

Vladimir Nabokov and Women Writers

by

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**A dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of
Doctor of Philosophy
(Slavic Languages and Literatures)
in The University of Michigan
2014**

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Acknowledgments

This dissertation would not have been written without generous support and encouragement of several people. I am extremely grateful to my dissertation advisor, Omry Ronen, whose energy, sense of humor, dedication to Russian literature, and extraordinary kindness have encouraged many of his students to write and complete their dissertations. He will be greatly missed by me, by his other students, and by all those who knew him.

I would like to express my gratitude to the chair of my dissertation committee, Olga Maiorova, for her help and advice on how to proceed with and finish my dissertation. My gratitude also goes to Yuri Leving for his kind interest in my work and his invaluable comments on my topic and dissertation. My ideas grew stronger as a result of conversations with Herbert Eagle, and I thank him for his comments and his endless help with editing my work. My gratitude goes to Andrea Zemgulys, whose insightful comments have also influenced the final outcome of my dissertation.

I also wish to thank my friends for their support and interest in my graduation: Sara Feldman, Anjali Purkayastha, Hira Parikh, and Isaiah Smithson for being good friends in need, the wonderful Stephens family for always being there for me, Chris and Vera Irwin, William and Margaret Dunifon for their hospitality, Brad Damaré and Yana Arnold for spending time together, Mila Shevchenko and Svitlana Rogovyk for their teaching advices, and Jean McKee for her patience in answering all the questions I had.

Last but not least, I thank my parents Dmitry and Liubov Lomakin for their help and encouragement, my husband Anton Vorontsov for his love and patience, and my daughters Marina and Katherine who made it all worthwhile.

The completion of the dissertation was made possible by the support of the Rackham School of Graduate Studies at the University of Michigan.

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List of Abbreviations

Note: Books by Vladimir Nabokov unless otherwise noted.

- A *Ada or Ardor: A Family Chronicle* (New York: Vintage, 1990)
- AnL *The Annotated Lolita*, ed. by Alfred Appel Jr. (New York: Vintage, 1991)
- AY Boyd, Brian. *Vladimir Nabokov. American Years* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1991)
- BS *Bend Sinister* (New York: Time, 1964)
- G *The Gift*, trans. by Michael Scammell and Dmitri Nabokov with Vladimir Nabokov (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1971)
- Gl *Glory* (New York: Vintage, 1991)
- IB *Invitation to a Beheading*, trans. by Dmitri Nabokov with Vladimir Nabokov (New York: Putnam, 1959).
- LL *Lectures on Literature*, ed. Fredson Bowers (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1980)
- LRL *Lectures on Russian Literature*, ed. Fredson Bowers (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich/Bruccoli Clark, 1981)
- LATH *Look at the Harlequins!* (New York: McGraw- Hill, 1974)
- NG *Nikolai Gogol* (Norfolk, Conn.: New Directions, 1944)
- PF *Pale Fire* (New York: Vintage, 1989)
- P *Pnin* (New York: Vintage, 1989)

- RLSK *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight* (New York: New Directions, 1968)
- RB *A Russian Beauty and Other Stories*, trans. by Dmitri Nabokov and Simon Karlinsky with Vladimir Nabokov (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1973)
- RY Boyd, Brian. *Vladimir Nabokov. Russian Years* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1991)
- SL *Selected Letters, 1940-1977*, ed. by Dmitri Nabokov and Matthew J. Bruccoli (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich/Bruccoli Clark Layman, 1989)
- SSAP *Sobranie sochinenii amerikanskogo perioda*, 5 vols. (St. Petersburg: Symposium, 1999)
- SSRP *Sobranie sochinenii russkogo perioda*, 5 vols. (St. Petersburg: Symposium, 1999-2000)
- SM *Speak, Memory: An Autobiography Revisited* (New York: Vintage, 1989)
- Stikhi Ann Arbor, Mich.: Ardis, 1979
- ST *The Stories of Vladimir Nabokov*, ed. and mostly trans. by Dmitri Nabokov (New York: Knopf, 1995)
- SO *Strong Opinions* (New York: Vintage, 1990)
- TT *Transparent Things* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1972)
- NWL *The Nabokov-Wilson Letters*, ed. by Simon Karlinsky (Berkeley and Los Angeles: U of California P, 2001)

Abstract

Vladimir Nabokov and Women Writers

Mariya Lomakina

This study sheds light on a heretofore neglected aspect of Nabokov studies: his attitude toward women writers and their literary art. Nabokov's critical statements about women writers, ranging from dismissive remarks to fully negative reviews, have created for some scholars a view of him as "a literary misogynist" who wants to make his readers, especially women, feel stupid and powerless. I investigate whether there is any justice in branding him with such a label. Indeed, if taken literally, some of his declarations, because of their sarcastic tone, could lead to a false impression of the anti-female stance. However, a close analysis of some of Nabokov's key works that express opinions about women writers (these include both fiction and non-fiction) suggest that in most cases Nabokov's opinions are based strictly on an author's artistic and stylistic tendencies and not on the author's gender. In my first chapter, I examine the nature of Nabokov's critical statements in his reviews. In addition to addressing the poetics of a certain group of female writers, they express an important aspect of his literary vision in general. This chapter also examines Nabokov's literary relationships with his era's most prominent women poets: Anna Akhmatova, Marina Tsvetaeva, and Zinaida Gippius. Their literary "shadows" appear in Nabokov's novels *Pnin*, *The Gift*, *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight*, the story "Vasily Shishkov," and other works. My second chapter explores Nabokov's intertextual methods in the

stories “A Slice of Life” and “The Admiralty Spire.” When viewed together, they provide a new more favorable perspective on Nabokov's treatment of women writers. My third chapter addresses the author's representation of fictional literary women whose metaliterary role attests to Nabokov's own literary views. Nabokov's targeted critiques and his evaluation of the most gifted women poets and prose writers, his stylizations and parodies, his efforts to recast what was aesthetically weak in the works of others, and his metaliterary use of women writers as characters in his prose all point to a stance on artistic value that is independent of gender.

Introduction

My thesis is prompted by Vladimir Nabokov's critical statements about women writers made in his non-fictional and fictional works, explicitly and implicitly. Ranging from high praise of some women writers to the more frequently dismissive remarks about others, these statements have raised a very specific question in Nabokov scholarship, that of his literary reaction to women writers. What did Nabokov mean when in a letter on May 9, 1950 to an American critic Edmund Wilson he declared: "I dislike Jane [Austen], and am prejudiced, in fact, against all women writers" (NWL 241). What did he mean when in the same letter he proclaimed that "they are in another class" (NWL 241)? To many of Nabokov's readers, the writer's defiant declaration about "Jane" can be easily considered as revealing the essence of his literary treatment of women writers. In fact, the writer's frequently unpredictable and inexplicable literary tastes have puzzled some scholars because of the set of values seemingly implied. In his article, "Vladimir Nabokov and Women Authors," Maxim Shrayev, for example, writes: "In thinking of Nabokov's uneasy relationship with women authors, I am bewildered by the readiness with which some of Nabokov's critics apply an omnibus solution to this rather complex problem. Must one take as a guiding principle a remark Nabokov allowed himself in a letter to Edmund Wilson in the context of discussing a reading list for his fiction course?" (53)¹.

¹Brian Boyd also points out that Nabokov was "deeply unfashionable in an age committed to canonical revisionism and increased attention to women, minorities, the non-Eurocentric and the demotic" (32). See Boyd, Brian. "Literature, Pattern, Lolita: Or Art, Literature, Science." In *Transitional Nabokov*. Duncan White and Will Norman, eds. New York: Peter Lang, 2009: 31-53, p.32.

At the same time, a characteristic ambiguity that marks Austen's case makes Nabokov's alleged prejudice against women writers questionable. In the "Introduction" to *Nabokov-Wilson Letters*, Simon Karlinsky states that "it was [Wilson's] particular pride to overcome Nabokov's typically Russian prejudice against women novelists" (NWL 17).² After the American born critic advised his Russian friend "to read *Mansfield Park*" (NWL 243) Nabokov, "quickly – and most 'uncharacteristically,' as John Updike observed – 'capitulated' to Wilson's point of view" ("Her Monster" 160).³ In her article, "Her Monster, His Nymphet: Nabokov and Mary Shelley," Ellen Pifer also points out that Nabokov set aside his "male bias against women writers" with "remarkable alacrity – a mere week – after he opened the cover of Austen's novel" (161). The result was that he included *Mansfield Park* (1814) in his course on European fiction taught at Cornell University in the nineteen fifties and even wrote to Wilson about his intention to do so:

²About the fact that such prejudice against women writers existed in Russian society for a long time, Catriona Kelly writes: "Women's prose and poetry,' [zhenskaiia proza/poeziia] for which the alternative and still more openly contemptuous expression is 'lady's prose and poetry,' [damskaia proza i poeziia] are assumed to show the positive merits of observation and decoration, but to have the more than compensatory demerits of sentimentality, banality, and lack of intellectual power" (2). Kelly brings out additional reasons for such dismissive views on women's writings in Russian society:

the most important Russian received idea of all is that women's writing is simply not very interesting. Indeed, how could it be, when it deals with women's limited experience, rather than with men's enormous experience of the social and political issues which have been central to the dominant discourse of Russian literature, critical realism, and reflects women's small woes, rather than the tragically coloured priestly mysticism which has shaped so much of Russian poetry? (3).

As Kelly states, such views of women's writings "recur again and again in Russian history" (3).

³In his letter to Nabokov Wilson wrote: "You are mistaken about Jane Austen. I think you ought to read *Mansfield Park* . . . She is, in my opinion, one of the half dozen greatest English writers" (NWL 243).

“and I think I shall use it too in my course” (NWL 246). As my archival research revealed, Nabokov intended to dedicate at least ten (!) lectures to Austen's novel and included her as the only female writer alongside Dickens, Flaubert, Proust, and Kafka in the course “Masterpieces of European Literature” that he taught at American universities for almost a decade (New York archives, Berg collection, box unnumbered).

Austen's remarkable case is not the only one that easily undermines any “facile assumptions” about Nabokov's “presumed chauvinism” (“Her Monster” 161). This is especially true in regard to English and American writers, poets and novelists, some of whom were Nabokov's contemporaries. According to Stacy Schiff, Nabokov “based his qualified admiration for the American Romantic poet Emily Dickinson on the fact that she managed to create in double isolation: once from people, again from the ideas of her time” (Schiff 54). While it was the writer's wife Véra who detested the works of the Victorian novelist George Eliot, it was Nabokov who defended this woman writer “on a private occasion” (Schiff 132). The qualified admiration Nabokov also extended to contemporary English women authors, to which his letters testify. In his now published correspondence with editors and friends, *Selected Letters: 1940-1977*, one finds two letters on behalf of the American writer and critic Sylvia Berkman. In one of them – to Henry Allen Moe on September 24, 1956 – Nabokov supported her candidature for a Guggenheim fellowship and, along with her scholastic achievements, complimented Berkman's creative writing as being of “subtle and real artistic value” (SL 188). Nabokov's favorable treatment of this woman writer is even more telling in his letter to her publicist Pyke Johnson on December 16, 1958: “I think very highly of her talent, of the delicate brilliancy of her writing and am keenly interested in the success of her book [the collection of stories *Blackberry Wilderness*]” (SL 270). Several years later, when *Lolita*'s enormous success enabled Nabokov to

retire from teaching, move to Montre, Switzerland and dedicate himself entirely to writing, he and Véra met a Swedish poet Filippa Rolf (1924-1978), who became a frequent guest in the writer's household. In the "Introduction" to the already-mentioned correspondence, D.V. Nabokov has commented that when his father, who "generally sacrificed most other pursuits to the pursuit of his art, did take the time to write letters, the stimuli were family ties, close friendship, and aesthetic, professional, and scientific matters that required the authority of his signature" (SL xvi). Nabokov's letters to Harvard on Rolf's behalf were marked by cordial friendship that had drawn both Véra and Nabokov to their talented new friend (Schiff 273). According to Schiff, Rolf revealed herself as a "brilliant, widely read poet and a superbly talented linguist, comfortable in fifteen languages" (273). As Schiff also points out, both Nabokov and his wife took a parental interest in the career of this woman writer. Among all kinds of "pressing advice" from the couple was that Rolf must move to America for the sake of what Nabokov and Véra repeatedly and characteristically termed "her genius" (Schiff 279).⁴

Unlike Europe or the United States, before the early 20th century Russia did not produce and therefore could not boast of any woman writer comparable in her literary achievements to their Western counterparts. Nabokov's negative declarations about Russian women writers are more telling and numerous as compared to those he made about the English ones, as his reviews indicate. Nabokov's literary reviews emerging in different European periodicals during and as a result of his post-revolutionary emigration, have Russian women writers as a recurrent focus. In these reviews, only one woman writer, Nina Berberova, receives Nabokov's unequivocal praise.

⁴Schiff also writes that in meeting Rolf, Vera – "a tough grader" when it came to the business of literary evaluations – for one saw this female poet as an "ideal Swedish translator" for her husband's *Pale Fire* (327). To the list of Nabokov's successful literary relationships one may also add his collaboration with a female translator Evgeniia Cannac who was translating his Russian novel *Zashchita Luzhina* (1930)/ *The Defense* into French (AY 397).

The acidic tone of some other statements about women writers (Odoevtseva, Damanskaia, Tauber, Kondratovich) that will be addressed later in this dissertation, seem to underscore his aversion to the female novelists and poets who were his peers. Despite Nabokov's seeming prejudice against Russian women writers and in some cases against English ones (Woolf, Mansfield), I would like to propose that it is at the heart of what seems to be the most impossible – that of Nabokov's literary relationships with *Russian* women writers – that the stigma of sexism and the author's alleged prejudice against women writers can be challenged. Indeed, Nabokov's attitude to women authors varied from writer to writer and the ridicule of them in his art was not always an approach he implemented with women writers he explored. Nabokov did not necessarily share the longstanding prejudice against women writers on the Russian literary scene that is evident from the lack of distinguished ones by the turn of the 20th century. Despite Nabokov's overall negative treatment of women writers in his reviews, the instances of positive treatment of them in his fiction and criticism are significant for our understanding of his attitude towards women writers. In this dissertation I seek to demonstrate that Nabokov's attitude to women writers was not gender-oriented but art-specific. This is not to suggest, however, that Nabokov was never hostile when the issues of female writings were in question. On the contrary, this dissertation will demonstrate what exactly Nabokov rejected in the writings by women authors, explain the reasons for his heartfelt disapproval, and show how he consistently corrected or parodied those features and approaches that were not palatable to his literary aesthetics.

In considering the presence of other writers in Nabokov's texts, this dissertation takes intertextuality as a theoretical framework for the exploration of literary sources in Nabokov's art. Intertextual dialogue can indicate the degree of agreement or disagreement between writers and is especially relevant to Nabokov's art, in which actual women writers are present, either

explicitly in his literary reviews, or implicitly in his fiction via intertextual references. It has been noted that Nabokov's penchant for parody creates an interesting game for the reader in decoding the writer's artistic riddles.⁵ Although some intertextuality can be seen as parodic, this is not the case with all intertextuality. In his chapter on parody, Yuri Tynianov explains that parody as being something mocking or comical is just a widespread definition of this term.⁶ At the beginning of the 19th century, there was a Slavic translation of the word “parody” from Greek, which is *perepesn'*/re-singing. This old definition belongs to the poet and literary theoretician Ostolopov (*Dictionary of Ancient and Old Poetry*/ N. Ostolopov. Slovar' drevnei i novoi poezii, chast' II St. Peterburg, 1821, p. 334). Although Ostolopov's translation of parody was not assimilated as a literary term, it is exactly *perepesn'* or re-singing that, according to Tynianov, leads away from the already established and falsely precise characterization of parody. As he explains:

Слово это не привилось; как термин оно неприменимо, потому что «песнь» излишне точный и буквальный перевод компонента «ωδη», – а между тем слово это отводит от приевшегося, мнимо точного слова «пародия», и что еще важнее, содержит сближение понятий пародии и подражания, вариации (перепеснь – перепев) (Тынянов 293)

This word did not assimilate; it is not applicable as a definition, because “song” is a too precise and literal translation of the component “ωδη”, – and yet, this word leads away from the already established and falsely precise word “parody”, and what is even more important, brings together the notions of parody and emulation, variation (re-song – re-singing) (Tynianov 293).

According to Tynianov's definition of parody, the latter is somewhat closer to emulation, but

⁵As Herbert Grabes explains, 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,” but because “it is always part of a pervasive game structure that turns his texts into complex riddles” (497).

⁶Tynianov, Yuri. *Poetika. Istoriia Literaturny. Kino*. Moskva: Nauka, 1977, pp. 284-310.

without the ridiculing aspect which the common meaning of parody implies. In his article, “Emulation, Anti-parody, Intertextuality, and Annotation,” Omry Ronen also points out that parody in its narrow sense is not the only way of dealing with already existing texts. When an artist evokes another writer in his own work, there can be three purposes for it: “emulation, that is, an artistic endeavor to equal or excel a certain model by selective imitation that intensifies its virtues and gently corrects its shortcomings; parody in the narrow sense, when a style is represented in such a way as to foreground and exaggerate its characteristic features, especially faults; and the anti-parody” (Ronen, “Emulation...” 65) “Anti-parody,” or “the revision and improvement” of other writers’ artistic tasks through the “artistic superiority of the new solution” (“Emulation” 65) is what Nabokov implements in his story “A Slice of Life.”

The problem of Nabokov's attitude toward women writers has not received sufficient attention in scholarship heretofore and is an area of critical neglect. So far there has been remarkably little published on Nabokov and women writers, and that which exists tend to focus on the presence of English women writers in Nabokov and mostly in regard to *Lolita*.⁷ Several studies that deal specifically with the appearance of Russian women writers in Nabokov's art include those by Andrei Ar'ev, Gennady Barabtarlo, Barry Scherr, and Maxim Shrayner with the emphasis on Anna Akhmatova's legacy as represented in Nabokov's *Pnin*.⁸ These scholars

⁷On how *Lolita* is a tribute to the 19th century English women writers see Herbold, Sarah. “(I have camouflaged everything, my love): *Lolita* and the Woman Reader.” *Nabokov Studies* 5 (1998/1999): 71-98; and Pifer, Ellen. “Her Monster, his Nymphet: Nabokov and Mary Shelley.” In W. Julian Connolly, ed., *Nabokov and his Fiction: New Perspectives*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1999, 158-176.

⁸Ar'ev, Andrei. “Vesti iz vechnosti (O smysle literaturno-filosofskoi pozitsii Nabokova). In *V.V. Nabokov: Pro et Contra*. Vol. 2, St. Petersburg, 2001: 169-193; Barabtarlo, Gennady. *Phantom of Fact. A Guide to Nabokov's Pnin*. Ann Arbor: Ardis, 1989: 99 -109; Scherr, Barry. “Settling Accounts with Russia's Silver Age: Nabokov Writes Akhmatova.” *The Russian Review* 65 (2006): 35-52; Shrayner, Maxim. “Vladimir Nabokov and Women Authors.” *The Nabokovian* 44 (Spring 2000): 52-63.

attempt to resolve an existing ambiguity that has to do with the presence of Akhmatova or her imitators or both in Nabokov's novel and raise the question of the writer's literary attitude to the poet. Nabokov's hidden references to Akhmatova in *The Gift* and also in *Lolita* were noted by Omry Ronen.⁹ Considering Akhmatova's presence in *Lolita* in connection with the image of Gray Star and her “Долго шел через поля и села”/ He walked for a long time across the fields and villages,” Ronen comments that “a student of intertextuality [...] might find this instance interesting because it adds a new dimension to Nabokov's literary treatment of Akhmatova, which Akhmatova herself was inclined to interpret adversely on the basis of Lisa Wind's poems in *Pnin*” (“Emulation” 164). Nabokov's literary relationship with Marina Tsvetaeva is also revealing and has been analyzed by Vadim Stark and, to an extent, by Alexander Dolinin and by the biographers of these writers, Brian Boyd and Simon Karlinsky.¹⁰ Tsvetaeva's reputation in Nabokov's eyes as a tragic Sovietophile whose style Nabokov parodied in his own writings is firmly established by these scholars.¹¹ The writer's treatment of this poet, however, requires additional scrutiny considering that research on this subject is also very sparse. Zinaida Gippius's covert appearance in Nabokov's story “Vasily Shishkov” and in *The Gift* enables the critics

⁹Ronen, Omry. “Emulation, Anti-Parody, Intertextuality, and Annotation.” *Nabokov Studies* 5 (1998/1999): 63-70.

¹⁰Stark, V. “Nabokov-Tsvetaeva: Zaochnye dialogi i 'gornie' vstrechi.” *Zvezda* 11 (November 1996): 150-156; Dolinin, Alexander. *Istinnaia Zhizn' Pisatelja Sirina*. St. Petersburg: Akademicheskii Proekt, 2004, pp. 29, 229n.39 and 335; Boyd, Brian, *Vladimir Nabokov: The Russian Years*. Princeton: Princeton UP, 1991, pp. 221, 342 and 344n. and *Stalking Nabokov: Selected Essays*. New York: Columbia UP, 2011, p. 219; Karlinsky, Simon. “Nabokov and Some Poets of Russian Modernism.” *Cycnos* 12:2 (2008).

¹¹In Nabokov's online forum in 1997, Alexander Dolinin has stated that in his parody of Tsvetaeva “Iosif Krasnyi” Nabokov “lampoons Tsvetaeva's political sympathies.” The message that Vadim Stark conveys in his article is that Nabokov did not publish this parody during Tsvetaeva's lifetime because it parodied her obscure political ideology. Brian Boyd writes that Tsvetaeva was “compromised in her relationship to Stalin's Soviet Union” (219) in *Stalking Nabokov: Selected Essays*, although at this point his comments about Tsvetaeva's politics and Nabokov's attitude towards it ends.

Maxim Shroyer and Olga Skonechnaia to mention this woman writer in their articles.¹²

Despite the existence of the above-mentioned sources, no extensive study on the topic of Nabokov and women writers has been offered thus far. In his article, “Vladimir Nabokov and Women Authors” or its Russian version “Pochemu Nabokov ne liubil pisatel'nits,” Maxim Shroyer does pioneering work in attempting to offer a systematic approach to this subject. Based on a concise overview of the writer's letters, reviews, and a few examples from his fiction, Shroyer studies Nabokov's literary attitudes to women writers, but not in a comprehensive way. Although Shroyer's article brings out a problem of Nabokov's metaliterary evaluations of women authors, it almost completely ignores the writer's positive evaluations of actual women writers and attributes more value to his negative remarks. The latter fit well into the overall structure of Shroyer's argument that Nabokov had a rather serious dislike of the female writers, as the Russian version of the article especially suggests. Perhaps one article is not enough to address a topic that deserves far greater elaboration. The aim of my work, therefore, is to address this deficiency, to suggest an alternative interpretation of Nabokov's treatment of women writers, and to study the problem of Nabokov's literary evaluations extensively and in depth. Nabokov's attitude toward Russian women writers is especially important, as it becomes a recurrent preoccupation in his fiction and criticism.

In arguing that Nabokov's attitude to women writers was more complicated and nuanced than it has been perceived, I discuss a wide scope of relevant women writers, including several who have not received scholarly attention. Despite a considerable amount of scholarship that

¹²Shroyer, Maxim. "Nabokov's 'Vasily Shishkov'; An Author= Text Interpretation." In Steven G. Kellman and Irving Malin, eds. *Torpid Smoke: the Stories of Vladimir Nabokov*. Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2000; Skonechnaia, Olga. "People of the Moonlight': Silver Age Parodies in Nabokov's *The Eye* and *The Gift*." *Nabokov Studies* 3 (1996): 33-52.

exists on *The Gift*, no one has mentioned, for example, that Nabokov may well have had in mind the well-known Russian painter and the author of a diary, Marie Bashkirtseva (1860-1884) for his character Margarita Lorentz in the novel's first chapter. Nabokov's interest in Bashkirtseva's literary works was inasmuch as she became the author of the first “human document” in Russian literature, a term that the Symbolist poet Alexander Blok and later Georgy Adamovich appropriated in their writings.¹³ And yet, in her diary, which is the only literary work that remains by this woman writer apart from her letters, Marie Bashkirtseva wished to be remembered as a famous painter if she were not to die young (Gurevich 75). As it happened, Nabokov fulfilled her wish by commemorating her in *The Gift* in the guise of Margarita L'vovna, who in her later years was giving drawing lessons to the female protagonist of *The Gift*.¹⁴ As this example shows, keeping alive the creative memory of this woman writer, notwithstanding the literary merit of her production, marks Nabokov's literary relationship with Marie Bashkirtseva and, as will be shown later, with some other women writers who appear frequently in his art.¹⁵

¹³“Human document” is a term coined by the leader of the Paris Note school, Georgy Adamovich, with a reference to literature as a sincere document of personal experience rather than a craft. Proclaiming her diary to be a human document, Bashkirtseva was the first to transgress the boundaries of emotional self-expression in Russian literature.

¹⁴In her *Diary*, Bashkirtseva said: “Если я не умру молодой, я надеюсь остаться в роли великой художницы; но если я умру молодой, я хотела бы издать свой дневник, который не может не быть интересным. [...] Это очень интересный человеческий документ” (qtd. in Gurevich 75)/ If I am not to die young, I hope to remain in the role of a great painter; but if I die young, I would like to publish my diary that cannot not be interesting. [...] It is a very interesting human document.” Marie Bashkirtseva died at the age of twenty four from tuberculosis. Nabokov fulfilled the first part of her wish by depicting her in the role of a well-known painter in emigration Margarita Lorentz (one who sang and played music as Bashkirtseva did).

¹⁵The main reason for this hypothesis, however, is that, Nabokov had spotted—as he did in the case of Anna Akhmatova – a detrimental influence of Marie Bashkirtseva on other women writers. For the list of women who were influenced by Bashkirtseva see Rosenthal, Charlotte. “Achievement and Obscurity: Women's prose in the Silver Age.” In Clyman, Toby W. and Diana Green, eds. *Women Writers in Russian Literature*. Westport: Greenwood Press, 1994, p.166 n.16. Laura Engelstein postulates Bashkirtseva as a model for Verbitskaia's

The first chapter of this dissertation will focus on Nabokov's reviews. Despite a considerable lack of prominent female authors on the Russian literary scene until the turn of the 20th century, in the first two decades of the century the situation drastically altered. Women began to be recognized as writers with the quality of their work comparable to that of men. Anna Akhmatova, Marina Tsvetaeva, and Zinaida Gippius are only among the most prominent names among the women writers, whose talent, popularity and success formed a new generation of female figures on the Russian literary scene. Nabokov's literary relationships with these prominent women writers as well as others about whom he left comments in fiction and criticism, will be the focus of the first chapter of this thesis.

In the second chapter of this dissertation, I argue that Nabokov's way of dealing with other literary sources is not always limited to parody in the narrow sense. His other aesthetic strategy is “anti-parody,” which does not imply the destruction of the existing mechanism as parody does, but offers its renovation and alteration into something new and artistically superior to its original. In his now published *Lectures on Russian Literature*, Nabokov even referred to this method as “the simplest and perhaps the most important one” (105). Nabokov's intertextual methods of “emulation,” “parody” and “anti-parody” (Ronen, “Emulation” 65) in regard to Russian and English women writers will be analyzed in Chapter two of this dissertation, using the examples of “A Slice of Life” and “The Admiralty Spire.” These stories, which are the only ones in Nabokov's short fiction that deal extensively with the issues of female literary creativity,

heroine in *Keys of Happiness* (417n). Even Zinaida Gippius was “involved.” In *A History of Russian Women's Writing: 1820-1992*, Catriona Kelly writes that it was Gippius's heroines, who recall Bashkirtseva's “naive but manipulative femme fatale” and who “indulge their erotic feelings up to the point of demonism in a literal sense (involvement with the Devil)” rather than her masculine persona in poetry that became canonical amongst later women poets (157). In *The Gift*, Nabokov refers to both of these women writers in one sentence in order to establish a connection.

when viewed together provide a new perspective on Nabokov's more favorable treatment of women writers.

Nabokov's favorable attitude to women writers is also evident in his novels. However, the research on the role of female characters in Nabokov's fiction is rather sparse.¹⁶ Some relatively recent work on Nabokov's women in dissertations present a systematic analysis of this subject matter from both feminist and non-feminist points of view. Elena Rakhimova-Sommers' "The 'Ona' of Nabokov's Hereafter: Women Characters as Otherworldly Agents in Nabokov's Fiction" focuses on metaphysical aspects of Nabokov's works translated through his female characters; and Lara Delage-Toriel's "Ultraviolet Darlings: Representation of Women in Nabokov's Prose Fiction," studies the four female figures ever present in Nabokov's novels: the vulgar, the virtuous, the muse, and the mother, and examines the way in which Nabokov represents the familiar archetypes and makes them "uniquely Nabokovian" (1). At the beginning of her dissertation, Delage-Toriel comments that Nabokov's female characters are "constantly under scrutiny but are never endowed with a point of view or a mind of their own. They are unfailingly presented as objects of male vision, a vision which is often *deliberately* reductive" (9).

I argue that Nabokov's attitude toward creative women deserves additional scrutiny. In chapter three of this dissertation, I focus on the writer's representation of female characters because it can shed light on his literary relationships with the actual women writers. The purpose of this chapter, however, is not to provide comprehensive portraits of Nabokov's fictional

¹⁶For the interest in Nabokov's interpretation of female images that provoked a debate held on the internet between members of the Nabokov Forum in the nineties, see Linaker, Tanya "A Witch, A Bitch, or a Goddess? Female Voices Transcending Gender as heard and recorded by Chekhov, Mansfield, and Nabokov" *Slovo* 17:2 (2005): 165-178, p.168. For the feminist critical response to Nabokov's art see Lara Delage-Toriel's dissertation pp. 5-12.

women, a work that has already been done by Delage-Toriel, but rather to underscore certain peculiarities of their representation that may attest to the role of a creative woman in Nabokov's art. Of interest are the “literary women” or the ones who can elucidate Nabokov's own literary tastes, the ones who are writers themselves, and the ones who carry a certain metaliterary role important for the understanding of Nabokov's aesthetics. Since the question of female creativity in Nabokov is a broad topic, I suggest we view it in terms of the specific functions that women fulfill in his art. At least three can be distinguished: mediatory, metaliterary, and aesthetic.¹⁷ One might wonder whether such a division is necessary; however, the aesthetic, the metaphysical, and the ethical present an organic unity in Nabokov's art and each of these categories can be viewed through the prism of the other two.¹⁸ Such a distinction also focuses on the structural aspects of Nabokov's fiction that in themselves can be the answers to many of the writer's riddles. This chapter will also bring out the reasons for the absence of accomplished fictional women writers in Nabokov's art.

If Nabokov ever appears to be using a gender-specific terminology, there is an explanation to this fact as well. The author was raised in a patriarchal culture where women were not a part of the literary world. Neither Nabokov's mother nor his sisters were writers. And yet, I argue that not everything was defined for the writer by the fact that some literature he criticized was written by women authors. Aesthetic criteria also went into play. Throughout my thesis I seek to demonstrate that Nabokov offered important insights into literature written by women and was suggesting new avenues of growth for women writers. Even though he frequently

¹⁷These terms will be discussed later in this thesis. For the mediatory function of Nabokov's female characters see also Elena Rakhimova-Sommers' dissertation “The ‘Ona’ of Nabokov's Hereafter: Women Characters as Otherworldly Agents in Nabokov's Fiction.”

¹⁸See Alexandrov, Vladimir. “Otherworld.” In Vladimir Alexandrov, ed., *The Garland Companion to Vladimir Nabokov*. New York: Garland Publishing, 1995, p. 568.

commented on the lamentable state of some writings by female authors, he nonetheless encouraged them to write. I argue that first of all, he read a sufficient body of works written by women to permit worthwhile assessments of their writings. Second, in his reviews he pointed out the challenges that women writers were still facing thus enabling them to consider his criticism for their future work. Third, Nabokov offered the examples of how he thought a woman should write in his own writing. In a story where the narrator is a woman, he modeled complex narrative structure and style for a female voice; in his longer works (that do not have female narrators) he delineated a metaliterary female character. What follows is a vision of Nabokov as a literary critic who was not merely indifferent to literature written by women.

Thus, Vladimir Nabokov, a great Russian-American writer of the 20th century with a rather provocative slant of thought, had “strong opinions” about women writers and female literary creativity that he expressed in his fictional and non-fictional works. Throughout his texts, Nabokov challenged the reader's perception of female authors, fictional and not, and addressed a number of questions in regard to what he regarded as women's literary aesthetics. As will be shown in this dissertation, considerable commentary and criticism about women writers in Nabokov's letters, lectures and reviews provide a firm ground for the analysis of his fiction from the perspective of his literary attitude towards them. I hope that this study will contribute to a better understanding of Nabokov's literary relationships with women writers in Russia and abroad, that it will dissolve his reputation as being decisively against women writers, and that it will advance the question of women's writings as it appears in the writer's criticism and through the prism of Nabokov's art.

Chapter 1

Vladimir Nabokov and Some Women Writers of Russian Modernism

The political cataclysms of 20th century Russia compelled many talented writers to abandon their homeland and seek asylum in different countries and on all continents. Although many of them remained a part of the Russian literary milieu, their literary independence and political freedom had to be sought far beyond their country's borders. This was the fate of the Russian-American writer Vladimir Nabokov, who after the Revolution of 1917 left Russia for exile in Western Europe. Nabokov's family settled briefly in England and later moved to Berlin where his literary vocation began to take shape. Alongside his Russian poetry written while he was a student at Cambridge and his early prose that began to position him as a gifted author, Nabokov also wrote literary criticism that was published in different European periodicals in the 1920s.¹ In particular, during his Russian years, Nabokov reviewed extensively the works of contemporary Russian female novelists and analyzed the writings of the newly-emerged group of

¹Nabokov published his first Russian novel *Mashen'ka* in 1926, but his early poems, plays, stories, and translations appeared as early as 1921 in the *Trinity Magazine* and the émigré daily *The Rudder/Rul'*. The latter was founded by his father V. D. Nabokov, a prominent member of the Constitutional Democratic Party who frequently published in this newspaper and elsewhere in the émigré press. In order not to be confused with his father, Nabokov chose Sirin as his pseudonym, the name he would keep throughout his vocation as a Russian writer in Europe (RY 179).

Russian female poets in the Berlin literary newspaper *The Rudder*.² Some of these reviews, ranging from high praise of some women writers to dismissive remarks about others, have raised a rather speculative question about Nabokov's criticism, that of his literary reaction to women writers.

Much of Nabokov's criticism does not spare a good number of women authors from his literary attacks. In their articles, "Vladimir Nabokov and Women Authors" and "Settling Accounts with Russia's Silver Age: Nabokov Writes Akhmatova" Maxim Shrayer and Barry Scherr respectively speculate about Nabokov's alleged prejudice against women writers. Throughout their works, both critics bring out examples of Nabokov's clearly negative attitude to female authors. Although Nabokov appears to be very critical and even hostile when the issues of "female poetics" and women writers are in question, there are also instances that serve as an indication of his favorable treatment of many of these writers. In this chapter, I seek to demonstrate that Nabokov's evaluations of women writers are in the main not gender-specific, but art-specific. I argue that the writer's critical remarks about women authors are based strictly on aesthetic grounds, not male chauvinism. Nabokov's reviews represent the first body of work in his writings about women. They seem to have started his polemics with female authors. With the exception of one woman poet, they are directed towards emigré writers who, like the author himself, had to share the plight of European exile.

² The writer's biographer, the scholar Brian Boyd, distinguishes two literary periods in Nabokov's life: the "Russian years" that began with his European immigration of the 1920s and the American period, starting from 1940 when the writer immigrated to the United States.

1.1 *Women Writers and Nabokov's Reviews.*

What do we know about women writers and Nabokov's reviews? As Shrayner points out, Nabokov's reviews analyzed poetry by ten women, prose fiction by three women, and criticism by four women, a total of seventeen authors in thirteen reviews.³ The number of reviews in which Nabokov parses the works of male writers often critically exceeds the number in which he examines the female writers by at least three times. Indeed, not all of Nabokov's authorial gestures toward women writers are dismissive. For example, the renowned Russian woman writer Nina Berberova (1901-1993), who in the 1960s became especially known for her collection of memoirs *Kursiv Moi/ The Italics are Mine* (1969), was praised by Nabokov for her first novel *The Last and The First* (1929) which he called “своеобразной, ладной, и блестящей книгой”/ an original, harmonious and brilliant book (SSRP 3, 701). Nabokov described Berberova’s style as follows: “Слог на редкость крепок и чист, образы великолепны своею веской и точной силой. Это не дамское рукоделие, не безответственное братание с безднами и не заказной отклик на злобу дня, – это литература высшего качества, произведение подлинного писателя” (SSRP 3, 702)/ “The style is uncommonly fine and pure, the images are splendid in their weighty and precise power. This is not lady's handiwork, not an irresponsible fraternization with chasms, and not a response, made to order, on issues of the day. This is literature of the highest quality, the work of a genuine writer” (my translation). In another review, in which none of the male poets were well favored by Nabokov, he complimented Berberova for the vivacity [*zhivost'*] of her writing style (SSRP 2, 638).

The fact that the author wrote only *one* review – “that of Berberova's novel *The Last and*

³For a detailed catalogue of names and works arranged according to the years in which Nabokov's reviews appeared, see Shrayner, Maxim. “Vladimir Nabokov and Women Authors” p. 54.

The First (1929) – that was 'outright positive'" ("Vladimir Nabokov and Women Authors" 54), Shroyer takes as an argument in favor of Nabokov's clearly negative attitudes toward women writers. Considering that out of three prose writers that Nabokov reviewed one received unequivocal praise, the style of another was "cautiously encouraging" ("Vladimir Nabokov and Women Authors" 60), and the writing of the third was completely rejected, these numbers do not suggest any pronounced gender bias. In fact, several arguments can be made in defense of a more favorable position towards women writers on Nabokov's part than the ones that Shroyer makes. One has to do with the prose of a minor writer in Paris, Avgusta Damanskaia (1875-1959). Nabokov's remarks about this author reveal him as being capable of judicious evaluation of women writers as Nabokov does not dismiss everything in her collection of stories. Along with a critique of the glaring inaccuracies of some of her statements, the writer compliments sharp observation [*metkoe nabliudenie*] and a colorful element [*zhivopisnyi shtrikh*] achieved by this woman writer gracefully, without the pressure of the pen [*legko, bez nazhima pera*] (SSRP 2, 678). In his review, Nabokov kindly pointed out that a simple, descriptive story based on real life [*prostoi, opisatel'nyi rasskaz, osnovannyi na deistvitel'noi zhizni*] he considered a suitable genre for this woman writer (SSRP 2, 678). What is more interesting, however, is that Nabokov criticized the same features and approaches in Damanskaia's writing as he did in the prose and poetry of some male writers in his reviews. About Damanskaia he wrote:

Впечатление чего-то неточного, непроверенного оставляют и некоторые другие образы в книге. Так, прочтя фразу о женщине, которая с "орошенным кровью лицом шагнула назад," или о женщине, у которой лицо "заливалось малиновым сиропом," бесхитростные могут подумать, что в первом случае речь об опасном ранении, а во втором о кухонной катастрофе. На самом же деле это только два изысканных способа сказать, что человек покраснел (SSRP 2, 677).

Some other images in the book leave the impression of something

inaccurate and unexamined. Thus, having read the phrase about a woman who “stepped back with a face washed with blood,” or about a woman whose face “had drowned in raspberry syrup,” the ingenuous might think that in the first case the discourse is about a dangerous wound, and in the second – about a kitchen disaster. But the fact is, these are merely two sophisticated ways of saying that a person has blushed (my translation).

The same sort of stylistic inaccuracy or even mannerism of style that Nabokov observes in his analysis of Damanskaia's prose, he also finds in the story by a male writer and thus comments in his review:

Рассказ Темирязева ярок и отчетлив, но автору хочется посоветовать отбросить некий прием, которым он пользуется. Вот образец этого приема: «спокойствие, спокойствие, спокойствие», твердит Петушков ... и если рука, державшая шляпу иногда вздрагивала, то это происходило исключительно от холода или от мускульного напряжения». Вот это кокетливое «исключительно» – прием сомнительный, часто встречающийся, кстати сказать, у Эренбурга. Зачем эта маска, зачем не просто сказать (или показать), что человек был оскорблен, рассержен? (SSRP 2, 670).

