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ABSTRACT

"The 'Matreshka-technique' in Nabokov's
'Lips to Lips.'"

by Sergej Davydov

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The device of encapsulating one or several texts within another text is one of Nabokov's favorite literary techniques. This technique I propose to call "matreshka-technique." In Nabokov's "matreshkas" the inner text, written by the hero, is enclosed within the outer authorial text. Unlike the "manuscript found in the bottle," where the relationship between the text and the frame is static, the inner and outer texts of Nabokov's "matreshkas" enter into an intricate and dynamic relationship. Their coexistence under one cover or title is far from symbiotic. Provoked by the inner text, the outer text opens a polemic discourse. Their discord vacillates between different degrees of antagonism such as parody, mockery, parasitism, sabotage, and outright hostility. Nabokov's "matreshkas" are palindromal works combining two narrative voices--one, the unmarked, aimed outward, and the other, marked voice, having as its target the inner text. In this sense, Nabokov's "matreshkas" are examples par excellence of what M. Bakhtin termed the "double voiced discourse."

In my paper I discuss three narrative levels on which Nabokov carries his "double voiced discourse." On the first level the discourse assumes the form of travesty, on the second--the form of parody, on the third--the form of satire.

The relationship between Nabokov's story and Ilya Borisovich's novel can be best described as travesty. Ilya Borisovich's melodramatic novel provides the pattern as well as the fabric for Nabokov's sartorial enterprise--from the scraps of an "alien text" Nabokov stitches together a work of his own. The result is a travesty, "a grotesque imitation," rather than the more noble variety of parody which "always goes along with genuine poetry."

In order to treat the story as parody one must turn to the work of a more prominent author than Ilya Borisovich. In his book on Gogol Nabokov admits that "after reading Gogol one's eyes become gogolized and one is apt to see bits of his world in the most unexpected places. I have visited many countries, and something like Akaky Akakyevich's overcoat has been the passionate dream of this or that chance acquaintance who never had heard about Gogol." The grotesque vivisection of Ilya Borisovich is in fact executed with Gogolian scalpel and in Gogolian tragi-comic tone. As far as its content is concerned, Nabokov's story continues the well known theme of unfortunate "scribes" who were robbed of the object of their infatuation. The comparison of "The Overcoat" and "Lips to Lips" concludes with the discussion of the somewhat paradox role

of the narrator. In my opinion, the narrator undertakes that sartorial task which even the "devil" Petrovich so "piously" (Luke 5:36) refused--namely to mend the old garment. Nabokov unfolds the frayed fabric of Ilya Borisovich's novel and patches it with the lordly material from his story. In this motley garment the new verbal texture of the story is joined stitch to stitch with the novel's threadbare fabric. Gogol's story ends on a fantastic note. The disrobed phantom of Akaky Akakyevich roams the streets of St. Petersburg and gets even with the alleged villains. A no less whimsical parallel to Gogol's story can be found also in "Lips to Lips." Not unlike Shakespeare--who used to appear in the role of the Ghost on Elsinor's walls--Nabokov appears in his story as a specter, sent out to haunt and punish the real villains. However, to account for this conjecture, it is necessary to shift from the 19th Century St. Petersburg to Paris of the 1930's, from the fantastic mode to the realistic, from the fictitious villains to the real ones, and ultimately, from parody to satire.

The last part of my paper deals with Nabokov the satirist. It shows that the fabula of the story "Lips to Lips" is taken from the actual lives of Nabokov's arch enemies--G. Adamovich, G. Ivanov, N. Otsup--and how its kaleidoscopic sujet is composed from various works of the members of this Paris group, including I. Odoevtseva, Z. Hippus, A. Burov, R. Blokh, A. Tal. The last look on the story and on Nabokov's personal relations to the Russian Parnassus in Paris is cast through the prism

of Pushkin's poem "Arion." I conclude with a formulation of the "moral message" of V. Nabokov/Sirin, who "far from having been a frivolous firebird, . . . was a rigid moralist, kicking sin, scuffing stupidity, ridiculing the vulgar and cruel--and assigning sovereign power to tenderness, talent, and pride."

MODELS, MIMICS, AND THE "MATRESHKA-TECHNIQUE"

IN NABOKOV'S "LIPS TO LIPS"

Sergei Davydov

"Satire is a lesson,
parody is a game."

V. Nabokov

1

A Double-barreled Parody

Matreshka, a country cousin of elegant Chinese boxes, is a rather plump, wood-carved Russian doll which contains a number of other dolls, each a smaller replica of the original. While I cannot insinuate any predilection on Nabokov's part for this or any kind of Russian folklore, the device of encapsulating one or several texts within another text is one of Nabokov's favorite literary techniques. Some of Nabokov's best novels, such as Despair, Invitation to a Beheading, The Gift, and Pale Fire are perfect examples of what I propose to call "matreshka-texts."

In Nabokov's "matreshkas" the inner text, written by the hero, is enclosed within the outer authorial text. Unlike the "manuscript found in the bottle" where the relationship between the text and the frame is static, the inner and outer texts of Nabokov's "matreshkas" enter into an intricate and dynamic relationship. Their coexistence under one cover is far from symbiotic. Provoked by the inner text, the outer text, as a rule, opens a polemic discourse with the challenging text. Their discord vacillates between different degrees of antagonism, such as parody, mockery, parasitism, sabotage, and outright hostility. Nabokov's "matreshkas" thus combine two narrative voices--one, the unmarked

voice, aimed outward, and the other, marked voice, having as its target the inner text. In this sense, Nabokov's "matreshkas" are examples par excellence of what M. Bakhtin termed the "double voiced discourse." Such a discourse, according to Bakhtin, "maintains a double focus, aimed at the referential object of speech, as in ordinary discourse, and simultaneously at a second context of discourse, a second speech act by another addresser."¹ For the present analysis I have chosen a story in which Nabokov exploits for the first time to the full the structural possibilities of a double narrative in which the narrator's second voice leaps into a rare and hilarious falsetto.

