

Networks of Displacement: Genealogy, Nationality, and Ambivalence in Works by Vladimir
Nabokov and Gary Shteyngart

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ABSTRACT

Networks of Displacement: Genealogy, Nationality, and Ambivalence in Works by Vladimir Nabokov and Gary Shteyngart

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In this dissertation I examine Vladimir Nabokov's and Gary Shteyngart's use of family metaphors to manage intersecting Russian and American literary and cultural continuities. Both authors fashion their relationships to literary predecessors and common cultural narratives in terms of disrupted filial relationships, describing both an attachment to the conservative narratives of the nation and a desire to move beyond their rigid structure. I articulate this ambivalence as a productive state of transnational subjecthood that allows these authors to navigate apparently oppositional national identities. Central to this reorientation is a critique of the hierarchical schema of the national canon, which frames literary culture as a determinative series of authoritative relationships. By reimagining these relations as part of a branching network of co-constituting associations, we open the space for transnational subjects to move within and overlap these networks.

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For my wife, Gillian

Introduction

The genesis of this dissertation was rooted in the phrase “Russian-American authors,” a term which began to seem to me too benign. The discourse of hyphenated identities is largely concerned with the contentious intersection of racialized categories, an otherly identity brought into conversation with a separate “American” category that is tacitly understood as white.¹ In this context, matters of Russian-American identification seem to lack urgency, the racial difference of Eastern Europeans having long been whitewashed in America. But it is in part this assimilation, or domestication, of difference that impels this project. The difference represented by Russians in America, once viewed through the lens of racialized exoticism and political intrigue, now can seem something uncomplicatedly knowable and consumable. And in this familiarity, the identities attached to categories like “Russian” and “Russian-American” risk seeming naturalized and uniform. This dissertation approaches these identifiers as active spaces of intersection, given specificity by the overlapping and refraction of a litany of political and cultural projections.

I am most interested here in the many narratives of Russian displacement, and their close relationship to notions of Russian authorship. In the first wave of Russian emigration immediately following the 1917 revolution, the emigre intelligentsia saw themselves as the last bastion of an old Russian culture held in opposition to the corrupting influence of Sovietism. Decades later, emigre author Vasilii Aksyonov would

¹ For an overview of this history, see Annette Harris Powell’s “Critical Contexts: The Hyphenated American in Twentieth and Twenty-first Century America.”

write in his essay “*Luchshee sostoianie literatury – emigratsia*” that emigration was the ideal state for Russian literature, imagining the Russian author as a free thinker operating separately from the demands of the state (Aksyonov 21-22).² At the same time, we can also articulate distinctly American projections of Russianness and Russian authorship that reframe the experience of Russian displacement as part of American mythologies of immigration and civic virtue.

The narrative of Ellis Island era immigration evokes awestruck Eastern European families sailing in under the gaze of the Statue of Liberty. This imagery recalls a genre of twentieth century immigration novels which promoted accounts of noble sacrifice, tireless striving, and just reward, all affirmations of American ideas of democracy and meritocracy. Later, defectors from the Soviet regime would affirm American political ideals as refugees from a corrupt foreign empire. And even today, Soviet writers like Boris Pasternak, Joseph Brodsky, and Alexander Solzhenitsyn evoke a statelessness that is both tragic and triumphant, and a transcendence into art in spite of tremendous suffering under an imperialist nation. Complicating things further, the antithetic parallelism of the Cold War ethos evokes a dread of contact with foreign ideals presented alternately as Old World primitivism or foreboding futurism, and the abstract and alien myth of the “Russian soul” provides an air of intrigue and inscrutability. Meanwhile, classical Russian literature can evoke to many Americans little more than a vague sense of antiquity, and the authors a white-bearded wisdom.

² Incidentally, the tradition of Russian literature in exile begins even earlier, including such authors as Alexander Pushkin and Ivan Turgenev, and others less well known to American readers.

Vladimir Nabokov and Gary Shteyngart are notable for their position among these intersecting narratives, and for their direct engagement of that position in their texts. Central to the work of both authors is their negotiation of the tensions between these often contradictory projections. Cultural production in the Russian diaspora is burdened by the dual expectations of personal autonomy and national identification. Likewise, the American immigration mythos, which affirms American civic virtue by integrating the presence of outsiders, projects for these authors a tenuous dualism of foreignness and familiarity. Even the operative narratives of displacement themselves - emigration, with its out-going trajectory and implications of exilic independence, and immigration, with its in-coming trajectory and its seeking, often aspirational attitudes - suggest a tension that must be dealt with. Both Nabokov and Shteyngart thus find themselves having to navigate narratives of national belonging and established traditions of displacement and nationlessness which, as we shall see, are themselves closely tied to projections of both Russian and American identification.

Nabokov in particular inhabits such a proliferation of narratives that he epitomizes one of his own, that of the untouchable cosmopolitan. In fact, we might locate in this legacy an early reference point for the western narrative of transcendent Russian migrants. Nabokov's modern legacy suggests both access to an authentic pre-Soviet Russia, and a wholehearted embrace of America, its intellectual and popular culture, language, and landscape. And his characterization as a "shuttlecock above the Atlantic" suggests a metaphysical freedom found in emigration, which benefits from modern narratives of creativity in exile (*Strong Opinions* 117). This close association

between Russian emigration and aesthetic enlightenment is likely rooted in the tropes of Russian Formalism, which thrived during the first wave of Russian emigration (1917-1930). But the themes common to the Formalists - the autonomy of literature from material history and an attraction to mythic natural imagery - are today primarily associated with Nabokov for western readers. After him, the model of migration as ascendency was embraced by Joseph Brodsky, whose speech "On the Condition We Call Exile" defines modern exile as a movement away from tyranny toward any freer land that gets the author "closer to the seat of the ideals that inspired him all along" ("The Condition" 2). Readers familiar with Nabokov's interviews will recognize here an echo of his statement, "It is in America that I found my best readers, minds that are closest to mine. I feel intellectually at home in America" (*Strong Opinions* 10). Russian authorship and migrant authorship alike thus become a practice of personal autonomy which, as we shall see, becomes a determinant narrative in itself.

Gary Shteyngart writes today against the narrative demands of both the transcendent Russian litterateur and the "good" Eastern European immigrant, highlighting the often contradictory ends to which Russians are invoked in the American imagination. The narrative of the Nabokov-styled emigre runs directly counter to that of the mythologized American immigrant, whose success is grounded not in achieving intellectual independence but in adapting to the strictures of a foreign culture, an affirmation of what Oscar Handlin has called "the American formula" (Handlin vii). While seminal immigrant novels progress to this end toward a "second birth" as in Abraham Cahan's *The Rise of David Levinsky*, or a transportation from the Middle Ages

to the twentieth century as in Mary Antin's *The Promised Land*, Shteyngart's work is markedly skeptical (Handlin xii, xxi). We might speculate a number of reasons for this: the global mobility and digital connectivity reflected in Shteyngart's work undermine the insurmountable distance that demands complete and permanent transformation in early narratives; the realities of the global economy undermine the notion that immigrants must realize their future in the United States; an enduring antipathy for foreigners and Soviets belies the promise of equality made by the early immigrant genre. At the same time, the legacy of Russian authorship after Nabokov is also inaccessible to Shteyngart and his protagonists, given their rootedness in the experience and expectations of immigration. Still, neither view of Russianness is to be ignored in Shteyngart's novels.

In this project, I focus on Nabokov and Shteyngart for both thematic and systemic reasons. First, I am interested in authors who directly engage the collision of Russian and American identities. Therefore, authors like Alexandr Solzhenitsyn, who actively avoided assimilating to the American literary scene, feel outside the scope of this project, though they are central to the formulation of an American mythology of Russian authors. Second, I am interested in authors who engage this intersection of identities by directly invoking filial themes. Given the universalist tone of Brodsky's poetics, the imagery of family and filiality are not nearly as central to his poetry as they are in the work of Nabokov and Shteyngart.³ Last, in this project I focus on the engagement of literary predecessors as central signifiers of cultural continuity, and both Nabokov and Shteyngart

³ Although we typically don't see Brodsky address the theme of family in his poetry, he does write about his family in his American essays. We might seek a connection between this and his work with elegy, as seen in the collection *Part of Speech*, a genre rooted in loss and inheritance. The structures of inheritance at work in Brodsky's elegies may provide a new way forward for future work on the issues explored in this dissertation.

engage directly with this phenomenon. Brodsky is less invested in the symbolism of cultural predecessors, and so feels less strongly engaged with the priorities of this project. And given the history of Russian culture, this language of predecessors skews toward male writers.⁴ Nabokov and Shteyngart are of particular interest to me not just because of their personal engagement with this symbolism, but because of the way they have been drawn into this language of predecessors by readers and critics. Nabokov is uniquely influential in the maintenance of the American conception of Russian writers, as is indicated by the use of his name as an indicator to categorize Shteyngart. And Shteyngart is often presented as the representative of a larger cohort, himself a sort of modern, Jewish Nabokov.

Reading Nabokov and Shteyngart together highlights these authors' role as signifying elements among other such signifiers in this cultural landscape. Thus, we might think about Nabokov's impact not as the irresistible influence of a great talent, but as the symbolic resonance of a name and legacy so thoroughly integrated into a national language as to embody a whole category of experience. Likewise, we can read Shteyngart's simultaneous deference for and disavowal of Nabokov and other Russian authors as a matter of identification, not influence. That is, he responds to a supertext that surrounds his predecessors, not exactly to their texts themselves. We are less eager to locate the same dynamic in the work of Nabokov, probably because of the success of the Nabokov mythos, but I believe he manages his references to the same end: not just to

⁴ That said, in the conclusion of this dissertation, I will address the work of women writers Irina Reyn, Ellen Litman, and Nina Berberova in this masculinist context.

confirm or deny some notion of personal taste, but to identify himself in relationship to a language of precursors and predecessors.

By tracing this language in the work of Nabokov and Shteyngart in particular, we are able to understand it not just in the historical context of Cold War attitudes, which is a context that is already well-studied, but also in terms of the resonance of this period for a new generation of readers and writers who look back on Cold War structures with skepticism and irony as a part of an ended era. Still, these writers, in spite of vast differences in the circumstances in which they emigrated, and consequently in their relationships to Russia and the United States, face in their work the same question: what is my relationship as a migrant writer to the Russian literary tradition, and to the culture of the country in which I write now? I will examine the terms on which these authors are connected – by themselves and by their audiences – to Russian and American cultural narratives, and the techniques these writers use to carve out a creative space in which they can write and be read in a context that is not strictly defined by the national. Still, my intent is not to suggest that either Nabokov or Shteyngart manage to - or even attempt - to surpass the narratives they inherit. Rather, both authors negotiate these tensions as an ongoing dialogue, ultimately embracing their burdened position as a troubled, yet fertile inheritance.

A Genealogy of Letters

Both Nabokov and Shteyngart express this negotiation consistently in genealogical terms. In their work, absent fathers, false fathers, and overbearing parents

reflect a preoccupation with cultural continuity and the struggle for personal autonomy. Their depictions of their foreign characters as unfit sexual partners answer anxieties about cultural commingling. And the discrediting of new fatherhood implies an unwillingness, or even an inability, to fulfill expected narratives of American normalcy. In each of these themes, we recognize a complex relationship with the psycholinguistic law of the father, and its preeminence in national identity and tradition. In the works that I will discuss here, these authors refer to fathers and patriarchal forms with considerably more emphasis than they do mothers.⁵ Partly, this patriarchal imagery is a response to the masculinist narratives of authorship and citizenship inherited from a canon of mostly male authors and cultural critics. Partly, it is the product of these authors' own maleness, and the assumption that they would inherit a paternal role themselves.

The language of belonging, and identification and the projection that these things come from a patriarchal source, offer both stability and restriction. For example, a conservative intuition makes us return to the filial metaphor especially in times of turbulence. Nabokov seems in *Speak, Memory* to be eulogizing his lost country with his representation of his lost father, or vice versa. Likewise, the fatherly approval that Shteyngart craves in his autobiography is closely aligned with a desire to be accepted in a national context. But for both artists, there is also an aesthetic and intellectual resistance to the determinant logic suggested by the filial metaphor, which surfaces for both authors as a discomfort at being pigeonholed.

⁵ Still, Shteyngart's work would provide for significant commentary on grandmothers and the Jewish mother cliché in another project.

Edward Said famously identifies in codified filial narratives a number of liabilities. Relationships of filiation reflect the vertical hierarchy of a self-confirming culture “based on a constantly practiced differentiation of itself from what it believes to be not itself” that consistently “sets the valorized culture over the Other” (*The World, The Text* 12). Thus, the authoritarian demand of filiation is for orthodoxy, leaving room to perceive only faithful children or defectors, as is often the case in displaced national groups. Still, this is not exactly an arbitrary external demand. Art critics Olesya Turkina and Viktor Mazin describe a sense of comfort taken in the “Great Stories” that maintain “a parental function which permits the subject from early childhood to immerse him/herself in the cradle of the culture” (Turkina and Mazin 74). Turkina and Mazin have in mind here the grounding effect of narratives inherited from the Soviet state, through which the civil subject’s identity was made comprehensible. The same model of parental determinism informs the space of diaspora, which insists upon the legacy of ancestors and the memory of home, and the project of immigration, which often assumes the final measure of assimilation as the ability to raise an American family.⁶ For the subject dedicating at least a part of himself to the continuation of a national idea, these narratives offer in return the reassuring linearity of the family line.

All of this so far refers to the internal state of a subject for whom cultural demands limit available languages of expression, thereby exerting a pull toward a particular version of oneself. This impacts the way Nabokov asserts himself in relation to the expectations of the Russian diaspora (Chapter 1), and the way Shteyngart and his

⁶ Note the American familial imagery of Uncle Sam and Lady Liberty as the “Mother of Exiles,” as she is described in Emma Lazarus’s “The New Colossus.”

characters respond to the narratives of American assimilation (Chapter 3). But, Said's work on filiation also prompts us to think about authorial identity in terms of how it is perceived by an external critical observer. His commentary on the "Eurocentric model for the humanities" suggests a model whereby the relevance of any given work is determined by a national category expressed as a "filial continuity." On this subject, he writes,

Its authority comes not only from the orthodox canon of literary monuments handed down through the generations, but also from the way this continuity reproduces the filial continuity of the chain of biological procreation. What we then have is a substitution of one sort of order for another, in the process of which everything that is nonhumanistic and nonliterary and non-European is deposited outside the structure. (*The World, The Text* 22)

In other words, the significance of a work, and the identity of an author, is reckoned in terms of their relationship to a previous, usually nationally determined, tradition. Hence, as we shall see, Nabokov was criticized in the emigre scene for not being sufficiently Russian, and is lauded in the American scene for producing work that is fundamentally American. Nonetheless, as one reviewer from *The Star-Ledger* remarks, Gary Shteyngart "has been compared to Vladimir Nabokov...Which means he's Russian."⁷ In this sense, nationality may be made flexible to suit a narratological need for solidarity or exoticism.

The rigidity implied by the filial metaphor is concentrated, I think, largely around the names and personas of the authors who are arranged into this line. These literary forefathers anchor the filial continuity to a set of concrete (though not at all unchangeable) mythologies that both benefit from the filial structure and contribute to its

⁷ This review copy is included in the paperback run of Shteyngart's *The Russian Debutante's Handbook*.

narratological power. We might sense here something of the family romance motivating Harold Bloom's *Anxiety of Influence*, the priority of the predecessor (whom Bloom figures as the Father) establishing the secondary status of the succeeding artist (the Son). Thus, Oedipal tensions dominate here and throughout this dissertation at large.

Attributing the law of the father to a particular figure lends it a referential power. Both Nabokov and Shteyngart engage this dynamic in their work, evoking canonized texts and enshrined literary predecessors as central thematic signifiers, signaling the convergence of strong cultural demands and deeply ingrained associations. In doing so, they maintain a genealogy of letters that weaves in and around the themes of nationality and displacement.

Given all this, the personas associated with Russian authors are laden with symbolism, the point of convergence for a vast complex of political narratives. The project of Russian letters has long been intimately connected to the articulation of a Russian identity, a topic much debated by Slavophiles and Westernists throughout the country's modern history. In 1802, writer and critic Nikolai Karamzin wrote of Russian literature's task as one of national self-differentiation, calling for readers and writers to embrace domestic Russian wisdom rather than relying on the French and English literature commonly translated in that era (Karamzin 110-111). Given this project, individual works and authors serve as rallying points for political and cultural agendas throughout Russian history. As critic Angela Brintlinger observes, in the troubled times following the revolution of 1917 Russian thinkers looked to literary heroes to "offer models to the searching author," to solidify a sense of aesthetics and ethics, and to help to

reify a vision of Russian life by providing a tenable hold on the past (Brintlinger 4).

Most notably, Alexander Pushkin signified for many a moment of authentic Russianness, sanctified in the effort and sacrifice of the artist: “Pushkin was a prophet who had given himself to the Russians and who now, in the twentieth century, offered himself as a banner under which they could unite” (6).

In this environment, celebrated authors acquired a patrimonial presence, focusing in their names the values and agenda of the current intelligentsia. As such, Russian intellectual history echoes a “classic 'fathers and sons' conflict,” a generational conflict presented in the novel of the same name (Glad 255).⁸ Placed so centrally to the progression of intellectual history, the paternal figure of the author is ingrained in a network of references in which the place of each figure is reinforced by the linear logic of progress from thesis to antithesis. This movement provides an appealing continuity, but does so at the cost of seeming to predetermine the place and significance of a given work. Turgenev spoke out against ideological readings of his novel, but soon found himself at the center of a political debate. Nikolai Chernyshevsky’s 1886 novel *What is to Be Done?* was a direct response to *Fathers and Sons*, substituting the empty nihilism of Turgenev’s protagonist Bazarov with a philosophy of “rational egoism.” Chernyshevsky’s novel later became the target of Dostoyevsky’s *Notes from the Underground*, and Vladimir Nabokov engages his intellectual legacy in *The Gift* (Katz and Wagner 26).

The problem with all this is that such a direct line of cultural inheritance invites

⁸ The popularity of the gendered translation of Turgenev's *Otsy i deti*, which is sometimes more directly translated as *Fathers and Children* seems to testify to the importance of the metaphor of masculinity in understanding this model of intellectual history.

the reader to predetermine their response to a text based on their understanding of the author's identity and predisposition. In their criticism of Turgenev's *Fathers and Sons*, which exemplifies this genealogical dynamic, contemporary Russian readers focused mostly on their ability to place Turgenev on either side of the generational gap, alternately commandeering him as either a supporter or detractor of their own vision for the country. On this subject, Turgenev wrote,

[T]he reader is always uneasy, and and easily becomes puzzled, even annoyed, if the author treats the character he represents like a living being, that is, he sees and portrays both his worse and better sides, and most of all, if he doesn't show a clear sympathy or antipathy to his own creation. ...The reader is ready to impose on the author made-up sympathies and antipathies, in order only to avoid unpleasant "vagueness." (Turgenev 36 my translation)

This creative indeterminacy is threatened by the genealogical metaphor which, in the context of the decades surrounding the Russian revolution, ties the author's identity closely to political affiliations.

The flight abroad spared First Wave emigre authors much of the creative and ideological strictures imposed by the Soviet regime, which seem to have grown from this approach to literature. But the demands of the diaspora reinforced the need for national coherence in their intellectual products. Artistic and intellectual communities formed cultural centers in Paris and Berlin, maintaining salons and journals to disseminate to emigres throughout Europe. Emigre intelligentsia regarded work coming out of the Soviet Union as fundamentally un-Russian, having been produced by a new culture they regarded as foreign to the Russia they remembered. Anticipating their return home, the emigre intelligentsia imagined themselves as the last representatives of true Russian

culture, who would some day restore the national tradition after the failure of the revolution. In this atmosphere, many thinkers in the emigre scene adapted a form of nationalist orthodoxy, casting aspersions on the Russianness of texts and authors that they disagreed with.⁹ And, in spite of the creative and organizational contributions of women like Marina Tsvetaeva and Zinaida Gippius, many depictions of emigre authorship invoked the patrimonial presence of the male Russian author, as in a 1923 poem by Vladislav Khodasevich, which imagines the Russian poet as a stern-faced priest, a herdsman, and the gatekeeper to a secret garden.¹⁰ Access to the essence of the homeland was thus to be gained through the guiding presence of the male author.

All this says nothing of American perspectives on Russian writers, which are themselves layered phenomena. Most American readers in Nabokov's era had a limited exposure to Russian literature, owing to the small market for translations from Russian at the time, and to a preponderance of political narratives circling the events following the revolution. Readers held as a reference point the potent mixture of sentimentality, Old World noblesse, and Orientalized passion epitomized by popular Tolstoy and Dostoyevsky stories (Bulgakowa 215).¹¹ And from the popularity of these authors, imaginations likely held to the image of the Russian author as bearded sage. These figures reflect something of what C. Vann Woodward called the "assumed parental roles" inhabited by the nations of the Old World (Woodward vii). This parental metaphor

⁹ For a thorough history of this period, see Marc Raeff's *Russia Abroad: A Cultural History of the Russian Emigration, 1919-1939*.

¹⁰ "Hozhu sredi svoih stihov, / Kak nepoblazhlivyy igumen / sredi smirenykh chernecov. / Pasu poslushlivoe stado / A procvetajushhim zhezlom. / Kljuchi tainstvennogo sada / Zvenjat na pojase moem." (*Stikhotvorenia* 273, ln 2-7)

¹¹ Bulgakowa describes this literary stereotype as the foundation of a tendency toward hyper-russified depictions of Russian characters and situations throughout American film culture.

suggests the perceived weight and authenticity of an enshrined culture, and in the case of the Russian stereotype, an essential, otherly presence that stood in contrast to the relative youth of American culture.

With the Cold War came a new set of reference points that were closely aligned with a metaphorized “rejection of the European father as a model and a moral authority” (Geoffrey Gorer qtd. in Woodward xix). The imagined Russian author soon became a political dissident, striving with America against the pre-democratic structures of the Soviet project. Though English readers were often still unaware of many new Russian works, but new personalities and new types were embraced from the Russian scene. Boris Pasternak affirmed this narrative when he received the Nobel Prize in 1958 for his novel *Doctor Zhivago*. Incidentally, it is speculated that he was offered the award largely for political reasons, to affirm the defiance of the West’s political enemy through art (Soukup 19). The fact that Pasternak was ultimately pressured by the Soviet regime into declining the award simply cemented the political narrative of dissident authorship. After Pasternak, Solzhenitsyn’s stoic depictions of suffering and Brodsky’s “spacecraft” singularity (“Condition We Call Exile”), to say nothing of Nabokov’s extreme cosmopolitanism, established an otherworldly tradition of apparent transcendence above the turmoil of nations. Indicative of the strength of the “Russian author” as a type is the fact of just how little readers knew of these artists, even while using them as cultural reference points. Soukup remarks on Pasternak’s symbolic potency: “the citizens of the free world, most of whom have never heard of Pasternak and his work, celebrate him for what they view as an act of defiance of the Soviet regime, without worrying much about

his book...or about his poems” (Soukup 19). Brodsky, too, shows us the strength of this literary type, given that he was named the American Poet Laureate in 1991 although most of his poetry was originally written in a language most Americans don’t read.

Last, the immigrant novel as a genre, though without quite so many singularly resonant Russian predecessors, exerts a similar force on authors. Incidentally, women writers like Mary Antin and Anzia Yezierska seem to be more readily embraced as part of the American immigrant literary continuity, perhaps because the marriage narrative reinforces the filial authority that characterizes the traditions considered so far. Indeed, the genre themes of family and reproduction establish the immigrant novel as fundamentally concerned with maintaining and restoring the filial model of continuity. And given the tendency of the immigrant novel to skew toward autobiographical (or at least autobiographically inspired) material, this narrative priority is likely to be taken as the author’s creative priority as well.¹² These authors, too, fall into a genealogical structure, progressing through differing eras of immigration. Shteyngart addresses this dynamic directly in his novels, and while Nabokov seems less interested in addressing himself to the immigrant novel specifically, his themes of family and sex resonate with this model of continuity, expressing a clear level of skepticism that puts him in conversation with the goals of the genre.

Enumerating all of these narratives reveals the tangled language of foreignness and filiation that writers like Nabokov and Shteyngart engage. From the practice of the authors mentioned above, parallel narratives of displacement emerge, creating additional

¹² See, for example, Ilan Stavans’s anthology *Becoming American: Four Centuries of Immigrant Writing*.

categories of transnational association: those of the emigre author and the immigrant author. The category “emigre literature” provides a unifying image that benefits from many of the tropes associated with the literature of modern exile: the solitary artist, romantic poverty, the potency of memory, the sublime quality of aesthetics. Incidentally, John Glad reminds us that exile and emigration historically were not uncommon experiences for Russian writers: Turgenev, Dostoyevsky, and Pushkin were all displaced during their careers (though Pushkin was internally exiled). But since the First Wave of Russian immigration, the category has largely solidified around the legacy and personality of Vladimir Nabokov. As such, the emigre author often radiates a nationless cosmopolitanism that is unavailable to the immigrant. The immigrant novel, as it is understood from the genre’s foundational texts, is informed more by the spirit of integration. It is enclosed by place, on its face a genre of American literature, and so often used to reinforce American national narratives.

It is a testament to the strength of Nabokov’s personal mythology that his American works are not typically thought of as immigrant novels even while, I will argue, he addresses a number of tropes from the American immigration narrative. For that, the literary pedigree that he cultivates with his referential style is at least partly responsible. Likewise, given the mystique of his predecessors, it is unsurprising that Shteyngart made a similar name for himself with his ironic literary self-consciousness. This intertextual approach allows both writers to engage actively with the filial continuities that encase their novels, by responding to the resonant authorial mythologies that give shape and specificity to this continuity. Attending to these continuities as

structures grounded in both literary and political history further allows us to track these structures alongside changing global realities. As a modern immigrant, Shteyngart's affiliations are distinctly different from Nabokov's: modernized, mobile, digital, and simultaneous. So, by engaging the structures of filiation, reading Shteyngart alongside Nabokov also allows us to interrogate our changing narratives of transnationalism and displacement, and to recognize the role of the Russian tradition in evolving those narratives.

Networks of Displacement

In spite of the strength of the genealogical metaphor observed here, we will observe that Said's discussion of filiation actually hinges on an extended discussion of the modernist retreat from filial logic (*The World, The Text* 16-21). Citing T.S. Eliot's belief that "the aridity, wastefulness, and sterility of modern life make filiation an unreasonable alternative," Said observes a loss of faith in the vertical structures that characterize the metaphors of genealogical continuity (17). We might recognize here a distaste for what Joseph Brodsky called the "linear principle" of imperialism, which seeks to restore fracturation in the past with "a detailed projection of the future" ("Flight" 47). And, especially in a Russian context, we will further recognize a fundamental commonality with the experience of modern exile or displacement. The rigidly linear model implied by filial orthodoxy cannot account for the complexities of the global space, and to fully appreciate the work of authors who engage this space of intersection and dynamic renegotiation, we must call upon a different model of affiliation.

This is not to say that the filial model has lost all applicability in our era. As Said points out, even new structures of democratic affiliation reproduce to some degree the reified and invisible priorities of filiation (*The World, The Text* 24). The literature of emigration and immigration arranges itself into a sort of genealogy that orders authors from a number of national backgrounds, even while their shared experience is the disruption of linear continuity. While Nabokov and Shteyngart struggle with the implications of the filial metaphor, and while they stake out new spaces of transnational identification and creativity, both authors embrace the family line. In spite of his cosmopolitan persona, Nabokov continually returns to paternal reference points (Pushkin, his father) to articulate his personal Russia. And even in his satiric resistance Shteyngart holds closely to the narratives of Russianness, Jewishness, and American immigration as though with the strained affection an adult child might feel for an overbearing or distant parent, an affection that appears unerringly in all of Shteyngart's work.

Formalistically, we can observe these contradictory impulses in the metaliterary approach common to all of the texts that I discuss here. For example, Nabokov's practice of intertextual reference both draws upon the strength of the canon and reorients it within his own textual worlds. His play on the conventions of authorship - parodies of literary biography, deliberate confusion between himself and his narrators - disrupt reader expectations of the author as a stable source of meaning, even as his texts celebrate authorial expression. And similarly, Shteyngart's bittersweet satire is immersed in the forms that he burlesques, expressing both an ironic distance from and a persistent attachment to the national narratives and identities he engages.

Speaking generally, the prevailing mood of all of the works to be discussed in this dissertation is one of deep ambivalence. The paternal force of the nation, of literary lineage, and of all such Great Stories restrains autonomy at the same time that it provides coherence and comfort. For this reason, the logic of filiation and the genealogical metaphor, evocative as they are of the contradictory impulses toward independence and interdependence experienced in all families, may be uniquely suited to representing this moment of troubled continuity and displacement. As such, Oedipal tensions feature as a principal reference for many of my readings. David Eng aligns these tensions with the problem of nationality in his book *The Feeling of Kinship*, characterizing the Oedipal complex as a “constitutive prohibition that emerges with the very inception of language, a structuralist legacy privileging certain forms of kinship as the only intelligible, communicable, reproducible, and livable ones” (Eng 16). The language of nations, understood in this way, limits the transnational subject to an either/or proposition that cannot account for disruption and simultaneity of affiliations caused by global migration. But the genealogical metaphor also conceals within itself the potential for deviation. Viewed from a genealogical perspective, every father is someone’s son, himself an object of narratives that defined his future. And so, the Oedipal structure anticipates that the symbolic son will become the symbolic father. This is not so much a matter of castration and restoration, as it is an opportunity to articulate a structure that accounts both for the necessity of a non-linear model of global affiliation and the rigid commitments of filial logic. Emigre and immigrant narratives encapsulate this tension in the simultaneous

tasks of seeking continuity with the past and forging new independence through its rupture.

Recent works by Eng and Judith Butler attempt to revise our structuralist language of kinship, arguing that the realities of the modern family cannot be understood through the Oedipal structure. They argue that families with same-sex parents, single parents, and adoptive parents demand a new language of kinship that does not depend on the rigid schema of desire and recognition centered around relations with the mother and father.¹³ And earlier work by Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari rejects the contentious three-point Oedipal structure in favor of a rhizomatic model resembling a ginger root which grows in branching directions. This model intends to defuse the Oedipal rivalry, and to unite the fracturation of the subject with the development of the subject.¹⁴ I take inspiration from these approaches, but rather than doing away with the Oedipal model entirely, I ask what happens when multiple symbolic structures are made to intersect. This intersection is something we all experience, given the multiplicity of cultural and subcultural affiliations and identities we inhabit, but the transnational subject experiences an intersection that is quite visibly codified in national terms.

I have so far discussed these national symbolisms in explicitly masculine terms, owing largely to the fact that most of the Russian authors typically known to American non-specialist readers - and especially Russian literature in emigration - have been men. The reproductive logic of the literary genealogy also reinscribes the paternal authority of the cultural progenitor. But besides this, the maleness of the inheriting subject also

¹³ For more on this dynamic, see Butler's *Antigone's Claim*.

¹⁴ See Deleuze and Guattari's *Anti-Oedipus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*.

impacts the way this structure works. Take, for example, Eng's analysis of Deann Borshay Liem's film *First Person Plural*, in which Borshay Liem reckons with her own adoption and first meeting with her Korean birth mother. In Eng's interpretation of this scenario, the intersection of two family lines represents for the transnational adoptee the entanglement of two incompatible symbolisms compounded by race and nationality. Borshay Liem's two mothers represent a conflict of attachment and identification, occupying the same position in the Oedipal construct; if the mother as object promises to fulfill the subject's desire for oneness and cohesion, having two such figures must undermine that sense of unity. The feminine position in this structure is thus a passive one, which primarily seeks reconciliation according to the Oedipal model. We observe the same result in the marriage plots in Antin's and Yeziarska's immigrant novels.

By contrast, the masculine Oedipal positions strive for distinction. For Nabokov and Shteyngart, the struggle around national affiliation is outwardly directed, less a crisis of internal coherence than a matter of frustrated self-representation. As such, the language of male prepotency is common to all of the texts that I will treat here. The striving Oedipal subject surfaces even in Nabokov's work, in spite of his distaste for psychoanalysts' systemic method. And in spite of the inheritance of skepticism that Shteyngart takes from Nabokov, Oedipal language obsesses him. The benefit of this masculine metaphor, is that built into the rigidity and frustration of non-priority is the promise of ascendancy. As such, though these authors are poised between the parentage of narratives that are at once contradicting and co-constituting, as symbolic sons confronting the patrimony of these national codes, they confront these tensions as

potential for creative growth even as the intersecting symbolisms present themselves as challenges. By positioning themselves in the metaphorical language of masculinity, both authors are able to express a skepticism for the categories of filiation they address, even as they embrace them. As a result, Nabokov and Shteyngart take a characteristically ironized approach to nationality and identity.

Thus, both Nabokov and Shteyngart address their predecessors not just as patriarchal figures in their own right, but as objects themselves of a greater nationalized narrative. As such, this project is not motivated by an interest in influence, but rather in the signifying network that converges on these references and the relationships that surround them. The transnational space places this convergence on display, and reveals this collision of symbolisms not as a blow against a subject that seeks internal cohesion, but as an opportunity for negotiation proffered to a subject prepared to reconcile with its own dividedness.

The structure that I propose to understand these relationships is a living network comprised of intersecting narratives of filiation and affiliation, including national narratives of continuity and foreignness, and transnational narratives of exile, emigration, immigration, and other experiences. Common figures (the nostalgic expat, the greenhorn, and the Russian dissident), enshrined predecessors, and new cultural producers all appear in this structure as nodes of concentrated meaning, each accumulating significance from intersecting narratives (the legacies of old texts and ideas, new interpretations, new collisions of perspectives), and radiating outward to impact surrounding elements. Thus, the proliferation of stories and competing

symbolisms fits into a complex and simultaneous matrix of narratives without completely discrediting the continuity of any individual line of filiation.

We may do well to consider this cultural network with something akin to Marianne Hirsch's notion of the “familial gaze,” where the vision of each member intersects with that of the others (Hirsch 11). The subject, and indeed the subject’s predecessors, are *made*, in a sense, by the projections of the others that surround him, even as he himself *makes* the others with his own perceptions and projections. For Nabokov and Shteyngart, the son reinvents the father, even as the father gives direction to the son. So too are these authors able to manipulate the narratives that surround them, by exposing the contingencies behind the most potent cultural anchors in the networks from which they emerge. The phrase “networks of displacement” thus expresses both an interest in the way experiences of migration and alienation are narrativized as ongoing literary traditions, and the critical distance from mythologized cultural reference points provided by the intersection of these narratives.

From Nabokov to Shteyngart

In the current era of globalism, narratives about crossing great distances and exotic differences now begin to feel familiar. And while the patrimonial structures that shape these narratives still exist, our relationship to them as readers is now distinctly different. I attempt to articulate this change in my analyses of Nabokov and Shteyngart.

In chapter one, I consider the father-son metaphor at work in the Paris scene of the First Wave of Russian emigration, and its development into a model for cultural

continuity and intellectual orthodoxy abroad. I read Nabokov's last Russian novel *The Gift (Dar)* (1938) as a reimagining of the sanctification of iconic authors in the Russian diaspora of the 1920s, wherein the figure of the celebrated author was held as an originary point that anchored a language of cultural identification threatened by exile and isolation. The novel tracks the development of young writer Fyodor Godunov-Cherdyntsev through a number of projects, including an account of artists abroad, a biography of his father, and a literary biography of revolutionary icon Nikolai Chernyshevsky, all these coming together as Fyodor's own autobiography. Nabokov figures his hero's relationship to his literary predecessors as a family narrative, linking the literary patriarch to the lost father figure, the words of Alexander Pushkin placed at times in the mouth of Fyodor's dead father. These paternal figures are made to occupy the same cultural space, unifying politics, aesthetics, and the private sphere, and exposing in this intersection the distance between the celebrated author's semiotic function in the project of cultural coherency, his original text, and the author as a person.

I continue this line of argument with a reading of Nabokov's first English novel *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight* (1941), a parodic literary biography that follows the overstepping narrator V. in his task to memorialize his older brother, a Russian author with a career in English letters. As V. replaces his brother's history with his own, Nabokov performs an inversion of the filial metaphor, revealing the literary predecessor as the ongoing project of the remaining generation. Thus, Nabokov imagines the self-identifying project of the diaspora as one of participation and co-constitution, rather than the strict inheritance of an orthodox narrative. Inherent to this proposition is

Nabokov's willingness to engage in national narratives as part of his art and the establishment of his literary persona. This willingness flies in the face of Nabokov's mythologized nationless cosmopolitanism, but it also coincides with his central metaliterary project, allowing him to respond directly to the narratives that shape the position from which he writes, and to restructure them as points in his own network of references.

