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NABOKOV AND KHODASEVICH:
THE LYRE LIGHTENS

In the years following the publication of *Lolita*, Vladimir Nabokov's English readership began retroactively devouring his nine Russian novels in translation.¹ When *The Gift* was published in 1963, over one hundred eager critics authored rather bewildered reviews.² Aesthetic and stylistic dissimilarities between *Lolita* and *The Gift* confused critics, who concluded that a large chasm separated Nabokov's English texts from those originally written in Russian. While recent scholarship at least partially confirms this bifurcation by labeling the later Nabokov as a Cold Warrior,³ this paper argues that his sanguineous manipulations are already

¹ This article was originally presented as a paper at UCSD and I would like to take this opportunity to thank that audience for their insightful comments. I am especially grateful to Monika Greenleaf and Anna Lordan, whose assistance and guidance proved invaluable to me. I would also like to thank Mikhail Efimov, for graciously sharing his unpublished manuscript "A Commentary on a Commentary, or How the Heavy Lyre Can be Placed in the Cypress Chest?" / "Комментарий к Комментарию, или Как Тяжелая Лира Помещается в Кипарисовом Ларце?"

² Yuri Leving, *Keys to the Gift: A Guide to Vladimir Nabokov's Novel* (Boston: Academic Studies Press, 2011), 436. Two Nabokov novels were published in English in Berlin in the 1930s, but this article refers to the wave of translations that appeared after *Lolita*'s 1958 publication in New York.

³ For example, see Eric Naiman, "Nabokov and McCarthyism" paper presented at *The Novel in Russia and America: a Comparative Conference*, UC Berkeley, May 12, 2012, Adam Piette, *The Literary Cold War: 1945 to Vietnam* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2009) and Steven Belletto, *No Accident, Comrade: Chance and Design in Cold War American Narratives* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012). According to Piette, Nabokov "harbor[s] the most extreme forms of bi-fold Cold War fantasies, staged textually as fictions generated by the constant inner war within all citizens of the Cold War security states," 13.

visible in the original Russian version of *The Gift*, which was written in 1930s. In the last of his Russian-language novels, Nabokov crafts a literary heritage, starting with Gavril Derzhavin and ending with Nabokov's contemporary Vladislav Khodasevich. Nabokov simultaneously elevates and entombs his predecessors so that he can securely carry the torch of Russian literature in emigration.⁴ Nabokov utilizes Khodasevich's depiction of the author-hero relationship and violently rejects the latter's characterization of Orpheus, both crafting and destroying a bridge to one of the last living representatives of Russian literature in emigration.

Nina Berberova, Khodasevich's third wife, describes the close friendship between the two émigré writers in her memoirs. David Bethea explains how Berberova was the first to recognize this real-life friendship in *The Gift* and her analysis led to the widely accepted understanding that "the *principal* sources for Koncheyev and Fyodor are, respectively, Khodasevich and Nabokov."⁵ While Nabokov notoriously avoided conflating himself with any of his heroes, in a 1952 letter to the Chekhov Press, he penned a foreword admitting that "the young Russian poet, Fyodor Godunov-Cherdyntsev, is an alter-ego of the author."⁶ However, Nabokov was not merely describing the friendship of a young, talented author, similar to himself, with an older poet and compatriot. In his foreword to *The Gift*, Nabokov crowns Khodasevich "the greatest Russian poet that the twentieth century has yet produced."⁷ This deification of Khodasevich allows Nabokov to both solidify his link to his friend and simultaneously move past him and assume the title of the greatest Russian prose writer.

Nabokov's novel directly references Khodasevich's book of poetry, *The Heavy Lyre/Тяжелая Лира*, as well as major themes from the collection, particularly the tragic fate of the Orphic hero, to whom a heavy lyre is given.⁸ Throughout *The Gift*, Nabokov argues against Khodasevich's depiction of Orpheus by championing a more hopeful hero with a literary gift that

⁴ Alexander Dolinin writes that "Nabokov was obviously looking for an answer to the crucial question raised by a number of émigré writers and critics in the 1930s: how can literature survive in the conditions of exile?" from "The Gift," in *The Garland Companion to Nabokov*, ed. Vladimir Alexandrov (New York: Garland, 1995): 146.

⁵ David Bethea's "Nabokov and Khodasevich," chap. 452-463 in *The Garland Companion to Nabokov*, ed. Vladimir Alexandrov (New York: Garland, 1995), 462-463n25.

⁶ Leving, 46.

⁷ Vladimir Nabokov, *The Gift* (New York: Vintage International, 1991), unpaginated Foreword. For an analysis of Nabokov's "deliberate manipulation of literary genealogy," see Monika Greenleaf, "Fathers, Sons and Imposters: Pushkin's Trace in *The Gift*," *Slavic Review*, 53, no. 1 (1994): 143.

⁸ For a detailed account of the role of Orpheus in Nabokov's short stories, see Priscilla Meyer, "Nabokov's Short Fiction," chap. 119-134 in *The Cambridge Companion to Nabokov*, ed. Julian Connolly (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2005). Meyer shows how the theme of Orpheus in Nabokov's fiction logically arose from an earlier motif of "the émigré's obsession with a lost Russia," 121.

is neither heavy nor tragic. By simultaneously adopting and rejecting Khodasevich's figure of Orpheus, Nabokov inserts himself into the literary family tree that Khodasevich had constructed. Khodasevich had "written himself out" / "исписался" as a poet by the late 1920s, but he continued writing as a literary critic and biographer of Pushkin and Derzhavin.⁹ Khodasevich focused on Derzhavin's search for his literary successor, which he eventually found in Pushkin, in order to metaphorically mourn his own personal inability to find someone to continue Russian literature in emigration.¹⁰ By including imagery from Khodasevich's poetry in *The Gift*, Nabokov casts himself as Khodasevich's successor and becomes a twentieth-century Pushkin.¹¹

