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NINA'S' ENDINGS:  
SOME SUBTEXTS OF NABOKOV'S "SPRING IN FIALTA"

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Nabokov's "Весна в Фиальте" ("Spring in Fialta," 1937)—widely considered his most accomplished short story and widely anthologized as one of the most important Russian stories of the twentieth century—most readily presents itself as a reworking of Chekhov's similar tale of an adulterous affair, the 1899 "Дама с собачкой" ("The Lady with the Little Dog"), itself a "crypto-modernist" reworking of Tolstoy's 1878 *Анна Каренина* (*Anna Karenina*).<sup>1</sup> Whatever Nabokov's tale may or may not tell us about human mores and relationships (essentially, a realist concern) it ultimately deals more vitally with the modernist preoccupation with the boundary between life and art. At what turns out to be their last meeting in the fictional town of Fialta, the narrator realizes that the casual liaisons he has enjoyed over the past fifteen years with a woman named Nina have constituted something more precious than he had suspected: a genuine love surpassing the staid bourgeois happiness he has enjoyed with his wife "на ясном

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<sup>1</sup> Nabokov placed "Весна в Фиальте" among "the leading troika" of his stories, together with "Облако, озеро, башня" ("Cloud, Castle, Lake") and "The Vane Sisters"; Shrayer, 207. John Burt Foster, Jr. calls Nabokov a "covert modernist," 146-55. Shrayer applies the term to Chekhov as well (199).

севере моего естества” (563; “in the clear north of my being,” 410).<sup>2</sup> Still more significantly, Vasen’ka also realizes by the story’s end that his liaisons with Nina have formed a work of art, a “text” more important than the daily lives each had continued to lead independent of the other. But when he belatedly tries to turn the fairy-tale “text” of his relations with Nina into reality by overtly professing love for her, he breaks the spell of art and Nina is taken away from him—first, through her rejection of his love; then, the very next day, when she is killed in a collision with a truck bringing a traveling circus to town.

Nabokov embeds his story in a narrative trajectory of Vasen’ka’s *gradual realization* of the true nature of the affair, which is atmospherically mirrored in the *dissipation of the mist* enshrouding Fialta and its accompanying dreamlike state at the story’s matutinal opening. “Весна в Фиальте облачна и скучна. Все мокро” (562; “Spring in Fialta is cloudy and dull. Everything is damp,” 409) the tale memorably begins, then over the course of the story the “сонная весна” (563; in English this becomes “the very somnolence of its humid Lent,” 409) enveloping the town gradually lifts. The weather itself is ambivalent, poised between mist and rain (“Моросить не то перестало, не то Фиальта привыкла, и уже сама не знала, чем дышит, влажным ли воздухом или теплым дождем,” 563; “Either the drizzle had stopped or Fialta had got so used to it that she herself did not know whether she was breathing moist air or warm rain,” 410) on a gray day not yet aware of the springtime that pervades it (“...запахи этого серого дня, насыщенного весной, но в себе еще ее не чующего,” 564; “saturated with a vernal essence which itself it seemed slow in perceiving,” 410). The mist is first punctuated by the glint of a piece of silver foil littering the street (“сверканье серебряной бумажки, поодаль брошенной посреди горбатой мостовой,” 574; “a bit of tinfoil someone had dropped, shining in the middle of the cobbled street in the distance,” 419), then by the narrator’s realization that the stone of a parapet on which he leans has become warm, like a body (“камень был, как тело, теплый,” 581, an image both sensuous and

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<sup>2</sup> The narrator is called Vasen’ka in the Russian version, Viktor in the English. The name “Fialta” is an homage to Chekhov’s Yalta, based on the real-world prototype of Fiume. The opposition between Vasen’ka’s staid married life and his intermittent affair with Nina is one of Nabokov’s many pointed allusions to Chekhov’s story, in which the clumsy *amant* Gurov initially views his Anna as an easy Crimean (i.e., southern) vacation conquest, but comes to realize on his return to his family in Moscow (i.e., in the north) that he might at last have found a real, but now far more entangled, love. On the parallels between “Весна в Фиальте” and Chekhov’s “Дама с собачкой” see Shrayner 211-20.

ominous; “the stone was as warm as flesh,” 425) and that “белое небо над Фиальтой незаметно налилось солнцем, и теперь оно было солнечное сплошь, и это белое сияние ширилось, ширилось, все растворялось в нем” (581: “the white sky above Fialta had got saturated with sunshine, and now it was sun-pervaded throughout, and this brimming white radiance grew broader and broader, all dissolved in it,” 425)—until finally the mist dissipates to such an extent that the narrator finds himself standing not in Fialta, which has disappeared like a mirage, but in a train station in Milan (“все исчезало, и я уже стоял на вокзале, в Милане,” 581; the English version makes this a fictional “Mlech”: “all vanished, all passed, and I stood on the station platform of Mlech,” 425) holding the newspaper in which he reads of Nina’s death in the automobile accident.<sup>3</sup> In this advent of reality the story follows a pattern seen elsewhere in Nabokov’s works, from *Машенька* (1926; *Mary*), whose hero Ganin sustains a similarly text-like memory of his relationship with the eponymous heroine (which in fact predates his first meeting with her: “[он] сотворил единственный ее образ задолго до того, как действительно ее увидел,” 77; “he had fashioned her unique image long before he actually saw her,” 44) only to abandon it on the brink of reuniting with her in Berlin; to *Lolita* (1955), in whose retrospective account Humbert Humbert comes to realize something of the reality that stood behind the fairy-tale “nymphet” he had conjured up out of the real Dolores Haze (whose surname, *nota bene*, replicates the Fialta mist). If the trajectory of “Весна в Фиальте” recalls anything in Russian literature before Nabokov, it is perhaps Lermontov’s “Тамань” (“Taman”), one of the stories collected in the 1840 *Герой нашего времени* (*A Hero of Our Time*). Lermontov’s tale enacts a shift from Romanticism to Realism by having the narrator’s initial impression of gothic eeriness among the locals with whom he lodges in the town of Taman’ on the Black Sea (a blind boy appears able to see, his sister seems to be an undine, they leave their hut each night for mysterious adventures) dissipate upon his eventual realization that they are nothing more than “honest smugglers,” poor subjects of empire rather than

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<sup>3</sup> Accomplishing a temporal leap within a short passage was a favorite device of Nabokov’s. In *Speak, Memory*, for example, at the end of Chapter Six devoted to his passion for butterflies he describes a pursuit that begins in the marshes near his family estate outside St. Petersburg, ca. 1910: “Still unsated, I pressed forward. At last I saw I had come to the end of the marsh. [in Russia]. The rising ground beyond was a paradise of lupines, columbines, and pentstemons [on Longs Peak, Colorado, in the 1940s].” Nabokov then remarks, “I confess I do not believe in time. I like to fold my magic carpet, after use, in such a way as to superimpose one part of the pattern upon another. Let visitors trip” (138-9). The textual device is one which subordinates, or appears to subordinate, life (precarious, unpredictable, damaging) to language (subject to fashioning by the writer at will into an object of beauty).

otherworldly beings. Not for nothing does Lermontov's chosen toponym "Taman" suggest туман (fog), just as "Fialta" evokes the Chekhovian Yalta. Nabokov may in fact have borrowed the idea of using a toponym laden with foggy meaning from this very precedent in Lermontov.<sup>4</sup>

One cue that Nabokov's story is concerned with matters other than the characters' adulterous affair comes in the opening scene in which a local child awkwardly attempts to juggle *three oranges* while continuously dropping one of them ("пошел, с выпученным серым, пупастым животом, мужского пола младенец, ковыляя на калачиках и стараясь нести зараз три апельсина, неизменно один роняя, пока сам не упал," 563; "a pantless infant of the male sex, with a taut mud-gray little belly, jerkily stepped down from a doorstep and waddled off, bowlegged, trying to carry three oranges at once, but continuously dropping the variable third, until he fell himself," 410). In its most obvious valence the scene signals the ultimate impossibility of maintaining the story's *ménage à trois* among Vasen'ka, Nina, and her husband Ferdinand; but it also invokes an important precedent in Russian modernism for the fusion of art and life: Vsevolod Meyerhold's play *Любовь к трем апельсинам* (*The Love for Three Oranges*), an adaptation of a 1761 *fiaba* by Carlo Gozzi which Meyerhold co-wrote with Vladimir Solov'ev and Konstantin Vogak in 1914.<sup>5</sup> In Meyerhold's play the main characters enter the stage in a parade, a device borrowed from seventeenth-century French and Italian theater and intended, Meyerhold explains in a separate essay, to compel the spectator to recognize the events as pure playacting.<sup>6</sup> The device is patently echoed, one might add, in the traveling circus whose advertisements are

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<sup>4</sup> A further suggestion that Lermontov's *Герой нашего времени* influenced "Весна в Фиальте" may be found in the Foreword Nabokov provided the English translation on which he collaborated with his son Dmitrii: "It will be marked by the good reader that the structural trick consists in bringing Pechorin gradually nearer and nearer until he takes over; *but by the time he takes over he is dead*" (vii, emphasis added). The trajectory of increasing presence, until full presence manifests itself as death, is essentially that of "Весна в Фиальте."

