



Nabokov's Textobiography

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NABOKOV'S TEXTOBIOGRAPHY

A Man's life of any worth is a continual allegory — and very few eyes can see the Mystery of his life — a life like the scriptures, fugurative — which such people can no more make out than they can the hebrew [*sic*] Bible. Lord Byron cuts a figure — but he is not figurative — Shakespeare led a life of Allegory: his work are comments on it¹

(John Keats, Letter to George and Georgina Keats, between 14 February and 3 May 1819)

'Yes, I know that I had sworn, in my previous letter to you, not to mention the past, especially the trifles in our shared past' (*Stories*, p. 137; *DS*, p. 83).² So opens the second paragraph of Nabokov's short story 'Pis'mo v Rossiuu', written in Berlin in 1925 and translated into English as 'A Letter that Never Reached Russia'.³ Nabokov's epistolary narrator, a Russian émigré writer, addresses a beloved woman whom he has not seen for eight years. Using the formalists' estranged perspective, he tells her of things she will never see, things that fill a single night of his existence: a brightly lit train's 'marvellous clatter', a 'front of a cinema ripp[ing] in diamonds', a 'blissful, melancholy sensation' of exile. In a short preface to the English translation (1969), Nabokov explained the changes in the translated title as his means of minimizing ambiguity. Even if this tale of roughly a thousand words might have been originally intended as a letter by a historical Russian exile in Berlin to his historical if distant beloved living in Russia, it never reached the addressee in a postal envelope. Thus, Nabokov seems to be saying to his American reader, it is she or he who is now the addressee of the historical-letter-turned-fiction. The irony of the English title is, of course, that 'the letter' indeed 'never reached Russia', either in a canvas sack with other items of foreign mail, or as a short story printed in Russia. In the 1970s, Nabokov could only dream of his writings reaching the mass audience in Russia. He knew it might happen some day. However, his works,

¹ *The Letters of John Keats*, ed. by Maurice Buxton Forman (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1935), p. 305.

² Nabokov's works have been abbreviated as follows: 1) Editions of Vladimir Nabokov's works: *DS* = *Details of a Sunset and Other Stories* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1969); *Glory* = *Glory* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1971); *LL* = *Lectures on Literature* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, Jovanovich, 1980); *Mary* = *Mary* (Greenwich, CT: Fawcett, 1971); *ND* = *Nabokov's Dozen* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1960); *PP* = *Poems and Problems* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1970); *PSS* = *Perepiska s sestroi* (Ann Arbor, MI: Ardis, 1985); *RB* = *Russian Beauty and Other Stories* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1975); *S* = *Sogladatai* (Paris: Sovremennye zapiski, 1978); *SL* = *Selected Letters* (London: Vintage, 1991); *SM* = *Speak, Memory: An Autobiography Revisited* (New York: Putnam, 1966); *SO* = *Strong Opinions* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1973); *SSoch* = *Sobranie sochinenii v chetyrekh tomakh* (Moscow: Pravda, 1990); *Stories* = *The Stories of Vladimir Nabokov* (New York: Knopf, 1995); *TD* = *Tyrants Destroyed and Other Stories* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1981); *VCh* = *Vozvrashchenie Chorba* (Berlin: Slovo, 1930); *VF* = *Vesna v Fial'te* (New York: Izdatel'svto imeni Chekhova, 1956); 2) Archival collections: *VNLC* = Vladimir Nabokov Collection, Manuscript Division, Library of Congress; *Bunin* (Leeds) = Papers of Ivan and Vera Bunin, Leeds Russian Archive, Brotherton Library, University of Leeds; *ZShLC* = Zinaida Shakhovskoy Collection, Manuscript Division, Library of Congress. Unless indicated otherwise, parenthetical dates refer to dates of publication, and unless otherwise stated, the translation is mine.

³ Julian W. Connolly provides a compelling reading of the story in 'Nabokov and the Narrative Point of View: The Case of "A Letter that Never Reached Russia"', *Nabokov Studies*, 1 (1994), 9–20.

including 'A Letter that Never Reached Russia', did not become available to the readers in the former Soviet Union until the late 1980s.⁴

Breaking his earlier promise not to dwell on the past, Nabokov's epistolary narrator continues:

For we authors in exile are supposed to possess a lofty modesty of expression, and yet, here I am, from the very first lines, disdaining that right to sublime imperfection, and deafening with epithets the recollection on which you touched with such lightness and grace. Not of the past, my love, do I wish to speak to you. (*Stories*, p. 137; *DS*, p. 83).

It is true that nowhere in the letter, except in its opening paragraph, does the narrator speak of the past, of his shared past with his Russian beloved. As he explains in his metafictional digression, his opening paragraph of reminiscences was triggered by the letter in which his beloved evoked their secret wintry dates in pre-revolutionary St Petersburg. Her playful evocation hit home, and the writer's memory sent him on a journey to the eight-year-old past, and then something unpredictable happened. Through writing, memory built a chain of artistic recollections of 'ardent kiss[ing] behind a waxen grenadier's back' in the 'glorified snuffbox' of the Suvorov museum, of the dazzling 'silvery blaze of the Tavrisheski Park', of a Russian soldier's bayonet being plunged 'into the straw-bellied German-helmeted dummy in the middle of a Petersburg street' (*Stories*, p. 137; *DS*, p. 83). The rest of the story, describing one unforgettable night in the Russian émigré's interwar Berlin, is in fact a prolonged justification of the writer's preference of 'sublime perfection' over 'sublime imperfection'. What does it mean when a writer chooses to 'deafen with epithets' an idealized recollection that does not seem to need literary ornamentation to survive trials of time? In the second seminal paragraph of 'A Letter that Never Reached Russia', Nabokov posits a problem that applies to his entire *œuvre*. This problem, the relationship between the raw material of fiction sustained by memory and the form of the aestheticized final product, lies at the heart of my inquiry into the shape of Nabokov's artistic development.

The intense (auto)biographicity, the metafictionality, and the prominence of literary acts of addressing all make it very difficult to apply generic terms to Nabokov's fifty-eight Russian and ten English stories (plus the originally French 'Mademoiselle O' (1936)). Indeed, what is 'A Letter that Never Reached Russia'? A short story with an epistolary façade? Or an actual unmailed (or returned) letter that now reads like a short story? Or perhaps an essay in the genre of creative non-fiction about the epistemological act that allows the writer to achieve a state of otherworldly bliss? To complicate the matter further, the scene at the Suvorov museum where the two lovers meet on cold winter mornings is repeated in both of Nabokov's autobiographies, the English, *Conclusive Evidence* (1951) and *Speak, Memory* (1966), and the Russian, *Drugie berega* ('Other Shores', 1954):

⁴ For an examination of Nabokov's readership in pre-perestroika Russia, see Slava Paperno and John V. Hagopian, 'Official and Unofficial Responses to Nabokov in the Soviet Union', in *The Achievements of Vladimir Nabokov*, ed. by George Gibian and Stephen Jan Parker (Ithaca, NY: Center for International Studies, 1984), pp. 99–117. Their article supplements Ellendea Proffer's pioneering essay, 'Nabokov's Russian Readers', in *Nabokov: Criticism, Reminiscences, Translations and Tributes*, ed. by Alfred Appel, Jr, and Charles Newman (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1970), pp. 253–60. *Tamizdat* and *samizdat* distribution in the Soviet Union was an abnormal process that exalted the reader's expectations and made the act of reading both unnecessarily rushed and perfunctory. Only after the massive wave of post-1987 Russian editions did Nabokov gain a proper massive audience in Russia (Alekssei Zverev, 'Literary Return to Russia', in *The Garland Companion to Vladimir Nabokov*, ed. by Vladimir E. Alexandrov (New York: Garland, 1995), pp. 291–305).

So from these great museums we graduated to smaller ones, such as the Suvorov, for instance, where I recall a most silent room full of old armour and tapestries, and torn silk banners, with several bewigged, heavily booted dummies in green uniforms standing guard over us. (*SM*, p. 236; *SSoch*, iv, 262).

Is the early epistolary story an excerpt of a future autobiography, a dress rehearsal of the play that Nabokov would not actually stage for another quarter of a century?

