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"Between Sunset and River": Nabokov's Bridge to the Otherworld

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“Between Sunset and River”:
Nabokov’s Bridge to the Otherworld

Senior Project submitted to
The Division of Languages and Literature
of Bard College
By Jesse Weiss

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Introduction: Mind, Body and Nabokov's Metaphysical Precedent

In an interview with Alvin Toffler for *Playboy* in 1964, Vladimir Nabokov said that “art at its greatest is fantastically deceitful and complex” (*Strong Opinions*, 33). This statement is a rather un-Nabokovian one, fairly simple and direct, and deeply telling into Nabokov's craft as a writer of fiction, poetry, criticism, and translation. As an artist, Nabokov constantly strived to achieve that state of “greatness” that he cites in the quote. Looking at the statement inversely, Nabokov's deception and complexity are in the fact the elements of his writing that make his art so unique.

One aspect of the “deception” that Nabokov used throughout his writing career is his commitment to remain untethered to one specific voice or narratological mode. Some of his male protagonists are eerily reminiscent of the author himself, and a reader might often wonder if Nabokov is in fact writing many revisions of an “autobiography” while experimenting in fiction. While it is often unclear whether Nabokov projects his own self onto his protagonists, it is always obvious that he employs rhetorical tactics to obfuscate the intricately balanced relationship between author, protagonist and narrator. Nabokov's authorial voice dominates his story-telling, just as his signature motifs – butterflies, mirrors, sunsets, chess pieces – dominate the figurative structure of his fiction. Nabokov is careful to make sure that no matter whom the reader believes the protagonist to be or what the reader makes of the narrator's unreliability and delusions, he remains the author, forever present and still not dead.

Take the example of his 1938 novel, *The Gift*. As its protagonist, Fyodor Godunov-Cherdyntsev attends to the deathbed of his friend Alexander Yakovlevich Chernyshevski, sitting

with him in his last moments, he remarks on the state of the old man's bodily decomposition and mental delirium:

The following day he died, but before that he had a moment of lucidity, complaining of pains and then saying (it was darkish in the room because of the lowered blinds): "What nonsense. Of course there is nothing afterwards." He sighed, listened to the trickling and drumming outside the window and repeated with extreme distinctness: "There is nothing. It is as clear as the fact that it is raining."

And meanwhile outside the spring sun was playing on the roof tiles, the sky was dreamy and cloudless, the tenant upstairs was watering the flowers on the edge of her balcony, and the water trickled down with a drumming sound. (*The Gift*, 312)

This example is emblematic of Nabokov's ability to reach out into his stories and playfully mess with the perceptions and observations of his narrators. It is also in this tongue-in-cheek way – and usually only in it – that Nabokov reveals some of his deepest philosophical convictions, such as his belief in the possibility of life after death. Thus, when Chernyshevski states his certainty in the termination of life as the termination of the soul, saying that "there is nothing afterwards," Nabokov, the auteur and creator of this paradoxical scene, slowly zooms out from Chernyshevski's words to reveal the fallacy of the old man's belief: the rain he thought he was observing was just water trickling down from his neighbor's balcony garden.

Poignant, morbid, and darkly satirical, this passage is in many ways emblematic of Nabokov's narratological and metaphysical adventurousness. This juxtaposition of seriousness and play, the mundane and the eternal, is what allows him to be both deceitful and strikingly convincing. It is perhaps understood best through another quote from Nabokov, who suggested,

in his book on Nikolai Gogol, that “the difference between the comic side of things, and their cosmic side, depends on one sibilant” (*Nikolai Gogol*, 141). Nabokov needs Gogol to back up his idea of using comedy – or a variety of other literary devices, puns included, to mask the verity of his metaphysical topics, because his effort to address these topics is a heavy burden to carry alone. Comedy helps to lighten it; Gogol provides a sense of companionship and shared tradition. In fact, Vladimir Alexandrov, in his *Nabokov’s Otherworld*, identifies the author’s use of comedy as his principal foil for exploring transcendental themes: “I join many of his admirers in seeing him as a comic genius; but he is also much more than that, because his conception of the otherworld underlies the comedy” (*Nabokov’s Otherworld*, 6). Nabokov’s satirical side and his interest in metaphysical questions are inextricably linked together.

But the author’s satire never overtakes his ability to think and behave rationally: Nabokov, for all his complexity and trickery, remains one of the most level-headed intellectuals of his time. Throughout his career, he was a particularly idiosyncratic figure to interview, as he insisted that all of his answers be type-written in advance. Describing this facet of his character in the collection of interviews and critical essays, *Strong Opinions*, he confesses to his inability to spontaneously verbalize his thoughts: “I think like a genius, I write like a distinguished author, and I speak like a child. [...] I have never delivered to my audience one scrap of information not prepared in typescript beforehand and not held under my eyes on the bright-lit lectern” (*SO*, xv). This insight into the degree of preparation and consideration Nabokov needed to present his ideas publicly highlights an important aspect of his authorial persona. Though his name would be scattered across the spine of his books in thousands of American homes by the time of his death, Nabokov was careful to preserve the integrity of his words, and not let them be compromised

because of his poor public-speaking ability. It is as if Nabokov insisted that he wanted to be remembered, and endure as a literary figure, separate from his body, existing in language alone.

This distinction between Nabokov's carefully considered presentation of language, and his enigmatic presentation of self, recalls René Descartes' *Meditations on First Philosophy*. Nabokov's life began over a quarter of a millennia after Descartes wrote his treatise in 1641, and it is more than likely that Nabokov was familiar with Descartes' writings, or at least encountered *Meditations* through his primary education, or when reading for his exam in French Literature at Cambridge. In the seminal philosophical text, Descartes examines the possibility of God's existence and expresses certainty of the distinction between mind and body in mankind. Touching on a topic of interest for Nabokov, Descartes frames his argument by suggesting a blur between dreams and wakefulness: "I see so manifestly that there are no certain indications by which we may clearly distinguish wakefulness from sleep that I am lost in astonishment" (Descartes, 7). Descartes' suggestion in the overlap between sleep-states and wakefulness may be seen as an introduction to Nabokov's experiments with his authorial persona. Determined to exist in language, inhabiting his own fictional works, he explores a number of transitional spaces in his poetry and fiction, be they dream states, aberrations of language, comic paradoxes or the doubling of self. Information about the author's presence in his literary work is often obfuscated from the reader who needs to work hard to understand the separation between the real author, writing the text bodily and in the full presence of his mind, and the fictional authors Nabokov created for himself.

Descartes concludes his meditation by saying that "there is a great difference between mind and body, inasmuch as body is by nature always divisible, and the mind is entirely

indivisible,” setting an epistemological precedent for others, Nabokov included (Descartes, 31). Cartesian dualism provides a framework for an examination of Nabokov’s oeuvre in all its dazzling complexity. It is only through the possibility of the duality between body and mind that Nabokov’s experiments in literature seem plausible. Through contemplating his several manifestations of self in thickly-veiled alter egos, his interest in the possibility of life after death, and his extensive and well-documented synesthetic and dream-like experiences, we can notice that Nabokov’s primary aesthetic concerns revolved around the assumption that the soul can exist independently from its host. As I examine in this project, Nabokov specifically treats the concept of disembodiment by translating every aspect of himself into varied literary manifestations. In the story “Spring and Fialta,” and in the poem “Oculus,” he ponders the possibility of a far-reaching and timeless mode of perception, free from physical restraints. In the short story “Vasiliy Shishkov” and in *The Gift*, he explores the potential of dissolving into his characters as a means of effectively rewriting his own history. In his poetry in general, Nabokov builds bridges for himself to access other realms of existence and perception where his body can no longer take him.

Each of these forays out of the author’s body towards a singular, eternal existence of the authorial soul was at the forefront of Nabokov’s consciousness as a writer. His limitations due to financial troubles, deaths of beloved family members, and the imminent threat of war in 1930s Europe were the catalytic forces that pushed Nabokov to seek an existence outside of himself. His talent as a writer of fiction, and his more personal passion of poetry were effective means to react to his troubles. For us as readers, these multifarious incarnations cast the author in a new light: as a bodily vessel for a soul yearning to expand the possibilities of his perception, memory

and love. Nabokov's written word holds the power to transmit his readers and his own mind to another plane of existence, free from the physical constraints of this world, a space where reality can be molded to the specifications of his metaphysical desires.

Chapter One: Nabokov's Synchronizations: Spiraling Memories
in "Spring in Fialta" and "Oculus"

Each artistic medium has its own particular relationship to time. In music, time and duration is an essential element to any composition, dictating rhythm, and using repeated phrases to form a refrain and structure in a song. In literature, time can be extended or compressed — hundreds of pages can describe a single instant of feeling, or a single page can take a narrative across centuries. The element of time in literature is especially important because reading is an activity with definite duration. As time passes, the reader notices changes in plot, structure and characterization — the progress, or evolution, of the narrative. Each turning page introduces new elements to the story, thus informing, or perhaps altering, the reader's perceptions of the text previously encountered. The visual arts, however, offer viewers a chance to grasp the entirety of the work in a single instant, where the form, style and particular aspects of any work are seen all at once, and can be digested as a whole. Where one's appreciation of a piece of music or a literary text is prolonged over the duration of time in which it takes to perceive the completed work, visual narratives are instantly digestible, with every element of their composition visible at the same time.

In a letter penned to his wife Véra on June 8th, 1939, Vladimir Nabokov makes clear his desire to experience a work of literature as one would experience a painting, that is, all at once. He writes: "A new theory of literary creation flashed into my mind [...]: we don't look at a painting from left to right, but we take in everything at once; that's the principle a novel should be built upon, but because of the peculiarities of a book (pages, lines, and so on), it is necessary

to read it through twice, and the second time is the real one” (*Letters To Véra*, 433). Spontaneous as it may have been, this statement reveals a foundational principle of Nabokov’s aesthetics. He aspired to write as if the experience of reading literature could be condensed into a single instant of feeling, a complete picture of form and narrative all at once. He also wants his readers to experience a literary world created by an author instantaneously. This idealized form of reading with immediate comprehension is subsumed by the reality that a book must really be read in full, twice, before it can be properly understood and digested. Unlike a work of art, an understanding of the form and content of literature is a process that takes time, and is not purely an exercise of the eye.

Though this letter was written three years after the original composition of “Spring in Fialta” (1936), echoes of Nabokov’s aspirations to allow his reader a complete and immediate perceptual understanding of a literary text ring throughout the story. And while, in 1939, Nabokov laments that no reader could be able to have a complete range of perception over a single text in a single instant, in this poetic and visual fictional landscape he takes care to endow Victor with this ability. The story begins with Victor’s arrival in the city of Fialta – as well as the realization of his ability to perceive reality as a whole in a flash of visuality and intuited memory:

It was on such a day in the early thirties that I found myself, all my senses wide open, on one of Fialta’s steep little streets taking in everything at once, that marine rococo on the stand, and the coral crucifixes in a shop window, and the dejected poster of a visiting circus, one corner of its drenched paper detached from the wall, and a yellow bit of

unripe orange peel on the old, slate-blue sidewalk, which retained here and there a fading memory of ancient mosaic design. (*Stories*, 413)

What draws Victor's attention on the streets of Fialta is not out of the ordinary, but the way in which he sees these disparate images and objects, is particular to his perceptual abilities combined with his presence in the Mediterranean town. It is the city itself that allows him to react to the world in a particular, alert and time-defying way. With his "senses wide open... taking in everything at once," in Fialta, Victor is seeing and feeling everything around him in a single instant, as if (as Véra imagined) he were looking at a work of art. Furthermore, his presence in Fialta has activated another perceptual faculty for Victor, which is his ability to interact and envision his own memories with unusual clarity and deep visual detail.

In a lecture Nabokov gave to his class at Cornell University around 1948, he offers a definition, and a real-world example, of what Victor is experiencing when he finds himself with his "senses wide open." The lecture was entitled "The Art of Literature and Commonsense," and the crux lies in Nabokov's definition and description of something "very loosely termed *inspiration*" (*Lectures on Literature*, 377). Nabokov suggests that the sensation that one feels in a single moment of aesthetic synchronization, when disparate objects and subjects, sights, sounds, smells all coalesce in a single moment of feeling, as Victor felt upon entering the streets of Fialta — this is what he calls "inspiration." He suggests an instance of such a feeling:

A passerby whistles a tune at the exact moment that you notice the reflection of a branch in a puddle which in its turn, and simultaneously, recalls a combination of damp green leaves and excited birds in some old garden, and the old friend, long dead, suddenly steps out of the past, smiling and closing his dripping umbrella. The whole thing lasts

one radiant second and the motion of impressions and images is so swift that you cannot check the exact laws which attend their recognition, formation, and fusion [...] you experience a shuddering sensation of wild magic [...] This feeling is at the base of what is called inspiration (*Lectures on Literature*, 377-8).

