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LEFT SIDE OF THE MOONNabokov's Personal Terminology of Homosexuality¹

Lunar metaphors are as old as literature itself and even older.² In literature, their meanings may radically differ. In Pushkin's *Eugene Onegin*, the moon is associated to stupidity. In *Timon of Athens*, Shakespeare maintains that the moon steals her energy from the Sun. In *Diary of a Madman*, Gogol says that men's noses are all on the Moon, the Earth will squash them and the Moon ought to be saved: the Moon is connected to Gogol's idea that noses can exist separately from their owners, in other words, to fear/desire of castration. In Bulgakov's *The Master and Margarita*, the moonlight is tied to suffering and guilt. In Boris Pilnyak's "The Tale of the Unextinguished Moon", it is a symbol for terror. In *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* by James Joyce, the narrative connects the young protagonist to the moon, alluding to Aegyptian Toth, the god of the moon, literature and death.

In 1911 the Russian philosopher and journalist, Vasily Rozanov, wrote about the "people of the moonlight". Thus he spoke of those for whom no universally accepted word had yet been found; later on they would be called homosexuals. According to Rozanov, attraction for the love of people of the same sex hides behind many events, facts, and phenomena such as artistic creativity, religious asceticism and revolutionary exploits. It is "the people of the moonlight" who engage in such activities, because they are not up to attending to family life, to which the majority of straight men and women devote their energies. In antiquity such people, according to Rozanov, committed self-castration in the name of the moon-goddess Astarte; in the Middle Ages, they became monks. By sharpening differences, he had resort to any device he could think of:

¹ Translated from the Russian by Giuliana Ferreccio and Massimo Maurizio. All translations from Nabokov and Russian authors are ours, except for Nabokov's or other authors' texts originally in English. The original version of this article appears in A.Etkind. *Sodom i Psikheia. Ocherki intellektualnoi istorii Serebrianoogo veka*. Moscow: Arsis 2015.

² In pagan religions, the feminine principle and death are usual meanings for the moon; see Eliade 1999, 54-183.

To a sodomite he is someone different
 His handshake is different
 His smile is entirely different! (Rozanov 1911, 98)

These ideas had nothing in common with science, no matter what one means by science. Still, such an analysis of homosexual love must be seen as a raw, ground-breaking experience in the Russian context. Rozanov was by no means a liberal, and the way he dealt with sodomites was obviously full of fear, even hatred. At his time homophobia was well-rooted even among specialists. At the beginning of the 1920s, European psychoanalytic societies refused to have homosexuals as their members because they held them as incurable neurotics. In a crooked way, however, Rozanov's homophobia was targeted at a Victorian sexual repression. Rozanov blamed "the people of the moonlight" not because they might be specifically depraved, on the contrary, because they were stifling their sexual identity. With a special eagerness he described not sexual depravities in the wake of Krafft-Ebing or Havelock Ellis, but the opposite cases, like ascetic lives or unconsumed marriages. All this he attributed to a "spiritual sodomy", more or less matching a form of latent homosexuality. Practicing Sodom's sin was to Rozanov a rare and repulsive matter, but in lives and texts he perceived an endless, frequent "spiritual sodomy". Sodomites bring forth the idea that coitus be a sin, they spread around the world a guilt-feeling for their own desires and repulsion for their own body; they influence culture, because they do not use up their energy in sex. Rozanov's sodomites are not gay, they forbid themselves to be such.

As a consequence, the people of the moonlight are afraid of fulfilling their depraved essence and for this reason they channel their energies into culture, permeating it with their values. Thus Rozanov's notion of Sodom radically differs from Freudian libido (Sinyavsky 1982, 33 and Etkind 1993, ch. 2). They both recognise a lineage between sexual attraction and cultural creation, but Freud gave no decisive meaning to the object of attraction, whereas Rozanov did. Freudian sublimation lies in deflecting libido from the field of immediate satisfaction – whether it be a homo- or heterosexual act, to cultural activity. Rozanov shared Freud's intuition, i.e., the less one exhausts himself in sex, the more strength is left to create culture. In Rozanov's view, however, a fundamental asymmetry separates "normal" and homosexual love: normal people live without feeling ashamed, the sodomites fear their own unnatural attraction, therefore they live like ascetics.