The story "Usta k ustam" (Lips to Lips), written in 1933,² is actually a novel within a story. The story is a tragi-comic account of a Russian émigré, Ilya Borisovich Tal, who has written a wretched melodramatic novel entitled Lips to Lips. The hero's novel constitutes the inner text of this "matreshka," while Nabokov's story of the same name provides the outer text. In the first part of this essay I will examine the intra-textual relationship between the novel and the story and in the second part I will focus on the correlation between Nabokov's story and its extra-literary context.

In carving this "matreshka" Nabokov proceeds from the inside toward the outside. He begins with the "inner doll" (the opening quote from Ilya Borisovich's novel), and shapes around it the "outer doll" of his story. At close examination of the respective fabulae it becomes apparent that Ilya Borisovich's melodramatic novel provides the pattern as well as the fabric for Nabokov's sartorial enterprise. Both the novel and the story describe

a classical love-triangle unrequited love, and betrayal. In the novel, the elderly bachelor Dolinin falls fatally in love with the youthful Irina; in the story, the widower Ilya Borisovich "soon to be fifty-five" becomes involved in a love affair with his own novel. In the novel, ^{the} enamored Dolinin dreams in vain of the day when Irina will come to him and exclaim: "Take me, take my purity, take my torment" (p. 50); in the story, the literary amateur, Ilya Borisovich, tremblingly and likewise in vain, dreams of artistic recognition when his novel will appear in the fashionable literary almanac Arion. In the novel Irina betrays Dolinin, giving her preference to a young artist; in the story the almanac Arion betrays Ilya Borisovich, preferring the writings of young "Russian Joyces" to the gushy gifts of Ilya Borisovich. In the novel the deceived and "colossally wealthy" Dolinin makes his will in Irina's favor; in the story the "quite well-off" but not less deceived Ilya Borisovich transferred to Arion an "unspecified sum." The suicide of the disillusioned Dolinin is reflected in Ilya Borisovich's utter failure as a writer.

In its turn, the pattern of plot-mimicking-plot is paralleled by anagrammatic reverberations between names. In his novel Ilya Borisovich gives his hero a Russian surname Dolinin (from dolina - "valley"); Nabokov in his story answers in kind, giving his hero a German surname Tal (from der Tal - "valley").³ The name of the novel's heroine--Irina--is an incomplete anagram of the title of the almanac--Arion. The "young artist" of the novel has his counterpart in the "young Joyces" of the story.

However, the relationship between the inner and the outer

dolls of a matreshka rests on two principles--similarity of the general outline and difference in the actual artistic makeup of the respective dolls. Likewise in our story: if on the level of fabula the guiding principle is the analogy between inner and outer texts, then on the level of siuzhet the emphasis shifts to the differences between parts of that analogy. According to Bakhtin, "The dialogical approach is possible not only in relation to the entire speech act, but also in relation to any of its parts, even a single word, provided that such a word is perceived not as a neutral lexical item, but as a marker of another's speech act, and that we can discern in it an alien voice (chuzhoi golos)."⁴ Nabokov borrows from the siuzhet of Ilya Borisovich's novel only the cloakroom episode with a few accessory motifs--the coat-check tag, the coat itself, and the cane--yet bases on them the entire makeup of the story. I shall examine how Nabokov exploits the motifs that obstruct [^]to the point of sabotaging [^]Ilya Borisovich's novel but that make his own (Nabokov's) story "tick."

The story opens with a direct quote from the manuscript of Ilya Borisovich's novel.

The violins were still weeping, performing, it seemed, a hymn of passion and love, but already Irina and the deeply moved Dolinin were rapidly walking toward the exit. They were lured by the spring night, by the mystery that had tensely stood between them. Their two hearts were beating as one. (p. 47)

The magniloquent style breaks down as soon as the action reaches the cloakroom:

"Give me your cloakroom ticket," uttered Dolinin (crossed out). "Please, let me get your hat and manteau" (crossed out). "Please," uttered Dolinin, "let me get your things" ("and my" inserted between "your" and "things"). Dolinin went up to the cloakroom, and after producing his little ticket (corrected to "both little tickets")-- (p. 47)

Then the narrative focus shifts to the author of these pedantic lines.

Here Ilya Borisovich Tal grew pensive. It was awkward, most awkward, to dawdle there. . . . The author was terribly impatient to plunge with his hero and heroine into that starry night. Still one had to get one's coats, and that interfered with the glamour. (pp. 47-48)

Ilya Borisovich's "strictly lyrical" talent stumbles over the paraphernalia of prose. However, when he finally finishes with the "cloakroom fuss" and is "about to present his hero with an elegant cane,"

Ilya Borisovich naively delighted in the gleam of its knob, and did not foresee, alas, what claims that valuable article would make, how painfully it would demand mention, when Dolinin, his hands feeling the curves of a supple young body, would be carrying Irina across a vernal rill. (p. 48)

When Ilya Borisovich sets out to describe this vernal scene, he will have to return to that point in the manuscript at which he "had almost gotten stuck," namely to the theatre cloakroom, in order to confiscate the precious but meddlesome cane from his hero's hands. This dead-end cloakroom scene, which almost proves fatal

for Ilya Borisovich's novel, will play a fatal role also in his life, for it will be here that Ilya Borisovich will overhear the conversation which ultimately destroys his illusion of himself as an artist. While Ilya Borisovich flees the theatre in a panic after this "tragic" denouement, Nabokov adds a final touch of irony to the story--he makes Ilya Borisovich forget his cane in the theatre. Thus forced to imitate in his life his own art, Ilya Borisovich will return to the perniciously magnetized cloakroom--just as Dolinin's cane forced him to return to that place in the manuscript of the novel.

