

After Rapture and Recapture: Transformations in the Drafts of Nabokov's Stories

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Nabokov's dedicated biographer, Brian Boyd, articulated a paradoxical discrepancy—paradoxical unless we remind ourselves that in Nabokov's world “commonsense” has been “shot dead”—between Nabokov's dismissive statements on the use of manuscripts by scholars, and the scrupulousness with which the writer and his intimates have preserved his archival treasures.¹ In the preface to his annotated translation of *Eugene Onegin*, Nabokov preached that “rough drafts, false scents, half-explored trails, dead ends of inspiration, are of little intrinsic importance.” And he continued, echoing vintage W. K. Wimsatt and Monroe C. Beardsley: “An artist should ruthlessly destroy his manuscripts after publication, lest they mislead academic mediocrities into thinking that it is possible to unravel the mysteries of genius by studying canceled readings. In art, purpose and plan are nothing; only the result counts.”² How does it feel to be treading the forbidden ledges and corridors of Nabokov's manuscripts in the company of other scholars and in spite of the master's verdict?

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¹Brian Boyd, “Manuscripts,” *The Garland Companion to Vladimir Nabokov*, ed. Vladimir E. Alexandrov (New York, 1995), 340–41. Nabokov's remarks on “commonsense” are found in his lecture, “The Art of Literature and Commonsense,” Vladimir Nabokov, *Lectures on Literature*, ed. Fredson Bowers (New York, 1980), 380.

²Nabokov, *Eugene Onegin: A Novel in Verse by Alexander Pushkin*, trans. and comm. Vladimir Nabokov (Princeton, 1975), 1:15.

I will begin with a general outline of Nabokov's working method during the European exile. He would start with a first draft of a story which he would subsequently subject to editing. The intensity of Nabokov's editing grew over time to reach a climax in the mid-to-late 1930s, when Nabokov wrote his finest stories as the general output of his short fiction steeply declined. Nabokov changed up to 50 percent of the material in the first draft. From a heavily marked rough draft, Nabokov would make a fair copy in long-hand, and he would also make some corrections there. Even prior to their marriage in 1925, Véra Nabokov (née Slonim) had served as Nabokov's typist, producing typescripts either from his fair copies or from the heavily edited drafts, in the latter case taking dictation. In the case of a number of short stories, one can document fairly precisely on the basis of dates in the manuscripts as well as various cross-references how long it took Nabokov to write a first draft. To give just two examples: "Groza" ("The Thunderstorm") was written in Berlin during 22–25 July 1924; "Oblako, ozero, bashnia" ("Cloud, Castle, Lake") was composed in Marienbad during 25–26 June 1937.³

Nabokov professed the neo-Romantic notion of a sweep of inspiration, and composed the first drafts of a number of short stories in an exalted state of creative bliss. Like Pushkin, on whose "scales" he "weighed" his art and craft, Nabokov distinguished between two types, or two stages, of inspiration: "*vostorg* and *vdokhnovenie*, which can be paraphrased as 'rapture' and 'recapture.'"⁴ In his discursive writings, as well as through the lives of his author-protagonists, Nabokov foregrounded a two-tiered model of the creative experience. It begins with the conception: "The pure flame of *vostorg*, initial rapture, which has no conscious purpose in view but which is all-important in linking the breaking up of the old world with the building up of the new one." "When the time is ripe," Nabokov told his students, "and the writer settles down to the actual composing of his book, he will rely on the second serene and steady kind of inspiration, *vdokhnovenie*, the trusted mate who helps to recapture and reconstruct the world."⁵ The composition of a first draft thus falls under the rubric of the second type of inspiration, *recapture*. At the same time, one wonders whether the editing and revising a rough draft—en route to a final publishable version—was a matter of inspiration? How is one to interpret Nabokov's remark that once "fiery *vostorg* has accomplished his task," "cool *vdokhnovenie* puts on her glasses"⁶ Is the transformation of the initial draft into the final version a domain of recapture, Nabokov's "cool" inspiration, but *inspiration* nonetheless? Or should revising be placed outside the two-tiered domain of inspiration as the laborious and sometimes

³"The Thunderstorm" is dated 22–25 July 1924, in the first publication (*Segodnia* [28 September 1924]: 6. "Cloud, Castle, Lake" is dated in 25–26 June 1937, in the manuscript of the rough draft (Nabokov Papers, container 7, folder r). As Boyd explains, "normally dates on Nabokov's manuscripts, like those of John Shade [in *Pale Fire*], record the time of first creation, not final completion" (*Vladimir Nabokov: The Russian Years* [Princeton, 1990], 409).

⁴Nabokov adopted a modified version of Pushkin's terms as they appear, for instance, in the article "Vozrazhenie na stat'i Kiukhel'bekera v 'Mnemosyne'" ("Objections to Kiukhel' baker's Articles in 'Mnemosyne,'" 1825–26). See A. S. Pushkin, *Polnoe sobranie sochinenii*, vol. 11 (Moscow, 1949), 41–42. The quote comes from Nabokov's poem "Neokonchennyi chernovik" (An Unfinished Draft, 1931), which can be found in *Poems and Problems* (New York, 1970), 66.

⁵*Lectures on Literature*, 378–79.

⁶*Ibid.*, 379.

protracted period of making sober and deliberate stylistic, and, in some instances, structural decisions? One might recall Nabokov's remark in a 1966 interview that he is "a slow writer, a snail carrying its house at the rate of two hundred pages of final copy per year."⁷ Further yet, how is one to account for Nabokov's authorized translations of his Russian texts into English? Did inspiration of any type play a part there?

Nabokov's transformations of initial, inspiration-driven drafts into final versions offer precious insights into the laboratory of his art. However, in any analysis of a manuscript that was revised and edited by its author, many variables simply cannot be accounted for unless one foregrounds a working hypothesis. Suppose that in a heavily edited draft all corrections are made in the same color ink as the presumably original text is written in. How can we tell, without using highly technical means of analysis, whether the author made the changes while writing, or later during a separate stage of revising the text? A number of similar problems arise in the process of studying a writer's manuscripts and drafts.

