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NABOKOV’S "VASILIY SHISHKOV": AN AUTHOR=TEXT INTERPRETATION*

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The span of Vladimir Nabokov’s career in letters (1916-1977) coincided with a period of ruthless challenges by literary critics to fundamental notions of the author and of authorship. Nabokov began his


I am grateful to Dmitri Nabokov for access to the papers of Vladimir Nabokov at the Library of Congress. Where sources of translations from the Russian are not included, the translations are mine. My translations do not aspire to capture the originals’ artistry, but rather attempt to be literal insofar as that is possible.

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professional literary career in the early 1920s in Berlin, when the Formalist attack against biographical criticism was reaching a crescendo in his native Russia. Between 1923 and 1937 Nabokov made six visits to Prague where aesthetics and literary evolution were being redefined by the Czech Structuralists. Nabokov continued to write in the 1930s, in Germany and then in France, steadily becoming the new star of Russian émigré fiction. The Russian Formalist School had already been suppressed in Soviet Russia by the time of his move to the United States, while the center of inquiry into authorship had moved from Europe to America. Conditioned in part by T.S. Eliot's seminal essays of the 1920s, the New Critics not only denounced the tenets of humanist criticism, but also introduced their thinking into American university teaching in the 1940s-50s. These were, of course, the decades of Nabokov's tenure as a college professor, where he could not but encounter New Criticism. The success of *Lolita*, Nabokov's increasing fame and acclaim in the 1960s, and his move to Europe coincided with the Poststructuralist assault against traditional mythologizations of the author. Poststructuralism — and particularly its French wing — had had a tremendous impact upon the critical thought of our time and affected the prevalent critical reception of Nabokov in the 1970s and 1980s as a meta-literary writer.

Nabokov's artistic experience, both bilingual and bicultural, puts into question the validity of the Poststructuralist views of the author and authorship, especially the influential ideas of the French philosophers of culture Roland Barthes and Michel Foucault. Barthes and Foucault were the culmination of the twentieth-century offensive against the humanist notion of the author as an individual endowed with exceptional linguistic and cognitive powers. Barthes' "The Death of the Author" (1968) and Foucault's "What Is an Author?" (1970) constitute a two-part desperate and brilliant attempt to remove the author from the domain of literary criticism.1 In their writings the role of the author was downgraded to that of a modern *scriptor*, an author-function, a mere device to record myriad information units that

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surround the author. Such a schematic and reductionist view of the author left no room for irrational components of creativity. On the whole, the Poststructuralist critical enterprise attributed little significance to the author’s talent, world vision, and individuality and applied identical hermeneutic strategies to all writers across the board. In the case of Nabokov, the critics’ reluctance to recognize the centrality of a metaphysical quest in his works apparently came as a consequence of Poststructuralist doubt that meaningful and interpretable rays of information may oscillate between an author’s personal cosmology and that projected by the author’s text. Such notions as Barthes’ “death of the author” or Foucault’s “author-function,” which deny the author his creative powers and violate the indivisible author-text continuum, are inapplicable to Nabokov’s text.

In Nabokov’s 1971 interview he advocated a critical approach that considers the author in his or her own terms: “The main favor I ask of a serious critic is sufficient perceptiveness to understand that whatever term or trope I use, my purpose is not to be facetiously flashy or grotesquely obscure but to express what I feel and think with the utmost truthfulness and perception (SO, 179).” When set against major developments in twentieth-century views of authorship and textuality, Nabokov’s career testifies to his adamant opposition to imposing a totalizing schema on an author’s text. Furthermore, Nabokov objected ruthlessly to critics’ attempts to separate and/or juxtapose what they saw as his life (constructed largely for public consumption in the form of biographical writing) and his works (as the domain of academic criticism). The artificial and rather pointless distinction between the textual and the extratextual (the distinction goes back to Russian Formalists and Czech Structuralists and was embraced by the New Critics and the Poststructuralists) never figures in Nabokov’s artistic universe. A student of Nabokov thus faces a challenging task: to find an organic model of the relationship between the author and his text.

The Nabokov-specific model that I will foreground in this essay presents the relationship between the biographical/contextual information pertaining to Nabokov the author and the analytical/structural information encoded in Nabokov the text as this formula: author=text (“author equals text”). This model eliminates a critic’s need to draw an impossible and meaningless line where the authorial dimension supposedly ends and the textual begins. The relationship between
Nabakov the author and Nabakov the text then may be likened to a mirror placed against another mirror, which sets the reflecting/reflected rays of information into perpetual motion. Nabokov's artistic career may be presented as a multi-level production, reception, and transformation of complementary creative signals by the author and the text. “Vladimir Nabokov” the author and “Vladimir Nabokov” the text are name and subject headings of the same creative entity.

Naturally, because the author and the text exchange rays of creative information within a sociocultural medium, and not in a literary vacuum, the impact of the medium results in the creation of poetic personae, literary mystifications, and cultural myths. To arrive at a faithful interpretation, one must describe the key parameters of the medium where the author and the text interact and inform each other.

Below I will present an author=text interpretation of “Vasily Shishkov,” Nabokov’s last Russian short story. Written in Paris in 1939, it fashioned the author’s fictional representative as a Russian émigré poet. Through the fictional persona of his alter ego, Nabokov examined the impact of exile upon creativity and questioned his own aesthetic preferences in the late 1930s. Written and published less than a year before his departure for the New World, the story emerged as a twofold testament. On the one hand, Nabokov makes a pronouncement regarding the future of Russian poetry in exile. On the other, the story prompts a model of its own reading in which the author informs and creates the text insofar as the text witnesses, documents, and unmakes the author.

In most cases, Nabokov further historicized and contextualized the English texts of his short stories as compared to their Russian twins. It is not surprising that the Englished version sets the story in a concrete historical time, spring of 1939. The Englished text also supplies an additional layer of authorial information by identifying the narrator, who is nameless in the Russian text, directly with the author, Vladimir Nabokov: “...and to you, Gospodin Nabokov, I must show this — a cahier of verse” (Stories, 495). One should not overlook the fact that the story’s protagonist, the poet Vasily Shishkov, addresses its autobiographical narrator as Mr. Nabokov (the Russian “Gospodin”: Mister), and not as Mr. Sirin, although Sirin was Nabokov’s
constant pen name in the prewar Russian émigré literary world. As if to compensate for the lack of unequivocal authorial presence (in the Russian version, Shishkov simply says “And to you, I must show...”), the Russian text links itself with the genre of memoirs: “Moi vospominaniia o něm sosredotocheny v predelakh vesny sego goda” (literally, my reminiscences of him are confined to the spring of this year; VF, 205). The memoiristic vein is downplayed in the Englished text: “The little I remember about him is centered within the confines of last spring: the spring of 1939” (Stories, 494)² In this short fictional memoir, Englished in the early 1970s, Gospodin Nabokov becomes a source that radiates the presence of the author.

The protagonist of the story, a Russian writer living in Paris, is approached by a young poet by the name of Vasiliy Shishkov. Shishkov seeks advice in a literary matter, and during their next meeting he shows the narrator a notebook with some thirty poems. The poems testify that he is an untalented graphomaniac:

Stikhi byli uzhaznye, — ploskie, pestrye, zloveshche pretentsioznye. Ikh sovershennaiia bezdarnost’ podcherkivalas’ shulerskim shikom alliteratsii, bazarnoi roskosh’iu i malogramotnost’iu rifm ..., a o temakh luchshe vovse umolchat’: avtor s odinakovym udal’stvom vospeval vsë, chto emu popadalo pod liru. (VF, 206-7).

(The poetry was dreadful — flat, flashy, ominously pretentious. Its utter mediocrity was stressed by the fraudulent chic of alliterations and the meretricious richness of illiterate rhymes.... As to the themes, they were best left alone: the author sang with unvarying gusto anything that his lyre came across” [Stories, 495].)

The disappointed maître, “not spoiled by such desires” as the request of the young poet, answers him with perfect honesty that the poems were “hopelessly bad” (Stories, 495). Shishkov then confesses that the “bad” poems were a hoax produced in a single sweep only to determine the extent of the narrator’s honesty: “Those credentials are not mine. I mean, I did write that stuff myself, and yet it is all forged. The entire lot of thirty poems was composed this morning, and to tell the truth, I found rather nasty the task of parodying the

² In fact, Nabokov did plan to write a separate chapter of his memoir dedicated to the émigré contexts of his Russian years, see Boyd, RY; bits and pieces of this chapter must have entered Chapter 14 of Speak, Memory.
product of metromania. In return, I now have learned that you are merciless — which means that you can be trusted” (Stories, 495). Shishkov presents another notebook with the “real” poems by which he is to be judged. This time the narrator finds the poems “very good” (Stories, 496). Shishkov goes on to share some of his turbulent emotions with his new interlocutor. Shishkov lacks a direction and a place in life: he fluctuates between some of the most extreme solutions, which include going to Africa or to Russia, entering a monastery, and, committing suicide. He also alludes to some other way of interrupting his routine: disappearance. In fact, Shishkov does actually disappear before long after undertaking to publish a monthly review, A Survey of Pain and Vulgarity. Neither the narrator himself nor anyone else ever hears of Vasily Shishkov again. The notebook with poems remains in the hands of the narrator, who wonders whether Shishkov “did not overestimate/

The transparency and soundness/
Of such an unusual coffin” (Stories, 499).

A protagonist with the last name Shishkov also figures in two other short stories, both from Nabokov’s Middle period, “A Bad Day” and “Orache.” Set in the 1910s and structured as fragments of a larger semiautobiographical narrative, both stories feature a boy, Putya Shishkov, who suffers from being unable to reconcile his rich emotional life with the indifferent or threatening façades of the public world.3 Anticipating the dilemma of his later namesake, the young Putya Shishkov also seeks an escape into a world of his own in which the colors and shapes of people and objects would change according to his imagination. Sitting in a carriage on his way to a country birthday party (in the company of a moody older sister) Putya considers plans of escape: “Plead sickness? Topple down from the box?” (Stories, 269).