The generic status of Nabokov's short stories is even more mutable than that of the novels; Charles Newman aptly termed their author 'the protean novelist of our time — not merely because he has spanned several cultures, or turned traditional formulae to contemporary uses — but because he has succeeded in developing structures in which once disparate poetic, philosophical, theatrical, and documentary voices are enjoyed under the name of the novel'.⁵ Among the short stories, one finds numerous forms of writing: letters ('Admiralteiskaia igla' ('The Admiralty Spire', 1933)), obituaries ('Pamiati L. I. Shigaeva' ('In Memory of L. I. Shigaev', 1934)), literary polemics ('Vasilii Shishkov', 1939), meditations ('Slovo' ('The Word', 1923)), travel guides ('Putevoditel' po Berlinu' ('A Guide to Berlin', 1925)), essays on literary subjects ('Nabor' ('Recruiting', 1935)), political satire ('Istreblenie tiranov' ('Tyrants Destroyed', 1938)), feuilletons ('Khvat' ('A Dashing Fellow', 1932)), memoirs ('Mademoiselle O', 1936), and so on. How does one make sense of such a generic variety? While it would take a separate study to investigate all generic connections between Nabokov's short stories and his other forms of prose, I would like to propose a model that elucidates the relationship between the stories and his epistolary and autobiographical heritage.

I see the stories as the middle, fictional, stage of a three-stage development in which information had been first processed in Nabokov's letters and given a semblance of historicity, then recoded in his short stories and recorded as fictional, and, finally, defictionalized again and presented as remembered historical past in his autobiographies. Chronologically, the short stories were created during the middle phase of his life, from 1920 to 1950, and he did not complete a single short story, either in Russian or in English, after 1951, the year in which the original version of the autobiography, *Conclusive Evidence*, came out in the United States.⁶ In this article I trace three stages (the epistolary, the short-fictional, and the autobiographical) of three themes that permeate Nabokov's works. They are the themes of first love, of artistic creation, and of memory. Before considering specific examples, I make two more distinctions with regard to Nabokov's letters.

Nabokov left a vast epistolary legacy. His Russian letters of 1920 to 1950, only some of which have been published or analysed, can be divided into two groups.⁷ The first consists of conventional business letters with a purely communicative function, such as correspondence with editors or his appeals for help with obtaining

⁵ Charles Newman, 'Beyond Omniscience: Notes Toward a Future for the Novel', *TriQuarterly*, 10 (Fall 1967), 52.

⁶ In his 1971 interview, Stephen Jan Parker asked Nabokov whether he was contemplating any new short stories. Nabokov responded that 'now and then a very complete image flashes before me, quivers for a moment and is firmly dismissed'. He admitted 'conserving' his energy for 'ampler tasks' (Stephen Jan Parker, 'Vladimir Nabokov and the Short Story', *Russian Literature Triquarterly*, 24 (1991), 70).

⁷ See *SL*, 'Letters Written in Germany and France, 1923–1939', and *PSS*. Parts of Nabokov's Russian correspondence are deposited at the Berg Collection, New York Public Library; Library of Congress and at Leeds Russian Archive, Brotherton Library, University of Leeds. I have examined parts of Nabokov's literary correspondence of the 1920s–30s, including that with Nina Berberova, Ivan Bunin, Vladislav Khodasevich, Zinaida Shakhovskaia, and others.

entrance visas. The other group, however, exhibits features that put it in proximity to the genre of the 'familiar letter', a codified post-neo-Classical literary genre specific to its time and associated in Russian literary history with the Arzamas circle (1808–25).⁸ Nabokov's literary letters, as opposed to the familiar letters in the Age of Pushkin, were never intended for circulation or subsequent publication, and in fact Nabokov always guarded his personal privacy. Still, and probably because Nabokov's aesthetics are rooted so firmly in the Pushkinian Golden Age, his literary letters share with the familiar letter of the 1800s to 1820s an aesthetic *ustanovka*, to use the term of Iurii Tynianov, who took a serious interest in letters as a writer's laboratory.⁹ At stake in both Nabokov's literary letters and the Arzamasian familiar letter is that they privilege the aesthetic function over the communicative one, which dominates in business correspondence.¹⁰ For Nabokov, as for the Arzamasians, literary letters are works of art, and they exhibit a varying degree of artistic structuredness.

The literary letters of the 1920s gave Nabokov a chance to test some of his original designs, both on the level of individual tropes and the overall narrative structure of a short story. As William Mills Todd III observed, the familiar letter gave Pushkin 'much exercise in this casual, yet subtly ordered, creativity. When Pushkin became a professional writer in the 1820s, he put his accomplishments in correspondence to use in the creation of the larger, more public work, *Eugene Onegin*' (p. 192). For Nabokov, who was exactly a hundred years younger than Pushkin, the literary letters of the 1920s represent an epistolary stage of a complex three-stage artistic development leading ultimately to his autobiographies.

The shape of Nabokov's three-stage artistic development has virtually no equivalents among other Russian writers. To establish the necessary points of reference, I now look briefly at the careers of Nabokov's chief Russian masters, Anton Chekhov and Ivan Bunin.¹¹ Chekhov was Nabokov's predecessor in his treatment of letters as drafts and notebooks for future works, many of them never realized. Chekhov consistently treated his letters as drafts for future stories and plays. A typical example is found in his letter to his sister, written in 1888, where he

⁸ See William Mills Todd III, *The Familiar Letter as a Literary Genre in the Age of Pushkin* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1976). For a concise survey of the problem of the familiar letter in the Age of Pushkin, see Todd's introduction.

⁹ For an overview of the Formalists' studies of the Russian familiar letter, see Todd, pp. 13–16. The term *ustanovka* was defined by Tynianov in a seminal article 'Oda kak oratorskii zhanr' ('Ode as an Oratorical Genre', 1922). Tynianov wrote: 'Ustanovka is not only the dominant of a literary work (or genre) which charges the subordinate factors with their functions, but also the function of a literary work (or genre) with respect to the closest non-literary speech series [rechevoi riad]' (Iu. N. Tynianov, *Poetika. Istorii literatury. Kino* (Moscow: Nauka, 1977), p. 228). Nabokov's business letters are precisely such a non-literary speech series in relation to his literary letters. Tynianov discusses the Russian familiar letter in another important article, 'Literaturnyi fakt' ('Literary Fact', 1924) (Tynianov, pp. 265–67).

¹⁰ My use of the term 'aesthetic function' is close to Jan Mukařovský's and to Roman Jakobson's 'poetic function'. By the prevalence of the aesthetic function over the communicative in Nabokov's literary letters I mean that while they do deliver a given amount of information to the addressee (that is, they communicate information), their foremost function is to reflect upon their own poetics. Mukařovský deals with the aesthetic function in several works, including the 1936 monograph, *Aesthetic Function, Norm and Value as Social Facts*, trans. and ed. by Mark E. Suino (Ann Arbor: Department of Slavic Languages and Literatures, University of Michigan, 1970). Among other things, Mukařovský writes of 'the competition between the aesthetic and the communicative functions in literature' (p. 9).

¹¹ For a discussion of the literary and personal relationship between Nabokov and Bunin, see my article, 'Nabokov i Bunin: poetika sopernichestva', in *I. A. Bunin i russkaia literatura XX veka* (Moscow: Nasledie, 1995), pp. 41–65.

outlines a number of details and images of a southern coastal resort, both a Yalta and a Nice:

Looking at the shore from aboard the ship, I realized why it hasn't yet inspired a single poet or given a plot to any decent artist-belletrist. Doctors and wealthy ladies advertise it, and that's its main strength. Yalta is a cross of something European, resembling pictures of Nice, with something tacky and country-fairish. Box-like hotels full of miserable withering consumptives, insolent Tartar mugs, bustles with shameless expressions of something vile, those faces of lazy rich men seeking three-penny adventures, the smell of perfume instead of cedar and the sea, a pitiful, seedy pier, melancholy lights far away in the sea, the chatter of young ladies and their suitors who came here from all over the place to enjoy nature about which they know nothing, all this makes such a dull impression and affects you so strongly that you begin to accuse yourself of preconceived notions and partiality.¹²

Some of his notes towards a future story surfaced in 1895 in 'Ariadna', others were later used in 1899 in 'Dama s sobachkoi' ('Lady with a Lap Dog'). All similarities aside, one finds two principal differences between Chekhov's and Nabokov's treatment of letters as artistic testing-grounds of the future projects. For Chekhov, who was one of the most prolific writers of letters ever, virtually every epistolary act involves some conscious gestures towards a future work of fiction, some elements of a creative laboratory. Conversely, Nabokov's letters of the Russian Period exhibit a division into two groups, the strictly 'business' letters and 'literary' letters. The second difference has to do with the fact that for Chekhov, literary letters were not just a stage of his artistic development but a major part of his activities as a writer. He would recycle the same motifs or tropes many times, and they would be as likely to originate in his stories and plays as in his letters. In Nabokov's case, the Russian literary letters were a distinct first stage of a three-part development. We therefore have a situation where a linguistic discovery (an epithet, a metaphor, a pun) is born during an epistolary act, later given a second fictional life in a short story, and, finally, born again as a recollected memory.