Before *The Gift* was published in English, *The New Yorker* magazine printed two excerpts, "The Lyre" and "Triangle Within Circle," whose titles underscore the importance of Khodasevich as a key to understanding the novel as a whole.¹² The title "Triangle within Circle" suggests that Khodasevich's idea of the author-hero relationship is central to *The Gift*.¹³ Khodasevich argues that one can represent the author, in his case, Pushkin, with a circle, inside of which a polygon, representing the hero, Evgenii, is inscribed.¹⁴ The polygon and the circle share points of intersection along their circumferences, but they are nonetheless distinct shapes. Since Nabokov in many respects "ventriloquizes" Fyodor, Khodasevich's author-hero diagram, when applied to *The Gift*, becomes a model to show the relationship between Fyodor and the

⁹ David Bethea, *Khodasevich: His Life and Art* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1983), xv.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 319 and 337.

¹¹ Russian émigrés attempted to use Pushkin's legacy as a unifying force and even inaugurated a Russian Culture Day on Pushkin's birthday, see Brian Boyd, *Vladimir Nabokov: The Russian Years* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1990), 242. However, as Greenleaf notes, Pushkin also acted as a disruptive force within émigré circles; Nabokov's contemporaries waged a "ferocious post-revolutionary struggle over Pushkin's inheritance" that included Mandelstam's "Pushkin i Scriabin," Khodasevich's "Koleblemyi Trenochnik," Bryusov's "Moi Pushkin," Marina Tsvetaeva's "Moi Pushkin" and "Pushkin i Pugachev," and Akhmatova's *Zapiski o Pushkine*, 142 and 143n13. Alexander Dolinin explains how Khodasevich viewed the anti-Pushkin faction as "the most important symptom of cultural nihilism," *Istinnaiia Zhisn' Pisatel'ia Sirina: Raboty o Nabokove*, (Sankt-Peterburg: Akademicheskii Proekt, 2004). For a detailed analysis of Pushkin's role within émigré circles, see Roman Timenchik, and Vladimir Khazan, *Peterburg v Poezii Russkoi Emigratsii (Pervaia i Vtoraia Volna)* (Sankt-Peterburg: Izdatel'stvo DNK, 2006).

¹² Vladimir Nabokov, "Triangle within Circle," *The New Yorker*, trans. Dmitri Nabokov March 23, 1963, 37 and Vladimir Nabokov, "The Lyre," *The New Yorker*, trans. Michael Scammell April 13, 1963, 44.

¹³ Vladislav Khodasevich, "Avtor, Geroi, Poet," *Vladislav Khodasevich: Sobranie Sochinenii v Chetyrekh Tomakh, Tom 2*, ed. V.P. Kochetov (Moskva: Soglasie, 1996), 378-382. Also see Dolinin, 165. Khodasevich's argument was only one of a large number of theories regarding the author-hero relationship, including Bakhtin's *Author and Hero in Aesthetic Activity*, which proliferated around the same time, but this paper will focus solely on Khodasevich's diagram.

¹⁴ Aleksandr Pushkin, *Evgenii Onegin*, in *Polnoe Sobranie Sochinenii* Vol. 6, ed. B.V. Tomashevskii (Moskva: Akademiia Nauk SSSR, 1937).

other characters, who are essentially his creations.¹⁵ At the beginning of the novel, Fyodor “involuntarily turned his head because of a burst of light that had ricocheted from his temple, and saw, with that quick smile with which we greet a rainbow or a rose, a blindingly white parallelogram of sky” / “неволью поворачивал голову (блеснуло рикошетом с виска) и увидел – с той быстрой улыбкой, которой мы приветствуем радугу или розу – как теперь из фургона выгружали параллелепипед белого ослепительного неба.”¹⁶ Since the light shines on his temple, the image becomes that of a polygon within a circle — Khodasevich’s depiction of the authorial relationship. Besides the protagonist, the four main characters in *The Gift*, Yasha Chernyshevski, Nikolai Chernyshevski, Koncheyev and Zina, form points of a parallelogram that is circumscribed by a circle, representing Fyodor. Naming and describing these four individuals, many of whom carry the burden of Orphic traits, allows Fyodor to externalize them, argue against them, and simultaneously move past both them and Khodasevich’s depiction of Orpheus.

Khodasevich’s very name ties him to *The Gift*. The novel’s original title *Yes / Да* contains a positive life-affirming response to Hamlet’s question “to be or not to be.”¹⁷ The syllable “da” also forms the middle of Khodasevich’s name. While it is only one syllable, Nabokov frequently plays with names in particular at the level of the syllable, for example, “Lolita.”¹⁸ The opening lines of Khodasevich’s book of poetry *The Way of Grain / Путем Зерна* include a reference to his own name: “The sower passes along the even furrows. / His father and grandfather went along these same paths” / “Проходит сеятель по ровным бороздам. / Отец его и дед по тем же шли путям” (italics mine).¹⁹ Khodasevich’s history of slicing up his own name and incorporating it into the beginning of his poems allows for the possibility that Nabokov’s playful early title of *The Gift* includes an indirect reference to his preferred predecessor.

¹⁵ I am grateful to Monika Greenleaf for this insight.

¹⁶ Nabokov, *The Gift*, 6. Vladimir Nabokov, *Dar* (Moskva: Izdatel’stvo AST, 1997), 10.

¹⁷ Leving, 128. See also Polina Barskova, “Filial Feeling and Paternal Patterns: *Hamlet* in *The Gift*,” *Nabokov Studies*, 9 (2005): 191-208.

¹⁸ See Vladimir Nabokov, *The Annotated Lolita: Revised and Updated*, ed. Alfred Appel, Jr. (New York: Random House, 1991), 9.