In chapter two, Nabokov continues this reshuffling of semiotic precursors, now confronting the narrative demands of an American audience. I read the novels *Pnin* (1957) and *Lolita* (1955) as direct engagements with common American narratives of Russians and immigrants, and with Cold War anxieties about foreigners. While the novels' protagonists share a number of similarities, both engage opposite yet complementary narratives of the Other. *Pnin* engages the disempowering language of the greenhorn; *Lolita* the unwelcome presence of the sinister foreigner. By exploring these contradictory foreign characters, Nabokov reveals the complex interaction of dread and desire at the core of Americans' narrative interest in immigrants and foreigners, a dynamic that is played out in the taboo sexuality and perverse family structures at play in *Lolita*.

In this chapter, the metaliterary dimension of this project proceeds from what I believe is Nabokov's explicit engagement with his audience's perception of him as a Russian author and as an "Old World" intellectual. This dynamic plays out in this chapter both with an analysis of the trends expressed in reviews written by Nabokov's contemporaries and his response to these trends in his personal myth-making, and also

with an analysis of this theme in Nabokov's novels. In my readings of *Lolita* and *Pnin*, Nabokov invites readers to mistake him for his foreign characters, not just as a commentary on authorial presence, but as a critical engagement with the stereotypes that make up the landscape that he entered as a Russian writer in America.

In chapter three, I apply a similar approach to Shteyngart's first two novels, *The Russian Debutante's Handbook* (2002) and *Absurdistan* (2007), both of which engage the experience of Soviet immigration. These texts are uniquely concerned with a number of new narratives unexplored by Nabokov: the post-Cold War inferiority complex of an ex-Soviet in the west, the experience of Jewish identity in the Soviet state, and the complexities of returning to Eastern Europe after immigration. Shteyngart addresses these narratives in explicitly Oedipal terms, his characters experiencing their alienation in terms of a frustrated masculinity, what I interpret as a sense of their having been castrated by the conflicting demands of the national narratives that surround them, and by the weight of their own history.

This chapter also explores Shteyngart's dramatization of a literary rivalry with predecessors Brodsky and Nabokov, and proposes a reading that substitutes the burden of the Russian exile tradition with a transnational language of reference that showcases Shteyngart's simultaneous affiliations. By integrating both Ivan Turgenev and Ernest Hemingway as models of coping with an Oedipal culture, I attempt to map a flexible, yet tenuous network of filiation that expresses Shteyngart's self-conscious dualism, his indebtedness to the narratives of Russianness and foreignness that precede his career, and the critical distance he maintains between these narratives and himself.

The relationship between Vladimir Nabokov and Gary Shteyngart illustrates this ironic distance in an ideal form. To illustrate, I offer the following example, which reveals the legacy of Russian literature as an inheritance of displacement. In chapter one of *Speak, Memory*, Nabokov remembers watching his father seem to levitate before his window as he is tossed in the air in celebration by a crowd of peasants:

[H]e would fly up in this fashion...reclining, as if for good, against the cobalt blue of the summer noon, like one of those paradisiac personages who comfortably soar...on the vaulted ceiling of a church while below, one by one, the wax tapers in mortal hands light up to make a swarm of minute flames in the mist of incense, and the priest chants of eternal repose, and funeral lilies conceal the face of whoever lies there, among the swimming lights, in the open coffin. (*Speak, Memory* 31-32)

This image evokes Nabokov's loss of his father even as he remakes him in his own aesthetic image. Readers already familiar with Nabokov, will likely read this as a personal expression of the inevitability of loss, and the unearthly continuity to be found in art. We are, however, also invited to read the excerpt in close relationship to the symbolic Russia of the author's past when he writes of the pre-revolutionary moment at the beginning of the same section: "The old and the new, the liberal touch and the patriarchal one, fatal poverty and fatalistic wealth got fantastically interwoven in that strange first decade of our century" (30). The image also speaks to a lost civilization in the mode of the nineteenth century narratives already familiar to American readers. Especially given the rarity of such memoirs at the time of *Speak, Memory's* publication and the status of Nabokov's career, the image of Nabokov's ascending father thus comes to function as a central image of the rupture experienced in emigration.

When Shteyngart invokes the image in his 2014 autobiography, it seems calculated to invoke the same association, but to a very different end. The scene begins with a crowd of Oberlin students, drunk and high, carrying Gary aloft either to or from a dorm party; in his memory, Shteyngart is unsure of whether he is coming or going. He writes:

As I am being tossed up and down by the many weak Oberlin arms, am I thinking of the book I have just read - Nabokov's *Speak, Memory* - in which Vladimir Vladimirovich's nobleman father is being ceremonially tossed in the air by the peasants of his country estate after he has adjudicated one of their peasant disputes? Yes, that is precisely what should be on my mind. Because literature is slowly seeping into my goatee along with the Milwaukee's Best and the vile coat of fried buttery fat surrounding the Tater Tots served in the cafeteria. (*Little Failure* 260)

The image so iconic of Nabokov's loss is here reimagined as Shteyngart's introduction to a Russian literary culture already infused with Nabokov's cultural scrutiny, and the awareness of readers' desire to see a genealogical progression between Nabokov and those who follow him in the American narrative of Russian literature. Indeed, Shteyngart's autobiography reflects much of the same lyricism, nostalgia, and filial anxiety that Nabokov's does. But the image of the crowd, much like Shteyngart's experience of displacement, is remixed. No longer a solemn liturgy, the crowd is all lewd celebration; the emigre's loss and alienation, now familiar after generations of readership, can be played for jovial recognition, albeit with a key aspect of the experience lost in the process. The comparison is both apt, and entirely wrong.

This may be a self-deprecating moment for Shteyngart, to defuse any suggestion that he is imitating Nabokov too closely. But it also suggests an engagement with a

readership conditioned by very specific associations. Above all, it suggests a recognition that the narrative of Russians and Russian literature in America is the product of a number of contradictions: exoticism and familiarity, cosmopolitanism and provinciality, authorial distinction and an audience's tendency toward generalization. These traits are balanced and reworked as the cultural atmosphere requires at any given moment.

Reading Nabokov and Shteyngart together allows us to draw out these contradictions, and in so doing, expose narratives of difference that have receded from the public imagination in our present era of immigration. Homi Bhabha urges us with his emphasis on difference over diversity to turn our attentions to “a politics which is based on unequal, uneven, multiple and *potentially antagonistic* political identities.” (“Third Space” 208). In his essay “Reflections on Exile,” Edward Said reframes this multiplicity in musical terms, describing the cultural systems inhabited by the transnational subject as interwoven melodic lines playing off each other to form a complex “contrapuntal” music (“Reflections” 186). By approaching the models of filiation invoked in these novels as parts of a branching network, overlapping and intertwined, I hope to create the space to read these multiple and uneven identities critically, and to reveal something behind the contrapuntal experience of displacement.

Chapter 1:

Emigration and the Individual Talent: Parentage, Personality, and Creativity in *The Gift* and *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight*

The story of Nabokov as an American writer begins with an understanding of Nabokov as a Russian writer, and a key tension that accompanies that identity. Nabokov's attachment to Russian "literature, language, and [his] own Russian childhood" is well known (*Strong Opinions* 10). This concern is most often understood as an emotional response to the experience of exile, as indeed seems to be the case in Nabokov's *Speak, Memory*, which unifies the shadow of his father's death with the loss of a nostalgic and cultured Russia. In this context, Nabokov's poetics of intertextuality is a logical extension of his national self-identification. His special preference for Pushkin, his interest in Gogol, and his distaste for Dostoyevsky and Nikolai Chernyshevsky, to say nothing of his combative relationship with many of his contemporaries in emigration, suggest the formative influence of a distinctly Russian cultural network. And yet, Nabokov famously denied such identifying affiliations:

As for influence, well, I've never been influenced by anyone in particular, dead or quick, just as I've never belonged to any club or movement. In fact, I don't seem to belong to any clear-cut continent. I'm the shuttlecock above the Atlantic, and how bright and blue it is there, in my private sky, far from the pigeonholes and the clay pigeons. (116-117)

This claim is a refusal to accept any national category of literature, Russian, American, or otherwise. So the assertion that he is without influences reads as a refusal of creative parentage, suggesting instead a sort of self-begetting.

That this tension should feature prominently in the transitional works between

Nabokov's Russian and English careers is fitting. *The Gift (Dar)*, published in 1937 under the pseudonym V. Sirin, was Nabokov's last novel in Russian, and his most self-consciously intertextual work of Russian fiction. It features the development of a young emigre author, Fyodor Godunov-Cherdyntsev, each chapter following the development of his latest work: a collection of early poems, a biography of his late father in the mode of Pushkin's travel sketches, a tragic romance about emigre poets, a satirical literary biography of political dissident and author of the 1863 book *What is To Be Done?* Nikolai Chernyshevsky, and the fictionalized writing of *The Gift* itself. The themes of filial loss and remembrance, and literary inheritance interweave throughout the novel, closely associating the family structure with the cultural demands of the Russian literary diaspora.¹⁵ Monica Greenleaf characterizes the novel's referential maneuvering as a narratological bid for control in a life of loss and exile. And Alexander Dolinin refers to the novel as a means by which Nabokov attempts to "reshuffle the Russian classical canon, reconsider the accepted criteria of selection, and thereby construe his own literary lineage." (Dolinin 59). These interpretations reflect the same ambivalence seen in Nabokov's statements on influence and national identity, locating in the Russian canon both a stabilizing permanence and an order against which to seek independence.

Nabokov's first English novel, written during the same period that he was finishing *The Gift*, continues the exploration of this tension with a meditation on the process by which authors are enshrined in the first place. *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight* follows narrator V.'s attempts to memorialize his half-brother, a Russian writer

¹⁵ For a thorough exploration of these themes, see Monika Greenleaf's "Fathers, Sons and Impostors: Pushkin's Trace in *The Gift*."

who switched to English, against the efforts of other inferior biographers. However, as the novel proceeds, it becomes less an account of Knight's life and more an account of V.'s process of researching and writing the book. In the end, the biographer and his subject become eerily indistinguishable, as in V's famous statement, "I am Sebastian, or Sebastian is I" (*Sebastian Knight* 205). *Sebastian Knight* exchanges references to the Russian canon for Shakespearean references, using his new audience's cultural vocabulary of literary greatness to characterize a fictional author whose biography much resembles the transition that he himself aspires to make.

In this chapter, I propose an approach that may help us to account for how Nabokov defines the terms of his own originality while still acknowledging this poetics of intertextuality. If the method of insuring one's own independence is to remake the world, it should prove helpful to understand not just how Nabokov imagined his position in the world of his own text, but also how he may have viewed the author's position in the world of letters and ideas at large. In the novels addressed in this chapter, that position is expressed consistently in familial terms, presenting first the linear structure of priority and authority implied by filial relationships only to reveal the actual experience of these relationships as characteristically ambiguous. The themes of filial continuity and authorial personality emit an important structural resonance in these texts, but they are also revealed to be fundamentally changeable, contingent upon the critical perspective of readers and successors. As such, *The Gift* blends literary predecessors Alexander Pushkin and Nikolai Chernyshevsky with the neutralizing figure of Fyodor's father, thereby drawing our critical eye to the law of the father. *The Real Life of Sebastian*

Knight represents the successors and celebrants of an author from the perspective of a younger brother who both reveres the elder and covets his brother's advanced position for himself. As parodies of literary biography, these novels destabilize the reified presence of the authorial persona by explicitly confronting the narratological impulse behind the creation of an iconic predecessor. And by demonstrating the means by which the author himself is textualized, Nabokov provides a distance that allows us to navigate the world of letters more freely.

The rigidity of any canon depends on the weight of a long history reified through the strength of enshrined personalities, the author providing a palpable locus in which to locate the authority of a programmatic intellectual history. In Roland Barthes's formulation, the traditional perception of the author is as an originary anchor, which roots the source of contemporary meaning in a specific moment of the deep past.

The Author, when we believe in him is always conceived as the past of his own book: book and author are voluntarily placed on one and the same line, distributed as a *before* and an *after*: the Author is supposed to *feed* the book, i.e., he lives before it, thinks, suffers, lives for it; he has the same relation of antecedence with his work that a father sustains with his child. (Barthes 52)

Invoking the logic of procreation, Barthes describes a mode of reading that attaches meaning to a self-contained originary figure whose intentionality determines the significance of his text. Extrapolating from here, a cultural canon imagined as a series of similar father-child relationships inscribes an immutable biological linearity which seeks to regulate the order and priority of ideas. Likewise, Pascale Casanova locates the cultural value of a work of literature in a sense of "nobility" transmitted from past generations of authors. Thus, the names of sanctified authors - Shakespeare, Dante, and

Cervantes - act as signifiers of “a national literary past [and] its historical and literary legitimacy” (Casanova 14). We detect here a line drawn between the author's name and his existence as a historical person, as a means of establishing not only the strength of a national tradition, but also what she later calls the “romantic image of the artist's singularity – the fundamental element of literary mythology” (109). This idea, according to David Bethea, is especially ripe for commentary in Russian letters, the status of the author reaching that of a “secular saint” or martyr at the hands of a constantly scrutinizing state (Bethea 33). Such a transformation depends on the coherence implied by the author's lived life and the vital punctuation of his death.

Of course, as Casanova argues, literary value must also be sanctioned by the “guardians, guarantors, and creators of value” in the literary sphere: critic. This pact is framed as a “consecration,” a transformation of the earthly and ordinary into an “absolute literary value” (Casanova 126-7). Critic Michael Benton calls this the creation of a *biomythography*, a concept that “expresses the elevated status of canonical writers, the sense of their remoteness from the ordinary, that whiff of otherness that implies access to magic and the supernatural” (Benton 48). For Barthes, “the modern *scriptor* [in contrast to the canonized Author] is born *at the same time* as his text,” or at least, in the on-going utterance of the text, which he understands as an amalgam of “quotations” and “signs,” all pointing to other “writings” (Barthes 52-53). These perspectives invite us to examine the establishment of literary continuity not as the strictly linear progression implied by the biological language of genealogy, but as a recursive structure that is established and made to evolve by the proliferation of new texts.

Reading *The Gift* and *Sebastian Knight* together as transitional works allows us to employ this structure as part of Nabokov's negotiation of nationality and displacement. Even as they rely on the emotional resonance of the filial relationships evoked here, these novels engage the names and legacies of literary predecessors above all as specialized signifiers in the cultural languages that attend Nabokov's transition from Russian to English letters. Some twenty years after writing *The Gift*, Nabokov would list among the many attributes of his "infinitely docile Russian tongue" the "implied associations and traditions...which the native illusionist, frac-tails flying, can magically use to transcend the heritage in his own way" ("On a Book Entitled *Lolita*" 317). In these texts, Nabokov approaches his predecessors as anchors for such associations, allowing at once an adherence to a familiar national schema and the critical distance implied by his cosmopolitan independence.

Choosing Sides: Russian Literature and Politics in Emigration

For the Russian intelligentsia, literature had always been explicitly a practice of ideology and national self-identification, but following the revolution of 1917 these matters were of special concern. Emigre writers were faced with the dual task of representing life in exile and carrying the torch of Russian culture during the crisis at home. Many believed themselves to be the last protectors of a free Russian literature, which elsewhere suffered at the hands of government censorship and centralization. These lofty aspirations, though, resulted in a parallel institutionalization of creativity, defined by the political leanings of journal publishers and salon leaders, rather than state

representatives.¹⁶ Homi Bhabha has argued that the space of diaspora intensifies the discourse of nationalism in its search for coherence abroad, writing “The nation fills the void left in the uprooting of communities and kin, and turns that loss into the language of metaphor” to bridge the discontinuities of time and place (“DissemiNation” 291). During the time of the Russian First Wave, this metaphoric language drew from the timelessness of the Russian literary canon, and the symbolic potency of literary heroes.¹⁷ So, as much as Nabokov’s use and abuse of Russian literary giants may have been an attempt to massage Russian literary history to suit his needs in exile, or simply to assert his own aesthetic preferences, I believe that his metaliterary and intertextual work in *The Gift* also represents a calculated critical engagement with the Russian emigration’s language of intellectual continuity.

Most modern criticism of *The Gift* as literary biography takes its cue from Simon Karlinsky’s influential article “Nabokov’s Novel *Dar* as a Work of Literary Criticism,” which describes *The Gift*’s juxtaposition of de facto father of Russian poetry Alexander Pushkin with the controversial revolutionary figure Nikolai Chernyshevsky as an incarnation of “the constant conflict within Russian literature between those who regard it as a creative process and value it as art and those who are interested in it only as a prop for extra-literary ends of one sort or another” (Karlinsky 287). Nabokov would express this distinction somewhat more precisely in his 1958 talk “Russian Writers, Censors, and Readers,” in which he describes Pushkin’s genius as a refusal to be “a good servant of the

¹⁶ For an account of the political atmosphere of emigre publications, see Roger Hagglund’s “The Russian Emigre Debate of 1928 on Criticism.”

¹⁷ This language was all the more potent, given the long-time national perception that Russia could not speak of a culture of its own until it had established for itself a great writer, the like of a Shakespeare or a Goethe (Levitt 7).

people and of social endeavor [instead writing] extremely subtle and extremely independent and extremely imaginative verse about all things on earth” (“Censors and Readers” 6). By contrast, he ranked Chernyshevsky - who was arrested for political dissidence in 1862, sentenced to mock execution and imprisoned - as a “radical critic” who was “concerned exclusively with the welfare of the people and regarded everything - literature, science, philosophy - as only a means to improve the social and economic situation of the underdog and to alter the political structure of his country” (4). Nabokov frames this difference as an explicit antagonism when he refers to Chernyshevsky’s often-quoted sentiment that “a good pair of boots was far more important for the Russian people than all the Pushkins and Shakespeares in the world” (6). Naturally, this debate resonated in emigre circles where thinkers searched for figures who could help concretize the emigration’s cultural project.

Given all this, critics tend to approach *The Gift*’s metaliterary project as an attempt to dethrone a literary pretender, embedding the novel securely in the cultural politics of the emigration. The novel’s fourth chapter “The Life of Chernyshevsky” is usually characterized as the slaughtering of the liberal intelligentsia’s “sacred cow” (Karlinsky 284). It was so controversial as to be redacted in its original publication in the emigre journal *Sovremenie Zapiski*.¹⁸ And Nabokov’s contemporary Vladislav Khodasevich gleefully anticipated when the novel was to be published as a whole that “All intellectuals and readers from the progressive thought police, who have watched over Russian literature since the 1840s, should hit the ceiling” (Khodasevich,

¹⁸ Georgii Adamovich accuses Nabokov of “demagoguery” (Adamovich 4). In his memoir, Mark Vishniak accuses him of “viewing Chernyshevsky’s disgrace with the shamelessness of an aesthete” (Vishniak 254).

“Sovremennie Zapiski” 9). In the end, certain aspects of *The Gift* do indicate a preference on the part of the author. “The Life of Chernyshevsky” ends with a “mediocre but curious sonnet” written in memory of Chernyshevsky, as if to mock the “high deed” [*podvig*] the poem attributes to him (E300/R336).¹⁹ ²⁰ And at the end of his novel, Nabokov reverses the gesture, evoking Pushkin’s *Eugene Onegin* as an ethereal music that ushers the book out in its final lines with bitter-sweet triumph.

But the novel contains a compelling ambivalence. In “*The Gift: Nabokov's Aesthetic Exorcism of Chernyshevsky*,” Sergei Davydov refers to a quote in *The Gift*, which is actually taken from Nikolai Chernyshevsky’s reflections on his own writing, as the novel's aesthetic mission statement: “[I]f someone were to take some miserable, forgotten novel and carefully cull all its flashes of observation, he would collect a fair number of sentences that would not differ in worth from those constituting the pages of works we admire” (E251/ R268). Davydov’s argument is that *The Gift* demonstrates what such “flashes of observation” could do in different hands (“Aesthetic Exorcism” 378). This approach implicitly suggests that *The Gift*, in spite of Nabokov's critical stance in the novel, owes a certain filial debt to Chernyshevsky, who is the source of the thesis to Fyodor's antithesis. As such, Davydov cites a curious note of empathy for

¹⁹ Unless otherwise indicated, all quotes from *The Gift* will be reproduced from the official translation and supplemented with bracketed Russian from the original in cases where Nabokov's original choice of words is relevant to the topic at hand. All quotes will be dually cited to show their location in the Russian original as well as in the translation, following the formatting used above.

²⁰ Considering Nabokov's exegesis of this word in his 1932 novel *Podvig*, it acquires an unmistakable hint of irony here, which supports Karlinsky's interpretation. He defines the term in the introduction of his translation *Glory* as an “inutile deed of renown” (4), and expands elsewhere:

“The book's – certainly very attractive – working title...was *Romanticheskij vek*, “romantic times,” which I had chosen partly because I had had enough of hearing Western journalists call our era 'materialistic,' 'practical,' 'utilitarian,' etc., but mainly because the purpose of my novel, my only one with a purpose, lay in stressing the thrill and the glamour that my young expatriate finds in the most ordinary pleasures as well as in the seemingly meaningless adventures of a lonely life” (2).

Fyodor's aesthetic target:

Equally important is not to lose sight of the genuine attitude of Fedor and his author Nabokov toward the real Chernyshevskii, Chernyshevskii the man, rather than the *bete noire* and the blackguard of Russian letters: “And on the other hand [Fedor] began to comprehend by degrees that such uncompromising radicals as Chernyshevskii, with all their ludicrous and ghastly blunders, were, no matter how you looked at it, real heroes in their struggle with the governmental order of things (which was even more noxious and more vulgar than their own fatuity in the realm of literary criticism), and that other oppositionists, the liberals or the Slavophiles, who risked less, were by the same token worth less than these iron squabblers” (228/214-15). (374)²¹

By highlighting the distinction between the man and his legacy, Nabokov and Fyodor are able to subvert the demands for orthodoxy made by the emigres' critical community. To conclude that Chernyshevsky's presence in *The Gift* is intended only to dispose of an intellectual competitor, then, seems like following the trail only part way.

It was possibly Nabokov's refusal to commit to a distinct political position on Chernyshevsky that caused such uproar over his protagonist's literary biography. Those who adhered to Chernyshevsky's ideals would naturally interpret the chapter as a mocking indictment; but those who abhorred his utilitarianism would likely find his treatment too sympathetic, and politically unfocused. In point of fact, there is little in the chapter written against Chernyshevsky. Rather, it mixes unbecoming personal details, like Chernyshevsky's list of times and places he had vomited, with the more traditional account of the author's arrest and sentencing. Likewise, the chapter's frequent mangling of the biographical time line, leaping by free association from the abuse Chernyshevsky sustained in prison, to a fight with a cab driver, to Chernyshevsky's interest in pastry

²¹ Also cited here is Nabokov's clarification from *Strong Opinions* about Chernyshevsky, “whose works [he] found risible, but whose fate moved [him] more strongly than did Gogol's” (156).

shops and their presence in *What is to Be Done?* confuses the Chernyshevskian myth with difficult to account for details (E 225-227/R 254-256). Emigre critic Mark Vishniak would complain that the “naturalistic – or physical – details” in the chapter are so many as to make the “artistry of the depiction...doubtful” (Vishniak 254). Viewed from this perspective, the real bite of the novel is its challenge to the sanctity of the mythic author as a regulatory device in Russian culture. By illuminating the forgotten details of the life behind the persona, *The Gift* disrupts the reified history that surrounds such figures, calling into question the very process of literary myth-making.

That is, *The Gift* targets not simply a personality, but a mode of uncritical reading in which the nationalized metaphor of personality limits the possibilities of meaning. Allying an authorial persona too closely to matters of nation and ideological continuity prevents the reader from detecting the flashes of truth and humanity present in the work of even poorly-regarded authors. Instead, the reader should strive to read outside of these categories. Nabokov writes on this subject in his “Russian Writers, Censors, and Readers”:

The Russian reader in old cultured Russia was certainly proud of Pushkin and of Gogol, but he was just as proud of Shakespeare or Dante, of Baudelaire or of Edgar Allan Poe, of Flaubert or of Homer, and this was the Russian reader's strength. I have a certain personal interest in the question, for if my fathers had not been good readers, I would hardly be here today, speaking of these matters in this tongue.

The nationalistic category – signaled implicitly by the dense symbols of the authors' names – is a constricting one, which literally restricts the language of creative intellect. The good reader, like the good writer, is instead imagined as a *free* reader, whose duty is “To give account to none, to be one's own / vassal and lord, to please oneself alone.”

(These words he translates without comment from Pushkin's "*Ne dorogo tseniu ya gromkie prava...*" to end his lecture) ("Russian Writers" 11-12). This is to say, the priority of both writer and reader is not to commit themselves to the monism of a national culture, philosophy or theory, but to the unattributable joys of nature, emotion, and inspiration.²² Abandoning these obligations frees both the reader and the writer to follow truth and beauty wherever they lay.

Enshrining Pushkin: A Challenge to the Concept of the Free Reader

Of course, even the author typically taken as Nabokov's paragon of pure art is steeped in the language of the nation. Alexander Pushkin was enshrined as a national poet by the Russian intelligentsia and commemorated by a monument – the first dedicated to a poet, as opposed to a military hero – in Moscow in 1880. As Marcus Levitt characterizes it, this symbolic transformation of Pushkin provided the intelligentsia with a “concrete sense of its own corporate identity” that had previously been unavailable (17), literally giving body to the diffuse project of articulating a national culture. And, it provided a weighty authorial voice in the intelligentsia's project to define the Russian nation [*narod*] and a public opinion independently from the tsarist state. In exile, Vladislav Khodasevich and his followers also embraced Pushkin as a vital

²² Nabokov's translation style here is invested in maintaining Pushkin's rhyme-scheme, so the changes in sense here are notable. Pushkin's original (1936) reads “To wander here and there according to one's whims, / Reveling in the divine beauties of nature, / among the creations of art and inspiration / fluttering happily into the joys of emotion / - This is happiness! These are our right/This is the law... [права].”

Nabokov's translation reads: “...to stroll / in one's own wake, *admiring the divine / beauties of Nature and to feel one's soul / melt in the glow of man's inspired design / - that is the blessing, those are the rights!*” In his translation, Nabokov layers onto Pushkin's poem an image that we will see return explicitly in *The Gift*. The effacing gesture of “melting in the glow of man's inspired design” suggests a measured distancing from writerly personality, while still recognizing the potency of a *designed* environment of art and letters.

connection to their classical Russian past, as part of their project to preserve and continue the tradition of Russian letters.²³

During these times of political revolution and geographical dislocation, the image of Pushkin provided the continuity of a cultural inheritance, and in so doing, mapped the logic of filial relations onto the acts of writing and reading. For example, the speeches given by Dostoyevsky and Turgenev during the centennial installed them in the eyes of many observers as his heirs (Turgenev was said to have seemingly “crowned himself” during the ceremonial unveiling of Pushkin's monument (Levitt 106)), borrowing from Pushkin's own symbolic authority to install him at the head of the canon. Similarly, the literary debate abroad dwelt on how best to train a suitable “replacement” [смена] for past generations of writers, in order to protect against the distortions of the Soviets, ameliorate the isolation of exile, and carry on the flag of Russian literature (“Russian Emigre Debate” 523).

But while those who took comfort in the symbolic continuity of an iconic predecessor were able to map the transmission of values and aesthetics with the language of inheritance, dissenters had little room for middle ground or ideological nuance. Rather, Levitt argues, they were compelled rhetorically to reject the past entirely, adopting “the imagery of dethroning or enthroning Pushkin, bowing down to the poet's effigy or spitting on his grave” (8). The very selection of Pushkin as a national icon was originally resisted by thinkers who thought – like D.S. Pisarev, one of Chernyshevsky's major proponents – that his idealistic notions of art were irrelevant to the concerns of the

²³ For a detailed account of Khodasevich's invocations of Pushkin, and competing attitudes during the period, see Roger Hagglund's “The Adamovic-Xodasevic Polemics.”

nation's masses. Similarly, in exile Georgii Adamovich's critical camp regarded Pushkin as a tether to a canon irrelevant to life in exile, and as an obstacle to truly free expression uninhibited by style, arguing instead for Lermontov and Pasternak as models of depth through inelegance (“Weighing *The Gift*” 416). We may recognize here the same dynamic observed in the reception of Nabokov's *The Gift*: Any criticism or alteration of even an aspect of the icon is received as a complete rejection and a traumatic reformulation of the potent symbol. To the believer, such a gesture is anathema.

This polarization, I would argue, is a direct result of the filial metaphor of the literary predecessor, the strength of which is to unify the incontrovertible variability of the nation under the symbolic presence of one person. The singularity of the poet-hero's body – not to mention the singularly quotable authorial voice, and the isolable authority of the author's mind – stands in as the body of the nation, seeming to reconcile the multiplicity of bodies and voices in its population. The metaphor seeks to mask the unstable narrative behind its selection, replacing it with the naturalized logic of biology, and in so doing, it inscribes rigid possibilities of meaning that can be attributed to the enshrined figure. Reduced to a singularity, the predecessor provides an example to be emulated or rejected in its entirety. And so, reverence or iconoclasm being the only options, the language of the icon provides a stable backbone for polemics and politics, but only at the disservice of creativity.

Nabokov takes issue with this mode of creating culture in a personal letter, in which he criticizes Dostoevsky for what he calls his “famous but essentially claptrap politico-patriotic speech” given at the Pushkin celebration of 1880:

Dostoevski the publicist is one of those megaphones of elephantine

platitudes (still heard today), the roar of which so ridiculously demotes Shakespeare and Pushkin to the vague level of all the plaster idols of academic tradition, from Cervantes to George Eliot (not to speak of the crumbling of Manns and Faulkners of our times). (qtd. In Boyd, “Nabokov, Pushkin, Shakespeare” 1)

He renders the bronze likeness as a crumbling plaster idol and the exaltation of the great author as a demotion, from the “quiddity” of the text (Nabokov “Russian Writers” 12) to platitudes shouted through a megaphone for mass consumption. Pushkin's often-cited poem *Exegi Momentum* comes to mind here: “I will erect a monument to myself, not made with hands./ To it the nation's overgrown trails [*narodnaya tropa*] will not reach, / And its defiant head will raise higher than Alexander's column” (“*Exegi*”). In this formulation, the ineffability of the text outreaches the physical constructions of the nation, be they monuments or roads. And the similarity between the words *tropa* (trail) and *trop* (trope) seems significant here, perhaps meant to imply a related skepticism for national constructions both physical and narratological.²⁴ The genius of the artist and his text can survive only out of reach of the ossifying tropes of the nation, which require of the author the unsustainable rigidity of an icon.

Nevertheless, among his many other references, Nabokov consistently appeals to the symbolic potency of Pushkin throughout much of his writing, providing us with the basis of a more nuanced model for seeing the author's relationship to his predecessor. Most instructive for this point is Nabokov's 1937 address, “Pushkin, or the Real and the Plausible,” in which he speaks directly to the difficulties of biography and its precarious place in literary culture, and its seeming to require as a matter of course the corruption of

²⁴ This possible connection seems especially resonant, keeping in mind Pushkin's explicit versified sentiments about the 'purpose' of poetry, “Whether for the tsar or the nation [народ] / Isn't it all the same to us? The hell with them” (“*Ne dorogo tseniu ya gromkie prava*”).

its subject. The culprit in this speech is not nationalism, but something that falls between the tyranny of language and the biographer, the pretense of “an unalloyed truth” (“Pushkin, or the Real” 39). Nabokov characterizes the pursuit of such a goal as an egotistical delusion, a “shameless compilation,” a “pillaging,” and the attempt of a “voracious yet limited mind to appropriate some tasty personage.” The credulous biographer only writes his own preoccupations over the personality he hopes to capture and the credulous reader mistakes the cogency of narrative as fact. This dissonance reminds us of our distance from the past. And yet, even the most savvy intellect stumbles into the semantic trap:

The life of a poet is a kind of pastiche of his art. The passage of time seems inclined to re-evoked the gestures of a genius, imbuing his imagined existence with the same tints and outlines that the poet had bestowed on his creations. After all, what does it matter if what we perceive is but a monstrous hoax? Let us be honest and admit that if our mind could reverse direction and worm its way into Pushkin’s age, we would not recognize it. What is the difference! The joy that we derive is one that the bitterest criticism, including that which I direct at myself, cannot destroy. (38)

The world of art finds itself in uneasy proximity with the raw “truth” of the author’s historical existence, resulting in a unifying narrative, yes, but one that is a “monstrous hoax,” a reified story only nominally related to – but seemingly dominated by – the real life of the predecessor. The effect: the realities of Pushkin’s age - which celebrants of the great author hope to preserve, and to which Nabokov here appeals himself - become unrecognizable.

Still, Nabokov forgives this deception, because he is able to differentiate the author’s world from the mythic construction that surrounds him. We will note in the

above passage a measured shift from a language of *describing* the author, as with an evidential text, to a language of *enjoying* the narrative both *of* him and *by* him. Later he continues: “If I inject into [the images that make up my Pushkinian biography] a bit of the same love that I feel when reading his poems, is not what I am doing with this imaginary life somehow akin to the poet’s work, if not to the poet himself?” (40). Here the codified life of the author recedes into the background, deferring to the flexibility and vibrancy of an impromptu reader response. The weight of historical consensus is displaced by the authority of the eminently present evaluation of the creative individual. The reader's redemption lies in his ability to sense the difference.

Raising the Dead: A Symbolic Blasphemy

But the emotional resonance of the filial metaphor risks obscuring the separation between the authentic joy and inspiration that Nabokov describes above and the burdensome semantic weight of the collectively defined icon. It is striking to note the degree to which the story of Fyodor's father is interwoven with the novel's metaliterary project. Beyond the structural pattern of dedicating the novel's three middle chapters to Fyodor's attempted biography of his father, his studies of Pushkin, and *The Life of Chernyshevsky* – not to mention Fyodor's frequently cited memory of his father's appreciation for Pushkin – throughout the novel there runs a silent narrative that links the father figure to the semiotic development of the cultural icon, mediating this connection through the fear of loss and the influence of memory.

This meditation on the father resonates suggestively with the tone of the emigre

scene of Nabokov's youth. Slavist Leonid Livak describes the literary environment with a key filial metaphor: “The Paris School literati argued that exile's spiritual vacuum produced the 'emigre young man' or 'emigre Hamlet,' whose world-view differed from that of emigre fathers” and whose intellectual life was dominated by the need to find a stabilizing factor to alleviate the “*inquietude*, solitude, and despair” of life abroad (Livak 200). The phrase “emigre Hamlet” suggests a person suffering from melancholic loss, who is frozen in time, driven to distraction by the impossibility of satisfying the father's ghost and unable to act on his own desires in the present. The presence of this theme, in addition to the obvious autobiographical connection, allows Nabokov to work through his position amongst the paralyzing demands of the emigre literary scene.²⁵

To solidify the parallels between the literary predecessors and Fyodor's own father, Nabokov unifies the three figures in a sort of suspended life through death, an ambiguous potency that Monika Greenleaf relates as a “dreamscape of eternal return” (Greenleaf 154). Each figure undergoes an unnatural resurrection, to the dismay of even those who revere them in death. For example, Chernyshevsky's 'return from the dead' appears in the literary review of the fictional critic Valentin Linyov, who incorrectly assumes that the mock execution in Fyodor's biography is fiction:

And worst of all, having described the scene of the hanging and put an end to his hero, [Godunov-Cherdyntsev] is not satisfied with this and for the space of still many more unreadable pages he ruminates on what would have happened 'if' – if Chernyshevskii, for example, had not been executed but had been exiled to Siberia, like Dostoyevskii. (*The Gift* E302/R 337-338)

²⁵ For an exhaustive account of *Hamlet* as a thematic reference and a model for plot points throughout *The Gift*, see Polina Barskova's “Filial Feelings and Paternal Patterns: Transformations of Hamlet in *The Gift*.”

Earlier, Nabokov makes the same self-conscious move when, as a prank on an opera-goer who asks whether Pushkin is alive, Fyodor “*blasphemously* replie[s], 'Well, he came out with a new poem just the other day'” (E 100/R 114 my emphasis). And earlier still, we recall Fyodor's fantasy about his father's return, which is said to inspire a “sickening terror” (E 88/R 100) after he had become “[a]ccustomed...to consider his father dead” (E 87/R 99).

