

**Emergence of Meaning and Cross-Cultural Translation  
in Vladimir Nabokov's *Translation and Commentary*  
of Alexander Pushkin's *Eugene Onegin***

By Anna Dergatcheva

“...the passion of science and the patience of poetry.”

VN, from an *Anonymous Interview*, 1962

What is translation? On a platter  
A poet's pale and glaring head,  
A parrot's screech, a monkey's chatter,  
And profanation of the dead.

VN, *On Translating "Eugene Onegin"*

“I shall be remembered by Lolita and my work on Eugene Onegin,” – declared Vladimir Nabokov in one of his interviews.<sup>1</sup> Both prophecies proved to be ironically true, but tragically delusive, having in mind the increasingly vulgar abuse of Lolita's image, and all the post-Nabokov translations of *Onegin*, repeatedly acknowledging his achievements, yet repeatedly producing the same kind of fallacies he was so furiously struggling with. Nabokov worked on the *Translation and Commentary* of *Eugene Onegin (EO)* for ten years (1954-1964), which means on the scale of his creative activity that he “devoted as much time to making Pushkin available to English-speaking readers as he would need to compose all three of his own English masterpieces, *Lolita*, *Pale Fire*, and *Invitation to a Beheading*.”<sup>2</sup> The original idea to translate *EO* for the Cornell lectures, providing a few useful notes, useful for the students, evolved into twelve hundred pages of the most voluminous work ever devoted to the study of *EO*. Nabokov described the idea of the project in different ways, one of the earliest versions being that “*Eugene Onegin* is as great a world classic as *Hamlet* or *Moby Dick*, and [my] presentation of it will be as true to the original as *scholarship and art* can make it.”<sup>3</sup> These notions, *scholarship and art*, are the key ones to my interpretation of this project, since the *Translation* itself is an *anti-art*, ‘perversepedantic-impossible,’ (according to Edmund Wilson, a close friend and a colleague of Nabokov), and ‘absolute monstrosity’ (according to

Sir Isaiah Berlin),<sup>4</sup> and the *Commentary*, in its turn, might be called *anti-scholarship* by the multiple features and hints, which will be described hereafter.

Nabokov's relationships with Pushkin (or, precisely speaking, with the mythologies of Pushkin) appear to be intensely intimate: Pushkin was for Nabokov the generative force of the new literary language, the 'harmony of the verse,' and the 'matter of style.'<sup>5</sup> Pushkin's plots, the logic of development, and 'general atmosphere' prove to be essential for the creation of the Nabokov's own meta-text. In particular, *Onegin's* reminiscences appear in Nabokov's poetry (exile and/as travel); short stories (the duel allusions); and most notably and at the multiplicity of levels - in the novels<sup>6</sup>, especially in *Ada* and *Pale Fire*.<sup>7</sup> The plots, the characters, and the stylistic moves, *estranged* by the means of the irony, are embedded in the 'background knowledge' of the heroes of Nabokov's meta-text<sup>8</sup> to as much an extent that the method of estrangement, alienating the original texts, does not obscure the references. The importance of *EO* for the process of comprehending Russian literature, culture, and 'russianness'<sup>9</sup> on the whole was significant for Nabokov: being a sibling of the 'stylist' kinship, which stems from Pushkin - Chekhov - (Bunin), VN enjoyed the production of metaphor, the 'work' of detail, the structures of prosody, and the interplay of cultural texts (in Lotman's sense) in Pushkin. In spite of this, having 'to decide between rhyme and reason,' he chose reason, neglected his artistic and creative self, sacrificed the melody to the meaning<sup>10</sup>, and the meaning to the sequence of practically meaningless (except for the abstract consequent reference of each term) words.<sup>11</sup>

Thus, the 'only ambition' for the project that was proclaimed, was "to provide a crib, a pony, an absolutely literal translation of the thing,"<sup>12</sup> and as an aim to "let the readers <...> want to learn the language of Pushkin and to reread *EO* already without the word-by-word crib."<sup>13</sup>

