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PUSHKIN'S PRESENCE IN *SOLUS REX*

Regardless of the reasons, artistic or autobiographical, it is evident that Pushkin's presence in Nabokov's last, abandoned Russian novel, *Solus Rex*, unlike in *The Gift*, is mainly focused on the theme of the protagonist's lost love and his quest for it in the world beyond. In his biography of Nabokov, Brian Boyd pointed out the correspondence between the projected sequel of *The Gift* and Pushkin's unfinished verse drama, *Rusalka*.¹ Boyd's observation was followed up in further studies.²

I should like to survey more fully Pushkin's motifs and direct allusions to Pushkin's texts in *Solus Rex*. One chapter of Sirin's new novel first appeared in the last

¹ Boyd, Brian. *Vladimir Nabokov: The Russian Years*. Princeton: Princeton UP, 1990, 517.

² Grayson, Jane. "Washington's Gift: Materials pertaining to Nabokov's *Gift* in the Library of Congress." *Nabokov Studies*, vol. 1 (1994), 21-67. Dolinin, A. *Istinnaiia zhizn' pisatel'ia Sirina: raboty o Nabokove*. St.Petersburg: Akademicheskii proekt, 2004, 278-293. On the *Rusalka* theme in Nabokov, see: Grayson, Jane. "Rusalka and the Person from Porlock." In: *Symbolism and After: Essays on Russian Poetry in Honour of Georgette Donchin*. Ed. Arnold McMillin. London: Bristol Classical Press, 1992, 162-85; Johnson, D. Barton. "'L'Inconnue de la Seine' and Nabokov's Naiads." *Comparative Literature*, 44 (1992), 225-48.

issue of *Sovremennye Zapiski* (1940) under the general title *Solus Rex*; the other chapter, *Ultima Thule*, was published in the first issue of *Novyi Zhurnal* (1942). In the foreword to his English translation, Nabokov stated that *Ultima Thule* was the intended first chapter of the novel. Nabokov's conclusion of Pushkin's *Rusalka* was originally planned to be presented as a work by Godunov-Cherdyntsev in the continuation of *The Gift*. Instead, it appeared separately in the following issue of *Novyi Zhurnal*, an epilogue, as it were, to the abandoned novel.

Ultima Thule was composed in such a way that it could appear in the collection *Spring in Fialta* as a separate story, flawlessly complete in itself. Its narrator, the artist Sineusov, is devastated by the loss of his wife and appeals to Falter, his ex-tutor, who is now a man with mysterious knowledge of the otherworld and has apparently solved "the riddle of the universe." Sineusov is certain that solving this riddle can help him reunite with his wife. His first attempt at finding some comfort and distraction during his wife's illness was his work on a series of illustrations for an epic poem entitled *Ultima Thule*, which he had been commissioned to do, in a somewhat similar way as Mozart³ was commissioned his *Requiem*, by a stranger, in Sineusov's case "a well-known writer" from a faraway northern land. However, the author did not return to check on his order. This motif of a commission for which no one would ever come, as well as the theme of approaching death, closely resemble the relevant scene in Pushkin's *Mozart and Salieri*:

На третий день играл я на полу
С моим мальчишкой. Кликнули меня;
Я вышел. Человек, одетый в черном,

³ Dolinin. *Ibid.*, 281.

Учтиво поклонившись, заказал
Мне Requiem и скрылся. Сел я тотчас
И стал писать – и с той поры за мною
Не приходил мой черный человек;
А я и рад: мне было б жаль расстаться
С моей работой, хоть совсем готов
Уж Requiem.⁴

[I was playing
upon the carpet with my little boy –
there came a knock: they called me, and I went;
a man, black-coated, with a courteous bow,
ordered a Requiem and disappeared.
So I sat down at once and started writing.
Now from that day to this my man in black
Has never come again.—Not that I mind
I hate the thought of parting with my work,
Though now it's done.⁵]

Compare this fragment with the episode in *Ultima Thule*:

You remember him, don't you, that strange Swede or Dane — or Icelander, for all I know [...] who introduced himself to me as 'a well-known writer,' and, for a price that gladdened you [...], commissioned me to make a series of illustrations

⁴ Pushkin. *Polnoe sobranie sochinenii v16 tomakh* (AN SSSR, 1937-1950), vol. 7, 1948, 131.