Rozanov was by no means a solitary Russian inventor. He valued Weininger and relied on pre-Freudian psychiatrists. The lunar and solar metaphors he took from Johann Bachofen, who defined matriarchy (which he discovered, or rather, invented) as humanity's lunar phase and the ensuing patriarchy as the solar phase. Bachofen, however, did not mention homosexual love. Rozanov's great interest in homoeroticism is his own invention, as well as the revival of a classical trope.

Rozanov's metaphorical device, which he presented from the start as a positive trait, could be employed in a number of cases reaching far beyond the original sexual belonging. In Rozanov's view, contemporary culture, including orthodox religion, would lead to revolution. The accusation of "sodomy" he addressed to a whole bunch of cultural representatives, led him to use an aggressive and cutting idiom, a sort of intellectual caricature; for this reason, he was forgiven his clear touches of blasphemy and his many excesses. Sergei Bulgakov, a future priest, in his letter to Rozanov, defined "the people of the moonlight" as "a key opening to a horrid lot of things, and one is steadily and increasingly forced to reckon with it".³

Rozanov's metaphors are still relevant to Russian language today. Igor Kon has titled his own book on homosexual love *Lunnyi svet na zare* (Kon 1998) using Rozanov's old idea. Besides, Kon has assumed that the new Russian metaphor, *Golubye* (light-blue and "fairy") is genetically tied to the idea of moonlight, itself partly light-blue. Referring back to Rozanov, Kon assumes that his moon light is well-known and clear to the reader. I will now try to show how in his attempt to find suitable means to give shape to homosexual experience, Nabokov consistently used Rozanov's very device without pointing to its source, probably thinking that his reader would anyway ignore that source.

The Proud Selenographer

Only once, during his lectures, Nabokov spoke about Rozanov calling him an outstanding writer who merges talent with moments of astounding naiveté.⁴ So enthusiastic a portrait, one of the rare occurrences when Nabokov praised a writer belonging to the Silver Age (the age of Russian modernism), is enhanced by a personal memory. "I knew Rozanov" the professor reported to his Cornell students, without resorting to details.⁵ In his youth, when Nabokov may have known Rozanov, he confronted the problem of homosexual love for the first time: his younger brother was a homosexual.⁶ They both went to school. Vladimir found Sergey's diary, and, after

³ For S.N. Bulgakov's unpublished letters to V.V. Rozanov, see Kolerov 1992, 153-154.

⁴ Nabokov 1981, 87. This trait has given way to old clichés; Alexander Benois assessed Rozanov in a similar way: a mixture of "extremely keen observation coupled with an almost childish naiveté" (Benois 1990 vol. 2, 249).

⁵ In *Sebastian Knight* we understand that some Rozanovs knew the narrator's family before the revolution. In Nabokov's best biography (Boyd 1990) and in the best collected essays on him (Alexandrov 1995), Rozanov is not even cited in the index. The first groundbreaking research on Rozanov's influence on Nabokov is due to Olga Skonechnaia (1996, 33-52).

⁶ Nabokov's childless uncle, V.I. Rukavishnikov, from whom Vladimir Nabokov inherited his estate, was also homosexual. Andrew Field (1976, 38-39) stressed the similarities between Kinbote and Rukavishnikov.

learning of his brother's unusual feelings, he showed it to their governess, who in turn reported to their father. Although Vladimir Dimitrievich Nabokov regarded this problem with his usual liberal frame of mind (he had authored a bill which was intended to lighten homosexuals' lot), Nabokov's brother had to listen to a far from easy speech (Nabokov 1996, 560). Astonishment and guilt feelings surrounded Nabokov's dealings with his brother. Sergey Nabokov was a victim of the Nazi campaign against homosexuals and in 1945 he died in a camp (Karlinsky 1980, 157).⁷ Relations between brothers became more relaxed while Nabokov was busy writing *The Gift*, where the homosexual role is entrusted to tender and unhappy Yasha Chernyshevsky: only then could Nabokov at last dine with his brother and his companion (Boyd 1990, 106; 396). Critics have already pointed out that understanding Nikolay Chernyshevsky in *The Gift* depends on the way one sees him in *The People of the Moonlight*, where one reads: "Chernyshevsky's relevance to our culture was, of course, huge. He was ½ urning, ¼ urning, 1/10 urning" (Rozanov 1911, 156).⁸ As he sketches out his protagonist Godunov-Cerdyncey, Rozanov reports:

Again N.G. Chernyshevsky's countenance flashed to his mind, about him he only knew that he was "a syringe with sulphurous acid", as Rozanov somewhere says. (Rozanov 1911, 195)

In Nabokov's works we find homosexuals, unhappy, highly enigmatic people who are close to the protagonist. In *Glory* Nabokov depicted a homosexual professor of Russian literature and gave him the lunar name of Archibald Moon (in the English authorised translation, to dispel any doubt, also Moon). With his knowledge of Russia, Moon "astonished and enchanted" young Martyn, but their relationship grew troublesome when Moon started showing an excessive fondness for the young man. If homosexual Moon with his name alludes to the moon, homosexual Yasha Chernyshevsky in *The Gift* alludes to the moon by his own metaphor for love. Yasha is in love with Rudolf and writes about him so:

I am fiercely in love with his soul – and this is just as fruitless as falling in love with the moon. (Nabokov 2001, 41)

In *The Gift*, the editorial secretary of the emigration "Newspaper" is described as follows: "a moon-like, phlegmatic person, ageless and virtually sexless" (Nabokov 2001, 59).

⁷ Simon Karlinsky mentions this in his comment to *The Nabokov-Wilson Letters* (Nabokov 1980, 157).

⁸ The similarity between the portrait of Chernyshevsky in *Lyudi lunnogo sveta* and in *The Gift* has been noticed by Olga Skonechnaya (1996, 41).

In *Pale Fire* there are two protagonists, the heterosexual Shade and the homosexual Kinbote. They are as different as the sun and the moon. Shade is a happy monogamous man, who has spent his life with his wife; Kinbote is a lonesome homosexual who is constantly in search for a partner. Shade lives up to old age in his father's house; Kinbote is an expatriate without a home. Shade does not eat vegetables, Kinbote is a vegetarian. Shade writes verse, Kinbote writes comments. Shade is famous, Kinbote is unknown. Shade often speaks about the sun and almost never about the moon. His best time of the day is morning, his favourite time of the year is full summer. Shade's repeated crises are connected to the aster of day-light, when he sees the sun appearing in his head. Unlike Shade, Kinbote does not see the sun, or struggles against it. While Kinbote follows the hard prescriptions needed to combat sun rays, endangering the furniture, Shade makes fun of him. Kinbote lives at night, even his memories of his homeland, Zembla, are enriched under the grey light of the riverside rainy roofs. His solitary nights are permeated by the horror of memories having the same colour:

I would lie awake and breathless – as if only now living consciously through those perilous nights in my country, where at any moment a company of jittery revolutionists might enter and hustle me off to a *moonlit wall*. (Nabokov 1989b, 96, my italics)

Unlike Kuzmin and Rozanov, Nabokov lived a historical moment when homosexuality was becoming a fully accepted literary theme (Sedgwick, 1990),⁹ but defining a terminology still required a long time and Nabokov was interested in this process, choosing several options, among which some of his own devising. In relation to Moon, for instance, he employs the term “uranism”, in *The Eye* the meaningful notion of “sexual left-handed person” is used to the purpose,¹⁰ in “Spring in Fialta” bisexuality is defined by the artistic formula “eclectic in carnal life” and in a further case “pederast” comes to help. Professional interest in this terminology lasted all his life long and his early family impressions doubtlessly lurked behind it. In his memoirs Nabokov reported that his father, V.D. Nabokov, gave his contribution to this field by “coining a convenient Russian word for ‘homosexual’: rill’nopolly [equal-gendered]” (Nabokov 1996, 492).