The first name Vasilii also figures prominently in several of Nabokov’s short stories. “Spring in Fialta” features the expatriate Vassen’-ka, a diminutive of Vasilii, and “Cloud, Castle, Lake” and “Recruiting” portray the Russian émigré Vasilii Ivanovich. Although not a

3 In the collection Sogliadatii (The Eye, 1938), “Orache” follows “A Bad Day” and they literally form a textual continuum.
poet like Vasily Shishkov, Vasily Ivanovich is a poetry lover who feels threatened by the oppressive vulgarity of the world around him and seeks refuge in another world. In addition, scholars have pointed to the fact that the name Vasily derives etymologically from the Greek βασιλευς (emperor), suggesting a mark of privilege that Nabokov often grants his favorite characters, Vasily Shishkov being one of them. At the same time, Nabokov points out in “Recruiting” that the name Vasily Ivanovich emblematizes a typical Russian combination of a first name and a patronymic; Vasily Ivanovich thus stands for an “X,” a Russian “Mr. Smith.” One is compelled to compare the characteristics that Nabokov’s narrators give their privileged characters in the related stories; Vasily Shishkov is a “neobyknovennyj simpatichnyj, chistyi, grustnyj chelovek” (an extraordinary attractive, pure, melancholy human being; VF, 213; Stories, 495); Vasily Ivanovich in “Cloud, Castle, Lake” is described as “ètomu milomu korotkovatomu cheloveku ... s unnymi i dobrymi glazami” (that likable little man, ... his eyes so intelligent and kind; VF, 236/ Stories, 426). Finally, Nabokov’s genealogical tree is germane, for Vasily Ivanovich Rukavishnikov was the name of Nabokov’s uncle and Shishkov, a prominent name in Russian literature, the maiden name of his greatgrandmother.

The next layer of information concerns Nabokov’s place in the Russian émigré literary context of the 1930s. Such an inquiry is necessary to decode the reasons for his decision to mystify critics by adopting a pen-name, “Vasily Shishkov,” and subsequently to demystify his pen-name through the eponymous short story. By the mid-1930s Nabokov had become the leading émigré prose writer of the younger generation. Between 1930 and 1939 six of Nabokov’s novels were serialized in Sovremennye zapiski (Contemporary Annals), the leading émigré review and one of the best ever in Russian cultural

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5 In the nineteenth century, the name of Admiral Aleksandr Semënovich Shishkov (1754-1841) was associated with a literary group whose members sought to defend the purity of the Russian language against the invasion of Western syntax and vocabulary; in the twentieth century the novelist Viacheslav Iakovlevich Shishkov (1873-1945) left an impressive body of work including a well-known novel, Peipus-ozero (Peipus-Lake).
history. From 1921 to 1939 his short stories appeared regularly in eight major émigré newspapers and magazines. In the 1930s, due to the decline in Berlin’s Russian emigration and also because he was planning to move to Paris, Nabokov began to print his short stories exclusively in Paris, chiefly in the leading newspaper, Poslednie novosti (Latest News), but also in Contemporary Annals and the short-lived albeit excellent Russkie zapiski (Russian Annals). By the mid-1930s only a handful of enemies would dare deny Nabokov his peerless position in Russian prose. His poetry, published almost weekly in Rul’ (The Rudder) in Berlin in the 1920s then occasionally in Parisian periodicals in the early 1930s, was never hailed in the same way as his prose fiction. In most cases, with the exception of the personally hostile Georgii Adamovich/Georgii Ivanov and Zinaida Gippius/ Dmitrii Merezhkovskii circles, the reasons for the lukewarm reception of Nabokov’s poetry had to do with its actual quality. Rhythmically oldfashioned, stylistically conservative, and at times marred by formal incongruities, his Russian verse could never claim praise equal to that granted his prose. Nor could it compete with the poetry of the leading émigré poets of the older generations, such as Georgii Adamovich, Ivan Bunin, Zinaida Gippius, Georgii Ivanov, Viacheslav Ivanov, Vladislav Khodasevich, and Marina Tsvetaeva. As for the best Russian émigré poets of the younger generation, Nabokov may arguably be placed in the same category with Igor’ Chinnov, Dovid Knut, Vladimir Korvin-Piotrovskii, Antonin Ladinskii, Irina Odovtseva, Boris Poplavskii, and Anna Prismanova. (I say this less for the sake of classification and more to signal that the entire

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6 From 1931 to 1934 at least seven poems by Nabokov were featured in Parisian Russian periodicals, two in Sovremennye zapiski (September 1931) and five in Poslednie novosti (July 31, 1932; September 8, 1932; January 29, 1933; May 3, 1934; June 28, 1934). Between 1934 and 1939 not a single poem by Nabokov seems to have appeared in Paris, while only one was published elsewhere, in no. 8 (1935) of the Estonian-based magazine Nov’ (Virgin Soil). Boyd (RY, 509) has speculated that Nabokov ceased publishing his poetry because he was being denied his due by the Parisian critics of the Adamovich circle. However, Nabokov’s known poetic output of the 1930s is quite small compared to the hundreds composed in the 1920s: only about a dozen original poems plus those incorporated into The Gift. Most likely, the decline of his poetic output in the 1930s signals an internal dissatisfaction with his own poetic achievement. For Nabokov’s own remarks on the distribution of his poetic output, see PP, 13-15; also see Véra Nabokova’s introduction in the 1979 Stikhi.
“Vasily Shishkov” controversy was not simply a vengeful act of desperation on the part of the ostracized Nabokov, but more importantly a matter of healthy poetic competition in which he was hoping to prove his poetic merits even to those who would deny them a priori. The three poems that I identify below as “the Vasily Shishkov cycle” — produced in conjunction with the eponymous 1939 short story — may well be among Nabokov’s very best.)

The younger generation of émigré poets also included a number of lesser lights like Iurii Mandel’shtam, Anatolii Shteiger, Vladimir Smolenskii, Ekaterina Tauber, and Iurii Terapiano. Several of the younger poets belonged to the so-called Parisian Note school of Russian poetry (Parizhskaja nota) with Georgii Adamovich as their aesthetic leader and mentor. The followers of Adamovich tended to be negatively disposed towards Nabokov throughout the 1930s and even as late as the 1950s-1970s, when Adamovich himself had tried to make amends with Nabokov. The opinions of the Parisian Russian poets as regards Nabokov were also shaped by one of Adamovich’s closest literary associates of the time, Georgii Ivanov, and by the Gippius/Merezhkovskii enclave. The enmity on the part of Georgii

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7 See Nabokov’s somewhat eccentric and elusive comments on the aesthetics of the Parisian Note in SM, 284-285; an earlier version of the chapter of Nabokov’s autobiography where he mentions Adamovich and Merezhkovskii by name was published as “Exile” in The Russian Review in 1951. The earlier passage is also found in CE, 212-3.

8 In Odin ochestvo i svoboda (New York: Izdatel’stvo imeni Chekhova, 1955), 222-228, Georgii Adamovich devoted a large and insightful section to Nabokov’s poetry. Several other memoirs by the Parisian Russian litterateurs carried hostility to Nabokov into the 1970s; see, for instance, Iurii Terapiano, Literaturnaja zhizn’ russkogo Parizha za polveka (Paris/ New York: Albatros-C.A.S.E/Third Wave Publishing, 1986), 92, and passim; Aleksandr Bakhrakh, Po pamiati, po zapismam (Paris: La presse libre, 1980), 99104, and passim; V.S. Ivanovskii, Polia eliseiskie (New York: Serebrianyi vek, 1983) 20, 128, 247-8, 257. Many Parisian poets did have reasons to be irritated by Nabokov’s consistent epatage of their poetry; a typical example may be found in Nabokov’s very favorable review (and exceptional for that matter) of Antonin Ladinskii’s poetry collection, Chérmoe i goluboe (Black and Blue); in the review, in passing, Nabokov manages to “kill” Terapiano, Otsub, Iu. Mandel’shtam, Adamovich, and even Poplavskii with a few caustic remarks; see Kniga, 389.

9 G. Ivanov and Adamovich clashed after World War II, which is evident from Ivanov’s very interesting and controversial article “Konets Adamovicha” (The End of Adamovich), Vozrozhdenie 11 (September-October 1959): 179-186.
Ivanov is usually explained on purely personal grounds: in 1929 Nabokov published a very negative review of the novel *Izol'da* (1929) by Ivanov’s wife, Irina Odoevtseva. In response, Ivanov rejected Nabokov’s poetry outright in one short sentence which oozes hostility: “Stikhi prosto poshly” (The verses are simply vulgar — what could have been worse to Nabokov than an accusation of *poshllost’ poshilust’?*). This must have angered Nabokov so much that he subsequently refused to give Ivanov any credit whatsoever, even for his outstanding short novel, *Raspad atoma* (Splitting of the Atom, 1938), which he dismissed as “poshlen’kii, sentimental’nyi, zhemannyi” (tacky, sentimental, affected). In the preface to *Poems and Problems*, he spoke of the “dreary drone of the anemic ‘Paris school’” (PP 14).