Ilya Borisovich's heavy-handedness in manipulating the cloakroom items in the novel prompts Nabokov to try his hand on them. Nabokov promotes the meager inventory borrowed from the cloakroom scene of Ilya Borisovich's novel to the key position of his story. The artistic diffidence of his hero incites the author to write his own "Lips to Lips," as a palinodic story apropos cloakrooms. The second voice in Nabokov's double-voiced discourse is directed against the "alien word" of Ilya Borisovich, against his unacceptable tastes--Ilya Borisovich "esteemed Lugovoy," knew Pushkin through operas, and found him "olympically serene and incapable of stirring the reader" (pp. 50-51). To counter-balance Ilya Borisovich's oafish style, Nabokov puts forth at the end of his story no less than four variants of the same scene. His first variant is classical:

Russian speech crepitated in the cold vestibule
 /potreskival russkii razgovor/. Ilya Borisovich
 relinquished into the hands of an old woman in black

his cane, his bowler, and his topcoat, paid for a numbered jetton, which he slipped into his waistcoat pocket, and leisurely rubbing his hands looked around the vestibule. (p. 61)

The second variant is laconic: "Old woman in black. Number 79. Down there" (p. 62). The third is grotesque:

"Meet our editor," said Euphratski, while Galatov, rolling his eyes and trying not to let Ilya Borisovich regain his wits, kept catching the sleeve in a semblance of assistance and talking fast: "Inokentiy Borisovich, how are you?" "For God's sake, leave me alone," muttered Ilya Borisovich, struggling with the coat and with Galatov. "Go away. Disgusting. I can't. It's disgusting." "Obvious misunderstanding," put in Galatov at top speed. "Leave me alone," cried Ilya Borisovich, wrenched himself free, scooped up his bowler from the counter and went out, still putting on his coat. (p. 63)

Nabokov's final and perhaps most effective version of the cloakroom theme is the off-stage variant implied in the story's last sentence: "Ilya Borisovich slowly walked to and fro, and after a while went back for his cane" (p. 63).

In this palinodic story, which calls to mind the unequal contest between Marsyas and Apollo, the outer text answers the challenge of the inner text and attains an easy victory. However, the humbleness of Ilya Borisovich is hardly comparable to the hubris of Marsyas, moreover, unlike Gods, "poets never kill." Hence Nabokov spares the life of the failed artist — a successful director of a company installing toilet equipment, Ilya Borisovich — and instead teaches him a lesson. In this sense Nabokov resembles more Apelles giving unrequested drawing lessons to the cobbler

than Apollo flaying Marsyas alive. In the funhouse mirror of his story Nabokov performs an artistic execution of Ilya Borisovich in accordance with the hero's own scenario. Dipping his pen in the hero's own ink-well, Nabokov forces Ilya Borisovich's life to recapitulate step by step the blunders of his art. If Nabokov's story has a moral, it can be expressed in a simple formula: a life which imitates wretched art must eventually share the fate of that art. As in life, so in art Ilya Borisovich is irredeemably awkward with his canes. In Nabokov's poetic system a cane becomes the mythical instrument with which the author teases, mocks, tries, and chastises his unfortunate hero-writers. ⁵

All of the obvious parallels and analogies notwithstanding, there are more differences than similarities between the story and the novel. Nabokov's text touches Ilya Borisovich's only slightly. The unison title "Lips to Lips" is their only real tangent. In that "dissonant kiss" are combined two speech acts, two texts—practically alike in their outer characteristics yet immeasurably disparate in their respective artistic merits. For this reason, Nabokov's jesting story can hardly be called a parody of Ilya Borisovich's novel. "Lips to Lips" is a pastiche in the strictest sense of the word. From the scraps of an alien text Nabokov stitches together a work of his own. To the consummate author, Ilya Borisovich's novel is not worthy of being parodied. For Nabokov, "the spirit of parody" which "always goes along with genuine poetry," ⁶ is a means of paying homage to the parodied text. But there exists a second kind of parody, less pretentious and more grotesque. Of these two types of parody Nabokov writes:

When the poet Cincinnatus C., in my dreamiest and most poetical novel, accuses . . . his mother of being a parody, he uses the word in its familiar sense of 'grotesque imitation.' When Fyodor, in The Gift, alludes to that 'spirit of parody' which plays iridescently around the spray of genuine 'serious' poetry, he is referring to parody in the sense of an essentially lighthearted, delicate, mocking-bird game, such as Pushkin's parody of Derzhavin in Exegi Monumentum. 7

In relation to Ilya Borisovich's novel Nabokov's story is, of course, a "grotesque imitation," and falls into the lower order of parody. However, Nabokov's tragi-comic story can also be read as a parody of the more noble variety. But in order to do so we must turn to the work of a more prominent author than Ilya Borisovich.