<sup>5</sup> Sergei Prokofiev also wrote an operatic version, which premiered in Chicago in 1921; Possner, 55-7. Senderovich and Shvarts also note the allusion to Meyerhold's play in Nabokov's mention of the three oranges. They additionally trace the mentions of oranges throughout Nabokov's *oeuvre*, arguing that through their association with Meyerhold's play oranges came to serve as a symbol of Russian Symbolist culture in general, in particular as indexes to the *commedia dell'arte* and the Russian fairground booth (балаган; 293-347; on "Весна в Фиальте" see especially 294-301).

<sup>6</sup> Possner 57. Meyerhold explains the significance of the parade in his 1912 essay, "Балаган" ("The Fairground Booth"): "Пролог и следующий за ним парад, а также столь излюбленное итальянцами и испанцами XVII в. и французскими водевиллистами заключительное обращение к публике, все эти элементы Старого театра обязывают зрителя смотреть на представление актеров не иначе, как на игру" ("The Prologue and subsequent parade, as well as the closing address to the public so beloved of the Italians and the Spanish in the seventeenth century as well as French vaudevillians, compels the spectator to view the actors' performance as nothing other than play," 215).

mentioned several times in passing in Nabokov's story, until the circus itself finally arrives on the outskirts of Fialta: "Откуда-то издали доносились звуки трубы и цитры" (580; "From afar came the sounds of music—a trumpet, a zither," 424). In a subtle twist on Meyerhold the circus parade actually appears toward the *end* of the story, in the penultimate scene in which Vasen'ka offers his ill-timed profession of love to Nina—and Nabokov propels the Meyerholdian idea of artistic play into ambivalent confrontation with death when he has Nina die in a collision with the circus truck.<sup>7</sup> The *Three Oranges* also figured importantly in Meyerhold's efforts to cultivate an element of play instead of realist verisimilitude in his theater: "In *Three Oranges* and in studio exercises [organized by Meyerhold], actors [...] learned to oscillate effortlessly between fiction and reality, content and commentary."<sup>8</sup> Nabokov's playful allusion to the three oranges may be meant to signal a similar oscillation in his tale. Nabokov may also have been aware of the 'three oranges' motif as an emblem of the modernist aesthetic from the journal of that name Meyerhold edited from 1914-1916 in St. Petersburg, which was influential among the World of Art group.<sup>9</sup> It was in the journal that Meyerhold also used his Hoffmannian pseudonym "Doctor Dapertutto" and encouraged a cult of pseudonyms among his devotees<sup>10</sup>—a reflex of modernist play-acting-in-life that might have influenced Nabokov's own use of the pseudonym "Sirin" until 1940.

A still more significant metadiscursive moment in the story lodges in what a series of intertextual clues suggests was its response to another meditation on the merging of life and art, Vladislav Khodasevich's 1928 "Конец Ренаты" ("The End of Renata"). Khodasevich's essay has come to be seen as the seminal statement on—or more accurately, debunking of—the Russian

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<sup>7</sup> Senderovich and Shvarts see this very fusion of play and death—*балаган смерти*, the "fairground booth of death" in their term—as definitive for Nabokov's adaptation of Meyerhold's concept of play as central to theatricality (317).

<sup>8</sup> Possner, 65.

<sup>9</sup> Cf. Nabokov's reference, in the description of his wanderings in Petersburg in 1915 with his first love "Tamara," to "the stylized snowscape of the 'Art World,' *Mir Iskusstva*—Dobuzhinski, Alexandre Benois—so dear to me in those days" (*Speak, Memory*, 236). As Senderovich and Shvarts put it, "Набоков нашел в мотиве апельсина компактный символ Серебряного века, в пору которого прошло его детство и отрочество, но который он фактически не успел узнать, и в чьих играх он ретроспективно участвовал на протяжении всей своей жизни [...] Театральность Серебряного века была открыта Набоковым позднее, уже в эмиграции, в 20-е годы, когда он стал интенсивно изучать исчезнувшую эпоху своего детства и юности" (301, 302; "In the motif of the orange Nabokov found a compact symbol for the Silver Age during which time his childhood and youth unfolded but which he didn't really have a chance to discover, though he retrospectively took part in its games for the rest of his life [...] Nabokov discovered the theatricality of the Silver Age later, already in emigration, in the 1920s, when he began intensively to study the lost era of his childhood and youth").

<sup>10</sup> Possner, 77.

modernist vogue for “жизнетворчество,” “life-creation” or the effort to merge life with art.<sup>11</sup> Although he does not mention the Khodasevich essay anywhere directly, there is good reason to believe that Nabokov knew it. Khodasevich was one of the few literary figures in the Russian emigration whose work he held in high regard, an ally of Nabokov’s, even, in the émigré literary battles both took up in the 1930s.<sup>12</sup> Nabokov refers to him in *Speak, Memory* as a “bitter man, wrought of irony and metallic-like genius, whose poetry was as complex a marvel as that of Tyutchev or Blok” and inserts an avatar of him in his consummate Russian novel, the 1937 *Дар* (*The Gift*), in the character Koncheev (the only other writer the writer-hero of *that* novel respects, and with whom he even stages imaginary conversations on the nature of literature).<sup>13</sup> Nabokov wrote an enthusiastic review of Khodasevich’s *Собрание стихов* (*Collected Poems*) in 1927 in the Berlin émigré newspaper *Руль* (*The Rudder*). Khodasevich for his part wrote flattering reviews of Nabokov’s early novels *Король, дама, валет* (*King, Queen, Knave*) and *Защита Лужина* (*The Defense*). Nabokov and Khodasevich thus already felt “mutual rapture” (взаимное восхищение) for each other’s work by the time they first met on 23 October 1932 in Khodasevich’s Paris apartment.<sup>14</sup> They subsequently encountered one another on a series of intermittent occasions, usually by chance when Nabokov was in Paris (*nota bene*, at the time when he was writing “Весна в Фиальте”)—not unlike Vasen’ka’s sporadic meetings with Nina, which also mostly take place in Paris, albeit in an intellectual rather than romantic series of encounters. The Nabokovs hosted Khodasevich for dinner at their apartment on 30 October, then met him at Aldanov’s apartment in November of that year. On November 15 Khodasevich attended a reading Nabokov gave. The two writers met again at Aldanov’s several times in January 1936, then in February of that year gave a joint reading. In January 1937 Khodasevich offered introductory

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<sup>11</sup> For a detailed account of the essay’s impact and of relations between Briusov and Petrovskaja, see Grossman. For an analysis of a closely related debunking of Symbolist *жизнетворчество* in Ivan Bunin’s near-contemporaneous (1925) story “Дело корнета Елагина” see Panova. As Panova shows, Bunin’s story was also written in close dialog with Khodasevich’s “Конец Ренаты” (73-4).

<sup>12</sup> “союзник Набокова в литературных войнах 1930-х годов,” as Dolinin comments (41).

<sup>13</sup> *Speak, Memory*, 285. Khodasevich, at any rate, is widely considered to be the prototype for Koncheev, though the character possibly incorporates traits of other émigré writers as well, among them Nabokov himself, who in the foreword to the English translation claimed to “distinguish odds and ends of myself as I was circa 1925” in the character (Dolinin *Комментарии*, 129, 571; Nabokov, *The Gift*, i). Khodasevich’s long-time partner Nina Berberova claimed that the imaginary conversations between Godunov-Cherdyntsev and Koncheev were, *mutatis mutandis*, records of “прозрачные, огненные, волшебные беседы” which had taken place between Nabokov and Khodasevich in Paris (quoted in Dolinin 559; “the transparent, fiery, and magical conversations”).

<sup>14</sup> The phrase comes from Dzhon Mal’mstad [John Malmstad], 277-8.

remarks at an evening devoted to Nabokov's works, which likely served as the basis for his assessment of Nabokov in "О Сирине" (1937, "On Sirin"), one of the most perceptive contemporary responses to Nabokov's emerging *oeuvre* in which he famously declared Nabokov's main theme to be "жизнь художника и жизнь приема в сознании художника" ("the life of the artist and the life of the device in the consciousness of the artist") and called Nabokov a magician who, having first amazed his reader, then shows him the whole laboratory of his tricks (391, 394).<sup>15</sup> The two met again several times over the course of 1938, when Nabokov and his family moved to Paris in preparation for their departure from Europe.

In light of these close and admiring relations (which were unusual for both writers) it is plausible that the two engaged in a literary dialog as well. Nabokov's creation of the character Koncheev and his imagined discussions with Godunov-Cherdyntsev in *Дар* may have been a response to Khodasevich's own intervention in the novel's serial publication in *Современные записки* (*Contemporary Annals*) to offer resoundingly positive reviews of its emerging parts.<sup>16</sup> In this regard Nabokov's work on *Дар* may resemble what Gary Saul Morson claims for Tolstoy's work on *Анна Каренина*: namely, an absorption of concurrent events (here literary-critical, in Tolstoy's case historical) that became essential to its fabric but could not have been anticipated when work on the novel first began.<sup>17</sup>

In April 1936 Nabokov interrupted his work on *Дар* to write "Весна в Фиальте." It has been suggested that work on the story provided respite from the novel, but I would argue that it was instead a deliberate contribution outside the novel's framework to the dialog with Khodasevich undertaken within it—specifically, in response to issues raised in "Конец Ренаты."<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> Khodasevich, "О Сирине," 391- 394. The article appeared just before Khodasevich spoke at a 24 January 1937 evening devoted to Nabokov in Paris; Nabokov's own "О Ходасевиче" ("About Kodasevich") appeared just after Khodasevich's untimely death in 1939.

