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VLADIMIR NABOKOV AS TRANSLATOR OF RUSSIAN POETRY

Vladimir Nabokov's poetry and translations remain the least explored aspect of his work. In the light of the considerable growth in Nabokov studies in recent years, the relative lack of interest in Nabokov's poetry is surprising. Such hesitation to confront Nabokov's poetry and translation might be rooted in the fact that Nabokov holds an established position of excellence as a prose writer but is less talented as a poet. Thus Caryl Emerson's commentary on Nabokov's translation of Pushkin's *Eugene Onegin* defends Nabokov's translation strategy of being as literal as possible, but plays down his skill as a poet. „Nabokov“, says Emerson, „a magical master at prose, was probably right to stick to literalism. He wasn't a good enough independent poet to carry any other method off.“¹ Emerson's explanation notwithstanding, it is useful to point out that for Nabokov translation is a very sophisticated process that requires a translator to be genius, scholar, and first-class actor. Nabokov dismissed Boris Pasternak's translations of William Shakespeare into Russian as „incredibly rubbishy.“² Indeed, Russian readers usually prefer to read the translations of Shakespeare by the minor acmeist poet Mikhail Leonidovich Lozinsky rather than by Pasternak. Thus Lozinsky's achievements as translator far outweigh his modest achievements as a representative of the Silver Age of Russian poetry.

Some contemporaries have praised Nabokov's skill as a poet. In his 1965 essay „The Strange Case of Pushkin and Nabokov“ Edmund Wilson points out that Nabokov is extremely well-versed in various poetic devices, and highly regarded by many as a skilful poet who knows how to use enjambment, alliteration, modulation and other techniques. In Wilson's view, Nabokov's observations on Pushkin's craftsmanship in *Eugene Onegin* in the lengthy commentary supplementing his translation serve as a useful tool to help students of Russian literature appreciate Pushkin's verse.³ Paul Morris in his survey of Russian

1 C. Emerson, „Perevodimost“, *Slavonic and East European Journal*, Vol. 38, No.1, Spring 1994, 84-9, 86.

2 Quoted from: N. Cornwell, *Vladimir Nabokov*, Northcote House in association with the British Council, London 1999, 22.

3 E. Wilson, „The Strange Case of Pushkin and Nabokov“, *NYRB*, July 15, 1965, 3-6; reproduced in Russian: N.G. Mel'nikov (ed.), „Klassik bez retushi: Literaturnyi mir o tvorchestve Vladimira Nabokova“, *Novoe literaturnoe obozrenie*, 2000, 387-392, 391.

émigré critics' responses to Nabokov's poetry suggests that in the 1920-40s „Nabokov was a visible presence as poet both for readers and for critics“ and „all but the most virulent of commentators (in an intellectual environment marked by its polemical vigour) conceded Nabokov's skill and even virtuosity as a poet, even at his young age.“⁴ It appears that when Nabokov's reputation as a major prose writer became established, critics ceased to judge it independently from his fiction and defined it as poetry of a prose writer.

Critics also consider Nabokov's translations of Russian poetry into English as the translations by an important prose writer. Robert Conquest views Nabokov's translation of *Eugene Onegin* as a failure, but asserts that Nabokov has succeeded in translating Pushkin's masterpiece into the language of Nabokov's own fiction.⁵ Only a few critics consider Nabokov's *Eugene Onegin* a great work of art in its own right. For instance, Anthony Burgess sees it as a peculiar work of art that exemplifies a kind of rococo style that could only be appreciated by Russian émigré readers.⁶ Since Nabokov's translation practices evoke many mixed responses, his work as translator provides us with a good opportunity to investigate Nabokov's translation theory in relation to modernist practices in Europe and in Russia and to establish whether Nabokov's limitations as translator derive from his modernist aesthetics.

It is also important to bear in mind that Nabokov's poetry is not well-known in the English-speaking world and is only now being discovered in his native Russia. There is simply not enough evidence to suggest that Nabokov was not a good enough poet to translate Russian poetry into English. Russian modernism produced many superb poets (Pasternak, Anna Akhmatova, Marina Tsvetaeva, Osip Mandelshtam – to name just the most important figures of Russian modernist canon), and Nabokov's poetic voice was clearly overshadowed by more prominent voices of the Russian Silver Age, as well as by his own achievements in fiction writing. Nabokov's poetry deserves attention and awaits re-discovery, and this article will try to do justice to Nabokov the poet who should not be overlooked as one of the important innovators produced by the Silver Age.

It will be also argued below that a new methodological approach is required when dealing with modernist practices, offering more subtle explanations of the correlation between modernist aesthetics and philosophy and literary practices. I will demonstrate that the question of translating poetry in the European modernist period should be viewed in relation to the cultural and historical conditions

⁴ P.D. Morris, „Vladimir Nabokov's Poetry in Russian Émigré Criticism: A Partial Survey“, *Canadian Slavonic Papers*, vol. XL, Nos. 3-4, September-December 1998, 297-310, 310.

⁵ R. Conquest, „Nabokov's *Eugene Onegin*“, *Poetry*, Vol. 106, June 1965, 263-268; reproduced in Mel'nikov, op. cit., 385-387, 387.

⁶ A. Burgess, „Pushkin and Kinbote“, *Encounter*, Vol. 24, No. 5, May, 1965, 74-78; reproduced in Mel'nikov, op. cit., 392-396, 396.

of modernism. This approach challenges the abstract expectation that a good poet necessarily produces quality translations of other poets.

Recent studies by Gerald S. Smith,⁷ D. Barton Johnson,⁸ Julian W. Connolly,⁹ and Michael Wachtel¹⁰ re-consider Nabokov as a poet and highlight the most important features of his poetics, including his themes, imagery and metre. Judson Rosengrant's illuminating article „Nabokov, *Onegin*, and the Theory of Translation,"¹¹ should not be overlooked either, as it sheds new light on Nabokov's theory of translation as manifested in some of his essays on this subject and in his forward to *Eugene Onegin*. While this latter major achievement of Nabokov the translator has been widely discussed in literary criticism, Nabokov's translations of other Russian nineteenth-century poets and of his own poetry into English has not received much attention. The present article aims to eliminate this lacuna in Nabokov studies, presenting Nabokov first of all as a modernist poet. Taking into account Nabokov's Russian-European-American identity and his linguistic and cultural richness, I would argue that Nabokov's English poetry style derives from English and Russian modernist tradition and shares some of the original features ascribed to his prose style. I will try to develop Wilson's observation that Nabokov's translation of Pushkin's masterpiece reveals Nabokov's transgressive strategies and his fluid identity of a poet in exile who is torn between the two cultures: the Russian cultural heritage and the English-speaking world to which Nabokov tries to adapt himself.

As Wilson puts it, Nabokov's *Eugene Onegin* reveals the tormented self of Nabokov himself and might be seen as Nabokov's attempt to reconcile the two disparate halves of his identity as Russian-English/American author. In Wilson's view, Nabokov in his translation of *Eugene Onegin* continues to play a game of hide-and-seek with his readers that evolves around his hybrid (Russian-English) identity as manifested in his English fiction.¹²

In the words of Neil Cornwell, Nabokov's English prose style displays the following markers: „extensive linguistic and cultural polyglot facility“; „strongly coloured by the striking originality.“¹³ „*Bend Sinister* introduces,“ Cornwell points out, „an invented (hybrid) language and other elements of paronomasia (code-switching or wordplay),“ concluding that „richness of vo-

⁷ S.G. Smith, „Nabokov and Russian Verse Form“, D.B. Johnson (ed.), *Russian Literature Triquarterly*, Ardis Publishers, Ann Arbor 1991, 271-306.

⁸ D.B. Johnson, „Preliminary Notes on Nabokov's Russian Poetry: A Chronological and Thematic Sketch“, *ibid.*, 307-328.

⁹ J.W. Connolly, „The Otherworldly in Nabokov's Poetry“, *ibid.*, 329-340.

¹⁰ M. Wachtel, *The Development of Russian Verse: Meter and Its Meanings*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 1999, 165-8.

¹¹ J. Rosengrant, „Nabokov, *Onegin*, and the Theory of Translation“, *Slavonic and East European Journal*, Vol. 38, No.1, 13-27.

¹² E. Wilson, *op. cit.* ref. 3, in Mel'nikov, *op. cit.*, 392.

¹³ N. Cornwell, *Vladimir Nabokov*, Northcote House in association with the British Council, London 1999, 11.

cabulary, unusual turns of expression, defamiliarisation, and [...], phonic patter and cryptic patter' are to the fore."¹⁴ The present article will assess the qualities of Nabokov's language as expressed in his translations of Russian poetry into English in terms of the modernist canon, suggesting that Nabokov's hybrid style is also strongly pronounced in his poetry and translations. It will be argued that this quality of Nabokov's style reflects on his hybrid identity, incorporating the Russian and English modernist cultures in which he was well versed. I will suggest, therefore, that we need to look at all Nabokov's works, be it poetry or literary criticism, in the same vein: i.e. in terms of their relations with English-Russian modernist practices.

As will be demonstrated below, this methodological approach is not applied evenly in Nabokov scholarship, resulting in a distorted and fragmented view of Nabokov's oeuvre. Using examples from Nabokov's translations of Russian poetry and from his statements on translation theory, I will be arguing that Nabokov the modernist is largely indebted to Henri Bergson's philosophy. Nabokov's translations and views on translation theory reflect and embody central Bergsonian ideas, given that any translations are inevitably linked to the concepts of memory and representation of the self that are central to Bergson's theory of creativity.

First of all, it would be useful to refer to Nabokov's own theory of translating, in order to assess its links, if any, with the modernist modes of representations. According to Rosengrant, most critics responding to Nabokov's translation of *Eugene Onegin* failed to appreciate Nabokov's own explanations of his fully developed method of translating which he tried to implement in his own work. „It would seem that few critics have been willing to come to terms with Nabokov's reasons for rendering Pushkin the way he did," Rosengrant suggests, „have been willing to evaluate his undertaking on the basis of its own distinctive theory rather than according to some preconceived notion of what a verse translation should or should not be."¹⁵ Rosengrant's painstaking analysis of all the articles and essays manifesting Nabokov's views on translation theory focuses on the three modes of verse translation highlighted in his foreword to the English version of *Eugene Onegin*.