Temiriazhev's story is vivid and clear, but one wants to advise the author to give up a certain device that he uses. Here is an example of this device: “calmness, calmness, calmness' repeats Petushkov . . . and if the hand that was holding a hat sometimes trembled, that was happening exclusively from cold or muscle tension.” This coquettish “exclusively” – is a doubtful device, one can, by the way, often find it in Erenburg. Why this mask, why not simply say (or show), that a person was insulted, made angry (my translation).

The same verbosity of description that Nabokov finds in Damanskaia's prose, he also humorously notes in the works of the minor poet Sergei Rafalovich. The author advises the poet to express his thoughts more concisely – exactly as he does for Damanskaia – because for Nabokov, a verbal phrase does not require more than one or two words to express even a poetic idea:

Для того чтобы сказать, например, что наступили сумерки, вряд ли нужна расточительность : “ Но день бледнел, бледнел и гас, пока не наступил предсмертный час на склоне дня, на зыбкой грани мрака, тот час который мы зовем не ночью и не днем, а часом между волком и собакой.” Шесть строк вместо двух слов” (SSRP 2, 637).

In order to say, for example, that dusk had fallen, one hardly needs to be dissipated: “But the day was getting paler and paler and was dying out until an hour before death has come on slope of the day, on the ripple border of darkness, that hour that we call not the day or the night, but the hour between a wolf and a dog.” Six lines instead of two words (my translation).

As will be shown in chapter two of this dissertation, Nabokov's criticism of Damanskaia would also appear in his fiction, in particular, in the Russian story “Admiralteiskaia Igla” / “The Admiralty Spire” (1933), dedicated to an analysis of literary flaws in fiction by certain female authors. In this story, Nabokov addressed instances such as the inaccuracy and verbosity of description, which were not palatable to his literary aesthetics and had been criticized earlier in his reviews. According to Shroyer, “Damanskaia's stories, although ably constructed, suffered from a flatness of language as well as superficial, Baedeker-like⁴ tone of descriptions” and therefore could not have received from Nabokov more than a “lukewarm review” (“Vladimir Nabokov and Women Authors” 60). If Nabokov's review of Damanskaia can be called “lukewarm,” Nabokov's reviews of the male writers discussed above were lukewarm as well.

Nabokov's criticism of Damanskaia's prose can be easily defined as “neutral.” I do not argue that all of Nabokov's remarks about women authors could be considered favorable. I argue, instead, that it is important to understand the context and the reasons for his heartfelt dismissals of some women writers. As Shroyer points out, in 1929, Nabokov wrote a “dismissively offhand”

⁴ Karl Baedeker was a German publisher and pioneer in the business of descriptive worldwide travel guides.

review of Odoevtseva's novel *Isolde* (1929) saying that “all of this is written, as they say, 'dryly,' – which for some reason is considered an achievement – and in short phrases,' – which also, they say, is a plus” (qtd. in “Vladimir Nabokov and Women Authors” 55). Irina Odoevtseva (1895-1990), a Russian émigré in Paris, was quite successful in literary circles after her immigration to the West. Her ballads were widely praised, her first published story “Shooting Star” (1926) prompted the renowned émigré writer Ivan Bunin to express a wish to meet her. Odoevtseva’s first novel *The Angel of Death* (1927) had even greater success and “at least a dozen reviewers praised the book” (Bobrow 472). In his biography of Nabokov, Brian Boyd gives a detailed account of her relationship with Nabokov and explains what followed and preceded his review. In March 1930, Georgy Ivanov, a distinguished Russian émigré poet and also Odoevtseva’s husband, surveyed “with outraged criticism” several of Nabokov’s books in a newly emerged Parisian journal *Chisla* (RY 350).⁵ As Boyd points out, Nabokov knew well what had caused Ivanov’s reaction to his own work: “Several months earlier, Odoevtseva had sent him her first novel, with the inscription ‘Thank you for *King, Queen, Knave*,’ making it appear as if he had sent her his latest novel” (RY 350). Véra Nabokov, the author's wife, later explained that “this bribe ought to have influenced” the review her husband wrote of Odoevtseva’s book. “It had the opposite effect if any” (RY 350).⁶ As it often happens, Nabokov's fiction provides answers to many of his critical views. The explanation of this incident appeared afterwords in Nabokov's

⁵For Ivanov’s entire review see *V.V. Nabokov: Pro et Contra*. p. 215.

⁶In a now published letter to Prof. Gleb Struve, dated on July 3, 1959, Nabokov also explained that the only reason for Ivanov's attacks on him in *Chisla* was the fact that “Madame Odoevtsev' has sent [him] her book (I don't recollect its title—*Winged Love? Wing of Love? Love of a Wing?*), with the inscription “Thank you for *King, Queen, Knave*” (i.e. thank you for having written *KQK*, since, of course, I had not sent her anything). I panned the novel of hers in *Rul'*. That demolition provoked Ivanov's revenge. Voila tout” (SL 289). See also Nabokov's brief discussion of this incident in *Strong Opinions* p. 39.

next novel *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight* (1941), the writer's first English novel, which he composed in Paris during a very short period of time. Under the mask of his male narrator, the writer quite openly commented on the importance of dispassionate judgment in criticism:

To express his gratitude to a man who by saying what he thought of a book was merely doing his duty, seemed to Sebastian improper and even insulting as implying a tepidly human side to the frosty serenity of dispassionate judgement. Moreover, once having begun he would have been forced to go on thanking and thanking for every following line lest the man should be hurt by a sudden lapse; and finally, such a damp dizzy warmth would develop that, in spite of this or that critic's well-known honesty, the grateful author might never be quite, quite certain that here or there personal sympathy had not tiptoed in" (102).

Unable to be objective about Odoevtseva's novel due to personal circumstances, Nabokov was compelled to write a dismissively offhand review of her prose. And yet, a rejection of a writer on personal grounds was certainly not the main reason that provoked Nabokov to a critical debate. As we shall see, Nabokov's evaluations of other writers were based on aesthetic grounds. Had personal connections inclined Nabokov toward positive assessments of other writers,⁷ he would never have allowed himself the sharp criticism of Berberova – with whom he was on friendly terms throughout his life – that he in fact made in one of his letters. In view of Nabokov's attitudes to female authors and what he was like as a critic, a small digression from his reviews of women writers to his letters about them seems useful. Written to close friends, they provide a glimpse into Nabokov's personal views and allow one to compare his assessment of male and the female writers. This digression will also illustrate that the main reason for Nabokov's criticism of

⁷Another woman writer whom Nabokov rejected on personal grounds was Zinaida Shakhovskaia (1906-2001). Shakhovskaia helped Nabokov and his family during the difficult times in exile and also claimed to be the first one to “discover” Nabokov as a writer. Many years later, at one of the literary soirées at which Nabokov appeared already as a renowned writer, he coldly greeted her saying “Bonjour, madame,” appealing to her as he would to a stranger in spite of a long lasting friendship and correspondence (AY 395).

women writers was the aesthetic criteria and the same was true of his assessment of male writers.

In a letter to Professor Gleb Struve dated on June 14, 1970, Nabokov once refuted Berberova's "*feminine memory*" as in the case of the "idiotic anecdote about [his] 'Rakhmaninov' dinner jacket." (SL 470, my italics). In her memoirs, Berberova explained the event. She mentioned that the composer had given Nabokov a tuxedo, "tailored, as Nabokov put it, 'in the period of the Prelude,'" that is before the war in the final years in Paris (*Italics are Mine* 325). Nabokov, however, denied the story. In a subsequent essay entitled "Nina Berberov," he explained that he never possessed in Paris or elsewhere a tuxedo Rakhmaninov had given him, although he mentioned that at one point the composer did send him several items of obsolete clothing that Nabokov sent him back (SO 290).⁸ It is not clear whose memory was better in this case. D.V. Nabokov, the author's son, for example, wrote that the composer did give Nabokov "an obsolete cutaway in 1940 to wear at his first summer-school lecture at Stanford University" that Nabokov returned (SL 470). Dmitri Vladimirovich also recalled that at roughly the same time, Rakhmaninov also gave him his first radio, that present was "lovingly used for many years" (SL 470). Although it is hard to say whether Nabokov reconstructed the history correctly, there remains his criticism, a comment about a woman writer's "feminine memory" that cannot be easily dismissed or refuted. Maxim Shroyer does not mention this comment in his article perhaps for the reason that it can be softened and even "neutralized" by the fact that Nabokov, the critic, made a similar one about a male writer, Boris Pasternak, that shall now be considered. In order to better understand this parallel in Nabokov's criticism of male and the female writers, one has to look more into what Nabokov was like as a critic.

⁸Nabokov's more scholarly criticism of Berberova appeared in the same essay, in which he complimented – apart from "a couple minutiae mistakes" – her "excellent article" on his *Pale Fire* (SO 290).

According to Brian Boyd, Nabokov's literary treatment of male writers can be summed up as follows: “[he] would treat beginners or weak writers gently if he could detect some pulse of talent, but attacked puffed up reputations like Gorky’s without compromise. Unable to comment positively on Aldanov, the most popular author on the very short list of the publishing firm “Slovo”, headed like *Rul’* by Hessen, he simply kept silent about him” (RY 256). Among the “big” names whom Nabokov “attacked without compromise” was the Nobel Prize winner for literature, Boris Pasternak. The latter first appeared in Nabokov's reviews in 1927 in the following way:

Есть в России довольно даровитый поэт Пастернак. Стих у него выпуклый, зобастый, таращащий глаза, словно его муза страдает базедовой болезнью. Он без ума от громоздких образов, звучных, но буквальных рифм, рокочущих размеров. Синтаксис у него какой-то развратный (SSRP 2, 638)

There is in Russia a rather talented poet Pasternak. His verse is bulging, goitrous, goggle-eyed, as if his muse is suffering from Basedow's disease. He is crazy about unwieldy images, sonorous but literal rhymes, and thundering meters. His syntax is rather depraved (qtd. in Scherr 42).

Nabokov's reception of Pasternak as a poet varied throughout the years. Eventually he came to admire his verse and applauded the fact that Pasternak was getting the Nobel Prize “on the strength of his verse” (SO 206). Nabokov's assessment of Pasternak's prose was more challenging. In late 1950s he openly declared his dislike of *Doctor Zhivago* (1957) as “pro-Bolshevist and historically false” (SO 206). Nabokov was aware of the badgering the poet underwent in the Soviet Union; however, he believed the Soviet government was “hypocritically denouncing Pasternak's novel” for the reason of “increasing foreign sales, the result of which they would eventually pocket and spend on propaganda abroad” (SO 205). Some believed

Nabokov envied Pasternak, partially for being the first with his novel on the bestseller list.⁹

Pasternak himself vetoed Nabokov's candidacy as a potential translator of his novel into English saying that “that won't work; [Nabokov] is too jealous of my wretched position in this country to do it properly” (qtd. in Johnson, “Pasternak's *Zhivago*” 21).

Nabokov's actions and public words should be understood in political context. What he himself said in the interview conducted by a “docile anonym” in October 1972 explains best his ethical position in this situation. Nabokov had an opportunity to write a review of *Doctor Zhivago* for *The Reporter*, but he refused. There were several reasons for it; the obvious one was the fear of harming the author. As Nabokov said: “although I never had much influence as a critic, I could well imagine a pack of writers emulating my 'eccentric outspokenness' and causing, in the long run, sales to drop, thus thwarting the Bolsheviks in their hopes and making their hostage more vulnerable than ever” (SO 206).¹⁰ There were other reasons for Nabokov not to write a devastating review, among which was the likely possibility of “seeing it attributed to competitive chagrin” (SO 206).

Leaving out politics, he regarded *Doctor Zhivago* “as a sorry thing, clumsy, trivial, and melodramatic, with stock situations, voluptuous lawyers, unbelievable girls, and trite coincidences” (SO 206). Some doubted that Nabokov ever read the book. According to Robert

⁹There was a competitive appearance of Pasternak's *Doctor Zhivago* and Nabokov's *Lolita* on the *New York Times* bestseller list in the late 1950s.

¹⁰Male and female writers in emigration whom Nabokov reviewed in 1920s and 1930s could never be harmed by the writer's criticism as Pasternak would have been in the Soviet State. As Boyd writes, “On October 23, Pasternak was awarded the Nobel Prize. He accepted, and the Soviet press immediately denounced *Doctor Zhivago* as 'artistically squalid' and a 'malicious lampoon' on the Soviet Union. *Pravda* claimed that if there were a 'spark of Soviet dignity left in him,' Pasternak would have rejected the prize. On October 27 the Soviet Writer's Union voted to expel him. He was called a pig 'who befouls the place where he eats and befouls those by whose labor he lives and breathes.' On October 29, Pasternak declined the prize.” (AY 372).

Hughes, Nabokov never read the entire novel, “however attentively he began it”: “he was to a certain extent blinded by his political disagreements and by what he judged to be shoddy craftsmanship, bad writing, and poor translation” (166). According to Stacy Schiff, Nabokov did read Pasternak's novel since in a letter to the American editor and publisher Jason Epstein, he said : “I am reading Dr. ZHIVAGO - dreary, conventional stuff” (qtd. Schiff 243). Nabokov's rejection of the novel on aesthetic grounds is interesting because he was not the only one to accuse Pasternak of negligent style. In the late 1950s, Vsevolod Ivanov berated Pasternak (apparently in reference to *Doctor Zhivago*) for allowing himself to write in a careless style. Pasternak objected saying that he “purposely writes almost like Charskaia,” because he wants his prose to be read “by anybody in one gulp.” As Tamara Ivanova writes:

Поначалу устраивались обсуждения новой прозы и даже споры. Всеволод [Иванов] упрекнул как-то Бориса Леонидовича, что после своих безупречных стилистически произведений: “Детство Люверс,” “Охранная Грамота” и других, он позволяет себе теперь небрежение стилем. На это Борис Леонидович возразил, что он “нарочно пишет почти как Чарская,” его интересуют в данном случае не стилистические поиски, а “доходчивость,” он хочет, чтобы его проза читалась “взахлеб любым человеком,” “даже портнихой, даже судомойкой.”¹¹

First there were the discussions of the new prose and even arguments. Vsevolod[Ivanov] reproached Boris Leonidovich at one point that after his stylistically impeccable works: “Lover's childhood,” “Safe Conduct” and others, he now allows himself a careless style. Boris Leonidovich objected to this by saying that he deliberately writes almost like Charskaia, that he is interested, in this case, not in the stylistic search, but “intelligibility,” he wants his prose to be read “in one gulp by any person,” “even by a dressmaker, even by a scullery-maid.”

Nabokov's intransigence in artistic matters makes the above comment especially interesting. As

¹¹ Ivanova, Tamara. *Moi sovremenniki, kakimi ya ikh znala*. Moscow, 1984: 424.

Schiff sums up: “the insult [Nabokov] hurled at the book” was the accusation that “Pasternak’s mistress had written the novel for him, the worst that could be said not because Pasternak might have relegated the responsibility, but because the thing *read* as if written by a woman (Schiff 243). A somewhat similar reference to being written “as if by a woman,” one finds in Boyd’s biography of Nabokov. According to Boyd, as a lyric poet Nabokov considered Pasternak “a kind of masculine Emily Dickinson” (AY 371). This by no means is a comment against Pasternak, as Nabokov admired the great American poet (Schiff 54). However, as Karlinsky also sums up, “for Nabokov *Doctor Zhivago* was a piece of pulp fiction, regrettably written by a poet he admired, a book, as he put it in the afterward to the Russian version of *Lolita*, about a ‘lyrical doctor with penny-awful mystical urges and philistine turns of speech and an enchantress straight out of Charskaia’ (qtd. Introduction, NWL 27).¹²

Thus, Nabokov's model of artistic evaluations reveals itself not as a simple one: there are all kinds of writers, male and female, in the author's literary world. What can be said about Nabokov's criticism of Berberova is that it does not seem so striking any more considering his critical remarks about Pasternak's prose. Nabokov's comments about Pasternak as a poet in his 1927 review brings us back to the last but not least issue in Nabokov's evaluations: underdeveloped poetics in the verse of some male and female poets as indicated in his reviews. The tendency here is the same as that with the prose writers whom Nabokov reviewed. He dislikes the same kind of features and approaches in the verse of some male poets as he does in female ones; in other words, he does not appear to be more critical of the women writers in any way.

¹² Lydia Charskaia (1875(78)-1937) wrote widely popular novels for and about teen-aged girls in pre-revolutionary Russia. Nabokov mentions her in his Russian novel *Glory* indirectly by referring to her novella *Princess Dzhavakha* (1903).

The problem of underdeveloped poetics reveals itself through linguistic deficiency, tasteless sound orchestration and poor rhymes, and also generally boring modes in the verse of some male and some female poets. For example, on underdeveloped poetics in K. Irmantseva's poetry, Nabokov writes: “В 'Итальянских сонетах' К. Ирманцевой есть отдельные хорошие строки, но нет стройности, простоты и естественности, требуемых слухом от сонета. Чувствуется искусственность рифм, неправилен слог, некоторые ударенья не на месте. . . . И все так 'изысканно' и 'изломанно’”. . . (SSRP 2, 671)/ “In K. Irmantseva's “Italian Sonnets” there are individual good phrases, but there is no harmony, easiness, and naturalness that the ear demands from a sonnet. One senses the artificiality of rhymes, the form is incorrect, some stresses are out of place . . . and everything is so 'refined' and 'affected' . . .” (my translation).¹³ But perhaps Nabokov is even more critical of Benedict Duelsky's sonnets, the only sonnets by a male writer that Nabokov reviewed:

Безграмотный набор слов, неправильные ударенья, почти полное отсутствие смысла (и какие-то безграмотные клише, когда и есть проблеск мысли!), насилие над цезурой и женской рифмой, – и все это в ореоле какого-то наивнейшего провинциализма – вот что приходится сказать о творчестве Бенедикта Дуэльского. Эпиграфом к 'Сонетам' взят стих Пушкина 'Прекрасное должно быть величаво.' Но должна ли быть величава безграмотная чушь? (SSRP 2, 637)

Illiterate choice of words, incorrect stresses, almost total lack of sense (and some illiterate cliches, when the sense is there!), the torture of caesura and feminine rhymes, – and all this is in the halo of naive provincialism – this is what one has to say about Benedikt Duelsky's art. An epigraph to the “Sonnets” is taken from Pushkin's “The beautiful must be majestic.” But should illiterate nonsense be majestic?

¹³Compare this comment with the last paragraph in *The Gift* where Nabokov refers to the appealing musicality of the “Pushkin sonnet” or “Onegin stanza”: “the ear cannot right now part with the music and allow the tale to fade” (G 378).

Although Nabokov identifies poetic flaws in the works of almost every female poet he reviews, he also does justice to their artistic merits. Thus, about Mariam Stoiam's poem "Kham" (Vulgarian), he says: "есть недочеты в этом стихотворении – прозаизм, безвкусицы, растянутость, но есть и кое-что привлекательное – ритмическая сила, стон, восточные отзвуки" (SSRP 2, 654)/ "There are shortcomings in this poem – prosaism, lack of taste, drawl, but there is also something appealing – a rhythmic power, moan, Eastern echoes" (my translation). Similarly, while giving the poet his due, Nabokov identifies the poetic flaws and merits in the verse of the already-mentioned Sergei Rafalovich:

Для того чтобы сказать, например, что наступили сумерки, вряд ли нужна расточительность. . . . Шесть строк вместо двух слов. . . . Зато там и сям меж двух вялых встречается у Рафаловича подлинно прекрасный стих, как, например, этот ответ души ее создателю: «Ненужной телу я была и, с ним не споря, завернулась, как в белый саван, в два крыла (637).

In order to say, for example, that dusk had fallen, one hardly needs to be dissipate. . . . Six lines instead of two words. . . . But here and there among two languid poems appears a genuinely splendid one as, for example, this answer of the soul to her creator: "My body did not need me and not arguing with it, I have wrapped myself into a white shroud, as if in two wings.

The author's choice of these lines as an example of fine poetry is notable considering that the first person lyrical voice is feminine (the word "soul" in Russian is feminine: "dusha"). But the specific femininity of some poems by Irina Kondratovich attracts Nabokov's attention in a negative way: "К Ирине Кондратович грешно придирается. Большинство поэтесс любит писать 'рот' вместо 'губ' и воспевают колдуний, шелка и Пьеро с Коломбиной." / "It would be embarrassing to find fault with Irina Kondratovich. Most female poets like to write "mouth" [rot] instead of "lips" [guby] and to extol sorceresses, silks and Pierro and Columbine" (qtd. in

“Vladimir Nabokov and Women Authors” 58)¹⁴. And yet, for Nabokov, male poets did not escape certain poetic mannerisms either. Thus, Nabokov writes:

Современные поэты особенно “парижские,” почему-то чрезвычайно любят всякие отрицательные прилагательные, обманывая себя тем, что гораздо изысканнее или как-то воздушнее сказать, например, “нехолодный” вместо теплый. В одном небольшом стихотворении у Кнута я насчитал целых шесть таких длинных прилагательных, начинающихся на “не” (SSRP 2, 656).

Modern poets, especially the “Paris” ones, are somehow extremely fond of negative adjectives, deceiving themselves by the fact that it is more subtle and somehow airy to say “not cold” rather than “warm.” In one small poem by Knut, I have calculated a total of six such long adjectives that begin with “ne.”

Despite her poetic skills, the poet Ekaterina Tauber, writes “very clearly and very tediously” (qtd.

¹⁴ A renowned 20th century poet Vladislav Khodasevich identified a similar problem in his assessment of female poetry, not poets. Before Kondratovich’s imitation of Blok, there were many other women poets who were the mediocre epigones of somebody else’s talent:

The so-called ‘poetry of the female soul’ has attracted the general attention of poetry lovers. The specific “femininity” of poems has begun to be valued much more highly than heretofore. And demand has called forth supply, and to meet it, either in whole books, or in individual poems on the pages of journals and almanacs, there have glistened not only feminine, but even characteristically “ladylike” (damskoe) poems. A rash of mannerism, psychological crises, caprices, affectations has raised upon us – everything with which these young pupils of Sappho have tried to display and underline to each other the “femininity” of their poetry. Through the thicket of silks, rouge, necklaces and feathers, which have become the necessary accessory of this poetry, it has been hard to make anything out except the desire to be original” (Utro Rossii, 1916/274 Oct. 1)

The fact that Nabokov and Khodasevich spoke of similar issues in women's poetry only indicates that the problem of female epigones was real. As for male imitators, Nabokov, for example, wrote: “Размышления [Юрия] Мандельштама о любви были бы сносны, если бы ему принадлежал приоритет” (SSRP 2)/ “[Yuri] Mandelstam's speculations 'on love' would have been tolerable if he had been the first (my translation).

in “Vladimir Nabokov and Women Authors” 54) according to Nabokov. She appears twice in his reviews unlike most other emigré poets (the exception is Marina Tsvetaeva). It is worthwhile to mention that Nabokov thinks that the poet Vladimir Dikson also writes “грамотно, но скучно” (SSRP 2, 641)/ “literately, but boringly” (my translation). A summary of Nabokov's poetic views that he made in a brief discussion of Nikolai Gumiliev's poems can be easily considered his response to male as well as female poets:

Стихотворение не может быть просто «настроением», «лирическим нечто», подбором случайных образов, туманом и тупиком. Стихотворенье должно быть прежде всего интересным. В нем должна быть своя завязка, своя развязка. Читатель должен с любопытством начать и с волнением окончить. О лирическом переживанье, о пустяке необходимо рассказать так же увлекательно, как о путешествии в Африку. Стихотворенье – занимательно – вот ему лучшая похвала (SSRP 2, 640).

A poem cannot be just "a feeling", "a lyrical something," a selection of random images, fog, a dead end. A poem, in the first place, has to be interesting. It should have its own plot and denouement. A reader should be curious to begin and finish with excitement. About a lyrical experience, a trifle, one should narrate as excitingly as about a journey to Africa. Being engaging is the best praise for a poem (my translation).

Although Nabokov's reviews of the works of female poets and also prose writers on the whole are no more negative than those of works by male authors, one specific observation is evident throughout his reviews. This is Anna Akhmatova's influence on other poets.

The problem of underdeveloped poetics in women's poetry is closely connected to another focus of Nabokov's reviews, which is Anna Akhmatova's detrimental impact on female poets. In one of his reviews, Nabokov calls Akhmatova: “a lovely poet [poetessa prelestnaia], no doubt, but one who should not be imitated” (qtd. in “Vladimir Nabokov and Women Authors” 58). What did Nabokov mean when he said that Akhmatova should not be imitated? Akhmatova's

absolute authority as a “poetess of love” had made her the “Alpha and Omega of poetry by Russian women” (Kelly 208). Although not an emigre writer herself, her early poems generated a large number of epigones among emigre women, whose poems, however numerous, remained, in Catriona Kelly's words, “the unimpressive echoes of the only voice that mattered” (208). In his *Contemporary Russian Literature*, Prince D. S. Mirsky explains the reasons for Akhmatova's popularity among other poets. According to Mirsky:

Akhmatova's success is due precisely to this personal and autobiographical character of her poetry: it is frankly “sentimental” in the sense that it is all about sentiment; and the sentiment is not interpreted in terms of symbolism or mysticism, but in simple and intelligible human language. Her main subject is love. It is always exceedingly actual, not only in sentiment but in treatment. Her poems are realistic and vividly concrete: they are easily visualized. They always have a definite background – Petersburg, Tsarskoe Selo, a village in the province of Tver' (257).

In *A History of Russian Women's Writing: 1820-1992*, Kelly also brings out those specific features that Akhmatova's imitators took from her and which Nabokov, as we shall see, disliked:

Much ‘feminine verse’ written by ‘outsiders’[abroad] was characterized by imitation of the paradigms set up in Akhmatova’s early collections, *Evening* and the *Rosary*. A similarly *distraine* heroine finds herself in a similar urban setting; the tone is, with depressing regularity, submissively haughty or haughtily submissive. . . . Another standard motif, again in the Akhmatovian tradition, was that of religious repentance for erotic misdemeanor; poems of this kind place the woman speaker or protagonist in a more or less sharply defined ecclesiastical setting, and examine her sensibilities as the ritual unfolds (260).

The fact that Akhmatova became a model to many female poets whose subject matter was centered around love, the poetess knew herself. In a “barbed epigram” written in 1960, she wrote: Я научила женщин говорить... Но, боже, кто их замолчать заставит! (Akhmatova 226)/ “It was I who taught women how to speak, / But God! who’ll stop their mouths?” (my translation).

Akhmatova's influence on other women poets is a recurrent preoccupation in Nabokov's reviews. What exactly was detrimental in Akhmatova's verse in regard to her imitators, Nabokov elaborates in his fiction and therefore this is worthy of a separate discussion. The remaining part of this chapter will also focus on Nabokov's literary relationships with Marina Tsvetaeva and Zinaida Gippius. All three poets received Nabokov's praise despite the fact that they were women. He highlighted the strong aspects of their art in his own while sharply criticizing their imitators. The fact that he valued the literary achievements of these three major poets in Russian literature will reveal Nabokov as a shrewd critic and will also help to understand who the actual prototypes in his prose were.

1.2 Nabokov and Akhmatova

Of all women poets, Anna Akhmatova plays the most speculative and probably the most interesting role in Nabokov's oeuvre. Being a subject of wide discussion in Nabokov scholarship, his attitude towards Akhmatova, as well as her influence on other women poets, have raised a number of very specific questions. For example, in his article, "Vladimir Nabokov and Women Authors," Shroyer asks: "Did Nabokov object to Akhmatova's poetry or just the appropriation of her literary legacy by female poets? What did he resent, literary personae fashioned specifically after the *femmes fatales* of the early Akhmatova or any female poetic voices speaking to the woman's condition?" (59). Nabokov's novel *Pnin* (1957) is the first one that triggered such speculations. I argue that in this novel and his other fictional works Nabokov admired Akhmatova's poetic gift despite reservations he might have had about her writing style. The same cannot be said about the poet's imitators.

As Shrayer points out, Akhmatova's epigones acquire "caricatural proportions" in *Pnin* ("Vladimir Nabokov and Women Authors" 58) and Barry Scherr brings out those instances where the writer hints at Akhmatova's imitators. The first one occurs when Nabokov quotes an excerpt of poetry by Lisa Wind. The "eponymous hero's former wife" (Scherr 36) asks him to listen to her latest poem in Chapter Two:

<p>Я надела темное платье И монашенки я скромней; пуп; Из слоновой кости распятье Над холодной постелью моей.</p>	<p>I have put on a dark dress And am more modest than a nun; An ivory crucifix Is over my cold bed.</p>
<p>Но огни небывалых оргий прожигают мое забытьё И шепчу я имя Георгий – George – Золотое имя твое! (SSAP 54).</p>	<p>But the light of fabulous orgies Burn through my oblivion, And I whisper the name Your golden name! (P 56).</p>

Another example appears only in Chapter Seven, the novel's last. It consists of another poem by Lisa written "some three decades earlier and sent to the novel's narrator, with whom she had fallen in love prior to her marriage to Pnin" (Scherr 37):

A few days later she sent me those poems; a fair sample of her production is the kind of stuff that *émigré* rhymsterettes wrote after Akhmatova: lackadaisical little lyrics that tiptoed in more or less anapestic tetrameter and sat down rather heavily with a wistful sigh:

<p>Самоцветов кроме очей Нет у меня никаких, Но есть роза еще нежней Розовых губ моих. И юноша тихий сказал: "Ваше сердце всего нежней..." heart." И я опустила глаза... (SSAP 162).</p>	<p>No jewels, save my eyes, do I own, but I have a rose which is even softer than my rosy lips. And a quiet youth said: "There is nothing softer than your heart." And I lowered my gaze... (P 181).</p>
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As Shrayer points out, Nabokov "overflows Lisa's poetry with stock images" ("Vladimir Nabokov and Women Authors" 58) from Akhmatova's collections of poems *Evening* (1912) and

Rosary (1914). Indeed, the imagery that appears in Akhmatova's early verse includes facial features (eyes, mouth), female accessories (gloves, a fluffy muff, a veil), clothes items (a dress, a skirt) and a reference to its color (black, grey) and cut (*décolleté*). The poems in *Pnin* even have direct antecedents in Akhmatova's verse. As Gennady Barabtarlo was the first to point out, Lisa's first poem alludes to “Все мы бражники здесь, блудницы...”/ “We are all revelers here and harlots” (1913) (*Phantom* 109):

Lisa in *Pnin*:

Я надела темное платье
И монашенки я скромней;
Из слоновой кости распяты
Над холодной постелью моей
(SSAP 54)

I have put on a dark dress
And am more modest than a nun;

An ivory crucifix
Is over my cold bed (P 56).

Akhmatova in *Rosary*:

Ты куришь черную трульку
Так странен дымок над ней.
Я надела узкую юбку,
Чтоб казаться еще стройней.
(Akhmatova 79)

You are smoking a black pipe,
The puff of smoke has a funny shape.
I've put on my tight skirt
To make myself look still more svelte
(*Completed Poems* 135).

The heroine's second poem creates a comparison to Akhmatova's “Углем наметил на левом боку...”/ “He coal-marked the left-side spot” (1914) from *Rosary* (*Phantom* 274). The last line in the final quatrain is almost identical to that in Lisa's:

Чтоб тот, кто спокоен в своем дому,
Раскрывши окно, сказал:
“Голос знакомый, а слов не пойму,”

So that he who finds peace in his own home
Might say through the open window:
The voice is familiar, but the words are obscure,

– *И опустил глаза* (Akhmatova 101, my added). *And lowered his gaze* (qtd. in *Phantom* 275, my italics).

The quality of Lisa's verse is unremarkable and characterized, as Scherr notices, by a “surprising number of repetitions (especially of the words “rose” and “nezhnei”)” and the “ineffectual

control of poetic devices” (38).¹⁵ As Scherr also points out, nearly every line of Liza's verse strikes a false note: “If the narrator is more modest than a nun, then why does she even observe that her bed is 'cold'?” (38). Interestingly enough, in one of his reviews Nabokov criticized Nina Snesareva-Kazakova's collection of poems *Hallowed Be Thy Name* (1928) for the “mixture of feminine sinfulness and devoutness [*smes' zhenskoi grekhovnosti i bogomol'nosti*]” that for Nabokov had originated in Akhmatova's verse (SSRP 2, 664).¹⁶ As pointed out by Kelly, among those motifs that Akhmatova's epigones borrowed from her was that of “religious repentance for erotic misdemeanor; poems of this kind place the woman speaker or protagonist in a more or less sharply defined ecclesiastical setting, and examine her sensibilities as the ritual unfolds” (260). Apparently, in the case of his novel, Nabokov deliberately points to this thematic conflict by making the theme of monastic exterior and inner passion also appear in Lisa's verse. Nabokov's remark about Akhmatova in his review of Snesareva-Kazakova's collection is also interesting and fair, if one is to consider that the literary persona the poetess exploited in some of her early poems was that of a “female decadent sinner” (Kelly 213). In “Исповедь”/ “Confession” (1911), for example, a woman “kneels before the priest at the moment of absolution and feels the touch of a hand through fabric” (Kelly 213):

Умолк простивший мне грехи.	Having forgiven me my sins, he fell silent.
Лиловый сумрак гасит свечи.	In the violet dusk candles sputtered,
И темная епитрахиль	And a dark prayer stole
Накрыла голову и плечи.	Covered my head and my shoulders.

Не тот ли голос: "Дева! Встань'..." Isn't that the voice that said: "Maiden!

¹⁵For the analysis of rhymes and meter in Lisa's poem see Scherr, Barry. “Settling Accounts with Russia's Silver Age: Nabokov Writes Akhmatova.” p. 37.

¹⁶Before Nabokov, it was Stalin's henchman Zhdanov who made a comment in 1946 calling Akhmatova “a nun and a harlot, with whom harlotry is mixed with prayer” (qtd. in “Vladimir Nabokov and Women Authors” 58). Eikhenbaum made a similar reference to Akhmatova's “dual image” before Zhdanov, and Nabokov “quite independently of Eikhenbaum recognized this quality at least by the 1920s” (Scherr 47).

	Arise..."
Удары сердца чаще, чаще.	My heart beats faster, faster.
Прикосновение сквозь ткань	The touch, through the cloth,
Руки, рассеянно крестящей.	Of a hand absently making the sign of the cross.
(Akhmatova 110)	(Collected Poems 155)

In Akhmatova's other poem, "Ты пришёл меня утешить"/ "You have come to console me" (1913), also from *Rosary*, a religious belief appears as a "vital refuge for the heroine" and, as Kelly observes, an "inseparable part of her worldview" (213).

To many readers, the question of whether Nabokov had in mind Akhmatova's epigones for the figure of Lisa Wind, or if he targeted the poetess specifically remains in the speculative sphere. According to Andrei Ar'ev, it is impossible to parody a copy without parodying the original and, therefore, behind Lisa's poetic figure the critic sees Akhmatova ("Vesti iz vechnosti" 187). Lidiia Chukovskaia, the poet's friend and the author of notes about Akhmatova, on the other hand, was not sure whether Nabokov was referring to the poet herself or her imitators. In her book, *Notes about Akhmatova*, Chukovskaia recalls that Akhmatova was inclined to interpret the poems in *Pnin* adversely and disliked the novel as a whole:

This evening's angry topic was *Pnin* (I had dropped off the book in the interval). She didn't like the book in general, while in regard to herself she found it slanderous. I also don't like the book, or rather my soul is not in harmony with the soul that creates Nabokov's novels. But does it slander Akhmatova, or does it parody her imitators? It's hard to say. Anna Andreevna regards it as a definite slander. (qtd. in Scherr 38).¹⁷

Akhmatova might have been too quick in considering *Pnin's* parodies "a jibe" at her. As Scherr indicates, to the list of poems that she believed targeted her specifically, one may add a 1916 epigram by Bunin, with the title "Poetess":

¹⁷ Lidiia Chukovskaia, *Zapiski ob Anne Akhmatovoi v trekh knigakh*, vol. 2, 1952-1962 (Moscow, 1997), p. 458.

Большая муфта, бледная щека
Прижатая к ней томно и любовно,
Углом колени, узкая рука...
Нервна, притворна и бескровна.

A large muff, a pale cheek
Pressed to it languidly and lovingly,
Angular knees, a narrow hand...
Nervous, affected and anemic (qtd.
in Scherr 38).

This poem, as Scherr explains, an emigre literary critic Georgy Adamovich “for one, saw as more likely commenting on the general literary milieu of pre-Revolutionary Russia” (38).

Incidentally, in her article “The Hero of Labor,” Marina Tsvetaeva made an interesting comment that during that time women poets were all alike: “поэтессы, при всей разномастности, удивительно походили друг на друга” (qtd. in Efetov 23)/ “In spite of different coats, poetesses looked surprisingly alike” (my translation). Tsvetaeva also recollected how based on two or three characteristic components, such as “woman, love, passion,” the poet Valeri Briusov encouraged the audience to name – at one literary event – the first decadent woman poet. Tsvetaeva named Nadezhda L'vova, Briusov – Anna Akhmatova” (qtd. in Efetov 23).

While Akhmatova's recognition of herself in Lisa's verse “needs to be given some credence,” “several plausible models among women in emigration serve as an indication of the 'multiple sources' that have entered Nabokov's *Pnin*” (Scherr 39). Among Akhmatova's imitators the possible inspirations for Lisa's verse Scherr sees in two emigre poets: Lidiia Chervinskaia and Irina Odoevtseva. This hypothesis seems plausible considering that Nabokov's negative attitude to both stemmed from his unpleasant personal interactions with both. Moreover, both were Akhmatova's epigones. As Scherr explains, Lidiia Chervinskaia (1907-1988) began writing in the 1930s in Paris under the influence of Adamovich who saw her as an heir to Akhmatova (39). She was also regarded as the most outstanding “disciple” of the “Parisian note” whose

literary views Nabokov did not share.¹⁸ In fact, it is indicative that the lyrical speaker in the first of Lisa Wind's poems whispers the name “Georgy.” Unfriendly to Nabokov’s writing, Georgy Adamovich “regularly detested his works in emigre periodicals and in turn became a victim of the writer's parodic allusions in *The Gift* and the story 'Vasily Shishkov’” (Scherr 39). This hypothesis is also reinforced by the appearance in *Pnin* of the emigre critic Zhorzhik Uransky (a diminutive from Georgy/ George) who devotes “his next *feuilleton* to an appreciation of Lisa’s muse, on whose chestnut curls [he] calmly placed Ann Akhmatov’s coronet, whereupon Lisa bursts into happy tears – for all the world like little Miss Michigan or the Oregon Rose Queen” (P 45). As pointed out by Scherr, Chervinskaia could have attracted Nabokov's attention through her negative review of his play *The Event*” (39).¹⁹

Irina Odoevtseva is also a likely prototype for Liza’s poems on the basis of the author’s uneasy relationship with a poet Georgy Ivanov, who, as mentioned earlier, once published a “scathing attack” on Nabokov’s writing and who was also Odoevtseva’s husband. This hypothesis seems especially plausible considering that Odoevtseva appears in Nabokov's other works and again in close connection with Akhmatova. As Sergei Davydov explains, in Odoevtseva's poem “Баллада о Гумилеве” (Ballad on Gumilev), “a rather 'akhmatova-like' lady carries on an imaginary and absurd conversation with the poet Gumilev, who has just returned from Africa” (20):

– Я вам посвящу поэму,
Я вам расскажу про Нил,
Я вам подарю леопарда,

I'll dedicate an epic to you,
I'll tell you of the Nile,
I'll give you a leopard,

¹⁸Parisian Note – a literary term which became current in Russian emigre literature in the early 1930s and is linked with the literary criticism of Georgy Adamovich.

¹⁹For Chervinskaia's critique of Nabokov's play *The Event*, see in Mel’nikov, N.G. *Klassik bez retushi: literaturnyi mir o tvorchestve Nabokova* p.173. As a critic Chervinskaia also appears in one of Nabokov's reviews. He lists her, albeit negatively, among the “rejected” poets in Zinaida Gippius’s almanac *Literary Review* (SSRP 5, 593).