<sup>16</sup> Malmstad, 284-5. David Bethea suggests that the idea of having Godunov-Cherdyntsev write a biography of Nikolai Chernyshevsky (which takes up the entire fourth chapter of *Дар*) may have been prompted by Khodasevich's own recent study of the eighteenth-century poet Derzhavin (titled simply *Derzhavin*, 1931; 454).

<sup>17</sup> Morson notes of the war which figures in part 8 of Tolstoy's novel, "The point here is that the Eastern War had not begun when the novel began to be serialized, and so (unless we assume that Tolstoy could foresee the historical future) the events of part 8 *could not* have been part of any original plan," 138).

<sup>18</sup> Boyd notes that Nabokov interrupted his work on *Дар* to write "Весна в Фиальте," 426. Shroyer calls Nabokov's work on the story "a breather from working on his penultimate Russian novel" (220), but in my reading there was more involved than a respite: the story was a literary accompaniment to Nabokov's other interactions with Khodasevich at the time.

Nabokov's story echoes the essay in ways that extend far beyond the fact that the heroines in both works are named Nina, though we might take that onomastic echo as Nabokov's cue to the dialog between the two.<sup>19</sup>

Both Khodasevich and Nabokov offer analyses—autopsies, one might even say—of the Symbolist phenomenon of “life-creation,” the notion that everyday life ought to be conducted as if it were simultaneously to be read as a work of art. The critique is clearest in Khodasevich's essay, where the fallacy of the Symbolist attempt to “слить воедино жизнь и творчество” (“fuse life and artistic creation”) provides the very point of his caustic review—which he wrote in direct response to the suicide of its subject (10).

Khodasevich recounts what he sees as the tragically misguided life of Nina Petrovskaiia (1879-1928), the daughter of a provincial official who “found herself” when she moved to Petersburg and began to move in Symbolist and decadent circles (9). Petrovskaiia became a minor writer of sorts (whom Nabokov, too, read—see below) but was better known for the stormy romantic affairs she had with various writers at the turn of the century.<sup>20</sup> In Khodasevich's view she tragically exemplified the fallacy of Symbolism's conviction that even daily life had to be conducted as if it were a work of art, a conceit which in the end made of Symbolism little more than “история разбитых жизней” (“a history of shattered lives”) while the artistic projects its adherents planned were somehow never realized (“их творчество как бы недовоплотилось,” 7). “Литературный дар ее был невелик. Дар жить—неизмеримо больше” (8; “Her literary gift was modest. Her gift for living was incalculably greater”), he states in a concession to the effectiveness of her behavior before recounting the sad litany of the affairs Petrovskaiia conducted at fever pitch, as if her life were a relentless drama (“Из жизни своей она воистину сделала бесконечный трепет,” 8; “She turned her life into endless agitation”; “жила в неистовом

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<sup>19</sup> Pen'kovskii notes that in Russian literature of the Pushkin era and beyond the name “Nina” was most often associated with—and thus came eventually to signal—a heroine who devoted herself to romantic affairs (66). Nabokov was keenly aware of what might be called the irony of coincidence between literary characters and their real-life prototypes, as in Khodasevich's pairing ‘Renata’/‘Nina Petrovskaiia’: cf. the posthumously published drafts of his unfinished novel, *The Original of Laura*, where the “Laura” in question is both the addressee of Petrarch's sonnets and a woman named “Flora,” wife of the dying narrator Philip Wild (the late 1970s title essentially surviving as an artefact of Symbolist culture of the early twentieth century). In this light Khodasevich's essay would well have been titled “The Original of Renata.”

<sup>20</sup> On Petrovskaiia's relations with Briusov, in addition to Grossman see the more recent scholarship of Lavrov and his publication of the Briusov-Petrovskaiia correspondence.

напряжении, в вечном возбуждении, в обостренности, в лихорадке,” 9; “she lived in a furious tension, in a perpetual state of excitement, hypersensitive to everything, in a feverish trance”). In his account Petrovksaia strove constantly “к разыгрыванию собственной жизни как бы на театре жгучих импровизаций” (10, “to *act out* her life as if in some kind of theater of searing improvisations”). She once tried to kill her former lover Andrei Bely, shooting at point-blank range a gun that misfired, and proposed mutual suicide to Briusov).<sup>21</sup> In her serial romantic affairs she tried to convince herself that she was passionately loved, but in fact was serially abandoned and even scorned (12-3). The years she spent in emigration after 1909 were characterized by restless wandering punctuated by a desperate search for new meaning (“Ее скитания за границей известны мне подробно. [...] прожила она до осени 1922 года в ужасающей нищете [...] она перешла в католичество,” 16; “I know her wanderings abroad in detail [...] she lived until fall 1922 in terrible poverty [...] she converted to Catholicism”).<sup>22</sup> She died impoverished and largely forgotten, in a Parisian Salvation Army hostel on a late February day in 1928 (“В нищенском отеле нищенского квартала,” 7; “In a miserable hotel in a miserable neighborhood”)—having committed suicide by turning on the gas.

For Khodasevich, the tragedy of Petrovksaia’s blind commitment to “life-creation” is amplified by the fact that she had in a sense already entered the realm of art as the prototype for the heroine Renata in her one-time lover Valerii Briusov’s 1908 *roman à clef*, *Огненный ангел* (*Fiery Angel*; hence the title of his essay). In that novel the tangled relations between the characters “Ruprekht,” “Nina,” and “Count Henrich” (read: Briusov, Petrovksaia, and Andrei Bely) unfold as an antiquarian drama set in the sixteenth century, a confessionally turbulent time when the Catholic church struggled to suppress protestantism while also contending with flourishing cults of demonology. The Renata/Nina of this tale initially consorts with an angel, then with the devil,

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<sup>21</sup> Grossman, 137.

<sup>22</sup> Nabokov himself regarded Catholicism warily. In a letter to Zinaida Shakhovskaia he wrote, “Likewise, when I read in French, I never touch anything that has even a drop of Catholicism (hence both Claudel and Mauriac are poisoned for me)” (quoted in Shroyer, 195-6). “Весна в Фиальте” repeatedly hints at its “Catholic” setting: the story is set in springtime, during Lent; early in the tale the narrator notes “витрина с распятиями” (563; “the coral crucifixes in a shop window,” 409); above the town stands St. George’s mountain, and Nina’s husband Ferdinand takes perverse glee in a tourist object he buys—a grotesque inkwell model of it; Ferdinand and his entourage in the restaurant form a blasphemous parody of *The Last Supper* (572; 417); and Ferdinand himself is acidly described as having gone through “небольшой период модного религиозного прозрения” after which he turns his gaze “на варварскую Москву” (578; “a brief period of fashionable religious conversion [...] he had turned his dull eyes toward barbarous Moscow,” 423; cf. also Humbert Humbert’s brief parodic turn to Catholicism in *Lolita*).

then repents but dies after being interrogated by a Church inquisitor, on the eve of her planned burning at the stake.

The Nina of Nabokov's story is not identical to that of Khodasevich's essay; but neither is she a copy of Chekhov's Anna Sergeevna, who in turn is not a duplicate of Tolstoy's Anna Arkadievna. The point in these reprises is not duplication but an adaptation in which the name and character type serve as an index to the moral or aesthetic issues to be engaged rather than a declaration of intent to imitate.<sup>23</sup> Nina Petrovskaiia was born in 1879, while Nabokov refers to his heroine as "ровесница века" (565; "she was [the age] of the century," 411)—essentially a generation younger, though the characterization makes her emblematic of an era (and, one notes, Nabokov's own exact contemporary, though at one point he comments that she "looked significantly older than her years," "была на вид значительно старше своих лет," which might be a nod in Petrovskaiia's direction, 565; "she looked twenty at least," in the English, where by age she should be 16 or 17). Nor is Nabokov's point in any way to assess Khodasevich's biographical subject; but the portraits of the real-life and the fictional Ninas share motifs that point to a distinct echo of the Khodasevich essay in Nabokov's story. In the most general sense the trajectory of 'lifting mist, the advent of reality' in Nabokov's story can be seen as an episodic realization of Khodasevich's rhetorical unmasking of Symbolist illusion. As a part of that conceit both Nabokov's story and Khodasevich's essay place the heroine's death at the beginning: both are fatidic explorations of the meaning of a death which is known in advance.<sup>24</sup> Khodasevich's account is a posthumous analysis of a life his readers would know had ended, while at the opening of Nabokov's story the narrator, having noted the series of liaisons leading up to his meeting with Nina in Fialta, already states, "ибо я не в состоянии представить себе никакую потустороннюю организацию, которая согласилась бы устроить мне новую встречу с нею за гробом" (565; "for I cannot imagine any heavenly firm of brokers that might consent to arrange me a meeting with her beyond the grave," 411)—though the irony Nabokov relishes is that the

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<sup>23</sup> Senderovich and Shvarts suggest that Nabokov's use of the name "Nina" may have been meant as a "grotesque inversion" of the character "Ninette" in Gozzi's *The Love of Three Oranges* (306).