⁵ *Three Russian Poets, Selections from Pushkin, Lermontov and Tyutchev* in new translations by Vladimir Nabokov (Norfolk: New Directions, 1944), 26-27.

for the epic poem *Ultima Thule*, which he had just composed in his language. Of course there could be no question of my acquainting myself thoroughly with his manuscript, since French, in which we agonizingly communicated, was known to him mostly by hearsay, and he was unable to translate his imagery for me. [...] He was pleased with my fist *blanc et noir* sample, and we decided on the subjects of the other drawings. As he did not turn up in a week as he had promised, I called his hotel, and learned that he had left for America. [...] But when you died, when the early mornings and late evenings became especially unbearable, then, with a pitiful, feverish eagerness, the awareness of which would bring tears to my own eyes, I would continue the work for which I knew no one would come [...].⁶

The abstract quality of the commission, "its spectral, intangible nature, the lack of aim or reward," brings the artist closer to the realm, where, for him, his dead wife exists, "such a darling earthly creation, for which no one will ever come anywhere [...]" (507).

Before turning to the Pushkinian allusions in the sequel of *The Gift* it should be noted that the style of the inception and the ring-like overall composition of *Ultima Thule*, with a recapitulation at the end, remind one of a poem in prose. *Ultima Thule* is an epistle, a message, from Sineusov to his late wife. As in many of Nabokov's novels, the addressee of the story is a beloved, a wife, a "you," which is a characteristic feature of his intimate narratives. This lyrical appeal in *Ultima Thule* is mournful because the beloved is dead. In poetry, such laments go along with the genre of incantation or invocation of the dead. Sineusov's entreaty to his late wife is remarkably similar to the one found in

⁶ *The Stories of Vladimir Nabokov*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1995, 506-507. All further references to this edition are given as page numbers in parenthesis.

Tiutchev's famous poetic cycle dedicated to Denis'eva, which reaches its emotional climax in the verses composed after her death, especially in the poem "On the Eve of the Anniversary of August 4, 1864":

Вот бреду я вдоль большой дороги [...]

Друг мой милый, видишь ли меня?

[...]

Вот тот мир, где жили мы с тобою.

Ангел мой, ты видишь ли меня?⁷

[Here I plod along a highway [...]. / My darling friend, are you able to see me? //

[...] Here is the world that you and I lived in. / My angel, are you able to see me?]

Similar intonations, rhetorical questions, phrases, and tender names are used by Sineusov: "[...] if, after your death, I and the world still endure, it is only because you recollect the world and me. [...] Are you able to hear me?" (496-497). Tiutchev's repeated call, "*Angel moi, gde b dushi ne vitali, / Angel moi, ty vidish' li menia?*" ["My angel, wherever the souls soar, / My angel, are you able to see me?"], resounds as a leitmotif throughout *Ultima Thule* down to the last paragraph of the story: "But all this brings me no nearer to you, my angel. Just in case, I am keeping all the windows and doors of life wide open" (518). Sineusov's wife died of the same illness, tuberculosis, as Tiutchev's beloved Denis'eva. According to Berkovskii, the poems dedicated to Denis'eva show a strong affinity to the lyric poetry "of mature Pushkin tragically evoking

⁷ Tiutchev, F. I. *Polnoe sobranie sochinenij* (Leningrad: Sovetskii pisatel', 1987), 222. The translation is mine.

his destroyed love ('Appear, beloved shadow') and to those emotional concerns of Pushkin which converged in his work of genius — *Rusalka*.⁸

Judging by the drafts, *Rusalka* played a prominent part in the second volume of *The Gift*. After Zina's death, Godunov-Cherdyntsev would read the conclusion of the play written by him to Koncheyev. It is significant that in *Bend Sinister*, one of the offsprings of *Solus Rex*, in a functionally similar episode (with Shakespeare's Ophelia replacing Pushkin's Rusalka), Ember quotes his translation of *Hamlet* to Adam Krug, who has just lost his wife.