¹⁹ David Bethea, “Following in Orpheus’ Footsteps: A Reading of Khodasevich’s ‘Ballada,’” *Slavic and East European Journal*, 25, no. 3 (1981): 55. Unfortunately, Khodasevich’s incorporation of his name into the lines of the poem is lost in translation. According to A. Dolinin, Khodasevich repeats this pattern in the first line of “*Iz komnaty v seni svecha perekhodit*” – which contains an anagram of “Khodasevich,” quoted in Maria Malikova, “Zabytyi Poet,” an introductory article to V. V. Nabokov. *Stikhotvoreniia*. (St. Petersburg: Akademicheskii Proekt, 2002), 34-35.

In an obituary for Khodasevich in the magazine *Sovremennye Zapiski* in 1939, Nabokov writes: “What makes his *genius* particularly striking is that it matured in the years of our literature’s torpescence” / “Его дар тем более разителен, что полностью развит в годы отупения нашей словесности” (italics mine).²⁰ While his English translation uses the word “genius,” the Russian original uses the word “дар” / “gift.” Nabokov continues by mentioning that Khodasevich had “published no poems lately,” when actually he had not written any poems for a whole decade.²¹ Khodasevich’s “poetic silence” was emblematic of the difficulties facing many émigré poets after the revolution.²² In *The Gift*, Nabokov offers an alternative to Khodasevich’s silence by “lightening” the poetic gift and having his protagonist switch to writing prose.

In his poem “The star shines, the air trembles” / “Горит звезда, дрожит эфир” in *The Heavy Lyre*, Khodasevich compares the world to a present from God.²³ He ends the first stanza with “How could one not love this whole world / Your incredible present” / “Как не любить весь этот мир/ Невероятный твой подарок.”²⁴ However, at the end of the poem, the speaker jokingly destroys the “absurd” world, “as a small child destroys a fortress made of cards.”²⁵ This card fortress evokes the childhood toys and games from Fyodor’s collection of poems.²⁶ However, while Fyodor prefers sturdy toys, Khodasevich depicts toys that are flimsy and doomed to be destroyed. Here one can see the beginning of the divergence between the two authors, with creation in the eyes of Khodasevich becoming a tragic and calamitous process, and life being a small present instead of a large gift.

The title of Nabokov’s novel also seems to reference a famous Pushkin poem, which begins, “Vain gift, gift of chance / Life, why were you given to me?” / “Дар напрасный, дар

²⁰ English version from: Vladimir Nabokov, *Verses and Versions: Three Centuries of Russian Poetry, Selected and Translated by Vladimir Nabokov*, ed. Brian Boyd and Stanislav Shvabrin (Orlando: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt Publishing, 2008), 336. Russian version from: Vladimir Nabokov, “O Khodaseviche,” *Sovremenniki o Vladislave Khodaseviche*, ed. A.C. Berger (Sankt-Peterburg: Aletejya, 2004), 392.

²¹ Nabokov, *Verses and Versions*, 338.

²² For more on Khodasevich’s “poetic silence,” see Bethea “Following in Orpheus’ Footsteps: A Reading of Khodasevich’s ‘Ballada,’” 63.

²³ Bethea, *Nabokov and Khodasevich*, 166.

²⁴ Leving, 128.

²⁵ Vladislav Khodasevich, “Sobranie Sochinenii v Chetyrekh Tomakh,” *Stikhotvoreniia, Literaturnaia Kritika 1906-1922*, Vol. 1, ed. V. P. Kochetov (Moskva: Soglasie, 1996), 223.

²⁶ Nabokov, *The Gift*, 10 and 14.

случайный/ Жизнь, зачем ты мне дана?”²⁷ Pushkin had answered this question two years earlier in his poem “The Prophet” / “Пророк,” which focuses on a moment of inspiration that appears to inspire life with purpose. The two poems are even connected by the individual words contained in them. For example, the last stanza of “Vain gift” includes the line “My heart is empty, my mind is idle” / “Сердце пусто, празден ум,” which mirrors the second line of “The Prophet,” “In a bleak desert I dragged myself along” / “В пустыне мрачной я влачился,” since the Russian word for “empty” forms the root of the word for “desert.” The fact that he posed his question a second time after answering it earlier might imply that Pushkin was undermining his earlier ideas and that for him poetic life has no answers, only perpetual fluctuations between flashes of enlightenment and the pain of life. Nabokov’s novel attempts to answer Pushkin’s question, within the context of a post-revolutionary émigré society, where much of the small readership was struggling with and reevaluating its literary heritage.

Fyodor underscores the importance of “The Prophet” by mentioning how significant it was for his father. He explains at the beginning of Chapter 3:

My father took little interest in poetry, making an exception only for Pushkin: he knew him as some people know the liturgy and liked to declaim him while out walking. I sometimes think that an echo of Pushkin’s “The Prophet” still vibrates to this day in some resonantly receptive Asian gully.²⁸

The connection between Fyodor’s father and Pushkin heightens the poet’s filial dilemma of having to forge a way in life while weighed down by the overbearing perfection of his literary and biological ancestors. While Fyodor admits no resentment to his successful predecessors, he is unable to complete a biography of his father, just as Khodasevich was unable to finish his biography of Pushkin. One can even view Khodasevich’s biography of Derzhavin as a tactical retreat, which gained him access to Pushkin’s literary heritage while saving him the anxiety of writing about the greatest poet.

²⁷ Leving, 129-130. Both Boyd and Dolinin reference the connection to Pushkin’s poem. See Brian Boyd, “Nabokov, Pushkin, Shakespeare: Genius, Generosity and Gratitude in ‘Dar’ and ‘Pale Fire,’” *New Zealand Slavonic Journal* (1999): 1-21.

²⁸ Nabokov, *The Gift*, 148.

