

## NABOKOV AND PUSHKIN

Pushkin died without establishing a literary school and without leaving behind a single direct disciple. His poetic message, if it was understood at all, was soon distorted by foes and friends alike.<sup>1</sup> Nor did Pushkin's aesthetic creed of pure art endear him to the Russian intelligentsia of the decades to come. His journal *Sovremennik* (*The Contemporary*) changed hands, and its new editors made several attempts to dethrone the aristocratic poet and write off his poetic legacy. In fact, soon after the death of Pushkin, Russian literature took an altogether different course, becoming a utilitarian tool for the promotion of civic, social, moral, religious, and political causes—a change that was to numb the aesthetic sensitivities of several generations of Russian readers and critics. Under such circumstances, the eclipse of Pushkin's sun was all but imminent.

Pushkin did not find a worthy descendant in his own century but had to wait for a distant one in the next. During the first decades of the new century we observe something that can be called a "centennial return" to the Golden Age of Pushkin. The entire pleiad of Silver Age poets, Merezhkovsky, Briusov, Balmont, Blok, Bely, Ivanov, Khodasevich, Akhmatova, Mandelstam, Tsvetaeva—each claimed Pushkin as "their own" ("moi Pushkin"—"my Pushkin") and perceived their own epoch, their personal lives and losses as parallel to Pushkin's life, death, and era.

Perhaps no one at home or in exile made claim to Pushkin's legacy more faithfully than Vladimir Nabokov. Born in 1899, one hundred years after Pushkin, Nabokov adopted Pushkin as his personal muse and never abandoned that calling. This muse followed him in 1917-18 to the Crimea where Pushkin "had wandered . . . a century earlier" (*SM* 244), and welcomed the young poet in exile. An epigraph from Pushkin's poem "Arion" opens Nabokov's first volume of verse published in the emigration, *Gornii put'* (*The Empyrean Path*, 1923). The volume is dedicated to the memory of Nabokov's father, while Pushkin's poem serves as an emblem of the young poet's exile: "Both helmsman and sailor perished!— / I alone, the mysterious singer, / Swept ashore by the storm, / I sing the former hymns / And dry my damp garment / In the sun at the foot of a cliff" (Translation by W. Arndt). This poem had a very personal significance for Nabokov. His father, V.D. Nabokov, the leader of the Constitutional Democratic Party, left Russia with his family after the Bolshevik coup. In emigration he was editor-in-chief of the Russian newspaper *Rail* (*The Rudder*), and in 1922 in Berlin was assassinated by Russian terrorists from the extreme right. Through the prism of "Arion," Nabokov's father becomes the "perished helmsman," while the son, rather immodestly, reserves for himself the role of the rescued "mysterious singer" cast by the cataclysms of history into a secure harbor of exile. A Pushkin memento also marks the beginning of Nabokov's prose; his first novel *Mary* (1926) opens with an epigraph from *Eugene Onegin*: "Having recalled intrigues of former years, / Having recalled a former love."<sup>2</sup> Thus from very early on

Pushkin became a permanent dweller in Nabokov's art. His presence extends from fleeting allusions to direct quotations (attributed and unattributed), from occasional motifs to entire themes and fully formulated aesthetic concepts.<sup>3</sup>

It has long been established that the central theme of Nabokov's art is art itself. His concept of art for art's sake and the supreme independence of the poet from all societal needs is a direct outgrowth of Pushkin's treatment of this theme in such works as "The Poet and the Rabbie," "To the Poet," "From Pindemontii," "Egyptian Nights." The majority of Nabokov's novels have as their hero a writer, a poet. The unsuccessful poet Lensky, at whose expense Pushkin deflates the sentimental-romantic canon of the elegy in *Eugene Onegin*, served as a model for a number of Nabokov's hero-writers who were often created for the sole purpose of exposing their artistic diffidence. Pushkin's theme of "Mozart and Salieri" (popularized recently in Shaffer's play and Forman's movie *Amadeus*) became a blueprint for a number of situations in Nabokov's novels in which we find pairs of rival artists of unequal talent. Not unlike Salieri, the lesser artist in Nabokov's novels contemplates or actually commits an ethical or aesthetic crime against his superior rival.<sup>4</sup> On a more arcane level, the "Salieri syndrome" develops into a direct conflict between the hero-writer and his ultimate creator, Nabokov himself.

Pushkin's lifelong preoccupation with questions of the legitimacy of power, his various rulers, usurpers and pretenders (Boris Godunov, The False Dmitry, Pugachev) find their grotesque refraction in Nabokov's imaginary kings, kingdoms, and revolutions in works such as "Ultima Thule," "Solus Rex," *Bend Sinister*, and *Pale Fire*. On the metapoetic level, the notion of usurpation can be applied to the kingdom of the literary text itself, where this theme develops into a conflict between the writing hero and his legitimate creator over authorship, copyrights, royalties, and post-mortem acclaim (*Dequain*). In *Pale Fire* we find the poet and his commentator in an analogous situation. Taken a step higher—from the metapoetic to the metaphysical level—the conflict between the creator and the creature, which lies at the center of Nabokov's "poetic theology," affords us a rare glimpse into Nabokov's own notions of creation, life, death, immortality, and God. These occasional glimpses are far more revealing than Nabokov's quibbling potshots at religion in several works and in interviews, which call to mind Pushkin's poetic blasphemies of the period of his "Parnassian atheism."<sup>5</sup>

The theme of the death of the artist and the immortality of art, as we know it from Pushkin's elegy "André Chénier" or his "Exegi monumentum," is replayed in various keys in the majority of Nabokov's novels (*Mary*, *The Deputy*, *Despair*, *Invitation to a Beheading*, *The Real Life of Sebastian Kravich*, *Bend Sinister*, *Pale Fire*, *Lolita*). The otherworldly intrusions into the world of the living, and the attempts to peer into the mystery of death migrate from work to work in Nabokov's art. According to his wife, the "beyond" ("poustoronost") was Nabokov's main theme: "it saturates everything he has written, it symbolizes, like a watermark, all of his creation."<sup>6</sup> The osmosis

between the two realms, which gives Nabokov's "gnostic" novels a definitive "spectral dimension," remind the reader of Pushkin's "otherworldly shades" encountered in his early burlesques and elegies, in "The Coffinmaker" and "The Queen of Spades," in the unfinished *The Water Nymph* (which Nabokov completed for Pushkin), in *Boris Godunov* and *The Stone Guest* and most strikingly, in *The Feast During the Time of Plague* which Nabokov translated into English.<sup>6</sup>

In their art, Pushkin and Nabokov shared a predilection for experiment, testing the limits of their genres, and crossing the boundaries between poetry and prose. In *Pale Fire*, for example, Nabokov created his own generic equivalent of a "novel in verse." Like *Eugene Onegin*, in which Pushkin often commented on the very process of writing, the majority of Nabokov's texts are self-referential. Both authors repeatedly entered their work in *propheta persona*—Pushkin did so overtly in *Eugene Onegin*, Nabokov's presence was usually more cryptic.

The other important point where Pushkin's and Nabokov's poetic and personal manners overlap is in the elitism of their art and personal attitudes. Both writers were aristocrats with family trees rooted deeply in Russian history. But taking pride in one's ancestry went hand in hand with the liberal attitudes that characterized the best segment of the enlightened Russian nobility. For Pushkin and Nabokov, honor—personal and artistic—embodied the greatest ethical and aesthetic values. 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 assigned sovereign power, whereas pretentiousness, dishonesty, illegitimacy, and vulgarity were the equivalent of cardinal sins and were mercilessly mocked. Nabokov's witty but devastating replies to his critics, such as J.-P. Sartre or Edmund Wilson, were couched in the best tradition of Pushkin's replies to his adversaries. Likewise, Nabokov's hoaxes in which he mocked, under various pseudonyms, Georgy Adamovich and his Paris followers ("From a Poem by Calmbrood," "The Poets," "Vasily Shishkov") call to mind Pushkin's delightful invention of Feofliakt Kosichkin under whose name in 1831 Pushkin fooled his arch-enemy Fyaddei Bulgarin.