In his book on Gogol Nabokov admits that

after reading Gogol one's eyes may become gogolized and one is apt to see bits of his world in the most unexpected places. I have visited many countries, and something like Akaky Akakievich's overcoat has been the passionate dream of this or that chance acquaintance who never had heard about Gogol. 8

The grotesque vivisection of Ilya Borisovich is in fact executed with Gogol's scalpel and in Gogol's tragi-comic tone. The tongue-tied clerk, Akaky Akakievich, mechanically copies letters; Ilya Borisovich, *littérateur*, copies outworn literary clichés. The story of Akaky Akakievich's short-lived but passionate infatuation with his overcoat is in more than one way echoed by Ilya Borisovich's equally short and zestful infatuation with

his novel. In both stories an analogous erotization of an inanimate object takes place. The copy of Arion in Ilya Borisovich's hands is transformed into a "pink, plump, cool tome" as Ilya Borisovich sticks "his white knife . . . into the fat, foliated flesh of the book" (p. 59). Akaky Akakievich feels "as if he had married, . . . as if he were no longer alone . . . on life's road . . . And that companion was none other than the overcoat itself, with its thick padding and strong lining that would last forever." ⁹ Ilya Borisovich "blossomed" under the influence of his love affair with his novel, he even "walked his cane with a new, novelistic stance" (p. 58). Akaky Akakievich, taking a stroll in his new overcoat, "walked along in such merry mood that, who knows why, he almost darted after some lady who flashed by like lightning, every part of her body filled with extraordinary motion." "Properly speaking," writes D. Chizhevsky, "Akaky Akakievich dies on account of love." ¹⁰ The fervor of both Akaky Akakievich and Ilya Borisovich is brought to an end in a catastrophic denouement in which both heroes are robbed of the objects of their respective infatuation.

The swindle perpetrated by the Parisian editor, Galatov, concludes the theme begun by Akaky Akakievich: "Well, really, those French! What can you say. If they are, really, after that sort of thing... then, really..." Akaky Akakievich's pathetic words "Leave me alone. Why do you do this to me?" are heard again in Ilya Borisovich's outcries during the fateful scene in the cloakroom, as he tussles with Galatov for his coat: "'For God's sake, leave me alone,' muttered Ilya Borisovich, struggling with the coat and

with Galatov. 'Go away. Disgusting. I can't. It's disgusting'" (p. 63). Ilya Borisovich does preserve his overcoat, but his cherished illusion of being an artist is snatched away from him. The mention of the coat several times during this scene unequivocally underscores the literary context in which this grotesque episode should be read. ¹¹

In this comparison of "The Overcoat" and "Lips to Lips" a somewhat paradoxical role belongs to Nabokov himself. In "The Overcoat" the "one-eyed devil" Petrovich refuses to mend Akaky Akakievich's old "dressing-gown," and quite properly so. According to the Gospels, "No man putteth a piece of a new garment upon an old; if otherwise, then both the new maketh a rent, and the piece that was taken out of the new agreeth not with the old"(Luke 5:36). In my opinion, Nabokov undertakes in his story that sartorial task which even the devil Petrovich so piously refused--to mend Ilya Borisovich's old garment. Nabokov unfolds the frayed fabric of the novel and patches it with material from the story's "lordly collar" (s barskogo plecha). In this motley garment the new verbal texture of the story is joined stitch to stitch with the novel's threadbare fabric. ¹²

Literary critics were long inclined to view Nabokov's work as being outside the Russian literary tradition, and more than once commented upon Nabokov's "non-Russianness." ¹³ In my opinion, "Lips to Lips" stems from the tradition of 19th century Russian literature and continues the lineage of the unfortunate clerks, with whom Ilya Borisovich shares several traits. Not this type per se, but rather the theme of "unfortunate scribes" is what

attracts Nabokov. Akaky Akakievich is unable to change a letter from the first person to third, he can only copy mechanically. The object of his infatuation is his overcoat. Dostoevsky's Makar Devushkin in Poor Folk not only copies but writes himself; he possesses his own sentimental, epistolary style. The object of his affection, Varenka, is at least another human being. The "unfortunate scribe" Ilya Borisovich copies decrepit literary clichés and creates from them his own work of literature. The object of his passion is literary fame. All three infatuations meet their tragic end in a "robbery."

As we have seen, Nabokov's parody in "Lips to Lips" is two-pronged. In respect to Ilya Borisovich's novel, the parody is a "grotesque imitation." In its relationship to Gogol, Nabokov's parody is the noble game which "always goes along with genuine poetry."

In his book on Gogol, Simon Karlinsky writes:

After Dostoevsky's Notes from the Underground, Chekhov's "Heartache" and "My Life," after Kafka's The Trial and Nabokov's The Defense and Invitation to a Beheading, we can see that "The Overcoat" was the initiator of the great modern tradition of writing about the solitary and vulnerable individual human being rejected or threatened by a dehumanized collective.¹⁴

Gogol's story ends on a fantastic note. The disrobed phantom of Akaky Akakievich takes the execution of justice into his own ghastly hands. It roams the streets of St. Petersburg and gets even with the alleged villains. A no less whimsical parallel to Gogol's story can be found also in "Lips to Lips." Not unlike Shakespeare--

who often appeared in the role of the Ghost on Elsinor's walls-- Nabokov appears as Nemesis, the specter sent out to haunt and punish the villains of the story. However, to account for this last conjecture it is necessary to shift from St. Petersburg to Paris, from the fantastic mode to the realistic, from the fictitious villains to the real ones, and ultimately, from parody to satire.

