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IN SEARCH OF A MAILBOX — LETTERS IN *THE GIFT*

The *Gift* (Dar, 1937-38; 1952) opens with a street that is described as “beginning with a post office and ending with a church, like an epistolary novel” (4).¹ This is not a mere simile: although *The Gift* is not what we traditionally call an “epistolary novel,” we will notice the novel is replete with “epistolary” motifs. “The recurrence of letters in Nabokov’s prose,” says Kopper, “reveals the importance he accorded them in the construction of plot.”² Kopper also notes an abundance of “failed acts of communication,” taking such examples as “a preserved correspondence” in *Mary*, “letters that may or not may have been sent” in *Laughter in the Dark*, or the case of “Ultima Thule”, which is formed as a letter to the otherworld. “Letters,” he continues, “help Nabokov’s characters break open the chambers of solitude where time and space confine the human soul.”³ Also, Boyd’s treatment of the “letters theme” in his work *Nabokov’s Ada* confirms the importance of letters

¹ *The Gift*. Trans. Michael Scammell with the collaboration of the author. 1963. New York: Vintage, 1991. All further citations from this text will be noted by a parenthetical reference containing the page number.

² Kopper, John M., “Correspondence,” in *The Garland Companion to Vladimir Nabokov*, ed. Vladimir E. Alexandrov (New York: Garland, 1995), 54-67.

³ *Ibid.*, 54.

in Nabokov's writing.⁴ Indeed, once we direct our attention to letters, we will realize how Nabokov's works abound with letters. The purpose of this paper is to reread *The Gift* by focusing first on the correspondence between Fyodor Godunov-Cherdyntsev and his mother, secondly on N. G. Chernyshevski's letters quoted by Fyodor, and thirdly on Fyodor's last letter to his mother, which will be our main concern in this paper.

Searching Nabokov's crammed mailbox

Before we proceed to *The Gift*, our main subject, we have to clarify the principal features of letters in Nabokov's works.

Firstly, they often turn out to be one-way letters: to put it differently, in many cases, the receiver of a letter is in a sense absent, or at least, indeterminate. The obvious examples are "Ultima Thule",⁵ in which the addressee is the narrator's dead wife, and "A Letter That Never Reached Russia"⁶ ("*Pis'mo v Rossiю*"), the "never reached" in the English title implying the lack of a receiver.

In *Despair* (*Otchayanie*, 1936; 1966), while the narrator and protagonist, Herman Karlovich, willingly quotes his own letters, he never tries to show the original letters from Felix, saying "all the answers have been destroyed" (*Despair*, 57).⁷ It might be said that this is a variation of "one-way letters."

In *Pale Fire*, Kinbote shows us a letter to his wife, in which he mentions a letter from her. However, the letter in question is never presented to us, almost as if it did not exist at all.⁸ Nabokov

⁴ Brian Boyd, *Nabokov's Ada: The Place of Consciousness*. (Ann Arbor: Ardis, 1985. Rev. ed, Christchurch, NZ: Cybereditions, 2001).

⁵ "Ultima Thule," in *The Stories of Vladimir Nabokov* (1995. New York: Vintage, 1997), 500-522. All further citations from this text will be noted by a parenthetical reference containing the abbreviation *Stories* and the page number.

⁶ "A Letter That Never Reached Russia," in *Stories*, 137-140.

⁷ *Despair*. 1966. London: Penguin, 2000. All further citations from this text will be noted by a parenthetical reference containing the abbreviation *Des* and the page number.

⁸ *Pale Fire*. 1962. New York: Vintage, 1989.

states in his commentary on *Eugene Onegin* that the epistolary form of novels “necessitates the author’s providing his main characters with confidants” (*EO* II, 341).⁹ This is both a simple and highly important rule when viewed in the context of Nabokov’s works: Nabokov quite often refuses to provide his characters with confidants.

Roman Bogdanovich in *The Eye* (Soglyadatai, 1930; 1965) is believed to send a letter every Friday to a “Tallin friend,” whose existence seems rather doubtful. Elsewhere he mentions that the supposed reader of these letters is the “very old” Roman Bogdanovich of the future (*Eye*, 77)¹⁰ and he complains “Perhaps I had no intention to post it. . . .” (*Eye*, 82) when his letter is intercepted by the narratorial “I,” or Smurov. The archetype of Roman Bogdanovich can be detected in Goethe’s *Die Leiden des jungen Werthers*, a novel which “is mostly in epistolary form,” explains Nabokov in his commentary on *Eugene Onegin*, “consisting of letters—really monologues—addressed by Werther to a certain Wilhelm, who mercifully remains mute and invisible” (*EO* II, 345). “A monologue disguised as a letter” may be the precise expression for those letters (letter-shaped stories included) mentioned above.