Most often Nabokov resorted to the metaphor of the moonlight. There are reasons for this preference. If pseudo-scientific terms like “urning” refer to psychiatry and, one way or another, keep carrying along negative connotations, Rozanov's motif is convenient because it is undefined, and apparently commonplace. The reader takes this formula as a romantic cliché, whereas it is a diagnostic tool. The reader's attention skips

⁹ On the acceptance of homosexuality in Victorian England, see Sedgwick 1985 and Sedgwick 1990.

¹⁰ Nabokov's homosexual brother Sergey was left-handed (Nabokov 1996, 560).

over it, thus perfectly responding to the author's intentions. Nabokov uses this device in a systematic and persuasive way: in spite of its being a hackneyed romantic cliché, the moon is hardly ever mentioned without recalling this specific meaning. In Nabokov's texts, the counter-evidences, showing the moon outside a homosexual context, are very rare; they concern, specifically speaking, parallels between the moonlight and the whiteness of the film-screen or Humbert's distinctive trait of being a sleep-walker (*Lunatik*). Nabokov's systematically using one single motif to decode difficult situations parallels the formal definition of leitmotif in prose narration:

We mean the principle by which a motif, once arisen, is repeated later on many times [...] The only thing that defines a motif is its being fit to be reproduced in the text [...] The author intentionally [...] starts the "engine" of associations which begins working, giving rise to links [...] which the author may not have thought of. [...] this construction principle is, on a prominent level, the distinctive trait of poetry. (Gasparov 1993, 30)

Having derived the moon metaphor from Rozanov, Nabokov updates its meaning. Having borrowed this motif implies pointing to its source and renewing the general understanding of the problem his precursor had earlier worked out. Citing the light of the moon not only alludes to homosexual love but also recalls Rozanov's connecting it to intellectual art-works.

Luzhin is an exceptionally gifted chess-player, a fit idiom for an autonomous cultural creation. His artistic biography starts with a chess game he plays with a flirtatious aunt¹¹ and ends with his suicidal flight from his wife. Luzhin's sexuality and his talent are communicating vessels, his energy is channelled into chess-playing while in his relationship with his loving wife, he is impotent. Luzhin's life is made up of unfulfilled relationships with his coach and tutor Valentinov. This character was a connoisseur of the Orient (his name may refer to the famous II century Valentine, the founder of

¹¹ The aunt toyed with small Luzhin, taught him to play chess and had an affair with his father. May Nabokov have portrayed this figure in dear, quaint aunt Maud ("I was brought up by dear bizarre aunt Maud" – Nabokov 1989b, 36)? It is highly probable that this aunt, the first muse and enchantress, may have suggested the particular metaphors with which Shade describes his own first moments of inspiration: "One day, when I'd just turned eleven [...] there was a sudden sunburst in my head [...] Like some little lad forced by a wench / With his pure tongue her abject thirst to quench, I was corrupted, terrified, allured" (Nabokov 1989b, 38). See Luzhin's feelings when he discovers his father with his aunt: "he was very surprised and somehow ashamed" (Nabokov 1990b, 74). Such interpretation of dear aunt Maud's educational practice brings Shade close to Luzhin and *Lolita*: child seduction has a happy ending. Brandon S. Centerwall (1990, 469-84) tried to prove, on biographical evidence, that young Nabokov was seduced by his uncle (I am grateful to Erik Naiman who pointed out this contribution). In my view, this hypothesis is not proved and is useless: the Nabokovian motif of child seduction (in key texts always heterosexual) renders a childhood fantasy and not a real event.

