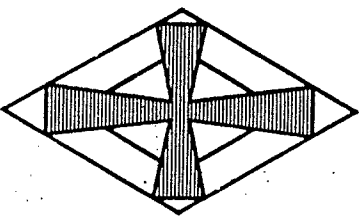


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Nabokov and Pushkin

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Pushkin departed from this world without establishing a literary school and without leaving behind a single direct disciple. His poetic message, if it was understood at all, was soon distorted by foes and friends alike.¹ Nor did Pushkin's esthetic creed of pure art endear him to the Russian intelligentsia of the decades to come. His journal *Современник* changed hands and its new editors made several attempts to dethrone the aristocratic poet and write off his poetic legacy. In fact soon after the death of Pushkin, Russian literature took an altogether different course, becoming a utilitarian tool for the promotion of civic, social, moral, religious, and political causes — a change that was to numb the esthetic sensitivities of several generations of Russian readers and critics. Under such circumstances, the eclipse of Pushkin's sun was imminent. The deformation of his legacy culminated in the centennial celebration in 1899. Unlike the 1880 celebration, most Russian writers took virtually no part in the jubilee because of the political as well as the commercial vulgarization of the poet's image. The paraphernalia of this celebration included Pushkin cigarettes, tobacco, rolling papers, matches, steel pens, stationery, ink stands, knives, watches, vases, cups, shoes, dresses, lamps, fans, candy, liqueur, perfume "Bouquet

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¹ See for example, Zhukovskii's well-intended deformation of Pushkin's lines from «Памятник»: «Что предельство жинной стихов я был полезен» which, from 1841 until 1881, was taken for the authentic version. This text was also engraved on Pushkin's monument.

Pushkin," and, for good measure, a board game called "Pushkin's Duel."²

Pushkin did not find a worthy descendant in his own century and had to wait for a «далекий потомок» in the next. It is the poets of the Silver Age who should be credited with the first genuine appreciation of Pushkin's sun. Starting with the repudiation of the jubilee in the 1899 issue of *Мир искусства* (No. 13-14), and during the first decades of the new century, we observe something that can be called a «столетнее возвращение» to the Golden Age of Pushkin. The entire pleiad of the Silver Age poets: Merezhkovskii, Briusov, Valmont, Blok, Velud, Ivanov, Khodasevich, Akhmatova, Mandelstam, Tsvetaeva, each claimed Pushkin as their own («мой Пушкин») and received their own epoch, their personal lives and losses as parallel to Pushkin's life, death, and age.

Стояло солнце Александра,

Сто лет назад сияло всем...

(Мандельштам, «Кассандра», 1920)

Принесли мы Смоленской заступнице,

Принесли пресвятой Богородице

На руках во гробе серебряном

Наше солнце, в муке погашеное, —

Александра, лебеда чистого.

(Ахматова, «А Смоленская нынче именница»,

Август 1921)

Perhaps no one at home or in exile made claim to Pushkin's legacy more faithfully than Vladimir Nabokov. Born in 1899, 100 years after Pushkin, Nabokov adopted him as his personal muse and never abandoned that calling. This muse followed him in 1917-18 to the Crimea where Pushkin "had wandered... a century earlier" (SM, 244, 288)³, and welcomed the young poet in exile. An epigraph from Pushkin's poem «Арион» opens Nabokov's first volume of verse published in emigration, *Горный путь* (1923). The volume is dedicated to the memory of Nabokov's father, and Pushkin's poem serves as an emblem of the young poet's exile:

... Погиб и кормщик, и пловец!
Лишь я, таинственный певец,
На берег выброшен грозою,

Я гимны прежние пою
И ризу влажную мою
Сушу на солнце под скалою.

This poem had a very personal significance for Nabokov. His father, V. D. Nabokov, the leader of the Constitutional Democratic Party and the editor-in-chief of the Berlin émigré newspaper *Руха*, was assassinated in 1922 in Berlin by Russian terrorists from the extreme right. Through the prism of «Арион» Nabokov's father becomes the "perished helmsman," while the son, rather immodestly, reserves for himself the role of the rescued "mysterious bard," cast by the cataclysms of history into a secure harbor of exile.

