревьев; в слове, и только в слове воссоздаю я для себя окружающее меня извне и изнутри, ибо я – *слово* и только *слово*."[203]

Now let us go back to the first half of the poem and look at verse 6 of the second stanza: not only does the tight recurrence of the fricative sound /ʂ/ in "shum morya, dyshashiy na sushu" recreate the effect of wind blowing among trees, whereby the two settings, the sea and the remembered wood, merge into each other, but it also condenses the sounds of the Russian language in the most comforting and soothing materialisation of its corresponding "fluffy-gray, three-stemmed Russian letter,"[204] as Nabokov describes it. Even though the self-translation prevents, for obvious reasons, from a full vocalisation of Russian phonemes, it does show an intrinsic care in inducing a sense of gentleness and delicacy through its diction. Namely, the marked overabundance of /s/ in the final two

[203] Belyy, "Magiya slov," 430.
[204] Nabokov, *Speak, Memory*, 381.

stanzas – only interrupted by the abruptness and cacophony of the homeoteleuton "scurrying and rattling," which by way of contrast helps highlighting the polished smoothness of the surrounding verses – reproduces the mellow sounds of a melody, the harmonious accordance of a treasured memory. The self-translated text also introduces the metaphoric past participle "drowned" as referred to the soft voice of the motherland, muted during the day: the evanescence of air vibrations is once more treated in terms of a material entity sinking in deep water. In conclusion, if the Russian noun "glubin[a]" can be understood as both depth and intensity, the English "deep," when performing a nominal function, is more specifically referred to the sea. Thus, the identification between the sounds of water and the voice of Russia is finally accomplished in the last verse of the self-translated text, where such a correspondence is made once and for all unequivocal.

Ultimately, the soft sound of the title is not that of the sea, nor is that of the Russian luxuriant forests and wild nature. At its very core, *Tikhiy shum* is a poem reflecting on language and, most of all, on the author's keen fondness for his mother tongue, for the lush richness of his much beloved and yearned for Russian idiom. Such a conclusion is arrived at by inspecting a series of semantic shifts which suggest a flowing continuity between different sensorial perceptions, from hearing to touch and sight. The synaesthetic combination of impressions results in the assimilation between sea and forest, exile and patria. What eventually brings them together is the chain of alliterations and consonances, so intense they become almost onomatopoeic. The English text succeeds in strengthening both the synaesthesia and the onomatopoeia: a concert of harmonised reverberations resonates throughout the whole length of the self-translated poem, its verses further enhancing the suggestive power of a synthetic concurrence of senses. The result is an osmotic interfusion of perceptions supported by a chorus of evocative sounds. Even more

so when the Russian original and its English counterpart are conjoined and read as two aesthetic realisations of a single experience, an exercise in synaesthesia itself.

2.2 *Oko / Oculus*

Oko (1939) is the seat of many of Nabokov's literary and philosophical intuitions, in that it further explores the motif of *bispatsial'nost'* as a reflection of the author's exilic experience and identity.

Despite its relevance among Nabokov's verse production, *Oko* had remained unpublished until it was finally selected for self-translation and paired up with its English counterpart as *Oculus*. Here, a few slight variations that happened in the process of its rewording into English may help us advance some of its core elements to the foreground. As it will become evident from the following dissection, the poem's many insistent negative constructions and progressive reductions amount to an illustration of Nabokov's own approach to some narratological principles and techniques.

Though, according to the author's own dating, it followed the publication of *Soglyadatay* [The Eye, 1930] of almost a decade, it shares the novella's point of view, its hands-on reflection on an external – and estranged – angle on life.

Nabokov's Russian text
I stanza
Око
К одному исполинскому оку
без лица, без чела и без век,
без телесного марева сбоку,
наконец-то сведен человек.

Literal translation
**Oko*

To a single gigantic **oko*
without face, without forehead, without eyelids,
without the corporeal haze on its sides/contours,
finally the/a person is reduced.

Nabokov's English translation
Oculus
To a single colossal oculus,
without lids, without face, without brow,
without halo of marginal flesh,
man is finally limited now.

As indicated in the title itself, *Oko* is quite straightforwardly about an eye, though a peculiar one. Its distinctive feature lies in its abnormal size – after all, the adjective attributed to it is "ispolinskiy" / "colossal." Another relevant aspect can be detected in correspondence of "odn[oy]" / "single:" instead of being paired with its symmetrical double, the eye in question is isolated. A *unicum* of mythological lineage: cyclops were both colossal and single-eyed. Such a noteworthy conformation for an eye is reflected in a likewise uncommon denomination: the Proto-Slavic variant "oko" is translated as the Latin "oculus," which duplicates the estranging effect on the reader's perception, the Latin variant not being etymologically related to the English eye, as "oko" and "glaz" do not share the same root. What the noun *oko* also manages to do for all its conciseness is to present Nabokov's taste for wordplays and puns: in addition to being a palindrome, its letters are contained in Nabokov's own surname. The Latin version chosen by Nabokov as the English title fails to reproduce the playfulness of the original; instead, it may sound rather serious, almost pretentious in all its classical rigidity and lack of quirk. A simple transliteration of *oko* as such would have probably retained the vivacity of the original, adding a level of eccentricity without being too removed from the Latin *oculus* itself, which would have probably served as an unconscious intermediary in the Anglophone reader's mind. We should also mention, though, that the palindromic nature of the title might work *in absentia* through the English noun eye, which was in point of fact chosen as the title for

the English version of the novel *Soglyaдatay* (1965), on the translation of which Dmitriy Nabokov had worked before his father stepped in and edited it – and quite significantly so. Also, as noted by Nabokov himself, the term eye resonates with the Russian title of the novel, which the author pronounced as "Sugly-dart-eye:" "I gave up trying to blend sound and sense, and contented myself with matching the 'eye' at the end of the long stalk."[205] On this subject, Irina Marchesini has written:

> il prefisso "so-," fondendosi con meta della radice do *"gljaд"* ("glja"), si trasforma in "sugly", che ricorda molto l'aggettivo "ugly" (brutto). Il resto della radice russa, unitamente alla prima parte del suffisso "-ataj" ("at") diventa *"дart"*, un termine inglese di senso compiuto che equivale non solo ad un sostantivo (freccia, dardo), ma anche ad un verbo, non a caso impiegato nell'espressione "to dart a glance at sb/sth" (lanciare un'occhiata veloce a qualcuno o qualcosa), particolarmente calzante quindi al contesto. Infine, il restante "aj" (foneticamente identico, a livello speculare, al pronome russo di prima persona singolare *"Ja"*) viene associato, per omofonia, al sostantivo inglese *"eye"* (occhio), che eredita il significato portato dalla radice russa *"gljaд"*. Ma il sostantivo *"eye"* a sua volta è omofono del pronome di prima persona "I" (io). […] Nonostante un'apparente maggiore semplicità morfologica e semantica del titolo inglese, esso conserva il nucleo semantico del breve romanzo, il problema dell'identità e l'elemento dello sguardo.[206]

What these evidences should be able to prove is Nabokov's consistent penchant for literary intertextuality and linguistic calembours, both of which significantly shape the poem in question. As I am going to illustrate, a similar yet differently accomplished process of reduction constitutes a fundamental aspect of *Oko* / *Oculus*.

The first stanza consists of four descriptive verses. The portrayal of the eye is painted through a series of reverse strokes: instead of outlining the subject by way of positive statements, the poem presents an emphatic sequence of "bez," repeated four times in the space of two lines. The insistent iteration of the negative preposition is faithfully

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[205] Vladimir Nabokov, *The Eye* (London: Vintage, 2010), I.

[206] Irina Marchesini, "Mise en abîme e autotraduzione: Vladimir Nabokov attraverso lo specchio delle sue parole. Il caso di *Sogljaдataj – The Eye*," in *Autotraduzione e riscrittura*, 272-273.

reproduced in the English "without," which sounds even more redundant because of its increased length, especially when compared to the three monosyllabic nouns it precedes in the second verse, namely "lids," "face" and "brow." This subtractive technique activates a cerebral mechanism of positive elaboration through negative claims that is typical of litotes. Moreover, such a narrow succession of disjunctive prepositions evokes a sense of fragmentation. The flesh is stripped from around the corners of the eye until only the globe itself is left – a relevant geometrical detail that will become essential to the understanding of the subsequent verses. Hence, the poem opens with an explicit synecdochic replacement, where a single eye is put in place of the human being, a substitution that the Russian original reproduces in the semantic choice of *oko* as a partial reference to the author's name.

Nabokov's Russian text
II-IV stanzas
И на землю без ужаса глянув
(совершенно не схожую с той,
что вся пегая от океанов,
улыбалась одною щекой),

он не горы там видит, не волны,
не какой-нибудь яркий залив,
и не кинематограф безмолвный
облаков, виноградников, нив;

и конечно не угол столовой
и свинцовые лица родных –
ничего он не видит такого
в тишине обращений своих.

Literal translation
And, having looked at the earth without fear
(absolutely not similar to the one
that, all covered in oceans,
smiled/ was smiling on one cheek),

he does not see any mountain, any wave,
not even any bright bay,
and not the silent cinematographer

of clouds, vineyards, cornfields;

and obviously not the corner of the dining room
and the/his relatives' leaden faces –
nothing like that he sees
in the silence/quietness of his rotations.

Nabokov's English translation
And without any fear having glanced
at the earth (quite unlike the old freak
that was dappled all over with seas
and smiled with the sun on one cheek),

not mountains he sees and not waves,
not some gulf that brilliantly shines,
and not the silent old cinema
of clouds, and grainfields, and vines,

and of course not a part of the parlor
with his kin's leaden faces – oh, no,
in the stillness of his revolutions
nothing in that respect will he know.

In stanzas two to four the point of view is displaced from the external description of the eye's appearance to the internal perspective of its vision. Coherently with the opening verses, the Russian text has three different negative units, counting both prepositions and adverbs, repeated nine times in twelve lines, namely "bez" (1), "ne" (7) and "nichego" (1). In the English self-translated text the number is increased by one; also, mostly because of syntactic requirements, the choice is more variegated, as the following list shows: "without" (1), "any" (1), "un-" (1) "not" (5), "no" (1), "nothing" (1). Such a broader spectrum of negative components permeates the English text and makes the process of reduction more evident, incontrovertible even – see, for instance, the exclamatory remark "oh, no" added in the third stanza, which heightens the feeling of disillusionment.

In both the Russian and the English versions, the second stanza contains a three-verse parenthetical element which offers an allegorical description of the earth. This is

where the eye and the planet are at their most comparable similarity: each of them is a globe in most perfect isolation. What should be noticed at this point is a significant addition made in the target text, where the earth is explicitly compared to an "old freak" smiling "with the sun" on one cheek. While the allusion to the sun makes it easier to recognise the present subject as the earth – especially when we think of it being hit by rays "on one cheek," that is on one half of its surface, due to the rotation around its axis – the extra "old freak" contributes to a further personification of the planet. Another round / spherical form, that of a human face / head, is thus mentioned as part of a tight recurrence of globular elements. This establishes a relationship of partial correspondence and inclusion between the two spheres, the earth and the eye, as mediated by the human head. According to Aleksandr Potebnya's definition, "синекдоха есть такой переход от *A* к *x*, при котором в *x*, т. е. в искомой совокупности признаков, *одновременно* дано восприятием или же мыслимо и *A*, но так, что *A* почему-либо выделяется из ряда признаков *x*."[207] Thus, by taking a man's head as the representation of the planet where he belongs, an added synecdochic transfer is performed in the English version, a part being chosen as the representation of the whole. Such a supplementary synecdoche makes the tone sound lighter, irreverent (especially in correspondence of the adjectivation "old freak") and the original enigma at least partially easier to guess. Consequently, the self-translated text exhibits an increased skill at suggesting parallelism and selective contiguity.

What follows is a long list of all those details that cannot be perceived by the eye when secluded in its confinement. There seems to be nothing blissful in its sublimated state. And yet, because they name what is lost to the eye, these verses serve as an inventory of all that has been lost, assembled in a rapid succession, as if in a cinematographic montage,

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[207] Aleksandr Potebnya, *Teoreticheskaya poetika* (Moskva: Visshaya shkola, 1990), 164. Potebnya's italics. [Synecdoche is a form of transition from *A* to *x* in which, in *x*, that is in a certain correspondence of signs, we are able to perceive *A* as well, but in a way that *A* is, for a certain reason, isolated from the signs belonging to *x*].

even more so when the faces are said to be "svintsovyye" / "leaden," as in black and white movie. *Oko* / *Okulus* ultimately pursues a precise function: it saves memories from oblivion; by mentioning them, cherished scenes from a distant nature and a long-lost everyday life are rescued and preserved as precious remainders of the past. Details are monogrammed in the verses of the poem.

Another relevant moment of tension is created in correspondence of the oxymoronic contrast between "tishin[a]" / "stillness" and "obrashcheni[ya]" / " revolutions." In the original text, while the noun "tishin[a]" could be interpreted as quietness both in the sense of lack of sound and motion, with regard to the given context the term "obrashcheni[ye]" indicates the orbital revolution of the earth around the sun. The English version, on the other hand, plays with the polysemous nature of the target verse: the richly sylleptic word "revolution" may indicate the orbital motion, as in the original text, and a social uprising at the same time; by coupling it with the noun "stillness," a collision develops between the two contradictory terms as two polar opposites of dynamism and stasis, of impetus and hindrance. Such a verse also seems to comment on the failure of revolutions to bring actual transformation, especially considering Nabokov's utter disapproval of the Russian October. Climax, thus, is reached through conflicting forces, which serve as an introduction for the reader to a likewise antithetic conclusion.

Nabokov's Russian text
VI stanza
Дело в том, что исчезла граница
между вечностью и веществом –
и на что неземная зеница,
если вензеля нет ни на чем?

Literal translation
The thing is that the border [disappeared]
between eternity and matter [has] disappeared –
and what is the purpose of an unearthly pupil,
if there is no monogram on anything?

Nabokov's English translation
Gone, in fact, is the break between matter
and eternity; and who can care
for a world of omnipotent vision,
if nothing is monogrammed there?

The last stanza tries and advances a hypothetical approach to explain the ultimate contradiction that lies at the heart of the poem: a gigantic eye is unable to capture details in spite of its privileged angle and external point of view. Thus removed, the eye is deprived of its main function, that is to aim attention at minutiae by being part of the context itself.

The conclusion is built on two pairs of antithetic opposites – the one between "vechnost'[/]" / "eternity" and "veshchestv[o]" / "matter," decaying by its very nature, and the other between "nezemnaya zenitsa" / "omnipotent vision" and "venzel'[/]" / "monogram[/]." The self-translated text further contributes to the escalating tension between such antipodal concepts: the noun "granitsa," indicating a border or limit, is rendered as "break," which accentuates the idea of fracture and disjunction; the term "zenitsa," literally designating the pupil of the eye, has its English translation as "vision," where the concrete body part is metonymically substituted with its corresponding abstract whole, a complex ability or action; moreover, the adjective "nezemnaya," meaning unearthly, is replaced by a more intense "omnipotent," which shifts the focus from the exclusion suggested in the Russian negative prefix "ne-" to the inclusion of the Latin lexeme "omni-," also creating a rich contrast with the following "mono-" in "monogrammed." As a result, the sense of broad all-encompassing perspective is possibly intensified in the English version, as opposed to the Russian text, which appears as being more focused on the estranged angle. Such a progressive increase in antithesis and underestimation results in a meiotic deconstruction to the detriment of integrity. This is

also testified in the ending, which is left open – but not unresolved – through the use of a rhetoric question interrogating the authentic value of such a peripheral point of view.

There is at least one more reason why the use of the attribute "omnipotent" as the English counterpart of the Russian "nezemnaya" should not pass unnoticed. We may suppose that to Nabokov, who by the time *Oko* was written had already been experimenting with prose, the compound adjective must have sounded close to the term omniscient, which qualifies the narrator whose perspective is all-knowing and posed outside the "monogrammed" viewpoint belonging to a single character or voice. This detail should be enough to finally persuade us that *Oko* / *Oculus* is in fact a novelist's meta-poem. It is by no chance that the novella *Soglyadatay*, also dealing with the Russian diasporic identity, pushes the boundaries between internal and external point of view by constantly exploring, questioning and ultimately discarding the limits between first and third person narrator, reunited in a single "bifurcated or dissociated self,"[208] as defined by Julian Connolly. The subtext of emigration resonates throughout the whole length of *Oko* / *Oculus*: like an external narrator, the émigré author is unable to preserve the internal perspective on things, estranged as he is from the place where he once belonged. The omnipotent / omniscient viewpoint reflects his removed and thus secluded point of view, external to his motherland, which he left, and to his new surroundings, where he feels out of place.

If read in the light of its English translation, *Oko* offers its readers a sincere apology of partiality, it praises and celebrates a synecdochic perspective on life while making synecdoche itself into its structural principle. The eye is but a part of the human being and,

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[208] Julian W Connolly, "Madness and Doubling: From Dostoevsky's *The Double* to Nabokov's *The Eye*," in *Russian Literature Triquarterly*, 134. In particular, Connolly interprets Smurov's need for a double as a consequence to Golyadkin's (in Dostoyevskiy's *The Double*) conclusive approach to himself as an outsider, a spectator in the economy of Nabokov's critical approach towards and subversion of Dostoyevskiy's narrative. Smurov's is a defence mechanism, "the narrator's attempt to protect his self-esteem by uncoupling the core personality from his external shell" (Ibidem).

as the poem has it, of the whole earth through their common spherical form; like the title "oko" is a component of Nabokov's own surname, the English "eye," only implicitly present in the poem, is a phoneme within the Russian *ɔoglyaðatay*, which serves as the title for the novel that must have inspired the writing of the present poem and that ostensibly challenges conventions when it comes to the narrating voice; memories are but fragments of a lost synchronicity between space and time, émigrés are but scattered pieces of a broken whole. Still what *Oko* / *Oculus* seems to prove is that the more a viewpoint is steeped in the ground it belongs to, the more it will be faithful to its minutiae. The more it floats around its target, instead, the easier it will lose its focal point. A process of loss that is reproduced in the progressive neutralisation of vision through the poem's frequent subtractive and antithetical reductions. As the Greek voice of synecdoche keeps echoing to these days, the world as we know it is but a synthetic combination of partial truths, not mutually exclusive but syncretic, dual at the least, hopefully plural. There is no singular objective eye projected onto the earth, no gained perspective through isolated distance. Like *oko* belongs to Nab*oko*v, vision – and memory as part of a retrospective look – can only belong to one singular eye: individual and subjective.

2.3 *Неправильные ямбы / Irregular Iambics*

Unlike the previous poems, Nabokov wrote *Nepravil'nyye yamby* in Russian while already living in the US, more precisely in Ithaca, New York. By 1953, the year when these verses were composed, Nabokov had already been using the English language as the main vehicle of his literary expression for at least a decade. Not in this case. Poetry still fulfilled the need for an exercise in linguistic memory. Yet the influence of time and space

distancing the author from his Russophone past is perceptible. As anticipated in the title, the present poem invites us to delve deeper into Nabokov's art of – mature – versification.

Nabokov's Russian text
Неправильные ямбы
В последний раз лиясь листами
между воздушными перстами
и проходя перед грозой
от зелени уже назойливой

до серебристости простой,
олива бедная, листва
искусства, плещет, и слова
лелеять бы уже не стоило,

если б не зоркие глаза
и одобрение бродяги,
если б не лилия в овраге,
если б не близкая гроза.

Literal translation
Faulty iambics
For the last time, (with) leaves flowing
between airy thumbs
and moving/changing, before a/the (thunder)storm/threat,
from an already importunate green

into a simple silverness,
the/a poor olive(-tree), foliage
of art, splashes and words
are not worth of being coddled

were it not for the sharp-sighted eyes
and the approval of the/a vagabond,
were it not for the lily in the/a ravine,
were it not for the imminent (thunder)storm/threat.

Nabokov's English translation
Irregular Iambics
For the last time, with leaves that flow
between the fingers of the air
and pass before the thunderstorm
from green by now importunate

into a simple silverness,
it ripples, the poor olive: foliage
of art! And it would seem that words
were now no longer worth the fondling,
had there not been a vagabond's
sharp-sightedness and approbation,
had not the gully held its lily,
had not the thunderstorm drawn near.

The original verses of *Nepravil'nyye yamby* offer us the chance to hear the voice of a more mature Nabokov, one who wrote poetry as such less and less frequently. Though preserving a margin of regularity, the author applies slight variations to the exact iambic meter, as the title itself suggests (on which more later). Also, the rhyme is modulated in a remarkably unconventional pattern, which follows the scheme aaBc* BDDc* DeeD; in particular an extended and imperfect rhyme can be found between "nazoylivoy" and "ne stoylo" (as indicated in correspondence of the symbol *). Such an innovative configuration discards any trivial assumption on the reader's part and betrays expectations by breaking conventional rules, a series of transgressive behaviours a younger Nabokov would seldom, if ever, have allowed himself to perform. We should mention here that the present poem exemplifies Nabokov's preference for a less classical or rigid versification in the period following his emigration to the US (1940-1973, according to Smith's distribution), which he manifested in a preference for ternary measures such as anapaests and amphibrachs, especially compared to the European years 1923-1939, when his predilection for iambs is unquestionable.[209] While retaining the iambic rhythm and the four ictuses per line, the English version loses the rhyme scheme altogether, thus giving the impression of a less structured set of verses. The same effect is achieved by removing the original partition in three stanzaic units.

[209] Smith, "Nabokov and Russian Verse Form," 281.

Furthermore, if the source text has no punctuation except for short pauses in the form of commas, the target text has an exclamation mark at the beginning of line *7*, splitting the poem in two almost equal halves and turning the climatic acme into a graphic evidence. Nevertheless, the self-translated poem has an unvaried number of enjambements – 6 both in Russian and English, precisely between lines 1-2, 3-4, 4-5, 6-7, 7-8, 9-10.

Both versions have the syntactic subject, "oliva" / "olive," appear for the first time only in verse 6 – such a delayed introduction even more evident in English, where the proper denomination of the tree is preceded by the pronoun "it" and followed by an added colon serving as an introduction to the commentary "foliage / of art." Thus configured, this core line (6) proceeds at a slower pace and has an increased reflective attitude. In both source and target texts, lines 1 to 5 serve as a long preparatory preface where the olive tree is described before being introduced by its name. What follows from line *7* to the end is the poet's own consideration on the sense of words and, as a transitive consequence, of poetry.

Again, as in *Tikhiy zhum / Soft Sound* nature and versification are conjoined in the poet's mind as being mutually concordant. This emerges quite clearly in the Russian poem, where a tightly knitted fabric of sounds resonates through the three stanzas: the compound /li/ echoes in "*li*yas' *li*stami," "nazoy*li*voy," "*li*stva," the unstressed first syllable of "*le*leyat'," "b*li*zkaya" as well as in the hypothetical conjunction "es*li*," thrice repeated, and in the two key subjects "o*li*va" and "*lili*ya," even twice in the relatively narrow space of the latter. Fedor Dvinyatin has interpreted such an iteration as reverberating even more intensively in the poem through a sequence of synonymic echoes:

> своеобразным звукосмысловым центром становится глагол *литься,* представленный в тексте в форме *лиясь.* Сочетание паронимической соотнесенности и синтаксической связанности рождает квазиэтимологические фигуры: сначала *лиясь… листами,* которая затем продолжается в *лиясь… листва,* и, наконец, *лиясь… олива,* что придает и *листам-листве,* и *оливе* ощутимую сему «нечто льющееся».

> Но этим отнюдь не ограничивается экспансия глагола *литься:* в типичных для Набокова ассоциативных звукосмысловых подтекстах, синонимических и квазисинонимических, он представлен еще по крайней мере трижды. В семантической основе глагола лежит «движение воды», а значит, к анализируемому комплексу подключается *гроза,* особенно в плане метонимического соответствия *гроза – ливень.* Так как *проходить… от зелени… до серебристости* означает «одному предмету менять цвета, играть цветами», в подтексте оказывается и глагол *переливаться: *переливаясь перед грозой.* Наконец, олива *плещет:* это значение «трепетать, колебаться в воздухе», но другие значения того же глагола связаны с движением жидкости: река плещет (лиясь), плескать на что-то (=лить), расплескивать (=проливать).[210]

All things considered, we should also remember that, before going by his actual name, Nabokov penned his literary works as Sirin, which he inherited from a mythological bird of Slavic lineage. As once more reported by Dvinyatin, the Russian translation for the French *lilas*, which in the poem resonates in "liliya," coincides with *sirin*, *siren'*.[211] Even without calling in a third language, however, the consonance between the lilac, the English equivalent for *siren'*, or "lily," as in the poem itself, and the Russian *liliya* is quite evident. Hence, the alliterations detected in the original text might be read as a synecdochic representation of the poet himself (not too dissimilar from the case of *Oko*, illustrated in 2.2), whose pseudonym is broken into splinters and resounds in the fragments of the poem.

The English version keeps no trace of such relevant reverberations, if not in "lily," which alone, however, may not be evocative enough and would anyway require a series of linguistic transformations. The only phonic aspect that we might take note of is an increased presence of fricative consonants between lines 1 and 7. In other words, the sound of the wind blowing between leaves is reproduced through the articulation of the voiceless /f/ and /s/ (and the voiced variant /z/), appearing respectively six and ten times (including the title). Nevertheless, the self-translation has no compound sound framing the whole

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[210] Fedor Dvinyatin, "Pyat' peyzazhey s nabokovskoy siren'yu," in *V. V. Nabokov: Pro et contra*, vol. 2, 301. Dvinyatin's italics.
[211] Ibidem, 302.

structure of the poem, as it happens in the Russian text. As a result of this and of the arrangement of its unrhymed verses in a seemingly continuous – almost prosaic – flow, the English version confers a sense of spontaneity while losing the elaborate architecture of the original. The more straightforward nature of the English diction is also due to the preference for finite verb forms instead of their Russian nonfinite counterparts in both "liyas'" / "(that) flow" and "prokhodya" / "pass," through the use of a periphrastic relative construction.

What, however, the English version does preserve is the synaesthetic nature of the vocabulary. In the original verses the "perst[y]" are described as "vozdushny[ye]" while in English "air" is said to have "fingers;" the olive tree "pleshchet" / "ripples" as liquids do; "slova" / "words" are coupled with the verb "leleyat'" / "[to] fondl[e]" as if they were perceptible to the touch and could be caressed.

Yet the original text presents still a greater preference for ambiguity. Let us focus the attention on the noun *groza*, which recurs twice, precisely in the first and last stanzas. As it first occurs, the term is used according to its literal meaning, indicating a weather phenomenon, and is coherently translated as "thunderstorm," which presents a richer semantic spectrum. When it appears for the second time, though, we might want to interpret *groza* as a broader term, a threat pertaining not just a specific meteorological manifestation, but rather a more general menace or danger. In this case, the term "thunderstorm," also due to its increased precision, sounds quite reductive and less conducive to the polysemy of the source material. Even more so if we take into account the last stanza, where at least three elements seem to be completely out of context: within the confines of this poem we do not get enough elements to deduce who the "brodyaga" / "vagabond" is and where to locate him in relation to the "ovrag[/]" / "gully." It is only by referring to another of Nabokov's poems that we might be able to fully appreciate the conclusion of the text in question and read it in another, more complete, light.