Nabokov lists them: „(1) Paraphrastic: offering a free version of the original, with omissions and additions prompted by the exigencies of form, the conventions attributed to the consumer, and the translator's ignorance. [...] (2) Lexical (or constructional): rendering the basic meaning of words (and their order). This is a machine can do under the direction of an intelligent bilingualist. (3) Literal: rendering, as closely as the associative and syntactical capacities of another language allow, the exact contextual meaning of the original. Only this is true

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Rosengrant, op. cit., 13.

translation.¹⁶ In his foreword to Pushkin's *Eugene Onegin* Nabokov distinguishes himself from the translators who produce what he defines as readable translations, palatable for consumption by semi-educated readership. „I have been always amused,“ claims Nabokov, „by the stereotyped compliment that a reviewer pays the author of a „new translation.“ He says: „It reads smoothly.“ In other words, the hack who has never read the original, and does not know its language, praises an imitation readable because easy platitudes have replaced in it the intricacies of which he is unaware.¹⁷

On another occasion, Nabokov states that the result of the perfect attempt to translate a text should be an endless list of notes: „I want translations with copious footnotes, footnotes reaching up like skyscrapers to the top of this or that page so as to leave only the gleam of one textual line between commentary and eternity. I want such footnotes and the absolutely literal sense, with no emasculation and no padding – I want such sense and such notes for all the poetry in other tongues that still languishes in, poetical' versions, begrimed and beslimed by rhyme.“¹⁸ Nabokov's vision of the text as a combination of semantic units, or a set of building blocks, that can be transmitted into another language, resonates well with the work of the Russian formalists and British mythographers who point to the possibility of considering literature as a self-regulating system. As Robert Scholes reminds us, such a view „has been a strong force in modern critical thought.“¹⁹

Thus in his seminal essay „The Task of the Translator“ Walter Benjamin, one of the most important German modernist critics, states: „Translation thus ultimately serves the purpose of expressing the central reciprocal relationship between languages.“²⁰ For Benjamin, translation represents the relationship between languages „by realising it in embryonic or intensive form,“²¹ for languages are interrelated in what they want to express. Benjamin's view that translation brings out the kinship of languages is based on the theory of cognition that proves the impossibility of an image theory and stands close to the ideas of Russian formalists. As Benjamin puts it, „to grasp the genuine relationship between an original and a translation requires an investigation analogous to the argumentation by which a critique of cognition would have to prove the im-

¹⁶ V. Nabokov, „Foreword“, Pushkin, Aleksandr. *Eugene Onegin: A Novel in Verse; Translated with a Commentary by Vladimir Nabokov In Two Volumes*, vol. 1, Princeton University Press, Princeton, 1964, vii-viii.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, ix.

¹⁸ V. Nabokov, „Problems of Translation: *Onegin* in English“, *Partisan Review*, No. 22, 4, Fall 1955, 496-512.

¹⁹ R. Scholes, *Structuralism in Literature: An Introduction*, Yale University Press, New Haven and London 1974, 117.

²⁰ W. Benjamin, „The Task of the Translator“, *Illuminations*, translated by Harry Zorin, Pimlico, London 1999, 70-82, 73.

²¹ *Ibid.*

possibility of an image theory.²² According to Benjamin, any translation that strives for likeness to the original is impossible because of the subjectivity factor that affects cognition. Nabokov's idea of creating an extensive list of footnotes to complement any translation echoes Benjamin's call to overcome the limitations of an image theory. Both authors understand translation as a process that results in a change of the original text, and treat the original text as a living organism that experiences its afterlife existence. Benjamin expresses this transformation thus: „For in its afterlife [...] the original undergoes a change. Even words with fixed meaning can undergo a maturing process. The obvious tendency of a writer's literary style may in time wither away [...]. What sounded fresh once may sound hackneyed later; what was once current may someday sound quaint.“²³

Benjamin asserts that the mother tongue of the translator also undergoes transformation over the centuries. Benjamin also argues that both languages available to the translator form fragments of some metatext: „Although translation, unlike art, cannot claim permanence for its products, its goal is undeniably a final, conclusive, decisive stage of all linguistic creation. In translation the original rises into a higher and purer linguistic air, as it were. It cannot live there permanently, to be sure, and it certainly does not reach it in its entirety.“²⁴ According to Benjamin, the process of translation is about not only transmitting a message but also about revealing differences. The task of the translator is not to harmonise the difference between the original and the translation, but to display the complementary nature of languages and texts. The space between one language and another suggests a third space, a utopian space that no longer expresses anything, for it is a pure language, an expressionless and creative Word, defined by Benjamin as the shape of the arcade.

Benjamin uses the image of an arcade to formulate a contrast between interpretive translation and literal translation: „Rather, the significance of fidelity as ensured by literalness is that the work reflects the great longing for linguistic complementation. A real translation is transparent; it does not cover the original, does not block its light, but allows the pure language [...] to shine upon the original all the more fully. This may be achieved, above all, by a literal rendering of the syntax [...]. For if the sentence is the wall before the language of the original, literalness is the arcade.“²⁵

In Benjamin's view, the literally translated text is a transparent surface that allows the light of the original to fall onto the new version, creating an interplay of surfaces, providing thereby a vision of newness accumulated out of the frag-

²² *Ibid.*

²³ *Ibid.*, 73-74.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 75.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 79.

ments of words. The first language does not disappear in favour of the second but continues to exist, like some ghost.

It can be argued that Nabokov's wish to supplement any translation with a list of footnotes comes very close to Benjamin's vision of transparency and literalness. Nabokov's footnotes might be seen, therefore, as a tool that helps recover some stylistic peculiarities of the original text in a more tangible manner. Benjamin thinks that „the transfer can never be total“ and that there always be an element in the translation which goes beyond transmittal of subject matter that can be defined „as the element that does not lend itself to translation.“²⁶

Benjamin distinguishes between the work of poet and that of the translator and argues that while „the intention of the poet is spontaneous, primary, graphic“, the translator's purpose is „derivative, ultimate, ideational.“²⁷ Benjamin's definition of translation as „midway between poetry and doctrine“²⁸ might be applied to Nabokov's own search for a perfect style through translating. In this respect, it is important to bear in mind that the search for a style becomes a self-conscious element in the modernist literary practice. As Malcolm Bradbury and James McFarlane aptly sum up, „Modernism is less a style than a search for a style in a highly individualistic sense; and indeed the style of one work is no guarantee for the next“ because any modernist „is perpetually engaged in a profound and ceaseless journey through the means and integrity of art.“²⁹

In the light of the above observations, it does not come as a surprise that Nabokov was interested in translation practices all his life. Any modern writer of significant talent and sophistication in search for a style would try, as Nabokov did, to infuse either one style with another, or one language with another, to achieve a sense of novelty, or hybridity. In his article „The Art of Translation“ (1941) Nabokov identifies three types of translators: „the scholar who is eager to make the world appreciate the works of an obscure genius as much as he does himself; the well meaning hack; and the professional writer relaxing in the company of a foreign confrère.“³⁰ In Nabokov's view, a translator must have as much talent, or at least the same kind of talent, as the author he chooses to translate. Nabokov's characterisation of the both of them as ideal playmates³¹ is akin to Benjamin's belief that translation is a creative process, not just a mechanical reproduction of the original.

²⁶ Ibid., 76.

²⁷ Ibid., 77.

²⁸ Ibid., 78.

²⁹ M. Bradbury and J. McFarlane, „The Name and Nature of Modernism“, *Modernism: 1890-1930*, Penguin Books, London 1976, 19-26, 29.

³⁰ N. Nabokov, „The Art of Translation“, *Lectures on Russian Literature*, Picador, London 1983, 319-321, 319.

³¹ Ibid.

Nabokov establishes his own criteria for the perfect translator. In addition to considerable talent, Nabokov's ideal translator should be a knowledgeable scholar who „must know thoroughly the two nations and the two languages involved and be perfectly acquainted with all details relating to his author's manners and methods, with the social background of words, their fashions, history and period associations.“³² Nabokov also expects the translator to be an outstanding performer who „must possess the gift of mimicry and be able to act, as it were, the real author's part by impersonating his tricks of demeanor and speech, his ways and his mind, with the utmost degree of versimilitude.“³³

Nabokov's translation theory evolves around a search for a style that expresses fluid states of subjectivity. Rosengrant regards Nabokov's three modes of translation „as stages in a continuum of shifting semantic and structural correlation.“³⁴ In Rosengrant's view, lexical translation does not attempt to reproduce the aesthetic form of the original, while the literal translation is „accompanied by aesthetic form to the extent that it does not hinder the scrupulous representation of cognitive meaning.“³⁵ Rosengrant defines Nabokov's paraphrastic mode of translation as: „Recreative correspondence, wherein cognitive meaning is subordinated either to the replication of such formal features of the text as metre and rhyme (which are now regarded as crucial to its identity), or to the reproduction of its ‚spirit‘ – its tone and gestures – with a commensurate reduction in formal mimesis.“³⁶

Rosengrant refers to Nabokov's translation of the lyrical verse of Pushkin, Lermontov and Tyutchev in *Three Russian Poets*³⁷ as an example of paraphrastic translation, emphasising that Nabokov's evolution as a translator led to his eventual excellence at literal translation. Rosengrant continues: „Textual semantics for the Nabokovian literalist thus consists of three interactive dimensions: 1) The range of association potential in the original language at the moment the work came into being, 2) the range of association delimited by the text as a self-consistent aesthetic structure, and 3) the new associations that, for good or ill, subsequent readers bring to the text – the socially and historically conditioned responses that constitute their apperception of it.“³⁸

Judging Nabokov's translation of Pushkin's *Eugene Onegin* as an attempt at literal translation, Rosengrant stresses that this mode of translation represents at its best Nabokov's belief that it is superior to any other forms of rendering the

³² Ibid.

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ Rosengrant, op. cit., 14-5.

³⁵ Ibid., 15.

³⁶ Ibid.

³⁷ V. Nabokov, translator, *Three Russian Poets: Translations of Pushkin, Lermontov and Tyutchev*, New Directions, Norfolk, Conn. 1944.

³⁸ Rosengrant, op. cit, 15.

text because it has a chance „of carrying over full literary meaning from one language to another.“³⁹

Rosengrant acknowledges that Nabokov's theory of translation has „genuine sophistication and value, even if his own application of it was erratic, and even if that theory in its literalist mode may require more literary skill and scholarly insight than most translators are capable of providing.“⁴⁰ Rosengrant's analysis also points to some failures in Nabokov's translation of *Eugene Onegin* (in regards to chapters XVII and XXXIII, for example) and Rosengrant suggests that Nabokov himself for whatever reason, was not always able to sustain his literalist mode of translation „at a consistently high level, that he himself was not always able to reach his own austere but noble standard.“⁴¹ This is not to suggest that his theory of translation is itself flawed. „His *Eugene Onegin* must therefore be accounted a partial failure of translation not because he carried his literalist theory too far [...] but because he did not carry it far enough.“⁴² In the light of Rosengrant's observations, it becomes clearer why Nabokov felt dissatisfied with his attempt at translating Pushkin's novel in verse, a monumental work, described by Vissarion Belinsky, influential Russian 19th-century critic, as a poetic work which has not only profound aesthetic influence on the development of Russian culture, but also holds its special significance for Russians from the point of view of social and historical development.⁴³ It is Belinsky who established *Eugene Onegin*'s canonical status as a masterpiece, defining it as „the most sacred work of Pushkin, the beloved child of his imagination“ and a perfect expression of his personality.⁴⁴

It could be argued that Nabokov's own feeling of reverence towards Pushkin's masterpiece echoes Belinsky's views and stems from Romantic doctrine, which pushes the authenticity of the poetic work to the fore. Nabokov also challenges Belinsky's fashioning of Pushkin as realist writer. According to Hillis Miller, modernist poetry „grows out of romanticism but goes beyond it.“⁴⁵ The intense subjectivity of the Romantic spirit remains central to Nabokov's modernist writing. As translator of Pushkin, Nabokov gets a chance to inscribe his own subjectivity into the most canonical work of Russian literature. This point can be easily illustrated by Nabokov's statements on his work as translator as conveyed in his 1955 poem „On Translating *Eugene Onegin*“:

³⁹ Ibid., 17.

⁴⁰ Ibid., 25.

⁴¹ Ibid.

⁴² Ibid.

⁴³ V.G. Belinsky, „Article 8: „Eugene Onegin“, *Vzgliad na russkuiu literaturu*, Moscow, Sovremennik, 1988, 440.