Nabokov claimed as well that “the goal and the plan of the art is nothing, the result is everything,” meaning that “the drafts, the sketches, the false traces are not important for the understanding of the essence of the novel,” and that “it is not relevant for which purpose and why did the author chose that or this way.”<sup>14</sup> However, the result of Nabokov’s work, the *Commentary*, suggests quite different if not opposite implications. VN not only digs out and discusses each and every draft and variant of word selection, stanzas and chapters, rejected by Pushkin even at early stages, but also attempts to interpret the reasons for this or that choice, elimination, etc.<sup>15</sup> Such ardent attention to details, manifested in the *Introduction*, is indeed essential to VN’s esthetics: “In art, as well as in science, delight can be found merely in the feeling of the details...”<sup>16</sup> However, more than 1000 pages of ‘details’ in the *Commentary* exhaust the scientific kind of discourse and engage in what anthropologists refer to as ‘cultural translation,’ practiced for centuries by missionaries, ethnographers, travelers, and subsequently adopted by scholars.. Indeed, even if no scientist can pretend to objectivity in the choice of the material nowadays, it is absolutely essential that the strategic consistency and neutrality of vocabulary, the corpus of references to the ‘discipline of science,’ and the ‘balanced’ interpretative framework are the shared modes of the ‘scientific’ research. Nabokov’s value-oriented epithets and references, such as ‘hilarious author,’ ‘mediocre sonnet-writer,’ etc. can be attributed to the personal layer of connotation, precious solely within VN’s *axiologic paradigm*, and incompatible with the strategy of science.<sup>17</sup> How, then, might be the oeuvre interpreted? As a compensatory structure, where anti-art meets anti-science? Or, as an ironic *menippeah*, where the synthesis is achieved, as in all of VN’s oeuvres, at the meta-textual level and interplay of the texts.

### **The *Translation* and the Meaning.**

Lydia Liu in an editorial on the problems of translation “in global circulations”<sup>18</sup>, raises several important issues on the latest concerns of the scholarly world. She mentions that “the

problem of translation has become increasingly central to critical reflections on modernity.” One can no longer talk about a translation as if it were a purely *linguistic* or *literary* matter. Nabokov, as a bilingual author, realized this perfectly,<sup>19</sup> and the ‘slavishly faithful’ literalism of the *Translation* is therefore compensated by the generosity and the art of the *Commentary*. Nabokov’s self-translations demonstrate a distinctive approach to the phenomenon of translation as *cultural act*, in which he serves as a mediator between the two realities.

Philosophic inquiries of the last century have resulted in the conclusions on a principal indeterminacy of translation from the ‘inherent’ general linguistic schemes of Chomsky’s kind.<sup>20</sup> Even on the level of simple sentence structures, as Quine, for example, shows, “statements are never verifiable or falsifiable in isolation.”<sup>21</sup> He shows that it is not possible to separate belief (or, as I term it onwards, the ‘background knowledge’) from the linguistic meaning because “we do not have any access to the world independent of our beliefs about what the world is like.”<sup>22</sup> On the level of a literary ‘reality,’ which is cohesive and coherent, both in syntagmatic and paradigmatic levels, this is even more so, because the private set of knowledge (‘plane of immanence’) of an individual author is not translatable or transmittable independently of the context of the matter of language itself. Within the theory of correlation between words and denotates, following Saussure’s elaboration, one can observe that if “a stimulus meaning for every term covers *all its events and states of affairs*,”<sup>23</sup> then there exist no maneuver to make an individual’s understanding outside the language, and “truth conditions are not available.”<sup>24</sup> That is why, according to Quine, “no theory of meaning can be set up in reliance on the truth propositions, and interpretation of the speech of another is always radically indeterminate.”<sup>25</sup> In the case of a text translation, which is an interpretation of a higher organization than the primary mental effort of initial comprehension, the literalism of the translation is not approachable due to the differences in the indeterminate semantic ‘fields’ of the words. Furthermore, it is complicated by the initial indeterminacy of

the individual perception. Therefore, “meaning is not an entity or property of an entity; it is a relation between (at least) a speaker, a time, a state of affairs, and an utterance.”<sup>26</sup> VN, trying to (re)construct the ‘reason’, or the semantic entity of Pushkin’s text, had to transport all other ‘states of affairs’ of Pushkin’s language into the *Commentary*.<sup>27</sup> This is the reason of his repetitive insistence on the indivisible status of the opus, which the vicious editors sought to diminish as much as possible.<sup>28</sup> These speculations lead to the conclusion that any attempt to transport or transload an absolutely ‘literal’ meaning is inevitably followed by an indefinite number of inevitable connotations brought by the difference between the semantic fields of the native and hostile culture of the transported text.