Которого сам убил.

Колыхался розовый веер –
Гумилёв не нравился ей.
– Я стихов не люблю. На что мне
Шкуры диких зверей?

Which I killed myself.

The pink fan fluttered
She didn't like Gumilev.
“I don't like poetry. And what
Do I need with the skins of
wild beasts?” (qtd. in Davydov 20).

This poem “conjures up the name of the play (The Black Panther)” which Ilya Borisovich – the character of Nabokov's story “Lips to Lips” (1933) – attends on the fateful night of his revelation. An amateur theatre poster that Nabokov added in the English version of this story, features the actress Garina “reclining on the skin of a panther shot by her lover who was to shoot her later on” (Davydov 20). According to Davydov, it is also certain that the heroine Irina in Ilya Borisovich's wretched novel owes her name to Odoevtseva.

Pnin, however, is not the only novel in which Nabokov refers to Akhmatova's imitators. As Shroyer points out, while Lisa is “most certainly an epigone of Akhmatova's verse,” a character – but not the verse – of the fictional poetess Alla Chernosvitova in Nabokov's Russian novel *Glory* (1932), “seems to carry something of the mythologized aura of the early Akhmatova” (56).²⁰ What constituted the cultural mythology that surrounded Akhmatova's name, one finds in the diaries of her contemporaries. As pointed out by K. Efetov, in the bohemian circles of the 1920s there existed an astonishing and even paradoxical opinion that a female's cultural exclusiveness and her intellectual height depended largely on the number of lovers she had. Based on the diary about Akhmatova by her confidant Puknitskii, Efetov believes the poetess herself was aware of this view:

²⁰ Scherr also comments that “with Lisa Wind and to some extent with Alla Chernosvitova in *Glory*, Nabokov is broadly attacking a certain manner of living and of basking in the aura of poetic mystique that he associates as much or more with her imitators as he does with Akhmatova” (48).

“Как это ни странно, культурность и образованность женщины
измеряется количеством любовников.
У АА – 20-47. У Судейкиной – 5-6.
Я: 'У А. И. Ходасевич – 23.'
(АА): 'Да, она как-то очень!' (способна).
АА очень огорчена, что я подумал, что у нее много было” (qtd. in Efetov
27).²¹

“As strange as this might be, a female's cultural exclusiveness and
her intellectual height depend on the number of lovers she has had.
АА- 20-47. Sudeikina – 5-6.
me: 'A. I. Khodasevich – 23.'
(АА): 'Yes, she is' (somehow capable).
АА is very upset that I thought she had a lot” (my translation).

According to Efetov, such an aura around Akhmatova's name could well have suited Nabokov for the depiction of Russian “decadent women poets” (27). In *Glory*, a composite caricature of these women occurs in the figure of Alla, whose portrait, along with certain characterizations of her verse, provides an insight into Nabokov's literary views:

She was twenty-five, her name was Alla, and she wrote poetry: three things one would think, that were bound to make a woman fascinating. Her favorite poets were two fashionable mediocrities, Paul Gerald and Victor Gofman; and her own poems, so sonorous, so spicy, always addressed the man in the polite form (you, not “thou”) and were asparkle with rubies as red as blood. One of them had recently enjoyed great success in St. Petersburg society. It began thus:

On purple silks, beneath an Empire pall,
You vampirized me and caressed me all,
And we tomorrow die, burned to the end;
Our lovely bodies with the sand will blend (Glory 29).

What is interesting to note is that a characteristic feature of Alla's verse to use a polite “vy”

²¹Interestingly enough, the creators of such legends around Akhmatova's name referred to her poem “Vse my brazhniki zdes' bludnitsy” in order to justify their tales. Akhmatova, however, insisted that this poem was a creation of a bored girl rather than a description of debauchery: “Стихи скучающей девочки, а не описание разврата, как принято думать теперь” (qtd. in Efetov 27).

instead of “ty.” Nabokov mentions in his reviews the actual woman poet Ekaterina Tauber, whose poems “have not been spared the ruinous influence of Akhmatova” (qtd. in “Vladimir Nabokov and Women Authors” 58). He writes: “[Tauber] has a feature pertaining to all poetesses. This is the use of the form 'you' [the Russian formal *vy*], not 'thou' [the familiar *ty*]” (qtd. in “Vladimir Nabokov and Women Authors” 58). In the Russian version of his article “Historical Modernism,” Omry Ronen indicates that Yasha Chernyshevsky in *The Gift* also employs the formal “vy” instead of “ty” while addressing a friend in his poem (“Istoricheskii Modernizm” 252). Such manner of address Nabokov puts into a joke: “as a sick Frenchman addresses God, or a young Russian poetess her favorite gentleman” (G 51) / “...как на 'вы' обращается больной француз к Богу или молодая русская поэтесса к любимому господину” (SSRP 4, 225). Significantly, appeals of this type are numerous in Akhmatova's own poetry, along with a corresponding French quote:

O, vy priedete k nam
Zavtra po pervoputku.

Mozhet byt', luchshe, chto ya ne stala
Vashei zhenoi.

...A nad krovat'iu nadpis' po-frantsuzski
Glasit: “Seigneur, ayez pitie de nous”

(qtd. in “Istoricheskii Modernizm” 252).

O, you shall come tomorrow
with the first snow.

Maybe it is better that I did not become
Your wife.

... And there is an inscription above the bed
that says: “Seigneur, ayez pitie de nous” (my translation).

While Akhmatova herself is certainly not a direct prototype of Alla Chernosvitova in *Glory*, some elements of her verse became a model for Alla's poetry in Nabokov's novel.

The Gift brings into perspective another example when Nabokov refers to the detrimental impact of Akhmatova on other poets. A dark-haired poetess Anna Aptekar' makes a cameo appearance in the novel's Chapter Five. Her name "Anna" along with the last name "Aptekar'" (The Pharmacist) suggests Akhmatova's role as a poetic mediator to Russian women. On another plane, Nabokov explains this seemingly derogatory nickname in the essay "On Khodasevich" (1939), in which his attitude to the strictly personal and largely autobiographical character of such female verse becomes transparent:

Art, authentic art, whose object lies next to art's source (that is, in lofty and desert places – and certainly not in the overpopulated vale of soulful effusions) has degenerated in our midst to the level, alas, of *remedial lyricism* [*lechebnuiu liriku*]; and although one understands that private despair cannot help seeking a public path for its easement, poetry has nothing to do with it: the bosom of the Church or that of the Seine is more competent in these matters' ("On Khodasevich" 225, italics added).

The fact that this comment appeared in an essay dedicated to the memory of Vladislav Khodasevich, is not accidental. In some ways Nabokov's views on contemporary poetry – in which the women's poetry of the period became an important exhibit – were close to those of this emigre poet. In a review essay "Zhenskie Stikhi"/ "Women's Poetry" (1931), Khodasevich explained that "a poem's confessional power does not guarantee its literary quality" and that "poetesses, due to certain features of the female character (precisely character – not soul)" rely overmuch on unmediated expression of feeling (Khodasevich 578). Such characterization of women's poetry was in tune with the general mood of Russian emigre poetry that "placed increasing emphasis on unmediated 'feelings' at the expense of 'insincere' artistic form and craftsmanship" (Bethea 453). A lengthy polemic on the importance of "craft versus a human

document” that was sparked between Khodasevich and Adamovich was close to Nabokov as well. In the same essay, while mourning the loss of Khodasevich, Nabokov wrote that “even the most *purs sanglots* [iskrennie rydaniia] requires a perfect knowledge of prosody, language, verbal equipoise” and “the poetaster intimating in slatternly verse that art dwindles to nought in the face of human suffering is indulging in coy deceit” (“On Khodasevich” 225).²²

The uncompromising attack on Akhmatova-like figures, however, does not mean that Nabokov was hostile to the poet as well. As Yuri Leving notes, Akhmatova's poem “Жарко веет ветер душный” (1910)/ “The wind blows stifling hot” is in intertextual dialogue with a passage from *Pnin* (*Vokzal – Garazh – Angar* 246):

<p>Сухо пахнут иммортели В разметавшейся косе. На стволе корявой ели <i>Муравьиное шоссе.</i> (Akhmatova 35)</p>	<p>The everlastings in my loosened braid Smell faintly dry. On the rough trunk of the spruce tree <i>There's an ant highway</i> (<i>Completed Poems</i>, my italics 91).</p>
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In his novel, Nabokov uses Akhmatova's imagery in order to describe the motion of a car in parallel to that of an ant, who “had his own troubles, having, after hours of inept perseverance, somehow reached the upper platform and the balustrade (his autostrada) and was getting all bothered and baffled much in the same way as that preposterous toy car progressing below” (P 115). Akhmatova's poem and this passage from Nabokov's novel, scandalous in regard to his treatment of women writers, create an interesting juxtaposition to the writer's parodies in *Pnin*. But the final instance on the path towards understanding Nabokov's attitude to Akhmatova occurs not in *Pnin*, but in *Lolita*.

While “none of Nabokov's works was written as a money-spinner, least of all *Lolita*” (AY

²² It is not surprising, therefore, that so many of Nabokov's reviews of women poets focus on the technical aspect and poetic proficiency of their art.

271) Nabokov had to work on *Pnin* and *Lolita* at the same time. Because he anticipated that *Lolita* might be difficult to publish (as indeed it was), he began *Pnin* in 1953 “in the hope that the series of detachable, story-length chapters might earn him an immediate income as he sold each one to the *New Yorker*” (AY 271). In his biography of the writer, Boyd indicates that “as Nabokov wrote *Pnin*, he had the completed manuscript of *Lolita* beside him” (RY 288). There is a certain continuity between these novels in terms of Akhmatova's indirect presence in both of them. And yet, it is only to Akmatova and not her epigones that Nabokov refers in *Lolita*. As Omry Ronen indicates, the imaginary place name “Gray Star,” or “Seraia Zvezda” in the Russian *Lolita*, is “an abbreviated quotation from Akhmatova's early poem, which when juxtaposed with the quotations from Poe (And the stars never rise, but I feel the bright eyes / Of the beautiful Annabel Lee; И зажжётся ль звезда, вижу очи всегда / Обольстительной Аннабель –Ли, in Bal'mont's translation) that reverberate throughout the novel, functions as a thematic clue to Humbert Humbert's quest”:

Долго шел через поля и села,
Шел и спрашивал людей:
«Где она, где свет веселый
Серых звёзд – её очей?»

He walked for a long time across the fields and villages,
He walked and asked the people:
“Where is she? Where is the merry light
Of the gray stars, her eyes?” (qtd. in “Emulation” 66)

In *Lolita*, as Ronen says, Nabokov calls the Gray Star “the capital town of the book” (qtd. in “Emulation” 66). In terms of the writer's literary assessment of Akhmatova, this instance makes *Lolita* as important as *Pnin*, if not more so.

It seems that for Nabokov, Akhmatova was put forward as both the model and the

exception: the aesthetic deficiencies of her “feminine” poems were redeemed by her poetic gift.²³ According to some critics, however, Nabokov’s attitude towards Akhmatova is problematic in view of the two “wicked parodies” in *Pnin*. But as pointed out by Simon Karlinsky, Nabokov “also parodied the prose of Andrei Bely to which he owed so much, in a passage from *The Gift*, where he referred to it as ‘cabbage-flavored hexameters’” (“Nabokov and Some Poets” 4).²⁴ In his article, “The Basis of Ancient Parody” (1954), Lerivré comments that “even when something as ridicule is used, it does not mean that the parodist is completely negative about its target. Aristophanes was able to parody and admire Euripides at the same time” (qtd. in Rose 24). Nabokov also admired Akhmatova. However, not pointing out her minor artistic flaws and not mentioning the bad influence that according to Nabokov she had on other women poets would have been for him in the *artistic* sense immoral. In spite of Nabokov's parodies in *Pnin*, it is important to note that they were not included in the posthumous collection of Nabokov's poems *Stikhi* (1979), edited by Véra Nabokov, as opposed to the writer's parody of Marina Tsvetaeva's verse. Nabokov's literary relationship with this woman poet presents another interesting case of his treatment of women writers and shall now be considered.

1.3 Nabokov and Tsvetaeva

Nabokov met Tsvetaeva personally, in Prague, in 1924 (RY 221). He “found her charming” and in the Russian version of his autobiography *Drugie Berega/ Other Shores* (1954) recalled how he accompanied her “on a strange lyrical hike” “in a brisk springtime wind, over

²³Catherine Ciepiela makes a similar observation about the literary treatment of Akhmatova by Khodasevich. See Ciepiela, Catherine. “The Women of Russian Montparnasse.” p. 123.

²⁴In the English translation these words are rendered as “cabbage dactyls” (G 169).

some hills of Prague” (RY 221). As pointed out by the first biographer of Tsvetaeva, Simon Karlinsky, Nabokov apparently wrote a detailed account of his conversation with the poet on that occasion in a letter to his then fiancée, Véra Slonim. In 1966, after the publication of Karlinsky's first book about Tsvetaeva, the Nabokovs informed Karlinsky of this letter, supposedly held in their archive in New York, and promised to show him a copy. In the subsequent years, however, this letter proved impossible to find and was considered lost (“Nabokov and Some Poets” 4).

Nabokov's scholarly assessment of Tsvetaeva's art, on the other hand, is more telling and started in his reviews. As is the case with other female poets, the writer found Tsvetaeva's verse not very promising. In one of his reviews – about her drama in verse, *Theseus* (1927), – Nabokov wrote that the poetess had amused herself with “unintelligible rhyme-weaving;” about another, he stated that *Phaedra* can only cause “astonishment and severe headache” (qtd. in *Marina Tsvetaeva* 184). According to Karlinsky, Nabokov had “little use” for Tsvetaeva's poetry in the late 1920s and throughout the 1930s, as his “hostile reviews of it show” (“Nabokov and Some Poets” 4). Despite being the first body of criticism in his writings about women authors, Nabokov's reviews do not provide a comprehensive picture of his literary relationship with Tsvetaeva. The writer's assessment of this woman poet occurred in his other non-fictional and fictional works as well.

The most frequently quoted example of Nabokov's literary criticism of the poet is his parody "Iosif Krasny" composed in 1937 in the style of Tsvetaeva's “metrical and stylistic innovations” (Scherr, “On Poetry” 622). Playing on the poet's frequent use of “dashes, exclamation marks, and startling enjambement” (Scherr, “On poetry” 622), these verses were even mistakenly taken as Tsvetaeva's own verse (Stark 150). The poem first appeared in print in Nabokov's posthumous collection “Stikhi” (1979):

Иосиф Красный, – не Иосиф
Прекрасный: препре-
Красный – взгляд бросив,
Сад вырастивший! Вепрь

Горный! *Выше* гор! Лучше ста Лин-
дбергов, трехсот полюсов
светлей! Из-под толстых усов
Солнце России: Сталин! (qtd. in Stark 150).

[Joseph the Red, – not Joseph
the Fair: most fair, fair –
est of all – with one gaze cast
Planting orchards! Boar mount-

ainous! Towering over mounts! Better than a five-score of Lin-
dbergs, brighter than fifteen-score
of poles! The sun of Russia, from under
Thick moustaches: Stalin! (tr. by Barabtarlo)²⁵

According to Karlinsky, what prompted Nabokov to write this parody in the form of a “brief groveling and worshipful ode to Joseph Stalin,” was Tsvetaeva's alleged pro-Soviet sympathies and the poet's awareness of her husband's activities on behalf of the NKVD (“Nabokov and Some Poets” 4). In 1932, while living with Tsvetaeva in their European emigration in Paris, Sergei Efron accepted a job from an organization that devoted itself to facilitating the return of exiled Russians to their homeland. As Karlinsky explains in his biography of Tsvetaeva, the actual function of this organization was “recruiting agents for the Soviet secret police, agents whose tasks eventually entailed acts of terrorism directed against Soviet defectors and the emigres who were too vocal in their criticism of Stalin” (*Marina Tsvetaeva* 213). According to Karlinsky, “in the late 1930s, when the sensational revelations in the Russian and emigre French press about Efron's activities on behalf of the Soviet government became known to the public,

²⁵ Gennady Barabtarlo's translation of Nabokov's poem appeared in NABOKV-L (Nabokov Forum) NABOKV-L@UCSBVM.USCB.edu on March 25, 1997.

both Vladimir and Véra Nabokov took an extremely hostile position vis-a-vis Tsvetaeva” (“Nabokov and Some Poets” 4). In her biography of the writer's wife, Stacy Schiff also indicates that Véra Nabokov was adamant on the subject: “How could [Tsvetaeva] not have known, in the cramped quarters in which they lived, that her husband was a Soviet agent?” (337). This comment appeared in one of Mrs. Nabokov's letters to Ekaterina Eleneva, Tsvetaeva's correspondent from her Prague years (*Marina Tsvetaeva* 249). Years later, while prevailing on the Chekhov Publishing House in New York to bring out a volume of Tsvetaeva's selected prose that was banned in the USSR, Eleneva invited Nabokov to provide the collection with the introduction. Promptly, she received a reply from Véra who wrote that “while her husband had a high regard for Tsvetaeva as a writer and a poet, he did not want to do the essay because of Tsvetaeva's connection with Soviet espionage” (qtd. in *Marina Tsvetaeva* 249).²⁶

While there is enough evidence that Nabokov believed Tsvetaeva to be “compromised in

²⁶ Whether Tsvetaeva did not know of her husband's activities on behalf of the Soviet government or simply refused to believe the rumors is hard to say. According to Karlinsky, Kirill Henkin, whose mother was a neighbour and a friend of the poet, suspected that Tsvetaeva “must have somehow explained it all to herself in a way that would not disturb the Rostand-derived view she had of herself and her husband: his selflessness, his chivalry, his sense of honor” (qtd. in *Marina Tsvetaeva* 213). As pointed out by Omry Ronen, it turned out that Sergei Efron did not kill Ignace Reiss, the murder in which he was implicated, and behaved honorably during court hearings (“Molv” 83). But Véra Nabokov had other reservations about Tsvetaeva, some of which may have been shared by her husband as well. According to Stacy Schiff, Véra argued – speaking for both Nabokovs – that “Tsvetaeva had been no worse off than the rest of the emigres and had been as well as anyone... In her letters there is a constantly recurring whining note which is not exactly endearing,' she added” (Schiff 338). According to Karlinsky, Tsvetaeva was published no less than other writers in emigration. While it is true that “she often found herself rejected during her Paris years— by critics, by editors, by other writers – it is also true that she deliberately sought and courted such rejection” (*Marina Tsvetaeva* 177). Véra cited a more serious offense in a letter to Karlinsky saying that “some day, I hope, you will agree with me that she maltreats the Russian language by knocking the words on their little heads with a hammer until she can make them stay in, quite oblivious of their comfort, no matter that here and there a damaged leg or arm may stick out. In Russian poetry Pushkin's way to treat the words is the kindest, no wonder they sound so happy in his verse” (qtd. in Schiff 338).

her relationship to Stalin's Soviet Union" (*Stalking Nabokov* 219), it not obvious that in writing this parody he meant so much the political aspect rather than a purely artistic one. First, Tsvetaeva's biographical past does not provide sufficient evidence that she shared those Soviet sympathies. In a letter to a friend, Anna Teskova, she, for example, says: ". . . I who cannot sign a salutary address to the great Stalin, for it was *not* I who called him great, and even if he is great, it is not my kind of greatness, and perhaps the most important thing – I hate every triumphant, bureaucratized church" (qtd. in "Nabokov and Some Poets" 4). Perhaps in writing this parody Nabokov *was* motivated by the events associated with Tsvetaeva and described in the press. But is it a "worshipful ode" or an ironic rendering of the subject matter? While Karlinsky points to the poem's "almost hysterical veneration of Stalin" (4), in his view ascribed by Nabokov to Tsvetaeva, in *Smekh v kontse tonnelia*, Leo Yakovlev observes that Stalin is presented here not as a "mountain eagle," but a "mountain swine" (30).

I think that Nabokov's parody is neither a "worshipful ode" nor an ironic rendering of the subject, but rather an expression of spiteful indignation toward the Soviet regime that he artistically conveys by using the daring stylistic innovations and originality of Tsvetaeva's verse. This is evident from direct antecedents that "Iosif Krasny" has in two of Tsvetaeva's poems. First, enjambements within a rhyming broken word in "Iosif Krasny" (luchshe sta Lind-bergov) one finds in Tsvetaeva's Scythian lullaby "Kolybel'naia" (1923):

Как из моря из Каспий-
ского – синего плаща,
Стрела свистнула да...
(спи,
смерть подушками глуша).

As from the sea, from the Caspian
Sky-blue cloak –
Arrow whistled yes...

(sleep,
while stifling death with pillows)
(my translation)

Another example comes from Tsvetaeva's "Поэма Лестницы" (1926)/ "Stairs," in which the syntactic "cacophony" is even more telling. Compare Nabokov's poem with Tsvetaeva's following lines:

Даст!
(Ныне зубаст
Газ) ибо за нас
-Даст! - (тигр он и барс),
-Даст! - Чорт, а не Маркс!

(It's gas-explosion
time. Hurray!
Who was foreclosing,
he'll pay)

back!
(Nowadays gas
pays) for our class
– pay back! – (bites worse than barks)
– pay back! – by the devil, not Marx!
(qtd. in Burgin 162)

A reference in the last line to another figure associated with the Soviet regime sheds light on Tsvetaeva's political views in this case.

An assumption that Nabokov's parody owes much to Tsvetaeva's obscure politics and less to her style may be due to Zinaida Shakhovskaia's comment in her book *V Poiskakh Nabokova*:

“С Мариной Цветаевой он, кажется, был знаком, но, видимо, так же при ее жизни мало ею интересовался. Имя ее не встречается ни в одном из его писем ко мне, да и Марина Цветаева никогда мне о нем не упоминала – по-видимому, и сама особого интереса к Набокову не испытывала” (77)/ “He probably was acquainted with Marina Tsvetaeva, but apparently was little interested in her during her lifetime. Her name does not appear in any of his

letters to me, and Marina Tsvetaeva never mentioned him to me – apparently had no interest in Nabokov either” (my translation). In the past ten years, however, the research has shown that Nabokov took a particular interest in Tsvetaeva's verse. In the 1920s and 30s, both writers participated in a poetic dialogue with each other on topics familiar to both. As Leving observes, the theme of alien but hopelessly dear Russia is reflected in the poems of both writers (*Vokzal-Garazh-Angar* 176). Compare the following lines from Tsvetaeva's “Рассвет на рельсах”/ “Daybreak on the Rails” (1922), and Nabokov's “В поезде”/ “On a Train” (1921):

Tsvetaeva:

...Россию восстанавливаю...
Из сырости – и свай,

Из сырости и серости [...] *и серости* [...]
Из сырости и шпал
Из сырости – и сирости...
(Tsvetaeva 1990, 312)

I am reconstructing Russia...
from dampness – and from bearing piles,
from *dampness* – and *grayness* [...]
from dampness – and railway ties,
in!
from dampness – and shabbiness...
(qtd. in *Keys to the Gift* 294, my italics)

Nabokov:

Внимая трепету и тренью
Смолкающих колёс, – я раму опустил:

Пахнуло сыростью, сиренью!
(qtd. in *Keys to the Gift* 294, my italics)

Harking to the shudder and whine
of the wheels decelerating into silence, I
pulled down the window,
and the waft of lilacs and *dampness* rushed
(qtd. in *Keys to the Gift* 294, my italics)

The chronology of these poems indicates who initiated the dialogue. As Leving points out, it is apparently Tsvetaeva who was the first one to reveal a certain interest in the young poet, Vladimir Sirin (176).²⁷ Although more than a decade later, Nabokov responded to Tsvetaeva in *The Gift* with Godunov-Cherdyntsev fantasizing on the theme of returning to his homeland

²⁷Nabokov was Tsvetaeva's junior by nine years. The lyrical hike that Boyd mentions in his biography took place three years after these poems had been written.

(*Vokzal- Garazh-Angar* 176): “Быть может, когда-нибудь, на заграничных подошвах ... я ещё выйду с той станции ... Погода будет, вероятно, серенькая. ... но всё-таки кое-что ... разгляжу – хотя бы потому, что глаза у меня всё-таки сделаны из того-же, что тамошняя *серость*, светлость, *сырость*. . .” (SSRP 4: 211-212, italics added)./ “Perhaps one day, on foreign-made soles...I shall again come out of that station...The day will probably be on the grayish side... but [I] still make out something..., if only because my eyes are, in the long run, made of the same stuff as the *grayness*, the clarity, the *dampness* of those sites. . .” (G 37, italics added). In 1927, as Leving indicates, Nabokov also developed a triad *syrost'*– *serost'*– *sirost'* as a euphemistic code for the S-S-S-R (the USSR) (*Keys to the Gift* 294).

If Tsvetaeva ever changed her mind in regard to the Soviet Union, it was not during the time when she composed her collection of poems *Лебединый Стан/ The Demense of the Swans* (1917-1920). In these poems, she collected her reactions to two Russian revolutions, eulogized the White Army and expressed her sympathy for the Tsar. According to Karlinsky, she knew well that these poems could never be published in Soviet Russia. The same fate was awaiting the collection in emigration as “the originality of its manner was too far advanced for the taste of conservative emigre publishing houses” (*Marina Tsvetaeva* 127). In 1957, Professor Gleb Struve published *Lebediny Stan* in Munich from the manuscript preserved in Geneva and sent a copy to Nabokov. On April 1, 1958, Nabokov replied to him with a letter, now preserved in the Library of Congress, Washington, DC, thanking him for the collection:

Дорогой Глеб Петрович,
спасибо Вам от жены и от меня за интересный сборник Марины Цветаевой. Это какой-то трёхглавый орлёнок. Честь Вам и слава, что не дали пропасть этим талантливим останкам (qtd. in Belodubrovsky 33).

Dear Gleb Petrovich,
thank you from my wife and myself for the interesting collection by

Marina Tsvetaev. Here we have some sort of three-headed eagle.
Honor and glory to you for not letting these talented remains perish
(my translation).²⁸

Although the collection was not published during Tsvetaeva's lifetime, it is likely that Nabokov was acquainted with some of these poems before their first appearance in book form. Tsvetaeva read her poems at recitals and *The Demense of the Swans* was also partially serialized in the Russian daily in Paris *Poslednie Novosti (The Latest News)*, in which Nabokov published his own works (*Marina Tsvetaeva* 191). In light of the discussion of Tsvetaeva's political views, some of these poems are worth quoting:

1

Андрей Шенье взошёл на эшафот.
А я живу и это страшный грех.
Есть времена – железные – для всех.
И не певец, кто в порохе – поэт.

И не отец, кто с сына у ворот
Дрожа срывает воинский доспех.
Есть времена, где солнце – смертный грех.
Не человек – кто в наши дни – живёт.

4 апреля 1918

André Chénier has mounted the scaffold.
And I live and this is a great sin.
There are iron times for all.
And the one who is a poet in gunpowder, is not a singer.

And one is not the father, who takes off while trembling
From his son a military armour.
There are times when the sun is a mortal sin.
The one who prospers in our times is not human (my translation).

4 April 1918

²⁸This letter is now published. See Belodubrovsky, E., ed. “V. Nabokov. Pis'ma k Glebu Struve” [Letters by V. Nabokov to G. Struve]. *Zvezda* 4, (April 1999): 23-39.

Не узнаю в темноте
 Руки – свои иль чужие?
 Мечется в страшной мечте
 Чёрная Консьержерия.

Руки роняют тетрадь,
 Щупают тонкую шею.
 Утро крадётся как тать.
 Я дописать не успею.

4 апреля 1918

I do not recognize in the dark
 The hands are mine or another's?
 The Black Cavalry
 Is rushing around in a scary dream.

The hands are dropping a notebook
 Testing the thin neck.
 A morning is crawling like a thief
 I shall not be able to finish my writing (my translation).

4 April 1918

Tsvetaeva gave these poems a subheading, “Andrei Shen'e,” and, as Alexander Dolinin notices, it is likely that parts of the second half of “Andrei Chen'e” (Руки роняют тетрадь, / Щупают тонкую шею. / Утро крадётся, как тать. / Я дописать не успею.”) Nabokov commemorated in one of his most provocative Russian novels about a totalitarian regime, *Invitation to a Beheading* (1935/36).²⁹

²⁹Dolinin refers to two instances in Nabokov's novel that create a correspondence to Tsvetaeva's “Andrei Shen'e”: a scene where Cincinnatus is “mechanically testing” (IB 12) his “awfully thin” (IB109) neck in Chapter Ten ('машинально ощупывает' свою 'тоненькую' шею) and the words “to finish writing something” (IB 209) (кое-что дописать) in Chapter Nineteen that he pronounces before he is taken to the beheading (*Istinnnaia Zhizn'* n.39 229).

In his Russian fiction, Nabokov also makes a reference to Tsvetaeva as a critic. In *The Gift*, Godunov-Cherdyntsev recalls “восхищённо, благодарно, полностью, без критических затей, всех пятерых, начинающих на “Б” – пять чувств новой русской поэзии” (SSRP 4, 258)/ “My mind in those days accepted ecstatically, gratefully, completely, without critical carplings, all of the five poets whose names began with “B” – the five senses of the new Russian poetry” (G 86). As Dolinin also observes, a similar comment about five “B”-s of Russian symbolism, Tsvetaeva had made before Nabokov, in her essay “Герой труда”/ “A Hero of Labor” (1925): “Обращено ли, кстати, внимание хотя бы одним критиком на упорное главенство буквы Б в поколении так называемых символистов? – Бальмонт, Брюсов, Белый, Блок, Балтрушайтис” (qtd. in *Istinnaia Zhizn'* 335).³⁰/Did any critic ever notice the stubborn prevalence of the letter B in the generation of the so-called Symbolists –Balmont, Briusov, Bely, Blok, Baltrušaitis? (my translation). Nabokov, however, disliked Tsvetaeva's prose and did not come to admire it later. In one of his reviews, he commented that Tsvetaeva wrote for herself and not for the reader, and there was no need to study her dark odd prose: “М. Цветаева пишет для себя, а не для читателя, и не нам разбираться в её тёмной нелепой прозе” (SSRP 2, 671)/ “M. Tsvetaeva writes for herself and not for the reader, and it is not for us to study her dark odd prose.”³¹

The final instances of Nabokov's literary encounters with Tsvetaeva occurred throughout his American years. In the English version of his autobiography, *Speak, Memory*, he called her “a

³⁰Nabokov valued Bunin's poetry more than his prose. It is likely, therefore, that the fifth poet in Tsvetaeva's enumeration he replaced by Bunin in *The Gift*.

³¹ Interestingly enough, the dislike was mutual. In a letter to Anatolii Shteiger dated on July 29, 1936 Tsvetaeva wrote: “Какая скука – рассказы в 'Современных Записках' —Ремизова и Сирина. Кому это нужно? Им—меньше всего и именно поэтому—никому” (qtd. in Stark 152)/ What a bore the stories of Remisov and Sirin in *Contemporary Notes*. Who is in need of them? They – least of all and therefore – no one (my translation).

poet of genius” (SM 287), the evaluation (genial'nyi), as Stark points out, coming from the writer and critic not often generous with praise, is not only interesting, but unusual (151).³² Although Nabokov did not want to write an introduction to Tsvetaeva's prose in the 1950s, he agreed to translate one of her early poems that she composed in 1913. While preparing a collection of emigre writings for publication, Karlinsky and Alfred Appel asked Nabokov to translate the poem. This time Nabokov had no reservations and the translated last quatrain of her untitled verse that appeared on November 12, 1972:

Amidst the dust of bookshops, wide dispersed
And never purchased there by anyone,
Yet similar to precious wines, my verse
Can wait: its turn shall come.
-Marina Tsvetaeva (translated by
Vladimir Nabokov, November 12, 1972).³³

This translation concluded Nabokov's literary relationship with the poet, and it is fairly certain that he acknowledged Tsvetaeva's poetic gift.

While Nabokov's treatment of Tsvetaeva reveals that, despite reservations, he was “capable of an objective evaluation” (“Vladimir Nabokov and Women Authors” 58) – a characteristic Shroyer attributes to Nabokov in his literary judgements of some women writers – there is one more poet who is especially interesting in view of such a characterization. In the final portion of this chapter I argue that Nabokov's disagreements with Zinaida Gippius on what literature should strive to achieve did not prevent him from judicious and careful considerations of her art.

³²The exact quote is: “Marina Tsvetaev, wife of a double agent, and poet of genius, who, in the late thirties, returned to Russia and perished there” (SM 287).

³³Karlinsky, Simon and Alfred Appel, Jr. Eds. *The Bitter Air of Exile: Russian Writers in the West 1922-1972*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1973, p. 93.

1.4 Nabokov and Gippius

According to Karlinsky, Nabokov gave “no credit at all to the most profound and influential of the early symbolists, Zinaida Gippius (1869-1945), the poet who inaugurated, on a regular basis, accentual verse, assonance rhymes and the mystical outlook that define the whole of Russian Symbolist poetry” (“Nabokov and Some Poets” 3). The reasons for rejection were not personal, although Nabokov had enough grounds for them as well. In 1916, when he began writing his first poems and “had the misfortune to publish them,” Gippius, “a sharp-tongued hostess of the capital's leading literary salon asked Nabokov's father at a session of the Literary Fund, to tell his son, please, that he would never, never be a writer” (qtd in RY 121). This incident Nabokov later recorded in his autobiographies *Speak, Memory* and *Drugie Berega/ Other Shores*. While commenting on his early poetic experimentations, he admitted that those poems were “juvenile stuff, quite devoid of merit and ought never to have been put on sale” (SM 238). Although eventually Gippius came to acknowledge Nabokov's talent (RY 522), she was reluctant, as Nina Berberova recollects, to give the writer his due during their European exile: “Just as Gertrude Stein ignored Joyce and did not invite to her place people who spoke of Joyce, so Gippius did not speak of Nabokov and did not listen when others spoke of him – unless, of course, in derisive tones” (*Italics are Mine* 248).

Besides this incident in Nabokov's early life, the two writers had other, more serious reasons for disagreement later on. Apart from his poetry, Gippius also rejected Nabokov's novels “on the same grounds she had for rejecting Anton Chekhov's fiction earlier: absence of mysticism and of Dostoevskian roots” (“Nabokov and Some Poets” 3). As pointed out by Gippius' biographer Temira Pachmuss, the poet expected literature to treat “God and immortality

as its main themes. The point of departure for Gippius, both as a poet and a critic, was the mystical content in literature, symbols, and the deepening and intensification of the reader's artistic sensitivity. She asked that more attention be paid to the eternal qualities of art – love for God, Christian morality, and poetry of feeling and thought” (307). According to Prince D. S. Mirsky, Gippius worked at her form “only to make it more flexible and adequate to the expression of her ideas” (*Contemporary Russian Literature* 192). In her memoirs, Berberova also comments that Gippius was “far from understanding the role of the *word* in verbal art” (*Italics are Mine* 247).³⁴ For Nabokov, on the other hand, the substitution of “live observation” for “abstract schemata” as well as the “eradication of detail in the name of featureless 'general ideas” was a sign of a “captive consciousness” and neglect of earth for the sake of heaven (Skonechnaia 44). He even stated that “literature is not a pattern of *ideas* but a pattern of *images*” (LRL 166).³⁵ As pointed out by Olga Skonechnaia, the idea of the “absolute authority of the idea” for Nabokov was an “attempt to subject art and life to social and metaphysical schematics” (44). Such a utilitarian role for art was not a part of the writer's literary aesthetics.

Nabokov's attitude towards Gippius' position on what literature should strive to achieve is reflected in his fiction, especially in *The Gift*. In the figure of the Parisian critic Christopher Mortus, who turns out to be “a woman of middle age, the mother of a family” in private life (G

³⁴Berberova, however, indicated that Gippius at least “had her own yardstick, had taste, prized complexity and refinement in the realization of formal goals” (*Italics are Mine*, 247).

³⁵ Nabokov, however, was not a promoter of the slogan “art for art's sake,” because, as he explained in an interview, “unfortunately, such promoters of it as, for instance, Oscar Wilde and various dainty poets, were in reality rank moralists and didacticists – there can be no question that what makes a work of fiction safe from larvae and rust is not its social importance but its art, only its art” (SO 33). In a letter to the Slavic Professor George Noyes at UC, Berkeley Nabokov wrote in 1945: “I never meant to deny the moral impact of art which is certainly inherent in every genuine work of art. What I do deny and am prepared to fight to the last drop of my ink is the deliberate moralizing which to me kills every vestige of art in a work however skillfully written” (SL 56).

169), Nabokov's scholars see Gippius (*Keys to the Gift* 421). As was typical of many women writers, Gippius wrote under male pseudonyms (Anton Krainii, Comrade Herman, Lev Pushchin, etc.), and it is not surprising, therefore, that the critic of Nabokov's novel is disguised under a male name. As Alexander Dolinin notices, one of the biographic details that connects Gippius with Nabokov's character even more is that Mortus used to be the author of excellent verse (*Istinnaia Zhizn'* 243). Despite Nabokov's disagreements with Gippius on other issues, in one of his reviews he called her an “outstanding poet” / “незаурядный поэт” (SSRP 5, 593). According to John Malmstad, in the figure of Christopher Mortus, Nabokov, as he often does, combines the features of two hostile critics: Georgy Adamovich and Zinaida Gippius (qtd. in *Keys to the Gift* 421). While the style of Mortus's review with its rhetorical questions and exclamation marks points to Adamovich's, its subject matter seems to have targeted Gippius specifically: it contains a parallel between the utilitarian approach to literature of the radical intelligentsia of the 1860s and the modernist religio-philosophical ideas to which Gippius had a direct link (*Istinnaia Zhizn'* 244).³⁶

³⁶As Dolinin explains, Gippius' philosophy grew in connection with the ideas of Solov'ev, Merezhkovsky, and Rozanov, but her aesthetics, as pointed out by V. Khodasevich in his article "O forme i soderzhanii" (1933), were formed during the time when the ideas of Pisarev and Chernyshevsky dominated the minds of intelligentsia:

ими была проникнута вся “передовая” критика, с варварской наивностью отделявшая в искусстве форму от содержания. . . . Вот от этих-то эстетических воззрений, воспринятых в молодости, а потому с особой силой, Гиппиус и не свободна до сего дня. . . . В конце концов получилось, что её писания представляют собой внутренне противоестественное сочетание модернистской (порой очень прямой) тематики с “дореформенною” эстетикой (SSRP 4, 757).

they penetrated all the “leading” criticism that, with a barbarian naiveté, separated in arts form from content. . . . It is from these aesthetic views, learned in her youth and therefore with an extra

Gippius' presence in *The Gift* is also reinforced in the context of the novel's "erotic theme" (Skonechnaia 45). As Olga Skonechnaia indicates, the novel's protagonist Fyodor reflects on the "neurasthenic Yasha Chernyshevsky, a young man of confused sexual orientation, who is obsessed with his university friend Rudolf" (40). Skonechnaia sees Yasha's tragic triangle with Olga and Rudolph as the embodiment of Nikolai Chernyshevski's relationships: "Yasha's abnormal decadent love triangle echoes a certain relationship in Nikolai Chernyshevski's life: Chernyshevski – Olga (his wife) – Khmelevskii (their friend), Chernyshevski – Olga – Dobroliubov, Chernyshevski – Olga – Savitskii, and others" (40). Skonechnaia also argues that in Yasha's story Nabokov unites "the men of the Sixties" with their "Decadent and Symbolist successors" (44). Gippius' role in this respect is important. As Skonechnaia explains, "in her 1931 article 'The Arithmetic of Love' which appeared in *Chisla*, a journal hostile to Nabokov, [Gippius] returns to the idea, so beloved, by the Symbolists, of man's androgynous essence. The love of 'women-men' (zhenmuzhchiny) for 'men-women' (muzhezhenshchiny) is an attempt to surmount the division of the sexes and win the battle of death" (Skonechnaia 44).³⁷ Nabokov's attitude toward Gippius's views of the "androgynous as the perfect individual" (Pachmuss 92) is reflected in *The Gift* when Rudolf becomes – with his "feminine" soul, "which proceeds through

strength, that Gippius is not free today. . . . It turned out that her writings present in themselves a contradictory combination of the modernist (often very straightforward) thematics with the "pre-reform" aesthetics (my translation).