The repetition of this gesture (death and resurrection, followed by revulsion) reduces the strength of each individual personality to an open signifier, generalized in its multiplicity. Taken together, these moments express the troubled relationship with the predecessor as an urge to distance oneself from the past, while still betraying a desire for the stability of an essentially original moment. The predecessor becomes the human face of an ideal, and his death signals the inaccessibility of the ideal's source, even as the apparent finality of loss helps to articulate the unity of that moment within the language of lived history. So, the layered deaths and imagined resurrections of Chernyshevsky, Pushkin, and Godunov-Cherdyntsev Sr. allow us to read these figures not as characters or specific references to people, but as structural devices that accompany the novel's plot and seem to drive its aesthetic argument. In setting his array of predecessors in proximity with each other, Nabokov allows these disparate symbolic constructions to resonate independently of their real-life significance, and positions himself in conversation with the raw materials of his cultural environment. This is, I think, a shining example of the method that Khodasevich famously describes in his 1937 overview of Nabokov's work:

After a careful look, Sirin presents himself primarily as an artist of forms and literary techniques par excellence, and not only in the well-known sense that the formal aspect his writing distinguishes itself in its

exceptional variety, and its shining and novel complexity. These things famously catch the reader's eye not just because Sirin does not mask or hide his techniques, as is most often done,...but rather, because Sirin himself puts it all out in the open like a magician who strikes his audience by completely exposing his laboratory of wonders. This, it seems to me, is the key to everything of Sirin's. His productions are inhabited not just by living personages, but by his countless techniques, which, like elves and gnomes, twisting between his characters, perform great labors: sawing, cutting, nailing, and painting right before the viewer's eyes the decorations with which the piece plays itself out. They create the world of the work and reveal themselves to be unavoidably important characters. Sirin doesn't hide them, because one of his main tasks is to show how literary techniques live and work. (*O Sirine* 5 my translation)

Woven around these resonant father figures is a silent narrative that requires a level of abstraction that challenges our emotional connection to such personalities.

Our biggest indicator in the development of this analysis is the discomfort that Nabokov's characters express in relation to the novel's ongoing project of deconstruction. The critic Linyov is disturbed by Fyodor's revision of the accepted myth of Chernyshevsky, which depends on the writer's martyrdom at the hands of the state. Even more suggestive, perhaps, is the way this character reifies the language of symbolism, taking Chernyshevsky's mock execution as real, and decrying it as blasphemy when the icon's actual life encroaches on the narrative constructed around him. This anger speaks to the primacy of the great man's mythos, and the degree to which it is inscribed upon our perception of history. As much as we depend on the presence of such myths to give order to our sense of time, so too do we require that they emanate only from the distant past, because the ideal of the iconic personality depends on the supernatural quality of its consecration. The icon must be like us, yet fundamentally different and better, beyond the normal person's reach in both greatness and context. And the distance of time only

reinforces this contrast.

To recall Nabokov's talk on Pushkin: "The passage of time seems inclined to re-evoke the gestures of a genius, imbuing his imagined existence with the same tints and outlines that the poet had bestowed on his creations" ("Pushkin, or the Real" 38). That is, the narrative of the author's creation overtakes the historical fact of his life. But let us entertain the possibility that these "tints and outlines" are not simply the author's own creations, but rather collaborations with his reader. In the same way that an author's work can be said to stand the test of time, so might we say that it is upheld by time, because the celebrated images and excerpts that we come to accept as characteristic of an author are made famous by the selections made by readers and critics over the course of a classic text's long career. It is after all an *imagined* existence that is attributed to the celebrated author, a pastiche assembled according to the priorities and tastes of others who came later.

We might understand this phenomenon as a function of what biographer Richard Holmes refers to as "Invention marrying Truth" (Holmes 20). In this marriage, he continues, "[t]he fluid, imaginative powers of re-creation pull against the hard body of discoverable fact," and "[t]he inventive, shaping instinct of the story-teller struggles with the ideal of a permanent, historical, and objective document." The biographer's dilemma imbues the author/reader collaboration with an underlying tension, whereby the naturalness of history and objective fact is presumed to outweigh the writer's narrative, even while this history is shaped by the fact of its being told. So, insofar as cultural weight is concerned, the author's enshrined life is as much dependent on the "handful of

instructive and amusing lines” that Nabokov derides in his Pushkin speech as those very lines are dependent on the author's signature. The image of the canonized author allows us to categorize and measure the worth of the text, but this valuation seems natural only because the perceived weight of time obscures the multitude of decisions and selections that consecrated the cultural icon. All this is unsettling in its recursivity.

So, we are perhaps unsurprised to see the emotional implications of Fyodor's resurrection fantasy:

The miracle of this return would consist in its early nature [*priroda*], in its compatibility with reason, in the swift introduction of an incredible event into the accepted and comprehensible linkage of ordinary days; but the more the necessity for such naturalness [*estestvennost'*] grew with the years, the more difficult it became for life to meet it, and now what frightened him was not simply the imagining of a ghost, but the imagining of one that would not be frightening. (*The Gift* E 87/R 99)

What disturbs Fyodor is the incomprehensibility of reintroducing his father's presence – purified and made unearthly by memory – into the naturalized [*estestvennyj*] rigidity of lived history. Fyodor's present is defined by a logic embedded in an understanding of his father's history – specifically that he is dead. The unnatural intrusion of the past disrupts this narrative (“comprehensible linkage”) of the ordinary and calls into question the validity of the “hard body of discoverable fact” (Holmes 20). In other words, the specter here is not simply the ghost of the father, but the thought of a reality stripped of its objective finality and overrun by fiction. Like Fyodor, we depend on the distance of time to assert ourselves against the mythic presence, because without this space we seem to slip from the biological order of linear history, which demands that we come *after*, and that we inherit our world from the past but only after the past is gone.

The Life-Text of Chernyshevsky

Key to avoiding this discomfort is maintaining the weighty span of time that reinforces the status of the author, and so we return again to the metaphorized person of the author. The success of the myth, Michael Benton suggests, depends on the realization of the figure's finite lifespan: "Death defines the 'Life' with its mythic shadow as well as its chronological full stop" (Benton 65). The predecessor's mortality reasserts the connection of his life with the 'natural' logic of lived history, while the unfathomable character of death distinguishes his now distant life from the present. What's more, this full stop allows us to conceive of the icon's life and work as completed and self-contained units, the "death of the other" being an "event that underlies all claims to both totality and interpretation." (Baker 220). The totalizing biological events, birth and death, are attached to the icon's life in a "generic relationship" that blurs the line between actual events and the written life, the basis of what critic William Epstein has called the "life-text" (Epstein 37). This relationship, he continues, is an "epistemological naivete...freighted with ontological significance," which "locates [the lived life] outside (or to the side) of contemporary theoretical discourse" (38). Such deference for the biological and biographical locates the essence of the author in a past and completed moment in history, an origin point from which emanate the meaning of his great texts and the meaningfulness of his name and likeness. From this we might conclude that the rarity of the predecessor's irretrievable moment in time, and the inaccessibility and brevity of his life on earth underlie the universal value of his revered works.

We will note the discomfort that results when details from the unprocessed and uncontrolled life of the icon encroach on the accepted life-text. Nabokov addresses this phenomenon in his English short story “A Forgotten Poet,” which seems to echo the Pushkin celebrations of 1880, except for the fact that a man claiming to be the celebrated author is in attendance. He writes:

[T]he intelligentsia could hardly bear to visualize the disaster of identifying the pure, ardent, revolutionary-minded Perov as represented by his poems with a vulgar old man wallowing in a painted pigsty.... Intellectual Russia [was afraid of] the destruction of an ideal; for your radical is ready to upset everything in the world except any such trivial bauble, no matter how doubtful and dusty, that for some reason radicalism has enshrined. (“Forgotten Poet 573)

Here again, like the plaster bust, the iconic status of the author is reduced to a trivial bauble, which is toppled when the coarseness of lived life is brought into the sanctified sphere of ideas.

Given this, the offense of Fyodor's *Life of Chernyshevsky* is that it exposes the very mutability of the author's 'event'-based mythology. Diaspora theorist Sudesh Mishra describes what amounts to a cultural hierarchy of events: “Whenever an event gathers about it that quality of time-tested eventfulness that permits it to operate as an *exemplar*,” entering into group consciousness as a cornerstone of historical thought (Mishra 9). Events such as the birth and death of the author, his arrest and his sentencing, acquire their status in that they are recognized and talked about as important events. So the formulation of these events as 'events' depends on the validation of ongoing speech, and their status depends on a rigidly enforced orthodoxy. Mishra continues: “An eventful event is able to keep attracting and discarding statements (*and all statements are*

transformative of the event as basic datum) over a substantial span of time” (9 my emphasis). By granting the petty details of Chernyshevsky's earthly life the same narrative status as the more orthodox myth-building elements – for example, Chernyshevsky's resolute indifference at his mock execution – Fyodor allows the reality of the all-too-human life of the author to encroach upon his sacred position in the minds of his disciples. In so doing, Fyodor's biography removes the possibility of stability from the 'event' and shines an unwelcome light on the constructedness of the figure of Chernyshevsky, threatening to enable an uncontrolled transformation of his mythology.

To object to this totalitarian anxiety seems in line with Nabokov's usual complaint about “the ferrety human-interest fiend, the jolly vulgarian,” and the reader who finds too readily a string of “evolving serial selves” in his writing (*Strong Opinions* 24). This is because the identification with the “pure, ardent, revolutionary-minded author as represented by his poems,” as described in the short story above, presupposes a direct line drawn between the writer and the text. This troubling proposition is seemingly based on the assumption that the reader is able to grasp the incontrovertible truth of the author's intent, and thereby *know* the author.²⁶ And more, it supposes that every reader is able to come to the same conclusion. Such a rigid equation between the text and the imagined author arrests all free development of ideas, and worse, locks the reader/disciple into the imagined authority of a sacrosanct author.

²⁶ See Andrew M. Drozd's *Chernyshevskii's What is to Be Done? A Reevaluation* for a compelling reinterpretation that flies in the face of the orthodoxy of Nikolai Chernyshevsky. Drozd provides a convincing alternative reading of *What is to Be Done?* that suggests the work is itself a parody of many of the ideas typically attributed to its author, and that the novel does not propose to answer its titular inquiry, but instead simply poses the question without fully endorsing any of the answers it represents.

Fyodor addresses exactly this phenomenon in his *Life of Chernyshevsky*, marveling at the fervor that surrounded Chernyshevsky's work:

Instead of the expected sneers, an atmosphere of general, pious worship was created around *What to Do?* It was read the way liturgical [*bogosluzhebnye*] books are read – not a single work by Turgenev or Tolstoy produced such a mighty impression. The inspired Russian reader understood the good that the talentless [*bezdarny* - “ungifted”] novelist had vainly tried to express. (*The Gift* E 277/R 311)

Here, *What to Do?* takes on the weight of a holy text (this impression is emphasized by the presence of the root *bog-*, 'god,' in the original), curiously not for the quality of Chernyshevsky's novelistic work, but rather for his fecklessness. Nabokov administers the consequences of the disciple's credulousness by continuing immediately after this to remark on the critic Pisarev's support of the novel, and his “*dushevnaia bolezn*” (sickness of the soul) which is connected to his “perverse aestheticism,” as if to damn Chernyshevsky by association. However, in the preface of *What to Do?*, Chernyshevsky invokes his creative failings as a credit to his work's epistemological strength:

I don't have even the shadow of artistic talent. I even have a poor command of the language. But that means nothing: read, dearest public! The reading will be worth it. Truth [*Istina*] is a good thing: it compensates for the insufficiency of the writer who writes in its service. Therefore I say to you: if I hadn't warned you, it probably would have seemed to you that this tale has been written artistically, and that the author has a lot of poetic talent. But I warned you that I have no talent – and so now you'll realize that the merits of this tale are all due to its truthfulness. (Chernyshevsky “*Predislovie*”)

With no craft or artistry to speak of, the value of the text emerges from the author himself as a conduit for an absolute truth. In fact, literary value estimated thus, pretenses of style or art obscure the authority of the tale, serving only to distract a decadent,

intelligentny readership who is – both sadly and amusingly – “so impotent and so mean because of the enormous quantity of junk in [their] head[s].” The text merges now with the author, removing all aesthetic filters to communicate only the essential truth of the writer's design.

The frequent focus on the physical embodiment of Chernyshevsky's texts throughout Fyodor's biography seems explicitly designed to point out the potential for derangement rooted in this union. For example, the stutter “*se...sekret o t... o tom*” caused by smudging from a leaked tear on a famous letter written by Chernyshevsky to his wife draws the unreliability of the author's living body in too close proximity to the public image of the text. Likewise, Fyodor's description of his “harsh, ugly, yet amazingly readable” handwriting (*The Gift* E 273/R 306), and the wayward spots of ink that fall into a book when Chernyshevsky tries to dye a piece of thread black, attribute a certain coarseness and lack of control to the author's writerly body (E 274/R 307). This unwieldiness draws into question the mystical veracity of the text, as the author's mortal shell jerks his hand away from the straight line of perfect authorial intention. We are reminded that the act of writing itself distances the author from the pure world of his thoughts, and consequently, we are distanced still further. Here we come to what seems to me the clearest expression of Nabokov's objection to the cultishness that follows the enshrined author. The inflexible connection drawn from the living historical writer to the perfected, self-containing space of the text demands from both the rigidity expected of the textual symbol.

The Author's Name as Signifier

Nowhere do we see this equation quite so clearly as in “the empty 'rigidity' of the name” (Lyotard 72 #66 my translation). With the invocation of the author's name, we recognize a likeness both physical and conceptual, including all the titles and memorized lines, the programmatized meanings thereof circulating in public knowledge, and the supposed relation of the author to other personalities, all of which define our understanding of the icon's position in our cultural environment.²⁷ And yet, we immediately recognize the abstraction behind this association. Jean-Francois Lyotard writes:

The proper name is a designation, like a deictic, it has no more significance than that, and it is no more than the abridged equivalent of a description defined by a whole array of descriptions. It is a mark of pure designative function. But it is different from a deictic in that it is independent of the “actual' phrase” [i.e., independent of experienced reality – a conceived of event or thing] (65-66 #57).

The proper name loads the “actual” life and body of the author with the complex narrative formed about and around the published text, seeming at first to reinforce the notion of the author as the singular source of meaning and authority. But the disconnect between the name and the actual thing poses a troubling “question of the anteriority of signification versus designation” (62). For example, Michel Foucault's “What is an Author?” defines an opposite and complementary vector of signification, assigning the author's name “a classificatory function” that allows one to group and define texts in

²⁷ See also: “Deaths of the Author” in Michael Woods’s *The Magician's Doubts: Nabokov and the Risks of Fiction*.

relation to the author and to other texts along the lines of “homogeneity, filiation” and other categories:

It would seem that the author's name, unlike other names, does not pass from the interior of a discourse to the real and exterior individual who produced it; instead, the name seems always to be present, marking off the edges of the text, revealing, or at least characterizing its mode of being. (Foucault 107)

The possibilities of meaning in the text, then, are as much defined by the image of the author as the author is defined and imagined in the public narratives that emerge from and encapsulate his work. These contradictory impulses create a cyclical pattern of meaning with a fundamentally dislocated origin. The effect of this cycle comes to resemble what we might call the complete textualization of the iconic author.

Nabokov's most prominent commentary on this phenomenon in *The Gift* is of course the deliberate confusion created between the Chapter Four literary biography of Nikolai Chernyshevsky and the fictionalized biography of the son of Fyodor's neighbors, failed emigre poet Yasha Chernyshevsky, which is described by the romance in chapter one. Both works are requested of Fyodor by the salon leader Alexander Yakovlevich Chernyshevsky. Both are refused at first, and both are finally brought into close proximity in the final chapter on Alexander Yakovlevich's death bed. The joke appears to be that the life and identity of Chernyshevsky the great author are as much a construction as Chernyshevsky the fictional failure.

The structural similarities between the two stories bear this idea out. We recognize in the final account of Yasha's short life the same disrupted timeline that characterizes *The Life of Chernyshevsky*, suggesting in both accounts a potent

emotionality that folds the life of the celebrated person into a dense circuit, presented as a familiar traumatic narrative but rendered unrecognizable in terms of lived history. An account from Yasha's father collapses his son's life span into a single expression, marking his first word as "fly," a common Russian death omen. "His first word was *muha*, a fly. And immediately afterward there was a telephone call from the police: to come and identify the body" (*The Gift* E 311/R 348). *The Life of Chernyshevsky* features a similar collapse, starting with its subject's death and ending with his birth. Here again, Nabokov's use of multiplicity drains both personalities of their specificity, rendering the name an empty sign, and seeming to point out the futility of "writing a biography about Chernyshevsky."

So distanced from the natural progression of lived life, the significance of "Chernyshevsky" is abstracted away from the actual existence of any real person, to be recognized instead as a node in a network of narratives both within and outside of Nabokov's novel. In the end, Alexander Yakovlevich describes life as wholly wrought from text, claiming that his whole life he had lived "only in the margin of a book I have never been able to read," comparing himself to a man reading a foreign text and understanding only the simple markings of the marginalia. He concludes, "the context is completely unknown" (E 311/R 348). It is in this same space of uncertainty that the icon dwells, separated from the full text of his semiotic existence.

The result is a kind of uncontrolled mutation, rendering the iconic personality fundamentally different yet the same in the reader's mind. Hence Nabokov's transformation of Pushkin into *Pyshkin* and Sirin into *Shirin* during the meeting of the

intelligentsia in his final chapter (E 322/R 361).²⁸ We recognize the name but immediately see it as a distortion. Nabokov's name play draws our attention to the same function in our own network of names and narratives. If the significance of the icon is in the intersection of the stories and statements made about the icon, as a node in a growing network of text, then each new statement added to that intersection changes the character of that node. We see this change in character in the typographical mutation of Pushkin and Sirin, as well as in the shift in who is meant by "Chernyshevsky." Re-interpretations, misunderstandings, and mispronunciations thus converge with accepted readings as part of the same network of associations.

Incidentally, Nabokov repeats this gesture in his 1964 *Playboy* interview, impersonating an English-speaking reader who addresses him as "Mr. Naborkov,' or 'Mr. Nabahkov,' or 'Mr. Nabkov' or 'Mr. Nabohkov,' depending on his linguistic abilities" (*Strong Opinions* 24). This joke seems like a strangely defensive pretension, but within it lurks a concise expression of Nabokov's point: The narrative of the iconic author is a produced by his readers and his creative progeny as much as it is produced by his own creative impulses. Nabokov is renamed by his imagined reader as he is recontextualized by the introduction of an international perspective. In effect, Nabokov himself is reshaped and rewritten in a new network of international narratives and associations.

Chapter two of this dissertation will directly discuss the transmutations and distortions that accompanied the English-speaking public's introduction to the new

²⁸ Pyshkin has a speech impediment that "seemingly provide[s] an alibi for his last name." Fittingly, he mispronounces the word *dumayu*, 'I think,' as *dymayu*, 'I give off smoke.' This linguistic smokescreen is followed up by the construction *symashchestvie* which, spelled correctly, would mean 'insanity.' In the translation, it is said that Poshkin pronounces the word "cushion" as "coshion" (*caution?*), perhaps as a similar signal to the reader.

foreign writer called “Na-boh-kov.” For now, it pays to briefly mention the name play that signalled the next stage in Nabokov’s career. To this point, Nabokov had been publishing as Vladimir Sirin. And with the polemics surrounding *The Gift*, Sirin fit logically into the generational schema of Russian intellectual history as a young writer responding to the excesses of his forebearers. It was on the strength of this name that Nabokov was accepted as a contributor to Russian letters. But when Nabokov started writing in English, he shed his pseudonym and the associative capital that came along with it. In his autobiography, Nabokov wrote of Sirin as a completely different person, remarking that Sirin had passed “across the dark sky of exile...like a meteor, and disappeared, leaving nothing much else behind him than a vague sense of uneasiness” (Dolinin 49). Alexander Dolinin observes that in the Russian translation of the same memoir, Nabokov does not translate the passage, indicating a split between his Russian career and his American career.

The basis of this split, rather than signifying any essential statement about Nabokov internally, appears to be a matter of semiotic discontinuity. The cultural continuity implied by the name Sirin would be meaningless before an American audience, so in effect, Sirin’s imagined disappearance is a possible ending to a line of literary filiation. Vladimir Nabokov, the new persona, rises from the “vague sense of uneasiness” left over: no longer beholden, in the minds of a new audience, to the order implied by the overburdened names of his predecessors, but fully vulnerable to being reimagined by those same readers. In my reading, *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight* speaks directly to this tension.

The “Knight’s Move” as Revised Continuity

Composed in part during the same time that Nabokov was completing *The Gift*, *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight* is a transitional work, Nabokov's first foray into English while finishing his most elaborate work in Russian (Comwell 157). Remembering Nabokov’s famous statement that the true heroine of *The Gift* is Russian literature, we read the novel as a farewell in relation to *Sebastian Knight*, which features many of the same themes – the search for truth through art, the documentation of a young writer’s development – but which lacks most of its precursor’s characteristic network of Russian touch points. Having done with Russian literature, Nabokov seems to move on to a different context, more prominently marked by Shakespearean references than Pushkinian ones.²⁹ But *Sebastian Knight* is marked by the same symbolic structures as *The Gift*, establishing the fictional Knight as a fourth iteration of a predecessor sanctified in death, and locating for a fourth time a sense of stability in the framework of an iconic personality.

Nabokov explicitly connects the two works on a variety of levels, seeming to characterize *Sebastian Knight* as an extension of *The Gift*'s artistic statement. Most strikingly, he inserts into his narrator V.'s mouth an almost directly translated excerpt from Khodasevich's review “O Sirine,” which appeared shortly after the final installation of *The Gift* in *Sovremennie Zapiski*: “I should like to point out that *The Prismatic Bezel* can be thoroughly enjoyed once it is understood that *the heroes of the book are what can*

²⁹ See, for example, Samuel Schuman’s Schuman, Samuel. “Which is Sebastian? What’s in a (Shakespearean) and Nabokovian Name?” in *The Goalkeeper: The Nabokov Almanac*.

*be loosely called 'methods of composition' (Sebastian Knight 95 my emphasis). The excerpt reads as a statement of purpose for Knight's art, linking the fictional author to the realization of the textualizing projects in Nabokov's Russian work. Read with *The Gift*, we might see Knight's successes – *in* literature and *as* literature, the subject of his brother/biographer's truth searching – as a sought-after egress from the discomfort and rigidity that characterized the questions about canon and personality in the emigre diaspora.*

It makes sense that this change in tone would accompany Nabokov's decision to strike out on his own before a new audience. In fact, comparing the trajectories of the protagonists from both novels suggests that *Sebastian Knight* attempts to articulate a new model of creative independence and continuity not to be achieved in the naturalized continuity suggested by the genealogy of celebrated authors. For example, like *The Gift*'s Fyodor, both V.'s and Sebastian's creative identities are largely concerned with the loss of their Russian father who, like Fyodor's father, is associated with Pushkin, having been killed in St. Petersburg during a duel (*Sebastian Knight* 136). But while Fyodor immerses himself in the complex symbolic world of his predecessors, Sebastian escapes into the future, taking his mother's name and starting to write in English.³⁰ In this gesture, we recognize an alternative course to the one Fyodor follows, and another potential outcome for a young emigre writer finding his way in a complex cultural environment. After all, the first sentence of *Sebastian Knight* places Sebastian at the center of *The Gift*'s generational dilemma, establishing his birthday as December 31, 1899, as if to offer

³⁰ Sebastian's shift, as well as his aesthetic priorities, have certain parallels to Nabokov's own linguistic crossing (Rampton 57).

Knight, whose position parallels Nabokov's own, as a new icon to transition from the nineteenth century to an independent and transnational new age.

Indeed, *Sebastian Knight* suggests a palpable shift of cultural authority away from the distant past. While Fyodor is still a learner, Sebastian's career is already established, having won him the status of a public personality subject to all the weighty symbolism of the predecessors in *The Gift*. And unlike Fyodor, who mostly finds himself on the receiving end of influence, being the *recipient* of the titular "gift" of inspiration from those that came before him, Knight's biographer V. finds himself, in spite of his insecurities, presiding over the world of literature and directly articulating a literary philosophy by creating his own image of his brother.

In sum, the model of authorial continuity most clearly articulated in *The Gift* is a vertical hierarchy, transmitted from generation to generation on the strength of the enshrined cultural father. In *Sebastian Knight*, this linearity is explicitly disrupted, Knight's status as cultural predecessor never having been established, except through the writing and reading of what can only ironically be called his biography. The priority and singularity associated with the enshrined author is here handed over to the guarantors of cultural value, here imagined not as a son but as an equal. As such, the linear structure presented by the Russian canon takes a new, distorted shape, characterized by what V. calls a "Knightian twist" (158).

Slavist Irina Paperno actually identifies this move as central to Nabokov's poetics, and to Fyodor's subversive concept of the *new* in literature. Fyodor articulates this concept using a chess metaphor: "any genuinely new trend is a *knight's move*, a change

of shadows, a shift [*sdvig*] that displaces the mirror,” suggesting a move that is connected to the past but fundamentally different (*The Gift* E 239/R 269 my emphasis), Paperno attributes the chess metaphor first to theoretician Viktor Shlovsky, and later to Formalist thinkers in general, as used in a theory of literary evolution that “[i]n opposition to the positivistic notion of a linear course of literary development (progress)...envisioned literary evolution as a curve, with a regular pattern of displacement (*sdvig*), or a 'knight's move'” (Paperno 296-297). The hooked pattern of the knight's move – an adaptation of a precursor which is completed by a creative distortion – resembles the self-conscious twisting (recall the elves and gnomes from Khodasevich's review, twisting between the characters of Nabokov's literature) evident in “The Life of Chernyshevsky,” in the names Pyskin and Shirin, and in the systematic weaving of predecessors throughout *The Gift*. And it is offered as the predominating theory of cultural continuity in *Sebastian Knight*.

The move is represented in Sebastian Knight's graphical signature, a drawing of a chess knight (*Sebastian Knight* 17), and later during V.'s search for Sebastian's lover Nina Rechnoy, when one interviewee opens the door holding a chess knight (142). This scene happens immediately after V. assures us, “I have tried to put into this book as little of my own self as possible” (141), only to digress on the minute details of his own encounter. The interviewee gestures V. into the apartment with the piece and throws it down on a table, literally defacing the knight. This curious tangent seriously questions V.'s claim that he has committed himself to “follow the same rhythmical interlacements” of Sebastian's life in his text (136), instead injecting the “magic and logic” of his own quest for his book. In every sense, the knight's move leads the narrative to this place, leaving

V.'s mark on his brother's biography, and imposing a wholly unexpected narrative logic on the past.

Still, in spite of this departure, *Sebastian Knight* is anchored in a filial logic that consistently draws us back to the linear logic of succession. V. equates Sebastian with his father in one memory, “My father is dead, Sebastian is asleep, or at least mouse-quiet in the next room – and I am lying in bed, wide awake, staring into the darkness,” which features a familiar sense alienation from the past (21). And twice we see that *Hamlet* is one of Sebastian's inspirations, evoking the complexities of the text's father-son theme. V. recalls that Sebastian's first childhood novel was the story of a student whose father was killed by an ear-doctor uncle, and later he cites an excerpt from Sebastian's later work that includes “a purple passage in Hamlet” as one of the elements Sebastian remembered incorporating into his work (64, 68). (We are alerted to the importance of these moments because V. remarks both times that his rival biographer either didn't get the reference or didn't pay attention to the text.)

These details signal the same melancholic obsession with the past that we recognize in *The Gift*, as well as the disrupted succession plot in *Hamlet* itself. All things Freudian ought to be treated with caution in relation to Nabokov, but we are reminded here of Ernest Jones's 1922 reading, which seeks to explain Hamlet's inability to act against his uncle as a symptom of his repressed natural desire to depose and replace his own father.³¹ As we saw in *The Gift*, the shape of this plot repeats itself throughout *Sebastian Knight*. We see it in the efforts of rival biographer Goodman, who V. accuses

³¹ For a detailed discussion of these elements, see Ernest Jones's essay, “A Psycho-analytic Study of Hamlet.”

of trying to make his own fortune on the back of Sebastian's legacy by trying to “get [his] book into the market while the flowers on a fresh grave may still be watered with profit” (15). And again, we see it in V.'s repressed egoism, which we sense early on in his complaint that “to readers of Goodman's book I am bound to appear non-existent” (6).³² V., here resembling both Hamlet (as Sebastian's authorial successor) and Claudius (as his brother), inadvertently reenacts the twin usurpations in the text he produces, by asserting his own narrative over that of his subject.

The Real Life of Sebastian Knight is in fact the meticulously detailed narration of V.'s life and his travels during his (unsuccessful) quest to learn about his brother (Foster, Jr. 165). And yet, the whole affair is motivated by filial affection and a desire to concretize a family legacy. Thus, the knight's move is deeply rooted in an ambivalence that challenges the linear continuity described in *The Gift*, yet is not fundamentally opposed to it. That this change accompanies Nabokov's switch to English does not necessarily suggest a rejection of the continuity suggested by the cultural language of the Russian canon and the emigre community. Rather, I believe this is an attempt to reimagine this continuity in such a way that can support the dislocation and multiplicity of cultural languages and identities necessitated by Nabokov's direct engagement with the transnational.

The “Ideal Fiction” of the Self and the Predecessor

This negotiation is by necessity a contested search for context, which plays out as

³² Lucy Maddox groups V. in the same category as the overtly egotistical Kinbote of *Pale Fire* and K. of the short story “Solus Rex” (Maddox 65).

the subject seeking to distinguish itself both in the totalizing logic of the national, and within intersubjective logic of the Oedipal. So far, we have seen these two structures working in the context of a literary canon, which reinforces the national by suggesting a kind of intellectual family tree. As such, the family romance central to Harold Bloom's anxiety of influence allows us to unify these narratives of ambivalence. Bloom imagines the weight of literary history, which we have already identified as deeply invested in the logic of the nation, as the authority of a father-poet. Born in the midst of a culture already in motion, the artist struggles with the fact of coming distinctly *after* his predecessors, but still strives to find the "private sky" that Nabokov enjoys. Incidentally, Bloom's first schema by which the literary successor can differentiate himself is described as "poetic misreading or misprision" or a "swerve," paralleling Nabokov's knight's move (Bloom 14). And in spite of Nabokov's distaste for Freud, our approach to understanding the complexes of authorial independence leads to a fundamental psychoanalytical construction, the searching subject and the Other as object.

Bloom traces this opposition as far back as Descartes, lamenting the requisite "localized space" of the object as the necessarily alienating root of Cartesian dualism (38). Indeed, if the mind knows itself to be distinct only by virtue of its own thought – *I think, therefore I am* – then all else must be absolutely separate as the object of the mind's act of definition, and secondary to the mind's internal coherence. Hence, the crisis of originality and influence: "Cut mind as *intensiveness* off from the outer world as *extensiveness*, and mind will learn – as never before – its own solitude. The solitary brooder moves to deny his sonship and his brotherhood" (39). In other words, poised to

regard its own unity as the measure of reality, the mind of the writer is loathe to recognize its own *secondness* and seeks to withdraw from the ordering principle of the predecessor, what Bloom mockingly calls “the only authority that matters, property or the priority of having named something first” (78). To recognize a thought as “somebody else's idea” casts doubt upon the solitary unity of the mind, spurring the creative subject to seek solace by denying the continuity of inheritance.

However, Bloom's revealing reification of “priority” as “property” sets the stage for an artful exit from this isolation, especially considering his turn toward the act of naming. If we define the unity of the mind by the process of thought – by the process of defining, naming, and categorizing the external *as* external – we must recognize the subject itself as a function of a localized narrative. Psychoanalytic thinker Roy Schafer argues:

We are forever telling stories about ourselves. In telling these self-stories *to others* we may, for most purposes, be said to be performing straightforward narrative actions. In saying that we also tell them *to ourselves*, however, we are enclosing one story within another. This is the story that there is a self to tell something to, a someone else serving as audience who is oneself or one's self. ...On this view [sic], the self is a telling. (Schafer 35)

And, if the terms by which we understand the definition of the self are but narrative constructions, so must we understand the concepts that define the distance between subjects.

Drawing on Freud's characterization from “Analysis Terminal and Interminable” of the healthy ego as an “ideal fiction ” – a statement based not in the true unity of a single mind, but as an average statement of all observable minds – Geoffrey Green

collapses the temporal element that differentiates the self from previous subjects.³³ He writes:

If normality is 'an ideal fiction,' so, too, are the concepts of past and present. My life (as I come to understand it through psychoanalysis) is a specific narrative part of all lives. By distinguishing between the ideal and the practical, meaningful associations are established between inner and outer reality, the self and the world, life and fiction. (Green 20)

If we recognize the unity of the self as a fiction based on all possible subjects conceived together, we see the 'present' moment suggested by the oneness of our own life as itself merely a construction differentiated from the past that surrounds us. By confronting the difference between the ideal (i.e., the constructed) and the practical (the reified), we enable ourselves to defy the continuity of our own construction.

We see this blending of past and present in Nabokov's struggles with time, and especially in the recurring theme of haunting spirits that surfaces in many of his texts.³⁴ In the context of emigration, this is a complex gesture. Emotionally, it suggests the intensity of one's attachment to the past, as demonstrated by Fyodor Godunov-Cherdyntsev's - and, indeed, Nabokov's - consistent recall of his father. But, it also undermines the hierarchical logic of cultural continuity, as demonstrated by Fyodor's horror at the concept of his father's not being dead, to say nothing of the emigre intelligentsia's reaction to his revisitation of Chernyshevsky's earthly life.

At issue here is the relationship between this temporal shift and the linear shape of

³³ Freud also conceives of the "ideal fiction" of the ego in terms of the temporal, using it to orient the question of a "permanent cure" of neurosis. Thus framing the concept of wellness, Freud defines a singular 'present' of ideal unity against a long past of separateness. In the same place he characterizes the goal of talk therapy as a means of "includ[ing] [portions of the patient's id] in the synthesis of his ego," framing the problem of the self even here as a struggle of internality versus externality (Freud Section V).

³⁴ For more on Nabokov's philosophy of time, see Martin Hagglund's "Chronophilia: Nabokov and the Time of Desire" and Brian Boyd's "Nabokov, Time, and Timelessness: A Reply to Martin Hagglund."

historical thinking. When we apply the dualistic construction, 'past/present,' to our perception of temporality, we substitute the authority of the past with the inescapability of time. Says Bloom: “[T]he present is a precipitated past, and nature a continuum of localized spaces,” so the past is done and self-defining, and most importantly, it constantly subsumes the present moment under its own logic (Bloom 38). But, confronting the unidirectional narrative of linear history allows the creative self to assert its freedom from the oppressive unity of its predecessor. Walter Benjamin urges us away from “the whore called 'Once upon a time' in historicism's bordello” as a means of redeeming the present (Benjamin 262). In his model of history, the narrative construction recedes, in spite of its perceived *firstness*, behind the activity of the writing writer. By imagining “a present which is not a transition, but [a present] in which time stands still and has come to a stop,” he figures the present as a place from which the past is written. Hence, “historical materialism supplies an unique experience *with* the past,” not *of* the past. The unity of the past is disrupted, and the potent construction of *priority* is revealed as fiction.

This view of history necessitates a rethinking of the status of the predecessor. To wit, if the past is formed by the doubled motion of looking back, so too is the *self* of the predecessor. More than a unidimensional tick on an orderly and irreversible timeline, the great man starts a second existence, immersed in the living vocabulary of remembering. Bloom writes: “The strong poet fails to beget himself – he must wait for his Son, who will define him even as he has defined his own Poetic Father. To beget here means to usurp, and is the dialectical labor of the [Covering] Cherub” (Bloom 37). Bloom's

equation of *begetter* as *usurper* bends the vector of history and inheritance onto itself. The father's intractability is written by the son's narration, while the very act of that narration calls it into question. By the same merit, the work of the Cherub – symbolic of constructed exteriority (and thereby, the separate unity of interiority) (38) – is a dialogue, that both asserts and refutes the proper place of self versus other, past versus present, and predecessor versus successor. All such distinctions deconstructed, the successor frees himself of the demands of succession, if only in his awareness of its construction.

Given this, unlike the making of a *Pyshkin* or a *Shirin*, the making of a *Knight* is not a simple distortion. Rather, the “Knightian twist,” tested in *The Gift* and given full body in *Sebastian Knight* folds the historical timeline into a Mobius strip, allowing V. to write and alter the life-text of his predecessor while his own creative identity is shaped by the “rhythmical interlacements” of that predecessor's legacy (*Sebastian Knight* 137).