Whether it was for personal reasons or reasons of professional loyalty, it is still difficult to explain why such a fine critic as Adamovich, both passionate and rational about poetry, was ill-disposed to Nabokov’s verse while he favored some of the lesser poets. Throughout the 1930s Adamovich’s responses to Nabokov’s fiction were overall becoming more and more enthusiastic although still filled with sour-grape reservations. In 1934 he published a long essay on Nabokov. While claiming to be the first overview of Nabokov’s writings (which it was not), the essay said remarkably little about his verse: “...v stikhakh ... on rassudochno-trezv i bezmuzykalen” (...in verses he is cerebral and devoid of music). Adamovich is off-target in this short verdict. Nabokov’s poetry is much less “cerebral” than his prose. As to the musicality, his poems suffer from an excess of musicality and sonority, from a narcissistic exploitation of the melodiousness of Russian classical prosody. What I think disturbed Adamovich in most of Nabokov’s verse was its failure, despite a seeming sincerity and openness, to communicate with the reader, to speak to his

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12 “To Zinaida Shakhovskaja,” n.d. (stamped April 1939), letter in ZSh LC.
reader as a friend, an interlocutor, a confidant. Additionally, Adamovich must have found irksome a certain overcrowding of phenomenal details in Nabokov’s poems. Adamovich preached to his disciples, the poets of the Parisian Note, to speak of specific direct feelings and immediate reflections with little reference to the phenomenal world.

All in all, with the exception of Godunov-Cherdyntsev’s verse in *The Gift*, Nabokov seemed to have published no poetry under his name from 1936 until his departure for the United States in 1940. However, he continued to seek recognition for his poetry. Nabokov certainly had axes to grind with Adamovich as the leading tutor of the younger émigré writers, with G. Ivanov as his single most vicious critic, and with Gippius and Merezhkovskii who had been skeptical of his talent from its earliest manifestations. “Vasilii Shishkov” was not Nabokov’s first attempt to settle matters with his literary enemies. The blow would have been successful had the 1931 story “Lips to Lips” indeed been printed by *The Latest News* as the newspaper originally intended. A second *coup de plume* would have been more triumphant had the poem “Iz Cambrudovoi poemy ‘Nochnoe puteshestvie’” (From Calmbrood’s long poem ‘Night Journey,’ 1931) been published in Paris instead of Berlin’s *The Rudder*. (The *Rudder* ceased publication several months later; by the early 1930s, the days of Russian émigré literature were numbered in Berlin, and Paris became the major literary center of the Russian emigration). Camouflaged as an installment in Nabokov’s translation from an invented English poet Vivian Calmbrood (actually Nabokov’s anagram), the excerpt abounded with references to the literary climate of the émigré Paris, especially the polemic between Adamovich and Khodasevich. Nabokov’s pastiche was directed against a critic dis-

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14 The longest statement on Nabokov’s poetry by Adamovich appeared in *Odinochestvo i svoboda*, 222-228.


16 See Davydov’s analysis of the “Lips to Lips” controversy in Chapter 1 of his *Teksty Matreski Vladimira Nabokova* (Munich: Otto Sagner, 1982; see also Boyd, *RY*, 373-74.


guised as the bearer of “adamova golova” (adamic head), a double
pun on Adamovich, whose prerevolutionary verse was associated with
the Acmeist search for the transparent Adamic language. The next
brilliant, if covert blow, was dealt Nabokov’s literary foes in The
Gift, where the Adamovich—“adamic head” association probably gave
rise to the Christopher Mortus. In the novel, Mortus is a pen name
of an influential émigré critic, whose satirized image is informed by
both Adamovich and Gippius. Following The Gift, another opportu-
nity for Nabokov to wage an elegant attack against his opponents did
not present itself until the eve of World War II.

Vladislav Khodasevich, a major Russian poet and Nabokov’s liter-
ary comrade-in-arms, died on June 14, 1939. Living in Paris and
mourning the loss of Khodasevich, Nabokov composed “Poëty” (The
Poets), part of a cycle of three programmatic poems he wrote in the
summer and early fall of 1939. This poem, one of his best, albeit not
devoid of formal shortcomings, centers on the destiny of Russian
émigré poets who were shaped in exile (cf. Vasiliiy Shishkov in the
story) and typifies his recurring motif of exiting this world and enter-
ing another:

Pora, my ukhodim: eshchë molodye
so spiskom eshchë ne prisnivshikhsia snov,
s poslednim, chut’ zrimym siian’em Rossii
na fosfornykh rifmakh poslednikh stikhov.

A my ved’, podi, v dokhnovenie znali,
Nam zhit’ by, kazalos’, i knigam rasti,
No muzy bezrodnye nas dokonalni, —

515-526, and “The Adamovic-Xodasevic Polemics,” The Slavic and East Eu-

19 On Nabokov and Adamovich and some origins of “adamic head,” see Field,
VN: The Life and Art of Vladimir Nabokov (New York: Crown Publishers,
1986), 132-135; Boyd, RY, 370-371, 569, fn. 22. Nabokov’s pastiche was
reprinted in the 1979 posthumous edition of his verse; see Nabokov, Stikhi, 238-
242.

20 See John Malmstad, [Dzhon Malmsted], “Iz perepiski V.F. Khodasevicha (1925-
1938),” Minushee 3 (1987): 286; see also Aleksandr Dolinin, “Dve zamekli o

21 On Nabokov and Khodasevich, see [Nikita] Struve, “V. Khodasevich i V.
I nyne pora nam iz mira uiti (PP, 92; cf. Stikhi, 260).

(It is time, we are going away: still youthful, with a list of dreams not yet dreamt, with the last, hardly visible radiance of Russia on the phosphorescent rhymes of our last verse;.

And yet we did know — didn’t we — inspiration, we would live, it seemed, and our books would grow but the kithless muses at last have destroyed us, and it is time now for us to go; [PP 93])

The first four of the nine quatrains identify with the plight of the younger generation of émigré poets to which Nabokov himself belonged, and do not equate “exiting the world” directly with death; the English variant downplays this even further by replacing “pora nam iz mira uiti” (literally, it is time for us to leave the world) with “time for us to go.” However, the next three quatrains build up a Khodasevich-specific tension between the beauty and grace of the world, on the one hand, and its horror and ugliness, on the other: “ne videt’ vsei muki, vsei prelesti mira” (not to see all this world’s enchantment and torment); “detei maloletnikh,/ igraiushchikh v priatki vokrug i vnutri/ ubornoi” (the young children/ who play hide-and-seek inside and around/ the latrine). Like the Khodasevich of his tragic cycle, “Evropeiskaia noch’” (The European Night, 1922-1929), Nabokov draws on the realia of modern Western civilization, such as an advertisement for aspirin: “rydan’ia reklamy na tom beregu” (an electric sign’s tears on the opposite bank). The last two quatrains concentrate — presumably — on the death of Khodasevich. Note the way Nabokov uses ellipses in the Russian text to indicate a threshold for something that words cannot communicate:

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22 For Nabokov’s commentary to the poem, see Stikhi, 319-20.

23 Nabokov’s use of the word “ubornai” (latrine, in the genitive case, “ubornoi”) in a lyrical poem was probably informed by Vladimir Korvin-Piotrovskii’s poem “Is nochnykh progulok” (From Nighttime Walks), Rul’ 2458 (December 25, 1928): 2, where this word also appears in a description of a cityscape; the poem was published in Rul’ on the same page with Nabokov’s own “A Christmas Story.”
Seichas perekhodim s poroga mirskogo  
V tu oblast'... kak khoches' ee nazovi  
Pustynia li, smert', otshen' ee ot slova, —  
A mozhets byt' proshche: molchan' ee liubvi...  

(In a moment we'll pass across the world's threshold  
into a region [ellipses in the Russian text] — name it as you please:  
wilderness, death, disavowal of language,  
or maybe simpler: the silence of love... [PP, 94-5; cf. Stikhi, 261].

The last quatrain points directly to the title poem of Khodasevich's  
third pre-émigré verse collection, Putèm zerna (Grain's Way, 1920).  
Below are the last quatrain of "The Poets" and the last three couplets of "Grain's Way":

Tak i dusha moia idet putem zerna:  
Soidia vo mrak, umrèt — i ozhivèt ona.

I ty, moia strana, i ty, ee narod,  
Umreš' i ozhiveš', prodia skvoz' etot god, —

Zatem, chto mudrost' nam edinaia dana  
Vsemu zhivushchemu idti putèm zerna.  
(Khodasevich, "Grain's Way," 1917)²⁴  

Molchan' ee dalekoi dorogi telezhnoi,  
Gde v pene tsvetov koleia ne vidna,  
Molchan' ee otchizny (liubvi beznadezhnoi),  
molchan' ee zarnitsy, molchan' ee zerna.  
(Nabokov, "The Poets," 1939; PP, 94; cf. Stikhi, 261)

(A literal translation of Khodasevich's poem: Thus my soul goes by  
grain's way:/ Having descended into darkness it then returns to life./  
And you, my country, and you, my people,/ Will die and return to  
life, having lived through this year, — // For we share the same  
wisdom:/ All that lives will go by grain's way; Nabokov's translation  
of his quatrain: the silence of a distant cartway, its furrow,/ beneath

²⁴ Vladislav Khodasevich, Sobranie stikhov (Moscow: Tsentrion interpak, 1992.),  
94-95.
the foam of flowers concealed;/ my silent country (the love that is hopeless);/ the silent sheet lightning, the silent seed; PP, 95)

Both poems refer to homeland ("moia strana," "otchizna"). Moreover, Nabokov ends his tombeau with a key word from Khodasevich's lexicon, zerna (grain) in the genitive singular case, exactly as Khodasevich ends his. The poems also share an underlying mythopoetics: the motif of a grain of wheat dying into the ground in order to be reborn: "In very truth I tell you, unless a grain falls into the ground and dies, it remains that and nothing more; but if it dies, it bears a rich harvest" (John 12: 24).

Sometime in June 1939 Nabokov also wrote a Khodasevich obituary that sums up the deceased poet's achievement. In the obituary a poet's death is described in the same terms as in "The Poets," as a departure. In both texts, Nabokov employs forms of the verb ukhodit' (to leave), (to depart). At the end of his Khodasevich obituary, he writes:

Kak by to ni bylo, teper' vsë koncheno: zaveshchannoe sokrovishche stoit na polke, u budushchego na vidu, a dobytchik ushel tuda, otkuda byt' mozhet koe-chto doletat' do sluksa bol'shikh poetov, pruznaias nashe bytie svoei potustoronnei svezhest'iu — i pridavaia iskusstvu kak raz to tainstvennoe, chto sostavliaet ego nevydelimyi priznak [italics added].