The merit goes to Dvinyatin again: the "vagabond's / sharp-sightedness" and the "gully" are to be found in the poem *Rasstrel* (1927), also self-translated as *The Execution*. Here we read the following verses: "и вот ведут меня к оврагу, / ведут к оврагу убивать" ["and presently I'm led to a ravine, / to a ravine to be killed"] and, later on, "я взгляда отвести не смею / от круга тусклого огня" ["I dare not turn my gaze away / from that disk of dull fire"].[212] These lines coincide both with the attentive look and the setting described in *Nepravil'nyye yamby*. The fact that the poet imagines himself "drifting into Russia" may confirm him being a "vagabond," though in hyperbolic terms. Such a reading would also support the hypothesis according to which the author may have deliberately used the Russian term *groza* in accordance to its sylleptic nature as indicating both a storm and a threat, thus significantly reducing the success of the self-translated poem at conveying the ultimate meaning of the source text and its intertextual implications.

The paratextual elements surrounding both the Russian and English counterparts are at odds with the content of the poems. The titles sound incongruous with the content as they point the reader's attention towards the prosodic level of the poem. So does Nabokov's English note to the self-translated text, which reads as follows: ""irregular" (or "faulty," *nepravil'nïe*) refers to the fact that in Russian prosody *ésli* (if) is never scudded, as for example the word *méshdu* (between) is allowed to be by an old tradition. There is no reason, however, why this other light and fluid disyllable should not be treated similarly, especially at the beginning of an iambic line."[213] This warning remark requires a deeper consideration of Nabokov's approach to prosody.

Nabokov first introduced the term "scud" in *Notes on Prosody*, a mature study of poetic structure which he based on Belyy's theories (the latter had used the roughly synonymic term *poluudareniye*, to refer to the half-stress in Symbolist poetry) and published

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[212] Nabokov, "Rasstrel" / "The Execution," in *Poems and Problems*, 46-47.
[213] Nabokov, *Poems and Problems*, 145. Italics and transliterations are Nabokov's.

as an appendix to his monumental translation of Pushkin's *Evgeniy Onegin*. As an evidence of Belyy's exclusive influence over Nabokov, we could bring forth the "ladder-like diagram with solid circles to represent metrically strong syllables that are not occupied by a word-stress and hollow circles to represent those that are," as described by Smith, whose words also confirm Belyy's exclusive influence over Nabokov: "this method has found practically no other proponent apart from Nabokov since Belyy used it in 1910."[214] Because he preferred sense over form ("then, in a language newly learned, / I grew another stalk and turned / your stanza patterned on a sonnet, / into my honest roadside prose – / all thorn, but cousin to your rose"),[215] Nabokov had Pushkin's iambic tetrameter illustrated according to a detailed taxonomical and comparative approach for the benefit of his Anglophone readers' full appreciation of the Russian bard's magnitude – notwithstanding its mostly negative reception, we should not forget that Nabokov's *Eugene Onegin* (1964) pursued first and foremost a didactic purpose.

And didactic it is. Due to its almost anatomic approach, Nabokov's classification was considered too much of a prescriptive dissection of verses, an invasion of foreign – Russian – forces or, alternatively, a resourceful system unsuitably lacking in a scientific terminology.[216] Nevertheless, his acute analysis and insightful observations are relevant to a broader appreciation of the writer's approach to versification. Nabokov's was, beyond any expression of judgement, an attempt at systematisation. As observed by Boyd, "Nabokov firmly dismisses the idea that a foot in an iambic line can be anything but an iamb, whatever the actual accent of the words within the foot. The line is the unit of meter as the

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[214] Smith, "Nabokov and Russian Verse Form," 272-273.

[215] Nabokov, "On Translating "Eugene Onegin"," in *Poems and Problems*, 175.

[216] "This vocabulary, for all its expressiveness and resourcefulness, with its "scuds," "tilts" and so on, has never attracted specialists in Russian versification. It occasionally makes an appearance in non-specialist discussions of verse rhythm; but it remains essentially a solipsism." Smith, "Nabokov and Russian Verse Form," 275. As illustrated by Smith himself, Belyy's methodology had already been surpassed by Boris Tomashevskiy, Kiril Taranovskiy and Mikhail Gasparov by the time Nabokov was applying it to Pushkin (ibidem).

organism is of life, and a variant accent does not create a new foot (pyrrhic, trochaic, or spondaic) any more than a man with one leg constitutes the start of a new species."[217] Hence, "when in verse a weak monosyllabic word (i.e., one not accented in speech) or a weak syllable of a long word happens to coincide with the stress part (ictus) of a foot, there results a modulation that I [Nabokov] term[s] a "scud"."[218] Nabokov's wish to standardise studies in prosody and, consequently, to fix an unambiguous, objective, universally accepted yet easily accessible terminology emerges from the following lines:

> in English theories of prosody scuds have been described as "weak places," which is too value and ambiguous for recurrent nomenclatorial use, and defined as "omitted stresses," which is meaningless, since the metrical stress of a scudded foot is not "omitted," but merely not trodden upon by the unaccented syllable of the passing word, which, however, is aware of the unused steppingstone it skims.[219]

The scud affecting the Russian preposition *mezhdu* is, according to Nabokov's taxonomy, "tilted." More precisely it belongs to the category of "duplex tilts," which do not occur freely in Russian verse and consist in "servile dysillables, which, in speech, are accented on the first syllable but in verse are made, if need be, to undergo a neutralisation of accent by scudding,"[220] as in the case of "*cherez* ("across," "over"), *chtobï* ("in order to," "so that," "lest"), *dabï* ("so as to"), *ili* ("or," "either"), *mezhdu* ("between," "among"), *oto* (the extended form of *ot*, "from," as used before some words beginning with certain combinations of consonants such as *vs*), and *peredu* ("before," "in front of")"[221] among others. As observed by Nabokov himself, it may be not by chance that each of the reported scudded words have an abbreviated form (*chtob*, *chrez*, *il'*, *mezh*, *pred*), mostly used in verse.

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[217] Brian Boyd, *Vladimir Nabokov. The American Years* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1991), 702.
[218] Vladimir Nabokov, "Notes on Prosody," 454.
[219] Ibidem, 458.
[220] Ibidem, 468.
[221] Ibidem. Italics and transliterations are Nabokov's. Notice the inconsistence between "meshdu" in *Poems and Problems* and "mezhdu" in *Eugene Onegin*.

Anyhow, *eslí* does not belong to the list of "scuddable" prepositions. By choosing such a configuration, Nabokov actively disrupts the homogeneity of the iambic meter, one that represents his own past as a young poet fascinated by Khodasevich's classical forms and the overall Russian traditional verse, though hardly ever surrendering to Modernist experimental forms, as free verse or *dol'nik*. As argued by Smith: "in Nabokov's poetry as a whole, as with many Russian poets of the nineteenth century and the metrical repertoire of Russian poetry as a whole, I4 [iambic tetrameter] forms a thematically neutral, all-purpose formal resource, a regularly recurring background against which rarer measures are thrown into relief."[222] The addition (and repetition) of an unscudded element impairs the neutrality of the iambic verse and introduces a significant thematic variation.

Rarely is poetry the converging point of fortuitous coincidences. While the scud allows "mezhdu" and "pered" to melt into the rhythmic flow, the prosodic discontinuity introduced in "esli" freezes it in a solid break. Its relevance is highlighted by Nabokov himself in the only note to the text, a consideration that should bring the reader's attention to the ultimate essence of these four verses – we also ought to remark that the note in question is only in English but refers exclusively to the Russian poem and thus proves Nabokov's wish for Anglophone readers to be aware of his original intention. Nabokov's lines, commenting on Pushkin's rhythm, may help us prove this point:

> it is therefore of great interest to note that in One : LVI, in which our poet affirms his eagerness to differentiate between Onegin and himself, lest the sarcastic reader or some promoter of slander accuse him of narcissism, Pushkin disposes consecutively three lines, each beginning with one of the six tiltable disyllables:
>
> 4 *Mezhdu Onéginïm i mnóy*
> *Chtobï naʒméshlivïy chitátel',*
> *Ili kakóy-nibuď izdátel'…*[223]

[222] Smith, "Nabokov and Russian Verse Form," 281.
[223] Nabokov, "Notes on Prosody," 469. Italics and transliterations (stresses included) are Nabokov's.

What Nabokov is taking note of in the few lines cited above is Pushkin's use of scudded feet to distance himself from his main character, embedding this suggestion in the very texture of his verses by way of repeated prosodic variations. Instead of a scudded preposition, in *Nepravil'nyye yamby* Nabokov uses a scudless one by tradition; instead of varying it, he repeats it in a tight anaphoric sequence. Otherwise put, he inverts Pushkin's verses, on which Nabokov himself reflected. Though his *opus magnum* on *Evgeny Onegin* was published almost a decade after *Nepravil'nyye yamby*, its astounding level of in-depth analysis and intimate knowledge let us envision Nabokov's long years of close readings and re-readings of Pushkin's masterpiece. Thus, through his prosodic choice, he distances himself from Pushkin's tradition, from a margin of prosodic regularity that was still recognisable enough in *Onegin*, but which is progressively rarefied in his own verses, until it is contradicted in the concluding stanza of the analysed poem, where the iambic feet is inverted in the scudless "esli." If anything, such a reversal of ictus and depression bridges the gap between *Nepravil'nyye yamby* and *Rasstrel* by marking the intertextual portion, containing the reference to "zorkiye glaza," "brodyag[a]," "ovrag" and "groza," highlighted as it is by a lacking link in the metric chain.

Another cross-prosodic shift is required in the title: while *nepravil'nyye yamby* refers to the rhythmic infraction in correspondence of "esli," the irregular iambics of the English text are so because of their frequent rhythmic variations, as in "for the" (1, scud) and "fingers of" (2, scud). The slowing-down effect of an unaccented stress combined with the sequence of accented unstress – accented stress in "it ripples the poor olive" (6, scud + false spondee) invites the reader to indulge in such a focal passage. The overabundant use of polysyllabic words (some of which are compound nouns), where the metrical stress falls on the secondary word accent as well, further increases the number of scuds, as in "thúnderstorm," "impórtunate," "sílverness," "vágabond," "(sharp-)síghtedness" and "approbátion," thus slowing down the rhythm even to a greater extent.

Rasstrel was also written in iambic tetrameter and also played with scuds (the English self-translation not preserving the rhythm). Though *Nepravil'nyye yamby* came after a hiatus of almost thirty years from *Rasstrel*, both texts insist on a similar imagery, yet from a very different standpoint. *Rasstrel* is narrative, metephorical, analytic; *Nepravil'nyye yamby* is descriptive, allegorical, synthetic. Moreover, while *Rasstrel* is mainly about the experience of emigration and the nostalgic retrospection ensuing from such a displacement, *Nepravil'nyye yamby* shifts the focus from the exile's yearned-for nightmare to the meaning of writing – each verse a branch swaying in the breath of commotion on the brink of an overwhelming blast of inspiration. Still, *Rasstrel* already contained the seed of formal experimentation:

> freudians have found here," Nabokov wrote in the note to *The Execution* referring to the concluding stanza, in which he expresses his desire to return to Russia, even if it meant being executed, "a "death wish," and Marxists, no less grotesquely, "the expiation of feudal guilt." I can assure both groups that the exclamation in this stanza is wholly rhetorical, a trick of stile, a deliberately planted surprise.[224]

The shocking revelation in *Rasstrel*, which is presented by the author as pertaining the rhetoric of the text rather than its content, evolves into a deliberately planted jolt in the rhythm of *Nepravil'nyye yamby*: this transformation we may interpret as Nabokov's ultimate recognition of a shared intent between the two poems – that poetry is, at its very essence, a matter of form.

Nepravil'nyye yamby celebrates the imperfection of irregular verses, of a mature writing that is finally able to perceive the power of expressiveness and emphatic focus in evident faults and transgressions to the norm, as it happens in the unscudded anaphoric repetitions. Nabokov's English iambs, instead of being patently "faulty," are "irregular" – a slight variation that the title itself hints at – their consistent meter modulated into a less

[224] Nabokov, *Poems and Problems*, 47.

tight rhythmic weave where some loose stitches, in the form of scuds, let the author's emotive tension seep through.

Like *Oko* / *Oculus*, Nabokov's *Nepravil'nyye yamby* / *Irregular Iambics* is a metapoem reflecting on the practice of versification. Verses are a consistently perfectible creation, the poet's path is a constant struggle with his own past self. Yet he must acknowledge the value his previous works and experiences: had there not been *Rasstrel*, there would be no *Nepravil'nyye yamby*; "had there not been a vagabond's / sharp-sightedness and approbation," had not the threat of expatriation "drawn near," verses would stagnate as if "words / were now no longer worth the fondling." In *Nepravil'nyye yamby* Nabokov places his verses between the enthusiasm for the new and the retrospective look, between the eagerness for change and the value of past traditions.

Irregular Iambics is probably one of the few most evident cases in which self-translation does not manage to fully replicate the intensity and vigour of the original poem: it lacks the alliterative flow of the source text as also the author's anagrammed presence; the translation of *ovrag* as "gully" instead of "ravine," as appearing in *The Execution*, makes the intertextual connection between the two poems less easily detectible; the loss of polysemy in the noun "thunderstorm" inhibits the possibility for alternative readings. *Irregular Iambics* is the product of Nabokov's active selections, a synecdochic reduction in that it only represents a part of what *Nepravil'nyye yamby* stands for – a part of the iambic meter it follows, a part of the tempo, configuration and lexical complexity of the original creation.

Nevertheless, it is precisely in this rarefied structure, in its imperfections and irregularities that its strength lies: since the readers' and the poets' overall preference had shifted from formal precision and consistency with tradition to a more open and flexible composition, *Irregular Iambics* adheres to a contemporary taste, its compact format, scudded

rhythm and lack of rhymes even more palatable to its Anglophone audience. Its conciseness and visual immediacy, its heightened enigmatic reticence are all the more congenial to a modern 20th century post-war readership. Its irregular verses seem to be the logical evolution of their Russian counterpart in the arch of the poet's literary growth. One whose unpredictability and unruliness have become the most distinctive trademark.

INTERLUDE

"Люби лишь то, что редкостно и мнимо, что крадется окраинами сна, что злит глупцов, что смердами казнимо; как родине, будь вымыслу верна. Наш час настал. Собаки и калеки одни не спят. Ночь летняя легка."

Vladimir Nabokov, *Dar*.[225]

"Love only what is fanciful and rare; what from a distance of a dream steals through; what knaves condemn to death and fools can't bear. To fiction be as to your country true. Now is our time. Stray dogs and cripples are alone awake. Mild is the summer night."

Vladimir Nabokov, *The Gift*.[226]

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[225] Nabokov, *Dar*, 116.

[226] Vladimir Nabokov, *The Gift* (New York: Putnam's Sons, 1963), 178. "The participation of so many Russian muses within the orchestration of the novel makes its translation especially hard. My son Dmitri Nabokov completed the first chapter in English, […]. The four other chapters were translated by Michael Scammell, in the winter of 1961, at Montreux, I carefully revised the translation of all five chapters. I am responsible for the versions of the various poems and bits of poems scattered through the book." Ibidem, 9.

Безумец / The Madman

Comme un fou se croit Dieu, nous nous croyon mortels.

Delalande, *Discours sur les ombres.*[227]

Within the confines of the Greek term *logos* language and cognition are united in a tacit agreement of intentions. Words organise the facts of existence labelling both matter and abstraction. At their most primitive manifestation, thoughts articulated in words are given structure and harmony; through the act of verbalisation they acquire a grammatical (read normative) logic. In Andrey Belyy's words,

> когда я называю словом предмет, я утверждаю его существование. Всякое познание вытекает уже из названия. Познание невозможно без слова. Процесс познавания есть установление отношений между словами, которые впоследствии переносятся на предметы, соответствующие словам. Грамматические формы, обусловливающие возможность самого предложения, возможны лишь тогда, когда есть слова; и только потом уже совершенствуется логическая членораздельность речи.[228]

And yet words can create chaos too. They can discard conventions, contradict common sense, overcome coherent assumptions. At their most advanced rhetorical use,

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[227] The quotation is in fact the epigraph to *Priglasheniye na kazn' / Invitation to a Beheading*, where it is attributed to one of Nabokov's fictional authors.
[228] Belyy, "Magiya slov," 429.

words may shape illogical thoughts, still preserving the architecture of consequential structure. There lies the power of language: to raise castles on shaking grounds, to build bridges between sinking shores. There also lies the risk of language: to open windows into floods, doors onto precipices and waterfalls.

Bezumets / *The Madman* (1933) plays on both the virtues and pitfalls of language and persuasive reasoning. Along the same line as *Nepravil'nye yamby* / *Irregular Iambics*, it can be includ,ed in the list of Nabokov's metapoems reflecting on the art of writing and the potential of words. As in *Oko* / *Oculus*, the poet treads the fine line between here and there, fact and projection, ultimately trespassing the borders of logic, and *logos*, conventions. Nabokov's language constantly contradicts itself, opening up a space for antinomies to coexist. As a point of juncture and interface, *Bezumets* / *The Madman* gives us the opportunity to further explore the interstice between source and target text, that liminal space where new currents are allowed to stream.

Nabokov's Russian text
I-III stanzas
Безумец
В миру фотограф уличный, теперь же
царь и поэт, парнасский самодержец
(который год сидящий взаперти),
он говорил:

«Ко славе низойти
я не желал. Она сама примчалась.
Уж я забыл, где муза обучалась,
Но путь ее был прям и одинок.
Я не умел друзей готовить впрок,
Из лапы льва не извлекал занозы.
Вдруг снег пошел; гляжу, а это розы.

Блаженный жребий. Как мне дорога
унылая улыбочка врага!
Люблю я неудачника тревожить,
сны обо мне мучительные множить
и теневой рассматривать скелет

завистника, прозрачного на свет.

Literal translation
The/A Madman
In the (secular) world a street photographer, now [instead]
tsar and poet, Parnassian autocrat
(who for a year had been locked up),
he said:

"To Fame [to (con)descend/bow]
I did not wish to (con)descend/bow. She hastened on her own will.
Now I have forgotten where the/my muse was trained/taught,
but her path was straight and lonesome.
I did not know how to store friends for future use,
from the/a lion's paw I did not remove thorns.
Suddenly it began/has begun to snow; I look, these are roses.

Blissful destiny. How dear is to me
an/my enemy's sad little smile!
I love to harass the unlucky one,
to multiply agonizing dreams about me
and to scrutinise the shady skeleton
of the/an envious one, transparent to the light.

Nabokov's English translation
The Madman
A street photographer in laic life,
now poet, king, Parnassian autocrat
(since quite a time kept under lock and key),
thus did he speak:

I did not wish to stoop
to Fame: it rushed up of its own accord.
I've now forgotten where my Muse was schooled.
Straight, lonesome was her path. I never knew
how to stock friends for use, nor to pull thorns
from lion paws. It suddenly began
to snow; surprising! It was snowing roses.

Enchanting destiny! How much I prize
an Enemy's wan little smile! I like
to incommode
the Failure, multiply
his painful dreams about me, and examine
the skeleton of Envy, shadowgraphed

and showing through, if held up to the light.

Nabokov composed *Bezumets* in the form of a soliloquy. The first four verses, detached from the rest of the poem, act as an introductory remark by an external voice, briefly portraying the main speaker. The effect produced on the reader is one of disorientation: the subject is presented as both a street photographer and a tsar, a poet and a tyrant. Again, etymology serves our purpose. If we consider the adjective "parnasskiy" / "parnassian" as referring to mount Parnassus, where Apollo and the Muses were thought to dwell according to Greek mythology, the noun "samoderzhets" / "autocrat" might be interpreted as either a person detaining power over the arts or, metaphorically, as the presumptuous self-assessment of a person valuing his creative output over other people's. Since the poem was written in 1933, it is imbued with a sense of absolutism, swiftly escalating as it was at that time: in that very same year Adolf Hitler was appointed first chancellor of what would have become known as the Third Reich while Stalin was promoting the second Five-year Plan as well as building a repressive regime which would have soon resulted into a violent rush of political purges and, subsequently, the manic tension of the Great Terror in a matter of few years. Much of the poem's tone and vocabulary may be read in the light of such a permeating macro-historical undercurrent.

As to the direct speech, we may take note of the fact that while the Russian poem has inverted commas enclosing the main quote, the self-translation has no punctuation mark if not for the colon preceding the address. Such a subsequent change might have been dictated by the necessity to create a more fluent transition from the introductory remark on to the reported soliloquy. More importantly, due to this choice a subtler identification occurs between the external voice (possibly the author's own) and that of the main speaker, the latter's words declaimed, not merely reported, in the English version.

The effect of the prosopopoeic representation is thus accentuated in the target text, where the poet's voice is less detached from the madman's – the poet a mirror onto whom the madman is reflected. To a committed anti-Darwinist non-determinist thinker, as Nabokov professed himself to be ("there is also keen pleasure (and, after all, what else should the pursuit of science produce?) in meeting the riddle of the initial blossoming of man's mind by postulating a voluptuous pause in the growth of the rest of nature, a lolling and loafing which allowed first of all the formation of *Homo poeticus* – without which *sapiens* could not have been evolved"),[229] mimicry constitutes the basic principle for survival and, in literature, the quintessence of any creative form of representation, as Sergey Davydov's lines corroborate:

> метаморфоза, как мимикрия, – это дар творца. Набоков-энтомолог был, как известно, ярым антидарвинистом. Он отвергал теория, согласно которой чудо мимикрии объясняется одним лишь естественным отбором. […] В понимании Набокова мимикрия – это дар творца твари, чтобы та, повторяя изысканные многоцветные узоры, прославляла сотворенный мир. Мимикрия – это дивное внешнее сходство нетождественного, метаморфоза – еще более внутреннее тождество несходного. Если мимикрия – артистический дар, то *метаморфоза* – дар метафизический. […] все эти перевоплощения из одной ипостаси бытия в другую попирают смерть.[230]

If we take Nabokov's definition of mimicry into account, especially compared to his consideration of eccentricity, the madman's patterns of thought become clearly discernible:

> "natural selection," in the Darwinian sense, could not explain the miraculous coincidence of imitative aspect and imitative behaviour, nor could one appeal to the theory of "the struggle for life" when a protective device was carried to a point of mimetic subtlety, exuberance, and a luxury far in excess of a predator's power of appreciation. I discovered in nature the nonutilitarian delights that I sought in art. Both were a form of magic, both were a game of intricate enchantment and deception.[231]

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[229] Nabokov, *Speak, Memory*, 617. Nabokov's italics.
[230] Sergey Davydov, "Nabokov: geroy, avtor, tekst," in *V. V. Nabokov: Pro et contra*, vol. 2, 322-323.
[231] Nabokov, *Speak, Memory*, 465.

By taking a closer look at the madman's locution, we may become aware of his tendency to adopt an imitative behaviour, in Nabokov's terms. On the one hand he follows a seemingly rational – presumably commonsensical, therefore mimetic – pattern of thought. Observe, for instance, the lucid argumentative structure, where the confutative stanza ("ya ne zhelal" / "I did not wish," "ya ne umel" / "I never knew") is followed by an affirmative one ("kak mne doroga" / "how much I prize," "lyublyu ya" / "I like") and finally ends with a hypothetical desire ("grugim by stat'" / "oh to be another!"). On the other hand, though, the speaker exhibits a taste for – artistic, nonutilitarian – eccentricity in the form of non-pragmatic expression, which he manifests in metaphors: he utters that "iz lapy l'va ne izvlekal zanozy" / "he never knew how] to pull thorns / from lion paws," alluding to his supposed inability to ingratiate himself to rivals; he notices how it is snowing roses, an allusive celebration of his own glory; envy is an x-rayed "skelet" / "skeleton," not undisclosed but transparent to the light (notice how the compound and uncommon verb "shadowgraph[/]" is intertwined in the colloquial texture of the poem despite its technical rigidity).

In his essay *The Art of Literature and Commonsense*, Nabokov reflects on the subtle line dividing lunatics from artists, including writers:

> a madman is reluctant to look at himself in a mirror because the face he sees is not his own: his personality is beheaded; that of the artist is increased. Madness is but a diseased bit of common sense, whereas genius is the greatest sanity of the spirit. […] Lunatics are lunatics just because they have thoroughly and recklessly dismembered a familiar world but have not the power – or have lost the power – to create a new one as harmonious as the old. The artist on the other hand disconnects what he chooses and while doing so he is aware that something in him is aware of the final result. When he examines his completed masterpiece he perceives that whatever unconscious cerebration had been involved in the creative plunge, this final result is the outcome of a definite plan which had been contained in the initial shock, as the future development of a live creature is said to be contained in the genes of its germ cell.[232]

[232] Nabokov, "The Art of Literature and Commonsense," 377.

The madman's articulated thoughts follow a steady pattern where antithetical concepts are juxtaposed in a continuous sequence gradually building up to what only appears to be a logic argumentation but which in fact runs counter to common sense – a mixture of mimetic behaviour and eccentricity which should grant his ability to survive as a creative person. Fame is considered as a detriment to which one is forced to "nizoyti" / "stoop;" inspiration can be "schooled," friends are "stock[ed] […] for use," as goods are; an "enemy's wan little smile" is something to be "prize[d];" dreams are "muchitel'nyye" / "painful."

Nevertheless, for all his excesses and idiosyncrasies, the main speaking voice is unable to preserve his own freedom, as the introductory lines hint at ("sidyashchiy vzaperti" / "kept under lock and key"), and, in a figurative sense, survive. In order for him to be an artist, he would have to be able to "create a new [world] as harmonious as the old:" here traced is the dividing line between delusion and talent, deception and vision, madness and art. This boundary is about to be subtly crossed.

Nabokov's Russian text

IV-V stanzas

Когда луну я балую балладой,
волнуются деревья за оградой,
вне очереди торопясь попасть
в мои стихи. Доверена мне власть
над всей землей Соседу непослушной,
и счастие так ширится воздушно,
так полнится сияньем голова,
такие совершенные слова
встречают мысль и улетают с нею,
что ничего записывать не смею.

Но иногда – Другим бы стать, другим!
О поскорее! Плотником, портным,
а то еще – фотографом бродячим:
как в старой сказке жить, ходить по дачам,

снимать детей пятнистых в гамаке,
собаку их и тени на песке.»

Literal translation
When I pamper the moon with a/my ballad
the trees beyond the fence grow agitated,
out of turn they hasten to fall
into my verses. To me the/a power is entrusted
over the whole world, which is disobedient to my Neighbour,
and happiness expands so airily,
the/my head fills up with such a radiance,
such perfect words
meet up with thought and fly away with her,
that I do not dare to write down/ take note of anything.

But sometimes – How I'd wish to become another, another!
Oh, hurry up! Carpenter, tailor,
or else – errant photographer:
as in an old fairytale live, go from one country home to another,
take shots of dappled children in a hammock,
their dog and the/their shadows on the sand."

Nabokov's English translation
When I with balladry blandish the moon
the trees beyond the gate grow agitated
and they endeavor out of turn to get
into my verse. I'm privileged to rule
the entire world (which disobeys my Neighbor),
and happiness so airily dilates,
my head is filled with such an incandescence,
and words of such impeccable perfection
come to meet Thought and wing away with her
that I dare not write down a single word.