On one level, Pushkin's "The Prophet" is about the poet's navigation of a difficult filial relationship. Pushkin was plagued by complaints from the censor, which left him unable to publish a significant portion of his work and pay off his ever-mounting debt. During the furor of his coronation ceremonies, Nicholas I met with Pushkin, officially sanctioning his release from six years of exile, and declared that from that point he would be the poet's personal censor. Pushkin was so inspired by the meeting that next to his poem he wrote the date, not of the poem's creation, but of his meeting with the emperor.²⁹

Khodasevich's poem "Ballad" / "Баллада," the last poem in *The Heavy Lyre*, draws on Pushkin's "The Prophet." Although Khodasevich's poem is not a ballad in the traditional sense, its compact tripartite structure and amphibrachic trimeter lend it a sense of musicality, with the composition of each line mirroring that of the poem as a whole.³⁰ In his analysis of verse of the period, Gerald Smith finds that Khodasevich, more than any other poet, favored the iambic group, with particular emphasis on the tetrameter (Nabokov coming in second).³¹ This choice of amphibrachic trimeter for his "Ballad" draws attention to the fact that Khodasevich was distancing himself from his usual Pushkinian iambic tetrameter. Khodasevich uses his dialogue with Pushkin's "The Prophet" to illustrate his understanding of poetic inspiration as musical, otherworldly and, ultimately, tragic.

During the ballad's first third Khodasevich describes the claustrophobic, prison-like surroundings of his room, and ends with a question similar to the one that begins Pushkin's "Vain gift": "To whom can I convey how pitiable / I and all these things are?" / "Кому мне поведать, как жалко/ Себя и всех этих вещей?" In the following third, the narrator enters a trance and starts rocking to the sound of music, saying "But sounds are more truthful than sense/ And the word is the strongest of all" / "Но звуки правдивее смысла / И слово сильнее всего." This references the final line of Pushkin's poem, "With the word burn the hearts of people" / "Глаголом жги сердца людей." Both poets are quoting John 1:1, with Pushkin's Old Church Slavonic "word" / "глагол" descending from the Latin "verbum" and Khodasevich's "word" / "слово" coming from the Greek "logos."

²⁹ T.J. Binyon, *Pushkin: A Biography* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2003), 237.

³⁰ Barry Scherr, *Russian Poetry: Meter, Rhythm, Rhyme* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1986), 95 and Bethea, "Following in Orpheus' Footsteps: A Reading of Xodasevič's 'Ballada,'" 61.

³¹ Gerald Smith, "Nabokov and Russian Verse Form," *Russian Literature TriQuarterly*, ed. Carl Proffer et al (Ann Arbor, MI: Ardis, 1991), 279.

In an earlier poem from *The Heavy Lyre* collection, “I do not believe in earthly beauty” / “Не веру я в красоту земную,” wings sprout from a wound.³² Thus, when the narrator states that the music becomes “a blade that pierces me” / “пронзает меня лезвие,” the reader can assume that wings sprout, allowing the narrator to rise above the vertical axis of the poem, so that his head is in the stars while his feet stay in Hades. The acquisition of new wings could mean that he becomes a six-winged seraph, the angelic source of the revelation of Pushkin’s prophet. Khodasevich’s narrator gains the eyes of a snake, the mythical serpent whose tongue is given to the prophet. In this way Khodasevich not only incorporates elements of Pushkin’s poem into his own, but also tries to embed himself within and gain control of his predecessor’s narrative. We can infer from the fact that Khodasevich was a devoted scholar of Pushkin and composed dozens of articles on his work that he could greatly admire the poet’s achievements while maintaining a sense of filial anxiety about his own.

Khodasevich solidifies his break from Pushkin by naming his hero and narrator “Orpheus” at the end of the poem’s last line. “Orpheus” is also the final word of the collection as a whole. An unnamed “someone” hands Orpheus a “heavy lyre,” thereby making Khodasevich’s subject a *heavy gift*.³³ The naming of his poet confirms Khodasevich’s rejection of the redemptive Pushkinian prophet. The name Orpheus is related to the Greek words “orphe” (“darkness”) and “orphanos” (“fatherless”, “orphan”) and therefore could imply both filial anxiety and a freedom from paternal-filial responsibility. While life can gain meaning through communication with people wielding poetic power, in Khodasevich’s poetry this comes at the expense of mutilation and death. Khodasevich continues his negation of the Pushkinian prophetic ideal in his second poem titled “Ballad,” written four years later. As Bethea explains, “the impasse alluded to in the first ‘Ballada’ is now complete.”³⁴ One can interpret the poetic silence of the last decade of Khodasevich’s life as a way to cope in a world that literally kills poets. He felt that he could only write poetry in Russia, but also knew that return would likely be fatal.

³² Bethea, *Khodasevich: His Life and Art*, 247.

³³ A literal translation would be, “And through the wind someone hands me / A heavy lyre.”

³⁴ Bethea, *Khodasevich: His Life and Art*, 250.

In 1941, Nabokov translated Khodasevich's first "Ballad" into English and renamed it "Orpheus."³⁵ Nabokov uses Khodasevich's abcb rhyme structure for all stanzas, even though Khodasevich himself switches and uses abab for his most musical stanza. The most significant change is the second half of the penultimate stanza, which Nabokov translates as "and a great heavy lyre is from nowhere / handed me by a ghost through the gale" / "И кто-то тяжелую лиру / Мне в руки сквозь ветер дает."³⁶ Who is the ghost that mysteriously appears in the translation, handing over the "great heavy lyre"? Perhaps it is Khodasevich himself, two years after his death, passing his lyre on to his translator. Nabokov uses the word "circular" twice in the poem and "circle" once, whereas Khodasevich only includes the word "circular" / "круглый" once, in the opening stanza. Nabokov's emphasis on circularity makes the poem itself a circle, connecting the two authors.