A Pushkin memento also marks the beginning of Nabokov's prose. Nabokov's first novel *Машенька* (1926) opens with the lines from *Евгений Онегин* (I, 47): «... Воспомня прежних лет романы, Воспомня прежнего любовь...» Thus from very early on, Nabokov established Pushkin as a permanent dweller in his art. His presence extends from fleeting allusions to direct quotations (attributed and unattributed), from occasional motifs to entire themes and fully formulated aesthetic concepts.⁴

It has long been established that the central theme of Nabokov's art is art itself. Nabokov's concept of art-for-art's sake is a direct outgrowth of Pushkin's treatment of this theme in such works as «Поэт и толпа», «Поэту», «Из Пиндемонти», «Египетские ночи.» The majority of Nabokov's novels have as their hero a writer, a poet. The unsuccessful poet Lenskii, at whose expense Pushkin deflates the sentimental-romantic canon of elegy, served as a model for a number of Nabokov's hero-writers who were often created for the sole purpose of exposing their artistic diffidence. Pushkin's theme of «Модарг и Сальери» became a blueprint for a number of situations in Nabokov's novels in which we find pairs of rival artists of

² See Marcus Levitt, "Pushkin in 1899" in *The Golden and Silver Age*, eds. Boris Gasparov and Robert Hughes (Berkeley, forthcoming).

³ The titles of Nabokov's works cited in this article were abbreviated as follows: SM — *Speak, Memory* (N. Y., 1970), C — *Стихи* (Ann Arbor, 1979), ВФ — *Весна в Филадельфии* (N. Y., 1956), NG — *Nikolai Gogol* (N. Y., 1944), O — *Отчаяние* (Berlin, 1936), IB — *Invitation to a Beheading* (N. Y., 1965), Пнк — *Приглашение на казнь* (Paris, 1938), ЗЛ — *Защита Лужина* (Berlin, 1930), SO — *Strong Opinions* (N. Y., 1973).

⁴ For a discussion of Pushkin and Nabokov see, Clarence Brown, "Nabokov's Pushkin and Nabokov's Nabokov" in *Nabokov: The Man and his Work*, ed. L. S. Dembo (Madison, 1967), pp. 169-208. William Rowe in his *Nabokov's Descriptive World* (N. Y., 1971) lists a number of Pushkin allusions, and so does D. Waton Johnson in his article "Nabokov's *Ada* and Pushkin's *Eugene Onegin*," *The Slavic and East European Journal*, vol. 15, No. 3 (Fall, 1971), 316-23. See also Priscilla Mayer's recent essay, "Nabokov's *Lolita* and Pushkin's *Onegin*," McAdam, McEue and McFate" in *The Achievements of Vladimir Nabokov: Essays, Studies, Reminiscences and Stories* (Ithaca, 1984).

unequal talent.⁷ Not unlike Salieri, the lesser artist in these novels usually contemplates or actually commits an ethical or esthetical crime against his superior rival. On a more arcane level, this Salieri syndrome develops into a direct conflict between the hero-writer and his ultimate creator, Nabokov himself.

Pushkin's preoccupation with the questions of legitimacy of power, the various rulers, usurpers and pretenders (Boris Godunov, Dmitrii the Pretender, Pugachev) find their grotesque reflection in Nabokov's imaginary kings, kingdoms, and revolutions in works such as "Ultima Thule," "Solus rex," *Vend Sinister*, and *Pale Fire*. On the metapoetic level, the notion of usurpation can be applied to the kingdom of the literary text itself, where this theme develops into a conflict between the writing hero and his legitimate creator over the authorship, copyrights, royalties, and post mortem acclaim (*Отчуждение*). Taken a step higher — from the metapoetic to the metaphysical level — this poetic theology affords us a rare glimpse into Nabokov's own notions of creation, life, death, immortality, and God. These occasional glimpses are far more revealing than Nabokov's quibbling potshots at religion in several works and in various interviews, which are reminiscent of Pushkin's poetic blasphemies of the period of his "Parnassian atheism."

The theme of the death of the artist and immortality of art, as we know it from Pushkin's «Андрей Шенъ» or «Памятник,» is replayed in various keys in the majority of Nabokov's novels.⁸ The otherworldly intrusions into the world of the living and the attempts to peer beyond ordinary reality into the mystery of death migrate from work to work in Nabokov's art. According to his wife, Vera Evseevna, «потусторонность» was Nabokov's main theme: «...ею пропитано все, что он писал, она, как некий водяной знак, символизирует все его творчество.»⁹ The osmosis between the two realms, which gives Nabokov's "gnostic" novels a definitive "spectral dimension," seems to repeat the theme of Pushkin's otherworldly shades, encapsulated in his early burlesques and elegies, in «Гробовщик» and «Ликовая дама,» in «Русалка,» *Борис Годунов* and «Камennyй гость,» and most strikingly, in «Пир во время чумы.»