### **The *Commentary* and the Cross-Cultural.**

The consequences of the ‘cultural translation’ suggest that ‘universalia’ of various origins, while being translated and transmitted to different cultures, gain significant connotations, which in fact completely transform the discourse. These speculations let one conclude that, in fact, any emergence of cultural difference should be seen as embedded in the process of global circulations that determine which elements count as differences and why they matter. In the case of the *Translation and the Commentary* of *EO*, however, one deals with an even more complicated event, which might be termed cross-cultural translation, because within the dialogic structure of the work Nabokov transforms both the background knowledge of the recipient audience, and the background knowledge of the novel, widening the connotative field by the means of ‘science’, accessible to him in the 20th century, but not accessible to Pushkin and the audience of the 18th century. Explaining on two pages all the misfortunes of the drink made from *Vaccinium vitis-idaea*, or “mountain cranberry,” or ‘lingonberry,’ distorted by different translators to the extent of ‘bilberry wine’, ‘blueberry syrup,’ and ‘whortleberry liquor,’<sup>29</sup> Nabokov makes an act of multiple cross-transplantation of the discourses. George Steiner in his *After Babel: Aspects of Language and Translation*

suggests an important notion of an act of understanding as an act of translation, no matter friendly or hostile utterances (languages) are involved.<sup>30</sup> Nabokov, emphasizing the basic untranslatability of *EO* by the clumsiness of his literal crib, makes the act of understanding through *further* interpretation crucially important. The individual attitude and interpretative skills transcend the incomprehensibility of paradigms through the personal language of the author, and the very power of cultural diversity versus universalism, or 'general assumptions,' emerges from this process. Nabokov insisted on the importance of the details, and he thoroughly reconstructs the multiple details of Pushkin's discourse, discovering such forgotten connotations, as, for example, the creation of the popular dog's nick *zhuchka* out of Zhuzhu and Bizhu, the names of the master's lapdogs, or interpreting the epithet *krasnaya* (in 'krasna litsom,' referring to Olga in Chapter 3), not as a reference to the color of her face, but in the more archaic meaning of 'krasivaya,' mentioning *a propos* the Red Square. However, the later example illustrates Nabokov's creative voluntarism in interpretation. He insists that the "common opinion, shared not only by the translators, but by the kind, simple-hearted Russian readers <...> might be referred to the color of face only out of exceptional silliness."<sup>31</sup> His argument is opposed in the majority of the interpretations, but this is not relevant to the essence of the totality of the opus, since VN "perfectly understood, that the person [he was imagining] was not Pushkin, but a comedian, whom I paid to play his role. No difference! I enjoy this game, and I already believe in it myself."<sup>32</sup> He also enjoyed giving epithets such as 'deceivers,' 'mild imbecile' and 'impotent poet' to the litterateurs or pieces of literature he despises, and 'the greatest poet,' 'delightful passage,' and 'wonderful scene' to their 'opposites,' thus creating his own hierarchy and his own history of literature. Such an approach stylistically justifies the unnecessary references, reconstructed by VN - for example, interpretation (with the same alienating estrangement) of multiple plots and

motives, often alien to Pushkin's connotations, connected solely in a way 'everything is connected to everything' in the discourse of postmodernity.

Literature obviously derives its value at all levels of a language. However, the meta-language of translation as a cultural act involves much more than the conventionally described structural 'faces' of the given text. The 'pain' of translation is an important driving force of the process: it deprives the right of a translator as an author and involves him in interpreting the background knowledge of the two worlds. Simplifying the Sapir-Wharf hypothesis as "One World – One Language," the *Commentary* can be seen as an intersection of the diverse *petits recits* of the cross-references constructed and connotated by VN.

### **The *Translation* and the *Commentary* as Menippeah.**

Both Pushkin and Nabokov were writers, who enjoyed playing with the languages, producing masterpieces that can be read at a number of different levels, each level providing a valuable literary experience. The meta-text of postmodernity was not alien to Pushkin's technique, and an interplay at different levels of literary reality, as well as the dialogic form of the plot construction (dialogues between the 'high' and 'low' culture, 'national' / 'universal' representations, reality / irreality, the heroes and the author etc.) was both the apex of his novelty for Russian literature and the core value of his *international* literary significance.<sup>33</sup> Nabokov, in his turn, has certainly identified the demiurgic presence of Pushkin-the-Author in the novel, and a constant dialogue with him, with the heroes, the readers, and the imagined reference groups such as the critics, the friends, the 'beau monde', is supported through the *Commentary*. Such a playable structure of both Nabokov's and Pushkin's texts is sometimes referred to as inherent to a separate genre of literature, the *menippeah*, introduced to the system of genres by Bakhtin in his *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*. *Menippeah* essentially differs from the three known classes: the epics, the lyrics, and the drama, having a tendency to penetrate and to transform them. An understanding of the

typological features of the menippeah lets the researcher cover such a wide variety of texts as Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, Joyce's *Ulysses*, Bulgakov's *Master and Margarita*, or Nabokov's *Ada*, and conceptualize intertextuality and the game with different signifiers of the reality within a wider context than a traditional reference to *la condition postmoderne*.

