

NABOKOV'S SEXOGRAPHY

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In 1907, in an essay entitled 'The Metaphysics of Sex and Love', Nikolaj Berdjaev decried the treatment of sexual intimacy in contemporary art and philosophy:

Отвратительная ложь культуры, ныне ставшая нестерпимой: о самом важном, глубоко нас затрагивающем, приказано молчать, обо всем слишком интимном не принято говорить; раскрыть свою душу, обнаружить в ней то, чем живет она, считается неприличным, почти скандальным.

The repugnant lie of culture has now become unbearable: one is ordered to be silent about that which is most important, that which touches us in the deepest sense; opening one's soul, revealing from within that by which one's soul lives is considered indecent, almost scandalous.¹

Berdjaev was paraphrasing and critiquing a programmatic poem by Fedor Tjutčev. In 'Silentium' (1830s), Tjutčev postulated two main principles. The first was the impossibility of communicating to the other one's intimate thoughts and feelings, for any attempt to do so inevitably resulted in miscommunication:

Как сердцу высказать себя?
Другому как понять тебя?
Поймет ли он, чем ты живешь?
Мысль изреченная есть ложь.

How can a heart expression find?
 How should another know your mind?
 Will he discern what quickens you?
 A thought once uttered is untrue.²

The second principle posited that one's soul was a private other world – the only dimension where one can communicate to satisfaction:

Лишь жить в себе самом умей –
 Есть целый мир в душе твоей
 Таинственно-волшебных дум;
 Их оглушит наружный шум,
 Дневные разгонят лучи, –
 Внимай их пенью – и молчи!..

Live in your inner self alone
 within your soul a world has grown,
 the magic of veiled thoughts that might
 be blinded by the outer light,
 drowned in the noise of day, unheard....,
 take in their song and speak no word.³

The English translations I have just quoted are Vladimir Nabokov's own, rendered and published in America in the 1940s. This was Nabokov's way of paying tribute to Tjutčev's post-Romantic poem, the stigmata of which meant a great deal to Nabokov during his Russian years. Nabokov avoided describing the intimate experience of sex in his fictions featuring Russian protagonists, from Ganin in *Mašen'ka* (*Mary*, 1926) to Godunov-Čerdynceev in *Dar* (*The Gift*, 1937-1938). In those cases where he attempted to write novels of sexual obsession, the characters and settings were Western, and, I would argue, the results were much less satisfactory than in his "Russian" Russian novels. To cite Julian W. Connolly's recent encyclopaedic summation, "*King, Queen, Knave* [*Korol', dama, valet*, 1928] is not one of Nabokov's major novels"; *Kamera obskural/Laughter in the Dark* (1933/1936) has elicited a similar critical judgment.⁴ As for *Volšebnik* (*The Enchanter*, 1939; publ. 1986) – to be considered later alongside with the other flammables for the *Lolita* explosion (1955) – Nabokov "was not pleased with the thing" originally, remarking that "the little girl wasn't alive".⁵

The problem of sex in Nabokov's Russian works is threefold.⁶ It entails three dimensions which I will call the linguistic, the meta-aesthetic, and the metaphysical. Before exploring these three dimensions in detail, it might be useful to sketch a brief list of sexual motifs and imagery in Nabokov's Russian works. *Kamera obskura* tops the list of sexual scenes and imagery, while *The Gift* occupies the very last place on the list with but one disguised

allusion. In Nabokov's first novel, *Mary*, Ganin ponders his girlfriend's habits in bed – a brief unsentimental digression; elsewhere, Ganin recalls a prelude to lovemaking with his beloved Mary:

– Я твоя, – сказала она. – Делай со мной, что хочешь. Молча, с бьющимся сердцем, он наклонился над ней, забродил руками по ее мягким, холодноватым ногам. Но в парке были странные шорохи, [...] Машенька лежала слишком покорно, слишком неподвижно.

"I am yours," she said, "do what you like with me." In silence, his heart thumping, he leaned over her, running his hands along her soft, cool legs. But the public park was alive with odd rustling sounds [...] Mary lay there too submissive, too still.⁷

The *innamorati* never consummate their passion in the novel. In *King, Queen, Knave* one finds a passing reference to a condom (an example of Nabokovian making strange: a child picks up from the pavement "something resembling a pacifier, yellow and transparent"); in this presumed sexual thriller, only two brief paragraphs speak of lovemaking. In *Zaščita Lužina* (*The Defense*, 1929-1930), the reader learns that Lužin's impresario, Valentinov, develops a theory that chess genius is a refraction of sexual desire. Consequently, Valentinov tries to maintain his ward's "chaste moroseness" ("celomudrennaja sumračnost").⁸ Later in the novel, Lužin's mother-in-law envisions Lužin as a sexual pervert, while in actuality there was no sex between Lužin and his wife, and Nabokov had no sex scenes to omit. In *Podvig* (*Glory*, 1931-1932), Martyn (Martin) finds it increasingly difficult to cope with his own chastity; in a brief scene he loses his virginity in the arms of another man's wife, an amateur poet, Alla. Of his two subsequent sexual experiences in the novel, one is suppressed:

[Мартын] глядел с любовью на ее голые детские плечи [about a young English woman Martin meets in London], на стриженую русую голову и был совершенно счастлив. [!gap in the text!] Рано утром, пока он мирно спал, она быстро оделась и ушла, выкрав у него из бумажника десять фунтов. "Утро после дебоша", – с улыбкой подумал Мартын...

[Martin] gazed lovingly at her bare, childish shoulders and blond bob, and felt completely happy. [!gap in the text!] Early next morning, as he slept, she dressed quickly and left, stealing ten pounds from his billfold. "Morning after the orgy," thought Martin with a smile [...].⁹

Martin's affair with a waitress in Cambridge also lacks anatomical descriptions. Finally, Martin loves Sonja chastely, having no "wicked intentions" and wishing only to "lie close to her and keep kissing her cheek".¹⁰

The protagonist of *Sogljadataj* (*The Eye*, 1930) alludes to having had mechanical sex with both Matilda and her predecessor, a seamstress. The protagonist imparts his erotic dreams to the reader, while also “eyeing” the German maid as she masturbates behind closed doors:

[...] смешно подумать, до каких развратных и игривых ухищрений доходила эта скромная девица – Гретхен или Гильда, не помню, – когда дверь была заперта на ключ, и почти голая лампочка на висящем шнуре озаряла фотографию молодца в тирольской шляпе и яблоко с барского стола.