Thematic links between the plot of *Rusalka*, on the one hand, and the stories of Godunov-Cherdyntsev and Sineusov, on the other, have been identified by Boyd, Dolinin, and Grayson (see above, notes 1 and 2): both Nabokov's personages lose their beloved wives; both are shattered by their loss, and, in part, it should be added, also by their feeling of guilt in regard to the dead woman.

One important detail in this connection has remained unnoticed by the commentators. Sineusov's grief is augmented by the fact that his wife died while being pregnant and that he was to blame for this: "And, holding on to you from within by a little button, our child went with you. But, my poor sir, one does not make a child to a woman when she has tuberculosis of the throat" (497). Of course, Sineusov was not a Bluebeard (this analogy would be employed by Nabokov in *Lolita*), but Falter's punning distortion of the wife-murderer's nickname, "Moustache-Bleue," to make it resemble the

⁸ Berkovskii, N. "F.I. Tiutchev." In: Tiutchev, F. I. *Polnoe sobranie sochinenii*, 41-42. The recurrent image of *rusalka* in Nabokov's works is tinged with intimate personal memories of his youth and of lost Russia; see: Fomichev, S. A. "Nabokov – soavtor Pushkina (Zakliuchitel'naia stsena *Rusalki*)." In: *A. S. Pushkin i V.V. Nabokov. Sbornik докладov mezhdunarodnoi konferentsii 15-18 apreliia 1999 g.* St. Petersburg: Dorn, 1999, 212-216.

surname of the painter (514-515), contained an obvious reference to Charles Perrault's Barbe-bleue.

In his dream, Sineusov asked the doctor if it was possible for a child to be born in the grave, and the doctor "(who was at the same time Falter, or was it Alexander Vasilievich?)" replied, "with exceptional readiness, that yes, of course it sometimes did happen, and that such children (i.e., the posthumously born) were known as cadaverkins" (498).

The dream of a child being born posthumously evokes the birth of Rusalka's daughter, Rusalochka, in Pushkin's play. Significantly, Sineusov, like Godunov-Cherdyntsev in the second part of *The Gift*, is drawn to the sea after his wife's death.⁹ In *Rusalka*, the young prince, overwhelmed by remorse after the suicide of the miller's daughter, keeps returning to the bank of the river where she drowned herself. In Nabokov's story, Sineusov spends most of his time near the sea:

I sat on the pebbles of the beach, where once your golden legs had been extended; and, as before, a wave would arrive, all out of breath, but, as it had nothing to report, it would disperse in apologetic salaams [...] 'There's Sineusov, the artist—lost his wife the other day.' And I would probably have sat like that forever, picking at the desiccated jetsam, watching the stumbling foam, noting the sham tenderness of elongated serial cloudlets all along the horizon, and the wine-dark washes of warmth in the chill blue-green of the sea. (498-499)

⁹ Dolinin provided a detailed comparison of the Godunov-Cherdyntsev and Sineusov plot lines (*ibid.*, 284).

Not much is known about Sineusov's wife, though we do know that, already confined to bed and unable to speak, she would write her husband "funny trifles with colored chalk on slate – for instance, that the things [she] liked most in life were 'verse, wildflowers, and foreign currency'"(506).¹⁰

The motif of money is present in *Rusalka* and in Nabokov's ending of Pushkin's drama. In keeping with the folklore image of the water nymph, Nabokov in his drafts also mentioned (wild) flowers: Rusalochka tells the prince that she "often comes up upon land to pick flowers for her mother".¹¹

Nabokov was not the only Russian writer to try his hand at finishing Pushkin's *Rusalka*. Still, there must have been something special about this piece that attracted Godunov-Cherdyntsev and his author so much. According to Dolinin, who regards the novel *Solus Rex* as the second volume of *The Gift* wherein Fyodor is the author of both chapters (the story of Sineusov and the world of *K* [the king]), the 'invented' losses of his

¹⁰ The significance of this phrase in the story is analyzed in: Johnson, Donald B. *Worlds in Regression: Some Novels of Vladimir Nabokov* (Ann Arbor: Ardis, 1985), 209. Andrei Ar'ev convincingly argued that Nabokov's terminally ill heroine writing messages on a slate is an allusion to the dying poet Derzhavin, who composed his last, unfinished ode "The River of Time" on a slate board. In addition, "the slate bearing the password" in *Solus Rex*, according to Ar'ev, ought to contain the same key-phrase about "verse, wildflowers, and foreign currency," thus connecting the two chapters. See: Ar'ev A. "Otrazhenie na aspidnoi doske (O rasskazakh *Solus Rex* i *Ultima Thule*)," *Revue des études slaves*, tome LXXII, fasc. 3-4: *Vladimir Nabokov dans le miroir du XXe siècle* (Paris, 2000), 365, 356.