⁷ Valentinov and Lushin in *Защита Лужина*, Mr. Pierre and Sincinatus in *Приглашение на казнь*, Getman and Ardaloin in *Отчуждение*; Fedor Godunov-Cherdyntsev and Konchey, and Chernyshevskii and Pushkin in *Дар*; Mr. Goodman and V.; and V. and Sebastian Knight in *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight*; Clair Quilly and Humbert Humbert in *Lolita*; Charles Kinboe and John Shade in *Pale Fire*.

⁸ *Машенька*, *Защита Лужина*, *Отчуждение*, *Приглашение на казнь*, *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight*, *Vend Sinister*, *Pale Fire*, *Lolita*.

⁹ See her introduction to V. Nabokov, *Стихи* (Ardis, 1979). W. W. Rowe's *Nabokov's Spectral Dimension* (Ann Arbor, 1981) is devoted exclusively to the "otherworldly" aspect. See also my "gnostic" interpretation of *Приглашение на казнь* in *Тексты-матрешки Ваадимира Набокова* (München: Otto Sagner, 1982), pp. 100-182.

One should add to the numerous similarities between Pushkin's and Nabokov's poetic manner their predilection for experiment, in which they test the limits of the genre and cross the boundaries between poetry and prose. In *Pale Fire*, for example, Nabokov created his own generic equivalent of a "novel in verse." Like *Евгений Онегин* in which Pushkin often commented on the very process of writing, the majority of Nabokov's texts are self-referential. Both authors also repeatedly entered their work in *propria persona* — Pushkin did so overtly in *Евгений Онегин*, Nabokov's presence was usually cryptic. Their works, thus, often contain their creators, in the literal sense of the word.

The other important point where the poetic and personal manners of Pushkin and Nabokov overlap, is in the elitism of their art and personal attitudes. Both writers were aristocrats with family trees rooted deeply in Russian history. But taking pride in one's ancestry went hand in hand with the liberal attitudes that characterized the best segment of the enlightened Russian nobility. For both men, honor — personal and artistic — embodied the greatest ethical and esthetic values. Though both men were liberal in their political outlook (constitutional monarchy in Pushkin's case, liberal democracy in Nabokov's), neither man considered the "republic of letters" an egalitarian domain. Rather it was an absolute monarchy where only talent, pride, honesty, and impeccable taste were assigned sovereign power, whereas mediocrity, pretentiousness, dishonesty, illegitimacy, and vulgarity (пошлость) were the equivalent of capital crimes or cardinal sins, and were mercilessly mocked. Nabokov's witty but devastating replies to his critics, such as J.-P. Sartre or Edmund Wilson, were couched in the best tradition of Pushkin's replies to his calumniators. Likewise, Nabokov's hoaxes in which he mocked, under various pseudonyms, Georgii Adamovich and his Paris followers («Из Камбруджской поэмы,» «Поэты,» «Василий Шипков») were inspired by Pushkin's delightful invention of Feofiliakt Kosichkin with which he fooled Bulgarin.¹⁰

However, the importance of the Pushkinian creed for Nabokov is best perceived in the light of the debate over Pushkin's legacy, which developed in the late 1920s and early 1930s in émigré circles. The polemic brought into focus the fate of Russian poetry in exile and questioned the vitality of Pushkin's model for the future of Russian literature. Georgii Adamovich and Vladislav Khodasevich, the two deans of Russian letters in diaspora, found themselves on opposite sides of the conflict.¹¹ Adamovich, the leader of the

¹⁰ See Pushkin's «Торжество дружбы, или оправданный Александр Анфимович Орлов» or «Несколько слов о мизинце г. Булгарина и о прочем,» both 1831.