(Be it [sic] as it may, all is finished now: the bequeathed gold shines on a shelf in full view of the future, whilst the goldminer has left for the region from where, perhaps, a faint something reaches the ears of good poets, penetrating our being with the beyond's fresh breath [literally, otherworldly freshness] and conferring upon art that mystery which more than anything characterizes its essence"; italics added; SO, 227).

I have italicized four key notions shared by "The Poets" and "On Khodasevich," two related to the main secret, and two to the recurrent motif of entering the otherworld. Both tributes to Khodasevich, in prose and in verse, appeared in the July (49) issue of Contemporary Annals for 1939. The obituary was signed with Nabokov's usual penname, V. Sirin, while the poem bore a different signature: Vasilii

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Shishkov. Nabokov’s plans for an elegant revenge against his foes became a tour de force of literary mystification.

3

All the technical circumstances behind the hoax have not been uncovered. Nabokov shared his plot with a few friends. Among the editors of *Contemporary Annals*, his accomplices were Iliia Fondaminskii and Vadim Rudnev. At the same time, in 1957 another former editor, Mark Vishniak, referred to Vasilii Shishkov as if he were a real poet, and not Nabokov’s mystification. A two-page manuscript with two other poems, dated “X. 39” and signed “Vas. Shishkov,” has survived among some sixty letters that Nabokov sent the émigré littéra- teur Zinaida Shakhovskaja in the 1930s. Of the two poems preserved by Shakhovskaja, the second, “Otviazhis’ — ia tebia umolaiu!” (Will you leave me alone? I implore you!), was published in the April (70) issue of *Contemporary Annals* in 1940 under the title “Obrashchenie” (The Appeal) and also signed “Vas. Shishkov” — half a year after the “Vasilii Shishkov” mystification had been unveiled by Nabokov himself. In the manuscript two poems, “My s toboiu tak verili v sviad’ bytiia...” (We so firmly believed in the linkage of life...) and “Will you leave me alone?...” are united by a title, “Obrashcheniia” (Appeals), and assigned roman numbers I and II. The three poems (“We so firmly believed in the linkage of life...,” “The Poets,” and “Will you leave me alone? I implore you!” [also known as “The Appeal”]) form a three-part lyrical cycle that exhibits numerous connections with the short story “Vasilii Shishkov” as well as with the circumstances behind its inception, production, and reception. My reconstruction of the “Vasilii Shishkov” poetic cycle is supported among other facts by Nabokov’s consecutive arrangement of the three poems in the 1953 collection *Stikhovoreniiia* (Poems).

26 See Vladimir Nabokov, “Notes for the Russian Recital in New York City (early 1950s),” corr. MS. and TS., VN LC, container 8, folder 5.
28 Vladimir Nabokov, “Obrashcheniia,” MS., ZSh LC.
29 See *Stikhovoreniiia*, 19-23; “We so firmly believed...” is dated 1938, “The Poets” and “Will you leave me alone?...” 1939. In *Stikh* only one short poem separates “We so firmly believed...” from “The Poets” and “Will you leave me
In addition to their textological connections, all three poems of the “Vasilii Shishkov” cycle display organic ties in their versification (ternary meters, rhyming practices; see below) and also share several central clusters of images and motifs, including nostalgia and entering the otherworld.

For instance, the poems speak of refusing oneself the privilege of seeing Russia in dreams: “ukhodim: eshchë molodye,/ so spiskom eshchë ne prisnivshikhsia snov” (we are going away: still youthful,/ with a list of dreams not yet dreamt; “The Poets”) and “chtob s toboi i vo snakh ne skhodit’sia/ okazat’sia ot vsiacheskikh snov” (lest we only in dreams come together, all conceivable dreams to forewear; “Will you leave me alone?...”); in both cases “snov” (genitive plural of the Russian “son”: dream) is in the rhyming position.

“The Poets” was printed in Contemporary Annals in July 1939 and attracted the attention of émigré critics. Before discussing the possible reasons why Adamovich allowed himself to be deceived by Nabokov’s mystifying scheme — and hailed the birth of a new poet — I would like to outline another motive for Nabokov’s choice of the name “Vasilii Shishkov.” It goes back to Khodasevich, who had a number of reasons to dislike both G. Ivanov and Adamovich.

Khodasevich’s fondness for literary mystifications has been a subject of critical discussions, including those in his own memoirs.30

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alone?..., which follow each other consecutively. In PP and Stikhi, Nabokov assigned a different title to “Will you leave me alone?...”: “K Rossii” (To Russia); cf. “Obrashchenie” (The Appeal) in the Contemporary Annals publication. The poems “Oko” (Oculus) and “Chto za noch’ s pamiat’iu sluchilos’” (What happened overnight...) may also be related to this cycle. “Oculus” is the fourth known poem by Nabokov written in 1939; see PP, 100-101 and Stikhi, 264. Dated 1939 and written in Paris, it mentions the “disappeared boundary between eternity and matter”: “... ischezla granitsa / mezhdu vechnost’iu i veshchestvom”; compare in “We so firmly believed...”: “... dymka volny / mezhdu moyoi i toboi, mezhdu mel’iu i tonushchim” (a wave’s haze / between me and you, between shallow and sinking). “What happened overnight...” is dated 1938 in Stikhotvorenija (18), PP (90-91), and Stikhi (259); PP and Stikhi indicate that it was written in Menton.

During a joint evening of poetry in 1936 in Paris, Nabokov heard Khodasevich read “Zhizn' Vasiliia Travnikova” (The Life of Vasily Travnikov), a fictional account of the life and works of Aleksandr Pushkin’s elder contemporary, whom Khodasevich invented not only to trap his literary enemies but also to reaffirm his own place in what he saw as the kernel tradition in Russian poetry. The Khodasevich piece on Travnikov contained several quotations from the fictitious poet’s oeuvre. Khodasevich composed and stylized some, while he borrowed at least one from his late friend the poet Muni (S.V. Kisin). A brilliant performance, “The Life of Vasily Travnikov” beguiled the audience and elicited much praise from Adamovich, who was generally reluctant to pay Khodasevich his due. As the Khodasevich scholar A.L. Zorin has pointed out, the blindness and gullibility of the public — led by Adamovich himself in being taken in by this obvious hoax — defies rational explanation. Khodasevich’s mystification worked perfectly, which not only created a precedent for Nabokov’s invented poet, Vasily Shishkov, but also offered concrete tips.

Nabokov’s biographer has suggested that the names Shishkov and Travnikov share an etymological pattern: both derive from general botanical terms, the former from shishka (pine cone), the latter from trava (grass). There is another possible antecedent for Nabokov’s choice of an alternative nom de plume and the name of his fictitious character. In 1926 he started a short story about a young émigré who crosses the Russian border illegally to undertake an expedition to his

31 For details of the reading, see Boyd, RY 424-425.
32 See Zorin, “Nachalo”; Boyd, RY, 509. Adamovich devoted a section of his literary column in The Latest News to the Khodasevich’s “discovery.” In a recent interview (March 15, 1994, Daytona Beach, Florida), one of the very last living émigré poet of the first wave, Igor’ Chinnov (1908-1996), pointed out to me that although Adamovich was a very sensitive critic and wonderful stylist, his general knowledge of literature was more limited than it appears from reading his prose. For instance, in the 1940s Adamovich admitted to Chinnov that he had never read Dante’s The Divine Comedy. Adamovich’s willingness to “buy into” the Khodasevich scheme may have resulted from his insufficient knowledge of late eighteenth-century Russian literary culture; even more ludicrous is the readiness of Adamovich to believe the story about Travnikov’s surviving archive, which Khodasevich claimed to have found.
33 Boyd, RY, 509.
old manor-house.34 The story was left unfinished, but Nabokov signed the manuscript with the name “Vasily Shalfeev.” The last name Shalfeev, although less common than either Shishkov or Travnikov, is also of botanical origin, from *shalfei*, a medicinal herb familiar to most Russians for its soothing effect upon the respiratory system (Nabokov suffered from frequent throat ailments) and known in English as garden sage (*Salvia officinalis*). Someone as fond of dictionaries as Nabokov was (he used to read the Dal’ dictionary and later Webster’s in bed) may have considered this pseudonym with a double etymological twist as a possibility. In addition, the risky expedition that the protagonist of the 1926 “Shalfeev” story undertakes to Russia across the Polish border seems akin in spirit and design to what Martin plots in *Podvig* (Glory, 1931) and Vasily Shishkov contemplates and then rejects in 1939: “Try making my way back to Russia? No, the frying pan is enough” (“èto polymia”; *Stories*, 499/VF, 213).

Just as the inception of these two mystifications reveals many affinities, their reception also follows a similar pattern, especially when in both cases the herald of the two “new” poets — Travnikov and Shishkov — was Adamovich. “Rejecting hope and consolation in life, in poetry [Travnikov] strove to repudiate any use of ornamentation,” — thus Khodasevich assessed his invented protagonist’s contribution.35 Having subscribed to Khodasevich’s mystification, Adamovich praised the discovered poet for writing the kind of verse that had been unknown in Russia before Pushkin and Evgenii Baratynskii: “impeccable, sober, devoid of any sentimentality, any stylistic excesses.”36 Three years later, Adamovich gave an enthusiastic endorsement to another “discovered” poet, Vasily Shishkov, in his regular column in *The Latest News*:

Who is Vasily Shishkov? Have other poems signed with his name appeared before? I cannot be sure of it, but I do not seem to recall seeing this name in print. In any event, the name did not stick to my memory, although judging by the poem published in *Contemporary Annals*, it should have. In Shishkov’s “The Poets” every line, every word exhibits talent [Adamovich quotes the first two quatrains of “The Poets”]. I regret being unable to quote this mar-

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34 Ibid., 261.
36 Ibid., 31.
velous poem in full for lack of space; I will however ask again: Who is Vasily Shishkov? Where does he come from? It is very possible that in a year or two this name will be familiar to all who care about Russian poetry.  