The experience of the sights and sounds simultaneously is a moment in which Nabokov suggests that “time ceases to exist” once “the entire circle of time is perceived” (*Lectures on Literature*, 378). Looking back to Victor’s sense-observations on the streets of Fialta, the reader can notice something similar happening here. Time seems to pause, disparate images link and form a line that Victor can trace, and the spiral that Victor and Nina have been following through Fialta, once again becomes a circle, as the “entire circle of time can be perceived.” Victor’s ability to see in this way is crucial to the modes of vision that Nabokov implements in “Spring in Fialta,” and in his later poem “Oculus.”

Though Victor is able to have this type of sensory experience while in Fialta, his ability is not constant. The story shifts between recollections of the past and descriptions of the present — as Maxim Shrayner points out in his comparative analysis of “Spring in Fialta” against several works by Anton Chekov, “the reader is bound to notice both space and time in Fialta conflate the past and the present; we have two towns within one as well as two ‘interlaced’ times, the linear historical time and the spiral time of memory” (Shrayner, 211). Victor makes such a remark himself regarding the duality of geographies and temporalities that he perceives in Fialta; this observation is not totally limited to the reader’s imagination. Victor narrates:

Fialta consists of the old town and of the new one; here and there, past and present are interlaced, struggling wither to disentangle themselves or to thrust each other out; each

one has its own methods: the newcomer fights honestly—importing palm trees, setting up smart tourist agencies, painting with creamy lines the red smoothness of tennis courts; whereas the sneaky old-timer creeps out from behind a corner in the shape of some little street on crutches or the steps of stairs leading nowhere (*Collected Stories*, 426).

Shrayer's observation is important in terms of the distinction in temporalities that it defines — a differentiation between the “linear historical time” and the “spiral time of memory” that occur during Victor's experience in Fialta. Victor's awareness of the ‘competition’ between past and present to emerge in Fialta indicates that he has some understanding of, and also control over, his ability to perceive these two timelines independently.

Charles Nicol, in his essay “Ghastly Rich Glass,” identifies the importance of the “spiral” plot that Nabokov implements in the structure of “Spring in Fialta,” as well as a number of his other works. He writes: “The spiral plot structure involves the protagonist repeating situations that have already occurred in different guises, leading him not around in a circle but to a higher level of perception” (Nicol, 175). Both Nicol and Shrayer's observation on the spiraling taking place in “Spring in Fialta” does not come out of thin air — rather, Nabokov wrote explicitly about his interest in spiraling forms towards the end of his autobiography, *Speak, Memory*.

Nabokov notes that he sees his own life much like “[a] colored spiral in a small ball of glass” (*Speak, Memory*, 275). The unending nature of the spiral was particularly fascinating for Nabokov, who imagined that spirals can be conceived as a kinetic form of a circle — non-static, and constantly leading from one thing to another. He continues in *Speak, Memory*: “The spiral is the spiritualized circle. In the spiral form, the circle, uncoiled, unwound, has ceased to be vicious; it has been set free... Twirl follows twirl, and every synthesis is the thesis of the next

series” (Ibid.). This cyclicity of action and motion that Nabokov describes here is mirrored in Victor’s observation of Fialta moving around him.

As Victor and Nina walk through the town of Fialta, the route of their journey follows a spiral pattern through the city streets as well. Located on the side of Mount Saint George, sits Fialta, a town with streets running left to right, and also up and down along the undulations of the land. Victor notices narrow staircases and streets going uphill as he walks around the city with Nina, and their journey ends with them at a high vantage point, with a view of the whole town before them. Their gradual ascent to the top of the town, along with the meandering they do through the city streets, indicates a spiral pattern to their physical locations throughout the day. Furthermore, this spiraling route is emphasized by the fragmentary nature of Victor’s perceptions as he walks through the streets of Fialta.

These qualities of spiraling that occur in Victor’s memory are met with the immediacy of cosmic synchronization in the linear time of the present. I would like to argue that it is through these moments of synchronization that Victor is able to access the “spiral” memory of the past, as he becomes aware of metaphysical truths, which have serious implications for his life and for Nina.

At the beginning of the story, Victor’s remarks on how he was “taking in everything at once” allows Nabokov to bring together his reader and his narrator. The series of observations that Victor makes as he walks Fialta’s streets reveal objects that are grouped and repeated. The reader is quick to notice them, but that do not hold any particular significance for Victor as the narrator. Nabokov gives Victor a chance to “collect” the objects in his field of vision as well as in his memory. In fact, it is through his ability to notice such minute and particular elements of

these objects that the reader achieves the sense of perceiving the Fialta street instantaneously. Victor's perception is nothing less than remarkable, considering how quickly his focus skips between disparate objects all around him, before bringing them together into a harmonious unity. For Victor, "taking in all at once" does not take a toll on the quality of vision, because instead of diminishing his capacity to see and connect, it adds a temporal dimension to the act of perception, thus condensing time into a single instant of feeling.

As the story progresses, Victor continues to notice the things around him in the same way — fleetingly, but with special attention to their details. However, in the second half of "Spring in Fialta," after the story's other protagonist, Nina, appears on Fialta's misty stage, Victor's mode of perception changes; simultaneously, his relationship with time begins to shift. No longer is he simply registering his surroundings in the present, but he also begins to travel in and out of the past, as he recounts his longstanding relationship with Nina and their scattered encounters since they met 15 years earlier. Upon their chance encounter in Fialta, Victor and Nina exchange a kiss — one which leads him to recollect a kiss he shared with Nina, 15 years before: "She kissed me thrice with more mouth than meaning, and then walked beside me, hanging on to me, adjusting her stride to mine, hampered by her narrow brown skirt perfunctorily slit down the side" (*Collected Stories*, 415). This kiss, and simple observation of Nina's appearance is enough for Victor to jump back in time to the first time they met.

Remembering his first encounter with Nina, Victor's visual memory is cold and dark: "My memory revives only on the way back to the brightly symmetrical mansion toward which we tramped in single file along a narrow furrow between snowbanks, with that crunch-crunch-crunch which is the only comment that a taciturn winter night makes upon humans" (*Collected*

Stories, 416). Here, the visual details are sparse — they are replaced with tactile, auditory, and olfactory perceptions. For example, Victor recalls losing his flashlight, then a sudden kiss on Nina’s “generous, dutiful lips,” and finally a snowball fight. Devoid of a visual backdrop, the memory seems to fade in Victor’s mind quickly and painlessly. He returns to the present, in which he accompanies Nina for a bit of shopping in Fialta’s touristy center. In the descriptions of his walk with Nina, Victor’s perception of the present continues to be strong; in fact, because of the abundance of visual details it may be stronger than his grip on the past. He makes note of the beaded curtain and red leather purses before him in the shop, and, as he steps outside with Nina, he comments on the burning smell in the air, which matches the grays and browns of the visual description. This is when he experiences another moment of fragmented, but instantaneous perception, tracing a line from “a small swarm of gnats [...] darning the air above a mimosa” to “two workmen in broad-brimmed hats [...] against a circus billboard” (*Collected Stories*, 417). Still aware of minute details in his immediate surroundings, Victor is not hung up on any particular thing that he sees. But he notices the nuances of Fialta’s drab but charismatic existence, enlivened by Nina’s presence and finds the words to selectively describe what is surrounding him, synesthetically tracing a line from the smell of the air, to a swarm of flies, to a banal scene of two men eating lunch. This shift from Victor “taking in all at once” to a more historicized retelling of his relationship with Nina signals a shift in the narrative of *Spring in Fialta*. The narrator’s instantaneous, but fragmented, perception of the present transforms into more complete, but less isolated in a single moment in time, visions of the past.

As Victor continues to delve into his romantic past, however, his memories gradually become more clear, while his perception of the present loses its striking clarity. On recounting

his second meeting with Nina, the narrator describes a party in Berlin. While doing so, he gives in to a narrative mode that is unusually hinged on visual, graphic details, such as “her small comfortable body folded in the form of a Z”; “an ashtray stood aslant on the couch near one of her heels”; “her stalklike cigarette holder” (*Collected Stories*, 418). This memory prompts him to narrate other separate memories of Nina, each one more descriptive than the last. Recalling a meeting in a railway station in Paris, he “sees” Nina sitting in her compartment as the locomotive begins to depart, “having suddenly forgotten about us or passed into another world.” His description of the small crowd that is saying good-bye to the young woman is similar to a retelling of a film episode, flashing in front of the observers’ (and the reader’s) eyes: “we all, our hands in our pockets, seemed to be spying upon an utterly unsuspecting life moving in that aquarium dimness, until she grew aware of us and drummed on the windowpane, then raised her eyes, fumbling at the frame as if hanging a picture, but nothing happened” (*Collected Stories*, 418-419). Here Victor acutely observes Nina as she literally departs from his vision, yet the banality of the interaction is overwhelming. Sensing that Nina is about to emerge in “another world,” Victor, in his recounting of the event, creates a great deal of tension for the reader, half-expecting something to happen between the two of them. Instead, Nina merely looks back towards her friends, and drums on the glass, “but nothing happened.” Victor’s awareness of the past in this instance is deeper than the superficial qualities of what he can merely see. He remembers his feelings of expectation, and the reader begins to think that his sense of Nina as a being from another world predominates his memory and is, in a way, more engrossing and stimulating than the visual details that surround their occasional rendez-vous.

Victor's exploration of his past and his relationship with Nina continue to evoke more specific details as he tells the story of his encounters with Nina's husband, Ferdinand. As Victor's memory of Nina in the train station began to reach deeper than pure visual qualities, his memory of Ferdinand is dotted with visions of the future yet to come. Victor remembers a specific encounter with Ferdinand at a café in Paris, shortly after the release of one of Ferdinand's new novels in which Ferdinand's appearance haunts his memory: "[f]or a moment his whole attitude, the position of his parted hands, and the faces of his table companions all turned toward him reminded me in a grotesque, nightmarish way of something I did not quite grasp [...] his glossy hair was combed back from the temples, and above it cigarette smoke hung like a halo; his bony, pharaohlike face was motionless: the eyes alone roved this way and that, full of dim satisfaction" (*Collected Stories*, 421). Here, Victor's perception of Ferdinand is both superficial and metaphysical — his observations of Ferdinand's appearance are detailed, and careful, making use of simile to emphasize his features. But Victor curiously references the future in his revisiting of the past — he acknowledges that at the time of seeing Ferdinand he did not fully comprehend the significance of the death imbued in his face, and the halo hanging above his head. Revisiting this memory serves as a connecting point between the past and the future for the narrator, and his ability to recall this information is essential in his understanding of the events yet to unfold for Nina, Ferdinand and their third-wheel, Segur.

At the end of their day together, as they are about to say their goodbyes, Victor suddenly comes into contact with a vision of the future and intimation of death presented through a typical Nobokovian trope. Nina enters her car and waves goodbye to her friend: "in the metal of one of the bomb-shaped lamps we ourselves were momentarily reflected, lean filmland pedestrians

passing along the convex surface; and then, after a few steps, I glanced back and foresaw, in an almost optical sense, as it were, what really happened an hour or so later: the three of them wearing motoring helmets, getting in, smiling and waving to me, transparent to me like ghosts, with the color of the world shining through them, and then they were moving, receding, diminishing (Nina's last ten-fingered farewell)" (*Collected Stories*, 426). Victor's vision of himself and Nina in the reflection of the convex mirror allows him to glance into the future as he turns his head — he catches a glimpse of Nina along with husband and friend in their last living moments, looking like ghosts. The “bomb” shape of the lamp suggests that a death will occur, perhaps suddenly, like an explosion. A few hours later, standing in the train station, Victor happens to see news of Nina's car crash printed there. Her car smashed against a circus caravan, and she was the only one of the three passengers to die.

But death had haunted Victor's memory of Nina and Ferdinand for quite some time — he saw Ferdinand's deathly-looking face in the café in Paris years before, and imagined Nina going to some “other world” as she departed from the train station. By the end of the story, the reader comes to realize that this day spent reminiscing about the past was Nina's last day on earth. As the clock counts down Nina's final living minutes, Victor becomes more separated from the present, as he is only able to dwell in his vivid recollections of the past. In the final scene of the story, Victor chances to look down at a newspaper where he sees mention of Nina's death, and experiences a moment of complete dissociation. Victor feels a rush of emotion to his gut as he stands on the station platform, his arm resting on a stone pillar there:

But the stone was as warm as flesh, and suddenly I understood something I had been seeing without understanding — why a piece of tinfoil had sparkled so on the pavement,

why the gleam of a glass had trembled on a tablecloth, why the sea was ashimmer: somehow, by imperceptible degrees, the white sky above Fialta had got saturated with sunshine, and now it was sun-pervaded throughout, and this brimming white radiance grew broader and broader, all dissolved in it, all vanished, all passed (*Collected Stories*, 429)

Victor's moment of "understanding" comes to him as a warm rush of bright white light throughout the sky. Everything around him is subsumed in the intensity of the light, suggesting that this moment of cosmic synchronization is so strong, that his grip on reality is completely lost in favor of his memory. In a single instant, Victor grasps the entire scope of Nina's life, and feels a deep sense of inexpressible love, which overtakes him completely. Furthermore, the moment of synchronization comes when Victor feels the "stone as warm as flesh," a physical connection that makes him think he has made a connection to Nina's hand — their final moment of contact before Nina is gone from him forever.