¹¹ For the Khodasevich-Adamovich polemics, see Gleb Struve, *Русская литература в изгнании* (N. Y., 1956), pp. 199-222; Roger Nagelund, "The Russian Émigré Debate of 1928 on Criticism" in *Slavic Review*, vol. 32, No. 3 (1973), 515-26, and "The Adamovich-Khodasevich Polemics" in *Slavic and East European Journal*, vol. 20 (Fall 1976), 239-52; and David Bethea, *Khodasevich: His Life and Art* (Princeton, 1983), pp. 317-31.

Paris group, called for a turning away from Pushkin. He accused Pushkin of lapidary simplicity, of formal perfection and a lack of concern for content, and declared Pushkin's poetic model inadequate to express the complexity of the modern world and to capture the increasingly introspective human soul. Much to Khodasevich's and Nabokov's dismay, the Paris group found Pushkin's verbal perfection "suspicious," and urged young poets to embrace Lermontov's soul-searching rhetoric and the "inelegant" manner of Pasternak. The Parisian journal *Числа*, which boycotted Khodasevich and regularly assaulted Nabokov, became the main tribune for the anti-Pushkin campaign. According to Adamovich,

Пушкин искажал в тридцатых годах, и не только Бенкендорф с Натальей Николаевной тут повинны. Пушкина точил червь простоты (*Числа*, 1:142). ... Пушкину еще удалось спасти «грацию» от уже закрадывавшейся в нее глупости (*Числа*, 2/3:168). ... Непонятно, когда это успели накурить перед ним столько благонамеренного фирмиама, что за дымом ничего уже не видно. К фирмиаму болшинство и льнет: удобно, покойно. «Поклонник Пушкина, но человек неглупый...» — эту фразу написал я как-то само собой, не сразу заметив ее парадоксальность (*Числа*, 7/8: 159).

In a later article Adamovich questioned Nabokov's mission to keep Pushkin's tradition alive:

Между тем, сознательно или невольно, [Набокон] как будто все-хивает почву для какого-то будущего Пушкина, который опять придется наволдить в нашей поэзии порядок. Новый Пушкин может быть и не явится.¹⁰

Adamovich's opinions were readily echoed by his disciples such as the talented young poet Boris Rorlavskii, who declared:

А все удачники жуликовать, даже Пушкин. А вот Лермонтов, это другое дело. Пушкин дитя Екатерининской эпохи, максимумального совершенства он достиг в ироническом жанре «Евгений Онегин». Для русской же души все серьезно, комического нет, нет неважного, все смеюшися булут в аду (*Числа*, 2/3: 309-310). ... Пушкин последний из великодушных мажорных людей возрождения. Но даже самый большой из червей не есть ли самый большой червь? (*Числа*, 4: 171).

¹⁰ Георгий Адамович, «Владимир Набоков», *Одиночество и свобода* (N. Y., 1955), p. 227.

Unlike Khodasevich, Nabokov did not participate directly in this critical polemic, yet he missed no opportunity to cross swords with Pushkin's calumniators in his fictional works. In the narrative fragment entitled «Из Камбруджской поэмы "The Night Journey"» (1931), the fictional English poet, Vivian Calmbrud (an anagram of Vladimir Nabokov), converses with the poet Chenston (whose non-existing tagi-comedy, "The Covetous Knight," Pushkin claimed to have translated in «Скупой рыцарь»). Nabokov puts in Chenston's — and hence Pushkin's — mouth satirical portraits of Adamovich and Georgii Ivanov, whose names are not mentioned but whose identity is unmistakable.

In addition to his discrepancies with Adamovich and Ivanov on matters of esthetics, Nabokov also vented his ethical indignation. In the story «Уста к устам» (1933), he lampooned the two for the extortion of a large sum to finance their almanac *Числа*. Mockingly, *Числа* arrears in Nabokov's story under the Pushkinian title "Аглон," to remind Adamovich and Co. that by raising their hands against Pushkin (and boycotting Khodasevich and Nabokov), the editors resemble the "pirates" of the Greek legend who attempted to rob the bard Arion of his well-deserved musical earnings.¹¹

To test Adamovich's literary tastes and moral honesty, Nabokov published a poem entitled «Поэты» in 1939 under the new pen-name, Vasilii Shishkov. In his weekly literary column in *Последние новости*, Adamovich, who had regularly assaulted Nabokov's poetry, hailed the appearance of a mysterious new talent: "At last a great poet has been born in our midst." A few months later, in the same *Последние новости*, Nabokov published a story entitled «Василий Шишков» in which the gifted poet, Vasilii Shishkov, mysteriously disappears, or actually dissolves into another poet, the author of the story.¹² Vasilii Shishkov's idea in this story, to start a new monthly entitled *Обзор Страдания и Пошлости* which would collect the most jarring examples of «пошлость» found in the daily press, is reminiscent of Pushkin's idea to publish a similar journal under the title *Revue des Revues*.¹³

¹¹ The legend is told by Herodotus, I, 23-24 and Ovid, *Fasts*, II, 79ff. The pro-Deceitnist interpretation of Pushkin's "Arion" should be re-examined in the light of his legend.