Scholars of Nabokov’s versification have commented on the choice of a meter not common in his versification, amphibrachic tetrameter (Am 4), for “The Poets.” An argument has been made that the choice of a meter that occurs only once in Nabokov’s verse after 1925 was the main reason Adamovich did not suspect a Nabokovian presence behind the text of the poem signed “Vas. Shishkov.” However, it seems highly unlikely that Adamovich would have remembered Nabokov’s metrical repertoire in such detail in 1939, especially given that Nabokov had not published verse under his name since 1935. The “Vasily Shishkov” cycle not only contains less ornamentation than just about any other of Nabokov’s pre-World War II Russian poems, but also addresses the issues that were most vital for the entire émigré literary community with utmost precision and sobriety. If Nabokov in his earlier mystification, “Night Journey,” and Khodasevich in “The Life of Vasilii Travnikov,” seem to partake of a playful and witty sensibility of the Pushkinian Golden Age, then Nabokov of the “Vasily Shishkov” cycle employs literary mystification to communicate with the readers directly and without any mediating stylization. Constructing a new authorial persona for himself and lurking behind the semitransparent veil of mystification, Nabokov created a genuine voice which is unparalleled by his other poems. In the poems of the “Vasily Shishkov” cycle, love, language/silence, and death are intoned by a relentless and at times clairvoyant poet. The death of Khodasevich was not the only one standing behind the several deaths in the cycle. There is something of the poet Boris Poplavskii (1903-1935), Nabokov’s junior by some three years and a dapper darling of Russian Paris, in the image of Vasily Shishkov in the eponymous story. Poplavskii’s death in 1935 startled the émigré literary community and signaled that something was amiss in the lives of its younger poets. Additionally, “Will you leave me alone?” (printed in 1940


when the Shishkov mystification was subsiding into history) speaks of Russia gleaming through the grass of two “far-parted tombs” (“skvoz’ travu dvukh nesmeznykh mogil”). The two non-adjacent graves refer to Nabokov’s father, V.D. Nabokov, killed on March 28, 1922 and buried in Tegel outside Berlin, and mother, E. I. Nabokova, who died on May 2, 1939, and was buried at the Russian section of Olšánske Hřbitovy in Prague.39

One cannot resist reading Shishkov’s/Nabokov’s poem, as well the comments that it elicited from Adamovich, in a postfactum light of somber irony: on August 17, 1939, when the review was printed, Russia Abroad had but ten months remaining. The Nazis would march into Paris on July 13, 1940, thereby shutting down the era of the First Russian Emigration. Rather than noting the meter of “The Poets,” which is not at all unusual for twentieth-century Russian prosody, Adamovich probably saw in the poem a sober, direct, naked voice prophesying the end of Russian culture in European exile.

4

The short story “Vasily Shishkov” comments not only on the verse of the invented poet and his inventor, but also on its reception by Russian émigré critics. In the brief remarks prepared by Nabokov for the 1979 edition of his poetry, only half a sentence deals with the “Vasily Shishkov” controversy: “…that I could not help prolonging the joke and described my meetings with the nonexistent Shishkov in a short story which, among other treats [sredi prochego iziuma], contained a critical reading of the poem itself and Adamovich’s praises” (Stikhi, 320).

No one thus far has attempted to take Nabokov’s remark seriously and literally. In “Vasily Shishkov” the young poet Shishkov and his interlocutor, the narrator Nabokov, offer critical commentaries on each other’s work. Since the character is a literary personification of his creator, it is only to be expected that the poetic material and the critical commentaries it elicited would be homologous with Nabokov’s poetic and critical oeuvre. To narrow the circle, I propose to examine the critical exchange between Shishkov and Nabokov — the meta-literary centerpiece of the story — in light of Nabokov’s verse and

39 Natal’ia Tolstaia suggested this in her useful commentary in Nabokov, Krug, 521.
Nabokov’s criticism, and critical observations on Nabokov by Adamovich and Khodasevich.

When Nabokov reads the first notebook containing what Shishkov would subsequently label as his parodies of “the product of metromania,” he is outraged by three defects: the tasteless sound orchestration, the poor rhyming practices, and the omnivorousness of the poems’ themes. He offers examples of atrocious rhymes from Shishkov’s “bad” poems: “dostatochno skazat’, chto sochetals’ takie pary, kak ‘zhasminavyrazhala uzhas mina’, ‘besedki’ i ‘bes edkii’, ‘noktiurna’-brat dvoiurnyi’ (for example, teatr-gladiator, mustang-tank, Madonna-belladonna; VF, 207| Stories, 495); the rhymes in the English text are somewhat better than in the original. In comparing these examples with several examples of Nabokov’s own “chic” alliterations and unfortunate rhymes, I draw from the entire corpus of Nabokov’s verse as selected by him for the 1979 edition, but a certain emphasis will be placed on his poetic output of the 1930s, particularly the seven poems published in Paris under the pen-name “Sirin” between 1931 and 1935.40


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The next layer of comparison involves Shishkov's and Nabokov's rhymes. There are striking resemblances between the examples criticized in the story and the following compound rhymes in Nabokov's poetry: "apostolu — po stolu" ("Taina vecheria," 1918), "uglovatyi — voshla ty" ("Ia ponniu v pliuhevoi oprave...", 1923), "iz raia — vybiraia" ("Pustiak — nazvan'e machty..., " 1926), "pripomnishi' son — na pamiat' on" ("Snovidene," 1927). His poetic corpus also includes such trite and "meretricious" (as the narrator of the story puts it) rhymes as "lazur'iu — glazur'iu" (1923), "vetra — metra" (1925), "nashe — krashe" (1927), "prostiraiu — osiazaiu," (1928), "s chastivo — opasivo" (1930), "rabami — oblakami" (1934), "sidit — gliadit" (1934), "Kachurin — lazuri" (1947), and such cacophonic rhymes as "sêla — dolgii" (1926) and "besposhchaden — radi" (1932).

In a study of Nabokov's versification, G.S. Smith proposes that "departures from exactitude" have a marked function in his verse.  

Smith finds it noteworthy that Nabokov employs cacophonous compound rhymes like "besedki — bes edkii" to demonstrate the poor quality of Shishkov's "bad" poems. He also points out that in "serious" poems like "Slava" (Fame, 1942) Nabokov uses "outlandish" compound rhymes as an ideologically or aesthetically marked category. Such practice reaches a climax in the most directly political of his poems, "O praviteliakh" (On Rulers, 1944), where both the compound rhymes and a reference to "my deceased name-sake" point to the great Futurist poet Vladimir Maiakovskii (incidentally, Nabokov considered Maiakovskii a "paltry Soviet poet not devoid of some glamour and knack but fatally corrupted by the regime he served with loyalty"; Stikhi, 320). In contrast to Smith's data, my own analysis of Nabokov's versification shows experimentation with inexact and compound rhyming — with varying degree of success — to be a consistent feature of his poetry. In fact, as early as 1919 we find such Maiakovskian signature rhymes as "mogli vy — netoroplivyi" ("Foot-

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41 Unless otherwise indicated, all quotations from Nabokov's poetry are from Stikhi, his self-selected and largest volume of Russian poetry, published posthumously in 1979.

42 See Smith, "Nabokov and Russian Verse Form."
ball”; cf. Maiakovskii’s famous poem “A vy mogli by” [Would You Dare, 1913] where “ryby” is rhymed with “mogli by’”). Moreover, in the 1930s Nabokov was trying to work out a signature rhyme of his own — most likely challenged by the exhilarating experimentation in Soviet Russia by such poets as Nikolai Aseev, Semen Kirsanov, Il’ia Sel’vinskii, and Nikolai Tikhonov and certainly by Marina Tsvetaeva in emigration. Two important long poems of the 1930s — both published in The Latest News — display a peculiar rhyming of a feminine clausula with a dactylic one or vice versa. In “Veche r na pustyre” (An Evening on a Vacant Lot, 1932) we find seven rhymes of this sort: “proshche — zanoschivoi,” “odinochestvo — nochi,” “baloven’ — nebyvaloi,” “pamiat’iu — plamia,” “schastiia — chashchu,” “otnialo — neplotno,” “oko — krivobokuiu.” Another poem, the confessional “Kak ia liubliu tebia” (How I love you, 1934) contains four more rhymes of this type: “oprometchivo — trudnoi rechi,” “snova — osnovano,” “stvolami — plamenem,” “rastsvetshii — vechnoe.” The experimentation with inexact rhyming — both Nabokov’s (author) and his Shishkov’s (text) — signals again that Nabokov might have reached a plateau in poetry and that he tried to revitalize his poetic form. (In a 1944 letter to Edmund Wilson, Nabokov claimed that he “invented the rhyme combining a dactylic and a feminine ending.”)