Whatever sense of triumph we may feel for V.'s sake in the end of the novel comes from his understanding of this phenomenon:

[T]he soul is but a manner of being – not a constant state – [and] any soul may be yours, if you find and follow its undulations...Thus – I am Sebastian Knight. I feel as if I were impersonating him on a lighted stage, with the people he knew coming and going...They move around Sebastian – round me who am acting Sebastian...And then the masquerade draws to a close. The bald little prompter shuts his book, as the light fades gently. The end, the end...but the hero remains, for, try as I may, I cannot get out of my part: Sebastian's mask clings to my face, the likeness will not be washed off. I am Sebastian, or Sebastian is I, or perhaps we both are someone whom neither of us knows. (204-5)

The essence of identity here is a process rather than a static and knowable thing. And as a performance with multiple players, this process dissolves the singularity of the personality into a dialogical text, which we attempt to regulate, but which escapes our

control and marks us. The potential for anxiety here is evident, but these final lines read more as an elevating redefinition of the self than as a complete self-effacement. Take for example V.'s awkward phrase, "round me who am Sebastian." This mangled statement leaves V. somewhere between "I am" and "who is," countering the totality of self-definition with an unresolvable question, and signaling a revision of the very grammar of self-narration. Like the twisting inversion of the linear timeline, it invites a proliferation of meaning.³⁵ That is the main concern of the anxious successor in trying to assert himself against all that came before him, and the concern of the displaced subject for whom the language of the national cannot account for the instability of transnational experience.

Emigration and the Individual Talent

The unperfected nature of these structures generates a perpetual multiplication of meaning. Each iteration of the question, demanding an alteration of its premise, evokes a slightly different answer. In other words, the new, even when derived from the old, asserts its own independence by reframing the context from which we read the past. The words of T.S. Eliot come to mind:

What happens when a new work of art is created is something that happens simultaneously to all the works of art which preceded it. The existing monuments form an ideal order among themselves, which is modified by the introduction of the new (the really new) work of art among them. The existing order is complete before the new work arrives; for order to persist after the supervention of novelty, the *whole* existing order must be, if ever so slightly, altered; and so the relations, proportions, values of each work of art toward the whole are readjusted; and this is

³⁵ For more on the circularity of these lines and similar moments throughout Nabokov's oeuvre, see Carol T. Williams's essay "Nabokov's Dialectical Structure."

conformity between the old and the new. (Eliot)

This circularity speaks especially to the power of the biographer, to the reified authority of the life-text, and to the strength of the curving knight's move to react to and give life to the inverted structure behind the literary icon. This curve appears as the central image in Nabokov's sense of time:

The spiral is a spiritualized circle. In the spiral form, the circle, uncoiled, unwound, has ceased to be vicious; it has been set free. I thought this up when I was a schoolboy, and I also discovered that Hegel's triadic series (so popular in old Russia) expressed merely the essential spirality of all things in relation to time. Twirl follows twirl, and every synthesis is the thesis of the next series. If we consider the simplest spiral, three series may be distinguished in it, corresponding to those of the triad: We can call "thetic" the small curve or arc that initiates the convolution centrally; "antithetic" the larger arc that faces the first in the process of continuing it; and "synthetic" the still ampler arc that continues the second while following the first along the outer side. And so on. (*Speak, Memory* 275).

In Nabokov's formulation, the circle is vicious because of its rigidity. The point that begins the circle is inseparable from the point that ends it; in fact, the two overlap, creating a closed circuit where nothing new is possible.³⁶ Freedom from the circle comes from the ability to open the relationship between its two ends, in order that the ending point, being constantly moved forward with time, can be tracked in relationship to the previous cycle. This is the freedom of the artist – to follow the first arc and still succeed

³⁶ The circular design is visible, for instance, even in Fyodor's hyphenated surname Godunov-Cherdyntsev, which inscribes the spiral by uniting the opposite ends of Nabokov's history of Russian literature with the reified names of the enshrined writers Chernyshevsky and Pushkin. Sergei Davydov links the phonetic root of *Chernyshevsky* to *Cherdyntsev* through their shared element *chernila* (ink) ("Aesthetic Evolution" 366), while Monika Greenleaf ties Fyodor to Pushkin by way of the play *Boris Godunov*, which she also traces to a diary entry in which Nabokov recalls a final memory of his father, solidifying this relation in Nabokov's writing of his own father (Greenleaf 147).

We are, perhaps, able to escape the rigidity of this circle by recognizing the unlikelihood of anyone claiming this particular artistic parentage. Combining these authors suggests not an endorsement of either personality, but rather a commentary on the semiotic status of both names, and their ossifying effect on the terms of creativity in Russian literature.

in moving outward.

Thus, Fyodor Godunov-Cherdyntsev's decision to write his novel “in the shape of a ring” to capture “the circular nature of everything in existence” with “a continuously curving, and thus infinite [бесконечная] sentence” (*The Gift* E 204/R 230). This gesture is perhaps no clearer than in the sonnet that, having been split down the middle, both begins and ends Fyodor's biography. I will reassemble the poem here, translated from the original. Notice that as published in Fyodor's text, the volta comes before the octave:

What will he say of you, your distant descendant -
Praising the past or simply abusing it?
That your life was terrible? That a different
One might have been happier? That you could never expect anything
different?

That your high deed wasn't done for nothing, your dry work
By chance turning toward goodness
And crowning the white brow of the shackled prisoner
With a single closed and airy band. (E300/ R336)

Alas! That the enlightened [просвещенный] descendent would not say
That everything is blown by the same wind, in the enlivened robes,
Truth [Истина] bends her fingers like a cup

With a womanly smile and child-like care
As if examining something in her hand
Which is concealed from us by her shoulder. (E212/R 239)³⁷

Upon our first reading of the deconstructed sonnet, we are taunted with Truth's withheld secret, perhaps recalling Chernyshevsky's appeal to Truth at the beginning of *What is to Be Done?* We assume the Truth to be essential, as Chernyshevsky claims about his narrative, uncontaminated by the pretense of style and aesthetics. But when we reach the

³⁷ There are key differences between between the original and Nabokov's approved translation. The “enlightened descendent” becomes a prying historian. Perhaps to compensate for this loss of sense, the “airy band” that crowns Chernyshevsky in the end becomes “a circle of ethereal *light*.”

remainder of the sonnet we are confronted only with the descendant's narrative.

Expecting answers, we find more questions. And if we return again to the beginning of the text in order to “complete” the poem, the response to these questions is again Truth's answerless mystery, now augmented by the coronation narrative produced by the descendant's inquiry.

We should recognize here V.'s cycle of “who is?” and “I am,” which draws the self and the other together in its linguistic loop. This is, perhaps, the “deeper truth” that Zina, Fyodor's lover and reader, values above historical fact, a truth produced not by the authority of the historical text, but by Fyodor's dissection and reconstruction of it (E 205/R 230). When we recognize this cycle, we see it as an “airy band” or a circle of “ethereal light” (as it is expressed in the translation) – always in motion, but never slowing into the frozen face of liturgy and orthodoxy. We should recognize this ethereal light from Nabokov's translation of Pushkin's “Не дорого ценю я громкие права...,” in which he depicts the author's ultimate state of independence as the feeling of one's soul melting into “the glow of man's inspired design” (“Russian Writers” 12).

Connected with this image is what Barthes refers to as the “counter-theological” act of reading (Barthes 5). The literally enlightened state of creativity, in both cases, comes not from striving for singularity, but by immersing oneself into one's complex narrative environment, not passively, but brazenly, and according to “one's own whims,” in Pushkin's phrasing. Thus, Fyodor's adaptation of Pushkin's final stanza of *Eugene Onegin* in the closing lines of Chapter 5. From Pushkin's original – “Blessed is he who has ended the celebration of life early,...who didn't read life's novel to the end, and

suddenly realized that he could leave it, like I have left my Onegin.” - he derives:

Good-by, my book! Like mortal eyes, imagined ones must close some day. Onegin from his knees will rise – but his creator strolls away. And yet the ear cannot right now part with the music and allow the tale to fade...the chords of fate itself continue to vibrate; and no obstruction for the sage exists where I have put The End: the shadows of my world extend beyond the skyline of the page, blue as tomorrow's morning haze – nor does this terminate the phrase.” (E 366/R 412).³⁸

The legacy of the text continues on out of the author's hands and is completed in the mind of the reader: Fyodor, as a reader of Pushkin, shows Onegin rising from his knees after the end of Pushkin's text. With this gesture, Fyodor installs his text as a continuation of Pushkin's text, and thereby as a continuation of Pushkin's legacy. Knowing this, we perhaps read Pushkin's own exit in *Eugene Onegin*, and his implied expectation that Onegin will go on without him, as particularly prescient. So, Fyodor follows the predecessor's arc but adds to it the context of his own text, as well as the perspective of his moment in history. In doing so, he creates novel meaning through repetition, collapsing the rigid distinction between predecessor and successor.

Nearing the end of *The Gift*, we see for a third time the ethereal light of creative independence, and the full realization of the arc that leads Fyodor back to his predecessors. On a walk, Fyodor achieves a height of aesthetic purity unparalleled by the false starts that characterize his early writing. He writes, “My personal I...had somehow disintegrated and dissolved; after being made transparent by the strength of the light, it was now assimilated to the shimmering of the summer forest...,” his capacity for artistic perception achieving an ineffable singularity that exceeds even his body (E 332/R 374).

³⁸ Sergei Davydov also makes this observation in “Weighing *The Gift* on Pushkin's Scales” (425).

We recognize here a complete reproduction of the natural scene Nabokov inserts into Pushkin's depiction of the independent artist who, “admiring the divine beauties of Nature” feels his “soul melt in the glow of man's inspired design.” Even in the purity of nature, one is immersed in human narrative, the experience filtered through the context of the known past. As such, Fyodor's transcendence is a troubled singularity, because even this achieved independence is a borrowed one:

[A]s often happened on these woodland days...Fyodor imagined his father's isolation in other forests...[H]e experienced something akin to...the spirit of his father's peregrinations – and here it was most difficult of all to believe that despite the freedom, despite the greenery and the happy, sun-shot dark shade, his father was nonetheless dead (E 335/R 376).

Meeting his father's spirit beyond any naturalized sphere of life – on the terms of pure imagination – Fyodor is able to commune with his predecessor without fearing the rigidity of his enshrined personality. This relationship parallels that of the writer and the active reader, so in Fyodor's emotional connection with his father, we see a corollary for the inspiration that he takes from Pushkin. After all, as Fyodor writes later, “My father...not only taught me a great deal but also *trained my very thoughts*, as a voice or hand is trained, according to the rules of his school...” (E 127/R 145 my emphasis). The predecessor shapes the successor's thoughts, but does not define them.

We even come to understand the productive terms of Fyodor's relationship to Chernyshevsky in these terms. From his father's training, Fyodor learns “that one could take a certain delight in the accuracy of a shot” (E 127/R 145), a lesson that inspires his *Life of Chernyshevsky*, which he characterizes as “firing practice” (E 196/R 222). In this small detail, we detect one last characteristic of the arcing spiral of cultural history: the

predecessor teaches the successor to depose the looming personalities of the past by transmitting a spirit of freedom through creativity. The necessity of this lesson is clear in Nabokov's description of the vicious circle of Russian history:

The radical critics fought despotism, but they evolved a despotism of their own...There was a disastrous flaw in their fervor. Sincerely and boldly they advocated freedom and equality but they contradicted their own creed by wishing to subjugate the arts to current politics. If in the opinion of the Tsars authors were to be the servants of the state, in the opinion of the radical critics writers were to be the servants of the masses. The two lines of thought were bound to meet and join forces when at last, in our times, a new kind of regime, the synthesis of a Hegelian triad, combined the idea of the masses with the idea of the state. ("Russian Writers" 5).

To attempt to realize an ideal of freedom necessarily creates a new orthodoxy, which by real artistic standards is oppressive. Hence, Nabokov's hesitance to name any author as his inspiration. The name – when supposed to refer to a reified and static body – is a pale facsimile that arrests thought in a limited system allowing for reference but not reinterpretation. As in history, the ideal that is too rigidly defined is necessarily destabilized by the next generation. But the infinity of the triadic spiral provides both a connection to the past and a freeing flexibility. The final point of the spiral is always moving forward, past familiar texts and narratives, but leaves the goal of the perfected idea always unactualized, in the space of the text's potentiality.

This perspective represents a radical shift from the priorities of the emigre diaspora. Whereas the linear view of filiation locates the coherence of the individual subject in the nationalized projection of the past, Nabokov's spiralized network does the opposite, hanging the coherence of the past on the actions of the present individual. In our articulation of filiation, this reimagination opens the transnational subject to the

ambiguities of the global and the shifting, simultaneous, and interconnected associations it enables. This allows both a connection to national narratives of continuity and identification and the latitude to utilize and respond to multiple such narratives at once. In the next chapter, I will consider how Nabokov took advantage of this flexibility in his American career.

Chapter 2:

Embracing Foreignness and Meeting the National Gaze in *Lolita* and *Pnin*

Having adapted Nabokov's spiralized timeline to our understanding of the literary canon, it seems a reasonable leap to apply this structure to the question of nationality in his American novels. The national canon echoes the language of inheritance in its hierarchical model of cultural transmission. And the same logic of filial hierarchy often attends the language of national affiliation, in talk of motherland and fatherland, nostalgic narratives about forefathers and ancestors, and the questioning of outsiders as admissible marriage options. These structures depend on a clear articulation of what exists outside of the unifying national category, whether by monopolizing the terms of inclusion and valuation in the national schema, or by stereotypically naming the Other. Nabokov engages these processes directly in his American works; and with his very presence in the American literary scene, he challenges both national canon and identity, drawing the foreign and the domestic together in the same figure.

The critical discussion on Nabokov and national identity struggles to account for this destabilizing simultaneity, as in the following conversation between Alexander Dolinin and Brian Boyd. In his essay "Nabokov as a Russian Writer," Dolinin describes what appears to be Nabokov's deliberate separation between his Russian legacy and his American persona, which Dolinin characterizes as "a born cosmopolitan genius who has never been attached to anything and anybody but his autonomous imagination and personal memory" (Dolinin 53). Tracing this distinction to Nabokov's own criticisms of his early work in the prefaces to his translations, Dolinin articulates the Nabokovian

personas as two separate people: the American Nabokov as “the older man” or a “haughty mandarin,” and the Russian Sirin as “a cocky rookie fighting his way up to the top,” and an apprentice creating “juvenilia” (50-51, 62). Nabokov’s translations of his Russian novels omit a number of Russian names and references, suggesting a shifting identification. And, Dolinin argues, we see this shift explicitly in Nabokov’s English memoir when he describes his Russian persona Sirin as a separate, long disappeared writer, but removes the reference entirely in his Russian translation, seeming to confirm that the distinction is located in nationality. Boyd characterizes Dolinin’s interpretation as a distortion and an insult, pointing out Nabokov’s ongoing commitment to the Russian literary tradition and to the ideals of Russian liberalism in opposition to Sovietism. He instead offers a model of creative evolution based in “cultural meliorism,” arguing that Nabokov seems critical of his early work only because his impulses and standards have naturally developed according to new, higher needs. In other words, there is no need to view Sirin and Nabokov in opposition (*Stalking Nabokov* 188).

To my thinking, Dolinin’s and Boyd’s perspectives need not be mutually exclusive, and seem to be oppositional only because of the linear bias of the debate’s national framing. In point of fact, Boyd’s concept of cultural meliorism parallels the linearity of Dolinin’s national projection, suggesting a movement from a primitive originary position to a more sophisticated state of individualism (191). Boyd connects this evolution to the political views of Nabokov’s father who, like a number of nineteenth century thinkers, saw the West as a model for the cultural future of a less advanced Russia (192). So naturally, mapping this structure onto Nabokov’s transition from the

provincial community of Russian emigres to the transnational anglophone sphere makes his change in perspective seem like a repudiation of the Russian past; and as a result, the distinction between Sirin and Nabokov could be read as the purification of an American category. But if we assume that Nabokov's identity management is intended, like his management of the Russian canon, as a disruption of this linearity, we open up avenues to read Nabokov's self-representation as a commentary on the conventions of national identification.

The measure of Russianness in this discussion seems to be the degree to which Nabokov engages his current work with the network of Russian cultural touchstones that we recognize in his early work, a category that naturally includes his own Russian novels. Partly, these decisions must have been a matter of translation, done for the sake of western readers who lack the knowledge of Russian literature to contextualize Nabokov's early accomplishments. Hence, his decision in *Strong Opinions* not to focus on "the nice points of dislocation and strategy" from his earlier Russian writing, which would likely make less sense to an audience without specialized knowledge of the emigre scene (*Strong Opinions* xvii).

More than that, in this context the meaning of Nabokov's Russian identification would be inflected by new associations and expectations about Russian culture and its relationship to the west. Depictions made popular at the start of the twentieth century imagined stereotypical Russians characterized by an exotic "Asianness" that was seen as both savage and sentimental, and fundamentally separate from western ideas of cultural progress (Bulgakowa 214). The international recognition of Tolstoy and Dostoyevsky

also built expectations about Russian literature around the nineteenth century novels, anchoring Russian writing to a distant world of snowy steppes, troikas, and melancholic Slavs. The nativism of the Cold War era would have amplified any such differences, likely rooting a Russian writer in the past of Old Europe rather than in the contemporary American scene. Of course, none of these cliches were representative of Nabokov's experience of Russian culture: he was deeply rooted in the westernizing tradition of Russian liberalism and educated in western literature and languages since childhood; his emigration allowed for a mobile sense of Russianness associated with memory and literature rather than a strict attachment to the traditional Russian setting; and his treatment of the Russian canon, as I argue in the previous chapter, seeks to place the past in conversation with the present. Given all this, we might view Nabokov's treatment of his Sirin persona and his Russian works not as a rejection, but as a necessary reorientation. Switching to the English literary market necessitated the inclusion of a new network of narratives, and an engagement with new nationalized perspectives that recast the significance of his Russian legacy and identity. So, at the moment of his American arrival, he underwent a curious semantic spiral: Nabokov was the same person as Sirin, but when understood in context "Nabokov" must also be someone different.

Edward Said's thoughts on exilic subjectivity provide some precedence for applying Nabokov's spiraling dynamic here. In "Reflections on Exile," Said attributes to exiles a "scrupulous...subjectivity" in which the displaced person's feelings of alienation translate to an awareness of the systems of power and economy inherent to the cultures that surround them ("Reflections" 184 Said's emphasis). For Said, this subjectivity is

characterized by a “plurality of vision,” and an “awareness of simultaneous dimensions” from the exile’s old and new environment occurring together “contrapuntally,” like countermelodies interwoven in a piece of music (186). In the same way, I argue, Nabokov's cosmopolitanism is not exclusive of his Russian identity, but rather benefits from an understanding of how the value of this Russianness was perceived by a western audience. By leveraging this identity as part of his own American narrative, Nabokov enacts Said’s double vision and presents his Russian identification both as an enduring aesthetic attachment and as an object of a larger transnational narrative. We may recognize here something similar to the triadic progression of Nabokov’s spiral: Nabokov’s sense of himself as a Russian and a Russian writer, met with the antithetical demands of an American audience, engenders a critical transnational awareness attuned to the symbolic payload of being a Russian in America. As such, Sirin goes missing in Nabokov’s memoir not because his legacy has been rejected, but because Nabokov recognized the loss of cultural capital heralded by his moving to a new audience. Partly this is a jibe at American centrism, but it’s also an accurate representation of the way he was likely to be received in a new market - as an obscure foreigner.

This is, I think, a reasonable continuation of Khodasevich's observation that Nabokov's task as a writer is to reveal “how literary techniques live and work” (*O Sirine* 5). His attentions turned from the inward-looking concerns of emigre literature to the task of finding a place in American immigration, it makes sense that the narratives of foreignness Nabokov experienced himself would become key elements of his new fiction. In his Russian works, Nabokov depicted and anatomized his relationship to the cultural

predecessors that unified the emigre community, and in doing so crafted his own place among them. In his American works, he did the same with the images of otherness that organized American culture during a time fraught with anxieties about foreigners and deviation.

In this chapter, I examine Nabokov's interaction with these narratives both in his literature and in the development of his authorial persona. I argue first that Nabokov's protagonists in *Pnin* and *Lolita* are attuned to the era's ambivalent attitudes to foreigners, and more to the point, that Nabokov deliberately inhabited the archetypal yet contradictory images of foreignness that he used in his fiction. These works appeal to and hijack Cold War containment anxieties, exposing the mechanisms of American modes of difference, and establishing Nabokov in the American imagination as the notorious firebrand he is known as today. Nabokov responds to these common images in much the same way that we have already observed him responding to literary predecessors: as concentrated nodes of cultural significance that can be engaged but not removed. By engaging these images, he invites his readers to consider his authorial identity in relationship to these cultural markers, and ultimately to ask how his identity may affect their experience of his text.

The reader that I assume for this analysis is an American one, as I believe Nabokov himself likely did during the composition of *Pnin* and *Lolita*, given his statements that it was “in America that [he] found [his] best readers” and that he felt “intellectually at home in America” (*Strong Opinions* 10). The publication history of *Lolita*, of course, insists on the status of international readers, but I am of the mind that

the national structures most central to these works - the New World/Old World dichotomy that grounds the American immigration mythos, and the prominence of the United States in the Cold War - were widely enough recognized that these dynamics would resonate to some degree with the novel's early French and English readers. Even disallowing that, we can at least project a contemporary reader who approaches *Lolita* as a landmark text; and given the common critical narrative that the novel represents the summation of Nabokov's journey into Americanness, we might assume a certain attentiveness to these national themes.³⁹

To this discussion, I introduce an analysis of the erotic themes in *Lolita*, seeking parallels between the taboo sexuality represented in the novel and the simultaneous dread and desire felt in relation to the Other. I argue, by inducing this response in his reader, Nabokov enacts a similar combination of allure and aversion directed at foreigners in the American mythology, and toward the author himself as a foreign presence in American letters. By inviting this dynamic in the creation of his own public image, Nabokov established his American persona among national narratives of difference, which became the stuff of his American fiction. I finish this chapter with a discussion of the rivalry between Humbert Humbert and Clare Quilty as a parallel to this process. In my reading, this relationship dramatizes the strength of these complex national narratives, installing Quilty as a predecessor whose influence enacts the momentum of a pop cultural inheritance to which Humbert Humbert has no access. Allowing the narrator to fall

³⁹ See for example John Haegert's analysis "Artist in Exile: The Americanization of Humbert Humbert," which describes elements of Nabokov's early English stylistics as steps in a process of Americanization that is completed in *Lolita*, and Robert Roper's recent book *Nabokov in America*, whose subtitle "On the Road to *Lolita*" figures the novel as the destination of an American road trip.

victim to his rival's machinations, Nabokov represents in his character an authorial position that is potent in its otherness, yet ultimately subsumed by the culture that surrounds it.

These contradictory impulses are consistently present in Nabokov's immigrant characters, and in his practice of personal myth-making. To return again to his comments on his public persona, Nabokov writes:

I think like a genius, I write like a distinguished author, and I speak like a child. Throughout my academic ascent in America, from lean lecturer to Full Professor, I have never delivered to my audience one scrap of information not prepared in typescript beforehand and not held under my eyes on the bright-lit lectern. [...] [N]obody should ask me to submit to an interview if by 'interview' a chat between two normal human beings is implied. It has been tried at least twice in the old days, and once a recording machine was present, and when the tape was rerun and I had finished laughing, I knew that never in my life would I repeat that sort of performance. (*Strong Opinions* xv)

Here, Nabokov inhabits two extremes in his representation of foreignness: the haughty, transplanted European genius, and the hopeless immigrant, child-like and inarticulate. Of course, as is always the case with Nabokov, neither representation is entirely true, and in the end, the whole thing is revealed as a "performance." It's clear that Nabokov's claims that he struggled with English were greatly exaggerated. (Nabokov actually learned English before he learned Russian, and read English classics as a child.) But it was his ability to represent *the foreign* - both transitively and intransitively - that allowed him to fruitfully navigate the network of narratives that converged on him in the United States, and that immortalized him in American culture.

“Russian” Stuff: Nabokov’s Complex Language of National Difference

That Nabokov’s national identity was a loaded one at the start of his American residency goes without saying. American attitudes about Russia during that period changed drastically according to the political winds. Initially official rhetoric characterized the Bolshevik revolution as a democratic triumph against tyranny, until ideological competition sparked the deep-seated political rivalry that led to the Red Scare. Shifting alliances and economic conditions caused vacillating attitudes leading up to and during World War II, until the German invasion of Russia in 1941 began a pro-Soviet period in America that lasted to the end of the war. The loss of Hitler as a common enemy allowed divisive rhetoric to bubble again to the surface.⁴⁰ Under these shifting conditions, the political capital that Nabokov represented as a Russian speaking about Russia was considerable. Brian Boyd’s celebrated biography speaks to this fact in Nabokov’s teaching career:

He had been hired at Wellesley not simply because of the brilliance of his lectures, but also because his outspoken comparisons of the mediocrity and barbarity of Nazi and Soviet rule had been just what people wanted to hear at the time that the Hitler-Stalin pact was leading to the subjugation of Europe. (*American Years* 43)

Likewise, for public speaking engagements, Nabokov was frequently called upon to speak to the experience of Russian intellectuals (his go-to lecture in the forties and fifties was “Russian Writers, Censors, and Readers” [*American Years* 359]). On one occasion

⁴⁰ For details on this period, see Lynn Boyd Hinds’s and Theodore Otto Wind, Jr.’s book *The Cold War as Rhetoric: The Beginnings, 1945-1950* (31-60).

when he couldn't support the politics implied by a speaking invitation, he suggested alternative speakers by the sole virtue of their being Russian.⁴¹ And one cultural group's chairwoman remarked after one of Nabokov's readings that "What [she] loved best was the broken English," delighting in Nabokov's persona as much as in the content of his speech (*American Years* 51).

To a degree, Nabokov must have found this atmosphere frustrating, though academic dilettantes and book-club-goers appear with some good humor in his American fiction. On multiple occasions, Nabokov spoke out against this nationalistic "pigeonholing" ("Books: The Russian Box Trick"), requesting that his publisher avoid printing "'Russian' stuff" on the cover of *Speak, Memory* to preserve the dignity of his work, and balking at well-meaning comparisons with other Russian authors like Pasternak, which might seem to align him with the Soviet state (*Selected Letters* 107). Like his friend Edmund Wilson, he understood that most Americans' knowledge of Russia was based on little more than "attendance at the Russian ballet, the reading in translation of a few nineteenth-century novels, and a vague notion of Marxism and

⁴¹ In a 1946 letter declining to speak before The American Society for the Study of Russian Culture, Nabokov writes: "I do not think that unless we face boldly all the facts, this country can evolve a sincere and constructive international policy," and further, "while I feel certain that there is nothing in my lecture that could have come in conflict with your purposes, I do not like the idea of having to speak under any restrictions whatever." He ends the letter: "But considering the great number of Russian scientists and writers now living in New York, I feel sure that you will have no difficulty in finding the right sort of man."

From his response, we can infer that Nabokov's "facing boldly all the facts" would include airing his views on Soviet anti-intellectualism and his belief that Soviet culture was fundamentally opposed to what he understood to be Russian culture. In a similar refusal to one Mrs. Theodore Sherwood Hope of the New York Browning Society in 1944, he writes: "When I lecture on Russian literature I do so from a writer's point of view, but upon reaching modern times cannot avoid stressing the fact that Communism and its totalitarian rule have prevented the development of authentic literature in Russia during these last twenty five years." His glib final remark, "My fee is considerably higher than the one you suggest," further implies his offense. Both requests came during a period of likely pro-Soviet sentiment in America (Nabokov *Selected Letters* 48, 72).

Lenin” (Wilson 4), and committed himself to trying to raise the cultural discourse beyond common images.⁴²

Still, he was a shrewd navigator of conventional ideas. During pro-Soviet periods in America, Nabokov downplayed his political opinions at the university (*American Years* 44), and sought to integrate elements of positive Russianness in his teacherly persona. One student recalls Nabokov playing the part of the nostalgic expat during a reading exercise at Wellesley College: “After the sentence has fallen, mutilated, he sighs rapturously, ‘So good to hear Russian spoken again! I am practically back in Moscow’” (66). Reportedly, Nabokov had never actually been to Moscow and disliked the accent common to the city, so this detail seems calculated to draw his students in with a kind of invented old world nostalgia. Nabokov also constructed ruses for his colleagues. In one instance, he convinced a pro-Soviet scholar that the true leader of the USSR was in fact not Stalin but the man posing as his interpreter, selling this story, presumably, on the strength of his own Russian identity (46). Similarly, in the case of his novel *Pnin*, Nabokov insisted on projecting Russianness to his audience even before they opened the book. In a letter to his publisher, he asked that the original portrait on the book’s cover be revised in accordance with a detailed taxonomy of Slavic features, and accompanied his request with a series of photographs to demonstrate “the Russian potato nose” and the properly “simian” space between the nose and mouth (*Selected Letters* 190).

All this indicates a command over the symbolic value of Russian difference. In

⁴² Boyd argues that Nabokov’s translation of *Eugene Onegin* was in part intended to “make Pushkin part of the heritage of the world and not just Russian literature” (*Stalking* 198). Nabokov himself called the work a “crib” for students trying to read the original, a description that implies both a desire for accessibility and an expectation of commitment. Elsewhere, Boyd also describes Nabokov’s *Nikolai Gogol* as a “popularizing work” (*American Years* 54).

the presentation of Nabokov's literature, this meant a mandate for absolute accuracy but not essentialism. *Pnin* must have the racial characteristics of a Russian, but let there be no onion domes or samovars on a book when the story inside does not concern them. Nabokov's personal performances, on the other hand, represent a different path to accuracy. Whether as a romantically nostalgic expat or a crafty insider, he sought to draw people into his personal narrative by capitalizing on their desires and assumptions about Russian people, all very real perceptions. From the account of Nabokov's perceptive student, who notes the incongruousness of her own reading performance with Nabokov's ecstatic play-acting, we might surmise that the best participants in these games understood that they were mystifications similar to those done in the author's fiction. The "proper" outcome here, in Nabokovian terms, is that the participant will eventually come to see the author's device and appreciate the way he constructed the game, and in doing so, come to appreciate some truth about their own process of thinking.

Nabokov's American works invite the same reassessment of American attitudes. And, I argue, they are consciously poised to address themselves to a nation faced with the curious task of simultaneously embracing and neutralizing national difference. Nabokov's immigrant protagonists capitalize on the extremes of American perceptions of foreigners. The novels *Pnin* and *Lolita* in particular inspire a compelling comparison, drawing on many of the same conventions to produce immigrants that appeal alternately to national predilections and anxieties. Both novels feature as their protagonist a foreign intellectual who is prone to punning and mispronunciation, who suffers from violent

bouts of nostalgia, and who finds the popular culture of young Americans incomprehensible and distasteful. But while *Pnin's* eponymous professor and *Lolita's* Humbert Humbert hit many of the same notes, their net effect within each novel is decidedly different.⁴³

These details shape the good-natured Professor Timofey Pnin to fit the familiar profile of the turn-of-the-century greenhorn (though it is said early on that Pnin had come to America some ten years ago [*Pnin* 14]). The character's haplessness evokes an all too familiar fish-out-of-water story. He is persistently betrayed by his accent and linguistic foul-ups, and he is barely acculturated to an atmosphere that leaves him as though at “war with insensate objects that [fall] apart, or [attack] him, or [refuse] to function, or viciously [get] themselves lost as soon as they [enter] the sphere of his existence” (13). The events of Pnin's story are thrust upon him by circumstance; they are personally tragic, but of little concern to the rest of the world. He mixes up a train schedule, misplaces a prepared speech, is callously deceived by his ex-wife, and is unceremoniously fired because of the unpopularity of his Russian classes. Speaking to Pnin's unfitnes, one colleague says, “The world wants a machine, not a Timofey” (161). Thus characterized, Pnin represents a familiar – and above all, impotent – form of difference. This much is emphasized by the fact that his attributes and misadventures are casually labelled in the novel as “Pninian,” signifying the commonality of his

⁴³ For another comparison of Pnin and Humbert Humbert, see Yannicke Chupin's “L'écritain déplacé dans *Lolita* et *Pnin* de Vladimir Nabokov.”

peculiarities in the reader's imagination (15).

Timofey, like the greenhorn type, is a known quantity, but he is unwanted – not because he poses any distinct threat, but because he simply doesn't fit. Even while his “old-fashioned charm” and “unforgettable digressions” about his pre-American existence give him an exotic aspect (11), his presence is neutralized according to the needs of an “American” world. He is useful or *wanted* insofar as he helps to reaffirm expectations about who he is as a Russian and as a foreigner. Thus, Pnin's story is marked by the signposts of the public immigrant experience of the era: he arrives at Ellis Island (11) to what he calls the “New World” (118).⁴⁴ Even in his difference, Professor Pnin conforms to a well-ordered sense of what a foreigner is, or ought to be.

On the other hand, the monstrous Humbert Humbert is alien and unfathomable. Whereas Pnin is distinctly Russian, to the point of caricature, Humbert Humbert seems to come from no country in particular, having been written as if to represent foreignness itself. Humbert writes that his father was a “salad of racial genes” (*L* 9), identifying himself with the entire continent of Europe. He is Swiss, but has Celtic looks; he grew up in France but briefly married a Russian emigre; and he once even exiled himself on an Antarctic expedition. All these details leave readers without any definite nationality in which to place his peculiarities. This is to say nothing of the fact that, narrating his memoir under a pseudonym, Humbert is literally nameless, and thereby made untraceable to any genealogy.

In this spirit, critic John Haegert aligns Humbert's sexual perversions with his

⁴⁴ We can observe similar terminology applied to Nabokov's work in general. For example, writing in 1966, critic Henry Grosshans evokes Nabokov's “Old Russia” in contrast with the new Soviet order in “Vladimir Nabokov and the Dream of Old Russia.”

fundamental “emigre character,” citing his unwillingness to “participate in the plenitude of American life on its own terms, without some mediating vision of Europe to direct and control it” (Haegert 140). He has in mind here Humbert's act of sacrificing Lolita to the memory of his first love Annabel, and his parallel tendency to project the Riviera landscape of his childhood onto his American surroundings. It's worth observing that Haegert uses the term emigre, rather than immigrant, highlighting Humbert's position as an interloper, rather than an integrated presence like Professor Pnin. This perspective leads Haegert to locate in the novel a core element of American mythology, the “legendary conflict between New World possibilities and Old World sensibilities” (139). And although he is quick to caution that Nabokov would find a purely allegorical reading “idiotic,” it is clear how much the development of Humbert Humbert as a villainous foreigner benefits from the suggestion of that dynamic.

By appealing to both of these common types, Nabokov integrates his fiction into American narratives of difference without implicating himself in the banalities that those narratives imply. This is consistent with Nabokov's public persona which, alternately cruel and kindly, represents similar elements of positive and negative foreignness. It is also consistent with a form of cosmopolitanism that is perhaps uniquely appropriate to dealing with Cold War culture. The perception at the time was that the United States and the Soviet Union were “antipodal archetypes.” This point of view by necessity produced a rhetoric of simple images and associations (Hinds 3, 15). This rhetoric was generalized to all aspects of life, demanding purity in realms ideological, political, and sexual. We observe this thinking in *Lolita*, in the casual racism practiced by hotel owners

encountered across the country, and in Charlotte Haze's insidiously euphemistic fear that H.H. may have "a certain strange strain" in his family's racial history (*Lolita* 74).

Nabokov's is a cosmopolitanism that trades in the extremities of cultures, their clichés and their stereotypes. Hence the varied cast of vulgarities that haunt the author's work.

But Nabokov's texts breathe life into the simple image, showing the insufficiency of ideological rhetoric, and challenging the reader to see more than the limited perspectives of the characters he creates. Pnin, for example, adds to the comic immigrant stereotype a sense of nobility that surpasses his simplistic symbolic value. When attempting to sell the novel, Nabokov described him as follows:

When I began writing PNIN, I had before me a definite artistic purpose: to create a character, comic, physically unattractive - grotesque, if you like - but then have him emerge, in juxtaposition to so-called "normal" individuals, as by far the more human, the more important, and, on a moral plane, the more attractive one. Whatever Pnin is, he certainly is least of all a clown. (*Selected Letters* 178).

A man of great moral courage, a pure man, a scholar and a staunch friend, serenely wise, faithful to a single love, he never descends from a high plane of life characterized by authenticity and integrity. But handicapped and hemmed in by his incapability to learn a language, he seems a figure of fun to many an average intellectual, and it takes a Clements or a Joan Clements to break through Pnin's fantastic husk and get at his tender and lovable core. It is this combination of the grotesque and the gentle that makes him so pleasingly bizarre. (*Selected Letters* 182).

The grotesqueness of the foreign cliché here reveals the grotesqueness of "normal" individuals who, steeped in ideology, cannot grasp the humanity that underlies their superficial impressions of the stranger. In *Pnin*, at least, it is the foreigner who is best suited to live correctly, and it is to our own embarrassment that our structured thinking does not allow us to recognize it.