¹² See Nabokov's commentaries to both texts in *Poems and Problems* (N. Y., 1970), p. 95 and in *The Tragic Destroyed* (N. Y., 1975), p. 204. The Vasilii Shishkov hoax had its antecedent in 1936 Khodasevich repeated in print a successful hoax by inventing a new poet of Pushkin's time, Vasilii Travnikov. The gullible Adamovich was duped by Khodasevich's forgeries, declaring Travnikov "a most gifted poet, innovator, teacher: it's enough to hear one of his poems to be convinced of this." In «Вечер Сириня и В. Хопасевича», *Последние новости*, No. 5439 (13 February, 1936). Both "Vasilii hoaxes" are in the spirit of Pushkin's delightful invention of Feofilakt Kosichkin under whose name Pushkin mocked Volgarin.

¹³ See Pushkin's letter to his brother of 1-10 January 1823.

Nabokov himself best summed up the satirical role he had played in the annals of Russian émigré literary life in the poem «Неоконченный черновик» (1931):

меня страшатся потому,
что зол я, холоден и весел,
что не служу я никому,
что жизнь и честь свою я взвесил
на пушкинских весах, и честь
осмеливаться предпочесть.

An intimate familiarity with and appreciation of Pushkin and his time was, for Nabokov, the test of intelligence and sensitivity in a Russian literary critic. Nabokov also weighed the heroes of his own fiction on the same Pushkinian scales. A disrespect or insensitivity toward Pushkin, a second-hand familiarity with him through the "vile libretti" of Tchaikovsky's operas, or a complete unawareness of Pushkin's heritage are tantamount to cardinal sins in the esthetic universe of Nabokov's fiction, sins for which the despotic creator punishes his creatures. Nabokov skillfully directs the hand of Nemesis in meting out poetic justice.

A failure to recognize the traces left by Pushkin in the Russian language portends misfortune for the heroes of Nabokov's fiction. In the novel *Защита Лужина* (1930), Luzhin-père sits down to play chess with his son for the first time: «Начнем, пожалуйста» (ЗЛ, 50), the father challenges the future grandmaster. He loses not only because he faces a chess prodigy, but also because he opened his game with the words of Lenskii before his fatal duel with Olegin. Later in life, when the child prodigy has aged, he fails to devise a successful defense against his opponent, loses his mind and commits suicide. The fact that in his childhood Luzhin never opened that thick tome «с портретом толстогобobo курчавого мальчика» (ЗЛ, 21) — E. Geitman's famous etching of Pushkin — is at least partly responsible for Luzhin's downfall.

In Nabokov's story «Памяти Д. И. Шигаева» (1934), an old Russian émigré, Shigaev, converses with a bohemian poet, Viktor, about literature. Shigaev knows very little about poetry, yet he places Letomtov above Pushkin: «Нет, что там ни говорить, а Дермонтов как-то нам ближе, чем Пушкин» (ВФ, 95). When Viktor pesters him to recite even a single line of Letomtov, Shigaev tries in vain to recall something out of Rubinstein's opera and then excuses himself: «Давненько не перечитывал, все это дела давно минувших лет...» (ВФ, 95). Shigaev does not realize that he has just quoted the opening and the concluding line of «Руслан и Людмила.» Shigaev's death in the story and Viktor's obituary to him — the story itself — become, on another level, Nabokov's

death sentence to Adamovich's literary tastes.