During Victor and Nina's day spent walking the streets of Fialta, a number of objects come into the reader's, and Victor's, field of vision. Curiously, many of the objects that Victor notices are spherical in shape: beads, oranges and lollipops. These objects themselves are scattered throughout the text, each one appearing more than once in Victor's field of vision. But Victor doesn't seem to be aware of this repetition. Though he is quick to describe the lollipops as having "elaborate-looking things with a lunar gloss" or noticing on the collar of a Gypsy-woman a "string of beads around her dusky neck", Victor is not necessarily aware that these objects repeat themselves in front of him, despite his careful observations of them (*Collected Stories*, 414). As a reader, these images are easy to pick up on and track. They seem out of place, and

their vibrant descriptions give weight to their existence. The placement of oranges, beads and lollipops in the story has no particular sway over the narrative arc of the story, or the actions of the characters, but these spherical objects do establish a sequence of “dots” that the reader connects as Victor and Nina walk around the city streets.

It is important to notice the spherical shape of these objects that Victor repeatedly observes, and the spherical shape of the glass ball in which Nabokov imagines his own life, is an essential component in one of Nabokov’s poetic works, the 1939 poem “Oko” (Oculus). The story and the poem are connected in more ways than one. In tandem, they serve as a key to understanding how the role of memory shapes the limits of perception both in life, and afterwards. The opening stanza of the poem presents the image of a disembodied eye, floating above the physical dimensions of earth in a realm of its own: “To a single colossal oculus, / without lids, without face, without brow, / without halo of marginal flesh, / man is finally limited now” (*Poems*, 105). Nabokov instills an image of a hanging sphere in the sky, with “limited” perceptual abilities in comparison to mankind. This eye in the sky is a mirror image of Victor’s opening eye, and opening senses, that he mentions at the beginning of “Spring in Fialta.” Victor’s experiences of cosmic synchronization, and his relation to vivid visual memories and a heightened mode of perception, are the same issues that are addressed in “Oculus,” only in a different form.

This poem was originally written in Russian, but Nabokov later translated it himself before publishing *Poems and Problems*, a hybrid collection published in 1969 consisting of Russian poems translated into English by the author, poems originally written in English and a series of chess problems. His English translation is published as follows:

Oculus (1939)

To a single colossal oculus,
 without lids, without face, without brow,
 without halo of marginal flesh,
 man is finally limited now.

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

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

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

Gone, in fact, is the break between matter
 and eternity; and who can care
 for a world of omnipotent vision,
 if nothing is monogrammed there? (*Poems*, 105)¹

The last word of the first stanza is “now,” which immediately brings the question of time to the forefront of the poem. “Now” indicates a shift, that something has changed, and we are now reading into a new era of possibility. Nabokov made a strange choice when deciding to use “now” rather than the more accurate Russian translation of “finally” (*nakonets-to*) at the end of the first stanza. The change marks a shift in the temporality of the poem — something has come to pass which has changed the landscape in which the poem exists. The original Russian text

¹ “Oculus” was originally written in Russian, and later translated to English by the author. In my analysis, I compare the original Russian and the English translation to address a question of temporality between the two poems.

reading “finally” suggests that oculus, or man (which is the subject of the poem), has just died. The English “now” brings the reader through this moment of death, into a new epoch of perceptual abilities only emerging after the death of the subject. In “Oculus,” the disembodied eye is one floating in space, and opening for the first time after death. Considering this, “Oculus” is a poem that, instead of inhabiting a particular space and time, rather builds a model for human consciousness at the end of human life, suggesting that the faculty of memory is all that is left once man’s mortal coil has been shed. The closing stanza confirms that the colossal oculus actually has vision — “who can care / for a world of omnipotent vision, / if nothing is monogrammed there?” The opening and closing stanzas of the poem provide the only positive statements — the rest of the poem is defined by what is *not* seen or known — and these positive statements are essential in understanding where and when the eye is existing, and why.

The fourth stanza of the poem holds a clue about the movement of the oculus, which is a feature that Nabokov surely considered. The line reads: “in the stillness of his revolutions / nothing in that respect will he know.” “Still” and “revolutions” are antithetical, immediately complicating the idea of the motion of the eye. But like the a heavenly body, the “oculus” presented in the poem may appear to be still, while it is in fact slowly, constantly revolving; a sphere tumbling in midair. This image brings to attention a passage from the closing chapter of *Speak, Memory*, where Nabokov gives a further clue about spirals, spheres and their relationship to time:

Innermost in man is the spiritual pleasure derivable from the possibilities of outtugging and outrunning gravity, of overcoming or re-enacting the earth’s pull. The miraculous paradox of smooth round objects conquering space by simply tumbling over and over,

instead of laboriously lifting heavy limbs in order to progress, must have given making a most salutary shock. ...for every dimension presupposes a medium within which it can act, and if, in the spiral unwinding of things, space warps into something akin to time, and time, in its turn, warps into something akin to thought, then, surely, another dimension follows — a special Space maybe, not the old one, we trust, unless spirals become vicious circles again. (*Speak, Memory*, 301)

This quotation from his autobiography underscores Nabokov's interest and concern for the position of God at the time of creation, and an interesting interpretation of his previously professed interest in spirals. From Nabokov's point of view, spherical objects in space (such as planets and stars) only seem to be still objects, while they constantly spin and tumble through the heavens. A stillness that is never quite still, revolutions of movement that spiral forward into another dimension. It's an archetype which one could argue Nabokov employs heavily in the architecture of his narratives, where the beginning and end of a story merge, or occupy the same space in time — so by the end of the story, the reader has only returned to the opening lines of where it all began. This is true in many of his stories, including "Spring in Fialta," and his fiction, such as *Lolita* and *The Gift*.

But the quotation above also plays into the content of "Oculus" directly. On one hand, the reader must consider the separation between spatial and temporal "realities" in the poem. As previously discussed, the oculus itself has a timeless quality to it as it is the eye that has opened just after death — or the end of time for an individual; the spatial disconnect lies in the eye "having glanced / at the earth," presumably from a vantage point far away from the earth itself. As Paul Morris mentions in his brief analysis of the poem in his book *Nabokov's Lyric Voice*,

“[t]he oculus is not only an eye but also a circular opening, here not out of an architectural structure but onto the universe” (Morris, 180). Nabokov’s concern in the composition of this poem is certainly much more grand than the mere perceptual abilities of an eye looking down at the Earth. The cosmic significance of the oculus as a window into another dimension beyond the un-“monogrammed” Earth suggests that a more pure state of perception is possible once man has passed on to death. In the poem, visual perception is ceded to a pure relationship with the cosmic and the divine.

Complicating this relationship, Morris continues: “although death has brought the dissolution of the boundary separating eternity and matter and hence conferred a measure of omnipotence, the advantage is doubtful if the stamp of particularized life is not to be seen” (Morris, 181). The contradiction between “matter” and “eternity” in those closing lines also raises questions about what the “oculus” is actually perceiving. If “Oculus” takes place in the eye opening after the moment of death, it would make sense that the eye cannot see any particular details or images because it is not living. The void that is created in the poem in the middle three stanzas through the repetition of precisely what is *not* seen and perceived creates an antithesis between the pieces of physical matter that constitute daily life on earth and something quite opposite, a timeless, non-physical form of being, which is what Nabokov suggests is the existence of memory after death.

This suggestion of “omnipotence” is relevant here as well, as Nabokov may have even referenced God directly in the second stanza of the poem: “having glanced / at the earth (quite unlike the old freak / that was dappled all over with seas / and smiled with the sun on one cheek),” indicating that either the “old freak” was looking at the earth at the time of creation, or

the “old freak” is the earth itself, indeed “dappled all over with seas” and the “sun on one cheek” as the sun only shines on half of the earth at a time. Indeed, in the original Russian version of the poem, the words “old freak” do not appear in the text, suggesting that the complete parenthetical statement in the second stanza is only referencing the earth — however, the English translation retains the possibility of the reading that the “old freak” is a reference to God. Whether God is directly referenced in the poem, or if the comparison between the eye and God is implied, the notion of the “eye” as viewer is concretely understood to be occupying a space outside of time and physical form. For Nabokov, the revolutions of the eye, outside of space and time, open up the possibilities about where and when the “oculus” is actually existing.

Nabokov sets up this possibility very clearly in the same quotation from *Speak, Memory*: “in the spiral unwinding of things, space warps into something akin to time, and time, in its turn, warps into something akin to thought, then, surely, another dimension follows — a special Space maybe” (*Speak, Memory*, 301). The seeing eye in “Oculus” can be conceived as a form of unravelled humanity, like a circle unwound to form a spiral. The “oculus” has been stripped of all “marginal flesh,” and is “limited” insofar as the faculty of perception is the only quality that it retains. Even still, the “oculus” cannot really see, as everything in the poem, all of the earthly qualities “of clouds, and grainfields, and vines,” are all lost to the “oculus”: “nothing in that respect will he know.” So what is left of the “oculus”? Suspended in a state of pure perception, the eye cannot even make out any particular details of the space in which it exists. The closing lines of the poem provide some form of closure for this issue: “Gone, in fact, is the break between matter / and eternity; and who can care / for a world of omnipotent vision, / if nothing is monogrammed there?” The closing stanza of the poem clearly situates the position of the oculus

and its relationship to its surroundings. There is no matter from the point of view of the oculus, only timelessness — a world exists below, but “nothing is monogrammed” upon its surface; it is completely blank.

The mode of perception is established in the lines of “Oculus,” one that is completely detached from the goings-on of the world, and focused solely on memory, is the same type of perception that Victor experiences through the narrative of “Spring in Fialta.” Nabokov’s understanding of inspiration, and a greater adherence and attentiveness to moments of “cosmic synchronization” instill in his readers and in his own metaphysical beliefs that time is largely relative. There are moments, in both fiction and reality, in which “the entire circle of time can be perceived” in a single moment of feeling. Both the “Oculus” and Victor are examples of this — but at an extreme. In both of these accounts, it is only in the moments just before, or just after, death in which this type of perception is possible.

Chapter Two: Buffer Spaces and Shifting Identities Between Europe and America

In 1939, Russian émigré readers living in Paris came across a poem entitled “The Poets.” It appeared rather inconspicuously, and the author was thought to be one “Vasiliy Shishkov,” a name that seemingly no one could vouch for, including Georgii Adamovich, one of the most prominent critics of this time. Later that year, Vladimir Nabokov, under his known pen name Sirin, came forward and published a short story entitled “Vasiliy Shishkov,” obliquely providing the fact that he had invented the character of Shishkov himself, and sought to use the pseudonym to subversively publish his poetry as an affront to Adamovich, who had not been a supportive voice of Nabokov’s verse. When Adamovich first read “The Poets,” he responded: “...who is this Vasiliy Shishkov? Where does he come from? It is quite possible that in a year or two everyone to whom Russian poetry is dear will know his name,” clearly unaware that Nabokov had anything to do with the matter (Boyd, 509).

Adamovich had characterized Nabokov’s verse very critically, ultimately decrying it as not worthy of entry into the canon of Russian poetry. He wrote in an essay that Nabokov’s verse was distinguished by the “same rush and accumulation which characterizes Pasternak’s poetry,” while it “revels in verbal innovation and combination and disparages the search for concision and simplicity” and is “far removed from [...] ‘the poetic canon established in the emigration’” (Boyd, 509). Nabokov, otherwise lauded for his literary talent, did not take to this attack lightly. While it is possible that he intended to publish “The Poets” with the sole aim of disproving Adamovich’s criticism, the poem itself suggests far deeper implications for Nabokov’s poetic identity than the purely superficial satisfaction of impressing a literary foe. It is

possible that through the creation of a new fictional identity in Vasiliy Shishkov Nabokov begins to develop a method to allow himself to disappear inside the words of his poems and stories.