It is amusing to think what depraved devices of love play this modest-looking girl – named Gretchen or Hilda, I do not remember which – would think up when the door was locked and the practically naked light bulb [...] illumined the photograph of her fiancé [...] and an apple from the masters’ table.¹¹

The number, directness, and intensity of sex scenes in *Kamera obskura* are equal to none in the Russian works, including a long passage where Krečmar (Albinus in *Laughter in the Dark*) negotiates between his wife’s “chill of innocence” (“cholodnaja povoloka nevinnosti”) and Magda’s “prirodnaja otzyvčivost’” (lit.: natural responsiveness).¹² The dystopian world of *Priglasenie na kazn’* (*Invitation to a Beheading*, 1935-1936) is not entirely free of sexuality. Cincinnatus C. is haunted by his wife’s habitual infidelities: at the dinner table, Cincinnatus would be mortally afraid to bend down, and chance:

[...] случайно под столом не увидеть нижней части чудовища, верхняя часть которого, вполне благообразная, представляет собою молодую женщину и молодого мужчину, видных по пояс за столом, спокойно питающихся и болтающих, – а нижняя часть это – четырехногое нечто, свивающееся, бешеное.

[...] to see the nether half of that monster whose upper half was quite presentable, having the appearance of a young woman and a young man visible down to the waist at table, peacefully feeding and chatting; and whose nether half was a writhing, raging quadruped.¹³

Cincinnatus’s executioner, Mr. Pierre, torments his cellmate with pseudo-philosophical meanderings on the subject of sexual callisthenics. In *The Enchanter*, the final scene lingers on the details of the Central-European nympholept’s autoerotic sorcery over the naked body of the sleeping nymphet; the girl awakes, “looking wild-eyed at his rearing nudity”, and “the film of life had burst”.¹⁴

Nabokov’s Russian short stories yield very little on the subject of sex. In ‘Vozvraščenie Čorba’ (‘The Return of Chorb’, 1929), Chorb recalls his

chaste wedding night: "That night he had kissed her once – on the hollow of the throat – that had been all in the way of lovemaking."¹⁵ The English circus dwarf, Fred Dobson, manages to make love to the wife of his protector, the liminal conjurer Shock in the story 'Kartofel'nyj el'f' ('The Potato Elf', 1929). Nabokov must have found this perverse scene too hard to imagine, and omitted the sex entirely: "And all at once, in some absurd and intoxicating way, everything came in motion."¹⁶ Finally, mention should be made of Nabokov's Russian poem 'Lilit' ('Lilith', 1929; publ. 1970), arguably the most explicit rendition of sexual intercourse in his Russian works.

To return to my earlier definition of three dimensions in Nabokov's treatment of sex and sexuality, the linguistic dimension refers to his perilous attempts to seek out the perfect Russian words to describe sexuality and, specifically, sexual intercourse. One rereads the stereoscopic opening of *The Gift* with its linguistic pyrotechnics, and one wonders why Nabokov found himself short of words when writing about sex. In his Russian works, Nabokov consistently euphemizes sexual imagery, and frequently does so by resorting to sublime Romantic diction. A few examples will suffice. Since Russian does not have a neutral equivalent for both the verb "to make love" and the noun "lovemaking", Nabokov had to make due with "ljubov'" (love), as in this description of Martin's affair with a waitress: "ee ljubov' okazalas' burnoj, nelovkoj, derevenskoj" ("she made love stormily, clumsily, rustically").¹⁷ Marfin'ka, Cincinnatus's wife in *Invitation to a Beheading*, employs the pronoun "ëto" (it) contextually in place of "make love"; Cincinnatus, a timid *intelligent*, refers to sexual intercourse as "v izvestnuju minutu" (at a certain moment).¹⁸ On a loftier note, in *King, Queen, Knave, The Defense, Glory*, and *The Enchanter*, orgasm is disguised as "sladost'" (sweetness), "ščast'e" (happiness), and "blaženstvo" (bliss). Additionally, the Enchanter's penis is disguised as a "volšebnyj žezl'" (magic wand).¹⁹ The poem 'Lilith' occupies a special place in Nabokov's sexual vocabulary. It creates a detailed list of substitutions, including "plamja" (flame) and "bulava" (mace), both referring to an "erect penis", "vostorg" (rapture), here standing for "approaching climax", and "blaženstvo" (bliss), connoting "orgasm".²⁰

Ironically, Nabokov signals his own bewilderment over the old-fashioned and stilted usage in sexual scenes. Martin dreams of new adventures over a volume of Maupassant: "mustachioed Bel Ami, in a stand-up collar, was shown undressing with a lady's maid's skill a coy, broad-chested woman."²¹ Nabokov's native – classical Russian – tradition lacked the experience of the literary treatment of the human body and sex that Western authors as Maupassant and Flaubert had revolutionized in the nineteenth century. Nabokov continues to write with the sexual reticence of his Russian master, Anton Čechov, who links the Russian classics and moderns.²² In 'Dama s sobačkoj' ('Lady with a Lap Dog', 1899), Čechov's narrator ceases to be omniscient while Gurov and Anna make love in her hotel room; he

regains his capacity for diegetic ubiquity – his access to the bedroom – only when the sex is over, and Gurov devours a watermelon to the accompaniment of Anna's tears of self-punishment. The chastity of Nabokov's Russian characters – especially as compared to the Western inhabitants of his Russian novels – was one of the writer's tributes to his native tradition as he gradually un-Russianed himself in exile. Nabokov was not alone in his pains over reconciling the chastity of classical Russian literature with his covert modernist leanings.²³ Another covert modernist – Nabokov's senior contemporary, fellow-exile, and subsequently his rival, Ivan Bunin – also agonized over the linguistic dilemma of writing sex. Here is a quote from Bunin's diary entry for February 3, 1941 – a time when he was working on his last testament, the collection of love stories *Temnye allei* (*Dark Avenues*, 1943, 1946):

То дивное, несказанно-прекрасное, нечто совершенно особенное во всем земном, что есть тело женщины, никогда не написано никем. Да и не только тело. Надо, надо попытаться. Пытался – выходит гадость, пошлость. Надо найти какие-то другие слова.