However, the importance of the Pushkinian creed for Nabokov is best perceived in the light of the debate over Pushkin's legacy, which developed in the late 1920s and early 1930s in the émigré press. The polemic put into focus the fate of Russian poetry in exile and questioned the vitality of Pushkin's model for Russian literature in the future. G. Adamovich and V. Khodashevich, the two deans of Russian letters in the diaspora, found themselves on opposite sides of the conflict.<sup>7</sup> Adamovich, the leader of the Paris group, called for a turn away from Pushkin. He accused Pushkin of lapidary simplicity, formal perfection, and a lack of concern for content, and, furthermore, declared Pushkin's poetic model inadequate to express the complexity of the modern

world and to capture the increasingly introspective human soul. Adamovich questioned Nabokov's mission of keeping Pushkin's tradition alive: "[Nabokov] plows up the earth for some future Pushkin who once more will take it upon himself to put our house of poetry in order. Perhaps the new Pushkin will never appear."<sup>8</sup> Much to Khodashevich's and Nabokov's dismay, the Paris group found Pushkin's verbal perfection "suspicious," "empty," and urged young poets to embrace Lermontov's soul-searching rhetoric and the "inelegant" manner of Pasternak. The Parisian almanac *Chisla (Numbers)*, which boycotted Khodashevich and regularly assaulted Nabokov, became the main tribune for the anti-Pushkin campaign.

Nabokov did not participate directly in this critical polemic, yet he missed no opportunity to cross swords with Pushkin's calumniators in his fictional works. In the narrative fragment "Iz Kalmbrodovoi poemy" ("From a Poem by Calmbrood," 1931), which is a pretended translation of "The Night Journey" by the invented English poet "Vivian Calmbrood" (an anagram of "Vladimir Nabokov"), the nonexistent poet converses with the poet Chenston. (Pushkin claimed that his *Skupoi rytsar'* was a translation of Chenston's non-existent tragic-comedy *The Covetous Knight*.) Nabokov puts in Chenston's—and hence Pushkin's—mouth satirical portraits of Adamovich and Georgy Ivanov, the other villain on the Russian émigré Parnassus. In the story "Lips to Lips" (1933), Nabokov lampoons Adamovich and Ivanov for the extortion of a large sum to finance the almanac *Chisla*. In mocking fashion, the almanac figures in Nabokov's story under the Pushkinian title "Arion," which was to remind Adamovich and Co. that by raising their hands against Pushkin (and boycotting Khodashevich and Nabokov in *Chisla*), they resemble the pirates of the Greek legend who attempted to rob the bard Arion of his well-deserved musical earnings.<sup>9</sup>

Nabokov best assessed the satirical role he played in the annals of Russian émigré literary life in the poem "Neokonchennyi chernovik" ("An Unfinished Draft," 1931): "Zolius (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 . . ." (PP 67).

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. On the same Pushkinian scales Nabokov also weighed the heroes of his own fictions. An insensitivity or disrespect toward Pushkin, a second-hand familiarity with him through the "vile libretti" of Tchaikovsky's operas, or a complete unawareness of Pushkin's heritage are tantamount to cardinal sins in the aesthetic universe of Nabokov's fiction, sins for which the despotic creator punishes his creatures. Nabokov skillfully directs the hand of Nemesis in meting out poetic justice.

A failure to recognize the traces left by Pushkin in the Russian language portends misfortune for the heroes of Nabokov's fiction. In *The Defense*

(1930), Luzhin-père sits down to play chess with his son for the first time: "Let's start, if you are willing" (*Dof* 64; "Nachnem, pozhalui"), the father challenges the future grandmaster. He loses not only because he faces a chess prodigy, but also because he opened his game with the words of Lensky before his fatal duel with Onegin.<sup>10</sup> Later in life, when the child prodigy has aged, he fails to devise a successful defense against his opponent, loses his mind, and commits suicide. The fact that in his childhood Luzhin never opened that "large volume of Pushkin with a picture of a thick-lipped, curly-haired boy on it" (*Dof* 33)—E. Geitman's famous etching—is at least partly responsible for Luzhin's downfall.

In Nabokov's story "In Memory of L. I. Shigaev" (1934), an old Russian émigré converses with a bohemian poet, Viktor, about literature. Shigaev knows very little about poetry, yet he declares with certitude: "No, say what you will, but Lermontov is somehow closer to us than Pushkin."<sup>11</sup> When Viktor challenges him to recite even a single line of Lermontov, Shigaev tries in vain to recall something out of Rubinstein's opera *The Demon* and then excuses himself: "Haven't read him in a long while, all these are deeds of bygone days . . ." Shigaev does not realize that he just quoted the opening and the concluding line of Pushkin's first epic poem *Ruslan and Ludmila*. Shigaev's death in the story and Viktor's obituary of him—the story itself—become, on another level, Nabokov's death sentence on Adamovich's literary tastes.

In the best passage of the story, Viktor describes the most prevalent of all hallucinations in Russian literature: seeing devils. Viktor's nocturnal tormentors have little in common with Lermontov's lofty Demon or even with the "poetry devil" of Ivan Karamazov. Viktor's devils belong to the most delightful terrestrial sub-species of Pushkin's "devils" ("besy," "besenata") as we know them from "The Tale of the Priest and His Worker Balda," from "Scenes from Faust" and "Sketches for Faust," or from the Dantesque "And We Went Farther" ("Skazka o pope i rabotnike ego Balde," "Stseny iz Fausta," "Nabroski k zamyslu o Fauste," "I dalee my poshi"). These unmagical, toad-like, and thoroughly domestic creatures climb on Viktor's writing desk, spill his ink, and make themselves comfortable on a volume of Pushkin, thus unambiguously signaling their provenance and hinting at the path the young poet should follow.

Once we move to the professional literati in Nabokov's fiction, the author's intolerance toward his hero-writers who are disrespectful of Pushkin intensifies. In the story "The Admiralty Spire" ("Admiral'skaya igla," 1933), Nabokov unceremoniously exposes a lady author, Mme Solntsev, for dressing up her vapid novel, *The Admiralty Spire*, in the glamour of Pushkin's line from *The Bronze Horseman*: "And bright are the slumbering masses / Of deserted streets, and luminous is / The Admiralty spire" ("I isany spishchie gromady / Pustymykh ulits, i svetla / Admiral'skaya igla"). Mme Solntsev has committed a sacrilege; the shame, as well as the poorly authored, whose every sentence "buttrons to the left," have to be exposed. "Toshlost" or "poshlust"—

as Nabokov renders this untranslatable Russian word into English in his book on Gogol (see the article "Poshlost" in this volume)—"is especially vigorous and vicious when the shame is *not* obvious and when the values it mimics are considered, rightly or wrongly, to belong to the very highest level of art, thought or emotion" (*NG* 68).

In the novel *Despair* (1936) the murderer Hermann, whom J.-P. Sartre accused of having read too much Dostoevsky,<sup>12</sup> commits an even greater sacrilege against Pushkin. It is greater because Hermann is a talented writer who knows his Pushkin by heart, yet who intentionally perverts his ideals, exploiting Pushkin's art for sinister schemes. The perversion starts as an innocent joke: in Hermann's paraphrase of Pushkin's tale "The Sho" in the Russian version of the novel, "Sil'no point-blank and without superfluous words kills the lover of cherries, and with him, also the plot (which was, mind you, perfectly familiar to me)."<sup>13</sup> The turpitude of Hermann's joke becomes apparent once we realize that he kills his double, Felix, in the manner of his perverted paraphrase of Pushkin. What is even worse, Hermann attempts to make Pushkin an accomplice in this hideous undertaking. As he devises the elaborate murder, Hermann recites Pushkin's poem, "This time, my dear, 'tis time. The heart demands repose" ("Pora, moi drug, pora Pokoia serdse prosit"), in which Pushkin had contemplated his escape into the realm of art, "To a remote abode of work and pure delight" ("V orbitel' dal'niu trudov i chistykh neg"). It is true that after shooting his double, Hermann begins to write a story about it, but the murderous tale cannot redeem Hermann. Pushkin's ethical and aesthetic maxim that "Genius and villainy are incompatible," which Pushkin put in the mouth of Mozart, are lost on Hermann, the Salieri of Nabokov's novel. (Hermann's "deed" is more in the vein of the apocryphal story claiming that Michelangelo once killed his model to better depict a corpse.)