Schematically Bakhtin has singled out three fundamental roots of the novelistic genre: the epic, the rhetorical, and the carnivalistic. The roots of the genre are important in Bakhtin's understanding because of the intrinsic characteristic of genre as living in the present but 'remembering' its archaic roots, which are constantly self-renewing. The carnivalistic, at its turn, stems from the Menippean satire, or *menippeah*, which "has had an enormous and as yet insufficiently appreciated importance for the development of European literatures."<sup>34</sup> The menippeah's influence on the *dialogic* type of literature, and its principal carnivality, which in terms of more recent Narratology might be interpreted as the *discursive irony*, allows to interpret its understanding as not a strict genre, but as a formative principle of the narrative texts like *EO* and the *Commentary*. The Narratology understanding of narrative fiction, which "differs from lyrical poetry or expository prose, because it represents a succession of events,"<sup>35</sup> might be applied both to *EO* and to *Commentary* with reservations, because Pushkin's novel sustains a verse structure, and Nabokov's *Commentary* is not fiction in its proper sense, and does not follow the consequent development of the events. However, the *petits récits* of the *Commentary*, or the multiple narratives are linked and organized in a type of the 'new narrative' of the referential fiction, which appeared much later than Tomashevsky's 1925 conceptual work. Using Tomashevsky's distinction, one can note that if Pushkin's novel is a proper one, which possesses both a story and a plot (*fabula* and *sujet*), Nabokov's *Commentary* has a *sujet* (or a number of *sujets*), while a plot can be synthetically reconstructed as the Personal Hierarchy of Literature.

The inner structures of the menippeah in the *Translation and the Commentary*<sup>36</sup> let us interpret this opus as a type of new referential fiction, close to the Pale Fire and Pavić's 'vertical readings.' The main feature of menippeah is that it is characterized "by an extraordinary freedom of plot and philosophical invention."<sup>37</sup> The unrestrained freedom of Nabokov's value-oriented hierarchy of literature, his inventing the new history of literature, with alienated estranged plots of the other authors, retold in an ironic way,<sup>38</sup> might be interpreted as typical for menippeah.

In strictly historical genre of menippeah, as described by Bakhtin, "the issue [of the menippeah's plot] is precisely the testing of an *idea*, of a *truth*, and not the testing of a particular human character, whether an individual or a social type."<sup>39</sup> Nabokov weights the *truth* of a value of each Pushkin's word and character, as well as of each of the hundreds of other literary pieces he refers to, on the balance of his cultural and individual epistheme. Nabokov's redundant references to the texts and figures very vaguely connected with any possible Pushkin's plane, also reflects an important structural aspect of menippeah as carrying "an extraordinary philosophical universalism and a capacity to contemplate the world on the broadest possible scale."<sup>40</sup> However, this should not be mistaken with a basic non-arbitrariness, on the contrary, the arbitrary judgements are very characteristic for the genre, and, as it was mentioned, for Nabokov's narrative as well. This stems from yet another formal device that menippeah comprises – "inappropriate speeches and performances,... including manners of speech," which are introduced in order to "destroy the epic and tragic wholeness of the world, ... to free human behavior from the norms and motivations that predetermine it."<sup>41</sup> Nabokov's inappropriate 'manner of speech' in characterizing the authors and the plots, which is in conflict with the modality of a 'proper scholarship,' reflects, I believe, Pushkin's own 'liberation' of the language, and emphasizes the freedom of judgement from the demiurgic position of the creator of the text. Another important features

of menippeah, emerging from Nabokov's text, are the presence of inserted genres, which "reinforces the multi-styled and multi-toned nature of menippeah." The genre variety of the *Commentary* is not evident from the first look, since the assertion of the opus is its 'strict' devotion to the scientific study. However, taken through the scope of discursive analysis, i.e. more by their fragmented facets, than by the systematic appearance, the multiplicity of genres is apparent: the 'fiction – non-fiction', the 'historical narrative', the 'biography', the 'scientific talk', the 'critique,' the 'journalistic essay', etc.