Another example is the narrator of *The Eye*, who “wanted to write a few traditional letters” before committing suicide, but finds that he “had no one to write to” because he “knew few people and loved no one” (*Eye*, 17).¹¹ There are many such characters who lack a correspondent. For Nabokov characters, in other words, having a confidant to write to is a source of comfort and happiness. It is also probable that some characters, pretending not to be alone and lonely, try to write letters to “mute,” “invisible,” vague correspondents. Letters in Nabokov’s works thus prove frequently not to be a means

⁹ *Eugene Onegin. A novel in Verse by Aleksandr Pushkin.* Trans. with commentary by Vladimir Nabokov, 2 vols., Bollingen Series 72. Paperback edition. Princeton: Princeton UP, 1990. All further citations from this text will be noted by a parenthetical reference containing the abbreviation *EO* II and the page number.

¹⁰ *The Eye.* Trans. Dmitri Nabokov in collaboration with the author, 1965, New York: Vintage, 1990. All further citations from this text will be noted by a parenthetical reference containing the abbreviation *Eye* and the page number.

¹¹ “[A] few traditional letters” before committing suicide remind us of the three letters Charlotte writes before she is killed, which we will discuss later in this essay. The “three letters” are *passim* and the “destroyed” three letters from Felix, which are mentioned in this paper, are one of them.

of normal communication.

Secondly, letters are sometimes seen as diaries and as a means of “self-preservation.” The idea is clearly observed in the expression “epistolary diary” in *The Eye*. Roman Bogdanovich stays home every Friday “to write his diary” and he insists that it gives him “a feeling of self-preservation,” saying “you preserve your entire life, and, in later years, rereading it, you may find it not devoid of fascination” (*Eye*, 76); he is supposed to send “weekly contributions” to a “Tallin Friend” (*Eye*, 77). This has something to do with the problem of the addressee or, more generally, for whom a book is written. For instance, it is sometimes suggested that the supposed reader of *The Gift* is the future Fyodor himself.

Thirdly, let us focus our attention on “coded” letters. It seems that letters in Nabokov’s works are supposed to be read by a stranger, not by the intended reader. The most well-known case is the correspondence between Ada and Van, which is written in their own invented code.¹² We can also find minor references to a “code” in other places. For example, *The Eye* has a scene in which the narrator surreptitiously reads a letter from “a certain Uncle Pasha” to Khrushchov, expecting to find some allusion to Smurov. It turns out there is none, and he says, “if it was coded, then I did not know the key” (*Eye*, 58).

We may say that the theme of “coded letters” is linked to that of “translated letters.” The origin of this theme is, no doubt, Tatiana’s letter to Onegin, which is supposed to have been written in French but “translated” by Pushkin into Russian. Again in *Despair*, Herman “remembers” and reproduces the third letter among the three “destroyed” letters from Felix, explaining, “I was long in relishing that last letter, the Gothic charm of which my rather tame translation is hardly capable of rendering” (*Despair*, 104). The same device is adopted by Humbert Humbert, who remembers and recreates Charlotte’s

¹² *Ada, or Ardor: A family Chronicle*. 1969. New York: Vintage, 1990.

“destroyed” letter.¹³ Humbert, as Wood aptly describes, “is only translating, or recreating,” therefore, Charlotte’s letter can also be seen as “translated.”¹⁴ Coded letters and translated letters are very close, for they are both rephrased from the original (as for “translated” ones, however, the original is an “illusion,” that is, nonexistent, as Wood points out).¹⁵ Letters in Nabokov’s works are thus doomed to be decoded, reconstructed, (sometimes both mercilessly and selfishly) interpreted, abridged, and translated by others - including us, the readers of his works.

Fourthly, we notice the curious fact that letters are often accompanied with a strong wind. We are familiar with at least two scenes in which a man holding a letter (or letters) is struggling with an extraordinarily violent wind. In the aforementioned scene in which Smurov intercepts Roman Bogdanovich’s letter, an unusually strong wind keeps buffeting the street, and the third chapter of *Despair* begins with the image of a postman who first “walks backwards” and later “has swerved round and, bent double, still fighting, walks forward” in “the wind’s violence” (*Despair*, 45).¹⁶ We could interpret in several ways the image of a letter in a strong wind, but if seen quite simply, it seems to imply the difficulties a letter might go through before reaching the intended address.