Gnosticism; on his index finger Valentinov carries “a ring with Adam’s head”); Luzhin felt an “unhappy love” for him and when Valentinov abandoned him, he gave Luzhin money, “as one gives a lover one has grown bored with”. Valentinov had “a peculiar theory that the development of Luzhin’s gift for chess was connected with the development of the sexual urge”, and a less peculiar practice: “fearing lest Luzhin should squander his precious power [...] he kept him at a distance from women” (Nabokov 1990b, 94). The whole story is a clear illustration of Rozanov’s ideas on the relation between art and sexuality, trusting after all its validity. Sublimation does not occur under one’s father’s or society’s influence, but thanks to a homosexual attraction. At the story’s climax, we are given a clue to its source: “the heavy, oppressive moon” lightens up a love scene, during which Luzhin and his future wife get convinced of his impotence:

She had again sat on his lap [...] But the moon emerged from behind the angular black twigs, a round, full-bodied moon – a vivid confirmation of victory – and when finally Luzhin left the balcony and stepped back into his room, there on the floor lay an enormous square of moonlight, and in that light – his own shadow. (Nabokov 1990b, 116-17)

In *Mary* (*Mashenka*) Ganin loves the girl he loved in his youth and, dreaming of meeting her again, he rejects the women who pursue him. One day he meets Mashenka in the stillness of the park, but no attraction arises and Ganin disappears “cycling in the moonlight haze homeward” (Nabokov 1989a, 73). Many years go by and he again awaits Mashenka, spends the night before their encounter getting drunk in a group of homosexual dancers’ room. “The room was lit by a somewhat pale, unearthly light, because the ingenious dancers had shrouded the lamp in a scrap of mauve silk” (Nabokov 1989a, 96). Ganin keeps repeating the verses of the poet who is dying in the room: “The full moon shines over forest and stream. Look at the ripples, how richly they gleam” (Nabokov 1989a, 92).¹² The following morning he refuses to meet Mashenka and, playing around with his own muscles, he stays alone. His life is full of adventures, but his relationship with the old poet appears to have been his deepest attachment.

In “Spring in Fialta”, Ferdinand, a bisexual, sucks “a long stick of moonstone candy, that specialty of Fialta’s”. The narrator, fully in love with his wife, feels, on the contrary, a solar sensation that exceeds Shade’s similar ecstasies.¹³ In *Sebastian Knight* the

¹² Podtiagin repeats the clichés of the Russian ballade; see Kapnist: “Uzhe so t’moju nochi / Prosterlas’ tishina, / Vychodit iz’za roshchi / Pechal’naya luna”.

¹³ “Suddenly I understood something I had been seeing without understanding [...] the white sky above Fialta had got saturated with sunshine, and now it was sun-pervaded throughout, and this

narrator starts feeling his fondness for Sebastian in a particularly sharp way, when he reads his novel, *The Other Side of the Moon*. In “Istreblenie tiranov” (“Tyrants Destroyed”), the narrator makes up the murder of the dictator he is in love with and stops making a difference between himself and the former. Trying to disentangle himself from this complex of homoeroticism and narcissism, the narrator thinks back on the Moon:

A horrible feeling seized me, that was remarkably relevant for the dream, and woke me up immediately, in my dismal little room, with a dismal moon shining through my curtainless window. (Nabokov 1956, 181)

“I am listless and fat like Shakespeare’s Hamlet”, the protagonist tells us; and this self-description turns into a well-known, though unexpected metaphor: “Ah, Hamlet, thou lunar fool” (Nabokov 1956, 184; 192). The moon again goes along with Hamlet in *Bend Sinister*, where the scholarly work “The Real Plot of Hamlet” and the American project of “a film out of Hamlet” are discussed: “We’d begin [...] with [...] the mobled moon”; “the moon making fish-scales” on the roof of Elsinore; “The moonlight following on tiptoe the Ghost in complete steel” (Nabokov 1990a, 111-12). This idea, so evidently relying on psychoanalysis, portrays Hamlet’s possession both as a homoerotic attraction for his father and a paranoid mechanism. Hence “Tyrants Destroyed” brings forth a paradoxical view of political terrorism as attraction toward the victim-tyrant; hence *Bend Sinister* infers an analytical trait of tyranny. The protagonist’s first encounter with dictatorship, which is full of homosexual sadism,¹⁴ takes place by the light of a remarkably meaningful moon:

The left part of the moon was so strongly shaded as to be almost invisible in the pool of clear but dark ether across which it seemed to be swiftly floating, an illusion due to the moonward movement of some small chinchilla clouds; its right part, however, a somewhat porous but thoroughly talc-powdered edge or cheek, was vividly illumined by the artificial-looking blaze of an invisible sun. The whole effect was remarkable. (Nabokov 1990a, 9)

The picture matches the definition: *Bend Sinister* may mean “Left detour”, “Left Turn” and maybe also “Round movement leftward”. The whole novel is a political allegory and the scene with the made-up left side of the moon offers a summarized

brimming white radiance grew broader and broader, all dissolved in it, all vanished” (Nabokov 1958, 28).