⁴⁴ Ibid. [Translation is mine. — A.S.]

⁴⁵ Quoted in M. Bradbury and J. McFarlane, op. cit., 47.

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

O, Pushkin, for my stratagem:
 I travelled down your secret stem,
 And reached the root, and fed upon it;
 Then, in a language newly learned,
 I grew another stalk and turned
 Your stanza patterned on a sonnet,
 Into my honest roadside prose —
 All thorn, but cousin to your rose. [...]

Elusive Pushkin! Persevering,
 I still pick up Tatiana's earring,
 Still travel with your sullen rake.
 I find another man's mistake [...].
 This is my task — a poet's patience
 And scholiastic passion blent:
 Dove-droppings on your monument.⁴⁶

The poem gushes in admiration for Pushkin's genius, and in a light-hearted manner Nabokov also fashions himself here as an ideal playmate of Pushkin. Yet Pushkin would not take an aesthetic stand on dove-droppings the way Nabokov does. Nabokov extends here the sphere of art and invites Pushkin to treat dove-droppings as artefacts, thereby welcoming his 19th-century predecessor to the age of modernity. As Cornwell's study reminds us, Nabokov regarded Pushkin as the greatest poet of his time, and perhaps of all time (second only to Shakespeare).⁴⁷ Taking into account Nabokov's essays on Pushkin, his discussion of Pushkin in his novels and letters, and his translations of Pushkin's poetry, it appears that Nabokov was anxious to secure Pushkin's place in the western canon. Cornwell's observations on Nabokov's translations of Pushkin also support this view. „Nabokov considered *Eugene Onegin*,“ says Cornwell, „to be a great world classic, and hoped that a major scholarly edition of Pushkin's ‚novel in verse‘ would establish genuine cultural status for it in the English speaking world. To a certain extent this has happened, but [...] no single-volume, popular' edition of the translation, with minimal, or at least greatly abridged, critical apparatus has yet been published.“⁴⁸

Indeed, Nabokov's role in the canonisation of Pushkin in the western literature is immense. Nabokov admired the formal elegance of the *Onegin* stanza, and his poem „On Translating *Eugene Onegin*“ appropriates Pushkin's famous

⁴⁶ Quoted from: V. Nabokov, *Poems and Problems*, Weidenfeld and Nicholson, London 1970, 175.

⁴⁷ Cornwell, op. cit., 24.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 25.

stanza. This act of total devotion to his teacher begs the question, „Why did the Onegin stanza have such an appeal for Nabokov?“ According to Michael Wachtel's analysis of the Onegin stanza, Pushkin, for his *Eugene Onegin*, „devised a stanza unprecedented in literary history.“⁴⁹ Therefore, the Onegin stanza remains Pushkin's special signature in all further references to it. „The uniqueness of the Onegin stanza [...] produced an extraordinarily firm formal and semantic constellation for Russian readers.“⁵⁰

Wachtel compares this situation to the Italian literary tradition, famous for the *terza rima* that Dante used for his *Divine Comedy*, and concludes: „For Russian poets, it proved to be a model so powerful that relatively few would try to repeat it. Those who did, however, fully expected their works to be understood (and judged) against the background of Pushkin's prototype.“⁵¹ Given Wachtel's explanation of the significance of the Onegin stanza for Russian readers, it becomes possible to reassess the view of Nabokov's poetic qualities. Nabokov, it could be argued, translates the Pushkin text so literally to preserve the formal characteristics of the stanza, thus importing it, as it were, into the English-speaking world. It is also significant that Nabokov's last Russian novel *The Gift (Dar, 1935-37)* culminates with Nabokov's poetic farewell to his novel in the last paragraph, which imitates the Onegin stanza, foreshadowing Nabokov's Bloomian appropriation of Pushkin's form and force.

It took Nabokov several years in the 1950s to reproduce the Onegin stanza in English. Nabokov saw it as the most important structural element of Pushkin's novel in verse. „In transposing *Eugene Onegin* from Pushkin's Russian into my English,“ Nabokov admits, „I have sacrificed to completeness of meaning every formal element including the iambic rhythm, whenever its retention hindered fidelity. To my ideal of literalism I sacrificed everything (elegance, euphony, clarity, good taste, modern usage, and even grammar) that the dainty mimic prizes higher than truth.“⁵² Going back to the above-cited poem „On Translating *Eugene Onegin*,“ it would be possible to reassess Nabokov's own achievement in reproducing the Onegin stanza in his last Russian novel. Thus, clearly referring to his novel *The Gift*, Nabokov proudly states: „I grew another stalk and turned/Your stanza patterned on a sonnet, /Into my honest roadside prose —/ All thorn, but cousin to your rose.“ This innovation has been overlooked by Nabokov scholars, inasmuch as Nabokov's usage of Pushkin's Onegin stanza implies that Pushkin's achievement of writing a novel in verse culminates in Nabokov's novel as „poem in prose“ in a single paragraph. To put it differently, Nabokov's fidelity to Pushkin is ambivalent here. It could be even argued that in

⁴⁹ M. Wachtel, *The Development of Russian Verse: Meter and its Meanings*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 1998, 121.

⁵⁰ Ibid.

⁵¹ Ibid.

⁵² Quoted from: Wachtel, op. cit., 165.

The Gift Nabokov presents himself as a true modernist writer, developing experiments at mixing verse and prose, or producing a new style of lyrical or melodic prose in deliberate imitation of the practice of Andrey Bely, Anton Chekhov and Ivan Bunin.⁵³ In other words, Nabokov infuses the final part of *The Gift* with lyrical, and even elegiac overtones, thus misrepresenting the epic qualities of Pushkin's *Eugene Onegin*. It is an innovative gesture which adds a special aesthetic significance to *The Gift*: it is as if its author is paying tribute to Pushkin and returning a gift of writing novel to the father figure of the Russian novel, rescuing Pushkin from the attempts of Soviet Marxists to canonise Pushkin as a socialist realist writer.

In his article „Pushkin's Iambic Metre in Nabokov's Novel *The Gift*“ contemporary Russian scholar Iu. B. Orlitsky demonstrates that *The Gift* is written in a very innovative manner, for it develops Bely's views on prosody further. Orlitsky believes that Nabokov's examples of iambic tetrameter, favoured by Pushkin, are much more imaginative and innovative in terms of their stress patterns than Bely's experiments.⁵⁴ The novel's numerous examples of iambic metres and Nabokov's discourse on versification are also comparable to Nabokov's *Onegin*. Nabokov's juxtaposition of poetry and everyday speech in *The Gift* helps to highlight the stylistic polyphony of the novel. In this respect, *The Gift*, exemplifies a device of mixing poetry and prose extensively discussed in Yurii Tynianov's article „On the Composition of *Eugene Onegin*.“ According to Tynianov, semantic meaning is highlighted in prose at the expense of the emotional connotations or sound effects found in poetry. Tynianov suggests that by mixing poetic and prosaic elements authors could refresh these two modes of speech. As Tynianov points out, the order and presentation of words in prose is subordinated to their semantic meaning, and the balance between prosaic and poetic elements in Pushkin's novel in verse is not disturbed.⁵⁵ It could be argued that both Tynianov and Nabokov learned from Pushkin's *Eugene Onegin* how to construct a language of hybridity: their fiction is infused with poetry, to the extent that it corresponds neither to fiction, nor to poetry in their pure forms of expression.

Mikhail Bakhtin, one of the most influential Russian modernist critics, also challenges Belinsky's view of Pushkin's *Eugene Onegin* as an objective representation of Russian life. Bakhtin identifies it as an encyclopedia of stylistic utterances and images. For Bakhtin *Eugene Onegin* „is not inert encyclopedia that

⁵³ See the excellent discussion of the links between the short fiction of Nabokov, Chekhov and Bunin in: M.D. Shroyer, *The World of Nabokov Stories*, University of Texas Press, Austin 1999.

⁵⁴ Yu.B. Orlitskii, „Pushkinskii iamb v romane Nabokova *Dar*“, V.P. Stark (ed.), *A.S. Pushkin i V.V. Nabokov: sbornik dokladov mezhdunarodnoi konferentsii 15-18 aprilia 1999 g.*, „Dorn“, St. Petersburg 1999, 198-210.

⁵⁵ Yu. Tynianov, „O kompozitsii *Evgeniia Onegina*“, *Poetika – Istoriiia literatyry – Kino*, Nauka, Moscow 1977.

merely catalogues the things of everyday life“ because in this novel „Russian life speaks in all its voices, in all the languages and styles of the era“; and it „is a self-critique of the literary language of the era.“⁵⁶ In search of a stylistic polyphony similar to the multiplicity of voices in *Eugene Onegin*, Nabokov also relies on parody that can be seen as the central figure of his narrative structure. I think that just like Nabokov's shorter fiction, his translations and poems might be seen as preparatory sketches for his novels. It is not coincidental, for example, that Nabokov excelled in writing parodic poems on his famous contemporaries such as Pasternak and Tsvetaeva. In his comments on the liberating function of parodic-travesty literary forms Bakhtin states: „These parodic-travesty forms prepared the ground for the novel. [...] They liberated the object from the power of language in which it had become entangled as if in a net; they destroyed the homogenising power of myth over language, they freed the consciousness from the power of the direct word“ to the effect that „a distance arose between language and reality that was to prove an indispensable condition for authentically realistic form of discourse.“⁵⁷

In the words of Cornwell, the *Onegin* stanza in *The Gift* was used „to mark Nabokov's farewell to the Russian novel.“⁵⁸ While this is true, it could be also argued that Nabokov considered his novel to be the last chapter in the history of the Russian novel since *Eugene Onegin* marked its rise. In the eyes of Nabokov and of Russian émigrés the Soviet communist regime signified the end of Russian history, novel and culture in general. Given the fact that Nabokov and other writers saw Pushkin's epoch as the Golden Age of Russian poetry, Nabokov's translation *Eugene Onegin* should be also considered as having autobiographical overtones. In this respect, Wachtel's observations are of particular relevance: „the poets of the early twentieth century used the *Onegin* stanza as a strict autobiographical genre and a vehicle for seriousness. For them, the form was linked less to the specific plot of Pushkin's novel than to a nostalgic *recollection* of an earlier time. This central role of memory – at times serious, at times parodic – also informed the *Onegin* stanzas written by poets after the Revolution. It served the émigré well in his desire to conjure up a lost, yet once vital culture [...].“⁵⁹

Curiously enough, Nabokov abandoned his own theory of literal translation in his English translation of *The Gift*. Wachtel suggests that „while retaining the rhyme scheme,“ Nabokov „subtly alters the form by using exclusively masculine rhymes.“⁶⁰ Wachtel also argues that Nabokov „felt the need to preserve the structure“ because „the fidelity to form was necessary to ensure a more comp-

⁵⁶ M. Bakhtin, „From the Prehistory of Novelistic Discourse“, D. Lodge, (ed.), *Modern Criticism and Theory: A Reader*, Longman, London and New York 1988, 125-156, 131.

⁵⁷ Bakhtin, op. cit., 139.

⁵⁸ Cornwell, op. cit., 56.