The last point we emphasize is that letters bearing a date can provide the reader with chronological information. Chapter 4 of *Despair* opens with whole text of Herman’s letter, which is followed by the statement: “Here it is before me, the letter I finally wrote on that ninth of September, 1930” (*Despair*, 57). After this, while explaining the features of an “epistolic form of narration,” he assures the readers that they will “find the date” above each quoted letter, and continues: “Dates are required . . . to keep up the illusion” (*Despair*, 58). When reading a work by Nabokov, dates on letters are always helpful to reconstruct the chronology of the work. For example, we have a dated letter from

¹³ *The Annotated Lolita*. Ed. with preface, introduction, and notes by Alfred Appel, Jr., 1970. Rev. ed. (New York: Vintage, 1991), 67-69.

¹⁴ Michael Wood, *The Magician’s Doubts: Nabokov and the Risks of Fiction*, (Princeton: Princeton U P, 1995), 118.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 145.

¹⁶ The wind, like other meteorological motifs, repeatedly appears in Nabokov’s works, partly as an indicator of the Maker’s (or the author’s) presence (of course, there are many other explanations on the matter), so the “wind-letter” pair is only a part of the wind theme.

Lolita in part two, chapter twenty-seven, which serves to at once establish and confuse the timeline of *Lolita*.

Incidentally, the following passage found in the comment on an “epistolic form of narration” mentioned above is noteworthy: “...all those ‘do-you-remember-that-time-whens’ (detailed recollections follow) are brought in, not so much with the object of refreshing Why’s memory as in order to give the reader the required reference . . .” (*Despair*, 58). This remark immediately reminds us of “Ultima Thule,” which actually begins with the phrase “Do you remember the day...” (*Stories*, 500). Also, the opening paragraph of “A Letter That Never Reached Russia” consists of a detailed memory of the shared past of two lovers (*Stories*, 137).

Having glanced at the main features of letters in Nabokov’s works, touching only a few examples, we may now turn our attention to the numerous other letters contained within *The Gift*, each of which deserves careful scrutiny.

Correspondence between Mother and Son

As mentioned before, we will take a close look firstly at the correspondence between Fyodor and his mother, secondly at the fragments from Chernyshevski’s letters, and thirdly at Fyodor’s last and possibly most significant letter to his mother.

Let us add another feature of Nabokov's letters here: letters are often presented as a sample of a respective character’s writings. Nabokov in his commentary on *Eugene Onegin* tells us, “In the course of the novel Pushkin quotes the writings of all three main characters: Tatiana’s letter, Lenski’s last elegy, and Onegin’s letter” (*EO* II, 384), and we know Nabokov himself adopted the device in his own works by quoting articles, books and letters written by his characters. In *The Gift*, we get an idea of the writing style of the protagonist and his mother through their letters.

As already stated in the preceding section, in many of Nabokov's works letters cannot be regarded as a means of communication. They seem to be wandering, with no address to reach. Correspondence between Fyodor and his mother, however, appears to be an exception: it is an ideal communication, with the son's inquiries and the mother's prompt replies flowing smoothly. However, it is not presented in the text only to show their ideal relationship: the letters are deliberately woven into the right spots within the text. As Pichová points out, fragments of his mother's letters are set to frame the biography of his father.¹⁷ Their letters implanted at the beginning and the end of his father's biography look as if they were a part of an epistolary novel. His mother, a good adviser, encourages Fyodor to write his first prose work, replying immediately to his questions with sentiments that never disappoint him. Their conversational letters thus form a part of the biography. The important thing to note is that there is no gap between each fragment of their letters: Fyodor's question is immediately followed by his mother's answer, which ignores and resolves the actual space and time separating mother and son. At least in the text, a long blank in which one waits for the other's letter mercifully disappears. The flow of the correspondence creates the impression of a dialogue unfolding in a single place and time, its continuity uninterrupted. Moreover, these fragments of their letters are all undated (except for the one Fyodor writes on his father's birthday), which encourages us to ignore the entire space / time lag. In this correspondence we find the happiness of having a correspondent, the happiness of sharing memories and the happiness of understanding each other. Their ideal correspondence (more precisely, one of his mother's letters) acts as the catalyst to launch Fyodor's first prose writing.

Fyodor as a reader of Chernyshevski's letters

Next, let us focus on the letters of N.G. Chernyshevski, a historical figure and the protagonist in

¹⁷ Hana Pichová, *The Art of Memory in Exile: Vladimir Nabokov and Milan Kundera*, (Southern Illinois UP, 2002), 45. Here she regards letters as one of the other fragments which are expected to "evoke personal memories."