¹⁴ On entering dictator Krug’s study, a room is shown in which a eunuch keeps watch on “a score of brown-skinned Armenian and Sicilian lads” waiting for their hour of death; Krug’s son dies after having been raped by those boys (Nabokov 1990a, 141).

portrait, an allegory of allegory. The protagonist who tries to understand the enigma of the new regime feels like a “proud selenographer”. But intellect is powerless, there is nothing to be understood and the great philosopher loses his contest against the inept tyrant. In the novel are three female characters who serve the regime, entice Adam Krug and kill his son. These Bachofen sisters exert a full female power over Krug, but they are themselves subject to the homosexual dictator, whom the moonlight illuminates. In this case too, Nabokov ironically follows Rozanov’s clues: the sisters are scornfully named after Johann Bachofen, who invented the theory of matriarchy. Generally speaking, *Bend Sinister* makes the reader feel that Nabokov’s interest goes to the history of ideas, quite regardless of what it purportedly means to prove.

Nabokov’s thought about the Average Man was similar to Hannah Arendt’s on the “banality of evil”; furthermore, both Paduk’s regime, as portrayed in the novel, and Arendt’s “totalitarianism” show the common denominator tying Nabokov’s regime to the Nazis, the common basis of historically similar situations. At the end of the novel the author comes to his hero’s aid and he too sees his role under the moonlight: we see “the shredded ray of a streetlamp”, along which the so-called authorial will alights on his protagonist. In a later afterword going back to this topic, we have: “In a sudden moonburst of madness, Krug understands he is in good hands”.¹⁵

SM and 69

In the marvellous poem “To Prince S.M. Kachurin” (1947) the same cluster of ideas merges into the nostalgic dream of return. The rhymed narration unfolds as a letter to America, written on the third day after returning to the USSR. The narrator, a Russian émigré and American spy, is disguised as a priest. He travels with a false passport, in which not everything is quite right and carries along a novel by Sirin. This makes him “transparent”, which sounds as a self-quotation from *Invitation to a Beheading*. He is in Russia and he is scared.

He would have wished to go back to America, which was by now dearer to him than Russia. But his return depends on a certain Kachurin: the narrator has reached the USSR following his instructions, and now writes him a letter and dreams of meeting him again in America. All this happens while he lives with his own translator, in a Leningrad hotel “with a view on the Neva”.

He is a “broad-shouldered provincial slave”: he is also a translator who never leaves his dictionary. This useless but stalwart companion controls the narrator; without “convincing” him he cannot even move a step. The narrator feels “the languor of youth” and contrives a way to convince his translator to drive out of town to the “red stable” among the birches (it is the “red stable in the middle of a white field” from “Spring in

¹⁵ See Nabokov’s Introduction to the novel (Nabokov 1990a, xviii).

Fialta”, the place of the child’s memories and a further citation from Sirin). In that moment the protagonist of these thoughts, the translator, “drowsing, made a noise with his lips, reached out toward the dictionary”¹⁶ a funny gesture the narrator gives a remarkable relevance to, “here is the explanation of the whole life”. The narrator’s fear is not chased away even by the moon, which here too has homoerotic connotations. The Neva landscape is lit by the moonlight and embellished by phallic or even orgasmic hues, so untypical to it.

This poetic vision is intentionally controlled in every detail. The author is the best interpreter of his own text, it is he who combines the delicate inspirations with the expert’s interpretations. He controls the whole gamut of possible interpretations, is ready to favour one and set off the others. He knows the master-key by which a gloomy and humourless reader will approach his text, and lies traps on his way. To a kindlier, merry reader he will lovingly suggest more compelling reading paths. The author’s aim is, after all, to share his own real or invented, experience. The process of interpretation enters the whole of this experience, which the author shares, like all the rest, with his reader.