⁵⁹ Wachtel, op. cit., 168.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 167.

lete meaning.⁶¹ Wachtel's analysis points to the innovative qualities of Nabokov's modernist practices. Wachtel's remarks about the English translation of *The Gift* offer a new insight into Nabokov's poetics. Thus Wachtel states: „In short, Russia's most celebrated apologist for literal translation was forced to reassess his position when the question arose in regard to his own poetry. Nabokov's work on *The Gift* testifies to the primacy of the form and extraordinary communicative value of the *Onegin* stanza.“⁶²

Wachtel's discussion challenges the established view of Nabokov as a conservative modernist, especially in his poetic achievements. Gerald Smith examines Nabokov's links with Russian poetry, bringing together Nabokov's views on versification and on his own poetry that he scattered in his letters and autobiographical writing, demonstrating that Nabokov was largely indebted to Bely's theory of versification.⁶³ In his comments on Nabokov's essay „Notes on Prosody“ Smith argues that „Nabokov takes Bely's work as his only authority in Russian metrics“ and therefore „he bypasses the central tradition completely.“⁶⁴ Smith considers Nabokov's quantitative data of the rhythm of *Eugene Onegin*, in the essay „Notes on Prosody“, as being an insufficient explanation of the richness of Pushkin's metrical repertoire, and claims that Nabokov's attempt to translate Bely's method of rhythmical analysis into lucid English „remains essentially a solipsism.“⁶⁵ Smith's detailed study of Nabokov's own poetry offers profound insight into Nabokov's metrical patterns, suggesting that „the iambic groups dominates his metrical repertoire,“ and within it iambic tetrameter occupies an unusually prominent place.⁶⁶

As Wachtel reminds us, Russian modernist poets closely linked iambic tetrameter to Pushkin and his epoch.⁶⁷ Wachtel describes two groups of poets: one includes Soviet Futurist poet Vladimir Mayakovsky, who used the „classical“ form to create a new interpretation of it, while another group (including Symbolist poets Zinaida Gippius and Vladislav Khodasevich) employed this metrical form in their own poetry to mark a sense of continuity, to establish their links with predecessors in the nineteenth and eighteenth centuries. Therefore, Smith's analysis of Nabokov's metre, rhyme and stanza supports the view that Nabokov represents the aesthetic aspirations of Russian „classical“ modernists. Smith states: „His chief mentor in his earlier work was probably Balmont, and in his later work Bunin and Khodasevich. For them, as for all Russian poets, verse form was an ideologically semanticised area: formal innovation was char-

61 Ibid., 168.

62 Ibid.

63 G.S. Smith, „Nabokov and Russian Verse Form“, op. cit., 272.

64 Ibid.

65 Ibid., 275.

66 Ibid., 301.

67 Wachtel, op. cit., 248.

acteristic of those poets who stood politically to the left, who accepted the Revolution of 1917 and remained in Russia or soon returned to it.⁶⁸ Smith implies that Nabokov's aesthetics and ideology were entwined: „For Nabokov, this rendered him unacceptable; and the formal choices that he made indicated very graphically his nostalgia for a time before the spirit of innovation had changed Russian poetry and Russian society. And his theoretical views were similar: he chose to ignore the work in versification that was one of the most genuine and lasting achievements of Soviet scholarship in the humanities, remaining faithful to the memories of his youth.“⁶⁹

According to Barton Johnson, the Ardis collection of Nabokov's poetry which contains 247 poems is far from being the most representative of Nabokov's oeuvre, because other sources list 500 or even over 1,000 poems.⁷⁰ Only a small portion of Nabokov's poetry is known to English readers: his 1971 *Poems and Problems* boasts 39 poems because there was no readership for translated poetry. Even so, Johnson propounds that „*Poems and Problems* is an important work in the Nabokov canon“ because „poetry and chess problems hold equal place as minor genres in his creative life.“⁷¹ Seen in this light, Nabokov's comparison of his translation of *Eugene Onegin* to dove-droppings on Pushkin's monument bears the sign of double irony. It contains Nabokov's lament over his own death as poet (the theme of a poet's death became a hallmark of Russian poetry of the 1920-30s) and over the Golden Age of Russian poetry, seen by him as the irrevocable past.

While the responses to Nabokov's translation of *Eugene Onegin* are well documented and discussed in Nabokov scholarship, I would like to emphasise an aspect which, in my view, has not been given enough attention by critics, namely – the intrinsic bond between Nabokov the translator and Nabokov the modernist writer. One would be hard pressed from reading all the responses to Nabokov's translation to discover any clear rationale for Nabokov's translation strategy in his version of Pushkin's masterpiece. Close investigation of Nabokov's aesthetic views and their links with Russian and European modernism might enable us to understand Nabokov's strategy in a more comprehensive manner. The views expressed in Clarence Brown's article „Nabokov's Pushkin and Nabokov's Nabokov“⁷² help fill gaps in our assessment of the evolution of Nabokov's creative psychology.

⁶⁸ Smith, op. cit., 302.

⁶⁹ Ibid.

⁷⁰ Johnson, op. cit., 314.

⁷¹ Ibid., 313.

⁷² C. Brown, „Nabokov's Pushkin and Nabokov's Nabokov“, L.S. Dembo, (ed.), *Nabokov: The Man and His Work*, The University of Wisconsin Press, Madison, Milwaukee and London 1967, 195-208.

In the face of numerous attacks on Nabokov the translator, Brown strongly defends Nabokov's position and accuses critics of Nabokov's style of being insensitive to the aesthetic reasons that shaped Nabokov's translation theory, because „Nabokov is a consummate master of style.“⁷³ Brown establishes a useful benchmark against which Nabokov's style should be judged and compares Nabokov to British and American modernist authors: „It is remarkable for a writer of such foreign origin and temperament to serve as a model in many matters of style for indigenous authors.“⁷⁴ Brown argues strongly for real grounds for the appreciation of Nabokov's work as translator. As Brown puts it, „One is perfectly free, that is, to like or dislike his version, but it seems to me that one ought first to be much surer (1) what it is that one is judging, and (2) on what grounds one is judging it.“⁷⁵ Brown believes that Nabokov's *Eugene Onegin* is a deliberate compromise – „between two extremes“ and „between two languages“ – and offers the most extraordinary conclusion that Nabokov's translation is „relatively unimportant among the contents of this work.“⁷⁶ To support this view, Brown draws attention to the fact that the translation part occupies only about two-thirds of the whole English edition of *Eugene Onegin* that Nabokov prepared.

Brown is convinced that Nabokov's *Eugene Onegin* is yet another game with the reader, a deliberate trap for those who expect literary texts to be readable. As Brown demonstrates, Nabokov developed almost an intimate link with Pushkin's text and was not prepared to share his insights into Pushkin's craftsmanship. According to Brown, „To put *this Onegin*, which no one except Nabokov has ever apprehended, into a readable translation is to cheapen a transcendent miracle of art, to betray it to those who will complacently congratulate themselves on having „read *Onegin*. [...] The translation is the easy solution to the mystery of *Onegin*, the obvious route which, once taken, traps the brash traveler and holds him forever distant from the sanctum of Pushkin's art.“⁷⁷ Brown's assumption notwithstanding, Nabokov's endless games with readers, including the readers of his *Onegin*, might be also seen in terms suggested by Ortega y Gasset who defines modernism as an arcane and private art. According to Gasset's work *The Dehumanisation of Art, and Other Writings on Art and Culture* (1956), modernist art divides its audience aristocratically into those who understand it and those who do not. Gasset identifies this view of art as play and

⁷³ Ibid., 196.

⁷⁴ Ibid., 197.

⁷⁵ Ibid.

⁷⁶ Ibid., 198.

⁷⁷ Ibid., 199.

delightful fraud that avoids the traditional and gravitates towards self-hate and irony.⁷⁸

In the above mentioned article „The Art of Translation“ Nabokov formulates a few rules to help other translators render into English the Russian poems of their choice, suggesting thereby that any art product is artefact. Nabokov describes his perfect translation of Pushkin's poem „To“ („K“), focussing on the opening line „I remember a wonderful moment...“ („Ja pomniu chudnoe mgnoven'e...“). Yet Nabokov shies away from any exhibitionism: „Thus I was confronted by that opening line, so full of Pushkin, so individual and harmonious; and after examining it [...] I tackled it. The tackling process lasted the worst part of the night. I did translate it at last; but to give my version at this point might lead the reader to doubt that perfection be attainable by merely following a few perfect rules.“⁷⁹ It can be argued, however, that Nabokov sees translating activity as part of life experience and refers to another translator's would-be attempt at Pushkin's poem as the event of his life, as his fate, implying thereby that a specific person actualises the uniqueness of every object and its diversity.

Nabokov's translation theory, as conveyed in „The Art of Translation“, stands conspicuously close to Mikhail Bakhtin's notion of aesthetic creation. As Bakhtin writes, „The artist's enormous labour over the word has the ultimate goal of overcoming the word, because the aesthetic object arises on the boundaries of words, on the boundaries of language as such.“⁸⁰ In his essay „The Art of Translation“ Nabokov likens the English and the Russian languages at his disposal to two buildings, two spaces, and presents himself implicitly as a displaced subject that oscillates between the two territories: „The English at my disposal is certainly thinner than my Russian; the difference being, in fact, that which exists between a semi-detached villa and a hereditary estate, between self-conscious comfort and habitual luxury.“⁸¹ Nabokov's observation reveals the common condition of immigrant authors who adopt another language in their writings. It is not coincidental, for example, that contemporary Australo-Hungarian writer Andrew Riemer identifies himself with such established writers of hybrid identity as Nabokov, Joseph Conrad and Tom Stoppard. „For us,“ Riemer maintains, „[...] that language despite the confidence with which we exploit its forms and possibilities, remains external, or merely cerebral, consistently delighting us with its suppleness, the surprising transformations it is capable of undergoing, but rarely, if ever, becoming fully personal in a way that only experiences acquired from the time of early childhood may become deeply

⁷⁸ See: Y Gasset, Jose Ortega, *The Dehumanisation of Art, and Other Writings on Art and Culture*, Garden City, New York 1956.

⁷⁹ V. Nabokov, „The Art of Translation“, op. cit., 321.

⁸⁰ M.M. Bakhtin, *Art and Answerability*, translated by Vadim Liapunov and Kenneth Brostrom, University of Texas Press, Austin 1990, 297.

⁸¹ V. Nabokov, „The Art of Translation“, op. cit., 320.

personal.⁸² Seen in this light, Nabokov's translation of Pushkin's works can be assessed as Nabokov's attempt at externalising his own experiences of childhood, and as his desire to immortalise the world of hereditary estates that was lost for ever.

It would be also possible, however, to take Brown's mentioned above hypothesis further and suggest that Nabokov as modernist author, who had been increasingly dissatisfied with the artistic past, experienced an anxiety over representation and authorship. Although Brown does not describe Nabokov as modernist translator, he sees Nabokov's *Eugene Onegin* as one of the manifestations of Nabokov's principal themes permeating all his writings. In Brown's view, Nabokov is „extremely repetitious.“⁸³ To put it differently, Brown thinks that the phenomenon of Nabokov is based on the idea of unity and oneness.⁸⁴ Brown's argues that all Nabokov's novels could be reduced to the same plot. Using Nabokov's formula from *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight*, that „the only real number is one, the rest is repetition,“ Brown states: „The central position in the novel is usually occupied by the charismatic figure of some poet or novelist of genius. The other figure is the person in the foreground, usually the narrator, whose entire function consists of surrounding the genius at the middle. He researches the genius, seeks him out.“⁸⁵

Brown's discussion implies that Nabokov's *Eugene Onegin* should be viewed on a par with his other novels, for it has the same underlying themes and structural elements. Brown identifies some similarities between Nabokov's *Eugene Onegin* and *Pale Fire*, which also contains a poem and a commentary: „The length and worth of commentary being out of proportion to these qualities in the poem, and this is precisely the structure and the nature of the work in Pushkin.“⁸⁶ Brown concludes that Nabokov's four-volume translation of *Eugene Onegin* „is only in detail different from what this extremely repetitious and extremely varied writer has been doing throughout all of his mature career.“⁸⁷

Brown's juxtaposition of Nabokov's translation of *Eugene Onegin* with Nabokov's novels, including *The Gift* and *Pale Fire*, suggests that one of the primary concerns of Nabokov was the relationship between prose and poetry. Brown also implies that Nabokov was more interested in his role as guide to Pushkin and Pushkin's times than in his role as translator. Given the fact that one of European modernism's concerns was the representation of meaning, it

82 A. Riemer, *Inside Outside: Life Between Two Worlds*, Angus and Robertson, An Imprint of Harper Collins Publishers, 1993, 178.