In “Vasiliy Shishkov,” Nabokov clearly distinguishes himself from the eponymous young poet. For instance, he narrates their first encounter in the first person perspective, not giving any hints that Shishkov and Sirin, his pen name at the time, are one and the same. The story begins with Shishkov approaching Nabokov after an “Evening of Russian Émigré Literature” in Paris, and asking to speak with him (*Stories*, 494). At their meeting the following afternoon, Shishkov plays a trick on the narrator Nabokov by handing him a notebook full of poetry, which the latter reads, and criticizes without reservation. Shishkov is impressed by “Nabokov’s” directness, and responds: “‘I now have learned that you are merciless — which means that you can be trusted. Here is my real passport.’ (Shishkov handed me another, much more tattered, notebook)” (*Stories*, 495). The “game” Shishkov plays is a parody of Adamovich’s critical reception of Nabokov’s poetry in the past. This is especially significant in view of the fact that “Nabokov” is impressed by the second notebook he receives, just as Adamovich was when, in “The Poets,” Shishkov’s name was substituted for Nabokov’s. The reader then learns that Shishkov entrusts the contents of the entire notebook to Nabokov, should anything happen to him. The narrator eventually leaves Paris and, upon his return, learns that Shishkov has disappeared, with no one to give him information on his whereabouts. He concludes the story with this tongue-in-cheek admission of his involvement in the hoax:

“But where the deuce did he go? And, generally speaking, what did he have in mind when he said he intended ‘to disappear, to dissolve’? Cannot it actually be that in a wildly literal sense, unacceptable to one’s reason, he meant disappearing in his art,

dissolving in his verse, thus leaving of himself, of his nebulous person, nothing but verse? One wonders if he did not overestimate

The transparence and soundness

Of such an unusual coffin.” (Stories, 499)

In considering the strange disappearance of Shishkov, the narrator Nabokov, dramatized in the short story, wonders what his younger colleague meant by saying “he intended to disappear, to dissolve.” Obviously, Nabokov knew full well that his character had never actually existed. From his authorial perspective, Shishkov dissolved into his verse, and disappeared. But Shishkov also dissolved into the pages of Nabokov’s fiction, for it is the story itself that may be characterized as “transparent” — an “unusual coffin” into which Shishkov seals himself. Shishkov is not the only one of Nabokov's characters who disappears: both Van and Ada disappear at the end of *Ada*, their deaths uncertain; Sebastian Knight dies into his books in *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight*; and short stories such as “Perfection” feature protagonists whose disappearance is not certainly into death, but rather into a narrative time-space that is both opaque and see-through.

In all of these cases, Nabokov reveals his deep interest in one’s possibility of disappearing into a text, or a new life that a work of fiction may establish. In fact, he often asserts that his characters are immortalized through his narratives. Inversely to Shishkov's disappearance, Nabokov was able to dissolve into the guise of his invented character, using Shishkov’s identity to expand his literary capabilities through experimenting with the form and content of his poetry, and to gain acceptance from an unbiased audience of critics. Even further, though creating an alternate identity for his own writing, Nabokov could carve out a space for

himself to address such themes as authorial sovereignty and his own aesthetic and real-life insecurities, which he may not have been able to state using his own voice and name. He is no longer interested in elegiac mourning of his lost Fatherland or in nostalgic recollection of the past as something that could be brought back in a work of art. Instead, in “The Poets” and *The Gift*, Nabokov begins to subtly detach himself from the threads of 19th century romanticism, which still remained strong in Russian émigré literature, and move towards a new type of modernism that lost the elegiac, mournful perspective on the now-distant motherland of Russia. As Thomas Karshan summarizes in his introduction to the compilation of Nabokov’s *Selected Poems*, in “dealing with his shattering transition from the Russian to the English language, Nabokov explores the basic words and gestures for farewell, and plays painfully on their inadequacy to the tasks he wishes they could perform for him: renunciation, mourning, exorcism” (*Selected Poems*, xiii). This deflection of his own identity and complete departure from Russian literature coincided, as Karshan points out, with Nabokov’s imminent departure from Europe to America, as well as his transition to becoming a writer in the English language.

At the time of the Vasiliy Shishkov hoax, the entire European continent was on the brink of war. Tensions were quickly escalating, jobs were growing more scarce, and the rising power of Nazi Germany made the future look highly uncertain. Furthermore, Nabokov, his wife Véra, and their son Dimitri, were barely making ends meet — Véra held an office job, which was the only consistent source of their income, and Nabokov’s sporadic earnings as a writer were not enough to substantially support the family. This time in Paris was especially trying for the Nabokovs. In his autobiography Nabokov ruminates that his “bleakest recollections are associated with Paris, and the relief of leaving it was overwhelming” (*Speak, Memory*, 258). This

is why, when Shishkov states that he intends “to disappear, to dissolve,” it is rather Nabokov’s voice speaking through the mask of another writer, effectively expressing his own desire to abandon his meager existence, and avoid the imminent violence in Europe. In this way, and through the effort involved in creating Shishkov, Nabokov explores his ability to figuratively dissolve into his fictional characters, playing the roles of author, narrator and character simultaneously; his intent is obviously to give himself a new life in the pages of his fiction.

Nabokov investigates the potential of oscillating between literary identities in order to expand his artistic power, which, after all, were then greater than his agency in supporting a decent every-day existence. He would explore other capacities of literary buffer spaces at this time too: experimenting with metatextual forms in his fiction, or by creating a coagulated vision of the “otherworld,” thus examining the possibilities of timelessness in both his poetry and prose. In his novel *The Gift*, Nabokov invents a version of himself as young poet-cum-writer Fyodor Godunov-Cherdyntsev, and in the next year behind the guises of Vasiliy Shishkov, and Victor in “Spring in Fialta,” he explores the realm of memory as another escape. In all these works, he plays himself within his created worlds, detached from the troubles of reality. Nabokov’s “buffer spaces” within fiction thus allow him to experiment with manifestations of authorial self within different metatextual levels: the author’s world and that of a narrator, a protagonist, between past and present, between this world and another, where he can effectively rewrite his own history, and shape reality to his liking. The buffer spaces that Nabokov creates can also be seen as a type of “hiding place” for the author, where he can’t be immediately seen or found by his readers, for there he can disappear behind the guise of his semi-autobiographical characters. While “in

hiding,” detached from his work, Nabokov still monitors his readers and critics from a hidden vantage, much like a god, or a puppeteer.

In his interview with Alvin Toffler for *Playboy* in 1964, Nabokov describes his writing process as a Platonic type of discovery, almost directly alluding to the allegory of the cave:

“There comes a moment when I am informed from within that the entire structure is finished. All I have to do now is take it down in pencil or pen. Since this entire structure, dimly illumined in one’s mind, can be compared to a painting [...] I may direct my flashlight at any part or particle of the picture when setting it down in writing” (*Strong Opinions*, 31-32). In other words, by establishing a distance between himself and his own fictional and poetic creations, Nabokov begins to exist in his fictional worlds where time can stand still and reality can be molded.

“The Poets” represents the prime example of Nabokov’s experimentation with narrative distance. The poem takes on a new meaning when read from the perspective of Nabokov’s using Shishkov as a buffer space. The distance that Nabokov creates between himself, and the metatextual reality of Shishkov, allow for his authorial presence to multiply into at least two distinct bodies: Nabokov as narrator and author (also his name Sirin potentially splits his identity further) and Shishkov as a protagonist, and a poet. The separation between the narrator of the poem and Shishkov as its literal protagonist alone creates a type of intermediary space for Nabokov where he can simultaneously embrace both identities. Similarly, authorship of the poem can belong to both figures: Nabokov-Sirin and his character Shishkov. Moreover, in “The Poets,” Nabokov uses a completely different meter than he had used in any of his previous poems to further obscure his shared identity with Shishkov; he also employs compound rhyme which is rare for his verse. As Gerald S. Smith concludes in his exacting analysis of Nabokov’s poetic

meter, “Nabokov viewed departures from exactitude as a specific device, to be used to mark certain particular texts, rather than as a generally available formal resource which it became in Russian poetry during his time. It is noteworthy that in the short story ‘Vasiliy Shishkov,’ Nabokov uses compound rhymes to exemplify the ‘market-place excessiveness and low level of literacy’ of the spoof poems that Shishkov uses to test his critic” (Smith, 295). Nabokov consciously shed his style not only to obscure himself, but to “mark” the text of his poem as a departure from his poetic corpus.

This creation of a new literary voice in his invented character permits Nabokov to make grave concessions within the lines of the poem about the current prospect of his poetry, the endangered art form in pre-war Paris. At the beginning of the second stanza, he confesses: “It is time, we are going away: still youthful, / with a list of dreams not yet dreamt” (*Poems*, 102-103). The invocation of the first person plural pronoun allows him to make a wide claim and to speak for all Russian émigré poets. The second half of the same stanza confirms the detachment that the émigré poets feel while their home country fades away from them: they part not merely with the world, but “with the last, hardly visible radiance of Russia / on the phosphorescent rhymes of [their] last verse” (Ibid.) It is important to note here that Nabokov, in the penultimate chapter of *Speak, Memory*, recalls a different outlook of Russian émigré writers at this time: “In their attitude towards literature they were curiously conservative; with them soul-saving came first, logrolling next, and art last. A retrospective glance nowadays notes the surprising fact of these free belles-lettrists abroad aping fettered thought at home by decreeing that to be a representative of a group or an epoch was more important than to be an individual writer” (*Speak, Memory*, 284-5). In his opinion, his fellow citizens wanted desperately to be able to connect with their

homeland. But he had already realized that the distance between Paris and Russia was great, and the diaspora's connection to the land was diminishing by the day, "the last, hardly visible radiance of Russia" drifting off to into hazy memory. Here, Nabokov is suggesting that, in a way, a whole generation of Russian poets are going to disappear. In the next stanza of the poem, he bitterly asserts that "the kithless muses at last have destroyed us" indicating that the émigré poets whom he is addressing have been overtaken by another group of writers who have no geographical or national identities. Perhaps they are the same "individual writers" that Nabokov counterposes to the émigré poets in his autobiography, and to whom he also belongs.

In the next stanza, Nabokov further develops the theme of detachment by indicating the distance Shishkov's poets feel from their readers: "And this not because we're afraid of offending / with our freedom good people" (*Poems*, 102). The juxtaposition of the "we" (the poets), and the "good people" creates a rift between the author and the reader, stratifying his readership into classes of aesthetic sensitivity. It is another kind of buffer space that is carved out of the difference in the perceptual abilities and aesthetic sensibilities of the poets, as opposed to the philistines. Specifically, Nabokov concludes the stanza with the line "we prefer not to see what lies hidden from other eyes," again invoking the first person plural pronoun to speak for all poets, and suggesting that the perceptual abilities of the poets extend beyond the limitations of others.

He immediately dives into three stanzas listing in a number of examples of the visual details that the poets can observe, or the images that are specific to them. Speaking through Shishkov, Nabokov presents these images as too painful to be seen by just anyone. The poem's narrator notes "all this world's enchantment and torment," and "all that weighs upon one,

entwines one, wounds one,” and concludes with the admission that these images are “all the things that already [he] cannot express.” The last sequence of the poem, consisting of three stanzas begins with the words “not to see,” and ends with an emphasis on feeling, suggesting that the poets, who Nabokov and Shishkov both favor, have an expanded range of perception, in vision, emotion and pain.

The shift from things that Nabokov’s narrator can see, to things that he cannot see, constitutes the main narrative and lyrical focus of the poem. For example, in the seventh stanza he lists “all that wounds one...”, suggesting that even the most sensitive authors have a limit to what they can experience. Further, it is the tragedy of the poets that they lack the ability to “express” all of these ugly things. In a sense, they have a moral obligation to transmit their potential to see beyond the limits of the physical world, and yet, Nabokov admits that there exist things that even the best of them “cannot express.” In his mind, the poets have an expanded field of vision, but have lost their ability to speak. This combination of attributes is reminiscent of the “colossal oculus” which appears in Nabokov’s eponymous 1939 poem. There, a gigantic eye is endowed with vision, but it is also unable to express itself verbally.² The poem concludes with the lines “and who can care / for a world of omnipotent vision, / if nothing is monogrammed there?” suggesting the tragedy of a wasted wondrous, far-reaching perception (*Poems*, 139).

Because of this realization, Nabokov’s Shishkov is making it clear that his remaining poetic opportunities in this world are diminishing. The ideas of “dissolving” and “crossing over” predominate in the final two stanzas of “The Poets,” along with the repeated invocation of “silent/silence”: “In a moment we’ll pass across the world’s threshold / into a region—name it as

² An analysis of “Oculus” constitutes the second half of my first chapter.

you please: / wilderness, death, disavowal of language, / or maybe simpler: the silence of love; / the silence of a distant cartway, its furrow, / beneath the foam of flowers concealed; / my silent country (the love that is hopeless); / the silent sheet lightning, the silent seed” (*Poems*, 102). By using the plural pronoun “we” again, Nabokov describes a mass exit of the poets. Already gone from their motherland of Russia, they are now crossing “the world’s threshold” into a new, silent region of existence. The repetition of “silence” in the poem’s closing lines elevates the word — it nearly becomes a mantra, having acquired a spiritual quality. With their “disavowal of language,” they can achieve perception in this silent land only through their faculties of vision and memory, the same state as the oculus. Conversely, their inability to express the pain and beauty of the world makes their transition to the otherworld imperative, because there, silence rules. In the buffer space created between silent and audible worlds, silence becomes a positive quality of existence, as the narrator suggests that the purest form of experience in the otherworld is one without sound.