Yet sometimes – Oh to be another! Quick!
Another! Tailor, carpenter – Or, say,
itinerant photographer: to live
as in an old tale, work the villas, take
pictures of dappled children in a hammock,
and of their dog and shadows on the sand.

The second half of the poem is translated as closely to the Russian original as possible, as far as the content is concerned. Only a slight variation happens at the end of

the fourth stanza. Here the madman's claim "nichego zapisyvat' ne smeyu" becomes a more definitive "I dare not write down a single word," the categorical negation remarked in the unequivocal "[not] a single word." This way Nabokov illustrates the madman's fault, the cause of his deluded state and, consequently, takes a step away from the prosopopoeic voice of the poem: the madman has "dismembered a familiar world" but is unable, or unwilling, to build a new one, which artists do by way of their artistic act. In the madman's case, not a single word becomes not a single world: madness is, unlike art, the inability to transform the void resulting from a deconstructive act into a new creation.

When we consider the poem in full length, it becomes clear that the madman's discarded psyche is epitomised in a set of values highlighted, in the English version, through the use of capital letters: "Fame," "Muse," the "Enemy's" "Failure" and "Envy," the mysterious helpless "Neighbor" (God? A(nother) dictator?) and "Thought." The target text pinpoints this distinctive trait by converting two more nouns from the concrete impersonations of the "neudachnik[/]" and the "zavistnik[/]" into the abstract capitalised phenomena of "Failure" and "Envy." Though the two states may seem to be personified and epitomised, once we consider the Russian text it becomes evident that they are in fact objectified and depersonalised, since they are turned into archetypic parameters. They become absolute criteria that sum up the madman's beliefs, delineate his inverted ethos. Such a result is attained by way of a subtle metonymic shift whereby the feeling ends up standing for the person who feels, the abstract for its concrete counterpart.

According to Roman Jakobson's prescient essay *Two Aspects of Language and Two Types of Aphasic Disturbances* (1956), metonymies and metaphors act respectively on contiguity, through combination and contexture, and similarity, by way of selection and substitution.[233] Now, when we consider Nabokov's English version as a self-sufficient unit,

[233] "It is the external relation of contiguity which unites the constituents of a context, and the internal relation of similarity which underlies the substitution set." Roman Jakobson and Morris Halle, "Two Aspects of

both "Failure" and "Envy" are but plain personifications. Yet if we relate the target text to its source and think of the two poems as two momenta of the same creative motion, then "Failure" and "Envy" are to be considered as metonymies: they are the abstract manifestations taken for those who experience them. In this sense, the subsequent affirmations become metaphoric: hypothetically speaking, we may be able to multiply the painful dreams of a *neudachnik* and examine the skeleton of a *zavistnik* if we wished to do so, but to perform the same actions as referred to failure and envy as abstract concepts would be utterly impossible. Hence a metaphoric level is added in the English version as a result of the two metonymic substitutions.

This happens, however, not inside one linguistic medium but across two linguistically distinct yet corresponding strings of words. An analogous replacement occurs at the beginning of the poem, where the year of reclusion in the Russian original is turned into a more general "since quite a time" in the English text, a *correctio* and consequent abstraction which, if compared to its counterpart, may sound hyperbolic, elongated at the least. This emphatic evidence of time intervening between the two versions is only visible once we consider them as mutually complementary. It is only by attributing both texts the same worth that we will be able to fully appreciate the scope of self-translation. "As two "independent" texts in paradoxical "interdependence", the second text does not interpret the first so much as it "completes" it, or finishes it:"[234] such a statement risks providing an impaired perspective on the intricate net of interrelations existing between self-translated texts. Not only does the target text "complete[/]" the source, provided it needs or allows any integration; it is the text which came first in chronological order that enriches the second, too. We can only interpret the emphasis of the English version by retrieving the

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Language and Two Types of Aphasic Disturbances," in *Fundamentals of Language* (The Hague: Mouton & Co., 1956), 68-69.

[234] Hokenson and Munson, *The Bilingual Text: History and Theory of Self-Translation*, 10. The words enclosed in inverted commas are quotations from Brian T. Fitch, *Beckett and Babel: An Investigation into the Status of the Bilingual Work* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1988), 60.

point in time fixed in the Russian poem; as a result, the target text magnifies the chronological scope of the experience, makes it sound vague, farfetched, dramatic almost. We can perceive the metonymic substitutions and contextual abstractions of the English version only by calling in the source material, where they are all but abstract or abstruse.

Because of this bilateral complementarity, we should remove the concept of self-translation from its identification with the target text only and replace it right in that halfway space that exists between source and target material, that interstice between the two variants, the partial realisations of an encompassing whole, yet self-sufficient in their all-encompassing autonomy. Ultimately, self-translation should be understood not as a *result* but rather as a *process*. Aphasic would be a self-translated text deprived of its other rightful half. A bilingual text risks losing its "gift for combination,"[235] in Jakobson's terms, if the alignment of the two counterparts were not taken into account, the analysis resulting in a contexture-deficient product which discards any sense of contiguity. And yet not acknowledging the chasm between the two mutually independent texts still has its side effects and may lead to a selection-impaired reading, whereby discrepancies, asymmetries and deviations could go unnoticed in favour of indiscriminate assimilation.

That translation ought to be able to open "another space" for linguistic and cultural mediation to be carried out was already theorised in Post-Colonial Studies and the Cultural Turn. What the investigation of self-translations should contribute with is a deeper awareness of such a liminal space, as confirmed by Hokenson and Munson:

> the bilingual text, from its two sides, directly opens out on that space, the interliminal region between languages, disclosing residues of the social and intellectual history that both systems now exhibit, in virtual overlap and intersection, through bilinguality. The single voice of standard second-hand

[235] Jakobson, "Two Aspects of Language and Two Types of Aphasic Disturbances," 70.

> translation silences that space. Intercultural self-translation constructs it stereotypically as a unique reading field.[236]

This transitory area becomes quite perceptible in the case of poetry, where words are rarely, if ever, spare, their presence meaningful, their meaning dense. Changes may be slight, yet because they happen in such a condensed language they must be significant.

As a consequence to the evidence discussed so far, I am persuaded that, being the product of the same mind, the process of self-translation digs deeper in the gap between different idioms and brings the rhetorical potential of words to the light. Hence, as the work of a miner unearthing precious stones, the study of self-translation should excavate such a liminal edge and expose these hybrid translucent treasure-troves, these interstitial figures of speech. Regular tropes, or intra-tropes, as we might call them, are independent and enclosed, they emerge from the inside of each single text taken as a unit of meaning; inter-tropes, on the other hand, are interdependent, it is only by conjoining the two (or more) mirrored texts that they may come to light. Intra-tropes are opaque, they do not let the reader see beyond their linguistic surface, they are intralinguistic; inter-tropes are transparent, their skin translucent when exposed to the reflecting prism of different idioms, theirs is an interlinguistic anatomy. Intra-tropes are central, dominant in our horizon of expectation, overt; inter-tropes are peripheral, substandard, latent, covert. We might think of the relationship between "neudachnik[/]" / "Failure" and "zavistnik[/]" / "Envy," or that between "god" / "since quite a time," as a form of inter-trope, a metonymic shift happening across two distinct texts and idioms, its effect resulting either in a concretisation or an abstraction, depending on which reading direction (ST to TT / TT to ST) we, readers, choose to follow.

We may also consider the following lines from *Kak ya lyublyu tebya* / *How I Love You* (1934):

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[236] Hokenson and Munson, *The Bilingual Text: History and Theory of Self-Translation*, 12.

Ужель нельзя там притулиться,	I wonder, is there nowhere a place there,
и нет там темного угла,	to lie low – some dark nook
где темнота могла бы слиться	where the darkness might merge
с иероглифами крыла?	with a wing's cryptic markings?
Так бабочка не шевелится,	(A geometrid thus does not stir
пластом на плесени ствола.	spread flat on a lichened trunk)[237]

The target text has two added intra-tropes, namely the wave of alliterated sounds in the sequence "there" – "nowhere" – "there," and the parenthetical elements which enclose the penultimate and final lines. We may also observe two inter-tropes: the term designating a pictographic writing system, "iyeroglif[y]," is rendered into a less connoting "cryptic markings," which does not specify the nature of the characters if not by their enigmatic nature. Also, the Russian lexeme for butterfly, "babochka," becomes a sectorial "geometrid," a moth, for that matter, with wings of almost geometric shape and a distinct tendency to prefer environments that match their pigments. While in the first case the English version broadens the lexical contours, the hypernym chosen over the hyponym, in the second a subordinate class is selected over its corresponding superordinate. The added brackets correlate such an inclusive interrelation with a graphic representation.

Let me remind you of similar cases emerging from some previously investigated poems. In *Oculus* the addition of "old freak" smiling with the sun "on one cheek" extends the personification of the earth, the human face explicitly becoming its allegorical representation through their common spherical form; also, the concrete "zenitsa" [pupil] is metonymically substituted with an abstract "vision." In *The Rain Has Flown* the mention of the pearl in conclusion may not be evocative enough therefore requiring a backward look at *Dozhd' proletel* to detect a metonymic presence of female gender as also suggested in the polysemous "serezhki." Similarly, the intertextual reference to Tyutchev's *Silentium* may appear evident only once the Russian *Eshche bezmolvstvuyu* is read as a necessary companion

[237] Nabokov, "Kak ya lyublyu tebya" / "How I Love you," in *Poems and Problems*, 78-81.

to *I Still Keep Mute*. These last two cases, in particular, also demonstrate how an informed reading of the target text can only be attained by involving the source material.

Such an interlingual configuration of rhetorical devices can also be observed inside single poems, provided they involve a margin of code-switching or code-mixing. The following lines, from the English *An Evening of Russian Poetry* (1945), exemplify this case. During a literary event, the Russian poet is asked to translate a couple of everyday expressions from English to Russian. The answer, though, is not so much of an adequate translation:

> *"How would you say 'delightful talk' in Russian?"*
> *"How would you say 'good night'?"*
>
> Oh, that would be:
>
> *Bessónnitza, tvoy vzor oonýl I stráshen;*
> *lubóv moyá, otstóopnika prostée.*
> (Insomnia, your stare is dull and ashen,
> my love, forgive me this apostasy.)[238]

The process of (self-)translation is activated and carried through along the verses of the poem. The loosely phonetic transliteration, as in *"oonýl,"* *"otstóopnika"* and especially the patently erroneous *"lubov,"* which lacks the palatalisation of both the liquid sound and the fricative, betrays the poet's lie: as the subsequent parenthetical self-translation shows, the translated sentence does not coincide with the audience's requests. Instead, its overabundant pathos clashes with the utter bathos of the questions. Almost literally refusing any trivialisation of language, Nabokov takes advantage of the closing lines to reflect on what he defines an "apostasy," without explaining whether his abjuration concerns the deliberately faulty translation or a far greater betrayal he blames himself for, that which he has committed against his mother tongue – a theme he had, by then, already

[238] Nabokov, "An Evening of Russian Poetry," in *Poems and Problems*, 162-163. Nabokov's italics.

explored in *Softest of Tongues* (1941): "but now thou too must go; just here we part, / softest of tongues, my true one, all my own…"[239] It should be mentioned here that the original version of the poem, as published on the *New Yorker* (21(19), 3 March 1945, pp. 23-24), did not include the final two lines, which made the conclusion intelligible only to readers versed in Russian. Yet even without those, what is reported as a translation is in fact an act of self-translation since the scene only happens in the author's mind, the asked questions are but an excuse for the author to mislead his readers. Through the incongruous (self-)translation, thus, Nabokov ends the poem in reticence, which is at once intratextual, due to the code-switching and the cryptic nature of the last affirmation *per se*, and intertextual, since it presupposes a comparison between the original – imagined – requests and their intentionally inadequate (self-)translation by the author/poet.

Not only the occurrence of an obscure idiom but also of patent inaccuracies can demonstrate the relevance of the source text, the value of comparative work as well as the halfway positioning of self-translation. The following lines, from *Evening on a Vacant Lot* (originally published as *Vecher na pustyre* in 1932), could cost Nabokov the charge of linguistic arbitrariness or, worse, accidental violation due to ignorance, without the support of a more accurate exegetic approach: "nothing do I know – except / that it's worthwhile being born / for the sake of this your breath."[240] This syntactic transgression, namely the pairing of a demonstrative adjective and a possessive adjective as two consecutive qualifying attributes to the same noun, comes through the Anglophone reader's mouth as an unexpected hiccup, a gratuitous negligence one should have the instinct to correct. It is only when the source text is referred to that the reader may be able to put it into context and motivate it: "etogo dykhaniya tvoyego"[241] is a standard variant for Russian language – at least in so far as the morphological order is preserved as such – and it could be rendered

[239] Nabokov, "Softest of Tongues," in *Collected Poems*, 164.
[240] Nabokov, "Evening on a Vacant Lot," in *Poems and Problems*, 69.
[241] Nabokov, "Vecher na pustyre," in *Poems and Problems*, 68.

in English as this breath of yours. Yet Nabokov's infraction of conventions comes as the culminating point after a series of syntactic inversions, as in "never did I want," "maybe empty is the world," "nothing do I know" which might be reproducing the poet's "muttering," his "leaden-weighted words."[242] If read in this light, the English version contains not so much of a mistake as a linguistic image of the poet's own vulnerability, a backlash of his underlying tensions. Not even a mis-take. Rather, a good take on the poem's overall atmosphere of uncertainty.

The ending of *The Madman* is worth looking into as well. Here the speaking voice discloses his strongest wish to become an "itinerant photographer: to live / as in an old tale, work the villas, take / pictures of dappled children." Now, much as they would have been beneficial to generations of young readers and patient parents, photographers are nowhere to be seen in old tales – if this were the case, we might have hoped for any chance evidence of truth surviving in their shots. Also, to attribute such an advanced technology to such a remote (by the poet's own admission) past seems to be too much of an anachronism. Again, the Russian text may help us unravel this intricate riddle. As its first meaning, the verb "snimat'" has to take away, remove, withdraw something from where it belongs – a piece of clothing from the body, a crop from the field, Hence its figurative – metonymic – meaning as taking pictures, that is to say (quite literally) taking a scene from the real. When referred to children, as in the Russian poem, it might imply a sylleptic coincidence between its figurative and literal meaning thus implying the idea of them being photographed or, as it would happen in old tales, taken away, snatched, which is also reflected in the etymology of the English verb to kidnap. The English "take pictures" does not convey the supposedly purposeful equivocation of the Russian predicate and even instills in the reader a sense of bewilderment due to its unrelatedness with the context of old folk narratives. The original version opens up an alternative space which is ultimately made opaque in the target text. It

[242] Ibidem, 71.

is only when compared to its source that the self-translation becomes transparent and suitable to alternative readings.

In all its shifts and turns, in its posthumous profanations of buried words, self-translation, like any translative act, is but a forgery. To quote yet one more of Nabokov's poems on translation, "reflected words can only shiver / like elongated lights that twist / in the black mirror of a river / between the city and the mist."[243] While exposing the complexity and compromise of any endeavour in self-translation, interstitial figures of speech, or inter-tropes, as we have called them, oozing from the fissures between bilingual texts, further corroborate the importance of the comparative work. When it comes to Nabokov's poetic works, we have climbed the safe towers of monolingualism, reading him now as a Russophone, now as an Anglophone author; rarely have we ventured out in the perilous mist of his bilingual versions. But for all its obscurity and transitoriness, the halfway river of self-translation still retains the exuberance of the creative undercurrent, the luxuriant excess of art. These waters we should navigate.

[243] Nabokov, "On Translating 'Eugene Onegin'," in *Collected Poems*, 153.

PART 2

ANTITHESIS

3. С ДРУГОЙ СТОРОНЫ / THEN AGAIN

On Metalogisms

> Con le sue proposizioni «prive di senso», le affermazioni «non verificabili», inventa universi, finge inesauribili cerimonie. Essa possiede e governa il nulla.
>
> Giorgio Manganelli, *La letteratura come menzogna*.[244]

On January 24, 1937 Vladislav Khodasevich introduced one of Nabokov's public readings in Paris – his audience was eager to listen to the then still unpublished opening of *Dar* [The Gift, 1937-1938]. The piece was published as *O Sirine* shortly after. There, in a most significant passage, Khodasevich first pointed out what was to become the key to all of Nabokov's oeuvre:

> Сирин не только не маскирует, не прячет своих приемов, как чаще всего поступают все и в чем Достоевский, например, достиг поразительного совершенства, – но напротив: Сирин сам их выставляет наружу, как фокусник, который, поразив зрителя, тут же показывает лабораторию своих чудес. […] Сирин их потому не прячет, что одна из главных задач его – именно показать, как живут и работают приемы.[245]

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[244] Giorgio Manganelli, *La letteratura come menzogna* (Milano: Adelphi, 1985), 223.
[245] Khodasevich, "O Sirine," 241. First published on *Vozrozhdeniye*, no. 4065 (13 February 1937): 9.

Khodasevich's critical approach was crucial to subsequent readings of Nabokov, especially with regard to his prose (see, for instance, *Priglashenive na kazn'* [Invitation to a Beheading, 1935], in which the literary framework is gradually dismantled as a theatre backdrop, the device literally bared under the reader's eyes). His poetry, though, would have remained comparatively unexplored, especially after his emigration to the United States, only four years after Khodasevich's essay, and his blazing career as an Anglophone novelist. Had he stayed in Europe, such words would have probably found their resonance among verse scholars and readers as well. But this is wishful thinking. What we do know, though, is that it was only in 1979 that Vera Nabokova eventually managed to draw the public attention back to her husband's poems. In her brief but dense introduction to the posthumous collection *Stikhi* [Poems, 1979], issued by the American publishing house Ardis, she revealed an aspect of Nabokov' work which had until then passed unnoticed: "хочу обратить внимание читателя на главную тему Набокова. Она, кажется, не была никем отмечена, а между тем ею пропитано все, что он писал; она, как некий водяной знак, символизирует все его творчество. Я говорю о «потусторонности», как он сам ее назвал в своем последнем стихотворении «Влюбленность»."[246] The collection had undergone a first selection by Nabokov before his death.

Interestingly enough, *potustoronnost'* defies any exact translation into English and could be only very loosely rendered into a much more banal and utterly ineffective "otherworld." The Russian compound noun comes from the locution *po tu storonu*, literally on that side, and, while commonly indicating the afterlife, in Nabokov's hands the word does not seem focused on its spiritual connotations so much as its metaphysical implications. I would go so far as to say that in Nabokov's interpretation *potustoronnost'* indicates *per se* the recognition of a meta-logical margin of existence, one that goes beyond

[246] Vera Nabokova, "Predisloviye k sborniku: V. Nabokov. Stikhi (1979)," in *V. V. Nabokov: Pro et contra*, vol. 1, ed. Boris Averin, 342. Originally published as an introduction to Vladimir Nabokov, *Stikhi* (Ann Arbor: Ardis, 1979).

the scope of linear consequentiality and rational congruence. *Poяyшstoronnoяt'* is the world as straightforward objective factuality, *potшstoronnoяt'* is the realm of alternative flipsides, of coexisting and not mutually exclusive perspectives.

By 1917 the revolution was under way. So much it spread from its political and social epicentres to literary surroundings, where formalists were isolating the concept of *ostraneniye*. In his foundational essay, Viktor Shklovskiy defined the process of art as intrinsically estranging:

> и вот для того, чтобы вернуть ощущение жизни, почувствовать вещи, для того, чтобы делать камень каменным, существует то, что называется искусством. Целью искусства является дать ощущение вещи, как видение, а не как узнавание; приемом искусства является прием «остранения» вещей и прием затрудненной формы, увеличивающий трудность и долготу восприятия, так как воспринимательный процесс в искусстве самоцелен и должен быть продлен; искусство есть способ пережить деланье вещи, а сделанное в искусстве не важно.[247]

Nabokov's emigration made him de facto into an estranged or, as Steiner put it, "extraterritorial" writer, "eccentric, aloof, nostalgic, deliberately untimely."[248] As a result, alienation in the form of estrangement is one of Nabokov's most recurrent devices, his "survival strategy"[249] to homesickness, in Boym's words. Even his choices as a translator favoured those literary works based on a sense of deracination, as in Lewis Carrol's *Alice in Wonderland*, where an imaginary land becomes the setting for the protagonist's adventures, or Captain Mayne Reid's *The Headless Horseman*, with its motif of swapped identities, not to talk about Lermontov's *Geroy nashego vremeni* [A Hero of Our Time, 1840] or Pushkin's *Evgeniy Onegin*, both centred on an ostracised protagonist. Most importantly, masks,

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[247] Viktor Shklovskiy, "Iskusstvo kak priyem," in *Sborniki po teorii poeticheskogo yazyka*, vol. 2 (Petrograd: Tip. Z. Sokolinskogo, 1917), 7-8. The passage has been transcribed here according to standard Russian orthography.

[248] Steiner, "Extraterritorial," 11.

[249] Svetlana Boym, *The Future of Nostalgia* (New York: Basic Books, 2001), 257.

disguises and impersonations as well as doubles, alter egos and doppelgängers crowd Nabokov's original literary output.

> Художник (и говоря конкретней – писатель) нигде не показан им прямо, а всегда под маскою: шахматиста, коммерсанта и т. д. Причин тому, я думаю, несколько. Из них главная заключается в том, что и тут мы имеем дело с приемом, впрочем, весьма обычным. Формалисты его зовут остранением.[250]

In addition to this, the sense of displacement also takes the shape of an illicit and often alienating homecoming, which, by Nabokov's own admission, he envisioned not infrequently: "what it would be actually to see again my former surroundings, I can hardly imagine. Sometimes I fancy myself revisiting them with a false passport, under an assumed name. It could be done."[251]

From a rhetorical point of view, metalogisms pursue a similar purpose in that they defy the logical asset of reality by constantly questioning its principles through an estranged vision that is essential to any form of artistic endeavour. "There is, it would seem, in the dimensional scale of the world," Nabokov wrote, "a kind of delicate meeting place between imagination and knowledge, a point, arrived at by diminishing large things and enlarging small ones, that is intrinsically artistic."[252] The art of diminishing large things and enlarging small ones is none other than *ostraneniye*. Thus, not only is estrangement intellectually processed and verbally articulated, but it also echoes in Nabokov's linguistic traits. In this sense, we may also motivate Steiner's statement that "Nabokov is a writer who works very near the intricate threshold of syntax; he experiences linguistic forms in a state of manifold potentiality and, moving across vernaculars, is able to keep words and phrases in a charged, unstable mode of vitality."[253]

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[250] Khodasevich, "O Sirine," 243.
[251] Nabokov, *Speak, Memory*, 573.
[252] Ibidem, 503.
[253] Steiner, "Extraterritorial," 10.

I specifically chose to address the question of metalogisms since I am persuaded that the significance of *potustoronnost'* lies first and foremost, if not exclusively, in Nabokov's sapient use of language, echoing Belyy's motto "ибо я – *слово* и только *слово*."[254] Words and tropes evolve from the *limes* of metasememes into the open thresholds of metalogisms, "windows giving upon a contiguous world."[255] With antithesis, paradox and estrangement Nabokov carves the cleavage between common logic and individual thought. In metalogisms he attains a *tertium non datur*, be it in the form of an impossible return, of *potustoronnost'* or even self-translation. In metalogisms he condenses a symbolic representation of his exilic experience, his extra -territorial / -cultural / -linguistic identity.

A close reading of some of his poems will prove the relevance of metalogisms in Nabokov's attempt at exploring, and hopefully motivating, his sense of detachment and dislocation. Both *Nomer v gostinitse* / *Hotel Room* and *Formula* / *The Formula* take place in the space of a room, which becomes a vestibule for a potential transfiguration; the antithetical semantics of the first text lets duality emerge while the polysemic ambiguity of the second reflects the metamorphic process itself. The result of such a permutative progression is illustrated in *Rasstrel* / *The Execution* and, even more so, in the narrative poem *K Kn. S. M. Kachurinu* / *To Prince S. M. Kachurin*, where estrangement from oneself is thematically ingrained in the motif of disguise and is equally projected onto the use of estranged linguistic elements.

Ultimately, Nabokov's metalogisms expose his idiosyncrasy at its most positive and productive potentiality: his progression from *dvoemiriye* to a search for *soyedineniye dukh*

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[254] Belyy, "Magiya slov," 430.

[255] Nabokov, *Speak, Memory*, 608. Although Nabokov quotes these words as if part of a critic's opinion, they are probably his own (see Alfred Appel's *Introduction* in: Vladimir Nabokov, *The Annotated Lolita*, ed. Alfred Appel (London: Penguin, 2000), XXVI).

cherez tret'ye.[256] *Po tu storonu* is, after all, the symbolic plan for *triadizm* to be fulfilled, where *bispatsial'nost'* expands onto a third dimension.

3.1 *Номер в гостинице / Hotel Room*

Nabokov wrote *Nomer v gostinitse* in 1919, while staying in the Crimean peninsula. He arrived in Sebastopol with his family on March 26, a few days before his final departure from the Russian borders, while the Red army could already be seen advancing through the region. His room, number seven, in the Hotel Metropole[257] inspired the following verses.

Nabokov's Russian text
Номер в гостинице
Не то кровать, не то скамья.
Угрюмо-желтые обои.
Два стула. Зеркало кривое.
Мы входим – я и тень моя.

Окно со звоном открываем:
спадает отблеск до земли.
Ночь бездыханна. Псы вдали
тишь рассекают пестрым лаем.

Я замираю у окна,
и в черной чаше небосвода,
как золотая капля меда,
сверкает сладостно луна.

Literal translation
A/the room in a/the hotel
Not really a bed, not really a bench.

[256] Bal'mont, *Poeziya kak volshebstvo*, 5.
[257] Boyd, *Vladimir Nabokov: The Russian Years*, 159.

A bleak[ly] yellow wallpaper.
Two chairs. The mirror is curved/crooked.
We enter/get in – my shadow and I.

We open the/a window with a noise/sound:
a glint [of light] falls down onto the earth/ground.
The night is breathless. (Some) dogs in the distance
break into/disrupt the stillness with a resounding bark.

I stand still near/at the/a window,
and in the black cup of the firmament/sky,
like a golden drop of honey,
the moon gleams tenderly.

Nabokov's English version
Hotel Room
Not quite a bed not quite a bench.
Wallpaper: a grim yellow.
A pair of chairs. A squinty looking-glass.
We enter – my shadow and I.

We open with a vibrant sound the window:
the light's reflection slides down to the ground.
The night is breathless. Distant dogs
with varied barks fracture the stillness.

Stirless, I stand at the window,
and in the black bowl of the sky
glows like a golden drop of honey
the mellow moon.

First things first. The lack of article in the English "Hotel Room" reproduces the sense of vagueness of the Russian title even more than the indeterminate article would. As often, though, the original meter (iambic tetrameter) and rhyme scheme (AbbA cDDc EffE) are both lost in translation. Cohesion in the English version is provided through internal rhymes, as in "yellow" – "mellow," "sound" – "down" – "ground," "stillness" – "stirless." Assonances and alliterations, as in "yellow" – "shadow" – "window" – "mellow," "slides" – "night," "sky" – "honey," and consonances, as in "black bowl" – "glows," induce a sense of coherence.