That miraculous, something beautiful beyond words, entirely matchless in all of earthly experience, which is the female body has never been written by anyone. And not only the body. I have tried – it comes out vulgar. I need to find some other words.²⁴

Bunin's labors are echoed in the words of Berdjaev, in a late essay, 'Thoughts about Eros' (1949): "Love has been so distorted, so profaned and vulgarized [opošlena] in the corrupt human living, that it has become nearly impossible to pronounce the words of love; one must find new words [nužno najti novye slova]".²⁵

The meta-aesthetic dimension of Nabokov's depiction of sex consists in the congruity in his descriptions of the sexual act and the act of artistic creation (from the first gleaming of inspiration/arousal to the arrival of the final product). A brief tour of Nabokov's self-referential statements, such as his seminal lecture 'The Art of Literature and Commonsense' (1941; publ. 1980), suggests that Nabokov tends to depict the creative act and the sexual act in virtually identical, neo-Romantic terms:

The Russian language which otherwise is comparatively poor in abstract terms, supplies definitions for two types of inspiration, *vostorg* and *vdokhnovenie*, which can be paraphrased as "rapture" and "re-capture". The difference between them is mainly of a climatic kind, the first being hot and brief, the second cool and sustained. The kind alluded to up to now is the pure flame [cf. "plamja" = "erect penis" in 'Lilith'] 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.²⁶

In *King, Queen, Knave*, Nabokov thus relates Franz's sexual dream about Martha:

Он теперь близко видел ее блестящие губы, вздувающуюся от смеха шею, – и заторопился, чувствуя, как нарастает в нем нестерпимая сладость; и он уже почти прикоснулся к ней, но вдруг не сдержал вскипевшего блаженства.

Now he saw quite closely her glossy lips, her neck swelling with glee, and he too began to hurry [...] feeling an unbearable sweetness welling up within him; he was about to clasp her hips but suddenly could no longer contain his boiling ecstasy.²⁷

In 'Lilith', the protagonist describes his approaching orgasm as: "uže vostorg v rastuščem zude / neopisuemyj skvozil" (lit.: "now an unutterable rapture / stirred in the ascending itch"). A few lines below, the love-making is interrupted "na polputi / k blaženstvu" (lit.: "at half the distance / to bliss").²⁸ It is certainly true that in both cases, that of literary creation and of sex, Nabokov opts for the loftiest words that describe the highest imaginable degree of pleasure, and the pool of synonyms is much more limited in Russian than in English. However, I hold that Nabokov's meta-aesthetics of sex are deliberate, and they are linked with the third dimension of this discussion, the metaphysical side of Nabokov's sexual themes and gleams.

The metaphysical dimension pertains to Nabokov's suggestive depictions of sex as one of the ways through which a privileged individual gains access to the otherworld.²⁹ From the mid 1920s onward, Nabokov created in his fictions various models of what the otherworld might be like. He shared his otherworldly vision with privileged protagonists ("representatives" in Nabokov's terms: Martin; Cincinnatus C.; Vasilij Ivanovič in 'Oblako, ozero, bašnja' ['Cloud, Castle, Lake', 1937]; Godunov-Čerdynceev and others). In *Nabokov's Otherworld*, Vladimir E. Alexandrov proposed that one regard Nabokov's metaphysics, ethics, and aesthetics "as names for a single continuum of beliefs, not for separate categories of Nabokov's interests". It follows that "any work, or any aspect of a work, needs to be located in terms of metaphysical, ethical, and aesthetic criteria; and, conversely, any single criterion can be read in terms of the other two".³⁰ In Nabokov's discursive statements, primarily those in 'The Art of Literature and Commonsense' and *Speak, Memory* (1966), artistic discoveries – of words and of butterflies, respectively, – are treated ostensibly as otherworldly states of being. Likewise, Nabokov increasingly viewed sexual experiences in terms strikingly

similar to the ones Vladimir Solov'ev described in 'The Meaning of Love' (1903) as:

[...] проблески не земного блаженства, то веяние нездешней радости, которыми сопровождается любовь, даже несовершенная, и которые делают ее, даже несовершенную, величайшим наслаждением людей и богов – *hominum divumque voluptas*.

[...] glimpses of unearthly bliss, the breath of otherworldly joy that accompanies love, however imperfect, and that makes this imperfect love the greatest pleasure of humans and gods.³¹

In Nabokov's Russian works, one observes a growing conflict between the entomologist-morphologist's naturalistic imperative to anatomize the sexual subject (just as any other fictional subject or butterfly species), and the metaphysician's avoidance of trivializing that which ceases definition, the unutterable, the ineffable "main secret".