In my research, I have proceeded under a hypothesis that Nabokov's corrections represent a discrete, post-inspirational stage of editing and revising. Furthermore, I distinguish two processes within Nabokov's revisions of his rough drafts. The first involves linguistic and stylistic changes, including changes of individual words and tropes as well as rewriting entire sentences. For instance, consider the opening of an apprentice short story, "Govoriat po-russki" ("Russian Spoken Here"), written in 1923 and never published in Nabokov's lifetime.⁸ Writing of a tobacconist's window, Nabokov replaced "na sinevatom barkhate" (literally: on bluish velvet) with "na ukhabakh golubogo barkhata" (literally: amid mounds of blue velvet), the latter making its way to the typescript. A more fascinating example of a linguistic fine tuning is found on page four of the first draft of the story "Muzyka" ("Music," 1932), where Nabokov actually added the epithet "potustoronnie" (literally: otherworldly; "spectral" in the authorized translation) to the noun "ruki" (hands), this in the episode where the protagonist stares at the hands of a pianist, reflected in the lacquered blackness of a concert grand.⁹ Students of Nabokov's metaphysics should relish the adjective since such direct nonmetaphorical references to the otherworld are quite rare in his works. Concomitant with acts of rewriting are those of cutting, trimming, and erasing à la Chekhov, Nabokov's Russian master of the short story.¹⁰ Readers who still fault Nabokov for his allegedly excessive cataloguing of details and physical objects would find his first drafts even more baroque than the published texts. To turn to "Russian Spoken Here" again, Nabokov initially described the colors of cigarette packs as «розоватые, золотые, красные, желтые» (literally: mauve, golden, red, yellow) while settling in the typescript for «пестреют коробки» (literally: there lies a motley of boxes).¹¹

⁷Nabokov, *Strong Opinions* (New York, 1990), 68 (the interview was conducted by Alfred Appel, Jr., in Montreux, Switzerland).

⁸Nabokov, "Govoriat po-russki," manuscript (ms.) and typescript (ts.), Nabokov Papers, container 7, folders i and j.

⁹"Muzyka" (the story bears the "Ograda" in the first draft), ms., Nabokov Papers, container 7, folder gg. See also *The Stories of Vladimir Nabokov* (New York, 1997), 334.

¹⁰On Chekhov as Nabokov's Russian master see my *The World of Nabokov's Stories* (Austin, 1999), chap. 3.

¹¹Nabokov, "Govoriat po-russki," ms. and ts., Nabokov Papers.

The second category encapsulates changes altering drastically the meaning of the story as a whole. Consider “Pil’gram” (“The Aurelian”), Nabokov’s masterpiece story, written and published in 1930. The story tells about one Pilgram, a shopkeeper and entomologist living in Weimar Berlin. The purpose of Pilgram’s whole life is to realize his otherworldly dream of an expedition to one of the areas renowned for their butterfly population. At the end of the story, preparing to depart for a lepidopterological expedition, he dies of a stroke at the threshold of his perfect dream. The motif of pilgrimage is central in the signification of the protagonist’s otherworldly journey.¹² The name of the protagonist draws immediate attention due to its foreign sound to the Russian ear. Nabokov’s passion for dictionary research might have yielded a fitting name for his protagonist. “Pilgram” (or “pilgerame”) is the Scots-English word for “pilgrim.” In Russian, two different words, “palomnik” and “pilgrim,” both Latin-derived, are used. While an English speaker seems quite likely to apprehend the *pilgram-pilgrim* connection, fewer Russians sense the fact that the name Pilgram encodes pilgrimage.

The evolution of the protagonist’s name deserves a closer look. In the first draft, Nabokov uses the name Karl Gruber.¹³ On the first few pages of the fair copy, he refers to his protagonist as Alfred Zommer (the Russian transliteration of the German “Sommer”) but then decides to change it to Pilgram, just Pilgram without any first name. The fair copy has preserved Nabokov’s changes: he heavily crossed out the name Sommer and corrected it to Pilgram. The name Sommer was given to the rich amateur, whom destiny sends to buy from Pilgram a collection of moths; the collector’s name was originally Krechmar (Kretschmar)—the name of the German protagonist of the novel *Kamera obskura* (1931). In the fair copy, the story also bears a different title, “Palomnik,” probably to downplay the connection between the protagonist’s name and pilgrimage. Nabokov must have put much stock into the title and its special relationship to the protagonist’s name. The heavily-edited first draft did not have a title. In the fair copy, from which a typescript was presumably made and sent to the Paris review *Sovremennye zapiski*, two alternative titles (or two words of a single earlier title) are so heavily crossed out that it is difficult to make out what lies underneath the heavy layer of ink. The second word is “baboček,” genitive plural of “babočka” (butterfly); the first word appears to be “liubitel’” (lover; fan). The original title might have been “Liubitel’ baboček” (“A Lover of Butterflies”). The provisional title, “Palomnik,” was written above the two crossed-out words. Beneath the titles Nabokov wrote “rasskaz” (short story)—something he did not usually do in his manuscripts. Perhaps the ecclesiastically charged title would have obviated the meaning of the story; by adding a clear genre label he must have hoped to avoid his piece being taken for an essay on pilgrimage.¹⁴ Unfortunately, neither the typescript of the story nor

¹²I discuss the motif of pilgrimage in detail in *The World of Nabokov's Stories*, chap. 2.

¹³See Vladimir Nabokov, “Pil’gram” (“Palomnik”), ms. and ts., Nabokov Papers, container 7, folders dd and ee.