Because Chekhov died relatively young, at the age of forty-four, we can only speculate what might have been the connections between his letters, his fiction, and his memoirs if he had, indeed, left memoirs. At the same time, the epistolary, the fictional, and the memoiristic components are all well represented in Bunin's *oeuvre*. In fact, Bunin produced a variety of memoirs, from the autobiographical recollections written in the mid-1930s to his late *Vospominaniia* ('Reminiscences', 1950). As opposed to Chekhov's and Nabokov's letters, Bunin's are markedly devoid of artistry even when they are concerned with literary topics such as his venomous remarks about Blok or Nabokov. Bunin treated letters as strictly communicative and not as creative acts. They are business-like and to the point. In his will of 1942,¹³ he wrote unequivocally about the prospects of publishing his letters: 'All my letters (to all my addressees) are not to be published. [. . .]. I almost always wrote my letters poorly, carelessly, hurriedly and not always in accordance with how I was feeling' (ix, 480). Otherwise, one finds in Bunin's letters an attitude to the epistolary act as *a priori* below the act of writing artistic prose. As to his memoirs, they are the exact opposite of Nabokov's. Devoted chiefly to specific recollections of meetings with

¹² 'To M. P. Chekhova', 14 July 1888 (letter in A. P. Chekhov, *Polnoe sobranie sochinenii i pisem v tridsati tomakh* (Moscow: Nauka, 1974-85), II, 295-96).

¹³ See Bunin's literary wills, in Ivan Bunin, *Sobranie sochinenii v devyati tomakh* (Moscow: Khudozhestvennaia literatura, 1965-67), ix, 480-83.

other artists, Bunin's memoirs were written first and foremost to settle scores with the past, as polemical diatribes. One does not find in them traces of his style as the writer of short stories, or discussions of such cosmological issues as the nature of time, love, or memory that are central to Nabokov's memoirs.

To illustrate how Nabokov treats his literary letters as a laboratory for future short fictions, many of which were never written, I now compare two letters Nabokov sent in the summer of 1923 from Soliès-Pont, Provence. He went to Provence to work as a farmhand, to get away from Berlin in the aftermath of a broken engagement. In the first letter, written to his ex-fiancée on 25 May 1923, he tries to negotiate his uncertain status in the eyes of the woman he still loves and longs for. It is difficult, he admits, to alienate himself from the memories of great happiness. Then follows a most fascinating epistolary twist that elevates the letter to the level of a literary text. Earlier in the letter, Nabokov admits to being too exhausted after a day of toiling to write with style ('literaturno'). However, he still chooses 'sublime perfection'. He describes the extraordinary heat of the southern night, the cypresses and the palm trees, the frogs that croak and choke, deafening the orchard where a large 'nightingale with dishevelled feathers' [*rastrepannyi solovei*] sits in the high branches against the contour of the moon.¹⁴

Just as the frog 'deafens' the nightingale's song in Nabokov's letter, its writer chooses (to use an expression from 'A Letter that Never Reached Russia') to 'deafen with epithets' (*zaglushat' epitetami*) the seething memories of his unattainable beloved. A different letter, written from Soliès-Pont to his mother some three weeks later, on 19 June 1923, adds a level of complexity to the description of a Provençal summer night:

It is evening now, with lovely cloudlets in the sky. I took a walk around the plantation, behind the grove of cork oaks, ate peaches and apricots, admired the sunset, listened to a nightingale's tweets and whistles, and both its song and the sunset tasted of apricot and peach. (*SL*, p. 3)

The literary nightingale in the two letters must have had an historical antecedent. Although the second letter strikes quite a different note, it continues to elaborate on a series of interconnected images to be used later in a work of fiction. The nightingale's song and the sunset, tasting of apricot and peach, demonstrate the verbal perfection and economy of poetic means that distinguish Nabokov's best writing. It is not surprising that the cluster of images he collected and recorded in letters during the summer of 1923 made its way to his fiction, in this case to the 1932 novel *Podvig* ('Glory'). The protagonist, a Russian exile like his creator, goes off to work at a farm in southern France. In the passage, describing Martyn's evenings at the farm, a student of Nabokov's letters encounters several familiar images: 'Before turning in, he would walk over to the cork woods beyond the farm, and smoke and muse. Overhead the nightingales whistled in short rich phrases, from the pond came the rubbery croaking of frogs' (*Glory*, p. 164). Moreover, the same chapter mentions a letter Martyn wrote to his beloved in London, 'testing fate'. Her answer was this: 'Enough, for Christ's sake. I will never marry you. Moreover, I loathe vineyards, the heat, snakes, and, especially, garlic. Cross me out, do me that favor, darling' (*Glory*, p. 165).

¹⁴ 'To Svetlana Siewert', 25 May 1923 (letter in *ŽShLC*). The letter may not be quoted in full for reasons of copyright.

The two letters from Provence are typical examples of Nabokov's epistolary art, through which he discovered himself as a writer of fiction. They might have materialized in a short story but instead ended up in an episode of a novel. Nevertheless, his other literary letters of the 1920s did serve as textual testing-grounds for single tropes and whole descriptions that later resurfaced in his short stories. In this connection, of special interest are his letters to Bunin. The letters span over eighteen years and testify to the changing literary and personal relationship between the two writers. Nabokov's first letter to Bunin, written in 1921, sets the tone for the initial stage of the correspondence. Nabokov, then a virtually unknown young Russian poet, structures the letter as a declaration of love.¹⁵ The confessional tone and the motifs of love are crucial because Nabokov incorporates parts of his letters to Bunin into his short stories written in the form of addresses to beloved women. I now take a closer look at Nabokov's second letter, written in 1922. He describes the moment when he composed 'Kak vody gor, tvoi golos gord i chist' ('Like water from the mountains, your voice is proud and pure'), the poem that was later published with a dedication to Bunin:

Это было в дождливую ночь. Я возвращался к себе. Ветер трепал деревья вдоль черной улицы, блестящей местами, как мокрая резина, и с коротким плотным звуком падали каштаны.¹⁶

(It was on a rainy night. I was walking back home. Along the black street which glistened here and there like wet rubber, wind shook the trees, and chestnuts fell on the ground with short heavy knocks.)

With some emendations, the description reappears as fiction in 1924, in the story 'Blagost' ('Beneficence'). The story is structured as an address by its protagonist, a sculptor, to his girlfriend who has left him and will probably never come back. He waits for his beloved near the Brandenburg Gate. She never shows up, and as the evening progresses into a rainy night, the story comes to its closure, a masterly sketch of Berlin's disjointed harmony:

Черные стекла были в мелких, частых каплях дождя, будто сплошь подернутое бисером звезд ночное небо. Гремели мы вдоль улицы, обсаженной шумными каштанами, и мне все казалось, что влажные ветви хлещут по окнам. А когда трамвай останавливался, то слышно было, как стучались наверху об крышу срываемые ветром каштаны: ток — и опять, упруго и нежно: ток . . . ток . . . Трамвай трезвонил и трогался, и в мокрых стеклах дробился блеск фонарей, и я ждал с чувством пронзительного счастья повторения тех высоких и кротких звуков.