To go a step further, a comparison of the rhyming practices in the three poems of the “Vasilii Shishkov” cycle (presumably drawn from Shishkov’s “good” poems in the second notebook) with the rest of Nabokov’s poetry of the 1930s also reveals much affinity. In the cycle we find such bleak and feeble rhymes as “molodye — Rossii,” “glazakh — vetviakh,” “pokinul — dolinu”; such parodic rhymes as “maloletnikh — letnikh,” “slëzy — berëzy,” “udivist’no — nedeistvit’noi”; such purely grammatical rhymes as “obidt’ — videt’” (cf. also “byt’ — zabyt’” in the 1923 poem “Sankt-Peterburg — uzornyi inei...”). Adamovich must have been so taken by the prophetic message of “The Poets” that he overlooked some of its obvious formal weaknesses, several of which are emblematic of Nabokov’s versification overall. On the other hand, while Nabokov’s metrical conservatism is not atypical of the versification of Russian émigrés (classical meters were often employed as a protective armor

43 Wilson Letters, 126.
against what many émigré poets saw as the ideologically-charged avant-gardism of Russian Soviet poetry), his rhyming practices bespeak a certain indifference to the semantic function of rhyme. On the other hand, in his émigré criticism Nabokov did display an understanding of what constitutes a quality rhyme. For instance, in a 1931 review, he wrote: “I think that if one were to tune one’s lyre to Pushkin’s or Derzhavin’s prosody, one ought to avoid inexact rhymes (ravnina — edinyi, vetro — vstreiti’, lirnik — kumirni).”\(^{44}\) He also advised his younger brother, Kirill Nabokov, in 1930, to pay closer attention to rhyming perfection:

More than once I have written in *The Rudder* about ungraceful rhymes, which torture one’s ears and create a comical effect due to one’s ear’s habitual associations. For instance, you rhyme “mozg” and “roz”; having reached the word “roz,” where one’s ear awaits a rhyme, one involuntarily makes “rozg” from “roz,” and this “rozg” [i. e., “birch rods” instead of “roses”] are laughable. “Zhadyi” and “sada” or “pozharishch” and “lapishch” do not rhyme at all, while “rastsvet” and “tsvet” or “kogti” and “nogti” rhyme too obviously, being cognates, and this is bad. A rhyme ought to make the reader both amazed and satisfied, amazed by how unusual it is, and satisfied with its preciseness and musicality (*PSS*, 118).

Thus, in the discursive writings, as well as in the story, Nabokov criticizes rhymes that are akin to his own inexact rhymes, including those of the “Vasily Shishkov” cycle.

What are we to make of such a seeming double standard? A case of not seeing a beam in one’s own eye? Perhaps a blindness to the limitations of one’s own verse would be too one dimensional for Nabokov. What do “phosphorescent rhymes of our last verse” signify in “The Poets”? Are they gleaming with formal brilliance? Or are they, perhaps, dim and moldy? Or do they in fact signal the immi-nence of the poetic death and “disappearance” of Vasily Shishkov, along with his creator Vladimir Nabokov, then still Sirin, and their colleagues, other Russian émigré poets? It is probably all of the above if one concludes that Nabokov provides a double-edged commentary in “Vasily Shishkov” on his own poetic practices. Thus, his analysis of first Shishkov’s “bad” poems and now his “good” ones also sends

\(^{44}\) See *Kniga*, 392.
an important self-critical message regarding his poetic crisis of the 1930s.

5

Before shifting to the matter of Shishkov’s disappearance within his own verse, I will sum up my comparisons of Shishkov’s and Nabokov’s versification. Atypical of Nabokov’s prosody as the meter of “The Poets” may be, its rhyming connects the “Vasiliy Shishkov” cycle with his poetic output in general and with the other poems of the 1930s in particular. For Nabokov, rhyme seems to have been a structural/structuring and grammatical device, and only occasionally a paronomastic device. In the poems of the “Vasiliy Shishkov” cycle, the oracular poetic persona makes up for the unremarkable versification.

When offering Nabokov the second, “much more tattered,” notebook with “good” poems (“Here’s my real passport…. Read just one poem at random, it will be enough for both you and me”; Stories, 495), Shishkov also confronts him with an unexpected and unwanted critical judgment of his work:

By the way, to avoid any misapprehension, let me warn you that I do not care for your novels [note that Nabokov renders knigi as “novels” and not literally as “books,” thereby narrowing the circle of Shishkov’s response to fiction only; the Russian “books” could refer to both poetry and prose; by 1939 Nabokov had published in emigration two separate volumes of poetry plus the collection “The Return of Chorb” with fifteen stories and twenty-four poems], they irritate me as would a harsh light or the loud conversation of strangers when one longs not to talk, but to think. Yet, at the same time, in a purely physiological way — if I may put it like that — you possess some secret of writing, the secret of certain basic colors, something exceptionally rare and important, which, alas, you apply to little purpose, within the narrow limits of your general abilities — driving about, so to speak, all over the place in a powerful racing car for which you have absolutely no use, but which keeps you thinking where could one thunder off next”; Stories, 495-496).

45 A rare exception is the poem “Vliublennost” (Being in Love) composed by the last of Nabokov’s literary representatives, Vadim in Look at the Harlequins! (1973). In Vadim’s poem, “vliublennost” (literally, being in love) is rhymed with “potustoronnost” (literally, otherworldliness) thereby making a point about the connections between love and the otherworld.
Shishkov’s comments sum up a view of Nabokov as a metaliterary writer, which goes back to the 1930s and was later embraced by a pleiad of Western critics and postmodernist writers. This formulation, “in a purely physiological way,” suggests that Nabokov possesses an inherently golden pen that ensures the brilliance of his style and the effectiveness of his devices. Such physiological writing — so one is compelled to assume from Shishkov’s critique — does not open any metaphysical horizons. The “metaliterary” view prevailed in the pre-World War II émigré criticism, only to experience a second upsurge in Western academia in the 1960s-1970s. By the end of the 1930s, depending on whether the émigré critics were well disposed toward Nabokov (Khodasevich, Bitsilli, Struve, N. Andreev) or against him (Gippius/Merezhkovskii, Adamovich), they would either hail or belittle him on quite similar grounds. Compare, for instance, this seminal formulation by Khodasevich from his essay “O Sirine” (“On Sirin,” 1937) with the judgment of Adamovich’s in the aforementioned “Sirin.” For Khodasevich,

...Sirin becomes predominantly the artist of form, of literary device, and not only in the sense — now common and widely recognized — that the formal side of his writings stands out for its exceptional diversity, complexity, brilliance, and novelty.... Sirin not only masks or hides his devices, ...but rather reveals them like a conjurer .... Here, I feel, lies the key to Sirin. His works are inhabited not only by dramatis personae, but also countless devices which — like elves or gnomes — ... carry out enormous tasks.... They create the world of a work of art and become its indispensable characters. This is why Sirin does not hide them: his main goal is to show how devices live and work ... I actually think, or am almost sure that Sirin ... will one day open up and present us with a ruthless satirical portrayal of a writer. Such a portrayal would be a natural stage in the development of this central theme which possesses him.46

And now Adamovich:

Sirin’s prose resembles Chinese shadows: a perfectly white background which nothing can disturb or stir up. And against this background weaving the most quaint patterns are what seem to be either people, or passions, or fates. Try

looking through the chinks into what's gaping in between: there is nothing there, one loses vision in milky-white emptiness .... Could it be that he would prefer the rubber smoothness of style over everything else? It is suffocating, cold, and strange to read Sirin's prose. And it matters not whether we look inside it or glance at its surface. But let me repeat it, he is a remarkable writer, a most original figure ... The remaining doubts concern only what he does with his gift.47

While Adamovich wrote three years earlier than Khodasevich, both claim — the former with skepticism, the latter with optimism — that Nabokov's potential is still to unravel in the future. The critics expect different things from Nabokov, although both fashion him as a meta-literary gamesman. For Adamovich, who makes the mistake of separating artistry from ethics in Nabokov's indivisible world, "a moral criterion is inapplicable" to Nabokov. Apparently oblivious to the fact that in most of his pre-1934 mature works (especially Kamera obskura and The Defense) Nabokov makes ethical judgments about his characters, Adamovich challenges him to become a writer concerned with the human condition. Between January 1934 and March 1936 Despair and Invitation to a Beheading were published, as it were, in response to Adamovich's requests. Khodasevich's wish also came true in several works of the late 1930s that feature writers as their major characters. Already in "Spring in Fialta," which Khodasevich does not discuss in his essay, we encounter a successful Hungarian-French writer, Ferdinand, the story's "salamander of fate." The protagonist of "Spring in Fialta," the Russian émigré Vasen'ka, makes the following comment about Ferdinand's writing:

At the beginning of his career it had been possible to distinguish some human landscape, some old garden, some dream-familiar disposition of trees through the stained glass of his prodigious prose... but with every new book the tints grew still more dense, the gules and purpure still more ominous and today one can no longer see anything at all through that blazoned, ghastly rich glass, and it seems that were one to break it, nothing but a perfectly black void would face one's shivering soul (Stories, 420).

Notice how close this comes to both Adamovich's and Khodasevich's remarks on Nabokov. The complexity here lies in the fact that although Vasen'ka (Vasily), the narrator of "Spring in Fialta," and not

his rival, Ferdinand, happens to be Nabokov’s privileged character in the story, Ferdinand also shares much with his creator. Note the narrator’s comment regarding Ferdinand’s responses to unwilling critics: “But how dangerous he was in his prime [Nabokov was reaching his prime in the late 1930s], what venom he spurted, with what whips he lashed when provoked! The tornado of his passing satire left a barren waste where felled oaks lay in a row, and the dust still twisted, and the unfortunate author of some adverse review, howling with pain, spun like a top in the dust” (Stories, 420-21). I have demonstrated above that the 1930s witnessed precisely a “tornado” of Nabokov’s counterattacks, overt at times, covert at others, but always elegantly hitting the target. In “Vasily Shishkov” Nabokov’s duel with the critics reached a high point: the short story finalized what the novel The Gift and the story “Spring in Fialta” had done with such elegance and poignancy.