<sup>24</sup> This structural device is also deployed in Dostoevsky's "Кроткая" ("The Meek One"), Tolstoy's "Смерть Ивана Ильича" ("The Death of Ivan Ilych"), and Bunin's "Легкое дыхание" ("Light Breathing"), to name just a few prominent Russian precedents.

story itself in effect does this, making “Nina” manifest as it extends her tale beyond the opening remark that she has died (more on this below).

Like Petrovskaia in Khodasevich’s account, Nabokov’s Nina is characterized by her fragility and instability.<sup>25</sup> Nabokov describes her as “эта маленькая узкоплечая женщина, с пушкинскими ножками” (575; “that small dark woman of the narrow shoulders,” 419) and repeatedly emphasizes her diminutive size: she has a “маленькое скуластое лицо” (567; “her small face with prominent cheekbones,” 412) and “малый рост и худоб[а]” (565; “her neat slender build,” 411). The narrator at one point takes between two fingers “худенький Нинин локоть” (574; “Nina’s slender elbow,” 419) while Nina herself removes the gloves “с маленьких сухощавых рук” (578; “off her small thin hands,” 423). Khodasevich describes how, in the midst of her tortuous relations with Briusov, Petrovskaia would lie on the sofa: “По двое суток, без пищи и сна, пролеживала на диване, накрыв голову черным платком, и плакала” (“She would lie on the sofa for two whole days without eating or sleeping, having covered her head with a shawl, weeping,” 15). One of the characteristic poses in which Vasen’ka remembers his Nina is also on a sofa: “Она сидела с ногами в углу дивана, сложив свое небольшое удобное тело в виде зета” (568; “She was sitting in the corner of a couch, her feet pulled up, her small comfortable body folded in the form of a Z,” 414).<sup>26</sup> Both heroines become involved in a chaotic series of romantic affairs. Petrovskaia “была невестою одного, вышла за другого” (“was the fiancée of one but married another,” 8-9; “Первым влюбился в нее поэт...Первый роман сверкнул и

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<sup>25</sup> In his lecture on Chekhov’s “The Lady with the Little Dog,” Nabokov notes that the heroine’s “awkwardness and tender angularity are delicately conveyed” (258). To some extent this is a type, and one favored occasionally by Nabokov: the physically and emotionally fragile woman/girl who is not of this world. It reappears memorably in the image of the suicide Sybil Vane in “The Vane Sisters”: “so childishly slight in close-fitting gray [with] carefully waved dark hair, that small, small-flowered hat with a little hyaline veil as worn that season, and under it her small face broken into a cubist pattern of scars due to a skin disease, pathetically masked by a sunlamp tan that hardened her features, whose charm was further impaired by her having painted everything that could be painted” (617).

<sup>26</sup> I conjecture that the “Z” in question is another textual motif: the graphic notation used in Russian documents—ledgers, for example—to mark the *end* of the entry on a page on which space still remains. Also, Nina’s remark on seeing Vasen’ka is “Нет!” (“No!”). He glosses this as “(в значении «глазам не верю!»)” (568; “in the sense of, ‘I can’t believe my eyes,’” though the phrase is omitted in Nabokov’s English translation, where Nina simply says, “Well, of all people—”) but the fact remains that what she has uttered on seeing him is an emphatic negation. Nabokov arguably uses the same orthographic device in *Приглашение на казнь*, when the narrative records that the last entry Cincinnatus makes in his prison notes is the word “death” crossed out: ~~смерть~~ (175). Cincinnatus is interrupted and does not continue the entry—ever—but the “hard” orthographic fact that remains on the page is the negation of death. Alexander Zholkovsky also suggests that the “зета” (“Z”) in Nabokov’s text could stand for “zero” (private conversation).

погас,” “The first to fall in love with her was a poet... That first romance flared up and then went out,” 12). When Vasen’ka first meets Nabokov’s Nina there is “тогдашний ее жених” (565; “her fiancé was a guardsman,” 411), but when they meet again in Berlin she has parted ways with him (“она только что разошлась с женихом” 568; “she had just broken with her fiancé,” 414)—and Vasen’ka is already able to ascertain, “оглянув других мужчин в комнате, кто из них знает больше о ней, чем знал я” (568, “having glanced at the other guests, I instinctively determined which of the men knew more about her than I,” 414). Vasen’ka is well aware of her ongoing series of “быстр[ые] связ[и]” (576; “her casual affairs,” 421), and at one point recognizes in a handsome German who comes to retrieve a trunk of hers a fellow member of “то[т] же, очень международн[ый] союз[], в котором состоял и я” (575; “the very same cosmopolitan association of which I was a member,” 420). Where Khodasevich moralizes, however, Nabokov defuses the melodrama of a life gone bad by portraying his Nina as blithely unaware of the consequences of her affairs. She is not a flawed agent of her fate, as Petrovskaiia is in Khodaevsich’s account, but a contemplated *object*, a figure in Vasen’ka’s reminiscences as well as in Nabokov’s transcendent rendition of her life. In place of Khodasevich’s moral lesson, Nabokov offers a statement on the nature and value of art—always, in his case, solipsistically created (out of a female persona by a male observer/narrator, if one wishes to go that route).

Both Ninas lead a peripatetic émigré existence, a symptom of their fitful relation to life, as well as of the emigration’s symbolic function in both accounts as an afterlife or otherworld. Nabokov’s Nina “всегда или только что приехала или сейчас уезжала” (567-8; “She had always either just arrived or was about to leave,” 413). Khodasevich notes that Petrovskaiia lived in Poland, Italy, and France, and that she had to resort at times to begging, to sewing linen for the military, to writing a screen play for a movie actress, to going hungry (16). The Nina of “Весна в Фиальте” is not impoverished like Petrovskaiia, but Vasen’ka at one point has a dream in which he sees her on the landing of his apartment building, asleep on a trunk like a homeless vagabond: “увидел, что там, в проходе, на сундуке, подложив свернутую рогожку под голову, бледная и заматанная в платок, мертвым сном спит Нина, как спят нищие переселенцы на Богом забытых вокзалах” (576; “I saw, lying on a trunk, a roll of burlap under her head, pale-lipped, and wrapped in a wooden kerchief, Nina fast asleep, as miserable refugees sleep in godforsaken

railway stations,” 412; recall Khodasevich’s description of Petrovskaiia’s death “в нищенском отеле нищенского квартала,” “in a miserable hotel in a miserable neighborhood,” 7).

Both heroines experience a moment of ominous departure from a train station hinting at a more final separation. In Khodasevich’s account Petrovskaiia leaves Russia in 1909, setting off for the deracinated “epilog” to her life as a Symbolist consort and declaring her departure to be a form of exile (“«в ссылку», по ее слову,” “‘into exile,’ as she put it,” 16; she was accompanied to the station by Briusov and Khodasevich). “Она уезжала навсегда,” Khodasevich remarks (“She was leaving for good,” 16). In Nabokov’s story the departure is less literally final but even more symbolically freighted with motifs of isolation and separation. When Vasen’ka and his wife encounter Nina by chance on the platform of a Berlin train station she disappears from every one’s view, then reappears behind the class of the railway car window “перейдя в другой мир” (569; [as if having] “passed into another world,” 414), drumming on the glass until someone helps her open the window before the train departs—leaving the narrator with a childhood memory of a scrap of a French song linking “hymen and death” (in the English version, 415; in Russian, “венц и кончина,” 569).<sup>27</sup>

The focus of Khodasevich’s essay is Nina Petrovskaiia’s flawed attempt to merge art and life, manifested for him in particular in her self-deceiving attempts to be part of other people’s dramas. “Жизнь Нины была лирической импровизацией, в которой лишь применяясь к таким же импровизациям других персонажей, она старалась создать нечто целостное— ‘поэму из своей личности’” (“Nina’s life was a lyrical improvisation in which by latching onto the same kind of improvisations put on by others she tried to create something whole, a ‘poem of her personality,’” 17). The recurring references to posters for the approaching circus in Nabokov’s story already suggest themselves, as mentioned above, as ironic indexes to the tale’s unreality, to its Meyerholdian element of play; but Vasen’ka himself also views his series of liaisons with Nina as having taken place on a series of “stage-sets”: “Все эти платформы и лестницы, и чуть-чуть бутафорские переулки, были декорациями, оставшимися от каких-то других доигранных жизней” (567; “all those platforms and stairs and three-walled rooms and dark back alleys, were trite settings [in Russian, lit. “stage sets”] remaining after some other lives brought to a close long

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<sup>27</sup> On the Tolstoyan allusions in the passage, see Seifrid.

before,” 413). Like Petrovskaia, a writer of minor talent better known as a Symbolist hanger-on, Nabokov’s Nina “enters into the role” not of muse but merely of close companion to her fashionably avant-garde writer-husband—whose books she is not even able to read her way through (“уже вошла в роль я не скажу музыки, но близкого товарища мужа-творца [...] хотя на самом деле вряд ли одолела хоть одну из его книг” 571; “had already assumed if not the part of a muse at least that of a soul mate and subtle advisor [...] although it is wildly improbable that she had ever waded through a single volume of his,” 417)—and Nabokov’s narrator notes her long-standing but failed efforts to imitate her husband and his entourage (“давнее, преданное подражание им,” 582; “long-standing, faithful imitation of them,” 425). His brusque assessment of “ложь и бред Нининой жизни” (577; “the lies, the futility, the gibberish of that life,” 421) could well have been lifted from Khodasevich’s necrologue of Petrovskaia (cf. also Ruprekht’s lament in Briusov’s *Огненный ангел* that Renata tried to tempt him to sin, “применяя ложь и лицемерие,” “by using lies and hypocrisy,” 180).