The first stanza presents a detailed description of the spatial context in which the subject is placed. The hypothyposis is rendered even more subtle and concise in English, where the lack of predicates (grammatically standard in Russian for the verb to be) is much more evident, as in "wallpaper: a grim yellow" and "a squinty looking glass." Thus, the immediacy of the English version as well as its distinctive aura of synthesis are a direct consequence of a faithful translation of the source material. Moreover, the mirroring effect described in the poem is enhanced in the syntactic distribution of the self-translated text: here, each verse of the first stanza is composed of two hemistichs, including the second line (not so in the original). The specular quality of the text is reflected in the use of the pronoun "my" / "we" referred to the speaking voice and his own shadow, introduced as if it were an independent entity.

The poem has a rather peculiar chronological structure: it is only at the end of the first stanza that the poetic persona – and focal point of view – enters into the room which has already been described in the previous three verses, the human presence filling in, replacing even, an evident absence. Accordingly, space is described by subtraction, a technique *Nomer v gostinitse* shares with *Oko* (2.2). Suffice it to notice that the opening image of the sofa, never otherwise mentioned, is evoked through a double negation: truth lies in the interstices, in the midst of things.

The stagnant stasis of the room is then disturbed by the incoming presence(s), identified in the first verb – of movement – "my vkhodim" / "we enter," followed by another predicate implying dynamism, "my otkryvayem" / "we open." The English adjective "vibrant," added *ex novo* to qualify the clinking sound of the windowpane while being opened, contributes to increasing the sense of movement. Furthermore, the distribution of the two actions "we enter" and "we open" at the beginning of two consecutive lines makes the English version tighter while highlighting the aforementioned mirroring effect.

The preference for minus-description at the opening of the poem recurs in the second stanza, where the night is said to be "*bez*dykhanna" / "breath*less*." The English version further plays with this effect by translating the verb "zamira[t']" into the periphrastic construction "stir*less*, I stand," where stillness is suggested through the absence of movement. The space surrounding the poetic persona is filled with absences: dogs barking in the distance, the light's reflection onto the ground, the radiance of the moon glowing far up in the sky. The manifestations of nature are immaterial, evanescent compared to the dull physicality of hideous artificial matter. The only neutral component is the window. In the Russian text, the noun "okno" opens the second stanza, a direct object moved before its verb and given absolute prominence; a few lines later, the same word appears in rhyming position, again drawing strength from its linguistic surroundings. In English, the term "window" is pushed forward until it reaches the end of the line: such an infrequent and unidiomatic place for a direct object brings it to the forefront. As such, the window acquires a functional role within the space of the poem, not only as a constituent part of the room in which the scene unfolds, but also as a necessary threshold between the interior of an enclosed area and the external expanse.

This antithetical partition of space is duplicated in two further elements. The light's reflection lets us envision a source of light, probably the moon, and its projection onto the floor. The Russian noun "otblesk" is etymologically evocative: the root word *blesk* indicates a brilliance, a shine; the prefix *ot-* points in the direction of its origin. Reality is again duplicated and split between matter and abstraction. The other item alluding to an antithetical representation of space has been presented to the reader in that "zerkalo" / "looking-glass" of the first stanza. While the Russian attribute "krivoye" has crooked or curved as its first meaning, Nabokov chooses to focus the reader's attention on its second, figurative sense: by translating it as "squinty," he attributes the human flaw of strabismus to an object; alternatively, he makes it perform the equally human action of looking

sideways. Furthermore, while the collocation *krivoye zerkalo* can be found in Russian, its English translation as "squinty looking-glass" is unidiomatic and creatively unique to Nabokov's own versification. Also, by preferring the compound word "looking-glass," already graphically split in two halves, to a simpler mirror, Nabokov attributes to the inanimate glass surface the potential of action, of "looking" through its surface – the mirrored face looks at him, his reflected (sideways) eyes stare at themselves. Hence the window, the reflection as both light and shadow as well as the looking-glass bisect the world in two polarised halves – source and reflection, matter and abstraction, reality and speculation. Barton Johnson has observed a similar bisection of Nabokov's cosmos at large:

> *noch'* provides a semantic context for the prototypical Nabokovian words *ten'* and *son*, as well as such common items as *luna* "moon" and *zvezdy* "stars" […]. To find *dusha* "soul" […] almost on the same level as *ten'* and *son* is surprising. It is the only term referring to a living creature. Taken together, the four highest frequency words form a part of the pattern that at least partially defines Nabokov's now more or less familiar "two world" cosmos.
> Each of these four terms is a member of an antonymic pair that defines a major dimension of Nabokov's universe: *noch'* / *den'*, *son* / *yav'*, *ten'* / *svet*, and *dusha* / *telo*. Each reflects one of Nabokov's two worlds.[258]

A liminal space of coexisting opposites opens up as if on a photographic negative.

In the case of *Nomer v gostinitse*, the self-translated text has a more distinct effectiveness at exposing the antinomies between *posyu-* and *potustoronnost'*. The specularity of its structure is underscored through an increased use of internal rhymes, alliterations and consonances. The frequent use of compound terms in the English version increases the sense of partition. Yet the trespassing of the threshold does not take place. The English

[258] Barton Johnson, "Preliminary Notes on Nabokov's Russian Poetry: A Chronological and Thematic Sketch," 318-319. Barton Johnson's italics. Barton Johnson's statistics are based on a computer analysis of the Ardis *Stikhi* containing 247 poems (about 5000 lines and 25000 words).

adjective "stirless," at the beginning of the third and final stanza, gives prominence to the static tension of the depicted scene, possibly increased in self-translation through its double internal rhyme with "breathless" and "stillness," both equally evoking a sense of paralysis. The existence of outer space is perceived but not further explored; the subject stands at the window, inertia ensues. As an evidence of the failed crossing, the subject performing the action of standing motionless beside the window is again the singular "ya" / "I," which neutralises the doubling effect of the plural "my" / "we" of the previous stanzas. The world is brought back to its opacity.

3.2 *Формула / The Formula*

In 1931, while living in Berlin, Nabokov composed *Formula*. As the title suggests, the poem adopts a seemingly scientific approach to the question of *potustoronnost'*. Though not properly intertextual, its enigmatic verses, as I shall argue, acquire a particular meaning when read in comparison with Khodasevich's *Баллада* [Ballad, 1921].

Nabokov's Russian text
I-II stanzas
Формула
Сутулится на стуле
беспалое пальто.
Потемки обманули,
почудилось не то.

Сквозняк прошел недавно,
и душу унесло
в раскрывшееся плавно
стеклянное число.

Literal translation
A/the fingerless coat
is stooping/stoops on the/a chair.

The darkness deceived/cheated (me),
it seemed/looked like something else.

A/the draught [of air] passed by not long ago,
and brought my/the soul away
in the smoothly uncovering
glass number.

Nabokov's English version
Humped up on the back of a chair,
  a fingerless overcoat.
The darkening day was deceptive:
  fancy has it all wrong.

A current of air has passed recently
  and one's soul has been blown
into a flowingly opening
  cipher of glass.

The poem opens with a rather static description followed by an unexpected perturbation. The initial order – a coat hanging on a chair, the day growing darker – is unsettled by a sudden draught of air which initiates a process of transformation within the main speaking subject. As confirmed by Connolly, "the concept of the "otherworldly" can be subsumed under a larger thematic rubric – that of the "two world" theme. Numerous poems by Nabokov depict an opposition between two realms, although the specific subjects addressed by these poems range from something as concrete as a missing love to something as abstract as other realms of being."[259]

The first stanza in the Russian original is characterized by a distinct and playful sound pattern. In the first line the dental sounds /s/, /t/ and /l/ are repeated and combined with front vowels /i/ – /e/ and the back vowel /u/; the second verse alternates the stops /b/ and /p/ with /t/ and couples them with the front vowel /a/ and the back one /o/; the third line combines the previously mentioned plosives /p/ - /b/ with the newly added nasal /m/

[259] Julian W. Connolly, "The Otherworldly in Nabokov's Poetry," in *Russian Literature Triquarterly*, 330.

while mixing the different vowels together; the fourth verse incorporates many of the already used consonants and vowels. This complex phonetic weave results in an elaborate fabric where the principle of reflection plays a crucial role: horizontally, there is a significant correspondence between the first and the second term in each of the first three lines, as in "sutulitsya" – "stule," "bespaloye" – "pal'to" and "potemki" – "obmanuli;" vertically, they all phonetically reflect in the fourth verse, as argued above. Moreover, the second and third lines are made of two words, the first and last are each of three units. In the English translation this rigid and synthetic order seems to have been completely lost. Yet the constructive principle, rather than dissolving altogether, is shifted from phonetics to semantics. The preposition "up" contrasts with "back;" the suffix "-less," in "fingerless," stands opposite the prefix "over-" in "overcoat."

As in *Nomer v gostinitse* / *Hotel Room*, the action takes place in the enclosed space of a room. Yet a difference emerges, especially in the Russian text, where the term "nomer" specifically indicates a hotel room by contrast with a private one as indicated by "komnat[a]." The English version highlights this variation by using the possessive adjective "my" in the closing stanza of *The Formula* (see the next few pages), thus suggesting an increased sense of intimacy with the surrounding space as opposed to the anonymity of an impersonal hotel room. What *Nomer v gostinitse* and *Formula* also have in common is a reference to numerical terms, the first in the title itself (though on a figurative note), the latter in verse eight, namely in "steklyannoye chislo" and later in "sosudov tsifrovykh" (third stanza). Moreover, the adjective "kriv[oy]" recurs in the two texts. Both poems begin with a sense of almost geometrical order which is suddenly disrupted by an incoming presence (the speaking subject and a current of air, respectively) whereby the surrounding space is fractured and filtered through reflecting surfaces. The semantic field of numbers also emerges in the English title of the presently analysed poem. The noun "formula," which both Russian and English languages imported from Latin, may refer to a synthetic

string of numerical symbols prescribing a mathematical procedure or a set of computational rules; alternatively, it might also indicate a conventional linguistic pattern used in given contexts to perform a certain action or to obtain a designated result – as, for instance, a mathematical operation or a magic spell.

The polysemous nature of the title reverberates in some key words throughout the text. The noun "skvoznyak" has its root in the adverb "skvoz'" evoking a sense of movement and transition. The term "chislo" indicates both a number and a date. The ambiguous texture of words becomes particularly evident in the English self-translation, where a periphrastic "current of air" is preferred to a more straightforward draught: the semantic field of liquidness emerges when "current" is coupled with "flowingly" as well as in the subsequent "filtered" and "vessels" of the third stanza. The Russian verb of movement "uneslo" is rendered into a more poetic "has been blown," which rather pertains to the field of wind and breath, as also the original "dusha" does.

Stanzas three to five consist in a description of the process of transfiguration in its unfolding.

Nabokov's Russian text
III-V stanzas
Сквозь отсветы пропущен
сосудов цифровых,
раздут или расплющен
в алембиках кривых,

мой дух приображался:
на тысячу колец,
вращаясь, размножался
и замер наконец

в хрустальнейшем застое,
в отличнейшем Ничто,
а в комнате пустое
сутулится пальто.

Literal translation

Let through the reflections
of (the) numerical vessels,
inflated or flattened
in (the) crooked alembics

my soul was transforming itself:
into a thousand of rings,
revolving/turning around, it multiplied
and ultimately came to a still

in the most crystal-clear stagnation,
in the most perfect Nothing,
and in the room a/the empty
coat is stooping/stoops down.

Nabokov's English version
Filtered through light as reflected
by vessels of numbers,
bloated of flattened
in curved limbs of alembics,

my spirit was being transfigured
into thousands of rings,
which gyrated and multiplied
and at last it all came to a stop,

in most crystal stagnation,
most excellent Nought;
and in my room just an empty
overcoat hunches its back.

The third stanza opens with the adverb "skvoz'," which echoes "skvoznyak" in stanza two. Though it fails to reproduce the same anaphoric effect, the English version does present other interesting points of reflection. In "vessels of numbers" the term "vessel" might indicate a container or a type of boat. In both cases, however, it suggests the idea of a significant number or quantity (of what is not made clear) and a sense of movement, of transference. Also, the English noun "limbs" is added as part of the twelfth verse, creating a rich consonance with "alembics" and projecting an animate aspect onto them. Further on,

"Nichto" is translated as "Nought," which could stand for nothing and zero, a numerical absence.

Hence the poem has a consistent subtext, which could be summarised as follows:

	Russian	English
Mathematics	Formula chislo cifrovykh tysyachu [razmnozhalsya] [Nichto]	Formula cipher (of) numbers (into) thousands multiplied [proliferate] Nought [nothing]
Geometry	krivykh kolec [vrashchayas']	curved (of) rings (which) gyrated [turn]
Chemistry	alembikakh [propushchen]	(in) alembics filtered [sieved, drained]

In the chart presented above, the Russian terms appearing in square brackets do not necessarily have a meaning univocally pertaining to the semantic field of hard sciences. The English version significantly increases the impression of scientific rigour by preferring words with a higher level of specific saturation to more neutral equivalents. The process of transfiguration, presumably related to metaphysics, is thus described as following a series of steps illustrated with methodical precision. The English self-translated text seems to confirm this when, in line four, the poet explicitly denies the reliability of "fancy" when it comes to interpreting the surrounding world.

Yet, for all its meticulous precision, *Formula* / *The Formula* is built on a series of paradoxical statements and ambiguous components. For instance, what coat has fingers? Since the very first lines, the poem maintains the impossible by describing a piece of clothing as lacking a very specifically human feature. Again, in the second stanza, the focus is projected onto an enigmatic "steklyannoye chislo" / "cipher of glass." What could be

hidden behind such a riddle? According to a possible interpretation, suggested by Morris, we might understand it as a mirror:

> in this setting, with a play of light which deceives the imagination, the poet's soul is carried by a draught (from another realm) into, presumably, a mirror, an open number of glass, […]. Allowed transfer into another space, the poet's soul is transformed and transfigured 'into thousands of rings,' at last to come to a stop […].[260]

Such a reading, however, seems too simplistic. Rather than indicating a number *tout court*, the English "cipher" implies in fact a numerical code or a secret (encoded) way of writing. The fact that it is made of glass implies its transparency and, figuratively, its utmost clarity. In this case, then, the translated version would also motivate the previous "raskryvsheyesya plavno" / "flowingly opening," as a code gradually being disclosed and eventually deciphered. Moreover, through the word "cipher" the connection between the title and the whole text is elucidated: what the poem does is, in point of fact, illustrating the process of revealing the hidden formula – or cipher – of transfiguration as a metamorphic process. Hence the references to hard sciences as mediated through a biological mutation.

At this point I suggest bringing in Nabokov's much admired friend and colleague Khodasevich, whom he considered "a bitter man, wrought of irony and metallic-like genius, whose poetry was as complex a marvel as that of Tyutchev or Blok."[261] In 1941, just a year after his emigration to the United States, Nabokov translated Khodasevich's *Ballada*. Envisioning the spark of inspiration as an increasingly rhythmic enchantment of transfiguration, Khodasevich ultimately identifies himself with the quintessential poet: Orpheus, who gives the title to Nabokov's version. *Ballada* and *Formula* share some crucial features. Khodasevich sets his poem in the poet's room: a dismal sordid place – a stucco ceiling in place of the sky, a light bulb as the pallid substitute of the sun, some spare pieces

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[260] Morris, *Vladimir Nabokov: Poetry and the Lyric Voice*, 117.
[261] Nabokov, *Speak, Memory*, 604.

of furniture: chairs, table and bed. The space is described as "circular."[262] A window, some white palmtrees engendered on the pane by frost, lets the poet imagine faraway landscapes in their exotic lush. Then, spurred by the rhythmic ticking of a watch ("the lyrical click of a pocket rhyme – / the tiny music that tells the time," as Nabokov would write in his 1944 *The Poem*),[263] he begins rhyming words to himself – "what a vague, what a passionate murmur / lacking any intelligent plan." Melody grows into a heavy lyre, Orpheus stands alone on black boulders.

Nabokov must have perceived the amphibrachic trimeter as determinant to Khodasevich's melodic, almost chanting rhythm and decided to reproduce it faithfully in his English version. This meant, however, that some semantic and syntactic variations had to be made. In this respect, it is most interesting to notice what Nabokov added *ex novo*. The watch sitting in the poet's pocket is described as "loud and quick," alluding to the poet's increasing awareness of time. The line "ya sam nad soboy vyrastayu" is translated as "high above my own spirit I tower," without any *∂ukh* being present in the original. The room and the furniture "slowly start in a circle to sail," the reference to liquidness being also Nabokov's own touch. Finally, in the last stanza, the refrain, typical of ballads, is slightly varied: the previous reference to the sixty-watt lamp bulb morphs into an arbitrary "away the false heavens are blown," which has much in common with Nabokov's own line "fancy has it all wrong," which can be read in his *The Formula*. Whether Nabokov had Khodasevich's poem in mind while composing *Formula* or not, it seems evident that he must at least have been reminded of his own lines while translating *Ballad∂a*. *Formula* and *Ballad∂a* share the same vision of artistic inspiration as a transition between two states, a journey

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[262] This and the following quotes are from: Vladislav Khodasevich, "Orpheus," in Brian Boyd, Stanislav Shvabrin, ed., and Vladimir Nabokov, trans., *Verses and Versions. Three centuries of Russian Poetry Selected and Translated by Vladimir Nabokov*, 345, 347.
[263] Nabokov, *Poems*, 17.

between two worlds. In this sense, inspiration is a constituent part of Nabokov's *potustoronnost'*, as Connolly's words can confirm:

> one can place the poems expressing the two world theme into four broad categories: poems involving the poet's thoughts about his distant homeland; poems about the poet and a loved one; poems about art and the nature of inspiration; and poems about a supernatural "other" realm – a world that exists beyond our physical dimensions and that an perhaps be comprehended completely only after death.[264]

What *Formula* and *Ballada* do not share, though, is the final outcome. Khodasevich presents us with Orpheus standing on rocks, fiercely holding his lyre: transfiguration, in his case, is included in the poem. On the contrary, Nabokov's ending is deliberately left open. The Russian imperfective verbs "priobrazhalsya" and "razmnozhalsya" as well as the English past continuous "was being transfigured" do not reveal the ultimate result but remain focused on the unfolding of the action. What we are left with is the perfect *nihil* of "Nichto" / "Nought." The fingerless coat is, at the end, not "bespaloye" / "fingerless," as at the beginning, but more definitively "pustoye" / "empty."

If Khodasevich seems to believe in the poet's ultimate role to be inspired and to inspire, in spite of the shallow and trivial surroundings of his there and then, here Nabokov appears to be more interested in the process rather than its conclusion, in the poet's own psychological progression rather than in his role. Hence the prescriptive steps described in almost scientific terms. What is more, Nabokov does not present us with the poet's new status: we are left in an empty room where nothing more than the poet's few spare traces survive. Such a conclusion only confirms that through inspiration the poet may have reached a new dimension, that *po tu storonu*, on the flipside of space and time, yet we have no other, more tangible evidence. While in Khodasevich's Orpheus we are given the ultimate proof of the poet's evolution, in Nabokov's *Nichto* let us envision his

[264] Connolly, "The Otherworldly in Nabokov's Poetry," 330.

metamorphosis, giving room for interpretation. The poet's coat serves as the conclusive evidence: an empty shell, devoid of life, or the hollow skin left behind by a snake after its moult.

Post scriptum: in a later English poem entitled *The Room* (1950),[265] Nabokov has a poet disappear in the "blend / of anonymity and doom" of a hotel room which "seem[s], that room, to condescend / to imitate a normal room." He himself was then staying in Canada (evoked in the maples of the poem), at the Park Plaza Hotel, for a lecture at the University of Toronto.[266] By now the reader should be experienced enough to recognise the same chair, window and bed. This time, though, the glint of light does not come from the moon but from the electrical bulb of a shop sign. A cheap picture hangs on the wall: the eruption of red maple foliage in autumnal wind resembles a heart being shot through (not unlike Mayakovskiy's or Pushkin's). The sheer contrast between art and *poshlost'* is echoed when the poet curses the painting "in the style / of Mr. Churchill at his best," an ironic remark on the English Prime Minister's naïf style as a painter. A sense of loneliness and seclusion is displayed in the dead poet's last words, written – rather conveniently in pencil (quite unlike Esenin's drained blood) – above the bed: ""alone, unknown, unloved, I die"."

In *The Room* Nabokov lets us glimpse beyond the poet's disappearance. Through the external voice, the poet's death is said to be "a question of technique, a neat / enjambment, a melodic fall." Metamorphosis can only be granted by the artistic, creative act. When the poet vanishes, his words remain, a trace of his existence surviving as a warning to the attentive eye in the anonymity of a hotel room resembling a "ghostly thorax," an empty cage deprived of its beating life.

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[265] Nabokov, *Poems*, 25-26.
[266] Boyd, *Vladimir Nabokov: The American Years*, 145-146.

In the English verses of *The Room* the Russian poems *Nomer v gostinitse* and *Formula* evolve into an obituary for the poet's death that is reminiscent of Roman Jakobson's 1930 prophetic words:

> через несколько десятков лет мы будем жестко прозваны – люди прошлого тысячелетия. У нас были только захватывающие песни о будущем, и вдруг эти песни из динамики сегодняшнего дня превратились в историко-литературный факт. Когда певцы убиты, а песню волокут в музей, пришпиливают к вчерашнему дню, еще опустошеннее, сиротливей да неприкаянней становится это поколение, неимущее в доподлиннейшем смысле слова.[267]

3.3 К Кн. С. М. Качурину / To Prince S. M. Kachurin

Nabokov wrote one of his most suggestive and controversial poems in 1927. Its first stanza introduces the reader to a recurrent dream, during which the poetic persona finds himself back in Russia and is led to a ravine to be killed. Then, suddenly, he comes back to his senses and gratefully repossesses "the fortunate protection of [his] exile." Yet the poem ends on a surprising note:

Но сердце как бы ты хотело,	But how you would have wished, my heart,
что это вправду было так:	that *thus* it all had really been:
Россия, звезды, ночь расстрела	Russia, the stars, the night of execution
и весь в черемухе овраг.	and full of racemosas the ravine![268]

Rasstrel/The Execution tells of Nabokov's nostalgic retrospection and unconditional devotion to his native land. But it does so by presenting the reader with an extraordinary condition – an execution – and a likewise eccentric concluding standpoint.

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[267] Roman Yakobson, "O pokolenii, rastrativshem svoikh poetov," in Yakobson, Roman and Dmitriy Svyatopolk-Mirskiy, *Smert' Vladimira Mayakovskogo* (The Hague-Paris: Mouton, 1975), 34.
[268] Nabokov, "Rasstrel" / "The Execution," in *Poems and Problems*, 46-47. Nabokov's italics.

The envisioned journey of homecoming recurs throughout Nabokov's poetry and prose. As Svetlana Boym writes,

> nostalgia is the main drive in his work […]. Yet even at their most redolent, the nostalgic trails are predicated on the impossibility of homecoming. As the years of exile multiplied, political necessity was transformed into an aesthetic choice. The nonreturn became Nabokov's main literary device. At the same time, the writer seems to travel back almost in every text – but illicitly, in the guise of his characters, under a false name, crossing borders in the text, not in life.[269]

In his Russian novel *Podvig* [Glory, 1931-1932] the young quasi-autobiographical protagonist Martyn Edel'weys plans to illegally penetrate the Russian borders for twenty-four hours only to disappear into thin air, his shadow slowly infiltrating a dense forest. Here post-revolutionary Soviet Russia is given the enigmatic name of Zoorlandiya and is described as a dystopic country:

> страна была скалистая, ветреная, и ветер признан был благою силой, ибо, ратуя за равенство, не терпел башен и высоких деревьев, а сам был только выразителем социальных стремлений воздушных слоев, прилежно следящих, чтобы вот тут не было жарче, чем вот там. И, конечно, искусства и науки объявлены были вне закона, ибо слишком обидно и раздражительно для честных невежд видеть задумчивость грамотея и его слишком толстые книги. Бритоголовые, в бурых рясах, зоорландцы грелись у костров, в которых звучно лопались струны сжигаемых скрипок, а иные поговаривали о том, что пора пригладить гористую страну, взорвать горы, чтобы они не торчали так высокомерно.[270]

The poem *Ul'daborg* (1930) presents a similar scenario. Its subtitle being *Perevod s zoorlandskogo* [A Translation from the Zoorlandish], the text can be read in the light of *Podvig* and has been interpreted as a possible ending to the novel itself.[271] Similarly, here

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[269] Boym, *The Future of Nostalgia*, 262.

[270] Vladimir Nabokov, *Podvig*, (Sankt-Peterburg: Azbuka, 2014), 161.

[271] Maksim Shrayer, "O kontsovke nabokovskogo "Podviga"," *Staroye literaraturnoye obozreniye* 1, no. 277 (2001): magazines.russ.ru/slo/2001/1/shaer.html. Accessed 7 Jun. 2017; alternatively see: Maxim Shrayer, "The Perfect Glory of Nabokov's Exploit," *Russian Studies in Literature* 4, no. 35 (1999): 32.

arts and sciences have been banned, beauty is but a fading memory. The descriptive tone is suddenly interrupted by a roaring laugh resounding through the main square. "Я вернулся," exclaims the poetic persona. He has come back and at present he climbs on the scaffold.

	Literal translation
Погляжу на знакомые дюны,	I look at the familiar dunes,
на алмазную в небе гряду,	at the diamond ridge in the sky
глубже руки в карманы засуну	deeper my hands in the pockets I thrust
и со смехом на плаху взойду.[272]	and with a smile on the scaffold I climb.

The fact that he has been identified as the unwanted returnee means he must be executed. His grotesque laugh in the face of death sounds incongruous and disturbing.

In the short story *Poseshcheniye muzeya* [The Visit to the Museum, 1938], a visit to a seemingly ordinary museum in the invented French town of Montisert gradually grows into a nightmarish hallucination where an Escherian maze of corridors and rooms leads the narrator to a somewhat familiar and yet foreign Russia, that of the Soviet era:

> "нет, я сейчас проснусь", – произнес я вслух и, дрожа, с колотящимся сердцем, повернулся, пошел, остановился опять, – и где-то раздавался, удаляясь, мягкий ленивый и ровный стук копыт, и снег ермолкой сидел на чуть косой тумбе, и он же смутно белел на поленнице из-за забора, и я уже непоправимо знал, где нахожусь. Увы! это была не Россия моей памяти, а всамделишная, сегодняшняя, заказанная мне, безнадежно рабская и безнадежно родная.[273]

For fear of being recognised, the protagonist and narrator throws away his possessions, rips up his documents and money. Unfortunately, this is not enough:

> но для того, чтобы совершенно отделаться от всех эмигрантских чешуй, не обходимо было бы содрать и уничтожить одежду, белье, обувь, все, –

[272] Nabokov, "Ul'daborg," in *Stikhotvoreniya*, 351.
[273] Vladimir Nabokov, "Poseshcheniye muzeya," in *Zashchita Luzhina, Kamera Obskura, Lolita, Rasskazy*, ed. A. Ferez (Moskva: Olma-Press Zvezdnyy mir, 2003), 519.