2

The Level of Satire

No matter how unlikely it may sound, "Lips to Lips" is a realistic and, moreover, a satirical story, if examined against its extra-literary background. One particularly scandalous occurrence which took place in Paris in 1931 provided the actual model for the plot of "Lips to Lips." The real villains in this case were Nabokov's long time foes, Georgy Adamovich and Georgy Ivanov, who appear as Galatov and Euphratski respectively in the story. The literary almanac of the story, Arion, corresponds in reality to the journal Chisla (Numbers), edited by Nikolai Otsup, and published in Paris during the 1930's. G. Adamovich and G. Ivanov, ^{the} bellwethers of the Parnassian "mystagogues"-- as Nabokov calls them--¹⁶ were co-founders of this refined journal, resembling the pre-revolutionary Apollon. However, after the fourth issue Numbers found itself on the verge of bankruptcy and threatened to fold. The savior and victim of Numbers turned out to be one Alexander Burov. Like Ilya Borisovich, Burov had written an indescribably wretched novel, called Once There Was a Land,

and the history of its appearance in Numbers is faithfully recounted in "Lips to Lips." Numbers #5 printed three pages from Burov's novel with the notice "To be continued." In the next issue the editors unaccountably referred to these three pages as a "prologue." Compare the analogous circumstances in "Lips to Lips":

It was entitled "Prologue to a novel." It was signed "A. Ilyin," with, in parentheses, "To be continued." A small bit, three pages and a half, but what a nice bit! Overture. Elegant. (p. 60)

It is fair to say that Burov's entire novel was eventually published in the ensuing issues, and in Numbers #7/8 Adamovich inserted a review which highly praised the opus.

All of these events undoubtedly irritated Nabokov, all the more ^{so} because Numbers had taken from its very inception an extremely hostile attitude toward Nabokov's work. In the inaugural issue of Numbers (1930) Nabokov was attacked by G. Ivanov, who labeled him a "self-styled count worming his way into high society, the son of a scullery maid, a black sheep, a pariah" (graf samozvanets, kukharkin syn, chernaia kost', smerd).¹⁷ Personal scores to settle played not a small part in this vitriolic sally. In the previous year Nabokov had written a rather unfavorable review of the novel Isolde by Irina Odoevtseva,¹⁸ who happened to be Ivanov's wife. Ivanov seized the first opportunity to calumniate Nabokov. Echoing Adamovich, Ivanov accused Nabokov of "turning his back on his countrymen in favor of foreign models." According to Ivanov, in King, Queen, Knave Nabokov "assiduously copied a mediocre German model, and in The Defense, a French one."¹⁹

Exactly which models the critic had in mind was never made clear.

In addition to Ivanov and Adamovich, a number of other Parnassians of the staff of Numbers joined the anti-Nabokov campaign. Thus "Lips to Lips" can be seen a Nabokov's satirical rebuke, a mocking refutation of all the accusations brought forward in Numbers. The story abounds in precisely those elements which are ordinarily missing from Nabokov's work. That wealth of invention, that rarefied fantasy which is Nabokov's hallmark, and for which he was usually criticized, here gives way to realism, fact, and document, i. e., those artistic characteristics which Numbers collectively lauded. Adamovich could have hardly called "Lips to Lips" a "willful little world, an invention of a frigid and idle imagination."²⁰ As though in answer to Adamovich's surprise that a writer like Nabokov could arise out of Russian literature ("In him, all our traditions are broken off"),²¹ and also in refutation of Ivanov's charge that he supposedly copied foreign models, Nabokov utilizes in his story models that are exclusively Russian. ^{Without} naming names, Nabokov evokes and mocks in his story the works of writers to whom Numbers gave preference, while shying away from the best authors of Russian emigration, such as Khodasevich, Bunin or himself. The same technique of textual borrowings from Ilya Borisovich's novel Nabokov now applies to the works which appeared in Numbers. Let us examine some of the miniature subtexts with which Nabokov embellishes his story.

The title of Ilya Borisovich's novel which gave the story its name is taken from a poem of dubious quality by the poetess Raisa Blokh (Numbers #2/3:13):

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

Пусть в блестях инея земля тверда
В Лагуне синяя тепла вода,

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

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

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

The fabula of Ilya Borisovich's melodramatic novel likewise is not fully Nabokov's. The chance meeting in the theatre and the in-unison "outburst of love" between Dolinin and the stranger Irina, who "happened to share his box," are courtesy of A. Burov. Here is a comma-riddled excerpt from this monstrous opus, Byla zemlia (Once There Was a Land), (Numbers #6:49):

Could it really have been genuine terror, a criminal (so to say) light-mindedness, when in those honeyed days, in all only two weeks after ^{the}wedding, on the way home, from Dresden, first to Italy, in the Hotel Savoy, he, a happy tender husband, chanced upon, in the same hotel, completely by chance, celebrated one more similar, extraordinarily delightful meeting, with a similar beauty, the youthful wife of Count Bastiari!... In the theatre, in La Scala, in the neighboring box sat such a majestic Italian beauty, 'the finest marble' . . . This could

only indicate the necessity of, the need for this trial, this, if you wish, fall into sin, and both Stratonov and Countess Bastiari, meeting by chance, never before having seen each other, not knowing each other, happening to catch each other's gaze, in which could so easily be read both supplication and avowal, and submission to fate--and very late, until the burning dawn, for some reason the lights burned in the Countess' boudoir...

[My italics]

In his gibe at Numbers, which continued untroubled to publish Burov's execrable scribblings, Nabokov makes a subtle pun with commas. In "Lips to Lips" Ilya Borisovich gives one copy of the finished novel to the editor Euphratski for proof-reading.