According to Dolinin, Khodasevich's article, written a few years before the publication of *The Gift*, could have suggested to Nabokov a parallel between Mortus's aesthetics and that of the "vulgar-utilitarian criticism" of the 1860s (*Istinnaiia Zhizn'* 244).

³⁷As Pachmuss explains, Gippius considered bisexuality a "divine state," and regretted that its components are not united "in a harmonious way, as God and Christ" (Pachmuss 92). While probing the concept of an androgynous being, she stated that in each human being there are traces of man and woman, with neither component ever wholly missing.

life as a self-confident woman does across a ballroom floor” (G 55) – “a godlike androgyne,” “a man-woman” (Skonechnaia 45). Yasha's love is “hopeless, unrealized, unconsummated: ‘what can I do with his soul?’” (Skonechnaia 45). Interestingly enough, among several sources for the “non-Euclidian” Yasha-Rudolf-Olga triangle, Skonechnaia sees a well-known relationship between Zinaida Gippius, Dmitri Merezhkovsky, and D. Filosofov (later V. Zlobin) (47).³⁸ While the “founders of the new religion saw in their triangle the embodiment of the mystical principles of the Holy Trinity” (Skonechnaia 47), their correspondence – which Gippius did not wish to make private and which often exemplified “literary confessions of high artistic quality” (Pachmuss 18) – suggests an erotic connection between its participants.³⁹ In her book, *Erotic Utopia*, Olga Matich explains that Gippius' views on love were characterized by “enervation and cerebral stimulation of senses rather than fulfillment of desire” (208). Her love letters are “a typical example of the kind of epistolary discourse that served as a substitute for sexual relations in Gippius' life, with the correspondents creating physical intimacy on the page, not in life” (Matich 206). It is not impossible, therefore, that Gippius's sexual mysticism, with its unique

³⁸ As Anne Brodsky comments, “Homosexuality in the Silver Age is inextricable from the striking experimentation with the love triangles and menages-a-trois of the period” (102). Yasha's story is Nabokov's way of debunking the philosophies of the time that “linked homosexuality, genius, and artistic/sexual communities. It also enabled Nabokov to make some critical observations about turn of the century ideals of the modern woman and sexuality” (98).

³⁹ Intending to promote a spiritual revolution, Gippius gave “her own interpretations of God and of God's teachings” (Pachmuss 104). Being a strong advocate of the religious evolution of mankind, she believed in the realm of the Third Testament that would disclose itself to humanity in the future. According to Gippius, The Kingdom of the Old Testament has revealed God's power and authority as truth; the Kingdom of the New Testament reveals truth as love, and the Kingdom of the Third Testament will reveal love as freedom (Pachmuss 104). She believed in the importance of the New Church and initiated it along with her husband as a secret religious movement “The Cause.” While seeking the supporters for her Cause, she emphasized the importance of the Trinity hoping to awaken in man an attraction to the Three in One which is reflected in all aspects of human life, as well as in the number of the participants of this religious group (Pachmuss 108).

fusion of metaphysics and eroticism, provided important “raw material” for Nabokov's parodies in *The Gift*.⁴⁰ In this novel, the tragic outcome of Yasha's triangle reveals Nabokov's own skepticism towards the idea of “collectivity in love,” which in Gippius's case was “the opposite of celibacy, at least on the face of it” (Matich 163). Gippius's own pretensions to a “higher vision” (Skonechnaia 35) – “a celibate triple union, an ideological menage à trois, became the vehicle of her collective erotic ideal” (Matich 163) – has made her a subject to “earthly blindness” (Skonechnaia 43) in Nabokov's view, and it is no coincidence, perhaps, that Mortus is also presented as “suffering from an incurable eye illness” (G 181).⁴¹ Gippius pleaded in favor of celibacy and viewed childbearing as devouring individuality (Pachmuss 90). The fact that Nabokov makes Mortus a mother of a family is indicative in this case as well.

If Nabokov was ever interested in the unconventional aspect of Gippius's personality, it was only because of the outcomes it produced. A fetishist, epistolary discourse was only one of this woman writer's idiosyncratic behaviors. Perfumed cigarettes, menswear, and a penchant for exaggerated feminine costumes and hairstyles that according to her contemporaries (Adamovich) “overstepped the boundaries of good taste” (qtd. in Presto 143), contributed to her public image as a “decadent femme fatale,” the “fin-de-siècle Cleopatra,” or even a “Female Dandy” (Matich 206).⁴² Gippius was a cultural icon of the turn of the twentieth century. The literary soirées that she used to arrange with her husband in a private setting had much popularity in Russia and abroad. Her private setting of choice was her apartment, whose ambiance Andrei Bely invariably

⁴⁰Gippius's theme of love (“the state-of-being-in-love”) must be understood as a “heavenly, platonic love – bearing the imprint of divine Eros in opposition to physical love which enslaves mankind in his mortal existence” (Skonechnaia 45).

⁴¹The themes of “nearsightedness” and “angelic clarity” in *The Gift* were also discussed by A. Dolinin in *Istinnaia Zhizn'* p. 245.

⁴²Gippius's “Cleopatra look” included a diadem, a fashionable accessory at the turn of the century. She also liked to entertain her guests reclining on a couch (Matich 171).

described as “brown, cinnamon-like, and enveloping” (qtd. in Matich 218). The adjective “enveloping” is well-suited for the description of the aura that surrounds M-me Lecerf in Nabokov's *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight*. In fact, this manipulative femme fatale who spins invisible webs around people as her favorite pastimes and enjoys secrecy and mystification has Zinaida Gippius as one of her prototypes.⁴³ In Nabokov's archives at the Library of Congress there remains an original manuscript of the novel that Gennady Barabtarlo has studied for his recent translation (2009) of the book. In the Appendix to the book, Barabtarlo writes that M-me Lecerf is an invented name; however, on the margins to the manuscript's seventeenth chapter, Nabokov left a note, later crossed out, saying that out of decency he has changed the actual name of M-me Lecerf's husband: “Из приличия я переменял [настоящее] имя её мужа” (qtd. In “Prilozhenie: Rukopis” 283). The fact that Nabokov had Gippius in mind for the depiction of M-me Lecerf is reinforced by his rather overt reference to her and D. S. Merezhkovsky in the story “Vasily Shishkov” (1939). Gippius, who never appeared in public without her husband, is referred to in this story as “an ample female [obshirnaia dama] (a translatress, I believe, or perhaps a theosophist) with a gloomy little husband resembling a black breloque” (ST 498).⁴⁴

Apart from her abundant work as a critic, poet, and prose writer, Gippius was known for her editorial work, about which Nabokov left a comment in his reviews. In 1938, as Pachmuss explains, the poet “embarked on a new venture – the publication of a group of articles and short stories under the title *Literaturny Smotr: Svobodny Sbornik/ Literary Review: A Free Collection*” (248). She wrote letters to young Russian poets and prose writers in Paris welcoming them to

⁴³According to Omry Ronen, another prototype for M-me Lecerf is Nina Berberova, although for other specific reasons. See Ronen, Omry. “Berberova (1901-2001)” in *Iz Goroda Enn* p. 49.

⁴⁴For Gippius's presence in “Vasily Shishkov” also see Shroyer, M. “Vladimir Nabokov and Women Authors” p. 55 and “Nabokov's Vasily Shishkov”; An Author=Text Interpretation” p. 168.

contribute to her *Review*. In these letters she stated that the contributors “would choose their own subjects and forms of presentation” and that as an editor, she would “publish these works in their original form” (Pachmuss 248).⁴⁵ “Freedom of opinion and expression” seems to have been the exciting motto of this *Review*. Despite the originality of this editorial approach, Nabokov, however, negatively recalled Gippius’s “Experiment in Freedom,” as she called her work, questioning the actual purpose of the enterprise.⁴⁶ The fact that Nabokov’s prejudice against Gippius as an editor was caused by their previous disagreements is unlikely: it is exactly in this review that Nabokov credited Gippius as a poet. He, however, warned the readers against her prose: “И Зинаиде Гиппиус, и Георгию Иванову, двум незаурядным поэтам, никогда, никогда не следовало бы баловаться прозой” (SSRP 5, 593)/ “Zinaida Gippius and Georgi Ivanov – two outstanding poets – should have never, never froliced with prose” (my translation). This review, first published in 1940 in *The Rudder*, seems to have ended Nabokov’s relationship with this woman poet and also concluded his reviews of female writers during his European exile. And yet, Nabokov’s fiction reveals one more example of his relationship with Gippius, which is worth noting.

Gippius was a woman writer the objective evaluation of whom must have been the most difficult for Nabokov. Considering the disagreements both of them had in matters of literary art and also in human relationships, it is not surprising that the author of “Vasily Shishkov” referred to this woman writer as being “unknown to [him]” (ST 498). At the same time, one cannot overlook the fact that Nabokov participated – as he did with Akhmatova and Tsvetaeva – in

⁴⁵In the preface to the *Review*, Gippius reiterated that “the editor does not select the works; he merely selects writers, authors. Every selected author is accepted unconditionally; he is free to write anything he likes. The editor neither gives advice nor makes alterations; the material is published in the same form in which it is submitted” (qtd. in Pachmuss 248).

⁴⁶For Nabokov’s assessment of Gippius’s *Literary Review* see SSRP 4, 591.

intertextual dialogue with Gippius, thus acknowledging her presence among those female poets who did not escape his attention in his reviews. As Leving observes, her poem “Elektrichestvo”/ “Electricity” (1901) serves as one of the subtexts for Nabokov's philosophical dialogues with Symbolist metaphysics (*Vokzal-Garazh-Angar* 32):

...Концов концы коснутся –
Другие “да” и “нет,”
И “да” и “нет” проснутся,
Сплетенные сольются,
И смерть их будет – Свет (Gippius 111).

The ends of the ends will touch each other
The other “yes” and “no,”
And “yes” and “no” shall wake up,
Interlaced they will merge
And their death will be – Light (my translation).

Nabokov addresses Gippius's metaphysical quest in his unfinished novel *Ultima Thule* (1939), in which the widower Sineusov asks his interlocutor Falter – who claims to have found the answer to the understanding of the ultimate truth of things – the following: “Позвольте мне спросить вас: существует ли Бог? (SSRP 5, 133) . . . есть ли хоть подобие существования личности за гробом или все кончается *идеальной тьмой*?” (SSRP 5, 135, my italics)/ “Let me ask you: does God exist? (ST 517) . . . Is there even a glimmer of one's identity beyond the grave, or does it all end in *ideal darkness*?” (ST 519, italics added). Interestingly enough, in his article “Naiznanku,” Omry Ronen has pointed out that as a subtext for this poem, Gippius took a novel by a nineteenth century English writer Marie Corellie (1855-1924), called *A Romance of Two Worlds* (1886). In this novel, the nature of electricity is associated with existence after death. As Ronen explains in his article, in Corellie's novel the resurrection of Christ serves as evidence of the phenomenon of “personal magnetism,” and for that reason Christ warns Mary Magdalene not

to touch him.⁴⁷ Thus, Nabokov addressed the sentimental prose of this female author in *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight*, albeit negatively, and expanded the idea of the mysterious nature of electricity in his English story “Time and Ebb” (1944) and also in his subsequent American novel *Ada* (1969) and in John Shade's poem “The Nature of Electricity” in *Pale Fire* (1962). Nabokov, however, never reproached Zinaida Gippius for the underdeveloped poetics of her own verse. His critical statements about Gippius as well as other women writers as made in his reviews indicate how diverse Nabokov was in his literary treatment of many of them. However, the diversity of aesthetically unsatisfactory examples from the writings of female authors does not suggest that gender per se was the issue for Nabokov in his literary evaluation of women writers. In other words, Nabokov's comments about the peculiarities of writing by women authors, as seen thus far, have proven to be in the main not gender-specific but art-specific. Nabokov's reviews of those women writers whose art he thought to be an example of admirable writing style also suggest that the writer was not entirely negative about his targets. And yet, Nabokov's reviews alone do not provide a comprehensive picture of his treatment of women writers for the reason that they remain only a part in the diversity of critical judgements found in his other fictional and non-fictional works. In a similar vein, any definite conclusions about Nabokov's attitude to women writers cannot derive from his letters either, as a certain subjectivity that the correspondence implies has to be considered. One of Nabokov's correspondents during his Russian Years, the writer and a critic Countess Zinaida Shakhovskaia, once said: “Правда [. . .] писателя, поэта, художника, композитора – это его творчество.” (*Otrazheniia 6*)/ “the truth [. . .] of the writer, poet, painter, or composer is his art” (my translation). Being already a renowned American writer, Nabokov made a similar comment even earlier, in 1967, in one of his

⁴⁷See Ronen, O. “Naiznanku” *Zvezda* 11, 2010.

interviews: “the writer's art is his real passport” (SO 63). In light of Nabokov's declaration and Shakovskaia's comment later on, it makes sense to look more into Nabokov's fiction.

Chapter 2

Methods of Intertextuality and Women Writers in Nabokov's Art:

“A Slice of Life” and “The Admiralty Spire”

When dealing with Nabokov's fiction, one soon realizes that the intertextual aspect of his art is one of the most important and probably the most difficult tasks that the reader faces. Nabokov's texts are full of intertextual references: names, quotations, and other literary, historical and cultural allusions. This semiotic environment is important for understanding Nabokov's literary treatment of women writers. When arguing with female authors, parody is one of the writer's favorite intertextual enterprises and, as pointed by Omry Ronen, “there are very few parodies in Nabokov that remain unidentified” (“Emulation” 68). In this chapter I explore Nabokov's parodies of women writers. In particular, I shall focus on the story “A Slice of Life” that received very little attention in Nabokov criticism, and juxtapose it with “The Admiralty Spire.” These stories present different sides of Nabokov's attitude towards women writers. By bringing together these apparently conflicting views of women writers, I arrive at a more complex understanding of Nabokov's vision of women writers and their contribution to the literary process. While in “The Admiralty Spire” Nabokov presents a negative attitude towards women writers, I argue that their portrayal in “A Slice of Life” is more positive and encouraging than previously understood.

As the parodies in *Glory* and *Pnin* indicate, Nabokov's attitude towards Akhmatova's epigones is marked by censure of low artistry and, as mentioned earlier, the possible presence of the poet herself on the pages of *Pnin* has raised some very specific questions.¹ Considering Nabokov's penchant for parody – Nabokov believed that “the spirit of parody always goes along with genuine poetry” (“parodiia vseгда soputstvuet istinnoi poezii”) (G 24) – what strikes us as noteworthy is that critics sometimes attribute a mocking and ridiculing character to his parodies, thus making them more wicked than in fact they are. For example, in his article “Settling Accounts with Russia's Silver Age: Nabokov Writes Akhmatova,” Barry Scherr argues that Nabokov's “mocking attitude towards Akhmatova, and in all likelihood toward some of the women poets who imitated either her manner or her lifestyle, hints at a broader rejection of figures from the early decades of the twentieth century” (35). In a similar vein, while calling Nabokov's story “A Slice of Life” “a potpourri of everything Nabokov must have detested in women's writings and mocked in his reviews,” Maxim Shrayer considers it a poor parody of the female voice (“Vladimir Nabokov and Women Authors” 62). While emphasizing the lack of attention to the historical background of the term “parody” and the fact that the Oxford English Dictionary still follows the eighteenth century definition of parody as a burlesque poem, Margaret Rose explains that the modern designation of parody as something negative and destructive goes back to 1561 when Scaliger was the first one to use the word “ridiculous” in describing the basic meaning of parody (Rose 9).

¹As Barry Scherr says: “Are readers to see the passages in *Pnin* as directed at Akhmatova or at her imitators” (47) or both? On the question of Akhmatova's presence in *Pnin* see Ar'ev, Andrei. “Vesti iz vechnosti” (O smysle literaturno-filosofskoi pozitsii Nabokova) in *V.V. Nabokov: Pro et Contra*. Vol. 2, St. Petersburg, 2001: 169-193; Barabtarlo, Gennady. *Phantom of Fact. A Guide to Nabokov's Pnin*. Ann Arbor: Ardis, 1989: 99 -109, and Chukovskaia, Lydia. *Zapiski ob Anne Akhmatovoi v trekh knigakh*. Vol. 2, Moscow, 1997: 458. Scherr, Barry. “Settling Accounts with Russia's Silver Age: Nabokov Writes Akhmatova.” *The Russian Review* 65 (2006): 35-52.

Although Scaliger cannot be blamed for the negative connotations attributed to parody later on, “his use of the Latin word 'ridiculous' to describe the comic aspects of parody may be said to have led some English critics at least to view the latter in a more negative light than was necessary because of the associations of the word ridicule with mockery in English, and to have thus made its eventual reduction to the burlesque more easily“(9). In order to understand this situation, a brief digression seems useful.

In his article “Pasternak's Zhivago,” D. Barton Johnson discusses an interesting example that occurred in regard to Nabokov's treatment of Boris Pasternak’s poem “Nobelevskaia Premiia” (1959)/ The Nobel Prize. Pasternak wrote this poem during the persecutions by the Soviet government occasioned by his novel *Doctor Zhivago*, for which he was nominated for the Nobel Prize:

But what wicked thing have I done,
I, the “murderer” and “villain”?
I, who force the whole world to cry
Over my beautiful land (qtd. in "Pasternak's Zhivago" 22).

In the same year, Nabokov also writes a poem, reminiscent of Pasternak’s, on the basis of the reception of *Lolita*, a novel that in the late nineteen fifties made a competitive appearance on The New York Times bestseller list:

What is the evil deed I have committed?
Seducer, criminal – is this the word
for me who set the entire world
a-dreaming
of my poor little girl?

According to Patricia Blake, by writing his poem in the style of Pasternak’s verse, Nabokov intended to “publicly ridicule *Doctor Zhivago* and mock Pasternak’s suffering at the hands of his Soviet persecutors” (qtd. in “Pasternak's Zhivago” 21). Nabokov indeed disliked Pasternak’s

novel, mainly on artistic grounds.² However, “to mock and ridicule” was not his purpose in writing this poem. As D. Barton Johnson explains, Nabokov – in his book *Poems and Problems* – said: “The first strophe imitates [Johnson’s emphasis] 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’” (qtd. in “Pasternak’s *Zhivago*” 22). Blake overlooks this note in Nabokov’s own writing along with the possibility that “Nabokov’s ‘parody’ may well have been intended as a tribute to Pasternak, the poet” (“Pasternak’s *Zhivago*” 23). As Johnson explains, “imitation is not the same as parody” (23).

In his article, “The ‘Matreshka-technique’ in Nabokov’s ‘Lips to Lips,’” Sergei Davydov points out two types of parodies that are relevant to Nabokov’s art.³ “The spirit of parody” which “always goes along with genuine poetry,” is “a means of paying homage to the parodied text. But there exists a second kind of parody, less pretentious and more grotesque” (“The ‘Matreshka-technique’” 8). Significantly, of these two types of parody Nabokov himself wrote:

When the poet Cincinnatus C., in my dreamiest and most poetical novel, accuses . . . his mother of being a parody, he uses the word in its familiar sense of ‘grotesque imitation.’ When Fyodor, in The Gift, alludes to that ‘spirit of parody’ which plays iridescently around the spray of genuine ‘serious’ poetry, he is referring to parody in the sense of an essentially lighthearted, delicate, mocking-bird game, such as Pushkin’s parody of Derzhavin in Exegi Monumentum (qtd. in “The ‘Matreshka-technique’” 9).⁴

Unlike Nabokov’s imitation of Pasternak in the above-mentioned poem, his treatment of

²For Nabokov’s discussion of Pasternak’s *Doctor Zhivago* see his interview in *Strong Opinions*, pp. 205-207.

³See Davydov, S. “The ‘Matreshka-technique’ in Nabokov’s ‘Lips to Lips.’” *The Vladimir Nabokov Research Letter*: 8 (Spring) 1982: 8.

⁴According to Davydov, in “Lips to Lips,” the protagonist’s novel within the text of Nabokov’s story is a “grotesque imitation.” In its relationship to Gogol’s “Overcoat,” the writer’s parody is a “noble game” (“The ‘Matreshka-technique’” 12).

Akhmatova's epigones in *Pnin* falls under the first type of parody that the author describes as “grotesque imitation.” However, in view of the fact that parody is not always a mockery or a ridicule, it makes sense to reconsider the nature of Nabokov's parodies in those works where the actual women writers are present. A further analysis of the story “The Admiralty Spire,” which is a parody of female poetics in prose and also in poetry, will help to elucidate this point. To interpret this story and also “A Slice of Life,” I shall use the notions of parody and also anti-parody.

Indeed, parody is not the only method that Nabokov uses when dealing with other literary sources. In his lectures on Russian literature, he writes: “Let me refer to one more method of dealing with literature – and this is the simplest and perhaps the most important one. If you hate a book, you still may derive artistic delight from imagining other and better ways of looking at things, or, what is the same, expressing things, that the author you hate does” (LRL 105). This method, which is a creative alteration of the targeted text into something new and artistically superior to its original, was described by Irena and Omry Ronen as “anti-parody.”⁵ In the above-mentioned story “A Slice of Life,” the literary art of Akhmatova's epigones along with that of other representatives of women's literature in the first decades of the twentieth century presented for Nabokov “a tradition or a poetics that has not been achieved but remained a stunted growth” and “an unfulfilled promise” (“Emulation” 69). This unrealized promise, with the possibility of improvement, Nabokov addresses in his own art. In “A Slice of Life,” with no inclination to mock, but rather motivated by the desire to show *how* a woman should write, Nabokov successfully created an “anti-parody” of the female poetic voice.

⁵ Ronen, Irena and Omry. “Diabolically Evocative: an Inquiry into the Meaning of a Metaphor” n.19 p. 377. Also see the Russian version of this article, “Cherti Nabokova” in *Zvezda* 4, 2006, 175-188.

2.1 Nabokov's Story "A Slice of Life" as an Anti-parody of Female Writing

"A Slice of Life" was first published in 1935 in an émigré daily in Paris called Poslednie Novosti (The Latest News) and was included later in *Soglyadatai* – a collection of short stories – in the Russian émigré journal *Russkie Zapiski* (Russian Annals) under the Russian title "Sluchai iz zhizni." As is usually the case with many of Nabokov's stories written in emigration, it takes place in Berlin and introduces Russian characters who abide in this émigré setting. The story's heroine and also the narrator, Maria Vasil'evna, is a lonely and unhappy woman who by Nabokov's design becomes a witness to a love triangle of a betrayed husband and unfaithful wife. Feeling sorry for the husband, Pavel Romanovich, and his situation and, at the same time, trying to secure some happiness for herself, she involuntarily surrenders to his plan to shoot his unfaithful wife by calling on her and convincingly asking her to meet Pavel at a designated place where he has gone to await her arrival. At the bar where all the protagonists meet, Pavel tries to shoot his wife, but only injures her. The police come, lead him away, and take the injured woman to the hospital. A German man at the bar who for some time was talking to Pavel, walks Maria to his house, but upon arrival explains that he cannot let her in. After the German's unexpected behavior, she walks home alone once again feeling lonely and disappointed in her relationship with men.

In light of Nabokov's treatment of women writers, the story addresses two sets of problems. One has to do with Akhmatova's influence on her imitators, another with Nabokov's attitude to the entire tradition of female poetics in prose.⁶ It also presents particular interest due to the fact that the narrator is a woman. In his analysis of "A Slice of Life," Brian Boyd points out that this story is the author's "only venture to write a complete tale in the first person feminine voice," and in

⁶ By female poetics in prose I mean the so-called "decadent" fiction written by female authors and popular in Russian literature in the first decades of the twentieth century.

this endeavor Nabokov “succeeds superbly” (RY 421). Despite the exceptional rarity of Nabokov's attempt to create a piece of fiction in which the narrator is a woman, the story has received very little attention in Nabokov criticism, and that which exists is mostly and unambiguously negative.⁷ For example, Linda Saputelli-Zimmermann writes that Nabokov had nothing of substance to say in this story and “aside from the narrative voice, there is, in fact, little which is remarkable either about its plot or its executions” (144). Saputelli-Zimmermann’s gentle dismissal of “A Slice of Life” from Nabokov’s otherwise significant contribution to the genre of short fiction, seems to have been influenced by its title: “the effect of this story is to produce on the reader no more and no less than the title promises... ‘Sluchai iz zhizni’ reflects the meaning of the title itself in that it is a vignette in an émigré setting” (151). Without going into a detailed analysis of the story, Shroyer argues that “A Slice of Life” “does not succeed as a parody of a woman’s voice, instead drawing the reader’s attention to the crooked seams of its own construction – as though a master blacksmith were doing needlework” (“Vladimir Nabokov and Women Authors” 63). I will challenge this interpretation, because “A Slice of Life” is full of interesting details on thematic and structural levels.

As Saputelli-Zimmermann indicates, “Nabokov’s plots do not usually develop in the manner the reader expects” (147) and this story is not an exception. To the love triangle Nabokov adds a twist, as the story is marked by the atmosphere of shabbiness and moral squalor in which all the characters including the female narrator, live. In Roy Johnson’s view, such a narrative mode creates a problem. While Nabokov succeeds in revealing the squalid behavior of his characters, whom he depicts as “horrendously degenerate, self-seeking, and crude,” Johnson argues that the

⁷The exception is Akiko Nakata's article “An Agent Narrating: Nabokov's 'A Slice of Life'” *Journal of Nanzan Junior College* 24 (1997): 1-16, in which the critic sees the story's female narrator as Nabokov's agent.

vulgarity of the female narrator who describes herself as being “in the rumpled dress of a slatternly after-lunch siesta” (*Stories* 406) does not make her female authorship psychologically credible.⁸ According to R. Johnson, Nabokov’s narrative lapse reduces to the vulgar female narrator being both “logically and aesthetically coherent,” whereas “women like Maria do not, could not think in such terms.” In response to R. Johnson’s argument, I would argue that in “A Slice of Life” Nabokov elaborates on his own version of the “decadent” fiction popular in Russian literature in the first decades of the twentieth century. Indeed, from the mid-1890s until 1917, plenty of decadent works, “some good, some bad, and a good many awful” (Kelly 7), were to elaborate different representations of the decadent heroine. Many of these were composed by women. A characteristic feature of this kind of fiction was “the new woman,” “independent, career-minded, and unconventional, especially with regard to her sexuality, was usually an artist of some sort” (Rosenthal 156). In women’s fiction of this kind, a subcategory of the “new woman” was a “female decadent” through whom women writers were depicting “the extension of equality of the sexes to the sphere of morality” (Rosenthal 156).⁹ Among the writers of such decadent fiction was Anastasiia Verbitskaia (1861-1928), the writer who has often been criticized for “the vulgarity and pseudointellectualism of her works” (“Two Notes” 43). In 1914, Kornei Chukovsky, for example, wrote a review of Verbitskaia’s most popular novel *Keys of Happiness* (1908-1913) discrediting it on aesthetic grounds (inarticulate style, simple syntax, and repetitive vocabulary) and pointing out how much the author used the words “she flushed,” “her eyes sparkled,” “incrustation,” “abyss,” and “blood.”¹⁰ With evidence depressing to Chukovsky, he stated that Verbitskaia’s novels were

⁸ Johnson, Roy. “A Slice of Life.” *Nabokov tutorials*, 2001: <http://www.mantex.co.uk/ou/a319/nab-035.htm>

⁹ For an analysis of this kind of fiction see Nikolskaia, T. “The Contemporary Woman in Early Twentieth Century Russian literature.” *Irish Slavonic Studies* 8 (1987): 107-114.

¹⁰ Mania El'tsova in Verbitskaia’s *Keys of Happiness* is an example of a “female decadent” that

bestsellers, more sought after in public lending libraries than those of Tolstoy or any other “serious” writer. Nabokov seems to have shared Chukovsky's criticism, as Verbitskaia indirectly appears in the writer's art.¹¹ As pointed out by D. Barton Johnson, the St. Petersburg seamstress in Nabokov's longest story “The Eye” takes as a role model one of the decadent heroines from Verbitskaia's novel *The Story of a Woman's Life/ Istoriiia odnoi zhizni* (1903) and, like her heroine, also “wishes to see herself as a beautiful, strong-willed, passionate, emancipated creature” (“Two Notes” 42). In choosing Verbitskaia's novel as one of the subtexts for “The Eye,” Nabokov defines his female character by her reading tastes. Indeed, Verbitskaia's prose is a kind of fiction that Petersburg seamstresses “would be likely to read and regard as profound: flaming manifestoes of the progressive, sexually emancipated, semi-literate working woman” (“Two Notes” 42).¹² In “A Slice of Life,” Verbitskaia's covert appearance has another dimension. The fact that the female character carries the same name and patronymic as the heroine of Verbitskaia's novel remarkably called *In a New Way/ Po-novomu* (1902), serves as one of the indicators of Nabokov's intertextual method of “anti-parody” in “A Slice of Life.”

Roy Johnson finds the female narrator not only slovenly, but also uneducated, and it is simply not possible, according to this critic, for “this supposedly stupid woman” to describe

was popular among women writers in the first decades of the 20th century. The actual innovation of Verbitskaia's books, however, “did not so much lie in her depiction of intense sexual experience as in her representation of women whose sexual appetites were not constrained by guilt” (Kelly 151). It was Verbitskaia's (and also Nagrodskaja's) “relative underemphasis on the remorse felt by a woman in love with two men, rather than their overemphasis on that woman's feelings of anger or even desire, which made their work new in a Russian context” (Kelly 151).

¹¹Another writer whom Chukovsky criticized in his essays was Lidiia Charskaia (1875(78)-1937). Nabokov mentions her in the first chapter of *Glory* and also in the commentary to this novel in SSRP 3, 717.

¹²For analysis of the literary subtexts in “The Eye” see Johnson, D. Barton. “Murochka, The Story of a Woman's Life.” *The Nabokovian* 17 (Fall), 1986.

Pavel's descent in the intelligent way she does: "En passant, he managed to finish the decanter, and presently entered... the final part of that syllogism which had already united, in keeping with strict dialectical rules, an initial show of bright efficiency and a central period of utter gloom" (ST 410). However, the narrator is not by any means uneducated – Pavel finds the explanatory French dictionary *Larousse* in her room that he has to pull out from a bunch of other books on the shelf – there is no lapse in characterization on Nabokov's part.¹³ In fact, if anyone is indeed uneducated in this story, it is Pavel whose casual interest in dictionaries Nabokov detests: "like most people who read little, he had a sneaking affection for dictionaries, and now he pulled out a thick-bottomed pink volume with the seed head of a dandelion and a red-curl'd girl on the cover" (ST 409). Maria, on the other hand, reflects Nabokov's own literary views, if one recalls the writer's insistence on having a good dictionary as a prerequisite to being a good reader ("Good Readers and Good Writers" 3). By distinguishing his characters through their reading habits, Nabokov was also careful not to place them on the same level, a mistake he did not forgive Dostoevsky in *Crime and Punishment* (LRL 110). The flaw of the book – as he writes in his lecture on Dostoevsky – lies in the scene when Raskolnikov, the killer, discovers through the girl Sonya the New Testament:

She has been reading to him about Jesus and the raising of Lazarus. So far so good. But then comes this singular sentence that for sheer stupidity has hardly the equal in world-famous literature: 'the candle was flickering out, dimly lighting up in the poverty stricken room the murderer and the harlot who had been reading together the eternal book.' 'The murderer and the harlot' and 'the eternal book' – what a triangle (LRL 110).¹⁴

In "A Slice of Life," the vulgarity of a slatternly woman (by her own admission) and that of an

¹³ See the commentary to this story in SSRP 4, 770.

¹⁴ In another instance Nabokov also comments that "the inhuman and idiotic crime of Raskolnikov cannot be even remotely compared to the plight of a girl who impairs human dignity by selling her body" (LRL 110).

uneducated criminal is not the same thing. Nabokov underlines his position in regard to Dostoevsky's aesthetic lapse when in his own story, Pavel and Maria create a contrast to each other in the way they talk. "A Slice of Life" is marked by the presence of two narrators: a male and a female, with the artistic sensitivity ascribed not to the male, but the female artist.

"A Slice of Life" is a story that lends itself to a schematic illustration of text within a text. In his book *Texty-Matreshki*, Davydov explains a certain peculiarity of Nabokov's art characterized by the presence of inner and outer texts, with the artistic superiority of the latter. I claim that this is exactly how "A Slice of Life" is constructed. Along with Maria who narrates Nabokov's story, Pavel tells his own version, also called "a slice of life," which is included in Maria's text:

Когда мы вошли в пивную, Павел Романович сидел облокотясь о стол, тер мизинцем красные, голые глаза и длинно, однотонно рассказывал что-то, какой-то «случай из жизни», совершенно незнакомому немцу, сидевшему за его столом.... «С другой стороны, – говорил Павел Романович, – мой отец не хотел влипнуть в историю и поэтому решил его окружить забором. Хорошо-с. От нас было до них как примерно...примерно до трамвая, так что никаких претензий у них быть не могло. Но согласитесь, что провести всю осень в Вильне без света – не шутка. Тогда, скрепя сердце...» Было совершенно непонятно, о чем он рассказывает... «Этому решению, – говорил Павел Романович, – посодействовала болезнь отца. Если вы там действительно жили, то, конечно, помните улицу. По ночам там темно, и часто случается...» – «Павлик, – сказала Леночка, – вот твое пэнснэ, я нечаянно увезла в сумке». – По ночам там темно...» (SSRP 4, 550, my italics).

When we entered the pub, Pavel Romanovich sat leaning on his elbow at a table next to the bar; he rubbed with his minimus his red naked eyes, while imparting at length, in monotone, some "slice of life," as he liked to put it, to a total stranger seated at the same table, a German, enormously tall...

"However," Pavel Romanovich was saying in Russian, "my father did not wish to get into trouble with the authorities and therefore decided to build a fence around it. Okay, that was settled. Our house was about as far from theirs as – " He looked around, nodded absentmindedly to his wife, and continued in a perfectly relaxed manner: " – as far as from here to the tramway, so that they

could not have any claims. But you must agree, the spending the entire autumn in Vilna without electricity is no joking matter. Well, then, most reluctantly – ”

I found it impossible to understand what he was talking about. ...

“My father's illness,” went on Pavel Romanovich, “contributed to his decision. If you really lived there, as you say, then you remember, of course, that street. It is dark there by night, and not infrequently one happens to read – ”

“Pavlik,” said Lenchka, “here's your pince-peez. I took it away in my bag by mistake.”

“It is dark there by night,” repeated Pavel Romanovich... (ST 411, my italics).

This narrative and Maria's story Nabokov deliberately juxtaposes to each other in style, language, tone, and even in choice of the audience. In *Strong Opinions*, he declares his aversion to the “blurs and blotches” of abstraction (33). His main artistic frustrations are inability to “caress the detail” and generalization and obscurity of description.¹⁵ Pavel's narrative becomes a monotonous set of unclear sentences that stand in contrast to Maria's witty and observant voice. The essence of his story is twice removed from the auditors: first from other characters who happen to be around him in the bar; second, from the readers to whom his story is also obscure. As Maria declares: “Было совершенно непонятно, о чем он рассказывает” (SSRP 4, 550)/ “I found it impossible to understand what he was talking about” (ST 411). Some of Pavel's sentences do not even make sense: “Если вы там действительно жили [в Вильне], то, конечно, помните улицу. По ночам там темно” (SSRP 4, 550)/ “If you really lived there, as you say, then you remember, of course, that street. It is dark there by night” (ST 411). The last phrase – *it is dark there by night* – is repeated twice for more emphasis.

¹⁵ In the same collection of interviews, Nabokov also says: “As an artist and scholar I prefer the specific detail to the generalization, images to ideas, obscure facts to clear symbols, and the discovered wild fruit to the synthetic jam” (SO 7).

Through Maria's narrative Nabokov amends what he finds distasteful and weak in the female Russian writers of his day. In particular, he refers to the literary flaws of Akhmatova's imitators.¹⁶ In one of his reviews, Nabokov criticized Nina Snegareva-Kazakova's collection of poems *Hallowed Be Thy Name* (1928) for the mixture of "feminine sinfulness and devoutness [smes' zhenskoi grekhovnosti i bogomol'nosti]" that for Nabokov had originated in Akhmatova's verse (tr. in "Vladimir Nabokov and Women Authors" 58). On the theme of monastic exterior and inner passion, Nabokov also elaborates in "A Slice of Life":

Отменяя по телефону дело, я видела себя в зеркале и себе самой казалась монашкой со строгим восковым лицом, но через минуту, пудрясь и надевая шляпу, я как бы окунулась в свои огромные, черные, опытные глаза, и в них был блеск отнюдь не монашеский – даже сквозь вуалетку они горели, ух как горели (SSRP 4, 548).

While telephoning to cancel my visit to Nick's former place of employment (he needed the rubber overshoes he had left there), I saw myself in the looking glass of the hallway as resembling a forlorn little nun with a stern waxy face; but a minute later, as I was in the act of prettying up and putting on my hat, I plunged as it were into the depth of my great, black, experienced eyes, and found therein a gleam of something far from nunnish – even through my voilette they blazed, good God, how they blazed! (ST 409).

With humor, Nabokov addresses the excessive use of Akhmatova's images by her imitators in other places as well. One such instance occurs when Maria says: «Я как-то очень долго поднималась по лестнице, и меня почему-то страшно мучила мысль, что последний раз, когда мы с нею виделись, я была в той же *шляпе* и с той же *черной лисой* на плече» (SSRP 4, 550, italics added)/ "It took me ages, dim ages, to climb the staircase, and for some reason, I was terribly

¹⁶ As Shroyer pointed out, "the female narrator's gestures, her phrases, her looks of 'gear sadness' and her 'lips masked by the fringe of [her] black shawl' seem to have leaped to Nabokov's story from the verses of Akhmatova's epigones among émigré women" ("Vladimir Nabokov and Women Authors" 62). Indeed, Nabokov uses those in order to create a reasonably credible female point of view.

tormented by the thought that at our last meeting I wore the same hat and the same black fox” (ST 411). Compare this instance with that in which Irina Odoevtseva describes female apparel in *Isolda* (1928): «Чернобурая лисица свисала с ее плеча. Шляпа, туфли и перчатки лежали тут же на ковре» (*Isolda* 82, italics added)/ *A black fox*¹⁷ was hanging down from her shoulder. *A hat*, shoes, and gloves were laying here on the carpet as well (my translation). In his review of Odoevtseva’s novel, Nabokov also writes: «Прямо на него шла Изольда... Большие, светлые, прозрачные глаза внимательно смотрели на море, будто ожидая чего-то» (знакомое, увы, читателю ожидание») (SSRP 2, 680)/ “*Isolda* was walking straight at him ... Big, luminous, transparent eyes were watching the sea intently, as if waiting for something (an expectation all too familiar to the reader)” (my translation).

Nabokov also extends the generalized representation of Akhmatova’s epigones to a broader picture of the poetics of decadent women's prose when Maria says:

Все мои романы, по какому-то секретному соглашению между их героями, всегда были как на подбор бездарны и трагичны, или, точнее сказать, бездарностью и обуславливалась их трагичность. Их вступления мне вспоминать совестно, развязки – напротив, – а средней части, то есть как раз самой сути, как бы вовсе и нет, а вспоминается только какое-то вялое копошение, как сквозь туманную воду или липкий туман (SSRP 4, 547).

All my romances, by some kind of collusion between their heroes, have invariably followed a prearranged pattern of mediocrity and tragedy, or more precisely, the tragic slant was imposed by their very mediocrity. I am ashamed to recall the way they started, and appalled by the nastiness of their denouements, while the middle part, the part that should have been the essence and core of this or that affair, has remained in my mind as a kind of listless shuffle seen through oozy water or sickly fog (ST 408).