Still more telling—in these works by two consummate artists of the word—are the verbal coincidences between the texts. Both works resort to the verb *оказываться/оказаться* (to turn out to be) as an index to unmasking, a way to register the irony of the actual non-coincidence of life and art. It is an obvious enough verb, to be sure; but its repetition at key moments suggests it carries heightened meaning. The signal instance in Khodasevich’s critique of Symbolist culture is “Но клюквенный сок иногда *оказывался* настоящей кровью” (“But the cranberry juice sometimes *turned out to be* real blood,” 10; italics mine), an overt reference to Aleksandr Blok’s 1906 play *Балаганчик* (*The Fairground Booth*), in which a clown who has been hit over the head with a wooden sword cries out, “истекаю клюквенным соком” (“I’m bleeding cranberry juice”—an assertion, in Blok’s case, of the utter theatricality of life). Later, commenting on how Petrovskaia deceived herself about her romantic affairs, Khodasevich states, “тем временем Нина *оказалась* брошенной да еще оскорбленной” (“in reality she *turned out to be* abandoned and scorned,” 13; italics mine). Nabokov then deploys the verb in the resounding final sentence of the story, in which the narrator states that, unlike her husband Ferdinand and his sidekick Segur, Nina “*оказалась* все-таки смертной” (582; “had *turned out* after all to be mortal,” 425; italics mine).

Nabokov also brings forward a key existential pun which is latent in Khodasevich. Describing Blok’s exasperated view of Petrovskaia, Khodasevich notes that her chosen posture in

life was that of “always” dying (17) and comments on her excessive drinking, “В вечном хмелю, не теряя рассудка, она уже была *точно по другую сторону жизни*” (“In a perpetual [lit: eternal] state of inebriation, but without losing her mind, she was already *as if on the other side of life*,” 16-7; italics mine). In the Russian version of Nabokov’s story the narrator remarks, “Если мне надо было предъявить на конкурс земного бытия образец ее позы, я бы, пожалуй, поставил ее у прилавка в путевой конторе, ноги свиты, одна бьет носком линолеум, локти и сумка на прилавке, за которым служащий, взяв из-за уха карандаш, раздумывает с ней над планом спального вагона” (568; “Had I to submit before judges of our earthly existence a specimen of her average pose, I would have perhaps placed her leaning upon a counter at Cook’s, left calf crossing right shin, left toe tapping floor, sharp elbows and coin-spilling bag on the counter [...]” 413). The “sleeping car” reference in the Russian text already potentially hints at death, but in the English version of the story, as if in a retrospective gesture toward Khodasevich’s unexploited wordplay, Nabokov promotes the image to one in which the employee, “pencil in hand, pondered with her over the plan of an *eternal sleeping car*” (413; italics mine).

The most compelling parallel between Nabokov’s story and Khodasevich’s essay lies in their shared theme of *life taking on existence as a text*, which serves as the central point in each work’s meditation on the meaning of “life-creation.” Khodasevich comments that in the cult of *жизнетворчество* not only were everyday events expected to take on the aspect of art, literary works were also treated as a real element of every one’s lives (“написанное кем бы то ни было становилось реальным, жизненным событием для всех,” 9; “something that had been written, no matter by whom, became a real life event for everyone”). Members of the circle strove to *act out* their lives as if in a theater of improvisations, treating the act as real life even though they knew it was a performance (“Знали, что играют,—но игра становилась жизнью,” 10; “They knew they were acting; but the acting became life”). The irony in Petrovskaia’s case is that her “textual” role as the prototype for “Renata” in Briusov’s *Огненный ангел* continued outside the bounds of that novel because, although Briusov had supplied a literary *dénouement* to the “Renata” plot, he was unable to end it in real life. “Со смертью Ренаты не умерла Нина Петровская, для которой, напротив, роман безнадежно затягивался” (15; “With the death of Renata, Nina Petrovskaia did not die; rather, for her the novel dragged on hopelessly”). Her life and “text” then fully coincided, “она старалась создать нечто целостное—«поэму из своей личности». Конец личности, как

и конец поэмы о ней, — смерть. В сущности поэма была закончена в 1906 году, в том самом, на котором сюжетно обрывается *Огненный ангел*” (17; “she strove to create something whole—a ‘poem of her self.’ The end of the self, just like the end of the poem about it, comes with death. The poem was essentially completed in 1906, the same year in which the plot of *Fiery Angel* breaks off”). Petrovskaia’s life continued in emigration, but her intuition as an artist of life (“чутье художника, творящего жизнь, как поэму” 18) told her that life could not end without another dramatic event as its finale. In Khodasevich’s account this came with the death of her mentally ill younger sister Nadya in January 1928—an event that marked the final and complete fusion of the life with the “poem,” or more specifically, with the structure of a *sentence*: “Смертью Нади была дописана последняя фраза затянувшегося эпилога. Через месяц с небольшим, собственной смертью, Нина Петровская поставила точку” (18; “Nadya’s death brought to completion the last phrase of the dragged-out epilog. A little over a month later Nina Petrovskaia inserted the final period, with her own death”).

That Nabokov’s Nina exists essentially as a figure of text rather than life is the very point of “Весна в Фиальте”—and an extension of a cardinal theme running through his entire *oeuvre*. It is essayed as early as his first novel *Машенька*, in which the hero creates a beloved as a figure of memory independent of her real-life prototype, whom he then abandons; and extends, notably, to *Lolita*, whose “nymphet” heroine is a creature of the narrator Humbert Humbert’s perverse fantasy and prison diary and then to *Pale Fire*, whose narrator erects an entire fantastic kingdom of “Zembla” in a set of footnotes wildly at odds with the text they annotate. In “Весна в Фиальте” Nabokov thus appropriates from Khodasevich the idea of a “Nina” who exists already as a textual phenomenon. When Nina asks Vasen’ka at the opening of the story where he is leading her, he replies—in a voice that is manifestly one of retrospection rather than immediate experience, still further underscoring the nature of the events as a fashioned account rather than “life”—“Собственно говоря, назад в прошлое, что я всякий раз делал при встрече с ней, будто повторяя все накопление действия сначала вплоть до последнего добавления, как в русской сказке подбирается уже сказанное при новом толчке вперед” (565; “Back into the past, back into the past, as I did every time I met her, repeating the whole accumulation of the plot from the very beginning up the last increment—thus in Russian fairy tales the already told is bunched up again at every new turn of the story,” 411). Vasen’ka later characterizes his life as a text in whose

margins Nina has intermittently appeared: “она появлялась на полях моей жизни, совершенно не влияя на основной текст” (575; “she hurriedly appeared in the margins of my life, without influencing in the least its basic text,” 420). But Nina’s existence in other lives is textual as well. From time to time even when Vasen’ka was not in touch with her, “она сбегала по ступеням чьей-нибудь фразы” (575; “she would run down the steps of a chance sentence,” 420).<sup>28</sup> Then, in a knowing echo (on Nabokov’s part) of the Symbolist vogue for embodying real people in literary characters, Vasen’ka comments, “В другой раз она кивнула мне из книги мужа из-за строк, относившихся к эпизодической служанке” (575; “In a bookshop she nodded to me from a page of one of her husband’s stories, a page referring to an episodic servant girl,” 420). The description which accompanies her appearance in the book could be taken as a statement on Nina’s own ephemeral being-as-text: “ее облик,—писал Фердинанд,—был скорее моментальным снимком природы, чем кропотливым портретом, так что, припоминая его, вы ничего не удерживали, кроме мелькания разъединенных черт” (575; “‘Her face,’ he wrote, ‘was rather nature’s snapshot than a meticulous portrait, so that when...tried to imagine it, all her could visualize were fleeting glimpses of disconnected features’” 420).<sup>29</sup>

The real writer behind the text in “Весна в Фиальте,” the creator of *its* “Nina,” is of course Nabokov the master artist, not the imperceptive Vasen’ka, who even on the plane of real life only belatedly realizes what he has had with Nina and who, like the narrator-hero of *Отчаяние* (*Despair*), can be blind toward literary allusions he himself makes. It is also arguably Nabokov, not his hero, who offers the final statement on Nina’s existential status, just as he does for Lolita in that novel’s ending.<sup>30</sup> In his belated profession of love for Nina Vasen’ka unwittingly invokes

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<sup>28</sup> Cf. the opening of *Lolita*, with *its* embodiment of the heroine running down stairs within a sentence: “the tip of the tongue taking a trip of three steps down the palate to tap, at three, on the teeth. Lo. Lee. Та” (9).