One can also observe this visual linking of the two authors, the living Nabokov and the "living dead" Khodasevich, in the circuitous routes Fyodor takes to meet the poet Koncheyev. Both of Fyodor's imaginary meetings with Koncheyev involve parodic Orphic journeys to the underworld or otherworld.³⁷ Their first conversation occurs on a walk towards Koncheyev's home in Charlottenburg. While there is a glaring absence of any topographical details, the mention of Charlottenburg suggests that their path will lead them towards Grunewald.³⁸ The fact that the park's name ("Grunewald") literally means "green forest" allows it to exist simultaneously as an actual physical location and as a mythical, timeless place. Towards the end of their first walk, as they are presumably approaching Charlottenburg and Grunewald, their voices blend together, with Fyodor and Koncheyev finishing each other's poetic sentences. Fyodor says: "That river is not the Lethe but rather the Styx. Never mind. Let's proceed: And now a crooked bough looms near the ferry, and Charon with his boathook, in the dark, reaches for it, and catches it, and very..."³⁹ By cutting their meeting short and revealing that it was all

³⁵ Frazier, Kevin. Zembla, "A Note on Pale Fire and Khodasevich's 'Ballada'." Accessed November 23, 2011. <http://www.libraries.psu.edu/nabokov/fraz1.htm>.

³⁶ Nabokov, *Verses and Versions*, 347. Nabokov translates the word "someone" / "кто-то" as "ghost."

³⁷ Stephen Blackwell, "Boundaries of Art in Nabokov's *The Gift*: Reading as Transcendence," *Slavic Review*, 58, no. 3 (1999): 605. For a discussion of how Fyodor's meetings with Koncheyev follow a "fairy-tale formula," see Maria Malikova, "V.V. Nabokov and V.D. Nabokov: His Father's Voice," *Nabokov's World*, ed. Jane Grayson, Arnold McMillin and Priscilla Meyer (New York: Palgrave, 2002), 25.

³⁸ For a more detailed analysis of the role Berlin plays in Nabokov's fiction, see Marina Naumann, *Blue Evenings in Berlin: Nabokov's Short Stories of the 1920s* (New York: New York University Press, 1978).

³⁹ Nabokov, *The Gift*, 75.

imagined, Fyodor shows his respect for the older poet Koncheyev but emphasizes his ultimate authorial control of the narrative.

Fyodor's second meeting with Koncheyev occurs within Grunewald itself. The forest, already associated with death (since it is the location of Yasha's suicide), assumes an additional hellish quality due to the mass of German tourists and their overpowering smell "of dust, of sweat, of aquatic slime, of unclean underwear, of aired and dried poverty, the smell of dried, smoked and potted souls a penny a piece."⁴⁰ This beach packed with souls presumably waiting to be transported to the underworld is reminiscent of the apocalyptic landscape of Khodasevich's Necropolis and contrasts starkly with the otherwise luxuriously green setting full of butterflies and birds. These antithetical versions of the same setting reflect the differences between the worldviews of Khodasevich and Nabokov. In order to leave the Edenic forest and descend into Koncheyev's metaphorical realm, Fyodor "swam for a long time, half an hour, five hours, twenty-four, a week, another."⁴¹ After this mythic journey across a body of water, he walks uphill and (imagines that he) finds Koncheyev, who is dressed all in black and has a "bloodless" face.⁴² This image of Koncheyev as the living dead resembles Bely's description of Khodasevich (admittedly written when they were no longer friends): "Pathetic, green, sickly, his face that of a little corpse and his expression that of a green-eyed snake, he sometimes seemed to me a youth who had fled from a crypt where he had already met with maggots."⁴³ Koncheyev is sitting under an oak tree, which is where one would expect to find an imaginary Orphic figure in an imagined underworld, because Eurydice herself was an oak nymph. Fyodor's journey to the underworld is neither tragic nor traumatic; the keys that he loses on his journey symbolically lead him back to his future wife.⁴⁴

During his second meeting with Fyodor, Koncheyev directly references Pushkin's "The Statue" / "Памятник," which Nabokov translated and retitled "Exegi Monumentum," after the poem's epigraph.⁴⁵ While Koncheyev quotes the poem's third stanza, the second and fourth stanzas contain images of lyres that provide literary immortality by linking the poet to future generations. Pushkin was not only discussing his relationship to future generations of poets, he

⁴⁰ Nabokov, *The Gift*, 336.

⁴¹ Ibid.

⁴² Nabokov, *The Gift*, 337.

⁴³ Bethea, *Khodasevich: His Life and Art*, 80.

⁴⁴ For a detailed investigation of the role physical keys play in the text, see Leving, 220.

⁴⁵ Leving, 178-179.

was also describing his personal struggles with filial power dynamics, both poetic and political. As David Bethea explains, Pushkin's poem is "both a turning to Horace's ode 'To Melpomene' ('Exegi monumentum') and Derzhavin's reworking of Horace in his 'Pamiatnik,' and a turning away from those sources."⁴⁶ By referencing the poem in which Pushkin constructs his own literary genealogy, Nabokov facilitates his insertion into the same family tree. This brief allusion to Pushkin's poem in *The Gift* creates a clear connection between Derzhavin, Pushkin, Koncheyev, and Fyodor, and by extension, Khodasevich and Nabokov.