Although the female narrator is talking about her previous romantic relationships, Nabokov’s

¹⁷ This kind of fox is known in English as a silver fox.

deliberate pun is clear. The word “roman” in Russian, along with the above meaning of romance, also means a “novel.”¹⁸ The prose of Russian female novelists in the first decades of the twentieth century was characterized by the renowned Symbolist poet Alexander Blok as follows: “properly speaking they are not literature but human documents... not just ink, but blood too has gone into the making of these books... the greater part of it is inarticulate but then, more often than not, the true martyr is inarticulate.” (qtd. in “Contemporary Woman” 2). While Nabokov sympathizes, as Boyd points out, with the fate of the unfortunate heroine in “A Slice of Life” (RY 421), his intransigence in artistic matters is also clear. For Nabokov, the style of any good writer, male or female, as he himself says in *Transparent Things*, should be “diabolically evocative” (когда слог писателя дьявольски способен вызывать изображаемое к жизни)/ when the writer's style can diabolically bring the depicted to life (qtd. in “Cherti Nabokova” 175)). In *Strong Opinions*, as Irena and Omry Ronen observe, Nabokov even refers, without the religious aspect, to the writer's artistic rivalry with God (“Diabolically Evocative” 376):

A creative writer must study carefully the works of his rivals, including the Almighty. He must possess the inborn capacity not only of recombining but of re-creating the given world. In order to do this adequately, avoiding duplication of labor, the artist should *know* the given world. Imagination without knowledge leads no farther than the back yard of primitive art, the child's scrawl on the fence, and the crank's message in the marketplace” (SO 32).

One finds description of the “creative impulse and the first disobedience” that is close to Nabokov's in the writings of Denis de Rougemont, as Irena and Omry Ronen also point out: “When Satan was asked, ‘Why did you leave Paradise?’ he answered, ‘I wanted to be an author....’ The Devil also wished to create his own work... In truth the will to create, the need to write, simply, coincides

¹⁸Interestingly enough, Prince D. S. Mirsky called Akhmatova's early lyrics “love novels” (*Contemporary Russian Literature* 259).

deep down with the Luciferian temptation: to become like God, to make oneself an author, to authorize oneself in an autonomous world” (qtd. in “Diabolically Evocative” 376). Although some of Nabokov’s characters are endowed with infernal qualities, his own self-image is not that of a demon, but rather a magician who conjures the devil up and then exorcises him. As the writer himself says: “Some of my characters are, no doubt, pretty beastly, but I really don’t care, they are outside my inner self like the mournful monsters of a cathedral façade – demons placed there merely to show that they have been booted out” (SO 19).

In her narrative, Maria also comments: “My infatuation with Pavel Romanovich had had at least the delightful advantage of staying cool and lovely in contrast to all the rest” (ST 408). Nabokov found distasteful excessive sentimentality in any writer, but he mostly observed it in works by female novelists. From Nabokov's correspondence with Edmund Wilson one learns that the critic and apparently Nabokov himself gave preference to a writer who “did not express her longings or her feminine day dreams,” but approached her material in a “very objective way, thus making something perfect that will stand” (NWL 243). If Nabokov was indeed convinced, as Scherr argues, about the inability of some women writers “to separate their daily lives from their literary endeavors” (35) or their “lack of imagination to invent the subjects of their own instead of borrowing them from life” (35), he shows how this problem characteristic of existing women's writings, in his opinion, can be resolved in “A Slice of Life.” Indeed, Tanya Linaker observes in regard to this story a double reality that is typical of Nabokov's writings, a plausibility of another interpretation of the given events: “there are a few mentions that Pavel never visited the narrator, that he came to talk to her brother, who had gone out, that he did not notice her presence and talked to either her landlord or a stranger in a pub, that he did not see very well without his glasses, which his wife took by mistake” (171). Thus, the entire story may well have been the fruit of Maria's

imagination.

Nabokov also enriched his story with one of his favorite stylistic devices, artistic play with the characters' names. It is significant that only Maria Vasil'evna and Pavel Romanovich are called by their first names and patronymics. As mentioned earlier, the name and the patronymic of the female narrator points to Verbitskaia's early novel and Nabokov's method of "anti-parody" in "A Slice of Life." There is also Maria's brother Kolia who never appears in the story, but whose name Nabokov mentions twice. There is a hint that Kolia can write, because Pavel counts on his help in creating an accusatory letter to his wife's mother. Being Maria Vasil'evna's brother makes him Nikolai Vasil'evich, a name sake of Gogol, whose literary style Nabokov admired.

According to Shroyer, "Nabokov probably considered it a mark of low artistry when a woman author created a feminine persona and told a story in her name" ("Vladimir Nabokov and Women Authors" 62). It is a dubious proposition to ascribe to Nabokov an exclusively gender-specific assessment of female prose. There is, however, a story in which Nabokov indeed censures a woman writer, whose literary style he parodies with the help of his fictional representative. Nabokov's Russian story "Admiralteiskaia Igla"(1933)/ "The Admiralty Spire" is among those that trigger misogynistic suspicions in some of Nabokov's readers and even poses a question about the ethical aspect of Nabokov's art. And yet, there are some important reasons for Nabokov's parody and the critique of the female writers in this story.

2.2 "The Admiralty Spire" and the Problem of Female Poetics in Nabokov's Art.

The story is written in a form of a letter to a female novelist, whose book, also called *The Admiralty Spire*, the male narrator accidentally reads. The novel does not impress him; on the contrary, he is left with an uneasy feeling upon reading it. Convinced that it narrates the story of

his first love in Russia some sixteen years earlier, the narrator concludes that this woman novelist obtained much private information from his beloved Katya. Although he addresses the author as Mrs. Serge Solntsev, he assumes, towards the story's end, that it was Katya herself who “out of silly coquetry, has concocted a worthless book” (ST 356).

As a professional writer, the male narrator is able to catch various stylistic mistakes and inaccuracies of description in the book by the female novelist. Some of these literary flaws create a parallel to a set of dismissive gestures that Nabokov made in his reviews. In his commentary to the story, Yuri Leving notices that the problem with the female narrator's description of her character's eyes is similar to the one found in Nabokov's analysis of Avgusta Damanskaia's collection of stories *Wives/Zheny* (1929), with a sense of something inaccurate and unexamined (SSRP 3, 812): “По-вашему, ее васильковые глаза становились в минуты задумчивости фиалковыми: ботаническое чудо! (SSRP 3, 621)/ “According to you her cornflower eyes would turn violet in pensive moments – a botanical miracle!” (ST 350).¹⁹ Interestingly enough, in his

¹⁹ In his review of stories by A. Damanskaia (1875-1959), Nabokov writes:

Впечатление чего-то неточного, непроверенного оставляют и некоторые другие образы в книге. Так, прочтя фразу о женщине, которая с «орошенным кровью лицом шагнула назад», или о женщине, у которой лицо «заливалось малиновым сиропом», бесхитростные могут подумать, что в первом случае речь об опасном ранении, а во втором о кухонной катастрофе. На самом же деле это только два изысканных способа сказать, что человек покраснел (SSRP 2, 677).

Some other images in the book leave the impression of something inaccurate and unexamined. Thus, having read the phrase about a woman who “stepped back with a face washed with blood,” or about a woman whose face “had drowned in raspberry syrup,” the ingenuous might think that in the first case the discourse is about a dangerous wound, and in the second – about a kitchen disaster. But the fact is, these are merely two sophisticated ways of saying that a person has blushed (my translation).

article “Zhemannitsy” (1914), Ivanov-Razumnik observes the same lapse in Akhmatova's “Ya nauchilas' prosto, mudro zhit’”/ “I have learned to live simply, wise” (1912):

Лишь изредка прорезывает тишь	The quiet is cut occasionally
Крик аиста, слетевшего на крышу...	By the cry of a stork landing on the roof...
	(qtd. in <i>Completed Poems</i> 147)

According to Ivanov-Razumnik, the poetess could not hear the stork's cry, because storks do not cry: “aisty – krichat' ne umeiut” (49).²⁰ Another problem – and Nabokov also mentions it partially in one of his reviews – is a placement of an adjective behind a noun thus making what he dismissively called “poetry in prose.”²¹ For Nabokov, the authors of this kind of writing were young gymnasium pupils or women authors (SSRP 3, 813).²² The female novelist of “The Admiralty Spire” places an adjective behind a noun for the sake of elegance: “the pretty Christmas tree with its *chatoyant* lights seemed to augur to them joy jubilant” (ST 351). For the narrator of Nabokov's story and for the writer himself, such mannerism of style is enough to kill the best of recollections. As Leving also points out, this sentence in “The Admiralty Spire” alludes to Raisa Blokh's collection of poems *Moi Gorod/ My City*, to which Nabokov made a reference in one of his reviews (1928). Nabokov's comment in this review helps to locate the actual antecedent in Blokh's verse that he had in mind when he wrote “The Admiralty Spire.” It is also important for

²⁰ Nabokov, however, makes the inaccuracy of description a common flaw in the style of not only female but also male writers. In *The Gift*, Fyodor Godunov-Cherdyntsev points to the glaring mistakes in the descriptions of nature by the renowned Russian nineteenth century male novelists: “My father used to find all kinds of howlers in Turgenev's and Tolstoy's hunting scenes and descriptions of nature, and as for the wretched Aksakov, let's not even discuss his disgraceful blunders in that field” (G 85).

²¹ See V. Nabokov. “Benedict Duel'sky. Sonety” (1926) in SSRP 2, p. 636.

²² A reference to “poetry in prose” in a female's writing, one also finds in Nabokov's drama “The Event” in act 3 (SSRP 5, 506).

our understanding of Nabokov's treatment of Russian women poets of his time. The following lines from the writer's review statement, Blokh's poem "Gospodi! Umeret' by srazy" (1931)/ "God, to die at once" from her other collection *Tishina/ Silence*, and "The Admiralty Spire" contain a connection in the entire semantic ambiance:

все это *золотистое, светленькое* и чуть-чуть пропитанное (что, увы, в женских стихах почти неизбежно) холодноватыми духами Ахматовой – может на непридирчивого читателя произвести впечатление чего-то легкого, *простого*, птичьего (SSRP 2, 654, my italics).

Ты пошли мне совсем *простое*,
золотое счастье земное
Или дай мне уснуть опять
(Blokh, *Tishina*, my italics).

«красивая елка, переливаясь огнями, казалось, сулила им *радость* ликующую» (SSRP 3, 623)

"All this [poetry] –*golden, light*, and slightly permeated with Akhmatova's cold perfume (something, alas, almost unavoidable in women's poetry) – may give the indiscriminating reader the impression of something light, *simple*, birdlike" (my translation, my italics).

"Send me a very *simple*
golden earthly happiness
Or let me fall back asleep"
(Blokh, 16, my italics)

"The pretty Christmas tree with its *chatoyant* lights seemed to augur to them *joy jubilant*" (ST 351).

In his article, "The 'Matreshka-technique'," Davydov comments that Blokh's poem "Pust' nebo chernoje grozit dozhdem"/ "Let the black sky threaten with rain" may have suggested to Nabokov the title of his other story, "Lips to Lips" (1932). In contrast to "The Admiralty Spire" where the

poor narrator is a woman, the author of the unfortunate novel in “Lips to Lips” is male.²³

There are more examples in “The Admiralty Spire” that serve as an indicator of Nabokov's literary disagreements with women writers. As the male narrator explains: “[a] predilection to such expressions as ‘time passed’ or ‘cuddled up *frileusement* in Mother’s shawl,” the inevitable appearance of an episodic ensign (straight from imitations of *War and Peace*) who pronounces the letter *r* as a hard *g* and, finally, footnotes with translations of French clichés, afford sufficient indication of [the female writer’s] literary skill” (ST 348). Significantly, “cuddled up *frileusement* in Mother’s shawl” (“ziabko kutas' v mamin platok” (SSRP 3, 620))²⁴ is reminiscent of the line in one of the poems by Liubov Stolitsa from her collection *Rainia* (1908), repeated in every strophe:

Холодно... Кутаюсь в белый пуховый платок...

В мрачном саду скорбно никнет беседка, качая.
Пурпурный плющ ее бросил одну, увядая.

²³ Пусть небо черное грозит дождем,
Я солнце горное видала в нем.

Пусть в блесках инея земля тверда
В лагуне синяя тепла вода,

И чайки носятся, и даль чиста
И так и просятся к устам уста.

Благословенная моя тоска,
Огонь задумчивый, что сладко жжет,
Я привезла тебя издалека,
Я сохраню тебя от всех невзгод.

(Let the black sky threaten with rain, /I saw the mountain sun in it. //Let the land harden in shiny hoarfrost, /In the Lagoon the water is blue, warm, //And the gulls scud, and the distance is pure/ And beckon lips to lips. //My blessed heartache, / Pensive flame that sweetly burns, /I brought you from far away, /I will guard you against all adversities) (qtd. in “The ‘Matreshka-technique’” 16).

²⁴ Here Nabokov again leaves his emphasis (italics), which is present in the English version of the story, translated by Nabokov's son D. V. Nabokov in collaboration with the author.

Зябнет. Тоскует. Шлет красному другу упрек.

Холодно. Кутаюсь в белый пуховый платок.

Печь веселится, искрит пересветом обои.
В мрачном саду умирают покорно левкои.
Грустный паук вьет последний лучистый моток,

Холодно... Кутаюсь в белый пуховый платок...

Нет его...Нет...Согревал, но огня не дождался,
Красным устал быть... ушел... Побледнев, оторвался.
Сердце тоскует. Шлет дальнему другу упрек...

Холодно... Кутаюсь в белый пуховый платок (Stolitsa, my italics
57).²⁵

In 1909, the Silver Age poet Innokenti Annenskii, whom Nabokov highly esteemed, highlighted in the leading journal of Russian Symbolism *Apollon* that there were many features and approaches in Stolitsa's verse that were out of place: “я бы мог составить маленькую диссертацию из разбора ошибок, дерзаний и всевозможных придумок Любви Столицы – ими переполнена 'Раиня.' Ну пусть уж пожинает лавры кто-нибудь другой. Я же хочу расстаться с ней, задумчивой, покинуть ее тихую, озябшую . . .” (27)/ “I could write a small dissertation by analyzing the mistakes, efforts, and various poetic ideas that characterize Stolitsa's verse – *Rainia* is full of them. But let someone else reap laurels. As for me, I want to part with her, lapsed into thought, to leave her, quiet and chilled . . .” (my translation).²⁶ It seems

²⁵ It's cold. I cuddle up in a white downy shawl. //In a gloomy garden a pergola sorrowfully droops, having shaken. //A purple ivy left her alone, having faded. //Shivers, feels sad, sends to her red friend a reproach. //It's cold. I cuddle up in a white downy shawl. //A stove is delighted, sparks the wallpaper with a play of light. //In a gloomy garden, a gillyflower submissively dies. //A sad spider weaves the last skein. // It's cold. I cuddle up in a white downy shawl. // He's not there ... Is not ... Did warm up but did not wait for the fire. //Got tired of being red ... He left ... Turning pale he tore himself off. The heart grieves. Sends to the far away friend a reproach. It's cold. I cuddle up in a white downy shawl (my translation).

²⁶ Annenskii, I. “O sovremennom lirizme: One” *Apollon* 3, 1909, 5-29.

that in writing his story in 1933, Nabokov partially undertakes this effort. In her poem, Stolitsa borrows a line from Alexander Pushkin's "Zimnee Utro" (1829) / "A Winter Morning." Compare the following lines from Stolitsa's and Pushkin's verse:

Stolitsa:

Печь веселится, искрит пересветом обои.

A stove is delighted, sparks the wallpaper with a play of light.

Pushkin:

Вся комната янтарным
блеском
Озарена. Веселым треском
Трещит затопленная печь.

The room is lit with amber
light.

Hot stove rattles
in delight.

In Nabokov's story the male narrator "unceremoniously exposes the lady author Mme Solntsev for dressing up her vapid novel, The Admiralty Spire, in the glamor of Pushkin's line from *The Bronze Horseman*" ("Nabokov and Pushkin" 486). As Davydov comments, Nabokov weighs the talent not only of his own heroes but also of writers and critics in general, by their attitudes towards Pushkin ("The Matreshka-technique" 22). 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" ("Nabokov and Pushkin" 631). Nabokov's intolerance towards his hero-writers who are disrespectful to Pushkin is obvious when about Mme Solntsev's novel, the narrator says: "Neat title...and a famous Pushkinian line to boot. But it was the very neatness of that title that boded no good" (ST 348).²⁷ Indicative is also the narrative structure of text within a text that Nabokov chooses for his story in order to show that the inner

²⁷Interestingly enough, in Nabokov's drama *The Event*, as A. Babikov points out, another fictional woman writer, Antonina Pavlovna, borrows for her mediocre novel a line from the verse of an actual male poet, this time from Tiutchev's "Vesenniaia groza" (SSRP 5, 764).

novel by a woman writer is a sham. As he explains in his book on Nikolai Gogol, poshlust' – the untranslatable Russian word that for Nabokov signifies banality – “is especially vigorous and vicious 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” (NG 68). In order to expose this sham, the male protagonist in the story hastens to introduce himself, “so that [his] visual image may show through like a watermark; this is much more honest than to encourage by silence the incorrect conclusions that the eye involuntarily draws from the calligraphy of penned lines” (ST 348). Significantly, the honesty with which the narrator describes the literary mode of his peer novelist marks Nabokov’s own style. One recalls the writer's response to the emigre literary critic and novelist Mark Aldanov, who warned Nabokov about his parodies in *The Gift*, because unambiguous jibes at Z. Gippius and G. Adamovich, depicted in the figure of the fictional critic Christopher Mortus, were known to be offensive to Adamovich.²⁸ In his response to Aldanov, Nabokov, nonetheless, explained that his purpose in writing these parodies was not laughter as such, but the desire to show a common order of literary ideas emblematic of the novel's time frame:

Приводя вымышленные образцы критики, я руководствовался не стремлением посмеяться над тем или иным лицом (хотя и в этом не было бы греха, – не в классе же мы и не в церкви), а исключительно желанием показать известный порядок литературных идей, типичный для данного времени, – о чем и весь роман (в нем главная героиня литература). Если при этом стиль приводимой критики совпадает со стилем некоторых лиц и цац, то это естественно и неизбежно. Моих друзей огорчать это не должно. Улыбнитесь, Марк Александрович! Вы говорите, что «Дар» рассчитан на очень долгую жизнь. Если так, то тем более с моей стороны любезно взять даром в это путешествие образы некоторых моих современников, которые иначе остались бы навсегда дома (qtd. in *Istinnaia Zhizn'* 274).

In listing the imaginary examples of criticism, I was guided not by the desire to laugh at this or that person (although there would be no

²⁸See Dolinin, A. “Plata za proezd” in *Istinnaia zhizn' pisateliia Sirina*. p. 274.

sin in that either: we are not, after all, in class or church), but exclusively by the desire to show a familiar order of literary ideas, emblematic of the given time, – the entire novel is about this order (with literature as the main heroine). If in doing so the style of the given criticism coincides with the style of certain persons and swells, that is natural and inevitable. My friends should not distress. Smile, Mark Aleksandrovich! You are saying that *The Gift* is entitled to a very long life. If so, then it is even more courteous to take into this trip free of charge the images of some of my contemporaries, who otherwise would have stayed home forever (my translation).²⁹

Likewise, the desire to show a common order of literary ideas emblematic for the story's time frame and beyond marks the writer's own style in "The Admiralty Spire."³⁰

"The Admiralty Spire" does not spare English women writers either. In his biography of Nabokov, Boyd points out that as the material for "The Admiralty Spire," Nabokov had read "all" of Virginia Woolf and Katherine Mansfield as examples of banality and "felt his critical talons twitch" (RY 402). In a letter to Z. Shakhovskaia written on 25 July, 1933, Nabokov mentions these women novelists along with the Russian representatives of this genre:

²⁹Had Nabokov decided to actually ridicule contemporary Russian women writers—and many critics would point out that this is exactly what he does with the writers not palatable to his aesthetics – there would be no harm in that either. While the modern understanding of ridicule and its laughter that the parody entails bears more negative characteristics than humor as such, there is an element of ridicule that has a positive characteristic (Rose 26). Stone, for example, in his concept of "useful ridicule" (1914) describes the following: "ridicule is society's most effective means of curing inelasticity. It explodes the pompous, corrects the well-meaning eccentric, cools the fanatical, and prevents the incompetent from achieving success. Truth will prevail over it, falsehood will cover under it" (qtd. in Rose 26). About the nature of a parodist, the critic Lerivre says that the latter needs to be "a craftsman, critic, poet, to have the ability to combine admiration with laughter thus (in other words) to combine insight, criticism and ridicule without admitting malice" (qtd. in Rose 24). Such role of a parodist implies talent.

³⁰Indeed, Nabokov goes beyond the limits of the twentieth century in his discussion of female writers. In *The Gift*, for example, he observes the "literary coquetry" in the prose of the 19th century female novelists: "Like all the rest of our radical critics having a weakness of easy gain, [Chernyshevsky] eschewed courtly compliments to lady writers, and energetically demolished Evdokiia Rastopchina and Avdotia Glinka. 'An incorrect and careless patter' (as Pushkin puts it) left him unmoved. Both he and Dobroliubov flayed literary coquettes with gusto – but in real life [...]" (G 265).

It so happens that recently I have been reading many books of the female gender [knig zhenskogo pola]. *Facts Only, Sir* [Tol'ko fakty, ser, 1933] by Mrs. Kunina, for instance, and *The Body* [Telo, 1933] by Mrs. Bakunina. The first is far from being untalented, but she writes unevenly, breaking into a gallop, and the ending is no good. The second is not very talented, but writes as if she were washing the floor a grandea, noisily wringing out the black-wet rag over the bucket, from which she then lets the reader drink: altogether a boring and crippled book.... Also: everything written by Virginia Woolf and Katherine Mansfield. You might read, say *Orlando* [1928], this is an exemplar of first-rate poshlost'. Mansfield is better, but there is also something terribly irritating about her, a banal fear of banality and this flowery sweetness. Her *Journal* [1927] deserves some attention.³¹ I even felt like writing an essay about these ladies [ob etikh damakh] but I kept myself from doing it" (tr. in "Vladimir Nabokov and Women Authors" 56).

In "Vladimir Nabokov and Women Authors," Shroyer notices that this letter to Shakhovskaia was written only two months after he had composed "The Admiralty Spire" ("Vladimir Nabokov and Women Authors" 57). This fact, however, is not sufficient to justify the decisive conclusion about Nabokov's prejudice against women writers that Shroyer draws.

Considering this letter and also the fact that this story is full of anti-feminist sentences, such as: "every sentence [of Katya's novel] is buttoned to the left," or that the narrator's past was "besmirched in a lady's novel," and finally his request of Katya to stop writing: "Listen – stop writing books!", seeing Nabokov as being extremely hostile to women writers is understandable. In fact, Nabokov even encourages his readers to identify the author himself with his narrator, whose image he is trying to portray throughout the story. One such instance occurs when the narrator says: "since the day of [his and Katya's] last meeting there has been a lapse of sixteen years – the age of a bride, an old dog, or the Soviet republic" (ST 349). Sixteen years after the

³¹ Consider the appearance of the male writer "antidultsinist" in *The Event* (SSRP 5, 489). At the same time, it was Mansfield – and not only Shakespeare – who may have drawn Nabokov's attention to what later had become the title of his novel *Pale Fire*: "In the wood where the snow is thick, bars of sunlight lay like *pale fire* (*Journal* 207, my italics).

Russian revolution of 1917 indicates the year in which the narrator writes his letter to Katya, which is 1933. It coincides with the actual year when Nabokov wrote and published his story. In the year 1933, Nabokov was thirty four. In the same paragraph about his last meeting with Katya, the narrator explains: “Katya and I are not coevals. I was going on eighteen, she on twenty” (ST 349). This makes the narrator also thirty four. The narrator of “The Admiralty Spire” also shares some of Nabokov's own literary views. Much attention in the story is given to the depiction and critique of the pre-revolutionary literary milieu that surrounded Katya. In his book, *The World of Nabokov's Stories*, Shroyer invites us to compare certain key motifs and separate images in “The Admiralty Spire” to those that appear in Nabokov's autobiographies. This chapter does not attempt to testify to what extent Nabokov's short stories fictionalize his biographical past; however, if one were to compare various instances in “The Admiralty Spire” with those in Nabokov's English version of autobiography, *Speak, Memory*, the parallels would be numerous.³²

On the other hand, in order to discourage any identification between his own biographical past and the characters in his fiction, Nabokov – in the commentary to the English translation of this story (1975) – writes: “Although various details of the narrator’s love affair match in one way or another those found in my autobiographical works, it should be firmly borne in mind that the ‘Katya’ of the present story is an invented girl” (ST 662). In the collection of Nabokov's interviews one also finds: “I am very careful to keep my characters beyond the limits of my own identity” (SO 13). A “self-deprecating manner” that Saputelli-Zimmermann observes in the male narrator's representation of himself, may suggest to the readers a good measure of snobbishness, callousness of heart, and a general lack of charity. About his own personality, Nabokov, however, said in

³² For other intertextual references in this story see Leving's commentary in SSRP 3, pp. 810-820, Shroyer's *The World of Nabokov's Stories* pp. 307-309 and Saputelli- Zimmermann's dissertation pp. 82-97.

another interview: “As a private person, I happen to be good-natured, straightforward, plain-spoken, and intolerant to bogus art” (SO 175).³³ Interestingly enough, Nabokov repeats the above-mentioned quote in one of his interviews, slightly changing it: “As a private person, I am good-natured, *warm, cheerful*, straightforward, plain-spoken, and intolerant to bogus art.” (SO 139, my italics). The added characteristics are what makes the actual author different from his fictional representative in this story.

Apart from the narrator's personal characteristics, on a thematic level the story deals with the issues of poor art and demonstrates how the same material can be used by a very mediocre writer and a real artist. But there is also another – perhaps even more important – focus in the story, which is the theme of lost love and nostalgia for a lost past. Significantly, the amount of space that Nabokov allows for the narrator's creative recollections far exceeds those few paragraphs dedicated to the critical remarks about the female writer's prose. Speaking about Nabokov's Russian years, Saputelli-Zimmermann explains that most of the protagonists in Nabokov's early works are Russian émigrés, whose “spiritual nourishment derives almost exclusively from memories of Russia and a longing for the past” (16). The male protagonist in “The Admiralty Spire” is not an exception. Russia – the lost homeland and everything associated with it – becomes the magic source of a “happier, though irretrievable, world whose evocation offers solace and the license to fantasize” (16).³⁴ Being an émigré writer in Berlin, the male narrator seems to have found a “judicious balance between his nostalgia for the past and the reality of his present” (16)

³³The fact that the narrator's request not to write books comes along with another request, which is to remain an “enchanted image” of the past rather than “a real person,” makes Tanya Linaker argue that Nabokov makes from his fictional representative “a caricature of a misogynist” instead of its authentic image (176).

³⁴As noted by Nina Berberova, instead of living in irretrievable nostalgia, Nabokov “had invented a literary style” out of his pain and loss. (qtd. in Boym 269).

until he encounters it in the novel by a female writer. The thought that his love, imperfect then but idealized now, has found its literary rebirth in a poorly written novel, becomes unbearable. The narrator of Nabokov's story is, therefore, understandable in his grief. But does he seek revenge, as Shroyer, comments (“Vadimir Nabokov and Women Authors” 52)? Towards the story's end the narrator explains:

Katya, why have you made such a mess of it now [napakostila]? Come, let us have a calm, heart-to heart talk. With a lugubrious hiss the air has now been let out of the arrogant rubber fatman who, tightly inflated, clowned around at the beginning of his letter; and you, my dear, are really not a corpulent lady novelist in her novelistic hammock but the same old Katya ... who out of silly coquetry, has concocted a worthless book (ST, 356).

The “gentle-bitterness and self-irony” (*The World* 305) that Shroyer observes in the narrator's tone towards the story's end indicates his painful submission to the fact that Katya has distorted their past rather than gives a sense of triumph over her.

Perhaps “The Admiralty Spire” alone is not enough to draw a complete picture of Nabokov's attitudes to women writers.³⁵ There is, however, “A Slice of Life,” remarkable by the fact that on the basis of its intertextual method of “anti-parody,” it can be seen as Nabokov's contribution to the poetics women's writings. Two of these stories can be seen as companion pieces on the basis of their underlying affinities of conception and theme.³⁶ Both stories were written

³⁵While some critics view the story as “typical anti-feminist” writing, others attempt to reevaluate the perception of Nabokov as a “literary misogynist.”For the debate on this subject matter held on the internet between the members of Nabokov's Forum in the nineties, see T. Linaker's article p.169. [Colleen Kennedy, “Nabokov Forum,” NABOKV-L-archives, 3 November 1998 <<http://listserv.ucsb.edu/lsv-cgi-bin>>; Roy Johnson, “Vladimir Nabokov Forum,” NABOKV-L-archives, 29 January 1995 <<http://listserv.ucsb.edu>.>]

³⁶In his article, “The Future Perfect of the Mind: 'Time and Ebb' and 'A Guide to Berlin,’” Robert Grossmith also suggests to view two of Nabokov's other stories as companion pieces for the same reason (151).

during Nabokov's European emigration. They share the same narrative structure of “text within a text,” and deal with the same issues of women writers' literary aesthetics that crystallize one of the recurrent preoccupations of Nabokov's reviews. Considering that nowhere else in his short fiction was Nabokov so explicit about the issues of female literary art as he was in these two stories, “A Slice of Life” and “The Admiralty Spire” – when viewed together – provide a new perspective on Nabokov's attitude to women writers. In his letter to Shakhovskaia, Nabokov wrote that in the first decades of the twentieth century he acquainted himself widely with literature written by women. While identifying for himself the literary flaws in the writings by women authors (about whom he wanted to write an essay but restrained himself) in 1933, he composed “The Admiralty Spire.” Inspired by the same theme, Nabokov composed in 1935, “A Slice of Life.” Taking into consideration that the writer did not stop discussing the poetics of women's writings with his parody and two years later offered another story which, instead of being a parody of the female voice, offers a *solution* to the problem of underdeveloped poetics in women's writings, “The Admiralty Spire” along with “A Slice of Life” can be safely referred to as Nabokov's response to actual women writers and offers another critical view on literature written by women (this time in Nabokov's fiction).

Chapter 3

“Artists in Disguise”: The Role of the Creative Woman in Nabokov’s Art

In the previous chapters I have tried to demonstrate that Nabokov’s aesthetics are demanding with regard to male as well as female writers. What is interesting to note is that while there are plenty of male artists in his fiction, many of whom he presents as gifted authors, the same can hardly be said about Nabokov’s women. As the instances in *Glory* and *Pnin* indicate, he not infrequently parodies the works of female artists and, with the exception of a few examples that will be addressed later, there is hardly an ideal female writer in Nabokov’s works. Despite all of the above, I argue that such absence or deficiency does not serve as an indication of an anti-female-writer stance. Instead, in this chapter I propose that there are reasons for the limited presence of accomplished female authors in his fiction that have nothing to do with the impossibility of women being successful writers. Indeed, the idea that Nabokov grants his fictional women a secondary role, confined to the sphere of aesthetic contemplation rather than artistic creation, is shared by more than one scholar. For example, in her dissertation, “Ultraviolet Darlings: Representations of Women in Nabokov's Prose Fiction,” Lara Delage-Toriel argues that Nabokov’s female characters are “constantly under scrutiny but are never endowed with a point of view or a mind of their own. They are unfailingly presented as objects of male vision, a vision which is often *deliberately* reductive” (9). A binary opposition of subject versus object, relevant

to Nabokov's depiction of women, is present in a number of feminist studies most of which tend to focus on Nabokov's scandalous and provocative novel *Lolita*.¹ Speaking about *Lolita*, Sally Robinson, for example, views the novel as an artistic rivalry between male readers and the narrator "over possession of a woman as token, *object*, and finally text" (Robinson 5, my italics). Taking into consideration Nabokov's male-gender-oriented politics and arguing that *Lolita* is "as much the *object* consumed by Humbert as she is the product of her culture" (141, italics added), Linda Kauffman questions whether there is, in fact, a woman in Nabokov's text.² Another feminist critic, Colleen Kennedy, emphasizes the reduction of woman to an object of contemplation by saying that Nabokov writes "pornographic novels for the viewing pleasure of a community of men" (qtd. in Herbold 74).³ Even more critical of the author is Virginia Blum, who throughout her article argues that Nabokov is a sadistic narcissist, who makes his female readers feel stupid and powerless.⁴ Sarah Herbold, on the other hand, views *Lolita* as sophisticated and as clever as Humbert or Nabokov, and comments that the novel covertly acknowledges its need for and indebtedness to a woman reader.⁵ Herbold's and also Ellen Pifer's studies focus on Nabokov's attitude toward English women writers and especially attempt to defend Nabokov

¹It is indicative that there are not many feminist studies of Nabokov and those which exist tend to focus on Nabokov's *Lolita*. As Delage-Toriel explains, the "metafictional apparatus" that surrounds Nabokov's novels is "mined with protective devices" that "pre-empts and even ridicules a feminist reading" of the writer's art (10).

²Kauffman, Linda. "Framing *Lolita*: Is There a Woman in the Text." In *Refiguring the Father: New Feminist Readings of Patriarchy*, eds. Patricia Yaeger and Beth Kowalski-Wallace, 46-58. Carbondale and Edwardsville: Southern Illinois University Press, 1989.

³Kennedy, Colleen. "The White Man's Guest, or Why Aren't More Feminists Reading *Lolita*." In *Narrative and Culture*, eds. Janice Carlisle and Daniel R. Schwartz, 46-53. Athens, GA, and London: University of Georgia Press, 1994.

⁴Blum, Virginia. "Nabokov's *Lolita*/Lacan's Mirror." In *Hide and Seek: The Child Between Psychoanalysis and Fiction*, 201-45. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995.

⁵Herbold, Sarah. "(I have camouflaged everything, my love)': *Lolita* and the Woman Reader." *Nabokov Studies* 5 (1998/1999): 71-98.

against accusations of taking an anti-female writer stance.⁶ Finally, in a similar vein of viewing a woman as object, although not necessarily from a feminist perspective, David Rampton points out that Humbert's description of Lolita at certain moments in the novel is "an exercise in the special art of *seeing her as an object*, an art that only aesthetic detachment makes possible" (Rampton 119, my italics).

Nabokov's representation of women indeed poses a question about their roles as the objects of aesthetic contemplation rather than as creative artists in their own right. Although his narrators, many of whom speak in the first person voice and are often unreliable, may indeed justify some of the above arguments, Nabokov's own attitude toward a creative woman calls for additional scrutiny and cannot be reduced to the object-subject binary opposition. In this chapter I propose that the aesthetic strategies the writer implements in his depiction of women makes them far less mere objects of his "male-dominant fictional worlds" than some of the above critics indicate. Moreover, I argue that Nabokov's women, many of whom he covertly presents as genuine artists, are not denied their share of creativity. Nabokov's female characters are often artists in their own right. Their elusiveness, however, can be wrongly taken for passivity. In this chapter I shall also demonstrate that, paradoxically, in Nabokov's fictional worlds, women are

⁶Pifer, Ellen. "Her monster, his nymphet: Nabokov and Mary Shelley." In W. Julian Connolly, ed., *Nabokov and His Fiction: New Perspectives*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1999, 158-176. For both scholars, Nabokov's critique of female exploitation in *Lolita* has its roots in the writings of the 19th century English novelists, in particular Shelley's "Frankenstein, or the Modern Prometheus" (1818) and Bronte's *Jane Eyre*. In her article, Pifer demonstrates how *Lolita* – Nabokov's "difficult baby" – honors Shelley's "hideous progeny" in profound and unexpected ways. Pifer notices striking parallels between Shelley's famous protagonist and Nabokov's infamous one, and suggests a literary kinship between the two novels that thus far has gone unnoticed. The purpose of Herbold's article is to show that Nabokov places his women readers *and* his female characters in a position that invites them to read his novel and act "playfully and aggressively" (95). In fact, Herbold argues that the novel acknowledges the preeminence of Charlotte Bronte, who already in the 19th century criticized the male ambition to usurp the female point of view.

active even when dead.⁷ While certain feminist critics see Nabokov's women as vulnerable creatures devoid of personalities and minds of their own, I argue that they are quite powerful and also in the literary sense. There are at least three functions that define the role of a creative woman in Nabokov's art: aesthetic, mediatory, and metaliterary. Taken together they present an organic whole in the writer's fictional universe, and therefore each is the subject of a section of this chapter.

3.1 Elegance as Art: the Aesthetic Function of Nabokov's Women

One of Nabokov's female students at Wellesley College, Hannah Green, remembered Nabokov's lecture on Tolstoi, and what he had said about the nineteenth century writer's female characters: "Какие это замечательные женщины! Внимательно наблюдайте за ними. Постарайтесь представить их себе как можно ярче" (Pro et Contra 208)/ "What remarkable women they are! Watch them closely. Try to imagine them as vividly as possible" (my translation). This statement is true in regard to Nabokov's heroines, as he also presents them as artistically striking in his fiction. While Nabokov's women repeatedly emerge as the objects of aesthetic contemplation (there seems to be no argument about the fact that he depicts them from the point of view of their outward appearances) their roles are not limited to only being the aesthetic objects: they are implied co-creators of their aesthetic value. In her article "Les Artistes de L'élégance Chez Marcel Proust et Vladimir Nabokov," Juliette de Dieuleveult argues that Nabokov turns his elegant female characters into artists exactly because he describes them not as works of art, but as true artists, "the artists of elegance." As a first step, I shall discuss Dieuleveult's article, as the critic's

⁷ As D. Barton Johnson writes: "None of the women simply dies, all continue to exist and act upon the living" ("L'inconnue" 244).

main argument is relevant to the discussion of female creativity in Nabokov's art.⁸ Dieuleveult argues that turning elegant women into artists is a pattern applicable to several of Nabokov's works. Since the critic pays particular attention to the novel *Ada*, this work will be discussed in greater detail along with other examples from Nabokov's oeuvre that can shed light on the writer's attitude toward female creativity.

First, one wonders what could be the reason for Nabokov's insistence on female outward appearance in his art. In her article, Deuleveult points out that this theme is not new: Proust, Balzac, and Baudelaire also emphasized the role of the spectator in recognition of elegance, especially female elegance. Dieuleveult refers to Proust's lines about elegant women, because they describe remarkably well a similar idea in all the above writers including Nabokov:

Quel plaisir ineffable pour l'observateur, pour le connaisseur de rencontrer par les rues de Paris, sur les boulevards, ces femmes de génie qui, après avoir signé leur nom, leur rang, leur fortune, dans le sentiment de leur toilette, ne paraissent rien aux yeux du vulgaire, et sont tout un poème pour les artistes, pour les gens du monde occupés à flâner (302).

What an ineffable pleasure it is for the observer, for the connoisseur, to encounter in the streets of Paris, in its boulevards, these women of genius, who after having signed their name, rank, and fortune in the feeling of their toilette, become, albeit not for vulgar eyes, a whole poem for artists and for the ordinary people who pass by.⁹

⁸ The following translations from this article are mine.

⁹ In his book, *Aesthetic Function, Norm and Value as Social Facts*, Jan Mukařovsky wrote that the degree of aesthetic perception "fluctuates for each person according to his age, changes in health, and even momentary moods. But as soon as we consider a social context rather than individual viewpoints, it turns out that despite all transitory individual variations there is a fairly stable distribution of the aesthetic function in the world of objects and events" (4). Mukařovsky states that the "dividing line between the domain of the aesthetic function and that of extra-aesthetic phenomena will not be entirely clear, since there are many gradations of the aesthetic function and it is rarely possible to determine the complete absence of even the weakest aesthetic residue (4). But it is possible "to ascertain objectively – from certain symptoms—the presence of the aesthetic function in, e.g., matters of housing, dress, etc." (4).

If Nabokov's fictional women exceed themselves in the art of elegance, how does he achieve the task of turning his elegant women into artists, into co-creators of their elegance?

In Deuleveult's words, he makes a woman and her outfit a subject of interest (302). Indeed, the emergence of these elegant artists is characterized by the presence of certain artistic details relevant to their existence in the novels: female paraphernalia and accessories, their "toilette" and "parure", the cuisine and furniture that accompany their lives, all of these things are elevated to the artistic sphere that one finds within the domain of Nabokov's art. His female characters and all that surrounds them – which becomes an indispensable attribute of their existence – play an important role in Nabokov's art, especially if these women are considered elegant by the author. Everything matters for the description of their portraits: colors and cuts of their dresses, choice of accessories, their manner of walking, all this is the subject of study and "l'objet d'admiration esthétique" (313). As Dieuleveult proclaims: "la toilette féminine" is "une oeuvre d'art" (302).