In the best passage of the story, Viktor describes the most prevalent of all hallucinations in Russian literature: seeing devils. Viktor's nocturnal tormentors have little in common with Letomtov's lofty "Демон" or even with the "petty devil" of Ivan Karamazov. Viktor's devils belong to the most delightful terrestrial sub-species of Pushkin's "devilkins" (бесенята), as we know them from «Сказка о попе и работнике его Балде», or from the «Сцены из Фауста», «Наброски к замыслу о Фаусте», or from the Dantesque «И далее мы пошли.» These unmajestic, toad-like, and thoroughly domestic creatures climb on Viktor's writing desk, spill his ink, and make themselves comfortable on a volume of Pushkin, thus unambiguously signaling their provenance and hinting at the path the young poet should follow.

Once we move to the professional literati in Nabokov's fiction, the author's intolerance toward his hero-writers who are disrespectful of Pushkin intensifies. In the story «Адмиралтейская игла» (1933), Nabokov unceremoniously exposes a lady author, Mme Sointse, for dressing up her varid and "poshlusty" novel, *Адмиралтейская игла*, in the glamor of Pushkin's line from «Медный всадник»: «И ясны спящие громады/Пустынных улиц, и светла/Адмиралтейская игла.» Mme Sointse has committed a sacrilege; the sham, as well as the portly authoress, whose every sentence "buttons to the left," have to be exposed. «Пошлость» or "poshlust" — as Nabokov renders this untranslatable word into English in his book on Gogol — "is especially vigorous and vicious when the sham is not obvious and when the values it mimics are considered, rightly or wrongly, to belong to the very highest level of art, thought or emotion" (NG, 68).

In the novel *Отчуждение*, the murderer Gertmann, whom J.-P. Sartre accused of having read too much Dostoevskii,¹⁴ commits an even greater sacrilege against Pushkin. It is greater, because Gertmann is a talented writer who knows his Pushkin by heart, yet intentionally perverts his ideals, exploiting Pushkin's art for sinister schemes. The perversion starts as an innocent joke: in Gertmann's paraphrase of Pushkin's «Выстрел», «Сильвио наповал без лишних слов убивает любителя черешен, и с ним фабулу, которую я впрочем знал отлично» (О, 45). The turpitude of Gertmann's joke becomes apparent once we realize that Gertmann killed his double, Felix, in the manner of his perverted paraphrase of Pushkin. What is even worse, Gertmann attempts to make Pushkin an accomplice in this hideous undertaking. As he devises the elaborate murder, Gertmann recites the poem, «Пора, мой друг, пора! Покоя сердце просит.» in which

¹⁴ Sartre's 1939 review of *Despair* (*La névrose*) is discussed in Andrew Field, *Nabokov: His Life in Art*, (London, 1967), pp. 231-32.

Pushkin had contemplated his escape into the realm of art, «В обитель дального трудов и чистых нег.» It is true that after shooting his double point-blank, Gertman begins to write a story about it, but the murderous tale cannot redeem Gertman. Pushkin's ethic and esthetic maxim that «Тени и злодейство/Две вещи несовместны,» which Pushkin put in the mouth of Mozart, are lost on Gertman, the Salieri of Nabokov's novel. (Gertman's "deed" is more in the vein of the apostrophal story claiming that Michelangelo once killed his model to better depict a corpse.)

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

The artists do not kill in Pushkin's and Nabokov's universe. More likely, they become victims. Reading Nabokov's *Приглашение на казнь* (1938), it is difficult not to evoke Pushkin's 1825 elegy «Андрей Шеняев»:

Я плахе обречен. Последние часы
Влачу. Заутра казнь. Торжественной рукою
Палач мою главу подымет за власы
Над равнодушною толпою.

The hero of *Invitation to a Beheading*, Cincinnatus C., is awaiting execution for an unusual crime of "gnostic turpitude." The main characteristics of the society, which will decapitate Cincinnatus, is its total lack of culture. "The ancient inborn art of writing is long since forgotten," "the moon [stands] watch over the familiar statue of a poet" (NB, 93, 19), and the old ungrad writers are reduced to rag dolls for schoolgirls:

...Тут был и маленький волосятый Пушкин в бекеше, и похожий на крысу Гоголь в цветистом жилете, и старичок Толстой, толстоношенный, в зипуне, и множество других, например: застегнутый на все пуговицы Добродюбов в очках без стекол.

(ПНК, 39)

It is a grotesque irony that Cincinnatus' cultural legacy surfaces while he is at work in such a doll shop. Nevertheless, Cincinnatus soon develops a true "fondness of this mythical Nineteenth Century." He likes to "feast on ancient books," and has even read *Eugene Onegin*. There can be little doubt that Cincinnatus is the last relic of the forgotten culture in this dystopian

society, and his "gnostic turpitude" can be interpreted as an esthetic rather than a moral "crime" for which he has to die.