Each of the “silent” images and spaces that Nabokov indicates are imbued with metaphorical significance. The silent “distant cartway” represents the road towards the heart of the silent region where the poets will travel. The “silent country” is Russia, the land the poets have left, thus detaching themselves from their national heritage. Their longing for Russia is compared to “the love that is hopeless,” which suggests that any affiliation with their forgotten home may be a worthless endeavor. On the final line, “the silent sheet lightning” invokes the same image of an incredibly bright, encompassing wash of white light, which characterizes Nabokov’s visual representations of the otherworld as seen in works such as “Spring In Fialta” or Nabokov’s description of cosmic synchronization in *Lectures on Literature*. The poem concludes

with the image of “the silent seed,” which is hopeful and brimming with promise. After all, the whole enterprise of “crossing over” may be worth it. The seed will eventually come back to life in another form, its state of “silence” may be temporary.

David M. Bethea, in his essay “Nabokov and Khodasevich,” explains that “The Poets” was originally written as a eulogy. It was delivered at the funeral of Nabokov’s friend, the Russian émigré writer Vladislav Khodasevich in 1939. A very literal reading of the poem reveals it to be several allusions to the transition from life to death, as well as cementing the proximity of death and promise of the hereafter as central themes. The final two stanzas seem to directly point towards this transition, and the state of existence in the hereafter, the silent and surreal pastoral imagery evokes an idea of heaven. No matter whether the poem can be read literally, as Nabokov’s roadmap to the afterlife, or as a more metaphorical reading about the “death of Russian poets” and the limitations of their ability to express themselves, the act of crossing over between worlds is central to our understanding of it. Nabokov, through the separation between himself and his poetic subject, exercises his ability to exist in both realms simultaneously. Writing under the veil of anonymity, he utilizes the buffer space he creates in “The Poets” to address the themes of despair, the inescapability of terror in Europe, and the shedding of his identity as a Russian writer, emblemized by finally shedding his widely-known Russian pen name, Sirin. It was in the year following the Vasiliy Shishkov episode that he moved to America, and began his bright career as a writer and poet in English.

This is why Nabokov’s final Russian novel, *The Gift*, is so emblematic of Nabokov’s state of mind, and especially of his evolving authorial strategy at that time. It was published in serialized form in 1938 while Nabokov was living in Paris, his final European home before the

emigration to the United States. However, he penned the novel in the preceding years while eking out a meager existence in Berlin, the city that sets the scene in *The Gift*. The novel's protagonist is a young Russian poet named Fyodor Godunov-Cherdyntsev. Fyodor's personal history and attributes harbor an eerie resemblance to Nabokov himself, such as his love of lepidopterology and his fated romance with a young Jewish girl named Zina. There are also overlapping chronologies that place both the author and his character in the same time and place in history. Godunov-Cherdyntsev, like Nabokov, was a talented poet from a young age. Further, his love for poetry and his desire to join the ranks of outstanding Russian poets such as Pushkin, Blok and Khodasevich is perhaps the most important similarity between Nabokov and his protagonist. In *Speak, Memory*, Nabokov reconstructs his first feelings of poetic inspiration and his days of avid poetic composition at the age of 14, through the visualization of a pavilion with a bridge extending from it, the place where he liked to write poetry on his family's estate. This pavilion was so distinct in his mind, that he kept recalling it frequently: "I dream of my pavilion at least twice a year" (*Speak, Memory*, 215). While the entire description of the space remains highly surreal and dream-like, Nabokov vividly depicts a bridge connecting the pavilion, which appears to nearly float in mid-air compared to its surroundings: "The narrow little bridge that arched across the ghyll at its deepest part, with the pavilion rising midway like a coagulated rainbow, was as slippery after a rainy spell as if it had been coated with some dark and in a sense magic ointment" (*Speak, Memory*, 216). The "slippery" bridge seen here is a symbol representing a different type of buffer space that Nabokov creates. Between the solid land of reality, and a highly surreal, floating pavilion that encompasses the essence of poetic creation, this bridge is a narrow, difficult passage to traverse, one which only a few individuals can cross.

It is as if in crossing this metaphorical bridge, Nabokov carves out a new existence for himself, that between reality and poetry. Here, he can assume any identity he chooses, be it Vasilii Shishkov, or Fyodor Godunov-Cherdyntsev.

In *The Gift*, one of Fyodor's earliest compositions is introduced in the text in its entirety, as a poem that "had moved [his mother] most of all" (*The Gift*, 94). Although left untitled in the pages of the novel, the poem was finally published in English in 1979 under Nabokov's own name, and given the title "The Swift":

One night between sunset and river
 On the old bridge we stood, you and I.
 Will you ever forget it, I queried,
 — that particular swift that went by?
 And you answered, so earnestly: Never!

And what sobs made us suddenly shiver,
 What a cry life emitted in flight!
 Till we die, till tomorrow, for ever,
 You and I on the old bridge one night. (*The Gift*, 94)

The poem reads as a traditional love lyric: it is short, piercingly nostalgic, and encompasses romantic imagery, such as the figures of young lovers, a sunset, allusions to death and tears, and the swallow bird swooping across the scene. Its motion is both metaphorical and metonymic — as an emblem of memory or a symbol of psyche, a swallow crosses over from past to present, flying on to eternity. In his analysis of "The Swift," Paul D. Morris argues that "through use of motifs of transition — at sunset on a bridge — the individuals in the poem are presented as suspended in a liminal space where they are allowed briefly in their love, and in the identification of a shared lyric temperament, to escape the earthly coordinates of time and space" (Morris, 186). Morris' identification of this "liminal space" where both of the lovers can exist

outside of time and space points directly to the existence of the timeless otherworld. Further, the penultimate line of the poem, “Till we die, till tomorrow, for ever,” suggests the possibility of a space where death is overcome, and consciousness can continue on to infinity. In other words, here, the narrator’s identity dissolves into the text as it happens to Nabokov and his protagonist in “Vasiliy Shishkov.”

Nabokov's reference of a bridge in this poem cements the symbolism of bridges in his poetic and fictional works. For him, bridges represent a transitional, timeless buffer space, a fragile link between worlds, experiences, life and death. It is not surprising that the bridge Nabokov describes in “The Swift” reappears throughout his autobiography, deepening the personal connection that Nabokov had with bridges — physical and metaphorical. For Nabokov, symbolic bridges are more significant than physical ones, because they perform not only the function of crossing a body of water, but also distinctly mark times and places where people or things come and go. From his childhood onward, bridges stand as entry and exit points in some of Nabokov’s most vivid memories. One of the first instances that Nabokov shares about bridges in his autobiography comes from the time when his father, Vladimir Dmitrievich Nabokov, was returning home from his imprisonment. V.D. Nabokov helped draft the Vyborg Manifesto, a document that encouraged Russians to resist the government after the Tsar began to dissolve the Parliament in 1906.³ Nabokov remembers the anticipation he felt, and the colorful and joyous day when his father came back to their family estate in Vyra in a horse-drawn carriage. The image of the bridge traversed by horses stands out in Nabokov’s memory: “I see with the utmost clarity the sun-spangled river; the bridge, the dazzling tin of a can left by a fisherman on its

³ See Dragunoiu, 21-23

wooden railing” (*Speak, Memory*, 30). The imminent return of his father was not just a matter of crossing the bridge back into the village, but also his return to young Nabokov’s life.

Another example of the importance of bridges in Nabokov’s personal history comes from chapter 12 of *Speak, Memory*. In the beginning of his young romance with Tamara, the narrator discovers his girl’s initials carved into a bench near the bridge’s pavilion. Later, he sees her “standing quite still [...] in a birch grove, she seemed to have been spontaneously generated there, among those watchful trees, with the silent completeness of a mythological manifestation” (*Speak, Memory*, 230). Both the beginning and the end of their romance are marked with the motif of a bridge. From afar, a young Nabokov observes Tamara, to him, a “mythological manifestation,” walking across a bridge with two other girls. It takes him a whole month before he summons the courage to speak to Tamara. His memory of the romance is hazy, and thinking about the experience retrospectively, he writes: “In looking at it from my present tower I see myself as a hundred different young men at once, all pursuing one changeful girl in a series of simultaneous or overlapping love affairs, some delightful, some sordid, that ranged from one-night adventures to protracted involvements and dissimulations” (*Speak, Memory*, 240). Though the passing of time surely had an effect on the older Nabokov to vividly remember the specifics and subtleties of his relationship with Tamara, the fact that she entered his life by crossing a bridge, and left it in the same fashion, suggests that the entirety of their romance existed on another plane of reality, in an altered space between history and the future. This kind of estrangement, according to the term used by Russian formalist critics, such as Victor Shklovsky, allowed Nabokov to experience the romance as “a series of simultaneous or overlapping love affairs.” Nabokov also uses this deflection from himself to “a hundred different

young men” to exercise his ability to exist outside of his own body when times are tough, or the weight of the past weighs heavily on him. In this instance, Nabokov retrospectively cites his promiscuity as a young man as a phase that he regrets, rationalizing his regret through saying that those “hundred different men” were not really him. In Nabokov’s personal life, as well as his artistic one, the ability to shift in, out and between these identities further establishes his need and interest to inhabit other names and other worlds.

His romantic experiences with Tamara and general promiscuity at this time were regularly condoned by his mother, who “contented herself with shaking her head dubiously though not intendedly, and telling the butler to leave every night some fruit for me on the lighted veranda” (*Speak, Memory*, 232). This lack of restriction on his love life from an early age led to Nabokov’s acceptance of Tamara’s role as one of the first people to show him around St. Petersburg. Both the young narrator and his light-footed guide found the city “horribly deprived of the sylvan security [they] had grown accustomed to” (*Speak, Memory*, 234), and thus much different from the secure and serene Vyra where Nabokov grew up, and which he rarely left, except to go to school. On the other hand, St. Petersburg evolved for the two lovers as a place for magical discoveries. At evening time, its architecture would come alive for them, with buildings and streetlights that could not be found at Nabokov’s home estate acquiring a preternatural quality: “Solitary street lamps were metamorphosed into sea creatures with prismatic spines by the icy moisture on our eyelashes. As we crossed the vast squares, various architectural phantoms arose with silent suddenness right before us” (*Speak, Memory*, 237). Needless to say, this otherworldly scene could only start being accessible to Nabokov once he left his property, crossing the bridge to a metropolis where he became effectively nameless in the crowds also

walking the city streets. This dislocation from his name and identity in a completely new and novel urban space was one of Nabokov's formative experiences of otherworldliness. In later years, the experience engrained in his youth remained a marker for his desires to disappear and exist on another plane of reality.

The multiplicity of identities that Nabokov suggests he experienced at this time has specific significance to his romance with Tamara, and the potential of their romance to be characterized as "otherworldly." When Nabokov writes of their final encounters, he describes them each as final partings, almost death-like in their irrevocability and hopelessness: "During that last summer in the country, we used to part forever after each secret meeting when, in the fluid blackness of the night, on that old wooden bridge between masked moon and misty river, I would kiss her warm, wet eyelids and rain-chilled face, and immediately after go back to her for yet another farewell" (*Speak, Memory*, 240). Figuratively complex, every part of this description suggests that Nabokov's narrator is in a dream-like state. The setting includes paradigmatic details of mystery and motifs of obscurity typical in Nabokov's fiction, such as the "misty river" and the "blackness of the night." Even further, the narrator has trouble actually parting from his beloved, as he notes that after leaving her, he would again go back for "yet another farewell." The inability for the two to part, the mystery and foggy memory of their relationship, and Nabokov's sense of several selves, and deflections of identity during this relationship, all feed into this author's concern with "timelessness," the state of being where time is stretched or condensed, seemingly unaffected by the laws of the universe. It is not purely because of the bridges, which bookend his relationship to Tamara, that this episode is characterized as timeless,

but rather the inverse is true: the timeless quality of their affair is inextricably linked to the crossing of bridges, and the worlds they can inhabit once those bridges are crossed.

To return to “The Swift,” it seems increasingly likely that the subject of Nabokov’s poem is indeed Tamara, considering his specific recollections of their romance in his autobiography. In a sense, the poem emblemizes the relationship completely, highlighting both its brevity through the figure of the swallow dashing across the lovers’ field of vision, and the sense of timelessness that Nabokov felt while he was seeing Tamara, represented through the statement “Till we die, till tomorrow, for ever,” which mirrors the repeated farewells that Nabokov distinctly remembers. The middle line of the poem, the only line that does not adhere to the ABAB rhyme scheme, is also the only line in which the addressee of the poem is quoted: “And you answered, so earnestly: Never!”. This break indicates that the narrator of the poem is not the only one implicated in the otherworldly scene “between sunset and river,” for images and emotions are accessible to any person as long as they are aware of what they are seeing. The figure of the swallow zipping across the narrator’s field of vision, though only for a fraction of a second, is elevated to an image engrained in the minds of both lovers; the scene is not restricted to the narrator’s singular perception. The emphatic response from the poem’s addressee, “Never!”, further suggests a break in chronological time, establishing the possibility of consciousness existing eternally. This implication of another consciousness in the “timeless” moment captured by the poem suggests that Nabokov believes his experiences of timelessness are not particular to him alone. Rather, they can be experienced by anyone who shares his aesthetic principles and mnemonic strategies.