83 Brown, op. cit., 200.

84 Ibid.

85 Ibid., 201.

86 Ibid., 204.

87 Ibid., 205.

could be argued that Nabokov saved Pushkin from the process of forgetting and misrepresentation by drawing the modernist reader's attention to the semantic richness of Pushkin's text.

To a great extent Nabokov in his four-volume edition of *Eugene Onegin* produced a highly personalised account of Pushkin. As Brown explains, Nabokov uses Pushkin as his muse: „Nabokov is very much a Russian writer, and whenever Russian literature of the modern period has risen above the humdrum and everyday it has risen on the wings borrowed from Alexander Pushkin. Fate and Pushkin are identical. Pushkin is Nabokov's fate.“⁸⁸ In other words, Brown justifies Nabokov's stance of making readers read Pushkin as Nabokov, because both Pushkin and Nabokov share the same fate and are concerned with the fate of art itself.

Some critics note the presence of the otherworldly elements in Nabokov's prose and poetry.⁸⁹ In my view, one of the most central aspects of Nabokov's work is a withdrawal from the civilised urban world into mystery and fascination with the primitive, manifested in Nabokov's repetitious journey into the remains of the past. Nabokov uses such journeys as a voyage of self-discovery and revelation. It is not coincidental that Nabokov associates himself with the disappearing culture of the Russian aristocracy, defining it as mythical in the same manner, as anthropologists would characterise the culture and rituals of surviving tribal societies. In his 1962 preface to the English edition of *The Gift* Nabokov writes: „The tremendous outflow of intellectuals that formed such a prominent part of the general exodus from Soviet Russia in the first years of the Bolshevik Revolution seems today like the wanderings of some mythical tribe whose bird-signs and moon-signs I now retrieve from the desert dust. We remained unknown to American intellectuals (who, bewitched by Communist propaganda, saw us merely as villainous generals, oil magnates, and gaunt ladies with lorgnettes). That world is now gone. Gone are Bunin, Aldanov, Remizov. Gone is Vladislav Khodasevich, the greatest Russian poet that the twentieth century has yet produced. The old intellectuals are now dying out and have not found successors in the so-called Displaced Persons of the last two decades who have carried abroad the provincialism and Philistinism of their Soviet homeland.“⁹⁰ While Nabokov's other translations of Russian poetry will be discussed below, I would like to suggest here that Nabokov turned his physical displacement into a poetics of estrangement that became the governing trope in all his works, including his translations of Pushkin's poetry.

⁸⁸ Ibid., 207.

⁸⁹ See, for example: V.E. Alexandrov, *Nabokov's Otherworld*, Princeton University Press, Princeton, 1991; Connolly, Julian, „The Otherworldly in Nabokov's Poetry“, op. cit.

⁹⁰ V. Nabokov, *The Gift*, Penguin Books, London, 1963, 8.

Nabokov's formal experiments with the *Onegin* stanza and his whimsical annotations and translations are expressions of this ontological and linguistic estrangement, used by Nabokov as markers of Pushkin's own strangeness in the context of western canon. Thus Rosengrant points to the unusual usage by Nabokov of the pseudo-Elizabethan *'tis* in his translation of Tatiana Larina's conversation with her nurse in *Eugene Onegin*: „I can't sleep, nurse: 'tis here so stuffy!“ („Ne spitsia, niania: zdes' tak dushno“).⁹¹ Rosengrant demonstrates that such liberty with Pushkin's text derive from Nabokov's attempt to give his „version some semblance of poetically organised structure“, which is often done „at the expense of the naturalness that is the hallmark of Pushkin's verse.“⁹² Rosengrant is dissatisfied with many examples of Nabokov's Victorian and at times stilted English. „One wonders, too,“ says the scholar, „about Nabokov's oddly stilted English and his erratic collocations: ‚time was‘, and ‚stored in my memory no dearth‘, for example.“⁹³ In her analysis of Nabokov's translation Rosengrant pinpoints his „evident desire to concoct a hybrid from modern British and American English.“⁹⁴ Nabokov's pastiche does not represent adequately Pushkin's diction, which Rosengrant characterises as „a historically representative and individually vital mixture of colloquial and standard Russian.“⁹⁵

Other readers of Nabokov's *Eugene Onegin* produced responses, similar to the Rosengrant's criticisms. Robert Conquest does not approve of Nabokov's usage of „peaceful sites“ instead of Pushkin's phrase that could be easily rendered in English as „peaceful places“.⁹⁶ Wilson levels similar criticism at Nabokov's translation of Pushkin's *Eugene Onegin*, giving an interesting explanation of Nabokov's strategy as translator. Wilson argues that Nabokov's style tends to be both elegant and shocking at times, exposing a tendency to excessiveness and over-ornamentation in some of Nabokov's linguistic games. To Wilson, Nabokov's translation epitomises the most eccentric aspects of Nabokov's stylistics, because on many occasions Nabokov makes Standard English hardly recognisable. According to Wilson, Nabokov's translation boasts a great many examples of words which could only be found in the Oxford English Dictionary, marked as dialectical, archaic and, out of use.⁹⁷ It is difficult, of course, to insist on Nabokov's consciously applied strategy of subversive modernism throughout the whole translation. Nevertheless in the light of Wil-

⁹¹ Rosengrant, op.cit., 19.

⁹² Ibid.

⁹³ Ibid.

⁹⁴ Ibid., 20.

⁹⁵ Ibid., 21.

⁹⁶ R. Conquest, „Nabokov's *Eugene Onegin*“, *Poetry*, vol. 106, June 1965, 263-8; translated and reprinted in: N.G. Mel'nikov, (ed.), *Klassik bez retushi: Literaturnyi mir o tvorchesve Nabokova*, Novoe Literaturnoe Obozrenie, Moscow 2000, 386.

⁹⁷ E. Wilson, „The Strange Case of Pushkin and Nabokov“, translated and reprinted in: *ibid.*, 387-92, 388.

son's observations it becomes clear how close Nabokov comes to his own canonisation of Pushkin as one of the classics of European literature, at the same confronting his great predecessor from the modernist point of view.

In this respect, Nabokov's perception of Pushkin as a canonical genius strikingly resembles the definition of canonical authors as provided in Harold Bloom's book *The Western Canon*.⁹⁸ As a result of his examination of twenty-six canonical authors, Bloom was able to answer the question, „What makes the author and the works canonical?“ „The answer,“ explains Bloom, „more often than not, has turned out to be strangeness, a mode of originality that either cannot be assimilated, or that so assimilates us that we cease to see it as strange.“⁹⁹ Taking into account Bloom's definition of great quality writing as strange, it becomes possible to support Brown's claim that Nabokov saw Pushkin as his alter ego.

By juxtaposing Brown's view with Bloom's theory of canon, it is possible to argue that Nabokov's attempt at translating the most canonical work of Russian literature is ambivalent. To put it differently, the task of Nabokov the translator appears to be twofold. On the one hand, Nabokov reproduces in English the strangeness of Pushkin's work, which he sees as canonical and Romantic, and on the other hand Nabokov fashions himself in the style of Pushkin's poetic persona, believing that he understood Pushkin's poetic language. Given the fact that Nabokov translated Pushkin's texts and referred to his poetry and fiction all his life, it would not be an exaggeration to state that Pushkin was, indeed, a Bloomian precursor for Nabokov. This might be also due to the fact that Nabokov interpreted Pushkin as the first Russian European writer who made extensive use of various canonical European authors. This is evident in Nabokov's annotations to his translation of *Eugene Onegin*. Bloom's words that „canon is primarily manifested as the anxiety of influence that forms and malforms each new writing that aspires to permanence“¹⁰⁰ are applicable to Nabokov. By re-defining Pushkin as a precursor of Russian modernism, Nabokov allies himself with Bakhtin, who finds in *Eugene Onegin* individual parodic manifestations of the language associated with various literary schools of the time, examples of self-irony, and explosive fusions of subjective and objective. Yet, as a poet of considerable talent, Nabokov goes further than Bakhtin and subverts the expected, thereby presenting Pushkin's *Eugene Onegin* as an infinity of new relationships.

Nabokov's case also illustrates vividly Bloom's thesis that „Literature is not merely language; it is also the will to figuration, the motive for metaphor that Nietzsche once defined as the desire to be different, the desire to be else-

⁹⁸ H. Bloom, *The Western Canon: The Books and School of the Ages*, Papermac, London 1996.

⁹⁹ *Ibid.*, 3.

¹⁰⁰ *Ibid.*, 12.

where.¹⁰¹ In fact, Nabokov's poem „On Translating *Eugene Onegin*“ situates Nabokov as being elsewhere, primarily in St. Petersburg, in the space of Pushkin's text, which allows him „to pick up Tatiana's earring“ and to walk as Pushkin „between the city and the mist.“ Nabokov's eccentric usage of English throughout his *Eugene Onegin* is crucial to understanding of his translating strategy. As modernist poet-translator, Nabokov presents himself both as insider and outsider in relation to Pushkin's text, aspiring to immortality and greatness. Bloom summarises such desire as manifestation of the relationship between original writing and canonical tradition: „This partly means to be different from oneself, [...] to be different from the metaphors and images of the contingent works that are one's heritage: the desire to write greatly is the desire to be elsewhere, in a time and place of one's own, in an originality that must compound with inheritance, with the anxiety of influence.“¹⁰² Bloom investigates canon as part of literary evolution, exposing the dynamics between the old and the modern. In the Bloomian fashion, Wilson characterised Nabokov's translation of *Eugene Onegin* as „the strange case of Pushkin and Nabokov.“¹⁰³

Nabokov's experience as translator also lends itself to the expression of the most profound concepts of creative evolution, conveyed in Bergson's works. For example, by not producing a smooth version of Pushkin's text Nabokov expresses his disbelief in traditional notions of the wholeness of individual character and avoids the kind of mechanical reproduction that destroys novelty and annihilates time. As Bergson suggests, „The more we focus our attention on the continuity of life, the more we see how organic evolution comes closer to the evolution of consciousness where the past presses the present to give birth to a new form which is incommensurable with its antecedents.“¹⁰⁴ Nabokov appears to be viewing Pushkin in the Bergsonian light, when he transcends the *élan vital* (life-drive) of Pushkin's masterpiece into his own creative impulse both in his translation of *Eugene Onegin* and in his novels featuring prose and poetry. In fact, Nabokov mentions Bergson among the favourite authors who shaped his creative psychology at the onset of his career. As Leona Toker aptly observes, Nabokov does not differentiate between poets, authors and philosophers: „When Nabokov mentions that, in Western Europe, between the ages of 20 and 40, [his] favourites were Housman, Rupert Brooke, Norman Douglas, Bergson, Joyce, Proust, and Pushkin, he does not grant the philosopher a privileged place but groups him alongside the poets and novelists.“¹⁰⁵

¹⁰¹ Ibid.