The Gift's allusions to and borrowings from Khodasevich's work extend far beyond his scholarship on Pushkin and the poem "Ballad." There are several winged animals that fly between the *The Heavy Lyre* and *The Gift*. One of those is a swallow, translated by Nabokov as "a swift."⁴⁷ Nabokov cited his poem "The Swallow" / "Ласточка" as his personal favorite and "gifted" it to Fyodor.⁴⁸ In the poem, two lovers are standing on a bridge, a metaphorical link between Fyodor's past, present and future. They see a swallow fly past and promise to remember that moment "Till we die, till tomorrow, for ever."⁴⁹ Swallows were important in both Khodasevich's poetry and his literary criticism; the opening lines of Derzhavin's swallow poem form the final lines of Khodasevich's early article on the poet.⁵⁰ In Khodasevich's own poem "The Swallows," two birds exist metaphorically inside of the speaker and are trying to break free through the windows that are his eyes.⁵¹ By including a swallow in his poem, Nabokov liberates one of the tragic heroes of Khodasevich's poem. Swallows form a living link between Derzhavin, Khodasevich and himself.

Not only swallows, but also butterflies travel between *The Heavy Lyre* and *The Gift*, specifically Psyche, the mythical idea of the soul that sometimes takes the form of a woman or a butterfly. For Khodasevich, the character Psyche is similar to Orpheus in that she combines the

⁴⁶ David Bethea, *Realizing Metaphors: Alexander Pushkin and the Life of the Poet* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1998), 219. According to Michael Wachtel, "Exegi Momentum" also analyzes Pushkin's relationship to Tsar Alexander, because the poem includes the line, "For having awoken kind feelings with a lyre" / "Что чувства добрые я лирой пробуждал," which potentially refers to a meeting during which the Tsar admitted to Pushkin an admiration for an anti-serfdom poem, *A Commentary to Pushkin's Lyric Poetry 1826-1836* (Madison, Wisconsin: The University of Wisconsin Press, 2011), 357.

⁴⁷ For an analysis of the theme of swallows in Russian poetry, see Irina Surat, "Tri Veka Russkoi Poezii," *Novii Mir* (2006), http://magazines.russ.ru/novy_i_mi/2007/4/su16.html (accessed November 20, 2011).

⁴⁸ Leving, 253. Nabokov had a much earlier poem titled "Swallows," which he presented to his family as one of Pushkin's lost poems.

⁴⁹ Nabokov, *The Gift*, 94.

⁵⁰ Bethea, *Khodasevich: His Life and Art*, 231.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*

creative with the tragic. He writes: “The simple soul cannot bear / The *heavy gift* of secret hearing / Psyche falls under it.” / “Простой душе невыносим / *Дар тайнослышанья тяжелый* / Психея падает под ним” (italics mine). In the world of entomology, “psyche” refers to both bagworm moths and the small butterfly *Leptosia nina*. Since Nabokov himself liked to draw attention to the structural similarities between N’s and Z’s, it is possible that there is a connection between *nina* and Zina. The butterfly theme would have been further developed in *The Gift* had Nabokov finished and published his second addendum, “Father’s Butterflies,” which was Fyodor’s scientific recollection of his father’s four-volume *Butterflies and Moths of the Russian Empire*. This addendum reaffirms the connection between Fyodor and Nabokov, as he explains in a letter, it “foretold my destiny – this retreat into entomology.”⁵²

Nabokov transposes the paradoxical sterility of the Orphic myth onto the animal kingdom, specifically, onto a pregnant butterfly wearing a chastity belt. Fyodor writes:

...my father discovered the true nature of the corneal formation appearing beneath the abdomen in the impregnated females of Parnassians, and explained how her mate, working with a pair of spatulate appendages, places and molds on her a chastity belt of his own manufacture, shaped differently in every species of this genus, being sometimes a little boat, sometimes a helical shell, sometimes — as in the case of the exceptionally rare dark-cinder gray *orpheus* Godunov — a replica of a tiny lyre.⁵³

Fyodor’s father proceeds to stab the butterfly with a pin, simultaneously demonstrating his masculine authority and the tragedy of the Orphic fate. The image of the butterfly must have been dear to Nabokov, as he autographed one copy of *The Gift* with a picture of a butterfly and the words “*Parnassius Orpheus Godunov*.”⁵⁴

Fyodor’s childhood nightmare, towards the beginning of the novel, features a veiled reference to Pushkin’s “The Prophet.” Fyodor describes that “an agile hand would slip inside me and powerfully squeeze my heart. Or else I would be turned into a horse...”⁵⁵ The horse’s

⁵² Leving, 14.

⁵³ Nabokov, *The Gift*, 112.

⁵⁴ Leving, 63.

⁵⁵ Nabokov, *The Gift*, 17.

appearance (in Russian, it is specified that it is female, thus, a mare) could be a humorous illustration of the individual elements of the word “nightmare.” At the end of the dream, the mare raises her tail “fountain-like,” implying either defecation or sexual arousal. This is the first of several erotic Pushkin references in *The Gift*. Fyodor argues that his father’s “mistake was not that he ran down all ‘modern poetry’ indiscriminately, but that he refused to detect in it the long, life-giving ray of his favorite poet.”⁵⁶ Additionally, Fyodor describes his pleasure from reading Pushkin as “a sweet, strong stab.”⁵⁷ These quotes hint at the homosexual nature of Orphic literary inheritance.

The Russian “Silver Age” embraced the myth of Orpheus. The Bolshoy Theater staged a production of “Orpheus” in 1903.⁵⁸ Meyerhold staged Gluck’s opera “Orpheus and Eurydice” at the Marinsky Theater, with Fokine as choreographer, in 1911.⁵⁹ In addition to Khodasevich, Tsvetaeva, Mayakovsky, Rilke and Bryusov all had poems dedicated to Orpheus. Skonechnaia argues that in *The Gift*, Yasha’s androgyny and unconsummated love are both symptomatic of the Silver Age.⁶⁰ Anna Brodsky hypothesizes that Nabokov uses Yasha Chernyshevski to discredit the Silver Age link between homosexuality and artistic genius.⁶¹ However, Nabokov himself is in many ways a Silver Age author, and Koncheyev’s poetry reflects this. In one of his poems, someone translates Pushkin’s “And the steppe, and the night, and in the moonlight” / “и степь, и ночь, и при луне” as “the moon, a polygon, a viola of confused gender.”⁶² These lines parody Khodasevich’s conception of a polygon inside a circle. They also conflate the idea of gender confusion and homosexuality with the bastardization of Pushkin. This section seems to demonstrate that, according to Nabokov, a faithful “descendent” of Pushkin must be masculine and heterosexual.