<sup>29</sup> This remnant of flickering features is another Nabokovian reflex, usually used to signal that something belongs to the realm of art (or memory, its near-equivalent in Nabokov’s world) rather than quotidian reality: of a French girl he met as a child on the Riviera then saw again in a Parisian park he writes, “The leaves mingle in my memory with the leather of her shoes and gloves, and there was, I remember, some detail in her attire (perhaps a ribbon on her Scottish cap, or the pattern of her stockings) that reminded me then of a rainbow spiral in a glass marble. I seem to be holding that wisp of iridescence, not knowing exactly where to fit it, while she runs with her hoop ever faster around me and finally dissolves among the slender shadows cast on the graveled path by the interlaced arches of its low looped fence” (*Speak, Memory* 152). In *Lolita* when Humbert Humbert on a walk in the woods shoots a gun borrowed from a friend, he “actually managed to hit a hummingbird, though I must say not much of it could be retrieved for proof—only a little iridescent fluff” (216).

<sup>30</sup> Dismissively noting Ferdinand’s specious facility for literary invention, Vasen’ka remarks, “я же никогда не понимал, как это можно книги выдумывать, что впроку в выдумке” (571; “I never could understand what was

a literary reference that already signals love's doom: "и я сказал, наше дешевое, официальное *ты* заменяя тем одухотворенным, выразительным *вы*, к которому кругосветный пловец возвращается, обогащенный кругом: «А что, если я вас люблю?» (581; "and I said [substituting for our cheap, formal 'thou' that strangely full and expressive 'you' to which the circumnavigator, enriched all around, returns]," 425). Evidently wishing to appeal to Pushkin's celebrated poem of 1828 "Ты и вы" ("You and Thou") in which the poet's beloved inadvertently reveals her true feelings by substituting a "heartfelt" (сердечный) familiar pronoun "ты" for the "empty" (пустое) formal "вы"—but with a would-be sophisticated reversal of the pronouns, so that the formal "вы" (you) now becomes the expressive form displacing the "cheap, official" informal variant, Vasen'ka inadvertently lands in a different Pushkin poem which *does* use the formal "вы" for its declaration: the 1829 "Я вас любил" ("I loved you once"). What he does not evidently realize, however, is that the latter poem is a statement that a relationship has *ended*, not, as in the other, an opening bid for love.<sup>31</sup>

In both works, the motifs of life, theatricality, and text come together most poignantly in the symbolic domain of the sentence. Khodasevich wholly circumscribes Nina Petrovskaiia's life within the "text" of the "poem" she tried to make of her life when he states that with her suicide she "placed the period" that closed the final phrase of the epilog that her life in emigration had been.<sup>32</sup> This is the warning Khodasevich issues: that if you begin a sentence—if you start trying to turn your life into a text—you inevitably must also end it with a period (death). Nabokov does

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the good of thinking up books," 416). On the hero's blindness to the literary allusions surrounding him in *Отчаяние* see Carroll. On this point I disagree with Shroyer, who states that "Vasen'ka understands that the only domain where he and Nina will always be together is his memory, an otherworldly narrative sustained by language and love" (234). But is it not Vasen'ka who realizes this. It is Nabokov, and his attentive (re)readers.

<sup>31</sup> Zholkovsky notes this dual reference - but does not explain its significance ("Philosophy of Composition," 393). The same is true for Dolinin, 776. Shroyer also notes the dual reference but sees the second poem as contiguous with the meaning of the first, not its inadvertent reversal (225-6).

<sup>32</sup> Nabokov's *Приглашение на казнь* also draws a close connection between the extent of writing and that of life: Cincinnatus's cell contains a blank sheet of paper as well as "изумительный очищенный карандаш, длинный как жизнь любого человека" (12, "as long as the life of any man")—save that of Cincinnatus, the narrator adds, because he has been sentenced to death (48). The concentration of the modernist merging of life and text down even to the level of punctuation—essentially, a hyperbolization of the conceit—also appears in Isaak Babel's "Гюи де Мопассан" ("Guy de Maupassant"). Babel's story is itself a study of modernist life-imitating-art in which the narrator, a part-time tutor of French, and his voluptuous client act out the seduction scenes in a Maupassant story she has been translating under his tutelage. When the client asks how he manages to translate so felicitously, he intones to her about the "army of words" in which all forms of weaponry serve and tells her that "никакое железо не может войти в человеческое сердце так леденяще, как точка, поставленная вовремя" (219; "no iron can pierce the human heart as chillingly as a period placed at the right moment").

not comment self-consciously, as Khodasevich does, on the form of his final sentence; but he places the word “mortal” right before the last period marking the end of the entire text, thus making the ending of his sentence and his text coincide fully with the ending of Nina’s life (and the Russian “смертной” more directly invokes the sense of смерть, ‘death,’ than does the Latinate English “mortal”). Having noted that the grotesque and ridiculous Ferdinand and Segur, “саламандры судьбы, василиски счастья” had escaped the automobile accident with only light damage to their scales (“отделались местным и временным повреждением чешуи,” 582; “salamanders of fate, those basilisks of good fortune, had escaped with local and temporary injury to their scales,” 425), he laments that the fragile and lovely Nina: “несмотря на свое давнее, преданное подражание им, оказалось все-таки смертной” (582; “in spite of her long-standing, faithful imitation of them, had turned out after all to be mortal,” 425).<sup>33</sup> The sentence masterfully embodies a paradox which encapsulates the essence of Vasen’ka’s relations with Nina in which what had *seemed* mirage-like, almost imaginary, an artefact of the mist enveloping Fialta, turns out to be real at the very moment that it is lost. On one level it states that, while Ferdinand and Segur survive, Nina died, i.e. exists no more; but on another level it asserts that, while they were mere figments of imagination, she *turned out to be* mortal, i.e. *more* real than they.<sup>34</sup> The paradox inheres in the statement’s simultaneous confirmation of absence and reality: the very statement announcing Nina’s absence is the one which asserts her ontological reality. It is a verbal device (or trick, in the admiring sense Khodasevich applied to him) of which Nabokov was fond: cf. the ending paragraph of “The Vane Sisters,” another in the trio of his favorite stories, in which the narrator’s very statement that he

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<sup>33</sup> The bestiary vocabulary used here to describe Ferdinand and Segur (василиски, саламандры – basilisks and salamanders) may have wandered in from Bruisov’s *Огненный ангел*: cf. the passage in which Ruprekht quavers before Renata, who has been consorting with demons: “я обмирал пред ней, как под взором василиска” (70; “I quavered before her, as if under the gaze of a basilisk”); and Ruprekht’s description of a vision Renata has of “ступени некоей лестницы, изображающей ее земную жизнь, по которым ступала она среди змей, василисков, драконов и других чудовищ” (177; “the steps of some kind of ladder representing her earthly existence, which she ascended amidst snakes, basilisks, dragons, and other monsters”)—an apt enough description of the life Nabokov confers on *his* Nina.

<sup>34</sup> Ferdinand and Segur as they scurry off to their fairy-tale realm recall the grotesque figures surrounding Cincinnatus throughout *Приглашение на казнь*, who shrivel up and disappear as he awakens from the nightmare of a world that has imprisoned him. That the very narrative of Nina acquires a certain incontrovertible—textual—reality of its own despite her fictional death recalls Zholkovsky’s observation on the verbal effects of the “Lady of Spain” limerick (“There once was a lady of Spain/Who said: ‘Let us do it again/And again and again/And again and again/And again and again and again”): “Roughly speaking, the Spanish lady and her intentions are fictional, whereas the repetition of the word *again* is a fact” (*Themes and Texts*, 220).

has failed to find any meaning in a dream turns out to be an acrostic—which he does not see, but the astute reader does—conveying a message from beyond the grave.<sup>35</sup>

Nabokov's dialog with Khodasevich on the relation between life and art arguably extends further even than his response to "Конец Ренаты." "Renata" (Nina Petrovskaia) herself wrote a story about a peripatetic love affair, "Бродяги" ("The Wanderers," the central piece in her 1908 collection of stories *Sanctus Amor*). Although a banal statement on the meaning of love that one would otherwise expect to fall below Nabokov's aesthetic radar, "Бродяги" might have come to his attention in his youth, when he read widely in the literature of Russian Symbolism. He might also have read or reread it under the influence of Khodasevich's essay on Renata/Nina. Like Nabokov's "Весна в Фиальте" a reworking of Chekhov's "Дама с собачкой," Petrovskaia's tale indulges in a formulaic Symbolist mixture of mysticism and decadence inspired by the writings of Stanisław Przybyszewski.<sup>36</sup> Onto an easy liaison between the male and female protagonists, which begins in a chance meeting in a restaurant and continues intermittently for two years, Petrovskaia projects the notion that love is a lofty spiritual ideal to which one devotes one's life but never attains. The male narrator recounts his brief experience of happiness, which descended on him like a miraculous gift then abandoned him (*nota bene*, the first-person narrative persona is a feature Petrovskaia's story shares with Nabokov's, whereas Chekhov narrates his tale in the third person). His affair with the married heroine begins with almost magical ease when she tells him over dinner that she thinks constantly of love and wonders at each new meeting, is this it? ("не здесь ли?," 175). When she visits him the next day she declares that her love is a form of "madness" (безумие), a "fiery whirlwind" (огненный вихрь) that sweeps away everything called "life" (176; the epithet огненный clearly alludes self-admiringly to Petrovskaia's role as Renata in Bruisov's *Огненный ангел*, published in the same year). He continues to see her, nervously asking if he is the one she had been waiting for. At one point he asks her to stay for good and be his wife—