¹⁰² Ibid.

¹⁰³ Wilson, op.cit., see ref. 3.

¹⁰⁴ H. Bergson, *Creative Evolution*, translated by A. Mitchell, 1911; quoted from: L. Kolakowski, *Bergson*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 1985, 56.

¹⁰⁵ L. Toker, „Philosophers As Poets: Reading Nabokov with Schopenhauer and Bergson“, *Russian Literature Triquarterly*, op. cit., 185-196, 186.

While Toker juxtaposes Bergson and Nabokov only in relation to Nabokov's novels, I would like to extend this line of study to Nabokov's theory of translation and his translations of Russian poetry. This approach assists us in reading Nabokov's translations to confront some strange qualities in his work as a translator whose perception of space, time and creative evolution was inevitably shaped by the modernist aesthetics. Placed between philosophy and metaphysics, Nabokov's translations display some underlying Bergsonian outlook, especially in relation to the transcendence of the *élan vital* of the originals. According to Leszek Kolakowsky, Bergson believed that the *élan vital* was „the original energy that, by infinite bifurcations and wrestling with the resistance of matter, produces higher and higher variations of both instinct and intelligence.“¹⁰⁶ As Kolakowski explains, „Something of this original impulse is preserved in all species and all individual organisms, all of them working unconsciously in its service.“¹⁰⁷ Kolakowski points out that Bergson theory of creative evolution has flaws inasmuch as it is Bergson's conviction that the life-drive can be reformed into an empirical concept according to scientific criteria.¹⁰⁸

In some ways, Nabokov's translation theory, based on the preference of literalness in relation to other methods of translation, also aspires to scientific status. If we take Bergson's view that life is a continuous process in which the original drive divides itself into a growing variety of forms but retains a basic direction, then Nabokov's own explanation of his translation theory appears to echo Bergson's views. For Bergson the life process has no goal and no one can anticipate its future course, and it is similar to an artistic creation. By the same token, Nabokov sees the translating process as part of creative evolution. The article „Problems of Translation: *Onegin* in English“ outlines Nabokov's vision of ideal translation with copious footnotes, „footnotes reaching up like skyscrapers to the top of this or that page.“¹⁰⁹ It exemplifies Nabokov's concern with the representation of the *élan vital* as the important semantic element upon which the translator should focus. It also serves as a perfect illustration to Bergson's image of evolutionary process.

Bearing in mind that Nabokov's annotations do not serve merely as a scholarly commentary to the text he translates, it is worth looking at his idea of doubling the main body of the text in the light of Bergson's aesthetic theory. Nicholas Warner thinks that Nabokov's commentary on Pushkin's *Eugene Onegin* and his notes to the translation of Lermontov's *A Hero of Our Time* can be viewed as literary art in their own right. This is especially felt in the way

¹⁰⁶ Kolakowski, op. cit., 57.

¹⁰⁷ Ibid.

¹⁰⁸ Ibid.

¹⁰⁹ V. Nabokov, „Problems of Translation: *Onegin* in English“, *Partisan Review*, 22, 4 (Fall), 1955, 496-512; quoted from: Rosengrant, op. cit., 26.

Nabokov's hints, eccentric comments and playful interruptions are aimed at provoking the reader's response, thereby actively involving reader in becoming a co-author, at least at the moment of reading the text. As Warner observes, Nabokov's commentary of *Eugene Onegin* not only debunks established myths about Pushkin, but it „also includes parody, self-reflexive commentary, parallels between Pushkin and Nabokov, biographical links between Nabokov and the society described in *Eugene Onegin*, critical jabs at Pushkin, diatribes against rival translators and critics, expositions of Nabokov's aesthetic views, and a wide variety of interpretive, speculative, and descriptive digressions.“¹¹⁰ In other words, Warner points out that Nabokov's translation footnotes allow him to present himself as shadow author, because Nabokov-the-commentator both clarifies the text under his scrutiny and obscures its understanding, drawing the reader's attention to his own persona and to his aesthetic views. In the case of Pushkin's *Eugene Onegin*, Nabokov desires to achieve immortal association with the name of Pushkin in order to inscribe his own name in the modernist canon of European literature.

Russian modernism's preoccupation with Pushkin is well documented in numerous studies of the Silver age of Russian culture.¹¹¹ Boris Gasparov argues that „Pushkin and his age occupy a central place in the ramified system of cultural myths created by the modernist era. [...] ‚The Pushkin myth‘ served as a constant symbolic background against which the age of Modernism saw itself, tested its ideas and aspirations, and recognised and comprehended its ideal, transcendence, essence and destiny.“¹¹² Nabokov's treatment of Pushkin appears to be in line with cultural developments of Russian modernism, with its concern with the Nietzschean notion of eternal return and with cultural archetypes.

Nabokov's experimental translating of Pushkin in the form of footnote and commentary should not be seen in isolation from Nabokov's own poetry. Thus Nabokov's translation of his own narrative poem „The Paris Poem“ (1943) provides a body of notes which makes it difficult to comprehend the text as a whole undivided entity. Despite this poem strongly bearing the mark of autobiographical narrative, in his „Notes“ Nabokov emphasises the intertextual complexity of his poem, presenting it as a palimpsest and playful parody of some texts of Nekrasov, Pushkin and Gogol. Nabokov explains that his line „Wondrous at night is

¹¹⁰ N.O. Warner, „The Footnote As Literary Genre: Nabokov's Commentaries To Lermontov and Pushkin“, *Slavonic and East European Journal*, Vol. 30, No.2, 1986, 167-182, 173.

¹¹¹ See, for example: B. Gasparov, et al. *Cultural Mythologies of Russian Modernism; From the Golden Age to the Silver Age*, University of California Press, Berkeley, Los Angeles, Oxford 1992; D. Wells, *Akhmatova and Pushkin: The Pushkin Contexts of Akhmatova's Poetry*, Birmingham Slavonic Monographs, Birmingham 1994; A. Smith, *The Song of the Mocking Bird: Pushkin in the Work of Marina Tsvetaeva*, Peter Lang, Berne, Berlin, Frankfurt, New York, Paris, Wien 1994.

¹¹² B. Gasparov, „Introduction“, op. cit., 1-16, 5.

gaunt Paris“ is „an imitation of a hyperbolic passage in Gogol’s *A Terrible Vengeance* (a wretchedly corny tale) which begins: ‚*Chuden Dnepr pri tikhoi pogode*‘ – „wondrous is the Dnepr in windless weather.“¹¹³ Nabokov paraphrases Gogol’s elevated narrative, fashioned in the Romantic vein, to parodic effect. He appropriates Gogol’s vision of the mysterious space in a down-to-earth, if not vulgar, portrayal of Paris: „Wondrous at night is gaunt Paris. / Hark! Under the vaults of black arcades, / where the walls are rocklike, the urinals / gurgle behind their shields.“¹¹⁴ Nabokov’s modernist, fragmented self is also reproduced in his notes to the poem that invokes intimate knowledge of Russian literature and of Paris of the 1930s.

Nabokov’s juxtaposition of his own artistic self with the Romantic ideology provides an interesting insight into his own modernist aesthetics, especially because Nabokov highlights the formal qualities of his work, being anxious about the ethics of representation. While it is difficult to place Nabokov in the context of any school or trend, Russian or otherwise, some critics compare his poetry’s verbal innovation to Pasternak’s craft. Thus Georgii Adamovich, an important Russian émigré critic, asserts that Nabokov is „the only authentic émigré poet who has studied Pasternak and learned something from him.“¹¹⁵ Maxim Shrayer outlines Nabokov’s indebtedness to Bunin’s works.¹¹⁶ It has become commonplace in Nabokov studies to state Nabokov’s close links with the Russian symbolist movement that lasted from 1880 to 1910.

It would not be an exaggeration, however, to suggest that in its linguistic richness, stylistic polyphony and metatextual quality Nabokov’s writing is akin to Tsvetaeva’s art. Both Tsvetaeva and Nabokov continued to maintain links with Russian symbolism well into the 1920-30s, and transgressed the geographical and linguistic boundaries of their predecessors. They are the only Russian émigré authors of considerable talent who wrote in another language (Tsvetaeva wrote some of her poems and essays in French; Nabokov succeeded in becoming an American writer). They were also actively involved in modernist cultural developments in Berlin and in Paris in the 1920-30s. In spite of their very different modes of delivery, both Nabokov and Tsvetaeva are famous for their intellectual games with readers and for their concerns with form and structure that they viewed as the real meaning of the work. Tsvetaeva’s belief that art has no social purpose is strongly pronounced in her 1932 essay „Art in the Light of

¹¹³ V. Nabokov, „The Paris Poem“, *Poems and Problems*, Weidenfeld and Nicholson, London, 1970, 115-125, 125.

¹¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 119.

¹¹⁵ Adamovich, Georgii, „Vladimir Nabokov“, V. Blich (ed.), *Twentieth-Century Russian Literary Criticism*, Yale University Press, New Haven 1975, 228.

¹¹⁶ M. Shayer, *The World of Nabokov’s Stories*, University of Texas Press, Austin, 1999; see also: A. Smith, „Vladimir Nabokov (1899-1977)“, *American Short-Story Writers Since World War II*, Fourth Series, A Brucoli Clark Layman Book/The Gale Group, Detroit, San Francisco, London, Boston, Woodbridge, Conn., 2001, 254-271.

Consciousness“ („Iskusstvo pri svete sovesti“) that suggests that a writer's moral duty is to write well and turn his own life into artefact.

The most important point of comparison of the two authors lies in the tradition of ethics and cultural studies that Benjamin aptly describes as metatextual. „The uniqueness of a work of art,“ maintains Benjamin, „is inseparable from its being embedded in the fabric of tradition.“¹¹⁷ Such a view places translation at the heart of any creative process. Benjamin's notion of the mark of the uniqueness (aura) of art objects and Bakhtin's explanation of the boundaries of utterances put to the fore responsive understanding of art. Bakhtin's description of self-consciousness on the threshold that „takes place on the boundary between one's own and someone else's consciousness“¹¹⁸ sheds some light on Nabokov's rediscovery of Pushkin. According to Bakhtin's theory of culture, cultural domain has no inner territory, because „it is located entirely upon boundaries“ and „boundaries intersect it everywhere, passing through each of its constituent features.“¹¹⁹ Nabokov's image of a translator, as constructed in his translations, poems, and essays, represents a self-conscious modernist author who constantly crosses the boundaries of various texts and traditions.