Fyodor's first complete work of prose, "The Life of Chernyshevski". Although Fyodor ridicules and caricatures Chernyshevski, his way of treating Chernyshevski's letters sometimes strikes us as sincere and even compassionate. In this biography Fyodor analyzes large numbers of letters and concludes that they are "the letters of a model youth." He continues: "instead of imagination he was prompted by his obliging good nature as to what another would relish" (218-19). For example, he keeps feeding his father, "who liked all sorts of events," with news, information about fads and so on. Here, Fyodor shows us examples of these historical events, using Nabokov's famous "tabulation device." His letters, therefore, can be regarded as windows into the events of the past. More noteworthy is the word "imagination" in his comment on Chernyshevski's style in letters. It implies Chernyshevski's lack of imagination in all respects and moreover it suggests Fyodor's belief that even a letter should be written with a certain degree of imagination. Indeed, Fyodor writes his own letters with imagination, especially the final one in the novel.

The presentation of Chernyshevski's letters to his father is followed by observations on his letters from Siberia to his wife and children, which gradually encourage Fyodor to evoke and delineate the profile of his protagonist. From these letters Fyodor constructs the image of Chernyshevski, consolidating it with his predilection, his habits and so on.

The most critical letter of all is stained with one of Chernyshevski's teardrops. Fyodor presents the letter in the following manner: "Before us is Chernyshevski's famous letter to his wife dated December 5, 1862: a yellow diamond among the dust of his numerous works" (273). His remark here, though ironic, nevertheless seems to ascribe at least a greater value to the letter than any other works by Chernyshevski (actually none of his work attracts Fyodor). He continues to analyze the letter closely, from his handwriting to the trace of a tear, with possibly the same passion with which he would analyze a work of art. Here, he also tells us that Chernyshevski's fictional biographer Strannolyubski "justly designates this letter as the beginning of Chernyshevski's brief flowering" (273). The quotation from

Strannolyubski seems to justify Fyodor's special focus on this letter and moreover leads to the idea that the letter is also important as the starting-point of Chernyshevski's creative period. That the highly private writings of a man to his wife could be preserved for the thorough scrutiny of an utter stranger in the future serves to underline the capacity for even private correspondence to be decoded and eventually judged as art by others. This is what happens when "Ultima Thule" and "A Letter That Never Reached Russia" are read. Therefore, this idea of a private letter as a work of art must always be active in Nabokov's mind. Fyodor's treatment of letters here reminds us of this Nabokovian concept, and later we will explore Chernyshevski's last letter with the same curiosity and passion as Fyodor's.

Before that, some of Chernyshevski's other important letters should be briefly mentioned. Fyodor closely examines Chernyshevski's "second letter to his wife" written two days after the first one, and this is followed by the remark "A few days after that he began to write his novel *What to Do?*" (274). The process above makes it clear that these two letters can be regarded as the introduction to his most famous work. It can be said that writing these letters motivated him to write the novel. As correspondence between Fyodor and his mother became the introduction to his father's biography, so Chernyshevski's letters to his wife became the starting-point of his novel.

The letters Fyodor quotes are all written by Chernyshevski, thus we are not sure whether his wife and children wrote to him or not. There is only one exception—a letter from Chernyshevski's father advising his son to write "some tale or other" (288). While Fyodor himself cannot receive letters from his father any more, Chernyshevski gets at least one letter from his father. At first glance, the brief paragraph in which Fyodor comments on the letter from Chernyshevski's father doesn't seem very important. However Fyodor, by quoting his protagonist's father, seems to try to alleviate Chernyshevski's loneliness. Fyodor thus proves that not all Chernyshevski's letters were one-way letters. Unlike Fyodor, Chernyshevski receives an encouraging letter from his father, which is a fact Fyodor cannot overlook. We may presume that this paragraph is Fyodor's show of compassion for

Chernyshevski.

It is the “pure sound” of Chernyshevski’s letter, which cannot be heard in Chernyshevski’s fiction, that catches Fyodor’s attention. The following phrases Fyodor extracts contain several key words and expressions that permeate *The Gift* itself:

“My dearest darling, I thank you for being the light of my life.”... “I would be even here one of the happiest men in the world if it did not occur to me that this fate, which is very much to my personal advantage, is too hard in its effects on your life, my dear friend.”... “Will you forgive me the grief to which I have subjected you?” (287)

It is notable that these fragments embrace such dominant ideas in *The Gift* as “happiness,” “thanks” and “fate.” This “pure sound,” however, rings with a pitiful note, because there is no reference to a reply from his wife at all. The reader is not sure whether these selfless, sincere words really reached Chernyshevski’s wife’s heart. His wife, the only intended reader of his letters, might not appreciate them, might be unable to make out the “pure sound,” while Fyodor, an utter stranger, in her stead reads them carefully, and generously rescues these pure words to be immortalized in his text. Chernyshevski’s letters to his wife seem to be completely ignored by his wife, but Fyodor mercifully responds to them as if to compensate her cruel silence.