All the mentioned attributes of menippeah in Nabokov's text are, however, merely accompanying the main structural essence of the genre, which is the predominantly *dialogic discourse* of it. Nabokov holds and supports parallel dialogues at multiple levels throughout the entire *Commentary*. The intensity of intimacy of the relations in these multiple dialogues changes from one respondent to another. "There is neither a first nor a last word and there are no limits to the dialogic context (it extends into the boundless past and the boundless future)," - wrote Bakhtin. "Even past meanings, that is, those born in the dialogue of past centuries, can never be stable (finalized, ended once and for all), they will always change (be renewed) in the process of subsequent development of the dialogue."<sup>42</sup> This renewal in the process of dialogue in Nabokov's case might be interpreted as the cyclic resurrection of the cultural text he had abandoned in Russia, which grows through all his oeuvres and creates a meta-text of cross-references in his (anti-)Terra.

A few main reference groups of the dialogic partners can be singled out in the *Commentary*.

The first group of dialogic partners consists of each and every hero of Pushkin's novel.<sup>43</sup> "The appearance of it [Tatiana's letter] in Pushkin's hands might be... explained by the fact that it was copied for him by Onegin in Odessa, where in 1823-1824 they plunged into the memories of their past habits..."<sup>44</sup>; "Stanza XIX in Chapter 2 should have satisfied Onegin's

curiosity long time ago...”<sup>45</sup>; “Indeed, Onegin is not so witty as rude [in this passage], and it seems astonishing why <...> Lensky does not challenge him for a duel at once.”<sup>46</sup>; “It is left for the reader to guess how Tatiana Larina took the marvelous notes of Rousseau, concerning religious prosecution, and the epithets like ‘culte ridicule’ and ‘joug imbecile’ as referred to the Orthodox Church, which she belonged to.”<sup>47</sup>

The second dialogue is maintained with Pushkin himself - in two planes, as an author and as a personage of his own novel (an ‘author’, in its turn, can be subdivided to the layman who eats, drinks, travels, and a semi-‘sacred’ construct of an intellectual activity, where he ‘thinks’, ‘considers’, ‘writes’, ‘deletes’ (the stanzas), etc. “I am almost sure that Pushkin deleted the end of the stanza because of the two fallacies, which he could have corrected only by rewriting it.”<sup>48</sup>; “The time gap in May 1824 was marked by Pushkin’s quarrel with the Governor, and one can suppose that our poet had extinguished the drafts of the letters or other materials, written down between stanzas VII and XXVIII [of Chapter 3].”<sup>49</sup> “Apparently, having remembered, that the Larins were described as relatively ‘poor’, Pushkin eliminates southern fruit [from their table].”<sup>50</sup> The dialogue with Pushkin can also be traced in “On Translating *Eugene Onegin*,” an earlier poem written in *Onegin*’s meter and rhyming scheme: “I <...> turned // Your stanza patterned on a sonnet, // Into my honest roadside prose - // All thorn, but cousin to your rose.”

The third group of dialogic affiliates consists of the Pushkinists and the translators of Pushkin; the fourth are the readers of Pushkin - the contemporaries, and the post-mortal, which sometimes overlap with the readers of the *Commentary*, but more often this group (with which the reader’s self-identification in the course of reading is mostly coinciding) is a separate entity. It is also interesting that the readers are divided into those who can enjoy the original and those who can not, the ‘deprived ones.’ This division is, however, not made merely on the basis of understanding the original, but on the basis of those who can or can

not understand all the details and reminiscences of plot. 'Students studying Russian literature'; 'Russian reader', 'American reader', "A common [wrong] opinion shared not only by the translators, but by kind and simple-hearted Russian readers..."<sup>51</sup>

The fifth group are people from Pushkin's 'circle' - his correspondents, friends, readers, artists, *littérateurs*, etc. "During the times of Pushkin and Tolstoy in an aristocratic milieu... among the people, affiliated by friendship, *qui se tutoyaient*, it was usual to address each other by a surname or a title."<sup>52</sup> They make a definite entity, which is extremely important for Nabokov's chronotop because of their physical coinciding with Pushkin in time. Each talk, letter, or publication is thoroughly dated by Nabokov, so that the clear cut between the 'contemporaries' and the after-world could be made.