The Dread of the Foreigner and the Desirous National Gaze

Of course, Humbert Humbert derives much of his intrigue and menace from the same qualities of foreignness. Pnin and Humbert embody parallel contradictions: clownishness/dignity, repulsiveness/seductiveness. Taken together, they enact complementary processes in the maintenance of national difference. As such, it isn't entirely surprising when either character reflects something of the other. A nameless figure with a "brownish complexion, wearing dark glasses" engages a vulnerable-looking child at a bus station in a curious "*quid pro quo*" - that's Pnin (*Pnin* 103). A "shabby emigre" shrugs awkwardly before a bloviating college director - that's Humbert (*Lolita* 196). More than simply parading opposite stereotypes, these novels allow us to consider the fundamental contradiction that makes the Other so compelling to the imagination.

All this resonates with issues central to the maintenance of American national identity. Take for example the Cold War containment ethos that established the US and the USSR as diametrically opposed ideological actors. Alan Nadel interprets this rhetoric as the product of a paradoxical "narrative of courtship and rivalry...the Other and the Same, the virile and the impotent, the satisfied and the frustrated" that historically surrounded the two countries (Nadel 5). In this shifting landscape, the strength of capitalist democracy was reaffirmed precisely because of Socialism's corrupting presence, and the "American atom" was deemed righteous and mighty because of the

existential threat of aggressors developing the same weaponry (21). This ambiguity also troubles the New World/Old World distinction that resurfaces so frequently in Nabokov's American novels. On its face, the newness of the New World is only significant in opposition to the Old, relying, in this formulation, on the opposition of American democratic ties and European ethnic ties. At the same time, the democratic spirit of the New World thrives on the integration of Old World difference. Bonnie Honig writes of this ambivalence: "'Their' voluntarist embrace of America, effective only to the extent that they come from elsewhere, works to reaffirm but also endangers 'our' way of life. The foreigner who shores up and reinvigorates the regime also unsettles it at the same time" (Honig 76). The rhetoric of nationalism, xenophobia, and racism seek to resolve this tension by externalizing the national idea's internal disunity. And the individual subject, itself suffering the same disunity, is necessarily swept up in this act of transference.

At the root of this anxiety is an awareness not just of the Other's presence, but of the Other's uncontrolled gaze and the effect of that foreign perspective on the integrity of the autonomous subject. Recall Lacan's interpretation of the mirror stage, in which the infant first conceives of itself as a unified whole only through the outside gaze reproduced by looking in a mirror. The subject knows itself through the gaze of the Other, but the implied unity of that otherly gaze exists in stark contrast to the disunity and contingency that the subject experiences in itself.⁴⁵ Thus, the self is intimately dependent

⁴⁵ Rudi Visker connects this experience to ambivalent attitudes to foreigners in "The Strange(r) Within Me" (433-434). In this piece, Visker argues that Julia Kristeva's critical project in *Strangers to Ourselves* is incompatible with Freud and Lacan's ideas about the uncanny and the Other, based on what what he appears to think is Kristeva's too optimistic claim that acknowledging "the foreigner in ourselves" means to give ourselves over to "the foreign" as an entity, which risks to efface the individual subject. I am less

on the cohesion produced by being observed by the Other, but is existentially threatened by being the object of the Other's gaze. Husserl and Levinas suggest that the "original entanglement" of this formative moment is central to the encounter with the stranger, signaling a deeply felt "vulnerab[ility] to the gaze of the Other" which decenters the egocentric subject (Bernet 47). And Julia Kristeva characterizes this contact as an encounter with the uncanny, evoking the very destruction of the self (*Strangers* 187-188). The response: a troubled process of "identification-projection" which allows the subject to situate itself "in relation to the other" (187). We observe the same dynamic in the paradoxical dependence on and flight from foreigners that Honig describes above, and the same instinct to project a differentiating narrative on the foreigner in the Cold War response.

The slippage in terminology here - between Other, stranger, and foreigner - requires extra commentary, especially given that Kristeva's encounter with "l'etranger" is consistently translated as "foreigner" when it could just as easily be translated as "stranger." Kristeva speaks to the neutralizing effect that "artifice" has on the uncanny, and though she has in mind the realm of fiction, we might see certain parallels with the national and consequently with the narrativization of the foreigner. Rather than dwelling in the facelessness of the uncanny, the artifice of national identity gives a concrete name to difference, and bolster's the subject's identity with that of a civil group identified against the foreigner. This projection is the product of an instrumentalizing perspective that seeks to identify difference in terms of the stability of national groups, what we

literal in my reading of Kristeva.

might call a national gaze.

Rudolf Bernet refers to this relationship as the creation of “the Other-for-me,” which must “adapt itself to my mental framework in order to be apprehended by me” (Bernet 44). The national gaze instrumentalizes the foreigner as “Other-for-me” - or rather, Other-for-us. This is at its core a function of desire: desire for a sense of cohesion in oneself, and desire for the Other-for-me, who will give body to our narrative of personal cohesion. But this desirous gaze is by its nature always to be returned by another subject looking back. So contact with the foreigner is not only disturbing because of our proximity to an alien presence; it also threatens to make us the object of another subject’s instrumentalizing scrutiny. This is true even when we perceive ourselves to be in control. Interpreting Levinas, Paul Moyaert writes: “In caressing (touching, feeling, stroking), the hand loses its instrumental meaning and its mastery. The I who caresses is not an I who is in control of oneself. For to touch the Other also means to be touched from outside by that Other” (Moyaert 36). As Bernet argues, “reciprocal vulnerability and exposure create a form of community,” albeit an unbalanced and unsettled one (Bernet 47). Levinas urges us to embrace this reciprocity and give up the egocentric model of self. And Kristeva’s insistence on the foreigner in oneself seems predicated on a realization of the same reciprocity. But the jealous subject - and the national subject is a jealous one - depends on this difference and shrinks from the Other’s uncontrolled gaze.

As readers of *Pnin*, we enact the desire to instrumentalize the foreigner. As readers of *Lolita*, we dread the possibility that we are the instruments of the foreigner’s

projection, although we are also attracted to that projection's exoticism. Given all this, we might view Charlotte Haze as a surrogate for these complex feelings of attraction and revulsion. Early in their acquaintance, it is Humbert's exotic European quality that most appeals to Charlotte. However, in Charlotte's hysterical confession of love, it is precisely this foreign appeal that marks Humbert's threatening nature. Worried that he does not return her feelings, Charlotte writes:

Of course, I know with *absolute certainty* that I am nothing to you, nothing at all. [...] *But* if, after reading my 'confession,' you decided in your dark romantic European way, that I am attractive enough for you to take advantage of my letter and make a pass at me, then you would be a criminal - worse than a kidnaper [*sic*] who rapes a child (*Lolita* 68).

Humbert's "dark romantic European way" turns his imagined advances into an aggressive "taking advantage," equating his very presence with the crimes he will later commit. The contact that Humbert represents is literally and figuratively penetrative, and seems to be as invested in matters of nationality as in matters of sex (in spite of Nabokov's comments to the contrary). Curiously, Charlotte immediately invokes the same foreign characteristics to disarm Humbert's unsettling difference. In the same letter, Charlotte attempts to recharacterize Humbert's difference as an easily categorized national stand-offishness: "I know how reserved you are, how 'British.' Your old-world reticence, your sense of decorum may be shocked by the boldness of an American girl!" By appealing to the ordered difference of the New World/Old World cliché, Charlotte reaffirms the sanctity of her American identity, and even manages to reshape the power dynamic of the situation. No longer passive and penetrable, she becomes the aggressor, claiming now what she calls a characteristically American

boldness.

Introducing these erotic elements charges the space of nationality with something akin to sexual taboo in its paradox of dread and desire. Viewed from this perspective, the national subject is repelled by the foreigner precisely because he is appealing. In *Totem and Taboo*, Freud writes of the “dread of contact” and repressed desire enacted in taboo:

The prohibition becomes fully conscious, while the surviving pleasure of touching remains unconscious. [...] The prohibition owes its strength - its compulsive character - to its association with its unknown counterpart, the hidden and unabated pleasure, that is to say, to an inner need into which conscious insight is lacking. (*Totem and Taboo* 22, 26)

In the national context, Freud’s “inner need” seems to be narratological in nature. The foreigner’s presence defines the limits of the national category, as in the Cold War containment narrative. And, reducible to a catalog of knowable traits, the foreigner offers an alluring foil to the familiar. So, readers of *Lolita* are prompted to feel this taboo contradiction in relation both to the novel’s sexual themes and, I argue, in relationship to the exotic presence of the foreigner who relates the narrative.

All this in mind, we will notice that Freud’s observations about taboo are based on systems for navigating the difference between groups. For example, the incest taboo, as he describes it, was not intended to police any actual act of sex between specific people, but rather to determine acceptable levels of contact between clans and phratries, based on the symbolic value of their group’s totem (6-8). Those who violated a taboo were endowed with the same dreadful presence as the taboo act or object.⁴⁶ In all of these

⁴⁶ Incidentally, we observe the same categorical difference, and ambivalence about identification, in the very construction of Freud’s *Totem and Taboo*. Freud takes care to differentiate his research subjects from the western subject as “poor, naked cannibals” who “according to our standard, are otherwise very immoral” (2, 4), and as representatives of “low grades of culture” (20). And yet his universalizing argument compels him to identify the western subject with the “primitive” subject:

examples, the symbolic presence of the Other is essential to the organization of worldly interactions; it is the potential of that symbolic presence to escape controlled containment that constitutes its threat. For Charlotte Haze, becoming the object of foreign desire robs her of a sense of self-determination, which she can only restore by determining the identity and significance of her foreign lover: as a dark European, a stuffy Brit, and ultimately as married “Mr. Humbert” in stark contrast to the exotic “Monsieur Humbert” of their early acquaintance.

Incidentally, Dolores Haze follows the same pattern as her mother. When she and Humbert first meet, she is attracted to his looks, which are consistently described in national terms: “Irish eyes,” “pseudo-Celtic,” “Franco-Irish,” (*Lolita* 69, 104, 122). But Humbert’s distinctly foreign voice later triggers her disgust: she says his French “annoys everybody,” demands at Humbert’s inelegant phrasing that he “speak English,” and responds violently to Humbert’s threat to keep her “in exile” studying French and Italian (243, 149). Also like her mother, Lolita attempts to disarm Humbert Humbert by appropriating his foreignness as a signifier of familiar derision. Putting on a phony British accent to insult him, Dolores sarcastically calls Humbert “fahther deah” turning his exoticism against him (220).

This detail seems to suggest the reader’s/Charlotte’s/Dolores’s attraction to the

It may be surmised that the taboo of Polynesian savages is after all not so remote from us as we were at first inclined to believe; the moral and customary prohibitions which we ourselves obey may have some essential relation to this primitive taboo the explanation of which may in the end throw light upon the dark origin of our own “categorical imperative.” (20)

Freud’s insistence on savagery and primitivism reinforces the separateness of the western subject, even as he argues for the similarities between cultures.

exotic foreigner as a trait deeply rooted in popular American culture. Dolores Haze's imitated accent may be mockery, but it also has a certain resemblance to the pageantry of Hollywood starlets, which could signal the era's wider trend of fetishizing and appropriating foreign voices. Similarly, Charlotte's casual cosmopolitanism makes her seem to Humbert like a "weak solution of Marlene Dietrich" (37). And Nabokov's insistence on movie idols throughout *Lolita* reminds us of the key role Hollywood played in assimilating European artists to American cultural needs, and converting the currency of foreignness (accents, ethnic features) into commodities of American desire. So, Charlotte and Dolores Haze's contradictory responses to Humbert's foreignness suggest a taboo felt in a visceral bodily register, an abstract subjective one, and a concrete cultural one.

Two More Cases of Narrativizing the Other

Another comparison of Nabokov's immigrant protagonists may be instructive here. In the previous chapter, I remark that in *The Gift* the aesthetic apex of Fyodor Godunov-Cherdyntsev's story, his moment of artistic transcendence, is signaled by a blending of his soul with his surroundings. Fyodor's integration in the narrative of Russian culture in emigration is achieved in this image of merger. In both *Lolita* and *Pnin*, this device returns as Nabokov's immigrants merge into their American settings. But the character of the device differs, depending on the narrative power either character wields. Humbert Humbert has one such experience during the moment he first possesses Dolores Haze, the Sunday afternoon on the divan. In his ecstasy, Humbert seems to

disappear into his surroundings, submerged in his own narration as a bundle of sensations lost in sunlight:

I lost myself in the pungent but healthy heat which like summer haze hung about little Haze. [...] I entered a plane of being where nothing mattered, save the infusion of joy brewed within my boy. What had begun as a delicious distension of my innermost roots became a glowing tingle which *now* had reached that state of absolute security, confidence and reliance not found elsewhere in conscious life. [...] Lolita had been safely solipsized. The implied sun pulsed in the supplied poplars; we were fantastically and divinely alone. (*Lolita* 59-60)

Humbert experiences this contact as a triumph in the sublimation of his objectified victim. By contrast, sympathetic Pnin's existential moment leaves him helpless and terrified, lost in an unfamiliar American town after one of his many defeats. Pnin experiences this contact as a fundamental threat to his subjectivity. The first of these repeating episodes is described as follows:

Man exists only insofar as he is separated from his surroundings. [...] Death is divestment, death is communion. It may be wonderful to mix with the landscape, but to do so is the end of the tender ego. The sensation poor Pnin experienced was something very like that divestment, that communion. He felt porous and pregnable. He was sweating. He was terrified. (*Pnin* 20)

Pnin and Humbert Humbert, based as they are on immigrant archetypes, produce fairly predictable reactions here. Contact with the helpless greenhorn makes him pregnable, his ego overpowered by impersonal surroundings. Contact with the insidious interloper, on the other hand, makes the American subject pregnable.

Pnin and Humbert's exits seem to conform to this reading. The last we see of Professor Pnin, he has lost his job and is driving into the distance, leaving behind the house he has finally bought. Pnin's final indignity confirms his secondary status in

America, but it is also in this moment that Pnin seems at his most transcendent: “[T]he little sedan *boldly* swung past the front truck and, *free at last*, spurted up the shining road, which one could make out narrowing to a thread of gold in the soft mist where hill after hill made beauty of distance, and where there was simply no saying what miracle might happen” (191 my emphasis). At his lowest, Pnin is allowed to be bold and free, if only in his driving, a newly learned skill that signifies a kind of American mobility. Nabokov surely intends something more universal (or personal?) than a celebration of American promise, given the fact that such hypernatural scenes typically signify the aesthetic redemption of the fallen hero in his other works. But the contradictions central to this moment speak well to the ambiguous status of foreigners in America.

The sentiment that “there was simply no saying what miracle might happen” seems rather sentimental for Nabokov, until we realize that the scene is capped by another insult from one of Nabokov’s mean-spirited American mediocrities. In the book’s last lines, Jack Cockerell, who consistently mocks and impersonates Pnin throughout the novel, teases “the story of Pnin rising to address the Cremona Women’s Club and discovering he had brought the wrong lecture” (191). Cockerell’s story returns us to Pnin’s mishap from chapter 1, the event he was traveling to when he has his first existential episode, as though to invite us to start afresh deriving fun from Pnin’s cultural disadvantage. It is only in this context that Pnin is extended untold miracles in America, after he has finally been removed and relegated to near total abstraction, a distant foreigner to be invoked in narrative.

Contrast this with Humbert Humbert, who also ends his story in an idyllic

landscape: a “friendly abyss,” “a melodious unity of sounds rising like vapor,” a “concord” both “majestic and minute, remote and magically near” (*Lolita* 307-308). Like Pnin, Humbert Humbert recedes into abstraction; but he takes Lolita with him as he fades into an infinity figured as “the refuge of art [...] the only immortality you and I may share, my Lolita” (309). Humbert romanticizes his his obsession, attempting to assert his narrative control to the end, and so we suspect him even in what seems like the moment of his purest intentions.

The differing effects of this imagery emphasize the dialogic function played by foreigners in Nabokov’s work, and in the nationalist imagination at large. The foreigner subjected to the national gaze becomes Pninian: porous, charming, useful in narratives, but seemingly powerless to do anything else. Hence Humbert Humbert’s initial ability to pass under his unsuspecting neighbors’ radar, not unlike his French colleague Gaston Godin, another suspected pedophile, who is seen as a “lovable, lovably freakish fellow!” (181). But when the foreigner’s gaze meets ours, and his desires reveal themselves in contrast to our own, desire turns to dread, as when we realize Humbert Humbert’s solipsization of Lolita. Being forced to confront the will and desire of the foreigner threatens the narrative primacy of the American subject, and fundamentally undermines the very notion of American determinism. This position differs significantly from the discredited reading of *Lolita* that frames the work as a Russia-meets-America allegory. In his essay “On a Book Entitled *Lolita*,” Nabokov critiques the interchangeability of such rigid formulations: “[A]n otherwise intelligent reader who flipped through the first part described *Lolita* as ‘Old Europe debauching young America,’ while another flipper

saw in it ‘Young America debauching old Europe’” (315). In these readings, the difference between nationalisms is static and determinant. But when Nabokov’s own characters appeal to the New World/Old World formulation, such distinctions appear artificial, matters of narrative convenience.

By challenging us to confront the tensions and taboos presented by the foreigner, Nabokov’s novels make us reconsider our adherence to categories of difference. Readers are probably quick to criticize Charlotte Haze for what could easily be called her hypocrisy toward Humbert Humbert’s early presence. But, as we shall see in more detail later, we experience much the same attraction and alienation in our own response to Humbert and his text. *Pnin* invites a similar realization in readers who take pleasure in, and take pity on, the subjugated Timofey Pnin. We are all, to some extent, subject to the narrative of our national gaze, and so we are all - especially American readers - likely to indulge in common images that guide and skew our reading. So, is Mrs. Haze entirely to blame for the fetishization that so confuses her in her encounter with the foreign? Certainly no more, and no less, than we are.

The Shuttlecock Swatted: Critical Reception of Nabokov’s Foreign Aesthetic

Nabokov represents the same categorical crisis in his very presence on the American literary scene, hence the amount of critical attention given to his nationality as an author. Like Humbert Humbert, Nabokov is typically understood in extremes. Positive critics tend to present him as a reinvigorating cosmopolitan force, capable of reaching heights of “ecstatic” prose seldom reached by other American writers (Updike

“Grandmaster Nabokov”). Others have stuck close to the version of Nabokov as “a haughty aristocrat who taunts his readers and skewers his critics unmercifully,” these accusations of aristocracy lending him a distinctly European aspect (Flower 537). Likewise, Edmund Wilson’s critique of Nabokov’s prose in *Lolita* focuses on “poses, perversities, and vanities which sound as if he had brought them from the St. Petersburg of the early nineteen-hundreds” (qtd. In Giles 167). And Joyce Carol Oates laments in Nabokov a distinctly foreign arrogance and contempt. She in particular judges Nabokov by an essential un-Americanness:

Nabokov exhibits the most amazing capacity for loathing that one is likely to find in serious literature [...] [O]f Nabokov, what excuses can we make? - that his early years were tragic indeed, that he suffered the loss of his father, his homeland, his entire way of life, his ‘untrammled, rich, and infinitely docile Russian tongue’? - that, ultimately he *is* not American, and his scorn for the democratic ideal is something as deep in him, as natural, as his genius for words, for chess, and for the capturing of butterflies? (Oates 107)

Oates’s postscript, added to her essay some ten years later, puts these comments in stark relief. Here, she wonders at her initial assessment:

Why I should have wished, or imagined I wished, the idiosyncratic and incontestably brilliant Vladimir Nabokov to be a species of *Dostoyevsky*, or *Mann*, or more egregious yet, *myself*, I can’t comprehend. Nabokov did the work he was born to do [...] and so it’s quite beside the point, and futile besides to wish him otherwise. (108)

The need to see the foreign writer in familiar terms - as a version of an already comfortable Russian figure, or as a version of herself - makes his uncontrolled presence a narratological threat. Nabokov, as an embodiment of the foreigner’s taboo, then, is a reflection of the national subject’s own desire.

Like Humbert Humbert’s, Nabokov’s foreign presence was aligned with deviance

in the eyes of many of his early readers. In one assessment of the early response to *Lolita*, critic F. W. Dupee describes a readership that associated a “Great [American] Tradition” with a “moral centre” which would expel Nabokov based as much on his identity as on the content of his work:

In his personal and literary antecedents Nabokov was a hybrid, an unregenerate cosmopolitan, in a period which had gone native with a vengeance. By “gone native” I mean “become preoccupied with the national origins of literature, convinced of the sanctity of tribal traditions.” [...] And just as the “idea of the nation,” in one critic’s phrase, was thus rehabilitated, so the word “moral” became compulsory in criticism. Into this situation Nabokov failed to fit at all, not because of his actually mixed origins but because they show in his work, are proudly explicit in it, help to make it what it is. (Dupee 31)

Likewise, Paul Giles identifies in the early censorship of the novel an impulse toward the “identification of discrete communities, enclosed areas, to which some homogenizing ethical idea can be plausibly attached” (Giles 179). As such, negative reviews after *Lolita*’s initial release frequently emphasized Nabokov’s foreign nationality. Orville Prescott’s scathing 1958 review lingers curiously on the book’s internationality - “the book written in English in the United States by a White Russian emigre can be bought legally in Paris where it was first published” - before characterizing the book as “highbrow pornography” and “refined” depravity, which is somehow more concerning than typical “Anglo-Saxon” smut (Prescott “Books of the Times”). Prescott’s nationalist priority further reveals itself when he characterizes Humbert Humbert first as “a middle-aged European intellectual,” and as a pervert second. More explicitly, Robert Pitman of London’s *The Sunday Express* argues that “*Lolita*, as plainly as *Das Kapital* or *Mein Kampf*, is in effect a propagandist book,” seeming to equate Nabokov’s sexual

themes with the most infamous foreign political influences of the era (qtd. in Dupee 34).

By contrast, early favorable reviewers tended to emphasize Nabokov's Americanness, or avoid the topic of nationality altogether. Robert R. Kirsch of *LA Times* mentions only that Nabokov is a professor at Cornell (Kirsch "Books, Authors"). And Conrad Brenner of *New Republic* reconciles Nabokov's background with a possible American legacy by wondering "who will put [*Lolita*] on the syllabus tomorrow? Alongside *Huckleberry Finn*, perhaps?" (Brenner "Art of the Perverse"). This is a critical reversal. These early critics called for the acceptance of the individual work before an unfamiliar readership by first grounding Nabokov in the American academy and canon.

Considering all this, the weight given to Nabokov as a personality is worth extra consideration, especially as it concerns the apparent necessity for readers to confirm or deny the author's own perversity and cruelty in common with his most famous anti-hero. The popular legacy promoted by readers like Pitman and Oates in the statements above is often repeated today, even by well-meaning commenters. For example, one recent documentary relies on the image of the cruel, infinitely critical foreigner by beginning with aggressively edited clips of Nabokov listing his loathings set to a soundtrack of foreboding strings. It continues with the *ad hominem* approach by raising the problem of whether *Lolita* is a moral work or "the fantasies of a dirty old man," near the end concluding that one can probably let Nabokov "off the hook" (Smith "How Do You Solve").⁴⁷ In his tribute on the fiftieth anniversary of *Lolita*'s publication, Christopher

⁴⁷ Nabokov's "rant" is actually edited together from two separate interviews - BBC Television (1962) and BBC-2 (1969) - and is mostly sourced from a moment where Nabokov is quoting John Shade from *Pale Fire*, though he does admit that he does share some of Shade's opinions (*Strong Opinions* 18).

Hitchens also echoes the question of Nabokov's complicity in Humbert's pedophilia, remarking, "it is very clear that Nabokov *did* think about it, and had thought about it a lot"(Hitchens "Hurricane Lolita"). In response to this public perception, many of today's academics respond with a curiously reactionary fervor against any suggestion of indecency in Nabokov's work (Naiman 18). But this, to me, is beside the point.

We have already seen how Nabokov's immigrant protagonists provoke the dread and desire inherent in national narratives, and how keen he was to deal in the currency of Russian otherness in his work and in his early public persona. From the above, we see the close relationship between national and moral categories, the foreigner and the pervert seeming to exist together in the margins of uncomfortable contact. This is, it's safe to say, where Nabokov lives, both in his work and in the imaginations of his audience. But these liminal spaces of difference and deviance don't lead to the untouchable cosmopolitanism that triumphalist readings would grant Vladimir Nabokov. Rather, they ground him alongside his characters in an ongoing dialogue of national symbolism, of which he is both a participant and an object. One is normally compelled to argue that Nabokov's acts of self-representation keep him in the cloudless sky he fashions in his oft-quoted shuttlecock metaphor, but in my reading, the poses that Nabokov strikes show him as an occupant and consistent utilizer of the pigeonholes he claims to avoid.

Indulging a Misreading: Nabokov as Narrator

The prevailing critical approach to Nabokov is to insist on the separation between

the author and his characters; but what if we assume that Nabokov intends for us, at least at first, to conflate him with his creations? This kind of error is fundamental to Nabokov's sense of aesthetics, interested as he is in the curious interaction between writer and reader. In *Speak, Memory*, he speaks to this relationship using the construction of a chess problem as a model. In this problem, the sophisticated player is led through a series of misdirections until finally reaching a solution that on its own would seem simplistic: "The pleasant experience of the roundabout route [...] would amply reward him for the misery of the deceit, and after that, his arrival at the simple key would provide him with a synthesis of poignant artistic delight" (*Speak, Memory* 292). That is, as much as Nabokov's work depends on the successful reading of the astute cosmopolitan reader, so does it depend on the initial misreading.

David H. Richter identifies this dynamic in what he calls Nabokov's tendency toward "reader entrapment," the elicitation of "mistaken judgments or inferences." (Richter 418-419). Let us agree that critics are justified in reading the hints of the author's presence as evidence of his dexterity, as expurgations of personal tragedy through art, or as an exorcism of personal anxieties by insisting on his difference from lesser models. But even in this case, such readings ignore a key part of the interaction initiated by Nabokov-as-trickster: the preliminary moment when we fall for the joke and identify the author in all that we see. Supposing that we read Nabokov within the network of preceding narratives and associations with which we know the author to engage, this case of mistaken identity seems calculated to yield insight into how American audiences receive a foreigner as a cultural producer.

Pnin's narrator famously invites this tricky association between character and author. As a number of critics have pointed out, the narrator's persona and narrative style have much in common with Nabokov's mandarin pose: he has a "fastidious elegance" and artistic arrogance (Garrett-Goodyear 193); he has the same streak of creative sadism as Nabokov.⁴⁸ One is tempted to see Nabokov in these similarities, especially given that the narrator begins with a sense of first-person omnipotence that is only gradually undermined as he reveals himself to be a character alongside Pnin (subtly in the middle of Chapter One [*Pnin* 16], and overtly in the final chapter). More to the point, we come to identify the narrator - the "prominent Anglo-Russian writer" who ultimately deposes Pnin (140) - as the same "Vladimir Vladimirovich," Paris emigre and entomologist, that Pnin ruefully discusses with a Russian colleague in Chapter Five (128).⁴⁹ Readers of *Speak, Memory*, Nabokov's first long publication in America, would recognize this as a clear reference to the author.

This resemblance engages the author's foreign voice as a fundamental aspect of his literary brand, which is refracted through a living matrix of national associations. For example, Mary Besemeres reads the narrator as an expression of Nabokov's well-acclimated English-speaking persona in contrast to Pnin, who represents an alienated foreign voice that is supplanted and replaced (Besemeres 394). Indeed, Nabokov has much in common with Pnin himself, in his academic career and in his meticulously reproduced English mispronunciations that, written "very much from an

⁴⁸ For more on this relationship, see Charles Nicol's essay "Pnin's History" and Ambrose Gordon Jr.'s "The Double Pnin."

⁴⁹ For a full accounting of these in-text identifications of Nabokov Gennadi Barabtarlo's book *A Guide to Nabokov's Pnin* (182, 197, 209, 245).

insider's perspective," reflect language patterns that Nabokov hoped his colleagues would recognize (395). Anchored thus to both major figures in the text, the author is able to employ contradictory images of foreignness in his manipulations: we sympathize with Pnin all the more when we associate the narrator's cruelty with the author's machinations; and yet, we can't overly scorn the narrator or the author, given what we assume is his shared experience in Pnin's noble suffering.

More to the point, though, Nabokov's device draws our attention to this act of identification and its effect on the very process of narrative. Corrine Hales remarks that as *Pnin* progresses, the novel's focus shifts from Timofey Pnin's life to that of the narrator, whose representation of Pnin reveals itself to have been only an "impersonation," the facts having been filtered through the narrator's need to identify himself as distinct from his subject (Hales 177-178). In other words, we see the narrator in Pnin. We also see Pnin in the narrator, whose story reminds us that as an emigre the narrator shares Pnin's loss and dislocation (Besemeres 402). And, we see Nabokov in both, having recognized a sort of authorial life-text bleeding into both characters. Hales identifies in this dynamic the formation of a set of "triplets" (Pnin, the narrator, and the author) each reflecting off the others (Hales 178). This prismatic reflection is a byproduct of the very act of sense-making. The teller of a narrative necessarily leaves his mark in the structure of the reality he puts forth. But so too does that narrative reflect back on the author, imprinting him with an image that is partly of his own making and partly of his audience. Our understanding of a character is informed by what we know about the author; and our understanding of the author is informed by what we know about

his characters.

For Nabokov, there is an essential national element to this doubling. In the essay that accompanies *Lolita*, Nabokov differentiates himself from Humbert Humbert, countering claims that he, like his character, is anti-American. He writes: “I chose American motels instead of Swiss hotels or English inns only because *I am trying to be an American writer* and claim only the same rights that other American writers enjoy. On the other hand, *my creature Humbert is a foreigner* and an anarchist, and there are many things, besides nymphets, in which I disagree with him” (*Lolita* 315 my emphasis). This curious distinction seems to make two claims at once. It affirms Humbert’s foreignness as a sinister element separate from Nabokov himself, who seeks to affirm his Americanness; but the fact that Nabokov is *trying* to be an American writer affirms his foreignness in common with his character. The contradiction inherent in this statement draws attention to the troubled quality of foreignness here. Is Vladimir Nabokov less foreign than Humbert Humbert? Is he a better kind of foreigner? Is it his act of *trying* that makes the difference? Given his treatment of the theme as discussed above, these questions seem too simplistic. But they indicate the priorities of the national gaze, and in doing so, they show the convergence of author and character.

Most critics will (not incorrectly) insist on the difference between Nabokov and Humbert Humbert, but the difference isn’t in their respective foreignness. In fact, a great many readers identify a foreign voice not dissimilar from Nabokov’s as a fundamental part of the novel’s reader seduction. For Dana Brand, “[o]nly Humbert the foreigner is able to resist” the “images of normalcy provided by advertising, mass culture, and

applied social science” in American culture, by virtue of his outsider’s mindset (Brand 14). Rachel Bowlby describes Humbert Humbert’s resistance as an appeal to “the European literary and artistic tradition,” noting a perceived rivalry between an “authentic” and originary European high culture and a secondary, mimetic American low culture (Bowlby 162-168). David Andrews argues that Humbert’s overblown poetic style recalls the stereotypical “Frenchman-as-aesthete,” evoking a European decadence (Andrews 70-71). And Elizabeth Klosty Beaujour argues that Nabokov’s functional word play - which must necessarily characterize Humbert Humbert’s writing as well - is made possible by the unique perspective of a bi-lingual writer.⁵⁰ Nabokov even gives his own artistic project, the achievement of “aesthetic bliss,” to Humbert Humbert, albeit in corrupted form (Roth 34). These similarities don’t indicate any essential or internal proclivity between author and character; but they do show that both figures can occupy a similar place in the view of readers who start with a distinct idea of what a foreigner must be like.

Our ability to distinguish the two comes from our familiarity with the author himself, but even this, Nabokov recognizes, is a matter of audience perception. Nabokov comments on the confusion caused by the multi-layered artifice in *Lolita*: “After doing my impersonation of suave John Ray, the character in *Lolita* who pens the Foreword, any comments coming straight from me may strike one - may strike me, in fact - as an impersonation of Vladimir Nabokov talking about his own book” (*Lolita* 311). So, even Nabokov directly speaking is imprinted by the reader’s skepticism of whether or not we

⁵⁰ For an extensive treatment of this subject, see Beaujour’s *Alien Tongues: Bilingual Russian Authors of the “First” Emigration*.

can truly know him. Here, we might see another revision of the “knight’s move” that characterizes Nabokov’s work. Nabokov’s technique of intertextual reference, even in his most reverential moments, was never to pay homage or to continue the path of his predecessors; nor was it to surpass or undo them. Rather, it places his work in explicit dialogue with the associations that grow around the names and legacies of celebrated authors. Nabokov’s texts enact a “pattern of displacement” that imagines culture not as a linear progression from a completed past, but as a complex network of relationships and associations in which authors do not unilaterally generate meaning, but accumulate significance through the cultural participation of others (Paperno 297). By inviting the confusion of his readers, who seek to place the author and his work within their own network of associations, he performs another such displacement, this time complicating his own authorial autonomy. Nabokov banks on his readers’ unconscious contribution, embracing the fact that his text is inflected by those readers’ concepts of self and Other. By allowing himself to become the Other, he draws his personal displacement into the world of his text, thus claiming his spot within his American audience’s cultural network.

The Reader Divided: Buying into Humbert Humbert’s Projection

All this aligns with the central trope of *Lolita* - to make the reader viscerally feel their contact with the Other - insofar as such a project only gains strength when readers are unsure as to whose seductions they are responding to. Whether we feel ourselves to have been seduced by Humbert the devious libertine or Nabokov the moral artist makes a difference in how we understand our enjoyment of the novel. But Nabokov blurs the

difference, as for instance when he remarks, “No writer in a free country should be expected to bother about the exact demarcation between the sensuous and the sensual” (314). Nabokov’s statements against the separation of the erotic and the artistic cut to the center of the novel’s effect. As Paul Giles argues, the novel’s challenge and resonance are not in its subject, but in the crisis of category caused by the peculiar voice that author and narrator share:

Censorship debates are focused, by definition, around the symbolic rather than the social order; the issue is never what actually happens, but what is allowed to be represented. [...] In this light, pornography is threatening not so much as a sign of misogynist dehumanization or bacchanalian revelry, but rather as a sign of philosophical anarchy: an excess of information, a glut of materials, all of which cannot be safely ordered within the existing frameworks of social knowledge or community practices. This is precisely what we find in *Lolita*: too many words, too many languages, too many possibilities, too much uncomfortable relativism; and this is why the novel stands as a challenge to the established notion of national cultures. (Giles 179)

In other words, the novel’s deviant themes are bound up with the book’s generative linguistic associations. Critic Evelyn Nien-Ming Ch’ien’s focus on Nabokov’s curious brand of English draws him and Humbert Humbert still closer: “In *Lolita*, [Nabokov] molests language, metaphorized as a young girl, and calls this book his ‘love affair with the English language’” (Ch’ien 62). The perversion performed in *Lolita* is directly connected to the novel’s status as an act of foreign speech. So in the same manner that Humbert’s presence works on Charlotte Haze, the novel at once draws us in and repels us with its uncontrolled foreignness.

This view of *Lolita* necessitates a close look at the figure of the seduced reader, who appears explicitly as an active participant in the novel’s textual world. Lionel

Trilling remarks that to whatever degree readers may feel “outrage at [Humbert Humbert’s] violation of the sexual prohibition,” they feel this way because they have been seduced into “conniving in the violation, because we have permitted our fantasies to accept what we know to be revolting” (Trilling 363). Humbert Humbert/Nabokov’s aesthetics lead the reader dangerously close to accepting their brand of foreign decadence. But perhaps more to the point, they draw the reader into the foreigner’s mental framework, and perform the disturbing sublimation of an American subject.⁵¹ Linda Kauffman’s foundational feminist critique of *Lolita* remarks on the disappearance of Dolores Haze’s voice and perspective from the novel, suggesting that Humbert Humbert’s is a dual violation. She remarks that Humbert’s violations are seemingly the “Law of the Father,” which Kauffman understands as the authority of legal guardianship (Kauffman 133, 137, 143). Notably, Humbert defines this law in distinctly international terms, citing legal and historical precedence from England, ancient Rome and Egypt, and “certain East Indian provinces” to excuse his attraction to little girls (*Lolita* 19).

The curious realization that this kind of ethical reading allows is that the reader is simultaneously made an “accessory to [Humbert Humbert’s] crime” and a “potential victim” (Herbold 89), Sarah Herbold’s interpretation of the novel advances this tension by suggesting that in spite of Humbert Humbert’s gleeful abuse of girls and women, there may be space for an ethical reading that still takes aesthetic pleasure in his taboo eroticism. In this alternate reading, Nabokov’s women are able to subvert Humbert’s erasures and projections: Lolita understands Humbert’s seductions, manipulates him herself, and even

⁵¹ For a thorough account of the landscape of ethical critiques of this sublimation, see: Anika Susan Quayle’s “*Lolita is Dolores Haze: The ‘Real’ Child and the ‘Real’ Body in Lolita.*”

extracts some pleasure from him; and Charlotte too gets one over on Humbert since she is the one who introduces Clare Quilty to her daughter. Herbold goes on to describe a conflicted readerly subject. To refuse the potential for women's pleasure and power in *Lolita* threatens to align the reader with the same chauvinistic structures that seem to justify Humbert's narrative. On the other hand, suggesting that Lolita has the space to take pleasure from Humbert's attentions leads us straight back to the space of complicity where the reader enjoys, and thereby seems to endorse, Humbert's abuse of women. For Herbold, this dynamic "produces a woman reader as the modern reader par excellence: one who recognizes herself as being as self-divided as she is integrated, as guilty as she is innocent, and as powerful as she is powerless" (97).