Fyodor in his biography of Chernyshevski treats letters carefully to extract the essence from them. As he analyzes the letters of his protagonist, we will now explore our protagonist’s most important letter.

A Letter That Never Reached . . .

In reading chapter four (“The Life of Chernyshevski”) in which Fyodor scrutinizes his protagonist’s letters, we ourselves may consequently become inclined to take a close look at Fyodor’s own letters, and in doing so may find an ideal object of study in chapter five: his lengthy letter to his mother. On rereading it closely, we will discover, as expected, many factors that would enrich the world of *The Gift*. We could even call it Fyodor’s hidden “yellow diamond” (sincerely, not ironically) but unlike Chernyshevski’s, his letter is highly imaginative. Correspondence between Fyodor and his mother, as discussed in the previous section, can be seen as a successful means of communication. The last letter to his mother, however, is quite different from the other letters: it is not so much “conversation” as a monologue, through which the reader hears Fyodor’s true voice.

Fyodor the narrator almost abruptly begins to quote this letter, without explaining this is Fyodor the character’s letter to his mother. The reader will find no line that should indicate this is a letter, and also no reply from his mother that can be seen, but the occasional use of “you” gradually encourages the reader to presume this must be Fyodor’s letter to his mother.¹⁸ Here we will observe this imaginative (yet somehow inchoate) letter from four different angles.

The first point to notice is a certain link (or analogy) between a letter and a phone call—a link found in many works by Nabokov. The theme of the “collaboration of letters and the telephone” permeates *The Gift*, and we will first clarify the analogy between these two media of communication. At the beginning of the letter Fyodor writes “The other day I wrote Tanya a long, lyrical letter, but I have an uncomfortable feeling that I put the wrong address on it: instead of ‘122’ I put some other number, without thinking, just as I did once before” (348-49). This remark reminds us of a man who always calls up the Shchyogolevs by mistake “because of the similarity of the [telephone] numbers” (156-57). Fyodor himself eventually makes the same mistake (325). The “wrong number” theme

¹⁸ The mother and the son indeed seem to understand each other unusually well, so that their “conversation” gives us the impression that they should really be the same person, as the case of the invented dialogues between Fyodor and Koncheyev.

therefore connects mailing addresses and telephone numbers. This theme also leads us to the theme of “wandering letters,” which we will discuss later.

We may note, in passing, that several interesting images lurk in the number “122.” For example, when it is placed in reverse order, it will be transformed to a famous address in the world of fiction: 221B Baker Street is where Sherlock Holmes lived.¹⁹ “122” also corresponds with the special figures that appear in Proust’s *À La Recherche du temps perdu*. In “Noms de pays: le noms,” Marcel seems to be possessed by “le beau train généreux d’une heure vingt-deux.”²⁰ The Number 1.22, which signifies the time of departure of the “generous train,” is therefore a magic number that would bring him to the cities of which he dreams. It is also interesting to note that Marcel and Fyodor seem to be in a common situation more or less. Though 122 must be a magic number that symbolizes Marcel’s dream cities including Balbec, he (being rather passive) is always doubtful of really catching this train. So it takes quite a long time for him to decide to take this special train. This number thus remains for Marcel only a dream number for a while. For Fyodor, “122” means the address at which his family lives—the place he dreams of visiting. However, his tone in the following lines curiously resembles Marcel’s passive tone when he expresses only his wish in the past, not his current intention: “I’ll visit you in Paris. Generally speaking I’d abandon tomorrow this country, oppressive as a headache—where everything is alien and repulsive to me” (350).²¹ His idea of visiting Paris is just an idea, so we are not sure if he really leaves or not.

Now let us return to our main concern. After finishing his letter to his mother Fyodor falls asleep, whereupon which someone rings the Shchyogolevs – this later proves to be the same man who

¹⁹ Though a reference to Doyle’s detective here may sound irrelevant, Holmes stories, mentioned sometimes in Nabokov’s work, share certain ideas with *The Gift*: a biographer who tries to recapture the image of his close person, and the impossible return of a once killed man. Incidentally, in *The Return of Sherlock Holmes*, narrated by Watson as the detective’s biographer, Holmes is back to 221B Baker Street, disguised as an old bookseller with a curved back, who bears a vague resemblance to the old, long-nosed book peddler with a bent back, who sells books to Chernyshevski (243).