> остаться идеально нагим, и хотя меня и так трясло от тоски и холода, я сделал, что мог.
> Но довольно. Не стану рассказывать ни о том, как меня задержали, ни о дальнейших моих испытаниях. Достаточно сказать, что мне стоило неимоверного терпения и трудов обратно выбраться за границу.[274]

The obsessive paradox of being recognised as both a returnee and a stranger in one's own motherland reverberates through the verses of *Kak ya lyublyu tebya* / *How I Love You* (1934), where the poet urges his own alter ego, possibly a younger self, to come home:

Уйдем, уйдем, пока не поздно,	Let's go, let's go before it's too late,
скорее, под плащом, домой,	quick, under one cloak, come home,
пока еще ты не опознан,	while you still are unrecognized,
безумный мой, безумный мой!	my mad one, my mad one![275]

In *Dlya Stranstviya Nochnogo Mne Ne Nado…* ["For Nighttime Peregrination I Do Not Need…," 1929] a "беспаспортная тень" [shadow without passport] jumps on the Russian side of the border. Concealed by the darkness, the man is not recognised and at the same time fails to recognise his city, Saint Petersburg, and his childhood home. The process of recognition fails altogether. Some children sleep in what must have been his room, he bends over them and osmotically gives them his own dreams. Alienation from one's own self is thematically ingrained in the poem.

As part of a cycle of *postos* poems, *K Kn. S. M. Kachurinu* (1947) narrates the first impressions of a much awaited homecoming. Because of its length, only 9 of its 21 stanzas (the first and fourth part) will be analysed in detail here. A brief summary will be provided for the remaining (central) parts.

Nabokov's Russian text
I-IV stanzas
К. Кн. С. М. Качурину
Качурин, твой совет я принял

[274] Ibidem.
[275] Nabokov, *Poems and Problems*, 78-79.

и вот уж третий день живу
в музейной обстановке, в синей
гостиной с видом на Неву.

Священником американским
твой бедный друг переодет,
и всем долинам дагестанским
я шлю завистливый привет.

От холода, от перебоев
в подложном паспорте не сплю:
исследователи обоев
лилеи и лианы шлю.

Но спит, на канапе устроясь,
коленки приложив к стене
и завернувшись в плед по пояс,
толмач, приставленный ко мне.

Literal translation
To Pr[ince] S. M. Kachurin
Kachurin, I have taken your advice
and here now, it is the third day I have been living
in a museum setting, in a blue
sitting-room with a view on the Neva.

As an American priest
your poor friend is dressed up/disguised,
and to all the Dagestan valleys
I send/am sending an envious greeting.

Due to the cold, to the palpitations
of a/the false passport, I cannot sleep:
to the researchers of wallpapers
I send/am sending lilies and lianas.

But [he sleeps], settling on the settee,
with [his] knees placed against the wall
and wrapped up in a/the plaid to [his] belt/waist,
the/an interpreter sleeps, appointed to me.

Nabokov's English version
Kachurin, your advice I've accepted
and here I am, living for the third day

in a museumist setup: a blue
drawing room with a view on the Neva.

As an American clergyman
your poor friend is disguised,
and to all Daghestan valleys
I send envious greetings.

Because of the cold, and the palpitations
of a false passport, I cannot sleep.
To wallpaper investigators
lianas and lilies I send.

But he sleeps (curled up on a canapé,
Knees snugly pressed to the wall,
In a plaid rug wrapped up to the waist)
– the interpreter I've been assigned.

Since the very title, involving a certain Prince Kachurin whom the speaking voice addresses himself to, the poem asks for the reader's active participation in deciphering its many allusions. The first stanza opens *in mediaѕ reѕ*, the poetic voice spending his third day in Russia. Due to the apostrophic address, however, we never hear Kachurin's own voice throughout the whole text. Because of its monological nature, then, the poem could be read as reporting the content of a letter. The tone is rather confidential and intimate: the poetic persona has followed his friend's advice and entrusts him with his own otherwise undisclosed considerations. Due to its iambic tetrameter and alternate rhyme scheme, the Russian original sounds less spontaneous than the more colloquial English diction, deprived as it is of any fixed rhythmic or rhyme pattern.

Again, the scene takes place in the enclosed space of a (rented?) room. Unlike the two poems previously analysed in this chapter, though, the present one has a more decidedly marked narrative structure and illustrates "the principle of making a short poem contain a plot and tell a story,"[276] which served as a scheme for Nabokov's more mature

[276] Ibidem, 14.

poetry. The first four stanzas are sufficient to present us with the basic elements of the plot. A man, disguised as an American priest, lies in a room with an interpreter. The river Neva reveals the exact geographical location – the city of Saint Petersburg or, since the poem was written right in the middle of the Soviet era, of Leningrad, without it ever being explicitly mentioned. The detail of the false passport further motivates the man's disguise and the presence of his interpreter: he has probably infiltrated the Russian borders illegally (to Kachurin's advice) and is currently hiding himself under false pretences.

The informal tone of the poem emerges in certain linguistic features; the fact that they have been preserved and sometimes accentuated in the translated version proves the importance of such a component. The Russian spoken expression "i vot uzh," that I have tentatively translated as "and here now," has been rendered into a less vernacular "and here I am," which nevertheless highlights the resigned tone of a person who, despite breaking the law, feels trapped and helpless. The double repetition of "ya shlyu" / "I send" at the end of the second and third stanzas has more to do with the oral tendency toward unchecked iteration than it has with poetic refrains. The use of brackets in the English fourth stanza graphically marks a – literally – parenthetical digression on the interpreter's sleeping posture. Even the Russian more historically connoted noun "tolmach," which in ancient Rus' indicated a "должностной, официальный переводчик, посредничавший в беседе между русским человеком и иностранцем,"[277] is rendered as a neutral "interpreter."

The original verses have an enigmatic quality to them which resembles that of *Formula*. Let us read into some of the embedded riddles. The assertion "zhivu / v muzeynoy obstanovke" seems to allude to the aseptic isolation in which the speaking voice is constrained. "Issledovatel[i] oboyev" might be interpreted as a reference to insomniacs staring at the walls covered with wallpaper, lianas and lilies featuring as a common print pattern. Most interestingly, the envious greetings to "dolin[y] dagestanskim" is an indirect

[277] *Tolkovyy slovar' Ushakova*.

quote from Lermontov's poem *Son* [The Dream, 1841], whose opening stanza reads as follows:

В полдневный жар в долине Дагестана	I dreamt that with a bullet in my side
С винцом в груди лежал недвижим я;	in a hot gorge of Daghestan I lay.
Глубокая еще дымилась рана;	Deep was the wound and steaming, and the tide
По капле кровь точилась моя.	of my life-blood ebbed drop by drop away.[278]

Exactly a century later than the original, Nabokov translated Lermontov's text as *The Triple Dream*.[279] The English title summarises the poem's layered content, in which three levels of dream are contained into one another and are enclosed in a circular structure: a dead man dreams of a wounded person laying in a Daghestan valley and dreaming of his faraway beloved, who, in her turn, dreams of him, dead. Similarly, Nabokov's *K Kn. S. M. Kachurinu* presents a three-layered dream: the speaking subject dreams "of go[ing] off to the country" and subsequently immerses himself in the memory of "the pampas of [his] free youth;" moreover, as suggested in the reference to Lermontov's verses, his own homecoming might be in fact a dream, thus transforming the whole poem into a reverie. Transported into a different cultural context, the English translation of this particular reference risks losing such a meaningful retrospective connection – even more so when Nabokov makes the *dolina* into a "gorge" (in a later version, dated 1956-57, which he redacted for his and his son's translation of *Geroy nashego vremeni*, he would have used the more appropriate "dale").[280] When read against *Son*, the envious feeling seems to be

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[278] The English translation is Nabokov's: Boyd and Shvabrin, ed., and Nabokov, trans., *Verses and Version. Three centuries of Russian Poetry Selected and Translated by Vladimir Nabokov*, 296-297. For the purpose of the present analysis I have used Lermontov's version as reported by Boyd and Shvabrin in the aforementioned source book, namely: Mikhail Lermontov, *Polnoye sobraniye sochineniy*, vol. 1, *Stikhotvoreniya*, ed. Boris Eykhenbaum (Moskva: Gosudarstvennoye izdatel'stvo khudozhestvennoy literatury, 1947-1948), 85.

[279] Originally published on *The Russian Review* 1, no. 1 (1941): 33. A second version was published in Mikhail Lermontov, *A Hero of Our Time*, trans. Vladimir Nabokov and Dmitry Nabokov (Garden City: Doubleday Anchor, 1958), V-VI.

[280] Boyd and Shvabrin, ed., and Nabokov, trans., *Verses and Version. Three centuries of Russian Poetry Selected and Translated by Vladimir Nabokov*, 298. Originally in Lermontov, *A Hero of Our Time*, V-VI.

directed not so much to the Daghestan valleys themselves as the epitome of open spaces and pure nature, as to the dead man laying there, his corpse the ultimate evidence of his heroic feat. As in *Rasstrel* / *The Execution*, the poetic persona admires fearless abnegation and self-sacrifice. However, even if the reference to Lermontov passed unnoticed, the poem would still work: a more naïve reading will interpret the Daghestan valleys as an illustration of untouched beauty and the man's envy as the expression of his wish to overcome the narrow limits of his present condition. *Per contra*, the rest of Nabokov's poem inverts Lermontov's: if the latter is set "v poldnevnyy zhar," the first has "ot kholoda;" if the latter presents a dreaming corpse, the first introduces us to a living insomniac.

The speaking voice then goes on to describe his own emotive state when, coming closer to the window, he has felt the urge to go off to the country, his body aching "with the languor of youth once more." The window, thus, is again a portal, this time opening onto the past. By his own admission, he is back in Russia "after the laps of almost / thirty years of eclipse," which, if we take 1947 as the chronological setting of the poem, ends up coinciding with Nabokov's amount of time spent in emigration by the time he wrote the poem in question. He compares himself now to a "picture postcard minus one corner (cut off for the sake of the stamp)," the stamp literally symbolising the stamp of reality onto his life, now to a train stopped "in the stillness of fields," unable to move forward. Despite his enthusiastic projections, however, he suddenly comes to the realisation that he would be "completely translucent / with a novel of Sirin in [his] hands:" a Russian novel – for that matter, the author's own – would disclose his disguise, making him easily recognisable to others.

In the last part of the poem, the increasingly melancholic rumination on nostalgia degenerates into an incongruous conglomerate of entangled thoughts. Or, at least, apparently so.

Nabokov's Russian text
XVII-XXI stanzas

Мне страшно. Не столбом ростральным,
не ступенями при луне,
ведущими к огням спиральным,
ко ртутной и тугой волне,

не заслоняется…при встрече
я, впрочем, все скажу тебе
о новом, о широкоплечем
провинциале и рабе.

Мне хочется домой. Довольно.
Качурин, можно мне домой?
В пампасы молодости волной,
в техасы, найденные мной.

Я спрашиваю, не пора-ли
вернутся к теме тетивы,
в чарующему «чапаралю»
из Всадника без Головы,

чтоб в Матагордовом ущелье,
заснуть на огненных камнях,
с лицом сухим от акварели,
с пером вороным в волосах?

Literal translation

I am afraid. Not the/a rostral column,
Not the steps in the moon,
[the steps] leading to the spiral fires,
to the mercurial and taut wave,

can hide/shield…when we meet/next time
I will, then/however, tell you everything
on the new, on the broad-shouldered
provincial and slave.

I want to go home. Enough.
Kachurin, may I go home?
To the pampass[-grass] of my free youth,
To the texases discovered/found by me.

I (am) wonder(ing)/ask(ing), isn't it time
to go back to the theme of the bow-string,

to the enchanting "chaparral"
from the Horseman without Head,

(in order) to, in the Matagordo Gorge,
fall asleep on the fiery (red) stones,
the face withered/baked with watercolours,
a crow feather in the hair?

Nabokov's English version
I'm frightened. Neither the rostral column,
nor the steps that lead, under the moon,
down to the spiral reflections of lights,
to the compact quicksilver wave

can mask – Anyway at our next meeting
I shall tell you everything
about the new, the broad-shouldered
provincial and slave.

I want to go home. I've had enough.
Kachurin, may I go home?
To the pampas of my free youth,
to the Texas I once discovered.

I'm asking you: Isn't it time
to return to the theme of the bowstring,
or to what is enchantingly called "chaparral"
in *The Headless Horseman*,

so as to fall asleep in Matagordo Gorge,
on the fiery-hot boulders there
with the skin of one's face parched by aquarelle paint,
and a crow's feather stuck in one's hair?

The final sequence opens with two more topographic details: the monumental "stolb[/] rostral'n[yy]" / "rostral column" and the "stupen[i] […] / vedushch[iye] k ognyam spiral'nym" / "the steps that lead […] / down the spiral reflections of light" guide the reader to the Neva embankment, in correspondence of the so called *Strelka Vasil'evskogo ostrova* [Spit of the Vasil'evsky Island]. In both the original and its translation the second sentence is left incomplete: due to such a prominent aposiopesis the reader has no chance to know

what the column and the steps cannot mask. We know, though, that the spiral occupied a particular place in Nabokov's poetics and mindset. An open form, it symbolises the uninterrupted flow of space and time: "the spiral is a spiritualized circle. In the spiral form, the circle, uncoiled, unwound, has ceased to be vicious; it has been set free,"[281] or again: "every dimension presupposes a medium within which it can act, and if, in the spiral unwinding of things, space warps into something akin to time, and time, in its turn, warps into something akin to thought, then surely, another dimension follows – a special Space, maybe, not the old one, we trust, unless spirals become vicious circles again."[282]

The following stanza is similarly reticent: who is "the new, the broadshouldered / provincial and slave?" Could he be Stalin? The image of a head of state may be easily associated to a "shirokoplech[iy]" person, an attribute alluding to his sturdiness and prominence; he might be "provincial[/]" if we consider he originally came from the Georgian region; the concluding "rab" could be a reference to his signing of the Molotov-Ribentrop pact in 1939 (in 1947 the Second World War, or *Velikaya otechestvennaya voyna*, was still resonant enough). Yet in 1947 Stalin was anything but "nov[yy]." Could the poetic persona be referring to the interpreter then? The interplay between different readings increases the effectiveness of the ongoing reticence as well as the discomfort due to such an ambivalence.

This state of uncertainty and anticipation introduces us to the last part of the text. Here, the main speaker comes to the realisation that he wants to go home and ostensibly implores his addressee to be brought back. It was Fedor Dvinyatin who first traced back Nabokov's line to Boris Pasternak's poem *Mne khochetsya domoy* [I Want to Go Home, 1931-1932],[283] where the theme of homecoming is equally explored, though from a different angle. The fact that Pasternak never left Russia makes of him an internal émigré writer.

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[281] Nabokov, *Speak, Memory*, 594.
[282] Ibidem, 620.
[283] Dvinyatin, "Pyat' peyzazhey s nabokovskoy siren'yu," 295-296.

His wish to go home, rather than consisting in a synchronic movement through space, materialises into a diachronic yearning for an innocent past, one of innocent vitality and familiar intimacy. I would argue that the melodramatic tone of the plea contained in Nabokov's verses also reminds of Nikolay Gogol''s short story *Shinel'* [The Overcoat, 1842]. In his 1927 essay *Kak sdelana «Shinel'» Gogol'ya* [How Gogol''s Overcoat Is Done], Boris Eychenbaum wrote: "есть в «Шинели» и иная декламация, неожиданно внедряющаяся в общий каламбурный стиль – сентиментально-мелодраматическая; это – знаменитое «гуманное» место, которому так повезло в русской критике, что оно, из побочного художественного приема, стало «идеей» всей повести."[284] What Eychenbaum was referring to is Akakiy Akakiyevich's whining complaint "оставьте меня, зачем вы меня обижаете?" [leave me alone, why are you insulting me?]. Nabokov's verses and Gogol''s *skaz* share their disruptively unforeseen incoherence with the rest of the text: "получается впечатление комического несоответствия между напряженностью синтактической интонации, глухо и таинственно начинающейся, и ее смысловым разрешением."[285]

Nabokov's lines become even more incongruent when the speaking voice of his poem, whom by now we know to be Russian by nationality, culture and language, associates the concept of home with a series of American referents, such as the pampas grass meadows, the Matagorda Canyon and the traditional feather of native Americans – in other words, the mythological Wild West. Like in Pasternak's *Mne khochetsya domoy*, Nabokov's homecoming is, against all odds, a journey through time rather than through space: his America is not a geographical place but rather a place of the mind, a projection of his own childhood. This emerges in correspondence of "Vsadnik[/] bez Golovy" / "*The Headless Horseman*," a Western novel by the adventurous writer Thomas (Captain) Mayne

[284] Boris Eychenbaum, "Kak sdelana «Shinel'» Gogolya," in *Literatura: Teoriya. Kritika. Polemika* (Leningrad: Priboy, 1927), opojaz.ru/manifests/kaksdelana.html. Accessed 21 Mar. 2017.
[285] Ibidem.

Reid (1868), whom Nabokov came to know thanks to his cousin Yuriy Raush von Traubenberg and loved throughout his Russian childhood.[286] In the original version of the poem, Reid's novel appears without any typographic mark that may help identify it as a title, but for two initial capital letters; in the English translation, the title is written in italics, which makes the reference easier to grasp, despite it already being part of the target culture. This might be due to the fact that to a Russian ear the noun "vsadnik" reminds more of Pushkin's verse novel *Медный всадник* [The Bronze Horseman, 1833-1837], also set in the city of Saint Petersburg, though in the imperial 19th century. We may suspect that ambiguities are purposefully left unresolved.

What Nabokov is performing here is a complex process of identification and estrangement at once. Not only does he identify himself with the poetic persona of his verses by giving him his own life experience, but he also misleads the reader by playing with his own past: though having had a Russian childhood (in spite of his trilingual upbringing and Anglophone family), the writer identifies it with a series of American elements, mediated through a novel he had read as a young boy – hence the reference to American stereotypes. The word "dom" / "home," therefore, is to be understood as a conglomerate of memories from his cherished past or, alternatively, as the safe refuge that emigration provided him with in adulthood. As maintained by Boym,

> the expression "to go home" is one of the most ambiguous in Nabokov's writing; it doesn't always refer to the return to Russia. […]
> Here, "going home" means going back to the poet's carefree youth in Russia, to the exciting readings of Captain Mayne Reid […]. The writer longs for Russia, where he was first possessed with anticipatory nostalgia for the United States. Or rather, the ex-Russian disguised as an American dreams of going back to the America of his Russian dreams just as he is going "home" to Russia. Two spaces, Russia and the United States, and two moments in time are linked in a Mobius strip of the writer's imagination.[287]

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[286] Nabokov, *Speak, Memory*, 525. He would have later translated Reid's novel into French alexandrines.
[287] Boym, *The Future of Nostalgia*, 272.

The conventional contours of words are widened, their aura spread, as in the case of "Texas," whose semantic borders are stretched to such an extent that they are ultimately able to include Nabokov's quintessentially Russian past. A semantic *эдvig* of sorts. This becomes particularly evident in the source text, where the American state appears in the estranged plural form of "teksasy," also lacking the capital letter. Nabokov's quasi-neologism makes the process of *остраненiye* into a visual evidence, a semantic clue where the symbolic use of the term and its semantic shift coincide in one single synthetic lexeme:

> поэт совершает семантический сдвиг, он выхватывает понятие из того смыслового ряда, в котором оно находилось, и перемещает его при помощи слова (тропа) в другой смысловой ряд, при чем мы ощущаем новизну, нахождение предмета в новом ряду. Новое слово сидит на предмете, как новое платье. Вывеска снята. Это один из способов обращения предмета в нечто ощутимое, в нечто, могущее стать материалом художественного произведения.[288]

K Kn. S. M. Kachurinu is ultimately a poem about estrangement, both in a thematic and linguistic sense. The speaking voice is estranged from himself, disguised, as he is, as a clergyman. The sight of Russia is estranging to him, after so many years of absence and longing. The passing mention of Sirin results in an estranged presence of the author, who peeks through his own verses. The implied mention of Lermontov, Gogol', Pasternak, Pushkin and Reid estranges their words from their respective contexts and gives them new shades of meaning. The idiosyncratic connotation of certain lexemes lets them be read as if for the first time.

What makes the poem even more subtly estranging is Prince Kachurin's identity. In the English note to his self-translation, Nabokov describes the addressee in his poem as "[his] poor friend, a former White Army colonel, [who] died a few years [prior] in an Alaskan monastery," a man of "golden heart, moderate brain power, and senile optimism

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[288] Viktor Shklovskiy, "Stroyeniye rasskaza i romana," in *Sborniki po teorii poeticheskogo yazyka*, vol. 3, *Razvertyvaniye syuzheta* (Petrograd: OPOYAZ, 1921), 10-11

[whose] daughter is married to the composer Tornitsen."[289] In the introduction to a reading in New York in 1949, Nabokov specified his name as Sergey Mikhaylovich Kachurin; he first appears in *Dar* as the author of *Krasnaya knyazhka*.[290] Now, few Russian émigrés ventured back to their motherland during the Soviet era. We know of Vladimir Lebedev (1883-1956), one of the co-redactors of *Volya Rossii* [Will of Russia, a social-revolutionary periodical published in emigration] in Paris, who in 1929 travelled back to the Soviet Union with somebody else's passport and published his report once he managed to escape unharmed; also Pavel Dolgorukov (1866-1927), a cadet and deputy of the second *Duma*, infiltrated the Soviet borders twice but was eventually arrested and executed.[291] When asked by *The Paris Review*, in 1967, whether he had ever been in touch with Soviet citizens, Nabokov answered that he had practically no contact with them, though he once "agree[d], in the early thirties or late twenties, to meet – out of sheer curiosity – an agent from Bolshevist Russia who was trying hard to get émigré writers and artists to return to the fold."[292]

While Nabokov's character might have been inspired by the case of popular returnees or by his own experience as an émigré writer, neither Kachurin nor Tornitsen ever existed as such. They are but another figment of Nabokov's own imagination. The name Kachurin itself was suggested by Nikolay Yakovlev, a contributor to *Rul'* [The Rudder] and a friend of his, who often helped Nabokov's creativity by providing him "with a list of names of extinct Russian families that he could bestow on this or that character he would invent."[293] Hence Kachurin is the imaginary addressee of Nabokov's apostrophe,

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[289] Nabokov, *Poems and Problems*, 141.
[290] Vladimir Nabokov and Galina Glushanok, ed., "Zametki <dlya avtorskogo vechera «Stikhi i kommentarii» 7 maya 1949 g.>," in *V. V. Nabokov: Pro et Contra*, vol. 2, 142.
[291] Ibidem.
[292] Herbert Gold and Vladimir Nabokov, "Vladimir Nabokov, The Art of Fiction No. 40," *The Paris Review*, no. 41 (Summer-Fall 1967): theparisreview.org/interviews/4310/vladimir-nabokov-the-art-of-fiction-no-40-vladimir-nabokov. Accessed 10 Jun. 2017.
[293] Boyd, *Vladimir Nabokov. The Russian Years*, 255.

one that we may as well read as extending to a chimeric Russia. Reflecting on the significance of apostrophy in Nabokov's poetic output, David Rampton wanders: "if Russia is not a country but the poet's soul, then what better figure to imagine this than the apostrophe, with its sublimity, urgency, and yearning, and its invocation of a "you" that can be read as a transposed "I"?"[294]

For this reason, the poem should not necessarily be read as a letter but rather as an act of *avtokommunkatsiya*, defined by Yuriy Lotman as a verbal exchange in which "субъект передает сообщение самому себе, то есть тому, кому оно уже и так известно."[295] While this would be already a form of estrangement from oneself, for self-communication to have a reasonable purpose, apart from a merely mnemonic function, the message should act upon its code, adding a new, secondary layer to the semantics of the text.[296] This is where the linguistic device of estrangement becomes determinant to the purpose of the poem, broadening the semantic borders of words. As a result, Russia is apparently obliterated – there is no explicit mention of it throughout the text – still, it survives under the cover of a displaced semiosis. "There are no voluntary devices for forgetting, but there are devices for remembering badly: it is necessary," Umberto Eco affirms, "to multiply the semiosis."[297] Nabokov's lack of recognition ultimately fulfils Shklovskiy's principle of *ostraneniye*, according to which "целью искусства является дать ощущение вещи, как видение, а не как узнавание."[298] Thence *potustoronnost'* is ultimately about "the possibility of preserving the earthly *within* the paradisiacal"[299] and, even more, a meta-logical return: in *K Kn. S. M.*

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[294] David Rampton, "The Art of Invocation: the Role of the Apostrophe in Nabokov's Early Poetry," in C. Proffer, E. Proffer, Lowe et al., ed., *Russian Literature Triquarterly*, 350.
[295] Yuriy Lotman, "O dvukh modelyakh kommunikatsii v sisteme kul'tury," in *Izbrannyye stat'i v trekh tomakh*, 76.
[296] Ibidem, 83.
[297] Umberto Eco, "An Ars Oblivionalis? Forget It!," *PMLA* 103, no. 3 (May 1988): 259.
[298] Shklovskiy, "Iskusstvo kak priyem," 7. The sentence is reported here according to standard Russian orthography. The term *uznavaniye* [recognition] is used, as explained by Shklovskiy himself, to indicate – and criticise – Potebnya's lack of distinction between practical image ("образ, как практическое средство мышления") and poetic image ("образ поэтический – средство усиления впечатления").
[299] Connolly, "The Otherworldly in Nabokov's Poetry," 334. Connolly's italics.

Kachurinu, as in many poems by Nabokov, the otherworld is but a restoration of the poet's childhood and motherland or, alternatively, the protection found in his American exile – meta-logical because it has been deprived of its recognisable traits through the use of an estranged and estranging language.

"Dom" / "home," "teksasy" / "Texas," "Vsadnik[/] bez Golovy" / "*The Headless Horseman*" are all symbols in Belyy's sense: "символ есть измерение догмата: *третье* его глубина; ибо в символе догмат – не круг, а спиралью построенный конус вращения; линия эволюции в конусе *догмата-символа* есть из единственной первоположенной точки растущая плоскость кругов и фигур, в круги вписанных."[300] They are a metonymic representation of the past and, in that, a metaphoric expression of a wish – a spiral cone opening onto a third dimension, that of *potustoronnost'*, its ending open, unresolved. The spiral, Nabokov's "spiritualised circle," stands for a perpetual (r-)evolution, "one uninterrupted peel […] / revolving on [a] fingertip" – a *Restoration* (1952), a whirl of unfolding alternatives:

> To think that any fool may tear
> by chance the web of when and where.
> Oh window in the dark! To think
> that every brain is on the brink
> of nameless bliss no brain can bear[301]

K Kn. S. M. Kachurinu is yet another manifest example of how Nabokov's self-translated poems should be read in combination and comparison to one another. The most evident case of intra-trope is contained in the mention of "teksasy" / "Texas," the first becoming a metonymic representation of the latter as filtered through the author's own memory. Though the English version might seem self-contained and does stand on its own,

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[300] Andrey Belyy, *Na perevale*, vol. 3, *Kriziz kul'tury* (Sankt Peterburg: Alkonost, 1920), 77 and 80.
[301] Nabokov, "Restoration," *Poems*, 29.

it does not compensate for the loss of the many literary reminiscences and semantic stratifications that are so relevant to the original text –

> unless there be no great surprise –
> as when you learn to levitate
> and, hardly trying, realize
> – alone, in a bright room – that weight
> is but your shadow, and you rise.[302]

[302] Ibidem.