¹⁴In 1925, following the publication of the short story “Bakhman” (“Bachman”) in *Rul’*, Nabokov received a peculiar request from Dr. Bernhard Hirschberg of Frankfurt am Main. Taking Nabokov’s short story to be a memoiristic essay, Hirschberg asked for permission to translate it into German to be published in “one of the local newspapers.” See Bernhard Hirschberg letter “To Vladimir Nabokov,” 8 March 1925, Nabokov Papers, container 8, folder 13.

the corrected proofs seem to have survived. My guess is that Nabokov changed the title from “Palomnik” to “Pil’gram” either in the typescript, or in galley proofs.¹⁵

Nabokov’s short fiction makes a leap between the limpid texture of “Rozhdestvenskii rasskaz” (“A Christmas Story,” 1928) and the astounding power of “The Aurelian” (1930). Prior to “The Aurelian,” Nabokov had not written any short stories for one and a half years. Although the story took just ten days to write, the surviving manuscripts tell an extraordinary tale. A comparison of Nabokov’s densely edited first draft with the clean fair copy yields a number of structural changes. Below, I would like to concentrate on those of Nabokov’s artistic decisions that alter the protagonist’s characterization and the story’s narrative structure. I have already spoken of Nabokov’s decision to change his protagonist’s name from Karl Gruber to Alfred Sommer to Pilgram. Several changes—both large- and small-scale—emphasize Pilgram’s fixation upon his dream and underscore the motif of pilgrimage. In the first draft, Pilgram and his wife are said to have tried to have children. Eleanor first had a stillborn baby, then a miscarriage, then another serious medical problem. Only then is Pilgram reported to have left her alone (*ostavil ee v pokoe*), after which for a while he betrayed his wife with a seamstress. Such a cluster of prosaic details—had it indeed remained in the final Russian version—would take the reader’s attention away from Pilgram’s monomaniacal nature. To use a different example, the first draft allows an insight into the shaping of the seminal formulation about Pilgram’s butterfly store as the only link between his “dreary” mundane existence and the otherworldly “phantom of perfect happiness.”¹⁶ Originally, Nabokov described the space of Pilgram’s longed-for pilgrimage as a «живо[й] энтомологически[й] ра[й]» (literally: live entomological paradise). As Nabokov’s otherworld was becoming more and more *sui generis*, he experienced a growing need to write about it without relying on readily available formulas. A reference to an “entomological paradise” would have simplified and literalized Nabokov’s metaphorical private codes. Hence Nabokov’s decision to leave out a reference to paradise, a traditional religious concept.

One more important editorial decision involves the entomological sign system in the story. The first draft carried an epigraph from the second stanza of Afanasii Fet’s oft-anthologized poem “Babochka” (“The Butterfly,” 1884): «Не спрашивай: откуда появилась?/ Куда спешу?» (Don’t ask: whence I come?/ Whither I hasten?).¹⁷ Apparently, Nabokov had intended to keep the epigraph in the fair copy but then changed his mind—after writing out the first verse—and marked it out diligently. Steering clear of direct admissions of literary indebtedness, Nabokov left a covert trace of Fet’s poem in the final version. While not disrupting the unity of the text, the following Russian sentence uses Fet’s motif of a breathing butterfly as a subtext:

¹⁵It is also possible that Nabokov did not want to have two texts under the same title; in 1927 he wrote and published a poem also entitled “Palomnik.”

¹⁶*Stories of Vladimir Nabokov*, 252.

¹⁷See Afanasii Fet, *Polnoe sobranie stikhotvorenii* (Moscow, 1959), 303. Nabokov knew Fet’s heritage intimately and would later translate three of his poems into English. The poems which Nabokov translated are: “Alter Ego” (1878), “Izmuchen zhizn’iu, kovarstvom nadezhdy...” (“When life is torture, when hope is a traitor...,” 1864), and “Lastochki” (“The Swallows,” 1884). All three were published in *Russian Review* 3 (Fall 1943): 31–33.

Пильграм ясно почувствовал, что он никогда никуда не уедет, подумал, что ему скоро пятьдесят, что он должен всем соседям, что нечем платить налог,—и ему показалось дикой выдумкой, невозможным бредом, что сейчас, вот в этот миг, садится южная бабочка на базальтовый осколок и дышит крыльями.¹⁸

Finally, a major structural change in “The Aurelian” signals the growing perfection of Nabokov’s poetics. Reading the final Russian version, the reader is never completely sure whether Pilgram is indeed planning a real expedition. The reader wonders whether Pilgram is capable of separating the reality of his otherworldly dreams and the actuality of a butterfly-collecting expedition. In this connection, the following paragraph, which Nabokov chose to omit in the fair copy, appears especially gratifying and illuminating. The paragraph is written in pencil and found on the last page of the first draft, right after the sentence in which Pilgram drops a money-pot and bends to pick up the coins:

Никто не видел, как он вышел из дома. Вечерняя, еще солнечная улица была полна народа—соседи запирали лавки, шорник напротив играл со своей собакой, две девушки высокими голосами о чем-то оживленно разговаривали. И у всех были прилежные глаза, все знали свою улицу, знали кто когда проходит мимо, готовы были потом обсуждать всякую необыкновенную мелочь,—и все таки никто ничего не увидел.¹⁹

In the first draft, Nabokov must have still felt compelled to justify his decision to create a narrative split between the textual opening of Pilgram’s departure and his death that engenders a closed ending. The quoted passage reads like a section of a detective story and prompts the readers to investigate the hidden possibilities of Pilgram’s disappearance. Conversely, the function of the last, split paragraph in the printed version is to set the reader on a pilgrimage along with Nabokov’s protagonist. Following Pilgram, the reader enters a privileged textual zone that I call a *textual otherworldly opening*.²⁰ By leaving the explanatory passage out of the final version, Nabokov unequivocally concludes “The Aurelian” with Pilgram’s death. The philistine in Pilgram remains on the floor of his shop with his face “knocked out of shape” not by death, but by a burgher’s commonsense, by a commonsensical cause—a money-pot that he drops on the floor.

¹⁸Nabokov, *Sogliadatoi* (Paris, 1938), 199 (“Pil’gram felt it clearly that he would never go anywhere; he thought that he was going to be fifty soon, that he owed to all the neighbors, that there was no money to pay taxes,—and it seemed a wild fantasy, an impossible delirium that right now, at that very moment, a southern butterfly descended onto a basalt rock and breathed with its wings.”)

¹⁹“Pil’gram,” ms., Nabokov Papers, container 7, folder dd (“No one saw him leave the house. The evening street, still sunny, was crowded; the neighbors locked their shops, the harness-maker across the street played with his dog, two young women discussed something animatedly in their high-pitched voices. And everyone had watchful eyes, they all knew their street, knew who passes by where, and were prepared afterward to discuss any conspicuous trifle; but still no one saw anything.”)

²⁰See Shroyer, *The World of Nabokov’s Stories*, chap. 2.

However, the idealist dreamer in Pilgram defies the constraints of commonsense and sets out on an endless journey across the memory of the reader.