All Euphratski did was to insert in one of the first lines a temperamental comma in red pencil. Ilya Borisovich religiously transported that comma to the copy destined for Arion . . . (p. 55)

This comma owes its "temperamental" existence not only to Burov's cruelly abused punctuation, but also to Numbers #9, which contained another of Burov's stories, "Muzhik i tri sobaki" (The Muzhik and Three Dogs). The typesetter inserted between the first and second paragraphs of the story an errant comma which "temperamentally" stands out on page 27.

The nurses understand, more with their hearts than with their minds, when to leave the patient alone with his dear ones, and when to come in again with quiet, angelic tread. , [sic]

The sick woman had been battling with Death for the next gasp of breath for eleven days, and . . .

This picquant jest, based on a typesetter's error, is one of the

finest examples of Nabokov's satiric skill.

In Ilya Borisovich's life, just as in his art, his debacle occurs in a theatre cloakroom. The pedantic attempts of Ilya Borisovich to gain control over the coat, bowler, check-ticket, and cane prompted Nabokov to describe the same scene four times. Now possessing the blueprint of the story's sub-textual mechanism, it is not difficult to find the source of this importunately repeated scene. In Adamovich's story of a losing gambler, "Ramon Ortis" (Numbers #5), the description of just such a scene appears twice: before and after the catastrophe.

Handing his coat, he thought for a moment that an odd number on the coat-rack would be a good sign. The young girl smiled, handed him his number, and said, "Nineteen." She had never done that before. Ramon Ortis was unable to keep silent: "Your age, perhaps?"

. . .

He hurried down, threw his number on the counter and seized his coat, as though afraid of being late to somewhere. Although there was nowhere for him to hurry to, one need remained--to walk, walk, and walk²²

The fatal object in the cloakroom scenes, the cause of so much grief in Ilya Borisovich's life and art, is a cane. In the inner text it belongs to the hero Dolinin, in the outer text it belongs to Ilya Borisovich himself, and on the extra-textual level such a cane, most probably, belongs to Zinaida Hippius, whose appropriately named story "Perlamut^rovaia trost'" (The Mother-of-Pearl Cane) appeared in Numbers #7. In her story Hippius describes in detail the luxurious cane which gives the story its name, but at that point its role ends.²³ According to

Chekhov's well-known formula, "If at the beginning of a story the hero pounds a spike into the wall, then at the end of the story he must use that spike to hang himself." ²⁴ Indeed, Nabokov may have used the cane to remind Hippus of this elementary rule of prose writing as well as of her false prophecy: in 1916, having read the first book of Nabokov's verse, she asked Nabokov's father to tell his seventeen-year-old son that he will "never, never be a writer." ²⁵ One wonders if Nabokov, having become a writer despite her prediction, wanted to tease Hippus for her pointless introduction of the cane motif. In contrast to her superfluous cane, Nabokov endows his cane with a number of compositional and stylistic functions, operating within the inner and outer texts of his matreshka.

The anagram^matic game, in which the names in the story mimic those in the novel, continues also in respect to the names in Numbers. Both Ilya Borisovich's surname (Tal) and his pen name (Annenski, derived from the name of his dead wife Anna), point to Anna Tal, whose novel Kletchatoe solntse (The Checkered Sun) was reviewed in Numbers. The name of the editor-in-chief of Arion, Galatov, stems from the initials "G.A." with which Georgy Adamovich signed his review of A. Burov's novel, just one line above the name "Anna Tal" (Numbers #7/8: 272). Nabokov borrowed the name for his second villain "Euphratski" (and apparently his pseudonym "Tigris") from G. Ivanov's novel Tretii Rim (The Third Rome). Its hero Velski, in order to dispell. thoughts of suicide, begins to intone the first words that come to mind: "Tra la la, . . . La donna mobile. Tiger and Euphrates. Tiger and Euphrates"

(Numbers #2/3:32). No doubt Ilya Borisovich's heroine Irina owes her name to Ivanov's wife, Irina Odoevtseva. In her poem "Ballada o Gumileve" (Ballad on Gumilev), (Numbers #2/3), a rather "akhmatova-like" lady carries on an imaginary and absurd conversation with the poet Gumilev, who has just returned from Africa.

--Я вам посвящу поэму,
Я вам расскажу про Нил,
Я вам подарю леопарда,
Которого сам убил.

"I'll dedicate an epic to you,
I'll tell you of the Nile,
I'll give you a leopard,
Which I killed myself."

Колыхался розовый веер--
Гумилев не нравился ей.

The pink fan fluttered--
She didn't like Gumilev.

--Я стихов не люблю. На что мне
Шкуры диких зверей?

"I don't like poetry. And what
Do I need with the skins of
wild beasts?"

These verses conjure up the name of the play (The Black Panther) which Ilya Borisovich attends on the fateful night as well as the theatre poster which Nabokov added in the English version of the story: "An amateur poster featured Garina reclining on the skin of a panther shot by her lover who was to shoot her later on" (p. 61).

Probably the most elaborate choice of names was that of "Arion." Here several conjectures can be drawn at once. Arion was the title of a real almanac which appeared in Petersburg in 1918²⁶ in which Nikolai Otsup, the editor-in-chief of Numbers, made his poetic debut. The almanac was prefaced by an epigraph from Pushkin's poem "Arion": "Lish' ia, tainstvennyi pevets,/"

Na bereg vybroshen grozoiu," (I alone, the mysterious singer,/
Was swept ashore by the storm). Both Pushkin's poem and the
legend of the Greek poet Arion fit nicely into the context of
Nabokov's story.