The Gift — focusing on the writer Godunov-Cherdyntsev and thereby granting Khodasevich’s wish — began to appear serially in April 1937, some three months after the Khodasevich’s essay. Godunov-Cherdyntsev’s imagined conversations with his literary ally, the poet and critic Koncheyev (whose image is informed by Nabokov’s vision of Khodasevich), bridge Nabokov’s one-dimensional reception by most émigré critics and the critical responses to the “Vasily Shishkov” controversy. In the second conversation, which takes place in the Grünewald in Berlin, Koncheyev lists five shortcomings in Godunov-Cherdyntsev’s writing. Here is Koncheyev’s third comment: “…you sometimes bring up parody to such a degree of naturalness that it actually becomes a genuine serious thought, but on this level it suddenly falters, lapsing into a mannerism that is yours and not a parody of a mannerism, although it is precisely the kind of thing you are ridiculing — as if somebody parodying an actor’s slovenly reading of Shakespeare had been carried away, had started to thunder in earnest, but had accidentally garbled a line” (Gift, 339). Nabokov used his skill in creating literary personae to demystify the authorship of “The Poets.” After the story “Vasily Shishkov” had appeared in The Latest News, Adamovich had no choice but to respond publicly to Nabokov’s short story. In a concluding section of his regular literary column, Adamovich discussed the chances that Vasily Shishkov was fictional:
I must confess that a suspicion had crossed my mind: could it be that Sirin made it all up, that he created both Vasilii Shishkov and his verse? Sirin's own poetry is certainly of a much different sort. But if it is at all possible to compose something for another consciousness and to intuit the other's themes, such a possibility is twice as likely for Sirin with his talent and inventiveness. In parodies and pastiches inspiration sometimes loses restraint and even forgets about the acting like an actor who lives his part.48

One gets an almost uncanny feeling from reading this last sentence, so closely does it recall the message of Koncheyev's critical comment about Godunov-Cherdyntsev's art of parody in The Gift!

Adamovich reiterated his reasons for having welcomed Shishkov with much enthusiasm. He insisted that the entire text of "The Poets" was written "on such a compositional level when ornamentation [ukrashenie] [was] not needed or [was] inseparable from the poem's whole."49 Adamovich was still unwilling to fall victim to Nabokov's mystification. He labeled "Vasilii Shishkov" a "feuilleton," thereby downplaying the fictionality of Nabokov's short story.50 Adamovich also called Shishkov a "Russian Rimbaud," which not only testified to his continuing admiration for "The Poets" but also ipso facto identified the teleology of Shishkov's career with that of the mythologized French poet and adventurer.51 In the story, Shishkov relays to Nabokov that he considered going to "Africa, to the colonies" (Stories, 499) but then decided against it.52 Despite that, Adamovich assumed that Shishkov ended up "running away from literature to Africa,"53 again, betraying his tendency to treat the story as a piece

49 Ibid.
50 "Vasilii Shishkov" appeared on September 12, 1939 on page 3 of The Latest News where they usually placed literary columns (e.g. the regular column by Adamovich), short stories, and feuilletons.
51 For a recent discussion of the cultural mythology of Rimbaud's disappearance from the literary scene, see Chapter I in Svetlana Boym's Death in Quotation Marks (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1991).
52 Nabokov himself had considered undertaking an expedition to the tropics, as reported by Nikolai Raevskii, "Vospominaniia o Vladimire Nabokove," Prostor 2 (1989): 115.
53 Adamovich, "Literaturnye zametki."
of journalism or as a memoiristic account, and not as a work of fiction.

Adamovich plots his review of the story with great caution: he wants to consider every possibility and yet shield himself from a possible next round of Nabokov's mystification. Having insured himself against the "fictional" outcome of Nabokov's story, Adamovich goes on to suggest the Khodasevich hoax "The Life of Vasilii Travnikov" as a precedent for "Vasilii Shishkov" in case Nabokov's indeed turned out to be a "quaint mystification." Adamovich seems torn at the end of his review. He is right in identifying the genesis of Nabokov's invented poet with Khodasevich's earlier mystification. He is, however, unwilling to be Nabokov's fool. Thence comes Adamovich's most important comment, which he utters as though unaware of the depth of its meaning: "It would be a great pity if Shishkov the fugitive turned out to be 'a metaphysical being' [sushchestvom metafizicheskix]: it would be a great joy to know his other works and to discover that his silence is not final."54 For Adamovich, the poet Shishkov's "metaphysical" nature (Adamovich uses "metaphysical" in the sense of "fictional") is a disappointment; among other things it would prove that Adamovich had no reason to deny Nabokov's poetry its due. But for Nabokov, the metaphysical disappearance of Shishkov is the story's ultimate triumph over time and the shrinking émigré cultural context! Incidentally, in a rather long preface to the English text of the story, printed in Tyrants Destroyed (1975) three years after Adamovich died, Nabokov elucidated several circumstances behind the Vasilii Shishkov controversy. He quoted "The Poets" in full and also made this comment on Adamovich:

Adamovich refused at first to believe eager friends and foes who drew his attention to my having invented Shishkov; finally, he gave in and explained in his next essay that I 'was a sufficiently skillful parodist to mimic genius.' I fervently wish all critics to be as generous as he. I met him briefly, only twice; but many old literati have spoken a lot, on the occasion of his recent death, about his kindness and penetrativeness. He had really only two passions in life: Russian poetry and French sailors (Stories, 657).

54 Ibid.
It remains to explain the last three sentences of “Vasiliy Shishkov.” Since this was Nabokov’s last Russian short story, its ending could also signal a guide to the poetics of his short fiction. The narrator, Gospodin Nabokov, analyzes the nature of Shishkov’s disappearance as follows:

Что вобснече значили эти его слова — “исчезнуть”, “раствориться”? Неужели же он в каком-то невинном дом для рассудка, дико буквальным смыслом имел в виду исчезновение его в своем творчестве, раствориться в своих стихах, оставить от своей личности только стихи? Не переоценит ли он “прозрачность и прочность таких необычных гробниц”? (VF, 213-4).

(And, generally speaking, what did he have in mind when he said he intended “to disappear, to dissolve”? Cannot it actually be that in a wildly literal sense, unacceptable to one’s reason, he meant disappearing in his art, dissolving in his verse, thus leaving of himself, of his nebulous person, nothing but verse? One wonders if he did not overestimate

The transparency and soundness
Of such an unusual coffin; Stories, 499).

The English text represents the last bit of the story as a two-line quotation from a poem. In fact, metrically speaking, it is a single line of an anapestic pentameter (An5) broken into two demistiches by a caesura after the first unstressed syllable of the third foot: the transparency and soundness // of such an unusual coffin. In the Russian text, the line is rendered graphically as prose, while metrically it is a verse of an amphibrachic pentameter (Am5) with a caesura falling after the second foot: “прозрачность и прочность // так в необычных гробницах.” In both cases, the verse quoted by Nabokov points — if covertly — to the ternary meters of the “Vasiliy Shishkov” cycle, the English to the anapest of “We so firmly believed…” (An4) and “Will you leave me alone?…” (An3), the Russian to the amphibrach of “The Poets” (Am4). At the same time, not a single complete poem in Nabokov’s 1979 collection creates a precedent for an Am5, while only two lines — the beginning of Koncheyev’s poem quoted in The
Gift — are known to have been written in An5. The exact connection between the poems of the “Vasiliy Shishkov” cycle and the poem from which Nabokov quotes at the end of the story? Were the Russian émigrés who read the story in 1939 supposed to infer from it — given the critical repercussions of the earlier publication of “The Poets” — that Nabokov was quoting yet another poem from the notebook Shishkov had entrusted to him before “disappearing”? Or were they to take this as another instance of his use of prosodic structures in prose as markers of privileged meaning, here the motif of disappearance? In the final analysis, is the line of verse at the end of the story Nabokov’s or Shishkov’s? Are we after all supposed to separate Nabokov the author of the story and Shishkov the literary persona that this text creates?

In the 1970s, Nabokov was compelled to provide an extensive background in the preface to the English version of the story — in fact the most extensive preface in all of the short stories — and include the entire “The Poets” (Stories, 656-7). After the publication of the Russian version of the story in 1939, émigré readers did not need any such preface: the poems, as well as reviews in the émigré press, were easily accessible; those readers were steeped in the émigré context and partook of much the same information as Nabokov himself. He was rightly concerned that the context of the story be made available to the English-language reader in the 1970s. The preface to his Englished story provides the reader with the missing information about the author-text continuum. Nabokov’s efforts were aimed at restoring the sparkle of his time-dimmed mirrors.

Finally, what is “Vasiliy Shishkov” about? Here the text tells about the author’s intention to abandon his cultural milieu. Nabokov’s biographers have demonstrated at length how by the end of the 1930s he was “searching for an exit” from the narrowing and thinning context of Russia Abroad. The late 1930s were a time when Nabokov searched for a new literary persona that would allow him to speak/write in a foreign language. He tried French — the short story “Mademoiselle O” (1936) was the fruit of this — but opted for Eng-

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55 The two lines in The Gift are quoted in Linyov’s review of Koncheyev’s poetry collection; see SSoch, 3:152.
56 “Searching for an Exit: France, 1939-1940” is the title of Chapter 22 in Boyd, RY.
lish. For a short period in 1938-1939 he worked simultaneously in both English and Russian. Anticipating Nabokov’s move from the Old World into a New World, “Vasily Shishkov” was his harmonious, perfect exit from the world of the Russian emigration. While Adamo-vich suspected that Shishkov had left for Africa, there are transparent hints in the story about Shishkov’s possible move to America. There are German-Jewish refugees discussing visa intricacies on the fringes of the story. The gently comical portrayals of a group of refugees — both preceding Nabokov’s conversations with Shishkov — contain remarkable parallels with the portrayal of German-Jewish refugees in the film Casablanca (1943), directed by Michael Curtiz. In the film, much as in the story, the refugees practice conversing in a foreign language with no sense of proper usage.