While drafts of most of the Russian short stories have captured Nabokov's thorough stylistic revisions, few measure up to "The Aurelian" in terms of the depth and magnitude of their structural alterations. A case in point is the ending of "Nabor" ("Recruiting," 1935), where significant revisions of language neighbor major structural transformations. "Recruiting" is a nearly plotless meditation on the writer's hunt for a character's physical prototype while "the design of [his] novel is fixed in [his imagination]."²¹ In the final version, Nabokov speaks in the two closing paragraphs about having forever "recruited" a certain elderly Russian émigré, Vasiliy Ivanovich:

Но он был уже мой. Вот с усилием он поднялся, выпрямился, переложил трость из одной руки в другую и, сделав сперва короткий пробный шаг, спокойно двинулся прочь—если не ошибаюсь, навеки,—но как чуму он уносил с собой необыкновенную заразу и был заповедно связан со мной, обреченный появиться на минуту в глубине какой-то главы, на повороте какой-то фразы.

Мой представитель был теперь один на скамейке, и так как он передвинулся в тень, где только что сидел Василий Иванович, то на лбу у него колебалась та же липовая прохлада, которая венчала ушедшего.²²

The last two paragraphs underwent particularly intensive editing in the rough draft.²³ The revisions were of two kinds. Nabokov thoroughly reworked the syntax and composition of the second sentence in the first paragraph (in the translation, produced collaboratively by the author and his son in the 1970s, the long Russian sentence is broken up into two). Originally, the sentence started with the middle part: «как чуму, он уносил с собой» (literally: like the plague, he carried off with him). Nabokov also cut references to "folds of clothing" and "wrinkles of his skin" in which Vasiliy Ivanovich presumably "carried off" the extraordinary literary disease. Finally, Nabokov got rid of the last sentence: «Я как никак почти уверен, что это был русский» (literally: I am nonetheless almost sure, that this one was a Russian). In an earlier paragraph, Nabokov's narrator speculated that the elderly man "was perhaps not Russian at all," and the deletion of the final sentence thus rid the ending of a certain redundancy.²⁴ Nabokov's stylistic editing of the

²¹*Strong Opinions*, 69. The remark was made in an interview with Alfred Appel, Jr. in the context of a discussion of the author's control over his characters in a novel.

²²"Nabor," *Poslednie novosti* (18 August 1935): 3. See also *Vesna v Fial'te*, 126 ("But he was already mine. Presently, with an effort, he got up, straightened, transferred his cane from one hand to the other, took a short, tentative step, and then calmly moved off, forever, if I am not mistaken. Yet he carried off with him, like the plague, an extraordinary disease, for he was sacramentally bound to me, being doomed to appear for a moment in the far end of a certain chapter, at the turning of a certain sentence.

My representative, the man with the Russian newspaper, was now alone on the bench and, as he had moved over into the shade where V. I. had just been sitting, the same cool linden pattern that had anointed his predecessor now rippled across his forehead"). The translation, from *Stories of Vladimir Nabokov*, 205, adds elements of commentary to the original.

²³Here and hereafter the references are to "Nabor," rough draft, Nabokov Papers, container 7, folder s.

²⁴*Stories of Vladimir Nabokov*, 404.

story's ending amounted to finding the perfect ordering of words, as well as erasing plethoric images and superfluous sentences.

Conversely, two substantive changes in the ending bespeak Nabokov's conscious elaboration of a unique narrative poetics. In the rough draft, the first paragraph ends with the following sentence: «Я не знаю, каково будет счастье, которым я его наделю» (literally: I do not know what kind of happiness I will endow him with). The "happiness" probably refers to a plot situation the author will endow his character with, but also to the Nabokovian idea of textual immortality, which the author awards his character. Why did Nabokov choose to omit the sentence in the final version? Did he fear that it would be too frank an admission of the story's purpose and method? Was he mindful of his own penchant for playful narcissism?

The second important structural change in "Recruiting" concerns the figure of the author's representative, which is central to Nabokov's poetics.²⁵ A representative (for example, Vasilii Ivanovich in "Cloud, Castle, Lake") not only informs and shares the inferred author's narrative perspective but also partakes of the authorial worldview. "Representative" figures can be found in several other fictions by Nabokov, including *Dar* ("The Gift," 1937–38), "Zaniatoi chelovek" ("A Busy Man," 1931), and "Tiazhelyi dym" ("Torpido Smoke," 1935). The notion also figures in the Russian version of "Mademoiselle O" (chapter 5 of the memoir *Drugie berega* [*Other Shores*, 1954]). Where in the final version of "Recruiting" Nabokov has «Мой представитель был теперь один на скамейке» (My representative was now alone on the bench), in the draft he had also considered and rejected «Я или мой представитель ...» (I or my representative...). However slight, the distinction is very significant to Nabokov. By referring to the narrator as "my representative" and deleting a reference to the narrator's "I" (the story has up to this point been told in first person with strong currents of free indirect discourse), Nabokov thereby literally separates the *narrator-I* and the *narrator-agent* ("my representative was now alone on the bench"). Pekka Tammi has astutely described the split as an "effort to step from a lower plane of observation to a superior one—an attempt to 'peer beyond [one's] own limits.'"²⁶

During his latter years, Nabokov considered English translations of his Russian works the definitive versions, insisting that translators into other languages use the authorized English, rather than the original Russian versions whenever possible.²⁷ Nabokov certainly had his reasons to do so, especially after he had found a loyal and gifted translator in his own son. Most of the substantial corpus of Nabokov's short stories was cotranslated (or translated after Nabokov's death in 1977) by Dmitri Nabokov. In a preface to the recent, definitive volume of his father's stories, Dmitri Nabokov spoke of a "cloudless collaboration between father and son, but the father had authorial license to alter his own texts in their translated form as, on occasion, he deemed appropriate."²⁸

²⁵See my *The World of Nabokov's Stories*, chaps. 1 and 2.

²⁶See Tammi, *Problems of Nabokov's Poetics: A Narratological Analysis* (Helsinki, 1985), 127.

²⁷See Boyd, *Vladimir Nabokov: The American Years* (Princeton, 1991), 484.