¹¹ Grayson, "Washington's Gift," 31. Nabokov's *rusalka* retains, to a large extent, her folklore image, which includes such an attribute as wildflowers. In *Speak, Memory*, Nabokov remembers how he and his Tamara "bathed in a fairy-tale cove and swore eternal love by the crowns of flowers that, like all little Russian mermaids, she was so fond of weaving" (Nabokov, V. *Speak, Memory. An Autobiography Revisited*. New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1966, 240). In *Pnin*, "peasant maidens would make wreaths of buttercups and frog orchises; then, singing snatches of ancient love chants, they hung these garlands on riverside willows and on Whitsunday the wreaths were shaken down into the river, where, unwinding, they floated like so many serpents while the maidens floated and chanted among them. A curious verbal association struck Pnin at this point; he could not catch it by its mermaid tail" (Nabokov, V. *Pnin*: New York: Doubleday, 1957, 76-77. This motif finds its way into Nabokov's English novels especially in connection with Shakespeare's mermaid, Ophelia: "as in Sudarg's mirror, the mermaids merge; Shakespeare's Ophelia turns up in Pushkin's waters" (Meyer, P. *Find What the Sailor Has Hidden. Vladimir Nabokov's 'Pale Fire'*. Middletown: Wesleyan UP, 1988, 124). In *Pnin*, it is Kroneberg's Russian translation of *Hamlet* ("plyla i pela, pela i plyla") that serves as a link between the image of Ophelia and the Russian folk ritual; see: Barabtarlo, G. *Phantom of Fact: A Guide to Nabokov's Pnin*. Ann Arbor: Ardis, 1989, 139-141.

characters reflect the real loss of the loved one, and Fyodor responds by a symbolic action: he finishes Pushkin's incomplete drama about a man suffering from remorse.¹² On the other hand, Boyd's suggestion that Nabokov's interest in the *Rusalka* theme was to a large degree personal should not be ignored. As Boyd has indicated, Nabokov's recent love affair threatened to separate him from his wife and child.¹³

Perhaps Nabokov decided to distance himself from such possible and unnecessary allusions, especially in view of Khodasevich's subjective reading of *Rusalka* in the context of Pushkin's personal affairs.

Pushkin's *Rusalka* contains, in the most condensed form, all the major themes of Nabokov's projected continuation of *The Gift*, and also the gist of *Ultima Thule* and *Solus Rex* – the story of a king soon to become a widower. The main character of *Rusalka* is the prince who wanders the shores, longing for the woman whom he betrayed and deserted. The drafts for *The Gift* (II) indicate that Nabokov considered making Godunov-Cherdyntsev (also an unfaithful man) a “prince.”¹⁴ Sineusov's name in turn links him to the first Russian princes, Rurik, Truvor and Sineus.¹⁵ Furthermore, there is Falter, a character that appears in the continuation of *The Gift*, as well as in *Ultima Thule*. Falter provides the only clear-cut connection between the two texts.¹⁶ A former tutor of Sineusov and later a successful businessman, Falter undergoes a dramatic transformation, becoming a possessor of the absolute and, perhaps, a mediator between this world and the

¹² Dolinin. *Ibid.*, 290.

¹³ Boyd. *Ibid.*, 517.

¹⁴ Grayson, “Washington's Gift,” 28. Grayson actually rejects the parallel with Pushkin's Prince (30). Fomichev (*ibid.*, 223) argues the opposite.

¹⁵ Boyd. *Ibid.*, 519.

¹⁶ Grayson. “*Rusalka* and the Person from Porlock,” 170; Dolinin. *Ibid.*, 282. Grayson has mentioned the connection between *The Gift* (II), *Ultima Thule* and *Rusalka*, (170), however her emphasis on the motif of “sudden death” in regard to *Ultima Thule* is not pertinent, since Sineusov's wife died after a prolonged illness.

world beyond. In *The Gift* (II), his appearance is brief and enigmatic; in *Ultima Thule*, on the other hand, he is at the center of the story which Sineusov is telling his dead wife.