²⁰ Marcel Proust, *À la recherche du temps perdu, Du côté de chez Swann*, édition présentée et annotée par Antoine Compagnon (Paris: Gallimard, 1987-88), 378.

²¹ This passage echoes Marcel’s following remark: “J’aurais voulu prendre dès le lendemain le beau train généreux d’une heure vingt-deux” (*Recherche*, 378).

always dials the wrong number. It is also important that this very phone call eventually helps Fyodor reunite with his father in his “dream.”

Nabokov’s works contain numerous scenes in which letters and telephones take turns in working. In *Bend Sinister*, for example, Krug tries to call Ember in order to inform him of Olga’s death. First he complains, punning, “I could never remember Ember’s number”.²² Again there occurs a problem of tricky numbers (here figures are closely connected to a person, as Krug observes that the “6” in the middle of his number resembles Ember’s Persian nose; we may also notice that the name “Ember” has a “b” in the middle which curiously resembles a “6.”). When Krug finally seems to reach Ember, the narrative, instead of tuning into a telephone conversation as expected, abruptly turns into a long text in quotation marks, which turns out to be Ember’s letter to the Maximovs. The letter shows us that Ember’s letter was interrupted by the phone call and is therefore forced to change its subject into quite an unexpected one because of the call announcing Olga’s death.²³

Another memorable phone call is the one in *Lolita* which informs Humbert of Charlotte’s death.²⁴ He is told over the phone that she has had an accident, while he believes she is still in the room finishing her letters. Letters and the telephone again work together, and what should be noted is the fact that Humbert is informed not directly but indirectly about an accident that happened just outside his residence. Realistically, he would be told directly by his neighbor, therefore the telephone seems an unlikely device for telling him about the nearby accident and is literally remote, especially in this context. The same observation applies to Charlotte’s third of her three letters she has finished just before she is killed. Humbert presumes the letter is meant for him, which (if that were true) she tried to send him via the mail service, rather than just leaving it in the room which would have been the more

²² *Bend Sinister* (1947. Penguin, 1974), 33.

²³ It is worth noting that Nabokov frequently uses the telephone to inform his characters of someone’s death. Incidentally, in reality, as in fiction, it was a phone call that informed Nabokov’s family of the death of his father: in *Speak, Memory, An Autobiography Revisited*, (1967. New York: Vintage, 1989), Nabokov’s mother’s speech is interrupted by the ring, and the author only uses the simple phrase “when the telephone rang,” not making any further explanation (49).

²⁴ *Lolita*, 95-97.

likely thing for her to do. An indirect message from Charlotte, together with the indirect information about her death, make the reader recognize the theme of a “message sent in a roundabout way.”²⁵

Now let us go back to the telephone ringing after Fyodor wrote the letter to his mother. The phone call is transformed in his sleep into a call from his former landlady, and it eventually leads him to the dream in which his father comes back safe and sound. If the Nabokovian habit of the telephone announcing death is applicable here, this call may be working as confirmation both of his father’s death and continuing existence.

Secondly, we will see how this letter becomes the starting point of *The Gift* itself. Like Ember’s letter mentioned above, Fyodor’s letter is also interrupted by Zina, his lover. It should not be overlooked that the very line interrupted by her predicts a future book, which looks exactly like *The Gift* itself. Therefore, this letter is the hidden core of the novel. One purpose of the letter is to tell his mother how happy he is about the birth of his sister’s baby, and his remark toward the end of the letter that “all this has something to do in a roundabout way with Tanya’s baby” (351), implying a pleasant excitement derived from a new-born life, might suggest the germ of a novel conceived in Fyodor himself. This one-and-a-half-page letter is replete with his honest feelings about Berlin, his views on the past, present, future, and above all, on Russia, and it is here we make out “the pure sound” of Fyodor’s mind. Representing his unreserved thoughts, this is possibly the only written source through which the reader glimpses Fyodor’s mind. The letter, which contains “non-stop trains of thought” (351), seems to be heading directly for a future book that looks like *The Gift*. Added to the incomplete biography of his father and Chernyshevski’s *What to Do?*, *The Gift* itself has its hidden entrance in a letter. It is important that the letter is not just a means for Fyodor to talk about the future book to his mother, but its rhythm (most possibly the “nocturnal rhythm” of the rain that keeps falling while he writes the letter) of this letter seems to flow directly into the text of *The Gift*.

²⁵ The reader of *Bend Sinister* is formally informed of Olga’s death in a still more roundabout way, that is, through Ember’s letter briefly mentioned in this paper, not through Krug’s voice in their telephone conversation.