Hence, Heymann is denied "repose" in "a remote abode of work and pure delight." Both of his sacrificial offerings, the slain double and the murderous tale, are rejected by the gods, and Nabokov leaves no doubt that the vile artist will end in Hell. It is amusing to note that in the foreword to the English edition of *Despair*, published some thirty years after the novel appeared in Russian, the incensed and unforgiving author returns to remind his hero, who perverted Pushkin's ideal, that "Hell shall never parole Hermann" (*Des* xiii).

True artists do not kill in Pushkin's and Nabokov's universes. More likely, they become victims. Reading *Invitation to a Beheading* (1938), it is difficult not to evoke lines from Pushkin's 1825 elegy "André Chénier," commemorating the poet guillotined by the Jacobins: "Condemned to the block. I drag out my last hours. / At dawn—the execution. With a triumphant hand / the headman will lift my head by the hair / above the indifferent crowd." The hero of *Invitation to a Beheading*, Cincinnatus C., is awaiting execution for the unusual crime of "gnostical turpitude." The main characteristic of the society, which will decapitate Cincinnatus, is its total lack of culture: "The ancient

inborn art of writing is long since forgotten" (IB 93) and the old unread writers are reduced to rag dolls for schoolgirls. It is grotesque that Cincinnatus yearning for culture surfaces while he is at work in such a doll shop: "... here there was little hairy Pushkin in a fur carick, and radlike Gogol in a flamboyant waistcoat, and old little Tolstoy with his fat nose, in a peasant's smock, and many others" (IB 27). Nevertheless, Cincinnatus soon develops a true "fondness for this mythical Nineteenth Century." He likes to "feast on ancient books," and he has even read *Eugene Onegin*. There can be little doubt that Cincinnatus is the last relic of the forgotten culture in this dystopian society, and his "gnostic turpitude" can be interpreted as an aesthetic rather than a moral "crime" for which he has to die.

The only thing Nabokov gives his convicted hero is a pencil "as long as the life of any man except Cincinnatus," and several sheets of checkered paper. Cincinnatus' pencil is thus the only weapon to meet the challenge of the axe. On death row, a poet is born. Cincinnatus is aware that he writes "obscurely and limply, like Pushkin's lyrical duelist," Lensky (IB 92), yet as his writing becomes more inspired, his tête-à-tête with death turns into a struggle for artistic immortality. Cincinnatus expresses the same plea before the execution as Pushkin's André Chénier: "Save these jottings—I do not know whom I ask, but save these jottings . . ." (IB 194). A Chénier was guillotined on the 7th Thermidor 1794, two days before the Jacobin dictatorship fell; the dictatorship in *Invitation to a Beheading* falls at the moment of the execution. The betraded Cincinnatus raises his head from the block and, amidst the dust and cataclysms of the crumbling world walks "in that direction where, to judge by the voices, stood beings akin to him" (223). It can be safely argued that Cincinnatus is rescued because he acquired and preserved cultural literacy in a world deprived of genuine art, and because of his link to Pushkin's patrimony.

The most prominent place on Nabokov's Olympus is reserved for those who possess a true knowledge of Pushkin. Nabokov sometimes devises literary characters for the sole purpose of guarding this sacred treasure. They may be incidental and outwardly unremarkable people, yet Nabokov depicts them using his most precious tints. One of them is the elusive Petrov in *The Dyzense*: "His sole function in life was to carry, reverently and with concentration, that which had been entrusted to him, something which it was necessary at all costs to preserve in all its detail and in all its purity, and for that reason he even walked with small careful steps, trying not to bump into anyone, and only very seldom, only when he discerned a kindred solicitude in the person he was talking to did he reveal for a moment—from the whole of that enormous something that he carried mysteriously within him—some tender, priceless little trifle, a line from Pushkin or the peasant name of a wildflower" (Dyf 230–31).

The precious, minor character such as Petrov eventually attains full size in Nabokov's last Russian novel, *The Gift* (1937). Here the mission of preserving Pushkin's creed and absorbing his art into one's own was entrusted to the

young poet, Fyodor Godunov-Cherdyntsev, who is by far the most autobiographical character in Nabokov's fiction.

The appearance of *The Gift* in 1937 coincided with the centennial of Pushkin's death. Nabokov presented on this occasion a public lecture in Paris, entitled "Pouchkine ou le vrai et le vraisemblable" ("Pushkin, or the Real and the Plausible"). James Joyce happened to be present at the reading. In his lecture Nabokov bemoans the low level of familiarity with Pushkin of the average Russian, whose knowledge rarely exceeds the vague memories of one's school compositions and of the vile libretti for Tchaikovsky's operas based on Pushkin's works. From this gray majority of compatriots Nabokov isolates those few for whom "to read [Pushkin's] works, without a single exception—his poems, stories, elegies, letters, plays, reviews—and to reread them endlessly is one of the glories of earthly life."<sup>14</sup> In anticipation of the hosts of books written on the occasion of the centennial, Nabokov warns his audience about the genre of "fictionalized biographies." Even the most sincere and well-informed attempt to transform a great poet's life into a biography results in a "monstrous hoax," turning the poet's life into a "pastiche of his art" and reducing the man to a "macabre doll" (p. 40). Nabokov shows us how easy it is to conjure up plausible vignettes of Pushkin: "Here, then, is this brusque, stocky man, whose small swarthy hand (for there was something Negroid and something simian about this great Russian) wrote the first and most glorious pages of our poetry . . . I see him . . . at his country place, . . . in his nightshirt, hairy, scribbling verse on a scrap of gray paper of the kind used to wrap candles, as he munches on an apple. . . . And finally, there he is with a bullet in his belly, sitting crosswise in the snow and aiming at d'Anhès for a long, long time. . . ." (40). The impossibility of reconciling the "plausible" and the "real" Pushkin is matched only by the impossibility of translating his verse: "It is a platitude to say that, for us Russians, Pushkin is a colossus who bears on his shoulders our country's entire poetry. Yet, at the approach of the translator's pen, the soul of that poetry immediately flies off, and we are left holding but a little gilded cage" (41). As if to demonstrate the point, Nabokov read to his audience several of his own translations of Pushkin into French.

Nabokov resisted the temptation to write "The Life of Pushkin," and chose instead to turn into a "macabre doll" the iron man of Russian letters, N. G. Chernyshevsky, whose notorious pen signed the "death warrant" for the "Golden Age" and for everything Pushkin and his art stood for. But the task of writing the life of this radical critic of the 1860s fell to Fyodor Godunov-Cherdyntsev, Nabokov's favorite character. Chapter 4 of *The Gift* contains *The Life of Chernyshevski* written by the novel's hero Fyodor.