In her analysis of Nabokov's *Ada*, Dieuleveult shows how the novel's female protagonists Ada and Lucette become artists of elegance as a result of the audacious cuts of their dresses, accessories (fur), and the use of color in their clothing (307). Colors constitute an important code that serves as an elaboration of the theme of elegance in Nabokov (unity is another component of elegance described by Dieuleveult: "unite de la toilette," which is a "totalité indivisible"). As Dieuleveult rightly argues, the choice of color allows one to compare the female characters in this novel and draw a hypothesis as to who is elegant and who is not. Indeed, Ada and Lucette both wear yellow and black, just as Aqua is dressed in the same colors twenty years earlier: "...she changed into black slacks and a lemon shirt" (qtd. in Deuleveult 304) and "Aqua [...] put on yellow slacks and a black bolero"(304)¹⁰. In this example, a secondary heroine, Aqua, involuntarily

¹⁰ On the use of colors in Nabokov see also D. Barton Johnson's "Synesthesia, Polychromatism,

becomes elegant for her choice of color when compared to Ada and Lucette, Nabokov's artists of elegance. Black is a dominant color in Nabokov's art and is also Ada's color. As Dieuleveult argues, one may recall a black dress that she wears at the restaurant "Ursus": both ladies wore [...] very short and open evening gowns [...] Ada, a gauzy black" (qtd. in Dieuleveult 306). In fact, there is a systematic association of color and personage in Nabokov, with black being the color of a seductress in *Ada*. There is also a mermaid paleness that brings contrast to her black outfit: "Le noir et son contrepoint, la pâleur d'Ada, sont constitutifs d'une élégance en clair-obscur qui fait d'elle "une jeune fille fatale, une pâle beauté" ("she's a jeune fille fatale, a pale beauty") [Black and its counterpoint, Ada's paleness, are the constituents of elegance in the light vs. dark that make her a young girl fatale, a pale beauty] (qtd. in Dieuleveult 306). Nabokov emphasizes the erotic function of colors that he attributes to the vestments of his female characters, and in *Ada*, this function is given to black.

Inseparable from their "toilette," accessories perfect the elegance of Nabokov's heroines. The recurrence of fur as an important accessory in the female outfit is a motif of female elegance in Nabokov (Dieuleveult 307). This detail intensifies women's roles as seductresses:

La récurrence des fourrures vise à souligner la tension érotique que électrise l'univers féminin de romans de Nabokov. Les femmes n'y sont pas présentées comme des créatures immatérielles, inaccessibles, vouées à une contemplation lointaine et détachée. Elles sont des êtres de désir qui n'hésitent pas à tirer un parti érotique de toutes les ressources qu'offrent le vêtement et, en particulier, les fourrures (307). [The recurrence of furs aims to underline the erotic tension that electrifies the female universe of Nabokov's novels. Women are not presented as immaterial creatures, inaccessible, designed for a distant and detached contemplation. They are the creatures of desire who do not hesitate to use the erotic part of all the resources that the vestment offers and, in particular, fur].

and Nabokov" in *A Book of Things About Nabokov*, Ann Arbor, Ardis 1974.

Thus, along with their aesthetic value, female clothes and accessories serve as pointers to women's traits of character, becoming an expressive code that has to be deciphered by the readers. As Dieuleveult explains: "nous arrivons ici à un point-limite de l'utilisation du vêtement, celle où il n'est plus décrit pour sa valeur esthétique mais utilisé comme un code devant/être déchiffré par le lecteur. / "Here we arrive at a compelling argument of using the vestment when it is no longer described for its aesthetic value, but is used as a code being deciphered by the reader" (308).

Dieuleveult also argues that if a woman is compared to an artist in wearing her dress and if her clothes are appreciated by the reader as a work of art, little by little she herself becomes identified with a work of art. In fact, she argues that the making of a woman not merely a work of art, but an artist of elegance is to pose a risk of idolatry, since that consists in passing from the sphere of contemplation to the sphere of creation, to admire not the finished work, but the artist in the work (314). And yet, how does a female character with her beautiful outfit become an artist herself? Or, how does this transition from the sphere of aesthetic contemplation to the sphere of creation happen? In my opinion, this transformation is possible because Nabokov allows a woman to express her meaningful creativity in his works. Just looking at an outfit of an elegant woman is in the sphere of aesthetic contemplation. But showing a woman at work (for example, sewing a dress) or creating an explicit or implicit reference that she is an artist, means to pass from the sphere of contemplation to the sphere of creation. And this is exactly what Nabokov achieves in his art. By allowing an elegant woman to express her taste or judgment in picking out an outfit for herself, he assigns to her a role of a creator within the artistic creation of the writer himself. Therefore, to Dieuleveult's list of what constitutes "un sujet d'étude" in Nabokov's representation of women, one may add a depiction of the creative process itself: a woman at work or the hints at such. There are several examples from Nabokov's other novels and a short story that

can help to elucidate this point.

The aesthetic preferences of Nabokov's elegant women can determine the fate of his male protagonists. As Yuri Leving points out, Fyodor in the *Gift* is "so mysteriously 'hooked' by the charming dress of his landlord's daughter," that not only does he accept "an exorbitant rental fee," but he also agrees to endure "the torturing presence of the repulsive philistine Shchyogolev" in the episode in which he rents the Berlin room (*Keys to The Gift*, 295):

Here is my daughter's room, here is ours," [Shchyogovel] said, pointing to two doors on the left and right. "And here's the dining room," and *opening a door in the depths*, he held it in that position for several seconds, as if taking a time exposure. Fyodor passed his eyes over the table, *a bowl of nuts, a sideboard...* By the far window, near a small bamboo table, stood a high-backed armchair: *across its arms there lay in an airy repose a gauze dress, pale bluish and very short (as was worn then at dances), and on the little table gleamed a silvery flower and a pair of scissors* (qtd. in *Keys to The Gift*, 295).

Zina's dress serves as a catalyst for Fyodor's decision to rent a room in Shchyogolev's house and therefore to meet Zina. The occurrence of *scissors* next to the creative material which formed the dress is of a particular interest as they imply Zina's involvement in the process of making it. Indeed, why would Nabokov leave such a seemingly insignificant detail as scissors next to the creative material in the description of Zina's dress? Perhaps the reason is to indicate that she was involved in the artistic process of making or altering it to fit her own aesthetic taste.

Scissors and the dress also point to Nabokov's aesthetic strategy in his other works: the smaller the detail, the more important it is. Just as details relevant to the dress are important for Nabokov, so is the female creator. Indeed, along with pointing to the development of the novel's love theme, the reference to the dress is reinforced by a strong literary allusion. As Leving writes, Nabokov creates a hint by saying that such dresses were worn "then at [ballroom] dances (togda na balakh), and the perspective which opens to Fyodor's eyes and in which the dress seems to

appear, “turns out to focus on the enfilade of a Petersburg mansion of the 1830s from Gogol’s “The Diary of a Madman” (195):

I should like to peek into the drawing room into which one only sometimes *sees the open door*, and through the drawing room into another room. Oh! What sumptuous furniture! Such *mirrors and porcelain*! I’d love to get a peek in there, into that half where Her Excellency lives – that’s the place for me! Into her boudoir; there are so many little jars standing there, and *little bottles*, such *flowers* that one is afraid to breathe on them: see how *her dress lies thrown, and looks more like air than a dress*. I’d like to get a glimpse inside her bedroom... what wonders, I feel, must be in there, such paradise, I feel, as doesn’t even exist in heaven (qtd. in *Keys to The Gift*, 295).

Thus, it is clear that in *The Gift* a woman’s dress acquires a strong metaliterary implication rather than being a mere clothing article¹¹. It also transfers a woman from the “feminine” sphere into the literary one, merging the aesthetic and the metaliterary functions of Nabokov’s character.

The literary subtext in which Zina’s dress is present and the occurrence of scissors as an instrument of creation also bring evidence to Stephen Blackwell's argument about Zina’s role as a co-creator and a powerful artistic force who, along with Fyodor, shapes the plot and drives the structure of Nabokov’s novel. In his book, *Zina's Paradox: The Figured Reader in Nabokov's 'Gift,'* Blackwell focuses on the nature of the narrative in *The Gift* and argues that Nabokov emphasizes the act of reading as “a model for transcendence of the isolated self, where two beings may merge in the artistic sphere” (6). In Fyodor’s poetic enterprise, his art is “processed, molded, and shaped by Zina” (3). Blackwell’s study poses an interesting question of whether Zina is a “creative partner” versus a muse, an ideal reader, or a spiritual companion to Fyodor and his art. On first reading, Zina is obviously not an imminent creator of the narrator’s/ Nabokov’s novel. The

¹¹ This is not a singular example of metaliterariness in Nabokov’s art, but is a part of Nabokov’s general strategy that includes a novel, *The Gift*, in which the main character is Russian literature.

evidence found in the text makes her, albeit important, only a passive observer of Fyodor's art: "there was an extraordinary grace in her responsiveness which imperceptibly served him as regulator, if not as guide" (G 196). And yet, despite the latter evidence, such details as Zina's dress compel the reader to look for another, hidden layer of interpretation.¹²

Another artist of elegance, whose presence, like Zina's, is reinforced by the literary undertones of her dress, is Lolita. As pointed out by Sarah Herbold, the famous couch scene where the shoeless "little maiden" with "guileless limbs" wears a pink checked dress which Humbert describes as an "innocent cotton frock" (AL 57), is endowed with Lolita's artistic sophistication. Indeed, Lolita is just as artful as Humbert when she "deliberately complements her seductively girlish dress, which is 'ample in the skirt, tight in the bodice', by painting her lips and holding in her hand a beautiful, banal Eden red apple" (Herbold 81). Herbold asks: "Is Lolita playing Eve? The 'banal, Eden-red apple,' 'the dangling slipper and her 'slipperless foot' rubbing against the pile of old magazines are allusive gestures: Eve, Snow White, Cinderella, a Playboy centerfold, Emma Bovary dangling her slipper, Jane Eyre pausing at the bottom of the stairs at Thornfield to

¹²Zina's dress also demonstrates Deuleveult's point on the importance of the surrounding details and accessories in Nabokov's depiction of women. But her comment that the key images of a dress (thread, cloth, etc.) allows Nabokov to express metaphorically his writing project, is arguable considering Nabokov's ridicule of Nadezhdin's thought in *The Gift*: "Для гения недостаточно *смастерить Евгения Онегина*, – писал Надеждин, сравнивая Пушкина с портным, изобретателем жилетных узоров" (SSRP 4, 433)/ "To be a genius it is not enough to have manufactured Eugene Onegin' wrote the progressive Nadezhdin, comparing Pushkin to a tailor, an inventor of waistcoat patterns..." (G 267). Alexander Dolinin, in his commentary to *The Gift*, refers to the actual source, "Poltava. Поэма Александра Пушкина" (Vestnik Evropy. 1829, #8), in which this comment occurs. In this article, written in the form of a dialogue, one of the interlocutors caustically notices: "Для гения не довольно *смастерить Евгения*" / "To be a genius it is not enough to have manufactured Evgenii" and compares Pushkin's art to beautiful and fashionable tailor items, "чьей творческой дланью *создан* этот пышный жилет, роскошествующий всеми радужными цветами на груди вашей" (SSRP 4, 734)/ "by whose creative hand is this splendid vest that luxuriates with all iridescent colors on your chest, created" (my translation).

fasten her sandal” (Herbold 81). The literary subtexts, therefore, with which Nabokov treats Lolita’s outfit “subtly represents her as being just as literary, allusive, and creative as Humbert – or himself” (82).

Filled with literary allusions, Lolita’s dramatic posing in the above episode also points to her artistic personality. As Herbold says: “Lolita is putting on an act. She is ‘playing Lolita’ – or rather, she is playing one of her alter egos, Lola the bobby-soxer” (81). Nabokov also emphasizes her highly artistic nature when she participates in a school drama and is interested in ballet. Her creative drive reaches its peak when she decides to run away with Quilty, whose dramatic skills impress her more than Humbert’s. Along with Humbert’s main crime (that he deprived Lolita of her childhood), he also deprives her of the chance to immortalize herself through her own artistic voice and actions. Depriving Lolita of the chance to artistically express herself, commemorate her own identity through acting, and thus possibly killing a rare artistic talent (who knows, Lolita could have been a star) is one of Humbert’s heavy sins according to Nabokov: “Then I [Humbert] knew that the hopelessly poignant thing was not Lolita’s absence from my side, but the absence of her voice from that concord” (AL 308). While for Humbert Lolita barely exists as a “mere object of his emotion and imagination” (AY 655), for Nabokov, as Boyd points out, she is “quite a different creature, *a person in her own right*, and one of the characters he found most admirable in all his works, or that his book seethed with indignation of Humbert’s manipulation of all the women in his life” (AY 655). But Lolita’s constant struggle against Humbert’s manipulations point to Nabokov’s insistence on the child’s artistic expression and emphasizes the author’s position in this case.¹³

¹³ Consider, for example, a letter that Lolita writes from camp Q. She literally and figuratively (by Nabokov) eliminates her “I” from her writing and then regains it again: “Dear Mummy and Hummy,

Nabokov's insistence on his female characters' artistic expression is evident in his other works. The story "The Vane Sisters" is remarkable in the way that its non-elegant heroines are turned into artists. However, the sphere of aesthetic contemplation in this story is not that which one finds in the writer's other works (the exception may be *Lolita*). It is significantly undermined by the male narrator's narrow perception of these girls triggered by his indifference and the lack of consideration towards their fate. As Linda Wagner rightly states, the physical description of the Vane Sisters affects the readers as negative, because the observer makes them merely into "some tawdry female objects" (235). Acknowledged by others as admittedly beautiful, Sybil, nonetheless, seems unappealing through the prism of the male narrator's perception. Even though she touches him being "childishly slight in close-fitting grey" over her "carefully waved dark hair" and that "small, small flowered hat with a little hyaline veil", her scarred skin is compared to "a cubist pattern" worsened by the fact that she pathetically masks it "by a sunlamp tan that [hardens] her features" (ST 621). Her charm is further shattered by the excessive make up she uses, leaving "the pale gums of her teeth... the only visible openings into her beauty" (621). Similarly, her sister Cynthia, who does not attract the narrator's attention either by "her ways, which [he] thought repulsively vivacious" or "her looks, which other men thought striking" (but who nevertheless becomes her lover), is given a portrait no less disappointing than her sister's:

Hope you are fine. Thank you very much for the candy. I [crossed out and re-written again] I lost my new sweater in the woods. It has been cold here for the last few days. I'm having a time. Love.

Dolly"

Nabokov defends *Lolita* and also her writing against Humbert and this time from her mother by inwardly ridiculing the criticism of Charlotte—another woman writer who also writes letters in *Lolita*: "The dumb child,' said Mrs. Humbert, "has left out a word before 'time.' That sweater was all-wool, and I wish you would not send her candy without consulting me" (AL 81).

She used cosmetics with as much zest as her little sister had, but with an additional slovenliness that would result in her big front teeth getting some of the rouge. She was handsomely dark, wore a not too tasteless mixture of fairly smart heterogeneous things, and had a so-called good figure; but all of her was curiously frowzy... (621).

The male narrator's point of view destroys the perception of these women as elegant artists as a result of a disdain that he and his colleague D. feel toward them.

Since they are simply unable to appear as artists of elegance within the fictional universe of this story, Nabokov emphasizes their creativity in a different way. As a result of the author's interference, the narrator has to admit, albeit condescendingly, Cynthia's creative abilities as a painter: "her artistic gift... her delightful, gay, but not very popular paintings, which the friends of her friends bought at long intervals" (ST 628). After Cynthia's death, the narrator becomes especially interested in the fate of one of her paintings called "*Seen through a Windshield* – a windshield partly covered with rime, with a brilliant trickle (from an imaginary car roof) across its transparent part and, through it all, the sapphire flame of the sky and a green-and white fir tree" (628). A brilliant trickle that falls from the car roof in the painting ties back to the brilliant icicles that drip from the "eaves of a framed house" which the narrator observes on that Sunday afternoon when he meets D. The reference to colors in the above episode are also important, because "the sapphire flame of the sky" is reminiscent of Cynthia's eyes "of a frank, frightened blue" color, just as Sybil's red lipstick is reflected in "a strange ruddy tinge" of a parking meter as a result of the "tawny red light of the restaurant sign above the sidewalk" (ST 620). The narrator is also compelled to acknowledge Cynthia's interest in linguistics. The "misshapen or illicitly connected words, puns, logogriphs, and so on" gain her a reputation of "a perverse amateur" in the narrator's, but not the author's eyes. The Vane sisters become the real artists in Nabokov's sense, when they invite the readers to look for a secret signal as the narrator expresses the hopelessness of his attempt to

discern some glimpses of them beyond death: “I could isolate, consciously, little. Everything seemed blurred, yellow-clouded, yielding nothing tangible. Her inept acrostics, maudlin evasions, theopathies – every recollection formed ripples of mysterious meaning. Everything seemed yellowly blurred, illusive, lost” (ST 631). The clues earlier in the story prompt alert readers to construe the first letter of each word in the above passage as part of an acrostic message: “ICICLES BY CYNTHIA, METER FROM ME SYBIL” (RY 194). In other words, as Brian Boyd points out, “the dripping of the icicles that led the narrator off his usual course toward the restaurant where he meets D. and learns of Cynthia’s death have enticed him there under Cynthia’s direction” (194).¹⁴

The Vane Sisters become the artists in Nabokov’s sense by means of his literary devices. Being bound by the male narrator to remain only in the sphere of aesthetic contemplation, they are rescued by the author through the system of mute responses that these girls implement. The author does not save these women from the injustices of his male characters; however, he justifies their lives in the readers’ eyes. As a result, the girls’ last name contains Nabokov’s initials metaphorically making them “VN’s sisters.” They also become the propagators of Nabokov’s art that incorporates all of his aesthetic, metaphysical, and ethical concerns.

So far we have seen that women in Nabokov’s art become the artists of elegance through

¹⁴ In a disappointed letter to his editor, Katherine White, who rejected the publication of “The Vane Sisters” in the *New Yorker*, Nabokov wrote: “The ‘icicles by Cynthia’ refers of course to the setting at the beginning of the story and is a message, as it were, from her forgiving, gentle, doe-soul that had made him this gift of an iridescent day (giving him something akin to the picture he had liked, to the only small thing he had liked about her); and to this, in eager, pathetic haste, Sybil—a little ghost close to the larger one—adds ‘meter from me, Sybil’, alluding of course to the red shadow of the parking meter near which the French professor meets D” (SL 116). The forgiving and gentle nature of the dead girls was out of the *New Yorker’s* line because, as White said, the characters did not arouse their emotions (SL 118). The editors viewed the story from the misleading first person male narrator’s point of view, not Nabokov’s; while the author’s critical position was clearly on the side of his victimized female characters.

their dresses. Their costumes are filled with literary allusions and thus they establish a certain framework with which the reader treats their creative apparel.¹⁵ The aesthetic function, however, is not the only one that defines the role of a creative woman in Nabokov's art. As "The Vane Sisters" indicate, their role is to be the writer's agents. Nabokov also depicts them as the mediators between his fictional worlds, and therefore their next function can be called *mediatory*.

3.2 Agents and Co-creators: the Mediatory Function of Nabokov's Female Characters.

The perception of Nabokov's fictional women as mediators derives from the idea of two mutually exclusive worlds that characterize Nabokov's fiction. One of these worlds is the physical world of his fictional personages and another, to which the mediatory function of female characters has a direct link, is the "otherworld." The latter is a more abstract term and therefore needs clarification. The term "potustoronnost'" or "the beyond" was initially formulated in 1979 by Nabokov's widow, Vera, in the introduction to the writer's posthumous collection of Russian poems "Stikhi" (1979). As Vera said: "undetected by anybody, this theme, like a watermark, permeates everything Nabokov wrote" (qtd. in Davydov 190). The most systematic and extensive explanation of this theme is offered by V. Alexandrov in his book *Nabokov's Otherworld*. As he writes:

Otherworld" might seem to imply beliefs that are primarily metaphysical. However, Nabokov's writings show that his metaphysics are inseparable from his ethics and his aesthetics; indeed, all three are best understood as names for a single continuum of beliefs, not for separate categories of Nabokov's interests. Nevertheless, for analytical purposes, it is necessary to formulate

¹⁵ Another example of a piece of clothing being important for its literary undertones is Lucette's dress in *Ada*. As Boyd indicates, her green nightgown in the first part of the novel is a reference to Arthur Rimbaud's poem "Memoire" (*Ada: The Place of Conscience* 52-54).

distinctions and definitions. By “metaphysics” I mean Nabokov’s faith in the apparent existence of transcendent, nonmaterial, timeless and beneficent, ordering and ordered realm of being that seems to provide for personal immortality and that affects everything that exists in mundane world. I say “apparent” and “seems to” because a cardinal tenet of Nabokov’s faith is the irreducible alterity of this other realm from the vantage point of mortal experience: all one can have is intuitions of what it may be like; no certainty about it is possible. By “ethics” I mean Nabokov’s belief in the existence of good and evil; his belief that both are being absolutized by being inextricably linked to the transcendent otherworld; and both are accessible to mankind and especially to true artists as universal criteria for guiding and judging man’s behavior. Nabokov’s “aesthetics” consist of two aspects: the first is the theme of the creation of art, which, as long been noted by critics, Nabokov embodies in a variety of forms; the second is the characteristic shape and style of his works – the structures, devices, syntax, alliterations, narrative perspectives, and rhythms that are his signatures. The relationship among metaphysics, aesthetics, and ethics in Nabokov’s works are so intimate that it might be visualized graphically as a ternary field with one of the terms labeling each of the apexes and his works represented by points within the field. Thus, any work, or any aspect of a work, needs to be located in terms of metaphysical, ethical, and aesthetic criteria, and conversely, any single criterion can be read in terms of the other two (“Otherworld” 568).¹⁶

Nabokov’s material and spiritual worlds are connected with each other. There is an idea of “communication between different states of being” in Nabokov’s art (Grayson, “*Rusalka*” 171). How does this communication happen? According to several Nabokov scholars, his female characters are the ones who carry this communication, becoming the agents of Nabokov’s “otherworld.” As D. Barton Johnson says: “None of the women simply dies, all continue to exist and act upon the living” (“*L’inconnue*” 244). They make the “otherworld” strongly “feminized”

¹⁶While Alexandrov defines “otherworld,” Ellen Pifer emphasizes its characterization. According to this critic, Nabokov’s “otherworld” is love or the different shades of love as Pifer explains in her article: “The realm of the supernatural is reserved by writers like Poe, Bierce, and Lovecraft for the worst horrors conceivable to the imagination. In Nabokov’s landscape, on the other hand, the presence of ghosts may express and indeed celebrate the most generous forms of human love” (“*Shades of Love*” 76).

(Shrayer, *The World* 244). Elena Rakhimova-Sommers has based her entire research on the close analysis of several of Nabokov's texts: *Pnin*, *Bend Sinister*, *Laughter in the Dark*, and a story "Spring in Fialta" and in her dissertation, "The *Ona* (She) of Nabokov's Hereafter: Female Characters as Otherworldly Agents in Nabokov's fiction," argues that Nabokov's "beyond" is indeed "charged with a feminine presence" (8). As the critic further explains, Nabokov's female characters are the "otherworldly agents – fragile, yet crucial links between the worlds of mortals and Nabokov's transcendent realm" (8).

While Rakhimova-Sommers' dissertation focuses on the themes and texture of Nabokov's "otherworld" (the critic points out that her dissertation might well have been entitled "The many faces of Nabokov's potustoronnost"), the informative-expressive code through which communication with the "otherworld" takes place in Nabokov's fiction could be emphasized even more for the purposes of our research. In other words, what are the means by which a communication with the "otherworld" occurs in Nabokov's fiction? The reason to study this code has to do with the richness of associations and the multiplicity of Nabokov's stylistic devices in his aesthetic communication with the reader. It can also shed light on Nabokov's representation of "literary" women. Indeed, a connection with the "otherworld" often includes female participation, in which the "literary" women are no exception. Being the mediators between the world of living and "the beyond," they trigger the literary response of the male artists.¹⁷ Rakhimova-Sommer's dissertation is not geared towards a detailed analysis of the "literary" women in Nabokov's art, perhaps for the reason that others have already done this work. In his analysis of *Pale Fire*, Brian Boyd, for example, argues that Shade's daughter Hazel acts upon her

¹⁷ Besides, as Ellen Pifer observes, the "key' that opens up the *other* world does not lie in abstract concepts or formulas; it is encoded in the concrete phenomena of the actual" (85).

father from the “otherworld” through a butterfly *Vanessa atalanta* and influences the outcome of his poem.

Indeed, Shade’s poem poses a question of Hazel’s survival after death. As Boyd indicates, this problem of communication “from beyond the grave” through a butterfly might seem an “absurdly bold conjecture” (*Nabokov’s PF*, 138). And yet, one should consider that it is also a part of a pattern to the reader familiar with Nabokov’s other works (*Nabokov’s PF*, 138). Moreover, there is already one woman who clearly and explicitly acts from the otherworld in *Pale Fire*: the poet and painter, Aunt Maud. As Boyd comments, “if one character in the novel somehow survives death, and the question of another’s survival is as forcefully posed as Hazel’s case, it would almost seem strange *not* to provide an answer” (*Nabokov’s PF*, 138). After several re-readings, as Boyd indicates, one decodes (lines 344-47) that in those “lights” Aunt Maud warns Shade about his death:

She [Hazel] had strange fears, strange fantasies, strange force
Of character – as when she spent three nights
Investigating certain sounds and lights
In an old barn...” (PF 45).

Even a predilection of a butterfly (whose reemergence throughout the poem is a pattern) just as death approaches, seems to be a sign of her “otherworldly” presence (*Nabokov’s PF* 138).

Boyd further explains that in associating *Vanessa* with Hazel, the reader might see a problem in the fact that the butterfly is already explicitly identified with Shade’s wife, Sybil. The latter is described (lines 270-271) as “my dark Vanessa, crimson-barred, my blest/ My Admirable butterfly” (PF 42).¹⁸ Boyd argues, however, that here Nabokov acts as a “master polemicist” in

¹⁸“Red Admiral” is another name for the *Vanessa atalanta* species (*Nabokov’s PF*, 141).

Interestingly enough, Kinbote makes a comment to line 270 of Shade’s poem about this butterfly and says that “zemblans call it *harvalda* (the heraldic one)” (PF 172). In the Russian commentary to the novel, one finds that old German for hariwald, heriwald is

chess: “if Hazel were as it were promoted to a White Queen, she can now take after her mother in death as she could not in life, she now can play the part of the *Vanessa*” (*Nabokov's PF* 141). It is interesting to note that while Sybil is Shade’s intellectual and spiritual companion (and at certain moments his muse), she is also described (in line 366) as having a study of her own, “twice removed” from Shade’s. She also translates Marvell and Donne into French (line 677-78) and Shade has a typist Jane Dean (lines 384-85), whose presence makes the reader assume that Sybil does not type all of her husband’s work. With Sybil next to the poet or in her study, it becomes clear that it is Hazel who stands behind Shade’s muse in lines 945-66:

You drive me to the library. We dine
At half past six. And that odd muse of mine,
My versipel, is with me everywhere,
In carrel and in car, and in my chair.

And all the time, and all the time, my love,
You too are there, beneath the word, above
The syllable, to underscore and stress
The vital rhythm. One heard a woman’s dress
Rustle in days of yore. I’ve often caught
The sound and sense of your approaching thought.
And all in you is youth, and you make new,
By quoting them, old things I made for you (PF 68).

Hazel is an example of a female character in Nabokov's fiction who is a powerful driving force and who shapes the final outcome of the male character’s poem. As in “The Vane Sisters,” Nabokov greatly exaggerates the aesthetic shortcomings of Hazel's appearance; however, he makes her powerful in another way. On a phonetic level, the sound alliterations in the words “*Vanessa*” and the already discussed “*Vane Sisters*” link these words and also *Pale Fire* with Nabokov’s story. The established parallel makes one wonder whether Hazel, like the Vane sisters,

“komanduiushchii armiei” or the one who is in command of the army (SSAP, 679).

who direct the narrator's attention through tricks of light and shade, does the same through a butterfly and is granted a collaborative part in her father's work. Boyd sees Hazel as Shade's collaborator, who inspires him to write his work (the second part of the poem is especially about Hazel) and also changes some of his philosophical views (Shade feels a sense of unexplainable hope, lines 830-835).¹⁹ While Sybil remains Shade's wife and a female character not deprived of intellectual independence, it is Hazel who is given the final move that leads to the conclusion.

Besides butterflies, the aesthetic code through which a communication with the "otherworld" takes place includes other means. As pointed out by Barbara Wyllie, *dream* is a conventional means of accessing 'other worlds' in Nabokov's art (11). In *Glory*, for example, a schoolmate Lida who appears in Martin's dream saying "Gruziny ne ediat morozhenogo"/ "Georgians do not eat ice-cream" (G 12) distantly reiterates the words of a man named Gruzinov in the final portion of the novel. Gruzinov's account of how the crossing into the USSR has been done before him becomes the last factor in Martin's decision to cross the Russian border thus leading him to his death at the novel's end. As Pekka Tammy comments, "a motif from a dream seen by Martin years ago is quietly transferred to the narrative reality" when he "vaguely feels that sometime somewhere the same words had been spoken" (qtd. in Tammy 174). What seems important is that this motif is associated with a seemingly unimportant female character, a secondary personage who nonetheless is a link into Nabokov's "otherworld" and whose words become a stylistic device relevant to Martin's death. Another example of a woman connected to the "otherworld" through a dream is when the main character Luzhin in *The Defense* asks his fiancée: "are you real?" (qtd. in Alexandrov "The Defense" 80). After the character "wakes up

¹⁹ As Boyd points out, one finds a more explicit example of such transformation in Nabokov's story "Christmas" (141).

from the nap into which he drifts following her visit, he remembers her as ‘a delightful dream he had dreamed’” (qtd. in “The Defense” 80).²⁰ In “Ultima Thule,” on the other hand, the “otherworldly” woman does *not* appear in the narrator’s dream making this a feature of thematic and technical importance relevant to the entire design of this literary piece.²¹

“Ultima Thule” is written in the form of a letter from the artist Sineusov to his wife who recently died. Stunned by the death of a beloved woman and yet perfectly lucid, he mocks the absurdity of addressing her as he does and speculates on her possible reaction, if she could read his letter. In this letter, he talks about his former tutor in St. Petersburg, Adam Falter, the man they both once met on the Riviera. From Falter’s brother-in-law, whom he accidentally meets, Sineusov learns that his former tutor has been driven to insanity after being recently exploded into an understanding of the ultimate truth of things, normally denied to the mortal mind. Trying to cope with his grief, Sineusov arranges a meeting with Falter and stuns him with questions about the “otherworld.” Presented as “something more and something less than human” (RY 518), Falter easily “outmaneuvers his interlocutor” – and then declares that “amid all the piffle and prate I inadvertently gave myself away – only two or three words, but in them flashed a fringe of absolute insight – luckily, though, you paid no attention” (ST 522). Those “two or three words” or “the funny trifles” that Falter accidentally pronounces, and which are to carry an all-

²⁰ For the “otherworldly” presence in this novel see V. Alexandrov’s chapter “The Defense” in *Nabokov’s Otherworld*, pp. 58-83.

²¹ In the forward to the collection *A Russian Beauty and Other Stories* (1973) Nabokov explained that he planned to make “Ultima Thule” the first chapter of his unfinished Russian novel *Solus Rex*, that he eventually abandoned (RY 517). First published in 1942 in *Novyi Zhurnal*, “Ultima Thule,” however, was preceded by the publication in 1940 of the piece that was supposed to be the second chapter to *Solus Rex*, also entitled “Solus Rex.” The latter was first published in what turned out to be the last issue of *Sovremennye Zapiski*. The English version of “Ultima Thule” first appeared as a separate story in the above collection (RY 517).

resolving insight into Sineusov's quest, are the ones that his wife, already unable to speak, wrote “with colored chalk on slate – , for instance, that the things [she] liked most in life were 'verse, wildflowers, and foreign currency” (ST 510). During his elaborate philosophical rambling, Falter, against his own will, repeats the words of the deceased woman and in this way becomes a mediator between the world of living and Nabokov's “otherworld” in this story:

What then would you say about a Truth with a capital T that comprises in itself the explanation and the proof of all possible mental affirmations? One can believe in the *poetry of a wildflower* or the power of *money*, but neither belief predetermines faith in homeopathy or in the necessity to exterminate antelope on the island of Lake Victoria Nyanza, but in any case having learned what I have – if this can be called learning – I received a key to absolutely all the doors and treasure chests in the world; only I have no need to use it, since every thought about its practical significance automatically, by its very nature, grades into the whole series of hinged lids” (ST 516, italics added).

The reference to the verse and money becomes a pattern in this story, as Falter repeats these words in more than one passage. The next one takes place when Falter describes himself as a man who “[acts] like a beggar, *a versifier*, who has received a million of *foreign currency*” (ST 516, italics added). I notice that as in a fairy tale, where the number of opportunities granted to the character to complete an extraordinary task equals three, so in this story the number of times Falter mentions the female character's words is limited to three, with a subsequent reduction of the words given. Indeed, in the first passage the flowers, the verse and the money are mentioned. Although still visible, such reference is somewhat subdued in the second.²² The final passage, where only the money is present, becomes somewhat farcical:

The following day his brother-in-law's dull voice informed me on

²² This fairytale association is more noticeable in the English version of “Ultima Thule,” since Falter compares himself to “the versifier” only in the English translation of this literary piece (tr. by D.V. Nabokov and the author).

the telephone that Falter charged 100 francs for a visit; I asked why on earth had I not been warned of this, and he promptly replied that if the interview were to be repeated, two conversations would cost me only 150. The purchase of truth, even at a discount, did not tempt me, and, after sending him the sum of that unexpected debt, I forced myself not to think about Falter any more (ST 522).

In spite of all the hints that Falter brings to Sineusov's quest, the character fails to recognize the evidence he so eagerly seeks.

Falter's figure as the mediator between the world of the living and the beyond, receives additional meaning that Nabokov purposefully assigns to him. Falter's personal characteristics given in the narrator's description of him, Nabokov brings out as following:

one look at Falter was sufficient to understand that one need not expect from him any of the human feelings common in everyday life, that Falter had utterly lost the knack of loving anyone, of feeling pity, if only for himself, of experiencing kindness and, on occasion, compassion for the soul of another, of habitually serving, as best he could, the cause of good, if only that of his own standard, just as he had lost the knack of shaking hands or using his handkerchief (ST 522).

In her article, "Shades of Love," Ellen Pifer writes that Nabokov's realm of "*timeless* existence" (77) is characterized by an emphasis on love.²³ One wonders therefore, why Nabokov chose such a heartless madman to perform a mediatory function on behalf of his female character. After all, the aesthetic code we have seen so far that connects the world of living and Nabokov's "otherworld" includes a benign list: a butterfly in *Pale Fire* or the tricks of light and shade in "The Vane Sisters." This, however, is a carefully crafted trick on Nabokov's part. As Dolinin indicates, "falter" in German means a "moth" (*Istinnaiia zhizn'* 161) and therefore the mediation

²³ As Pifer writes: it is "love's power to transform the nature of human existence" that "constitutes an 'invisible umbilical cord' which, as Cincinnatus remarks in *Invitation to a Beheading*, 'joins this world,' the prison of finite perception, 'to something beyond it'" ("Shades of Love" 77).

ironically occurs not through a large “caromlike” man, but again through one of Nabokov's scaly-winged creatures.²⁴ In his biography of Nabokov, Boyd also indicates that “*Falter* is German for 'butterfly'” and “like a butterfly, he has been through a process of radical metamorphosis” (RY 518). The metamorphosis, however, does not explain the choice of a heartless mediator between the physical world of Nabokov's character and the world, which is supposedly love. Falter's outward appearance does not seem to be suitable for a butterfly image either.²⁵ What comes to mind is that in this story Nabokov deliberately creates an illusion: Falter's essence is just as harmless and unscary as that of a butterfly or a moth, or even the “otherworld” itself. Despite the evidence, Falter ends up being even helpful to the reader, who also becomes involved in the riddle of the narrator's quest.

In losing a beloved woman and coping with his grief, Sineusov draws close to the protagonist of Pushkin's unfinished drama *Rusalka*. In Pushkin's drama, the young prince overwhelmed by remorse after the suicide of the miller's daughter keeps returning to the banks of the river where she drowned herself. In her article, “Pushkin's Presence in *Solus Rex*,” Irena Ronen writes that Sineusov, just like Pushkin's prince, spends most of the time near the sea (7). What unites both of these characters, is “the feeling of guilt” in regard to the deceased woman (6).²⁶ Indeed, as Nabokov writes, Sineusov sees a dream in which he asks the doctor (“who was

²⁴In her article, “Pushkin's presence in *Solus Rex*,” Irena Ronen, for example, writes that “the appearance of a moth that strikes an electric lamp in [the story] 'The Return of Chorb' evokes the death of Chorb's wife, caused by an electric shock, and indicates her spectral presence, as do many other of Nabokov's moths and butterflies” (12). See Ronen, I. “Pushkin's Presence in *Solus Rex*” in *NOJ: Nabokov Online Journal*, vol. 2, 2008.

²⁵Nabokov also describes Falter as having “a strong cast” with “the caromlike coordination of his bodily movements, as though he had ball bearing for cartilages” that “in retrospect [explained] why he survived the sock: the original figure was large enough to withstand the subtraction” (ST 501).

²⁶Also see the Russian version of this article: Ronen, Irena. “Pushkinskaia tema v nezavershennom romane Nabokova 'Solus Rex'” in *Zvezda* 4, 2008.

at the same time Falter, or was it Alexander Vasilievich?") if it was possible for a child to be born in the grave, to which the doctor replies: "yes, of course it sometimes did happen, that such children (i.e posthumously born) were known as cadaverkins" (ST 497). From the same paragraph one learns that the painter's wife had died six months into her pregnancy: "And, holding on to you from within by a little button, our child went with you. But, my poor sir, one does not make a child to a woman when she has tuberculosis of the throat" (ST 497). The reader discerns the additional meaning of the above lines through the story's connection with fairytales. As Irena Ronen also observes, "Sineusov was not a Bluebeard (this analogy would be employed by Nabokov in *Lolita*), but Falter's punning distortion of the wife-murderer's nickname, 'Moustache-Bleue,' to make it resemble the surname of the painter (514-515), contained an obvious reference to Charles Perrault's *Barbe-bleue* (7). Thus, the motif of guilt creates an important undercurrent in this story that only emphasizes the female "otherworldly" mediation common in Nabokov.

Even though the female character's mediatory function is achieved via interference of another personage (Falter), its significance is not undermined: the female active participation in this story Nabokov makes evident in some other ways as well. For example, the female character's "otherworldly" presence is stated when already in the first paragraph of his letter, Sineusov writes: "if, after your death, I and the world still endure, it is only because you *recollect* the world and me" (ST 500, italics added). Moreover, she establishes her presence in her husband's artistic response to some Nordic poet who commissions him to do a series of illustrations for his epic poem, entitled *Ultima Thule*. At first, Sineusov takes this task to distract himself during his wife's illness and also because the financial compensation for this work gladdens the dying woman. But then, after her death, the fantasy grows into what Nabokov

himself called a “self-contained artistic obsession” (RB 147) and begins to “develop its own reality” (RB 147) to the extent that the character moves into it physically.²⁷ His art helps him to resurrect his wife in another guise as “Queen Belinda,” but only temporarily as she is to die during an attempted coup. Despite Sineusov's failure to triumph over death even in the world of “free fancy” (RB 147), he understands that his recollections of his wife is the only ally of her eternal existence: “most terrifying of all is the thought that inasmuch as you glow henceforth within me, I must safeguard my life. My transitory bodily frame is perhaps the only guarantee of your ideal existence: When I vanish, it will vanish as well” (ST 522). But Sineusov is wrong, as through his letter and Nabokov's story, the beloved woman has immortalized herself.