(*VCh*, p. 164)

(The black windowpanes were specked with a multitude of minute raindrops, like a night sky overcast with a beadwork of stars. We were clattering along a street lined with noisy chestnut trees, and I kept imagining that the humid boughs were lashing the windows. And when the tram halted one could hear, overhead, the chestnuts plucked by the wind knocking against the roof. Knock — then again, resiliently, gently: knock, knock. The tram would chime and start, the gleam of the streetlamps shattered in wet glass, and, with a sensation of poignant happiness I awaited the repetition of those meek, lofty sounds. (*Stories*, p. 78))

A number of motifs and tropes from the 1922 letter to Bunin echo in the short story. We find the same colours (black street, black windows), the same glitter of

¹⁵ 'To Ivan Bunin', 18 March 1921 (letter in *Bunin* (Leeds)).

¹⁶ 'To Ivan Bunin', 26 November, 1922 (letter in *Bunin* (Leeds)).

street lamps.¹⁷ In 'Beneficence' the central image, that of falling chestnuts, acquires yet another level of signification. The sound of falling chestnuts, mapping the beat of a young heart, initiates a series of recurrent motifs. Moments of intense happiness, during which Nabokov's privileged protagonists (Ivanov of 'Sovershenstvo' ('Perfection', 1932); Pnin of the eponymous novel (1957), among others) experience what he called 'cosmic synchronization', are frequently marked by heart pains. The heart expands rapidly as it feels the pangs of the otherworld.

The narrator's beloved in 'Beneficence' will never receive his passionate address. This connects her with the distant Russian addressee in 'A Letter that Never Reached Russia'. Written less than a year after 'Beneficence', the epistolary story also draws on Nabokov's second letter to Bunin as it describes the colours, lights, and sounds of night-time Berlin, in particular the note of sheer happiness on which the narrator ends his letter: 'Listen: I am ideally happy. My happiness is a kind of challenge' (*Stories*, p. 140; *DS*, p. 87). It is noteworthy that 'A Letter that Never Reached Russia' was originally printed in the émigré newspaper, *Rul'* ('The Rudder'), with a subtitle 'From the second chapter of the novel *Shchast'e* ('Happiness') (29 January 1925, pp. 2–3). Nabokov contemplated an autobiographical novel 'some important elements of which were to be reslanted in *Mashen'ka* ('Mary', 1925) (*Stories*, p. 647; *DS*, p. 82). He never wrote it, but it is probable that the novel was supposed to contain a major epistolary dimension lacking in *Mary* (see Parker, p. 71).

Finally, here is an example of a single image that originates in the letter to Bunin and finds its way to another of the early short stories, 'Port' ('The Seaport', 1924). In the 1921 letter to Bunin, Nabokov speaks of the 'black street which glistened here and there like wet rubber'. In 'The Seaport', a lonely Russian émigré Nikitin comes to a seaport in southern France. As he wanders around the docks looking for work, he encounters a black soldier wearing a colonial uniform ('negr v kolonial'noi forme'). The soldier's face, glittering with drops of sweat, is likened to a wet rubber shoe: 'litso, kak mokraia galosha' (*VCh*, p. 18). The image of a night street in Berlin has travelled a long way and undergone quite a metamorphosis.

The letters to Bunin provide a foretaste of Nabokov's three-stage development in which autobiographical information proceeds from literary letters via fictional texts into autobiography. Of course, it would be absurd to assume that only the information recorded in Nabokov's literary letters would later find its way to the autobiographies. The business letters (and several of the letters to Bunin from the 1930s deal exclusively with dry professional matters) naturally carry a residue of biographical information: names, dates, places, prices, and so on. However, the literary letters are indispensable because in them factual information is given an artistic verbal shape. Consider, for instance, Nabokov's postcard to Bunin sent from London in 1939. Nabokov describes an English spring: 'Тут весна, — газон и сырость — во всю цветут анютины глазки, желтые с черным, личиками необыкновенно похожи на Гитлера, — обратите внимание при случае'¹⁸

¹⁷ The transformation of images and motifs from the letter to the short story was a gradual one, as becomes apparent if one compares the newspaper version of 'Beneficence' with the later book version. The style of the newspaper version, more in line with that of a spontaneous emotional letter than controlled fictional prose, is improved significantly in the book version. For instance, compare one sentence from the newspaper version with the one quoted in the main text: 'Черные стекла были в мелких, частых каплях дождя, что напомнило ночное небо, сплешь подернутое бисером звезд' (*Rul'*, 27 April 1924, p. 7).

¹⁸ 'To Ivan Bunin', 8 April 1939 (postcard in *Bunin* (Leeds)).

(‘Spring’s here — lawns and dampness — pansies are everywhere in bloom, yellow and black, their little faces bearing a terrible resemblance of Hitler, take a look when you get a chance’). In *Speak, Memory*, he describes a ‘breezy day in Berlin’ when he and his son ‘stood before a bed of pallid pansies, each of their upturned faces showing a dark moustache-like smudge, and had great fun, at [Nabokov’s] rather silly prompting, commenting on their resemblance to a crowd of bobbing little Hitlers’ (*SM*, p. 305). Or, take a real incident Nabokov mentions in the autobiographies:

In the summer of 1929, every time I walked through a village in the Eastern Pyrenees, and happened to look back, I would see in my wake the villagers frozen in the various attitudes my passage had caught them in, as if I were Sodom and they Lot’s wife. (*SM*, p. 131)

Nabokov’s first evocation of the Old Testament story of Lot’s wife (Genesis 19. 26) can be found in a letter written to Bunin from a Pyrenean village in 1929: ‘We are living in a lovely remote corner; we are the only “aliens” in this village and as we proceed down the main street, the locals turn into pillars of salt.’¹⁹ The motif of the perplexed ‘local inhabitants’ (*Stories*, p. 250; *ND*, p. 82) staring with surprise at the butterfly collectors, ‘strange people who have come from afar’ (‘strannye liudi, priekhavshie izdaleka’ (*S*, p. 196)) to their remote corner of the world, is echoed during the middle, fictional stage of Nabokov’s three-stage development, in the short story ‘Pil’gram’ (‘The Aurelian’, 1930). What an incredible artistic memory! Clearly without access to his 1929 letter, Nabokov repeated almost verbatim a mythic metaphor he had sent off twenty years before writing the autobiography. There is more than a perfect memory at work here. There is also Nabokov’s conviction that once conjured up, an artistic discovery will always be at the artist’s fingertips.

‘The Admiralty Spire’, created in one sweep of inspiration on 23 May 1933 in Berlin, is crucial for understanding the epistolary past and the autobiographical future of Nabokov’s short stories. Written in the form of a letter, the story is long and rich in cultural and historical allusions. Unlike ‘A Letter that Never Reached Russia’, with which it shares autobiographical information, ‘The Admiralty Spire’ possesses a complex plot that evolves simultaneously on two levels. The subject-matter concerns the relationship of autobiographical fiction to the events that inform it, and the *Vorgeschichte* is ‘The Admiralty Spire’, a Russian novel by an unknown author published in one of the Baltic countries. The novel’s title, borrowed as it is from the prologue to Pushkin’s *Mednyi vsadnik* (‘The Bronze Horseman’), catches the eye of the protagonist, who is an émigré professional writer. He picks up a copy, reads it, and then dashes off an indignant response to the author. Although the name printed on the cover is male, the epistolary protagonist/narrator opens his letter by addressing a woman: ‘You will pardon me, dear Madam, but I am a rude and straightforward person, so I’ll come right out with it: do not labor under any delusion: this is far from being a fan letter’ (*Stories*, p. 344; *TD*, p. 121). He conjectures that the author of the novel is a female who obtained a lot of private information from his first love, a Russian by the name of Katia. Sixteen years have elapsed since his last meeting with Katia, ‘the age of a bride, an old dog, or the Soviet republic’ (*Stories*, p. 345 *TD*, p. 123), as he puts it. Now, as the middle-aged

¹⁹ ‘To Ivan Bunin’, 18 May 1929 (letter in *Bunin* (Leeds)).

caustic émigré writer reads a mediocre and overwritten story of his own first love, the maimed memories call for literary revenge. And avenge himself he does.