²⁸*Stories of Vladimir Nabokov*, xiii.

For the purposes of this investigation, and especially as concerns the stages and types of revising, even more fascinating are Nabokov's reworkings of the English versions prepared by translators other than his own son. In this connection, virtually nothing has been written about Peter A. Pertzoff (1908–67), an early translator of Nabokov's finest Russian stories. Pertzoff was by no means Nabokov's first translator into English. By the time of Nabokov's move to America in 1940, several others, including Gleb Struve and Serge Bertensson, had tried their hand at rendering Nabokov's fiction in English.²⁹ Nabokov himself had already Englished two Russian novels (*Despair* and *Laughter in the Dark*) and composed a novel directly in English (*The Real Life of Sebastian Knight*).

In 1933 the émigré historian Mikhail Karpovich recommended Pertzoff to Nabokov as a skillful translator.³⁰ In 1938, Nabokov and Pertzoff discussed the possibility of translating Nabokov's entire second collection of short stories, *Sogliadatai* ("The Eye"). Pertzoff undertook the translation of two stories, not necessarily Nabokov's finest. The first one was "Skazka" ("A Nursery Tale," 1926), which the translator hoped would be accepted by *Esquire*, where "Kartofel'nyi El'f" ("The Potato Elf," 1924) had been published in December 1939. Nabokov read a draft and approved of it, suggesting that the translator break long sentences into shorter ones. As we know from Nabokov's correspondence with his agent of the time, Altigracia de Jannelli, Pertzoff's translation of "A Nursery Tale," as well as his translation of "Podlets" ("An Affair of Honor," 1927), were rejected by several magazines and never published.³¹ In 1941, still quite optimistic about their collaboration, Nabokov suggested that Pertzoff take on a translation of *The Gift*, giving him the option on the project until 1 December 1941. The proposal was rejected by publishers, and Pertzoff's translation was never consummated.³² The story might have ended right there, had it not been for the fact that between 1941 and 1943 Nabokov and Pertzoff entered a new phase of their professional relationship, a creative collaboration resulting in their having produced remarkable translations of three of Nabokov's finest Russian stories, "Cloud, Castle, Lake," "The Aurelian," and "Vesna v Fial'te" ("Spring in Fialta," 1936).

The first short story which Pertzoff and Nabokov translated and placed in an American magazine was "Cloud, Castle, Lake," printed in *The Atlantic Monthly* in July 1941. It was followed by "The Aurelian," which appeared in *The Atlantic Monthly* in November 1941. In August 1941, Nabokov suggested that Pertzoff begin working on "Spring in

²⁹See Vladimir Sirin, "The Return of Tchorb," trans. Gleb Struve, *This Quarter* 4 (June 1932): 592–602; and "The Potato Elf," trans. S. Bertensson and I. Kosinska, *Esquire* (December 1939): 70–71, 228, 230–36. I am grateful to D. Barton Johnson and Michael Juliar for their help in checking this reference. As one learns from a letter to Nabokov from his early American translator, it took Bertensson six years to place the translation of "The Potato Elf." See Sergei (Serge) Bertensson letter "To Vladimir Nabokov," 25 January 1938, Nabokov Papers, container 8, folder 16.

³⁰Here and hereafter the references are to Nabokov's eight letters and three postcards to Peter A. Pertzoff, Nabokov Papers, container 8, folder 21. In 1964, Pertzoff donated his Nabokov-related materials, including drafts of translations, to the Library of Congress, where he was on the staff of the Library's Cyrillic Bibliographic Project from 1948 until his death in 1967. In addition to the records at the Manuscript Division, I have also consulted Pertzoff's Official Personnel File at the Library of Congress.

³¹See Pertzoff letter "To Altigracia de Jannelli," 13 February 1939, and Vladimir Nabokov letter "To Altigracia de Jannelli," 16 May 1939, both in Nabokov Papers, container 8, folder 16.

³²See, for instance, A. I. Nazarov, "The Gift," reader's report for The Bobbs-Merill Company, *ibid.*

Fialta.” The translation underwent several revisions by Nabokov and was finished by March 1943. *The Atlantic Monthly* rejected the story, claiming that it was too long for them, and in May 1947 the story was printed in *Harper’s Bazaar*, predominantly a high fashion magazine.

As one can see from the surviving manuscripts and the correspondence, the cotranslators followed the same procedure with all the three stories. First, in accordance with Nabokov’s wishes, Pertzoff would prepare a literal translation of the Russian original. Nabokov’s requirements were stated most clearly in a postcard, mailed to Pertzoff on 1 August 1941: «Для меня главное—получить точный и грамотный перевод, который вероятно потом раздраконю» (“The most important thing is to get a precise and competent translation, which I will then probably dragonize” [an alternative translation would be: “subject to draconic scrutiny”—see below on Nabokov’s use of the term]). Indeed, Nabokov would go over Pertzoff’s versions and edit them very thoroughly, in places rewriting up to 80 percent of Pertzoff’s accurate English.

Here are two examples of Nabokov’s radical reworkings of the translation drafts of the story “Spring in Fialta.” At the beginning of the story, the émigré narrator speaks of the evocative name of the fictional Riviera resort:

Я этот городок люблю; потому ли, что во впадине его названия мне слышится сахаристо-сырой запах мелкого, темного, самого мятого из цветов, и не в тон, хотя внятнее звучание Ялты; потому ли, что его сонная весна особенно умащивает душу; не знаю; но как я был рад очнуться в нем, и вот шлепать вверх, навстречу ручьям, без шапки, с мокрой головой, в макинтоше, надетом прямо на рубашку!³³

Pertzoff rendered the sentence as follows:

I love this little town; whether because I hear in the hollow of its name the saccharine damp odor of the tiny, dark, most ruffled of flowers, and the off-key, though intelligible, sound of Yalta; or because its somnolent spring especially anoints the soul; I don’t know; but how I was glad to awaken in it, and to be now splashing uphill to meet the rivulet, hatless, my head wet, in a mackintosh pulled right over my shirt.³⁴

Nabokov crossed out 62 of 78 words in Pertzoff’s sentence (80 percent). After his corrections, broken up in two, the sentence read as:

I am fond of Fialta; I am fond of it because I hear in the hollow of those violaceous syllables the sweet dark dampness of the most ruffled of small flowers, and because the alta-like name of a lovely Crimean town is echoed by its viola; and also because there is something in the very somnolence of its humid Lent that especially anoints one’s soul. So I was happy to be there again, to trudge

³³Nabokov, “Vesna v Fial’te,” *Sovremennye zapiski* 61 (1936): 91–92. See also *Vesna v Fial’te* (New York, 1956), 8.