In the second stanza of the poetic letter to S.M. Kachurin, the author sends a “jealous greeting” to a citation from Lermontov, to “all the plains of Daghestan”. Lermontov’s poem “The Dream” shows a murdered warrior, who dreams his last dream, in which his beloved appears. This woman sees her dream in her own dream, in which she perceives the Daghestan plain and the dead narrator. In this context the “jealous greeting” means not only that the Leningrad hotel is as dangerous as the Daghestan plain. This intertextual reference leads one convincingly to a second reading spotlighting the letters to Kachurin as a love story.

In the background of the landscape with the Neva – the moon, the steps, the street lamp, and the wave, the narrator sees the body of the sleeping translator. After observing him, he returns to his letter: “Among other things, when we will meet I will tell you everything”. The promise is addressed to Kachurin: the narrator means to tell his old American friend about his new Russian friend. Becoming almost like a slave, the author of the letter now asks his far-away addressee for permission: “Kachurin, may I come back home?” The narrative spy-story structure is based on a threefold level of submission: on the one hand, the narrator yields to Kachurin, who sent him on his mission, on the other, the narrator gives in to his translator who controls him, being himself a slave. In the text one feels a strange pleasure concerning the Neva and the broad-shouldered provincial. The author’s irony reads these feelings by a double decoding: a reverse nostalgia for America is hidden within the spy-story plot which

¹⁶ The dictionary was probably Russian-English and the translator was so incompetent as to be unable to part with it; but his move is in keeping with the meaning found in V. Dahl’s dictionary the whole poem long.

opens up as erotic fantasy. The narrator is disguised as an “American priest”, but he is neither American nor priest. The addressee is called Kachurin: one just has to “stretch out one’s hand toward the dictionary” to understand the erotic aura of such a last name.¹⁷

Now we are ready to read again Prince Kachurin’s initials,¹⁸ but also to understand that they point out the sense of distance of the “sixty-nine [...] *verste*” separating the protagonist from the red stable: S.M. and 69.

The charm deriving from these comfortable interlinguistic symbols plays a foremost role in many of Nabokov’s works, but not in his biography. It is an important difference for further key motifs in Nabokov’s work. For instance, he constantly writes about his return to Russia, but never actually returned there. The closest analogy to this situation I can think of is in Svetlana Boym’s work on the motifs of suicide in the poetry of Mallarmé, Mayakovsky and Cvetaeva. The philologically inclined scholar highlights the therapeutic meaning of their art. They were writing *not* to act and did *not* act, for as long as they wrote. Up to a point, the writing process has saved them from desire, carrying out the same function the psychologist ascribes to free associations (Boym 1991).

Among the “Viennese delegation of psychoanalysts”, whom Nabokov made fun of, such interrelation was called projection. The psychoanalytic view of projection implies that an unacceptable desire may not consciously be accepted but unconsciously embedded into the text: by relying on his knowledge, the psychologist spotlights in the text what the author himself did not know about his own text. In Nabokov, however, we notice that the author plays a controlled, subtly deliberate and intentional game with the reader’s desires, ideas and forms, although many moves in the game remain hidden. We are dealing with a more complex, active power-process than the psychological notion of projection yields. The author has written what he meant to write and he invites us to read that only.

Like the Freudian dream, the text fulfils the desires that do not come about in reality. Thus Martyn in *Glory* freed his own author from the harmful desire to return to Russia, thus Gumbert or Kinbote would free him from other unattainable longings. Texts help authors not to fulfil some desires; maybe they also help their readers.

¹⁷ According to Dahl, *kachura* is “beanpole, a very tall person” and *kachurit’*, “twist, warp, crumple”; *kachur’*-“swing”.

¹⁸ It is amusing to note that in Nabokov’s self-comment he attached to these poems, these initials were deciphered in various ways: in one case Kachurin is called Stefan Mstislavovich, in another Sergei Michajlovich. See M.E. Malikova’s footnotes to Nabokov 2002, 572-573.

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