How does Nabokov gesture the metaphysical nature of sex and sexuality? In some cases, he employs traditional Biblical mythopoetics to convey sexual sensations. Martha speaks of sex with Franz (*King, Queen, Knave*) as having been "paradise" ("это был рай").³² Alla (*Glory*) calls swift extra-marital sex with Martin taking "a peek into paradise" ("zagljanut' v raj").³³ The setting of 'Lilith' is "Paradise" ("рай"), a conflation of Graeco-Roman and Biblical imagery, which turns into a "Hell" ("ад") by the end of the poem. Upon hearing Magda's name for the first time, Gorn comments: "Aha, Magdalena," thereby appropriating the Biblical image of the Holy Whore.³⁴ When Krečmar's brother-in-law comes to rescue him from a *camera obscura*, Robert Gorn is described as standing naked and covering his private parts, like "Adam after the Fall".³⁵ In *The Enchanter*, the main character speaks of the approaching orgasm this way: "life was emancipated and reduced to the simplicity of paradise [do raja]".³⁶

In Nabokov's Russian works, Western characters and some secondary Russian characters are incapable of conceiving of a *sui generis* otherworld, and Nabokov shows that they must rely on metaphors and metonymies of religious and fairy-tale mythopoetics.³⁷ Conversely, Nabokov's privileged Russian protagonists repudiate metaphysical stereotypes and clichés. Nabokov's ultimate solution to the problem of depicting the sexual experiences of his representatives is silence, achieved through omissions and gaps. Devices of silence are consistent with Nabokov's later discursive and poetic statements about the otherworld, such as the admission in 1942 of "tajna" (main secret): "that main secret tra-tá-ta tra-tá-ta tra-tá – / and I must not be overexplicit".³⁸ The sexual silences are especially manifest in *Invitation to a Beheading* and *The Gift*. In 'Spring in Fialta' (1936), written as a breather

from *The Gift*, Nabokov rehearsed narrative and linguistic solutions for the problem of the incommunicability of love, and of sex as concomitant with love. The narrator, Victor (Vasen'ka in the Russian version), is silent the only time in the story he and Nina make love:

“Фердинанд фехтовать уехал”, – сказала она непринужденно, и посмотрев на нижнюю часть моего лица, и про себя что-то быстро обдумав (любовная сообразительность была у нее бесподобна), повернулась и меня повела, виляя на тонких лодыжках, по голубому бобрику, и на стуле у двери ее номера стоял вынесенный поднос с остатками первого завтрака, следами меда на ноже и множеством крошек на сером фарфоре посуды [...] и от нашего сквозняка всосался и застрял волан белыми далиями вышитой кисеи промеж оживших половинок дверного окна, выходившего на узенький чугунный балкон, а лишь тогда, когда мы заперлись, они с блаженным выдохом опустили складку занавески [slight erotic hint and gap in the text!], а немного позже я шагнул на этот балкончик, и пахло с утренней пустой и пасмурной улицы сиреневой сизостью, бензином, осенним кленовым листом [...]

“Ferdinand has gone fencing,” she said conversationally; [...] [Nina] turned and rapidly swaying on slender ankles led me along the sea-blue carpeted passage. A chair at the door of her room supported a tray with the remains of breakfast [...] and because of our sudden draft a wave of muslin embroidered with white dahlias got sucked in, with a shudder and knock, between the responsive halves of the French window, and only when the door had been locked did they let go that curtain with something like a blissful sigh; [slight erotic hint and gap in the text!] and a little later I stepped out on the diminutive cast-iron balcony beyond to inhale a combined smell of dry maple leaves and gasoline [...].³⁹

As their entire relationship is based on a code of silences about the most intimate experiences, Nina must die after Victor alludes to a prospect of their being joined in a bourgeois marriage:

[...] я подумал о том, что некогда тут была жизнь, семья вкушала по вечерам прохладу, неумелые дети при свете лампы раскрашивали картинки. Мы стояли, как будто слушая что-то; Нина, стоявшая выше, положила руку ко мне на плечо, улыбаясь и осторожно, так чтобы не разбить улыбки, целуя меня.

I reflected that formerly there had been life here, a family had enjoyed the coolness at nightfall, clumsy children had colored pictures by the light of a lamp... We lingered there as if listening to something; Nina,

who stood on higher ground, put a hand on my shoulder and smiled,
and carefully, so as not to crumple her smile, kissed me.⁴⁰

Victor violates the code that exists between him and Nina, the code that is best formulated in William Blake's poem, written in 1793:

Never seek to tell thy love
Love that never told can be;
For the gentle wind does move
Silently, invisibly.⁴¹

Victor confesses his love: "Look here – what if I love you?" Nina's silent response, a "quick, queer, almost ugly expression", would later reverberate in the words of Ivan Bunin's heroine in 'Natali' (1941), a remarkable short story from *Dark Avenues*: "how could I, your secret wife, become your open mistress in the eyes of the world?"⁴²

In *The Gift*, the reticence about intimacy is taken to the extreme form. Nabokov's narrative concludes on the night when Nabokov's most deliberate novelistic *alter ego*, Fedor Godunov-Čerdyncev, and his beloved Zina are presumably to become sexually intimate. When Zina asks Fedor whether he loves her, he is so fearful of vulgarizing the unutterable that he gives her a circumspect answer: "What I am saying is in fact a kind of declaration of love."⁴³ Fedor's wishful intimation alludes to the imminent love-making: "Neuželi segodnja, neuželi sečas? Gruz i ugroza sčast'ja" ("Will it really happen tonight? Will it really happen now? The weight and the threat of bliss").⁴⁴ The novel ends on an open note of imminent, albeit unconsummated, happiness.

Nabokov sought closure on the subject of writing about sexual intimacy in his first English-language novel, *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight* (written in France in 1939; publ. USA 1941). In his analytical commentary, the transitional Russian narrator V. illustrates his points with quotes from the fictions by the half-Russian, half-English Sebastian:

Naturally, I cannot touch upon the intimate side of their relationship, firstly, because it would be ridiculous to discuss what no one can definitely assert, and secondly because the very sound of the word "sex" with its hissing vulgarity and the "ks, ks" catcall at the end, seems so inane to me that I cannot help doubting whether there *is* any real idea behind the word. Indeed, I believe that granting "sex" a special situation when tackling a human problem, or worse still, letting the "sexual idea", if such a thing exists, pervade and "explain" all the rest is a grave error of reasoning. "The breaking of a wave cannot explain the whole sea, from its moon to its serpent; but a pool in the cup of a rock

and the diamond-rippled road to Cathay are both water" (*The Back of the Moon*).⁴⁵

Both V. in his commentary and Sebastian in his life and art regard the physical aspects of sexuality as a surface expression of the metaphysical ones. Such an understanding results in a unique idea of sexual harmony:

Physical love is but another way of saying the same thing and not a special sexophone note, which once heard is echoed in every other region of the soul (*Lost Property*, p. 82).