³⁴“Spring in Fialta,” corrected ts., Nabokov Papers, container 8, folder 20.

uphill in inverse direction to the rivulet of the gutter, hatless, my head wet and my skin already suffused with warmth although I wore only a light mackintosh over my shirt.³⁵

Only two minor changes were introduced in the published version: the word “alto-like,” misspelled by Nabokov in the draft, was corrected, and one conjunction “and” was dropped.

Later in the story, the narrator recalls his first meeting with Nina:

Я познакомился с Ниной очень уже давно, в тысяча девятьсот семнадцатом, должно быть, судя по тем местам, где время износилось.³⁶

Pertzoff produced an apt translation:

I had met Nina a very long time ago, probably in nineteen seventeen, judging by the places where time had grown threadbare.³⁷

Nabokov chose to introduce a cultural reference to prerevolutionary Russian avant-garde theater in place of the political metaphor of time in the Russian original. The sentence made it to print without further emendations:

My introductory scene with Nina had been laid in Russia quite a long time ago, around 1917 I should say, judging by certain left-wing theater rumblings backstage.³⁸

By calling the result of revising the drafts “razdrakonit” in the letter to his bilingual translator, Nabokov simultaneously implicated two of the word’s subterranean meanings. More commonly in Russian, the perfective verb “razdrakonit” (usually no imperfective pair) connotes an act resulting in “having torn something apart.” In Russian, the same verb points to both “drakon” (dragon) and “drakonovskii” (draconian, pertaining to Draco, archon of Athens in 621 BC or the severe code of laws that was established by Draco). In English, “to dragonize” means not only “to turn into the fierce mythological creature,” the dragon, but also “to keep guard over or watch as a dragon.” At the same time, to treat something or someone “draconically” means to treat with extreme severity.³⁹

Might Nabokov’s choice of verb underscore, both literally and palimpsestically, the guardian-author’s concern with rendering his text both adequately and elegantly? Nabokov probably would have agreed with the great Russian translator of Byron, Tatiana Gnedich, who said that “a translation ought to be faithful like a wife and beautiful like a mistress.”⁴⁰

³⁵Ibid. See also *Stories of Vladimir Nabokov*, 413.

³⁶“Vesna v Fial’te,” *Sovremennye zapiski*, 94. See also *Vesna v Fial’te*, 11.

³⁷“Spring in Fialta,” corrected ts., Nabokov Papers.

³⁸Ibid. Compare with *Stories of Vladimir Nabokov*, 415.

³⁹See “Draconic,” “draconically,” “dragon,” “dragonize” in *OED, The Compact Edition of the Oxford English Dictionary* (Oxford, 1988).

⁴⁰On Gnedich as a translator see David Shraer-Petrov, “Otshel’nitsa iz Tsarskogo Sela. Gnedich,” *Druz’ia i teni* (New York, 1989), 270.

Following Nabokov's editing-cum-dragonizing, Pertzoff would prepare a clean typescript, where Nabokov introduced some final changes. For instance, in the typescript of "Cloud, Castle, Lake" he asked Pertzoff to omit references to Tiutchev's programmatic poem "Silentium" (1830s) as well as another poem, "Vchera, v mechtakh obvorozhennykh..." (Yesterday, in the enchanted dreams...). In the Russian, the sentence read as:

Разместились в пустом вагончике сугубо-третьего класса, и Василий Иванович, сев в сторонке и положив в рот мятку, тотчас раскрыл томик Тютчева, которого давно собирался перечесть («Мы слизь. Реченная есть ложь», — и дивное о румяном восклицании); но его попросили отложить книжку и присоединиться ко всей группе.⁴¹

In Pertzoff's original version, the references to Tiutchev's poetry were translated literally and lost their punning luster:

Everyone found a place in an empty car, unmistakably third-class, and Vasiliï Ivanovich, having sat down by himself and put a mint into his mouth, immediately opened a little volume of Tiutchev, whom he had long intended to reread ("We are slime. The spoken is a lie," and the marvelous exclamation about rosiness), but he was asked to put the book aside, and join the whole group.⁴²

Nabokov's corrections mostly addressed the parenthetical references to Tiutchev. This would have been the sentence after the changes he had made in Pertzoff's first draft:

Everyone found a place in an empty car, unmistakably third-class, and Vasiliï Ivanovich, having sat down by himself and put a mint into his mouth, immediately opened a little volume of Tiutchev, whom he had long intended to reread ("Thought uttered is a lie": stuttered, isn't, and that divine one with "the scarlet exclamation" of the dawn), but he was asked to put the book aside, and join the whole group.⁴³

While Nabokov rescued the general thrust of his Russian pun, his pun nonetheless lost much of its sharpness and wit, as well as its laying bare its roots in the Russian literary tradition.⁴⁴ Could it be that by dropping entirely the parenthetical clause, Nabokov admitted to the intranslatability of cultural memory, especially when the original renders it through devices that tend to resist translation?

⁴¹"Ozero, oblako, bashnia," *Russkie zapiski* 2 (1937): 34–35; the story was subsequently retitled "Oblako, ozero, bashnia." See also *Vesna v Fial'te*, 237.

⁴²"Cloud, Castle, Lake," corrected ts., Nabokov Papers, container 8, folder 20.

⁴³"Cloud, Castle, Lake," corrected ts. and ts. with notes, *ibid.*

⁴⁴Omry Ronen has argued that Nabokov's puns exemplify the rebirth of Pushkin's approach to punning, an approach that consists in laying bare the very device that engenders a given pun (the last name of Nabokov's protagonist Pnin, decoded by Ronen as Pun-een, is a characteristic example). See "Dva poliusa paronomazii," *Russian Verse Theory: Proceedings of the International Conference at Los Angeles, October 1987* (Columbus, 1989), 1–9.