According to Dolinin's hypothesis, Nabokov's unfinished Russian novel *Solus Rex* (of which “Ultima Thule” constitutes a chapter), was supposed to be a part of the never finished second volume of *The Gift* (*Istinnnaia zhizn'* 278).²⁸ In her study of the unpublished materials (the so-called “pink notebook” preserved in Nabokov's archives in The Library of Congress, Washington DC) that contain what could have been a continuation to *The Gift*, Jane Grayson writes that “the time is fifteen years on” from the action of *The Gift* (“Washington's Gift” 28). One learns that Fyodor, who is now a writer, is married to Zina and lives in Paris in a one-room flat. Unlike in *The Gift*, the characters' relationship is not cloudless: Fyodor is abrupt and disregarding with Zina.²⁹ After a quick but intense infatuation with a prostitute, he loses Zina

²⁷As Nabokov explains: “Sineusov mentions in Chapter One that he is moving from the Riviera to his former apartment in Paris; actually, he moves into a bleak palace on a bleak northern island” (RB, 147- 48).

²⁸On what could become the second volume to *The Gift*, see Grayson, Jane. “Washington's Gift: Materials Pertaining to Nabokov's *Gift* in the Library of Congress.” *Nabokov's Studies*, vol. 1 (1994), 21-67. Dolinin, A. *Istinnnaia Zhizn' pisateliia Sirina*, Akademicheskii proekt, 2004, 278-293; Leving, Yu. *Keys to The Gift: A Guide to Nabokov's Novel*. Boston: Academic Studies P, 2011, pp. 18-26.

²⁹ As an example of Fyodor's “self-absorption and unwillingness to see Zina's position” Grayson

through her death in a car accident and, like Pushkin's prince or Nabokov's Sineusov, feels pangs of remorse in regard to the lost woman. As a result of his grief, Fyodor finishes Pushkin's *Rusalka*, an act which becomes “a symbolic action” that reflects “the real loss of the loved one” (Ronen, I. 9).³⁰ The “invented losses” in “Ultima Thule” and the chapter “Solus Rex”³¹ that were to be the parts of Fyodor's creation are also the refraction of love through loss.

In establishing a connection between *Solus Rex* and the unfinished second volume of *The Gift*, Dolinin provides some important links that make this connection possible. Among those are the thematic ones: the death of a beloved wife, coping with the loss on the shores of the Riviera, and moving to Paris after that. Moreover, both Fyodor and Sineusov receive their inspiration from a work that belongs to somebody else.³² To Dolinin's list one may add another connecting point that has to do with the female characters in both of these works. The only fictional woman in Nabokov's art who like Sineusov's wife does *not* appear in the character's dreams is Zina in *The Gift*. In his address to his wife, Sineusov writes: “As to you, never once since you died have you appeared in my dreams. Perhaps the authorities intercept you, or you yourself avoid such prison visits with me” (ST 502). In *The Gift's* third chapter, Nabokov writes that Zina also “never

provides a scene where Shchegovel's nephew Kostritskii arrives in Paris from Germany “on the scrounge from his step-cousin” (“Washington's Gift” 28). Fyodor, who comes home after a lousy day “taken up by some filming with one thought—to sit down and write” finds a stranger in the house, becomes rude with Zina and “goes out leaving her to cover up for him with a lame excuse about his having had to go the chemist's” (“Washington's Gift” 29).

³⁰According to Boyd, Fyodor's ending to Pushkin's drama was supposed to be an epilogue to the second volume of *The Gift* (517).

³¹The chapter “Solus Rex” is a tale of a lonely king in a Northern land.

³²Dolinin argues that the most important connection between the two pieces is the protagonist's desire to find out the truth of the essence of being (“nekuiu tainu bytiia”) and Falter's figure that is present in both works (282 and 284). I. Ronen provides another link, not mentioned previously by the commentators, which is the motif of guilt (“Pushkin's Presence” 7).

appeared in [Fyodor's] dreams, remaining content to delegate various representatives of hers and confidantes, who bore no resemblance to her but who produced sensations that made a fool of him – to which the bluish dawn was a witness” (G 191). There is something ephemeral and intangible in Fyodor's description of Zina:

Она как тень внезапно появлялась, от родственной стихии отделясь. Сначала освещались только ноги, так ставимые тесно, что казалось, она идет по тонкому канату. Она была в коротком летнем платье ночного цвета – цвета фонарей, теней, стволов, лоснящейся панели: бледнее рук ее, темней лица (Dar 357, italics added).

She always unexpectedly appeared out of the darkness, like a shadow leaving its kindred element. At first her ankles would catch the light: she moved them close together as if she walked along a slender rope. Her summer dress was short, of night's own color, the color of the streetlights and the shadows, of three trunks and of shining pavement – paler than her bare arms and darker than her face” (G 189).³³

Considering Dolinin's hypothesis about the connection between Nabokov's two literary pieces and also the fact that Fyodor is the author of both, it is likely that his loss of Zina is somehow reflected in Sineusov's tale. Considering Zina's future fate as presented in the drafts to the second volume of *The Gift*, it is not unlikely that just as Sineusov's wife, she would have been Nabokov's “otherworldly” agent.

³³At the same time, Zina's spectral and intangible nature is only partially emphasized in *The Gift*. One of the examples of her earthy presence is unambiguously stated when she is busy patching a sock, which is also another example of a woman at work in Nabokov's fiction:

She was sitting by the door to the balcony and with her gleaming lips half parted was aiming a thread at a needle....She continued to busy herself with a stocking stretched over a wooden mushroom [prodolzhalo vozit'sia s chulkom na gribe] and without lifting her eyes, but smiling quickly and slyly, she said: 'I also know that you used to live at seven Tannenberg Street, I often went there (G 193, my italics).

We have seen so far that one of the main departments of Nabokov's metaphysics is pneumatology. In his book, *Aerial View: Essays on Nabokov's Art and Metaphysics*, Gennady Barabtarlo writes:

a trained eye can detect, in many of his stories and novels, another dimension very delicately, almost ephemerally inset into the text. There, the spirits of the dead may softly interpose in the affairs of the quick. Characters thus affected never recognize the presence; and the few select ones that do step beyond vague premonitions cannot retain their sanity and sometimes their very life. They may sense the waft but cannot see its source, and any attempt to trace it is thwarted by a gentle but resolute hand – a guardian angel distracting a child who is about to explore a whirling fan by touch (51).³⁴

In this respect, the pattern of squirrels that run through the novel *Pnin* presents particular interest as it also reveals a female tender participation “in mortal lives on the part of those who once cared for them when they too were mortal” (AY 282).

Several critics have noticed that behind the pattern of squirrels in *Pnin* stands the figure of Pnin's former fiancée, Mira Belochkin, who tragically perished in a Nazi concentration camp. As Rakhimova-Sommers points out, Nabokov introduces the image of an “otherworldly observer” in the novel, who seems to be watching over mortals with a “compassionate eye” (155).³⁵ This mysterious observer, as Boyd explains, one “might not be wrong to think is Mira Belochkin herself” (AY 286). Apart from the obvious connection between Mira's last name and

³⁴ In his analysis of “The Enchanter,” Barabtarlo demonstrates that through a particular set of devices, the “otherworldly woman quite actively and even aggressively managed to prevent harm from being done to her daughter and punished the offender. For a detailed analysis of the female mediatory function in this story, see Barabtarlo, G. “Those who Favor Fire (On The Enchanter)” in *Aerial View: Essays on Nabokov's Art and Metaphysics*, 39-75.

³⁵ As Rakhimova-Sommers indicates, the term “mysterious observer” was introduced by Nabokov himself in the discussion of his English novel *Transparent Things* in one of his interviews. See *Strong Opinions*, p. 195.

the word from which it derives (“belochka” is a Russian diminutive of belka/squirrel), one finds in the text a reference to Mira as “the kindly designer of the squirrel pattern in Pnin's fate” (AY 286). As Boyd indicates, throughout the first part of Chapter Five, “the pointedly disguised repetition of 'mira' (Miranda or Mary...Mary or Almira) in the names of the imagined observers looking down on Pnin, and the squirrel whose escape from death seems to trigger Pnin's long delayed discovery of the right route – now take on an eerie suggestiveness” (AY 286). Here is the passage: “from the top platform of an old, seldom used outlook tower – a 'prospect tower' as it was formerly termed... the adventurous summer tourist (*Miranda* or Mary, Tom or Jim, whose pencilled names were almost obliterated on the balustrade) might observe a vast sea of greenery” (P 112, italics added). The paragraph that follows the above opens with a similar repetition of Mira's name and the appearance of Pnin himself under the prospect tower:

On a dull warm day in the summer of 1954, Mary or *Almira*, or, for that matter, Wolfgang von Goethe, whose name had been carved in the ballustrade by some old-fashioned wag, might have noticed an automobile that had turned off the highway just before reaching the bridge and was now nosing and pocking this way and that in a maze of doubtful roads. It moved warily and unsteadily.... At times it might seem, to a less sympathetic soul than *our imagined observer*, that this pale blue, egg-shaped two-door sedan, of uncertain age and in mediocre condition, was manned by an idiot. Actually its driver was Professor Timofey Pnin, of Waindell College (P 113, italics added).

Pnin's unfortunate meandering in the woods, however, would soon be resolved by the “otherworldly” observer, to which Nabokov creates multiple references in the novel: “Our luckless car operator had by now lost himself too thoroughly to be able to go back to the highway, and since he had little experience in maneuvering on rutty narrow roads ... his various indecisions and gropings took those bizarre visual forms that *an observer on the outlook tower might have followed with a compassionate eye . . .*” (P 115, italics added). This chain of

associational cross-references ends with a squirrel who miraculously escapes a gun shot and also an ant who with “inept perseverance” for hours tried to get on top of the tower. The latter, as pointed out by Rakhimova-Sommers, is an affectionate caricature of Pnin himself, drawn from above (155). Then, “a moment of 'cosmic sincronization' unites these seemingly unrelated images and events into one harmonious whole” (Rakhimova-Sommers 155): “the ant found an upright beam leading to the roof of the tower and started to ascend it with renewed zest; the sun appeared; and Pnin at the height of hopelessness, found himself on a paved road with a rusty but still glistening sign directing wayfares 'To the Pines'” (P 155).

One finds in Chapter One an even more obvious connection between Mira and the pattern of squirrels. The squirrel appears first in the context of the protagonist's heart attack that recalls his childhood delirium. In his fever, he feels that the squirrel pictured on the wooden screen of his room in St. Petersburg may hold “the answer to the world's riddle” (Nicol 199) and becomes preoccupied about the “reddish object” that the rodent holds in its paws. As he emerges back into his present surroundings, “a gray squirrel sitting on comfortable haunches on the ground before him” emblematically samples “a peach stone” (24). Suddenly, it seems as if the riddle has been answered: Pnin recovers and as in the previous case, at once finds a way he so eagerly seeks (to reach Cremona and deliver the scheduled lecture on time). As Pnin's seizure takes him back into his past, he also recalls Dr. Yakov Belochkin, the pediatrician who treated him for his childhood fever. Along with being Pnin's doctor and a good friend of his father, Yakov Belochkin is also Mira's father. The mentioning of her death on the pages of *Pnin* poses a question of “whether ours is a world of pointless pain” (AY 282). As Boyd indicates, the novel provides “a number of possible metaphysical answers to the problem of human pain” (282), which is indeed a cardinal problem in *Pnin*. In the first chapter and later on, life piles misfortune

after misfortune on Pnin, as if there were some “evil designer- the destroyer of minds, the friend of fever... that concealed the pattern with such monstrous care, that the key must be as precious as life itself and when found, would regain for Timofey Pnin his everyday health, his everyday world” (P 23). As if by magic, however, “the apparently insurmountable obstacles” are suddenly withdrawn and, as Boyd explains, “some other force seems to arrange a kindlier disposition of fate, and incorporates the squirrel and its peach stone in refutation of the idea of an evil designer or a pointless pain” (AY 283).

Despite the compassion one feels for Pnin, one wonders how to deal with Mira's death. Later on one learns that being found too weak to work, she was chosen to be exterminated. Being an “anthropomorphic deity” to all his characters, Nabokov makes Pnin somewhat immune to her death by giving him a chance not to think about her, partially as a result of being trapped in his own misfortunes. From Chapter Five one learns that

in order to exist rationally, Pnin had taught himself, during the last ten years, never to remember Mira Belochkin – not because, in itself, the evocation of a youthful love affair, banal and brief, threatened his peace of mind..., but because if one were quite sincere with oneself, no conscience, and hence, no consciousness, could be expected to subsist in a world where such things as Mira's death were possible. One had to forget – because one could not live with the thought that this graceful, fragile, tender young woman with those eyes, that smile, those gardens and snows in the background, had been brought in a cattle car to an extermination camp and killed by an injection of phenol into the heart, into the gentle heart one had heard beating under one's lips in the dusk of the past (P 134-135).³⁶

³⁶ In his *Anthology of Jewish-Russian Literature*, Maxim Shrayer comments that Mira is possibly a composite image of the medievalist Myrrha Lot-Borodine (1882-1957) and also Raisa Blokh (1899-1943), whose collection of poems *My City* (1928), Nabokov negatively reviewed in the Berlin daily *The Rudder* (Rul') (*Anthology* 1, 463). Blokh died in a concentration camp – the exact circumstances of Blokh's death are unknown – and as Shrayer comments: “Nabokov, who had known both Blokh and Gorlin [Blokh's husband] in Berlin and who left Germany in 1937 with a Jewish wife and son, later regretted the harshness of his review. His remorse might have led him to the discovery of the character of Mira Belochkin” in *Pnin* (*Anthology* 1, 463). Another reason for Mira's possible

Although Pnin's seizure in the novel's first chapter revives in him “that rich recollection of his past, that generous measure of his having lived through so much, and to awaken our sense of the poignant reality of Pnin's inner self” (AY 283), one wonders how to be reconciled with Mira's fate. Described in the same chapter as “murdered, forgotten, unrevenged, incorrupt, *immortal*” (P 27, my italics), one wonders whether the reader, just as Pnin, should not contemplate her death. This, however, is not Nabokov's intent. As is the case with David's fate in *Bend Sinister*, Nabokov refuses to make of Mira's torture and death something other than torture and death. What Zoran Kuzmanovich says in a different context is true in regard to Mira as well: “what is better for Nabokov is the possibility of a world without torture. To keep that possibility alive, Nabokov gives us David Krug (and I also think Mira Belochkin), as cute and loveable as any of our children, but a child who happens to end up tortured to death. In the end, such torture and death cannot make sense in the world of *Bend Sinister* or in any other world. It cannot because it must not” (57).³⁷

In his book, Barabtarlo observes that there is a correspondence between “the squirrel's visiting a chapter” and Pnin's appointed misfortune, immediately passed or immediately pending” (*Aerial View* 151). When in chapter two, right after his former wife's insolent behavior, Pnin contemplates her “impure, dry, sordid, infantile soul” and yet wishes to keep her, a squirrel encounters him on the path, “climbs up to the brim of a drinking fountain and, as Pnin approaches, thrust its oval face toward him” (58). Pnin obliges by pressing the pedal that

composite image is that Raisa Blokh's poems also appeared in 1939 in the volume *Testaments* along with poems by Myrrha Lot-Borodine (*Anthology* 1, 463).

³⁷ Kuzmanovich also quotes Theodor Adorno's statement that “[t]here is no longer beauty or consolation except in the gaze falling on horror, withstanding it, and in an alleviated consciousness of negativity holding fast to the possibility of what is better” (57). There is hardly any other solution to Mira's fate.

controls the flow of water. After eyeing him with contempt, the thirsty rodent goes on drinking for a considerable time and then leaves “without the least sign of gratitude” (P 58). In its absolute greed and ingratitude, the squirrel seems to resemble Lisa, who appears several times throughout the novel with a number of personal requests for Pnin, appalling in their crudity. It also prompts Pnin to realize that his earlier desire to keep his former wife “with her cruelty, with her vulgarity” is not worth a thing.³⁸ Indeed, Lisa's appearance in Pnin's life presents a chain of events that only emphasise his unfortunate fate and draws the reader's attention to his misfortunes. Not being able to receive adequate praise for her poetry from the narrator, she takes Pnin's marriage proposal out of revenge toward the narrator, her former lover. Another betrayal occurs on board the ship when being pregnant with another man's child and still married to Pnin, she makes an easy access to America the only reason for her travel with Pnin. Finally, several years later after leaving her second husband, she appears at Waindell to ask the protagonist to contribute to her son's schooling, to which Pnin agrees. As mentioned earlier, Nabokov makes Liza an artist.³⁹ But her poetry, written in the style of Akhmatova's epigones, is only a mediocre copy of the actual writer. Along with Lisa, Nabokov also presents Mira as an artist. Her interest in photographic art is evident when Pnin recalls the “fads of his and [her] youth, the amateur theatricals, the gypsy ballads, *the passion she had for photography*” (P 134, my italics). In light of Nabokov's attitude toward a creative woman, it is indicative that there are two women in Pnin's life, who reveal some artistic curiosity. Lisa's cruelty and vulgarity, however, prevent her

³⁸ In the same passage right before the squirrel appears, Pnin suddenly senses that he is “on the verge of grasping at last the all resolving principle of the universe (*his word*), the key to his existence” (*Aerial View* 152). This major revelation, as Barabtarlo explains, is “perhaps the fact of his being the subject of the masterly invention, the squirrel's persistent reappearance serving as proof and telltale emblem” (*Aerial View* 152).

³⁹ Lisa's interest in poetry, however, is not her primary occupation. After settling in America, she becomes a professional psychiatrist and is referred to as Dr. Lisa Wind.

from exhibiting a genuine artistic result.⁴⁰ But in contrast to Pnin's former wife, Nabokov refers to Mira as a real artist.

In view of Mira's artistic passion, it is indicative that the squirrel's appearance on the pages of *Pnin* can be compared to a series of photographic snapshots: a squirrel drawn on the screen of Pnin's childhood bed; a squirrel holding a peach stone; a squirrel drinking water from the fountain, a squirrel that crosses the snow in front of the college library, and, finally, a picture postcard representing "The Gray Squirrel" (P 88) that accompanies Pnin's letter to Lisa's son. Nabokov insists on visual imagery in the novel as a means of presenting – also by contrast – another visual artist, the painter Gramineev, whom Pnin briefly encounters in Chapter Five (a chapter dedicated to Mira's memory). As Barabtarlo observes, Mira's actual photographs share the subjects with the paintings of Gramineev, "a well-known, frankly academic painter, whose soulful oils – 'Mother Volga,' 'Three Old Friends' (lad, nag, dog), 'April Glade,' and so forth – still graced a museum in Moscow" (*Phantom* 214. Note 133.32). According to Barabtarlo, being of the same period as Gramineev's paintings, Mira's pictures somehow deprecate the works of the famous artist (*Phantom* 214, n. 133.32) when Pnin asks: "where were they now, those artistic snapshots she used to take – pets, clouds, flowers, and *April glade* with shadows of birches on wet-sugar snow, soldiers posturing on the roof of a boxcar, a sunset skyline, a hand holding a book?" (P 133). As Rakhimova-Sommers observes, Gramineev's artistic reputation is further undermined in Chapter Five when Pnin regrets that Lisa's son Victor – a very talented youth and possibly a genius – is not present at Cook's summer house to meet and also be coached by Gramineev (160). To that, as Rakhimova-Sommers also notes, one of the guests at the house

⁴⁰ Nabokov believed in Pushkin's aesthetic principle that "genius and villainy are two things that are incompatible" (Davydov 487).

unambiguously remarks: “You exaggerate the splendor” (P 127).

In view of Mira's artistic vocation, it is also not accidental that Pnin chooses a *picture* post card that depicts “the Gray Squirrel” (P 88) as a gift to Victor. After agreeing to Lisa's request to contribute to Victor's schooling, Pnin meets the boy and gives him a number of presents among which the post card acquires its own significance. This card brings a whole chain of events that end up being beneficial for Pnin. For example, as a sign of gratitude, Victor sends him a glass punch-bowl that in turn creates an opportunity for Pnin to show off his intellectual brilliance. When a guest at his party explains that as a child she always imagined Cinderella's glass shoes “to be of exactly that greenish blue tint” (P 158) as the character's new glass bowl, with the sudden pedantry and accuracy of a good scholar, Pnin explains the erroneous assumption that has led to the wrong conclusion:

Professor Pnin remarked that Cendrillion's shoes were not made of glass but of Russian squirrel fur – *vair* in French. It was he said, an obvious case of the survival of the fittest among words, *verre* being more evocative than *vair* which, he submitted, came not from *varius*, variegated, but from *veveritsa*, Slavic for a certain beautiful, pale, winter-squirrel fur, having a bluish, or better say *sizily*, columbine shade – from *columba*, Latin for “pigeon,” as somebody here well knows... (P 158).⁴¹

As in the previous episode where Pnin gets lost in the woods, in this instance the seemingly unrelated images and events are united into one harmonious whole. The post card, the glass bowl, the squirrel's fur, and the shoes of a fairy tale princess, unexpectedly serve as the indicators of Pnin's life consisting of not only losses, but also gains. As Charles Nicol says, among Pnin's gains is “a completion of an extensive piece of research,” in which the reference to

⁴¹According to Charles Nicol, the confusion of *vair* and *verre* is accepted scholarship (Nicol 201). See Stith Thompson, *The Folktale*, New York, 1946, p.127.

the above episode is mentioned (198).

Thus, an image of a squirrel “gracing every chapter with scheduled regularity” (*Aerial View* 151) is an emblematic one. Barabtarlo comments that its appearances in *Pnin* “assemble into a pattern more complete than the one formed by a posy of violets in *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight*, or by the oblong puddle in *Bend Sinister*, or by the sunglasses in *Lolita*” (*Aerial View* 151). And yet, whether its image is an “otherworldly” one or “simply a poetic part of the novel’s intricate design” has been the subject of critical debate (Rakhimova-Sommers 152). While Rowe argues that the squirrels in *Pnin* are the “resurrections of Pnin’s dead boyhood sweetheart Mira Belochkin” (62), Barabtarlo explains that no matter how persistently such imagery may recur in Nabokov’s fiction, it needs to carry “no burden of meaning whatsoever other than the fact that someone beyond the work is repeating them, that they are all part of one masterly pattern” (*Aerial View* 155).⁴² Attempting to draw a conclusion from these interpretations, Rakhimova-Sommers writes that “one might argue that as far as Nabokov and the idea of the ‘otherworld’ is concerned, the question is never of establishing its existence with absolute certainty, but allowing for the possibility of such existence, in whichever shape or form it presents itself to the imaginable reader. One would not go too far allowing that ‘perhaps’ there is some kind of ‘presence’ in *Pnin*, especially in the chapter devoted to Mira’s memory” (152). In order to understand Nabokov’s design, as Barabtarlo and Boyd both assert, the reader “ought to gain an elevated vantage point,” to climb on a prospect tower as she is encouraged to do in *Pnin* (*Aerial View* 176). As Boyd explains, Nabokov well understood that “any power which could pattern human lives would have to be far beyond the human, beyond the fathoming of reason”

⁴² For Boyd’s criticism of Rowe’s method see also *AY*, 585-86 and *Nabokov’s Ada: the Place of Consciousness*, 237-253.

(*Nabokov's Ada* 101). But he also felt that “imagination might be able to imitate this power and to create a 'correlated pattern in the game,' thereby, perhaps, sharing 'something of the same pleasure in [the patterned game of life] as those who played it found” (*Nabokov's Ada* 101).

One may say with certainty that Mira's presence on the pages of *Pnin* can hardly be left unnoticed. Nabokov's “otherworld” justifies the female existence in his art. Paradoxically, instead of being unnoticeable, almost unnecessary figures, in the fictional worlds of his novels and stories they become quite active. They appear in dreams that can be prophetic, or communicate through a system of mute responses. They remind us about themselves through special imagery: butterflies and animals, light and shade, and establish their presence in other people's memories through their personal characteristics. In the context of Nabokov's metaphysical imagery, one more image seems especially important. If the “otherworld” occupies such an important place in Nabokov's oeuvre, and if his female characters are indeed his “otherworldly” agents, one wonders whether there is a single female figure that can embody the distinctive characteristics of all “otherworldly” women in Nabokov's art. Such a female figure exists and its image is a *rusalka* (a mermaid).

3.2.1 On the Role of “*Rusalka*” in Nabokov's Art

A *rusalka* or a mermaid is a mythological female creature that can live simultaneously in two worlds and is herself a means of interaction between them. As Rakhimova-Sommers explains, her dualistic nature “perfectly matches the very essence of the writer's fleeting, loving, and lovable realm” (9). Nabokov's fascination with mermaids is known. They appear everywhere in his art: from their paraphernalia (combs, mirrors) and the red hair of his heroines to the water imagery and anagrams relevant to their being. Several examples from Nabokov's texts are especially indicative.

In *Lolita*, for example, Humbert contemplates drowning Charlotte and it is not accidental, perhaps, that after her death she appears in his dream “as a mermaid in a greenish tank” (AL 132).⁴³ The aspiring artist Victor Wind in *Pnin*, “places various objects in turn – an apple, a pencil, a chess pawn, *a comb* – behind a glass of water and [peers] through it at each studiously” (P 98). In his article, “The Otherworldly Role of Water,” David Rutledge discusses the presence of words that allude to water as special imagery that often serves as a means of transcendent communication in Nabokov's art. Indeed, in the story “Spring in Fialta,” the voice of the dead singer, so powerful and ecstatically full that when she was alive seemed to “swallow her up in the glory of a fiery clod” as soon as she would begin:

On dit que tu te maries,
tu sais que j'en vais mourir,

this absent voice gives the male protagonist no rest. After Nina's departure, “the melody, the pain, the offense, the link between hymen and death evoked by the rhythm, and the voice of the dead singer” arises “at increasing intervals like the last *flat little waves* sent to the beach by a passing ship” (ST 419, italics added).⁴⁴ This passage also reminds one of the beautiful voice of the little mermaid in Andersen's fairy tale that she has to trade for a pair of legs in order to become human. As pointed out earlier, it is the absence of Lolita's voice from the concord of other children's voices that gives Humbert pangs of remorse.⁴⁵ Although considerable research has been done on the

⁴³ For more examples of Charlotte being associated with a mermaid see Dolinin, A. *Istinniaia zhizn' pisatelia Sirina* p. 293.

⁴⁴ For a detailed analysis of Nabokov's “otherworldly” rusalka in this story see Rakhimova-Sommer's dissertation, pp. 12-60.

⁴⁵ In her article, “Nabokov's *Lolita* and Andersen's *The Little Mermaid*,” Emily Collins looks specifically at how Andersen's fairytale “The Little Mermaid” is evoked in *Lolita*, and draws the parallels between the two works that would elucidate the implications of this fairytale “among Humbert's educational gifts” and “Nabokov's fairy-tale allusions” (77).

manifestation of rusalka in Nabokov's art, one instance has not been mentioned in criticism.⁴⁶ As part of the aesthetic code with which Nabokov allows the “otherworldly” communication to take place in his art, the mermaid hides in the chance anagram of “rusalka” from the German word *kursaal* in the English version of *King, Queen, Knave* and is relevant to its female protagonist Martha, a good swimmer and an unsuccessful killer (KQK 251).⁴⁷

One wonders why the image of a mermaid held such fascination for Nabokov. Perhaps one reason is that she is indeed “the only mythological creature to combine the best of both worlds, the here and the beyond,” and is herself a link between them (Rakhimova-Sommers 17). In his article, Barton Johnson points out the mermaid's obvious meaning as the figure of death (L'inconnue 244). According to the history of mermaids, the rusalka is a mythological spirit of a woman who has died an unnatural death. Being a victim of betrayed love, she drowns herself in the river.⁴⁸ Examples of this nature are numerous in Nabokov's art. One remembers that Shade's daughter Hazel commits suicide by drowning as a result of the impossibility of requited love in *Pale Fire*, and the red-haired Lucette does the same in *Ada*. In fact, in this novel, Van's last letter to Lucette contains a reference to her as a “mermaid” and a “bird of paradise.” As Boyd explains, Van thinks of her, drowned in the Atlantic, as the user of face powder with the “bird of paradise on the lid”: “it had been Lucette, now a *mermaid* in the groves of Atlantis..., who had favored that powder”

⁴⁶ For more examples see Rutledge, David. “The Otherworldly Role of Water.” *The Nabokovian* 41 (fall) 1998, 19-23. Alexandrov, Vladimir. *Nabokov's Otherworld*. p.181.

⁴⁷ Other examples of the “otherworldly” agents hiding in anagrams are mentioned by Raguet-Bouvard in a linguistic connection between Lolita's nickname “Lo” and the French word “l'eau”/water (Rakhimova-Sommers 38). For word play of a similar nature see also Rutledge p. 21.

⁴⁸ Although there is a link between the tragic death of a woman and Nabokov's otherworld, Johnson warns against the wrong interpretation of death in Nabokov. The “watermark” of Nabokov's mermaids is simply one of the expressions of Nabokov's “hereafter” (244) or “otherworld,” which, as Alexandrov has pointed out, is quite complex, and, as Johnson comments, “not always what it seems” (244).

(qtd. in *Nabokov's Ada* 203, my italics).⁴⁹

Besides the image of death, there are other reasons for a rusalka to occupy a special place for Nabokov. One of them is biographical. The duality of a mermaid reflects Nabokov's bilingualism (Nabokov knew several languages, but wrote mainly in English and Russian) and his literary identity was as a Russian and American writer. As Jane Grayson says: "the translation of earth maiden into water spirit gives him a new and productive image, not just for expressing his feelings of loss and betrayal, but also a sense that through art there can be an assurance of continuity through change, a way through from one world to the next" (170). By loss and betrayal Grayson means Nabokov's need to emigrate to Europe and then to America after the Russian revolution of 1917.⁵⁰ Therefore, it is "at the point when Nabokov was going through the difficult process of transforming himself into a writer of English, that the motif of metamorphosis and of journeying between states of being enters his writing in combination with the motifs of violent death" (Grayson 171). The dualistic nature of a mermaid also reflects the author's identities as a writer and a professor at Cornell, Wellesley College, and Harvard, a professional lepidopterist and an artist. An allusion between the origin of the mermaids and Nabokov's pseudonym, which he used during his Russian years is also identifiable. Sirin, the last name he chose in order not to be confused with his father, reminds one of sirens, at least phonetically. As Beatrice Pillpots has it, these birds of paradise, according to Greek mythology, were to metamorphose "from birds to fish

⁴⁹ Just before her death, Lucette writes a letter to Van that he reads prior to her death. This letter includes a poem that deals with the subject of a ghost talking to a mortal. For Lucette's mermaid manifestations and her messages from the grave see Boyd, Brian. *Nabokov's Ada: The Place of Consciousness*. pp. 202-236.

⁵⁰ Nabokov frequently associates the loss of his country and language with a theme of nostalgia for the lost past. His first Russian novel *Mashen'ka* (1926), written already in his literary exile, is about the memories of the past which can never be regained in their original form. Brian Boyd's bibliography in two volumes is especially helpful in understanding Nabokov's literary stages: Russian, European: German and French, and American.

as they became more closely identified in the popular imagination with the fish-tailed mermaid” (Pillpotts 20). The metamorphosis of birds into fish and Nabokov’s transformation as a writer is suggested by this comparison. There is also a literary reason to draw a connection between Nabokov’s art and this mythological creature. As mentioned earlier, among Nabokov’s collected works, there is an ending to Pushkin’s unfinished drama *Rusalka*. Just as the rusalka reflects Nabokov’s fundamental questions of death, loss and “the metamorphosis,” so *Rusalka* to Pushkin was “a work he kept returning to and into which he seems to have projected some of his thoughts on dilemmas of loss and adjustment, of life at a crossroads” (Grayson 164). Is Nabokov’s ending to Pushkin’s drama merely a tribute to the great master, or are there other reasons for it? Grayson mentions that when someone asked Nabokov about Pushkin’s “artistic, personal, or merely utilitarian” (164) reasons for “leaving off writing the drama when he did” (164), Nabokov, at one point in his commentary to *Evgenii Onegin* said: “these are matters of metaphysical order” (164). Perhaps finishing Pushkin’s drama was a matter of metaphysical order for Nabokov as well.

The image of a mermaid is also important for Nabokov's representation of women including the literary ones. According to Russian mythology, the elusiveness of a mermaid is one of her dominant characteristics (Rakhimova-Sommers 9). This also holds true of Nabokov’s representation of female characters. Since women in his art are often associated with the “otherworld,” they are surrounded by its mysterious nature and therefore not easily definable. On the elusiveness of fictional women in Nabokov's art Stacy Schiff writes: “most of the benevolent female characters in Nabokov are women we barely see; inside or outside the parentheses, quickly, efficiently, and often in childbirth they die. They fail to materialize even in the works that bear their name. The faithless, treacherous, obtuse women claim their roles front and center” (162). Their elusiveness makes them especially mysterious and intriguing, just as Nabokov’s art:

“Eta taina ta-ta, ta-ta-ta-ta,/a tochnee skazat’ ia ne vprave.” (that main secret tra-ta-ta tra-ta-ta tra-ta – /And I must not be overtly explicit) (qtd. in Scherr, “Poetry” 619). But the fleeting and illusory nature of their being should not be wrongly taken for their passivity.

The image of a mermaid that shines as a watermark through Nabokov's art makes his women especially powerful. Her distinctive characteristics that pertain to Nabokov's “otherworld” are elusiveness, the ability to live in two worlds and to fulfill a mediatory function. A mermaid's position as a victim and a figure of death also makes her remarkable in the writer's view. But what seems to be most important for Nabokov is that her image makes her a victim on the one hand and a powerful creature on the other. In Pushkin's drama and Nabokov's ending to it she is even revengeful.⁵¹ In the latter portion of this chapter, I shall demonstrate how Nabokov implements what can be called a “rusalka” principle in his works by showing how heroines who are seemingly vulnerable and victimized on the one hand become quite powerful on the other. This topic has been partially addressed by us in the discussion of women in *Pale Fire*, “The Vane Sisters,” and “Ultima Thule.” Although Hazel Shade, the Vane sisters, and Sineusov's wife become quite active in Nabokov's fictional worlds after death, the “rusalka” principle also holds true of the alive women in his art and his representation of other literary women whose actions and personal characteristics shed light on Nabokov's literary views. The latter point brings us to the last but not least function of Nabokov's heroines: *metaliterary*.

3.2.2 The “Rusalka” Principle and Nabokov's Literary Women.

How does Nabokov achieve making his seemingly vulnerable and victimized female

⁵¹In *Pnin's* second chapter, Nabokov also makes an interesting comment that “Lermontov [...] has expressed everything about mermaids in only two poems” (P 61).

characters on the one hand, active and powerful on the other? The answer is in Nabokov's representation of them, because to the attentive re-reader he presents them that way. In view of this method of representation, Sarah Herbold's article is interesting, as with the example of *Lolita* she explains how Nabokov implements what we call a “rusalka” principle in regard to his women readers and also female characters. As Herbold says, although the novel “does mount an attack on the female reader, whom he alternately excludes, belittles, shocks, and bullies,” it also “covertly acknowledges its need for and indebtedness to female readers, characters, and writers, whom he portrays as powerful and sophisticated” (75).

In her article, Herbold addresses explicitly the issue of how Nabokov grants his female readers a choice of whether to feel themselves as victims or not. For example, throughout the novel he seems to privilege the male audience by making Humbert direct his narrative toward “a male reader, as if to suggest that they are sharing a naughty joke out of earshot – and at the expense – of women” (Herbold 84). It is perhaps for this reason that Colleen Kennedy argues that “*Lolita* enacts a symbolic murder of woman for the viewing pleasure of a community of men” (qtd. in Herbold 74) thus attributing to its female readers a victimized position. But Humbert's appeal to the male reader and the latter's alleged submission to his rhetoric allows Nabokov to also undermine that male reader's cleverness and to shame his desires. As Herbold convincingly states, “with his extravagant irony, Humbert implies that the nymphomaniac is a crazed, pathetic, oversexed criminal who believes that nymphets really exist instead of recognizing that they are the projection of his own diseased mind” (85):

A normal man given a group photograph of school girls or Girl Scouts and asked to point out the comeliest one will not necessarily choose the nymphet among them. You have to be an artist and a madman, a creature of infinite melancholy, with a bubble of hot poison in your loins and a super voluptuous flame permanently aglow in your subtle spine (oh, how you have to cringe and hide), in

order to discern at once ... the little deadly demon among the wholesome children...(qtd. in Herbold 85).

As Herbold also observes, “by repeating the second person pronoun (*You* have to be an artist...with a bubble of hot poison in *your* loins, etc.), Humbert implies that the reader may also be a nymphomaniac” (85). The above passage, however, has nothing to do with the women readers and not by chance. In those instances where Humbert seems to appeal only to the male audience (“Gentlemen of the jury!”), Nabokov does not mean to ignore his female readers, but merely keeps them at bay from the scandalous nature of those instances.

But how then does a female reader of *Lolita* become powerful and sophisticated and why does Nabokov need her and why is he indebted to her? A part of Nabokov's artistic game is to invite a woman reader to actively participate in *Lolita's* “strenuous battlegame” (92) and to test her literary intelligence. As mentioned earlier in this chapter, Herbold sees *Lolita* as much more sophisticated and clever than she appears and just like Humbert, she is playing artistic games. The same holds true of her mother Charlotte. Although Humbert and Nabokov “both seem unequivocally to reject this typical American adult female as stupid and unattractive, Charlotte is also strangely sympathetic. She is also much more powerful than she appears” (93). Indeed, as Herbold points out, it is due to Charlotte that *Lolita* is smitten by Quilty before Humbert even comes to “Ramsdale” (94). It is also *Lolita's* mother who makes her believe that Humbert has chosen her over *Lolita* in a scene where she plans to send her daughter away to camp Q. While *Lolita* interprets Humbert's alleged approval of this plan as a rejection (she calls him a “double-crosser”), Charlotte “ruins Humbert's chances with *Lolita* from the very start” (Herbold 94). Moreover, it is also *Lolita's* mother who drives Humbert to murder his rival, an act that lands him in prison and leads to his early death (94). These are only a few examples of Charlotte's role

which is remarkably fatidic in Humbert's life.⁵² But they all indicate that behind the vulgar provincial bridge player and women's book club member stands a female character who governs the outcome of Humbert's diary. Moreover, in her article, Herbold argues that behind Charlotte as a character stands the actual woman writer, "Charlotte" Bronte: "she is a kind of hidden avenging deity who, through Lolita, her daughter and rival/double, controls the plot of Humbert's/Nabokov's book, which is partly modeled on and a response to *Jane Eyre*" (93). As Herbold further explains, both novels stage a contest between supposedly innocent female victims and powerful, manipulative male protagonists. The subversive powers of women in both novels are also very strong.⁵³ In fact, as Herbold points out, Nabokov acknowledges that he cannot "beat" Bronte (who has already subverted the tradition of male literary masters) any more than Humbert can "beat" Charlotte, because the female author "has already upstaged all male writers who have exploited female sexuality by parodying them in the figure of Rochester" (94). Thus, as Herbold states, by making *Lolita* seem (and even be) so hostile to women, "Nabokov seems to browbeat the female reader into submission. But his hidden references to Charlotte Bronte, like his subtle indications that *Lolita* is far more sophisticated than she seems, suggest that he secretly wanted the woman reader to read aggressively – and playfully" (96).

While Herbold sees Lolita and her mother as powerful and sophisticated, this interpretation does not undermine the fact that both women have been treated badly by Humbert. Herbold makes it clear in the analysis of the scene where Humbert, calling himself "Jean-Jacques

⁵²What makes Charlotte a sympathetic character is that Humbert sees her as an attractive version of his beloved Lolita. As Herbold states, after Humbert and Lolita's mother marry, he makes Charlotte "unearth...a thirty-year-old album, so that I might see how Lotte [Charlotte] has looked as a child; and even though the light was wrong and the dresses graceless, I was able to make out a dim first version of Lolita's outline, legs, cheekbones, bobbed nose. Lottelita, Lolitchen" (qtd. in Herbold 95).