The two thematic levels of Nabokov's story are the theme of first love, one of the most central for his entire *œuvre*, and the theme of poor art degrading treasured memories of an idealized past. Halfway through his tirade, the protagonist tears down the cynical mask, deflates 'the arrogant rubber fatman who [. . .] clowned around at the beginning of [the] letter', and addresses his first love directly rather than via the façade of a 'corpulent lady novelist in her novelistic hammock' (*Stories*, p. 352; *TD*, p. 132). In a different tone, one of gentle bitterness and of self-irony, he writes:

Katia, why have you made such a mess of it now [*napakostila*]? Come, let us have a calm, heart-to-heart talk. [. . .] How intensely I must have loved you if I still see you as you were sixteen years ago, make agonizing efforts to free our past from its humiliating captivity, and save your image from the rack and disgrace of your own pen! (*Stories*, p. 352; *TD*, pp. 132–33)

If one translates into biographical terms the situation recreated with such moving verisimilitude in the protagonist's recollections, and with such vulgar disregard for the indeterminacy and suggestiveness of the language of Russian romantic love in Solntsev's eponymous novel, it would amount to the following. What would happen if Nabokov's historical first love, Liusia Shul'gina, the Tamara of *Speak, Memory* and in part the Mashen'ka of his first novel, were indeed to produce a subjective, politicized and ill-written account of their love which 'perpetrates' (*Stories*, p. 353; *TD*, p. 133) and violates Nabokov's own perfect memories?²⁰ This is only a supposition, but it serves to illustrate Nabokov's task as an autobiographer in *Speak, Memory/Drugie berega*. One of the finest in the entire book, the 'Tamara' chapter (Chapter 12 in *Speak, Memory*; Chapter 11 in *Drugie berega*) reads as a short story that conflicts, some twenty years later, with its own proto-biographical past distorted in Katia's novel, which is, of course, also Nabokov's creation. This paradigmatically Nabokovian predicament corresponds to the three-stage model of Nabokov's artistic career I proposed earlier. What remains is to identify and examine in some detail the correspondences between 'The Admiralty Spire' and the autobiographies.

In *Speak, Memory*, Nabokov wrote about his correspondence with Tamara: 'Happy is the novelist who manages to preserve an actual love letter that he received when he was young within a work of fiction, embedded in it like a clean bullet in flabby flesh and quite secure there, among spurious lives' (*SM*, p. 249). In 'The Admiralty Spire' the protagonist summarizes the way Katia distorted their shared past: 'The trimmings are yours, I'll concede, and so are the stuffing and the sauce, but the game [. . .] is not yours but mine, with my buckshot in its wing' (*Stories*, p. 345; *TD*, p. 123). The hunting imagery, rehearsed in the story and brought out again in *Speak, Memory*, signals the importance Nabokov attributes to the epistolary past of his fiction and autobiographies. He regrets he had not 'kept the whole of' his correspondence with Tamara within works of fiction. That would have created more of a literary background, like the one in 'The Admiralty Spire', against which to construct an autobiography. I shall not deal here with the novel *Mary* and its autobiographical dimension. It is clearly very important as Nabokov's first large-scale attempt at fictionalizing his past and the story of his first love. In *Speak, Memory*,

²⁰ On Liusia Shul'gina, see Brian Boyd, *Vladimir Nabokov: The Russian Years* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1990), pp. 110–60.

he makes several statements about the way the writing of *Mary* 'relieved [him] of that fertile emotion' (*SM*, pp. 244–45). But he is most specific in *Drugie berega*: 'впоследствии, в полуавтобиографической повести, я почувствовал себя вправе связать это с воспоминанием о Тамаре' ('Later, in a semibiographical short novel, I felt that I was entitled to link this with my recollections of Tamara' (*SSoch*, iv, 266).²¹ Finally, in a preface to the English translation of *Mary*, he makes a very interesting admission:

Readers of my *Speak, Memory* (begun in the 1940s) cannot fail to notice certain similarities between my recollections and Ganin's. His Mary is a twin sister of my Tamara [. . .]. I had not consulted *Mashenka* when writing Chapter Twelve of the autobiography a quarter of a century later; and now that I have, I am fascinated by the fact that despite the superimposed inventions [. . .] a headier extract of personal reality is contained in the romantization than in the autobiographer's scrupulously faithful account. (*Mary*, p. 10)

Nabokov's letters to Liusia Shul'gina would have been of enormous interest to this article, but they do not seem to have survived. Still, his references to the correspondence with his first beloved, both in 'The Admiralty Spire' and in the autobiographies, may be supplemented with some of his other literary letters.

Two such letters, both written to Nabokov's sister Elena (Helene) Sikorski, née Nabokov, after they had relaunched their correspondence severed by the Second World War, contain clues for decoding 'The Admiralty Spire' and the autobiographies. In the first, dated 26 November 1945, Nabokov informs his sister that he 'gained a huge amount of weight' and now looks like the Russian poet Aleksei Apukhtin (1840–93): 'здорово растолстел, стал похож на Апухтина' (*SL*, p. 61; *PSS*, p. 26).²² In 'The Admiralty Spire' the protagonist refers to himself as corpulent, although he contrasts his 'piquant' and 'zesty' corpulence with the flabby one of 'the poet Apukhtin, the fat pet of ladies' (*Stories*, p. 344; *TD*, p. 121). Just how much self-mockery is contained in this statement becomes evident towards the end of the story, when Nabokov's narrator invokes two oft-quoted poems by Apukhtin. The invocations occur soon after the narrator had broken down and deflated his relentless rubber dummy. He now begins to doubt his own efforts to 'free [their] past from its humiliating captivity, and save [Katia's] image from the rack and disgrace of [her] own pen!' (*Stories*, p. 353; *TD*, p. 133). The narrator is not sure if he is succeeding, because '[his] letter smacks strangely of those rhymed epistles' that Katia used to 'rattle off by heart'. The Russian text makes two references to Apukhtin's verse without identifying their sources. The first is a slightly altered opening line from 'Pis'mo' ('The Letter', 1882), which should read: 'Увидя почерк мой, Вы, верно, удивитесь.'²³ The second is from 'Otvét na pis'mo' ('A Response to a Letter', 1885): 'Здесь море ждет тебя, широкое, как страсть, | И страсть, широкая, как море'.²⁴ The English version of the story, produced in the 1970s,

²¹ Nabokov is writing about the extraordinary sunsets in 1917 that Aleksandr Blok records in his diary.

²² Nabokov likened himself to a cross ('pomes') between Apukhtin and General MacArthur in a letter to Mark Aldanov of 23 July 1948 (Andrei Chernyshev, 'Kak redko teper' pishu po-russki [. . .]. Iz perepiski V. V. Nabokova i M. A. Aldanova', *Oktiabr'* (1996: 1), 137).

²³ A. N. Apukhtin, *Polnoe sobranie sochinenii* (Leningrad: Sovetskii pisatel', 1991), p. 223.

²⁴ Apukhtin, p. 241. Linda Saputelli Zimmermann identified Apukhtin's poems in her very illuminating discussion of 'The Admiralty Spire' ('The Russian Short Stories of Vladimir Nabokov: A Thematical and Structural Analysis', doctoral dissertation, Harvard University, 1978, pp. 87–90). Zimmermann also makes very good observations on the Russian cultural milieu immediately before the Revolution, especially the gypsy songs, of which Nabokov's narrator speaks at considerable length.

identifies the author of the two quotes: "The sight of my handwriting may surprise you — | but I shall refrain from closing, as Apukhtin does, with the invitation: "The sea awaits you here, as vast as love | And love, vast as the sea!" — I shall refrain, because, in the first place, there is no sea here, and, in the second, I have not the least desire to see you" (*Stories*, p. 353; *TD*, p. 133).