The character Yasha Chernyshevski possesses many traits of the failed Orphic hero. Yasha is an unlucky member of a love triangle, which Fyodor describes as a “banal triangle of tragedy, formed within an idyllic circle, and the mere presence of such a suspiciously neat

⁵⁶ Nabokov, *The Gift*, 149.

⁵⁷ Nabokov, *The Gift*, 95.

⁵⁸ John Bowl, “Russian Symbolism and the ‘Blue Rose’ Movement,” *The Slavonic and Eastern European Review*, 51, no. 123 (1973): 168.

⁵⁹ Edward Braun, *Meyerhold: A Revolution in Theater* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 1998), 112.

⁶⁰ Olga Skonechnaia, “‘People of the Moonlight’: Silver Age Parodies in Nabokov’s *The Eye* and *The Gift*,” *Nabokov Studies*, 3 (1996): 45.

⁶¹ Anna Brodsky, “Homosexuality and the Aesthetic of Nabokov’s *Dar*,” *Nabokov Studies*, 4 (1997): 95-115.

⁶² Skonechnaia, 45.

structure, to say nothing of the fashionable counterpoint of its development, would never have permitted me to make it into a short story or novel.”⁶³ The impossibility of this perfect Euclidian love triangle again echoes Khodasevich’s description of Pushkin and Onegin’s relationship as a “circle circumscribing a polygon.”⁶⁴ Yasha’s unrequited love for Rudolph drives him to suicide, in the same Grunewald forest where Fyodor later meets with Koncheyev. After Yasha kills himself, the reader discovers that Khodasevich’s *The Heavy Lyre* is “lying” next to his bed. In this way Nabokov shows the dangers of accepting Khodasevich’s conception of the poet as Orpheus.

One might argue that, despite Yasha’s homosexuality and artistic inclinations, Fyodor’s description of Yasha’s poetry as “feeble” denies him access to the Orphic myth.⁶⁵ However, negative criticism of an author’s early works should not deny him access to the Orphic legacy. In many ways, Fyodor’s criticism of Yasha’s work mirrors the émigré community’s initial reception of Nabokov’s first few, slim volumes of poetry. The evaluations of Nabokov’s early collections range from: “a small but very boring booklet” (Gul), to “a peacock-like aestheticism and artificiality” (Mochul’skii), and “simply vulgar” (Ivanov).⁶⁶ As Nabokov describes in *Speak, Memory*, the first famous critic of his work, Zinaida Gippius, “at a session of the Literary Fund asked my father, its president, to tell me, please, that I would never, never be a writer.”⁶⁷ One can see Fyodor’s love and whole-hearted supporter Zina, whose name is the diminutive of the name “Zinaida,” as an antidote to the pain of this initial rebuff of his creative efforts.

Yasha’s name is the Russian first-person singular pronoun combined with a diminutive suffix, a conspicuous “I” in *The Gift*’s largely third-person narrative.⁶⁸ His patronymic, Alexandrovich, hints that he is the literary son of Pushkin and again raises the question of how he can forge his own distinct path. Yasha, rather conveniently, acts as a receptacle for the more negative Orphic traits, leaving the positive ones for Fyodor. During a meeting in which he feels

⁶³ Nabokov, *The Gift*, 42-43.

⁶⁴ Dolinin, 165.

⁶⁵ Nabokov, *The Gift*, 38.

⁶⁶ Morris, 41, 40, and 47 (respectively).

⁶⁷ Vladimir Nabokov, *Speak, Memory: An Autobiography Revisited* (New York: Vintage International, 1989), 238. As Bethea notes, “Nabokov uses the word ‘writer’ in *Speak, Memory*, a word which would clearly prove Gippius to have been wrong; if, however, the word ‘poet’ is allowed to replace the word ‘writer,’ which seems sensible in context, then the ‘nasty’ Gippius (‘zlaia Zina’ was Gippius’ nickname) turns out to have been right.” David Bethea “Nabokov and Blok,” chap. 374-382 in *The Garland Companion to Nabokov*, ed. Vladimir Alexandrov (New York: Garland, 1995), 381n3.

⁶⁸ Greenleaf, 150.

scrutinized by Alexander Yakovlevich, Yasha's father, for their physical resemblance, the narrator ponders whether he "himself existed only because of a vague congruity with the deceased — while Yasha was perfectly real and live, and only the instinct of self-preservation prevented one from taking a good look at his features."⁶⁹ Several of Nabokov's other texts, including "The Vane Sisters," *Pale Fire*, and *Lolita*, also contain the suggestion of ghostly interference to problematize narrative authority.

Just as the reader learns of Yasha's existence only after his suicide, through Fyodor's retelling, the reader only "meets" the poet Koncheyev through two of Fyodor's imagined encounters.⁷⁰ Koncheyev is the character most frequently associated with Khodasevich, despite the fact that he is slightly younger than Fyodor, whereas Khodasevich was thirteen years older than Nabokov. The Russian root of the name Koncheyev means "to end" or "to die" and it can also mean "to orgasm." While it is difficult to ascertain when the Russian word acquired that latter meaning, it seems likely that Nabokov would have been familiar with the French phrase "la petite mort" which gained the meaning "to orgasm" around the 1880s.⁷¹ Khodasevich, who himself lapsed into poetic silence during the last ten years of his life, wrote essays about the death of Russian literature in emigration.⁷² First Khodasevich, and later Nabokov, wrote poems about an émigré poet shamefully ejaculating in front of strangers.⁷³ Within the figure of Koncheyev, the end of Russian literature is thereby connected with "the feelings of potential creative impotence their [émigré] authors experience as Russian poets who must spill their verbal seeds on alien pavement."⁷⁴

The solipsistic nature of Fyodor's relationship to his main Orphic characters suggests that they are both inventions and extensions of his own self. This same suggestion applies to Nikolai Chernyshevski, insofar as the reader only sees him through Fyodor's scathing interpretation. And yet, there are many parodic parallels between Chernyshevski and his "author," Fyodor.