Despite a very high number of corrections and emendations, Nabokov was very pleased with Pertzoff's work and hoped to continue their collaboration, which was beginning to turn into a friendship after Nabokov had visited Pertzoff in Ithaca in 1944. No correspondence with Pertzoff past 1944 seems to have survived among Nabokov's papers, and the reasons for the termination of their collaboration remain to be uncovered.

Nabokov's method of "dragonizing" is illustrated even more amply in his reworking of Pertzoff's literal version of "Cloud, Castle, Lake." The story deals with a failed attempt by its main character, a Russian intelligent Vasiliy Ivanovich, to escape the oppressive world of Nazi Germany, enter the otherworld through an opening in the landscape, and stay therein for eternity. The English translation of the story appeared in 1941 and contained several alterations that Nabokov must have made to enhance the anti-Fascist message.

In his draft of the translation—made from the text published in *Russkie zapiski*—Pertzoff rendered the tourist song literally, producing a rendition that, although devoid of prosodic features, corresponded closely to the Russian original:

Распрости́сь с пусто́й трево́гой,
палку́ толсто́ю возьми́
и шага́й большо́й доро́гой
вместе́ с до́брыми́ лю́дьми.

Say farewell to empty fears,
Take a walking stick,
And march along the highway
With your fellow-men.

По холма́м страны́ родимо́й
вместе́ с до́брыми́ лю́дьми,
без трево́ги нелю́димо́й,
без сомне́ний, чорт возьми́.

In the hills of your country
With your fellow-men,
Without empty fears
Without doubts, the devil take it.

Киломе́тр за киломе́тром
Вместе́ с солнцем, вместе́ с ветром,
вместе́ с до́брыми́ лю́дьми.

Mile after mile,
With the sun, with the wind.
With your fellow-men.⁴⁵

Nabokov was not satisfied with Pertzoff's job and retranslated the song, restoring the original's meter (trochaic tetrameter, T4) but also making radical changes. The (anti)lyrics of the German tourist song were toned up from politically neutral and signifying poshlost' and philistinism to encoding Nazi slogans:

Stop that worrying and moping,
take a knotted stick and rise,
come a-tramping in the open
with the good, the hearty guys!

Tramp your country's grass and stubble,
With the good, the hearty guys,
Kill the hermit and his trouble
And to hell with doubts and sighs!"

⁴⁵Vladimir Nabokov, "Cloud, Castle, Lake," corrected ts., Nabokov Papers; Nabokov, "Ozero, oblako, bashnia," *Russkie zapiski*, 36–37.

One mile, two miles, five and twenty,
 sunny skies and wind in plenty...
 Come a-tramping with the guys!⁴⁶

The second example illustrates Nabokov's quest to render in translation the landmark devices of his poetics of prose. It has been argued elsewhere that Nabokov employs prosodic features, and more specifically, metrical markedness, to signal to the reader the presence of metaphysical openings in the texts of his Russian fiction.⁴⁷ What can be a better test of the deliberateness of the authorial design than an authorized translation? Indeed, in several crucial instances in the original Russian text of "Cloud, Castle, Lake," Nabokov highlights his message by rendering it in ternary meters, as in the following three examples: «и с тою чужою женой» (in reference to the idealized object of the protagonist's unrequited love); «перистые облака, вроде небесных борзых» (describing clouds—the markers of the otherworld in the story); «детство героя» (emphasizing the centrality of memory and nostalgia in communicating with the otherworld).⁴⁸ In the manuscripts of the Russian texts, in most cases, metricized units of prose represent a later stage of editing and revising.⁴⁹ In the rough draft of the English translation, Nabokov corrected Pertzoff's literal and prosody-free clauses to ternary units of English prose. Most likely, Pertzoff was partly aware of Nabokov's use of prosodic markedness, either through his own experience of reading the stories closely in preparation for translating them, or in accordance with Nabokov's instructions, possibly communicated to him orally.⁵⁰ In several instances, Pertzoff tried to render Nabokov's ternary clauses in English. Nabokov accepted Pertzoff's "toward something or someone" as an equivalent for «к чему-то, к кому-то». He also agreed with Pertzoff's "odor of jasmine and hay," a translation of «пахло жасмином и сеном». At the same time, he corrected Pertzoff's "with that other man's wife" to extend the anapaestic beat of the English for an extra foot: "with that lady, another man's wife" (An2 to An3). He also changed Pertzoff's ternary albeit heavy-handed "the childhood of hero" to the more elegant and still ternary "the hero's child-

⁴⁶Nabokov, "Cloud, Castle, Lake," Nabokov Papers. See also *Atlantic Monthly* 167 (June 1941): 739. Note that in *The Atlantic Monthly* version, the song's last stanza still had three lines as in the Russian original. When preparing the story for the 1958 collection, *Nabokov's Dozen*, Nabokov historicized further the context of "Cloud, Castle, Lake," which was now set in a concrete time, "1936 or 37." He also rewrote the last stanza of the song, now a perfect quatrain, and included a characteristic image of Nazi youths marching: "In a paradise of heather/ Where the field mouse screams and dies,/ Let us march and sweat together/ With the steel-and-leather guys!" (*Stories of Vladimir Nabokov*, 433). In the 1956 Russian version, published in *Vesna v Fial'ke*, Nabokov added a fourth verse to make the last stanza a perfect quatrain but did not enhance the anti-Fascist message as he did in the English text.

⁴⁷By metrical markedness I mean that in contrast to merely employing metricized or rhythmized prose throughout the text as did Andrei Belyi, Nabokov deliberately and discriminately gives certain crucial sentences or phrases metrical shapes thereby marking and distinguishing them from the rest of the prose text (Shrayer, *World of Nabokov's Stories*, chap. 1).

⁴⁸"Ozero, oblako, bashnia" 34, 36, 36. See also *Vesna v Fial'ke*, 236, 239, 239.

⁴⁹As one learns from the first draft of the story, Nabokov arrived at the final versions of metricized prose gradually, having tried and crossed out more than one transitional variant ("Ozero, oblako, bashnia," ms., Nabokov Papers, container 7, folder r).