Fyodor is a beginning poet on his way to becoming a major writer. *The Gift* traces three years of Fyodor's aesthetic education, and each of Fyodor's artistic accomplishments is weighed on Pushkin's scales. Fyodor's development as an artist loosely parallels the path Russian literature took after the Golden Age of poetry in the 1820s, to the turn to prose in the 1830s, through the age of Gogol

and Belinsky, to the utilitarian Iron Age of the 1860s, and through the period of Dostoevsky and Tolstoy, into the Silver Age and modern times. In addition, Fyodor refracts the evolution of Russian literature through the theoretical achievements of the Formalist school. This dramatization of literary history and criticism in *The Gift* is Nabokov's most elaborate answer to the anti-Pushkinian attitudes voiced in the last century and repeated in more recent times. Nabokov tells us in the introduction to the English edition, that *The Gift's* central character is Russian literature. Indeed, "not since *Eugenie Onegin* has a major Russian novel contained such a profusion of literary discussions, allusions and writers' characterizations," writes Simon Karlinsky in the first critical article on the novel.<sup>15</sup>

Chapter One, covering the period of Fyodor's poetic apprenticeship, contains an array of minor and major allusions to Pushkin. Fyodor's name, Godunov-Cherdyntsev, belongs to an extinct aristocratic lineage and owes something to the author of *Boris Godunov*. Nabokov gives Fyodor a nurse who comes from the same village as Pushkin's nanny Ariana Rodionovna (*Gift* 98); Nabokov's mother's nanny came from that region too (*Drugie berega*, p. 37). Fyodor's collection of verses, partially reproduced in Chapter One, opens with a poem about his nanny and introduces us into the nursery of the future poet. All of Fyodor's poems are couched in iambic tetrameter, the measure given to Russian poetry at its birth by Lomonosov and immortalized by Pushkin. Entire sections of the novel are written in verse form, overt and concealed, which makes *The Gift* a generic cousin to Pushkin's experimental "novel in verse," *Eugenie Onegin*.

Pushkin's contemporary A. Bestuzhev-Marlinsky once wrote that "poetry is to prose as an infant's rattle is to a youth's compass." In chapter 2, the young poet makes his transition to prose. Fyodor embarks on an imaginary journey to Central Asia and China, tracing the steps of his father, a famous explorer who did not return from his last expedition to this region. The apprenticeship to Pushkin continues in this chapter also, for the son's search for his lost father is prompted by a sentence from Pushkin's *The Journey to Arzum* (1835/36). Learning entire pages of Pushkin by heart, Fyodor absorbs into his poetic system Pushkin's narrative manner. He attempts to bring the "transparent rhythm" of Pushkin's prose "to the limits of blank verse." An accidental iambic and alliterative sentence from Pushkin's novel *The Captain's Daughter* serves as a living example: "Ne priveidi Bog videt' russki hunt bessmyslennyi i besposhchadnyi" (*Dar* 111; "God helps us not to see a Russian riot senseless and merciless" [*Gift* 97]). The short samples of Pushkin's prose that Fyodor quotes or paraphrases in Chapter Two are all alliteratively patterned: "Zhavra struias', ozhidai serpa. . . . Navstrechu shla Karolina Schmidt, devushka sil'no narumianennaiia, vida skromnogo i smirenogo, kupivshaiia krovat', na kotoroi umet Shoning" (*Dar* 109, 111; "The harvest rippled, awaiting the sickle. . . . Toward him . . . came Karolina Schmidt, a girl heavily rouged, of meek and modest appearance, who acquired the bed in which Shoning died" [*Gift* 96,

97]). In Pushkin's original the alliterations are even tighter. The sound of Pushkin's prose indeed serves as a "tuning fork" for the young poet during his migration to prose. This alliterative quality is, of course, a permanent hallmark of Nabokov's prose, Russian and English.

During his imaginary journey, Fyodor continually refracts the image of his lost father through the prism of Pushkin: "the rhythm of Pushkin's era commingled with the rhythm of his father's life." Or even more directly: "With Pushkin's voice merged the voice of his father" (*Gift* 98). Thus, Fyodor's sorrow and the search for his lost father actually involve two parental figures. Both missing men exert their presence in an elliptic yet tangible way, best expressed in the words of the invented memoirist Subhoshekov: "They say that a man whose leg is cut off at the hip can feel it for a long time, moving nonexistent toes and flexing nonexistent muscles. Thus will Russia long continue to feel the living presence of Pushkin" (*Gift* 98-99).

It is according to this bizarre principle that Fyodor physically resurrects Pushkin in the following episode, which involves a practical joke played by two pranksters on Fyodor's grandfather, who has returned from America after twenty years and is unaware of Pushkin's fatal duel. During a theater performance of *Othello* the two boys point out to him a swartly elderly gentleman in the adjacent box and casually inform him that he is Pushkin.

The refusal to accept Pushkin's death and the attempt to return him to life find their reflection in Fyodor's attempt to restore Pushkin's text. In Chapter Two Fyodor quotes two quatrains that Pushkin allegedly wrote in an album of one of Fyodor's aunts (*Gift* 99). The first quatrain is taken from an undated and unfinished poem by Pushkin; the second one, however, is Fyodor's own creation—a collage of various bits from Pushkin ("Elegy" 1830; *Eugenie Onegin*, ch. 3, stanza 13 and ch. 8, stanza 12). Completing the poem, Fyodor fulfills, as it were, Pushkin's own wish expressed in the opening lines: "Oh no, my life has not grown tedious, / I want it still, I love it still" ("Ta zhit' khochu . . .").<sup>16</sup>

In a similar vein, Fyodor's voyage to China in chapter 2 can be seen as a realization of a dream that both Pushkin and Nabokov once cherished. In 1830, Pushkin wished to join a diplomatic mission to Peking, but was informed that the Tsar would not grant him permission to travel abroad. In 1916, the seventeen-year-old Nabokov inherited a sizable fortune and planned to sponsor an entomological expedition to West China to be led by the famous naturalist G. E. Grun-Grzhimailo. This time Lenin's revolution destroyed the poet's dream.<sup>17</sup>

Fyodor's imaginary journey in chapter 2 can be seen as compensation for the unrealized dreams—his own, his author's, and Pushkin's. Fyodor embarks on this journey by stepping into a picture of Marco Polo leaving Venice. It depicts a ship with lowered sails, shortly before its departure for the Far East (*Gift* 115; *Dar* 132). Fyodor's own situation—pen in hand, in front of the picture—calls to mind the final stanzas of Pushkin's fragment "Autumn"

("Osen," 1833): "Fingers cry out for a pen, the pen for paper, / A moment—lines and verses freely flow. / So a ship slumbers in the stirlless vapour, / But hark: sailors leap out, all hands are swarming / Up and down the masts, sails fill with wind, / The monster's moving and it cleaves the deep. // It sails. Where shall we sail? . . ." (Tr. by D. M. Thomas). Fyodor's imaginary journey in search of his father proceeds, as it were, along Pushkin's dotted itinerary, whereas the concrete geographical details, the descriptions of exotic fauna and flora were borrowed from books of the great naturalists M. Pzheval'sky and G. E. Grum-Grzhimailo. Pushkin, too, when writing "Kamcharka Affairs" (1837), copiously excerpted the work of the eighteenth-century explorer of that region, S. P. Krasheninnikov (1755). If one realizes that Pushkin began to write about Kamcharka—a place he had never been—just a few days before his fatal duel, this exotic journey attains a certain touch of otherworldliness.

Fyodor's imaginary expedition to Tibet, from which his father did not return, becomes for Fyodor a metaphysical journey into the *terra incognita* of the "beyond." The journey is begun by the father whom the son joins midway, but the trip is completed by the son alone. As a result of this "being one" with his father, Fyodor has matured spiritually as well as artistically—the young poet returns from the journey as a prose writer of considerable stature. At the end of the journey, Fyodor's search for Pushkin is also completed, and it is now time for him to move on. Thus, at the end of chapter 2, Fyodor leaves his old room and moves to a new place: "The distance from the old residence to the new was about the same as, somewhere in Russia, that from Pushkin Avenue to Gogol Street" (*Giff* 145).

Chapter 3 of *The Giff* brings us to the 1840s, the Gogol period in Russian literature. In his book *Nikolai Gogol* (1944) Nabokov, guiding the reader through the gallery of Gogol's grotesque characters, singled out "poshlust" (usually transliterated as "poshlost")—the elusive Russian word referring to various manifestations of "poor taste"—as the prime target of Gogol's art. For Fyodor, reading *Dead Souls* in chapter 3 (*Giff* 156) proved to be invaluable practice in detecting "poshlust," while Gogol's art of the grotesque set the example of how "poshlust" should be mocked. Berlin, the world capital of "poshlust," with its indigenous as well as Russian inhabitants, provided Fyodor with stunning samples of this universal affliction. However, even this essentially Gogolian theme owes something to Pushkin (see the article "Poshlost" in this volume).