In *The Gift*, “The Swift” is left untitled, and only a few words introduce the poem. It rests on the surface of the page, as a vignette connecting Fyodor’s literary past to Nabokov’s more confident authorial presence. And yet, in the novel, Nabokov introduces Fyodor to be the poem’s author as well as its lyrical hero. This is a move that allows him to separate himself from his character, and thus claim greater authorial agency. Only much later would Nabokov reappropriate the poem, including it in his own collection *Stikhi*, published posthumously (“Poems”, 1979). Moreover, he even called “The Swift” “probably [his] favorite Russian poem” (*Strong Opinions*, 14). While there is no question that Nabokov is indeed the author of “The Swift,” with the publication of *Stikhi*, the attribution of the poem in the novel became problematic, posing a serious threat to the autonomy of Fyodor Godunov-Cherdyntsev as the implied author of *The Gift*. It is as if after 1979, two years following Nabokov’s death, that Fyodor stopped being the sole author of the texts that are presented as his in the novel. Instead, he began to appear as Nabokov’s co-author, a puppet, or a veil behind which the actual author hid as the master of his fictional world.

Although Nabokov used many pseudonyms throughout his career as a writer, it is his characters’ proximity to the author that may seem challenging to the perplexed reader. Both Vasiliy Shishkov and Fyodor Godunov-Cherdyntsev came into being at one of the most difficult points in Nabokov’s life. The introduction of these protagonists as authorial alter egos in the poems, the story “Vasiliy Shishkov,” and *The Gift* may be interpreted as the master’s attempt to carve new authorial identities for himself. Their presence in literature led to the creation of metatextual buffer spaces for Nabokov, for the narrator-protagonists’ existence in fictional worlds and their unique personal histories allowed the author to imagine existential and psychic

realms independent of his own. And better yet, he had the power to shape the spaces in which these characters led their lives by making his authorial presence in them manifest. As I attempted to prove in this chapter, in creating these worlds, Nabokov effectively split his identity, and rewrote the rules for how an author is able to interact with his works. Rather than standing outside of his poetry and fiction and letting his “representatives” have their own autonomy, Nabokov devised spaces in which he would remain present, even after his death. In a sense, the creation of a buffer space is Nabokov’s medium and primary tool for accessing the “otherworld” evoked so often in his writing.

Chapter 3: Camouflaging with Darkness: Nabokov's Flight from Reality

In Nabokov's fiction and poetry, it is easy to lose track of what is real, and what is imagined. By blurring the lines between perception and imagination, he draws the reader's consciousness out of his fictional "reality" towards an idealized existence emblemized by dream states, deliriums, and flights of fancy. Unlike the reader, though, who may be baffled by the discrepancy between what seems "real" in Nabokov's worlds and what is not, the author seamlessly moves between both ontological poles, experimenting with shifting narratological modes and obfuscating the relationship between himself and his narrator or narrator-protagonist to ultimately eliminate the space between them. This chapter addresses Nabokov's experimentation with narrative hierarchies. By analyzing the highly-detailed dream sequence in *The Gift* where Fyodor reconnects with his dead father and the (meta)physical spaces created in "Evening on a Vacant Lot" and "How I Love You," it ponders the possibility of Nabokov's creating these intermediary zones between dream and the real as "portals" – the fictional grounds where he can travel through time, reconnect with his lost loved ones, or encounter alternate versions of himself.

Roland Barthes, in his seminal essay of literary theory, *Introduction to the Structural Analysis of Narratives*, offers three possibilities of how a narrator functions in a work: "The first holds that a narrative emanates from a person [...] The second conception regards the narrator as a sort of omniscient, apparently impersonal, consciousness that tells the story from a superior point of view, that of God: the narrator is at once inside his characters and outside them. The third [...] conception decrees that the narrator must limit his narrative to what the characters can

observe or know” (Barthes, 110-111). Using Barthes’ categories of narration, we can see that Nabokov encompasses all three of these perspectives in the text of *The Gift*. With the overlap in authorship between Godunov-Cherdyntsev and himself, both of these figures act alternating between being the novel’s narrators and authors. Moreover, they seem to be taking turns in detaching themselves from the immediate happenings of the world around them, providing the reader with a limited perspective of the reality presented in the novel. The final words of the novel read: “[...] no obstruction for the sage exists where I have put The End: the shadows of my world extend beyond the skyline of the page, blue as tomorrow’s morning haze — nor does this terminate the phrase. The End” (*The Gift*, 366). These closing words bring the reader right back to the beginning of the novel, for the “morning haze” echoes the atmosphere which surrounds the protagonist’s first appearance before the reader’s eyes: “One cloudy but luminous day...” (*The Gift*, 1). This mirroring of the weather motif is more than mere coincidence. By mentioning the same atmospheric conditions, Nabokov establishes the possibility of a circular reading of the novel, encouraging the reader to delve into it again and re-experience Fyodor’s formation as a writer. The novel’s final words refer to such a re-reader as a “sage,” thus complimenting the determined few who will continue to explore the “shadows” of Fyodor's world. It is also likely that the use of “my” in this final sentence, ascribed within the confines of the novel to Fyodor, aims at confirming his status as its implied author. For the brief last moment, Fyodor’s voice once again overtakes Nabokov as the sole creator of *The Gift*.

Fyodor constantly claims the role of the novel’s author: he speaks to Zina of writing a big work of fiction, he contemplates telling the story of their love, and he “prepares” himself for a major literary feat by producing smaller literary works, such as a collection of poems and two

biographies. But throughout *The Gift*, Fyodor also serves as the dramatized narrator of the novel. His experiences and observations are limited to his everyday existence, his dreams, otherworldly intimations, and voyages through memory, such as his vivid recollections of his father or his going back in his imagination to the familial estate in Russia in the second chapter. The tension between Fyodor's role as the novel's author as well as its dramatized narrator is a subject of great debate in Nabokovian scholarship, as the subject of narratology in *The Gift* is characterized as an issue where Nabokovian "critics disagree on almost every topic: identity and number of narrators, the relations between the first-person and third-person voices, as well as between different narrational 'I's, and so on" (*Garland*, 140). As Alexander Dolinin remarks in the same essay, the tension is resolved because "The authorial consciousness [...] is free to don whatever narratorial mask it thinks expedient for its design" suggesting a structural flexibility Nabokov intentionally included in the fabric of the novel (*Garland*, 161).

Because Fyodor's omniscience in *The Gift* is always a subject of doubt, readers are left to determine for themselves who has been enjoying this kind of proximity to the protagonist's emotional and intellectual self throughout the text. Nabokov obviously makes his toying with the possibility that Fyodor is the novel's sole narrator part of his metatextual game. He engages in the same pursuit of narrative ambivalence in other novels written during the 1920-30s, such as *Despair* and *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight*. What he would like the reader to believe is that he as an author is living under his narrator-protagonists' skin and vice versa. At the same time, he makes it explicit that this particular novel is not an autobiography and that Fyodor is not his alter ego.

In 1962, the year before *The Gift* was first published in its complete form in English (including the originally omitted fourth chapter), Nabokov gave an interview with Peter Duval-Smith and Christopher Burstall of the BBC, and the interview was later printed in *The Listener*, the BBC's weekly publication at the time. When speaking to Duval-Smith, Nabokov introduced Fyodor to the new English-speaking audience: “[*The Gift*] portrays the adventures, literary and romantic, of a young Russian expatriate in Berlin, in the twenties; but he's not myself. I am very careful to keep my characters beyond the limits of my own identity. Only the background of the novel can be said to contain some biographical touches” (*Strong Opinions*, 13-14). The simultaneous admission and denial of Nabokov's overlap in identity with his protagonist problematizes his pronounced detachment from his character. As it is often the case with Nabokov, his every new statement presents the reader with a new set of questions. Here, the main of them is why the author has left so little space between his own history and Fyodor's.

Brian Boyd, in his biography remarks that in *The Gift* Nabokov “draws on his past more than anywhere else in his fiction” (Boyd, 463). Boyd's statement is grounded in observations that most Nabokov-conscious readers will make. The protagonist, who also represents and articulates the novel's self-consciousness, has a remarkable number of similarities to Nabokov, particularly in the episodes where his childhood and adolescence are described. Immediately coming to the reader's attention is Fyodor's devotion to poetry, his poverty in Berlin, his nostalgia for Russia, the country his family were forced to abandon after the revolution, and his penchant for collecting visual and auditory details to use them in his literary work. There's also his all-encompassing love for catching, cataloging and researching butterflies, one of Nabokov's deepest lifelong passions. Fyodor remarks that he inherited this fascination from his father,

whose collection of butterflies were “real treasures” accumulated on his many travels around the world as a famous naturalist (*The Gift*, 15). Fyodor reminisces on long walks with his father from his childhood, remembering the “bliss,” “fascination,” “special fluency,” “grace,” and “enchanting world” of lepidopterology to which he was then introduced (*The Gift*, 109). From this moment onward, butterflies inextricably link Fyodor to his father, and in another direction, to Nabokov.

Near the end of *The Gift*, Fyodor comes across a butterfly in the woods which draws him out of the present into his mourned and irrecoverable past. The butterfly serves as a trigger for Fyodor’s imagination and as a means for directing his self-reflection back towards his father. “A golden, stumpy little butterfly, equipped with two black commas, alighted on an oak leaf, half opening its slanting wings, and suddenly shot away like a golden fly. And as often happened on these woodland days, especially when he glimpsed familiar butterflies, Fyodor imagined his father’s isolation” (*The Gift*, 334-5). Just as Fyodor lived most of his life separated from his father, whose travels eventually landed him a place at an internment camp in Siberia from which he never returned, Nabokov the author of *The Gift* has to live in eternal “exile” from his parent assassinated by a monarchist in Berlin in 1922. Thus Fyodor’s separation from Konstantin Dmitrievich Godunov-Cherdyntsev mirrors Nabokov’s own separation from his father, whom he adored as a young man and kept paying tribute to as a mature individual, most notably, in *Speak, Memory*. Most importantly, in *The Gift*, the author is able to re-imagine the return of his murdered father by portraying Fyodor’s reunion with Godunov-Cherdyntsev senior in one of the novel’s final scenes where the protagonist slips between reality and the “otherworld” one night.

In the final pages of *The Gift*, Fyodor gives what amounts to one of Nabokov's most comprehensive and specifically detailed accounts of crossing over to the otherworld. What the protagonist imagines, the author describes as a dream-like condition "on the border between consciousness and sleep" (*The Gift*, 351). Moreover, the setting for the "encounter" between Fyodor and his father is dominated with light, color, and atmospheric motifs which Nabokov often employs when indicating the presence of the otherworld, such as "the whisper of the rain" that soothes Fyodor into this dreamy state, a nonsensical impulse of alliterative poetic versification, and "a monogram of light resembling an infusorian" in the character's "subpalpebral field of vision" (*The Gift*, 351-2). The amount of specific visual detail which Nabokov employs in this passage, a continuous paragraph extending for three and half pages, as well as the flurry of images and impulses passing through Fyodor's mind, prompt the reader to question whether the protagonist is truly asleep, or has crossed over to another plane of existence characterized by heightened, nearly omniscient perception. Further complicating the questions of the protagonist's state of mind is the illusion Nabokov creates of Fyodor "waking up" when "suddenly in the thickening mist [...] came the silver vibration of a telephone bell, and [he] rolled over prone, falling..." (Ibid.). The phone call appears to snap Fyodor out of his "dream" when, in fact, he is falling deeper into his unique psychic state of omnipotence and "cosmic synchronization" which may also be perceived as an otherworldly experience. At this point, another figure enters Fyodor's dream. It is his lover Zina who has answered the ringing phone. Zina delivers a message that someone is waiting for Fyodor at his old apartment, and that he must hurry.

The ensuing dash through the streets of Berlin, dimly lit by street lamps, is reminiscent of Nabokov's other dreamy sequences, such as the description of his first escapades through St. Petersburg at night, along with his first lover, Tamara, in *Speak, Memory*. Fyodor even specifically recalls the city of St. Petersburg in his description of the eerie and mutating architecture of nighttime Berlin: "At this time of year in Berlin there is something similar to the St. Petersburg white nights: the air was transparently gray, and the houses swam past like a soapy mirage" (*The Gift*, 352). Although bordering on the surreal, Nabokov's depiction of Fyodor's sprint through the German capital with highly specific details that are too vivid to make the dream-like and otherworldly characteristics of the scene fully believable. Rather, these details distract the reader from the surreality, redirecting him towards a concrete vision of Fyodor's previous Berlin experiences, such as his running back to his old apartment after tutorials or literary meetings. For example, Fyodor comments on a lighting system in the place where night workers were making improvements on the road: "Some night workers had wrecked the pavement at the corner, and one had to creep through narrow passages between planks, everyone being given at the entrance a small lamp which at the exit was to be left on a hook screwed into a post or else simply left on the sidewalk next to some empty milk bottles" (*Ibid.*). Too specific, mundane and logical to be perceived as an attribute of a dream, this image draws the reader away from the possibility that Fyodor is not completely conscious, cancelling the supposition of his existence on another plane or being or in his imagination. The lamp and hook sequence, in fact, sets the precedent for the reader to imagine the remaining action in this particular scene as an actual event.