All things belong to the same order of things, for such is the oneness of human perception, the oneness of individuality, the oneness of matter, whatever matter may be. The only real number is one, the rest are mere repetition. (p. 83)

Had I even known from some reliable source that Clare was not quite up to the standards of Sebastian's love-making I would still never dream of selecting this dissatisfaction as the reason for his general feverishness and nervousness. But being dissatisfied with things in general, he might have been dissatisfied with the color of his romance too.⁴⁶

For Nabokov's privileged protagonists in the Russian works, the issue of sexual harmony has its roots in the literature and philosophy of the Silver Age.⁴⁷ In Chapter 10 of *Speak, Memory*, Nabokov reminisced about the problematics of his sexual rearing – a rare admission given Nabokov's ostentatious privacy:

Exhausted by our adventures in the chaparral, we lay on the grass and discussed women. Our innocence seems to me now almost monstrous [...] The slums of sex were unknown to us. Had we ever happened to hear about two normal lads idiotically masturbating in each other's presence (as described so sympathetically, with all the smells, in modern American novels), the mere notion of such act would have seemed to us as comic and impossible as sleeping with an amelus. Our ideal was Queen Guinevere, Isolda, a not quite merciless *belle dame* [one must not overlook the reference to John Keats's 1819 emblematic poem 'La Belle Dame sans Merci' as well as to the Symbolist cult of *Prekrasnaja Dama*, the Beautiful Lady], another man's wife, proud and docile, fashionable and fast, with slim ankles and narrow hands. The little girls in neat socks and pumps whom we and other little boys used to meet at dancing lessons [...] belonged, those nymphets [N.B.], to another class of creatures than the adolescent belles and large-hatted vamps for whom we actually yearned.⁴⁸

Nabokov's memoirs here betray two tensions. The first is between the meta-physical and the physical, between a not quite earthly ideal of femininity and an adolescent's exploding sexuality – both viewed by the fifty-year-old Nabokov. The second tension, the more subtle one, is between the dim sexual prospects of a bourgeois marriage and the luring sexual charms of free love and adultery. Both tensions pertain to the problem of sexual harmony, and both were addressed by Berdjaev in his captivating 1907 essay:

История Эроса в мире имеет мало точек соприкосновения с историей семьи. [...] И в средние века рыцарская любовь, единственно истинная любовь, существовала вне форм семьи. Прекрасная Дама никогда не бывала женой, признанной институтом семьи. В Новое время семья слишком часто признается могилой любви и Эрос поселяется в романтике свободной любви, нередко, впрочем, вырождающейся в пошлость и адюльтер.

The history of Eros has very few common points with the history of family. [...] And in the Middle Ages courtly love, the only genuine love, existed outside the boundaries of family; the Beautiful Lady was never a wife, recognized by the institutions of family. In the Modern times family is too often believed to be the grave of love, while Eros finds a home in the romantic free love, which not infrequently deteriorates into vulgarity and adultery.⁴⁹

How can Nabokov's Russian "representatives" live without sexual harmony? Paradoxical as it may sound, they either do not have sex at all (e.g. Lužin; Godunov-Čerdynceŭ), or have it with people whom they do not love while hopelessly desiring an idealized Beautiful Lady (e.g. Ganin and Ljudmila vs. Ganin and Mašen'ka; Martin and Rose vs. Martin and Sonia). At the same time, those characters in Nabokov's novels whom the author does not grace with his otherworldly intuitions seek sexual harmony outside the boundaries of a bourgeois marriage. The adulterers include: 1) Westerners who are either morally reprehensible such as Gorn and Magda (*Kamera obskura*), or vapid as Franz and Martha (*King, Queen, Knave*), or victims of their physical desires, as Krečmar (*Kamera obskura*); 2) secondary Russian female characters, such as Alla (*Glory*) and Marfin'ka (*Invitation to a Beheading*); 3) the murky protagonist of *The Eye*, whose place in Nabokov's oeuvre has received due attention.⁵⁰ Nowhere in Nabokov's Russian novels and stories do we see the picture of a sexually harmonious marriage.

Nabokov's closing statement on sex in *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight* made a lot of sense: the Russian Nabokov opted for sexual silence so as to remain faithful to his classical leanings as well as not to vulgarize a lofty and otherworldly ideal. In Nabokov's first American (and second English-language) novel, *Bend Sinister* (1947), the philosopher Adam Krug longs

for his dead wife, who is only present in the novel as a figurehead of remembrance. Krug recalls his marriage as an island of harmony. Still, however much he may believe in the metaphysical nature of love, he also experiences carnal urges: "He had lost his wife in November. He had taught philosophy. He was exceedingly virile. His name was Adam Krug."⁵¹ The totalitarian state employs his son's promiscuous nanny in attempting to break Krug's moral integrity and opposition. Nearly succumbing, Krug warns his teenage temptress: "[...] this is going to be a bestial explosion, and you might get badly hurt. [...] I am nearly three times your age and a great big sad hog of a man. And I don't love you."⁵² In the end, *Bend Sinister* treats the sexual act in a poignantly dystopian fashion, and Nabokov thus circumnavigates the problem that was never resolved in his Russian works. The artistic and philosophical problem of reconciling earthly sexual harmony with "unearthly bliss" (Solov'ev) brings me to the sources for *Lolita* within the hermetic world of Nabokov's art.