Thirdly, we will focus on the image of “infinity” in this letter. Quoted entirely from start to finish, it ends in a vague, strange manner. The last part reads as follows: “Well, that’s it. Keep well, *je t’embrasse*. Night, rain quietly falling—it has found its nocturnal rhythm, and can now go on for infinity” (351). The French closing, curiously enough, is followed by one more line, and this “last” line, overflowing the traditional closing phrase, looks slightly unusual for a remark in a letter. As the last word “infinity” beautifully implies, this letter seems to continue forever, ignoring any boundary, flowing directly into the narrative of *The Gift*. The quotation mark that indicates the end of the letter is put after the line beginning with the word “Night” and ending with “infinity,” but it would be more natural if it were placed after “*je t’embrasse*.” However, this unnatural ending is surely clever and necessary, for it successfully veils the boundaries between the letter and the narrative to augment the image of an infinite letter. False ending and infinite continuation are both significant images which are found throughout the novel, and as Blackwell points out, “This ‘boundlessness’ is Fyodor’s fervently sought ideal. And this image, of course, mirrors exactly the structure of *The Gift*’s composition: it is the presentation of a line that extends infinitely past the narrative boundaries.”²⁶ It is especially important that the end of *The Gift* seems to mimic the end of the letter in question. It is no exaggeration to say that the last phrase of the novel “nor does this terminate the phrase” (366) has its origin in the last part of Fyodor’s letter. Once the boundaries between the letter and the novel are blurred, this letter begins to look more and more like an open entrance to the novel.

Last but not least, we must underscore the presence of the word “night,” framing both the beginning and the ending of the letter; more precisely, the word “night” appears first in the line immediately before the first sentence of the letter (thus outside the letter) and then in the last sentence of the letter (thus inside it). The arrangement of this word attracts the reader’s interest, and one feels like exploring this rather mysterious appearance of the night. Here, we will survey the letter on the

²⁶ Stephen H. Blackwell, *Zina’s Paradox: The Figured Reader in Nabokov’s “Gift,”* (New York: Peter Lang, 2000), 159.

supposition that the “night” is a latent lover of Fyodor. First, let us prove the striking contrast between Zina, his true lover, and the “Night.”

As briefly mentioned before, the pivotal sentence that delineates his future book is interrupted by Zina, and her interruption is described as follows: “The door suddenly opened, Zina half entered and without letting go of the door handle threw something on his desk” (349). Blackwell underscores Zina’s “profound respect for boundaries, which may not be broken”, and this observation is well applicable to the present scene of her modest interruption.²⁷ With this in mind, let us turn to the passage followed by the first sentence of the letter:

When supper was over and Zina had gone down to let the guests in, Fyodor retreated noiselessly to his room, where everything was animated by rain and wind. He half-closed the casements of his window, but a moment later the night said: “No,” and with a kind of wide-eyed insistence, disdainful blows, entered again. (348)

It is not too fantastic to make out the contrast between the personified night who “entered” his room and Zina, who only “half entered.” Night, easily crossing over the boundaries, enters Fyodor’s room to watch him writing beside him, while Zina can neither enter his room nor can she know what he is actually writing.

We discover the possible archetype of this mild confrontation between the real lover and the metaphysical lover (the “night”) in “A Letter That Never Reached Russia,” a story Nabokov wrote more than ten years before *The Gift*. The story, just like “Ultima Thule,” takes the form of a letter written by a Russian writer living in exile in Berlin. The letter, overtly addressed to his former lover in Russia, consists principally of detailed pictures of Berlin by night. The main part of the letter begins

²⁷ Ibid., 158.

with the brief line “It is night” (137), and this Berlin night remains central until the end. Though it may be too obvious, it should be emphasized that the line “It is night” has the same tone as the last line (beginning with “Night,”) of Fyodor’s letter in question. The following line may give authenticity to the idea of the night as the author’s other lover: “And meanwhile, outside the door, waits my faithful, my lonely night with its moist reflections, hooting cars, and gusts of high-blowing wind” (139). It is clear through such a phrase as “my faithful, my lonely night” that the author of this letter regards the night as a female companion. This image is clearer in the Russian original, for the noun *ночь* (night) is feminine. The reader cannot help feeling a little abashed when encountering this sentence, realizing that there are two heroines in the story and the letter; moreover, we have the impression that the author of this letter seems to have given up his true lover in Russia in favor of the Berlin night, his new love.