Fyodor's disorientation as he continues to march through the streets of Berlin becomes evident through a few tongue-in-cheek details incorporated in the scene, like a mention of blind students only holding classes at night in their "economically dark schools which in the daytime housed seeing children" or a still-lit Russian bookstore "serving books to the night taxicab drivers" (*The Gift*, 353). The narrative seems to swerve back towards its otherworldly underpinnings as the narrator illuminates Fyodor's state of consciousness: "[He] could not recall the layout of the streets, and the ashy night confused everything, changing as in a negative image the relationship between dark and light parts" (Ibid.). But the unfamiliar scene reverts to normal once Fyodor returns to his old apartment where "the room was exactly as if he had still been living in it" (*The Gift*, 354). Fyodor's reunion with his "daytime" self continues in his recollection of the emotions he felt when previously reminiscing about his father's love of lepidopterology, noticing "the same painted ceiling wonderfully ornamented with Tibetan butterflies [...] Expectancy, awe, the frost of happiness, the surge of sobs merged into a single blinding agitation" (Ibid.). The surge of these specific emotions which help Fyodor recall his feelings about his father only add to the reader's uncertainty about whether Fyodor is conscious, or existing in another state of mind or, perhaps, on another plane of reality.

Finally, Fyodor's suspicions about the event presently about to take place, his meeting with an unknown individual, reaches its climax: "He know *who* would enter in a moment, and was amazed now that he had doubted this return: doubt now seemed to him to be the obtuse obstinacy of one half-witted, the distrust of a barbarian, the self-satisfaction of an ignoramus" (*The Gift*, 354). In this one sentence, the narrator uses four synonyms in sequence to describe the idiocy of feeling "doubt" at a moment like this and thus emphasize his certainty of

what is about to transpire. The repetition of these derogatory nouns is at first simply a rhetorical device to further enhance the reader's belief in the actual conscious reality of the meeting about to unfold. But once the reader learns, as he soon will, that the event is only happening on another plane of consciousness or reality, the repeated statement about the folly of feeling "doubt" suggests the infinite possibilities of the otherworld — that anything can happen, even the resurrection or return of Fyodor's long-lost and presumed dead father.

Fyodor, anxiously awaiting his visitor, is suddenly face to face with Konstantin Dmitrievich Godunov-Cherdyntsev, who at first "said something, but so quietly that it was impossible to make anything out, although one somehow knew it to be connected with his return, unharmed, whole, human, and real" (*The Gift*, 354). His father's muted and indiscernible voice still conveys a message to Fyodor, even though Fyodor can not make out what he is saying. And Fyodor mentions he feels an acute sense of fear, dreading his father's approach towards him. His father then utters another phrase, similarly inaudible, but Fyodor again receives the message that "everything was alright and simple, that this was the true resurrection, that it could not be otherwise" (*The Gift*, 355). It is as if Fyodor is communicating with God in this moment: the spiritual transmission of information without words is nevertheless clearly understandable for the protagonist. Further, his father's assurance that "this was the true resurrection" adds another layer of spiritual import to this interaction, likening his father's return to the resurrection of Jesus Christ.

It is easy to imagine why Nabokov chose to include this scene in the novel. In creating a fictionalized version of himself in Fyodor, and going to great lengths to mirror their histories as individuals, Nabokov carves a space for himself to rewrite the terrible truth about his father's

murder, and imagine a time and place in which his father could return to him, so they could have just one more chance to interact. This moment is imagined in *The Gift* as only a momentary meeting between father and son, before it becomes clear that the whole scene did not transpire in “reality.” Fyodor then “dissolves” into the image of his father standing before him, and as they touch, a feeling of terror strikes the young man, immediately waking him up from the dream. The moment in which Fyodor and his father actually make physical contact in the dream is ripe with sensorial detail extending far beyond the limits of tactile sensations: “With a moan and a sob Fyodor stepped toward him, and in the collective sensation of woolen jacket, big hands and the tender prickle of trimmed mustaches there swelled an ecstatically happy, living, enormous, paradisaal warmth in which his icy heart melted and dissolved” (*The Gift*, 355). The specific prickliness, a sort of comforting discomfort, is met with the highly Nabokovian feeling of an “enormous warmth,” presumably love, into which Fyodor dissolves and then wakes up. Though Nabokov never specifically cited dreams of his own father in his writing, this brief and otherworldly scene is a key to interpreting the author’s imagining his father as continuing to exist outside of the constraints of reality.

In addition to this fictional reunion in the space of the novel, Nabokov also suggests meetings with his dead father in his poetry. In his earlier, 1932 poem, “Evening on a Vacant Lot,” Nabokov also imagines a scene of his father’s re-appearance, as he did six years later in the pages of *The Gift*. Although there are no explicit allusions to V.D. Nabokov in the body of the poem, the dedicatory inscription reads “*In memory of V.D.N.*,” calling attention to Nabokov’s father’s name before the poem begins. In the conclusion of the poem, a familiar figure appears before the narrator, a body which the reader can assume is the return of his father from the grave.

Looking at the specific imagery in “Evening on a Vacant Lot,” one will notice a number of details repeated in the pages of *The Gift*, suggesting that Nabokov’s imagining the possibility of his father’s “resurrection” in the poem has the same motif structure as the images constituting Fyodor’s dream-state in the novel.

The poem begins with the word “inspiration.” It is a topic which Nabokov treated with gravity, investigating it in depth in such novels as *Mary* and *The Gift*, short stories “Torpid Smoke,” “Benevolence,” and “A Guide to Berlin,” as well as his later essay “The Art of Literature and Commonsense.” In the essay, he directly drew a parallel between the space of this poem and the author’s contemplations on the nature of inspiration and its relation to instances of cosmic synchronization in the world, and subsequently, in fiction⁴. The poem begins with an image traditionally linked to elegiac poetry; it can also be traced back to Nabokov’s fictional explorations of the border between life and death or between remembrance and forgetting. The figure of sunset establishes from the outset the possibility of death, loss, and, the otherworldly experiences thematically associated with one’s morning the loss of a loved one. But, considering that the imagery of a sunset is inseparable of Nabokov’s aesthetic of the otherworld, it also calls for an interpretation of the poem’s first stanza not as a lamentation, but as a promise. Nabokov’s narrator finds himself “Self-lost, melting in the air and sunset,” seemingly unhinged and untethered to reality. His uncertain emotional state further opens up the possibility for otherworldly experiences to take place in the narrative space of the poem. Again, as has been the case in *The Gift*’s scene of Fyodor’s “meeting” his father, the sunset brings on a feeling of dissolving, in this case, “melting.” The narrator’s becoming one with his environment is the

⁴ See chapter 1, p.3

scene's central lyrical action. Eventually a bridge begins to emerge between reality and the otherworld. Unsettled, grieving, longing for someone or something, the narrator gives in to a deep and brooding emotion, which, swelling up in him, brings him to the brink of tears: "Never did I want so much to cry" (*Poems*, 92). With the quickly encroaching otherworld, he experiences great uncertainty, even fear.

One of the most noticeable features of the poem is its second-person perspective, which is highly unusual in elegiac lyrical poetry. "Evening on a Vacant Lot" is clearly addressed to an unidentified party, presumably the person to whom it is dedicated, the author's father. While the poem largely forgoes any narrative details that might introduce this other individual, the inclusion of several apostrophes that include the second-person pronoun "you" mark the lyrical direction of the poem, effectively undermining the first-person narrative flow which Nabokov establishes in the poem's opening stanza. These repeated breaks in perspective come at the end of the first, third and fourth stanzas, and at the beginning of the second. For each of these invocations of "you," there is also a noticeable shift in time. Every time an addressee is evoked, Nabokov reroutes the poem's time towards the past, suggesting that the only connection the narrator feels between the "I" and the "you" is the one grounded in the passage of time.

The first apostrophe appears at the end of the first stanza and alludes to an image of a butterfly. "My precious being," the narrator calls it affectionately, as if making a nod towards Nabokov's lifelong love of butterflies. But the invocation seems to extend beyond the passion of collecting and studying butterflies. Still addressing the "precious being," the narrator concludes the first stanza with an admission of his fascination with the butterfly's beauty and transience: "nothing do I know — except / that it's worthwhile being born / for the sake of this your breath."

The reference to “breathing,” which may be a figurative description of the fluttering of butterfly wings, is in the continued present tense. Thus it suggests that the poem’s addressee may still be alive, or at least imbued with spiritual life (“*dukh*” and its derivatives in Russian denote both “breath” and “sprit”). Nabokov makes it possible for the reader to think of “breath” as the fluttering of butterfly wings, or the continuous life of a soul, but certainly not of human breath. His choice of the polysemous trope makes the other thematic correlations in the poem just as ripe with ambiguities and interpretive possibilities.

The use of “you” in the second stanza seems to point towards the action of creating poetry itself. This is a diversion from the animate “you” – a soul, an insect, – whom the narrator addresses in the first stanza. The second stanza begins: “It once was easier and simpler: two rhymes — and my notebook I’d open / How hazily I got to know you / in my presumptuous youth!” Nabokov is referencing here his early days of poetic creation, when he would spend days in the park pavilion at Vyra, composing verse. Nabokov notices that his ability to write poetry has become more difficult as he has aged, but he does not lament it. Although he is no longer is capable of writing “simpler: two rhymes — and my notebook I’d open,” a new, difficult process of transcribing reality, is now in place. What he used to write was a momentary glimpse of reality which, “when transcribed in a fair copy, / deprived of magic instantly.” Now this very poem is a recreation of “magic,” or, embodies the magic itself.

“Evening on a Vacant Lot” was written years before *Speak, Memory*. But in its second stanza, Nabokov recalls his connection to the park pavilion in Vyra as a place of poetic inspiration, specifically articulating the function of the bridge that connected the floating pavilion to the rest of the estate. This is an important evocation, for it establishes the primacy of

the bridge as a foundational space not only for Nabokov's lyrical self-perception, but for his poems' structure and thematic unity as well: "Leaning my elbows on the railing / of verse that glided like a bridge." The bridge is more than a place where poems are born; it is a launching pad which propels Nabokov's narrator into the transcendental space that may or may not be the otherworld: "already I imagined that my soul had started moving, started gliding, and would keep drifting to the very stars." This line suggests a sort of cosmic transference that would lift the poet's soul out of his body, so that it could float on towards infinity. This action is emblematic of Nabokov's poetic oeuvre of the 1930s. For example, it recalls the motif of crossing over the world's threshold in "The Poets," with its similarly cosmic event of mind separating from body and continuing on to another realm of existence. The continued action the Nabokov implies in the line "keep drifting to the very stars" similarly invokes a sense of infinity and endlessness in this ascent to other realms, further emphasizing the author's interest in an existence untethered to the physical world, and his hope that the soul can live on free from the mortal constraints of the body.⁵

In the third stanza, the narrator evokes an image of a lone house in the dark night. It is lit by the light of the full moon and a single kerosene lamp in the house window. The stanza's main contrast is grounded in the relationship between light and darkness. Light is imagined as a force deep within, trying to escape a blanket of obscurity. Nabokov uses such adjectives as "amazement," "fabulous" and "deathless" to describe the presence of light, suggesting its infinite and wondrous qualities. Once the light escapes from the darkness, as it seems to in the closing lines of the stanza, it can no longer be dimmed: "again it shines through, / for its lid was not tight

⁵ See Paul Morris, 102, 136, 144, and *The Garland Companion*, 566-571

—and no longer / can one take it away from you” (*Poems*, 93). This moment is the third time the “you” is brought to the front of the lyric, breaking the narrative flow and again suggesting a timelessness of “you” which is associated with the infinite promise of “no longer.”