The sixth dialogue is constructed with the matter of language itself, i.e. multiple references to the semantic fields of different epithets, and the metaphysical internal pain of a demiurgic translator, struggling with the impossibility of complete coinciding of the semantic fields, is expressed at this level. "Both nouns refer to the mysterious and charming romantic lexicon, so often used in EO and so untranslatable into English."<sup>53</sup>

Yet another dialogue is supported with all the authors of the corpus of literature (more than 120 authors are mentioned only in the *Commentary to Chapter 3*), whose plots, as it was described, are retold with the usage of the mode of 'estrangement' and who are connoted with the terms like 'known', 'imbecile', 'rhyme adjuster' (De Lattaignant); 'sensitive but giftless' (Sophie Cottin); or 'great' (Shakespeare, La Fontaine), etc. Nabokov also inserts the usual meta-references of autobiographical character, thus becoming an 'unofficial' hero of his own *Commentary*: "When I was reading EO for the first time in the age of nine or ten..."<sup>54</sup>

A more hidden dialogue can be figured out of the dichotomy of the 'anti-art' of the *Translation* and the 'anti-scholarship' of the *Commentary*. This last one connects all other levels; it encompasses the multi-leveled structure of the opus into one thesis-antithesis-

synthesis circle, where the *synthetic* is born in the process of translation-interpretation-understanding.

### Conclusions

Nabokov's *Translation and Commentary* altogether might be interpreted as a *menippeah*, maintaining all the significant features of it, as described by Bakhtin. It is noted by many researchers, that a meta-text of Nabokov's heritage can be 'properly' read solely by the recipients who possess at least three languages (English, Russian, and French),<sup>55</sup> and therefore some 'background knowledge', which is pre-given by these languages according to Sapir-Wharf theory.<sup>56</sup> Moreover, by the means of the cross-cultural translation Nabokov sought to (re)create the lacking 'background knowledge' for the specific target audience, the American Reader, purposefully petrifying the recipient with the process of translation and creatively interpreting the metaphors and allusions. Nabokov's *Translation and Commentary*, therefore, cannot be explained simply as a guide to the Russian original for those who were not sufficiently proficient in Russian to enjoy Pushkin's numerous connotations and word play. It involves more of the philosophy of language and translation in a mediating role of the translator, cross-cultural value-creation and bilinguinity metamorphoses.

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### Notes

<sup>1</sup> Interview in *The Paris Review* [1967].

<sup>2</sup> Brian Boyd, *Vladimir Nabokov: The American Years* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1991). P. 318.

<sup>3</sup> From an "Application for Guggenheim Memorial Foundation: a Letter to Henry Allan Moe (Secretary) on April 5, 1952," in *Vladimir Nabokov: Selected Letters, 1940-1977*, p. 130, italics are mine.

<sup>4</sup> "Lewis M. Dabney interview with Isaiah Berlin," in *Wilson Quarterly*, winter 1999.

<sup>5</sup> *Commentary*, p. 36; *Pouchkine ou le vrai...* p. 4.

<sup>6</sup> Naming the most explicit allusions, there will be *Parisian Poem* and *Expulsion; Orach* (Putya's father on a duel) and *The Dastard; The Gift, Drugie Berega, Invitation to a*

*Beheading, Lolita, Ada, and Pale Fire.*

<sup>7</sup> It is interesting how Nabokov mediates these reminiscences, mainly by means of the estrangement. The most relevant and estranged is the story told in *Ada* in the scene of the seduction of Marina by Demon Veen. It corresponds to the sketch of *EO*'s plot, provided in the *Introduction* to the *Commentary* in a metonymical way, bearing the same sign of estrangement, but more alienated from the original. "A trashy ephemeron (an American play based by some pretentious hack on a famous Russian romance)... [Demon Veen] proceeded to possess her [Marina] between two scenes (Chapter Three and Four of the martyred novel). In the first of these she had undressed in graceful silhouette behind a semitransparent screen, reappeared in a flimsy and fetching nightgown, and spent the rest of the wretched scene discussing a local squire, Baron d'O., with an old nurse in Eskimo boots. Upon the infinitely wise countrywoman's suggestion, she goose-penned from the edge of her bed, on a side table with cabriole legs, a love letter and took five minutes to reread it in a languorous but loud voice for nobody's benefit in particular since the nurse sat dozing on a kind of sea chest, and the spectators were mainly concerned with the artificial moonlight's blaze upon the lovelorn young lady's bare arms and heaving breasts... <...> The next scene <...> started with a longish intermezzo staged by a ballet company whose services Scotty [Impresario] had engaged, bringing the Russians all the way in two sleeping cars from Belokonsk, Western Estoty. In a splendid orchard several merry young gardeners wearing for some reason the garb of Georgian tribesmen were popping raspberries into their mouths, while several equally implausible servant girls in sharovars <...> were busy plucking marshmallows and peanuts from the branches of fruit trees. At an invisible sign of Dionysian origin, they all plunged into the violent dance called *kurva* or 'ribbon boule' in the hilarious program..." (*Ada*, p. 15-16). VN never names the 'famous Russian romance', but with the appearance of Baron d'O, the 'background knowledge' of the respondent who possesses Pushkin's text is activated.