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<sup>35</sup> Khodasevich notes that in Nabokov's works a character's death often coincides with transition to another realm: Cincinnatus in *Приглашение на казнь* "dies" in transition from an imaginary world to the real one in which his author dwells; the hero of "Terra incognita" dies at the very moment when he immerses himself in the world of the imagination. The hero of "Пильграм" (in English translation, "The Aurelian") dies for his wife and the customers of his shop at the very moment when he at last departs for "Spain," a place created in his daydreams rather than the actual country ("О Сирине," 392-3). Zholkovsky also notes that Nabokov's final words, "оказалось все-таки смертной" actually mean that his heroine is "живая" ("Philosophy of Composition," 398; "alive").

<sup>36</sup> Grossman, 145.

whereupon she delivers a sermon on free love, outlining the life of bored familiarity that would ensue if they married, then walks out of his life.

Petrovskaia's homage to free love may be banal, but the striking number of motifs it shares with "Весна в Фиальте" suggests that Nabokov was aware of it. Both stories emphasize the fleeting nature of happiness, which is recognized more in retrospect than in the moment: "Мое счастье было кротко," Petrovskaia's narrator remarks ("My happiness was short-lived"); "Я принял его как чудесный неожиданный дар, и оно покинуло меня, еще юное, живое, навсегда озарив мои дни" (174; "I took it as a wondrous and unexpected gift and it abandoned me while it was still young and alive, having lit up my days forever"). In both works, the affair extends intermittently over a finite period of time: "С этой женщиной, о которой я говорю, мы встречались в продолжение двух лет" ("I saw this woman about whom I am speaking over the course of two years," 174; it is fifteen years in Nabokov's story). In both cases there is a stodgy husband behind the affair: "Иногда я видел ее мужа—всегда мрачного молчаливого человека" (174; "Sometimes I saw her husband—always a gloomy and silent man"; in Nabokov it is "боевой офицер из аккуратных, красавец собой, тяжеловатый и положительный," 565 ["a guardsman on leave from the front, a handsome heavy fellow," 411]—this, of course, is the Chekhovian anti-bourgeois note informing both works). In both stories a key episode takes place in a tawdry restaurant. In "Бродяги" it appears in the scene in which the two lovers first meet: "Тогда усталая певица с слишком подведенными глазами перемененно поет какой-нибудь надрывающий избитый романс" ("Then a tired singer with too much mascara under her eyes sang some kind of heart-wrenching worn-out romance," 175); in Nabokov it is the "скуchnоватое кафе" (572; "perfectly bourgeois establishment," 417) Ferdinand perversely enjoys frequenting, with its female orchestra wearily grinding out tunes ("оркестр из полдюжины прядущих музыку дам," 572; "this orchestra composed of half a dozen weary, self-conscious ladies interlacing mild harmonies," 417); in both cases it is a decadent motif whose ultimate origin is likely Blok's 1906 "Незнакомка" ("Incognita") in which "по вечерам над ресторанами/горячий воздух дик и глух" ("in the evenings above the restaurants/the hot air is wild and deaf")—a recent memory when Petrovskaia wrote her tale.

One particularly telling suggestion that Nabokov may have been influenced by Petrovskaia's story is the image of window frames casting shadows like a cross—a fatidic motif

which Nabokov subtly deploys once, in the scene of the first kiss between Vasen'ka and Nina ca. 1917 (“Зажигаются окна и ложатся, с крестом на спине, ничком на темный, толстый снег,” 565; in Nabokov’s English translation the “cross” reference disappears: “Windows light up and stretch their luminous lengths upon the dark billowy snow, making room for the fan-shaped light above the front door between them,” 411-2) but which Petrovskaia hammers home three times: “Перекладыны рам черными крестами лежали на полу” (“the window frames lay like black crosses on the floor,” 176, when the heroine first comes to visit the narrator); during one of her later visits, “Как в первую ночь, мы сидели на диване, не расплетая рук, а перекладыны рам крестами лежали на светлом полу” (“As on that first night, we sat on the sofa holding hands while the window frames lay like crosses on the lit floor,” 177); and in the heroine’s description of how, if they married, the past would look at them with sad reproach, “От этого взгляда снится иногда эта комната, голубые окна и черные кресты на полу” (178; “From that glance I sometimes dream of this room, with its blue windows and the black crosses on the floor”).

Perhaps the closest parallel between the two stories, however, is the crucial moment in the plot when the hitherto seemingly *mystical* or *otherworldly* love between the characters is ruptured by the hero’s attempt to ground it, to make it real. In “Весна в Фиальте” Vasen'ka does this by uttering the Pushkinian words, “А что, если я вас люблю?” (581; “Look here—what if I love you?,” 425). In Petrovskaia’s story the hero thinks to himself that “Захотелось чего-то прочного, на долгие дни” (“He wanted something solid, to last a long time,” 177) before saying to the heroine, “Останься навсегда, будь моей женой” (“Stay forever, be my wife,” 177 - itself surely a quotation, whether conscious or not, of the phrase “*Verweile doch, du bist so schön,*” the uttering of which by Goethe’s Faust in response to any of the pleasures the devil provides him would mean his immediate death: a potentially deep subtext informing both works that links *the attempt to realize desire* with *death*). In Nabokov’s tale, Vasen'ka repeats his statement: “Нина взглянула, я повторил, я хотел добавить...” (581; “Nina glanced at me, I repeated those words, I wanted to add...,” 425); so does the narrator in Petrovskaia’s “Бродяги”: “—Будь моей женой,- повторил я тупо, с отчаянием, не слушая ее слов” (“Be my wife,’ I stupidly repeated, in despair, not hearing her words,” 177). In both cases the awkward declaration leads to a rupture which destroys the love (or its illusion). In Petrovskaia’s story, “И вдруг разорвалась пелена жуткой тишины...” (“Suddenly the shroud of the horrible silence was rent,” 177), after which the

narrator becomes aware again of noises in the building and in the street. In Nabokov, "...но что-то, как летучая мышь, мелькнуло по ее лицу..." (581; "something like a bat passed swiftly across her face," 425; italics mine)—an image whose source lies not in Petrovskaiia's story but in the original, as it were, of Renata/Nina (published the same year): in Briusov's *Огненный ангел* at the very moment when Ruprekht, after a series of tortuous comings together and partings from the maddeningly inconstant Renata, offers *his* earnest proposal of marriage: "К моему удивлению, это мое предложение, которое и поныне представляется мне естественным и разумным, произвело на Ренату самое дурное впечатление, и сразу на ее лицо как бы упала тень от какого-то мимовеющего крыла" ("To my surprise, my proposal, which to this day seems natural and sensible to me, produced the worst possible impression on Renata. Suddenly her face looked *as if the shadow of some kind of wing flying past* had fallen on it," 170, italics mine). In all three cases it is the ethereal woman who rejects the possibility of a real relationship.<sup>37</sup>

Nabokov's borrowings from Petrovskaiia should, of course, be read as an appendix to his dialog with Khodasevich. Both Khodasevich and Nabokov offer tales of a "Nina" whose life was subsumed within a text and whose tragically early death placed a period at the end of that text and life. "Конец Ренаты" is a necrologue offered as a stern, even moralizing, warning against the importation of text into life, the living of a *life* as if it were a text. The consequences of the flawed choice Petrovskaiia makes are emotional turmoil and death. On this plane, Nabokov's Nina is altogether different. She is blithely unaware of any consequences of her serial affairs, almost joyous in multiplying them. But Nabokov's point is not to promote some sort of moral relativism. Rather, he restores an element of the Chekhovian subtext which works in "Дама с собачкой" to defuse any Tolstoyan remonstrance that might apply to the illicit affair between the characters:

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<sup>37</sup> There might be yet another 'Nina' connection involving Khodasevich: Nina Berberova, his longtime partner who was "ровесница века" ("the century's coeval"), having been born in 1901. In her autobiography Berberova comments in some detail on Petrovskaiia as she and Khodasevich encountered her in emigration. Both are struck by the difference between Briusov's heroine and the pathetic old figure before them. "Когда она поцеловала меня, я почувствовала идущий от нее запах табака и водки" (194; "When she kissed me I could smell the tobacco and vodka on her breath"). In Berberova's account all Petrovskaiia does is talk about 1911 and Briusov, who, however, does not answer her letters (195). Berberova for her part speaks highly of Nabokov, describing him in terms sympathetic to his own self-description as the light of the Russian modernist emigration (367-8); but he was less flattering of her. Berberova and Khodasevich split up in 1932, the year Nabokov and Khodasevich met. She subjected Nabokov to a detailed account of the split—and he found her literary talk high-schoolish and unbearable (Boyd, 391-2). In addition to recalling the Nina of Khodasevich's essay, Nabokov's use of the name may thus have been a playful reminder to Khodasevich of the Nina with whom he himself had just parted.