Critics have identified a number of Nabokov's works that informed *Lolita*.⁵³ In brief: several Russian fictions feature nympholeptic fantasies, including those of Krečmar in *Kamera obskura* and Ščegolev, Zina's stepfather in *The Gift*. *The Enchanter*, composed right before the move to America but not published until after Nabokov's death, initiates the perverse narrative capsule, but lacks the redeeming meta-aesthetic and metaphysical aspects of Nabokov's "Confession of a White Widowed Male".⁵⁴ In *Bend Sinister*, Krug describes the teenage Mariette – the cause of the "agony of his senses" – as his "hot, vulgar, heavenly delicate little *puella*".⁵⁵ The Russian poem 'Lilith', perhaps more so than any other Russian texts, points in the direction of Nabokov's subsequent blending of traditional religious mythopoetics with his unique otherworldly intuitions. The names of the two nymphets, Lilith and Lolita, share the basic "i-vowel-i-vowel-t" configuration. Both texts engage Graeco-Roman attributes. In the pagan Paradise, the hero of the poem recognizes "in every faun / god Pan" ("i v každom favne / ja mnil, čto Pana uznaju").⁵⁶ Humbert Humbert describes Lolita as "the loveliest nymphet green-red-blue Priap himself could think up".⁵⁷ In both works, Nabokov indicates the demonic or chthonic nature of the nymphets. In *Lolita*, Humbert theorizes that

between the age limits of nine and fourteen there occur maidens who, to certain bewitched travelers, twice or many times older than they, reveal their true nature which is not human, but nymphic (that is, demoniac); and these chosen creatures I propose to designate as "nymphets".⁵⁸

The sexual mise-en-scène in 'Lilith' anticipates that of the famous "couch scene" in *Lolita*, the scene which Alexandrov has characterized as a "hybridization of aesthetics and erotics":⁵⁹

В глубине
 был греческий диван мохнатый,
 вино, на столике гранаты,
 и в вольной росписи стена.

In the room behind
 one glimpsed a shaggy Greek divan,
 on a small table wine, pomegranates,
 and some lewd frescoes covering the wall.⁶⁰

In *Lolita*: "Place: sunlit living room. Props: old, candy-striped davenport, magazines, phonograph [...]. [Lolita] had painted her lips and was holding in her hallowed hands a beautiful, banal, Eden-red apple."⁶¹ Both the poem's hero and Humbert "let [their seed] go to waste", to quote the story of Onan from Genesis 38. By means of a "secret system of tactile correspondence between beast and beauty", Humbert finally "crushed out against [Lolita's] left buttock the last throb of the longest ecstasy man or monster had ever known".⁶² Similarly, after Lilith "retreated, drew her legs together", leaving her lover "at half the distance / to rapture", he "spilled [his] seed / and knew abruptly that [he] was in Hell".⁶³

In *Lolita*, but also in *Ada or Ardor* (1969), the protagonists' ideals and aspirations of sexual harmony go against the grain of the bourgeois marriage. The sexual relationships between Humbert Humbert and Dolores Haze, and Van Veen and Ada Veen, the former *de jure*, and the latter *de facto* incestuous, violate the ethical norms and criminal laws of modern civilized society. Humbert confesses that "[he] had so-called normal relationships with a number of terrestrial women having pumpkins or pears for breasts".⁶⁴ Veen enters a number of "normal" relationships that model a bourgeois marriage – bourgeois "following Flaubert, not Marx", as Nabokov put it in an essay on 'Philistines and Philistinism'.⁶⁵ And yet, Humbert and Veen both dream of antiterrestrial love, and for both characters sexual bliss can be achieved only in a fantastical domain, an empyrean Kingdom by the Sea, an otherworldly Ardis Two. To quote Berdjaev: "There are no 'natural' norms, norms are always 'supernatural'. Mystical love will always seem 'antinatural' in this world."⁶⁶ And here again the poem 'Lilith' comes to mind: "Humbert was perfectly capable of intercourse with Eve, but it was Lilith he longed for."⁶⁷

In *Lolita*, the only norms by which Humbert aspired to be judged are nebulous and unearthly: "Winged gentlemen! No hereafter is acceptable if it does not produce her as she was then, in that Colorado resort between Snow and Elphinstone, with everything right: the white wide little-boy shorts, the slender waist, the apricot midriff".⁶⁸ In fact one might take seriously the possibility that Humbert prepares to address a jury of angels or is writing for an angelic audience:

Oh, do not scowl at me, reader, I do not intend to convey the impression that I did not manage to be happy. Reader must understand that in the possession and thralldom of a nymphet the enchanted traveler stands, as it were, *beyond happiness*. For there is no other bliss on earth comparable to that of fondling a nymphet. It is *hors concours*, that bliss, it belongs to another class, another plane of sensitivity. Despite our tiffs, despite her nastiness, despite all the fuss and cases she made, and the vulgarity, and the danger, and the horrible hopelessness of it all, I still dwelled deep in my elected paradise – a paradise whose skies were the color of hell-flames – but still a paradise.⁶⁹

Early in *Ada*, the narrator explicates the suffering of young Veen:

If the relief, any relief, of a lad's ardor had been Van's sole concern; if, in other words, no love had been involved, our young friend might have put up – for one casual summer – with the nastiness and ambiguity of his behavior. But since Van loved Ada, that complicated release could not be an end in itself; or, rather, it was only a dead end, because unshared; because horribly hidden; because not liable to melt into any subsequent phase of incomparably greater rapture [cf. *vostorg*] which, like a misty summit beyond the fierce mountain pass, promised to be the true pinnacle of his perilous relationship with Ada.⁷⁰

In *Lolita* and *Ada* the master-trope of the novel is an orgasm, a prolonged spasm of eternity, a moment when time is vanquished and the one having the orgasm enters the otherworld. Having switched to English and transposed himself into American culture, Nabokov achieved in *Lolita* and *Ada* that which he had not accomplished linguistically, and had not fully arrived at meta-aesthetically and metaphysically in his Russian works. And yet, despite the changes in his language and milieu, as well as a general shift in publishing standards between the 1920s and the 1970s, even in the American works Nabokov's characters never quite resolve the problem of sexual harmony that was left unsettled in his Russian works. To quote Humbert Humbert again:

I am trying to describe these things not to relive them in my present boundless misery, but to sort out the portion of hell and the portion of heaven in that strange, awful, maddening world – nymphet love. The beastly and beautiful merged at one point, and it is that borderline I would like to fix, and I feel I fail to do so utterly. Why?⁷¹