Finally, the “you” is given a body in the fourth stanza. Approaching, is the figure of a man “in the twilight.” The narrator identifies him instantly: “I recognize / your energetic stride. You haven’t / changed much since you died”. The use of enjambment here emulates the action of the man moving closer to the narrator, making the the reader run through the lines, presumably until after the poem ends, when the narrator and the figure meet and embrace in their moment of reconnection. Thus the vacant lot which sets the scene for the poem is a magical place, a meeting point of loving and longing souls. The closing stanza of the poem highlights the possibility of the “resurrection” of dead and forgotten things, objects that the narrator notices in the beginning of the poem, such as the “Trash of solitary outskirts, weedy little stalk with teardrops, skull of happiness, long, slender, like the skull of a borzoi.” In the poems final lines, these motifs reappear, though this time, they seem to be coming alive, resurrected from their stasis and decomposition into lifelike objects. The “trash” mutates into “a deformed tin can,” the weedy stalk blossoms into “weedy flowers,” and the slender canine skull returns: “Across the vacant lot in harkening dust I glimpse a slender hound with snow-white coat.” Through the bookended transformation of dead and inanimate objects into living and breathing creatures, the entire “vacant lot” takes on special significance. It is a place of resurrection.

The entire poem is particularly reminiscent of Fyodor’s dream in *The Gift*, with its otherworldly motifs, sense of timelessness, and ultimately the strange yet impossible meeting and reconnection of a son with his dead father. While in *The Gift*, Fyodor uses the narrative space

of his dream to resurrect the dead parent, the narrator in “Evening on a Vacant Lot” uses a geographical location to imagine a place where a similar encounter could happen. Effectively, Nabokov is experimenting with time and space as an effort to increase the potential of his vision, as he did earlier in “Oculus.” If he could see through time, if something could be seen and grasped instantly (as he described in that letter to his wife in 1939 “we don’t look at a painting from left to right, but we take in everything at once” (*LTV*, 433)), then his artistic vision could be both complete and incontestable. Nabokov visualizes in his poems the same kind of floating, disembodied eye. In “Evening On A Vacant Lot,” the fourth stanza begins “Blinking, a fiery eye looks, / through the fingerlike black stacks / of a factory,” repeating the imagery of a disembodied eye from “Oculus.”

The black smoke rising from the factory in this image seems to compromise the magical purity of omnipotent vision Nabokov only hints at in “Evening on a Vacant Lot” but introduces fully in “Oculus.” But if we note that this same image of light passing through a “fingerlike” scene is not particular to “Evening...” alone, the connection acquires a special significance. In the closing stanza of Nabokov’s 1934 poem “How I Love You,” light similarly pours in, filtered through a wooded landscape: “The beams / pass between tree trunks; they band / the tree trunks with flame” (*Poems*, 96). In this instance, the tree trunks, having replaced the smoke stacks, create a contrast between light and dark that is always present in Nabokov’s writings on the otherworld. In these two examples, the presence of light is central to both poems, and the closing image of light streaming through the tree trunks in “How I Love You” creates an interplay of shadows, each one split by the ray of light. In this same fashion, Nabokov in “How I Love You” continues to shift between images of light and dark. Even further, he imagines himself as a figure

of light, contrasted with the subject of the poem, a nondescript, shadowy figure of unknown identity. Shifting between elements of light and dark, silence and noise, Nabokov juxtaposes the life that is real, prosaic, and finite, with an idealized existence in which one that is free from the alternating light and dark of reality. Instead, Nabokov hypothesizes the possibility of posthumous existence in a dark and silent space, which he imagines as life in a state of pure love.

Continuing with “How I Love You”, we can see that the opening lines of the poem reinforce the contrast between light and dark, an effect the narrator attributes to weather and landscape: “Kind of green, kind of gray, i.e., / striated all over with rain” (*Poems*, 95). The rain causing streaks across the narrator’s field of vision is reminiscent of other contrasting vertical patterns which punctuate the poem. Nabokov juxtaposes this gray and green scene with the narrator’s desire to hide under the shield of a dark cloak with his beloved – the “mad one.” He states with urgency “Let’s go, let’s go before it’s too late, / quick, under one cloak” (*Ibid.*) Later, in the third stanza, a similar contrast between atmospheric light, and a hidden space of darkness allows Nabokov to create a counterpoint between “the blue sky [that] looks all lacquered” and the narrator’s hope of finding a safe, dark space to hide: “I wonder, is there nowhere a place there, / to lie low—some dark nook” (*Ibid.*) The repeated contrast between elements of light and dark in the poem mirror the contrast between silence and noise, where noise, like light, pervades, while the narrator explicitly states his effort to seek a silent existence, a mode of pure perception and emotion, similar to Vasilij Shishkov’s longing in “The Poets.”

The second stanza of the poem is preoccupied with the tension between silence and noise, and how the force of time only decreases the possibility of remaining silent: “Self-control, silence. But with each year, / to the murmur of trees and the clamor of birds, / the separation

seems more offenseful / and the offense more absurd. / And I fear ever more that rashly / I may blab and interrupt / the course of the quiet, difficult speech / long since penetrating my life” (*Poems*, 95). Thus the narrator remarks that the passage of time has an effect on his ability to remain silent, in a baby-like state, purely receiving the world’s sensory riches without questioning them. As time passes, it becomes increasingly difficult for the narrator to remain in this idealized state, unless he could find a way out and hide from the “light” of reality. In other words, exiting reality, as the narrator concludes in the poem, is only possible once both silence and darkness have been successfully attained.

The topic of perspective in “How I Love You” is of central importance. Its title suggests the existence of a narrator (“I”) and an object of his love (“You”), but as the poem progresses, it becomes less clear whether there are two distinct bodies, or just one person whose personality is fractured. Nabokov highlights the danger of both narrator and subject caught together in the first stanza: “Let’s go, let’s go before it’s too late, / quick, under one cloak, come home, / while you still are unrecognized, / my mad one, my mad one!” One would assume the “mad one” to be a woman, or perhaps a muse, but as Paul Morris identifies in his analysis of the poem, “the addressee of the poet’s love remains tantalizingly indeterminate. Potentially an individual, the nominal and adjectival declensions of Nabokov’s mellifluous Russian suggest neither a woman, nor the (in Russian grammatically feminine) muse” (Morris, 128). From the original Russian text, one can gather that the subject of Nabokov’s love is not a woman, such as his wife, or young lover Tamara, but rather a masculine figure, potentially one aspect of the author himself, or a manifestation of an alter ego.

One way to consider this puzzle would be to think of “my mad one” as Nabokov’s iteration of himself in the guise of Vasiliy Shishkov. Although Shishkov came into existence in 1939, five years after “How I Love You,” it is possible to assume that the idea of a “Vasiliy Shishkov” came to Nabokov long before he actually executed the poetic ploy. The urgency that the narrator elicits in the poem, saying “before it’s too late[...]while you are still unrecognized” hearkens back to one of the central episodes in the short story: the effort “Nabokov” made to separate his identity from the fictional Shishkov and his fear that the whole episode would be voided if their identities were linked together by an interloper. Instead of their being caught together, the narrator ponders the possibility of the two remaining together yet invisible.

Nabokov evokes the image of a butterfly camouflaged against the shadow-covered ground: “I wonder, is there nowhere a place there, / to lie low—some dark nook / where the darkness might merge / with a wing’s cryptic markings?” (*Poems*, 95). Similarly to the evocation of a butterfly in “Evening On A Vacant Lot,” this metonymy allows him to idealize his favorite creatures and imagine a simpler existence free from societal constraints and anxieties. Were he and his lover both butterflies, they would have nothing to hide from, their natural camouflage would allow them to remain undetected in this world without further manifestation. Because this idealized transformation into a butterfly is not physical, but figurative, the narrator returns to the Cartesian ideal of allowing his soul to separate from his body through the fabric of “the world’s texture”: “How I love you! In this / evening air, now and then, / the spirit finds loopholes, / translucences in the world’s finest texture” (*Ibid.*) And if the world were covered in a perforated veil separating it from another reality, there is the possibility of slipping between the partition, Nabokov

suggests, providing us with another instance of his contemplating fictional reality's "buffer spaces."

Since the character of Vasiliy Shishkov had not yet been invented when "How I Love You" was written, one could also consider the poem to be Nabokov's tribute to his dead father. Just as in *The Gift*, the appearance of a butterfly holds a special connotation for Nabokov, marking his hope that his murdered father continues to live on in another reality. The shared passion of lepidopterology between Fyodor Gudonov-Cherdyntsev and his father further enhances the possibility of this connection. In the novel, the narrator and his father had reconnected in the ephemeral space of a dream; in the poem, the urgency which the narrator conveys to his loved one suggests that their time together is fleeting, and they must go, "before it's too late" and the dream is over.

The poem concludes with an imperative: "Stand motionless under the flowering branch, / inhale—what a spreading, what flowing!— / Close your eyes, and diminish, and stealthily / into the eternal pass through" (*Poems*, 96). The effect of these lines is akin to visualizing Nabokov standing on the other side of a wall from the person he loves, their separation irreversible, unless could slip "into the eternal." Nabokov begs the other one to "stand motionless" and "diminish." What happens here is an act of fictional superimposing of realities, images, and desires. We may again recall Fyodor's dissolving into his father's body in his dream, or Vasiliy Shishkov dissolving into his verse. And yet, when Nabokov beckons his subject towards him, he insinuates that so far, he cannot make this transition himself: it must come from the other direction.

Conclusion

The presence of the otherworld is constantly at the forefront of Nabokov's aesthetic. Once the master weaves magical and unexpected events into the fabric of his prose, he turns the otherwise banal scenes of daily life on their head. As evidenced by scenes such as Fyodor Godunov-Cherdyntsev's dream sequence in *The Gift*, the line between reality and the otherworld in his works is often in flux, or nonexistent. This ambiguity is amplified by Nabokov's determination to both conceal and insert himself in his fiction through straddling the border between the two worlds, and thus always remain only partially visible to the reader.

Another central aspect of Nabokov's literary identity lies in his ability to inhabit "bodies" other than his own through his writing. The eponymous character in *Pnin*, Fyodor in *The Gift*, and invented aliases such as Vivian Darkbloom, Vivian Bloodmark, and Vasiliy Shishkov are all examples of Nabokov inventing fictionalized versions of himself. Detached from history, they are removed from the public eye to a realm where he can effectively rewrite his own history. Experimenting with Shishkov in particular, Nabokov expands his poetic capabilities. He uses an old form – a literary hoax – to address such topics as his detachment from Russia and his attempts to change the bleak outlook of Russian poetry in exile. The guises of Shishkov and Godunov-Cherdyntsev, as I attempted to prove, serve as buffer spaces for the author to experience an eternal, timeless existence within the secure and not entirely unfamiliar environments of his fictional words.

Through these forays, I have come to perceive Nabokov's aesthetic as a field of creative power magnetized towards the themes of silence, timelessness, a far-reaching perception, and

ultimately, a dissolution of body into soul. In his prose and poems that touch on these topics, Nabokov defines guidelines and establishes a precedent for an individual who wishes to exist eternally. The rules he outlines for his readers are far from simple to follow: be attentive; be brave; cultivate your memory; believe in art as magic and magic as art; let your imagination soar.

The constant presence of the otherworld in Nabokov's fiction, combined with specific passages indicating how one might arrive there, suggest that the otherworld is not so much a specific place, but a state of mind. As if in advocating for an existence characterized by silence and an expanded field of vision, Nabokov imagines a serenity achievable in this world through acts similar to meditation. Although he never speaks of his "mystery" directly, a perceptive reader may intuitively understand that only when the constraints and worries of this world are removed, one can slip through reality's thin veil towards an idealized existence of pure perception, untethered to the passage of time.

In *Vladimir Nabokov and the Poetics of Liberalism*, Dana Dragunoiu contends that the recurring appearance of Vladimir Dmitrievich Nabokov in Nabokov's works, primarily in his poetry, is in part an effort for the writer to channel his father's political idealism and philosophy. Nabokov's "identification with his father's liberalism" Dragunoiu writes, "was not simply a general attitude of mind, but a coherent and historically specific view about the legitimate boundaries of human knowledge, the proper functions of government, and the unconditional value of the right to self-determination" (Dragunoiu, 30-31). Certainly, Nabokov's liberalism was his father's political legacy, and Nabokov's desire to engage with his father manifested itself in his fiction. But there are also Nabokov's aspirations of "liberation," founded upon the possibility of an otherworldly experience. Following his father, but also taking his life work in another

direction, Nabokov advocates and explores a break from the confines of society and the physical limitations of the body. This leads him to the creation of transcendental spaces in poetry and prose and, consequently, to reestablishing a connection with someone who he deeply, timelessly loved.

Vladimir Nabokov died in 1977 in Montreux, Switzerland, leaving his literary legacy – an unmatched poetic vision, an intimation of aesthetic bliss unattainable on this world, and dazzling verbal artistry – to remain forever perplexing and comprehensible only to those who work hard to achieve familiarity with his works. It is by means of his stories and poems that Nabokov captures an avid audience of readers and scholars from around the globe and thus lives on, slipping through the divide between this world and another. One can imagine him as a shooting star, straddling the boundary between heaven and Earth, alluring, enigmatic, and alive: “Across the dark sky of exile, Sirin passed, to use a simile of a more conservative nature, like a meteor, and disappeared, leaving nothing much else behind him than a vague sense of uneasiness” (*Speak, Memory*, 288).

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