<sup>8</sup> Including Nabokov himself, playing an author, a commentator, an editor, a translator, etc.

<sup>9</sup> I refer to 'Russianness' not in Shakhovskaya's sense of 'knowing what the piece of black bread tastes like', but in the sense of Pnin "holding the edges of his scarf with a chin, a very Russian gesture..."

<sup>10</sup> This is, to my mind, the most serious sacrifice. Nabokov even tried to keep the meter - iamb varying from dimeter to pentameter, which sometimes proved to be harmful for his transparent meaning reference, as in numerous examples when he unjustifiably uses "'tis'

instead of 'it is' or 'that is.' The signifiers of alliterations were also abandoned, although Nabokov's 'color reading' (described in *Conclusive Evidence*), as well as his love for anagramming, make alliterative plays extremely significant for his esthetics. Comp., e.g., "I've decided to entitle the book [*Mary*] *Mariette* since I can't stand the English 'mash' in the transliteration of the Russian title." - from a *Letter to Frank Taylor, 1969*, in *Selected Letters*, p. 459; also "For rendering precisely the rhythm of the [Maiden's] Song, I've invented the following alliterative imitation, the meaning of which has, of course, nothing to do with the illustrated lines (3-4): You're the brightest, Davison, // You're the lightest, Milligan. // Razygraites', devitsy, // Razgulyaites', milye!" - from *Commentary*, p. 340.

<sup>11</sup> Multiple examples are given by Boyd and other critics, I will contribute the following from Chapter 3, which was chosen for the analysis here because of the reasons intrinsic to Pushkin: (XI) "His style to a grave mood having attuned, // time was, a flaming author // used to present to us his hero // as a model of perfection"; (XXIV) "Why is Tatiana, then, more guilty? // Is it because in dear simplicity // she does not know deceit // and in her chosen dream believes?" etc.

<sup>12</sup> From an *Anonymous Interview*, 1962.

<sup>13</sup> *Commentary*, p. 36.

<sup>14</sup> *Commentary*, p. 41.

<sup>15</sup> E.g., *Commentary to Chapter 3*, XXIIIa, which is a rejected stanza from the final draft: "This stanza is nothing more than a set of banalities, and Pushkin rejected it quite justly." (*Commentary*, p. 315).

<sup>16</sup> *Commentary*, p. 36.

<sup>17</sup> The interesting comparison with the 'strategically scientific' interpretation would be, for example, Yury Lotman's *Commentary to EO*.

<sup>18</sup> Lydia H. Liu, ed., *Tokens of Exchange: The Problem of Translation in Global Circulations* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1999).

<sup>19</sup> The self-translations are the most relevant, since he practically rewrote the texts entirely, while transmitting them from/into Russian/English. A close reading of the two 'variants' of the same novel reveal not only minor semantic shifts, but also interpretative and conceptual ones, as in *Camera Obscura*, which he retitled *Laughter in the Dark* and substantially rewrote it. Another significant examples are the three versions of his autobiography: *Conclusive Evidence* (English), *Drugie berega* (Russian) and *Speak, Memory* (English). Nabokov's early

translation of Carrol's *Alice in Wonderland* is characterized by sacrificing of content to supra-textual value of Carrol's word play.

<sup>20</sup> George Steiner in *After Babel* justly observes that these 'inherent' schemes were never proven, and Chomsky in his 'absolutistic univeralism' disregarded the difference as a concept.

<sup>21</sup> W.V. Quine, *Word and Object* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1960), p. 38.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid.

<sup>23</sup> Saussure, p. 59. italics mine.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid.

<sup>25</sup> Kirsten Malmkjær, "Philosophy of Language" in *Encyclopaedia of Linguistics* (London and New York, 1996), p. 338.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid.

<sup>27</sup> VN was aware of the complicatedness of the process: "Because most literature derives its value not only from the literal meanings of the words in the text, but also from other aspects of those words such as their sound, their connotation, and other subtleties which often are extremely language-specific, it becomes necessary to decide whether it is more important to preserve the literal meaning of the words of the original text, or to seek to convey those intangibles that make it a work of literature rather than a piece of informative writing." From: VN, *Art of Translation*.

<sup>28</sup> See, e.g.: "Cornell Press... likes to produce 'beautiful' books.... What he [VN] would like is to publish the complete text, no matter how modestly presented, even as a paperback..." (From Vera Nabokov's Letter to Jason Epstein, 1959, in *Selected Letters*, p. 274-275; also "To make things easier for you I agreed (very much against my better judgement since in my opinion it detracts from the value of the book) to take out the two appendixes..." - from a Letter to Victor Reinolds (director, Cornell University Press), 1959, in *Ibid*, p. 259-260.