The only thing Nabokov gives his convicted hero is a pencil "as long as life of any man except Cincinnatus" and several sheets of checkered paper. Cincinnatus' pencil is thus the only weapon to meet the challenge of the axe. On death row, a poet is born. Cincinnatus is aware that he writes "obscurely and limply, like Pushkin's lyrical duelist" (NB, 92), yet as his writing becomes more inspired, his tête-à-tête with death turns into a struggle for the artist's immortality. Cincinnatus' last wish before the execution is simple: «Сохраните эти листы, — не знаю, кого прошу, — но: сохраните эти листы...» (ПНК, 190). Pushkin's André Chénier expresses the same plea before the execution: "...друзья, сии листы/Всю жизнь мою хранят... Молю, найдите их; невинной музы дани/Сберите...» A. Chénier was executed on the 7th Thermidor 1794, two days before the Jacobin dictatorship fell; the dictatorship in *Invitation to a Beheading* falls at the moment of the execution. The beheaded Cincinnatus raises his head from the block and, amidst the dust and cataclysms of the stumbling world, walks «в ту сторону, где, судя по голосам, стояли существа, подобные ему» (ПНК, 218). It can be safely argued that Cincinnatus is rescued because he acquired and preserved cultural legacy in a world deprived of genuine art, and because of his link to Pushkin's patrimony.

The most prominent place on Nabokov's Olympus is reserved for those who possess a true knowledge of Pushkin. Nabokov sometimes devises a literary character for the sole purpose of guarding this sacred treasure. They may be incidental and outwardly unremarkable people, yet those whom Nabokov entrusts with this mission are depicted in a most precious manner. One of them is the elusive Petrov in *Защита Лукина*:

Единственным его назначением в жизни было сосредоточенно и благоговейно нести то, что было ему поручено, то, что нужно было сохранить непременно, во всех подробностях, во всей чистоте, а поэтому и ходил он мелкими, осторожными шажками, стараясь никого не толкнуть, и только очень редко, только, когда улавливал в бесединке родственную бережность, показывал на миг — из всего того огромного и таинственного, что он в себе нес, — какую-нибудь нежную, бесценную мелочь, строку из Пушкина или простонародное название полевого цветка.

(ЗЛ, 209)

The precious, minor character such as Petrov eventually attains a full size in Nabokov's last Russian novel, *Дар*. Here, the mission of preserving Pushkin's creed and absorbing his art into one's own was entrusted to the young poet, Fedor Godunov-Sherdymtsev, who is by far the most autobio-

graphical character in Nabokov's fiction.¹⁵ Nabokov considered *Дар* "the best, and the most nostalgic" of his Russian novels (SO, 13), while Andrew Field called it "the greatest novel Russian literature has yet produced in this century."¹⁶ Be that as it may, Nabokov's last Russian work, with which he made his definitive entry into modern literature, can be seen as a farewell to his 20-year-long literary career in the tongue of Pushkin.

Nabokov, whom many compatriots considered to be the most "un-Russian" of Russian writers, was soon to leave the Old World to become an American writer, never to write another novel in Russian.¹⁷ Yet the American Nabokov would return to Pushkin as translator and scholar, devoting to *Евгений Онегин* as many years of his own life as it took Pushkin to write it. Nabokov's translation, accompanied by three volumes of meticulous commentaries remains the most enduring literary monument raised to Pushkin on American soil.

¹⁵ I have traced the Pushkin theme in *The Gift* in two separate studies: "The Gift: Nabokov's Aesthetic Exorcism of Chernyshevsky," in *Canadian-American Slavic Studies*, vol. 19, No. 3 (1985), 357-374, and "Weighing Nabokov's *The Gift* on Pushkin's Scales," in *The Golden and Silver Age*, eds. Boris Gasparov and Robert Hughes (Berkeley, forthcoming).

¹⁶ Andrew Field, *Nabokov: His Life in Art* (London, 1967), p. 249.

¹⁷ Nabokov's alleged "un-Russian-ness" is discussed in Gleb Struve, *Русская литература в изгнании* (N. Y., 1956), pp. 282-86.