Nabokov’s postface “On a Book Entitled Lolita” (1956) offers an insight into his post-émigré assessment of his search for a new language in which to write: “My private tragedy, which cannot, and indeed should not, be anybody’s concern, is that I had to abandon my natural idiom, my untrammled, rich, and infinitely docile Russian tongue for a second-rate brand of English, devoid of any of those apparatuses — the baffling mirror, the black velvet backdrop, the implied associations and traditions — which the native illusionist, frac-tails flying, can magically use to transcend the heritage in his own way” (L, 316-17). Look at how precisely Nabokov puts it. The “baffling mirror” transforms him into Shishkov against the contextual “backdrop” of “associations and traditions,” — the native Russian heritage preserved and yet transformed in exile. This is exactly what Nabokov says and does in “Vasily Shishkov.” He rescues the heritage of Russian émigré culture. He preserves its texts — Shishkov’s poems. But insofar as Nabokov as a quintessential Russian émigré author creates Vasily Shishkov in his text, this very text decreates Nabokov as émigré author by pronouncing his own verdict: to disappear in “his art,” to dissolve in “his poetry.” There is after all inexplicable illusionism in Shishkov’s disappearance. To quote the narrator’s remark in the story, “Where the deuce did he go?” (Stories, 499). Still, Shishkov’s otherworldly disappearance into the “transparent and sound” world of his liminal poems is not the worst alternative for the culture of the Russian emigration.

It is revealing to compare Nabokov’s skepticism regarding the future of the Russian emigration circa 1939 with his optimistic and
inspirational jubilee remarks on the tenth anniversary of the Bolshevik Revolution in 1927:

We are the wave of Russia gone out of its shores; we have been spilled all over the world.... We celebrate ten years of freedom. Perhaps no other people has known the freedom we know. In this invisible Russia that surrounds us, nourishes our lives, fills our souls, and colors our dreams there is no law other than our love for her, and no other authority than our own conscience.... Nowadays, when they celebrate the USSR-gray anniversary [otmechaetsia seryi, èsèsèsèrnyi jubilei], we celebrate ten years of contempt, faithfulness, and freedom. Let us not blame our exile. Today let us repeat the words of the ancient warrior of whom Plutarch wrote: "At night, in tents, amidst a desert far away from Rome: I put up my tent, and my tent was Rome for me." 

Some twelve years later Nabokov's creation, the émigré poet Shishkov, "implored" his homeland to leave him alone:

Will you leave me alone? I implore you!
Dusk is ghastly. Life's noises subside.
I am helpless. And I am dying
Of the blind touch of your whelming tide.

One stanza later, the poet is ready to sacrifice so much — his name, his native tongue — only for his homeland to let go of him:

I'm prepared to lie hidden forever
and to live without name. I'm prepared,
lest we only in dreams come together,
all conceivable dreams to foreswear;

to be drained of my blood, to be crippled,
to have done with the books I must love,
for the first available idiom
to exchange all I have: my own tongue (PP, 96, Stikhi, 262).

The latter stanza anticipates what Nabokov would say twenty years later in "On A Book Entitled Lolita." When "Will you leave me alone?...." came out in the last issue of Contemporary Annals under the name "Vas. Shishkov," Nabokov had less than two months left to

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enjoy his ambivalent status as a Russian émigré with an unwanted Nansen refugee passport. On May 19, 1940, he would sail to America, no longer Vladimir Sirin, but Vladimir Nabokov the would-be Russian-American writer. The cultural climate in the United States was not conducive to preserving and developing the émigré heritage. In America, as Nabokov put it in his foreword to The Gift, the rich world of Russian émigré culture “remained unknown to American intellectuals (who, bewitched by Communist propaganda, saw [Russian émigrés] merely as villainous generals, oil magnates, and gaunt ladies with lorgnettes).” Incidentally, one of his foes, Zinaida Gippius, did in fact look like a “gaunt lady” with a lorgnette and is disguised in “Vasiliy Shishkov” as “an ample female (a translatress ... or perhaps a theosophist) with a gloomy little husband resembling a black breloque” [Stories, 498] — one pictures Dmitrii Merezhkovskii right away!

Nabokov needed his last Russian short story not only to triumph over his émigré literary foes before exiting gracefully. He needed to make a closing statement regarding the destiny of Russian emigration. In fact, while he parted with his Russian voice, which he would never quite regain thereafter (“Vasiliy Shishkov” is both a valediction and a last testament), the creation of a new English-language persona was in the works. The name of the narrator in The Real Life of Sebastian Knight (1938, pub. 1941) is “V,” suggesting that the English-speaking voice in the novel was not yet ready for a full-fledged (named) narrator.

The move to America placed the Russian Nabokov in a “transparent and sound coffin.” While in the United States, and especially after the success of Lolita, he hardly participated in the cultural life of the Russian émigré community.58 His literary name in Russian underwent transformations from Vladimir Sirin to Vladimir Nabokov-

58 He did continue to publish in Russian in the leading New York émigré periodicals, Novyi zhurnal and Vozdushnye puti; several of his Russian books also appeared after World War II, including the first complete edition of The Gift (1952), and the first edition of the Russian collection Spring in Fialta (1956). Those publications, as well as the Russian versions of Lolita and Speak, Memory and the translated excerpts from the Eugene Onegin commentary, were tributes to Nabokov’s Russian years. In America Nabokov wrote no fiction in his original Russian. He also “disappeared” from the émigré cultural life and gave very few readings in Russian. He did continue to write occasional poems in Russian.
Sirin to Vladimir Nabokov. The "coffin" or the "sepulcher" of Vasily Shishkov's verse benefits from a very literal reading, especially since the narrator uses the expression "bukval'no ... ischeznut" (to disappear literally). Additionally, Vasily Shishkov — however much he is constructed as Nabokov's literary persona — emblematizes the destinies of other émigré poets during World War II. Many émigré writers died between 1939 and 1945. A number of them (both Jewish and non-Jewish) like Iurii Fel'zen, Il'ia Fondaminskii-Bunakov, Iurii Mandel'shtam, and Elizaveta Kuz'mina-Karavaeva (Mother Maria) — perished in Nazi concentration camps.

7

To return to the author=text model that I proposed above, via his artistic practices, laid bare in "Vasily Shishkov" and central to the poetics of his other works, Nabokov validated the workings and products of artistic imagination as ontologically equivalent to the "objective" world informing his fiction. This feature of Nabokov's poetics is related to his conception of artistic cognition, where all is a function of the perceiver, who "authors" the world of the text.

From the vantage point of the 1990s, "Vasily Shishkov" stands as both the author's guide to his own text and the text's immortalization of the author.59 Shishkov's disappearance is Nabokov's window onto textual eternity, a perfect textual opening. As a footnote to Nabokov's lifetime of equating the author and the text, the prominent Russian émigré scholar Vladimir Veidle called his 1977 obituary "Nabokov's Disappearance." One could not think of a more Nabokov-specific formulation.60

In 1955 Georgii Adamovich, one of the key players in the Vasily Shishkov affair, published a volume of memoiristic essays entitled Odnoinochevno i svoboda (Solitude and Freedom). As if attempting to correct postfactum his earlier reservations about Nabokov's poetry, Adamovich devoted an extensive section to analysis of it. He was right to point out that Nabokov the poet had "studied and learned


something from Pasternak." 61 Other critics would later identify a number of parallels between the two great writers. 62 It is not impossible that while Nabokov had been influenced by Boris Pasternak’s poetry in the 1920s-30s, Pasternak had considered Nabokov’s experience of writing a novelistic biography of a poet (The Gift, 1937-1938) and including his verses in the text of his novel in writing Doctor Zhivago (1958). The relationship between Nabokov the novelist and poet and, Pasternak the poet and novelist, is possibly reciprocal. However, if there is one major feature that these disparate writers share, it is their organic understanding of the mirroring relationship between the author and the text.

The last issue of Mark Slonim’s short-lived but absolutely first-rate Parisian biweekly newspaper, Novaia gazeta (The New Paper), featured an essay by Pasternak, “Vstrechi s Maiakovskim” (My Meetings with Maiakovskii). 63 The same issue also featured Nabokov’s essay, an anti-Freudian lampoon “Chto vsiakii dolzhen znat’?” (What Everyone Has to Know?). 64 Pasternak’s essay ends by describing his reaction to Maiakovskii’s tragedy Vladimir Maiakovskii (1914):

I tak prosto bylo eto vsë. Iskusstvo nazyvalos’ tragediei. Tak i sleduet emu nazyvat’sia. Tragediiia nazyvalas’ “Vladimir Maiakovskii”. Zaglavie skryvalo genial’no prostoie oktrye, chto poet ne avtor, — no predmet liriki, ot pervogo litsa obrashchaishchisia k miru. Zaglavie bylo ne imenem sochinitelia, a familiei soderzhania. 65

(And all this was so simple. Art was called tragedy, as art should be called. The name of the tragedy was Vladimir Maiakovskii. The title

61 Adamovich, Odinochestvo i svoboda, 222.
63 See Boris Pasternak, “Vstrechi s Maiakovskim,” Novaia gazeta 5 (May 1, 1931): 12. The essay was excerpted from Pasternak’s memoiristic work Okhrannaja gramota (Safe Conduct, 1929-1931). The excerpt was probably reprinted from its publication as “Pervye vstrechi s Maiakovskim” (First Meetings with Maiakovskii) in Literaturnaja gazeta 20 (April 14, 1931). In the complete text of Safe Conduct it appears as Chapters 3-5 of Part 3.
64 Nabokov, “Chto vsiakii dolzhen znat’,” Novaia gazeta 5 (May 1, 1931): 3.
65 Pasternak. “Vstrechi s Maiakovskim.”
concealed a brilliantly simple discovery, that the poet is not the author, but the subject of the lyrical verse who addresses the world in first person. The title was not the first name of the author, but the last name of his content).

Nabokov's dazzling and prophetic short story "Vasiliy Shishkov" proves the same point.