Gogol's skill at rendering "poshlust" absurd and his art of blurring the boundaries between phantom and reality find their full expression in chapter 4, in Fyodor's mock biography of Chernyshevski. Fyodor casts Chernyshevski, the nineteenth-century radical critic, writer, and revolutionary, as the hero of a would-be Gogolian tale. The cruel but hilarious vivisection of the darling of the liberal intelligentsia is performed with a Gogolian scalpel. Yet there remains one substantial difference: in Fyodor's art even the most fantastic and

absurd details which one would take for fragments of the imagination turn out to be true and verifiable fragments culled from Chernyshevski's real life.<sup>18</sup>

According to Fyodor, Pushkin is Chernyshevski's "most vulnerable spot; for it has long become customary to measure the degree of flair, intelligence and talent of a Russian critic by his attitude to Pushkin" (*Giff* 255). The pure art of Pushkin and the utilitarianism of Chernyshevski represent for Fyodor two antagonistic lines in the history of Russian culture. Pushkin's prophetic 1828 poem "Poet i tolpa" ("The Poet and the Rabble"), written in the year of Chernyshevski's birth, reads like a blueprint for Fyodor's sally against the utilitarian aesthetic of the men of the 1860s, who were reputed to value a pair of boots higher than the paintings of Raphael or the collected works of Shakespeare. Commenting upon Chernyshevski's critical judgment in matters of art, Fyodor compares him to the "cobbler who visited Apelles' studio" (*Giff* 242). Fyodor's remark is a direct allusion to Pushkin's 1829 parable "The Cobbler" ("Sapozhnik"): "A cobbler, canvassing a painting, / Has found the footwear on it flawed. / The artist promptly fixed the falling, / But this is what the cobbler thought: / It seems the face is slightly crooked. . . . / And isn't that bosom rather nude? . . . / Annoyed, Apelles interrupted: / 'Judge not, my friend, above the boot'" (my translation).

The nonchalant ease, wit, and playful irreverence of Fyodor's lampoon of Chernyshevski link it to the tradition of "Arzamas," the merry club in which Pushkin and his friends, through travesties and skits, exorcised the demons of the retrograde literature perpetrated by the members of the group "Beseda," also known as the "Archaisists." For Nabokov, who was a founding member of the émigré "Arzamas," the anti-aesthetic and anti-Pushkinian attitudes of the past had far-reaching implications for the present. In Fyodor's eyes the men of the 1860s were directly responsible for the advent of Socialist Realism in the 1930s, which placed an iron full stop after the Russian cultural explosion of the Silver Age. The invective against Chernyshevski was also obliquely aimed at the Adamovich clique, the "Paris mystagogues," whom Nabokov held responsible for the wasteland of Russian literature in emigration.

Fyodor happened to be more fortunate in the novel than Nabokov was in real life: Fyodor does find a publisher for his book in chapter 5, while Nabokov was not allowed to slaughter publicly the holy cow of the Russian liberal intelligentsia. *The Giff* appeared on the pages of the otherwise very tolerant *Contemporary Annals* (*Sovremennye zapiski*), but without the *Life of Chernyshevski*—a rare example of censorship from the left in the history of Russian émigré literature. As if anticipating this cut, Nabokov opened chapter 5 with several unflattering reviews of the purged chapter. Nabokov's fictitious reviews of Fyodor's book plausibly capture the prevailing mentality of the critics of the day, their cultural and ideological bias. One reviewer, for example, criticizes Fyodor for placing "solemn but not quite grammatical maxims in the mouths of his characters, like 'The poet himself chooses the subjects for his poems, the multitude ['tolpa'] has no right to direct his inspiration'" (*Giff*

302)—without recognizing that this sentence is a quote from Pushkin's "Egyptian Nights." The review by Christopher Mortus of Paris is a brilliant parody of Adamovich's anti-Pushkin musings (*Giff* 302–305). Nabokov's preemptive move in the beginning of chapter 5 reminds us of Pushkin, who in the foreword to the second edition of *Ruslan and Ljudmila* reproduced some of the most inept reviews of that work without adding a word in his own defense.

By the end of chapter 5, Fyodor's last work, *The Gift* itself, is born. Until this point it existed only in potentiality, as a novel to be. However, Fyodor's presentations of the finished book permeate its not-yet-written pages: "It's queer, I seem to remember my future works, although I don't even know what they will be about. I'll recall them completely and write them down" (*Giff* 194); "[a]t times I feel that somewhere [my book] has already been written by me, that it is here, hiding in this inky jungle, that I have only to free it part by part from the darkness and the parts will fall together of themselves" (*Giff* 138). The anticipation of the final form of the not-yet-written work is one of Pushkin's devices most skillfully employed in *Eugene Onegin*, in which the poet, peering into a "magic crystal," dimly recognizes the shape of his future novel (ch. 8, stanza 50). The novel is announced in chapter 3, stanza 13, and in the last chapter Pushkin has his hero Onegin read this very novel (ch. 8, stanza 36).

Finally, not only Fyodor's anticipation of his future book, but also his parting from the completed work is truly Pushkinian. The final paragraph of *The Gift* is Fyodor's final tribute to Pushkin, to his iambic tetrameter, to the Onegin stanza, and to Pushkin's closing of his novel in verse: "Good-bye, my book! Like mortal eyes, / imagined ones must close one day. / Onegin from his knees will rise— / but his creator strolls away. / And yet the ear cannot right now / part with the music and allow / the tale to fade; the chords of fate / itself continue to vibrate; / and no obstruction for the sage / exist where I have put The End: / the shadows of my world extend / beyond the skyline of the page, / blue as tomorrow's morning haze— / nor does this terminate the phrase," Compare with the last lines of *Eugene Onegin*: "Blest who life's banquet early / left, having not drained to the bottom / the goblet full of wine; / who did not read life's novel to the end / and all at once could part with it / as I with my Onegin" (Nabokov's translation).

*The Gift*, in which Nabokov resurrects Pushkin in so many ways, takes us through a century of Russian literature. Nabokov considered it "the best and the most nostalgic" of his Russian novels (SO 13), while Field called it "the greatest novel Russian literature has yet produced in this century."<sup>9</sup> Be that as it may, with this "centennial return" in *The Gift* to the Golden Age of Pushkin, Nabokov made his definitive entry into modern literature. It was Nabokov's last Russian work, and as such it can be seen as a farewell to his twenty-year-long literary career in what he called his docile Russian tongue. Nabokov, whom many compatriots considered to be the most "un-Russian" of Russian

writers, was soon to leave the Old World to become an American writer, never to write another novel in Russian.<sup>20</sup> Yet the American Nabokov would return to Pushkin as a translator and scholar, devoting to *Eugene Onegin* as many years of his own life as it took Pushkin to write it. Nabokov's translation, accompanied by three volumes of meticulous commentary, remains the most enduring monument raised to Pushkin on American soil.