According to Herodotus, the singer Arion left his native
Lesbos to wander the wide world with his lyre. While he was
sailing homewards the crew of ^{the ship} covetous of Arion's precious gifts,
robbed him and prepared to kill him. The bard sang a final song
and cast himself into the sea. He was borne up by a dolphin entran-
ced by the music of his lyre and carried safely to shore on its
back. Once in Corinth, Arion awaited the ship's arrival and
delivered the crew into the hands of justice. Pushkin's poem,
except for the title, has only little in common with the legend,
and is usually interpreted in connection with the first anniversary
of the execution of the Decembrists:

Нас было много на челне;
Иные парус напрягали,
Другие дружно упирали
В глубь мощны веслы. В тишине
На руль склонясь, наш кормщик умный
В молчанье правил грузный челн;
А я--беспечной веры полн,--
Пловцам я пел... Вдруг лоно волн
Измял с налету вихорь шумный...
Погиб и кормщик, и пловец!--
Лишь я, таинственный певец,
На берег выброшен грозюю,
Я гимны прежние пою

И ризу влажную мою
Сушу на солнце под скалою.

(There were many of us in the bark;/Some were trimming the sails,/Others in harmony were plunging/The mighty oars into the deep. In calm [weather]/Bent over the rudder, our skillful helmsman/ In silence steered the weighty bark;/And I--full of carefree trust--/I sang to the shipmates... Suddenly the bosom of the waves/Was ruffled with a swoop by a roaring gust.../Both helmsman and sailor perished.--/I alone, the mysterious singer,/Swept ashore by the storm.,/I sing the former hymns/And dry my damp garment/In the sun at the foot of a cliff.) (Tr. by Walter Arndt)

The legend of Arion in combination with Pushkin's poem cast a curious light upon Nabokov's personal relations to the Russian Parnassians of Paris who repeatedly raised their hands against Pushkin ²⁷ and tried to throw Nabokov "overboard" from the ship of ^{Russian} literature. It is well known that Nabokov weighs the talent not only of his own heroes--as in the case of Ilya Borisovich--but also of writers and critics in general, by their attitudes toward Pushkin. By choosing the title of Pushkin's poem for the name of the Parisian review, Nabokov perhaps intended to deliver to his fellow travelers his own spiteful message: of all those on board the ship of Russian literature in exile, all would perish save one, the "mysterious singer" with the name of the heavenly bird "Sirin." Nabokov was never in doubt about his superiority over his contemporaries. In his self-referential novel Look at the Harlequins! Nabokov writes:

The second part of the Thirties in Paris happened to be marked by a marvelous surge of the exiled arts, and it would be pretentious and foolish of me not to admit that whatever

some of the more dishonest critics wrote about me, I stood at the peak of that period. In the halls where readings took place, in the back rooms of famous cafés, at private literary parties, I enjoyed pointing out to my quiet and stylish companion the various ghouls of the inferno, the crooks and the creeps, the benevolent nonentities, the groupists, the guru nuts, the pious pederasts, the lovely hysterical Lesbians, the gray-locked old realists, the talented, illiterate, intuitive new critics (Adam Atropovich was their unforgettable leader).²⁸

In 1956, when "Lips to Lips" (after 33 years of delay) could finally appear in print, "everybody who might have been suspected of remotely resembling the characters in the story was safely and heirlessly dead,"²⁹ while Nabokov was the only writer of the emigration on the path to lasting fame. Not long before Nabokov had written "Lips to Lips," he penned the following lines about himself:

меня страшатся потому,	they fear me,
что зол я, холоден и весел,	because I am evil, cold, and
что не служу я никому,	merry,
что жизнь и честь мою я	because I serve no one,
взвесил	because I weighed my life and
на пушкинских весах, и честь	honor
осмеливаюсь предпочесть. ³⁰	on Pushkin's scales, and dare
	to favor honor.

It is in this way that the satirical level of "Lips to Lips" reveals the somehow unexpected "moral message" of Vladimir Nabokov/Sirin, who once said of himself:

In fact I believe that one day a reappraiser will come and declare that, far from having been a frivolous firebird, I was a rigid moralist, kicking sin, scuffing stupidity, ridiculing the vulgar and cruel--and assigning sovereign power to tenderness, talent, and pride. ³¹

Sergei Davydov,

NOTES

¹ Problemy poetiki Dostoevskogo, 3rd ed. (Moscow, 1972), p. 316; tr. in Readings in Russian Poetics: Formalist and Structuralist Views, eds. L. Matejka and K. Pomorska, (Cambridge, 1971), p. 176.

² Both Nabokov and A. Field are incorrect in the dating of this story. Published only in 1956 in Vesna v Fialte i drugie rasskazy (N.Y.: Iz. im. Chekhova), the story could not have been written before 1933. The evidence will be found in this paper. All translations from the story are Nabokov's, and are from the edition Russian Beauty and Other Stories (N.Y.: Mc Graw-Hill, 1973). They are given in the text parenthetically.

³ The surname "Tal" appears only in the English version.

⁴ Op. cit., pp. 314-15.

⁵ Ilya Borisovich is the first, but hardly the only, Nabokovian hero to suffer on account of a cane. For the hero of Despair, Hermann, who intends to commit the perfect murder and write an impeccable work of art, the lowly stick proves an equally dangerous object. Hermann's murder, like his tale, is foredoomed to failure by a single mistake concerning a stick. In both cases the heroes' downfall occurs through an instrument of their own making. With the disreputable stick and the more noble cane, Nabokov punningly chastises their masters for their own blunders.

⁶ See Dar (N.Y., 1952), p. 18; The Gift (N.Y., 1970), p. 24.

⁷ Strong Opinions (N.Y., 1973), p. 76.

⁸ Nikolai Gogol (N.Y.: New Directions, 1961), p. 144.