Indeed, all readers of *Lolita* are faced with a similar self-division that links the novel's themes of sexuality and nation. I have already alluded to the strict code of conduct that characterized the Cold War period, and the important role of sex and obscenity in maintaining those cultural demands. It is worth noting, then, that the women lambasted in *Lolita* are also the people who are most invested in ideas of what American girls are *supposed* to be. Their rigid adherence to these ideas is hardly less restricting to Lolita's subjectivity than Humbert Humbert's narratological erasure. For example, Mrs. Pratt of Beardsley School's educational philosophy smacks of internalized chauvinism:

[W]e stress the four D's: Dramatics, Dance, Debating and Dating. We are confronted by certain facts. Your delightful Dolly will presently enter an age group where dates, dating, date dress, date book, date etiquette, mean as much to her as, say, business, business connections, business success, mean to you [...] [W]ith due respect to Shakespeare and others, we want our girls to communicate freely with the live world around them rather than plunge into musty old books. (*Lolita* 177)

Charlotte Haze's relationship to her daughter's adolescent development is more complicated, but still apparently not open to Lolita's own complexity. By her own report, she views her daughter as a "sturdy, healthy, but decidedly homely kid" (65), and yet, even while she is unaware of Humbert's feelings for Lolita, she resents her as a legitimate sexual rival, apparently "more afraid of Lo's deriving some pleasure from [Humbert] than of [his] enjoying Lo" (56). Charlotte's dread of her daughter's sexuality seems linked to an overall denial of personhood. For example, she uses a questionable parenting guide that ranks in a stock list of negative characteristics such traits as "boisterous" and "inquisitive" alongside "aggressive," "irritable," and "obstinate" (81). Elsewhere, she criticizes Lolita for being "defiant," but of course it is primarily in her moments of defiance that Lolita is able to make her voice heard. We observe here the erasure of Lolita's voice, the reduction of Lolita to her sexuality, and the desire to control her sexuality, exercised not by a pervert and an outsider, but by parents and professionals who have internalized these acts as cultural norms.

Of course, any resentment toward these figures, and especially toward Charlotte, is again the result of Humbert Humbert's seduction, and again a form of sublimation. (We have no way to know Charlotte's feelings, after all, except by what Humbert tells us.) Since Charlotte is just as much the object of Humbert's national gaze as he is of hers, by adopting this attitude we submit to the foreign framework of the Other. Humbert's critiques of Americans, then, are not the simple anti-American demagoguery they were assumed to be by Nabokov's early American critics. Rather, they prompt readers to reconsider the rigid singularity of their own national subjecthood. Critic

Graham Vickers suggests that *Lolita* inspires us to recognize Humbert Humbert's urges not just in ourselves but in American culture in general. He argues, the same unsettling collision of "childlike innocence and adult sexuality" found in *Lolita* is central to the coquetry of child stars like Shirley Temple, and the infantilized girliness of sex symbols like Marilyn Monroe (Vickers 64, 69). The point is, *Lolita* does not offend and insult for the sake of bald criticism, nor does it elicit pleasure for the sake of uncritical enjoyment. Rather, it insists on, in Herbold's terminology, the "self-divided" nature of the modern subject, reflecting in the reader their own skepticism and discomfort with their own culture.

This is especially problematic for the American national subject in Nabokov's era, given the reliance on the unity and exceptionalism popularly implied by the New World/Old World phenomenon and Cold War containment philosophy. To acknowledge the same deviance attributed to foreign decadence in one's own culture, or to admit (even abstractly) to those deviant urges in defiance of local standards of decency, necessarily places the reader at odds with the orthodoxies used then to determine conformity to American ideals. The fact that this cultural repositioning is prompted by a foreign narrator who appeals to readers with an elegance of expression, and a wealth of allusions, that resonate principally as *European* disrupts the narrative primacy of the New World/Old World distinction. And the fact that all this is done by a Russian writer who is celebrated as a leading American author seriously impacts the legibility of national literary distinctions. *Lolita*'s appeal to taboo allows readers to feel this sense of division viscerally, uniting the themes of sex and nation as functions of a hidden desire that draws

us nearer to the Other even as it repels us.

These tensions have always been the fundamental inverse of the American democratic ideal. Brian Boyd writes, “Nabokov was...a European intellectual who had found refuge in American universities - and what could be more American than that?” (*American Years* 34). But at the same time, Nabokov - as many others immigrants - was received as fundamentally un-American, divergent and unfamiliar in his predilections and identity. Embracing this contradiction helps us to envision a cosmopolitanism not free from the rigid categories that would define us, but which confronts those categories directly and acknowledges the need to engage them in the modern search for selfhood.

Chasing Quilty: American Culture as Literary Predecessor and Rival

In this context, the filial metaphor that frames the cultural continuity discussed in the previous chapter must be rethought. In a strictly national context, Nabokov’s foreign presence, like Humbert’s, corrupts the integrity of the ordering system, opening it to new forms of association and meaning. As such, the divided subject perhaps starts to question the linear determinism of their own inherited mindset, a tendency that may be presaged by the language of genealogy in *Lolita*. Humbert Humbert appeals to paternalism: “I am your father, and I *am* speaking English, and I love you” (*Lolita* 150). (Notice that the theme of fatherhood is here interwoven with the theme of nationality.) But he can only do so through the corrupting influence of his incestuous desires, which even then are only a “parody of incest” (287). Humbert’s gun, which he wryly terms “the Freudian symbol

of the Ur-father's central forelimb" (216), is "inherited" from Dolores Haze's father. So Humbert's pretenses of paternal priority are characterized as corruption, borrowing, and pretending.

As the author of his own American story - and indeed, the author of Lolita's story - Humbert's priority is also drawn into question by the presence of his rival, the American playwright Clare Quilty. Here again, we might detect Nabokov's explicit engagement with the themes of cultural continuity, haunting his protagonist with a predecessor who evokes not just the strength of a singular author's legacy, but a whole cultural landscape. Quilty is first named as Humbert's "predecessor" when he vacates the parking spot that Humbert takes before checking into the Enchanted Hunters hotel (117). More importantly, we later learn that Quilty had known Dolores Haze long before she became Lolita (272). As such, we recognize in Clare Quilty a parallel threat to personal and aesthetic freedom as is suggested by the anxiety of influence: the feeling of having one's every move prefigured in a landscape determined by a powerful forerunner, and of always coming *after*. For most of the novel, we know Quilty as the unshakable pursuer Detective Trapp, who sends Humbert Humbert into paranoid fits of fancy during their zigzagging chase across the country. He is also, incidentally, said to resemble a Swiss cousin of Humbert's father, Gustave Trapp, uniting in this detail the predecessor and the pursuer (139, 218). As the novel nears its end, the pursuit is reversed as Humbert struggles to overtake Quilty, who has absconded with Lolita, to reclaim the object of his desire and to kill his rival.

We might detect here a hint of the Oedipal dynamic suggested in Harold Bloom's

anxiety of influence. And indeed, Quilty's status as a writer figures him as a "Poetic Father" who seems to wield influence not just over Humbert Humbert, but over Nabokov himself (Bloom 37). Quilty's plays *The Little Nymph* and *The Lady Who Loved Lightning* (recalling Humbert's mother, who was killed by a bolt of lightning) mirror the beginnings of Humbert's story (*Lolita* 31); and *The Enchanted Hunters*, in which he casts Lolita as a seductive nymph, re-envisioning key events of *Lolita* and prescribes an end. The nymph is ultimately lured away by the Young Poet, an analog for Quilty, who claims to have written the play's events, and indeed the characters, himself (201). Critic Eric Naiman remarks on a number of details that establish Quilty as "a Shakespeare run amok," citing for example, the fact the license plates on Quilty's cars during his chase with Humbert Humbert include the combinations "WS 1564" and "SH 1616," Shakespeare's initials and the years of his birth and death (Naiman 38). Hence, Quilty is installed as a sexual rival and as a cultural predecessor.

But as Quilty enters into Humbert's daily existence, his threatening nature shifts from that of a singular predecessor to a more generalized presence. Take for example Humbert's pursuit of Quilty in the "cryptogrammic paper chase" wherein he follows a string of literary references and fake names left to taunt him in hotel books and registries (*Lolita* 250). At first, Humbert experiences this chase as a well-matched battle of wits between himself and his very literate rival, but he soon starts to feel himself awash in a pervasive and depersonalized code of associations. Humbert comes to suspect that Quilty has turned the chase over to a series of "successors" who plot against him (252), and even fears that in his paranoia he has attributed the signatures of real people to Quilty's game

(251). His rival's narrative power thus decentralized, Humbert experiences it as though it were an attribute of the American population at large. Building from Michael Wood's reading of Quilty as an embodiment of "the way we feel when we feel things are against us," we might see here a broader struggle with the cultural alienation associated with being a foreigner (Wood 128).

Hence, the rivalry is played out in details suggestive of Humbert's unfamiliarity with American English and American culture, immersing Humbert in a sense of mystification, even as he seeks to induce the same feeling in his readers. For example, Humbert and Quilty's first meeting is marked by a misheard conversation ("Where the devil did you get her?"... "I said: the weather is getting better.") characterized by the same foreignizing take on English that Humbert displays throughout the novel (*Lolita* 127). Quilty's presence pollutes all aspects of the American scene, emphasizing Humbert's generalized sense of alienation. His list of publications appears in a theater magazine kept in Humbert's prison library (*L* 31), he is featured in a cigarette ad hanging in Lo's room (69), seems to inspire the name of Lo's summer camp (64), and is mentioned in various casual expressions of recognition throughout the novel (121). During the cross-country chase, Quilty (as Trapp) seems to materialize in cars all over the country; and motorists, nurses, and tennis players all seem to collude against Humbert in Quilty's game. Humbert, who lacks the cultural capital to understand this language of references, is doubly confounded by the ubiquity of his predecessor. As a result, he develops a paranoid habit of reading the American environment, scrutinizing license plates that seem to contain textual clues about his unseen antagonist, and

composing endless lists of store fronts where danger and confusion seem to lurk (224-227).

Thus, the influence wielded by the predecessor is reimagined as the predominance of a powerful and alien culture, a point of view not entirely dissimilar from where we concluded the previous chapter. For Humbert-the-successor, the very feeling of his predecessor's notoriety, his works, and his "sensational name" are reified parts of the cultural landscape, assumed currency in the interactions of everyone around him (271). But even as we accept the symbolic predominance of a singularly powerful predecessor, all this reaffirms the role of *others* - not the celebrated figure himself - in the creation and maintenance of cultural power. Like the relationship between Bloom's Poetic Father and Son, the cultural predecessor is continuously created and recreated in the life of his own legacy: in peripheral texts (reviews, digests, ads, and syllabi) and in the memories and daily language of his audience. As such, for a good deal of *Lolita*, Clare Quilty exists only in a series of references. He is given body first in the speech of those characters who acknowledge and promote his celebrity, and in the mind of readers who recognize the language of references that establish him in the novel's textual world. So the predecessor is imagined not as an originary point from which culture descends, but as a node around which others maintain and organize cultural capital.

Having immersed himself in a language of new associations, Nabokov likely felt much the same sense of disorientation, or at least readers might expect him to. Reading Humbert again as an authorial stand-in, we sense a kind of narratological impotence. When Humbert wields his gun, it goes off "with a ridiculously feeble and juvenile

sound,” going “limp” in his hand, and giving the impression that its bullets “merely trickled” into their target (297). But then, Quilty’s position is also undermined: for all his threatening ubiquity, he is “practically impotent,” and his sexual desires also render his bid for priority a perversion (298). The implication here seems to be that any such line of continuity, conceptualized in relation to this singular kind of paternal priority, is but a paltry order. As representatives of cultural programs placed in competition, neither Quilty nor Humbert seem worthy of being taken too seriously. Quilty’s Hollywood sleaziness and comic pretensions represent a parody equivalent to Humbert’s esoteric classicism. The imagined encroachment of the foreign order is no legitimate threat, much as Humbert’s seductions are appealing yet transparent. But the domestic order is here also suggested to be false and corrupting, even absurd. As such, the foreign and familiar are placed on equal ground.

As readers grow more familiar with the texture of *Lolita*’s language, Humbert and Quilty grow closer and closer together. Quilty shifts from resembling Humbert’s uncle (139, 218) to take on the role of Humbert’s brother (247, 249). Humbert and his rival look alike (“I am said to resemble some crooner or actor chap on whom Lo has a crush” refers to Quilty [43/9]), they are the same age (138, 218), and they are of the same mind (“The clues he left did not establish his identity but they reflected his personality, or at least a certain homogenous and striking personality; his genre, his type of humor...the tone of his brain, had affinities with my own” [249]). This last point indicates Humbert’s habits as a reader: the “homogenous and striking personality” that he detects in his paper chase with Quilty may well be his own. As such, in their fatal confrontation, the two men

face the same grammatical doubling that we observed between Sebastian Knight and his brother/biographer V: “I felt suffocated as he rolled over me. I rolled over him. We rolled over me. They rolled over him. We rolled over us” (299). The ambiguous pronoun shift signals the logical blurring between Humbert and Quilty, but includes now the still more confusing entities “they” and “us.”

From this doubling emerges an unparseable proliferation of pairs including not just Quilty and Humbert, but Nabokov and his readers. Critic Priscilla Meyer argues that Quilty is both a doppelganger fictionalized by Humbert to absolve himself of his guilt, and also “Nabokov’s agent,” a collaborator with the author’s anagrammatical avatar Vivian Darkbloom (Meyer 15). As her argument progresses, she reveals additional layers of doubles:

The reader, like Humbert rereading events, will move on multiple readings from finding his double in Humbert [i.e., sympathizing with Humbert] to finding it in Quilty [enjoying the subversion of Humbert] and finally in Nabokov [appreciating both effects in their simultaneous construction]; Quilty is Humbert’s brother; the ‘good reader,’ falling from one false (but increasingly comprehensive) bottom to the next, becomes Nabokov’s. (*Lolita* 16)⁵²

The questions initially raised by the novel’s multiple doublings (Did Quilty somehow manage to author Humbert’s circumstances? Does Quilty work as Nabokov’s implement to frustrate his narrator? Or does Humbert author Quilty himself as part of his obfuscating narrative?) are internal to the text and unanswerable. But with the reader included here in *Lolita*’s doubling dynamic, we are compelled to think about our own role in embodying Nabokov’s characters, and even Nabokov himself.

⁵² Incidentally, Humbert also addresses the reader as “*Bruder!*” (262).

Corruption as Cultural Translation: Nabokov in the National Gaze

Lolita directly addresses the importance of interpretation in the embodiment of literary experience when Humbert famously pleads to the reader “Imagine me’ I shall not exist if you do not imagine me” (129). This is, I think, not just a metafictional statement, but a fundamental truth about the cognitive act of narration and the act of knowing others. We, as readers, embody Humbert not just by actively processing Nabokov’s text, but also by applying a myriad of associations to his characterization. The figures of the immigrant, the dark foreigner, and the European aesthete all help to establish the character in a concrete cultural context. We recognize a parallel process in the embodiment of Clare Quilty in the references that signal him throughout the novel, and in the embodiment of *Lolita* herself. On this subject, Humbert writes, “What I had madly possessed was not she, but my own creation, another, fanciful *Lolita* - perhaps more real than *Lolita*,” a *Lolita* that, as we see in their first meeting, is expressed and understood through a key association with his childhood love Annabel: “[T]here was my Riviera love peering at me over dark glasses. [...] It was the same child - the same frail, honey-hued shoulders, the same silky supple bare back, the same chesnut head of hair” (62, 39). The *Lolita* that we know in the novel is embodied in Humbert’s desirous gaze, in which she makes sense only in relationship to his fetishized experience.

But Humbert’s presence, and the motivations behind his gaze, are embodied and made by our own desirous national gaze, which subordinates the character to our sense of continuity. Desire aligns here with a narratological urge. We might appeal to literary

theorist Peter Brooks: “Desire necessarily becomes textual by way of a specifically narrative impulse, since desire is metonymy, a forward drive in the signifying chain, an insistence of meaning toward the occulted objects of desire” (Brooks 105). That is, desire seeks to give name to an enduring want, and in so doing, subordinates the object of desire to an established network of meaning. So, Humbert subordinates Lolita to the narrative of his idealized first love, seeking to restore the lack that is revealed when the primal scene of the novel’s sexuality, Humbert and Annabel’s encounter on the beach, is disrupted. As the object of desire, Lolita is made the object of a “signifying chain” expressed by a language of references that are ultimately alien to her.

The desirous gaze thus parallels the national gaze that so confounds Timofey Pnin and colors our view of Nabokov and his characters; both gazes subject the individual to a set of narrative priorities that limit that person’s potential for expression and significance. Importantly, these narrative gazes are not all the result of malicious intent. Limited, as we are to referential language, we all think through a series of associations that correspond to a particular worldview, and which limit our perception of others. One might even argue that Lolita does the same thing in her early naivety. We have already remarked on Lolita’s early crush on Clare Quilty, Humbert Humbert’s resemblance to Quilty, and the cigarette ad featuring Quilty which Lolita hangs next to a magazine photo labeled “H.H.” for her new crush (*Lolita* 69). Might not it be possible that, in the beginning, Humbert Humbert was to Clare Quilty as Lolita is to Annabel, a figure on whom the desirous gaze can be retrained? This is simply to point out that all characters in *Lolita* are objects of desire, even those who are presented to us first as paternal or

patriarchal stand-ins.

So too is Nabokov himself made the object of our narratological desire. In this respect, Nabokov's themes of sex and desire participate directly in his exploration of cultural continuity, interpretation, and authorship. As readers of *Lolita*, we are invited to "fondl[e] [the text's] details;" like Humbert and Nabokov, as we alternately connect or pass over its patterns and allusions, according to our own worldview and predilections (Naiman 45). Using this data, we construct the context in which the novel makes sense. This way of reading collapses the vertical relationship between author and audience that *Lolita*'s narrative style implies, and in fact brings us to acknowledge that we read the novel, its contents, and the author himself, as part of a much greater network of signifiers that becomes legible only through the narrative order imposed by a multitude of desirous gazes.

One moment in particular highlights this effect at play in *Lolita*. In their final confrontation, Quilty attempts to bribe Humbert for his life and includes a conspicuously unartful Shakespeare reference: "I promise you, Brewster, you will be happy here, with a magnificent cellar, and all the royalties from my next play - I have not much at the bank right now but I propose to borrow - you know, as the Bard said, with that cold in his head, to borrow and to borrow and to borrow" (*Lolita* 301). Brief as this moment is, the thematic density of the scene draws our attention. Humbert violently confronts his narratological rival, and is offered as riposte a piece of the English literary legacy. Quilty completes this gesture by delivering a Nabokovian signature in the form of a butterfly while revealing his own concerns about literary succession: "I am a playwright. I have

been called the American Maeterlinck. Maeterlinck-Schmetterling, says I” (301).⁵³ The American Quilty dismisses his European predecessor by corrupting his name; so what of his transformation of Shakespeare?

A reader already primed to seek Nabokov in his text may likely attribute Quilty’s flippancy to the author himself. Quilty’s rejection of Maeterlinck has clear national undertones, so it might seem reasonable to suspect that Nabokov similarly seeks to assert himself in opposition to his greatest English predecessor, were it not for his well-known respect for Shakespeare. However, I read in this allusion a more general interest in the processes of reference itself. Both Humbert and Nabokov borrow and borrow and borrow throughout the whole of their text, with the intent of manipulating their reader with a specialized language of cultural references. But rather than appealing to other texts and authors as static signifiers of authority, this style of reference concentrates on the transformative effect of context. The content of the obscure and sophisticated European references that Humbert and Nabokov make is by and large less functional than the effect they produce in readers who experience them as signifiers of the narrator’s/author’s difference. And familiar references too are reinvigorated and transformed in this strange context.

On the effects of context, one act of reading depicted from *Pnin* is especially illuminating. Here, Professor Pnin is forced to look up a passage from “Hamlet” in English, having only read it in Russian.

Alas, “Gamlet” by Vil’yama Shekspira had not been acquired by Mr. Todd, and was not represented in Waindell College Library, and whenever you were reduced to look up something in the English version,

⁵³ According to Anthony Appel, Jr., Nabokov once commented in a personal conversation that this might be “the most important phrase in the chapter” (301/5).

you never found this or that beautiful, noble, sonorous line that you remember all your life from Kroneberg's text in Vengerov's splendid edition. (*Pnin*, qtd. in Ch'ien 83).

Placed in a new linguistic context, Shakespeare and his text are transformed into something familiar yet distinctly different, “Gamlet” by Vil’yama Shekspira. In the case of *Lolita*’s allusion to “Macbeth,” the change in context concerns a cultural language rather than a spoken language, but the transformation is no less fundamental. Uttering Shakespeare’s line transforms the referent by the very fact of its repetition, re-placing it in relation to an all new network of associations. More to the point, so too does the identity of the speaker of that utterance, such as it is perceived by his audience. Given our critical preoccupation with nationality when reading Nabokov, to say nothing of the confrontational streak he cultivated in his persona, we may be predisposed to read allusions like this as a foreigner’s appropriation, or deliberate corruption, of the canon he is entering. But these moments also reveal themselves as the result of a reciprocal form of cultural translation, the inevitable reinterpretation of images and situations when we are forced to confront this difference.⁵⁴

Reading these details in the context of Humbert and Quilty’s rivalry likely suggests that Nabokov’s position as an American writer of foreign origin puts him at a unique disadvantage before his audience’s national gaze. But it also highlights Nabokov’s long-standing engagement with the reader’s relationship to authors and texts, and the way that this relationship is reshaped in a transnational context. The living author functions as a signifier in much the same way that the enshrined author does, with the

⁵⁴ I am indebted to Columbia’s Valentina Izmirlieva for pointing out this line of argument.

exception that the living author can steer the layered significance that loads his authorial identity and his text. This relationship by necessity draws the transnational author into the discourse of nationality. Nabokov's recognition of this fact, and his decision to embrace it, are largely responsible for the impact of his early American works and his position in the American and global canons.

Chapter 3:

The Divided Global Subject in *The Russian Debutante's Handbook* and *Absurdistan*

In his novel *Absurdistan*, Gary Shteyngart inserts a satirical doppelganger, Jerry Shteynfarb, who echoes his creator's success, but reveals himself as a hack and an opportunist. Shteynfarb is characterized mainly in terms of pigeonholes, critiqued by the narrator as an aspiring "Jewish Nabokov," and a smug and self-serving player of "the professional immigrant game" (*Absurdistan* 81, 63). This character seems to be Shteyngart's response to his own public persona. In the press blurbs that accompany his first novel, Shteyngart is compared both to Saul Bellow, for his engagement with the American immigration narrative, and lauded in one review from *Novoye Russkoye Slovo*, as an emergent "literary hero" to all those "who value Nabokov and Brodsky."⁵⁵ These characterizations seem somehow incompatible, suggesting at the same time a nostalgic commitment to the immigrant story as an American genre, and Nabokov's sardonic cosmopolitanism. By allowing these traits easy coexistence in his double, Shteyngart describes his own contested position amongst American narrative continuities: the mythology of domesticated immigrant difference, and the cosmopolitan independence that acquires a curiously Russian association thanks to the legacy of his predecessors.⁵⁶

Like Nabokov, Shteyngart exploits these narratives directly as part of his public persona, but Shteyngart seems to address an audience that is more prepared to question

⁵⁵ This review text is included in the paperback edition of Shteyngart's novel *The Russian Debutante's Handbook*.

⁵⁶ For an overview of the conventions of the immigrant narrative, see William Q. Boelhower's essay "The Immigrant Novel as Genre."

the integrity of common imagery. For example, in the artist's photo adorning the back cover of *The Russian Debutante's Handbook*, Shteyngart sits over a storm grate, sporting a fur-collared coat and a thick black beard, and holding the end of a leash attached to a small brown bear. Next to it, the words "The real thing," from a review in *Esquire Magazine*, seem to assert the naturalness of this composition: a real Russian immigrant, bear cub and all. The sum effect of the image is a winking representation that fulfills the American image of Russianness to the point of ridicule. Indeed, to present oneself culturally as an immigrant is by necessity a performance, grounded in a rigid vocabulary of comedic accents, cultural gaffes, and American dreams. So presenting the author as the "real thing" primes the skeptical reader. What is a "real" immigrant voice, when it is surrounded by so many expectations and conventions?

This self-conscious gamesmanship resonates first as a way of reclaiming an authentic and independent voice, a playful sort of Nabokovian trickery that opens the nationless blue sky that Nabokov projected for himself. Joseph Brodsky wrote about a similar "autonomous, spacecraft-like mentality" enjoyed by displaced writers who work freely of the expectations of an audience that doesn't know them, but he continued less optimistically on the creation of a kind of exilic genre:

Indeed, we've got a pedigree.... If one wants, one can trace it all the way back to Adam. And yet we should be careful about the place it tends to occupy in the public's and our own minds. We all know what happens to many a noble family over generations or in the course of a revolution. Family trees never make or obscure the forest; and the wood is now advancing. ("The Condition We Call Exile" 16)

The family line reproduces itself in its own image and begins to decline in an artistic environment where the "qualitatively novel" ought to rise to the top. While Nabokov and

Brodsky may have taken some refuge in the “desperate sense of being *no one*,” no such space of anonymity is available in their wake for writers like Shteyngart, who is already known as the heir to his predecessors (qtd in Benedict 21). So, the category of autonomous cosmopolitanism, though perhaps less cartoonishly than that of the swarthy foreigner, is also predetermined. As a Russian-American author, Shteyngart finds himself caught between these two narratives, much as he and his protagonists are caught between national categories.

Shteyngart's first two novels approach this legacy of difference through a varied vocabulary of displacement in an attempt to account for what he articulates as his protagonists' “own relative loss of place in this world; [an] irrevocable perdition” (*Russian Debutante* 429). Both novels follow the hopeless life of a young immigrant struggling for self definition in a world saturated by ethnic and national narratives. *The Russian Debutante's Handbook* starts as an immigrant novel chronicling the embarrassments and failed relationships of unambitious, self-proclaimed “beta immigrant” Vladimir Girshkin, but turns to an expatriate theme when Vladimir flees to the fictional Eastern European city Prava, where, newly empowered, he becomes the *de facto* American cultural consultant for the Russian mob. *Absurdistan*, on the other hand, progresses as a modern day exile narrative, as immigrant heir Misha Vainberg is denied reentry to the U.S. from Russia because of a crime committed by his gangster father. Misha's attempt to return to the U.S. with a false passport strands him in the war-torn republic of Absurdsvani, trapped by the so-called Old World. In both texts, Shteyngart's protagonists experience their nationality as if stuck between extremes, able neither to

achieve a comfortable status (cultural or legal) in the United States, nor to deal with the historical weight of the Eastern Bloc.

In combining these themes, Shteyngart's novels attempt to reimagine the American immigrant genre for a world of increasing global mobility, where the path of the immigrant no longer has to end with assimilation in the host country. This, however, is not a position of uncomplicated privilege or flexibility. Rather, this mobility leaves Shteyngart's protagonists caught between a multiplicity of narratives, including not just American narratives of Russians and Soviets, but also Russian and European narratives about Americans, and narratives about Jewish identity.

In America, Shteyngart's protagonists are ciphers of the American state, and the struggles and pain of their immigrant stories are co-opted as part of the official narrative of successful assimilation.⁵⁷ At the same time, their presence provides the dominant American culture a "reassuring portrait of itself from its ethnic margin," making even the explicit assertion of difference a statement of complicity in someone else's national narrative (Zaborowska 19).⁵⁸ Living with the legacy of famous Russians, Shteyngart's characters, like the author himself, feel pressured to conform to narratives of noble and *intelligentny* Russianness. As such, Vladimir Girshkin suspects that his girlfriend's parents plan to "break bread with Brodsky and Akhmatova" upon meeting with his family, suggesting a fear of being unable to live up to a mythology of Russianness that would redeem Vladimir's inability to live up to an orthodox narrative of Americanness

⁵⁷ Madelaine Hron takes umbrage to this effect in *Translating Pain: Immigrant Suffering in Literature and Culture* (1-25).

⁵⁸ This happens in spite of a modern ethnic schema that imagines European immigrants as white. For more on this process, see David R. Roediger's *Working Toward Whiteness: How America's Immigrants Became White, The Strange Journey from Ellis Island to the Suburbs*.

(*Russian Debutante* 88). This expectation appears to be rooted in the vestiges of a Cold War mindset. Lauren G. Leighton describes a “mirror” effect that influenced American assumptions about emigres’ political ideas, suggesting that Russians who had defected from the USSR simply sought the opposite of their home nation in the US, making them each a motivated voice in the American political camp.⁵⁹ Pat Simpson suggests that this expectation carries on to affect westerners’ view of post-Soviet literature and art, which is primarily valued for its dissident character (Simpson 398). So, the same expectation may influence the way we see Shteyngart himself.

At the same time, these characters are troubled by an inability to fulfill Russian and European expectations.⁶⁰ For example, when asked by a Slavophile friend whether he reads poetry, Vladimir rattles off a list of names including Akhmatova and Brodsky, only to have these references dismissed as the “baggage of the new [world]” (*Russian Debutante* 223). By adhering to western expectations of Russian culture, Vladimir replaces a Russian sensibility with a model of coherence imposed by western publishers and public knowledge. Likewise, as we shall see, these characters’ Jewishness removes them from a stable sense of Russianness. Critic Magdalena J. Zaborowska argues that the strength of the modern immigrant writer’s self-narrative comes from his confrontation of this troubled semiotic status. She writes:

[N]ewcomer authors can be read as subjects when we focus on the failures and disillusionments they relate rather than on standard Americanizations that they were expected to undertake. Having come here, the immigrants find themselves caught in the juxtaposition of the Old Worlds and the New – and both are unavailable to them. The two alien cultures facing each other over their respective differences produce an immigrant conflict

⁵⁹ For a full treatment of this dynamic, see Leighton’s essay “The Third Emigration and the West.”

⁶⁰ For an account of how Shteyngart himself has been perceived by Russian critics to be insufficiently Russian, see: Adrian Wanner’s “Russian Hybrids: Makine, Kaminer, and Shteyngart” (667-668).

of in-between identity. (Zaborowska 27)

Shteyngart's depiction of characters that are "properly" neither American nor Russian defies the nationalistic logic of the novel of assimilation, as well as the nostalgia of the émigré tale. Unwilling to default to the stability provided by these genres, Shteyngart draws our attention to the tropes of these narratives. Hence, his protagonists read as semiological pawns embattled by a multiplicity of national conventions. But in this troubled position, he creates characters that respond in novel ways to the intersecting structures of affiliation that govern the global era. And in so doing, I argue, he articulates a global subjectivity that reflects a changing attitude toward national affiliation and the fulfillment of national narratives.

Julia Kristeva speaks to this crisis of self-narration, which she goes so far as to associate with the excesses of twentieth-century totalitarianism (*Nations* 69). She describes a "speaking being" that is fundamentally fragmented and disoriented amongst the competing symbolic orders of nationalism, religion, and secular progress.

The values crisis and the fragmentation of individuals have reached the point where we no longer know what we are and take shelter, to preserve a token of personality, under the most massive, regressive common denominators: national origins and the faith of our forebears. "I don't know who I am or even if I am, but I belong with my national and religious roots, therefore I follow *them*. Thus does the contemporary Hamlet soliloquize, and it is a rare person who does not invoke a primal shelter to compensate for personal disarray. (2)

Kristeva's invocation of Hamlet echoes the "émigré Hamlet" of Nabokov's era, suggesting an individual immobilized by the weighty project of self-definition in the shadow of the patriarch's narrative. The immigrant seeks the stabilizing "natural" space of the homeland (the father), even while invited by the adoptive symbolism of the new

order. But, in fact, it is through this discomfort that the subject is given voice. She continues: the “speaking being...is actually made up of a splitting, a clash between our symbolic identity having strong brotherly demands and our imaginary identity rooted in the original cell (family, race, biology)” (4). The speaking subject struggles to reconcile its own imagined originary unity with the competing and fragmenting demands of its complex narrative environment. And the doomed effort of reconciliation reveals the subject's essentially uncategorizable nature, the “individual strangeness” that Kristeva argues must be recognized not just in displaced people, but in people of every civic status (47).

In this chapter, I argue that Shteyngart embraces this strangeness and fragmentation by defiantly fashioning his characters as failures. Neither *The Russian Debutante's Handbook* nor *Absurdistan* emphasizes redemption as the foregone conclusion of the immigrant narrative: in the end Vladimir is still threatened by his foreignness in the United States, with an American son “in cahoots” with his American mother (*Russian Debutante* 476); and Misha Vainberg becomes a refugee from Absurdsvani attempting to reenter the U.S. as an illegal immigrant with a fake passport (*Absurdistan* 333). Both Vladimir and Misha manage to reposition themselves in relationship to their difference, but they cannot eliminate it. Indeed, they must not, lest their story endorse too closely any nationalist narrative of normalcy. By refusing this orthodoxy, Shteyngart distances himself from the determinism of linear models of history and filiation that support the logic of assimilation, insisting instead on a model of simultaneity, imperfection and ambivalence.

We should read Shteyngart's engagement with far-reaching cultural narratives as directly linked to his explicit engagement with literary continuities and the formation of his own literary identity. Like his refusal to adhere to the tropes of the immigrant narrative, I argue, Shteyngart's intertextual style leverages literary markers to create a vocabulary of divergence from nationalized narratives of success and identification. In the latter part of this chapter, I will focus on Shteyngart's allusions to Ivan Turgenev, himself an exile who returned to Russia, and Ernest Hemingway, the prototypical American expatriate. By invoking these names, Shteyngart creates a shifting economy of displacement that destabilizes the expected progression from Russian to American poles of identity. In so doing, he is able to capitalize on the varying tones of the immigrant, expatriate, and exile to establish not a successful narrative of an achieved or restored identity, but rather a personal narrative freed – to the limited degree to which that is possible – by its refusal to accept its proper generic conclusion.

Masculinity and the Cult of the Immigrant

Shteyngart's main intervention into the immigrant narrative is his refusal to allow his protagonists access to traditional versions of sex and masculinity. In previous chapters, we have observed that the genealogical continuity of the filial line serves as a unifying metaphor for notions of filial continuity and identification. The Oedipal structure, as we've observed it, promises continuity insofar as the son eventually becomes a father, and inherits the signifying authority associated with that position. *Lolita's* themes of sexual perversion evoked something of the dread and titillation resultant from

the foreigner's uncontrolled presence. But the unfit masculinity that Shteyngart represents in his work suggests instead a form of semiotic castration that reproduces the displaced subject's semiotic powerlessness.

Until fairly recently, "the immigrant" has traditionally been imagined in scholarship and in public policy as male, owing to the early assumption that men are the primary economic subjects that drive international migration (Hondagney-Sotelo 5).⁶¹ We are of course aware of the close connection between the hegemony of manhood and the nation,⁶² as seen in the institution of marriage, fatherhood, laws regulating sexuality, and the gendered division of labor and capital. These institutions seek to unify the variability of individuals within the nation under a rigidly codified system of sexual and familial relations. But current studies of such institutions seek to discard the idea of static and universal genders, instead articulating a pluralized model of dynamic, local masculinities.⁶³ Such studies urge us to see masculinity as a performance in complex and evolving settings. This chapter takes its cue from R.W. Connell's work on gender, which advocates the study of the transnational space as a hotbed for intersecting and evolving masculinities.⁶⁴ In this context, Shteyngart's insulted protagonists urge us to train a critical eye on the gendered apparatuses that inflect the immigrant narrative, allowing a renewed focus on the problem of a mythologized patriarchy.

⁶¹ Hondagney-Sotelo further argues that, taken on their own, studies of women in immigration done in reaction to this precedent may have given the unintended effect of reinforcing a universalized masculinity in the field of immigration studies, because gendered arguments had not been performed on men until recently.

⁶² For an overview of current literature, see Jeane Nagel's essay "Nation" in the *Handbook of Studies on Men and Masculinities*.

⁶³ For more on these trends, see Oystein Gullvag Holter's essay "A Theory of Gender, Patriarchy and Capitalism" and Robert A. Nye's "Locating Masculinity: Some Recent Work on Men."