4. МОЛЧИ / SPEAK NOT

On Reticence

> I know more than I can express in words, and the little I can express would not have been expressed had I not known more.
>
> Vladimir Nabokov, *Strong Opinions*.[303]

Nabokov loved his masks. As if a character from one of his own novels, his presence can be detected in many of his prose works.

The short story *Vasiliy Shishkov* (1939), in particular, was Nabokov's last piece of short fiction written in Russian before the writer's emigration to the US. There, the young protagonist, who gives the name to the homonymous story, calls upon a certain *gospodin*, who is the narrator as well as a poet and who, by chance, happens to go by the name of Nabokov. Yet the author's presence is not confined to his explicit mirrored self. As the story unfolds, the reader comes to understand that Shishkov is yet another splinter of Nabokov's fragmented and multiplied *persona*.

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[303] Nabokov, *Strong Opinions*, 45. The quote consists in Nabokov's answer to the question on whether he believed or not in God.

By the time he published the aforementioned story, Nabokov had already used Vasiliy Shishkov as the pseudonym for a poem titled *Poety* [The Poets, 1939], which won Georgiy Adamovich's unprecedented praise: "the trick worked: in his weekly review [Adamovich] welcomed the appearance of a mysterious new poet with such eloquent enthusiasm that I could not resist keeping up the joke by describing my meetings with the fictitious Shishkov in a story which contained, among other plums, a criticism of the poem and of Adamovich's praise."

The 1939 poem explores the broader implications of emigration: the collective "we" encapsulates the large émigré Russian community of the young generation, "still youthful , / with a list of dreams not yet dreamt, / with the last, hardly visible radiance of Russia."

As noted by Maxim D. Shrayer, the poem plays with ellipses. The omission is twofold since it quotes from Khodasevich while at the same time using silence, and therefore absence, as a tool:

> In a moment we'll pass across the world's threshold
> into a region - name it as you please:
> wilderness, death, disavowal of language,
> or maybe simpler: the silence of love,
>
> the silence of a distant caraway, its furrow,
> beneath the foam of flowers concealed;
> my silent country (the love that is hopeless);
> the silent sheet lightning, the silent seed.

Yet Nabokov's silence is not gratuitous nor fortuitous. On the contrary, it becomes a vehicle to let the reader fill in the gap between words and feelings, substance and intuition, source and target material. Nabokov entrusts his audience with the freedom to deduce. His writing is often a process of subtraction, whereby he prefers to stop at the moment he feels language coming up short in spite of its rich complexity and ancestral sedimentation and admit to his own limits.

Still such linguistic shortcomings never turn into void, lack or deprivation. By the same exercise of *де*duction, Nabokov invites us to *деduce* the presence of others beyond his own verses. Nabokov's words are dense with reminiscences of distilled presences. They are a conglomerate of diaphanous substance which, once exposed to the light, discloses its strata. A sculptor of sentences, Nabokov chisels out the linguistic matter until the essence oozes through its cracks.

Like Shishkov disappearing behind his own poems, Nabokov camouflages himself in other poets' lines, drawing a complex network of *подтексту*. Whether used to praise or criticise, reticence contributes to the enriching of the readers' experience, thus elevating the subtextual elements into a metatextual dimension, which can be perceived after the more immediate and immanent moment of reception. Through metatextuality, Nabokov's poems move peripheral elements such as quotations, references and allusions to the forefront of the textual matter. Self-translations only enhance this process by making the further effort to grant the Anglophone reader equal tools for interpretation, despite – or by virtue – of cultural barriers.

4.1 *Неоконченный черновик / An Unfinished Draft*

Nabokov dated *Neokonchennyy chernovik* back to 1931 but, like *Oko*, had never published it before *Poems and Problems*. Translating into English poems that were unknown in their original form might seem a peculiar choice. If *Oko*, however, lends itself to lay readers, *Neokonchennyy chernovik* requires a more in-depth knowledge of Nabokov's poetics. What this poem in particular demonstrates is that it was not on the basis of their straightforwardness nor their fortune in Russian that Nabokov selected which texts to include in his first and only bilingual collection. Also, in these verses Nabokov skilfully

constructs his own response within the complex and loud debate on the fate of Russian diasporic literature. But he does so quietly, in a whisper, almost cryptically.

The essence of *Neokonchennyy chernovik* is beyond (or between) its lines. It reveals by omitting, it exposes by hiding. Its elliptic surface turns absence into presence.

Nabokov's Russian text
Неоконченный черновик
Поэт, печально промышляя,
твердит Прекрасному: прости!
Он говорит, что жизнь земная
слова на поднятой в пути
– откуда вырванной? – страницы
(не знаем и швыряем прочь)
или пролет мгновенный птицы
через светлый зал из ночи в ночь.

Зоил (пройдоха величавый,
корыстью занятый одной)
и литератор площадной
(тревожный арендатор славы)
меня страшатся потому,
что зол я, холоден и весел
что не служу я никому,
что жизнь и честь мою я взвесил
на пушкинских весах, и честь
осмеливаюсь предпочесть.

Literal translation
An/the unfinished draft
A/the poet, despondently making his living,
confirms/repeats to the Handsome: farewell/excuse me!
He says that earthly life
is words on a page picked up on the/a path/road
– torn out from where? –
(we do not know and throw it away)
or the momentary flight of a bird
through a/the bright hall/room from night to night/night after night.

Zoilus ([that] stately rascal,
only interested in profit)
and the/a vulgar man of letters
([that] anxious tenant of glory/fame)

are afraid of/fear me
because I am evil, cold and merry,
[because] I do not serve anybody,
[because] my life and honour I (have) weighed
on Pushkinian scales, and honour
I dare prefer.

Nabokov's English version
An Unfinished Draft
The poet dealing in Dejection
to Beauty iterates: adieu!
He says that human days are only
words on a page picked up by you
upon your way (a page ripped out –
where from? You know not and reject it)
or from the night into the night
through a bright hall a brief bird's flight.

Zoilus (a majestic rascal,
whom only lust of gain can stir)
and Publicus, litterateur
(a nervous leaseholder of glory),
cower before me in dismay
because I'm wicked, cold, and gay,
because honor and life I weigh
on Pushkin's scales and dare prefer
honor….

The original poem has four quatrains (aBaB cDcD eFFe GhGh) and one distich (II). Though the rhyme scheme is not respected in the English version, Nabokov chooses to keep the iambic tetrameter almost intact. This results in a stomping rhythm, especially in the self-translated text, where it sounds almost syncopated. The only traces of rhyme in English are between "night" – "flight," "stir" – "litterateur" – "prefer" – "honor," "dismay" – "gay" – "weigh." A series of internal rhymes can also be detected as in the case of "Zoilus" – "Publicus" – "nervous," "bright" – "flight" and "dare" – "prefer." Moreover, the English version is made more phonetically resonant through its many consonances and assonances, as in "page picked up […] / upon […] page ripped," almost reproducing the sound of

paper being swept by wind, and "bright […] brief bird's flight," sounding like wings flapping clumsily in a closed space. On the whole, the English version manages to compensate for the prosodic richness of the original.

The poem consists in a brief but wry criticism addressed by a poet "dealing in Dejection" toward someone absentmindedly picking up one of his pages and rejecting it altogether. While in the English version the two consecutive addressees are represented and apostrophised in a general "you," in the Russian original they are given their own voice, the parenthetical statement "(ne znayem i shvyryayem proch)" reporting their words in a direct speech.

The poem is split in two roughly equal halves. The verse distribution becomes more regular in self-translation: without taking into account the last verse, made of one isolated word, the two parts are of eight lines each; the fifteenth verse is omitted in English, where it would have probably disrupted the surviving rhyme pattern, as shown above. In both source and target text, each half is made of one uninterrupted flow of words: the two introductory verses in the first half are followed by a long sentence that comprises a parenthetical remark, which in its turn contains an interrogative form as an aside; the second sentence runs for the whole length of the second half and has two parenthetical units as well. The tone is therefore argumentative and confers the impression of someone wanting to make the most of the little time (or space) he has.

In the first part, the poet's life is outlined in a few traits that go straight to the point: a life of hardships, sacrifices and rejections is the author's only prospect. This emerges particularly in the self-translated version, where "Dejection" and "Beauty" are both written in capital letters as the two most defining aspects, the latter being unwillingly repudiated for the sake of (economic) survival. The use of some more exact and less common lexical variants in English, such as in the case of "iterate" (for "tverdit[']"), "adieu" (for "prosti") and "reject" (for "shvyrya[t']) also contribute to the final result, namely a strong poetic

subtext emerging in self-translation: iterations are a distinctive feature of versification; the word adieu has a poetic connotation, imported as it is from French; rejections are a notorious recurrent feature in a writer's career.

The second half of the poem introduces us to two different individuals: "Zoil" and a not better specified "literator ploshchadnoy." A Greek historian and rhetor who scathingly objected to Homer's talent and whose works have survived only in short fragments, Zoilus has suffered from a bad reputation throughout the centuries, becoming the epitome of the obnoxious critic acting out of envy. Referring to the Italian man of letters Lorenzo Valla, whose notes on the translation of the New Testament earned him a life (and afterlife) of hardships and unpopularity, Erasmus compared him to his infamous Greek forefather (though, in fact, restoring his honour): "literature so deeply spoiled and corrupted needed a Zoïlus, a scourge of the barbarians, […] in other words it called for a severe censor, indeed a kind of Momus; even, if you like, an insulting one."[304] In his masterpiece *Les Misérables* (1862), Victor Hugo also used Zoilus as a term for comparison: "quand Zoïle insulte Homère, quand Mævius insulte Virgile, quand Visé insulte Molière, quand Pope insulte Shakspeare, quand Fréron insulte Voltaire, c'est une vieille loi d'envie et de haine qui s'exécute."[305]

Pushkin has Zoilus appear in *Ruslan i Lyudmila* [1820]: "ты видишь, добрый мой читатель, / тут злобы черную печать! / Скажи, Зоил, скажи, предатель, / ну как и что мне отвечать?"[306] [You see, my dear reader, / there lies the malice of a black stamp! / Tell me, Zoil, tell me traitor, / how and what am I supposed to answer?]. He also features in *Na Kachenovskogo* [On Kachenovskiy, 1818], a satirical epigram where the Russian poet

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[304] Desiderius Erasmus, "182 / To Christopher Fisher. Paris [about March] 1505," in *The Correspondence of Erasmus: Letters. Letters from 142 to 297, 1501-1514*, trans. Roger Mynors and Douglas Thomson (Toronto: Toronto University Press, 1975), 92.
[305] Victor Hugo, *Les Misérables. Cinquième partie. Jean Valjean* (Paris: Émile Testard, 1891), 21.
[306] Aleksandr Pushkin, "Ruslan i Lyudmila," in *Sobraniye sochineniy v desyati tomakh*, vol. 3, *Poemy. Skazki*, ed. D. Blagoy et al. (Moskva: Gosudarstvennoye izdatel'stvo Khudozhestvennoy Literatury, 1960), 39.

comments on an article criticising Nikolay Karamzin's *Istoriya gosudarstva Rossiyskogo* [History of the Russian State, 1818] by Mikhail Kachenovskiy (*Vestnik Yevropy*, 13, 1818). Pushkin reminds Kachenovskiy of an earlier epigram addressed to him in 1806: "бессмертною рукой раздавленный зоил, / позорно клейма ты вновь не заслужил!"[307] [By the immortal hand [you, a] crushed Zoilus / an infamous stamp you did nor deserve again!]. Zoilus recurs, among others, in poems by Derzhavin, Zhukovskiy, Lermontov, Tyutchev.

The second person presented by Nabokov is a "literator ploshchadnoy." While in Russian the subject is not further identified, in the English version he appears as "Publicus, litterateur." As a name, the variant Publius was rather frequent in ancient Rome; the adjective, as reported by Nabokov, indicates something (or someone) that is owned by the state – public slaves were called thus – and, by extension, something (or someone) considered to be common, ordinary, trivial, unprestigious. Though in close connection with the adjective "ploshchadnoy" (from the noun *ploshchad'*, square), the name "Publicus" assigns to the subject a more defined, circumscribed identity further qualified by the French calque "litterateur," where an aura of prestige suggests an antithetical contrast with the previously discussed sense of vulgarity and inelegance.

I would make the point that the presence of two words derived from French in the English poem is a rather significant key to the text. This and the more straightforward identification of two characters through the use of the proper names "Zoilus" and "Publicus," both referring back to Latin, point in one most relevant direction. Nabokov's *Neokonchennyy chernovik* was written right in the middle of a debate developing within the Russian émigré community between Paris and Berlin. Due to its controversial complexity, this subject alone would necessitate a whole dissertation in itself. For the sake of

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[307] Aleksandr Pushkin, "Na Kachenovskogo («Bessmertnoyu rukoy razdavlennyy zoil»)," in *Sobraniye sochineniy v desyati tomakh*, vol. 1, *Stikhotvoreniya 1814-1822*, ed. D. Blagoy et al. (Moskva: Gosudarstvennoye izdatel'stvo Khudozhestvennoy Literatury, 1959), 67.

conciseness, suffice it to say here that the Russian diaspora in Europe was roughly split in two halves. One was led by Georgiy Adamovich and Georgiy Ivanov, both belonging to what Nabokov defined the "anemic "Paris school""[308] formed around the almanac *Chisla* [Numbers]. They adamantly advocated in favour of a definitive dismissal of Pushkin's tradition, which was to them too polished, clean and anachronistically refined. They objected to Khodasevich's, Nabokov's and, generally speaking, Modernist poets' wish to keep the Pushkinian flame burning throughout the 20th century. In particular, Adamovich promoted Lermontov's emotional impetus over Pushkin's measured style:

> у Лермонтова поразительна в стихах интонация, поразите лен звук, а вовсе не тот тончайший подбор слов, которыми пленяют Пушкин и Тютчев. В лучшем случае Лермонтов бывает остер в выборе выражений, хотя и почти всегда склоняется к внешним эффектам. Но источник его вдохновения так глубок, сила напева так могуча, что после его стихов трудно вспомнить другие, которые не померкли бы рядом. Стихи эти, бесспорно, хуже пушкинских по качеству, но они не менее их значительны своим общим смыслом – вот что все чувствуют, как бы Лермонтова ни оценивали. В стихах этих есть какой-то яд, от которого пушкинский поэтический мир вянет, какой-то яд, от которого он распадается, и если не свершения, то стремления лермонтовской поэзии тянутся дальше пушкинской.[309]

This attitude also motivates Nabokov's concluding lines, where the poet measures his honour and life on "Pushkin's scales:" as Sergej Davydov maintains, "an intimate familiarity with and appreciation of Pushkin and his time was, for Nabokov, the test of intelligence and sensitivity in a Russian literary critic."[310] This is confirmed by Nabokov himself when in Paris, in 1937, during a lecture for the centenary of the Russian bard's

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[308] Nabokov, *Poems and Problems*, 14.

[309] Georgiy Adamovich, "Lermontov," in: Vladimir Markovich and Galina Potapova, ed., *M. Yu. Lermontov: Pro et Contra. Lichnost' I tvorchestvo Mikhaila Lermontova v otsenke russkikh mysliteley i issledovateley* (Sankt-Peterburg: Izdatel'stvo Russkogo Khristianskogo gumanitarnogo instituta, 2002), 843. First published in *Poslednіye novosti*, no. 6840, (19 December 1939). "В то же время культ Лермонтова в поэзии «парижской ноты» вызвал резкие возражения со стороны В. Ф. Ходасевича и В. В. Набокова. Неприятие ими позиции Адамовича было обусловлено прежде всего тем, что оба они воспринимали отказ от «пушкинской» традиции как отказ от поэзии вообще." Ibidem, 1066.

[310] Sergej Davydov, "Nabokov and Pushkin," in Vladimir Alexandrov, ed., *The Garland Companion to Vladimir Nabokov* (New York: Routledge, 1995), 485.

death, *Pouchkine ou le vrai et le vraisemblable* [Pushkin or the True and the Plausible], James Joyce sitting in the first rows, he declared that Pushkin "неизбежно составляет часть нашей [Russian] интеллектуальной жизни"[311] [Pushkin undoubtedly is a constituent part of [Russian] intellectual life].

Both Zoilus and Publicus are characterised as being primarily interested in money,[312] as it emerges in the parenthetical elements "([…] koryst'yu zanyatyy odnoy)" / "([…] whom only lust of gain can stir)" and "(trevozhnyy arendator slavy)" / "(a nervous leasehoder of glory)." The English verb "cower" also contributes to their negative representation through its rich consonance with the adjective coward, tacitly implied and subsequently evoked in the added "dismay."

The self-translated version moves the word "honor" to the very last verse. Isolated, it encapsulates the very essence of the whole poem. Also, by substituting the final full stop with an elliptical suspension, the self-translation transforms the attribute "unfinished" of the title into the textual device of aposiopesis. Hence, while the English title anticipates the subsequent (lack of) conclusion, in the original Russian text, where there is no graphic ellipsis, the attribute "neokonchennyy" might be interpreted as unpolished, unrefined – especially considering the long sentences, the relative scarcity of punctuation and the impulsive tone – and thus may allude to the "dreary drone"[313] of the Parisian Parnassus in contrast with Pushkin's impeccable precision and thoughtful formal outlining.

There is also at least another possible interpretation to the poem's *nesovershennost'*. In an early draft of Pushkin's *Tsigany* [The Gypisies, 1824], Aleko tells his son the following words:

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[311] Vladimir Nabokov, "Pushkin, ili pravda i pravdopodobiye," lib.ru/NABOKOW/Pushkin.txt. Accessed 26 Jun. 2017.
[312] "In the story "Lips to Lips" (1933), Nabokov lampoons Adamovich and Ivanov for the extortion of a large sum to finance the almanac *Chisla*." Davydov, "Nabokov and Pushkin," 485.
[313] Nabokov, *Poems and Problems*, 14.

	Literal translation
«Прими привет сердечный мой,	"Take my hearty advice,
Дитя любви, дитя природы,	Son of love, son of nature,
И с даром жизни дорогой	And with the gift of [your] dear life
Неоцененный дар свободы!..	The underestimated gift of freedom!..
[…]	[…]
Зато беспечен, здрав и волен,	And then light-hearted, healthy and free,
Тщеславных угрызений чужд,	Alien to any vainglorious pang of consciousness,
Он будет жизию доволен,	He will be satisfied with life,
Не зная вечно новых нужд.	Not ever knowing any new necessity.
Нет, не преклонит он колен	No, he will not bend his knees
Пред идолом какой-то чести.»[314]	In front of the idol of some honour."

Aleko's advice is drenched with his passionate wish to lead a life of freedom and independence from social constraints. However, he himself will fall prey to that very same honour which he so vehemently despises, defining it an idol. While committing his crime, Aleko is not able to free himself from the standards dictated by civilisation. Pushkin's comment on Jean-Jacques Rousseau's state of nature can be read, in a sense, as a reflection on the human necessity for limitations and conventions, for an ethical doctrine of which honour is a manifestation.

By stating that he values honour over life, Nabokov fully projects himself onto Pushkin's position and ends up identifying with him in the moment of his fatal duel with George d'Anthès, when Pushkin indeed chose honour over life. The verb "osmeliva[t'sya]" / "dare" seems to allude to the poet's well-known dramatic fate. The repetition of "chest'" in "predpochest'" resonates like an ill omen while confirming the firmness of the poet's moral principles. A similar effect can be found in the self-translated text, where a strong consonance reverberates through the final words "dare prefer / honor." As stated again by Davydov,

> though both men were liberal in their political outlooks (constitutional monarchy in Pushkin's case, liberal democracy in Nabokov's), neither one considered the "republic of letters" an egalitarian domain. Rather, it was an absolute monarchy where only talent, pride, honesty, and impeccable taste were

[314] Aleksandr Pushkin, "*Tsigany*," in *Sobraniye sochineniy v desyati tomakh*, vol. 3, *Poemy. Skazki*, 444-446.

> assigned sovereign power, whereas pretentiousness, dishonesty, illegitimacy, and vulgarity were equivalent of cardinal sins and were mercilessly mocked.[315]

Aleko's monologue was finally discarded from Pushkin's poem and did not appear in its published form.[316] It is, we might say, a *neokonchennyy chernovik*, an unfinished draft, a "page ripped out" which, like Nabokov's own verses, holds in itself a potent and yet undisclosed declaration of intent.

Neokonchennyy chernovik / *An Unfinished Draft* fully illustrates Nabokov's potential for satirical representation. Through some thoroughly orchestrated elliptic omissions, the poet manages to convey his dismissive opinion on the Zoilus and Publicus of his times. The sarcastic playfulness of the poem, possibly increased in self-translation, emerges in the allusive quality of the epithets chosen to designate Adamovich and G. Ivanov. Ellipsis manifests itself as a textual evidence through the two pseudonymous allusions and their respective parenthetical characterisations. The recreation of the French context, the pun in the second name and the final suspension, all specific to the English version, further emphasise the elliptic and at the same time sardonic tone of the original.

4.2 *Какое сделал я дурное дело / What Is the Evil Deed*

"Рукописи не горят" wrote Mikhail Bulgakov. And he was right. When in 1950, at Ithaca, Nabokov tried to burn one of his manuscripts, his wife Vera urged him to stop and

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[315] Davydov, "Nabokov and Pushkin," 484.

[316] Pushkin's passage has been first associated with Nabokov's poem by Grigoriy Amelin and Valentina Morderer, who on the contrary read in it an invalidating response to Aleko's (and Pushkin's own) aspiration to freedom and nature (Grigoriy Amelin and Valentina Morderer, *Miry i stolknoveniya Osipa Mandel'shtama* (Moskva: Yazyki russkoy kul'tury, 2001), 238).

have second thoughts. It was the first chapters of *Lolita* that he was carrying to the garden incinerator.[317] It did not burn.

Nabokov's Russian text
Какое сделал я дурное дело
Какое сделал я дурное дело,
и я ли развратитель и злодей,
я, заставляющий мечтать мир целый
о бедной девочке моей?

О, знаю я, меня боятся люди,
и жгут таких как я за волшебство,
и как от яда в полом изумруде
мрут от искусство моего.

Но как забавно, что в конце абзаца,
корректору и веку вопреки,
тень русской ветки будет колебаться
на мраморе моей руки.

Literal translation
What an evil deed I (have) committed/What is the evil deed I (have) committed,
What an evil deed I (have) committed/What is the evil deed I (have) committed,
and am I a/the seducer and villain,
I, who made the whole world dream
of my poor girl?

Oh, I know I am feared by people,
and they burn those like me for sorcery,
and as if from poison in a hollow emerald [cup]
they die of my art.

But how funny that at the end of the paragraph,
in spite of the proof-reader and the/my age/century,
the shadow of a/the Russian branch will (be) sway(ing)
on the marble of my hand.

Nabokov's English version
What Is the Evil Deed
What is the evil deed I have committed?

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[317] Gold and Nabokov, "Vladimir Nabokov, The Art of Fiction No. 40," theparisreview.org/interviews/4310/vladimir-nabokov-the-art-of-fiction-no-40-vladimir-nabokov. Accessed 10 Jun. 2017.

Seducer, criminal – is this the word
for me who set the entire world a-dreaming
of my poor little girl?

Oh, I know well that I am feared by people:
They burn the likes of me for wizard wiles
and as of poison in a hollow smaragd
of my art die.

Amusing, though, that at the last indention,
despite proofreaders and my age's ban,
a Russian branch's shadow shall be playing
upon the marble of my hand.

Kakoye ǝdelal ya ǝurnoye ǝelo is built on alternate rhymes and iambic pentameter, except for the last verse of each stanza, an iambic tetrameter. This variation is made evident in the graphic arrangement of both the original and the English self-translated text: verses four, eight and twelve are indented, thus appearing visually shorter than the rest of the lines. While reproducing the rhythmic structure (though more loosely), *What Is the Evil Deed* preserves only one rhyming pair per stanza, namely "word" – "girl," "wiles" – "die" and "ban" – "hand." The English rhyme scheme adds an extra layer of emphasis on some of the keywords: "word" and "hand" refer to the art of writing; "girl" and "ban" lead back to the tabooed content of Nabokov's work (briefly discussed below); "wiles" and "die" indicate the writer's own fate.

Nabokov wrote *Kakoye ǝdelal ya ǝurnoye ǝelo* on December 27, 1959, four years after the Olympia Press publication of *Lolita* and just one year after the G. P. Putnam's Sons' edition. However, he did not publish the poem until 1961, when it was issued on the pages of the almanac *Vozdushnyye puti* [Aerial Ways; vol. 2, New York]. By 1956 Nabokov was already conscious of the crime he was accused of, as the postscriptum "On a Book Entitled *Lolita*" demonstrates. The novel was charged with pornographic content and anti-

Americanism,[318] its author publicly repudiated for his alleged immoral conduct. Years after the novel had first seen the light, Nabokov entrusted such a short poem with the burden of his distress at having been utterly misunderstood by critics and readers alike. And yet he did so not without mordant irreverence towards those who accused him.

A sense of guilt and responsibility emerges in the English verb "commit[/]," pertaining the semantic field of crimes, which translates a more neutral "sdela[t']." This intensified degree of self-censure is also iterated in the second verse, where the noun "zlodey," a narratological term designating villains, is rendered into a more judgmental and unequivocal "criminal." The expression "[to] set the […] world a-dreaming" is remindful of the collocation to set something on fire, which, if read literally, in point of fact denotes a crime. The adjective "little" precedes the noun "girl" to translate the Russian "devochk[a]:" as a further moral blame, Nabokov prefers to address a lower age span than that indicated by the term *девушка* (probably more appropriate to connote Lolita's adolescence) and respects his intention using the diminutive form in English.

In the second stanza, the proposition "menya boyatsya lyudi" is turned into a passive "I am feared by people," where the focus is shifted from the original "lyudi" to the author himself, significantly deprived of his agency and falling victim to his readers' sentence. "Volshebstvo" / "wizard wiles" further expand the semantic field of tales, also recurrent through lines seven and eight, the poet being compared to a sorcerer whose art degenerates into lethal poison. By translating the noun "izumrud[/]" as "smaragd," rather than emerald, the English version projects a certain sense of preciousness and sophistication onto its vocabulary and, consequently, onto the ostracised author.

In the third and last stanza, a choice dictated by a similar taste for refinement can be detected in the term "indention," preferred to a simpler chapter or paragraph, while also remarking the poem's layout. A pun is added in the English version, where the noun "age"

[318] Vladimir Nabokov, "On a Book Entitled *Lolita*," in *The Annotated Lolita*, 311-317.

may indicate the entire epoch of the 20th century, as in the Russian "vek," or more specifically the poet's own elderliness, in which case he would be again alluding to the age gap, a theme notoriously permeating *Lolita* and previously stressed in "devochk[a]" / "little girl." In the last two lines, the poet expresses his personal revenge: in spite of the ban imposed by proofreaders (read censors) and the anachronism of such a ground-breaking oeuvre, he foresees his eternal fame. In both versions, it is a Russian branch that evolves into the epic symbol of the author's posthumous glory. The mention of "mramor[/] moyey ruki" / "the marble of my hand" evokes the image of a commemorative monument.