⁹ All translations from Gogol are my own.

¹⁰ "O 'Shineli' Gogolia" (On Gogol's 'The Overcoat'), in Sovremennye zapiski (Contemporary Annals), #67 (Paris, 1930), p. 191.

¹¹ Nabokov's story shares with Gogol's also a general tone of stylistic counterpoint--the tragic interrupted by the comic, the pathetic by the grotesque. Compare the following passages:

"Молодые чиновники подсмеивались и острили над ним, во сколько хватало канцелярского остроумия, рассказывали тут же перед ним разные составленные про него истории; про его хозяйку, семидесятилетнюю старуху, говорили, что она бьет его, спрашивали, когда будет их свадьба, сыпали на голову ему бумажки, называя это снегом. Но ни одного слова не отвечал на это Акакий Акакиевич, как будто бы никого и не было перед ним . . ." (Гоголь).

"Литературные неудачники, мелкие журналисты, корреспонденты каких-то бывших газет измывались над ним с диким сладострастием. С таким гиком великовозрастное хулиганье мучит кошку, с таким огоньком в глазах немолодой, несчастливый в наслаждениях мужчина рассказывает гнусный анекдот. Глумились, разумеется, за его спиной, но громко, развязно, совершенно не опасаясь превосходной акустики в местах сплетен. Вероятно до тетревиного слуха Ильи Борисовича не доходило ничего" (Набоков).

¹² The same pattern is found in Nabokov's "Parizhskaia poema" (Parisian Poem), in Poems and Problems (N.Y., 1970), p. 122:

"В этой жизни, богатой узорами / (неповторной, поскольку она / по-другому, с другими актерами, / будет в новом театре дана), /

я почел бы за лучшее счастье / так сложить ее дивный ковер, /
 чтоб пришелся узор настоящего / на былое--на прежний узор . . ."

[In this life, rich in patterns (a life / unrepeatable, since
 with a different / cast, in a different manner, / in a new theatre
 it will be given), // no better joy would I choose than to fold /
 its magnificent carpet in such a fashion / as to make the design
 of today / coincide with the past, with a former pattern . . .]

¹³ Cf., G. Struve, Ruskaia literatura w izgnanii (Russian Literature in Exile) (N.Y., 1956), pp. 282-85.

¹⁴ The Sexual Labyrinth of Nikolai Gogol (Cambridge, 1976), p. 144.

¹⁵ See A. Field, Nabokov: His Life in Art (London, 1967), pp. 174-75.

¹⁶ Speak, Memory, 3rd ed. (N.Y.: Capricorn Books, 1970), p. 284.

¹⁷ P. 235.

¹⁸ Rul' (The Rudder), October 30, 1929, p. 5.

¹⁹ Numbers #1, p. 234.

²⁰ "Sirin," Poslednie novosti (The Latest News), January 4, 1933.

²¹ Ibid.

²² Compare with the analogous passage in "Lips to Lips":
 "Ilya Borisovich relinquished into the hands of an old woman in
 black his cane, his bowler, and his topcoat, paid for a numbered
 jetton, which he slipped into his waistcoat pocket, and leisurely
 rubbing his hands looked around vestibule" (p. 61), and "Old woman
 in black. Number 79. Down there. He was in a desperate hurry,

had already swept his arm back to get into a last coat sleeve, but here Euphratski caught up with him, accompanied by the other, the other--" (p. 62). On top of everything, Nabokov wittily mocks Adamovich's inapt joke with the check-number and the check-girl's age. If Adamovich's young charmer is "perhaps" nineteen years old, Nabokov's old woman is, of course, seventy-nine.

23 "What a beautiful cane you have . . . She handed me her cane. Its lower part--of black wood, its upper half--completely covered with a mother-of-pearl incrustation" (p. 103).

24 B. Tomashevski, Teoria literatury: Poetika (Moscow-Leningrad, 1928), p. 145. See also V. Skhlovski, O teorii prozy (On Theory of Prose) (Moscow, 1929), p. 135.

25 Speak, Memory, p. 238; Drugie berega (N.Y., 1954), p. 238.

26 Izdatel'stvo Siringa (Siring's Publishing House). My italic.

27 G. Adamovich: "Pushkin begun to dry up in the 1830's, and Benkendorf and Natalia Nikolaevna are not the only ones to blame. The worm of emptiness was gnawing Pushkin" (Numbers #1:142). "Pushkin still managed to save the 'grace' from the silliness which kept creeping in" (Numbers #2/3:168). B. Poplavski: "All lucky men are on the roguish side, even Pushkin. Lermontov, of course, is a different case. Pushkin is a child of the Cathrine epoche who achieved the top of perfection in the ironic genre (Eugene Onegin). For the Russian soul everything is serious. There is no place for frivolity, for trifles. All who laugh will end in Hell" (Numbers #2/3:309-10). "Pushkin is the last among the magnificent 'major-keyed' dirty people of Renaissance. However, is not even the

greatest worm just the greatest worm?" (Numbers #4:171).

²⁸ (N.Y., 1974), p. 116. "Adam Atropovich" stands of course for Adamovich ("adam" - "anthropos").

²⁹ From Nabokov's introduction to the English edition of "Lips to Lips." Here, however, Nabokov is not entirely correct. G. Ivanov died in 1958, G. Adamovich in 1972. "Death" in Nabokov's works can be regarded also in figurative sense, as an artistic failure.

³⁰ From "Neokonchennyi chernovik" (The Unfinished Draft), in Stikhi (Poems) (An Arbor, 1979), p. 245.

³¹ Strong Opinion, p. 193.