⁵³ For the analysis of the hidden references to Bronte in *Lolita* see Herbold pp. 94-95.

Humbert,” explains that Lolita “had already proved to be something quite different from innocent Annabel, and that the nymphean evil breathing through every pore of the fey child that [he] had prepared for [his] secret delectation, would make the secrecy impossible and the delectation lethal” (qtd. in Herbold 90). Humbert's suggestion that the reader should feel sorry for him, because he “fell prey for demonic Lolita” is undermined by this allusion to Rousseau. As Herbold explains, the eighteenth century writer's “histrionic self-defense against accusations of unethical conduct in the *Confessions* is often unconvincing” (91). Humbert's treatment of a woman reader is precisely as Herbold describes: “the woman reader is alternately accused of reading for erotic (and perhaps masochistic) pleasure, insulted for being a prude, stripped of her silly illusions about childhood, derided for being overly sentimental, and appealed to as a sympathetic and wise listener who can perhaps understand or forgive – or be duped” (91). This, however, is not Nabokov's way of treating a woman reader. Although Kennedy and Blum both argue that the novel is “not only thematically, but also stylistically hostile to women,” on a purely stylistic level Nabokov presents it as in favor of women readers. *Lolita* is named after its female protagonist, but is, in fact, about Humbert and the scrupulous “bookkeeping of his concupiscence” (Vries 149). As Gerard de Vries observes, “Humbert, who, either acting or thinking, is present in all its 69 chapters, has more claim to giving his name to the book than Dolly's sobriquet, she being absent from more than half of the novel's chapters, 37 in all” (149). But the main reason in favor of a woman reader is even more obvious. One simply has to acknowledge how much she should know in order to be a *good* reader of *Lolita*. Nabokov scholar, editor, and friend, Carl Proffer, once said that “the ideal reader of *Lolita* would be a literary scholar trained and widely read in several European languages, a Sherlock Holmes, a first-rate poet, and the possessor of an eidetic memory” (*Keys to Lolita* 5). Given that the reader-

response expectations for both genders are the same (we observe that the reference to “Shirley Holmes” is in the novel) and also quite high, one wonders whether there is, in fact, any other writer who requires more of their audience than Nabokov.

Besides *Lolita*, Nabokov encourages his readers to observe the “rusalka” principle in his other works. While critics have noticed that there are not many good female writers in Nabokov's art, he makes at least one woman a genuine artist as powerful as a male. Along with being a biologist, a painter, an actress, and the artist of elegance, Ada is a writer in her own right. In fact, the novel by the same name is treated as a “joint narrative” with both characters' participation in telling their story. As Boyd observes, “Van and Ada in middle age reestablish their love together and retell together the story of their love” (“Ada” 15). On several occasions Ada is summoned by Van and echoes him “in the feminine key” (Delage-Toriel 199). However, with the exception of a few brief passages, Ada's participation in writing the novel is relegated to its margins and, as pointed out by Jeanne Ewart, she disappears altogether after Part Two. One wonders, therefore, about the role of Ada's voice in her family chronicle and the possible reasons for the character's silence. As pointed out by Ewart, one of the reasons for Ada's silence is her “growing frustration with Van's insistent domination of the narrative. Finding her textual voice ineffectual, she chooses silence, leaving Van to his solipsistic and narcissistic account” (85). Van's egoism not only with respect to Ada, but also his younger sister Lucette, constitutes, as Boyd demonstrates in his book *Nabokov's Ada: The Place of Consciousness*, a moral core for the character's treatment of all women in the novel. Like *Lolita*, Ada is faced with constraints not related to her talents and interests.

It is also not a poor literary style (her letters to Van are the example) or the lack of skills that lead Ada away from Van's narrative. Evidence of Ada being a talented literary artist is the fact

that Nabokov bestows upon her one of his stylistic devices. In doing so, he makes her not only Van's collaborator, but his own literary agent. The device not yet discussed in Nabokov scholarship can be called "a case of letter counting" or creation of new words from previously existing ones. In order to write secret messages to each other, the two come up with the idea of alphabetical letter-counting in the second paragraph of Chapter Twenty-Six:

For their correspondence in the first period of separation, Van and Ada had invented a code which they kept perfecting during the next fifteen months after Van left Ardis... One letter words remained undisguised. In any longer word each letter was replaced by the one succeeding it in the alphabet at such an ordinal point – second, third, fourth, and so forth – which corresponded to the number of letters in that word. Thus "love," a four-letter word, became "pszi" ("p" being the fourth letter after "l" in the alphabetical series, "s" the fourth after "o," et cetera)... (A 160, italics added).

We notice a similar technique that Nabokov used in *Podvig/Glory* in order to create the town name "Adreiz" in the second chapter for the actual toponim Koreiz in the Crimea.⁵⁴ First, the three-letter ending "eiz" is a common ending for Crimean town names. However, only Koreiz and the imaginative Adreiz share an additional "r" before this ending (cf: Simeiz, Oleiz) . As for the beginnings "Ko" and "Ad" in these names, the letters "k" and "o" as well as "a" and "d" in the Russian alphabet are four letters apart. In other words, "o" is the fourth after "k" in Koreiz, and "d" is the fourth after "a" in Adreiz. As a consequence of equal separation of letters in the combinations "ad" and "ko," the distance a - k and d - o is also the same and equals nine (here we took ë=e and й=и). In addition, similar combinations of one consonant and one vowel separated by four letters are "ад", "бе", "ди", "ек", "ин", "от", "пу", "уч", "цэ", "эб", "юв", "яг." The first

⁵⁴ Nabokov also mentions Koreiz in his autobiography *Speak, Memory* in Chapter Twelve: "My family settled in the vicinity of Yalta, at Gaspra, near the village of Koreiz (SM 244). Koreiz, separated from Gaspra only by the park, was indeed the place where the family lived when they left Russia after the Revolution. See also Brian Boyd's biography of Nabokov *Vladimir Nabokov: Russian Years* pp. 136-137.

one among this set most resembles the often “A”-beginning of real Crimean town names, especially the ones near Koreiz: Alupka, Alushta, Autka. What was Nabokov’s reasoning in choosing the fictitious “Adreiz” for Koreiz? Adreiz as a prototype for a town name is carefully chosen by the author. One may safely state that Nabokov deliberately explains his technique of word creation that resembles the one he had used thirty seven years earlier on another continent. Once in *Ada*, Nabokov even misspells Ardis (the name of the estate where the characters live) as “Ardez” making the word a phonetic relative of Adreiz. But what becomes relevant for this discussion is that Nabokov bestows this interesting technique on his fictional *female* writer and not only on Van.

In granting his female character one of his stylistic devices, Nabokov not only demonstrates the art of his literary riddles, but also distances himself from his male protagonist and makes the female one the representative of his own literary views. Indeed, although about Van, *Ada* is the name of the novel which is predominantly a male narrative and describes a male character’s life. Ada is also a character who by her intellect and artistic skills is not inferior to the male artist and perhaps it is one of the reasons why Nabokov makes her Van’s sister.⁵⁵ Thus, Ada is presented as being much more powerful from the literary point of view that one might think. As Herbold explains throughout her article, this double relation towards women of treating them both as victims and as powerful creatures is complex and paradoxical. And yet, Ada's case (and also Lolita's and the Vane Sisters') shows that this principle stands at the core of Nabokov’s representation of women, in which the literary ones are a subcategory.

At the beginning of this chapter, I have tried to demonstrate that by presenting his women

⁵⁵The same logic occurs in “A Slice of Life” when Maria takes over the narrative that should have been her brother’s (Pavel came to see Kolia) and writes Pavel’s story through a female perspective.

at work, Nabokov makes none of his fictional women leisurely creatures. By doing so, he entirely avoids Dostoevsky's mistake of not granting his female characters the right to create. A twentieth century philosopher G. Landau "whose mind Nabokov greatly respected" (RY 225) once said that

“Человеку в творчестве” нет места в творчестве Достоевского...Свою жизнь, иногда большого духовного напряжения и уже всегда огромного душевного нажима, проводят они в напряженной праздности, в озлобленном бездельи... Герои Достоевского праздны, но отнюдь не инертны, не ленивы, не Обломовы; но – активность их направлена не на внешнее претворение, а сосредоточена на внутреннем кипении – во вне же преимущественно выявляется в виде разрушительного взрыва...⁵⁶

Persons who do a creative work do not have a place in the art of Dostoevsky. They spend their life, sometimes of great spiritual effort and no doubt always of great emotional pressure, in strained idleness, embittered inactivity. Dostoevsky's characters are idle, but not inert, not Oblomovs, but – their activity is geared not toward outward realization, but is focused on the inner boiling – and outside the inner self it manifests itself mostly as a destructive explosion (my translation).

Inattention to the creative process which Landau considered to be Dostoevsky's aesthetic flaw is certainly not a characteristic of Nabokov's art. What is missing from his art is exactly the creative inactivity of his characters, especially female, that according to Landau one finds in Dostoevsky. Even the so-called “vulgar” women are given the opportunity to create. In *King, Queen, Knave*, for example, Nabokov remarkably compares Martha's evil plot of killing her husband to the art of writing. As Julian Connolly observes, this woman's lack of success in her venture (of killing her husband) “is foreshadowed by an incidental gesture she makes earlier in the novel. While waiting for Dreyer to return home one night, she writes his name with a pencil. As she starts to

⁵⁶Quoted by O. Ronen in “Antitezisy” [Counterstatements: Russian Writers Against Dostoevsky] *Zvezda* 1 (January 2011): 221-229.

black it out, the pencil tip breaks and she does not finish the task. Minutes later, Dreyer enters, and Martha laments: ‘my spells don’t work’” (Connolly “KQK” 208). But lest we make the mistake of thinking that Nabokov does not provide a distinction between an artistic creature and a talented creator, let us turn to another example where literary women are present.

In his first English novel, *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight*, Nabokov distinguishes his fictional women in their talents and the diapason of activities they can perform. The difference between a genuine artist and an amateur one is clear in the case of Clare and Larissa, two women in Sebastian's life who are somewhat reminiscent of each other in their devotions and, at the same time, drastically different in their abilities to understand art. The first encounter with Larissa takes place in Chapter Three when the seventeen-year-old Sebastian has developed a friendship with the futurist poet Alexis Pan and his wife Larissa and accompanies this “weird couple” to the East (RLSK 28). Pans' everyday life consisted of a “Marcopolian journey” from one provincial town to another where the poet was creating his “lyrical surprises” in every one of them. Larissa's role on these trips was to prepare costumes for her husband's stage performances: “Alexis Pan generally appeared on the stage dressed in a morning coat, perfectly correct but for it being embroidered with huge lotus flower” (RLSK 29). Nabokov presents Larissa at work when he describes her sitting next to her husband "sewing on buttons or patching up a pair of old trousers, the point being that she never did any of these things for her husband in every day life" (RLSK 30). Equipped with a creative vein and undying devotion to her husband's “gleam of real talent” (RLSK 29) which she, however, only intuitively felt, Larissa's work also appeared in a constellation (the Great Dog) painted on her husband's “bald brow” (RLSK 29).

While Nabokov depicts Larissa, who never leaves the feminine sphere of her activities, with the same ironic rendering as he does other literary women devoid of genuine artistic taste,

he makes the portrait of Clare quite different from that of Alexis Pan's wife. Although myopic and forgetful, but never when Sebastian's art is concerned, Nabokov describes Clare as “one of those rare women who do not take the world for granted and who sees everyday things not merely as familiar mirrors of their own femininity. She had imagination – the muscle of the soul – and her imagination was of a particularly strong, masculine quality” (RLSK 83). In her analysis of Clare's portrait, Delage-Toriel comments that this woman “is perhaps one of Nabokov’s female characters who comes closest to the intellectual and artistic alertness of his male characters; indeed, she possesses 'that real sense of beauty which has far less to do with art than with the constant readiness to discern the halo round a frying pan or the likeness between a weeping-willow and a Skye terrier’” (qtd. in Delage-Toriel 58). Delage-Toriel, however, argues that the value of her talent is “somewhat undercut by the fact that it is presented as an 'unfeminine quality’” (58): “by associating a certain exiguity of the mind with femininity on one side, and a certain strength of imagination with masculinity on the other, Nabokov betrays the limits of his own male perception” (Delage-Toriel 58). Perhaps Nabokov had another reason in mind when he granted his female character this distinctive trait. In the commentary to his Russian translation of the novel that is also a study of the novel's original manuscript, Barabtarlo explains that Nabokov's initial design was to name the wife of the futurist poet, Clarissa. Barabtarlo also explains that Nabokov eventually abandoned this idea for fear of making a too obvious connection with Clare. “Larissa, a hysterical wife of nonsensical poet Pan, may be with some views on Sebastian (or vice versa), was called Clarissa in the draft, with an obvious connection with Clare Bishop, Knight's girlfriend in the 1920s” (283, my translation).⁵⁷ Thus,

⁵⁷Nabokov, Vladimir. “Istinniaia Zhizn' Sevastiana Naita.” tr. by Gennady Barabtarlo, St. Petersburg: Azbuka-klassika, 2009, p. 283.

Nabokov's choice for the name of his female character is not accidental: Clarissa instead of Larissa leads to Clare: the latter being without the feminine suffix *issa/essa* (cf. poet vs. poetessa). In characterizing Clare's imagination as "masculine," Nabokov creates a comparison between the two women and points to the "feminine" nature of Larissa's art and the much stronger artistic abilities of the other woman.

Nabokov, however, does not make Clare a more visible artist. Although he does not deprive her of a trait that he thought was essential for an artist, her sphere of literary creativity is limited to Sebastian's art. Clare's case is just another example that depicts a female displacement in Nabokov's fiction. He presents her as being physically weak and eventually lets her die in childbirth as an indication of her inability to release her creative potential even as a reader of Sebastian's art (due to his infatuation with another woman). Death in childbirth is the author's way of showing female displacement. Clare's bad health and her poignant death through late miscarriage is Nabokov's way of showing her dislocation in this novel for reasons not related to her talents and interests. But while Clare's case makes her a subject of compassion and pity, her imagination also distinguishes her among other literary women in this novel and also in Nabokov's art. It also makes her a strong advocate of Nabokov's literary views and of characteristics not frequently bestowed or easily deserved and therefore more valued.

Despite Clare's inability to release her creative potential, Nabokov's other fictional women do appear as ideal readers of their male partners' art. Often these women are granted exceptional abilities of observation, they are equipped with skills and literary tastes that are not merely intuitive, and they are indispensable to the male artists. And yet, there might seem to be something victimizing about their positions as readers, without any consideration given to their own creative outcomes. As Delage-Toriel observes, "even those female characters (Clare Bishop,

Sybil Shade, You) who are distinguished less for their beauty than for their intellect are denied the creative élan of their male counterparts. Their most eminent quality is to be good readers, not good writers" (198). According to Boyd, "someone so decidedly male as Nabokov . . . [is] more comfortable with woman as muse than a woman as writer" (AY 655). In his last finished novel, *Look at the Harlequins!*, Nabokov presents the eminent qualities of a good reader and also a writer by showing what she needs through what she lacks. Although a parody of the Nabokov canon, the novel as well as its female characters project some of the writer's metaliterary views and therefore is worthy of discussion.

3.3 *Look at the Harlequins!* and the Metaliterary Function of Nabokov's Female Characters.

In his reviews, Nabokov often commented on certain linguistic inaccuracies of the women writers of his milieu. In *Look at the Harlequins!* or *LATH*, as the writer himself called it, this feature acquires an exaggerated range. The narrator Vadim, who himself is a talented writer and even shares some of Nabokov's own literary traits, marries a woman who does not understand Russian and therefore cannot appreciate the primary instrument of his creation. Iris, "a sleek little flirt" who eventually dies by the hand of her lover, calls herself a "rotten linguist" (23). Although like Ada she is not deprived of linguistic creativity and imagination (Iris likes to invent new words from those previously existing: "F. Clipton" from Russian "evkalipt") and even takes desultory lessons in Russian as Vadim matures as a writer, her interest in learning the language eventually ends with "a dull habitual aversion" to it. She ceases "trying to look attentive and bright when Russian, and Russian only [is] spoken" (53). In compensation for

being debarred from Vadim's writing, Iris, nonetheless, decides to become a writer herself. She even shares some of Nabokov's, but not Vadim's, literary tastes: both are ardent admirers of H. G. Wells' novels. But Iris exhibits no literary talent and is even unable to imitate “the small number of gifted authors among the prosperous but ephemeral purveyors of 'crime fiction'” (56) while she rewrites a detective novel that never reaches completion.

The perpetual disadvantage with which Iris leaves Vadim and his art does not stop with his second wife, Annette Blagovo, albeit for a different reason. Without being extremely ambitious herself, Annette assists Vadim by being his typist. But in view of the amount of typing to be done and of her doing it so slowly and badly, since her work “teemed with misspellings, typos, and ugly erasures” (98), Annette jealously and perhaps rightly felt that Iris could have been of better help to a writer. While lacking Iris' linguistic impediments by being thoroughly equipped with reading knowledge of French and Russian as her native tongue, she proves to be ignorant of Vadim's works and admires the writers opposite to Nabokov's aesthetics, or reads them not in their original or in the wrong translations: “in just the past five months she had read Galsworthy (in Russian), Dostoevsky (in French), General Pudov-Usurovski's huge historical novel...Did she know Morozov's poetry? No, she did not much care for poetry in any form; it was inconsistent with the tempo of modern life” (99). Annette also discredits Vadim's (and Nabokov's) art by promising to *look up* (*prosmotret'*) all of his books, a way of reading almost incompatible with Nabokov's insistence on re-reading good books with a dictionary (“Good readers and Good Writers” 3). Her personal characteristic of being forgetful is interesting as it reminds one of Clare's in *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight*, but differs significantly in what it signifies as well as in the irony that Nabokov puts into description of Annette's memory or the lack of it: “her abstraction grew perilous: stray cats at night knew that the same erratic deity that had not shut the kitchen window

would leave ajar the door of the fridge; her bath regularly overflowed while she telephoned . . .” (130). But what seems to create the major artistic dissonance in Vadim's relationship with Annette is her friendship with a mediocre provincial woman whose pro-Soviet sympathies and dislike of America make a great impact on Annette's mind.⁵⁸ She calls America “a sinister 'free' country,” the university where Vadim teaches “ghastly Kvirn” (read Cornell), her husband “a heartless bourgeois” whose “pathological revolt against Art and Progress in the Soviet Land” (148) becomes just another reason for her divorce.⁵⁹

After Annette's death, Vadim takes custody of his eleven-year-old daughter Bel, a female character in Nabokov's oeuvre whose poetry presents a perfectly articulated work of art. In fact, as pointed out by Lucy Maddox, the poem Bel writes in response to the storm that she survives by being sheltered in the basement of a museum where her class came to see a collection of stuffed animals becomes a crucial point in Vadim's life: “On rereading those strange lines, I see through their starry crystal the tremendous commentary I could write about them with galaxies of reference marks and footnotes like the reflections of brightly lit bridges spanning black water” (qtd. in Maddox 151). Vadim's commentary is nothing else but *Look at the Harlequins!* itself written “in the form of an autobiographical memoir, on the savage, silent, invisible wolf at the dark center of love and art, and its daylight counterpart, a dead family friend” (Maddox 151) with all the imagery

⁵⁸After leaving the political tyranny of the Soviets, Nabokov admired America as a peaceful and liberating place where he could exist freely both culturally and politically. As he said in the collection of interviews *Strong Opinions*: “I came to America in 1940 and decided to become an American citizen, and make America my home. It so happened that I was immediately exposed to the very best in America, to its rich intellectual life and to its easy-going, good-natured atmosphere. I immersed myself in its great libraries and its Grand Canyon. I worked in the laboratories of its zoological museums. I acquired more friends than I ever had in Europe” (27).

⁵⁹Nabokov's essay “Russian Writers, Censors, and Readers” in *Lectures on Russian Literature* pp. 1-14 is exactly a revolt against the development of arts in the Soviet land.

being present in his daughter's poem:

In the dark basement, I stroked
the silky head of a wolf.
When the light returned
and all cried : “Ah,”
it turned out to be only
Medor, a dead dog (qtd. in Maddox 151).

But despite Vadim's love for his daughter or as a result of it, he marries for the third time, now an ambitious woman who is striving for success and what seems to be high artistic standards. Vadim describes her, “artistically, strictly artistically” as the “best-looking of my three major loves” (160). But under Louise's looks and elegant veneer stands again a rather mediocre woman devoid of any literary taste. Her reading is reduced to consuming “all the 'serious' bestsellers discussed by sister consumers belonging to the Literary Group in which she likes to assert herself as a writer's wife” (187). Louise also wants some glory out of her husband's literary prominence and success to be reflected on herself. In fact, she marries Vadim in anticipation of the most prestigious literary prize in the world, most likely the Nobel Prize, that according to the rumors in a literary magazine, he is about to receive. But Vadim loses the prize in favor of two Albanian authors, one of whom is a “long-haired woman compiler of children's books” (187).⁶⁰ Louise, who is interested in everything fashionable: “modish gadgets..., singing furniture, miniature TV sets, stereorhics, portable orchestras, better and better video sets, remote-control instruments for turning those things on and off, and an automatic telephone dialer” (186) that Vadim buys for her, also leaves him when he does not get that most prestigious prize. Besides, Louise, who transfers

⁶⁰Here Nabokov implicitly refers to Pasternak and his Nobel Prize winning on the basis of *Doctor Zhivago*, a novel Nabokov detested mainly on artistic grounds. Pasternak's style in this novel was compared to that of a woman (Schiff 243), in particular Lydiia Charskaia, a composer of children's tales that had enormous success in prerevolutionary Russia and who in a way is reflected in *Look at the Harlequins!*.

Bel “with bed and books to the Opal Room downstairs” under the pretense that “perhaps I too need a studio” (189) stands in contrast to the intellectually independent Sybil Shade, whose room of her own only marks her significance in *Pale Fire*. In Louise's case, the hideous banality [urodlivaia poshlost'] of a stepmother-versus-stepdaughter relationship and the woman's intrusion into Bel's trustful young life, only makes Camus replace Keats and the girl's grades to deteriorate. After Louise enters Vadim's household, Bel no longer writes poetry (190).

But the moral and artistic misfortunes in Vadim's life, epitomized in the figures of his three wives, ends with the appearance of You, the only woman who can fully understand and appreciate his art. Not much is known about You for the reason that "reality would adulterate if he started to tell 'what you know, what I know, what nobody else knows'" (qtd. in AY 633). And yet, what is known is enough to draw a portrait that excludes her from the panopticum of female harlequins. Her imagination, originality of mind, and linguistic capability are revealed when she notices “a yellow butterfly settled briefly on a clover, then wheeled away in the wind” and observes: “Metamorphosa” in her “lovely, elegant Russian” (228). Although an artist of elegance in her “skirt with its pattern of irises” (233) and “the gleam of [her] topaz” (234) that does justice to her hand, You possesses none of Louise's superficial charms and the question of marriage does not interest her in a way that matters to Louise. Unlike Annette, she reads attentively everything Vadim writes and her literary education – she studied Turgenev at Oxford and Bergson in Geneva – does not leave any doubt. Most importantly, however, she is able to discern Vadim's talent and “actively participates in the creative world of the writer, using her own pen” (Delage-Toriel 116):

I could say what I do not remember having been moved to say in years, namely: My happiness was complete. As I walked, I read those cards with you, at your pace, your diaphanous index at my rough peeling temple, my wrinkled finger at your turquoise temple-vein. I caressed the facets of the Blackwing pencil you kept gently twirling...My eyes moved with yours, my pencil queried with your

own faint little cross in the narrow margin a solecism I could not distinguish through the tears of space (233).⁶¹

Through her skills and abilities as an ideal reader of Vadim's works that she “followed pretty closely” (228), You is also capable of awakening artistic confidence in Vadim that he eventually starts to feel: “You knew my work too well to be ruffled by too robust erotic detail, or annoyed by a too recondite literary allusion. It was bliss reading Ardis with you that way, triumphing that way over the stretch of colored space separating my lane from your lounge chair. Was I an excellent writer? I was an excellent writer” (234). Thus, through parody, Nabokov excludes and belittles the first three wives of his fictional writer, but he overtly acknowledges and praises one woman: You.

The reader, however, never learns the name of the actual woman who stands behind Vadim's love, the Reality, as he calls her. By the choice of the second person pronoun for his addressee, Nabokov implies that it can be any woman who can understand and appreciate Vadim's (and perhaps Nabokov's) art. But as Boyd points out, the novel's resemblances to the author's stylized autobiography *Speak, Memory*, makes the actual prototype of You – Véra, Nabokov's wife (AY 626). Véra's role in Nabokov's life Boyd describes as following: “in her dedication to literature and to Vladimir Nabokov she would be his wife, muse, and ideal reader; his secretary, typist, editor, proof-reader, translator, and bibliographer; his agent, business manager, legal counsel, and chauffeur; his research assistant, teaching assistant, and professorial understudy” (RY 215). When an interviewer asked the writer to assess the scope of Véra's collaboration in his work, he answered laconically: “no, I could not” (Schiff xi) and also added that “without my wife, I would not have written a single novel” (Schiff 66). According to Stacy Schiff, Véra was Nabokov's co-author in

⁶¹This passage is another example of a woman at work with a pencil being an instrument of female creative enterprise. Significantly, in Nabokov's poetic language, a pencil makes changes in the sphere of female activity and moves a woman from clothes to books.

many senses and as Herbold observes, “was also a behind-the-scenes co-conspirator whose power emerged only intermittently from behind her husband's more commanding – and vulnerable – presence” (91). As Véra once said of her relationship to her husband's oeuvre, “I am always there, but well hidden” (Schiff 339).⁶² Nabokov also stated that Véra's picture “has often been reproduced by some mysterious means of reflected color in the inner mirrors of my books” (SO 191). What is interesting to note is that women who appear in the muse category in Nabokov's art share some of Véra's characteristics. As Delage-Toriel points out: “Clare Bishop, Zina, Ada and may be Sybil [...] are allowed to interfere in their partner's literary choices, much as Véra did with Nabokov's own work” (116). Indeed, Sybil Shade is granted Véra's visual acuity and intellectual independence, Clare – the alertness of imagination and Véra's trust in the values of it (AY 642). Like Véra, You remembers every detail of her husband's work and her loyalty to the artist and indifference to fame are also the characteristics of Nabokov's wife (AY 633). What unites Véra and Zina Merz are the biographical similarities. As Boyd explains, “Zina inherited many of Véra's traits, among which, her Jewishness and her employment as secretary and translator in a law firm – the novel's Traum, Baum, and Kasebier office is actually modeled on the Weil, Ganz and Dieckmann office where Véra worked” (RY 355). Stacy Schiff who believes that *The Gift* was the novel “from whose autobiographical tones [Nabokov] had the most difficult time to extricate himself” (93), also states that Zina is easily “the single most appealing woman in his fiction; even Véra, who spent her time distancing herself from Zina, defended the character's purity and moral authority” (91). Based on the examples from *LATH* and Nabokov's other novels, one may conclude that what Nabokov distinguishes in his fictional women is their moral integrity and the artistic

⁶² Indeed, Véra appears only in the Index to *Speak, Memory*, the work which by implication of its title is supposed to be the most autobiographical.

maturity that becomes crucial to the male artists. The presence of these qualities in a female character or the lack of them is what makes the male artists vulnerable and Nabokov's rusalka-like women powerful.

If one were to summarize the specific characteristics of Nabokov's benevolent women, they would be intellectual maturity, solid education, knowledge of several languages, the exceptional taste that at first is revealed in clothes but often goes beyond the issues of elegance, visual acuity, alertness of imagination, literary sensitivity, moral integrity, patience as a personal trait, and loyalty and indispensability to the male artist. This list can hardly make a Nabokovian woman vulnerable in the reader's eyes. It seems that on the contrary, her intellectual and artistic presence along with the subtle elegance of her outfit, makes her a powerful creative force in Nabokov's art. The writer masterfully distinguishes his female characters by means of contrasts that, as we have seen, he implements with the literary women in *LATH* – a novel that according to D. Barton Johnson presents a “fitting summation” to the writer's literary art (“Look at the Harlequins” 340). And yet, despite the exceptional qualities of these benevolent women, one does not find many good female writers in his works. This can hardly be said about the male artists, a fact not surprising in view of Nabokov's major themes that Alexandrov and other scholars have described as the theme of art and the fate of the artist. But why did Nabokov not create more portraits, besides Ada and Bel, of talented female writers, thus making himself vulnerable to the common prejudice of being a “literary misogynist” or having an “anti-female-writer stance” in his art?

In his book, Blackwell notes that Vladislav Khodasevich was the first to identify Nabokov's main theme as that of the “artist in disguise” (qtd. in Blackwell 37). Khodasevich even went so far as to propose some difficulties that would “especially complicate a novel's construction if one

chose not to disguise one's artists, but to present them directly" (37):

In presenting his protagonists directly as writers, Sirin would be forced in portraying their creative work to insert a novel into a story or a story into a story, which would immeasurably complicate the plot and would demand of the reader a certain familiarity with the writer's trade. [...] Consequently, all of [the protagonists], being shown without masks, openly in the role of artists, would become [...] positive characters, creating extraordinary and superfluous difficulties for the author. Beyond that, it would be too hard in this case for the author to free them of that loftiness and saccharinity which almost inevitably accompanies the literary portraits of true artists" (qtd. in Blackwell 37).

While the artists of elegance are indeed artists in disguise with their dresses filled with literary subtexts, and Nabokov's "otherworldly" agents do appear, albeit almost invisibly, as the hidden links and co-creators in the male artists' lives, many would argue, perhaps, that what Khodasevich called "an artist in disguise" can be applied to Nabokov's treatment of women writers. Indeed, Nabokov made "no secret about women writers – a symptom of provincial literature" (Schiff 38). Such a negation is mostly true in regard to the female writers of his emigre milieu, and he reflected his attitudes in his non-fiction. And yet, in thinking about Nabokov's attitude toward women writers, one should not forget that Nabokov was also a writer who admired a small number of gifted authors: the latter being also reflected in his art and non-fiction. Moreover, the limited presence of good female writers in his novels, may be reflected in Nabokov's perception of a particular order of literary history, as Nabokov wrote in his letter to Mark Aldanov.⁶³ It could also be a tribute to Véra. Being a talented writer herself, Véra refused to become a writer in favor of assisting the one who, in her opinion, truly deserved it. As Boyd states, 'Véra could have been a writer of talent had she chosen to be, but believed so fervently in Nabokov's gift that she felt she

⁶³For Nabokov's letter to Aldanov see Dolinin, Alexander. *Istinnaia Zhizn' Pisatel'ia Sirina*. p. 274.

could accomplish more by assisting him than she might have on her own” (AY 38). And yet, she was exactly that “artist in disguise” who, in Barabtarlo's words, behind the scenes “elicited from her husband's creative consciousness his incomparable literary works” (qtd. in Ronen, “Véra” 103).

There is one more reason for Nabokov's withdrawal of a genuine female writer from his works that incorporates all of his aesthetic, metaphysical, and ethical concerns. It is extremely hard to be a writer in Nabokov's sense: so hard that his most talented male artists are not always ready to face the challenge. One may even say that the writer spares his fictional women from the difficulties and challenges of the fate of the artist that Nabokov makes his male writers endure. Nabokov believed that “*beauty plus pity* [...] is the closest he can get to a definition of art” (LL 251). In the Introduction to *Bend Sinister* in 1963, he also referred to it as “tenderness, brightness, and beauty” (BS xv). The opposite of art was bogus art, with which Nabokov was stubbornly refusing to compromise. He believed, however, that “one day a reappraiser would come and would declare that, far from having been a frivolous firebird, [he] was a rigid moralist kicking sin, cuffing stupidity, ridiculing the vulgar and cruel – and assigning sovereign power to tenderness, talent, and pride” (SO 193). Whether Nabokov answered the demands of his own aesthetics in his representation of literary women is up to the reader to decide.

Conclusion

“I go by books, not by authors. I consider Anna Karenin the supreme masterpiece of nineteenth-century literature; it is closely followed by The Death of Ivan Il'ych. I detest Resurrection and The Kreuzer Sonata. Tolstoy's publicistic forays are unreadable (SO 147, my italics).

In his *Lectures on Russian Literature* Nabokov once wrote:

Joseph Conrad, a British novelist of Polish descent, writing to Edward Garnett, a writer of sorts, in a letter dated the 10th of June 1902, said: 'Remember me affectionately to your wife whose translation of Karenina is splendid. Of the thing itself I think but little, so that her merit shines with the greater lustre.' I shall never forgive Conrad this crack. Actually the Garnett translation is very poor (147).

On first reading of this episode one gathers that Nabokov was intransigent in matters of Constance Garnett's translation of Tolstoy's *Anna Karenina*. To many of Nabokov's readers such a conclusion does not come as a surprise: in another instance – in a letter to James Laughlin on July 16th 1942 – Nabokov openly declared himself to be “frankly homosexual on the subject of translators” (SL 41). Despite this casual declaration made by Nabokov in a letter to a friend, there exists another plane of reading of the above passage. Nabokov appears to be just as critical and intransigent about the male writers in this instance as he is in regard to this female translator if not more.

The purpose of this dissertation was to examine Nabokov's literary attitudes to women writers made in his non-fictional and fictional works. Since the 1960s, Nabokov's oeuvre has generated a considerable amount of criticism, however, not on the grounds of his literary treatment of women writers. In fact, no extensive study on the topic of Nabokov and women writers has been published to date despite a large number of his critical statements about them spread out in his fictional and non-fictional works. Although there are studies of the female theme in Nabokov's art, there is only one scholarly article that attempts to look systematically at Nabokov's attitude toward women writers.¹ Nabokov's critical statements about women authors appear in several of his novels (*Glory, Pnin, The Gift, Lolita, Ada, The Real Life of Sebastian Knight, Look at the Harlequins!*), his short fiction (“The Eye,” “A Slice of Life,” “The Admiralty Spire”), non-fictional works (letters, lectures, reviews) and therefore had to be studied extensively. The present dissertation aimed to remedy the above-mentioned deficiency and shed light on a heretofore neglected aspect of Nabokov studies: his attitude toward women writers and their literary art.

In the first part of this dissertation I examined the nature of Nabokov's references to the actual women writers found in his letters, lectures, and especially newspaper reviews. Among the things he disliked in women's writing were underdeveloped poetics in women's poetry (like tasteless sound orchestration or poor rhymes), limited thematics, excessive sentimentality, inability to invent something artistically new, making it a mere repetition of someone else's talent. In my dissertation I argued, however, that Nabokov was just as critical of the male writers in his reviews as he was of the female ones. The statements about male and female writers that he made in his reviews indicate that the writer's criticism, in the main, was not gender-specific,

¹ Shroyer, Maxim. “Vladimir Nabokov and Women Authors.” *The Nabokovian* 44 (2000): 52-63.

but art-specific. Nabokov also attacked “big” names. Among female writers, his attacks on “big” names include Anna Akhmatova, Marina Tsvetaeva, and Zinaida Gippius. And yet, the writer's reference to Akhmatova as a “lovely poet,” although one who should not be imitated, to Marina Tsvetaeva whom he called “a poet of genius,” and to Zinaida Gippius whom Nabokov addressed as an “outstanding poet” indicate that despite personal and literary disagreements he might have had with these women writers, he gave them their due and revealed himself as a shrewd critic. Indeed, Nabokov's disagreements with Gippius on what literature should strive to achieve did not prevent him from making an objective evaluation of this woman writer. Nabokov did not share Tsvetaeva's alleged pro-Soviet sympathies, however, he was able to admire her poetic gift, as his imitation of her style in “Iosif Krasnyi” suggests. Anna Akhmatova for Nabokov was redeemed from the chain of her imitators by her originality of style and unique imagery. The critique of certain peculiarities of some of her verse that for Nabokov seemed to be inferior and which he so skillfully parodied in *Pnin* are softened by the fact that he acknowledged Akhmatova's talent in *Lolita* and again in *Pnin*. Nabokov participated in intertextual dialogues with Akhmatova, Tsvetaeva, and Gippius. This fact serves as an indication of his keen interest in these women writers' literary art.

Nabokov made more generalized review of women's writings in his stories “A Slice of Life” and “The Admiralty Spire.” His Russian story “A Slice of Life” (1935) has drawn several controversial responses regarding the effectiveness of this literary piece as a work of art. The only story in Nabokov's oeuvre written from the point of view of a female narrator raises inevitable questions about the writer's attitude to female authors and the specifics of his art from a gendered point of view. Indeed, does this story represent everything Nabokov dislikes in women authors or does it surpass “the seeming parody on female melodramatic writing”

(Linaker 171)? Parody exaggerates the flaws and emphasizes the aesthetic mistakes. Yet, it is not the only way of using an already existing work of art as material for another writer. In his *Lectures on Russian Literature*, Nabokov refers to “one more method of dealing with literature” (105) that he considers “the simplest and perhaps the most important one” (105). “If you hate a book, you still may derive artistic delight from imagining other and better ways of looking at things, or, what is the same, expressing things, that the author you hate does” (LRL 105). By “reading in” Nabokov’s “A Slice of Life” and also “The Admiralty Spire”, the second chapter of this dissertation attempted to see the first story as an “anti-parody” (Ronen, “Emulation” 65) of a female voice and suggested another interpretation of Nabokov’s artistic purposes. Instead of creating a parody of a woman’s voice, the writer revealed his aesthetic preferences as to how short fiction should be written. As for the “The Admiralty Spire,” this generalized parody of women's writings, when view together with “A Slice of Life,” provides a new, more favorable, perspective on Nabokov's treatment of them. In these stories, Nabokov revealed himself not as being simply prejudiced against women writers, but also willing to show how a woman should write. Both stories, when viewed together, can be safely referred to as Nabokov's response to the actual Russian women writers who were his contemporaries.

Nabokov also expressed his opinions of women writers in his fiction. While there are plenty of male writers in his art, many of whom he presents as gifted authors, the same can hardly be said about Nabokov's women. He not infrequently parodies the works of female artists in his fiction, and with the exception of a few examples, there is hardly an ideal female writer in Nabokov's art. The general opinion is that Nabokov dislikes his female characters, that he grants them a secondary role, confined to the sphere of aesthetic contemplation rather than creation. In this dissertation I have shown that a characteristic feature of Nabokov's characters is their

elusiveness that can be wrongly taken for passivity. I argued that, paradoxically, some women in Nabokov's fictional worlds are active even when dead. Moreover, Nabokov's literary women, many of whom he covertly presents as genuine artists, are not denied their share of creativity. In fact, he transfers them from the sphere of aesthetic contemplation to the sphere of creation by constantly presenting them at work or the hints at such. Nabokov's female characters are hardly leisurely creatures and even the so-called “vulgar” women are given the opportunity to create.

I argued that a cohort of positive fictional literary women also appears in Nabokov's novels. In *Look at the Harlequins!* Vadim Vadimovich N. meets the woman who turns his life around and awakens his artistic confidence. In this novel, it is almost impossible to separate Véra, the writer's wife, from Nabokov's fictional You, just as it is impossible to separate Véra from Clare in *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight*. Although Véra Nabokov was always quick to deny any resemblance between Zina in *The Gift* and herself, she shares all the elusiveness and other characteristics of her fictional counterpart. And yet, Nabokov makes none of these benevolent literary women into independent writers. One reason for this is that he spares his fictional women from the difficulties of the fate of the artist: it is so hard to be a writer in Nabokov's sense. Another reason for the absence of accomplished female authors in Nabokov's fiction is related to the fact that Véra's signature was no longer to be found in *Rul* (The Rudder), the leading Russian paper of the emigration, after she met Nabokov. She thought he was the most gifted writer of his generation and that she would accomplish more by assisting him than she might have on her own (Schiff 38). Her signature as a writer and translator virtually disappeared from the published pages of *Rul* or any other literary journal in deference to her husband's books. It is because Véra elevated the role of a wife to a high art that the absence of accomplished women writers from Nabokov's fiction should be viewed not as his prejudice against them but

rather as a tribute to a woman who became his literary shadow “cleverly and elegantly made for him by a very painstaking fate” (G 177). Out of a sense of ethical propriety, he had no desire to embody in his art the completely gifted female writer that Véra chose not to aspire to become.

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