It is not coincidental that Nabokov treats *Eugene Onegin* as a playful palimpsest, drawing the reader's attention to Pushkin's own paraphrasing of western literature. Nabokov's comments demonstrate that any modernist translator has to be familiar with the author's techniques and cultural contexts, so impersonation, mimicry and interchange become possible. Nabokov's translation theory is similar to Benjamin's reference to the human face in his discussion of photography. According to Benjamin, the photographed face resists in its uniqueness and circumscription the universal equality of things, with its unintelligible flux and terror of borderless abundance. While for Benjamin the photograph of a human face embodies the unique moment of its creation and its perception, for Nabokov the verbal photograph of a writer's self serves the same purpose. Nabokov's ideal translator who is „beyond genius and knowledge“ must „possess the gift of mimicry and be able to act, as it were, [...] the real author's part.“¹²⁰ Nabokov expects his ideal translator to be as faithful as possible to the original. In 1925 Nabokov also defined writers as „translators of God's creation, his little plagiarists and imitators who dress up what he wrote.“¹²¹ Yet Nabokov rebelled against mechanical and vulgar reproduction and mimicry. The horror of replicas, copies, facsimiles and reproductions is a major theme in Nabokov's

¹¹⁷ W. Benjamin, „The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction“, *Illuminations*, op. cit., 211-235, 217.

¹¹⁸ M.M. Bakhtin and V.N. Voloshinov, *Marxism and the Philosophy of Language*, translated by Ladislav Matejka and I.R. Titunik, Harvard University Press, Cambridge MA 1986, 108.

¹¹⁹ Bakhtin, *Art and Answerability*, op. cit., 274.

¹²⁰ Nabokov, „The art of Translation“, op. cit., 319.

¹²¹ *Ibid.*

writings. It is important to bear in mind in this context that Nabokov's theory of literal translation requires some sort of artistic insight and ability to reproduce the text as a living organism, so that readers experience the illusion of living Pushkin or Lermontov. In other words, Nabokov's understanding of the act of writing and translating relies on the idea of performing the text through the act of reading.

Nabokov's outlook is akin to Bergson's aesthetic, which combines both Romantic and modern views of art. As Mary Gillies explains, „Bergson believed that the artist created both the art and the criteria by which it is judged; but he also believed that a central role must be given to perceivers of the art object, for it was their responsibility to recreate the art form and to come to terms with what the artist had represented.“¹²² Gillies goes on and says that Bergson „desires that every tool be brought to bear in an analysis of the aesthetic emotion evoked by the art work.“¹²³ In the metaphysical vein, Nabokov also believes that any creative impulse inherent in matter is capable of storing and releasing energy. Like Bergson who wanted to enable readers to perceive this or that text, Nabokov supplied his translation of *Eugene Onegin* with footnotes and commentary, believing thereby in his role of an instructor. Both Bergson and Nabokov construct in their works the image of a reader who should be trained to appreciate the incidental and the subjective, in order to enhance his intellect and his intuition, bringing into question the positivist and scientific outlook of the Enlightenment period. It could be argued that Nabokov lived up to the Bergson's image of a true writer who captures „a unique emotion, an impulse, an impetus received from the very depths of things.“¹²⁴

Toker identifies Bergson's influence on Nabokov thus: „The consciousness of the transformation of the duality of the physical and the spiritual into a continuum may be regarded as the metaphysical background of the self-reflexive Möbius-strip narrative structures in most of Nabokov's major novels.“¹²⁵ This is also true of Nabokov's translations of Russian poetry. As Toker points out, both Bergson and Nabokov provide a critique of the rigidity of life and of automatism in the regulation of society, but „the consciousness of the sinister potentialities of modern culture is, in general, more intense in Nabokov than in Bergson.“¹²⁶ It can be argued that Nabokov's concept of literalness discussed above is imbued with creative impulse, since Nabokov the co-author experiences several temporal existences simultaneously. As translator, Nabokov high-

¹²²M.A. Gillies, *Henri Bergson and British Modernism*, McGill-Queen's University Press, Montreal and Kingston, London, Buffalo 1996, 24.

¹²³Ibid., 25.

¹²⁴L. Toker, „Nabokov and Bergson“, in: Alexandrov, op. cit., 367-373, 369.

¹²⁵L. Toker, „Nabokov and Bergson“, ibid.

¹²⁶Ibid., 372.

lights the dialogical nature of his position: it is as if he still exists in the space of Pushkin's text and is a captive of his own cultural epoch.

Yet, while dealing with Pushkin's text, Nabokov also performs the role of editor, especially in his remarks on Tatiana Larina, the protagonist of *Eugene Onegin*. As Warner explains: „Pushkin, Nabokov thinks, would have gone too far by having Tatiana read Onegin's diary, but Nabokov then shows that, in a certain sense, Pushkin does not go far enough, and explains just how Pushkin could have done so – by showing the diary to us, the readers, and thereby giving us yet deeper understanding of Onegin's character.“¹²⁷ In the words of Warner, Nabokov's concluding his „Translator's Epilogue“ with a rendering of Pushkin's poem „The Work“ testifies to Nabokov's belief in the authorial quality of his work as translator and editor. Nabokov establishes yet another analogy between himself and Pushkin, depriving Pushkin of the last word, so to speak. In the light of Warner's discussion of the issue of complement and competition in Nabokov's *Eugene Onegin*, it becomes clear that it is „the commentator „, who „literally has the last word.“¹²⁸ In this respect the commentator's words reflect on the evolutionary process that enables the reader to understand the object of translation in a specific way.

Bergson's vision of evolution is not reduced to linear progress. His theory of time, based on a simultaneous existence of several lines of evolution, implies that a new social structure must not rely on the definition of progress as something superior to the older line of evolution. The modernist concept of free flow, or indeterminacy, is a crucial notion present in the work of both Bergson and Nabokov. Therefore, it is difficult to agree with Warner's above-mentioned suggestion that Nabokov's vision of Pushkin implies a static appropriation of the original text. Nabokov's translation of *Eugene Onegin* might be seen as an artefact, open to new interpretations and challengeable by future generations. In spite of some parodic effects, Nabokov appears extremely serious in his approach to Pushkin. „The seriousness of Nabokov's own emotion,“ Warner points out, „is most evident in the enormous scope of his enterprise, which blends together some of the chief concerns of his life in a form which is itself a blend of parody, poetry, the novel, scholarship, criticism, anatomy, and biography.“¹²⁹

Nabokov's work as translator of Pushkin's novel in verse overshadows his other work as translator of Russian poetry. Nabokov's contributions to translating Russian poetry include not only classical poets, such as Pushkin and Lermontov, and a medieval epic *The Song of Igor's Campaign* („Slovo o polku Igoreve“), but also several poems of Fedor Tjutchev, the forerunner of the Rus-

¹²⁷ Warner, op. cit., 178.

¹²⁸ Ibid., 179.

¹²⁹ Ibid., 180.

sian symbolist movement. Tiutchev's poetry, with its metaphysical overtones and strongly pronounced subjectivity, stimulated a search among Russian symbolists for a mystic world of relationship in which the poet could act as coordinator of infinitely complex relationships and fragments of reality. For Russian symbolists the poet's mind becomes the most important force that „is constantly amalgamating disparate experiences“, since his life differs from the ordinary man's experience that is, to use T. S. Eliot's words, „chaotic, irregular, fragmentary.“¹³⁰ Tiutchev's art is not included into the pantheon of Russian literature, in comparison with Pushkin's canonical work *Eugene Onegin*. It is useful to point out here that most of Nabokov's translations of Russian lyrics use the paraphrastic method of translation. This might be due to the fact that Pushkin's *Eugene Onegin* is not a short poem that expresses a single point of view but a novel in verse that offers a complex combination of various discourses that might be lost through other modes of rendering as identified by Nabokov.

Nabokov's translations of Tiutchev and of Russian medieval poetry deserve scrutiny here because they epitomise Nabokov's intrinsic bond with European modernist tradition, that separates art and politics. Harvey Goldblatt's analysis of Nabokov's translation of the Russian medieval epic *The Song of Igor's Campaign* believes that Nabokov challenged Roman Jakobson's patriotic stance in his scholarly treatment of this work, because Jakobson's „preoccupation with the issue of authenticity somehow took attention away from purely artistic concerns.“¹³¹ Nabokov differed from most Russian émigré scholars and writers who, in the words of Edmund Wilson, used „events in the literary world as pretexts for creating issues in connection with current politics.“¹³² In his book *Three Russian Poets: Selections from Pushkin, Lermontov and Tiutchev*¹³³ Nabokov selects for translation those poems which deal with philosophical, aesthetic or subjective issues. In Nabokov's view, Tiutchev's personality does not contain „that romantic appeal which makes the biographies of Pushkin and Lermontov almost homogeneous with their muses“ and „the batch of poems inspired by his political views makes rather painful reading.“¹³⁴ Tiutchev's philosophical and love lyrics share many themes with Nabokov's own writings, including the theme of loss, despair, spiritual quest and otherworldliness. According to Galya Diment, both Nabokov and his sister Elena Sikorskaja considered Nabokov's translations of Tiutchev to be the best part of Nabokov's *Three Russian Poets*.¹³⁵

¹³⁰ T. S. Eliot, „The Metaphysical Poets“, *Selected Essays*, London 1932, 287; quoted in: McFarlane, James, „The Mind of Modernism“, *Modernism: 1890-1930*, op. cit., 71-93, 83.

¹³¹ H. Goldblatt, „The Song of Igor's Campaign“, in: Alexandrov, op. cit., 661-672, 667.

¹³² Quoted in: Goldblatt, op. cit., 672.

¹³³ V. Nabokov, *Three Russian Poets: Selections from Pushkin, Lermontov and Tiutchev*, New Directions, Norfolk, Conn. 1944.

¹³⁴ *Ibid.*, 38.

¹³⁵ G. Diment, „Three Russian Poets“, in: Alexandrov, op. cit., 709-714.

The most successful translation of Nabokov included in the book is his rendering of Tiutchev's poem „Last Love“ („Posledniaia liubov“, 1852-54). It displays Tiutchev's profound insights into modernity at their best. Nabokov claims that Tiutchev's poetry „has quite exceptional qualities and reveals [...] elements which characterise the fin de siècle renaissance of Russian poetry (also called decadence, also called symbolism [...]) which in its turn was partly influenced by similar trends in French poetry.“¹³⁶ Tiutchev's treatment of space and of intuitive knowledge stands close to Bergson's images of creative evolution. By the same token that Bergson's ideas attracted many European modernists because his notions of creative evolution and of a mobile and constantly changing self appeared to address the central concerns of the twentieth-century culture, Tiutchev's poetry offers to a Russian reader a new notion of divided self and of a mystical, intuitive bond with Russian space which could not be comprehended logically.

This is also true in relation to Tiutchev's language, which aspires to be precise and accurate. Gillies states that Bergson appreciated „clarity of expression, brought about by correct word choice and vital expressions, helps to make language more precise and thus a better mode for representing experiences.“¹³⁷ Bergson's concern with the vitality of language also implies that the imagination is also important for the poet as he „constantly in presence of a vividly felt physical and visual scene.“¹³⁸ Tiutchev's poetry reveals the poet's intuitive interactions with the world and expresses the poet's preoccupation with the limitations of language. Tiutchev appears to be anxious to convey what Bergson identifies as *durée*, the intuition of duration. Tiutchev shares with Bergson the frustration of the poet who feels unable to express adequately his experience in the rigid form of language. As Bergson states: „We necessarily express ourselves by means of words and we usually think in terms of space [...].“¹³⁹ In this sense, both Tiutchev and Nabokov are the most Bergsonian poets in Russian poetry, aspiring thereby to escape from the limits of space and language constraints. Their poems are permeated with the dynamic sense of fighting with the external constraints imposed on their self-expression.