⁵⁰Nabokov and Pertzoff probably saw each other in New York as well as spoke on the telephone at the end of 1940 (letter "To Peter A. Pertzoff," 11 November 1940, Nabokov Papers, container 8, folder 21).

hood.” Similarly, Nabokov altered Pertzoff’s inventive “fleecy clouds, like heavenly borzois” to the pyrotechnically perfect “whispy clouds—greyhounds of heaven.”

And here is an even more telling illustration of Nabokov’s poetics of editing. At the culmination of “Cloud, Castle, Lake,” Vasilii Ivanovich encounters an otherworldly vista, a locus of perfect memories and nostalgic hopes, and decides to stay forever in the pseudomedieval tower. In the cloud/castle/lake episode, the narrator’s recognition of the poeticity of the otherworldly landscape precedes a line that signifies the castle, the central part of this landscape:

На той стороне, на холме, густо облепленном древесной зеленью (которая тем поэтичнее, чем темнее), *высилась прямо из дактиля в дактиль* старинная черная башня.⁵¹

Pertzoff’s draft reads:

On the other side, on a hill thickly covered with verdure (which was darkest where most poetic) *there rose straight from dactyl to dactyl* an ancient black tower.

Nabokov corrected it in keeping with his signature device in the Russian:

On the other side, on a hill thickly covered with verdure (and the darker the verdure, the more poetic it is) *towered arising from dactyl to dactyl* an ancient black castle.

Except for the addition of two commas around the participial clause, the sentence went to print otherwise unchanged.⁵² The italicized clause, dactylic both in Russian and English, simultaneously encodes three dimensions—the metric, the iconic, and the transcendental. Dactyl, a ternary meter, in addition to its being *sheer verse* (dimension one) also represents the *physical space*, the *architecture of the otherworld’s opening* (dimension two) by lending itself to a graphical depiction that echoes the structure of a tower wall with its crenellations:

tow\ered_____a\ri\sing_____from\dac\tyl_____to\dac\tyl....

Because the opening to the otherworld is a transitional and privileged zone, a *boundary between the physical and the metaphysical*, this adds a transcendental component (dimension three) to the triple signification of the dactylic line.⁵³ Thus in both the Russian original and the “dragonized” English translation, the complex *signification of the meta-*

⁵¹“Ozero, oblako, bashnia” 39 (emphasis added). See also *Vesna v Fial’te*, 243.

⁵²“Cloud, Castle, Lake” 740. See also *Stories of Vladimir Nabokov*, 435.

⁵³The opening to the otherworld is glimpsed in the text as early as the story’s title, “Oblako, ozero, bashnia”; ób-la-ko-ó-ze-ro-básh-nia is a truncated dactylic (D3) line.

physical via the metaliterary suggests the presence of a major textual opening, coinciding with the culmination of the story.

In conclusion, consider a comment Nabokov made in a 1966 interview: “The greatest happiness I experience in composing is when I feel I cannot understand, or rather catch myself not understanding ... how or why that image or structural move or exact formulation of phrase has just come to me.”⁵⁴ The drafts of Nabokov’s Russian stories reveal a relatively small number of major structural changes and revisions. Do Nabokov’s literary practices corroborate his neo-Romantic model of conceiving of a work and composing by inspiration, from the “fiery rapture” of the initial idea to its “cool recapture” during the act of writing? If indeed for Nabokov the composition of a first draft amounted to a reconstructive process of recapturing the initial rapturous thrill of having discovered the story in its would-be spatial form, this could explain why the majority of Nabokov’s revisions were of a stylistic, rather than of a structural sort.⁵⁵ As a pattern, once a first draft of a story has been penned down, the rest of the work—linguistic revision and merciless cutting—was aimed at achieving an absolute perfection of verbal art. In those cases where we do see major structural changes at the stage of a rough draft’s transformation into a final version, they bespeak turning points and/or synthetic moments in the dynamic of Nabokov’s artistic growth.

Nabokov’s editing of the translations of his three finest stories into English in the 1940s further testifies to the centrality of verbal perfecting in his art. Nabokov’s English diamonds are impeccably cut and polished. “How strange should a text be allowed to sound, at least initially, in a target language?” Caryl Emerson recently asked in her closing remarks at a forum on literary translation. And then she posited an even more provocative question: “Do translations have authorial ‘rights’?”⁵⁶ What Nabokov needed from Peter A. Pertzoff, his early translator, was the English-language equivalent of a Russian first draft. This enabled Nabokov to take over the translation at a post-recapture stage of working on a story, when the cool *vdokhnovenie*—to extend Nabokov’s image—had surrendered her tasks to a self-conscious editor, both an adversary of “strangeness” and a zealous advocate of “authorial rights.” Having arrived at a point in the creative continuum which he knew so well from having composed the original, Nabokov would then magically and laboriously transform a roughly cut diamond into the kind of final version which impelled the editor of *The Atlantic Monthly* in the 1940s, Edward Weeks, to telephone Nabokov after having read the translation of “Cloud, Castle, Lake”: “We are enchanted, this is genius, this is what we have been looking for, we want to print it at once.”⁵⁷

In a recent encyclopaedic overview of Nabokov’s manuscripts, Brian Boyd cautioned petulant Nabokov scholars against working with unpublished manuscripts and correspon-

⁵⁴*Strong Opinions*, 69.

⁵⁵I use the term “spatial form” in keeping with the ideas of Joseph Frank, as expressed in the most complete form in his *The Idea of Spatial Form* (New Brunswick, 1991).

⁵⁶Caryl Emerson, “Perevodimost’,” *Slavic and East European Journal* 38:1 (1994): 88. Emerson is not referring here to nuances of intellectual property law.

⁵⁷Letter “To Peter A. Pertzoff,” on Wellesley College stationery, n.d. [March 1941], Nabokov Papers, container 8, folder 21.

dence: "The most urgent task at present seems not to consult the Library of Congress's mainly fair copy of texts or even to study juvenilia or pore through the notes and tens of thousands of pages of correspondence at the New York Public Library in the hope of finding a fact or two to clinch an argument, but to annotate texts already published."⁵⁸ Taking exception to Boyd's pronouncement, I see the future of Nabokov studies in archival and manuscript research. Having just navigated through the master's centennial, students of Nabokov have only seen the tip of the iceberg.

⁵⁸Boyd, "Manuscripts," 345.