Both the opening and the end of Nabokov's *Kakoye ∂elal ya ∂urnoye ∂elo* / *What Is the Evil Deed* acquire a particular significance in the light of two referents Nabokov must have had in mind while writing these lines. If, on the one hand, the opening verse of the Russian original could be read as both an exclamation or a question, the English translation, on the other, is constructed in the form of an authentic interrogative sentence: the poet directly addresses to himself and his readers a question, wondering what the cause of his guilt might be. What at first appears to be a genuine interrogation, though, turns into a sarcastic recrimination when, in the next few lines, the poet blames his rivals of having enjoyed the reading of that very same novel they themselves have been accusing of obscenity and debauchery. A similar incredulous exclamation on the poet's part constitutes the opening of Pasternak's *Nobelevskaya premya* [Nobel Prize, 1958],[319] whose verses address his forced refusal of what is traditionally regarded as the apex of any intellectual's career.

	Literal translation
Что же сделал я за пакость,	What nasty/vile thing have I done,

[319] The poem was originally composed in December 1958. Two additional stanzas were included in January 1959: "все тесней кольцо облавы, / и другому я виной: / нет руки со мною правой, / друга сердца нет со мной! / А с такой петлей у горла / я б хотел еще пока, / чтобы слезы мне утерла / правая моя рука" [tighter and tighter is the ring of the roundup / and I am guilt to someone else: / there is no right hand with me, / the friend of my heart is not with me! / And with such a stitch in my throat / I would like to be still, / so that the tears might (be) wipe(d) / (by) my right hand]. The reference is to the poet's relationship with Ol'ga Ivinskaya.

Я убийца и злодей?	Am I a killer and villain?
Я весь мир заставил плакать	I made the whole world cry
Над красой земли моей.[320]	On the beauty of my land.

By Nabokov's own admission, his verses were inspired by Pasternak: "the first strophe imitates the beginning of Boris Pasternak's poem in which he points out that his notorious novel "made the whole world shed tears over the beauty of [his] native land,"[321] he annotated. Nabokov's text requires to be read in comparison to Pasternak's: the first is a calque of the latter, their syntactic correspondence almost exact. For this reason, I would suggest that Pasternak's poem functions as a *podtekst* to Nabokov's.

It was Kirill Taranovskiy who, on the basis of what had already been discussed by Bendikt Livshits in 1919 on Osip Mandel'shtam ("не новых слов ищет поэт, но новых сторон в слове, данном как некая завершенная реальность […]. Вот почему не только «старыми» словами орудует поэт: в стихах Мандельштама мы встречаем целые строки из других поэтов; и это не досадная случайность, не бессознательное заимствование, но своеобразный прием поэта, положившего себе целью заставить чужие стихи зазвучать по-иному, по-своему."),[322] maintained that embedding another poet's words – or any other form of artistic endeavor – in one's verses is not plagiarism but, rather, a matter of poetic dialogism. He did so by introducing the concept of *podtekst* in reference to Mandel'shtam's verses *Kontsert na vokzale* [Concert at the Station, 1921]: "предположение, что Мандельштам считал свое чтение потенциальным сырым материалом для своего

[320] Boris Pasternak, "Nobelevskaya premia," in *Stikhotvoreniya i poemy v dvukh tomakh*, vol. 2, ed. Vladimir Al'fonsov et al. (Leningrad: Sovetskiy pisatel', 1990), 131.
[321] Nabokov, *Poems and Problems*, 147. Notice Nabokov's (deliberate?) mistake in referring to the beginning of Pasternak's poem – it is in fact its third stanza he is imitating. The "notorious novel" Nabokov addresses to is *Doktor Zhivago* (1957), published in *tamizdat* for the Italian Feltrinelli.
[322] Benedikt Livshits, "V tsitadeli revolyutsionnogo slova," in *U nochnogo okna. Stikhi zarubezhnykh poetov v perevode Benedikta Livshitsa*, ed. P. Antokol'skiy et al. (Moskva: Progress, 1970), 185. Originally published in: *Puti tvorchestvo*, no. 5, 1919.

собственного творчества, выглядит весьма вероятным."[323] Taranovskiy defined *podtekst* as "уже существующий текст, отраженный в последующем, новом тексте."[324]

Once this reference is recognised, some slight differences from the referent will be perceived. These are important to identify Nabokov's interpretation of his own supposed crime. While Pasternak has "pakost'," "ubiytsa," "plakat'" and "kras[a] zemli moyey," Nabokov has "durnoye delo," "razvratitel'," "mechtat'" and "devochk[a]." Nabokov's text is evidently concerned with the questions of seduction and age difference.

Many critics have considered Nabokov's poem as a parody of Pasternak's verses and, more generally, as an expression of envy towards his success. At the end of the 1950s the two writers, whose paths had been until then radically different, – the one had emigrated at the dawn of the Soviet era, the other had stayed as an internal émigré – were competing for the first place in the American bestsellers list: "by the end of September *Lolita* had climbed to the top, but after seven weeks in that position it was knocked down to number two by Pasternak's novel,"[325] as recorded by Yuri Leving and Frederick White.

Though he regarded Pasternak as an accomplished poet, Nabokov harshly criticised his prose:

> Пастернак – поэт, а не прозаик. Как роман «Доктор Живаго» – ничто, он полностью соответствует консервативному стилю советской литературой. Он плутает, подобно «Унесенным ветром» и к тому же переполнен мелодраматическими ситуациями и всевозможными ляпами. По сравнению с Пастернаком мистер Стейнбек – гений.[326]

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[323] Kirill Taranovskiy, "Ocherki o poezii O. Mandel'shtama. I. Kontsert na vokzale. K voprosu o kontekste i podtekste," in *O poezii i poetike* (Moskva: Yazyki russkoy kul'tury, 2000), 16.
[324] Ibidem, 31.
[325] Yuri Leving and Frederick H. White, *Marketing Literature and Posthumous Legacies: The Symbolic Capital of Leonid Andreyev and Vladimir Nabokov* (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2013), 120.
[326] Nikolay Mel'nikov, "O Nabokove i prochem: Stat'i, retsenzii, publikatsii," *Inostrannaya literatura*, no. 7 (2003): http://magazines.russ.ru/inostran/2003/7/nabok.html. Accessed 4 Sept. 2017. Originally in *Ivy magazine*, (February 1959): 28.

However, as asserted by Boyd, "what was there for Nabokov's to envy? Not Pasternak's gift as a lyric poet, which he happily acknowledged – he called Pasternak 'a kind of masculine Emily Dickinson,' no mean compliment."[327] Nabokov praised Pasternak's achievements in versification but placed the latter's poetic style as far from his own as he possibly could. If Nabokov considered himself the heir of a tradition which progressed from Pushkin to Ivan Bunin and Khodasevich, Pasternak descended from Vladimir Benediktov and Andrey Belyy, whose *razvernutaya metafora* and avant-garde lexical experimentation would have become predominant in 20th century Futurist versification.[328]

According to Taranovskiy, four different types of *подтекст* can be distinguished:

> (1) текст, служащий простым толчком к созданию какого-нибудь нового образа; (2) «заимствование по ритму и звучанию» (повторение какой-нибудь ритмической фигуры и некоторых звуков, содержащихся в ней); (3) текст, поддерживающий или раскрывающий поэтическую посылку последующего текста; (4) текст, являющийся толчком к поэтической полемике.[329]

Instead of reading Nabokov's poem as an overt declaration of envy toward Pasternak, I would argue that Nabokov's embedding Pasternak's verses in his poem strengthens the polemic tone of his response to the accusations regarding *Lolita*, thus performing both functions (3) and (4) as defined by Taranovskiy, that is to help bring to the forefront the ultimate significance of his novel beyond its more appalling patina as well as to participate in the controversy, given it was reaching massive proportions, with his own point of view, in an as much concise and succinct form as it could be summed up into. While Pasternak's allusion to the beauty of his land constitutes the profound essence of his

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[327] Boyd, *Vladimir Nabokov: The American Years*, 371.

[328] Simon Karlinsky, "Nabokov and Some Poets of Russian Modernism," *Cycnos* 2, no. 12 (25 June 2008): revel.unice.fr/cycnos/index.html?id=1453. Accessed 4 Sept. 2017.

[329] Taranovskiy, "Ocherki o poezii O. Mandel'shtama. Kontsert na vokzale. K voprosu o kontekste i podtekste," 32.

novel, the issue of Humbert Humbert's paedophiliac obsession with Lolita is just the tip of the iceberg, the whole intricacy of his deranged psychology gradually emerging on the surface as the lewd – and provocatively appealing – scenes become less and less frequent. Though this is not the place to discuss the complexity of *Lolita*, Nabokov's own words on it should prove sufficient to demonstrate my point:

> as far as I can recall, the initial shiver of inspiration was somehow prompted by a newspaper story about an ape in the Jardin des Plantes [in Paris, where Nabokov was staying in late 1939 – early 1940], who, after months of coaxing by a scientist, produced the first drawing ever charcoaled by an animal: this sketch showed the bars of the poor's creature's cage.[330]

Such a statement might be instinctively interpreted as referring to the character of Lolita: it is her who, after all, is abducted by Humbert and taken hostage to his wishes. Against any simplistic assumption, though, it is the persecutor himself Nabokov is referring to here: it is Humbert who, trapped in the cage of his past, cannot act any differently in the present. When considered in the light of its genesis, *Lolita* conveys a deeper message, one that deals with the ethical premises and consequences of nurture. As a result, Nabokov's verses are to be interpreted as a protest against the much trivialised reading of his novel as a feuilleton instead of a multifaceted character study.

Such a polemic tone emerges in Nabokov's last stanza as well. Even so, the reference might be read as filtered through Pasternak's poem, its last verses reading as follows:

	Literal translation
Но и так, почти у гроба,	But even so, almost in the grave,
Верю я, придет пора –	I believe the time will come –
Силу подлости и злобы	When the power of meanness and malice
Одолеет дух добра.[331]	The spirit of kindness will overcome.

[330] Nabokov, "On a Book Entitled *Lolita*," 311.
[331] Pasternak, "Nobelevskaya premia," 131.

A restored sense of justice and order is envisioned at the end of both Pasternak's and Nabokov's poems, during and after the poet's death respectively. In Pasternak's case it is represented by the incorporeal principle of virtue, in Nabokov's concluding line it is incarnated in the palpable matter of a statue's hand. The allusion to the "russk[aya] vetk[a]" / "Russian branch" may be hinting at the laurel wreath, an ancient symbol for recognition, as it continues, for instance, in the tradition of the poet laureate.

Yet, as maintained by Boris Kats, while the reader's attention is focused on the final glorification,

> понимание последней строфы "Какое сделал я дурное дело…" только как мечты о посмертном памятнике может привести читателя к ошибочной интерпретации всего текста. Не напрасно Набоков включил свой собственный перевод этого текста в сборник "Стихотворения и проблемы" […]. Мы, действительно, имеем дело не просто со стихотворением, но и с проблемой, и задача читателя (и особенно исследователя) – не попасться в ловушку.[332]

Nabokov's own note on the text is a substantial evidence that Pasternak is part of the poem's enigma. Still, Nabokov would not be Nabokov if he were not demanding more of his readers than an overt allusion.

In 1941-1943 Nabokov translated Pushkin's *Exegi monumentum* (*"Ya pamyatnik sebe vozdvig nerukotvornyy,"* 1836). The last two stanzas read as follows:

И долго буду тем любезен я народу, Что чувства добрые я лирой пробуждал, Что в мой жестокий век восславил я Свободу И милость к падшим призывал.	"And to the people long shall I be dear because kind feelings did my lyre extol, invoking freedom in an age of fear, and mercy for the broken soul."
Веленью Божию, о Муза, будь послушна: Обиды не страшась, не требуя венца, Хвалу и клевету приемля равнодушно,	Obey thy God, and never mind, O Muse, the laurels or the stings: make it thy rule to be unstirred by praise as by abuse,

[332] Boris Kats, ""Exegi monumentum" Vladimira Nabokova: k prochteniyu stikhotvoreniya "Kakoye sdelal ya durnoye delo…"," *Staroye literaturnoye obozreniye* 1, no. 277 (2001): magazines.russ.ru/slo/2001/1/ka.html#_ednref19. Accessed 12 Jun. 2017.

И не оспаривай глупца.	and do not contradict the fool.[333]

Nabokov's writing of *Kakoye ∂elal ∂urnoye ∂elo* must have been informed by his reading of Pushkin's *Exegi monumentum*, which becomes especially evident when we consider their mirrored rhythm and rhyme pattern. In his commentary to his translation of *Evgeniy Onegin*, Nabokov gives the following gloss to Pushkin's epigraphic poem: "the first four [stanzas] have an ironic intonation, but under the mask of high mummery Pushkin smuggles in his private truth. […] The last quatrain is the artist's own grave voice repudiating the mimicked boast [Gavriil Derzhavin, 1796]. His last line, although ostensibly referring to reviewers, slyly implies that only fools proclaim their immortality."[334] Notice the prominence Nabokov gives to some key passages: "padshi[ye]" is individualised in "broken soul;" "obid[a]" is metaphorically identified in "stings," strengthening the visual impact of the "laurels."

Hence Pushkin's *Exegi monumentum* provides a *kontekst* (more than a *podtekst*) to both Pasternak's and Nabokov's stanzas. In *Kakoye ∂elal ya ∂urnoye ∂elo / What Is the Evil Deed* Nabokov places his own verses within the evolutionary line of the poet's epigraphic inscription which, starting with Horace was received by Derzhavin and parodied by Pushkin. What Pasternak first contributed with is the sense of defeat at being judged and disapproved of by critics and readers alike. If Pushkin considers himself "dear" to his people, Pasternak and Nabokov regard themselves as "criminal[s]" due to other people's assessment of their work. "Chuvstva dobryye" are replaced by "pakost'" and "durnoye delo" respectively. The poet's role is subverted and radically changed: from a bard

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[333] Aleksandr Pushkin, "Exegi Monumentum," in *Verses and Version. Three centuries of Russian Poetry Selected and Translated by Vladimir Nabokov*, 215. A more literal version can be found in Nabokov's commentary to his translation of Pushkin's *Evgeniy Onegin* (Pushkin, *Eugene Onegin. A Novel in Verse*, vol. 2, *Commentary and Index*, 311). For the purpose of the present study, I have used the original of Pushkin's poem as contained in Boyd's and Shvabrin's book: Aleksandr Pushkin, *Sochineniya Aleksandra Pushkina*, ed. Modest Gofman (Berlin: Yubileynoye izdaniye Pushkinskogo komiteta, 1937), 275-276.

[334] Pushkin, *Eugene Onegin. A Novel in Verse*, vol. 2, *Commentary and Index*, 310.

incarnating the value of freedom and mercy, he becomes a poetaster accused of sorcery. Yet if in Pasternak there still can be found hope for justice to come, Nabokov does not leave much space for redemption: a simple branch, not Pushkin's laurel, not even a wreath, will be hanging on "the marble of [his] hand;" rather than the statue's limb, the cold hard stone ultimately represents the poet's *rigor mortis*. The only consolation seems to be condensed in the adjective "Russian." As reminded by Verkheyl Keys,

> во многих отрывках своей поэзии и прозы Набоков как пишущий эмигрант оказывается заинтригованным идеей успеха. Быть знаменитым в этом случае значит не только удовольствие признания той среды, в которой displased person должен был завоевать себе место, но еще более – перспективу его литературного будущего на территории родного языка.[335]

Nabokov's *exegi monumentum* acquires strength and meaning from its *con-text* and *sub-text*. Its reticent allusions to *Lolita*, Pasternak and Pushkin require that some differently implied content be disclosed. As in *To Prince S. M. Kachurin* or *An Unfinished Draft*, though, the English text becomes even more cryptic, hiding its referents under the thick layer of translation. Still, its increased linguistic obscurity enhances its elusiveness. *What Is the Evil Deed* turns implications into omissions. Yet Lolita's presence is so overwhelmingly palpable, it cannot be ignored. What in Russian is a junction of literary intersections ends up becoming, uprooted as the English version is from the poem's original cultural humus, a dead-end street. Which, all things considered, translates exactly what the publication of *Lolita* must have then felt like from the author's perspective.

4.3 *О правителях / On Rulers*

[335] Keys Verkheyl, "Malyy korifey russkoy poezii. Zametki o russkikh stikhakh Vladimira Nabokova," *Ekho. Literaturnyy zhurnal*, no. 4 (1980): 143.

In 1944, when this poem saw the light, the world was in the grip of war. *O pravitelyakh* is Nabokov's response to the notion of history as a recollection and celebration of the rulers' deeds instead of peoples' trials and individual ordeals. Its parade of politicians and heads of state is very much of its times: in 1942, during the Second Moscow Conference, Stalin and Churchill had met in the Kremlin; a year later, in December, they met again. In Nabokov's verses they reunite once more.

Nabokov's Russian text
First part
О правителях

Вы будете (как иногда
говорится)
смеяться, вы будете (как ясновидцы
говорят) хохотать, господа –
но, честное слово,
у меня есть приятель
которого
привела бы в волнение мысль поздороваться
с главою правительства или другого какого
предприятия.
С каких это пор, желал бы я знать,
подложечкой
мы стали испытывать вроде
нежного бульканья, глядя в бинокль
на плотного с ежиком в ложе?
С каких это пор
понятие власти стало равно
ключевому понятию родины?
Какие-то римляне и мясники,
Карл Красивый и Карл Безобразный,
совершенно гнилые князьки,
толстогрудые немки и разные
людоеды, любовники, ломовики,
Иоанны, Людовики, Ленины,
все это сидело, кряхтя на эх и на ых,
упираясь локтями в колени,
на престолах своих матерых.

Literal translation
On (the) rulers

You will (as sometimes
they/people say)
laugh, you will (as clairvoyants
say) guffaw, gentlemen –
but, word of honour,
I have an acquaintance/friend
who
would be excited at the thought of greeting
the head of a state or of any other
enterprise.
Since when, I would like to know,
in the pit of the stomach
we began to feel such
a tender gurgling (when) looking in the binoculars
at the sturdy one with a hedgehog/crew cut in the lodge?
Since when
the concept of power became equal
to the key concept of motherland?
Some Romans and butchers,
Karl the Handsome and Karl the Hideous,
utterly rotten princelings,
corpulent German women and various
cannibals, lovers and lumberjacks,
Johns, Luis[es], Lenins,
all this was sitting, groaning every now and then/now and again,
leaning their elbows against their knees,
on their mature/hardened thrones.

Nabokov's English version
On Rulers
You will (as sometimes
people say)
laugh; you will (as clairvoyants
say) roar with laughter, gentlemen –
but, word of honor,
I have a crony,
who
would be thrilled to shake hands
with the head of a state or of any other
enterprise.

Since when, I wonder,
in the pit of the stomach
we've begun to experience a tender
bubbling, when looking through an opera glass

at the burly one, bristly haired, in the grand box?
    Since when the concept
of authority has been equated
with the seminal notion of patria?

All sorts of Romans and butchers;
Charles the Handsome and Charles the Hideous;
utterly rotten princelings; fat-breasted
German ladies; and various
Cannibals, loverboys, lumbermen,
    Johns, Lewises, Lenins,
emitting stool grunts of strain and release,
    propping elbows on knees,
sat on their massive old thrones.

The lines of *O pravitelyakh* are probably among some of Nabokov's most atypical. Some spare words are isolated in single verses, insistent questions are addressed to the reader, parenthetical elements are segmented from the rest of the sentence. The tone is generally rather informal and colloquial; the poem has a spoken expressiveness, a declamatory eloquence to it. In addition to this, the verses are shifted to the centre of the page, a layout which reminds Futurist tastes, almost mimicking Vladimir Mayakoskiy's trademark, his *lestnitsy* [ladder-like verses]. And yet such a detail is only apparently inconsequential. Rather than praising the poet wearing the yellow blouse, the layout chosen by Nabokov trivialises Mayakovskiy's notorious distributional principle, radically transforming its dynamically scattered verses into a static stack of lines which is more reminiscent of epitaphs than of any avant-gardism. The enthusiasm for change, the eagerness to innovate are exacerbated and deconstructed from the inside by making the presumed experimental mode look redundant and self-contradictory. Were it not visible enough, such a parodic approach to Mayakovskiy's recurrent feature is also remarked in the lines "pisavshiy stikhi i v polosku / i v kletku" (in the second part, on which more later) correlating ladder verses to a patterned print, a standardised eccentricity of sorts. This, together with the centred outline, is lost altogether in the self-translated version.

Another important feature in Nabokov's poem can be found in isolated words which, as a consequence to the stepladder-like distribution, are deliberately confined in separate verses. This is the case of "govoritsya," "kotorogo," "predpriyatiya" and, later on, "podlozhenkoy" and "net." Illustrating Mayakovskiy's style, Grigoriy Vinokur wrote: "слова, тесно связанные своими значениями и с этой стороны составляющие нечто целое, синтаксически нередко разобщены полностью и представляют собой несколько самостоятельных целых."[336] Mayakovskiy's syntax is

> такую систему, в которой формальные связи ослабляются за счет семантических, а каждое отдельное слово способно быть законченным и самостоятельным синтаксическим целым, свободным от синтаксической зависимости по отношению к словам, иерархически более высоким. Иными словами, это тот тип речи, при котором нет различия между словом и предложением и который обычно считается лежащим в самом основании истории человеческого языка.[337]

What distinguishes at least two of Nabokov's separately inscribed words is their purposeful lack of self-sufficiency. The impersonal predicate "govoritsya" appears as a matter-of-fact colloquial expression which, for that matter, has no individual value in the context of the phrase where it belongs – even more so when we realise that the following "smeyat'sya" is the standard verb for smile, not an uncommon expression that sometimes people use; "kotorogo" is a relative pronoun and is therefore syntactically linked to what precedes it while introducing the following subordinate, thus marking a transitory portion – not an independent whole. In English, the relative "who" mimics the same effect, its gratuitous alienation all the more noticeable due to its monosyllabic nature. The only other word that was kept in isolation in the self-translated text is "enterprise." In this case, its removal from the verse row is far from irrelevant: industry and progress had a programmatic value in the Futurist environment and, in that, it appears as a powerfully

[336] Grigoriy Vinokur, *Mayakovskiy – novator yazyka* (Moskva: Sovetskiy pisatel', 1943), 78.
[337] Ibidem, 96.

evocative key word which may be understood on a more concrete level as firm or figuratively as endeavour, undertaking.

As defined by Tomashevskiy, the conversational tone is a recurrent feature in poetry: "здесь выдерживается тон беседы, и отсюда получается впечатление большей близости говорящего к слушателю, большей эмоциональной насыщенности."[338] Nabokov's lines do use such compelling strategies of direct involvement. The second person pronoun "vy" / "you" is addressed to the readers, subsequently referred to as "gospoda" / "gentlemen." Insistent resolute questions require that readers reflect on the theme of temporal power and authority. This, again, mimics Mayakovskiy's fondness for oral declamation and dialogic exchange with his audience. As Vinokur again states, "первый и самый общий стилистический признак языка Маяковского заключается в том, что он целиком пронизан стихией устного, и притом преимущественно громкого устного, слова. […] Все это написано *для голоса, а не для глаз*."[339] Colloquial expressions relating to oral speech can be found in Nabokov's "chestnoye slovo" / "word of honor," "vprochem" / "however" (the oral quality of the latter emerging more from the inclusion of the whole aside as part of a parenthetical fragment), the "grunts of strain and release" "ekh" and "ykh" in the source text (the onomatopoeia disappearing in English), the exclamatory "net" / "no, thank you" as well as the all-encompassing conclusion "i tak dalee" / "and others of the same kind." The declamatory quality of Nabokov's poem will become particularly evident in the second part, where, as clarified in Nabokov's notes to the text, the sentence "ni luchshe, ni veseley" is a parodic calque of Stalin's "hilarious pronouncement"[340] *жить стало лучше, жить стало веселее* [life has grown better, life has grown merrier], clearly detectible to any Russophone ear.

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[338] Tomashevskiy, *Stilistika*, 280.
[339] Vinokur, *Mayakovskiy – novator yazyka*, 111 and 113. Vinokur's italics.
[340] Nabokov, *Poems and Problems*, 133.

Nevertheless, such a seeming straightforwardness is outweighed by a considerable lack of outspokenness. Nabokov's language is allusive, almost allegorical. People are presented *in absentia*. This is the case of Velimir Khlebnikov, alluded to in correspondence of "smeyat'sya," "yasnovidtsy" and "khokhotat'," which go back to his *Zaklyatiye smekhom* [Exorcism by Laughter, 1908-1909], a cryptic spell where language is given new vitality and acquires the power of a prophetic revelation. The lines "glyadya v binokl' / na plotnogo s ezhikom v lozhe" refer to Stalin, as also explained in Nabokov's own note: "tourists attending performances at Soviet theaters used to be deeply impressed by the late dictator's presence,"[341] where the mention of tourists could be read as engaging with a Western / European point of view on the Russian government during the Stalinist era. What the self-translation as "looking through an opera glass / at the burly one, bristly haired, in the grand box" lacks is the tongue-in-cheek iconoclasm of the original sentence, in which the term "ezhik[/]," while also indicating the – quintessentially military – crew cut, has hedgehog as its denotative meaning. Each one of the names "Yoanny, Lyudoviki, Leniny" has a historical counterpart which is evidently preserved in the English text: "Yoan[/]" / "John[/]" has its Slavic equivalent in Ivan, clearly referring to Ivan Groznyy; "Lyudovik[/]" / "Lewis[/]" is a variation on the French Luis, a hint at Luis XIV; "Lenin[/]" is the only name preserved in its original form both in the Russian version and the English one. The prototype of leadership represented by these three notable historical figures belonging to three different epochs is one of hegemonic authority with a marked solipsistic disposition on the ruler's part, spanning from tsarism, through autocracy to modern day totalitarianism. Furthermore, in the Russian text each of the three names reflects the language dominating in its respective era: Latin for the Middle Ages, French for Pre-Enlightenment and Russian for the age of Socialisms. While mediating the content through a naturalising version of the names – thus losing the linguistic stratification in favour of an

[341] Ibidem.

Anglo-centric homogenisation – the self-translation retains the allusive quality of the source text.

What is most unexpected of Nabokov's versification is the crude impudence of the next few lines, where the act of defecation is not so subtly implied. This, again, we can interpret as an evidence of Mayakovskiy's truthfulness to everyday language, even when it requires vulgarity:

> фамильярность языка Маяковского очень легко обнаруживается в его словарном составе и фразеологических средствах. Здесь обращают на себя внимание слова и выражения грубоватого, а иногда – откровенно грубого, вульгарного стиля, намеренно и сознательно противопоставляемые поэтом гладкому и стандартному словарю массовой литературной продукции.[342]

Nabokov's use of onomatopoeic sounds in Russian in "kryakhtya na ekh i na ykh," further expands his adherence to prosaic fraseologisms and mundane colloquialisms in the present verses. The self-translated text detaches itself from the original counterpart and uses a more formal periphrastic "grunts of strain and release." Though the language is undoubtedly less eloquent, the vividness of the scene is still retained.

The second part of the poem is equally rich in implied references and hidden presences.

Nabokov's Russian text
Second part

Умирает со скуки историк:
за Мамаем все тот же Мамай.
В самом деле, нельзя же нам с горя
поступить, как чиновный Китай,
кучу лишних веков присчитавший
к истории скромной своей,
от этого, впрочем, не ставшей
ни лучше, ни веселей.
Кучера государств зато хороши

[342] Vinokur, *Mayakovskiy – novator yazyka*, 123.