Why indeed? The question thus remains whether Nabokov's sexual otherworld is paradisial, infernal, or both together. Hardly gratuitous are the puns, half-hidden in the title of the novel and the first name of its heroine. So enticing is the genitive case, contained in the word "Ada", that, willy-nilly

one begins searching for various decodings, such as *pesn' Ada* (song of hell) or, as Michael Wood recently remarked, “*iz Ada*” (“*iz Ada*” = from hell) is also “*is Ada*”. “This *is Ada*,” Wood writes, “and *Ada* is Eden and Hades at once. She is Van’s heaven and hell, could only be both.”⁷² “Quilty,” Humbert interrogates his arch-rival Quilty before murdering him, “do you recall a little girl called Dolores Haze, Dolly Haze? Dolly called Dolores, Colo?” Beneath the surface of Quilty’s reply – a non-sequitur only at first glance – lies a possibility, which Humbert cannot allow: “Sure, she may have made these calls, sure. Any place. Paradise, Wash., Hell Canyon. Who cares?”⁷³

While my observations may need further validation, one thing seems certain: Nabokov, Humbert Humbert, and Van Veen all conceive of the possibility that time can be conquered and stopped, that is both artistically and sexually. Here is a telling passage from *Speak, Memory*:

I confess, I do not believe in time. I like to fold my magic carpet, after use, in such a way as to superimpose one part of the pattern upon another. Let visitors trip. And the highest enjoyment of timelessness – in a landscape selected at random – is when I stand among rare butterflies and their food plants. This is ecstasy and behind the ecstasy is something else, which is hard to explain [Vot èto – blaženstvo, i za blaženstvom est’ nečto, ne sovsem poddajuščeesja opredeleniju]. It is like a momentary vacuum into which rushes all that I love. A sense of oneness with sun and stone. A thrill of gratitude to whom it may concern – to the contrapuntal genius of human fate or to tender ghosts humoring a lucky mortal.⁷⁴

In chapter eleven of *Speak, Memory*, Nabokov described the moment of composing his first poem. He was convinced that the poet achieved the state of “cosmic synchronization”, the “capacity of thinking several things at a time”. Nabokov’s *sui generis* notion of cosmic synchronization bridges the ephemeral otherworld and the creative process, both deeply personal and transrational. The state of cosmic synchronization describes an aesthetic experience where time ceases to exist, an experience whose sexual equivalent is orgasm. The works of Nabokov and his Anglo-American representatives – and one recalls Humbert’s essay, “Mimir and Memory”, and Van’s studies in “Texture of Time” – speak of such artistic and sexual possibilities, of “aurochs and angels, the secret of durable pigments, prophetic sonnets, the refuge of art”, without ever being able to enact them fully.⁷⁵

In conclusion, I would like to offer three quotations, in the hope that their dialogic interplay will lend my argument further justification. It is written in Nabokov’s ‘The Art of Literature and Commonsense’ (1941):

In my example memory played an essential though unconscious part and everything depended upon the perfect fusion of the past and the present. The inspiration of genius adds a third ingredient: it is the past and the present *and* the future (your book [but also your world, one adds]) that come together in a sudden flash; thus the entire circle of time is perceived, which is another way of saying that time ceases to exist [as in an orgasm, one might say]. It is a combined sensation of having the whole universe entering you and of yourself wholly dissolving in the universe surrounding you. It is the prison wall of the ego suddenly crumbling away with the nonego rushing in from the outside to save the prisoner – who is already dancing in the open [cf. Sebastian Knight's "I am speaking of dance, not gymnastics"].⁷⁶

It is written in Berdjaev's 'Metaphysics of Sex and Love' (1907):

Платон жил до явления Христа в мир, но постиг уже трагедию индивидуальности, ощутил уже тоску по трансцендентальному и прозрел соединяющую силу божественного Эроса, посредника между миром здешним и миром потусторонним.

Plato lived before Christ, but had already comprehended the tragedy of individuality, had already perceived the longing for the transcendent, and had envisioned the connecting power of divine Eros, the intermediary between this world and the other world.⁷⁷

It is written in the Berakhot treatise of the Babylonian Talmud: "Three things are a small bit of the world to come: Sabbath, the sun, and sexual intercourse."

NOTES

- ¹ Berdjaev, 'Metafizika pola i ljubvi', in: Šestakov (1991: 233). Unless indicated otherwise, here and hereafter all translations from the Russian are mine.
- ² Nabokov (1944: 33-34); cf. the original in Tjutčev (1988: 44-45).
- ³ *Ibid.*
- ⁴ Alexandrov (1995: 214, 225).
- ⁵ Appel (1991: 312; lvi).
- ⁶ In this essay, I will concentrate on representations of heterosexual sex and love in Nabokov's works. Homosexual desire in Nabokov's works was explored in recent contributions by Skonečnaja and Brodsky.
- ⁷ Nabokov (1990d, 1: 86; 1989d: 73).
- ⁸ Nabokov (1990c: 94; 1990d, 2: 53).
- ⁹ Nabokov (1991d: 51; 1990d, 2: 189).
- ¹⁰ Nabokov (1990d, 2: 189; 1991d: 96).
- ¹¹ Nabokov (1990d, 2: 330; 1991b: 72).
- ¹² *Laughter in the Dark* (1936) is Nabokov's reworked Englished version of *Kamera obskura*; hence one does not find a full correspondence between the Russian and the English texts. See Nabokov (1933: 56). "Chill of innocence" is Nabokov's rendition, see Nabokov (1989c: 84). On the whole, Nabokov increased the sexual thrust of the novel in the English version.
- ¹³ Nabokov (1989a: 64). See also Nabokov (1990d, 4: 35).
- ¹⁴ Nabokov (1991a: 74; 77).
- ¹⁵ Nabokov (1997: 150).
- ¹⁶ Nabokov (1997: 234).
- ¹⁷ Nabokov (1990d, 2: 225; 1991d: 103).
- ¹⁸ Nabokov (1990d, 4: 35; 1989a: 63).
- ¹⁹ Nabokov (1991a: 91).
- ²⁰ Nabokov (1970: 50-55); in his semi-literal English translation, Nabokov shows much creativity in coining the corresponding euphemisms. See also Nabokov (1979: 206-209).
- ²¹ Nabokov (1991a: 48).
- ²² I argued recently that Čechov's sexual reticence served as a background for Nabokov's dialogue with Bunin; Šraer (1995: 53-58); Shrayer (1998: 339-411).
- ²³ The term "covert modernism" was coined by John Burt Foster, Jr. and applied to Nabokov's *The Gift* in *Nabokov's Art of Memory and European Modernism*. I have examined the Nabokov-Bunin rivalry and proposed to view the succession of Čechov, Bunin, Nabokov as a tradition of Russian covert modernism in Shrayer (1999).
- ²⁴ Grin (1977-1982, 3: 81).
- ²⁵ Berdjaev, 'Razmyšlenie ob Ėrose', in: Šestakov (1991: 267-268).
- ²⁶ Nabokov (1980: 378).