Sergei Davydov

## NOTES

1. See for example, Zhukovskiy's well-intended but monstrous deformation of Pushkin's lines from "Exegi monumentum"—"That I was useful because of the lively loveliness of my verses" ("Что прелестнu zhivoi snkhovoria byl polezen")—which from 1841 until 1881 was mistaken by the entire nation for the authentic version and was engraved on Pushkin's monument.
2. Nabokov translation, *Eugene Onegin*, chapter 1, stanza 47 (vol. 1, p. 115).
3. The topic of Pushkin and Nabokov is discussed in several articles and book chapters: Clarence Brown, "Nabokov's Pushkin and Nabokov's Nabokov," pp. 169–208. William Rowe, *Nabokov's Deceptive World*, lists a number of Pushkin allusions, as does D.B. Johnson in his article "Nabokov's *Ada* and Pushkin's *Eugene Onegin*." In the chapter "The Chess Key to *The Gift*," Johnson discusses Pushkin's poem "The Three Springs" ("Tri kluchcha") in the context of the theme of "keys" in the novel *The Gift* (*Worlds in Regression*, pp. 100–106). See also Meyer, 1984, and "Lolita and Onegin: America and Russia," in her *Find What The Sailor Has Hidden*, pp. 13–38.
4. Valentinov and Lavhin in *The Defense*, M sieur Pierre and Cincinnati in *Invitation to a Beheading*, Hermann and Ardalon in *DePART*, Fyodor Godunov-Cherdyntsev and Koncheyev, and Chernyshevsky and Pushkin in *The Gift*, Mr. Goodman and V., and V. and Sebastian Knight in *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight*, Clair Quilty and Humbert Humbert in *Lolita*, Charles Kinboe and John Shade in *Pale Fire*.
5. See her introduction to V. Nabokov, *Sibiri*. W.W. Rowe's *Nabokov's Spectral Dimension* is devoted to the "otherworldly" aspect. See also my "gnostic" interpretation of *Invitation to a Beheading* in *Teksty-martirizki Vladimir Nabokova*, pp. 100–182. V. Alexandrov treats brilliantly the metaphysical theme in his recent book, *Nabokov's Oberworld*. The "beyond" also figures prominently in both of B. Boyd's recent volumes, *Vladimir Nabokov: The Russian Years*, and *Vladimir Nabokov: The American Years*.
6. Nabokov, *Three Russian Poets*, pp. 11–19.
7. For the Khodasewich-Adamovich polemics, see Struve, 1956, pp. 199–222; Roger Hagglund, "The Russian Emigré Debate of 1928 on Criticism," and "The Adamovich-Khodasewich Polemics"; see also Bethea, *Khodasewich*, pp. 317–31.
8. Adamovich, 1955, p. 227.
9. The legend about Arion is told by Herodotus (I, 23–24), and Ovid (*Fasts*, II, 79ff). The pro-Decembist interpretation of Pushkin's poem "Arion" should be reexamined in the light of this legend.
10. Pushkin, *Eugene Onegin*, chapter 6, stanza 27.

11. *Tyrants Destroyed and Other Stories*, p. 166.
12. Sartre's careless 1939 review of *Dejean* is discussed in Field, 1967, pp. 231-32.
13. *Othelmaie*, p. 45. In the English version, Pushkin's plot is replaced by the plot of *Othello* (*DS* 46).
14. "Pushkin, or the Real and the Plausible," p. 39. Subsequent page references will be given in the text.
15. Karlinsky, "Vladimir Nabokov's Novel *Dar* as a Work of Literary Criticism," p. 286.
16. Nabokov himself engaged in writing apocrypha of this kind, composing, for example, the final scene for Pushkin's *Water Nymph* (*Rusalka*) or "restoring" the nonexistent French original of Tatianna's letter to Olegin, which Pushkin allegedly "translated" into Russian. Likewise, Nabokov fulfills the promise made by Pushkin in *Engene Olegin* (ch. 1, stanza 50, first edition): in footnote number 11 to the "African" line, "Beneath the sky of my Africa" ("Pod nebom Afriki moe"), Pushkin promised the reader "to publish in due time a complete biography" of his famous Ethiopian great-grandfather Abram Hannibal. Pushkin began this biography in the first chapters of the unfinished novel *The Blackamoor of Peter the Great* (*Chag Petra Velikogo*, 1829). Nabokov delivers on Pushkin's promise in Appendix One to his translation of *Engene Olegin* (vol. 3, pp. 387-447). Nabokov's learned treatise about Pushkin's African ancestor is based on historical documents that were unavailable to Pushkin.
17. Field, 1977, p. 96.
18. I have documented and analyzed the sources from which Nabokov drew this true-to-life biography of Chernyshevski in my article, "The Gift: Nabokov's Aesthetic Exorcism of Chernyshevsky." See also the article on "The Gift" in this volume.
19. Field, 1967, p. 249.
20. Nabokov's alleged "un-Russianess" is discussed by Struve, 1956, pp. 282-86.

## NABOKOV AND SHAKESPEARE: THE ENGLISH WORKS

What he thought of him? "Nature had once produced an Englishman whose domed head had been a hive of words; a man who had only to breathe on any particle of his stupendous vocabulary to have that particle live and expand and throw out tremulous tentacles until it became a complex image with a pulsing brain and correlated limbs" (*BS* 119). What he especially admired? "The verbal poetical texture of Shakespeare is the greatest the world has known, and is immensely superior to the structure of his plays as plays. With Shakespeare it is the metaphor that is the thing, not the play."<sup>1</sup> Why he could not escape him? "Pushkin's blood runs through the veins of modern Russian literature as inevitably as Shakespeare's through those of English literature."<sup>2</sup>

The stage is thus set for an exciting interplay—inevitably. No anxiety of influence, no fear even of the "voluntary imitation of thought, in submission to another man's genius," required by translation (*BS* 120). The two passages from *Hamlet* which Nabokov rendered into Russian as early as 1930 are evidence enough.<sup>3</sup> Nor was his early predilection for that particular play without consequences—as we shall soon see.

Translation as such remained, however, an early exception. Nabokov's interaction with Shakespeare took the form of integration—from incidental quotations and allusions to imitations and the parodying of larger patterns and themes. In this respect Shakespeare holds a singular position, at least in his English works, and yet he is merely the most brilliant star among a host of lesser ones that shine in and through the skies of Nabokov's fictional worlds. For all his occasional jibes at T. S. Eliot, Nabokov proves to be, after all, a prime example of the learned writer in terms of "Tradition and the Individual Talent," a writer for whom "the whole of literature of Europe from Homer and within it the whole of the literature of his own country has a simultaneous existence and composes a simultaneous order"<sup>4</sup>—with the additional advantage of the emigrant's several "own countries" and the inclusion of the New World. And his awareness of this simultaneity of the literary tradition inspired an *écriture* that takes some of the shine of originality off the more recent enthusiasms for intertextuality.

Intertextuality with Nabokov poses particular problems, not only because he draws widely on various literatures—Russian and English to the hilt, French, German, and American extensively enough to vex even competent readers. It becomes a hazard because it is always part of a pervasive game structure that turns his texts into complex riddles: "Why did I write any of my books, after all? For the sake of pleasure, for the sake of the difficulty. I have no social purpose, no moral message; I've no general ideas to exploit but I like composing riddles and I like finding elegant solutions to those riddles that I have composed myself."<sup>5</sup> It may seem reassuring that Nabokov's compositions contain both the riddles and their "elegant solutions," but, faced with a text that does not necessarily tell one which is which, the ambitious reader soon becomes a harassed detective and the even more ambitious critic a source hunter of sorts. There is thus hardly any publication on Nabokov that has not come up with one or another discovery of a "hidden" source for (or "obvious" parallel to) a particular textual instance, and a great number of studies are devoted to just this task. And if detective novels are popular because detective work can—at least on the reading level—be great fun, it is no wonder that critics are attracted to this sort of task: "In Nabokov's treasure hunts, you are invited to join the fun."<sup>6</sup>

Thus a title like "Nabokov and Shakespeare" might well, for many Nabokovians, promise the thrill of more detective work, the discovery of more sources and textual parallels, or at least the promise of a comprehensive listing of all the brilliant discoveries that have been made. The present essay will,

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with 'black-hundred' White Russians and do not mix with the so-called 'bolshévians,' that is 'pinks.' On the other hand, I have friends among intellectual Constitutional Monarchists as well as among intellectual Social Revolutionaries" (SO 96). And therefore I have saved for a closing quotation what I consider his clearest statement of his politics, one that is itself strikingly tolerant: "Since my youth—I was 19 when I left Russia—my political creed has remained as bleak and changeless as an old gray rock. It is classical to the point of frigidity. Freedom of speech, freedom of thought, freedom of art. The social or economic structure of the ideal state is of little concern to me. My desires are modest. Portraits of the head of the government should not exceed a postage stamp in size. No torture and no executions. No music, except coming through earphones, or played in theaters" (SO 34–35).