When Nabokov wrote the original version of 'The Admiralty Spire' in 1933, he was the opposite of corpulent. The photographs of the time, as well as his memoirs in the 1930s, present him as a very skinny and slender athletic individual. Why the Apukhtin association? Is it because Nabokov did not want the reader to look for resemblances between his narrator and himself? But why then did he not fictionalize his historical past in the story completely beyond recognition? His letters to his sister Elena provide a number of clues. Apukhtin, whose obesity usually comes to mind along with a few passionate stylized poems such as 'Nochi bezumnye, noch bessonnnye' ('Mad nights, sleepless nights', 1876), represented for Nabokov the direct opposite of his own physique and mature verse. In *Speak, Memory*, he recoils at the 'shameful gleanings from Apukhtin's and Grand Duke Konstantin's lyrics of the *tsiganski* type' (*SM*, p. 225) present in his own first poem. Conversely, in 1945, when Nabokov likened himself to Apukhtin in a letter, he was already contemplating writing his autobiography. He had also just gained much weight as result of giving up smoking.²⁵ The associations with Apukhtin and his verse are tested in a familiar letter to Nabokov's sister before being incorporated into an autobiography. In sum, with the Apukhtin references we observe a complex transformation. First, they make a fatidic intrusion in 'The Admiralty Spire'. Then, Nabokov's biographical circumstances solidify a double-ironic identification in a postwar letter.²⁶ Later still, in *Speak, Memory*, he discusses Apukhtin in connection with his own early attempts at poetry. Finally, in the 1970s he enhances the Apukhtin motif while translating into English his 1933 story.

In the late 1940s, Nabokov revisited the material he had earlier channelled through fiction. One such visit to the past is documented in a letter he sent to his sister on 6 December 1949. He describes riding a bicycle to his uncle's estate to fetch a book: 'It was at the end of the summer, a cold dark evening, carbide in a bicycle lamp, probably in the middle of August, definitely in 1914' (*PSS*, p. 58). In all versions of Nabokov's story of first love ('The Admiralty Spire', the novel *Mary*, the 'Tamara' chapter of the autobiographies) the reader finds the young lovers riding bicycles along park alleys. In *Speak, Memory*, Nabokov recalls how 'on dark rainy evenings [he] would load the lamp of [his] bicycle with magical lumps of calcium carbide, and [. . .] ride cautiously into the darkness' (*SM*, p. 33).²⁷

Had the actual letters Nabokov wrote to Tamara before the Revolution and from the Crimea in 1917–18 been available, the post-epistolary past and the proto-biographical future of his Russian short stories would no doubt have been even more explicit. However, it is still a rewarding experience to compare the figurations of certain key motifs and separate images in 'The Admiralty Spire' and Nabokov's autobiographies. The multiple parallels as well as the differences testify again to the

²⁵ Brian Boyd, *Vladimir Nabokov: The American Years* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1991), p. 87.

²⁶ In a different letter to Elena Sikorski, Nabokov recalls having mistakenly attributed Afanasii Fet's poem to Apukhtin in 1914 (*PSS*, p. 58).

²⁷ In *Mary*, Ganin 'would plunge into the black, bubbling darkness and ignite the soft flame of his bicycle lamp; and now, when he inhaled the smell of carbide, it brought back everything else' (p. 101).

extent to which his short stories fictionalize his biographical past and yet prepare its subsequent restoration to the level of autobiographical prose. At times, however, an image travels from a short story to the autobiography almost unchanged after so many years as fiction. Such is the case with one remarkably vivid and naturalistic detail in Katia's portrait. The protagonist reminisces about picking strawberries: 'Жарко наливалось солнце, — и это солнце, и земляника, и катино чесучевое платье, потемневшее подмышками' ('The hot sun bore down, and that sun, and the strawberries, and Katya's frock of tussore silk with darkening blotches under the arms' (*VF*, p. 224; *Stories*, p. 349; *TD*, p. 127). In the 'Tamara' chapter, Nabokov revisits the summer of first love:

And there she was, my happy Tamara, on the points of her toes, trying to pull down a racemosa branch in order to pick its puckered fruit, with all the world and its trees wheeling in the orb of her laughing eye, and a dark patch from her exertions in the sun forming under her raised arm on the raw shantung of her yellow frock. (*SM*, pp. 239–40)

и вот — вижу ее, привставшую на цыпочки, чтобы потянуть книзу ветку черемухи со сморщенными ягодами, и дерево и небо и жизнь играют у нее в синеем взоре, и от ее веселых усилий на жарком солнце расплывается темное пятно по желтой чесуче платья под ее поднятой рукой. (*SSoch*, IV, 265)

It is, of course, both nearly impossible and fruitless to speculate whether this penetrating detail had been actually remembered and brought into exile as part of Nabokov's baggage, or was conjured up only later. It might be helpful, however, to consult his 1967 interview, where he revamps and applies a Platonic idea to the art of memory. The interviewer, Alfred Appel, Jr, asked Nabokov to 'comment on the significance of autobiographical hints in works of art that are literally not autobiographical'. He replied: 'Imagination is a form of memory. An image depends on the power of associations, and association is supplied and prompted by memory' (*SO*, pp. 77–78). Thus, the detail, the dark blotch in the armpit of Katia or Tamara, undergoes the same metamorphic cycle in which it first stands as fiction, presumably a product of imagination, and then as a recollection, presumably a product of memory. To quote Nabokov:

When we speak of a vivid individual recollection we are paying a compliment not to our capacity of retention but to Mnemosyne's mysterious foresight in having stored up this or that element which creative imagination may want to use when combining it with later recollections and inventions. In this sense, both memory and imagination are a negation of time. (*SO*, p. 78)

'The Admiralty Spire' continues to shape a metafictional motif that passes from the short stories to the autobiography. The epistolary protagonist stresses that he and his beloved were structuring their fresh memories as future recollections:

We were preparing in advance for certain things, training ourselves to remember, imagining a distant past and practicing nostalgia, so that subsequently, when that past really existed for us, we would know how to cope with it, and not perish under its burden.

(*Stories*, p. 348; *TD*, p. 127)

'The Admiralty Spire' in effect charts two fictional trajectories of the same cluster of memories now turned into two proto-autobiographies, one put together by a graphomaniac, the other by an artist of memory. The motif of the present as a series of would-be recollections plays a prominent part in such stories as 'A Guide to Berlin'

and 'Tiazhelyi dym' ('Torpid Smoke', 1935).²⁸ In 'A Guide to Berlin', Nabokov suggests that the 'sense of literary creation' is to 'portray ordinary objects as they will be reflected in the kindly mirrors of future times' (*Stories*, p. 157; *DS*, p. 94). He speaks of a little boy eyeing objects and people inside a beer hall. The boy's memory is still flung open to the world, and 'whatever happens to him in life, he will always remember' the raw and splendid details in their unstructured interrelation. The details only seem unstructured, while in fact they have already been given the shape of a 'future recollection' (*Stories*, p. 160; *DS*, p. 98). In 'Torpid Smoke', which records the pains of a new poem being delivered into this world, the protagonist also speaks of glimpsing 'a future recollection' (*budushchee vospominanie*) (*Stories*, p. 396; *RB*, p. 40; *VF*, p. 82) that he receives in a moment of 'terrifying clarity' akin to what Nabokov would later term 'cosmic synchronization' (*SM*, p. 218):

It dawned upon me that exactly as I recalled such images of the past as the way my dead mother had of making a weepy face [. . .] so one day I would have to recall, with merciless, irreparable sharpness, the hurt look of my father's shoulders as he leaned over that torn map [. . .]; and all this mingled creatively with the recent vision of blue smoke clinging to dead leaves on a wet roof. (*Stories*, p. 396; *RB*, p. 40)

Speak, Memory is very much a guide to its own making, and the transformations of 'future recollections' into autobiographical material are a leitmotif in the book. Consider, for instance, a game Nabokov describes playing with a friend in the Crimea: 'The idea consisted of parodying a biographic approach projected, as it were, into the future and thus transforming the very specious present into a kind of paralyzed past as perceived by a doddering memoirist' (*SM*, p. 248). With the help of irony, both playful and clairvoyant, the passage crystallizes a seminal point. Nabokov's autobiography is iconoclastic in its structure, theme, and metaphysics, and does indeed elevate facts and details, both historical and imagined, to the level of art. Biographical method, which Nabokov parodied as a young poet, is naturally a part of any autobiography. However, his autobiography is exceptional in its insistence upon what he called 'secret themes in a wide-awake fate' (*tainye temy v iavnoi sud'be* (*SSoch*, iv, 133)) in the preface to the Russian version. This is why when the same motif recurs in letters, short stories, and autobiography, it blurs beyond distinction the conventional boundary between the fictional nature of art and the biographical shape of life.