<sup>29</sup> *Commentary*, p. 285-287. It is interesting that Charles Johnston, whose translation of *EO* appeared in 1977, makes apologies to VN's word-to word crib and *Commentary* as to the most helpful source for a 'true' translator, still - ironically and paradoxically - suggests 'bilberry wine,' since it's neatly fits the meter.

<sup>30</sup> George Steiner, *After Babel: Aspects of Language and Translation* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), p. xvii.

<sup>31</sup> *Commentary*, p. 291.

<sup>32</sup> Vladimir Nabokov, *Pouchkine, ou le vrai et le vraisemblable* (Paris, 1937).

<sup>33</sup> *Songs of Western Slavs* by Pushkin features the high point of his 'post-modern' perception of literary interplay, when a pseudo-folk cycle of the "Western Slavic" songs, mocked by Mérimée in a book of 1827 *La Guzla ou choix de poesies illyriques, recueillies dans la Dalmlie etc.* was (re)'translated' into Russian with a vast pseudo-historical commentary and longish allusions to non-existent French 'specialists' on the field. Such a cultural artifact has never appeared before in Russian literature, and Pushkin had to articulate his 'deceit' on the pages of a literary journal *Biblioteka dlia chteniia* [Reader's Library] in 1835, the same year the *Songs* appeared in print. The play with extra-textual levels, therefore, was represented in the multiplicity of forms, very close to Nabokov's play with the book *formantae*, when he plays himself the roles of commentators, editors, referees, translators and literary critics.

<sup>34</sup> M. Bakhtin, *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984), p. 189.

<sup>35</sup> Thomashevsky, p.66. (Orig. pub. in Russian: 1925).

<sup>36</sup> An interpretation of Pushkin's *Eugene Onegin* as *menippeah* see in Alfred Barkov, *Progulki s Evgeniem Oneginym* [The Promenades with Eugene Onegin] (Ternopol: "Aston", 1998).

<sup>37</sup> Bakhtin, p. 189.

<sup>38</sup> E.g., "Young Werther, pretending on the status of an artist, goes to a tiny provincial town with grottoes, lindens, and brooks, and finds out in its purlieus an ideal village by the name of Walheim. There he meets Charlotte S., or Lotta, 'Lotchen' (how he joyfully names her in a manner, characteristic to the German bourgeoisie of that time). She marries an honest and straightforward Albert. A novel, written primarily in epistle form, consists of letters – actually, monologues addressed by Werther to some Wilhelm, who graciously stays ever mute and unseen. At every occasion Werther bursts in tears, tackles with kids, and continues to love Charlotte frantically... etc." - from *Commentary*, p. 299. Almost every story retold by Nabokov is distanced and estranged by him in a similar way, so that the *History of Literature* hierarchically resurrects from his opus.

<sup>39</sup> Bakhtin, p. 189, emphasized by M.B.

<sup>40</sup> Bakhtin, p. 190.

<sup>41</sup> Bakhtin, p. 191.

<sup>42</sup> M. Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1981), p. 49.

<sup>43</sup> Nabokov quite arbitrarily includes Pushkin and his Muse as the heroes of the novel at the very beginning of the *Introduction*, providing no explanations. However, other critics, such as Lotman and Chukovskii, conventionally understand this perception in the same manner.

<sup>44</sup> *Commentary*, p. 324.

<sup>45</sup> *Commentary*, p. 282.

<sup>46</sup> *Commentary*, p. 288.

<sup>47</sup> *Commentary*, p. 295.

<sup>48</sup> *Commentary*, p. 287.

<sup>49</sup> *Commentary*, p. 297.

<sup>50</sup> *Commentary*, p. 287.

<sup>51</sup> *Commentary*, p. 291.

<sup>52</sup> *Commentary*, p. 288.

<sup>53</sup> *Commentary*, p. 294.

<sup>54</sup> *Commentary*, p. 288.

<sup>55</sup> Sometimes also German, as in the case of *Invitation to a Beheading*, and more particular 'local' vernaculars of existent and non-existent languages, such as in case with *Lolita* and *Pale Fire*. For the multiglossia of Nabokov's texts see, e.g., Sergeeva, Olga. "My Uncle in the Best Tradition." In *Ural*, #6 (June), 1999.

<sup>56</sup> The notion of Nabokov's meta-text was elaborated by Viktor Erofeev and Andrei Bitov.

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