- 27 Nabokov (1990d, 1: 160; 1989b: 75).
- 28 Nabokov (1970: 52-53).
- 29 Contemporary discussions of Nabokov's metaphysics have been shaped by the following works: Sisson (1979); Pifer (1989); Johnson (1985); Alexandrov (1991). Other critics have contributed to the study of Nabokov's metaphysics.
- 30 Alexandrov (1991: 5-6).
- 31 Vladimir Solov'ev, 'Smysl ljubvi', in: Šestakov (1991: 63).
- 32 Nabokov (1990d, 1: 175).
- 33 Nabokov (1991d: 39; 1990d, 2: 181).
- 34 Nabokov (1933: 23).
- 35 Nabokov (1933: 195); see also Nabokov (1989c: 278). In *Laughter in the Dark* (Nabokov 1989c: 138), Margot envisions a revealing mise-en-scène: "And then she cried, too, because at supper Rex [Rex is Gorn's translated version] had touched her right knee and Albinus her left—as though Paradise had been on one side of her and Hell on the other."
- 36 Nabokov (1991a: 92).
- 37 In three recent conference papers, Susan Elizabeth Sweeney argued that Nabokov employed the motifs of the Sleeping Beauty story in several works, including the Russian story 'Skazka' ('A Nursery Tale', 1926), as well as *The Enchanter* and *Lolita*.
- 38 Nabokov (1970: 111).
- 39 Nabokov (1990d, 4: 311-312; 1997: 419-420).
- 40 Nabokov (1990d, 4: 321; 1997: 429).
- 41 Blake (1970: 60).
- 42 Bunin (1965-1967, 7: 172).
- 43 Nabokov (1991c: 364).
- 44 Nabokov (1990d, 3: 329; 1991c: 366).
- 45 Nabokov (1992: 103).
- 46 *Ibid.*
- 47 On Nabokov's Silver Age, and especially Symbolist roots, see Alexandrov (1991: 213-234). Some aspects of the aesthetics and metaphysics of sex in Silver Age Russia, as well as the issue of "boulevard literature", are considered in Part Two of Engelstein's *The Keys to Happiness* (1992).
- 48 Nabokov (1989e: 203). Note also that the passage betrays a certain anxiety about male homoeroticism.
- 49 Šestakov (1991: 260).
- 50 Especially in D. Barton Johnson's scholarship; see, for instance, 'The Eye', Alexandrov (1995: 130-135).
- 51 Nabokov (1990b: 195).
- 52 Nabokov (1990b: 197).
- 53 See, for instance, Ellen Pifer, 'Lolita' (1989), Alexandrov (1995: 305-321); Purin (1996).

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- ⁵⁴ For the background of *The Enchanter*, see Dmitri Nabokov, 'On a Book Entitled *The Enchanter*', Nabokov (1991a: 81-109). For a stimulating discussion of *Lolita's* metaphysics, see Alexandrov (1991).
- ⁵⁵ Nabokov (1990b: 197).
- ⁵⁶ Nabokov (1970: 50-51).
- ⁵⁷ Appel (1991: 42). Pan, Greek Pan, in Greek mythology deity of herds, pastures, woods, and fields. Son of a nymph and Hermes, Pan is endowed with chthonic features, both in his origin and image. Etymology from Indo-European root *pus-*, *paus*, "to make fertile", which corresponds to the deity's true functions and puts him in close proximity with Dionysus; Pan is part of Dionysus's retinue. He is passionate and pursues nymphs. As a deity of nature's elemental forces, Pan throws people into irrational, *panic* fear. Early Christianity classified Pan with the demonic world, referring to him as "noontime demon" who corrupts and scares people. In Roman mythology, two deities correspond to Pan, Faun (patron of pastures) and Sylvan (patron of woods). In Russian painting, M.A. Vrubel's "Pan" (1899, Tret'jakov Gallery, Moscow) is notable. Priapus is the Graeco-Roman deity of fruitfulness, originally associated with phallic cult and iconography. See "Favn", "Pan", "Priap" in Tokarev (1991-1992).
- ⁵⁸ Appel (1991: 16-17).
- ⁵⁹ Alexandrov (1991: 170).
- ⁶⁰ Nabokov (1970: 53).
- ⁶¹ Appel (1991: 57-58).
- ⁶² Appel (1991: 61).
- ⁶³ Nabokov (1970: 52-55).
- ⁶⁴ Appel (1991: 18).
- ⁶⁵ Nabokov (1981: 309).
- ⁶⁶ Šestakov (1991: 259).
- ⁶⁷ Appel (1991: 20).
- ⁶⁸ Appel (1991: 230-231).
- ⁶⁹ Appel (1991: 166).
- ⁷⁰ Nabokov (1990a: 100).
- ⁷¹ Appel (1991: 135).
- ⁷² Wood, *The Magicians's Doubts* (1994: 220).
- ⁷³ Appel (1991: 296).
- ⁷⁴ Nabokov (1989e: 139; 1990d, 4: 213).
- ⁷⁵ Appel (1991: 309).
- ⁷⁶ Nabokov (1980: 378; 1992: 111).
- ⁷⁷ Šestakov (1991: 237).

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