In 'Vstrecha' ('The Reunion', 1931), a story from Nabokov's middle period, the protagonist tries to recall the name of a poodle that belonged to a little girl he used to know as a child:

Somewhere in his memory there was a hint of motion, as if something very small had awakened and begun to stir. [. . .] Everything vanished, but, at an instant his brain ceased straining, the thing stirred again, more perceptibly this time, and like a mouse emerging from a crack when the room is quiet, the live corpuscle of a word. . . . 'Give me your paw, Joker.' Joker! How simple it was. Joker. . . . (*Stories*, p. 307; *DS*, pp. 137–38)

Almost twenty years later, in 1948, Nabokov wrote Chapter 7 of his autobiography, which he published as a short story, 'Colette', in the *New Yorker* (31 July 1948, pp. 19–22) and later included in *Nabokov's Dozen* (1958) under a different title, 'First Love'. At the end of the chapter, he describes miraculous recollection:

²⁸ Zimmermann notes that in *Speak, Memory* Nabokov's account of composing verse is 'taken almost verbatim' from 'Torpid Smoke' (Zimmermann, p. 225).

And now a delightful thing happens. The process of recreating that penholder and the microcosm in its eyelet stimulates my memory to a last effort. I try to recall the name of Colette's dog²⁹ and triumphantly, along those remote beaches, over the glossy evening sands of the past, where each footprint slowly fills up with sunset water, here it comes, here it comes, echoing and vibrating: Floss, Floss, Floss! (*SM*, p. 152; *Stories*, p. 606; *ND*, p. 50–51)

On 15 April 1937, their twelfth wedding anniversary, Nabokov sent his wife a letter of exceptional artistic beauty and tenderness. It was April in Paris. Vera Nabokov was still in Berlin with their son Dmitri, hoping to join her husband before long.³⁰ He wrote his letter in Russian, but at places he inserted French and English phrases and private codes, a common practice in his letters to his wife. I quote only a few sentences to illustrate the letter's deeply affectionate tone (the underlined words were originally written in English):

My life, my love, it is twelve years today. And on this very day Despair has been published, and The Gift appears [. . .]. My darling, I love you. [. . .] My love, my life, how long it's been since you've stood before me, and God, how many new things there will be about my little one, and how many births I have missed (of words, of games, of all sorts of things). [. . .] Poor Ilf has died.³¹ And, somehow, one visualizes the Siamese twins being separated. I love you, I love you. [. . .] I embrace you, my joy, my tired little thing. (*SL*, pp. 22–24)

Two months later, when Nabokov was working on one of his finest short stories, he shared with his 'representative', the Russian émigré protagonist Vasiliï Ivanovich, the experience of addressing a distant beloved. There are, of course, structural and generic differences between Nabokov's epistolary address to his wife and Vasiliï Ivanovich's interrupted and renarrated monologue to 'another man's wife, whom he had hopelessly loved for seven years' (*Stories*, pp. 426–27; *ND*, p. 90). However, the similarities are striking. One of the unique features of 'Cloud, Castle, Lake' lies in its fusion of voices, the protagonist's and the narrator's, at several climactic points in the story, the points at which the opening of the otherworld shows through chinks in mundane reality.³² They join their voices in a double-voiced address to their beloved women, one being Vasiliï Ivanovich's unattainable love, the other his 'employer's' beloved who is also the story's immediate addressee. Here is an example:

It happened that on a distant slope or in a gap in the trees there would appear and, as it were, stop for an instant, like air retained in the lungs, a spot so enchanting — a lawn, a terrace — such perfect expression of tender well-meaning beauty — that it seemed that if one could stop the train and go thither, forever, to you, my love. (*Stories*, p. 428; *ND*, p. 91)

Elsewhere, the reader also finds forms of passionate address recalling the ones Nabokov used in the letter to Vera: 'My love' (*Stories*, p. 430; *ND*, p. 93); 'My love! My obedient one!' (*Stories*, p. 431; *ND*, p. 95). The connections between his letters to

²⁹ Colette was a French girl he met on a beach in Biarritz.

³⁰ I am not interested in all facets of Nabokov's career; for details of Nabokov's life in 1937, see Boyd, *The Russian Years*, pp. 432–46.

³¹ Il'ia Il'f, a Soviet Russian writer, co-wrote his books with Evgenii Petrov.

³² On the metaphysics in Nabokov's novels, see Vladimir E. Alexandrov, *Nabokov's Otherworld* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1991); D. Barton Johnson, *Worlds in Regression: Some Novels of Vladimir Nabokov* (Ann Arbor, MI: Ardis, 1985); in the short stories, see my articles, "'Cloud, Castle, Lake" and the Problem of Entering the Otherworld in Nabokov's Prose', *Nabokov Studies*, 1 (1994), 131–53, and 'Pilgrimage, Memory and Death in Vladimir Nabokov's Short Story "The Aurelian"', *Slavic and East European Journal*, 40 (1996), 700–25.

his wife and 'Cloud, Castle, Lake' present yet another perspective on the post-epistolary trace in his short stories. They also point to the proto-autobiographical status of his epistolary and short-fictional addresses to his wife.

In the penultimate chapter of both *Speak, Memory* and *Other Shores*, Nabokov makes a dazzling artistic move that will always distinguish him as an innovative autobiographer. In a rather neutral, almost detached tone, he recalls his growing literary success in the late 1920s. Then, suddenly, a magical intrusion of three words changes the course of his entire autobiographical narrative: 'By 1928, my novels were beginning to bring a little money in German translations, and in the spring of 1929, *you and I* went butterfly hunting in the Pyrenees' (*SM*, p. 281; my italics). This 'you and I' cluster, two shifters put together, initiates a series of addresses culminating in the final chapter, where Nabokov's son is born and the family leaves Europe for the New World. This chapter begins and ends as an address to Nabokov's wife, either a long familiar letter or a literary monologue put down on paper, one cannot really tell:

They are passing, posthaste, posthaste, the gliding years—to use a soul-rending Horatian inflection. The year are passing, my dear, and presently nobody will know what you and I know. Our child is growing; the roses of Paestum, of misty Paestum, are gone [. . .]. We shall go still further back, to a morning in May, 1934 [. . .]. There I was walking home, at 5 a.m., from the maternity hospital near Bayerischer Platz, to which I had taken you a couple of hours earlier. (*SM*, p. 295)

In this chapter, Nabokov touches on almost all his most important aesthetic, ethical, and metaphysical beliefs. He describes thinking of love for a person in terms of 'drawing radii from [his] love — from [his] heart, from the tender nucleus of personal matter — to monstrously remote points of the universe' (*SM*, p. 296). He stresses being a 'confirmed non-unionist' in questions of faith. And, what is central for my discussion, he talks about the power of memory to resist the speediness of time. In this connection, his invocation of a Horatian ode in the first sentence of the chapter is far from being gratuitous. He paraphrases the opening of Horace's Ode to Postumus (Ode 14, Book II), in which the ancient poet addresses his friend with bitterness and solemnity: 'Eheu fugaces, Postume, Postume, | labuntur anni' ('Alas, my Postumus, our years | glide away silently').³³ The subject of the Horatian ode is the shortness of life, the nearness of crossing over, the inevitability of death. At the end of the poem, Horace envisages an heir who will spill the best wine on the floor during a luxurious feast. Nabokov also speaks of an heir in his final chapter, about his son, whose development was a source of many 'discoveries' for his parents (*SM*, p. 297). In fact, Nabokov crowns the chapter and thus his entire autobiography with a now famous description of the parents marvelling at their son's discovery of a liner that would take them across the Atlantic: 'a splendid ship's funnel, showing from behind the clothesline as something in a scrambled picture — Find What the Sailor Has Hidden — that the finder cannot unsee once it has been seen' (*SM*, p. 310). The finder here is not only his five year-old son but also Nabokov himself and the reader, and the ultimate discovery is the unique shape of an autobiography, the perfect vessel of art emerging from life's chaotic clotheslines. The invocation of both Horace and Virgil (roses of Paestum from *Georgics*, Book IV) as shapers of the

³³ *A Selection of Latin Verse with Notes*, ed. by Henry D. Wild and others (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1914), p. 49.