Charles Nicol

#### NOTES

1. Boyd, 1991, p. 84.
2. Boyd, 1996, pp. 168–69. Boyd notes that this debate was held on November 28, 1919; Nabokov had described it as taking place the following spring and as his only political speech. Boyd does not mention one problem: Nabokov precisely dated the speech that he claimed to have borrowed as having been given by his father on January 16, 1920 and published the following week, two months too late to have been of use in November.
3. Bishop, p. 237.
4. Boyd, 1991, p. 256.
5. *Ibid.*, pp. 85, 311, 372.
6. "What Faith Means to a Resisting People," p. 212.

### "POSHLOST"

"Poshlost" (or "poshust" in Nabokov's punning transcription, he also transliterated it "poshlost") is a Russian word that Nabokov introduced into the English language. It refers to the broad range of cultural, social, and political phenomena under the category of "inferior taste."<sup>1</sup> Nabokov elaborates on the concept in his book *Nikolai Gogol* (1944): "The Russian language is able to express by means of one pitiless word the idea of a certain widespread defect for which the other . . . languages I happen to know possess no special term. . . . English words expressing several, although by no means all aspects of *poshlost* are for instance: 'cheap, shabby, common, smutty, pink-and-blue, high falutin', in bad taste, . . . inferior, sorry, trashy, scummy, tawdry, gimcrack and others under 'cheapness.' All these however suggest merely certain false

values for the detection of which no particular shrewdness is required. . . . [B]ut what Russians call *poshlost* is beautifully timeless and so cleverly painted all over with protective tints that its presence (in a book, in a soul, in an institution, in a thousand other places) often escapes detection" (NG 63–4).

In his 1950 lecture on "Philistines and Philistinism" (LRL 309–314), Nabokov expanded the concept with additional features. "Poshust" or "poshism" is the mental essence that emanates from a "smug philistine," a "dignified vulgarian," a "bourgeois" (in a Flaubertian, not a Marxist sense—for it reflects "a state of mind, not a state of pocket" [LRL 309]). "Poshust" always presupposes the veneer of civilization, but the values enjoyed by the philistine as genuine are by implication a fraud. Manifestations of "poshust" range from petty to cosmic: they include the harmless kitsch and make-believe of advertisement, the banality of mass culture, the automatic exchange of platitudes, trends, and fads in social and cultural life, bogus profundities, pseudo-"great books," hackneyed literary criticism, political propaganda, totalitarian forms of government, organized cults and anthropomorphic notions of the "beyond," and much more. For example, shoddy thinking such as comparing Senator McCarthy to Stalin or Hitler, and concluding that "America is no better than Russia" or that "We all share in Germany's guilt" is "poshust." "Listing in one breath Auschwitz, Hiroshima, and Vietnam is seditious *poshlost*. Belonging to a very select club (which sports *one* Jewish name—that of the treasurer) is general *poshlost*" (SO 101).

Nabokov treats "poshust" with lofty disdain and impish mockery. It should be understood, however, that when he attaches this "deadly label" to something, it is an act of aesthetic judgment as well as a moral indictment. To expose and exorcise "the demons of *poshlost*" (NG 69) in their various disguises is not the pursuit of a *bête noire* by a cranky pundit—it constitutes an essential part of Nabokov's aesthetic and ethical mission.

As a state of mind, "poshust" knows neither class nor national boundaries. "An English duke can be as much of a philistine as an American Shriner or a French bureaucrat or a Soviet citizen" (LRL 310). The epitome of "poshust" for Nabokov was Soviet Russia, "a country of moral imbeciles, of smiling slaves and poker-faced bullies" where, thanks to its special "blend of despotism and pseudo-culture" (LRL 313), the ability to discern "poshust" all but atrophied. But to the Russians of Gogol's, Tolstoy's, or Chekhov's time and culture it was Germany that had always seemed "a country where *poshust*, instead of being mocked, was one of the essential parts of the national spirit, habits, traditions and general atmosphere, although at the same time well-meaning Russian intellectuals of a more romantic type readily, too readily, adopted the legend of the greatness of German philosophy and literature; for it takes a super-Russian to admit that there is a dreadful streak of *poshlost* running through Goethe's *Fanshi*" (NG 64). Nabokov, who in his early novels frequently mocked the German brand of "poshust," is aware that "To exaggerate the worthlessness of a country at the awkward moment when one is at war with it [the year

was 1944]—and would like to see it destroyed to the last beer-mug and last forget-me-not,—means walking dangerously close to that abyss of *poshlust* which yawns so universally at times of revolution or war" (NG 65).

However, the prime domain of "poshlust" is art and literature. Here Nabokov focuses on cases "when the sham is *not* obvious and when the values it mimics are considered, rightly or wrongly, to belong to the very highest level of art, thought or emotion . . . *poshlust* is not only the obviously trashy but also the falsely important, the falsely beautiful, the falsely clever, the falsely attractive" (NG 68, 70). Yet, Nabokov finds it often difficult to explain why exactly an acclaimed work of literature, full of noble emotion, compassion and best intentions "is far, far worse than the kind of literature which *everybody* admits is cheap" (NG 70): "The trouble is that sincerity, honesty and even true kindness of heart cannot prevent the demon of *poshlust* from possessing himself of an author's typewriter when the man lacks genius and when the 'reading public' is what publishers think it is" (NG 69). Among the symptoms that signal the presence of "poshlust" in a work of art, Nabokov lists "Freudian symbolism, moth-eaten mythologies, social comment, humanistic messages, political allegories, overconcern with class or race, . . . case histories of minority groups, sorrows of homosexuals . . ." (SO 101, 116). The philtine lives under the delusion that "a book, to be great, must deal in great ideas" (SO 41). For Nabokov any form of didacticism, moralism, utilitarianism, or anything that compromises the aesthetic purity of a work of art belongs to the realm of "poshlust."

Some insight into the more consummate aspects of "poshlust" can be gained from the list of acclaimed authors or works that Nabokov reviles. A random sampling that I have compiled from his *Strong Opinions* includes the four doctors—Dr. Freud, Dr. Zhivago, Dr. Schweitzer, and Dr. Castro (115), Sir Bertrand Russell, the peace activist (98), the "awful Monsieur Camus and even more awful Monsieur Sartre" (175), Mann's "Death in Venice" (101), the "execrable" D. H. Lawrence (135), the book for boys about "bells, balls, and bulls" by Hemingway (but Nabokov loved "The Killers" and his "wonderful fish story," and considered Hemingway better than Conrad [80]).

Among great Russian writers Nabokov "dislikes intensely *The Karamazov Brothers* and the ghastly *Crime and Punishment* fignarole" with its "sensitive murderers, soulful prostitutes," and murky mysticism (SO 148, 42), yet he considers *The Double* Dostoevsky's best work (84). He detests Tolstoy's *Resurrection* and "The Kreuzer Sonata," but considers *Anna Karenina* and "The Death of Ivan Ilych" to be masterpieces of nineteenth-century literature (SO 147). Nabokov loves Gogol's *Petersburg Tales*, his plays, and *Dead Souls*, but loathes his folklorism, "moralistic slant," "utter inability to describe young women," and his "obsession with religion" (SO 156). In his adolescence, Nabokov relished the works of Wells, Poe, Browning, Keats, Flaubert, Verlaine, Rimbaud, Chekhov, Tolstoy, and Blok. Between the ages of 20 and 40 his favorites were Housman, Rupert Brooke, Norman Douglas, Bergson,

Joyce, Proust, Shakespeare and Pushkin (SO 42–43). Poe and Brooke later lost their thrill, but Shakespeare and Pushkin remain for Nabokov the two greatest literary geniuses. Nabokov singled out Joyce's *Ulysses*, Kafka's *Metamorphosis*, Bely's *Petersburg*, and the first half of Proust's *In Search of Lost Time* (SO 57, 85), in that order, as the greatest achievements of twentieth-century prose. But he dismisses *Finnegans Wake* as "a formless and dull mass of phony folklore" (SO 71).