The above juxtaposition of Nabokov, Tiutchev and Bergson indicates that Nabokov's rendering of Tiutchev's poetry into English would stand close to the translations of his own poetry, for he shares with Tiutchev the same belief in the importance of the aesthetic transformation of reality. Tiutchev's „Last Love“ is reproduced almost literally in Nabokov's rendering, with the rhyming pattern being preserved. Nabokov acts as co-author of this poem, and his rendering of

¹³⁶ Nabokov, *Three Russian Poets*, op. cit., 38.

¹³⁷ Gillies, op.cit., 45.

¹³⁸ Bergson, quoted in: Gillies, *ibid.*

¹³⁹ Bergson, „Time and Free Will“, quoted in: Gillies, op. cit., 45.

Tiutchev's poem resists a smooth reading. „Last Love“ is written in a way that preserves colloquial diction and refers to the all-inclusive „we“: „O, how tenderly we love towards the end of our lives“ („O, kak na sklone nashikh let nezhei my liubim i suevernei...“).¹⁴⁰ There are two exclamation marks in the original, which are omitted in Nabokov's translation. Tiutchev's line in the second stanza „continue, continue, my enchantment“ („prodlis', prodlis', ocharovan'e“) is translated as „enchantment, let me stay enchanted.“ The preceding line „Don't rush, don't rush, declining day“ („pomedli, pomedli, vechernii den“) is presented as „O tarry, O tarry, declining day.“¹⁴¹ The flow of the three-stanza poem, which runs uninterrupted in the original, as if the poet speaks to us in one breath, appears severely distorted if not fragmented in Nabokov's translation. Such a device activates readers' involvement in the semantic play embedded in the poem, but destroys the natural tone of conversation with the reader, creating an intimate bond between the reader and the poet.

Nabokov draws the reader's attention to the philosophical message of the poem, presenting it as an act of performance and highlighting nuances in the meaning. This is especially felt in the last stanza, which in the original reproduces a clichéd rhyme of Russian love poetry „love – blood“ (liubov' – krov'). The choice of words and imagery in Tiutchev's poem are unremarkable, if not pedestrian: „Let the blood in my veins get thinner, /But the tenderness is not getting thinner. / O you, my last love! / You are my bliss and my hopelessness.“ („Puskai skudeet v zhilakh krov' / No v serdtse ne skudeet nezhnost' ... / O ty, posledniia liubov'! / Ty i blazhenstvo i beznadezhnost'“). The poem's strength is its melodic pattern. It lends itself to being performed as a short love aria, known in Russian as *romans*. The poem is emotionally charged, and contains a few exclamation marks absent in Nabokov's translation. The last line in „Last Love“ contains a neologism: the last love is defined as bliss and hopelessness („blazhenstvo i beznadezhnost'“). The latter noun does not exist in Russian and derives from the adjective „hopeless“. Tiutchev's short love lyric is aimed at performance, reinforced by the dynamic structural element, especially in the concluding line which exposes love as a strong driving force, full of vigour and contradiction, thereby evoking bliss and despair at the same time.

By contrast with the original, Nabokov's translation is more elaborate. This is especially evident when we compare Tiutchev's concluding lines that should be rendered as „O, you, last love! /You are my bliss and my despair“ with Nabokov's „O last belated love, thou art/a blend of joy and of hopeless surrender.“ Undoubtedly, Nabokov's phrase „thou art“ alludes to Shakespeare's 18th sonnet that starts „Shall I compare thee to a summer's day? /Thou art more lovely and more temperate; /Rough winds do shake the darling buds of May.

¹⁴⁰F.I. Tiutchev, *Stikhotvoreniia*, Sovetskii pisatel', Moscow-Leningrad 1962, 280.

¹⁴¹V. Nabokov, *Three Russian Poets*, op. cit., 34.

/And summer's lease hath all too short a date."¹⁴² Nabokov uses the archaic „to tarry“ making Tiutchev's poem resembling medieval English poetry. As mentioned above, the same tendency to use obscure and archaic language is strongly present in Nabokov's *Eugene Onegin*. Both Pushkin and Tiutchev are well known for using colloquial modern Russian and for striving to avoid ambiguous language. It seems, therefore, that Nabokov uses archaic words to express the sublime. Since this device was used widely in Russian modernist poetry, it does not come as a surprise to see Nabokov's attempt to make full use of it in English.

In the light of the above analysis of Nabokov's poetic aspirations, it could be suggested that Nabokov's translations both complement and compete with the original texts. It is as if his translations of Russian poetry into English suggest improvements on the originals, creating a fragmented image of self and introducing an ironic double vision of the text under scrutiny. In other words, Nabokov extends his literary artistry to his own translations of Russian poetry, creating a new type of translator who also acts as literary critic, highlighting the structural innovations and shades of meaning in the original, thereby engaging the reader into a literary play with the text in question.

As has been demonstrated in the present article, Nabokov's translation theory and his translations of Russian poetry should be viewed in conjunction with the analysis of his hybrid identity constructed in Nabokov's works in English. Nabokov's artistic psychology is based on his highly elaborate concept of mimicry, which is non-mechanical and imaginative. Nabokov's poetic persona is shaped by the modernist aesthetic, inspiring the artist to be a performer and philosopher. Thus Nabokov explains in his autobiographical work *Speak, Memory*: „When a butterfly has to look like a leaf, not only are all the details of a leaf beautifully rendered but markings mimicking grub-bored holes are generally thrown in. ‚Natural selection‘, in the Darwinian sense, could not explain the miraculous coincidence of imitative aspect and imitative behaviour, nor could one appeal to the theory of ‚the struggle for life‘ when a protective device was carried to a point of mimetic subtlety, exuberance, and luxury far in excess of a predator's power of appreciation. I discovered in nature the non-utilitarian delights that I sought in art. Both were a form of magic, both were a game of intricate enchantment and deception.“¹⁴³ Bearing in mind Barry Scherr's characterisation of Nabokov's poetic talent which „beyond the formal virtuosity, comes out largely through his evocative descriptions, his gift for parody, and the imaginative situations, which often veer on to the surreal and the grotesque,“¹⁴⁴ it

¹⁴² W. Shakespeare, „Sonnet 18th“, *The Illustrated Stratford Shakespeare*, Chancellor Press, London 1982, 1009.

¹⁴³ V. Nabokov, *Speak, Memory: An Autobiography Revisited*, Vintage International, New York 1967, 125.

¹⁴⁴ B.P. Scherr, „Poetry“, in: Alexandrov, op. cit., 608-625, 623.

could be argued that in his translations Nabokov continues to ponder the nature of artistic mimicry and of the ethics of performance.

By employing the device of estrangement throughout his translations Nabokov uses his talent for the ethical self-situating, instilling in his readers a set of cultural values and making them accountable for the fact of reading. Just like in his novels, in his translations Nabokov continues to play games with his reader, using the poetic language to the parodic effect. In this respect, his understanding of modernity stands close to Julia Kristeva's vision of the practice of the text. „Every practice which produces something new (a new device),“ Kristeva argues, „is a practice of laughter: it obeys laughter's logic and provides the subject with laughter's advantages.“¹⁴⁵ According to Kristeva, „When practice is not laughter, there is nothing new; where there is nothing new, practice cannot be provoking: it is at best a repeated, empty act. The novelty of a practice (that of the text or any practice) indicates the jouissance invested therein and this quality of newness is the equivalent of the laughter it conceals.“¹⁴⁶ In the light of Kristeva's explanation of the practice of text, Nabokov's eccentric devices and mocking smiles, found in abundance in his translations of Russian poetry, demonstrate that his translation theory of literal translation should not be taken at its face value. Nabokov's texts, including his translations, fulfil their ethical function because they pluralise and pulverise what Kristeva defines as „scientific truths about the process of the subject (his discourse, his sexuality) and the tendencies of current historical process [...] on the condition that it develop them to the point of laughter.“¹⁴⁷ It would be true to state that parody plays the most important role in Nabokov's translations and his work in general, because it is subordinated to the laws of the literary evolution, seen by Nabokov as a dynamic creative force.

Nabokov understands creative evolution, including the translation process, as the ethical-aesthetical event. Nabokov the translator eschews the sublime in aesthetics (the core notion of European modernism and Russian symbolism) and seeks to recover both understanding and ethics within aesthetics. His position is similar to Bakhtin's post-Enlightenment aesthetics in that it does not reduce art to transcendental experience or atemporal ideas. In the words of Ronald Schleifer, „Bakhtin attempted to comprehend an aesthetics of borders, inhabited by the ordinary virtues of kindness and mercy, which would allow room for both abundance and otherness in momentary, comprehending wholes.“¹⁴⁸ In Schleifer's view, twentieth-century European modernism struggled with „the

¹⁴⁵J. Kristeva, *Revolution in Poetic Language*, translated by Margaret Waller, with and Introduction by Leon S. Roudiez, Columbia University Press, New York 1984, 225.

¹⁴⁶Ibid.

¹⁴⁷Kristeva, op. cit., 233.

¹⁴⁸R. Schleifer, *Modernism and Time: The Logic of Abundance in Literature, Science and Culture 1880-1930*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 2000, 230.

ambiguous success of secular Enlightenment values in order that it might articulate logics of abundance“ that include „what Bakhtin calls the ‚infinite‘ character of cognition, the ‚yet-to-be achieved‘ character of ethical action, and [...] the multiplication of the seemingly singular moments of aesthetics.“¹⁴⁹

In the light of the above assessment of modernism as a global comprehension of the abundant wealth of history, thought, and experience, Nabokov’s translation theory and his translations of Russian poetry appear to explore the relationship both between different language structures and between various cultures. In his translations Nabokov pursues an aesthetics of wholeness that transcends both the materials of art and the formal devices that shape that material. Nabokov’s translations, however, might be also seen as verbal material for his novels. They reveal Nabokov’s chief preoccupation with language and explain how poetry helps Nabokov create the stylistic polyphony for which his novels are famous. „Language,“ maintains Bakhtin, „reveals all of its possibilities only in poetry since here maximal demands are placed upon it; [...] all its aspects are strained to the extreme, and reach their ultimate limits.“¹⁵⁰ It can be argued, therefore, that Nabokov explored the poetical qualities of both the Russian and the English languages in order to master his style as fiction writer. In this respect, Nabokov’s dismissal of the authentic poet of considerable talent does not come as a surprise. Nabokov warns: „The main drawback [...] is the fact that the greater his individual talent, the more apt he will be to drown the foreign masterpieces under the sparkling ripples of his own personal style. Instead of dressing up like the real author, he dresses up the author as himself.“¹⁵¹ Nabokov ideal fiction writer must be a good translator who is able to overcome language by impersonating poetic discourse in order to inscribe the border of genres in his works.

To conclude, Nabokov’s attempts at translating of poetry reveal Nabokov’s desire to employ poetic discourse in his fiction in order to highlight – in a truly modernist manner – that any writing is just an artefact and an embodiment of the Russian formalists’ notion of art as craft¹⁵² that relies on clever tricks and devices to create an illusion of novel experiences.

¹⁴⁹ Ibid., 231.

¹⁵⁰ M.M. Bakhtin, *Art and Answerability*, op. cit., 294.

¹⁵¹ V. Nabokov, „The Art of Translation“, op. cit., 319.

¹⁵² see Shklovsky’s article „Art as Device“; V. Shklovskii, „Iskusstvo kak priem“, *Gamburgskii shchet: Stat’i – Vospominaniia – Esse (1914-1933)*, Sovetskii pisatel’, Moscow 1990, 58-72.