⁶⁴ Specifically, Connell's "Men, Gender and the State" and "Globalization, Imperialism, and Masculinities."

In the orthodoxy of American immigration, state apparatuses play an important role in normalizing a masculine identity: the imperative to marry and raise a fruitful (and heterosexual) family; the economic mandate to work and produce, especially through physical labor and through contact with the land;⁶⁵ and the cultural expectation to adopt qualities typically held to be masculine, such as competitiveness, independence, and ambition. All this is, of course, not to mention the inevitable caveat that the family line is fully integrated in the host nation only by producing children, who are born with the advantage of citizenship. Yet, normative masculinity is frequently withheld from the immigrant on the basis of race and class. Long familiar narratives seek to emasculate Jewish and Asian immigrant men, and to present black men and Latinos as hyper-sexual and physically threatening. (As we saw in the previous chapter, Nabokov appealed to similar narratives in his American works.) Likewise, immigration imagery from the early twentieth century infantilized the incoming population with narratives of rebirth and childishness. In these stories, the body is reasserted as a social construction, the form of the Other banished from the space of proper sexual availability and potency, barring the naturalizing path of heterosexuality, reproduction, and inheritance.

As such, Shteyngart burdens his protagonists with a doubtful ability to fulfill the narratives of manhood set before them. Misha Vainberg is seemingly unable to exercise any agency at all. He is overwhelmed by the “virus” of Soviet history, and is likewise immobilized as the heir to both his father’s wealth and his guilt, both of which were earned in the wake of the Soviets’ failure (*Absurdistan* 37). From the very first, he

⁶⁵ These activities are specifically characterized as masculine ones, for example, in Willa Cather’s *My Antonia*.

questions “If ‘man’ is the right word” to describe him; and Misha’s grotesque body projects his unfitness and impotence, from his obesity to his “half-*khui*,” which was mutilated in a botched circumcision (vii, 10). Paralyzed by the ideal narrative of his predecessor, Misha is arrested in a feeling of orphanhood and childish reverence for his deceased “Beloved Papa,” whose imperfections he refuses to acknowledge even in memories (179, 233). Similarly, Vladimir Girshkin is infantilized by the ambitions laid before him by his overbearing mother, whose criticisms of her son include even his posture. She accuses him of “walking like a Jew” and having “homosexual hips,” characterizations that make Vladimir’s divergence seem all the more hopeless by naturalizing the correlation between sexual and social masculinities (*Russian Debutante* 45).

In much the same way that Misha's body is emasculated, Vladimir's body is both feminized, from his “homosexual hips” to his short stature and small penis, and made animalistic, his “East Bloc smell” earning him the childhood nickname “Stinky Russian Bear” (36). All these details mark the body with a physical difference that critic Daniel Boyarin equates with a phallic lack that signals feelings of alienation and contempt for the Jewish subject. This characterization reveals an act of violence that links the racially and sexually symbolic marginalization of Vladimir's body with the grotesque mutilation of Misha's penis. For Boyarin, the circumcised penis signifies innate and palpable difference, which naturalizes the disadvantaged position of the Jewish man in the face of xenophobia and antisemitism (Boyarin 277). Misha Vainberg's traumatic circumcision signals this fundamental castration, a loss literally ordered by his father, who dominates

Misha's thoughts and ties him culturally, spiritually, and legally to the backward sphere of Eastern Europe. We also sense in this castration anxiety the vivid internalization of Vladimir's "beta immigrant" angst, his failure to fulfill the demands of the 'good' immigrant persona, and the narratological weight of the intersecting national histories and identities that would define him. Both protagonists bear the marks of culture openly on their bodies.

Misha and Vladimir's dual castrations invite us to consider Shteyngart's work in psychoanalytical terms, gesturing at what Slavoj Žižek has defended as "the 'hard kernel' which announces itself through the 'patriarchal family' – the Real of the Law, the rock of castration" (Žižek 50). However, Shteyngart's explicit use of phallic and Oedipal imagery seems in the end to be somewhat misleading in its straightforwardness. It is true, the "big Other" looms throughout these novels, but a classic understanding of the Oedipal structure does not explain the complicated subjectivity of their immigrant protagonists (46).

In Shteyngart's novels, the son cannot resolve his anxieties by taking the position of the father for himself. Thus, after Misha Vainberg literally fulfills the Oedipal narrative by sleeping with his father's young wife Lyuba, his self-loathing only increases, as his encounter ends with an internal disapprobation: "*Not too bright, you step-mother-fucking, father-hating joke of a man*" (*Absurdistan* 95). We might have expected this encounter to restore Misha's castration, allowing him to recover something of the phallus by claiming his father's position – indeed, Lyuba calls him "little father" – but instead it worsens, as Misha imagines himself to have lost a testicle as some sort of

“Freudian revenge” for his usurpation (93). The same discomfort is expressed early in *The Russian Debutante’s Handbook*. Vladimir transforms his feelings of insufficiency into an anxiety about his father, one day noticing “the new and disturbing fact [that] his father [is] old” (*Russian Debutante* 34). This transference suggests an anxiety about a new order where the father, relegated to the past, is surpassed and no longer able to provide structure or clarity to his adult child. When the son is not able to articulate for himself a stable sense of agency, the result of this change is doubly threatening.

This emasculated state directly recalls that of the emigre Hamlet – in fact, Misha Vainberg is referred to throughout *Absurdistan* as a “sophisticate and a melancholic,” evoking the student prince (*Absurdistan* 116). But whereas Nabokov's early protagonists restore themselves and their predecessors through art, Shteyngart's have no such recourse. These characters do not simply confront their forebears in a time of uncertainty; they also lose themselves in the demanding symbolism of a foreign culture. Critics Olesya Turkina and Viktor Mazin describe this trauma from the perspective of the post-Soviet subject who is left searching for a coherent vocabulary of self after the loss of the empire. For Turkina and Mazin, the bedrock of subjectivity is constituted from the “parental function” of “Great Stories” that socialize the child according to the narrative of the nation (Turkina and Mazin 74). Without this parental presence, the individual is left virtually nameless, unable to articulate his sense of self in a newly incomprehensible history. For the post-Soviet subject, this means a loss of the central antagonism between East and West, but for Shteyngart’s immigrant Hamlets, the threat of this loss is multiplied by the subjects’ confrontation with a series of new narratives: the normative

American; the sympathetic immigrant; the detestable foreigner; and the super-literate, politically conscious Russian. Where these stories overlap, the work of these novels takes place.

We note in these texts that the threatening phallic power of the father, who at times seems to be the central hub of the son's symbolic dilemma, is dispersed throughout both novels to other relationships. This redistribution is most explicit in *The Russian Debutante's Handbook*. Vladimir's father is a "tired" Old World figure, imagining himself as a "beta peasant, poor fellow with his weak, sentimental heart," a Russian precursor to Vladimir's beta immigrant. As such, the father recedes into the past to allow the ascendancy of Vladimir's mother, the "alpha peasant" who has pulled the family into the New World (*Russian Debutante* 133). Mrs. Girshkin is said to be "the law of the household," fully inhabiting the Law of the Father (138). Indeed, as a successful corporate lawyer, she represents the law of the New World both literally and figuratively. She assumes the authority to name, dubbing Vladimir "*Failurchka*. Little Failure," thereby enacting the nationalist narrative of American economic ambition (16). And her emasculating exhortations about Vladimir's body further inscribe her narrative authority in the realms of sexuality and race. We observe a similar movement in *Absurdistan* when Misha's mother threatens the symbolic reign of his father, refusing to circumcise her baby for fear that the custom was 'too Jewish' (*Absurdistan* 18). Throughout both novels, the Law of the Father is dispersed, but not dispelled. The son is left at the mercy of another order embodied by the mother, the Oedipal object of desire. The Oedipal triangle is twisted, and the figure that typically promises unity to the subject

becomes in herself threatening.

So, it is striking to note in these texts a consistent intermingling of the parental with sexual relationships, a theme signaled explicitly when Misha Vainberg remarks, “For reasons all too complex and murky, the sight of children and their parents together aroused me” (210). We sense this overlap in Misha’s relationship with the Absurdsvani girl *Nana*, whose rather suspect name echoes the privileged position of the grandmother as a figure of continuity in much of Shteyngart’s work. For Shteyngart’s characters, graduating into mature sexuality does not restore the divided subject, but rather immerses him anew in a narratological struggle with the big Other. This is made no clearer than in Vladimir Girshkin’s relationship with the wealthy Francesca, with whom he experiences his closest approximation to acculturation. Even in acceptance, Vladimir is subject to a redoubled narrative burden. He is admired primarily as a novelty by Francesca’s cosmopolitan family and Slavophile friends; and Francesca herself, who enumerates Vladimir’s virtues as “Well-read, educated, from a different country” (*Russian Debutante* 79), feels uncomfortable when Vladimir tries to include himself in the banalities of everyday life. (“Good enough for bed, but not good enough for the organic-toothbrush store,” he complains (96).)

Francesca explicitly articulates Vladimir’s position: “I like you because you’re a small, embarrassed Jew. I like you because you’re a foreigner with an accent. I like you, in other words, because you’re my ‘signifier’” (80). As such, Francesca’s narrative of irreconcilable difference has the same effect as the nationalistic narrative of success and assimilation touted by Vladimir’s mother. Indeed, Francesca is said to resemble

Vladimir's mother (81), who later seems to appear as the couple is arguing: "Vladimir looked down at his feet, brought them closer together, as if Mother had been hovering over the scene all along" (97). The big Other reasserts itself through this relationship, recalling both the cultural and physical inscription of difference that paralyzes both Vladimir Girshkin and Misha Vainberg. Even in acceptance, Shteyngart's immigrant subject occupies a position of semiotic castration as the object of someone else's nationalist narrative.

Refusing the Immigrant Story's Resolution

This position is a psycholinguistic double bind which locks the subject into an economy of foreignness, foreclosing all possibility of normalcy or naturalization. In Shteyngart's Oedipal struggle, there is no exit or resolution, only an endless web of conflicting narratives. Even as Vladimir Girshkin surpasses his father, he can do so only as the *beta* to his mother's *alpha*. And even as he is acculturated into an American family, he can do so only when received as fundamentally foreign, a mere signifier in a narrative based on exoticism and facile liberalism. Hence, Shteyngart's definitive word on his immigrant protagonist's future with an American mate:

Their life would be uneven and strange, but not much stranger, and certainly not as awful, as the life that preceded this one. At least, with the Ruocos, his lack of ambition was a virtue, not a vice. At least he could Jew-walk to his heart's content...

And that would be the compromise, not bad as compromises go. He would never be lonely in America. He would never need turn to the Girshkins for their dubious parental comforts, never have to spend another day as Mother's Little Failure. At the age of twenty-five, he would be born into another family.

He would have reached, all by himself, the final destination of every immigrant's journey: a better home in which to be unhappy. (100)

Vladimir is born again to another culture, no longer lonely but fundamentally compromised. Shteyngart cryptically rearticulates the same impossible position in *Absurdistan* as Misha Vainberg weeps for “[his] own impotence and collusion in everything around [him]” (*Absurdistan* 37). After the death of his powerful father, Misha is as though swept away by history, helpless against the force of its current but also dependent on the coherency it provides. In the end, Misha runs from the legacy of Judaism and his father, expecting only to raise the child of the disdained writer Jerry Shteynfarb (objectifier of the Jewish immigrant story par excellence) with his girlfriend Rouenna (332). Likewise, Vladimir returns to the U.S. to await the birth of his son, whose coherent identity, an “American in America,” is a matter of anxiety more than satisfaction (*Russian Debutante* 476). Neither novel allows relief for its protagonist.

The critical move that Shteyngart’s novels demand, I think, is rooted in this refusal to unify the divided subject. Indeed, their function as satire requires it. Speaking in terms of genre, the very idea that Vladimir or Misha should find stability by resolving their gendered narratives of kinship and marriage would render them both (and the novels themselves) passive objects of the nationalist narrative of American assimilation. But by performing this narrative of orthodoxy *badly*, Shteyngart's characters establish an alternate narrative that is ultimately unconcerned with assimilation, and that instrumentalizes the nationalist narrative in a story that is at once personal and global in nature. Immigrant angst is but one experience of otherness in Shteyngart's work, and the dualistic national framework that sets this angst in motion is folded in upon itself as these novels venture into other forms of displacement. This effect is perhaps no more clear

than in Vladimir Girshkin's mid-novel transition from immigrant to expatriate:

[He] would never be an *immigrant* again, nevermore a man who couldn't measure up to the natives. From this day forward, he was Vladimir the Expatriate, a title that signified luxury, choice, decadence, frou-frou colonialism. Or, rather, Vladimir the Repatriate, in this case signifying a homecoming, a foreknowledge, a making of amends with history" (179).

By calling himself an expatriate, Vladimir claims both a state of nationlessness and a prerequisite sense of belonging to the nation that he left behind, effectively fulfilling his American identity by choosing to leave the country. In the same breath, he anticipates in his trip to Prava a sense of restoration, expecting perhaps to replicate the childhood unity of living as a Russian in Russia. The simultaneity of these claims perhaps does not suggest an easy coexistence of American and Russian identities, as much as it indicates an ethics of difference that assumes these national categories are caught in a state of turbulent intersection and co-constitution.⁶⁶

The simplicity that Vladimir presents to the reader in this passage is not to be borne out, because the distinctness of these national identities topples under the weight of lived experience. For one, Vladimir's homecoming is entirely imagined: his trip to Prava is in reality not a return but a relocation to a country he's never been to. Indeed, he is attacked as an *auslander* by a group of nationalists – and even while seeking normalcy in Russianness, he is repeatedly received as an *amerikanetz*. More to the point, Shteyngart's Jewish protagonists are alienated even in their home country by the widespread antisemitism they face in Russia. This much is made evident even by the nationality on

⁶⁶ This seems in line with the focus on intersection, hybridity, and creolization that has dominated debates about cultural formation in recent years. For more, see Homi K. Bhabha's "Cultural Diversity and Cultural Differences" and Kwame Anthony Appiah's "The Case for Contamination."

their passports, listed as Jewish rather than Russian, a practice that historically split the identity of Russian Jews in the Soviet Union.⁶⁷ As such, Shteyngart's protagonists become Russian only by leaving Russia, naturalized too late by the priorities of an insular American gaze.

Such is the case, arguably, for Shteyngart himself. Slavicist Adrian Wanner's somewhat glib final word on Shteyngart, “Russian to Americans, American to Russians, and a Jew to Jews,” leads us to reconsider the national dualism implied by immigration, nationality here understood as an attribute applied to the subject from outside, not an essential quality of the self (*Out of Russia* 133). Rather than an absolute bulwark of identity, nationality is here a matter of context, an unstable conclusion reached between the subject, who tries to articulate its own sense of self, and the Other, who observes the subject from without. Such a notion compels us to rethink the masculinist unity of the self that the national gaze assumes. No longer dependent on the singular origin of paternal authority, the subject is defined dynamically through contact with the foreign Other, and through this negotiation finds itself in context amongst related – and sometimes contradictory – categories of normativity (nation, gender, etc.).

This is a formulation that we, in spite of ourselves, seem to understand intuitively. Elsewhere, Wanner makes a sort of structuralist truism: “one could argue that it is precisely the look from abroad and the confrontation between the 'native' and the 'foreign' that allows the construction of national identity in the first place” (4). We recognize in this dichotomy between “native” and “foreign” the same cyclical collapse that we

⁶⁷ For more on this phenomenon, see Adrian Wanner's *Out of Russia: Fictions of a New Translingual Diaspora*.

observe in Nabokov's work, where the self and the Other merge in a kind of mutually-constituting spiral, and still further, the commonality and complicity we observe in *Lolita* between the desires of the American reader and the foreign speaker. In his emigre works, Nabokov generates in this collision a sense of continuity, and *Lolita* invites a democratizing kind of transnational contact. But Shteyngart's immigrant subject finds ceaseless disruption.

This contact-as-conflict is central to Shteyngart's hybridized immigrant subject, who we should see neither as halfway through the process of acquiring the symbolic capital of Americanness, nor as uniquely able to pick and choose the best of both worlds in comfort. Rather, the hybrid subject is, for most purposes, a free agent that navigates intersecting symbolic landscapes, dynamically challenging and creating meaning. For Shteyngart's immigrant subject, the rigid logic of nation and patriarchy is replaced by a process of confrontation, rearticulation, and growth. This rhizomatic model of subjectivity provides the underdog 'beta immigrant' with recourse to personas ultimately unconcerned with orthodoxy and legitimacy as defined by a single cultural vocabulary.⁶⁸ As such, Shteyngart's protagonists shift between the roles of philanthropist and conman, or mobster and family man as readily (and messily) as they do between national categories.

These movements are lateral, not hierarchical, and their priority in directing Shteyngart's novels belies the strength of the patriarchal imperative behind more traditional immigrant narratives. The ethical value of this mode of subjecthood is a key

⁶⁸ For more on this model, see Gilles Deleuze's and Felix Guattari's "Introduction: Rhizome." in *A Thousand Plateaus*.

concern in Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari's *Anti-Oedipus*:

[The unconscious] knows nothing of castration or Oedipus, just as it knows nothing of parents, gods, the law, lack. ...The question is not that of knowing if women [or indeed, anyone] are castrated, but only if the unconscious "believes it," since all the ambiguity lies there. What does belief applied to the unconscious signify? What is an unconscious that no longer does anything but "believe," rather than produce? What are the operations, the artifices that inject the unconscious with "beliefs" that are not even irrational, but on the contrary only too reasonable and consistent with the established order? (*Anti-Oedipus* 61).

Shteyngart's 'beta immigrant' implies a disbelieving subject and a full rejection of the assumed castration of his protagonists, or at least a rejection of the notion that their foreignness represents a lack that must be restored. To uncritically reproduce such an image would be to reproduce the vertical power structure that inspires it, and to continue its symbolic violence.

This, I think, accounts for the misogynist streak that both Vladimir Girshkin and Misha Vainberg display. Consider Vladimir's characterization of Francesca as his "last hope of conquering the New World" (*Russian Debutante* 178), or Misha's callous explanation for choice to abandon his Absurdi girlfriend, "I don't want her. And I don't want her people" (*Absurdistan* 332). For both men, the complexes of nationalism overlap uncomfortably with their relationships, rendering women as cultural conquests, and relationships themselves as little more than the fulfillment of some tribal imperative. Indeed, citing Benita Parry, Daniel Boyarin attributes a concomitant misogyny (not to mention homophobia and racism) to the divided subject who seeks wholeness through the subjection of others (Boyarin 285). By giving credence to the mythology of nations and naturalization, Vladimir and Misha perform the same violence on their romantic

partners that they themselves face. And for their efforts, they restore no part of unity.

Given all this, alongside the fertile globalism and knotty transnationalism that characterize his sometimes circuitous novels, Shteyngart's work is a significant revision of the classic immigrant narrative. By confronting the castration of his protagonists while ultimately refusing restoration as a sought-after conclusion, these novels signal the illegitimacy of American assimilationism and cultural supremacy, embracing instead a form of cosmopolitanism in the tradition of the archetypal wandering Jew. These texts offer a hybrid subjecthood as a powerful alternative to nationalism while avoiding the vagaries of utopian cosmopolitanism or mystic humanism. The hybrid subject is a powerful one not because it is a superior subject, or indeed a more comfortable one, but because it is a subject uninterested in the stability of meaning. This much, as we shall see, is clear even in Shteyngart's process of intertextual self-identification.

Repositioning Shteyngart as Cultural Heir

In a recent special issue of the *Slavic and East European Journal*, Amelia Glaser remarks that Shteyngart and his Russian-American cohort function as translators and interpreters of Russian culture, capitalizing on the “mounting cultural capital of things Russian” (Glaser 18). From this perspective, we might read Shteyngart's frequent references to the Russian literary canon as a means of establishing a Russian pedigree while still writing for an English-speaking audience. The above pages, I think, necessitate further comment on this tactic, given Shteyngart's resistance to fulfilling national narratives of belonging. When approaching this subject, we need but remember

Shteyngart's tongue-in-cheek bear cub portrait to know that we as readers are being conditioned to read the author's Russianness, as Vladimir Girshkin's cosmopolitan girlfriend does, as a signifier to affirm our own Americanness. So, though we may nod knowingly at Misha Vainberg's evocations of Dostoyevsky (*Absurdistan* 15) and Chekhov (194), we must also avoid, as Americans, the pretension of too eagerly leaping upon *kulturnost'*, as does the young Russian major who insists before Vladimir that Turgenev's *Sportsman's Sketches* is mandatory reading for all Russians and modern Slavophiles (*Russian Debutante* 71). This short exchange sets up a bait-and-switch that informs our reception of all of Shteyngart's intertextual work. In truth, we are told, Vladimir only skimmed the classic in his youth and remembers none of it, so the litmus test for Russianness turns out to be an American invention, the iconic value of the great text receding behind Vladimir's lived experience. What then is the purpose of these references? And what is the effect of reading Russianness into them?

In my reading, Shteyngart's intertextual links continue the project of hybridity beyond introducing Russian signposts to address the priorities attributed to a Russian-American writer – that is, to interrogate the very notion of what it means to be a Russian writer in America, and what it means to claim any national culture in a transnational genre. The proliferation of writers and writing in Shteyngart's work suggests that professional self-representation is indeed on the author's mind and that, in spite of his apparent skepticism about national categories, he recognizes the enduring nature of the struggle for identity. These issues position Shteyngart as a writer besieged from all sides, drained of his voice by American tropes and overburdened by the legacy

of Russian letters. The complex that results is similar to that experienced by Shteyngart's emasculated protagonists, and the critical impulse behind his treatment of the subject is the same. The in-novel literary acts of Shteyngart's characters resonate potently because of their ultimate failure to reflect a stable sense of self.

For example, Vladimir Girshkin temporarily takes on the role of writer by penning a poem about a childhood memory of his mother. As we learn, the poem was written for the express purpose of ingratiating Vladimir to the American expatriate literati in Prava, packed with “as many ethnic references as possible” in order to make himself seem exotic (214). But the actual text is quite disarming, providing an uncharacteristically vulnerable and intimate look at the otherwise overbearing and manipulative Mrs. Girshkin. The castrating parent disappears and is replaced by a struggling and selfless woman who orders only water in a Chinese restaurant so she can afford to buy lunch for her son – the poem begins, “This is how I see my mother.” Stripped of her intimidating cultural capital, Vladimir's mother appears for one time fully accessible, and we glimpse here a relationship based on actual contact rather than the demands of expectation. But for its author the poem falls flat, overburdened by the familiar loaded imagery of the sacrificing immigrant mother and childhood nostalgia. At its reading, Vladimir characterizes the piece as such:

There it was. A poem with little to impart but with clean lines like the room at a good bed-and-breakfast: simple wooden furniture, a tasteful framed print hanging above the couch of some sylvan scene – moose-in-brook, cabin-lost-in-trees, whatever. In other words, thought Vladimir, it was absolutely nothing (262).

Vladimir's exotic references are rendered down-home, bucolic clichés already common to

the American cultural landscape, and one of the rare moments witnessed in the Prava literary scene that wasn't "entirely self-conscious or self-referential" is made to feel calculated and artificial (263). Saturated as *Russian Debutante's Handbook* is with self-conscious immigration tropes, it seems reasonable to read some of the same frustration in Shteyngart's authorial voice during this moment. Vladimir's audience gives the poem superfluous praise, yet the real content of the memory – access to experience, truth, or just its "individual strangeness" – is obscured by convention. The same seems to be a given in Shteyngart's storytelling.

Absurdistan features a similarly disquieted literary scene, in which Vladimir Girshkin reappears, accompanied by Gary Shteynfarb, now to address the weight of the author's Russian literary background. In a college memory, Misha Vainberg finds his Slavophile friend Alyosha-Bob with his Russian acquaintances destroying his material possessions, including a stack of Russian literature, as a drug-fuelled spiritual ritual and an attempt at becoming a "real Russian" (*Absurdistan* 177). The specificity of Alyosha-Bob's exhortations, "Die, Pasternak, die!" and "Fucking *Ada*. Take that, Nabokov! You sixteen-karat bore!" – not to mention the structural similarity to the novel's early citation of works by Ivan Goncharov and Fyodor Dostoyevsky – suggest a certain authorial endorsement of this exorcism. The scene recalls and amplifies Vladimir Girshkin's casual devaluation of the works of Ivan Turgenev, another instance of invoking the name of a literary 'father,' only to dismiss him.⁶⁹ One assumes that

⁶⁹ That Shteyngart should choose this text for Vladimir's dismissal is noteworthy. *Sportsman's Sketches* is regarded as a seminal text of Russian liberalism, and has invited comparison in American criticism to *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, being among the first texts in historical memory to concern itself with the emotional life of serfs.

Shteyngart is clearing for himself a creative space beyond the reach of both American and Russian narratives, and may be tempted to accuse him, after establishing his Russian pedigree, of trying to have it both ways.

But we are primed to distrust an unironic reading here. For one thing, we already know Girshkin and Shteynfarb as hacks who exploit their Russian background before an audience. More to the point, the destruction of Mandelshtam and Nabokov, Vladimir's ignorance of Turgenev, and the presentation of Vladimir's failed poem are all rooted in the representation of Russianness to American students, with all their cultural naivete and patronizing multiculturalism. The fact that Shteyngart references himself and his work twice during the violent encounter with Alyosha-Bob signals a commentary on his authorial persona. One possible implication is that the Russianness that we read in Shteyngart's novels is decidedly and deliberately false. From the learned allusions assumed to be rote in the Russian *dusha*, to the italicized and latinate Russian swear words that garnish Shteyngart's prose, those details that seem to signal authenticity are broadcasted through enough layers of exotic and domestic narrative to make the real core of experience completely inaccessible. "The real thing," it turns out, doesn't really exist in literature, as Alyosha-Bob's own realization signals: "I think Girshkin and Shteynfarb have really led me astray" (177).

What then of this liberating destruction, of evoking the Russian writer's celebrated predecessors only to put them through the shredder? As a metaliterary gesture, the night we see Vladimir and Shteynfarb together appeals to the killing of the father as a trope in and of itself. We expect Shteyngart to suffer from an anxiety of influence that mirrors the

complexes of his characters. And we expect the troubled writer to seek freedom by resisting the conventional markers of “Russianness” and “Americanness.” This expectation of cosmopolitan liberation, the exclusive insight of the marginal man, starts to feel familiar. This is the curious thing about writing for an audience that has grown to expect Brodskys and Akhmatovas. When immigration and exile become quintessentially Russian (or indeed, American), the liberating ambiguity of hybridity, which we expect to free us from the cultural inscriptions of nationalism, is itself codified in the national narrative. So, like Vladimir, who asserts his Americanness by leaving America, Shteyngart and his characters paradoxically assert their peculiarly Russian status by railing against it. And like the son raging for independence, this utopian hybridity reveals itself, when viewed as a simple reversal of the static, bordered nation, to be a product of the very category it hopes to overcome. In this way, Shteyngart's deconstructed immigrant story does indeed risk leading us astray. The fact that Shteyngart alludes to his own novel while denying his predecessors suggests that he has banished all but his own terms, but even his own terms, when carried out to this systematized conclusion, are wrong-headed.

Still, even if the reader comes to this conclusion, these texts begin to grant their author a troubled autonomy. Shteyngart's novels embrace the challenges of influence in the same way that they capitalize on the division of the immigrant subject. Rather than allowing us to avoid or resolve the sense of fracture, Shteyngart's work leads us to focus on the moving parts to observe their collision. This perspective allows us to view the hybrid subject not as a static category, but as an agent of dynamic intersection between

systems of meaning, and as a figure of ongoing adaptation and response to new orthodoxies. So, Shteyngart's intertextual anchors represent much more than sign-posts, winks, and nods. When observing the best of Shteyngart's intertextual work, we recognize the names of his predecessors not simply as unidirectional references, but as nodes of dynamic meaning that connect multiple separate but overlapping symbolic systems. These mentions are not references to the authors themselves, but rather a sort of synecdoche by which Shteyngart refers to a whole tradition of associations and a related set of expectations. The name of the father, then, does not simply threaten the project of autonomy. It also reveals itself as the predicate of change and newness.

This perspective allows us to consider ambiguity and ambivalence as fundamental to the modern subject and the relationships that constitute it. For the transnational subject in particular, for whom belonging, independence, and relevance can mean radically different and contradictory things at once, this perspective signals an important flexibility. Julia Kristeva's notion of "strangeness," for example, emphasizes the fundamental fragmentation of all subjects in order to free the foreigner [étranger] from the limited narrative options of national scapegoat and diasporic victim. For Kristeva, "strangeness" is produced by the intersection of separate and sometimes irreconcilable expressions of the self. Publicly, we experience strangeness as a result of intersecting narratives of race, gender, nation, and even profession; privately, we experience it in the fundamental contradiction at the heart of the very act of self-identification. She bases her reading of this private experience in the roots of psychoanalysis:

With the Freudian notion of the unconscious the involution of the strange in the psyche loses its pathological aspect and integrates within the assumed unity of human beings an *otherness* that is both biological *and*

symbolic and becomes an integral part of the *same*. [...] Uncanny, foreignness is within us: we are our own foreigners, we are divided. [...] My discontent in living with the other – my strangeness, his strangeness – rests on the perturbed logic that governs this strange bundle of drive and language, of nature and symbol, constituted by the unconscious, always already shaped by the other. (*Strangers* 181-182)

Otherness is integral to *sameness* because of the radical contingency that a subject can conceive of itself as such only in relation to an Other. The very act of self-definition requires self-differentiation, as we observe in the insecure subject's projection of its own fragility and incoherence onto the foreigner, or even more fundamentally, in the child's realization that his parents are someone *other* than himself. So, we learn to be ourselves quite literally from others, not just in the Great Stories that create meaning and culture, but also in the sudden and disturbing realization that in order to sense the unity of ourselves, we must first know alienation. Thus, our own unconscious is “already shaped by the other,” and we are in a sense foreign to ourselves.

Realizing this, Kristeva altogether rejects the notion of a unified subject in favor of a profound instability and constant negotiation of meaning, a call to immerse oneself in discursivity rather than the reassurance of a concretized identity. This should put us in mind of Mikhail Bakhtin's model of discourse, as well as the tension inherent to language and culture which, he argues, are simultaneously centralized into a stable core of meaning by the centripetal forces of authority and orthodoxy, and pulled apart by the centrifugal processes of interpretation and contact.

[T]he centripetal forces of linguistic life, embodied in the “singular language,” exists alongside practical heteroglossia. Language in any given moment of its development is stratified not by linguistic dialect in the exact sense of the word..., but...by social-ideological languages....And this practical stratification and heteroglossia is not just a static version of linguistic life, but a dynamic one: stratification and

heteroglossia deepen and widen as long as the language lives and develops; alongside the centripetal forces the continuous work of the centrifugal forces of language go on, and along with a continuous verbal-ideological centralization and unification go on the processes of decentralization and disunification.

The subject's every concrete linguistic expression is a point of application for both centripetal and centrifugal forces. (Bakhtin 84)

Bakhtin's heteroglossia is a movement from below, but here he acknowledges our indebtedness to the Great Stories of the patriarch – the first alien Other, the father – even as he reaffirms the resistance and revisions inherent in the life of language.

Heteroglossia, strangeness, ambivalence – all these are central both to the self and to language and symbol by nature. Consider the dual significance of Bakhtin's term *slovo*, which indicates both the singular and centralized naming authority of “a word,” and the elastic and collaborative nature of “discourse.”⁷⁰ In this formulation, the unique, unitary utterance exists alongside the dispersed commonality of language at large, with none of the violence implied by the Oedipal metaphor. As much as claiming control of the word (*slovo*) suggests the ability to name oneself or one's world, it also suggests the recognition that untroubled naming authority is unrealistic.

Heteroglossia and Simultaneity in “Fathers and Sons”

Shteyngart's intertextual references in *The Russian Debutante's Handbook* work in a similar way. Reading them as straightforward allusions suggests a conclusive statement about the cultural affiliations and aspirations of Shteyngart and his protagonist.

Vladimir's immigrant story is punctuated by allusions to the work of Ivan Turgenev, first

⁷⁰ For a helpful clarification of this subject, see David K. Danow's “M. M. Bakhtin's Concept of the Word.”

in the chapter titled “Fathers and Sons” (*Russian Debutante* 19) and again in the awkward party conversation about *Sportsman's Sketches*, tempting Shteyngart's knowledgeable readers with the flavor of Russian classicism. By contrast, Vladimir's life abroad is accentuated by frequent references to Ernest Hemingway, evoking America's Lost Generation of writers. The Americans living abroad in Prava are referred to as young Hemingways (212, 240), and the immigrant fetishism of the first half of the novel is replaced by a “cult of expatriates” (307) modeled after “Papa Hemingway, the patron saint of the expatriate scene” (301). The switch from Turgenev to Hemingway seems to reject the insular support of the diasporic Russian identity in favor of an unfettered individualistic freedom, a move that affirms a sense of American romanticism.

But, as Vladimir's subtle shunning of Turgenev suggests, these allusions are not without their baggage. Turgenev signifies not just Russianness, but an *American reader's* sense of Russianness; and Hemingway, whose complexity is obscured by the fawning nickname Papa, ultimately provides no meaningful reorientation for Vladimir or the effete and foolish expatriates in his circle. These references muddle Shteyngart's national symbolism, though they seem at first to lay it out neatly. But that's the point. By turning our attention to the layered significance of these allusions, we recognize them as points of contact in separate but intersecting systems of language and meaning. And by doing this, we gain access to a poignant moment of strangeness where the name of the father – or rather, the father's book – simultaneously signifies itself and something else.

The early chapter title “Fathers and Sons” (19) speaks to the tangled nature of Shteyngart's cultural landscape by revealing a moment of transnational hybridity that is

woven into the very fabric of his text. Positioned so early in Shteyngart's novel, this allusion seems to point to Turgenev's novel, a Russian reference to identify a Russian protagonist and a Russian writer. But as we familiarize ourselves with Shteyngart's work, this allusion loses its straightforward unidirectionality, instead suggesting both Russian and American frames of reference. After we become aware of the importance of Ernest Hemingway's paternal presence in the second half of Shteyngart's book, this allusion acquires a second referent: a Hemingway story of the same name. The phrase "Fathers and Sons" resonates as a simultaneous allusion to two separate originary texts and two separate canons. Ultimately, the key here is not the actual substance of these dual referents themselves, but our recognition of their simultaneous presence and the opposing forces they exert on the novel's cultural landscape.

Here meaning is not centralized around the name of the father. Instead, the significance of this allusion is contingent on the reader's willingness to entertain two separate and opposing claims about its supposed meaning: that Shteyngart's work originates from a Russian tradition, and that it originates from an American tradition. Ultimately, the full significance of the allusion is accessible only to readers who are aware of both referents, and those referents become clear only through the process of reading (and re-reading) Shteyngart's text. In this process, there takes place an unspoken dialog that occurs instantaneously in a moment of readerly recognition. That realization decentralizes the creation of meaning in the landscape of the text, disrupting the filial order of categorization that the allusion, and the immigrant narrative as a genre, implies as the baseline of meaning.

What might have seemed at first like a throwaway allusion thus signals the thematic work of the novel as a whole. This rings especially true when we consider the title “Fathers and Sons” in relationship to the contents of the chapter that follows. At first, the chapter and its title seem to reinforce a narrative order based in the immutable categories associated with the nation and its filial metaphor. The chapter sets the novel's events in motion by establishing a deal with the father of the gangster, Groundhog, who Vladimir will serve in Prava – Vladimir will assure his citizenship in exchange for a position of influence. We learn of Groundhog's rise to power from his aging father, who relates it as the story of father and son. And we and Vladimir are invited to respond to the son's exploits through one of two nationally-based moral codes, either with outrage, “in a kind of American way,” or acceptance, like a “*rusски muzhik*” (21). The word of the father and the civic structure of the nation are entwined here with the novel's inciting incident, initiating the plot as a product of these familiar orthodoxies. But our reading of the chapter title disrupts these categories even as they are established.

In the space of a three-word phrase, the distance between what we at first characterize as two separate modes of association is collapsed. The singular origin and linear progression implied by the national canon's filial metaphor are troubled by a model with dual predecessors, and by a successor whose invocation of the name of the father fundamentally alters its meaning. And the faith this chapter seems to express in the categories of nation and filiality is silently labeled as the premise of a post-structuralist satire, to be exposed by the rest of the novel's events. The title “Fathers and Sons” thus acquires a sense of productive hybridity, modeling a textual transnationalism that

parallels the novel's articulation of the transnational subject. The identifying phrase loses the centralized authority to create stable meaning, as do the literary forebears signaled by the reference, and even Shteyngart himself who momentarily cedes his authorial powers to the associative powers of his reader.