при исполнении должности: шибко
ледяная навстречу летит синева,
огневые трещат на ветру рукава…
Наблюдатель глядит иностранный
и спереди видит прекрасные очи навыкат,
а сзади прекрасною помесь диванной
подушки с чудовищной тыквой.
Но детина в регалиях или
волк в макинтоше,
в фуражке с немецким крутым козырьком,
охрипший и весь перекошенный,
в остановившемся автомобиле –
или опять же банкет
с кавказским вином –
нет.
Покойны мой тезка,
писавший стихи и в полоску
и в клетку, на самом восходе
всесоюзно-мещанского класса,
кабы дожил до полдня,
ныне бы рифмы натягивал
на «монументален»,
на «переперчил» –
и так далее.

Literal translation
The/an historian dies of boredom:
after Mamay follows the same Mamay.
In fact, we cannot handle
misfortune, like bureaucratic China,
that added a heap of superfluous centuries
to its modest history,
not becoming, by the way,
any better, any merrier.
The coachmen of governments, in return, are good
while fulfilling [their] duties: quickly
the glacial blue flies towards them,
(the) fiery sleeves clap in the wind…
The foreign observer looks
and in front sees (some) beautiful bulging eyes
and behind a beautiful hybrid of a divan
cushion with a monstruous pumpkin.
But the husky fellow with decorations or
the wolf in a mackintosh,
wearing a peak-cap with the German steep/thick visor,

hoarse (voiced) and entirely contorted,
in a/the pulled up car –
or again a/the banquet
with Caucasian wine –
no.
My late namesake,
who wrote verses and in lines
and cells, on the very rise
of the Soviet bourgeois class,
if only he had lived until noon/midday,
now he would be drawing rhymes
on "monumental",
on "over-pepper" –
and so on.

Nabokov's English version
The historian dies of sheer boredom:
On the heels of Mamay comes another Mamay.
Does our plight really forces us to do
    what did bureaucratic Cathay
that with heaps of superfluous centuries
augmented her limited history
(which, however, hardly became
    either better or merrier)?
Per contra, the coachmen of empires look good
when performing their duties: swiftly
toward them flies the blue of the sky;
their flame-colored sleeves clap in the wind;
the foreign observer looks on and sees
in front bulging eyes of great beauty
and behind a beautiful blend
of divan cushion and monstrous pumpkin.
But the decorated big fellow or else
    the trench-coated wolf
    in his army cap with a German steep peak,
    hoarse-voiced, his face all distorted,
    speaking from an immobile convertible,
or, again, a banquet
with Caucasian wine.
    No, thank you.

If my late namesake,
who used to write verse, in rank
and in file, at the very dawn
of the Soviet Small-Bourgeois order,

had lived till its noon
he would now be finding taut rhymes
such as "praline"
or "air chill,"
and others of the same kind.

As a history book following through different epochs, Nabokov's account goes on to present Mamay, a Mongol commander of the Golden Horde in the 14th century, appearing here as the embodiment of foreign – Eastern – rule, violent invasion as well as the ancestor of Ivan Groznyy's despotism. Giambattista Vico's prophetic notion on the "corsi e ricorsi" of history, which he theorised in his *Scienza nuova* [The New Science, 1744], is reduced to its utmost essence, as ingrained in Vico's own words: "ed è maraviglioso il ricorso di tali cose umane civili de' tempi barbari ritornati,"[343] the barbarian domain represented in the person of Mamay. The negative judgement on China, its "kuchu lishnikh vekov" / "heaps of superfluous centuries," becomes more subtle in English, where the historically connoted variant "Cathay" (which also sounds closer to the Russian "Kitay") is preferred. Such a choice shows Nabokov's attentive consideration of the historical context as conveyed by words: Cathay is the name by which China was known to medieval Europe.[344] While projecting the reflection onto a diachronic background, this historical shift in the English lexicon softens the sharpness of the hostile opinion, removing it from the present.

This is where Nabokov's diction again departs from Mayakovskiy's: such a refined vocabulary as manifested in "Cathay" and, later on, the Latin adversative conjunction "per contra" as well as the Latin noun "patria," all pertaining the self-translated text, contrasts with Mayakovskiy's much more pragmatic style and taste for vivid, contemporary

[343] Giambattista Vico, "Principi di scienza nuova d'intorno alla comune natura delle nazioni, in questa terza impressione dal medesimo autore in un gran numero di luoghi corretta, schiarita, e notabilmente accresciuta," in *Opere Filosofiche*, edited by Paolo Cristofolini (Firenze: Sansoni, 1971), 682.
[344] *Oxford Dictionaries*, en.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/cathay. Accessed 13 Sept. 2017.

communication. For this reason *O pravitelyakh* results in an amalgam of parodic style and individual creation:

> in the poem "On Rulers," Mayakovsky is parodied only in the lines devoted to him (lines 52-60), especially in the suggestion that he would have rhymed the name Churchill with the Russian word "pereperCHIL," overpeppered. Mayakovsky who knew no other languages but Russian and Georgian (which he learned as a child) was indeed notorious for his wrong stress of foreign names and words, indicating through his rhyming that he stressed both the first and the last names of the American President Woodrow Wilson on their last syllables. Otherwise, this poem does not break its lines into Mayakovskian "stepladder" (lesenka) pattern, nor does it use Mayakovsky-style rhymes, which Nabokov did in other poems dating from the same period, such as "Slava" ("Fame").[345]

For all their rather categorical segmentation, Simon Karlinsky's words do confirm the hypothesis that Nabokov's verses are to a certain extent linked to Mayakovskiy's: they are not exactly broken into Mayakovskian "stepladder" pattern, yet they are powerfully remindful of that. They mimic it, they mock it – between imitation and novel creation, they become a *tertium* of their own.

In this respect rhymes also play an important role. With regard to Nabokov's overall verse production, it goes without saying that, while Modernism significantly "de-grammaticised" rhyme and preferred a much freer approach to the outline, Nabokov "is less adventurous than Bryusov, and extremely conservative when compared with one of the principal innovators of his time, Vladimir Mayakovsky."[346] This is to be found in such exact rhymes as "inogda" – "gospoda," "myasniki" – "knyaz'ki," "Mamay" – "Kitay," "prischitavshiy" – "stavshey," "sineva" – "rukava," "inostrannyy" – "divannoy" and "kozyrkom" – "vinom," only to name a few. And yet a different use of rhyme can be observed in *O pravitelyakh*. Referring back to the first part of the poem, the rhyme between

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[345] Karlinsky, "Nabokov and Some Poets of Russian Modernism," revel.unice.fr/cycnos/index.html?id=1453. Accessed 4 Sept. 2017.
[346] Smith, "Nabokov and Russian Verse Form," 293.

"slovo" – "kotorogo" and "kakogo" is betrayed by the difference between the graphic realisation of the voiced velar stop /g/ and its labialisation when pronounced; a rhyming pattern can often be detected between words including one another, as in "*priyat*el'" – "pred*priyat*iya," "pod*lozhe*chkoy" – "lozhe," "*Len*iny" – "ko*leni*" and, in the second part, "khoro*shi*" – "*shi*bko," "si*neva*" and "ruk*ava*" – "*navyka*t," "«monument*ale*n»" – "d*ale*," all of which require a truncation to be perceived. Such a tendency is compensated for with the use of an enriched similarity between preceding or following lexical items, such as in the case of "bul'kan'ya" – "binokl'," "ezhikom" – "lozhe," "lyudoedy" – "lyubovniki" – "lomoviki," as well as full repetitions, as in "s kakikh eto por," "Karl," "na [ekh] i na [ykh]," "Mamay," "ni [luchshe], ni [veseley]." This alternation between exactness and anomaly could be interpreted as an attempt at illustrating Mayakovkiy's style while also discrediting it: "Nabokov viewed departures from exactitude as a specific device," Smith insists, "to be used to mark certain particular texts, rather than as a generally available formal resource which it became in Russian poetry during his time."[347] The result, therefore, is rather destabilising and nonuniform, almost discontinuous.

Both the Russian and the English texts show a strong will to preserve the level of rhetorical awareness and playfulness on both the phonetic and lexical levels: if the source text presents a strong consonance between "priyatel'" and "predpriyatiya," the target text has "empires" instead of "gosudarstv[a]," thus creating a consonance with the aforementioned "enterprise," hinting at the juxtaposition and contiguity of state and industry, an analogy that was spurred, in the USSR, by the implementation of the first Five-Year Plan (1928-1932); such a choice also suggests a verbal relation between an emperor's absolute sovereignty and the *vozhd'*'s power over the Soviet territories. The strong alliteration of the stop sound in "utterly rotten" strengthens the sense of bitterness and disappointment of the passage as well as the impression of stale atmosphere and

[347] Ibidem, 295.

corruption. The lexical correlation between "lyudoyedy" – "lyubovniki" (in the root in "lyu-") and "lyubovniki" – "lomoviki" (in the suffix "-v(n)iki") evolves into a semantic progression from "cannibals," through "lover*boys*" to "lumber*men*" that shows the signs of a human evolution from annihilation to maturity; but, because of Nabokov's lack of faith in evolutionism, this ends up in nothing more than a lumbering movement. The use of two contrasting compound words in "ostanovivshe[yesya] avtomobile," the first implying stasis, the second suggesting movement, is reproduced in the oxymoron between torpor and change in "immobile convertible," which takes advantage of the increased consonance between the suffixes.

Since Nabokov wrote the poem in question in 1944, after his emigration to the US, history is observed from an external point of view, which is explicitly mentioned in correspondence of the "nablyudatel' […] inostrannyy" / "the foreign observer." The perspective being identified as estranged, it results in distorted views and disturbing appearances: the trip through history is compared to a real coach journey where the path is dictated by the "kuchera gosudarstv" / "coachmen of history," whose appealing beauty masks their grotesque backsides, quite literally remindful of stuffed cushions or the bulging surface of pumpkins. This also may serve as a further evidence of Nabokov's fascination with the device of *ostraneniye*, as discussed in chapter 3.

The subsequent verses contain the description of the two heads of state dominating the scene during the Second World War: while the "detina v regalyakh" / "decorated big fellow" is identified as a "Soviet general"[348] by Nabokov himself, the "volk v makintoshe" / "trench-coated wolf" is none other than Adolf Hitler, depicted in his usual attire, a coat and the army cap; the "kavkask[oe] vin[o]" / "Caucasian wine," on the other hand, is indicative of Josef Stalin, who was known to be fond of Caucasian wine and was Georgian himself. The mention of Teheran in the notes refers to the Tehran Conference held in 1943,

[348] Nabokov, *Poems and Problems*, 133.

attended by Stalin, Roosevelt and Churchill. This, Nabokov calls out, will be our last stop in the historical journey which he himself has been guiding us through, verse after verse.

The Russian exclamation "net," enriched in the English version as a more ironically polite "no, thank you," introduces the reader to the last part of the poem, also incorporating an embedded portrayal. Nabokov's "pokoynyy […] tezka" / "late namesake," by way of analogy, brings us back to Vladimir Mayakovskiy. Nabokov's imitation game emerges to the surface of the poem when, in the last few verses, once the reference has been disclosed, his rhyming pattern comments on Mayakovskiy's much debated attitude towards the Soviet regime. In the Russian original, Nabokov uses "monumentalen" and "pereperchil"[349] to covertly allude to Stalin and Churchill respectively, without explicitly mentioning them. And yet the two men are embedded there, in the fabric of the poem, their names more resonant through their purposeful absence. Moreover, the adjective and the verb are selected on the basis of their analogy with the person each of them characterises: Stalin was undoubtedly a monumental presence in Russian as well as global history. Churchill's association with the verb "pereperchi[t']" is slightly less immediate to catch but is equally played on analogy: the Russian verb means literally to overdo with pepper; on a more figurative note it also may indicate to behave miscalculating measures or limits, to exaggerate.[350] As a matter of fact, Churchill was known to have a rather confident boisterous personality, a characteristic that would be particularly beneficial during WW2, when his animated speeches inspired the British nation and "added pepper" to his people's souls. This analogical relation between signifier and signified is radically changed in the English self-translated text. First, the translation is naturalising since the two signifiers are substituted in order to reproduce the same rhyming pattern in the target language – sound,

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[349] Smith considers Mayakovskiy's suicide poem *«Lyubit? ne lyubit? Ya ruki lomayu…»* and its pun "инцидент исперчен" as a possible referent (Smith, "Nabokov and Russian Verse Form," 296).

[350] *Bol'shoy tolkovo-frazeologicheskiy slovar' Mikhel'sona*, dic.academic.ru/dic.nsf/michelson_old/6594/Пересолить. Accessed 13 Sept. 2017.

in this case, is prioritised over sense. Second, the relation between the word *in praesentia* and that *in absentia* is not one of analogy but rather of contrast: the word "praline," which still rhymes with Stalin, evokes a sense of sweetness and mildness. Though Stalin's public icon had been carefully conjured up so as to convey an aura of benevolence and compassion, his intolerant regime induced a state of great terror which was anything but mild or merciful, the inflexibility of steel rooted in the very name he chose to go by in history. On the other hand, the coldness of the "air chill" contrasts with the hotness prompted in the Russian allusion to pepper, both on the atmospheric and chromatic levels.

Nabokov's rhymes *in absentia* are of great importance and are to be interpreted as a manifestation of his own personal dismissal of Mayakovskiy's versification, which he saw as ultimately compliant with Stalin's hegemonic power. This emerges when we compare the two – linguistically divergent – terms referring to the Russian leader, "monumentalen" and "praline." One celebrates the leader's mythological stature, the other contributes to the narrative of an appealing authority. Both are attributed by Nabokov to Mayakovskiy's pen, had the latter been alive when the poem in question was written. As stated in his essay *Philistines and Philistinism* (1981), by bourgeois Nabokov understood "in Flaubert's sense […] a state of mind, not a state of pocket. A bourgeois is a smug philistine, a dignified vulgarian."[351] Had the guiding light of Futurism not fallen victim to that same regime he was accused of complying with, Nabokov seems to imply, he would have joined the "Soviet Small-Bourgeois order."

In a note to his self-translation, Nabokov defined Mayakovskiy as a "minor soviet poet, endowed with a certain brilliance and bite, but fatally corrupted by the regime he faithfully served."[352] Alas, among the many obscure Soviet poets he could have mentioned, a minor poet Mayakovskiy was not. Not even in the West. On the contrary, the most

[351] Vladimir Nabokov, "Philistines and Philistinism," in *Lectures on Russian Literature*, 309.
[352] Nabokov, *Poems and Problems*, 133.

resonant voice of Russian avant-garde poetry, he was one of the very few writers who, at the dawn of the Soviet regime, was accorded a foreign visa and given the rare privilege to travel through America in 1925 for three months – a poet in diplomatic guise. This, however, in Nabokov's eyes, was not a case to praise. This, on the contrary, was enough of a guilt.

Nabokov's uncanny imitation of Mayakovskiy's style breaks the mould of his "rank / and file" poetry, gradually dissecting its most distinguishing features and reproducing them in an estranged form which subverts its supposedly innovative features right from the inside. *O pravitelyakh* results in a game of contradictions. While Mayakovskiy's presence is recognisable in Nabokov's declamatory pose and his informal language, the centred layout gives his poem the retrospective look of an epitaph; its allusiveness impinges on the straightforwardness of Mayakovskiy's verbal encomium of the Revolution and the subsequent Soviet regime. Nabokov is able to turn the incumbent presence of some of the most resonant names of the 20th century into an absence which is still very much palpable. *On Rulers* doubles the effect of the original by further exploring the possibilities of such a parodic imitation. Though less frequently appearing in the English text, the only two monolexical verses there pursue two determinant functions: the first contradicts Mayakovskiy's tendency towards syntactic isolation, the second consists of a key word which, on its own, is able to recreate the context for Futurism. The prosaic informality of the original Russian text is significantly decreased and compensated for with the use of more formal expressions. The concluding rhyming pun, adapted to the target language, adds a layer of contrast with the original counterpart by suggesting an even more conflicting image of the *vozhd'* and thus further trivialising the falsely laudatory attitude. *O pravitelyakh* / *On Rulers* is ultimately an extended parody of poets and leaders alike – of both poetry serving the purpose of power and power as a form of parade and performance.

Reticence ensues from parody and becomes an instrument to achieve it. Still, the silence of omissions is more resonant than shouted names. A word is enough to the wise.

PART 3

SYNTHESIS

5. A LONGER POEM

Слава / Fame

Rarely does translation come to a definitive end. It is a process rather than a closure, an intention instead of a resolution. Because of its intrinsic nature, the act of self-translation does not know exhaustion: the self-translative mode is a ruminant meditation on oneself's oeuvre. Yet instead of being merely retrospective, self-translated poems put the past into a new perspective. They entrust the text with a new existence, a restored – or brand new – fame.

Nabokov wrote the longer poem *Slava* [Fame] in 1942, shortly after his emigration to the US. In spite of its direct and immediate title, the text is a slow introspective contemplation on the poet's eventual anonymity and disappearance into oblivion. By virtue of its complexity, *Slava* condenses some of the most recurrent themes and features explored in the previous chapters of the present comparative study and might be useful to draw some final conclusions.

Mimicry

Slava ponders on the fate of an émigré writer, whom the author identifies with, considering his highly likely disappearance into oblivion.

Nabokov's initial insistent use of similes sounds like a hiccuping lilt ("like a spy, like a hangman, like an evil old schoolmate"[353]), fragmenting the reading flow into a cadenced and monotonous litany. Such a repetitive pace introduces the reader to Nabokov's main inspiration for the rhythmic component: "(Akakiy Akakievich / had a weakness, if you remember, for "weed words," / and he's like an Adverb, my waxy guest)." The lines in *Slava* mimic Gogol's style, "interspersed with more or less meaningless accessory words."[354] Nabokov's imitation of Gogol's diction, however, does not fall short of implications and introduces us to the poet's feeling of linguistic inadequacy as well as to his attempt at mimicry as a tool for adaptation and consequent survival. "I can't make my tongue conform to those accents", writes Nabokov. Like a child learning to speak, Nabokov's poetic effort is an exercise in adherence to form and structure in the attempt to preserve the legacy of the past.

Such a faith in norm and tradition is also quintessentially autoreferential since it applies to Nabokov's own literary production, taking the form of a mostly source oriented self-translation, to the point that the English syntax or some lexical units may sound unusual and unconventional. This often results in marked elements, which tend to preserve and expose their connections to the source text, therefore resulting in functional markedness, consisting in "un qualsiasi frammento di testo che violi le aspettative contestuali dei parlanti."[355] Though not necessarily overtly foregnising translations, the English versions often showcase more elaborate linguistic options, as a consequence of the predominance of their original Russian counterparts. The fact that the target texts usually have a looser rhythm and more irregular rhyme patterns is due to Nabokov's distinct interest in lexical choices. His taste for ekphrastic depictions and intertextual dialogues do

[353] This and the following quotations are from Nabokov, *Poems and Problems*, 102-113.
[354] Ibidem, 113.
[355] Salmon, "Il processo autotraduttivo: definizioni e concetti in chiave epistemologico-cognitiva," 88.

serves in point of fact the purpose of *mimesis*. Coherently enough, the potential for reversibility is generally rather high, mostly due to Nabokov's reliance to the Russian text.

Displacement

Reversibility is, after all, ingrained in Nabokov's lines: that of the *nostos* is probably the most recurrent motif in Nabokov's prose and poetry, frequently taking the shape of a thematic restoration of the past:

> but my word, curved to form an aerial viaduct,
> spans the world, and across in a strobe-effect spin
> of spokes I keep endlessly passing incognito
> into the flame-licked night of my native land

If, as demonstrated above, the return to the motherland takes the shape of a source oriented self-translation, Nabokov's verses do leave space for fresh initiative, turning linguistic displacement into the disarraying principle that breaks into the orderly surface of his predominantly retrospective style. "And furthermore, not without brio, / you happened to write in a quite foreign tongue," he writes in *Fame*.

Self-translation thus returns to the original act of *translatio*, by which matter is physically moved from one place to another. As a consequence, the poet himself is allowed to envision his own return home: "and a vision: you are in your country". He transcends contingency and, by way of his own linguistic act, projects himself onto a parallel dimension, freed of any physical and chronological constraints. Such an unconventional treatment of logic and logistics reverberates in Nabokov's use of metasememes and metalogisms, whereby a preference for more target oriented variants is spurred by the need for a symmetrical impact on Russian and English readers alike. Thus rebalanced,

Nabokov's self-translative mode consists in "uno scambio linguistico orizzontale, […] un rapporto simmetrico."[356]

Such a horizontal, or symmetrical, correlation allows the target text to become not a mere replica of the source text, but rather an independent self-sufficient product, fully responding to the principles of inventiveness and creative elaboration, in that the symbolic capital is equally distributed among source and target texts.[357] Therefore the self-translated version manages to live through displacement and survive in a different linguistic framework, taking advantage of the new perspectives that a different idiom allows to explore.

Omission

Yet Nabokov's linguistic articulation falls short of accuracy when it comes to reveal the essence of this other dimension. Hence the aposiopetic discourse which, counter to any logics, turns reticence into an expressive medium:

> And I'm happy. I'm happy that Conscience, the pimp
> of my sleepy reflections and projects,
> did not get at the critical secret. Today
> I am real remarkably happy.
>
> The main secret tra-tá tra-tá-ta tra-tá -
> and I must not be overexplicit;
> this is why I find laughable the empty dream
> about readers, and body, and glory.
>
> Without body I've spread, without echo I thrive,
> and with me all along is my secret.

Thus self-translation becomes the privileged instrument to transcend space and time as well as a tool to code and recode experience:

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[356] Grutman, "Beckett e oltre: autotraduzioni orizzontali e verticali," 52.
[357] Ibidem, 54.

I admit that the night has been ciphered right well
but in place of the stars I put letters,
and I've read in myself how the self to transcend -
and I must not be overexplicit.

Self-translation may ultimately be interpreted as the secret to overcome circumstantial barriers and contextual limits. Even when reticent, the uttered word becomes a mirror onto which the author is reflected, a portal into conscience:

but one day while disrupting the strata of sense
and descending deep down to my wellspring
I saw mirrored, beside my own self and the world,
something else, something else, something else.

An exercise in discipline, self-translation hinders oblivion. Like a glass exposed to light, the poem exposed to the self-translating action mirrors the poet's reflective process, while contemplating the possibility for untrodden exegetic paths, stimulating fresh insights. For this reason, Nabokov's self-translation is a form of "supra-autotraduzione,"[358] in that it moves from a rarer language (Russian) into a more widespread one (English), pursuing the purpose of self-promotion.

Yet reticence becomes a tool by which the two versions and the hierarchical linguistic distribution are rebalanced: what cannot be attained in Russian is equally inaccessible to the English language. This and the nostalgic presence of Russian that we may be able to detect in Nabokov's English verses re-equilibrate the self-translating process. Thus, rather than bifurcated, self-translation conjoins source and target versions, moving beyond any form of preconceived or even conventional relationship between the two languages as well as Nabokov's own exogenous bilingualism.[359]

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[358] Ibidem, 55.

[359] "Incontriamo però anche parecchi autotraduttori il cui bilinguismo è invece esogeno [as opposed to the endogenous one], ovvero è il risultato di uno spostamento e di un'influenza esteriore alla comunità d'origine.

Once the balance has been restored, source and target text become mutually vital and essential to an in-depth understanding of Nabokov's self-translative as well as creative process. Once correlated, their interdependence exposes that liminal space where translation happens and continues to negotiate between languages and cultures well beyond the moment when the act of rephrasing ends.

È il caso per eccellenza dei numerosi scrittori costretti dall'emigrazione a cambiare lingua o a scegliere fra lingue diverse." Ibidem, 57.

POSTLUDE

I am advocating that we should trust the text. We should be open to what it may tell us. We should not impose our ideas on it, except perhaps just to get started.

John Sinclair, *Trust the Text*.[360]

[360] John Sinclair, *Trust the Text. Language, Corpus and Discourse*, ed. John Sinclair and Ronald Carter, (London: Routledge, 2004), 23.

In Lieu of Conclusions

"Music, I regret to say, affects me merely as an arbitrary succession of more or less irritating sounds." Nabokov's snobbery towards music may seem surprising, disappointing to some extent. Especially when we compare the two forms of artistic endeavour. Poetry and music do in fact share most of their core features, from rhythmic modulations to a certain tempo.

In order to understand Nabokov's standpoint, we should take into account the fact that, according to him, poetry meant first and foremost tradition and mimesis:

> formal innovation was characteristic of those poets who stood politically to the left, who accepted the Revolution of 1917 and remained in Russia or soon returned to it. For Nabokov, this rendered them unacceptable; and the formal choices that he made indicated very graphically his nostalgia for a time before the spirit of innovation had changed Russian poetry and Russian society.[361]

What poetry and music do not share, is the principle of arbitrariness, which in music develops into improvisation, while taking poetry down the path of free verse.

In this sense, as far as tradition is concerned, poetry is a form of repetition, a variation of what precedes, an iteration of the past. Meter, rhythm and rhymes are tools to convey the impression of moving forward while, on the contrary, keeping still and firm within the frame of structured alterations that are all but arbitrary.

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[361] Smith, "Nabokov and Russian Verse Form," 302.

Nabokov composed *Parizhskaya poema* [The Paris Poem, 1943] in anapaestic trimeter, a meter he loosely conveyed in his self-translated version. Built on such a peculiar pattern, the poem is itself a hymn to recurrence:

> In this life rich in patterns (a life
> unrepeatable, since with a different
> cast, in a different manner,
> in a new theatre it will be given),
>
> no better joy would I choose than to fold
> its magnificent carpet in such a fashion
> as to make the design of today coincide
> with the past, with a former pattern,
>
> in order to visit again - oh, not
> commonplaces of those inclinations,
> not the map of Russia, and not a lot
> of nostalgic equivocations -
>
> but, by finding congruences with the remote,
> to revisit my fountainhead,
> to bend and discover in my own childhood
> the end of the tangled-up thread.

Poetry thus becomes that *rumyanaya dorozhka* which Nabokov cyclically goes back to in order to revisit his own past and, by way of that, the past of his native culture and Russian motherland. Self-translation is an alternative route to the same destination, albeit not a shortcut.

For us, readers, self-translations constitute an additional opportunity to plunge in the depths of the literary text and resurface with a more profound awareness on both source and target material. Self-translated works, for all their eulogy of hybridity and coexistence, invite us to go back to the very essence of literature and Literary Studies. Self-reflected, the textual evidence is given primary importance as both the poet's own working material and the reader's/scholar's riddle. This is the reason why, in spite of it seeming

anachronistic, I have chosen to trust the text. Close reading is, I think, the most suitable approach to any comparative study of self-translated versions. Treating language as data is, after all, a potent antidote to superficial readings and forgetfulness. Thus John Sinclair wrote:

> the text at any particular time carries with it everything that a competent reader needs in order to understand the current state of the text. It encapsulates what has gone before in a single act of reference, so that the previous text has exactly the same status as any other piece of shared knowledge. In many cases it also prospects forward and sets the scene for what follows.[362]

[362] Sinclair, *Trust the Text. Language, Corpus and Discourse*, 15.

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