In his book on Gogol, Nabokov compiles from among the characters of European fiction a list of typical perpetrators of "poshlust." We find here Polonius and the royal pair in *Hamlet*, Rodolphe and Homais from *Madame Bovary*, Laevsky from Chekhov's "The Duel," Joyce's Marion Bloom, young Bloch in *Search of Lost Time*, Maupassant's "Bel Ami," Anna Karenina's husband, and Berg in *War and Peace* (NG 70). An analogous list can be made up of characters from Nabokov's own works. I would include here Luzhin's impresario Valentinov (the evil variant of "poshlust" and Luzhin's in-laws (the harmless variant) in the novel *The Defense*; Hermann and his act of murder conceived as a work of art in *Despair*; M'sieur Pierre and the "art" of execution in *Invitation to a Beheading*; N.G. Chernyshevski, as a literary character in chapter 4 of *The Gift*, and Zina's stepfather Shnyogoley, the dictator Paduk from *Bend Sinister*, the biographer Goodman in *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight*; Lolita's mother and Clare Quilty in *Lolita*, to name only the major ones.

It is not mere coincidence that Nabokov first elaborates the notion of "poshlust" in his book on Gogol, the greatest master in Russian literature of depicting and mocking this vice. Nabokov guides the reader through a gallery of Gogol's "poshlaki" and "poshlachki" (male and female perpetrators of "poshlust"), pauses before the more exquisite cases of "poshlust," and comments on the "gusto and wealth of weird detail" with which Gogol paints these "sleek, plump, smooth, and glossy" creatures (NG 71). However, even this most Gogolian category owes something to Pushkin. Reflecting on the reception of *Dead Souls*, Gogol wrote: "[Critics] discussed my case a lot. They analyzed various of my facets, but failed to identify my main essence. Only Pushkin discerned it. He used to say to me that no other writer before me possessed the gift to expose so brightly life's *poshlust*, to depict so powerfully the *poshlust* of a *poshlusty* man [poshlust' poshlogo cheloveka] in such a way that everybody's eyes would be opened wide to all the petty trivia that often escape our attention. This is my main quality, it belongs exclusively to me, and is lacking in other writers" ("The Third Letter à propos *Dead Souls*," 1843).<sup>2</sup> If Gogol's statement can be trusted, it would be fair to say that Nabokov in his interpretation of Gogol views his subject through Pushkin's eyes. Of all Russian writers it was Pushkin's artistic and moral code that Nabokov made into his own, and whose explicit and implicit presence permeates most of Nabokov's literary and critical works (see "Nabokov and Pushkin" in this volume).

The elusive concept of "poshust" deserves one last gloss with regard to the cultural background that shaped Nabokov's values and contributed to such a low tolerance for anything that did not meet his high standards. The anglophile Nabokov family descended from ancient Russian nobility of colossal cultural and material wealth. In addition to several million rubles and a two-thousand acre estate, which were to be lost in 1917, the firstborn Vladimir inherited even greater wealth: "the beauty of intangible property, the unreal estate" (*SM* 40) of future memories of a perfect boyhood, spent in Russia's "most fantastic city," St. Petersburg, and amidst the luxury of Northern fauna and flora at the country estate in Vyra. Surrounded by books and butterflies (he became an expert entomologist before he was ten), loving parents, and experiencing his first love affair, Nabokov developed a lifelong passion for everything precious and passing. Brought up by private tutors to speak French, English, and Russian, he had read by the time he was fifteen more of the great works in his three languages than most native speakers of them read in a lifetime.

Fate, too, was generous to Nabokov. He was born on Shakespeare's birthday (April 23) in the last year of the last century, which marked the centennial of Pushkin's birth. The first two decades of this century, known in the history of Russian culture as the Silver Age, have seen the best Russian poetry since Pushkin's Golden Age (Blok, Bely, Bal'mont, Brusov, Makovskiy, Khlebnikov, Gumilev, Akhmatova, Mandel'shtam, Pasternak, Tsvetaeva, Esennin). During these years Nabokov wrote poem after poem with that "terrifying facility" for lyrical verse that for a Russian of his generation was often "as much a part of adolescence as acne."<sup>7</sup> Later he studied at the private Tenishev Institute, an emphatically liberal and nondiscriminatory school, which produced another celebrated alumnus, Osip Mandel'shtam, the greatest Russian poet of the twentieth century. Nabokov was to draw on this wealth for the rest of his life and to distribute it generously among the heroes of his fictions and their readers. The "exorcism" of the "demons of *poshust*," who threaten to engulf civilization in universal dullness and tedium, constitutes the core of Nabokov's aesthetic, ethical, and philosophical profession of faith. Its values inform most of Nabokov's works and "strong opinions." Let me conclude with one such opinion: "In fact I believe that one day a reappraiser will come and declare that, far from having been a frivolous firebird [an allusion to Nabokov's pen name 'Sirin'], I was a rigid moralist kicking sin, scuffing stupidity, ridiculing the vulgar and cruel—and assigning sovereign power to tenderness, talent, and pride" (*SO* 193).

Sergei Davydov

#### NOTES

1. Nabokov discusses "poshust" in the following texts: *Nikolai Gogol*, pp. 63–74; *Strong Opinions*, pp. 100–101; and the essay, "Philistinism and Philistinism," *Lectures on Russian Literature*, pp. 309–14.
2. Gogol, 1959, vol. 6, p. 151.
3. Boyd, 1990, p. 96.

#### THE REAL LIFE OF SEBASTIAN KNIGHT

Throughout his work Vladimir Nabokov has explored the terra incognita beyond the borders of consciousness, to glimpse other worlds ordinarily unperceived.<sup>1</sup> Such diverse characters as Hermann Karlovich in *Despair* and John Shade in *Pale Fire* speculate upon consciousness after death, while Cincinnati C. in *Invitation to a Beheading* and Art Longwood in "The Ballad of Longwood Glen" enter invisible realms. Others transform themselves to enter the invisible realms of the minds of their fellow characters. Fyodor Godunov-Cherdyntsev in *The Gift* habitually tries "to imagine the inner, transparent motion of this or that other person. He would carefully seat himself inside the interlocutor as in an armchair, so that the other's elbows would serve as armrests for him, and his soul would fit snugly into the other's soul—and then the lighting of the world would suddenly change and for a minute he would actually become Alexander Chernyshevski, or Lyubov Markovna, or Vasiliev" (35–36).

Nabokov's first English novel, *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight*, is a complex elaboration of this metamorphic theme, as the narrator, V., writes a biography of his dead half brother, the novelist Sebastian Knight, relying on memory, interviews, Sebastian's books, and intuitive conjecture. V. concludes "that the soul is but a manner of being—not a constant state—that any soul may be yours, if you find and follow its undulations. The hereafter may be the full ability of consciously living in any chosen soul, in any number of souls, all of them unconscious of their interchangeable burden. Thus—I am Sebastian Knight" (202–203). V.'s book, "beguiling and melancholy," in Moynahan's phrase,<sup>2</sup> is the result of a poignant yearning for communion with an aloof half-brother whom V. says he hardly knew, even when they were boys. Nabokov has reversed the ancient fraternal theme: Cain and Abel, like Oedipus and Jocasta's sons Eteocles and Polyneices, become fatally estranged, whereas Sebastian's death brings V. and Sebastian close together at last.

The distant relationship of Sebastian and V. reflects Nabokov's behavior toward his younger brother Sergey, and Sebastian resembles Vladimir in other ways: both are born in 1899, flee Russia as a result of the Revolution, attend Cambridge University, live in Europe, and write brilliant, idiosyncratic