Turgenev's *Fathers and Sons* and the Superfluous Man

A closer reading of these dual referents reinforces the thematic importance of this effect. Shteyngart's references to Turgenev evoke a canon of works and characters that tacitly warn against the structural regime that would compromise the voice of his transnational creations. For example, mention of Turgenev brings to mind the characteristically unfit Russian heroic type, the superfluous man, named for Turgenev's short novel *Diary of a Superfluous Man*, who is marginalized in the same way as Shteyngart's immigrant subject. Slavist Ellen Chances links the origins of the superfluous man to the experience of the westernized intelligentsia of Turgenev's era, who felt as out of place in conservative Russia as they did in Europe (Chances 112). This is akin to what David Patterson refers to as a type of spiritual homelessness experienced by "a person who has lost a point, a place, a presence in life" (Patterson 2). More to the point, Patterson reads the superfluous man as a person who has lost the ability to respond to the cultural world with a viable voice, a "loss of the word" (10). This loss marks an imbalanced relationship to what Bakhtin has called the very "discourse of life" (qtd in Patterson 5), a powerlessness before a sense of cultural inertia that leaves language "permeated and entangled with common thoughts, points of view, alien value judgments

and accents” (Bakhtin 90).

The superfluous man's downfall is that he holds himself apart from these forces, seeking stability in a reactionary utterance. In the context of a novel like Shteyngart's this utterance would be the act of proclaiming an independent and uncomplicated political identity. But rather than restoring unity, the subject confounds itself. Patterson writes of the superfluous man, who does just that:

There is nothing of himself in his utterance; at best, there is merely an echo of himself in the word he has borrowed. The superfluous discourse, the discourse of the loss of the word, is a hollow discourse, and the superfluous man is a hollow man. He seeks no truth that might give his word substance and depth, for that would mean taking up a dialogical response to the other in place of his monological mimicry of the other; it would mean letting go of the handrails of fixed phrases and ready answers that imprison him; it would mean turning away from the mirror. And that he cannot do. (Patterson 12-13)

Elsewhere, Patterson characterizes the superfluous man's attempts to give himself voice as fundamentally “narcissistic,” isolated as they are from the discourse that gives life to language and culture (10). In his conviction about himself and his world, the superfluous man resigns himself to a life of non-existence, envisioning either a life undifferentiable from that of others or a life of complete inversion, neither of which he can fully own or inhabit. And in this way, the superfluous man can only “borrow” from the script that even in his resistance would only define him negatively. We observe this problem in Vladimir Girshkin's “uneven and strange” life with his essentializing girlfriend Francesca, and in the impasse he experiences as “foreigner” in the West and “auslander” in the East. And we sense the same difficulty in Shteyngart's references to Russian authors which, like so many golden apples, invite the reader to place his protagonist using categories of

difference already instrumentalized by national narratives.

Invoking this interpretation of the superfluous man in our reading of an American immigration novel should not lead us simply to bemoan the self-seeking nature of American culture specifically. Rather, it suggests the very category of nationality as a rigidly monological way of understanding identity. In the case of Shteyngart's immigrants, the civic subject's identity is a singular expression, either American or Other, Russian or Other, these categories constituted by mutual negation. Even identities that embrace a utopian transnational hybridity, as we have seen, are easily appropriated as part of a national narrative (as in the idea of immigration as quintessentially American, or exile and emigration as quintessentially Russian). So, recouping the loss of the word does not suggest unflinchingly reasserting one's own uniqueness in the face of "common thoughts." Even as Shteyngart's literary references immerse his work in the language of national canons, they introduce an epistemology that fundamentally resists the tendentious model of self and Other that underscores the logic of nationality and foreignness.

We turn now to Turgenev's *Fathers and Sons*, and the unsuccessful revolutionary Yevgeny Bazarov, sometimes identified as a superfluous man, whose ideological monism stands as a foreboding example of an ideological process that leads to the besieged subjecthood suffered by Shteyngart's immigrants. Bazarov envisions a life of complete ascetic objectivity in opposition to the sentimentality of his predecessors, denying himself his desire for Anna Odintsova and the redeeming affection of his parents (Ball 147). By attempting to reverse the life of sentiment, he fractures himself, making impossible any

union or compromise between his ideas and the ideals of his fathers. This sense of fracture is, rooted as it is in negative self-definition, a product of the very narrative that Bazarov resists. Likewise, the intelligentsia of Ellen Chances' example, split between Russianness and Westernness, recall a dichotomy that defies resolution and thereby reinforces the narrative of Russian essentialism and conservatism. In other words, as subordinates to a master narrative of irreconcilable difference, these figurations of the superfluous man suggest a direct cause for the loss of the word. Embracing with single-minded rigidity one side or another of a dichotomous schema, these predecessors model a way *not* to approach identity. And in so doing, they show how easily dualism is reduced to a kind of egoistic monism.

The contemporary reception of Turgenev's work lends potency to this reading. Critic Richard Freeborn characterizes Turgenev's era as a period when Russian litterateurs "presupposed commitment to one set of ideas rather than another," the intelligentsia having assumed an explicit role in directing the culture and politics of the nation writ large (Freeborn 244). The result, he writes, was "a literature riven by polemic," where the novel served as an occasion for public debate in the pages of periodicals. This environment naturally constrained the terms of artistic expression, as is particularly visible in the case of *Fathers and Sons*. Turgenev's novel provoked impassioned objections both from old-style liberals who disdained Bazarov as a fawning celebration of nihilism, and from radical youths who interpreted the character as a slanderous

caricature.⁷¹ This reception was arguably precipitated by the central conceit of the text, which, starting with its title, naturalizes the rupture of the Oedipal conflict as the structural center of political change.⁷² But the gesture is less interesting as an invitation to political reaction than as part of a study of Turgenev's cultural environment.

Read alongside Turgenev's 1869 essay "Apropos of *Fathers and Sons*," the novel positions Turgenev in opposition to the polemical nature of Russian letters, even while it indicates a certain fascination with it. Modern critics see in Turgenev's tale of Bazarov – and in the superfluous man in general – a call to dialogism as a model of expression rather than the rigid stability of naming and categorization (Ball 146, Patterson 16). Indeed Turgenev's "Apropos of *Fathers and Sons*" seems to substantiate this interpretation, locating in his work a "vagueness" that he expects not to be tolerated by readers who look to the author to provide a direct message (Turgenev 338-339). Turgenev urges novice writers against the impulse to "have the last word," instead advocating an unpolemical form of representative literature that observes for the writer "freedom in its widest sense – in one's relationship to himself, to one's preconceived ideas and systems, and even to one's nation and history." And yet, Turgenev's ideal of "communion" with one's surroundings necessitates that he immerse his work in the full landscape of Russian intellectualism, with all its inconsistencies. Bazarov's characterization, then, is not itself a political commentary, but rather one set piece in a fuller representation of a politicized literary atmosphere. Looking back, we recognize in

⁷¹ For an overview of the novel's reception, see James Woodward's book *Turgenev's Father's and Sons*.

⁷² Isaiah Berlin's influential review of *Fathers and Sons*, "Fathers and Children: Turgenev and the Liberal Predicament," reinforces this reading: "The central topic of the novel is the confrontation of the old and the young, liberals and radicals, traditional civilization and [a] new, harsh positivism."

Bazarov a prescient depiction of the thinkers that would first receive *Fathers and Sons*, and in this, as clear and vivid a depiction of that landscape as might be expected. That such a representation of Russian culture should have been met with resistance in a literature so invested in polemic is not surprising.

Here, the dilemmas of author and protagonist align. Just as Bazarov's access to word and voice is diminished by the fixity of an irreconcilable binary, so too was Turgenev's own access diminished before an audience primed to confirm in art what they already believed in the realm of politics. Turgenev's superfluous man, then, might serve as a double warning against both the insecure monism of the self and the rigid intellectual sectarianism that ruled the minds of his less well-attuned readers. This parallel establishes the novel as the site of a different sort of politics determined not by fixity, but by multiplicity and mutability. Bakhtin's heteroglossia here enters the realm of the self, emphasizing the layered affiliations and associations that equally divide and unify author, protagonist, and reader.

Embracing individual strangeness, then, is a matter of accepting the instability and contingency of the elements of meaning that constitute any world view. The superfluous man calls upon us to recognize this dynamic. That is the inheritance that Shteyngart claims by invoking Turgenev and *Fathers and Sons*, and by adopting Turgenev's template for his protagonists. But unlike his predecessor, Shteyngart approaches these issues before a postmodern audience that is more willing to accept the messiness of the borders that his narrative crosses. And we accept this not because it is desirable in some abstract partisan way, but because it is a fact of the world we live in.

Hemingway's "Fathers and Sons" and Oedipal Ambivalence

Still, when in *The Russian Debutante's Handbook* we encounter the paternal image of Ernest Hemingway, we as readers latch onto him for his curiously American air of independence and his ruggedly masculine persona, which stands in striking contrast to Vladimir's emasculated foreignness. More to the point, Hemingway's literary legacy models a life of narrative control that Vladimir tries to mimic when attaching himself to the writers in Prava, as if to enact an Eastern European *Movable Feast*. Indeed, Hemingway's nickname "Papa" signals both his machismo and his place of literary influence, as he is viewed by some as the father of the modern American "hardboiled" style, and the direct predecessor of writers like Norman Mailer and Kurt Vonnegut (McConnell 161-163). Hemingway's sparsely measured writing style in particular signals a level of semantic control that is denied to Shteyngart's protagonist. Critic Peter Schwenger long ago attributed to Hemingway a "masculine mode" of writing, citing his restraint in using details and his reticence for expressing unchecked emotion (Schwenger 621). But more than projecting some kind of superficial manliness, Hemingway's style suggests a total command of meaning within his narrative environment, aligning him with the Oedipal father.

Hemingway appeals to this narrative authority throughout his writing. In a letter addressed to a publisher, he writes, "[N]o alterations of words shall be made without my approval...[T]he stories are written so tight and so hard that the alteration of a word can throw an entire story out of key" (79). We can equate this "tightness" with the sense of

objectivity that we detect in Hemingway's consistent advocacy for the "simple declarative sentence," a just-the-facts approach to fiction that presumes to distill the author's expression to an unembellished reality (*Hemingway on Writing* 28, 38). Hemingway's metaphors for writing tend to invoke the authority behind this linguistic control, which he refers to as an unspoken law of prose "as immutable as those of flight, of mathematics, [and] of physics," aligning the author's "absolute conscience" with the authority of institutionalized measures of thought, including even the "standard meter in Paris" (77, 7). And critics have long connected Hemingway's work with various colors of imperialism, characterizing his naturalist depiction of Africa and Africans as an extension of the American frontier fantasy, and his depiction of Native Americans as implicit to a white male orthodoxy.⁷³ All this speaks to an understanding that critic Robin Silbergleid detects in Hemingway's posthumous novel *The Garden of Eden*, which she reads as a self-conscious dramatization of the power dynamics implicit to the act of narration. Creating narratives "functions as sense-making (and self-making)," an action that Silbergleid associates with a space of masculinity and the centralizing forces in the construction of meaning (Silbergleid 103). So, Hemingway's "masculine mode" becomes the exercise of a patriarchy of his own, an apparent mastery over an enclosed system of meaning.

But this legacy appears in stark contrast with the living textual reality that Shteyngart's dual reference signifies. Indeed, at the height of its semantic control, Hemingway's style depends on the same generative interpretation that Shteyngart's

⁷³ For more on this theme, see Josep M. Armengol-Carrera's essay "Race-ing Hemingway: Revisions of Masculinity and/as Whiteness in Ernest Hemingway's *Green Hills of Africa* and *Under Kilimanjaro*."

reference produces. In *A Movable Feast*, Hemingway writes briefly of his sparse style: “[Y]ou could omit anything if you knew that you omitted...and make people feel something more than they understood” (qtd in Schwenger 625). Omission being the other half of rigid selection, Hemingway here imagines this technique as a form of inducement, but the space for association must allow for the admission of the Other, dissipating the author's control of his linguistic landscape.

Shteyngart signals a key reference point for this uneasy intersection of authority and self-definition by gesturing twice to Hemingway's Nick Adams stories: first, with his allusion to “Fathers and Sons,” the last story in the collection, and later with a direct allusion to “The Killers” (*Russian Debutante* 80). The stories of Nick's childhood inspire a sociolinguistic reading, moving from the primordial imagery of the untamed, pre-linguistic subconscious to a narrative order established by a patriarchal figure. The collection begins and ends with Nick's childhood, framing the stories with Nick's relationship to his father and the Ojibwe people who play a consistent, yet marginalized role in his early memories. Nick's relationship to the Other is first characterized as a fear of death, experienced alone while his father is out fishing:

There was no noise anywhere. Nick felt if he could only hear a fox bark or an owl or anything he would be all right. He was not afraid of anything definite as yet. But he was getting very afraid. Then suddenly he was afraid of dying. Just a few weeks before at home, in church, they had sung a hymn, “Some day the silver cord will break.” While they were singing the hymn Nick had realized that some day he must die. [...]

Last night in the tent he had had the same fear. He never had it except at night. It was more a realization than a fear at first. But it was always on the edge of fear and became fear very quickly when it started. (*Nick Adams* 14)

Nick fires his rifle to break the silence and to signal his father to return, and he reports

that he was frightened by something that sounded like “a cross between a fox and a wolf” (15). Nick's fear thus reveals itself as a narrative crisis. The nothingness of death signaled by the church hymn is here evoked by the dark and soundless night, a threat that could be dispersed if only he could identify the distinct voice of some creature in the darkness: “if he could only hear a fox bark or an owl.” By knowing and naming the Other that awaits him outside the tent, Nick can end his anxiety, but when he tries to describe the cause of his fear, his imagination produces a disturbing chimera that defies category – something not quite wolf nor fox. The return of Nick's father restores coherence by naming his fear; it was a “screech owl” as Nick had originally hoped. The father's voice provides order and narrative in the wilderness, where otherwise the helpless son is left alone.

This anxiety continues, if somewhat more repressed, in Nick's relationship to the Indians. The uncontrolled pall of death follows the Indians throughout Nick's childhood, reinforcing an air of alienness, and aligning contact with the Other with the same desperate need for differentiability and regulation that Nick experiences in the darkness. Recall the suicide and gruesome caesarean surgery from Nick's first recorded encounter in “Indian Camp,” the man found face-down in the road at the start of “Ten Indians” (27), and the “sweetish smell that all Indians had” that seems to haunt his grandfather's shack after his last Indian tenant dies unexpectedly, making the property unrentable (35). The dark shadow of the Other persists, though the threat is neutralized by the father's act of differentiation. In “Indian Camp,” Nick's father momentarily masters the fear of oblivion by narrativizing his contact with the Other – that is, by selecting what aspects of the

experience are relevant and understandable. In the darkened room where he cuts into his patient, he reassures his son about the woman's cries of agony, “[H]er screams are not important. I don't hear them because they are not important” (18). Dr. Adams silences the disturbing cry of the Other, much as he did in the dark woods, with the authority of an instructing father, a practicing physician, and a white man among natives. And his glib explanation of the husband's suicide, “He couldn't stand things, I guess,” similarly provides order, giving a name – even if a strangely facile one – to the man's disturbing actions (20). The story concludes with Dr. Adams summarily answering a series of questions as Nick tries to understand what he saw, and finally with a sense of reassurance after the traumatic night, under the direction of the father: “In the early morning on the lake sitting in the stern of the boat with his father rowing, he felt quite sure that he would never die” (21).

Nick's father neutralizes the dark wordlessness of death itself by exercising his narrative will, and allows Nick to render the anxiety-inducing Other into something familiar. Thereafter, Indian characters acquire names, and Nick's contact with the Other develops into sexual and romantic love shared with his Indian girlfriends Prudence and Trudy. We see Nick enact his narrative mastery through his racially-based rejection of Trudy's brother Eddie Gilby “that half-breed bastard” as a potential suitor for his own sister Dorothy, his gleefully violent fantasies about shooting Eddie, and his indifference to Trudy's tears after hearing his threats (262).

Having thus internalized the symbolic voice of the patriarch, Nick turns it against his own father to reassert his own subjecthood. In “Fathers and Sons,” Nick admits the

uselessness of his father's opinions in matters of sex (258) and recalls vivid fantasies about shooting his father (265).⁷⁴ And most importantly, he links the narratively potent sense of smell, elsewhere associated with the haunting memory of the Indians (35, 266), to his father when he recalls inheriting a pair of outgrown underwear which he had refused to wear because “Nick loved his father but hated the smell of him” (265). In these memories, Nick's feelings about his father blend with the anxiety and alienation provoked by death and the Indians early in the collection, reimagining the Other as an entity both absolutely foreign yet fundamentally familiar.

Remember Kristeva's “strange” subject, governed by an unconscious that is at once the subject's own and “always already shaped by the other” (*Strangers* 182). Here, the Other – the law of the father, the inertia of “common thoughts,” the cradle of culture – is figured literally as Nick's father, and the subject's “discontent in living with the other” emerges in Nick's Oedipal rage. Yet despite Nick's disgust at the stifling closeness of his father's odor, he still loves him; and while he distances himself from his Indian friends, he is haunted by their absence and longs for the contact he had experienced. All this reflects the “conflictual bond” the subject has with the Other, what Kristeva calls (borrowing a phrase from psychoanalyst Maurice Bouvet) a simultaneous “need for identification and a fear of it” (188).

Shteyngart's Transnational Ambivalence

Taken together, the dual referents of Shteyngart's allusion to *Fathers and*

⁷⁴ For more examples of the Oedipal conflict in this collection, see Ann Edwards Boutelle's essay “Hemingway and 'Papa': Killing of the Father in the Nick Adams Fiction.”

Sons/"Fathers and Sons" confirm an ambivalence not just at the center of his own novel, but as a major element in the life of his predecessors' texts. Turgenev's novel problematizes the singularity of the adversarial narrative of father and son, and the anxiety and vulnerability of the Nick Adams stories seem to indicate a sensitive fluidity more than a macho fractiousness. All this echoes Shteyngart's resistance to the orthodoxies of American immigration, as well as his reliance on the same themes. We should see here something similar to Nabokov's spiral, the "spiritualized circle" that connects past and present in the author's active imagination. Shteyngart's move from Russian to American, signified by the names of his iconic predecessors, is not a progression nor is it a comfortable stasis. Indeed, as many critics have noted, Ernest Hemingway viewed Ivan Turgenev as one of his greatest influences, a fact that Shteyngart likely knew, given Hemingway's celebrated status among Soviet audiences.⁷⁵ Even given this knowledge, though, one must acknowledge that Hemingway most frequently referred to his relationship to Turgenev as a fist fight which he, having surpassed his predecessor, had won (Cirino 46, *Hemingway on Writing* 99). So while Nabokov may have fashioned for himself an aesthetically pleasing spiral, one envisions more a cycle of dominance and dysphoria at play for Shteyngart.

We might view this simply as the nature of a life mediated by language. We observe this dynamic textually in the final pages of Hemingway's "Fathers and Sons," as Nick seamlessly, yet jarringly transforms from son to father before the reader's eyes. Although the narrator proclaims Nick to be "all through thinking about his father," he is

⁷⁵ For more on this, see Mark Cirino's "Beating Mr. Turgenev: 'The Execution of Tropmann' and Hemingway's Aesthetic of Witness," Deming Brown's "Hemingway in Russia," and Yuri Prizel's "Hemingway in Soviet Literary Criticism."

swept away by one last memory, which much to Nick's dismay, vividly enacts what we recognize to be the resolution of his Oedipal narrative:

[H]e had sat inside the woodshed with the door open, his shotgun loaded and cocked, looking across at his father sitting on the screen porch reading the paper, and thought, "I can blow him to hell. I can kill him." Finally he felt his anger go out of him and he felt a little sick about it being the gun that his father had given him. Then he had gone to the Indian camp, walking there in the dark, to get rid of the smell. There was only one person in his family that he liked the smell of, one sister. All the others he avoided all contact with. That sense blunted when he started to smoke. It was a good thing. It was good for a bird dog but it did not help a man.

"What was it like, Papa, when you were a little boy and used to hunt with the Indians?"

"I don't know." Nick was startled. He had not even noticed the boy was awake. He looked at him sitting beside him on the seat. He had felt quite alone but this boy had been with him. He wondered for how long. (*Nick Adams* 255-256)

The reader is perhaps inclined to see the unattributed line of dialog as part of the memory that preceded it, reaffirming Nick's position as a questioning son under the aegis of his father. Reading further, we, like Nick, are startled and confused. We experience here the subject's unease before the Other, and the strangeness this anxiety causes when envisioning his own identity. Nick disappears and reappears under the narrative presence of his father even as he is revealed to have become Papa himself. And his ascension reads as a non-event. The fracture and anxiety suggested by the Oedipal narrative are not resolved. Rather, they reappear cyclically, not just in the biological pattern of reproduction, but internally and symbolically, within the subject.

The same feeling of non-eventfulness seems to end Shteyngart's *The Russian Debutante's Handbook*, in which Vladimir's son is introduced with a similar anticlimax. After the twin dreams of stable identity and fatherhood are dashed by the imagined

collusion of Vladimir's American wife and son, we feel properly deflated because we seek resolution in a progression whereby troubled sons become wise and just fathers. But Vladimir's nationalistic complexes reveal him to be as petty and insecure as ever, and fulfilling the narrative of American immigration only heightens his dysphoria. Vladimir fantasizes about living “foolishly, imperially, ecstatically” in the days when he embraced the exhilarating marginality of Prava, yet he seems envious of the aseptic American lifestyle that awaits his son, “insulated from the elements by stucco and storm windows,” and from the “illness...fear and madness” of otherness represented by the “Eastern lands” of his father's origins (*Russian Debutante* 476). Vladimir is stifled by this binarism but at the same time he embraces the order it provides. We as Shteyngart's readers react to the text in much the same way. We enjoy the porous cultural borders that defy the steady logic of nation and other, but even as we read, we reinforce that same logic. The power and independence that Vladimir gains by asserting his Americanness abroad makes sense just as easily as the “foolish, imperial, ecstatic” life of exotic Russianness does. And our final disappointment for Vladimir signals our regret that he does not ascend into some comfortable national status.

So, this ending is not, I think, a complete failure of autonomy. As modern cosmopolitan readers, we approach immigration novels with an eye toward transcendence, waiting for a humanistic plot to dislodge the American insularity that marginalizes the foreigner. In this hopeful reading, we reveal our enduring dependence on the rigid categories of the nation, even while we presume to resist them. The utopian cosmopolitanism of the global elite depicted in Shteyngart's work (grad students, expats,

post-structuralist girlfriends) seems humorous to us because we recognize instinctively that it is impossible – even while we hope that it is not. Our initial credulous reading of Shteyngart's intertextual references, then, signals the novel's satirical function. We relish the dissolution of these categories because, fundamentally, we rely on them. Perhaps after all, we do not *desire* the complexities of transnationalism, though we must recognize that they exist. By creating himself self-consciously as a Russian-American writer, Shteyngart reveals the transnational not just as an external phenomenon of crossing borders, but an internal one of tangling and dissolution.

Coda

Critic Ali Behdad locates an enduring ambivalence at the center of American immigrant relations, and at the center of the very idea of the nation-state, which requires the threat of siege to give coherence to a national order (Behdad 156, 165). The American mythology of immigration, he writes, seeks to resolve this tension by generalizing a positive narrative of stable and acceptable immigration separate from its historical context. Quoting Lawrence H. Fuchs, he writes:

“[T]he lenient attitude towards immigration in the nineteenth century, once transformed into a national myth for and by subsequent generations, becomes forgetful of the historical context of its formation. What the myth of the nation as a refuge for the oppressed of all nations represses is that, until very recently, ‘it was applied only to whites from Europe’ and ‘was driven primarily by capital seeking labor in pursuit of wealth.’” (159)

The stereotype of the Russian-American immigrant stabilizes this mythology; and, as I have argued, the presence of the Russian-American author, especially the legacy of Vladimir Nabokov, in the American canon domesticates the presence of foreigners still further. Gary Shteyngart’s work speaks directly to American narratives of Russianness and the role of the Russian literary canon in embodying those narratives. And reading both authors together reveals a common tension at their core.

Nabokov’s induction into the American canon was characterized by the ambivalence of these national narratives: he and his characters represented an alienness that both drew and repelled readers, ultimately solidifying the perpetual outsider persona that feeds his brand of cosmopolitanism. Shteyngart both benefits from Nabokov’s cultural status and is pigeonholed by it, this dynamic representing the ambivalent

foundation of his relationship to Russian literature, which he must view through the perspective of his American audience as well as through his own national perspective. Nabokov's Russian work establishes this ambivalence not just in terms of American national ideas, but in terms of a more generalized narrative of nationality. The spiralized time line that links successor to predecessor; the interplay of reader and author who immerse each other in text; the co-constitution between author and protagonist, both of whom are the object of their reader; the rhizomatic growth enabled by fractured narratives; and the intersecting networks of national associations: all of these share a similar tension between a stabilizing authority and the openness of free association.

Our attentiveness to this tension introduces a complexity not typically associated with the mythologized assimilation narrative, or indeed with the narrative of Nabokovian independence that converted *Lolita* and the rest of Nabokov's catalog into American cultural currency. These narratives provide a stable image of acceptable difference that works as a foil to the racialized politics of immigration that dominate the national imagination today. The Eastern Europeans of the traditional immigration story present "proper" immigration as a *fait accompli*, something that is done by adhering to a set narrative that can be invoked in contrast to other less orthodox immigrant experiences: undocumented immigration, cyclical migration, and the experience of immigrants who cannot - or simply choose not to - assimilate as readily as the mythologized narrative, which has been polished and accelerated by historical distance, suggests. The iconic legacy of Russian authorship in America produces a similar effect, foreignness and American affiliation coexisting simultaneously within the celebrated author's name,

evidencing a successfully integrated difference.

But by reading Nabokov and Shteyngart in conversation with these mythologies, we reveal the unresolved ambivalence that is repressed by common narratives. The immigrant stories told by Shteyngart and Nabokov show the narrative of Russian immigration to be deeply unsettled in spite of - and indeed because of - the orthodoxies of American assimilation and affiliation. This approach, I believe, contests the language of domesticated difference that bolsters our era's entrenched and racialized discourse on immigration. Moreover, the ambivalence reflected in the work of Nabokov and Shteyngart reflects a paradigm shift that further undermines the rigidly nationalized narrative of immigration. Gayatri C. Spivak has remarked on the necessity in an era of global mobility to rethink the concept of diaspora, given its investment in the impossibility of return after crossing of national boundaries. Likewise, given the possibility of cyclical migration, the conception of America as "place of arrival" must also be rethought in the global era (Spivak "Reflections on Diaspora"). These changes suggest a movement from the rigid structuralism of the national, toward a fluid model of global movement, and shifting and simultaneous affiliations. The model of permanent immigration and the mandate for integration formalized by the mythos of European immigration seem less relevant in this environment.

And yet, in spite of the flexible autonomy that this global mindset might offer, we are still undeniably drawn to the stability of the national. Thus, in spite of the liabilities of their Eastern European identity, Shteyngart's protagonists are unable to fully inhabit any post-national subject position as either expatriate or cosmopolitan. And we finish

both novels disappointed that neither protagonist achieves a comfortable national status, though we are acutely aware of the confusion caused by such statuses throughout either book. Likewise, in spite of Nabokov's own articulation of his stateless cosmopolitanism, his cosmopolitanism is deeply entrenched in the associative language of nationality, and so we are still compelled by the question of his national affiliation. All this indicates a critical ambivalence that speaks to a central truth of the global era: our reality may be global and fluid, but even the most cosmopolitan among us are still invested in the security of national thinking. Acknowledging this ambivalence provides access to a political language that subverts national hegemony while avoiding framing the post-national as a space of transcendence. Indeed, as we have seen, even narratives of displacement typically associated with personal or aesthetic autonomy - expatriation, creative exile - are implicated in similarly constricting schemas of association and continuity. My approach to Nabokov and Shteyngart acknowledges the ambivalence that all such narratives of affiliation can inspire as foundational to global subjectivity, and indeed to much of human experience.

Suppressed Female Voices in the Russian Tradition

While this ambivalence provides some latitude in relationship to the paternal narratives of nationality, it does not offer a neutral position. Rather, whatever benefits of autonomy this embracing of ambivalence confers are deeply invested in gendered relationships. I have already discussed the suppression of the female subject in *Lolita* as a potential appeal to western readers' distrust of a foreign patriarchal presence. We might

observe a similarly stunting approach in the relationships that Shteyngart depicts, whereby Shteyngart's female characters are instrumentalized as part of his protagonist's cultural integration. As such, in *The Russian Debutante's Handbook*, Vladimir's relationship with Morgan, whom he meets in Prava and ultimately marries, is patronizingly predicated first on her access to "normalcy" as an American girl in contrast to his own persistent foreignness, but he ends the relationship when he begins to find her worldliness intimidating (*Russian Debutante* 328, 336). In *Absurdistan*, Misha Vainberg callously discards his provincial Absurdsvani girlfriend Nana for the chance to reclaim his American status at the end of the novel; and he is bolstered throughout by his relationship to Rouenna, whose low income, low education, and job as a stripper place her in stark contrast to the highly educated, wealthy, male Misha. The fact that Rouenna is Latina seems to comment further on this power differential, given Misha's European background. The possible fulfillment of Misha's immigration story is thus predicated on his contrast with a racialized immigrant group.

Indeed, much of the flexibility that Shteyngart and his characters enjoy in their ability to embrace their marginalized identity might not be possible for other immigrants who can't escape into whiteness. These relationships draw our attention to the instrumentalization of women in the gendered structures of cultural continuity, and to the instrumentalization of non-western people and people of color in enforcing solidarity in racialized narratives of belonging. This is a logical extension of Nabokov's and Shteyngart's more general project of deconstructing conventional narratives.

This does not yet speak to the gender bias that makes women's authorial voices so

uncommon in Russian letters abroad. The Oedipal logic that underlies the Russian canon, for example, presupposes a male writer as cultural father or son, imagining space for women primarily as an object of the male literary perspective. Beth Holmgren locates the roots of this issue in the political commitment of Russian letters, which derives a “generically male” perspective from the established personalities of the nineteenth century’s cultural leaders (Holmgren 136). The view of female subjectivity emerging for this perspective is thus characterized by “its secondary value, adjunct roles, conformist virtues, convention-bound sexuality” (140). Even positive depictions of women acquire a “terrible perfection,” which Rosalind Marsh associates with the stereotypes of the “strong woman” and the muse, such as the famously idealized Tatiana from Pushkin’s *Evgenii Onegin* (Marsh 13). We will recognize this positive stereotype even in Nabokov’s Zina from *The Gift*, Fyodor’s lover and ideal reader.⁷⁶

Holmgren remarks on the common tack for Russian women writers to subordinate their work to the furtherance of a cultural cause, ignoring the particularity of these issues likely because of the historical perception in Russian letters that “women’s literature” is a frivolous and corrupted form of a more universal, inherently masculine, art form (Holmgren 140, Marsh 13).⁷⁷ So it is of particular note that many of the Russian women who have risen to prominence in America directly address these cultural dynamics. In her 1969 autobiography *The Italics Are Mine*, Nina Berberova confronts the difficulty of establishing a private creative persona, which she articulates in opposition to the demands of the gendered domestic sphere and to the personalities of the emigre scene (“Father and

⁷⁶ For more on this, see Stephen H. Blackwell’s book *Zina’s Paradox*.

⁷⁷ For more on this perspective, see Judith Vowles’s essay “The ‘Feminization’ of Russian Literature: Women, Language, and Literature in Eighteenth-Century Russia.”

mother gave me only a name. It was not I, but they, who thought it up. All the rest that is in me I 'made.'" [Peterson 497]/ "This book is about myself, not about other people; an autobiography, not a set of memoirs" [492]). Contemporary writers Lara Vapnyar and Irina Reyn also address the difficulties behind female selfhood, but their strategy has been to inhabit the narratives of female secondariness in Russian literature. Vapnyar's 2006 novel *Memoirs of a Muse* is the story of a Soviet immigrant Tanya, whose childhood fascination with Dostoyevsky and his mistress leads to her envisioning her adult calling as the muse to a great writer. In immigration, she attaches herself to a selfish and mediocre New York novelist, until she grows disillusioned and leaves. And Reyn's 2008 novel *What Happened to Anna K.* reimagines Tolstoy's *Anna Karenina* as a contemporary immigrant story, in which protagonist Anna K. spurns her husband and the immigrant community in Rego Park, Queens in favor of a young American writer, again dreaming of being immortalized in text.

By addressing these tropes of female personhood - the muse, the tragic heroine, the male author's companion - as they are established in precursor texts, Vapnyar and Reyn position themselves as inheritors not just of Russian literary influence, but of entrenched structures of cultural authority. While their heroines are conditioned to look to men to "creat[e]" them and "mold" them "onto the page," Vapnyar and Reyn articulate a kind of troubled autonomy (*Anna K.* 47). They articulate a version of female selfhood and authorship, but must do so with a compromised language of cultural reference. As such, Reyn describes her use of Tolstoy as an act of both "hubris" and "reverence" - an act of personal distinction from an inherited culture and of deference to its priority and

associative power (“Rewriting *Anna Karenina*” 36).

This ambivalence may be especially well suited to describing the considerations of authorship and affiliation in immigration. As such, in Reyn’s *What Happened to Anna K.*? her eponymous heroine both feels confined by the conservative expectations of her immigrant community and desires to be “claimed” by it (*Anna K.* 216); she disdains to be counted amongst the “sausage immigrants” of her neighborhood but plays “the immigrant card” for American men in order to evoke a sense of exotic authenticity (2, 18). The novel’s appeal to Tolstoy, likewise, is engaged in a dual appeal to Russian and American reader perspectives: the reference grounds the novel in an explicit reevaluation of Russian literary practice, appealing to a kind of specialist knowledge about the role of women in Russian literature; but it does so while appealing to a language of Russianness easily accessed by American readers, the aura of the Russian classic having been a major factor in the marketing plans for the book (“Rewriting *Anna Karenina*” 37). All this speaks to the divided nature of immigrant subjectivity in terms that may already seem familiar. Reyn invokes her predecessor as a kind of “self-sabotage,” against “the weight of a conventional immigrant success narrative” (34). Hence, Reyn’s rejection of one stultifying language of immigration and Russianness leads her back to the problematic language of women in Russian literature.

The purpose of this final foray into gender is first to indicate another direction for further research on the topic of filiation and identification, given the collision of the themes of romance and marriage with the codified language of literary reference employed in these immigrant novels. Vapnyar and Reyn’s critical underrepresentation is

indicative, I think, of the dynamics I describe above. Second, even the brief inclusion of this perspective helps to illustrate the degree to which the ambivalent position I attribute to Nabokov and Shteyngart is entrenched in the logic of hierarchical authority. I have discussed in this project Nabokov and Shteyngart's attempts to establish themselves among a complex network of associations and orthodoxies, lending to their projects a progressive cosmopolitan air, albeit one that I have sought to qualify.

Reading these authors alongside the efforts of still later women writers allows us to view Nabokov and Shteyngart as part of the establishment themselves. As such, Reyn's references to Nabokov consistently evoke a paltry kind of cultural capital: the self-important writers that attract Anna are all Nabokov "disciples" (*Anna K.* 46), and her tragic romance is begun with a discussion on Nabokov, who represents here little more than the status won by displaying Russian knowledge before an American ("I love Nabókov," she said, careful to pronounce the author's name the right way, the Russian way. There would be no Nábokovs between them" [74].) Nabokov is here evoked as an American's measure of Russian capital, a model that is ultimately discredited by the end of the novel when, finding no satisfaction in her American admirer, Anna K. kills herself. In this maneuver, Reyn takes much the same position that we have seen Shteyngart take with his invocation of Nabokov, drawing him near with one hand and pushing him away with the other. But while Shteyngart's ironical approach to his Russian predecessors seems to have contributed to his installation as the heir to the Russian-American tradition, neither Reyn nor Vapnyar have so far enjoyed the same recognition.

Conclusion

All this speaks to the complex subjectivity suggested by the ambivalent position that Nabokov and Shteyngart occupy. Theirs is by necessity a defensive position that seeks to counter a multitude of narratives of Russianness: the rigid continuity of a politicized Russian canon, the antagonism of Cold War dualism, the instrumentalization of the American immigration story. By addressing these structures directly, I argue, Nabokov and Shteyngart construct for themselves a troubled autonomy, laying bare the frameworks that contain them. The imagery of intersecting narrative networks that I have employed suggests a somewhat more level playing field, in contrast to the vertical hierarchies that I began by observing. But it is clear that in navigating these structures, Nabokov and Shteyngart also occupy a privileged position as European males. As much as opening up the potential antagonisms at the core of these authors' unresolved national affiliations may aid or discourse on immigration and displacement, so too must we acknowledge their implicitness in the structures that they critique.

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