⁶⁹ Nabokov, *The Gift*, 35.

⁷⁰ Ivan Tolstoi examines the possibility of Koncheyev as an "unreal" character in "Khodasevich v Koncheev," *V.V. Nabokov: Pro et Contra*, ed. D.K. Burlaka, B. Averin, M. Malikova, T. Smirnova (Sankt-Peterburg: Izd-vo Russkogo Khristianskogo Gumanitarnogo Instituta, 1997), 795-805.

⁷¹ Simpson, John, ed. *The Oxford English Dictionary*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, Third edition, December 2005; online version September 2011. s.v. "Petite Mort, N." <http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/260928> (accessed December 13, 2011).

⁷² For example, see his 1936 essay, "Before the End,": Vladislav Khodasevich, "Pered Kontsom," chap. 593-597 in *Vozvrashchennyi Mir*, ed. G.L. Murdaov i graf P.P. Sheremetev (Moskva: Russkiy Mir, 2004).

⁷³ Bethea, *Nabokov and Khodasevich*, 453-454. See Khodasevich's poem "Pod zemlei" and Nabokov's "Lilit."

⁷⁴ *Ibid*, 454.

Both of their last names include the root “cher,” which is the base of the word for “ink.” They even share a birthday, July 12th, although Chernyshevski’s birthday is according to the Julian calendar and Fyodor’s follows the Gregorian.⁷⁵ Fyodor tries to dissociate himself from Chernyshevski by claiming that Chernyshevski did not recognize Pushkin’s genius; however, most scholars argue that this is historically inaccurate.⁷⁶

After a period of writing about his father, Fyodor says that the world of his memories feels as natural to him as “water to Ophelia.”⁷⁷ The image of the floating corpse indirectly connects him to the Orphic myth.⁷⁸ The parallels between Zina and Hamlet strengthen Fyodor’s connection to Ophelia. After the death of Zina’s beloved father, her mother quickly remarries an unworthy man. Zina’s mother’s toad-like face implicates her in the murder of her husband, who died of angina pectoris, what Russians call “a toad in the chest.”⁷⁹ The Schyogolevs later relocate to Copenhagen, leaving their “princess” behind. Zina’s role as Hamlet allows for Fyodor to assume elements of Ophelia’s character and imbue them with a creative and poetic agency.

While the novel masquerades as a typical love story, Nabokov claims in the foreword that, “[i]ts heroine is not Zina, but Russian Literature.” Thus in a sense Zina, mother of the muses, is herself just a pale shimmer of the moon, a reflection of Fyodor’s brighter inner psyche. Naiman compares her to Galatea and writes that “Fyodor’s love for Zina strikes me as just a more complex version of his love for his own poems.”⁸⁰ In Nabokov’s unpublished continuation of the novel, Zina dies in a car accident.⁸¹ One possible explanation for this “murder” is that Nabokov was having an affair while writing *The Gift* and wanted to end it once and for all. As Leving explains, “tender Zina had no choice but to die” because “any traces of Guadanini had to vanish in order to keep Vladimir and Vera, Nabokov’s true Muse, together.”⁸² Although Zina may very well be modeled on Nabokov’s lover, a different explanation might be that she can die because she never existed to begin with. Like Yasha, who commits suicide, Koncheyev, who appears in two separate mirages and Chernyshevski, who exists only in Fyodor’s lambasting

⁷⁵ Leving, 163.

⁷⁶ Ibid.

⁷⁷ Nabokov, *The Gift*, 125.

⁷⁸ I am grateful to Monika Greenleaf for this insight.

⁷⁹ Barskova, 194 and Leving, 185.

⁸⁰ Eric Naiman, *Nabokov, Perversely* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2010), 174.

⁸¹ Leving, 176.

⁸² Leving, 177.

critique, the idea of Zina is constructed through various clues (an invitation, a gauzy dress, etc.) with the main goal of supplying Fyodor with his idea for a novel.

Fyodor, and by extension Nabokov, tries to separate himself from his characters in the last paragraph of the novel. Again invoking Pushkin, and consequently Khodasevich's diagram and literary heritage, Nabokov writes, "Onegin from his knees will rise — but his creator strolls away." / "С колен поднимется Евгений, — но удаляется поэт."⁸³ The Russian original uses the word "poet" instead of "creator," emphasizing that the author is not necessarily leaving, but is turning from poetry to prose, just as Fyodor does over the course of the novel. In the last phrase of *The Gift*, "nor does this terminate the phrase" / "и не кончается строка," the Russian verb "to terminate" refers back to the poet Koncheyev.⁸⁴ Another way to translate these final words would be "the line does not end," in other words, literature can continue on and writing does not have to be fatal for "creators," that is to say, prose writers. Unlike Khodasevich, who only wrote poetry and criticism, Nabokov uses the word "phrase" / "строка" to suggest an alternative, a form of prose that is poetic and musical. Nabokov ends his novel by solidifying his rejection of Khodasevich's tragic Orphic poet and by celebrating the potential for lyrical prose writers to flourish, even in emigration.

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⁸³ Nabokov, *The Gift*, 366. Nabokov, *Dar*, 382.

⁸⁴ Nabokov, *The Gift*, 366 and Greenleaf, 143.

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