Similarly, in the last paragraph of the story we are given a foreshadowing of the night's reincarnation as a lover. The paragraph opens as follows:

Listen: I am ideally happy. My happiness is a kind of challenge. As I wander along the streets and the squares and the paths by the canal, absently sensing the lips of dampness through my worn soles, I carry proudly my ineffable happiness. (140)

The image that this passage creates in our mind is that the writer is kissed by “the lips” of the damp night. Curiously, in the first paragraph of the letter the writer recollects how they (he and his love) kissed on a Petersburg morning. Therefore, the first and the last paragraph vaguely echo each other, through the kiss motif. The story, incidentally, is framed with other common motifs: a loving young couple and a watchman at the opening, and a loving old couple and a watchman at the end. In addition, what should not be ignored is the feeling of “happiness.” The past author in the first paragraph must naturally be happy with his lover, but the present author in the last paragraph is also

“ineffab[ly] happy,” despite his lover’s absence.

All these details promote the contrast between the remote, unreachable, almost invisible lover and the very close, intimate new love—the Berlin night. The tone of the letter must make his lover (the only intended lover) irritable and sad, feeding her with the impression that he has deserted her. It is also possible that this letter was written with the presupposition that it would neither be read nor even reach the addressee, as is often the case with a Nabokovian letter. The author of the letter begins to write it, thinking that he still has a dear person to write to, but what he writes gradually reveals his complete loneliness, fortunately with a tinge of happiness. The author thus eventually confronts “loneliness,” the last word of this letter.

In Fyodor’s last letter the sense of loneliness and the monological tone are weaker, and the night / lover association is less obvious; therefore, at first glance it is an ordinary letter to his mother. However, as the image of the night (or more precisely, “rainy night”) that frames the letter indicates, this letter gently reverberates with the tone, rhythm and sentiments of “A Letter That Never Reached Russia.”

Fyodor’s letter is interrupted by Zina, his true girlfriend, but he soon resumes writing as if nobody had disturbed him. Amazingly, there seems to be no visible trace of Zina in this letter: what is stressed here is his “wonderful solitude” (350). Zina is not directly mentioned, as if she did not exist.

What should be especially noted is the fact that Fyodor’s last letter in this novel, composed in the presence of the personified night, seems not to be posted. The next morning Fyodor leaves his room to see the Shchyogolevs off without bringing anything with him but three and a half marks, and then realizes he is unable to enter the apartment because both his and Zina’s keys are inside it. Realistically speaking, judging from this his letter will be left there in his room forever: as the last word predicts, the words in the letter will keep wandering infinitely, without reaching anywhere. It turns out to be a letter that never reaches his mother, so it is only the reader of the novel *The Gift* and

the “night” who manage to read it.

Even if this letter is neither read nor replied to by his mother, it receives a generous response in an unexpected form—a dream of his father’s return. At night, after finishing his letter, he falls asleep listening to the “whisper of the rain”—the sound which has continually accompanied Fyodor’s letter, and quite possibly the sound of the “night’s” own voice. Finally, prompted by the phone call, he plunges into the mysterious nocturnal street. Walking along, Fyodor finds his street, which seems to be the same as the one where his first apartment in the novel was located, that is, the one that begins with a post office and ends with a church. At the end of the street “a post with a gauntleted hand on it indicated that one had to enter from the other end where the post office was,” but Fyodor is “afraid of losing it in the course of a detour and moreover the post office—that would come afterwards—if Mother had not *already* been sent a telegram” (353). This rather preposterous passage, based on dream logic, surely has something to do with the letter to his mother he has just finished. He needs to find the post office anyway. Fyodor, ignoring the sign, enters his street, and is at last reunited with his father. We may say that the dream of his father’s return is a response from “night.” The Berlin night, disguised as “the St. Petersburg white nights” (352), mercifully and silently responds to Fyodor’s question “when will we return to Russia?” (350) and leads him to the miraculous place where he can meet his father. It seems reasonable to suppose that the Berlin night might lead him to reunite with his father, perhaps as a display of gratitude to Fyodor who not only generously let her (night) enter his room to stay there while he wrote the letter, but even mentioned her at the end of the letter.

The last letter that is unlikely to reach anywhere thus forms a focal point for the attention of a reader of *The Gift*. We realize how the Berlin night, the letter’s hidden heroine and one of Fyodor’s readers, plays a significant role here. As the only reader of the last letter other than ourselves, the night gently and quickly responds to Fyodor’s missive. There are still many letters wandering in Nabokov’s

works, searching for an ideal reader who, like the Berlin night, can appreciate them and give a right, responsible reply. Now we understand that it is the reader of Nabokov's works who is expected to be such an ideal receiver and reader of these wandering letters.