In the image of Falter as an apparent mediator between life and death, and the person who can connect Sineusov with his dead wife, there are some traces of the third important character of Pushkin's *Rusalka* – the miller. Pushkin's miller lost not only his daughter; but he also lost his mind after her suicide. Still, he bridges the two worlds and is a messenger, the one who brings to the prince the news about his beloved and her transformation. In Nabokov's conclusion of *Rusalka*, the miller not only imagines himself to be a "local raven" but actually leads a double life, existing at the same time as a human and a "raven" – a traditional folklore messenger and mediator between the living and the dead. The best known literary example relevant to our topic is "The Raven" by Edgar Allan Poe. Perhaps it is not a chance that the name of Falter's sister in the English version of *Ultima Thule* is Eleonora.

In Pushkin's art, according to Iskoz-Dolinin's insightful observation in the study of *Belkin's Tales* and *Little Tragedies*, one can recognize a parallel development of similar plots, a correlation between a serious, elevated treatment of a theme, and its reflection in an ordinary, down-to-earth situation that borders on parody.¹⁷ Curiously enough, Iskoz-Dolinin did not include in his list of parallels "The Stationmaster." This was done by Khodasevich. In his work on *Rusalka*, Khodasevich showed that there is a correspondence between the tragic tale of the miller's daughter and a low, quite prosaic

¹⁷ Iskoz, A. (Dolinin A. S.). "Povesti Belkina." Biblioteka velikikh russkikh pisatelei pod red. S. A. Vengerova, Pushkin, vol. 4, (St. Petersburg, 1910), 184-200. "The Stationmaster" is singled out as a work that opens a new chapter in Pushkin's creative art (198).

and “happy” version of it in the story of the stationmaster and his daughter.¹⁸ Like Pushkin in his prose, Nabokov in *Solus Rex* created an alternative to *Rusalka*, but his episode of the prince and a common girl also includes some elements of parody with regard to “The Stationmaster.”

Crown prince Adulf, nicknamed “Prince Fig,” passing one day on horseback through a distant hamlet, “noticed a comely little girl to whom he offered a ride, and notwithstanding her parents’ horror (which respect barely helped to restrain), swept her away, while her old granddad kept running along the road until he toppled into a ditch [...], the child returned after an hour’s absence, holding a hundred-krun note [the foreign money motif again – *I.R.*] in one hand, and, in the other, a fledgling that had fallen out of its nest in a desolate grove” (534).

Let us turn now to Nabokov’s earliest prefiguration of the master-plot developed in *Ultima Thule*, “The Return of Chorb.” The protagonist of the story is devastated by the sudden loss of his young and passionately loved wife. “He sat daylong on the shingly beach, cupping colored pebbles and letting them flow from hand to hand” (148). Chorb tried to revive the elusive image of his dead wife by returning to the places they had visited on their honeymoon, and by gathering “all the little things they had noticed together” (149). Just like the prince in Pushkin’s tale, Chorb goes back to the “melancholy shores” where he was happy with his beloved. The *Rusalka* water theme in “The Return of Chorb” is subdued, but it is present in the description of Chorb’s wife’s wide eyes, “whose pale greenish hue was that of the shards of glass licked smooth by the sea waves” (149), and in the picture of a “pink *baigneuse*” over the bed in his hotel room.

¹⁸ Khodasevich, Vl. *Pushkin i poety ego vremeni v 3 tomakh*. Berkeley, Oakland: Berkeley Slavic Specialties, 1999. Vol. 1, 321-322.