Western literary tradition might also signal that Nabokov is fully aware of a complex literary synthesis that resulted in the text of his autobiography. Indeed, in *Speak, Memory*, as nowhere else, we can see his artistic quest in all its unity and diversity. Here everything comes together in his protean art. The importance attached to addressing connects the autobiography with the genre of epistolary novel, and not only in its history (Rousseau's *La Nouvelle Héloïse*, Goethe's *The Suffering of Young Werther*, Pushkin's unfinished *Novel in Letters*) but also its revitalization by Nabokov's contemporaries (Shklovskii's *Zoo, or Letters Not about Love, or The Third Heloise*).³⁴ Several chapters of the autobiography ('Mademoiselle O', 'First Love') were written as separate short stories, and nearly all were published in periodicals in the form of short stories ('Tamara', 'Lodgings in Trinity Lane').³⁵ The fact that a number of chapters of the autobiography stand as short stories in their own right suggests that the modernist Nabokov understood that the meaning of genre is not in its neo-Classical rigidity but in its constant readiness to encompass innovations. In other words, Nabokov's experiments with conflating the autobiographical and the epistolary in such short stories as 'Beneficence', 'A Letter That Never Reached Russia', 'The Admiralty Spire', or the postwar 'That in Aleppo Once . . .' (1943) created a foundation upon which the writer constructed his autobiography. Before embarking on an autobiography in the 1940s (his first attempts, of which little survives, go back to 1935; see Boyd, *The Russian Years*, pp. 420–21), he had rehearsed acts of addressing a beloved in several short stories, including 'Cloud, Castle, Lake' and even 'Spring in Fialta', where the protagonist exclaims in the midst of a first-person narrative: 'But then what should I have done with you, Nina, how should I have disposed of the store of sadness that had gradually accumulated as a result of our seemingly carefree, but really hopeless meetings?' (*Stories*, p. 421; *ND*, p. 22). At the end of *Speak, Memory*, the most explicit of Nabokov's autobiographies,³⁶ the author confesses his love to his wife and mother of his child, his lifelong Muse: his Russia, his Mnemosyne, and his Lorelei. Heinrich Heine's celebrated poem 'Die Lorelei' is relevant here not only as a paradigmatic Romantic statement about love and memory but also because in 'The Admiralty Spire' Nabokov's narrator recalls the last verse from Osip Mandel'shtam's prophetic poem 'Dekabrist' ('The

³⁴ Both Shklovskii's *Zoo* and Nabokov's *Lolita* are examined in Linda S. Kauffman, *Special Delivery: Epistolary Modes in Modern Fiction* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992).

³⁵ I have not dealt here with the short-fictional and autobiographical status of 'Mademoiselle O' because it has already received detailed consideration in J. B. Foster's research ('An Archeology of "Mademoiselle O": Narrative Between Art and Memory', in *A Small Alpine Form: Studies in Nabokov's Short Fiction*, ed. by Charles Nicol and Gennady Barabtarlo (New York: Garland, 1993), pp. 111–35) and in John Burt Foster, Jr., *Nabokov's Art of Memory and European Modernism* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1993), pp. 110–29. In *Nabokov's Art of Memory*, Foster writes of Nabokov's 'fascination with the uncertain boundaries between fiction and autobiography'. 'Tamara' was published in the *New Yorker*, 10 December 1949, pp. 35–39; 'Lodgings in Trinity Lane' (which corresponds to Chapter 13 of *Speak, Memory*) appeared in *Harper's Magazine*, 202 (January 1951), pp. 84–91. Readers may object to my not having engaged the subject of *Pnin*'s serialization in the *New Yorker* before its publication in a book form. The serial publication of four of the seven chapters of *Pnin* is drastically different from the publication of 'Mademoiselle O', which was conceived as a short story/memoiristic essay to be published in the French periodical, *Mesures*. In the 1920s and 1930s Nabokov published a number of excerpts of his Russian novels in émigré newspapers, usually assigning them story-like titles, but this does not qualify such excerpts to be considered short stories.

³⁶ I have not discussed the fascinating topic of Nabokov's fictional pseudo-autobiography, the novel *Look at the Harlequins!* (1974), in which the epistolary dimension plays a very significant part. One should always keep in mind that 'Being in Love', a key poem for understanding Nabokov's otherworld, appears in this novel. Also pertinent here is his rewriting of his brother's biography in *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight* (1941).

Decembrist', 1917), which draws upon Heine's poem. Nabokov uses Mandel'shtam's verse doubly ironically when he rips apart Solntsev's falsifying novel: 'And at the end of the book you have me join the White Army and get caught by the Reds during a reconnaissance, and, with the names of two traitresses — Russia, Olga — on my lips, die valiantly' (*Stories*, p. 352; *TD*, p. 133). The last two verses of Mandel'shtam's poem read: Все перепуталось и сладко повторять: | Россия, Лера, Лорелея' ('Everything has been all mixed up and it is sweet to repeat: | Russia, Lethe, Lorelei').³⁷

The study of the poetics of Nabokov's short stories helps one to visualize not only the anatomy of his art but also its genesis and evolution. I conclude by looking at a passage from the Russian version of the autobiography, which makes a profound if concealed statement about Nabokov's understanding of a writer's development. In Chapter 1 of *Other Shores*, he writes of his development as a child. He claims to have learned words and numbers simultaneously, to have realized all at once that he is he, and his parents are his parents, whose age relates to his in a certain way. This, says Nabokov, 'corresponds to the theory of ontogenetic repetition of the previous stages of development. From a phylogenetic standpoint, the moment when the first human being started to reflect about himself coincided with the dawning of the sense of time' (*SSoch*, p. 137; see also *SM*, p. 21).³⁸ *Mutatis mutandis*, Ernst Heinrich Haeckel's evolutionary law, to which Nabokov refers, applies to Nabokov's life in literature. Short stories are a stage through which a writer like him goes in order to embrace more polyphonic forms. Indeed, his autobiography is structured as an analysis of his artistic development. The fact that he wrote his last short story, 'Lance', during the year his autobiography was published suggests that he had completed his own achievement by finding a literary form that would be not only a personal history of its author, an Autobiography, but also a literary history of its text in the making: a Textobiography.³⁹

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MAXIM D. SHRAYER

³⁷ O. E. Mandel'shtam, *Sobranie sochinenii*, 3 vols, ed. by G. P. Struve and B. A. Filippov (Moscow: Terra, 1991), I, 66.

³⁸ In the Russian, the end of the passage reads: 'Все это соответствует теории онтогенетического повторения пройденного. Филогенетически же, в первом человеке осознание себя не могло не совпасть с зарождением чувства времени' (*SSoch*, IV, 137). In the English, Nabokov replaced the biological terms with less specific ones: 'All this is as it should be according to the theory of recapitulation; the beginning of reflexive consciousness in the brain of our remotest ancestor must surely have coincided with the dawning of the sense of time' (*SM*, p. 21). In the last chapter of *Speak, Memory*, Nabokov speaks of the 'phylogenetic passion' boys have for 'things on wheels' (*SM*, p. 300).

³⁹ I express my thanks to: the Kennan Institute for Advanced Russian Studies for awarding me two Short-Term Grants (November 1993; May–June 1996) that allowed me to complete large parts of the research for this article; the staff of the Manuscript Division of the Library of Congress (Mary Wolfskill and Frederick W. Bauman, Jr); the late Militsa Greene, University of Edinburgh, and Richard D. Davies, Curator, Leeds Russian Archive, for giving me access to the papers of Ivan Bunin and for permission to quote from Vladimir Nabokov's letters to Ivan Bunin; Dmitri Nabokov, of Montreux, for permission to work with (and quote from) unpublished materials (the copyright is held by the Estate of Vladimir Nabokov); Alan P. Bradford, Connecticut College, for reading the manuscript and making helpful suggestions, and *Modern Language Review's* anonymous readers for their suggestions.