after consummating their love Gurov sits calmly (“не спеша”) eating a slice of watermelon while Anna Sergeevna assumes a despondent pose, “точно грешница на старинной картине” (“like that of a fallen woman in an old painting”) (398). Striking a pose borrowed from a painting is here unmasked as needless, even tedious, histrionics—and Chekhov could thus be counted a critic of “life-creation” *avant la lettre*. Nabokov responds to Khodasevich’s call to separate art and life by showing, in effect, that while importing text into life may be bad, transforming life into text is not—it is the supreme artistic goal of both “Весна в Фиальте” and *Дар*, the writing of which Nabokov interrupted to offer this corrective to Khodasevich’s view (much as the excerpted short story “Круг” [“The Circle”] essayed the circular narrative structure of Chapter Four in *Дар*, the mock-biography of Chernyshevsky). Nabokov’s “Nina” is not an agent who makes the bad choice of importing art into life; she is a figure in a text, essentially not a person at all, not even a fictional representation of one, but already only a “galley slave” (as Nabokov referred to his characters, with mock *hauteur*)—partly in Vasen’ka’s clumsy and imperceptive recollections, but fully and transcendently in the matrix text (in which Vasen’ka, too, is a galley slave) set before us by Nabokov the author.

Ultimately what Khodasevich does is to promote by implication an alternative form of modernism to that pursued by the Symbolists: that of high art, realized only in texts, whose boundaries must be guarded against muddying influences like “life-creation” (a stance perhaps not inconsistent with his being a poet, whereas Nabokov was primarily an artist of prose).<sup>38</sup> Nabokov wrote “Весна в Фиальте” as part of his series of sympathetic interactions with Khodasevich in the 1930s—but in polemical response to the claim in “Конец Ренаты” that attempts to fuse life

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<sup>38</sup> Khodasevich was consistent in his views. Elsewhere, in the course of otherwise admiring reminiscences of Maksim Gor’kii, he condemns what he saw as that writer’s preference for storytelling over real life. Khodasevich notes Gor’kii’s “крайне запутанн[ое] отношени[е] к правде и лжи” (“Gor’kii,” 164; “extremely complicated relation to truth and lies”) which expressed itself, *inter alia*, in the paradox of Gor’kii’s insistence, on the one hand, that fiction be faithful to reality (“всех беллетристов подозревал в искажении действительности,” 157; “he suspected all writers of distorting reality”); and, on the other, in his enthusiasm for fantasy, however unreal: “способность к мечте, дар мечты-приводили его в восторг и трепет” (166; “a capacity for dreaming, a gift for dreaming, brought him to a state of rapture and trembling”). As an example Khodasevich cites a case in which Gor’kii, who could not bring himself to destroy an illusion (“разрушать какие бы то ни было иллюзии он считал кощунством,” 167; “to destroy any illusions whatsoever seemed sacrilege to him”) and who for example delighted in a Sorrento coachman who deceived him by driving off without giving change, first promised the Baroness Varvara Ikskul’ help in arranging an exit visa from the USSR then utterly failed to intervene on her behalf—having made his promise evidently simply because he could not bear to disappoint her dream of leaving (172-3).

and art must fail. Nabokov shares Khodasevich's irony toward Symbolist role-playing, especially when carried out by second-rate performers—as in the “ложь и бред,” the “lies and madness,” generated by his Nina as she tries to act in the drama of other people's lives. But he will not so readily evict art from daily life—or from memory of it. In his case the textualization of Nina is not, existentially, a “lie.” In place of Khodasevich's hieratic condemnation he offers an alternative aesthetic of memory-as-art, informed by an even keener—or more consistently modernist—sense of the reality constituted by the text.

In both texts memory plays a crucial role. One of Khodasevich's key statements on this theme is his 1925 poem “Соррентинские фотографии” (“Sorrento Photographs”) in which he outlines a notion of involuntary memory close to that of Proust (in whose 1913 *À la Recherche du Temps Perdu* the mere scent of a madeleine triggers extensive recollections leading to the resurrection of an entire world). It begins by declaring memory's capricious nature, which cannot be constrained: “Воспоминанье прихотливо / И непослушливо. Оно – / Как узловатая олива: / Никак, ничем не стеснено” (270; “Memory is capricious / And disobedient. It / Is like a sprawling olive tree: / Constrained by nothing and no one”). The poem goes on to compare memory to a photographic double exposure mapping vignettes from his life in Moscow and Petrograd onto contemporary scenes from a motorcycle ride on Capri, then concludes that in its capriciousness memory is not to be trusted: “так же дико и темно/И так же, вероятно, лживо...” (“just as wild and dark/And no doubt just as false,” 275).<sup>39</sup> One should set against this the pronouncements Nabokov made on the nature of memory, such as the claims in *Speak, Memory* that, rather than a chronological account, the tracing of “thematic designs through one's life should be, I think, the true purpose of autobiography” (27); that there was “pressed upon my life a certain intricate watermark whose unique design becomes visible when the lamp of art is made to shine through life's foolscap” (25); and his confession “I do not believe in time. I like to fold my magic carpet, after use, in such a way as to superimpose one part of the pattern upon another” (139; *nota bene*, here a deliberate superimposition, *versus* Khodasevich's random double exposure). Compare also closely related statements such as that made by Godunov-Cherdyntsev in *Дар*, as he nears completion of his biography of Chernyshevsky, that the wily motifs he had been chasing in his

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<sup>39</sup> The motorcyclist and photographer was Gor'kii's son, Maksim Alekseevich Peshkov (522).

subject's life “теперь мне послушны,—темы я приручил, они привыкли к моему перу” (414, “I have tamed its themes, they have become accustomed to my pen,” 236—and note here the opposition between the unruly memory—непослушливо—of Khodasevich's poem, written in 1925, and the now “tamed”—послушны—themes in Nabokov's novel of 1937-38).<sup>40</sup>

The life-text of Nina in Nabokov's tale may end with its final period, as does that of Petrovskaja in Khodasevich's account. But the paradox remains—and is celebrated by Nabokov—that the life embodied in the tale of Nina persists before our eyes on the page. Hence, too, the collision in his story of Meyerholdian play with death: play alone is not enough, it must confront and triumph over metaphysical reality.<sup>41</sup> Nabokov does this by restoring “Nina” as a work of art, a self-consciously fashioned artefact whose verbal reality stubbornly defies destruction and rises phoenix-like out of the ashes of her fictional death. The *textual* Nina—unwittingly and haltingly recreated by Vasen'ka in his recollections, but in a reality the story self-consciously emphasizes, a figure created by Nabokov—constitutes the real joy engendered by Fialta, just as in the earlier *Машенька* the hero Ganin no longer needs the person of his beloved because he has already created the “text” of her in his memory (indeed, created her textual variant before he even met her in person). The textual reality Nabokov celebrates here is at once not real, as fiction; and incontrovertibly real, as text—the “only immortality you and I may share” (309) as the author of *Lolita* (not its narrator-character Humbert Humbert) tells *his* heroine at that later novel's close.<sup>42</sup> Whether, at the end of a long day—or nearly a century, for this story—these kinds of device in Nabokov ultimately instantiate the “magician's doubts” or represent only a “gallant, splendid, and foredoomed effort” at merging metaphysical and literary immortality, in the context of the Russian

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<sup>40</sup> In Foster's analysis it is Nabokov's view of memory as a willful creative process which determines his alliances among the varieties of modernism available in Russian and European literature. He is inimical to the avant-garde and its abstract experimentation (cf. the mendaciously fashionable avant-garde writer Ferdinand in “Весна в Фиальте”) and prefers French over most Anglo-American modernism, with the exception of Joyce. He is strongly attracted in particular to Proust's *Recherche* but rejects its doctrine of involuntary memory as the basis of art. Nabokov instead cultivates “originary memories” (recorded most openly in *Speak, Memory*) which he then develops into a set of “master narratives” informing the whole of his *oeuvre* (32).

<sup>41</sup> On the concept of play in Nabokov's *oeuvre*, see Karshan.

<sup>42</sup> This self-conscious intrusion of the author speaking personally of or to his created characters at the end of the work is another homage to Pushkin, whose *Евгений Онегин* (*Eugene Onegin*) ends with a farewell to “his” Onegin. The ending of Nabokov's *Дар* mimics this parting in a disguised Pushkinian Onegin stanza in prose, which apostrophizes, “Прощай же, книга!” (541; “Farewell, my book!”).

modernist emigration they constitute a claim at once playful and profound for the transcendent potential of life transformed into text.<sup>43</sup>

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<sup>43</sup> *The Magician's Doubts. Nabokov and the Risks of Fiction* is the title of Michael Wood's study of the author. The comment on Nabokov's possibly "foredoomed" effort comes from Rorty (150).

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