Both the sequel to *The Gift* and the story of the artist Sineusov are replete with reminiscences of that early short story. Chorb leaves Nice suddenly, without waiting for his wife's funeral. Godunov-Cherdyntsev also leaves before the funeral, and, in *Bend Sinister*, Krug does the same. There is another trace of "The Return of Chorb" in *Bend Sinister*: the motif of the dead leaves and the puddle in the middle of the black pavement that "resembled an insufficiently developed photograph" (150).¹⁹ Chorb's horrible, visceral scream (153) prefigures the still more powerful, terrible, and prolonged screams of Falter in *Ultima Thule*, even though we are dealing with the opposite effects: for Chorb, the fright and the scream mean that "the ordeal is over,"²⁰ whereas Falter's mental agony is the result of an utter change and separation from everyday reality. The appearance of a moth that strikes the electric lamp in "The Return of Chorb" evokes the death of Chorb's wife, caused by an electric shock, and indicates her spectral presence, as do many other Nabokov's moths and butterflies. Falter's name means 'moth,' and moths in motels, as the author explains in *Lolita*, are called "millers".²¹ Thus Nabokov creates an interlinked series of mystical mediators: a moth, a miller, and Falter.

In the drafts of the second volume of *The Gift*, Godunov-Cherdyntsev tells Koncheyev that he has always been tormented by the lack of an ending in *Rusalka*, its "torn-off tail," "that operetta like exclamation 'where are you from, my lovely child?'"²²

¹⁹ On the significance of the puddle and the dead leaves in connection with Krug's wife see: Johnson, D. Barton. "*L'Inconnue dela Seine*" and Nabokov's *Naiads*, 239.

²⁰ Sleepy Chorb mistakes the living for the dead: the prostitute for his dead wife. This is a replay of Nabokov's earlier story "Revenge," in which the wife thinks that she goes to sleep with her husband, but instead finds a skeleton in her bed and dies of fright. Nabokov returned to the *Chorb* story in *Look at the Harlequins!* New York: McGraw-Hill, 1974, 74-75.

²¹ In his observation on the *Rusalka* theme in *Lolita*, Dolinin mentions that in one of the key scenes of the novel, Humbert notices millions of motel moths "so-called 'millers'" (293). Nabokov made this parallel more noticeable in the Russian version of *Lolita*. Tentatively this observation was first made by G. Barabtarlo (*ibid.*, 113).

²² Dolinin. *Ibid.*, 283.

“The Return of Chorb” is a story that touches upon one of the master themes of Nabokov’s art, the pursuit of establishing a connection between this world and the world beyond, the retention of the dead in the living. At the same time, the story contains a noticeably open, grotesque, almost farcical ending. The lackey and the harlot bend their heads to listen to what is going on inside the room which the parents of Chorb’s wife, still unaware of her death, have just entered. “But in the room all was silence” (154). Indeed, “the rest is silence,” but Nabokov used here Pushkin’s device of leaving his hero “at an unfortunate minute for him.” In a gentler manner, Nabokov repeated this denouement in *The Gift*. “Eugene will from his knees arise – but his creator strolls away.”

The preserved fragments of *The Gift* (II), and the texts of *Solus Rex* and *Ultima Thule* clearly indicate which works of Pushkin meant most to Nabokov during the final stage of his Russian period. The first one on the list would be *Rusalka* and its antipode, “The Stationmaster,” then *Mozart and Salieri*, and, finally, on a metaliterary level, “The Egyptian Nights.”

It has been pointed out that Sineusov and Godunov-Cherdyntsev both receive their inspiration from a work that belongs to somebody else.²³ In case of Sineusov, he receives his theme from a complete stranger, a foreigner. In “The Egyptian Nights,” Charsky, the protagonist of the story, is amazed by the ability of the Italian improvisatore to get his inspiration from another person: “Why? Another person’s thought had barely touched your ear, and already became your property, just as if you had carried, nurtured, and developed it never ceasing [...]”. “Every gift is unexplainable,” says the

²³ Dolinin. *Ibid.*, 284. Incidentally, the allusion to “Egyptian Nights” is supported by the motif of foreign language. Sineusov and his foreign commissioner have a difficult time understanding each other. In “Egyptian Nights”, a linguistic barrier provides an ironic dimension to the improvisator’s performance.

improvisatore refusing to elaborate on "that close tie between one's own inspiration and another's external will".²⁴

Throughout Nabokov's creative life Pushkin's 'external will' was his inexhaustible source of inspiration.



²⁴ Pushkin. *Ibid.*, Vol. 8 [1], 1948, 270. The translation by Paul Debreczeny (*Alexander Pushkin: Complete Prose Fiction*. Stanford: Stanford UP, 1983, 255) is here somewhat revised.